In Sickness and in Health

by BonesAndScales

Summary

As soon as Dr. Lecter is seated, Will says, “So they hired you to work on my profile?”

Jack holds back a sigh. This will not do. They have not started working yet and Will is already acting up. Jack opens his mouth to speak, but Dr. Lecter beats him to it. “So it seems.”

Will snorts. “Well, this is gonna be fun.”

Everyone knows that Will and Hannibal are married. Not everyone knows that they are married to each other.

Notes

Translation in русский over here: In Sickness and in Health by PrincessIce99

You know that one post about married people who work at the same place but nobody knows they are married to each other so they all think they are having an affair? Yes, you know the one.

Warnings: nothing beyond canon-typical violence I think.

My last one shot's angst drained me, so I took an old WIP and started to stress write
nonsense and here we are now. Have this piece of... cathartic writing thingy.

Enjoy!

(Btw feel free to point out any typos or mistakes!)

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

Isaac is trying his best to focus on the presentation. Really he is. But Pr. Graham is making it very
difficult for him to keep his eyes on the giant projector and the gruesome photographs displayed on
it.

Isaac read Pr. Graham’s brilliant monograph on time of death by insect activity two years ago, and
was elated to hear that he is actually a teacher at Quantico. He expected the man to be a relatively
old, charming, soft spoken gentleman who would—hopefully—offer you tea and biscuits when
you came to him for questions.

When he got inside that lecture hall though, Isaac certainly did not expect that piping hot, kinda
scruffy, devastatingly gorgeous Adonis. God have mercy on him.

Too bad for the tea and biscuits though. Pr. Graham looks like the kind of guy whose diet consists
entirely of black coffee, no sugar no cream. Oh, well. For him, Isaac is ready to change his
drinking preferences.

And he is not the only one either. Mel has been sending him pointed looks since the beginning of
the presentation, discreetly gesturing at Pr. Graham from three sits over, conveying obscene
thoughts with her eyebrows alone. And he caught Quinn and Nell and at least five other of them
checking out his—impressive, hot damn—behind when the controller fell on the floor and he had
to bend down to pick it up.

He will have to convince Vica to share her notes with him, since he zoned out for a good chunk of
the lecture, fantasising about the man’s curls. He is sure she has not had any problem following the
presentation, being lesbian and all. Lucky her.

“—Tell me your design. Tell me who you are.”

Isaac snaps out of his daydream when Pr. Graham shuts his laptop. Oh. It is over already. Everyone
stands to exit the hall. Isaac takes his time, hoping to linger at the end and ask the professor to
enlighten him on a few points—that he was too distracted to take notes of.

“All sad, dull truth of these crimes is they can usually be reduced to a male penetrative control
issue. I am expecting a higher lever of scrutiny,” Pr. Graham says as he tucks his notes and folders
into his briefcase.

All right. He seems like the kind of guy who would like a good profiling-related verbal sparring.
Isaac is going to show him the full extend of his intensive extra studying—although he is still bitter
about Mel being the unsurpassed top of their promotion.

He takes a deep breath as he approaches the front of the room. A few other trainees try to catch Pr.
Graham’s gaze, but he is stubbornly not looking at any of them. Shy, huh? Isaac likes it. He opens
his mouth, a charming ‘Professor?’ right on the tip of his tongue until he catches the glint of a ring
on the man’s left hand.


His mouth clicks shut as a wave of disappointment crushes his heart. He almost does not see Jack
Crawford—holy shit, Jack Crawford—entering the hall, the stream of students reverently parting
like the Red Sea around him. He looks over his shoulder at Pr. Graham promptly putting on glasses—hot damn—when he notices Jack Crawford approaching his desk.

“Mr. Graham. I’m special Agent Jack Crawford.”

“We’ve met.”

Isaac allows himself one last longing look at the man before turning and following the others out of the lecture hall. He considers calling Mel over tonight to drown their sorrow in cheap vodka. Again.

Franklyn gathers all his courage. “Are you married?” he finally asks, after spending half the session stealing glances at Dr. Lecter’s hands, clasped over his crossed legs.

Dr. Lecter does not look down at his own hand. “Yes,” is his simple answer.

Franklyn waits a moment for him to elaborate, a somewhat encouraging smile on his face. When he does not, Franklyn clears his throat. “Is she a psychiatrist too?”

“What makes you think that?”

Franklyn chuckles quietly, although it comes out sort of faint, his voice still hoarse from his breakdown at the beginning of the session. “Well, I heard doctors tend to marry each other.”

“Really now.”

“Yes,” Franklyn says, nodding. “Something about sticking together in a hostile environment. And because of their heavy schedule, they can’t spend much time with their partner, and that quickly drives away partners that don’t also work in health care.” Franklyn threads his fingers together looking at the high windows of the office. “Also, there’s the emotional support needed when you lose a patient. Most people don’t see as much people pass away during their lives, it might be harder for them to realise how much of a toll it takes on their partner each time they can’t save a patient.”

“No desire stronger than to be understood. Even more so by a romantic partner.”

“Yes. I guess people are more comfortable with a partner that can relate to the hardships of their professional lives.” Franklyn reclines in his seat. He crosses his legs, his ankle on his knee, and rests his hands on them, trying to imitate Dr. Lecter.

“You’ve made your researches.” The doctor pauses, tilting his head slightly. “Medicine or sociology?”

“Medicine, actually,” Franklyn admits. “These are things I went through myself, when I was trying to find a girlfriend. Hard to explain to them that you absolutely can’t be there for Christmas and Thanksgiving and anniversaries.” He gives a short, self-deprecating laugh. These few years were hell. He would not do it again if given the choice.

Dr. Lecter studies him for a long time. His piercing gaze makes Franklyn both squirm in discomfort, and preen at being the sole subject of his attention. “You wanted to become a
psychiatrist. But you didn’t see it through to the end.” This would have sounded insulting in anyone else’s mouth, but in Dr. Lecter’s mouth it is a mere observation. Cold and impartial but still polite and elegant. The kind of tone Franklyn would love to be able to achieve one day.

“I dropped out of med school,” Franklyn admit sheepishly with a half smile. “Wasn’t my thing.”

“How did you live it?”

“Like most people, pretty bad at first. Like a failure. But I found something else that I liked more, and well, I no longer feel ashamed about it,” he says, nodding in pride at his own progress.

They spend the remaining of his hour speaking about his studies, his latest reads, his grandmother’s cooking, and surprisingly, coffee. Franklyn does not see the minutes pass by, so engrossed by the conversation. He finds he likes talking to Dr. Lecter. He likes how easily the topics flow, and he likes being the focus of the man’s attention.

It is only at the end of the session when Dr. Lecter stands and the ring catches the light again that Franklyn realises that Dr. Lecter still has not answered his question. “So. Are you married to a psychiatrist?” he asks as he stands up as well, following Dr. Lecter to the door.

Dr. Lecter turns to look at him, stopping just in front of the door, under the landing. “Not a psychiatrist, no. A teacher.”

“Oh. A teacher.” That is rather unexpected.

“Does that surprise you?”

Franklyn shifts from foot to foot. He feels like he has offended Dr. Lecter. Would not do to be passed on to another psychiatrist when he has just been referred to him. And he likes Dr. Lecter, an observant, refined, cultured, composed man. Everything Franklyn aspires to be. He clears his throat. “Well. Teacher is a noble profession of course, but I was expecting—health care, obviously—but if not that, something to do with the arts maybe.”

Dr. Lecter stares at him with an inscrutable look. “Some would argue that teaching is an art,” he says.

It feels like a warning of sorts. Oh god, Franklyn really hopes that he did not offend him. He can’t jeopardise his plans of becoming Dr. Lecter’s friend before it even started. “Yes,” he agrees immediately, hoping to be in his good graces. “Learning can be hammered in with the sufficient amount of determination, but pedagogy isn’t innate to everyone. A sort of natural talent.”

“Is it?” Dr. Lecter puts his hand on the handle without opening the door.

“Well, that’s what I believe at least.”

Dr. Lecter offers him a parting smile and Franklyn internally sighs in relief. Disaster avoided. Dr. Lecter opens the door, stepping aside to let him walk outside first. And Franklyn startles when he is immediately greeted by a tall, imposing man.

“Dr. Lecter. I’m special Agent Jack Crawford,” the man says, offering a handshake, which Franklyn returns automatically despite his confusion.

“I hate to be discourteous, but this is a private exit for my patients.”
Jack turns around in time to see Will pushing the glass door of his office open. He stops when he sees Dr. Lecter studying the map and the photographs on the wall.

“Will, this is Dr. Lecter—”

“I know.”

Dr. Lecter turns around, his eyes scanning Will from head to toe. “Hello, Will,” he says politely with a nod and a smile. Will does not answer, barely nodding back before going to plop down on one of the chairs facing Jack’s desk, putting his cup of coffee on the edge of the desk.

“Dr. Lecter is here to help us for the—”

“I know,” Will cuts him off again.

Jack presses his lips together, holding back an annoyed sigh. Gotta keep up the composed appearance for Dr. Lecter. He discreetly shoots Will a scathing look, promising hell if he does not behave himself. Will flippantly looks away, almost imperceptibly rolling his eyes. Almost. Jack’s eyebrow ticks. He inhales deeply, turning away from his reluctant agent-slash-consultant-slash-blood hound to inform Dr. Lecter of the confessions they have been receiving since this morning.

When Jack goes back to his seat, he notices that Will’s eyes are still fixed on Dr. Lecter, staring at his back rather intently. All right, Will is not outright ignoring him. Things are not hopeless. Dr. Lecter turns towards them and Jack gestures at the second chair in front of his desk. “Please.”

As soon as Dr. Lecter is seated, Will says, “So they hired you to work on my profile?”

Jack holds back a sigh. This will not do. They have not started working yet and Will is already acting up. Jack opens his mouth to speak, but Dr. Lecter beats him to it. “So it seems.”

Will snorts. “Well, this is gonna be fun,” he says under his breath, reaching for his cup of coffee.

“Will,” Jack says warningly.

Will spares Dr. Lecter one brief side way glance, before reclining in his chair, his cup cradled in both hands. It seems he is willing to hold back the attitude for now. Good. Maybe they will manage to get some work done after all.

Jack clears his throat again. “About those confessions…”

The shrill ringing of a phone thunders through the silence of the room, followed by a soft groan and the rustling of sheets. Hannibal’s hand shoots out of the warm nest of blankets to grab the offending phone, cutting off the second ringing.

“Hello,” he says, without checking the caller ID first. There are no traces of sleep in his voice. “Agent Crawford, good morning. No, it’s okay, don’t worry.” He turns on his back, one arm thrown across his eyes. “Yes. Yes, I understand. No need for apologies. Yes, of course. I’ll pass the message. My pleasure. Have a good day, Agent Crawford.”
Agent Crawford cuts the call, and Hannibal throws his phone back on the bedside table. He stays still for a moment, taking in the familiar, comforting scent of the room. The sheets ruffle again on his left. He turns on his side and scoots closer to the warm bundle beside him. He pulls the blankets a little so they slip off Will’s head. Will groans again, and turns away from him, hugging the blankets closer to himself.

“Mmh… What’s he want now?” Will says, his voice quiet and hoarse with sleep, not concealing his annoyance.

Hannibal snuggles against Will’s back, the faint smile on his lips pressed against the warm skin of Will’s nape. He throws an arm over the blankets to pull Will closer. Will protests weakly at the added weight on his back but stays still otherwise. Hannibal lifts his head to drop a kiss on Will’s hair before lying down again. “Agent Crawford informed me that he’ll be deposed in court. The adventure will be yours and mine today.”

Will hums drowsily, taking some time to process the information. Hannibal should probably wait another hour before trying to engage with him in any kind of conversation.

“Kay. That’s good. Perfect,” Will says slowly, sleep already catching up. His breathing evens out and soon he is dozing again, his chest rising and falling slowly under Hannibal’s arm.

He turns his head to look at the alarm clock on the bedside table, and turns back to nuzzle the curls behind Will’s ear. “It’s still early. Our flight to Minnesota isn’t in another three hours,” he whispers. “Go back to sleep. I’ll prepare breakfast.” He leaves another kiss on top of Will’s head, and makes to leave the bed.

Before he can get up, Hannibal feels Will grab his arm and pull him back on the bed. Before he can turn to look at Will, Will pushes him on his front on the mattress, making him huff out a faint oof. Hannibal pushes himself up on his elbows but Will plops down on his back, pinning him to the bed.

“You stay right where you are, Hannibal,” he says, biting down on Hannibal’s ear.

“‘Yes, they are taking things,’” Dixie, whispers into the phone to Kim, who shouts-whispers at her excitedly. Dixie throws a glance over her shoulder at Curls and Cheekbones, digging through dozens of boxes of paperwork, leafing through numerous pages. It is going to be hell, rearranging everything once they are gone. If there is anything left. They already put aside a third of the boxes to take them. “No, they didn’t say whe—yes they can.” At Kim’s insistence, she turns to the two men, and asks, “What did you say your names were?”

Neither of them answers. They do not even look at her. Dixie is this close to kicking them out of her office, FBI be damned.

Curls grabs another paper from the box containing the resignation letters, stares at it for a moment. “Garrett Jacob Hobbs?”

Cheekbones turns to look at him.

“One of our pipe threaders,” Dixie supplies. She points at the box near Curls’ hip. “Those are all the resignation letters. Plumbers union requires them whenever members finish a job.” She briefly
turns back to her desk to whisper in the phone, “I’ll call you back.” And hangs up on Kim’s hysterical calls of ‘wait wait wait’. This little incident is going to spread like wildfire in their friends circle in the next twenty minutes. Maybe telling Kim about it first was not so brilliant an idea.

“Does Mr. Hobbs have a daughter?” Curls asks, still not looking at her.

Dixie shrugs. “Might have.” Almost every worker here is married and has children, so yeah. Very likely. But she does not keep track of everyone’s family affairs. Not her job.

Cheekbones steps closer to Curls, stopping when their shoulders brush. He leans over Curls’ shoulder to read the document. Curls does not push him off. “It’s him,” he says quietly to Cheekbones, to which he only nods. Curls finally lifts his head to look at her, although he does not quite meet her eyes. “You have an address for Mr. Hobbs?”

The Hobbs’ residence is a war zone.

Beverly scribbles the last details the witness gives her. The man is in shock, his explanations are all over the place. Much like all the other statements she collected so far. When the man is done—really really done for sure this time—she thanks him, offers a few words of support and lets a local cop take care of the rest.

She looks around at the Hobbs residence. Jack is standing near the entrance of the house, barking orders right and left. For a second, she feels sorry for the cops trembling in fear, jolting each time Jack’s voice booms out urgently. Jimmy and Z are nowhere in sight, either still in the house, or somewhere behind the barrage of police cars.

Dr. Lecter is walking beside the gurney carrying Abigail Hobbs—still alive, still conscious—as the paramedics push it through the front yard towards the ambulance. Poor girl. One moment she is happily having breakfast with her family, and the next she is orphaned and lying in a pool of her own blood. And things are only going to get worse once the press stick their noses in this case.

A little further away, Will is standing near the police line. He looks… bad. Still, pale, mute. His hands have a few trails of blood dripping down his fingers where it has only been perfunctorily washed, and there are a few droplets still on his face and glasses. He has a blank look on his face. And Beverly knows that look, having seen it far too many times on far too many of her colleagues. That is the look they have just before they break apart. Beverly heads towards him fast to offer some support. She does not want to lose their new team member when he has only just arrived.

Before she can make it to him though, she sees Dr. Lecter joining Will, while the paramedics haul the gurney inside the ambulance. He stands close to Will, puts a hand on one of Will’s forearms and leans close until their heads are but a few inches apart. They speak in hushed voices for a few seconds, before Will nods once, and lets Dr. Lecter pull him gently into the ambulance with him.

The paramedics pull the doors closed.
Jack swirls the wine in his glass, his eyes fixed on the fire crackling softly.

What happened with the Minnesota Shrike was a disaster. He should not have been in court that day. He should have been at the Hobbs residence. Will should not have been on his own to apprehend the Shrike. He takes a quick sip of his wine.

At least, Abigail Hobbs is still alive. Once she wakes up, he will have someone talk to her. Jack needs to know if she hunted with her father. He could send Will. If the man is still on his team by the time she wakes up. “I’m worried about Will,” he says quietly. “He seems pretty shaken up by what happened with Garrett Jacob Hobbs.” Jack looks side ways, tries to decipher anything on Dr. Lecter’s face, but the man is a wall. Nothing beyond a calculated level of friendliness.

Dr. Lecter brings his own glass to his mouth, taking a sniff before sipping it slowly. “You needn’t be,” he says quietly, lowering his hand again. Something like fondness makes it past the wall at the mention of Will. “Will is fine.”

Jack raises his eyebrows at that, looking at Dr. Lecter. “Have you seen him since then?”

“Yes. We spent a few evenings talking about what happened. He is as shaken as anyone would be in this situation. But he’ll be fine.”

“I didn’t know he was your patient.”

“He isn’t. We’re only having conversations.”

Jack blinks once, twice, somewhat taken aback. He did not think Will would get along with Dr. Lecter. Their first encounter in his office did not exactly end badly, but it certainly did not go well either. He takes another slow sip of his wine, mulling over this. It might not be that surprising, in the end, that they became friends after the whole Shrike debacle. Bonding over a shared traumatic experience and finding support in each other.

But their relationship is not the main problem here. He came to discuss Will’s mental health.

Jack clears his throat as quietly as he can. Which is not that quiet at all. “I fear he got too close to Hobbs. I think he needs therapy.”

The fondness recedes behind the wall, and a professional, clinical kind of reassurance surfaces in its stead. “You didn’t break him, if that’s your concern.”

Jack holds back a sigh of relief. Good. That confirmation is good. It is good to hear it from someone else. Jack does not think he could bear another loss in his team. “Review board okayed his return to the field but I recommended a psych eval.” He wanted to ask Dr. Lecter to do it, since Alana’s relationship with Will is too personal. But it seems that Dr. Lecter’s relationship with Will is not as detached as he thought it was. He will have to find someone else.

“That won’t be necessary. Will is perfectly functional. And sane.” There is certainty in his voice and confidence in his assessment. Something Jack can believe in.

But he has to be firm on this one. “I’d like to have him pass one anyway.”

Dr. Lecter mulls over this a moment, nursing his glass of wine absently, his gaze fixed on the fireplace. The fire casts flickering shadows on the sharp angles of his face. “It would only be a formality. But I can recommend a colleague psychiatrist if you’d like a second opinion.”

Jack nods his head, something like relief washing over him. “I’d be grateful if you could.”
Will is lying on the couch of the study, his legs thrown over Hannibal’s thighs, while Hannibal is sitting on the other end of the couch, flicking through pages on his tablet. Will stifles a yawn as he turns another page in his book.

“Jack is worried about you,” Hannibal says offhandedly.

Will does not look up from his book. “Is he, now,” he says, his voice flat and uninterested. The words are starting to jump and dance before his eyes. Maybe he should go back to Wolf Trap and sleep.

“He thinks you need therapy, after what happened with Garrett Jacob Hobbs.”

Will lifts his book over his head to look at Hannibal. “Really? What did you tell him?” he asks accusingly.

“I think the way you acted tipped him more than anything I could have told him.”

“Well, it’s supposed to be the first time I kill someone. Gotta play the part.” Will shrugs, lowering his book again to resume his reading. Maybe he overdid it a little if Jack thinks he needs fixing.

“And now he thinks you’re unsuitable for field work.”

A small mischievous smile tugs at his lips, he does his best to hide it from Hannibal behind his book. “Mhm. Can’t serve guests with broken china, right?” Hannibal telling him Jack considered him like his finest china was quite spot on too. Will liked it. And he is glad he is not the only one thinking Jack is treating him like a child. Or a prized pet, whose leash had to be held tightly. He is impatient for the day when Jack will realise Will also has teeth, and knows how to use them.

Hannibal settles his tablet down, balancing it on Will’s knees. He slowly runs a hand up and down Will’s thigh. Will pushes his leg up into Hannibal’s palm. “Would he be less likely to send you out in the field if he thinks you fragile?”

Will turns a page before answering. “Nah, I doubt that. What happened to Miriam didn’t teach him anything,” he says, catching Hannibal’s wandering hand in his own and keeping them clasped over his leg, readjusting his hold on his book. “He’ll throw all his ponies in the fray if that means he can catch the Ripper. Me included.” Jack can be just as reckless as the both of them when it comes to the Ripper. It is a wonder he is the head of the BAU. You would think such a position would require a minimum of level-headedness.

“You aren’t one of is ponies.”

“Technically, I am—I have a badge and all,” Will automatically reaches for the inner pocket of his jacket until he realises that he is not wearing his jacket. He really needs to sleep. “As soon as the board allows me back on the field, he’ll drag me out of my lecture hall each time he stumbles upon a corpse.”

Hannibal frowns. “This won’t do. Your students need a proper education.”

Will chuckles mirthlessly. “You go tell him that.” Maybe Jack would listen to Hannibal. He seems to have more consideration for his opinion than for Will’s, or anyone else’s. Oh, and he seems to
listen to Alana too. Must be a psychiatrist thing. Will sets his book down on his chest to look at Hannibal. “The board’s decision comes in tomorrow. They’ll allow me back on the field. You’ll see, he’ll just barge into my lecture hall in the middle of a presentation and drag me off to the lab.”

Hannibal hums, thrumming the fingers of his free hand on Will’s shin. He shuts his tablet and puts it on the coffee table when Will shifts his legs, threatening to make it fall. “You won’t go back to the field so soon. Jack recommended a Psychological Evaluation.”

What the fuck.

Will lets go of Hannibal’s hand and props himself on his elbows, his brow furrowed. The book slides down to his belly, and Hannibal catches it to put it on the coffee table beside his tablet.

“A psych eval? Seriously?” When Hannibal nods, Will releases a long, tired sigh, letting his head fall backwards to look at the ceiling. One case, and Will is already done with Jack. He wonders how much longer he will stay on his team. Maybe he should stick to consulting. He lifts his head again to look back at Hannibal. “Yeah, okay, whatever. Just rubber stamp me and we’ll be done with it.”

“I recommended Bedelia.”

Will freezes, his eyes wide open. They stare at each other for a long moment. The fire crackling softly the only sound around them, casting orange hues and dancing shadows in the room.

“You didn’t.”

“I did.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Hannibal.”

“Will.”

They keep staring at each other for another solid minute. Then Will sighs and lets himself fall back on the couch, groaning in displeasure. He rummages through his memory, looking for the reason that would compel Hannibal to subject him to this. He does not remember doing anything deliberately rude in the last twenty four hours. Or during the week. Or the month. He is starting to think Hannibal is just being an asshole for no reason whatsoever until—“Is it because of Winston? Hannibal, just how petty can you be.”

“It isn’t because of your new stray.”

Will slowly, very slowly, lifts a sceptical eyebrow.

Hannibal takes Will’s hand again and brings it to his mouth, pressing a lingering kiss on the back of his fingers. “Be assured that I would have preferred to do your Psychological Evaluation myself as well—”

“Do it then.”

“—but there’s an obvious conflict of interests here,” Hannibal finishes, letting go of Will’s hand to go back to stroking his thigh.
Oh. Oh, yes, that’s right. A mischievous smile lifts the corners of Will’s lips at this, annoyance temporarily forgotten. “What Jack doesn’t know can’t hurt him.”

“He ought to find out someday.”

Will snorts. “And that day will be glorious, but hasn’t come yet.”

“You sure love to torment poor Uncle Jack.”

“You’re one to talk.”

Hannibal smiles down at him and pushes Will’s legs apart, leaning down to settle between them.

Before their chests meet, Will pushes him away with both hands. “Oh, would you look at the time. I should go back to Wolf Trap. With my dogs and Winston,” he says with emphasis, swinging his legs off the couch to stand up.

Hannibal lunges forward, grabbing Will’s waist with both arms and hoisting him over his shoulder with ease, drawing out both complaints and laughters from Will. “You’re not going anywhere, Will,” he says over the sound of Will’s clear laugh. He walks out of the study, turning off the light on his way out, and up the stairs to their bedroom.
Two problems.

Will has a hickey on the side of his neck. That is not one of the problems.

At first, Alana thought it was some kind of bug bite, or because of the cold, but upon closer inspection, yes, that is indeed a hickey right there—and quite an impressive one—almost completely covered by a thick scarf.

And here is the first problem. Alana knows that scarf and it certainly does not belong to Will. It belongs to Hannibal.

During her residency at Johns Hopkins, she heard all kind of things circulating between the nurses and other doctors. Rumour had it that Hannibal was the last heir of an old, wealthy, powerful family. And the general consensus was that he was locked in a marriage of convenience since birth and lived separately from his wife, not divorcing for the sake of appearances—and because of a deceased parent’s last will. Which, with all due respect to her fellow residents, sounded like utter nonsense to her, no matter how old-fashioned and extravagant Hannibal is.

Hannibal tended to be very proficient at separating his private life from work. Maybe a little too proficient. All she managed to glean from him was that his spouse worked in academia—something something academic publishing something something scientific journals. That is all. No photographs in his office, no impromptu phone calls, no anecdotes on his marriage.

To Alana, Mrs. Lecter sounded more like an acquaintance than a wife.

She had to reluctantly agree with the general consensus, and accept the fact that Hannibal was married to someone he did not love—although he did not seem to necessarily be in bad terms with her. It seemed inevitable at the time that he would one day start something with someone he actually loves. The betting pool at Johns Hopkins had only grown bigger as the years passed, and was still unclaimed by the time she finished her residency.

Too bad Hannibal does not work there anymore. Jess from the cardiology department would have hit the jackpot, betting Hannibal would fall for a brilliant, much younger, antisocial woman of a completely different social standing. Had it wrong for the ‘woman’ part, but the rest is pretty much spot on.

Here is the second problem. Will is also married.

Much like Hannibal, he is very discreet about his spouse. But Alana has eyes and board certification and it does not take a genius to guess that Will is unhappy with the state of his
marriage. He does not share his home with anyone else than his dogs—no night stand on the other side of the bed, no second toothbrush in the cup, no pumps beside his boots. Alana assumed that he was either in the same situation as Hannibal and married to someone he does not love, in a long distance relationship, or widowed. The last option was promptly ruled out when she asked him what job his spouse was doing and his immediate answer was a sharp “A bullshit job.”

Considerate friend that she is, she lent a sympathetic ear, but any questions about his spouse were equally rudely evaded. Which made it pretty clear to her never to bring up that sensitive topic ever again, lest she wants to lose his hard won trust and friendship.

A few papers slips from the table and to the floor, and Alana makes to pick them up before being stopped by Will’s quiet ‘I got it, I got it’ as he bends down to retrieve them. A muffled thud resounds behind her, followed by a hushed ‘Goddammit, Isaac’, and she turns to see one of the students being helped back onto his feet by another after having seemingly missed a step down the stairs.

She turns back to Will just as he straightens up and resumes packing his folders.

She could be reading too much into it. Maybe Will just happens to own the same scarf as one of Hannibal’s.

Alana fiddles with her fingers as the students trickle out of the lecture hall. A good deal of them ogle Will on their way out, and particularly that tiny patch of red skin on his neck. Alana is getting some serious second hand embarrassment. She worries her bottom lip, staring at Will’s back as he stuffs his laptop inside his briefcase.

Oh god, she has to say something before Jack arrives. “Will?”

Will turns towards her halfway through pushing another folder into his briefcase.

“You have a… You have...” Alana trails off, gesturing to her own neck, a grimace marring her face.

Will frowns in confusion, then understanding dawns on him and he releases a little “Oh”, reaching for his neck. He rubs blindly, trying to find the spot.

Alana bites her lower lip, the nervousness mounting slowly. She makes to reach for his scarf, retracts her hands, and reaches out again. “Here, let me...”

Will leans forward slightly, and she slips her hands between his scarf and his neck to pull up the collar of his shirt a bit, and then arranges the scarf so it completely covers the mark and then some. When she is done, she leans back a little, surveying her work. All right, that will do. The mark should not be visible even if the scarf slips off a little.

“Thank you,” Will says, nodding his head once and going back to Stuffing his papers in his briefcase.

Alana offers him a sheepish smile, which freezes on her lips. She chances a glance at the students. They are ogling her now, looking from her to Will and back to her again with raised eyebrows. Oh God, they think she put that hickey there. Will does not meet anyone’s eyes so they all look at her expectantly. She very slowly, very obviously tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, two, three times in a row, with her left hand, making sure that they all notice the very absent ring on her ring finger. They take the hint and hurry out of the lecture hall, immediately loosing interest in her. Alana holds back a sigh of relief.
She starts when Will asks her, “What brings you here?”

Change of topic. Perfect. She takes a deep breath. “I didn’t want you to be ambushed.”

Will releases a discreet sigh, annoyed and resigned. She really can’t blame him. “Jack?”

“He should be here later. Immediately later. Soon to now. He might be behind me right now.”

Will straightens up and Alana does not have to look behind herself to know Jack is entering the lecture hall. She squeezes her eyes shut a second, bracing herself for the conversation that is to come, and which she really does not want to have.

“Here’s Jack.”

Whatever good mood Will was in, probably thanks to whatever occurred last night, it vanishes as soon as Jack comes to stand beside Alana.

“How was class?”

“I really should’ve tried harder to convince Hannibal to do it.”

“There was an obvious conflict of interests.”

Will snorts. “He said the same thing. But there’s a conflict of interests here too. Since he’s your patient.” He extends a hand to take the glass of wine Bedelia offers him. “Thank you.”

“It’s unconventional but not unheard of.” Bedelia sits in front of him, elegantly crossing her legs.

“Something you have in common,” Will says before taking a sip of his wine.

His eyes wander the room, taking in every detail. It is not the first time he has been in her home, but this is the first time he has come as a patient. Bedelia studies him as his eyes linger on the painting between the windows, the new curtains and coffee table, the rug she had to have changed after the last unfortunate incident, a rug exactly like the previous one, but she knows that he notices the change anyway.

“You could rubber stamp me,” he says when his eyes settles on the window. “Put an end to both our misery.”

“That would be unprofessional of me.”

He turns back to her. “Not even for an old friend?” He says, the mockery of a charming smile on his face. Something he tried to pick up from Hannibal. It only looks sardonic on his face.

Bedelia offers a toast at the attempt, and the smile turns into a more natural boyish grin. “We aren’t friends.” The words are not meant to be malicious. A simple truth.

“I was referring to Hannibal.”

“Hannibal isn’t any more my friend than you are.”
“Really, now? Do you drink wine with all your patients?”

“You two are unconventional patients enough to warrant unconventional methods.”

Will chuckles and brings the glass to his mouth. “Can’t deal with our marital problems while sober?” he says before taking a sip.

“Unfortunately for you—and fortunately for me—I don’t provide marital therapy.” She brings her own glass to her lips. “Your marriage doesn’t seem in need of any therapy anyway.” She tilts her head towards Will’s neck, where the hickey is proudly in display, a stark contrast against his pale skin. “You, on the other hand…” she trails off.

Will rolls his eyes. “Jack Crawford thinks I need therapy. I’m making him lose his… ‘beauty sleep’, ” he says, obvious disdain in his voice as he says those last words.

“Do you think you need therapy?”

“I have a psychiatrist at home already.”

“You’re not sufficiently emotionally detached from Hannibal for therapy to work.”

“Therapy doesn’t work on me, whoever does it. Jack knows it and he sent me here still,” he says, making a circular motion with his hand to indicate Bedelia’s living room. “This isn’t for my well-being. This is for his conscience.” Will takes a sip of his wine, managing to somewhat make it look both furious and dignified. “If he had any consideration for me he would’ve dug up our marriage certificate from the FBI’s records already,” he adds as an afterthought.

Bedelia studies him for a long moment, but neither his face nor his demeanour betrays anything. Something he picked up from Hannibal. Bedelia remembers he was not as hard to read when she first met him, before he and Hannibal got married. Now, Will wears his own person suit, well-tailored and unnoticeable to the untrained eyes. Her eyes are anything but untrained. “What is it that you want to punish him for?”

Will opens his mouth and closes it again. He looks down at his left hand, turning the ring on his finger with his thumb, thinking about his next words. Or maybe debating whether or not he should tell her at all. Bedelia waits patiently.

“Two years ago,” Will says eventually, still playing with his ring, “his obsession with a specific killer costed him the life of one of his agent. She wasn’t even an agent, she was a trainee. A brilliant trainee.” He looks up at her, the cold flame of righteous anger burning in his eyes. This one Hannibal picked up from him. “He’s about to do the same thing all over again.”

“With you.”

“With me.”

Bedelia doubts Hannibal would allow it. She has seen with her own eyes to what length he would go for his spouse. And if given the choice, she would prefer never to see it again. “That agent in training, were you close to her?”

“She was one of my students.”

Bedelia pauses. “This is revenge.”

“This is a warning,” Will says, although his tone is light, there is an unmistakable sharp edge to his
words. Bedelia would like to feel sorry for Jack Crawford and the incoming storm he will have to
deal with. She finds she cannot.

A few beats pass as they look each other in the eye. “Have you been to see Abigail Hobbs lately?”
she says, redirecting the conversion to its initial purpose. Assert that Will is not haunted by the
ghost of the man he killed, and stable enough to be allowed back on the field.

The cold anger vanishes as soon as it appeared. “Visited her a few times. She’s still in a coma.”

“Do you feel responsible for what happened to her?”

“I killed her dad. Orphaned her. That comes with some responsibilities and obligations.”

“Do you see her as a surrogate daughter?”

Will turns his head towards the window, playing with his ring again, thinking about her question.
Or feigning to think about her question. Bedelia has no doubt that he already talked about this with
Hannibal, has had plenty of time to mull over it, and maybe already came up with an answer. But it
is not much the answer as whether or not he will answer at all that matters to her.

After a while, Will looks at her again. “I wish I didn’t.”

A smile graces Bedelia’s lips, faint, barely noticeable, but honest.

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See?

Will cannot see where he is walking. The cold bites into his naked skin mercilessly. He recognises
the earth under his feet, the cold grass, and sharps twigs pricking his bare feet. Leaves and
branches ruffle over and around him. The uneasy feeling of being observed does not bother him as
much as it should. And neither do the eyes lurking in the dark.

See?

He can hear the steady sound of hooves hitting the ground behind himself. He does not have to turn
to know the stag is following him, his antlers cutting through the night, the black feathers of his
coat swaying with each step. He walks so close to him that Will can feel each warm puffs of air on
his arm every time the stag exhales. His own breathing comes out shakily, with a cloud of
condensation he feels on his face but cannot see.

See?

The grass and roots and twigs change to concrete. Cold, hard, wet. He comes to a halt when his feet
meet a puddle. The stag stops behind him, touches his cold nose to Will’s arm, urging him to
continue. There is no rain falling on his skin. The air does not buzz with the humidity of a storm
that just passed. Will resumes his blind walk.

See?

This is not water splashing under his feet.
“So you’re back in the field.” Beverly chuckles when Will starts at the sound of her voice. “Sorry.”

He rolls his shoulders jerkily and turns back to the target. “The board okayed me, and Jack got my psych eval.”

Beverly crosses her arms over her chest and goes to lean against the wall behind Will. “Dr. Lecter gave you the all clear.”

“No, another psychiatrist did my psych eval.”

Oh. Now that is not what she understood. “Really?” She thought Jack wanted Dr. Lecter to do it. Something about Dr. Bloom not being able to do it herself because she has been Will’s friend was years now. And Jack seems to hold Dr. Lecter’s opinion in high esteem. He did say that if Will was not allowed back on the field, he would consult Dr. Lecter for their cases instead.

“Yeah, turns out our relationship’s too personal. Conflict of interests and all that,” Will says offhandedly.

Too personal, huh. Beverly does not bother holding back the grin on her face. Will is not looking at her anyway. “So you finally took a liking to befriending shrinks. It was bound to happen one day. Murphy’s law, you know,” she says teasingly. She does not have to see Will’s face to know that he is rolling his eyes at her. That only serves to widen her grin.

“Yeah,” Will says slowly. “Something like that.” He lifts his arms again to shoot.

Even from there, Beverly can tell he barely touched the target. She looks Will up and down, studying his stance, lingering on the line of his shoulders. “You’re a Weaver. I took you for an isosceles guy.” She takes a step closer to him.

“I have a rotator cuff issue, so I have to use the Weaver stance.”

Probably a remnant from his life as a cop in New Orleans. She puts a hand on his shoulder. He makes a small sound of surprise—or protest maybe? He does not shake her off though—and briefly looks over his shoulder. She pushes down on his shoulder to correct his stance. Damn, he is tight. “You are tight.”

“I got stabbed when I was a cop.”

She guessed right then. She is about to tell him about the time she got stabbed in the third grade with a number two pencil when she notices the little patch of red-purple skin just under the collar of his shirt. “Nice mark.”

Will does flinch at that one. “Uh. Yeah. That’s—yeah.” He slightly lifts his shoulders to push his collar up, breaking the stance she just corrected.

“At least, one person in the team is having a good time,” Beverly says teasingly as she grabs his shoulders again to push them down. Taking pity on him, she pulls on his collar slightly to cover the mark. She also flares out his left elbow, and pushes his feet further apart with her own. Once satisfied with his stance, she steps back and slips her earmuffs back on. “See if that helps with the recoil.”

Will pulls the trigger five times, and this time the results are better. He takes off his earmuffs and
turns to look at her, not quite meeting her eyes and offers a half smile. “Should I pay you for that lesson?”

“Always a pleasure to help the rookies,” she says, winking at him.

“I’m older than you.”

“Still the rookie in the team.”

“I believe I’m not the last one who joined the team.”

“If Dr. Lecter behaves, maybe we’ll give him an honorary member card,” she says, waving her hand, and steps forward to put a hand on his shoulder again. She plasters a mock solemn expression on her face. “You’re the last one who joined the team.”

Will swats her hand off his shoulder playfully. “Aren’t we a little too old for hazing?”

“Fortunately for you, yes.”

“So you’ve come all the way down here to teach me how to shoot.”

“Nope, Jack sent me to find out what you know about gardening.”

“Can you tell me what that man is doing over there by himself?”

“That guy? He’s some kinda special consultant. Works with the FBI.”

Freddie frowns as the man kneels in front of one of the graves, his eyes still closed. She glances at the other FBI agents. They look at him with intrigued and sceptical looks on their faces. Aside from Jack Crawford, none of them seems to know what the man in actually doing.

Then the hand in the grave surges up to grip his arm and he is kicked out of whatever trance he was in. She watches as all the agents rush to the graves, pushing the man away. He stumbles back until his back hits a tree, a haunted look on his face.

Special consultant, huh? He looks more like a psychic than a consultant to her.

Some extensive background researches are in order.

“Don’t touch him!”

Brian rushes to the grave, his team close behind. Will jumps to his feet and plasters himself against a tree trunk a few metres away. Brian kneels down near the man. His mouth opens and closes, hissing air in, and wheezing it back out, soundlessly screaming in pain.

They do their best to get him out of the grave without causing any more damage. The man screams
silently during the whole process, he screams when they hoist the gurney into the ambulance, and he keeps screaming still inside the ambulance.

As he watches the ambulance leave for the nearest hospital, Brian swallows the lump in his throat with difficulty. He secretly hopes that the man will pass away before they make it to the hospital. His body is in shambles. The rest of his life will be nothing but agony. There is nothing left to save.

Jimmy pats his back before they go back to digging out the other bodies.

Brian chances one look at Will. He went back to the police line, waiting near Jack for them to finish. They talk in hushed voices. Will does not look fazed by what just happened, his face the perfect picture of calm and indifference. It would have been convincing, if he were not nervously turning the gold band on his ring finger with his thumb.

Will startles awake, out of breath and covered in sweat, his brain banging around in his skull. The ghost of Garrett Jacob Hobs still burns behind his eyelids. His hand instinctively reaches for the spot on his right, searching blindly until he remembers that he told Hannibal to stay in Baltimore today again.

He forces himself to lay still on the bed, his eyes fixed on the shadows of the ceiling. He breathes in deeply, holds the air in his lungs, and exhales slowly. Rinse, repeat. Until his heart rate is back to a steadier pace, and the headache recedes to a low buzz. He thinks of the exercises Hannibal used to make him do whenever he felt reality slip through his fingers.

*Wolf Trap, Virginia.*

*Will Graham.*

He turns his head to look at his alarm clock. *Almost two a.m.*

That makes less that two hours of sleep. Will licks his lips, they feel like sandpaper under his tongue. He sits up slowly, so as not to worsen the buzz in his head, takes off his soaked shirt and throws it aside. The dogs are still asleep, curled up in their beds. He looks out of the window. The night sky is clear. No rain. No snow. The roads should be almost empty at this hour.

An hour later, he is pushing the door of their house in Baltimore open, locking it behind himself with a soft *click*. He kicks off his shoes in the entrance. No need to switch on the lights. His steps, though silent, are sure as he walks through the corridors blindly, never bumping into anything. He sheds his clothes on his way to the bedroom, leaving them on whatever pieces of furniture are closest to him.

The door of the master bedroom is half open. It does not creak when he pushes it further to slip inside, does not make a thud as he closes it. The curtains are still open, letting the moonlight stream in. Will crawls into bed and under the blankets, slowly, gingerly, mindful of Hannibal’s sleeping form. Although Will is sure he woke him up the instant he parked his car beside the Bentley.

Will lays down against Hannibal’s back, wraps his arms around his middle, and buries his face between his shoulder blades.
He almost flinches when Hannibal takes one of his hands and threads their fingers together. He brings it to his mouth, pressing a kiss on Will’s knuckles. “I’m here,” he whispers against Will’s skin.

And Will squeezes his eyes shut, tightening his hold on Hannibal’s waist.

Hannibal finishes slicing the last andouille sausages and sets them aside on a plate. He glances at Will, on the other side of the kitchen island, cutting the bell peppers on auto-pilot, lost in thought. Although his focus is elsewhere entirely, his movements are precise and practised.

Over the years Hannibal has grown quite fond of Cajun cuisine. It has, after all, often single-handedly saved their couple. Especially at the beginning of their relationship, when things were still rocky, and they were still figuring out how to make things work together. Hannibal lost count of how many times he has used gumbo as a peace offering to Will whenever they would argue.

It surprised him at first, that Will would find comfort in a taste of childhood, considering his childhood was nowhere near happy. But Will seems to have managed to detach his father and the time he spent with him from everything else that constituted his childhood. Keeping the best—fishing, sailing, cooking—and discarding the rest.

Which turned out to be for the best. When they got together, they quickly came to the realisation that hunting would not be able to hold their relationship together on its own. Cooking just so happened to be the only legal pastime they had in common—although obviously Hannibal’s refined dishes were very different from Will’s more homey ones—so it became the pillar of their domestic life, the first step of their lives together. Hunting was the first room of their palace, cooking was the first brick of their home.

Cajun cuisine also constantly reminds Hannibal of the first time Will took the lead in the kitchen, and subsequently made him discover a newfound love for jambalaya—and kitchen sex, but that’s another story. There is a very special room in their shared mind palace whose walls are entirely built up on the smell and taste of that day.

“I thought I was done with nightmares,” Will says, cutting the last green pepper in equal slices without seeming to register his own movements.

“Hobbs?”

“Yeah.”

Hannibal reaches for the plates of sliced peppers Will has aligned in the middle of the kitchen island, and adds them to the potatoes in the pan. He did have his suspicion for Will’s surprise visit, but he preferred to let Will decide on his own when to breach the subject first. He seemed to desperately need the rest last night when he stumbled into bed, trembling, tense and smelling of fear.

“It isn’t the first time you see him in your dreams.”

“No.”

“That’s why you’ve kept me out of Wolf Trap lately.” Hannibal does not need to turn to know Will
flinched at his words, though they were only meant as an observation. It is not unusual for Will to prefer to spend his nights in Wolf Trap, their house there being closer to Quantico, and far from the agitation of Baltimore. But it was surprising of him to insist Hannibal stays in Baltimore, considering they are not in the middle of a quarrel. Hannibal did not push, knowing Will would come to him if things got worse.

“I thought it would pass. It’s been some time since I last worked in the field. I thought I’d just—need some time to readjust.” The knife clatters on the counters, and Hannibal turns to see Will rub his brow with the back of his hand in a poor attempt at hiding his eyes. “I’m sorry, I should’ve told you sooner, but I thought…”

Hannibal circles the kitchen island to join him. He slips an arm around Will’s waist, leans down to nuzzle his temple. “It’s okay. I’m glad you told me now.”

Will chuckles, turning his head to run the tip of his nose on Hannibal’s cheek. “I feel like a child. Terrified by nightmares.”

“Neither fear nor nightmares have anything to do with age.” He leaves a kiss on Will’s jaw before going back to the stove, grabbing the plate of sliced andouille sausages on his way to add them in the pan. “Will you allow me back in Wolf Trap?”

He hears Will rummage through the cupboards for another bowl in which to whisk the eggs.

“Mmh… I don’t know. The dogs are doing a lot better since you’re no longer sneaking them food.”

Hannibal glances over his shoulder, throwing an imperious look at Will. “I tolerate them enough to feed them, you should be grateful.”

Will snorts, not bothering to look up from where he is whisking the eggs. “Yeah, sure. I’d be grateful if you could stop spoiling them.”

“I’ll have to spoil you instead to compensate.”

When Will is done with the eggs, he slides up to him at the stove, setting the bowl on the counter. He tilts his head up, asking for a kiss. Hannibal turns his head to place a quick peck on Will’s lips as a thank you. Will gently knocks his hip against Hannibal’s to push him aside and slips his hand under Hannibal’s on the handle of the pan. “Coffee?” he asks, batting his eyelashes prettily at him, as he steals his place at the stove.

Hannibal grabs a handful of Will’s backside, smirking when it earns him a squeak and an elbow in the ribs. He leaves Will to tend to breakfast and goes to prepare some coffee and set the table.

Breakfast is a quiet, unhurried affair spent in comfortable silence, peppered with a few words exchanged here and there. But mostly, Will uses the time to recollect himself, dissect the previous day, label and compartmentalise in their palace anything he wants to share with Hannibal. Images, smells, faces, feelings, conversations… Everything is arranged meticulously inside a new room, and kept for later examination. Hannibal sees all the process unfold inside Will’s eyes, but does not take part in it, waiting to admire the finished product.

Will seems to be feeling considerably better with a warm meal in his stomach. He pushes his empty plate aside and wraps his hands around his steaming cup of coffee, taking slow, leisurely sips. He leans back in his seat, sticks his feet to Hannibal’s calves. Even through his pyjama pants, Hannibal can feel how cold they are.

“Jack told you about our latest case?”
“He called to ask me if I could come take a look. If my schedule allowed it.”

“Does your schedule allow it?”

Hannibal lifts his cup to his mouth, his eyes searching for Will’s elusive ones. “Does it?”

Will mulls over this one for a moment, humming softly as he taps his fingernails on his cup. “No, it doesn’t,” he decides after a while. “I’ll take care of that one. You’d only waste your time.”

Hannibal hides a smile behind the rim of his cup. “I’ll inform Jack of my heavy schedule then.”

Will’s eyes settle on the window and the first rays of sunlight. The cold light of winter mornings suits Will particularly well, accentuating the pallor of his complexion and dancing in his eyes like glass.

“This one will be quick,” Will says, unaware—or feigning to be unaware—of Hannibal’s eyes fixed on him. “A doctor or pharmacist using his diabetic patients as fertiliser for his mushroom garden.”

Charming. “A rather unique choice.”

Will scrunches his nose. “Yeah. Wasn’t pretty to look at.” He tips his head back and downs the rest of his coffee, licking his lips afterwards to chase the taste, hoping it will distract him from the gruesome images from whatever he saw at the crime scene. And then his eyes alight when he seems to remember something. The corners of his mouth turn down in an irritated frown. His cup clacks on the table. “Freddie Lounds was at the scene. She was observing me. Prepare for an unsavoury article about me soon.”

“Should we invite her for dinner?”

“Depends on what she publishes.”

“Where do you draw the line?”

“She can say whatever she wants on me.” Will pauses. “Not one word on Abigail.”

Hannibal’s cup makes a sharp, final click when he sets it down on the table. “Very well.”

Will is fast asleep, curled up on the couch facing Abigail’s hospital bed.

Alana heard from Jack that things did not really go so well today. What with their suspect slipping away because of an untimely tabloid article. She read the article herself, and has been worried for Will since then. The words were harsh, spat out like dirt, layered with unflattering double-entendres. Everything you would expect from a tabloid journalist.

She grabs the heels of her shoes to slip them off, before entering Abigail’s room. It is not that late, but Will certainly looks like he needs the rest. She takes the blanket that was left on the back of the couch, and drapes it over Will. The movement is familiar and practised, something she used to do when she was much younger. Alana smiles to herself. Will may be older than her, but in many ways he reminds her of her younger brothers.
Alana goes to sit on the edge of Abigail’s bed. “Hello, Abigail,” she says, her voice soft in the silence of the room. She digs into her bag, takes out a book. “I thought you would be bored, all alone here, so I brought you something to pass the time.” She smiles and holds up the book, even though she knows Abigail cannot see her. She lowers the book to her lap, running her fingers over the cover. “Flannery O’Connor. I read everything she ever wrote when I was your age.” She leafs through the pages, stopping somewhere around a third of the book, one of her favourite parts, and starts reading quietly. The world flow on her tongue smoothly, she almost knows them by heart, having read them so many times.

“Good evening, Alana.”

Although the words were spoken softly, Alana starts with a quiet gasp and whips her head around. Hannibal is standing in the doorway, his coat draped in the crook of his arm, smiling at her. She did not even hear him arrive.

She offers him a smile. “Hannibal. Good evening.”

He steps into the room, and even then, she can barely make out the sound of his shoes against the linoleum floor. That is something about him that has always fascinated her. She notices the books he is holding in his arm, partially hidden by his coat, and lifts her own book. “I see we had the same idea.”

“Great minds think alike.” Hannibal stops in front of Will, studying his relaxed form on the couch.

“He must have had a terrible day,” Alana says. “I came to talk to him about that ‘Takes One to Know One’ article. Make sure he is all right after that…” she trails off when she sees Hannibal reach out to Will with his free hand.

“Once again our minds aligned.”

He slowly, tenderly runs the back of his fingers from Will’s jaw to his temple. And Will’s head ever so slightly follows the movement in his sleep, inhaling and exhaling softly. His eyes flutter open. It takes him a few blinks to fully come to consciousness, his eyelids batting off the last remnants of sleep. And then a small, warm smile graces his lips when he registers Hannibal’s presence. Hannibal smiles back at him. The look they share is heavy with words and emotions Alana cannot decipher. She shyly lowers her eyes to the book on her lap.

“Good evening, Will,” Hannibal greets him quietly.

“Hey,” Will greets back, his voice hoarse with sleep. “Hello, Alana.”

Alana’s head snaps up to him. “Will.” She offers him a gentle smile, hoping to put him at ease. “How do you feel?”

“Good. Kinda tired but good.” He pushes himself up to sit, rolling his shoulders to work out the cricks. He reclines in the couch, the blanket slipping off his shoulder to pool around his waist. “Are you nervous?”

“I’m about to breach the subject of that article.” A flash of recognition passes over his eyes and Alana hesitates a second, refrains herself from worrying her bottom lip. “I wanted to tell you that… if you want to talk, I’m always there to listen. As a friend, not a psychiatrist.”

Will smiles at her. A sincere, easy, open smile. Something she rarely sees from him. “You’re kind, Alana,” he says softly. His eyes convey a lot more meaning than what his words say.
Alana returns his smile with a fond one of her own. “That’s what friends do.”

“I’m fine, you don’t have to worry about me.”

“What she wrote doesn’t bother you?”

Will shrugs. “Honestly? No. I find it hilarious actually.” He pulls the blanket back on his shoulders. “Some psychiatric circles have said and published worst things about me,” he adds, side eyeing Hannibal.

Alana raises her eyebrows in surprise. She does not remember Hannibal ever publishing anything on Will. She is not even sure they knew each other—or knew of each other—before Jack introduced them to work on the Minnesota Shrike case. Maybe Will implies something else.

Before she has the chance to ask, Hannibal says, “A shame. You have a beautiful mind.”

“You’d be the only one to think that.”

“And I’d love nothing more than for you to appreciate its beauty.”

“If it could stop ploughing through other people’s mind without my consent, I would.” Will tilts his chin towards the books in Hannibal’s arms. “What did you bring?” He leans forward, reaching for the books, making the blanket fall to his lap again.

Another jolt of surprise and disbelief. You do not usually snatch someone’s books from their hands when asking them for the titles, unless you know them really well. That is kind of rude. But the movement seems familiar, something he is used to do.

And it is even more surprising when Hannibal only lowers his arm to let Will take the books, the movement looking just as familiar. “George Sand. Germaine de Staël.”

Will turns each book in his hands, examining the covers. “Really? No Baudelaire or Camus?” he says, looking back up at Hannibal, an eyebrow raised teasingly. He lowers the books to his lap instead of giving them back, keeping both his hands flat on the cover. Hannibal does not seem to mind.

“I thought Abigail would like those better,” he says, turning his head to Abigail’s bed. “But Alana’s selection is still more suitable, I believe.”

Alana lifts her own book again, looking at Will. “Flannery O’Connor.”

Will nods his head sagely, and Alana breaks out into a grin. “Good call. I’m not sure Abigail speaks French.”

“If she doesn’t, it’s never too late to start learning,” Alana says gamely. “We can take turns reading to her,” she offers. “I’ll see how rusty my French is.”

“You have a lovely reading voice, Alana. Please.” Hannibal inclines his head at her slightly to prompt her to continue. “And since my presence is now unnecessary, I’ll take my leave.”

Will taps his hands on Hannibal’s books still on his lap. “I’ll be keeping those. Dust off my own French.”

Alana winces internally. She has known Will for quite some time—longer than Hannibal has that is for sure—so she knows that he does not mean to be rude. But she is unsure how Hannibal would
react to someone basically stealing his books on a whim. She braces herself for Hannibal passive-aggressively demanding his books back.

But again, Hannibal only smiles at Will. “Of course.”

He reaches out to ruffle Will’s hair, making Will chuckle and swat the offending hand away. Alana feels like her eyebrows are going to be stuck in a permanent surprised lift. If she had any doubt about something going on between the two of them, that familiarity-borderline-rudeness is one damning evidence. She does not remember Hannibal acting this way—or tolerating this behaviour—with anyone else. Not even Dr. Sutcliffe from the neurology department.

Hannibal turns to her, gives a nod and a quiet “Good evening, Alana,” before he leaves.

Alana keeps her gaze fixed on Will as his eyes trail Hannibal’s retreating back. Once he disappears from his line of sight, Will turns back to her.

“You guys seem to get on well.”

Will shrugs. “Kind of, yeah.”

“You spend a lot of time together?”

Will puts Hannibal’s books on the couch beside his legs, and pulls the blanket higher around his shoulders. “A lot of dinners. Some nights too.”

Alana can’t help another jolt of surprise at that. “Nights?”

“Dinners tend to drag on. Wine turns to brandy, and then it’s too late for me to drive back to Wolf Trap. So yeah. I spend the night.”

Alana has a million questions, half of them absolutely not appropriate for the situation and Abigail’s young ears. Alana takes a second to recollect herself, and find something to redirect the conversation. Joking about an affair might lead to an awkward discussion considering it would only be a half joke. She clears her throat, throws him a mock accusing look and says, “So you’re the reason why he hasn’t held any dinner party lately.”

Will’s lips stretch into a mischievous grin. “I might just be.”
Chapter 3

Opening with a... very emotionally distressed Will. If you really don't feel like reading that kind of stuff right now, you can just skip the first section. Self-care, self-care!

Enjoy!

Will holds Abigail tightly in his arms. Her body is so small, so frail against his. He whispers soft words of reassurance in her ear. The knife bites into her neck. With one swift movement of his arm, he severs the carotid.

Will jolts awake, gasping for breath, trying to fill his burning lungs. Nausea floods him and he jumps out of bed, rushing for the en-suite bathroom. The sudden movement, paired with the pounding headache, make him stumble and bump into the night stand, knocking his book and lamp over, and hit his shoulder against the door frame leading to the bathroom. He smears blood on the wall as he reaches for the light switch. The light burns his eyes, and he almost slips on the puddle of blood on the tiles. He falls to his knees on the cold floor, not registering the pain shooting up his legs, and leans his head over the toilet bowl, gripping the cold edge tightly. His knuckles turn white, so white against the red he is smearing everywhere.

Nothing comes out. The heave stubbornly sits in the back of his throat. The seconds pass like hours, and he cannot get rid of the nausea. It hurts. It burns. It screams in his head. He can’t breathe. It is a vice around his chest, water in his lungs. Each wave makes him sicker. He tries to scream, expel something, anything. He opens his mouth, his throat closes off. It won’t come out. Nothing comes out. He can’t breathe. He can’t breathe.

He shoves a finger down his throat.

Only to be yanked back into a solid chest. Will struggles, but he is only pressed harder to Hannibal’s chest. He thrashes about, fighting against Hannibal’s hold, screaming—trying to scream—at him to let go, let go, let go. There is so much blood. On his hands, on his face, on his clothes. Abigail’s blood. He can’t let Hannibal touch him. He can’t have him know what he just did to her.

But Hannibal does not let go. His hands hold Will’s wrists in a vice-like grip, his arms wrapped tightly around Will’s chest, blocking any more movement. It is only in the tight embrace that Will realises how violently he is shaking. His entire body is racked by violent sobs. Each of his breaths comes out ragged and broken. Will lets his head hang between his shoulders, and he sees.

There is no blood on his hands. No blood on his clothes. No blood on the floor.

He stops thrashing about. Hannibal loosens his grip, pulling Will higher against his chest and allowing him to sit up straighter. His hands stay on Will’s wrists, rubbing slow circles on the inside of his wrists with his thumbs, about two inches from his palms.

Through his soft, broken cries, Will slowly becomes aware of Hannibal’s voice, steady and
comforting, whispering in his ear. Will bites his lips to try and quiet his sobs, and focuses on Hannibal’s words.


Will does not know how long they stay like this, seated on the cold tiled floor, but eventually his breathing evens out, and his body stops shaking but for a few quiet hiccups. The nausea recedes, and the headache returns to the now familiar buzz. All his strength leaves him at once, and his body goes lax into Hannibal’s arms.

Will shifts in the embrace, turning slightly towards Hannibal to tuck his head under his chin, pulling his legs closer to himself, trying to be as small as possible to fit all of himself into Hannibal’s comforting presence. Hannibal readjusts his hold around him. He keeps whispering in Will’s ear, rocking him slowly, stroking his arms, his back, his head.

Will is exhausted, from the lack of sleep, from his nightmare, his fear and the ensuing panic, from his crying. Will is exhausted from everything. He wants to fall back asleep right there. He vaguely registers Hannibal pressing kisses on the crown of his head.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he whispers.

Will does not know. This still feels so raw. He is exhausted.

He shakes his head weakly, and stays unmoving in the embrace.

Will’s car is nowhere to be seen. Alana knocks on the door anyway. She can hear the dogs barking. She glances at her watch. It is way too early for him to already be at Quantico. She goes to sit on the chair on the corner to wait for him. If he does not show up in thirty minutes she will go to see him in his lecture hall later in the day.

Just as she lowers herself on the chair, she hears a car approaching the property. And yes, it is Will’s car that appears from behind the corner. Alana stands back up and steps off the porch, waiting as he parks his car beside hers, and steps out of it.

She can’t help but raise her eyebrows at Will’s outfit. Once again he is wearing that scarf that could or could not be Hannibal’s scarf, but what really catches her eye is his coat. A really nice, really expensive looking coat. It is definitely worth more than everything she is wearing right now, jewellery and accessories included. Although, from what she can see, his is wearing his usual clothes under that coat.

“Hello, Will,” she says, as soon as he closes the door of his car. “Where were you so early in the morning? And looking so classy too,” she asks teasingly.

“‘Morning Alana.” He goes to open the trunk to take out a duffel bag and a garment bag. So he does have the suit that goes with the coat after all. “Spent the night at Hannibal’s.”

Alana’s eyebrow ticks involuntarily. Damning evidence keep piling on. “Dinner dragged on and wine turned to brandy again?” She sees him balance the duffel bag on his leg so he can free one of his hands to close the trunk, and she goes to help him. He nods a ‘Thank you’ when she takes the garment bag to help him.
Will goes to open his door, Alana following close behind. The dogs bark again when they step on the porch.

“He took me to some fancy Italian restaurant. Brandy came after.”

Alana stops in her tracks. That is a lot of surprises so early in the morning. Hannibal rarely—very rarely—takes anyone out to dinner, preferring to cook himself. The very few times she heard of him inviting anyone to dine anywhere else than at his house, it was always with long-time friends and colleagues. She herself has never been invited at any of those, and she has known him for quite some time.

And here is Will, invited out to some fancy Italian restaurant within a month of their first meeting.

“That explains the attire,” she says, trying to keep her voice light. “You could have done something with your hair to complete it.”

“Oh, I did yesterday—even I know a little something about etiquette—but I just didn’t have the willpower this morning. I kind of left in a hurry.” The dogs slip out as soon as the door is open enough for them to pass. The two first bump into his legs on their way, and he steps aside to let the others out. When the last slips past them, he opens the door wider to let her in first. “Coffee? Tea?”

He leaves the door open, drops his duffel bag somewhere near one of the armchairs. “Beer? Although it’s kinda early.” He extends a hand towards her to take the garment bag she hands him.

“Tea’s fine.”

Will drops the bag on the armchair, and she follows him into the kitchen, watches him rummage through the cupboards.

“So what brings you here, so early in the morning?”

“Abigail Hobbs woke up.”

Will pauses. “Jack wants me to see her?” he asks, taking out two mugs.

“Yes.”

“And you don’t.”

“I think it’s still too early. She needs to—”

Will almost drops the mugs when his phone rings. He places the mugs on the counter and fishes his phone out of his pocket. “Jack,” he says after taking one look at the caller ID. He turns his gaze on her again, a small smile on his face. “Do I want to answer?”

“If you want to be yelled at first thing in the morning.”

Will chuckles and puts his phone on the counter, letting it ring, and goes back to preparing tea.

“I thought our last session was supposed to be the first and last time you’d be here as my patient.”

“Technically, I’m not here as a patient but as a guest.”
Bedelia still does not move from her front door, not letting Will in. “An uninvited guest.”

“Yes, but look I got you one of our best bottles,” Will says, holding up the wine bottle he took with him. “Hannibal is going to miss it a lot,” he adds, as though it would sway her decision to let him in.

“I’m sure he’ll find another to replace it promptly. Come on in,” she says with a smile. She opens her door wider and steps aside to let him in, taking the bottle when he hands it to her. “Thank you.” She leads him to her kitchen. The living room is for patients. She searches inside her drawers, takes out a corkscrew. “So, who sent you? Jack Crawford or Hannibal?”

“I sent myself.” Will reaches for the bottle and the corkscrew. Bedelia lets him open the bottle while she fetches two glasses from one of the cupboards.

“Does Hannibal know you’re here?”

“Not yet.” The cork pops open, and Will brings it to his nose to take a sniff. Another thing he picked up from Hannibal. “But he’s bound to find out soon. Can’t hide anything from him.” He generously fills the two glasses. Something Hannibal could not make him loose. Not that Bedelia is complaining. He leaves the bottle on the kitchen island, and hands her a glass.

“Why bother to come at all then? You could confront him directly.” She bring her glass to her mouth, smelling it before taking a slow sip. Wonderful. Much like anything coming out of Hannibal’s pantry. Her appreciation must show on her face, because Will pulls on a smug smile, lifting his own glass in a toast.

“Just a few things I need to work out before actually broaching the topic with him,” he says before taking a sip. He makes a surprised face as soon as the wine touches his tongue. “Oh man, this one is really good,” he mutters to himself, looking down at his glass in wonder.

She smiles at his antics. “Is this rehearsal?”

“I’d say polishing. Some tweaking here and there.”

“It is more usual for people to use mirrors for these kind of things.”

“Where would be all the fun?” He says with a boyish grin pressed to the rim of his glass. “How about lunch? Have you eaten already?” He looks around the kitchen, first at the sink and at the racks, and seeing them empty, at the glass doors of the upper cupboards, checking for missing plates. “Hannibal always says it’s not good to discuss on an empty stomach.”

“How cavalier of you,” she says, returning his smile. “No, I haven’t eaten yet.”

“I’m letting you choose the restaurant. My treat.”

Bedelia indicates her kitchen with a small movement of her hand. “You can have my kitchen and my pantry. I hear your cooking got much better since your marriage.”

“I’m afraid I’m not as showy as Hannibal.”

“Something simple is fine by me. Something that would pair well with the wine,” she says, lifting her glass.

Will places his glass on the counter near the bottle, and goes to open her fridge. He peruses its content slowly, carefully, humming as he slides his fingers over his bottom lip. Something
Hannibal picked up from him. When he is done he moves to the pantry, once again carefully looking at the shelves. He comes back with a few ingredients and some bottles, arranging them neatly in the middle of the kitchen island.

“All right, I don’t remember the name, but it’s a French dish with chicken and white wine, so we’re all good,” he says, going back to the fridge to pick some more ingredients.

“I’ll defer to your judgement.” Bedelia watches him rummage through the cupboards for the tools he will need and she goes to sits on the chair near the door.

When Will has taken out everything he needs, he approaches her to drape his jacket over the back of her chair, a quiet “Sorry,” on his lips, before going back to the counter, rolling his sleeves up to his elbows.

Bedelia lifts her eyebrows when she sees the bruises circling his wrists. Large bruises shaped like hands. Even the watch on his left wrist is not large enough to completely conceal it. They are almost faded—this must have happened at least a week prior—but they are impossible to miss on his pale skin. All kinds of scenarios form in her head, and she discards most of them. Will would have been more conscious about hiding them if he did not want their cause to be known. “Is that Hannibal’s doing?”

He looks up at her confusedly. She tilts her chin in the direction of his hands.

Realisation hits Will, and he looks down at his wrists, as though only now noticing the bruises. “Oh that. That’s—uh—the aftermath of an eventful night. You know how it is,” he says as an explanation, a sheepish expression on his face. He reaches for an onion and starts cutting it with quick, precise movements.

Bedelia stares at him, bringing her glass to her mouth. Will is deliberately alluding to sex. Which means this has nothing to do with sex. “Something you’d like to talk about?”

“So kind of you to worry about me,” he says, briefly looking at her, an eyebrow lifted teasingly. Bedelia keeps staring at him silently, until he drops the act. “I almost hurt myself—accidentally—and he swooped in to prevent it. A little too vigorously. Nothing to worry about.”

Bedelia waits a moment for him to elaborate. He does not. “I see.” She returns to sipping her wine, not commenting any further. She does not know whether he is telling the truth, but she guesses that is the most she will get from him, so she leaves him to prepare whatever he has in mind.

About an hour later, the table is set, and they sit down to eat Will’s *French dish with chicken and white wine*, Bedelia at the head of the table and Will on her left.

“I dreamed that I killed Abigail,” Will says apropos of nothing as he refills their glasses.

Bedelia does not answer immediately, letting it sink in. She takes her time to savour the dish. Like the wine, it tastes wonderful. “How did that make you feel?”

“Sick. Almost threw up when I woke up,” he says, wrinkling his nose.

Quite distasteful to speak about throwing up during a meal, but Bedelia will pardon him this one impoliteness as he was the one to cook the meal in the first place. “It isn’t unusual for people to find the act of killing sickening.”

“I didn’t feel sick the last time I killed someone.”
“No, indeed.” Bedelia sets down her silverware to reach for her glass. She takes a slow sip, appreciating the delicate pairing with the meat. “You felt sick when you woke up. How did you feel when you were holding the knife?”

Will imitates her, taking his own glass. He mulls over her question for a moment, pressing his lips to the rim of his glass, another habit Hannibal could not make him lose. Bedelia has no doubt that Will is once again pondering whether to answer honestly rather than on the answer itself.

“Love,” he says eventually, setting his glass down.

“Whose love was it? Yours? Or that of her deceased father?”

“It was her father’s love that held the knife.” He says, running a finger on the handle of his own knife. He looks at her again, meeting her eyes. “I don’t think I have any love for her. I feel responsibility for orphaning her, and I want to help her. But love?” He shakes his head. “That may be premature.”

“Yet you want to be a part of her life.”

“Responsibility,” he says again.

“The responsible thing to do would be to never see her again. You killed her father. You were present when her family died. You’re part of her trauma.” She notices the minute tick of his eyebrow. Although as always, as harsh as her words may be, there is no malice in them.

“And saved her life in the process.” He pauses. “Jack Crawford thinks she knows what happened to the bodies of the other seven girls who were killed. He wants us to talk to her at least once.”

“This may be one time too many.” She takes one last sip of her glass, before picking up her silverware again. “How does Hannibal feel about Abigail Hobbs?”

Will perks up in surprise, his hand holding his fork stopping halfway to his mouth. “He doesn’t talk to you about her during your sessions?”

“You think we don’t talk about that at home?” he says, disbelief tainting his voice.

“What I think, what I know and what I don’t, it doesn’t matter. What matters is what you tell me. And what you don’t.”

Will huffs out a laugh, shaking his head slightly. Still grinning, he bites heartily into the piece of chicken on his fork. “There’s a reason I don’t fancy psychiatrists,” he says around his mouthful. Another impoliteness Bedelia is ready to magnanimously overlook.

“And yet you married one.”

“A monumental lapse in judgement.”

“That has been lasting for almost a decade.”

“The things you’d do for love,” Will says with a half smile, lifting his glass for a toast.

Bedelia returns his smile and clinks her glass against his.
They all start packing their things when Pr. Graham shuts his laptop, indicating the end of the lecture. Emmeline has to subtly kick Zac’s leg to get him moving, ripping him from his intense mooning over Pr. Graham. She certainly understands the sentiment, but unlike the rest of them, Zac is just unable to lament discreetly. She better set him up with someone else soon. She is not one to refuse free drinks but no amount of vodka would be worth spending another night listening to him despair over their already taken professor.

She has to practically drag him down the stairs, sighing in exasperation. She notices Vica waving at her from the other side of the lecture hall, her notebooks piled in the crook of her left arm. Vica sends her a sympathetic look, making a few signs with her right hand—pointing at her own wristwatch, and then miming knocking back a bottle with a fisted hand. Emmeline shakes her head and makes a phone with her hand, bringing it to her ear. Vica nods and follows the stream of students out of the hall.

Emmeline pauses halfway down the stairs when she sees the stream part in the middle and make way for someone entering the lecture hall. At first she expects Jack Crawford. He has been invading the hall more and more frequently as of late, coming right at the end of the lecture—she wonders how long it will take before he interrupts them in the middle of a lecture—to whisk away Pr. Graham without even giving him the chance to gather his papers, and disappearing before they all exited the hall.

But today is not such day, and the person cutting through the swarm of students is a tall, distinguished gentleman dressed in a suit with way too many patterns—paisley on plaid on stripes, what on god’s green earth—and somehow managing to make it look good. But what really catches her attention is the intense look the man keeps fixed on Pr. Graham’s back. How their professor does not flinch from that stare—or at the very least notice it—she does not know. Emmeline is pretty sure such a gaze would rip her skin to shreds, were it directed at her. She shivers at the mental images the thought brings up.

Emmeline remembers seeing this man roam the halls with Jack Crawford and occasionally Dr. Bloom a few times already. He does not seem to be a professor, nor an agent. And he is not one of the higher ups either. Probably a consultant.

Without looking away she whispers, “Zac, you see what I see?” When Zac does not answer, she turns to see him once again lost in his contemplation of Pr. Graham. She elbows him in the ribs, and hisses, “For god’s sake, Isaac, get a grip.” And Zac finally rips his gaze from Pr. Graham to turn it to the newcomer. And promptly does a double take. Ah, shit. That may have been a mistake on her part.

The man stops a few feet away from Pr. Graham.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Pr. Graham says without turning around, still methodically filing away all his papers into their designated folders. So he did feel that scorching gaze on him after all.

“Your lecture was brilliant.”

“Already done with your appointments, doctor?” Pr. Graham throws a glance over his shoulder at the last word, and the man’s—a doctor apparently—burning gaze immediately softens to something a little more professional. And definitely more appropriate.

Looks like someone else has got the hots for their professor. She tries to look at the doctor’s left
hand but it is hidden by the two-thousand-dollar coat held in the crook of his arm.

“Jack Crawford sent me to fetch you.”

Pr. Graham scoffs. How he manages to make a scoff sound so lovely, she has no idea. “Of course he did.”

Emmeline balances her last notebook between her left arm and her hip and pulls Zac down the stairs to exit the hall. The two of them close the march of students trickling out of the hall.

Just as they are about to pass the door, Zac roughly grabs her elbow, a hushed “Mel, Mel,” on his lips, as he looks back into the hall, his eyes comically wide open.

She turns around just in time to see the doctor—who is now standing much, much closer to Pr. Graham—press the back of his right hand to their professor’s forehead, pushing back those luscious curls. “How do you feel today?”

The pang of jealousy at how easily the man can initiate physical contact with their very introverted, very unapproachable professor only lasts for a second, before a wave of disbelief and amazement washes over her when said professor does not pull away and—sweet baby Jesus—leans into the hand.

“Much better.”

Zac and her are left to pick up their jaws from the floor when the doctor lowers his hand to Pr. Graham’s—not exactly the small of his back, but definitely lower than the friendly thoracic vertebrae level.

“Aspirin is only a temporary solution,” the doctor chides softly.

“Temporary is enough.”

Finally noticing them, Pr. Graham sends a look in their direction, one eyebrow raised in a perfect, accusing arch.

Startled out of their staring, Emmeline and Zac lower their heads in guilt and apology, promptly scrambling out of the hall. They have not turned the corner that she already has her phone in her hand, furiously typing.

Abigail holds onto Will Graham’s arm tightly as he guides her to one of the benches of the garden, Dr. Lecter following them close behind. She has been in that hospital bed for so long, she feels like a toddler. Her legs can barely support her weight, they will not move as fast as she wants them to move. Her body will not do what she tells it to do. It is frustrating. She already feels bad enough, she does not need to feel betrayed by her own body.

She gingerly turns around to sit on the bench. Her legs almost give out under her when she lowers herself. Her grips on Will’s arm is so tight her own arm is shaking with the strain. Her body just won’t move right. She refrains from worrying her bottom lip in frustration. As soon as she is seated she lets go of Will’s arm, clasps her hands on her lap and keeps her eyes on them. Will sits down next to her while Dr. Lecter stands close to him.
“How do you feel?” Will asks in a soft voice. He is being so careful around her, physically, emotionally, handling her like fine china. This is not what she needs, but she plays along anyway. In her situation she can’t be picky about the people willing to help her. For each one, there is a dozen others who would rather see her gone.

“Alone,” she says. A hint of fear slips into her voice, making it tremble ever so slightly. “I’m going to be messed up aren’t I? I’m worried about nightmares.”

“We’ll help you with the nightmares,” Dr. Lecter says, his tone less careful than Will’s. More clinical. This is surprising. Dr. Bloom had been sympathetic and benevolent with her, she thought Dr. Lecter would be the same.

“Can you? That woman from earlier, she said you were insane.”

“Do you believe her?” Will does not sound upset, only curious about her answer. You would think anyone would feel at least annoyed when someone badmouths them.

“I believe what I see.”

“And what did you see?” Dr. Lecter asks, making her look up at him, only to promptly lower her gaze to her hands again. She does not like their eyes. Both Will’s and Dr. Lecter’s. They are too piercing, too searching. It does not feel safe, to have anyone see you so clearly. It feels like a violation of sorts. Trespassing. Stealing secrets. Ransacking a person’s most sacred place. Some things are kept locked in a mind for a reason, and they would be better taken to the grave.

Abigail swallows the lump of fear in her throat, gathers all her bravado to keep her rancorous, grief stricken expression in place. “I saw you kill my dad.”

“Does that make me insane?”

“It doesn’t make you good,” she says dryly, glancing at him, her eyebrows raised in an unimpressed arch. Will does not react to her words, as though he expected them. But out of the corner of her eyes, she sees Dr. Lecter tilt his head at her blunt answer and tone. There is curiosity in those eyes. An alarming kind of curiosity. She hesitates, licks her lips, before soldiering on anyway. “There is a reason society condemns killing so much. Even if you have to do it.”

“Society finds beauty in life,” Will answers calmly, softly. Nothing throws him off it seems. It does nothing to help her frustration. “And by association, taking it away is the ugliest thing people could possibly conceive.”

A solid layer of disappointment takes form under the grief and vulnerability she allowed her eyes to show. She refrains from clicking her tongue, settling for lowering her gaze to her hands again, closing off on herself so they do not notice the change. Will tilts his head to try and catch her eyes again, and she turns her head away from him. She can’t help the anger slipping into her voice alongside her resignation. “And what does that make me, as the daughter of a killer?”

“You said he was loving, and I believe you. There was plenty of horror in him, but you brought out the most beautiful part of him.”

That startles her, and she chances a glance at him. His voice is laden with emotion, and so are his eyes. There is an—not exactly wistful—intimate quality to his answer. Her eyes are drawn to Dr. Lecter as he takes a step closer to Will, a peculiar kind of longing passing over his eyes. Something dear and familiar. Something treasured. Abigail furrows her brow, a question burning in the back of her mind, but wariness holds back her tongue.
“I know you want to ask, so let’s make a deal,” Will continues, before she can decide whether she should ask. “Quid pro quo. An honest answer for another. You can go first, ask away.”

Abigail does worry her bottom lip this time, wringing her hands nervously. She really does not like being read so easily. And she can’t help but be suspicious of his offer. This is a very generous offer. One that could easily backfire, for any of them. There is also no guaranty of him actually being honest. After a moment of debating with herself, she decides to give it a try anyway. Nothing compels her to be honest after all.

“How did you feel when you killed my dad?”

“Powerful.”

She starts and her eyes snap up to finally meet Will’s eyes. No hesitation. No wavering. The answer blows away the layer of disappointment. She does not know whether she should feel scared for the honesty of his answer, or the relief that blooms inside of her. And before she can stop it, the relief slowly, dangerously morphs into wonder.

“Quid pro quo,” Dr. Lecter reminds her. “Did your father tell you about the young women he killed?”

She hesitates a second too long.

“You don’t have to answer now,” Will says, his voice still soft and soothing, “but when you do, I’d like you to be honest with us.”

Freddie drums her fingers on her purse, leaning on Hannibal Lecter’s Bentley. A couple nurses pass by her and she nods at them politely. Better get on the staff’s good side if she is going to come back more often. Courtesy gets you everywhere and everything.

She takes a look at her phone, checking the time. They have been in the hospital for a while now. She wonders what they could be talking about with Abigail. Although she does not worry too much about them influencing her. Abigail is young but she is clever. And wary. She will not trust the man who killed her father so easily.

Freddie will have to come back later to give Abigail her business card, since Will Graham stole the one she had prepared.

After a few more minutes, she straightens up when she sees him and Hannibal Lecter approach the Bentley. She plasters a charming smile on her face and steps forward, extending a hand to offer a handshake to Graham. “I’m Freddie Lounds. I believe we’ve never been formally introduced, Special Agent Graham. Or is it Graham-Lecter?”

Graham ignores her hand. “I think you mean Not-Really-An-Agent Graham,” he says, raising an eyebrow. He sounds more annoyed than angry. Freddie is kind of vexed that she did not garner a stronger response. Oh well, it might be for the best.

Seeing that Graham does not take her hand, Lecter steps closer to return her handshake instead of his spouse, his own charming smile in place. “Miss Lounds. We have never been introduced either.”
“Dr. Lecter. Pleasure to meet you.” He seems more concerned about etiquette than his wall of a husband. Maybe Freddie could get answers out of him if Graham does not cooperate. “I read your paper. ‘Evolutionary Origins of Social Exclusion’. It was very enlightening.”

“And I read your article. ‘Takes One to Know One’. Very enlightening as well.” The charming smile has not moved, but it now has a sharp quality to it. It is not exactly a threat, but it is certainly not welcoming.

Slandering someone is not the best way to get on with their spouse, indeed. She will need to allay them before hoping to gain anything from them. She coyly inclines her head, softens her voice, donning her best remorseful demeanour. “Please. Let me apologise for my words regarding your husband. They were hurtful and misguided.”

“Too bad apologies can’t erase words,” Graham quips up.

Giving them a false sense of power does not work with them. Noted. Change of strategy. “You and I have our reasons for being here but I think we both have Abigail Hobbs’ best interests at heart.”

“Telling her I’m insane seems a little counter productive.”

Lecter places a hand on the small of Graham’s back. So close to each other, it is even more obvious how mismatched a pair they make. Appearance, tone, mannerism. Nothing matches.

“It seems we’ve started off on the wrong foot,” Lecter says. His arm moves across Graham’s back to hold onto his upper arm and gently pull him closer to tuck him into his side. “Why don’t we try again? We’d love to have you over for dinner.”

“No we don’t,” Graham immediately objects, although he does not move away from his spouse.

Freddie offers a small smile. She takes the victories as they come, however small they are. But she does not want to seem too eager. “Despite my reputation, I’m not so easily swayed by bribery,” she says, trying for a teasing tone.

“No bribery involved, I assure you,” Lecter says in a similar tone, while Graham ostensibly rolls his eyes. Another victory for her. Maybe she will manage to get something from them after all. “Why not invite Abigail too? So we can work everything out together.”

She manages to stop the twitch of her eyebrow, but not quite the surprised tilt of her head. Lecter is very agreeable. Maybe a little too agreeable. They had the upper hand when they invited her alone, but involving Abigail is practically shooting themselves in the foot, giving her the lead instead. Deliberately. Years as a journalist taught her to be wary of too cooperative people.

But they also taught her that nothing ventured, nothing gained. “I see no reason to refuse then,” she says, easily sliding a delighted smile on her face. “Which house should I go to?”

“We’ll send you an invitation with all the specifics.”

“Since we already have your business card.”

“Are you still upset?” Hannibal asks, his voice quiet over the rumbling of the Bentley and the soft
classical music playing in the background.

Will keeps his gaze resolutely fixed on the trees through the passenger window. “What do you think?”

“I think it would be amply justified.”

Will releases a long, tired sigh. He rubs a hand over his face. “Playing nice with her won’t stop her from posting whatever dirt she can find—or make up—on me.” He puts his elbow on the windowsill and leans his head on his hand. He can already feel the headache dawning. They have been more and more frequent recently.

“There is no ‘dirt’ on you for her to find,” Hannibal says, his thumb occasionally tapping on the crown of the steering wheel.

Of course there is not any. They made sure of it.

Will looks side ways at Hannibal’s hands. Large, strong, calloused, the veins prominent. Scarred. Will loves his hands. They wear the marks of craftsmanship, of experience and mastery. Hours spent in the kitchen, the inevitable cuts and burns you get day after day at the stove. Years of saving lives in the ER, hands deep into barely alive bodies. A lifetime of hunting, first alone, then with him.

When Hannibal glances at him, Will promptly looks away, back at the scenery zooming past his eyes. The mix of light browns and muted blues are like a balm to the buzz in his head.

“What’s on your mind?”

Will shrugs. “Nothing much.”

“You don’t look any better than earlier. If anything you look paler still.”

“Yeah, fall isn’t exactly the best time of the year for a sunbath,” he says, keeping his voice light and casual, to hide the mounting headache pounding his skull. He closes his eyes and focuses on the soft rumbling of the engine, the quiet notes coming from the radio, the warm air coming from the heater, the coldness of the window a few centimetres from his forehead.

“You told Abigail you felt powerful killing her father.”

“I know what I said.”

Hannibal pauses, considering his next words. Will can practically hear the gears turning in his head.

“I thought you didn’t want to involve her any more than she already is.”

Will bites his lower lip. Yes, he did not want to. But he could not bear that layer of disappointment in her eyes. He talked without thinking. When he is about to answer, a spark of pain shoots through his brain, like lightning through a fog, bringing with it a wave of nausea. He squeezes his eyes shut, inhales and exhales through his nose slowly, until the pain recedes enough for him to talk. “Pull over,” he says, his voice tight and quiet.

Without asking any question, Hannibal pulls over on the side of the road. Once they are safely parked away from the road, he turns off the engine.
Will unbuckles his seat belt, but does not get out of the car. He reaches inside his pant pocket for his bottle of aspirin, ignoring Hannibal’s disapproving look. He pops three pills into his mouth, swallowing them dry. He puts the bottle back inside his pocket, and leans his head against the window, waiting for the effects of the medication to kick in, breathing deeply, slowly. He sighs at the cool glass soothing the storm in his head.

For several long minutes, he does not say anything, and Hannibal does not ask anything either. He closes his eyes, counts his breaths until the headache and the nausea recede. Minutes pass by slowly. Or maybe it is hours? Will does not know.

When he opens his eyes again, he does not dare look at his wrist watch, not wanting to know how long he made Hannibal wait in silence for him. Will feels his gaze on him, but he keeps his eyes resolutely fixed on his own reflection on the window. He looks… tired, faded, hollowed out. The last few weeks really took a toll on him. It has been too long since he has had a restful night of sleep.

His eyes stray to the console between them. Pristine. Not a single nick. It is like it has never been used. Hannibal takes utmost care of everything he owns. He starts when Hannibal places a hand on his thigh, slowly stroking his leg.

“I’m here,” Hannibal says softly.

Will licks his lips, dry and chapped. Sandpaper. “When I was at Eldon Stammets’ mushroom garden, I saw Garret Jacob Hobbs lying in someone else’s grave,” he says, because he needs to work that one out of his head, and so far his attempts at doing it on his own have all ended miserably. He lifts a hand and runs his fingers over the numbers of the gear stick. Maybe the nicks are too thin to be visible.

“A hallucination?”

Will nods. There are no nicks on the gear stick. Visible of otherwise.

“You didn’t tell Jack.”

“Of course not.” Jack would only make things worse. “The board would take me off the field. Again.”

“It may be for the best. This hallucination was most likely caused by stress. Taking some time off might help.”

Will mulls over this a moment. He does not want to be taken out of the game so early. They have only just started. He strokes the gear stick with his thumb. It should not look so pristine. He folds his thumb, running his nail over the numbers. Hannibal’s hand lands on his, entrapping it against the stick, holding his hand tightly to prevent any damage. Will looks down at their hands on the gear stick, wriggles his own experimentally but Hannibal does not move, his grip only tightening until Will’s hand cannot move anymore. It does not hurt. The touch is warm and familiar. Will loves his hands.

Will turns his gaze back in front of himself, at the road and the trees and the soothing blend of blues and browns. “My dreams are still haunted by the ghost of Garrett Jacob Hobbs,” he starts slowly. “I see myself pulling the trigger. Over and over. I see Hobbs falling to the ground, barely holding on to life. I bask in the euphoria, dizzy with power.” The hold on his hand loosens. He does not try to extricate it from under Hannibal’s. “But it doesn’t last. When I wake up, all that is left is nausea, stuck in the back of my throat.”
“Was it what happened the other night?”

Will turns his head away from him. He does not feel ready to tell him what he really dreamed about that night.

When he does not answer, Hannibal moves his hand slightly over his, so he can run his thumb over Will’s knuckles, in a soothing gesture. “It takes a certain kind of courage,” he says, his voice soft and reassuring, “to see past what society deems horrendous, and find the beauty lying beyond.”

“I know,” Will says in a breath, quiet, intimate, vulnerable. A secret for the two of them. Maybe an unconscious request for comfort. A shiver runs down his spine and he moves his head away from the cold window, sitting up straighter. He does not know how much time has passed but the air in the car is considerably colder. Hannibal’s hand is so warm over his own. Will loves his hands. He takes another steadying breath. “Sorry. Headache passed. We can go now.”

Hannibal does not move away, keeping his hand over Will’s and rubbing small circles over his knuckles for several long minutes. Then he leans towards him and Will turns his head, closing his eyes when Hannibal leaves a quick peck and a spark of warmth on his lips.

Then Hannibal dips his head to take a quiet sniff near Will’s collar. He lift his head and pokes the sensitive skin under Will’s ear with the tip of his nose, inhaling softly. Will tilt his chin up a little to give him better access, inviting him closer, revelling in each warm puff of breath on his skin. He has come to love his husband’s little antics, no matter how odd they are.

Hannibal places a hand under Will’s jaw and turns his head so they can face each other. He brings their foreheads together.

“What do I smell like?” Will asks, out of habit more than anything.

“Fever. Sweet and faint.”

“Yeah? No wonder I have a headache.” Also explains the tiredness, nausea and chills.

Will’s phone rings, startling them both.

Will fishes his phone out of his jacket. “Jack,” he says, looking at the caller ID. He probably wants to yell at him again for whatever reason. Will is not in the mood for his bullshit. He mutes his phone and puts it back in his pocket, lets Jack call him again and again and yell at his voicemail to his heart’s content.

Hannibal starts the engine again, turning on the heat enough so Will stops shivering. “Jack can wait, we are going home. I want you to rest.”

Will wants to protest—he still has a mountain of work to do—but this actually sounds like a great idea right now.
“Taking Abigail out of a controlled environment would be reckless. You take her home, she may experience intense emotions, respond aggressively. Or reenact some aspect of the traumatic event without realising it.”

Jack frowns. This is not what he wanted to hear. He can’t work with that. “Dr. Lecter?”

Dr. Lecter mulls over this a moment. “Dr. Bloom is right,” he eventually says, looking at her. “But there is a scenario where revisiting the trauma event could help Abigail heal and actually prevent denial.”

Jack notices Alana shaking her head and rolling her eyes at Dr. Lecter’s words.

He manages to hold back a pleased smile. Two different opinions, he will chose the one that best serves his agenda. Not that the both of them being against him would have stopped him. He just would have had to find someone who agrees with him.

“Will killed her father to save her life,” Alana soldiers on, her tone getting more pressing with each word. “If she sees Will as her saviour and he doesn’t meet her expectations, she could transfer rage toward her father onto him.”

Jack appreciate people who hold their grounds. When they have the same opinion as him. “He’ll deal with it,” he tells her, cutting short her argumentation. He knows Alana and Will have been close for a long time, so her concern might be more out of consideration for a friend than a completely professional opinion. “Where is he?”

“Resting,” Dr. Lecter says. “He wasn’t feeling well.”

Jack raises an eyebrow. That does not answer his question. “Where is he?”

“He is resting.”

Alana turns to Dr. Lecter, a slight frown marring her face. “Something happened? Is he all right?”

“The last few weeks have been stressful for him. It seems he hasn’t slept properly for a while now.”

“Is he going to be okay?”

“He’ll be fine,” Dr. Lecter reassures her, before looking back at Jack. “But he needs to rest,” he says, his tone more insistent, putting emphasis on the word ‘rest’. Jack does not like that tone one
bit. It seems Dr. Lecter’s opinion is not going to be as useful to him as he thought.

“You aren’t taking Abigail back to Minnesota without him.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait until he is feeling better.”

Jack’s eyebrow twitches. He straightens up in his chair, claps his hands over his desk and gives Dr. Lecter a long, level look. “Dr. Lecter, I appreciate your concern for Will,” he says slowly, enunciating each word carefully, “but I have seven families waiting to know what happened to their daughters.”

“And I appreciate your dedication to your job, Agent Crawford,” Dr. Lecter shoots back, “but Will is in no condition to properly conduct an investigation right now. I doubt you’d tolerate a job half done.”

All right, enough with the diplomacy. “Where is he?” he demands. If he has to go and drag Will out of his house, he will. This is the FBI, not a charity. Jack working his ass off by himself is not going to land any criminal behind bars. He needs his agents to follow. So unless Will is out cold in a hospital bed, there is no reason he could not do his job.

“He is resting,” Dr. Lecter repeats calmly.

Jack clicks his tongue. He is seriously reconsidering involving Dr. Lecter in this case. His insight is certainly helpful, but his protectiveness over Will is going to hinder their work more than anything. He whips his phone out of his pocket, punches in Will’s number. After a few rings, Jack is redirected to a voicemail. He curses under his breath, and calls again before the greeting reaches its end.

Dr. Lecter reclines in his seat, crossing his legs and clasping his hands over his lap. “He is not going to answer.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“Because he is resting.”

“He’ll have to save his rest for later, because I need him now.” Voicemail again. He calls again.

“Will’s mind is his sharpest tool, one that should be handled with care,” Dr. Lecter says slowly, as though explaining a difficult concept to a child. Jack really does not like his tone at all. “You don’t want to break him now. Allow him some rest.”

At soon as the voicemail greeting starts, Jack disconnects and shoves his phone back into his pocket. He clasps his hands over the desk again, and adopts the same tone as Dr. Lecter. “Will isn’t some glass figure, Dr. Lecter. He has worked in Homicide before. This isn’t anything new to him.”

“Jack, please,” Alana says dryly. “Hannibal is right. You might think of Will’s empathy as a gift and a valuable tool in your investigations, but it is putting a strain on him. You push too far, he’ll draw back. You’re going to alienate him from yourself, and lose an agent in the process.”

“Just give him a few days,” Dr. Lecter adds. “Enough to make sure it isn’t anything serious.”

Jack releases a long, annoyed sighs. He pins Dr. Lecter with a scathing look, but the doctor is not backing down so easily, sending back a steadfast glare of his own. After a long, uncomfortable minute of staring, Jack decides to relent. He will not get anything done if he wastes all his time
arguing with a wall. And he doubts starting to yell at Dr. Lecter would make him comply. He is not as docile as Will or any of his agents, since he is a consultant.

“A few days,” Jack hisses between his teeth. He will have to keep an eye on Will and Dr. Lecter’s relationship. Their friendship might not come in as handy as he thought it would.

Hannibal sits on the edge of the bed slowly so as not to disturb Will’s sleeping form. He is once again wrapped up in a mountain of blankets on Hannibal’s side of the bed, his face buried in his pillow.

Hannibal pulls on the blankets until they slip off Will’s head, and down his shoulders. He leans down to leave a trail of kisses on the warm skin of his nape, above the collar of his shirt. Will stirs when he kisses the shell of his ear. Will breathes in deeply and exhales a content sigh, although he stays on his front and keeps his eyes closed.

“You’re home early,” Will says, his voice hoarse and quiet with sleep. “I thought Jack would keep you longer.”

Hannibal buries his noise in the soft strands of hair behind his ear, inhaling softly. Will always smells divine after waking up. Although the last remnants of fever mar his natural scent. It seems the medication he gave him before leaving could not completely rid him of the fever, but at least Will looks less tired. “Since you weren’t there, Jack didn’t have anybody to yell at.”

“Oh, right. His weird respect for psychiatrists.” Will chuckles, his smile making his ears wiggle slightly.

Hannibal takes one of those lovely ears between in teeth, nibbling on it gently. Will jolts with a squeak and finally turns on his back. He wraps his arms around Hannibal’s neck and pulls him down, pressing his boyish grin to Hannibal’s mouth in a chaste kiss. Will’s lips are dry against Hannibal’s and he can’t help but give them a quick lick before they part.

“How do you feel?” he asks, moving down to nibble on Will’s jaw, slowly drifting to the underside of his chin and the tender skin of his neck.

Will tilts his head back, running his hands over Hannibal’s shoulders in slow lines. “Better.”

“Do you think you could stomach a light dinner?”

“A really light dinner then. One course, no starter, no dessert. Think you could achieve that feat?”

“You’re asking a lot of me, darling Will, but I’ll try my best.”

Will’s hands run up Hannibal’s neck until he can tangle his fingers in his carefully combed hair and muss it up. Hannibal takes hold of one of his hands and bring it to his mouth to pepper careful, lingering kisses to the bruises on Will’s wrist in a silent apology. Something he has been doing repeatedly since he put these bruises there. He is not usually as sorry for marking Will, but these particular marks are an ugly reminder of something he can certainly not think of fondly.

“Don’t worry, it doesn’t hurt. They are almost faded anyway,” Will says, pulling him in again for another kiss. “So? What did Jack want?”
“Just what you expected. He wants Abigail back in Minnesota. And he wants you to go with her.”

Will shrugs. “Figured. What did you say?”

“That you were indisposed for now, and that he’ll have to wait until you get better. Jack wasn’t pleased.”

Will chuckles. “He doesn’t like when he isn’t given everything he wants the instant he wants it.” He reaches for the lapels of Hannibal’s jacket and pushes them off his shoulders.

Hannibal slips it completely off himself and places it on the other side of the bed. He eases off the knot of his tie while Will starts to lazily undo the buttons of his waistcoat. “It seems the FBI values bullheadedness more than perspicacity.”

“A monstrous amount of bullheadedness can certainly make up for a lack of perspicacity.”

“Not in his chase of the Chesapeake Ripper I’m afraid,” Hannibal says, a smirk gracing his lips. It has been decades already and Jack has not made any progress on his hunt of the Chesapeake Ripper, despite his obstinacy bordering on obsession and all the hounds he gathered. Hannibal throws his tie next to his jacket and helps Will undo the last buttons of his waistcoat. “He’s giving you a few days of respite before we’re taking Abigail back to Minnesota. Although, by ‘a few’ I think he means no more than one before he drags you back into the lab.”

“Two if he’s feeling magnanimous.”

“I want you to get a CT scan in the meantime. Just to make sure there isn’t any bleeding or stroke in your brain. And I think a preventive plan would be good if your headaches are getting more frequent.” The waistcoat joins the jacket and the tie on Will’s side of the bed.

Will winces as he runs his palms on Hannibal’s chest, over the soft fabric of his dress shirt. “More medication?”

“And a few changes in your lifestyle maybe.” He will have to make sure Will stops depriving himself of sleep. That may include butting heads with Jack more often to prevent him from pushing Will beyond his breaking point. He can’t say he blames Jack for being dedicated to his job, but when it comes to Will’s health, Hannibal is not making any concession.

Will grabs Hannibal’s arms and pulls him down. Hannibal goes pliantly, lowering himself over Will, tucking his head against Will’s neck, and slipping his arms between his back and the mattress while Will’s hands find their way back into his hair.

“You’re not thinking of putting up a diet plan for me, are you?”

“I think we’ll have to readjust your diet, sooner or later. Maybe start with the coffee.”

Will clicks his tongue. “Oh no, Hannibal, you’re not forbidding coffee. I need my daily dose of caffeine to function as a human being. Besides, caffeine withdrawal would only worsen the headaches.”

“Cutting out coffee altogether would be ill-advised, indeed. I’m only suggesting reducing your daily consumption.”

“If I have to cut down on coffee, alcohol is getting the same treatment. Which means no more wine with your fancy dinners.”
It is Hannibal’s turn to wince. Well, he can’t say he did not see that one coming. “Very well. No more wine for dinner.” He props himself up on his elbows, and looks down at Will’s mischievous smile. “You ask so much of me, my dear,” he says, leaning down for another kiss.

Will grins at him when they part. “How do you even put up with me?”

“How, I wonder.”

Franklyn twiddles his thumbs nervously. Clockwise, counter clockwise, clockwise, counter clockwise, clockwise.

He crosses his legs at the ankle, finds it uncomfortable, crosses them at the knee, finds it even more uncomfortable, crosses them at the ankle again, and gives up altogether and uncrosses them. The temperature in the room seems both too high and too low. He feels simultaneously like taking off his jacket, and rubbing his arms to warm them up.

He leans forward, his elbows on his knees, and runs his hands in his hair, combing it back. They feel so much softer since he changed his hair products. The ones he got almost gives the same effect as Dr. Lecter’s. Although he would love to find out exactly what brand he uses. He inhales deeply, and lets out all the air in a breath, and instantly berates himself for his ungentlemanly behaviour.

He sits up straighter, smooths down his shirt, picks up non-existent lint off his jacket, and straightens his tie. He takes a steadying breath and reclines in his seat. Once he is certain that his appearance is once again impeccable, he looks down at his watch. And promptly starts panicking again.

Seven minutes. Dr. Lecter is seven minutes late. This is not normal.

He realises he is nibbling on his bottom lip, and immediately stops. He knows he did not get the time wrong, it has always been the same hour for every single one of his sessions. Maybe he got the date wrong. He looks at his watch again, and the tiny number in the square over the six informs him that no, he did not get the date wrong either.

When his leg starts jumping on its own, Franklyn stands up and walks to the window, his hands clasped behind his back. He makes a slow circle in the room, his eyes roaming the paintings and sketches attached to the wall. They are really tasteful pieces. Dr. Lecter truly has exquisite tastes. He wonders if he could get replicas of those.

Then he walks to the window, slips his fingers between the slats of the jalousie to peek outside. Dr. Lecter’s Bentley is right there, parked where it always is, immaculate as though it was never used. If Dr. Lecter is indeed not in his office, he could not have gone too far without his car. But the entrance of the building was not locked. Franklyn doubts he would have forgotten to lock the office if he left.

He looks at his watch again. Eight minutes.

Franklyn swallows the lump of nervousness that is starting to form in his throat. He goes back to his seat, looking down at the expensive leather of the chair, shifting from foot to foot. He turns on his feet to look at the door. Maybe he could try and listen if Dr. Lecter is actually in the office.
Oh god, no. This is not becoming of a gentleman. If he wants to know whether someone is in, it is more proper to knock. He is going to do just that.

Franklyn marches up to the door, straightens his tie again, and lifts a hand. And does not knock. It would be rude to interrupt a session. Maybe the person that came before him is having a particularly difficult day and needs more time. A real gentleman has to be considerate and respectful of other people’s suffering. He lowers his hand and goes back to the window. The Bentley has not moved.

He looks at his watch. Nine minutes.

Okay. That’s too much. He can’t take it anymore. Screw being a gentleman.

Franklyn walks to the door again and knocks. Three confident raps. He only has to wait a few seconds before the handle moves. So Dr. Lecter is actually inside after all. Franklyn plasters a smile on his face as the door swings open, and promptly drops it when it reveals someone that is not Dr. Lecter.

“Who are you?” he blurts out before he can think.

The man that opened the door looks just as surprised as him, one eyebrow raised inquisitively. They stare each other up and down for a solid minute. The man looks unrefined and scruffy, his hair unkempt and his flannel shirt worn. He has a big envelope under his arm, stamped with the logo of one of the most expensive private clinics of the city. The kind of medical care a person of his apparent social standing could hardly afford. The kind of medical care a person of Dr. Lecter’s social standing could afford.

As though summoned by his thought, Dr. Lecter appears at the man’s side. “Franklyn. I’m sorry for making you wait. I was about to call you.”

Franklyn scrambles for words. “Oh, uh—No, don’t worry. I should be the one apologising for interrupting your session.”

The man’s eyes jump from him to Dr. Lecter, and to him again. “When was your appointment?”

Franklyn looks down at his watch again. “Ten minutes ago.”

“Would it be okay if it ended fifteen minutes after the usual time?”

“What? Is there a—”

“Thank you.”

And the door closes on his face.

“No booze I’m afraid, young lady.”

Abigail smiles as she takes the mug of tea Will hands her. “I think I’ll survive.” The mug is fuming, warming her hands. It smells of ginger and lemon, nothing like the free stuff she found in her room.
Will sits down in front of her with his own mug.

Abigail brings her own to her lips to take a tiny sip and is pleased to also find honey in it, among other things that she can’t put a name on.

“Jack Crawford wants us to take you to the cabin tomorrow,” Will says.

“What does he want from me?”

“He thinks you helped your father kill all those girls.”

Abigail reels back, almost dropping her mug and pouring scalding water over herself. She reins herself in before panic can settle in, and carefully places it back on the table, rubbing her hands over her legs briefly before wrapping them around her mug again. She expected that answer, but it is still a shock to hear it said out loud, and so frankly too. She would have expected anyone to sugar coat it, at the very least.

“The news might be right to blame me,” she says. “However you look at it, I’m still the reason why all those girls died.” She lets all the grief she can muster show on her face, tilting her head down enough to look dejected but not enough to completely hide her face. “It’s never going to stop now, is it? A permanent smear on my name that I’ll drag everywhere I go.”

“People are fickle minded. The attention will die down, eventually. They’ll find something else to be outraged about.”

“But until then, you’ll have to hang on,” Dr. Lecter says, coming back from whatever he was doing on the other side of the room. Abigail almost forgot he was here. He looks less imposing without his jacket and with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, more approachable. It was odd to find him in Will’s room when she came knocking. But she guesses they must be used to late night talks and each other’s company. They already seemed pretty close the first time they came to see her at the hospital.

She nods, and takes a sip of her tea, using it to ground herself. “It was good to see Marissa today.”

“Was it?”

“She told me she doesn’t believe what the news say.”

Since there are only two chairs in the room, Dr. Lecter goes to sit on the windowsill just behind Will. She carefully does not raise her eyebrows when he grazes a hand over the line of Will’s shoulders on his way. Will does not react at all, seemingly familiar with the touch.

“She still believes in the best of you after the rest of the world has let you down,” Dr. Lecter says as he lowers himself on the windowsill. “Don’t we all need someone like that?”

“She believes in the best of me, because it is all she has ever seen,” she mutters into her mug.

Will brings his mug to his mouth, taking a slow sip, while his eyes seem to search for something inside her. “You don’t think of her as a friend.”

Abigail looks away. Her eyes land on the single bed, and Will’s two small duffel bags at its foot. Seems like quite a lot for just one night. She taps her fingers on her mug, to have something to do with her hands. It is true that she has never been able to see Marissa as a friend or a confidant, no matter how open Marissa was with her, and how hard she tried to understand her. Abigail has just never wanted her to understand. After all, she had condemned Marissa the moment she met her.
Hard to be honest to someone you chose as a sacrifice.

“I’d rather not see her again, after I get out of the hospital.”

Out of the corner of her eyes, she notices Will tilting his head, trying to catch her gaze. “Marissa Schurr. Nineteen. Wind chaffed. Auburn hair. Same height and same weight as you.”

“I know,” she says softly, her eyes now fixed on the lamp on the night stand, the only source of light in the room. The soft light combined with the comfortable warmth gives the room a cosy, safe feeling. Maybe that is why it feels so easy for her to say, “She could have been another victim of my dad.”

“She would have been, indeed,” Dr. Lecter says.

Abigail brings her cup to her mouth, closes her lips around the rim, taking the smallest of sips. She likes the feel of the warm tea against her upper lip more than she likes drinking it. She finds it relaxing. Although she is used to getting unwanted remarks for that habit. But neither Will nor Dr. Lecter comments on it, so she indulges herself until the knot in her stomach eases off. After a moment she places the mug back on the table.

“I want to leave. I’ll sell the house, and use the money to pay for college.” She knows she can’t stay in Minnesota. No college would ever accept her here. If she could, she would move out of the country altogether, but she doubts she would have enough money left afterwards to pay for any kind of accommodation. A part time job during her studies would help her greatly.

“With all the wrongful death lawsuits, I doubt you’ll have much money left to move out,” Will says softly.

Abigail already thought of that. “Freddie Lounds told me she would help me publish a book,” she says, finally looking back at Will, “on what happened to me. I could use that money.”

Dr. Lecter and Will exchange a look at the mention of Freddie Lounds. She can’t decipher anything on Dr. Lecter’s face, but Will is very obviously unhappy about the book thing.

“A book about you would also be about us,” he says slowly.

“I can make it so you appear in a good light. You did save my life after all.”

Will raises a sceptical eyebrow. “Nothing from Freddie Lounds would ever make me appear in a good light.”

“We don’t want to attract any attention to ourselves,” Dr. Lecter says. “Be it good or bad.”

“Something to hide?”

“Something terrible,” Will says with an ominous voice, although his mischievous smile ruins the effect.

She could make a joke about a body in the closet, but given the circumstances, this does not seem like a good idea. So she goes for a teasing, “You guys are having an affair or something?”

Dr. Lecter winks at her and she involuntarily puffs out a laugh, promptly hiding it behind her mug.
Jack stays a few metres away from Will and Dr. Lecter as they both examine the body of Marissa Schurr mounted on the antlers. Will is pointing a flash light in the girl’s mouth, muttering something about foreign tissues and trace amounts of blood.

They take Abigail back in Minnesota to find out whether she was involved in her father’s murders, and a new girl dies. “Where was Abigail when this girl was murdered?” Jack says.

“She was with me,” Will says, carefully pushing the girl’s hair away from her face. “She couldn’t sleep last night so she came to my room to talk. Fell asleep around two in the morning.”

So Abigail Hobbs could not have murdered this girl. It does not mean she was not involved in the murders of the other ones. “So we’re looking for another killer.”

“Someone that was inspired by Garrett Jacob Hobbs. A copycat of sorts,” Will lowers the girl’s head again and switches off his flash light. He takes a step back to face Jack, almost bumping into Dr. Lecter.

“A copycat,” Jack repeats, stepping closer to them.

“An intelligent psychopath. No traceable motive, no pattern. He may have been inspired by Hobbs for this murder, but he may never kill this way again,” he says gesturing at the body of Marissa Schurr. “He will be much harder to catch.”

“And Abigail could be his next target,” Dr. Lecter says.

Jack releases a long, tired sigh. “I think it is time Abigail left home permanently,” he says slowly. “Pack up whatever she needs to pack up and get her out of Minnesota.”

Will nods and they both go back to the stairs to leave the cabin, leaving him alone with the body of yet another person he could not save.

Abigail holds the pillow to her chest, her body raked by quiet sobs. The devastated cries of Marissa’s mother are still ringing in his ears.

None of this should have happened. This should not be her life. This is all her father’s fault.

She should have killed him.

Rage joins her grief, bringing in another wave of angry tears. She hugs the pillow tighter. It smells of home. The smell brings both comfort and resentment. A handmade pillow, with a deer she embroidered across the fabric herself. How much she loved those pillows. How proud she used to be of everything in their home. Everything, they made themselves, nothing ever went to waste.

None of her is gonna go to waste.

Horror dawns on her. She reaches for the boxes on the table, flings open the one closest to her. She shoves it away when she sees a gun inside, and reaches for another. This one has her hunting knife. This knife too, they made themselves, carved the hilt out of leg bone. Human leg bone.
She should have killed him.

She cuts one of the threads holding the seams of the pillow together, and throws the knife on the couch beside her. Her hands gnarl as she pulls at the fabric until the seams give enough for her to slip her hand inside. Her hand trembles as she pulls out the first wad of hair, a broken cry tearing itself from her throat. Wads and wads and wads of hair come out. Human hair, as dark as hers. Her breath quickens with each handful of hair she pulls out. She almost can’t hear own choked cries over the sound of the blood pounding in her ears. These are all the girls that were sacrificed for her. They lived with her, they were everywhere in her house. Their flesh was in her mouth.

She should have killed him.

A large, heavy hand lands on her shoulder, startling her. She whips around, knife in hand.

The knife tears through flesh, and blood sprays all over her hands.

Alana hauls up another bag in the trunk of the car, and steps aside to let Hannibal squeezes the last two bags in whatever empty spot he can fit them in. Abigail does have quite a lot of stuff she wants to take with herself. Alana would have thought that she would not want to keep anything that reminded her of this house. Everything she takes will be a reminder of the tragedy that occurred here after all.

But since Abigail is quite practical, she is probably going to sell everything she can save from the house.

The crowd near the police line parts to make way for another car.

Jack steps out the moment it is parked behind their own car. “Where is Will?” he says, marching up to them.

“He went back ahead with Abigail,” she informs him as Hannibal closes the trunk.

“And why is that?”

“She was feeling unwell amidst all those reporters shouting at her,” Hannibal says.

Understatement of the century. Abigail had looked paler than death when they joined her in the house after battling off the line of journalists. Not surprising, considering the obnoxious questions they were hurling at her.

Jack curses under his breath, not looking pleased about it. Just as the woman who was driving closes the door, he gestures at her to get back inside, as he himself flings the passenger door open. Alana sends the police officer a sympathetic look when she looks back at them confusedly.

The crowd parts again and the car leaves as abruptly as it came.
Will hops up on the counter near the sink of their en-suite bathroom as Hannibal gathers all the supplies he needs to change the dressing of his wound.

He winces as Hannibal carefully removes the bandages he wrapped over the gash on the palm of his left hand. It does not look pretty. Thankfully, it was not serious enough to require stitches. Grabbing the blade of a knife with one’s bare hands is not exactly the best way to save oneself from being stabbed, but well, it gets the job done. Will is just glad he did not lose any finger in the process.

“This one will be hard to hide,” he says, as Hannibal unwraps the last of his bandages and throws it over the little heap of bloody gauze he made near the sink.

“I’ll make sure it doesn’t scar.”

“Don’t like it when people other than you leave marks on me?” Will says, a teasing smile on his lips.

“You left enough marks of your own on my skin,” Hannibal retorts, cleaning the wound with saline.

Will chuckles. “Nothing as drastic as the smile you carved on my stomach.” He brings his right hand to his stomach, rubbing the scar with his thumb. He can’t actually feel it under his clothes, but he does not have to look to know exactly where it lies. He used to hate that smile years ago, a constant reminder of how foolish they were, and how deeply they hurt each other. Now he thinks of it fondly. They survived each other, they can survive anything.

“Hopefully, we’ll never have to mark each other that way again.”

“Well, it’s almost been a decade without killing attempts. Is it safe to assume we’re good?”

Hannibal leans in to peck the grin on Will’s mouth. “Don’t you jinx us now, beloved,” he whispers against his lips. He goes back to changing the bandages on Will’s hand, applying antibiotic ointment on the wound before wrapping it with gauze again. His movements are precise and practised. The steady hands of a surgeon. Will loves his hands.

“How is Abigail?” Hannibal asks once the wound is securely bandaged again. He stands to put away all the supplies.

“She was shocked. And very sorry. She wouldn’t stop apologising. I thought she was going to cry again at some point.” Will wriggles the fingers of his left hand, testing his range of motion. He is pleased to find the dressing is not hindering any of his movements. Having a doctor for a spouse really does come in handy.

“Will you tell me what happened back in the Hobbs’s residence?”

Will hums softly. “I’m not too sure myself. She was ripping the pillows open with a hunting knife. I tried to call her, but she didn’t hear me, so I touched her shoulder. While she still had the knife. Not my brightest move, I admit.” When Hannibal is done putting everything back in the cabinets, Will slides off the counter to follow him to the bedroom, switching off the light on his way out, and into their bed. Fresh sheets. Will loves fresh sheets.

“There wasn’t much else you could have done without alerting Alana,” he says, pulling back the blankets and settling in under them. “Why was she opening the pillows?”

Will slides in close to him, curling himself against his side, mindful of his injured hand. “They
were stuffed with hair. Human hair,” he says, running his hand over Hannibal’s chest. “I believe they belonged to all the girls her father killed. She did say that he never wasted anything.”

“She panicked when faced with the undeniable evidence of her father’s doings.” Hannibal reaches for the lamp on his night stand, flicking it off. It is earlier than the time Will would usually go to sleep but Hannibal has been adamant on him getting more hours of sleep. Not that Will is complaining. He is never one to refuse some extra cuddling time in bed.

“And this time it was actual real genuine panic. She was still pretty shaken up in the car.” It was very refreshing to see her being so honest with her emotions. Will hopes she will allow herself to do so more often. Not very healthy to bottle up everything. He would know.

“She is being more open around you.”

“Maybe she’s just afraid I’ll tell Jack she tried to kill me.” Her fear is not really unfounded. He would be wary too, if the head of the BAU were breathing down his neck, waiting for the smallest mistake to label him as a criminal. Although, now that he thinks about it, it is kind of a similar situation as his and Hannibal’s. Jack just does not know whose mistake he is waiting for.

“A killing attempt would be the last nail in the coffin.”

Will huffs out a laugh. “What’s a little stabbing? I’ve survived much worse,” he leans up, propping himself on his elbows and looking down at Hannibal, a small smile on his lips. “You, for instance.”

Hannibal smiles back at him and pulls him down until their foreheads touch and their noses brush together. “I could say the same, my darling.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Since I am the writer of this story, and thus God, I make LGBT+ marriage and adoption legal in all 50 states from, let’s say, at least the 00’s. There we go. Enjoy!

“Do you have an appointment?”

“Do you have a beer?”

Hannibal’s wry expression turns into an amused one and he steps aside to let Alana in.

She saunters into the office, starting to unbutton her warm coat, and stops in her tracks when she notices Will, reclining in Hannibal’s desk chair, a heavy book in his hands. “Will,” she says, her eyebrows raised in surprise. She did not think she would ever find him in here. A few intimate touches and stolen glances are one thing. Will casually presiding in Hannibal’s office is another. Thankfully, so far she have not heard any rumours from the other professors and agents at Quantico, so she guesses they are more discreet around people they are only acquainted with.

Will lifts his head, and nods in greeting. “Hello, Alana.”

“Shouldn’t you be at Quantico?” she says, recovering from her surprise and offering him a smile. The smile promptly disappears when she notices the bandage around his left hand, almost completely hidden behind the heavy volume he is reading. “What happened to your hand?”

Will lifts his hand, so she can see it better. “Cut myself while gutting a fish,” he explains, shrugging slightly. Alana knows Will has been a fisherman almost all his life, but she does not remember this kind of injury ever occurring before. This does not look like a shallow cut either. Must have been quite the fish. And quite the knife. Will closes his book—French, going by the cover—and places it on the desk beside Hannibal’s piles of notes. “And I’m hiding from Jack,” he says, answering her first question.

“Hiding,” Alana repeats, tilting her head. “What about your students?”

“I’m done with lectures for the rest of the day.” Will reclines in the chair, looking entirely at ease. “In addition to the Copy Cat killer, we’re working on a new case, and we’re kind of stuck at the moment. Jack is on edge. It’s not good being in the lab right now,” he says, a tired smile on his face.

She unbuttons the rest of her coat and slides it off her shoulders, letting Hannibal take it from her to hang on a coat rack near the entrance. He gestures at the couch for her to sit on while he goes to open his liquor cabinet. Strange for a doctor to keep alcohol in his office, but Alana knows that he tends to stay in here long after his last patients have left.

“And so you come here instead,” she says.
“I find it easier to think when I have someone to rock ideas back and forth with.” He sends Hannibal a look, and as though feeling his gaze, Hannibal looks over his shoulder, sharing a smile with him. It only last a second before Will break the eye contact and stands, rolling his shoulders to work out the cricks. Alana wonders how long he has been in here. He circles the table, his fingers grazing the polished wood, and goes to plop down on one of the chairs facing each other in the middle of the room. “Jack’s probably gonna call you in reinforcement if we don’t make any progress.”

“I thought he went to Hannibal now, whenever he needs a second consultant on a case,” she says, surprised. It has been a while since Jack asks her to consult on a case. Since he asked Will to do it, in fact. And Hannibal. Not that she is complaining. This gives her the opportunity to focus on Abigail and her recovery. It also gives her more time to take care of her own students, and saves her the travels from Georgetown to Quantico.

“Unfortunately, my schedule just so happens to be incredibly heavy this week.” Hannibal places the bottles he took out of the cabinet back in, and joins her on the couch, handing her the glass of beer.

“Thank you.” Alana takes an experimental swig, appreciating the taste. She does not know where Hannibal buys his beer, but it always tastes heavenly. Leaves her to wonder what is inside. She is usually good at detecting flavours in beer but there is something in Hannibal’s brew that she just can not put a finger on.

“What about me?” Will quips up from his seat. Hannibal turns to him. Will lowers his chin to look at him from under his eyelashes. “It’s not dinner,” he says with a small, hopeful smile. How exactly the time of the day could sway Hannibal in his decision, Alana has no idea.

But it does and Hannibal considers Will’s request a moment, tapping a finger on his glass, although his smile betrays the tease in his gesture. “I’ll allow a few sips,” he says eventually, standing to hand his own glass to Will, which. Alana is not even going to comment on it. Either everyone at Quantico is blind, or these two only act this way in front of her.

“So generous of you,” Will says as he take the glass, beaming at Hannibal. He brings the glass to his nose and gives it a quick sniff, before taking a sip. Hannibal reaches out and briefly runs his hand in Will’s hair, and Will ducks his head to avoid it.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?” Hannibal says when he sits back on the couch beside her while Will nurses his—Hannibal’s—glass, taking his time to appreciate each stolen sip. Alana takes another swig of her beer before answering. A little liquid courage for the following conversation. “I went to see Abigail earlier, and well, now I also need someone to talk to.”

“Didn’t go well?” Will says.

“It could have been worse, I guess. There’s still a long way to recovery, but she’s getting there. Slowly.”

Abigail is a clever girl. Resourceful and obstinate. Pragmatic and manipulative. And extremely affected by what happened to her. Alana knows Will and Hannibal feel responsible for her and want to somewhat be a part of her life, but she still thinks this has little chance of benefiting any of them. Abigail needs to recover in a safe, clinical environment to find her footing again, and regain the confidence to move forward. Will and Hannibal stepping in would only serve her as a crutch.

Will swirls the wine in his glass, looking down at it pensively. “Abigail is probably still—”
His phone rings, startling them and interrupting him in the process.

Will rummages through his pockets to take it out. One glance at the caller ID makes him grimace. “Guess who,” he says, standing up without answering the call, probably waiting to be outside to do so.

Hannibal releases an unamused sigh at the interruption. “Something has to be done about Jack’s systematically inconvenient timing.” He stands up as well to follow Will to the coat rack near the door.

“I’m sure there is,” Will says, putting his phone back in his pocket while it is still ringing. “I’m afraid I’ll have to heel this time.” He hands Hannibal his glass of wine, reaching for his briefcase and his jacket. “Thanks for the few sips,” he says, turning briefly to smile at him.

Hannibal nods in answer, taking the glass and Will’s briefcase to let him slip his jacket on. “Can I expect you for dinner?” he says, handing Will his briefcase again when he is done struggling with the sleeves.

“I’ll try to come, but no promises.”

“Do call me in advance, whether you can or cannot make it.”

“Will do,” Will nods quickly and looks at Alana one last time. “Good to see you, Alana.”

“Take care,” she says just before he breezes out of the office.

The door makes a soft thud as Hannibal closes it again. He goes to sit back beside her, this time with his glass in hand. He takes a few seconds to finally taste and savour his wine, before saying, “Would you joins us tonight? Or only me, if our dear Will finds himself indisposed.”

A dinner. It has been so long since the last time she had dinner at his house. She used to go there frequently when he was her mentor. But since she became a psychiatrist herself, and her schedule became even heavier than what it already was during her residency, the opportunities for dinner parties at Hannibal’s have been very scarce. She is about to eagerly accept when she remembers that she has to work tonight. A couple students she has to help with their dissertation. Something extremely important to them, and thus to her.

“I hate to decline an invitation to your table,” she says, an apologetic smile on her lips, “but I already have something planned for tonight.”

“Maybe some other time then,” Hannibals says, inclining his head to indicate that no apologies are required. “Interesting day with Abigail?” he asks instead, changing the subject.

“Oh but Will, you’re married, right? Any children?” Beverly quips up.

Jimmy looks up at Beverly, then at Will, then down at the corpses of the Turner children. Great timing. Will pauses at the question, whether in surprise or in discomfort, that is to see.

“No,” he says without looking at Beverly, while he still paces around the tables, looking at the corpses with interest, careful not to meet any of their eyes—although this particular habit is not
unusual. Jimmy can count on one hand the number of times Will has looked him the eye. Will circles the table with Mrs. Turner’s corpse, moving to the one with Mr. Turner. He drums his fingers on the paper cut in his hands. Discomfort it is.

“Really? How long have you been married?"

“Almost a decade.”

Holy shit. A decade. Jimmy almost drops his pen. That is… unexpected to say the least. And kind of impressive. Will barely seems to tolerate their company a few hours a day. It is surprising that he would bear someone’s almost constant presence for nearly a decade, given that he is a hardcore introvert and all.

Z looks up from where he is examining the wounds on Mr. Turner’s body. “So, you don’t have children by choice?”

Will hesitates on that one, continuing his slow prowling around the tables—prowling may not be the best description, it looks more like a lost animal looking for a way out—accompanied by the rhythmic thrum of his nails on his coffee cup. “We can’t have children of our own,” he says with a tight, uncomfortable smile, that he promptly hides behind the rim of his cup, this time not only avoiding their eyes, but avoiding looking in their direction altogether.

In Jimmy’s humble opinion, not being able to conceive is not much of a problem in nowadays society if one wants children—aside from the few purists who still think no children but biological ones are your own. There are quite a lot of alternatives. “What about adoption?” he asks, leafing through the photographs they took at the Turners’, sparing Will the added discomfort of being stared at.

“Adoption’s not an option either.” Will resumes his pacing, more to distract himself than to actually examine anything. He goes from drumming his fingers to flicking his cup with his index finger, growing more and more uncomfortable with the subject. The sharp noises echo between the glass walls of the lab. “We… don’t meet all the requirements.”

Jimmy looked up this stuff himself a while ago, and indeed there are quite a lot of strict requirements. He guesses Will did not tick the mental health box. Which might make it an even more sensitive subject to discuss.

“The mental stability one?” Beverly says bluntly.

Jimmy sends her a wide-eyed look. Talk about subtlety. When Will has his back turned to him, Jimmy discreetly gestures at her to drop the subject. Beverly ignores him.

“Amongst other things.”

“Have you considered surrogacy?” Beverly soldiers on anyway.

“Yeah.”

Will comes up to him, extending a hand to request the photographs. Jimmy tries to offer him a supportive smile, but Will completely avoid looking at his face. Jimmy honestly does not know what he expected. Will then goes to spread the photographs on an empty table, his back turned to them. He very obviously shuts them out, very obviously uncomfortable with that topic as well. It would be best to just drop the whole thing, lest he has an emotional breakdown in the middle of work. Jimmy would rather not deal with that in the middle of calcined corpses.
“Yeah, but…?” Z asks.

There are times when Jimmy feels like the rudest man on Earth. And then there are times he remembers just who he works with.

“Yeah, but no.”

“IVF? Donation?”

“We’re still considering our options.”

Jimmy can’t see Will’s face, but he can see him nervously turning the wedding band on his ring finger with his thumb. He gestures at both Z and Beverly to cut it out already.

Beverly finally takes pity on him. “Well, you guys still have time. You’re still young,” she says, going up to Will and bumping her hip against his gently. He seems surprised at first but does not step away from her.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Most of the time in sexual assaults the bite mark has a livid spot in the centre, a suck bruise. In certain cases, they do not. For some killers…”

Victoria is methodically taking notes of everything that comes out of Pr. Graham’s mouth. He did warn them at the very beginning that they could be tested on absolutely anything he said. This is both the best and worst kind of teacher. But Victoria is used to that. She sweated blood for her law degree.

She hears a hushed, “Hey, Vica,” from her left. She does not have to look up and only pushes her highlighters closer to the edge of the table, so Nell can reach for them across the tiny alley between their tables.

Victoria meticulously frames paragraphs of her notes with highlighters, following a very precise colour code. Thankfully, today there are no images coming with the lecture, so she does not have to juggle between taking notes of what is being projected and what Pr. Graham is saying. Although she will not undermine the considerable impact—and interest, let’s be real—gruesome murder photographs give to a lecture.

She searches for her yellow highlighter to frame an example, and after a moment realises it is no longer in the pile, but on the edge of Nell’s table. She reaches across the gap between their table only to quickly pull away again when Jack Crawford—oh god, Jack Crawford—barges into the room, crossing to the front of the hall.

“Class dismissed. Everybody out,” he says, his voice echoing around the room. For a second they all look at each other in confusion. Obviously that is a second too long because Jack Crawford’s voice booms again. “What did I just say? Let’s go!”

And they all scramble to their feet, gathering their notes—

“No! No, no, no. You stay right where you are,” comes Pr. Graham’s voice, much louder than his
lecture voice, making them stop in their track. “Sit down. No, you sit down, now.” This seems to astonish Jack Crawford as he turns wide open eyes at Pr. Graham. Again, they all look at each other confusedly before slowly sitting down again, although preparing to stand again if Jack Crawford orders them to. When the chairs stop scrapping and the notes stop ruffling, Pr. Graham says, “Jack. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

That seems to knock Jack Crawford out of his stupor. “When I tell people to leave, they leave,” he says slowly, enunciating each syllable.

“You’re making it difficult to provide an education.”

“I think between a lecture and a crime scene, we know which one holds the more importance.”

Will makes a broad movement of his arm to indicate the lecture hall. “These people will work on your crime scenes one day. But that day won’t come without my lectures. So, yes, I think we know which one holds the more importance.”

Everyone in the rooms internally releases a resounding ‘Ooooh’, exchanging bewildered and impressed glances. Where’s the popcorn when you need it?

Jack Crawford takes a deep breath. “We are ready to leave. You’re the only one we’re waiting for.”

“And you’ll have to wait for another,” Pr. Graham glances at his wristwatch, “forty-three minutes. A lecture can hardly go on without a teacher, can it?”

“You’re my agent before being their teacher.”

“I beg to differ. I was hired here first and foremost to form these people and that is exactly what I’m doing.”

Jack Crawford grinds his teeth—Victoria can actually hear his teeth grinding from her seat, holy shit—at Pr. Graham’s reply. “You know what that’s called? Insubordination. I can get you fired for that.”

“Go ahead, fire me.” Pr. Graham reaches inside the inner pocket of his jacket, fishes out his ID badge and throws it on his desk, making them all hold their breath in anticipation. And excitement. On the other end of the hall, Zac plasters both his hands on his mouth, his eyes sparkling, torn between admiration and horror. “Here, you’ll want that back.”

Victoria is pretty sure Zac almost fell from his chair, only saved by Mel. The tension is honest to god crackling in the air as Pr. Graham levels Jack Crawford with an intense look that just promises the punchline of the century—

“You’re never pulling anyone from this lecture hall again.”

—Here it is.

Jack Crawford seems to reel as if struck.

Victoria hides a puff of half amusement and half disbelief in the palm of her hand, her eyes wide open. She does not know what Pr. Graham’s punchline is referring to, but obviously it is one hell of a sore spot for Jack Crawford. For a second he seems lost, hurt and defeated. And then he is seething. He is boiling with rage. It is like watching a volcano just before its eruption.

Vica is floored. And apparently, so is everyone else. Jimi is not so discreetly recording the entire
thing. That could land him some serious legal issues, but honestly? Same. That is the kind of things that absolutely needs to be kept for posterity, and passed on to the next promotions like a relic.

“Now if you’ll excuse me.” Pr. Graham ostensibly rustles the papers in his hands. He clears his throat and resumes his lecture. “For some killers, biting may be a fighting pattern as much as sexual behaviour—”

Everyone goes back to frantically taking notes of everything Pr. Graham says, as well as occasionally, and not so discreetly, throwing a few glances at Jack Crawford, who is still staring at Pr. Graham pacing behind his desk as he speaks.

After several long, uncomfortable seconds, Jack Crawford finally storms out of the room, very noticeably leaving Pr. Graham’s badge on the desk.

Victoria is so going to retell this—all of this, every single second—to her girlfriend as soon as she gets back to her flat, FBI confidentiality be damned.

Bedelia might have been a little unfair in choosing this particular place, as it happens to be quite an expensive restaurant.

This place was chosen to suit both her tastes and Will’s need for privacy. The tables are spaced out enough so conversations can’t be overheard from one to another. The only sounds that reach them are the gentle notes coming from the quartet playing on the other side of the room, the quiet voices of the other diners, and the soft clicking of silverware against plates.

Bedelia lifts her fork to her mouth, savouring the taste of the lamb. Exquisite.

Will, on the other hand, has only been picking at his plate.

The loss of appetite is neither new nor surprising. Will did mention recurring bouts of nausea. What is surprising to her is its persistence. She thought that Hannibal would have done something about it already.

Will pushes his food around in his plate, occasionally forcing a meagre forkful in his mouth and chewing slowly, so as not to draw the waiters’ attention. “I should stop seeing Abigail,” he says apropos of nothing.

“You should, indeed.” From what she understood, Will and Hannibal are now registered as Abigail Hobbs’ guardians. Will has started to visit her at the hospital on his own more frequently. Bedelia doubts this could benefit either of them in the long term. “Why do you keep going back to her?”

Will gives up pretending to eat his food, settling his silverware down, and takes his glass of wine instead. But much like the food, he does not drink much of it. His sips are too slow to be considered appreciation anymore, and amount more to him wetting his lips than drinking.

“It’s been a while since I haven’t thought of having children.”

“What is it in Abigail Hobbs that rekindled that want?”

“I wonder,” he says quietly, swirling the wine in his glass, earning himself a scandalised glare from
one of the waiters. “I wanted to buy her fly-tying gear earlier this week, in a fit of anger. Thought better of it in the end, but the impulse was still there.”

Bedelia lifts her eyebrows. She wonders how much of Abigail Hobbs’ father Will is channelling. He seems to have assimilated Hobbs’ thoughts and convinced himself they are his own.

She sets her silverware down to pick up her own glass. “She hunted with her father. She could be fishing with you,” she says, studying him over the rim of her glass. He has spent the whole evening avoiding her eyes, an old habit she thought he had finally dropped around her. She does not remember doing anything that could have driven him back into his old defence mechanisms. “You want to be a father figure to her because you expect something from her. There isn’t anything healthy in such a relationship.” Once again her words are harsh, but not meant to be malicious.

Will frowns at this, putting his glass back on the table, to the right of his plate. “I want her to be allowed a normal life. After everything that happened to her, she deserves some peace at last.”

“What Abigail Hobbs needs is the space to grow into the person she wants to be, not the person you want her to be.” She pauses, observing his reaction. Will stays impassible, waiting for her next words. “What happens when she does not become the ideal you have of her?”

He does not answer and turns his head away from her, his gaze fixing itself on the left hand of the cellist from the quartet, moving deftly over the strings of his instrument. The million thoughts she sees whirling in his eyes is answer enough for her.

Bedelia leaves him enough time to mull over her words, before deciding to change the subject. “How about your health? Have there been any improvements?”

Will finally tears his gaze from the cellist’s hands and back to her. He picks up his silverware, trying once again to eat. “I got a CT scan of my brain. No bleeding, no large stroke. Overwork was the best answer they could provide.”

“What have you decided to do? I doubt Hannibal would simply leave it at this.”

“He is putting up a preventive plan for the headaches, and making some arrangements with his patients so he will be able to occasionally consult for Jack Crawford in my stead.”

“Moving the strain from you to him.” Will nods once, forcing himself to at least finish half of his dish. Bedelia slows down her own pace to give him the time to eat more. She knows Hannibal is growing increasingly worried about Will’s loss of appetite and has been monitoring his food intake lately, making sure he does not starve himself. Since he can’t do it tonight, she will have to ensure all his work does not go to waste. “You don’t believe in the success of these preventive measures, do you.”

“I feel this is unnecessary. I was a homicide detective and I know what overwork is. This isn’t that,” he says, shaking his head. “But whatever this is, I don’t want it to devolve into something more serious, so for now I’m going with it.”

“You could try and pass some other tests. Some diseases can be harder to detect than others.”

“I did. They all came back negative.”

One of the servers comes to their table asking if everything is all right—not so subtly side eyeing Will’s barely touched plate—to which she politely responds by the affirmative with a smile, sending him off again. She waits until he is out of ear range before saying, “Have you considered that you could be struggling with a mental illness?”
Will pauses, rubbing his index finger back and forth on the handle of his knife. “I’ve been told it’s a possibility.”

“One you’d rather not think about.”

Will lets out a mirthless laugh, quiet and cynical. “I’ve studied and investigated on people struggling with mental illness enough to know this isn’t what I’m battling.”

“Mental illness can manifest itself in different manners from one person to another,” she says slowly. “And denial rarely leads to recovery. I’m surprised that Hannibal hasn’t referred you to me as a patient again.”

“He did. I declined.”

“What is this then? Another rehearsal?”

Will reaches for his glass of wine, pauses half way through, and takes his glass of water instead. “Some more polishing, I’d say.”

Bedelia contemplates his answer a moment. “Why do you feel the need to polish your act before talking to him?”

“What about the no marital therapy policy?” he says teasingly, raising an eyebrow. That is something he has in common in Hannibal, avoiding question by being flirtatious. She levels him with an unimpressed look, until he relents. “This is more for me than for him, I guess. So many thoughts kicking around in my head. If I can’t understand them myself how would he?” This does not seem like the whole reason, but Bedelia guesses that is the only one she will get from him.

“As a therapist, helping people understand the thoughts whirling in their heads is part of his skill set. And as a husband, supporting you during your moments of doubts is one of his duties.”

“In theory.”

“Is it him that you doubt?”

Will shakes his head, looking into his glass of water as though he would find answers inside. “Not him, no.”

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Emmeline groans at the sound of her phone ringing and vibrating ceaselessly on her night stand. She recognises the ringtone identifying the caller as Vica.

Instead of answering, she pulls her pillow over her head to block out the sound. Nothing personal but today has been a terrible day, physically and mentally exhausting, and she desperately needs to sleep. She is not in her early twenties anymore. She can’t pile up all nighters, down dozens of cups of coffee to compensate the lack of sleep and still show up in class looking as fresh as a daisy.

After a while, the phone stops ringing, and she sighs in relief, ready to black out again.

Until her phone starts pinging with a flood of messages.

After a solid minute, seeing as Vica is not relenting, Emmeline, eventually emerges from under her
pillow. She fumbles in the dark, trying to grab her phone, cursing when the many books piled up precariously on the edge of the night stand topple over, sending notes and papers flying around.

The light emitted from the screen scorches her retinas and she has to blink a few time to get used to the brightness. Once she does, she does not bother to scroll up to see all the messages Vica sent her, only reading the last few ones.

‘Mel’

‘Answer your phone’

‘I know you’re there Mel’

‘Don’t you play dead on me now’

‘Mel’

‘MEL YOU WAKE UP RIGHT NOW OR SO HELP ME GOD’

‘MEL’

Just as another flurry of iterations of her name arrives—with an increasing number of ‘E’—she types out what she expects to sound like a dry ‘what’.

Another string of messages makes her phone ping furiously.

‘There you are’

‘You won’t believe me’

‘Brace yourself’

‘I just saw Graham leaving a restaurant with his wife’

Emmeline pauses. Reads the last message again. Twice. Thrice. As no other explanation comes from Vica, she sends a sceptical ‘pics or it didn’t happen’.

Almost immediately, her phone pings again with three blurry images of Pr. Graham in company of a woman, exiting a restaurant. They stand close together as he is holding an umbrella to shield them from the rain. He is wrapped in what looks like a really expensive coat and his hair is—she zooms in, because surely she is mistaken, oh no, no, she is not—combed back.

Passed her initial shock, her eyes finally slide to the woman accompanying Pr. Graham. And she does a double take. She reaches for the lamp on the night stand, and sits up in her bed. The quality of the image combined with the screen of rain makes for an abysmal photograph but the figure beside Pr. Graham is striking. A graceful, elegant woman. Blonde hair falling in delicate curls around a heart-shaped face, long, slender legs and fair skin, and an hourglass figure hugged by a lovely blue coat. Emmeline seriously does not know who she is jealous of.

She shakes her head, recovering in time to cut through Vica’s flowery poetry over Mrs. Graham’s otherworldly beauty with a curt ‘don’t send this to zac’.
Beverly sits on the edge of Will’s desk in his lecture hall as he keeps looking through the files of missing boys. This case has been particularly difficult for him. It seems the subject hits a little too close to home for him to really be able to think clearly. Thank god, Alana Bloom was available to consult on this case and help them.

“Sorry about last time,” she says. “I was a little pushy.”

“It’s okay. I’m used to those kind of questions.” He does not look up from the screen, keeps his voice light and casual. Which is all the indication Beverly needs to know that it is not okay.

“One of my sisters had the same problem with her wife. They’re both sterile—the odds, right?—and we tore our hair out for months trying to find a solution. I guess I reacted automatically, back in the lab.” She remembers the devastation on her sister’s face when she learnt that she could not have a child of her own, and the strain it put on her marriage. And she also remembers the happiness and relief on their faces when their little baby girl was born, screaming and crying and healthy.

Will finally stops pretending that he is working and releases a weary sighs. He reclines in his seat and rubs a hand over his eyes. “When you’re married for so long, people expect you to talk about your children. Makes it awkward when you don’t have any,” he says, although he still does not look at her, his eyes moving over the rows of seats surrounding them.

“So you do have a social life after all,” Beverly says, a smirk on her lips. She reaches out to pat his shoulder, but retracts her hand as soon as her fingers make contact with his flannel shirt. She really has to get rid of that habit of touching everything and anything—got her in trouble more than once, especially with this job. But his only reaction to the light touch is to look back at her with a curious expression so she guesses that did not offend him.

“Reluctantly.”

“Your partner’s friends?”

“Sometimes.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Sometimes,” she repeats, urging him to elaborate.

Will seems to ponder whether he should answer her at all. She notices his thumb turning the gold band on his ring finger, slowly, steadily. She saw him do that a couple of times, when put in an uncomfortable situation. Will is quite the recluse, avoiding people like the plague, reducing his interactions to the bare minimum and the unavoidable. But he seems to be in good terms with his spouse, if he can find reassurance just from fiddling with his wedding band. She wonders what kind of person he is married to.

“I try to avoid them whenever I can, but you know, if you never show up with your spouse at social gatherings, people start talking.”

Beverly nods slowly. Seems fair. “So you subject yourself to those once every blue moon.”

“Gotta keep up the appearances.”

“Tough life.”

“You don’t say.” He finally looks up at her, and they exchange a smile. Which only lasts a second before he turns his gaze to his laptop again. Well, that is one small victory, but a victory all the same.
Hannibal looks up when the dogs start barking and sees Will’s car parked beside his own in front of the house. He removes the chicken from the cooking pot, and sets it in a bowl of cold water, keeping the broth to a steady simmer.

The front door creaks open, and he can hear the soft clicking of the dog’s paws on the wooden floor as they undoubtedly crowd Will, demanding his attention.

Hannibal takes the chicken out of the bowl and starts cutting it into thin slices. Today again, there is only one course for dinner. This is slowly becoming a habit, as Will finds himself assaulted with bouts of nausea in the middle of their meals more often than not. Hannibal has been digging through his old cookbooks and recipes looking for light and still sufficiently nourishing meals to cook for him, counting the calories to make sure Will reaches the daily intake he needs.

“Good evening, Will,” he says, when he hears Will’s footsteps entering the kitchen.

Will comes up behind him and slips his arm around his waist, holding on tightly. He rubs his face on the nape of Hannibal’s neck, seeking comfort. His body is warm.

Hannibal sets the knife down and wipes his hands clean. He turns in Will’s embrace to wrap his own arms around Will’s shoulders. They are tense. His whole body is.

“I’m here,” Hannibal says quietly, pressing a kiss to the crown of Will’s head.

Despite his efforts, Will is still losing weight. His shoulder blades are sharper under Hannibal’s palms, his shirts hang loose around his waist and shoulders, his skin is tight over his increasingly protruding ribs. Hannibal has thought of increasing the number of meals to eat per day and cutting down the quantity in each, if Will can’t eat enough in one sitting. But given Will’s schedule, this might be a difficult change to implement in his routine.

He also has to find a solution for Will’s increasing lack of sleep. Adding hours to their nights is not having any effect as Will can’t seem to fall asleep long after they get into bed. And when he finally does, it is often to wake up a few hours after, gasping and terrified and covered in sweat.

Hannibal nuzzles Will’s curls, inhaling softly. He smells of fever again, faint and sweet, and something else he can’t quite put a name on.

Will snuggles closer into the embrace, his cheek pressed to Hannibal’s shoulder. “We wrapped up the case,” he says, his voice muffled against Hannibal’s shirt, “arrested the woman who abducted the boys, and took them into custody.”

Hannibal’s hand finds its way into Will’s hair. “Isn’t it a good thing?”

“It is.”

“But you’re still upset.”

Will takes a deep breath and lets it out in a tired sigh. “That woman. She was just—she just wanted a family of her own. Children to love, and to love her.” His arms tighten around Hannibal’s waist. “She wished for it so hard, strived for it. And in the end it just—”
“You’re nothing like her, Will,” Hannibal says firmly, cutting off Will’s train of thought before it can go to places he can’t follow. “She killed one of her ‘sons’, didn’t she?”

“She was choosing them. Got rid of those who didn’t fit her idea of an ideal child.” Will pauses. Hannibal does not have to look to know he is worrying his lovely lips, damaging the delicate skin. Hannibal has tried for years to make him lose that habit. In vain. “I chose Abigail, didn’t I?”

“You’re nothing like her,” he repeats, his voice firm but reassuring. His hand covers Will’s nape, his thumb gently rubbing the tense muscles hugging the column of vertebrae. “That woman’s love was conditional. Yours never is.”

Will lets out a short laugh devoid of any joy. “I don’t love Abigail. I’m failing step one.”

“You want what’s best for her. That is just as important.”

“But this is still what I want. What about what she wants?” Will rubs his face against Hannibal’s shoulder, releasing another long sigh. “Right now, she is still battling with the ghost of her father, and the stain he left on her name.”

Hannibal considers this a moment, his fingers tracing circles along Will’s back, making him squirm when they get too close to his flanks. Hannibal refrains from clicking his tongue at how much sharper the knobs of Will’s spine feel under his hands. “We could help her. If memories of her father are still hurting her, we just have to supplement them with positive associations. Get rid of bad dreams.”

“What are you thinking of?” Will asks warily.

“Psilocybin.”

Will straightens up, meeting his eyes. They seem to look for something in his eyes. After a second of searching, they do not like what they find and a frown mars his face. “No.” Razor sharp.

Hannibal does not try to argue. From experience, he knows that this tone means that Will is not going to budge, whatever Hannibal says. Instead, he lifts a hand to rub a finger on the crease between Will’s eyebrows to smooth it down. Although Will turns his head away to avoid him, the puerile gesture fills its purpose, erasing the frown and even drawing a quiet chuckle from Will.

“What do you suggest then?” Hannibal says when Will faces him again.

“Alana is right. Abigail needs to work things out for herself,” he says, bringing his hands to Hannibal’s chest and letting them run over his shirt in slow lines, smoothing out the wrinkles. “And we already have our hands full with Jack and the FBI, and having to juggle with the Chesapeake Ripper and the Copy Cat. They are our priority right now.”

“Right now, our priority is your health, my darling.” Hannibal catches one of Will’s wandering hands and brings it to his mouth, leaving a kiss on his palm, then another on the inside of his wrist, taking a moment to just brush his lips against the tender skin. “How do you feel?” he asks, letting go of Will’s hand to press his own to Will’s forehead. He does not feel overly warm, but Hannibal will still give him something in case a fever escalates.

“Not too bad,” Will says, tilting his head to dislodge Hannibal’s hand from his forehead.

“Headaches?”

“Manageable.”
“But still present.”

“I’m getting used to them,” Will says, shrugging slightly.

“You shouldn’t. This is not a good sign.” Hannibal will have another appointment scheduled at the hospital, and make Will pass another battery of tests. If they still do not find anything, they will go to another hospital. “Do you think you could eat?” He leans in to touch their foreheads together. Definitely some medication needed for an incoming fever.

“Yeah, I think I could. Nausea spared me today,” Will says, leaning in for another embrace. “Small mercies.” He wraps his arms around Hannibal’s neck, while Hannibal gathers him in his arms, clasping his hands at the small of his back.

Hannibal notices some of the dogs poking their heads through the door. Buster, always the boldest of them all, ventures one careful paw into the kitchen, and Hannibal clicks his tongue, ordering them back in the living room. They scramble back in a flurry of yips and clicking paws.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I spent way too much time wondering whether Bella would think of herself as 'Bella' or 'Phyllis'.

Enjoy!

“Yeah, cravings are getting a little tough to handle, but otherwise things are pretty good.”

“Enjoy your life while you can. Once the little hell spawn comes into the picture it's over for you.”

Ned chuckles. “Now, don’t say that dude,” he says, nudging Larry in the elbow, not too hard so as not to provoke an accidental car crash, and risk never welcoming his little baby girl into the world.

“Believe my experience. I’d know. I have three of those at home.” Larry reaches into his pocket where he always keeps a photograph of his children. Ned has seen it a hundred million times already. “My three little nightmares,” he says as he holds up the photo with a proud smile, not taking his eyes off the dark, empty road.

Ned smiles at the photograph of the three very young children gathered around a table, pulling faces at the camera. Larry tucks the picture back into his pocket, patting it close with a fond smile.

“Obviously, you never learned your lesson,” Ned says.

Larry’s low, barking laugh booms into the car. Ned starts at the sound but soon feels a grin tugging at his own lips. “And god forbid I ever do,” Larry says, his warm, gravelly voice cutting through the quiet of the night.

The laugh dies abruptly as Larry squints at the road, slowing down the car. “Ned, you see what I see?”

Ned leans forward in his seat, trying to find what caught his attention. Maybe a deer. It is not usual to find some treading along the side of the road at night. But as they get closer to the figure, Ned realises that this is definitely not a deer, roaming the empty road. “Is that… a man?”

“Looks like it.”

“Dude’s probably lost.”

“Half naked in the middle of the night?” Larry says sceptically, while he activates the flashing light on the roof, so the man on the road knows this is a police patrol coming his way. He slows the car some more until they reach a walking speed.

“Bad night maybe?”

Larry stops the car in front of the man as he lifts an arm over his face to shield his eyes from the
bright lights. Ned grabs his flash light and they both step out of the car to go meet the man. Jesus, it is really cold.

“Are you lost?” he says, pointing the flash light at the man.

“What?”

All right, dude is out of it. Better start with the basics. Baby steps, baby steps. “What’s your name?”


Ned raises his eyebrows and sends a surreptitious glance at Larry, who just discreetly shrugs one shoulder. That is not a good sign if he can’t even remember his name. Ned lowers his flash light, tilts his chin at the man. “You know where you are, Mr. Graham?”

“Lester,” he correct again, which. Ned is getting a little lost himself here.

“Mr. Lector?”

“Graham-Lester.”

“Mr. Graham-Lester.” The man nods. All right. Good. He knows his name. Baby steps. “You know where you are?” Ned repeats.

“No.” The man coughs and sniffs, shivering from the cold. Walking around half naked in the middle of the night at this time of year is not exactly the most brilliant of ideas.

“Where do you live?”

“Baltimore, Maryland.”

Ned winces. Jesus Christ. Looks like Mr. Graham-Lester is really lost. “That’s quite a long way from here,” he says, frowning. There is more than eighty kilometres from Baltimore to Wolf Trap. That is at least an hour long journey by car. Who knows how much longer it takes by foot.

Mr. Graham-Lester pulls on an even more confused expression. He looks around himself, his brow furrowed. “Where are we?”


That seems to reassure Mr. Graham-Lester, whose expression eases into something less confused. “Oh, uh. I live here too.”

Ned stares at him a moment, sends another look at Larry, before nodding his head slowly. The man has two houses. Well, at least they know he did not walk here all the way from Baltimore. And they will not have to drive an hour to take him back home. Ned points the flash light at the dog sitting at Mr. Graham-Lester’s feet, wagging his tail in concern. “Is that yours?”

He looks down at his feet. “Hi, Winston,” he says, his voice softer. The dog stands and nudges his owner’s legs. Said owner leans down to give him a few gentle strokes on the head, before straightening up again, and wrapping his arms around himself. “Can I sit? My feet hurt.”

“Why don’t we take you home?”
“Dexamethasone…”

“That’s used for patients with tumors.”

“Kepra…”

“He was epileptic. Radiation?”

“Gamma four.”

Realisation dawns on Brian. “Steroids for inflammation. Anticonvulsants for seizures. Radiation from chemotherapy,” he lists off. He looks up at Will and Dr. Lecter leaning on the table facing theirs, with the mutilated body laid across. “Our guy has a brain tumour,” he concludes triumphantly. Take that Graham. This is how they work here.

Brian can feel Beverly’s reprimanding stare boring holes in the back of his head.

Will does not seem to register him or what he just said. “He’s afraid of dying in his sleep,” he says. Brian rolls his eyes, lowering his head to partially hide it. “He makes angels to watch over him.”

Brian’s eyebrow twitches. He bites the inside of his cheek to hold back a witty remark. Again with those mind tricks thingy, without any evidence to back it up. It does not even follow any kind logic. This is just speculation and wild guessing.

“To pray over him when he sleeps. Who prays over us when we sleep?” Dr. Lecter says, turning his head to look at Will. Brian braces himself for another one of Will’s leaps of logic.

But Will only rubs a hand over his eyes, sighing quietly. “We should inform Jack,” he says, straightening up to leave the morgue.

“Yeah, you do that,” Beverly says, but Will is already out the door, Dr. Lecter following close behind.

When they are both out of earshot, Beverly turns to him, crossing her arms, and Jimmy discreetly steps back to avoid being a collateral damage.

Brian lets out a long sigh before facing Beverly and her wrath. “What?”

“You just can’t help it, can you? He’s doing his job, like all of us.”

“He’s pulling conclusions out of his ass,” Brian hisses, gesturing in the direction of the glass door where Will left. “That’s not what I call investigating.”

“Just because you don’t understand how he works doesn’t mean you have to belittle what he does. If he gets the job done, that’s all that matters.”

Brian rolls his eyes. “The end does not justify the means.” Beverly is too kind with Will. She protects him like she protects her own younger siblings, despite being herself younger than him. Will probably reminds her of her little sister, what with the whole ‘can’t have children’ situation. “There’s nothing reliable in his methods,” Brian says, “if we can call his little tricks methods at all. Throwing in a few wild guesses and hoping this will save someone? We don’t have time for that. We’re dealing with human lives here.”
Beverly’s eyebrow ticks and she opens her mouth with an undoubtedly scathing reply on the tip of her tongue. But Jimmy clears his throat ostensibly, rustling his papers, before she can speak. “Guys, not that I don’t enjoy the show, but now is not the time.”

Beverly and Brian both turn away from each other, sighing in exasperation. Brian takes off his protective mask and bloody gloves. He extends a hand towards Jimmy, and Jimmy hands him the reports. Brian makes to leave the morgue, direction Jack’s office.

He has not made it out of the morgue when something catches his attention, out of the corner of his eye. Will and Dr. Lecter are standing in an empty corner, a little further away from the other work bays, and out of the linesight of the other investigators in the lab. They stand close to the wall so as to stay innocuous.

They seem to be arguing about something in hushed voices, but Brian is too far to actually hear anything. Dr. Lecter lifts a hand to grab Will’s shoulder, and Will roughly swats it away, taking a step back to lean against the wall. Brian frowns, ready to swoop in if the argument turns into a fight. He will not tolerate this in his lab. If they want to take it out on each other, they go do it outside of his domain.

But neither of the two men moves, staring at each other intently. Brian is surprised to see Will actually look someone in the eye. But after a few beats, he breaks the eye contact first, bringing his hands to his face to rub it slowly, pushing his hair back. Dr. Lecter steps forward lifting his hands to Will’s face, and Brian is ready to intervene, but he only removes Will’s hands from his face to take his head between his hands. Brian raises his eyebrows when Will—Will ‘no touching’ Graham—does not push the doctor away, and lets him rub slow circles over his temples with his thumbs.

Oh. Headache.

He remembers that Will is particularly prone to those. Has been since before he joined Jack’s team.

Brian is about to make his way over to them to inform them that there are endless supplies of aspirin hidden in the lab, but remembers that Will also has his own stash of bottles stuffed into his pockets.

He turns on his heels. Gotta tell Jack what they found out about that Angel Maker.

Bella runs one delicate hand on her leg, smoothing out a wrinkle on her dress. A small, much needed distraction. When she feels able to speak again, she looks back up at Dr. Lecter. “Have you ever kept anything from your wife?”

“Husband,” he corrects gently. “I can’t say that we’re always completely transparent with each other, but we try to keep each other aware of issues that concern the both of us. Or at least that’s what I want to believe.”

Bella nods once. She did not think he would give her an honest answer. He seems rather discreet on his private life. But she guesses this is still quite a general answer. Most married couples of their social standing have the same dynamics. “My cancer only concerns me.”

“But your life concerns both you and Jack. Just like his.”
Bella looks away, a small smile on her lips. Until death to them part, wasn’t it? “How would you feel if your husband hid something like this from you?”

“Jack’s reaction could be similar or entirely different from mine.”

“I know. How would you react?”

Dr. Lecter turns his head to the high windows of the ceiling, thinking about his answer. Bella is grateful he is actually considering her question. “I guess I’d be hurt if I were to discover it by myself,” he starts slowly. He does not seem too sure of his answer. “But in the end, I’d wait for him to come to me. When he feels ready to do so.” There is more certainty in that second part. This is probably something he is used to do, enough to expect his husband to make the first step whenever he needs to. Bella is not sure whether she envies or pities that kind of trust. It could so easily be failed.

She takes a deep, steadying breath. “I don’t feel ready to tell Jack. I’m afraid I’ll never be. It already took me a long time to accept it and to resign myself. A long, painful time. I don’t know if I’ll be able to bear seeing Jack go through the same thing.”

“Because his distress would only add to your suffering.”

A wry smile lifts the corner of her lips. It sounds so selfish, put that way. She looks down at her hands, at the well-loved ring on her finger.

“You don’t want to see him hurt,” Dr. Lecter says. “And you don’t want to see him hurt because of you. Because you love him.” He pauses, waiting for her to meet his eyes again. “Jack feels the same way about you,” he assures her, his voice holding the same certainty he uses when talking about his own husband.

Bella smiles at him. This feels like something a friend would say, not a psychiatrist.

“If it were the other way around,” she asks while he is being reassuring, hoping for a favourable answer this time, “if you were the one being ill, would you tell your husband? Right away?”

Unfortunately, Dr. Lecter is back to being her psychiatrist. Well, at least she tried. “I can’t pretend to know how I’d feel, were I in your situation. Neither would I be able to predict how he’d react,” he says, inclining his head slightly, as though in apology. “It would be the same if Jack were in your position.”

“Nothing can prepare you for those kind of things, right?” She guesses someone’s personality could not even tip anything on their reaction. Cancer can change people in the most unexpected ways. She wonders what kind of person Dr. Lecter’s husband is. “I’ve dined at your home many times now. How come I never met Mr. Lecter?”

“Unfortunately, we don’t live together,” he says, averting his eyes somewhat sheepishly, as sheepish as someone like Dr. Lecter can be. “For professional reasons.”

“A long distance relationship? You mustn’t see each other much.” Even in her current state, Bella could not imagine living separately from Jack. She spent half her life with him, his mere presence has often been a comfort to her. Although, the last few months have been trying for her, and she often thought of completely isolating herself from him.

“We try to make the most of the time we have together.”

“Do you miss him?”
Dearly.”

It barely lasts a second, but Dr. Lecter finally lets his affection for his husband reflect in his eyes unrestrained. And Bella feels a needle of grief puncture her stomach as she is transported back to the time when she and Jack would stroll hand in hand along the quays of Livorno.

Hannibal leans on the door jamb of the study. His eyes land on Will where he is sitting on a pillow in front of the coffee table, his back to Hannibal.

The floor is littered with pillows, a couple of which were dragged from the couch behind him, and the rest of it stolen from the guest rooms. Three stacks of books and one pile of notes are arranged neatly on one side of the coffee table while his phone and his laptop lie on the other side, the screen of the latter split between a slide show in the making and what looks like a research article. Will is hunched over a handful of notes, adding remarks in the margins. His cup of tea is on the floor beside him, where it will not risk being spilled over either his papers or his laptop.

Hannibal takes a moment to appreciate the cosy nest Will built for himself around the coffee table. After a moment, he lifts a hand and softly knocks on the door to announce his presence. Will starts, turning his head to look at him, his eyes glassy with tiredness.

“Do you intend to sleep at all tonight?” he chastises gently.

Will smiles at him, taking off his glasses and placing them on the table over one of the stacks of books. Hannibal leans away from the door and joins him on the floor, pulling a pillow for himself. He curls an arm around Will’s waist, bringing them close.

“I’m preparing a lecture, one that is not in the program,” Will says, gesturing at his laptop. “Have to build it from the ground.”

Hannibal leans towards the screen to look at the photographs of the slides. “A lecture on the Copy Cat.”

Will nods, clicking his pen and placing it on top of his notes. He grabs his cup and downs the last of his tea, before placing the cup on the table beside the books. “Jack wants to get all the minds he can on that case.”

“He wants to stop relying entirely on yours.” Hannibal leans in and nuzzles Will’s hair, still wet from the shower, and inhales softly, parsing through the smell of the soap to find Will’s scent. He frowns when he finds it. The smell of fever lingers over it still. He brings a hand to Will’s forehead. Hard to tell if he is warm from fever or from the shower.

“Yep. Not that I’m complaining,” Will says, taking Hannibal’s hand from his forehead to place it on his waist instead, a silent incentive for Hannibal to hold him. “That leaves me more time to prepare my other lectures.”

Hannibal squeezes his waist—thinner still than the previous days, he notices with concern. He briefly wonders whether Will eats at all aside from the dinners they share, but quickly discards the idea. He knows better than to starve himself. “And how much time did he leave you for that one?” He reaches for the notes. “May I?”
“Yeah, go ahead. Jack said ‘within the briefest delay possible’, which means he wants this presentation ready for tomorrow morning. But I’m not going to half ass a lecture for him. Least of all this one.” He looks up at Hannibal from under his long eyelashes, a slight smile on his lips. The smile is thin and tired, nowhere near bright enough to belie the dark circles under his eyes.

“He is asking a lot of you lately. I thought your little confrontation would have advised him against exploiting you.”

Will does a double take at that. “The—what—how’d you know that?”

“It seems to be on everyone’s lips at the Academy.”

Will groans in displeasure. “I thought it was just my students,” he mumbles, bringing a hand to his face, rubbing the heel of his palm over his eyes slowly. “Fantastic. More unsavoury rumours about me. Just what I needed.” He leans sideways until he plops down on the sea of pillows, Hannibal’s hand sliding over his waist as he slips away.

Hannibal’s eyes skim through the first page of notes, then move on to the next. “Interesting insight on the Copy Cat,” he says, “although this is all over the place, my darling.”

“First draft,” Will quips up.

Hannibal lets his hand rest on Will’s thigh, stroking it slowly. “From what I heard, the rumours are actually quite pleasing. I believe there is a petition demanding for a life size statue of you.”

“Bernini’s David style, right?”

“You saw it?”

“I signed it.”

Hannibal smiles. He follows Will down onto the pillows, sliding in close behind him. Not the most comfortable position for reading, but Will’s content purrs are worth every discomforts. He mouths at Will’s nape and gently grazes his teeth on the shell of his ear, eliciting a jolt and a surprised laugh from Will. “A brazen decision.”

“I signed ‘Will Lecter’.”

“A lovely decision.”

Will snickers, grabbing a pillow to hug it to his chest, snuggling back more comfortably into Hannibal’s chest. “It’ll be taken down within the week, anyway,” he says, muffling a yawn into the pillow. “Hopefully, there won’t be any repercussion for the students.”

“It was all in jest, I believe.”

“I hope so.”

Hannibal kisses Will’s hair and goes back to perusing his notes on the Copy Cat killer. It takes him a few minutes to go through all of the notes, having to squint to decipher the tight handwriting of the remarks squeezed into the margins. As the minutes pass, Will’s breathing evens out and his chest rises and falls steadily. By the time Hannibal is done, Will is already fast asleep.
Beverly finds Will in the morgue, looking at the two mutilated bodies of Mr. and Mrs. ‘Anderson’. His eyes are fixed on the bodies but they do not seem to really see them. The expression on his face reminds Beverly of the day they wrapped up the Minnesota Shrike case. He looks bad. Still, pale, mute. On the verge of breaking.

She approaches him slowly, her gait light and easy, non threatening. But he does not seem to realise he is no longer alone even when she leans on the wall, facing him, the two of them only separated by the body of Mrs. ‘Anderson’.

“You’re no longer the rookie in the team, congrats,” she says gently, smiling at him.

He finally registers her presence, lifting his head. His eyes meet hers briefly, before he turns them back to the bodies. “A hard won privilege.”

“So I heard. And so did everyone here. Thanks to your students.”

“They are… very enthusiastic.”

She huffs out a quiet laugh. Everyone working under Jack knew something terrible had happened between Will and him during the Lost Boys case when he came back from Will’s lecture hall without Will and looking ready to murder someone—which would be pretty ironic coming from someone whose job is to arrest murderers. Nobody amongst them was foolish enough to ask him what happened and they set off to the crime scene in deathly silence.

But Will’s students—godsend that they are—were all very eager to share every single detail of what transpired during those five minutes Jack spent in the lecture hall. Beverly even heard of a short recording of it circulating amongst the students, but since the owner could face some serious issues with the administration if they found him, they jealously defend it from everyone else’s viewing. A shame. Beverly really wants to see that recording of Jack getting owned. Morbid curiosity.

“They talk of you like a legend. I don’t remember anyone denying Jack anything since… forever.”

Will shrugs. “Had to start one day,” he says, entirely unconcerned by the god-like status he acquired amongst the fresh batch of agents.

“Oh? You intend to make it a habit?”

“It’ll depend on Jack.”

Beverly chuckles. “It’s a wonder he didn’t show you the door. Or kick you out altogether.”

“Yeah. I’m surprised myself,” he says, lifting his eyes to her minutely again, offering a small smile. “I think consulting Hannibal is his passive aggressive way of telling me I’m not indispensable.”

Beverly tilts her head. So now, it is ‘Hannibal’ instead of ‘Dr. Lecter’, huh. Well, she is relieved Will does not resent him. “I’d say it’s a good thing. Takes some stress off your shoulders. You look like you really need it.”

Will frowns at her words. “Do I seem different?”

“You’re a little different. But you’ve always been a little different. Hard to tell when something’s
He smiles at her again, wider and more sincere this time, seemingly appreciative of her honesty. “How would I know if there was something up with you?”

“You wouldn’t. But I would tell you if you asked me. Return the favour?”

To her relief, Will does not dismiss her question with an immediate answer, and mulls over it a moment. “I guess it’s not just our work that’s been bothering me lately.”

Beverly nods once. “Something you wanna talk about?” she says slowly. She knows that this is a very private topic, and that they probably are not close enough for her to pry like this, but she also knows that in their line of work, staying silent for the sake of politeness could cost them a team member.

Will lowers his eyes to the bodies again, but his gaze is focused inside himself. He nibbles on his bottom lip, another little habit of his she noticed alongside the compulsive ring fiddling. He searches for his words—or debates whether he should talk at all maybe—before opening his mouth. But before he can answer, Jimmy’s voice interrupts them.

“Would the real Mr. and Mrs. Anderson please stand up?” he says, entering with two folders, one of which he hands to Will. “No? Meet Roger and Marilyn Brunner.”

Hannibal rinses the last plate and places it on the kitchen island beside the others for Will to dry. He stops in his track at the look on Will’s face. His movements are slow and meticulous, wiping the same plate again and again, turning it slowly in his hands. Hannibal wipes his own hands dry. He comes up behind Will, takes his forearms in his hands to make him lower the plate on the counter. Will is pliant under his hands, keeping still as Hannibal folds him into a gentle embrace.

Will’s ears wiggle as he grinds his teeth, and Hannibal takes one of them between his lips, nibbling on it lightly. That seems to wake Will from his stupor and he tilts his head forward to escape Hannibal’s teeth. Then he sighs and leans back into the embrace, placing his hands over Hannibal’s, tracing the web of veins and scars with the tips of his fingers.

“Mrs. Crawford is ill?” Will says, apropos of nothing.

“As per patient-doctor confidentiality, I can’t disclose this information,” comes Hannibal’s automatic answer.

“So she is.”

Hannibal nuzzles Will hair, inhaling softly. Fever again. He presses his cheek to Will’s, rubbing against his stubble. “What makes you think that?”

“We interviewed Mrs. Budish today. Asked her how her husband acted after he found out about his cancer. Jack had a revelation in the middle of it.”

“I see.”

Will pushes Hannibal’s arms off of himself and moves from his hold. He grabs the stack of dry
plates to put them back in the cupboards, while Hannibal picks up the last plate to dry it. Will leans back against the counter, observing him.

“How is she coping?”

“I can’t disclose this either.”

“Not even to your husband?”

“Especially not to my husband.” Hannibal joins Will at the counter and reaches past him to put away the last plate and shut the cupboard. He places his hands on the counter, on either side of Will’s waist, caging him in. He tilts his head, trying to catch Will’s gaze. “Why the sudden interest?”

Will resolutely keeps his eyes on Hannibal’s tie. He mulls over his next words a moment, nibbling on his bottom lip. Hannibal’s eyes slip to that reddened lip, caught between two sharp sets of incisors. Will brings one hand up on Hannibal’s chest, tracing the patterns of his tie, maintaining the gap between them. After a moment, he releases his abused lip. “Jack is a lot easier to read than you.”

“Quite the irony, coming from a behavioural specialist,” Hannibal says, smiling when Will finally meets his eyes.

“It may just be that I’ve been unable to think straight lately.”

“According to your colleagues, you’ve been operating at peak performance as of late.”

Will shrugs. “Must be all those meds.”

“I’d say thanks to your adaptability.”

“And coffee withdrawal. Keeps me on edge.”

Will tilts his head up, his eyes half lidded, and mouth stretched in an enticing smile. Hannibal obediently leans down for a kiss, chaste and tender, the slow drag of lips against lips. Will’s hands find his hips and pull him closer, until they stand flush against each other from their knees to their chests. Then those hands slide up his arms, over his shoulders, and finally tangle themselves in his hair. Hannibal pulls away when Will’s tongue touches the seam of his lips.

“Shall we bring you down from that edge?”

“I’d rather you push me over it,” Will says, leaning in for another kiss, only for Hannibal to draw back again. He locks his hands behind Hannibal’s head and pulls him in.

Hannibal grabs his hands and holds them down on the counter behind him, offering an apologetic peck when Will groans and struggles to free his hands. “As much as I’d love to, you look exhausted, darling Will.”

“I could use a shot of endorphins.”

“Pantry, second shelf, next to the sugar.”

Will rolls his eyes ostensibly. “Hannibal,” he drawls out in exasperation, “I don’t need chocolate.”
“I thought Jack called Will.”

“Will wasn’t available, so Jack asked me to come in his stead.”

Beverly nods slowly, crossing her arms over her chest to fend off the cold. They both take a step back from the entrance of the barn to let the team of EMTs slip inside with a gurney. She looks up at the two men already on the wooden ladder, taking Elliot Budish’s body down from where it is hanging on the rafters. She would love to know exactly how the man managed to hang himself up there in the first place. Morbid curiosity—that is practically a requirement for the job.

“It still surprises me to see you at crime scenes,” she says, looking back at Dr. Lecter. “Consultants usually keep to meeting with us in the lab.”

“Will would be the exception.”

She huffs out a laugh. “He often is. In a lot of manners.”

“He is, indeed.”

“And you? As a psychiatrist, I doubt you’re used to seeing crime scenes and dead bodies so often.”

“Not as a psychiatrist. But as a former ER surgeon, I had to deal with mutilated bodies on an almost daily basis.”

Beverly nods again. The agents have managed to untie the ropes around the rafters, and are now lowering the body to the circle of agents and EMTs standing under, ready to collect it. Z stands not too far from them, camera in hand. The corpse is laid down in a body bag and Beverly can now see the familiar lacerations and patches of skin arranged like wings and tied to the body’s forearms. She is again left to wonder how Budish managed to do this to himself. She is fairly sure Will would have known with one look. He is good at figuring out these kind of things, as though he did them himself.

“You know what happened to Will?”

“He was feeling unwell,” Dr. Lecter says simply.

Beverly nods. These occurrences have been more and more frequent, lately. She knows Will has been battling with recurring headaches, downing bottle after bottle of aspirin, struggling to stay focused. But she doubts this is the only thing he has to put up with. The headaches are the only symptom he allows himself to show. Or is unable to hide. “It’s been a couple weeks now. I tried to ask him if something was wrong, but I couldn’t get a single word out of him. He’s a very private man.”

“Indeed.”

“You wouldn’t know something about this, would you? You two seem quite close.”

Dr. Lecter nods, his eyes still fixed on Budish’s corpse. “We are. But, as you said, Will is quite reserved. It is not unusual for him to downplay the severity of his own condition.”

“I figured if he were to talk to someone, it’d be either Dr. Bloom or you,” Beverly says, shrugging lightly. “I’m not trying to pry into his personal life, but I’d be reassured to know he has someone to talk to.” She has no doubt that Will is in good term with his spouse, but she also suspects that he
would be reluctant to bring up work-related issues if said spouse does not work in the same field. He seems like the kind of person who would endeavour to protect his domestic life from the horrors of his professional life. Keep it a safe haven. Who does not need one?

“Will does talk with me. This is a difficult job you are doing, he knows better than to keep it all to himself.”

“Okay,” Beverly says, nodding slowly. “Okay, that’s good to hear. Thank you. And congratulation for making it past his walls.”

Dr. Lecter lets out a long suffering sigh, and Beverly can’t hold back a smirk at the uncharacteristic reaction, but promptly bites her lip to wipe it off her face. This is not very appropriate for the situation.

“It was no easy feat,” Dr. Lecter says.

“Will is quite the stubborn guy.”

“It is part of his charm.”

Z takes one last photo before the EMTs place the body bag on the gurney, to be transported back to the ambulance. Beverly and Dr. Lecter step aside again to let them pass, before following them out, Z and Jimmy close behind.

Will opens his eyes.

He stares at the ceiling. The other side of the bed is still empty. The alarm clock blinks on the night stand.

11:35 p.m.

Will closes his eyes.

Will opens his eyes.

He stares at the ceiling. The other side of the bed is still empty. The alarm clock blinks on the night stand.

2:02 a.m.

Will closes his eyes.

Will opens his eyes.

He stares at the ceiling. The other side of the bed is still empty. The alarm clock blinks on the night stand.

5:03 a.m.

Will closes his eyes.
Will opens his eyes.

“Holy shit—”

Will jolts in surprise when a strong pair of arms reels him backwards into an iron grip. He lets out a startled cry when the ground disappears under his feet, his legs kicking out, and his arms flailing for a second before they instinctively lock around Hannibal’s neck, holding on for dear life, his breaths coming out short and ragged. Hannibal readjusts his own arms under Will’s back and legs, hoisting him up higher against his chest.

“What—Where—” Will croaks out in between panicked huffs of breath. His gaze, eyes wide open, flickers around the room, taking in his surroundings. It takes him a moment to recognise the upper floor of his house, the old bedroom that they have never used since they bought it. Hannibal is carrying him out of the room, towards the narrow staircase leading back to the ground floor.

Will closes his eyes and breathes deeply, willing his heart rate to return to a somewhat normal pace, and come down from the rush of adrenaline. Blood stops roaring in his ears, and he can finally hear the dogs barking at Hannibal’s feet, rubbing against his legs, and standing in his path. Hannibal clicks his tongue sharply and orders them back downstairs, probably to avoid tripping on one of them and risk making them both tumble down the stairs. They shuffle down the steps, his two smallest slipping and rolling down the last few ones.

“Hannibal,” Will says, his voice faint and hoarse. “Why are you—What—”

“Will. You were trying to climb on the roof.”

Will flinches at his tone—tight and steel hard, shit, he is furious—and it takes him a second to actually process the words. He frowns in confusion. “I—What?”

Hannibal stops in his track, takes a step back and angles his body so Will can look through the open bedroom door. Will hoists himself up in his arms to better see inside the room.

The window is open.

Shit.

He almost killed himself in his sleep.

Horrifying images of his own body lying still and broken in front of the porch assault him and he bumps his head against Hannibal’s shoulder, his eyes squeezed shut, to push the vision out of his mind. He slowly rubs his forehead against the cool fabric of Hannibal’s suit jacket.

When the images fade away and Will feels able to form clear sentences again, he swallows the lump in his throat. “I’m sorry,” he says quietly. His body bounces with each step Hannibal takes down the stairs.

Hannibal momentarily stops in his descent, and leans down to kiss the bridge of Will’s nose. “You have nothing to apologise for, my darling,” he says, his voice softer after hearing Will’s wary one. “I’m glad nothing happened to you.” All right. If Hannibal is mad, it is not at him. Good. Will does not think he could hold his own in a verbal joust right now.

“I didn’t hear you come home last night.”

“I just arrived.”
Will raises an eyebrow. “Jack could learn something from you about timing.”

“Indeed.”

Will sags in Hannibal’s hold, feeling even more tired after the rush of adrenaline. This permanent state of exhaustion paired with the headaches are making it harder to work for Jack. Something is bound to go horribly wrong. He might have to stick to consulting, or even just teaching, for a while. “This is getting out of hand. I can’t keep going like this,” he says, rubbing the heel of his palm against his face slowly, and letting out a tired sigh.

“This won’t go on much longer, don’t worry.”

Will perks up. “Huh?”

“We’re going to the hospital. You have encephalitis.”
Donald Sutcliffe is a mysterious character. In the show he seems like a decent dude—and easily manipulated—but in the script he is a conceited narcissist. Sacrifices had to be made.

Also, Will and Hannibal love to make heart eyes at each other.

Enjoy!

Jack frowns when he notices the familiar Bentley in front of Will’s house, parked beside Will’s car. He should not find it all that surprising that Will and Dr. Lecter spend their spare time together, considering they have only seemed to get closer after the Minnesota Shrike case.

Jack himself has spent a considerable amount of time with the doctor after that case. He has proven to be an excellent conversationalist and a solid sounding board. However, despite Jack having dined at Dr. Lecter’s house multiple times, the doctor himself never once came to his, turning down invite after invite. It is odd to see him at Will’s.

Jack parks his car behind the doctor’s Bentley, as the door of the house opens just enough to let the dogs slip out. Excellent timing. Jack steps out of the car, and makes his way to the porch to go greet Will. The dogs send him curious looks and bark as he approach them, their nails clicking on the old wood of the porch. They do not immediately run out into the yard, instead circling each other, tongues lolling and tails wagging excitedly, waiting obediently for Will to come out.

Just as Jack reaches the porch, the wood creaking under his shoes, the door is pushed open, making the dogs perk up and turn to look at it. A tall figure emerges from the house.

Jack pauses in his track. Dr. Lecter.

“Jack. Good morning,” he says, offering a nod and a polite smile, no traces of surprise on his expression.

Jack returns the nod. “Hello, Dr. Lecter.”

The dogs gather around the doctor, and he pulls the door shut again, absent mindedly stroking the heads bumping into his hands and legs. Will is nowhere in sight. Jack sends a look over his shoulder. His car is still there though.

Jack tries to come closer to Dr. Lecter but the dogs are blocking his path, their tails swatting his shins. He takes two steps back to avoid getting dog hair all over his pants. Bella could deny him entrance if he were to come home covered in those.

“Where’s Will?” he says, standing a safe distance away from the dogs.

“Hospitalised.”

“Noble Hills Health Care Centre.”

The name is familiar. If Jack recalls correctly this is a private hospital. And quite an expensive one. Not the kind of place Will would go to, should he ever need medical attention. He would be more likely to go for a public establishment. “Not Johns Hopkins?”

“I’d rather not have him at Johns Hopkins after the security incident with Eldon Stammets.” Dr. Lecter whistles and the dogs finally run off into the yard, yipping and barking loudly. It is surprising to see them respond to him. He must have spent a lot more time with Will than Jack first thought. He goes to stand closer to him, briefly shaking the hand Dr. Lecter offers.

“What happened?” he asks, concern starting to seep into his voice.

“Will contracted autoimmune encephalitis.” A cold dart of fear pierces Jack’s guts at the words. “The right hemisphere of his brain was inflamed. Right now he’s in an induced coma, being treated with antiviral and steroid therapies.”

It takes a second for Jack to process the information. Will is ill. Will has been ill for a while. And Jack did not see anything. Just like he did not see anything with Bella. Or rather, he did not want to see. His mouth opens, but no words come out, so he closes it again. His eyes stray to the dogs running in the yard. Dr. Lecter’s gaze is still boring into his head, observing. It is what they do. It is what Jack does. He can’t pretend he did not noticed, because he did. He saw the signs, he saw Will’s exhaustion, he heard Alana’s plea. And he ignored them all.

Jack takes a deep, quiet breath, recollecting himself and trying to find his words. He clears his throat. “Is he going to make it?” His voice does not waver.

“Yes, the encephalitis has been diagnosed soon enough for him to make a substantial recovery. But he’ll be bedridden for a month at the very least.”

Jack nods slowly, holding back a sigh of relief. Thank god.

One of the dogs ambles further away from the rest of the pack, sniffing the ground on his way. Dr. Lecter steps off the porch and into the yard, and Jack follows close behind. He expects Dr. Lecter to call the dog back, but he only maintains a constant distance with it—maybe hearing range—and stops when the dog starts to examine a shrub.

Jack needs to ask. “Was there a—” The words are stuck in his throat. He swallows once, but the lump does not disappear. “How long has he been sick?” he says instead.

“He’s presented a few worrying symptoms for a while now. I had him see a colleague neurologist, just in time it seems. Will was admitted three days ago.”

“Three days ago.” Jack nods in understanding. In resignation. “Why am I only hearing about this now?”

“It was rather sudden. He didn’t have the opportunity to inform the Academy, and isn’t able to right now.” Dr. Lecter turns those observing eyes to Jack again.

Jack refuses to lower his own. “But he had the time to inform you,” he says, more brusquely than he ought to.

“I was the one who took him to the hospital. I had planned on calling you on his behalf, but some
last minute arrangements had to be made first.”

Jack’s eyebrow ticks. The FBI is not in the top of the to-do list. It feels insulting, to him, and to his co-workers, but Dr. Lecter is the one who got Will in the hospital, when Jack is the one who should have actually done it. He has no right to complain. “I see,” he says simply. “Are you here on his request?”

“Yes, Will asked me to look after the dogs.”

The dogs. Right. Jack rubs a hand over his face. His eyes trail over the open field, to Dr. Lecter’s car, to the house behind them. This morning is turning out to be a disaster. He might have to call Beverly to come with him at the Baltimore State Hospital instead. It might take longer to confirm whether the inmate is the Chesapeake Ripper without Will, as Freddie Lounds claimed in her article this morning, but Jack has not kept Beverly on his team all those years for no reason.

Dr. Lecter tears him out of his thoughts. “What brings you here? If I may ask.”

“I needed Will for a case. An inmate at the Baltimore State Hospital murdered a nurse. I wanted Will to have a look.”

“I’m presently available, if you wish for me to consult on this case.”

Jack raises his eyebrows. “All the arrangements have been made already?”

“Not quite,” Dr. Lecter says, shaking his head. “I still have a few things to tend to, but nothing that couldn’t wait another day.”

“I wouldn’t want to impose on your time.”

“You’re not imposing at all, I’m volunteering.” Dr. Lecter whistles again, high and sharp, and soon after, the dogs come running towards them again.

Jack ponders over this a moment. Although Dr. Lecter usually offers a good insight on the cases he works on, Jack needed Will specifically to confirm or invalidate the identity of the inmate as the Ripper. Something Jack doubts Dr. Lecter could do, having himself never worked on a Ripper case. But well, beggars are not choosers. Jack nods. “Yes, okay. Thank you, Dr. Lecter.” They will work out the specifics later. For now, they need to go to the Baltimore State Hospital before someone disturbs the scene.

Jack steps back again as the dogs crowd Dr. Lecter. He watches in mild horror as Dr. Lecter leans down to stroke their heads and backs, unconcerned by their rubbing up against his pant legs, probably getting dog hair stuck all over them.

“Just a moment,” Dr. Lecter throws over his shoulder, leading the pack back into the house.

Jack only nods, keeping a safe distance when the dogs pass in front of him, still sending him curious looks.

“I was expecting Dr. Graham. Dr. Bloom just called me about him.”

“Will Graham is not a doctor, he teaches at the Academy.” Agent Crawford extends his hand for a
handshake, which Frederick returns with aplomb.

“Ah. A teacher then. A shame he couldn’t be here himself.”

“Unfortunately, he isn’t available as of now,” Hannibal says. “So I came in his stead.”

“Which is just as good. It’s a pleasure to have you visit my establishment at last, Hannibal,” Frederick answers smoothly. He gestures at the two seats facing his desk. “Please, gentlemen, take a seat.” He goes to sit in his own armchair, reclining in it as he tucks his tie more securely under his suit jacket, flattening it out. “The crime scene has been left undisturbed, as per your request, but I suppose keeping the infirmary sealed off won’t be necessary anymore.”

“No, indeed,” Agent Crawford says, shaking his head. “The privacy was for Mr. Graham’s sake.”

“Oh, yes. He’s quite the topic of conversation in psychiatric circles. I’m sure you’ve heard plenty about him too, Hannibal.” It is hard not to. Will Graham is a recurring name in their community, whether for his articles—those that are related to psychiatry that is, Frederick has no real interest in forensic science—or the particularities of his mind.

“I have, but I don’t partake in those speculations myself.”

Frederick chuckles. “Speculations. Quite harsh of you.”

“I have yet to hear of anyone submitting any study to support any argument regarding Will Graham.” The tone is mild but the words are cutting, almost accusatory. Frederick feels one corner of his mouth tick up. Interest, curiosity.

“That would be because we’re woefully short on material on his sort of thing.”

“His sort of thing?”

“A unique cocktail of personality disorders and neuroses that makes him a highly skilled profiler,” Frederick rattles off the common description given of Will Graham’s ability by his fellow psychiatrists. Which he is sure Hannibal already knows of. Out of the corner of his eye, he notices Agent Crawford frowning and opening his mouth to speak, but Hannibal beats him to it.

“This is still speculations on your part, if I am to assume that you’ve never had the opportunity to speak to him yourself.” There is the slightest tilt of Hannibal’s chin as the words leave his mouth.

“Well, Mr. Graham is a very elusive man. I wonder if anyone ever would be able to interview him.”

“Mr. Graham already passed FBI procedures,” Agent Crawford pipes up, in an attempt to cut the discussion short, “and was deemed suitable to work at the Academy. There’s no need for other assessments.”

“We’re all specialised in the workings of the mind. You can’t tell me you aren’t interested in his.”

“I certainly am,” Hannibal concedes, nodding once. “But I wouldn’t publish anything on him without his explicit consent. Something that couldn’t be said about all psychiatric circles.”

Frederick huffs out a laugh. “A point on which we can agree.” He hears the annoyed sigh from Agent Crawford, and decides to postpone the discussion. Maybe for when he can speak in private with Hannibal. Despite his claim, he does seem to have an interest in Will Graham, but maybe not the same kind of interest shared by their colleagues. Frederick rises from his seat, circling his desk.
Donald jots down a few last remarks on his clipboard after checking Will Graham’s vitals. He is responding well to the treatment. It is a relief, considering they have not receive the results for the tests yet. But Donald preferred to immediately start him on an aggressive treatment. The weeks Mr. Graham spent undiagnosed have already compromised his health enough as is. Hannibal brought him to the ER just in time.

Donald clicks his pen and puts it back in the breast pocket of his white coat. He tucks the clipboard under his arm and shoves his hands in his pocket. He turns to face Hannibal, sitting on the chair beside the bed, hands neatly folded over his crossed legs.

“Although the circumstances may be unfortunate, it’s a pleasure to finally meet your spouse, Hannibal,” he says quietly, barely louder than the beeping machines around the bed.

Hannibal only inclines his head as an answer. Donald does not remember seeing him with such a tired look since they were working in the ER together. His suit is impeccable and he does not have a single strand of hair out of place, but there is a tightness to his entire demeanour that betrays the sleepless nights and the stress he must have been under.

In order not to aggravate him, Donald goes for a light, “So. Will Graham.”

“Will Graham, indeed.”

“Who would have thought?”

“I was surprised as well.”

Donald huffs out a quiet laugh. “He certainly does not look like the kind of company you usually enjoy.” Mr. Graham is the kind of guy Hannibal would not be caught dead frequenting, let alone marrying.

“And yet.”

“And yet.” Love is a strange thing. Donald looks at Mr. Graham again, looking so peaceful in his sleep. He wonder what is in him that appeals to Hannibal. Not being attracted to men himself, he can still tell that his looks played a part in the whole process. It is no secret that Hannibal likes to unabashedly indulge in anything beautiful. But Mr. Graham’s appearance must have played a considerably lesser part than his wits. Donald bets he is a terrific verbal sparring partner. “I would have loved to be able to chat with him. He must be quite the fellow for managing to catch your eye. Aside from the ruckus his abilities caused in the community, that is.”

“You might have the opportunity to, once he gets better. But he may not be willing to offer much about himself.”

“Yes, he is quite infamous for that,” Donald says, chuckling lightly.

He does not count the number of people who tried to approach him only to be rudely turned down. Donald himself once wrote him a letter to invite him to a conference, only to have it sent back to him with a NO THANKS and a hasty signature scribbled in red under his own name—combined
with the coffee stain in one of the corners, Donald is pretty sure Mr. Graham replied as he was grading papers. It got a laugh out of him at the time.

A small smile tugs at Donald’s mouth at the memory, earning him an inquisitive smile from Hannibal. “You’ve been married for a while now. Before you turned to psychiatry, if I remember correctly,” he says, redirecting the conversation. “You must have learned a lot about his psyche since then. Anything you’d like to share?”

Hannibal shrugs lightly. “Nothing that could be of any therapeutic value to other patients. And if there were, I would abstract it in a form that would be totally unrecognisable.”

“You’re keeping him all to yourself.”

“I am.”

Donald smiles at him again. It is endearing. And a side of Hannibal he is just now discovering. “You know, given you never talked about your spouse, I assumed it was a sensitive topic. Maybe that you were widowed. But now I know why you wouldn’t want to bring attention to him.”

“Will already has enough people to fend off as is. No need to add his spouse’s colleagues.”

“Fair. But you don’t have to worry. I’ve no intention of publishing anything about him. To be honest, I would have liked to talk with him about one of his papers. One that was related to neurology.”

Hannibal looks out the window a moment, thinking, his eyes tracing the shapes of the other buildings bathed in street lights, before turning to him again. “That particular paper was published over three years ago.”

Donald almost whistles in awe, but refrains at the last second—no need to be rude. He would not put it past Hannibal to know by heart each and every article Will Graham ever wrote, content, date, and journal it was published in. Hannibal has a frightening memory. “True. But I never had the chance to meet him until now. A shame that he does not attend conferences. I know he has been invited to some.”

“His work might have grazed neurology a few times, but it isn’t his field of expertise. Which is why he declined those invitations.”

Donald nods slowly. “A shame. For someone so recluse, he has some fascinating insights on the human mind.”

“He does.” Hannibal’s eyes soften as they settle on Mr. Graham again. The expression is so unfamiliar—almost foreign—on his face, Donald finds himself stunned for a second. Love really is a strange thing.

Alana puts her elbow on the windowsill and leans her head on her arm, eyes flickering on the moving scenery. It has been a while since she has been in Hannibal’s car. A very, very long while.

The last time was when he picked her and her room mate up from a party because everyone was either smashed or high or both—med students’ parties are not to be underestimated—and their taxi
just mysteriously never showed up, having disappeared from the surface of the earth. She does not remember much of that night, aside from that it was a night of unspeakable excesses and debauchery. And that Hannibal practically had to carry them into their flat because they could barely stand on their feet.

No, really, Alana hoped she would never have to go into Hannibal’s car again. Too many mortifying memories attached to it.

“If I recall, you already had a few sessions with Abel Gideon,” Hannibal says, pulling her from the most disastrous night of her residency.

Alana takes a second to recollect her thoughts. “Two, when he was first institutionalized. But I mainly saw him in court. And I wrote an article about him for the Journal of Criminal Psychology.”

“Yes, I read it,” he says, looking at her briefly. “An interesting approach on the subject, and a remarkable analyse considering you had so little source material to work with.”

Despite being used to receiving feedback from fellow psychiatrists on her articles and papers, it is still strange to have Hannibal read and comment on them. Although objectively speaking, it is only normal that he reads other psychiatrists’ work. But for Alana, it still oddly feels more like a professor grading one of her assignments, as opposed to a colleague offering criticism. Repressing the urge to ask for a more detailed assessment, she says, “A handful of my PhD candidates requested an interview with him. Two of them were granted one.”

“How did it go?”

“One of them came out of it persuaded that Abel Gideon killed a lot more people than just his wife and her family. The name Chesapeake Ripper was left unsaid but it resounded loudly in the room.”

“Not that surprising. At the time of Gideon’s trial, the Chesapeake Ripper was all over the news. It was an all too obvious connection to make. Almost disappointing.”

“I admit I was a little disappointed when I read his paper,” she says slowly.

“Too low a level of scrutiny?”

“Will would have probably thrown it into the nearest bin.” She does not like to talk badly of her students. They take their work seriously and mistakes are part of the learning process, but she tends to be very finicky when it comes to cases she personally worked on. And this conclusion was one she would have expected from a tabloid journalist, not a PhD candidate.

“Will is a very strict teacher. What he finds sub par might actually be good work for anyone else.”

Alana huffs out a laugh. She straightens up in her seat, folding her hands onto her lap. “From what I heard from his students, I can safely say that he is way harsher than you ever were.”

“The self-discipline he expects from the people around him reflects how demanding he is with himself.” Hannibal slows the car as they drive inside the gates of the Baltimore State Hospital.

“It’s a shame how closed off he is. With that self-discipline, who knows what he could have achieved. But I know he isn’t one to make waves. Sometimes a comfortable life is more appealing than one of greatness.”

“To each their own. As long as one is satisfied.”
Alana hums quietly. “Hard to tell if Will is.”

“Indeed.”

Hannibal stops in front of the hospital, behind Frederick’s car. They step off the car as a couple of police officers trickle out of the building. The last one holds the door open for them. Alana offers her a smile and the officer tips her hat at her. Hannibal and her make their way through the maze of corridors and staircases leading to Frederick’s office, greeting the orderlies one their way, although only a handful of them actually acknowledge them, let alone greet them back.

“It’s a good thing that Will was diagnosed before he could take on this case,” Alana says quietly, but her voice still bounces off the walls of the corridor, along with the sound of their heels clacking on the floor. “Jack is obsessed with the Ripper. He would have pushed. That could have been the last straw for Will.”

“Will is quite resilient, but Jack is not to be underestimated in his obstinacy.” The disdain in his voice is cold and naked. Alana raises her eyebrows in surprise, glancing at him. Hannibal’s face betrays nothing. She knows he is not pleased with the way Jack treats Will, but she did not expect that displeasure to be so sharp. His tone is back to neutral when he says, “Although, there is little chance that Abel Gideon really is the Ripper. Neither methodical nor meticulous enough.”

“What makes him so hard to catch,” Alana says, nodding. “Has Will woken up yet?”

“He is still in a coma, and should be for another few days. But he is responding well to the treatment.”

“So the tests for encephalitis came in positive.” That was fast. It would usually take at least a week for the results to arrive.

“They haven’t come in yet.” Figured. “Dr. Sutcliffe trusts his diagnosis, and mine. If Will does have encephalitis, it would be unwise to leave him without any treatment for another week, while we wait for the results.”

“Well, you’ve yet to misdiagnose a patient, I believe,” Alana says, shrugging lightly. Back at Johns Hopkins, rumour had it that Hannibal once smelled stomach cancer on one of his professors. Which sounded like utter nonsense to her. But after witnessing first hand Hannibal singling out perfumes, colognes, and meds repeatedly and accurately, she started to think that it might not be that inconceivable.

“Which does not mean it’ll never happen.”

True. But at least it can point where to start searching first. A considerable advantage in a profession where the days—the seconds—are numbered.

They reach Frederick’s office, and Hannibal lifts an arm to knock on the door. Alana stops him mid movement, placing her hand on his forearm.

“Hannibal,” she says quietly, so that she will not be heard through the door, “Thank you. For taking care of Will.”

Hannibal smiles at her. “Thank you as well,” he says, his voice as quiet as hers. “You care about him just as I do.”

“He’s not as close to me as he is to you. I’m glad he could open up to someone.” She realises too late that this could vaguely refer to their affair, and bites the inside of her cheek, but Hannibal does
not react to her words at all.

“So am I.”

The rush of fear dies as quickly as it appeared and she holds back a sigh of relief. She lets go of his arm and he knocks on the door, three curt rasps, and soon after the door swings open on Frederick’s confident smile.

“You’re less focused today.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“It might not be to some. But to me, painfully so.”

Hannibal turns his eyes to the window. The golden morning light bounces off them, his pupils narrowing and closing themselves off to her scrutiny. “Can you blame me?”

Bedelia tilts her head, studying his figure. “I guess I would have been more surprised if you weren’t.” The signs are subtle but they are striking once you notice them. They lie in the strained set of his shoulders, in the tension in his jaw, in the sharp edge inside his gaze. Everything is concealed under a thick layer of confidence, of balance and composure. She can’t see but she knows Hannibal is struggling to keep a tight rein on his anger. Thankfully—for him, and for everyone around him—his grip is ironclad.

Hannibal’s jaw relaxes and he takes a quiet, steady breath. “The house is quiet. There was a time when I used to love this stillness, only disrupted by my own activity.”

“But not anymore.”

“Not anymore, no,” he says, his voice soft and quiet. “I thought I was prepared for the eventuality of his absence. It isn’t anything unusual between us. We don’t see each other as much as we ought to, both of us taken by work and obligations.”

“Being accustomed to the distance does not lessen the longing. This is different from having incompatible working schedules. This might be as close to losing him as you’ve ever got.”

The corner of his mouth lifts slightly. “No, it isn’t.” He finally turns his gaze to her again. Whatever crack in his armour may have appeared earlier welded itself back under the light. “Will is not gone.”

“He is not gone, but he is out of reach. It’s a different kind of distance.”

“It’s only temporary.”

“But temporary is already too much.”

Hannibal takes a moment to mull over her words. Something sharp and fierce sparks into his eyes, and he turns his gaze to the window again. It is too fleeting for Bedelia to have to time put a name on it, already retreating behind the veil. It stays there, not quite dying, simmering under the light. “It is odd, seeing him in a hospital bed, so frail and pale. Still and dreamless.”
“Odd but not unfamiliar.” It is in those moments Bedelia wishes Will were in the room as well. They are a lot easier to understand when together. Anything she cannot decipher in one’s expression, she can guess in the other’s.

“I remember at the time thinking there would never be anything as unsightly to witness, and hoping it would never happen again.” Hannibal slowly turns the gold band on his ring with his thumb, no more than half a rotation before he catches himself and folds his hands on his lap, turning his eyes to hers again. “But in the last few weeks I realised that it is much worse to watch him wither away without knowing what ails him.”

“Better the devil you know.” She pauses. “How did that make you feel?”

Hannibal mulls over his answer a moment. “I was chasing an answer that kept itself barely out of my jaws, taunting and arrogant.” Bedelia carefully keeps her expression neutral. It is a mild answer but a strong statement coming from Hannibal. “It was an unpleasant feeling,” he says when she does not answer.

“A lack of control and the fear of the unknown,” Bedelia says eventually.

Hannibal tilts his head. He does not seem to mind her avoidance. “The unknown is made of opportunities, and opportunities are not to be feared.”

There are truths that only take form when said aloud. “The thrill of anticipation is just as common as the fear of the unknown. But this is a different kind of anticipation, one closer to fear than curiosity.”

Franklyn fidget in his seat. He nibbles on the inside on his cheek, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. He thinks about his next words, trying to find a phrasing that does not seem too dismissive or insistent, and in a tone that will not come across as rude or sarcastic. It is admittedly easier said than done. Franklyn really wonders how Dr. Lecter manages to do it so naturally.

Deciding that the silence has been going on for too long, and that it would be definitely rude of him to make Dr. Lecter wait any longer, he clears his throat and says, “I admit I was a little surprised when you requested that we move our scheduled session. On such a short notice no less.” He adds a light chuckle at the end, to lighten the words, make it clear he does not resent Dr. Lecter for this.

Dr. Lecter tilts his chin minutely. “And I apologise for the inconvenience this might have caused or will cause you.”

“Oh, no, please, don’t apologise,” Franklyn says, holding one of his hands up. “I know you wouldn’t do this without a very good reason. And it just made me question what those reasons are. Not that I’m asking for explanations if this concerns private issues,” he adds hastily. He does not want to make it look at though he is prying for personal information, even though the question has been whirling in his mind for most of the week. When Dr. Lecter does not immediately answer, Franklyn adds an uncertain, “It just… got me curious.”

Dr. Lecter’s eyes bore into him, and Franklyn starts fidgeting again. Oh god, he has really done it now. Dr. Lecter is going to refer him to another psychiatrist, all because he is unable to phrase a question politely. Dr. Lecter opens his mouth, and Franklyn braces himself for the inevitable.
“It is a private issue indeed,” he says instead.

All the tension leaves Franklyn at once, and he can’t quite hold back a half nervous, half relieved laugh. He stops at once when he realises it looks as though he is mocking Dr. Lecter’s private issue. He coughs and clears his throat. “Um, well, I hope things will resolve themselves then. And that this isn’t anything too serious,” he says, trying to sound supportive. “I mean. Yes, I am your patient but if you… feel the need to talk about it, I’m still willing to lend an ear.” He offers an encouraging smile.

“You’re in no obligation to listen to my issues, Franklyn. I am. As your psychiatrist.”

“Oh, yes, of course. I know a patient doctor bond works one way. But after all those weeks I feel we’ve got closer. Almost like friends, you know. And it’s only normal for a friend to show consideration to another.”

Dr. Lecter stares at him with an inscrutable look again. “If the changes in our schedule affect your life, I will gladly listen to you, but you are under no obligation to understand the reason of those changes.”

Oh god, here they go again. Franklyn is threading on thin, thin ice. He feels the sweat forming between his brows, but resists the urge to pass a hand on his forehead. “I’m not doing it by obligation,” he says slowly, gazing Dr. Lecter’s reaction at each word. “I’m only concerned about you.”

“We can talk about the way that concern affects you, if you wish to.”

Now that is a dismissal if Franklyn ever heard one.

Will’s eyes flutter open, his pupils opening up to the dim light of the room. He is lying on a bed, looking up at a blurry ceiling. He blinks once, twice and his vision clears up. Now the blurry ceiling is an unfamiliar ceiling. A sort of pop corn, off white, light brown thing. He can’t quite tell the exact shade with such a low lighting. It must be night time.

The mattress he is laid on is also unfamiliar, harder than the ones at home. He slowly moves his fingers back and forth—there is something pinching his left index finger—in small lines over the blanket. Scratchy. Thin. He never would have allowed such a thin fucking blanket in either of their homes, the dogs would have ripped it to shreds. At least he is not cold, so the thing is doing its job.

The room smells odd. Some kind of chemicals, cleaning products, antiseptics. It smells like the lab. A little less pungent maybe.


There is a steady beeping and the soft wheezing of machines on either side of him. He recognises the loudest one as his heartbeat. It is insistent, but soft enough not to be annoying. The rhythmic beeps could almost lull him back to sleep. For a second he is tempted to do so. His brain is mush, his limbs are lead. He could use another hour or ten of sleep.

“Good evening, my darling.”
Will’s eyes snap to his right. Hannibal.

A smile tugs at Will’s lips, and his heart sends blood rushing to his cheeks. “Hey,” he croaks out, and immediately regrets it, feeling his throat constrict painfully from disuse. He tries to cough the soreness out. Shit, terrible idea, the pain only gets worse, oh fuck. It hurts. He just doomed himself. Coughing fit not stopping. Good job, Graham. Some help would be appreciated. It burns, goddammit, it burns.

There is a hand on his jaw, pressing on his chin, and Will opens his mouth to let Hannibal slip ice chips inside. He keeps them under his tongue so as not to swallow them wrong and send them right into his lungs. He tries to force himself to stop coughing—keyword *tries*—just long enough to suck on the chips.

The first drop slides down his throat and oh, Jesus fuck, it is heaven. A thin trail of droplets keeps trickling down his tongue slowly. He vaguely registers fingers massaging his scalp. The coughing recedes. The pain recedes. Everything is fine again. Will keeps sucking on the ice chips blithely, letting the cold and the moisture soothe the burning sensation. When he runs out of ice chips, Hannibal tips some more inside his mouth.

Hannibal is still standing beside his bed, one hand holding a cup—presumably the ice chips—and brushing his curls gently with the other.

He should not be standing.

Maybe Will could… Yes, okay, his arm is moving, it is numb as hell but it is moving, perfect. He reaches for the bottom of Hannibal’s suit jacket with a trembling hand. His fingers barely have enough force to grip the soft material. Will feels his frustration mounting when he can only give it a weak tug. Hannibal finally gets a fucking clue and lowers himself to sit on the edge of the bed, and Will goes back to happily sucking on his ice chips.

Hannibal’s hand is now stroking his belly, over the blanket. The thin blanket. So thin he can feel the warmth of his palm. Maybe that blanket is not so bad after all.

Will is out of ice chips again, but his throat does not burn anymore. He drags his hand over his belly, and Hannibal takes it in his own, squeezing gently.

“How long was I asleep?” Will asks. His voice is still hoarse, but speaking does not hurt as much.

“Almost a week.”

“Yeah? Passed in a blink for me,” he says, smiling. Hannibal returns his smile, brings Will’s hand to his mouth to press a kiss inside his palm. Will likes when he does that. And he likes to do it too. He loves Hannibal’s hands.

“How do you feel?”

“Dead tired,” Will says, sighing. “Ice?”

Hannibal gives him some more ice chips. “The first couple weeks are always the worst, but it’ll get better eventually.”

It will get better. He will get better. A wave of relief washes over him again, overwhelming. He squeezes his eyes shut, breathing deeply through his nose. They know what he has. He is going to be treated. He will get better. “I thought I was going insane,” he says quietly. He tries to squeeze Hannibal’s hand, and is delighted to find that he can, his arm no longer as numb.
Hannibal leans down to kiss his forehead. “Neither of us could go insane, my love.”

Will hums around the ice chips. “Because we already are?”

Hannibal flicks Will’s forehead, earning himself a squeak promptly followed by a snicker. “We received the results for the tests you ran. You have anti NMDA receptor encephalitis.”

“What means…?”

“Your immune system is attacking your brain.” Great. Just what Will needed. A civil war inside his own body. “But we started the treatment before too much damages could be caused. You’re expected to make a substantial recovery.”

“I knew marrying a doctor would come in handy eventually.”

“Sad that it took me almost ten years to finally prove my worth as a husband.”

“Better late than never,” Will says, patting and rubbing Hannibal’s thigh the way he would comfort one of their dogs. Hannibal raises an unimpressed eyebrow and Will lets out a quiet laugh. His hand climbs up Hannibal’s abdomen, his fingers spreading over his waist coat, marvelling at the feeling of the material. “I guess I owe you that one. How do I pay you back?”

Hannibal scoots closer and Will’s hands smooth over his ridiculous tie, the tip of his index finger slipping under the knot.

“I can think of a few things,” Hannibal says, leaning down.

Three short raps make their heads snap towards the door. A nurse, young and tired, her hair held up in a tight ponytail, slips inside the room, apologising and greeting them politely. Hannibal stands from the bed and goes back to his chair as she approaches Will. She checks for his vitals, asks him a battery of routine questions and briefly explains to him what happened during the first week of his treatment. She is exhausted, more than Will is, and she still has hours to go before she can go back to her shoebox of a flat and collapse on her squeaky bed, forgoing whatever meal it is you eat when you come back from work at 7 a.m. She also offers some advice to Hannibal, to which he only nods politely, despite already knowing the procedures himself.

Will answers all her questions diligently, and after a few minutes, she is slipping out of the room again, closing the door softly behind herself. Silence falls in the room again, only broken by the soft wheezing of the machines.

“Night shift is hell,” Will says after a moment, his eyes still fixed on the closed door

“Indeed.”

Hannibal comes to sit back on his bed, and Will looks up at him, reaching for his hand again.

“How are you holding up without me?” he asks, tracing the raised veins with the tips of his fingers.

“I started to work on your lectures so I can replace you as a guest lecturer when Alana is in Georgetown.” Will raises an eyebrow. He did not think the Academy would actually accept. He wonders what kind of bullshit Hannibal pulled for that one. “I have to say your handwriting is a lovely challenge, my darling. I became quite skilled at pinpointing the exact moment you ran out of coffee.”

Will gives him his best shit eating grin. “Why, thank you, babe. I try my very hardest.”
“I have gathered as much.”

Will huffs out a laughs. “Please, do tell me how your first lecture with my students goes. Even better, record it discreetly.”

“I believe that would be unethical, not to say illegal.”

“Illegal, what’s that? Is it edible?” Will chuckles and turns his head against the pillow to avoid another flick, swatting Hannibal’s hand away. “I’m surprised no body dropped while I was out. No untimely call from Jack?”

“Oh, there was. Jack asked me to consult for a case. He had you in mind, but I caught him as he came in Wolf Trap, ready to wrestle you out of the house.”

“Good job. I see your timing is still impeccable,” Will says, patting Hannibal’s hands. “Why did he go all the way to Wolf Trap anyway? Usually he just pulls me out of my lecture hall.”

“So he could take you all the way to the Baltimore State Hospital by himself, and in the briefest delay.”

Will pulls a face at that. Baltimore State Hospital. Frederick Chilton. “Condolences, darling. Must have been excruciating. Here, you can have a hug,” he says, grabbing Hannibal’s upper arms and pulling him down. Hannibal goes pliantly, supporting his weight on his elbows. Will wraps his arms around his waist and strokes his back slowly.

“I managed just fine, but thank you for your concern.” Hannibal nuzzles his neck, peppering kisses around his pulse point, and poking the underside of his chin with his nose, inhaling deeply.

Will tilts his head back, humming in content. “What happened at the hospital? The other hospital.”

“A nurse was murdered by one of the inmates. And Freddie Lounds apparently spread rumours of the culprit being the Chesapeake Ripper.”

What the fuck.

Will slips his hands between the two of them to push at Hannibal’s chest so they can look at each other. “Jack wants to fact check for Freddie Lounds now? That’s ridiculous,” he says, his brow furrowed. Jack’s obsession is making him desperate. Next thing he knows, they will be collaborating with Freddie Lounds on a case. Jack is starting to get in their way. They might have to do something about it.

Hannibal leaves a kiss on the corner of his lips, tearing him from his thoughts. “I would agree.”

Will turns his head to catch Hannibal’s mouth in a chaste kiss. Quick and tender. Just a greeting. “So? What are you gonna do about that Ripper?”

“We’ll see.”
“How’s it going with the fresh batch?”

“They ask a lot about you.” Alana flattens the sides of her skirt as she lowers herself on the cold chair.

Will’s mouth stretches into a half smile, and he lets his eyes slip off Alana’s chin and sweep over the rest of the room. “You don’t make it to Quantico without being pathologically curious.”

The small round table Will chose, in one of the far corners, near the fogged up windows, makes a perfect vantage point for the entirety of the room, allowing him to observe without being observed. This single advantage seems to override all the disadvantages of the location; the cold seeping in through the glass panels, the quiet buzzing of the television, sprouting commentaries of a baseball match, and the pungent smell of antiseptic, much stronger here than in the centre of the room. Alana tries to tune out the voices of the man and woman seated somewhere behind her, both engrossed in a heated debate on whether pineapple belongs on pizza.

“They’re worried about you. They keep asking me for updates after each lecture—which I don’t give. So now they’re imagining all kinds of scenarios about what happened to you.”

Will shrugs, pulls his robe tighter around himself, to fend off the chill of the windows. He looks tired. His skin still harbours the sandy paleness of the ailed, although she has been assured by both Hannibal and his Dr. Sutcliffe that he is responding well to the treatment. “Would be a good assignment for them. Scavenging for information without any lead. That’s pretty much what they’ll have to do on a daily basis once they become agents.”

“You sure you want your students snooping around the hospital?”

“They’ll find this place eventually, whether you give them the incite to snoop or not. Might as well make it an educational experience.”

They share a quick, secretive smile, before Will breaks the eye contact again.

With the late hour, the room is not as crowded as usual, only a couple people strewn about, talking in hushed voices. Most of the sound comes from the middle of the room, where a fierce game of bridge is taking place. Will’s eyes slide over every person coming and going, with an ease that speaks of habit rather than a conscious act. They barely come back to her, settling on her chin a
second before they resume their inventory on the room.

Alana smiles at the young nurse who nods a greeting at them as he passes by their table, arms laden with a plaid blanket. Will’s eyes follow him as he goes to offer it to one of the residents in a wheelchair, seated at the bridge table.

“Is there… anything I could do to help fend off the boredom?” Alana asks. She could probably offer to come more often, even though her schedule is already pretty tight. She has to juggle between Georgetown and Quantico, her PhD students, her own practice, and Abigail, but she could maybe find a way to squeeze in a few more visits to Will during the week.

Will considers her offer, which she is glad for, having half expected him to just brush her with with the usual, ‘I’m fine’ attitude.

“I miss my dogs.”

Of course. Alana smiles, fond. She does not know what she expected. “I can’t bring your dogs in the hospital.”

“I know. I’m not asking you to sneak them in. I just… miss them.”

“They’re doing fine, if that’s any consolation. I went with Hannibal to feed them the other day, he’s taking good care of them,” she assures him, recalling the morning a few days ago.

The entire experience was surreal. Whereas she was prepared for the dogs’ excitement at her presence, as she is accustomed to by now, she certainly did not expect the ease with which Hannibal commanded them. She knows he has been tending to them maybe twice a day—at most—for the past few weeks, which gave them some time to bond, but she was still left to wonder whether he has been doing this for longer than just the past few weeks.

Maybe the past few months. Since he met Will.

Alana mentally berates herself. Now is not the time to speculate on their affair.

Something shifts in Will’s gaze at the mention of Hannibal. “I know.”

“Pretty sure he’s also grooming them behind your back,” she adds jokingly, leaning in over the table.

“Oh, yeah, he does,” Will says, entirely serious, to which she hopes he did not notice her baffled expression. “They shed a lot less when brushed regularly. I told him to just get them to a dog grooming service, but he wouldn’t listen. This is unbecoming apparently.”

Alana schools her features just before he turns to her again. “He really grooms them all? All seven of them?” She tries to imagine Hannibal seated on the floor, brush in hand, surrounded by seven dogs and a mountain of dog hair. The picture is… unsettling, to say the least.

Will shrugs again, a note of amusement tinting his voice. “So he told me. I don't think he was lying.”

“That's, uh, very kind of him.”

The corner of Will’s mouth twitches up before he can stop it. “He's really sweet when he wants to be.”
Alana forces a smile on her face, silencing the little voice screaming in her head. There is a lull in the conversation as the door swings open again as a little child barely tall enough to reach the handle storms into the room and towards the table where the fierce bridge war is still ongoing, and climbs into the lap of one of the men. A woman—probably the mother going by the resemblance with the child—follows him inside, closing the door behind her, a lot calmer than the little boy.

Alana lets her gaze travel over the room, sliding over the various shelves and tables laden with magazines. “If you want me to bring you books or journals, you just say the words.” She has accumulated a considerable loot over the years as a med student and then when she started writing her own papers. “Not much forensics, but I have psychology and medicine related stuff.” Criminal profiling being very interdisciplinary, she knows Will reads papers from a plethora of fields, including those two.

Will lets out a dry chuckle. “It’s fine, thanks. Hannibal saw to it that I have full access to anything psychology and medicine related. So did Dr. Du Maurier.”

“Dr. Du Maurier. Your psychiatrist?”

“I’ve only ever had one appointment with her,” Will says, shrugging. “I don’t know if I can really call her my psychiatrist.”

“Well, I hope this one appointment was worth it.”

“It was certainly enlightening.”

They both turn to the door as it clicks open, and a nurse comes in pushing a wheelchair. When she notices them, she smiles and waves at them—at Will. Alana arches an eyebrow when Will actually waves back at her—well, more like, briefly raises his hand—his mouth stretched in a faint smile. The nurse pushes the woman in the wheelchair further in the room, and disappears from Alana’s line of sight, towards the table where the pineapple debate is nearing its climax.

She starts at the loud screech of a chair scraping against the floor. Looks like lady in the wheelchair is siding up with the man on the ‘pineapple pizza is an abomination’ front. The first woman is now out her seat, fiercely defending her opinion, with force hand gestures. The young nurse tries her best to calm the situation.

“Any progress on the case with Gideon?” Will asks.

Alana turns back to him. “Still following our leads,” she says vaguely, unwilling to talk about cases with him. She would rather he focuses on his recovery.

Will considers her answer, tapping his fingers on the armrest, eyes still trained on the pineapple discourse table. “If it’s any help, I see the Ripper but I don’t… feel the Ripper. He’s an artist. This is plagiarisms.”

Alana frowns. “You see the Ripper? What do you mean? Did Hannibal bring you the reports?”

“Nope.”

“Did he visit you on Jack’s behalf?” she soldiers on, leaning forward to try and catch his gaze again.

He looks back at her at the tone, eyebrows pinched together. “You’re angry.”

Alana presses her lips together. Will is not the one she should direct her anger at. She is going to
have a long conversation with Hannibal though. “I just think you should focus on your recovery,” she says, her voice gentle.

“I don’t have much to do here aside from sleeping and eating and being injected all kinds of meds. I wouldn’t say no to a little intellectual stimulation.”

“Intellectual stimulation does not have to be working on murders.”

He gives her another dry smile. “I’m not exactly in top form to grade papers.”

“But you are to profile murderers?” The words are much harsher than she intended them to and Will arches an eyebrow. She takes a quiet breath, tucks a strand of her behind her ear to break the eye contact. Her eyes settle on his hands instead, where is thumb is slowly twisting his wedding band. Behind her, the trio agrees to disagree and stops snapping at each other for a more civil conversation. “Sorry, I thought you would have… turned this to your advantage and taken some distance from work. At least for a while.”

Still playing with his ring, Will stares at her for a long while. “Don’t go too hard on Hannibal. I was the one who nagged him about the case until he spilled,” he says eventually, “Pathological curiosity, you know?” He offers a small smile, in the hope that it will alleviate her.

It does not work. “Please, Will, if he—or Jack or anybody—is making you work while you’re hospitalised you don’t have to protect them.”

“I promise, Alana, I’m not covering anyone and nobody’s forcing me to do anything.”

Alana stares at him, and eventually nods, accepting to drop the subject. Will is not the one she should be reprimanding.

Brian breezes through the lab, eyes skimming over the reports that were dumped in his arms as soon as he arrived. Despite not looking up from the files, he does not bump into anybody, the other people working here deftly sidestepping him, used to the routine. Brian barely answers their greetings, swiftly making his way to Beverly’s workstation. He pushes the glass door open with his shoulder.

“Bev, do you have the results of Jack’s—”

He looks up and stops in his track in the doorway, as everyone turns to him. His eyebrows arch up in surprise at Dr. Lecter’s unexpected presence.

“Mr. Zeller. Good morning,” the doctor says, offering him a polite smile and inclining his head slightly in greeting.

Brian mirrors the movement by reflex, still standing awkwardly in the entrance, one hand holding the side of the glass door. Shaking off the surprise, he lets it swing shut and enters the lab. “Dr. Lecter. I wasn't told you would be working with us today.”

“I was informed this morning. I have to apologise for coming unannounced. Dr. Bloom had to cover for another colleague in Georgetown, so Agent Crawford asked me if I could come in her stead.” He briefly looks at Beverly, seated at her work station, her back to the computer monitor.
“And Mrs. Katz wanted to know details on the reason for Will's absence.”

Brian frowns. “You made it here on such short notice? Isn’t your practice in Baltimore?” Traffic is at its worse right now. Brian almost did not make it in time, as someone apparently left their head on the pillow and with it their eye-hand coordination, making them miss the red light and birthing a monstrous traffic jam probably all the way to DC. Dr. Lecter could not have made it all the way from Baltimore so quickly.

“Dr. Lecter replaces Will for his lectures,” Jimmy quips up, leaning against the table in the middle of the room. “He was supposed to give one this morning, until Jack called.”

Right, right. Replacing Will. Brian clears his throat awkwardly, tapping his fingers on the back of the reports. “So, uh, Will?”

“Is currently hospitalised, for an indefinite amount of time.”

They have been told as much by Jack. “Did he tell you what happened?” Knowing the man and how reserved—borderline secretive—he is, he probably did not give any detail, and will just reappear at work one day as though nothing happened. But asking does not hurt.

“Encephalitis. It was diagnosed just in time it seems. He’ll be bedridden for another three weeks at the very least.”

Maybe not as reserved then. “You went to see him? How is he?”

“It might take a while, but he is responding well to the treatment. He’s expected to make a substantial recovery,” Dr. Lecter says. “He was put in an induced coma for a week.” Brian winces internally. Beverly winces externally. That must be something serious if they had to resort to that. “But he woke up a few days ago.”

“Is he at Johns Hopkins?” Beverly asks.

“No. He was admitted in Noble Hills, in Baltimore.”

Brian bites down on a whistle just in time. “Really? Isn’t it like a high class private hospital?” He knows Will would not want to stay in Johns Hopkins after what happened with Mushroom Dude there, but still. There are plenty of other options a lot less expensive that Noble Hills he could have chosen. And also a lot closer to his house in Wolf Trap. Brian hopes that Will has a solid insurance, if he is staying there for a month.

“It was on my recommendation. An old colleague of mine who is specialised in autoimmune encephalitis works there. It is a rather small clinic, and a lot less crowded than public hospital. I thought Will would prefer a place without too many people coming and going.”

Well, Brian hopes Dr. Lecter is helping Will pay the bill then.

“Would be good to go see him,” Beverly says, “He must be bored out of his mind all alone there.”

Brian nods slightly. He can relate. It is hellish, being confined to a hospital bed with nothing to do but think about your life going downhill.

Heavy footsteps echo behind them, and they all turn as one to look at the entrance of the lab. They straighten up as Jack comes in, looking ready to murder someone. Brian steps aside, going to sit on the chair in the corner of the room, as Beverly swivels around to face her computer monitor again.
“You guys had better trace that call, and have a name and address ready.”

Beverly’s ears are still ringing from Jack’s last outburst, just before he stormed out of the room. She chances a look at Z, who looks everything like a chastised kid. Beverly suspects she does not look any better. She guesses that is an automatic response after working for so long with Jack.

She takes a deep breath and swivels back on her chair, trying to trace the call for the sixth time. She has to find something. She knows how important this is, for Jack, who is working his ass off despite Mrs. Crawford needing him now more than ever, but also for Will. Beverly knows Miriam Lass was one of his students. She is glad he is not working on this case. Despite his aloof demeanour, she knows he takes his job to heart. Lass must have been as hard a blow to him as it was to Jack.

She glances at the door at the sound of footsteps, just in time to see Z leaving for his own workstation, Jimmy not too far behind.

Rather than leaving as well, Dr. Lecter comes to stand beside her, eyes trained on the numbers flickering on the screen. “You said they never found a body for the last Ripper victim?”

Beverly nods. “Miriam Lass, a trainee who went after the Ripper. And never came back.”

“An agent in training.”

“Yeah. Her disappearance almost cost Jack his place as head of the BAU. He pulled her out of her classroom, let her investigate on her own. Broke the rules for her.” Beverly does not know exactly what happened, aside from what the administration deigned to reveal and the bits and pieces she gathered from Jack, in between tirades of guilt and broken confessions. She had been astonished, to see this mountain of a man shaken to the core. “He was… devastated. Wasn’t pretty to see.”

“I can imagine.”

Much like the five times before, the sixth search turns up empty. No electronic trace of any call to Jack’s house at 2:47 a.m. More out of desperation than anything, she tries again. “I didn't work with Will back then, but it must have been terrible for him, losing a student.”

“Indeed.”

Will Graham is both everything and nothing Donald expected.

The rudeness and crass attitude, he had braced himself for, having heard much about it, in excruciating details even, and been subjected to a diluted version of it himself—he is not forgetting that refuted note so soon. The quiet, insistent scrutiny, the razor sharp eyes, the ease with which he reads him, Donald was not prepared for. Needles of discomfort prickle his nape whenever he has to go in Graham’s room to check his vitals. In the last week, since he woke up, Donald has come to dread these daily five minutes, even though their conversations are kept to the routine questions
and a few poor attempts at small talk on Donald’s part.

He is still left to wonder what it is exactly in Will Graham that appealed to Hannibal. Surely being subjected to this unpleasant scrutiny several hours a day has to take a toll on him. Donald wishes Hannibal were here to act as a buffer more often. Graham usually keeps those razors trained on his husband whenever he is in the room, allowing Donald to breathe and do his work while they stab each other in silent conversations.

No such luck today.

Graham keeps staring at a spot on Donald’s sleeve. An almost unnoticeable smear, from this morning when his son decided breakfast was not acceptable. “My youngest’s latest feat,” Donald say, another attempt at small talk—doctors are nothing if not persistent. “Apparently I’m feeding him all wrong. Either not fast enough, or he spits his food at me. There’s no in between.” He offers a smile, which he knows has very little chance of being returned. Persistence, persistence.

And indeed, Graham only gives him a once over. Again. Donald feels the uncomfortable need to readjust his tie, fiddle with the army of pens in his pocket, tap his fingers on the clipboard. Do something, anything, to redirect Graham’s gaze from his head.

“Two boys,” Graham says after a moment, “Still young. Less than ten years old.” He tilts his head to the side, considering, “Less than eight?”

Here it comes. Donald arches an eyebrow, half impressed, half apprehensive. “Indeed. My oldest is six, youngest is almost two.”

“And you’re expecting another.”

This breaks the ‘uncomfortable’ frontier and jumps right into ‘disturbing’ territory. “Did you read my profile?”

Donald tries to rationalise the whole thing. Graham probably overheard the nurses talking, or asked them directly about him. Maybe he mentioned it in passing one day during an exam, to fill the silence and lighten the mood. Worse case scenario, Graham has done some background research on him for whatever reason—maybe Donald was a suspect for a case at some point.

Graham shrugs lightly. “Just a feeling.”

Or this. Professional curiosity overrides the discomfort. It truly is a shame that Hannibal wants to keep that fascinating mind to himself. “Quite an impressive feeling,” he mutters.

Graham does not answer, his eyes finally sparing Donald, settling on the wall opposite the bed instead. Donald almost sighs in relief. He jots down a couple more notes, glad to see that Graham’s condition is still stable.

“How is it like? Raising children.”

He pauses at the unexpected question, and lifts his gaze from the clipboard to Graham again. Bad idea. The razors are back against his throat.

“Like working in the ER,” he says, “It’s a 24/7 job where you have to be available at every moment. They wake you up at ungodly hours of the night, need extensive monitoring, and you have to make sure everybody eats their veggies and nobody hurts themselves in the bathroom.”

The corner of Graham’s mouth tick up, the closest he got to a smile since he woke up.
Taking it as an encouragement, Donald continues, “Sometimes—often, actually—they decided to paint their room with feces because they were bored, or they start a fire in their easy bake oven or they rip their diaper and run around screaming, “I’m naked don’t look at me!” while there are guests in the house,” he says, waving his pen in circular motions, his voice tinted with fond exasperation. “One day you get a call from school telling you your child has been expelled because they stole all the other children’s toys and hid them. And you spent the next week scrambling to find another school. Sometimes you have—” Donald cuts himself off, realising that he has started to ramble and sneaks a glance at Graham.

The man’s gaze is as sharp as ever, the corner of his mouth ticked up in a knowing smile. “Administration nightmare. I can relate.”

Donald takes the victories as they come—however small they are. “And that’s not the worse.” Donald’s eyes shift to the window, recounting, “You have nightmares about letting go of their hands in a crowd, and then you’re not even fazed when you have to have their jaw wired shut because they decided bike handlebars are extra features.”

Graham winces visibly. “Sounds hellish.”

“At times it is,” Donald nods, more at ease with Graham’s gaze, now less piercing, tinged with amusement and a hint of worry. “At times it’s heaven. There’s nothing quite like going home to children latching onto your legs and babbling about their day, or waking up on sunday mornings to them sneaking in your bed for snuggles.” Donald taps the end of the pen to the clipboard to click it shut, and puts it back into his pocket. “The only things you can really have fears about is… having them brutally abducted. Or falling ill with an incurable disease. All the rest, the vomit projected in your eyes, the diaper cream on the carpet, the pool of urine right beside the toilet…” Donald shrugs lightly, making a vague gesture with his hand, “it’s all part of the process.”

Graham’s gaze becomes distant again. “Not sure Hannibal would want to deal with this.”

Donald is vaguely embarrassed when it only now occurs to him that of course Graham is asking because the Graham-Lecter household is planning an for addition. “How long have you been married?”

“Almost a decade.”

“Almost a decade,” Donald echoes, not quite fast enough to hide the surprise. His wife and he started talking children within months of their marriage and had their first within two years. Granted, they have been together since their residency, but still. Ten years is a long time. “And you’ve never tried…?”

Graham shrugs, whatever that means. “Still debating whether our lifestyle is fitted for child rearing.”

Donald nods in understanding. They also spend countless sleepless nights overthinking whether being doctors would prevent them from spending enough time with their children—both of them terrified that it might end in child abandonment. It was months of planning, and working out schedules ahead to make sure one of them could always be present for them. “It’s a lot of responsibilities, being a parent. Children are extremely vulnerable, you need to ensure their health, their safety, their well being. Provide love, support and guidance. You go into this unprepared, and it’s your child that will suffer the most.”
Isaac tries his best to focus on the presentation. Really he is. But Dr. Lecter is making it very difficult for him to keep his eyes on the giant projector and the disturbing pictures displayed on it.

When the administration told them Pr. Graham would be replaced for an unknown length of time, Isaac thought his life over, right until he walked into the lecture hall to Dr. Totally Banging Graham conversing with Nell and Quinn about... something—Isaac could not hear a single word over the chorus of ‘oh fuck’ in his head.

Isaac’s eyes keep sliding over the improbable combination of patterns of his suit, which nobody should have been able to pull off. The man looks gorgeous in it; the lines of his jacket accentuating his broad shoulders and trim waist. God, what Isaac would give to bite into those biceps. Too bad he is also married. Although that does not seem to be much of a problem for either him or Pr. Graham—Vica is still trying to convince him that one encounter is not enough basis to draw any conclusion on the nature of their relationship, but Isaac’s instinct has never failed him before, and right now it is screaming at him that the two men bone on the regular. Vica is just in denial, blinded by her infatuation with Mrs. Graham.

“—not only does this identity serve as a refuge from traumatic memories, it also provides the individual with an inner world unlimited by moral and social norms—”

After sweeping over the lecture hall once more, the man’s eyes plant themselves in his, and Isaac has to avert his gaze to his notes again. He internally slaps himself, and forces his brain to focus on the words coming out of the doctor’s mouth rather than their plumpness—god, he would die for a taste of them. But he can’t fall behind when his dream career is right at his fingertips.

For the remainder of the lecture, he manages to keep his eyes off Dr. Lecter’s lithe figure pacing in front of the desk.

Much like with Pr. Graham, it is too bad that his good looks do not counteract the negative aspects of his teaching. Their methods are quite similar. Whereas Dr. Bloom keeps a dialogue with them, encouraging them to react and interact, Pr. Graham and Dr. Lecter do not leave any room for discussion. Both follow their outline—very, very detailed, fortunately or unfortunately—without interruption, giving them just enough time to jot down all the information being dumped on them. Unforgiving and ultra selective; you assimilate things the second they are given to you or you die. Major throwback to the the traumatic years Isaac literally bled for his forensic sciences degree.

However, contrary to Pr. Graham, Lecter does answer questions once his presentation is over—massive improvement to the glass wall Pr. Graham dresses between them once he shuts down his laptop. Massive improvement number two, Dr. Lecter actually answers mails and welcomes students in the classroom outside of lectures.

And here Isaac has it. His sophisticated, charming, soft spoken gentleman teacher who would probably offer you tea and biscuits when you came to him for questions. This overrides every single negative aspect of his teaching. A damn shame that this setting is only temporary.

At the end of the lecture, Vica and a couple of students linger behind to talk to Dr. Lecter, forming a little semi circle around him. The man is certainly a lot more approachable than Pr. Graham, his body language open, and making eye contact with everyone involved in the discussion.

Isaac stuffs his notes in his backpack, and follows Mel to the desk to sneak into the conversation. They makes it just in time to hear Nell finish, “—whereas the DID theory can better explain the long cool-off periods, and the transition between fantasy and action.”
“That is true,” Dr. Lecter replies, nodding once. “However, while it has its advantages, the DID theory also fails to explain the complexity of human behaviour. Serial murderers don’t exist in a social and cultural vacuum; their habits, personality, and conscious will be affected by powerful surroundings. The most salient proof being the prominence of serial murderers in the US compared to other countries.”

Oof, the man does not mince his words. Cue a couple polite smiles and subtle glances between the assembled students, as they try to prompt someone, anyone, to say something.

Apparently feeling magnanimous, Dr. Lecter says, “I’ll have to defer to Pr. Graham’s expertise for a deeper approach on the sociological side of things. When he will be back at the Academy.”

Isaac decides it is the perfect moment to butt in. “Speaking of, do you know what happened to him? We weren’t given much information on his absence.”

“The FBI is surprisingly good at keeping secrets.”

Another round of uneasy smiles and glances.

“There are some rumours about him being hospitalised,” Nells says, shifting her notebooks on her hip. “But nothing about the reason why.”

It is certainly odd that the doctor was called in to replace their professor. Usually, Dr. Bloom was the one who covered for him if he found himself unable to assure his lectures. He will probably be out for a long while, if the administration had to call in reinforcement. Dr. Bloom could not take over all his lectures for an extended period of time, since she also has to work in Georgetown.

“As per your professor’s request, any information on his condition or whereabouts are to be kept confidential,” Dr. Lecter says, to their disappointment. “He’s a very private man.”

“Do you know which hospital he’s been admitted to?”

“Again, I’m afraid I can’t communicate the address.” Dr. Lecter offers them a somewhat apologetic smile.

Nell shrugs lightly. “Just wondering if you knew the hospital’s policy on gifts.”

Will closes his eyes, and inhales deeply, takes in the scent of incense and burning candles, alight with silent prayers. The smell of melted wax carries quiet whispers, hopes for a miracle, for salvation, for a sliver of happiness in the bleakness of bone crushing days. He holds his breath, listen to their voices.

The bells ring in the background, followed by the flight of dove, cutting through the quiet of the chapel. Will opens his eyes.

Hannibal’s feet make no sound on the old stone of the floor. Will feels his presence all the same. He turns on his heels, the fabric of his suit hissing softly. Hannibal, radiant under the golden light of the chapel, stands before him right over the skull graven on the floor. Will eyes are drawn to the reds and roses of the peonies sitting demure in the crook of his arm, the stems held in a silver ribbon. The flowers make a bright contrast to the pale colours of his suit; the only witnesses to
their first step in the new life they will weave together.

Will blinks. “Oh no, you didn’t,” he says, one corner of his mouth twitching up involuntarily. “Hannibal, you promised you wouldn’t.”

Hannibal smiles at him from where he is standing in the doorway of the hospital room, one arm laden with flower bouquets. “And I kept my promise. These are from your students.” He crosses the threshold, footsteps quiet as he comes to stand beside Will’s bed.

Will extends a hand when he gets close enough, and plucks one of the bouquets out of his arms. A little handwritten get-well card has been inserted amongst the flowers, the cream colour standing out amidst the bright flowers. In the dim lighting of the room, he can barely make out the message written in pale green. Rest something something speedy recovery something something brighter days.

Hannibal sets the rest of the flowers on the table beside him, over the neat stacks of journals. Will quickly inspects the compositions of the bouquets. Roses, daisies, hydrangeas...

“Sweet Williams,” he says, smirking. “They’re as subtle as you.” He snickers at the unimpressed look Hannibal sends him.

Will is aware that some students are... interested in him, although thankfully none has tried to make a move on him so far. He has learned pretty early on that a wedding ring is nowhere near as effective a deterrent as a wall of coldness and indifference. A couple of the students are quite persistent though. He also heard some of them mention a wife and a night in Baltimore—someone probably saw him with Bedelia. He is still debating whether he should tell Hannibal that he is now married to his psychiatrist.

Hannibal fishes out two small boxes, one brown and the other dark grey, from his briefcase, and hands them to Will.

“And these are…?” Will asks, turning them in his hands. No labels on the boxes.

“More gifts from your students.” Hannibal moves to pull the chair near the wall closer to the bed, and unfastens the button of his suit jacket before he settles down gracefully, folding his hands over his crossed legs. He regards Will with an easy smile, clearly amused by the effusion of concern from his students.

The brown box contains three little cylinders, and the grey box two small tubes and a dispenser. Will takes one item from each box, inspecting them. He arches an eyebrow at the labels printed on the containers. “Is that... hand lotion? And lip balm?” And both products of quite expensive brands too.

“A very concerned student who had a couple of unpleasant experiences with hospitals herself. May I?” Hannibal reaches out for the boxes and Will pushes them towards him so he can examine their content.

“Should tell them I also had several unpleasant experiences with hospitals myself.” Will uncaps one of the tube, brings it to his nose, pleased to find that the smell is rather faint. He places each product back in their boxes and Hannibal puts them on the table, next to the flowers.

Will blinks. He reclines more comfortably on the couch of Hannibal’s office, readjusting the pillow under his head. “By the way, did Alana give you a dressing down?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it a dressing down.” Hannibal sits down beside him on the edge of the
couch, close enough for their hips to touch. He swipes non existent dust from his leg and folds his hands over his lap. “It was more of a vigorous reminder not to mention cases to you while you’re recovering.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Are you sorry for my mishap or for orchestrating it?”

Will grins, flashing his teeth. Hannibal does not quite roll his eyes at him. “So little faith in your own husband.”

“With good reason.”

Will chuckles. He would have loved to see it, Alana going off at Hannibal while he feigns remorse. He sinks deeper into the pillow, clasping his hands over his stomach. “Any progress with the case?” he asks, to which Hannibal raises an eyebrow. “I won’t tell Alana this time, promise.”

Another sceptical look from Hannibal before he says, resigned, “Jack decided to work with Freddie Lounds, to push the Ripper into becoming visible.”

“So I heard.” Jack is getting desperate if he is willing to risk another murder just to make sure the Ripper is not in a hospital for the criminally insane. But this is not a bad idea. The Ripper is a narcissist. Will blinks, and brings the tablet closer to his face, ruffles through tabs until he finds the article he was looking for. He reads aloud, “—a killer who’s eluded the FBI for years and has baffled their most ‘gifted’ profilers. That serial killer? None other than the Chesapeake Ripper. This would explain why the Ripper has been silent for more than two years’. Nice. I’m sure the real Ripper loved that one.”

“A very unsubtle and brutish way to force his hand.”

Will blinks and folds his empty hands over his stomach again. “It might work. Ripper would probably make sure everyone knows he is being plagiarised,” Will says. Hannibal averts his gaze to the fire crackling on the other side of the room. “You talked to Gideon, right? Your thoughts?”

“No trace of artistry in him. And a strong penchant for shock value.” Hannibal says, his tone steady and composed. Might as well have been a sneer.

Will snorts, endeared. He reaches for Hannibal’s hand, brings it to his mouth to press a kiss on the back of his fingers, a little reassurance. Nothing good comes out of a sulky Hannibal.

“Phuong told me—that’s night shift nurse—she told me someone came here looking for you,” he says, keeping Hannibal’s hand warm between both of his, held over his chest. “They didn’t let him in, so he prowled the parking lot until they threatened to call the police.”

“She was probably referring to Franklyn. He has been following me around lately.”

“Mr. Nine Referrals?”

“Himself.”

Will blinks. He leans forward and taps the end of his pen on the desk of the office, stretching his legs under the desk. “I’m starting to understand why so many psychiatrists kicked him out of their practice.” He places the pen behind his ear and grabs Mr. Nine Referrals notes from the piles of black notebooks arranged neatly on the side of the desk—Hannibal’s patient notes. He opens it on a random page. Blank. He turns several more pages. All blank.
Hannibal smirks at him from where he is sitting in one of the armchairs. “Ever heard of the Hippocratic Oath, my darling?”

Will throws his pen at Hannibal, which he catches easily. “I called dibs on the sass today, didn’t I?”

“Apologies. Returning it now.”

“Forgiven.” Will shuts the useless notes, and places them back with the other equally useless books. Hannibal stands from the armchair and goes to stand near the fireplace. Will swivels the chair to keep him in his line of sight. The light of the flickering flames softens the sharp angles of his features, makes the shadows of his pale lashes dance on his cheekbones. Will reclines in the chair, enjoying the view.

“It seems a patient doctor relationship is not satisfactory to him.”

Will snorts. “Should I be worried?”

“Friends, Will. He wants to be friends.”

“Mhm. Did he ask you for your personal number yet? You know, for house calls.”

“William.”

When Will fails to hold back a chuckle, Hannibal gives him a scandalised look, chin tilted up, mouth pressed in a thin line.

“Sorry, sorry.” Will blinks and the soft glow of the fireplace turns back to the dim lighting of the hospital room. Deciding he has tormented him enough today, Will reaches for Hannibal’s hand again, presses a kiss to it, nuzzling his palm. Hannibal visibly—for Will anyway—relaxes under his gentling, the tight line of his shoulders unwinding slowly. “Stalking is ranking pretty high on the rude scale,” Will says, letting go of his hand.

“As long as he does not engage me in conversation at unfortunate times, it should not be a problem.”

“What happens when it becomes one?”

“We will think of something.”

Will tsks. “You will think of something. My brain is on fire, remember? I’m out of order.”

“All those beg to differ.” Hannibal tilts his chin at the piles of journals neatly stacked on the table, buried under the mountain of flowers. “But I take it you give me carte blanche.”

“Use it wisely.”

“When the cat’s away...”

“Careful there.” Will lifts a hand, presses a fingertip to the knot of Hannibal’s tie, feels it move ever so slightly when Hannibal swallows. “Don’t make me put you in a collar.”

“Wouldn't you love that?”

Will wraps his fingers around the tie, just under the knot and lets his hand slide over the soft material, not exercising any pressure until he reaches the very end. When he does, he tightens his
grip and gives a brief tug. “Wouldn’t you love that?”

“Too many mirror neurons.” Frederick reclines in his seat and clasps his hands on his lap. He glances at his wrist watch. It has been only been a couple of minutes since Alana left the office to go interview Gideon. “They’re supposed to help us socialise and go away, but it seems like he held onto his. Which makes socialising difficult.”

“A mild form of echopraxia,” Hannibal says.

“You’ve talked to him, right? Does he have a habit of taking on your speech pattern?”

“Sometimes. During intense conversations in particular.”

Frederick jolts in his seat when a deep groan echoes loudly, rattling the entire building. He lifts his gaze to the ceiling when the power goes out, and the emergency lighting flashes on. Hannibal pushes himself up from his seat, going for the door, and Frederick follows suit. Outside the office, a group of hospital security guards is running down the dark corridor, their silhouettes illuminated by the emergency lights.

Hannibal heads down the corridor as well, following the guards. Frederick watches him until he turns around the corner and disappears from his line of sight, before going back into his office, closing the door behind himself.

“Get away from her. Step away now.”

Alana waits calmly as the door of the cell opens again, and the security surrounding it step inside, pointing their guns at Gideon.

“Turn around. Lace your fingers behind your head.”

She watches as Gideon steps away from her, and lifts his arms, hands behind his head as instructed. The guards take him down and usher her outside of the cell, where Hannibal is waiting for her behind the group of hospital security.

“Power went out, and all the cells opened. He pulled me into his to protect me from the other patients,” she explains before he can ask. Looking down the corridor, she sees the other guards pushing the last patients back into their cells and closing the doors. “Would the real Chesapeake Ripper do that?”

“He might.”

They both look up when the lights flicker back on, and the bulb over each cell door shifts from red to green again.
After the meeting with Jack Crawford, Freddie makes her way towards Dr. Lecter’s lecture hall—or rather, his husband’s—rather than leaving the building. She timed the meeting so she could catch him at the end of his lecture. After a couple minutes of roaming the maze of corridors, she finds the right classroom, and patiently waits near the open door for the end of the presentation, leaning against the wall.

It only takes a few minutes until the first students start trickling out of the hall. Some of them send her curious looks, which she returns with charming smiles. Once the last students are out, she steps inside the dimly lit room. Lecter is tucking his notes in his briefcase, facing away from her.

“Ms. Lounds,” he says, momentarily looking over his shoulder. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Good afternoon, Dr. Lecter. I had a meeting with Agent Crawford, and I thought I might ask after your husband while I’m here.”

His briefcase clicks when he shuts it, and he turns on his heels. “I believe you saw him a couple days ago.”

Busted. Freddie does not let the surprise show on her face, her polite smile firmly in place. It was probably the young little nurse from the night shift who spilled. Poor little thing should have learned to hold her tongue. Terrible things happen to little things who can't hold their tongue. Things like the director of the hospital they are working at learning about the nightly activities that pay the rent when multiple part time jobs can't.

Lecter drapes his coat in the crook of his arm and takes his briefcase. “Shall we?” With a small movement of his arm he indicates the little corridor leading out of the hall. They walk out together.

“So kind of you to walk into his shoes,” she says, waiting as he locks the door behind them, and then following close as they make their way out of the building. “Taking over some of his lecture, replacing him to work on cases.”

“I was consulting for the FBI before Will has been hospitalised..”

“Yes, indeed. And see how well those cases worked out.”

“I would consider the resolution of the Shrike case a success.”

“You orphaned a young girl.”

“And stopped a killer in the process.”

“I’m sure Abigail Hobbs is grateful that her name is now associated with ‘daughter of a serial killer and cannibal—’”

Turning a corner, they almost run straight into a man—a trainee, going by his shirt—and Lecter grabs his upper arm before he can fall. Freddie recognises him as one of the students she saw coming out of the lecture hall a few minutes ago. The trainee apologises profusely, to which Lecter smiles before they both resume their walking, politely but curtly dismissing the man.

“Nothing to be done about this but to let the noise die down. People will forget about the Shrike eventually.” Lecter hastens his pace, probably eager to get to his car and get rid of her, and she has to almost jog to keep up with his long strides, her heels clicking sharply against the floor. The closer they get to the entrance, the more the corridors are crowded. The halls leading to the gates
are packed to the brim with people, most of them heading to what she can assume is a cafeteria. It is almost half past one, still a reasonable time for lunch break.

“She needs people to know the truth of what happened now.”

“Revisiting trauma can be of great therapeutic value, indeed.”

“She refuses to have a book published without your consent.” This recent development came as a surprise to Freddie, when she went to visit Abigail the previous week. Up until now, Abigail was only vaguely hesitant about publishing that book, and nowhere near as adamant about obtaining Graham and Lecter’s approval. And she clams up whenever Freddie inquires about the reasons for this sudden change.

“She knows how much we value our privacy.”

Freddie arches her eyebrows sceptically. “She changed her mind right after you took her back home.” Outside of the building, they make their way across a field of trainees. Several groups of trainees jogs by them, all wearing matching sweats. Some of them nod in Lecter’s direction in greeting. “If I remember correctly, your husband hurt his hand right after you came back from Minnesota.”

“Correct.”

“How coincidental, that he’d sport an injury right as Abigail decides she absolutely needs your accord.”

“If you really need to know, he injured his hand while gutting a fish. A little mishap that can happen to any fisherman. Surely you already know about his favoured pastime?” he says, his tone tinged with accusation.

She offers him an easy smile, unaffected at having been found out. As a journalist she is only doing her job. And curiosity is fundamental to her job. Of course she had to investigate why Abigail changed her mind so suddenly. And find what the Graham-Lecters are hiding.

Lecter stops in his track and turns to face her. “It is lovely conversing with you Ms. Lounds but I’m afraid we’ll have to save this discussion for another time,” he says, ever so polite. “We have yet to have you for dinner, I believe. Although it’ll have to be postponed as well, considering the current circumstances.”

“Of course, there is no rush. I wish your husband a quick recovery,” she says, offering one last polite smile.

“What was Miriam Lass looking into?”

“Medical records. If the Ripper was a surgeon, she thought he might have treated one of his victims.” Beverly stuffs her hands into her jacket to keep them warm as they make their way to the abandoned building. Several agents are already here, most of them either making phone calls nears the SUVs, or investigating the area, forming little groups near the entrance.

“They retraced her steps,” Dr. Lecter says.
Beverly shrugs lightly. “The ones they could find. She made a jump somewhere they couldn’t explain. Much like Will.” When he sees them, Jack steps away from the door of the building to meet them. “Every surgeon that came into contact with a Ripper victim has been thoroughly vetted and or currently under observation.” Thinking of it now, Dr. Lecter might have heard about it from his colleagues at Johns Hopkins.

“Including Dr. Gideon.”

“Dr. Gideon was not in my bedroom. The Chesapeake Ripper was,” Jack says when they reach him. He fishes his phone out of his coat pocket. “The last call let something the others didn’t. A phone number.” He presses call.

Hannibal finds Will in his stream. He knows Will can feel him, but still does not spare him a single glance, eyes resolutely set on the line, chin tilted down to hide his face in the shadow of his cap. Hannibal stays on the bank, denied entrance.

He blinks, steps inside the hospital room, closes the door with a quiet click. He walks to the middle of the room, studies Will’s form seated at the table, and the strained line of his shoulders. He does not acknowledge Hannibal’s presence, gaze fixed on the window. There is not much to see through the small sliver between the thin curtains, the garden deserted at this late hour. The silence in the room is only disturbed by the soft pitter patter of the rain hitting the windowpane, and the quiet tapping of Will’s index finger on the wood of the table.

Hannibal steps closer, and Will’s eyes flicker to him, a sheen of cold fury shrouding the bright blues of his irises. Hannibal stops in his track and Will focuses back on the window. Hannibal observes the slow rise and fall of Will’s shoulders as he breathes, waits until the tight line of his jaw relaxes. Just an inch.

“Did Alana come visit you today?”

“No. Beverly did.” Will’s voice is as cold as his demeanour, and sends an unpleasant shiver crawling up Hannibal’s spine.

“Ms. Katz.”

“She told me what happened at the observatory.”

Hannibal’s fingers twitch on his coat, draped in the crook of his arm. He does not answer. He expected Will’s anger.

The tension hangs heavy in the room, a hand pressed to Hannibal’s throat, ready to snap it at any moment. Each second ticking by, each raindrop dying against the window is another needle in the back of his neck. Hannibal ignores the feeling, focuses on Will instead, hunched over the table.

Will knows how to wear pain with dignity. There is pride in the scars it leaves, triumph in the stories they tell. And for all the ones they share, time has laid a patina of tenderness. Illness, on the other hand, is unbecoming of him. Exhaustion paints him frail, turns his skin thin and sickly pale. His frame seems so much smaller in the robe wrapped loosely around his shoulders. He is not losing weight anymore, but he has yet to regain any of what he has already lost. The shadows under his eyes are deep, his skin stretched tight over his cheekbones. The warm scent of hope never quite
manages to hide the smell of defeat illness spreads on his skin.

Anger, however. Anger suits him beautifully. It exalts his complexion, sharpens the blade of his
gaze. It bleeds the scent of burning incense. Will’s anger is a beast, ferocious, magnificent, never
tamed and never allayed. Hannibal can almost hear the thoughts roaring in Will’s mind, see them
dance in the pyre of his eyes.

“I didn’t think you’d stoop so low,” Will says, breaking the silence of the room.

Hannibal arches an eyebrow, torn from his musings. He straightens his back ever so slightly, holds
his chin high. “Stoop? If ever I stoop, Will, I promise you will know.”

“You must think yourself clever.” Will plants his eyes in Hannibal’s, pushes away from the table to
lean back against the chair, lifts his chin in an echo of Hannibal's earlier movement. “Yet here you
are, dancing right into his palm.”

“And he still cannot get the upper hand.” Hannibal has played this game time and again, and so far
always come out victorious.

Will narrows his eyes, not bothering to hide the accusation screaming in his pupils. “You didn’t
have to involve her. You didn’t have to be so… petulant. He’s not rude to you, is he?”

“He is to you.”

“He’s rude to everyone working under him.”

“Is it a reason to excuse his behaviour?”

“If you had an ounce of respect for me, you’d stop trying to fight my battles. For one who prides
himself on his self discipline, you could sure use some impulse control.”

Hannibal’s jaw clenches at the affront, but he forgive him his condescension. He may not regret his
actions, but he knows he deserves Will’s anger. “Turn a blind eye to his abusive behaviour if you
please. I won't.”

“Abusive behaviour,” Will echoes, smiling sweetly, his tone not quite a sneer. “How generous of
you, to defend my honour.”

“He overstepped your boundaries, disregarded your health. He kept pushing you in the face of
glaring symptoms. Would you have waited until he broke you?”

The façade collapses. Will’s eyes darken. He clicks his tongue in distaste, averts his gaze briefly,
lips pulled back in a snarl. “Your hypocrisy knows no bounds, does it? You broke me. Twice. And I
rebuild myself from the ground. Each. Fucking. Time.” He presses his lips together, inhales
sharply, reins the anger in. “Isn’t it why you chose me in the first place? A little teacup that gathers
itself up however many times you shatter it.”

Before he can catch himself, Hannibal's fingers twitch minutely, inward, reaching for the scalpel
hidden inside his sleeve in an automatic gesture. It does not escape Will's scrutiny. His eyes dart to
Hannibal's hand, before bearing into his again, brilliant in their rage, now a perfect mirror of his
own.

Will huffs out a dry laugh, eyes flashing with malice. “Take it, darling. Take my life. It's yours. It's
been yours since you slipped that ring on my finger. A pretty leash for my ‘beautiful mind’,” he
spits out the two last words, barely more than a whisper yet ringing loud in the stillness of the
Hannibal sets his mouth in a thin line. A shame that after all those years, Will still despises his extraordinary gift. “A weapon has no need for a leash, does it?”

“I wasn’t foolish enough to lock myself unarmed in the den of the beast.”

“Sweet, lovely lamb,” Hannibal croons, his tongue deceptively mellow around the words, “Underneath your sinless coat lies the cruellest beast. You had no qualm savaging anything I dared surrender. How many more sacrifices shall I make to appease your wrath?”

“How many more sacrifices shall I make?” Will snaps back, scathing. “Nothing ever sates your appetite. You’ll tear the flesh off my bones and still crave the marrow. You want me to believe that this,” he gesture at the space between the two of them, “means anything to you when you crush everything we build. If you want this to stop, then make it stop. Better yet, just go to the fucking courthouse. I’ve had enough of your backhanded compassion.”

*Neither of us can survive separation.*

“Always the wisest of us two, aren’t you? The sanest and the most virtuous. I can only imagine how great a satisfaction it must bring you to think that you’re the only one holding us together, the only one keeping us free. How much moral ground do you have on me? You make one fine martyr, William.”

“And you sure like to fancy yourself my gracious executioner. Don’t you know that it’s rude to play with your food?” Will smirks when Hannibal is not prompt enough to hide the minute narrowing of his eyes. The malicious glee disappears with his next words, replaced by righteous anger. “I’m tired of having to fight my way through your games and your deceptions. How can I trust you when you can’t even be honest with me?”

Hannibal feels more than he hears his own teeth grinding together, as his jaw clenches in an attempt at curbing the anger threatening to tear through his guts. When it won’t be allayed, he forces his jaw to unlock. “You would be the most suited to preach about honesty, wouldn’t you?” he says, low and hoarse, voice laced with cruel promises. “Remind me, my darling, which of us is constantly trying to convince himself of being a good man.”

Will sucks in a breath at the words. Hannibal waits for an answer he knows will not come. Will’s eyes fill up, beautiful in their hurting, the shine of tears replacing the sheen of anger. He catches himself, eyes narrowing, their flame forced back to life. The shroud of coldness that falls over Will’s gaze sends Hannibal back to a time when they were no more than ‘Officer Graham’ and ‘Dr. Lecter’ to each other.

Will opens his mouth. No words come out. He swallows. His throat clicks sharp and clear in the silence of the room. His lip quivers when he tries to speak once more. “Get out,” he whispers.

Their eyes meet one last time.

Hannibal turns on his heels.

Chapter End Notes
So it has come to my attention that this fic can no longer be considered a crack fic, and thus needs a real title. Suggestions anyone?

Also, credit where it’s due, thank you justlikeyouimagined, Niceven, Dormy and their wonderful children for all the parenting hell stories.
See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I see dear William couldn’t make it tonight. Again,” Thea says as soon as she gets within hearing range of Hannibal, and earns herself a smile.

When she gets close enough, he leans in to kiss both her cheeks, in true Parisian fashion. She has come to like this habit, amused at the way it never fails to elicit raised eyebrows from people unused to Hannibal’s manners. Carl, right on her heels gets a handshake before Hannibal directs his attention back to her.

“How is he doing?” she asks when the waitress goes to offer champagne to the other guests, “I hear he’s been working on a paper.”

Hannibal takes on a mock solemn tone. “I’m afraid I’m sworn to secrecy on the subject.”

“Not exactly appropriate for casual conversation, I admit,” she says, flashing him a knowing smile. That seems to surprise him and he raises an inquisitive eyebrow. “You know something.”

“Maybe.” Not that it is a secret. William usually does not mind talking about his researches when asked—depending on who is asking. However, given he has decided to write on the pathology of torture, she can understand that Hannibal would be reluctant to mention it. All the more reason for her to inquire about it, and see how he politely charms his way around it.
“He’s always had a keen interest in the human mind. Or rather, he’s been gifted with an uncanny ability to understand it,” he says, completely sidestepping the subject. Thea almost wants to roll her eyes. Seems like he is not in the mood to play tonight.

“One thing you two have in common,” she says. Hannibal tilts his head, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. The reaction is all too predictable. He does love to be reminded of their similarities, treasures them as scarce as they are. Though it may not be obvious how antipodal they are when they attend the opera together; William is surprisingly adaptable, more often than not donning on Hannibal’s mannerism to blend into their circles. “Maybe we’ll see him during your next dinner party. It’s been even longer since he’s last attended one.”

“Why not come over for dinner? He much prefers those to parties.”

“I’d rather you cook for us properly, which means dinner and a show. It’s the performance that gives it its charm.”

“Cannot force a feast, a feast must present itself. I can only wait for inspiration to come knocking,” he says, his eyes sweeping over their little group, and getting a round of polite smiles in return. His eyes catch onto a man making his way towards them, and immediately dart back to her.

“Fortunately, simple dinners aren’t slave to her whimsy.”

“Maybe I’ll reconsider then.” Of course she will accept. Who would not.

Hannibal takes a sip of his glass, his gaze subtly wandering back to the approaching man. Said man can barely conceal his excitement, eyes sparkling as they settle on Hannibal. It seems he has gained yet another admirer, though he obviously does not wish to speak to him, blatantly ignoring him even as he gets closer.

Undeterred the man keeps advancing on them until he is practically standing against Hannibal’s side, a wide, toothy grin directed at Hannibal—and again utterly ignored.

“I believe this young man is trying to get your attention.”

“—removal of organs and abdominal mutilations all hint at a suspect with anatomical and surgical knowledge.”

Jack arrives in the lecture hall just in time to see a photograph of Jeremy Olmstead, all the tools of his pegboard jutting from his corpse, turn into a picture of the Wound Man. He stands at the back of the entrance, waiting for the end of the lecture. Dr. Lecter walks back to the front of the desk, his eyes surveying the dark room before they land on Jack. He pauses.

“There is a distinctive brutality.”

Maintaining the eye contact, Dr. Lecter clicks on the remote and the next slide appears. Miriam.

An FBI trainee named Miriam Lass was investigating private medical records of all the known victims when she disappeared. She’s believed to be the ninth.

Dr. Lecter focuses back on the students, coldly and methodically exposing the circumstances of
Mam’s disappearance, and the events that transpired at the observatory. Jack stays until the end, does not allow himself to look away. This is his penance.

Several minutes later—or was it an eternity, it certainly felt like it—the screen turns to black and the lights flood back inside the hall. The reverent silence turns into a flurry of rustling papers, creaking chairs and shut laptops. Jack keeps to the entrance, nodding back at awed and intimidated trainees as they pass by him. A few students stop at the desk, exchanging a couple words with Dr. Lecter. He makes a show of sending brief looks in Jack’s direction, and soon the students take the hint and hurry out of the room. Jack finally steps into the lecture hall, joining Dr. Lecter at the desk.

“Jack, I’m sorry you had to hear this.”

“There’s nothing to apologise for, Dr. Lecter,” Jack says, waving his hand dismissively. “I didn’t get where I am by covering my ears.”

“No, indeed.” His eyes dart to the entrance, and Jack turns to see the last students disappear behind the corner. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I came to ask your insight on a case.”

“The Chesapeake Ripper has struck again?”

Jack nods. “There are… similarities. The victim was found in his hotel room bathroom. Abdominal mutilations and organ removal.” Z made it clear that the crime scene had Ripper written all over it, but something nagged at Jack’s mind. With Will in the hospital, and Alana in Georgetown, his next best option for a profile is Dr. Lecter.

The man considers his words. “You’re expecting other bodies after this one.”

“If it’s the Ripper, yes. At least two more bodies, and then nothing for months, maybe years. We’ll have a window to catch him and then that window will close.”

“And last time it closed, it costed you Miriam Lass.” It stings more than Jack cares to admit. He can only nod, not trusting his voice. “We best be on our way then,” Dr. Lecter says, turning to gather his notes and put them back into his briefcase.

“Surgery was performed and then un-performed. With bare hands. He clawed his sutures open,” Z says, gestures at said sutures on Jason Murray’s body, laid on one of the tables of the morgue. “Ripper took the kidney. Also tried to take the heart but was interrupted.” His fingers hover over the gash on the chest. “It’s intact. Traumatised, but intact.”

Jimmy stands at the table next to the corpse, where they spread the photographs of the crime scene. “Pieces of him were torn off from bed to bathroom, like breadcrumbs.” He grabs two of the photographs and hands them to Dr. Lecter.

Beverly watches as the man examines the evidence, his eyes inscrutable. He seems tense, his gaze harder than usual. At first she thought that the corpse was making him uncomfortable, but this is hardly the first time he comes down to the morgue. Chances are, consulting for Jack and helping Alana cover for Will’s lectures while still having to take care of his own practice is starting to take
its toll on the man.

“The surgery wasn’t performed in the hotel room,” he says eventually. “There would have been more blood.”

“If he’s moving his victims, he could be performing the mutilations in the same transport.”

Dr. Lecter picks a couple more photographs. Beverly throws a glance at Jack who is leaning against one of the empty tables. He does not look any better, brows furrowed and mouth pressed in a thin line, holding his breath as though waiting for his sentence.

“It’s not the Ripper. The crime scene doesn’t bear his signature.” Dr. Lecter places the photographs back on the table, and moves to the corpse, taking a closer look at the mutilations.

Jack releases a discreet breath—of relief or disappointment, she could not tell. Possibly both. Z’s look, though, is clearly disbelief. He opens his mouth, closes it. Beverly can practically hear the vehement rebuttal on the tip of his tongue but he stops himself. This is not Will. “Knife wounds are cuts, not stabs,” he starts to list off calmly, counting the similarities on his fingers, “Anatomical knowledge, dissecting skills, mutilations, organ removal. Victim is clothed, on display. This screams of a Ripper kill,” he concludes, lightly opening his arms, palms up.

“The Ripper has been consistently theatrical. He left one of his victims in a church pew using his tongue as a page marker in the Bible he was holding.” Dr. Lecter circles the table, eyes travelling over the various wounds. Out of the corner of her eyes, Beverly can see Jack following his every movement. “Ripper kills have meaning. This,” Dr. Lecter gestures at the body, “is not his work.” At the words, Jack seems to deflate, sighing deeply. Dr. Lecter turns to face him. “You’re looking for a medical student or trainee, performing back-alley surgeries. And this one had a… regrettable outcome.”

“We found twenty-two signature components all attributable to the same killer,” Z says, defending his position.

“Twenty-two possible signature components.”

“And the missing kidney?”

Dr. Lecter considers this a moment. “A valuable organ.”

Oh. “An organ harvester,” Beverly says.

“It’s a brilliant diversion.” Dr. Lecter turns to Jack again. “You could interview people who dropped off organ donor lists without getting an organ.”

Jack is out the door in a second, and they are left to look at each other over Jason Murray’s corpse. Z has a sour look on his face and he does not take long to leave too, storming out of the room and going back to his work station.

Beverly sighs, starting to gather the photographs on the table and putting them back in their folders. “And here we thought the window had opened,” she says, more to herself than anyone, “Lass being the first victim of the spree. But it’s been days and still no bodies.” Jack is starting to doubt, and nothing good happens when Jack doubts. The head of the BAU has to be bedrock, otherwise the whole edifice will crumble.

“Could the Ripper have become more… uh, discreet?” Jimmy asks, helping her stuffing everything back in their place. “Maybe we just haven’t found the bodies yet.”
“If the Ripper strikes again, we’ll know,” Dr. Lecter says, “He’d only have to pick up the phone.” Beverly nods. Now that the Ripper has a direct mean to torment Jack, he is not going to pass on any opportunity. “You’re our new Will Graham now.”

“Will is more familiar with the Ripper than I am.”

Will could probably be more familiar with any killer than anyone could be.

“Yeah? I hear the Ripper is a sensation in psychological circles,” Jimmy says, gathering his folders and his tablet and balancing everything on his hip.

“Dr. Bloom said papers about him pop up every now and then.” Though Beverly does not remember her ever working on a Ripper case with them.

“He is a recurrent subject, yes. But at most we only have a detached, clinical knowledge of his pathology. Will’s understanding is more,” he pauses, searches for an appropriate word, settles for a quiet, “intimate.” Something passes over his eyes, too quick for Beverly to identify the feeling, before they turn back to their usual polite, calculating glint. “Jack is grooming him to catch the Ripper. One day he may go inside and never come back.”

“Just his luck that he’s the best in the business. Hopefully you’ll be there to bring him back if he gets too close.”

“Hopefully.”

Bedelia only needs one glance to know.

“Red or white?” she asks, going straight to her liquor cabinet while Hannibal takes place in the living room. Hannibal lifts his eyebrows in mild surprise, but he does not do her the affront of asking what the wine is for. He looks as impeccable as ever. And he is not fooling anyone. Or, at least, he is not fooling her. “I believe we’ll both need it.”

“Rather unconventional.”

“I have no license to risk anymore,” she reminds him, looking over her shoulder, “You’re the only one ignoring my retirement.”

A charming smile. “Then, something pink I think.”

She picks two glasses and pours them both a generous amount of wine. She wishes she could take something stronger, but it would go from unethical to impolite. She hands Hannibal his glass before going to sit in her own chair. Hannibal takes his time, bringing the wine to his mouth, sniffing it before taking a slow sip. It is so rare to see him stall, Bedelia can’t help but be amused by the sight.

She waits patiently for him to find his words.

“For all the efforts it takes to raise, trust is quite a brittle edifice,” he says eventually, “It takes years to build, but it only needs a second to collapse.”
“It takes honesty and understanding. And it takes forgiveness.”

The corner of his mouth ticks up in a mirthless smile. “One can only forgive so many times.”

“ Asking for forgiveness requires to be prepared not to be forgiven.”

His gaze turns to the window, the veil of his mind firmly in place, even now. “Even after all these years, I am still in awe that we somehow managed to reconcile two lifestyles so wildly different. So wildly incompatible.” Bedelia’s eyes flicker to his hands, where his thumb fiddles with his ring for a second before he catches himself. “And I find myself wondering how much I’d lose trying to disentangle them.”

Wildly incompatible indeed would be the best way to describe the two of them. And yet. “So far you’ve been quite successful in accommodating each other.”

Hannibal’s shoulder moves in the slightest shrug as he slowly swirls the wine in his glass. An impoliteness entirely too reminiscent of Will. “I guess I’m still waiting for the moment when this fragile balance finally breaks.”

Here it is. “Is that how you perceive your marriage? Fragile.”

Hannibal sighs, his eyes finding the window again. “Maybe… Inequal.”

“For whom?”

A long beat as Hannibal weighs his words. Bedelia takes a sip of her wine, observing the way his thumb keeps unconsciously finding its way to his ring, rotating it slowly. He opens his mouth, closes it, and finally settles for a steady, “Will could rebuild a life.”

*Without me,* hangs loud and cutting between the two of them.

Bedelia carefully does not raise her eyebrows. They must have had quite the fight for Hannibal to be so shaken. “But you’re not so sure for yourself.” She waits until he meets her gaze again. “Do you resent him for this?”

“Why would I?”

“Why wouldn’t you?” He does not react at the accusation. “You said he could rebuild a life. Would you let him?”

“I let him twice.”

“Would it be more accurate to say you couldn’t let him twice?” She tilts her head, considering. “Why is that?” Hannibal looks down at his glass, searching for answers in the wine. Bedelia takes another sip of her own, lets the full weight of her words sink in. “I imagine you were lonely.”

His eyes flit back to her. It is almost endearing. “I didn’t feel lonely,” he says, his composure still perfectly in place.

“You may not have recognised it as such. Or may not have wanted to.”

“I have friends and the opportunity for friends. It’s hardly a lonely life.”

“But nobody behind the veil.” She pauses. “Did you take him with you, behind the veil? Is that why you couldn’t let him twice?”
Hannibal arches an eyebrow, noticeably displeased at the implication. “Will would not suffer a cage.”

“No, of course not.” Bedelia takes one last sip, before settling her glass on the table beside her chair. She brushes her palms on her knees, smoothing out non existent wrinkles, before folding her hands in her lap. She levels him with a steady look. “Understanding is a heady feeling, so often wasted and so often spoiled. One learns to cherish it, after having been deprived from it as long as you’ve been.”

He muses over her words, an answer on the tip of his tongue. It gets swallowed with a sip of wine.

The shrill beeping of a pager thunders through the quiet of the changing room, deserted but for the two of them. Phuong unwinds her arms from Olga’s waist, lets her fish her pager out of her pocket.

Olga tsk. “Bad timing, my dude,” she tells the offending device, one arm still draped around Phuong’s shoulders.

Phuong rubs her palms against her eyes, trying to dry off tear tracks. “Can’t hide here forever.”

Olga pushes herself up and extends a hand, helping Phuong to her feet. “You’ll manage?” she says, reaching out to push Phuong’s hair out of her face and tuck a strand behind her ear.

“Yeah, I’ll survive.”

“You sure?”

Phuong manages a small smile, and pushes her gently. “Just go already.”

“I’ll see you later.” With one last squeeze to her shoulder, Olga turns to exit the room. Barely two steps and she whips around again, engulfing her in another tight hug. “It’ll be alright, hon, you’ll be alright.”

Phuong returns her embrace briefly, nodding in her shoulder, before pushing her away. The door swings shut being Olga, and Phuong is left alone in the changing room.

Going to the sink, she tears a couple tissues from the dispenser and wipes her nose. She can’t quite repress a wince at her reflection in the mirror. Red, puffy eyes and cheeks, darkening the circles under her lids. Not exactly presentable. A splash of cold water does not do much to help. Hopefully, nobody will comment on it.

A look at the clock on the wall tells her that she has been in here for about fifteen minutes. Can’t afford to stay any longer, there are still several patients she has to see before dinner. She will have to take care of this blackmail problem later.

Next patient is Mr. Graham.

She makes her way through the corridors swiftly, razing the walls, keeping her chin low, and carefully avoiding eye contact with anyone.

Mr. Graham’s door is open. She takes a deep breath, plasters a smile on her face and knocks twice before slipping inside.
She manages a cheerful, “Hey, it’s me again. Back to bother you.”

Mr. Graham looks up at her, not quite meeting her eyes, from where he is reading on the bed. The half smile turns into a frown as he takes her appearance in. Thankfully, he does not comment, just closes his book and places it back on his lap.

She goes to check his vitals, avoiding his eyes. “You’ll be out soon, yes? A couple more days and you’re back into the wild.”

“Yes, but it’s not as though the treatment is over. I’ll still have medication to take for at least a year.”

“True, but having meds to take at home is a big improvement compared to being locked in a hospital room. Plus, you’ll be with your husband, and he won’t have to bribe the staff to let him in outside of visiting hours.” Night shift team is certainly going to miss all those delicious bribes. It has become the highlight of their shift for the last month, trying to guess what Mr. Graham’s husband would come up with. “Speaking of, I haven’t seen him in the past few days.”

He shrugs, and the sudden tightness in his shoulders is unmistakable. “A lot of work, you know.”

She nods, makes a mental note not to mention his husband again. “You’ll finally see your dogs again,” she says, changing the subject. “I’m sure they missed you.”

“Yes.” A glint of sadness still clings to his eyes. Phuong really has to wonder what happened between Mr. Graham and his husband. They were always so sweet with each other whenever she came in his room. “You might see me again too. Relapses are pretty common, more so in patients without a tumour.”

Phuong carefully keeps her tone light. “Only in about a fourth of the cases.”

“Knowing my luck…”

She offers him a smile. “Relapses are usually less severe than first episodes.” He tentatively smiles back, his eyes flickering from her chin to her shoulder. She mentally curses Mr. Husband for choosing the worst possible time to be having a lovers spat.

The corridors are empty, silent but for the quiet beeping coming from some of the rooms. It is way past curfew, and way past visiting hours.

As usual, the room to Will’s door is open, letting the light from the corridor spill inside. Hannibal closes the door behind himself with a soft click, encasing them in the soft, dim light of the lamp.

His feet carry him to Will’s bedside. He looks peaceful in his sleep, no longer haunted by nightmares. His chest rises and falls steadily under the thin blanket, lips slightly parted, inhaling and exhaling slowly. Hannibal can barely discern the frantic motion of his eyes under his closed lids.

A second of hesitation.

He reaches out, lets the back of his fingers hover over Will’s cheek, his temple, his fluttering
lashes, never touching.
Will remains deep in sleep.

“They’re all missing different organs. Before, we were looking at waiting lists for a heart or kidney. Now we’ve got kidneys, hearts, livers, stomachs, pancreases, lungs, intestines.” Jimmy cannot quite conceal the exasperation in his voice as he points at the second corpse. “This guy, he’s missing a spleen. Who the hell gets a spleen transplant.”

“They graft on a little extra spleen cause of increased risk of sepsis,” Z quips up.

Jimmy rolls his eyes so hard, he almost pulls a muscle. “That was rhetorical.” They have been up since three am since they brought the fourth body in, and have ran out of coffee three hours ago. Now is not the time to fuck with him.

Jack sends them a look, and they both shut their mouth. He crosses his arms, sighing deeply. “That organ harvester has a flourishing business.”

“We don’t even know if these organs are transplanted within the US. They could be exported to China for all we know.”

“Chinese have a cultural taboo that restricts voluntary organ donation. You die with all your parts or you dishonour mommy and daddy.”

“Killing somebody else for parts doesn’t break that taboo.”

Jimmy sighs for the umpteenth time this morning, turns tired eyes to Z. “I was agreeing with you.” Now is really not the time to fuck with him. Z has at least the decency to look sheepish.

Another look from Jack. It only takes a couple seconds for the room to fall completely silent. “How many killers?”

“One,” Dr. Lecter says from where he is inspecting the wounds of the fourth corpse, leaning over the table.

“You’re confident it isn’t the Ripper?”

“Aside from the complete lack of the Ripper’s usual theatricality, the removal of organs is poorly done. Clumsy at best.” Dr. Lecter gestures at the sutures, which, Jimmy has to admit are quite uneven. “This isn’t the Ripper’s work.”

Alana reaches for the last onion, dices it with precise, practiced movements. “Will will be out of the hospital soon,” she says, not looking up from her work.

At the centre island, Hannibal delicately arranges tomato skins into roses. “Indeed.”
“He should not return to his lecture hall at the Academy for another several months, but knowing Jack, he won’t hesitate to drag him back in the field if he thinks the Ripper is going on another spree.”

“It would be ill advised. Overwork certainly played an important part in worsening his condition.”

The steady sound of the knife on the board is barely louder than the quiet notes coming from Hannibal’s sound system. Once the last onion diced, she slides everything into the designated plate, and places the knife back on the cutting board. She turns to face Hannibal, waits for him to look up at her. “He’ll be out of the hospital before this case is over.”

“I doubt Jack would consult him. We’ve established that it is not in any way related to the Ripper. Most likely a medical student harvesting organs.”

“What of Miriam Lass?”

“What of her?”

“We’ve still yet to hear from the Ripper. It’s unusual of him to take so long between corpses during a… a sounder.” The words leaves an odd flavour in her mouth. She reaches for her glass of beer, takes a small sip to wash down the unpleasant taste.

“We don’t know what is going on in his mind. He’s an oddity amongst killers.”

She takes another swig of her beer, swishing it in her mouth a moment before swallowing. “I hope that when he strikes again, Jack will come to us first.” She walks to the centre island, watching Hannibal peel the last tomatoes. She had missed seeing him cook. It has been an eternity since she last attended one of his dinner parties, and even longer since she helped him in the kitchen. “I have not worked on a case related to the Ripper yet.”

“And I sincerely hope you will never have to. We still don’t know how he chooses his victims.”

“You’re not worried for yourself? You’re not an agent.” She knows Hannibal is not helpless. She has seen him neutralise dozens of violent patients during her residency. But it has been years since he last worked in a hospital. And some self defense techniques are not going to save him when countless full fledged agents have died at the Ripper's hands.

Done with the last rose, Hannibal sets the peeled tomatoes aside, and carefully transfers each rose from the plate into a bowl of cold water. “I’m more worried for Will than for myself.” He wipes his hands on his apron and picks up his glass of wine, takes a small sip.

“Jack told me he’d make sure Will doesn’t get too close.”

“Do you trust him to hold his promise?”

Alana sighs, looking down at her glass, considering her answer. “I trust him not to actively try and break it,” she says slowly.

“But you don’t believe in his ability to uphold it.”

“Do you?” she asks with a wry smile.

“As much as I believe in his ability to ensure his agents’ survival.” He puts down his glass and reaches for the bowl of carrots, starts cutting them with quick, efficient movements. The knife slides smoothly over the cutting board, the steady thuds and the rocking motion almost hypnotic.
“What of Miriam Lass then?”

“Miriam Lass is… a lesson hard learned.” His hands still over the board and Alana meets his gaze again. “I trust Jack not to make the same mistake twice.”

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“We can’t afford that kind of hardware. We use consumer grade.”

“Digital trunk system.”

“Yeah.”

“Jack, if the ambulance radio is on, I can use a DF sweep to find it.”

Beverly takes place in front of the ambulance alongside the semi circle of FBI agents, all their guns pointed at the door of the ambulance. Jack stands in front of them, shotgun at the ready. One of the agent moves forwards, sticks a crowbar against the door. He looks back at Jack, who gives him a signal and the agent twists the crowbar in the opening. Beverly tightens her grip on her gun.

The doors spring open.

Her eyes widen in surprise and horror. She lowers her gun.

Jack takes a step forward, shotgun hanging by his side.

A body lays on the gurney—Devon Silvetri. His shirt is cut open, revealing a gash across his ribs, not unlike Jason Murray’s corpse back in the hotel room. His blood has seeped through the gurney, is dripping off the bars to form a puddle on the floor of the ambulance.

They have arrived too late.

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“Keeping to yourself, Alana? It’s not like you.”

Alana whips around, wide eyes landing on Mrs. Komeda. She is smiling at her, holding a glass of champagne in each hand.

“Mrs. Komeda—”

“So we’re back to last names?” she interrupts, eyebrows delicately arched. “How cold. And here I thought distance made the heart fonder.”

Alana offers her a warm smile. “Thea, it’s good to see you.”

Thea smiles back, hands her a glass of champagne. Around them the party is as lively as ever, guests strewn all around the sitting room, conversations almost completely covering the music coming from the sound system. Alana does not know half of the people invited, though she does recognise the servers roaming the room. She finds Mr. Komeda talking with a group of people she
does not know on the other side of the room.

“It’s been an eternity since Hannibal’s last dinner party,” Thea says, taking a sip of her champagne.

“Longer still since I last attended.”

“More reason to enjoy it to its fullest.” She hooks her arm under Alana’s and pulls her forwards, steering them through the tight crowd. A couple people nod at them in greeting—or rather, nod at Thea—on their way, and she gracefully but briefly acknowledges them, makes sure not to be pulled into any conversation. Alana smiles at her antics. They make it to the centre of the room, where tables are brimming with appetisers and beverage.

“Oh no, Thea, we can’t—”

“Alana dearest, it’s a dinner party. We’re here specifically for the food.”

Alana huffs out a laugh, easily giving in. They set camp a couple metres from the tables, surreptitiously and steadily emptying them.

“It’s a shame dear William couldn't attend,” Thea says, scanning the room from over the rim of her champagne glass. “I believe it’s been over two years since Hannibal last convinced him to stay. He’s not very fond of those.”

“William? A relative of Hannibal’s?” Alana asks, eyebrows raised in surprise. She has never heard of any family member of his before.

“You haven’t met him yet? William is Hannibal's husband.”

Alana is very glad she was not sipping her champagne. Would have been unbecoming to spit it out everywhere.

“A sharp tongue and an even sharper mind,” Thea continues, while Alana’s eyes dart frantically around the room, looking for Hannibal—in vain, he is probably still in the kitchen. “Too bad he’s not here tonight, I’m sure you two would get along wonderfully. Although you’d have more chance catching him at the opera, sipping champagne and hiding in Hannibal’s shadow.”

Will would not be caught dead at the opera, let alone one of Hannibal’s dinner parties. He would never willingly go within a ten metres radius to the kind of people filling the room.

It can’t be him.

She needs confirmation.

Keeping her tone light, she asks, “William… Graham?”

Thea beams at her.

Shit.

“You do know him,” she says, delighted and entirely unaware of Alana’s internal struggle. “Yes, this William. Although he prefers to introduce himself as Lecter to Hannibal’s acquaintances. Gives him much more anonymity to only be known as his husband.”

Alana takes a deep, quiet breath, tries to rationalise the situation. William is a common first name, and Graham is a common surname. But there are not twenty Will Graham working at Quantico. She needs further confirmation.
There is light coming from the windows, illuminating the front yard. He should be back from the hospital today.

Jack steps off the car, into the cold of the night, makes his way to the front porch. As soon as the wood creaks under his feet, he hears the dogs barking from inside the house. A couple seconds later the front door opens, just enough for Will to slip outside. He closes it behind himself, keeping the dogs inside. Jack can’t help his eyes from taking him in from head to toe. He looks… pale, small. He has lost weight. A lot of weight. An image of Bella flashes before his eyes, and Jack has to look away. He rubs his hands together, both to warm them from the cold and to have something to do with them.

“Jack. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Jack clears his throat, and looks at Will again. “It’s good to see you back, Will.”

“I just got home, yeah.” Will shrugs, his eyes set somewhere over Jack’s shoulder.

Jack nods, searching for his words. “Good. That’s good.”

Will stares at him a long moment. “If you were looking for Hannibal he is not here.”

Jack frowns at that, wondering why Dr. Lecter would be here now that Will is home and can take care of the dogs himself. But he does not dwell too long on the implication. Now is not the time. “I was looking for you.”

Will raises a sceptical eyebrow. “In case you didn’t know, I’m still on medical leave.”

“I know, I wouldn’t have come here if it weren’t serious.” Another flurry of barks and Jack looks at the door, can barely see the heads of the dogs asking to be let out. Will clears his throat, tilting his head inquisitively. Jack decides to go straight to the point, pleasantries be damned. “We’ve got another body.”

“Ripper has struck again?”

Jack shakes his head. “Not the Ripper. The Copy Cat.”

Will storms inside their home in Baltimore, slams the door shut behind himself. He is cold, he is fucking freezing, dripping with rainwater, soaking the tiles and ruining the rugs. He did not take the time to grab a coat, jumped in his car, and drove to Baltimore under the pouring rain.
He makes his way straight to the kitchen because of course Hannibal is there. He fucking lives in there. And sure enough, there he is, calmly drying plates and glasses with a cloth. He does not even look up when Will stops in the doorway, despite knowing exactly why he is here. Son of a bitch.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Hannibal does not look perturbed in the slightest. There is not a hitch in his movements as he sets the dry plate on top of the pile and grabs another from the rack. “You’ll have to be more specific,” he says, tone even and unconcerned.

Will fists his hands, his nails digging into his palms. For a second, he imagines his hands around Hannibal’s throat, squeezing the life out of him, wiping the grin from his smug face. He pushes the thought to the back of his mind, stores it for later. He takes a deep breath, forces his hands to unclench. He adopts Hannibal’s tone, his cadence of speech. “Andrew Caldwell. Michelle Vocalson. Darrell Ledgerwood. Christopher Ward.”

“None of which you vetoed.”

“Devon Silvestri.”

The plate is added to the pile, the clack loud and clear in the tense silence of the kitchen. Hannibal finally looks up, props his hands on the counter and meets Will’s eyes. “The dead can’t plead their case.”

Will can’t fucking believe—“Hannibal,” he says slowly, as though talking to a child—and he might as well be, he might as well be dealing with a fucking brat—“What do you think you’re doing.”

“Redirecting the FBI’s attention.”

“To the Copy Cat?”

Hannibal shrugs. Because that is just how much he cares. That is just how much he fucking cares. About him and about them. And about anything regarding their marriage and safety and future. Will does not know what he expected from a conceited, bloodthirsty, batshit crazy fucking psychopath.

“It is far less conspicuous than the Ripper.”

“It still leads to us.”

“Jack has to start from the ground. They have nothing but some details from the Shrike case.”

“It still leads to us,” Will repeats, enunciation each word carefully. He steps into the kitchen, breaches Hannibal’s sanctuary. Hannibal almost takes a step back. Almost. He catches himself just in time, straightens his back, lifts his chin. But Will saw it, saw the mask falter, and a sense of power settles warm and insidious in his stomach. He plants his hands on the counter, right hand a couple centimetres from the knife block.

Hannibal breaks the eye contact, unties the apron from around his waist to fold it neatly. Will does not let himself be distracted by the movement.

“I had to act fast after Jack opened the chase for the Ripper again.”

Will lets out a wry, mirthless huff. Not quite a sneer. “And whose fault is that?”
“I’m throwing bones, Will. This is hardly against our interest.” The apron is abandoned on the counter and Hannibal grabs the pile of plates, turns around—turns his fucking back to Will—to put them back in their cupboards.

“And it didn’t cross your mind that you could just, I don’t know, lie low? Swallow your misplaced pride and let it die down?”

When he faces Will again, the composure is firmly back in place. He lifts his chin ever so slightly, looking down on Will. “Nothing in this particular issue can be left to chance.”

Will lets out an incredulous huff. “Do you even hear yourself—” he cuts himself off, rubs a palm over his face. His brain is pounding against his skull. He is freezing. And he is so fucking tired. He just got home after a month in the hospital and already he has to deal with this—this bullshit. He inhales deeply, exhales through his nose.

“Will, you know as well as I—”

“Shut up. I don’t want to hear your voice.”

Hannibal sighs, grabs a couple glasses and circles the counter to put them away. “Our first conversation in days and you’re already tired of my company.”

Will’s voice drops low and hoarse, a promise more than a threat. “Hannibal, I’m going to sew your mouth shut.”

Hannibal does not even deign looking at him. “I’d love to see you try.”

Will yanks a knife from the block.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, the ‘sewing mouth’ line is totally a reference to InfiniteCrisis’ phenomenal fic You Are My Heart (Else I Would Cut You Out) whose dialogues are so sharp I cut myself reading.
Will spits out blood.

He grits his teeth, holds back a frustrated shout.

He hates it. He hates this. Hates the ease with which Hannibal throws him around. He feels locked in his own body, a shell unable to keep up with his mind. Each movement is excruciating, limbs numb and quivering with exertion.

Weeks spent lying on a hospital bed do not forgive.

Will has lost too much weight, lost too much strength. His waist is all hard edges in the clutch of Hannibal’s arms, his bones bird-like.

Hannibal might as well be handling a rag doll.

He crashes Will into the cupboards as easily as stepping on a mirror. Glass shards rain over the two of them, turning the kitchen floor into a bed of stars. Perfect to die upon. Perfect to kneel and mourn upon.

Will cries out. He thinks he does. It gets drowned under the blood rushing in his ears. The world blurs, blackens, brightens. He forces his vision and his mind back into focus. He has to hold on. He has to. *He has to.*
The handle of the knife is slippery, covered in blood. Hannibal’s blood. It is a small victory amidst an ocean of defeats, but a victory nonetheless.

But Will needs more. He will take everything he can to the grave, every inch of flesh, every drop of blood. He will take it all because it is his.

Hannibal ignores the pain, ignores the blood gushing out of the deep gash on his left upper arm. Ignores the red rose blooming on his white sleeve, so dark it seems almost black.

Their dance is one well loved, each step perfected to its deadliest height; blows after blows, each fiercer than the last, all blocked one after the other, until—

A sickening crunch tears through the haze of adrenaline. Hannibal’s head snaps to the side. The taste of iron explodes in his mouth.

Will’s left fist stings with utter satisfaction as it connects with Hannibal’s jaw.

His glee is short lived. A knee drives into his stomach. He doubles over, bile crawling up the back of his throat.

Will does not relent. He never has. Hannibal knows he never will.

Backed into a corner, he lashes out until death strikes.

Hannibal has to stop this.

Hannibal sweeps his legs, sending him sprawling to the floor—so easily, god fucking damn it.

Will pushes up on his forearms. The glass shards from the cupboard dig into his skin. He gets back to his feet. His grip tightens on the knife.

He can’t let go.

He has to hold on.
Grief coats the blade like poison. Insidious. Relentless. Each cut, shallow as they are, brands him to his core. Anger and desperation merge into one in Will's eyes. They burn and hurt and fuel their pyres—or is it their pyre? Will has condemned them as one.

Hannibal has to stop this.

Will is not going down alone.

The knife slashes through clothes, bites into skin. His muscles scream for mercy. They scream and scream and scream and scream and scream. He is dying tonight, and there is no comfort to be found in the knowledge that hands he has loved will now lift the life from his chest.

But he is not going down alone. He has to hold on.

He has to.

He has to stop this.

Will thrusts the knife forward, pierces through flesh and wrings a cry from Hannibal.

Blood pours between them.

He is not going down alone.

He has to—

He has to stop this.

—harsh fingers bore into his skull and slam it against the wall.
Will’s eyelids flutter open. And squeeze shut again.

His body arises to pain. His back hurts. His thighs hurt. His arms, his abdomen, his head. Jesus, his head. If his brain would kindly stop trying to knock itself out against his skull he would be grateful.

His brain is a stubborn uncooperative shit, and Will has to turn his face into the soft pillow to muffle a moan. Hannibal’s scent floods his senses.

His eyes snap open.

Hannibal.

He pushes up from his lying position. Is immediately taken with vertigo. His vision turns black, all strength leaves him. Gravity yanks him down and he crashes on the—ow.

Fuck.

A blanket follows him in his descent. Will groans, stays unmoving on the floor until the black veil disappears from his eyes, until his limbs respond to his brain again. He blinks several times, chances another look at the room. The curtains are pulled closed, though he can still hear the storm raging outside, wind and rain rattling the glass. A small lamp on one of the end tables casts orange hues on the walls.

Sitting room. One of their private ones. Soft tones, warm mahogany and a plethora of mismatched pillows. First floor then.

Not the basement.

He is alive.

He is alive.

His clothes have been thrown haphazardly on a chair nearby. They are covered in blood. A small puddle has had the time to form on the rug before it all dried up. Will looks down at himself. Black and blue but not a speck of red on his naked body. There is a patch of gauze on his temple where he hit the wall, and more wrapped around his palms and arms where glass shards dug into his skin.

He is alive.

Patched up, stripped down, unceremoniously tossed on a couch.

Alive.

He gingerly pulls himself up, leaning on furniture as he limps out of the room, holding the blanket around his shoulders.

The hall is dark but for two patches of light spilling out from two rooms. The one he is in, and another a little further down the corridor. Bathroom. Will makes his way to that second patch, using the wall as support. He stops just shy of the rectangle of light, one hand holding onto the door jamb. He peers inside.
Towels and gauze and various medical supplies litter the floor. Everything stained red.

“Am I widowed yet?”

Hannibal’s eyes blink open, take a moment to focus before he looks up at him.

“You tell me,” he says, neither his voice nor tone betraying his state. He is sitting on the floor, back against the wall, upper arm and abdomen wrapped in gauze where the knife tore through flesh. His bloodstained clothes lay in a heap under the sink, presumably unsalvageable. Reddened eyes flicker to Will’s empty hands. “At least, you’ll spare me the affront of using a gun.”

“Would I even need it?” Will jerks his chin towards Hannibal’s abdomen. “That doesn’t look too good.”

“It won’t kill me,” says Hannibal, and the certainty of his words should not feel so comforting. “You either aimed very poorly or very accurately.”

They stare at each other in silence.

Then Will walks into the bathroom, careful not to step on anything bloody or pointy or both. He readjusts his grip on the blanket, and crouches down beside Hannibal, slips an arm behind his back to help him up.

“I don’t think I can carry you upstairs,” he mutters, “Or downstairs, for that—Ah!”

Hannibal gets to his feet, scooping Will up in one smooth motion. The blanket slips off Will’s grasp when he clutches at Hannibal’s shoulders in surprise, but it stays trapped between Hannibal’s arms and his back, drags on the ground as he carries him out of the bathroom.

Bastard.

“You can drop the posturing right now, there isn’t anyone to impress here,” says Will, his tone biting but definitely softer than he intended. A small part of him worries at how easily Hannibal handles him despite his injuries. Will needs to rebuild his muscle mass, and he needs to do it quick—that is at least one vulnerability that can be easily dealt with.

“Not even you?”

“Especially not me. Put me down.”

Hannibal relaxes his hold on Will’s waist, and he slides down against Hannibal’s front until his feet are back on the cold tiles. The gauze scratches his belly, a stark contrast to the soft cotton. Hannibal pulls the blanket over his shoulders, keeping him close. Their eyes lock, searching. He leans in to touch his forehead to Will’s.

For a minute or ten neither of them speaks, and the truce settles in, swelling with every breath.

Then, no louder than a whisper, Hannibal says, “If you still intend to sew my mouth shut, you’ll find all the supplies you need here.” Because he just does not know when to quit.

Will hums in contemplation. Matching his tone, he decides, “Duct tape. That’s all you deserve.” And relishes the quiet hiss of distaste the suggestion tears from Hannibal. Oh yes, he would hate duct tape. Too pedestrian.

The trek back to the sitting room is slow and laborious, Will having used up most of what was left
of his stamina to get to the bathroom in the first place, and Hannibal being way weaker than his misplaced pride would let him admit. Will expects him to pass out anytime, but they both make it to the couch whole and conscious.

Will helps him lie down, and Hannibal sighs in relief, eyes falling shut—the one and only sign of exhaustion he would allow. Will sits beside him close enough for their hips to touch, the blanket still held loosely around his shoulders. He places one hand on the gauze wrapped around Hannibal’s middle, and whispers, “Does it hurt?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Hannibal chuckles, a weak, ragged sound. “Cruel boy.”

“Who rubbed off on me, I wonder.”

“Cruelty isn’t an acquired taste. You were quite proficient at pretending yours didn’t exist.” Will rolls his eyes, too tired for yet another pointless argument. Hanibal rests his own hand over Will’s, waits for him to meet his gaze before adding, “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. I’ve always found this part of you charming.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

Will pulls his hand away, and Hannibal turns on his side, scooting back against the couch to make room for him. With their combined efforts, they manage to both fit on the couch, Will enfolded in Hannibal’s hold, back pressed against his chest. Will does not want to share his blanket, so he does not. The house is warm, and if Hannibal has complaints, he can shove them wherever he pleases.

Hannibal has no complaints, simply presses his face to Will’s nape.

“Wake me if you’re about to die,” Will mumbles into the pillow.

Hannibal hums softly, a rumbling purr not unlike the thunder on the other side of the window. “Burn the house down if you need to get rid of the evidence,” he says eventually, warm puffs of breath against Will’s skin.

“I don’t want to bury you here.”

“No? What would be a more suitable grave then?”

“I’d chuck you in the bayou for the gators, back in Louisiana.”

Will both hears and feels the smile against his neck as Hannibal says, “Back where we started. How romantic.”

“Don’t pretend you wouldn’t do the same.”

“Please. I wouldn’t share a single pound of your flesh.”

There must be something very wrong with Will for him to find the statement endearing. Must be all the meds. He keeps silent, and the pitter-patter of rain lures them into much needed sleep.
Alana does not mean to pry.

Feed the dogs. Take the opportunity to play with them without anyone’s supervision. Leave.

Simple.

Still, she finds herself lingering in Will’s living room. Or rather, Will and Hannibal’s living room. It seems safe to assume Hannibal owns the house as well. And if Hannibal owns this house, then Will also owns the house in Baltimore.

The more she thinks about it, the more surreal the entire affair seems.

She would have liked to see Will, now back in the wild, both to check up on him and to… well. Ask about some things she should already know after years of friendship.

Too bad Hannibal snatched him up before she could visit. But she can’t fault him, really. Over a month without being afforded any kind of privacy must have built some tension. Hannibal falling off the face of the earth just as Will is discharged from the hospital is as loud a confirmation as any. They need the time, they need the proximity. Hopefully, the backlash will be minimal.

She had attributed Hannibal's visible unrest during the past few weeks to the stress of work, of consulting, of the lectures at the Academy. Not to having his husband hospitalised.

His husband.

Will and Hannibal. Husbands.

The thought is surprising in how decidedly unsurprising it is.

They obviously enjoy each other’s presence. As private as they both are, there has always been an undeniable familiarity and fondness between the two of them—moving around each other, sharing space with an ease that speaks of years of cohabitation. Little signs that, alongside the discretion, made her assume they were each other’s dirty little secret.

God, she could have just asked, huh?

At her feet, Buster whines in his sleep, his small body twitching every now and then. Alana smiles, pulls her phone out of her jacket to snap a couple photos of the pack huddled in front of the chimney. She selects one to send to Will, along with a short *Kids are safely in bed*. The dogs remain undisturbed throughout the ordeal. Maybe she will adopt a dog too one day, to rain all her caretaking urges over.

The phone slides back into her pocket and she reclines in the armchair, tucking her hands between her crossed legs to keep them warm. Her eyes survey the darkened room from her vantage point in the far corner.

It is strange, being here on her own. It feels like transgression, somehow. Even though she has visited many times, even more so in the last few weeks to help Hannibal tend to the dogs, the place feels completely different now that she knows it also belongs to him.

Who would have thought? Will’s presence and character permeate everything in the house. One glance would suffice for anyone to conclude that he very much lives on his own, save for the dogs. But Alana now knows what signs to look for.
There are two books stacked on the single nightstand. One is an essay she read back in her twenties and the other, the third volume of a fairly popular series she has yet to read—horror, if she is not mistaken. Nothing unusual about the arrangement for a single person; she herself had the quasi entirety of her textbooks as well as personal reading scattered about her bed when she was in med school, switching her bedside reading depending on her mood and the urgency of assignment deadlines.

Beside her, the shelves framing the chimney are filled with an array of trinkets and books. Alana pushes up from the armchair to take a closer look, careful not to step on any stray tail on her way. The highest ledges are a cluster of entomology, sociology or criminal law volumes, and the occasional psychology or medical ones do not look out of place amid them.

On the other side of the room, the upright piano is pristine. Her fingers walk across the keys in a simple, familiar tune. Not a speck of dust. No sheets either, on the rack or the top. She has seen Hannibal play the harpsichord countless times, be it during dinner parties or just for the two of them, and obviously a harpsichord would not fit in the relatively small living room. Will, on the other hand… She had always assumed he could since, well, he owns a piano, but thinking back, she has never seen him actually play. She will have to ask once Hannibal releases him.

Her little tour ends in the doorway leading to the study. She slips her hands in her pockets, gives the living room one last once over.

Any possible hints of Hannibal’s presence here are deftly camouflaged in Will’s. It is endearing, in a way, but a little voice in her head keeps wondering if all of this is really unintentional.

Franklyn sighs, taking another swig of his beer. His glass is almost empty. The bottom stares back at him with something like pity.

Tobias has yet to touch his own drink, has left it perched on the top of the upright piano along with his suit jacket. He has yet to put down his violin either, still working on a new composition. Franklyn has not dared interrupt him. There is something about that piece that disturbs him somehow. It is not drastically different from what Tobias usually does, but it is laced with… something profoundly bitter. Longing, perhaps.

He acknowledges the mastery but god, it is not alleviating his own torment. He sighs again.

“What has you sighing so much?” Tobias finally says, pausing to put the bow down, pick up the pencil and scribble something on the sheets.

“Kind of a difficult week. I got a message from Dr. Lecter a couple days ago.”

“Your therapist?”

Franklyn nods. “He cancelled our next appointment.”

“Happens sometimes. He gave a reason?”

“Apologized profusely for the inconvenience, but no. No reason.”

“From what I gathered he’s a very private man.” One last mark on the sheet, and Tobias sets both
pencil and instrument down. He retrieves his glass from the piano and makes his way towards Franklyn. “He’s made himself scarce at the symphony as well lately, or so I’ve been told,” he says, settling on the armchair opposite him. He raises his glass towards him, which Franklyn mirrors automatically, before taking a long swig.

Franklyn sighs again, shoulders sagging. “He’s been making trips to the hospital almost daily for several weeks, and now he stops seeing patients altogether?” He looks down into his glass, swirling it lightly, as though to find answers in the ripples. Works with cheese, why not beer. “I’m concerned. He could have been…” he pauses, then, with dawning horror, says, “He could have been diagnosed with a serious condition.”

God, what if he had? Franklyn does not know what he would do if he found out that Dr. Lecter had cancer, or CJD, or a respiratory disease, or—

Tobias cuts through his bleak train of thought. “Probably would have referred his patients to another psychiatrist if that were the case. He only cancelled this week’s appointment, yes?”

“I don’t know. He provided a colleague’s contact information.”

“Did you call?”

Franklyn shakes his head. The beer, although excellent, has no answer for him. Across from him, Tobias leans back in his chair, legs crossed, hands cradling his glass. Franklyn does the same, though more of a slouch than repose.

“I’ve been thinking,” he says, fingers drumming on the glass, “he wouldn’t have suggested it at all if he didn’t expect to be absent for an extended period of time, would he?”

Tobias shrugs. “I wouldn’t know.”


Franklyn slides down his seat ever so slightly. Sighs again. “He didn’t seem any different in the last few weeks though. His routine hasn’t changed aside from the trips to the hospital. I would have noticed if something was wrong.”

“If it’s not him, then it’s a relative,” Tobias says, looking out the window, one finger slowly tapping the side of his glass. “He’s married, isn’t he?”

Franklyn nods. “Yeah. He’s very professional though, not too comfortable with the idea of befriending a patient. I couldn’t glean anything about his wife aside from her profession.”

Tobias turns back to him at that. “You mean, his husband?”

Husband?

“Husband?”

“Husband.”

Well.

Now those eyebrows are definitely raised in amusement.
“How do you know he has a husband?”

“Howard about him at the symphony. A certain William, if I recall.”

Franklyn looks down at his hands, down into the remnants of his beer. He retraces his memories back to a couple months ago, before Dr. Lecter’s schedule started to include daily detours to Noble Hills. Franklyn had always looked out for any recurring woman by his side but... Had there been someone else with him? To the farmers’ market on Sundays? To the butcher shop on Thursdays? Groceries twice a week, cheese weekly, wine bimonthly… Was there another man tagging along?

Dr. Lecter is quite fond of crowded streets. It could have been anyone, it was impossible to—

No, no, Franklyn would have noticed if anyone popped up beside him on a regular basis, man or otherwise. He pinches the bridge of his nose, eyes squeezed shut.

Who opened the door for guests? Who took the Bentley for maintenance in… wherever? Who left every morning, came back every night? The doctor himself did not always sleep at home, going instead to… somewhere; out of town. There was a procession of cars stopping in his driveway every week. Which one would have been his husband’s? God, Dr. Lecter’s life was too full to keep up.

Franklyn needs a drink. He has one. He throws his head back, downing the last of his answerless beer.

———

“Ciao, Bella.”

The steady scratching of the pen pauses as she looks over her shoulder at Jack. She is still dressed as he saw her this morning, with the addition of a cream coloured sweater hanging loosely off her frame, the kind too comfortable to be worn out of the house despite Jack’s copious amount of compliments. Her slippers lay kicked and abandoned under her desk, feet brushing together, sole over bridge alternatively.

“Howllo, handsome,” she says, returning his smile. “You're home early.”

“So are you.”

Jack steps into the study. They have barely seen each other in the last few weeks, Bella working increasingly later, preparing for the Military Committee conference, and then flying out to Budapest to attend it. Soon she will have to leave again for the following meeting in Brussels.

But right now she is home.

She puts her reading glasses down, neatly folded, and gathers her papers and calendar, pushing them closer to her open laptop. She swivels on her chair to face him, legs delicately crossed, thighs peeking from just under the hem of her pencil skirt. Jack is taken with the sudden urge to kneel and kiss the exposed skin, as he was once wont to before… before everything. Instead, he settles on the edge of the desk.

“I see Dr. Lecter stood you up as well,” she says, staring up at him from under her lashes.
“I’m all yours, baby.”

She pushes up from her chair, and comes to stand between his legs, hands cupping his jaw while he clasps his own behind her back, loosely holding her. Jack tilts his head up and she rests her forehead against his a moment before leaning in for a peck. He presses his mouth to her neck, where it meets her shoulder, and catches the last remnants of her perfume—and something else. Someone else.

He presses one more kiss to her temple, before leaning back to look at her. “I was thinking, it’s been a while since the last time I took you out,” he says, running his hands up her back, over the soft cashmere of her sweater.

“Yes?”

“I got us a table at Obelisk, if you’re amenable.”

Her smile widens—god, she is as beautiful as ever. One would never think her ill.

“That’s very cavalier of you, young man. I like the confidence.” A parting kiss, and she steps out of his embrace. “Just let me change into something more appropriate.”

“You’re perfect as you are, Bella,” he says, because it is the truth.

She throws him a playful smile over her shoulder, and walks out of the room, bare feet silent on the carpet.

The flower shaped peel of clementine joins the other three near his meds on the side of the counter—because Will has no motivation to actually cook but the stomach wants what it wants. No footsteps echo behind him, none ever do, but Hannibal’s gaze burns the back of his neck. Will does not look up even as a pair of arms circles his waist and heat drapes across his back. Hannibal brushes his cheek against his, rubbing their stubbles together.

“You’re up quite early.”

The sun will not rise in another three or four hours. But the stomach wants what it wants. Will does not answer, mildly distracted by the fingers teasing the waistband of his sweatpants. He does not feel like talking right now.

He picks a segment of clementine and holds it up for Hannibal, to keep his mouth occupied. Hannibal bites into it. Victory.

The second attempt, however, fails miserably.

“What’s troubling you?” Hannibal asks, guiding Will’s hand back on the counter.

“Just hungry.”

“Yes, that much was obvious.”

He leans back, just an inch, still close enough for his breath to caress Will’s neck. His hands rest on Will’s upper arms, rubbing up and down. Will stalls. Picks his clementine apart, aligns the pieces
on the counter leaving about an inch between each. Hannibal’s hands migrate to his waist, and Will just knows he is about to try and pull a conversation totally inappropriate for the hour from him. He peers over his shoulder and shoves a segment in Hannibal’s mouth. Victory.

Hannibal swoops in for a kiss.

Ah.

Yeah, okay.

Still a victory.

He turns to face Hannibal, ends up pressed against the counter as they readjust the angle. With tongue and teeth he gets the piece back, because that’s his clementine thank you, and breaks the kiss. Although they stay close, chest to chest, temple to temple, in the following silence their eyes never meet. Hannibal is not going to cave, Will knows.

“I thought you'd kill me, you know,” Will whispers, “I thought I would either wake up in the basement or never again.”

“I briefly entertained the idea, much like you did, I believe.”

Will chuckles, not entirely mirthless. He leans back, reaches behind himself to collect the last two segments, and pops one in his mouth. The stomach wants what it wants. “Ideally, I would have landed you in the hospital for a month.”

“Once you've pulled on some weight you can give it another go.”

“And you’ll get another chance to pluck my name out of the rolodex.” Will pauses, considering. “Would you regret it afterwards?”

“I would mourn you.”

“Long enough to follow me in death?”

“I would live for the two of us, and feel the ache of your absence every second of every day as penance.” There is no hesitation in his voice. It is comforting, in a way.

Not wanting to dwell too much on the thought himself, Will catches Hannibal’s chin between his fingers and pushes the last piece of clementine in his mouth. Victory.

Hannibal chews his defeat, then promptly grabs Will by the waist and lifts him up on the counter —then has to stop, breath held. Looks like his injuries are still sensitive. His hands rest on the counter on either side of Will’s hips, curled in tight fists, and his head hangs between his drawn up shoulders as he rides out the wave of pain. Feeling magnanimous, Will cradles Hannibal’s head to his chest, hands open and gentle over his nape, chin resting on his crown. He counts a dozen heartbeats before Hannibal relaxes, though he does not move away from Will’s embrace.

Will hesitates. Braces himself and resumes, “We’ll never get rid of it, huh? This edge of violence that clings to us in hatred and mercy alike.” He feels Hannibal tense against him. “There’s no room for anything between us. There’s barely enough room for us between us.”

A beat.

“Is that what you believe?”
“It is what I know.” Hannibal remains uncharacteristically silent in his arms, still but for the slow rise and fall of his shoulders. Will soldiers on. “This. The two of us. We wanted it, we wanted to make it work. And we did, but at what cost?” They are both covered in scars, some that have yet to fade, and some that will never heal. But they were two grown men, who both survived a lifetime of violence.

How many children would they kill before they made it work?

“There’s no room for anyone between us,” he repeats, barely above a whisper.

Hannibal straightens up, looks him in the eye. And the naked hurt that shines in them feels like a fucking blow to the chest. Jesus, that is exactly why he did not want to talk. It is too soon, they are both too brittle, too unsteady.

“You have so little faith in us,” says Hannibal.

Will loathes hearing him so wounded. He reaches out, pulls him back in a tight embrace, is intensely relieved when Hannibal returns it after a beat. “I almost died twice, you died once.”

“For ninety-six seconds.”

“Ninety-six seconds too long.” Ninety-six seconds during which Will existed in a world without him. He never wants to go back to it again. “I don’t trust that we won’t kill each other one day. I wouldn’t want anyone caught between the two of us when that day comes.”

Hannibal’s breath hitches, and Will’s follows suit. “I would take your life so no one else could. And I hope that you’ll return the courtesy.” Will wants to answer, really he does. When nothing comes, Hannibal says, quiet even in the silence, “Only you can stay my hand. You need only ask.”

Will swallows.

“I know.”

But the words have long since rusted in his saliva.

Hannibal rarely sends her emails, favouring either phone calls or letters, and when he does, they are never as clipped as this. The message does not contain anything substantial. An apology, no explanation. No request to reschedule the appointment. It might as well be a telegram. Something Will would write.

Bedelia does not bother with a reply, well aware that it will likely not be read, and any questions will remain unanswered, until either Will or Hannibal show up at her house again.

She stares at the words a moment more, before closing the tab.

“Lady, I don’t know what you put in your beer, but I’m pretty sure it’s illegal.”
“This one’s a gift from Hannibal. He’s the one you want to take into custody.”

“Ah. I knew the man couldn’t be all clean,” says Beverly, smirking at Alana. “You wouldn’t have caught on so easily if he were.”

Alana smiles back at her, one eyebrow arched. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Once her own glass filled, she leaves the bottle on the table nearest to them, for easy access. She plops down on the end of the couch closest to the armchair Beverly claimed, and crosses her legs, their shoes but inches apart. Her dress rides up her knees lightly, but she does not bother smoothing it down, only pulls her cardigan tighter around her shoulders.

“I’m actually kinda impressed.” Beverly raises her glass in a toast, tilts her head in mock admiration—or perhaps not entirely false. “Going after a married man? Way to step up your game, Bloom.”

Alana huffs a laugh, lightly kicks Beverly’s foot with her own. “Unfounded accusations. And entirely uncalled for.”

“I don’t know how you manage to rock the demure look without shaking off the reckless streak,” says Beverly, humming to herself. “It’s witchcraft.”

“I don’t kiss and tell, Katz.”

Beverly winks at her, her smile pressed to the rim of her glass, and takes a swig. Jesus, she really needs to know what Dr. Lecter does to his beer. It might actually be something illegal.

As she savours her drink, a comfortable silence settles between them, only disturbed by the sounds of the night filtering in through a window left ajar.

Then she says, “It’s good to have you back. The lab desperately needs more flavour.”

“This is a man’s world,” Alana singsongs lightly. “We don’t fare any better in psychiatry—can’t be worse than in surgery though, that’s for sure.”

Beverly nods, and raises her glass again. “One for our compeers in tech.”

Alana follows with a half smile, takes a long swig. She sighs in appreciation, then leans down, grabs each of her shoes by the heel and sets them under the couch, pulling her legs up beside her. The hem of her dress rides further up and this time she does pull it down, tucking it under her thighs.

“You know, the last case I worked on was the lost boys,” she says. “I was not prepared for a human cello.”

“You should have seen Shrooms Man.”

Alana huffs against the back of her hand. “Oh god, no, thanks. I heard about it, it was more than enough. Kudos to Will for handling that one.”

“He’s ex-homicide. I’m sure he’s had his fair share of fucked up stuff,” says Beverly, shrugging. She sinks deeper into her seat, extends her legs and crosses them at the ankles. Stretched out, her feet almost reach Alana’s pumps. She is careful not to kick them. “I had to look up all the musicians, music store owners, and patrons of the Symphony in Baltimore. And anyone who had a ticket to the last show. It’s going to be a long week. Weeks, maybe. There are hundreds of names
on that list.”

“No way to narrow it down? We’re looking for someone who knows how to treat catgut strings, yes?”

“We kept those details out of the news but whoever’s doing this isn’t going to advertise it. It’s been over a century since anyone’s treated catgut strings with olive oil.”

Alana considers this, humming to herself, tapping her index finger to her glass. Her eyes stray to the open window. “So you’re basically going into this blind.”

Beverly brings her glass to her mouth. “Yep. The usual, you know.”

Franklyn is worried.

It has been days. Days that he has observed Dr. Lecter’s house. The two cars have not moved an inch in the driveway. Nobody has come in or out, not even to empty the mailbox. But he knows the doctor is home, or well… he knows that someone is in the house. Some of the curtains have been drawn closed, mostly those from the ground floor, and at night, light can be seen from those left open.

He has tried to contact Dr. Lecter. None of his emails were answered, calls go straight to voicemail, and whenever someone knocks on the door, nobody opens, even when the lights are on inside the house.

Franklyn is worried. He will give it another day, and if he still gets no sign of life from the doctor, he will have no choice but to intervene.

Hannibal finds Will on the second floor, in the library facing the street. He is sitting in an armchair pulled up near one of the windows, early morning light raining on him. He looks small, drowning in Hannibal’s sweater, legs pulled up to his chest. Closed in on himself in a chair too large, with a back too high, a fabric too dark. It is eating him.

“So this is where you were hiding,” says Hannibal, walking up to him.

Without looking at him, Will tilts his chin towards the window.

“Mr. Nine Referrals,” he says.

It is not even eight in the morning.

Franklyn is being referred as soon as Hannibal starts seeing patients again.

He gives the street no more than a cursory glance before focusing on Will again.

His eyes are still glassy from sleep, hair mussed and clothes in disarray. His head is delicately tilted
back against the chair, the pale column of his neck exposed and vulnerable. Entirely too tempting.

“I don’t often feel wistful,” says Hannibal, “but at times I find myself missing Slovakia.” He leans down, presses a kiss to Will’s forehead. “And those three weeks when we had nothing but each other.”

Will blinks up at him, thick lashes casting long shadows on his cheekbones. “You mean, when we were half dead?”

“Yes.”

“Dreading the cops would raid the place before we could fully heal?”

Hannibal smiles. “Yes.”

“ Forced to share a kitchen for the first time?”

“Yes.”

“You almost cut off my hand when I used your board.”

“You tried to slit my throat for adding citrus to your pan.”

Will huffs a laugh, bright and sweet. “Good times.”

There had been something surreal about going from lavish dinners, precarious games of half truths, and betrayals and forgiveness, to the mundane reality of brushing their teeth side by side, taking turns in the shower and folding the laundry together. Learning to share space, to accommodate each other's routines, to tend to each other's wounds, to live together had been the toughest and most exhilarating hardship they went through.

Three weeks of continuous awe at how hands that so oftentimes tore at each other could just as easily mend and soothe. At the time they had both been aware on some intellectual level that their lives were irremediably intertwined, but this. This had been beyond anything they could have anticipated. Gestures and words so simple and yet so foreign to either of them.

Love had hurt them from the day they met, and neither of them quite dared believe when, out of blood to draw, it birthed tenderness instead.

“There’s no point missing something that wasn’t lost,” says Will, bright eyes trained on him.

Hannibal smiles and Will looks away, back at Franklyn’s poorly concealed car.

Hannibal brings the ottoman to the window, sets it in front of Will. Once settled, he waits for Will to detach his attention from the street and back to him before reaching for his ankle. Will keeps completely still, and without breaking eye contact, Hannibal leans down to press a kiss to the top of his knee. Delight flutters in his chest when the corner of Will’s mouth twitches up at the gesture. He straightens up and gently pulls Will’s ankle until he unfurls, readjusting his position, his arms loosely hugging the leg still folded close to his chest.

The house is warm, and still Will’s extremities never seem to warm up. Cold feet, cold fingertips. His body appears to be constantly battling his environment, keeping the blood about his heart and brain where he needs it most. As Hannibal kneads warmth back into a freezing sole, Will gradually softens under his touch, sinking further into his seat, unfolding his other leg and tucking his toes under Hannibal’s thigh.
After a while, Hannibal asks, “Are you recreating this environment to protect us, or to guard the world from us?”

Will shrugs lightly. “Whichever offends you less.”

“You would confine me, have me caged where I can harm no one but us,” Hannibal says, without heat or accusation. Simply a statement.

“Neither isolation nor death could curb your influence.”

“So you decide to set me loose on the world?”

“If you won’t bear a leash, then I’ll teach you to heel.”

Hannibal pauses, looks up, one eyebrow raised. The tone was light, the words offhand, but Will’s gaze holds an undeniable severity. Still, there is a smile teasing the corner of his mouth and Hannibal finds himself smiling back.

Will is the first to break eye contact, pulling his legs out of Hannibal’s grasp and standing up from the armchair.

“Shower,” he says, dispersing the tension at once, and makes his way out of the library.

Hannibal follows suit. There is still breakfast to prepare. “Something in particular you’d like to eat?”

“Just keep it simple,” Will replies, disappearing in another room. A couple seconds later, he pokes his head through the doorway again. “Maybe something sweet?”

Chapter End Notes

cough duct tape cough

End Notes

Thank you for reading! Comments and kudos are very much welcomed and loved :D

Also, I have a tumblr and a twitter (and a pillowfort but it's empty right now) and you can also find me on telegram. Come say hi!

Works inspired by this one: An Engagement by mokuyoubi

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!