Herringbone

by bluebloodbruise

Summary

After surviving the Fall, Will returns to Molly and Wally, desperately trying to avoid being consumed by trauma.

But trauma, like misspent love, is a wound that roots deep. The more Will hides, the more he aches for Hannibal.

Notes

I wanted to write about the aftermath of trauma and the complicated feelings that arise from longing for someone who hurt you.

This is a slow-burn exploration of Will's roller-coaster of emotions after the Fall. I wanted to feel mundane and slow, because so are recovery and self-discovery.

No Molly & Will love-fest here--sorry!

It may include triggering stuff, largely relating to drinking, depression, suicidal thoughts, and infidelity (towards Molly). It's not explicit until chapter 13, and sex is always consensual.

There's a happy ending too, though the path to it is bumpy and at times circular.
“Do it rough,” Will grits out.

For a moment the hand holding his chin stills, the needle cold and sharp against the bloodied stubble before sinking into flesh. Will keeps his eyes shut through the procedure, his face turned to the darkened wall. It is near dawn somewhere in rural Pennsylvania. Through a high window, the sky peeks pitch black and moonless, suffused with tiny stars.

Dead light, Will thinks. The sky is little more than a graveyard of astral bodies and dead light.

There is pain and there is discomfort. Will focuses on the feel of his tattered clothes, damp and crusted with blood, half dried on the interstate drive. He focuses on the stars, the scratchy stucco wall, the smell of wet wood and dusty plaster, until all physical pain recedes into the roaring of water in his lungs.

“Do it rough,” he says again, minutes or maybe hours later, when the needle has moved into his collarbone. Neither of them speaks about the implications of that request nor the implications of abiding by it—not during the procedure nor after, not even when their clothes have been burned to cinders in a canister in the backyard.

Silence, Will thinks to himself, at last tucked under pink polka dot sheets, clad in pants too long and a shirt too narrow to comfortably fit. Silence is all that can keep us alive now.

His body itches with new stitches and exhaustion, the aftermath of misfired adrenaline, and for an instant Will believes he won’t be able to breathe again, let alone sleep. The hunting cabin is oppressively quiet, the bedroom menacing with its scattered stuffed animals and porcelain dolls. Will lies alone with the ghosts he made for himself, but more so with the ghosts of those who live still. Like the smiling family of three framed on the nightstand, whose bodies may come to keep their burnt clothes company under the big birch tree.

Will lets himself think of Molly then, and Winston, and Wally, and Francis, in that order precisely. There is a spark of something—of fear or of pride—that flares right before he tips over the edge of unconsciousness. And then all is truly dark and tarry, the feeling of being in the wrong skin deferred for a few more hours.

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It is Fall in Western Pennsylvania, where all nature dies a slow, magnificent death. Will thinks that while standing on his own by the shallow stream that opens in front of the borrowed cabin. The thought is not fully his own, but it came into his mind fully formed nonetheless. He can hear dinner being cooked inside the cabin behind him, can see crows and large moths webbing around the golden trees.

The air smells rusty. It smells like blood and fireplaces, he thinks, mildly excited. It must be around Halloween now. Wally would be getting anxious about his costume, and Molly would spend a handful of late nights sewing and hot-gluing and dabbing fake blood. There would be half-eaten candy all over the countertops the day after. The blood would wash right off Wally’s sticky hands and he would laugh his high-pitched ghoulish laughter while the dogs tried to eat his crumbs. He would come out of slaughter vibrant and clean. Like Spring after Winter.

Will looks up at the stormy Pennsylvanian sky, where rain and river share the same iron grayness,
the same promise of something tragic and glorious about to implode. He thought of wading in, kneeling down, waiting until there was no patch of skin left unsubmerged. To put rocks in his pockets. To drown in three feet of sweet water after having survived two hundred feet of oceanic roar. He shakes his head and the vision fades like smoke.

His mended shoulder aches, and so does his stomach when the smell of braised meat finds him. Some other hurt rattles in there too, a broader longing, an unnamed heaviness that if he did not know better he would call “grief.” But Will does know better.

With another glance at the stream, he starts walking back to the hunting cabin, just like he does every day for the past seven weeks—slowly, as if dragging his feet could delay, or even change, the inevitable conclusion of his trek.

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Silence can make strangers of any cohabitants, Will knew and relied on this, if not for all of his life, then for the majority of those months holed up in the woods.

Routine matched with silence kept his skin in place, tighter but firmer around his brain. It lent him a sense of control he seldom found in the company of people.

Fishing with his borrowed rod in his borrowed waders by the shallow stream gives him a purpose, and purpose always gave Will a measure of control, a quasi-peace. That peace generally culminates with snapshots of his dogs, Molly, and Wally, running in the snow, raking leaves, sharing marshmallows on the porch. Stuff of catalogs and advertisements, stuff he isn’t sure has really happened to him but, like the photo on his borrowed nightstand, seem unequivocally happy and thus harmless. No monster lurking behind that door.

As his wounds healed, the borrowed clothes did not settle more comfortably around his body, but irked more severely, to the point where Will would wake up whimpering and clawing at pink sheets. After the third night, there were pills and tea left on his nightstand. The vials were all neatly labelled with stock cards. “Ibuprofen,” “Valium,” “Amoxicillin,” they read, handwritten in aggressively flamboyant script. As unsure about the origins of his pain as the man who wrote the labels, Will took them all.

As he lies in his child-size bed waiting for chemicals to take over, Will realizes that, though he had long perfected the art of weaponizing silence into social alienation, he had never found himself having a co-conspirator in that plan.

How startling it is for Will to conclude that he is not playing a game of silence against Hannibal Lecter. Instead, he is playing it with him.

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Less than a week later, Will stood by the river without his fishing rod. It had rained heavily for three days and his nightmares had thinned out. The sky looked bruised, filling Will with a wistfulness akin to mourning.

Will went out to be alone, which was unusual. Though they shared a cabin smaller than a studio apartment, contact was minimal. Will lived somewhere else, always, regardless of where his body lay. This was something understood between them and, Will suspected, Hannibal followed the same protocol. He too lived somewhere else far, far away from the cramped kitchenette, the polyester rugs, the mounted deer heads. The wounded, slowed-down flesh, and the too-small loafers.
As the afternoon bloomed, Will heard footsteps behind him. He didn’t turn, not even when body heat could be felt through his windbreaker, all down to his back. Will tried to conjure dread, the panic of being caught, but it wasn’t there. Not after so many days dreaming of a quiet drowning, fantasizing about an exit easier than the one he had to make for himself.

Still his body jolted when a hand fell against his shoulder, warm and pressing, resting there for the first time since a needle was between them.

There was an instant when all Will could hear was the breath in his lungs, the blood rushing to his head. And then the voice over his shoulder, not too close but unbearably intimate. Time and silence had done nothing to dull its power, Will realized distantly. Maybe even sadly.

“Are you leaving soon, Will?” Hannibal asked.

Will shrugged. It had been unspoken for a while, he thought, with hindsight.

“Yes.”

The hand bit into his injured shoulder.

“You’ll be missed.”

The hand fell away. They stood side by side gazing at the ominous sky, indigo and steely.

When Hannibal spoke again, his tone was even, revealing nothing short of commonsense and practicality.

“Should I make arrangements for my arrest?”

“No.” Will replied, startling himself with the absolute finality in his voice.

“No?”

“I need to go. What you do is up to you. I have no interest in knowing.”

Hannibal hummed, bringing both hands to rest on his hips. The pose of a man considering the myriad of options opening suddenly before him.

“Very well.”

The polite reasonableness of it all seemed preposterous, infuriating to Will, but he let it simmer and steam away like he did with so many of his untrustworthy thoughts.

“Should I pack you something to eat? The woods are treacherous around this area. It might take you a while before finding rescue.”

Two images visited Will at the same time:

1) Hannibal under his hands, teeth soaked crimson, a black crack on his forehead where the rock would have released brain matter; and
2) Wally in a top hat and fake fangs, smiling through a mouthful of cherry-flavored blood.

Reeling, Will took a step back, away from the images as from the man beside him. The movement forced him to face Hannibal for the first time in months. Night was falling fast. Covered in shadows, his eyes had a strange calmness, old and worn as if he had read the last page of their story and accepted its conclusion. When Hannibal reached out to steady him, Will let him hold his
elbow.

“I am okay,” he stammered, breathless. “I’m okay. I just, I need to go home. I need... They need. I must...I must go. Before it’s too late.”

Hannibal regarded him for a long moment before moving his hand from Will’s elbow to his cheek. Something passed between them then—fast, bright, and slippery, too slippery for Will to catch it properly. He leaned into the touch anyway.

“Of course you do, Will.” Hannibal whispered gently. He cupped Will’s jaw and traced the mangled skin there, up and down, over and over, until scar tissue felt chewy and oversensitive. Their eyes met and Will felt caught, the kind of shock that freezes you from the inside out, forces you to lose time. A tight seam inside Will threatened to rip. He jerked back and his feet found water. Hannibal let his hand fall again but his eyes stayed on Will’s. They felt relentless and threatening like lightening must feel to trees. The air between them turned coppery as if blood had been spilled. Then Hannibal blinked and turned away, a puppet on a string.

Will saw him retreat into the cabin, measured steps, a straight line across the gravel. Spooked by a sensation he could not place, Will tightened the borrowed windbreaker against his waist and headed into the woodsy slopes.
Will wandered for maybe fifteen hours before being rescued. It was hard to tell time in the dark. It might have been longer. But when help eventually came, it came in the shape of blue and red sirens, as paramedics, local police, and eventually the FBI poured over his clothes, his skin, his memories, all parsed out and sifted through like hay. Not very neatly, but thorough.

Because he had long discarded most of his borrowed clothes, he was nearly hypothermic by the time a weekend hunter found him. Frostbite hemmed his fingers and toes. His eyes were glassy with dehydration and his throat burned with cold and hunger. They let him rest after processing. They let him call home after interrogating him next to a sleepy-eyed public defendant.

He kept to his story, trimmed down to the bone of plausibility: they both fell from the cliff fighting Francis and he survived by mere chance. He had no recollection of how he had crossed state lines, had seen no one when he woke up half naked in the woods. He found an uninhabited cabin and foraged for food until luck led one of his hiking excursions to the man who rescued him and drove him to Wolfs Corners. Maybe Lecter survived, patched him up, and dumped him once he became dead weight. Maybe someone else did that, one of his many elusive accomplices. Or maybe Will stitched himself up in a bout of despair. It was hard to tell. Drugs, pain, and shock had done a number on him, warping his delicate mind into unreliable shards.

In the end, it was his body that acquitted him, the ragged scar tissue on his collarbone and cheek the work of an unskilled man in a hurry, his memories hazed with the trauma of surviving murder, his voice shrill with the horror of starvation and isolation.

They let him go, first from emergency care, then from the local police station. State police gave him a cell phone, prescriptions, and a stack of business cards with names to call once he settled back home. The FBI put him on a flight to Maine with the intention to visit him within two weeks. Will acquiesced blindly, feigning the kind of abandonment that comes when one believed all to be doomed and cannot yet grasp he has lived to tell the tale. Shell-shocked, meek. A little boy lost and found.

Jack would come and the press would come, Will thought as Pittsburgh grew smaller and smaller from his window seat. It did not concern him in the least. He had survived a dragon and a monster, had slain one and escaped the other. He had wrung this new destiny, earned the mellow retirement that comes with great sacrifice. He would soar just like his airplane, over the terror and the abnormal, the groove of madness hiding in the Pennsylvanian woods. He would go back home, to marshmallows and dogs and kids’ laughter over fake blood. He would conquer it this time, the promise of eternity devoted to being content and wholesome and safe.

Finally settling, Will stretched his legs and thought of Molly’s sweet voice, shaken and so relieved as they briefly talked over the phone. He thought of Hannibal’s eyes, inscrutable and so very alive, under the purple sky. How silence had done them good, had made them certain and strong in ways he couldn’t fully fathom yet but warmed him still, made him sit up straighter in his seat.

It hit Will then that he was not sure who the “they” were in his train of thought—if him and Molly, or Hannibal and himself.

For the first time since the fall, Will felt doubt. And right after, its twin, fear.

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Molly picks him up from the airport. She looks the same. She is bundled in a red sweater with white reindeers, her hair in a messy ponytail. Thanksgiving, that’s right, Will surmises, waiting for a joyful memory associated with the occasion to ping. When none comes, he belts his best smile and rushes to Molly outside security. They hug. She smells the same, chalk with a hint of cedar. She’s bitten her nails down to the quick. If just now or over a period of time, it was impossible to tell. She is skinnier though, he notes on closer inspection. Her blue eyes are papery with tears.

“I knew you’d come back. I just knew it. You’d never leave us. Not you. Not you, my sweet man,” she says over and over again as she takes his arm, weaves him out of the airport and into the parking lot. Wally is waiting at home with the dogs, she interjects, all quick and strained and brimming up with hopefulness.

Will tries to hold on to his smile as he slips down the passenger seat, his face throbbing where she touched his scar and said: “What did that horrible man do to you?”

Will is fairly certain she means Hannibal. He doesn’t tell her it was his bidding, the bad stitching, nor that it was his fault, the vicious stabbing. He vows to never say his name again from there on out. The same as before. Only better. Only better now that you are free, he reminds himself as they step into the driveway and six dogs bound wildly to maul him after such long absence. Wally trails behind them shyly, mittens and wool cap on, clean of any fake fangs or blood. Will hides his disappointment by awkwardly patting the boy on the shoulder.

After dinner Will lies down—on his bed, in his sheets, his shorts, his shirt, his pants—next to his wife and across the hall from their son, and talks about renovations to their home, plans for their Thanksgiving meal. Mundane stuff, the stuff psychiatrists would have told Molly is safe to discuss with a trauma victim easing back into the flow of life. Will nods and replicates his best smile from the airport all the while a mounting breathlessness climbing in his chest. Before it can escalate into a full-blown condition, he holds Molly’s face close and drags her into a forceful kiss. She half gasps, half laughs, and it is a familiar sound, comfortable if not exactly comforting.

She falls asleep quickly after that, head on his shoulder, hand gripping his waist. Will can feel joy and relief pour out of her in droves, slightly suffocating in their intensity and demand.

Once he is sure the house is firmly asleep, Will slips into the bathroom and strips off his clothes. He steps into the empty tub and cuddles up in the dark, attempting to lull away whatever is clawing at his belly.

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It rains and snows constantly once he arrives. He stands on his porch at first light and tells himself he did not bring Winter here, that severe weather means marshmallows and family gatherings around his out of tuned piano where they exchange grandiose tales of gore and fright.

No. That’s not right. He doesn’t have a piano in this house (his house. No. their house) and they never did trade on the macabre (Molly and Wally, he means). No, that’s someone else’s life, someone else’s memories.

Should he mourn them?, Will wonders as he takes a sip of his coffee, black, no sugar, maybe a splash of whiskey soon, just to wake him up, to make him feel steadier. It’s been three weeks since he came back home, surely no one would fault him for a good-natured swig. His father used to call them that after a long day’s work: “a good-natured swig.” And look what it got him: bad breath, an empty wallet, and stage-4 liver cancer.

No whiskey then.
Will tips his mug onto the ground and watches the white snow turn into brown slush.

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They don’t speak about what happened between their last goodbye at the hospital and his miraculous homecoming ten weeks later. It’s a gap that silence can patch up, Will thinks, heal them, the way it did before. Not between them, but the other them, the them-them that was never truly a “them,” not a legitimate one like the Grahams anyway, a them sanctified by marriage, approved by all.

Will is thankful really, in the end, that they, the Grahams, don’t speak of it at all, of the void that could so easily turn into a black hole if they kept on feeding it.

Yes, Will hums as he regards the winter wonderland sprawling outside his kitchen window, this is better. This tacit agreement about talking only of memories shared. Soon will be Christmas, lights will need hanging, trees wreathing, presents wrapping. Marshmallows will be crisped on the fireplace. We will be happy again, he tells himself, like the happy family we always were. We will make more newly improved happy memories, and then we will go on, thriving, onwards. Being happy like happy people are.

Purposefully, he walks to the pantry and busies himself with pulling ingredients to bake graham crackers from scratch, accessing a muscle memory from another time, another person—a silent bystander who, from a distance, looked as spices were mixed in a wood-paneled kitchenette.

It seems harmless enough.

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Nightmares set in on the one-month mark. At first they are timid, broken little things that make sleep a touch harder without a muscle relaxant or a mild soporific. But quickly they grow roots and shake him awake every hour or so. Molly finds him in the strangest places, not sleepwalking exactly, but not fully conscious either. The bathtub, the attic, twice the kitchen floor. Once in a hallway closet. He hides in the dark and whimpers as if wounded. His temperature shoots up and he sweats through his clothes, that is how much stress his body is under when he dreams.

Molly kisses him, always so kind and careful, never pushing for anything beyond the paltry semblance of domestic intimacy. There is no sex between them, only this, her gentle care-taking. Will does not know when he reverted to be a limp beast again, but here they are. At least his condition keeps the FBI away, keeps him safe in his happy-family snow-globe. Sometimes he overhears Molly on the phone, her voice brooking no arguments with those who hound Will for his attention. Silently he cherishes her gatekeeping, the do-or-die way she dedicates herself to his recovery.

He doesn’t tell Molly, but by the second week he has found a way to alleviate the night terrors.

He walks to the living room and presses his naked body against the icy windowpanes.

It is not the cold that soothes him; it is the belief that this ritual can bring change, can function as a convoluted echolocation that will draw peace to him. He has no rational words to explain his irrational behavior so he cannot share it with Molly. She could not understand what is mysterious to him as well. So he keeps it all to himself, knowing that she will never guess it if he does not speak.
Sometimes Will wakes up shivering on the porch, his bare shoulders and feet sprinkled with fresh snow.

After a month goes by, Will is afraid of what he is wishing for, what he is trying to lure with his vulnerable body. He is afraid, most of all, of being heard.

So he buys a new lock for the bedroom and begs Molly to keep the key overnight. He suffers through the nightmares like a saint suffers through martyrdom: teeth gritted and thankful for being given the chance to touch something unfathomable without having yet died.
Christmas, Maine

With the frequency and violence of his night terrors, counseling gets mentioned once or twice in casual conversation. But then Christmas looms nigh and tasteless thoughts get waylaid by mistletoe and candy-cane.

Besides, how could Will articulate that these nightmares are tame by comparison to what he has seen in waking life, nothing more than wandering into a black forest of varnished tar for what feels like centuries, the weight of loneliness squeezing his brain to the point of tears, of madness, of wanting to peel the skin off his bones so relief can be found in the form of depersonalization?

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Without consistent sleep, Christmas happens suddenly. Will throws himself into making the celebration special, a hallmark of transformation and of good omens to come. Never a Christian, Will bakes three types of pies, layered and stacked up high with whipped cream and homemade jam. For three days, the house smells of wonderfulness, the notes of cinnamon and nutmeg brightening up their remote corner of the world.

Always sensible, Molly eventually cottons on to his agitation. She drapes herself over Will’s good shoulder as he pulls a cake out of the oven, and kisses his ruddy cheeks.

“Slow down, cowboy! Plenty of Christmases to fatten us all up!,” she teases and he drafts a smile that comes out a grimace because his Sacher Torte has failed to rise properly and his peppermint ganache is fast congealing. Because he must sleep well tonight or the following morning will have him bitter and not enjoying Wally’s surprise when he opens the lures Will has so diligently crafted for him over the last few days.

That’s what matters now. Will wants to wade knee-high in Wally’s childishness, soak up his particular brand of innocent rejoicing.

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When Wally does open the hastily wrapped package in the bleary dawning light, he regards Will suspiciously, his fingers pinching the blue feathers upside down. Wally has been giving him side glances since he found Will crawling on the kitchen floor one night, sober, naked and crying. They didn’t tell his mother. There was no point.

“Say ‘thank you, dad’,” Molly admonishes. Wally narrows his eyes and repeats the words blankly. Will resents him the lack of enthusiasm and continues to do so as the boy refuses to eat his plum-stuffed turkey or partake in his rhubarb-gooseberry latticed pie.

“You know how kids are at this age, honey,” Molly says breezily after Wally excuses himself to go play with the dogs. “They go through phases, grow out of stuff. It means nothing. Really.” She pats his hand in her cursory way, but her kindness feels grating this time around, so Will pulls his fingers abruptly and starts scrapping uneaten pie into the trash.

Afterwards he gives in to the whiskey bottle stashed behind the baking powder and sits outside until it grows dark, his mind rancid with savage disappointment, so thick it nearly chokes him.

It is lonely inside, so he lingers on the unlit porch long after the cold has immobilized his shoulder with pain.
By midnight Will cannot tell his emotions apart, can only fall into them helplessly and hope they will find a way to work themselves out, to purge from his bloodstream through sweat, tears, or piss. Anything, anything but the rabid energy that threatens to engulf him, the primal fear that if he gives an inch to his weakness it will swallow them all whole, hook line and sinker.

When he finally stumbles into the living room, it is a moonless night, the fairy-lights on their seven-foot tree the only thing keeping him from pitch black. There is an eerie stillness in the air, not unlike the harbinger of a snow storm. But Will knows better. He wraps himself in a blanket and gets his loaded rifle from the locked cabinet.

When he sits on the porch, gun and tumbler in hand, he cannot tell if it is anger, duty, or excitement that drives him back outside.

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Will gets away with standing vigil for almost a week, almost to New Year’s, until Molly finally intervenes. She takes the gun back to the safe and wraps him in bed, her arms and legs pressed against his back. He has drunk some by the time she comes along, so when she holds him and rocks against him, he is raw around the edges, the seams holding him together threadbare at best.

“We don’t have to talk about it,” she whispers into his neck. “Wally was getting scared, that’s all.”

Will wants to hum in agreement and apologize, but instead he finds himself half mumbling, half sobbing: “But I want to talk about him, Molly. I have to. You must understand. You must. I did do it. I did.”

He raves on and on, as she smooths his hair patiently, making little shushing sounds, and that is how Will knows, knows with irretrievable clarity, that she has no desire to understand. Then or ever, she has no desire to truly see him.

He knows when he spits out, equal parts desperation and contempt: “Molly, don’t you understand?! I fell in love with him. A little at least, but it was enough. A little went a long way! Don’t you understand what that makes me?”

And she chants back, “It’s okay, honey, it’s okay. You are safe here with me. I love you. Just go to sleep. Shh shh, sleep my sweet man.”

He did, resentfully, and when he woke, he fought her for the first time since he had returned home. Then he picked up his gun and his blanket, and went outside to sit and wait.

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The days stretch long when you roam hungry. Will’s hands grow chaffed around the barrel, his eyes teary from scanning the shimmering white darkness for familiar shapes.

The monster did not visit and Will, gone half-mad, did not relent.

New Year’s Day came and went. Molly made more forceful references to therapy. Wally peered at him from behind drawn curtains, fearful and perhaps glad to see Will holding guard. Will looked back at him and pushed a finger against curling lips: Hush hush, little boy or the monster will sniff you out.

Wally ran away and Will smiled into his tumbler, the cold burn of whiskey fueling his heaping regret.
Jack left messages about a child serial killer. Will regarded the notes scrolled in Molly’s neat script and left on the kitchen table. He was unsure if it meant a child was killing or children were being killed.

Will sipped his coffee, curiosity piqued but quickly deflated as he looked out into the freshly fallen snow. The vast expansion of untouched whiteness renewed his sense of loneliness. Not the kind of loneliness that comes from being alone, but that which comes from knowing company can only bring disaster.

Feeling exceedingly off-kilter, he took his coffee to the outside barn and started working on new fishing lures—lures, which he now knew beyond a shadow of doubt would never be used by anyone.

For the first time in a long long time, Will looked up at the feathery sky and thought of Abigail.
Sometime in Winter, Molly came home from her special ed. job brimming with undisguised mirth. Will was on his sixth whiskey that early afternoon, but he had gotten good at passing drunkenness for moroseness. She twirled into the kitchen and slapped a red square on the counter.

“Look! Look what Daryl made!”

Daryl, Will vaguely remembered, was a particularly challenging case, a boy so withdrawn he rarely spoke. His parents had grown increasingly frustrated, enraged, and ultimately numb. Will could relate.

Molly, however, always a kind dogged soul, thrived on a challenge. She loved Daryl like victims love a broken toy—with the impulse of returning it to an untouched state they themselves could never revisit.

Perhaps that was unfair, though.

“But not less true,” his mind supplied flatly.

Will looked at the red square, the runny black writing, the messily glued shapes. It was a Valentine card, he realized slightly dazed. Was it February already? Where did January go?

“Do you see?” Molly said flushed, unwinding her scarf. “He did that!”

Will nodded. “I see. Is it for you?”

He was fully aware that it was and, that by sharing it with him, Molly was seeking partially his enthusiasm, partially his endorsement of her professional skills.

“Yeah. I mean, it’s pretty basic roses are red kind of stuff. But it’s the first time he expresses a willingness to participate in societal conventions! I mean, it’s a big deal!”

“Hmm hmm.”

Will moved away to the window, letting his eyes lose focus on the glittering snow. Behind him, he could feel Molly bristle, cycling rapidly through shock, disappointment, indignation and, last but not least, the degradation of serotonin that resulted in deep exhaustion.

Will knew all about this cycle. He had just gone through it staring at a nine year old’s attempt at a handmade Valentine.

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Suicide had become a foreign concept. It dawned on him one day when he had again fallen asleep against the wooden balustrade, rifle dangerously perched against his chin.

Suicide used to be a talisman in the early days, a protective shield against the enormity of his actions, the unerasable consequences of his choices. He couldn’t change the past but maybe if he died, he’d be given a reprieve. Not atonement exactly, just a reset button. To be born again, not poor, not bitter, not broken. Whole. To be made again whole.

No. Truthfully what he wanted out of death was:
1) to be left off the hook;
2) to be made invisible to all who had ever known him;
3) to be a ghost yet remain alive.

That’s it. He wanted out so he could start afresh.

(A divorce then, not a demise. But that conclusion he couldn’t bear so he buried it.)

The thought was a loop and that loop fed into itself, never reaching a feasible conclusion. He couldn’t die and live, and he couldn’t be truly alive if he so yearned to die.

So the realization that he did not fantasize about killing himself any longer should have felt as some kind of hard-earned victory, a thorn pushed out by healthier flesh.

Instead it emphasized how hopelessly stuck he was. So far gone into numbness that he had now resigned to stay put, hurting and immobile, waiting for the elements to run its course, but unmotivated to speed their natural conclusion.

Could self-hate be such a paralytic?, he mused as he gulped down some godawful moonshine and thought back to his father’s eyes in his last months—holed out things where moths could huddle.


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Will wished to say he felt him coming before the dogs did, but that would be a lie. The dogs barked around noon, waking him up from a feverish doze, and then he was standing on the porch, as massive and commanding as Will remembered him being. As if no time had passed at all, but for the sprinkle of gray in his beard.


Jack shook his head in open distaste.

“You are not looking good, Will”

“Well, murder will do that to you.” Will purposefully did not specify if he saw himself as the victim or the perpetrator in that statement. He stumbled up and moved away.

“I came to let you know we canvassed the area. The Pennsylvania area where you were found.”

“Oh?”

“There were no definitive traces. Not until this week.”

Will stopped behind the screen door. The dogs scratched to be let in.

“Did you come to tell me you found his body?”

Jack hesitated, the tell of his uncertainty the way he tilted his head down.

“Not exactly. We found a great amount of his blood though, on a clearing. Ripped clothes. Some hair, strips of skin. Teeth.” He took a breath before muttering, “A bone.”
Will’s head whipped back at that.

“Which bone?”

“What?”

“Which. Bone?”

“A toe.”

Will snorted.

“Not exactly vital.”

“Do you think he is alive?”

“I don’t care.”

“Don’t you really? So why are you sitting out here for months with a gun in your hand?”

Molly. Molly called him, told him about his vigils, Will realized with a dull thud. They thought fear drove him to it, fear of a second and most deadly home invasion. Dear lord.

“Maybe I like the snow.”

Jack sighed at that, visibly frustrated.

“I just wanted to let you know what we found so far.”

“A toe and some blood.”

“A toe, much skin and blood, Will. Likely a fatal encounter with wild life.”

“Or another killer.”

“Or another killer,” Jack conceded.

“Do you think I did it, Jack? Finally cut him up into pieces?”

The way Jack slow-blinked made it clear the thought had crossed his mind once or twice.

“Did you, Will?”

Will chuckled at that, low and bitter.

“No. No, I didn’t. Not for lack of trying though.” Will tipped an invisible top hat and opened the front door. “Now if there’s nothing else I gotta go and fed the dogs, Jack.”

“Will...” he reached out and held his elbow. Will flinched and Jack dropped his hand. “We are all very sorry for what happened to you.” Jack reflexively touched his own cheek. “But we will get him, if something else didn’t already. In the meantime, try to get some rest. You look unwell.”

And with that platitude Uncle Jack once again turned on his heel and strode back to a sleek SUV, his black overcoat flapping in the frigid wind, big boots careless of smudging pristine snow.
For a couple of nights after Jack’s visit, not even whiskey could ease Will into sleep. He stayed silent and let Molly touch him, kiss his slack mouth. He commended himself on putting up a convincing performance of a case of the flu mixed with a bad hangover. He cried sparsely, once or twice in the empty bathtub when we was sure no one was home. He must have miscalculated at least once though, because one day he came downstairs to find Wally making pb&j sandwiches in the most accusatory silence.

When it got too cold to stand outside, Will began rationing those moments carefully, like measured bites on a discontinued candy bar.

Then one night, it must have been late March, he saw him standing under the towering oak tree at the edge of the property. It was a full moon and the dogs were roaming for easy prey under the house. The man stood as if the weather didn’t touch him, the ice around his ankles collecting gracefully, his hair whitened out by snow.

Will’s first reaction was to wave. Absurdly, his hand shoot up in an aborted motion before he caught himself and started backwards up the porch stairs in search of his gun. The man didn’t move. From afar he looked like an apparition, Will easily tricked into believing his feet hovered above ground. Only Will knew better now.

Quickly, Will grabbed his hunting rifle and his blanket and stepped on the slippery frost with sturdy strides. If the approaching gun caused the man any distress he did not show it. When Will was close enough to shoot him through and through, he commanded with a shake of his head: “Walk,” and the man did, heading instinctively to the barn behind the house.

They trudged the half mile under aquatic moonlight, the sound of crunching feet all that disturbed the air. Once they reached the barn door, Will said, “Open,” and the man did.

Inside, Will kept his gun trained on the man’s face. It was a face Will knew well, thought about frequently. There were cuts and abrasions now, likely a broken nose, the bangs longer over his sunken eyes, but apart from that, Hannibal looked fairly similar to the last time they met. Will glimpsed at the man’s naked hands. Ten fingers. Bluish with cold and scraped along the knuckles, but ten nonetheless. Will had to tamper down the insane urge to pull off the man’s boots and check for his toes.

“Sit,” Will pointed at the wooden crates he kept as furniture. The man did that too, clutching his left side slightly. Will knew that wound as intimately as if he had put it there.

Will regarded him and the man regarded him back, amusement flickering in his closed down face. He looked simultaneously younger and very very old, dangerously old really, cunning with knowledge.

“You came,” Will said after a while.

“I did.”

His voice was raspy. Underuse probably. Will thought he might be catching longing in there somewhere, but it could have been smugness.

“ Took you a while,” Will answered simply, hoisting the gun to better aim at the man’s heart.

Hannibal chuckled, a low thrumming sound. “Do accept my sincere apologies for any disturbance my delay may have caused.”
Will’s index finger pressed lightly on the trigger. “Shut up,” and the man did but the smile lingered, as sharp as Will remembered. He could see the outline of fangs, real fangs, under the split lip. Blood crusted the gash, real blood, iron-flavored. Will could smell it from where he stood.

Time stretched on. The man sat on his crate breathing evenly and Will sat in front of him, six feet away, trying to decide if this meeting was real or a particularly vivid dream.

“Are you cold?” Will asked suddenly, and the man shrugged. Not an important enough question to use his voice.

Will moved gingerly then, the gun erect between them. He kept gliding forward until the barrel touched Hannibal’s chest. Will felt the metal meet flesh and smiled, a lopsided thing. He could smell him this up-close, stale sweat and dried blood and the forest’s floor: bark, animal bones, rotted leaves. Organic smells, things that could be grasped and twisted and crushed.

Hannibal’s breath stayed steady as the barrel nuzzled his solar plexus. Will kept his eyes on the grey fleece sweater, threadbare and stained. He could see bloody welts were the fabric had torn. Carefully, Will pulled the blanket from his shoulders and passed them onto Hannibal’s back, looping the frayed edges around his neck. Then, very slowly, he tucked the knit under Hannibal’s chin. Will let his thumb find the dimple, rest against it for a second. It was a perfect fit, he noticed absently.

Walking backwards to his crate, Will sat down and pulled a bottle from a toolbox. He took a swig and stared at the man in front of him, swaddled in an oxblood-and-black herringbone blanket, hair flickering silver under the slanted moonlight. His breath might have picked up, just a bare wheezing, but Will couldn’t tell for sure, not over the drumming flooding his own ears.

Hannibal didn’t say anything and nor did Will. They regarded each other quietly, silence ripe with a mutiny of secrets, until the sound of birdsong came through the cracked windows, a new batch of snow covering their night tracks.

It was almost like old days.
The creaking of a heavy door roused him, immediately followed by Molly’s calling. She sounds abrasive and overwrought, Will thinks blearily. It is after noon and she spent all morning frantically calling hospitals in the area. When she sees the fallen whiskey bottle, something cracks in her voice.

“Enough is enough, Will. I have to draw the line somewhere. I know you are hurting, but you need help. You gotta see someone.”

He careens towards her shoulder, blinded by the excess of sunlight. His head throbs and it takes him a moment to get his bearings, but when he does, he struggles for the gun only to tumble forward, his legs pins and needles from sleeping seating up. Molly holds him by the armpits, displeasure furrowed steep in her brow. That face alone, the pain etched there, has him nearly sobbing an apology, promising anything, anything at all for her not to leave him behind.

She rans a hand over his stubble and smiles her sad smile. “I will never leave you,” she says. “I love you pumpkin.” And just like that, Will is upright and stumbling out of the musty barn, the rifle nudged safely under Molly’s arm.

As they sludge back home through the melting snow, she speaks again: “At least you had the good sense to wrap up and not freeze to death.” Only when Molly tightens the herringbone blanket around his neck does Will catch a whiff of rust and sweat under his nose. He inhales deeply.

Not a dream after all. Worse yet, the monster had made sure to tuck him warm before vanishing into the morning light.

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Will vows, with renewed conviction, to stay away from all that poisons him. Whiskey, crime, the past. The barn.

Before fully committing to closing that door in his mind, however, he must steal away from Molly’s arms and sprint through half a mile of dirty snow, a flashlight and a plastic bag his only belongings.

On a crate, he deposits candles, matches, a bottle of sparkling water, crackers, and a makeshift first aid kit. His heart hammers with an illicit thrill. It takes him back to when he fed strays in Louisiana against his father’s wishes. There was barely enough food for an adult man and a growing child, let alone a pack of starving mutts.

Next to the items, Will places the herringbone blanket, neatly folded and unwashed. There had been internal debate about leaving some of his clothing but that felt too intimate, clearly prohibitive. Will presses his nose against the knit one more time before putting it down. It looks, and it definitely feels, sentimental, but Will is saying goodbye, so he gives himself permission to
entertain something more complicated than pain or anger for once.

At last, he distributes the cards. His handwriting is a blotchy cursive, not unlike that of poor Daryl, but it is all he’s got so he gives it his all. Perched against his offerings, the inky lettering stands out obscenely. “Crackers,” it reads. “Water,” “blanket,” “medical supplies.”

Will smiles an impish smile—a thing he didn’t know still lived inside him—and slips back out, his step lighter and his smile fonder, buoyed by his display.

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In the next few days the house grows draftier. Will sticks blankets under doors and insulates the windows in his bedroom, but the cold seeps in nonetheless. April showers clean the ground of runny snow, the wind warms up and brings in the smell of sap and honey.

Will sits dutifully at home, in a rocking chair Molly inherited from a long dead Southern Baptist grandfather, dogs gathered in a lazy heap, cooking book open on his lap. Hot tea steams by his side.

His mind unspools in the domestic placidness, screaming silent screams. It could fill a whole room, the screeching sound of his discomfort. He could spoon his spleen with it and feed it to the dogs.

He shuts his eyes and balls his fists on the vermilion portion of the cushions. He thinks of blood gushing from fibers, wool tearable like skin. It’s a fleeting thought, but it helps.

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In the meantime: an anniversary his phone reminded him not to forget. There are colorful balloons and store-bought cake, protracted bedtime sex, and a photo with Wally which Will hopes will not end up in a nightstand splattered with blood.

Glancing at Molly’s mobile screen, Will notices that Wally doesn’t smile in the photograph, his eyes downcast in a frown that matches that on his mouth. He plays with a loose thread on his Yankees sweater. His hair is too short, giving him an institutionalized look, his hands too stocky for such a gawky body. Will frowns in return. What an annoying kid.

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Sometimes in the listless afternoons, Will plays music on the radio. It began as an innocent exploration of his phone and concluded with three-hour-long time-skips where all is lost to him but the irate sounds of antique harpsichords and Italian contraltos, both battling for dominance over his attention.

It is a zero-sum game. No one wins, but Will finds oblivion anyway.

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By the third week, Will allows himself to step outside under the pretense of good behavior. He takes a detour to the neighboring woods, watches smoke rise from fireplaces, wonders who starts a fire in late April, pretends to be interested in leaf patterns, until he finally meanders back to the barn.

To the casual eye, nothing has been disturbed. The cards, the goods, they are all neatly lined up, apparently untouched. A film of dust collects on the blanket. Will picks it up and breathes it in,
scans for forensic tracings, skin cells, hair follicles, bloodstains, something to ease the souring in his stomach. He does not allow himself to put into thoughts what grips him because that feeling is oily and it may stain his mouth.

In the end, he walks back home disquieted, arms wrapped around his torso. It is colder now under the high Spring sun than it ever was inside the Atlantic. Will feels naked.
Early Spring II

Chapter Notes

A Saturday special: two chapters for the price of one.

Again and again, Will wakes up standing on the porch.

The first time, Wally found him still asleep, eyes open but unseeing. He called for his mother, carelessly loud, and Molly walked Will back to bed, hands hovering over his back. She brought him stale cookies and a hot-water bottle, stopped short of fluffing his pillows, but not of offering to read him the news.

The last time, Hannibal found him.

Will must have felt him across the cobwebs of sleep, because when he opened his eyes he saw him peering at him only a hairbreadth away from his nose.

“Hi stranger,” Will said and Hannibal laughed. Silently, an arch of eyebrows and a tick of the lips, but Will knew a genuine laugh when he saw one. Hannibal took a step back, stood ramrod straight with a hand perched under his chin, and accessed him long and hard.

“When did the sleepwalking return, Will?,” he finally asked, and just like that, they were back to sitting across from each other in offices, crime scenes, tables, forests. Will looked up and saw the man before him dressed in a black and red suit, dark hair slicked back in an impeccably varnished helmet.

Will laughed then, an aborted little giggle that sounded ugly even to this ears.

“It doesn’t work like that, doctor.”

“What doesn’t, Will?”

“Some things don’t just ‘return.’ They never really went away. They are dormant but constant.”

“Like symptoms of a chronic condition?”

“Something like that. You think once they leave, you are rid of them for good. But you aren’t. You can’t be. Not when they are part of you.”

“Are we still talking about your sleepwalking, Will?”

“No. You know very well we are not.”

Hannibal huffed a small inward chuckle and the past dissolved around him like fog. The man on the porch came in sharp relief, his faded jeans and nondescript sweater, the black leather jacket, weathered skin, hair windblown and messy. A little bump in his nose betrayed a badly healed fracture.

“You are not you,” Will whispered unbidden, the cold under his feet suddenly unbearable, the
pressure in his forearms crushing. He looks down and sees he is barefooted, nails cutting into the bare skin where he hugs himself protectively. He is only wearing his underwear.

It is bright out and Will recognizes the upholstery immediately, which meant he was indeed standing on his porch, nearly naked and during daylight hours, talking to a wanted serial killer. It could be a nightmare. But Will knows better than that.

He folded his right foot under his left foot and shook his head. “I am too sober to deal with this.”

“The wife’s still keeping you from all damning vices, Will?” Hannibal asked, his voice alight with tiny silver bells.

“Fuck you. I am cold. I am going inside,” Will said, turning around. Showing his back to a killer.

Hannibal did not follow but he did not move either. Will wondered absently if a neighbor could own binoculars or be out bird-watching at that time of day. It did not occur to him that Molly and Wally might still be home until later, when she came down for breakfast.

For a moment, Will stood dazed inside his living room, front door open, looking at the man in a leather jacket through the closed screen door. Hannibal’s stillness made him nearly invisible, an uncannily inanimate object blending with his surroundings. Will sensed amusement radiating from him but that could quickly turn into hunger, so he was inching for the door handle when Hannibal sprung back to life with one deep breath. He smiled a magician’s smile, slick and sly, and proffered his hand.

“Well, it has been a pleasure as always, Will. Should we do this again?”

Will’s feet instinctively perched to take the extended hand. But before he could move forward, Wally’s voice echoed from upstairs followed by barking. Will turned to address a bouncing dog, and when he glanced back at the porch, it was empty.

Cautiously, he dead-bolted the front door, opened the kitchen curtains, and began preparing pheasant in Cajun sauce for lunch.
Late Spring, Maine

Chapter Summary

Thank you for your feedback---you are all keeping me going.

Will slinks into the barn at 7:30 sharp. He lies to himself about not expecting Hannibal to be there waiting for him. He is and he does, so Will just walks up and sits on the crate at the far end of the wall. The loaded gun rests on his lap, conspicuous and completely useless.

Hannibal has lit up some of the candles. It’s crepuscular but Will can see his other offerings lined up between them, dusty and diminished by their presence. It feels too close to the bone to speak, an unexpected disadvantage somehow, even if they are meeting in his property and only one of them has an outstanding warrant for his arrest. So Will stays silent until he can’t help it anymore.

“Are you going to try to kill my family?,” he finally asks.

Hannibal is audibly amused when he says, “No.”

“But that was the plan, wasn’t it? When I found you lurking in my front lawn?”

“Yes,” he answers without hesitation. “Though I was hardly lurking.”

Will keeps his eyes trained on the barrel lying on his knees.

“What changed?”

He can hear Hannibal crossing and uncrossing his legs, the rustling of fabric, almost see the straight line of his spine unwind, sense him choosing the right words.

“I saw you,” he says simply.

Will feels the temptation to ask for clarification but decides against it. He doesn’t want to know, doesn’t want to hear it. Give the devil an inch and he’ll take a mile. He’ll take your whole life too, if you aren’t careful. Will is careful. If there’s anything he learned from being different is to be good at concealing, at evaluating risks conservatively. He shakes his head. He knows what Hannibal means anyway. He saw the damage in him. No self-respecting happy man carries that amount of damage around.

“Why are you here?,” Will demands without really wanting to, but it’s late, or at least it feels very late, three lifetimes and five winters ago, more than he ever thought he could endure, so he can’t help asking. He may not want to help it altogether.

“I told you,” Hannibal’s voice is even but not unkind. “You were missed.”

Will chuckles humorlessly. He puts the gun down against the crate and begins to pace the darker areas of the barn, the crevices where the candle glow can’t reach. Tiredness makes his reckless, but then again he made a truce with death months ago; he cares very little about being shot in the back by a fugitive friend.
“Does your wife know where you are?” Hannibal asks, but it is not lost on Will that he means “who,” not “where.”

“My wife is a saint!” Will’s voice is strained, nearly high-pitched, when he whirs around and speaks. Spite is clearly there, though Will is unsure for whom. He can feel Hannibal’s eyes pressing on him but he refuses to look up or come nearer.

When the silence stretches on, Will begins counting the cracked beams on the ceiling.

“Where you staying?,” he asks at last.

“Up the hills, less than four miles away. Why? Are you going to invite Uncle Jack for a visit?”

Will laughs at the implausibility of that idea. “No!” And then on an impulse, “Are you safe there?”

“For now.”

“How long, would you wage?” Until they find/kill/take you stays unsaid, but Will knows Hannibal knows. They both do, that is why they are here.

“Maybe three weeks? More if I am very careful.”

“I thought you always were.”

“Hmm. It’s different when I am not alone.”

Will looks at him then, head on. He was wearing the same casual clothing, his hands bandaged across the knuckles, two-day stubble. He sat with an ankle crossed over a knee, his boots unsettlingly muddied and scuffed.

Not his shoes, Will thinks. Not alone either.

A tidal-wave of red water rises from the back of his skull, cresting behind his eyelids, threatening to spill into his hands. Will dashes to the barn door, half expecting Hannibal to stop him, but true to his nature, he remains immaculately poised, a wax simulacrum of life were not for his bruised knuckles and growing beard. The slightly liquid glimmer in his eyes. The impatient tapping against his crossed ankle.

“Will,” he says, and Will freezes with his hand on the iron bolt. He turns and finds Hannibal suddenly less than two feet away, arms outstretched. “You forgot your gun.”

Will wants to reach out, snatch the riffle, and beat Hannibal senseless with the stock until all there is left of him is a pile of bloodied bones and a handful of viscera sprawled around the walls like confetti.

But even in the midnight of his anger, Will knows he won’t, that wanting with such violence is as close as he ever gets to letting himself want anything at all. He wants and wants and wants, but wanting only ever got him a broken heart.

So instead of acting, Will turns around gently and walks away into the chilly evening. Not one glance spared, he is carried forward by the tepid hope that if he is to be shot in the head, then and there, at least he gets to call it a day and be done with them all.
Late April brings afternoons warm enough for swimming off Moorhead Lake, if Wally promises to stay close, if Will promises to keep an eye on him.

Neither are very good at keeping the promises they make to Molly, which Will realizes with a start when Wally is but a pinpoint in the open water, and he has been sneaking into the bathroom almost every night to drink bourbon straight out of the bottle while nestled in the empty tub. At least he is not making it to the barn, Will rationalizes torn between screaming after Wally to get back to shore and relishing the silence of being left alone on the patchy grove.

It’s been four days since he last saw Hannibal. Will half expected to have been woken up by gunshot by now, but no, the blissful cacophony of routine made up of Molly’s showers, Wally’s thumping music, barking dogs, and hissing tea kettles, remains unchanged. Like molten lava gelled into a vial, a vital force congealed into black ash.

Will knows he is waiting, but as he throws the line back into the water and sees Wally splash in the distance, he reasons it is a vigil that does not derive strength from admission or temporality, it’s too organic for that.

Like an ocean or a black hole, it vortexes because it can, because it wants, because it does, and because it will. That’s how Will feels about this standoff. Or is it an intermezzo, a fallow season?

That’s a thought that doesn’t get finished because Molly appears on the slope, waving merrily, a basket filled with store-bought pastries and drugstore coffee. Will’s stomach twists when she puts the goods down on a quilted blanket and Wally rushes out to grab a pink frosted donut, spraying water everywhere in his wake. Will shakes off the wetness from his elbow and sleeve, scrunching his nose in what Molly interprets as delight. “Your favorite!” she says as she presents him with a dry-looking apple turnover and a Styrofoam cup of burnt-smelling brew.

Will reluctantly puts down his rod and sits down next to Molly. He can’t stop thinking why on earth would anyone rush to get a pink donut no one in a three mile radius would ever fight for. His mood thunders with an itching impatience, his silence stolen by Wally’s overexcited voice talking rapidly about fishes swarming under the surface, moss and slippery rocks. Molly laughs and her laughter is full, ripe, and scalds like too cold water.

Up above, a hawk flies unseen. Will chews dispassionately and thinks of the sound of gunpowder and the smell of blood.

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It’s 7:30 on a Sunday when Will finally goes by the barn. He’s been drinking since morning, Molly having left to attend some all-day school pageant. Smartly, she took Wally with her.

Will is mildly satisfied with his progress. He has kept the booze to a strictly midnight schedule, has been enthusiastic in bed, once even picked wild flowers on his way back from fishing and placed them on Molly’s nightstand. She kissed him the way she always does, eyes closed and lips tilted up in a smile Will doesn't believe any of them earned.

Though he wouldn't admit it, there’s a hint of fear as Will opens the big wooden door, the kind of misfiring nervousness that results from having fallen out of habit of mastering a particularly
treacherous task. His heart is steady but his hands are shaky. Could be the alcohol though, he
counterpoints, because he’s loathe to think of any other option.

The smell hits him first. It’s sour-sweet, flesh-colored, a bit musky. That almost gets his heart
going, as he steps into the darkened vault.

Daylight is dying and he can’t tell if any candles are on until he walks into the middle of the barn.
He sees him then, in a white shirt, crisp and ironed sharp to the point of tears, and perhaps Will
gasps when he smells the smell at the same time he sees the curved column of his back and his
hands, almost ashen white in that dim light.

There is a waxiness that vanishes when Hannibal straightens, noticing Will skulking against the
wall, and it’s by the way he clutches the towel in his hands, his lovely ten-fingered hands, that Will
can tell he was nervous too, and relieved now.

That flexing of fingers is a handshake and a smile, and vaguely an invitation to sit down on the
makeshift dinner table he crafted, must have been crafting for days now, unsure if the wobbly
crates would have any use, much like the lures hanging from the shelves were crafted with the
promise of stillness, this table, the slices of meat on the plates, their thick rich smell, coppery and
spicy and altogether too familiar, they must have been made with the promise of sturdiness,
because when Will stumbles forward, Hannibal immediately holds him up with an outreached
hand, strong, distant, and absolute.

Hannibal maneuvers him to the top of the table and Will sits in front of the food, the candles weak
but suddenly blazing. Hannibal sits in front of him, carefully folding a linen napkin on his lap.

There’s silver cutlery, white china, glassware, a silver platter and two candelabra, the herringbone
blanket as makeshift tablecloth. Its black and red pattern resembles blood and ink seeping under
their meal.

Will wants to laugh but finds himself frozen. Hannibal tilts his head in a way that encourages him
to start eating, but Will cannot trust his body to move. Time and space have become unpredictably
liquid. He stares entranced as Hannibal cuts a slice of pink meat and touches it to his lips. His shirt
is incandescently white, a blue-midnight bow tied around his neck. His hair is not quite varnished
as once before, but still combed neatly, his shave fresh and precise.

It hurts to look and not to look at all, at the man without the suit, the host at the table, the monster
with a heart.

Will makes a small movement to pick up his fork but ends up touching the blanket instead, feeling
the fabric as if it had ridges, scarred tissue, a skin texture. The warmth of the candles, the rare
meat, and the dust on the wooden crates make the air glossy, hard to breathe, impossibly intimate,
like they are smelling each other, the insides of each other.

Hannibal is staring now, probably with displeasure or mild annoyance. Will can feel it as he rubs
his fingers over the blanket, but he can’t stop, can’t shake the fog that throws him back to the tiny
cabin in the woods, polka dot sheets, the scent of strangers in the pillows and the rugs. Part of him
wants to scream and run, the other part wants to drop his head to the table and cry until all the
alcohol has drained out of him through tears.

When catatonia seems within reach, a bright point yanks him back into the moment, the barn, the
candlelight, the familiar smells that are theirs combined, them-them, and suddenly Will meets
Hannibal at eye level, finding him crouching by his feet, not touching him but staring until his
glare bounced off the back of Will’s skull, slinging him out of a muddy thought spiral.
“Will,” he whispers, and when Will opens his eyes and looks back at him, truly seeing him now, with his longer hair, and frayed sweater, and crooked nose, Hannibal smiles the way only he can smile, without movement or expression, just an imperceptible rearrangement in the heat molecules around their bodies. He can probably smell the alcohol in my breath this up-close, Will thinks recoiling, a tinge of shame and anger on his cheeks. But then, it doesn’t matter, because as he moves back to standing, Hannibal says, “Welcome home, Will.”

Something cracks open and the only way Will can keep hold of that crack is by picking up the fork and silently pushing food into his mouth.
Late Spring II

Chapter Notes

In case you were wondering, things spiral into all kinds of dark and NSFW in chapter 12 and 13.

It’s Wednesday at 9:30, the fifth day in a row that they meet in the barn. This time there is wine, a nice robust Chardonnay, and puff pastry filled with sweet and savory creams. Will drinks slowly, tasting the tannins shimmering on the back of his tongue, the butter coating his lips.

Wherever Hannibal is hiding, there must be an industrial-grade kitchen, Will think absently, slumping deeper in the pillows Hannibal placed against the crates. Will brought a rickety space heater, so they sit in front of it as of a fireplace, petulantly swirling their stolen wine in pricey stemware. The herringbone blanket cushions them from the sawdust on the ground, its red almost erotic under the heater’s glow.

If there was a pretense of distance, Will misplaced it in Molly’s house five days ago.

Will grows sleepier by the minute, has fallen asleep once before. Molly looks at him curiously when we lugs back home late at night, falls asleep on the couch, disheveled but sober. She stopped waiting up for him, and for that Will is thankful.

Small mercies.

Will and Hannibal do not talk. Silence is a strange blessing when shared by two overly imaginative minds. It weaves a sort of spell, stringy and light like gossamer. It binds things together that had no business getting along.

Will keeps his mouth shut mostly because he is afraid of what answers he might get. More pressingly, he is restless over the possibility that Hannibal must move on, time must be running out already, his location can’t be truly secure. Maybe it shouldn’t be, Will’s brain supplies. Maybe he should get caught. Maybe this time you are broken enough to be a functional lure. Maybe this time you get to keep him.

Hannibal sniffs at his wine. It’s a sound that precedes speaking, the sound Hannibal makes when he is seeking an opportune overture. Will knows this about him, knows many other details of his inner mechanics that he doesn’t know even about himself.

He does not know, however, if the man sitting two feet away from him on the dusty floor still has all ten toes or lost one in a Pennsylvanian forest. Not knowing is eating Will alive. He chalks up much of his day-drinking to the possibility someone else up in the hills may know the answer to this question.

Before Hannibal can say anything, Will asks rashly:

“When you leaving?”

Hannibal side-eyes him, a close scrutiny that Will has grown complaisant of. Neither pretend to miss the “me” at the end of the question.
“Must I leave?,” Hannibal says instead.

“Don’t you? Jack came over once. He wasn’t convinced you were dead then. Can’t be more convinced now.”

“Can’t he?”

Will gives him an unamused look and gestures at their food, but he is really thinking back to Hannibal mentioning he was not alone at his current hideout. Company makes one sloppy. Will should know.

Unknowing or unconcerned, Hannibal concedes, “Perhaps not.”

“So...soon?,” Will insists.

“Why worry about the future, Will? Can’t we enjoy what we have now?”

“And what would that be?”

Will’s voice is biting, much more spiteful than he intended it to be. In speaking, he tipped his glass almost to the point of spilling. Hannibal reaches out to straighten it out, their fingers nearly touching. As Will stares at Hannibal’s hand on the stem, dotted still with fading scratches, his anger ebbs away, the hollowness inside him hurting deeper, like a grave freshly dug open.

Before Hannibal can answer, Will says, rushed and low: “Don’t go.”

The air changes around them then, that way it always does when they are together in an enclosed space, like carbon dioxide outweighing oxygen. It gets too brittle to breathe.

So before Hannibal can answer that either, Will scrambles up and leaves, the half-drunk wine abandoned by the heater. As he walks into the lukewarm evening he tells himself he has to let this (him) go, needs to stop feeding the graveyard with new casualties before there’s no unoccupied ground left.

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The moon is full and the television is on when he gets to the house. Wally and Molly are playing some game in the living room, laughing as they trample over each other. Will sees them from the porch window, careful not to announce his presence. The dogs perk up at his smell but don’t whine, used to be without him by now.

Will sinks down to the steps and wishes he had a smoke. He thinks back to his father’s two-pack-a-day yellowed face and can’t tell what killed him faster, the booze or the Marlboros. Or the heartbreak, he throws in there just because he can.

Quietly, very quietly, Will admits he wishes Hannibal had kissed him on the mouth all those months ago, when they plunged to their deaths. That he didn’t, leaves Will raw and shaky, a battery running out on the last hiccups of its charge.

He lies down on the stairs and gazes up at the stars. It’s beautiful and clear, and he wishes to die only so he doesn’t need to keep on moving.
“Sometimes it feels like pieces of me never came out of the ocean.”

Will leans on the cracked window, watches the moon rise waning fat in the horizon, his voice nearly breaking when he says, “Like one of those latex dummies in science class, you know, the ones you play with to learn the names? Pull the organs out, rearrange them back inside? Only some of mine are missing.”

The confession hurts him in some secret way, so Will paces to the back of the barn, trying to work off sudden agitation. Hannibal hums behind him in that manner he has of asserting scrutiny through casualness. They do not face each other, not even once. Not looking makes it less real that he is truly here, that he went back, than they are doing this again. Meeting. Talking. Like the good old days—only those weren’t so good after all, were they?

Hannibal leans on the crates as if, Will thinks wildly, he had not moved since the previous night.

He asks in his perfectly neutral voice, “Vital ones? The missing organs.”

Startled, Will shakes his head, struggles against the impulse to turn and face him. “No. No, they can’t be. I am here now. I am alive.”

“But are you happy, Will? You, the wife, the borrowed child. Are you whole?”

“We are as happy as we know how to be.”

“And you?”

“I don’t know how to be whole, Hannibal. You saw to that.”

This time Will stays to finish his sweet wine spritzer, reveling on the citrusy concoction Hannibal surely assembled from scratch. But after that, he does leave, not abruptly but deliberately, as if their hour had just run up.

Hannibal never follows him out, never attempts to touch him, or even comes particularly close. They keep their places like utensils on a table, diametrically opposed, but identically purposeful. Lethal, likely, if ever combined again.

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Will doesn’t keep track of the days, instead focusing on the amount of nights he sleeps through undisturbed. They keep stacking up, amounting to a healthy heap. Conversations about counseling drift away into sunny afternoons by the lake, Wally improving his breaststroke after school, Molly curling around Will in the hammock on lazy Sunday mornings.

In the evenings, Will disappears into the barn where he supposedly keeps his restorative handiwork. Molly jokingly calls it “his man cave,” and encourages Wally to join Will someday in his rugged escapades. She suggests it lightly over breakfast, but the way Wally catches Will’s eye over toast makes it abundantly clear neither of them wishes this plan to come true. They nod agreeably though, before Wally turns on his heel to amuse himself with tonally deficient music that sets Will’s teeth on edge.
“Teenagers,” Molly sighs, rolling her eyes once the thumping begins reverberating from upstairs. “Livestock,” Will thinks darkly into his mediocre cup of coffee.

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Offhandedly, and after a particularly indulgent amount of Port and thick bittersweet chocolate slabs, Will finds himself sharing this fleeting thought with Hannibal. They are both barefooted and lying down in front of the heater, their knees angled towards each other in the reddish darkness.

“Livestock...It would seem that you resent the child, Will,” Hannibal remarked as he swirled his wine unsteadily, his voice a touch too slow to be pretentious. “Does he remind you of yourself? Orphaned but with a shuttered father?”

Will’s sour laughter came out much more indignant than he expected. “Ah, no! Wally doesn’t remind me of myself.” Hannibal had not been as nonchalantly amused as Will expected, which somehow made him feel achingly embarrassed. “No, Hannibal. If anything he reminds me of you.”

Clutching his tumbler, Will shuffled his body away, arms around his chest. “Haughty and always withholding, the bastard,” he muttered into the unlit side of the barn. “Like he could see all that is missing and was always keeping tabs.”

“And finds you lacking, I imagine?”

More than hearing Hannibal’s voice, Will felt it in a spectacular catastrophe of synesthesiac synapses. It touched his lower back first, then traveled featherlight up his spine, grazed his nape, brushed against his hair, traveled back down to his shoulders and nuzzled against his neck. Will wanted to say “stop” but how could he? How exactly can one demand an invisible force to stop ruffling leaves, stop bothering snow off the top of mountains, stop pressing on sore spots?

Will felt his body betraying him, instinctively turning towards the physicality imprinted in that voice, so earnest and so poisonously familiar.

In a powerful show of self-control, Will did manage to keep his eyes averted as he rotated to his back, as if not looking at Hannibal offered an added layer of protection, made him more opaque.

“I never found you lacking,” Will heard him say, incredibly close, so close Will was suddenly unsure voices could hold so much moisture, so much heat. For a split second of disorienting headiness, Will lay down with eyes firmly closed, fully expecting to be kissed, a realization that only dawned on him when fingers grazed his puckered lips.

The contact made him open his eyes. Looming above, Hannibal did not look at him but at his own hand, resting loosely against Will’s mouth. They must have been less than a foot apart, but the half-empty glasses stood between their bodies. Hannibal’s own lips were parted in a vague “o,” smudged red with wine. The eerie stillness made him waxy, a saint on a church altar, only his fingers were rough and warm, almost vibrating off Will’s cupid bow. His skin glowed tanned against the black dress shirt, and Will—quietly, distantly, for once a dispassionate observer in the mad savagery that often was his life—found him the most breathtaking creature he had ever seen in all his zookeeper’s life.

Of all the things he could have said to either break or propel the moment, Will chose: “God. I wish I could kill you and not have you stay dead.”

To which Hannibal answered, slightly slurred, his fingertips apparently resisting falling from
Will’s lips even as they rode the bitter words being spat out,

“You did. We will.”

As Hannibal’s hand moved to the floor and his eyes wandered into parts unknown, Will took the occasion to pull himself upright and try to sober up by shaking his head and clearing his throat. His mouth was too dry, his eyes sandy, his groin tight. He did not trouble himself with clarifying any part of that statement. There was no point. Will knew instinctively what Hannibal meant. He knew it because he felt it too.

If this was what star-crossed love felt like, Will thought while struggling with the onset of a vicious migraine, then he could understand why people died from it.
Thank you for your feedback. It is truly galvanizing!

Twice they fall asleep together in front of the plastic space heater. It wasn’t particularly warm or late, but Will is unsure what kind of work Hannibal is up to these days. He looks mostly healed, but Will maintains his glances to a minimum. Maybe Hannibal looked tired if Will looked closer. Maybe hunting became a compulsion in the face of leisure. Maybe his new bride keeps him up at all hours.

Will doesn’t care to know.

Expertly cooked food is often shared and fine wine consumed, but all in discreet, sensible amounts, respectively cloaked in candlelight. They aren’t friends or conspirators or anything tawdrier. They are acquaintances who shared trauma, blood relatives who lost touch but remember bad family stories.

One evening, after strawberries dipped in freshly whipped cream paired with a soft Zinfandel, Will woke up from an accidental nap, confused by his surroundings, his shoulder aching to high heavens. He saw him then, two feet away, curled up on his side, a hand under his cheek, the longer bangs obscuring his nose and eye. Their bodies mirrored each other, their concave shapes drawing two brackets on the herringbone blanket. Together they became an interruption in speech, a self-contained addendum, punctuation marks made flesh. The observation gave Will’s heart a little tug that could as easily be of apprehension as of wonder.

Emboldened by the lack of reciprocity Will began to inspect the killer who had recklessly fallen asleep by his side. In the orange light, Hannibal’s hair seemed silver and his skin papery with use, maybe with ambitious living. No, with being worn out, smooth like a pebble bracing against raging water, willfully and patiently.

Hannibal’s brow was furrowed as in nightmare, his lips pursed in a thin line. His knees were drawn up as if perpetually protecting his chest from an incoming blow. His feet were bare but for plain grey socks. Everything about him was utterly human, fragile, and vulnerable, almost childlike at that moment, and if pressed, Will would admit to fall in love with him again, right there and then—that is, if he had believed that what he was seeing was a man and not a performance. But Will knew better. So he wouldn’t because he didn’t.

He did consider pulling off the socks to check on his toes. It was a stubborn thought. But there they were. Will was a stubborn man. No point in denying it now. Reigning in that impulse made Will lax towards others, so that his hand moved to find Hannibal’s coat sleeve. It was a strange thing to do, but there they were. Will was a weird man, no point in denying it now.

He rubbed the black leather between his thumb and forefinger, the glint of his wedding ring catching in the heater's glow. There was no plan, no thought of making it to the skin, but then Hannibal stirred and caught his thumb in his cupped hand so quickly that Will thought again of lighting hitting a tree—brutal and unyielding. When Hannibal stilled Will’s motion, he also tugged on his bad shoulder, so that Will had no choice but to follow the painful instinct to jerk forward.
Will closed his eyes when he yelped, and kept them closed when Hannibal snaked his arm under his torso, drawing him closer still. “Come here,” he rumbled, barely above breath, a sleep-roughed whisper, but Will knew him, knew every pitch of his voice, even in silence, and because he did, he went.

As their bodies neared, it came to Will, in slow-motion and incredibly vivid, the image of two brackets coming together, erasing space, bridging the negative space in-between. Becoming one final exclamation mark.

It was heady and surreal, and Will told himself if he kept his eyes closed it wasn’t really happening, that there wasn’t anything to feel sketchy about, that the warmth rushing in was mechanically operated and not organic, that it was not intimate or unseemly to let his body be dragged until it slotted rather effortlessly under a chin, his nose rubbing against a tense Adam’s apple, feeling it bob with maybe a calculated demonstration of uncertainty, maybe authentically taken aback by how effortlessly they fit together, two adult men, stubborn and strange and likely doomed, bewildered that something as simple as human comfort could be within their reach.

When all his scents filled with the animal smell of weathered skin, the salty taste of sleep, Will stopped fighting the burn in his shoulder. Arms clasped around his back tightly, like severed tissue sealing itself back together, a wound made whole.

Experimentally, Will let his lips rest against Hannibal’s throat, so softly there was barely any pressure. There was, however, something maddeningly vulnerable about the hollow of his throat, peppered with end-of-the-day stubble and a smattering of scars, small, whitish, likely old but not too old to have blended in. Will wondered if they had always been there even when Will hadn’t, or if he just had never been close enough to notice them before.

Will increased the pressure on his lips then, spurred by the curiosity of what does a man who eats other men tastes like. The body beneath his stirred, but if out of conscious emotion or sleepy automatism, Will could not tell. Nonetheless, he decided to turn his face away, cheek against shoulder now, in what could only be described as an irrational stab at modesty, a belated attempt at distancing.

“We are not free men,” Will reminded himself, nose buried in leathery folds, “in more ways than one.”

As the measured breathing echoing in his chest began lulling him back to sleep, Will caught the tail-end of an image: Egyptian tombs, the stone walls moving to fit snug even after centuries of windstorms, ominous curses, and manmade intrusions tried to keep them apart. Those chambers of death may have housed many riches, but the greatest treasure was ascending to the afterlife, whole and in peace.

What a baffling thing to find on an old barn’s floor, Will thought drifting off, with nothing else to show for but a herringbone bier and a wreath made of scars.

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Because the hard drinking has ceased, Molly wraps around his waist one night and coos, “I am so proud of you!” Will, who is putting the dishes away, barely contains a huff of bitter laughter. He wants to spit back, “what for?” sarcastically, meanly, but knows better than to show that side of him. It takes them, the Grahams, nowhere. So, instead, he decides to dip his chin meekly, a performance of embarrassment as of acceptance. Molly kisses his hair and smiles, “Good to have you back, pumpkin.”
Will has heard her say that, in exactly the same tone of voice (gentle, mindful, assertive), to Wally and Daryl, to Winston and a handful of other animal and human broken things.

Will folds the kitchen towel in large triangles, then in smaller squares, until his mind is awash with trigonometrical formulae he is sure must belong to someone else. His blood roars in his ears as it did once before in such a dissimilar kitchen, years and years ago.

He is alone now, Molly having joined Wally in the living room. Will closes his eyes and calls Hannibal to him, silently, telepathically, magically, a Southern child bestowing prayers on a dubious guardian angel. He prays not for blessings but for oblivion. He prays to be swept away and erased, to be drown alive in a water that being red is not exactly blood, and being salty is not exactly maritime, a thing of flesh instead, a thing angels probably know nothing about.

Tripping upon that conclusion, Will switches off the kitchen light, and gradually lets his body slip to the tiled floor until he’s against the kitchen cabinets, slumped in perfect darkness.
The Longest Month: July, Maine

Chapter Notes

This is the last chapter where "slow" applies. The next chapters are long, dark, and often NSFW.

Late July brings two birthdates, only two days apart, though two days is all it takes to make them two drastically different people, two men on opposite sides of the horoscope. Or so Molly’s woman's magazine informs Will in a torrid afternoon, where restlessness finds him pacing the den, a Cancer incapable of finding any sympathy for the birthday boy on the cusp of adolescence, a Leo of all things possible. As if one of his children would ever be born a rash, domineering extrovert, Will muses, tracing the spines of books idly and malcontent.

He finds what he was looking for at last, buried between old dictionaries: a tattered leather-bound volume. He pulls it out, runs his fingers over the bleeding marginalia, inky and faded blue-black, hundreds of addenda and cursive corrections accrued over the decades. An heirloom, this cooking book is, the only Will ever possessed. With a sigh, he puts it back on the shelf.

In the end, Will does not bake a cake for Wally’s birthday as he first intended. In the end, Molly picks up a store-bought layered monstrosity on her way back home, and they all sing "happy birthday" blandly over neon-green candles Will is sure are leaking poison into the cake as they drip and sway on the white sugar frosting. In the end, Wally—awkwardly thirteen, perched at the edge of a growth spurt—hugs his mother and quietly accepts the red-wrapped video-games she gives him. Will awaits in the shadows, his scar aching from all the forced smiling.

Molly looks at him for a queasy moment, hesitancy spreading over her prettily flushed cheeks as she realizes that Will is not taking her cue to present Wally with his gift. It figures, after the big display Will had made out of his handcrafted lures at Christmas, but her expectancy still does not fail to annoy him. Will walks over to Wally then, his knees burning with every step forward. The boy doesn’t look up when Will pats him vaguely on the shoulder and slips two twenty dollar bills into his gangly hands. Their eyes lock the moment the money touches Wally’s clammy fingers, though, and Will instantly feels sick, his entire body drenched in muck and tar, the kind of oily nausea one associates with shame and scandal. Wally’s eyes, puffy and blue, speak of deceit and distrust, slimy with resentment. They provoke Will to think of blackmail and hush money, as if instead of celebrating Wally’s birthday, he was buying the boy’s silence.

Clumsily, Will walks backwards, almost fails to plaster on a benevolent smile as he comes into Molly’s line of sight. As it is, whether by accident or design, Molly only curls into his side, her arm snug around his waist. She quips with a hand outreached towards Wally, who surly tiptoes up the stairs: “There goes our boy, a fine lad, halfway into being a man!”

Will nods automatically, pushing a forkful of cake into his mouth. He barely manages to suppress a gag when the starchy sweetness hits the back of his throat, all artificial colors and toxic preservatives unfurling like a closed fist.
Less than a week later, Jack rings the house. Molly, being at work or grown lax in her watchdog efforts, is not there to intercept the call. Jack’s voice is full of exhales, the defeated stubbornness of a man incapable of letting go of a bad vice. Will knows all about that kind of erosion.

“Will,” he says, no greeting, no opening ever given.

“Jack,” Will replies defensively.

“I don’t mean to intrude,” Jack lies. “I just wanted to make sure that you hear it from me first.”

It’s a funny thing, panic. One moment Will is standing in his hallway, staring at the tan landline screwed on the wood-paneled wall feeling self-righteously put-upon, and suddenly, there’s cold sweat dripping down his back and sides, his stomach tied in ice, his mind running tabs of where all the guns in the house are stored, accessing maps to backroads all the way down to Florida.

When Will doesn’t speak, Jack continues, his ominousness predictably weaponized into bullying.

“We ran all the tests. It’s his blood, Will. His skin.”

“Hannibal’s,” Will croaks, because his brain reminds him that the man is alive, but his body now fully believes he is dead and the feeling is nothing short of a systemic malfunction.

“Yes” Jack pauses, so Will knows there is something else. There’s always something else with Jack.

“I doubt you’d call half a year later to tell me something you likely discovered in one week’s time. Can you cut to the chase? I got better things to do than keep taking these trips down memory lane.”

Jack responds to Will’s rudeness with the same displicency he always reserved for harmless subordinates.

“All at once Will is assaulted by images of pink polka dot sheets, the river snaking peacefully under vermilion clouds, the smell of cinnamon baking, meat being braised on hot coals. Blood. Blood always, its iron smell clinging to his clothes, his skin, on his skin, on Hannibal’s hands, blood but not rot, so he knew they were alive and healing. A framed photograph of a little girl and her parents, smiling around a Christmas tree. Their faces perched on a nightstand, looking over him night after night after night under the starlit Pennsylvanian sky.”

“Will?” Jack’s voice pulls at him, not because it’s loud but because it’s wary.

“I am here Jack,” Will sighs, pinching his nose, feeling a headache brew from the back of his neck.

“Bodies, you said. Whose?”

“A couple. Strangulation it seems, buried under a big birch tree near the cabin. Will...”

“No,” Will interrupts abruptly, and he sounds as final as he ever felt. “I am sorry Jack. I have no interest in any of this. That’s in the past. It’s behind me. I’m done. Please don’t call here ever again.”
The buzz of a disconnected line startles him, as the dim hallway suggests that he has lost time, moved from afternoon to evening in a mist of memories and half-truths. His body hurts with a bone-deep tiredness and it takes Will a while to walk back to the living room, sit down, gather his thoughts. He feels like someone who got bad news only to be told at the end of the call that they got the wrong number, all is fine after all, tragedy has not befallen him but some other unsuspecting patsy. It’s terrible, a terrible feeling of relief and lust and complicity Will doesn’t know how to work out of his system.

For a moment, Will resents Molly for not having been there to protect him from Jack’s particular brand of insidiousness. Then it dawns on him that it is not her absence that he resents, but her echo, which he found in Jack’s voice. Both, Will realizes with sundering clarity, address him with the type of sturdy authority reserved to damaged children.

It helps and it doesn't, to think back to the cliff, his mouth filled with blood, his violence regarded with awe, his strength validated by a monster much crueler that Will could ever be.

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That night, in bed, he lets himself think of Hannibal. Not abstractly, like a replayed dream or memory, but concretely, as if he, and not Molly, occupied the spot next to Will on the mattress. The thought, the weight and girth of it, feels almost obscene, but not quite as the fizzy elation that rises with it, the kind of elation, Will realizes, when he used to walk into random gas stations across the country and see chocolate-covered pecans on the stand by the cash register. That. That familiar contentment of renewed surprise, a satisfaction whose bottomlessness is directly correlated to its innateness. It’s in you, it feeds straight into that molten vortex that is you.

You can ignore it, but you will never outgrow it.

Walking to the bathroom, fumbling in the dark not to awake Molly, Will is unsure if he will throw up or jerk off once he is safe inside the cocoon of white tile. Locking the door, he climbs into the bathtub anyway, strips and curls up against the wall, hands gripping the ledges hard, hoping that the cold seeping into his skin can shake the wanting away.

When it doesn’t, Will tries crying, but without whiskey to lubricate his emotions, he is left bereft of coping mechanisms.

In the end, he presses his mouth against the stainless steel faucet, telling himself that is what kissing a monster would feel like: frigid, painful, and unresponsive, only one step removed from kissing a mirror.

Sleep claims him before Will can be sure to have fully convinced himself.

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The next day (and the next and the following one too), Will avoids Hannibal. He busies himself with helping Molly cut star-shaped paper ornaments for Wally’s Spring formal. He makes gingerbread cookies from scratch for her school’s bake-sale. He cleans the garage, the storm
drains, reads a book on the Industrial Revolution. Drinks a finger or two of bourbon a parent gave Molly as a “thank you” gift.

He listens to Monteverdi’s “L’Orfeo” with headphones and a bowl of ice cream, hiding in the attic among winter coats and shoeboxes filled with Christmas decorations. He nearly cries at the end, stupidly, inexplicably, easily.

But he doesn’t go back to Hannibal, doesn’t wonder about him, not after Wally's birthday, and Jack’s call, and the night in the bathtub, which was really just the aftermath of all those evenings lying together by the fire, stretching back to the cabin and its ridiculous polka dot sheets, when Hannibal would slip in to leave handwritten notes and caress his forehead under the guise of medical care, when all along it had been nothing short of a slow-boiling courtship, one Will willed (oh my god he could see it now) quietly, frighteningly quiet, but loudly enough for a monster to hear it thrumming from under a dead kid’s covers.

Will thinks about going to him all the time (all the damn time) but he doesn’t. Because—how could he go now, now that he knows, and still come back?

Right? Right.

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By the tenth day, a sense of discomfort creeps into Will’s bones, suddenly and thunderously. Like mold, it stains his hands, his words, his thoughts. He looks at Molly dancing as she feeds the dogs, a feather dressed in rainbow tie-dye, and he is filled with the urge to be good, to be good and stay good, just like those religious kids in one high-school used to preach. “Stay sweet,” they brandished like a shield against bad influences.

So he picks her up, her feet playfully dangling in the air, and takes her to the hammock on the porch, unwraps her dress and pulls her hair off its bun, kisses her until they are naked and she giggles with the thrill of novelty, of this man he presents himself to be, carefree and impulsive, and if she cared to look closely, a touch too intent.

A part of him shatters then, and he can hear its shards fall dryly on the ground, somewhere inside the most remote and alight clearing of his mind. It hurts to push into her as if he was driving something sharp inside his own body, or perhaps removing something essential, pulling it out with pliers. It’s confusingly similar to pleasure and yet it lacks all its warmth, its comfort. Molly mistakes his whining for lust and, as he hides his face in her fallen hair, there is no correcting her.

Afterwards, they lay intertwined and half-bare in the midday sun, Molly contentedly dozing off, Will shell-shocked as if he had just been beaten into submission.

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The next two times Will goes to the barn, Hannibal is not there. Will waits around, fidgeting with lures and fishing gear, even a piece of wood that could be sculpted into a gift if he really intended to be kind to anyone, but in the end, Hannibal doesn’t manifest and Will has no kindness left, so
when he walks back home he lets the barn door unlocked.

Let wild life come and tear it all apart. Let Jack come and find compromising traces. Let Molly come and discover...what? Space holds no clues, tells no tales.

Besides, if Hannibal has a new companion, aren’t they both skulkers now, limited by the berth of their binding commitments?

Once at home, Will entertains the possibility of going on a bender, but ultimately decides against it. He picks up his rifle and walks to the hills instead.

Let a hunter go and track his monster.
Off Stag Brook, Maine

Chapter Notes

TW for a whole lot of angst and dark dark talk, which in a way is the prelude to smut with these two.

When Will finally finds him, there’s blood on his brow from where he met with a low-hanging branch. There are swatches of sunshine and fog enveloping the white pines, the eerie chilliness of summer in the up-most northeastern state. There’s smoke coming from the massive brick chimney, flamboyant white billows that gave Hannibal away almost as immediately as did the carefully isolated ostentatiousness of the glass-covered house. And then there’s him, sitting on the porch, varnished shoes perched on the iron railing, casually swirling a glass of red wine in a white dress shirt and charcoal slacks, a monster in dinner attire. A monster all dressed up with nowhere to go.

Hannibal tilts his head as soon as he hears the brush crunch under Will’s feet, maybe catches a whiff of spilled blood and sweat before seeing the rifle barrel piercing through the tall hedges.

“Hello stranger,” Will says, hoisting the gun to match his heart.

Unfolding elegantly to standing, Hannibal manages a nearly perfect display of astonishment. “You came,” he whispers a bit breathlessly.

“I did,” Will answers while climbing the six steps to the porch, tracking mud into the pristine cedar floors.

There must have been something about Will’s posture, his scent, his unwavering aim, that transmitted his absolute resoluteness, because instead of the casual moue of distaste he affected every time he found himself on Will’s line of fire, this time Hannibal runs his hands over his immaculate white shirt, up and down as if trying to undo wrinkles that were never there. Briefly, but unmistakably caught off guard. Will delights, and brazenly lets such delight touch his eyes. He loaded his gun with a full round. He left his phone behind. He does not expect to come out of this unscathed, but nothing forbids him from enjoying going mad, if mad he must go.

“I thought...” Hannibal begins in a voice that being level, holds an edge. The edge could be disappointment or sadness, but Will settles for weariness. “I thought we were past guns, Will. By now, we both know you will not end me with one.”

Will decides to ignore the stab at intimacy, at a shared past. Instead he says, “Aren’t you going to invite me in, Doctor?”

Always the perfect host, Hannibal opens the French windows and steps aside for Will to pass him. By doing so, Will admits to the contrived game they both are playing, where neither truly intends to kill the other, not with guns, and likely with no other weapon but their words. Maybe it had always been that way, Will thinks as he walks into the large open-floor plan, kitchen, foyer, and living room all conjoined in one expansive area made of white walls and dark wooden floors.

“Fancy,” Will remarks, waiving around at the many chrome appliances and leather furnishings.
“You’re bleeding,” Hannibal says instead, suddenly standing too close to Will. His hands twitch, as if they were restrained by invisible wire.

“Yeah,” Will hums distractedly, pacing around, putting distance between their bodies. “Hunting accident.”

On top of the roaring fireplace (such a baroque extravagance in mid-July), a photo catches Will’s eye: a done-up blonde with red lipstick and a pink headband kissing a man, older, chubby, snow-covered mountains in the distance, a pair of skis peeking around their gloved hands. Lovers, a new thing, honeymoon perhaps.

“Did you kill them?,” Will points the rifle at the frame.

Hannibal, now standing four feet away with hands fisted in his side pockets (the outline gives him away, perhaps purposefully, Will thinks), does not move to look at the picture. He just replies, impassive and surprisingly fast, “Yes.”

“Both of them?”

“Hmm hmm.”

“How did you do it?”

“I snapped their necks.”

“Did they struggle?”

“They were asleep.”

“Oddly kind of you.”

“I had no interest in making them suffer,” Hannibal shrugs, leaning against an exquisitely upholstered chaise-lounge. (Floral, antique for sure, likely seventeenth-century French. Will wonders if Hannibal purchased it himself, or had the good fortune of highjacking a partner with similar vintage tastes. Neither possibilities sit well with Will, though for a second he is profoundly disturbed by his own growing attachment to the chair.)

“No. I guess not. You just wanted what they had.” Will looks around some more, his eyes taking in the beauty of the space. “Where did you bury them?”

“Outside. Under a particularly soulful chestnut tree.”

Will chortles, ugly and purposefully rude. “What a gentleman. Did you feed them to me?”

This time the answer takes longer to be proffered. The atmosphere changes ever so slightly, the scales tipping deeper into darkness. The sun streams in low and pulpy, throwing inky shadows against the white walls. A dead man’s home, a monster’s borrowed lair.

“I did,” Hannibal finally replies, quietly, almost solemnly.

“And the people in the cabin? In Pennsylvania. Did you kill them too?”

“Yes.”

“You strangled them and buried them under a tree.”
Hannibal’s frown is felt more than seen. Will is keeping his eye trained on the bolt, not his target.

“Jack called.” Will throws out as shorthand. “Did you feed them to me too?”

He knows the answer, remembers the sweet smell of braised meat. Both in the woods and in the barn. The indelible tang of horror and comfort, like screams coiled under the sinew.

“Yes.” Something shifts in Hannibal’s immaculately relaxed posture. His shoulders, Will notes, they heave differently, shakily, not with fear, no, but something closer to uncertainty. “Will,” he starts, as he pulls his hands out of his pockets, “why—”

“No.” Will interrupts with a voice that is too icy to be human, but there they are, at the end of their human ropes, so what else could he sound like at this point? “No. No more lies, no more subterfuges, no more long roads. We are taking shortcuts now.”

Polka dots, skylight filtering rural starlit, bright and free and kind, bloody pillowcases where his wounded cheek wept every night, handwritten notes by medicine bottles that could have been poison but he took them. Will trusted his friend, so he took whatever the monster gave him.

His vision blurs for a second, like a projector queuing in another slide. A little girl with her parents by a Christmas tree. Dead bodies under a big birch tree, rows of greasy teddy bears in low-hanging shelves, a bed too small for his body, a child’s size, a bier smelling of old detergent.

“Did you...did you kill her too? Did you kill...” Will swallows, tries to keep his eyes open, present, his throat angry, dry with resentment, but the moisture slips in, thaws his rage, makes it more or less wet with blood and tears from another girl’s senseless death. An older one.

“Will...” he whispers, the monster in the white dinner shirt and ironed slacks, in his most patient voice, a voice that Will knows better than any other because it exists as a casing, protecting a much plumper and naked one, whose timber if full with warring emotions, most of it fondness, a gross cloying fondness that makes Will’s stomach churn.

“Did you, crazy son of a bitch, kill that girl?” Will closes his eyes then, violently, his grip on the trigger-guard so tight he can feel capillaries bursting around his fingertips.

“No,” Hannibal murmurs, and it’s the oxidized quality of it, the color and texture of remorse, that convinces Will that he is being honest. “She died long before we came. Couldn’t you tell by the state of her bedroom? Its quality of pristine staleness? A museum to a lost only child.”

Will could, probably knew that to be the truth all along. But somehow that truth didn’t suit him, never fit right around the bones of his narrative, so he shook it off. Then, in those old woods, and now, in these new ones.

“You put me in a dead girl’s bedroom and you fed me her murdered parents.”

Will’s eyes are still decidedly shut, but he can see the scenes unfolding behind his dark lids with ease: the small girl weak with disease, her skin pasty and her hair thinning out, too tired to play with her toys, lying in bed all day dreaming up worlds in which she did not die but recovered, dreaming up love and a family as she looked up through her skylight at the great blue beyond. A little girl not unlike Will had been as he slid into death, infection and fever and love eating him up one day at the time.

(Hannibal’s fingers, incredibly gentle as he changed his bandages, whispering in his ear when Will shook with pain, his nose on his hair when he held him upright against the headboard, as if holding Will’s skin could ward off death, could yoke broken tissue back together by sheer will, by sheer
want alone.)

“Will...please—” Will hears Hannibal’s pleading voice cut through the fog, but only after he feels his touch destabilizing the barrel, attempting to lower it, or maybe to shake Will awake, boomerang him back to the white glass house, away from the woods and the fuzzy memories of others less fortunate than him, less dear to a monster. Those that didn’t get to survive his lovely hands.

Will’s body feels hot all of sudden, and itchy, boiling in borrowed skin. He yearns to zip it off like a too-heavy load. Put his body down and float up light and free.

“Take your shoes off!” Will barks instead, gun raised back to Hannibal’s askew face. “You heard me. Socks too.” When Hannibal hesitates to comply, Will adds, “Both feet please.”

Hannibal folds down gracefully, able to untie his varnished brogues without having to lean on furniture for support. His body is so effortlessly supple, Will desires it with a force he can’t fully comprehend if it is born of envy, spite, or lust. Maybe all three at once.

When his feet are bare against the deep bourbon floors, Will nearly gasps. Not only because they look so impossibly pale and vulnerable in the nude—the frailest part of a body that is growing old and is scared to show it—but because of the strange gap, the mauled stump at the edge of his right foot, gnarled like an ill pruned tree. A sixth toe left behind, a small sacrifice to the undergods of the forest.

They both stare at it for a long moment, until Will finds his voice again.

“It was yours. It really was your toe they found.”

“It was.” His voice sounds sheepish, as if admitting to his trick robbed away the grandeur of its illusion.

“My god,” Will cannot avoid muttering, left hand flying to his mouth. “You are truly something other, aren’t you?” He didn’t mean to sound fond, but somehow it does, in that awestruck way reserved for kids at zoos and magic shows.

Hannibal must have registered it because the room warms up almost immediately, an ineffable glow cultivated during his Baltimore stint as a professional host. Lush, welcoming.

A brief hint of a smile alights in his eyes, brightens them up with embers of daring memories. Makes him look all the less human in his expensive shirt and slacks, a demon dressed up in a man’s skin.

Afraid of letting the moment linger, Will decides to make good on his word and cut to the chase. Go for the kill once and for all.

“Is she here with you?”

“Who?” and Will must give it to him, Hannibal’s performance of human emotions has risen closer to perfection since the last time they played this variation of hide and seek, because if Will allowed himself, he could be fooled that Hannibal was genuinely at a loss then.

“Your newest bride? Or is it an old one? I imagine Bedelia would find hard to refuse you. After all, you did make her a star.”

After being stunted into stillness for an awkward moment, Hannibal suddenly unwinds into motion, gliding into the kitchen counter on the opposite side of the room. He busies himself with
capping and putting the bottle of wine away, before turning back to Will, a thoughtful debonairness as he slips his hands back into his pockets, “What makes you think that it’s a ‘she’?”

“Oh. Indeed. Forgive me,” Will snarls with mock courtesy, “you were always omnivorous. Picked up a few lost boys in your time, didn’t you? So why not. ‘He’ then. Where is he, this mystery man? Did you tire of him already? Did you dispose of him under some regal tree?”

“No. Though he seems quite intent on disposing of me, it turns out.”

“What?” Will’s skull throbs in earnest now, if from a migraine, a fever, or a mild concussion from his earlier fall in the woods, it’s anyone’s guess. Hunger, maybe too. When was the last time he ate anything? Yesterday night? Morning? Time is spinning cotton now.

“Come, Will. Your recent choice of company surely is dull, but it shouldn’t be enough to dull your wits.”

“What game are you playing? You said you weren’t here alone,” Will grits out over the high-pitch ring in his ears.

“I am not, Will. I have been taking my meals and spending my evenings with you. I hardly consider that alone.”

The air, thick with blood, thicker, hotter, his skin hotter too, congealing his lids together, oxygen binding with iodine. Will shakes his head, tries to clear it by taking deep breathes, blinking slowly. Every time he does, it feels like losing time, like a shutter opening and closing in an old Polaroid camera. Shlink. Shlink. Shlink.

“No. No no no. That’s not what...no. Stop. Stop lying to me. Stop playing games. Stop.”

“Will, you are the one playing games with yourself.” Hannibal’s voice grows richer, taller, like slabs of meat piled up high on a butcher’s shelf. “You, with your prefab family, no assembly required, like a dike protecting you from—”

“Shut up. Goddamn! For once in your life will you just. shut. up!” The weight of the rifle on his hand grounds him. The punch of a full magazine, the smell of oil, the roughness of the trigger, those are anchors. No dead girls, no wild beasts here. No blood on the tile either. Not yet anyway.

Will opens his eyes. He is standing in an L-shaped kitchen, black and white tile on the walls, herringbone patterned. A silver refrigerator, dark mahogany cabinets. He looks down. His feet are clad in muddy hiking boots. In front of him, not quite within arm’s reach, bare feet, roped in blue veins and neatly cut mother-of-pearl nails. Five toes in a row, and then five toes next to it, but one missing. Will’s heart twists with longing for it, the knob of flesh he never saw, will never come to know.

His mind swims in ferns steeped in blood, appliances splatted in arterial spray. He clears his throat, bullies his mind back to the task at hand. “Why did you come here?”

Hannibal sighs but doesn’t move, doesn’t speak at first. His voice is tinny when he does, like a bad connection about to drop. “You know the answer to that already, Will. You know all the answers already, just like you knew I didn’t kill that little girl in Pennsyl—”

“Shut up! Fucking hell. Just answer the question: why did you come here?”

“Because you called me.”
“Bullshit. Why?”

“Because you were here.”

“No. No.” Will wants to throw his hands up, press his sockets in with his thumbs, but he can’t. If he moves he’ll lose his grip on the gun, his place on the game. It’s all fraying around the edges now, runny with dug up feelings. “Why? The real why.”

“Because you were missed.”

“Please.” Something snaps inside him, taking his voice beyond the pale, crashing headfirst into animal rawness. Will tries hard not to, but when it does he knows Hannibal can hear what he is really pleading for. “Please.”

Hannibal sniffles, his gaze sliding an inch towards the ground, “Because I am in love with you.”

So that’s how the world ends, Will thinks, when the floor beneath his feet turns liquid. With a bang in a kitchen after all. Of course.

“Don’t say that,” he whispers unsteady, eyes shut with fever. “You can’t say things like that. You are a killer, you kill people.”

“That’s something that I do, not what I am.”

“What I am is in love you, Will,” he answers inflexibly, his eyes back on Will’s, so Will keeps his averted, on his boots, the standing mixer, the dirty wine glass on the island.

“God. No. I don’t want it. Please, no. Just. Take it back.”

“I most certainly will not.” Only Hannibal could sound mildly put-off while standing on a stranger’s kitchen declaring love into a barrel. “Can you put down the gun now, Will? I am tiring of these particular theatrics.”

Will can tell down to the wire the exact second Hannibal steps away behind the counter. He can tell by the way his skin prickles. If mourning absence or celebrating control, that Will cannot tell. Never could, really. What he can do is see clearly once Hannibal is out of his physical sphere, as if thunder stopped interfering with reception once the storm blows away.

What a formidable force, Will thinks to himself, a bitter smile pulling at his injured cheek, as he regards the man rinsing a thin-stemmed glass in the sink, his back ruthless and steady, his hands gentle and methodical. Static returns when Hannibal pivots to peer at Will, Will who is still standing five feet away with a muzzle aimed at his shoulders, hands shaking, brow collecting sweat and crusted blood.

The impeccable white shirt ripples, and for a moment, it looks wrinkled and unflattering, a size too big for his frame, his silvering hair a touch too long and unruly, his flecked eyes bloodshot.

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“Sweetheart,” Will wants to say, the impossible word almost waltzing out of his chapped lips. That—guilt, shame, awe, all lightning fast—propels Will backwards, one step at the time until he is by the fireplace, the whole room now between them.

Hannibal crosses his arms, a show of patience as much as a display of displeasure. From up-close, the burning wood smells clean, familiar, loving. For the first time since he stepped out of the Pennsylvanian woods, Will holds a sense of brutal clarity, savage because it obliterates anyone else
but himself and the man standing before him.

“I never stood a chance, did I?”

When Hannibal simply tilts his head, Will presses on, “Once you set your eyes on me. You would never let me go, would you?”

From the distance, it’s hard to tell for sure, but Will thinks he sees Hannibal flinch, his shoulders stoop forward as if taking a blow he did not know how to block, couldn’t expect to have ever been dealt.

“Will,” he whispers and it’s chockfull with bestial sorrow. Having heard his name handled with exhaustion, frustration, and sickroom carefulness for years, Will is surprised that he has never heard it so full of regret. And Will should know, having fingered sorrow more intimately than any other emotion in his life.

Love, he guesses, is bound to acquaint you with unexpected parts of yourself. Particularly if whom loves you is only adjacently human.

He lowers the gun then, at long last. Stares the monster right in the face, only to be unable to see him. All Will sees now is the black inkiness of sorrow cloaking the walls like old blood.

“You were right, you know? Of course you do. The smartest man in the room. Well, you were—right. About me never wanting to kill you with a gun. Now myself on the other hand,” Will says while quickly tucking the barrel under his own chin. “I always thought a bullet through the brain was my way to go.”

“Will!” Hannibal’s hands go up at the same time his shoulders fly forward. Strange, Will thinks dreamily. As if he was surrendering, which is funny because this is the first time Hannibal is truly safe since Will came out of the ocean.

“Yeah I know. Full of surprises, I am. Remember when I said I felt like some parts of me never came back from the ocean? Yeah well, I lied. I am missing some vital organs after all. You took my heart. I hate you for it.”

Triggers are also a funny thing, Will muses, stepping away from his own body. Small and unassuming and yet—so much power all resting on a single pressure point. Like a knife slashing through flesh. What a graceful way to go, in a way. It makes him smile a little.

“But I guess, no, I know, that I hate myself all the more,” Will hears himself saying from afar. "Because I made it so easy for you. Poor little broken toy soldier, so eager and so alone. Crumbs would have filled me for years, and there you were, handing out full meals. God, I fell so hard. For you. For your lies. For how beautifully easy you made it seem between us, the intimacy, the peace. I thought you...I let myself believe...stupidly... so damn stupid...that you...that you could—”

His reedy voice finally breaks into full-blown sobs, and Will feels sad for Will then, even as his mouth seems intent on running on and on through the cascade of tears.

“It doesn’t matter, does it? Not anymore. You didn't even see me in the end, you just saw some potential duplicate of you. And because of that fancy you ruined me, poisoned me enough I can’t love a good woman, can’t raise a good son. You turned me into my father, a mean drunk, spiteful of happiness, contemptuous of the future, regretful of the past because it hurts so damn much. I was so...oh god in love with you...and you set me on fire, you took and you took and you took until all is left of me is a ghost. So that when I pull this trigger all I am doing is finishing the job you
were too cruel or too coward to finish yourself. I guess we’ll never know which, will we Doctor Lecter?”

At that instant, Hannibal is but a flame shimmering on a foreign kitchen floor, his knees buckling in slow motion until they touch the black and white tile. If he speaks or makes a sound, Will can’t hear it, all noise droned out by the blood drumming in his ears. Will does allow himself to look then, gawking at the graceful curvature on Hannibal’s left knee, bent as if he was a knight or a groom proposing to his beloved, head hanging low, wind-chafed hair demurely covering his brow, the exposed back of his neck unusually delicate and vulnerable. His lovely hands fanned out on herringbone tile, fallen like a sacrifice, tension cordonning his tendons into an endless parade of twitches.

What a picture, Will thinks as he releases the trigger-guard, what a picture and what a guy.
The ringing echoes loud in the high-vaulted room. It goes on and on and on over the creaking of twigs in the fireplace. It goes longer over the panted words, harsh with banked breath, looped in a thickly accented mantra. It takes Will a good while to focus back into mundane noises after the shot blasts over his head, a force to be reckoned with if it ever met flesh. A force that could arm-wrestle god, Will thinks, but not beat the devil. Not really. Not if Will keeps cheating death only as a means to hold him close.

In another world, Will would have come to with an image of Molly, or perhaps Wally, grief-stricken and gaping at the mess he had left behind.

In this world, though, it was the compelling movement of Hannibal Lecter’s lips, muted but hypnotizing in their rapid flickers, enunciating the same words over and over again.

It was curiosity, in the end, what snapped Will away from death and back into his body. He wanted to hear that voice again. What a terrible lifeline.

Though time might have passed, nothing seems altered after Will drops the rifle. Shades of vermillion signal dusk has yet to give way to night. The fire is still burning behind him. And Hannibal is still folded on the kitchen floor, chest against thighs, his long hands so impossibly spread out that they seem about to snap at the webbing.

Will doesn’t dare to say his name. There is a gravity to his prostration, as if Will were to speak he would interrupt deep prayer, soiling it, maybe even setting in motion some great disaster. So he waits, quietly standing under the hole punched in the ceiling by the bullet meant for his brain, his hair drizzled with white stucco and shredded paint. He waits until his mind fills itself with song, a delightful freshwater chant.

It takes Will a while to realize the fruitiness in that delight is too close to the tang of gloating, of dominance, of drinking from the less fortunate. A sugar rush, by any other name.

The words find him then, reaching from behind a glass-case. They wear Hannibal’s pitch but they seem divorced from his body. Impulsively Will begins walking towards him, but halfway a sense of shame hits him so hard that he has to bend down and crawl on his hands until he feels the cold kitchen tile under his knees.

What a force sorrow is, Will realizes most sharply, for it made a prideful devil as small as a frightened man. Will reaches out to touch Hannibal’s fallen hair, mussed with sweat and streaked with silver. “Sweetheart,” he thinks again, fingers looming over Hannibal’s sun-starved nape, smelling the ammonia on his skin, but incapable of making contact. His breath feels wrong too, stuttered, ragged raw, his words garbled like a needle caught on vinyl, implacably snagged in the same grove: “I don’t know what to do, I don’t know what to do, I don’t know what to do.” The last recorded message before system failure, the first utterance of a ghost in the afterlife.

Drawing on muscle memory, Will tentatively brushes the hair off Hannibal’s forehead, tips his chin up with soothing admonishments. “Shhh,” Will whispers, “shhh” as if about to blow a flickering candle. A part of his brain still refuses to believe this is nothing short of a brilliant performance on emotional punishment through weaponized guilt. Will only fully acknowledges how deeply he has distrusted Hannibal when he is met with the glassy stare and the slack mouth of a man in the pits of shock, all color drained off his face as if he had been the one bedding death. There is no faking that. Will knows because such horror has often been his.
And then there’s the red smear dribbling down Hannibal’s lips, smudging his ill-fitting white shirt. “Sweetheart,” Will breathes out in a rush, his fingers tacky with blood, “sweetheart, you are bleeding.” For an instant, Will kneels frozen on the floor, awkwardly holding Hannibal’s jaw between his index and thumb, body angled towards his as if he could shield a grown man from a nosebleed, make blood vessels knit back together by sheer want alone. There is such a violence in his indignation that Hannibal’s body could betray him so profoundly, fate him to the indignity of common maladies like impromptu nosebleeds, that Will’s grip on his chin must be painful. Will directs his own body to get up and fetch some towels to staunch the hemorrhage, yet the pungent smell of blood and unwashed skin stops him, reminds him instead that he has never been this close to Hannibal in his life, certainly not without being on the verge of death himself.

The victory in that realization is as short-lived and foul-tasting as the one after succeeding in driving a monster to his knees by way of sequestering his heart. And maybe because Will is again on an unfamiliar kitchen floor surrounded by blood, or maybe because history repeating itself may suggest a path to be embraced, instead of getting up, Will leans in. Drawing Hannibal’s chin closer until it brushes his own, Will slips his tongue into his half-open mouth. It’s oddly lukewarm at first. Hannibal’s breath is harsh and sour with remnants of fear, his mouth lax with shock. The blood lurches sharp on Will’s throat, and once he tasted it he can’t stop. He pushes his chest hard against Hannibal’s until they lose their combined balance and hit the kitchen cabinets. He scrambles for purchase by wrapping his arms around Hannibal’s heaving shoulders, noses at his unresponsive cheeks, his jaw, his neck, finding tender corners where blood rabbits maddeningly alive. Kissing Hannibal becomes an exercise on rousing him, on bringing him out of darkness and back to light. In a flash, Will remembers this, this godawful moment of being kissed as an unrequited measure of survival, Hannibal tasting of panic and briny water, begging into his mouth “breathe, Will, breathe.”

Will did then, more by impulse than intent, because he had asked him to. Because Hannibal—his marble face crumpled with bruises and fear—had put his mouth on his, pushed muggy air in and asked him to live. How arousing, even for Will’s semiconscious brain, to see a beast frightened out his wits, terrified to lose what he didn’t even truly possessed. It was a horrific power that Will cherished with the toxic desperation of the long disempowered. To hold the reigns for once. To be in love and not give an inch, but take and take and take until his belly was full.

Only now, licking into the mouth of a defeated monster, the fullness felt strangely gutting.

There is nothing Will wants more, as he pushes and pulls against that limp mass of Hannibal’s body, than to feel it swell with ruthless hunger, to take and take and take from him. Will wants to. It is sundering how much Will wants to give himself away. It is sundering because there is no going back, no hiding again, no forts against this kind of softness. In the end, it is a sort of softness to allow himself to want a monster, to want to hold his hand and kiss his eyelids, and burn a black circle around each one of his hurtful memories until they are nothing but ash. It takes much more tenderness than violence to come into his own, and that right there is the truth Will has been keeping buried under his righteous grudges.

“Sweetheart,” he says again because now that he began he doesn’t seem able to stop. He says it into Hannibal’s greasy hair, into his blood-spattered lips, to the scars on his cheeks, the badly healed bone on his nose. The little hollow on his throat where Will’s thumbs fit so effortlessly. Will locks his ankles behind Hannibal’s slumped lower back, elbows crossed behind his neck and rocks, breathes into Hannibal’s body with his own body, as if physics could be defied by the force of his desire alone.

Will knows the precise moment when physics are indeed defeated because he finds himself slammed back against the kitchen tiles, his skull making a vaguely sickening sound when Hannibal
punches him in the chest, so hard Will’s breath stutters. There should have been violence but it is not violent as much as is instinctive, his overlapped hands pressing against Will’s breastplate in an inverted take on cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Hannibal’s hair is wildly streaked across his bloody face, his eyes unfocused with too many red emotions. Rage, panic, lust, confusion, they flame up high, making it hard to pinpoint the direction of his gesture. They lock eyes and Will reaches out slowly to smooth the hair from his cheek. He smiles and says, “Hello stranger” in a quiet, warming voice rescued from his past, when caring came without trapdoors. And just like that, the red ribbons strapping Hannibal fall apart, revealing the raw pulp of an unloved animal, wounded, naked, and desperately alone.

Haltingly, Hannibal releases the pressure on Will’s chest. His brow frowns and flinches, as if his face could not be trusted to aptly translate what goes on in his mind. “Come here,” Will whispers sensing his hesitance. Ankles still crossed around Hannibal’s thighs give him leverage to tip their chests together. Hannibal folds into him gingerly at first and then, once his face is inches away from Will’s neck and refusal is clearly off the table, with complete abandonment, knocking the wind out of Will with the sheer weight of his longing—not his muscles and bones, but all the wanting strung up so tight inside his body it threatened to tear each one of its seams.

Pinned to the floor, Will finds himself half-giggling, half-moaning, a state he dimly wonders if will be his default from here on out. His hands sheltering Hannibal’s skull, his nose burrowing under his earlobe, marveling at the pumping hum of his heartbeat, a bell tolling under their shared skin. “I always liked the way you smell,” Will says into that secret patch of flesh behind Hannibal’s left ear, because he can, because his imagination feels punch-drunk and swimmy, about to succumb to a resetting sort of virus.

It’s obscene, he muses, grinding against the body on top of his, it’s obscene to be this happy on a kitchen floor, caked in dry blood and sweaty clothes. It’s obscene, and yet so very simple to let it happen, to let himself laugh until the laughter becomes stringy with hysteria, and Hannibal is pulling him up to seat on his lap. He cradles his marred cheek and murmurs into his mouth, “Will, come back to me,” and Will does as he is told. He opens his eyes and sees Hannibal clearly now, the aging man hiding a boy with fangs.

They are so close kissing seems akin to breathing, so Will leans in and breathes into Hannibal’s mouth, runs his tongue over his top lip, the vermillion border, the lower lip, the impish corner of his mouth, sighs and mutters between kisses, “I am absolutely terrible at this.” Hannibal smiles, a rare concession Will being too close to his skin can do only with sensing, and replies, “We can be terrible together,” and Will knows, he absolutely knows that is a loaded statement, its crevices origamied with double-meanings, but god be damned if innuendo, morality, or the four horsemen of the apocalypse will get in the way of him consuming this formidable man, so instead of rising to the bait, Will drops his hand to Hannibal’s crotch and cups it as he often cupped Will’s trembling face—with ferocious care and mild uncertainty.

There is wonder at how still the house suddenly becomes, drowned in black shadows, night having blanketed them completely. “Don’t look away,” Will says abruptly and without forethought, before dipping to kiss Hannibal again, his gaze hard and unflinching. Kissing with eyes open is intimidating, but as Will presses the heel of his hand against Hannibal’s crotch his breath speeds up and his eyes cloud over, changing colors. From amber to gold to mossy brown. “I love you,” Will thinks but manages not to say, as he finds a steady rhythm against the scratchy fabric.

Instead, he rubs their noses together. “Let me see you,” the gesture says. “I don’t know how,” the answer slides along Will’s fingers as Hannibal removes them from his fly. For a queasy moment, Will fumbles with his own growing arousal, uncertain if he has been silently asked to stop. It scares him because, if asked, Will isn’t sure if he could stop.
Before he can untangle his limbs, Hannibal is lowering him onto the tiles again, only this time he takes great care to fold his hands behind Will’s skull, cushioning the cold from seeping into his hair and nape. He lingers, regarding Will with eyes a touch frenzied, his hands too warm and as they catch against Will’s waistband. “Sweetheart,” Will whispers, and it is permission as much as an admission.

It’s a thing of beauty to see a great beast fall, or hunters would not follow prey for miles and miles in inclement weather, Will thinks. And yet, what a sad beauty that is too, to find the human bursting around the monster Will came to dress up in bespoken suits and gelled hair, to find under such smooth puppetry a man with wrinkled eyes and dazzlingly quick hands, skin slippery with sweat and graying hair, a grip so bruising as it was unsteady, and maybe that, the unsteadiness, punched Will the hardest: that a man so confident in his dexterity could be rendered so utterly incapable of undoing a zipper—that seemed akin to see an imposing bison bucking in defeat. So Will took that impossible man’s shaking hand into his own and kissed each knuckle as it seemed fitting of a nervous lover or a scared animal, though in all likelihood Hannibal was neither, and with hazy wonder saw him shed the last traces of the monster Will had once known in Baltimore.

He smiles down at Will, and in that moment, lying on a kitchen floor, shirt untucked, stucco in his hair, and muddy boots pressing against black slacks, Will knows with a cutting certainty that desire has a vernacular, and his vernacular is the shape of Hannibal’s mouth when caught between pain and pleasure.

Taking Will’s hand into his own, Hannibal slips it under Will’s waistband, directs it to touch himself, slow and steady, the warm, dry dome of Hannibal’s hand setting a pace that, foreign to Will, feels maddeningly familiar, an afterimage of recurrent dreams. The skin on his skin is his but the pace is not, the smell is not, it’s something other, overlaid and conjointed, a friction with twin heads.

With eyes closed and head tilted back, Will fumbles to find Hannibal’s fly, to mirror the gesture, or is it to amplify it by doubling it? Rapidly fleeing consciousness offers Will no decisive answer. He clasps Hannibal’s left hand and drags it down to his erection, first over and then under fabric, rubs frenetically and erratically to his own embarrassment, his blunt fingers rough over Hannibal’s fine-boned hand, and for one too-long moment, their rhythm is absolutely off, unsyncopated and dissonant like an unrehearsed orchestra. But then their voices find a seamless cadence through their shared arousal, and the instant that happens, their bodies fall in tune, vibrating into a staccato that is both unpredictable and tender, so tender Will must grip his eyes shut and bite down into his bottom lip to achieve a sane measure of selfhood.

Likely sensing his refusal to surrender, Hannibal nuzzles into his neck, murmurs uncoupled words Will cannot understand, not verbally at least, but his body tells him all he needs to know, like patched up bones sensing an incoming storm. “I don’t love you,” Will grits out, through the loopy swirl of desire, the closing in of oblivion growing high-pitched in his groin, and Hannibal pulls back to beam toothily at him, his strokes increasing in sharpness as if daring Will to open his eyes and say that to his face.

But Will knows better, and so he doesn’t. Instead he repeats over and over again “I don’t love you,” even when his voice breaks and trails away into moaning, he says “I don’t love you,” louder and louder until those words and the white specks of arousal churning low in his belly are all that keeps him tethered to his body.

“I don’t love you,” Will gasps into Hannibal’s hair, his hand moving punishingly fast over Hannibal’s erection. “I love you,” he hears whispered back, and for a too-short of a moment, the whole world is reduced to that prick-point in time when both their throaty voices overlap in a
strangled chant, “I love you, I don’t love you, I love you, I don’t, love you,” their hands and cocks a well-oiled circle of desire and denial, until finally pleasure overtakes them both and they collapse breathless and loose-limbed on top of each other, a momentary truce wrangled out of flesh.

Sleep, or a particular vicious form of exhaustion, almost immediately claims Will. Before he lets the night take him, however, Will feels his hand being pulled from his own underwear, the chill of cold air and the stickiness of semen lingering when it is left open on the tile floor, only to be quickly covered by Hannibal’s equally wet palm. Hesitancy lasts less than a second, but it is there before Hannibal threads their fingers together, fluids harvested individually now gluing their skins to one another.

Will intends to pull away, shake off the desperate romanticism of the gesture but instead, warmed by the physical weight on his chest, he drifts off to unconsciousness, shirt bloodied, pants unzipped, and hand tightly held.
Will wakes up in the dark. He is lying on the tile floor, his shoulder aching but feeling oddly relaxed. His pain is diluted by confusion and a hint of urgency. Shadows pool around every surface. It takes him a moment to remember where he is, longer to realize that he is not alone. He feels the pressure on his hair before he registers it on his cheek, his hip, regular and ruthless like a ticking clock.

As darkness fades into passable visibility Will can see his recumbent back is curled on the crook of Hannibal’s elbow, his head tucked under his chin, torso splintered by both his arms. A vernacular Pieta by any other name.

Sitting against the kitchen cabinets, Hannibal bends down to gently kiss his hair, and it is as uncanny as witnessing a marble statue come to life. Will stirs decidedly then, hoping to signal certain intimacies belong to the deniability of sleep.

When Hannibal only tightens his grip around Will’s shoulders, nosing into his neck, panic blooms bright in Will’s stomach. Whatever they had done comes sharply into focus, out of adrenaline-fueled dreams and into full-blown daylight. They are two adult men on a murdered couple’s kitchen, holding each other in blood-splattered clothes, their hands sticky with dry semen. If there is a plausible explanation where survival and revenge feature predominantly, Will is at a loss to find it.

He attempts to move back to sitting, only to realize with a searing stab that Hannibal is keeping his bad shoulder somewhat in place by holding him across his lap. Will thinks of wrestling with the pain, but the pride to be gained does not match the comfort to be lost, so he stays put.

“Good morning Will,” Hannibal greets politely as if the laws of propriety that negotiated such pleasantries still applied to them.

“How long was I asleep for?”

“How long was I asleep for?”

“Three to four hours. Dawn will break soon.”

Will can see the white of his eyes in the murky kitchen gloom. They are alight, iridescent even, and Will imagines that’s what happiness looks like on Hannibal Lecter.

“I should clean up. I can’t remember the last time I showered.”

Hannibal hums at that, closing his eyes as he drops his forehead to Will’s. For a moment Will thinks of resisting the lull of his warmth, the even breath seeping into his temples, easing the strain of occupied spaces.

It’s a rather short moment.

Eventually Will unfolds his hands from his lap and brings them behind Hannibal’s neck. He runs his thumbs through the longer hair there, smooths over the grey stubble on his cheeks, the bruised tiredness under his eyes. Will is not exactly sure who this man is, this man he is wrapped around so tightly he can count the invisible white eyelashes on his eyelids. Whoever he is, he bears little resemblance to the elusive performer Will met in Baltimore. Will can feel the cracks in this man as one would on a broken vase. Like veins, those cracks cover every inch of his body, bleed out yearning, loneliness, and fear.
There’s joy too but it’s more hesitant, a half-mast thing.

“Why did you stop coming?” Will asks into this man’s throat. His breath makes the skin humid, so Will kisses it to keep it from going cold. “To the barn, I mean.”

“It seemed wise,” Hannibal’s voice is muffled but cautious. Will would know that clipped restraint anywhere, the artificiality of it. A muzzled beast.

“Why?”

“You were otherwise engaged.”

Will chuckles lightly, “That never stopped you before, Hannibal.”

“Perhaps it should have.”

The edge in his voice is unmistakable now, so Will pulls away until he can see his eyes. In the grim morning light they look almost crimson.

“Oh,” Will says as understand begins to dawn. “You saw.” The “us” remains unspoken but they both can hear it, loud and knife-like.

Hannibal holds his gaze, but it’s smoky with smoldering ash. It hurts Will in an old way, as old as his childhood and his father’s downturned lips.

“I am sorry,” Will says automatically. And then, with a tinge of anger, towards himself but also towards the monster he once knew, “No, I am not sorry. You brought it upon yourself.”

At that Hannibal does let go of Will, arms crossing against his own chest. Will feels the loss keenly, his balance thrown off. As he braces himself on the floor, Will can see the ash flare to embers, dangerously close to flames now.

“Well, you were spying,” Will spits out. “How else could you have seen Molly and I fucking if you weren’t?”

The molecules move so fast between them that, for a split second, Will is flung back to a time when dying on a kitchen floor seemed an absolute inevitability.

But then Hannibal exhales and the tension immediately dissipates.

In yet another feat of disorder, an upside-down world Will never thought habitable, Hannibal is reaching out and scooping Will back to his chest, propping his head just right on his shoulder, his lips brushing quickly against Will’s jaw before he whispers in a voice between conceding and inflexible, “I would not call it spying.” He kisses Will’s cheek before adding in a preposterously jovial tone, “I would however recommend thicker shades and an indoor hammock. It seems rather common sense for anyone as keen on privacy as yourself.”

Will is unsure if hilarity or indignation is the appropriate response to that, to this man he does not know but seems deeply attached to. So instead of making a choice, Will sinks in the unusual ease this odd man brings out in him. He shifts until he is kneeling and their mouths are at the same height, and kisses him, kisses him, kisses him with an abandonment that could be described as recklessly adolescent, but having been withdrawn all his life, that would not be true of Will.

“I miss you,” he mumbles into that not-monster’s mouth.
“I am right here,” Hannibal answers, amusement and knowingness filtering into Will’s skin.

“You know what I mean.”

Breaking the kiss, Hannibal tips Will’s chin up with such a sharp scrutiny he flinches a little. “I do,” Hannibal finally says.

The moment stretches until Will is hurting to breathe. For some reason, he seems to have forgotten to take air in, to keep his lungs lubricated. “Fuck,” he thinks to himself the second before he resumes blinking. “Fuck. I am way over my head.”

Suddenly Will is scrambling to get up. Standing, he cracks his joints, shakes his overlong hair.

“Mind if I use the shower?” he asks casually, already moving to the first door he spots at the back of the room. Hannibal follows at a slower pace, gradually unfolding from the floor. He hesitates before coming to full standing, winces at some vestigial pain on his right side. Sleeping on the floor while cradling an adult man will do that to scar tissue, Will realizes absently, his hands twitching to reach out. His mouth fills with bile, the sickening green of guilt. He sticks his hands in his jeans pockets.

The walls close in on him when Hannibal stands up to his full height, disheveled, skin browned with dry blood, shirt untucked, his fly half undone. His bare feet, purplish with cold, tell a tale Will can’t bear to hear without his heart squeezing out.

A man, Will thinks nearly shaking, just a man, tall and lean and aging.

“Do you mind?” Will repeats, pointing at the door for emphasis.

Hannibal regards him again with that infinite patience tripped with wires of razor-sharp insight. It paralyzes Will. It frightens him too. Terribly so. To be seen so crudely.

“Can I join you?” Hannibal finally remarks, and Will knows that is not what he first thought to say, but not being a monster does not make Hannibal a kind man, so Will should not expect to be let off easily.

“Perhaps another time,” Will lies with false affability, as if volleying a stray ball at a stranger in the park. He backs away from the room as smoothly as he can, while Hannibal tracks his movement with cool accessing eyes.

When the door to the guts of the house is finally closed between them, Will leans against it panting heavily.

“He knows,” Will mutters to himself. “He knows that if he touches me again I’ll die.”

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Guilt finds Will in the shower.

No matter how long he stays under the spray, Will seems incapable of washing away the tarry spit of guilt. It coats his fingers, his lips, his cock. The guilt is not for touching Hannibal. The guilt is for letting Hannibal see him raw with unresolved hurt, like a madwoman grown too fond of her
wallpaper.

Outside the bathroom, Will finds clothes too close to his size for comfort. He still puts them on, green wool sweater and jeans, delaying the inevitable dread of having to ponder about the origins of said garments. A dead man’s or a groom’s-to-be. Will doesn’t know which option disturbs him the least.

By the time he slips back into the main room, part of Will’s brain has decidedly shutdown, and with it, most of his gut. Drawing on his law enforcement past, Will thinks of the next hour as a sting operation—the goal is to get in and get out as efficiently as possible. He is a man on a mission now, someone’s husband and someone's father caught in a dangerous crossfire. His heart is not his own to lose.

It only takes walking into the open-floor room, streamed with early morning light, and seeing Hannibal freshly shaven, wet-haired and barefooted in a white cotton t-shirt and low-hanging grey pants, flipping pancakes in front of sprawling French windows. Just like that, Will’s brain switches back on with a stutter. For the first time in eleven years, his brain reaches out to God. Much like the last time, when he was bleeding out in the muggy Louisiana heat, Will is asking for a devil’s bargain. “Please god,” he prays silently as he sits down on the kitchen counter and stares at his empty plate, “please let me keep him. Take all my earthly possessions, take my dogs, take my balls, take Molly and Wally, take them all if that means I get to keep him.”

A stack of golden pancakes materializes in front of him while he prays, powered sugar snowing over blue-bleeding berries and brown specks. Will half-expects a face made of whipped cream smiling up at him. In another life, perhaps.

Hannibal teeters behind the counter, platting his food and pouring them coffee. Will can sense his nervousness a mile away, so he keeps his eyes trained on the food, tentatively pushing some into his mouth.

“How was your shower?” Hannibal’s varnished voice does nothing to smooth the tension in the room.

“Fine. Good.”

“And your food?”

“Great as always,” Will says between bites. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” Hannibal rejoins blandly as he sits across from Will.

They eat in silence. Silence eats at them too.

When peeling at it seems a healthier choice than peeling at his own skin, Will remarks offhandedly, “Are these Armagnac blueberry pancakes?”

That seems to do the trick, as Hannibal’s hands momentarily relax their vise-like grip on the silverware.

“Indeed. An old family recipe. Have you had them before?”

“I made them before.”

“Oh? And here I was thinking this particular variation with star anise was my own creation.”
“It is.”

Though he cannot see Hannibal’s face, he can sense curiosity perching high on his eyebrows. Their little steeple says “pray tell.” Will doesn’t need to see this to know this.

“You wrote it on your first edition of The Epicurean. On the margins.”

“Hmm.” Hannibal sounds pleased and simultaneously cautious, the closest to the performer Will knew in Baltimore. It is as grating as it is familiar, and that ambiguity in itself is enough to make Will want to scratch his skin off. “I imagined all of my belongings had been confiscated by the police,” Hannibal resumes after a deliberate pause.

“They were,” Will admits flatly as he takes a sip of his coffee. The brightness of the dark roasted beans and the clarity of freshly filtered water make him want to weep. He doesn’t. “I found it on the evidence log, next to a sincerely absurd amount of Japanese porn.”

“Erotica, Will. Incredibly valuable art, actually.”

“Fancy porn, then,” Will concedes while counting the number of yellow flowers painted on his china plate.

“Should I gather that you retrieved it?”

“I stole it.”

“You stole it.”

“Yes, it’s in my house now. Think of it, I should probably give it back to you.”

“Perhaps it is for the best that you keep it for now. While I am transient,” Hannibal says brightly as he clears away their plates. “Perhaps some day we can make a meal from it.”

Will knows a trap when he sees one. “Perhaps,” he replies while fidgeting with his mug. “I should get going,” he adds impulsively, iron screeching on tile when he gets up too fast. “It’s been a while and Molly will get worried.”

Of all the things he could have said, Will is aware that this one was likely chosen to apply the most amount of pressure on the vastest amount of scar tissue. He has been keeping tabs on the knives on the table. Hannibal likely could slit his throat in one fell swoop. It would look beautiful. That’s one way of getting his prayer answered, Will reasoned.

And yet, the man sitting before him seems adamant in not reverting back to his cool opacity, his detached interest in butchery. This man sighs, transparent in his irritation, mildly covert in his hurt, but overall plainly human. Will doesn’t know what to do with him. Mostly Will fears that Hannibal will touch him and he’ll break down and fuck him right there on the counter, not out of some uncouth bout of lust, but of an abject horror that once Will steps out of this grim snow-globe that is their crime scene of a honeymoon, he will never be able to find his way back in.

In the end, Hannibal sniffs into his coffee, stringent with displeasure and disdain, and Will can’t help saying, “Please don’t make this harder on me.”

“I believe you are making this preposterously hard all on your own.”

“Says the serial killer.”
“That truly is beneath you, Will.”

“I know,” Will mumbles defeatedly as he drops his face to folded arms.

After a long moment, Hannibal does touch him, his mouth resting on Will’s damp nape. It’s not exactly a kiss, but something more primal, the comfort of flesh folding over delicate patches, keeping them safe. They remain folded into each other on the kitchen counter, Will’s head resting on his crossed forearms, Hannibal’s cheek on Will’s hair. A closed-circuit of harm and want, a cracked reproduction of shade and light.

“You should go,” Hannibal finally breathes into Will’s ear.

“Did you just consider killing me?”

“Yes,” the reply comes fast and a tad too determined. A thought dog-eared and thoroughly fingered. Will feels a jolt of arousal.

“How would you do it?”

Hannibal kisses Will’s cheekbone before straightening himself back to standing. When he speaks, his voice looms. He sounds sad.

“I wouldn’t, Will.”

Will looks at his host then, faces him head-on. His pinched lips, his bloodless nose, his stormy crimson eyes. No discernible guile there, but then again, Hannibal was the father of lies.

“Well, my wife is waiting for me in our home. I gotta go. See you around.”

Will almost makes it to the front door before he feels the crushing pressure on his trachea, his feet compulsively kicking on thin air, his back burning with leached heat and the enforced arch of his spine, plucked upwards by the crook of Hannibal’s elbow.

Will cannot see Hannibal’s face as his brain struggles to get enough oxygen, but he can feel the manic glee pulsing through his muscles when consciousness flits by, a firefly growing dimmer in the darkness. Will wishes he could kiss him on the mouth as he kills him, or maybe suck him off through the aftershocks of regret. Either way, Will thinks as his legs become too heavy to carry his weight and capable hands grip around his slumping shoulders, perhaps God listened. Perhaps he gets to keep his monster after all.
Off Stag Brook, Maine IV

Will wakes up on a bed in a poorly lit room. All furniture is black, all walls white. Hannibal sits next to him on a chair, reading a small paperback. When he notices that Will is awake, he produces a teacup from a nearby table. There’s a tiny spoon on a dainty dish. He puts both on the empty side of the bed, next to Will’s hands, but not close enough that they would risk touching.

“You should drink this,” Hannibal says monotone, eyes already back on the page. “The honey will help with your sore throat.”

The violent sandpaper fire on his neck reminds Will of rope burn acquired one Summertime playing hangmen with his white Southern friends. It is altogether a bitter memory but the proffered honey does help soothing some of the burn.

“Did you poison this?,” Will asks conversationally as he pushes himself up against the headboard. The low light desaturates Hannibal, making him resemble a faded Polaroid. Will used to have one of his mother that looked just like that, all drained earthy browns and hunter greens. She was sitting on a meadow, her caramel hair in a bun, her eyes impossibly remote. Will was not with her then, might not even have even been alive yet.

When Hannibal remains engrossed in his book, a cheap pulp novel for the looks of it, Will feels brave enough to ask what he always wanted to know but feared finding out, “Jack told me they found hallucinogens and tranquilizers in the cabin. Did you drug me then?”

The look on Hannibal’s face is perfectly neutral but for the slight depression on his lower lip. Will knows this tell. He has bitten that lip himself.

“Sweetheart,” Will whispers reaching his hand out across the black blanket. Hannibal’s eyes follow the gesture over the top of his page, but otherwise he remains immobile. “Please?”

Hannibal sighs, a cross between irritation and exasperation. “In the beginning you needed to be sedated. You wouldn’t be able to live through the pain.”

Will turns his left hand up on the blanket, the palm looking small and eager in its emptiness.

“You eventually weened out of it,” Hannibal adds, his eyes flickering over Will’s hand.

Will curves each of his fingers up in a loose fist, unfurls the fingers again, one at a time. He coughs dry and painful hiccups, and Hannibal puts the book down on his knees.

“It could be argued that you may have been weened earlier.”

“So why wasn’t I?”

This time Hannibal’s sigh is dangerously deep, like dredging out waterlogged memories. Will spreads a little bit father on the blanket, splays his hand towards Hannibal’s knee.

“There was a look in your eyes.”

“What kind of look?”

The bed dips with Hannibal’s weight as he leans his right thigh on the mattress, the book now forgotten on the nightstand. He looks up at Will, his silver bangs hiding most of his eyes. Will
holds his gaze, feels him scanning the purple daisy-chain punched around his neck. Will rolls his head back, lets it fall to his left shoulder. In the dim light, his skin will look like watercolor. Hannibal slides up and up in the bed, slow and sly, until his mouth is inches away from Will’s bruised jugular. He hovers, his back muscles straining, his eyes transfixed, his breathing a little erratic.

“What kind of look, Hannibal?”

“Remote. As if you were already lost to parts unknown.”

Fingers slip into Will’s and he flexes around them tentatively, feels nails bite into his wrist at the same time lips brush against his collarbone.

“You didn’t want me to leave.”

“I didn’t want to lose you,” Hannibal amends, nose pressing hard where his thumbs broke most blood-vessels.

“So why did you let me go?”

“So I wouldn’t lose you.”

Hannibal speaks into Will’s hair and Will pulls him flush against his chest. He kisses him so hard it tears at both their lips. “There you are,” Will gloats with bloodstained teeth and Hannibal huffs a laughter, audibly this time, as he tugs at his t-shirt, at the blanket, at Will’s mouth.

When he tugs at Will’s sweater, though, all air leaves the room, so abruptly both their breathing stutters. Will finds his fingers pushing against Hannibal’s suddenly, stilling them as soon as they graze his navel. Hannibal’s hands, large and lovely, jolt Will’s skin with their sudden warmth, too hot and slippery. They feel like summertime fever, Will thinks with a shudder.

Their eyes lock and there are no words spoken, but the rigidity of Hannibal’s arms—staunchly braced on each side of Will’s chest—tells of his absolute commitment to consent, as much as his eyes, dark and inscrutable, scream a rage fueled by confused hurt. In that stalled moment when they simply access each other—Hannibal a taut line planked over Will’s retreating body—Will is reminded that there is no glory in seeing a being cowered by fear of refusal.

Carefully, as if approaching a wounded animal, Will reaches out. He runs the back of his knuckles over Hannibal’s forehead, his blonde-ash eyebrows, the tip of his nose, strokes his cheekbones and traces the shape of his pursed mouth with his index finger. He can feel Hannibal’s arms spasming with the effort of staying upright, of keeping all his skin from touching Will’s, even as his body bleeds out heat and his erection drags against Will’s thigh.

“You look older,” Will says without wanting to, his fingertips smoothing under Hannibal’s bloodshot eyes.

It’s strange to think this marble mask was laughing only a moment ago, that Will holds such disconcerting power: to make a monster a man, and a happy man a bitter monster.

When Hannibal frowns and begins to pull away, Will snaps out of whatever hazy state of detachment he placed himself in to cope with all his buried want and resentment and love—the last which is thorny and unruly and fits in no preordained place, but spills out between them in a tangle of barbwire and gossamer.

“No no, I don’t mean it as criticism,” Will grasps Hannibal’s forearms, splays a hand on his lower
back, forcing him to stay put, to drop back into Will’s body. Hannibal resists him though, stubborn in his offense as in any other encounter with rudeness.

“I only meant that I feel I am seeing you for the first time in years. I spent so much time resenting the man you were in Baltimore that I refused to see what may lie beneath him. I think I am beginning to see you now, Hannibal.”

Will lifts his head until he almost manages to kiss Hannibal on the lips. When Hannibal petulantly pulls his head up further, Will misses by an inch, kissing his chin instead.

“You are infuriating.” Will sighs, letting his head fall back to the pillow. “Beautiful, but still infuriating.”

A shadow crosses Hannibal’s face, a shadow Will recognizes as his own indecision regarding ever trusting someone who holds the power to thoroughly upend you. He could make it all better by promising to bend, to eternally devote himself to keep Hannibal content and appeased, even when such promise would be an open-ended lie. Instead, he overlaps his hands over Hannibal’s heart. Thumb to thumb, his hands look like doves flying out of Hannibal’s chest. Will looks long and hard at them.

“I want you inside me,” he whispers, more to himself than to Hannibal, but he must hear him anyway, because he lets his body relax a fraction, enough that Will can feel the weight of his erection cautiously settling against his own. Will gasps, unsure what he means, what he really wants, only that the mere suggestion of space between their bodies smarts and the smallest hint of friction elates him.

Allowing himself to touch Hannibal’s bare chest, Will tracks the puckered red hole the bullet left on his lower abdomen. He presses his thumb into the fresh scar, the wrinkled skin stretching awkwardly. This is part of what he means, so he says it again, “I want to be inside you.”

There is no hesitancy this time when Hannibal undoes Will’s fly. He undoes his own in the same brisk fashion and pulls out his erect cock almost defiantly, his eyes bearing on Will’s as if daring him to scold him, to find his actions lacking or exceeding.

When Will simply arches up into his groin, something snaps in Hannibal and, by extension, between them. He pulls Will’s pants and underwear past his thighs in one crude swoop, rucks up his sweater until he can touch his ribcage, dip his thumb into his navel, brush his knuckles over his hip bones, caress the sparse pubic hair below his waist.

To be able to see that swatch of pale skin, blue with secret veins, holds some kind of magic over Hannibal, more than Will’s cock or his ugly abdominal scar. Hannibal bends gingerly and touches that patch of skin with his lips, wet and quivering, speaks into it until Will is shivering with laughter and arousal. Amidst those, shimmers the vague contours of what Will imagines must be love, what love—and not its distillation—must feel like.

Unmoored, Will runs his hands over Hannibal’s bare shoulders, maps the ripple of his muscle, the scratch of his stubble and breath wafting over foreskin and pubic hair. It is lovely, a bone-thin thing of tenderness and awe.

Will would live inside it, if he could, inside that singular expression of Hannibal’s interest in him. There’s an infinite world in there, between the sublime resentment and the physical want, and the teeth in that world cut less than those which await Will back in his Moosehead Lake home.

For the time being, Will allows himself to push that thought away. To the ground it goes, to where
the future and the past live for now, as the present presses on Hannibal-large and all consuming.

“I miss you,” Will says again, and apparently out loud, because Hannibal pulls back from between Will’s legs, far enough to look him in the eye. His usually alert gaze is foggy, nearly teary, and it takes Will an instant to recognize his own labored breath is equal parts arousal and terror, and that that peculiar mixture of emotions are making him shake, are making Hannibal shake as well, if by contact or imitation it is impossible to tell.

Instead of dwelling on it, Will tries to avoid crying by steering Hannibal’s head back to his mouth so he can kiss the turmoil away. When they kiss, their tongues are nervous: they lick old cuts open, they suck new bruises on jaws because it’s the only way available to keep them from speaking admissions too big to sit on that bed with them. If spoken, they’d keep their bodies apart.

“I miss you too,” Hannibal finally breathes into the hollow of Will’s throat, his voice raw and strangely small, an allowance he himself did not know he could make. It is only then that Will pulls his sweater over his head, urging fabric to disappear between their chests. Secretly, metaphysically, he hopes a lack of clothes will bring their hearts closer together.

Immediately, their bodies seem to hold a will and a memory neither of their brains was aware, behaving as if lying half naked and breathlessly hard was a natural occurrence in their shared history. They move in unison, wince and moan in unison when they touch each other’s cocks without the proxy of their own hands. It feels incredibly intimate but Will cannot help chuckling, partially out of nervousness, but (he can admit it now) mostly out of joy. Hannibal is silent above him, furrowed brow concentrated in the languid, precise strokes that tingle down to Will’s toes, yet his eyes are filled with amber light, so Will knows he too is endlessly amused by how physical intimacy unexpectedly inebriates them, renders them similarly fast and loose.

Will licks his palm under Hannibal's focused gaze and begins to trace every crevice, every vein on his cock. He finds a deep, inexplicable pleasure in cataloging its weight and girth, the ginger freckles dusted around Hannibal’s navel, the mousy brown hue of his pubic hair. As if knowing such anatomical trivia about a serial killer would make him simultaneously a better profiler and tenderer lover.

Pleasure seems to stretch out indeﬁnitely, molten and weightless, depending only on the pressure and pace on their ﬁngers. There is no rush, no end in sight. Whatever they are doing, they are not working towards any kind of release. If anything, they are using their bodies to find perpetual abeyance.

“This is not sex, is it?” Will asks dazedly between jolts, his eyes closing as his body grows tauter and his conscience ﬂimsier.

Hannibal’s hand slips away from Will’s cock to his inner thigh, and for yet another disorienting moment, Will thinks he has ﬁnally dislodged whatever mad glass-jar of stifling lust they have going on here, only to feel Hannibal’s dry ﬁngers begin to push inside him, an answer in and of itself.

If desire has a vernacular, their vernacular is to earn every inch of common ground with a shovel, chip at it until their flesh runs clay-red, Will realizes amazed.

Incapable of keeping from crying out, his voice comes out frantic when he pleads, “More.”

Hannibal smiles against his scarred cheek, asks viciously light, “Of what?”

A jack-in-a-box propelled by repressed desire, Will’s body throws himself against Hannibal’s: arms snake around his neck, knees locked together by bunched jeans find enough leverage so he can rasp in Hannibal’s ear, “Do it rough.” A past echo and a future promise all wrapped into one.

Hannibal’s fingers burn inside him then, violently and earnestly, much like Will imagined they would. Their clinical delicateness always seemed alien, but this, the dry raw scorch of their relentless pressure, the ironclad inflexibility of his phalanxes carving a path inside Will’s body, that, that feels like the Hannibal he often sensed, and (dimly, covertly) yearned for.

Holding on to Hannibal’s shoulders, his mouth buried in his hair, drunk on pleasure and pain, Will wishes that he could die, or perhaps live forever, in that second before orgasm overtakes him. In that scintillating instant, he is fully cognizant of how much potential exists in him for taking and giving back, how much room is there for love and destruction. It is terrifying in his bottomlessness, so much so that he likes to believe it is the overpowering intensity of his epiphany that pushes Hannibal over the edge as well.

When Will unlocks his viselike grip around Hannibal’s shoulder, their stomachs are a mess of combined semen, their hair and breathing short-circuited and wild. Panting loudly, they look at each other as if they weren’t sure of their surroundings, though their hands are tight on each other’s hips.

“Are you okay?” Will ridiculously asks the killer inside him. Hannibal nods mechanically, his eyes remote and liquid, the slick surface of a very still, very chasmic pond. He looks simultaneously dangerous and lost, and Will is overwhelmed by the ferocious need to never, ever be sundered from this man, lest that means to sow their bodies together, merge their skin with cum and spit.

Hannibal’s fingers, loose and motionless now, twitch inside Will. “Don’t leave,” he says before he can stop himself, but what Will really means is “don’t move, don’t let this moment slip by and become something desolately empty of endorphins where regret and sorrow can find a crack to crawl between us. Stay inside me, and I’ll stay with you.”

Will wants to say it, but can’t, can’t find the right words, or perhaps the right kind of foolishness—either/or. Instead, he lowers them back to bed until they are facing each other, parentheses folded into one another like twin halves of a spliced apple.

When Hannibal finally pulls his fingers from Will, he does it so gently that Will can barely feel the loss. His body is quickly growing numb in the aftershock of tremendous emotional exertion, but Will is struggling bravely to stay awake, to stay present, to milk every ounce of this spectacular happiness he did no know could be found in the shambles.

When Hannibal shifts, Will drowsily reaches out for him, only to find him already moving closer, thighs, calves and cold toes burrowing between his own. He is naked now, his low-riding pants finally gone. Will entertains the possibility of stripping his as well, but all strength has left his limbs. Instead he rubs his sticky chest against Hannibal’s, seeks his hands, and kisses his unwashed fingers. He knew, of course he did, what Will wanted even if he did not found the words to ask him. It punches Will in the gut that he could ever have a lover who reads his mind without the price to pay being annihilation.

As if indeed hearing his thoughts, Hannibal fastens his arms around Will, hard and binding, a muscular ring of flesh no wise man should dare to try and breach.

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Sleep must carry them for a while because the next thing Will hears is Hannibal murmuring above
his head, “If you leave me, I’ll kill you.”

If he is dreaming or fully lucid, Will is unsure. Will mumbles back, nonetheless: “If I leave you, I’ll die anyway, so don’t worry too much about it,” before promptly drifting off.
This chapter grew into a monster, so here's the first part and the second half will follow shortly.

Somehow when these two start talking, they talk A LOT. So yeah, expect much more dialogue with swatches of smut soon.

The sweltering heat of their combined bodies and the afternoon sun rouses him. The room, sparsely furnished and windowless, feels like an airless vault, making the stench of their unwashed skin an almost physical presence between them. Will breathes it in, the animal sourness of their bodies, how unlike the sickening sweet smells of makeup and deodorant and detergent, olfactory markers Will has come to associate with the uneasy fit of his adult life. Together, they smell exactly how they are: unapologetically savage, men only by social performance, but something other altogether when let alone in the wild.

Hannibal stirs in what Will is rapidly growing adept at distinguishing as natural movement and not fabricated affectation. He nuzzles Will before he even opens his eyes, his hands reflexively searching for his wrists and ankles as to confirm Will is still there, truly, bodily there by his side. It is oddly endearing that a man greying out of middle age behaves not unlike an orphaned child.

Will lets himself be dragged under his chin, his hair further mussed by a roaming nose. He wonders if Hannibal is breathing him in and entertaining considerations similar to those entertained by Will only moments prior. He wonders too, fully aware of how naive these thoughts are, if physical intimacy made them more attuned to each other’s psyches, if they are closer to be one single identity now than ever before.

The idea settles too nicely on his bones, so Will, unaccustomed to easy harmony, moves away from the embrace to lay on his back. The ceiling is painted matte white. The single high vent has trouble filtering any light or new air in. No wonder it feels so stewy hot.

Hannibal remains on his side, studying Will closely. It is not that different from when they lay side by side in the barn, but for the black sheet covering both their naked chests. Will wonders absently what happened to the old herringbone blanket. For a while, Will teases at the thought, trying to keep the peace by way of keeping the silence.

“I have to go back,” Will finally says. The temperature in the room drops immediately, so he adds a tad too fast, “You know that, right?”

Hannibal’s bare toes rub against Will’s socked foot, and suddenly it is not at all like it used to be in the barn. Will is simultaneously reminded that he knows what this man’s face looks like in the throes of orgasm, but still cannot tell what went through his mind as he disposed of his sixth toe somewhere in the middle of rural Pennsylvania. It unsettles him somehow. Maybe it shouldn’t, all things considered, but it does.

Silence hangs between them, once again heavy and treacherous. That too unsettles Will: that no truce is durable between them, that no softness ever sticks. The burdens of their past—fear,
resentment, and its kissing cousin, guilt—hoover between them, so easily summoned. It drives Will crazy, ultimately offsetting any other rational thought. He turns and kisses Hannibal on the mouth, close-lipped and rushed, before he returns to his original position. He can hear Hannibal’s intake of breath, but doesn’t turn to look at him. Instead, he says to the ceiling:

“I have been gone for two days. Molly will be worried once she sees that I left my stuff behind. She’ll assume the worst.”

Will chances a glance towards Hannibal. He looks inhumanly still, hand tucked under his right cheek, eyes unblinking and expressionless. But now Will can see clearly through the shutters. There is an undercurrent of pain and rage that are closely rising under the cool surface, and the bruising throb around his neck reminds Will of what catastrophic impulsiveness those lovely hands are capable of.

“We don’t want the police crawling all over these hills, Hannibal. We simply can’t afford that. I have to go back.”

When those words do not seem to bank the dangerously mounting tension in his jaw, Will throws caution to the wind and touches the tip of Hannibal’s nose, the dimple where blood pooled only hours before, trying to conjure back memories of what a life without Will seemed to entail. The gesture may apparently telegraph “don’t kill me,” but is actually asking “don’t tear us apart.”

Almost begrudgingly, Hannibal unspools from his paralyzing anger, finding some internal way to reroute his flaring temper into something much smoother. It blows over him like a cloudy sky in the end, as he catches Will’s index finger and kisses its fingerprint.

“I will start breakfast,” Hannibal announces, abruptly sitting up. “A simple scramble perhaps?”

His voice is so artificially animated that Will can’t help grabbing him by the wrist. “Not yet,” he breathes out, “Just—stay a little longer. I am cold,” Will lies as he drapes his body over Hannibal’s turned back and kisses his bare shoulder.

May all the lies between them be this kind, Will knows Hannibal is thinking in the moment he slips back under the covers and spoons Will in 100-degree weather. Will knows Hannibal is thinking that because he is too.

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When Hannibal does leave the bed to take a shower, Will follows him around almost helplessly. He is unsure where his newfound sense of control over Hannibal went from night to morning, but he ponders about it as he sits on the floor of the peach-marble bathroom, his back against the foggy panes of Hannibal’s luxurious tub.

They keep a steady conversation through the sounds of rushing water, as Hannibal washes his body and soaps his hair. Will demurely averts his eyes, still on his dirty underwear, patiently waiting for his turn to use the bath. Hannibal has not remarked on Will’s unwillingness to shower together, and Will decided not to question any more of his actions until he is out of that damn house. He has swiftly moved to blame the house and its murderous miasma for all of his recent questionable choices. It seems a surefire way to keep his wits about him.

So he sits by while Hannibal showers, and they talk about the incredibly bland gastronomy found
in the rural northeast. Hannibal retells a rather eventful encounter with a troupe of hapless hunters somewhere in the New Hampshire mountains, and his detailing of the travails to make their meat taste serviceable amuses Will to no end.

When Hannibal steps out of the bath, bright pink and stark naked, Will kisses him on the lips, already mourning the loss of his raw smell. He doesn’t think about what it means that he doesn’t run a fresh bath, but instead sinks in Hannibal’s bathwater, rinsing his hair and chest languidly. He also pointedly does not question when Hannibal takes to shaving right there and then, a gilded barber’s razor in hand, casually regaling him with a new tale of murder and experimental backwoods cooking.

When Will is finished with his bath, Hannibal props a towel open and Will steps into his arms as if spellbound, the crisp white linen suit and the impeccable shave rendering Hannibal’s golden eyes all the more unnaturally illuminated and fond.

“Can you imagine,” Will muses as Hannibal begins to pat him dry, methodically but not without a certain lazy sensuality, “if this was our life? Can you imagine doing this every day?”

As he catches sight of their joined reflection on the full-length mirror, Will knows by the subtle stutter in Hannibal’s rubbing motion that he found a buried tripwire. Before Will can say anything else, Hannibal is gone, his truer self locked under lightweight fabric and expensive aftershave.

Of course Hannibal doesn’t have to wonder about connubial bliss, Will realizes belatedly. He already did, possibly every day, for the past four years.

Back in the mirror, Will’s body looks shrunken and colorless, not unlike how it looked when Will would curl up in Molly’s bathtub late at night, blindingly drunk and mercilessly cold.

Now, like before, it is a body dwarfed by Hannibal’s absence. The only addition is a premature fraying around his eyes and wrists and balls, the result of being made aware of the inevitability of having to say goodbye to something you desperately wish to hold close.
Will finds Hannibal in the kitchen, sitting at the counter, sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His left arm is hooked to a blood bag. His left hand cradles a steaming coffee mug while his right holds a newspaper. The picture he cuts, freshly shaven and barefoot in casual business attire, is every inch incongruous and magnificent.

“Howdy. Planning any fake deaths some time soon?” Will throws out casually as he moves around the kitchen searching for coffee. To his surprise, there isn’t any.

“You seem to forget that I am a wanted man, Will. I must prepare for the eventuality of needing urgent medical care.”

“Like a transfusion?” Will asks mostly to fill the painful awkwardness of finding a finished French press in the sink and the remnants of scrambled eggs in a frying pan. Being unwanted is not a sensation unusual to Will, but it has been years since he felt it so keenly, and never in Hannibal’s presence. It’s a blunt pain, with all the freshness of newly discovered tenderness.

Silence stretches as Hannibal continues to drink his coffee and read his newspaper quietly. In a way, it is as if Will had been left alone with a ghost. There is as much comfort as horror at the thought, so Will begins doing the dishes of a meal he has pointedly not been invited to share.

To his renewed disappointment, Hannibal doesn't protest. He doesn’t say much of anything for over half an hour. Eventually Will relents and makes his own pot of coffee. He walks to the expansive glass windows that make up most of the west side of the house. The sun is high and glaringly white. A thin layer of fog coats the tree tops. Birds can be heard all across the woods, that’s how still it is between them.

Stillness, Will comes to realize, is an abnormal force, sitting ill-fitting when they are angry or hurt. That something so ordinary would take place between them, a couple of killers, as it would between a couple of lovers, catches Will by surprise. For the first time, Will truly regrets what he is doing to Molly. He understands now how deeply betrayal can cut when sex is not a mere physical act but an expression of commitment.

“No breakfast,” Will says at last.

“Hmm?” Hannibal hums nonchalantly.

Will knows he can call him out on it, has earned that right the same way a lover does: by staying and holding his ground. Perhaps because he now knows this, Will does exactly that.

“You didn’t make enough breakfast for me,” Will clarifies without turning away from the wilderness. “Rather rude don’t you think?”

The faint sound of rustling paper and a sharp inhaling tells Will that he has gained Hannibal’s attention as much as a monster’s wrath.
“I imagined you were in a hurry to leave. Cooking for two would have been wasteful in such case. I was merely being considerate.”

“Considerate,” Will snarls. “There’s a word we should strike from our lexicon altogether.” Will turns to face him, cold anger unraveling low in his throat. Hannibal looks perfectly composed but for the plastic tube buried in the crook of his arm, the tension lines of displeasure etched around his downturn mouth.

“I find myself exponentially exhausted by your willful blindness, Will,” Hannibal replies smoothly, unhooking his vein and getting up to refill his cup—with the coffee Will brew. The gesture alone makes Will see red. “So much compartmentalization and obsession with the past cannot be good for your psyche,” Hannibal adds after a long sip.

“Oh fuck off, Dr. Lecter. You exhaust me,” Will barks, stalking across the room to where Hannibal leans leisurely against the sink. The urge to fight flares up high before his eyes, too quick for Will to be able to reign it in. He feels simultaneously very powerful in his indignation, and reckless in his righteousness. “You knew that I had a wife. You got one of those too, remember? What the fuck did you think would happen huh? You thought we’d fuck and all would be forgotten?”

“No,” Hannibal replies. His voice is steady, but his eyes slide to Will's knees. “But I had hoped.”

“You hoped? For what exactly? To woo me with sex?”

“Does that seem like such a ridiculous impossibility?”

And that, the unconcealed hurt, the vague discomfort Will used to detect in the voices of perennial mistresses and abandoned spouses, that completely disarms Will’s anger like a fuse cut off from a bomb.

“No. Of course not,” Will whispers as he automatically reaches for Hannibal's downcast chin. Just like that, he is filled with tenderness up to the brim of his ribcage. “It is just—as you.”

“What is?” Hannibal asks from under his lashes, and Will guesses the gesture is part performance part impulse, both stemming from the very human need for reassurance.

“To think that eroding my moral fiber would tip the scales in your favor.”

When Hannibal seems about to refute, Will smiles and runs his fingers over his mouth as lovingly as he knows how—a bit rough and stagey, like a rusty muscle.

“Making me an adulterer does not make me more loyal. You better than anyone should know that.”

“Should I?”

A shadow clouds Hannibal’s eyes, a dark and slick oil spill. The shared knowledge of the time Will had two masters hangs heavy between them, a painful and pregnant reminder of the consequences divided loyalties can cultivate between them.

Will holds his gaze. He steps closer still, until his socked feet cover Hannibal’s naked ones. When he is close enough to kiss him, Will presses a thumb into his cheekbone. “Hannibal. I made vows. To Molly. To Wally. I promised to stay by their side come hell or high water, and though arguably you may be bigger than both combined, it still matters. It matters to me to honor that promise, even if I fail at others. You must understand that. I am theirs now.”
“You were mine first.”

The resentment in Hannibal’s words springs up stale and covetous, worn out by years and years of being pressed down into more manageable emotions. The proximity of their bodies makes their sourness unmistakable.

“Yeah and look at what you did to me when you had me. You set me on fire, you cut into my body, you left me to die. Molly and Wally may be many things, but I will never have to fear them.”

“Perhaps that is why you will never be able to love them.”

Will drops his hand then, a deeply calculated gesture, because otherwise he knows he will end up kissing Hannibal and that seems too close to glossing over something that can fester into an abyss.

“Spite looks poorly on you, Hannibal,” Will says instead as he steps away.

“Sanctimoniousness doesn’t become you either, Will. And yet here we are.”

“Please, Hannibal. Please. I don’t want to leave like this.”

“Then don’t,” Hannibal retorts, impeccably poised in the middle of the kitchen. His white dress shirt is wrinkled right where Will pressed against his chest, the textile indentation a reminder that their bodies know each other intimately now. “You don’t have to leave at all.”

Will throws his hands up in the air, feeling utterly caged. “Hannibal, be reasonable! Molly will call the cops. Jack. They’ll come poking around here eventually.” Will begins pacing, panic speeding him into gear, “He will find us and arrest us, if state troopers don’t shoot us first. We can’t afford that.” I can’t afford losing you remains unsaid but, Will hopes, still heard.

“Be reasonable. What a preposterous request, Will. I was never reasonable when it came to any of my pleasures, and certainly will not be reasonable when it comes to you.”

The enormous room, in all its sprawling openness and seven-feet glass windows, grows incredibly cramped, so small that Will can’t breathe properly. He tugs at his hair and closes his eyes with his fists. What is this madness he keeps circling into? Love, Will knows. Love will keep you stuck and keep you going. That’s what his father used to say after his mother left and whiskey had become a fixture in their pantry.

The familiar warmth and coppery smell of Hannibal’s skin brings Will back to the present moment. Hannibal, who is cradling Will’s jaw in his lovely hands, his lips brushing over Will’s eyebrows as if they were just a couple having a row like couples do, occasionally fighting over broken arrangements and forgotten dates, making up just as easily with renewed promises and intimate touches.

“Will. There will be other children. Other dogs, other houses in the snow if you want. But there is only one of you and one of me. There is no happiness to be found apart. You know this. You know it deep in your bones.”

Will looks up at him, hard, trying to find the tripwire under his plain words.

“When did you decide to become so straightforward?”

“When obfuscation ceased to yield satisfactory results.”

“Oh yeah? When did that epiphany finally occur? I do not see you as the type to find clarity in
prison. So do enlighten me. When did this earth-shattering paradigm-shift happen, Dr. Lecter?"

Hannibal sighs, letting go of Will’s face. He walks to the windows, hands in his pockets, and it’s his patience, limitless at this point, that deflates Will’s engineered outrage. *I’m madly in love with you,* Will thinks with ruthless clarity. *Fighting you arouses me, fucking you soothes me, any time we exchange emotions I feel nourished. I lied. I am yours now, more than I ever was.*

Before Will can speak, Hannibal remarks offhandedly, “Did you know that body of water is called Stag Brook?”

Following his outstretched finger, Will slips to his side. They stand three feet apart, eyes on the silver line glinting in the distance. They could be anyone, friends or strangers, gazing out into nature, sharing a moment of complicit contemplation. In any world, in any version of time and space, they would always find this common ground, this brand of peace that is too close to telepathy for comfort, but also too rare to be ignored.

When he finds his voice again, Will replies with false ruefulness, “Of course I did. How do you think I found you? I know you, Dr. Lecter. I know how ridiculously fond of puns you are.”

And then haltingly, Will’s mind wanders down a parallel path, invasive but urgent. “Although I’d wage this was not your initial hideout. Others came before. Other bodies too. But you settled on this one because—” Will flinches and blinks, stumbling haphazardly upon unwanted knowledge, “...you decided to wait for me to come.”

Will can feel Hannibal scrutinizing him, his eyes bearing deep and down around his skull. That gaze is filled with an unspecified request, one Will cannot fully address without coming undone.

“I should have known. You manipulated me,” he finally says, deadpan. Feels for an old wound, finds it weepy but numb.

“How so, dear Will?”

“You provided me with an illusion of control. That I was hunting you, when all along you were staying put luring me on.”

“That is not an illusion,” Hannibal retorts blandly.

“Well, it is not control either,” Will bites out, tension gathering in his skull. Suddenly, he feels sick, queasy with deceit. Or disappointment.

He grips the ends of the tether inside his chest, knowing full well that if he looks up he will be signing his soul over to the devil. He can’t, Will tells himself. There’s a woman down in the mountains who still carries his name, a boy that cannot bury two fathers before he comes of age. A man who will do anything to put Hannibal in the ground.

It’s not fair, Will thinks. It’s just not fair.

“Shall I pack you a small lunch?,” Hannibal asks in a tone that, being mostly polite, does a poor job at masking something else. “Evening falls fast here, and in the dark it might take you hours to find your way back to Moosehead Lake.”

“No,” Will turns away, shaking his head. “Thank you, but—no. I should just go. I should try to make it there before daybreak.”

Immediately Will scans through the list of items he needs to keep them both safe. He needs to
change to his original soiled clothes, needs his gun, needs to rehearse a compelling fiction that explains all his bruises and abrasions.

Needs to relearn how to smile without showing his teeth.

Must appear unchanged, untouched by whatever madness makes his heart liquid and his head swimmy.

Must make his body believe his brain’s fictions. His heart is treacherous. He could never trust his heart. His father told him so when he was a kid, and he was right. If Will’s heart bleeds into his sleeve, he will be running away with a killer tonight.

No, not a killer, Will amends as he scans the room for his gun. My beloved.

Christ. He is in too deep.

“Will,” Hannibal calls as Will bends to pick up his rifle, still fallen where he left it, under a confetti of blasted stucco. Was that only three days ago? It feels like a lifetime ago.

He straightens up and looks at Hannibal. He is still by the windows, his long, graceful body turned to face the dusky sun. “The epiphany came after Francis. Once my beloved preferred to die and kill me than to live with the knowledge of our shared attachment, a revision of my previous methods seemed wise.”

Something quietly breaks inside Will. He strides the distance between their bodies in a fury, crashing inelegantly against Hannibal’s back.

“I will come back,” Will says into the white linen made warm and precious by the living skin under it. “Somehow, somewhere, this won’t be the last time you see me.”

Hannibal turns slowly in Will’s arms, and Will can tell the exact moment he capitulates into the absolute inevitability of compromise. He lets his head fall hard against Will’s as if his body had lost all of its gravity. This is foreign to him too, it comes to Will unbidden but not less startling. He doesn’t have the upper hand in any of it, not anymore than I do. We belong to who we are, and who we are is crystallized in what we feel for one another. We can’t escape this. We don’t even want to.

“Is that a promise, Will?,” Hannibal mumbles into Will’s hair.

“Yes. Yes, it’s a promise. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“I thought you’d do go away with me.”

“What?”

“That’s what I thought would happen when you’d finally catch me.”

“I never catch you, Hannibal. You always surrender.”

“Not always,” Hannibal answers, his overlong hair grazing Will’s temples.

Will can hear the unspoken ringing loud in the space between their mouths. “Only to you,” Hannibal’s voice telegraphs smug and resigned, playful and pained. Will kisses him then, with teeth and tongue, his fingers digging carelessly into Hannibal’s forearms, coming away sticky with blood pooling on the inside of his left elbow. Will licks the blood off his nails, off the gold ring on his right hand. It tastes surprisingly tawny, like oak-barreled wine and welding sparks.
“I think you should fuck me now,” Will grunts as he blindingly backs them into the kitchen counter (kitchens, why must always be in kitchens?), and begins fumbling with Hannibal’s buttons. “I thought you were leaving, Will.”

“Shut up.” Will grits out as he pushes his hands under Hannibal’s shirt, nuzzles into his breastplate, his collarbone. “God, I love the way you smell.”

Will feels Hannibal gathering him closer until he has Will fully slotted under his chin. With manic determination, Will tears at each stitch of clothing he can find between them, slips a hand under waistbands and belts, strokes his own erection, desperately seeking for a patch of skin that will quieten the wild throbbing in his chest. It takes him a while to notice that Hannibal is not moving with him, not matching his hunger, though Will can feel him unmistakably hard against his thigh.

Will wants to ask what’s wrong, but only when he attempts to form words does he realize that his throat is clogged with sobs. His eyes too are shut with tears, streaking Hannibal’s chest hair. Hannibal is drawing soothing circles between his shoulder blades.

"I am angry,” Will spits out bitterly, as he lays his palm flat over Hannibal's erection. “Not at you. Not really, not anymore. I am just always so angry.” He takes in a deep breath, pushes it out steadily, “I am exhausted of being angry.”

“You believe to be trapped, Will, but we are free.”

“Hannibal, we are anything but free. I am going back because we are not free. I can’t run away with you because we wouldn’t be free. We’d be hunted.”

Hannibal, incongruously, takes a step back and kisses the tip of his nose. When Will looks up, he seems amused.

“What? Why are you smiling? You can’t be seriously enjoying this.”

“I believe people would call this ‘a domestic.’ What great lengths you go to simply convey insecurity, Will.”

“And you say that as if you were delighted.”

Wrapping a hand behind his skull, Hannibal forces Will’s head back against his shoulder.

“Immensely,” he murmurs before picking Will up and splaying him on the kitchen counter. “Now, where were we?”

“Trapped in a murder house last I checked.”

“Will.”

“Fine. What would your answer be?” The cold air rakes his bare chest, the exposed skin below his navel.

Hannibal smiles, his fingers fluttering around Will’s fly, tracing the inside seams of his jeans, the curve of his cock trapped under fabric.

“In love.”

They lock eyes and Will’s breathing stutters to a stop. It stands to reason a monster could not look
so guileless in his excitements, but there he was, half-naked and tousle-haired between Will’s legs, smiling with impossible childish abandonment.

Will doesn't have the heart to correct him—though at the tip of his tongue, ready to jump forward, is the remonstration “in trouble is more like it.” In the end, when Hannibal's mouth closes hot around his cock, it is all semantics.

“We are in too deep,” Will thinks again, right before coming. That is likely the most accurate descriptor they will ever find.

It's beside the point, though. For one snatched moment, Will closes his eyes and gives in to obliterating pleasure, all his nightmares draining into the dark.

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Later, as he plows through bramble and jagged rock, Will realizes that he could feel Hannibal’s satisfied smirk against his balls, the chuckle in his mouth, the victory in his breath. To him, that had been a won argument.

It dawns on Will too, that he has come full circle. He has married the man who brought him homemade breakfast in expensive Tupperware. He has married the killer who wooed him with bloody valentines and violent exercises on self-improvement.

It doesn’t matter what the ring on his finger says. His spouse wedded him one scar at a time, many many moons ago.
Will manages to stay away for one hundred and ninety-two minutes. He had left unimpeded, sometime in the early evening, Hannibal vanished into the bowels of the house presumably to shower.

Surprisingly, he had not cleaned up after Will was gone.

There are still bloodstains splattered on the marble counter where Hannibal bit into Will’s lower abdomen, an inch shy of his scar. It had left an ugly mark, swollen and purple, hard to explain to a loving wife.

Some of the blood was Hannibal’s. In a haze of arousal, Will had dipped his fingers in the freshly harvested blood sitting in a plastic bag on the counter. He had hushed Hannibal’s token protests of contaminating sterilized samples by coating his cock and pushing it inside Hannibal’s body. Will came pathetically fast, less than an inch burrowed within. Blood and semen had trickled down Hannibal's thighs, and smeared in Will’s hands. He had looked hard and long at the cloying mixture settling under his nails, streaking his wedding band with a shiny crimson oiliness.

“When will it end?” he had asked half dazed to no one in particular, though Hannibal had gotten up from the counter where he laid splayed on his chest, his legs and ass shamelessly bare, his cock flushed and unspent. “I just fucked you and I already want to do it again. When will it end, this hunger?”

Though his mind was mostly blank, his voice carried unmistakable traces of terror. Hannibal had nuzzled into his neck, a big cat contented with his lot. “Never, dear Will.”

After that, Will had moved on autopilot, changing into old clothes, putting on muddy shoes, and picking up his gun and flashlight from the floor. He did not bother disinfecting his cuts or disguising the stench of sex from his skin. When he walked out into the chilly July evening, he had no well-defined plan. If anything, he half hoped to be devoured by wild life. To be spared any additional embarrassments, any protracted performances, that’s all Will could wish for now that he had hitched his star to a starving beast.

Less than an hour later, Will had turned around. He had felt queasy with the panic allotted to forgetting the front door unlocked before embarking on a long journey, or having walked out on a dying friend over a petty squabble. The situation suddenly seemed wrapped in ominous urgency, so he jogged all the way back to the glass house, taking at least two tumbles and two wrong turns in his mounting alarm.

When he finally reentered through the unlocked French windows, the kitchen lights were still on, but the rest of the house was deathly silent. Fear jolted hot in Will’s belly. If Hannibal was gone, (or worse, murdered) Will would have to go on a killing spree. He felt torn about this prospect: too exhausted to properly wield a weapon, but too committed not to follow through.

Will stands in the bloodied kitchen now, thinking—not for the first time—that he may be in purgatory. This sterile dome of a house, the frenzy of lust and anger running on a loop, the constant white heat and herringbone patterns, they seem fitting of eternal limbo. Perhaps he died in the Atlantic, and these are but the fantasies of a man drowned with a monster he could not fully give in to, nor completely let go of.

Perhaps loving Hannibal is in itself a form of self-inflicted purgatory.
With a resigned sigh, Will stalks into the back rooms, his grip on the trigger punishingly tight, physical pain the only thing keeping his feet moving.

He finds Hannibal asleep in the bedroom where Will had awaken after being strangled to unconsciousness. A small lamp is on. Like a nightlight, Will thinks with a pang, keeping the bad spirits at bay.

Hannibal’s shoulders are bare above the black sheet, one foot thrown over Will’s side of the bed, slim and too pale in the gauzy light. He looks absurdly peaceful and luminous in the ventless dark.

Like a child, Will thinks for the second time that day. Hannibal had such a disarmingly childishness to him, both in his terrible whims and unfettered glee. Will is, for all intents and purposes, thoroughly endeared by him. It annoys him still, but it seems a simpler response than bloodlust, so he pushes his natural animosity for fondness away and slides to the top of the bed. Hannibal looks profoundly asleep until he doesn’t, but by then the butt of Will’s rifle has been smashed against the side of his head.

“Will?,” Hannibal’s voice reaches from above, cottony and faraway, as Will wrestles to stand up. “What’s wrong?”

“You hitting me over the head for starters.”

A ruffled breath telegraphs both impatience and displeasure. Underneath it, though, is an undercurrent of something else, simultaneously sharp and soft. Will can’t quite place it, his eyesight woozy and his hearing dimmed.

“What are you doing here, Will?”

“I wanted to give you something.”

“A parting gift? How sentimental of you, Will.”

There is a coldness to his voice, a detachment that is not entirely human. Will is assaulted by a familiar fear: that Hannibal is essentially a monster, capable of astonishing impersonations of affection but ultimately incapable of feeling it. This is a fear Will has kept lurking in the back of his mind, distracted by the intoxicating notion that perhaps, perhaps sexual intimacy would magically remake Hannibal into a caring human.

Not, not a human, Will redacts automatically. A partner. His partner. A spouse of some savage kind.

A faint coughing shakes Will back to the moment at hand. Hannibal, Will realizes on a delay, is completely naked and disturbingly dirty. He stands tall and guarded, arms crossed over his chest, eyes bright and alert. Brown flecks smudge his cheeks, ribcage, abdomen, the insides of his thighs. Will cannot take his eyes away from him, this feral creature looming in the dark.

Dried blood, Will realizes with a start. The brown spots are blood in the shape of fingertips, Will’s fingertips, strewn all over Hannibal’s body, cordonning it like veins, like freckles. Like poison ivy.

A swoon comes over Will, making his body sway. It is not lost on him that Hannibal has not offered to help, let alone touch him, though Will is reeling wounded less than four feet away.

“No. Not a parting gift,” he grits out through clenched teeth, leaning heavily on the nightstand. “Something for you to remember me by. Something that can’t be taken away.”
When the air in the room only grows icier, Will chances a glance at Hannibal. There is no warmth in him, no clinical affability. Will would be hard pressed to match him with any previous version of the man he called a doctor, a friend, a killer, a lover. This is another being altogether, a creature of hail, frostbite, and rock.

Will is suddenly lightheaded with love for him.

“I want to give you absolute consent over my body,” he wheezes, spellbound. “The unlimited autonomy to do to it whatever you desire.”

Hannibal’s head tilts almost imperceptibly, mechanic and owl-like. “The only boundaries being those I impose myself?”

“Exactly.”

“You want to gauge how far my self-serving interests will run until they infringe on your well-being.”

“I want to know how far I can trust you. And how well you can trust yourself.”

“Is this offer bound by any temporal restrictions?,” Hannibal inquires dismissively, no kindness, no interest seeping into his tone. Will wants him all the more.

Will deliberates for a moment, then adds with finality, “No. No bounds. I’m yours until I die.”

“What if my death comes first?”

“Are you asking me if someone else may enjoy this offer posthumously?”

“Something like that.”

“No. It’s only for you. Even if you are dead, my body is still yours.”

“What if I ask you to keep it chaste until your own demise?”

“Your jealousy is becoming uncomfortably romantic in its baroqueness.”

“With a capital R, I hope.”

“Very little about you is not capitalized.”

Without warning, Hannibal drops gracefully to the bed, crossing his bare legs at the knee and patting the mattress beside him, “Will you lie down now?”

“You have yet to accept my offer.”

“I do. I accept it, Will. Till death do us part.”

“If I lie down, am I safe?”

“Do you want to be safe, Will?”

Will exhales, bone-dry tired. “I don’t want any more hurt. I know that for sure now. I couldn’t be a fugitive all my life, looking over my shoulder. I don’t mind dying, but I mind living in fear.”

“Are you asking me to stop killing, Will?” There’s a hint of curiosity in Hannibal's voice, mild and
likely fabricated, but enough to spur Will on.

“No. I don’t care that you kill. I care \textit{when} and \textit{where} you kill. I care that you’ll drag me into a whirlpool of impulsive catastrophes I’ll have little control over.”

“I would never jeopardize your life, Will.”

“Yes, you would. You can’t help it.”

Hannibal hums pensively, “That is perhaps not unwarranted, but quite unreasonable.”

“Guess what? I am not necessarily reasonable myself. Particularly not when I’m around you.”

The lack of a physical response—no creasing of eyes, no huffing, no frowning—makes Will’s skin crawl.

“It seems you may be attempting to strike a bargain,” Hannibal finally declares.

“Am I now?”

“Hmm. A devil’s bargain I would say. The power over your body for the power over my hand.”

“If I were, would that be amenable to you?”

“Would you truly stay?”

Will keeps his eyes on the small orange lamp, tests his voice for lies, “Maybe. Possibly.”

“If I say yes, could I add my own rubric?”

“That highly depends, Hannibal.”

“Imagine I solemnly vow to never make any life-or-death decision that is not entirely vetoed by you first.”

“Imagine that.”

“Imagine I ask for one thing only before signing that deal.”

“For as long as we both shall live,” Will insists.

“Very well.”

“What is it?”

“I would want to take a last life. To seal this pact of ours in blood, let’s say.”

“A sacrificial lamb?”

“Hmmm. Quite so.”

“You can’t kill a child.”

“I have no interest in hurting a child, Will.”

“I do not care to go to jail only to appease some long-harbored fantasy of killing Alana or Jack, Hannibal.”
“Fair enough. I do not wish for their lives that ardently either.”

Will pauses, considering, feeling the ground between them for hidden traps. There is one, he can sense it, shapeless but lit with danger. Hannibal sounds all too amused there not to be a concealed benefit waiting to be reaped.

And then, it dawns on Will, clear like electric sparks.

“Molly. It’s Molly, isn’t it?”

When Hannibal merely smiles in that quiet, euphoric way which triggers a whole room, Will can feel the wind being knocked out of his lungs, so perfect his understanding of Hannibal’s mind is in that moment. Like a door opening into a wild, rose-covered ruin. “You want to be Bluebeard’s last wife,” Will murmurs.

“Say yes, and my leash is yours,” Hannibal replies with bells jingling in his voice.

“I thought it already was, Hannibal.”

Hannibal moves minutely on the bed, and all the shadows grow sinister around his deep-set eyes and taut shoulders. Will fancies he can smell a mineral smell come between them, mossy and rotten like old gravestones under the rain.

“All the bodies buried under these trees and the bruises on your throat tell a different story, Will. You know that.”

The amusement in his voice shifts colors, storms out gunmetal and depthless. “You know that I could go and take her life anytime I am so inclined. I haven’t, not because you stand in my way, but because I want you by my side. That’s all.”

“Ah the subtleties of a monster in love. What joy.”

“Do not be snide, Will. It does not suit you.”

“I would say jealousy doesn’t suit you either, but then I would be lying.”

Will shuffles his feet, considers the high vent, any excuse not to look at Hannibal, naked, muscular, and sparkling with the mirth of intellectual chase. And that other thing, the onyx venom at his core, the thing Will cannot name, but arouses him and repulses him in equal measure. The thing he cannot wait to finger open with his tongue.

“I have been mad at you for so long. I don’t think murdering my wife will help any.”

“Be mad, Will. Better mad than indifferent.”

Will laughs bitterly, “I will never be indifferent to you, Hannibal. I am mad about you.”

“Do you mean ‘mad at me’?”

“No. I mean what I said.”

“Are you saying yes, Will?” Hannibal asks after a moment, his voice liquid and serpentine as he reaches over to leisurely trace Will’s erection, growing discernible under his jeans.

Will continues to refuse eye-contact. “My body is saying yes to your body, Hannibal. I am never going to sanction you killing Molly.”
“A stalemate then?”, Hannibal quips airily.

“Are we ever anywhere else?”, he replies equally light. Catching Hannibal’s hand in his own, Will takes his side on the bed.

“Perhaps not,” Hannibal concedes, moving his fingers over Will’s ring in precise and deliberate strokes. “Does that frighten you?”

“It excites me.”

“Is that one and the same?”

“With you? Yes. With anyone else—should I go and find out?”

Hannibal leans in. “If you leave now, I will kill you.”

“No, you won’t.”

He kisses Will, slow and long. “No, I won’t.”
Thank you all for still being here! This remains a slow-burn ride and you are all such good sports!

Also, this chapter kept growing so expect a new chapter in the next few days.

Will lies awake for a long time. It feels only right to keep vigil over Hannibal as he sleeps on his chest, ear to his heart, fist cuffing Will’s wrist. Every beat controlled, every pump surveyed.

Will is never as much Hannibal’s as he is in that stranger’s bed.

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In the dead of night, Will startles to a feeling of dizziness, almost vertigo.

He reaches for Hannibal automatically, and finds him deep asleep, his long body curled up against Will’s. Only then he hears it: Hannibal whimpering, his sounds that of a crying child or wounded animal. Will lifts a hand to stroke his sweaty bangs, but hesitates. He lingers between the desire to ease his lover’s pain and the delight in seeing a vicious killer so humbly exposed.

Turning, Will realizes that his right wrist is caught between Hannibal’s teeth. He has already sucked a bruise through the skin. It hurts in a dull, underwater sort of way.

Yet Will is incapable of taking his arm from his mouth. Whining in his sleep, haunted by nightmares, Hannibal resembles a starved, helpless animal whose trust is made manifest by surrendering to his hunger. Whatever Will had imagined sharing a bed with Hannibal would entail, in those long nights where Molly took his side, it certainly was not this.

In the end, Will stays stock still. When Hannibal stirs, nuzzling into Will’s jaw, Will pulls the blanket over his bare back, and kisses him lightly on the cheek. When he says the three words out loud, they punch a hole in his chest: “I am happy,” Will whispers into Hannibal’s hair.

In his sleep, Hannibal sucks Will’s wrist harder.

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The darkness feels wet around his body, his limbs loose with sleep. Breathing hurts, so he pants instead. His mouth is dry, sour with the aftertaste of a nightmare. He keeps his eyes closed, keeps the darkness steady and limber around him. There’s a weight on his chest, so compact it drives him into the mattress. He tries to hold on, to move it off, but it won’t budge. His grip is slippery, his hips buck. It feels good but painful. “What are you doing to me?,” he hears himself saying, whether out loud or in his own head it’s anyone’s guess. There’s a give when he buries his nails, a slickness when he pushes his fingers inside. The flesh is fever-hot and almost oppressively liquid. A hand comes to his neck, pushing ever so lightly and he can feel the smile vibrate down to the thumbs brushing against his collarbone, the muscles clenching around his knuckles. “I’m keeping you,” a voice replies. “What are you doing to me, Will?”
His eyes fly open, fully awake now. The darkness smooths out and Hannibal emerges from the shadows like a drowned body from the water: cheekbones first, gleaming with sweat, his tan mouth stretched open, the snag of his teeth protruding proud over pulled lips. He throws his head back, neck long with moaning, and hair sticks to his forehead, mundane and terrifying. One hand cups his own length, the other cuts deeper into Will’s trachea.

Will fails to swallow, fails closing his eyes though that could help ease the heat swirling up his toes and thickening on his belly. For a moment, his body recedes under the looming power of Hannibal’s weight, pressing static on Will’s groin, almost mocking him. Will twists his fingers and the body above him comes alive, rocking back and up, back and up, shoulders, hips, thighs lost in an erratic and graceful motion. The grip on Will’s throat weakens, Hannibal’s back curving in an impossibly vulnerable arch. Moved beyond reason, Will lifts a hand to Hannibal’s skull and pushes him down to his chest, licks his jaw, his brow, the sun-deprived valleys between skin and hair, steadily increasing pressure and friction, rubbing him raw from the inside out.

When Hannibal whimpers into Will’s hair, a fragile and broken thing, Will brings a hand to the small of his back. Drawing loose circles with his thumb, Will keeps Hannibal trapped there, between Will’s hard cock and his own semen, growing cool and gelatinous on their stomachs. The room fills quickly with the sounds of their breathing, harsh and uncertain. Will can’t let him go, not yet, not even after Hannibal’s body has ceased to offer any resistance.

He smells the crown of his head, the longer hair tickling his nose. Hannibal shivers and Will smiles, pleased and saddened. He can smell Winter in Hannibal’s hair as if Winter never left him, no matter how far he went to get away from the snow. Will’s cock aches between them but neither seems interested. Instead, he shifts so both his hands can cradle Hannibal’s nape. He can feel Hannibal’s breathing deescalating, becoming a precise metronome again. His face is turned to the wall, silver hair fanned across Will’s breastplate. Will cannot tell what he is thinking, not exactly, not until he draws one of Will’s hands to his lips and kisses its fingertips one by one. It’s the hand that had just been inside him. Then Will knows what Hannibal is asking him—once more, or maybe always. This time Will answers him with words. “I am making you mine,” he whispers, bending his lips to fit his ear.

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Will is hesitant to label their newfound intimacy “sex.” To him, it is just another form of trading hunger and pain between them. Somehow that feels much more dangerous than sex could ever be.

There is a whirl of darkness at its center. That’s what it is. It spurs them on, it makes them rut harder, come louder, leaving a sweet aftertaste in their noses and mouths, the juicy overripeness of nearly rotten fruit. Will suspects that, for him, it is that sweet-smelling darkness what ultimately keeps him clinging to a return to Moosehead Lake, to the house there, stable in its domestic frigidity. He can count on Molly and Wally to shelter him from slipping completely out of reach, to become a disposable pawn in a bored devil’s game of chase.

Or so he tells himself, though the lie feels brittle on his tongue. Will dips it in Hannibal’s mouth instead, waiting for him to taste its bitterness and rip his throat clean off.

But he never does.

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As the night ticks by, Will feels panic crawl inside him. Every time an orgasm is gutted out of his body, he strikes an hour off their borrowed clock, sharply aware that he is edging closer to having them both captured or killed.
Will imagines Hannibal thrills at that kind of high-stakes standoff, the feeling of knowing one’s limits by pushing them to a breaking point. Will, skittish by nature, is less aroused by danger than he is by destruction.

Don’t be fooled. Will would gladly burn the world down to keep Hannibal. He will not, however, go searching for a match just for the sake of starting a bonfire.
As dawn yellows the walls, Will gets up and gathers his things. From bed, Hannibal tracks his every movement, the same kind of cool scrutiny he reserves to fleeing prey.

“You are leaving after all,” he observes eventually.

“Yep,” Will picks up his underwear from the floor, flung carelessly the night before. He keeps his eyes on the rumpled garment. Something foul stirs in his belly, low and trigger-happy. “Told you. Gotta sort myself out. I can’t leave at a drop of a hat just because you felt like waltzing in and—”

Will stops himself short, sniffing the electric voltage speed up in the room.

That is a first.

Generally he barrels right on through, or Hannibal does, at the promise of blood spilled between them. But now, in the dingy light of a foggy July morning, covered in old scars and fresh spunk, Will looks at Hannibal—head propped on his open hand, stubbled chin and mussed hair—and just comes up empty. There is apprehension and sadness swimming between them, but very little hostility.

Hannibal must feel the change too because he says, “It is not a game, Will.”

A thread in his shirt is coming loose. Will pokes at it, viciously undoing the hem. “Nor a trap?,” he asks barely above a whisper.

The silence stretches between them, delicate and slippery, until Hannibal replies, equally tentative, “No—no, Will. It’s a promise. A covenant.”

Will tastes the word in his mouth before releasing a sigh. “Covenant.” It feels thick and heavy, a marble weight on his tongue. He climbs back to bed slowly. Hannibal pushes up against the headboard, making room for Will’s body, his chin on Will’s shoulder as soon as he settles by Hannibal’s side, leaning close but not fully in his arms.

“It worries you that I will tire of you.” It is not a question, and somehow Will is thankful for that, for the resolve of an unambiguous statement.

“If the mouse stops running, does the cat still care to follow?”

Hannibal licks his lips, choosing his words carefully, “I wouldn’t know how to stop.”

It sounds too much like a confession not to stick. Will isn’t sure what he refers to: if to following, running, caring (or killing). He only knows that the words hit him like a crowbar to the chest, landing acidic in his stomach. How exhausting it is, Will muses, to toggle between the monster and the man, the orphan and the killer. Will must love them both, love all versions of Hannibal, or it will likely spell disaster for the two of them.

No such concerns with Molly.

No such rewards either, adds his treacherous brain.

When Will glances up again, he finds Hannibal staring at a fairway spot, a thoughtful, absent look softening his brow.
Will reaches for him, pinches the scar tissue over his fine-boned wrist. “Hey. Where did you just go?” Will thinks he knows, but hearing it out loud becomes imperative.


Will can see it: the ransacked stone mausoleum, the crooked forest of dead trees with low-hanging black clouds. It is desolate in there, in the spaces without their bodies.

Will crawls into his bare chest, allowing the primal closeness of skin-on-skin to wash over him and offer him comfort. Hannibal winds his arms around his chest, drawing him in slow and steady at first, and then painfully tight. He noses at the side of his neck, and Will can feel his smile, a timid, experimental thing hidden against the curve of his throat, a thing of lonely children in playgrounds scanning the mob for a secret ally.

After a while, Will says, “I am going to take a bath. Do you want to join?”

The question is tossed out casually, between getting up and picking up discarded clothes, but they both know it is laden with meaning.

Wordlessly, Hannibal follows Will to the bathroom. Efficient as only he seems able to be, the bath is full and steaming within minutes. Will regards him as Hannibal lowers himself into the water, his infinite legs impossibly folded in the large marble cradle.

Will sinks opposite Hannibal, never breaking eye contact. There isn’t exactly enough space for two adult men, but if Will huddles, Hannibal can spread out comfortably—which he immediately does with charmingly entitled panache.

They turn the lights off so the rising sun can pour from the skylight, lending their bodies a ghostly hue. They could be anywhere. They could be back at the tiny Pennsylvanian cabin, or a luxurious home in Baltimore. It doesn’t matter. Hazy sunlight holds them together, away from space and time.

Once warm, Will makes a gesture beckoning for Hannibal’s foot. For a while, they don’t speak. Though his face reveals nothing, Will can feel the thrumming of excitement in the air, glowing off Hannibal like a live wire. It still catches Will off guard how certain surrenders can so suddenly charge Hannibal, fill him with genuinely unadulterated joy.

“Just come out with it,” Will says as he massages Hannibal’s foot, careful but firm. This is something he can do without second guessing, having always been good with his hands.

“Why should there be something, Will?” Hannibal replies, his tone dripping with condescension Will now knows is just a trick to hide how weak he feels with happiness.

“Because I know you. There is always something with you, doctor. It’s the bath, isn’t it?”

Hannibal hesitates, his two-day stubble and overlong hair pearled with condensation. “Well, you did in the past refuse to share this type of intimacy. I gathered it stemmed from your need to draw lines in which kinds of domestic behavior were afforded to us.”

Will snorts at that. “You thought I’d be okay with having you in me but not in my bathwater? Not everything has to be about you, Hannibal.”

Hannibal pins him with a strange, lopsided look, a frown that communicates he is quickly parsing through past information. “It is about someone, though. Who would that be, Will?”
Will sighs, mostly for show. He drops his head down and kisses Hannibal’s exquisitely shaped ankle before submerging it back in the water. He meets his gaze and finds it vulpine with the prospect of a hunt. That’s how Hannibal should always look, Will thinks to himself. Latched on him and alight with loving curiosity.

“Shortly after I was born, my mother slipped into a bath and slit her wrists. She was carted off to some mental institution and we never saw her again. My father took to the tub then, mostly to binge drink. He probably thought I couldn’t hear him crying from there.”

“But you could,” Hannibal states matter of fact.

“Yeah. Through the walls. I was always a light sleeper.”

They sit in silence a little longer, the water growing lukewarm around their tangled legs.

“It was likely postpartum depression,” Hannibal eventually remarks, his eyes closed and face turned heavenwards.

“Likely,” Will says. “But also maybe just crazy.”

“Do you fear that you are crazy, Will?”

“Oh honey, have you seen where I’m at? Of course I’m crazy.”

“Does that bother you?” Hannibal asks, eyes hooded, hands resting on each side of the tub, the very picture of benevolent debonairness.

Will holds his gaze and grins, “Maybe once it did.”

“Does it still?”

He pulls Hannibal’s other foot from underwater and starts kneading on its sole, hard and on this side of hurtful. “No. I am not my mother. You are not my father. Or vice-versa.”

“We are unique,” Hannibal singsongs.

“Perhaps.” Will shrugs. His full attention has fallen on the severed toe, it’s absence red and gnawed. “But more importantly, we are each other.”

Will bends, incapable of resisting the urge to put his mouth on the raw scar tissue. When his lips close over flesh, Will fancies that he can taste iron, bone, dry leaves—the molecular components of loss.

He lets the foot slip from his grip and disappear underwater with a small splash.

In the meantime something shocked Hannibal awake. His eyes widened and his head sprung forward, away from the wall. He doesn’t say anything, not while they finish soaping their bodies, nor when they separate at the door, Will heaving his gun over the shoulder.

And yet, Hannibal continues to scintillate with some obscure form of knowledge.

Somehow a lost piece of the puzzle must have clicked for him, Will reasons, because he can feel resolve radiating off Hannibal’s body. It’s a placid contentment and a ferocious certainty that Will envies.
Shortly after, Will finds Hannibal in the kitchen preparing orange juice by hand. The air is bright with sliced citrus, its green vivaciousness only amplifying Hannibal’s high spirits. As he places thinly cut bacon pieces in a sizzling pan, he hums an unknown concerto under his breath. As many times before, Will is taken aback by how elegant happiness can be in Hannibal’s presence, how easily befits around his broad shoulders and competent hands. How lovely he looks early in the morning, hair damp and smelling of laundered linens. It still takes Will’s breath away, the force of how much he wants him, wants himself to exist in a vacuum with this man, share in his habitat—a full stocked kitchen saturated in clean sunshine.

“Good morning, Will. We have been woefully neglectful of our meals,” he greets in his most polished tone, a tone completely undone by an undercurrent of giddy delight. Will knows this tone by heart now, knows how romantic bliss looks on Hannibal Lecter. Knowing this confers him with a power Will is not sure he is able to accept.

He sits down at the counter and sips his freshly squeezed juice with an appreciative smile. He feels shy all of a sudden, inadequate, sharing in this unlikely domesticity. He had come here to hunt Hannibal down, perhaps to hunt himself into oblivion, but certainly not to play house with a killer. Or to rekindle an old flame, his brain supplies quickly. Either way, Will tells himself. Either way.

An impeccably toasted omelet decorated with bacon rosettes appears under his nose. But food with Hannibal is never without a price, Will knows that too.

So when Hannibal asks, “Have you given any more thought to our conversation?”—his body a fluid line in grey cotton, handling dirty knives and mangled oranges with precision—Will is hardly caught by surprise.

“No,” he lies, chewing carefully. “I can’t think of you killing Molly when you’re making me come.”

Though Hannibal’s face is obscured by a sweep of silvering hair, Will can tell by the mere slope in his shoulders that Hannibal is smiling. Delighted still, even through rudeness and vulgarity. That’s what love does to a monster, Will thinks with a pang. It makes him soft and complaisant.

Before Will can fully play with the thought, Hannibal is upon him, so close that Will’s elbow bumps against his hip when he next raises his fork. Sprayed citrus, Will breathes in without looking up, and melted bacon grease, minced oregano, and t alc, no, unscented soap, and a hint of sweat and smoke under it all, the smell of a man Will could find blindfolded and gagged through storms and wildfires and mass graves. And suddenly, a slash of copper pennies, runny and sharp, scent and sensation melding together, forcing Will to yelp. He looks at his plate and sees the blood run over the yellow yolks, soak the tawny crispy bacon, making it crimson again.

“Hannibal?” he gasps in a small, childish voice, the voice of a nightmare slipping into waking life through a slit in the fabric of reality. Hannibal is still by his side, too close and too solid and too quiet. Will glances sideways and sees the knife in Hannibal’s grip, scarlet at the tip, before looking back down at his own hand.

A gash in his ring finger, right above his last knuckle and below his wedding band, is bleeding profusely. A perfect circle, Will knows before looking. He wants to scream “you cut me!” but the words die apathetically on his tongue. Of course he did. Trust a scorpion to sting its charge. Trust a heartbreaker to do some breaking.

Pushing his food away, Will wraps the damaged finger in his used napkin. For a moment, they both stare at the white tissue absorbing blood and turning red. Then, like a puppet on a string, Hannibal turns on his heel and returns to the sink. He does dish after dish mechanically, proficiently
scrapping Will’s soggy leftovers into the trash. He does not hum, but his body gives off a suppressed kind of excitement.

Will peeks at his cut, weepy at best now, and understands why.

Wrapped around his finger, the gaping skin-flap resembles a dark thread (a hand-carved ouroboros, a love-fueled crown of thorns, a flesh-color wedding band.)

Once it scars, Will assesses, it will look beautiful.
Angst before the quiet, and after the quiet comes a storm.

At the threshold between the porch and the foyer, Hannibal kisses him. It’s a thundering kiss, Hannibal’s hands clenched so tight around Will’s jaw its bones grind together. That’s what you get from giving a killer carte blanche over your body, Will thinks distantly amused and definitely aroused.

“Should we have a plan?,” Hannibal breathes against his cheek.

“If we did, it would be yours. I’m not much of a planner,” Will slurs, dizzy with want. The way Hannibal asks questions are usually prompts for pre-devised answers, so Will merely waits to be looped in.

“Shall you have six days to sort out your affairs? On the seventh day, if you are not back, I will go after you.”

Will snorts, rude and purposeful. “That plan sounds lifted from a fairytale.”

“So let it be a fairytale,” Hannibal replies pleasantly, his tongue teasing Will’s lips open.

“A gruesome fairytale, Hannibal,” Will warns, but cogent thought proves difficult as he licks into Hannibal’s mouth.

Hannibal hums, if in agreement or dismissal Will is unable to tell. He disengages begrudgingly instead, taking one step back so he can hold Hannibal’s gaze. His lips are steeped with spit, his eyes bloodshot with lack of sleep. Will is inundated by a foreign wave of fondness.

He wonders if this is what lovesickness feels like, and if they would have any use for such feather-light thing in purgatory.

“I wish you wouldn’t go,” Hannibal whispers and Will’s heart compresses hearing his voice crack around the “o”.

To avoid facing him, Will turns around and looks at the sun, a white rash spreading across the sky.

He shoves his hands in his pockets and wonders if, to some, love is the harm you do to others when you’ve ran out of ways to do it to yourself.

They fall into a chilling silence. Eyes closed, Will is visited by the image of a bereft child. Not just an orphan, but someone profoundly withdrawn, and thus loveless from a very young age.

A lonely and alone child, not by birth or design, but by tragedy. A child who never learned to communicate needs or wants, because he learned to take without giving first and enjoyed it—enjoyed it because giving included the possibility of refusal and loss. Taking offered no such gamble.
The child’s hands are strangely waxy, still unacquainted with catgut strings. His face is round and
drawn, and his hunger cannot be fully contained by such lithe bones. Will reaches out, but when his
fingers find the boy’s hair, it falls to ashes.

Will knows something about alienation, yet cannot fully grasp the effects of such long-term
isolation. It takes him a moment to come from under the powerful realization: that after a lifetime
of absolute imperviousness, Hannibal was feeling for the edges of loss again. That that edge must
feel to him like an inscrutable void of precipitous depth, promising nothing certain but a fall.

Will turns and finds Hannibal where he left him: in grey sweatpants and shirt, body unusually lax
and eyes haunted. He is not there either.

His hand jerks forward, moved by the stupendous impulse to erase Hannibal’s distress—old or
new, minor or severe, physical or emotional, it’s indifferent, they all bleed together in Will’s mind.
He finds himself thumbing the bump in Hannibal’s nose which Will now understands is a
headstone to someone’s premature demise. He can’t help smoothing over the crooked bone. As if
touch alone could retroactively mend pain.

He feels foolish for forming such childish thought, let alone enacting it. But the urgent need to
soothe the agitation brewing behind Hannibal’s neutral exterior overcomes him. That suppressed
agitation has been swelling for hours, days maybe. Now it floods Will’s senses with a high-pitched
ringing, the clink of china shaking at the onset of an earthquake.

Will desperately wants to tell him that it is for the best, that leaving will buy them time, allow
everyone some closure.

But he can’t. He can’t manage to say Molly or Wally names out loud, doesn’t dare to anymore. He
wonders if Hannibal knows.

Hannibal doesn’t quite meet Will’s eyes when he says, “I am not so naive as to think sex would
cure all wounds, Will. But I did hope that it would help you see.”

Startled by the unexpected shift in the conversation, Will blurts out, “See what? How compatible
we are in all regards?”

“Yes, but not only.”

“Hannibal, I would stay either way. Sex was never the lure.”

“Wasn’t it? Perhaps not. Perhaps boundless intimacy was.”

“Sex is not a bait either. Not then, not now. I don’t want to catch you.”

“That is not entirely true though, is it?,” Hannibal says softly, as if to himself, his eyes still on
Will’s throat.

“Perhaps not for you,” Will holds his chin and forces him to look at him. “Is that what you want?
What you wanted all these years? To catch me?”

“You can prove exceedingly slippery, Will.”

“I’m here, ain’t I?”

“I loathe pointing out the obvious, but you are about to leave.”
“This doesn’t have to mean goodbye, though. I don’t even know if I could ever say goodbye to you and mean it.”

“So perhaps I did catch you after all.”

“I feel caught,” Will falls to his chest, nose buried in a fistful of body-warmed cotton. “I always felt caught by you.”

Hannibal wraps around him, large hands engulfing his skull, and it could have been tender were his voice not deadpan empty. “You know I will never let you go, don’t you, Will?”

“Maybe. I believe I know. You can be quite slippery yourself.”

“No, I am not,” Hannibal says into his hair, his voice taking a disturbing finality. “Not when it comes to you. I always kept my grip on you steady, Will.”

“Is that what you thought sex would do? Lend leverage to your grip on me?”

“I thought it would encourage you to enter a permanent arrangement.”

“When you say it like that, it almost sounds like you’re proposing.”

Will’s wry chuckle is mostly muffled by Hannibal's neck. It takes a moment for the larger implications of Hannibal’s silence to sink in. But when they do, Will pulls his head away abruptly. He keeps his arms outstretched, helplessly trying to put distance between their bodies as awareness dawns, sharp and unyielding. “You can’t be serious!”

“And why is that, Will?,” Hannibal replies impassively. His eyes are dead when Will meets them. Just two black prick-points.

“Take a look around! I am grinding down on your cock in the middle of the night while my wife goes out of her wits wondering where I have been for the last three days! I can hardly imagine anyone more ill-suited for marriage than myself, Hannibal!”

“That is only because you married an ill-suited partner, Will,” Hannibal observes evenly.

“Oh really? So loyalty and stability will come easy to me once I’m married to a serial killer?”

“Language, Will. We have previously agreed that that term is juvenile and utterly unbecoming.”

“Oh I am sorry. How shall I refer to you in this fantasy of yours? My life-challenged betrothed? The collector of undeserving souls to whom I am affianced?”

“Must it be a fantasy?”

“Christ. I have to go,” Will bites out, scrubbing his face hard enough to draw blood.

Spoken out loud, that reasoning is sounding more and more like a feeble lie to Will’s ears—the B-side to the much crueler “I don’t want to stay with you.”

(Because a part of him doesn’t, doesn’t want the chase, the endless mind-games, the stress of performing baroque romance and witty banter 24/7, of being partner and lover and patient and foil all in one. Part of Will wants out, will always want off the merry-go-round that is Hannibal Lecter’s influence.

Sometimes loving someone is just what happens to you. Sometimes not staying is all the choice
Will wonders if Hannibal can hear that tune too.

“Stay.” (Apparently he can.)

“I can’t. We can’t,” Will lies, and it is getting easier.

So Hannibal obligatorily retorts, “We can do anything our hearts desire.”

The circularity of this argument is wearing Will down to the quick, making him revisit the theory that they might be dead after all, doomed to spin through regret and recrimination until skin falls dry from their bones.

“Ah. You make it sound so easy,” Will snaps irritably.

“It is easy, Will. You should really learn to relax with yourself.”

“I have relaxed with myself, in case you’ve failed to notice our present predicament.”

Taking another deep breath, Will searches for his gun, still hosteled over his shoulder. Metal feels good, solid, under his fidgeting fingers. “Listen, it is just hard. It is hard to let yourself indulge in catastrophe.”

“Is that how you see us, Will?” There is disappointment, but it’s remote, resolve having now contaminated every ounce of Hannibal’s body, even his usually reserved posture. “A catastrophe?”

“A natural disaster is more likely, you being a force to be reckoned with and all.”

“So are you, Will.”

Will flinches. “Yeah, that we can agree on. Like a tornado, I bust right through and leave a mess behind me.”

Brushing the hair at his nape, Hannibal chides not unkindly, “It doesn’t have to be so difficult to be yourself, Will.”

“It is the second hardest thing I can reckon doing.”

“Oh? What’s the first one?”

Will juts his chin out and stares—challenging and raw. Hannibal meets his gaze effortlessly, golden eyes see-through with knowing and something else. An unresolved ache.

Will purses his lips. He wants this to sound like an accusation.

“Loving you.”

Without another word, Will steps into the buttery morning and disappears through the woods. He doesn’t so much as spare a backward glance.

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The humidity hangs thick in the air, making Will’s old fractures and bullet wounds twinge. His ring finger throbs too. Will pushes his wedding band up so he can scratch at the raised line behind it. The skin looks simultaneously puffy and red, drained and sallow. No infection, just a reminder.
Under the late morning sun, the journey through rough terrain is morose and trying. Will’s boot sink deep in the waterlogged soil, his unkempt beard too hot around his neck. His throat burns as does his jaw, ass, and the inside of his thighs, where Hannibal’s stubble racked welts only hours before.

There is a looming awareness that the slow-goings in his hiking might be directly correlated with the rising apprehension in his belly. Will can picture the house on the valley swarmed by FBI agents, their reflective vests, bad haircuts, and matte firearms flickering vividly in front of his eyes. Molly on the front porch, lips parted and hair untidy, clasping Wally under a wool blanket, worry dug so savagely on her face that her eyes become tar pits, her mouth an open sore.

Will drags his feet through rock and bark until, far below, his white lodge lurks among shadowy pines.

Will stops on that last hill and breathes in the earthy aroma of early August. Even when his nose is full with it—chestnut and char and wet bramble—he can still taste Hannibal on his skin, his clothes, the lining of his muscles, burrowed inside fascia, an organism nestled in his bones, smoldering in his brain, gut, groin.

He loves him.

And then, Will breathes out, and he loves him not.
Moosehead Lake, Maine

Chapter Notes

The one where Wally and Molly are back.

It’s twilight when Will halts at his property line. The quietness in the glowing blueness is perturbing. No cars, no state troopers, no screaming sirens hollering in the distance. Just the night wind whistling in tandem with birds of prey.

After a short walk, Will stands in front of his darkened porch. A pale light can be seen in the downstairs living room, another gleams in the second floor. Wally’s room, Will remembers rustily. A soft whining filters from behind the unlocked screen door. Molly’s Jeep is parked on the driveway. And that is that.

Will is immediately gripped by cold, clammy horror. For whom or for what, he cannot tell—the possibilities are endless in their gruesomeness. The one that rears its head first, however, involves Hannibal covered in blood, blood so dense it shimmers black against his wide amber eyes and white crooked teeth. The blood may or may not be his, but that seems unimportant. That there would be blood on Hannibal is a desperate enough premise to propel Will forward.

He’s inside the house in a blur, moving too fast to be able to keep track of his own movements. He sees Molly as soon as he wades through a mass of sniffing dogs. They can smell it on him, the stink of otherness.

Molly is prone on the couch, the television humming in the background, hair spilled over crochet pillows. As fate would want it, she is tangled in the red-and-black herringbone blanket, her bare feet poking out from under the frayed fringe.

Will slinks close, scanning for ligature marks on her neck, blood pooling under her ribs. The dogs move with him, harried and skeptical. Before Will can touch her fallen foot, a high-pitch wailing makes him jump backwards. She is on him, mouth on his neck so hot and messy that he sways, nearly losing his balance.

“Will!”, Molly squeals. “You are finally home! Damn, you scared me!”

Will lets her hold his jaw, kiss his lips, smooth his hair back, the smile on her face slackening. She looks tired but not beyond what a long week at work would normally warrant. There are no eyes swollen with tears, no gestures filled with enormous uncertainty and gratitude. Not like when he had disappeared into the Atlantic only to resurface weeks later in the Pennsylvania wild. No, not at all like that. There is relief outweighing annoyance, but that is about it. And that, to Will, feels very very wrong.

It takes him a moment to realize that Molly continued talking while he had turned inwards. She was busy berating him for leaving on an extended trip without taking his cell phone, but even her berating has a lightness to it, a carelessness cat owners use to justify their pets roaming freely in the night. After being under Hannibal’s judicious care, such wide berth feels nearly insulting.

“...and so I almost called the police, you silly man!”
That sentence catches his attention. He feels overheated. Molly has settled him in the couch, her hands warm and heavy around his. Pressed against her fingers, his wedding ring bites into open flesh, burns right to the bone. She touches her palm to his forehead, nudes open his collar.

“Will! You are covered in bruises! What happened to you!??” Molly’s voice keeps drumming through his skull, high-pitched and toothy, but he seems unable to push words out, his breathing too short. It takes him a moment to realize that he is on the verge of a panic attack. Shaking his head, Will backpedals.

“I am sorry, I think I am dehydrated,” he lies easily. “I feel lightheaded.”

She kindly offers him some of her own tea. Chamomile, off-brand and offensively pedestrian, but Will drains it in one single gulp. “Will, you look really horrible,” she glares, sounding concerned but still only a smidgen above what a persistent summer cold would garner. Will wonders if she knows. He wonders if he wants her to know.

As sudden as perspicacity quickens in her eyes, it is painted over by something closer to determination. She talks on, undeterred, “Anyway, I was telling you, you careless monster, that I almost called the police when you didn’t come home on Friday night. I was that concerned! What kind of grown man goes hunting in the woods for a weekend and doesn’t take his cell phone?” Absently, she turns to take the empty mug from his spasming hands. In the way, she tucks a stray curl behind his ear. Will bristles and she bops his nose. “That’s not just inconsiderate but dangerous, don’t you think mister?”

Will nods automatically, his eyes on the shaggy beige rug. Had it always been this ugly? The dogs nuzzle at his boots, his ankles, insatiable in their curiosity. Will pets them dispassionately, incapable of properly seeing them, let alone telling them apart.

“Why didn’t you?,“ he asks without forethought.

“Didn’t what?,“ Molly’s bright eyes are distracted again by the purple pattern around his neck.

“Call the police.”

Before she can answer, the atmosphere in the room changes. The dogs mill away and they both look up to see Wally standing against the doorjamb, barefoot in his ratty Yankees pajamas. He seems to have grown two inches since the last time Will saw him, but his blue eyes remain as opaque as cat-eye marbles. He sets them hard on Will, teasing at a flap Will does not want to see opened.

“This guy,” Molly points at Wally. The boy still does not move from the doorway, nor does he waver from pinning Will with his intrusive eyes. Will gazes right back at him, openly hostile, a gluttonous man without shame of his appetite. “Thank god Wally told me of your hunting plans, or I’d have never downgraded to mad,” Molly chuckles fondly. “You’d be coming home to a house filled with state troopers, Mr. Graham! What about that for a homecoming, huh?”

Deciding that Will needs a snack before he can share his tale, Molly goes to the kitchen, rumpling Wally’s hair as she passes him. Alone in the living room, they assess each other without artifice.

What a cunning boy, Will thinks almost covetously. How fast he had come into mastering the art of forgery and human deduction. It took Will decades to become that fluent in shape-shifting. But not Hannibal, Will concedes. No, Hannibal would have been as precocious as you, little Walter. Thirteen, with his nose in a book and knee-deep in people’s businesses, pulling strings and watching them dance. Eagle-eyed and lonely, just like you little Walter, no one to see you, no one
to love you. Not the real you, anyway.

Wally smiles, a thin pressed thing. Will wonders if somehow he heard his thoughts—if this capricious young being actually comes closer to be Will’s own than anyone he could have fathered. Wally’s eyebrows vault as he darts over Will’s body, steadily taking in his ragged beard, baggy eyes, the bruised throat. Boyish lips pull into a lewd sneer, there and then gone.

No, perhaps not his offspring. Hannibal’s—a black-haired wolf hiding under children’s clothes.

For the first time, Will entertains the idea of Hannibal, not as a child, but as replicated into a new child. Their child, likely. The thought glints unsettling and titillating in the back of Will’s mind.

“Okay hon, here’s some _nourriture_,” Molly makes a dramatic flourish with her hand, presenting Will with a ham sandwich on a dishwasher-safe plate. Wally takes that as his cue to leave. He unfolds from the doorjamb surly, looking taller and lankier by the minute, as if that weren’t a biological impossibility. No one grows up in four days, Will reasons, biting into dry store-brought bread.

You did, his brain whispers insidiously, forcing Will back to the glass house, to the bloody herringbone tiles, the smell of fresh citrus, the sound of skin smacking against skin in the airless dark.

They stay in silence for a moment longer, Will chewing slowly regardless of how heinous the food tastes. Wally does not return, and Will does not question why.

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Will must have dozed off because he wakes up alone in the couch, the herringbone blanket over his knees, the only light filtering in that of a waxing moon. Wally is standing two feet from him, face tilted down like a bird picking a sound apart. His eyes remain impenetrable, black flint reflecting the moonlight.

“Hey buddy,” Will mutters automatically as he yawns and stretches, “What time is it?”

Wally regards him for an instant, body bowed slightly before he unwinds into a straight line.

“Are you going back to him?”

His voice, still childishly strident, hits Will like a booming shout. He considers lying but one glance at Wally tells him it is pointless. Will swings his feet to the ground, untangling the blanket from his legs.

“How do you know?”

Wally snorts, coltish and cocky at the same time. “He wasn’t exactly subtle. He used to skulk outside the house late at night, when he thought everyone was asleep.”

“But you weren’t,” Will says carefully.

Wally shakes his head deliberately slow, a trace of enjoyment snapping in his cold eyes. “No. I wasn’t.”

Will can see it clearly in his mind’s eye: Wally crouching in the attic room, hiding behind peeled curtains, scanning the snowy darkness for Hannibal to emerge. His satisfaction, heady and cutting, when the monster would hungrily wander from window to window, a ghost locked outside the
h

human world.

Dropping his gaze, Will tries for a different approach.

“How did you know who he was?”

“Tommy’s mom still buys those trashy magazines,” Wally replies matter of fact. “And then there’s the Internet. You two are quite a sensation there.”

Will nods dumbly. A part of him is in awe. Another part is starting an inventory of the guns in the house.

“Why didn’t you call the police? Weren’t you afraid he would hurt you or your mom?”

That earns him a more genuine chortle, an echo of what Will recalls as Wally’s younger self: spurting and uncoordinated.

“Nah. He wasn’t here for us. He was here for you. We were in no real danger.” Wally tilts his head up, pretending to consider. “Besides. I know where the guns in this house are. I could easily shoot a big bad wolf.” Abruptly, his voice drops to stone-cold flat, “You should never be afraid to defend yourself from what goes bumping in the night,” he singsongs. “Officer Crawford told me that once. Did you know that, Will?”

Will whips his head up, meeting Wally’s gaze with what he’s sure is a blatant display of animosity. Wally’s eyes remain as undisturbed as ever, but behind the ocular screen there’s a bleakness swimming, swampy and shiny. Not fully formed, not yet, but its jagged blade is being honed as they speak. Will can see it plain as day.

“What do you want, Wally?”, Will grits out at last.

“What did you tell my mom?”

“I told her that I got lost in the woods, tried to get help at a stranger’s house and the guy jumped me thinking I was there to rob him.”

It’s Wally’s turn to simply nod. “Not bad. Remarkably plausible.”

“Thank you,” Will says, leaning back on the couch. “I thought so myself.”

“Well, don’t congratulate yourself just yet,” Wally cocks his head just so. “You must let mom down easy now.”

“Must I?” Will coos, playfulness with an edge of threat. He evaluates Wally through a different set of parameters now: his gangly body is full of awkward bones that could be snapped quickly, vulnerable patches of hairless skin that can be easily punctured. Hemorrhage is such a sweet death for a youngster after all.

A sly grin spreads across Wally’s chubby cheeks. “Yes, Will, you truly must. Can’t have you bumping in the night now, can we? God knows what happens to monsters who do that.”

Not for the first time, Will wonders who was this child’s real father, what kind of man he must have been to produce such a peculiar creature. It could not have been Molly. Poor, nurturing Molly. No, not Molly at all. And yet—she definitely attracted a type.

Will sighs, rubbing his hands on his jeans—dirty, caked with mud, forensic traces of semen and
blood certainly embedded in its fibers. He wonders if Wally comprehends the full extent of his relationship with Hannibal. The revulsion in his gait suggests that he does, at least abstractly. The weight of what he is doing to Molly assaults Will then, unadorned and ugly.

Will gets up and Wally follows his every motion with keenly whittled eyes. Predatory, Will reasons, but perhaps not criminal.

As Will lumbers across the room, Wally’s voice reaches him, aloof and silvery. “Don’t forget,” he says ominously. Will turns and sees him staring, head slumped to the side, spectral in the washed out moonlight. Will has to double-check that his feet are not hovering above the ground. “You gotta do it soon.”

Will blinks and the boy grows black wings. His hollow eyes bloom mustard in the dark. His mouth is cut from ear to ear in a clownish smile and his long-fingered hands hold a surgical-grade blade.

Will turns back to the stairs. He makes a mental note before exiting the living room, and closes the door behind him.
Dear everyone reading this:

Thank you for reading this. I tend to only write 1 piece per fandom which means I likely won't be touching Hannibal after this, but having you around has made me want to keep on writing, and that is so, so rare for me that---thank you.

The next forty-eight hours are mostly a nebula of sleep, punctuated by perfunctory showers and liquid meals. His body, undone by years of abuse, finally caught up with his mind. The cracks ran wide and garish on his skin now, his eyes droopy, his limbs dragging, his bruises inflamed. Will slept and slept until Molly’s laughter woke him up from a suspiciously dreamless stupor.

Will found her and Wally in the kitchen, redoing the paint on the walls. Molly, clad in denim overalls, swung the paint-roller at Wally from the top of a ladder. Wally giggled as periwinkle splatter fell on his cheeks.

Will lingered in the doorway, uncomfortably aware of his intrusion. Not for the first time, Will felt too akin to a ghost, occupying the negative space around Molly and Wally, never fully corporeal, never truly belonging. It was as if they have moved on from him already, as one does after a prolonged winter of mourning.

“Oh look who is up!” Molly greeted him from across the room. “Sleeping Beauty, would you be so kind as to bring this young knight a dishtowel?”

Wally turned to him and Will caught his eye for a split second: sparkling with amusement, paint and chocolate brownies smudged on his pale face. Nothing pernicious there. As he handed Wally a roll of paper towels, Will pondered if he had cooked up their nocturnal conversation. It sure wouldn’t be the first time his dreams felt disturbingly real. Will shrugged the clammy scrim off his shoulders and made to the wood-paneled den where most of the dogs were sleeping.

He stayed there nursing stale coffee and staring blankly outside the window, waiting for the noise to die down. Eventually Molly would take Wally for a late-afternoon swim or a friend’s sleepover, and Will could slip back into oblivion.

Molly came to check on him once, poking her head in the door and asking if he needed anything from town. She seemed in good spirits, sandy hair dotted with blue paint, lips gentle when she kissed Will goodbye.

And yet, once again, Will could not stop an irking stab at the looseness of her affection, a certain measure of detachment that returned Will to the logic of cat owners: bound to a wild creature they can’t fully domesticate, you let them roam at their leisure, consciously deciding not to resent the creature’s lack of dependency on your care. It is a form of love, Will reasoned, mindful and unconditional. It is just not the form of love Will finds especially rewarding. Not anymore, anyway. Not without drawing unfair comparisons. Not without feeling at a loss, a sole asteroid whirring in a sprawling universe, unsure where black holes may lie.
To be tethered is to be caged, and Molly—kind, observant Molly—had long decided her broken husband needed a wider berth than most if he were to survive trauma. After experiencing the fury of conspicuous consumption, however, for Will to be untied is to be alone—or worst, unseen. Molly’s love, giving as it may be, holds no traction, causes no friction, leaving Will adrift.

It takes him a whole afternoon to follow this chain of thoughts through. When he does, Will concludes with a dull pang that his marriage to Molly had been doomed from the start. She married a man with a pack of dogs and a past, when all along he had been a wildling with claws, hiding from the future.

Will thought of Hannibal then, conjuring him full-bodied into the sun-drenched den. He thought how under his natural smell there was a trace of something that always drove him to distraction. It was blood, Will understood now, pure and simple. The smell of freshly spilled blood, jammy and iron-sweet, the tang of the hunt ripe on the tip of his tongue when he dipped to kiss him, or leaned in close. They both had it—not just the appetite, but the nose for it.

By the time Molly got home, Will was already asleep, curled up on the far-end of their bed. Somehow Molly knew better than to approach him, not so much as to stroke his hair or lie against his back.

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The following days, Will spends on hours-long nature walks. He always goes by the barn but never steps in. When he returns for dinner, he lingers at the edge of the property, waiting for the sun to set. Northern Maine in August shimmers with unabsorbed wetness, sticky with questions Will has yet to address.

One evening, Wally finds him staring at the magenta horizon. For a while they stand side by side, quietly enveloped in the chill of summer.

“Do you miss him?” Wally asks without turning, feet apart, chin tilted towards the smoky mountains.

“Yeah,” Will breathes in the waterlogged air. “I do.”

“I miss my dad too,” Wally says, his voice sounding like that of a small child for the first time in years. Will glances at him. He looks smaller too under the vast sheltering sky, head sagged down, twirling a rock in his gawky hands. Will doesn’t know what to say to that, so he says nothing.

After a long moment Wally adds, “At least yours is alive,” and Will can’t fault him for saying out loud what he was thinking silently, so he just nods. It is true, Will reminds himself, the person he is missing is alive and coming for him like only the vengeful dead could.

They stand there, shoulder to shoulder, gazing up in silence until navy blue swallows the redness whole.

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When he is alone at the top of the hill looking down at his rugged dollhouse, Will often entertains the notion of running away, of turning back towards Stag Brook and live for weeks on wild blueberries and campfire with Hannibal by his side. Sometimes, he can picture it so clearly he smells the tartness in Hannibal’s breath.

He never goes, though. Will tells himself trauma, guilt, loyalty are keeping him put. More truthful, and thus less readily for him to admit, is the nagging curiosity of what exactly Hannibal will do
once Will doesn't show up. Will he tear through the wilderness or will he slip away to enjoy his theatrical death somewhere foreign and decadent? Will he take another lover? And if so, will Will feel it from afar, a tugging behind his breastplate as the thread between them is ripped apart? It is not an entirely unpleasant thought, the idea of living a life of danger vicariously, refracted through their shared bond.

But still, Will sighs, walking back to his play-set in the valley. Still, not entirely true either.

All in all, the truth is much simpler: Will doesn’t go to Hannibal because he wants Hannibal to come to him. Even Steven.

The rest is minutia and collateral damage.

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On the fifth day, Molly calls Will to the porch to help her with the Sunday crossword. Wally is off with friends again, biking and swimming and eating ice cream in town. Will resents it. There is an innate confidence within Wally that only keeps growing as the boy steps into adolescence. Will is not sure yet what that fully entails but, whatever it is, Will certainly did not possess it at his age.

With a pitch of homemade lemonade sweating between them, Molly rattles clues and unfinished words for a good part of an hour. Will keeps an eye on the spotty tree-line outside their property, foggy-white with midday sun. When he falls behind on a joke, Molly changes to a different puzzle without so much as a hitch.

“Seven-word life story?”

“What now?”, Will barks.

Molly smiles around her pencil, lightly punching his arm. “Come on, you grump. Gimme yours and I’ll give you mine.”

Will sits with it for a minute, blinded by the muggy heat. He dimly remembers this exercise from psych evaluations. He explicitly remembers disliking it.

“Okay, I’ll go first,” Molly relents between lemonade sips. “‘Farm girl always puts her family first’.” She grins, counting the words on her fingers. “Not bad huh? What about you, tough guy?”

Will nods, anxiety rolling high on his belly. The trees are eerily calm today. His mouth has gone dry. He drinks some lemonade only to find sugar cloying his throat. He swallows and his voice floats out of his mouth, dissolute and disembodied, “‘Needs must when the devil is driving’.”

There are no more puzzles that afternoon.
Fun fact: the first time Wally speaks is this story *is* in chapter 22. All other times he appeared, you were seeing him through Will's eyes and Wally NEVER gets a voice there. It was deliberate that Wally's first words ever were: "Are you going back to him."

A thunderstorm, one of the many wonders of humid summers, cracks the night sky in two. Will had been in bed for hours, listening to the wind batter the trees, when Molly slides next to him. For the first time since his return, she leans in, snaking her arms around his waist.

"I love you, Will Graham," she whispers into his hair, her nose cold against his stubble. “You are my family. We’ve been through a lot and I gave you too much, so whatever is going on, I’m sticking by you.” She swallows and Will thinks he can sense her tone changing, getting grimmer and sharper. Her hand clutches over his abdominal scar, “I will never let you go without a fight.”

Will shudders, and Molly misunderstands it as sign to come closer, to tangle her damp feet in his. Without daring to move, he keeps his eyes on the ceiling where flashes of thunder make ghosts out of the shadows. She nestles on his shoulder, and for a moment he thinks she might have fallen sleep. Instead, she laces their fingers together, knocking their wedding rings in the process. Will winces. “You’re mine,” she mumbles in the crook of his neck, teasing the hair at his nape.

Will’s wary snort is muffled by the rumble of distant thunder. “I am yours,” he thinks darkly, “as much as water is bound by land. I’ll erode you until I’m free.”

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The next time Will awakes the clap of thunder still rattles the bedroom. It is dark out but morning is near, light itching around the curtains. At first he credits the noise for pulling him from sleep, but then the molecules of air rearrange themselves around his body, and Will knows that they are not alone in the room.

Standing by the foot of the bed, so still he could almost bleed into the ambient darkness, is Hannibal. He is either all dressed in black or covered in enough blood his clothes changed colors. Before Will can properly make him out, he hears him. His voice, gruff and low, ripples through the stillness of the room, both a tease and a threat: “Hello sweetheart.”

Will’s breath stalls mid-swing while his ability to catalog enormous amounts of data at once kicks into full gear. Hannibal’s features are covered in shadow but his hair streaks his face in odd angles. His back is slightly hunched forward, arms and feet away from his body, a pouncing stance. There is a knife in his right hand, narrow and glittering wet, likely stainless steel and undoubtedly well-worn. His voice sounded, not neutral, not violent, but spiked. Spiked.

Will’s mind tries to hold on to that fact but his body has suddenly taken over, his left hand reaching out without permission. Hannibal is now inches from it, close enough for Will to smell copper pennies on him. Apparently that is all it takes to shred Will’s grasp on rationality: the mere thought of blood on Hannibal bankrupts Will Graham completely.
As in slow motion, Will sees Hannibal lower his cheek to the outreached hand until he incongruously fits inside it. Sees him nuzzle tentatively, days worth of stubble grazing Will’s fingertips, catching against his wedding ring. The stench of blood grows stronger, and Will hears himself whisper, “Is it all yours?” To which Hannibal—so close Will can see the white in his eyes flash through blood splatter and grisly hair—replies ruefully: “20/80.” And just like that Will feels his lips pull at a reluctant smile: at the gall, at the mirth, at the preposterous familiarity of it all.

He wants to ask something else, but then Hannibal's eyes are fluttering shut, his lips wet on Will’s palm. “Sweetheart,” he murmurs against Will's lifeline. His voice sounds different, soberer and pulpier with longing. If Will tilted his chin up he could kiss him, this monster of his, and perhaps he would have, if the metallic clicking hadn’t cut through the intimacy of their breathings falling in step with one another. As it were, Hannibal was stepping back so fast all Will could discern was the dip in the mattress by his side, which with hindsight probably took place long before he remembered that Molly was in the room with them.

She had the gun aimed ramrod straight though her fingers were shaking. Will could tell, having been pushed behind her when she jumped to fire at Hannibal’s heart. Now she clicked and clicked, the trigger producing the same irritating, syncopated sound of high heels on concrete. Will could smell the panic radiating off her, feel the sweat pooling in her arms and back, the points of contact where she braced to keep him from her line of sight.

Though it couldn’t have taken more than a few seconds, the moment stretched into infinity as far as Will was concerned. His heartbeat stayed remarkably calm, his eyes on Hannibal above Molly’s messy ponytail. Back at the foot of the bed, Hannibal radiated a disturbingly excited heat, amused and aroused and menacing all at once. And then the clicking stopped, and all Will could hear was Molly’s breathing spluttering, adrenaline sky-high, her mind incapable of making sense of what her eyes were witnessing.

“I took your bullets,” Will finally says, never breaking eye contact. He can sense Hannibal's approving smile vibrating in the distance. He is vaguely surprised by how even his voice sounds.

“What?!” Molly manages to gasp, barrel still aimed at Hannibal though she has finally ceased depressing the trigger.

“Three days ago,” Will says again. “I took all your bullets.”

Molly turns to him, quick and fleeting, before she turns back to Hannibal. She has noticed the knife by now. When she thought her fear had bottomed out, it found a way to escalate some more. Will could reach out and stroke her shoulders, smooth out the tension piling there. But he doesn’t. He keeps his eyes on Hannibal, all of his body angled towards him. They aren’t touching but they might as well be, that’s how voluptuous this moment feels between them. It drips. It drips and drips and drips. He is inside Hannibal and Hannibal is inside him now, walled in and rooted deep.

“Will. What the fuck—Will!”, he can hear Molly’s indecision, betrayal, confusion, the gears turning amidst a parting fog, the fight impulse collapsing under that of flight.

Will inhales deeply, the sweetness of fear tingling in his lungs. He gives Hannibal a slow once-over, “You’re early. Who found you?”

Hannibal shrugs minutely, the knife catching in the dawning light. “Cousins? House-sitters? Some relations. Truly I didn’t find it important to ask.”

Will smiles, considering. “No, I imagine you wouldn’t.”
Molly’s fear shifts and the room grows denser, the air drained of pure terror. Indignation rears its head, shrill and sulfurous.

“What the fuck is going on, Will?!” she snarls, spit hitting his cheek when she turns to confront him.

Will shifts in the bed. Every muscle in his body strains. He arches with a frenetic thrill. A thrill for blood, sex—either, both, he can’t tell them apart anymore. His senses feel overridden, oversensitive, spiked. There’s that word again: spiked like a poisoned drink, a war weapon. It makes him dizzy. Will wonders absently if Hannibal would carry out without him if he faints now.

“Remember when I told you that I had fallen for him and feared a little could go a long way?” Will hears himself answering, voice distant but cuttingly precise. He flicks his wrist in Hannibal’s direction. “Well, this is how far it went.”

Quietly all hell breaks lose. Molly’s fear and indignation whiplash and there’s cunning and resilience in it now. It smells like burnt wood and pressed lavender. Will imagines that may be what maternal instinct smells like. Hannibal’s nostrils flare too, but before he can be upon Molly, Will grips her wrists, pinning her to the bed. She yelps but instinctively stays put. Hannibal stops moving as well, his eyebrows raised in question. The air shifts again and its weight rests squarely on Will’s shoulders.


The silence rings and rings in time with Molly’s harsh breaths, her heartbeat rabbiting under Will’s fists where he holds her down. He keeps his eye on Hannibal, but he does not see him. He sees the road to Georgia instead, its winding curves and long stretches of pristine forest, the pink cottage at the end, with its neat garden and white picket-fence.

“Will...” she whispers and she is crying in earnest now, her throat wild with it. She is pleading too, to some old shadow inside Will that uncurls briefly through the darkness like a hand waving before drowning. “You don’t have to do this,” she continues. “You don’t have to offer yourself up as a sacrifice. I love you,” she sobs, but under the tears there’s a wrought-iron steadfastness Will always admired and had grown accustomed to rely on. “Please don’t do this. Please,” her voice breaks a little, and Will can feel Hannibal sway forward, his grip on the knife stiffening.

Will releases her wrists slowly, eyes on the handgun abandoned on the duvet. It looks laughably sheepish, like a child’s toy, incapable of ever solving any human problem in an effective manner. Something hurts inside Will, a firm but solid lump in his chest blossoming like a stab wound. He looks up and Hannibal is regarding him steadily, face tilted to the side. There’s blood sprinkled all over his face, and his top lip is busted open.

“Molly—” Will breathes out and the whole stage falls quiet again. Molly stops sobbing, stops scrambling in the mattress. It is a terrible thing, this power. It is a more terrible thing still, to revel in it. She is looking at him, a foot away in their married bed, when Will admits it, crisp and mild, “I am in love with him.”

Something spoken in such a small voice should never have such a devastating effect, but there they were: Molly choking in a semi-scream, the clank of Hannibal’s knife bouncing off the wooden floor. Will keeps his eyes on the gun, numbly aware that sometimes you can cause more harm with words than with weapons.
Funny enough both parties seemed to have been waiting for those exact words to be punched out of Will. Once they are uttered, they become a skeleton key—one party is released, while another gets further locked in.

Molly is up and by the door before either Will or Hannibal can intercept her, but then the door opens and light floods in, rendering the dramatic scene they are all caught in poignantly mundane: a cheating man, his wife, and his demanding mistress. Wally comes into full view wearing a colorful X-Men t-shirt. It’s the fact that he has shoes on at 5 in the morning that cues Will into action.

“Go, Molly,” he says again, firmer this time. She had moved to push Wally out, closing the door with her back. Her eyes dart between Will and Hannibal as one would when trapped between wolves.

Hannibal folds down gracefully to pick the knife from the floor, distractedly running a hand through his hair. He’s impatient. Will can only see his profile, the tension creased around his eyes clashing with the curiosity in his gait, the way he regards Molly silently but too intently. Will thought he couldn't want him anymore than he did when they were wrapped together in that fever-dream of a glass house, and yet, right then and there, Will wants him so violently, he almost wishes Hannibal would kill him so he can save a sooty speck of dignity and not end up fucking a killer in a bed soaked with his wife’s blood.

“What if I don’t go?”, Will hears Molly ask, not uncertain but not convinced either. He can’t fault her. In her place, Will too would judge this a twisted game of chase he could never successfully evade. Hell, he still thinks that sometimes and he’s a willing participant.

“If you don’t go, he’ll kill you,” Will replies simply.

Molly gasps, but regains her composure admirably fast. “And if I go, how do I know that I am safe?”

“If you forget about this encounter and never threaten our safety, we have no interest in you,” Hannibal interrupts suddenly, and to hear his voice, baritone and polite, is a shock to everyone in the room. It’s Will’s turn to cock his head, appraising his lover carefully. He can find no guile there. But then again, Will rarely could because Hannibal rarely disbelieves his lies.

Molly seems to take the words in as well, weighing them closely. Her eyes flicker over Will, lingering on his bruised throat. She must arrive at some enlightening conclusion because her body relaxes a fraction and her countenance gains a pragmatic steeliness. “Just out of curiosity, if I broke this deal what would happen?"

She looks only at Hannibal as if Will had been cut off from negotiations, reduced to a giggling Solomon baby swaddled between two unstoppable forces. Will is tempted to bring up the dangerous dual meaning of that verb: that it can equally signify breaching, as entering, a contract. He doesn’t though. It doesn’t matter in the end. Not really. Not for Molly anyway.

Hannibal’s gaze slides to Will on the bed, the lower point in this charged triangulation of desire. For the first time that night, Will levels his gaze at Molly, full-on and unrepentant. He finds no guile in his words either, “If you do, we’ll hunt you and kill you, and no bone of yours will ever be found."

Molly nods once, before turning around and slipping out of the room. They can hear her footsteps on the carpet when she enters Wally’s adjacent room, speaking briskly as closets open and close.
Hannibal hums, barely audible and mostly to himself. This turn of events surprised him, but not unpleasantly so. Will can tell by the zing in his eyes when he pivots back to face Will. Will gets up at last, bones hurting with stress and humidity. He runs his fingers over Hannibal’s knife, the gunmetal handle, before finding his hand. He brushes over his knuckles, feeling for new scrapes and old bruises.

“Are we going on a long drive now?” Will asks, suddenly exhausted.

“Yes,” Hannibal leans into him, cheek against cheek. His eyes remain on the bedroom door, taut and scrutinizing.

“She is not going to call the police,” Will states with a certainty he didn’t know he had. “She’s smarter than that.”

“And the boy?”

Will spits a chuckle, unchecked and all too telling. “Oh no no no. He is definitely not calling the cops.”

That garners Hannibal’s undivided attention. His lips and eyebrows tick in a knowing arch. “You don’t say? Little Walter?”

“Let’s just say he isn’t on the side of the angels.”

As if on cue, Wally’s voice floats into the room, asking his mother where she put his iPhone. Will rubs his forehead against Hannibal's shoulder, and immediately a hand cups his nape, keeping him in place.

“You are unwell,” Hannibal mutters, lips ruffling Will’s hair.

“No, I am just tired,” Will yawns. “It turns out missing you takes a lot out of me.”

Hannibal hums again, and Will knows that he wants him too, now more than ever, with a rapacity that will kill them both sooner or later.

“Come on, we should get going,” Will moves away, kissing Hannibal’s shoulder quickly, familiarly. “Should I make us a snack? How long of a drive is it?”

Hannibal regards him. Sunlight whitens the room, making his eyes gleam gold with fondness. His lip, now crusted with blood, nearly splits open when he smiles, wide and wistful.

“No distance is ever too long when you are by my side, Will.”

He sounds so tragically sincere that Will cannot help a short laugh. “Well then, pb & j sandwiches it is,” Will throws over his shoulder as he steps into the hallway.

The morning air tastes cool and clean for what feels like the first time in years.
“No need for a double boiler,” Hannibal remarks, attempting to seem reasonable and failing miserably. Will already has the first pan simmering, insisting that cream froths so much better when a bain-marie is employed. He is well aware that Hannibal cannot find fault in such foolproof logic, thus leaving him to produce what Will considers his greatest culinary achievement: hot cocoa made from scratch.

Waiting for the cream to boil, Will takes Hannibal in. Helplessly distracted with his surroundings, he touches every surface, every throw-pillow, every miser dog figurine with light, assertive fingers. He’s transfixed by the most pedestrian of details: dust and mail and mismatched heirlooms Molly culled from her dead parents’ estate. He catches Will’s eye once or twice as he glides through the open living room, his excitement almost coy in its irrepressibility. Will smiles back hopelessly charmed, and wonders if life with Hannibal will always be like this—a heady mixture of butchery and sex and blazingly vulnerable displays of affection, from pain to yearning to bloodlust.

It is only when he hears Molly and Wally coming down the stairs and sees Hannibal wind himself up straight and glide back to the kitchen, that it occurs to Will that Hannibal’s buzzy excitement is that of an outdoor animal never allowed inside the house. How many nights had he spent in the snow watching them move in these spaces, inhabiting them with simple domestic tasks? Could he read their lips through the parted curtains, Will wonders, or didn’t he even try?

The cream rises at the same time Molly steps into the kitchen, two travel bags and one Wally in tow. She stopped to put lipstick on and brush her hair. Her eyes are faintly red, but her chin and shoulders are held up high. She is not afraid anymore, or if she is, anger towers over it proudly. Her eyes skate over Hannibal, who is still covered in blood and leaning against the vintage stove she picked from a roadside sale in Knoxville that one time they decided to go on an impromptu honeymoon.

Will breaks the slab of Scharffen chocolate in pieces and feeds them to the rolling cream. He adds a pinch of salt and cinnamon before stirring. They stay in a standstill for another moment, until Molly clears her throat and announces loudly, “We are leaving now. I trust you’ll be gone soon.” Hannibal hums, regarding her impassively. She moves her gaze to Will. “I never want to see you again. The scales have fallen off my eyes and I want to be done with you. I don’t care what you do from here on out, but I want a clean break.”

Before Will can say anything, Hannibal steps forward, tall and sharp, and oppressive in both these attributes. Molly automatically takes two steps back, Wally lagging behind her.

“Not to worry, Ms. Foster,” Hannibal intones smoothly, moving to pick up her bags. “Now, if you are to avoid commuter traffic or any other difficulty, I must really insist that you will be on your way, Ms. Foster.”

Her face pinches with what can only be described as revulsion, and Will feels for her, for how cruelly she is being evicted from her own home—at the crack of dawn, by a man soaked in dry
blood who in all likelihood fucked her husband at least once, if the marks on Will’s throat are anything to go by.

Molly, smart as only hurt people can be, smarter by virtue of her own early orphanhood, lifts her hand, barely restraining herself from slapping Hannibal across the face. He smiles, reptilian and smug, and she turns on her heel, which Will absently notes are at least five inches higher than anything she ever wore around him. She is already out of the door in a swirl of fabric and motion, when Wally chimes in, quiet but unflappably incisive.

“You are that serial killer, aren’t you? The one that eats people?”

Hannibal, who had moved back to Will’s side, inspects the boy with silent intensity. Will samples the melting chocolate, aware that Molly is right outside the door and may have found fresh bullets in her car. There is an imprecise but fuzzy energy radiating off Hannibal, curiosity with a hint of gasoline. It reminds Will of how he regarded Abigail right after her father died.

Hannibal replies, curt and equally firm, “Yes.”

Wally nods gravely, but nothing else changes in his demeanor. He remains perfectly poised, his moonless eyes stuffed with newfound knowledge, “I thought so.”

Molly walks back in then, putting a protective hand on Wally’s shoulder. “Let’s go Wally.” Wally doesn’t move. Instead he meets Hannibal’s gaze with unflinching interest.

“Are you really in love with Will?”

The air is sucked out of the room. Will becomes hyper aware of the metal spoon scrapping against the aluminum pot. He turns the heat off slowly.

Hannibal tilts his head, a predator compelled by scurrying prey. “Yes,” he says and Will releases a breath he did not know he was holding.

“How do you know?”, Wally pries again, head falling to mimic Hannibal’s. Molly coughs, an edge of unconcealed urgency when she scolds, “Wally. Really, we must go now.”

But Wally doesn’t budge. He stares and stares, and Hannibal stares back, impeccable mirror images of one another.

“He gave flavor to everything I did, taste to everything I made,” Hannibal replies at length, body austere but voice softened by something Will thinks may be whimsical resignation. “Life without him became saltless.”

Wally nods again. He drops his eyes to electric-blue sneakers, shuffling slightly. Will knows this stance, the withdrawn blankness of a plastic mind processing momentous information. Molly’s discomfort becomes claustrophobically palpable, not so much with Hannibal’s live-wire amusement but with Wally’s inquisitiveness, relentless and dispassionate in the face of mortal danger. It says something about a kid. Will knows that Molly knows it too.

Wally’s voice echoes through the room then, airy and faraway. “As if you were in a museum at night and then someone flips the lights on and you can see the paintings. Now you can see them clearly. All the colors come into focus and—it’s beautiful.”

That jolts Hannibal. Unexpectedly, Will sees him stride forward until he is less than two feet away from Wally. Molly’s hand digs into the boy’s shoulder, but he doesn’t flinch, doesn’t blink when Hannibal dips his head to meet his gaze.

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“Exactly,” Hannibal whispers, breathy and dreamy-eyed. Will is, immediately, inexplicably filled with a rage so blinding his gut churns tar. He drops the spoon in the sink carelessly, the vulgar clanking momentarily breaking the trance binding Hannibal to Wally.

“I think that I am in love with Tommy. I mean —” Wally’s voice falters but his gaze stays fixed on Hannibal’s, “—that’s how I feel about him. The colors, I mean.” Molly makes a little noise, rough in the back of her throat, but Will can’t tell if it’s a sob or a gasp or just a nervous tick.

The next time Wally speaks, his eyes fell to the floor. “Am I like you?”, he murmurs so very quietly that Will must strain to catch it. “If I really love him, am I a monster too?”

To Will’s mounting chagrin and confusion, Hannibal drops in front of Wally, hands hovering inches above Molly’s wrist. One knee bent, shoulders slumped, a sight Will had seen only once before. Bile slickers his nose. Will can smell anger rising in him, oily and rank.

Hannibal holds the boy’s face so forcefully Will believes him capable of giving Wally a nosebleed with the blunt intensity of his gaze. In a striking contrast with his body—bloodied, angular, and brutal—Hannibal’s tone is incredibly gentle, the kind of reassuring low-hum Will used to cling to when reality melted around him.

“No, Wally. You are not a monster,” he sounds strained, almost frenetic. “You are brave.”

When Wally snorts dismissively, Hannibal’s grip grows savagely hard, knuckles burrowing into the boy’s skull. Wally winces but, to his credit, he doesn’t shy away.

“It takes great strength to know one self, but greater bravery to love,” Hannibal assures too intently. “To love another is to embrace all the wild and frightening things that go bumping in the night of our minds. Do not be afraid, Walter,” he declares with absolute finality, unfolding back to standing so economical in his elegance that Will is swept anew with desire for the ergonomics of his body. “The island may be full of noises but we too are filled with tools that can turn any noise into the finest sound.”

The spell does break then. In a blink of an eye, Hannibal is back at Will’s elbow, hands casually laced behind his back. Will offers him a chipped Empire State Building mug, a thin skin starting to form at the top. Hannibal nods in appreciation and sips it while surveying Wally and Molly with detached insouciance. Mother and son seem cut in stone, struck by the thunder that are Hannibal’s words, or perhaps his presence. Will is reminded of his most lasting impression regarding Dr. Lecter: that to be pinned by his gaze must feel like lightning to a tree.

Wally’s eyes swim probing and bottomless for a minute longer, before he allows his mother to direct him outside. He hesitates at the threshold, hand on the door handle, nape and blue backpack peeking into the room. Will hears him say, “He is in love with you too.”

Will bristles, but Hannibal is already volleying back with a smile, “How do you know?”

A scoffing sound—acerbic or amused, Will cannot tell—precedes a chilling tone. “He used to spend nights drunk in the tub while my mom slept by his side. Sober as a whistle when you’re around,” Wally pauses. “Doesn’t take a genius. Guess he likes what he sees.”

Though Will can’t see Wally’s eyes, he imagines them bright mustard, black wings spurting where his backpack lies. Cunning boy, defusing a monster’s jealousy by assuring him that his prized possession never really belonged to anyone else. Will is unsure if Wally’s ultimate goal is to protect his mother or to undermine Will’s leverage on Hannibal. Either way. Either way, what a cunning boy Wally turned out to be.
“By the way, Will,” he chimes back in, “you missed some bullets. I put them in the coffee tin. Our cell phones are there too.”

The front door locks discreetly. Will collapses against Hannibal’s shoulder, adrenaline pouring out and mixing with the smells of blood and sweat etched in his leather jacket. He feels strangely aroused and maudlin, prickly and wrung out. Hannibal kisses the crown of his head, and for a moment they stand in the kitchen listening to Molly’s Jeep rev up and speed away.

“Should we follow them?” Hannibal says at length, but Will knows it is a rhetoric question, designed to replete the silence that is incrementally swelling into something else. Something too rife for them to broach without ripping their fingers to shreds.

Will kisses Hannibal’s neck, shakes his head softly. “No. We have to trust them not to tell on us and they have to trust us not to kill them.”

“Just like that?”

“Not quite,” Will shrugs sleepily. “I mean, I’d also like to trust that we won’t kill each other and that Wally won’t grow up to kill us both. But, you know—small mercies.”

Hannibal strokes Will’s hair in tempo with his breathing, a hand sturdily planted on the small of his back anticipating the need to keep Will upright once exhaustion overtakes him. For that particular kindness Will’s love stretches an inch wider. Every time he feels himself fully occupied by Hannibal, he finds a crevice to cram Will fuller still.

After a long pause, Hannibal rumbles in his ear, “One out of two are not ungracious odds,” which makes Will laugh, not because it is funny, but because likely it is true.
Westmoreland, Tennessee

Chapter Notes

Stuff gets hard. Then it gets harder.

The even whirr of the car engine lulls Will in and out of sleep, making his grasp on the half-empty bottle slippery.

Before leaving Moosehead Lake, when Hannibal had asked if there was anything Will wanted to take with them, he had grabbed the first liquor within reach. Hannibal had regarded the off-brand gin with a look too close to disappointment to encourage Will’s further inspection. They had boarded the dogs at a local kennel and left Molly’s address in Georgia. Will had spoken cheerfully about an impromptu bachelor party, wild fun to be in had in the Bahamas for two weeks. It was as outlandish and credible an explanation as breaking up your marriage to run away with an old flame, so Will went through the motions in an adequate kind of haze. Hannibal didn’t say much, but his fingers skimmed Will’s back ever so often, as if he needed a constant reminder that Will was physically there.

Sometimes, Will shrugged him off. Most times, he leaned in.

Now, hours into their drive, Will found himself nursing a searing headache and a surly disposition that had been brewing since they left Maine. He couldn’t fully place it, nor fully blame it on inebriation. It was too sticky, it reached too deep to be a common hangover. So Will slumped in the passenger seat and stared out of his window, trying to bank the agitation away.

The silence between them was neutral, Hannibal’s grip on the wheel steady. His right hand kept straying to Will’s, brushing over his knuckles, distractedly playing with his wedding ring. It didn’t help Will’s mood any. The familiarity with which he touched Will’s skin seemed to suggest that touch, when offered kindly, could convert love into ownership, ownership into something acceptable. It made Will’s temper flare, that thought.

Violence Will can predict, but gentleness sets him at sea. He could handle a monster made of claws and hard-ons, could tear into him, break him on his knee, but what is he to do with a man made of emotion? Is he supposed to play along, to surrender, to care? You can recover from a bad fuck, but you’ll die from a broken heart, Will’s father used to say, sitting on the porch, toenails yellowed from hard drinking.

Multiple crime scenes had never proven him wrong.

After gazing at hundreds of speeding trees, Will pulled his hand away. He hugged the half-empty bottle closer to his chest. If Hannibal resented the gesture, he didn’t show it. He kept his fathomless eyes on the road, messy specks of dry blood incongruous with the clean lines of his profile. He looked formidable in the dawning light, his chromatic hair fanned over his neck, the black turtleneck stolen from a dead man so very dashing, hiding the blood splatter so very well.

Feeling observed, Hannibal turned to glance at Will. Though he did not smile nor speak, his eyes vacillated with a surprised fondness Will instinctively recognized as the type of self-indulgent pleasure rich children display on Christmas morning when they get everything they wanted.
Half-hard, Will represses the urge to punch him. Or worse, to stroke the hair on his nape.

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When Will wakes up next, it is still very early morning, but the landscape has changed. It’s barer with yellow dirt and sunburnt brush. It feels like the South to him. He rolls down the window. It smells like it too, filled with hoops and sawdust.

“Where are we?” he asks groggily. His headache has bloomed into a mean thing. So did his mood.

“Tennessee,” Hannibal replies, his voice rough with disuse. “You have been asleep for nearly twenty hours.”

“Christ,” Will rubs his face hard, feeling the shame that comes with letting himself be slack and unguarded for such a long period of time. Better get used to it, his brain whispers viciously, ‘cause he’s never gonna stop looking.

Straightening up, Will notices the Tupperware by his feet. He toes it suspiciously. “Tell me you didn’t make a quick stop for fresh meat.”

Hannibal smiles, fractional and fleeting, but Will catches it because he is never gonna stop looking either. “No, Will,” he replies patiently. “It’s from Whole Foods.”

“There’s a Whole Foods in Tennessee?”

“There was in Virginia.”

An undercurrent of humor hums between them, magically undoing the tension knotting Will’s neck. He knows why that is, knows it steep in his marrow, but shoves it back down until the warmth is ground to palatable indifference.

Will thinks back to the last time he saw Wally and Molly, looks out of his window again, attempting to stave off hunger. Whatever is in that Tupperware smells good, herbal and lemony. It is then that Will notices his gin bottle is gone. An irrational anger spills over him. He is never going to be free again, never going to have a right to privacy, to individual whims and vices. Hannibal will wean them all out of him under the pretense of love. Will knows he will, expects him too even. But like his touch, there’s a bitterness to it, covetous and controlling.

That’s when Will sees the child-seat perched in the back, and it seems a good catalyst as any.

“What the fuck is that?”

Hannibal follows Will’s hand motion, registers it as overtly aggressive, and Will can clock down to the second the moment he decides to take the bait.

“It came with the car, Will. It’s a borrowed minivan, in case you failed to notice. Certain items seemed to add a certain...lived-in plausibility to it, so I kept them.”

“You mean, the baby-seat made it look less like a getaway car,” Will scoffs.

“Quite so.”

When Will’s silence becomes unavoidably hostile, Hannibal relents, sounding terribly put-upon as he adds, “Once again, I did not kill any children, Will.”

“Did you want to?”
For the first time since Will woke up, Hannibal turns to look at him. There is an intensity to his
gaze that Will did not know he was missing until it was off the road and fully on him, “Are you
asking me if I wanted to kill Wally, Will?”

Will isn’t sure if that is what he was asking, so he says nothing. The opposite of a smile, a tilted
bleak curl, flickers over Hannibal’s features. His eyes move back to the empty interstate. “Did you
want me to kill them, Will? Is that it? Are you disappointed with me that I didn’t sever that tie for
you? That I didn’t seal my commitment with bloodshed?”

Will snorts dismissively, kicking the Tupperware farther into the foothold. “Bloodshed is hardly a
form of commitment for you. It’s common practice.”

Hannibal winces, as Will knew he would, so he keeps at it, fingering that little sore spot.

“Did you ever want any kids?,” he throws out casually, slouching low in the seat, crossing his
boots on the old dashboard. “I mean, I know you carried a torch for your sister, but then you did
murder Abigail, so forgive me for not knowing exactly where you stand.”

Just the physical act of being in the South draws out his accent, renders it thicker and alive. With it,
comes a brashness Will had kept buried while he lived up north and played at being good. He
doesn’t feel good anymore. Not all.

Hannibal’s silence is ripe with lightning. Will doesn’t know if he’ll get hit or not, but god knows he
always liked to chase up a storm.

When an answer doesn’t manifest, Will carries on. “I never gave it much thought myself. Kids I
mean—me being unstable and all.” Will spins a finger towards his head and Hannibal tracks the
motion swiftly, just a slide of the eye. “Now you. A man like you.”

“What about a man like me, Will?” Hannibal says conversationally, but does an unusually poor job
at hiding his annoyance. Maybe that’s what Will is going to do to him: corrode his perfect
performance of gentlemanly humanity until only the beast remains, permanently raw and bare.

“Well, educated of course. Established. Blue blooded. Capable. A man like you seems born to be a
patriarch.” Will keeps his voice light, almost willfully ignorant. It pleases him to see Hannibal
bristle, his fingers bite into the worn leather wheel.

After a long while he replies tersely, “Perhaps in another life.”

“Yeah yeah I hear you,” Will drawls without missing a beat. There’s an abandoned gas station
passing outside his window, a big skeleton of rotten steel. “That’s how I used to think about it.” He
angles his hunched body towards Hannibal, leans his knees until they touch his thigh. Hannibal’s
body flinches at the contact, which is unusual but not unpleasant. Will shivers with a jolt of power,
tingly like an electric charge. “I wouldn’t be opposed to it, you know?” he continues, merrily
undeterred, “Having kids.” And then, for the piece de resistance, spoken with deliberate
ambiguity, “Molly’s pregnant.”

To Hannibal’s credit, he does not veer off the road, does not speed or slow down, doesn’t even
blink. Will would have noticed: he is looking intently, his left knee nudging Hannibal’s right thigh,
and all he can see is a vague lip twitch and perhaps a more prolonged inhale.

Will’s heartbeat takes off, though, leaving him lightheaded. Hard too, painfully so, as he peers and
waits for Hannibal to make a move. Let it be brutal, he prays silently, let it obliterate me
completely or turn me into art, but not let me go unchanged. The point where their clothes are
touching becomes alarmingly hot. And yet Hannibal doesn’t stir.

With a sigh, Will sees him click the turn signal and slowly pull to the side. He then turns the ignition off and folds his hands on his lap—not neatly, almost plaintively. His eyes stay on the road before them, wild and sad with lifelessness. They must be on a secondary route now, two-lanes and wide unpaved berms.

Will is all of a sudden very cold and very scared. It is an old fear, rusty with disuse, but decidedly familiar. Will thinks of how his father looked at him every time Will failed to bring friends home after school or staff a birthday party. His hands itch to reach out, to rub every part of Hannibal’s skin. It turns out Will also wants touch to convey ownership, even when dissent is all he seems to endeavor.

There is a moment, the moment before Hannibal speaks, where Will’s body hurts everywhere, as if nails and glass shards had been slipped under each inch of his flesh. That cool sense of dread spreads and feels familiar again, just like the desolate expansion of Southern land does.

“I love you,” Hannibal says at last, not a confession, but an exhausted statement. Flat and fingered empty by too many unanswered calls.

Somehow it manages to make Will colder.

He leans in and kisses Hannibal’s cheek, too wet and harried. As it is often the case with Will, once he touches Hannibal he can’t stop. So he kisses his nose, the curve of his eye, the bone under his chin, the corner of his downturned mouth, any stretch of bare skin that is within reach. When Hannibal remains immobile, Will cups his jaw and traces the shape of his cheekbones: up and down and up again, until his fingertips feel numb. To kiss Hannibal on the mouth now would be foul, as it would be to look him in the eye. So Will does neither.

“She was pregnant once,” he blurts out, voice sharp, all drawl gone. “Years ago. I didn’t want it.” Will looks down at Hannibal’s lap, at the silver zipper peeking in his jeans, cheap and engorged. So maddeningly arousing. So horribly undignified. “I wanted you.”

It is suddenly the truest thing Will has ever said, so he looks up and Hannibal is looking back, his eyes remote but dangerously dark. Will is still holding his jaw, so tight Hannibal's bones feel fragile under his grip.

“I always only want you,” Will rasps, and it hurts his lungs when those words rush out because he remembers the way Hannibal handled Wally. It is the loneliest feeling in the world to be the one who loves more. Will should know: it destroyed his father while it kept him happily married.

There is no admission, no encouragement from Hannibal. Will climbs into his lap anyway, pulling him closer by the hair. He kisses his mouth, all tongue and thumbs, nuzzling at stubble until Hannibal opens up for him. When he does, it feels like being caught in a storm: the metallic tang of Hannibal's busted lip, the mad dash to tug off the layers between them. An alarm rings off when Hannibal steadies Will's hands, pinning them to the roof of the car, but Will is past the point of caring then, too set on rushing to the end of this fight, to see it settled through gutting pleasure. He keeps his hands where Hannibal left them and lets him set their pace.

Hannibal’s fingers clutch at his hips, the hard line of his cock bucking under Will’s ass. They all conspire to punish Will with bruises. It feels natural, though, their bodies moving together through pain. It feels strangely soothing.

The car quivers around them and Will wonders if they will finally be arrested, not for murder, but
for indecent exposure on the side of a Southern highway. It seems a good way to go as Hannibal lets his legs fall open to better accommodate Will’s weight, and Will moans as they rock into each other, their bodies instinctively slipping into a rhythm that knows their arousal, knows where pleasure crests and nubs when pressed, knows that friction holds a power that can undo the most resistant of grudges.

“Say it,” Will demands against Hannibal’s neck, skin muggy under his lips.

“I love you,” Hannibal breathes out, fingers high on Will’s throat, hair tickling Will’s eyes. His voice shakes. Will lets his arms fall down and reach around Hannibal's shoulders, clasping their chests together.

“Only me.”

“Only you, Will.”

“Again.”

“I love you.”

“Again,” Will gasps, snapping his hips briskly, bearing down as the fingers on his throat open and close, open and close, the most delicate gesture of possessiveness Will has ever witnessed.

There is no answer this time, just heavy breathing. Will tells himself only he knows when Hannibal is on the verge of coming by the thin creases forming in his eyes, the just-so pinch in his brow caught somewhere between withholding and release. It makes him look young and unfairly vulnerable.

“Goddammit I love you too,” Will punches out, face buried in the hollow of his throat.

Pressed this close together, Will can distinguish the curve of Hannibal’s blonde lashes, so light they look almost breakable. Will can’t help kissing them, just a faint brush of lips, but somehow that subtle gesture triggers something in Hannibal. Suddenly Will is being picked up and slammed across the car seats, his head hitting the passenger window with a dull thud as Hannibal crawls up his body. There is an instant when the glint in his eyes is so completely primal, his teeth seem to thin out into fangs. He makes a sound as he reaches for Will’s throat that is not fully human. Will shudders and thinks absently, “This is what the eye of a storm looks like from the inside,” and takes a deep breath and lets it wash over him, the violence that ebbs once loves has run buck wild.

His shirt is pulled half over his chest, catches on his shoulders and is left there as Hannibal licks his scar and bites into a scabbled wound, still yellowish with the imprint of his teeth. It blooms red now, a skim of skin ripped clean off. Will arches into the pain, nearly elbowing Hannibal in the urgency to push his clothes off. Skin on skin becomes quickly a matter of life or death. Will finds the bullet wound on Hannibal’s abdomen by touch alone, by muscle memory, before he is struggling with the zipper in his jeans, already half open by the pressure of his arousal. Hannibal’s hand slips under his underwear and Will bucks so violently the window cracks when Hannibal punches it for balance.

“God, if you don’t kill me, I better die for you,” Will grunts out of nowhere, eyes scrunched shut, head tilted off the seat towards the foothold, palms wide open under Hannibal’s shirt, feeling his heart dash out of control under the ribs.

They are so close, both of them, bleeding and sweating, hard and angry with how much they want each other. And then Will’s fingers trail down Hannibal’s chest, sternum to navel, and all pleasure
Will recognizes the sound long before he can form a full picture in his head. It’s an ear-splintering whistle at first, then a rancid taste, plummeting in his belly. Time slows down. He can see an image well up from the cuts in Hannibal’s torso. They are fingernail marks. Whoever scratched him was wearing nail polish. Turquoise, expensive, professionally applied. There might be still some traces embedded in the gashes; god knows they are deep enough (defensive wounds. Yes? Well, maybe. Hannibal likes it rough after all). She (because it is definitely a “she”) smells distinctive, floral notes but poigniant with silver or mercury, some volatile metal. Will’s mind expands and splits: part of it remains in the throes of orgasm, but the majority is now consumed by the putrid wailing billowing from his fingertips and up his spine, translating the marks etched on Hannibal’s flesh into a solid event.

Before Will returns to full awareness, his body is already trashing. He hits Hannibal’s forearms first, once accidentally, then deliberately. “Get off me,” he grits out, fists and feet swinging. “Get the fuck off me now!”

Hannibal stills impressively fast but understanding lags. His eyes are blurry with lust, though his mouth pulls in a spiteful snarl. He hesitates long enough for Will to rear his head back and smack square against his nose. At once there’s blood everywhere, oozy blotches where before were spit-slick kisses. It becomes impossible to tell where ones begin and the others end.

Hannibal reels back so quickly Will can’t keep track of his movements. His hands lunge for Will’s neck, his lips and chin covered in a web of blood. Up-close, the red glimmer in his teeth is terrifying and he stinks of iron and salt. Will can’t tell if he broke his nose, but he might as well. Breathing falters and, for a second, Will is unsure if Hannibal is trying to kiss him, restrain him, or strangle him. As clarity seems a dubious gift, Will kicks him in the chest for good measure and reaches for the lock behind his head. The passenger door opens immediately and Will tumbles out, feet still stuck inside the car.

Crouched between the driver’s seat and door, Hannibal curls as a corned animal, lips pulled back, eyes following Will with feral attentiveness. He looks equal parts hurt and deadly, so Will lowers his legs slowly to the ground, using both hands as leverage. Standing up, he works on putting as much distance between them as he possible can without breaking into a sprint. His arms, now mottled with blood and bruises, shoot up defensively, but he can’t speak. Breathing, talking, swallowing, it’s all broken. His heart is broken. Never did Will feel so close to dying by sheer force of despair. He thought he knew eviscerating pain having been shot, stabbed, and nearly killed several times. But this is new. Pain this close to the bone is not unlike surgery without anesthesia. He is going to bleed out. Standing in that godforsaken road somewhere in godforsaken Tennessee, Will is absolutely sure he is going to die. There is no way he is bouncing back from this. He doesn’t even want to.

They stand still for a while, enough time elapsing for Will’s legs to start shaking with fading adrenaline. He doesn’t know what to do. His brain is a void roaring with ugly questions. Like comets, they spear around his skull, drawing blood. His body can’t catch up with his heart. His chest hurts so badly that he is on the brink of throwing up, but his cock is still half hard.

Hannibal continues to regard him coolly, more monster than man, knelt on the driver’s seat. His hair is so clotted and his lower jaw so bloodied, Will can’t make sense of his features. In truth he doesn’t want to. He can’t look at him. Oh god, he will never be able to look at him again.

Fuck. That thought punches him with a new tidal of sorrow, so savage Will topples down.
Whatever you do, don’t cry, don’t show weakness, Will tells himself, but he is already on the ground, knees hitting the dirt before his hands can come up to support him. He lands on some pebbles, wilted weeds, and a squashed pack of cigarettes. There are too many questions hurling for his mouth, but only one seems to matter, so Will goes with that. He asks in the loudest tone he can muster, “Did you fuck her?”

There is no answer, so he asks again, rife with a grief so raw it hasn’t been acquainted with righteousness yet.

“For fuck’s sake, Hannibal. Did. You. Fuck. Her?”

It comes out much too close to a scream. Gravel scrunches closer and closer, and Will lowers his head until it touches some sour-looking cigarette butts.

“You better not be thinking of coming near me unless you plan on killing me.”

The scrunching sound recedes. Will knows his instep, knows his wrath and his heartbreak by sound and smell alone. Would know it anywhere on earth. Will doesn’t want to, not anymore, but there’s nothing he can do about it now.

Time cures all wounds, Molly would say. You wait and see.

Molly, Will thinks brushing his torn jeans, was a paltry idiot.

Will unfolds back to standing and trains his eyes on a fuzzy point on the horizon, rosy with a dying sun. Hannibal hasn’t spoken yet, but Will realizes he also doesn’t want him to. He feels cold all over now, and it will never feel remotely warm again. His brains tells him so. To go so far as to run away with a serial killer to still be right where your father was at your age, down to the general geographical location: ain’t that irony for you, son?

He can hear Hannibal’s brain spin, the gears turning, his lips opening and closing as he chooses his words carefully. It makes Will want to cry all over again. He coughs up a dry heave instead, not shaped around sadness but hopelessness.

“It’s rather hypocritical of you to chastise me for visiting an old friend when you returned to your wife, Will.” Hannibal is aiming for a courteous rebuke, but it comes out as a spiteful hiss. Had he always been so transparent, this monster of his, under all those bespoken layers? Or had Will been so willfully blind?

“It doesn’t matter if you did,” Will hugs himself and rocks on his feet to stay warm. “I don’t want to know.”

His voice sounds dead to his own ears, a toy wrung out of batteries. “You lied to me. No relatives found you at the glass house. You went and deliberately sough her out. You went to her even after —” Will shakes his head. It doesn’t really matter. Talking is pointless. He is never going to walk away from this moment. If Hannibal doesn’t kill him with his bare hands, he already broke him beyond repair. And that’s fine, Will realizes. He is not waving anymore. He’s drowning.

“We’re done,” he says matter of fact. He gestures to the space between them, “This, whatever this is—it’s done.”

A car drives by, a red convertible, not vintage but still a good make and model. Will fights down the urge to wave at the young couple blasting their radio. His lungs hurt from all the pressure he is bracing in. Betrayal is a vicious paralytic.
Gravel again. Then the click of metal as the car door opens. A brief exhalation, “Very well, Will. As you wish.”

In the end, it seems too tragically simple, to let go of each other. No blood-soaked scene, no operatic goodbyes. Maybe that’s the thing with brittle materials—they do break when you least expected.

Will knows better, but he still croaks a little too petulantly, “That’s it?”

“Yes, Will, that’s it.”

It’s quiet at last. Tiredness sits between them, weighty and unmoving, a century worth of it.

“Are you going back to her?”

The smallest shuffle. Will shuts his eyes to better pick up on nuance.

“Bedelia’s dead, Will.”

Will nods. That seems likely. She will live forever in him, though, if he ate her. Would he eat Will still? No, probably not. There would be no sustenance in him. Their game is bloodless now.

“Stay off main roads,” Will blurts out after another long pause. His nails dig on his forearms but there’s no pain, only a hollow echo of what pain used to feel like. He needs to start walking if he’s ever going to find shelter before nightfall. His coat is in the trunk but he’ll be damned if he ever goes back into that car.

“You did delight in wickedness after all.”

It’s stated with a mixture of wistfulness and regret, pure and precise. Will knows it because he knows every inflection in Hannibal’s voice better than he knows himself and yet, in that moment in time, wistfulness and regret lights a bonfire in Will’s belly.

He opens his eyes and sees Hannibal, five feet away, unzipped jeans low on his hips but impeccably poised, chin defiantly raised as if welcoming a blow. A ravaged thing, a marble mausoleum chipped in all the wrong places.

“Oh fuck you!,” Will roars. “You’re the one who has lied and manipulated this—whatever the fuck this is—so often it never stood a chance!”

“Really, Will?”

There is rage in his voice but it doesn’t color his posture. He remains at his most professional: removed and austere, the psychiatrist from Baltimore. His eyes, however, hold a strange wet sheen Will cannot parse out—doesn’t want to, honestly.

“Must you continue to shift the burden of responsibility all onto my shoulders? Must I denounce myself as a monster countless times just to alleviate your pedestrian guilt? You, who have reduced me to live off mountaineers’ scraps for months, prison for years, like a common animal? You, who takes up with the first woman who passes as normal, whose ideas on happiness hinge on stale gin and stray dogs? I have wallowed long enough in mediocrity for you, Will Graham. Be as you wish. We part ways here.”

Always spectacular in his economy of movement, Dr. Lecter slips into the nondescript charcoal minivan, closes its door, and starts the motor running, all in one seemingly fluid motion. In the
same breath, Will turns away and starts walking, anything not to see the car drive past him. In his head, he retreats to a riverbank sparkling with early spring, a chill in the air that plays with the hairs on his nape. Abigail is in the stream with him, laughter pealing like silver bells.

“Better to love and lose than never to love at all,” she singsongs in her lovely girlish voice.

Will snorts, fishing rod caught mid-swing. “Clearly you never fell in love with a psychopath.”

Her faces clouds over, but Will shakes his head until the darkness smooths away. “I am sorry,” he says in his mind because he is rather useless at saying it in real life.

“It’s okay,” she replies with a smirk. “You should walk faster. Night will be here soon.”

Will opens his eyes and finds purple clouds dotting the bruised sky. It’s sundown somewhere in middle Tennessee and Will Graham strides eastbound on the 141, arms wrapped tightly around his throbbing shoulder, freezing though it’s 90 degrees in the shade.

Righteousness, he reasons, will eventually come to keep him company. And relief maybe too, that kind of delayed fizz that visits when one learns of having dodged a bullet.

No, he can be honest with himself now.

This is a bullet he never intended to dodge. He had intended to keep it, lodged deep in his heart, until the day he died.
Highway 141, Tennessee

Chapter Notes

I write because I can't help it, but I post because you read it. So thank you.

I think of this chapter as a slice of grief trapped in amber. It's an interlude before the next two chapters.

(Again there IS a happy ending. No worries).

Night falls and stays mild, but Will’s shoulder complains about the humid exertion. Cars drive by and a couple ask if he needs help or directions. Will shakes his head and keeps on walking by the side of the road.

He has no money and no ID, but knows that any police station would let him call Jack, and in the same day a car would be sent for him. After the cliff and Pennsylvania, people like Jack would always tend to believe Will if he accused Lecter of being an accomplished brainwasher, an obsessive captor. It is easier than believing they could be so wrong about another man they thought to know so well.

The prospect of taking that path leaves a dirty taste in his mouth. Will spits on the dusty berm and keeps moving eastbound. Howling rises from the woods, the underbrush menacing and comforting. Cabins and ranch houses sprawl between open fields, ramshackle gas stations, and whitewashed diners. Will thinks back to the food in the foothold, its lemony smell reaching around like a warm hug. It’s been over a day since he last had a meal.

Hunger suits him, though, the hollowness of his unnourished body a tangible manifestation of a more elusive kind of lack.

“You’re wondering if you might have overreacted,” Abigail chirps jovially, her step matching his with ease.

She is never older than the time she died, but now that years have elapsed since Will last saw her, Abigail’s facial features have become less refined, her body stifled in pastel greens and pinks. Her hair too is sometimes by her shoulders, sometimes down her back. She is starting to sport a southern drawl now that they are spending more time together, but her voice is almost robotic, as if lifted from an answering machine.

Will shakes his head once, eyes on the ground. “I know I didn’t. I just couldn't trust him anymore. He kept on lying.”

Abigail hums thoughtfully, “He always was the father of lies.” They walk in silence another half a mile before she adds, “But is it the lying that bothers you? Or is it the content of the lie?”

Will shrugs at that. “Does it make any difference?”

Abigail turns her clever eyes on him, “I think you know it does.”

“The content then,” Will says.
“That he went back to her,” Abigail supplies bluntly. Not even in his own head Will can say Bedelia’s name out loud, allow her a firm and bodily existence. If he does, he must picture her under Hannibal. “Is that what made you walk away, Will? Is that why you are so sure you didn’t overreact?”

Will looks up. It’s a starry night, gusty but otherwise unremarkable. Somewhere on the other side of the world, Hannibal will look up and see the same stars, dead light connecting their bodies across the distance.

“I realized there would always be others,” Will says frankly. “Older flames, younger pupils, all shimmering with a potential too dazzling not to be tapped. And Dr. Lecter would eventually go and tap it.”

Will glances quickly over his shoulder, registering Abigail’s playful grin. “Not like that,” he corrects awkwardly. “I mean—actually—yeah, maybe like that too.” Abigail’s laughter rings musical in the night air, the kind of laughter he never heard from her in real life.

Will lets a smirk touch his lips. He’s glad she’s here with him, even if the way she tilts her head to inspect him is too reminiscent of Wally’s. Or is it Hannibal’s? Will can’t tell anymore. They’re all starting to bleed together.

“He loves you, Will. He loves you as well as he knows how,” she chides lightly.

Will kicks a small stone with too much force. It goes hurling into the dark. “Yeah, well, his love is not very reliable.” He glances pointedly at her neck, covered by a satiny paisley scarf, “As you know too well.”

They fall silent after that, nearly jogging instead of strolling. Sensing his anger spike, she falls behind enough that he must slow down to let her catch up.

“I am sorry,” Will mutters, because that seems like what he should have said more to the people around him. “I really am.”

“For what, Will?”, she asks light and guileless.

“For everything. For dragging you down here again. For being careless,” he chokes up. “Above all, that. For being careless.”

He can’t see her shaking her head, but hears the motion clearly anyway, the rattling of her chunky silver earrings.

“It’s okay Will. You too are doing the best you can.” She sighs wryly. “It’s just that your best is not much better than his.”

Will sniffs a chuckle, runs his fingers over his eyes. “Don’t worry about him. He’ll find a suitable replacement in no time. What’s a master without followers?”

“I don’t know,” she replies sharply, hands dangling from her skirt pockets. Since they began walking she has changed from blue jeans to a frilly dress to a plaid school uniform. Will is incapable of pinning her down or keep her straight. “You seem pretty lonesome to me, Will.”

Will wants to retort indignantly, “I am nothing like him!” But that would be a barefaced lie and Abigail deserves better from him. If nothing else, she deserves never to be lied to again by the men in her life.
Suddenly Will is overtaken by the need to reach out and tuck the hair behind her ear. It’s long now, cascading down her waist, and auburn in the moonlight. He wants to say he loves her, that he’s proud of how agile and wise she grew up to be, that she will be fine on her own, even though Will knows it is not to her that he wants to say any of these things, but to a younger, shakier version of himself. At least he thinks it’s a version of himself. He is growing vaguer on those details too.

They walk quietly for another five miles or so, until Will needs to hide up in a tree nook and get some shuteye.

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It’s so far into the night it’s near daybreak by the time Will caves in and skulks around an isolated farmhouse seeking for food. The thought of killing flashes in living color, but Will decides to settle for breaking and entering. Abigail doesn’t follow as he squeezes through barbwire to steal some apples. They are mangy and half-ripe, but they’ll do the trick. He next gorges on water from an outdoor spout which tastes too alkaline to be safe. Under that first blush of sunlight, the land stretches vast and unkempt, the squatty log cabin at the center its own kind of lighthouse.

After having his fill, Will snatches three additional apples and stuffs them in his jeans pockets. He goes out the way he came, shimmying under barbwire, hands leaving bloody prints in the wooden poles and tree branches.

He runs back to the road and wraps his pricked fingers inside shirt sleeves. Then he resumes walking down the 141.

As the sun breaches the horizon Will stops by a clearing and hopes that, wherever Hannibal is now, he will be well-fed and well-rested, so that he may never feel a hunger so bleak, loss so bottomless, it’s like waking up in a borehole every damn time you open your eyes.

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“You’re awful quiet this morning,” Abigail observes warmly.

Will shrugs. “I am tired,” which not being the full truth is not a lie either. They’ve walked over 30 miles in under 24 hours.

“I guess missing him takes a lot out of you.” She is wearing a red and black suit this time, herringbone patterned. Her voice remains assertive but is growing dimmer by the minute.

Will lets the words sink in. It’s hot and sweaty already, though it’s not even ten a.m. judging by the angle of the sun. Not that Will can navigate around the elements anymore. He seems to have forgotten much of his nautical training—by design, he suspects, rather than by nature.

When he lets the silence stretch, Abigail quips again, “My daddy used to say most troubles of the heart boil down to lack of commitment.”

Will nods distractedly. There is a mound up ahead, a little cluster of colorful odds and ends. Even before they are upon it, Will knows what it will be. His stomach clenches with borrowed sorrow.

“Your daddy sounds like a smart man,” he remarks absently. They are closer now, close enough to see the crude cross, the smatterings of crushed metal, the opalescent beads and plastic flowers. He wonders if there will be a photo. Photos always make it worse for Will: harder to look away, easier to slip into the pain.

“Will,” Abigail calls gently, so gently it feels she touched his elbow. “Will, where are we going?”
Will shakes his head, his pace slowing down to a crawl. That’s a larger question he doesn’t have an answer for yet, so he lingers in the moment.

Against his better judgment, his fingers reach out for the cross. There is a photo after all, a cropped, water-damaged headshot of a blonde girl in a baseball cap. She can’t be more than nineteen. Abigail edges near, regards the dead girl not much older than herself.

Will wonders if the girl on the photo was the one driving. His mind tells him that she was not. She was the passenger, riding shotgun early in the morning. Likely someone who loved her was in the car with her when she died.

“What a waste,” Abigail murmurs, hands laced in front of her herringbone pants.

A shiver runs up Will’s spine, not from the heat and not from the sight of a roadside memorial. Instinctively Will rubs a hand over his right knuckles, scratches behind his wedding ring. He looks down in amazement. He had forgotten he was still wearing it. It looks brassy and battered, oddly old-fashioned amongst the barbwire scratches. He pulls it halfway up to reveal a stark, discolored line.

“What some scar you got there, mister,” Abigail leans in, eyebrows quirking with mischievous knowingness.

“I worked at it,” Will replies simply, tracing the healed flesh.

“Vinegar and salt?,” Abigail suggests brightly.

“Vinegar and salt,” Will nods, keeping the ring trapped around his knuckle.

The wind swipes by, rustling the rosaries hanging from the cross. A sad-looking bunny topples to the ground. Will crouches to pick it up, but something stops him. Touching it feels unholy, or perhaps too intimate. He turns to Abigail instead, who is still standing to his left, her porcelain face pinched in a tiny moue. She looks right through him, her big blue eyes pleading with sympathy and understanding. She, like the girl who died on that road, remind him that life is too short for half-measures.

Will pulls the ring out all the way and carefully lies it on the stuffed bunny’s sallow belly. One more memento to a lost cause.

“Let’s go,” he says, waving a hand at Abigail.

After a moment, she turns away and skips to his side. They walk to the edge of another nameless town, Will’s finger feeling surprisingly bare and vulnerable, but stronger and breathable too, like upturned earth.
All at once the 141 highway ends, dropping them off on the 260. Having exhausted his tricks to pilfer food from convenience stores, Will knew it was only a question of time before dehydration and sunstroke set in, bringing with them the kind of unfriendly hallucinations he wouldn’t be able to parse out or fence off. He would be hospitalized in less than two days judging by how weak he already felt.

But against all reason, he remained fixated on the 141.

Because that’s what heartbreak does to you: it holds you hostage by turning nourishment into poison. You gotta walk it out, his daddy always said, you gotta walk the poison out of you. Which was a way of saying, run from the pain before it catches you, run it down until it doesn’t resemble love anymore.

Will finally understands why Hannibal flew to Europe with Bedelia, why he hopped countries and cities, burnt through every mode of transportation available. Will feels it now, cursing through his muscles, the kinetic frenzy of moving as the only means to stay alive.

Having grown up unscathed by romantic passion, Will didn’t know it before, but boy does he know it now: grief and love have a lot in common. Being exposed once doesn’t immunize you for life, and having experienced the comforts of the latter does not prepare you for the violence of the former.

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By the third day, Abigail resembles a freeze-frame in an old television set: drained of color, her presence intermittent, as if blocked by static.

“You didn’t let him go?,” she asks sitting on a picnic table.

Will wades into the water, the stream quiet and clear. “Because he can’t be kept. I tried.”

“Do you really believe that? That he is so beyond your grasp?” Her voice carries beautifully through the distance, though her body grows fainter on the shore.

“Hasn’t he been always? One step ahead, multiple trains of thought running at the same time?”

“Elusive?,” she muses.

“Inhuman!”, Will spits with bitterness.

She laughs, crystalline and cruel. “So you cut him, again and again? To test his humanity?”

Will tips his cameo cap against the sunlight and swings his rod, “Sociopaths can perform love convincingly. But love can't humanize them.”

“Love won’t break him,” Abigail concludes, prescient and cold. Will can feel her voice hitting the back of his neck like an icepick to a frozen lake. “You want him to break.”

Will turns back and the shore comes rushing back to him, as if he had never moved deep into the river. Abigail is there, discolored in bloated sepia, hands locked around her knees. “I wanted him to love me,” he snarls.
“No you didn’t,” she retorts coolly. “You wanted him to pay. Pay and pay for what he did to you. The broken trust. The manipulations.”

“The lies!”, Will growls and Abigail nods demurely.

“The lies,” she echoes. Her pleated skirt dances in the wind. She looks up and her eyelids are transparent, the same white-blue of the morning sky. “You’ll die without him, Will.”

He follows her gaze and sees a single red cloud, spreading like an infected star.

“I know,” he mutters, and it hurts to form the words, though not as much as to breathe life into them. “I know.”

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In the next town over, Will steals a pack of Marlboros and lights two at once. Abigail side-eyes him, her watercolor skin more purple than peach. “What you doing, Will?”

He shrugs. It seems moot to explain to a girl whose father fed human meat what it felt like to grow up hungry. To explain how smoking can fill all the hollow spaces when you are starved and stuck.

Instead he tells Abigail that he lit the second cigarette for her, for his father, like a votive candle, like bait: if they cherished you, they’ll come back to haunt you.

Lying to himself is becoming moot too.

He had whispered Hannibal’s name when he lit the cigarette. And when its sourness hit the back of his throat, Will missed him for being exactly what he had always been: a selfish hedonist, a treacherous killer, and the love of his life.

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Will was playing with the idea of eating his last apple when he spotted the car lingering on the shoulder outside Silver Point. What struck him was not the make or model (a crimson Toyota, late-90s, Georgia plates), but the way it cut through the shoulder in a horizontal vector. There was an arrogance to that parking job which could only spell despair or entitlement.

Will approached the vehicle wearily, bemoaning the lack of a gun and the drilled-in knowledge that rural roads are prime hunting ground for opportunistic criminals.

The window close to Will was rolled down, no one sitting on the passenger side. The setting sun blinded him, making it hard to distinguish anything else. The motor might have been running. There was a quietness to the scene that was utterly unsettling, like walking midstream into a recurrent nightmare.

In the end, Will smelled him before he saw him which, as delusions go, presumably made the most sense. Smell gives texture to memory after all. Will placed his hands in his pockets and bent just a little, so he could greet through the open window, “Hello stranger.”

A linoleum knife lay on the passenger seat, blade obscenely shiny and clean. It looked brand new. Stock still, Hannibal was turned away, hair slicked back, hands perfectly distributed in the 10 and 2 positions. He wore a white t-shirt and blue jeans with a gold belt buckle. His hair looked darker and neater, his skin tanner and clean-shaved. There might have been cowboy boots too.

Will laughed with relief then, because this was the kindest, most outrageous hallucination his brain
could have concocted, and yet there it was, gifting it to Will right when he was wrenched enough to take what he could get. If Will was lucky, he would pass out on the spot and wake up in a local clinic hooked up to painkillers and fluids, his mind pleasantly removed from the daily struggles of loss and deprivation.

Secure in his own madness, Will leaned forward against the car door and repeated in an audacious drawl, “Hello Dr. Lecter. Going my way?”

When no answer came Will, feeling lightheaded and brazen, opened the door and sat down.

The car smelled musty, polyester upholstery and siphoned petrol with a sprig of musk. The smells were certainly culled from Will’s memories riding shotgun with his dad, up and down the eastern seaboard. It was strange to have this version of Hannibal—rough, sullen, masculine—.injected into such a formative childhood memory, but then again, as Will’s dreams went, this was mercifully tame. No bleeding corpses, no winged demons. Just two men in a car, a knife and an apple between them.

Will smiled and turned the radio on. A country ballad rolled in, maudlin and tinny. Hannibal didn’t move, the white shirt so snug against his body Will could see the veins and muscle in his forearms pop under the pounding sun. The urge to touch him felt so overwhelming, Will’s skin broke out in goosebumps.

To keep his hands elsewhere, he picked up the knife and cut the apple in two. Then, turning to Hannibal, he displayed the severed halves.

“I have been saving this for you,” Will said. “I worried you were hungry.”

As soon as it was out of his mouth, Will’s heart sunk. Of all the afterimages he could have dreamt up, this was one he had never expected: Hannibal’s golden eyes a deadened brown, his subtly expressive face devoid of all warmth and understanding. If Will didn’t know any better he’d believe this man had never met him, let alone loved him—that he was but a stranger wearing Hannibal’s skin.

That’s when it dawned on Will that he wasn’t in a tremendously lucid dream: he couldn’t be, because this was an impossible image to conjure. Unlike Abigail, Will simply held no point of reference for it. He had never seen Hannibal without being alight with curiosity, or fondness, or hurt, or some other incandescent reaction to Will. This, this must be what erasure looked like, or indifference, or something beyond all of that—absence, lovelessness, oblivion.

For the first time in their lives, Will feared him. Not because of his indifference or his knife, but because of his depth. Somewhere along the way, Will had convinced himself that he had seen all of Hannibal: all of his tarry anger and staining cruelty, all of his megalomaniac sadism and rigged kindness.

But now, now Will knew that was a lie. There was more to him, a cellar upon a cellar, a ground level to the guts of his mind, and it was beyond light in there; it was beyond darkness too. This must be the creature who survived endless winters only to hunt men like prey, on his hands and knees and with teeth as weapon. It was ruthless like only children can be, untethered from morality and civility. It tore into the hearts of men not because it pleased him, but because he could. It knew nothing of good and evil. It knew nothing of love either.

Incapable of breaking eye contact, Will felt sundered, charred down to his toes. He looked and looked at the cowboy with a new haircut and dead eyes, and loved him because—how could he not? He had committed him to memory and now every part of Will Graham, past and present and
future, was doomed to love every iteration of Hannibal Lecter: from killer to lover to enemy to stranger. As much as Hannibal was bound to weather through each one of Will’s: accomplice or betrayer, his beloved or someone else’s. That was their miracle. It wasn’t an easy one, but Will was fairly certain it was the only one either of them was going to get.

In the midst of shock, Will had forgotten to retreat his hand. It remained pathetically extended, the gnarly apple lying on his dirty palm, the core sticking out like an amputated paw.

Will let his eyes drift down. He put the apple on the dashboard and next to it, like an open promise, he placed the linoleum knife. It was sticky with sap. Blood soon, Will thought with a resigned smile.

Feeling the weight of Hannibal’s detached scrutiny, Will fell forward in the seat, hands dangling between his knees. As if folding yourself into smaller pieces could render you less conspicuous. “Can you just drive?,” he muttered to the foothold. “Just stop whenever you want me to get out. I just—I can’t—Please.”

The engine roared back to life, absolving Will from finishing his broken train of thought. He looked away, inspecting the dust kicked up by the screeching tires.

On the curb, Abigail stood lean and fragile in an old-fashion oxblood dress. She lifted her hand, her ashen face pursed with worry. Will grimaced and hesitantly waved back.

In a moment, her hoop skirt, polkadot scarf, and blood-red fingertips vanished from the side mirror. Will leaned against the headrest and thought how much, right there and then, she had resembled that one photograph of his mother.

Then he closed his eyes and disappeared into sleep.

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Will wakes up briefly and high-mast lights flicker over the windshield like fireflies in the night. The radio drones on pleasantly.

As soon as he gets his bearings, cold cloaks him like a second skin, like a film of snow. This may very well be the texture of sorrow. If it’s his or Hannibal's, Will can’t tell anymore. They are too enmeshed together, insomuch that Will is incapable of keeping track of his own sense of betrayal.

Sitting next to Hannibal, all swirls inky and murky between them. As if they were back on a Baltimore kitchen. Only this time, they are hemorrhaging together and their blood is pitch black.

All Will wants is to put his hands on Hannibal and ask where it hurts so he can make it better. Will suspects the last thing Hannibal will allow is for Will to touch him.

Hannibal drives with a fury and a force that are equal parts concentration and remoteness. He is not there, not really. Will suspects he can’t bear being around him. Will, on his turn, can’t bear being anywhere Hannibal isn’t. It’s wearing both of them down.

Will curls up in his seat and his eyes are drawn to the console. Tucked neatly around a paper napkin is an eaten apple core. It inexplicably cuts Will so deep, his bones rattle. He chokes out, “I can’t bear it. The way you look at me. I—I just can’t bear it.”

Hannibal tenses up. Shoulders, lips, knuckles, teeth, all bracing for impact.

“And yet you wear that look yourself,” he sneers, consonants thick, index finger jabbing in tempo
with his words. “Again and again and again.”

Will shrugs, “No better self-injury than to hurt those you love the most.”

“And that would be me?” There’s a bleak laughter in there somewhere, a joke so bitter it became common sense.

“That would be you,” Will replies dispassionately. Outside, a girl in red steps out of the dark and waves at the car. Will doesn’t wave back. “It will always be you, Hannibal.”

It is not quite an audible sound, it’s more an ambient bristling as if spikes rose from Hannibal’s shoulders. He has no interest in Will’s opinions, his candor or lack thereof. Will’s been dismissed, elided, put on mute.

“You can kill me,” Will thinks of offering, “if it makes you love me again.”

He doesn’t offer, not because he is above it, but because he doubts it would do any good. Instead, he reaches for the knife and runs his thumb over the blade, hoping to silently communicate his willingness, his desperate need to be let back in.

“I love you,” he ends up tapping in Morse code on the wooden handle. Once, twice, like a sailor lost at sea. When that doesn’t produce any response, he taps “Come back”.

If Hannibal notices, he makes no show of it. He has likely retreated back into himself, a mind burrowed too far away for Will to reach. No lighthouses in this storm, Will thinks, considering the knife on his lap. There’s blood on the blade now, a red watery drip. Will it ever be enough, the blood they shed at each other’s altar? Probably not, Will wagers. Not if history is anything to go by.

It breaks Will’s heart that for all their intimate knowledge, they have not yet mastered the art of being kind. Or loving. Which strikes Will as odd because they are in love with each other, clearly, must be, for all the pain they endure.

Or perhaps, his brain supplies insidiously, what you both are in love with is the pain.

Will sighs and leans against the window. He wonders how Bedelia died and hopes it was methodically eviscerating, a fitting punishment for an adulterous interloper. The hypocrisy of his thoughts is not lost on Will.

Still, he drifts back to sleep and dreams of poisoned apples and corpse brides trapped in glass coffins.

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It’s balmy until it’s not.

Will wakes up with a jerk. Both front windows are rolled down and it’s so dark out the stars seem twice as big and nigh. They are parked in a large open field, a landing strip cropped amidst the wilderness. On the right, there’s a small concrete cabin with a metal door. The keys are in the ignition and Hannibal is not in the car.

Cold returns in that abrupt, rapid-fire way only panic knows how to kickstart. So this is how it ends for him. Not with a bang but with the whimper of a starting engine and late-night radio, the puttering of a lonely drive back into a long life of hard drinking and organ failure.

Fuck.
Will lets his face fall into his hands, takes a mouthful of country air, rough with too much oxygen. He hears crickets and cattle, summer deep in the southern gallows.

In the distance, a teakettle hisses. Will turns to look out and suddenly Hannibal is there, by the passenger window, as soundless as a ghost and as elusive as one as well.

Will is assaulted by the thought, its teeth sinking into his heart: that for a man so carnal there’s an absurd lack of weight to Hannibal, his presence always barely within reach. Just now, standing close enough for Will to touch, and yet remaining as aloof and opaque as he did when he was in the wind or hiding under a tailored suit.

Maybe that’s at the core of what drove Will away from this, whatever this is. Will can never fully grasp, pin Hannibal down. And that perceived inability renders Will not just susceptible to be heartbroken; it makes him a great candidate to be replaced, erased, left behind.

How do you keep a creature science has yet to categorize? How do you hold down his interest when not even his body seems to carry any gravity?

From his vantage point, Will can only see Hannibal hands. They flex once before he says evenly, “I made tea.”

His feet remain noiseless as Will tracks them back to the concrete house. Morosely, Will struggles to unbuckle his seatbelt. Only then does he notice the extra layer of fabric thrown over his chest, trapping the warmth in. It shines red and black under the full-moon, the herringbone pattern infuriatingly unchanged after all the bodies it touched.

Blanket under his arm, Will wobbles towards the cabin, exhaustion and hunger catching up with him. His feet burn with blisters, the relentless heat of baked earth rising under his shoes. He will soon faint, awareness stretching dangerously thin when he leans against the front door.

The converted shack is so compact it barely holds the essentials: a cot, a vinyl couch, a narrow corridor where a hotplate and a mini fridge are stacked next to a row of cabinets. It reminds Will of their Pennsylvania cabin, the smell of braised meat suddenly too vivid in his nostrils. His mouth waters and the world fades to black for a moment.

The rush of hard floors never comes. When he open his eyes, Will is nestled on the crook of Hannibal’s neck. His face is averted to the side. Will can feel the strain on Hannibal’s muscles all along his shoulder, arm and hip, on the side where he is bracing to keep Will upright. He can smell him too, forceful and sweet, a cross between popcorn and copper. It makes Will’s eyes tear up, his knees go weak at the joints. He missed him, missed their bodies together.

Will sets to say “thank you,” but his mouth presses against Hannibal, at the delicate junction where his vocal cords are kept safe. Hannibal releases him so quickly, Will sways against the wall, trying to find support where support has been revoked.

Hannibal moves fast, but not fast enough that Will can’t notice the twitching in his nose. Displeased, perhaps even affronted. The gesture, likely involuntary and abysmally ephemeral, pierces through Will with more devastating depth than any bullet or blade ever did.

Will slides down the wall and settles on the concrete floor, blanket loose around him. He regards Hannibal shuffling around the kitchen, pouring tea into two standard white cups. No sugar, no milk, though Will takes his sweetened and Hannibal knows it. Good manners, Will imagines, are all that keeps him from denying Will a cup. Will is too wrung out to put any stock in good manners.
So when Hannibal bends to place the tea by his feet, Will grabs his wrist. Instinctively Hannibal pulls back, careful to shelter his body from Will’s. It hurts in the way happy photos of a past lover hurt: spiteful and bereft, like you were shortchanged in the lottery of life.

“You brought it from Maine,” Will shakes the blanket, incapable and uncaring of keeping a certain briskness from his voice.

“Yes,” Hannibal admits blankly. He denies Will his eyes much like he withholds affection: with purpose and willful indifference.

Will laughs darkly, “I left it for you once. In the barn.”

The desire to stiffen his grip on Hannibal’s wrist takes Will by surprise. It’s a vicious thing, ugly and full with fangs.

“You probably don’t remember,” Will adds conversationally. He imagines he can hear Hannibal’s bones crackle like pine-needles, hairline fractures seismically spreading under his fine skin. He presses harder. “I thought you didn’t want it. You didn’t take it with you.”

Hannibal shifts under Will’s fingers, both knees coming to rest on the ground. Neither of them is under the pretense Will’s grip is keeping him in place.

“I remember,” he says at last. “I couldn’t have kept it then.”

“Why not?,” Will asks and immediately regrets it.

“It smelled like you,” Hannibal replies simply. He breaks Will’s hold with a mere tug. Will had stopped putting force in it anyway.

Will wants to ask, “and now? can you keep it now?,” but doesn’t because he cannot predict Hannibal’s answer.

Instead he remarks, “You came back. To Tennessee. You could have driven away. You had a new car, a new look, clearly you were planning to get away. But you came back. Why did you?”

Hannibal rubs his wrist absently as he scrolls through a cell phone. From the floor, he looks impossibly tall and impossibly solitary, a centennial tree with exposed roots and a hollow for a heart.

Without removing his eyes from the screen, Hannibal says, “I worried that you were cold.”

Will’s heart clenches around the memory of another time when cold had been invoked as a good as any excuse to keep them tangled in bed a minute longer.

“I was,” Will admits, his voice fraying. It is so striking, the memory of damp skin, bare chest on bare back, slotted legs and spent cocks, that his gut aches with the probability of never having it again. “Hannibal—”

Startled, Hannibal looks up, as if his name on Will’s lips held the urgency of a command. Will takes the opportunity to reach out, right palm up, a new plea and another echo. The last time he asked for Hannibal's hand, Will’s were bloody from a shared kill. Not much has changed. There's blood on their hands now, though the only wounded are themselves.

Hesitation clouds Hannibal's brow for a moment, warps the corner of his mouth as he hems in his emotions. Will knows his tells so intimately now, they have ceased to be tells and just became
endearing lampposts, a searchlight over stormy seas.

When Hannibal finally proffers a hand, Will holds on to his wrist and hauls himself up, close enough to see the stubble on his chin, charcoal around his mouth. His breath smells of resin and apple, a hint of lemon from the tea. Petrol at the tail-end, and blood. Always blood.

Now that he got it, Will doesn't let eye-contact go, not even as he leans in. Hannibal remains ramrod still. Will can feel the tension pinning him together like steel nails on a bridge. It’s not hostility, but it’s equally sharp and defensive. Will traces the nodes in his spine, thinks of kissing each and every vertebra under his skin.

He is dimly aware that Hannibal doesn’t want this, doesn’t want to be touched in his way, and yet Will cannot stop himself from smearing against his mouth once, twice, short and soft brushes, corner, bow, corner, the dimple under his lower lip, the middle of his chin. Will feels his eyes flutter shut, his fingers grow wet and warm around Hannibal’s wrist.

“I love you,” he breathes against the long line of his lip, noses barely touching. He presses a hand against his chest, as final and deliberate as if he clamped a gushing artery. Hannibal's heartbeat remains dismally steady, so Will repeats, fingers digging in the scar on his wrist, “I love you. From this life to the next, I love you to madness, to distraction, to the end.” Will kisses both his cheeks, his forehead, hands shaking as they move to clasp at his shoulders, “I love you, Hannibal. Please—stay with me.”

The push against his elbows, firm at first and then borderline aggressive, does not come as a surprise but it stings nonetheless. When Will opens his eyes, Hannibal is five feet away, riffling through a kitchen cupboard and turning the hot plate on.

“I will prepare a light dinner,” he announces dismissively. And then, as he empties a box of pasta into a pan, “The charter plane will be here at noon. I left the keys in the car. You can keep it as you may need it. Unless—” he does not finish, but nor does he have to. Will fills in the blanks just fine: “unless someone else is coming to pick you up.”

Sighing heavily, Will sits on the edge of the cot. He takes off his shoes only to find his feet red and weepy. The linoleum knife rests on the nightstand next to Hannibal's burner phone and tea. The tea is almost untouched. The knife is folded up, like a closed chapter, a finished book. Resolved, Will thinks sadly.

When he wakes up, his feet are blissfully cool and moist. He peers down his body to find them dressed in gauze, the herringbone blanket once more strewn over his chest. His uneaten plate of food is gone.
The cabin has no windows, so Will cannot tell if it’s still nighttime. It sure feels like it. After a brief internal debate, he decides to glance around and search for Hannibal.

A line of metallic precision, he lies on his back on the couch, the phone nestled on his chest, hair fallen all to one side. He has changed to tailored slacks and a white button-down, but his feet remain bare. There is something so peaceful about him, almost comically fantastic, like a princess in a fairytale waiting to be kissed awake by true love.

Will shakes his head and slips out for a cigarette. He never thought he would fall back into it, but if there is a time to revisit bad habits this may very well be it.

Sprinkled with dawn, the night feels windy and sweltering. They are in Louisiana now. Will knew it for a while but he is finally ready to acknowledge it.

Standing in a starburst of smoke, Will surveys the abandoned airfield and weighs his options.

There must be a price to pay for nicking a sociopath's pride, a band to bind a monster's bleeding heart.

He wonders if Abigail will be waiting for him on the other side.
“I don’t know what to do with you.”

Hannibal stopped toweling his hair, nose flaring minutely as Will burst through the front door. The thought that he had to shower twice in one night to rid himself of Will’s scent lights up in the back of his skull. It hurts like electrocution does: alarmingly sharp and then breathlessly dry.

Will steps closer, feet bare and bound, palms up and open.

“I—,” his hands gyrate in the abstract space between their bodies, “—don’t know how this works out. We just run away? We share a house, a bank account? You go off to fuck other people?”

Hannibal, damp and only wearing a towel around his waist, stares him down, eyes narrowed and startlingly empty. Once more Will is taken aback by how paradoxical his body appears: substantial in breadth and brawn, but still defying permanence, gravity. All it’d take was one sudden movement and he would be out of reach again.

Maybe he was lightning after all—a force to be reckoned with, but not one that could be seized, held, kissed. Not without burning your mouth to cinders.

Breaking into motion, Hannibal clicks his tongue and tilts his head away. “Whatever this is,” he huffs under his breath, making the words sound offensive, dirty.

Will struggles not to throw his hands up in the air. “Fine. This relationship. This tragedy of epic proportions. This—,” Will restrains himself from using the word ‘affair.’ “This fallout,” he says instead. “What do you want me to say? I don’t know what this is! I just know I’m in it,” he pauses, trying and failing to catch Hannibal’s eye. “You hear me? I am in it.”

A perfect marble statue, Hannibal busies himself with applying aftershave and assessing his hair in an oval wall mirror. Will can see the muscles ripple in his naked back, seemingly unbreakable and yet latticed with scars and burns.

“Perhaps it is only so difficult to know what ‘to do with me,’ as you so crudely put it, because the removal of your makeshift family rendered it impossible to cast me as the monster you must protect them from?”

Grammar suggested a question mark at the end of that sentence; Hannibal’s voice, however, placed a scathing final stop. “Can’t keep the monster in the closet anymore, play with it only when life gets dreadfully dull, can you, Will?” He turns away from the mirror, abruptly facing Will. Buried in shadows, his eyes look cruel and cold, cut in cadmium and lead, poisonous heavy metals. “How difficult that must be for you indeed—good, loyal Will. How terribly, terribly difficult.”

Will holds his gaze for a moment, heat suffusing him from groin to cheek, traveling by way of his hands which had gnarled into fists. He barely manages not to bare his teeth. Peace can’t be conquered with swords, he remembers, the expression coming to him in Abigail’s chirping voice. Obediently, he averts his eyes.

Will lets the silence stretch until it becomes downright oppressive. Then he presses on, “Well? Do you know what to do with me?”

That catches Hannibal’s attention. He considers Will closely, fingers poised under his chin. Something must be amiss because his gaze quickly turns into a glare. Eye contact sours into an
unbearable, unnerving thing—a boxing match.

Will clears his throat. They have tried to conquer love with knives and that didn’t work either. Will consciously attempts to flatten his voice when he says,

“I am sorry, okay? I am.”

Hannibal pivots back to the mirror, preening. “And what exactly are you sorry for, Will?”

Will shifts on his feet, frustration rising. Deep breaths, he tells himself, deep breaths.

“That pain is the only language we seem to know. No, not pain,” Will amends. “Distrust.”

Hannibal scoffs slightly at this, turning to the clothes laid on the cot. A cerulean shirt, black trousers, fine leather shoes. Will wonders if he sat on the couch listening in, waiting for the car to start, for Will to disappear into the night, before deciding to wash himself off the muck which had festered between them, the mud Will had trailed into his nearly pristine life.

Emboldened, or perhaps desperate, Will takes another step forward. The cabin grows immediately smaller when their breaths fall in sync. They take up too much space when they are close together. Their footfall alone could burn a man down.

“Hannibal,” Will calls softly, a fistful away from grazing the small of his back. Hannibal turns and Will keeps his upturned palm between them. The reddish scar on his ring finger points accusatorially, plaintively, at Hannibal’s ribcage. He holds Will’s gaze again, and this time Will feels found out, scorched open. He lets it happen, let it scrape over him. So much anger on the surface, followed by a scum of indignation, but deeper, an undertow of surprise, hurt, and deepest of all, loneliness. That Will could breach so far with so little has both of them dumbfounded.

Outside, the wind picks up, wilding, threatening a summer storm.

Hannibal’s eyes flicker down, and for an instant, his mouth goes slack and his shoulders slump forward, a bird about to take flight.

“You kept it,” he whispers, awestruck, and hope—elusive, feathery, stubborn weed—spurts in Will’s chest, ropes all the way down to his toes because only Hannibal would phrase it in such a way. Not “you took your wedding band off,” but “you kept my scar” instead.

“Of course,” Will swallows, eyes on his outstretched finger, “Of course I did.”

Will could see the struggle blow over Hannibal: eyes blinking, fingers fidgeting with the knot of his towel, breathing hitching only to be expediently reigned into a flawless cadence. He struggled against his best impulses—to stay remote, impassive, detached. Will knew all about those instincts. Intimately.

Will could smell the struggle on him too, sweat blooming under the bland soap, and something tangier, not the acidic stench of fear but—Will looks up and sees it then, the blood welling on his bottom lip where he bit down hard.

“Hey,” Will can’t help touching him then, just a single fingertips brushing against his cheekbone. “Look, we shouldn’t—” There is more to say, he has mapped it carefully while finishing his fifth cigarette on the airfield, but it goes all up in smoke when Hannibal's hand clutches Will’s hip, his tongue around Will’s knuckle. Teeth dig on the sealed cut, threatening to reopen it. Will moans, lost somewhere between gasping and screaming.
Suddenly, Will is pushing them to bed, kissing him roughly, tugging at his towel and crawling all over his body with such a single-minded determination it gave the storm racking up outside a run for its money. Will feels Hannibal grow hard under his body, skin and hair slippery with bathwater and sweat, and his mind spins out, nearly short-circuiting with relief. They still have this; their bodies still know each other by touch alone even through the bleakest night.

It lasted a moment too long, Will rushing in too fast and too eager to keep his wits about him. Suddenly, it was all splayed open, ripped bare, how much he wanted Hannibal, how far he would go to keep him because of how excruciating it was to lose him. It was heady in a mercilessly vulnerable way and hence why, when Hannibal put his hands on his chest and shoved him, Will couldn’t stop falling, on a delay and on a loop, down down a sunless sinkhole.

In the end, Will is left on the bed alone, Hannibal efficiently stepping into his black trousers two feet away. Will gazes up at the ceiling. Still blank, still unforgiving. Deep breaths, he reminds himself, deep breaths.

Perched on his elbows, Will regards Hannibal, bare chested, lacing up his leather brogues. From that angle, in the harsh halogen lamp, Will can track every mark carved in his skin, old and new: the cut in his face, the brand on his back, the bullet wound on his side, the fading gashes on his chest.

“Everyone gets to leave a mark on you,” Will breathes out, falling back to the mattress. He wonders if there would be any use in voicing the unspoken.

As usual, Hannibal decides for him. “But yourself?,” he observes as close to neutral as a monster can manage when he too is in the throes of wilding.

Slipping into his linen shirt, he is once again the Baltimore psychiatrist, immaculate and shrewd. It wounds Will somewhere inside, dull and bright, as if he had let glass shards slip through his fingers.

“Sometimes the deepest scars are not the ones we wear on our skin, Will,” he adds with finality. “You better than anyone should know that.”

Will sighs. The ceiling looms closer. “Yeah, but even electric shocks leave a char behind. And that’s a hell of an unstoppable force.”

“Is that what you wanted, Will? To stop my heart?”

“I would have been content with owning it.”

“Then you should feel more than accomplished,” Hannibal retorts while polishing his gold cufflinks. “You didn’t just own it. Eventually you incinerated it.”

Will scoffs at that, humorlessly. “If there were ever a phoenix Hannibal, it would be you.”

“You sound very sure of yourself.”

“Not at all,” Will flings back, forearms crossed under his head. “I am very sure of you. Obsession is a form of resilience. It will keep you through the flames.”

“And what are you in this scenario? The match-striker? Or a curious gawker?”

“Be never said that I can’t enjoy a good bonfire,” Will muses, a somber grin playing over his mouth, pulling at his scarred cheek. “But I don’t think I’m either. At best, I can be the fire, but the
ashes and the rising are all on you.”

The wind thrashes against the metal door, its howl more urgent. Will wonders if flying a small charter plane is still on the table. An idea blooms unbidden: Hannibal trapped with him in that concrete bunker for days, years, simmering and sparring. Will smiles crookedly, pained by a twinge of longing. Sometimes all you can hope for is the best of the worst of times.

Hannibal exhales heavily, measured, before he declares, “This is not sustainable, Will.”

Yeah, you tell me, Will thinks to himself, shoulders starting to ache with the turn of weather. The words, soggy with rancid history, slouch in Will’s brain.

“Is that why you stopped me?,” he asks impulsively. “Right now on the bed?”

Fully dressed, Hannibal picks up his phone and goes about checking it. The exquisite clothes lends him a shell, a place to hide. Will immediately wants to shred the fabric to pieces. Hannibal lives in those scars; it is the knowledge of them that makes him Will’s.

“You have a tendency to diffuse difficult emotional situations through immediate physical gratification,” Hannibal adjusts his gelled hair in the mirror. “It is facile. Not to mention tiresome.”

There is a good amount of truth in Hannibal’s statement if Will stops and regards it closely.

He doesn’t.

Instead, he sits up and assesses Hannibal. Handsomeness fits all his patrician angles. Will fights down the impulse to run his fingers over each jut of his body—hips, collarbone, jaw, teeth, half-hard cock—and find out if they come out bloodied.

He can’t, not anymore. That’s the thing with calling it quits: you lose agency over your object of desire. Hannibal's boundaries are all his own once again. Will can only gawk from the other side of the glass, moon over a lost foreign land.

Weakly, Will remonstrates, “You never complained before.”

“No,” Hannibal shrugs. The complex blue fabric catches against his nape, right where hair had been trimmed and dyed chestnut brown. “I thought better to, as Americans so bluntly put it, take what I could get.”

Will stifles a grim laugh, “You mean what you got wasn’t enough?”

Hannibal evaluates him over his shoulder, and briefly something else cuts through the arctic fury—an exposed vein, peach-colored and leaking. Will shakes his head, lets it fall to his knees.

“You should marry me.”

It was out of his mouth before he could curb it or over-examine it.

“I beg your pardon?”, Hannibal spun around so fast his face seemed awkwardly vacant, as if no suitable expression had been found in his superb emporium of adequate human reactions.

“You’re right,” Will tells his feet. They are mottled with dirt and mud. Blood has seeped through the white surgical gauze. “This is not sustainable.” He lifts his head slowly. Hannibal's hands catch his attention, tanned and shaking, a surgeon’s undoing. Or a killer’s. “It would also make things easier if we’re ever caught. Spousal privilege and such,” Will points out casually.
Hannibal comes animated with a sniff then. He strides away into the kitchen. “I am not interested in any form of privilege I have not earned.”

Will sighs, bone-tired. Those lovely hands flex once, just like they did before, by the car, when they had made him tea. “Hannibal you’ve earned it,” Will pleads. “I have earned it. We walked through fire and burned down entire villages for it. I suspect we’ll keep burning until there’s nothing left in us to scorch if we don’t find a sustainable way to come together.” Deep breaths. Deep. Breaths. “Hannibal Lecter—you should marry me.”

Having walked into the narrow aisle that is their kitchen, Hannibal’s back is all Will can see. It stands impeccably motionless, all pretense of aloofness and busyness set aside. “I have no use for obligation and no taste for imposition,” he proclaims at last, haughtily, though his voice holds an added string, reedy and taut. It’s hope, Will knows. It is the same pitch as that drummed by the blood in his ears.

“Oh for fucks sake!,” Will does throw his hands up that time. He jumps out of bed and draws a circle on the concrete floors before he can stop himself. His tone rises, dangles one decibel away from shouting. “I want you to marry me! I am in love with you—quite madly if that failed to be made apparent. If you leave me, I’ll want to die and I’ll want to kill you. In absolute equal measures, I should add.”

Will inhales, feels the rasp in his throat where cigarette smoke has curled too much, too often. He shuts his eyes and cajoles his body to stay still, his voice to be reasonable. “Hannibal, just marry me and vow in some traditionally binding way to stick around and not stray and be fairly good at not deceiving me, or at least do it in a way that I know you are doing it, or better yet, do it with vagaries like gifts, or acquaintances, or my taste in clothes. Just—stay put long enough that it doesn’t hurt to want you.” Another deep breath, and he adds, “Please.”

When Hannibal finally turns around, he looks stricken. Will thinks of winds flogging a weathervane. A gash on a varnished surface. One blood-drop in a tall glass of milk.

Though he is unaware of any wrongdoing, Will pulses down the impulse to apologize. His hands do what they always do when Hannibal seems in distress: they fly up, powerlessly driven forward. It dawns on Will that as much as he idolizes Hannibal's competent hands, he places an immense wishful power on his own: the power to bridge time and heal old pain and coax pleasure and understanding forth, when all they have actually done in his lifetime is flail around in the dark, groping and pushing and slamming anything that made him feel too much, too bright.

And now, here they are again, at another cliff edge, and it feels vertiginously more tenuous than it did last time. Last time, it was their bodies which had most to lose. Now they know the limits of their flesh, they have tested them against the jags of the ocean. Their emotions may not be equally resilient. One blow too many and they’ll be bleeding out on the concrete floor, shattered and completely unsalvageable.

Or, much less dramatically and much more likely, they’ll be walking away from each other, different keys in their key-chains and a feeble grasp on the lie they have been telling themselves for years now: that they have a handle on this, that it, whatever this is, is not bigger than both of them.

Because it is. It is much much bigger than both of them, and Will feels it with a force he never felt before, the force wind imposes on leaves.

He takes short but certain steps until Hannibal is within reach. The light is poor, but Will doesn’t need to see him to know him. His back is slumped forward. His eyes are glazed over, absent. His hands hover over the silver teakettle as if he had been electrocuted mid task. There’s something
distinctly painful about seeing a man like Hannibal stripped of his perfect motor control, like a lion without his mane.

Will doesn’t touch him though he wants to touch him. He knows his hands are not magical, not really. So he waits.

Eventually Hannibal blinks and swallows, both acts incredibly humanizing. Without them, he’d be a mannequin in tailored clothes. He drops his tapered hands to the counter where they stay quivering. Will sees the air fill his lungs, expand his ribcage. His head drops next, coiffed hair fanning messily over one cheek. The patch of skin on the back of his neck is revealed, pale and so delicate Will must dig his feet on the concrete floor not to bend forward and kiss it. A moment later, he would praise such restraint. Hannibal shakes his head in a precise horizontal line—once, only once— but that’s all it takes to shatter Will’s heart.

Will lets his hands fall down. He had inadvertently been keeping them up and flat as if attempting to plead defeat or soothe a wounded animal. Now, prone by his side, they feel oddly raw, as if scrubbed off of skin.

It was a wild shot anyway, he tells himself. Probably not a great idea in the long run, he tells himself. Who the hell tries to fix conflict with marriage?, he scolds himself.

It’s about ten feet from the kitchen to the front door and Will takes them all in less than ten seconds. He can hear the rain slapping against the concrete walls, the earth, the trees. If he runs, he can reach the car before getting soaked through. He looks around the room but there’s nothing of his here. He imagines that Hannibal threw away his bags after leaving him behind on a Tennessee highway. Because that’s what you do when you are trying to overcome someone: you rinse your life from them, flush out all mementos.

Will’s eyes fall to the floor by the entrance, to the slump of herringbone fabric. Maybe he could take that. It’s as close to something belonging to him, only him, as this (whatever this is) will ever allow him to save.

Distantly, Will notices his wallet lying on a table by the door. He hadn’t seen it since Maine. He picks it up. It seems deceptively light.

He has almost convinced himself to walk out of the door, when Hannibal speaks, quietly, but so very much himself that Will immediately stops in his tracks.

“I went to Georgia,” he says and Will understands.

Molly. Hannibal had gone after Molly.
New Iberia, Louisiana II

Chapter Notes

So...there are a couple more chapters than I had initially predicted (if you called it, you were right!).

Fair warning: in a couple of chapters there will be some graphic stuff, mostly violence and sex. Which really can't be told apart with these two.

As always: thank you for reading. People in the comments: you make this possible.

Ah—this chapter is a long exhale. Hopefully it reads like one!

“I went to Georgia,” Hannibal repeats, loudly this time, his body looming menacingly in the kitchen shadows. Will can only distinguish his profile, tan and gold and blue.

Awareness dawns on Will with the brightness of thunder. Like scattered pieces of a puzzle coming together all at once, he can see it clearly now: the Georgia plates in the getaway car, the new linoleum knife, the little house at the end of a winding road, pink curtains and white picket fence. Molly. While Will languished on a Tennessee road, Hannibal had driven to Georgia to murder his wife.

A monster’s wrath. If he can't have you, no one else will. Burn all the bridges, burn them to the point of oblivion, render passage back an impossible option.

Sadness clasps Will, hard. Terrible thing, a broken heart. Inconvenient and blinding, leaves the mind trashing, decapitated from reason, divorced from self-preservation.

Will gets it though. How could he not? Hypocrisy will only carry you so far. Truth is, he would have done the same if he had had the opportunity. He would have gone and killed Bedelia just for the thrill of fastening himself to his beloved again, if merely by proxy. By killing who had last laid claim on Hannibal, Will would have had him again—would have stated, in a small bitter way, “I love you still, you bastard. May all you touched while not touching me burn in hell.”

So Will lets his hand fall from the door knob and asks evenly, “Did anyone recognize you?”

Hannibal does not turn, but Will can see the rippling down his back, hear the caution in his voice when he answers, “No.”

“Do you need help hiding the bodies?”

Hannibal shakes his head.

“Good.” Will folds his arms across his chest, presses his pigeon-toed feet together. There’s more he could ask for—forensic data, gory details, explanations or reparations—but they all feel moot now, as useless as heirlooms crunched to ashes. What it’s done is done. The past is a heap of fallen leaves. You got to sweep them away to make room for the blooms.

“Good?”, Hannibal echoes, skepticism seeping through calculated primness.
“Yes, good.”

Before Will can blink, Hannibal strode back into the room, a rare movement born entirely of impulse. Will can see the frown creasing his brow, the spasm in his left hand. “Is that all you have to say, Will?”

Will shrugs, still not daring to move. Details of Molly’s untimely demise hold no appeal, nor does the distinct possibility that Hannibal drove all the way to Georgia to forge some bond with Wally. Wally, the budding criminal mind with a queer eye. The idea alone sours his mouth.

In the end, Will elects to simply answer, “I imagine it will be easier to remarry as a widower than as a divorced man.”

“What?” It’s shocking to hear Hannibal sound at a loss, the man pinned together by Japanese etiquette and Soviet discipline.

“I have no interest in marrying you under a false name,” Will clarifies. “You are marrying me. You do understand that, right?”

Hannibal cocks his head, curiosity smoothing his momentary lapse in control, anointing his long inflexible body with a warm shimmer.

“Do you?,” he retorts at length.

Will slides his hands into his pockets to conceal the jitters, “I understand just fine.” He commands his spine to relax, to assume a conversational, confident stance. “You repaid my scorn by scorning my wife. I may have decided not to keep you, but you decided to make sure she wouldn’t keep me either.”

Will walks to the cot, sits down, and begins unbuttoning his flannel shirt. His voice floats dreamily in the dim, dead space between them. “You already had her address from the dog shelter in Maine. Athens from Westmoreland is a 7-hour drive.”

Will pulls his unwashed undershirt over his head, “It’s not quantum physics, Hannibal.” His skin reeks of stale smoke and burnt rubber. Not ideal, but it must do. “It’s you. And I know you, backwards and forwards, whole and in pieces. Dr. Lecter, I will always know you.”

By the time Will unhooks his belt, Hannibal’s brow cycled through a broad spectrum of emotions, most too quick and too unfamiliar to fully set in. Mild bewilderment and mannered indifference eventually give way to plain lust. His eyes flicker from Will’s fingers to his groin, to his chest and lips, until they settle on his chin. There is a question in Hannibal’s posture, or perhaps a challenge, politely framed by the leaning of his head. Will meets it full-on, shucking off his jeans, then his underwear, until he stands naked and soft by the foot of the bed, rumpled clothes discarded on the floor, feet bound in dirty bandages.

Hannibal’s gaze gains a physical weight, a temperature and a moisture. Will raises his chin and lets him wonder. Because that’s where three quarters of Hannibal’s heat generate from: unsated curiosity. Then Will steps to the nightstand and picks up the linoleum knife. The blade slides open with absurd ease. Will presses it against his abdomen, over the old crooked scar.

“Here,” he holds the knife in place, hilt pointed towards Hannibal. An offering. “One way or another, till death do us part.”

Though Hannibal’s body presents no alteration, Will can smell his agitation, hear the rapid intakes of breath, the uncoordinated brag of his heart, those extraordinary sensory clues that Will only
seems able to pick up when in Hannibal’s orbit. Like a magnet attuned to a singular force field.

Hannibal rubs his index finger over his thumb, an involuntary attempt to steer his thoughts. It immediately makes him more human, less regal in his detachment, less impervious in his certainty. Will may be the one bare, but in that instant, Hannibal is the one on the spot.

Without dropping the knife, Will steps closer.

“Come here,” he murmurs.

Hannibal’s eyes jump from Will’s belly to his face, and either by accident or design, he complies, stepping forward until there’s only the three-inch blade between them. Will can feel Hannibal’s muggy breath on his lips, his right hand hovering over the wooden handle, hesitant until not, until all it remains is the contradictory pain and pleasure of Hannibal’s fingers splayed on his lower back, holding Will in place as the blade breaches scar tissue.

A grunt punches out, and suddenly Will is being kissed and stabbed, blood seeping out of his stomach onto Hannibal’s delicate cuffs, his mouth liquid with Hannibal’s saliva. His knees buckle, and Will knows, with striking foresight, that they are going to fall in bed together, knows it before Hannibal pushes him down onto the mattress, so disarmingly fast Will only has time to register his feet leaving the ground and the air being kicked out of his chest by Hannibal’s own weight.

For a moment, it feels like drowning all over again: the bottom of the ocean rushing in, wet pressure seizing every beat of his heart, aching and engorging each one of his organs. Will feels Hannibal’s nails, his tongue and teeth digging into his skin, sees him lap at the bleeding wound, his wide chest constricting Will’s ribcage, his stomach, pressing on his groin, and it’s that, the primal act of conquering another human being through physical contact, that throws Will back into the fray.

Will has always been aware that some part of him, uncharted and expansive, shutdown in Hannibal’s absence, broke open under his influence. What he did not dare gauging was how far death had crawled under his bones. This time he hadn’t merely visited the dead; he had begun melding into one of them. Until Hannibal’s touch ran down his body, dragging skin and hair, starting up fires, Will could not have evaluated how far he had gone into hibernation. How many layers of snow had piled up during a lifelong urgency to make himself safe, to keep his own inflammable nature under wraps.

Breathing resembles burning when Will uses his teeth to tear through Hannibal’s cerulean shirt, to mouth open his trousers until he can smell him, hot, humid, and human, that unique part of his monster that is most unvarnished. The grip on his shoulders pulses and trembles, and Will gloats how easily he can rip a monster apart with just a pointed flick of his tongue.

In the midst of licking skin and coarse hair, Will mumbles, “Are you going to kill me now?”

To which Hannibal replies, expression moonless and altogether too close, “After,” in a voice slurred thick with desire, a desire that ran steep with cruelty.

It made sense, of course, Will reasons as Hannibal nuzzles at the wound in his stomach, smears blood over his cheekbones and nose like demonic warpaint. To have Will both ways, to consume him in life as in death, in the apogee of one and the ebb of the other, to take the body and release the soul—Hannibal would ask for nothing less. After all, he could only kill Will once.

“Do it,” Will grits out as Hannibal’s hand dips between his legs and finds a brutal pace that renders Will’s mind blank, the whiteout of desert sun and southern planes.
It hurts, dry and rough, and Will can’t help whimper, “You’re hurting me.”

Hannibal, seated bruisingly across his chest, looks down and smiles, vicious in his kindness.

“I know,” he says. “You want it to hurt,” he says, and pushes a finger inside Will, equally dry and rough, until Will’s breath comes out ragged and pained. Helplessly, Will’s hips buck up and his heart stutters madly. He feels lightheaded. His skin chafes. His thighs spread open.

The room grows hot too rapidly, concrete structure absorbing their combined body heat. Will imagines the walls must weep sweat. Imagines what a peculiarly harrowing image they must cut, both disheveled, Hannibal’s exquisite shirt half ripped, pants undone and pushed hazardously down to his knees. An image of combat, on the verge of blood-soaked.

It comes to him with immense clarity that this, this violence, is part of their intimate lexicon, a lexicon that though deeply arousing is also deeply circular. They are going to loop back into it. They’ll wrench orgasms out of each other’s body, they’ll sink in the erotic haze of domination, of fusion, for a too-brief afterglow, only to re-emerge from that hostility tone-deaf to each other’s demands. They are still on a collision course, they are just taking the scenic route.

A particularly harsh thrust pulls Will back to the room, the bed, Hannibal’s ironclad weight on top of his diaphragm. It’s getting harder to breath, to think, to stay present. Hannibal knows it, knows when Will’s attention scatters away from him, can probably feel it like a physical blow.

Will reaches out and steadies his hand. Immediately Hannibal freezes—uncertain, threatened, but heartbreakingly unsurprised.

“Come here,” Will whispers again, but this time he wraps his arms around Hannibal’s shoulders, physically bringing him down to his chest, erasing the distance between them. Unusually pliable, Hannibal allows himself to be lowered and cradled, his broad shoulders folding until they fit snug within the circumference of Will’s ribcage.

By degrees, the fingers inside Will still, and it is true, Will realizes with punishing sobriety, they do fuck when being in love becomes too unbearable. Kissing the crown of Hannibal’s head, Will wants to say, “you’re safe,” or maybe more truthfully, “now that you’ve decided to kill me, you have me, all of me, forever.” Instead, what comes out is a hushed “You’re my best friend,” which for all intents and purposes sounds limp and strange.

But Hannibal, unflinchingly attuned to their parallel language, seems to catch the enormity of its meaning. Gently pulling back from Will’s arms, he straddles Will’s hips and peers down through the dark. Will tilts his head up so Hannibal can see him, see the raw animal under the surface, splayed, hungry and leaking with tenderness and abandonment, folly too, the kind of recklessness that will get Hannibal killed someday, though not today. Nor tomorrow nor tomorrow nor tomorrow, Will vows silently. If it depends on him, this monster dies by his hand or he never gets to die at all.

“Oh Will,” Hannibal breathes as if he had heard Will’s thoughts, and Will can discern the moisture in Hannibal’s eyes right before he catches the glint of the knife in his hand.

If Will could, he would deny him. But he can’t, so he shuts his eyes and topples Hannibal to the mattress, burying his face in his groin, in the bunched fabric that pools around his thighs. Let him slash my throat while I suck him off. Let him dare.

He slides Hannibal’s remaining clothes off until they lie completely naked, skin to skin, bone to bone. Will kisses him once, twice, on the crook of his hips, the root of his cock, places sharp with
secrets and salt, places where major veins hide. He thinks of biting down, relishing in the blood spurting down Hannibal’s cock and into his throat, feeding off sperm and serum. Though dizzying, the fantasy sobers him up, triggering a wave of protectiveness for this monster entrapped in a human suit, fallen prey to all its idiosyncrasies and foibles, from tooth aches to hang nails to heartbreak and old age.

The linoleum knife is still clutched in Hannibal's fist when Will says with a fierceness he did not know he possessed, “Marry me or murder me, but you can’t have both.”

The shaking under his chest catches Will by surprise as does the somewhat perplexing bellow of Hannibal laughter, a sound, Will realizes much later, that he had never heard before. His laughter, like anything else about Hannibal, has an exotic elegance, a calculated ease to it.

In an instant, Will’s back is on the mattress, Hannibal's mouth on his ear, the knife digging below his sternum.

“Perhaps I can have neither,” he muses a little too wild. Will smooths over his rhomboids, corked and ready to spring. “Perhaps you were right in wanting to kill us both, Will. Perhaps that’s the only way either of us shall ever find peace.”

That, of all things, is an idea Will finds impossible to entertain. With suspicious ease, Will flips Hannibal over, knees locking his hips, forearms caging his jaw. He can feel Hannibal’s cock pushing against his belly, the blade warming against his navel. With a shudder, Will realizes he desperately wants both inside him. If Hannibal is holding them, then they are an extension of the man he loves, and Will has become that much of a greedy lover.

“Shut up,” Will hisses, blood thrumming in his eardrums, hawking above the pounding rain, “Just —stop.” Their faces are so close Hannibal’s irises have lost color. His eyes look defiant, his mouth beaten out of shape into the inversion of a smile. His glare and sneer seem authentic, feral and indomitable. Will stares back with abandonment, his own humanity rubbed off of all gentle corners. “Just fucking admit it. You are as lost as I am.”

Hannibal’s breath stutters for a second, too fleeting to be more than a suggestion under Will’s chest. He snarls and Will can see his canines, sharp and imperfect, the Achilles’ heel of an almost inhuman man. On sheer impulse, Will runs his tongue under them, the needles in Hannibal's mouth not that different from the blade in his hand.

All of a sudden Hannibal goes limp, the fight draining from his eyes first and his fist last. His erection slackens and the curved knife clanks on the concrete floor. Empty, his right hand comes up to tentatively brush the hair from Will’s forehead. Will sags into the touch and dips his head under Hannibal’s chin, muscles relaxing painfully all around. Leaning grows into a loose embrace, and suddenly, holding each other bare and bloodied becomes the most intimate thing they have ever shared. This time there is no body but their own bodies involved, no blood but their own blood partaken.

After a long pause, Hannibal murmurs into Will’s hair, “Divining outcomes when unpredictable forces are involved is not unlike sorcery.”

Against his better judgement, Will snaps back, “So you’re admitting you don’t know what to do with me either, huh?”

With a sniff, Hannibal concedes reluctantly, “Well, it is dangerous to get all that you want.” His fingers trace geometric patterns on Will’s lower back, whorls and vectors Will imagine must be some formula for how to best revert time.
“It doesn’t have to hurt,” Will rubs his lips over a smeared nipple. It has turned brown under Will’s dried blood.

“Really?,” Hannibal observes, sounding both breathless and unconvinced. “And how would you propose that we accomplish such miracle, Will? Blood magic?”

Will grins against chest hair. “No magic. Perhaps minimal blood. Enough for a pinky promise.”

“I was under the impression such rituals only worked for blood brothers.”

Will lifts his head and pins Hannibal’s eyes. “You are my family, Hannibal,” he says dead serious. Reclined in murky shadows, Hannibal looks unfathomably lax, disturbingly intent. Will wonders if he looks the same. “For better and for worse, you’re my other half.”

He strokes Hannibal’s jawline, the nearly invisible arch of his eyebrows, “Don’t lie to me,” Will pleads, but there’s an edge to his voice he doesn’t bother concealing. “Never again. Promise me that.”

Hannibal inhales, long and deep, eyes pointing heavenward. He sounds careful and thoughtful, like a prospector in mined ground, when he rejoins, “And if I were to break such vow?”

Options flash through Will’s mind, a slideshow presentation of all the unspeakable pain they are capable of inflicting on each other. Murder, revenge, desertion, they all seem contrived somehow, window-dressing to some much simpler truth.

“I will stop loving you,” Will answers in a quiet, startled voice. There is cardinal power in giving name to the unmentionable. Somewhere along the way he had forgotten.

Ignoring Hannibal's furrowed brow, Will holds his gaze when he repeats, steady with limpid certainty, “If you deceive me again, Hannibal, I will stop loving you. You can kill me, you can chase me down, you can trap me in a box. It won’t matter. I will never care about you again.”

What Will refrains from voicing is much crueler, if not less honest: “You’ll be all alone forever with no one who knows you or sees you, the full you, in all its variegated chaos. Old age will find you bitter and bereft, and eventually you will die alone in a prison of your own making.”

Exhausted of entropy, Will skips saying all of that out loud. He presses a kiss to Hannibal’s skin instead, right above his left ventricle. For a moment, he allows himself to believe the kiss will seep into Hannibal’s bloodstream, permeate every membrane and muscle until the promise becomes second nature, becomes integral to Hannibal’s circulatory system.

Hannibal's hand comes to rest on his skull, keeping Will pressed against his ribcage. The hesitation in the gesture is as tender as ill-fitting, so Will lets himself go pliant under Hannibal’s crushing grip.

“It is human nature to protect what was hardly won, Will,” he intones after a while, entirely too rehearsed and somehow still threatening.

“Don’t bring human nature into this, Hannibal,” Will warns blandly, toes running up his ankles, cheek cradled on the divot between his ribs. “We both know we are well beyond it.”

Hannibal nods appreciatively, his grasp on Will’s skull relaxing, turning into a lenient caress. “I adore you, Will,” he admits with disarming simplicity. “Temptation to keep you will encourage me to minimize your urge to leave.”
“I will never leave. I will promise that much in return.”

The silence between them ripens, fickle with possibility. Outside, the rain whistles through tree branches. Will closes his eyes and lies his head over Hannibal’s heart. Its regular metronome is both a comfort and an affront.

“I didn’t savor Bedelia in that way,” Hannibal blurts out then, and it sounds blurted out, like the words leaped out of his mouth unannounced. Will hums. He imagines their vibration entering Hannibal’s body through his fourth and fifth ribs, puncturing a lung. Blue blood would gush into his stomach, a bouquet of oxygenated cells.

Hannibal takes a big gulp of air, disturbing Will’s scarred cheek. “When I last visited her—I didn’t savor her in the way that you imagined.”

“It doesn’t matter, Hannibal,” Will mutters into his collarbone, because it doesn’t. Not anymore, not really, not now that Will has relented—finally, completely, hopelessly relented. He can feel the ease in his flesh, the warmth radiating from the inside out as if he had been given a brand-new skin. It fits this time round. It aches and itches and glows, but it fits. Like a recent pair of shoes, like tight leather gloves, like a new lover finding his way inside your body.

But Hannibal, wary of too many battles and finger-traps, is not convinced. Will can taste the suspicion in his breath when he asks, “Doesn’t it?”

Will sighs, “Well, yeah, it does.” Relenting again because that’s the only way this is going to work from here on out. Relenting into the truth, surrendering into the savage honesty of their want. “Though you were right, of course. I can’t fault you if you did enjoy her in more than one way. It would be hypocritical of me.”

“But does it bother you?”

“Hypocrisy?,” Will deflects instinctively. And then, because he must, “Of course it bothers me. Of course it bothers me that you ever touched anyone else but me. Truthfully, I don’t think either of us wants to find out how much it bothers me.”

“And why is that, Will?”

“We prize our freedom,” Will pauses. “A scavenger hunt of dead ex-lovers would hardly be our ticket to everlasting safety.”

“Is that what you want?”

“I want the everlasting bit,” he admits. “I fear the rest.”

Hannibal smiles, overtly pleased with the double entendre baked into that last word.

“When?”, Hannibal asks. Because he can. Because he too must.

“You know why.”

“Do I?” Will can sense the smug curve of his lips.

Pushing up on his elbows, Will meets Hannibal’s gaze. Under tousled hair, his eyes are dancing, mobile like fresh tar.

“How does love feel to you?,” Will asks. “You are a psychopath. You are technically not
“engineered for love.”

“Technically,” Hannibal rejoins with a half-smile, too trained to reach his eyes.

“So how does it feel?”

“It feels—dangerous.” His eyes slide to Will’s mouth. “A liability. And a gift.”

“There you have it,” Will quips, lying back down on Hannibal’s chest. “That’s why.”

“You fear that tipping into the former will undo the latter.”

“Something like that.”

“This sounds more and more like another barter, Will,” Hannibal admonishes mildly. “And less and less like a marriage proposal.”

“Perhaps it’s both.”

A hand runs through his hair, dispassionate and on the wrong side of kind. “Must I remind you that you never committed to our first bargain?”

“And yet you went through with it anyway,” Will points out. “You are the last bride standing, after all.”

“Not exactly.”

Under the spell of Hannibal’s touch, it takes Will a moment to catch the broader significance of that particular admission. “With Bedelia and Molly dead—oh. You didn’t kill her.” Molly, he means.

“Not quite.”

What a bizarre spectacle this is, a monster running amok with sincerity. What powerful contaminant love must be in Hannibal Lecter’s bloodstream, busting out padlocks, wreaking havoc on his neatly kept secrets.

“Pity?” Will yaws at last.

“Is that a question or a response?” There’s amusement in his tone, but not without an undertow of apprehension. The bracing for disappointment, the prepping for one more round on the tug-of-war they call their brand of intimacy.

“Both,” Will answers with finality. He slides his arms around Hannibal’s waist, burrows more fully between his naked legs. It will never cease to amaze him the ease with which their bodies spread and contract to accommodate each other, how natural it comes to negotiate their biological boundaries until there’s only one being, sheathed together in separate flesh. Will nuzzles into his breastplate. Sleep tucks him close.

“You should consider yourself a free man, nonetheless,” Hannibal declares all of a sudden, his baritone rife with authority, portentous and severe.

“I have no interest in being a free man, Hannibal,” Will drawls tiredly. “I never was one. Not even when I was a recent convict collecting strays in Virginia. I was always engaged to you.”

Hannibal inhales and all the air in the room disappears. “Oh Will...”
Will cannot help scoffing at Hannibal's wistfulness, the childlike surrender so incandescent it’s nearly blinding in the walled-in darkness they are intertwined in. “You know I’ll break you, right?”

“I thought you were marrying me,” Hannibal volleys, but there is no thorn, no heat in it.

“Exactly,” Will grins.

Hannibal tips Will’s head up so he can look him in the eye when he asks, “Does it frighten you?”

“What?”

“The great unknown.”

Will shakes his head. “It’s you, Hannibal. You’re the opposite of unknown. You are more intimate to me than the palm of my hand. This is inevitable. And I don’t fear the inevitable. Not even when the inevitable is death. I think our plunge into the Atlantic already established that.”

“So it is a conditional love, yours. Till you decide again that death should do us part.”

“I am not going to kill you.” Will kisses his wrist, the one propping his jaw. “I will not allow you that grace.”

“You mean that freedom.”

“That too.”

They smile at each other. It feels utterly simple and yet horribly complex. Will shivers head to toe.

“I am rather mad about you, Will,” Hannibal says, and it sounds like a whisper but it’s not. It’s a booming scream. More dangerous still, an admission Hannibal likely didn’t think would ever come to pass his lips. Not after Tennessee.

The shriek of heavy rain dwindles, muted by the enormity of their exchange.

Will lets his smile singe at the tips, “I imagine quite mad at me too.”

“No.” At Will’s disbelieving expression, he adds, “Not anymore. Even then, it never strays far from love. I can’t begin to fathom feeling something towards you that is not, at least in part, refracted through love, Will.”

“Good.”

Hannibal cocks his head, “Good?”

“For me at least. I’m less sure about the rest of the world.”

“Do you still crave for goodness, Will?”

“I crave for you,” Will nudges his jaw, his earlobe. “Which is as close to goodness as I’ll ever get.”

Done with talking, Will moves to kiss him on the mouth. It’s like nothing they did before: deliberate, yet familiar, perfunctory but staggeringly intimate. Never in his life Will kissed a lover, a friend, a family member in this exact manner. He wonders if this is what commitment feels like—like they have all the time in the world.

Hannibal is the one to break the kiss. His eyes gleam with a rich liquidness, mineral and
uncontrollable. Will swallows, overwhelmed, and reigns his body to let it wash over him, to welcome this monster that lives inside him now.

“Would you truly wish to kill my past lovers?”, Hannibal asks. A foreign emotion flickers over his face—foreign to them both.

Without hesitation, Will flings back, “Every single one of them.”

The smile spreads to Hannibal’s eyes, wheels them into a minor bonfire. “That might be a tall order.”

“How tall?”

“I would wage twenty, twenty-five.”

Will runs calculations in his head. Ammunition, roadmaps, hunting gear, a tidy list of do’s and don’ts. It might be too late to be reasonable. He might be in too deep. Oh well. “How many are still living, you reckon?”

Hannibal shifts them slightly so he can nose at Will’s hairline. “Hmm, fourteen? Maybe fifteen?”

“How many met their fate at your hands?”

“Not an unusual high percentage,” he replies with characteristic nonchalance. “Just the occasional casualty, here and there.”

“So about twelve percent then,” Will finds himself hard and dizzy. He laps at all the hair he can find. His hands roam to Hannibal’s throat. He wants him and he wants him and he wants him, like an oil spill released in the great white ocean.

“Something around that, yes,” Hannibal mutters, the wind knocked out of him. Finally, the drum of his heart rushes under Will’s fingers. “Are you thinking of increasing that number, Will?”

Will’s thighs clench around Hannibal’s hips, their skin unbearably prickly where it joins. The heat rises from the walls again, stewy with desire, dripping with unspoken promise. Will bites into the soft tissue around his Adam’s Apple.

“Maybe,” he whispers, before language unspools into the slapping of flesh.

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They come unfairly fast, embarrassingly unsophisticated. A tug and a stroke, panting down each others necks. Will would later tell himself he didn’t care, but he did. It offered a reassuring satisfaction to come that hard and quick, to be always on such a low-grade state of closeness that not much fuss was necessary to achieve release. It was easy. Against all conceivable odds, he and Hannibal were horrendously easy.

Afterwards, they lay side by side, sticky and chilled. Hannibal falls asleep first, holding Will’s hand in a painful grip. Will kisses his scuffed knuckles, the fine scars webbing over fine bone, and pretends they hadn’t come like this. That they hadn’t held hands through it, the live-wire jolt that rocked both their bodies as they rocked against each other.

When shivers resonate against his flank, Will whispers, “Are you cold?”, and Hannibal nods softly. After Will pulls the herringbone blanket over his bare back, Hannibal nuzzles his hand. It’s a simple, likely instinctive reaction to utilitarian kindness, possibly an engineered affectation to elicit
Will’s endearment. Will doesn’t know, may never know which—and yet. He leans closer to press a kiss to Hannibal’s sleeping mouth.

Will closes his eyes then and tells himself he has to pretend for now. One thing at a time. If he doesn’t take small bites, he’ll most certainly choke on the thickness of this—*whatever this is*— well, love.
Chapter Summary

And another interlude.

You may have noticed this story works in cycles: the Moosehead cycle, the Stag Brook cycle, the Tennessee/Louisiana cycle, and here we go into the last cycle: the out-of-the-US cycle!

This story has also turned into the longest location-based slow-burn. Conversely everything that took place has happened in less than one year. Talk about entropy of the time-space continuum!

Be warned: Chapter 34 will be intense (no added trigger warnings, just tread carefully).

Now they stand side by side in the airfield, the late morning air lazy with white heat. Will can feel the soil cooked through with rainwater and rotten leafs. The blue of the sky, clear and oblong and ever-growing, is so achingly familiar Will closes his eyes to better let it suffuse him: the feeling of home, of nostalgia, of forsakenness.

His hand slides to his stomach, pressing on the new row of stitches. They are neat and sore and tender, an exact mirror of the man who put them there.

Two feet away, Hannibal is assessing him under his lashes, not covertly but not openly either. It’s a stalemate again, outside, with clothes on, under the dazing midday sun.

The air is filled with more than discernible smells. There is a nervy undercurrent not unlike that found on airport terminals and checkout counters on Christmas Day: excitement and anxiety, frustration and longing.

If he reached his right hand out, Will could touch the back of Hannibal’s knuckles, the top of his shoulders, his left cheek. He doesn’t. He isn’t sure why he doesn’t, isn’t sure it would be the right thing to do anyway. So they stand side by side and wait and look up at the sky, at the hunter-green canopy of the trees, the yellow grass patches peeking around the concrete runway.

“You never said yes,” Will observes, finally breaking the silence between them. A headache has started to form in the back of his head, which surprises him since their silence, though prolonged, has been nothing short of companionable. Will scrunches his nose. No, no noticeable change, no stench of anger or fear. The air between them is as clean as the sky after a torrential downpour.

Will feels the fingers pressing on his nape before he can register relief. Instinctively he leans into the touch, firm but somehow careful, a cross between a strict doctor and a helpful lover. The pain skirting at the inseams of his temples drains away.

“Thank you,” Will breathes out, head tilted back, eyes still closed. His lungs fill with a sweetness he can’t quite place.

“My pleasure,” Hannibal replies politely, letting his hand fall back to his pocket.
Will points at his bandaged feet, brand new gauze peeking over beaten sneakers, “For everything.”

Hannibal nods absently, gaze lost on an invisible point in the horizon. The inside of Will’s right elbow itches, the place where he woke up to an IV dripping fluids into his undernourished body. Give the devil a mile and he will take your whole life.

It didn’t bother Will. He’d given his body over to Hannibal years ago, though the offer had only been formalized in recent weeks. If it was up to Will now, there would be no more boundaries between them. They would tourniquet their arms together and hook each other’s veins to the same cannula until their blood flowed back and forth in their hearts and no forensic test could ever tell them apart.

Will did not commit often, might never have genuinely committed before, but now that he did, it struck him how formidable his determination was, what a strong grab it possessed. He was all in. There was no place where Hannibal could hide now. If he tried, Will would hunt him down and seize him and suck him dry until Hannibal was all his, until no molecule of him existed without Will’s name on it.

It turned out Will was every bit a monster as Hannibal was, if of a different ilk. Will’s appetite bore a special single-mindedness that held as much rapacity as it did viciousness. With no storm left unweathered, Will found himself amply confident in his hunger, in his capacity to feast on one fruit forever—always ravenous, never satisfied. That’s what surrendering to Hannibal had cracked open for Will: an endless reservoir of certainty, crystalline and cutting, wet and salty. Now death was but a consequence, and the devil a meek consort.

There is a muffled purr in the distance and suddenly the placid Louisiana air kicks up and about under the wheels of a small plane. Hannibal raises his hand and waves. The white button-down rides up and Will can see the linoleum blade gleaming against tanned skin. Without thinking, he runs his fingers over the knife’s edge, then the band of Hannibal’s black trousers, dipping under the tailored fabric to graze his tailbone. There’s a bite mark there, tender and raised, depressed by Will late last night or maybe early that morning. Who’s keeping track anymore? (Will is).

Hannibal breaks out in goosebumps but his demeanor remains otherwise immaculate, turned away and ramrod straight watching the plane land. Will licks his thumb with a smacking sound and smooths the prickled skin with his saliva. He lets his thumb linger over the bruise only long enough to stir a low-grade ache.

This is Will’s monster now and he will very well have him know it every time he may seem prone to forget.

Hannibal slings an overnight leather bag over his shoulder and moves away as if Will had not just kissed him with his finger. With sleeves rolled up and sweat beading his forehead, he looks every bit the part of an urbane traveler: European, overindulgent and over his head. That contracted pilot is in for a rude awakening, Will thinks with amusement.

Will is always amused now, brutally and distractedly amused, like an old god in search of passable entertainment. Hannibal, on the other hand, is coiled away, shutdown tight around himself like a castle on a moot, all bridges drawn in. Will wants him and wants him and wants him. Wants him enough to drown them both in it. Wants him enough to carry them both through.

Hannibal too is in for a rude awakening if he is expecting Will to cut ties and make a run for it. Or to hunker down and let Hannibal take charge. There’s a hunger in Will now that makes his skin crawl, as if blood ran too hot not to simmer through his pores. No mastering can ever be achieved once that kind of quicksilver has been spilled.
Will tracks Hannibal as he walks ahead to greet the pilot in khaki fatigues. The swaying curve of his hips, the slouched debonairness of his shoulders, the high-pitched lilting of his voice, every inch the clueless middle-aged tourist.

Will wonders, with a force that will never stop startling him, how it would feel to be inside that body, if it’d be any different from penetrating the cowboy’s body, or the psychiatrist’s body, or the Ripper’s body. If he’ll be ever able to fuck them all or if Hannibal will keep them nicely partitioned from Will’s grasp, as much as he has kept himself from Will through the denial of that simple sexual act. They have touched each other so intimately and yet that, that they have never done, Will realizes with something akin to shock. For men who revel in barreling through each other’s boundaries, on piercing each other deep and hard, fucking had been surprisingly noninvasive. Maybe, Will reasons, they had tried to keep an aspect of their intimacy private. Maybe, Will muses, they shouldn’t.

The pilot smiles around his red beard, beckoning Will over. Feral still, newfound amusement be damned, Will lingers around the concrete shack, feet hesitant with old blisters and new abrasions. Will’s lower body is steeped in fresh flesh wounds: scratches, tears, bruises. Hannibal made sure of it, that it would show—on his gait, on his grimace—that Will too was a kept monster.

The glance Hannibal gives him over the pilot’s shoulder says so many things at once that Will must take a moment to consider them all. Mostly, there’s tight-lipped annoyance and exhaustion, lined by a heft of apprehension.

Will realizes that he hadn’t said yes either. That Hannibal could still expect him to leave on the parked Toyota instead.

Will walks over with as much determination as his injuries allow, making small talk about kit planes and ultralight aircrafts as he goes along. The pilot laughs, raucous and evidently at ease with Will’s gruff manners, and Hannibal’s grip on the leather bag relaxes a fraction. That and his subtle sneer are all him, not the man he is pretending to be. Will barely restrains himself from kissing him on the mouth right there and then, as they climb into the Cessna’s claustrophobic cabin.

It’s hot already, and their clothes stick where they are pressed together, knee to hipbone, shoulder to elbow. Hannibal remains turned towards the cutout window as Will continues to chitchat about mechanical trivia over the engine’s whirr. Hannibal’s hands are folded protectively around the bag on his lap as if it contained a treasure, and not a motley of fine shirts and shoes, high-priced tanning sprays, hair gel, and an antique shaving kit.

As with so many other things regarding his monster, Will knows better now. In the hour that took them both to shower and pack, Will had seen Hannibal circle the herringbone blanket, twice pick it up, once drop it on the cot, then fold it, and after stitching Will up, dovetail back, tease at its haggard fringes while checking his phone, only to relent and slip the huddle of red-and-black wool into his bag.

Will made no note of knowing this. It seemed impolite at the time, borderline petty.

Somewhere over the Gulf of Mexico, sweat rendering both their linen shirts transparent, Will leans in and whispers in Hannibal’s ear, “I want you every day, every way, until we die.” He moves away to check for the pilot on the rearview mirror. Satisfied that his eyes are still on the path ahead, Will leans back in and adds, “After you marry me.”

True to his nature, Hannibal rests absolutely still, controlled and poised in every motion but the bobbing of his Adam’s apple. A faint red impression there reminds them both of how much force Will’s mouth can have, what an effective conduit for expressing his willfulness his teeth can be.
Once they land in a private airfield in a deserted Cuban clearing, all palm trees and humid foliage, Hannibal smiles an open-mouth smile that looks too big for his fine-boned features. Will takes hold of the leather satchel and steps back, but not too far as to risk occluding his view. Contrary to Will’s presumptions, Hannibal does not carve the pilot with the linoleum knife, but neatly breaks his neck mid-sentence, the swift crunch of bone disappointing when contrasted with Will’s imagined rivulets of blood snaking down Hannibal’s broad chest, soaking his seersucker shirt, his long lips, his lovely lovely surgeon hands.

Now that Will thought of having him, having him in a way that he could enter his body and stay inside him for a long as they both could take it, no other thought seems worthy of lengthy attention. Only now—in no-man’s land, between his home turf and foreign ground, as a quasi-fugitive and an almost free man—can Will admit that he wants another man, another human being, like an animal would want another of his species: with reckless and blinding desire, unrelenting and utterly natural.

Hannibal positions the dead man’s body in the cockpit. He seems peaceful, as if caught in sleep. Will’s gaze pans to Hannibal and finds himself scrutinized with a mixture of efficient blankness and jaded alertness. Hannibal is vaguely angry, Will suspects. Or perhaps unsettled. Unsettledness would infuriate Hannibal more than any unpleasantry ever could.

Will throws him a wink and a slow smile. He offers the bag up. “Come and get it,” Will drawls and almost laughs out loud at the looseness of his own tongue, how loopy his muscles feel under the juicy Cuban heat. With measured steps, Hannibal walks over, eyes locked on Will’s, probing. The shape of his body, the fall of his instep are clinically precise now, cold to the touch. This, Will chuckles fondly, this is his monster. This frozen lake teeming with unpredictable liquid currents, that is the man he loves.

Hannibal stops inches away, the tawny bag hanging between them. He gives Will a long once-over, as if for good measure, for insurance, or maybe, hopefully, for safekeeping.

When he seems mildly satisfied, Hannibal tosses his messy bangs to the side and asks in a surprisingly earnest voice, “What is behind this sudden obsession with marriage, Will? I’ve always considered you an an island upon himself, adverse to such trite social conventions as civil unions and public rituals.”

Will recognizes the question for what it is before he can come up with a kind-worded answer. “You are not Molly.” He lets the bag fall to the dusty ground, barely missing Hannibal’s brown brogues. He keeps his eyes on Hannibal’s, his smile loose and rueful, “I don’t want you to be my spouse.”

Though his lips tense, Hannibal’s cadence remains perfectly neutral when he retorts, “Then you have lost me, Will.”

“Oh the contrary,” Will reaches out to stroke the stubble on his cheeks. They are salt-and-pepper now, more grey than white. “I have found you. And now I’m going to keep you.” He leans in further, until sound is a mere suggestion of vibrating air, “I don’t want you to be a crutch or a stand-in, Hannibal. I want you to be mine.”

Hannibal pulls his head away. “You wish to brand me, Will? Surely there are less conservative and more imaginative ways of doing it than—”

“I want to make you mine,” Will interrupts with a fury that warps his words. “I want you to take my name. I want you to take my life.” I want you I want you I want you, chants wildly in his head.
Their foreheads touch, and Will grips Hannibal’s skull between his thumbs. It feels fragile, somehow, right there behind his ears. Breakable.

“A leash then,” Hannibal whispers into Will’s mouth. They are both breathing heavily, their faces as close as their bodies are kept apart by the bag between them.

“Not a leash,” Will hisses. “A legacy. You are all the family I’ll ever have. This is the only way I can give you access to me after I’m dead or gone.”

Hannibal shakes his head once. Again, only once. “You are not going anywhere I won’t follow, Will.”

Will swallows his air, the salt of his sweat and the zing of his agitation. The sweetness in it is growing stronger, more mouthwatering.

“We can’t be sure,” Will fires back. “Not anymore. If I’m gone, I want you to keep me. I want you to be mine. To have a claim on me—on the record, in the flesh. On a tombstone.” Sucking a breath in, Will lifts his arms and snares them around Hannibal’s neck, forcing him to draw closer still. He can catch a whiff of the pilot’s scent on him, boozy and stringent, like bleach. “Just say yes, Hannibal.”

Hannibal leans in to press his mouth to the bridge of Will’s nose. “Perhaps someday,” he rushes out. “But not now.”

That’s his monster, Will thinks, torn between kicking him and fucking him to the ground. That’s the man I chose, sadistic and kind, Christmas Day and airport terminals all rolled up into one.

Stepping back, Will points at the fallen bag. “Pick it up,” he says. “You are going to need that blanket. It’ll be cold for you tonight.”
Cuba–Morocco

Chapter Notes

From the top deck, the stars hang like jewels stuck to black velvet. Will is reminded of a poem Hannibal once quoted to him, late into the night, the air burning with firewood: “I found it. What? The eternity. It is the sea mingled with the sun.”

The navy-blue sky over the Atlantic is as precious—in scope and silence and precision—as that little verse Hannibal quoted from memory in Baltimore, years and years ago. Will pushes his chest farther into the iron railings, takes the crisp surf in, and sighs. A dull pain lingers even in the quietest hours, when all the other cruise-ship passengers are either asleep or burrowed in the billiards bar. It’s a feeling of wastefulness, of malcontentment Will should be well acquainted with and thus resigned to by now. But as with all the setbacks in his life, Will can only swim upstream, battling against the incoming tide.

It might be a form of cabin fever, the result of days of sailing in the company of hundreds of rambunctious drinkers and overeager middle-aged gamblers. They are purloined letters here, in the open sea, hiding in plain sight. Spat out once by this ocean, now visitors with counterfeited identities. Sebastian and Alexander, their passports dictate. A saint and a conqueror with different last names. Different styles and personalities too, so different no one would ever imagine they came together as a pair, that they existed in the same time-space continuum, let alone the same life.

Maybe they didn’t, Will reasons, turning on his back to admire the bejeweled Mediterranean sky. The blues are deeper here, angrier.

Like a faded Polaroid, Will replays a slide of Hannibal in a silver and black pinstriped suit, his hair grayer and trimmer, his skin darker from constant sun. Only it is not a memory, it’s a snapshot from earlier that evening.

How quickly he had gone back to his old ways in this new life.

As soon as they landed in Cuba, Hannibal had handed Will his forged documents and disappeared into bespoken two-piece suits. Like a Macedonian emperor, he too always appeared attired in amour. Gunpowder and steel, rust and oxblood, Hannibal lived in that color-story now.

Whoever Hannibal’s Alexander was meant to be, he surely did not exist in the same historical period as Will’s Sebastian. In Cuba, as Hannibal spun lighter, Will grew bleaker. All of his fine shirts, his dozens of tailored trousers and scuffed loafers, were black. His socks were black and his underwear was black. Will dressed like an undertaker, a shopkeeper once noted slightly uneasy. He felt like one too. Not grieving, but too close to death to partake in human life. He let his beard and hair grow out, curl wildly until he could pull it back in a tie. His eyes became a shade darker, cobalt blue, he noticed one morning in the bathroom mirror. If a consequence of his full beard or the lack of sunshine, Will could not tell.

Hannibal asked him out a polite number of times, but Will simply had no interest in the outside world, particularly a place as vibrantly alive as Havana. The colors hurt the part of him which had always resented joyfulness. As did the hyper energy of the people, the tourists, the weather itself. Sebastian, fair-skinned and dressed in mourning, never saw Havana by day. He walked and walked alone through nocturnal streets clogged with late-August heat, trying to exorcize the sense of wastefulness that so heavily sat on his stomach.
Many of the buildings reminded him of Wally. Twice he was sure to have spotted the boy, wavy-haired and two feet taller, weaving through the throngs of inebriated youngsters. It was never him, naturally, but Will thought of Wally frequently, one could even say obsessively. No good reason for it that Will could find. But then again, there was a lot Will couldn’t account for anymore, a specter of unreality that his Sebastian should have been comfortable with—him being a martyred saint living with an amour-strapped prince and all—and yet, Will, the Will Graham from Louisiana, with rough hands and a scarred cheek, that man was thrashing with confusion. And anger.

Is anger really the right word for it?, Will wonders as Hannibal’s voice (still his own, regardless of put-on affectations) cuts through the lulling din of the waves, comes closer and closer until Will is forced to stop looking up and deign him with a glance, that beautiful travel companion of his, dashing with his platinum wristwatch and gold-threaded pocket square, a man he hasn’t touched in almost three weeks but by all empirical evidence and batted-breath whispers of Cuban socialites must be made of flesh and blood in addition to all the precious metals he adorns himself with, that man who Will doesn’t know anymore but still knows better than himself, that man halts delicately in front of him, smiles a warm smug smile, and asks, “Would you like to retire for the evening?”

Immediately Will wants to say yes because he misses him, misses every part of him, from his severed toe to the ghost of his breath, the texture of his scars, the least smooth parts of his body.

But Will can’t. Not because he is playing coy or hard to get or hiding from his basest desires. Not at all. It’s just that this man leaning on the railings next to him, crossing the Atlantic by his side, is not the monster he loves. This man, suave and amicable, never calls him by his birth name and when he does, he stops himself as if he regretted it, as if he wished to swallow Will’s name back into his mouth.

Will doesn’t understand how this happened, but it dawns on him as he shakes his head and hears Hannibal glide away across the wooden deck, that this right here is why he dresses all in black and shies away from the sun and grows his hair out. He hasn’t been mourning his past life, his broken marriage or forsaken country. He is grieving the loss of Hannibal, the Hannibal he presumed he’d get once they crossed the border between before and after, life and death.

A chill crawls up from the ocean. Will looks up and the stars are still there, fixed, blunt, and frosted. Another night without sleep, it seems.

It’s just that—it boggles the mind.

Somehow the Atlantic gave Will back his monster, but elopement took his beloved away.

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The dinner car is loud with foreign languages and stuffy with no air conditioner. Hannibal, however, is in an unusually pensive mood and that makes up for the noise and the heat. Across the tiny table, he holds his head on one hand and flips the pages of a book with another, the glint of his jade cufflinks the sole focus of Will’s attention.

After the exotic greenness of the Canary Islands and Madeira, Morocco felt stunningly real. Its terracotta jaggedness soothed Will’s untethered sense of self. It’s hot still, September at full steam, but it is hot in the dirt and grime way Will can understand. Sebastian likely would hate it here, prissy and meek as he is supposed to be. But Will Graham is tired of martyrdom almost as much as he is of pool parties, pink drinks, and community games on the observation deck every day at noon. So he takes to Morocco with a vengeance, sweating happily through busy street-markets and open-air food stands, running his fingers over every lapis lazuli mosaic and worn-down wall he can find.
At the end of a day of meandering around Casablanca, Hannibal met him in the dinning room. He gave Will a curiously long look and then declared: “We should disembark here and stay behind.”

That’s how they find themselves in a night-train to Oujda.

The dinner car is stuffed with weekend travelers screaming over card games and arguing over steaming food. The noise gnaws at Will. As soon as they boarded, he had secured a stiff drink and a pack of cigarettes. Just to keep him steady.

Clockwork masked as a man, Hannibal doesn’t need any external incentive to find peace amidst the crowd. He reads with the concentration of a man who survived war. Or prison, Will supplies with a bitter smile.

Never a fan of idle talk, Will pretends to profile the people around them when in actuality he is pondering about their sleeping arrangements. Nothing changed, so there should be nothing to parse out. The standard two bunk bed in one cabin, the staple of chaste intimacy they seem to have easily fallen into. Will cannot stop looking at Hannibal’s hands, though, the distracted, slow way he licks the tip of his fingers before he moves a page, his left hand hovering for a moment as he absorbs the last words printed on the corner. What a lovely hand, Will thinks, capable of such hurt and of such pleasure. How preposterous to consider the last time Will touched those hands they were in America still, they were themselves still, they had been bare. It had seemed to last forever.

Will laughs to himself, mean and low. Hannibal immediately rises his head at the sound, a sound so discrete no one else could have picked it up in that ruckus but a predator.

Catching his eye over the rim of his glass, Will tips it in a small salute. “Cheers,” he says and downs most of the whiskey.

Hannibal cocks his head in that particularly mechanic way, the way he often did back in Baltimore. And though not new, to see that gesture on Alexander is altogether a novelty.

Will holds his gaze, head-on.

“You are in a peculiar mood tonight,” Hannibal observes at last.

Will slouches back in his seat. “Am I now?” The table is so narrow that when Will shifts, his knees knock against Hannibal’s.

Book still erect, Hannibal hums. “Would you wish to discuss it?”

“You seem busy.” Will points at the leather-bound red book.

“I don’t have to be.”

Hannibal, dressed in his casual linen suit, all creams and eggshells, seems to be perpetually inured to sweat, constantly growing grayer around the edges. It breaks Will’s heart in a way only mortality can explain. They are running out of time. To do what Will is not exactly sure, but it smarts anyway. The wastefulness of it all.

Will signals for another drink, glass propped up in the air.

“It’s nice to have you around,” Will admits, tapping his cigarette pack. He has to scream to make himself heard above the commotion. Since Hannibal became Alexander, he has become harder to read. A cluster of barbwire and gossamer, like trenches stuck with poplar flowers and ripped flesh. That’s all Will can see when he peeps inside the man across the table, the sleeping body across the
Hannibal finally puts his book down on the sticky table. It’s going to stain, Will thinks quietly. But he doesn’t say anything. It’s also nice to have Hannibal’s undivided attention for a change. Well, nice. That’s hardly the right word, but Will is done with being accurate. That would be Sebastian’s purview, the fussy bastard.

“Have you felt neglected lately, Sebastian?” His voice is Hannibal’s voice, yet the words are Alexander’s-cum-psychiatrist. It scrapes at all of Will’s raw places.

Will shrugs, opening his legs wider under the table. He bumps Hannibal’s knees, nearly steps on his Italian loafers. Hannibal doesn’t move away.

“Not really. I knew there was a risk you’d grow tired of me sooner or later,” Will pulls a plastic lighter from his pocket. “But I confess I never expected it would be this fast. Nice one, Dr. Lecter,” he mumbles around an unlit smoke, “you got me good.”

Hannibal’s eyebrows arch slightly, but otherwise his expression remains unchanged. He regards Will with the same placid curiosity he once wore in Baltimore. There seems to be no spark, no razor hidden in it. Will cannot tell if Hannibal’s theatrical skills have increased so exponentially or if Will’s ability to see through him has dulled so supremely. It’s a toss-up.

Hannibal’s nose does twitch when Will lights his cigarette. Will cocks his head in response, a crooked grin playing on his lips. A provocation. Or a dare.

Hannibal caves in first. “Must you do that here, Sebastian? It is such a disgusting habit.”

Will shrugs again, holding the cigarette away from his face, blowing a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling. He does not offer to crack a window open.

“So it’s love, Dr. Lecter,” Will holds his gaze, cigarette suspended midair. “And yet—here we are.”

Hannibal crosses his hands primly over the closed book. His eyes follow the invisible lines his fingers draw on the red leather. Will knows a stalemate when he sees one.

They don’t speak of the past any more that they call each other by their birth names. It is just not done. The past is the vault Hannibal has skinned and left behind.

Their past is all Will has that feels real now. He is shaped around the scars Hannibal gave him. Maybe Hannibal can so easily zip out that life because there’s no scars on him to remind him.

(There’s a mystery Will can’t crack, not without cracking something else in the process.)

Will lets his gaze roam the room instead, snap on people with interesting tells: the ghostly indentation of a wedding ring, the scars of a dangerous past, the nervous shifting of a graveyard of secrets. A brawny man of color, dressed in a smart lavender and blue shirt, catches his attention. He is turned away, his back strong and familiar somehow, his shaved skull peppered with grey. All Will can see are his shoulders above Hannibal’s head, compressed by the mob standing at the bar. He can feel the man watching them through the large mirrors placed behind the liquor shelves.

Hannibal’s voice, flat and demanding, brings Will back to their table.

“What?”
“I asked if love has become a matter of concern to you.”

Will shakes his head: to clear it as much as to signal an answer. The cigarette has almost burned down in his hand. He must have lost time.

“Not recently, no.” Will takes a long, deep drag. Tarry smoke expands in his lungs, mixes in with whiskey, turns oxygen malty and heavy like molasses. “You give me no reasons to.”

Hannibal shifts, recrossing his legs and leaning back in his seat. Putting distance between them. Though he can’t read this man, Will can see him plain as day.

“One would think you jealous of my recent social engagements, Sebastian.”

A glass tumbler suddenly manifests by Will’s side, amber liquid splashing when poured. Will takes a hearty swig before saying, “Sure.”

“Are you jealous, Sebastian?”

Will grins. He slips his feet out of dusty sandals and spreads them out under the table, between Hannibal’s chair and shoe.

“I don’t know what the fuck Sebastian feels, doctor, but of course I’m jealous.”

Because Hannibal seems about to put on a mediocre show of surprise, Will leans forward, folding both forearms on the table so he doesn’t have to shout. “I asked you to marry me remember? It wasn’t that long ago. So just cut the crap and stop whatever mind games you are up to now, Hannibal.”

Hannibal recedes into his chair. He looks as if Will had slapped him across the face. It’s rather amusing. Will still feels amused most of the time, only now that amusement is a hair-trigger away from something else. Anger?, Will wonders, as Hannibal pulls his chair away from the table and arranges his hands over his crossed knee. After silence stretches to the point of breaking, Will huffs a laugh. He too sits back in his chair.

“Relax, doctor. I am no little teacup anymore. I ain’t gonna shatter just because you decided to pass on me.”

Will grounds his cigarette into the red leather of Hannibal’s book. He looks up and Alexander is still there, stiff with indignation and affront, but behind it, something else. Something entirely Hannibal’s.

Will smiles almost sweetly, “I had my fair share of guys turning me down, doctor. I can live with it.”

Hannibal’s face drops for a moment, his mouth slack and eyebrows vaulted, “There were other men?”

“Sure,” Will lies. “Weren’t there some for you?”

Hannibal runs a hand over his beige trousers, carefully smoothing an imaginary wrinkle. (That’s a very Hannibal gesture, Will remarks. Sometimes there is enough of the old Baltimore mannequin to override Alexander.)

When Hannibal speaks, his voice belongs to neither. “None that I fell in love with.”
Will raises his glass for another refill, shifts his left foot so his toe grazes the exposed skin on Hannibal’s ankle. “Well, well, well there’s that pesky word again. Love.”

Hannibal abruptly directs his eyes back to Will. Will waits for him to move his leg away, but he doesn’t. Instead he regards Will with an unnerving steeliness, caught somewhere between—Will squints, but he can’t tell. His eyesight wavers, foggy and speckled.

Behind Hannibal, the black man in the lavender shirt twists to better regard them. Will still cannot get a good look at his face, blocked by the swarm of rushing costumers and the bad lighting, but there’s an aura to him, a vibration of recognition that disturbs Will. As if the man were of a different species. A fox in a den of rabbits.

“Do you feel that your expectations of love have been gored, Sebastian?”, Hannibal intones in his most tried-and-true tone. So Baltimore it is. Goodbye Alexander. It was not nice to meet you.

Will struggles to return to the flow of their conversation. He hasn’t eaten all day. The whiskey and the smokes are going through him fast, hitting him harder than usual. Hannibal looks too solid all of a sudden, too close. The cream shirt, delicate to transparency, the top buttons popped against the heat, they leave little to the imagination. Will doesn’t have to imagine anything anyway. He knows everything about that skin and no amount of sunbathing or flaying or drinking can ever erase that knowledge. His heart starts pounding so loudly he wonders if Hannibal can hear it through the yodeling and the chewing and the cackling. Will bet he does.

“I’ve been gored,” Will finally manages to punch out. “My expectations of love? Not so much.”

Hannibal leans back into the table, fingers perched against his book. He flickers the cigarette ash from its cover. A casual picture of friendly disdain.

“Never expected much to begin with?”

“Never expected it, period. You proved me wrong.” Will lifts his empty tumbler and pretends to take a swig. “Cheers!”

Curious. Having never thought of himself as kind or loving, Will had been oblivious to how much room for love his body held until all the air rushed out, leaving an oddly sagging void, so vast Will finds himself pressing against his stomach just to make sure he remains solid underneath.

It’s the alcohol, he reasons calmly. And then he hisses through his clenched teeth, “You have rendered me a ghost!”

Hannibal sighs, long-suffering and annoyed, his fingers drumming on The Miracle of Medicinal Oils: A Holistic Proposal.

Will waves a hand over the checkered tablecloth as if to sweep the misconception away. “It’s not an accusation,” he slurs. “It’s at best a philosophical problem. You had broken my heart once, you broke my heart again, you will break it in the future. As I surely will yours. In that way, it is a state of permanence, impervious to entropy.”

Hannibal tilts his head, considering. The dim lighting renders his mouth too red, too stretched out. Lewd, an opening both treacherous and inviting. As if on cue, Hannibal licks his lips and Will can’t help track the movement, his whole body leaning towards it.

“Your heart is always breaking, thus never susceptible to be fully shattered, nor fully whole,” Hannibal observes raptly, the idea clearly pleasing him.
Will’s eyes drop to the pale line on his ring finger. “Like a ghost: not definitively gone, but certainly not alive anymore.”

Slowly, Will lifts his feet to Hannibal’s lap. Hannibal sits back on his chair, quick and effortless, letting Will’s heels rest on the empty space now carved between his thighs. If Will slouched down in his seat, his toes would press against Hannibal’s crotch. What would he find there, Will wonders distantly, his mind growing detached from his body.

Hannibal’s voice reaches him like a faraway breeze, gentle and lulling, “And how does love figure into that equation, Sebastian?”

Will slumps back in his chair, back into the shadows. He keeps his feet up. “I guess the same way life does. You only truly gauge its shape when it leaves you.”

A waiter comes by, sashaying in a white wrap-dress. She cannot be more than twenty. Will thinks of Abigail and, for a moment, his eyesight blurs and he can see her, not a day older than when she died, swaying to the jaunty music in a corner of the mint-colored room. Her face is flushed like she had never been exsanguinated. He thinks of telling Hannibal about it, how their daughter never strays far from them.

Instead Hannibal speaks again, “Did love leave you, Will?”

Something in his tone smarts. Will soars forward in his chair, “Did it leave you, Dr. Lecter?”

When Hannibal doesn’t answer, Will does. “Sometimes.”

There’s more whiskey in his glass. It burns going down but Will welcomes the pain like a pro, scrunched eyes and pinched nose. His dad would be proud.

“Do you find yourself wanting?”

Hannibal’s voice is paper-thin and a mile-wide, like a cut that you tell yourself will heal without stitches but ultimately bleeds you dry.

Will sighs. He stretches his arms on the table and puts his head on the crook of an elbow. A migraine is flirting with his bone, crumbling the forts he made for Sebastian.

“I want you,” he breathes out softly. “But you know that already. No need to goad me into admissions.”

“Is that right?”

“Sure,” Will lifts his head up. “You’re a good-looking man. Why wouldn’t I want you?”

Hannibal’s face, unlike his voice, is a shuttered window. Inside is lights-out.

“Love and desire are related emotions,” he notes smoothly. “Though not necessarily codependent.”

“Oh you are funny,” Will slaps his hand on the table twice. “So clever with your words.”

“Thank you, Sebastian.”

“Don’t thank me. I am not being kind.”

“What are you being then?”
“Honest.”

“Honesty can bring great clarity and peace of mind.”

“Isn’t that the truth.”

Will tips his head back to simultaneously finish his whiskey and ask for a new one, when something slings the corner of his eye. The black man in the lavender shirt is moving, cutting through the crowd with feline confidence, his mouth set in a mocking grimace, his bulk propelling him towards them like a boulder to a tree.

_Jack._

Oh god, no. Not now. Not him. Not yet. We are not done here. We still need more time.

Panic bulldozes through Will so rapidly, he only has time to snatch the butter knife off the table and yank Hannibal close by the wrist. The wood chair screeches against the floor as he drives forward, the lip of the formica table biting painful into his ribcage. Hannibal’s jasper cufflink comes undone and pricks Will’s clammy palm. Sweat drips down his back, his forehead, the underside of his black button-down. There is so much to say and not enough time. He holds Hannibal's gaze, fever boiling him into stasis.

Tell him you love him. He knows. Tell him anyway. It’s too late. No, it’s not. Yes, yes it is. We failed. _I_ failed him.

“Something wrong, Sebastian?”

Hannibal's voice skids in Will’s brain, slick with fear. His voice holds such proximity Will can taste the cinnamon tea on his breath.

And then, as quickly as panic bubbled, it bursts. He looks over Hannibal’s shoulder and the man is gone. Will blinks. Cold blankets him. Confusion, shame, defeat, all conspire to leave him drenched and empty.

Will shakes his head. He looks down and sees his hand locked around Hannibal's wrist, Hannibal’s hand clasped around his ankle. A little circuit of impulse, mirrored and closed off by their fingers. It’s warm and hard against Will’s sole. In the commotion, he had rammed his foot into Hannibal’s groin and now he knows what he had been wondering. Alexander wants Sebastian too, apparently.

Adrenaline sweats off him so thick Will can smell himself.

Incrementally, he releases the vice-like grip on Hannibal’s wrist. He sags in his chair feeling punctured and evacuated like an old balloon. Hannibal’s hand rests lightly against his bare ankle, subtly keeping it in place. He assesses Will more intently than he ever did in the last month. Will can feel Hannibal’s gaze like a hand on his throat.

Perhaps if Will lifted his head he could find a specter of their old flame staring back at him. He doesn’t. He’s too gutted to jostle with the devil. Or with Alexander, the piquant antiques dealer. Whoever brews to the surface first.

It comes to him then, as most things come to Will, that they are drowning, drifting away from each other in a way not less fatal than when they fell into the ocean almost a year ago. He can taste it in his tongue now, citrusy and singed, wafting from Hannibal’s body to his, the taste of—offense? No. Not that exactly. Resentment? Perhaps. Will flips through the inventory of emotions cataloged under Hannibal’s name, neatly pinned in gold lettering and black ink. To slip under Hannibal’s
mind after months of disuse feels like walking through an icy mirror, the specks of glass clawing at Will’s nerves.

After what was likely a stretch of silence, Hannibal probes again, “What else do you want for, Sebastian?”

The noise in the room roars back to Will, its howling clutter dredged along Hannibal’s varnished voice. The spiderweb thread breaks, and Will is flung out of Hannibal’s perspective, no richer in knowledge than before. Whatever he is hiding from Will, it’s straitjacketed close to his marrow.

“Not the same as you, clearly,” Will drops his head down. Crumpled on his lap, his hands look calloused, bloodless, the paws of an animal that walked too many miles in the snow.

“Oh?”

“I don’t have any use for veneers anymore, Hannibal, polished smoke and mirrors. Armors.”

“You think I’m in armor, Sebastian?” Hannibal asks, amused.

“I call you ‘the prince’ in my head.”

“That’s flattering.”

Hannibal’s hand flexes around his bare ankle and then Will knows.

He rubs his dirty toes against the inside of Hannibal’s cream-clad thigh and says, “A coward prince who goes chasing windmills and conquers nothing, most of all his fear.”

That hits the mark, grazes his flank, makes him bristle.

“Fear?” Hannibal almost spits the word, so much spite the accusation conjures.

Will runs a finger over his ring scar. “Remember when you left me on that Tennessee road?”

“I remember when you left me on a Tennessee road.”

Semantics. While Will was left without a ride, Hannibal had been left by his lover.

“I had never felt fear like that before.” Will holds on to his half-full glass, focuses on the ribbed texture of its design. “Life without you was like life without a soul. It was nightmarishly frightening because it was so damn simple. I was hooked on you. You got me. Once I stopped wriggling in the harpoon, it stopped hurting.”

Hannibal retreats back into his seat, folding his lovely hands on his lap. Will’s foot falls to the ground.

“I fail to see your point,” he lies, lips pursed in a petulant moue.

Will scoffs at that, openly and crassly. “What I’m telling you, Alexander, is that I’m not going to scurry away. But I’m not going to bend either. You can’t remake me into some rosy figurine you poke and pluck arrows from whenever life gets ugly.” Will finishes his drink in one go. It tastes of dirty water, oak barrels, and old regrets. It doesn’t burn on the way down anymore. But Will’s eyes water anyway. “I’m telling you that you’re afraid of me. Of us. And that I’m sick of it. You reek of fear.”

Propping his palms on the table, Will wrestles to get up. His vision swings and his knees wobble.
Human voices, mechanic recordings, clinking glass spread like molten sugar, long loops of it snaking around his head.

Will wonders distantly if he has been drugged and realizes with startling clarity that he doesn’t care. Either Hannibal did it or Hannibal will kill whoever did.

He blinks repeatedly in a failed attempt to sharpen his senses. Still seated, Hannibal watches him struggle, a twinkle in his dark eyes.

“Marry me or murder me, remember?,” Will slurs again, “That was the deal.”

“What if neither ever comes to pass?”

“All fairytales must come to an end, Hannibal.” The room spins and skates, but Will manages to straighten up. “Whether you want it to or not.”

Involuntarily, his dominant hand falls to Hannibal’s shoulder. For leverage, Will tells himself, but it’s not entirely true. Hannibal doesn’t recoil, so Will allows himself the admittance that he misses him. His smell, his skin, his touch. His cock.

“Now forgive me—” Will hiccups, “—I must retire.”

In the shadows, a lavender and blue shirt emerges. Will recognizes it for what it is now, this game of hunting. He leans to whisper in Hannibal’s ear, “By the way, there’s a fine young man at the bar that’s been clocking you all night.” He does the rude thing of pointing. The man waves across the room.

“I know,” Hannibal mouths against Will’s cheek.

Will steps away, his hand falling to the back of Hannibal’s chair. His eyes are two tar pits, hungry and helpless like an open sore.

“Well, you may want to give it a whirl, Alexander. You know—” Will gesticulates an arabesque, an impossible shape over Hannibal’s heart “—put some more paint on that armor of yours.”

“You sound angry, Sebastian.”

“I sound drunk, doctor,” Will curtsies, nearly stumbling. “Which I am.” He eyes the exit door. It’s hazy and altogether too hot, but he thinks he can make it.

Without Will’s authorization, his hand returns to Hannibal’s body, index and thumb cupping his chin gently.

“Goodnight, sweet prince,” Will recites under his breath. “May you find the sun mingled with the sea.”

As he zigzags through an off-kilter world, shouldering his way through a mass of swerving bodies, Will is transported to that instant under the Mediterranean sky, when the night was frosted with stars. He had pondered longingly if what he felt for Hannibal could be best described by anger, and had swiftly discarded such option as too crude, too simplistic, not graceful enough to encompass the complex history they both had woven together.

Now, clutching a bellyful sour on rye and nicotine, Will is prone to revise that conclusion.

It’s not anger. It’s fear. And it’s not even his. It’s Hannibal’s.
Oh fuck, Will thinks and then the world goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

That's a poem by Rimbaud.

Also, I always thought the scariest thing that could happen to either Hannibal or Will is to see Hannibal besieged by fear. Because if the devil can fear something, how can you say he isn't human?
A thud wakes Will from his stupor. It’s not sleep. It is too black-tar syrupy to be sleep. No dreams, no short-term memory, just the absolute lack of awareness.

His head throbs in tempo with the rattling of the train tracks. He’s still in his jeans and button-down, above the covers, on the bottom bunk of what he presumes is their en suite compartment. There’s sweat in every crevice of his body and his breath smells foreign. He must have lost time again, somewhere between leaving the dinner car and lying down in (Hannibal’s, his brain supplies with a sharp sniff) bed. The pillow smells of what Will has come to associate with Alexander: of argan oil and high-thread-count cotton, of fear masquerading as urbanity.

The dull clanking returns, the sound of raw eggs crashing on tile floors. The wetness of the sound has Will up on his feet too quickly. He sways close to falling over, but once up, he hugs the walls to the bathroom. A slice of light under the unclosed door tells him all he needs to know. The rest is a fog.

Hannibal is leaning back against the sink, tall and haggard under the phosphorescent light. His hair is endearingly rumpled, his collar askew. There is no jacket. The man pressing him into the mint ceramic may or may not have had a knife, may or may not have had his mouth on Hannibal's neck, may or may not have been threatening him, it is possible, it is possible that his hand was holding Hannibal's or he may have been twisting him into place, or perhaps taking his pulse, or teaching him how to dance, in all honesty Will did not stop to consider such minutia, did not think at all past the impulse to stay upright through stringy consciousness and harness the force necessary to yank fabric and hair with both hands, didn’t care until he had power over a bigger body than his by virtue of surprise, didn’t hesitate until he could pull the man backwards and smash his head against the nearest sharp corner, and that Will remembered well, the satisfying crunch of bones and flesh meeting dry wall, then a gap when he too was pushed against a hard surface, only to break through ringing dimness into a flood of light, wonky and harsh, highlighting the heaving shape trapped under his thighs, the head struggling between his fists, and Will could describe with graphic precision the color of his own nails around that man’s neck (purple with effort, white with force, red with blood splatter), but not surmise the faintest of appreciations for the man’s features, his rictus, his distinct panic when Will grabbed him by the nape and slammed his face over and over and over again on the lip of the toilet until the mint-colored ceramic ran crimson and gooey, and so did Will’s hands, up to his forearms, blood dripping everywhere, sticking to his overlong hair, his beard, and the sloshing gurgle coming from the man’s body, straddled and pressurized by Will’s weight as much as by his unreasonable anger, his impossible strength, and the deathly silence afterwards, Will remembered that as well, when the rattles from the lump of meat pulped under his fists had just subsided and it was just him and the manic rasp of his breath measured against
Hannibal’s steady metronome of a respiratory system, and the drip-drip of brain matter sliding down the white tiles. Will would remember that moment like a lopsided home video, complete with bright primary colors and the smell of decaying flesh, of copper pennies rinsed in warm water, of old butcher stores when air conditioner was an optional fixture.

Will would remember the fast-spreading ache in his joints, the places where he held tension or was stricken—jaw, neck, calves—flaring up as Hannibal’s fingers grazed the crown of his head. Will would remember realizing that he was kneeling down because he instinctively looked up chasing the brief touch, and found Hannibal towering over him, cream suit polka-dotted with red and brown specks, circles of tumescent lilac on his wrists, visible when his hands dipped to tilt Will’s chin up and his cuffs rode up. The jasper cufflinks were gone.

Hannibal’s collar was popped open almost to the middle of his chest and his mouth was swollen in a painfully familiar way, but his eyes, his eyes were full with so much that it threatened to crack his face open.

So Will looked away, to the dead body cooling between his knees. What had once been a man was on his stomach. Massive blood loss rendered him ocher, like an uncooked clay vase. His shirt, however, remained miraculously clean where it had been tucked inside his pants. Will untucked it. It was with no surprise that he found blue and lavender fabric peering back at him. A cheap polyester blend, Will noted absently, rubbing the shirttail between his fingers. When he let it go, the lavender had smudged with scarlet.

Awareness comes back slowly and then all at once. Hannibal is touching him, touching him for the first time in a month, touching him in a knowing and wanting manner. As if he were touching Will from inside his skin.

The bathroom is suddenly too cramped, too bright, too humid for Will to breathe properly. He gets up and strides out into the darkened room. Hannibal follows suit through the door left ajar. There are too many words and too many thoughts rioting throughout the room. His, Hannibal’s, the dead man’s. They howl and scream for attention, wild and garbled. Will can’t keep any, so he shuts them all out.

If Will asks what he wants to ask, he fears they will never speak again. Much like with all matters regarding Molly or Bedelia, to ask for details is to dole out death sentences and severance packages. There are just some things you can’t come back from, images you simply can’t erase once they imprinted in your mind. So Will walks the perimeter of their tight quarters three or four times, refusing to acknowledge the white glow coming from the bathroom, the slender man blocking its florescence with his bulky darkness.

Will knows when he is being waited on, when his mere presence stretches someone's patience thin. For once, in a very long time, he doesn’t give a proverbial fuck. His knuckles are glued together with brain matter. He has earned the right to some damn silence and contemplation.

In the end, Will circles the compartment for a seventh time and leans his forehead against the wall. It feels cool like only moving objects could. Somewhere in the distance, the train whistles. Hannibal has not spoken yet. He tracks Will like an experienced hunter surveys a hawk. Like a parent surveys their child’s first time on a merry-go-round.

“Is this your idea of a honeymoon or you really just want to get caught?,” Will asks at last because he knows a stalemate when he is in one, and that’s one thing he’s had enough with Hannibal Lecter. “ ‘Cause I’m all about worn out with your goddamn games.”

The wall offers no answers so Will opens his eyes. Speaking after killing hurts much less than he
thought it would. It’s a good hurt, anyway. Forest-fire-like. His voice alone comes out smoky.

Hannibal does not stir, does not make a sound. Will’s move then, he guesses. Tiredness has left him. Grogginess has too, and with it, any trace of compassion or surprise. Anger seems the loudest note but it is not the deepest. Something else churns in Will’s gut and it is mounting and mounting like a tidal wave. Hard to predict what will be left standing once it roars out of his mouth.

(Sometimes love is found in a burnt house, when every surface is charred to dust but the bones are solid and finally visible.

Sometimes all a fire leaves behind is sterile ground.

Hard to tell which without hindsight.)

In the grey darkness, Will walks over to Hannibal, his hands numb with the effort it takes to beat a grown man to death. It is not an unfamiliar feeling, nor is it unwelcome. Will flexes his hands before he stands in front of Hannibal, close enough to smell blood and beer and cigarette smoke off his clothes, and underneath it all, ions, nitrogen, and ozone. The smell of lightning before it strikes. Will doesn’t need to see him to know it: Hannibal is smiling.

“Did you drug me?”

It takes Hannibal less than a beat to say, “No.”

Then his gaze slides to the open bathroom door, “Not technically,” and it is the performative manner in which he shrugs that gives

They sit in the weight of silence.

Will sighs, rubbing his face with blunt, bloody nails. Hannibal remains stone-cold and indifferent, his shoulders drawn slightly back, as if puffed with pride. Or is it to shelter himself from a sudden blow? Will can’t tell. He can, however, see Hannibal more clearly than he remembers ever seeing him before. The ironwood stubbornness and fragile agitation, the mismanaged impulsiveness. And that other thing Hannibal doesn’t have a name for but Will does: misplaced love, which once soured, comes to resemble terror—both felt and inflicted.

Will steps way and then steps back closer. Down his nose, Hannibal looks at him and looks at him and looks at him, stiff and defiant, hungry and helpless and very very dangerous. Will can feel every tendon in Hannibal’s body rearing to jump to life, to crush a threat when it barely scented it. It must be taking all of his self-control to remain immobile, Will surmises. Good. Let him strain until he splinters. There’s pleasure in taunting a beast into revealing itself. It’s a sick, sticky pleasure familiar to all hunters, but an addictive pleasure nonetheless.

Will knows and doesn’t want to know what it all means. Not just the why and the who pertaining to the dead man on the bathroom floor, but the finer details of how Hannibal came to engender his death, came to judge him a suitable pawn in winding Will up and see if he’d go. It feels inelegant somehow, to plow through it, through Hannibal’s endlessly graceful, vicious mind. It feels wasteful too. As if by indulging in that process Will was indulging in perpetuating it, the game, the winding, the going. All he wants is to put his arms down. He is so goddamn tired of swimming upstream.

The train passes some high-mast lights and Will can see a single blood drop on Hannibal’s left cheekbone. Like a birthmark, the shape of a bursting star or a lipstick kiss, perched right under his eye. Will lifts his hand to brush it away, but then his wrist is gaining momentum and clashing with Hannibal’s mouth. The slap echoes through the airless room, a wet, runny sound not unlike that
which awoke Will.

Hannibal's head accompanies the motion, twists to the side. Will’s palm feels surprisingly hot. For a moment, he rests it against Hannibal's skin, taking in the prickling of roused blood rushing under his fingers. It’s an incredibly intimate and inexplicably sad gesture, like an exclamation mark at the end of a confession. It stings and soothes because it can’t be taken back.

Will hit him with his ring finger, he hit him with all his might. If he were still wearing his wedding band it would have left a nasty bruise. As it is, all Will’s hand left in its wake is a rumbling silence.

Will had never slapped someone before. Somehow he thinks of Molly on that last night in Moosehead Lake, her hastily painted lips and wobbly high heels, and feels a strange sense of kinship with her, one he had never felt throughout all their years as husband and wife. They finally have something meaningful in common: they both know what it is like to be wrung out so taut by Hannibal Lecter that to uncoil can only be akin to a death wish.

For a too-long of a moment, they both stand less than two feet apart, quietly breathing the same stale air. Then Will forces his legs to move and he is turning around and walking to the small window next to their bunks. On the sill, three blue bottles are lined up neatly. Hannibal’s new obsession, Will thinks with near endearment, as he regards the moonlight catch the oils inside the glass jars. He is still wrestling with this thought when his legs are pulled from under him and he is falling fast, hitting the floor headfirst. Before Will can react, a knee is reamed against his lower back, his lugs kicked of all oxygen. His overlong hair is pulled up and up so tight Will feels scalped. He attempts to move his hands but they have been locked behind his waist. Every muscle in his upper body screams with pain, and then Will’s mouth is bursting with fresh blood.

It takes him a very slow second to realize that he is being hit repeatedly, that somewhere along the way all their verbal sparring and physical tussles culminated in having his face shoved against a decidedly unswept floor in the dead of an African night so humid it will be impossible to properly clot or clean a wound, and that he will most likely die now, if not from massive blood loss then with massive brain trauma which Hannibal will inflict with his own bare hands. That's suddenly such a funny image—Dr. Lecter on his knees on top of Will, making a poor job of hogtying him and a mess of splitting his skull open—so stupidly funny that laughter bubbles through Will’s bleeding mouth, high and loud, too loud likely, or just loud enough for Hannibal to slacken the pressure on his grip, giving Will the slim opportunity to sock him right in the groin, backwards and so so inelegantly, but oh well, at least he is on his back and can look Hannibal right in the eye while the man murders him. And he does. Not a man, but a monster, lips gnarled and teeth bared, fangs and yellow eyes streaked with blood and grey hair mussed like the pelt of a wolf. That monster stares Will right back down.

He is going to kill me, Will realizes with simplicity and no moment of brighter clarity has ever passed between them. They come coupled and embraced, those two distinct thoughts: 

*He is in love with me and he is going to kill me.*
This is arguably the darkest this story gets (no death, actually a happy ending, but a messy messy middle).

Just, again, tread carefully.

In another life, in any other time, Will would have relented. He would have held Hannibal's furious gaze and let him do what he does best, which is to work things open with his lovely hands. He would have offered himself up as tribute, as a martyr, would have lived up to his new name.

But as it is, Will has already become something else altogether, something other than God’s sacrificial lamb or Jack’s shepherd dog. And it is that other being, that other-other Will had become sometime between the Chesapeake Bay and Louisiana who reared his head and aimed at Hannibal’s nose, a nose which Will loved dearly but such love did not hold him back an inch when he decided he did not want to die on the floor of a Moroccan train, nor did he want to give himself over to whatever bestial madness held Hannibal captive this time around, so god be his witness, he was going to break that monster apart if it meant he would get the (his) man back.

Blood from Hannibal’s nose rains down on Will’s face and he can taste it on his lips, that tangy, slightly jammy essence Will has grown so attached to. Lighting fast, Hannibal's hands cuff Will’s neck, because when did pain ever distracted the Ripper from a kill, and it’s impressive really, how strong and precise and focused the monster in him is, how almost effortlessly he straddles Will and seizes him by his throat and swivels his head side to side like a toy rattle until Will’s back teeth feel loose. “If I survive him,” Will thinks, vision blurring rapidly, “the bastard better dress each and every one of my wounds.”

He is nearing unconsciousness when the train hits a bump and Will manages to bite hard into the first knob of flesh he can find. Hannibal flinches back automatically, just for a fleeting instant, but it is enough for Will to get a hold of his wrists. They lock eyes and Hannibal must gather that Will is not going to back down when he grins around Hannibal’s knuckle and deepens the bite. Bone scrapes under his teeth.

They stay suspended in time: Hannibal's ring finger bleeding profusely inside Will’s mouth, the heat of his thigs coiled around Will’s hips, their breathing short and ragged, the flavor of raw human flesh oiling Will’s gums, their eyes latched for a second too long to be innocent, and it crosses Will’s mind they may fuck on that floor if history is anything to go by, though as it turns out, this is one of those rare occasions when it is not, so the next thing Will knows he is being hauled up and outward, the crystalline sound of shattering glass exploding all around him. Only much later, when the weight of Hannibal’s body had stopped hurting his back, would Will realize it had not been the window but Hannibal's medicinal oils what he had heard breaking.

It is odd that violence can so closely mimic tenderness, that it may share a similar language, that touch can be wielded in very identical ways for very different means.

All that occurs to Will as Hannibal towers over him and applies pressure to his rotator cuff, his collarbone, his stomach, the pain worse each time Hannibal’s fingers touch him. It aches in all the
crooked places where bones didn’t mend straight or skin wasn’t stitched back right. Hannibal would know. Directly or indirectly, he put each one of those wounds in Will’s body, he would know best how to make them sing. Only Hannibal could hurt Will with so much efficiency. With so much care.

That last thought snatches Will back into the breach so abruptly it catches Hannibal off guard. Or maybe he wasn’t as intent on choking the life out of Will as he appeared to be. Will doesn’t know, will never know (the same way he tells himself he doesn’t know why Hannibal chooses strangulation every time he decides to kill him, but he does, of course he does. It’s because Hannibal wants to be the last thing Will sees before perishing. It’s because he wants Will to love him first and last.)

What Will does know is that by some luck of the draw he finds himself on top of Hannibal. Once he is sat across Hannibal’s tailbone, joy and anger flare up so fast Will feels giddy, giddy like a kid planting a flag on an anthill. He pins Hannibal to the ground by his nape.

“Scream uncle,” he wants to say, but doubts Hannibal would understand the reference. He presses harder just to see if Hannibal will squirm. He doesn’t. For once, Hannibal feels lifeless. Not looks lifeless, but feels lifeless. It is an important and frightening distinction but one Will doesn’t care to dwell on. There’s two types of blood drying under his fingernails, of two different men who have lain under his hands in the last half an hour. One of them is dead. The other one is at his mercy.

Once power surges through him, Will is unable to shut off its voltage. He drapes his chest over Hannibal’s back, trying to catch a heartbeat with his skin. It’s there: faint, mechanic, barely above average. Will can see Hannibal breathing through his mouth, his nose too broken to be of any help. His face is turned to the side and a bruise is already forming under his left eye. From earlier, Will imagines, from his slap.

Before he knows what he is doing, Will is putting his mouth to the bluish mark seeded deep on Hannibal’s cheekbone. He laps at it gently. Hannibal makes a sound, small and choked and pitiful, and after that it is all a blur. Will does not know where his determination comes from. It’s almost divine in its steadiness. He sits back up on Hannibal’s hips and, keeping his arm across Hannibal’s nape, works on his own zipper. Then he snakes a hand under Hannibal’s stomach and works on his. He yanks Hannibal’s beige trousers down to his thighs. Somewhere along the way, they both must have decided to carry on pretending Will had subsumed a man whose body is a lethal weapon with little more than the force of his desire. Or maybe that’s exactly what took place and they both only agreed to let it happen and go unspoken.

There’s glass and oil scattered all around their bodies, but when Will smears his fingers through them, he can’t tell the difference between the two. He lingers only before he pushes his fingers inside Hannibal, and he tells himself that the lingering is due to logistical, not emotional, considerations. Bunched around Hannibal’s legs, the meticulously bespoken trousers are covered in maroon stains. It fills Will with an unnamed sadness to witness something beautiful be so utterly ruined. He closes his eyes and sets on establishing a brutal rhythm.

A whine punches out of Hannibal, and Will sees the snow then, the miles and miles of snow—iridescent, gnawing, and ruthless—unfolding behind his eyelids. With a jerk, Will opens his eyes, half expecting to find fog rise from his mouth. It’s muggy still, both inside and outside his body. It’s nighttime. They are still on a moving train. Hannibal has gone limp and pliant, though, under his hands. He moved only when Will stopped fingering him. He pushes back now, softly, into Will’s hand and, all at once, Will is suffocated by a sorrow he didn’t know he still housed, the kind of sorrow borne precipitously out of love. Fighting down the impulse to lean in and brush Hannibal’s hair off his bruised face, Will pulls his fingers out. It’s so hot they feel warmer outside
Hannibal than they did while in him.

For a moment, Will deliberates. He is, admittedly or not, waiting to hear Hannibal’s voice. Somewhere inside, Will wants this to stop. Somewhere deeper inside, he wants this to go on forever. Eventually, a part of him wins. Will gathers some oil and drips it on his cock, rough and unevenly, and tries to find a way into Hannibal’s body without having to touch him. It’s cruel but it’s also honest. When Hannibal cant's his hips up for Will, he can’t help a muffled whimper. His hands want to find Hannibal's hipbones, his hair, his stomach, but Will reminds himself that is not what this is about. At best, there is contentment to be had for endurance, for achievement, for survival. But that is that.

As he begins to move tentatively inside a body he has wanted and has feared wanting for longer than he can remember, Will realizes there is also pleasure in foiling Hannibal Lecter’s best-laid plans. For in no alternative universe would such a fine man have envisioned their first time properly fucking to take place on the fire retardant rubber flooring of an African night-train. Will smiles around the idea and wills his hips to snap briskly, to make this count, to make this hurt, but his body seems incapable of showing violence towards Hannibal’s body, not now, not like this, when it offers itself up so genuinely. No matter how much Will rams it, his hips stay supple and light, setting the gentlest pace, the slowest circles that pull low-breathing moans out of both of them. Twice Hannibal attempts to twist his head back and catch Will’s eye. It’s how Will realizes that his wrist had fallen from crushing Hannibal’s neck to cupping his cheek.

Reestablishing his grip, Will shoves Hannibal’s face on the ground. He keeps his hand on his head, pushing down. This is his, only his, for his enjoyment, not Hannibal’s. Only he gets to have it, Will tells himself but it sounds weak even to his own ears. Perhaps because Hannibal is loud, much louder that Will had imagined the man capable of being, let alone the monster. The man under him shivers and grunts and half-yells every time Will moves, as if Will knew his body down pat, down to the tripwire of his nerve endings and the secret code of his dermic ridges. He reacts like an animal stranded in a windstorm, an orphan caught in a fever—completely defenseless against what is being done to him.

Perhaps, Will realizes with a start, nobody loved him before. Perhaps no one has ever touched the monster under the person suit.

Quickly Will is drenched in their sweat to a point where he cannot say with any degree of certainty where his skin begins and Hannibal’s ends. Pleasure keeps sneaking up on him no matter how much Will fences it off, so before he knows it, he too is panting erratically, giving himself over to the mad dash of adrenaline and endorphins, to the absolute uniqueness of feeling his body become part of someone else’s so integrally at one moment Will believes he can see the splinters of glass from Hannibal’s perspective: sideways and up-close. They are beautiful, Will thinks in a trance, bloody and oily, shimmering red and transparent blue, they are beautiful. The cold rising from the empty plains, the snow crunching under his naked feet and the pieces of human flesh severed in his arms, those are beautiful too, the taste of uncooked meat and snotty tears, they are beautiful under the white morning sun, when winter is so long birds die frozen on the trees. Oh god, that is beautiful too, down to the sores in his hands, his boyish, lovely hands, Will thinks, and it takes it a minute to be startled by that thought, that memory which is not his own. It takes him twice as long to get re-situated into his own body and feel pleasure so intense it cuts through him, makes him double-over and burrow his head in Hannibal's neck. There is a hair-thin instant between that wave of physical heat and the next wave of icy cold—Will can sense the snow already blowing at the inseams of his brain.

*Deep breaths,* he tells himself in an eerie medley of his father’s and Abigail’s voices. *Deep breaths. Keep your head above water, son.* Reality wavers like a stream. Both his body and the one
under him shake. Like black ribbons on a flagpole, nothing lost, nothing gained. Like an unmarked grave, his brain supplies, borrowing similes from Hannibal's brain. A grave you can never return to, so you carry it with you at all times.

Will stops moving. Once he does, pain gallops. Mild concussion, a fractured rib, maybe two, a broken thumb surely, perforated eardrum, ruptured spleen if he is lucky, or is it unlucky, he can’t remember his 101 anatomy class anymore. Inventory of minor injuries: a chipped molar. A busted lip. A heart broken. Maybe mended. Maybe that’s not a minor injury after all.

A hand clutches at his hip. If Will didn’t know better, he would describe it as hesitant. Gentle even. But Will does know better—he’s clearer about himself now than he has ever been before.

He looks down and sees how they’ve shifted around each other, how they’ve dismissed all pretenses of a struggle and became reduced to a pile of limbs wrapped around each other. Hannibal has pushed up to his forearms and knees. Will folded over his back, arms locked around his midriff, head pillowed on his heaving shoulders. It resembles too closely an embrace for anyone’s comfort. Under him, Hannibal shakes again, the effort to remain upright with Will’s deadweight becoming unbearable. He smells of oatmeal soap and summer skin, Will thinks dizzily, and the urge to laugh hysterically comes back in full force.

The smell of him alone, the human smell of him, is enough to completely undo Will. The urge to cry tailspins from his groin to his mouth. Just because someone is vulnerable it doesn’t mean they are asking to be wounded.

Will wants to spit out, “What the fuck did you do to me?” but when he pushes back slowly, their bodies jerk awake to arousal. All words and sounds are momentarily lost. Out of pure instinct, Will puts his hand over the one nudging his hip. Immediately, his fingers burn with frostbite.

“You drive me crazy,” Will manages to punch out between thrusts, and he means it. Means every word down to the last drop of his marrow. “You know that? You drive me crazy, you son of a bitch.”

Hannibal’s head falls forward. There’s a small pool of blood on the floor, right under his broken nose. Will fights down the impulse to get up and fetch ice. He rolls his hips instead, as careful and as detached as he knows how, which is not very well at all. It’s just sex, he tell himself, this act, this snag in time when they rub their bodies together. It will come and it will go and they won’t be none the wiser for it. He can get off and walk away. They both can. That’s what being a murderer affords you: a mind free from moral shackles.

Snowflakes cloud his vision. The wind hisses through enormous larch trees. A wailing pierces the sugary mist, like a shriek—no, like a recorded message, tinny and distant, the disembodied voice of the dead. A child’s cry.

Will thrusts faster, trying to outrun the high-pitched sound but the sound overtakes him, and it’s there suddenly, in the train car with them. It grows and it grows in convex spirals, getting closer and closer until its vibrating through Will’s cock, a baritone cadence unbroken and unrelenting. “Will,” it pleads. “Will Will will will will,” like a vinyl caught on a dying man’s last words. Like footsteps receding in the snow.

This time horror physically propels Will backwards, his body disengaging from Hannibal’s. Will lands on his open palms. Desperately he crawls back on all fours, tripping on his unbuckled jeans as he struggles to put a safe distance between himself and the lump of flesh squatted in the dark. It’s useless, Will knows, even as he tells himself to remain calm. It’s useless and fatal. Hannibal is going to come for him. To finish him off. To finish himself off.
A ghost stepping out of a nightmare, Hannibal unfolds with remarkable ease. When he stands, Will can hear his bare feet crunch glass shards. Smoke and mica comprise him—abrasions and exertions do not stick to him. Pain doesn’t follow him home because Hannibal knows its number. It can’t hurt him anymore. Not after the snow, Will thinks in a jumble, his heart racing, his wounds oozing, his cock hard and leaking. He keeps his eyes on Hannibal but it doesn’t matter. This is it and Will’s body knows it, knows it in the webbing of every connective tissue, at the crux of every neurological awareness. One way or another, he is going to be changed on this floor (on someone else’s floor). That change is going to stick.

The musical circularity of their fates possibly pleases Hannibal as he considers Will across the darkened cabin. Reciprocity moves him. The beauty of synchronicity is not lost on Will. Love was, for most of his life. If he could, he would spare them. He would die with encephalitis a hundred times over so he could take it all back—for both of us.

With infinite confidence and leisure, Hannibal unbuttons his ripped shirt, then pushes off his trousers and underwear down his knees and over his feet. The fabric falls over the blood puddle left by his broken nose. The moonlight throws into high relief all the sharp planes of his naked body. He had grown gaunt and overly lean in the last month. Somehow Will had failed to notice it. His legs, Will realizes for the first time, are too lanky for the rest of his body, lending him an inhuman grace, a lacquered precision of movement. It is almost uncomfortable to look at him, but all Will can do is look up, awestruck and a little bit fearful.

There is something intelligently mean-spirited about this role reversal: only weeks ago, it had been Will stripping off of all his pretenses, turning himself over into Hannibal’s favor. Now, as Hannibal stalks towards him with savagely measured steps, Will can’t help but fear him. Each step Hannibal takes forward, Will crawls back an inch. When he hits a wall, Will tells himself: this is the only grave I will ever have. Hannibal will carry me with him for all eternity. No one will ever know where I am. No one will be able to mourn me.

Somehow Hannibal must hear these thoughts because he smiles, his mouth capable of infinitesimal expressions even when misshapen into a raw slab. Will blinks, and wings spring from Hannibal’s shoulder blades, moth-like and feathered black, twice as big as the room should allow for. His eyes glow crimson and his hands are clawed inward, each nail the size and shape of a scalper. He smells of power-plants and Stelmuze oaks, which Will never knew of until now, but now he does because Hannibal smells of them since he climbed one as a child.

“I love you and I am scared of you,” it arrives to Will’s mind unprompted. Where from, it’s anyone's guess. This time Hannibal doesn’t smile. He leans over to grab something from the floor, and then he is done with delaying the inevitable. He kneels in front of Will, so close their noses could brush. Will flinches, his brain urging him to get away, though empirically Will knows he can’t. He can feel the metal wall press behind him. He knows when he is trapped.

Hannibal’s fingers, human fingers or as human as a surgeon’s can be, reach out and begin undoing his buttons. When Will bears down on his jeans and shakes his head vigorously, Hannibal just prods with the kind of clinical patience you’d expect from an experienced practitioner. Eventually, Will gives in.

Hannibal folds each clothing item as if they were fine garments and not blood-soaked tatters. When Will is fully naked, Hannibal does not let him cover himself. Instead, he places a hand on his throat and another on his right hip and encourages him to lie on his back. Will defiantly pushes his knees against his chest and juts his chin out. Not much is going to keep him alive, so might as well go out with dignity. Hannibal may or may not have huffed a silent chuckle. Will can’t tell. Hannibal’s mouth has been sowed shut with screw thread, and the red haze of his eyes is bewitching. Will tries
and fails to look away. A slick hand touches the inside of his thigh. Instinctively Will winces and recoils. The hand draws circles closer and closer to his groin. Because it is Hannibal, it feels good and intimate even when it is a dirge, a mise-en-place, a culinary preparation. Will is powerless against him. Nearly instantly, his body relaxes and his limbs unfurl. When he sways, Hannibal cradles him, catching his lolling head on the crook of his left elbow, his hand caressing the side of Will’s neck. Will sighs. If life is to make love to the devil then it might be inevitable to die on his arms.

Gingerly, Hannibal lies him down on the floor, steiples his knees and stretches his legs apart only far enough to accommodate the width of his hips. For such a prolific killer, he has such a slight build, Will muses half-lidded, reason a balloon he grew tired of keeping tethered. It’s lovely. He’s lovely. Why deny it? Sometimes starting a fire is a job for two.

Reaching around, Will presses a hand on Hannibal’s tailbone. "I want you," he says. "Do your worst."

For a maddening instant, it is oddly peaceful: Hannibal kneeling between his legs, a wax mannequin busted out of all his alpine features. Will did a number on his face. For a maddening instant, it also seems like he may lean over and kiss Will’s brow. Instead, he skims his shoulders, his chest, his abdomen and Will wonders distantly if Hannibal is blessing him or drawing an invisible Y-incision over his body. Either might be one and the same for Hannibal.

Lying weightless on the floor, Will feels Hannibal’s fingers slip inside him. Unctuous and cautious, borderline impersonal, as if touch couldn’t be trusted to bridge gaps in communication anymore. It is important to Hannibal that they reach this conclusion, that some sort of imbalance is restored by flesh and not by speech. Will can accept that. He closes his eyes and lets the world freeze over.

A faint awareness of pain floats through him. It’s not coming from his body. Hannibal is scrupulously kind, his touch methodical even as his breath grows uneven. This is costing him, Will realizes as his toes curl around slow-simmering arousal. It’s taking something from him that he’d thought buried for good. Will is not sure who the subject in that sentence is supposed to be.

It’s been so long since Will came this way, so long since he felt open with someone (years, if he is honest with himself, the first time in the Baltimore office), that his body seems to have forgotten intimacy can resemble trust. He can’t allow himself to think about the uniqueness of this act. If he does, he will spook and he will cry.

Instead, he sees himself from above, lying on the snow on a bed of sticks. A fairytale bride by any other name. A gangly boy is walking towards him, all rags and starvation, his scrawny feet bare and chewed by chilblains. Will knows without knowing that the boy is hungry though his stomach is heavy with undigested meat. The boy is carrying a bundle of death. Will loves the boy in spite (or is it because) he can smell decay already clinging to his hair, his armpits, his breath.

His body dilates and Will’s eyes fly open. He’s back on the train. Curled around his neck is an afterimage of the boy—now a middle-aged man, always a full-fledged monster—pushing shallowly into his body, shivering and nuzzling against his collarbone. A Wound Man, made of ownerless scars and doorless secrets.

(Better yet: a structure tired of being a structure, a monster tired of being a man.

Oh god. Oh god.)

Panic and empathy run in concurrent currents through Will's mind. Slowly, he forces his numb legs to wind around the monster’s wings. The movement stirs Hannibal who jerks back with a start, a
guard caught sleeping while on duty. His gaze is dull and papery with wrinkles, his left eye swollen almost shut. There is moisture collecting around his nostrils, his hairline, his lashes. Will can’t tell if he’s crying, bleeding, or sweating. Maybe all. Maybe none.

“There you are,” Will whispers fondly and Hannibal tilts his head as if human language eluded him. He knows the monster wants to take a good look at him, to probe inside farther than his cock can reach. It dawns on Will that Hannibal behaves not as someone accustomed to largess, but as someone traumatized by scarcity. That he takes and takes and takes because he never knows when supplies will be denied. That he will never let Will go, not out of petty cruelty, but due to some instinctive, residual fear that after Will there will never be another, that he will have to go without forever—not just until death, but after too, whatever after may be.

Without love, it comes to Will as Hannibal rocks quietly into him, head snug under his chin. He didn’t know he wanted it, but now that he got it, he can’t afford to live without. He will wreak havoc before he is starved out again.

With awareness momentarily blinding him, Will closes his eyes again.

From above, they look like frosted blue marbles. The boy is looming above him, his teeth trailing threads of ripped flesh like comets. He pounds on Will’s chest with his bony fist and the impact reverberates all down to Will’s crotch, pain and pleasure a mix of thunder. It booms and echoes all the way into the Moroccan night. Inherently Will knows that he must be about to come, that Hannibal picked up speed with frantic abandonment, that neither of them will last, that they are both old and broken men who have drawn this courtship out beyond all possible measures of endurance and that they must let go, they simply must—and yet, the snow is still dotting his hair, and his clothes are sealed shut against his body, and Hannibal is there inside him, beside him, like a pearl you swallow so the ocean never parts you again, a precious metal you will to mingle with your gut so it crystallizes like a stalactite upside-down around the tissue of your heart.

“Oh god,” Will hears himself yelp in both worlds, the one where Hannibal is coming inside him and the one where the boy punches him once more and Will screams, “oh god, oh god,” his mouth stretching wide until it becomes a sunless tunnel, a sinkhole, wider until it threatens to rip at the corners, wider still until out flies a starling—white-speckled, alive, and so very eager for the mother-of-pearl sky.

Will shudders once, twice, nearly convulsing. He returns to the train, to his body. He looks down at it, and Hannibal’s head is nestled right above his pubic hair, his mouth aligned with his navel. Will can hear him crying, his back wracked by ugly open-mouthed sobs. It must hurt him, Will thinks, with such a badly broken nose. He reaches out and runs his fingers through Hannibal’s matted hair. He presses back almost immediately. It does not surprise Will that Hannibal is ice-cold to the touch.

Semen trickles down Will’s thigh onto the rubber floor. He brings his vaulted knees together as if they could offer Hannibal a modicum of privacy, a fortress to guard him from prying eyes. If it was up to him, he would keep him there forever, between his legs, bruised and battered and conquered, conquered so completely he will never fully recover, lest he tells himself otherwise when the morning comes.

Again, Will is not certain who the main subject of that thought is, nor who formed it. What Will does know, as pain rapidly reacquaints itself with underused muscles and obscure bones, is that no lovelier image could spring from his imagination than the picture they paint together: a creature with two arms and four legs, a second head sprung from the navel, feral and ravenous and so shrewd no world would ever be able to outsmart it, no man capable of mastering it as Will did then,
on the floor, in the dead of night.

Hannibal's nails dig on his hips. "Don't leave," he croaks, voice raw and robbed of any pride, "Please don't leave me."

Shapes blur at the corners and Will knows he must be crying too. "I am not," he vows under his breath—awestruck and a little bit in love, and altogether not sure of the feasibility of his promise. “I am keeping you. I am keeping you and we’ll never be without.”

And then, because he can help it now, he chokes out, “Sweetheart.”
Will must have dozed off because he startles into a pale darkness. His hands leap out before he can get his bearings. He finds Hannibal within arm’s reach, lying on his side, head pillowed on folded arms. With his one eye open, he spies Will. Silver stubble has come in, the hoary hair mingling with the brown of dried blood, hollowing out his face, making his tiredness so apparent Will had to be willfully blind to miss it. He is still stark naked and covered in bruises. They both are. But it’s the scrapes on Hannibal’s knees, irregular and reddish-raw, that clog Will’s heart.

Without forethought, Will reaches out and cups his cheek. The good eye flutters shut. Now he is blind, Will thinks. With him blind, I could be free.

The thought is shockingly eviscerating, hollowing Will out in return. He drops his hand to the floor and points his gaze at the ceiling.

“You shouldn’t have let me sleep. I may have a concussion.”

“You don’t,” Hannibal’s voice is so rough Will has trouble understanding him.

“How do you know?” It is a moot question, really, since Hannibal was the one doing the damage.

But if he feels for the hook, he doesn’t take it. Instead, he chides gently, “I am a doctor, Will.”

A broken chortle pops out of Will’s mouth. Without turning, he splays a hand over Hannibal’s belly. The skin distends with breath. To have him alive never ceases to fill Will with a punch-drunk sort of happiness. That he exists, that a man like Hannibal Lecter exists within reach, will never not amaze Will Graham.

“This is my favorite part of your body,” Will dips the ring finger in his navel.

“Because it reminds you that I am human?”

Will smiles, shakes his head. His throat hurts from being squeezed. “No. It reminds me that, once, you too depended on someone else to live.”

“A child-bearer.”

Will glances at him. In the shadows, his body does not look very different from the one peeking from under the bathroom door. Sallow, still, oddly crooked in places. Alone.

A wave of regret washes over Will. For whom, he is not exactly sure. Will pulls his hand away.

“How was your mother, Hannibal?”

Hannibal turns his face up and away in that peculiar manner of his.

“Remote,” he replies clipped.

A desire for blunt proximity curses through Will, fast and sloppy and sickening. Sex can only go so far. Will wants what he got the moment he was inside Hannibal’s childhood memory, the moment the boy he once was touched him, miraculously allowing him to wear Hannibal’s skin. He wants to sink his hands into Hannibal’s gut and be pulled in.

To want that desperately is love elevated to self-erasure. Or osmosis. Will is vague on those
Because to belong to Hannibal is to possess him, Will decides he must give the monster what he himself can barely fathom: himself.

Before he can regret it, Will blurts out, “I found my mother. In Louisiana. Back when I first joined the force.”

Hannibal hums noncommittally but Will knows him too well not to notice his shoulders fractionally rotating towards him. “Did she recognize you?”

Will shakes his head. There’s gum stuck to the ceiling, faded pink and lumpy.

“She thought I was my dad. She kept talking to me about myself in the third person. ‘Tell Will this, tell Will that.’ At one point, she called me Gabriel. That was her guardian angel, a nurse said later.”

“But you knew better?”

“Didn’t I always?” Will grins bleakly. “It was my brother’s name. He died before I was born.”

Hannibal’s eyebrows flicker and Will is filled with a scummy satisfaction that only he could catch such faint tell in the dark.

“I wasn’t aware that you had a sibling,” Hannibal retorts smoothly, but his tone betrays insult as if a mediocre secret had been successfully kept from him for too long of a time.

Will rolls to his side. There’s a heart-shaped scar on Hannibal’s left earlobe that Will had never seen before. He tucks away that piece of information for later inspection. “No, you wouldn’t be. Not a narcissist like you.”

Hannibal’s eyes are wide open, unblinking and trained upwards. Will wonders if he sees the dead piece of gum too.

“It was a twin birth,” Will adds. He never told this to another soul. He never thought he would. “Only I came out alive.”

He expects Hannibal to remark on the obvious parallel: that Will is a double already, that he devoured his other half before he was even born.

Always a sore of surprises, Hannibal asks instead, “Was it good to see her?”

Will rolls to his back, mulls the question over. “It was—illuminating. She said I had to get going.”

“‘Get going?’” The scare quotes are all but tangible around Hannibal’s imperious mouth.

“That it was too late for her, but not for her son. If I got going.”

Hannibal hums again, and Will knows by the inflection in the nearly unintelligible sound that he can hear the multitudes floating under the water, afraid to break surface.

“What age was your mother when she died, Will?”

“She was forty-one.”

“And your father?”
Will chews on his lip, “Forty-five.”

“You turned forty this summer,” Hannibal remarks impassively.

“Yes.”

Silence falls around them and the outside world springs forward, cheerful with birdsong, metal chucking, and human chirping. Dawn must be near. Soon they’ll be arriving at Oujda, bringing with them a corpse and a forensic graffiti finger-painted in all kinds of bodily fluids.

“Will,” Hannibal calls out and Will feels cold all over, a surging gust from toe to throat. Fingers tap on his wrist, careful and lukewarm. “Will. It’s not too late.”

The smell of vinegary antiseptics and the ashen color of his mother’s patchy hair finds him. Will shakes his head to dispel the image and, for once, longs for his reading glasses. Where did he last see them? Oh, right. Molly’s nightstand.

Without wanting to, Will forms the words, “What if it is?” and once they are out, they are out. They belong as much to him as to Hannibal now. Will doesn’t know if relief or horror descends upon him. You can never tell them apart when you entrust something fragile to Hannibal Lecter.

The fingers travel upwards, forming a fist and gripping the back of his neck. Not an impossible hold to break, not on paper at least, but Will doesn’t even try. He closes his eyes and leans in. Hannibal’s breath is sour and sharp on his nose when he says, “It is not.”

“You promise?”

Hannibal twists Will’s chin, forcing him to face him. His one eye is open and clear, evacuated of all usual barbwire and finery. It jostles something inside Will, something splintered and concave and scarlet-colored that must have been there all along. Will is torn between pulling away and burrowing in.

“I promise,” he whispers, brushing the hair from Will’s forehead. His gaze trails away, beyond Will, and for a moment he seems absent, and fond, and empty. Not a killer, nor a man, but a carbon copy of both. When he speaks again, his voice is startlingly flat, “And I always keep my promises.”

Unable to resist, Will looks up and immediately feels as if he had stuck his fingers on an electric socket, blue pain running through muscle, gluing veins and bone together. The air is singed with ozone. Will can’t help asking, “Why did you drug me? And don’t say you were curious.”

Hannibal’s touch falters, but his eye stays steady. “No, I wasn’t curious. Quite the contrary.”

Will can’t read him, so he makes a hazardous guess, “You were stalling for time.”

Hannibal lets his hand fall. He wets his lips before intoning carefully, “I imagine I was. Or perhaps I was attempting to speed up time.” His tone is all wrong, warped around something supple, and pliable, and pleading. “You did promise you’d eventually stop loving me. Once I disappointed you again.”

Suddenly Will can’t bear to look at him. He trains his gaze on the space between them, the color and shape and feel of the rubbery ground. It takes him back to another floor, another time, when they’d lain together in the old barn in Moosehead Lake, fencing off drafts and dirges with a cheap radiator and some stolen wine. How long ago those months were, how safer it all seemed compared to now.
No, not safer. Contained. Like voltage trapped inside a glass lamp.

Silence stretches brittle. Hannibal, never a man for disinterested kindness, presses on to test its weakness. “Did my time run out yet, Will?”

Will moves to study his own hands. They look swollen and small, too exposed to be seen in public. Will shakes his head once, slowly.

“I’m here.”

“You are,” Hannibal concedes. “For now.”

“I’ll stay if you keep me.”

“That simple?”

“Must it always be complicated?”

Abruptly Hannibal makes a grab for Will’s jaw. Just as quickly, Will shifts his gaze to the ceiling.

“My love for you is corrosive, Will,” Hannibal spits out, a touch too fast for comfort. “I can’t remember who I was before you. I feel myself fading. I can only see myself as a ghost. After Pennsylvania, it’s as if I fell into a trance. I had to find you. I had to—follow you. I had to—”

“Hannibal. Hannibal, stop.” His hands are on him before Will can stop himself. He presses on the soft flesh under this jaw, the sunken eye, the places where his fingers left bruises earlier on. “Stop wriggling in the harpoon. Let me see you. Let me have you.”

Poison spills out, the shimmer and consistency of snake skin. Hannibal’s face shutters and all Will can glean are the grey prickles of his stubble, like spikes in an armor.

“What if there is nothing left after you do?”

“Then we die as one,” Will assures him.

Hannibal shakes his head vigorously. Stubbornly. Will had yet to see this side of him: childish in its vehemency, or perhaps aristocratically allergic to self-doubt, to self-infringement. It sweeps over him like wind through fine china: rattling, boisterous, teetering on disastrous.

“You don’t understand, Will,” he insists, features so intense his face seems to run out of space. “For once in my lifetime, I felt invisible. I doubted my own weight, the shape of my own self. Clothes gave space and consistency to my body. Without them, I lost all substance. You called them armor, yet they were everything but.” Hannibal’s voice soars too thin, too close to breaking. Will recoils instinctively. “They were braces, Will. Buttresses.”

Time cartwheels and Will can hear what Hannibal is not saying because he has had this realization before: in Moosehead Lake, in the snow, in the dark, always in the dead of night where whiskey could not make an empty bathtub any warmer. What is unsaid goes unsaid because it seems too preposterous, too deafening, too prosaic to be vocalized: that reciprocal love, once achieved, left him at sea, that merging with someone so intimately tore down a sense of individuality he did not know to hold so dear. That there is a moral to this story, one Will also learned the hard way: It is indeed too dangerous to get exactly what you want, lest you are prepared to accommodate the changes it must bring.

Lifelong love, is this how it feels like? All these growing pains of bones unexpectedly spurting
longways?

It doesn’t matter. Will cups Hannibal’s jaw in both his hands, maneuvers it until he can catch his feverish eye. It gleams gold-yellow in the filtered darkness, mad with too much unchecked emotion.

“Hannibal, we are bedrock. Not the names we call each other, not the masks we wear for others, but you and I, our monstrous guts, our twined hearts, they are bedrock.” Will tightens his grip on his chin, pulls on it for emphasis. “I will never let you go. I’ll never stop looking.”

Hannibal sighs, but his shoulders don’t deflate, his eye doesn’t look any less fuller. Danger is lurking. Whatever blossomed in him is flushed with blood, begging to burst. All Will can do is hold him through it and hope not to die on impact. Hope that what is released is not poisonous, nor toxic, nor contagious, or if is, be it all three and kill them both in one fell swoop.

A shudder runs through Hannibal. Will feels it on his fingertips. He leans in and kisses the flat of his nose, the apex of his injuries, where it should but probably doesn’t hurt the most. Hannibal leans in and Will wonders if it stings to be kissed by the man who wounded you on the place he wounded you the least.

“I haven’t been frightened in such a long time that I forgot how helpless it feels,” Hannibal says into Will’s mouth. Will knows he has shut his eye, so he does too. Some conversations must be had by touch and sound alone.

“Falling is an act of courage. You told me that once. Hell, you may have told Wally too.”

Hannibal breathes out a long, long exhale. “I say a great number of things, Will.”

Will winces. Small and bare, that statement is the closest Will ever came to hear Hannibal Lecter admit defeat. Will places a harsh hand on his cheek, forcing him to face him. Sleek like a bottomless lake, slippery like an oracle, his one eye looks on.

“I don’t know how to make you trust me,” Will pleads.

Hannibal smiles, cold and distant. “You can’t.”

Will drops his hand. “No, I suppose I can’t.”

The first impulse is to ask what he wants because, truth be said, Will will likely give it to him sooner or later. But it is not smart to offer an arrogant man the world; he will only ask for the moon next. So strategically, Will proposes:

“Tell me where it hurts and I will make it better.”

Hannibal belts out a full body laughter that will never not catch Will off guard. It’s delightful, in a puzzlingly human and awkward way. Loud as it may be, it is a sound carrying more relief than amusement.

Will rubs Hannibal’s hands between his own as if to warm them, as if they weren’t both sweating in 100 degree weather. “I mean it,” he insists and, for an instant, Hannibal is rendered frozen, staring at their overlapping fingers. A scar healed, another waiting to be formed—an image rife with disturbing meaning.

Like wedding rings, Will thinks, but the kind you can never take off.
“A house,” Hannibal murmurs at length, not fully present. “Somewhere lush and secluded. At first.”

It dawns on Will that, trained to take all he craved, Hannibal may be constitutionally incapable of asking for what he wants. It might be beyond him to imagine himself as a participant in a barter that is not inherently rigged in his favor. It might kill him to even picture himself in such a vulnerable position.

“Can I come?” Attempting to convey levity, Will’s voice ends up sounding uncertain.

“Certainly. If you wish.”

Will sighs exasperated. “Marriage is all I know. I recognize the err of my ways. That I fix instability with conventional forms of ready-made stability. I get it. So I won’t insult you by proposing again. But Hannibal, you and I—” Will fumbles with his words, mostly because he is unsure which words are safe, which words translate appropriately in Hannibal’s vernacular. He isn’t fluent yet. There are concealed holes in the floor of their alphabet. Gesticulating between them Will settles for, “—it can’t be like it’s been so far.”

Hannibal looks away, considering. “No, I imagine it can’t.” When he looks back at Will, his face is troubled by yet another unnamed emotion. “Did I hurt you too terribly?”

Surprised by the sudden earnestness in his voice, Will barks a bitter chuckle, “Yes. Of course you did. All the time.”

Hannibal’s brow pinches. Will traces the shape of his mouth, angular bows blood crusted. He must have bitten himself at some point because one of the lunar cuts matches his crooked fangs. “We can’t go on being side by side but not together. You can’t demand to be let in and keep your own doors closed. I am tired, Hannibal. I am tired of being alone next to you.”

“What if what you find behind those doors displeases you?”

Will shrugs and his shoulder aches where it was punched, “Won’t know until I see it.”

“I love you,” Hannibal says plaintively, but the core of it rings hollow, like a rote shortcut.

“So what? Molly loved me. My dad, my mom, they loved me. Love didn’t make any of us less damaging to be around.”

“I don’t know what you want, Will. I don’t know how to best provide for it.”

“Bullshit. Self-deprecation looks poorly on you, Dr. Lecter. For all your demeaning Molly for her inability to truly see me, you do a bang up job at keeping your eyes closed.”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“Yes, you do. You’re afraid of seeing me and finding out that what I want doesn’t align with what you want.”

“Are you implying I am incapable of compromise, Will?”

“Not incapable. Unwilling. I imagine life hasn’t provided you with many incentives to be otherwise.”

“Are you such an incentive?”
"Am I? I guess we’ll find out."

"What exactly will we find out, Will?"

"If you are capable of seeing me past yourself."

"Is that the kind of love you want?"

"That’s the kind of love you advertised, Dr. Lecter. You told me you loved me for who I was, not what others imagined me to be. Then prove it. See me. Reveal yourself."

"What if—"

Will shakes his head. "No."

"You do not know—"

"Yes, I do. You’ll try to barter. Aren’t you tired of this cycle?"

"No—Well—I am—," he sighs, half affectation, half frustration. "It feels known."

"Tell me: what do you want? Straight up. What do you want, let’s say, for the next five years."

"You."

"What about it?"

"I want you. At the dinner table, in the garden, in bed, in museums and opera houses and the mountains, when it rains, in the hours before dawn and after, when it’s hot and sunny, when you can’t sleep, when there are leftovers, Paris in the spring and Florence in the fall, on marble tops and gold-leafed rooms, in the dark in the dark in the dark."

Will pushes Hannibal’s head to his shoulder and presses his lips against his hairline. Hannibal’s heart is beating so fast Will can feel it on his own ribcage.

A kite caught on a windstorm, Hannibal seems incapable of slowing down. "I want you to eat the meat I bring home and inquire how I harvested it, ask for details on provenance, recipe, rationale, garnish, the cookery and the particular techniques I employed to spin brass into brocade. I want you to taste it and feel it warm your belly, taste the story on your tongue, see the meat fall off the bone where it first met death. I want you to share the kill with me—if not in person, then vicariously. I want you inside me daily, uninterruptedly, eternally. I want you to share everything with me until there’s no part of you that doesn’t recognize me, my body, my memories, my thoughts, by smell and flavor alone."

His body shakes with the intensity of his words. Will holds him tighter as if to keep him from vibrating off his skin.

Will swallows thickly. Time drips by measured in Hannibal’s hiccupy breathing.

"I can do that," Will says after a while, only half jokingly.

Hannibal jerks his head back, seeking eye contact. His one eye is wild. Will doesn’t deny him. "Doesn’t it frighten you?"

Will laughs humorlessly, "Sure it does. But it frightens you too. We can be frightful together."
He lets the word hang between their mouths, the double entendre ripe to be picked.

“Do you meant it? You won’t leave?”

Will nods, and gently squeezes his shoulder. “I mean it. I will stay.”

“Could you be happy with that, Will?”

“That’s not the right question, Dr. Lecter.”

Sighing, Hannibal rephrases it, “What do you want, Will?”

“I want a place away from people. Wilderness. Quiet. Books. A fireplace. Good whiskey. I want to feel the ground under my feet. I want to stop fighting you. I want to eat your food and hear your stories, take up a new hobby, maybe learn more about watchmaking, my father was good at that and I never followed up on what he taught me. I want to fuck you. I want to fuck you without fearing what comes next. I want to let go of Jack and Molly and everyone that ever stood between us. I could visit Europe. I want you to see me and know me. I want to see you and know you and never have you feel alone again.”

Hannibal holds his gaze and, for once, he is the one who looks struck by lightning. Will can see his Adam’s apple bobbing when he whispers, heavy with forced levity, “I know a thing or two about watchmaking and been told to have an excellent taste in alcoholic beverages.”

Will drops his hand and faces the ceiling. Joints creak painfully as he sits up. “I’m going to get you something for that cut. Do you want me to help you into bed?”

Hannibal nods. “Will you join me?”

Will gestures at the mess around them. A dead body, bloody footprints, shattered glass. The stuff of horror movies and crime scenes. Will sighs and cracks his back, “I should take care of this first.”

“Please.”

On the floor, on his back, naked, Hannibal resembles the only thing that he is not: helpless. Will thinks of the other body that necessitates his attention—someone’s son or brother or lover. Not his, though. Not in a sustainable way.


“I’m counting on that,” Hannibal replies dreamily.

Will smiles against Hannibal’s wound (or is it his wound now?), “I was counting on that too.”

He scrambles up and unsteadily drags himself to the bathroom to collect the first-aid kit stashed behind the toilet.

When he comes back, Hannibal is asleep. Will curls around him on the floor.

Instinctively Hannibal curls back into the negative space around Will’s body. Their foreheads careen towards each other, needles on a force field. Before hearing them, Will can feel Hannibal’s words forming against his cheek. His eyes are shut. His hands feel for Will’s in the dark. “You are formidable.”

Will snorts. He cradles Hannibal’s hands between his palms as if to shelter them from old age.
“Yeah, well, gotta keep surviving you somehow.”

Hannibal burrows under Will’s chin, nudging against his bad shoulder and setting up sparks of pain. Will doesn’t pull away. Exhaustion pounds down on him, drugging limbs and dragging brain.

“Will. I promise to do my very best—”

Will rushes to cover Hannibal’s mouth with his left hand, the hand closer to his heart. “Don’t. Let’s just get somewhere safe and stay put for a while.”

Hannibal’s breathing grows deeper and steadier. For a while he seems asleep. Then he croaks “I do love you” his voice taking an unexpected, heartbreaking reediness. “I want to stay inside you until we are both dead. Longer.”

Will chuckles in spite of himself. “That is not even the most disturbing thing you said to me today.”

Leaning in, Hannibal rubs his nose against Will’s bruised windpipe and, not for the first time, Will thinks of him as a feral animal, going through life scrupulously imitating human behavior but failing to leave his pelt behind.

“It’s the truth, Will,” Hannibal drones out, and he does sound sincere—childishly, hopelessly, absolutely so.

“I know,” Will pulls the hair from his forehead. It smells acrid and it feels oily, coated with blood and fear. Will kisses him between the eyes: the good and the bad. “Sleep.”

Hannibal nuzzles into his neck, mumbles something unintelligible, and then for once, obeys.
Tlemcen—Souk Ahras, Algeria

Chapter Notes

Whether you are new or been here for a while, commenting or quiet, I wouldn't still be writing this if it weren't for you so—thank you for being here 90,000 words later.

I wrote this chapter thinking how delicate happiness is and how fragile our bodies are.

(The day came. He went to the flesh, he came back hurting. He went to the future, he came back empty. He moved, nonetheless.)

For the first days they sleep in the car. Their injuries were too remarkable to risk registering at hotels, and Hannibal slept better sitting up anyway, his nose too broken and uncared for to heal properly. Will mourns and rejoices that Hannibal may keep a scar that Will put on his body by force of his own body, unplanned and unmediated, just blunt bone bending cartilage.

The bite on Hannibal’s ring finger they both tend to religiously, with daily baths of vinegar and salt Will mixes and oversees personally.

On the eighth day, when Will kneels on the side of a road to change the bandage, Hannibal regards him closely, head perched low, his left eye steeped shut with a beautiful watercolor of mustard greens and bluish mauves. The way he overcompensates for the lack of sight with a forward tilt of his brow fills Will with an unexplainable tenderness. (A structure tired of being a structure echoes in the backbone of his skull).

Every day after he finishes cleaning the wound, Will tucks Hannibal's hair behind his ear (sometimes there is no hair loose but Will traces the shell of his ear anyway). Every day, he reminds himself that just because a monster is muzzled it doesn’t mean he has lost its teeth.

The uneven pattern mauled by Will’s canines has flourished into an alarming motley of lilac and red skin. Hannibal assesses it against the early morning sun.

“No infection,” and Will can hear the ambivalence in his tone.

Will brushes dust and gravel off his knees. They stole those jeans, like they stole the car they are currently crisscrossing Algeria in. The clothes, like the car, are two sizes too big.

“Did you want one?,’’ Will asks offhandedly.

Still sitting sideways in the passenger seat, long legs crossed out of the open door, Hannibal folds his bandaged hand on his lap. He looks older and solemn and paper-thin.

“I want everything that you will give me, Will,’’ he says wistful, and sad and so desperately honest that Will wants to kiss him then, with the rush and the force of an incoming train.

He has wanted to kiss him since they slipped out of the station in Oujda and hurried to the first bus departing towards the border. Once outside Morocco, they sunk into a comfortable, intimate silence, robust like lukewarm ocean water, holding them in place and on course as they moved with the throngs of tourists.
They had left a dead body behind luxuriously covered in their bodily fluids—mingled fluids, to add insult to injury. Will thinks fleetingly of Molly, of Jack. Of Wally’s supercilious mouth. If there is ever a time they deserve to be caught, this might be it.

Optimist to a fault, Hannibal trimmed Will’s knotted beard in a tiny restroom somewhere in the outskirts of Mostaganem, whistling while working the antique bone-incrusted blade around Will’s sore jaw. “Trust law enforcement’s stupidity, dear Will,” he admonished when Will frowned, refusing to partake in his good spirits.

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(The night came. He went to the past, he came back hurting. He went to the water, he came back burning. He moved, nonetheless.)

On the third day, Hannibal broke into a roadside clinic. Will waited in the car, worrying the seatbelt to tatters. Hannibal emerged later than he had promised, carrying handfuls of gauze, antibiotics, peroxide, saggy jeans, bleached t-shirts, and a sweatshirt with what Will guessed was a tawdry parody of the French flag. He had on a pair of aviator sunglasses Will had never seen before. He waved as he crossed the empty parking lot.

When Will glared, Hannibal twisted the rearview mirror to the passenger side and lazily ran a hand through his unwashed hair, “You don’t like them?”

 Forced to look over his shoulder to do a U-turn, Will rolled his eyes, “I don’t like you very much right now.” Will winced, his broken thumb smarting when he shifted gears, his cracked ribs complaining when he rotated back to the wheel.

He was the designated driver these days, Hannibal’s eye too damaged for alertly navigating small backroads and foreign signage. Hannibal’s French, however, remained pitch perfect, charming border patrol officers and locals alike.

Returning the mirror to Will, Hannibal shrugged and looked out of the window, “Rather inconsequential ‘liking’ if you are in love with me.”

Will gritted his teeth. The dirt road stretched so narrow and poorly lit he had to lean forward to see where the asphalt began and the woods ebbed. “If,” he repeated in both bewilderment and forewarning.

Hannibal switched the radio on and, like magic (always magic with him), operatic music flooded the car, making it impossible to tell for sure, but Will strongly suspected that, under his pretentious breath, Hannibal was chuckling.

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(The day and the night came. They went to the forest, it offered no shade. They went to the fire and the fire froze. They moved, nonetheless.)

Every day and every night, the summer heat bore on them so gamey sleeping with all the windows open did little to keep the sweat off their skin. They parked on the slopes of forested grouts and on the sides of meager creeks, the landscape yellowed by centuries of ruthless drought. They ate out of souks, the back of vans, and occasional vending machines. They bathed in the wild. They drove and drove and drove, eventually taking turns at the wheel, never speaking, rarely scanning for the news, constantly sleeping and being roused by odd sounds—howling and whimpering and crackling—whose provenience remained a mystery.
By the fourth day, Will’s thumb had doubled in size and his breathing had grown labored. Hannibal made him pull over under the smashing midday sun, and forced him to lay down on the backseat of their beat-up van as he improvised a makeshift splint. Will woke up to searing pain as Hannibal maneuvered his thumb left and right.

“I apologize for the pain,” he declared as he pulled on the bone. “It can’t be helped.”

Will hissed a muffled scream, “Yeah but you could have helped breaking it, couldn’t you?”

Hannibal frowned down at him, a mixture of practiced blankness and ill-concealed frustration. All the clothes he wore now—the blowzy tracksuits, the logo t-shirts, the florescent sneakers—did not fit him in the least and yet in nothing diminished his authority, his unshakable sense of dominion over the space around him. As if every corner of the world, every unexplored habitat, were his birthright, just a puzzle waiting to be solved. Will envied him as he had only envied Wally before.

Will also wanted to kiss him then, as they crouched together in the musty pinstriped backseat, all doors and windows open, dry heat rolling over them and painting their stubble with a persistent sheen.

He wanted to, but he didn’t.

They moved with the urgency of runaways, of newlyweds who cannot wait to reach their honeymoon, of bank robbers who speed through the night, anxious to drop their loot. They moved with their bodies, battered and bowled by years of a courtship that provided very little nourishment. Starvation and exhaustion, but caution too, kept them perched on the edge of a bluff they had survived once but never truly mastered. They didn’t know how to recover from what had happened when they zipped off their pretenses. They didn’t know how to go back to touching without tearing each other apart.

As if on cue, Hannibal bent down and drew Will’s splinted thumb into his mouth. The brown scabs on his lips tickled the sensitive patch of skin where thumb met hand. Will leaned in until his head slotted on the grove between Hannibal’s shoulder and neck.

Hannibal lingered. His fingers cupped Will’s wounded hand as if to let go would be to break him all over again. They both looked at it (Will’s sickly pallor wilting against Hannibal’s fading tan) and air congealed in Will’s lungs. It made breathing more painful than it had been since they left the train, more painful yet than when he had sunk into the Atlantic a year ago.

Hannibal mouthed at his wrist, the inside of his elbow, and Will thought, maybe, for a moment, he would break the spell and kiss him.

He didn’t.

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(Sand came, and salt, and brimstone where hellfire could make a landfall. They went to the sea, and the sea ran backwards. He faltered.)

For two days it rained and rained and rained, big gulps of sultry water that threatened to overturn the old silver van. Will curled against the backseat, a medley of mawkish pains screaming his name.

Through the window, he surveilled Hannibal. He stood in the downpour, chin-length hair plastered to his nape as he oversaw the Mediterranean, blue-bruised and thrashing against the bloodless crags.
It was beautiful, Will conceded, and timeless, two forces of nature greeting each other from a
distance, arm-wrestling for sovereignty and endurance.

Hannibal might just about win, Will thought, and smiled.

And then Hannibal turned and his body crumbled. His shoelaces had come undone, soggy with
dingy water, and for the first time, his height did not serve him as an advantage but became a
hindrance as he struggled to keep his balance. Clumsily hands rushed to the mud, one knee folding
in defeat.

Time and circumstances conspired to wear the monster down until the man was as smooth and
pliant as the rocks he crouched on. Hannibal didn’t complain, never so much as uttered a word of
discomfort or pain, but he must be hurting, Will realized, recent and settled fractures refusing to be
shrugged off just because a man commanded them too.

Before he could fully form the thought, Will had stepped out of the car and knelt down. The
ground was soft and slushy under his jeans, but he would only notice it much later, when the brown
spots had stained the cream upholstery. In that instant, Will did not feel the rain, did not feel the
tear on his thumb opening and closing. He kept his eyes on the limp laces as he slipped them back
into a bow. It was an uncomfortably familiar memory, of doing this for his father at daybreak, the
stench of gin and tonic waffling on his cheeks, the cool orange light trickling through their
curtainless windows.

When he finished, Will smiled. He did always have a knack for making crooked things look
perfectly seamless.

Will got up and they stumbled back to the car. They didn’t look at each other.

Once inside, they sat side by side, staring out the waterlogged windshield. The landscape fogged
milky with condensation. A radio station was hard to find in such diluvian weather, but Will kept at
it until something resembling chamber music emerged from the garbled static. You could barely
hear it above the pounding rain, but Will didn’t think it mattered. Hannibal felt for his hand then.
The touch was almost imperceptible, a swift brush of fingers that turned into a slower squeeze.
Will knocked their shoulders together, and only then he felt the rain, the humid deadweight it had
left on Hannibal’s sleeve.

Silence settled between them until Hannibal’s thumb began traveling from Will’s knuckles to his
naked arm, down to where his elbow rested against his hip. It found the seam of his jeans. Blunt
nails teased at them, up and down, thigh to iliac crest, and Will thought of a thread ripper, a fine
metal scalpel trying to cut through the inseams of his body as if it were a quilt, searching for the
weaker point so to pare Will off of his hide.

The image of his body flayed, exquisitely wet-crimson and pulsing, pushed a moan out of his lips.
Will’s eyes fluttered shut and his head lolled against the headrest. He could feel the shift gearbox
nudging his knee as he inched closer, yielding. At least it felt like yielding. He let his legs fall open.
The fingers pressed harder and moved deeper, treading on the seams around his fly.

“You can—,” Will said, and it sounded so strangled that he added briskly, "If you want.”

The rubbing of fingers on coarse fabric stopped. The warmth of a full hand replaced them.

“I have always wanted to,” Hannibal whispered, and something about his tone—drained out of
color, distressed, as flaccid as the shoelaces that had tripped him earlier, made Will crack his
eyelids open. Hannibal's head was bent, his left hand wrapped around Will’s thigh as if measuring
its girth. There was no sting to his touch, just the jutting of his desire, always present between them, never sufficiently satisfied, pathetic in its terribly unmatched stubbornness.

Will felt the urge to volley back that he too always wanted, even though it was a lie, or at least a very partial truth, he felt the compulsion to reciprocate because such was the force of Hannibal’s yearning. Will realized then, on a delay but certainly with urgency, that he held no defenses against Hannibal’s influence. That every barter he tried to keep boundaries in place had been eroded, contrived, gutted. Hannibal would take and take and take because love for him was an extension of himself, an oil spill supplied directly by his lymph nodes. Love for Hannibal was a matter of immunodeficiency. Will was the cancer, the foreign particle that ate him up from the inside out. Faced with such invasion, you either drive it out or fuse with it.

There was pleasure in this thought, if sharp and salty, like blood from a fresh gum wound.

Slowly, Will placed his hand over Hannibal’s and squeezed. Not gently nor affectionately, but determinedly.

If that squeeze had a color it would have been Prussian blue.

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(They went to the night, they stole the fire. They kindled the day, but only one burned. He stayed behind.)

On the seventh night, cold found Will in the backseat. As clammy sweat collected around his neck and chest, Will was transported back to Wolf Trap, to the smell of sickness sticking to his hands and his pillows, dragging the madness out of his mind and into his home.

He walked out of the car.

They had parked by a nature preserve outside Jijel. The night sprawled unnervingly mute and starless, the tree-lines heavy with smoke and distant fire. Will yearned for a shower like he hadn’t yearned since they had left Cuba: a perfumed, full-body, claw-footed bath, steam washing off the grub of years of soured love and aching resentment. It was nothing that he had experienced before but it felt known nonetheless, like a borrowed memory.

His head swooned with a chill, and maybe then, he knew it was bad.

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On the eight morning, after Will cleaned his wound, Hannibal pins him with a clinical stare and says “Let’s find a restaurant,” which is as a bizarre a request as could be expected of a man that had dutifully staved off hunger with fresh fruit, foraged greens, and the occasional street market findings, all while wearing an expression of martyrdom few saints managed to so brilliantly display. Funds, as obscurely unlimited as they always seemed around Hannibal, had been momentarily exhausted since a road-trip through the North African coastline had not been included in his original plans. Will grinned when he gleaned that information from overhead calls Hannibal kept placing in a variety of gas stations and burner phones. “I’m still foiling him at every step,” Will mused giddily each time Hannibal returned to the car, exasperation digging harsher crevices around his mouth.

So when Hannibal suggests a meal out, Will takes stock. He shuffles outside their new ride, delaying the drive. It isn’t fear of desertion or violence exactly, but something else crisps. Something sharper and simpler. Will sighs, the pressure in his chest a poisonous vine speeding to
Hannibal knew. Of course he did. Will sits in the passenger seat and hands him the keys before he had a chance to ask for them. He could argue that he is fit to drive and make a convincing case of it, but it is a question of time now. Breathing and heart-rate had been erratic for three days and the fever that shook him in sleep could no longer be passed off as overheated nightmares. That it took Hannibal days to sniff it out of him offers Will a sliver of satisfaction but not without the pang of sorrow. He likes his monster with all his unnatural senses. Otherwise Will would have to start seeing him as less than divine.

They drive in a granulated silence until they reach a stereotypical diner in Souk Ahras. Hannibal opens the door for Will and stays behind, studying him with unerring intensity. As he ambles through the neon-lit room, Will feels ashamed and conspicuous, a child caught in a white lie.

Eventually, over fried eggs and overcooked steak, Hannibal makes his overture. “You saw something in the train when you were under the influence. What was it?”

Will nods. Not the overture he expected, but one nonetheless. Ariadne teasing the tip of her yarn. “I thought I saw Jack,” Will replies evenly, eyes on his plate. “Instead of that other man.”

“Would you have behaved differently had it been Jack?”

Will chews through his fries with abandonment. He hasn’t swollen yet when he says, “Nope.”

Hannibal stops cutting his steak. He holds his chin, ran amok with peppery beard, and regards Will thoughtfully. His eyes are yellower as his hair grows whiter. “How come?” he asks.

Will glances up. Early morning light streams through the old foggy windows, softening all of Hannibal’s edges. He isn’t smiling, but Will can feel the warmth radiating off him anyway. Not fever hot, but mild. A well-polished affection.

“Listen, a man lays his hands on me, I’ll kick his ass,” Will swirls his fork around. “He lays his hands on you, I will kill him.”

Hannibal huffs a faint laugh and turns back to his meat. “Do you believe I am in need of such severe protection, Will?”

Will shrugs. The ketchup is redder than he remembers. Or maybe he had been making his own for so long, he doesn’t know what bottled ketchup looks like anymore. “From yourself? Most definitely. From some random guys? Probably not.”

Hannibal seems to give that answer his full consideration, cutting motion paralyzed midway. Then he hums, more statement than question, “But you’d still kill him were he Jack.”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

Will flickers his eyes up to Hannibal’s t-shirt, a cotton-blend maroon V-neck, and then down to his food. Hannibal has barely touched it, Will registers, just moved the meat around some. A ruse then, this whole meal. Theatrics to put me at ease. “You know why,” he grumbles, deliberately dunking fries in his coke. “Stop fishing for compliments.”

Surprisingly, nothing in Hannibal betrays displeasure. Light as feather, he quips, “I thought, of the
two of us, you were the fisherman, Will.”

“Sometimes,” Will says noncommittally. The hamburger patty tastes acid and stringy but Will makes an effort to swallow. His chipped molar aches if he doesn't. “Sometimes I am the lure.”

“Even for Jack?”

Will shrugs again and the gesture seems to dislodge his ribs further. “Sure, if I must. I won’t go seeking that game, but I won’t lose it either.” Will pauses, reaching for his coke. He deliberates while he drinks. “Is that what you want to hear? That I pick you? That I will always pick you? Against Molly, against Jack? That you trump them all?”

Hannibal looks away, towards the concrete parking lot. For such an austere man, his body is a cartography of seismic activity, telegraphing displeasure, joy, and anger through minimal topological alterations.

Sighing heavily, Will puts his utensils down. He stretches his hands on the table, on the space between their half-eaten food. Sunlight hits his fingers, revealing the particles of dust trafficking between their bodies. One day Will hopes their atoms merge together and reform the star, the black hole, that spawned them both.

Dead light, Will hears from the back of his mind, the sky is little more than a graveyard of astral bodies and dead light.

He remembers thinking that thought before, shortly after they had settled in Pennsylvania. It was not his thought then, but it is now. It’s theirs.

Will clears his throat. Hannibal still doesn’t turn back to their table.

“Fine,” Will scowls, fingers drumming on the Formica table. “I pick you. I will always pick you. We don’t need to seal it in anyone else’s blood. Let this be between the two of us. Aren’t you tired of always triangulating our relationship? I’m in love with you. You don’t need to share a gruesome tale of Molly’s death for me to choose you. We don’t need to go hunt Jack down. You don’t have to coerce me into murdering some stranger on a train. You can do all those things, and maybe you can get away with them all, but for what? They don’t bind me to you, they don’t bring us closer. Knowing you binds me to you. Your body binds me to you—your hands and you mouth and your mind. I am crazy about them. Your memories. The scars you don’t speak of, visible and invisible. Everything external to your body is of no consequence to my love for you. I am staying because I want you more than I want myself. That’s the truth and you should know it, though we should never speak of it again.”

Will stops abruptly. Words had come out of him as if he had jabbed a knife in his throat. The arterial spray is all over the table now, consuming the air between them.

Hannibal swallows thickly, “Shouldn’t we?”

He had turned towards Will at some point. Will couldn’t tell when. He had kept his eyes trained on the puddle of ketchup swelling under his napkin.

“No, we shouldn’t. You are monstrously conceited as it is.”

Despite himself, Will winks under his lashes, a quick smile grazing his eyes. Hannibal catches it, of course, and holds his gaze rapt, lips parted, head tilted forward. If Will leaned, they could kiss. He could lick him from the hollow of his throat to the inside of his thigh. And back. And back.
The thought shakes him. Will drops his eyes again, sits back straight, crossing his legs tightly. Without looking up, he can tell that Hannibal is smiling one of his inscrutable smiles.

A family of four comes into the restaurant, ringing the bell over the front door and dispelling the charged tension that had suddenly gathered between them. The man has a bright red cap, works with his hands, and beats his wife every time he drinks too much, which is about twice a week now. The drugstore makeup she favors does little to disguise the panic around her mouth, the caution in her two daughters’ gait.

Will thinks of blood running swampy over his forearms, gathering on his elbows. Black holes, blood pools like black holes, caved-in eye-sockets like imploded stars. The man in the red cap overlaps with the man on the train, both hunks of meat shredded by Will’s rabid claws. A spasm jerks through his spine, and Will is abruptly pulled back to the restaurant, to the garish sunlight, the smells of runny eggs and limp fries. He turns his hands back and front seeking for traces of brain matter. They are and they aren’t there. His legs shake so much Will accidentally kicks Hannibal under the table. A hand falls on Will’s knee and begins drawing firm circles over the bone. A glance and Will knows Hannibal knows, that he plugged into Will’s mind and snatched the same image being projected in there.

Hannibal opens his mouth to say something, but strangely closes it again. Will wonders if for once he will be considerate of boundaries and not push.

They exchange a long look when the family changes their minds about staying and the father demands their food to go. The man has a slight limp. Violence must run in his blood: inherited, institutional, sought after.

Will tracks them as they walk out into the parking lot. One of the little girls lingers behind and stares at him through the big bay windows. She hugs a pink stuffed unicorn and has jet-black curly hair. Her nose is already crooked. Soon, someone will find her body. There is little comfort in the idea that it won’t be Will. She raises her hand and waves. Before Will can respond, her mother yanks her into a blue truck and they are gone. Just like that.

Hannibal’s hand presses on his knee, cool and knowing. Will wants to push him off and hold him close until they both can’t breathe.

When Hannibal speaks, it is like a metal screw falling on a china plate. “Will,” he whispers, “I am sorry.”

Will shoves his hand away.

“Don’t.”

He gets up brusquely, rummaging his pockets for change to pay for his meal. Suddenly he can’t be in the same town, the same country, as that man. The man in the red cap, Hannibal, the man on the train, Jack, all the men who ever made him want to kill. To be what he is but can’t be all the time. Not without drowning. It’s too much inky-black poison not to drown in.

“Will, please. I am—”

“Shut up.” Will moves towards the cashier without sparing a glance back. “You are not.”

“I—think I am.” The sound floats from behind him. Hannibal must have followed him out.

“No. You are not sorry. You’re scared. It’s different.”
Will is on the parking lot before he can understand how he made it there. It’s hot for Fall. He feels like sweating off his skin. He can’t remember where they parked so he must wait on Hannibal.

Once they reach their new car, an aquamarine tinker toy so swanky Will must wrestle the urge to key it every time he rides it, Hannibal dithers before unlocking the doors. Will feels as if he is being held hostage.

“Is it that different?,” Hannibal finally asks, and his voice is threaded with a hesitancy that is careworn and curious.

“Wildly,” Will bites out, stirred by an emotion he also doesn’t have a name for but, if it was snowing, he would be pacing back and forth.

Hannibal nods and lets himself in. Will examines him through the shiny windshield, key in the ignition, legs crossed and hands folded, so poised and so at ease even when he is simply waiting. Will stays outside, trapped by the feeling that getting in now would be cheating, the equivalent of throwing the towel, of leaving a bone unpicked.

A cigarette, his soul for a cigarette.

Martyred by the sun, Will gives in to the buzz of air condition trailing through the open window. Hannibal had blasted it right below freezing, the way Will prefers though they never had a conversation about it. The icy air does little for sweetening Will’s mood which is bleak with a resentment he knows not exactly misplaced, but more accurately outdated. He can’t hold Hannibal accountable for his own darkness, not anymore, not when he is so decidedly in love with him. And looking at him drive, steady and solid and perhaps distantly amused in his gold aviator sunglasses and overgrown grey bangs, Will loves him with the kind of open-endedness one can only bestow on those you know too well. Too well to fear, too well to hold back, too well to quit and, sometimes, too well to trust completely.

For a while they drive at hazard, through wild pines and endless winding roads, all windows rolled down, the radio turned off. The clean air clears Will’s mind. Knowing that Hannibal is not following any preset itinerary does too. When he trusts his voice not to carry bitter spirits, Will brushes his knuckles against Hannibal’s. Without taking his eyes off the road, he holds Will’s three middle fingers and tucks them under his own on the steering wheel so he can drive safely without letting go. The gesture alone blindsides Will, triggering an old urge to cry.

To keep himself in check, Will picks at the ivory upholstery. The landscape has changed twice before he mutters, “Don’t say it again.”

“I won’t.”

“Not until you are sure—”

“I won’t,” Hannibal repeats, and he sounds final if not unkind.

Will nods. Outside, the pines turn into mountain ranges and he can finally breathe again.

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That night, when the liquid vinyl of heat and darkness blankets them both, Hannibal slips into the backseat. He wraps his arms around Will’s sleeping body and presses chapped lips to his nape.

Drowsily Will shifts in his arms, trying to get closer. Between the seat and Hannibal’s body, there’s nowhere else to go. He can hear air struggling to move through Hannibal’s broken nose.
“Can you breathe alright like this?,” he asks and Hannibal smiles against his forehead.

“I will be fine, Will.”

It stays quiet for a long moment, Will’s shivers braced by Hannibal's chest. Crickets and running water can be heard in the distance. Will breathes in, seeking for that clear saltiness, the freedom of oxygenated greenery, of health and life, but all he can smell is his own lungs, drowning in infection.

“I am not sorry I broke your nose,” he mumbles to the plush upholstery above Hannibal's shoulder.

“I am not sorry you did either,” Hannibal fires back so fast Will could have missed it amidst the kisses smeared on his collarbone.

A bemused sort of bone-deep understanding passes between them, and Will can’t keep it inside anymore. The words bleed out of him.

“Will you still love me if I am not a killer?”

The ensuing pause is hurtful because it’s so full instead of readily empty. The baked landscape crackles with heat, an eerily human sound. Like giggling girls.

“There is no lifetime in which I wouldn’t love you, Will,” Hannibal replies at last.

If he could, he wouldn’t have pressed. As it were, Will couldn’t help pushing as much as Hannibal could help ripping him apart to sew him back together.

“Yeah but would you love me more if I were a killer?” Will says "more" but he means something else altogether. It might just not be a qualifier for it. Not exactly.

The question echoes in the night, bouncing off their joint skin. Will can feel Hannibal inhaling carefully, kissing the sensitive patches of connective tissue along his throat, his jaw, behind his ear. He tightens his grip around Will’s stomach until Will can’t breathe anymore, his chest surging against Hannibal's in a desperate attempt to sieve for oxygen. For a moment, all Will can hear is the drumming of Hannibal’s heart rubbing against his heart, the garnet beat funneled by their mingled sweat. Hannibal's cock hardens against his quadriceps and Will believes he can hear that too.

At last, Hannibal dips his head down. Will parts his lips immediately, to draw air out or draw his tongue in seems an irrelevant distinction at the time. Air eventually does hurl out, but by then Will is coughing and coughing and coughing, painting their mouths, his fingers, and Hannibal’s collar with cherry-red blood, and that is about that for their midnight chat.
Tunis, Tunisia

Chapter Notes

*Sigh* There are extra chapters now. Another monster chapter, so I’m splitting it in three parts. (I’m starting to think this story owns me and not the other way around!)

Reading some of your last comments made me realize that what I find loving and tender, you may find unresolved or sad. That said, these next chapters all seem on the "lighter" side to me.

“Promise me that if I am caught, you’ll kill me. I don’t want to live without.”

“Will—”

“Promise me. I am not going back to jail and I am not going back to hell. So—promise me. Just break my damn neck. Make it quick.”

They are standing in a paved parking lot under a mustard sky, disheveled and muss-haired from a whole night of sleepless driving, and it is hot, so very hot, always hot inside and outside that Will can’t stop hugging himself although Hannibal told him twice not to, that it will make matters worse, but there’s a frisson of madness fizzing in Will’s brain now and it shakes him until his eyesight waltzes into little white clouds, and then Hannibal is too close, his arms coming around Will’s shoulders in slow-motion, warm and cautious, his chin pausing on Will’s head and Will knows he is being subjected to a condescending type of kindness, familiar to exasperated parents and small-town priests.

He leans in anyway, begrudgingly comforted by the smell on Hannibal’s white t-shirt: sweat, car upholstery, leather, cortisol, and seashore, from when he stopped to collect their new papers at the docks. There is a faint note of antiseptic already, which Will tells himself might not be really there. He buries his nose in it still, on the spot over Hannibal’s heart, and shakes his head over and over again. “No,” it vibrates off him, as if the word could shield him from himself. “No no no.”

Hannibal’s hand comes to the back of his skull, pressing intently. It keeps him in place as much as it brooks no argument. “Will,” he mutters into his hair, and it is the way he says it, low and stern and so desperately certain that jolts Will back a step. That certainty harbors an edge of fear. That certainty belongs to a lover, not an expert. Will should know. He tried to be both and failed.

“Will,” Hannibal maneuvers Will’s jaw up, peers into his eyes. “Will, you are not a wanted man. I am. You are free to go anywhere. Accidents happen everyday to tourists. That’s all. You were injured abroad. You need medical attention. Just go in and ask to be seen by a doctor.”

New shapes skyrocket, triangular and brutally sharp, threatening to cut Will if closes his eyes. He shakes his head again, nauseous with unease. “But you—”

“—I will wait for you to contact me as agreed,” Hannibal cuts him off smoothly.

An instrument appears in his hands, sleek and pliable. Will looks down, to where Hannibal’s fingers wrap around his wrist. A wallet, brown and battered, square-shaped and thick. The money,
yes, they discussed the money on the drive over the border. Will can remember now, vaguely, Hannibal's sharp voice repeating words at random, sometimes his full name, once Abigail’s and her father’s, anything, Will suspected, that would keep him from slipping into unconsciousness. The wallet feels funny in his hands, too heavy and too foreign, like a dead man’s life in a fist-sized package.

Hannibal lets go only to bring out another object, and Will is getting too tired of standing in the sun and sort these things out. He lets Hannibal turn him around and wedge something in his back pocket. “I’m on speed dial,” he says all business. “I’m your only contact.”

“But—”

“Will,” and there it is, the man he remembers from Baltimore, a sundial, an anchor for stray dinghies. Do lifeboats need rescue too?, Will muses, and for a moment his mind wanders away into the quiet of the stream. The pain provoked by Hannibal pinching his dislodged shoulder returns Will to the hospital parking lot. Hannibal is pointing at a pair of industrial sliding doors. “Will. Your illness is beyond me. You must go.”

Will shakes his head again. Cold ripples thorough him like shattered glass. His throat tastes of blood. “But you are just letting me go,” he whines, and it does sound like a dog howl, high-pitched and dispirited. “In there. Alone.”

“Yes,” Hannibal nods, arms crossed over his torso. Is he cold too?, Will wonders, or is it something else?

Panic rushes in, periwinkle and filled with spikes. A lovely-colored wreaking ball. It occurs to Will this might be a smartly disguised breakup. Jittery, he blurts out, “I could turn you in. I could run away.”

Hannibal’s eyes stay the same, focused and inflexible. But something flickers behind the wax mask, quiet and slithering. “You won’t.”

“How can you know?”

Hannibal sighs and his brow softens, a disturbing magic trick. Exhaustion surfaces then, dark wells dug around his mouth and eyes. “Will. I have to hope.”

Will scrunches his whole face, his whole body too. “Who are you?”

“You know who I am.”

“Not right now, I don’t.”

Will starts pacing, the frenzy of adrenaline sobering him up. They are loitering outside a major international hospital, two murders having a spat over emergency care and romantic commitment. Something must come loose in Hannibal too because, that instant, his shoulders sag and his hands fall empty by his side.

“I love you, Will,” he says to the gunpowder pavement.

A poem emerges from Will’s fevered brain, a broken fragment from a murder case involving high-school sweethearts: What did my arms do before they held you? The urge to say it out loud, to Hannibal, at the door of a foreign hospital right before he checks himself in, is too overwhelming, too dangerous in its unexamined bluntness, so Will backtracks into glibness, something he knows
to have served him well in the past.

“Sure. But you don’t trust me.”

“Don’t I?”

“Do you?” Will peeps from under his lashes and feels his cheeks flush. Hannibal does not smile, not exactly, but he brushes the hair off Will’s sweaty forehead in a way that is so fond, so convivial, Will’s dread lifts for an instant.

“I guess we shall see,” he singsongs. Then he turns around and walks away.

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The blasting air conditioner and the Tiffani blue walls remind Will of his fraying awareness, of the grubbiness of his skin, stewed with fever and improper washing. What is he doing? How bad could a chest infection and a collapsed lung get that a retired surgeon couldn’t fix it? The idea that Hannibal might be playing him for a fool returns ten-fold as Will makes his way to the front desk.

A security guard nods at him, and Will nods back, self-consciously touching his cheek, only to find his scar buried in patchy beard. It had grown wild again, after a week in the wind. His brain whistles—dream-catchers, tubas, and church bells—but curiously no police sirens. In sickness, his brain has grown to mirror Hannibal’s, concocting cast-iron sounds Will has no memory of taking note. In sickness as in health, he thinks to himself, and laughter bubbles unbidden and splintered, a guffawed half-mad noise.

A girl in blue scrubs speaks to him in a language he can’t understand, but he knows his script down pat, the one Hannibal drilled in him all night long, so Will keeps replying in his most obnoxious American accent until a man appears and provides him with paperwork in English.

His whole body shakes making it impossible to write legibly but that might be to his advantage.

It crosses his mind the wreckage of his body might be a psychosomatic cry for help and, for a long instant, Will stands there, leaning heavily on the counter doubting his own mind, and Christ, it’s like nothing ever changes and Hannibal is still slow-broiling his brain under the flame of sickness and curiosity, merging desire with fear until you couldn’t tell one apart from the other, himself apart from the killer.

Goddammit, Will bites out loud when blood wells up on his throat and his chest constricts in pain, and it dawns on him he might never see Hannibal again, and that, more than the prospect of death, incarceration, or suffering, propels him to straighten up and finish filling the fucking form in.

He leaves the first questions to the end: name, address, birthday. He opens up the wallet and there it is, amidst a fat wad of 100-dollar bills, his Virginia driver’s license, peeking from under the leather sleeve, dark-blue and worn out at the sides. Valid until 2019, it says. He should be surprised, but he isn’t, not really. Hannibal is the type of man who will save you from drowning and keep your wallet only to remind you of what you stand to lose. There is water-damage to the top portion of it, the color washed off a bit, but it’s his original driver’s license alright. William S. Graham it says, his full name and all. It turns his stomach in a whole different way, to be confronted with this wide-eyed man now, in a plaid button-up and thick-rimmed glasses. How naive he looks, a child waiting for the world to have its way with him.

You didn’t know what was coming then, he whispers to his old self. I don’t want to tell you either.

It would be easy to write down the truth, call Hannibal on his bluff. Would Jack come?, he
wonders distantly. Would Molly? Would they feel vindicated by the tapestry of damage done to his body?

The girl in blue scrubs stares pointedly at him. Sweat has drenched the paper under his hand. Will grimaces apologetically and starts piling dollar bills on the desk, too woozy to be able to count. The girl’s eyes trail to his bruised neck, his splintered thumb, and her gaze softens. Injuries she is intimately familiar with, Will imagines, either by obligation or by choice.

It’s the methodicalness of his deductions that gives it away: he is trying to buy time so he doesn’t have to proffer his ID. Silently he curses Hannibal for his endless games, the tests and the acrobatics of loving someone you just want to cook with but who sees you as prey, so they must hunt you as their meat.

“I love you, you fucking idiot,” he may have said out loud, and the girl’s eyes soften further as she taps on the first line of the form and whispers kindly, “Just do the best you can.”

Yeah, yeah, Will bets if he lifted her shirt he would find a bruise or two not unlike his own. Is there a world where men do not mistakenly hone strength through violence?, Will thinks angrily, blood dripping from the darkest recesses of his skull, and every one of those corners speaks in Hannibal’s voice, serpentine and sticky with pomegranate juice.

Resigned, he pulls the driver’s license out only to find another slotted behind it. It looks exactly the same but has a different name, address, and number. Gabriel Graham, it reads, born July 20, 1978, Wolfs Corners, Pennsylvania.

Joy and heartache and confused surprise, the elemental components of recognition, leap in his gut and Will is laughing, sobs unhinged from whatever part of his brain is still able to be amused by Hannibal’s sick sense of humor, still moved by the enormity of their bond, whatever that might be, well love, yes, well, better just get used to labeling it that way, because there is no other word for it at the moment, or maybe “more” is the word, Will’s brain rambles as he writes down his dead twin’s name, and another woman, darker-skinned and brighter-eyed, cups his elbow, and Will turns and hears the girl in blue scrubs speak in that first language he doesn’t understand, quickly and quickly, until it’s all blissfully black and silent and cool.

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When he wakes up in a small grey room, sitting on a stretcher with a Dixie cup on his hand, Will knows he has lost time. He looks up and the woman in a white coat is chatting with the girl in blue scrubs. They look down at him, and there it is again, the thunderclap of absolute compassion and sympathy and sorrow.

“Mr. Gabriel Graham,” the older woman says in a lilting accent, “I’m doctor Dolor. You are in the International Hospital Center of Tunisia. You are ill. Can you understand me, Mr. Graham? Can you nod for me if you do?”

Will does. He checks for his phone and wallet and, once he finds them, he vows to stay silent.

Instead, he asks, “What did she say?” he points at the girl in blue. “Earlier, by the front desk. She said something. I know she did.”

The doctor glimpses up from a chart. Both women’s eyes are chockfull with an emotion Will knows too well. It lived in his father’s face anytime his mother’s name was brought up. The doctor seems to consider it for a moment, and there is something in her expression, her eyebrows or her mouth, that reminds him of Molly. A certain willingness to set the wrongs of the world right.
“She said ‘love makes fools of us all’.”

The doctor scribbles some notes and pushes Will down on the stretcher gently. Her eyes are still misty when she smiles a prefab smile and lies, “Now you just wait here and we’ll make it all better.”

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“Hey. The doctor is going to keep me here overnight.”

Hannibal picked up on the first ring. Briskness bleeds into his voice, cracking it just below the surface. “Can’t it be avoided?”

Will feels a surge of annoyance curse through him as he covertly crouches behind a door, wearing less than a tunic, his thoracic cavity a greenhouse on fire.

“You broke three of my ribs, Hannibal,” Will hisses. “I got damage to my lungs and chest. They want me to stay longer than a night.”

A sharp inhale and a brief pause, “I’ll be there shortly.”

Then the line goes dead.

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Will didn’t know what to expect, but it wasn’t the version of Hannibal that marched into the triage room, all hellfire and brimstone. The incompleteness of this Hannibal struck Will the hardest: the unbuttoned gold cuffs, the unpolished leather shoes, the uneven wet hair. He had dyed it blonder this time and trimmed his beard back to cover most of his mouth and jaw, giving him the look of a weathered playboy. His nails were still too jagged, the purple dusting of bruises on his neck and eye too garish, the telltale signs of a beast wearing a gentleman's disguise.

Will could count down to the second the moment Hannibal found him leaning against a corner stretcher because his whole body shifted from combative to defensive, and boy wasn’t that a sight to behold. He strode right up to Will, so resolute and so suddenly Will had to careen backward or he would step on his feet.

“Wow wow, slow down,” Will held his hands up automatically, but when Hannibal’s agitation didn’t dissipate, when it threatened to engulf him too, Will placed both palms on his chest, feeling for the muscle rippling under the fabric. Up-close his breathing seemed surprisingly flat but underneath the silk, his heart galloped.

“You’re here now,” Will whispered more for Hannibal's benefit than his own.

“Of course,” he nodded petulantly. “Where else would I be?”

In spite of himself, Will smiled. He gestured towards Hannibal’s superb dress shirt, the well-cut black trousers. “I am gonna go with tailor? Maybe barber?”

Hannibal snapped his lips disapprovingly, but his hands had come to rest over Will’s, pressing him closer to his chest, or as close as they both dared in a surveilled public space. His heart rabbited still, under Will’s splayed fingers. He imagined Hannibal wanted him to know.

Will leaned in. “You look good,” he whispered into his ear and Will couldn’t help smiling wider when Hannibal ducked his head in a trained display of modesty.
“Thank you, Gabriel.”

Will scoffed and stepped away. Hannibal held his wrists so he couldn’t go far. “Yeah, I thought I’d have you to thank for that little stunt.”

“Well, you did need a new name.”

Will looked up mostly because he wanted to see in Hannibal’s eyes the smile he heard in his voice. It was there, streaked with a canopy of other emotions, predominantly amusement and a kind of thwarted panic. Something softer too, that Will had begun to associate with what love looked like on Hannibal Lecter. It looked like an ambush that had not turned out completely unpleasant.

Will stepped back in, close enough for Hannibal to kiss him if they were alone. They weren’t so he didn’t, but Will knew he wanted to and that was really the point.

God, Will buckled under his gaze. God.

Holding eye contact, Will volleyed back in a pantomime of his southern drawl,

“I guess you right. I did need me one of those. Ain’t I lucky to have you help with these things, Mischa? Ain't I lucky at all?”

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Although nurses kept milling around throwing disapproving stares, Hannibal did not move. He did not move when the doctor came back and described the procedures necessary to drain all the fluid from Will’s lungs, nor when she itemized his week-long in-site recovery, nor when a nurse appeared to assign him to a private room.

Hannibal didn’t ask questions, did not speak much past introducing himself as a fellow American expat. The aura of raging power he gave off kept everyone at bay. Money, Will suspected, a lot of it, was likely also helping the situation some.

As they waited in the triage room, his fingers kept straying to Will’s. At one point, he clung to Will’s uninjured thumb like a child on his first day of school.

“It’s going to be okay,” Will found himself murmuring.

“Of course it is,” Hannibal scoffed, arrogance doubled, mouth red with biting. “Why else would I have brought you here? You seem determined to forget that I was a surgeon, Gabriel.”

Will took his hand and squeezed. Impotence made him rude, Will realized with a twitch. “I love you,” he taps in Morse code against the bulging veins roping Hannibal’s forearm. “I love you I love you I love you.”

Will wonders when all caution was thrown three sheets to the wind, when did elaborate anti-detection gambits become less important than holding Will’s hand in a hospital room.

Around them, patients are brought in and out. Bleeding head wounds, bloated stomachs, protruding bones, weeping children.

“It looks ugly doesn’t it,” Will says eventually. “When you see it from this angle. In an emergency room, like a battered wife.”

“Will!” Hannibal’s tone is so dramatically shrill, Will is torn between insult and bitter amusement.
In the end, he just shrugs, “What? I’m telling it like it is.”

Silence falls between them uneasy and pelted. It's an ugly thing too, to strip their relationship from its most baroque theatrics, to bring down the lofty emotions to its basest consequences, to prosaic and grotesque things like infected chest cavities, pus, blood in urine, unfixable fractures, and impending cardiac arrest.

They stand against the stretcher for a good while, just staring at the ambulance entry, until Hannibal spits out, angrier than Will had seen him in weeks. Months even. “I love you.”

“You need to stop saying it like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like a band-aid,” Will observes.

The air is tinted with something, a smell Will cannot decode. If he were a betting man, he would say Hannibal can't either.

"I seem unable to help myself.”

“Do you find yourself wanting to say ‘I’m sorry’ instead?”

"Perhaps,” Hannibal drums on the stretcher, fingers nimble and furious. "Sometimes. I am—" he sighs, deflated "—uncertain.”

Will turns to regard him but he just keeps staring ahead. “How does that feel like?”

“What?”

“Uncertainty.”

A ghost of a smile hovers over Hannibal's lips, shy and misshapen. “It smells like you, Will”

“And what’s that like?”

Hannibal faces him at last, and his eyes are unfathomably moveable, like bats in the dark. “Vinegar and salt.”

Abigail's voice echoes in Will's brain, itself a specter from another life. Another time. A shiver runs up his spine, portentous and disquieting.

A male nurse manifests by their side then, gesturing for Will to lay down on the stretcher. They both know soon Will will be cut open. Neither of them moves.

“You should go,” Will whispers at last.

“I am not going to leave,” and he sounds as affronted as a deposed king would.

“Yes, you are. What good will come of you getting arrested? You landed me in hospital, I’d like to avoid the morgue for now.”

Hannibal stands up and hums, back so straight it seems about to snap. “Without any official bond between us it might prove difficult to visit you.”

Will reaches out and tucks a stray lock of hair behind his ear. “You will think of something.”
The smell of melted butter and brewed coffee rouses him before the clinking of metal cutlery does.

“Good morning, Gabriel. I have brought you breakfast.”

Will pushes up against the headboard and surveys Hannibal moving through the trickling sunlight, a familiar line of soft color and ramrod warmth, spreading china plates and glass Tupperware on his bed tray, the nightstand, and the window ledge.

Will scrubs his eyes. “How the hell did you get in here this early?”

Hannibal shrugs at the same time he pours coffee in two clay mugs. “I did not ask for permission.”

“Of course you didn’t.”

Will smiles and accepts his cup with a thankful nod. It tastes just right: lightly sweetened, almost cold, bold. Hannibal putters around, pulling a bread tray out of a wicker basket, a paperback, a chrome thermos which, knowing him, probably contains an exorbitantly priced, high-potency fruit juice. (It does. It’s orange-goji-kale-pomegranate enhanced with a vitamin blend, or so Hannibal reports).

It’s all lovely and laborious, and Will feels instantly ashamed of the attentions lavished upon him.

“You look terrible,” he mutters. “Did you sleep at all?”

To a casual viewer, Hannibal would look immaculate. But Will can distinguish the ridges on his mouth, the creases around his collar. Those little foibles tell a different story.

“It has proven difficult to sleep,” Hannibal admits over his shoulder as he picks up flaky puffs out of a pink box and displays them on a silver platter.

“In a proper bed?,” Will quips.

“Without you.”

Will almost drops his mug. “Jesus Christ, how are you so—”

“—loving.” Will reaches for a sugar puff, perched right at the edge of his nightstand. He chews gingerly, letting the nutty sweetness burst in his mouth. “It’s jarring.”

Hannibal sips into his coffee, legs crossing and uncrossing politely. He is wearing a rose-gold shirt that makes his skin tanner and his eyes yellower. Will eats his puff in silence thinking back to a time when those details would be lost on him.

“I’ll have you know that I always prided myself in being a generous host and an attentive friend, Will.”

Will grins meanly, “You killed your friends and fed them to your guests, Hannibal.”
Hannibal fastidiously tears at a miniaturized baguette, turning the butter plate on the ledge. The knife looks too sharp and too shiny not to be sterling silver. He must have found the rabbit hole back into his wealth alright, if this extravagance is anything to go by.

“Be as it may, my kindness shouldn't surprise you.”

“You tried to kill me. Repeatedly,” Will scowls. “The last time was little over a week ago. Forgive me for being hesitant about your bedside manners.”

“Will,” Hannibal growls, and it’s partially a warning but it’s mostly endearingly exhausted. It’s difficult to feel threatened by a man who rushes to offer you a napkin as the filling of your pastry pops out.

Will examines the mound of egg-colored cream caught in Hannibal’s palm. There’s still a lingering indentation of Will’s nails when they drove into his flesh. Will lifts his hand and licks the cream clean. When he snags Hannibal’s eyes, he looks years younger and lighter. Perhaps it’s the slanted sunlight or the pink shirt or the coppery hair, or just the way tenderness dulls the emptiness in his eyes. Will kisses his wrist for good measure, for the prospect of making that lightness stay.

“I love you too,” Will says to the napkin on his lap. “Just—go easy on me.”

Hannibal is back on his chair, an almond pastry inches from his lips.

“Never,” he retorts, and the smile is still there, incandescent, when he brings in an exotic fruit platter later that afternoon.
Hannibal is there every day after Will’s first surgery. Not just every day but almost every waking hour. Will imagines he must be recompensing nurses and security guards rather handsomely because they never as much as poke their heads in while he is in the room with Will.

They don’t talk about his medical condition, the procedures he undergoes, or his recovery. They don’t even talk much at all in the beginning, when Will is too groggy and weak to speak without effort. Will supposes Hannibal leaves when he sleeps, in those lazy hours spreading after lunch and before dinner, the time when Hannibal finally excuses himself without needing to be escorted out (such was not the case the first night, but they don’t talk about that either, because when the security guard grabbed Hannibal’s shoulder it came too close to chaos for comfort).

They sit together in busy silence, interrupted by beeping machinery and jovial chatting outside the closed door. Hannibal reads avidly, paperback after paperback, sometimes one a day. Philosophy, true crime, astronomy, culinary sciences, he reads and reads with an abstract smile in his glowing face, and Will regards him: regards him when he speeds through the pages or lingers on an illustration, regards him when he occasionally nods off, when he swans in the room at daybreak, wicker basket brimming with the finest delicacies found in town: embroidered napkins and damask towels, hand-painted china and Arabic coffee.

Convalescing becomes a sort of everlasting golden vacation, the kind Will, growing up poor and itinerant, never got to enjoy.

Once or twice, he wakes up to Hannibal’s hand wrapped around his naked ankle, distractedly drawing circles on his heel.

“Hello Mischa,” Will yawns.

“Hello Gabriel. How do you feel today?”

“So-so. Parched, actually. Is there some of that fancy juice?”

Hannibal puts his book down and does the impossible feat of producing a porcelain carafe from under the bed without displacing his hand from Will’s ankle.

“Here it is.” A straw sticks out, aluminum, not plastic, because of course Hannibal cannot abide by anything disposable.

Hannibal pours himself a cup and they sip in silence, the late-afternoon sun shimmering through the open blinds.

Will smacks his lips in contentment and Hannibal stares at him, unabashedly proud.

“You made this batch yourself, didn’t you?”

If Hannibal were a man capable of blushing, he might have then. Instead, he turned back to his book and replied unaffectedly, “Yes.”

He goes back to reading and Will lets him be. He distracts himself by making an inventory of the items in his room. Hannibal’s jacket on the chair, which means it must be getting cold out. His reading glasses on the table, which Hannibal only wears intermittently, Will suspects because he is struggling with the reality that is body is beginning to fail him. A box of Will’s favorite baked
goods, still sealed, waiting for Will’s appetite to make itself known. Another burner phone. A basket of fresh dates covered by a linen napkin.

A different paperback on his hands. The front cover reads *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Will laughs and, when Hannibal’s eyes snap back to him, Will stretches a hand out.

“Come here.”

Hannibal regards him with a mix of wariness and skepticism. The chair did travel slightly closer to Will’s bedside each day, but it’s been an incremental climb for a reason, designed to deflect any sort of attention. Or refusal.

Will understands then that Hannibal is enjoying this fragile truce they’ve concocted in the liminal space of the sickroom, this strangely public-private glass-dome where neither of them are fully themselves, when all they are supposed to do is play up their kindest, meekest facets. Will doesn’t want it to end either. He just wants it to get better, fuller. More.

“Come here and kiss me, Hannibal,” Will commands.

The book goes down on the table by the bed, next to the flowers, big yellow sunflowers that make the room seem twice as livelier. Hannibal changes them daily, two times a day if it is frightfully warm, because death scares him now, or organic decay does, Will isn’t sure which.

Hannibal kneels on the bed soundlessly, and it is chilling how stealthy he can be, how such a long, muscular body can be engineered to defy gravity, to kill without being noticed.

He moves up the bed and over Will’s body like the shadow of a vampire in an old black and white movie. Will’s heart races and he yanks him the rest of the way up, until Hannibal is settled firmly on top of him and they are panting just because they are touching.

His nose has mostly healed, but the bump remains, conspicuous like a promise, a knife wound to a tree trunk. It has Will’s name scrawled all over it.

When he first initiated this, Will thought they would kiss with closed lips, a dry press, but now that Hannibal’s body is on his hips, his chest carefully kept from his bandages, his nose brushing his throat, Will is less sure of how they are going to go about this without fucking each other into the mattress.

“Kiss me,” Hannibal murmurs pleadingly, and the low brag of his voice reverberates all the way down to Will’s toes, so that his tongue is inside Hannibal’s mouth before he can take the next bout of air, and kissing, Will thinks dimly, shouldn’t feel so sentimental or so meaningful or so damn humanizing, but there they are, clutching at each other as if they were pitching themselves into moonlight water, Will’s legs coming around to kick blankets and find Hannibal’s thighs and they are whispering too, not words, or not full sentences anyway, but small lullabies in incompressible vernaculars, and Will’s hands cling to his jaw, fingers running through rough beard until it burns, and goddammit you bastard he says, and Hannibal huffs an absolutely heartbreaking laughter inside his mouth which Will catches the tail-end of in his diaphragm, where his hand snaked under fabric in search for bare skin, and goddammit it with your fancy juices and your witty banter and your mutinous books, fuck you, what am I to do, what the fuck did my arms do before they held you, you bastard, and then Hannibal is not laughing anymore, he is kissing Will’s eyes shut, noisily and sloppily, all sense of decency and self-control gone, and when his hand drops under Will’s waistband, Will isn’t sure he can bear it, if he’ll be able to sustain his touch without fainting or vomiting or yelling because all of his flesh is alight like a forest fire deep down in Western Pennsylvania where summer dies dramatically with the explosion of the first indigo sky.
“Happy Anniversary, Will Graham,” Hannibal rumbles in his ear, his thumb tracing Will’s facial scar, his cock pushing against Will’s hip.

Will shifts so he can stare at him head-on. Hannibal too is aglow with the chemical madness that erupts when they let themselves rub against each other until sparks somersault.

“Happy Birthday, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal’s brow frowns and then vaults, information slotting together to form a coherent mathematical formulation.

“Court documents?”

Will tilts his chin challengingly. “That too. And you were a popular man in your time, Dr. Lecter. Data like that got around.”

Hannibal licks his lips, raw from rutting against Will’s beard. He chooses his next words with an unusual amount of care. “Did you deliberately plot to kill me on my birthday, Will?”

Will beams at him, rearing his head back slightly. This is being more fun than he initially expected. Every time Will had fantasizing telling Hannibal about this, he imagined bile and wrath would drive the confrontation forward, not lust-filled yearning and heart-pounding love. But, as with most things in Will’s life, reality always upstaged his imagination.

“If you had to die, I wanted you to be free first,” Will chirps. “If you were to feel sunlight one last time, I thought gracious that it would be on your birthday.”

“So you conspired to have me released on my birth date.”

“Yes.”

“Knowing I would likely die that day?”

“Yes.”

For a split second, Hannibal breathes heavily over Will’s mouth, his body sprawled on his, his groin pressing on Will’s, his hands buried high in his hair, and Will thinks, he could kill me now, just a quick twist to the left and my neck would snap.

Arousal spreads molten through his bones, making his hips thrust against Hannibal’s in quick circular motions.

Instead of killing him, Hannibal nuzzles him. His hands dips under Will’s underwear and he touches him now, slow and gentle, a caress that will never bring him to completion but will keep him wanting and at Hannibal’s mercy. Will’s breathing picks up and his limbs slip away from Hannibal’s back, suddenly too heavy with desire.

“What a brilliant boy you are, Will.”

Will manages to quill a broken moan into a grin, “Did you like your gift, doctor?”

Hannibal kisses his neck, his grip firming up as he stokes Will from root to tip again and again and again. Will can tell that his control is slipping as soon as his pace speeds up. He wants Will too much to play games with himself. He wants him too much to be able to play at all.

“Did you like yours, Will?,” he pants against his cheek.
Will catches his eyes, half-lidded and thrumming with heat. He drawls, “Oh yeah. I always wanted to own a monster.”

Hannibal’s motion grows rougher, his voice harsher. The skin on Will’s cock chafes with dryness and hunger and impatience.

“Do you still think I am a monster, Will?”

“Aren’t you?”

The stroking stops abruptly, and Will growls. Both hands come to hold his jaw and then the monster does throw all caution into the wind and curls soundly around Will’s battered chest. He brings his knees up to his belly, hands stacked under his head, a quotation mark wrapped around Will’s side like a vine around a tree. It’s a disturbingly childlike posture, nearly fetal.

And then Will knows. Hannibal doesn’t want to fuck him, not anymore, not here, not in this delicate cocoon of sunflowers and hand-pipped pastry, where they are both kinder and safer and more vigilant of their pasts because they must, because their freedom depends on keeping the bloodiest of their natures in check. He wants Will to love him, all of him. He wants Will’s body to make room inside his body, not out of clandestine lust or anger, but legitimate communion. A covenant of flesh made by two.

Will loops an arm under Hannibal’s torso, bringing him closer, until they both fit snug on the tiny hospital cot. “We’ll make love on high-thread-count sheets, what about that? In a chalet somewhere.”

He can feel Hannibal smiling against his skin. “You do indulge me so, Gabriel.”

Will kisses the top of his head. The sun had gone down, taking the chamomile-blondness of Hannibal’s hair with it. Will breathes him in, and under the sugariness of hotel soap, his original scent is still there, rowdy and tangy, and screaming Will’s name.

“What can I say, Mischa,” Will yawns, the throbbing between his legs subsiding painfully. “One gets tired of living a life with empty arms.”
The last morning before his release is the first Will wakes up alone. The absence of those smells he has come to associate with Hannibal—freshly baked bread, freshly pressed linen, freshly squeezed orange juice—is almost as cruel as the emptiness spreading inside Will. It’s spiked with something else beyond emptiness, a dread that leaves a chlorine taste in the roof of his mouth.

Somehow their bodies had found a way to never separate, to be always in contact: a palm resting on a knee, a finger on the crook of an elbow, a head to a shoulder.

To not be touched upon awakening feels brittle, like a tree deprived of water.

Will blinks against the glaring sunshine streaming through the open blinds. A tall, dark-haired woman in yellow scrubs moves competently about the room, checking monitors and collecting fallen blankets Will stranded in his sleep.

The nurse, like Will, is an American but, more than that, she is a born-and-bred Southerner—Georgia or South Carolina if Will ventured a guess. Will knew it the moment she walked in his room, six days prior, and cussed Hannibal for keeping Will alert when he should be asleep, for displacing the furniture in the room, for opening the shades too wide, and for feeding Will honey-soaked pastry and pistachio-studded fried shrimp when he should be on a lean diet.

Will knew and said nothing, the same way he said nothing about the childish delight of witnessing Hannibal silently fuming at the nurse’s remonstrations. Much like Will had been reborn a Pennsylvanian Dutch schoolteacher, Hannibal had been forced to leave his medical training behind. To pull rank on a nurse or to entice her Southern complicity would equally risk exposing their covers.

But no amount of pretending could erase Will’s fondness for her. He smiled into his straw every time she brought in his antibiotics and the temperature in the room dropped, Hannibal so pristinely still you could bounce a penny off his pleated trousers. Will suspected she was assigned to him not for language competences but because she did not fear Hannibal. She didn't blindingly ignore the monster; she just mistook it for spoiled wealth.

That last morning, she asks, sounding surprised, “You here alone today? Where’s your Highness?”

Will blinks again, confused. “Pardon?”

She draws a ladder in the air with her hand. “Tall, dark, handsome? Your—special friend?”

Will sits up straight against the headboard, his body aching in all the wrong places. “You mean Mischa?”

She shrugs, her nose crinkling when she sees the box of makrout on the nightstand. “Is that his
name now? We just call him ‘Your Highness’ in the nurses pit.’"

Will can’t help smiling, just a little. “He does have blue blood in him, you know?”

“And boy can you tell!” She nudges the box, inspects it from above, smells it, and finally decides to leave it alone. “Bossing us all around, amending the doctor’s prescriptions, nosing around your room at all hours. Lord, were we happy when you two patched things up.”

Up in flames goes Will’s fantasy that Hannibal kept responsibly busy when he wasn’t in the bedroom with him. Or that he had masterfully tamed his controlling megalomania when it came to Will’s medical treatment.

Will sighs heavily.

“You were huh?”

Energetically, the nurse trashes the drooping sunflowers in a bin. Her curly hair is swaddled in a bright yellow scarf that lit the whole room on fire. Or so Will thought.

“Listen, what you boys do is none of our business,” she says over her shoulder, “but a man like that comes with a lot of trouble. You must know that, right?”

Will rolls his eyes heavenward. “Do I ever.”

She stills and breathes out suddenly, almost dreamily, as if addressing a ghost in the room, "You seem like such a sweet man."

Her face falls slightly before she can catch it and shake it off. "He is hook-line-and-sinker for you, though," she adds briskly. "Gotta count for something.”

“Do you think so?”

She closes the shades next. “Boy do I. No man spends that much time by a sickbed unless it’s his kid or the love of his life. You ain’t the former, so you must be the latter.”

“No, I mean—” Will stares at his hands, knotted together over the starchy blue blanket “—do you really think it counts for something?”

The nurse stops fluffing his pillow, which is not part of her job but she does it anyway. Children, Will suspects, two, almost college-age. Some habits die hard. He should know.

Will can feel her regarding him very closely. “What? To have a rich madman head over heels for you?”

“Yes, you think it can—even things out?”

The pillow goes back down, and a glimpse at her face tells him everything he didn’t want to know.

“Well, I wouldn’t go telling you what to do, honey, but a man lifts his hand against me once, it’s once too many.”

Will hums. What a sad truth that is, and how ill-fitting of his reality.

“What if a man had died for you once?,” Will asks without lifting his eyes. “What if you knew he’ll do it again?”
She gives him a look, heavy-lidded and stone-faced. He can’t hold her gaze, which perhaps is in itself a giveaway.

"Then you enjoy the fire while it lasts ’cause it can't burn forever, can’t?"

With the shades drawn and the sunflowers gone, the room sinks into a dirty grayness. Will teases the hem of his sheet and suddenly Hannibal’s absence is so phenomenally felt he wants to cry. The sobs pile up in his chest, guppy and oppressive, and it takes him an instant to remember such feeling might not be love, but the side-effect of having his lungs punctured again and again.

After a while, the nurse tuts almost gently, “You love him, don't you?”

Will nods. She does not flinch and Will does not look away.

“You marrying that fool?”

What begins as a grimace blooms into a lopsided grin. “I asked.”

The nurse throws her hands up in the air. “Oh boy, you went and did it now. A man like that will never let you go. You gotta cut his heart out and bury it under a mandrake tree or he’ll come for you in the afterlife.”

Will’s smile, until then an uncertain thing, revs up into a full gurgling laugh. “Christ! You'd think we're talking about a centennial vampire, not a middle-aged man!”

The nurse shrugs again, her whole body displeased with the folly of men. She moves the chair from Will’s bedside to the far end of the room. “Well, you tell yourself that now, Mr. Graham, but when you can’t find your soul nowhere what you gonna say then?”

The empty plastic chair, thrown carelessly against the khaki wall, fills Will with such apprehension a gallon of black rainwater wouldn’t be enough to make up for its weight. Will swallows and it burns. Skin, muscle and organs turn into a pile of ashes when Hannibal is away. He had forgotten. God, he had forgotten.

He answers to his hands, “That love makes fools of us all?”

The nurse turns around, nodding as she flips the ceiling fan on. “Well, ain’t that the truth though. Ain’t that the truth.”

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It’s past dusk when Will smells the change in the room: cheap detergent gives way to a metallic sweetness, the same smell you catch under bridges that have rusted around forests.

“Good evening, Mischa,” Will greets, eyes still closed but lips already opened in a small smile. His footfall is so precise, Will could set his heartbeat by its cadence. The studied grace of a classically trained dance, an old German clock. Or a guillotine.

Will keeps his eyes shut, breathes him in as he glides from the door to the bedside. Through sound and smell, Will can glean Hannibal’s displeasure as he finds his chair moved, his sunflowers vanished, his pastry box untouched. He finds it grim now, all of it unbearably plain. Without his added touches, the room is just a hospital room, the bed just a sickbed. Will wonders if the same may be true of him: that without Hannibal’s varnished cover of fantasy, Will too is just a man, scarred and rude and feral, a ramshackle house whose wear and tear is starting to show.
A rustling noise and the complete cessation of movement cues Will to open his eyes. When he does, his heart stutters for a moment and how perplexing that there is little difference between being dumbstruck with pleasure or with panic.

Somewhere deep inside where Will doesn’t like to travel a piece of plywood comes undone. It’s beginning, he warns himself. It’s the beginning of the end.

Immobile by the foot of the bed, shrouded in smoky penumbra, Hannibal stands like a figurine on a cake. That’s Will’s first and last unfiltered thought: how much he resembles a figurine on a cake with his back uncomfortably straight, his legs slightly spread apart but strong in their grip, his hair swept back and pomaded, darkening all coppery tones; his eyes, like that of a skull, paint-brushed with shadows.

But it’s the suit, his impeccably tailored suit, that undoes Will. It shimmers opalescent white, not even faintly cream, but stark-white against the ominous bleakness of the room, the light emanating from the floral tie dizzying, because Will knows there are lilies or baby’s-breaths embroidered on that silk tie, hand-sowed in silvery thread to match the enormous bouquet Hannibal holds in his arms, so very ambitious in size he needs both hands to safely cradle it.

It is too much all of a sudden. Too much of a taunt.

Will snaps his eyes shut. The smell of vanilla sauce and slow-churned ice cream erupts, and an old old memory finds him, of Sunday mornings outside a posh restaurant by the harbor when the smell of hot beignets swirled in the air, mixing with the salt and the fish-gut in his hands, and how longingly he breathed in the rich scents of fried dough, cinnamon, and creme anglaise, stuff of dreams he could never have, could not dare touching, but whose smells still found him, still stirred yearnings he didn’t know he had, and once awakened never managed to be put back to bed.

The temperature in the room tips, a pendulum swing from white hot to snow whiteness. The rustling returns, tainted with a note of sourness.

God, why must he look so much like a figurine on a cake.

Will presses closed fists to his closed eyes.

“Come here,” he stammers, the screech of something big being rammed through a narrow aperture. When he doesn’t move, Will says, “Please, Hannibal. Just come here.”

Dressing shoes, brand-new and custom-made, click across the linoleum floor but remain at arm’s distance. Will stretches out his hands, determined to find Hannibal by touch alone.

“Closer,” he pleads, and finds it a ridiculous request because they both know it’ll never be close enough.

Will tilts his head up and the flowers fall with a cellophane flop. He feels Hannibal hover, feels the crisp white of his summer suit warming his face, as if light could be conveyed through fabric, or warmth rather, if love held a color and that color had the texture of feeling, damask-thick and gold-embroidered.

And then, the white fades and Will feels the redness of Hannibal’s displeasure, hotter now that it got wood to burn.

Lassoing his arms around Hannibal’s neck, Will pushes him down down down, until he has no other choice but to kneel on the floor. Only then Will opens his eyes. Hannibal looks up at Will, an unnerving mixture of heat and longing lubricating his gaze. Will grabs his perfectly shaved jaw,
feeling for the nicks he knows won’t be there, and kisses him so hard their teeth clank together. For such a brutal kiss, it’s strangely passionless, all claws and no skin.

Yet all it takes is for Hannibal to whimper against his lips, and Will is slipping off the mattress and into his lap, tenderly pressing kisses on the corner of his mouth, the bump on his nose, the frangible skin under his eyes where sleepless nights take hold. He licks a stripe around his neck, like a choke-hold, the scarlet line left by a razor slash.

“You’ll break my heart,” Will mumbles and then he is punching Hannibal’s chest, mildly but repeatedly. “I don’t know what to do with you. You break my heart.”

No past tense, no point in that. Just present and future in a loop until one cannot be told apart from the other. Like he can’t be told apart from Hannibal. But not vice-versa. No, not really. Always a touch out of reach, always a step ahead.

Will knows he is crying, not because his voice wavers reedy and gruff, but because Hannibal’s kisses taste salty-wet when they travel from his cheeks to his mouth. He doesn’t try to stop Will’s fists, even as these come to clutch the front of his jacket, disturbing the excruciatingly well-pressed double-breasted lapels. Up-close, the embroidery on the silver tie is even lovelier, threaded with pink and mauve.

Hannibal’s arms come around his shoulders, his cheek resting against the crown of his head. Will expects him to make tepid shushing sounds, but he doesn’t. He just holds Will, both crumpled on the wedge between bed and nightstand, letting the darkness and the humid heat pool around them.

To fall into Hannibal's broad chest feels like sinking into sopping ground, to be absorbed like deadweight, to be eaten by upturn earth, waterlogged and welcoming.

After a long, long while, Hannibal whispers in his ear “You could come home with me,” and Will hiccups a strangled sob that originally intended to be a mocking laugh, because how can he, how can he walk out of a glass-jar where only Gabriel and Mischa exist (barbed and guarded but equals) and step into a wide world where Hannibal will be Hannibal, gregarious and charming and cruel?

How did he talk himself into believing that he, Will Graham, could keep a being that has no limits, no boundaries, no gauges? That will take and take and demand more and more in return—an oil spill, a black hole, a sadistic god, never satisfied always curious always ravenous.

Monogamy must seem funny to him from up above, a funny little garnish mortals insist upon.

How can I tell myself that I’m enough now, crisscrossed with chewed-up scars, inside and out, aging, Will thinks, I am aging so damn fast, my body can’t take any more blows, you’ll have to go and find fresh meat that hasn’t spoiled, that is spry and fast on their feet, ‘cause you can take the boy out of Louisiana but the fish stink stays and it’ll stain your lovely garments and the glint will wear off the novelty, the sweetness of the uncivilized mistress curdling, because I won’t change, I can’t change dammit, I can’t be you or like you no matter how much—and others won’t have to, they’ll be just like you from the start, like Wally, oh fuck, he is just like you already isn’t he, down to those all-seeing eyes, and fuck me, I thought—no I didn’t, I told myself—no I did, I wanted to but—

Hannibal is sweeping Will’s hair rather forcefully, running the back of his hand against Will’s forehead, his face toggling between aggravated and alarmed, until he is demanding in an icily assertive tone, “Will. Will. What is this about? Where is this coming from?” and Will thinks, if I tell him he’ll lie, he will shape the truth into something resembling what I need to hear, but kneeling on the floor of a foreign hospital after having set fire to his life that seems the least of
Will’s problems, so he sniffs against Hannibal’s wrist and whizzes,

“You. You and I—we can’t—it will never—”

“What Will?”


Hannibal tilts his head at that and, through the tears, Will can sense his confusion, his brain whirring to get ahead of Will’s train of thought, to barricade it or divert it somehow.

“Will. It’s just a suit,” he lies, and the lie thoroughly exhausts Will. He gets up slowly and sits on the bed, his ribcage starting to thrum with pain. Cautiously, Hannibal mirrors his movements, a lion tamer wrangling a rabid mark.

“You’ll leave,” Will stares ahead, refusing to acknowledge the travel bag by the door. “Nothing binds you to me, not really. You’ll grow tired of me. Eventually. I’m not a killer, I’m a hobbyist at best. My body will break down, my mental health will keep deteriorating until I’m a shell. I’ll drink too much. I won’t be able to keep up. You’ll leave.” He turns to glimpse at Hannibal and finds him motionless, standing a foot away, seemingly indifferent. He is listening though. That much Will can tell for sure. “You’ll find a new charge, someone prodigious to play with. Another FBI agent maybe. Younger, limberer than I ever was. A woman perhaps? With a working-class accent and a shameful past. Like me but not me.”

Will can see it with such startling clarity the projection robs his mind of depth. It eviscerates him until Will is just a ghost lurking around the edges of Hannibal’s brilliant future escapades.

Hannibal inhales sharply, and that’s the first noise Will hears him make that evening which sounds genuine.

“Will,” he says quietly. “Please stop.”

“Why? Because it’s true?”

“Because it’s awful.” And the way he delivers that line could not be a more perfect rendition of a heartbroken British dowager.

Will scoffs. “That doesn’t make it less true.”

One knee at a time, Hannibal perches at the foot of the bed. There is something plaintive about him, all in white, meticulously coiffed and shaved, but also contrived. Like a doll of a saint or a painting of a penitent. He picks up one of Will’s hands and presses his lips against the lax knuckles.

“Tell me where it hurts and I’ll make it better.”

Laughter startles out of Will, bleak and warped with despair.

Hannibal smiles against his scar, the one on his ring finger, whited out by time. “Unlike you, I can actually say that with authority. I do happen to have a medical degree.”

“Stop.” Will whispers and his chest hurts and hurts and hurts. Maybe sickness didn’t happen to him. Maybe he is the sickness that happened to a man named Will Graham. “Please. I can’t bear it any longer.”
Hannibal kisses each of his knuckles once, and then again for good measure. “There is nothing to bear, Will. I am taking you home. I am here to take you home and you are coming with me.”

Will shakes his head, the smells of vanilla cream and cinnamon dusting so overpowering they gag him. “You must promise to kill me. When you are done with me.”

Hannibal sighs, more deeply and less authentically than before. “I am making no such promise, Will.”

“Why not?,” Will barks, frustrated and shortchanged, delirious with a lifelong inadequacy.

“Because I have a rule not to make promises that offer me no advantages.”

“I will offer you no advantages either when I’m a mean old drunk slobbering on your diamond-encrusted paisley suits. I can guarantee you that.”

Hannibal leans back and steeps his hands on crossed knees. “Very well. Should we stay here in this room then, smelling of various sicknesses and egregious food? Should I go back to threadbare clothes and unwashed hair? Will that offer you the advantages you so direly desire?”

Will peers from under his lashes. In the glum dimness, Hannibal seems to radiate lightning-white electricity, his own battery-operated island in a sea of otherwise unremarkable carbon grayness.

When did I fall so frighteningly in love with him? Will wonders. And how the hell do I slam the breaks on it, just for a little while, just so I can catch my breath?

The room contracts into a pinprick of light and Will struggles to exhale.

“Would you?”

“Of course,” Hannibal throws back instantly. Perhaps too fast, Will considers, to be entirely true.

“But that’s not who you are.”

“And you think that’s who you are? Poor little toy soldier, so broken and so eager, a child of the South whose parents drove themselves into an early grave so he must follow suit? Nonsense.” He clicks his tongue and juts his chin to the side, the arrogant slope of his profile equal parts dismissive and comforting. “And you know it’s nonsense. So stop it.” He places one single kiss on Will’s palm and Will wonders if he is being manipulated. There are other means of influence beyond violence after all. “Please Will. I don’t want to leave without you.”

Will sits back, knees to chest, away from dark pleading eyes, the softness on his puckered mouth.

Love sits on his throat masquerading as fear, the thing you will lose if you give yourself away. To be the one who loves more, Will thinks startled, will eat at you until all it remains is skin and bone. Particularly when whom you love is only adjacently human. God, and he must be, must he not? Unkillable and lovable, a monster that collects human emotions because he is incapable of growing them.

That’s not fair, is it? Not precisely.

Trauma will do that to you, shut you down until all your emotions are potted plants you keep nicely manicured under plexiglass.

Will knows. He learned it from the smell of snow gathering outside Molly’s house.
Hannibal is not that very different. Only his gardening techniques truly differ. A chef while Will is a drinker, a hunter while Will fishes. A taker whereas Will tends to give (in).

How do I keep you all to myself, Will howls silently, eyes darting everywhere but Hannibal’s face: the white tie, the folded hands, the white vest, the leather shoes, the white pants, the lilac-black nails, steeped with bruises, the white jacket, the gelled hair. You will take everything from me and I can’t help giving you my last drop.

Maybe he is a centennial vampire after all.

Just to disturb the charged quiet between them, Will asks, “Where are you going?”

“*We are going home,*” Hannibal rejoins smoothly.

“Where is home?”

“Wherever you want it to be.”

“But you have a plan.”

Hannibal turns Will’s hand up and presses it against his own cheek. The cold softness of his shaved skin is shocking. “An immediate one, yes. We’re taking the ferry to Palermo tonight. We’ll stay for a few days, until you feel strong enough to travel long distances.”

“And then?”

“Then we live to our hearts’ content.”

Will frowns, unconvinced. “Just like that?”

“It doesn’t always have to be complicated, Will.”

“But it must be feasible.”

Hannibal nods patiently, though Will suspects patience is not his initial response.

“I have funds. And so do you, if you wish to make use of your U.S. accounts. You are a free man, Will Graham. With or without an alias.”

“But not with, nor without you.”

There it is, the minuscule snarl, the flinching of irritation. “I can’t undo the warrants now, can I?”

“Nor would you want to.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” Hannibal concedes. “I am proud of my life’s work.”

“Your legacy,” Will spits out.

Derision must finally achieve its goal because Hannibal drops Will’s hand with no finesse.

“Will, stop. I am not going to entertain this discussion any longer. Not here, not now, and not for such an absurd reason when there are so many suitable ones to choose from.”

“Such as?”

“My incommensurable abilities, for instance. They can be quite daunting for a partner.”
Will cocks his head, refusing to let go of his well-nursed wariness, of that wound that roots deep through him and tells him, in an acid Southern drawl, that he’s never gonna be good enough. “Is that what I am to you now? A partner?”

Hannibal sighs, and it’s all teeth and bristles, the closest a man in a white brocade suit will ever come to look crass. His shoulders straighten and the softness about him disappears, replaced by a ruthless calm. “Will. What do you want?”

“Why are you wearing that suit?”

Appreciatively Hannibal runs his fingers over the double-breasted lapel, the pearl buttons. “I thought in good taste to start our new life in fine spirits and finer clothing. A blank slate, if you wish.”

“You look like a bride,” Will mutters, too flat to be an insult, but not enough to be a compliment either.

Hannibal catches on that nuance at once. Hand on the knot of his tie, he feigns a disinterest he does not feel, otherwise he wouldn’t be asking, “Does that repulse you?”

“What?” Will objects a tad too shrill, “No!” And then softer, “I could never be repulsed by you.”

A confession, Will thinks alarmed. That was a confession of some sort.

Sniffing the air, clearly offended but deciding to take the higher road, Hannibal counters, “By my wealth then. My proclivities?”

Will shakes his head. Both his hands go out again.

How is it that seeing a prideful man doubt himself instantly muzzles Will's bite? What is it with Hannibal and those nearly invisible flashes of self-consciousness that sling Will right back to the boy, barefooted and frostbitten, starving in the snow?

“Come here,” Will motions to his lap.

“Wouldn’t that be improper, Gabriel?”

“Everyone here knows we’re in love. Come here.”

Hannibal turns his nose up at that notion in a literal, vaguely humorous, fashion. “Is it that obvious?”

“Well, the lavish cakes and the midnight visits may have given it away.”

“You mean gave me away.” His eyes snap back to Will when he speaks and viciousness flickers in them, like a lamp strobbing right before it goes out.

Will places his hands palm up over the blue blankets, on his outstretched legs. A peace offering. “I think it’s fairly clear that it’s reciprocal.”

“How come?”

Will shrugs, “For once I don’t complain.”

“Is that all? I am sure some members of the staff would appreciate the opportunity to alleviate your boredom, Gabriel.”
“I’m sure they would.”

“Why are you pursuing this line of conversation now, Will?”

Poison seeps into his voice and it occurs to Will that Hannibal is beginning to connect misaligned dots, dots Will once too connected back in Moosehead Lake, when jealousy haunted his every waking thought.

“Please, Hannibal. Just—lay down with me.”

The economy in Hannibal's movements, the way his muscles spread only enough to render him supine, telegraph his suspicion and ultimate distaste with the unexpected turn of events. All he wants is to get out of this grim place. Everything else is expendable, energy dispersed to put out fires not of his own making.

That’s new to a man like Hannibal. What does it say that he lies down when Will pats the space next to his chest, leaving a two-inch gap between their shoulders?

Will inserts his fingers into Hannibal's half-open palm, effectively bridging the gap. Hannibal doesn’t hold them but also does not pull away. He waits, Will imagines, for the other shoe to drop.

It is not a conscious choice, but one Will's body makes for him: to twist on his side, until his chin is nestled on Hannibal's shoulder, until their tethered hands are pressed tight against his heart. It jackhammers, Will hadn't notice before, the same way he didn't notice he was shaking until Hannibal also lay on his side and leaned forward, his mouth so nigh Will could see his tongue wet his lips as he sighed contrarily, before white-clad arms gathered Will into the harbor of his throat, and there yes, when his nose lodged itself fully against Hannibal's Adam's apple, then Will realized he was shaking, shaking so hard Hannibal had to place his chin over his head, shelter him completely to ease him into a sort of trembling stupor where Will could find no words nor reasons apart from the obsessive idea of abandonment, of utter and inevitable lonesomeness.

Time does not move until Hannibal exhales again, arms slowly slipping from Will's back, fingers deftly undoing the buttons on his white jacket and draping it on the chair.

This is it, Will thinks. I ruined his suit. He is going to leave now.

Will attempts to suppress the incoming whirlwind of panic by focusing on the vest hiding underneath and now revealed in all its glory. It's a fabulous piece of craftsmanship. There are embroidered flowers in it as well, in silvery high-relief. Peonies perhaps, or orange blossoms. It's stunning, Will thinks with a shudder. So spectacularly ethereal. As are the small cufflinks, mother-of-pearl and tear-shaped, which Hannibal does fast work on, rolling the sleeves up around his elbows.

"What are you doing?," Will can hear the caffeinated ring of fear in his voice.

Hannibal gets up and walks towards the door. His voice too carries a ring, but it's cracked, a businessman's after hours of relentless negotiation.

"I'm going to pay for another night."

Will sits up abruptly. He can't see Hannibal well in the darkness. He can't see much of anything at all. “You are leaving?”

Hannibal pauses with a hand on the knob. He sighs again, and there it is, that hollow ring, "We are staying." Will knows without seeing that his face is furrowed with disgusted inconvenience when
he adds, "Apparently."

Will pulls the blankets off and tries to get up before a week without movement has him swooning against the mattress. Hannibal is there, steering him by the shoulders back to bed, though not as swiftly or kindly as he would have a day prior. Will knows it but decides to dismiss it as he leans heavily against the beautifully carved vest. Orange blossoms it is, etched in pallid steel thread, finished with wispy pearl buttons.

Will buries his nose in the textured fabric, speaks directly into Hannibal's navel. "Please don't ever get caught."

Hannibal's fingers rake through Will's hair, the inside of his bare forearms pleasantly smooth against Will's bearded cheek. "I don't care where you go," Will sniffs, fists forming around Hannibal's waist. "Just don't leave me behind."

Which was code, Will realized later, for promise me you'll never die.

With the effortless grace of an illusionist, Hannibal bends down and kisses the back of Will's skull. Then he steps away to pick up the scandalous bouquet from the nightstand. He holds it until Will looks up. Standing in white shirtsleeves, embroidered vest, and narrow pants with one foot placed in front of the other, he resembles a vision from either a forgotten fairytale or a tragic ballet.

Will stretches his arms out and immediately Hannibal deposits the flower arrangement across his elbows. Orange blossoms, cherry branches, and baby's-breaths encased in obscene amounts of ivory silk ribbon drape down his shoulders.

_It's not a coincidence. It can't be. This is the outfit of a bride._

Will brings the bouquet to his nose and inhales deeply.

Loving Hannibal, he realizes with a pang, smells like a spring orchard, not a burnt forest, after all.
The bed in the ferry is small for two people, let alone two adult men who sustained too many injuries in too little a span of time. But the crossing is twelve hours long so Will is thankful for the privacy, the quiet away from the overexcited students up on the deck. The last of summer birds, his father would call them.

They eat huddled on the bed, a bounty of delicate sandwiches and sliced fruit Will is absolutely sure were lovingly carved by hand in whatever hotel Hannibal was hiding. Will wonders when did Hannibal found the time to cook between so many hospital visits.

He wonders when did Hannibal cease caring about impeccable table manners and began finding acceptable to eat lying on a lumpy bed whilst wearing a three-piece suit that must have cost as much as the boat they are in, but is currently streaked with tears and city grime and wrinkles that may never come off.

Perhaps at the same time that he stopped sleeping, stopped caring about where he lived, stopped minding his freedom or the consistency of his hair color, the breadth of his diet or the depth of his wounds.

So, at least four years ago, Will’s brain supplies, as brutal and calculating as always.

Faced with the abrupt silence, Hannibal looks up from where he is daintily sprawled across the green-and-red floral bedspread. He catches Will’s eye and smiles, and it’s a strangely delighted smile, all teeth and starry eyes, like a child’s first day at the beach.

Will has no choice but to smile back and go on eating—two hands to hold a tiny sandwich, chin dipped down in a heady mixture of awe and nerves.

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October finds Will lingering by a golden porthole. It will be Halloween in America soon, candy-corn making kids’ hands sticky, their mouths crimson with cherry-flavored blood.

A year ago, Will had stood at the edge of water, and thought of Francis, and Wally, and Molly, and Winston—somewhat in that order—and wondered how could he keep moving forward when his soul had staggered out of his body and curled around Hannibal’s chest until his chest was his chest, and their skin had stuck together with blood so heartbreakingly warm Will had tossed them both into the ocean to try and cool the yearning away.

It’s too late now, Will thinks. For Halloween candy, for fake blood. For jumping out of the monster’s belly. It is his belly now. He made a home among the scars.

Likely sensing Will’s straying thoughts, Hannibal comes behind him, snaking an arm around his waist. He has stripped bare already and his skin feels oddly familiar against Will’s bandaged back. As if Will was touching himself.

He leans in and Hannibal kisses his right shoulder, lightly, hair ticking Will where it brushes behind Will’s ear.
“Come to bed,” he whispers and Will turns in his arms until they are embracing, breastplate to breastplate, Will’s head on Hannibal’s heartbeat, Hannibal's hands wrapped tightly around his shoulders. Like an apology, Will thinks, though he can’t say what they would be apologizing for. There seems to be so much, and yet, never enough.

They sway into each other for one long moment. Then Will kisses the corner of Hannibal’s mouth and takes him to bed.

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The dull ache in Will’s ribcage makes rest a fugitive endeavor. He twists under Hannibal’s weight, trying to push up against the railings and find some relief to the pressure building in his sternum. Hannibal whines softly against Will’s stomach, his grip tightening the more Will squirms.

Pain flares up along the fracture lines in his ribs. Gently, Will attempts to nudge him awake, to break out of his embrace. Hannibal must have spoken the truth about not sleeping while Will was hospitalized because his arms are stone-cold and deep-set. He sleeps like vampires surely must: stubbornly, uncaring, dead to the world as the world is to him.

Will stops fidgeting, settling into the burning pain, and Hannibal's grip eases a fraction. He mumbles in his sleep, sweaty hair plastered against his cheeks. Will traces the pinch in his forehead, trying to soothe whatever beasts bump in there. They must be bleak to make the devil shy away.

Without his white suit, Hannibal is just a man again, lean and deceptively strong, covered in a map of scars and fading bruises. Will skims the ones that most resemble fingerprints, the ones that best fit the shape of his thumbs.

That finally stirs Hannibal awake. Will can tell because he fumbles for Will's wrist before opening his eyes.

He still does this, Will observes distantly. Still makes sure I am here even now, after all this time. Even after I let him kill my wife and followed him across the ocean, he still must use his hands to make sure that I am solid, that I am here with him. That I haven’t run away or gone up in smoke. Yet.

This admission, possibly borrowed without permission, unsettles him more than Will would like to admit, so he coughs loudly, murmuring into Hannibal’s hair, “Sorry. Can’t sleep.”

He doesn’t need to specify any further. Hannibal is already up, groggily rubbing his eyes, dragging furniture across the nail-size room, not a stitch on him.

“Come here,” he gestures between yawns and Will marvels at the strangeness of witnessing a naked Hannibal Lecter sit on a plastic chair he dragged to the porthole, looking dignified as he struggles to keep his eyes open and his arms outstretched.

“Come here, Will,” he says again, less kind and more exhausted, and that crack in his voice, the subtle hurt in it, has Will stumbling forward until Hannibal's hands are on him, economic and certain, shaping him into a partial horizontal line.

It feels awkward at first, to dangle his feet off Hannibal’s thighs, to rest his head against his collarbone, let Hannibal's cheek rest against his cheek. Like a child with a fever in an old Victorian painting, only instead of a nursemaid or an angel they are both killers, on the run and in love. The image has Will spurting laughter that does nothing to alleviate his pain.
Hannibal clutches his shoulder warningly, “That will not do, Will.”

Will settles after that, his eyes lost in the dark-blue maw of the sky, his head tucked under Hannibal’s chin. The mere proximity of Hannibal’s breath, awake and alive and aware, tunes out the pain flashing inside him.

Perhaps the pain was not coming from his healing bones after all, but from his brain. Perhaps his brain, spoiled rotten, had grown distraught by Hannibal’s distance, lost to Will when he went into his deep deep sleep. Perhaps pain was a distress signal emitted, not by a broken body, but a lovesick mind.

Will turns his mouth so he can kiss the underside of Hannibal's jaw. Hannibal hums, low in his gut. Will can feel it travel through the vast expansion of bare skin.

That moment is the moment Will can envision a lifelong existence together, spanning backwards and forwards until no single minute of his existence stands without being crammed full of Hannibal’s fingerprints. It comes to him with no surprise, no fear, just a sweeter form of resignation.

(He took me to the hospital.)

The thought blindsides him, fat and airy, a thing of relief and shock. It hangs around his shoulders like a blanket, a talisman.

Unsettled by his next thought (Maybe monsters can learn), he burrows into Hannibal, bringing his knees up against his chest. Hannibal holds him tighter so Will can’t spill out of his lap. His hands have an absoluteness that can be terrifying because you know once they are on you, they will not let go until they are done with you. That’s the magic of Hannibal: he will never touch you without a purpose, and if you are lucky, his purpose is eternal.

Will presses a kiss to a pink, ragged scar on his chest, right over his jugular notch. A paring knife, or a hunting tool of some variety did that to him. Not too long ago. Maine, probably.

Will runs his tongue over it with something akin to jealousy. Or is it protectiveness? Will only knows he didn’t put that mark on Hannibal’s body and yet, there it is, gawking at him with impertinence.

As if guessing his thoughts, Hannibal says, "Bedelia did that." Something too close to amusement crawls into his voice, "With a salad fork of all things."

Will tastes sourness rising in his mouth. Of course she did. Of course even she would leave a lasting impression on his body. Hannibal is communal real estate by now. Everyone gets to trademark him. Everyone. Everyone.

Will wants him and wants him and wants him. Again. In that way that if he could he would re-orchestrate Hannibal’s heartbeat so the sound it makes is entirely of Will’s design.

Instead, he swallows slowly, letting lightning-fast emotions flicker through him until they empty him out. Only then he hisses, "Atta girl."

Hannibal's chuckle is felt, not heard. It thrums merrily through his ribcage.

Perhaps that is why Will prompts, “Did you ever go stargazing as a kid?,” eyes closed and voice lazy, but fully aware that this, like any event horizon, will start mildly before it supernovas.
Hannibal’s head springs up, his neck straightening out primly. He might have been half-asleep a second ago but is exceptionally awake now, alert to the smell of blood in the water.

He looks at the sky outside the window. “My sister and I enjoyed chasing fireflies in warm summer nights.”

“I used to go stargazing with this neighbor kid. Back in Erie,” Will says. “Sometimes we’d lay on his roof until sunrise, just daydreaming.” He can smell it now, the fresh cut grass, the oil in the rusty lawnmower. He smiles in spite of himself. “What a gangly thing he was.”

“How old were you?”

“Thirteen.”

It’s quiet for a moment as Hannibal shifts Will’s weight from his left to his right hip. It must hurt sometimes, the bullet wound. Like a phantom gnawing at his side.

“There were no windows where I lived when I was thirteen,” Hannibal says at last.

Will looks up but nothing registers in Hannibal’s face. He is as inscrutable as the past itself.

“Does that memory hurt you?” Will asks, so careful it’s almost dangerous. Hannibal can smell hesitancy. Can smell sympathy too. Will should know. He inherited that preternatural gift from him.

“Not particularly,” Hannibal shrugs, but his eyes stay on the porthole, a tad haunted in their emptiness. “What about yours?”

“Oh yes,” Will whispers and the acidity there snatches Hannibal’s attention like gold to a magpie.

“He left you,” he surmises, chin tilted to the side, picking apart Will’s face like a vulture would a carcass. Will doesn’t mind. All attention is better than no attention at all.

Will wets his lips, preparing—steeling himself. Secrets are slippery animals. You try to cage them and they ran amok. You try to share them and they curl in the dark until you can’t see them anymore.

“In a way. My father had to move down south that winter. I knew it was coming, but for a while I liked pretending I didn’t.” He smiles again, reflexive and nostalgic, a bitter man wearing a boy’s happy memories. “We were together every day, summer and fall, running bikes, trick-or-treating...”

“...stargazing,” Hannibal supplies smoothly, too smoothly, and Will knows he knows. It’s good. Will never enjoyed explaining himself. With Hannibal it’s all half-words, barely whispered, and meaning leaps out full-fledged from his mouth. What a gift perfect understanding can be.

“That too.”

For an instant, Hannibal stops breathing. He is choosing his words very very carefully, either for Will’s or his own benefit.

“Did you fall in love with him, Will?,” he finally asks, and his voice is remarkably sterile. It pricks Will some. “This neighborhood boy?”

The lull of the waves comes into sharp focus and Will is slung back to summer in Pennsylvania.
He lies on a warmed concrete roof, purple midnight above, a boy’s freckled hand on his bare knee. “Yeah. Yeah, I think I might have.”

There is no noise, no movement. The night has closed around them, void of air. The admission startled Will when he had wished to startle Hannibal instead. It is unfair, Will thinks, at least until Hannibal is probing, a little bit breathless, “Did he—did he reciprocate?”

Will shrugs. “Doesn’t matter now, does it?”

It doesn’t, it shouldn’t. But it does somehow, to both of them. So they both say nothing, letting confessions settle between them like molted dust.

It is Hannibal who breaks first. “What was his name?”

Will swallows, feeling suddenly suspended in time. It’s summer and fall, youth and middle age, sunset and dawn, and his skin aches to be touched. His voice is so close to breaking, he must whisper to control it.

“Thomas,” Will mumbles at last, and it feels like an incantation to say that name aloud after all those years of concealed mourning. “Thomas Clayton. Tommy.”

Hannibal hums, and for once, his hum is not a condescending tick but the sound puzzle pieces make when they’re clicking together.

“Like little Walter.”

It was Will’s turn to hum, gnarled, caustic, and low.

Hannibal’s hands move on his arms, behind his calves, the small of his back. The grip is steady, almost businesslike. An inventory of parts, if you will.

He may not even notice he is doing it, but he’s making sure I’m still here, still within his purview, still his. Will knows but doesn’t say. It feels like he has been doing a fair share of that for most of his life.

Eventually Hannibal speaks again, “Did you ever try to find him?”

Oh that’s a funny story. It’s funny, Will muses, in a way that breaks his heart.

“I did find him,” he replies and Hannibal’s grip stiffens around his knees, gathering Will closer as if there was anywhere closer to go but inside his ribcage. “In the police database. He had been missing for seven years then. No one ever found a body.” Will smiles but it’s grim, a metal scrap twisted at the sides. “There was a bloody sneaker, though. Stuck on his bicycle wheel.”

“Will—”

It’s the hesitancy in Hannibal’s tone that does it for Will. He can smell it too now. It’s a yellow-colored, mean thing, limp and herbal. It’s out of place in Hannibal’s vocal cords.

Will turns, nudging Hannibal’s chin down with his fist. He wonders faintly if he looks half-mad when he spits out, “Look, I am more in love with you than I thought myself capable. Loving, this thing we do,” he swings his hand between their bare chests, ”the talking and the sharing—this—I never wanted it. I was never any good at it either. But you’re here now and I won’t let you go, come hell or high water. I can’t put windows in your memories but I can vow never to let you out of my sight. And that might not be the love you want, but it’s all that I got.”
The black in Hannibal's eyes blooms blood-red when he holds Will’s gaze. He looks manic, Will thinks, and dangerous.

“I would kill him,” Hannibal slithers, intensity vibrating off his mouth and into Will’s. “I would kill him, just so you would be here now, saying those words to me.”

“I know,” Will exhales and kisses him, mercilessly, without any kindness whatsoever because kindness has often come in the guise of pity and Will Graham has had enough pity to last him a lifetime.

When Hannibal pulls him up by the shoulders, rattling all his old injuries, pain lights up in Will's body like a night sky from a plane, a map of impossibly bright pinpoints.

They are on the bed before Will can get the floor under him, hips and knees and lips carelessly, purposefully rubbed raw before Hannibal tugs on Will’s jaw, forcing him to make eye contact, and his voice, like his body, smells radiant, burnt orange and hunter green, wild and mossy, dripping wet with a bramble of unchecked emotions.

“But I do not rejoice in the loneliness, nor the fear, nor the loss it must have shadowed you all these years, Will. For that, I am truly sorry.”

They are hard, lying between each other’s legs, pressing against each other so firmly it hurts, so it’s difficult to make sense of Hannibal’s words at first. When they sink in, Will feels the hook in his chest, biting and burring. It’s hope, he knows. It’s fear too.

(He took me to the hospital this time.)

Will swipes the ashen hair off Hannibal's eyes so he can see him, really see him, all the way to the back of his skull, when he asks, “Can you feel sorry, Hannibal? Truly?”

Hannibal frowns, shaking his head minutely as if to release himself from an inopportune thought. He lets his chest fall back into Will’s. His warmth is so unexpected Will worries he might have caught a fever.

“I can—empathize with you,” he says with considered care. “I can dredge up my own pain if I must, and reexamine loss if I must, though it’s filtered through a double-paneled prism.”

“You stopped feeling regret? Grief?”

Will’s hands run through Hannibal’s hair and it’s such an instinctive act, it takes Will a while to notice he is doing it. More disturbingly, Hannibal is doing it too, on the inside of his thighs, in perfectly synchronized strokes.

“I don’t know if I ever fully experienced them,” Hannibal concedes. “I always possessed a certain adroitness in finding beauty in the most daunting.”

Will has trusted him with a secret, a secret so sharp no one was ever meant to handle, a secret so rancid Will had been prepared to die to protect it since he was thirteen. He feels embolden by his recklessness, by their intimacy.

So he asks, even though he dreads the answer, “Can you still find beauty in my death, Hannibal? In my suffering?”

Hannibal sighs deeply. “No more than in a dying star, Will.”
“A temporary spectacle?”

Hannibal raises his head, and there’s this shadow that lifts up when he meets Will’s eye. There’s a gutting boy and a graven skull behind that shadow, inside that face, and Will loves them both to hell and back.

“The glow of your dying body would offer me no more substance than stargazing offered you all those years ago, Will,” Hannibal says quietly, and he is being honest. Will can tell because his eyes are gleaming in a chillingly vulnerable manner. He is on the verge of tears, Will realizes, so he kisses him again, long and slow and bottomless, until he can’t remember any other point in his body but the one that is wet with Hannibal’s spit.

We should fuck, Will thinks urgently, aroused by Hannibal's hands moving inside his thighs, on his hips, the pressure of his body driving him into the mattress until Will can feel every ill-wired spring on the box.

Something holds them back, though, and Will can’t grasp if it’s the transitoriness of the space, the lack of proper supplies, or sleep, or time, or just that something is still amiss, at least for Will, and Hannibal can feel it, of course he can, the hooks keeping Will from him, because he is the one to pull back and regard Will closely, almost expectantly.

Will finally throws out, “Can you love me without thinking of me as part of yourself?,” squinting in the lucid dark, struggling for air.

That’s not what he wants to ask. That is not even second best. That is a distraction, but Hannibal doesn't seem to mind.

He replies without hesitation, without shame either, “ Probably not, if I were to be completely candid. You are my family, Will. You are an extension of myself. We have mixed our blood, our semen, our sweat. You are mine as much as I am yours.”

Will wants to sound aloof, wants to come, wants to eat Hannibal whole so he’s stowed away in his belly, in his bones, where no one else can find him. Will gave up his life for this man. Hannibal better never think of seeing the light of day again.

Instead, he taunts weakly, “Careful now. People will say the Ripper is in love.”

Hannibal touches him then, bold and insidious. A hand tracing his lips, another tracing his cock in controlled, insistent brushes. His eyes have that sick shine again, the oil sheen of an old cracking painting.

“Let them,” he rasps against Will’s lips. “I am. Madly and to the best of my abilities. Sometimes I doubt I would want to live without you.” His ring finger pushes to be let into Will’s mouth. “That’s the maddening part.”

Will smiles and sucks. Somewhere inside him—where he keeps traveling to against his better judgement—a flower blossoms, black-tar and velveteen. It smells like his memories of Tommy once did: salty with bitters, sweet with longing and stolen candy-corn.

“Well, one day you’ll die too and maybe we can meet again,” he says. “Up in the stars.”

Hannibal brings their foreheads together. He closes his eyes, but Will can still see the emotion embargoing his voice. “Nonsense. We’ll never die.”

Will thinks of their bodies, bloodied and twined plunging into the ocean, and he almost says out
loud, “Maybe that’s because we already did.”

Chapter End Notes

Geek side-note:

There's a callback to the first chapter ever—"A year ago, Will had stood at the edge of water, and thought of Francis, and Wally, and Molly, and Winston—somewhat in that order."

Not that order at all. Make of it what you will.

Also *now* you know why Will is so obsessed with Halloween and candy-corn.
Tucked in the top floor of a dilapidated six-story building, the apartment is Hannibal made stucco and wood: a vaulted cave drenched in golden sunlight, a skylight in every room but no doors, walls curved at odd angles and covered in hand-painted frescoes, faded with time but filled with authenticity, the hardwood floors dark and shiny, the marble kitchen pristine and well-loved.

Will knew upon a glance that this was not a mere hideout. Hannibal had lived here before. Had cooked and drawn and mused at length here. The scuffs on the floorboards by the balcony spoke of a musical instrument recently disposed of. Florence, Will imagines. He had it shipped to Florence five years ago. A whimsy Hannibal would come to regret.

A gentle tap to his elbow snatches Will from his involuntary deductions. He had been staring dumbly by the front door. The bouquet, showing the first signs of wilting, suddenly grows heavy in his arms.

Hannibal stands beside him, regarding him silently. The tension wafting off him is oppressively loud, too volatile to be faced head-on. Will gives the large open-floor space a once-over, more for show than need, and declares with finality, “I like it.”

Just like that, Hannibal's shoulders relax and he is gliding through the brightly lit living room, placing their travel bags on a leather ottoman, discarding his white suit jacket over a red brocade chair, opening the French doors to the narrow balcony that oversees Palermo at dawn.

Will stands and stands, incapable of moving, arrested by the delicate, incongruous warmth of witnessing Hannibal in white shirtsleeves, mussed-haired and unshaven under the pooling sunlight, turning on taps and checking on cupboards, jauntily humming an aria under his breath, the very picture of debonair elegance and rustic domesticity.

“The bathroom is through the bedroom,” he hears Hannibal say distantly, through the fog of exhaustion and apprehension and love, or joy perhaps. He wouldn't know. This sensation, this stunning clawing in his stomach, Will really wouldn’t know the name for. “If you wish to shower, you can go first.”

Will lets his eyes focus away from the pale decorated walls, the beige rugs, the solid mahogany furniture. Hannibal has a porcelain cup in his hand, clearly derailed mid task. There is a kettle on the stove, whistling steadily.

Right, he is making tea, offering his facilities, being an attentive host. Right.

Air jams in Will’s throat, making it hard to speak. He shakes his head instead.

“It’s fine. You can go first. I'm going to lay down.”

Hannibal assesses him coldly before he nods and lets it slide. He resumes pouring milk into a small flowery container, spooning sugar cubs into a dainty saucer. What beautiful hands he has, Will registers dazedly as he steps through a stone arch, barely tall enough for him to go through without bowing, and finds a bed, white with embroidered pillows, neatly arranged, and altogether too big for one person alone.

He did more than cook and draw while he lived here, Will sneers, and it’s a bitter thought. It’s bitter with the same kind of bite imparted by finding new scars in Hannibal’s body. Will it ever end, this assaulting process of discovery, the never-ending horror of finding yourself only a blimp
in someone else’s timeline?

With a heaviness he also doesn’t want to find a name for, Will sits on the edge of the bed, feet dangling off the exceedingly high mattress. He can hear Hannibal cooking in the adjacent kitchen and only then it dawns on him it will be impossible to move in this house without being in constant contact, to be seen at all times. The only door is either to be let in or out. Even the bathroom is concealed behind a glass screen.

Hannibal may have fucked in that bed but he never let anyone stay longer than necessary. It would make privacy recklessly elusive, it would open himself up to all kinds of accidental scrutiny. Or if he did, he loved them. If he loved them, Will will have to hunt them down and kill them all and that, in his present sapped state, seems too daunting of an endeavor.

He flops down and falls almost immediately asleep, his legs aching with the crooked pose, his mind restless with bumping dreams.

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The smell of hot coffee and dying flowers awakens him. It’s stuffy in the room, the skylight over the bed whited-out with afternoon glare and marine layer. A third smell finds him: condensation, cold-pressed oil, nutty and citrusy, at the same time familiar and alien.

Will opens his eyes and it’s still there: Italy, the plush mattress, the frescoed walls. That ache, low and base in the pit of his stomach.

By the bathroom entrance, at the foot of the bed, Hannibal is studying him as he towel-dries his hair. It looks longer once it’s washed. It looks lighter under the Italian sun. As does his skin, wet and bare, the trace-smell of oil still clinging to the air, its shimmer lingering in his shaved jaw, his fingers, his neck.

Will knows and doesn’t know, or better yet, knows but can’t trust himself to give in, not all on his own.

Without breaking eye contact, he pushes up on his elbows. Hannibal tracks his movements openly, a predator inventorying the weak spots in his prey. His eyes stay on Will’s lips when he finally speaks.

“Did anyone ever live here with you?”

Hannibal’s gaze flickers up, and his head tips to the side, evaluating.

After a moment, he replies evenly, “No.”

Will drops his head to his knees. He is still wearing washed-out jeans he did not buy, does not remember putting on. Did Hannibal dress him on the boat? His shoes are still on. Hannibal is barefooted, his missing sixth toe brutally exquisite in all its oddness, sinking in the oxblood tapestry.

“Did you fall in love here?,,” he redirects without lifting his eyes, and it might be an unfair test, a trick question, but Will is past caring about trivial matters such as morality and justice.

Hannibal's voice is rough and intimate and close, too close actually, it takes Will a second to register he is nearly kneeling on the bed, hands splayed an inch away from Will’s thighs, his breath and his smell and his heat a physical, overpowering thing, a menace really, to anyone determined to keep their wits about them.
“What do you think, Will?,” he whispers heavy and bruised with a tenderness that is a challenge, it is a challenge to behold, to endure, to match, it’s a challenge Will feels punching on his skin, at that defenseless intersection of ear and hair and pulpy underside, so Will turns his face to speak directly into Hannibal's mouth, which is open and moist and expectant and empty and ripped into a gory slit-smile, or is it a tiny expanding moue, Will can never never tell them apart, but still he squares his shoulders and raises his head and says,

“I think you are about to,” and after the words are out of his lips Will has lost all dominance over them. They belong to Hannibal now, to his teeth and his tongue and the sounds his body makes when he can’t help relinquishing control over it. Not just over his flesh, but his heart, Will thinks awfully embarrassed, awfully aroused too.

At once, there is too much bare skin and not enough of it, not enough for Will to slip in and live comfortably inside, inside Hannibal Lecter’s flesh suit, between his ribs and under his lungs, where Will would press his lips to alveoli and share in Hannibal's breath, in his oxygen supply, until no exhale could be taken that didn’t have Will’s voice in it.

A marvel of psychosis, always attuned to Will’s desires much more keenly than Will himself, Hannibal stammers against the corner of his mouth, “Off off off, take these off” tugging at Will’s plaid shirt, his jeans, his boxers, until their fingers clumsily overlap, trying and failing to undo buttons without ripping, but once they rip, they sigh, wounded, impatient and relieved.

God, Will thinks dizzyly, rapidly losing all notion of space and time and mass, their bodies too desperately glued together to hold any seams, any boundaries. God, I love you, I am mad about you, I want you, I want to die and I want to kill you and I want you to kill me so I will not have to live without you, a minute it would be, it would be a minute too long to go on without you.

Will doesn’t dare to say any of this aloud, his mouth full of Hannibal’s noise and spit, his abdomen contracting painfully in stutters and stitches as Hannibal pushes his legs apart with a force that is irrational, that is absolutely unnecessary, and it occurs to Will as he cherishes him from under his lashes, still secretive, still too uncertain about teetering off this precipice, that every time they touch intimately they fall in love a little bit more, bury themselves together a little bit deeper, until one day there will be no sun over their heads. They will be fully, bodily sepulchered within each other.

It is a spectacularly graphic image and Will welcomes it with open arms as Hannibal opens him up, quickly, too too quickly, the gash of oil vivid in the air, argan, Will recognizes it now, from hot Moroccan nights, from the coffin-like train car where Will killed a man for the fourth time and they did this for the first.

This, Will moans, this scares me.

“I know,” Hannibal soothes, his left hand keeping Will’s left hip from clenching shut when the girth and the pace of his fingers grow relentless. “It wouldn’t matter if it didn’t scare us,” he says to Will’s neck, his scar, the inside of his thighs, without words, but somehow words have failed them both too much, too many times, so they might do better without.

Desire bleeds over him to the point of suffocation, and Will is sinking down a whirlpool of red water, room temperature and thick with muscle. His vision swerves so he must close his eyes to gather a thread of awareness, but it’s too late somehow, his body has already taken over and he feels Hannibal from the inside, feels his fingers sink in him effortlessly—jagged overlong nails and all—hears the struggle pump through his tendons as Hannibal wrestles not to slump over Will’s chest and fails, so Will flips him on the mattress and crowds him with his body, a body he never gave much credit to but for surviving abominable attacks.
But here, straddling Hannibal, rendering a monster and a killer a whimpering animal between his thighs—breath shredded, eyes clouded, skin forced to crease with effort and pain and want—here, Will feels the full power of his body, the overwhelming capacity it has to maul and pillage and ravage, and it’s at the apex of that surge of righteous pride that tenderness comes crashing down on him, hard, so disorienting of an emotional shift that Will must look down at Hannibal—at the pleading weakness slackening his brow, the shaking of his hands limp by his side as he struggles to relax, to breathe, to let it all wash over him so he doesn’t drown in this, in this thing that they keep doing to each other, in a new-old bed under the new-old sun, this savagery that is to lay siege to someone else’s body with your body until it lets you in, conquered and defenseless and whittled down, this ongoing slaughter of each other’s borders until they are one, because because because I love you goddammit, Will wants to spit out, but it’s futile, or trite, or dishonest, or simply inadequate, so Will purses his lips shut and gentles his pace as much as his own rabid heartbeat allows him to, but once he lets his guard down, then he is howling, loud, truly too loud and not of his own volition because his body masters him now,

“I should have been the first!” He smacks Hannibal’s chest, matted with hair and tattered with desire, “Dammit! I should have been your first!”

(His first what? Lover? Killer? Bride? Will can’t say. It runs through him like unmanned electricity—the blinding disappointment, the piercing indignation. It burns every thought it touches).

And it’s terrible this thing, this this this vulnerability, this openness, this want, because fuck you, Will shakes with sharp, sterling-silver resentment, what am I to do now, huh? This is a shattered cup you can’t bring back together, a timeline you can’t undo or remake. What the fuck did you do to me? What the fuck—and Hannibal's hands are solid all of a sudden, bright and sleek and warm against the small of his back, keeping his movements steady as Will rocks inside him, because somehow he buried himself in Hannibal’s body to the hilt, so they are locked in this embrace now. This embrace of their own making that no man can break apart.

“Stay with me,” Hannibal rasps against his ear, agitation and exertion and something softer, fragiler, when he tilts Will down and folds his own knees against his chest so Will can fall forward without pulling out.

He means “stay inside me,” Will amends drowsily as the emotional expenditure catches up with him and he becomes radically pliable, arms loose around Hannibal's shoulders, his hips moving in slow circular thrusts that make the hair on both their arms stand on end.

Fingers run through his overgrown curls, tapering low at the neck. Their breathing falls instantly in sync, and Will dares to open his eyes. The flowers have been placed in a glass vase on the nightstand, their waning petals blue-veined and sweet-smelling. Hannibal’s eyes are golden cracks under hooded, sweaty lids. Will’s own breath smells of Hannibal, salty and cool and ionized. Their noses brush and Will smiles, tentative and small.

The phantom of a blonde woman lingers in the margins of his imagination, cheap heels, ill-fitting skirt, polyester top. Her briefcase is from Goodwill, her accent from a southern trailer park. Her blue-steel eyes open, mechanical like a porcelain doll, and Hannibal disappears inside them, a stone submerged beyond Will’s grasp.

His body shudders with the vision, his orgasm ebbing away as quickly as it had built around them.

Finding no resistance, Hannibal rolls him to his back, so he can be on top of Will, weighing him down, keeping him in place. His fingers slip back in as Will slips out. There is mania in his drilling motion and a rougher, uncomfortable edge. Only much later Will would reconcile that harsh sensation with the raised scar bunching Hannibal's ring finger. Then and there, over-stimulation
and altered planes of awareness completely fray Will’s grasp on reality to the point where his body threatens to give out, to cave in under the contradictory waves of pain and pleasure, love and fear.

For a moment, Will believes the blonde woman haunting his dreams is in the bedroom with them. A scream climbs and traps in his throat, where Hannibal’s hair brushes lightly against.

The illusion does not let go until Hannibal speaks again. His voice is gruelingly acid, a knife that cuts both ways. It hurls through Will’s ear and lodges in his gut, like a bullet.

“And I should have been your only one,” he roars viciously, his hands becoming fists around Will’s hips. Will does not know what he means. And then it doesn’t matter, because in one fluid motion Hannibal is inside him.

“You are inside me,” Will whimpers bewildered, shaking off his head of clinging webs, muscling his way back into the moment at hand, past and present and a multitude of possible futures sprawling ahead in his mind’s eye.

When he meets it, Hannibal’s gaze has a liquid blackness, oozing with raw coal and fossil fuel, things of wealth and privilege and hazard. “I belong inside you,” he groans, head falling between his shoulders as he collapses on Will’s sternum, panting.

It sounded like a threat, though perhaps he intended it as a promise.

“I belong inside you, Will,” he says again, plaintive now, as close to begging as Will could have imagined him capable. He gathers him in his arms and mouths at the hairline where new frown lines are forming. Hannibal feels inordinately big inside him once they stopped moving, once they settled into seeing each other instead of rushing ahead, away, inward.

“You are,” Will murmurs into Hannibal’s hair, and it feels like leaving dead skin behind. Like being flayed alive and getting away with it. “You are you are you are.”

The more he says it, the farther the specter of that blonde woman drifts away. Like an incantation against bad spirits, Will uses secret admissions to ward off all possible unhappy futures, futures in which they don’t end up here, in bed together, tearing each other open with their cocks, their hands, their mouths.

Slowed down by endorphins, it takes Hannibal longer than usual to cotton on to the enormity of Will’s words. When he does, he whips back, propping himself up on his hands, his face level with Will’s. He looks Will straight in the eye, unblinkingly hostile, and Will lets him. It’s frightening and intrusive but it wouldn’t matter if it wasn’t.

“But you said—”

“I lied,” Will counters plainly.

“In the train, you said there had been—”

“I lied.”

“And Tommy—”

“Could never had gone that far.”

“But before—during—marriage you must—”
Will shakes his head. “You were,” he repeats simply. “You are. You always will be now.”

(The only one I let inside me. Will doesn't spell it out but the unspoken words still quicken the air between them.)

Hannibal’s lips form a soft “oh” and it’s a surprisingly unbecoming look on him, confusion and disbelief. Will leans forward to kiss it away.

They settle in a comfortable silence, Hannibal’s head on Will’s uninjured shoulder, his lovely hands distractedly stroking him back to hardness.

Will cannot remember the last time he felt this raw, this scraped down clean, like a copper pot dipped in sodium bicarbonate. He can’t remember the first time either. This might be it.

For a long while, the staccato of his erratic breathing and Hannibal’s jerking hand occupy the room. Then Hannibal is speaking, his baritone returned to a civilized, smooth pitch.

“You are my one and only, Will,” he states in a startlingly clinical tone, as if upon lengthy reflection he had reached such momentous conclusion.

Laughter jumps out of Will, an uneven mess of arousal and amusement.

“I sincerely doubt that, doctor. This is a too well-used bed to sustain such claim.”

Hannibal sits up, primly uniting his hands over a naked lap. The way he abruptly pulls his body away, all of its parts, leaves Will at a loss. It feels like being slapped in the face by arctic wind once you’ve been in warm shelter for too long. You've deceived yourself into forgetting how vicious deprivation can be.

“I do not appreciate being mocked with vulgarities, Will,” he chides at the rumpled duvet. There are bloody streaks on the white fabric. Somewhere, somehow there must be flesh-wounds to match those forensic traces. Will wonders which one of them bears them. If not both.

Will sits up as well, uncomfortably hard and thoroughly drained.

“I am not mocking you, Hannibal,” he sighs, running a hand over his face. “I am in love with you.”

(And right then and there, Will can't tell if he too has begun using love declarations as prefab substitutes for apologies.)

Curling on his side, Will pats the space behind him. “Now come back down. I’m cold.”

Will waits for Hannibal to comply and falls asleep before it happens, his naked back goosebumped with the drafts brought on by the incoming evening. He can smell the sea, only a mile off their balcony, the cold coffee sitting on the kitchen counter, the nuptial flowers a step closer to rot. The oil coiled in their sheets, and Hannibal’s sperm on the back of his thighs.

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A full moon is up and upon him when Will comes to next. The hitch on his breathing awakens him, as does the tightness in his belly, the scorching heat under his skin. It feels like he is being branded, poked with white-hot pliers until it melts into a lulling, lukewarm stillness, banked with humid pleasure.

Glancing over his shoulder, he finds Hannibal pressed flush against his back, his left fist still
around Will, his right hand still twitching inside, although Will is fairly certain there is nothing left of him to be wrung out.

In stark daylight on in the darkest night, Will would be able to tell when Hannibal smiles one of his smug, cruel smiles. He doesn’t bother turning around to confirm it. Instead he laces his fingers over Hannibal’s, effectively forcing him to stop stroking his deflated cock. Hannibal yields, and his other hand follows suit, hooking across Will’s chest.

Will has almost drifted back to sleep when he thinks of mumbling into their shared pillow, “Was that murder or mercy?”

To which Hannibal responds, not a smidgen less smug nor cruel, “That, dear Will, was love.”
Palermo, Italy II

Chapter Notes

Well...this chapter got so long I thought you'd appreciate not having to get through 8,000 words in one go. I will be posting the second part very soon.

Thank you for still being here. I wouldn't be if you weren't, honestly.

Happiness is a thing of monochromes, a thing of rituals stitched in mundane pleasures. Will realizes it a week into their stay in Palermo, standing in a white-tiled kitchen wrestling with a lamb pie that refuses to golden. Will knew all about the hunter greens and solid browns of solitary life, the constant comfort of their company. But it’s different now, with Hannibal’s hand on his wrist, ghostwriting the lattice work on a pie.

It’s different even if it remains monochromatic, because the blue is vertiginously cobalt and the black impenetrably onyx. There is silver threading through it, from Hannibal’s carelessly overlong hair and his laughter, bottled and rarely uncorked, and the tilt of his head when he corrects Will’s posture or his grip on a knife, not with malice but pointed concern, a well-worn love for fineness, for sterling precision.

A surgical affection, Will calls it in his mind, and that too is quicksilver.

—-

They are loud, Will notices that detail last, which is strange.

Not just in bed but in life, courtesy of having the sky for a roof and a dead downstairs tenant whose empty apartment remains in perpetual litigation. Will wonders exactly how much Hannibal has to do with that particular legal quagmire, and because they can’t stop themselves anymore, one day Will asks him point blank if he killed their neighbor. To which Hannibal, prim and proper in white summer linens, scoffs so steeply it is as if he had screamed. It was vulgar, apparently, to suggest that an artist would debase his craft to stir up custodian quarrels.

Will laughed, its unchecked wilderness so absolutely new for both of them the sound shook something loose inside Hannibal. A rough bellow stuttered from his red mouth, deep-throated and rusty with consonants, startling Will midway squeezing lemons into a pitcher.

Before he could return to the task at hand, Hannibal had him by the jaw.

“You terrible thing,” he growled, cut between the black and the blue. His grip tightened, the electricity between them souring into a menacing thrum. For a moment, Will stopped breathing.

Wild things reared their head. And then, unable to accept defeat or to leave it at a stalemate, Hannibal took Will’s fingers into his mouth and suck the tartness off until Will went weak in the knees and neither of them was laughing anymore.

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They are loud in the late afternoons when Will must dash to the corner store for basic supplies.
Will fidgets as soon as meat and flour reach half-full in the pantry and Hannibal pulls the pen and pad out of the kitchen drawer.

“With your atrocious accent and that beard, you’ll attract less attention than a face who once haunted the neighborhood,” Hannibal admonishes sensibly as they stand by the door, running his fingers over Will’s nonexistent lapels for a third time.

Will nods meekly but upon his return he hollers, “Honey I am home!,” on the top of his lungs. Although Hannibal has not moved from the balcony overlooking the street, even though Hannibal is less than a foot away, Will hollers the greeting, bags strewn over his shoulders, and Hannibal comes to him, long-suffering but undeniably amused, and kisses Will’s lips with too much force, a force he instantly knows speaks of contingency plans and shootouts, of murder pure and simple, unrefined and horribly lonely.

So Will grabs him by the nape when he tries to pull away, and whispers, “The shopping can wait,” until Hannibal relaxes in his arms or sinks into the Persian blue rug.

Whatever comes first.

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They are loud in the morning, when Hannibal plays opera vinyls in a gilded monstrosity parked in the living room, and Will, from the bedroom, turns on bluegrass in their shared laptop, the cacophony of mixed rhythms eventually stretching Hannibal’s patience thin enough that it has him leaving unleavened bread unattended, his forearms covered in flour and flax seeds as he storms in and Will drawls, spreadeagled on the bed, “What? Something against American folk?”

Uncomfortably fast, Hannibal strides into his open legs, irritation and resignation swirling dangerously in his eyes. He slots his hips between Will’s knees, leaning in further until he is nosing Will’s neck. “I happen to be quite fond of some American folk,” he purrs obscenely.

Will heaves a contrary burst of laughter, high pitched and lopsided, as he tips Hannibal back so he can look at his face—his hair damp from the shower, his skin flushed from the oven—and for a moment Will considers mocking the tone-deafness of his humor.

But then Hannibal’s teeth are showing, wide and endearingly awestruck, crooked in a smile that looks as ill-practiced as Will’s, so instead Will pulls him down and says, “Fuck me with that laugh on your mouth,” and Hannibal falls down to his knees and does, flour transferring from his thumbs to Will’s thighs, hip bones, cock.

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They are loud when they mill around the house, constantly narrating thoughts and activities, muttering in varying languages, from Will’s hissed Creole as he fails to restore an old stopped clock back to life, to Hannibal’s hummed Russian as he arranges flowers in vases (so many vases dear lord, Will bemoans silently, because he understands that beauty is as crucial to Hannibal as comfort is to Will.)

Beauty is not lost on Will. Only that in the absence of hyacinths and peonies and calla lilies, there would still be enough warmth in the house as far as Will is concerned because Hannibal would be in it, and that’s all Will has eyes for these days.

He catches himself harboring such saccharine thoughts, fugitive in the dead hours of Fall, yet roaring in high-definition. Will is constantly surprised by the lack of revulsion elicited by a mind
which had once been a fort on igneous rock: water everywhere, no noise for miles but of his own voice.

These days, Hannibal is as loud inside his skull as he is under his body, when Will places a hand over his shivering pelvis and mumbles: “I don’t know anymore where you begin and I end.”

Hannibal would push closer until Will occupied every inch of him from the inside out. He would gloat, loud again, louder than one would expect in bed, and sharper too, no dazed edge in his voice, no chemical softness, “We don’t end, Will. We begin only.”

Friction or intimacy, both or either, had Will gasping against Hannibal’s wet mouth, pulling him further into his lap, surface skin warm from the sheets, inner skin burning from sex.

“And then?,” Will would ask in an aborted moan, rhetorically, distractedly, and Hannibal smiled against his throat, all teeth and thunder.

“Then we begin again,” he would rasp with a vaguely chilling intensity, right before coming with a string of sighs.

Will bit into his shoulder every time they had this exchange, his face sheltered by Hannibal’s mussed hair, a scream spilled into his cracking flesh.

Certain things could not be taken back once they were spoken out.

Will took heed and secreted words away into a soundproof vault, a childhood heirloom passed on by his father, but kept under lock and key by Abigail’s ghost.

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On the twelfth day, Hannibal manifested on the other side of the marble island and placed a manilla folder next to Will’s coffee. Pavlovian, dread and adrenaline slithered down his neck and up his spine, a two-way current of no-good valence.

9 per 12 inches, standard clasp closure, slim and slightly uneven. How could such a common office supply hold such an immediate power, be capable of upending a whole body’s endocrine balance? He studied Hannibal’s calculated veneer of patience, hands in pockets, loose tie and white shirt sheer enough to be distracting but not quite succeeding this time.

Will slowed down his sips until they approximated a convincing display of disinterest.

“Won’t you open it?” Hannibal finally folded. When Will remained immobile, he tacked on, “Please,” and almost—almost—managed to sound sincere.

Will made a show of seeming busy. Putting milk away, rinsing his mug. Mannerisms of a gracious houseguest.

But after a while, there was nowhere else to go. Finding himself caged, Will eventually relented.

The contents spilled over the counter too easily, like entrails on a gutted lamb. Mostly financial reports, punctuated with real estate deeds, or so Will gleaned.

Hannibal looked down impassively as Will riffled through dozens of contracts and bank statements. The whole affair rankled Will. It seemed designed to find him out, an elaborate ruse that culminated with Will being chided with a knife, or left alone on the side of a country road, no coat, no money, maybe no shoes this time.
“What am I supposed to do with this?,” Will bristled, recoiling against the counter.

“You are supposed to sign here and here.” He pointed at lines, his lovely hands fluttering over upside-down numbers and letters. “And here too, I believe.”

Bile rose up while Will's stomach dropped. Fool, what did you think? That you’d play house with a blue-blooded killer and it would come at no cost? That it would last like fairytales do, an eternal fade-to-black with no consequences, no ugly bargains? He’s rich, you’re not, the voice that wore his father’s drawl warned. You reap what you sow, boy, and you sowed up a great heap of trouble running away with the devil like some lovestruck fool.

It took Will a moment to realize that he was shaking his head, over and over again, like a piston in a machine. Having lost his voice, that or death seemed his only available options.

“Will he kill me in the kitchen?,” Will wondered with the cadence of a children’s rhyme, “or will he kill me in the bath? Will he stab in the gut or will he shank me in the throat?”

Will flipped through images of Hannibal on his knees, lovingly scrubbing the century-old oak panels with a white cloth, singing songs whose words Will couldn’t understand. “In the bathroom, then,” he concluded with a nod as Hannibal reached for his shoulder. Will flinched and Hannibal let his hand fall away.

“Will. Please.” He had a pen between his fingers, the same silver-and-blue dagger he used to scribble their shopping lists. Will had kept every single one of them: under the mattress, inside his boots, in decorative shirt pockets that were never opened. The way Hannibal crossed his tees (“tomato,” “tagliatelle,” “tarragon”) filled Will with a tenderness he couldn’t quite grasp, but made him want to rub the ink until he did, until understanding smudged into his bloodstream.

There was very little left of him to fight back, Will realized then. Unlike disease, happiness had eroded all his defenses, rendered him pliable with pleasure and weak with hopefulness. Hannibal could ask anything he wanted of him now and Will wouldn’t be able to stand up for himself. He might as well put it down on paper, the bequeathing of his soul.

He followed Hannibal back to the island and signed his dead brother’s name in each dotted line, one by one, the pen tracking Hannibal’s tapping fingers. He did it with unseeing eyes, mind throbbing with the hum of trapped electricity.

When Will stumbled away, lightheaded, Hannibal pressed on the small of his back, keeping him in place. “Will you so kindly go over this document again? It’s a life insurance policy.”

Will shook his head, knees threatening to collapse. He felt sick all of a sudden. “I don’t need to read it, Hannibal. I have no doubt you will find a way to take whatever you want from me whenever time comes.”

Hannibal’s hand did not budge. “Will, please. I must insist.”

It didn’t feel like a choice to lean over the counter. The name was still there, egregious and unchanged, in block print and Will’s scratchy handwriting: Gabriel, Gabriel Graham, unborn and rebirthed only to become the devil’s plaything. What a mess, son, what a mess.

Will’s eyes strained to focus, but his brain went on. It always did anyway.

“Why isn’t your name in any of these?” The realization sprung unplanned. Will’s brow furrowed. He could taste blood and something else, brinier, on the roof of his mouth. Semen perhaps. Or brackish water.
“It is, Will,” Hannibal hummed, surprisingly pleased. His hand slipped lower on Will’s back, sitting dangerously close to exposed skin.

“No,” Will countered, annoyed, certain, a dog with a bone. Something itched in his brain, around the hypothalamic regions. “It states the ‘Grahams,’” he insisted, jabbing the papers with distaste.

“Will. Please read with a modicum of attention. These are binding legal documents after all.”

And then, the scales fell from his eyes. Will was in a new kitchen, bathed in yellowish crepuscular light, but it was as if time had reversed. All he needed was a gun and a pair of prescription glasses to be back where they had started.

“What the fuck—“ Will roared quietly, the same quietness of approaching storms. “Killing her wasn’t enough huh? You had to—” He pulled away, putting as much distance as he could between himself and the laughing papers, the names etched in ink as in blood: Gabriel and Mischa, Gabriel and Mischa Graham. His stomach churned and chaffed. “You. You took my last name. You forged papers that have you—why? Why would you—It’s your family’s name, your legacy.”

Hannibal stood without moving, tall and broad and nearly inhuman in his stillness. His eyes were see-through with oxblood, the skin on his neck flushed against the open shirt collar. Maddeningly, he looked incapable of feeling and so full of it when he said, “The only legacy I care to keep is you, Will.”

Will winced, revolted by the artificial sweetness, the contrived preservatives dripping into the space around them. Like airborne toxins, like ghost fishing nets, capture devices by any other name.

“But that’s not entirely true, Doctor Lecter,” Will threw back, lurching forward. “We both know that. You are proud of your life’s work. You said so yourself, only weeks ago. I was there. Have you forgotten? Or do you take me for such a lovesick fool that—.”

“Will,” Hannibal cut him off, waving a hand between them with such finality Will was reminded of a linoleum knife slicing through soft flesh. “That part of my life is over. Dr. Lecter, the Monster of Florence, the Ripper, they will live on in print and in lore for as long as horror fictions do, but you and I—we are finite. I thought—,” he paused, averting his gaze in a dazzling performance of genuine coyness “—perhaps we could be finite together.”

That, maybe, and the hitch at the end, the too-loud curl of insecurity, so perfectly manufactured, hit Will the hardest. Instinctively, he went for the keys hooked on the wall. “I—I need to catch some air.”

“Don’t. I need to leave.”

Hannibal stalked him around the island, sudden and brutal. Will scrambled backwards, hitting the archway. The noise of bone crashing against stone seemed to snap the devil out of Hannibal’s eyes. He straightened his back in steady increments, ran a hand over his fallen hair and relaxed his shoulders, as if those little physical cues could help him get back into character, help him gather the human seams back together.

Hands flat on the counter, head dipped low, he said from under his fringe, “I love you. I love you,” and he said it with such tenacity, hurled it with the same insensitive brutality a surgeon calls
“clear” before shocking your heart with electrified paddles. There was no warmth to it, but the steely determination of a soldier who will not let death stop him, that will not let pain slow him down no matter how severe the wound might be.

“I don’t care,” Will wanted to hurl back, just to hurt, just to cause damage. “I never cared much about you anyway.”

But he was in love with Hannibal now, entirely, inescapably, nerve ending to nerve ending, gut to gut, so he couldn’t, his body wouldn’t let him harm that other half of him. It clamped down around vocal cords to keep him mute, leaving Will only with the kindness of mobility.

So Will takes it and runs with it, down the stairs and into the abandoned lobby, and then through labyrinthine streets he is distantly familiar with, until it’s dark and boisterous and alive with people whose ears do not ring with shots fired, imagination rimmed wall to wall with a tidal wave of blood.

(You cultivate love into a naturally inhospitable soil. You hope to see it take root, to flourish in otherwise adverse conditions. You fantasize so long about that single bloom you drive yourself blind to the pitiful stalk, the poisonous sap. You fill vases with invisible flowers because that’s all you have left to do.)

Among the dead, their red-tinted deluge, floats Molly, mouth slashed in an abnormal smile, skin mottled blue and black around the neck, where a gold band strangles her flesh.

The Grahams, the them-them. What a bloodbath, what an untenable, dreadful thing to bet a happy ending on.

Will finds a seat by the sea, puts his head on his hands, and promptly throws up.
Palermo, Italy III

It’s almost dawn when Will lets himself back into the apartment. Clothes have grown sickly sticky, moistened with cigarette smoke and sea spray and the musk of old streets, oily with urine and the moans of strangers.

He takes his shoes off and lies face down on the baroque wraparound couch Hannibal bought in an estate sale for his twenty-fifth birthday. Will does not question why that information pings when it does, why it doesn’t hurt like it should. Perhaps because he came back. Perhaps that’s the answer to every question from here on out.

“Honey you’re home,” it cuts coolly through the oppressive silence.

Will turns to the ceiling. There’s carving work he hadn’t noticed before, bark twisted into veiny snakes. “I told you I just needed some air.”

Hannibal hums, low and gravely, as if considering a difficult diagnosis. “You must have been near suffocation if it took seven hours to find relief.”

Smooth like a porcelain vase, Hannibal’s voice gives nothing away. But there’s a twang at the bottom of it, like the hidden wire on a trapeze number. So Will stays mum.

“Why do you?,” Hannibal presses on, undeterred.

Will lifts his head from the couch. He can see the contours of Hannibal’s profile resting against the balcony door. He might have been there for a long time or just stepped in. Will couldn’t tell. He has no interest in knowing. He feels full of an emptiness that goes beyond his upturned stomach. He feels wronged, that’s the truth. And he begins to wonder if he feels guilty too.

“Do what, Hannibal?,” Will asks flatly, burrowing deeper in gold-threaded upholstery.

“Love me,” Hannibal says simply.

It’s spoken in a such an even voice anyone else would find it wistful. Will, being a fisher of men, knows a sinkhole when he glimpses one.

Sitting upright, Will does his best to keep his own voice neutral.

“Why do you think I had a choice?”

“Did you?”

“Did you, Dr. Lecter?”

A slight stir. A nod or a shake or a shrug, Will can’t tell. Sometimes even when he is looking straight at Hannibal, Will still can’t tell.

He sighs.

“Looking back, it was just—unremarkable. You were the first in a long time to give me attention without passing judgement. I liked that. You were—shuttered. I liked that too. No need to keep my cards close to the vest if you did too.”

“Concealers are less likely to probe.”
“Unless they are psychiatrists.”

Hannibal smiles the saddest, fondest smile, the one he wears when Will falls asleep in his arms and he believes himself unwatched. Only Will could always see him. He could tell a whole lot about Hannibal Lecter without ever lying eyes on him. By smell, and memory, and empathy. By love too which is the trouble at hand.

“You were lovely,” Will relents, running a tired hand over his heavy eyes. “What else is there? You were lovely until you weren’t. But then—then it was too late. I had signed myself over.”

Hannibal hums again, sincerely this time. Will can tell by the slight variation in his pitch. “Yes, I am familiar with the feeling.” And that, that sounds sadder still.

“It took me a long time to realize it, though,” Will continues, nervous energy winding him up and making him go. “I remember, after the trial, changing all my locks, then my passwords. Any crevices where you could slip back in. But I still couldn’t keep you out. First you were in the local news, then the papers. So I changed addresses. I could still smell you in my clothes. I changed my cologne. I could smell you in my dreams. I changed states, and then I changed sleeping pills. It worked like a charm. For a while. But whenever I thought I was free, you’d publish some new article and suddenly there you were again—in my screen, in my mailbox, in my memories. I half convinced myself you kept publishing just so I couldn’t get away from you.”

“Not deliberately,” Hannibal tilts his head back. “I think.”

“Once I moved to Maine, I used to spend all my time with the dogs. I would take them out into the woods and tell them all about you. That’s how I met Molly actually. She thought it was endearing that I talked to my dogs.” Will snorts without humor, “If only she knew the stories I told them. Anyway, she was nice, and kind, and clearly attracted to damaged things. So I stuck around. I thought maybe all that niceness could rub off on me.”

“Did it?”

“It did and it didn’t. Months would go by when I wouldn’t think about you. And it was nice. But then Molly would say something or Wally would do something and—I would be off the wagon again.”

“Using alcohol to escape emotional turmoil is nothing to be ashamed of, Will.”

“Oh no, no, no I never drank around Molly until—well, after, you know? No no no alcohol wasn’t my drug of choice. You were. I would tell myself it was research on the field, and last thing I knew it was two a.m. on Monday and I had lost a whole weekend perusing medical journals. You were there every time, larger than life, peddling your wares. You never disappointed.”

“I rarely do,” Hannibal singsongs smugly.

“Keep telling yourself that.” Will shifts awkwardly on the couch, as if moving his limbs could reorganize history itself. “It was harder after,” he admits, back still turned to Hannibal. “After Francis. After Pennsylvania particularly.”

“Because we survived?”

“No. Well—” Will considers his answer carefully. “No. I made peace with being alive quick enough. It just—something happened. In the water. Something—,” he hesitates, the sharp lines of selfhood blurring in his mind, like overlapping frequencies. “I didn’t come back right.”
“Will—”

“No, listen,” Will turns around sharply, hands over the couch’s tall back. It’s too dark for Will to see Hannibal properly, but it doesn’t matter. Now that he began, Will cannot keep the words in any longer. The secret needs to manifest, to bleed out of him, like a sinful intention being made flesh by the act. “Not in some abstract, philosophical way. I mean literally. Something happened between us, there, in the water. I could tell as soon as I smelled the meat braising in Pennsylvania. I smelled it and I knew. That it wasn’t pork or elk or rabbit. I knew. And—I never stopped knowing ever since. Pain and sorrow and fear. Regret.” Will scrunches his nose, reminded of the poignant mothball smell. “I can smell them now—they all have different levels of acidity and sweetness and smokiness. You passed that on to me. In the water. I know it’s a preposterous notion but—”

“I heard you,” Hannibal interrupts feverishly, eyes fixed on a point beyond the railings. “Incessantly. After you left the cabin. But before too, when you were unconscious. Those first weeks my mind was filled with your screams, Will. Your tears vibrated off my bones, I could hear your sobs under my skin. It was maddening at first, no silence in my own body. But then it grew—comforting. Particularly after you left. I learnt to master it. I bracketed you in my dreams, made a concert hall just for you. You never stopped screaming.”

“So you came for me.”

“So I came for you,” Hannibal agrees with a gentle nod. “Though arguably it could be said you came for me first.”

“Arguably,” Will looks down and away, mulling that over. Just because something is without goodness, it doesn’t make it untrue. “Did you truly master it?”

“I thought I did,” Hannibal says and it’s an admission of fallibility if Will ever heard one. It might be an apology too, but to confirm that would require turning the lights on and leaning in, and Will is not ready for that type of intimacy quite yet.

“Until you didn’t,” he rejoins instead.

“Until you didn’t.”

Will scoffs. “So what you’re saying is that if I’d stopped visiting your dreams, you’d have let me go? That’s some bullshit reverse psychology even for you, doctor.”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal concedes mildly. “But I wanted you and I was fairly certain that you wanted me in return. It seemed rather wasteful not to pursue it.”

“Wasteful.” The word rots in Will’s mouth as he lets it linger.

“Not the adjective you’d choose?”

“No, actually it’s a good one. If you subscribe to that whole ‘only one house ruined’ axiom. We arguably deserve each other.”

“Arguably,” Hannibal says it without any heat but not without a bruise, latent and not less deep. Will can hear the echo of other words, other fights, filtering through it.

He goes back to facing the front door. “I would regret you if I met you today,” Will admits, head hung between his knees. “But I don’t regret you as we are now.”

“Too much respect for our shared history,” Hannibal states, detached but perhaps also pleased.
Will can see him in his mind’s eye, in the white suit with the bouquet of flowers draping over his elbows. Did he love him then? Was that the apex of their journey? Or was it at the cliff, falling into the ocean, and everything else that followed is but a fever-pitch dream, the scrambling of two unresolved souls for a measure of companionship when they doomed themselves to everlasting loneliness?

Will breathes in Hannibal’s smell, sweet and oxygenated and iron-rich, takes in the unstated luminosity he brings to a room just by being in it. He breathes out and it is still there, the hook in his heart, anchored around his spine, the crux of love, unbreakable and inevitable.

“I don’t think I am a killer, Hannibal,” he whispers, quiet but resolved. “Not in the way your—” the wanted word eludes him. ‘Charges’ is on the tip of his tongue but it seems wrong somehow. Self-deprecating, “—patients generally were.”

“Perhaps not,” Hannibal allows with a small turn of his head. “But that wouldn’t be what you are, anyway.”

He finally walks into the room, and Will can hear the balcony latch catching. For a moment, Will expects him to sit down, to loom closer, to make his body known and visible, a decoy in an otherwise unstable ground.

That he doesn’t, says something Will is not prepared to fully acknowledge.

Will swallows around that boulder, a cluster of uncertainties and half-truths. “So what am I?”

“What you are, Will Graham, is in love with me.”

He declares it with such certainty Will huffs a startled laugh, “And that suffices?”

“Dear boy,” Hannibal intones from the bedroom, loud enough that the sound carries across the walls, yet not light enough to resemble the entire truth. “You should know by now. That is all-encompassing.”

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The next few days are tentative at best. They move around each other, congenial but cold. There is no artful way of ignoring that Will sleeps in the couch now, that all vases are empty of flowers. That they’ve ran out of flour and no shopping list materialized. But then again, nor did any homemade tuscan bread.

The bedroom changes pronouns like people do after a divorce: it’s Hannibal’s now, not theirs.

The silence that settles is sterile. No bowie knives, no harpoons, no tripwires lurking under the bramble. No passion does either. It’s just them, Will realizes, just two adults inhabiting a house that vacuum-packed and fridged love.

Will’s extremities turn blue, impossible to warm in spite of countless cups of hot coffee and tumblers of malt. Hannibal floats around, immaterial and imperturbable, reading and drawing and occasionally cooking bland food that tastes exactly as he looks: aloof, not available for consumption.

Of the great mysteries of the universe this perhaps will go down as the most mind-boggling: all it took to defuse the walking bomb that was Hannibal Lecter was place him in the vicinity of requited love. Not in it, just adjacent to it.
The realization hits Will one moonless evening and doesn’t let him go. It sours the bourbon on his tongue, it freezer-burns the tip of his fingers by way of his chest. It chokes him, that kind of awareness does, because it lies bare his innate cruelty.

He stumbles to Hannibal’s bedroom only to be stopped at the threshold. There are no doors, but the laws of vampirism still apply to broken couples: hyperaware of borders, you hover, waiting for an invitation to be let in. He leans on the stone buttress and observes Hannibal undo his black tie and twin silver cufflinks in front of the large vanity mirror. It’s a ritual Will used to study from the bed, t-shirt askew and feet bare, fingers itching with amusement and longing.

Never one for civility, it fascinated Will how much care Hannibal deposited in choosing the fabric and color palette for each morning only to shed it like skin every night. Under the textile layers he remained the same, muscular and avid and lukewarm, but once the clothes covered his body he assumed a variety of characteristics that were much harder to pin down.

No, not assumed, Will corrects himself, folding his left foot over the right. Externalized. Attire allowed Hannibal an armor but also a canvas. For a man who got away with murder he was disturbingly eager to wear his heart on his sleeve. What does it say then, that for the last few days, he has retired the white linens and stepped into blacks and maroons that resemble steeped blood, old and scratched over wounds.

Their eyes meet in the mirror as Hannibal finishes unbuttoning his black dress shirt, hands dangling away from his torso. It’s cloudy in there, shuttered. But the scent is poignant if Will cares to notice. It smells of wilted roses, overly sweet and browning around the edges. Will knows the smell intimately, carried it around for years and would have made life unsustainable to those around them had Molly been as susceptible to the stench of grief as he had become.

With a sigh, Will walks into the room. He can feel Hannibal tensing, tracking his movements from the mirror. The predator in him recognizes Will as a threat. But the man in him can’t help but hope. It’s a deeply troubling image. Will reels from it as he stops an inch from Hannibal’s back, feeling the faint warmth of his skin through the dark fabric. You did this to him, he thinks, head hanging low. You hurt him in some essential, mysterious place neither of you knew was there.

Without looking at the mirror, Will slings an arm across Hannibal’s collarbone, shoulder to shoulder, and pulls him in until Will’s nose can nestle on his nape. The hair there retains the smells of the day, sweat and cologne and resin from the violin, graphite from his drawings. Spices, not from a dish but from old books, decaying in some trunk, the tinge of frostbite that never completely leaves him. Will breathes him in, the story of his last 12 hours, bright and brittle with that undertow of resignation and resentment. They both smell the same: like lemons pickled in smoke.

Neither moves for a long minute. Will sways them a little, his other arm coming up to latch around Hannibal’s breastplate, to draw him in closer and closer until it hurts Will to keep that much pressure on his forearms.

“I am sorry,” Will whispers, but he means to say, “I am sorry I got spooked. I didn’t mean to—not entirely. I want you so much more than I want myself it frightens me.”

Will tells himself he does not know the right words but he does. Of course he does. He just fears that saying them out loud will disempower him forever, will catastrophically pigeonhole him as the kept charge of a wealthier, greedier man. It’s not a realistic concern, but there they are, suspended in dim light, Will’s arms wrapped around Hannibal’s chest, his face buried in downy hair, until Hannibal, perceptive as he is ruthless, sighs deeply and tips his head to the left, creating a void that Will occupies instantly, his forehead slotting against Hannibal’s throat. His heart moves there, wild and unprotected, its uneven drum visible through the unshaven skin.
“Fuck,” Will can’t help muttering, as he slips his hands under the open shirt and folds them over Hannibal’s left ventricle, a clumsy attempt to create an external cupola, a dome of bone and cartilage that can keep that organ safe.

“I will die for you,” Will telegraphs with a ferocity he rarely allows himself. “If you want me to, if you ask me to, I will do anything for you. I will kill anyone, I will bury their bodies. For you.”

Will feels it, before he can see it reflected in the mirror: Hannibal’s hands lifting slowly and coming to rest over his own, the lovely tapestry of his fingers weaving together with Will’s. Like a funhouse, the words bounce around his brain: “Never apologize for coming to me, Will. We are beyond apologies you and I. We are alone without each other.”

With a certain degree of hesitation, Will presses an open-mouthed kissed to where blood twitches on Hannibal’s jaw. It’s small and brief, but it speaks volumes.

“He doesn’t want you to die, you fool,” the voice that haunts Will’s brain drones on, bitter and sharp. “He wants you to live. With him, for him. But live. He has no use for you dead.”

On much of a delay as it may seem, the realization only sinks in then. That Will also wants to live, that he only turns to death when the idea of life with a monster seems so overwhelmingly impossible, so viciously out of reach death would be the kinder option.

But he isn’t a monster, is he? He is a man who wants to take your name.

(Well. A vampire that will feed on my love for as long as we both shall live.

But so will you. You are not that different from him, son).

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It’s raining when Hannibal walks in the shadowy living room and says, “Should we go out for dinner?,” casually folding an ivory jacket over his L-shaped arm.

Will measures him over his book, seeking for hidden hooks. When he finds none apparent, he opens the front door with a flourish.

“After you,” he bows and Hannibal smiles, too easily delighted.

They walk in the drizzle, three feet between them, Will’s hands deep in his pockets. The air is damp and musty, suffocated by marine layer. Hannibal directs them to an unassuming restaurant on a crooked side street.

Once inside, Will picks a booth at the far end of the candlelit room. The restaurant is cavernous and dusty, a beige bunker adorned with plastic roses and black-and-white photographs of dead stars. The food must be spectacular, Will decides.

Instead of taking his usual place across from Hannibal, Will slides next to him, close enough that their knees bump when Hannibal reaches out for a menu. He is likely going to ask for a salad, he does that in places like this, catering to American tourists, and Will mocks him with theatrical glances and exasperated eye-rolls served with extra-sized orders of French fries and frothy milkshakes. Will never finishes them, but he enjoys witnessing Hannibal’s face cycle through rings of disgust, disappointment, and disbelief as Will dips his fries in root-beer shakes.

This time Will does not order, not even after the waitress comes by twice. Hannibal peers at him sideways but says nothing. He politely asks for two cokes at the waitress’ third pass, though Will
knows damn well that the day Hannibal Lecter will drink a coke out of a fountain spout is the day Will broke him.

They sit in perfect silence, red leather squeaking under them, the place empty but for two white-haired ladies at the counter. It’s early still for dinner and the evening is too windy to invite occasional strollers.

The cokes melt untouched before Will shifts agitatedly and mutters under his breath, “I am going to take your hand now, okay?”

The softening ice clinks against the glass. Will focuses on the condensation around the red and white straws, the diluted malt color of the drink. He waits for Hannibal to speak, but he merely nods, his elbow brushing against Will’s.

Feeling oddly naked, Will fumbles for his hand under the table. He finds it lying on the leather between their thighs. In the desaturated light, the veins on the back pop. They look competent and monstrous, instruments of torture and care. Will fights down the urge to kiss them, each salient vein, each twitching tendon. Instead he troubles himself fitting the gaps Hannibal created by spreading his fingers on the seat. Though simple, coy even, the gesture holds a charge of eroticism that makes Will dizzy, near seasick. Perhaps it’s the publicness of it, or its rarity (Will cannot remember the last time he held someone’s hand. Molly. It had to be Molly. Right? Not right). Perhaps it’s the effortless fit of their skin.

“Yes,” Hannibal is staring straight ahead when says it, lips pinched in what could be concentration or irritation

“Yes what?”

“Yes, I’ll take your hand,” he says in the same monotone.

Confused, Will glimpses at the stoic profile by his side, a waxy mask of candlelit jaundice. It gives nothing away. Quickly Will swipes the room for targets of possible rudeness which might elicit such aggressively guarded look. Apart from staff, there are only the two elderly ladies and they seem too quiet in their purple hats to stir any offense.

“What do you mean? I already took your—oh.”

It dawns at him like deductions used to: like rainfall, all at once and hard. His body locks in place and, for once in a lifetime, Will’s brain stutters to a halt. Blissful, unsettling whiteout descends upon him.

Hannibal must sense the power outage because he prompts in the same brisk, businesslike voice, “If it’s still on the table.”

Will can’t stop gaping at the women’s purple hats. Are they purple? Mauve perhaps would be a more accurate word. Or lilac. Lilac is a beautiful word, delicate like fine-stemmed glassware.

“Well—,” he mumbles but he isn’t truly shaping thoughts. It’s just filling the rapidly screeching silence with noise.

Uncharacteristically, Hannibal rushes to say, “It is fine if it is not.”

“No—I mean—”, Will reaches for his eyeglasses, forgetting they haven’t been there for years. He shakes his head. “No. Do you—I thought you—” It’s mauve. Yes, mauve for sure.

Eyes set on the dwindling candle, Hannibal nods gracefully. “I see. Please make nothing of it.”
His fingers begin to slip from Will’s. It is an instinctive reaction to tighten his grip so Hannibal can’t let go. Like a child distracted at the beach being reminded of a prized possession when a strong gust threatens to pull his kite away.

Will places both their hands on the table. Hannibal’s fingers look colorless and boney, separated from Will’s by the most determined stiffness.

Will can’t tear his eyes away from them, their hands overlapping. His voice is small but firm when he says, “Yes.”

He can’t avoid darting away when Hannibal asks, polite and clinical, a doctor clearing a patient for surgery, “Yes, you do?”

“Yeah,” Will breathes out a sly smile. He side-eyes Hannibal, still and solemn in the mustard light. “Yeah, let’s get hitched.”

Hannibal’s body tenses up to a point Will did not think possible, a rigidity he did not think human bodies could truly achieve without the intervention of death. “You didn’t just say that to me.”

“I think you did,” Will counters with a sardonic smile.

“No, I most certainly did not.”

“Are you taking it back?”

“No—”

“Then—”

Hannibal exhales, long-winded and through his nose. “Yes, Will, let’s get married.”

“Are you—”

“Yes, I am sure.”

“How long have you been sure?”

Hannibal sighs, his shoulders slumping forward. “Somewhere between six years and twenty minutes ago.”

Will can’t help laughing out loud, a burst of nervous energy finding a ready relief valve, “Vague on those details?”

“More and more,” Hannibal places his elbows on the ugly tablecloth and it’s Will’s turn to smile sadly. The white suit. Will can see it with painful clarity now. That had been Hannibal’s attempt at a formal proposal, a grandiose piece of theater that fit an ideal timeframe, an ideal narrative. Will had utterly ruined it in that strange manner that was so themselves: by wanting Hannibal too much to properly see him. Will had only seen the mask then, the guise of the eccentric god, the trained performer. But the man was in there, under the expensive suit and the ridiculously excessive flowers. Or maybe the monster was, muzzled in satin. It’s getting harder and harder to figure them apart these days.

One of them still had proposed to Will in that hospital room. Before the manilla envelope, before Tommy, before this, this contrived, indirect, maladroit attempt at asking for something experience proven it would certainly be denied.
Oh god, how many times had it happened already? How many times has Will misread him since they started this, this—this courtship?

Will swallows, looks down at the red-and-white tablecloth. It seems only fair to say it now before it’s too late.

“You know that—”

“Yes, I know,” Hannibal interrupts, voice and face hard as wolfram. Minerally impenetrable.

And Will directs to that tensile steeliness, to the candle, to the ladies in mauve, but more importantly, to himself. “I don’t mean to, but I will. Sometimes I will want to leave. Won’t you?”

“No.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

“Damn,” Will chuckles spreading his legs wide under the table. His joints ache as if he had carried lumber all day. “I like you,” he grimaces, and he means it, means it with a blistering simplicity, the same ecological certainty regulating gravity and solar extinction.

If Hannibal is moved, he does not show it. He sniffs into his untouched coke, tapping the plastic straw. “Of course you do. I am an excellent chef, an accomplished musician, a brilliant conversationalist—”

“Maybe,” Will cuts off smoothly, “but that’s meaningless.”

“How come?”

“That’s the man. The man is easy to like. But the predator who always finds his way in the dark, the boy who can never get his hands warm—I like them more and more each passing day. They will never leave, will they?”

With a heavy sigh, Hannibal amends, “They will never let you go, Will.”

Under the candlelight, the scars on their linked fingers come into high relief. A puffed red maul over a perfect white stripe. What a startling representation of their essence.

Gently, Will traces Hannibal’s knuckle.

“Good,” he says. “I don’t want to go anywhere.”

---

Will has been incapable of letting go of Hannibal’s hand since he first held it in the restaurant. Even when the silence between them grew uncomfortable, ripe with the enormity of their decision. Even when their skin grew too warm, their palms clammy, Will would not let go—he just moved his fingers to Hannibal’s wrist instead.

He could feel Hannibal struggle not to stare at their intertwined hands as they walked the streets of Palermo. Will wondered if the sudden turn of events left him as breathless as it did him.

(I am marrying him and he’s marrying me, not because we must nor because we can, but because we are helpless to stop it. There is no way to become closer that we will be able to resist, being
murder or matrimony. If I could, I’d graft him to my body so his oxygen would have to be purified by my lungs.)

As he unlocks their front door, Hannibal comments, “You’re exceedingly quiet.” He affects a certain offhandedness that Will recognizes for the bluff that it is.

“Just thinking,” Will remarks as he walks inside.

“Anything in particular?”, Hannibal seems cautious as he stays behind, closely monitoring Will as he takes off his jacket and undoes his laces.

“Oh very particular,” Will quips, padding barefooted into the bedroom. It takes him a handful of minutes to register that Hannibal didn’t follow.

Will finds him by the door, hand still on the brass handle. His face is a shroud of quietness but Will could hear the wailing blindfolded in the sea.

Will strides over and cups his face in both hands. “It’s you, sweetheart,” he whispers to the pursed lips, “It’ll be always be you.”

When Hannibal responds with a put-upon frown, that tick of dismissiveness when something rankles him as insufficient, Will breathes out, “If I could, I’d graft you to my body so your oxygen would have to be purified by my lungs.”

It feels painfully awkward and dangerously daring to speak his innermost thoughts aloud. He never did it before, not without a crime scene to officiate and exculpate his madness.

But Hannibal is in himself a crime scene, comprised of many bodies, many crimes, some even against Will. And perhaps because of that, he throws himself against Will, kissing him with such bluntness his teeth ache.

“You are gonna marry the fuck out of me, aren’t you?”, Will grins when he manages to pull back an inch.

“Language,” Hannibal remonstrates automatically, before dipping back down and murmuring against Will’s lips, “But yes. I do believe I will.”

---

They regard each other as they strip side by side. Hannibal's shoulders are hunched in a way Will believes is defeated and joyful, perhaps a touch discomfited. If there were ever a man who has not been prepared for marriage it is Hannibal Lecter.

“You asked me before,” Will states once he is down to his boxers.

“Pardon?”

“In the Tunisian hospital. I didn’t see it then. But you were asking, weren’t you?”

Hannibal shrugs, hanging the light-blue button-down in their closet. “One is often most blind to what they do not wish to see.”

“No. It is not that.” When Hannibal arches his eyebrows skeptically, Will insists while slipping under the sheets. “It’s not. I thought—actually I thought you were taunting me.”

“Taunting?”
“Yeah,” Will fluffs his pillow. How Hannibal managed to change the consistency of the pillows in one week is beyond Will’s comprehension. “Making fun, you know, that I—well—”

Hannibal stops folding his pants as if standing still helped him process information. He does that often, Will has noticed. He’d wondered if it’s something Hannibal learnt as a child, or later, in his studied attempts at passing as a human. “You thought I was ridiculing the fact that you proposed to me.”

Will nods.

“That would have been appallingly rude of me, Will,” he says putting his pants away.

“Sure, but you are a sadist serial killer so—”

“Will,” a hand swirling in Will’s general direction, another untucking his side of the duvet. “Language.”

The frostiness of his feet startles Will who, used to running cold, forgets often that Hannibal is cold by nature. “I would never,” Hannibal hesitates. “It never insulted me, Will, your—proposition. If anything it—”

“Repulsed you?” Will takes Hannibal’s hands between his own and rubs them together. Perhaps too cool surfaces can kindle a fire. Stranger things have happened. Like this, the two of them in bed together discussing marriage. That happened.

“Disquieted me,” Hannibal corrects, sounding disturbingly uncertain himself.

“Yeah no kidding,” Will sneers. “How do you think I felt when I asked? You are not exactly who I imagined spending eternity with.”

“No,” Hannibal turns on his back suddenly, his hands slipping away from Will’s grasp. “I imagine not.”

Will pulls Hannibal’s hands back between his. They are icier now if possible. Lilac, not mauve.

“Come on,” Will chides. “Not because of anything else but the fact that you abused my trust to the point you nearly killed me. That’s why. I couldn’t care less about your wealth, or your past, or your ‘proclivities’ as you’ve so elegantly put it. I just never thought I could forgive you. And I never dared believing you could love me.”

“I love you, though. I always did,” Hannibal declares, still turned away, still a touch too cold for Will’s comfort. “But burnt wood avoids the flame.”

It clicks for Will then, like a crime scene once did: pieces of scattered intention made coherent in one dramatically singleminded design.

“You wouldn’t allow yourself to believe it. That I chose you,” Will cocks his head to better regard the man lying next to him in bed. How transparent and resilient he looks, a glass figurine cast in hellfire and brimstone. “Not at face value, anyway. Not without a trial period.”

“I would not phrase it exactly in that way.”

“No,” Will concedes, switching the light off, “I imagine you wouldn’t.”
In the early morning, they drink coffee standing against the counter. The manilla envelope is back between them, though a casual observer would be easily convinced that it never went anywhere. Will wonders between sips where did Hannibal put it and where did he find the time to return it to the kitchen.

Will already signed it. Having for once gotten up before Hannibal, he made short work of it. They haven't discussed it, but he left the envelope unclasped, the pen uncapped on top of the broken seal. Hannibal knows, although he has offered no legible demonstrations of that knowledge. Or perhaps the way he effortlessly slides through the kitchen, barefooted and bare-chested, drinking from Will's mug and humming Slavic songs under his breath, is enough evidence. He's happy, Will realizes, stunned by how trivial happiness can be, how loud in its triviality.

When Hannibal careens softly towards Will's shoulder, he meets him halfway, a slight nudge to his cheek.

"What made you reconsider my offer?," Hannibal asks, eyes closed, bare arms streaked with goosebumps.

Will leans away, holding his mug with both hands.

"Maybe I just wanted to be asked."

Hannibal follows him like a compass, as if the magnetic field between them demanded him to fold into Will's body. "I asked," he says into Will's neck. "Again and again and again."

Will takes pity on him and kisses him on the shoulder. Reality is becoming a continent he visits with irregularity. Hannibal, the expansion of space occupied by his skin and muscle, is quickly becoming all the bounds Will cares for.

"Was I on probation, Will?"

The question blows through Will's throat, the place where Hannibal presses his lips, spilling right into Will's mouth.

Fluid, fading, Will puts his mug down and brings both hands to Hannibal's jaw. He smells of sleep and caffeine in the morning, and of salt from Will's spit where it dried around his stubble.

"No, I was," Will says before kissing him open with his tongue, and it's like getting on his tippy toes: it's not something Will must do, but it feels good to, for once—to let the guard down with the one you love. All hell be damned.

---

There's a trip, Hannibal says. It will be quick, he says. No more than 26 hours.

Will holds him and holds him, standing barefooted in the kitchen, refusing to pull back enough to look him in the eye which he already knows are alight with amusement. Though he knows nothing of its content, Will already dislikes the concept of this solo trip.

What if you are caught?, he asks. I won't be, Hannibal dismisses with an airy smirk as if debating evolution with a creationist. But what if you are? There's no contingency plan, Will leans heavier on his shoulder, and Hannibal runs a soothing hand down his back. I will provide you with a burner phone, we'll be in touch. Right, Will sneers sourly, because Interpol will allow you that one parting call to your beloved accomplice. They might to my husband, Hannibal rejoins, humor scintillating in his insufferably neutral voice. Don't go, Will pleads, abandoning all witty pretenses.
I must, Will. I don’t care. You don’t mean that. I do, actually. What good does me a husband seven feet under? I won’t get killed, Will. What little confidence you have in my skills, I should feel offended. Stay home and I’ll show you what gratitude feels like instead, Will counters stone-faced. Laughter thrums through Hannibal’s ribcage, I am flattered that you’ve grown this attached, Will. I am not attached, Will bristles, finally stepping away. I am practical. This, for all practical reasons, is a terrible plan. You just have to trust me, Will. Can’t you do that for a day? Much can happen in a day, Hannibal, Will scathes, walking out into the balcony. But suit yourself. If you get killed I will be free to marry someone else. Remember that. Hannibal follows him out. A gloomy sky harbingers rain and lightning. I will make sure to keep it in mind, he says fondly, arms snaking around Will’s waist. I would always come back to you, if only to bring you with me to the other side, he whispers into Will’s ear. How Orpheus of you, Will scoffs refusing to turn in Hannibal’s embrace. I like to think of myself more of a Hades, but whatever pleases you, beloved accomplice. Will could hear Hannibal’s smile scattering through his hair, where his mouth pressed warm and solid against his scalp.

Will did not relent, but Hannibal left at daybreak anyway.
Here’s the thing about trauma nobody wants you to know: it splits you in two. Not temporarily, not just at the point of impact, but forever. Before and after, the old you and the new you, they are mirror images that can’t quite exist at the same moment in time.

The impact stays, it cuts you up. (It builds you up too).

(Or at least you hope it does).

---

Will leans on the balcony, watching the morning drip away into the city gutters. There’s a cigarette in his hand that he is been telling himself not to light up. As if out of respect for Hannibal, for his fine furniture, for his dislike of Will’s willing self-destruction.

The thought is funny, at least in his head, that Hannibal would care so dearly for Will’s wellbeing, yet riddle his body with scars.

(He took you to the hospital this time.)

Will touches the thicket in his cheek, the roped scar under it, the white line on his forehead. These things would give him away as Will Graham.

He taps his healing ribs, the fading scar on his ring finger, the luxurious cotton blend of his new shirts. Those things are of whom came out on the other side—of the ocean, of the nightmare, of death. They belong to the man who knows very much about himself and very little about his future.

They are Gabriel’s, Will realizes with a strange clear-minded sobriety, and Gabriel can get whatever the fuck he wants.

Why shouldn’t he? He got to be born at 40, fully-formed and out of the guts of love. No voices in his head with a Southern drawl, no drunken fathers and maddened mothers. No dead wives, nor dead daughters either.

He gets to have it, Will decides, striking a match. Gabriel gets to have his monster and be one too.

The air fills up with the brine of smoke. Will inhales deeply, the silence around him a thing of teeth and pride.

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Trauma is sticky. You may push it in, bury it, but it slithers out, the fault-line your fingers can’t quite reach open, can’t quite heal shut.
It stings sometimes, but then you remember: you are not the crack, you are the structure standing.

---

The house swells around Hannibal’s absence. Stucco and floorboards crackle and expand longways, making rooms double in size. The air feels brittle and thiner, particularly in the bedroom, grayish yellow with all its skylights.

Strange affliction, co-dependence, Will thinks while he tries and fails to read a book about the Italian Renaissance, to bake a gooseberry-fig pie, to sleep through the glumness of the overcast afternoon.

He touches himself disinterestedly. The bed, white and too overly soft, feels foreign, hotel-like. No matter how much Will enjoys this house, it is not a home without Hannibal in it.

(Would it still be his home, though, if you left?)

With arousal, thoughts spiral painfully accurate, spearing a vulnerable spot Will didn’t know was there, low in his groin.

His brain conjures up Hannibal’s hands, covered in blood as he dices liver in his Baltimore kitchen, in a Pennsylvanian cabin, blood on his hands as he runs them through Will’s hair in a pitch-black night, runs them over his shoulders and stomach, tracing scars he put there with his hands or with his want which, Will should know by now, can be as unyielding as gravity itself.

Heat comes through Will suddenly, unhinging the doors in his brain that need double-locks. It smells like old blood in there, and sex, or the eidetic components Will connects with sex: musk, rarefied oxygen, raw skin, hands steep on brain matter, the glare of white porcelain or is it the moon, bone-white, and red, so much red it turns midnight black on his skin, sleek with it, and god sleekness, the unbearable intimacy of feeling your skin sleek with someone else’s blood, elevated into electricity by Hannibal’s gaze, he who is there, always there, a lurking presence thick with flesh and power, and that smell Will calls sex but it’s not sex, it’s euphoria, and that other thing, that elusive thing that rattles around you all your life and you fumble about for it since you are born, you paw at it, you want it, good god you want it more than breath itself, that warm clicking surety, that, that—trigger, is Hannibal on his knees, charred charcoal with blood from head to toe, Will’s fist punched through his chest until it flexes on the other side, fingers wet with gore and semen, feeling shattered ribs hug his forearm.

Will gasps for air and comes. It hurts everywhere, from his locked ankles to his closed eyelids. His body grows cold almost as swiftly as it overheated.

He is getting too old for too much pleasure, which is not as half a disturbing a conclusion than the realization that he will never be able to have another orgasm without involving Hannibal Lecter.

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Trauma, kissing cousin to memory, likes to shapeshift.

It twists and turns like a firefly, prompting leaps in imagination, filling holes in the stories you tell about yourself. It convinces you to fear a danger that has passed, to trust hurt because hurt wears a familiar face.

You tell yourself that you have changed, that you made yourself impervious to trauma without knowing trauma wears your mouth, makes you tell lies in a voice only you could believe. Because
it’s your voice. Or the voice of someone you once loved and then lost.

Often that person is you. Younger and more hopeful. But still—a version of you.

---

Will rouses from a sickly slumber, sweating off whiskey and cognac and whatever sweet syrup Hannibal kept in a glass decanter by the spices.

He dreamt of Abigail, her face bloodied, her throat slashed so deep he could see the back of her throat through the gash. She couldn’t speak, just gape like a fish drowning on dry land. He tried to reach her, or at least he thinks he did. It was unclear. Before he could scream, he had awoken with a dead weight on his abdomen. He looked down in a panic, expecting to see stitches and gory sheets, but there was nothing but his nails, digging through white fabric until it was dingy with oily streaks.

Attempting to clear his mind, Will roams to the big rosewood armoire Hannibal fills with color-coded clothes. He lets his fingers dot across the sleeves, feeling the changes in cashmere, cotton, silk, linen. It smells like him, the accumulation of fabric does: rich, robust with money and experience, and a well-loved consistency that Will has come to accept is what always attracted him to Hannibal. Hannibal knows himself since the dawn of time, and he enjoys that knowingness like he enjoys his clothes: tailored to precision.

Under neat rows of dangling pants, shirts, vests, and jackets, is a black bag. On top of the bag is a box, thin and emerald green, the kind of box Will only saw jewelry in, or expensive serving spoons, once, on his wedding day. A gift from Molly’s eccentric aunt. The woman had died days later and neither of them dared to open the box ever again.

Will recognizes the travel bag immediately though he tells himself not to, not to linger on what it might mean, if Hannibal put it there for Will to find, if this is what leaving him unchaperoned on his apartment was all about: another test, rigged to maximize Will’s ability to trip and fall.

He knows the bag because he packed it, back in Maine, when they decided to run away together. Apparently Hannibal did not dispose of it after leaving Will on the side of a Southern road. Somehow, between Tennessee and Georgia, Hannibal had mailed Will’s luggage here, to his home in Italy. Hoping, perhaps, that would become their home.

A delayed actualization, but nonetheless—Hannibal, always getting what he wants, sooner or later.

There’s a bitterness in that thought Will believed to have been bled out by now.

(He took you to the hospital. Remember. He took you to the hospital this time.)

Will allows himself to skim the zipper, to indulge in the temptation of finding out if there’s a corpse rotting inside, or just his scruffy socks, nested inside-out in messy lumps.

He picks up the box instead. What horror can be trapped in a two by ten-inch box?

He thumbs at the lacquered lid. Nothing. Nothing can surprise him anymore. He is impervious to Hannibal because he knows him inside-out like a sock, he has rolled the skin back and peered inside the monster until he found the boy frozen inside, the man holding both of them together like a metal clasp. Nothing Hannibal can do can hurt him, because nothing he can do can be unknown to Will.

The lid pops open with an easy clack. It seems loud in the dreadfully empty apartment. It’s late in
the night, late enough to be almost too early in the morning. The noise Will makes next is louder still, a piercing little shriek, owlish.

Like the bag, Will would know the knife anywhere, any way, tied up and blindfolded and half-dying on a kitchen floor, he would know it, the curved blade and the unassuming handle, the tip bent where it nicked Will’s rib.

There’s a crimson residue on the hilt, which takes Will a long moment to translate as dried blood, not rust. If it is his or Abigail’s, it is impossible to tell. Both, maybe. Likely both.

It looks obscene, the blade does, open and recumbent in a cutout bed of navy-blue velvet, the phallic metal dulled by use and age. The inscription shines with newness under the trickled moonlight. “I love you,” it reads in perfectly block font.

(As if you could engrave that in a knife and call it a Valentine. As if you could push away some blood and call it even.)

“Aren’t we even?,” Will asks the girl in the herringbone suit standing next to him, her liquid-white hand rounding the armoire’s brass knob. “Are we ever gonna be truly even?”

“You’re in love,” she says, as cordial and prim as she never was in life. “Same difference.”

The weight on his hands turns suddenly unbearable. Will feels himself fading, his knees wanting to give out. He can’t stop looking at the knife and he can’t sit down. He can hear Abigail moving around, shifting to come closer and stand in front of him. She takes his hands in her hands, translucent now, barely a wisp of color. Her nails are painted bright red like ripe sliced cherries.

“Will. You need to let go.”

“Don’t say that!”, he chokes out, feeling tears and thunder mix together in his chest, threatening to spill out. Her hands are brutally cold for someone with no substance. Will is reminded of Hannibal’s toes (icy, always so icy), how he tucks them under Will’s calves every night, awake or asleep. How he offers up the coldest parts of his body to Will, again and again, as if moved by the inexplicable belief that Will holds the power to reverse poor circulation, to undo the damage of a trauma Hannibal’s body refuses to let go of.

“Will. You must let go,” she repeats, kind, but with a ooziness to her voice that is quickly growing. She sounds like Molly, Will realizes with a start. Disappointed, worn out, hemorrhaged by the caprices of men.

(Who keeps a murder weapon only to etch a love confession into it?

A killer in love.)

Will cannot shake the image of being slashed open, the memories flooding him with a force only hammers and firearms should possess.

(Scorned love, weaponized into a dagger, ripping flesh, ripping his stomach, ripping Abigail’s neck, ripping Hannibal too, until all it was left was their blood on the linoleum, running wild like spoiled milk, a river worth of it.)

The box crunches under his gripping hands.

“I liked it,” Will whispers, not quite apologetically.
And it’s not a new truth. It’s a very old one actually, old enough that Will had hoped to emancipate it without any official recognition, without a proper sendoff.

(On the kitchen floor, bleeding out, a part of him had liked it. The awful intimacy, the searing pain, the wrathful indignation, the just comeuppance for baiting a shark with live prey. He had liked all of it, down to the blood peacefully clotting on his cheeks and nose).

There’s another clinking noise when blade and box tumble to the ground.

Abigail is gone and Will knows she will never return.

The scar on his abdomen throbs, as does every joint in his body, forcing him to fall down.

Curled up on the mink rug, Will can see the books Hannibal stacked under the bed, dust bunnies collecting around their leather-bound covers. He smiles, endeared by the mundanity of domestic cohabitation, what it reveals about the ones you love.

He wonders if Hannibal has read them all to the end, or forgot about each one midway through a chapter.

---

Hannibal calls only once, nearly 24 hours after he left.

“Will,” Hannibal says as soon as Will picks up, and the longing in his voice is as palpable as the other thing that latches on to it, an emotion Will struggles to place.

“I miss you,” Will rushes out, inexplicably urgent, receptor clutched to his mouth. “Please,” and he stops short of begging ‘come home,’ though his tone may give it away anyway.

Hannibal hums in assent, and even that inflection sounds exhausted, his voice roughened into a smallness that makes Will grip the cellphone with both hands. He can hear the wind blustering in the background. Water possibly too.

They stay on the line, breathing into silence, which doesn’t help alleviate Will’s unease. When was Hannibal Lecter ever at a loss for words?

“Did—did everything go as planned?”, Will probes with caution.

Hannibal hums again, distractedly, and for the first time in their long acquaintance Will scrambles to hold Hannibal’s attention. It is a new and horrifying sensation of bereavement, of betrayal.

“Hannibal,” he barks, a tad too desperate. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” and he sounds far far away, farther than any geographical location could account for. “All went accordingly. I will see you very soon, Will.”

“Hannibal,” Will hisses. A warning, not a request.

“I love you,” Hannibal whispers gently, out of the blue, as if talking to a different iteration of Will, as if wires had crossed through the great time-space continuum and this was a conversation from another life, with another version of Will Graham.

“Hannibal,” the plastic under Will’s hands cracks. “Let’s stay here. Can’t we do that? Can we stay here?”
The wind picks up wherever Hannibal is. He shifts the cellphone from one ear to the other and exhales. The gesture alone speaks of a cataclysmic weariness, and coiled underneath it, a soft, preoccupying vacillation.

Oh dear god what have you done, Will feels dashing through his spine just as Hannibal replies, musing with lightness,

“Love. It pays you a visit or it doesn’t. It changes you, though, whatever age you may be.” He pauses, and his voice stretches into a lofty, ethereal thing, “I didn’t know that. Did you know that, Will?”

Will shakes his head nervously, reflexively, forgetting for an instant that Hannibal cannot see him.

Too tired to stand up, Will folds against the kitchen counter. Somehow he had paced all the way from the bedroom to the kitchen.

“Safe travels then,” he throws out weakly, touching his forehead to cool marble, before pulling the phone back up and roaring into the mouthpiece, “Goddammit. I love you. You hear me you crazy son of a bitch? You come back home in one piece or help me god you’ll be digging a grave before sundown,” hanging up with such force the phone bounced when it hit the floor.

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When Hannibal walks through the door, Will can tell two things at once: that he hasn't shaved since he left, and that he smells wrong. Not unwashed or like other people, just wrong, unlike himself.

Neither of these things stops Will from jumping to his feet as soon as he hears the key in the front door. Hannibal lingers at the threshold, away, altogether too far, frozen with the strangest expression. Surprise, Will would wage. Not to be home, not to see Will in boxers in his living room, but perhaps to find everything just has he had left it.

"You look tired," Will ventures without moving any closer, and that's an understatement. Hannibal looks worn down to paper, face empty and distant.

Will opens and closes his hands, scrambling to make sense of Hannibal, to read him. If he didn't know any better he would think that was not Hannibal, but a twin from a parallel universe that found a doorway to their home.

"Are you hungry?," Will tries again, stepping towards him. There's a cut under his chin, another over his lip. Will can't help reaching out and trace them with his thumb. "I could make you something."

Hannibal looks down, his mouth relaxing under Will's touch. Up-close his eyes are burgundy, feverish and remote, like in a trance.

Hannibal looks down, his mouth relaxing under Will's touch. Up-close his eyes are burgundy, feverish and remote, like in a trance.

Will leans in to kiss him, his fingers slipping away to Hannibal's throat. There's a small indentation on his trachea too, like the brunt of a fingernail. Will pushes on it and the foreign smell grows thicker. Will breathes through his mouth and kisses him, slowly, licking around the cupid bow, where blood is still runny. Hannibal remains uncharacteristically still until his hands come to hold Will's face on both sides. He pushes away gently, almost begrudgingly.

"I must shower first," he says into the small space between their lips. When Will disregards it and leans back in, Hannibal elegantly slips away to the side. He is in the bedroom before Will can make sense of their exchange. He follows him (always, always). Hot water already steams the air.
Hannibal takes his showers scalding, Will imagines because cold is an enemy that lives within.

On the floor, his travel clothes are discarded in an uneven pile. Will cannot help picking them up. He tells himself he is doing it out of consideration, of habit. The grey wool is limp in his hands as Will brings it to his nose. Under sweat, city grime, and sea salt, it smells like Hannibal, if Hannibal had been doused in vinegar and woodchips.

Will tells himself it has been too long to paint an accurate picture. It's as much of a white lie as saying he is doing this because he cares about neatness.

He breathes deep into the stained fabric, a pendulum swings, and then it's too late to look away.

(They are in a hospital parking lot, both of them, Will inside Hannibal looking out through his eyes. You know this parking lot well, you've visited it often. It's a full moon and your body is strumming with an unruly, brutish energy. It got you by the jaws. You sit and you wait. For once, waiting is difficult, an ordeal. Finally a door bangs open and a yellow swatch of fabric glimmers in the darkness. Yellow as rue. Once you pounce, she loses purchase quickly. Her eyes go big as saucers when you straddle her, and you relish horror being given so much floorspace. If you could, you'd kill her a thousand times. You think of the song of birch trees waving in the Autumn wind. Like music from the spheres. She fights back, clawing at your neck, trying to scream. You do not block her efforts. You delight in them, stretching them to an inevitable ebb. You are filled with a stickiness, predatory but unknown to you. It's ugly, rude, it makes you laugh, laugh loudly when you know it would serve you best to be silent and discreet. Only you don't want to be discreet. You want this to last, for her to suffer a quarter of what you did, for her suffering to absorb your own. It's still over before you can have your fill. Her limbs go lax like they always do, her eyes rolling back into her head. You taste blood. You lick your split lip and sounds return through the fuzz of adrenaline. It didn't use to be like this. A lamp buzzes in the distance. Your hands are still tight around her neck, her hair spilled out of the yellow wrap. Your lips twist into a snarl, then a question mark. You do not want to let go.)

Silence snatches Will back. Hannibal stands in front of him, bare and dripping, the cuts on his chest inflamed by the hot water. His face is a room without windows, a closet with no handle. Water rivulets around his hip bones, disappears into his pubic hair. He's close enough to touch, if Will wanted to touch him. Will looks up without seeing him, still in two places at once. Somehow he has sat down on the bed, so he stands back up abruptly, grey turtleneck still bunched in his fist.

“You're angry,” Hannibal states without a hint of emotion.

“Of course I’m angry,” Will says before realizing it is true. "You keep fucking around with our lives. With our safety. For what? The sake of your massive god complex?”

“I find rudeness unspeakably ugly, Will. You know that.”

“She was not being rude, Hannibal!” Will snarls back, pacing. “She cared. She cared about me, she was warning me—”

“—Ah! Care!” Hannibal sneers, dramatically toweling off his hair. “As if livestock could understand the language of gods!”

Will storms right up to Hannibal’s toes, leaning forward to jeer directly in his face, “For an intelligent psychopath, you can be pathetically dense sometimes.”

And, just like that, darkness overtakes them.
—she was meddling, crassly attempting to drive a wedge, to turn you against me—"

—bullshit! She was being kind, Hannibal. Not that you’d be able to tell kindness apart from rudeness, no, not you, your fucking Highness, you are too far above—"

—should I simply ignore it, then, what she did to you, Will? The state I found you that night, how she poisoned you with her serpent tongue—"

—that is fucking rich coming from you, the devil incarnate! You took everything from me!

—Will! You are behaving like a child! Honestly I cannot make sense of—"

—you killed everyone I bonded with, everyone that mattered! You made me so alone all I am left with is you! And you don't even fucking want me!"

The silence is abrupt and crashing. They both stand stunned by it.

“This is not about a nurse, is it Will?”, Hannibal ventures first, words spaced out carefully.

Will shakes his head, his shoulders, bones jangling together in rage and exhaustion and resentment.

He steps back, trying to put a safe distance between their bodies.

“No. Clearly it isn’t.”

“Will—”

“You said no,” Will cuts off, spinning around, finger stabbing at the air, “You kept saying 'no' for months. You drugged me, you beat me, you fucked me, you landed me in hospital and you made me kill a man, but you still wouldn’t fucking marry me!”

“Will, I just asked you to—”

“Yeah guess what? It doesn’t spell out ‘happy ever after’ when you immediately turn around and commit murder. It spells ‘life sentence.’ It spells ‘get me the fuck out of here.’”

“May I remind you that you were the one who decided to marry the first woman—”

“No. Don’t,” Will growls dangerously. “Just don’t.”

“So I must listen to your—”

“You killed my wife! You killed my children! You almost killed me—several times! But you—”

“I made a place for you. I reversed time for you. I died for you, and still you didn’t want me!” Hannibal voice holds all the venom a heartbroken man can spew, the kind of spill no skin could ever fully contain. “You didn’t—” he halts and inhales deeply, as if the words scraped to be spoken, “—want me. You didn’t want me again and again and—”

“I want you now!”

“I’ve wanted you always!”

And god is that a roar walls shouldn’t be able to uphold. The air vibrates between them, high-strung and brittle, the ground crackling with fissures large enough to swallow a grown man whole.

Will sits down on the edge of the bed and crosses his legs at the knee. “Are there any other bodies I
should be made aware of?”

“Alana went missing last Winter,” Hannibal fires back, immediate and absolute, ten-feet tall in his majestic pride. “I do not expect her to be found.”

Will takes a deep breath and regards his shoes closely. That sure explains Jack’s sudden interest in house calls.

“Before or after you came for me?”

Hannibal inhales and oxygen turns inflammable between them, a handful of tinder away from sparking into a life-size bonfire.

“A simultaneous occurrence, as it happens,” he preens, haughty with honesty.

Will nods, taking the new information in. When he lifts his head, he has made up his mind beyond the point of no return.

“You need to leave,” he states, blunt and steady. “You need to go now. Because if I go, I may not come back.”

For a moment Hannibal just looks stricken, and there’s nothing beautiful about it, nothing rewarding in the way hurt and rage and disdain flicker over his face only to be absorbed almost instantly by his voracious pride. There is nothing beautiful in seeing a grown man be swallowed by the holes you helped him dig.

But then, he is bowing at the waist, darting in so tremendously fast, Will barely manages to dodge back and avoid being hit on the nose.

Hannibal’s eyes and mouth, the curve of his forehead and jaw, descend into shadow, and Will knows, with the certainty ascribed to nuclear disaster, that Hannibal is considering killing him on the spot.

He would do it with his hands, his whole body informs Will. The bleak intensity stiffening his shoulders speaks of a quick dispatch, a resignation letter in the shape of a broken neck.

But his eyes are bleeding, so there is a chance the romantic sadist in Hannibal will prefer a more laborious farewell, with oleander stuffed in Will’s eye sockets and perhaps poison ivy flowering out of his crotch.

(It would look beautiful either way. Will only wishes he could see it.)

They hold each other’s gaze as if to look away were to accept, not defeat, but an ending. That they pushed each other so far out the ledge now they must leap off or walk back. Neither is a gracious fencer. And blood is all they know.

Luckily, Will has a graveyard full of friends. The idea of topping it off with an intended seems too wasteful to endure.

He reaches out, slowly, as if to dislodge a trap around a fox’s paw. When his hand makes direct contact with Hannibal’s bare skin, the man jumps back so spasmodically Will is reminded of a malfunctioning kid’s toy.

It’s too late to let go, though, to stop midway. He brings another hand to the small of Hannibal’s back, applying the same pressure required to staunch a perforated artery.
Hannibal refuses to break eye contact. The manic will to burn the world down is still there. And then Will blinks, and it's gone. Only the pain remains, fat hurling metal flails. But it's the pain of a wounded animal, not a serial killer.

Hannibal steps away towards the closet, and Will lets his hand fall. On the floor, a puddle of water formed where Hannibal stood, dripping wet and naked.

“Killing with you was the most fun I had in my life,” flies out of Will’s mouth, sounding more wistful than it had any right to be.

Hannibal glances back. Though his mouth does not move, his eyes warm up, lightening to the saddest tone of amber.

The air between them changes smells Will can’t place. Grey like flint, but chalkier, a dry smell, a smell of something without flavor. The flip-side of zest. It’s something Will never caught on Hannibal before, that doesn’t go with his biology.

It occurs to Will that perhaps he is not resenting Hannibal's reckless killings, but that Hannibal killed them without him.

(The secrecy, the sheer compartmentalization of it all, stunk of the sheltering imposed on a child, an incapacitated spouse, a subordinate.

When you love a monster, you give yourself over, spikes, guts, infantry and all. To think that Hannibal may have been hiding knives in closets, bruises under his clothes, bodies all over the mountains, and Will there, in the dark, like a gothic damsel stashed away in a dungeoned castle, hands folded on his lap waiting for rescue or ravage.

The gall.)

Will watches Hannibal as he moves through the motions of selecting a clean shirt, buttoning it down, stepping into pleated trousers without bothering with underwear or socks. He is not going anywhere and killing is easier barefooted. That much Will can tell. The rest is a guessing game. Will used to be good at those. Once upon a time.

“What were you thinking while you did it?”

In front of the bathroom mirror, Hannibal brushes his hair back with his fingers.

“While I killed that nurse, you mean?,” he counters coolly, his back a steel-plated armor, all pretenses of kindness flung to the waylay. He definitely does not love Will now. Not anymore, anyway.

“I thought of well-polished wood, that herbaceous smell you can only achieve with high quality grain. Of fresh offal, garnished with minced basil and sweet onion, of sunsets by my childhood home, how fantastically blue and magenta they seemed to a six year old. Of Chianti wine left out to chill at the exact right temperature, and the first incision in a surgery, when the risk of failure is still dangling far away, but pleasure is about to be caught by the tail. I thought of my nails bitting into her neck, the delight of seeing her eyes fog over with the scrim of impending death. I thought of your face when you let me inside you, how vulnerable and young you look dear Will, desperately torn about enjoying something you were taught to fear. I thought of the faint possibility of being caught, of alternative train schedules and rental services nearby, of you leaving me, of killing you, of mourning you in a variety of black bespoken suits I would have cut for the occasion. Of having a quick meal before reaching the ferry if disposing of her body went faster than initially
predicted.”

“I thought of a great many things, Will,” Hannibal cants his head to the side, straight razor in one hand, an ugly smile appearing on his pursed lips but not reaching the dead marble of his eyes. “As I am prone to do.”

Will understands then, and only then, that neatness is a compulsion not unlike murder. For Hannibal, the two are conjoined. The nurse, rude in her ongoing dismissals of his skill, of his capacity to care for Will, of his humanity really, unknowingly created a ripple in Hannibal’s pattern, one that grew from wrinkle to rip until all he could see was her, magnified into the queen in a chess game she never knew she was playing. Hannibal couldn’t help taking her down, not once she became an avatar for his unresolved frustration, his amorphous unhappiness with current events. To kill her, to plot the act, to carry it out, would be to another groom the equivalent of cleaning out a room filled with past clutter, to make room for a coupled life without any loose threads hanging about. Will could see it now, clear as day, the impulse to regain control of a narrative that had become messy with knotted yarn.

There is something tender about a killer riddled with neuroses.

The trouble is that Will has grown tired of Hannibal cheating on him with dead women. So he has no tenderness left to lease.

“Hope it was worth it,” Will sneers, making purposefully vulgar gestures with his hands. “Getting your rocks off.”

Hannibal stalks out of the bathroom, razor in hand, his mouth and nose twisting as if affronted by the most nauseous stench. Reclined on the bed, Will smiles up sweetly, matching his displeasure with amused insouciance. He feels arousal stain the air. He wonders if Hannibal can feel it too.

If he does, he shows no interest in it.

Instead, he sits down next to Will.

He rolls up his shirtsleeves and, reaching around, pulls a pack of Treasurers from the nightstand. Tucked inside is a cylindric lighter that looks made of solid gold. Hannibal lifts a cigarette to his lips and the lighter flickers to life. Deftly, he holds the smoke in before releasing it over his head in studied puffs.

Will regards the billowing halo, mouth agape and fists curled, still stuck on whatever role he was supposed to be playing before Hannibal took the sharpest left turn known to man.

"You smoke?,” Will squeaks at last, as Hannibal takes another drag, elbows casually resting on his knees.

"Sometimes," he says, passing the cigarette to Will. "When the occasion demands it."

For a minute, Will just holds the golden cigarette like one would a broken piece of glass—awkwardly, between index and thumb. His senses betray him, automatically falling in sync with the rhythmic heat thrumming off Hannibal, the unspent nervous energy capped under his skin.

He had put a dark-grey vest on top of the silver-blue shirt, Will notices with surprise.

(But of course he did. Layers. Like medieval soldiers. You prepare for battle with layers of chained mesh.)
Eventually Hannibal must lean in to retrieve his cigarette, and Will finds himself leaning back just an inch, just enough that their shoulders can bump together. He suddenly feels very very exhausted, and madly, madly in love.

"Should I finish it?," Hannibal's voice, even but showing sincere signs of wear, cuts through Will's daze. Confused, Will jolts away, wincing.

"This," Hannibal clarifies, pointing at the half-burnt cigarette. "Not this," he runs his finger back and forth between them.

An airy, dismissive laughter would have been the appropriate response to the witty play on words. Only the deep lines under Hannibal's eyes and Will's jittery hands evidence they are past that. They are so past making light of their pain.

Will takes the cigarette from Hannibal, inhaling once before giving it back. "Go ahead. Finish it if you want."

Hannibal knocks their bare feet together, toe to toe, and the tangy scent stays copacetic until the other smell returns, more pungent now.

The smell is guilt, Will realizes effortlessly, guilt of the “uncertain” garden variety. Will should know. His father carried it around like a winter cloak.

For some baffling reason, the nurse’s murder failed to satisfy Hannibal’s hunger. Like a ravenous god, he took the fruit that usually fed him, but found it lacking. Juniper sits on Hannibal’s tongue now, bitters he never savored before. Murder tastes lackluster and tart, insufficient like unsalted meat. And it hurts him, in a way he cannot fully grasp, because it is not a constitutional part of him. It’s a virus, a toxin, wreaking havoc in his brain chemistry.

He is doing admirably well for a man who just woke up in the middle of the night and found all furniture moved around, Will concedes.

Will can’t help harking back to the engraved knife, propped in velvet and locked in a box.

No matter how much he tries to reassure himself he can master his destiny by mastering Will’s life and death, Hannibal was as much a victim of that blade as Will was. A linoleum knife with no handle, that’s what reciprocated love became for them once they met.

Will imagines that, at this point, to stop the bleeding they better bandage the blade.

“You have to leave,” Will says again, and the detachment in his voice strikes him as concerning. "For the night at least."

Hannibal's profile whips sideways and Will can see him flinch, a minuscule twitch of his lips, the type of reaction you’d expect from a cornered cat.

“This is the kind of love we signed up for, Hannibal," Will tries to reason, though it's becoming harder to find a way around petty jealousy and an odd feeling of neglect. "If we don’t find out how elastic it is now, some day it’ll snap. And then it will kill us. Doesn’t matter who’ll be holding the knife. We’ll both be dead.”

Will doesn't know if Hannibal can hear him through the static their mutual hurting generally produces. It’s like turning the dial to a nonoperational station: there’s no coherent sound for as long as their anger smears the radio waves.
"I will be here," Will assures, meaning 'I love you.'

'I love you' is always subtext now, even when his actions contradict it, the declaration is always there, a substratum, the molecular baseline for Will’s whole being.

From that perspective, Will can understand engraving the words in the weapon you used to sever yourself from love. A keepsake of your failure, as much as a reminder of your steadfastness.

(That's beautiful too, in its own blood-and-thunder kind of way).

With a blatantly exasperated sigh, Hannibal smashes the cigarette on the closest bedpost, and rises, walking back to the bathroom.

Truce's over, Will guesses.

From the bed, he can see Hannibal shaving the sharp slope of his jaw.

"Is this punishment, Will?", he asks conversationally. "Or a mere display of control?"

Will crosses and uncrosses his legs. "Do you find yourself deserving of punishment, Dr. Lecter?"

“One should never apologize for doing what nature endowed them to do.”

“Then you can’t accuse me of punishing you either.”

Hannibal taps the razor against the sink. Three deliberate, metallic thuds, like a bell ringing a death toll.

“Nature endowed you to be cruel, Will?”

It’s not a question, though Hannibal poses it as such. Will wonders if that is his version of small mercies.

“Not cruel,” Will sits back, spreading his hands wide on each side of the white duvet. “Just.”

Hannibal catches his eye in the mirror, cheeks smooth and glistening. He looks new and expensive, like a toy car you fear smudging with your grubby kid fingers.

Will holds his gaze with deliberate intensity.

“You play, you pay,” he says to the monster inside the man.

Hannibal's face shuts down instantly, his posture becoming solid, contained, inhumanly unapproachable. Will braces himself for what might be coming. He isn't frightened of what Hannibal can do to him. He is, however, uncertain of what damage Hannibal can inflict on himself, setting in motion wild cards of jilted rashness which may ultimately undo them both.

It's a gamble Will engaged in once before, when Hannibal surrendered. It is different now. Now Will is not only a match for Hannibal; he is his partner. Hannibal can either yield to Will, or cling to his hubris and break them apart. It's Hannibal’s choice as much as is Will’s call.

Standing in the middle of the room, Hannibal sizes him up. Freshly shaved and impeccably dressed, he looks almost a mirror image of his past self.

"Tell me Will: do you object to all my murders?," his eyes narrow, vulpine and a touch perverse. "Or only the ones you weren't invited to join?"
It's a trap if Will ever saw one, and a not well-concealed one at that. But perhaps it doesn't need to be to hit the mark.

Hannibal's lips curve fractionally and Will's anger returns ten-fold, honed down by being found out. He holds eye-contact hard, jaw set and shoulders squared, until Hannibal nods politely and walks out of the bedroom.

Will can hear him picking up his keys from the kitchen counter, can hear him putting shoes on and switching the lights in the living room off.

Will tells himself he is slipping into the bathroom to have a shower and a smoke, but when he can still hear the front door closing over the gush of rushing water, he recognizes the lie for what it is: a trickling into old habits, a familiar method to cope with overwhelming helplessness.

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As night moves deeper into the gallows, the empty apartment descends into eerie quietness.

Lying in the ceramic tub, cold and unwilling to move, Will realizes two things at once: that this must have been how Hannibal experienced Florence without Will, and that they must have been unusually loud for silence to feel so gutting now.

The latter is reinforced when a phone ringing slices through the darkened house. Will pads into the kitchen, naked and dripping, careless of the wooden floors. The air is unusually cool. Perhaps Hannibal’s absence can extend to the altering of tension between molecules, Will broods.

Something catches the corner of his eye when he passes the bedroom. Color, he realizes belatedly. Red and black, ghostly under the streaming moonlight.

Will walks in with the care of someone who found a burglar in their house.

A dead body, Will thinks, lies there, flayed open on the bed, supine like a sacrificial offering.

The herringbone pattern is more vivid than Will remembered.

(Oh fuck).

Tentatively, he lifts a hand to the blanket, expecting the red weave to run wet with blood. Perhaps black with it too, but old blood, saturated with resentment.

It doesn’t. The fabric is ironed and downy, likely dry-cleaned. No distinct smells fasten to it but a vague trace of Hannibal’s cologne, the stuffy woodsiness of the rosewood armoire.

Will runs his fingers over and over the intricate design: two forces symmetrically alike, never overlapping, radically different in temperature, though both could be drenched in blood and you wouldn't be able to see it. Neither could exist without the other, not if they want the pattern to remain in existence.

Will's skin crawls. He recoils as if someone had just walked on his grave.

Leave it to Hannibal Lecter to wrangle a dramatic statement out of store-bought wool.

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The ringing returns an hour later.
Will entertains the notion of letting it go unanswered again, but that would be foolish. Teaching boundaries is not the same as professing abandonment. Will would die before he'd let any of Hannibal’s pleas go unanswered.

With every old fracture aching anew, Will rolls out of the couch, mindful of the bottles and makeshift ashtrays scattered across the rug.

And then silence cracks, spectacularly loud and all at once, when Will hears the voice on the other side of the line.

"Hello Will," it booms.

Closing his eyes reflexively, Will registers how little his pitch has changed over the years. Imperious and inflexible, a bedrock with a few extra chinks.

An image flashes across his mind’s eye: Hannibal under the morning sun, eyebrows pinched with pleasure, the sliver of his open mouth pleading for Will to finish him off.

Will swallows, feeling remarkably indifferent. (But that’s trauma for you, sweetheart).

He wonders if his voice changed much in the interim months, before he walks out of his body and hears himself volleying back without a hitch,

“Hello Jack.”
Alors—this chapter took longer than initially planned. The good(?) news: chapters keep growing monstrously long, so I had to split this up. Here's part 1 with part 2 coming very soon.

Yes, that means I had to add an extra overall chapter. Yes, I know, I am a captive of this story. Yes, I feel like I'm in the Arabian Nights.

For all its tribulations, this chapter must be a "thank you" gift. To Jhonni (for all the dappled photos, late-night chats, and emails), and Cor (the Juliet Hulme to my Pauline Parker, or vice-versa, any way, partout).

To habitual commenters and readers and the people on Tumblr who sent me lovely messages I was too slow in answering: thank you. Your encouragement does matter.

That's it.

“Will.”

The name bounces off the darkened kitchen, like a scream let loose on an empty church. Will touches the scar on his cheek. In the cool darkness, the jagged skin feels thicker, cut afresh.

“I am here, Jack.”

Air rushes out on the other side of the line. Relief? Or is it impatience, familiar and well-worn? Will recognizes the sound for what it is: an habitual gesture of dominance.

“Will. It’s safe now. You hear? It’s safe now.”

The air shifts from charcoal to red, Jack’s voice a brushstroke on Will’s chest. His lungs stutter, his brow bunches. Will swallows, his fingers coming to rest on the marble counter.

“What do you want, Jack?”

“Did you hear me, Will?” His breath rushes closer, louder, as if screaming down the receiver will get Will to follow along faster. “You can leave now. We got them. You can come back home.”

The insistent tapping grows, like water dribbling on the side of a cave. Looking down, Will realizes it’s his own fingers making the noise. He had forgotten he possessed that hand. He had forgotten how to exhale. His chest hurts badly, as if Jack had punched him through the airwaves.

Before he can think better of it, Will’s voice drops to ice, and his anger becomes see-through. “Did you kill him?”

“Don’t. Don’t—” a hiss more than a threat as Will folds onto the counter, the cold marble startling his suddenly burning cheek. He wants to touch it, to check for damage though a part of his brain, the only alcove not assaulted by panic, tells him it’s impossible, he has healed for over a year, he can’t be bleeding again. Can he?

“Will, listen up, we don’t have much time—“

“Shut up!” Will spits out, bitter and ugly. The pain traveled down his diaphragm, settled nicely on his abdomen, throbbing luminous behind his scar. His other scar. His birthing scar, Will calls it behind the locked vault he labelled trauma. “For once in your life, shut up , Jack.”

Silence falls so fulgurant if Will bother to care he would have been worried. Turns out living with a killer engorged him with a devil-may-care kind of callousness.

“Now—,” deep breaths, Will tells himself. Deep breaths. “—did you kill him or not?”

“Why would that matter, Will?”

“Why do you think?”

“Will—” Ah the familiar hesitation of a man used to war but incapable of admitting defeat. “Molly is safe. So is the boy. You can come home now. He can’t hurt them anymore.” A pause, a swallow. Cheap theatrics, Will thinks, his body congealed into a strange L-shape, draped over the counter where peach-colored veins speed through pastel rock. His right hand aches from clasping the phone too tightly. “Will. You did enough.”

Kindness drips through the line, sluggish and eggy, a jacked-up IV of cloaked camaraderie. Like soldiers in the barracks, army buddies sunken in the trenches.

“Will, you don’t have to go on with this charade. You can leave him now. I can help you.”

Laughter bubbles out of Will’s lips without consent. It hurts, like spitting razors.

(The boy. Will never expected him to have died. But still, he can’t help the clammy feeling crawling up his spine.)

Will straightens out, sweat collecting around his neck and under his arms. There’s a smudge of bathwater on the counter, another on the mosaic.


Jack sighs, deep and weary. Disappointment. Will should know. He had been on the receiving end of that sound more times than he had had candy as a child.

“No, Will, I didn’t. I always believed that was your job.”

A gust of smoke blows through Will, unlocking each and every one of his tendons, uncrooking bones he didn’t know he could crack. He leans against the back wall, feeling pliant and feline. He is smiling, he notices a moment too late.

“You always did lack an imagination, Jack. I often wondered how did you do your job.”

“I see fear still makes you rude, Will,” Jack retorts, calmness poorly concealing his distaste at the turn their conversation had taken. At Will’s enduring recalcitrance to play the confused victim, the
grateful damsel in distress.

Shrugging to no one in particular, Will slouches against the wedge on the wall, phone receiver carelessly perched on his right shoulder as he flexes his stiff hand.

“How’s Molly, Jack?”

“She is fine, Will,” he volleys back quickly, aggression momentarily tempered. Sunday-night normalcy, throwing ball at the park, candlelit dinners, that stuff always did appease good old Uncle Jack. “She had been hiding in Northern Vermont under a fake name.”

Will hums, observing the shocking trimness of his cuticles. When was the last time he cut his nails? They are absurdly neat. Did Hannibal do it for him in his sleep? Likely.

The thought does not disturb him. If anything, it comforts him. An ache ricochets through his ribcage, lodges low on his groin. He misses him, Will realizes, scrunching his eyes shut, forgetting Jack and his clinical paltriness for a moment. Oh god, he misses him so much it makes each of his joints jolt out of its sockets.

“How did you find her?,” Will mutters, careful to sound shaken, a touch skittish. He doesn’t have to try too hard.


Jack pauses and Will wonders if he had suspected Will of killing his own wife. For a time at least, until state troopers found Molly holed up in a cottage in the woods, the farm girl she had always been at heart now fully on display. Cowering from the beast who took her husband.

(No. That’s not quite right, is it?)

Will shakes his head. It seemed feasible. As much as it had seemed feasible to Will that Hannibal had gone to Georgia to kill his wife. Instead, he had gone back to set her free.

What an odd creature Will had captured. What a gruesome gentlemanly monster.

Will had thought himself incapable of falling any further—and yet. There he was, half-naked and soaking wet, sparring with old acquaintances in the middle of the night, barreling into his forties, a sweet-sixteen in love.

What a blushing bride I ended up making, Will thinks self-consciously, bare feet curling one on top of the other, seeking for comfort that is not there.

“Actually we had been searching for Molly since you went missing, Will,” Jack rejoins, a slippery thing slinking into his voice.

Jack says “we” but Will knows that he means “I”.

“I didn’t go missing,” Will singsongs, phone cord twirling around his ring finger. “I went on a long vacation.”

Jack scoffs, the friendly veneer fraying as his version of the truth (Will, brainwashed prey drooling in a monster’s wallpapered dungeon) begins to sway. (Will, not a victim, but an accomplice. Will, not a sacrificial husband, but a willing concubine—oh no.no.no.no.no.)
How did Jack ever succeed at his job?, Will wonders distractedly, tracing gold veins rippling in the white marble. Honestly, how did he?

(Or perhaps you just grew sharper teeth under your new custodian, Will’s brain supplies, endlessly treacherous).

“She hid herself well,” Jack’s voice snaps Will out of his inner monologue. Neutral again, all business. “Whoever helped her disappear made sure she and the boy fell off the map. You, on the other hand—”


Wherever Jack is, he is pacing now, his voice softer, weakened by the burden of happiness. He’s a man with something to lose, Will realizes suddenly.

“Will! He’s a killer! A man who eats other men! You can’t seriously—”

“What?”, Will baits with a rash smile, surprisingly immune to the threaded innuendoes. “What can’t I seriously do, Jack?”

“Stay with him!” Jack yelps helplessly, but what he means is “you can’t really love him, you can’t really expect him to love you, you can’t actually want him.” All things Will does. Desperately, unassailably, very much does.

Will laughs again, a bellyful, raw and choked with bile.

“Can’t I now? I thought you wanted me to finish him off.”

Will tastes Jack’s waffling confusion, the burnt graphite of his exasperation when Jack roars, “Marriage is not the way I would go about finishing off a sociopath, Will!”

Ah. So he knows, Will muses, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. That means he might be in Palermo already. Interesting.

“Has it occurred to you that I may have him right where I want him?,” Will counters, tone modeled to be vaguely off-kilter, a tad compromised. That takes considerably more work.

“In his house?! Under his care?!,” Jack rages on. “Will, can you hear yourself?! Intimacy with Hannibal Lecter is a form of self-injury! For you to even consider it, he must have gotten into your head!”

“He did,” Will admits quietly. He stops midway drawing an arabesque, startled by his own earnestness, the plain edges of it. “Under my skin too.”

Amusement, the teasy pleasure of the chase, melts away. It’s just him now, Will Graham, alone with himself in a dark white-tiled kitchen. “I want him there, Jack,” he tells his old friend. “In my bed, in my head, inside me. I want him so much I would rip him limb by limb if he dreamt of being anything else but mine.”


“He gave you a wife, Jack,” Will rebuffs coldly, his heart sheathed in brutal honesty, the kind you
only allow yourself when there’s nothing left to lose. “Twice, if I’m not mistaken. Why would you begrudge him taking one of his own?”

Jack hesitates, and Will slithers right through that opening. He wouldn’t have, once upon a time, but now he can’t help it. He is his beloved’s match, after all.

“Pazzi’s widow. You married her,” Will drills on, his drawl a spit-throw-away from a taunt. “Recently, I would wage. Eight, six months ago?”

The stunted, resentful silence confirms Will’s suspicions. The hesitations of a mature newlywed, too zealous of his good fortune to notice he is wandering into another’s marital grievances. Too quick to assume Will gallantly disappeared with a monster to protect his wife instead of seeing it for what it was: that Will had made a bride of a monster, a lovesick man out of a serial killer. And it suited him. It suited him just fine.

“Will, I want to help you. I feel responsible for—“

“Never mind that,” Will cuts off brashly, waiving a hand Jack could not see. “Just tell me: am I still a widow?”

Their friendship never took root, not really. It had been little more than a convenience, a business arrangement Will singlehandedly longed to turn into a lasting bond. Once, he had genuinely cared for Jack Crawford’s opinion. Now, Jack would have struck him across the face if he could. The spite he felt for Will, urine-colored, would never fade away. Will felt its stain with searing certainty. And it didn’t bother him. It didn’t bother him in the least.

(Instead he thought of Hannibal, sprawled on their bed, his neck glossy against a cluster of cream pillows, his lips rubbed red and open, struggling to breathe through pleasure and failing, the small hurt noises he couldn’t muffle when Will pulled back from between his legs and found him staring, dazed and heavy-lidded, whispering in a voice peeled to a rasp, “You will be the death of me, Will Graham.” And Will, shy but making a show of otherwise, sitting back on his heels and brushing a hand through his messy hair, volleying with as much detachment as he could possibly muster whilst on the brink of orgasm, “You’d be so lucky as to have me kill you, Dr. Lecter. Instead, I am gonna make you wish that you were dead.”

They had laughed then, before they came.)

Now, as Jack stretched the acidic silence between them, Will felt laughter was a thing of barbwire and rusty fishhooks.

“Molly Foster Graham technically died in Georgia,” Jack declares at length, and there’s a flat finality to his voice Will also recognizes with ease. He knows when someone has washed their hands off him. He’s heard it in all pitches and sizes, in everyone and anyone but Hannibal. “Once she and Wally went into Witness Protection they were given new aliases so—“

“—so I am a widow,” Will fills in, his mind bowing at Hannibal’s brilliantly executed solution to their three-way conundrum. No muss, no fuss, a surgeon to the end. “Technically.”

“Technically yes, but Will, she is—“

“I see.”

Will moves away to the sink, rinses off a glass left on the counter. Hannibal’s probably. Too much in a hurry to leave, to put distance between himself and Will, to mind the chores. (You made him go, his brain reminds him. I had to, Will pushes back. How the hell will he ever learn boundaries if
I let him keep killing behind my back? You could join in, you know? Kill with him.) The glass shakes and clanks against the sink. A splinter comes off in Will’s thumb, splitting it in two. Blood rims the drain, an inky, hellish halo. Will turns back to the phone nestled under his chin.

“So how did you end up finding Molly?”, he asks conversationally, thumb upright to keep the blood from staining Hannibal’s floors. “If she was already dead, how did you catch up with a ghost?”

“We got lucky,” Jack states matter of fact, done and ready to pack up. “An anonymous source called the FBI missing persons’ hotline.”

Rubbing his beard, Will hums, “I bet he did,” and is about to hang up when Jack surges forward once more. The maudlin urgency in his voice keeps Will on the line.

“Will, I am sorry. I am sincerely sorry that I ever put Hannibal Lecter in your path. When he turns on you, call me. You hear me, I am here, Will, always. Call me and I will find you a way out. My number is—”

Will listens, frozen in place, the eleven digits floating across space, etching themselves in his brain like a spike to hot copper. He tells himself he hung up before Jack uttered the final digit because he has no purchase in his offer. He tells himself he won’t remember anyway, that his profound disinterest will allow him to forget.

Wandering into the bathroom, blood drops smudging the walls as he leans for balance, Will almost manages to convince himself that he doesn’t know that, push comes to shove, ten simple sequential attempts is all it’ll take to figure out Jack Crawford’s phone number.
In the first twenty minutes, Will calls Hannibal seventeen times. Every attempt, the dismissal of an unanswered ring, oddly uncaring and dull. Afterwards, an automated female voice informing him the voicemail he is trying to reach is full. He gives it a minute and rings again.

By hour three, his hands have started shaking when he dials the numbers on the shoddy flip phone. The 0 disappears under dried blood from the raw cut on his thumb. Will begins drinking then, when the shaking makes dialing a nuisance.

By daybreak, Will wishes for the worst possible scenario. At least he’d be done, released from the vicious cycle of fear and relief. At least all the pain and worry would have been for something, not squandered in idle speculation.

Jack never storms in and Hannibal never picks up, so Will lines up the phone, the bottle, and the engraved knife on the coffee table and sits down to play “fuck marry kill.”

He is halfway through the second bottle of rum, his skin taut and greasy where it chafes against the brocade upholstery, when it dawns on him that Hannibal may already be gone (captured or dead or far away), and Will is still there, a fidgety housewife, mixing his liquor and clutching his pearls, waiting for a roaming husband who’ll never come back home.

It hurts like only loss could: the piercing halogen blaze of a refrigerator door being opened in the dark, followed by the electric buzz of shock, the whistling hard on your ears until all fades to the sharp static of cognitive horror.

"If he goes, I'll catch him," Will takes another swig, his hands shaking but his mind still.

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Sometime in the early afternoon, Will pulls one of Hannibal’s wool sweaters over rumpled jeans and braves the soppy November hale. The sky is the color and density of slate, unmerciful and judgmental. Will wants to throw himself against it just to see if it would bruise.

In the tiny deli wedged between a spidery beauty parlor and a derelict movie theatre, the usual old men with newsboy caps tease him about his unkempt beard and wrinkled clothing.

“How did your donna let you out in that state, Guillermo?”

“She left me,” Will replies playfully as he pays for the gin and crackers with his own American Express, the one he retrieved from the bag in the closet.

No point in hiding anymore.

“Ah too bad,” the tall woman behind the counter retorts in broken English. “A tiff, for sure. How could she quit a handsome man like you?”

Her indignation is punctuated with broad hand gestures, the plaid in her blue pinafore swaying as she leans to pat Will’s cheek.

“Ah,” one of the white-haired men sitting outside ventures, “She must be a willful one! Look at him, Sara! You can tell he likes them feisty!”
Will smiles, a warm feeling of belonging he had forgotten could come without keeping your fingers aloof, always scanning for buried traps. He had given them his real name for a reason, after all.

Picking up the groceries, Will nods his goodbyes, a crowd of hoots rising as they notice the flush spread over his beard and down his neck. He is hopelessly in love; even the most common of men can see it.

Right as he is about to turn down the street, Will swivels back. He points at the old man leaning against the door and offers in his own broken Italian, “He’s right. I do like them feisty. My husband is a handful, but god only knows where I would be without him.”

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Drinking is only as good as your willingness to be amused or erased, and by late afternoon Will is bereft of either, left with nothing more but the sucker-punch of being left behind. Drinking does little to quench that hollowness, and less even to dampen the touchdown of guilt.

It seemed like a fun idea, the right amount of cruelty, at the time. To take the knife to the sink and shave off his mad beard with the weapon that once cut him open, that cut Abigail away too. A retribution, messy and raw like Will felt, to dull the razor with his thick hair, to dirty it with dead skin and scum.

In front of the bathroom mirror, naked from the waist up, Will’s face looked macerated with excess of alcohol and absence of sleep, his cheeks greyed with worry and hunger. The curved knife bobs up and down his neck, around the jut of his jaw, catching on stray angles, the tip digging in the soft tissue under his ears. It bleeds and bleeds and bleeds. It bleeds down his chin and over the white porcelain sink. It bleeds between his fingers, when Will presses on the cuts with chewed up nails.

Will regards himself, head tilted to the side, his face covered in red runny nicks, the skin pale and starved after months without sunlight, and his eyes shine unfairly young and eager, the loss as clear as the lust.

(You yearn for him and yearn for him and you push him and push him and turn him away so you can yearn for him and yearn for him—)

I never said I was smart, Will warns his sartorial brain.

No, but you did chase after that monster and you didn’t stop skinning him until he turned into a man. He’s yours now.

No point in hiding anymore.

But did he turn me into a monster in return?

No, son. You were one all on your own.)

When Will walks out of the bathroom, he lets the blood trail down. He rubs his sticky paws all over the frescoed walls and fine upholstery, plants brown fingerprints on pastel faces, gelatinous streaks on ivory vases, blood seeping between uneven wood-beams and staining the grain.

(Let him wash me away now. Let him try to clean this house off me, my scent off the walls, my blood off the woodcarving.)

Lying down on the bed, lily-white and plush and ignobly orderly, Will takes the knife to his ring
finger. The smile on his face pulls at his scar, a grimace doing a poor job of impersonating satisfaction. He is about to cut on top of the perfect circular line, when in a moment of irrational pique, he presses it against his abdomen instead. The skin there is eerily insensitive, but still when it punctures it hurts, and when it bleeds it stains.

Better soak through the mattress, Will says out loud, and laughs and laughs and laughs, the sound manic and brittle, and then smaller and smaller until it peters down to a quiet drunken huff.

The linoleum knife is still on his palm when Will curls up on his side. Directed by gravity, his blood has pooled around the engraving so that the “I love you” turned rusty copper, a medallion of color amidst all of Hannibal’s silvers and whites.

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The light pouring from the skylight awakens him before the rustling in the living room does. Inside Will’s skull, voices scream, old and new, crisscrossed in a neon-bright herringbone pattern.

When he opens his eyes, temples throbbing and mouth dry, Hannibal is there, leather jacket and keys dangling from one hand, head canted in a question mark. Standing in the threshold, a foot still out of the door.

(And ain’t that a good illustration of this mess you got yourself into, sonny boy?)

“It seems you had a busy night,” Hannibal remarks without a trace of emotion, eyes catching pointedly on the fallen knife.

Will shrugs, the gesture setting up little graveyards of pain all over his half-naked body. He tries to sit up and altogether fails.

“Look who’s talking. Killed any nurses on the way here?”

Hannibal sighs heavily, performatively, before turning on his heel and leaving the room. Again.

(But he does that exquisitely, though. What? Leaving.)

An image flashes behind Will’s closed lids as he sinks back into the mattress: Molly, her hair tied in a concentric ponytail, denim overalls covered in muck from working on her sprawling tomato garden. (There would be jam and pickling came Summer.) She is smiling through dapples of orange sunlight, her mouth big and filled with teeth.

Did she ever smile like that after he had come back from the dead, after he had killed a dragon? (Doubtful, son. Doubtful.

Did you?)

Will knows Hannibal is back in the room because he has neared close enough to touch. There’s a clear glass in his hand. Will wonders if it’s the same he put away earlier that night. If he were to find the spot Hannibal’s lips touched before if drinking could become akin to kissing.

Hannibal steps away as Will gulps the water down.

“I see you found the box,” he declares nonchalantly, sitting down on a purple tufted velvet chair.

Elegant, but a touch too ornate, Will had thought upon arrival. Now, with Hannibal occupying it, all dressed in black, left foot poised on right knee in one long trapezoid shape, the chair looked like
a throne, incandescent with power.

Though loathe to admit it, Will is thankful for that specific wording. No accusation of trespassing, no possessive articles defining access to belongings or spaces. Neutral. The best one can expect of a sociopath, really.

Molly returns to him, her high laughter echoing freely though space and time, rustling the leaves off golden-leafed maple trees.

Will sits up on his elbows, inexplicably energized. “Did you intend it as a gift?”

(If Molly or the engraved knife, Will isn’t quite sure. Either? Or perhaps it makes no difference if both feel like a gift.)

Hannibal shrugs beautifully, his lips pursing for an instant. There and then gone.

“In a way.” He smooths out a wrinkle marring his black trousers. One of many, Will notes with a start: Hannibal’s clothes are plowed with creases.

Hannibal clears his throat and continues, derailing Will’s murky thoughts, “A reminder, to be exact.”

Will leans forward, elbows coming to rest on his knees.

“A momentum mori?,” he asks with feverish intensity. “To Abigail?”

Hannibal seems to consider it for a moment, index finger to his lips, eyes growing absent with thought.

“A reminder,” he corrects mildly. “Of you, Will. Of my love for you.”

Will tries to catch his eye but, even though he’s looking at Will, Will knows when he is not being seen. So he presses on, “How inconvenient love can be?”

Hannibal smiles, dipping his chin towards his chest and shaking softly. And just like that, he is human again, a finely chiseled man, stubbled and mussed. Bruised too. Will wonders if he’s gotten any sleep since they last shared a bed.

“No, Will. How gutting if wielded carelessly.”

He looks up, meeting Will’s eye at last, and, there, there it is, that zing of understanding, of reciprocity, the gunpowder that holds them together. Hannibal’s lips quirk up in a suggestion of a smirk. “Or should I say, irresponsibly.”

“Is that what I am doing?,” Will asks, holding his gaze, holding the line too. (Here. You shall not cross herein. We shall see about that, Hannibal’s ghost of a smile throws back.) “Wielding love irresponsibly?”

“I think you know, Will” Hannibal purrs, seductively but mean too, like a finger stabbing a wound. “You are the one covered in blood, after all.”

Under Will’s skin, something viscous and sick rumbles. There’s a gracelessness to want, Will thinks bitterly as he takes in Hannibal’s porcelain demeanor. He leans back again, away, and Hannibal’s eyes light up, the amber of pleasure gentling the deep purple around his sockets.

(So that’s a no. No sleep for Hannibal in the last three days.)
Serves him right, Will remonstrates viciously, but his chest aches anyway.

In the distance, Molly laughs, a silver-bell chime.

“Jack called.”

It is out of his mouth before he can stop it. Not that Will may have wanted to stop it.

Hannibal is caught off guard by the precipitous conversational shift but recovers nicely, his arms falling to either side of the gold armrests, giving the impression of a god growing bored with presiding over mortal squabbles.

“Yes, I imagined he would. Eventually.”

“You did huh?”

Hannibal hums, fingers tapping on the carved wood. “He is a dog with a bone, Will. It seemed inevitable.”

His voice is so casually dismissive that Will conjures Molly and Wally up with a vengeance, overalls and straw hats, chewing gum and apple cores, specters that came back from the dead so Will could rid himself of guilt.

Ugly resentment bubbles up, of months of quiet punishing, no, of blatant misleading. Of being lied to. Of lying to himself.

Will opens his mouth to hurl “I know what you did,” or maybe, “we’re done, we are really done this time, you crazy son of a bitch,” and although it wouldn’t be strictly earnest, it would feel good to puke the venom out of his veins, to spread it around on someone else’s wounds.

Only Will looks up and sees him, the middle-aged man in the wrinkled black clothes, his hands tapping a melody of impatience that is but a poor concealer of exhaustion. The seams around his eyes cracking under the expenditure of keeping happy an enemy he’s fallen in love with too fast and too deep to have any saying in the matter.

Oh, Will realizes with childlike wonder. Oh, I am killing him.

Both his hands shoot forward, this awkward pleading gesture Will is not fully in control of. The joints in his shoulders strain and ache, that’s how impulsive the movement is.

A second later, Hannibal is gliding across the room, so supple and graceful Will is driven to distraction, nearly allowing the conversation to slip away. Towering over him, Hannibal hooks a ring finger under Will’s chin.

“We must clean these before they infect,” he says turning Will’s head left and right, his touch medical and brisk, his eyes dead behind a wall of plasticine darkness.

Jack’s voice cycles back, the mix of frustration and forced fondness coalescing into Molly’s radiant laughter. There’s a well of pain behind those sounds, familiar and remote. But relief too.

(They sound like your father.

Yes, but Jack and Molly are both alive, so I don’t have to care about them any longer.

We’re free, his brain singsongs, its voice overlapping with Will’s in a perfect harmonious pitch.)
Will reaches up too suddenly for Hannibal to be able to duck away. He tugs his jaw with both hands, tight enough to drive his neck and spine down.

“After,” Will choses to say into the inch between their noses, and Hannibal’s mouth tenses into a hard line. Not displeased, but uncertain, which can often overlap where a narcissist is concerned. Will wonders if only he can tell the difference now. “First we must make this.”

“Make what, Will?”


A hand falls to his thigh, presses between his legs and Hannibal groans, his head rolling back and away. It’s the smell, though, not the tone of his voice—steeped with moss, that wetness of longing, swampy with old blood and sour with sleepless nights—that shakes Will hard, hard enough to hurt.

“You are the most beautiful human being who’s ever walked this earth,” Will raves, wild words tumbling out of his mouth and into Hannibal’s exposed throat, their knees bumping together as Hannibal leans over, back muscles straining under Will’s splayed hands, ribs struggling to inhale, laboring to let go of a stuttered breath misplaced from another conversation, another time.

There’s a noise, small and strangled, and Will is wondering if Hannibal is laughing, when he notices they both have fallen backwards into bed, Will’s arms wrapped around Hannibal’s chest so brutally he is cutting his air supply. It’s Molly, Molly is the one who laughs and laughs and laughs until her voice is but a dim twinkle drowned by Hannibal’s harsh breath on his ear.

“You’re mine,” Will punches out, his voice cragged by the immensity of those words, of making them flesh. “All of you. No part of you, of you body, of your brain, is without beauty. Every shade and every fold, every tear and every moan, the tailoring of you clothes, the seasoning in your meat, the blood-splatter on your shoes, they are all mine. No one else can have it.”

Fingers bunch fistfuls of fabric causing seams to strain and buttons to rip. His arms clamp hard around Hannibal’s breastplate and Will tells himself he can hear ossein crack. Hannibal whimpers, a pitiful animal sound, and his weight slumps completely against Will’s bad shoulder. Pain climbs up like a firecracker—upward, thin, and stringent, a match let loose in the soundless nocturnal sky.

He might be crying. He might be crying, Will mumbles to himself, as he cradles the wounded man close, burrowing into his clavicle, tonguing damp cuts open—closer, in an idiotic attempt to get a grown man to merge with his skin, to step into his thorax and live there, untouched, unseen, caged in a prison of cartilage and bone.

(Will rubs his nose against the unwashed scalp, kisses the soft underside of Hannibal’s ears, that fragile curvature where hair disappears and skin is left barren, pointlessly unprotected and alone.

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Love is a dark room without gravity, where furniture floats at will. Go in, lock the door behind you. Fumble around for a comfortable place to lie down. Hold on to that shape, make sure you memorize it. Because one day it might just not be there.

Will rubs his nose against the unwashed scalp, kisses the soft underside of Hannibal’s ears, that fragile curvature where hair disappears and skin is left barren, pointlessly unprotected and alone.

Will knows then, but still he must ask.

“You told Jack where we were, didn’t you?”

Hannibal shivers head to toe, his mouth fluttering against Will’s Adam’s Apple, when he whispers, “Yes.”
“Why?”

“It seemed rude not to. It seemed rude not to,” he says again, like a child trying to ward off the monster under his bed. Will wonders what monster Hannibal is trying to ward off with those words, what order he is trying to impose on their world with the sheer force of his will.

He shifts in Will’s arms, hands feeling up Will’s back, cautiously, almost shyly. They settle on the back of Will’s neck, a neat bow of skin and bone. He nuzzles against Will’s scarred cheek, and freshly shaven skin burns with the sandpaper of three-day stubble. An apology, perhaps. Or a cunningly administered tranquilizer. Will was never able never tell them apart, not with Hannibal. He wonders if Hannibal himself can.

Pressing his cheek against Hannibal’s, Will breathes out, “Phone or mail?”

To which Hannibal responds without missing a beat, “Mail. Fine bone-colored Prantl stationary. A wisp of gold around the edges. Tasteful, and yet appropriately exceptional.”

Will sighs deeply. “You sent Jack a wedding invitation?”

“Shouldn’t Cupid be notified of godly nuptials?,” Hannibal murmurs into Will’s ear, an oily insidiousness creeping into his tone.

There is such misleading to that notion, Will almost gives in to laughing out loud. Instead, he brushes Hannibal’s greying hair back, exposing the tan line around his scalp. So many new wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. Will wonders if he put all of them there.

“Ask,” Will lifts his chin to better hold Hannibal’s gaze. “If you want me to kill Jack Crawford, all you have to do is ask, Hannibal.”

The beast inside instinctively pulls away, quicksilver eyes darting over Will’s face. Something braces under the surface, something metallic and liquid, too fleeting for Will to properly pin down.

“And you would heed that request?”


Hannibal’s nose twitches as his eyes solidify into a rubbery blackness. The temperature in the room drops, and with it, the man kneeling on Will’s lap changes species: animal to human to demigod, circling swiftly to something in between.

“He’s always been between us,” Hannibal hisses. “A ghost, a looming interloper since the first—

“—for you, then,” Will interrupts with firmness, cupping Hannibal’s cheek. “I’ll go out now and kill him. For you.”

That’s not the answer Hannibal wants. Will knows it, can feel it thrumming through the places where their bodies touch—knees, thighs, groin. Somehow they ended up tangled around each other, left hands curled together in a tightly-wound fist. The duvet is ruined now for sure, between Will’s bloody wounds and Hannibal’s muddy shoes.

“Not with me?”

“Nope. For you. Call it an early wedding gift, if you’d like.”
A little storm gathers between Hannibal’s pinched brow. “What if Jack is outside now, about to swarm our home, a gangle of policemen in tow?”

“Then I guess we’ll both die. Or they will. Still, not my design. Yours, actually, since you set this whole confrontation in motion.”

Whip-quick, Hannibal immediately parses the gold from the rubble. “So you do foresee an opportunity for your design to manifest.”

It’s not a question. Hannibal has the good sense of not posing it as such.

“Of course I do,” Will snorts. It suddenly feels too long of a day, of a lifetime, to keep up with old pretenses. “You know I do. I always did. I just slapped someone’s else name on it and called them ‘crime scenes.’”

“And not ‘aspirations.’”


“Which I cultivated,” Hannibal nods, his hand squeezing Will’s, a single modest fluttering. There is more kindness in that gesture than in any word they have exchanged in the last week.

“Did they flower yet?,” Hannibal looks down at their conjoined hands, his voice holding a demureness Will is incapable of accepting as genuine, though he knows it must be. “These rare nightshades?”

“They did and they didn’t. When they budded, they had your name on their sap. But then I came to taste your poison so often it became part of me. It tastes sweet now. Sounds sweet too. Like sirens.”

“Will—“ Hannibal pauses to lick his lips, a monster fearing to flirt with hope. (God, son, you did a number on this one, didn’t you?). “—will you let me—”

“Yes. Yes, of course I will. Of course I will. We can both brandish the blade until blood soaps the engraving. Like cutting the first slice out of a three-tier red velvet. Your hand on mine, around the hilt—”

A shiver runs through Hannibal as his head bows down in a strangely subservient manner, hair parting to reveal the delicate slope of his neck. There is a vulnerability to his nape, to his fingers, to his features really, that Will had successfully ignored for half a decade or so. He can’t now, so it hurts to look at him, as much as it hurts to admit a part of him will always, always want to sink his teeth into Hannibal’s gentlest membranes.

“Why do you say these things, Will?,” Hannibal whispers, lips touching Will’s knuckles.

There’s no hesitation in that answer; Will knows it by heart. “Because I believe that if I speak them out loud, I’ll stop wanting them.”

“Is it working?”

“No,” Will levels his gaze and presses a hand between Hannibal’s legs, to a hardness that mirrors his own. “Quite the contrary.”

In slow motion, Will can feel Hannibal’s hand on his bare thigh, hot and large, the jagged edge of his nails pulling fabric away.
They move effortlessly, their skin knowing by rote the instant path to intimacy. They kiss while releasing their breaths, chest to chest, the weight of Hannibal’s body reopening every cut on Will’s skin, and Will wonders absently if Hannibal can taste it, the tang of relief and gratitude and longing stashed underneath the layers of cheap liquor and cortisol. He can’t be sure, so he says to his tongue, with spit, in-between kisses, “I missed you. I thought you were gone.”

Hannibal kisses with eyes unflinchingly open, which never ceases to be an unsettling and thrilling quirk. He grips Will’s hips and spreads his knees apart with such economical ease it’s nearly clinical.

“You ordered me to leave,” he states blankly, running a thumb over the patch of freckles hidden below Will’s navel, below the irritated scar. To see that swatch of flesh, the smatter of caramel dots randomly penciled in Will’s skin, never fails to soften Hannibal’s features, to render the god into a man, and the man into a feral child, perennially befuddled by his good fortune.

Will bucks into the pressure of a wet mouth against lukewarm skin. This is different, his brain wheezes alarmed. Whatever this is, this is different.

Outward Will stammers, “You didn’t pick up your phone.” And it hits him then, ridiculously belated and inopportune, “Were you punishing me?”

Hannibal presses a finger to the cuts scabbing Will’s neck and face, a light, stinging caress. “Were you punishing yourself, Will?” His thumb ghosts over the pool of dry blood on Will’s abdominal scar.

Arousal clouds his thoughts, reroutes the chugging of his mind. Will jerks his head sideways, but it feels like a lie. Pain feels plural, but then again, so does forgiveness.

It sounds familiar once again, the clicking of lies, the ruckus his father used to produce deep in his throat after a night of hard drinking.

Hannibal steeps a daisy-chain of kisses around his navel, from hip bone to hip bone, and Will’s head changes directions, bobbing up and down.

“You train your monsters like you train your dogs, Will,” Hannibal admonishes to the inside of Will’s thigh, shirt unbuttoned midway, collar torn open and hanging loose. He sounds so certain, Will thinks, and so resigned. “Sudden spurts of kindness met with sudden removal of privileges when our actions betray your commands.”

“You are not a monster, Hannibal,” Will remonstrates the black shadow huddled between his legs, a creature made smaller by his crushing need for a closeness Will is at loss how best to provide short of slashing himself (or others) open. “Nor a creature, nor a beast.”

“Am I not?”

That’s not the question he is asking, or at least not the one he needs an answer for.

“I would never leave you,” Will gasps, blood rushing away from his head so fast his breathing comes hard through his mouth. “You must know that. I wouldn’t. Not permanently, anyway. You’re mine.”

Hannibal pulls back abruptly, his absence felt as if a ghost had come between them. Icy, dead air.

“A day would be too long if you were the one doing the leaving, Will.”
The seriousness in his voice sobers them both in a flash. Will scrambles to sit up and meet Hannibal’s averted gaze. Face to face, they resemble penitents praying, two men kneeling on a white casket lining attempting communication with a deity that may not speak their tongue. Will never wanted to be someone else other than his father’s son more than in that moment, the moment he realizes injury might be the job he was born to perform.

“So you do it instead?”

“Isn’t that how I keep you?,” Hannibal rejoins evenly, no trapdoor, no keyhole, no hope. “How you establish control?”

“I don’t want to control you, Hannibal!,” Will barks, irritation triggering in his chest. “I want to control myself!”

Hannibal reaches out then, deliberately yet too quick to be an entirely autonomous gesture. “But you are beautiful when you run wild, Will.”

“I know,” Will sighs, leaning into Hannibal’s touch. “I know. So are you.”

“So run wild with me, Will.”

Will turns to kiss the palm pressing against his scarred cheek. He laughs, a stuttered, choked chortle, the noise engines make when they are about to give out. “God, how I want to run wild with you, Hannibal. Everywhere, all the time. I want to see you raw, stripped off skin, I want to own every inch of your mind until there is no room left for you to write thoughts uncoupled from mine. I want you in sound and in silence, in light and dark.”

And then Will adds because why not? If this is confession, then there should be no secrets, and if it’s purgatory, they’ll never leave anyway, so why bother with kindness? “Especially in the dark, where you can’t hide yourself properly. I own you more there, in the dark, when you are weakened by the pleasure of being seen.”

Hannibal leans in, his mouth smearing between Will’s eyebrows. “Are you going to kill me there, Will? In the dark, at my weakest?”

“God no. I am going to marry you.”

“Isn’t that one and the same with us, Will?”

Will pulls Hannibal closer so his arms can encircle him completely, bring him in enough their bare chests can rub together. Nosing into the crook of his neck, Will speaks into a black shoulder, wrinkled and streaked with broken thread.

“Only if you leave me, Hannibal. Only if you lie.”

Will can’t remember the last time they held each other without a pretense, without blood sticking between them. Perhaps never.

Hannibal’s heartbeat is strong and precise under Will’s scratched skin, under his opened shirt, their joint ribcages. Will follows his breathing, the confident cadence of Hannibal’s lungs, until they resemble a single organism.

And then Hannibal’s overlong hair is spilling over jaw, his neck, a sudden structural collapse that speaks of resignation and damage and trust and steadfastness.
Hannibal exhales against Will’s collarbone, and Will knows a white flag when he sees one. It startles him still, but he knows. When he turns to kiss the swatch of skin closest to his mouth, an earlobe, a jutting acromion, Will knows. He knows it before it takes shape around Hannibal’s mouth, has known it since Hannibal took him to that neon-lit diner outside Souk Ahras, since he took him to the hospital shortly after.

It’s a long time coming. Only Will didn’t want to see it. Sometimes all you can do when you aren’t equipped to cope with a conclusion is to delay its arrival.

Hannibal says it anyway, like Will knew he would, stern and chilling and right on schedule, “I am so sorry, Will.”

And just like that, Will knows he means it. The words scintillate frostily, painfully, like only the truth could, a spiky glass ornament unfurling inside Will’s chest.

“For what” or “in which way” are left unspecified because it’s indifferent. Or perhaps because it’s all-encompassing. Between them, there are no crimes that aren’t pardonable, or at the very least transformable from offense into penitence, ritual, sacrifice, offering. All tassels for bonding.

Will burrows deeper, burrows him deeper, or as deeper as one can draw in a poison darts without dying from shock.

“I forgive you,” he tells the dirty hair, the unshaved jaw, the monster, the orphan, the old friend, a lover that turned sour, a husband who came back home. “Will you forgive me?”

A fist clasps the ridge between Will’s shoulder-blades as if attempting to dig through the muscle to pour into his heart. “I always will.”

They sway in silence, nestled into each other’s bodies. Sunlight bruises to violet, to a blanketed sable, starless and absolutely still.

“Should we worry about Uncle Jack?,” Hannibal prods at last.

Will runs a hand up and down his back, over the mottled scar, under the ruined shirt. His skin is cool and clammy, and for a moment Will wonders if Hannibal might be coming down with a cold.

“Not for now it seems.”

Hannibal shifts slightly, his thighs spasming on each side of Will’s chest. He must be all pins and needles by now. Will knows he is.

Neither of them moves, neither of them lets go.

Hannibal settles back against Will’s side, the one that aches less. “Too content with his new doll house to risk drawing a fire into his yard?,” he croaks.

Will hums at the cyan ceiling, thinking back to the high-note of regret veining through Jack’s angry exasperation. “We’re not at his house yet, so we’re not his priority. For now at least.”

“And when that changes?”

Will inches back from the embrace so they can catch each other’s eye. Hannibal’s are unfathomably, alarmingly alive with darkness, midnight forests and molten iron ores. Will wonders if his are too when he offers, “Then we put him out. What else, sweetheart?”
It’s the way Will teases the word, low and velveteen, that pulls a moan out of Hannibal’s half-parted lips.

“I got him right where I want him,” lights up in Will’s brain, a vengeful zipping firefly, before Hannibal leans in and snuffs it with a kiss.
Chapter Summary

Not a final chapter though it almost looks like one. And yet—there's a little bit more.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s not the knock on the door that awakens him, but the smell of weak coffee and bread toasting. The smells belong to an old memory, whiskey-stale and colorless, and another more recent, drenched in snow. So, for an instant, Will lies in bed unable to place himself in the timeline of his own life. Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Maine, a shed, a cabin, a house, all spaces he never owned but lived in nonetheless, lived in long enough for his smell to sink into the floorboards, the mattress. The bathtub.

He finds Hannibal in the kitchen, huddled over a rudimentary French press, freshly showered and cleanly laundered, his varnished shoes incongruent against the khaki slacks and black turtleneck, against Will’s ratty t-shirt and bloodied boxers.

An artist in Italy, Will thinks with more viciousness than the sight necessitated. Memories rush in, of Florence this time, sharp and insulting, a fair-haired shadow winking at the corner of his eye. It’s going to be one of those days. Will can tell already.

Hannibal turns to greet him, coffee mug in hand and hair flopping with lingering bathwater, his smile so disarmingly fond and domestic that a phantom irritation coagulates around Will’s budding headache. The stench of subpar beans is too close to Northeastern mornings and impromptu picnics by the lakeshore. Pink donuts and thumping bass echoing through the walls.

“No thanks. I’ll pass.”

Will beelines to the balcony, and it’s so easy to see when he hurts Hannibal now. He visibly recoils, proceeding to pour the coffee down the sink. Everything Will does and does not do has gained the potential to affect him.

Inexperienced and overeager, love turned Hannibal into a soldier stripped of armor. It did not release him from charging into battle, however. Hannibal does it every day still, fully aware that his flanks are showing, bare and on display. He pushes forward nonetheless, the lovesick fool. Will admires him too much to ever speak of this. Or perhaps, Will fears to touch his idol and find the gold sticking to his fingers. He isn’t sure anymore. Time is tricky when you spent most of it running away from yourself.

Outside, rid of familiar smells, Will can notice the town slowly waking into winter. The sky is clear with frigid dawn. It might rain in the afternoon, though he doubts they’ll be there to witness it.

They are getting married that evening, or as soon as they drive over the French border. Hannibal has it all planed out (probably for years, perhaps since he left Will bleeding out on his kitchen
floor). Some small town in the French countryside where their birth certificates have been securely mailed to weeks ago. They are marrying under their original names so it’ll be a matter of time before they are caught.

*God—Jack.*

Will runs a hand down his face, harsh with stubble and dry blood. His bones ache from holding together a nervous system overrun by anxiety and panic.

Behind the French doors, Will can hear Hannibal opening and closing drawers, rattling hangers, moving freely now that Will is awake. Pale gratitude pierces through Will’s mounting migraine. For a monster and a narcissist, no, for a lifelong bachelor, Hannibal took to sharing with unthinkable ease. His time, his space, his mind. His body too. Will groans at the memory of last night, how they had fallen asleep tangled around each other, half-naked and midway through a kiss. Hard too, unfailingly so. Maybe that’s the true source of his irritation, something as pedestrian and vernacular as a need to refresh his memory of Hannibal’s body. It seemed impossibly long since Will had last had him, since they had last had each other. The pure muscle memory of Hannibal’s touch, the smell of his skin right below his ear or between his thighs, is enough to make Will feel dizzy. It’s a sickness this thing they have going on, he tells himself, but not quite in his own voice. In a silky, platinum timbre, and it takes him less than a minute to tamper it down.

There is much that Will regrets in life but nothing could fester quite as abominably than starting to take posthumous advice from Bedelia on the topic of their husband.

Goddammit, *their* husband.

It is going to be a long day, Will broods, cracking his back and turning to go inside.

And that’s when the knocking comes.

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Will finds Hannibal barefooted, prowling two feet from the front door. He is holding a small revolver. Not defensively, just letting it sit on his hand next to his thigh. The gun is brass-colored and too detailed not to be an antique.

Will sometimes forgets how inhumanly still Hannibal can stand, life drained from his features until jagged bones and black shadows are all that remains. A dead man walking. No. Not that. Never that.

There is much Will wants to say as they regard each other coolly across the room. That it seems like it’s going to rain. That the guy across the street still hasn’t fixed his blinds. That they should get going. That he has no use for any of the stuff in the closet bag Hannibal seems keen on dragging around. That he is sorry. For the spurned coffee and the liquor bottles on the Persian rug and the blood on the frescoed walls and the recurrent dreams of Molly, and the callouses on his hands, hardened by vengeance and spite, by sailing three thousand nautical miles to see Hannibal married to another killer, living the life that was his, not hers, by oath and by design. For the lies and hesitations, for not bending him over the kitchen counter an hour earlier, food safety and inside voices be damned, and take him there and then, rough and unprepared, because words are wasted on them, they always were, they use them like live-bait and combat armor but never seem to let their bodies do the talking as much as they should and now, with all this knocking, with Jack, with daylight savings and time running out, it might be too late anyway, to learn a new language, to figure out the secret “o” in sorrow, or love, or forgiveness, although Will knows without needing
words that Hannibal forgives him almost anything short of dying and leaving him alone. There’s a secret “o” in loneliness too, one that Hannibal’s mouth fits to a T. If only Will got a chance to trace it with his own one more time, but the knocking comes again, a fourth time since Will stepped in from the balcony, and Hannibal’s eyes slide towards him, signaling the next move belongs to Will, and that’s the last coherent thought Will remembers holding, that he should tell Hannibal it doesn’t matter that Molly is alive, that he doesn’t have to conceal her in an iron maiden, secretive body behind narrative trapdoors. It made no difference when she was alive in bed with him, and won’t make a lick of a difference now. Because in so many ways Will was the one always dead to her. Too far gone in his unconsummated love affair with the devil to be reached by a nice human spouse. You can take the boy from the war but screams and shrapnel live within him, cloaked in a trench others call heart. Home is where the blood rages. Home is where blood spills. Which is a long-winded way of saying “I am yours. I was always yours, come hell or high water.”

What Will says aloud through gritted teeth is, “Give me that!” pointing at the dainty handgun. To Hannibal’s credit, he responds with the expediency and stealth expected of a serial killer. He lingers though, in the middle of the foyer, cinching Will with an odd, nearly blank but not quite, stare.

“Get in the bedroom!” Will waves the gun at him. It dawns on him that the gun might not even be loaded and if it is, it might be damaged enough to backfire and kill him on the spot. Oh well. Too late for that either. Should have fucked him in the kitchen, alright. “Did you hear me?,” Will barks angrily. “Go!”

Coming back to life, Hannibal glides soundlessly away where Will can’t see him, can’t reach him anymore.

A deep, preposterous sigh of relief pushes out as Will wraps his hand around the golden doorknob. It’s shaped like a lion’s head. Somehow he had missed that detail. One more for the pile.

They had a good run, Will tells himself, glancing around the luxurious apartment, messy with his mess, which is to say his vices and shortcomings and unwashed clothes and shed blood and pubic hair, and maybe his corpse too, soon, which all things considered is not a bad way to go nor a bad place to die. It’s as close to home as Will ever had, come to think of it.

So when he twists the doorknob, heart pounding on his gut but hand steady on the trigger, it is not the horror of battle that washes over him. It’s a comforting sort of pride.

“Hannibal has such lovely ankles” flits right as wood creaks on the hinges, and that, truly, would be the last coherent thought Will could remember forming.

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Hannibal is sitting cross-legged on the edge of the mattress, his spine impeccably straight as he reads one of the many books stashed under the bed. Dust collects on the fabric cover. His socketed feet form a perfect forward angle and grey sunlight streams from above, lending his disheveled hair a silvery halo. There is a dream quality to the scene, down to the mineral smell of oil and rummaged clothes.

It takes Hannibal a moment to lift his eyes from the page. His eyebrows steeple in a small inquisitive uptick and he lets his finger fall as a makeshift bookmark. He has not yet put the book down when Will feels the barrel of the revolver hit bone. Hannibal’s. His forehead to be exact.

Hannibal sighs, the sigh of gentry bored with peasant entertainment, but he does lay the book to rest on the duvet at last. It’s a thick doorstopper with a foreign title. Russian, if Will was made to
guess. He isn’t, since he is the one holding a gun.

“I trust crisis has been averted?” Hannibal intones politely, the skin around his neck flushed red. Sickly red, Will makes a fleeting mental note while digging the barrel deeper in Hannibal’s skull. It’s a good time as any to find out if that old thing still works.

“You can say that,” and his finger presses harder on the stiff trigger.

Hannibal moves subtly, the shifting of one leg over the other. Will’s eyes are immediately drawn down to the rise and fall of the fabric between his legs, along the inseams of his khaki trousers. Hunter green and arrogantly tailored, too tight now that Hannibal finds himself aroused. If by Will or by violence in general, the antique gun or his own cunningness, is always impossible to tell. Will searches for marks of psychic exhaustion, telltale signs of wear and tear with this little game of theirs, with Hannibal’s special brand of attention. Not altogether unsurprisingly, he comes back empty. He grips the trigger harder, forcing Hannibal to tip his head back, letting go of his perfect posture.

“A fucking kid, Hannibal. I nearly killed a fucking eighteen-year-old kid.”

“We can’t very well judge someone’s age when seeking for a discreet criminal online, now can we, Will?,” Hannibal tilts his chin to the side, considering. “All we need is a disposable driver. Age seemed an inconsequential matter.”

The noise of the gun hitting the closet registers later, when Will’s hands are already clamped around Hannibal’s neck, knee planted mercilessly on his chest. The skin under Will’s fingers feels clammy again, a touch too jammy with sweetness. Will drives his thumb into the windpipe, forcing Hannibal’s mouth to fall open.

“I should fucking kill you. Goddammit! I should just fucking kill you now and save the world a score of trouble.”

The smile of a man delighted to find death much more obliging than initially posited must be the same across history. In cornfields and battlefields, in prison cells and childhood bedrooms. That luminous burst of elation to have your negative feelings at last reciprocated, of finding peace finally within reach.

That age-old beatific smile blooms up and all the fight drains out of Will. His body collapses like a sandcastle under a wave. Hannibal rearranges Will around his limbs, the sweaty hair on the crook of his neck, the jut of Will’s hip against his cock. They rock against each other loosely, in a syrupy laxness that Will takes as confirmation he died on the landing and this is the kind of afterlife a murderer deserves: a close-circuit of washed-out memories, of tantalizing and unfulfilled “what ifs.”

Hannibal’s hands come warm and precise around the small of his back, rolling Will on top of him.

“We don’t have time for this,” Will slurs against Hannibal’s throat.

“Just a taste,” Hannibal slurs back, his mouth on Will’s ear, his jaw, tugging at the hem of his t-shirt until time grinds to a halt.

For once, for a second, Will lets his body melt into it, the breathy rhythm of Hannibal’s ribcage, the air rushing unevenly through his mouth as Will undoes his belt and presses closer, so close clothing becomes agonizingly coarse. Grazing the heart-shaped scar on Hannibal’s eyebrow which always tastes saltier to Will’s tongue, so much so he secretly gathered it had to be left by Hannibal’s sister,
a final reminder that time can’t part what blood brought together.

The sound of a man painfully in love must resemble that of one dying after a bitter fight with life. It’s a thought Will had harbored since he last saw his father, yellowed to the bone on a Southern hospice, the memory of his wife’s maiden name the only residue linking him to Will.

Sassoon. His mother’s maiden name was Will’s middle one, something levanted and othered, jammed between two passing bits of normalcy, two good ole Saxon male names, no ambiguity there. But his father remembered, as he was about to die, consumed by cancer and booze and bile, his father remembered his mother’s Hebrew name and the cross-stitch under her pillow, the German rusty from whispers passed down through a whole lineage of people Will never met, uncles and aunts and neighbors buried in an unmarked forest somewhere in the Old World.

As Hannibal ruts helplessly against Will's thigh, a slick desperation wracking his polite voice, nudging him to say things in languages Will couldn't fathom, Will cradles his skull and wonders if he knows—if Hannibal, in his infinite knowledge and crooked wisdom, can look into Will’s bloodstream, the recesses of memory encoded with shards of borrowed carbon, and see the vestiges that make Will not just Will but part of a much larger history, a soldier and a murderer, a cop and a son, once an orphan with two living parents, a survivor of a massacre not done to him but inherited by him nonetheless.

Hannibal’s eyes roll back in his head and Will, hard and with no desire to change that, murmurs, “You feel clammy. Are you sick?”

Suspended between Will’s hands, Hannibal’s face resembles a sunflower, his cheeks radiantly blushed on an erect stem, his hair sticking out like open petals.

“I believe I may have contracted a mild cold in my recent comings and goings.”

The honesty between them is intoxicating. It’s not new, but it’s still green with vulnerability, and thus startlingly coltish and sweet-smelling.

Will drags his lips against the damp scalp, the expression lines on Hannibal’s ruddy forehead. He is burning up. If due to fever or orgasm is anyone’s guess.

“You mean stalking nurses over two continents or just general errand-running?”

Hannibal purses his lips, and just like that Will knows the afterglow has worn off. Hannibal is himself again. Tempered by happiness but incapable of melding into something else. Something gentle and smooth and predictable. Against all odds, the thought pulls at Will.

“Will. All this vulgar banter is beneath us by now, don’t you think?”

“Never,” Will counters with such winsomeness his body demands for some distance from the flame. He flops back to the mattress, eyes on the cyan ceiling. No blood there. Not even he could reach that high up. “I could have been killed, you know? Thanks to your little stunt with Jack?”

Hannibal looks as kindly upon physical distance as he does on idle talk of Will dying. He takes Will’s hand into his own, folding it against his chest in one tight lock. His breathing labors still, under the untucked turtleneck. Will can smell sex and semen on him.

“Doubtful.”

“You never left, did you?”
It’s clear now, with hindsight. The seventeen missed calls. Casually unanswered. Punishment and retribution and protection all rolled up in one. He probably could hear Will pacing up there, wearing the floorboards to sawdust, his agitation and silence irrefutable proof of him being alive, and alone, and unharmed.

“I beg your pardon?”

“The apartment downstairs. It’s yours too, isn’t it?”

Hannibal turns on his side, eyes unhealthily bright under the sallow sun. “More or less.”

Will shoots to his elbow and half-shouts, index finger jutting out, “I knew it! I knew it! You killed the old lady!”

“I did no such thing! She died of old age after years of serving my family quite faithfully!”

Will wonders if there is a secret door somewhere in the apartment that leads downstairs, an emergency escape carved by generations of aristocrats up to no good. Aunts and uncles Hannibal would never meet, blue-blooded and red-handed, buried six-feet-under in old Soviet snow.

Separated by an inch of put-upon determination and stubborn self-righteousness, they square off in silence. Hannibal’s whole impassive face is scrunched with genuine displeasure. Like wrapping paper discarded under the tree on Christmas morning. A petty little nuisance, persistently wrinkled.

Will stares him down for a good minute, trying and likely succeeding at masking his own amusement.

“You are one resourceful son of a bitch, my love,” Will grouses and Hannibal laughs.

He laughs his awkwardly spontaneous laughter, raucous with baritones and a juvenile musicality, high-pitched right at the convex of surprise, before he reigns it in into muffled chuckles. It’s heartbreaking. The sheer lack of motor control, the way Hannibal’s nose twitches once the laughter blows over him, hurts Will in many more turns than his pain receptors know what to do with.

“I promised I would never leave you,” Hannibal leans in as if to kiss him, but thinking better of it, shifts to stroke Will’s hair instead. “And I always keep my promises.”

There’s little shelter to be found in recognizing that Hannibal’s method of keeping Will safe is by constantly lurching him into perilous situations. To keep him on his toes, limber on the razor’s edge.

A safety-net, a snake. The cavalry and the enemy. That’s Hannibal through and through.

His, though. To hold and to keep for as long as they both shall live.

“I love you,” Will leans in and breathes into his mouth because what else could he say that would aptly encapsulate the feeling of awe and annoyance, the urgency and want and, above all, the crispest tenderness ever known to man but, “Frightfully. I love you frightfully.”

Hannibal dips forward, erasing the last inch between their noses.

“Good,” he whispers a hairbreadth away from Will’s lips, smug and looming and transparently pleased. “Then we shall be frightful together.”

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“Last call,” Hannibal quips at the door, two bags poised by his feet.

“Leave the bag,” Will points at the black satchel fished out from the closet. “I have no use for what’s in there.”

Hannibal nods, his demeanor inscrutable, as he places the battered bag on the beaded ottoman. Not so discretely, he begins flecking dried blood off a saint’s painted face.

Will gives him a pointed look and Hannibal has the good sense of putting his hands in his pockets.

Will throws a last mawkish glance at the apartment. In the last hour, Hannibal had restored it to pristine condition. It smelled brand new now, of lemon and bleach.

“I will miss this place,” Will sighs, and the words unearth a raw earnestness he didn't know the depth of until then. Until he was asked to leave.

“You can come back anytime you wish,” Hannibal lies almost kindly.

Will snorts, and it’s a gesture as ugly as Will feels. Grabby, lacking, a touch too covetous. Ultimately sad, of a sadness made of lifelong deprivation.

“I may be a peasant,” Will spits, “but even I know it’s distasteful to visit a home in the absence of its rightful owner.”

Hannibal looks down at him from those two inches that often seem a foot wide, and rejoins with an air of concerned bafflement, “But you are its rightful owner, Will.”

Met with his own dose of bewilderment, Hannibal sighs heavily and picks up their luggage.

“Honestly Will, you must read what you sign with greater attention. Those were binding legal documents after all.”

Will trails behind him dazed, out the door and down the spiral staircase, “You gave me this house?”

Hannibal walks ahead, the chunk of ribbed keys jingling in his hand. “I made you its custodian. I couldn’t outright sell it now without rousing suspicions. But it’s yours. So is the downstairs apartment, if you ever feel the urge to—expand.”

He intones that last word as if sticky with rot or grime.

Not for the first time that morning, Will muses if 1) he should kiss Hannibal before they stand in front the justice of peace; 2) he should tell him that he knows. About Molly. That he knows and he is thankful for it. For her life, yes, but mostly for being spared the guilt of her death.

Will thinks the words up but what comes out is, “Unless you want children or a speakeasy, I see no need for home renovations.”

“You never know,” Hannibal rejoins, doing a good enough job at impersonating disbelief while telegraphing the loud desire to be persuaded.

Will grabs the keys from Hannibal’s hand and pockets them in one go.

“Oh trust me,” he says tightening his coat and braving the brisk winter gale. “This time I really do.”
In the end, they decide to do most of their own driving, eighteen hours of side-roads and freeways along the Italian coastline. In an unusual display of chivalry and concern, Will offers to take the first shift, which merges into a ten-hour journey in a cold little beige car that refuses to go above sixty mph without screaming. Hannibal sleeps for all of it, his legs too long to fit the doll-size backseat if he doesn’t curl up in a fetal position. Will would be remiss if not admitting that the reason why he drove so carefully had far less to do with highway police and more with the vertiginous endearment of witnessing a serial killer sleep like a starved child.

Somewhere on the outskirts of Rome, Will stops in a ditch and regards Hannibal through the rearview mirror. There’s a gun in the trunk, hidden among their sundries. There’s a knife too, engraved in blood.

Without making a sound, Will slinks out of the car. He’s getting better at being uncannily stealthy, at shedding his human skin. Soon he’ll outsmart the best of them, Will thinks, parsing through their bag.

When he slips back inside, night has fallen completely. Hannibal stirs as Will opens the back door, but so weakly Will could slit his throat before he would be able to put up a fight. It would be an intimate, if ignominious, way to kill.

“Will?,” Hannibal stammers, eyes cloudy with exhaustion and drugs, a hand shielding him from the overhead light. “Are you unwell?”

“I am fine.” Will brushes the overlong bangs off Hannibal’s forehead, hot still in spite of all the cold medicine Will forced him to swallow. “Go back to sleep,” he whispers, tucking the blanket under Hannibal’s chin. Against his better judgement, Will leans in, lingering cheek to cheek. The last thing they need is to both fall ill, but Will can’t help it.

Driving through the pitch-black evening, the red glimmer of the herringbone blanket catching on the rearview mirror, Will wonders if this is his life now: to be throughly upended by anything vaguely human that Hannibal does.

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“Are you here for the property auction?,” the red-haired girl in the pink sweater asks with a bumbling smile. Too many teeth for too round of a face, Will thinks, but says nothing.

Hannibal, on the other hand, always the gentleman even with a body temperature of 102F, smiles his most hospitable smile, turning to look at the woman sitting next to him on the court bench.

“Not at all,” he replies smoothly, eyes straying to Will who is standing five feet away, impatient and uncomfortable in a blue and grey tweed suit. Hannibal’s eyes remain bright, alight with fever, but yellowing now with mirth. It’s something Will could grow used to. To the smell of him too, buttery and wounded with sickness.

“I thought—” the girl fidgets with the hem of her ample lace skirt. “Since you are clearly not from here—I mean, not to offend you,” she giggles nervously as Hannibal’s smile grows teeth, “You look very dashing— I mean—you must think I am such a ditzy Irishwoman by now!”

Hannibal laughs with her, filing the edges off the uncomfortable prattler.

“Not at all,” he says again, warm, reassuring, the perfect foreign gentleman, with his coiffed hair, and freshly shaved jaw, and pleasantly irregular canines.
Will runs a finger under the white starched collar of his shirt, his skin prickling. He knows what the girl is thinking, can read her like the most banal of checkout novels. The way she glances over Hannibal’s hands, taking in and dismissing the scar on his bare fingers, filling in the gaps in his life-story to fit some chintzy fantasy of serendipitous romance. A house on the cliff, overlooking the French Riviera, two children, maybe one or two shepherd dogs. A boy with her unruly mop of red curls, a girl with patrician features like her father. Oh the joys of bilingual unions!

“So what brings you to Sainte-Agnès?,” she trills a note too high for casual conversation, her hand brushing against Hannibal’s elbow. “If you don’t mind me asking, of course!”

“Not at all,” Hannibal rejoins for what seems like the umpteenth time, amusement plastered over his handsome face, though Will can see a second layer unfurling under the surface, like a flower long deprived from sunlight. Pride, vanity, pleasure. At being looked at, admired with such unguarded desire.

Something hurts inside Will all of a sudden. It trickles down his spine, pushing him off the wall. Not jealousy, not just anyway, but something glassier and toothier. Sorrow, perhaps. Guilt. That he deprived Hannibal of something precious. Worse, that he is inadequate to fulfill a vital need, as trivial as it may be.

Incapable of standing still, Will scans for a sign to the restroom.

“In fact, I am here to be married,” Hannibal’s voice seems to have soared, to have dilated into a more decisive pitch. It snags Will’s attention, holding him in place. But then again, it might just be wishful-thinking.

The girl’s disappointment is physically visible, forcing her shoulders to droop and her smile to falter on her bovine cheeks.

“Oh. What a lucky girl she must be! To have you come all this way just for her!”

Hannibal hums, that noncommittal sound he produces when readying his person suit. He cants his face over her shoulder, deliberately pining Will with his gaze. Levity has vanished from his face, replaced by a disturbingly vacant coldness. It’s there and gone before he looks back at the girl.

“You could say I would die for him,” he states matter of fact, and the gasp the girl utters is definitely too shrill to be genuine. Her hand falls to his knee, this little conspiratorial intimacy she is now allowing herself.

“Oh, that sounds dangerous!,” she chirps, “and dreadfully romantic! Will they make it here in time for the ceremony?”

Hannibal pats the girl’s hand with a debonairness that betrays his tactile nature, his habit in measuring lovers and prey by the thickness of their skin. Will wants to leave but finds his feet rooted to the ground. The herringbone pattern on his tailored jacket grows straps and tightens around his chest like buckles on a straightjacket. Suddenly, he can’t move and can’t breathe. It burns to keep his eyes open, and yet, he can’t blink away.

Hannibal lowers his head, brushing against the girl’s corkscrew curls.

“That’s him,” he points at Will. “That creature right there.”

The girl swivels around to stare at Will. Her blue eyes look wild, swimming with curiosity and overstimulation. They dart over Will, clinical and appraising. He has the distinct feeling that she finds him lacking.
“Oh,” she says again, and that’s all it takes. Will is off the wall and on them in less than a second flat. His right hand digs on the girl’s shoulder, so deep he can feel her bra-strap tensing through the pink cardigan. She makes a small yelping noise that reminds Will of adults trying to speak to babies. Hannibal must be there too, but Will can’t see or hear him. All he has eyes for is this girl, with her red curls and round cheeks and stubby hands.

“I am going to kill you,” Will hisses in a voice so neutral, so close to cordial, he cannot recognize it as his own. “Not right now. Not here. No. I’ll find where you live, and on some moonless night, when you are taking the trash out or putting your seatbelt on, I will slit your throat so quickly you won’t be able to think of a last word. You’ll bleed out before I’ll let your body hit the ground.”

Hannibal’s hand on his, prying it from the girl’s shoulder, is the last thing Will remembers with clarity. A moment later they are alone in the vestibule, their names being called by a court official.

The ensuing silence is deafening. Will seeks for a roaring in his ears but there is none. Not even his own breathing is audible. All he can sense, from the corner of his eye, is the black and white herringbone pattern of Hannibal’s tweed jacket. Their wedding garments, handmade by a bent-over lady holed up in the Southern Alps. They had stopped to retrieve them on the way to Sainte-Agnès. Hannibal had held the wrapped parcels on the side of a mountain road and wept. Unsure if witnessing a display of emotion or the side-effects of a particularly vicious cold, Will had offered him a tissue and sat back in the car. He told himself he was gripping the steering wheel to stay awake. In truth, he had wanted to cry too.

Now, feeling the weight of Hannibal’s hand against his chest, Will knows that he is panting.


Will’s head lolls backwards and Hannibal catches it on his shoulder. He smells beautifully, like soap and fever, and a muskier almond flavor with a high-condensation point, like snow or spun sugar.

His mouth buries in warmed fabric and it’s joyfully loud in there, with Hannibal’s heartbeat singing. Will breathes out, “I think I’m a killer,” and he can feel laughter quietly strumming through Hannibal’s stomach, all the way to his Adam's Apple.

“Yes, I know.”

“Oh fuck,” Will groans as the municipal clerk approaches with a glass of sugared water. Hannibal takes it and they exchange brief pleasantries, clearly on the topic of wedding day jitters.

As Hannibal helps him up, Will grabs him by the wrist and whispers in his ear, “You can’t touch anyone ever again without my consent. That goes for fucking as much as for killing.”

Hannibal pulls back, far enough to look Will in the eye. The hard lines on his mouth and brow tell Will that he is turning the idea in his mind, testing it for loopholes and pitfalls. His eyebrows flinch minutely and Will knows he found them. Something flickers in his eyes, and Will knows, knows deep in his marrow, that Hannibal will say “yes.” Against his best interests, he is going to enter a burning house—no, not enter it. Make his home among the flames.

Hannibal’s nod is curt and incisive. (He says “yes” to me now like he said “no” to me before: with absolute sharpness and little-to-none hesitation.)

He’s all in, Will realizes, and there’s a twinge of horror and awe at the way his heart jumps at the idea. Hannibal Lecter will one day die because he once nodded at a proposal I made him.
They stand side by side in a small provincial office with two public servants as witnesses. The papers and the ceremony are officiated in French, while Will wonders idly if Hannibal paid everyone in the room to look that perky and compliant, or if they truly are ignorant of the kind of men being married in their quaint seaside village.

Apart from dispensing with rings, Will has made no requests. He indulged Hannibal’s choice of location, hideout, and ceremonial wear in exchange for the most streamlined wedding possible. That meant no vows, no kissing, no loitering around when Jack or Interpol could be around the corner, waiting to accidentally riddle them with bullets. Against all of his worst fears, Hannibal had gone along with Will’s reluctant approach to matrimony. Will blamed it on the unbreakable fever and did not question his blessings.

They stood side by side in their matching wedding suits, the calla-lily boutonnières perched over their hearts, as the justice of peace went through a litany of short questions and documental approvals. Hannibal signed his name first, and Will ignored the tremor in his hand that smudged his signature beyond recognition. Will closed his eyes when he signed his. Next to Hannibal’s, it looked neat and compressed, an efficient conglomeration of letters.

Once asked if there was something they would like to say to each other, Will pretended not to understand French. Hannibal shook his head briefly, chin dropping to his chest. He looked terribly bashful and young, but aged too, with that particular kind of tiredness that comes with telling yourself the best years might already be behind you.

Influenza, Will thought, is a hell of a force.

Either because he couldn’t help it or because he couldn’t be bothered to fight it, Will reached out and held Hannibal’s hands. They were colder than usual, and wilted in front of his thighs.

“If I saw you every day, forever,” Will recited, “I would remember this time.”

He wasn’t sure what he expected, largely because he hadn’t planned to say anything at all. He was mostly tired and hungry and antsy by the time they had pulled into Sainte-Agnès, a day later than planned, his back warped by the collection of horrific second-hand rentals Hannibal had selected for their shotgun road-trip. They had showered in a bed-and-breakfast that had rocks for walls, and walked over to the local courthouse as soon as the sun had risen.

Romance generally had no place in Will’s life, let alone in his mind, but in present conditions survival seemed as much of a pipe-dream as regular access to hot water and full nights of horizontal sleep. Sheer muscle memory and adrenaline were keeping him upright. So when Will spoke those words he spoke them because he wanted to, but it was a want exhumed from a lake where he had once dropped bodies and then promptly forgot how to get back there. He put miles and miles between himself and that place, the place where he had fallen in and out of love, a primordial scene he would never be able to properly reenact or resolve, so what was the point of ever going back there? Which is to say that, when Will spoke those words, he didn’t think of them as binding or especially meaningful. He said them with a wry grin and a perfunctory hand-squeeze.

It took him losing sensation on his left wrist to realize Hannibal was gripping him so hard circulation had momentarily been interrupted.

Will looked up, and the women around him were smiling—not their ordinary public servant smiles but a ruby kind of smile, all sequins and California poppies. A jolt of panic, or something too
adjacent to fight-or-flight, bolted through him and Will knew, knew before he looked at Hannibal, that he was about to lose control of the situation. It hit him like that head-rush in falling dreams, where one braces for impact.

So Will knew and still it knocked the wind out of him to see Hannibal fall to the municipal carpet, one knee folded, the other bent, his herringbone back shaking as he held Will’s hands in a vise-like fist. Unlike the other people in the room, Will was not touched by the image of a well-to-do man brought to his knees by the magnitude of love. For Will, the image was a haunting, a nightmarish reminder of a time he nearly emptied a shotgun in his head, or at least that had been the plan as he climbed up the ridges towards Stag Brook.

Will found himself yanking Hannibal up with such violence a seam ripped on his jacket. When their eyes met, Hannibal’s were glossy with unshed tears, fattened on years and years of solitary confinement.

Irritated, Will opened his mouth to demand “stop this!,” but instead found his teeth clashing against Hannibal’s, his tongue rimming the roof of Hannibal’s mouth.

It wasn’t a kiss as much as a threat, and Hannibal took it exactly for what it was. He grabbed Will by the neck, and forced him to stay put while he had his way with him. While he got what he had come for: a wedding and a husband whose memory he could digest at leisure for years and years to come.

Chapter End Notes

A friend of mine says they can always spot the shrink in this story, but I see the historian and maudlin poetry lover instead (or maybe I just let myself be more that when I write this, so I tell myself that's what's visible).

Which is a roundabout way of letting you all see me, because this is almost ending and it seems safer to do it now. Or maybe it just feels like last call.

I am not a people's person, I don't do social media, and I'm awkward at keeping standardized social responses (if my replies to your comments ever seemed off, know I was probably trying hard to sound "normal," "not like a shrink," or worse--"not off." And I fail at that. More often than not).

Anyway, these conversations are all the memories I'll ever carry of this fandom. And it was a pleasure. Even when it wasn't, it was. Words, you know, no organism more beautifully capable of asexual reproduction. Can never have enough of those.

There. Thank you for reading and talking back.
Saint-Amour, France

Chapter Summary

I know, I know...a wedding seems like such a neat place to stop. But there are a couple of things that still have to happen in Will's "becoming," so expect 4 chapters after this one. And yes, there's a happy ending. Cross my heart and hope to die.

This chapter was so long, I had to break it down (really, it was over 10k). This is part 1 of 2, so take everything happening with a grain of salt. Smut and a lot of talking coming next. If all goes well, part 2 will be here in early January.

Thank you to everyone reading and commenting. You took a chance on a WIP that became a monstrous labor of love. And you've been so kind about it. May the New Year be gentle with you all.

At last, a dedication:
Nalyra—you keep me right.

Cold, people will tell you, prevents growth. It kills. It kills small flowers in the bud, animals in the wild, it desiccates and cracks skin.

No one ever talks of the peace found in the subzero, the absolute absence of smell, the clear, ascetic transparence that only emerges when there is no warmth whatsoever. It smells blank, cold does. No germs, no viruses, no brewing, no sweat, no clamminess, no stench of overactive, leaking bodies. No sickness.

Cold—Will thought, while driving through endless stretches of one-way roads, the days so short sunlight is a misty whiteness—cold is judged unfairly by vain, thin-skinned summer birds. It is a thing of beauty, welcoming and clean. It doesn’t prevent growth; it prevents decay.

Will nodded to himself, the pain in his jaw reminding him to ease his grip on the steering wheel. It was dark out again, trees a suggestion of blackness outside the car windows. His back hurts, and so does his left shoulder, where Hannibal’s head had been putting pressure for over three hours. Will could feel the heat of him braise through three layers of fabric and both their skins.

His temperature had been rising steadily since they left Sainte-Agnès. For the first hour, Hannibal had sat next to Will. Buoyed by a jolt of jittery energy, he had talked and talked and talked—about the weather and the history of the Pyrenees, traditional alpine cuisine, indigenous fauna and flora, historical curiosities, the weather again, until the flush spread so high up in his cheekbones that his eyes turned marigold-yellow. He had switched the radio on then, pretending to study the rural landscape while there was light out, but Will could feel him struggle to stay awake.

Without meaning to, Will had pushed his left hand against Hannibal’s forehead, the back of his neck, feeling for an iciness he knew would not be there.

But still, Will couldn’t help it. He had to do something. His own hands were cold, dew and frost rising relentlessly from the fields. Maybe he could give some away. Maybe his hands could be magical after all. Just this once.
Cold, like trauma, only speaks to those who know its language. Once in you, it’s not something you can easily shake off.

(Snow made you, Will roared silently. Remember, you son of a bitch? You taught me to be cold!)

Out loud Will said, “Lay down and shut up,” when Hannibal’s eyes glazed over with wet fever. Hannibal smiled then, and that smile almost threw Will off the road. No iteration of the man or monster fit with that smile, slack and dripping warmth all the way to his knuckles as he reached for Will’s hand. When he touched Will’s ring finger to his lips, those were burning too.

“I don’t know who you are,” Will almost let slip it out.

He didn’t.

Instead, he kept driving, eyes on the pitch-black asphalt as Hannibal leaned over, nestling his warm head on Will’s bad shoulder. A runny nose nudged Will’s neck once, and then he was out. Like a kid on an overlong road-trip.

No. Like a toy finally wrung out of batteries.

(Fuck.
Don’t.)

Will pulled away gently. Getting sick was not an option. The kiss in the courthouse had been foolish enough.

When Hannibal’s wheezing grew too shallow, Will fought the urge to shake him awake.

Instead, he turned the radio up. Brazilian bossanova, of all things.

Will tapped his fingers in time with the jazzy beat. He began rattling trivia he must have learnt from his dad, or maybe from some guys at the force, back in Louisiana, or maybe—maybe from Beverly. Yeah. Details on decomposition, the effects of heat and sunlight on the corruption of human tissue.

Heat is a bastard, you know? Cold gets a bad rep, but it can be more satisfying than warmth. More intimate. Think of cold lips against yours, cold toes under blankets. The first snowfall. Can you see it now? Can you remember back to the first snowfall you saw, back in Eastern Europe, back when you still had all your toes?

By hour six, Will gave up telling himself stories.

He veered off the highway into the first medium-sized town. He stopped at a pharmacy and bought as much aspirin and anti-inflammatories as he could without raising any suspicion (“Sick kid, driving home for the holidays. You know how it is”). He bought grocery items that in any other life, any other time, Hannibal would have derided as drivel (canned soup, sliced white bread, cheese the color of play-dough.) Will paid no heed to the haughty voice in his head and paid cash.

He drove up the mountains, into forests so thick his breath came in a little easier. The local accent was hard to follow, but Will had never been as thankful for a tailored suit and a trunk filled with money as when he managed to parlay both into a shed on the outskirts of a private farmland. If Hannibal had been awake, he would have been proud of Will’s bargaining skills, his easy way with lying. The middle-aged woman in galoshes had been kind, but only as kind as women are to strange men who are charming and wealthy. If Hannibal had asked, Will would have told him: that he had
thought of him as he put together the image of a man no one could resist.

But Hannibal never woke up, so Will kept that to himself. Just one among the many threatening to break free. Will tampered them all down as he struggled Hannibal to his feet.

“If you die on me now, I’ll kill you in the afterlife,” he hissed as Hannibal leaned all his weight on his bad shoulder again. Hannibal may have laughed weakly, under his breath. Will couldn’t be sure. He couldn’t afford to. White noise surged through when he put an arm around Hannibal and found his shirt soaked with sweat.

Will was not short on medical knowledge, nor was he any good at kidding himself, but in that moment he decided to believe that a fever so lengthy and so high could be broken by home remedies alone. He focused on Hannibal’s boutonniere still pinned to his lapel, the delicate calla-lily a precipitous purple that resembled bloody wine.

“Only you would find that appropriate for a wedding,” Will chided as he let Hannibal fall into the queen-size bed.

The cottage was small, little more than a guest bedroom with a square window on one side, and a somber bathroom on the other. No kitchen. A hotplate and a tea kettle. White sheets and duvet, that at least would be to Hannibal’s taste

(If he ever sees it, you mean.

Don’t.)

Miles of vineyard-covered hills outside. Velvet curtains to keep the glassy daylight out. A bathtub, chipped and well-used, but still—Will felt lucky as he locked the front door.

He busied himself unpacking the drugstore items: dry goods, perishables, medicine. Lined up on the nightstand by expiration date first. Then, on second thought, by urgency. Ibuprofen, aspirin, water, orange juice, more water, bread, more ibuprofen. Ice cubes. Filtered water. Can’t have too much water. Can never have too much water or ice or aspirin, his father used to say. Keeps a man on his feet.

The desire to label each and every pill bottle by hand flared up so formidably Will lost time. When he came to, his hands were wrapped around the door knob as if he had tried to get out and forgot it was locked.

He shook his head, the cotton fuzziness at the edges of his skull inching a touch closer.

(Don’t. Not now. You can’t.)

The wood was cool where he laid his forehead against the door. He counted to ten slowly, first in English and then in French. He would never tell Hannibal that, for a while there, French had come to him much more naturally than English. When he was a child, back in Louisiana, back when all his friends spoke Creole, the friends his father had told him not to keep but he did anyway because their anger knew his anger by its name. Not just his anger, but his yearnings too. Will knew he was different in French long before he managed to verbalize it in English.

Getting down on his knees, Will started on Hannibal’s shoes, then his socks, and finally his belt and trousers. He barely stirred, a burning rag doll that seemed to never catch fire. Will breathed through his mouth as he pulled Hannibal’s coat and shirt off his shoulders. The sweet smell of sickness, of a body candied in panic, still hit his nose. Will told himself it was nausea what shot through him as Hannibal tilted forward, chapped lips pressing against Will’s cheek, his nose,
barely missing his lips.

“Stop that!” Will barked with much more anger than he thought himself capable. There was so much exhaustion. Where was the anger coming from?

Hannibal smiled, quietly, but Will was certain it was a smile this time, a slight pull of red, dry lips.

“If I get sick too, we are done.”

Will moved away to start the water running. Lukewarm, not too cold, but cold enough to break a fever, he reminded himself as he adjusted the taps. That voice in his head was not his own. That voice in his head was sturdy with a woman’s warmth. Distantly he wondered if he was casting Alana or his mother to fulfill a nurturing role he had no innate proclivity for.

Jack, imposing in a long black coat and a two-barrel shotgun, emerged in Will’s mind.

“The cat is out of the bag, Hannibal,” Will raised his voice to carry over the plastic partition. “Jack knows and the police will figure out you’re alive now that you got married. They will be looking for us. We gotta keep moving.”

He wasn’t sure if Hannibal had called him, but it seemed like something he might do, so Will made short work of filling the tub and returned to the room.

There had been times (many many many) when Will had wished to see Hannibal defeated. By force, by fate, by lust. Just conquered, incapable of putting up a fight, of exerting his will. Of winning.

And yet, when Will stepped back into that dusky room and saw him—the man who had killed more people than Will ever cared knowing, the monster who had killed most of the people Will ever dared caring for—it nearly broke him.

Hannibal sat on the edge of the bed, head bowed low, hands laced modestly over his naked lap, half covering his soft cock. His feet curled in an odd angle, left sole folded over the right arch as if shielding skin from the air itself. The void for his sixth toe shone grisly pink, an accusatory battle wound reminding Will of the inhuman lengths Hannibal was capable of going to get his way.

It took Will everything he had left not to start crying. Which may seem a meager feat, but for Will the desire to cry hurt. It resembled a punch to the throat, so little control he had over it. If he began, he would never be able to stop.

“I don’t even know who you are,” Will thought again, but it was getting harder to tell if the subject of that sentence was Hannibal or himself.

Avoiding to touch Hannibal while simultaneously having to hoist him up proved a distasteful task. Tacky skin stuck to the tweed of his jacket. Will’s stomach roiled, heavy and empty.

Without his usual panache, that machine-gun strength and confidence, Hannibal’s muscles sagged, his features turned waxier. He looked ordinary, repulsive even, Will noted as he deposited him in the cool bath, one shaky foot at a time. His head lolled absently against the porcelain rim and Will couldn’t help a wave of revulsion at the man before him. Feeble, dispossessed, limp. Human.

It would take nothing to drown him now, Will calculated, looming over the tub. It would make Will’s life so much easier. No dead weight to carry around. Just a slight nudge and off he would go, under the water, into the land of aqueous moonlight and frosted nightmares he slithered from decades ago. Back to the snow.
His wrist pinched and Will jumped away, hitting the plastic partition with a dull clank. From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Hannibal’s fingers suspended midair, elegant even when they were slipping away.

Irritation flared up again, brighter and hotter, in Will’s belly. “Why do you have to make everything harder huh? Why the fuck can’t you just be easy?!?”

He hadn’t meant to talk, let alone scream, but there they were, and sound carried in a brick dome. Will’s eyes pricked, and Jack rose up again, this time with claws outreached, a beckoning smile of understanding that did not quite fit his mouth.

(don’t don’t don’t don’t)

Time and air were sucked out of the tiny bathroom first, then out of Will’s lungs. He stopped breathing. It had been so long since he slept or ate or did anything but drive and move and worry. Always move, move forward with the worry, move the worry down, move worry out of the way of driving, drive forward don’t look back, the worry moves you backwards even if worrying is what keeps you driving at all.

He should have picked up cigarettes at the gas station. Fuck Hannibal’s cold.

(But you didn’t, did you?)

You could go now, though. Get in the car and drive. It’s not like he can stop you. Look at you. You haven’t even taken your coat off. Not like you’re planning to stay anyway. Nah. You’re always on the go, aren’t you, son? You’re never much of a keeper. You never knew how to stay put. Ask that wife of yours. She knows all about the husband who couldn’t stand the heat.)

“Shut up!” Will clasped his head, shook it to loosen the loucher thoughts. They flamed, dancing tongues behind his eyelids. “All of you, shut up! There’s no room for me anymore!”

(Us? You mean him? He’s quiet now. Not so seductive anymore. Not so easy to pin your crimes on a devil who looks like a lump of overcooked meat. But what about you, sonny? Can you hear yourself think when he’s not in here doing all the talking for you? Or can’t you face the truth?)

“What truth?”

(You know.)

It hurt. It always hurt, it seemed, to take stock of himself. Not the structure he had built himself into, but the crack that rushed along. The crack hurt in part, Will realized, because it had love stuck to it. Like scar tissue, or moss. Will thought of a big Ferris wheel crisscrossed with rust and vines. It scared Will to think that, in the eventuality of Hannibal’s absence, he would disappear under the overgrowth.

Stepping into the doorway, he allowed himself to consider leaving as if it were an actual possibility. He looked at Hannibal cast in half-light, mouth open and hands fallen over the rim.

Just because you love someone it doesn’t mean you have to endure the hurt they dredge up in you. Just because you promised, it doesn’t make you captive.

(Or does it?)
I love him. I love all of him, I think. He’s my blood now.

So? That doesn’t make you less of a killer, son. Serial killers trade family for self-preservation all the time. It’s covered under your policy. Nothing to be shameful about.

Don’t.

What?

Call me that.

A killer? Or a serial killer?)

As if pulled by the devolving bleakness of Will’s thoughts, Hannibal chose that instant to lift his oily head up and slit his swollen eyes open.

He whispered, so thickly Will could barely make sense of it, “C’est vous, maman?”

And that, as people say, was that.

Will only realized that he was wet when the water reached his shirt collar. It hadn’t occurred to him to strip before getting into the tub. He had thought nothing at all, actually, time again lost to the whims of his body. Speaking of, the water was so much colder than recommended for the peak of winter, but Hannibal was warm for both of them, burning up through Will’s three layers of drenched fabric. He turned to his side almost intuitively, making room for Will, turning himself into the negative space that enfolded Will’s body.

In the awkward confines of white tile and darkness, Will held Hannibal recklessly close, a bundle of shivering bone drumming helplessly against his chest. Before he could stop himself, Will began singing. It was an old church hymn, learnt during his father’s brief stint in Catholic sobriety.

What else was he to do? Hannibal had balled up his hands around Will’s lapels. Up close, Will could see the cuts on Hannibal’s eyelids, abrasions from fever that had turned his most sensitive skin to brittle parchment. What else could he do? He was hurting.

Will had never wanted to kill an illness before. Even with encephalitis, he had rolled over and taken it, the symptoms and then the cure. But there was no Hannibal before, so now there was Will, trying to wrestle influenza to the ground with little more than cold baths and Christian songs.

The idea of praying formed dimly, but then something else was swirling between them in the water, becoming riper and denser and sharper until it snapped.

With a hint of hysteria, Hannibal ran his hands up and down Will’s chest, rucking up his undershirt, clutching at his hips. Though consciousness seemed intermittent, he pulled at Will’s buttons, ripping half of them in the process.

Trust a killer to know how to dismember prey in the dark.

He reached between Will’s legs and pressed the heel of his hand forward. Will winced. He had never imagined Hannibal could be vulgar before. If before illness or marriage, Will was not sure, but he pressed back into Hannibal’s hand anyway.

Fever, however, made him clumsy. A thumb caught in Will’s boutonniere when he tried to yank Will’s jacket off. Hannibal yelped, a pitiful, mournful moan. It sounded like glass shattering, like a lung giving out.
Will let himself be swept up in the madness then. He pushed the bleeding finger into his mouth and sucked, murmuring into his ear, “It’s me. It’s Will. I’m here. I’m right here with you.”

Hannibal’s eyes firecracked, no direction, just blunt bestial force. When Will looked into them, he couldn’t find himself there. For one impossible moment, Hannibal looked at Will and didn’t recognize him.

Like most life-changing events, it would only be much later that Will could go back and pinpoint that moment as meaningful. At the time, Hannibal reared his head back and rammed Will on the jaw, throwing him against the tile wall and nearly knocking him out. When Will caught the tail-end of his wits, Hannibal was talking, an agitated garble of accented words, his limbs thrashing in the water. Will thought of a blind animal drowning in the night.

“Stop it! Stop that, goddammit!” Will wrestled to gather his wrists together, an elbow smacking him hard and splitting his lip. “What the fuck are you doing? It’s me! I’m on your side, remember? I fucked up my whole life for you, you crazy son of a bitch!”

Violence has a hair-trigger not unrelated to lust. Once turned on, the initiator flares, relentless until the blasting cap can lick at the mercury fulminate. Targets become secondary, blurs in the hunt to find release. It hurts to want with such fury, to silence such want for a sustained amount of time (try a lifetime). But then again, when did desire ever concern itself with casualties?

There’s a delicate second, quiet as if the oxygen in the bathroom has been volatilized into snow. And then Will closed his fist and just hurled it. There was no face, no name to the body being hit. A man in a red hat, a girl in a pink cardigan. Indifferent. All bones are susceptible to being broken if you put the right amount of weight behind your punches. Violence, when dispassionate, can be a sobering pleasure, one Will so very, very rarely indulged in. But in the few instants that took Hannibal to pin him against the wall, Will soared, up and up, released into the stratosphere, rendered weightless by chilling clarity.

The noise of blood being spat against porcelain was loud enough to make Will laugh, a feral snarl bottled too long not to have soured in the vine. Hannibal must have been sicker than Will estimated because he didn’t move to block the first blows. When he did, it was with the effortless grace of a man who understands violence is a mundane pursuit, and thus not worth the trouble of permanent damage. Even nude and out of his mind, Hannibal remained a surgeon and a gentleman, fighting by using gravity to his advantage and protecting his hands at all costs. It was all rather lovely, as most things related to Hannibal were. So as he flirted with unconsciousness, Will let his romantic side win a little and bemoaned not having indulged more often in that other treacherous pleasure: to witness Hannibal kill.

(Perhaps turning himself in a victim was the only way Will could get a seat at that particular show.)

Panting, Will waited to be pushed underwater. It was the next logical step: to permanently neutralize a threat. He could feel Hannibal’s breath on his mouth, the cloying stench of blood and sweat coming off him in doughy droves. It should have made him queasy, the sight of his naked husband, eyes bloodshot with fever and lips dripping gouts of blood.

It didn’t. Between Will’s legs, blood pumped harder.

(You can’t truly hurt a killer. All you can do is slow him down.)

Hannibal had him by the neck, arms restrained over his head. His grip was ironclad and painful, but his body looked nearly relaxed. Business as usual.
Somehow they had managed to stand up in the bathtub, so Will could see all the muscles under Hannibal’s bare skin gearing up for murder. Will still had his trousers on, his wedding shirt ripped down the middle and hanging off his shoulders. His mouth tasted of liquid aluminum, and Hannibal, with his dead inexpressive eyes, had a bruise flowering on his left cheekbone, a purple longitudinal shape, not unlike a calla-lily. Will thought of laughing, but air couldn’t pass through his throat. When he tried swallowing, Hannibal tightened his grip around Will’s esophagus, canting his head just so, as if curious to see if Will could surprise him by succeeding. Will smiled, showing teeth, because that much he could do. Then he lifted his right leg to stomp Hannibal’s foot, the one where he had dared to cut a nob of flesh off without consulting Will first. The water and the dimness warped Will’s perception, as did the rapidly decreasing influx of oxygen to his lungs. He failed, and with failure came the obscene realization that in his current compromised state Hannibal, the Cannibal was most likely going to break his neck.

Will thought of looking Hannibal in the eye and appeal to his better nature. A love plea like they do in the movies when an addict is out of control: “I love you, come back to me, remember the good times,” but really, where was the fun in that. You do not bring candy to the wild when you go hunting for wolves. You do not marry killers if you aren’t a bit of a crime scene yourself.

So instead of playing the wounded lover, Will gave him a lingering stare, head to (missing) toe. He tilted his jaw to the side where Hannibal’s forearm held him in place, rasping with a tiny smile, “Doing bad things to bad men makes me feel good.”

And then he wrestled a hand free, shoved it around Hannibal’s cock, and began stroking.

A grunt punched out. From both or either, it was hard to tell. Nothing changed in Hannibal’s demeanor, but Will knew him with an intimacy that required familiarization with secrecy, and with secrecy came disclosure. Hannibal’s tells flourished among the things he did not like admitting to himself. Though Hannibal’s grip remained rock-hard, he had gone weak in the knees. His exhales curled at the end, his cock heavier in Will’s hand. Hannibal made no move to stop him. His face resembled a curtained stage, animated only by bland curiosity, the way he experimented with the air supply allowed through Will’s windpipe. But, underwater, he rubbed their toes together.

If Will were a gambling man, he would have put money down that was another of Hannibal’s unconscious tells.

As he heard Hannibal struggling to breathe through his nose, Will forced a kiss to his mouth. Hard and with tongue, an horizontal swipe across lips and teeth. It was staggeringly hot inside his mouth, a luxuriant velveteen warmth that matched that of his foreskin.

Ripe, Will thought biting his bottom lip. Hannibal felt ripe for the picking.

Blood hit the back of Will’s throat, the briny aftertaste not unlike that of semen. He moved his tongue over Hannibal’s chin. The cinch on his neck finally loosened, but only as far as it allowed Hannibal to hold Will’s mouth under his, immobile and open, trapped between a hooked index and thumb. Hannibal kissed back as if he wanted to claw his way inside Will, with the same desperate intensity he had shredded through Will’s beloved wedding garments.

"He cried when he saw them,” Will recalled bittersweetly, and Hannibal’s fingernails dig into his cheekbones. He finally pressed his whole body against Will’s, and Will’s strokes slowed down to a crawl.

“Touch me,” Will said, but what he really meant was “Punish me.”

That became evident when Hannibal slid a hand under Will’s waistband, wrapping his fist around
him with such tenderness Will’s knees buckled. Killers like Hannibal don’t use kindness on their victims; they excise their lungs with them still breathing. Will should know; he had his heart removed in the same way, multiple times, often through his gut.

Shame found him before Hannibal whispered his name in a reverent baritone, but only sunk in after Hannibal pulled him close and put his arms around him.

“Will,” he repeated into Will’s matted hair, and he didn’t need to say anything else for Will to know it was over. Whatever had imploded between them had been diffused, as always, by the divine intervention of love.

Will felt himself slip to the bottom of the tub and, for the second time in his life, falling seemed the better option.

Hannibal, not one for unhappy endings not of his own making, hoisted him up by the shoulders and smiled, all winsome teeth and leonine pride.

Will gave in to the cold.

He shivered.
This is the longest chapter yet. I thought of breaking it down, but the truth is I want you to be trapped inside all that's happening here. No breaks, no shortcuts.

If I did this right, it should feel like a vortex: starts wide and presses in and in, until it becomes a sharp, single dot.

If not—well, have some smut with a heart!

For a long while, Will just stood by the bed, watching Hannibal sleep. He told himself to be considering trivialities, such as whether to get dressed and run out for a pack of smokes.

Half-truths help a man a great deal sometimes.

In the end, he laid down next to Hannibal, his back dangling off the mattress as he folded his knees against his chest. There. A negligible footprint, nearly invisible.

Sickness had made Hannibal pliable, a frightful kind of evacuation that spoke too much of trust for Will’s comfort. Care-taking was not his strong suit, though his family of strays may have suggested otherwise. To be caring one needed to be giving, and Will, even in his most optimistic moments, knew to be skeptical of his own reserves of love. He rarely did it, now that he came to think of it. Love, much like trust, did not come easily to him, nor did take root often, if at all.

He had grown up without much of it. His father said some people just don’t have what it takes. Presumably he was speaking about Will, but maybe, Will realized now, he was talking about himself. Will used to wonder if someone might have loved him if he had just stuck around long enough. If he had just stood still. But he didn’t. And now he had gone and eloped with a fugitive, by definition a restless engagement, though Will had begun to question Hannibal's volatility.

Molly was alive after all, even if Abigail wasn’t.

Glancing across the pillow at Hannibal—palms pressed under his flushed cheeks like a devil in prayer—Will smelled mint from the toothpaste and jasmine from the oil he had rubbed on Hannibal’s chapped lips. Underneath it all, the ashy drift of longing and maybe, tucked further down, the turpentine of sadistic amusement.

If his or Hannibal’s, it was anyone’s guess by now.

“Thank you,” Hannibal rumbled. His throat was giving him trouble but the scent of burnt sugar was gone. The fever had broken.

“You are welcome,” Will volleyed back, smiling, bitter, angry, reluctantly endeared. “My pleasure.”

“No it wasn’t.”

Will couldn’t muffle a short stab of laughter. “No, it really wasn’t.”
Slowly Hannibal’s fingers unfolded from under his pillow and stretched between them. They traced Will’s nose, his chin, his lips, carefully, as if mapping a forgotten landscape. Will closed his eyes and breathed in the smell of jasmine and salt.

“Will. My capricious Will.” The fingertips skimmed down his neck, over his bare shoulders, feather-light. “What would I do without you?”

Heat spread, communicating from Hannibal’s skin to Will’s. The room, stuffy with velveted darkness, shrunk into the space between them, a handful of cotton and humid air. It might have been sundown or it might have been daybreak. It was always four o’clock in the morning where Will’s lust was concerned.

Hannibal inched closer, a rustle of fabric and a blast of warmth piercing Will’s atmosphere. The scratch of three-day stubble brushed against his cheek. Will swallowed.

“We—we can’t.”

Breath fanned against his jaw, below his ear, a fleeting inhale and exhale. Controlled and yet right about to unravel.

“Of course we can,” Hannibal whispered, a plea and a challenge all rolled up in one. “I want you. I want you so desperately, Will.”

Will shook his head. His hand went straight to the waistband of his boxers, seeking for a gun he knew wouldn’t be there, hadn’t been there for half a decade. The impulse, however, outlived all of his life-choices.

“You are sick,” Will protested, eyes refusing to stay open. Hannibal held his head up by the jaw as if Will needed to be steadied, as if he could turn away from the kiss. The heat took him by surprise when Hannibal’s tongue slipped into his mouth. Like fingering an electric outlet, a shock of neon-blue. Hannibal pushed a thigh between his legs and Will pulled back, startled.

“Are you ashamed, dear Will?” Mirth wreathed his voice. Holy berries, yew seeds, poison in the shape of festivity, of window-dressing. “Of our little tussle in the bathtub?”

“You are sick,” Will insisted more forcefully, hands splayed against Hannibal’s chest, keeping him away.

Hannibal smiled, that vicious lipless trinket he used to taunt or goad people on.

“Well, now so are you, dear husband.” And his eyes, liquid with mischief, lit up as if they were filled with tears.

There was little Will could say to that. The fog in his head had already filtered out to his skin. He could feel it, his fever calling out to Hannibal’s like a flame dying to lick a tree.

Hannibal leered. There were bruises swelling under his eyes, a cut to his upper lip. A runny nose and a hoarse throat.

“You want me, Will,” Hannibal drawled.

And Will did.

Laughter on Hannibal seemed to only have two speeds: insidious enjoyment or self-indulgent surprise. Both equally dangerous, neither particularly pleasant. As if underscoring a passable point,
Hannibal ran a finger along Will’s hardening cock, and laughed—a silver-bell of a laugh, pealing in the seal of their bodies.

He laughed and Will bristled, crossing his arms. “Yeah, so what? I always want you.”

Which wasn’t a refusal, but a smokescreen. Accept what’s on the table and the devil may miss your willingness to take what lies under it.

“So let me,” Hannibal nuzzled Will’s Adam’s apple, amusement sticky in his voice. “It is our honeymoon, after all.”

Jasmine bloomed forward, syrupy-sweet and hot without a burn. A summer heat, nostalgic with beach sand shifting under bare feet. Will lost time. When he opened his eyes, Hannibal hovered over him, biceps gleaming with a hellish shimmer, the oil catching on his lips and thrusting hand.

Soon, if Will let him, that oil would be smeared inside him.

(Distantly Will considered if he had set this up. If he had rummaged for the jasmine oil among Hannibal’s sundries because he wanted to know how it felt on their skin, cooked in mutual desire.)

He inspected Hannibal’s gaze. Fireplug-red but present. The sick body held a man who wanted with so much fury no mortal ailment could long cloud the radiance of his desire. Will envied him that, then. The unwavering furnace of his convictions. It made him irresistible.

I wish you would consume me, Will thought, gazing up. Just quarter me up in morsels and cherry-pick the choice meats so, in your belly, I shall persist, perfect, the very rawest version of myself.

Out loud, he hissed through clenched teeth, “Yeah, okay. Yeah, you can fuck me.”

And Hannibal smiled, a rip on a nylon stocking, spreading slow and sensuous and destructive.

Will wondered if Hannibal may have heard it. Not the blunt words spoken, but the baroque ideas he would never, never, come Judgement Day or Easter Sunday, never voice into existence.

(You don’t go giving the devil an inch when you are uncertain of your own milage.)

“I missed you,” Hannibal murmured rough in his ear, and Will closed his eyes as Hannibal’s mouth closed around him.

Forget cold. Heat is a thing of beauty when shared between two moving bodies, Will thought as he bucked into Hannibal, into the core of him, damp and demanding. Sickness did nothing to curb his hunger, the unmistakable ease of a relaxed gag reflex. His hands, however, held Will’s hips down with too much force, a sort of miscalculated zeal. It hurt. It hurt not to be able to thrust, to keep eyes closed. It hurt to stay put and give himself away when himself was all he still had control over.

(Think of winter, son. Think of sterlings braving a blizzard, slopes covered in sleet and sugared with frost. Think of the child who had not yet fledged into a monster, the boy who had yet to fall in love. Think of him, frostbitten and starved, chaste and bloodthirsty. Preserved in Soviet ice. For your eyes only.)

“Look at me, Will.”

Hannibal’s voice echoed from above. It was cold, habitually domineering, but with that edge of ice once it begins to melt. Supple, on the brink of disintegrating completely.
“Will, please,” he intoned again, gentler this time. “Look at me when I make love to you.”

And there it was. Sterlings don’t survive in that kind of tropics.

Will shook his head again. Body heat bloomed from Hannibal, so luminous Will used it as echolocation, canting up towards its center of gravity, seeking friction.

“Oh for Christ’s sake!” Hands grabbed at Hannibal’s shoulders, impatiently trying and failing to pull him back down. “Will you just fuck me already?”

Hannibal sat back, the distance between their groins exaggerated by the chill in the room. Agitation traveled from Will’s heart to his cock, settling in his gut. The pit of longing banked with anger, always anger, voracious and unalloyed, a thing of aluminum and bronze.

(And blood. A bathtub of it. Enough blood to wash your hair in. Isn’t that what you really long for, sonny?)

In the back of his throat, Will tasted copper pennies.

Unexpectedly, a hand cupped his cheek, rubbing at the scar buried among overgrown beard. And then lips, fluttering against his lids, pressing a round weight on delicate skin, like coins of dead men’s eyes.

“Well, look at me,” Hannibal pleaded, and the lack of amusement made Will have to look, just take a peak to see what Hannibal’s face resembled when it sounded like a stripped screw.

It looked longer, dusted darker with finer wrinkles, but that was about it. Hannibal was still Hannibal, even when he sounded irrevocably sad.

“Don’t go, Will.” Hannibal’s fringe had fallen awkwardly in his eyes. It made him look younger, or unskilled, or perhaps just unsure, a tad too eager. The tendon around his left eye jumped. “Stay here.”

*With me* remained unspoken. As did the most urgent request, the one pouring out every pore since Will had laid eyes on him: *See me.*

Will blinked. A shiver ran down his spine. “Where else would I go?”

Hannibal’s back rippled as his cheek touched Will’s navel. “Into the past. Into all those improbable futures you so like to entertain.”

(And there you have it, son. He knows. He knows that you know. No safe dock in the harbor of your mind. He’ll find every thought, even if you hide them in your amygdala.

*Maybe we share that too now. Maybe that’s just fine.*)

“I always see you,” Will countered weakly.

“No you don’t,” Hannibal threw back, absolute. His black eyes burned holes through Will’s brain, all the way to visions of Lithuanian snow, of Goodwill briefcases shielding a blonde woman’s scuffed knees.

He should know better than to play hide-and-seek with the devil.

“You’re right,” Will traced the bruises around his cheekbones. “Sometimes I don’t want to.”
Hannibal lowered himself gingerly, cock slotting next to Will’s, a dipping twined pressure, and it hurt again, somewhere in the moonless side Will seldom allowed himself to visit.

“And now?”

Will sighed. He felt caught, and caged, and steadied. Hannibal did have such competent hands.

He pulled his knees up to his chest, “I want to.”

A well-oiled lover, Hannibal moved languorously once invited in. He fingered Will as if imparting a secret—with depth and detail.

A hand tipped Will's tailbone up. A kindness, a courtesy reminder that his compass polarized towards Hannibal, towards whatever direction his weathervane hands pointed to. Blotted eyes darted between Will’s lips, the scar on his forehead, the collar of bruises around his neck, a spy, a rover, a polygraph, endlessly scanning for secreted information.

Nestled inside him, Hannibal's fingers kept Will in place, his eyes keeping him silent while Will’s mind screamed.

Pleased with the prospect of pain, Hannibal’s lips instinctively curled up. But then his mouth dropped to Will’s kneecap, kissing the unremarkable juncture where femur meets fibula.

“I have been making love to you since we met,” he uttered in what could only be described as a neglected child’s most resentful voice. "Did you know?"

“I knew,” Will moaned and the kiss behind his knee turned into a bite.

"You should have killed me in that kitchen," Hannibal straddled him, a fist closing around his neck. "It would have been the kinder thing to do."

If in Minnesota, Baltimore, Maine, it seemed irrelevant now. What mattered was that Will couldn't unsee the orphan bleeding through a grown man’s arousal. It was terrible. It undid the very threads of Will’s favorite narrative: that a monster becomes a man because of love.

In fact, love was only the byproduct, a collateral means of consumption. Trauma made the monster a man. Without that chink in his armor, Hannibal would have grown up godly, hungry for death and dominion, no thought spared to suffering or love. Trauma, though, trauma taught a boy power but also taught him loss, so from then on, Hannibal couldn’t wield one without acknowledging the other. Love, a perverse check-and-balance, metastasizing as a consequence of meeting grief, of discovering one's wealth of resilience. And Will, a cut from the same damaged cloth, found himself at the crossroads of both. For Hannibal, he was the literal embodiment of both: a family lost and a family regained, a lover and an opponent, his keeper and his killer.

It was so terrible that Will made himself look. At the curve of Hannibal’s neck, the improbable gracefulness of his vertebrae, the tendons and veins tunneling under the scrolling skin, the tilt of his spine and the tip of his tongue tracing a triangle from Will’s hipbone to the base of his cock, tracking the large arteries on the inside of his thigh only to leave a cartography of contour lines painted in florescent spit. The shape of his fingers, slender and sinewy, sliding in and out of Will's body, unconsciously setting their breaths to a matching pace.

A performer to the bone, knowing himself observed Hannibal leaned his cheek against Will’s knee, lips ruby with effort, eyes drooping with tepid resignation.

He wasn’t smiling anymore.
(No safe harbor for him either, son. He lives in your body now. That much’s plain to see.)

Will drafted a grin that came out as a grimace.

(*When you make a body a home, how do you insure it against natural disasters?)*

Hannibal frowned. It was another thing of beauty, uncertainty on a cocky man.

“What’s the matter?” Hannibal twitched.

“It hurts,” Will replied, not quite a lie, but not exact enough to be a complete truth. Because it did hurt: to want someone so completely that the unconquerable fact of his mortality frightens you half to death and turns you on twice as hard—*that* hurts.

Hannibal hesitated before pulling his fingers out. He held them with his other hand, by the wrist, as if they were a scalpel needing to be sterilized or replaced.

Will peeked at him from the headboard.

“What do you care if it hurts?”

It must have come out as a slight, because Hannibal looked at his oil-coated fingers and frowned.

“No one has touched me in so long. It is as if there’s only ever been you, Will.”

The frown lines spread to Hannibal’s vermillion mouth, downturnining his lips into a displeased moue. When Will pulled him down, he offered no resistance. Their bodies still fit together in that apple-green way Will always correlated with a sort of serendipitous ease. Their angles just belonged together.

Will held him under the white duvet, a hand curled around his neck, their fevers melding. He wondered if the smell drove Hannibal crazy, the proteic butteriness of their bodies fighting the same infection at different rates. The wheezy thrum of Hannibal’s breath suggested that he was indifferent, oblivious even, to the smell. Hannibal’s toes were surprisingly cold, but so was his nose, moist and frigid like a cat’s. Will kissed it, kissed the skin marbled with abrasions and tiny contusions, the ones sickness brought and the ones he wrought with his fists with all the misplaced anger of a man shortchanged of self-control.

Hannibal tasted different too, now that the fever had broken. Slightly smokier, blood-forward, like cured meat. Will licked the ridge of his jaw, and Hannibal sighed, protracted and fragile, as if releasing an old hurt. No, a contraband hurt—something someone passed on to him once, a very long time ago, before he could truly consent to carrying it. Will pressed closer, drawn in by the scent. He wanted it, whatever this painful memory was, he wanted to chew it directly from Hannibal’s neocortex.

It dawned on Will then, nose stuck to Hannibal’s throat, that they had never done this: lay together, teasing the seams out of each other, lazily, eyes and hands deliberately placed and watched. Like playing chicken with the devil, Will thought as he reached between Hannibal’s legs.

“Come here,” he stroked.

Hannibal looked down at Will’s hand, his hips begrudgingly following the see-saw motion. He wetted his lips, blood seeping through the dry cracks.

“If I do, I won’t be able to stop.”
Will smiled under his lashes.

“Promises, promises.”

It would never manage to seem human, the brutal fluidity of Hannibal’s body. He had Will on his back and pinned to the mattress with one invisible motion. In many ways, murder must have always been an intended feature of his body, family tragedy or not.

Will tried to catch his breath before Hannibal pushed in, but couldn’t, couldn’t find his footing nor catch his eye. Their bodies collapsed together so seamlessly that in mere seconds Will couldn’t tell with any degree of certainty where he began and Hannibal ended. Will felt him though, immediately—spreading like smoke tags, unctuous and firm, stretching into a structure inside his body, like fingers on a latex glove, pushing and pushing until an exoskeleton emerged from within, tenting laxness into a full-fleshed design. A nave or a transept nestling an altar, the soft underbelly where orgasms and tears were churned, there, Hannibal treaded there, hard, viciously hard, until the pavement withstanding Will’s bones quaked and burned and dilated with a honey-colored warmth.

“Christ, you feel good,” Will punched out, arching up, and Hannibal smiled, a shy bird-boned smirk Will had no name for.

“You sound surprised,” he said, not quite meeting Will’s eye.

Will grabbed the meat of Hannibal’s thigh, yanking him forward.

“Spent most my life in my head. Easy to forget how good a body can feel.”

Hannibal drew back. He looked so ethereal, the ever-spreading white of his hair doing little to warm the sable of his eyes, that Will momentarily forgot the being scrutinizing him was a man, a man who was inside him. Something flickered under the surface, and Will felt it ripple all the way through Hannibal’s cock and down to his own toes.

“You had a wife once,” Hannibal remarked, and just like that, he was a man again.

Will gripped his neck and kissed him, ruthlessly, elbows digging between scrunched shoulders, ankles clamped hard around his tailbone.

“She wasn’t you,” he said, and for once Hannibal did the unthinkable, and looked away first.

Shaking, he huddled over Will’s chest, concentrated on rocking forward, on keeping Will’s legs up and apart, braked around his waist. Every old fracture hissed anew, but Will muted them in favor of hearing Hannibal moan against the crook of his neck. Loud, always so damn loud, Will thought, before husking in his ear, “Louder.”

Hannibal’s motion stuttered, and Will understood then that loudness was a privilege of the trusting, of the beast who peels its human skin at the door and fears not to be hunted for it.

“It is just us here now,” he brushed Hannibal’s sweaty bangs off his face. “Just us, wanton gods.”

The flush in Hannibal’s cheeks deepened. He let his eyes flutter shut and his head fall back, an undeniable display of surrender. Will kept looking, his own voice startling once it began to mount Hannibal’s. They breathed through their mouths, the air saturated with carbon dioxide and floral slickness, the skin of their inner thighs starting to chafe. There was spit on Will’s jaw, pooling where Hannibal muffled his cries. Will turned slightly so they could be cheek to cheek when Hannibal came.
My husband, Will thought, clinically, one step removed, the man in and above me, shuddering, blushing, a husband, mine, something I was once to someone else but never imagined having of my own. Or being given for keeps. And yet. There is a killer in my bed and I promised him my life.

(But then again, so did he.)

The raw upswing of kinetic energy must have surprised Hannibal, the force and speed of it, because his body heaved only once before it deflated heavily on top of Will.

Index finger erect, Will traced the curve of his spine. What an impossible lovely line, simultaneously strong and breakable. There was so much to him that Will didn’t know. So many implicit memories and concealed secrets, so many corpses, so many collisions Will would only know about if Hannibal told him.

Suddenly, a lifetime seemed too short. He should have loved him as a boy.

Will tightened the grip around his ribcage, from close to crushing. Hannibal coughed in response. It must hurt, congested lungs and all, Will considered, without letting go.

Muffled and winded, Hannibal asked, “Will you come inside me?”

And Will laughed, his legs releasing back to the mattress. “Do you want me to?”

“Very much so.”

The tang in Hannibal’s voice could have been earnest sheepishness or a manufactured approximation of garden variety embarrassment. Will thought he’d go to his grave unable to tell the difference.

But then Hannibal pushed up on all-fours, legs symmetrically spread apart to accommodate the exact girth of Will’s hips, and Will wondered if that was his answer.

The sight, by all means erotic, filled Will with dread. Flashbacks to a soggy train compartment grabbed him by the throat and made it impossible to breathe.

Guilt surfed high on his gut, surfacing higher on his cheeks.

Gently, he nudged Hannibal’s shoulders, forcing him to face him. “Not like this.”

Hannibal remained immobile, pegging him with a stare that spoke of bothersome peculiarities of the less intelligent. Will could see right through him. Perhaps that was the larger point.

Will sighed deeply, “I want to see you. You know that.”

Hannibal opened his mouth, but seeming to think better of it, silently rolled onto his back. His eyes stayed on Will, a little foglight flickering on.

Will touched himself slowly.

“What?,” Will kept his eyes down, on his gliding hand. “Sex?”

“That your desire for me is so intimately enmeshed with anger.”
“No,” Will sneered, rising to his knees. Hannibal tracked his every movement, eyes darkening in slow motion. “Do you really want to psychoanalyze me right now?”

Uninterested in an answer, Will crawled up his body. Even as he hooked his heel over Will’s shoulder, Hannibal mused, “Something is troubling you, though.”

Arousal derailed Will’s train of thought. He scrunched his eyes and pressed in. An inch of give would send him off, so Will breathed through the urge to tear at it, at Hannibal, to dash through the spark their bodies ferried when brought together. It held its own special DNA, that spark did, and once one of them was gone it would never be recreated again.

And that, the inevitable simplicity of that thought, that hurt too.

Their noses touched. At the heart of Hannibal’s irises, drops of rusty red swarmed like smudges of dry blood. Will had never noticed them before.

He ran a thumb over Hannibal’s mouth, forcing the scabs to bleed.

“You’re so goddamn beautiful,” he whispered, awe and hurt seeping in. “We’re so beautiful together.”

Hannibal’s sacrum curved up in that instant, perhaps purposefully, likely on instinct, and all was over too soon.

Will panted against his cheek, not unlike Hannibal had instants before, hiding in plain sight. A purloined letter of a confession he was, a veritable open book.

A kiss dropped to his skull, right at the most vulnerable seam of his occipital bone. Will could not remember the last time sex felt so awkwardly mundane, yet so staggeringly unsettling. It felt as if he had found a body bricked inside his walls. It should be frightening. By all accounts, it should be.

But as Will tucked his toe where Hannibal’s was missing, it wasn’t frightening at all. On the contrary, it was eerily peaceful.

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“I didn’t know you could sing,” Hannibal hummed after a long while. Colloquially, but with a twinkle of undisguised amusement.

Will turned in his arms, sluggish with sleep.

“You were very sick.”

Hannibal didn't let it go. “Interesting choice, 'The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came’.”

“My father used to sing that to me,” Will huffed at the greying ceiling. "As a kid.”

“I imagined he did. Still,” Hannibal insisted, insidiously stroking Will’s hair. “You didn’t have to sing it.”

"Yeah. Yeah, I did.”

We’re a family now, Will thought but did not say aloud. Confessions, no matter what type, should be given, not coerced.
“Just like that? A signature on a piece of paper and it’s lovemaking and choir-singing?”

It grated, but then again Hannibal wanted it to grate.

Will adjusted his grip on Hannibal’s back, ran his fingers over the burn etched there. The chewed-up texture never failed to fill him with mawing regret. As if it were his own skin, mauled and scarred beyond repair. He would do anything to make it go away.

No. He would do everything to put it there himself.

“It was always like that,” Will rejoined at last.

“No it wasn’t.”

“Just because I couldn’t show it doesn’t mean I didn’t feel it.”

“Feel what, Will?”

“Commitment. Care. Want.”

“But it’s different now, isn’t it?”

Hannibal’s tone changed when he let his guard down. It was nothing Will could describe objectively. It was just there, a thump, like a ballerina shoe hitting the theatre floor.

Will could hear it, that minuscule summoning, running a charming interference. So he admitted, “Yeah. It’s different now.”

Hannibal’s chin stirred against his forehead. A mere jerk to the right, but enough for Will to know that he was turning the words in his mind.

“Thank you,” Will hastened to offer, “for the apartment.” Conciliatory in a roundabout way.

Hannibal pulled away to gauge him, and it felt automatically fraught, that loss. The absence of head-to-toe contact, but also something else. Something harried.

“Everyone deserves to have a home, Will.”

(You gave up everything to follow him, son. There’s no home, no life, for you go back to.

If this house burns down, you burn down with it.)

Will swung his feet to the floor. Hannibal kept both hands on his shoulders, breath solid against his neck. Kind. Like restraints are kind, like spare tires are kind. Useful things only after disaster has made itself known.

“But that was your home,” Will told his cupped hands.

“No, Will. It was a house I owned and once lived in,” Hannibal remonstrated reasonably. “It became your home, though.”

“How could you tell?”

“You smeared the walls with your blood, Will. We tend to shed blood for the things we love.”

Will looked away, around. Glassy light ghosted around the maroon curtains. Time was speeding up
again, nibbling at their heels.  

*(So be it.)*

“Will.”

Will scrubbed a hand down his face. The unruly thatch of beard felt stiff with spit and come. He needed a shave. He couldn’t get a shave.

“I’m listening.”

“Will, you can’t get ahead of this,” Hannibal said, solemn and considerate. “Believe me, I have tried.”

Bird’s-eye-view vistas of Florence, aquatint with golden domes, flared behind Will’s eyelids. Yes, Hannibal would know. After all, he did try to escape *(him? them? this?)*. Once upon a time.

And yet. He never so much as seemed out of place, out of breath. A bullet, a fall, a mutinous fever, a handful of broken noses and one chopped toe, threadbare clothes and a litany of drugstore dye-jobs and yet. And yet, nothing amiss, nothing lost. Hannibal stood the test of time. Like willow trees: swaying, never really bowing down.

It rankled something in Will, that did. It always did, but now. Now more. Now that he teetered on the tip of that peculiar precipice, the only one he couldn’t walk back if he were to take the plunge. Marriage is easy compared with murder. You wouldn’t think so, but there you have it. You can undo marriage. Murder, though, is forever.

Will let his hands fall to his knees. “So what do we do?”

Hannibal sprinkled kisses on his hair, a brief rush of lips like brushfire.

“We seize every day to the fullest,” he replied. Reasonable, always so damn reasonable.

“Until we are caught?,” Will barked but with no heat. Softer, “Until we die?”

“No mortal thing lives forever, Will.”

Will pivoted, abruptly, unwittingly, nearly smacking Hannibal on the nose.

“Oh fuck you and your aphorisms, Dr. Lecter! I am scared, okay? I’ve been playing games with myself for too long. I can feel the tethers fraying.” Will shook his head, panting. It was dark there, in the apron of his mind, ghosts lurking on the forested fringes. And then it was light. Searing, penny-dropped-in-a-slot-machine bright.

“I need your help,” Will rushed out. “For us to have a future, I need you to help me.”

Hannibal leaned away, resting back on his heels. Curiosity, but something else, intense and soundless, loomed up to the surface. He craned his neck to the side, expectantly, politely, but all his facial angles dipped into a disturbing death mask.

Will caught his eye and hang on.

“You must prevent me from killing.”

Hannibal blinked. Once and twice, before his body visibly recoiled.
“I beg your pardon?,” he intoned after a pause, the boarding school stiffness of a wrongly accused aristocrat.

Will shifted closer, his hands spreading between their thighs. They looked limp next to Hannibal’s, now neatly laced on his naked lap.

“If I start killing I will never be able to stop. Don’t see? The FBI, some local police, Jack—,” Will counted the creases on his knuckles. Once words had shaped around haunting thoughts he couldn’t stop talking. “—they will catch on to me. And fast. I am not methodical like you, Hannibal. I won’t kill because I feel a disposition. I’ll kill because I can’t help it.”

For once Hannibal’s immobility did not seem particularly controlled or purposeful. He looked shell-shocked, struck still by force of circumstance, not choice.

“Please,” Will pleaded, hands pressing on the mattress. His throat closed, and exhaustion rained down, a quiet, wet trickle. “Please, Hannibal. I want to grow old with you.”

Hannibal sat like a statue, muscles so stiff breathing became invisible. Will widened his eyes and plumped his parted lips. Suddenly it became imperative to have Hannibal comply, to have him capitulate into a thankless position, have him exchange his hard-won freedom for Will’s homely safety, his violent delights for Will’s dormant violence. Will wondered if he could manage to squeeze a tear or two out, just enough to give his eyes a sheen of pathetic helplessness.

Hannibal regarded him coolly, measuredly. Betraying nothing, he rejoined, “You will.”

Will scoffed, theatrically dropping his head to his chest. “No, I won’t. I’ll be dead or locked away in less than a year if you won’t stand in my way.”

Will reached out, tentatively grazing Hannibal’s bare knee. He kept his eyes down, shoulders slumped in defeat, and wondered if Hannibal knew, if through the haze of surprise he could sense the teeth of the trap laid in wait before him.

(Love, sometimes the finest ambush for monster or man.)

Hannibal did not stir, but lightning finally whiplashed through him, sharp and shattering. He seemed twice as tall and broad and dangerous when he leveled Will’s gaze and growled, all consonants gone hard and merciless, “What you are asking for is a cruelty, Will. A muzzle by proxy.”

Not so blind with love, it seemed. Will felt a jolt of pride, thunderous and borrowed, clap in his groin.

“I’m asking you to keep me alive!”, he hurled back, feeling hollow and frenzied, as if both speeds could coexist at the same time. “To keep me with you until old age comes for us both. You promised me it was not too late! That we had time! Prove it.”

Every pilot light in Hannibal’s body, every emotion in his mind, shut and honed down with savage precision to that lucid wrath, an indignation so innate it sealed him into an impenetrable obelisk. Platinum and inhuman, and so so far away from Will’s reach.

Not that it mattered anymore. What had begun as a lark, had quickly cartwheeled into an ultimatum. Will couldn’t backdown now, even if he wanted. And he wasn’t sure that he did.

“I refuse to be your jailer, Will.” Hannibal spaced his words with crushing coldness, surface calm but steadily growing menacing. “It is insulting to both of us.”
And at that, he startled up, mechanical and stilted like a wound-up toy.

Will followed, incapable of standing still. Somewhere along the way, power had glitched into pleasure. He wondered again if forcing a sob or a whine was really out of the question.

“Be my custodian then,” he insisted, pacing around the circles Hannibal drew by the front door. “Love me enough to keep me safe.”

Hannibal stopped, half turned, a broad-shouldered shadow slanted against the stone buttress.

“I would never let harm come to you, Will,” he vowed, but there was no kindness left in his words, no warmth. Empty, they sounded, like rehearsed lines.

An itch started on Will’s nape.

“As much as you like to believe it, you are not God, Hannibal!” Will’s voice climbed. “You can’t anoint me with immortality, nor watch my every step. If I get caught or killed, I’m gonna be gone for good!”

It took Will a moment to realize Hannibal’s movements now had an order, a direction. He was going around the room collecting discarded clothes, bending down, riffling through the satchel by the bed. He was putting shoes on, pocketing a wallet, car keys, winding a checkered scarf around his neck, his hair mussed, his chest locked down, buttoned all the way up, and Will almost tripped on the shaggy rug when Hannibal stood before him, face averted towards the front door, a gentleman in herringbone tweed.

“He’s covered in semen,” Will thought, mouth stupidly agape, fists opening and closing by his side like broken jaws-of-life. “He just put his wedding suit on top of our mess.”

(And isn’t that an apt metaphor for how you two have gone about this, son? Covering the minefields with fool’s gold?)

Oh shut the hell up, will you? You know nothing about loving with eyes wide open!

The sudden whoop of cold air startled Will back to the room, to Hannibal slipping thick gloves on, one foot already out of the door.

“Where are you going?”, Will stammered, dazed. A plot twist, a new development. There were always some of those with Hannibal. The man was full of surprises. The monster, not so much.

“Out,” Hannibal declared, fingers flexing elegantly inside tawny leather.

“Out?,” Will growled, prowling closer. “In this weather? After that fever? Are you fucking kidding me?”

Hannibal sniffed, pointedly inspecting his cuffs.

“I believe the appropriate idiom is ‘needing to get some air.’ But perhaps you relate better to ‘going out for a pack of smokes.’” His eyes slid sideways, a little curl of malice twisting his well-used mouth. “A more familiar idiom, no dear Gabriel?”

Worn tethers do cave in at the lightest pressure. Will felt it with perfect clarity, the taut push followed by the lax release of his patience snapping.

“You know what? Fuck off.”
Hannibal spun, a graceful semicircle, and spat “I intent to,” only a second before the door slammed shut with a spiteful thunk.

Will sunk down on the foot of the bed, feeling as if his strings had been cut off.

A car revved up on the rocky landing, and then it was gone, a beaming of headlights blending with the sallow morning sun.

“That went well,” Will said out loud, and got up to make some tea.

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It had taken exactly three hours and forty seven minutes for Hannibal to swan through the front door. From the makeshift kitchen, Will saw him stride in, throw a plastic bag on the bed, and begin unwinding the red scarf with more force than strictly necessary. His hair was damp but his leather brogues were clean of mud. Trust a gentleman to walk spotless through mountain rain.

The contents jostled out of the bag, so Will stepped in to give them a proper once-over.

Hand sanitizer, cigarettes, a pack of condoms.

(Damn.)

“That went well,” Will said again, aloud again, to Hannibal this time.

Without sparing him a glance, Hannibal walked away.

Sometimes silence is just silence. Sometime silence is all that two people can do to keep themselves from toppling into the abyss. It was neither of those times.

Will wrapped his hands around the cold mug, and followed Hannibal back into the kitchen. He was pulling fresh produce from another bag, layering herbs on the bench, his hands elegant with efficiency. No traces of anger, no petulant indignation. All replaced by unfathomable concentration.

Will hovered by his side, close enough to bump his elbow. He could have blamed the slightness of the counter, little more than a metal bench pushed against a wall, but lies seemed beneath them now. So Will lingered, sipping his dull tea and watching Hannibal chop broccoli and carrots and onions until, sighing heavily, he presented Will with a cutting knife, proffered flat and horizontal, blade pointing towards Will’s heart. If Will so much as leaned in, it would poke his chest.

So Will did, before taking it in his open hand, he stared at Hannibal and let the blade dig through the wool of his cable-knit sweater. For a moment, he leaned hard enough to puncture, far enough to rest his forehead on Hannibal’s herringbone-clad shoulder.

The silence shifted then, from impersonal to alive with creature sounds, and Will waited for Hannibal to move, to lay a hand on him, to stab or kiss him, any bodily action that would disturb the silence again, color it some more.

When Hannibal did, it was to step aside and offer the food its full attention. Will straightened and started mincing garlic and chives. His technique was poor but the smells were inviting, the warmth of Hannibal’s body blending with that of the hot plate.

Will couldn’t remember the last time they had stood side by side and cooked together. Palermo, maybe? Baltimore, most likely.
With the crackling of oil, the silence between them gentled and Will found himself whistling quietly. The afternoon was pellucid with fog and rain, and Will felt visited by an unfamiliar sense of contentment, of belonging. It did not abate when Hannibal placed the raw heart between them, wet and glistering under the halogen lamp. Hannibal had done a splendid job at severing it from its owner. It looked lean and strong, the untrimmed fat creamy-white.

“Should we braise it?” Will asked, and felt Hannibal turn to give him a long look, a finger touching his lips as if to better appraise his thoughts.

“We should eat it whole,” Hannibal answered, pivoting to retrieve twine from the shopping bag.

Will nodded, tossing the onions and garlic, pouring the white wine into the mix. He had done a similar dish before, for Molly and Wally. Molly had only smiled with her lips, and Wally had picked the rosemary off the roasted pig’s heart, disapproval brazenly on display.

There was much Will could have said: about the harvested human heart they were about to consume, about the breaking of a promise made on their wedding day. It seemed pointless, though. In the end, monsters and men are built to return to what they know once they feel threatened. They will seek solace where solace was once found. Will did not need words to recognize that Hannibal was hurting, in his own surprisingly discreet and internalized way was hurting with the possibility, not of Will’s murder chastity, but of his repulsion. That he might start picking the rosemary off Hannibal’s heart.

The ultimate checkmate, the most inspired and cruelest too: marry the monster only to reveal that he must stay a man if he wants to be loved.

Will was not that much of a virtuoso. In many ways, he was a simple man. He was in love with another man who found solace in committing murder. To deprive Hannibal of solace would be like placing a butterfly in a shoebox with no air holes. A slow withering away.

While Hannibal tended to the meat, Will set up the wobbly Formica table with paper plates and napkins. He swallowed two aspirins and sat down, looking out of the window at the smoky mountains.

Hannibal didn’t meet his gaze when he brought the cast-iron pan to the table, nor when he plated their food, red tomatoes twisted into see-through roses. As they cut into the rare meat, the silence thickened with the kind of vibrant tension Will remembered from their first meals together after falling. The cramped cabin in Pennsylvania, musty wood-crates in the barn, the glass house with its sprawling industrial kitchen. So many memories of so many meals, and yet it was the first time Will sat down with Hannibal and ate the meat he gathered, knowingly, without picking the rosemary off its bones.

The wordlessly acknowledged realization quickened the air between them. No point in denying it. Hannibal was right: neither of them could get ahead of this, both of them powerless to one another.

Halfway through, Will put his utensils down. He waited for Hannibal to glimpse up from his plate.

“Excellent as always,” he grinned, patting his stomach. Though Hannibal did not smile in return, his eyes softened, their natural inexpressiveness giving way to a yawning yellowing.

Will held his gaze. Blood splattered on the right cheek, peppered on patchy grey beard. A messier kill, impulsive, not one of his most accomplished outings. A continuous sheen around his hairline and nostrils, remnants of fever that fed on instability, on bad sleep and poor nutrition, on reckless physical activities like going hunting someone in the sopping rain.
Hannibal caught him staring, fork and knife suspended midair. Will sighed and pulled the aspirin bottle from his pocket, shook it, placed it on the table between them. He tapped the cap, and like an animal, Hannibal’s eyes darted at the sound. He licked his lips and returned to the food, head bowed, cheeks hallowed, determined, Will could see now, to his performance of debonair detachment.

“I love you,” Will said, picking a piece of meat with his fingers and plopping it in his mouth. “I’m just tired of managing urges. I swing between wanting to tear people apart and want to tear into you. Both are so powerful the hinges of my mind are growing weak with holding them back. I’m cracking up, Hannibal.”

Hannibal didn’t look up from his plate, knife slicing through beautifully tender meat.

“Violence is innate to you, Will.” He chewed thoroughly before adding, “You shouldn’t concern yourself with holding back.”

Will slouched down on the plastic chair, feet knocking into Hannibal’s under the table. He still had his brogues on. As if he expected to be asked to leave at any moment. Hannibal relished in walking barefoot, Will knew, suspected to be one of the few primeval pleasures he hadn’t managed to tame into well-groomed gentlemanliness.

Armor, he was wearing armor, Will realized with a start. Somewhere along the way, their wedding garments had been tasked to ward off the very thing they were made to uphold.

“This isn’t about you, Hannibal. I am not refusing you or defying you. I am not denying myself. I know who I am thanks to you, though not because of you. I know I am a killer. For godsakes I once beat a man to death just because he touched you. I know what I’m capable of. That’s not the point.”

“What’s the point then?”

“I don’t want to be a serial killer,” Will breathed out, honest, clear-minded, as tired and certain as a newlywed can be. “Even if I am designed to be one, I don’t want to be enslaved by a preordained set of urges. How would that be any different from following enforced tenets on social acceptability? From marrying a nice woman and have a nice house with some nice kids in it? I want to choose for myself for a change. I want a life that doesn’t revolve around victim profiling and body dumps and escape routes and sleepless nights behind the wheel. I want a lifetime with you, not a life-sentence of us looking over our shoulder because I went off the deep end. I am so in love with you, you must know that, right?” Will’s head shook with a burst of humorless laughter. He looked away, to the creases on his washed out jeans. “So much. I want to know everything about you. It’s—unsettling, really. It never stops. The yearning. I couldn’t bear to have it lost, muddled by fear and resentment. Not again. Please.”

Silence returned, rough with secrets this time. Will tapped on the aspiring bottle once more. “As for you, you are not immortal. I’ve seen your body give out. I never want to see that again.”

Hannibal nodded thoughtfully. His fingers twitched around the knife’s handle. “But what if I want you to?”

Without warning, Will jerked forward, elbows landing with a loud thud, rattling Hannibal’s plate.

“Listen, I’ll kill when I must, eat what you hunt, and make love to you until we’re both raw. But if I start killing, I’m going to lose myself. I’ll be rabid with want. You’ll lose me one way or another.”
The words zapped out of him, leaving him breathless. He panted into the strained silence, into Hannibal’s averted eyes, his back impeccably straight, his neck bent towards a single untouched rosette. Will was so close he could smell the lingering infection on him, the juice of the herby roux, the sweat of another man drying on his skin. If Will didn’t know better he would say there was an air of contrition, a whiff of confused regret haloing Hannibal’s demeanor.

But Will did know him better, better than he knew death and that’s saying a lot. Will knew the differences between them were as bottomless as they were susceptible to love. That he might come to find release, power, even righteous euphoria in his killings, but never solace. Respite did not live in the cries of dying men, not for Will Graham. There was no glory, no quietening in wilding. He loved a man who loved death, though, and suffering and beauty, not in that order but in that medley. And that would never change. Notions of ethics and boundaries would. Promises would break, and people would die, but there was no narrative in which Will wouldn’t eat a heart to keep Hannibal. Even if that heart was his own.

He must have lost time again because his eyes felt teasy. The skin between his fingers burned where they gripped the aspirin bottle. Hannibal reached out, his thumb brushing against Will’s. If he so much as turned his pad they’d be pressing against each other, so Will did, he pressed his thumb against Hannibal’s, fingerprint to fingerprint, imagining each whorl aligning, every line and sulcus meeting its match and falling in the arms of its mirror image, a perfect slot of life and love and time and trauma, until flesh held no more dominion because their stories would be stored, not in cells, but in the stars.

The silence was suddenly so staticky Will could hear Hannibal swallow, tasting the words before having them spoken.

“Are you asking me if I value the bloodsport of marriage over that of murder, Will?”

Will held his breath. He peered at Hannibal from under his lashes.

“Do you?”

Hannibal folded and unfolded his legs. He crossed the plastic utensils over his plate and took Will’s thumb in his palm, squeezing once before letting go.

“Eat your heart, Will.”
**Chapter Summary**

If you are still here, know that your comments and your presence are such a gift.

This one is about family. And befriending darkness.

Also this hymn keeps getting referenced so, as soundtrack, have the most baroque version to date: at a Gucci (!) fashion show of all places. I believe Hannibal would be proud.

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sky is a swatch of cornflower blue, smudged with firewood and fog. Down in the valley, little clusters of light, where people have their Christmas trees propped against the window.

Had it only been a year ago since he crafted Wally a lure and slept on an empty bathtub?

He pulls on his cigarette, the chill of twilight finding him deep in the bone. What a difference a few months can make. If he had died on that cliff, if he had stayed home and locked the barn door behind him, he would not have known the particular fragrance of the French mountains, the dampness of winter mulching their vineyards.

But he did. And that, as they say, was that.

“Should I begin dinner? I gather by the sheer amount of hours you’ve spent loitering outside that we are not leaving tonight.”

Hannibal materializes by his side, black tailored trousers and voluminous wool sweater, hunter green and turtlenecked. On the cement landing, his feet peek out, pale and bare.

Will tilts his head accusatorially, “You’re going to catch your death.”

And he doesn’t need to look to know Hannibal’s eyes are on him, steadfast and intent, alight with sad mischief.

“I believe I already did.”

Against his better judgment, Will smiles, shaking his head.

It’s the kind of reaction that belongs to another time, another life. One where inside a briar-covered cottage, Abigail would be spindling cotton and asking to be tutored in French.

Will blows smoke out slowly, up and over his left shoulder, away from Hannibal’s stuffed nose. The night falls unmerciful, inky blots of darkness swallowing up the houses nestled on the hillside.

It’s too late for any dreams where Abigail is anything but a corpse flayed on a kitchen floor.

“You aren’t concerned about Jack,” Will points out, not a question but a long delayed admission.
“Why aren’t you?”

Hannibal, tall and groomed to an inch of his life, slips his hands in his pockets and says, “Jack fathered a child a month ago. He named her Bella,” like if it was nothing. Like if it was old news.

Will hums. Cigarette smoke mixes with that of distant chimneys, charcoaling the air.

“You knew. You knew he wouldn’t jeopardize his new family to come after us.”

Hannibal cocks his head, as if considering the point thoroughly.

“I was curious,” he settles on, and Will believes him.

“Do you want children, Hannibal?”

“Once,” he drawls, almost wistfully. “I imagined I’d enjoy a legacy.”

“And now?”

“Now I have you, Will,” he declares, with amusement again, brighter and softer this time, tinged with affection. That big bonfire that Hannibal determined never to stop banking. “Are you craving for descendants, Will? To hear your genes pitter-patting on wooden floors?”

It still smarts how easily they can read each other. Like open books. Like well-worn fairytales.

“What if I were?” Will challenges, refusing to face him. “Would you kill them too, these imaginary children, if I came to care more for them than for you?”

The silence bristles between them, the night sky layered heavy with navy blue. No stars. No forecast for rain. No gifts and no carols. They are fading way from the world as they distance themselves from honoring Christian calendar traditions.

“Possibly,” Hannibal relents. He pivots away from Will, back into the sealed landscape. Silence returns for a full minute before he adds, “Most likely.”

Will believes him—again. More than that, he feels a sense of lucid appreciation for Hannibal’s candor. He is what he is. Underneath the baroque language and operatic suits, there’s a man with a great appetite for pain.

Sometimes you fall in love with the mask. Sometimes it’s the quiet under the spectacle that seduces you. Will had fallen in love with Hannibal’s silence long before he came to value the trappings behind his veneers.

“What if I were the one to grow attached to someone else?,” Hannibal proposes suddenly. “Someone younger, perhaps. Filled with potential. A protégé, let’s say.” Hands casually perched in his pockets as if the idea had just been pulled from the faraway distance of a half-formed lark. “Would you do away with them too, Will?”

Will careens languorously onto the door jam, legs stretching out in front of him, arms heavy with end-of-the-day fatigue.

“Oh yeah. I might do away with you both, Doctor.” Hannibal studies him with rapt attention now, eyes glossing over, tongue darting out to wet his lips. Will takes a full drag before purring under half-lidded eyes, “While I’m at it.”

Hannibal strides forward. The heat of his body is immediate and demanding. It takes Will all he
has not to thrust into it, headily, like a wild child seeing fire for the first time.

A hairbreadth away from brushing their lips together, Hannibal croons, “Slip away, never to be found…”

Will closes his eyes, tilts his chin up, lets the peppery smell of Hannibal wash over him. His eyes are full of midnight, a cat waiting for prey to move. “Hmm hmm.”

Hannibal hovers for a second, his spine and shoulders bowed towards Will’s mouth, his feet planted solid on the ground. Will wrestles down the desire to blow smoke on his smug, bruised face.

“Like mother, like son,” Hannibal murmurs at last, and just like that, the spell is broken.

Will snorts uglily, pulling himself ramrod straight. He turns his face away.

“How was your mother, Hannibal?”

Shoulders squaring, Hannibal straightens up as well.

“I believe it’s the third time you ask me that, Will,” he sniffs, taking a few steps back. “Repetition is monotonous.”

“So is psychoanalysis. And yet—,” Will points abstractly at the void between them “—here we are.”

His cigarette will dwindle too fast if he keeps sucking on it, but Will needs time. He is not sure for what exactly. Regrouping, perhaps. Or to be mindful that a monster is also a man, and every man has a history that hurts.

So he stalls, mumbling around the filter, “You thought I was her when you were sick. Your mother, I mean.”

Hannibal hums again, nodding distractedly, but his shoulders hike further up. (Like a book, I say.)

“My mother loved flowers. Full heads of color all over the house,” Hannibal gestures with both hands, fanning over the whole dark hill as if it were a sprawling garden. “Freshly cut and always on demand.”

Will can see it. A motley collection of baby pinks and greens and lilacs, with a smudge of yellow reflecting the sunlight. It smells oppressively sweet, like an expensive perfume store, saturated with perfection.

“Did she have a green thumb?,” he probes lightly, seeking a way-out.

“Oh no,” Hannibal replies with a hint of laughter, but bitter, soured right at the tips. “I do not believe my mother touched a speck of dirt until the day she died. No. She just enjoyed being surrounded by beautiful living things.”

“That didn’t include you?”

Stiletto-thin vases stuffed with white tulips and blue hydrangeas, armfuls of them, on shelves and tables and nightstands. The image mushrooms in Will’s mind, a fleeting snapshot from an indistinct past. Will winces away the uncomfortable realization that he doesn’t know enough about Hannibal’s past to be able to tell if that memory belongs to him or to some home furnishing.
catalogue.

“It seems not,” Hannibal states, and Will stops pacing.

“Did she know?”

Hannibal’s profile is aquiline and ruthless, all sharp angles in the sepulchral dusk. He shrugs noncommittally, “She knew enough.”

Jerking his head back down, Will nods in sympathy. He considers issues of privacy when standing three feet away in the Jura mountains, cut off from all other human contact but a heart in your belly and its killer by your side.

“My mother was Jewish,” Will blurts out. He sucks on his cigarette again, for good measure, for two-prong grounding. Confessions still unsettle him, even after he upped and married a psychiatrist. “Well, German-Jewish. Half of her family was killed in World War II.”

He can hear Hannibal rolling that new piece of information in his mind. It makes this distinct clicking sound when he taps into Will’s thoughts, when he sees what Will attempted to conceal.

“You father disapproved of you knowing,” he asserts with absoluteness, and Will is always surprised with how much stinging pleasure is there to be found in being seen. Like pressing a thumb on a welling bruise or scratching at a healing scar.

“Of course he disapproved. He didn’t want any more weirdness sticking to his only son. A crazy mother and a quiet disposition were quite enough to make me queer. No need to go retching up Old World muck. Those were his exact words by the way: ‘Old World muck.’”

For a moment they lock eyes, sideways, just a mere tilt of both their profiles. Hannibal is covered in shadows, but Will can feel his piercing perspicaciousness. Like a blade, pointed at his skull.

“I find myself having dreams of Abigail now,” Hannibal remarks offhandedly, and the blade twists in Will’s stomach. The dull ache of memory, but disappointment too. He had hoped Hannibal would take his confession as a segue to disclose more about his childhood, the years leading up to the corpses in the snow. Instead his voice sharpens, “I dream of you too, Will. Covered in blood. By my side. Sharing in a savage pleasure.”

Will sighs deeply. The spicy scent of burnt wood has grown thicker. More houses tucked in with a festive fire then. A yearning for a Christmas he never had rises up, of mistletoe and eggnog in highball glasses, socketed feet under wool blankets, and blood soaking the tree skirt, the raw human hearts piled neatly in a pyramid under the gold fairy-lights.

A shiver runs up his neck. Will shakes his head as if he were denying himself a second helping of a favorite dish.

“Do you regret it?,” he mutters and rushes to clarify, because there’s simply too much that could fit in that one question. “Her?”

“No,” Hannibal replies too quickly, still turned away, both hands balled in his pockets. “What happened had to happen.”

There’s an old sorrow in Hannibal’s voice, like rust at the bottom of a copper pot. But no guile. Whatever corner they had turned extended much farther than “in sickness and health.” It smelled startlingly clean, the air between them. Sterile with supreme sincerity.
Will wonders if it’s anger. If the alkaline between them is the product of Hannibal’s anger, polished by years of concealment to resemble little more than radiating metallicness.

And then it springs to his mind: Palermo. All those jars overwhelmed with fresh flowers and their ensuing emptiness, the glass flutes seeming bare and irrelevant once the blooms had aged out of their prime and Will had taken to the couch.

That was the origin of the memory. Not his or Hannibal’s, but theirs. A shared memory copulated in everyday life.

“I hear my father in my head all the time,” Will mutters, a confession whispered into a hollowed tree trunk.

“What does he say?”

“Many things.”

Hannibal considers the reluctant admission, not just closely but carefully. Will can feel him holding the flung out words in his mind, prying them open with kid gloves.

“The past is not our enemy, Will,” he retorts at last, his voice gone remarkably gentle. “We are more than a mixture of carbon, predestined to repeat the crimes of our ancestors.”

Will wants to laugh, a mean, grisly laughter. He doesn’t. Instead he chews on his lip and throws out jokingly, “Hell, I must have surpassed any crimes my ancestors committed and I’m not even on the wrong side of forty!”

He doesn’t say that might not be true. He doesn’t say that he never found out exactly what crimes his German ancestors were guilty of. And he surely does not say he suspects the reason his father didn’t talk about those felled in the War is because they might have been on the wrong side of history.

He hopes, though, that Hannibal can tell.

(Guess, even, what havoc such unknowingness would have wreaked on a fledgling killer who was trying to be a good cop.)

Because the thing with Hannibal, the true terror of him, is his kindness. Not his judgmental violence, but his kindness. Heartfelt and on his sleeve, the downfall of a tried-and-true sadist. A part of him, refracted and twisted as it may be, hides a well of compassion. It lives in his silences, the thoughtful pauses between the dispensation of advice.

“Will,” he hesitates, and there, there it is, a soft gentling, the flat side of a knife. “Nor are we responsible for the crimes our ancestors committed against us.”

Will cannot suppress a choked chuckle at that. He thinks back to hot boatyards, fish guts and motor oil reeking on his hands, his shoulders weighted down with the knowledge of being watched, always watched, but never seen. He was his mother’s son, a strange, muddled offspring whose birth had resulted on another’s death. His father had always looked at him with a question mark scrunching his weathered face, wondering if Will had died and Gabriel had lived, maybe, maybe things could have been different.

No crazy son, no crazy mother.

In the end, though, there was only Will. And for Will, there was only Hannibal.
And that, as they say, was that.

Head slumping forward, Will finally lets out, “I am filled with anger, Hannibal. It’s such an ugly, sticky thing.”

“Anger can be a catalyst, Will. It does not have to be a paralytic.”

Something about the fastback of his tone makes Will wonder if he is saying that for Will’s benefit or his own.

“I was filled with fear too. For so long.” Suddenly there seems to be no more use for secrets between them. “Do you fear anything, Hannibal?”

Will can feel him taking the question in, fondling its edges, estimating the risk-and-reward of answering honestly. Will would kiss him then, if he could, if his feet weren’t stapled to the ground. Him, the gentleman with the pinched mouth. Him, the killer with a runny nose and kind strangling hands. He would kiss him until they both fell down on their knees, vanquished and ductile with desire.

“Dementia,” Hannibal announces without inflection, a clinician to the very end. “Any biological impairment that would corrupt my abilities, really.” He looks up at the sky, and it is as if he was speaking directly to God when he says, “Abandonment.”

Will’s whole body whiplashes towards him. “I wouldn’t!”

“But you did.”

“I married you, Hannibal.”

“I loathe to remind you that I am not your first nuptials.”

Will shifts on his feet. Looking down, he catches sight of Hannibal’s, blue-veined and covered in goosebumps. He has stacked them together, a tell, Will realizes now, of feeling under siege or at a disadvantage.

“Yes you are,” Will volleys at those feet, towards their raw papery whiteness. “I was always yours, Hannibal. I just didn’t let you have me.”

The balance between them is never as fragile as when Hannibal holds an answer captive. He crosses arms over his chest, hands mirroring his folded feet. When he speaks, his voice is clipped and slanted. Will wonders if he is getting cold.

“Nonetheless. You do have a habit of leaving, Will.”

(Me, it accuses silently. Of leaving me. For years.)

“Now you sound just like my father,” Will grimaces, touching a finger to forehead. “The one in my head.”

Hannibal inhales, supple and steep, and Will wonders if he too can smell contentment in the air, the nutty nostalgia of crepuscular December. If it stings on a foreign fracture somewhere in his brain, the one preventing him from ever going back home.

“I love you, Will,” he says at last, and for the first time it doesn’t sound like a request, or a threat, or an apology. It stands like fact and indemnity, and Will leans on it as if were both. “That will
Will nods. There is a second conversation they are having now, the one Will tried to avoid by spending an afternoon out in the cold, going through a pack of Virginia Slims.

“I forgive you.” If for Hannibal’s past trespasses or for his enduring love, it's anyone's guess.

Between his fingers, he finds his last cigarette burned down to the quick. Stumping it under his boot, Will tells the freckled darkness, “You are the very best and very worst of me, Hannibal. And that will never change either. We are a family now.”

He then turns on his heel and walks back to the house.

For once, Hannibal does not follow.

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Will awakes sometime in the night to find Hannibal standing by the open window. In the liquid darkness, he’s a grey specter, die-cut against a pool of amber light. It takes Will a long moment to realize the light is coming from nine white candles lined up on the ledge.

“You got candles,” Will mumbles, voice rough with sleep.

“Good luck and old traditions,” Hannibal recites, the windowpane misting over with his breath. “I thought we may have use for both.”

Will regards him, the man in a chunky wool sweater and crisp white collar. It’s cold, but perhaps not cold enough to necessitate so many layers of clothing.

Will raises his head from the pillow, the deduction coming to him unrequited.

“Your mother was Jewish too.”

He could see her now, an ashy ghost in a long white robe, carefully lighting solitaire candles on the public facing windows of an imperious manor, trying to ward off bad luck with faith and fairy lights. Too many windows, and not enough angels to ward off a force like Hannibal.

Right on cue, Hannibal half-turns, his profile softened by uncombed hair and yellow glow.

“So many threads of our tapestry overlap, Will. Sometimes I wonder if all of our stars are the same.”

Will pulls back the covers, pats the mattress gently.

“Come to bed, Hannibal.”

The stillness between them is so complete they could have been wax figurines in a medieval tableau. But then Hannibal exhales and time revives, unspooling with the elegant spread of his legs. He slips under the duvet, his socketed feet icy, his wrinkled trousers twice as wrinkled now. He lays on his back, fingers steepled over the fold.

In candlelight, his eyebrows and lashes are so fair they threaten to disappear. Even his features seem made of snow, Will registers with sadness, bound to dissipate if you so much as touch them.

He reaches out, closing a hand around Hannibal’s cheek.
“I miss you.”

“I am right here,” Hannibal drones out, eyes morosely fixed on the ceiling, on a point beyond both their sights. Perhaps their stars.

“No, you’re not.”

“No,” Hannibal concedes with an imperceptible cant of his brow. “I am not.”

Sighing, he turns to look at Will, cheek trapping hand between warm skin and cool fabric. There is a haunted quality to his eyes not unlike that cast by the candles: a pantomime of moving shadows, as if his anterior chambers were tasked with holding a secret.

It was painful to witness, a secret trying to bleed out of a cornea.

Will props himself up, his breath thickening once it fogs over Hannibal’s. For an instant, he leans as if to kiss him, to kiss away the skin of pain milking Hannibal’s eyes. It is so clear up-close, all the misdirected want and entitlement, the resentment trauma morphed into vicious pride. Will thinks it must have been difficult to miss. He must have been pointedly looking away not to see it. The pain, that pain, which has very little to do with Will, though Will is its current audience—an audience of exactly one.

Perhaps that’s why, though. Why Will failed to notice it sooner. Because, for once, Hannibal’s feelings weren’t about Will at all.

Gingerly, Will puts bare arms around him, around the man in the impeccable armor. The worsted trousers scratch against Will’s naked shins, his thighs, until, sheathed together by stubborn limbs, they don’t anymore.

Hannibal allows the embrace without deigning any reciprocation. Under Will’s chin, his muscles tense at parade rest.

He could fight him, wrestle a wounded man into submission. But what would be the point of that? There is no victory in overpowering the one you love. He is another you in different skins.

Instead, Will pushes through the braided wool, fingers the untucked hemline until he is grazing the flesh underneath, rough with the unmistakable texture of old scars. Will would recognize them blindfolded, the welts rulers leave on flesh after many years have faded them into memories the body does not know how to forget.

How, in god’s name, could he have missed those too?

With great care and no sight, Will tracks the raised grooves, his arm stiffening around surprisingly slender hips, holding them close and closer still, until his nose is burrowed in Hannibal’s hair and he can’t breathe anymore. There is no room left between them to allow for oxygen. That alone would be too much of a distance.

It hurts. In his head and in his bones, where Hannibal’s heartbeat echoes, a spoon-shaped sound.

Snow and fear and frostbite settling between scrawny shoeless toes, solitary confinement with little more than water for company and no windows, no windows for days and days on end, and the drawing of a starling mapped on the dust of a floor that had never been swept. Crooked, a child’s hand. No mattress, no language, a hunger so large it could swallow starlight whole.

Darkness, befriended.
The incantation rises in tempo with Hannibal’s rigid breathing, thinning raspier as Will’s grip grows more constricting.

_Sweetheart_, it whistles over and over again in the foghorn of Will’s mind, _Sweetheart, sweetheart, oh sweetheart_, until it fills him up to the rafters, up and up and Will might have blurted it aloud, if before he could mind his tongue, his mouth wasn’t spitting—raggedly, pitifully, desperately. “Goddammit! God-fucking-damn, I should have loved you as a boy!”

Saliva and sweat collect on Hannibal’s hairs, the tiny ones around his earlobe. Will holds him and holds him, the beast who doesn’t want to be held and the child who didn’t know being held was an option, until the tension breaks and Will is being held back, the drooping of a head nestling on his bad shoulder, a tentative brushing of lips against his bare collarbone.


For a dizzying moment, darkness encroaches heavily until Will recognizes that the room had not bloomed blacker, but his eyes had slipped closed because if there’s something Louisiana taught him is that crying seems easier when you aren’t able to see.

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Another thing Will learnt growing up in 200-square-feet trailers is that crying without making a sound is a skill, useful in many contexts (from schoolyard brawls to married binges), particularly when all you have to work with is a cheap bottle of whiskey and the wrong factory settings.

Hannibal doesn’t cry, but then again Will didn’t expect him to. He doesn’t let go of him either, and that, maybe, surprises Will the most.

Will cries, and cries silently, until he is reminded—by the way his lips fit against the furrow in Hannibal’s throat—that tears are by nature salty.

“The damage your father carried is not yours to inherit,” Hannibal remarks apropos of nothing, eyes wide open and pinned to the ceiling. “And if I may say so, Will, how considerate of him to have expeditiously passed away. For if he lived still, I would hunt him down and feed him his own sick liver to teach him to hold his poison in.”

(Secrets, like tears, only grow saltier the longer you hold them in. Or so Tommy said.)

Will inhales. Exhales. “I know you didn’t kill Molly.”

If Hannibal is surprised by the fork in their conversation, he does not show it.

“I never said that I did,” he hums against Will’s hair, his voice muffled but unmistakably indifferent.

“You never said that you didn’t.”

“You favored the narrative that best fit your needs, Will.”

“And you didn’t think best to disabuse me of such misguided fiction?”

“Why should I?,” he chides petulantly. “What good could come of it?”

Will snorts, a dry laugh. No good would come for him, Hannibal means.

No point in chastising an egomaniac for being self-centered. Or a lover for being fearful of
abandonment.

Lacing their fingers together, Will does short work of kissing each and every one of Hannibal’s knuckles.

“You went to Georgia to kill her, though,” he redirects.

“I did.”

“So why didn’t you?”

Hannibal rolls to his back, seemingly immersed in thought before declaring, “She was a remarkable woman, Will. She didn’t deserve to die. Not in her home, and not by my hand.”

As if Will had not known. As if Will had not been the one married to her.

Images of Abigail and Alana vine through Will’s mind, bleeding black rot. Did they deserve to die by his hand? Or did they fall victim to a monster who, by the time he met Molly in Georgia, had already been changed into a man?

“Besides,” Hannibal continues, light as air. “We both know what orphanhood can do to a boy, don’t we, Will?”

Sourness runs through Will, lightning fast and head to toe.

No. A monster is not reversible. Shape-shifting at best, if a semblance of docility is required to keep prey appeased. But reversibility is not altogether possible. Will should know. The darkness in him is blueprinted in his bones.

“So what?,” he barks, suddenly waiting nothing to do with a conversation he himself started. “You sat around chatting?”

“Though we are very different, Ms. Foster and I managed to find common ground,” Hannibal condescends. “We both understand the appeal of death and rebirth, for example.”

“Wait—,” Will pulls back abruptly. Sometimes the crook of a man’s neck is the most dangerous place in the world. “You stayed at her sister’s for a whole weekend?”

Hannibal nods with unreasonable insouciance. “Her sister was away and I needed time to sort paperwork. I taught her how to make grybukai. A traditional Lithuanian dessert.”

Without forethought, Will pushes both arms out, make-shifting an immediate boundary between them.

“You—you and Molly—you baked cookies?”

Hannibal’s lips twitch with something akin to irritation.

“We had to pass the time somehow, Will.”

“But—cookies?”

“It seems you were the one in charge of cooking. They were at a loss once you were gone. Furthermore—” Hannibal puckers his lips, a little put-on artifice intended to endear mindless nonchalance, “—the boy liked frosted cookies.”
There’s a tanginess only those who grew up lonely can taste. It’s unlike any bitters, acid not with
greed, or jealousy, or grief, but lack. The oniony poignancy of not being wanted, not being
included, never being seen. Of standing on the margins, a lifelong of outside looking in.

“Little Wally,” Will can’t help sneering.

“Little Wally,” Hannibal singsongs, turning on the pillow to face him. “How much he reminds me
of you, Will.”

“I can’t see how.”

A hand hovers over his face without touching. “The same knowing blue eyes. The same cunning
mind.” If Will didn’t know better he’d say a perverse pride crept into Hannibal’s tone. “What a
curious man he will make.”

“You mean monster,” Will hisses.

“I mean man, Will.”

Pushed to a limit he was not aware of breaching, Will rolls out of bed and stalks into the bathroom,
locking the door behind him with a loud bang. He stares at the small mirror with unseeing eyes,
wondering distantly if he should read that last exchange as payback or prophecy.

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It must be early dawn when Hannibal reaches for him. The candles had long died down and
sunlight peeked around the dense maroon curtains. Skin coarse with hair blanketed Will’s back.

Sometime in the night, Hannibal must have taken his clothes off. Sometime in the morning, he
must have decided to let Will in.

Will can feel breath ruffling the curls on his nape. Steady, with a hint of chill. Not asleep but
unwilling to be seen as awake. They breathe together, hands and thighs increasing their pressure
against Will’s hips. Lips graze his neck, chapped with lingering fever, and Will struggles to turn in
the embrace. No avail. Hannibal has him pinned in a half-moon position.

“My mother taught me French,” wafts into Will’s ear, sensual and maudlin, like a secret halfway to
spoiling into a dirge. “When I was a child.”

Hannibal pauses, his nose on Will’s hair. Though Will can’t see his face he knows that Hannibal's
eyes are muddy with upturned memories.

“I knew myself in French before I could fathom who I was,” Hannibal says, aloof and well-
measured, but there’s a weight to his confession, like air uncorked from a forgotten wine bottle.

Will nods, the picture coming to him unblemished: a fair and statuesque woman, hands like
sculptured snow.

“She was like you, wasn’t she?”

The faint restlessness in Hannibal’s body, the way his chin comes to rest on Will’s head and rubs
against his crown, tells him all he needs to know. So Will presses on.

“Your mother loved beautiful things that we take home and keep in jars so we can better monitor
their decay. It’s not too much of a leap to assume she loved to see death have its way with life.”
“Clever boy,” Hannibal whispers, but there’s ice among his fondness.

With a bitter taste in his mouth, Will ducks, shoving his nose in the hollow of Hannibal’s collarbone. The echo of mean-spirited guilt pushes out a reluctant confession.

“Me too,” Will mutters against Hannibal’s skin. “French Creole, but—”

Hannibal’s biceps, crushing around his ribcage, release Will into silence. He knows. Touch is telegraph, Morse code, between them. Hannibal knows, like his mother did before him, like Will does now, by smell and perception alone. You are like me, and I’m like you, not exactly your double but your kindred nonetheless. I love you by force of similarity, of refraction, for to be seen is to be made human and alive.

They stay slotted into one another, back-to-chest, a perfect concentric creature, a nautilus, a flesh-and-bone shell chamber. Inch by inch Will covers Hannibal’s fingers, where they thread tightly across his stomach. He squeezes once, the skin there colder than on Hannibal’s chest or between his legs.

(Don’t cast me aside just because I failed to match your image of me.

Please.

Keep looking. You’ll find me still worthy. If you just keep looking.)

“You have such exquisite hands,” Will mouths at the delicate patch of tissue between thumb and index, and just like that, Hannibal folds towards him, elastic and sorrowful, an allotropic structure shaped by the whims of external winds. Will turns to kiss him, on a scapula, on the junction of carotid and bone, any patch of solid muscle he can find.

Trapping Will’s ankles with his ankles, Hannibal hisses in his ear, wet and wild and altogether too threatening, “My most highly favored angel. I will never let you go. Never, do you hear me?” He pauses, rushing out in one blow, “Anything. Ask anything and I—”

And Will swallows because, as far as promises go, that’s not one any of them thought they could afford making, but here it is and there they are, so Will grabs him by the neck until their tongues meet over their shoulders, because silence is a minor concern when your body is abuzz.

A familiar weight rocks against his hip, frantic and out of compass. Will presses back, choking between kisses, “Please don’t. Stop. Please—don’t stop—”

(If rutting or killing, loving him or fucking with him, Will couldn’t tell. Not anymore. Desire had finally reduced them both to ellipses, smithereens of words half-spoken, so that their existence had become the sort of shorthand only one other person in the world would ever be able to read.)

There’s a song for this feeling, azure and aching, but Will doubts Hannibal would know it.

And yet, it would never cease to amaze him the eloquent way Hannibal spoke with his body, the metronomic control he possessed over member and muscle, the foolproof awareness of space, of the space his body took, the impression his body could make on another body just by virtue of pressure and movement. Like clockwork, the specific speed and rhythm and friction necessary to turn a mechanism on.

Hannibal doesn’t bother pulling their underwear off, but nor does he try putting a condom on.

“Small victories,” Will thinks, as he comes on his hand.
“Could you be happy with this?”

They are standing by the open window, side by side, chipped cups of second-rate instant coffee cooling in their hands. The air is still heavy with the vapors from their shower. They were about to leave when Hannibal stopped him. He had seized Will by the shoulders and looked long and hard at his face as if he were about to send him off to war. After a minute or two, Will had shrugged him off and went to boil some water. You see, Hannibal’s hands had been shaking and Will did not know what to do with that, so he made truly disgusting coffee instead.

“This?” Hannibal asks between sips, voice sleek, composure reupholstered enough that Will can stay by his side and gaze at the white Christmas sky as if it were just another day, another casual conversation.

“The monotony of nights and mornings.”

Hannibal turns to regard him a bit too abruptly, eyebrows raised. “Could you?”

It sounds like a box filled with darkness, that question. A gift of thorns.

Will shrugs into his cup. “I could give it a try.”

“Hmmm.”

“What?”

“Greater men have tried monotony before, Will. They found it tiring.”

“Not to me,” Will observes as the sky clouds over. “Not with you.”

“Still,” Hannibal persists, tapping the handle of his mug. “Routine is built on the habitual.”

“Is it now?”

“Happiness forged in routine is happiness born of habit.”

Will nods meekly because he may have put down his dueling sword but that doesn’t mean he’s going around without a foil mask. He has learned to pick his battles.

“If you say so.”

“Will—”

Then again, patience was never his strong suit.

“For fucks sake, Hannibal!” Will snaps, splashing coffee over his wrist. Rain begins to pour in earnest, staccato with suppressed fury. “I chose you! And I’ve wanted you for for—for years! Not a dream bride or some other men. You! In this—a tight, hazy, wistful way. I loved you, I think.”

Will sighs, running a hand down his face. “Or as much I knew how. Then.”

“And now?”

“Now I could live without you, but I’d rather die.”

Silence returns for a fraught moratorium.
“Will anything I cede ever be enough for you?,” Hannibal charges and Will frowns.

“Hannibal.”

“Very well,” Hannibal demurs, waving a conciliatory hand as he takes both their half-empty mugs. " 'To me be as it pleaseth God.' "

He too has learnt to pick his battles.

(But there’s no secrets between you two anymore, you say?

_Shut up._

Would he kiss you with a lying mouth, son? And would it taste any different if you did?)

At the sink, Hannibal stands with his back turned, his lovely hands engaged in the absolutely mundane task of rinsing off cutlery. It comes to Will unbidden: the image of those hands ravaged by old age, nerve damage, prison soap. Loneliness, most of all. No one to care for or torture.

And Will, alive, away, unable to see it.

To see _to_ it, that too, but mostly, just to see them, those kind competent monstrous lovely hands in full motion. There was no future beyond that point. The horizon of his life ended where Hannibal’s hands curved.

(If he didn’t say it now, he never would.)

“You know there’s never going to be anyone else, right?"

"I expected as much since we opted for a traditional marriage, yes,” Hannibal remarks distractedly while putting the cups away, and Will knows then, knows without a stitch of hesitation, that he has lost the ability to hold his ground against Hannibal once and for all.

Before he can regret it, Will is falling to his knees. Joints creak painfully but he pays them no heed. He press his face flush against Hannibal’s clothed navel, and it’s blissfully quiet there, in the warm dark.

Confessions too are easier with your eyes shut.

“No. I mean at all. At-all at-all.” He unfastens Hannibal’s belt blindingly, skims the fairer hair scattered around the waistband. He must have been a blond baby once. “You will have your parties and your social engagements and—and your protégés—but—for me—you are it. There’s just you now.”

It sounds rushed, squeaky, his own voice does, his fingers tripping on Hannibal’s fly.

A hand brushes against his hair, a lukewarm and noncommittal pressure, the sort of kindness dispensed to pets and children.

“You are welcome to join me in any endeavor I may pursue, Will.”

“Not the same thing, is it?” Will kisses the crease below Hannibal’s abdomen, the patch of pristine skin where a c-section scar would glow. “Now get rid of the condoms.”

The fingers on his hair still. “Boundaries have lost their appeal?”
Will snorts. “The day I’ll require a boundary between us is the day that I kill you. Mark my words, Dr. Graham.”

“Duly noted, Mr. Graham,” Hannibal volleys with mock seriousness, and Will knows that if he were to look up, he’d find a mix of curiosity and fondness staring down at him, perhaps a streak of detached surprise, the twist of a smile celebrating victory. He won, though. Will had offered himself up as spoils. On his knees, begging to be picked apart. Gloating seemed the least Hannibal could do from his new mighty heights.

The other thing about Hannibal, the thing Will can’t help admiring him for—more than his thoughtful silences, his disarming kindness, even more than his uncompromising strength—was something he often forgot about his partner: that though Hannibal staked his survival on control, he was, at heart, a lover of caprice. He revered it deeply, the universe’s ability to throw a curveball or pull the rug out from under his feet.

The phantom pain on his side pinched his face into a frown, but Hannibal still managed to lower himself gracefully, his bony knees bumping against Will’s, his fist coming around Will’s wrists to clasp them together in a bouquet of phalanges. It takes less than a minute and nearly a decade for Hannibal to kneel in front of Will, head downturned and hair still damp, their backs bowed and eyes level like teenagers forced to pray after running amok in the rain.

(Kitchens. Why must always be kitchens with them?)

“Are you happy, Will?,” Hannibal demands of the bundled hands. In the wake of silence, Will can hear the rain punishing trees, and underneath it, the other question, the one Hannibal is telegraphing with stuttered exhales: Do I make you happy?

Only then—kneeling on a white linoleum floor, unswept and unowned, Christmas somewhere in the French alps—does it occur to Will that the man he married might not know how to go about this, this befriending of each other’s grayness. The black-and-whiteness of violence, that they both understand uncannily well. They have traded on it all their lives, after all. But the defrocked in-between, the place where sticky fingers and runny noses come from, the holding of hands in public parks and stargazing on rooftops, that place, it might be utterly unknown to them both.

There’s no roadmap, Will realizes with a start. They are going in blind.

“I am…,” and there’s that song again—You wanted to dance so I asked you to dance, but fear is in your soul—hoopy with the smell of sweltering leather and halogen-lit freeways in hot summer nights, and Hannibal is in his memory now, lovely hands undulating outside the passenger window while Will drives aimlessly through sunburnt fields, nearly eighteen and nowhere to go.

“I am loose,” Will finally manages to say, knees starting to burn. “As if I’d thrown all pieces that comprise me up in the air and they have yet to land.”

“You exist in abeyance then,” Hannibal’s lips tick up. “Like Our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Or a ghost.”

“Both never just alive or dead.”

“Something other,” Will whispers in a daze, head full with fog.

A thumb brushes his bottom lip. Hannibal is leaning in.

“Are you, Will?,” he breathes out and Will instantly parts his lips to catch the words. “Are you
finally something other?”

“I am to you,” he returns wryly. “Your significant other.”

Hannibal smiles, too near not to kiss and yet not quite there.

“Ah. I do remember falling for your wit.”

“Nothing to say of my mind,” Will jeers with a grimace. “Because isn’t that a keeper?”

“Your mind is infinite in its terrain, Will. A true cartographer’s dream.”

“Because of all its dark patches?”

“Because of all its uncharted crevices.” Hannibal’s hands feel unseasonably warm when they cradle his skull. “How I wish I could trace them all.”

“Not for lack of trying. From light therapy to bone saw.”

Hannibal recoils as if slapped. “I am so sorry, Will.”

“No you aren’t.”

“But I am. And you know that I am. What good would do me to have you dead, to have destroyed your body and mind? So I could remain in my glass tower and sit alone with the knowledge that men do grow up to kill the beauty they can’t control? That instead of standing shoulders above the vulgar mob I repeated their mistakes with the same gleeful ignorance? Do you imagine me so solipsistic I am incapable of seeing that the shape of you is larger than my own shadow, and more beloved and richer than anything I could ever manufacture? I adore you Will, every inch of you, and I’d kill to befriend every inch of your darkness, but I should have known better than to think darkness could be friended with coercion.” Hannibal stops as if to catch his breath, though his posture remained undisturbed. “You are free to dismiss my apologies, but at least allow me the courtesy of acknowledging their sincerity.”

Will nods solemnly. It seems only fair. Even if Will’s value remains anchored in Hannibal’s refusal of loneliness, it is only fair to give a man his due.

He does not say, however, that he knows now that Hannibal’s few restraints were passed on by his mother, that she taught him to reign in, not his lust for beauty but his passion for chaos, so that Hannibal turned out a lonely, voracious aesthete with a white-knuckled defensiveness towards entropy when, in reality, he was meant to grow up into a wild and unruly god, followed and loved and pampered by those who shared in his bloody gospel.

She caged him, Will realizes, and in all likelihood Hannibal had been complicit in his own capture.

(Love. When it doesn’t break you, it teaches you to retrofit.

What a damn vicious force. No wonder his father made a living warning him off it.)

“I am not the result of the cracks you fingered open,” Will states, swiping the scar on his forehead, long healed and thinly forgotten. “I am—the structure standing. In spite—no—on top of those cracks.” He taps the scar on Hannibal’s ring finger. “And you, you are not just a structure. The refined psychiatrist. The cannibal serial killer. An exquisite obelisk, all platinum sheen and tempered iron. No. I see you, Hannibal. I know where your fault lines are.”
Hannibal lifts his eyes, flickering them back down when they meet Will’s. “Do they damage the overall painting, such craquelure?”

“Oh Hannibal,” Will takes their conjoined hands and, in a rare fit of sentimentality, allows to set them over his heart. “We are only standing here because of those cracks.”

Hannibal tilts his head sideways, a little lopsided, as if taken aback.

“I could never predict if you were able to love a man.”

“In lieu of a monster, you mean?”

“A monster you are well acquainted with, Will. The stuff of nightmares and crime scenes. Monsters offer no ambiguity with their clawed hands and eyes as flame. But a man—“

“There’s something to be said about an Achilles’ heel, Hannibal.”

“Do my human vulnerabilities arouse you, Will?”

“Among other things.”

Hannibal leans in then, hesitating when their cheeks touch. The arms that gather Will form a wary “x” over his back, as if uncertainty moved Hannibal to find Will solid under his hands.

There’s so much loneliness in denial.

“Your mother was a fool,” Will whispers in his ear and Hannibal laughs, heartily, a bellyful of stars.

“Oh Will.” Fingertips travel up, caressing Will’s shoulder-blades, the slope of his Adam’s apple, gently, lovingly, until the hand turns into a vise, crushing Will’s windpipe. “To nights and mornings, my sweet prince,” Hannibal coos as Will’s feet begin to kick, desperate for purchase or air. “To thousands upon thousands of them.”

The surprisingly brutal weight of Hannibal's chest grinds Will's into the tile. Unconsciousness surges fast, a high-speed bullet. When his neck wilts forward, the ironclad grip releases a fraction. Hannibal rubs their lips together.

“Please?” he murmurs into Will’s heaving mouth, raw and sloppy as if he were the one with a bruised throat. "Please, Will. Please."

Love must be a sickness because Hannibal looked stricken. He looked like widows do after a hopeless night in the emergency room.

Fumbling, Will feels for his hand. He finds a thumb and makes a fist around it, squeezing.


It's quiet with wet breathing until Hannibal croaks, sharp and ruined, “Anything?”

And all Will can do is shake his head, squeeze.

“Always.”

Chapter End Notes
A world of callbacks in this one:

The moniker "my sweet prince" appears only once before. It's a quote from Shakespeare, when Hamlet is dying. Will uses it on the train, when Hannibal is keeping his distance, as both a sign of desperation and longing.

The words Hannibal uses to describe Wally here are actually the words *Will* used to describe Wally in chapter 25.

In chapter 42, Hannibal says "there were no windows where I was at thirteen." Will gets to see that memory here.

In chapter 43, Will is so horrified by the idea of "the Grahams" that he refuses Hannibal's proposal. He called "the Grahams, the them-them. What a bloodbath, what an untenable, dreadful thing to bet a happy ending on." Here he calls Hannibal "Dr. Graham" because when he married Will, Hannibal took his name but did *not* drop his credentials—of course he wouldn't :) And that's major progress because we now know Will is staking a happy ending on being "the them-them, the Grahams," with Hannibal.

Twice here, Will says stuff to Hannibal he had promised in previous chapters never to say out loud: "we are a family now" and that he knew himself better in French Creole than in English. He also admits hearing his father in his head which was something so personal, he didn't even consider being able to share until it's out there. No more forts for the one he loves.

The hymn "The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came" is the song Will sings to Hannibal when he is very ill. He learned it from his dad, who sang it because it had his dead son's name on it. Hannibal quotes it repeatedly here because—he can be a passive-aggressive bastard.

The song Will quotes in his memory of driving around as a teenager is a 80s hit with a religious title (anyone recognized it?). Because I'm that much of an obsessive geek.
Florence, Italy

Chapter Summary

Part I of III:

Murder husbands, husbanding: a prologue.

Chapter Notes

This is a set-up chapter, so many details peppered here will only be fully explained in Part II (a gargantuan chapter that is slowly coming together). If you want the full picture, read this again/only when other parts drop (sometime in late June, I hope).

Same old reminders for the next chapters: happy ending but tw for vigorous discussions of mental illness and some spots of violence, sex and angst (sometimes all in one!). Most of all, tw for ridiculous amounts of lovestruck domesticity and pillow talking. So.much.talking.

Here’s the thing no one tells you about madness: unlike joy sadness anger, it does not fade. Madness does not gentle, does not come and go, does not find ways to be turned into something else. You can’t make up stories with happy endings because there is no ending where madness is concerned, happy or sad. It is what it is, and if it’s in you, then it’s in you to stay.

Maybe, Will thinks, you merely learn to survive it. Or maybe, more exactly, you must learn not to fear it.

If that’s as true of love as it is of madness, it’s hard to say. After half a decade in Hannibal’s care, Will stops trying to ascertain the difference.

(Or so he tells himself.)

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Will wakes up with a start. The wind rouses him the way it always does: by biting at his bad shoulder. Will rubs at it, the air muggy with sewerage. The vague contours of blood and violence recede into the darkness of sleep, shooed away by the endless eggy sunlight.

For a long while he lies there, sweat trickling down his bare back, trying to master absolute stillness.

Not that it matters. Hannibal could sleep through an air-raid these days. Nothing seems to wake him anymore. No jostling, no screaming, no touching.

Hannibal sleeps like the dead, Will thinks, propping on one elbow and brushing the grey from his forehead. More than once Will regarded Hannibal across a pillow—lips lax, arm thrown carelessly over his eyes— and wondered if cohabitation had done that to him, if half a decade of sharing a bed
had retired his predatorial instinct.

There’s bitterness in that thought, as if love conspired to make Will lonelier. For all he knows, mercenaries could barged into their lodgings and do unspeakable things to him before Hannibal cared to notice. Yet, more often than not, Will wondered if love had blinded him to anything but that reassuring image of a middle-aged man, unshaven and undressed, the sable sheets enhancing the tan bulge of his arms.

Will traces a line around the vulnerable hollow of Hannibal's throat, the loose corners of his chapped mouth. In his dream he puts a knife through both, and waits for Hannibal to geyser his way to death. There, he is as good as dead. But here, in the gorily bright light of a rented villa, he is merely asleep.

It’s funny, Will frowns, fondling the creases around Hannibal’s mouth and eyes, it’s funny how human he looks up-close, unguarded, all wrinkled. They are smile lines, Will knows: he put most of them where they are, etched in Hannibal Lecter’s skin. Love did that to him, it changed Hannibal like a car changes asphalt if it peels out too fast. The track-marks of connubial bliss, Will muses, two fingers resting on his pulse point.

Hannibal sleeps like the dead, but his heart beats strong and intact on his jugular.

It’s insufferable, Will thinks, shoving the sheets aside and swinging his feet to the mosaic floor. Simply insufferable. The stewed sunlight, the stickiness of recurrent nightmares. Both, neither.

Will breathes in the sour air pumped through the French windows Hannibal always refuses to close or curtain. It’s going to be another one of those days, Will can tell already. The weather is filled with tears.

Hannibal likes it, though—all of it. All of the yellowness and stucco gaudiness, the crooked streets and maudlin bridges that seem a strong wind away from toppling into the river. Will doesn’t know how to tell him that so much brightness gives him migraines, that so much sunbaked grandeur ushers in nightmares. It’s not just something Will can blurt out over a three-course meal—how much Florence makes him want to break out in hives.

“Will,” he hears at the same time he feels a pressure on his hand. He had forgotten it on Hannibal’s heartbeat. It happened sometimes. Will could sleep whole nights with his hand curled in Hannibal’s chest hair. As if he could seep closer by keeping watch over his heart.

It served as a reel now, his hand, pulling him back into the stuffy bed, into a body he knows by heart, knows better than his own heart, but still, it’s not enough. That’s another thing Will can’t fathom putting into words: that living outside Hannibal’s body is not enough anymore, so he must resort to dreams where he has him again and again, hemmed and sheathed and slashed, inside out.

(That’s not a helpful thought, Will knows, but he’s been good for a while, been on the straight and narrow for nearly a year. He misses the tang of alcohol and blood and synthetic clock oil, as much as he misses hearing his father’s Southern drawl rucking around his head, but he promised himself once, he promised only once but at the time once seemed enough, that he had to clear the red off his ledger if he was gonna keep himself from losing Hannibal. It’s been a long time though, and some bad things just feel good because they feel known.)

He goes. He lets himself be folded into Hannibal’s side, arranged like a tasteful bouquet of lilacs and roses. He smells of tincture and gold leaf, wealth and wallpaper, right at the juncture of clavicle and shoulder where Will presses his nose.
Hannibal smells just like he looks in this new iteration of their married lives: a hobbyist librarian and an art historian who trades on occasional antiques. A meek, well-spoken, slightly eccentric man most people come to admire, but very rarely know. He has grown guarded, this version of Hannibal has, as if a secret burdened him. Sometimes the performance is so flawless even Will believes there to be one. Like this morning. Like in the last few weeks.

Will gathers him closer, and it’s Hannibal’s turn to go where he is wanted.

“You’re awake,” Will whispers just to fill the silence.

Hannibal blinks slowly, and pulls back to regard him. He smiles and all the wrinkles in his face split fair and wide around his marigold eyes.

“Will,” he breathes again, into his hair this time. “My sweet Will.”

It’s full of floricultural warmth and deceptive lightness, so Will kisses him until he can feel blood bloom through the cracks.

(Just a taste. He loves me. It’s fine. It’s fine. It’s not falling, it’s parachuting. I’m on the black now, see?)

When blood hits his tongue, Will can’t help biting down, and for a split second there is a downpour of images, flickering flashbacks of Hannibal using his teeth to rip a man’s throat open, of Bedelia’s close-lipped chuckles echoing off tapestry walls, of blood all over Will’s hands, gushing under floodlights, Hannibal picking out the shards from his fingers and Will’s laughter howling and howling and howling through the nocturnal parking lot.

He has Hannibal pinned under him, wrists secured over his head, before he can catch up with his own movements.

“What time is it?”

“Almost eleven.”

Hannibal tilts his head elegantly towards the window, sighs.

“Regrettably I have a lunch appointment. Shall we adjourn until tonight?”

Will snorts, digging at Hannibal’s wrists, forcing them down on the mattress. Hannibal’s body is taut under his, tensile and bare. Will cannot remember when they first started sleeping without a stitch on. Long enough to have become accepted practice, but not so long as to feel fully normalized.

Will sits back on Hannibal’s thighs, and shakes his head.

“No.”

Hannibal looks up, an unimpressed mask. “No?”

“No. Open your legs.”

It shouldn’t matter anymore, the past. But it does. It is always there, between them even as they move forward, change aliases and acquaintances and countries, it’s there like an oil smudge on a photograph. Even when you can’t see it, its halo is there, taunting, waiting to be acknowledged.

Florence smells like rotten ghosts, Will decides as he jerks Hannibal’s ankles apart and closes his
mouth over a nipple, scapula, cheekbone, then nose, licking it from tip to brow and back to the corner of his jaw, until it lands under his right ear.

There’s so much loneliness in denial. Will had had this thought before, about Hannibal, but this time the diagnosis is self-appointed. Will runs his hands over Hannibal’s torso, the inside of this thighs. So much of his skin is unmarred, yet his body must remember every blow, every cut, every kiss. Will wants to believe he has now made him come more than any other lover. That he knows more of what lies under that skin than any law enforcement agent, any doctor. Suddenly he has to pulse down the impulse to rip a hole under Hannibal’s sternum. There might be something there that he missed.

(You can only kill me once. Remember? But you can watch me die a thousand times.

In my dreams, you mean.

In your bed too.)

Both thumbs join on Hannibal’s throat, a kiddish imitation of a bird about to take flight. A scar coils in there, under his twined fingertips, a small synched shape like a Grim Ripper’s sickle. Will put that on Hannibal Lecter’s skin too, eleven months ago. Eleven months ago Will wanted to hurt him bad enough and now he wants to hurt him again, with the glinting ghosts and the stale sweat between them, though he can’t, or shouldn’t, or won’t. Can’t. He can’t.

Hannibal’s gaze is unflinching, hands cuffed over ruffled hair, a little whiff of a grin petulantly pulling at his lips. Will wants to be wrestled off, wants Hannibal to twist his wrists and break them by the scaphoid. He won’t. He can and he should, but he won’t. Hannibal doesn’t fight him anymore. He indulges him often, ignores him a quarter part of the time, and smiles amusedly for the remainder. Grinding him into a Florentine mattress won’t change that. Shouldn’t. Or perhaps it can’t.

“Will,” he chides now, lips pursed in an ever-patient moue. “I have had this appointment in the books for months. It’s why we are here.”

Supercilious laughter rings through the bone area in Will’s skull a life with Hannibal has eroded. It’s honey-blond with turquoise nail polish. It bounces off the tapestries and Will wonders, not for the first time, if Bedelia was one of many Hannibal bedded in a collection of sun-saturated villas across Florence. If Will is just one in Bluebeard’s roster of foreign wives. Durable, undoubtedly, but always on borrowed time.

“I thought you wanted to show me Florence,” Will throws back.

Hannibal considers him for a moment, bloody lips beginning to dry. Then he responds flatly, “That too.”

It sounds like a lie, but most things do to Will these days. It doesn’t matter. Pushing Hannibal’s knees to his chest, Will rubs down hard, circles his hips, iliac crest to pubic bone, waiting for Hannibal’s breath to pick up. It never does. He never pants, never bucks or talks back, just lies under Will’s weight, his cock swelling indifferently under heat and pressure.

They have fucked in the last years, but mostly they made love. It’s a fact, and Will has gotten better at facing those. He’s madly in love with his husband (operative word madly), and has grown incapable of doing anything that is not, in some way, an expression of that consuming sentiment. Killing him would be the crown jewel, but Will has also gotten better at accepting his station in life. He’s seen Hannibal sick, in tears, in stitches, in mourning, and beyond drunk. He has lulled
him through nightmares and rough crossings, and he has lost him. Once or twice, but he lost him. Will can say it now, trying to give the man an orgasm, trying to force intimacy with his cock, Will can admit it, he’s lost him before. He lost himself too, but that’s not half the pain. It feels like being slowly drained out of blood, hemorrhaging on hard frosty ground, to lose Hannibal does. The muscle memory is enough to stymie his arousal, and Will’s grip on Hannibal's wrists falter.

Under him, Hannibal doesn’t look amused anymore, but nor does he look pleased. Splayed on rumpled sheets, legs and arms akimbo, Hannibal looks absent, remote, perhaps a touch disinterested. Or disappointed. Will has gotten worse at reading that particular emotion on Hannibal. When it manifests, it’s not subtle, it’s sharp, and Will can’t afford any more blood loss. Not if he wants to stay in the black.

Tentatively Will puts pressure on Hannibal’s trachea, delicate thing, and hears the first hint of a gasp. Performative perhaps. Hannibal has kept busy for the last few years. He’s more of a broad, brutal man now than before in spite of what his pastel suits may suggest.

Two fists slide to Will’s waist, clutch and push him down. Steadying him and stopping him at the same time.

For a moment, Will’s resolve waivers.

“Kiss me,” he pleads, bearing down.

Hannibal’s eyebrows rise minutely, “Why should I?”

“Because if you don’t, I’ll kill without you.”

The “again” is silent.

The original threat was something like “I’ll kill you.” But that bait had no bite. Not eleven months ago, and definitely not now. This version may not have one either, but at least there’s no blood, no splatter, no stitches required. Just a bed and two men in it, brimming with knives and no clothes on.

“What if it makes no difference anymore?” Hannibal shrugs, one shoulder raised nonchalantly.

“What if what we have now suits me better?”

Funny thing, that of hearing words you’ve toyed with in the basement of your mind—feared and probed like a wounded thing—bleeding into reality. By the mere force of speech, they come alive. Will wonders if you can ever kill words or if once spoken, they stick to you forever, like scars.

His hands are off Hannibal’s chest and his feet across the room in less than a heartbeat. He didn’t plan that, but then again he didn’t plan much of anything for the last two weeks. He certainly didn’t plan their little sojourn in Florence.

The breeze blowing through the open French doors make his skin seize with goosebumps, so Will slips into the dressing gown Hannibal draped on the chaise longue the night prior. A silky monstrosity of orange birds of paradise with a gold sash at the waist. It smells vaguely of him still, Will notices while stepping into the massive marble balcony. Malt and money and old blood.

The midday sun, slanted and filled with technicolor, seems to reflect the hundreds of stained glass windows scattered throughout the city. Will shields his eyes with one hand, feeling a headache whistle. His wedding band catches the light, turning it silver and soothing.

Will sighs and thinks of Hannibal, Hannibal amongst stainless steel appliances, in a white standard-issue prison uniform. He thinks of Hannibal as if he were not on the other side of the wall, in
Florence, in his bed, alive. In this life, Will traded a quiet stillness for a quieter riot. A minefield, Will considers, as a flock of seagulls crosses the sky over the cathedral’s dome. No. A battlefield, a crime scene. Will they ever stop chasing after each other?

He doesn’t hear Hannibal come closer because no one does, not unless Hannibal wishes to make his presence known. Humid breath tickles the overlong curls on Will’s nape. He stands there looming. There’s an inch of space between them, but Will knows he won’t bridge it. Hannibal will linger just within reach as he always does. A man not meant to be human, a beast wrapped up in a person suit even when naked.

(Or married. Or in love.)

If the thought applies to Hannibal or himself seems indifferent. They are one and the same now, coupled under the eyes of God. Of the Devil and the FBI too, come to think of it.

Hannibal hooks one finger where the fabric meets Will’s occipital bone and pulls down. Will feels the tension to unravel on his navel, where the sash is loosely tied. It would only take a firm push to have it fall, to rob it of its integrity. Will waits, puffs of air fluttering from his nape to his clavicle, his hair, his ear. He knows what it feels like to be assessed by a predator, to have fear or want or hunger sniffed out of him.

“Will,” the beast rumbles, almost a growl but more menacing because it’s businesslike, conclusive. He must have found what he was looking for after all.

The catgut-strung pain marches into Will’s temples (*VivaceAllegroAndante*). It’s a full-blown migraine, alright.

Will gazes ahead without so much as daring to exhale. “I fucking hate this city,” he says and he means it. They both know he really, really means it.

Hannibal does yank the fabric down then, at long last, but in his elegant, controlled manner so that Will is almost surprised to find himself suddenly naked in a pool of golden fabric.

His hands are cool, but his eyes are warm when he turns Will towards him and nuzzles into his neck.

“Come back to bed.”

“I thought you had an appointment.”

Their bed, changeable in shape and township, had become a living entity, like a favorite toy or a shared daydream. They entered it when they were cold or sick or tired, and stayed in it, facing each other, until they felt fit again. It never failed to recharge them, their bed, their bodies pressed together under countless amounts of sheets and secrets. They never needed to own furniture or linens because their bed was a state of mind, like a car crash they both experienced and both survived. Whenever their bodies lay together it became a sarcophagus, a fairytale, an infirmary.

Now Will ponders if it’s a fiction, if perhaps they have been taking each other to bed not to find strength, but to forge a truce. Maybe making love is just a means to make monsters men, mechanical and precarious.

(Maybe that’s just fine. Maybe monsters can become more human by making love to each other).

Always a step too close to telepathy for comfort, Hannibal grabs him by the chin, and it’s not a kiss as much as it is a punch. It jingles both their jaws and rubs their lips together until they are
both breathless and numb. They lock eyes, and there’s something charging the air, freezing them in place. Something tender and raw maws open, a live wire or some sort of disabused soft tissue.

One hand comes to cup his face. Wistfully, Hannibal caresses the scar on Will’s nape, purposefully hidden under the underbrush of overgrown hair. He feels around for them, the thirty teeth indentations. He did that to Will and Will let him. Eleven months ago.

Hannibal’s face softens, and it’s terrible to see, and beautiful, like a fire inside a cathedral.

“Little beast,” he murmurs and Will slaps the hand away.

(He’s seen the child, even kept a photograph in his wallet. Why is it not enough anymore? Because maybe you are Bluebeard. Maybe you are the one counting the hours for an execution. Maybe you want another man so much you exhausted all natural means of live consumption. Maybe death is all that’s left. Maybe you must quarter up and eat your bride to avoid madness from swallowing you whole.)

It’s been so long since he’s seen Hannibal covered in blood, his fine features rouged black in the moonlight. It’s been too long since he felt capable of killing, engorged with power, ready to turn a body inside out by sheer force of want and will.

(It’s slipping from him again. He can sense it, the incandescent flare of madness waving from around his cornea, occupying the ghostly crevices of his grey matter. It beckons forward with the arsenic-green light of freedom. If he gives in an inch, they’ll both lose their lives.)

Will comes back to the sunlight with a kiss stamped to his spine. Then another and another, until he can hear Hannibal kneel behind him on the marble balcony.

“You are going to be late,” Will says without inflection. The sky is so clear above him, the blue hurts his eyes.

“I know,” Hannibal hums between wetting Will’s sacrum with kisses. “Turn around, Will.”

Will shakes his head. His hands hurt from gripping the stone balustrade, from keeping his body upright. They are three stories above ground. He wonders if people can sense or see that a man who was once a killer, who is in love with a killer who is the best man he ever met, is half of a mind to pitch himself over the ledge because he can’t keep this kind of clawing love inside him for much longer. It’s folly, this is, their head-splitting hunger.

Hannibal’s stubbled cheek is pressed inside his thigh, his tongue rough and sticky. Will can smell himself on Hannibal’s mouth, Hannibal’s spit on his buttocks. He slips two fingers in, stills, a strange sort of holding pattern as if Will could ever deny him anything. Will blinks, strains. His whole body unfurls like a fist, wanting, starved.

Will returns to the skinny house outside Florence, with all its dead weeds and dusty picture frames, a life counted by the stacks of journal entries never entirely fulfilled. He doesn’t want to, but his mind wanders, and then his knees are crumbling.

Not surprisingly, Hannibal has him before Will can recognize he was leaning too close to the edge.

“I am taking you to bed,” Hannibal states, a futile warning, as he pushes an arm under Will’s shoulders and another under his knees, carrying him off the ground. Will knows he doesn’t mean as a cure for sunstroke. He knows, with the certainty of trains tearing through stations without stopping, that Hannibal will make love to him in that Florentine bed, a fate he has attempted to
avoid for almost two weeks.

Will is his husband now—has been for 53 months (some would argue twice as long), a legal agreement recognized in at least thirty one countries and across three continents. Yet in Florence he is just another bride, barely a step-up from a mistress. To sleep with him, to love him, isn’t that a crime of opportunity?

(That’s madness speaking, and you know it.)

Hannibal deposits him in the centre of the bed. The grey sheets have been neatly pulled back, the pillows fluffed and the duvet folded. There’s a basket of bread and fresh coffee on the nightstand. It’s a type of courtship, that attention to detail.

“You disgust me,” Will drawls at the tear-dropped chandelier.

Hannibal has finally stopped fidgeting with his phone and comes to sit by his side, legs crossed and hands steepled. The very image of proper civility in the bare flesh.

“No I don’t.”

Will sighs. More seagulls fly outside their windows, casting shadows overhead.

“No, of course you don’t.”

Hannibal leans back, spreading along Will’s body, shoulder to shoulder until they are twins, down to their corpse-like poses and keen observation of the twelve-foot ceiling.

“Can I make love to you now?”

An arm is flung over his forehead, shading his face from Will. But that he can’t stop flexing his index finger is as much a tell as any spoken declaration.

“Don’t you always?” Will deflects, and Hannibal drops his arm and turns his head, his eyes so dark they are nearly opaque.

“That I do does not mean you always want it.”

Will holds his gaze. He gives him to the urge of running a finger over his jaw. Hannibal’s stubble has turned mostly white in the last months. Will cannot avoid thinking the snow has returned to him in his later years. From the inside out.

“I always want it,” he whispers. “I don’t always know what to do with it.”

“With the love?”

It’s Will’s turn to drop his hand and drape it over his hair.

“With the want.”

Hannibal leans in, and it’s fluid and graceful, like most things he does. It’s plaintive too, and Will is garishly reminded that, not even three weeks ago, he’d seen Hannibal cry. He had been guarded about it, primly so, but that was what heartbreak looked like when it met Hannibal Lecter at 55. And it was devastating and graceful too.

Will kisses him back, both their hands overlapping on Will’s cheeks.
(Love must be a thing with petals, Will thinks, coercing a body to open up when fingered in its core.

He never can say who gives in first. The only thing he always knows for certain is the unmistakable sound Hannibal makes when emotions overrun his defenses, a helpless wounded whimper, or perhaps it's the sound his body makes when he stops struggling upstream and lets it have him. It, love. It, madness. It, Will.)

Hannibal is on him and then inside him rather effortlessly, this particular choreography known by rote. There's no force in Hannibal’s movements. They are graceful there too, when they smooth over Will’s hips, pulling his thighs up against his chest, a close mirror-image of Will’s previous motions, only better oiled, more experienced. Kinder too. You can say it. Hannibal is many things, but he is never a man who is afraid of a body, of what a body can endure and what it may want done to it.

They always look at each other when they make themselves vulnerable. They never flinch, never so much as dare to drop their heads or drift away. They stare right on as if they stared at the face of God, as if their eyes were stuck on a wet electric cord. They weather it, even when Will is skittish and Hannibal is elusive, they weather it. An eye for an eye. It seems the least they can do to honor the bond they so surgically tesseracted.

After a few minutes, Hannibal picks up speed and Will can't keep silent anymore. It punches out of him, arousal does, and he can feel the fraying ropes of reason unspool. The sun is strong, but it can't be more than one in the afternoon. Lunch hour still, more so in Italy where people seem to protract lunch until dinner, and dinner until dawn.

He places a hand on Hannibal’s lower back, and immediately he goes still, head canted into a question.

“Just—slower,” Will struggles to swallow. “Just go slower.”

Which is code for “don’t rush along. Wait. Stay.” This dialect is cuneiform. They both signal it, but neither ever speaks it.

Gingerly, Hannibal hoists Will into his lap, mindful not to separate their bodies. It's a magic trick, the fluent display of strength and skill, like most things are with Hannibal.

They clung to each other, chins buried in each other’s hair. Hannibal rocks quietly inside him, almost unconsciously, setting his pace to Will’s heart and effectively slowing it down. He runs a thumb over the shell of Will's ear, thoughtfully mapping its missing tip, and Will giggles, fond and grateful, the gentlest sound his body has ever produced.

It startles him. Hannibal opens a hand between his shoulder blades, breathes into his ear, "Little beast. Little beast, I have you. Can you feel it? I won't let you go."

That's the moment sex pivots into something else. Sex has always been a means of communicating, of bargaining grudges and shortcomings. But this act of forcing their bodies into becoming umbilically one and staying that way, in stasis, it’s different. It’s not sex, Will is stubborn about this finer point because he knows Hannibal, in his own crisp aloofness, cherishes the distinction too. It’s not sex, it’s understanding, and it lasts beyond Hannibal’s cock wilting or Will’s shoulder cramping up.

“You could make this easier for me, you know?”
Hannibal lets his head fall against Will’s cheek, a measured pressure.

“Could I?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Do I? I imagine it depends greatly on how you define ‘ease’.”

“Of course you do, Doctor. You know everything about me.”

“Not everything. Not always.”

Hannibal tightens the hold around Will's ribs, painfully so, and it is as close as to an admission as they both are ever gonna get, Will wages. That they know there’s a storm brewing between them, but like any other natural disaster there’s no way to hinder their path. You pack up and leave, or you hunker down and weather it.

By the hardness of Hannibal’s grip, inside and out, Will believes they are going unto the breach. Once more.

(Don't act surprised, Will. You married a warrior. Calling me a monster doesn't make you saner. It makes you smaller.)

He could tell him, of course. He could tell Hannibal about the recurrent dreams where he eviscerates him in graphic and creative detail, tell him that the voices have come back, about the tap-dancing pleasure of giving in to madness, just a little bit, just for a little while. He would take it in stride. (Likely.) He was a psychiatrist, for christ’s sakes. (Once upon a time.) And he did it before, didn’t it? When Will told him he was cracking up, back in the French Alps, he took it to heart, (well...), or as to heart as a murderer like Hannibal can take things that displease him. He had shielded Will, or at least endeavored to shield him, to steer him into greener pastures, away from all the scintillating mounds of artery-red that kept him up at night. (He did, didn't he?)

He could tell him, of course. But instead Will quips, “You are my husband. It’s part of the job description.”

“What is?”

“To be mindful not to bring new flames to where you took old ones.”

It’s a half-lie, a white one, but it shouldn’t matter if they both know it. The truth is heavier and too much complex for a moment so fragile with happiness.

“I did no such thing!” Hannibal sounds affronted, but Will could swear new smile lines cropped up around his eyes since last night.

Will brushes their noses together. "Yeah you did." Playful, but desperate too. "Don't lie to me."

People say familiarity breeds contempt, but what they won’t tell you is that it breeds madness more, and that madness can be a searing thing when shared, emboldening you to graze the sun.

"Will. You are not a flame. You're the Morning Star.”

Will snorts at the man inside him.

“If I’m Lucifer, what are you?”
“Merely his consort.”

Will grins, a metal thing, warped but warm to the touch.

“Then it seems you haven’t quite gotten the hang of marriage, m’dear.”

Hannibal dips his head to place a kiss on Will’s aching shoulder. It seems so gentle, so void of guile, Will’s stomach drops.

“I wouldn’t know, Will. You are my first.”

With both hands, Will twists Hannibal’s skull until their lips align.

“You are going to miss your appointment,” he spits. It comes out with a little more exuberance than he intended.

Madness must have a softer side, an underbelly where lightning and the northern wind take a respite, avoid a landfall. There must be such a place, Will tells himself biting back tears, because we are in it. He doesn’t know why he feels like crying now of all moments in his tumultuous life, but it is now, bracketed by Hannibal’s silvery hair, the lines on his face deep with the knowledge of Will’s love, that it comes over him. It comes over him fast and hard like it hadn’t in years. The crushing torque of their co-dependency, the spectacular spinning wheel of their folie à deux.

Hannibal’s breath fans over Will’s face in sputters. They have yet to go soft, but arousal has simmered down into one focused point, so that all feeling seems constricted to their lungs.

“My only standing appointment is with you,” he says and it’s a fugitive thing, whispered under the canopy of mingled hair, Will’s thumbs smoothing rhythmically over his cheekbones. “Must I remind you every day?”

“Yes but for how long?”

There’s no hesitation this time, no scenic routes. The words are gunshot and defibrillation, and they hit Will like both.

“Till death do us part.”

(Of course. Madness knows no ending but its own, the eating of its proverbial tail.)

Once, when he was in a bad way, Will had told Hannibal he thought he was falling apart.

“Let go,” he had said. “I will catch you when you fall.”

“Will you?,” Will had peeked from under a sincerely unwashed sweater and Hannibal had swept the dirty hair off his ruddy face and smiled his most vanquishing smile.

“Of course, Will. Haven’t I always?”

It was a passing reminder of the roiling Atlantic, the glass house, the Tennessee interstate, made jokingly even, but it fell so heavy-set with intent and certainty Will just nodded before confiding into his ear: “I can’t stop thinking about killing,” and Hannibal had barely vacillated in petting his back, god bless him, catching himself right before his breath had gone noticeably shallow.

Now, again at the mercy of his care (love, Will, it’s love and you know it), Will cranes his neck to kiss Hannibal properly, to plant moisture on the scar carved on his windpipe. The air clouds over with memories. They remember, they both remember the night Will cut that mark into Hannibal’s
skin, the couch springs digging into their thighs, Hannibal’s teeth sinking into Will’s nape.

The shudder running down Hannibal’s spine volleys into Will’s toes, forming a little circuit of panicky desire. Memory, like madness, can be highly contagious.

Will gathers the longer bangs around Hannibal’s temples, and yanks them back. They hold eye contact like they always did but seemed to have momentarily forgotten was a possibility. Their secret weapon, intimate knowledge: silently sourced and viscerally exhausting.

This time it makes Will smile, free and earnest and daring. Probing Hannibal’s mind feels like venturing into a wild scented garden after months confined to a sickbed.

“Till death do us part, you say?” He boldly places Hannibal’s hands on his abdomen, presses them into the old incision scar. “What are you waiting for then? Kill me, you coward.”

(That, I reckon, should take at least until mid-afternoon, sonny boy.)
Somme, France

Chapter Summary

Part II of III

Murder Husbands, husbanding: a piece in 7 variations.

Chapter Notes

This became a part 2 of 3 because frugal writing is *not* my strong suit.

People still here, you are a blessing. If you are here for rapidly approaching closure, this is not your day.

People commenting, this is for you. Because, honestly, after a months-long hiatus and over 50k words produced for my own work, I wouldn't have the energy to be back if it weren't for you. Writing can be a strange endeavor when you've known the ending of what you are writing for so long. It stops being about doing it for yourself, like it is earlier on. I am here now mostly because I want to share that ending with you. So, that you are here now, talking back, when I have spent over a year carrying this story around, means the world to me.

That said, we are going back in time. This and the next chapter are a fairytale wrapped in French countryside that tie in many canon and past references. They are also tragically domestic.

In the end, some chapters bleed out of me, some are pried out with pliers. This was both. The next one is more of the latter, so it may take me a month or two to be back. But I'll be back, I promise.

So buckle up, my friends. It's gonna be a moody ride.

One for sorrow
Two for mirth
Three for a funeral
Four for a birth

Five for heaven
Six for hell
Seven for the devil, his own self.

1. for Sorrow
Their first house sprung tall and big-boned, three stories of unused, crooked space sitting in sprawling marshland. The grounds were burnt down to fog and frostbite when they arrived in the bitter tail of December, but Will could see it, in his mind’s eye, the fields amuck with red poppies and gold wheat come springtime.

Slumped on a somber slope, the wooden house oversaw miles and miles of empty land, a regiment of black trees drawing an ominous gash in any otherwise pale horizon. It didn’t matter where their property line began and ended. They would never see another human being again unless they sought after their company.

It shouldn’t have surprised him that instead of fleeing to some obscure country, Hannibal had merely moved them a few hundred miles up the French northern border. Purloined letters. They had been purloined letters all their lives, eking out livings hiding in plain sight. Crime scenes and emergency rooms, broken marriages and even more broken bodies. Little fixes, little bursts of teeth peeking through the mask.

They had that in common, Will and his psychiatrist, Hannibal and his husband, but so did killers and soldiers. And Will was under no illusions that the house Hannibal unlocked with a rusty set of keys hadn’t been home to both before.

Houses are like people: they remember what was done to them, if not in their memory, then in their muscle. So it was with little surprise that Will walked into the enormous vacant structure and read it for what it was: a sort of brick and mortar grave, down to the sooty marks on its buttresses, and the pencilled scratches on its walls.

“Louis P.L. 168cm,” it read. “Jean 19,” it read, “177cm 14 July 1916,” and “O la la pédé,” and “Marais était ici,” and “Dear god be done already!” it read, carved around the kitchen sink, inked on the marble panels of the unfurnished parlor room, etched on the woodwork around the fireplace. Countless lines and scribbles in impossibly faded handwriting, distress signs encased in resin and graphite and stone, milkweed floss forced out of the past so Will could see, could witness the panic and the fear and the longing in real time, in the present, in his veins, on the tip of his fingers and the dendrites of his neurons.

Will fondled them all, each and every one, as Hannibal flitted around the rooms pulling sheet after sheet off velvet settees and rot-eaten medicine cabinets, disturbing the dust and the winter night with his lovely lovely hands.

It hurt to breathe all of a sudden, the dust caught in his throat, his shoulders and cheek and stomach throbbing.

From the front porch, a half-collapsed mess of blackened wood, Will could smell the river, and farther down, the road, and then, nestled together and spread apart, the wet limestone and worn-down engravings, many nameless and moldy, and covered with sorrow and shame and neglect too, the garden variety mildew of history.

The gravestones would reach for more miles than Will’s heart could count. He didn’t need to find them to see them, although he already knew he would, on a run or an errand or a hunt, alone or not, he knew he would find them, one way or another, the whole thousands of them. Louis and Jean and all the others would be there, whispering still of bombs and bayonets and trenches, and the oddly soft comfort of bodies in fatigues thrown together under muggy weather and khaki tarps, the night sky so clear and so wide that far up north stars became companiable compasses crafted out of dead light.

Whispering still about the shockingly easy way death came and blood smelled, intimate and
prosaic and finally quietening, when even machine guns went to sleep.

“Will.”

The light brush of Hannibal’s fingers startled him. He must have lost time, standing there talking to the dead. He couldn’t tell, though. He looked up, searching for a sense of time or place, but no so luck. Even the sky was vacuumed out of stars.

Will exhaled, the night air cool and unforgiving.

“How many times did this place get bombed, Hannibal?”

Hannibal folded both hands behind his back, straightened his spine. A gentleman surveying his new domain. “Twice. If I’m not mistaken.”

Will wondered if that would be his husband now, the mild-mannered country squire. If Hannibal would morph with the house like predators merged with the wild.

“Not too dire for the Somme, wouldn’t you say?” he added after a calculated pause, and Will could hear the tingle of smugness in the back of his throat, the pleasure of a good pun begging to crawl out.

Unamused, Will kept his eyes on the dense forested bleakness. A chill ran up his bare arms, “You brought me to a battlefield.”

Before he could hold his elbows up to his chest, a tailored jacket had been placed over his shoulders.

“Yes.”

“A hospice too, if those marks on the wall are anything to go by.”

Hannibal smiled, small and thin, and infinitely pleased. “They are.”

Will nodded. The dead whispered some more, gossip about the two strange men who had taken up the old asylum over by the marsh. And then, without warning (always without warning) Hannibal’s hands were on him, on his hips, and his neck, and his hair, and then lower, below, inside, outside, rubbing him so hard and rough Will’s breath caught and held until his lungs ached with dryness. It was painful and pointless to fight, and Will found himself lacking the strength to do either.

Wedged between the door and Hannibal’s chest, he chose to slump forward, into the smell of him, vibrant and animal under his armpits where the sweat of the day pooled, forceful and welcoming too, in that endlessly reassuring manner of his, that he was flesh and bone and solid like only structures made to last, only structures that have been through war, can be.

When Will finally dared to look down, Hannibal’s hand had stilled around the both of them. The cold air felt spiced with the heavy scent of their sex, liquid and buttery and alive, alive, alive, so alive, the ponding in Will’s head bragged.

A tendon twitched in Hannibal’s thumb as he caressed the softening curve of Will’s cock. He seemed reluctant to let go, to let the moment pass. Will made to lean up, intending perhaps to kiss the patch of bare skin revealed around Hannibal’s neck, where a button had popped open. But before he could complete the motion, Hannibal’s fingers were pressed against his mouth.

“Us the living, Will,” he rasped, “Us the living,” cheeks flushed a bruised red, eyes bloodshot and
filmy with grit and something else that always managed to send Will’s stomach aflutter, with terror or want was never a sure thing to say, but he found himself parting his lips anyway, sucking the grime and semen off Hannibal’s fingers, the dust and the memories and the fear that came off the land and off their bodies, pulling at it until both their knees threatened to sag and cave in.

That night they slept on the attic floor, the only carpeted room in the house. The warmest one too, according to Hannibal, who dispensed practical construction advice while stripping down to his underwear and crouching in a partially successful attempt not to hit his head on the low-hanging ceiling.

He spread the herringbone blanket for Will to lie on first, and Will, overtired and hungry, decided to indulge him the belief that they could feel cold when in all certainty they would spend the night wrapped around each other so tightly, no draft or mist could ever find passage between their skin.

2. for Mirth

For the first few weeks, Will gets up with the sun and runs.

He runs far and fast, mile upon mile of woodsy desolation, the sharp tongue of winter on his naked neck.

The sound the frozen black ground makes under his feet cannot silence the dead. The dead are chatty with the enthusiasm of being finally heard, their voices squeaky with underuse. With or without a gravestone to mark where their bones fell, they are scattered under the soil, and when the wind rustles through skeletal branches, Will can hear them all clear as a whistle, asking in Parisian French and rural German, in Breton and Prussian accents, how cold is the sun today and how warm was his coffee that morning and what texture is skin and hair and blood because they have long forgotten it. They ponder if it’s wise for Will to run at dawn without a thicker coat or to leave Hannibal unaccompanied for so many hours.

They sing and wail and muse what to name the particular intention behind the decision to confine an empath to a natural graveyard, a madman to an open-field holding over ten thousand souls. They quarrel if there can be love between beasts, if man is the cruelest beast of all and so only monsters are truly free to love without bounds. They quarrel and Will runs and runs until he can’t taper the burn in his gut any longer.

At home, Hannibal spends all his time in the spacious kitchen, all glass windows and sanded surfaces. Within days, there are blue hydrangeas on the large windowsills, embroidered cloth napkins, and rows upon rows of spices labelled in flamboyantly looped script. Will finds him there, always, dressed in earth tones, julienning vegetables, pickling peppers, jamming oranges, polishing down old brass pitchers and porcelain plates he decorates every afternoon with freshly baked breads and cream-speckled cakes. The air in the house is always lively with the smells of cooking, of quicklime, of high-strung Italian sopranos Hannibal dug out with a victrola from some closet in the basement.

At first Will lingered in the threshold, unsure of where to put his feet as Hannibal scrubbed the white floor tiles on hands and knees, waltzing between grinding beans and heating filtered water, absent, aloof, delighted. It took Will a few days to realize Hannibal must have missed having a kitchen of his own, that it had been over five years since he had cooked without being surveilled, uneasy, alone.

In all honesty, it took the dead telling him that the nervy energy permeating their newfound
happiness might be that of the recently released once long incarcerated. And Hannibal, Will knew too well, hadn’t just been a ward of the state for years on end. He had been Will’s.

So every morning when the sun tipped west, Will would slip back to the house, pull off the baggy clothes Hannibal had bought off the back of a van somewhere in Verdun, and press his nose to the dimple on Hannibal’s nape (splenius capitis, a blight French voice chimed in), breathing in cardamon, cinnamon, salt, malt, flour, cream, thyme, the infinite combinations of fruits and vegetables and small game the man conjured while Will ran with the dead.

Invariably Hannibal would cease sifting, scalloping, juicing for a brief moment, his hands devoted to bringing Will’s around his waist and over his navel. They would stay suspended there, settled in the sun-bleached kitchen, the frigid morning about to slide into a sterile afternoon, breathing each other in, a study in mirth and gratitude until, invariably, Will pulled away first, his diaphragm relaxing, his limbs and lungs supple with the sweetest weight.

He would grab a pear or an apple off the wicker basket and sit on the counter across from Hannibal to watch him cook. If he was lucky, Hannibal would turn the scratchy record player on and tell him all about Caruso and Lanza and Calve while Will nodded and feigned ignorance.

Sometimes Will told him about the dead out on the fields.

“What do you hear them say?”

Will shrugged. Emma Calve bellowed “Trois Chansons pour les Tout-Petits” under Hannibal’s rapid chopping.

“It is all garbled,” Will lied. “Like radio stations moving in and out while you drive through the desert.”

Hannibal turned back to the carrots, seeming to mull the words over. Calve moved on to sing about wretched lovers in the French countryside.

“Do you still hear your father?”

Will’s nose scrunched. It was a particular acid apple. “Are you my psychiatrist now?”

“Just a curious spouse.” Hannibal returned, scrapping potato peelings off the cutting board. The curve of his spine, Will thought, so perfectly at ease. So vulnerable in its newfound comfort.

The silence stretched. It was a funny-shaped pit, the apple’s. Will inspected it, wondering if it came from Garonne, or farther still, from Spain or Portugal.

“Conversations with the dead are bound never to end, Will.”

“You would know.”

It was an uncharacteristically stormy day. Will stared at the colossal glass-windows. Like a greenhouse. He wondered if once, in its many previous lives, their kitchen had been a sunroom, designed to improve the last days of shellshocked soldiers.

“Because I am a killer?”

Will turned his gaze to Hannibal. His face, placidly attending to vegetables. But his back had a small hitch now, a depressed, defensive ridge.
Will sighed. “Because you’re an orphan, Hannibal.”

The huff was as small as the hitch on his spine, and it seemed smaller still when he said, “It used to be my voice in your head, Will. Once upon a time.”

Definitely too tart for salads or plain eating. Perhaps a Tarte Tatin. French apple pie would be something Hannibal could execute exquisitely upon request. Will thought to be sure of it, now that Hannibal had become so transparent.

“Well. You lost that privilege when you put me in jail.”

“No. I lost that privilege when I did not die.”

It occurred to Will again that, like a shopwindow, their transparency was double-sided. The idea—to be seen at all times, anywhere—was more unsettling than expected. Will considered not finishing the bitter apple after all. Just have a pear instead.

“Will?”

“I heard you.” The pears were right next to Hannibal’s knife. Apple it was, it seemed. “Are you suggesting I only hear my father because I feel responsible for his death?”

Hannibal’s shoes were brown, some type of leather loafers. His feet, impeccable and poised, the tip of a white apron hovering over his knees. The record had finished, the raggedy itch the only sound in the kitchen. Hannibal did always enjoy to punctuate his speeches with dramatic silences.

“Will, you don’t have to fulfill a prophesy. Your desires do not have to be inherited madness, nor must they doom you to repeat the past. Your history is not your future. You are free.”

“Now you really sound like a shrink.”

“Will,” and there was a unique intentionality to the way Hannibal shaped his mouth around Will’s name once they got married, one that verbally translated how Hannibal used to look at him across the prison glass. “Conversations with the dead never end, not because the interlocutors are absent, but because they cannot talk back.”

The cool tiles sent a shock up his spine when Will slammed off the counter. Shoes or socks had been forgotten in the hurry to get to the kitchen. What other protective gear had he been oblivious to put on in this mad dash to believe a sadistic beast could be tamed into a trusted companion?

“So I’m crazy because I’m talking to myself?” Will threw the exposed core in the trash. Next to the potato peels and beheaded carrot tops you go. You pathetically little ravaged thing. “Right. Let’s settle on that then.”

He managed to get halfway through the hallway before Hannibal said anything back, and yet Will could still hear the firmly mild voice carrying over the closing door,

“Or let’s not.”

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The following day Hannibal ventured into the closest metropolitan area for supplies, abandoning the weekly trips to local markets and farm stands. Will never joined. It isn’t safe yet, he said. Rest, he said. Allow me to take care of this, he stated.
Will left the house before sunrise. Hannibal laid on his back in what did not amount to a passible impersonation of sleep by neither of their accounts.

Through the dim-lit forest, the dead nagged and groused, listing the ways in which people managed to disappoint, to get hurt, to turn into thin air. Will kept his head down and ran until his toes blistered.

When he returned home to a silent kitchen, he decided to go to bed.

It was dark out when he woke up, rain and hail smashing against the oval window on the attic wall. The silence had legs and arms and pressed heavy against his chest.

Will sunk into the mattress, the stench of his sweat-drenched clothes seeping into the baby-blue flannel, and there was a petty sense of victory to be found in defiling freshly laundered sheets. He remembered the feeling from his Moosehead Lake days: the stolen pleasures of the disempowered.

It took him much too long to realize he was not alone.

“Hello stranger,” Will greeted into the concave darkness, and the darkness sighed back, “Hello Will.”

The shadow that peeled off the wall was tall and broad and black, and for a moment Will could have sworn horns ribboned out of its skull. It came closer and closer with a clicking sound, the white in its eyes nearly glossy in the matte darkness.

Will held its breath, shuddered as the mattress dipped. When he opened his eyes, the shadow had shifted into a scythed shape, curled on its side. It had knees now, and shoulders, and blood splattered on its high cheekbones. It had a smile too, invisible like a folktale, that curved around the edges. Will touched its mouth.

“Why did you take so long?”

“I came as soon as I could.”

Dipping its chin, the creature caught Will’s thumb between his teeth. Will followed the movement with his eyes: scuffed knuckles, blood specks gathering under its septum. An unexpected setback.

Something inside Will stretched, long and thin, like a pocket knife. He careened until their noses brushed. The smell of upturned earth—mud and petrichor and rotten leaves—and beneath it, ripped flesh, freshly rendered.

Will put his arms around the man, pulled him deep into his chest. The man felt warm and soggy with humanness.

“Stay here.”

The man released a fractional intake of breath, not a sigh nor a sneer, but something in between.

“Where else would I go, Will?”

“You have anywhere to go.”

The indenture of lips dug against his throat, and for one breathless instant, Will expected to feel skin separate from musculature. Instead, the man inhaled and pushed farther into Will’s reach, so close Will could now loop both arms around his waist.
“But home is where the heart is,” the man yawned and Will laughed into the crown of chestnut hair.

“What’s for dinner then? Or will it spoil the surprise?”

The man pulled back enough for Will to catch his eye. Gleaming, secretive with delights Will could never fully grasp were they so self-sufficiently conceived, Hannibal replied,

“Coeur de boeuf a la Tripieres.”

The beauty of madness must be to see ours reflected on someone else, Will realized suddenly.

(God, is that what the dead see in me? The madness of history pinpricked into one bleeding consciousness?)

Will leaned in, slipping a knee between Hannibal’s legs.

“Tell me,” he whispered directly into Hannibal’s mouth, half-opened, expectant and lewd. “Tell me everything about the meat.”

3. for a Funeral

One day, Will woke up alone.

It had been so long since he had found himself in an empty bed that his first reaction wasn’t alarm or loneliness, but confusion. For a moment he laid there in the windy womb of their attic and believed to be somewhere between Wolf Trap and Baltimore’s State Hospital for the Criminal Insane. It was the first time in months that their bed—a borrowed standard-issued single-person hospital bed, three bars on each side—felt absolutely alien, ill-fitting, strange.

Will would never forget that dawn nor that feeling, no matter what else would come to pass between them. He knew it then, and later too, when he found Hannibal standing stiffly at the bottom of the stairs.

“I have a gift,” he said ominously. “You may not approve of it,” he pointed at the basement door. Ominously.

Masses of blood and limbs hanging from meat hooks, plastic-wrapped walls and the squelching of caving flesh flashed rather quickly before Will’s eyes. So bleary he must have felt in the early morning hours that any attempts at concealing his thoughts were immediately lost on Hannibal. Because Hannibal smiled, with teeth and eyebrows and shoulders relaxing in their sockets. Putting a hand on Will’s lower back, he quipped,

“Or perhaps you will be disappointed with how acceptable my gift will seem. Now.”

“If so,” Will grunted, rubbing his eyes and trying not to trip on the narrow stairs, “I am blaming it on your theatrics.”

It was a massacre of sorts, if surgically carried out. The cogs and the wheels and the faces lined up on the massive worktable, the synthetic oils labelled in a dearly familiar script. A myriad of grandfather clocks and wristwatches and brooch watches all gutted and splayed. For Will. For Will’s enjoyment.
“Oh,” Will said, thumbing a decidedly Victorian magnifying glass. He retuned his hands to his pockets immediately.

“Oh?”

Will turned and found Hannibal much closer than he expected, lingering just by his elbow. The stiffness had returned, but only to the corner of his lips.

Looking at that cinched mouth made Will feel mean and very tired, like an old dog without a place to lay his bones.

“Yeah,” Will let his head fall back, nuzzling Hannibal’s neck. “Oh.”

In that instant, stuck in time as they felt to be, Will wondered if Hannibal knew that life had not given him many chances to learn the words to express gratitude, but that his body did, with a type of animal urgency, wish to tell him all the same.

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Every evening after dinner, Will goes to the basement to piece clocks back together. Sometimes Hannibal joins him, sitting with a book on what had once been a dentist’s chair.

They stay there, in the iridescent glow of halogen lights, listening to the rain fall and clocks whirr, and for a while it’s good. For a while, the past is gone and the dead are quiet.

Every night, Will climbs up to their room later than Hannibal, only to find him awaiting with the first aid kit already by his side. Will does not know when it first began, the ritual of offering his mangled hands up for Hannibal to assess and bandage, but somewhere along the harshest patches of winter it had developed into a ritual, a way of bonding without words.

Without sex too, although sitting with Hannibal kneeled between his legs, Will could never avoid an avowal of awe and arousal. It was fondness, he knew of course, a dizzying kind of love he had never fallen victim to before. Before, the conditions hadn’t been ideal. But now it seemed to sprout at every inch in every crack, like mildew or poison ivy.

Unsurprisingly, Hannibal lived up to his medical training, so if sometimes Will played fast and loose with a box cutter it was no one’s business but his own. He slept better anyway, with Hannibal nestled around him, his hands and hair smelling beautifully of iodine. It was nothing new, nothing they hadn’t done before, playing a game of chicken, a round of doctor and patient. Only now they did it at home, in shirtsleeves, and love sat between them as they huddled on their child-sized bed and whispered out to the stars.

Hannibal seemed to treasure the ritual too, if the added garnishes were anything to go by. A bottle of vintage Port, a box of imported truffles, strawberries dipped in rich German chocolate, once a carton of Cuban cigars. They poked the porthole open and let the frosted wind drift in, the smells of mulched woods mixing with candle wax and tawny smoke.

“I thought you’d be the type to find drinking in bed distasteful,” Will blurted late one night, drunk and distracted by the weight of Hannibal’s shoulder on his shoulder, a bony ankle thrown over his shin in such a casual display of familiarity it nearly drove Will to tears. It was the wine. A strong, forward Merlot which made him feel weak in the knees.

“You are in in bed with me,” Hannibal slurred, accent oddly crisp. “How could I ever find that distasteful?”
When it comes to happiness, sometimes all one can do is relent. Even a stranger, a foreigner to the concept itself, must, if just for a moment, relent. Because how can one say with confidence, I bested the devil, if one never so much as tried His fruit?

Snagged in the groove of Hannibal’s neck, Will found himself leaning in and breathing out,

“I am so in love with you.”

And it seemed easy, cocooned in shadows and ghosts and hydroid peroxide, it seemed so criminally easy to just admit it. Natural even.

Hannibal huffed, a little contented, resigned, defeated noise.

“So am I.”

“It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?”

“Utterly preposterous,” Hannibal rejoined, bubbling a hiccupy sort of laughter that swept Will up until they both were chuckling at nothing in particular. It almost hurt, Will noticed, pushing up against the metal headboard.

“This shouldn’t be allowed to happen, you know?”

“What shouldn’t?”, Hannibal asked, the glass flute dancing in his tapered fingers. The moonlight rendered his fingernails transparent, and with claustrophobic clarity, Will thought that if he could, he would live under those nail-beds for all eternity.

“You. Me. Us. Two middle-aged antisocial personalities who have caused so much pain to so many people shouldn’t be allowed to find happiness. We are beasts, Hannibal, not men, and as such should not enjoy the privileges God bestowed upon His children.”

Hannibal regarded him, assertive with scapular precision, and Will braced for the impending monologue on the perks of existing outside regulatory bounds.

The low-humming chuckle caught him off guard. Hannibal’s face brightened, hazy with mellowed fondness. Cupping Will’s ears, he pushed their foreheads together clumsily. His breath reeked of rust and ashes, his stubble prickled Will’s chin. It hurt to be this close.

“Little beast,” he rumbled, and those two words held the weight of so many many more, such an enormity of them that Will’s body involuntarily folded forward, burrowing further into Hannibal’s side.

“You are mine, little beast,” flitted through Will’s hair in lovingly fragmented English. “Mine and mine alone.”

And it was only then that Will could find in himself to accept that love for Hannibal would always be just a means to erase all boundaries, all lines, all distinctions between self and other, and that if he could, if physics allowed him, he too would live inside Will. As a tumor, or a gland, or a starling.

Anything that would oblige him in and keep him from ever being cast out again.

“Doesn’t it seem inelegant to you,” Will pressed on, nose to heart, “that, of all of God’s creation, we should be the ones allowed to experience such grace?”
“Of all our sins, I do not imagine God would judge us the harshest for love.”

Will looked up, at the tilted profile of messy russet hair.

“Are you drunk?”

“Mildly,” Hannibal admitted. “Are you happy?”

“Madly.”

Will reached out and took his hand—a killer’s hand, a healer’s hand, a hand with a ring carved in its phalange—into his own hand. I carry his heart in this hand, Will thought, looking at the fit of their fingers pressed together. I hold it in my hand.

“Besides,” Hannibal added slowly, never one to stray from a contentious conversation. “If God did not wish His creation to experience love, He wouldn’t have given us such ability.”

“But what if love is a disease? Or rather, the symptom of a larger disease?”

“Do you believe to be sick, Will?”

“I believe to be mad.”

“Ah!” Hannibal tutted. “Madness is a social construction.”

“So you don’t deny it.”

“Deny what?”

“That I am mad.”

“You are an extraordinarily perceptive individual, Will, and porous. Life hasn’t always been kind to you either. I expect it will take a fair amount of time to heal once you allow yourself to feel freely.”

“That’s not what you told Wally.”

Will could hear the frown in Hannibal’s voice, “Who?”

“Molly’s son? Wally?”

“Oh, was that his name then? Honestly, Will. Homosexuality is hardly a disease.”

It seemed unlikely that a man of prodigious memory like Hannibal would forget such a pointed detail, but then again Will knew that kindness often came in the guise of willing ignorance.

“I never actually thought of him—of us—like that.”

“Oh?” Hannibal paused midway refilling his glass. “How did you think of us then?”

Through the blur of alcohol, Will ventured, “Bonded.”

“And you and Miss Foster?”

Will frowned. “Married?”

“I see,” Hannibal stated, cold and final even as his grip on the wine bottle wavered.
“You can break a marriage,” Will clarified, reaching to steady the bottle on the nightstand. “You can’t break a bond.”

“Of course you can!” and he sounded affronted by the mere suggestion Will would think otherwise. It was an artifact from his Baltimore days, that inflection, the certainty of a psychopath in charge of someone else’s wellbeing.

“No. I don’t believe one can.” Will thought of Abigail, Jack, Bedelia, himself. All dead or scarred, irreversibly changed, bound by shared captivity. “Not with you anyway.”

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At the edge of their property, between the cypresses and oak trees, ran a shallow creek. In the early Spring, the smatter of red poppies and yellow dandelions could be seen from the kitchen windows.

Once it’s warm enough to lie on the ground, they rise together and meander there. Sometimes Hannibal would pack cucumber and watercress sandwiches, pickled pears, and hot coffee and they would breakfast by the waterside, Will’s fingers swirling in the clear cool water. Just because he doesn’t run, it doesn’t mean he can stay still.

As the days grow longer, Hannibal adds art supplies to the picnic basket and draws while Will naps on the blanket. Under the fecund ground, the dead sing about lovers reunited in Arcadia, about the beast trapped under the sea, a bride whose unfulfilled childhood turned bitter and vengeful.

Will also studies Hannibal when Hannibal cannot be bothered to remind himself he is not alone anymore. Hannibal, so lost in draining the life out of nature that he takes leave of his body, Hannibal who cannot sketch without glasses anymore, who resents the inequities his flesh puts his pride through, the slight tremor on his left hand, the residual headaches of eye-strain, the longer refractory periods. The accrued sensitivity to cold, like an old cat left out in the rain.

In so many ways, Hannibal, the middle-aged man in the bespoke grey trousers and oatmeal cardigan, reminds Will of his father’s cats, the skinny, mean ones that used to come around the trailer park in the dead of night, prowling for scraps and hissing at those who offered leftovers. Regal in their decline, and feral to their last breath.

Love is changing you, the dead threatened without clarity in the singular or plural of that pronoun, and Will would reach for Hannibal’s elbow and hold on, squeeze it until he’d put the pencil down and link their fingers together.

Once he stopped drawing, the silence was absolute and, for a little while, Will could breathe properly.

“There are moments I want you so much it frightens me,” Will would confess through gritted teeth. And Hannibal would say, “How come?,” patiently, always so sterling with patience.

“It feels—ever-flowing. Endless. A sea without horizon. I reach down to find its bottom and can only find pitch-black darkness. Whatever I feel for you feels slick and uncontainable.”

“Like an oil spill.”

“Or an open artery.”

Hannibal would never take the eyes off the top of the trees, the sky. It was a kindness, this type of assisted privacy.
“It shouldn’t scare you, Will,” he would counter at last, like clockwork, the dispensation of sensible advice.

“What shouldn’t?”

“Power.”

The image of Abigail visited him, just as she was as she died, drained and splattered, a confection of reds on whites.

“Is that what this is? Not love?”

“Perhaps love is part of it, a fuel,” Hannibal conceded. “But what you are describing is not an accelerant, Will. It’s a flame.”

The dead frowned. Will could hear their skin crinkle through the herringboned fibers.

“So I love you because you connect me to a source of power?”

“Of potential power, to be more exact,” Hannibal tapped Will’s knuckles, a maestro to the very end. “Waiting to be let free.”

Will shook his head, the tension roping around his temples like an iron leash.

“Some boxes are best left untouched, Pandora.”

“Someone must steal the fire from the gods,” Hannibal smirked and Will almost gave into the temptation of looking up to see it, the smug mischief. “Or would you rather live in darkness forever?”

“Are you in this hypothetical darkness?”

“I stand by your side, Will. Sickness and health, life and death, heaven or hell.”

Will turned the words in his mind, tested them for brittle corners. “I spent most of my life being afraid of seeing things, of being taken advantage of. Power presents a certain number of uncalculated risks.”

“Pleasures too.”

Ah. There it is. The “there there” that is nowhere to be found because Will keeps it under lock and key.

Will sits up for this. He drags their interlocked hands with him, into his lap. Hannibal still does not turn to regard him.

Will finds the nerve to ask, finally, what he always wanted to know: how good of a diagnostician Hannibal truly is.

“Do you know how dangerous I am?”

And there’s no laughter now, no dead whispering, no glibness. Will wonders if this is what madness ultimately feels like: to be beloved and bereft, alone and full of voices, all at once and forever.

“As much as one can estimate the depth of an ocean knee-deep in the shore,” Hannibal replies
solemnly, and one of their hand twitches. Will can’t tell which, they are so tightly woven together. 

“Does it frighten you?”

Hannibal shakes his head, brow bowing slightly.

“It excites me.”

“Is that one and the same for you?”

“Perhaps where you are concerned,” and it sounds like a confession, dragged out of the dark and dangerous.

Maybe, Will thinks, it’s not love but captivity, this thing they share. Maybe they are keeping each other prisoner, using love as an excuse to not unleash themselves in the world. Because if they let go, they’ll be torn apart, their time together cut short whether they want it or not.

And because then he knows it to be true, he says it aloud, “I will be the death of you, Hannibal. You know that, right? One way or another, I’ll get you killed.”

The dyed hair catches the early morning sun when he turns, the blond on the sides sprawling like wheat or gold, a child’s watercolor, a soft and crude thing. His eyes are empty, like an unfinished painting, but his mouth is surprisingly kind.

“Yes, Will. I know.”

Will can’t help brushing the fallen strands back, tuck them behind his ear.

“No regrets, Prometheus? No cold feet? It’s your funeral, after all.”

Hannibal leans into the gesture. Like a cat, a stray one, unaccustomed to tenderness and thus disdainful of it.

“Someone must steal the fire from the gods, little beast,” he winks. “Even if it costs him life and limb.”

“Or liver,” Will volleys back and Hannibal stutters a laugh, an aborted gesture, almost as if his body had betrayed him by finding itself so throughly amused.

4. for a Birth

It’s summer when his birthdate comes around, and although Will has grown leery of celebrating mortality, he cannot deny Hannibal an opportunity to cook. Not when there’s only the two of them now, Hannibal’s considerable gifts shrunk down to a meager audience of one.

All day the kitchen is rowdy with enthusiasm, the orchestra of clinking pots and pans and polished glassware, the needle spinning ceaselessly on the rickety turntable.

“Go easy on me,” Will warns when he visits from the basement, midday and the heat already unbearable. “I am hardly a young man.”

Hannibal smiles over his shoulder, flour up to his elbows, his overlong hair tied back in a sweaty ponytail.
It’s an endearing sight as any Will has ever seen, so he does to Hannibal what Hannibal does to him when he is the one arms-deep in clock oil: he walks his fingers along Hannibal’s shoulders, like little stick figures running through an imaginary line.

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Will had made no requests but when night falls, he puts his foot down.

“Must we?” Hannibal’s brow pinches, clearly pained as Will spreads the herringbone blanket on the kitchen floor.

“I didn’t like it the first time around either,” Will replies, smoothing the wrinkles on the wool. “But it grows on you.”

Hannibal, a very wise man, knew when a battle was stacked to be lost. So, balancing the wine glasses on the crook of his elbow, he began distributing dishes and utensils in a pleasant rectangular shape.

They sat across from each other, Hannibal doing his best to kneel elegantly while trying to eat vichyssoise off an unstable crystal bowl. By the second bottle of champagne, neither of them could keep up the pretense of comfort, nor feign any interest in dessert, a mighty delicate tower of flaky puffs filled with vanilla cream and spun sugar Will suspects to be inspired by some queen’s wedding cake.

After a long stretch of silence, Hannibal remarks, colloquial and unpretentious, over the rim of his half-empty glass, “I want you.”

And Will laughs, but it comes out unsteady.

“You already have me,” he fidgets, because they are alone in another empty house, kneeling on another kitchen floor, and for once there’s no blood between them. But that other thing is still there. The howling hunger, the imprint of death, that. That’s still there, knives in or knives out.

Alcohol can soften Hannibal, lend him a comical sort of pliancy. But it makes him limber too, in a manner closer to animals than people, and Will should do well not to forget it. Because when he blinks, he finds himself on his back, suddenly feeling every crevice of the uneven tile bite into his bones.

Above him, Hannibal’s eyes are shiny, an unnatural brightness that turns them black in the moonlight.

“But I still want you,” he growls and it swirls down Will’s spine, coiling in his gut.

He stares at the predator and the predator stares back, smiles, briefly acknowledging their equal standing. It feels like baptism, that shock of cold bright light.

(Purgatory, Will imagines, is to be deprived of Hannibal pouring pain into every hole puckered in his soul.)

Cradling a cheek, Will arches up into the beast’s warmth. It’s his warmth too, they are the same.

“Then what are you waiting for?,” he dares, right before throwing Hannibal off and pinning him down. “Kill me, you coward.”

And Hannibal laughs, unconditional and unfeeling, as he begins to strip them down.
He doesn’t let Will come until the morning, and by then Will can’t help but think the dead aren’t wrong to speak so hurtfully of desire. It is indeed a thing with teeth, closer to birth than death itself.
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That night, for the first time in a long long time, Will dreamt of a man that was not Hannibal.

They met in front of the Primavera, the man all sharp angles like a pencilled scribble, hands so pale and lithe you could see right through them. When the man dipped his head as if to kiss him, Will’s hands shot up between them. The wetness was shocking on his fingers, and then hot and trembling, the heart punched cleared out of the man's chest and lying smilingly on Will's palm.

With the precipitous sensation of falling, Will woke up. Mouth dry, Hannibal coiled around his waist, an erection so painful it hurt to breathe.

Lying very still, Will counted back to a hundred.
Dear lovely people: If you are still out there, reading from the great wide void, welcome back.

Life got overfull, I've missed you (characters included).

Thank you for being here. It's been a long drive.*

5. For Heaven

It began, as so often did between them, with food.

Meals that could not be just for two took over the dining room table, then the refrigerator shelves. Confections clearly not intended for leftovers multiplied, perishable cream puffs and chocolate mousses, dozens of jam jars not properly boiled shut.

Will looked around the cluttered kitchen and knew then, knew like he had always suspected, that monogamy could not provide satisfying audience nor counsel where a narcissist is concerned.

“I may as well take these to Madame Loin,” Hannibal observes while placing dishes in the sink, the windowsill garlanded with five steaming egg breads neither of them would eat. “It will be a shame to see them spoil.”

Will hums, leaning against the backdoor in overalls and muddy boots. He looks down at his nails. Chewed up and filled with garden soil. He hums and nods again as if he didn’t know what he knows, as if he hadn’t noticed Hannibal’s hair getting sleeker, his suits sharper, his steps brisker.

It had been three years, Will reminds himself. That’s as good a run as a ringmaster can ask of a predator to stay still.

Will picks an apple and tosses it up in the air, debating if he should let it fall only to have an excuse to walk into the kitchen without having to take his shoes off.

“They do proof so nicely in the Fall,” Hannibal runs a finger over the golden challahs, wistfully caressing the raisins peeking through the pale dough. The tenderness in the gesture fills Will with an emotion he can’t parse, that feels simultaneously familiar and too far gone to fully recover.

The sound of the apple crashing and rolling through the black-and-white tile diverts Hannibal’s attention immediately, a quick lash of his stiffly manicured hair. He pins Will with his stare, vacant in that starlit way Will has grown accustomed to, the stage curtain he always has on when coming back from his drives to-and-fro Paris, silver spectacles hiding exhaustion and poor night vision, the joy of a successful impersonation of human affability still blanketing him heavily, too heavily for Will to be able to recognize him, to see him, to even want to greet him at the door.
So he stopped being in the house when Hannibal got back, first from occasional outings, then bimonthly cultural engagements, concertos and art galleries that gave way to weekly dinner invitations.

“You are welcome to join,” Hannibal would invariably say by the front door, swirling a paisley scarf around his neck, car keys already in hand.

Will would look down at his dirty fingernails and run a hand over his unruly beard, his hair grown so long and wild Hannibal used to brush it before bed to prevent the curls from tangling into an impenetrable jungle.

“Briar Rose, Brian Rose,” Hannibal used to singsong against Will’s brow as he kneeled by the fireplace and rested his head on Hannibal’s lap. “How many men have died in the bramble of your hair?”

And Will would smile sleepily, chin tipped upwards for a kiss, the reply coming from under his lashes, “Only you, my sweet prince. Only you.”

Will winces and drops his eyes to the fallen apple, nestled against Hannibal’s socketed foot.

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It had all started with some pomegranate rugelach Hannibal gifted a woman he met when his Mercedes broke down on the road to Beauvais. She was an opera singer in Paris, Hannibal had told Will that same evening, excited over the novelty of company, of being able to finally dust off his shelved Italian.

(Will had tried. He had tried for months but found he couldn’t improve from what he had learned during their stint in Palermo. As with so many other things in his life, it seemed he had peaked then.)

For a while, every time Will shook his head by the front door feeling the grime burn under his fingernails, he had resented Hannibal. Not for his appetites but for having tricked Will into believing he could ever be enough. It’s a terrible prank to play on a loner, to draw him out into the world and teach him to crave for companionship, only to remind him later that companionship is a plural noun, built for many and not just two.

Will could never fully understand that need, the pull for noise and chatter and outward stimulation. For an audience. Ghosts were loud and the dead knew all the good tricks, so why bother with the living?

But Hannibal, he knew—had always known—was different. A performer, an extrovert at heart. The helmeted hair and the gilded three-piece suits went beautifully with his culinary sleights of hand. How could Will resent him for being what he was meant to be? A skilled prestidigitator with as many tricks as there were targets. To live among them, blending in and lurking by—really, what is a predator without its hunting?

And Will. Declawed, muzzled, and tamed in their birdcage of a home. He was safe there, the woods filled with old graves and no surprises, enough land to keep him busy.

But still. Not much of a catch.

(And what’s a predator without its live prey?)

Sometime last Fall, weeks into Hannibal’s social sauntering, Will had taken up gardening. He
chose the grove by the shallow creek, hidden behind the tall trees. On the spot where Hannibal had once sat and drawn, Will planted hemlock and sweet briar, sheltering a swatch of Japanese eggplant and thyme.

At first, the dead had grumbled at earth being upturned, but once seeds sprouted green their voice had grown quieter. Eventually they went mum altogether, so that in the early mornings and evenings when Will tended to the garden, cicadas was all he had. Not that he had any use for company. He was a loner after all, Will reminded himself, watering can in hand, the house strangely dour in the distance, sitting in the dark hill, all lights turned off.

He took a shovel to the ground and cracked it open with one single whack.

Some cultures failed, but others thrived. Tomatoes and belladonna, yew bushes and cherry laurel, purple mandrake and rosemary. Crammed, tall and veiny, in wired fences. Will was adamant about keeping all runners contained, not let them grow feet of their own. He thought of planting mushrooms too, when the weather turned humid, but it felt like a bad pun, one he didn’t have anyone to share with and turn mordant. So he didn’t: make the joke or seed the spores.

Instead, he had put his hands in his pockets and walked around, counting stars and thinking of hot tin roofs in Erie, Pennsylvania.

It was a short walk, circular and constricted by plastic plant cages. No wonder Hannibal longed to roam. Will’s domain kept shrinking and shrinking until you could barely hold it together on a herringbone blanket. It was no bigger than its circumference, no less geometrical or foreclosed.

Isolation had also shown Will that he liked order. Prior to being left alone so often, Will always supposed he mimicked his partners. Molly enjoyed a good mess the way only a lover of children and strays could, so Will had tolerated her unwashed dishes and unmade beds. Hannibal, on the other hand, couldn’t fall asleep if Will’s hair spilled between them in knots, so Will had kept his hair brushed and braided, his beard and fingernails clean and trimmed.

(When they made love, Hannibal used to suck on his fingers. “So I can still taste you,” he would hum. “In your dreams?” Will would tease, feeling weightless. And Hannibal would lay down on his chest, skin to skin, and lick the scar on his cheek. “In the back of my throat, under my tongue, inside my gut,” a low chant until Will started grinding up, helpless and desperate, all language finally lost to them.

Hannibal still tried to kiss him, mostly in the mornings and when they met in bed, but Will always ducked away. Kissing Hannibal made him feel weak in the knees. You can’t stand up for yourself if your knees are weak.)

The order Will had come to favor, however, was stiff with punishment. He knew that too, long before he began yanking the vines that dared to grow outside the marked cages, the runts that dried on the stalk. He would pull them out, one by one, with bare hands. Once he pulled so hard his palm caught in a wire, ripping from knuckle to wrist.

He had regarded the injury under the sterile moonlight, gauging how prone to infection it might be. It was an ugly mess of blood and jagged flesh. He should take it to Hannibal, have him take a look, maybe put some stitches in.

But across the lawn, the house loomed silent like the grave it had once been, like the grave it was always intended to become once Hannibal were gone. Standing alone in the shadows, Will remembered the conversation they had had that morning over local cheeses and imported sherry.
It had been raining softly, and Hannibal brought out the best china, the slim fit of his tan suit faultless over an ivory silk vest. Will half expected a Panama hat or a gold pocket-watch to make an appearance.

Instead, Hannibal had sat across from him in the oval sunroom, shirt two-buttons-too-many unbuttoned, and overtured,

“How would you feel if I took up employment in Paris? Part-time, of course.”

Will kept staring at the miniature cheeses Hannibal had plated for them. How perfectly even and contained they were, so unlike his flowerbeds. Not that Hannibal had seen them. No one had, not even the dead. Not that it mattered. The garden was not for anyone’s eyes but Will’s, anyways.

He must have remained quiet too long because Hannibal continued, less gently this time.

“I would be working as a consultant for a highly regarded private collector. I would have to stay over, likely twice a week—”

Hannibal smelled like an Indian summer, Will thought, hot asphalt, spicy and overly dry. Right on cue, his mouth watered. Will kept his head down and nodded. He had stopped listening a while ago. What was he supposed to say? It wasn’t a question. Hannibal didn’t ask questions he already knew the answer to.

“Will,” Hannibal had clipped, crossing and uncrossing his legs. Will knew that sound better than he knew his own name’s. “Would you consider spending two nights a week in Paris?”

Will jerked his head up and Hannibal swam into focus. How odd. If he hadn’t known better he would have believed to be back in Baltimore, sitting across from a doll-like doctor. Tender and impossible, that painful memory was.

“Why would I want to do that?,” he said at last.

Hannibal inhaled, long and steady, a deliberately controlled movement.

“To be with me,” he breathed out.

“Do those people even know you’re married?”

“Should they?”

Will shrugged.

Leaning back and spreading both arms on each side of his chair, Hannibal had asked, “Do I look like a married man to you?”

Will gave him an once-over before turning his face back to the floor.

“Doesn’t matter what you look like, Hannibal. Only matters what you are.”

“And what am I?”

Will shrugged again. “Not here two nights a week, it seems.”

“Will, please—”

Will got up. His hands had suddenly gotten sweaty so he rubbed them down on his stained jeans.
He waved at the bay-windows, “I gotta water some plants.” Tipping the brim of an invisible hat, he had ambled through the front door before thinking of throwing over his shoulder, “See you around.”

That had been that. It seemed so very long ago. Rash too, but nothing he could do about it now, blood pooling on his elbow.

It was eerily bright that spring’s night, when Will had slipped through the cellar door and stood in the dim bathroom, bloody hands around a bottle of whiskey, eyeing the empty tub. It was as if, for an instant, time did reverse, but instead of Maine grief there was French insouciance, a sort of amused passivity only bystanders and sociopaths could enjoy. He wondered if Hannibal lived most of his days that way: feeling removed, inured, a brain built with an extra set of bone forts so nothing could truly touch him, nothing could really leave a dent.

Washing the blood away in the sink, Will considered if arriving at that placid indifference was his Heaven. If Heaven was acquiring the capacity to drift so far away from yourself, your inner voice becomes tinny like a ghost’s in a dream. If this was the best a man like him could ever hope for: a disinterest in life that kept murder at bay.

Towel in hand, Will wondered too if such revelation was ultimately Hannibal's doing: stuffing him full with love, only to teach him detachment through starvation, a brutal weening meant to serve as a cleansing, a lesson on godly self-sufficiency and indifference.

Well well well, Will told the reflection in the mirror, gaunt and stone-faced. People did not say he was a quick study for nothing.

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Accidentally, if not inadvertently, a new game had started that night. They had played many games over the years, and Will, an only child grown up among neglectful adults, knew all about keeping himself entertained with little more than a rhyme and some chickenwire. He didn’t mean to though, he told himself later, to catch Hannibal unawares. He didn’t mean to trick him into being vulnerable. Not like Hannibal had tricked him. Him, a loner, now loathsome of his own company.

The night of his first untreated injury, Will decided to school his body to seem so convincingly asleep Hannibal wouldn’t go noticing his wounded hand. Like the werewolf, he had mused wryly, in Little Red Riding’s bed.

When Hannibal came home smelling of other people’s houses, Will had lain on his side, hearing him strip down and put his clothes away. Hannibal’s bare skin, clammy with air conditioning, had sticked to Will’s t-shirt and boxers. He could smell alcohol in his breath too, where it rubbed against his nape. Rough hands came around his waist, rucking up his shirt. Hannibal did that sometimes, clutch a fist over Will’s breastplate while they slept. As if checking Will still had one: a pulse, a beat, a heart.

(In bed one winter, Hannibal had brushed their noses together and whispered, “Am I truly your one and only?” “Of course,” Will had replied, caressing the blunt scythe of his jaw. “Of course you are.” And Hannibal, improbably, had averted his eyes to the pillow and blushed. “Forever you think?” “Longer,” Will had sworn with a certainty only newlyweds and kamikazes could earnestly possess. “Much, much longer.”)

Even now, even as a reupholstered piece of cheap theatre, Will still wanted him. Loved him. Loved him too much for one person to carry alone. And that reminder was all it took to keep Will from giving himself away.
They stayed chevroned together for a good while. Will could feel Hannibal slip away, farther and farther, until his grip relented completely. It had made him sad, as if he was losing him again, as if all he ever did was choose between losing Hannibal or losing himself.

“Soon,” Will had repeated, the pins-and-needles in his arm keeping him awake much longer than usual. “Soon, the bathtub.”

But Will never made it to the bathtub. Not then, nor any other night.

Before he could slip out, a hand began tugging at the junction between neck and shoulder, a spastic open and closing. A cold nose followed, insistently burrowing behind his left ear.

God grant me patience, Will had mumbled, right before wetness seeped into his collar.

He would have recognized the sound a hurt animal makes anywhere in the world, let alone in his own bed. And because that part of him hadn’t changed, hadn’t dulled, hadn’t died yet, Will turned around and took Hannibal in his arms.

In the pale carryover light, he looked young and damaged, an orphaned fawn half starved out of his mind. But that’s not what he is, Will reasoned with a tinge of embarrassment, holding a serial killer while he suckled on frayed cotton.

Determined to keep him asleep, Will had pulled his t-shirt from Hannibal’s mouth and carefully replaced it with his thumb. Fuck you I love you you wild beast I love you too much entirely, Will muttered until he couldn’t keep his eyes open, couldn’t feel any sensation on the tip of his pruned finger.

In the morning, they had woken up spooled around each other, nose to nose, Hannibal’s breath on Will’s palm, still damp with hunger. They had locked eyes and done short work of their underwear, rutting hopelessly against each other, knees hamstrung by fabric, breathing each other’s air but never kissing, never looking away, not until Will took Hannibal’s bottom lip between his teeth and bit down, not until Hannibal began moaning too loud to feign sleep so Will gave up and gritted, “Just rip me apart, will you?”

Hannibal had come before Will did, shivering against his neck, and for one long moment, Will considered not coming at all.

From then on, Will had let it happen. Every other week, sometimes every other night. It depended. Will didn’t know on what exactly, just that it did. He told himself the game wasn’t intimate if they stayed on the surface, skin-level, some clothes on. That if they didn’t get inside each other Hannibal would stick around, would be paralyzed by the force of desire, homebound as a result of this magic spell Will was attempting to cast with his body.

It didn’t work. He should have known Hannibal immune to Old World trances.

(But Will tried. He seemed to be doing a fair share of that for years and years now.)

Meals did become more to scale, though. Stewed rabbits and stuffed pigeons, apple tarts just for two. But Hannibal still came and went, between Will’s thighs and from Will’s arms, and so Will conscripted himself to the garden, night after night, month after month, until the whole riverbank was crawling with ruby flowers and ripe tomatoes, the redness of them everywhere like a bleeding battlefield.

Sometimes Will would think of mincing belladonna, sprinkle some yew seeds in Hannibal’s jams. He did not know what stopped him: if the fear of being found out, or the fear of being trusted. Both
seemed unlivable in their repercussions.

There were also many other wounds Will never cleaned properly, the latest which had given him a mean fever. Hannibal had only discovered about that one because they happened to cross paths on the driveway in a chilly September twilight.

“You are bleeding,” Hannibal had remarked blankly, pointing at Will’s curled forearm.

“And you are not. What a dull day yours must have been.”

“Will...,” he had frowned, cheeks ruddy with the blast of wintery wind.

He looked exquisite, Will noticed, in a cream suit, brown Ulster coat, and tawny leather gloves. A Gatsby in the French countryside. Women and effete men would be fawning over him all night long, Will could just see it, the sparkly stream of drinks and compliments ribboning away. Blood too, if Hannibal were to be very very lucky.

Will had caught himself short of gawking, reminded they were only meeting due to the pursuit of opposite pleasures.

“Lock the front door when you return, will you?,” Will chided as he walked past him. “You left it unlocked last time.”

“I doubt anyone would survive breaking into our home, Will.”

“Not interested in finding out,” Will had hurled as he went in. “Lock the damn doors, Hannibal!”

Two days later, Hannibal had found him on the bathroom floor, unconscious and nearing a temperature of 106 degrees, the threshold of comas and brain damage.

---

Now when Hannibal bends to pick up the fallen apple, Will knows that’s what he sees: Will, burning up with the onset of sepsis, so far gone his memory has a 72-hour hole in it.

Unfortunately, he does remember coming to. It was dank and dusky, the smell of antiseptic so pungent Will believed to be back in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. A cannula hang from his left elbow and his head felt bruised and swimmy.

Before he could get his bearings, his body had scanned for Hannibal, panicking right before finding him across the room, draped against the door. Still dashing in his cream suit and leather gloves though something was different, slightly askew. Will couldn’t quite pinpoint what. The press in his pants not falling quite right, the slouch on his shoulders unbecoming.

Oh, it barreled through Will like an ambulance siren, shrill and portentous. So that’s what contempt looks like on my husband’s face.

Fumbling with his catheter, Will had pushed up against an unfamiliar headboard. Not their bedroom then, but some unoccupied guest-room. Will worried where Hannibal had been spending his nights, before deciding to cut to the chase. It had been a very long decade of playing charades. For once, Will couldn’t afford gambling with a loss.

“Hannibal, do you still—” Will paused, cleared his throat. Healed scars stung, in the shoulder, in the abdomen, in his cheek. His mouth went dry. It felt a hell lot like fear. “Have you fallen out of love with me?”
The weight of Hannibal’s undivided attention, even from a distance, even without heat, could knock the wind out of Will. Every single time.

Hannibal cocked his head to the side, hooking a hand under his chin with studied precision.

“No.”

It was too shadowy in the room for Will to see him properly, but he kept his eyes on Hannibal anyway. Open, he instructed himself, and steady. That’s the least you can do now. It’s all that you have left.

“Would you tell me if you had?”

“No,” a beat. “I would kill you.”

Will nodded. He didn’t know what to say to that.

“Do you want to kill me?”

Hannibal tipped his head the other way.

“I have considered it.”

Will didn’t know what to say to that either. Seemed settled, then.

“I see,” he said anyway.

Hannibal shifted against the wall, and the leather squeaked, a living dying thing.

“No you don’t.”

Will sighed. Hide-and-seek. There’s a game he knew too well.

“You know it’s easier to kill someone when they’re unconscious, right?” Will aimed for biting but likely landed on pleading. “Not to say politer. I thought you were a gentleman, Dr. Lecter.”

In two strides, Hannibal had crossed the room and depressed on the edge of the bed. The way he locked his hands over his bent knee spoke of an old impatience domesticated into a novel form of dueling: that of marital disputes.

“Will,” he declared, all bureaucratic efficiency. “I cannot continue bringing you back from the dead. I am tired.”


Will was at a loss. He didn’t know this game, this man, both dapper and worn out, armored and splayed open. He busied himself tracing the gold thread on the sheets. They had bought these together. On the eve of their first anniversary. The pattern spelled “forever” in Aramaic.

“I see,” he said again.

“No you don’t.”

Hannibal’s voice edged hard and tart. Will felt it slither down his mouth, withering tissue as it settled down in his groin.

He spread his hands on the covers, right where the last letter twirled. He told that letter, “Look, I don’t know what you want me to say. It was just—” Will hesitated and then lied. “Curiosity. A
“A test?” Hannibal sounded unconvinced.

“To my body.”

“Not to mine?”

“No. Well—” Will paused. *Now now, open and steady, don’t let the beast see the whip.* He tried again. “A test to your steadfastness, perhaps.”

“Will, please. This whole—,” Hannibal had stopped, pinched his nose, and then spat with acidic displeasure “—*standoff*—is, well, honestly insulting.”

“Oh is it?,” Will scoffed, over-enunciating each word. "Do I exhaust you, Dr. Lecter?"

Hannibal sighed, tapping his gloved fingers over the gold thread, a syncopated rhythm like Morse Code.

“I believe you are attempting to exhaust yourself,” he stated very certain, "of an the abundance of urges."

Well fuck you, Will thought, feeling see-through and sugar-glassed.

Ah. Battleship. Right, he could play that. His father had trained him as a young boy, when paper and pencil were all they had to while away the endless summer nights.

“How often do you regret me, Hannibal?,” Will charged, sinking ships in his mind. “How often do you fantasize about taking a young woman under your wing, a young man into your mouth? Huh? Pray tell.”

Hannibal had shaken his head, scrubbed a hand down his face. His voice came shredded, thinned out, properly, humanly tired, when he said to his lap, “Do you want to be set free, Will?”

“In a coffin?”

“In a deed. I can provide you with a new alias, property.” He angled his body away, towards the wall, and exhaled. “I can divorce you, Will. You could—“

“No!” Will jerked forward, the IV swinging in its steel pole. He yelped in pain and leaned back down slowly. “No. Don’t.”

“Don’t what, Will?”

“Don’t say those words to me. I won’t be able to forget them.”

“And yet how swiftly you forget that I *promised* to love and cherish you till we both shall die.”

“You were the one plotting my murder just now!”

Hannibal’s head whiplashed, eyes sunk and charred, and Will knew before their voices began to climb that they had pinned themselves into a corner. There was not going to be any way out of this but through.

“And you are the one gambling with your life! Will!” Hannibal sprung up, hands flailing, his body seemingly giving up control and accepting to be fully animated by irrational indignation. “Over
“What?! A party?! A five-day week?! It’s not as if you seek my company when I am here!”

“Why should I?!,” Will shot back, lifting off the bed. “So I can smell other people’s stench on your skin?!”

“Then come with me!”

“I don’t want you to go anywhere!” Will yelled, jabbing the mattress with every merciless vowel. Hannibal’s eyes narrowed, depthless and unseeing. He slouched forward, head perched in a predatory coil.

“But that’s not it, is it dear Will?”, he sneered, sibylline, a sadist with a scalpel. “It’s not my body you are so zealous of. It’s my freedom!”

Something rattled in the pit of Will’s stomach. Something featherless and fragile, something desperate for care.

“Shut up,” Will hissed between his teeth. “For once in your godawful life, Hannibal, shut up! You don’t know what I want!”

“Don’t I?”

“No, no you don’t! I don’t want—”

“What?,” Hannibal leered, but he meant I dare you. His eyes danced, goading. They had fucked almost every night prior to Will’s illness, thrice on the bathroom floor. That’s how Hannibal knew where to find him, that’s how he felt certain of having the upper-hand where Will’s helpless wants were concerned. I dare you, his smug mouth sung, I dare you to say ‘me.’

And so Will had said it, what he thought he never would, not with conviction anyway.

“Us! I don’t want us anymore. This—this cloying attachment,” Will spat. “I am sick of it.”

Hannibal’s pacing came to a sudden halt. It looked painful how still he held himself, the force necessary to control a body into becoming plaster. His breathing slowed down to a standstill, his eyes wide-open and unblinking, a house with all the blinds ripped out.

Attuned to him like a Newton’s Cradle, Will’s own breath sped up in response, the whoosh of blood rushing in his ears made thicker by Hannibal’s menacing silence.

“I see,” Hannibal intoned at last, the words exploding between them. A nerve jumped on his left hand, the one he kept balled by his side, and Will felt a crushing need to cry. “Well, I must admit you were right after all,” he finished stiffly. “I did not know that.”

Petrified under the weight of Hannibal’s gaze, Will could do little less but stare. I went too far, he thought in a panic, stomach beginning to curdle. I got too cocky, I rushed ahead, broke some invisible fence that can never be mended, forgot how fragile they are, the ties that bind, forgot just because someone invites you in doesn’t mean they’ll let you stay. I killed it, I killed us and not even over something that is true. I did it because I could, because I knew he couldn’t stop me.

With a mechanic twist of the shoulders, Hannibal clapped his hands together. The hollow slap boomed in the string-tightness of the room.

“Thank you so much for elucidating me, dear Will,” he said, the curve of his spine dipping in a
grotesque mockery of a curtsy. “Undignified thing, to be kept in the dark.”

Hannibal swiveled around, a figurre in a music box. Words clogged Will’s mind. He wanted to speak, conjure some magical resolution, but found his jaw locked, his throat a cull the sac where wild thoughts came to die.

Tell him, growled his twitchy inner voice, tell him you can’t live without him, that if he leaves, if he absents himself for longer than a night, you can feel the roof of your mind cracking, that you want him, want him with an energy that is restless and self-consuming, that knows no bounds nor subdivision, that it’s a sarcophagus with room for two but you’ll sooner bury him alive than let him live free. Tell him you love him like a lion-tamer loves his catch, with trepidation and power, that he can have all of you only if he accepts, self-selects to be yours in the flesh and in perpetuity, to play a version of Follow the Leader where he submits by abandoning all hopes of molding you. Tell him that he owns you since you first met and that all you want is a turn at owning him back the way he has never been owned before: ruthless, on his back, complicit and compliant.

Tell him, Will. Just tell him before it’s too late.

Hannibal was halfway through the door when Will managed to croak, “Hannibal, please—”

With clinical precision, Hannibal had stopped and half-turned, pausing with a hand on the knob. Will could immediately tell by the cut of his profile that all was lost to the fire.

“Goodnight, Will,” he signed off coolly. And then, right as the door was closing behind him, Will had heard him add in a low, lilting voice, “See you around.”

---

It had been five days since they last exchanged words. Hard ones to swallow, as if they had finally found a way to talk themselves to the end of love. As if words were the only weapons capable of taking down a couple of intelligent psychopaths.

Will remembers them a tad too clearly, the screaming mostly, but the barbs too. He wishes he didn’t, wishes he could take some back, or maybe just rearrange them into a neater version of the truth, a less crude one, like lean meat rid of stringy veins.

“I love you and I’m afraid you’ll leave me.”

Why was that bit of truth so hard to share? It fit on a Valentine’s card for godsakes, that’s how plain it was. Maybe Will should try writing it with an penknife across his chest so Hannibal would find the scars next time he went hunting for a heartbeat.

That way he wouldn’t be able to take them back, those words, couldn’t lose sleep over how to reshape them into something more ornate, an offering that didn’t reveal how poor he really was. How crazy too.

Because, you see, isolation had also shown Will that his crazy was not very flash or particularly entertaining. It was humbling to be dull enough to bore the dead into an early departure.

And besides, Will wasn’t sure Dr. Lecter would tolerate garden-variety crazy, if he could abide by neuroses that did not bloom spectacularly into corpses grafted to fruit trees.

But no, that wasn’t the whole truth either. The whole truth ran more like, “I love you and I’m afraid you’ll leave me, because my love for you is all I have left of myself.”
“And I’m afraid that may never be enough,” Will’s brain supplies uneasily as Hannibal spins around and drops the apple in the garbage disposal.

For a while, all there is between them is the vicious threat of industrial gurgling.

Once the noise ebbs, Will starts to unlace his shoes. When he steps forward, the box of bay leaves and rosemary is held up between them.

“What’s that now?” Hannibal glances over, quickly turning his attention back to the garbage disposal. “A peace offering?”

Head bowed, Will nods, the cold tile hurting his bare feet.

“Something like that.”

Hannibal hums distantly, dismissively, as he begins to pack the breads in a sealed metal tin. He doesn’t say it with words, but Will can hear it anyway. *I’m not interested*, his body temperature roars. *You are not that interesting anymore.*

Will has traveled too far to let a frigid disposition discourage him. They are not acquaintances anymore, nor business associates. They cannot partition what hurts until it’s sublimated into polite obligation. They are a codependent organism. If one limb suffers, the whole system risks collapse.

So apple or no apple, Will stays where he is, ramrod straight in the middle of the halogen-lit kitchen, forcing Hannibal to move around him and his handmade box of homegrown herbs.

*Olly Olly fucking Oxen Free.*

“Listen,” Will says after an acceptable period of silence. “I’ve been thinking. Perhaps I could join you tonight.”

“Join me?”

“Yes. For the dinner party,” he adds. “In Paris.”

“And why would you want to do that?”

Hannibal is turned away, folded over the counter. All Will sees of him is the curve of his shoulders, that smooth, imperfect arch of fabric concealing muscle and hurt. Violence too, and talent, and perhaps most precious of all, endurance.

“To be with you,” Will volleys, echoing a previous conversation. It’s as honest and open and steady as he knows how to be when his hands are shaking under a proffered wooden box.

“Ah,” Hannibal clicks his tongue, halfway between wrapping a round loaf in parchment paper. “But I thought you were sick of me, Will.” He pauses, and his back flinches, just the once, before he returns to the task at hand with graceful expediency. “Or should I say, of *us*.”

“Hannibal,” Will puts the box down and slides close, close enough to nudge Hannibal’s socketed heels. Cupping his jaw with one hand, Will leans in. As if hapless to avoid it, Hannibal pivots to face him, lips automatically parting open.

His eyes are big and bold and lonely, and Will can feel it, the gut-deep hunger, the longing to be held radiating from under the well-dressed bones.

Countless admirers may swarm him at parties, but no one will hold him knowing what he is. It’s a
different kind of isolation, crisp and golden, but no less cutting, Will realizes with a start.

(We are both so alone without each other. Like picked flowers, no root to feed off. Destined only to ornamental living and a slow death.)

Hannibal sways. If Will dipped forward, their lips would touch. They haven’t kissed in weeks, the absence having them both on thorns. Like a fairytale princess, Hannibal comes alive when he is kissed. Will knows this. That’s why withholding works, why kiss-and-tell became a game between them.

Smiling, Will turns his head away. He goes up on his toes and whispers in Hannibal’s ear, “There’s belladonna in the challah.”

(which is just another Valentine’s, only abridged into action)

Hannibal’s pupils dilate in slow motion, black on blood. The dried berries, he realizes startlingly fast. They are not raisins.

His lips twitch, but otherwise he does not move.

“Did you intend to poison me, Will?,” he asks without inflection.

Testing the seam of Hannibal’s cupid bow with his thumb, Will shrugs.

“Aren’t the breads for Madame Loin?”

Hannibal takes an abrupt step back and Will almost loses his balance.

He regards Will at arm’s length, so still the air around them congeals into thin ice. His eyes have the bleak sheen of a sky spiteful of stars. Will wants to touch him so much it hurts. To run a muddy finger over his white collar, to smear blood across his half-open mouth.

“You would have me poison a benefactor, then?”

Will keeps his hand out, palm up and exposed, reaching towards Hannibal’s heart.

“I don’t know, Dr. Lecter. Would I?”

It’s small, nearly invisible, the swipe of his tongue. What big eyes, Will thinks, what big lips, what big teeth. Better to devour you, my child.

But then Hannibal twists away and the spell breaks apart. Next thing Will knows, Hannibal is opening a cabinet door and placing something on his outstretched hand.

Will looks up, down, at the silvery film, the perky breads. Blood pumps in his veins, behind his scars, between his legs. If he doesn’t grip the cardboard roll, he will rip the buttons off Hannibal’s whalebone shirt, one by one.

“Better wrap the loaves in tinfoil,” Hannibal remarks over his shoulder. “We wouldn’t want them to grow unappetizing in the long drive.” He takes a knife and slashes five perfect pieces of twine.

“Would we, Will?”

There’s a tremor in Hannibal’s left thumb Will is ready to cherish until they both shall die.

“No,” he says, joining Hannibal at the kitchen counter. “We certainly would not.”
Chapter End Notes

Bits of nerdiness:

References to Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish holiday/new year, are all over this chapter—my not-so-subtle way of pointing to Will and Hannibal's shared history and their new beginnings.

The life they live here is almost word for word what they said was their "future dream scenario" in chapter 35. Be careful with what you wish for!

Hannibal is really into being "the one and only". He says the same thing to Will in chapter 41. Five years later the man is STILL waiting to hear it back!

Belladonna is a poisonous nightshade. "Nightshades" is exactly what Hannibal calls Will's murder tendencies in chapter 46. Look at a metaphor coming full circle in reality!

In this chapter and the next, we see how "the monotony of nights and mornings" they both discussed (and Will requested) in chapter 50 plays out in real life. Spoiler alert: their predictions were right on the money, at least until Will just takes a crazy left turn—as he is bound to do.

Like I said: nerdiness:)
This is a love story and a happy ending is coming, rest assured. But these chapters are sharp. We are in the middle of an arch about losing your mind and finding it again, albeit changed, and accept what you've become. It's bound to get darker before it gets resolved.

No real added tags going forward, but something about these chapters feels sensitive. It's not about graphic sex or violence. It's just — I feel I left bloody fingerprints all over these pages.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

6. for Hell

“Here’s the church and there’s the steeple—”

How does the rest go?, Will wonders, staring at his contorted hands. Music swells behind him, heavy on the strings. Someone screams in a Breton accent. Doesn’t matter. It is chilly and it’s loud, in the room and in his mind, a beer sweating in his hands.

How does the other one go? One for sorrow, two for mirth, three for a burial, and four for—what? How many offerings do you need to get to the Devil, anyway? That’s the goal, the grand prize, isn't it? The Devil, he’s seven, higher than Heaven and Hell. The Devil, he’s a gentleman, standing tall and proud in his black tailored suit, an undertaker amongst people in their Sunday Best.

That’s it, that’s how the rhyme goes: “Open the door and see all the people.”

Flexing his hands, Will grimaces at the flatness of his beer. Light ale, commercially produced, after-notes of tin and sewer. God, if Hell is other people he had just walked into a suburban ring of fire. No magpies in Heaven, though, and no magpies in Hell. No magpies in Paris either, it seems.

When all you want is to tie the Devil to you, no incantation is too inconsequential. You try them all, Will realizes, stepping out into the balcony. He looks up, seeking for some omen. All he sees is the sky, hurting with nightfall.

What was it that his father used to say? Pain is an open-ended story, living is what you do with the prompt.

Clock drawings and ritual sacrifices, dinner parties and human hearts, hell, wedding rings and poisoned breads. Will is not opposed to any of them, if they could, if they would. Bind them forever.

But the Devil is a gentleman and his business is everywhere. It is in the shaking of hands and the meeting of strangers, in the making of bad-faith promises about endless knowledge and wealth.

All Will wants, he realizes leaning against the railing and facing the sliding doors, is to be six-feet-
deep in blood, the sinewy smell of rendered flesh staining the air, the unbearable claustrophobic heat of life being redistributed, the shocking beauty of two hands rummaging around a chest cavity and holding each other together, rosaries of cartilage like matching rings, the things promised not open-ended but tightly coiled, eternity, ownership, communion, a vow made of sharded bones and shared secrets, the Devil with his black-stone eyes and tulip-red lips, holding Will’s slippery hand against his cheek and whispering over and over the fine mist of blood, “you are my one and only, you you,” until the earth thudded with the falling bodies of every magpie ever afloat in the sky, sacrificed by him, in the sevens for him, for him for him.

Will looks through the glass into the crowded room. That, he thinks, sipping his beer. The purity of that, unblemished. That’s what he wants to find on the other side of the door.

---

The moon is full, the air fogged with all its whiteness. Will peers over the railing: a twelve-story drop. He dangles his bear bottle by the neck and watches it crash on the concrete sidewalk. A satisfying crunch like the shattering of a wrist or a tibia. Or maybe a skull.

“Hello stranger.”

Will looks over his shoulder. A man stands there, six-foot tall in a white button-down and tight black jeans, holding a champagne flute. His head of wild brown hair is tossed to the side in scrutiny.

“You came in with Dr. Graham, didn’t you?”

Amused, his smile the same coldness as Hannibal’s: charming with frostbite. Jaw too sharp, eyes too deep-set, too strangely colored. Violet, maroon overlaid with blue. His skin is so pale it turns translucent under the moonlight, the stem of his neck made for bruising. There’s something metallurgic about him, though. The deceiving smoothness of iron, shaped just right to kill you on impact.

Social graces completely undone by years of exile, Will is caught staring for too long. The man’s smile falters a little, dims around his eyes, and Will’s heart speeds up.

(\textit{run})

“I am Will,” the stranger says, extending a hand, and Will gapes.

For a vertiginous moment, he cannot tell if he’s in a lucid dream, if meeting this strange man on a balcony strung with fairy-lights while his husband attempts to peddle murder by poisoned bread is truly taking place in what Will would have once described mockingly as “real life.”

The man sips his champagne. His mouth is cruel and thin, like an electric cord. No, not a man. A boy. He can’t be older than twenty eight, at least fifteen years younger than me. That’s Will’s first thought. The second is that he has the loveliest hands Will has ever seen, lean and long and strong with the most graceful tapering at the fingertips.

It’s the kind of exquisiteness that nearly brings Will to tears.

(\textit{Run})

Will makes to turn away, when the man reaches over and touches his cheek.

“Quite a scar you got there,” he says, brazen with a warmth that is all youth at first, but at second
glance is rife with something else, something far older and wiser: intent.

Will flinches away, skimming his face on instinct. It is fair and slightly raised, his scar is, a sensitive line pencilled deep in his stubble.

The man follows Will’s gesture with his eyes, licking his lips. An incriminating tick, rushed, primal. There’s something about him, this stranger, this other Will, that could be mistaken for an afterimage of Hannibal. If Hannibal had not been starved and scarred, if he had grown up to be a dancer or a con artist. If he had been born on the west side of the Iron Curtain, instead of inside.

There’s a troubling idea: two Wills and two Hannibals, one prettier and sleeker than both of them combined.

Will pointedly turns away, slouching his chest over the railing. Instead of taking it for the dismissal that clearly is, the man slips next to him. Will can feel the heat from the man’s body rubbing all along his side.

He smells like milk right about to go off. Kept too long in the bottle but not yet soured. Like burnt wood too, the rich mulch of a forest in the throes of wildfire. Will should be repulsed, but there’s something comfortingly familiar about the scent that only succeeds in putting him at ease.

Glass crashes and Will startles to find a champagne flute keeping his bottle company in the pavement. He cannot help thinking of car crashes in the freeway all those nights to-and-fro Wolf Trap: the exquisite bodies of drivers varnished in blood and windshield glass, their hands and bare feet twisted in impossible blue-and-yellow choreographies under the high-mast lights.

The man whistles an obscure aria Will has heard before.

(Run!)

“Alright, quid pro quo.”

The man begins rolling up his sleeve all the way to the elbow. He exposes a vertical red slice, wrist to mid-arm. By the looks of it, the scar couldn’t be more than a year old. His skin seems so fragile, looking may break it.

Will forces his gaze away.

“I tried to take my life but he gave it back,” the boy declares with detachment. “He called it a reward.”

“Who?,” Will finally speaks.

“The Devil,” the boy shrugs, running a thumb over the neatly sutured scar. “Who else?” His eyes flicker to Will’s, tired and sad like a proper child. “What about yours?” He touches his own face this time.

Will frowns, shaking his head to release the slide of Francis digging the knife in his cheek. His heartbeat floods his ears, saliva floods his mouth.

“A birthmark,” he says. The image falls away, replaced by Hannibal stitching the wound under the Pennsylvanian starlight. “No. A wedding gift.”

“Oh,” the boy’s French accent bleeds through as if released by understanding something brutal. “Oh! I see.”
He huddles close, close enough for Will to count every eyelash burnishing against a pale cheek. They are acetate-fine, his eyelashes, one small bump on the bridge of his nose indicating an earlier brush with violence. A dead mother, an alcoholic father. The stuff of domestic nightmares on either side of the ocean. Some things never change.

“Is it over now?,” the boy insists, conspiratorial. As if they were at summer camp; as if they were talking of love and not murder under the yellow moonlight. Then again, perhaps they are.

Will stares ahead into the city, for once unsure about the answer. Perhaps. Perhaps it had ended and he had simply been too deep in the woods to notice.

“There’s more to you than just scars, isn’t there, stranger?” The boy swivels, elbows dangling off the railing. What intimacy they had, dissolves at once. “I should have known Mischa would never acquire someone uninteresting.”

Will spins around. “Did you just insinuate I am a kept man?”

The boy shrugs. “You sure aren’t free, are you?”

And there’s no lie in that Will can dispute. So instead he glares, “What are you?”

“I am a musicologist,” the other Will sighs, eyes on the sliding doors. “Italian Barocco. I spend all my time incanting the dead.”

The man cants his neck and rubs his nape. It’s a punching feeling to see one of your mannerisms so perfectly replicated in another’s body. Will’s hand goes automatically to his waistband, only to find it empty. Nobody brings guns to a lovers’ quarrel.

“I used to talk to the dead too,” Will blurts out, head ducking down, fidgeting with his empty hands, and it sounds like an admission of loneliness more than a surrender, to tell an intrusive stranger a truth he had resented for so long. "For a living."

“I didn’t peg you for an archeologist.”

“No,” Will scoffs. “No one would.”

In silence, the cold air thickens with innuendo. Will wonders how the boy would look with his heart on his mouth.

“Do you still do it?”

Will startles, “What?”

“Stalk through the ruins talking to the dead?”

“More and more each day, it seems.”

The man trains his probing gaze on Will, and lets it linger. Will wonders if he learnt that little trick from dead composers or from Hannibal himself.

“My my my,” he intones in an affected voice, “How terribly lonely you must be.”
And yes, Will must if he’s entertaining private conservations with strangers whose most intriguing characteristic is to echo someone you love and never died but you believe to have lost all the same.

Taking advantage of the nervous pause, the man fumbles forward, dipping too close for his intentions to be misunderstood, a boy again in his clumsiness, or maybe a mixture of illusionist and virtuoso. Will can’t tell, can’t look away from the flushed face pinched with want, like if it hurt him to want, like if he couldn’t help chase down disaster.

Will tenses at the same time he leans in.

“If you do this, he will kill you,” Will hisses to the inch between their mouths. The vagueness of the words seems provocative, less of a threat than Will anticipated.

The boy grins, wide, wider still, as if his jaw could come unhinged at any instant.

“Of that I have no doubt.”

Up-close his top lip is scarred too, the distinct threaded line left by a fishhook. Will should know; he used to be a fisher of madmen. He caught one once, gutted him, and then took him home and made him his bride. Or was it the other way around?

\[(RUN \textbf{boy} RUN\]

Will careens and the boy’s scarred lip twitches.

“If he doesn’t, I will,” Will rasps and it’s surprisingly final and jaunty, that other admission, greener than the first but no less riper.

The boy runs a hand down Will’s arm, the kind of caress children and butchers gift their animals.

“Well then,” he smirks, lips to eyebrows. “The pleasure, the privilege is mine.”

And it must be a testimony to how far the rot of loneliness had settled in him that Will laughs, a full body laughter that throws his head back.

“Some lights do go out, you know.”

“Not in my line of business,” the man snakes a hand under Will's dress shirt, settles on the small of his back. “Nor in yours either, I’d imagine.”

Flesh dripping from black branches, barbwire around neck and knees, a body broken like a folding chair. It’s impossible to tell whose memory it is. It doesn’t seem to matter. The man leers, his hand too hot for Will’s taste. His smile grows serpentine, a snarl only orphans who put their fathers in the ground know.

“An archeologist never tires of death, does he, Will?,” the boy singsongs. “Nor does he forget past feats.”

\[(Too \textbf{late})\]

Will steps away. The hand on his back flexes, steady and proprietary. It’s a little funny, Will thinks, how life keeps throwing him people who mistaken him for empty real estate.

He holds the man’s gaze. It’s dark in there, like a mine flushed out of coal. Not a drop of light but plenty of natural resources.
“I am not looking for a friend,” Will states coldly.

The man smiles, all tiny sharp teeth. “Oh we wouldn’t be friends, stranger.”

He smells like the deep blue sea now, rotten with algae, clean with salt. For an instant Will entertains the notion of kissing him, of killing him, of pitching them both off the balcony and meet the shards down below.

If anything, it feels overdue. Will feels overdue. Overdue to kill and be killed, to die. For he had cheated death too many times and lived longer than most people he cared about, longer than both his parents for sure, sooner to be older than his parents had ever been. It was time, he slurs in his mind, it was goddamn time to let go.

“Gabriel. There you are.”

Hannibal’s voice is perfectly pleasant, carrying over the cool Autumn air. A jacket hangs from his left hand. The other grips the metal knob.

Will doesn’t know how long Hannibal has stood there. The screech of the opening sliding doors seems to have been lost on him.

Sweat breaks out under the man’s palm. Will feels cold for the first time that evening. It’s thrilling in the way only unexpected things could be.

What a picture we must cut, pressed together too close to allow for any gentlemanly explanation, Will thinks at the same time the other Will hollers, “Mischa! I trust you are enjoying yourself? Madame Loin has been dying for your company. That woman can’t get enough of you!”

The boy doesn’t move his hand nor does he step away. He smiles his frosted smile and Will is close enough to smell his breath: overripe milk with a hint of fresh blood.

“How’s the family?”, the boy tags on and Hannibal visibly winces. Will does nothing to stifle a laugh.

If the universe granted him a son with Hannibal, Will would wish him to be this confident, sharp right to the edge of reckless.

Always eerie, the stillness of Hannibal’s body pinwheels into something else. The boy and Hannibal exchange a look that would later occur to Will was impossible for two strangers. It held too much static, too many animal noises not to be some form of remote communication.

“Wilhelm,” Hannibal nods in greeting, opaque unless you knew him. If you knew him you could see the wielding sparks bright as fireworks. “I see you met my friend.”

“Is that what he is?,” the boy turns to face Will and their noses brush. The violet in his eyes is dotted with red specks. He is almost too lovely, Will thinks, that skinning him alive would seem like a waste.

The boy slips a business card into Will’s shirt pocket. He pats it once, before spinning around and murmuring, “See you around, killer.”

Will half-expected Hannibal to break his neck, to punish such impudent act of trespassing right there on a crowded French apartment. That he doesn’t, that he merely steps aside to let the boy back into the party, is not surprising nor unwarranted.
It is simply unwelcome.

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He can’t find Hannibal after that. Not that he was looking. No, Will went straight to the bar in the kitchen where guests cowered like limp animals readying for the slaughter.

On the marble counter, three remaining breads glimmered under the pendant light, their black berries bursting with botanical poison.

Will found a half-full bottle of gin and downed it in three swigs.

People laughed. Women louder than men, tinny with the helpless desire to be admired. Will could smell the red smears of old lipstick all over the airwaves. It ranked of middle-aged pain in that room, dozens of mundane lives trapped in suburban panic. Affluence did nothing for their laughter. They remained high-pitched with vulgarity, Will thought dizzily, hands clutching the sink for balance. So many fancy artworks and no serviceable knives, he tackled on while stumbling out into the living room, vision beginning to blur.

The apartment opened like a maze. So many doors. A bathroom could be behind any of them. (So could Hannibal. So could anyone. Rooms held more than one person. Some rooms even had beds in them. Not that Hannibal ever required a bed.)

Will pushed around people he didn't know, but who looked at him over their shoulders with tsking curls in their smiles. It occurred to Will that Hannibal had not properly introduced him, had likely not introduced himself as a married man either (“friend”). Anyway, even if he did, Will would not intuitively fit the bill. Too unkempt, too ill-mannered. More the type of rough delicatessen you enjoy for the night. Paid by the hour perhaps? (How had Wilhelm put it? “You sure ain’t free, are you?”) And Will guessed he wasn’t, hadn’t been for quite some time. Their lights stayed on and their fridge stayed full, but Will sure wasn’t paying for either of them.

Someone whopped. A man this time, fifty to fifty five, Alsatian, erectile dysfunction, preferred women with small feet. His mother took arsenic once. Terrible affair.

Leaning against the wall, Will swooned. It’s gonna be a hell of a ball if I throw up in her Lalique vase, he thought, and as soon as the image came to him Will considered it a done deal.

He shouldered forward, knocking someone’s drink. Hers, a woman’s drink. She yelped, a splash of black wateriness down the front of a shiny silver dress. Such big teeth for such a tiny mouth, Will noted, the pearls in her necklace incandescent. Her male companion was raving, gesturing at Will in French, too fast and too vernacular for Will to follow. Creole teaches you nothing about rich people.

Will shook his second bottle of gin in apology, but that only created more stains in the woman’s cleavage, plunging and sagging, cradling the white jewels.

White, Will thought, is such an unfortunate color, cold and inexpressive, just barely holding a pulse. Deep red now, the red of a stab wound, of fascia turned inside out like the flip-side of fine fabric, now that is color, that is art.

He might have said some of that out loud, maybe, because the woman scrunched her face and threw her head forth as if she was spitting. “Pédale” she said, to which her consort chorused “racaille!,” and then they were laughing and laughing, the sound ripping through the room so contagious Will joined in, the crystal chandeliers rattling with their cackles, the silver sequins in
the woman’s dress shaking, her features swirling until it bore another face, slender and violet, sitting in a car next to Hannibal, touching his knee as Hannibal stitched his bloody arm, whispering in his ear as if he were a bride, as if Hannibal was his to keep, so Will punched the woman on the chest, deliberately hitting her highball glass and sending it crashing against her bare flesh, the skin immediately opening to let silica shards in and blood drops out, the spectacular starburst of her pearls against the red of her gushing wound, sequins pinked, throat speckled, laughter overwhelmed with screams, hands seizing him, taking his bottle away, twisting his wrists behind his back, and it was so funny that some French art aficionados seemed to believe they were going to disarm a man who had been a ticking time-bomb for two decades, a threat even a career serial killer had failed to keep in check. It was so funny Will laughed some more, harder and louder, tripping over people’s expensive shoes, stepping on open-toed sandals, darkness waiting to claim him, limbs heavy with the fast ebbing of adrenaline and alcohol.

He was about to relent to the tugging crowd, when he felt his hands on him, his lovely hands, Will remembered distantly, how calm and certain Hannibal’s hands always were in a crisis, in a man’s bowels or on a lover’s back, holding Will upright and staunching the blood, his blood Will realized with a start, the grisly imprint of his hand on Hannibal’s white shirt when Will leaned against him and breathed him in, the crook of Hannibal’s jaw muddled by everyone’s acrylic perfume but no one’s semen, no one’s saliva, just him, sweetened with alarm and Provencal red wine, but only him, his husband, his monster, his paddle, only him underneath it all, now laced with Will’s blood.

Very little remained from exiting the living room to waking up in the industrial parking lot. Will had either lost time or conscience at some point. Maybe shame had short-circuited him at last. If pleasure didn’t get there first.

Will remembered looking down and seeing his hand wrapped in a pocket square, the beige paisley one they had bought in Palermo the night before they left to France. He remembered thinking he’d never be able to wash the blood off in a way it would restore the fine silk to its natural shade. And he remembered looking up at Hannibal’s profile from the passenger seat, and seeing a smudge of blood the shape of a thumbprint smeared on his cheek.

At the time Will was certain to be worth it—every crime, every sin, every mistake committed in his life would be worth it, if it would grant him the opportunity to lick that bloodstain clean.

But then oblivion claimed him and certainty, like the thought, slipped away.

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“Hold still,” the retired surgeon with a professional-grade suture kit in the trunk says.

The practiced aloofness in Hannibal’s movements is a problem. Not so much the ease in his craftsmanship but the ease in his words, the round way “divorce” and “friend” fit the shape of his mouth.

Will wondered if he had become such dead prey, his carcass was not worth preserving, consuming whole. A substitute might already be waiting in the wings anyway; a more exciting, limber version, whose scars may have sprung self-inflicted but would certainly progress into shared battle-wounds. Hannibal would like that: to stitch up his murder husband after they had both killed a dragon.

Will should know. He killed a dragon once, and got the scars and marriage certificate to prove it. (Maybe he is to play the dragon this time.)

“You could have incurred in severe nerve damage,” Hannibal remarks, snapping the thread with
his teeth.

The local anesthesia is wearing off and Hannibal’s mouth has been a sour line since Will first glimpsed it in the car. Will’s knees hurt from sitting askew on the passenger seat, door open, legs out, cold under industrial floodlights. It started raining hours ago, the afterglow of Fall taking Will’s euphoria with it. It’s grimy and wet and uncomfortable in his skin. He wants to crawl out. He wants Hannibal to hold him, to gather him close until all the grit of uncertainty washes away.

Instead, Hannibal brushes off his knees and throws the bloody cotton swabs in the backseat. The loaves of bread are there too, hastily wrapped in their suit jackets.

Trust a doctor never to leave an operating theatre unclean. Trust a killer to have a first-aid kit at the ready.

(You never know what lost boys you may find.)

They are going to have to dump the Mercedes, possibly move, certainly change their aliases. It all depends on how much Hannibal told his friends.

“Friends,” Will scoffs, the scare quotes looming large in his mind.

Hannibal starts the car before Will has time to buckle his seatbelt on. Hannibal’s fury is so poorly concealed it seems pathetic not to overtly display it. Will tunes the radio to a Euro disco station and blasts it at full volume. Hannibal endures it for about a quarter of an hour longer than Will anticipated. Still the fact remains there’s a boy walking around Paris with Hannibal’s handiwork on his skin.

So when Hannibal rubs his eyes and sighs into the dreary night, Will twists toward the driver’s seat and asks conversationally,

“Tell me, Hannibal: how did young Wilhelm taste?” He pulls the business card from his shirt pocket and makes a show of reading the neat block print. “Sweet, I’d imagine. Sweet Wilhelm. Did you fuck him before or after stitching him up?”

“Will,” Hannibal tells the rainy windshield, “you are very drunk.”

“Oh very. Very very very,” Will agrees in falsetto. “And yet—no cigar! No dead bodies! Oh what a pedestrian opera! What a Shakespeherian rag! The curtain falls and no dead bodies on stage!”

“Will—”

Hands spasm on the wheel, but otherwise the good doctor remains impassive, almost no warning in his voice.

“ ‘My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me. Speak to me. I never know what you are thinking. Think!’ ” Will raves, waving his hands around, too far gone to find words of his own, words that can express the vacillating fatality of never feeling safe, never finding the entryway to your own self, so you borrow the words some other killer once engraved on his sweetheart’s chest. “ ‘I think we are in rats’ alley, where the dead men lost their bones. What shall I do, Dr. Lecter?! What shall we ever do?!’ ”

“Will,” and for once Hannibal sounds tired. The man who perfected the art of eternal energy and inexhaustible verve closes his bruised eyes and, for once, pleads in a rather mild tone, “Stop.”

“Or what, Dr. Lecter, Dr. Graham? You going to kill me? At long last? You going to put on your
big boy’s pants and gut me intimately?,” Will sneers. "Don’t be stupid, Hannibal. You can’t kill me. You will never be able to kill me. You are soft. I made you soft.”

The air in the car goes very still, then very frigid, as if someone had vacuum-packed all the history between them. It was a vertiginous temperature drop but no less interesting for its mere existence.

(See what I did there? Just with a few words. Look at it. See what I have the power to orchestrate? A murder without corpses.)

Will does not hide his anticipation. He turns the radio off and lets danger soak the atmosphere. If Hannibal is going to call out his bluff, Will wants a front row to his own murder. He wants to go out with eyes wide open.

Hannibal releases a long exhale. His left thumb twitches on the steering wheel. It’s looking promising. Will leans in, their shoulders nearly kissing.

“I have no interest in marriage,” Hannibal says at last, not a whiff of anger or pain tainting his speech. “Did you know that, Will?” He glances sideways. He is not hurting and he is not lying. Whatever Will expected, it wasn’t that.

“Companionship, love, compromise...they hold no sway over me,” Hannibal continues as if discussing the ghost of someone he never particularly cared for. “You do. And I will do what I must to keep you, Will, even if it goes against the grain of my nature. But I am going against the grain, and we should do well to remember lest we find ourselves growing reckless.”

Will shifts towards the window, the rain so harsh it seals the world from sight.

“God forbid I have high expectations of a second marriage,” he mutters under his breath, and Hannibal’s profile tilts slightly in his direction.

Will can sense it all of a sudden. The ice of him, the ruthless scaffolding that renders Hannibal nearly inhuman, not out of callousness but resilience, this unusual abundance of feeling sublimated into a barrier, a sheet of black glass that lets nothing in and nothing out. Will was on the other side of it now. He had never been on the other side, not even in Baltimore. Even when he left him for dead, Hannibal had still kept a hatch open, a little poked hole through which Will could see him, see the monster inside the man, follow the bleeding heart through the snow. There was no light now to keep Will from getting lost in the woods. It hurt in a completely new and superlative way, the more cutting because it taught Will that even at its lowest tide, his love for Hannibal knew no bottom.

“No, Will,” Hannibal says quietly. “God forbid you forget who you married. You have been trying my patience for nearly a year and I’ve indulged you because, as your spouse, I seem beholden to weather your dark moods. But do not mistake my patience for weakness, nor my restraint for complaisance for I will tear you apart limb by limb before I let you burn our lives down just because you’ve grown restless in your middle age! You belong to me and I belong to you. Exclusively and in perpetuity, I am afraid. But if you keep testing me, Will, I will break you and I don’t want to. I shouldn’t have to.”

He halts and takes a deep breath, not out of theatricality but actual physical need, and something in Will’s lower abdomen stings, as if arousal could be whittled into a blade.

Hannibal returns his gaze to the road before adding politely, “So Will. Again. Please stop.”

Will slumps in his seat, seemingly chastised. He chews on his cheek, feeling the grisly scar etched
on the inside. The moon is still up, wolfish yellow, an endless loop.

Will sticks his throbbing hand between his thighs, aims low and shoots straight.

“Guess your mother was right after all. Men like you do grow up to kill the beauty they can’t control.”

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At home, Will cannot stumble past the foyer and Hannibal does not endeavor to correct him.

For the first time in half a decade, they sleep under the same roof but not in each other's arms.

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Will came to on the carpeted floor, dry-mouthed and aching. Dawn splashed the walls. He couldn’t have been asleep for more than two hours.

Common sense would suggest that showering and appeasing a furious serial killer should occupy most of his morning.

Within minutes, Will had found the car keys without having to really look for them. Hannibal had never hid them; Will just never made a point of going anywhere.

He was on the road to Paris before the sun had cleared the mountaintops. He couldn’t remember the last time he had been behind the wheel. Palermo likely, the long all-nighter to get to that damn court house. How Hannibal had sobbed on the side of a dirt road, the parcel of fine clothing shaking on his hands. Hannibal had later framed their boutonnieres, lacquered them and hang them on their bedroom wall. Their suits hang pristine in his closet, wrapped in plastic shrouds. For a psychopath, the depths of Hannibal’s sentiment never ceased to surprise Will. Not shock, never, but in many ways humiliate him. How did he end up being the cold one of the two?

Will shook his head, focusing bleary eyes on the winding road. He was doing this on instinct, tracing a route he had only traveled once in the dark. It helped that he had been law enforcement once. It helped that he was a killer still.

After a few dead-ends, he found it tucked in a concrete cul-de-sac. Twelve-stories high, 1980s cooperate housing impersonating Bauhaus urbanity. Not Paris either, but Vincennes. There’s a world of difference if one wanted to be particular.

Will did.

He circles around and decides to park three miles away. Walks in the spiteful cold in shirtsleeves, and sits on a bus stop across the street eating the trail mix Hannibal keeps in the trunk next to gallons of water, a sincerely impressive toolbox, the first-aid kit, a change of clothes, an unregistered firearm, two bowie knives, and more rope than a sane person should ever have any need for.

He sits and waits, the top balcony desolately empty. The trail mix is saltless. Will thinks of having a strong word with Hannibal once he gets back home.

Eventually, she walks out of the building, the shock of straw hair impossible to miss. Will flexes his bandaged hand around the knife he borrowed from the trunk, tracking Madame Loin as she unlocks the red BMW. Will wonders if there ever was a Monsieur Loin or if she made up her name like she did her hair.
It occurs to Will as he parses the gross raisins from the dried cherries that the reasoning behind his actions may not be fully sound. After all, he has not so much as exchanged two words with the woman he is currently stalking. Which means he still doesn’t know who he attacked last night. Another faceless victim to the pile. The cashews in particular really do need to be toasted to taste of anything but dehydrated bark. He wonders if in his godly prescience Hannibal envisioned this exact scenario and the bland trail mix is his punishment for Will going rogue. Will could see it. He couldn’t really blame him. Hannibal was a lover of order while Will bedded entropy every chance he got.

A young man peers over the railing. It’s past three now. If Hannibal is all-knowing, then it stands to reason he might very well have set up the run-in with the other Will. Will considers it. He sees the logic in it, the impetus to move things along. And what better catalyst but jealousy to draw a butterfly out of his chrysalis?

(If only it wasn't so hard to kill people with beautiful hands.)

No matter. Will is not petty about details. He was always an admirer of the big picture anyway. And the big picture is this: there’s an unlocked car in an empty parking lot on a Sunday afternoon that Will can approach with the entitlement of the mad or the wealthy.

It’s a nice car, Will admits, running a hand down its flank. Built to last and drive fast.

With the help of Hannibal’s toolkit, Will manages to reach the brake box fairly quickly. He unscrews the metal nuts and pockets them. They are large in this model, ribbed and durable. Gilded with a coat of gold they would make for lovely wedding rings, Will thinks, as he presses down on the pliers and severs the brake cables.

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That evening, Will finds Hannibal in the white-bone kitchen, elbows-deep in flour. He pads to him and buries his face between the bent shoulder-blades, the gesture at turns familiar and already lost.

Will breathes him in, the heart of him, through the warm grey wool.

Running stick-figure-fingers across Hannibal’s back, he murmurs, “You are my one and only.”

For a moment, the rolling of the dough stops. They linger, Will pressing his palms against the curve of Hannibal’s stomach, resting just above the sash of his white apron. Waiting, perhaps, for Hannibal to follow their ritual and take his hands.

He doesn't.

Will tightens his grip, feels the air crush out of Hannibal's constricted chest.

"He who holds the Devil better hold him well," Will whispers in his ear.

Hannibal stiffens, glancing down. There are two knives on the counter, one strategically covered in flour. Will twists Hannibal's left hand until it reaches his lips.

"If you run, I'll hunt you," Will warns flatly. "If you stray, I'll kill them."

He brushes his mouth against Hannibal's ring finger, just once, before adding, "But I'll never never let you go."

The weight on his chest sags. Will braces.
(There's so much load-bearing in love.)

Chapter End Notes

Somme/Paris, France

Chapter Summary

One long loop broken in two: Somme/Paris and Paris/Somme. Though with a happy ending, there's some savage vulnerability in these chapters. Also, reminder that Will is an unreliable narrator, so often what you get first is his *perspective* on things.

I am not usually one for personal notes, but here's one: I drafted the remaining chapters, but lost the drive to write. It was too long of a year and I've been undertaking a very demanding writing project, so somehow the flame went out and I can't hear any emotional resonance out of words.

This is to say—I don't know when I'll be back in 2020. All I can promise is that I *will* be back.

Until then, happy holidays and much light! I have no idea where History is headed, nor what journeys each of you is on, but may we all find the place that fits.

*One for sorrow,*
*Two for mirth*
*Three for a funeral,*
*Four for birth*
*Five for heaven*
*Six for hell*

7. *for the Devil, his own self*

Thursday. Another Pilates lesson, group therapy, dinner party at 8. Madame Loin keeps her schedule like she keeps her hair: immaculately peroxided, consistent to the point of death.

Will entertains the notion of scalping her and bringing the bloody hair to Hannibal. Let him try and cook that.

Some things are not made to be salvageable, by gastronomy or murder, so Will stills. He sits in Hannibal’s Mercedes and breathes in the expensive leather interiors, Hannibal’s cologne still faintly embedded in the upholstery.

A young man comes in and out of her balcony, laughs, drops a half-lit cigarette over the rail. Later Will might go and pick it up, finish it at his own leisure.

But for now, he unzips his jeans and turns the radio on. Italian Baroque music punches in. Perfect, a two for one kill, Will muses, touching himself through the damp cotton. In his mind, the woman hemorrhages from a throat wound, the sliced skin shaped into an orchid. Hannibal is on his knees, his mouth on Will’s thigh, begging in tempo with her gurgling sounds.

Will lets him in as the gloomy aria swells. Inside, he always lets Hannibal inside but it’s never deep enough, Will whines as he comes, an elbow thrashing against the gear stick.
The woman appears in the balcony, her repaired BMW parked by the front door.

It sure would be a pity if anything happened to that new paint job, Will thinks as he wipes his wet hand on Hannibal’s headrest.

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He’s by the woods again, his tan overcoat a fingerprint against the pewter sky.

Will tracks him from the second floor window, the cold of the day seeping through the glass panes.

They exist like two pointers on a clock now, living in the same circle and running loops around each other.

Will drives while Hannibal goes for long walks. Sometimes he smokes, white mist billowing over his long wind-chaffed hair. Will looks at him and looks at him, at the line of his shoulders and the length of his legs, the dismissive way he flickers ash into the blackened ground.

The last time he looked at Hannibal through a glass pane, Hannibal was trapped in a cage.

Perhaps nothing changed. Perhaps the cage only got bigger.

I should reach out, Will thinks, his hand dancing over the handle. It’s snake-shaped, brass and curvilinear. A warning, perhaps, to beware of who you let in. Or what you let out.

Will presses his hand against the glass, pins his eyes to Hannibal’s nape, covered by the tan collar.

If he turns, I’ll open, he bargains.

Hannibal chooses that moment to pivot towards the house. He cants his head and looks up, the cigarette suspended by his side.

Wave, Will rallies. Raise your damn hand and wave.

In the distance, Hannibal draws the cigarette to his mouth, puckers, releases. He holds Will fast in his gaze, Will knows. Three hundred feet are nothing for a creature like Hannibal.

A beautiful imitation of a man, Will thinks, both hands against the glass, one on each side of the handle.

Did I always want a man, Will wonders, and he imagines that he did. As a boy, he would catch himself staring at stevedores working the docks, tracking the way sweat trickled down their necks. He used to wonder if their sweat would taste bitter or sweet. Sin could take the guise of either or so his Sunday school teacher taught him. It would be harder for a pretty boy like him to know the difference, the skeletal grey man warned from the pulpit, and Will had bowed his head and cupped his hands, willing all thoughts of blood and sweat to travel from his groin to his brain.

With hindsight, that may not have been the wisest move. It did deliver him to the FBI, though, and to Hannibal. Eventually.

Will’s thumb twitches, edging towards the lock.

Say that I wave. Will he wave back?

(It doesn’t matter, son. You should tell him that you know. That’s all.)
He should tell him he found out about a year ago, when Hannibal had laid him out on the wet grass, cheeks flushed with late spring, their clothes still half on as he kneeled and slipped Will’s cock inside him, one hand mechanically clutching at Will’s bad shoulder, building up a painfully slow rhythm, neck thrown back, toes digging in the dirt, every bit of him beautiful, Will had thought, paralyzed by the boulder of their freedom, of their happiness, of love blushing and heaving between them.

How did I manage to entreat such a beautiful creature? How do I keep myself from disappearing into him?, Will had thought as he toppled Hannibal to the ground, their shirttails flapping, their feet slipping into the water and splashing Hannibal’s drawings, the brute strength of his arms, of his laughter, as he fit both around Will to keep them joined as they rolled over, their bodies knowing each other so well, wanting each other so much Will’s eyes welled up as they met Hannibal’s beneath him, wide and damp and bottomless, the tension there so threatening and imploring Will couldn’t help gathering Hannibal’s weathered face in his palms and look at him, look at him and look at him, absorb the portentous enormity of being inside another man without any other purpose but the act of not being apart, of being structurally made one through the lock-and-key properties of flesh and bone.

His voice had wavered when he whispered “Please let me stay inside you forever,” playfully, but it hadn’t come out as a joke at all though Hannibal had laughed anyway, the childish toothy laughter he saved for when all pretences of power had been set aside.

“Kiss me and I’ll take it into advisement,” Hannibal had returned with a smug tilt of his chin, as if he could, as if he genuinely held the power to rearrange their bodies, remake them into one piecemeal set.

When Will kissed him, Hannibal had smiled, and perhaps there had been no lovelier sight in Will’s life than the sound of that smile, the simple sigh of contentment a soul must emit when it lets itself be entirely possessed by another.

He didn’t know then, lying spent on the grove, but he would less than an hour later, Hannibal’s head heavy on his breastplate, the canopy of tall trees playing over their bare chests as they listened idly to birdsong. Will would say something about going to town on his own, and Hannibal would dissuade him by kissing the scar on his forehead, on his cheek, gentle even as he directed Will to a past remark, to the workings behind a particularly vicious dream that had awoken them in the night.

Will knew then with a clarity that broke him. He knew he was being managed like only a psychiatrist could manage a patient.

He couldn’t talk about it. Talking would make it real and Will wanted to believe they had had an uneventful happy marriage, they, the Grahams, the 2.0 version, that they had loved like ordinary people do, with abandonment and trust and just a hint of hopefulness.

Will found himself needing to believe that version of his life, holding on to it like a relic against all his untapped potential for harm.

For four years, he had thought to have finally done something honest in his life, something that had nothing to do with killing. He had loved a man no one had known before, a man others mistook for the Devil. And he had loved him well.

Turns out the old Southern priest was right: the Devil wears too many masks and Will was no good at telling them apart. Of all the Devil’s disguises, Will fears love might be the one he wears the best.
He couldn’t talk about it. Not with Hannibal anyway. And who else was there?

So Will had withdrawn, wearing circles on his garden, quietly raging about how easier all would have been if Hannibal hadn’t been the enemy, if he hadn’t crowned himself god.

And how do you make a god human? You make him bleed.

So Will did. For nearly a year, he did just that. Cut ribbons into Hannibal’s flank like tallies on a prison wall.

Down in the woods, Hannibal nods once, grounds the cigarette under his leather boot, and walks away.

Will drops his hands.

Later, he tells himself, I will reach out later. After dinner perhaps, when we'll be doing the dishes, or later still, when he will stay up half the night reading, or maybe earlier in the morning when I’ll find him standing by the front door, taking in the morning air, no coat, no shoes, no care for illness. I’ll reach out and hold his hand, be kind to him for once. He’d like that. He would like knowing that I can still see him.

And maybe then, finally, when the steel-beam of his shoulders relaxes and his chest opens, I will tell him. Over dinner some night, over some offensively tart dish. I will tell him that I know what he did to me and that I may not care to forgive him.

---

Will wakes up with a start.

Pulling a hoodie from the backseat, he drives to Paris (no, Vincennes) without so much as changing his rumpled clothes. His hand hurts, his neck hurts, his head hurts. He’s hungry, but a pack of Marlboros is gonna have to do.

He parks ten blocks away. Walks over to the apartment building, picks the lock with the confidence of a white criminal. Takes the stairs, not the elevator, two at a time.

Once inside, he is stunned by how different everything looks in the daylight. There are clothes strewn on the floor, half-eaten bread on the coffee table. Would Hannibal still entertain these people if he knew how they live when he’s not looking?

Will walks to the kitchen, selects the least sad-looking knife in the rack. It’s slim pickings. The bedroom has Tiffani blue walls. A better canvas than the purple ones in the living room. Who paints their walls purple? Will imagines he could do it in the balcony but he can’t trust that woman to be considerate of the neighbors. She played inane Vivaldi variations on loudspeaker until two in the morning for god’s sakes. That she did not die in the minor fender-bender, nor choked on poisoned bread (mild indisposition, her hacked emails relayed) is both a blessing and a curse.

Will makes himself at home on the black leather couch and lights up a cigarette. Tuesday: waxing, Pilates, board meeting, brunch. She should be dead in less than seven hors, Will thinks, putting out the cigarette on the armrest. It sizzles, a meat-like smell. Not bad, all things considered.

Fighting a migraine, Will inspects a photo on the mantle. Pink dress, heart-shaped sunglasses, unequivocally younger. He wonders if she tried to kiss Hannibal more than once. Once, at least. He might have let her too.
He will begin by stabbing her in the navel and work his way up from there.

---

“Thank you for everything, Hannibal,” Will says over the rim of his wine glass. Hannibal’s eyes flicker up and back to his food.

“You are welcome, Will.” Hannibal dresses in two-piece suits open at the collar now. No vests, no ties, no parties. They can’t return to the scene of the crime, but Hannibal still appears to have a part to play. “Did you have a pleasant drive today?”

For the past two weeks, Will has elected to sleep in the car. Or the couch, if the windchill is unbearable. The house, pregnant with centennial ghosts, now feels too full with newlywed memories.

“I did,” Will replies, cutting into the rare meat. Blood oozes into his white plate.

He doesn’t know when the romance with the black Mercedes began. It resembles a funeral hearse, the old thing does, and it gurgles gas like a spoiled child. Yet its age makes him exactly the sort of capricious, sleek beast Will has come to adore. Will has secretly named him a proper gentlemanly name from the antebellum South. He will take that name to the grave, like a curse he will, like his middle name, like the last memory of his father, he’ll take that to the grave too, god willing and the devil unknowing, he’ll end himself before he loses himself again.

“I am glad,” Hannibal offers. “You have spent too much time cooped up in this house.” Freshly shaven, he chews with measured bites. Each mouthful lasts approximately seven seconds, Will has averaged. “My oversight, perhaps. I should have encouraged you to explore the surrounding area sooner.”

Every day, Will drives away while Hannibal reads French novels and cooks their meals from scratch. He never asks for the car. Will wonders if he knows the car has found a new master, if he feels cold in their great big bed, if he struggles to fall asleep alone like he did in Tunisia. The lampshade in his bedroom stays on all night, Will can see it from the driveway. A lighthouse, a siren in the dark sea, leading shipwrecks into the disaster that is hope.

"But you couldn’t have, could you?”, Will swirls the blood with the creamy white sauce. “How would your therapy work then?”

"I beg your pardon?"

Will remembers rocking into Hannibal that last spring.

How his legs had suddenly jerked up, heels seeking purchase around Will’s waist, over his shoulders, Will grabbing his thighs and folding him in two, turning this man who could kill with a twist of his wrist into a clutter of clutchd limbs, shaking, sweating, control leaving him completely, seeming simultaneously young and open and wounded and invincible, and Will had loved him, loved him and loved him until love oiled him blind.

Hannibal had closed his eyes before he came. Will remembered because he didn’t, he kept his open as if something had tipped him off this would be the last time they would make love.

Will puts down his fork, presses his lips into the cotton napkin.

"Covert therapy. Well, covert quarantine really. That’s what you’ve been doing for the last four years, isn’t it Dr. Lecter? Keeping me safe from myself in a haunted house in the middle of
nowhere? No solo trips, no visitors, no victims. One psychiatrist.”

Hannibal dabs the meat in the sauce, one shoulder hitching. "Difficult to become a serial killer among broken clocks and empty trenches," he dismisses, bringing the meat to his mouth.

Will raises his glass. “And that’s why I meant what I said: thank you for everything, Hannibal.”

"You are very welcome, Will," he returns politely, but his wineglass remains on the table.

Will keeps his up, this fragile thing hanging between them. Like trust, he muses, and is surprised at the airiness in his voice, the one he hears in his inner thoughts now. It’s becoming more and more lucid, that voice. Not unlike Amberina crystal: blood-red fading into see-through.

He finally puts the glass down, turns back to his meal. Lamb, braised with chestnuts and blood-orange sauce.

"It didn’t work, did it?"

The air tenses between them. It’s a thing of seconds. Like fog falling over a forest, the oxygen simply congeals. Any animal in its right mind would cower, scatter. Will stares at Hannibal and cocks a smile.

"Well, I would not be so harsh to judge," Hannibal chews, a bit faster now. He twirls his wineglass, but his eyes stay on the fine stem. Will’s smile widens. "After all, you haven’t killed—"

"But it’s not gonna go away, is it?" Will speaks over him. “The—noise?"

Under the table, Hannibal crosses and uncrosses his legs. His left hand spasms, thumb caressing the knife handle. Will is not opposed to a bloodbath. Anything but more lies. Those are sharper and harder to heal than any stab wound. And he’d know. He's had his share of those.

Hannibal breathes out. To Will’s surprise, he dips his chin and admits, “No. Likely not, Will.”

The honesty pelts him. Inside his mind, a single crack widens into thousand striations, a solar flare worth of them. Will’s breathing speeds up, his smile splinters apart. How desperately he had needed it, Hannibal’s validation, his diagnosis. To be seen.

Their eyes are stuck together, Will realizes slowly, like a wet hand in an electric socket.

"Am I sick, Hannibal?,” he whispers thinly. He wants to lean over, as if they were sharing a secret, like they used to between prison bars and across carseats, but he can’t. His body feels locked in place. “Clinically, I mean. It’s more than urges and mood swings, isn’t it? The voices and visions and—” Will pauses, braces. “The way I think has changed. My brain has changed, hasn’t it? For keeps.”

Hannibal looks away. His eyes are expertly matte, a room with nothing to hide because all lights are out and you can’t find secrets if you can’t see a damn thing. Will’s throat closes. He chokes, coughs, loves him. Too much, it seems, for his lungs to move through it.

“Possibly,” Hannibal delivers blankly. And then, as if rethinking his tone, he sighs, folding both hands on his lap, “Probably, Will. Yes.”

The scar on Will’s abdomen throbs. It’s been years since it last did that.

“When did you find out?”
Something flickers in Hannibal’s face. His eyes soften, but his shoulders stiffen.

"I suspected in Pennsylvania, but was only sure when we reconnected in Maine."

Nearly seven years ago, then. Give or take.

"And you didn’t think to tell me?", Will croaks, waterlogged with regret he isn't sure it's his own.

"Taking into consideration our past history, it did not seem wise to offer psychiatric insight. I have on good authority you do not enjoy being psychoanalyzed, dear Will."

"Sure. And you were curious to see what would happen." Will waves a hand abstractly, "Wind me up and watch me go."

“Your brain is a marvel, Will.” Hannibal jerks forward, index finger punctuating his speech with unusual intensity. “Trauma rearranged its neurological pathways in such a stunning manner. You became something—extraordinary. Other."

Will snorts, hard and ugly. "How would you rate it against encephalitis, hmm? More of less stunning?"

"Will."

"Well, since this is a permanent condition it seems wise to discuss the particulars, no Dr. Lecter?"

Hannibal regards him with the birdlike scrutiny Will has come to associate with Baltimore, the doctor and his toys. Will stares back and smiles his mean smile. He thinks of the other Will and his beautiful hands. He wonders if Hannibal can tell he is thinking of another man, if they can hurt each other with telepathy now.

"You sound angry," Hannibal observes at last, blandly, from under the psychiatrist’s veil.

Will slouches deeper in his eighteenth-century chair. “I am a little angry, Hannibal,” he says conversationally. "I've been smelling memories and seeing ghosts for a better part of a decade. That does something to a person, you know?"

Hannibal’s mouth purses, fingers drumming on his neatly folded napkin. “Trauma holds a powerful torque, Will. It rewrites landscapes, builds up memorials. Like scar tissue, it gifts newness through pain."

"It also makes you a stranger to yourself, Hannibal,” Will drills on mercilessly. “To others. It hurts. It hurts a whole damn lot."

Hannibal freezes, frowns like wounded. "My own sense of smell only manifested after——"

You ate your sister, Will thinks. Unexpectedly he says, “You lost your family.”

Hannibal nods, a look not unlike thankfulness in his eyes.

"Did it hurt?,” Will presses. “To come to terms with what had been born out the ashes of their bones?"

“I was always myself," Hannibal cant's his chin, puckers his lips in a show of consideration. "Enhanced perhaps, through grief, but not altered by much. Nothing is lost in Nature, Will. Just rearranged, remade."
It is funny, Will thinks studying Hannibal’s bobbing throat, how people are strangers until they are not. How he and Hannibal had been strangers once, born so far apart there was an ocean and an Iron Curtain between them, raised in different alphabets, unaware of each other's existence until life had already had a way with them both, so thoroughly they had changed livelihoods at least twice and killed someone at least once. How tragic that we depend on inviting strangers into our lives, hoping against hope they won't be wolves in sheep's clothing, that a miraculous alchemy takes place so someone bears witness to the bland spectacle that is everyday life, to that small dent that is individual death. That someone cares to keep track and remember us even if they’ll come to try and forget.

How funny that we are all strangers until we are not, and that once such line is crossed, it can never be undone.

There will be never a time where I have not been in love with him, Will realizes with uncomfortable sharpness, no matter what may come of us. There will never be a time when we have not known each other intimately, the best and the very worst. No matter what happens, we can never go back to a clean slate.

We will never be strangers again.

"Christ," Will shakes his head. "It’s always an experiment with you. A science project."

"Humans are a good part chemistry," Hannibal remarks primly. "Psychiatry is but a map we overlay our chemical blueprint."

"Why can’t you just—", Will opens and closes his sutured hand, flattens it on the ivory tablecloth as if the fine fabric could soothe the ache. "—relent? Just stop playing games, give yourself over entirely?"

"Nature or nature?" Hannibal shrugs, cutting into his meat. "A mix of both, most likely."

Will runs a finger around the rim of his glass. It wails, high-pitched and maudlin.

"You suck on my clothes when you sleep."

Hannibal stops, tines caught midair. "Excuse me?"

Will takes a slow sip of his wine.

"On occasion, you suck on my collar. Like a starved animal. You whimper too, until I slip my thumb in your mouth. My skin turns purple, you suckle on it for so long."

His voice is so steady, and so very cold, unlike anyone Will ever met. The voice of woods emptied out of life. It fits nicely and clean around him, like a shrink-wrapped coat.

“See, Dr. Lecter”, he continues, and the voice is there again, coming out of his mouth, commanding and toneless. “I think your ventromedial prefrontal cortex, in all its traumatized glory, wants me to know this. Wants me to see you on your back, helpless. Maybe it's an unconscious surrender, maybe it’s an evolutionary mechanism deployed to endear me to you by triggering my care-taking instincts. I don’t know, I am not a doctor.”

Will pauses. From his pocket, he retrieves a plastic lighter and a half-smoked cigarette. He takes it to his lips, flickers the stub back to life, inhales. A curl of smoke forms between them. “What I do know, Dr. Lecter, is that you want to be known, completely, whether you admit it or not."
Hannibal has gracefully gathered his utensils, crossed them over the bloodied leftovers. His face is a wax mask, but the anger is transparent to anyone who cares to see, a hair-trigger away from full-blown outrage.

That’s always a fun time, Hannibal outraged. Will takes another drag, cups his elbow with one hand, winks. At least the pretence of a homely dinner has been cast aside.

"It may never come to pass again you realize?", Hannibal rejoins, sniffing his wine. “Now that you’ve spoken it aloud? You may have lost access to that part of me because you brought it to my awareness."

So that’s what he is afraid of: that showing all his cards may mean losing a grip on me, on us. He wants omniscient control, to sit on God’s lap, by any means necessary.

What a sad man, Will thinks in his spectator’s voice. What a sad, broken man this monster is.

“Perhaps,” Will squashes the cigarette on pink sauce. It’s runny now, separated by neglect. “But perhaps I find consent and mutuality more thrilling than covertly sourced knowledge."

"I am not sure that you do."

"I am sure that you don’t."

"Will—"

"So," Will barrels through, ignoring him, "must I take medication? I would rather not. Do I need to see a doctor? A proper one, without conflict of interests to cloud their judgement."

Hannibal moues, fiddling with the stem of his wineglass. “That would be your prerogative, I imagine."

"Do imagine that," Will muses, falling forward on his elbows, rucking up the tablecloth. “Another mind prowling around mine, touching all the knobs, moving the furniture around…"

“Don’t,” Hannibal gasps, startling them both. “Let me—"

"What? Gaslight me some more? Keep me isolated in optimal research conditions? Gosh Dr. Lecter, what big mouth, what big teeth you have. The better to eat you, my dear."

"You asked me to protect you,” Hannibal’s voice rises, “to keep you from your most indomitable urges. I only did what was asked of me, Will. You have been kept safe."

"Oh what a good man you are, so very selfless! Come off it, Dr. Lecter! You loved every minute of it! Playing God!"

Silence thunders, sequestering their breath. They are panting in sync, Will notices, which should not be surprising since most things they do and feel are refractions of each other. But it still is, helplessly is, disconcerting, to know you’ll never outlive another human being.

The first girl Will kissed, he thought would be his forever. Because he had kissed her, they had become tethered by spit and playground sand. She had forgotten his name two weeks later. He never memorized hers in the first place.

Somehow that seems relevant when Will straightens his back and demands, "Did you drug me, Hannibal?"
"No."

"Did you want to?"

"Yes!", Hannibal growls and blanches.

Oh, Will understands then. Oh he is in too deep, deeper than me, deeper than he ever thought possible.

A better man would cut him lose, would turn Hannibal away now as a kindness.

"And the boy?," Will charges. "The other Will? Is he the feather in your cap while you play doctor to your poor homebound husband? What kind of gothic novel do you believe us to be in? Should I fall in love with the wallpaper next?!"

The noise is crystalline, a single twiggy snap. The white tablecloth blots most of the blood away.

Hannibal clings to the broken glass, the back of his hand splattered red up to his pearl cufflinks.

“What do you wish me to denounce this time huh?,” he hisses, unblinking, blunt, careless, inhumanly still. “That I squirrel away crumbs of information you let slip unnoticed so I can regain control over the cacophony of feelings you unleash in me? Hmm? That it's a poor man’s coping strategy to conceal my absolute powerlessness against you, Will, against this fragile happiness we have herringboned together but that you have the power to undo, by simply—by simply—"

The top half of the wineglass explodes against the wall above Will’s head, a spectacular ringing shot. “Do you want to hear that secreted knowledge uplifts me because I know you are lost to me, Will, have been lost to me since we shared our first meal and I fed you our first lie? That I have loved you and I love you and I will love you till death do us part, but none of that matters because I cannot remake time, I cannot go back and redo that moment, nor should I want to because it brought us here, to this home, this bonded life and yet—"

And Will sees it, in startling bloodless detail, the severed ear. Not breakfast, not Marissa. Abigail. The first lie Hannibal fed him that neither of them could ever undo.

“I can never trust you, can I? Not completely.”

And Hannibal looks him straight in the eye, empty and crushingly pleading, and utters the most loving words he has ever directed at Will—not because they are kind but because they are the only ones he'll never be able to use to his own advantage,

“It is probably wiser if you don’t.”
A very long chapter and a not-so-easy chapter. Whatever the opposite of "digestible" would be.

Time is a fluid fever dream and love runs absolutely wild in this one.

Until Spring, everyone*

Betrayal is a bruise that never heals.

You tell your mind to trust, knowing the heart is deceitful about all things, that the heart wants what it wants, and what it wants is hell, it’s eden, it’s all.

The deceived heart hunts for what it misses, though it must go in blind so to let itself trust again. Because forgiveness is not just a fickle mistress, but the partner of punishment. It’s hard to let go of a trespassing, even if the crime was committed in love.

This Will knows. He knows that he has a habit of fearing what he wants and to want what he recognizes, a broken Narcissus intrigued not by his own image, but the image of the things he has loved before.

The heart is deceitful about all things, Will knows, not least about those it resents the most.

---

The first note appears on the passenger’s seat, perched over the blanket. Will wakes up shivering and finds it, firmly folded like a secret.

"Blanket," the note reads in swirling cursive, the slant in the consonants humorous.

Will doesn't find the thought of Hannibal having an extra set of car keys particularly funny, but he still pulls a thread on the red wool, drawing it towards his knees. The note flutters and falls.

They haven't talked for three days. Not since they last shared lamb.

Something is wrong, Will knows. He cannot put any of it in words. Like most things pertaining to Hannibal, the shape of his suffering is high-pitched but vague, opaque, odorless. Slippery like a new sheet of silk.

Instinctively Will wants to make it stop. Put his hands on Hannibal's body and staunch the bleeding. But there's no visible entry-wounds and Will's hand are covered in spikes.

In truth Will doesn't know how to reach him. Punishment seems all it's left that is intimate.

His ability to hurt Hannibal has proven what he never allowed himself to believe: that Hannibal is
his equal, not in strength, but in vulnerability.

Often Will ponders if their divide would be easier to bridge if Hannibal was having an affair, fucking some young body under the blue moonlight. If he was cheating, Will could kill him, perhaps kill them both with a paring knife, blood everywhere, eat the lying heart right out of Hannibal’s steaming chest. It would steam in the northern cold, live flesh would.

But he isn’t (can’t be, can he? no, he can’t. he can’t, I’d know).

And Will. Will misses the taste of his mouth almost as much as he thinks of killing.

Checking his mirrors, Will picks up the blanket, measures its worn weight on his hands. Though folded neatly, it feels clammy to the touch. Discreetly, he presses the herringbone fabric to his nose. It smelled like Hannibal, unwashed, the oils of his skin, the musk of his sex.

Oh, Will thought, flushing.

He finds the wettest patch and kisses it.

---

The second note comes three days later. Will finds it in the morning by the empty coffee pot.

"Ibuprofen" it states, the white oblong pill balanced against a water glass. "600 mg" in tinier script, placed between parenthesis, the linguistic shape of a kiss.

Will's back has been killing him, the unfortunate combination of old injuries and vintage carseats. The dampness also doesn't help any. Northern winters had been hard on Will since their first year. Hannibal used to keep every fireplace in the house roaring from October to March even though he enjoyed the foggy cold. It used to be unbearably sultry by sundown, so they'd strip and make love on the cool hardwood floors.

Will takes the pill and leaves a penny. On the back of a gas receipt, he scribbles in blue ball-pen: "Thoughts?"

For a while, he fidgets where to place it: if by the knife stand or the kitchen counter. He decides on the marble fruit bowl, clasped between two green apples.

Swiftly, he slips out through the backdoor. Even though it rains slow and irritatingly, Will whistles all day long.

---

The third note comes in the night, one Will spent driving aimlessly around dirt roads.

The moon is muffled into a synch, the air felted with mist. Will dithers outside the front door, head pounding, frozen to the bone. The heat had broken in the Mercedes and somehow the prospect of having to seek a mechanic to fix it seems unsurmountable. He should have found out where Madame Loin got hers serviced but now was too late to ask.

He jingles his keychain and sighs. A migraine, another, sharpening with the stale cigarette smell etched on the porch. Hannibal smokes too much, Will scolds internally as he steps in, nearly tripping on the tray as he does.

It's more of a silver platter really, one Will recognizes from holidays and anniversary dinners.
Hannibal got it from an antiques dealer in Versailles, a steal he had said, for an original Gorham. It's sitting on the crimson carpet now, in the middle of the unlit foyer. Will bends to inspect it and sees the blood before he sees the note. Cream thick paper, smudged red on the edges.

The heart was unmistakably human, Will registers first, the smell of raw meat strong on his nostrils.

He plucks the note, the same care and distance he'd use in a crime scene.

"Yours," it replies, the ink black and runny.

Will licks one fingertip and touches it to the sticky flesh. It's still warm.

---

The business card is where Will left it: inside his shirt pocket, folded in two.

---

Double-parked on the Rue de Valois, Will pretends to consider a walk in the Royal gardens. It’s an unusually balmy evening, but no amount of walking could shake off his discomfort with centuries-old wealth.

Will zeroes in on the second-to-last balcony, fourth floor. Windows open, muslin curtains flowing out. If the subdued glow and gilded ceilings didn’t give him away, the harpsichord and cellos trailing into the streets sure would.

Lighting up a Treasurer, Will considers the possibility of finding longterm parking in the 1st arrondissement of Paris. Vivaldi tapers off, replaced by Monteverdi. In the transition, Will catches a glimpse of something. A laugh? A scream? It’s there and gone.

No matter. There will be time to find out.

He checks the train schedules to the Somme on his new disposable phone, and wonders if Hannibal would mind paying for a long-distance cab. If he does, Will still has his American cards. It’s not like Jack doesn’t know where he is. Anyhow, Will has come to realize he doesn’t much mind being arrested. Most of his life has been spent in cages already.

Satisfied with his plan, he unlocks the Mercedes and leaves the keys in the ignition.

It was never a car he cared for anyway.

---

Turns out Hannibal was not a fan of long-distance cab rides.

He still paid for the fare, standing bare-footed and in shirtsleeves: a gentleman caught right before retiring for the night, forced to count euros in the pouring rain.

In Will’s defence, it was 4am and had been thundering on and off for the last five hours. Trains in rural France weren’t exactly reliable.

But still, Will’s impromptu excursion and the sorry state of his clothes did nothing to help matters between them.

“You endanger our safety by giving our home address to strangers now!”, Hannibal snarled as he
slammed the front door behind him. “To justify such recklessness, I am forced to imagine you had an exceptionally momentous night, dear Will.”

Will sat heavily on the couch, reaching for the tea on the table.

“Stop.” The tea was lukewarm and sweet, just the way Will liked it. It occurred to him Hannibal might have brewed it when he heard the cab pull into their driveway. "Stop trying to manage me, stop trying to control us. You always spoke so highly of how evenly matched we are—"

"We are—"

"Then stop treating me like an unpredictable appliance! You married me, not manufactured me, Dr. Lecter. I'm not yours to hold!"

Hannibal, never one for losing composure, squared his shoulders and screamed, "You are my partner, my lover, my family! You are mine!"

The walls seemed to rattle. Will sipped his tea.

"No I am not," he stated so flatly Hannibal flinched. "I can't be yours as long as I am not myself. And I can't become myself if all I hear is you, tinkering in my head. So," Will held his gaze unblinking, "back off, Hannibal."

Hannibal hunched forward, purposefully threatening. Will's head swam. For the hundredth time that year, he wondered if Hannibal had drugged him.

What a lovely man he is, Will yawned, tugging off his shoes. The loveliest hands and the loveliest shoulders and the saddest eyes.

Grief waltzed in the room, hanging between them like a deadman from a tree. It was so dense it knocked the wind out of Will.

For an agonizing moment, Will considered all possible scenarios, all the impossible secrets Hannibal may have kept from him: impending incarceration, divorce, loss of wealth, a family history of neuropathology, cancer, dementia—

"Oh god, let it not be illness," flitted urgent through Will's brain. “Please let it be something I can rescue him from.”

Before his mind could consent, his body was up and across the room, the stiff width of Hannibal’s shoulders clasped between his arms, clasped so tight Will could feel Hannibal’s heartbeat drum through his own chest.

“I got you,” Will murmured into Hannibal’s hair, dull and desperately mused, “I got you now,” cradling a serial killer’s skull with a gentleness it shocked him because against all odds and past evidence, Will still did not believe himself caring or particularly kind, and yet, as he ran a steady hand along Hannibal’s spine, Will accepted he must be, kind to the extent one can be to those who betrayed you, or maybe more, because in that moment Will’s need for righteousness and retribution receded into a mere shadow, a crease in the enormous fold that was their bond, and suddenly there was only the two of them. Not a predator and his match, not even a guilty and injured party, but just a man who loved another with painfully inadequate absoluteness.

Hannibal stood in place, legs and arms braced apart, the steel of his defiance something that still succeeded in making Will giddy with arousal. For the first time since they had slaughtered Abigail, Will let himself think the thought that had long danced around the edges of his awareness: “I am in
love with you and I am going to kill you,” followed by the unbearable admission, “and you will let me because you love me too.”

With eerie synchronicity, Hannibal chose that moment to nuzzle Will’s neck, lungs expanding and shrinking at strange intervals, moisture collecting on Will’s collar and bleeding onto his skin.

It burst into view, like a slide projecting upon a wall: there was something throbbing inside Hannibal, something nameless, the shape of a fist. A populated darkness.

As soon as Will sensed it, the air shifted between them. Hannibal shuddered, fingertips grazing Will’s hair.

“Sweetheart,” he whispered brokenly and Will immediately tightened the noose around his waist.

“What’s wrong?”, he mouthed against Hannibal’s cheek, his ear. “Baby, please tell me. I won’t let you go.”

Will said it in the mortifying tone they used in bed, breathy and silly with honesty, and yet what he meant was, “I am going to kill you so you are kept safe. In bloom and in perpetuity, inside me where no one else can reach you, where no one will be able to hurt you again. I will be your cage and sanctuary, and life’s indignities will have no dominion over us.” Which in all fairness, as impulses go, did not differ much from those Will faulted Hannibal for.

Fruit from the same poisoned tree, Will conceded, pressing the hardness between his legs against Hannibal’s disappointing softness.

“Loss should give context to our lives, remind us of the value of every fleeting moment,” Hannibal spoke at last, breath sticky on Will’s neck, his voice waterlogged not with tears but old blood. "Loss should not breed anguish, but renew freedom.”

Will wanted to chide, “You haven’t lost anything. I’m here, you’re here, we’ll work it out,” but lying seemed beneath them, even if the lie was halved and whited.

Instead, he stepped back. Sitting on the couch, he held Hannibal’s hand at a distance.

How vulnerable his feet looked, socketed iris-blue against the crimson carpet. How very helpless and wanting.

“I love you,” Will told those exposed feet. “Terribly. I love you so goddam terribly, Dr. Graham.”

After a long pause, he heard murmured back, so low it was nearly inaudible, “Forever?”

“No,” Will shook his head, burrowing longways in brocade cushions. “Much, much longer.”

The wool of the blanket scratched, tucked snug under his chin.

“Then don’t leave me,” Hannibal’s voice chased Will’s dreams. “Let us be terrible together.”

Exhaustion finally felled him. Drifting off, Will let out, “I think we already are.”

---

He liked to smoke too, the other Will. He smoked at all hours on his balcony overseeing the bustle of the shops and the Louvre, white t-shirt and boxer shorts, used to tourists never looking up, used to never being seen.
Will watched him, the way he tucked one foot on top of the other, the way he followed the melody along with his exquisite hands, the cigarette hobbling between his long fingers. His hair was much lighter and curlier than Will remembered from the party. His body was much thinner too, vulnerable even. Will worried he would catch a cold.

The other Will had people over constantly, boys and girls who looked younger than him. They laughed and talked very loudly, and sometimes Will could make up what they were saying. Nothing remarkable. Gossip about common acquaintances, rants about dead composers. The weather. Twice a girl with dark skin had spent the night. Will had seen them undressing against the windowpanes, the girl’s strong shoulder-blades pressed against the glass, their hands twined over her head.

Will had looked away then, out of respect. For her, he imagined, because he had none for him. He wondered between sips of stupendously overpriced coffee if that revealed a lack of self-respect so profound it extended to his double. Double? Competitor. (Prey).

Although sometimes, particularly when he lingered on the curb pretending to fumble with his phone so he could steal glances up, Will felt more like a jilted lover. He didn’t know who was doing the jilting, but somehow love seemed to be amiss or misdirected. He thought of the boy’s lips around the filter, on the girl’s neck, and wondered if Hannibal had kissed him like that. No, not him. Them.

In the end, looking in on young Will made old Will feel older, used up, othered. It reminded him what it felt like to be on the outside of something beautiful, hoping to be let in but knowing it would never feel right, no matter how in the thick of it he was. That’s how it had felt at Hannibal’s in Baltimore and at Madame Loin’s in Paris: not a participant, but an outsider, perpetually looking in. He wondered if it would feel different at Wilhelm’s, once he would be inside his Rue de Valois apartment. If it would feel like coming home.

Touching the knife in his pocket, Will stumped his cigarette, full for the night.

He guessed he would have to go and find out.

---

“At-all at-all.”

Will startles midway hanging his jacket by the front door. It’s late, but not like before. Will is never missing the last train again if he can help it.

“Pardon?”

“You said that to me once,” Hannibal clarifies, emerging from the shadows. “Remember?”

“I did?”

“Yes. In our honeymoon.”

“Oh,” Will shrugs off his dirty boots. “Well, if you say so. Bien sûr.”

Hannibal stands in the middle of the dim foyer, the black pinstripe on his vest a stark contrast against a crisp cream shirt. His hair is growing out again, dark brown threaded with ash. He looks timeless and remote, like a ghost. Will wonders if this is the version he introduced to Wilhelm, or if this one is for Will’s eyes only.
The silence stretches thin until Hannibal presses, “You don’t remember, do you?”

Will doesn’t want to lie. He already had to tell a half-truth regarding the Mercedes’ disappearance.

“Does it matter if I do?”

Hannibal shakes his head. Coming from behind, he leans in and brushes his lips against Will’s nape. It’s the closest they have been for weeks and the gentlest Hannibal has been for months, and yet it feels like a slap.

Distantly, Will wonders if Hannibal could smell the Rue de Valois apartment on him.

---

“One does not move to Paris. Paris moves into you,” the boy had declared the first time he came down from the balcony to take Will out.

They had spent the evening wandering through the city, peering at the back of fountains and visiting crumbling churches. Near dawn, they had sneaked into the construction site around the wounded Notre Dame and pressed their thumbs to wet concrete.

“How does it feel?,” the other Will had asked, standing on top of metal scaffolding. “Being part of a history that’s not of your own making?”

From that high up, the city spread like a manteau of glittering stars.

“Super,” Will affected in an exaggerated French accent, and the boy laughed, throwing his head at the sky, the slight stem of his neck begging to be broken.

Will remembered being thirteen in churches all over the South and waiting for his life to begin. Waiting for someone to come along and make things interesting for him. He had hoped for a boy as early as middle-school. An older, wiser, graver boy, nothing like this one. At last he had come, that intriguing gentleman, only his company had been paid in bone saws and prison time. Will had hoped for morning kisses and wordplay.

(Well. He told himself he did. After Molly, he wasn’t so sure that was ever true.)

“You like churches,” the boy observed as they reached the ground.

“I do.”

“God?”

“No, quite the contrary.” Will admitted. "Churches hold a history of pain and hopefulness, of everyone’s prayers. You can feel the texture of it, centuries upon centuries, just by touching their walls.”

“The texture of pain?”

“Of humanity.”

The boy smirked. With his blue-flax eyes not his lips.

“Do you often feel inhuman, Will?”

“Don’t you?”
The boy shrugged, bumping Will's shoulder. “Can anyone who only keeps company with the dead ever feel human?”

“I don’t know, Wilhelm, you tell me.”

“You are the one who married Death, Will.”

“No, I married the Devil,” Will amended and the boy smiled, with his baby teeth this time.

“How can you be so sure you aren’t the Devil, Will?”

And there's a possibility Will couldn't fully entertain yet, so instead he deflected, “What would you be in that scenario anyway?”

The boy kicked a cobblestone and opened his beautiful hands in a mock bow, “Faust, of course.”

Will tried to laugh, but found he couldn't.

The boy winked and shook Will’s hand on a bridge, already half-turned to leave. His skin was so tender and warm, coltish down to his very ligaments.

“We should do this again,” Will ventured before the boy could walk away.

He canted his head in that curiously inexpressive way he had, so very much like Hannibal. Something jagged bubbled in Will’s gut, the foreign instinct to put gloves on a child before they go off into the snow.

“And why would we do that?,“ the boy asked.

Feeling thirteen and out of sorts, Will stuck sweaty hands in his jeans, and told the truth.

“I could use a friend.”

The boy looked at him like Jack did, like Alana did, like Molly did, like most people but Hannibal did, once upon a time.

“Will. I can’t be your friend,” the other Will reasoned. “I’m in love with your husband.”

“I know,” Will smiled. “A situation doesn’t have to be ideal to be interesting.”

The boy laughed again, his heartless, hair-tossing laughter. His eyes sparkled with the promise of adventure, of carnage, and Will saw, in leisurely detail, the graveyard of lye and acid the boy had makeshift in his clawfoot bathtub. His father had gone in first.

Will thought of his own father then, dying on a hospital bed, thought of the easy way the needle had gone between his toes and how he had later sat in his car, telling himself it had felt wrong to kill him.

“There really is more to you than scars,” the boy crooned, his mouth curving suggestively, cheaply, and Will began wondering if Hannibal could have kissed a mouth that young and spoiled without a hefty amount of self-reproach.

“Plenty of wounds too,” Will volleyed easily, but what he meant was: we’ve looked at each other enough. I know what you’ll look like when you’re dying. Maybe we could be friends first.

Instead he asked, “Do you fantasize about killing me?”
To his credit, the other Will did not flinch, did not even hesitate.

“Bien sûr,” he replied smoothly, slipping beautiful hands in bespoken pockets, the perfect picture of a youth with nothing but wealth and time to waste.

Paris held a certain erotic stillness in the early mornings, its sluggish quietness unlike anything else Will had ever witnessed. It made him very sad for the boy, who had hitched his heart to someone as loud and human of a lover as Hannibal.

“You know it wouldn’t do any good, right?,,” Will started, gazing at the rooftops. “He’s never—”

“I know,” the boy interrupted, turning away. “A situation doesn’t have to be ideal to work out,” he threw over his shoulder, blunt with resentment. “You of all people should know that, Will Graham.”

---

Will finds him on the front step, the door wide open behind him. His shirtsleeves are rolled up to the elbows. Will can see the scars on his wrists puckering in the pinkish half-light.

“Good evening, Hannibal.”

“Good morning, Will.”

“The sun isn’t out,” Will argues, coming to stand next to him on the threshold. “I wouldn’t call it morning just yet.”

It’s violently cold, the sky a bruise of different blues. Will can smell the smoke in Hannibal’s hair before he spots the cigarette behind his back.

“Operating under the cloak of daylight savings, I see,” Hannibal observes tartly, lifting the cigarette to his lips. He isn’t wearing a coat and his feet are bare, the amputated toe startling in its blanched void. From his profile, he looks gaunt and prideful, some sort of impetuous deity who had grown tired of pretending to be mortal.

Will wishes he had thought of getting some smokes of his own if they must stand there and be battered by the icy wind, but now it was too late to go back to a gas station, and besides, they never carried the fancy brand he had come to favor. He probably could blame Hannibal for that too if he wanted: for introducing him to exquisite delights you can only find in special places.

Stand there they do, silent in a cloud of one-sided nicotine, the condensation of winter creeping into Will’s bones and gnawing at his phantom pains until his whole body itches with the inexplicable desire to bury his nose in Hannibal’s throat and inhale the smoke straight from his skin.

“Look, what’s going on with you?”

If Hannibal startles he does not show it.

“Must something be ‘going on’ with me?,,” he retorts without moving a muscle, but the scare quotes could not be more visible if he had drawn them with his fingers.

Somehow it’s not the bitter cold, nor the pettiness of an unshared cigarette, not even Hannibal’s dismissive aloofness what sends Will over the edge. It’s the damn bare feet. Pale and veiny, kittenishly capped by the loveliest ankles Will has ever seen and yet so fucking breakable, left
vulnerable on the doorstep like an open wound.

“You know what?,” Will swivels around, steps into the foyer. “Keep your secrets. I’m going inside.”

“My aunt has passed away,” echoes down the dark corridor. “She was the last of my family.”

Will stalks back out.

“I thought I was your only family.” Inexplicably, he finds himself jamming a finger in the air.

“She was my family only by marriage,” Hannibal explains, tapping the cigarette against the stone wall.

“So am I!”, Will flings back before realizing he is growling. Clutching the knife in his pocket, he breathes out steadily, “Did you kill her?”

Hannibal’s mouth corners in a brief uptick, a gesture Will can’t fully appreciate because Hannibal’s head is still dipped down. "She lived a long and prosperous life.”

I shouldn't trust him, Will thinks. There’s something slippery in that admission, something hollowed like a Russian doll. Something that disturbs Will to the very dimple of his core.

“Did you love her?”, Will finds himself demanding as if it were a natural segue.

It’s still cold and the sun is barely out, but Will is hot all over with an anger that mouths at his scruff, and he knows, he knows that the probability of Hannibal walking into that house without a fatal stab wound is dwindling with each question.

“Perhaps at one point,” Hannibal concedes, lighting another cigarette. “Not for a very long time, though.”

“When did she die?”

“Over a year ago," Hannibal inhales, his eyes closing as he leans towards the sun. "But word only reached me recently.”

He looks so empty, Will thinks, the blade of his knife tacky and stained. Empty like sun-bleached rooms, beautiful before you clutter them with furniture.

“She saw to my education as a young man,” Hannibal tells the sky and Will can see it, the long, angular woman with her black hair arranged in sleek braids, reading poetry cross-legged in a cool greenhouse.

“She loved you,” Will blurts out before he can stop himself. “Until she didn’t.”

Knuckles brush against the back of his hand, and for an instant the sensation is just an extension of the dream, the vision of the woman gutting eels with a gangly teenager by her side. Her hands are slippery with blood and freshwater.

“Will?”

Will blinks. The cigarette is caught half between his fingers, half between Hannibal’s. The burning end faces him. If he dithers, it’ll scorch him.

“Will,” Hannibal lowers his voice and looks down at their adjoined hands. “She didn’t love me.
She loved the image she gathered of me.”

“I love all of you,” and that might be growling again, Will wages.

“Hmm,” Hannibal nods thoughtfully, leaning back against the wall. “You resent most of me as well.”

Will turns away, towards the misty trees, squints at the styrofoam sunlight.

“Nice touch, the notes,” he says, pulling at the cigarette.

Hannibal is assessing him now, quite unapologetically.

“I aim to please.”

“You do.” Will paces. “All the time. Every thing you do pleases me.”

“Everything?”

Eye contact. Will still doesn’t enjoy it. But what’s the point of pretending there’s any bone forts in his mind for the thing he loves the most?

He lifts his chin and catches Hannibal’s gaze, faces the heartbreaking exhaustion and amusement playing over his features.

“Everything.” It’s a monstrous admission pleated inside one simple word. On the fringes of his sight, Will sees the cigarette shake between his blood-stained fingers, Abigail’s neck painting the kitchen floor red. Francis, kneeling, throatless. “Every godawful thing.”

Hannibal’s breath hitches, just an octave, but Will fancies to hear the rush of his heart, pitter-patter confusingly from ribcage to groin. He could ask anything of Hannibal right now and he would do it. He would take the knife himself and cut from neck to gut if Will demanded it.

Sometimes the most dangerous thing two people can do is fall in love with each other.

“Do you remember those pancakes you made in Maine?”, Will gestures into the woodsy distance. “The ones from The Epicurean?”

“Of course.”

“Care to try my version?”

“It’s the middle of the night, Will.”

“I thought we’d established it’s morning.” Will flickers his cigarette and walks back inside. “Anyway, I’m making some. Join me if you want.”

“We may be out of star anise.”

“That’s fine,” Will halts in the middle of the corridor. A film of dust coats the coat hanger and wall mirror. “We’ll make do.”

“Would you settle for a lacking meal, Will?”, trails behind him.

Will sucks in a breath, closes his eyes, throws over his shoulder, “It’s not lacking if we share it.”
“It would still be settling.”

“We don’t settle, Hannibal. We compromise.”

“Is that what you are doing, Will?”

“I am compartmentalizing,” Will lies. He finds himself back outside, waving a hand with startling insistence. “Come on, it’s cold out. You’ll catch your death standing here without shoes on.”

“Would that trouble you?”

“You catching influenza again?,” Will shrugs, feigning interest in the dying cigarette. It’s a cheap, drugstore brand, intractable to his tastebuds. “Yeah, it wasn’t much fun the first time around, you know.”

“No,” Hannibal pauses. It’s small and purposeful, the way he stands up a fraction taller, straighter, suddenly crowding the doorway. “Me. Dying.”

Will taps his foot irritably. “What do you think, Hannibal?”

Hannibal tips his head with the detached grace of a field strategist. “I can say with sincerity that I do not know.”

“Nothing you say is ever entirely sincere, Dr. Lecter,” Will reaches out on pure instinct, managing to stop short of grabbing his wrist. “Now will you shut up and come inside?”

“Are you still in love with me, Will?”

The scars, his scars, their scars, faded by time and history, so unlike and yet so much like the boy’s. Will cannot tear his eyes away. The knife jumps in his coat pocket. The desire to write over Hannibal’s wrist scars with his own hand is both shocking and soothing.

“I am working on it,” Will lies again.

“Should I find that enough?”

Will looks up, stares him down. “It’s already a lot.”

For once, Hannibal evades eye contact. “Love is?”

“You are.”

Hannibal preens, a hike of his eyebrows and chapped lips.

“One could take that as a compliment.”

“If anyone could, it would be you.”

His face breaks with unexpected softness, a slow crumble of sharp angles.

“I miss you, Will.”

Will sighs deeply.

“I missed—“ he runs a finger between them, “too.”

“Are you staying home today?”
Will frowns, pinching the forgotten stub between his fingers.

“We should quit these. We’re not getting any younger.”

“Will, I am—”

“Lock the door when you come in, will you?”

---

Hannibal sat lightly touching his plate. The kitchen perspired cinnamon and sadness, Will's fingers cramping around the dishtowel. He stood awkwardly behind him, unsure what to do next.

"Is it any good?", Will asked, rocking on the ball of his feet.

Knife and fork scratched the white china. "Of course," Hannibal said without lifting his head. "Quite."

Whatever had taken hold of Hannibal was deep and gunmetal heavy, unlike anything Will had seen in him before. He flipped through his mind trying to find a picture that fit: pain was too loose, outrage too bright. It was quiet and muted and old, this thing clamping inside Hannibal.

"Should I—," Will fretted with his apron strings, motioned to the door.

Hannibal's hands always moved too fast for Will to properly anticipate them. The pain found him a full second before he realized there was a viselike grip around his wrist.

Hannibal was still bowed over his plate, syrup congealing around the doughy disk. Nothing had changed. Not the sun coming through the vaulted windows, not the smell of melted butter in the air. And yet the room felt so full Will could hardly breathe.

He tried to move and his radius and ulna squeaked like on the verge of snapping. Hannibal always did hold on to him too tight, too intent, a tad too recklessly.


The release came slowly, almost incremental, blood-flow stubborn to return.

Will poured himself a cup of coffee and sat in front of Hannibal. Their knees bumped under the table. Before a bruise could form, Hannibal reached out and gently closed his fist around Will's wrist bones.

Whatever it was, it demanded a vigil.

Will sipped the cold coffee and sunk back in his chair.

---

Will tries to give the Rue de Valois a wide berth, so when he capitulates it’s usually dusk. All the windows look like Christmas presents, lit up gold from the inside.

The balcony is dark but the doors are left ajar. Will sits on the sidewalk and lets the cold seep through his threadbare coat. They should have gone to a tailor in Lille sometime last spring. Hannibal had spoken joyfully of it, the drive up the mountains, the Flemish words rounded softly in his lying mouth.
Will misses the taste of his mouth, the way Hannibal kisses by leaning all his weight on your chest. Hannibal always kissed like an extension of holding you close, of taking you in. A part of you stayed behind when he kissed you, it stayed in his arms.

A light appears on the fourth floor.

The boy, Will worries, might be bounty. If Will leaves, if he fails at becoming whatever Hannibal envisions. Insurance, ransom, sacrifice. A life saved not to be lived, but to be bartered.

But maybe that’s true of himself too.

Maybe that’s why he made it out of the ocean alive. Maybe once Hannibal stitched him up, Will’s life had ceased to be his own. He had become Hannibal’s, a scar, a notch, a soul in his ledger.

Or maybe. Wait. Maybe it’s the other way around. Will is getting fuzzy on those details.

The wind picks up, rank with river water. Will huddles knees to chest. Soon the police will be called. Maybe someone will tip Jack off, maybe the FBI will come too. Maybe it doesn’t matter. Maybe it’s all for the best.

Otherwise an unaccountable amount of people will die.

---

The front door is unlocked.

It’s past midnight. Will’s fingers bunch in his pockets. Past midnight and the damn door is left unlocked. Again.

He strides down the corridor, careless of closing the door behind him or taking his boots off. There’s an ache behind his eyes wanting to spill over. He reigns in, but the leash feels frail.

He walks into the study with no hesitation. It’s orange-warm and purple-dark inside, the glow of the fading embers casting ghosts against the walls. Usually Will would never dare treading on the pristine antique floorboards without a proper invitation or adequate footwear. But there’s no point in being polite when you are rearing for a fight.

“Hannibal!”, he blusters in, tugging at his bloodied gloves, about to throw them on the couch when he sees him: sitting at his desk, left cheek resting on tucked hands, fallen like a tired child.

Even the way he tucks his hands is elegant, Will thinks, slipping his shoes off, silence suddenly a precious commodity, one he’d give his life to protect.

A notepad peeks from under his cufflinks, the precise cursive of Hannibal’s hand bleeding equation after mathematical equation. A rough sketch of a profile, a woman’s, with an aquiline nose and black varnished hair decorated with cherry blossoms. The lines are too clean to be a lover, but the details are too loving to be anonymous.

Will feels a twinge in his gut, the complicated urge to break off a piece of Hannibal and swallow it.

He hovers for a moment. The brace of Hannibal’s shoulders is so unconditionally relaxed. Only in death Will imagined a man like Hannibal would let his guard down so completely, only in death. Did he leave the door open as an invitation for trouble, then? Or does he feel so profoundly at home safety is a given, like food and shelter?
Will’s hands flutter down to the part in Hannibal’s hair. White gold and unkempt, it dipped in his eyes when he stood. But like this, folded asleep, his hair fanned like a halo.

Why is it that the more I love him, the more I distrust myself?, Will thinks, smoothing the wrinkles in Hannibal’s forehead, around his eyes, the ones he put there, the ones Hannibal let him put there.

He knows the answer by now: Can’t go herding sheep with a wolf and expect to come home without blood on your hands. Only Hannibal might not be the wolf, which means his could be the blood staining Will's hands.

(That. That's the answer Will ultimately fears, the answer he keeps running from. Not that he loves a wolf, but that his love is the wolf itself).

Hannibal’s nose twitches, the furrow between his eyebrows deepening. He’s dreaming, Will knows. When they shared a bed, Will used to wake up to Hannibal jittering, a strange current convulsing his body. The nightmares smelled stale, like old boxed flour.

Will would roll onto his back and gather him to his chest, perch his chin over Hannibal’s rumpled hair, kiss the hairline where it grew damp.

“Where am I?,” he would ask in a motley of languages it took Will a month to decipher.

“Loved,” Will would reply every time, kissing him square on the mouth.

Hannibal jolts under Will’s touch now, a warm, snapped pressure. Will looks down and his wrist is clutched in Hannibal’s fist, sprained backwards. The angle is terrifying, a full tilt in the wrong direction.

“Will?”, Hannibal’s voice comes from far far away, staticky and shrill.

Pain spreads hotly. Will squeezes his eyes shut.

“I thought—your neck,” Will hisses. “It would hurt in the morning if I didn’t—oh fuck!”

Hannibal’s hands on his back, on the back of his hand, keeping it upright, leading him out of the room, into the corridor, soothing, “Breathe. Stay with me, Will. It’s just a sprain. The pain will stop soon, breathe,” the voice on his ear intimate and gentle, incongruent with the casual violence of the gesture, of his nature. Halting in the foyer for Hannibal to close the front door, turning the key twice, a minimal bid at an apology, the only Will was likely to get because foolish were those who went touching predators when they were unawares.

Will stumbles, yanks his wrist away, only dimly consenting to be shepherded upstairs.

“It fucking hurts, Hannibal!”

“You have sustained worse injuries,” Hannibal remarks, a smirk somewhere among the vines, his grip steady on Will’s elbow, reaching for Will’s hand, brushing the swelling knuckles against his cheek, the second plea for forgiveness Will has no wish to return but can’t help leaning into.

“Fuck you,” Will grouses, sitting down heavily on (their?) bed as Hannibal slips off his jacket and rolls up his sleeve with a care both clinical and alien.

He is dressed all in black. Black trousers, black button-down, black brogues, a vision that is as treacherous as it is touching: the Devil in mourning.
“I am never coming near you again,” Will spits and Hannibal laughs, not with his mouth but with his eyes, an inscrutable feat of magic.

He kneels on the floor and begins binding the wrist in surgical gauze. The skin is already bloated blue, the stamp of Hannibal’s fingers puffed and precise.

“Is it broken?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Will,” Hannibal sighs, long-suffering, “I am a doctor.”

“You’re a wife-beater, that’s what you are.”

Hannibal does not dignify that with an answer which is just as well because Will is now too tired to fight.

When Hannibal is done, he offers Will a pill and a glass of ice and stands aside, stripping down to nothing. His naked body is as Will remembers: muscular and frightful, with all the soft lines inherited from his mother’s side.

He must be keeping himself busy, Will bristles. French novels and rich food do not allow a body to keep such lean shape.

Will is sitting on the edge of the bed when Hannibal pulls the covers down and pats the mattress by his side.

“Lie down, Will.”

Hannibal still sleeps without a stitch on. That always spelled trouble. There was not a singular situation, from home invasion to a lovers’ spat, when that habit did not spell trouble.

Will refuses to turn back to look at him though he can feel the force of his determination. Close inspections reveals no contrition. Whatever sins Will may have committed, Hannibal finds within his purview to dole out this kind of accidental punishment.

“I said ‘fuck you, Hannibal’.”

A hand presses on his back, insistent and somewhat sensual. It’s the certainty, Will realizes. The certainty that it will get what it wants.

“Then come here and do it yourself.”

Will gives in and looks over his shoulder, just so his displeased expression can be fully appreciated.

“Puns have never been your forte, Dr. Lecter. Someone has to put you out of your misery once and for all.”

Hannibal’s curls on his side, left hand splayed between their bodies. A third unspoken offering.

The curve of his bare back shimmers in the near-darkness, the silver sheets pooling around his hips. The way the light catches on the burnt imprint of his scar fills Will with an ugly urge to cry.
“Please, Will,” he pleads, slow and monotone. “Lie down with me.”

With a huff, Will lets his head hit the pillow. He refuses to pull the covers from under his body. Like a corpse, he steeples hands over chest and stares unblinkingly at the ceiling. The only light source is from (his?) nightstand. He considers switching it off but that seems ill-advised, the type of slippery-slope Will knows has no ledge nor bottom.

“Try to sleep, Will. That couch cannot be a comfortable resting place.”

“Says the man asleep at his desk.”

On cue, a wave of drowsiness washes over Will. Distantly he wonders if the pill Hannibal gave him might not have been a painkiller after all. Not that it matters. Will still got in bed with him. Perhaps forgiveness isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Hannibal inches closer in what might be a discreet stab at intimacy, a subtle shift of shoulders and a brush of toes against Will’s ankles. The sheet rides lower, showing the fair smudge of hair trailing down his groin. Will closes his eyes.

“I miss seeing you across from me in bed,” Hannibal rumbles and Will knows this game too well to hedge his bets on a win. He tightens his arms across his chest and traps his hands under the armpits.

“And look at that. All it took was some good ole-fashion spousal abuse to make all your dreams come true.”

“Will, I didn’t intend to cause you harm.”

“I know.”

“Never,” Hannibal lies, and it's such a nice lie Will almost lets it slide. "I never—"

“Yeah, well. The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.”

“My mother used to say that ‘Hell is the resting place of great, not good, lovers.’ ”

That snags Will’s attention. Without permission, his eyes snap to Hannibal’s, shoulders rotating towards his form.

“Do you miss her?”

“Who?,” Hannibal’s lips twitch. “My mother?”

“All of them.”

“Not particularly." And there’s a sough somewhere in the moors, and a flatness that not being comfortable is honest. "Their acceptance was contingent on me being someone else.”

Will nods. He knows how that feels.

He settles on his side, facing Hannibal. His eyes are full with darkness, glimmering with violet light.

"How did you feel? After you lost them?”
“Alone,” Hannibal says without hesitation, “and free.”

“Free?”

Hannibal nods, licking his lips. Will knows he has walked into a trap the moment Hannibal’s fingers swipe his. Distracted, he had let his injured hand slip onto the mattress, into the void between them.

A thumb skims his wrist, slides under the bandage and strokes the thin skin there in small, gentle circles. Will’s eyes grow heavy.

“What about you, Will?”, it filters in groggily. “How did you feel when you lost your father?”

“Unsafe.”

“And with me?”

The warmth bleeds into every muscle in his body, liquid and syrupy. Will’s mouth moves of its own accord.

“Neither free nor safe.”

“Bonded?”, Hannibal offers, and there’s a sneer in his tone if you dug for it.

“Committed.” Will catches Hannibal’s hand, traces the scar on Hannibal’s ring finger with his own. “Sieged.”

“Loved?”

Will shrugs, burying his face on the downy pillow. “Does it matter?”

“You do. To me you do, Will. Greatly.”

“Not goodly huh?”

Hannibal smiles, eyes and lips this time.

“Why aim for the moon when you can hoard all the stars?”

Will feels a weight on his hip, the chill of Hannibal’s skin on the small of his back, snaking under his flannel shirt, climbing his spine like steps.

“That’s how Faust got into trouble.”

“Are you Faust in this scenario, Will?” The question ripples against his neck, damp under his ear. “Or are you Mephistopheles?”

“I've wondered if I’m Gretchen actually.”

“Nonsense!”

Will tips his head back. His hand is cupped inside another hand, coiled like a teacup. He feels the sheets, their well-ironed crease graze his knuckles, then the crisp thatch of pubic hair.

He would recognize the shape of Hannibal’s body in any universe, the divot of his hips, the raise of his stomach, the puckered hole on his abdomen, the femoral pulse between his thighs. The fit of
Hannibal’s cock when nestled in his grip, the delicate vulnerability of its length and unseasonable heat, the tonal shift in his throat when wanting hurts him too deep for him to know how to put it into words.

If I feel this, I am aware enough to stop it, Will thinks.

Instead he makes a fist and hurls back, “Not keen on a female love interest with an illegitimate child?”

Hannibal jerks, his hips responding to the see-saw motion of Will’s hand.

“Would you like to bear my children, Will?”

“I’ve entertained the notion.”

“The French countryside has you feeling paternal?”

“No!” Will speeds his strokes, focuses on the salty smell spilling from under the sheets, suffusing the room, the bed, the skin where they touch. “I don’t want any children. I want more of you.”

Hannibal, always sharp, even when his voice breaks, “Present tense?”

“Too recent to be past.”

Hannibal’s back sweats off a viscous gleam. The cut of his mouth pushes into the pillow, his hips drill Will’s hand into the mattress. It’d be enough to drive a lesser man mad: the sight of a man using another man’s hand to fuck himself.

“I see,” Hannibal manages to stutter, arching off the bed.

“I am not sure that you do.”

“Oh I guarantee that I see you with unfailing clarity, dear Will. And when I don’t, terrible things tend to happen.” Hannibal points his chin at Will’s bandaged wrist.

Will can’t help wonder if Hannibal knows what he’s been up to. If he knows that hunting has made him dangerous, tuned his ears to all kinds of emotional wind drift.

He leans closer, close enough to count the freckles dotting Hannibal’s shoulder-blades.

“I am so tired of lying to myself,” he whispers, touching a scarred cheek to Hannibal’s nape. He wonders if it sounds like an apology, if he says it like other people let out a scream.

“I know,” Hannibal admits, flat and unsurprised and yet so infinitely kind in his lack of curiosity. “I know all of you, Will.”

"Then you shouldn't still be here," Will rasps and is startled by the sound of his own voice. He had forgotten the sound it made when he cried. "I can't stop thinking about hurting you."

In Will’s hand, Hannibal leaks. It’s openness what always undoes him. Not violence, not the act of murder or sex or sparring, but the vulnerability inherent to opening someone up, with knifes or fingers or words.

Will smears a kiss at the base of his skull, where a decisive blow would kill him instantly.

“I love the way you smell,” he mutters into Hannibal’s matted hair. “I wish you would come inside
my lungs so I could never stop smelling you.”

The air coppers. Blood and pre-ejaculate must share the same alloys, Will thinks, motion hardening, must at some point have been made of the same raw materials.

He opens his eyes. Hannibal has turned fully on his stomach, forehead resting on a crooked arm, a mirror of his earlier position at the desk. Only now the sheets are humped at the foot of the bed, his body a plaintive, tense line. It’s not the loud moaning or his trembling ass, but that he’s planked on his toes that ultimately undoes Will. It’s too sad, too desperate of a position not to be born out of starvation.

Will bears down, pressing dry lips to the patch of burnt skin, the only place in Hannibal’s body he is sure there’s no feeling left.

Seismic, it feels, and volcanic.

Hannibal whimpers, the hand clutching Will’s seizing, forcing it to speed up and squeeze tighter, too tight, tendons pulling taut and tough, grinding and grounding and—

Will rips his hand away.

He sits up, hugging both arms to his chest.

“I should go before I fall asleep.”

“Stay,” Hannibal pants, trying and failing to catch his breath. “Please.”

Will turns to regard him. “Why?”

Hannibal huddles back to his side, brings his knees against his belly. Will is reminded that a beast is never as enticing as when he has been made weak with wanting.

“I too would enjoy a full night of sleep,” Hannibal says simply.

Sometimes the cruelest thing two people can do is fall in love with each other.

“Do you want me that much?”

Hannibal makes a noise between condescending and chastising.

“That’s not the verb I would choose.”

Will finally meets his gaze. A shadow passes between them, sly and sinister. Palms flat on the mattress, Hannibal hoists himself up. Will can smell him, the animal scent of him. He bends forward, languidly, hair bracketing Will’s jaw.

No one seems as powerful as when they are just barely outside your reach.

Will ducks away.

“What verb would you choose then?,“ he asks the nightstand.

Hannibal draws back, exhales. ”Why do you refuse to kiss me, Will?"

"Because I can't trust you."
"Must you trust me to want me?"

"No," Will deadpans. "But I should to have you."

And it's the truth, though again quartered and bleached. Because the plain truth is a handless knife, liable to hurt whomever seizes it: trust and forgiveness have become ornamental, and though Will would like to have them gifted, he's going to make do without. If Hannibal asks, he will.

"I'm sorry, Will." The words sound brassy, polished with wear, when they echo from Hannibal's side of the bed. "I don't know how to let go of you."

It comes to Will with vicious bluntness, a sort of menial epiphany: he doesn't resent Hannibal, he resents the man he envisions Will to be. That brutal, bold, victorious Victorian fantasy of a madman or a cad. Hannibal can't help it, Will imagines, yearning for that other Will who isn't real. Will can't help it either: he yearns for him as well.

"Alright," Will reaches down, pulling the covers over them both. "Close your eyes. I'll stay for a minute."

Hannibal wheels his palm up and Will drops his hand in it. He cuffs him by the bandaged wrist and Will lets him, even if it hurts a little.

Under the sheet, Will can see the painful swell of Hannibal's erection.

Something shakes lose inside him, something intolerably tender. Will swallows around it, the fluttering of wings in his throat.

"You haven't, you know?" he says suddenly.

"What?"

"Lost me."

It's easy for Hannibal to pick up on the thread of an old conversation. There is no such thing as time between them.

"Conventional wisdom would suggest forgiveness is mandatory for healing," he remarks, pushing up against the headboard and stretching his long legs, the usual ritual he would perform every time they'd begin discussing something that demanded his full attention.

Against all hope, Will found himself endeared, tempted to forget their differences stretched beyond the fact he shouldn't be wearing jeans and a winter coat when Hannibal sat naked next to him.

The hair in Hannibal's chest glints in the amber light, silverer by the day. Will was missing it, this incremental greying. Suddenly he couldn't find a good enough reason why.

Tearing his eyes away, he clears his throat, "And what would unorthodox psychiatry suggest?"

"That forgiveness cannot be induced, but only welcomed." Hannibal regards him with deliberate intensity. "It pays you a visit, or it doesn't."

"What if it doesn't?"

Hannibal rubs his eyes in a way Will expects to see him wearing glasses, a way that reminds him that in spite of many fabulous feats, Hannibal remains a man in his mid fifties, sleep-deprived and likely dehydrated, currently struggling to dispense psychiatric advice while blood redistributes
itself through his ageing body.

"The mind's ability to heal is rarely one-directional, Will," he yawns, the lines around his eyes darkening. "We heal by committing to move forward."

"What if all we do is move in circles, doomed to repeat old patterns of pain and punishment?"

"But it’s not a circle, is it? These conversations? They are ever-multiplying concentric journeys. Like days around the sun. No two of them are ever the same."

For the first time in a very long time, Will allows himself to consider Hannibal might actually be an excellent psychiatrist.

"Sure, Icarus, but without forgiveness aren't we bound to crash and burn?"

"Will," Hannibal pauses, retreads carefully. "The only forgiveness required to heal is that of oneself."

There's the woman again, with her black plaits and clever hands, whose death hurt something inside Hannibal he had long believed not to exist.

"Do you take your own advice?", Will asks.

"Often."

"Then you should know that forgiveness is not a requirement for love."

I love you without it, Will thinks, and you loved her without it too. That's why you are hurting. Because death leaves unresolved the things we could not master.

Without words, Hannibal listens, eyes and lips pursing in response.

"Forgiveness is a lens, Will. How can I believe you to see me when you refuse to see yourself?"

"Can the Devil be forgiven, Hannibal?"

"He can certainly forgive himself."

Wary, Will feels for the words in his mind. "Like kissing the knife that stabbed you?"

"Like offering your chest to a knife-thrower unsure of his aim."

"Do you find me that unskilled?", Will scowls.

"No, not at all. But you are reckless, Will."

"With your heart?"

"With yours."

"I didn’t give my heart away, Hannibal."

"Didn’t you?", and the way Hannibal’s narrows his eyes tells Will their conversation has split in two, its subtext likely referring to the boy in the Rue de Valois.

Will holds his gaze, notes the minute tension pulling at Hannibal’s jaw. He thinks of Baltimore, the myriad times he turned to Hannibal for rescue.
"That was trust, Hannibal," he warns. “Not carelessness."

"And now?"

"I’m not careless anymore. You saw to that."

Hannibal’s breath rushes out, an audible gush of relief or resignation.

"You know I would let myself be apprehended if it made you whole."

It’s not posed as a question, though Will suspects it might be partially one.

Will’s mind halts. They both know without needing to say it that polite society will not make the same mistake twice. If Hannibal the Cannibal ever finds himself within the range of law enforcement he is not going to be captured; he is going to be killed. What Hannibal is offering is a death sentence Will can officiate without having to pull the trigger himself.

The image comes, the hollow sound of Hannibal’s corpse hitting the pavement, the papery waste of his limp hands and blue lips.

Reflexively, Will shuts his eyes against it. “No you wouldn’t,” he bluffs, drawing both arms and popping the collar on his coat.

"Of course I would," Hannibal counters, softly, and Will realizes the offer must be genuine, because he never knew Hannibal’s tears to be insincere. “Of course I would, Will.”

"Why?", Will asks, fully aware that lifelong separation will entreat neither of them with freedom, that divorce or death will provide them with no semblance of peace. “Why, Dr. Lecter? So you can trap me in perpetual mourning?”

"So I can liberate you into the creature you are meant to be, Will Graham."

"Godly and righteous?"

And Hannibal smiles, the small, gleaming smile that glosses his eyes buttercup-yellow, “Loved.”

An ache circuits through their joined hands, Hannibal’s grip bruising and sure. Will tugs his hand free.

Sliding down the headboard, he turns off the lampshade. Night falls around them, circular and clandestine.

"You are not alone, Hannibal," Will tells the darkness, "nor are you a free man."

Hannibal doesn't move, so Will nuzzles closer, head to the curve of his shoulder. "Doesn't matter what other people taught you. Death and distrust can't keep me from you. I will love you through absolutely everything."

Hannibal breathes him in, sharply, at the top of his curls, and then they are breathing together.

After a while, he asks in the voice of a man who isn't convinced he did anything reproachful, "Should I make arrangements for my arrest, then?"

The enormity of those words lingers between them. They are old words, half-lit and never shelved away. Structurally bland but emotionally so exuberant Will finds himself winded, pained somewhere in the back of his skull and the seam of his balls. It hurts in all the tender places.
The horror of the least observed possibility floods forward: that in all his Otherness, Hannibal is a man who chose to tend to others. That the urge to heal, like that to punish, drove him to depths Will cannot fully fathom because Will never cared much about healing or harming; he cared about stopping. All he ever wanted in his life was for everything to stop. And here he is, in love with a man who thrives on setting things in motion, a man who would lay down his life so another could heal. That is the perverse enormity of Hannibal's offering: that he would embrace death and all its stasis so Will could have some quiet.

Maybe this is the only way it could have gone. Maybe this is the best of all worlds. Maybe this is what surrender looks like in the end: a monster falls in love with the Devil and the Devil tricks him into becoming human by gifting his immortality away.

Reaching across the divide, Will takes Hannibal’s left hand. It's a new pleasure, to be the one to reach out, to decide how their hands fit.

Latch it over his heart (like a shield or a promise. Whatever is less likely to leak), Will lets out, “Probably wiser if you don’t.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter loops through a lot of past stuff, so here's an absurd amount of notes. Feel free to skip!

When they are first healing in Pennsylvania and Will refuses to talk, Hannibal leaves him notes naming his pills. Later, Will leaves similar notes in the barn. The pendulum has swung and it's back to Hannibal doing it, culminating with him gifting Will a human heart. If he is offering his own or demanding Will's, it's up for interpretation.

Hannibal makes special pancakes in chapter 14, after Will nearly shot himself. Will reveals to have made them as well while they were apart, by stealing Hannibal's cookbook from the FBI evidence log. Almost a decade later, Hannibal finally gets to try Will's version (of food, but also of comfort, which in this universe are one and the same).

Those chapters are also the first time Will describes himself as being terrible at love and Hannibal quips "so let's be terrible together." There's been other callbacks to this exchange but this one made me so sad because Will is effectively saying "Jesus Christ we are LITERALLY terrible together, we probably shouldn't be doing this."

"Should I make arrangements for my arrest?" is the second thing *ever* we hear Hannibal ask Will in this story (the first is if Will is leaving, which remains Hannibal's primary concern because—abandonment trauma really sticks to you). Will's answer does not change much, but his phrasing really does (he uses Hannibal's words as his own now). It's a small detail but speaks volumes on how conjoined they've become.

An even tinier detail: before they move to the Somme in chapter 50, Hannibal tells Will he can ask anything of him and he'll do it. While Hannibal offers "anything," here Will offers "everything" which is minute evidence of how identically different they are. That same chapter, Will promises Hannibal there will be no one else in his life —"at-all, at-all," meaning not even a friend. Hannibal brings up that promise here,
once Wills starts spending time in Paris.

Last, it's no coincidence that they keep fighting over locked/unlocked doors. It's an understated thread, but from day one Will negotiates his feelings for Hannibal through the locking of doors, down to the second chapter when he asks Molly to get a padlock to their bedroom and keep the key so he can't wander away. I think it surprises no one Hannibal is like a cat: he never met a door he didn't want to swat open. So when he either lets a door stay closed (metaphorically) or offers to lock a door himself (literally) you know he learnt to compromise.

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