**hangnail**

by *mirlotta*

Summary

Will's teaching investigative psychology in a dead-end school at the edge of the world. Everything is so ordinary it's painful, until Hannibal Lecter transfers into his class and reminds him what it is to feel like starlight.

OR

Will's the teacher. Hannibal's the student. Both have a scary amount to say about murder.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Will Graham was beginning to rue the day he ever went into teaching. Seated in messy rows in front of him were about a dozen lifeless teenagers. Cause of death? Sheer boredom. Personally, Will had been hoping that the photo of the bloodied, disembodied arm he was displaying on the interactive whiteboard might have a larcenised at least a little morbid curiosity, but... You know what they say about teenagers being desensitised to violence and all that. This class had probably seen worse on children's TV; they probably couldn't separate actual severed limbs from bad prosthetics.

Never mind violence, Will was definitely become desensitized to teaching. The sun would bleach through the broken blinds at the back of the classroom, staining his skin as if with soggy tea-bags. He'd squint through the harsh light at the kids in front of him, wondering why they'd ever chosen a
subject they were planning on sleeping through. One time Will had been having a rough day, so he'd not said a word the whole lesson. Some snitch- he would put money on it being Freddie, honestly- had reported him about that to Alana Bloom, who was a lovely woman and unbelievably attractive and also his head of department.

He'd lied and told her it was all a psychological experiment to see how the kids would react. Linked to some case study or other. Alana believed him, or said she did- you could get away with anything when you were one of only three investigative psychology teachers in the entire state.

The kids in his class didn't mind him. They didn't like him, per say- he wasn't exactly Teacher of the Year material- but they didn't hate him, either. Will let them do as they liked, professionalism be damned. Class busybody, Freddie Lounds- she wanted to hound him after class, prying into his personal life? Her let her. It wasn't as if he had much of a life to pry into. Or that sardonic procrastinator, Abel- he wanted to pick his nose and eat it like a six year old? So be it. Will could scarcely find the effort to be appropriately disgusted, let alone reprimand him.

It wasn't that Will hated his job- his stupid, mundane, dead-end job. No, it was more that he really just couldn't give a shit about it. Teaching high-school investigative psychology might have originally sounded appealing, but in reality it just came down to powerpoint after powerpoint on effective exam technique. Curses to the school system, etc, etc.

It wasn't like he had much of a choice. It was teach here or do nothing. A prison record could do that to a man.

Will was trying not to think about prison.

He cleared his throat, pushing his glasses further up his nose and gesturing at the whiteboard. "Um. As you can see, this is the only part of the body that the, ah, so called 'Santiago Slayer' left at the crime scene. Does anyone notice anything interesting about it?"

The class stared bleakly up at the photo, some of them beginning to wrinkle their lips in ill-disguised disgust. The arm was covered in glistening snail-trails of blood that looped round and round like bracelets, or the tail-end of a falling star. The fingernails were blackened and sunken into the skin, and Will could almost smell the familiar reek of the freshly dead wafting from it. On the left side of the palm- which looked half torn off, actually- there was something which looked suspiciously like a bite mark. Neat little imprints in a half-moon grin, each one tinted a delirious red.

Will clicked the computer mouse and flashed to the next slide. More of the same. Abel Gideon had started making horrendous retching noises, and it sounded like his throat was being ripped out. The girl who sat next to him widened her eyes at him sympathetically, which was all Will needed to know that Gideon was shamelessly putting it on.

"Well?" Will asked the class, tapping his foot. "What's wrong with these images?"

Freddie folded her arms indignantly, rolling her eyes. "Someone was animal enough to do something like this- that's what's wrong." The class murmured its agreement. Will had to admit that this was much more brutal than anything he'd ever shown them before.

"Anyone else?" He didn't acknowledge Freddie, and she harrumphed in irritation. She was all about the recognition, Freddie Lounds- a 'no publicity is bad publicity sort of person'. She had beady, dark eyes in a wan, white face and she was always getting tangled up in other people's business.

"The, uh- the hand is almost ripped off," said a boy called Jimmy. He sounded peculiar, like his voice was clinging back in his throat. Maybe the photo was having more impact than Will had first
He sighed. "Yes- yes, that's right. But try and think about what was going through the killer's head. Why has he killed like this? Try and see the detail, the killer's design."

Deathly silence. Which was fitting, really, considering they were staring at all that was left of a dead man.

Will coughed. "Come on- anyone got any ideas?" He raked a hand through his unruly hair and tried to fight back a sigh. The class were starting to fall asleep again, Abel's head accidentally-on-purpose lolling on his neighbour's shoulder.

Will rolled his eyes- and that was when the door swung open, and everything changed.

One second there was no one there; the next there was a tall, haughty-looking man standing in the doorway, his lips pursed as if he expected better. His looked young- and yet his brown hair was already streaked across as if with greying starlight, one strand escaping and falling into his eyes. He pushed it back distractedly, nodding a greeting at Will. "Hello, Mr Graham. I'm Hannibal Lecter."

Will was thankful for the interruption but also somewhat annoyed. It wasn't like he'd been expecting anyone. He certainly hadn't been expecting someone would interrupt him in his last lesson of the day, and definitely no one looking quite so pristine, so... Official. Recognition dawned on him- slowly, and then all of a sudden, like the pain of being smacked in the face. "You're here for inspection?" Will asked the man resignedly, glancing cautiously behind him at the bloodied arm on the whiteboard.

Hannibal archly raised his eyebrows. "Have you been anticipating an inspection?"

The school had only just finished their last teaching inspection, so it wasn't particularly likely that there’d be another one so soon. But Will knew that the Fed liked to check up on ex-cons, make sure they were integrating into society properly, doing all the civilian work they could get...

Hannibal cleared his throat. "No matter. I'm a student, Mr Graham. Foreign exchange. Apologies for my lateness, but the office only just sent me down here." He smiled with his mouth but not his eyes, holding out his hand for Will to shake. Will took it, smiling uneasily back and trying to remember whether anything had been said at the last General Meeting about exchange students. He swallowed, decided that he didn't care, and shrugged it off. No one could blame him for mistaking Hannibal for an adult, anyway. With his form-fitted suit jacket- really, what kind of normal child wanted to wear a suit?- and prematurely greying hair, anyone would have placed him in his twenties at least.

That wasn't even mentioning the weirdly formal speech patterns.

"Take a seat, Hannibal," Will told the boy flatly, gesturing up at the whiteboard. "We were just discussing the Santiago Slayer. You don't already know the case-study?"

"No." Hannibal spoke the word softly, his lilting accent chewing at the edges of his English.

"Good. A clean slate, then." Will flicked through the various slides again, pausing for only a cursory moment in each. "Okay. Has anyone here thought of an answer, yet? What's particularly interesting about what's been left here?"

Blank silence. Again.

After a beat, a boy named Brian tentatively raised his hand. "Uh- looks like the hand is almost ripped off. It's wild. Really... Wild," said Brian.
Will fought back the urge to throttle him. "Yes, but Jimmy's already said that," he answered, slowly gritting his teeth. He didn't know why teaching did this to him - robbed him of his patience, his restrain, his general sympathy. Why anyone would choose this job voluntarily was beyond him.

Hannibal looked around the classroom to make sure no one else was going to say anything, then lifted his hand in such a way, he looked like the Queen acknowledging her subjects. "Would you please go back a slide?"

Will clicked mutedly at the computer. He imagined that he was detonating a bomb that would destroy him and this class and all their stupid answers with the same fire and intensity that Satan was forged in Hell.

Hannibal inclined his head towards the new slide. "Here, we have a good shot. The arm has clearly been mauled, savaged, as if by an animal. We are all more animal than we like to admit on the inside- and yet, this- ah, Slayer? - seems more animal than most."

Hannibal looked much more smug than he needed to; he was basically just rephrasing Brian's words, anyway. Will coughed lightly, and Hannibal looked directly at him, seeking eye-contact.

As teenage boys go, this was a little unnerving. Looking at your teacher was normally something akin to meeting Medusa head-on,

"Furthermore," continued Hannibal - and it was honestly the first time Will had ever heard a word like 'furthermore' spoken out loud- "it's also clear that what this Slayer seems- pure animal- is exactly what they're not."

Will turned to look at him, leaning back against the wall. "Go on."

"The blood trails go everywhere, across the entire hand and arm. And yet, on the fourth finger, they curiously stop halfway down it. It's as if something was obstructing the blood from covering everything. What would someone wear on the fourth finger of their left hand? A wedding ring. From the bloating we can see here, the man was probably large. Larger than he was on his wedding day, anyhow, and the ring will have been tight on his finger- stopping the blood from dripping down."

It was a teaching miracle. Will had found an investigative psychology student who actually had some genuine understanding of investigative psychology. And, honestly, he couldn't quite decide whether he was fascinated, amazed, or horrified. He looked down at Hannibal, sitting quite calmly in the middle of the front row and delivering an analysis that trained professionals would be proud of. "So tell me," said Will, licking his dry lips, "why is the man's ring now gone?"

Hannibal didn't blink, speaking slowly enough for every last word to seem profound. "Why is the ring gone?" He knew and Will knew that he knew. He was teasing, playing, leading his teacher on like a lover.

"They're trying to cover up the motive," drawled Abel out of the side of his mouth, sitting up straighter now. "Obviously."

Freddie Lounds gave a little squeak of understanding. "You're saying that the Slayer killed this man because of- of marriage, or something- and then wanted to cover it up by doing-" She gestured disdainfully- "this? Mauling the body into little pieces, ripping it up and removing the ring?"

Hannibal gave her a glance of appraisal. "Exactly. The ring was only removed after the fact. The Slayer took it as a memento, or couldn't bear to part with it, or simply didn't want anyone to realise this man was ever married at all." He turned to Will. "Does that stack up?"
Will couldn't trust himself to speak without sounding like a sap praising this new student. Suddenly-so exquisitely suddenly- his teaching job looked the tiniest bit worthwhile. He smiled at Hannibal with his eyes, if not his mouth. "It stacks perfectly."

As if on cue, the bell rang. Class adjourned.

As the students started leaving, Will stopped before Hannibal's desk. "Your accent," he said. He couldn't help himself- he wanted to speak to this boy just a few seconds more. "Hungarian?" It was either that or Romanian and he'd made a lucky guess.

Hannibal nodded, and Will thought he might have seen a new glimmer of interest flicker behind his eyes. Contrary to popular belief, not every teacher is a mindless slave in the machine that is the civil service. "Yes, indeed," said Hannibal, and turned away.

This odd, polite, fantastic boy disappeared into the crowd of ordinary students as if he'd never been there at all. He was the sort of boy, mused Will, who could grow up to commit the perfect crime.

And God knows, Will knew all about crime.

End Notes

I guess this is kind of the setting-the-scene chapter?? Comments and kudos are massively appreciated if you liked this or want to give me ways to improve

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