Black Argus

by Prose_By_Rose

Summary

Will Graham, a reclusive diesel mechanic with an empathy disorder, has recently adopted Abigail Hobbs, an 18-year old girl with a dark past. He’s learning all the ins and outs of how to be a single dad: cooking for the both of them, taking her on hunting trips... and helping her hide the dead bodies from the FBI.

It’d be easier if his love life hadn’t also gotten so damn complicated. He’s falling in love with both the charming Dr. Hannibal Lecter—a respectable psychiatrist who sometimes consults for the FBI—and the dangerous but passionate Chesapeake Ripper, who may be a killer but is the only man who loves Will for who he truly is.

As Will and Abigail try to stay one step ahead of the FBI, things are getting more and more dangerous, and Will may have to choose between the life he thought he always wanted and the people he loves.
Fic warnings for gore, violence, explicit sexual content, and cannibalism. See end of chapter notes if you want more details for the “graphic depictions of violence” warning for this chapter.

If you’re asking yourself “Black Argus,” what does that possibly mean? It’s a salmon fly pattern (it will be used as a metaphor later in the fic). I made a small Black Argus icon that I placed at the beginning of this fic so you can see what it looks like. You can also google “Black Argus fly” if you want to see photos.

A million thank-yous to my beta reader Katarra, I’m incredibly grateful to her!

Happy TWotL Anniversary, everyone ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Of all the fish that fall victims to our skill [...] the most interesting [are those] by reason of their size, strength, and gameness, the difficulty of their capture, and the romantic scenery of the districts in which [...] we have to seek them.”

Major John P. Traherne
Quoted in 1889
Inventor of the salmon fly “Black Argus”

Baltimore, Maryland
Fundraising Gala

“Hannibal,” Alana Bloom said, as she sidled up to Hannibal Lecter and linked her arm in his. “I have someone I want you to meet.”

He let dear Alana gently guide him across the room as he nodded greetings to the other gala attendees as they passed them.

“Friend?” Hannibal said.

“You could call him that,” Alana said.

Alana’s passionate interest in the inner workings of the human mind made her an interesting
conversation partner, and her extraordinary looks made him the envy of the entire room. He viewed her as he viewed the reproduction of The Bathers he had hanging in his kitchen: a delectable mix of beauty and intellectual diversion that went well with the décor.

“The hesitation in your voice says he’s not a friend,” Hannibal said. “Current or previous patient whose privacy you’re trying to protect?”

“It would be unethical for me to say,” Alana said. She tucked her chin, like she always did when she was uncomfortable. It was a patient then, likely a former patient if she was willing to acknowledge she knew him in public.

“His name is Will Graham,” Alana said. “You’ve likely heard of him.”

Hannibal had. Will Graham was diagnosed some years back with a empathy disorder. Too many mirror neurons in his brain. The psychology community had gone crazy over it, but Graham had refused all interviews, all evaluations, and retreated into solitude until eventually the fervor had calmed down. Hannibal was quite sure he couldn’t resist the temptation to fiddle with such a brain.

“You wish to introduce me because you believe I can help him,” Hannibal speculated, “when you feel you yourself could not. You give yourself too little credit, Alana.”

As they walked the length of the room he could see Dr. Sutcliffe and his wife patrolling the tables adjacent the stage. Eager to be center stage? Hannibal thought. Donald Sutcliffe was a distinguished neurologist and an engaging public speaker, but Hannibal was better. Poor Sutcliffe would be relegated to the outskirts of notoriety once again.

“He is a unique one,” Alana said. “And it got too… personal.” Hannibal’s eye caught on a man fussing with the setup of an entrée table.

The man looked like Saint Sebastian himself. Brown curling hair and dark stubble framed a tanned face. He was unapologetically masculine with lean muscle, and the hair was slightly unruly. But there was a hint of fragility in his muddy blue eyes. He was a beauty even Michelangelo could strive but fail to fully capture in marble.

But the tux the man wore was cheap and ill-fitted. The man constantly fidgeted, unused to both the formal clothing and the company. Hannibal knew he would never go with the kitchen décor.

“Hello, Will,” Alana said, and she was talking to the man Hannibal had been eying with interest. “May I introduce Dr. Hannibal Lecter? Hannibal, this is Will Graham.”

“Nice to make your acquaintance,” Hannibal said. Not only beautiful then, but with a mind so rare he made the Mona Lisa look commonplace.

Perhaps it was time for a change in his kitchen furnishings. Stain the wood of the appliance wall a dark brown to match Will’s hair. For his eyes, replace the ceramic tile floor with blue marble streaked with veins of brown. Put a mirror on the wall to mimic that unique and precious mind. The painting of The Bathers would have to go, the frivolity of the painting style clashed with Will’s rugged practicalness. Alana would have to go too.

Hannibal smiled his very well practised smile. The one that said I’m interested but not too interested as to be creepy; the kind of smile other people were comfortable with. Will Graham looked distinctly uncomfortable. He didn’t even look at Hannibal, instead averting his gaze.

“Likewise,” Will said. It sounded like a lie. “May I introduce Abigail?”
Abigail—who hovered next to Will like she expected Alana and Hannibal to suddenly turn into lions—had wide, startled eyes and freckles dotted on her face like fawn spots. She looked young enough to still be downing beer at frat parties. Will himself was at least 30, if not older. There was likely a 10 to 15 year difference between the two.

She was the sort of prize a man liked if he was trying to forget his age. Hannibal was bitter Will was such a man; the kind to not to care if his date was inexperienced and droll, as long as she was youthful and looked like she belonged on the cover of Good Housekeeping.

“Pleasure to meet you,” Alana said, shaking Abigail’s hand.

“A very lovely date, it is an exceptional pleasure to meet you both,” Hannibal said, so exaggeratedly polite that Alana rested a hand on his back, whether to comfort him or warn him he couldn’t say. Alana knew him enough to know that his usual politeness and charm only became uncomfortably excessive when he was angry.

“Not—she’s my daughter,” Will mumbled.

Oh, Hannibal had read this very wrong.

“My apologies,” Hannibal said. Will nodded yet still didn’t meet Hannibal’s gaze, instead talking to the vicinity of Hannibal’s shoulder. Hannibal resisted the urge to cup Will’s chin in his hand and gently tilt, until Will had nowhere to look but into his eyes.

“I never realized you had a daughter,” Alana said. Hannibal had to admit Will looked rather young to have a daughter already in college.

“Surrogate daughter,” Will said. “It’s a rather new development.”

“He’d adopt me, but technically I’m not an orphan,” Abigail said, a sincere smile stretching her face and easing the timid look from her eyes. “But I’m glad he’s my new father.”

“She’s the one who adopted me really,” Will said, self-consciously sipping at a drink in his hand.

“The family we choose often proves to be stronger than a family related merely by blood,” Hannibal said.

“It makes for a happier family too,” Abigail said. “My real father wasn’t a nice man; I was relieved when he left.”

“Abigail!” Will said.

“She’s allowed to dislike a man who was unkind, father or not,” Hannibal said. “And what will you do if he comes back?”

“I’d still be her father, not him. And I’d look out for her,” Will said. “It’s a father’s duty to keep his children safe.”

Hannibal knew there was only one way to truly keep her safe. As long as her biological father was alive, he could shatter the girl’s safe life she had built for herself. If he convinced Will to enter therapy, perhaps he could cultivate the same thought in Will’s mind, maybe even convince him to kill the father.

“Will was one of the volunteers who brought food,” Alana said. “He’s a fisherman and a hunter. Cooked some of it with fresh game.”
“Impressive,” Hannibal said. “I too cooked for the gala, but I must confess I bought my meat at the butcher’s.”

A lie. He had hunted down a particularly rude and inept lawyer. He had also brought his own game to the table. A wilder game.

“Only some of it,” Will said. “The rest of the meat came from the store.”

“I’m sure you still far surpassed us all,” Hannibal said.

“Don’t let him fool you,” Alana said. “Hannibal is a famously good chef. He hosts the most extravagant dinner parties I’ve ever been to—candlelight atmosphere, six course meals—makes the dishes himself, well, with the help of a couple prep cooks. The two of you are both fantastic cooks.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m fantastic,” Will said, “just unique this far from the bayou.”

“Expanding our palettes?” Hannibal said.

“Enormously,” Will said. He licked his lips in a nervous gesture. Perhaps the attention of the conversation on himself made him nervous, and Hannibal’s eyes tracked the movement.

“I helped Will. Here, you should try it,” Abigail said, grabbing a small plate of bacon-wrapped loin on rice, and passing it to Alana with a proud gleam in her eye. Alana cut off a chunk with a fork and took a bite. She carefully chewed the sample, savoring the pork as if it were a bite of blackberry crumble.

“Incredible,” Alana said, tapping the fork with approval in a rapid clang against the plate. She passed the plate to Hannibal. “Mmm, take a bite.”

Hannibal could smell the pork now that it was this close. It smelled like... human meat?

Will’s eyes were no longer on Hannibal’s shoulder, but instead he stared intently at the plate and then his eyes darted up to Hannibal’s mouth, tensed and anticipating Hannibal’s first taste. Hannibal waited until Will finally looked up and met Hannibal’s gaze. Fear and defiance swam in the waters of Will’s eyes.

Hannibal memorized the blue and brown he could see in those eyes. Could Hannibal dare to hope Will not only had a beautiful mind and body, but had the same perverse taste for human flesh?

Hannibal slowly brought a forkful to his mouth, determined to relish this moment, fearful that the taste would prove his hope wrong. The flavor burst on his tongue, deep and rich, and every yearning inside Hannibal leaped for joy. This was human meat.

Abigail’s father had already met his demise, and now Hannibal was eating him.

Hannibal chewed reverently. A more perfect moment could not be orchestrated. Not in any opera or play or song. He was Actaeon gazing upon the beauty of Diana.

“Hannibal?” Alana said.

He would gladly meet his own death just to experience this moment again.

“Unparalleled,” Hannibal said, feeling like he just saw the sun rise for the first time. “I have never met a more excellent cook.”
Will watched Hannibal. The man looked like he was having a religious experience over the food. There were even tears gathered in the corners of his eyes. Garret Jacob Hobbs must taste really nice.

Will cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“Every type of meat has a particular flavor,” Hannibal said. “I find if I concentrate, I can pinpoint the animal from which it came.”

Shit. Abigail looked over at Will, forehead crinkled in worry lines.

It was fine, Will told himself, just think of an animal Dr. Lecter hasn’t eaten before. Alligator? No, too common. Goat? Also common. Peacock? Dr. Lecter looked like the type of pretentious bastard to have actually eaten peacock.

“This pig had quite the unusual diet, better than most,” Hannibal said. “It changes the taste of the meat.”

Will breathed a sigh of relief. At least one uncomfortable question avoided.

“Commercially raised pigs are fed rendered pork,” Abigail said. “He probably just ate other pigs.”

Will shot her a sharp look. Now wasn’t the time to accidentally leave clues in front of Alana Bloom, who Will knew was an FBI consultant, for the sake of a witty joke. Even if cannibalizing a cannibal was cleverly ironic.

“I would say the bacon is a shoulder cut instead of a side cut,” Hannibal said. “The loin and bacon came from the same pig. And that’s liver and bits of heart mixed in with the dirty rice. Very excellent.”

“That is impressive,” Will said slowly. Dr. Lecter was right. He had gotten the cut of the meat right but the type of meat wrong? Then again, who would guess they were eating people.

“You know, despite Alana’s best attempts to conceal it, I’ve surmised she likely referred you to me, for therapy,” Hannibal said.

Will noticed Alana had her hand resting on Hannibal’s back, a gesture that clearly said she was sleeping with the oh-so-great Dr. Hannibal Lecter. Will swallowed the bitter feeling.

He could hardly blame her. Hannibal was charming; Will was antisocial and rude. Hannibal was well-educated, affluent, well-liked; Will grew up in ramshackle apartments near the boatyards and to this day barely scraped by a living. Hannibal exuded charm and self-control; Will woke up this morning bathed in sweat from a nightmare. His closest friends are seven stray dogs he adopted and one stray daughter.

Also, Will just fed her people.

“I’m avoiding therapy,” Will said. There wasn’t enough therapy in the world for how screwed up his life was.

“I understand the reluctance. I’m sure many psychiatrists have expressed undue interest in your empathy disorder,” Hannibal said. “But I assure you, Will, I’m far more interested in the benefits I could bring to your relationship with Abigail. She needs you as a father figure. It is an enormous
responsibility.”

Will glanced at Abigail. She did need him.

“Here’s my number, if you wish to make an appointment,” Hannibal said, perhaps sensing Will was beginning to cave. “Call me at any time. My only plan is to be redecorating my kitchen over the next few days.”

After Dr. Bloom and Dr. Lecter said their farewells and began to leave, Abigail pulled Will aside, gripping his tux sleeve in her hand.

“What do you think he knows?” Abigail whispered.

“To do so, he’d have to know what people taste like. I’d say we’re safe,” he said as he watched Dr. Lecter’s retreating back. The man had not a hair out of place. Will bet he owned that tux, probably owned several of them. Will tugged self-consciously at the hem of his own rented tux jacket.

“I sensed some sort of tension between you and Dr. Bloom,” Abigail said.

“Yeah,” Will said with a short laugh, “because she was my therapist. And I kissed her.”

“And?”

“And she said she couldn’t get involved with a patient, current or previous patient. Unethical. And since she couldn’t be what I needed, she would give me a referral to a new psychiatrist. Recommended Dr. Lecter, in fact.”

“Never hurts to try again.”

Will snorted.

“She’s sleeping with Lecter,” Will said, “And I guarantee you he’s not here as a volunteer. He actually paid for a table here. Could probably fund this entire fundraiser himself.”

Abigail raised an eyebrow at him. Yeah, ok, money isn’t everything.

“He’s charming, distinguished, very tall,” Will said.

“I thought maybe you were jealous of Dr. Lecter,” Abigail said, “but it sounds like you’re jealous of Dr. Bloom.”

“I’m not jealous of Dr. Bloom,” Will said.

He let his mind see the world from Alana Bloom’s perspective. He saw Hannibal from Alana’s perspective. Alana and Hannibal sitting close together for an intimate dinner, home cooked meal between them, and Hannibal’s smile visible in the flickering candlelight. The figure the man cut in his well-tailored tux. Sincerity and intelligence in his eyes.

“Wait, what am I’m talking about, who wouldn’t be jealous,” Will said. “She has a successful career, everybody loves her. She has a partner who’s attentive and romantic, and a damn sight better than the rest of us will ever get. Fine, I’m jealous. I wish I were Alana Bloom. I wish I had a someone like her Dr. Lecter. I’d also be saner if I were Dr. Bloom.”

“You going to schedule a session with him?”

“Whatever he’s charging, I’m not going to be able to afford it. I fix boat engines, and I’m rude
enough to scare away customers.”

“You’re good at what you do. You’d think rudeness wouldn’t scare people off so easily.”

“Yes, well, people care more about their own sense of importance than the workmanship on a boat engine,” Will said. “And when you’re rude to someone, you mess with that feeling of importance.”

Will would stop if he knew how. Trying to navigate the intricacies of small talk was like trying to make eye contact with someone. He would try, but inevitably fail, some unknown barrier in the way. It was uncomfortable, and he resented whatever was so different about him that he couldn’t make any friends that hadn’t helped him dispose of a dead body.

“It’s ok, Winston can be your therapist. I can translate for him. ‘So Will, tell me, how does feeding brains, toes, and ground bones to your dogs make you feel?’”

“Like I’m already in a prison cell,” Will said humorlessly.

“They won’t find anything, even if they get a warrant,” Abigail said unconcerned. “We have the gala attendees and our dogs to thank for that.”

“Bon appétit then,” Will said, and raised his drink in a toast to the very good health of the very dead Garret Jacob Hobbs.

Wolf Trap, Virginia
Graham Residence

“It’s none of our concern,” Will said. Abigail held out her tablet, but Will didn’t take it. He avoided looking at the screen. He didn’t want to see the photo of the burned husk that was once a 13 year old boy.

Freddie Lounds was a parasite. What sort of monster profited off publishing these horrifying photos, instead of leaving the dead to rest?

“Whoever they are,” Abigail said, “they’re killing children.”

“Let the police deal with it,” Will said. Abigail scoffed as she flopped down in a lounge chair next to the hand-built shelf crammed with assorted half-empty liquor bottles; Will had taken to a small amount of drinking just to fall asleep at night. Buster padded over to her, and she scritched the Jack Russell on the head, fingers moving at an agitated pace.

“Fine, so I do my best to figure out who it is,” Will said. “I give the FBI an anonymous tip. It’s their job to deal with people like these.”

“Didn’t work when you told them about my father.”

“I didn’t have evidence; they had no probable cause for a warrant. Your father covered his tracks. There likely was no evidence, save for you.”

Abigail lightly touched her throat, where hidden beneath her scarf was a jagged scar.

“If I told them, they would have known I was helping him,” Abigail said. She scooped up Buster to
sit on her lap, and he attempted to lick her face. She put a hand to her scarf to keep him from dislodging it, self-conscious even in the privacy of their home. “Thank you for saving me. Do you… regret it?”

There was a polite knock at the front door.

“You don’t usually get company,” Abigail said, and Buster leaped from her lap to join the pack as they scrambled for the front door. Will sighed. His dogs enjoyed the thought of unexpected company a lot more than Will did.

“Try never,” Will said. “Shotgun’s under the bed. Sit right there, you’ll be close enough to grab it if you need to.”

Will slowly opened the front door. Hannibal Lecter stood there.

Lecter was wearing a three-piece suit, of course he fucking was. Will had on an old flannel shirt covered in three layers of dog hair, with a rip on the cuff from when he was fiddling in the gear case of the latest Merc. He’s pretty sure he has a grease stain on his shoes.

“Dr. Lecter,” Will said, “this is a surprise.”

“Please Will, call me Hannibal,” Dr. Lecter said. “May I come in?”

Will whistled for the dogs to stay put as he opened the door wider. *He’s going to get dog hair all over a suit that costs more than what I earn in a month, Will thought.*

“Is this… is this about therapy?” Will said. He watched Hannibal wade into the waiting mass of dogs. Will pictured his home as Hannibal would see it. The dog beds scattered in front of built-in bookshelves cluttered with unread books and boxes of unfiled papers. The half-assembled boat motor propped against a chair that hasn’t been in style since the 80s. Will’s fucking bed, that doesn’t even have a box-spring under the mattress, parked in the middle of the living room.

“Uh, there’s only one open bedroom upstairs, too much boat and fishing equipment. Abigail gets the bedroom,” Will said, answering a question Dr. Lecter never asked. If he was here to try to convince Will to schedule therapy sessions, he now knew why Will hadn’t.

“I’m here because I’m hosting a dinner party next week,” Hannibal said, reaching out to pat Max, Will’s border collie, on the head. Max immediately thumped his tail against the floor. “I was hoping you could attend, and your daughter of course.”

“Thank you, but it sounds sociable. I try to avoid being *sociable,*” Will said. “I’m not very good at it.” Abigail made a sound like she was dying.

“What?” Will said.

“His dinner parties made the Best of Baltimore list, twice,” Abigail said. “Don’t you read the list?”

“No I didn’t—I mostly read breaking news and TattleCrime. Which may explain several of my neuroses.”

“Some say an invitation *is* considered enviable,” Hannibal said. “Would you really wish to deprive your daughter of the chance? The both of you would greatly improve the company.”

“Well, in that case,” Will said, not meaning it at all. But he already knew he’d accept; it’d be a chance for Abigail to think about something other than corpses and the FBI and serial killers for a
change. “Fine, we’ll go.”

Abigail laughed and kissed Will on the cheek. Will smiled despite himself and despite the embarrassment. He was used to the idea of a family being people who ignored and resented each other. Abigail constantly surprised him.

He could feel Hannibal’s eyes on him. Will wasn’t sure if the man judged him to be an ill-suited father. Abigail used to live in a suburban middle-class home. Now she lived with Will in the middle of nowhere in a farmhouse with threadbare carpets and dog dandruff.

“Until then,” Hannibal said softly.

Hannibal left Will’s house with Will’s acquiescence to the dinner party invite, Abigail’s admiration, Max’s devotion, and what little peace Will had left in his mind. Now that Will had seen Dr. Lecter in his house, he couldn’t unsee him.

An afterimage of Hannibal Lecter lingered by the bookcases. That ghost of Hannibal leaned against the brick fireplace casually reading *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri. It was one of those books Will had bought with the intention of reading, but he could never get past that damn first section, *Inferno*.

Poetry spoke in a way that unsettled Will. It was too much imagery for an imagination as vivid as his, he couldn’t *not* see the portrait the poem painted. *Inferno* was worse than most. He always stalled on the stanza when the tormented Francesca said about her lover: “*Love, which absolves no one beloved from loving, seized me so strongly with his charm that, as you see, it has not left me yet. Love brought us to one death.*”

If he closed his eyes, he could imagine the beautiful Francesca and the man she had been doomed to love suspended above the ground in an eternal windstorm in Hell, swept away from each other’s arms by the punishing winds just as love metaphorically swept them away from reason and into adultery. The two of them would forever be haunted by memories of the love they had felt that they would never experience again, a never fulfilled longing in their souls for each other.

Will wondered if Hannibal Lecter was the kind of man to feel sympathy for Francesca and her fate. Hardly likely. Men of his caliber rarely sympathized with the impulsive and imperfect.

“You know, a dinner party, that’s a lot of food,” Abigail said, interrupting Will’s wandering thoughts. “Dr. Lecter might need some extra meat.”

She clearly wasn’t done with their previous conversation.

“No, no. It’s bad enough, me serving your father up as some sort of tasty dish to get rid of the evidence,” Will said. “But to go in with the *intention* of killing someone. I didn’t mean to kill your father, his murder was an accident—”

“It’s not murder, we honored every part of him.”

“—we can’t just *do* this, Abigail.”

“What, you’d rather let those kids *die*? Like I would have died?” Abigail said.

She stormed out of the living room and out the front door, letting it slam shut. Her temper’s been showing lately. It might not be a bad sign. At least she no longer lists around the house pale and frightened, half-expecting to find her father waiting for her around every corner.
Will turned around to see the imaginary Dr. Lecter standing there watching the exchange.

“Well, have anything helpful to say?” Will said to the hallucination.

“This is important to her, for one reason or another,” the ghost of Hannibal Lecter said. “I would say she’s very determined.”

“I’d be sending her to the wolves. FBI, serial killers—and they’d all want a piece of us.”

“She’ll likely do this with or without you. As her father, are you really going to let her face the wolves alone?”

Dammit.

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**Baltimore, Maryland**

**Dr. Lecter’s Dinner Party**

“The wine I promised,” Dr. Bedelia Du Maurier said as she held out a bottle for Hannibal to take. “A Pinot Noir from the Clos de la Marèchale. Should go well with the entrée.”

“You sure you won’t stay for the dinner party?” Hannibal said as he passed the wine bottle to one of the prep cooks to add to the collection in the pantry.

“I’m your psychiatrist, Hannibal, not your friend,” Bedelia said. “You’ve made changes since the last time I was here; you redecorated the kitchen.”

“The essentials are all still the same, not a single appliance or counter changed.”

“It reminds me now of my father’s cabin in the Saint Lawrence Valley from when I was a little girl. Whatever you had in mind when you redecorated, it wasn’t your own taste. Every room in this house is specifically designed with other’s perceptions in mind: intimidation, admiration, and contemplation. But not the kitchen, it had always been strictly for your pleasure alone, and now that’s changed.”

“On the contrary, everything in this room is designed specifically for my pleasure,” Hannibal said as he sprinkled parmesan and olive oil on a platter of thinly sliced carpaccio “beef.”

“There are fishing lures on a rustic wood shelf where once there was a Jean-Honoré Fragonard painting.”

Well, he wanted Will to be comfortable here. It took hours to plan and prepare their kind of meals.

“The kitchen is where the fish is cooked, what better place to keep what lures the fish to my dinner table?” Hannibal said.

“The candles and mirror are a romantic touch. Hannibal, have you met someone?”

“Perceptive as always. Yes, I met a man. I invited him to the dinner tonight, in fact.”

“Is that the explanation for the second armchair? I had wondered if you were thinking of entertaining in the kitchen now.”
“The kitchen is for family, not guests.”

Hannibal planned many of his meals sitting in that original armchair. An index card with a recipe in one hand and a business card in the other, as he imagined step by step how he would procure his main ingredient. It was fitting there should be two armchairs now.

*Does Will sit in his own kitchen, imagining pools of blood and cracked bone and the smell of cooking flesh? Does he compose his masterpiece in the theatre of his mind, a rousing rehearsal before opening night?* Hannibal wondered.

The chime of the doorbell interrupted his thoughts. He had not expected another guest so early before the dinner party. It was another half hour until the party began.

“Alana, this is a surprise. Come in,” Hannibal said when he saw who was at the door. He had hoped, absurdly, when he heard the doorbell that it might be Will arriving early, perhaps dragged here by the sheer force of Abigail’s enthusiasm.

“I thought you might want some help setting up tonight.”

“If you insist,” Hannibal said as two attendants carried trays of hors d'oeuvres while a prep cook hurried towards the kitchen with an empty serving platter. He knew she was aware he always hired more than enough help for his dinner parties.

“Alright, I admit it, I’m actually here to talk,” Alana said. “It’s been a couple weeks since I last heard from you, not since the gala, when you didn’t invite me for a drink afterwards. It’s fine if it’s over, Hannibal, I’m a big girl. I just want the courtesy of being told.”

“I consider you a good friend, and a colleague. I will always consider you such.”

“So it is over then. Well, it was an affair, and affairs like this tend to end,” Alana said. She was hurt he was sure, but too proud to show it.

The look on her face reminded him of the painting of Catherine de’ Medici that used to sorrowfully stare at him from his aunt’s foyer and now hung in his study over the fireplace. The Catherine in the painting was proud yet melancholy, weighted down by the deeds she had done to ensure the survival of her heirs. *A mother will do anything for her children*, his aunt used to say. *Never underestimate it.*

Will had done what he needed to in order to keep Abigail safe. Hannibal wondered what would Abigail still need, what still drove her decisions and desires, and how would those needs might influence Will as her father.

“Well, now that I’ve invaded your home right before your dinner party, is there a way I can actually help?”

“You are not the only guest to arrive early, and I am too busy to be a proper host at the moment. Perhaps you would entertain her for me?”

Alana nodded, likely glad at the prospect of no longer being in the same room as Hannibal, and he ushered her up the stairs to the study. The other guest was leaning against the desk as she stared vacantly at the flickering flames in the fireplace. The guest wore her diamonds and lipstick like armor, a buffer between her and the world that had hurt her. She rested a hand on her stomach, face in a grimace.

“Margot, a dear friend of mine has arrived. May I have the pleasure of introducing Alana Bloom?” Hannibal said.
Margot turned towards them. It took a few moments, but the distant stare and unhappy turn of Margot’s mouth began to melt from her face. There was still sadness at the corner of her eyes, but she smiled, something she hadn’t done since the surgery.

“The pleasure is all mine,” Margot said. Alana absently ran her fingers through her own hair, tucking it behind one ear.

Interesting. He knew that tell.

“Care to join me by the fire? Could use the company,” Margot said.

These two certainly didn’t need him around.

As he walked back to the kitchen to say goodbye to Bedelia, he stopped by the dining table and switched the place cards for Miss Verger and another guest. He suspected Margot would benefit from a seat right across from Dr. Alana Bloom.

“Two families, states apart and little in common,” Abigail said, as Will drove them up the street towards Dr. Lecter’s house. “Maybe there isn’t a pattern.”

Abigail wore a white and black homecoming dress repurposed for the dinner party. She would look like the old Abigail, the one who went to Prom and high school football games, if it weren’t for her silk scarf. The faint reflections of the stately mansions guarding the street loomed on the passenger side window behind the profile of her face.

“No, there’s a pattern, otherwise they’d never had found the crime scene at the Frisks so quickly after the Turners. The FBI knows something about these families they’re not sharing with the press,” Will said. “I need more photos. I’m trying to reconstruct a family portrait out of instagram photos and fingerpaint drawings on the fridge.

“TattleCrime.com publishes photos for shock value, not photos with the mundane details. What I need is to know what these people looked like at the time of death. What position their bodies were in, the pattern of arterial spray on the walls… what emotion is still etched in the emptiness of their eyes.”

“Think we could pay Freddie Lounds for the rest of the photos? The ones she didn’t post on TattleCrime,” Abigail said.

“No one would accuse Freddie of journalistic integrity. She’d sell us more than photos if we asked. I doubt it will help us find what we’re looking for.”

“If we had found the killer already, we could have helped with the dinner party,” Abigail said glumly. “I could have made them into a chicken salad, or maybe a pot pie. Don’t suppose he’d let us help with the next one?”

“You know, you were supposed to stop worrying about this for just one night. Please Abigail, enjoy yourself. Take in the exotic food, the glittering dresses, the ceaseless grating chatter. In the morning, we’ll go back to tracking our killer, refreshed and ready to scour the dregs of TattleCrime some more.”
“Like you’ll be enjoying yourself,” Abigail said with an amused smile. “You’d rather face a serial killer than a dinner party.”

“You’re not wrong,” Will said, parking his 10-year old station wagon behind a BMW convertible.

The man exiting the convertible wore his black suit with resigned formality, like a nameless businessman still toiling away at the end of a long work day. Despite the obvious quality of the suit, the man had no similarities with their esteemed dinner host. The suit was so bland it faded into obscurity against the background of dramatic sculpted houses, and the white peppered at his temples and throughout his neatly trimmed beard held no distinguished quality. He regarded Will’s car with a puzzled look.

Will ignored the man’s gaze. He was sure if the man considered the car a travesty, it would only get worse when he saw the grey sports jacket and blue button-down that Will was wearing. He was comfortable in chest waders or sweaters, not formal wear.

Will didn’t feel any less out of place inside Dr. Lecter’s house. The house was a brick Colonial monstrosity surrounded by carefully maintained landscaping. No wild irises or ivy here, only ornamental hedges on a vibrantly green yard. There was an actual attendant at the door, dressed like a waiter at an overpriced restaurant, and Hannibal was there to personally greet each guest.

“Will, Abigail, I’m pleased to see you both. Come in, please.”

“Great to see you, Dr. Lecter,” Abigail said.

“Thanks for the invite,” Will lied.

As Hannibal helped Abigail out of her coat, the attendant held his hand out towards Will with an expectant look.

“Uh…” Will said.

“Your coat, sir,” the attendant said.

Oh. Before Will could take his off, he felt Hannibal step behind him and gently grab and pull the shoulders back to help Will remove it. He could feel Hannibal’s warm exhale against his neck.

“Oh, thank you, I’ll just—” Will said, as Hannibal handed it to the attendant. Abigail watched with raised eyebrows. Will wondered if she was embarrassed he hadn’t known what to do with his coat.

“And Dr. Sutcliffe, always glad to see an old colleague,” Hannibal greeted the man who had arrived in the convertible.

“Well, I would hardly miss it,” Dr. Sutcliffe said.

As they made their way further into the house, Sutcliffe said to Will, “You picked the right party to come to. Hannibal’s dinners are famous, more like a feast than a meal. He’s always been prone to extravagance.”

Will soon realized the food was not the only feast for tonight. For one, the room the guests were ushered into was a buffet of textures. Thick woven grey curtains hung against classic damask wallpaper with plush green armchairs standing on a hard polished marble floor. Throw pillows with goddamn zebra stripes were on a couch squatted in front of a crackling fireplace. Natural textures—flowers arranged in vases and carved wood furniture—rested on every flat surface of the room.
Secondly, the gossip was a banquet for the vultures.

“It’s a shame Hannibal doesn’t host more parties, he has exquisite taste, not just the food,” a woman who introduced herself as Mrs. Komeda said. Her straight black hair hung to her chin in a severe manner. She had snagged Will before he could make his escape to the far side of the room, where he had planned to linger next to the harpsichord and out of reach of conversation. “Best decor you’ll ever see. Better than my mother; she never learned how to accentuate a room. She once put rose-patterned armchairs next to paisley curtains. There’s a reason I don’t host any parties where my mother has decorated.”

“Hannibal does pride himself on his refined palette,” Dr. Sutcliffe said. He had not escaped Mrs. Komeda’s clutches either. He, unlike Will, had at least managed to snap up a glass of wine to fortify against Mrs. Komeda’s onslaught.

Mrs. Komeda turned to Will as if she expected him to have some opinion on the matter.

“Uh, it’s a very nice living room,” Will said.

“It’s a parlor,” Mrs. Komeda said.

Will wondered where Abigail was and if she would rescue him. He caught Abigail’s eye across the room.

“I feel as if there was a ‘but’ hidden somewhere in that sentence,” Dr. Sutcliffe said to Will. “You don’t meet many people with a ‘but’ when discussing Dr. Lecter’s exquisite tastes.”

“I guess zebra striped pillows are a little beyond me,” Will said. Dr. Sutcliffe tried to stifle an amused smile by clearing his throat and looking at the ground.

“Are they?” Mrs. Komeda said stiffly, as if he had just personally insulted her and her precious sense of decor, which put an end to that conversation. Unfortunately for him, Abigail had overheard.

“Can you try not to be rude,” Abigail said.

“I wasn’t trying to be rude,” Will said. He had finally managed to make his way next to the harpsichord and now did his very best to blend into the curtains behind him. “She shouldn’t have asked my opinion on the room.”

“If anyone asks, just say the room is lovely. Standard answer for all questions tonight. The food is lovely, the guests are lovely—”

“Mrs. Komeda’s conversations are lovely. Yes, I get it. Any actual benefits for attending tonight?”

“Have you tried this?” Abigail said holding up a cucumber slice with some sort of pale pink spread on top.

“What is it?”

“Some kind of mousse. Thought it was salmon, but tastes closer to chicken, I think.”

“It has to be tastier than the conversation.” It was. Apparently there were very good reasons to attend Hannibal’s dinner parties.

Will’s attempt to weasel his way out of social interactions backfired spectacularly when he snuck his way across the room to sample a few more of the hors d’oeuvres. Dr. Lecter spotted him, and noting
a guest without a conversation partner, felt the need to play host and talk to him. Not that he minded conversing with Hannibal. Hannibal was at least interesting, and seemed to understand Will’s protectiveness of Abigail. What he minded was that wherever Dr. Lecter went, the other guests followed, eager to join the conversation.

“A ricotta and prosciutto crostini, with peaches,” Hannibal said as he nodded at the grilled bread piled with decadent toppings that Will nibbled on.

“Delicious,” Will mumbled before remembering it wasn’t polite to talk with a full mouth. He stuffed the last bite of the crostini in his mouth to soothe his nerves, and got a smear of the ricotta on his hand.

“Prosciutto is traditionally made by hand,” Hannibal said. “The process itself takes two years.”

Two years? Who takes two years to make an appetizer?

“You begin in winter, with the hind quarters. You salt it, hang it to dry, and occasionally grease it over a crucial 18 months. The ham will begin to leave a sweet smell suspended in the air. An unmistakable perfume.”

Hannibal’s head dipped down to the side as he subtly inhaled, as if smelling the air. Perhaps he could smell the prosciutto even now.

Will nodded as he absently sucked the ricotta off his finger. He didn’t realize what he’d done until Hannibal’s head lifted and his gaze sharpened on him, lingering on his finger in his mouth.

Right, should have used a napkin or something. Will was too used to his own habit of napkin rationing from years of fishing and camping. He saved the napkins for the really dirty jobs, like wiping his hands while cleaning fish or getting oil off his hands after greasing the boat engine pistons, not for crumbs and bits of spread.

“Dr. Lecter,” a new voice said, and the interruption seemed to snap Hannibal back from wherever his attention had wandered. The newcomer was a short man with a wide smile and short brown hair side-combed into the universal haircut that men the world over favored.

“Dr. Chilton, may I introduce Will Graham?”

“Not the Will Graham? The one with the empathy, and the extra mirror neurons?” Dr. Chilton didn’t wait for Will to respond. “Your mind is of great interest to the psychiatric world, if I may say so, Mr. Graham. Especially to a man such as myself, considering my reputation and profession.”

“What profession is that?”

“Oh, I’m the hospital administrator, at the Baltimore Hospital for the Criminally Insane.”

“Are you saying I’m criminally insane?” Will said slowly.

“Goodness, no,” Chilton said with a chuckle, then added conspiratorially as if it was a big joke, “though I’d watch which psychiatrists you interview with, some might argue for insane.”

No, just criminal, Will thought.

“They don’t understand how a mind like yours works. I would never do that,” Dr. Chilton continued. “Perhaps you’d like to interview with me some—“
“Dr. Chilton, now is not the time for such topics,” Hannibal said, his eyes on Will not Dr. Chilton. It seemed at least one of the doctors could recognize the warning signs of an impending angry explosion. “This is a time of leisure, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, you’re right, of course.”

“Will, good to see you again,” Alana Bloom said, joining the conversation with another dark-haired woman in tow. “And if you don’t mind the interruption, Hannibal, I wanted to thank you for introducing Margot to me.”

“It appears Dr. Bloom and I have a lot in common,” Margot said.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t mind being interviewed by the lovely Dr. Bloom,” Dr. Chilton stage-whispered to Will loud enough for everyone to hear. “Everybody else seems to want to.”

“I don’t do interviews,” Will said to Alana to break the tension. “But if I did, I promise not to kiss you again.” That really wasn’t the way to do it. Hannibal’s mouth flattened in an unamused look as he looked between Alana and Will. Great going, Will, tell the host you once kissed his girlfriend.

“Well, as long as you promise;” Alana said, and it sounded like she was flirting with him.

Now Margot looked as unamused as Hannibal. Did everyone here want Alana? How strange it must be to be the object of desire for the entire room. Will contented himself with scrounging for scraps of affection. It’d been over three years since his last date.

“I don’t believe we’ve met. Jack Crawford, head of the the Behavioral Analysis Unit at the FBI,” a man introduced himself to Will as yet more people joined the conversation. “How did you and Dr. Lecter meet?”

“How do you know Dr. Lecter?” Will said. He was being rude again, he knew it. But he wanted to know, and didn’t know how else to ask.

“Oh, we work together on occasion,” Jack said, “Dr. Chilton, Dr. Boom, Dr. Lecter, me. You know it’s going to be bad if all four of us are called in.”

“Or in this case, good,” Dr. Chilton said. “We’ve caught the Chesapeake Ripper. Or rather, we caught him two years ago. He’s just confessed.”

“Abel Gideon may not know what he’s talking about,” Dr. Bloom said.

“He knows the crimes, inside and out, even what wasn’t released to the press,” Dr Chilton said. “He’s playing you, Dr. Bloom. He’s pretending he doesn’t know who he is.”

“I’m sure we’ll know whether or not he’s the Ripper soon enough,” Hannibal said.

“You’ve heard of the Chesapeake Ripper, I assume?” Dr. Chilton said to Will.

“Yes, I’ve—wait, are all of you FBI?” Shit, shit, shit. Why did he come to this dinner party?

“I’m the only FBI here. The good doctors here consult on cases from time to time,” Agent Crawford said.

Perfect. Will accepted a dinner invite from a psychiatrist who helps catch serial killers. Will did his
best to look like he hadn’t killed a guy just a couple weeks ago.

“Religious nuts who carve angel wings out of the skin of people’s backs and mushroom gardens grown out of human body parts, always a good time,” Dr. Chilton said. “I’m beginning to spend all my time either staring at the steel cages in the hospital or at the charcoal-painted hallways of the BAU. I’m starting to get sick of the color gray.”

An attendant whispered in Hannibal’s ear.

“May I have everyone's attention,” Hannibal said to the group. “I am pleased to inform you, dinner is ready to be served.”

At least Will was spared the indignity of deciding who was the lesser evil to sit by. There were place cards with names. Will sat at his designated spot between Alana and Abigail, and within conversation distance of Hannibal, a safe port in the storm. Unfortunately Dr. Sutcliffe and Mrs. Komeda were seated opposite him.

The first half of dinner went better than he had feared. Abigail and Hannibal had a lively conversation about Hannibal’s memories of Italy, while Mrs. Komeda interjected anecdotes from her own trips to Europe. Sutcliffe and Chilton and Crawford debated the implications of case studies on the brain scans of psychopaths. Will happily kept silent.

“Undeveloped amygdala and an increased volume of striatum, you can look on a brain scan and know someone's a psychopath,” Agent Crawford said.

“That particular brain development results in no fear conditioning and an overdeveloped rewards system in the brain. Recipe for psychopathy,” Dr. Chilton said. “At least psychopaths never have to worry about depression, or night dreads.”

“If only we all were psychopaths,” Dr. Sutcliffe said.

Margot and Alana ignored them and instead discussed poetry.

“‘Let me confess that we two must be twain, although our undivided loves are one.’ Reality has a tendency to undermine unrealistic expectations, like pruning shriveled blooms from a flower,” Margot said.

“Are your hopes unrealistic? Or is that just what you’ve been told by your brother? ‘Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediment,’” Alana said.

“Touché. If only it were that simple. You know, I’ll always find it baffling there are scholars who insist Shakespeare’s sonnets are platonic.”

“I always mention a man’s erect cock in an entirely platonic manner.”

Will choked on the mouthful of soup he was sipping.

It was when the stuffed onions were served as the fourth course that it all went to shit. As soon as the attendant placed the plate in front of Will, his heart sunk. Why had he not prepared for this? He couldn’t tell if there were onions in the stuffing. He could see cheese, spinach, meat. Could he risk taking a bite?

He glanced at Abigail as she ate a mouthful. He couldn’t see any onion pieces on her spoon. He could dig through the stuffing with the spoon and see if there were any, and separate out the
offending vegetable. Or he could not eat it.

Mrs. Komeda was staring at him. He couldn’t do it, could he? It would be bad manners, even he knew that.

“Everything alright?” Abigail whispered to him. “You’re not eating.”

“Fine,” Will whispered back. “Are there onions in the filling?”

“Yes. Do you not like onions?” Abigail whispered. “You use them all the time when cooking.”

“I use onion powder,” Will whispered, “and I like the taste of onions just fine.”

Right, he could just try to get a spoonful that didn’t have onion in it. Not eat much of it, claim he was getting full. He could do this. He carefully got a spoonful that he prayed didn’t have any, and took a bite.

Crunch.

Wet and firm and crunch and squish. There was pain in his jaw, in his teeth, in his throat. No, pain was the wrong word. It was the same discomfort his ears felt when they heard wet squeaking shoes on linoleum. The kind of sound that’s worse than pain. It made you want to rip your ears off, made you want to scream.

The scrape of silverware against plates deafened him. Skee... tap... tap... clathunk. The light in the dining room burned his eyes, and made him dizzy. The collar of the dinner jacket he wore scraped at his skin with every minute movement.

“—ill?

“Will?”

Shit, he had spit the piece of onion back on the plate. He had done it without thinking, the same jumpy reflex as swatting a spider off himself.

“Dad?” Abigail said. “Are you—went blank, like you—somewhere else.”

“What?” Will said.

“Hannibal, you’re torturing your patient,” Dr. Sutcliffe said with a nod towards Will.

“Will, are—ight?” Hannibal said.

“What?” Will repeated.

“SPD,” Dr. Sutcliffe diagnosed. “You have—where he can go?”

“Will,” Hannibal said, crouching down next to Will who was still seated at the table. “Can you hear me? Do you need a quiet room?”

“Yes, I... I need quiet, less distractions,” Will said. Hannibal gently guided him from the room, careful not to touch him. Will was grateful. Everything was too bright, too loud, too much. He wished he could escape his brain.

“It was delicious, it’s not that,” Will said, trying to put the thoughts in his head back in order.
“I know, Will,” Hannibal said, “Sutcliffe said Sensory Processing Disorder. A texture in the food?”

“Onions,” Will said bitterly. “Cooked onions, cooked celery, and raw tomato. They’re wet but crunchy. It’s too conflicting for my brain. My mind gets overwhelmed, like a small panicking child lost in a crowd of strangers. And then I can’t filter out distractions anymore. Suddenly background noises, like rustling paper and tapping feet, are as distracting as the roar of a jet. Also happens when I use my empathy.”

“The inner lives of the masses can be invasive. Crowding your thoughts and lapping at the sanctity of your mind.”

“It’s not the masses that are the problem. Petty people with petty problems. It’s when I get too close to one mind. How do I know which of their thoughts are theirs and which are mine?”

“The same way a mother knows her child by scent alone. Do you want peace, Will?”

“I want the quiet of my own thoughts.”

“This is the study, it will be quiet here,” Hannibal said. “I can put out the fire if it’s too distracting.”

Will glanced toward the lit fireplace.

“No, I’ll be fine if I close my eyes for a bit.”

“I have to wonder why you would choose not to tell me.”

“It has nothing to do with you. I use onion powder or small enough pieces that it doesn’t crunch when I cook. I thought I could fake it tonight. I didn’t want to be the weird one.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being weird. You’ll find I am as weird as you are, if not more. In case you didn’t notice, you would hardly have been the only one eating a special diet tonight. Margot’s still recovering from a surgery; it’s best if she only eats soft foods for now.”

“Sorry for interrupting the dinner party.”

“Never apologize, Will.”

Will closed his eyes, took in the silence and the darkness behind his eyelids. He needed to focus his attention. He could think about the crime scenes, and hoped it would help his mind concentrate again.

He had imagined the Turner crime scene and the Frisk crime scene over and over the past week. Imagined every possible scenario he could: the different precautions the killer could have taken, the possible sequence of the execution of the family members, possible words exchanged or not exchanged. But he knew he was missing something, there was an itch at the back of his brain.

The pendulum swung.

Will pictured a large living room covered in Christmas decorations, just like in the TattleCrime photos. There was an enormous Christmas tree lit with bright lights that sat in one corner, with garland and wreaths strung around the border of the room. Everything was store-bought, new, and matched. It looked like a living room you would find in a furniture magazine.

Mrs. Frisk was slumped on the couch with a bullet hole in her head, a counterpoint to the otherwise picture-perfect Christmas cheer. Mr. Frisk and the kids were collapsed on the floor amid a ruin of torn wrapping paper and opened presents. A small burned body was curled up in the fireplace.
The pendulum swung again.

Mrs. Frisk sat up on the couch, tears sliding down her face. Her family was dead all around her: her husband, her two kids, and her son, who had been kidnapped 10 months ago. The kidnapper had returned the son, only to kill all the family. Mrs. Frisk had been killed last.

Will held up the gun in his hand.

BANG!

A single gunshot, and Mrs. Frisk flopped backwards, blood spraying from her forehead as her body started to convulse. Will stared at her in bafflement. He hadn’t fired his gun.

He turned his head slowly to the side. Colin Frisk was no longer in the fireplace. He was standing beside Will, a recently fired gun in his hand. His skin was no longer blackened by fire and his untouched blonde hair tumbled over his eyes as he looked up at Will.

“You killed her?” Will said. “Why? Why would you—”

“I just wanted a family,” Colin said, voice small.

“You had a family.”

“The family you’re born into, they aren’t your real family. You understand, I know you do! Your dad isn’t your real family either.”

“My father tried his best. It wasn’t his fault. I was special needs and no one realized. I had a difficult childhood.”

“I chose a new family, like you,” Colin said as he grabbed Will’s open hand like a young child latches onto their parent.

“Your new family killed you.”

“I chose the wrong family. I can choose better next time.”

“You won’t get that chance, Colin,” Will said quietly to the young boy.

“No, but you will.”

Will opened his eyes with a shaky exhale, and he was back at Hannibal’s. The study was empty, Hannibal had left. Will took deep breaths and tried to steady his breathing as he looked around.

Unlike the cold, vast parlor downstairs, the study was warm and small, closing in around Will like a comfortable leather glove. Two plush armchairs lounged by a fireplace guarded by twin wood pilasters. Books and vases and antiques were stacked on orderly built-in bookshelves, and a chandelier with electric candles hovered high over the coffee table. A massive wood desk that swallowed up the empty space of the room sat across from the fireplace.

Will sat in one of the armchairs and rubbed his face with his hands. He needed to get a grip. The study door creaked open, and Will looked up to see Hannibal carrying in a tray piled with food.

“The other courses,” Hannibal said with a smile. “A salad, with asparagus and lotus root chips, and bread pudding with a pomegranate sauce. I also took the liberty of dicing the onion in the entree into very small bits. Should be safe to eat now.”
“Thank you,” Will said. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“It was my pleasure. How are you feeling?”

“Better, less unstable.”

“I can brew a cup of valerian root tea,” Hannibal offered. “It has a mild sedative effect, though it can be bitter without the proper sweeteners. Hippocrates himself extolled the virtues of the plant as a medicinal. It will take about a half hour to steep—”

“No, no I’m fine. Go ahead and return to your guests.”

“As you wish. You can stay here as long as you need to, Will.”

“That might be the rest of the evening,” Will said with a bitter smile.

After Hannibal left the room, Will saw a flicker of flame out of the corner of his eye. He looked back and saw Colin Frisk standing by the desk. Colin was engulfed in a pillar of fire, flames licking at him but his skin remain unburned. He pointed at a small stack of folders on the desk.

Will opened the top folder. There were photos of a familiar living room and a familiar crime scene. Will flipped through the papers, studying the report on the Frisk murders. Shit, there were autopsy reports, the forensics results, fingerprint analysis… Hannibal was consulting on the case.

Curious, he opened the next folder too.

It opened to a photo of a woman splayed out, a stool under her back as her legs and arms dangled towards the ground. She was dead, her eyes missing and her body pierced by IV stands, rebars, and medical equipment. Organs were cut out of her like her killer took surgical trophies, but the death felt clinical and cold, not triumphant.

The case report was labeled, “The Chesapeake Ripper.”

There was another photo dated two years ago. It was a dead man laid out on a workbench, resting on the hard surface like Lazarus lying in his tomb. This corpse was also mutilated by the tools of his trade, but this death felt passionate. Several screwdrivers pierced the man’s abdomen, a pair of pliers pinched his upper thigh, and a saw gnawed at his knee. Whoever killed this man had slaughtered him like one would a pig.

“These are not the same killer,” Will whispered to himself.

There was a knock at the study door.

Will quickly shut the folders and stepped away from the desk, grabbing a letter opener from the desk absent mindedly so he’d have something to fiddle with. Dr. Sutcliffe walked into the room.

“Ah, glad to see the honored guest is doing better,” Dr. Sutcliffe said.

“Honored guest?” Will said.

“Yes, Hannibal’s been showing you off all evening. You didn’t notice?” Dr. Sutcliffe said as he sat down in one of the armchairs. “The host sits at the head of the table, and the guest of honor sits to the right of the host.”

“Abigail sat to the right of Hannibal.”
“Hannibal’s a traditionalist. Etiquette insists the host arrange the seating to alternate between male and female, so Hannibal does. As a male guest he can’t sit you next to himself, messes with the alternating pattern, so he put Abigail in the guest of honor seat by the host, thereby—”

“—honoring me. I didn’t realize formal dinners were so complicated.”

“Oh, formal dinners are always ridiculous that way. The real question is, why you? What makes you so special?”

“Special?”

“Hannibal can’t resist showing off his rare treats. Whether it's food, antiques, or a guest. The last guest of honor was a famous opera singer.”

“I’m afraid I’m only a rarity in the psychiatric circle. Too many mirror neurons in my brain. Sorry if that disappoints you.”

“Well, you don’t disappoint,” Dr. Sutcliffe said with a chuckle. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Hannibal outright ignore his dinner guests before. He’s a seasoned surgeon in the ER who doesn’t even blink when he sticks his hand in someone’s guts, but one episode from you at the table and he froze, and then didn’t return until after dinner. Do him some good to deal with something that didn’t go his way for once.”

Will has assumed Hannibal had left as soon as Will started reconstructing the crime scene. Had he stayed the entire time, waiting in silence while Will lost himself in a crime scene?

“You diagnosed me at the dinner table.”

“I did a medical case study on the possible causes of autism. I got to know the symptoms of every end of the spectrum. So yes, I noticed you sometimes lack central coherence, and don’t know how to use hedging or indirect questioning.”

“In other words, I sometimes take things too literally and I don’t know how to politely frame questions and requests. I’m aware.”

“I’m sure it’s frustrating, especially when you’re high-functioning. You recognize your difficulty in connecting to others, but your brain isn’t adapted to fixing the problem. One of my case studies did the exact thing you do: she had a tendency to touch objects related to whomever she wished to form a connection with, since she couldn’t with her words.”

Will guiltily looked at the letter opener he was turning over and over in his hands and placed the item back on Hannibal’s desk. Will heard a set of footsteps tapping up the stairs to the study.

“Glad you found some company.” It was Hannibal, no doubt checking on Will.

“Well, I’ll leave you two to it,” Dr. Sutcliffe said, and it was just Will and Hannibal in the room.

“I had an excellent time chatting with Abigail tonight. But I was hoping to get to know you a little better. Perhaps you would agree to visit me again?”

“I don’t want an appointment—”

“No appointment,” Hannibal said, “just conversations. I wasn’t talking about therapy, Will.”

“Then what were you talking about?”
“Friendship.”

It was flattering, if odd. Not many people wanted to be friends with Will. Hannibal was friends with FBI agents, surgeons, socialites, even opera singers. He could understand why Hannibal would want to be his therapist, but his friend?

“Well, what’s a few conversations between friends?” Will said. Hannibal smiled.

“I believe some of the guests will be leaving shortly, if you wish to join me?”

He was right. While several of the guests still chatted in the parlor, a few had drifted near the coat room in the entryway. Hannibal went to escort the guests out while Will hovered in the entryway waiting for Abigail

“I apologize. For earlier,” Mrs. Komeda said to Will, startling him. “I didn’t realize you were… you know. He explained everything to me.”

“Hannibal told you,” Will said, heart sinking. Had Hannibal felt the need to explain Will’s behavior to his guests like Will was some misbehaving dog?

“Oh no, Hannibal never discusses his patients,” Mrs Komeda said. “Dr. Sutcliffe explained.”

“I’m not Hannibal’s patient.”

“Oh?”

“Margot and I are leaving, but it was so good to see you, Will,” Alana said, joining the group waiting outside the coat room. “What did you think of Dr. Lecter? I told you he’s a good psychiatrist when I recommended him.”

Will guessed saying ‘well, at least he's not Dr. Sutcliffe’ would not be a response Abigail would approve of.

“Dr. Lecter’s lovely,” Will said, remembering Abigail’s advice, before he realized that was a weird thing to say. Alana gave him an odd look. He took the opportunity to duck out the door as fast as possible as he said his goodbyes, Abigail at his side.

“That was fun,” Abigail said as she practically skipped down the front steps. “I’m glad we came.”

“Oh, it gets better,” Will said with a chuckle. “I found a way to get what we need.”

“What? How?”

“Hannibal’s consulting on the case, and he keeps the case files here. And he’s invited me back to his house. Looks like you’ll get to make your ‘chicken’ salad after all.”


Chapter End Notes

If you enjoyed reading, it would mean a lot if you left kudos or a comment!

(Yes, I made a Spacedogs reference in this chapter. I couldn’t resist.)
Chapter warnings: This chapter will be dealing with the Lost Boys from episode 1x04 Oeuf. Just like in the episode, families including young children have been murdered, including one boy whose body was burned in a fireplace. In my fic, the murders happen off-screen (save for the death of one mother). I do not describe in detail what the bodies look like, but Will does analyze the crime scenes and mentally recreates the death of the Colin Frisk’s mother. It is mentioned that Colin Frisk’s body was burned.

Several past crime scenes are mentioned, including a Ripper crime scene, that are described but not in super gory detail.
Chapter 2

Baltimore, Maryland
Lecter Residence

Hannibal cast a critical eye over his study. There was a cozy fire in the fireplace, warm puff pastry tarts with sausage on a tray on the coffee table, not a speck of dust on the innumerable books in the bookshelves, and even the investigation reports on his desk were organized by date.

Hannibal resisted the urge to check his watch again and instead nudged the report folders so that all their spines were perfectly aligned. It was 7:17 pm. Will was supposed to be here at 7:15.

The doorbell rang. Will was at the door bundled in a canvas coat and a dock worker’s knitted hat to insulate him from the cold night. His warm exhales were visible in the moonlight against cheeks bitten rosy by the cold. Will stumbled into Hannibal’s house with a muttered “hello” as soon as Hannibal opened the door.

Will flung off his coat before Hannibal could help him. He had to content himself with watching as Will snatched the knitted hat off, leaving his hair a fluffy halo around his face. He dumped the winter getup in Hannibal’s waiting arms and rubbed his hands together for warmth.

“Quieter than last time I was here,” Will said.

“It’s just you and me tonight,” Hannibal said with a smile as he hung up Will’s coat, tugging the coat onto the hanger so that it hung with its shoulders perfectly even.

“I told Abigail where I was going earlier today, but when I left she wasn’t at home. Again.”

“Out with friends?”

“I don’t know where she goes. I try not to ask,” Will said as he followed Hannibal to the study. “Her father kept track of everywhere she went, keeping her tethered to him like a small dog on a leash. I don’t want her to feel like I’ve put a dog collar on her.”

“But you’re concerned.”

“She’s angry all the time. Not at me. At the world, at her father, at herself. I wish I knew how to ease it. And I wish I knew she was safe.”

“You worry for her. You don’t want her to feel alone in a vast and treacherous world.”

Will nodded as he drifted past Hannibal and explored the room. Will walked as if he were the new owner of the study, touching whatever he pleased without a hint of self-consciousness. Hannibal rarely permitted people to treat his possessions with less than careful reverence, unless they wished to
become a future meal. With Will, however, it was different. Will rarely claimed spaces as his own. He walked the world uncertain of his welcome into people’s spaces, used to rejection and hostility. He felt no such reservation with Hannibal, and Hannibal felt pride in that.

“You want a balance,” Hannibal said. “You want enough control over her to feel that she’s safe, but not enough to make her feel trapped. The balance of control—our control over our own actions, our control over others, the control of others over us—is something we wrestle with our whole lives.”

“I don’t want to control her.”

“So instead you choose to let her control you. Is it a relief to have someone else hold the destiny of your life in their hands?”

“I let my love for her control me. It’s not the same thing.”

“Your command over your decisions still rest with you then. But you weigh your decisions based on her desires, not yours. You cannot forsake your desires altogether, Will. You need to make some decisions based on what you want.”

Will continued exploring the room, running his hand across the edge of the desk as he passed it. He inspected the bookshelf in front of him, reading the titles of the books. Will grabbed one of the books, Julie, and flipped it open.

“It’s in French,’ Will said when he realized he couldn’t read it.

“Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse, written in 1761 by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. An example of early literature citing authenticity as a moral compass rather than the strictures of society.”

“Be true to who you are,” Will summarised.

Hannibal stepped in close to Will to turn a few pages for him. His chest hovered a hair width away from touching Will’s arm as he gently flipped to the needed page for his chosen passage, careful not to upset the balance of the book in Will’s hands and reveling in the warmth he could feel emanating from Will’s body. He could feel Will’s eyes watching him like a phantom touch.

“It is that sound judgment and exquisite taste that draw their purity from the soul’s own,” Hannibal translated, slowly reading the page. “It is, in a word, the attractions of the sentiments far more than those of the person that I worship in you.”

Will’s eyebrows stitched together in concentration as he studied the page Hannibal read from.

“I allow that one could imagine you still more beautiful,” Hannibal continued translating. “But more lovable and more worthy of a man’s heart, no, that is not possible.”

Contrary to the author, Hannibal had no desire to change anything about the object of his affection. Not the uncombed curls in Will’s hair or the perpetual wrinkles between his eyebrows, even the unevenness of his jaw were all precious to Hannibal.

“Sometimes I dare to presume that Heaven has put a hidden conformity in our affections, as it did in our tastes,” Hannibal said, watching Will now instead of the book as he knew this passage by heart. “We possess all of nature’s penchants undistorted, and all our inclinations seem to coincide. Not having yet acquired the uniform prejudices of the world, we have uniform ways of feeling and seeing, and why should I not dare imagine in our hearts the same accord I perceive in our opinions?”

“An 18th Century discussion about soulmates,” Will said with a smile.
Will snapped the book shut and returned it to its designated space on the bookshelf. He snatched the glasses off his own face and rubbed at his eyes with his flat palms, exhaling a loud sigh. “You mentioned a type of tea last time I was here.”

“Valerian root tea.”

“Yes that. Is it still on offer? I’m feeling... tense.”

“Yes. It should help with tension, also promotes better rest,” Hannibal said as he noted the dark circles under Will’s eyes. “Have you’ve been having troubles sleeping?”

Will shrugged. Still, Will not only had admitted the worries on his mind, but had openly asked for Hannibal’s help, even if was just for tea and advice. Hannibal permitted himself a pleased smile.

Hannibal went to the kitchen where he kept air dried roots in a small jar for his herbal collection, which was a motley assortment of items like echinacea seeds, calendula flowers, passionflower leaves, plus others that were less harmless. He crushed the root and steeped it in hot water, slowly stirring in honey and letting the sweet smell of the valerian wash over him. As always the peace of the kitchen sunk into his bones as he slowly transformed the snarled tangle of dead plant into a cup of fragrant tea the color of gold.

“As requested, valerian root tea,” Hannibal announced after he returned to the study and presented Will with the cup of tea. “I grow the valerian myself as it is a perfect addition to my garden. The small clusters of white flowers create an eye-catching border, and carries a beautiful scent on the air. The flower was once treasured as a delicate perfume during the Renaissance.”

“Thank you,” Will said but his eyes were distant and he sounded distracted. Hannibal wondered what new puzzle was working itself out in Will’s brain.

Hannibal discreetly swept the room with his eyes, looking for what might have engaged Will’s empathy. The answer presented itself with the stack of folders on the desk that were no longer perfectly aligned, but whose spines were now slightly angled. Will had snooped through the FBI case files. If Will’s inattention to the tea he had requested was any indication, he had asked for the tea only to get Hannibal out of the room long enough to peruse the files.

Clever boy, Hannibal thought to himself.

He watched the silhouette of Will, outlined by the light from the fireplace flickering behind him, as he slowly drank the tea. Will’s throat bobbed when he swallowed the latest sip as his eyes shyly met Hannibal’s.

Hannibal drifted closer to Will without conscious thought, but for every step forward he took, Will stepped further away, keeping the same measured distance between them. There was no wariness in Will’s eyes. He probably didn’t even realize what he was doing, just keeping the proprietary distance he was used to between himself and other people. Hannibal stilled, keeping himself from continuing his slow pursuit.

“You mentioned you read TattleCrime,” Hannibal said as Will sipped at the hot tea, “when I visited you and Abigail in Wolf Trap.”
“Hmm? Yes,” Will said, only half hearing him. The FBI reports on the Turner and Frist cases had been enlightening, but there wasn't yet enough information to determine where the killers would strike next. Or maybe there was.

“Mrs. Frist was shot twice,” a FBI forensic investigator said from behind Hannibal’s desk. The investigator wore a white lab coat, and the ID badge clipped to his lab coat’s lapels identified him as Brian Zeller. “The first bullet traveled through her skull to the base of her neck, not killing her but inducing a seizure response.”

The desk disappeared and in its place was an examination table where the body of Mrs. Frist rested. Zeller moved his hands over the skull of the body to indicate the path of the bullet. “Cause of death was the second bullet, from a different gun. A gun whose ballistics match the murder weapon of a homicide one year ago, when a woman was shot to death with her own gun. She had a 13-year-old son who had gone missing 6 months earlier. He’s the prime suspect.”

“The son’s name is C.J. Lincoln,” a new voice said. Will whirled around to see Alana Bloom sitting in one of the armchairs. “None of these boys showed any signs of psychosis or violent behavior until after they had gone missing. They would have been manipulated into it, made to feel they had no other choice.”

“TattleCrime might be considered unusual reading material for some,” Hannibal said, tugging Will’s brain back to reality. “Do you find your mind wandering, searching out meaning and connection in the violent crimes listed throughout its pages?”

“I used to be a cop in Louisiana. I’m too aware of the meaning criminals have behind their crimes,” Will said.

“Not just criminals need a purpose in their endeavors. Do you search for meaning in your life?” Hannibal said.

“C.J. Lincoln is the oldest,” Jack Crawford said from where he stood a few steps away from the study’s open door. Will tried his best to keep part of his attention on Hannibal and part on the imaginary forensics team. “Most likely he’s our manipulator calling the shots.”

“We call them the Lost Boys,” Alana said. “And like the Lost Boys they are searching for a mother figure. It’s why they kill the mother last.”

“What if one was already found?” Will said to Alana, accidentally saying it out loud.

“I would say you are lucky, as all of us search for our purpose but rarely find it,” Hannibal said, assuming Will was talking to him. “What is your purpose, Will?”

Alana’s eyes widened in response to Will’s question as she looked to Jack. Jack slowly turned to the open doorway of the study as a shadow fell across the threshold of the room. The shadow stretched and distorted itself on the floor, but Will knew it was the shadow of a unseen woman lurking just out of sight in the hallway and he could see in her hand she held a gun.

“It’s not C.J. Lincoln who manipulated them, it’s someone else,” Alana said as the shadow grew larger and larger, until it threatened to envelope and swallow the room. “Someone who thinks of herself as their mother.”

It was the last piece of the puzzle that Will needed. The specters and the shadow in the room vanished, and it was just him and Dr. Lecter once more.

“I have to go,” Will said to Hannibal. “Just, uh, worried about Abigail. We’ll catch up again soon?”
“Same time, same place next week if you wish.”

Wolf Trap, Virginia
Graham Residence
Abigail still wasn’t home when he got back. Will tried to keep himself from pacing. She had been gone most of the day.

“She’ll call if she needs you,” the imaginary Hannibal Lecter said.

Like Garrett Jacob Hobbs, who Will still saw out of the corner of his eye from time to time, it seemed this particular presence was here to stay. Not that Will begrudged it; even when he wasn’t real Dr. Lecter had sound advice and a level head, a nice counterpoint to Will’s stressed existence. Perhaps it was a bad sign that Will felt such dependency on a figment of his own imagination, one that based on the boyfriend of his ex-psychiatrist no less.

Will tried to remember where he last left his tablet. Not in the living room or kitchen. If Abigail had used it last she had probably left it in her room again.

He was right. The door to her bedroom was open, and Will could see it lying on the controlled chaos that was the top surface of the wood dresser. The aforementioned chaos was a constant clutter of lip gloss tubes, makeup compacts, and bottles of hairspray and body mist, mixed in with random oddities like a pocket knife and AA batteries.

In contrast, the rest of the room was always neat and organized; even her scarves hung in a neat row in the closet on nails hammered into the wall. Will tried to ignore how empty the closet looked. Her mother had thrown away most of Abigail’s things, and Will didn’t have the money to replace everything she had lost.

“If I recreate the kidnapper’s mindset,” Will said to Dr. Lecter, “I should be able to figure out the identity of the fourth kid she took. Once I know who he is, I know which family she plans to kill next.”

“What does this kidnapper want?”

“She’s... lonely.”

Will swallowed hard as the silence of his house echoed in his head.

“She was looking for a child that didn’t fit in with the rest of the family. A boy with an interest in some inventive or mechanical hobby,” Will said as he brought up the missing persons page on the FBI website. “Each of the crime scenes were about 500 miles apart moving down the coast, which means the missing boy will be from either North Carolina or Georgia.”

“Will, I am a part of you, I can feel the ache inside you,” the figment of his imagination that looked like Hannibal Lecter said. “You already have a daughter and your dogs, what is it about family you still hunger for?”

“I’m afraid to find out.”
Will could hear the front door bang open and his dogs start barking. It was the type of happy barking that always greeted Abigail; she was home. He heard her run up the stairs.

“Just looking up information about the murders,” Will said as Abigail plopped a hunting bag inside her closet. “You’ve, uh, been gone a lot recently. Anywhere interesting you’ve been going?”

“Oh, I found an old hunting cabin up the stream, about 100 yards maybe from where the beaver dam was earlier this year. Looks abandoned. I mean somebody probably owns it, but they haven’t been there in years. I’m repairing it.”

“You’ve been repairing it?”

“Well, we need somewhere to take care of the bodies. I mean, there’s always another killer. And if it’s a place we don’t even own…”

“Cops won’t check there even if they investigate us,” Will said with a sigh. “I’m not sure I’m comfortable with this. What if the owner decides to visit while you’re there?”

“Will, this place was abandoned. Plants through the porch and floor, chimney crumbling apart, plumbing hasn’t worked in years type of abandoned. Plumbing works now though,” Abigail said proudly. “I used a putty I made from Dad’s bones to seal up leaks—”

“Oh god,” Will said running his hands over his face.

“—and replaced the corroded pipes with copper. Will, stop fretting. It’s what he would have wanted.”

Will was very likely the worst father in existence.

“Did you find anything?” Abigail asked him, looking over his shoulder at the screen.

“Yes. Chris O’Halloran from Fayetteville, North Carolina, that will be the next family.”

“So what do we do?”

Will looked at the mirror on the dresser and the one small photo tucked into its frame. It was Abigail dressed in waders and a fishing vest and holding up a bass in her hands, the hook in its mouth still there. Will was there beside her proudly beaming with an arm around her shoulders. It was the only photo of the two of them.

“Let’s take a vacation,” Will said.

“A vacation?”

“Take a week to just get away from here. North Carolina has plenty to see, including Fayetteville. It’ll be a chance to relax, spend some time together and take some family photos. And we can stop a murderous kidnapper while we’re at it.”

Abigail laughed and hugged him as hard as she could.

“I need to breathe,” Will said, but there was a smile in his voice.

The next hour was a flurry of packing. Suitcases were stuffed with clothes and toiletries, food from the refrigerator was piled into a cooler in the car, and guns and tools were hidden away in the car trunk, all while trying not to trip over the excited dogs dancing around their feet.
“Hi, it’s me,” Will said over the phone to the real Hannibal when he had a moment to catch his breath. “Look, Abigail and I are going on vacation, it’s a bit of a last minute thing. So I’m going to reschedule our talk to next week.”

“Of course,” Hannibal said, “I’m pleased to hear you and Abigail will be spending some time getting away from the everyday drudgery.”

“Yeah, well, like I said it’s unplanned so I have a lot to get done. I’m trying to find a hotel and I need to find a sitter for the dogs. We’re taking Winston with us but the rest are staying here—”

“I can watch your dogs, if you’re comfortable with that.”

“Thank you. I’ll drop off a key to the house on our way out of town,” Will said, then put his hand over the phone to tell Abigail, “We’ll need the INCH bags too.”

Abigail nodded and went to fetch the two hiking backpacks, one for Will and for her, that contained everything essential for a disaster scenario. Any normal family’s INCH bags—also known as “I’m Never Coming Home bags”—would contain enough to survive a nuclear release or a major natural disaster. Will’s and Abigail’s were for if the FBI ever found evidence on them.

“I look forward to hearing about your adventures when you get back,” Hannibal said. And that was nice, Will not only had a daughter to go on vacation with, but a friend to tell all about the trip when he got back, minus the murder bits of course.

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**Fayetteville, North Carolina**

**Woods Near Highway 87**

“Abigail! Are you alright?” Will said as he ran through the undergrowth over to her. She was staring at the blood splatters all over her shirt. Not her blood, thank god.

“I’m fine,” Abigail said. She held the gun in her hand rigidly away from her body, and looked like she might be in shock. “She had a gun, I… I had to do something.”

“You did good,” Will assured her. Abigail had done as he had trained her: if the perp reached for a weapon, shoot center mass and use as many rounds as you need to.

Winston trotted alongside Will, covered in mud from when the kidnapper—a woman by the name of Eva Blair—had kicked him off her after he had bit the woman’s gun arm at Will’s command. Winston was the only reason Eva hadn’t managed to get a shot in before Abigail returned fire.

Will had been afraid Eva would kill one of her kidnapped charges before he could stop her. His original attempt to handcuff her had ended with her elbow smashing into his face as she pulled her gun from her purse.

“You killed our mom,” C.J. Lincoln said, his face twisted into an angry displeased look.

“That woman was about to kill one of you if she had to,” Will said. “Your real moms would never had tried to shoot you, even to save her own life.”

“What happens now?” Chris O’Halloran said. He was small for 14, and looked ready to shake apart
in fright. His face was pale as his wide eyes darted from Will to Abigail and back again.

“The police should handle it from here,” Will said.

“No,” Abigail said.

“No?”

“If we turn them over to the police, with the evidence the FBI already has, they’ll lock these kids away. You told me yourself, it’s a biological instinct to bond with a captor. But the police, the court system, everyone who reads about them on TattleCrime will label these children as dangerous.”

“Abigail, they very well might be dangerous.”

“By that definition, I am too,” Abigail said.

Chris was still watching Will’s every move like he expected Will to lunge at him with a knife. The look on his face was as full of fear as Abigail’s had been 8 months ago, the day Will had saved her from her father.

“Fine. We’ll need to figure out alibis and a story to tell the police,” Will said to the three kids. “It won’t be easy. As far as the FBI is concerned, they have evidence you are killers.”

“So what do we do?” Jesse Turner said. He had been standing stock still ever since the first gunshot, too wary to move, but now he had something to focus his mind on.

“We’ll have to find a way to contradict the evidence,” Will said.

He closed his eyes and imagined the FBI searching the crime scene.

Brian Zeller bent over Eva Blair’s body and examined the bullet holes in her torso. Another agent inspected Eva’s car. The second agent’s ID identified him as Jimmy Price.

“The victim was lured from the highway into the nearby woods,” Price said as he followed the path of snapped twigs and muddy footprints from the abandoned car on the shoulder of the empty road to the body’s location, all while snapping photos for evidence.

“She was shot four times. We have three penetrating wounds and one perforating,” Zeller announced. “I can extract the bullet for ballistics, but based on the powder tattooing and lesions, I’d say handgun at intermediate range.”

“Likely one of the kids,” Price said, adjusting the focal point on his camera as he looked at the footprint in the mud on his viewfinder. “Most of these footprints are kid sizes 11, 8, and 7.”

“Same as the Turner and Frist crime scenes,” Zeller said.

The scene disappeared from his mind and he was back to looking at the faces of three anxious kids.

“No, no,” Will said. “If they know she was murdered, the kids are the likely suspects. First step, we’ll need to dispose of the body, and make sure the police never find it.”
“You eat bodies?” Jesse Turner said.

“We’re not going to have to help eat it, are we?” Chris O’Halloran said. He looked like he was ready to throw up.

“No, you’re not,” Will said.

“If they stay in the cabin a few days, there’ll be enough DNA evidence to make it look like she kept them hostage there. It’ll give us time to rehearse their alibis,” Abigail said over the phone.

She and C.J. Lincoln were in Eva’s car driving right behind Will. Will would have to find some way to dispose of the car later, but they couldn’t leave it in North Carolina for the police to find and start asking questions.

“So we say Eva found the abandoned cabin and fixed it up,” Will said. “She kept the kids there as prisoners.”

“Think the police will buy it?” Abigail said.

“If the kids’ stories all match and that cabin has evidence she kept them prisoner against their will, then yes,” Will said. “The next trick is leaving our names out of it. We don’t want the police looking into us.”

“We could make it look like one of the kids finally escaped the cabin. C.J. can walk from the cabin to the road, it’s only a few hundred yards. Then wait for a passing car to help him call the police.”

“Do you have anything your dad made out of his victims’ bodies?” Will asked, mind racing.

“A pair of earrings with a bit of bone and some pillows. Why?”

“What if Eva Blair was not only was responsible for kidnapping the Lost Boys, but was also the Minnesota Shrike?” Will said. “The way we get caught is the Minnesota Shrike investigation. We need them to stop looking.”

“I think I’m gonna hurl,” Chris said, face going paler.

“Pull over,” Will said to Abigail.

They parked the cars on the gravel shoulder of the next exit ramp. Chris stumbled out of the car to take deep breaths of the country air. Cattles grazed in a field right next to the road, and Chris stared blankly in their direction.

“Why’d we stop?” C.J. demanded as he exited the car.

“Chris isn’t feeling well, he needs a moment,” Will said.

“Just like he didn’t feel well after Conner. He’s always slowing us down,” C.J. said as he roughly pushed Chris straight into the barbed wire fence surrounding the field. Chris yelled in pain.

“Woah, hey, stop it!” Will said as Abigail pulled C.J. off Chris. Chris was shaking, and a trickle of blood ran down his arm from where a barb pierced his arm and soaked into the side of his shirt.

“Chris, it’s going to be okay,” Abigail said.
“Here, stop the bleeding first,” Will said, digging out a sterile gauze pad from his INCH bag. “Please tell me you’ve had a tetanus shot.”

Abigail held Chris’s arm and did her best to soothe him as she pressed the pad against the puncture in his arm.

“How could you!” Jesse yelled, and ran up and pushed C.J. from behind, and C.J. went sprawling on the gravel shoulder. C.J. grabbed Jesse’s shirt collar as Winston joined in the fight, barking and bumping into Jesse, knocking him off his feet.

“Stop it! Both of you,” Will said, and then pointed at C.J. “You! Sit down and stay there. Jesse, you need to calm down.”

“He ripped my shirt,” Jesse said, inspecting the torn collar. “And I can’t find my glasses.”

“My palms are bleeding!” C.J. said as he brushed the gravel off his hands, revealing the scraped-up skin.

“I’ll take care of it as soon as Chris is okay,” Will said. “How’s he doing?”

“It’s stopped bleeding,” Abigail said.

“Clean the wound out,” Will said, handing her hand soap and an unopened water bottle. “I’ll do the same for C.J.”

“A metal fence exposed to the elements—”

“Higher risk of infection,” Will said grimly. “We’ll need a doctor to look at it, and we can’t wait a few days to do it.”

C.J. hissed in pain as Will helped him clean his palms. After Abigail finished cleaning the wound on Chris’s arm, she unwrapped her scarf from around her neck and wound it around Chris’s arm to keep the gauze pad in place.

If he and Abigail brought the kids to a doctor, they couldn’t keep their names out of the investigation. Will could say he happened to be driving by and saw C.J. Still, too risky. Will happens to “adopt” a girl whose father was still missing and then “found” three kidnapped children. Will rathered the police didn’t have a reason to want a search warrant for his house.

“I’m going to go home, right?” Chris said. “Back to my family. The police won’t lock me away?”

“As long as you stick to the alibis we decided on,” Abigail said.

“So what if we go to jail?” C.J. said. “It’s not like I have family I want to go back to.”

“You can’t play video games in jail, stupid,” Jesse said.

“It wouldn’t be jail, it would be secure confinement in a juvenile detention center,” Will said, then winced as he heard something crunch under his feet. He lifted his foot to see Jesse’s glasses underneath. The side of the glasses frame was snapped near where it connected to the lenses. “Shit, sorry Jesse. I have duct tape. We’ll have to use that until we can buy you new glasses.”

“She killed our mom!” C.J. said pointing at Abigail. “Don’t you care about that?”

“She wasn’t your mother. She was the Peter Pan to your Lost Boys, a poor imitation of family,” Will said. “Did you ever read Peter Pan? Pan would eliminate the older Lost Boys so they would never
grow up to become adults, and Eva would have done the same to you.”

“That wasn’t in the Disney movie,” Jesse muttered.

“If we have to get to a doctor, how are we going to plant the evidence without the kids there?” Abigail said.

Will closed his eyes, took a deep breath and then opened them.

He stood in the middle of a small wood cabin. The wood floor and walls were bare, with only suitcases to serve as chairs and blankets on the floor for a bed. Cracks in the external wood walls were hastily patched with foam backer rods and epoxy, but the cabin was still crumbling into disrepair. A cast-iron stove in the corner operated as both oven and heat source.

Off the grid, the lights and water well pump were fueled by a gasoline-powered generator, so only essential lights were kept on to help save fuel. The FBI forensics team shuffled around him, taking photos and dusting for prints in the dim light.

“We have fingerprints on the door knobs, windows, you name it,” Price said as he crouched next to the rusted door knob of the front door. The wood floor beneath his knee showed the beginning signs of rot, and a large water stain splattered the wall from the ceiling to near his elbow, a sign of where the rain trickled in every time it stormed.

“We got hits on four of them—C.J. Lincoln, Jesse Turner, Chris O’Halloran, and Conner Frist—plus one unsub,” Zeller said.

“We’ll need to plant fingerprints,” Will heard himself say out loud to Abigail and the kids, though his mind stayed in the wood cabin. “We’ll need Conner’s and Eva’s too. Anything they touched that you still have?”

“Um—” Jesse said.

“Yeah, I mean, her hair dryer, right?” Chris said.

“And Conner’s stupid 2DS,” C.J. said.

“I’ve got hair,” a female investigator said, holding up a wisp of hair with tweezers. Her name tag read “Beverly Katz”. She sealed the piece of hair in a ziploc bag as she stared at the crumbling stone hearth beneath the cast-iron stove and the pile of unevenly chopped logs and crumpled newspaper nearby that served as fuel. “God, can you imagine being just a kid and being kept prisoner in a place like this? It’s a wonder these kids aren’t in a hospital.”

“Puts the phrase cabin fever in a whole new perspective,” Price said as he snapped a photo of metal rings attached to the walls with handcuffs hanging from them.

“Hair as well,” Will said. “At least for the three of you and Eva.”

“Ow!” C.J. yelled.

“He meant collect hair from a comb, not yank it out of your brother’s head,” Abigail said.

“Sorry,” Jesse said.

“Who’s going to collect hair from Eva?” Chris said, looking in horror at the couple of coolers in the backseat that no longer had anything remotely like sandwiches or yogurt in them.

“Wait, what’s her fingerprints doing here? Doesn’t she live just a few miles from here?” Katz said.

“We’ll need an excuse for Abigail’s fingerprints in the cabin,” Will said. “One that won’t cause any suspicion.”

“Jack, you need to take a look at this,” Price said, looking inside one of the pillows scattered among the blankets that served as a bed. “These pillows aren’t stuffed with commercial-grade polyester. It’s human hair and it’s not from the kids.”

“Same color and length as all those missing girls,” Katz said. “Think she wanted to keep the boys but kill the girls?”

“I’d say it looks like we found ourselves the Minnesota Shrike,” Jack Crawford said.

“There’s only one problem left,” Will said. “How do we keep the police from looking into us?”

“I’ve got an idea,” Abigail said.

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**Baltimore, Maryland**

**Lecter Residence**

Hannibal’s doorbell rang.

Hannibal slid on his robe as he checked the time of his cell phone. It was 3:20 in the morning. He marched towards the front door on soundless feet as he prepared for whatever threat had made its way to his house.

As he passed by the secretary desk, he slipped the scalpel that had been resting by his most recent sketches into his pocket. He opened the door wide, not sure if he should be expecting the FBI or a rival serial killer, but refusing to be intimidated.

Will stood on the front doorstep with a ragtag group of children. Will tried to smile through a split lip but it looked more like a grimace. The bruising all around his left eye socket was already forming into a black eye. A dog panted near Hannibal’s feet, and he could see the beast’s fur was matted with mud all along its belly and had caked blood near its mouth.

The shortest boy stared at Hannibal with wide eyes. The boy’s shirt was torn at the collar and his glasses were held together by duct tape. Beside him was another boy who was so pale he looked 3 seconds away from fainting. The side of his shirt was stained with blood and his arm was mummified in a wrapped scarf. The tallest one looked old enough to be a teen. He had a patchwork of bandages on his palms and scowled in Hannibal’s general direction.

The dog whined as it shuffled closer to Hannibal, and a spot of mud dripped onto Hannibal’s slipper.

“Um, can we come in?” Will said.
Chapter 3

Will had never seen that particular expression on Hannibal’s face. He could practically see the internal struggle as good manners warred with the desire for order and cleanliness.

“Will and guests, please come in,” Hannibal said, stepping aside and holding the door open wide. He looked more like he was inviting them in for one of his dinner parties than a man in a bathrobe inviting three strangers and one sorta-friend into his house in the middle of the night.

Hannibal’s black robe was loosely belted over what looked like white pajamas. Will had never expected to see him without several layers of perfectly tailored clothes, and it was a strange dissonance in his head to see the immaculate Hannibal in nothing more than rumpled sleepwear. His hair was even slightly ruffled on one side, and Will tried his best not to gape.

“Sorry about Winston. I’ll just, uh, do you have a bathtub I could wash him in?” Will said, wincing as he realized it was too cold to just rinse Winston down with a hose outside.

Winston trotted into Hannibal’s house, tail wagging, and proceeded to sniff around. Hannibal watched Winston’s progress intently, probably mourning the loss of the pristine cleanliness of his marble floor.

“Yes, there’s a bathroom attached to the study,” Hannibal said. “The children may use the guest bathroom in the hallway and the master bathroom.” Probably politely hinting the kids really should clean up.

“Looks like you and your charges have been beset by trouble,” Hannibal continued as the kids trickled into the house with shuffling feet and wide-eyed stares.

“Oh, trouble found me alright. Meet C.J. Lincoln, Chris O’Halloran, and Jesse Turner,” Will said nodding at each kid as he said their name. “They were kidnapped and held in a cabin off Route 602.
They say the name of the woman who took them is Eva Blair.”

“I take it by the fact they are still with you that you haven’t informed the police yet?”

“They need attention from a doctor and a good night’s sleep, not to spend the early morning hours in a police station and an ER. They’ve been through enough.”

“It appears they have,” Hannibal said as his gaze lingered on the makeshift gauze wrap on Jesse’s arm.

Please help us, Will thought. It’ll buy us time; I can’t just take them to the police yet. Not until Abigail is done planting evidence.

“One minute, I’ll fetch supplies and take a look,” Hannibal said.

As soon as Hannibal left the room, Jesse zipped over to a grandfather clock in the hallway. Will could tell at a glance the clock casing was mahogany carved into a sturdy and elegant shape. What worried him was the very slight uneven edges of the clock dial not to mention the rough texture of the dial’s metal surface, at least compared to modern metalwork. This was not one of the perfect machine-made clock dials of anything past the mid-19th century industrial revolution. This clock wasn’t just an antique but most likely the envy of museums, and it was in pristine condition.

“Do me a favor, don’t touch that,” Will said.

The sight of the bedraggled ensemble meandering around was comical compared to the elegant dinner guests that graced the parlor just a couple weeks ago. C.J. wandered the room with a bored expression on his face while Chris could barely be coaxed more than 10 steps from the front door.

“Do you think he’ll get mad we got mud on the floor?” Chris said, standing in one place as much as possible, likely to avoid contributing to any muddy footprints.

“What do I need to take a look at?” Hannibal said as he re-entered the room with a physician’s bag.

“Chris’s arm,” Will said.

Hannibal motioned for Chris to sit down on the couch in front of the fireplace. He meticulously unwrapped the scarf holding the gauze pad in place, silently assessing the wound. Will could see the question in Hannibal’s eyes as he examined the injury.

“Hannibal is going to ask questions,” Will remembered saying back in Fredericksburg when they planned their next move. “And I can’t say it was done by barbed wire. There isn’t any around the cabin.”

“This looks like the same kind of injury you’d get from a 6d nail, if it didn’t go very far into the arm,” Abigail had said.

“You know what a nail puncture looks like?”

“My father wanted me to understand how serious he was,” Abigail said, avoiding his eyes. “And he needed me to know he really would kill me if he didn’t sacrifice the other girls. I know what many different injuries look like.”

“The scarf isn’t the only clothing hiding a scar, is it?” Will asked softly. Abigail had pursed her lips and didn’t say anything more on the subject.
“A puncture wound,” Hannibal said. “Is it deep?”

“Not very. Maybe a couple inches,” Will said. “It was a metal nail from what I understand.”

“She told me to shut up and I wouldn’t,” Chris said, just like Abigail coached him to. Chris’s eyes darted back and forth between Will and Hannibal, as if he expected Hannibal to call him on the lie. “The woman who took me.”

“I see,” Hannibal said. “At what age did she remove you from your family?”

“Thirteen. Um, why?”

“Puncture wounds are a higher risk for Clostridium tetani bacteria,” Hannibal said. “The booster injection is administered at 11 or 12 years of age. You are lucky, you will have an increased immunity from the booster.”

Hannibal gently lifted Chris’s arm to a horizontal position to get more light, and looked at the injury from several angles.

“I’ll have to drive the kids straight to Hannibal’s,” Will had said to Abigail. “That means it’s up to you to plant the evidence in the cabin.”

“My main concern is the nail went through the shirt sleeve. He may have fibers from his shirt in the wound itself, as well as possible dirt and bacteria. It will need to be cleaned,” Hannibal said as he donned a pair of exam gloves.

The gloves were remarkably similar to the disposable gloves Will had bought Abigail just a few hours before. But one had been sterilized in a factory in Tennessee, the other mass-produced in Malaysia. And while Hannibal’s used his to avoid cross-contamination, Abigail used hers for handling any “evidence” she left for the FBI so she wouldn’t leave fingerprints.

“Fingerprints are what we worry about first,” Will had said. “We need to leave enough that the FBI will believe the boys and Eva have lived there for months.”

“You’re telling me I’m supposed to plant fingerprints in a cabin that no one but me has stepped foot in for years, and without the boys even there?” Abigail had said. “How are we supposed to get enough on every surface of the cabin?”

“They won’t check every surface. The trick is to know what the FBI will and won’t check.”

“This may take awhile,” Hannibal said to Will. “You might wish to send the boys to get cleaned up. There’s towels in the linen closet. You’ll find it next to the second guest bedroom.”

“Take off your shoes,” Will said to C.J. and Jesse as he herded them upstairs. The least he could do was try to keep everyone from tracking mud any farther than the foyer and parlor.

“Neat freak much?” C.J. muttered to himself as he peered into the open doorways of each room they passed. There were three bedrooms in addition to the study, and so far each looked like it belonged in a Ritz-Carlton.

“Is that Samurai armor?” Jesse said in awe.

Of course Jesse would wander into the bedroom with samurai armor in it. Will just hoped there wasn’t a sword to go with it.
“Each of you choose a bathroom to shower in and stop snooping around,” Will said as he disregarded his own advice and took a good look around.

This was definitely the master bedroom. It was more lived-in than the others—books on the desk and a tin of breath mints on the nightstand and a decanter on the dresser—though it was still 1000% more organized than any room Will had ever lived in his entire life.

“What type of skull is this?” Jesse asked as he inspected the the top of Hannibal’s dresser.

“Sea turtle, I think,” Will said as he peered closely at it. “It’s missing the lower jaw though.”

“Can’t eat then,” Jesse said.

“He’s dead. He can’t eat anyways,” Will said. But even if the dead can’t eat, they can consume. Garrett Jacob Hobbs has been dead for weeks, and he was still slowly devouring Will’s life.

*I ingested a serial killer, Will thought. And now I’m raising his daughter and eating my victims like he did. Christ.*

“I’m taking this room,” C.J. said.

“What? No!” Jesse complained. “I saw it first. I want to shower in this bathroom!”

“You haven’t even looked at the bathroom yet,” C.J. scoffed. “And I’m not showering in the other bathroom. The bedroom has pansy-ass flowers painted on the lamps.”

“That doesn’t sound like Hannibal’s decorating style,” Will said. He peeked into the guest bedroom C.J. pointed to.

“They’re antique porcelain vases converted into table lamps,” Will said. “Those pansy-ass flowers are traditional Japanese artwork. And you’re just taking a shower anyways, what do you care about the lamps?”

C.J. glanced covetously back in the direction of the master bedroom. It seemed the samurai armor had a lot of fans.

“Fine,” C.J. said, unwilling to admit the real reason he wanted the other room.

Will shook his head as he left the bedroom, closing the door behind him with a turn of the door knob.

*“Door knobs. Investigators start with dusting the entry and exit points. The door knob on the front door is a non-porous metal surface that comes into frequent contact with fingertips. It’s the perfect place to start,” Will had said while he and Abigail perused the shelves at the Fredericksburg’s Wal-Mart. “The rounder the door knob, the harder it is to lift the print. So we’re gonna give them a nice flattened oval one for the front door, they won’t be able to resist.”*

“So, we have each of the boys touch this one, then replace the actual front door knob with it,” Abigail had said as she inspected the door knob and deadbolt set. “What about Eva’s prints?”

“Well, there’s a reason we kept Eva’s hands.”

“How’s it going?” Will asked when he returned downstairs.

“I’ve used a topical anesthetic—lidocaine and prilocaine—in preparation of flushing the wound. I need a few more minutes still until I can begin,” Hannibal said with a reassuring smile. “If you could assist me, Will?”
“Of course,” Will said, pulling up a chair so he could sit near enough to both to help.

“I’ll be cleaning the wound with a high pressure syringe irrigation. If you could hold his arm in position, I prefer having more light from the table lamp to work by, and I don’t wish to tire my patient out. A little to the right—thank you, Will.”

Will gently held Chris’s arm at the shoulder and elbow so it was turned toward the bright light.


“Careful not to touch the anesthetic,” Hannibal said to Will as he filled the syringe. “It would do us no good if your arms went numb too.”

The aesthetic was a large smear of white cream on Chris’s arm around the puncture site. It looked like unabsorbed hand lotion.

“We’re gonna use hand lotion to plant evidence?” Abigail had said skeptically, grabbing a tube of lotion from her suitcase as requested.

“For Eva’s. Anything related to how she kept the kids locked in the cabin will be dusted for prints,” Will had said as he opened the trunk of the car and dug around his INCH bag until he removed a pair of handcuffs. “Wipe this down, then get Eva’s hand out of the cooler. Unfortunately her body will have stopped producing its natural oils, and we need these prints nice and visible once dusted. Can’t do that with the oils gone. Put the hand lotion on her fingertips, and you have enough grease to leave fingerprints.”

“What are you putting in the needle?” Chris asked nervously.

“Sterile isotonic saline,” Hannibal said. Chris didn’t look reassured so Hannibal clarified, “Salt and water. And there’s no needle, just an irrigation syringe. Ready, Chris?”

Chris nodded.

Hannibal put one hand next to the puncture wound, very gently pulling the skin of the upper arm taunt. Will tried to move his own arms out of the way without letting go of Chris, but in the end had to settle for Hannibal’s outstretched arm resting across his forearm.

He could hear Hannibal’s slow breathing as the good doctor used the syringe to flush the wound out.

Will watched Hannibal’s face. Dr. Lector’s deep brown eyes narrowed in concentration, and there was a slight tension around the edges of his mouth.

When he was a boy, Will’s first clue something was wrong with him was when he didn’t know anyone’s eye color, not even his dad’s. He knew what irises and pupils looked like. He could see eye color in portrait photographs. But he never saw the eyes of anyone he knew, at least not from anything but a great distance. Too great a distance to pick out the eye color.

Averting eye contact was an instinct so deep inside he never even realized he did it until that moment of realization. He tried for a while to make himself right. But everytime he made eye contact with someone, he felt fear and panic crawl into his throat until he stopped trying altogether. He learned later that feeling of panic was called sensory overload.

Hannibal glanced his way, their eyes meeting for a moment, and Will looked away before he could feel that heart-pounding fear. It didn’t matter. He now had the memory of Hannibal’s eyes safely stored away to remember whenever he wanted.
It took half a liter of saline to clean Chris’s arm. After he was finished, Hannibal gently palpated the surrounding skin to check for any foreign debris that might have burrowed elsewhere.

“I suggest a radiograph at the hospital in the morning to check for any metal still in the soft tissue. But he will be fine for now,” Hannibal said as he rebandaged Chris’s arm.

“Thank you,” Will said.

“Of course,” Hannibal said. “I’m sure the four of you will want to get what rest you can before we go to the police tomorrow.”

“That would be nice, but first, I really should give Winston a bath before he tracks mud through the rest of your house,” Will said.

Winston, who heard the word “bath,” whined from where he was flopped down on the floor near Chris’s feet.

Jesus, they had made a mess of Hannibal’s parlor. Will would be lucky if Hannibal ever invited him back. C.J. and Jesse’s shoes were scattered near the entryway, while Will had dumped his shoes and backpack filled with essentials in a heap next to the armchair. To make matters worse, Hannibal’s beautiful marble floor was criss-crossed in muddy pawprints and shoeprints.

“Shoeprints will be tricky. You’ll want latent shoeprints, no impressions. You’d never be able to mimic the weight and strides of the boys,” Will had said. “If they’re latent that means you can’t measure anything but the tread pattern and the shoe size.”

“Doesn’t latent mean it won’t be visible to the naked eye? You want me to leave invisible shoe prints?”

“The soles collect oils over time. Which means you can dust for shoeprints just like fingerprints. But track Eva’s shoes through some dirt. Let’s give them some very visible prints of the star performer.”

“Jesse should be done with his shower by now if you want to take a bath in the master bathroom. Just don’t get the gauze wet,” Will said to Chris.

Winston, at hearing the word “bath” a second time, looked at Will with betrayed eyes. Chris nodded and started towards the stairs.

“Shoes!” Will reminded him. Chris toed off his sneakers next to the console table a few feet away from the clock. None of us are going to remember where we left our footwear come morning, Will thought.

“Now that I am relieved of my patient, perhaps you’ll permit me to tend to your eye,” Hannibal said. “You have what I believe people call a shiner.”

“Yeah,” Will said embarrassed. “The boys thought I was Eva at first. You got to give them credit, they were determined to get free.”

This is why you shouldn’t hunt serial killers, you have to lie about everything all the damn time, Will thought. I miss the days when the most I was required to say to anyone was “Did you bring the manual?” and “Does the engine bog down while in wide-open throttle?” and “Fuck off.”

Hannibal retrieved a bag of ice wrapped in a hand towel from the kitchen.

“If you’ll permit me?” Hannibal said. Will motioned for him to go ahead.
Hannibal gently placed the makeshift ice pack against the swelling on Will’s face. While he held the ice there, his gaze openly rested on Will’s face, seeming to catalogue every valley and curve there. Will tried not to let himself feel embarrassed by the circles under his eyes and the bruising on his face.

*He’s looking at you with a doctor’s eye,* Will reminded himself. *He’s a good man who’s just trying to help.*

“A cold compress will help the first 48 hours after injury,” Hannibal said. “After that I would switch to using a warm compress on occasion.”

“Thanks,” Will said as he put his own hand against the ice pack and Hannibal let go. But as his hands withdrew, Will could feel the accidental brush of Hannibal’s fingers against his face.

“I’ll throw this away,” Will said, ducking out of reach of Hannibal’s hands and grabbing the old gauze pad and the discarded exam gloves from the couch with his free hand.

He wasn’t used to gentle hands touching him intimately, and he wasn’t sure he liked it. It was better to keep people at a distance, especially someone like Hannibal. He glanced around the room but didn’t immediately see a trash can. “Where’s the trash?”

“We’re gonna need trash,” Will had said as Winston, C.J., Jesse, and Chris pushed and shoved and clamored over each other to get in his car. Abigail would be driving alone in Eva’s car straight to the cabin.

“Trash?” Abigail had said.

“We need them to think someone’s been living there. And we don’t have food remains old enough and varied enough with us in the car.”

“Great. What I always wanted to do, steal trash.”

Hannibal insisted on throwing away the trash himself, leaving Will alone in the parlor. Will didn’t last more than a few minutes holding the ice pack against his face before he abandoned it to go clean Winston. Abigail was alone at the cabin right this very minute doing her best to keep them all out of jail. He didn’t have time to laze around putting ice on his face.

“Come on, Winston. Time for the dreaded B-A-T-H.” Will whistled for Winston to follow him and led him upstairs to the bathroom connected to the study.

*Abigail’s a smart girl. Stop worrying so much and trust her to take care of it. You need to concentrate on Hannibal’s role in this,* Will thought to himself as he picked Winston up, plopping him in the warm bathtub water and beginning the shampooing process.

Will was surprised when he heard a slight knock on the door and Hannibal peaked his head into the bathroom.

“It appears Chris is about to hyperventilate. Do you think you can calm him?” Hannibal said.

“Yes, uh, just let me, uh,” Will said as he tried to figure out how he was going to keep Winston in the tub where he wouldn’t get shampoo and water all over the clean bathroom.

“I can finish this for you,” Hannibal volunteered, kneeling down next to where Will was sitting on his knees by the tub. Will glanced at him out of the corner of his eye with a grateful smile, and he stood up with a self-conscious “thank you.”
Now that both men were distracted, Winston made his break for freedom.

“Winston!” Will said.

But it was too late. The resulting struggle between Hannibal and a 65 lb dog, where Winston managed to scramble halfway out of the tub with his front paws on the floor before he was snatched and returned to his watery torture, was only slightly less messy than an actual water fight.

“I’m so sorry,” Will said, feeling like he was the absolute worst house guest Hannibal had ever let into his home.

Hannibal was too polite to grimace, but Will suspected he wanted to as he slowly shed his now damp bathrobe. Beneath was a Oxford pajama shirt with a wet spot just under the collar. With as much dignity as he could manage, Hannibal peeled the shirt off and folded it to stack on top of the discarded robe.

If it was strange to see Hannibal in pajamas, it was stranger still to see him shirtless.

Will usually thought of Hannibal as something akin to untouchable. It never occurred to him it was merely the expensive and formal clothes that made Hannibal seem so distant and judgemental.

Hannibal’s bare chest was like any other man’s. There was graying chest hair adorning his pecs, nipples not quite identical to each other, skin with goosebumps, and hair standing on end from the cold.

His chest flexed and relaxed as he cleaned Winston, the muscles in his shoulders bunching from the exertion of rubbing in the shampoo, and Will couldn’t look away.

Hannibal looked like someone Will could have.

Only that wasn’t true, because Hannibal was Alana’s. Not to mention, Will was a man, and as much as society had changed in the last decade, it had changed too fast for plenty of those born in the swinging sixties. That, and Will was infamous for being rude, and being an unstable mess, and generally everything that was very un-Hannibal-like. Will took a deep breath to clear his head.

“I’ll, um, go talk to Chris,” Will managed to say despite the sudden dryness in his throat. He fled the bathroom before Hannibal could respond.

“Chris, are you alright?” Will said. “Hannibal mentioned you were—”

“There’s only two guest rooms!” Chris said like someone had just told pizza and ice cream were now forbidden. “I don’t want to share a bed with C.J.”

Will didn’t really blame him.

“That’s fine. You can share with me, and Jesse will bunk with C.J.”

“I don’t want to share with C.J. either,” Jesse said, coming out of the master bedroom. In his hands Jesse held a long white cattle horn.

“Where did you get that? Put it back,” Will said.

“It was just on the desk.”

“Look, don’t touch any of Hannibal’s things. You and Chris will share a bedroom, and I’ll share with C.J.,” Will said. “That ok C.J.?”
C.J. gave him a withering glare.

“I’ll... sleep in the living room,” Will said.

He’d just borrow a few blankets from Hannibal, it’d be fine. He’d have Winston for company, an infinite step up from C.J.

“I don’t want the room with the flower lamps,” C.J. said.

“Works for me,” Jesse said as he and Chris explored the guest bedroom that C.J. had rejected.

“Wow, this is nice,” Chris said.

The nightstands, dresser, bed, and reading chair were a gorgeous antique wood. The window overlooked the backyard and, once the sun rose, it would have a perfect view of the garden Will had seen glimpses of. The headboard of the bed could be barely seen behind the mountain of pillows. The sheets even had a goddamn bed runner over them.

“Ok, time to get some sleep. We’ve got an interview at the police station to look forward to,” Will said. Chris gulped. Will maybe shouldn’t have reminded him.

“Night Will,” Jesse said as Will turned out the lights.

Two down, one to go.

“C.J., you good?” Will asked as he stopped by the other guest room. Whereas the first room had been a mix of Japanese and English antiques, this bedroom was pure Old Italy.

Everything was ornate. Intricately carved patterns of scrollwork and abstract leaves crowded the furniture surfaces. Each furniture piece competed with each other to see which one could be more regal than the last. Will stood between the reading corner and the wardrobe, looking around the room in bewilderment at the sheer amount of patterns and textures.

“This room is weird,” C.J. said. “What’s with the small desk with a really large mirror?”

“That’s not a desk. It’s called a makeup table.”

“Perfect. What is this?” C.J. said. It was a marble statue of some sort. A large bearded muscled man was picking up or hugging or something a smaller man with curly hair.

“Hold on, let me google it,” Will said. He snapped a photo and did an image search. “It’s a famous statue in Florence, or well, a small scale reproduction of it. It’s Hercules and Antaeus.”

“What are they even doing?”

“It says it’s a scene from a Greek myth. Antaeus draws his strength from the earth, so to kill him Hercules lifts him off the ground and crushes him to death with a bear hug.”

“They’re both naked,” C.J. said flatly. “And it looks less like he’s crushing him and more like–”

“Yeah,” Will said.

He had a point. Hercules was lifting Antaeus, his arms wrapped around Antaeus’s back and his hands coming to rest on Antaeus’s hips. Neither of Antaeus’s feet could touch the ground. Instead one leg was kicked back high into the air, while one hand pressed pleadingly into Hercules’s back and the other hand tangled in his hair. Antaeus’s open-mouthed scream of pain and panic looked
“So people have just been starring at this for centuries and absolutely no one has thought it looked kinda gay?” C.J. said.

“Uh… that’s classical art in a nutshell.”

C.J. was unimpressed but finally accepted his fate of sleeping in the “weird room.” He all but shut the door in Will’s face.

Will saw Hannibal carry Winston out of the study, which was impressive considering how heavy the dog was. Winston, who was wrapped in a towel and reveled in the attention, happily surveyed the hallway from his perch in Hannibal’s arms. Will didn’t realize he had a kink for strong, shirtless men cradling a wet dog wrapped in a big, fluffy towel until that exact moment.

“You don’t have to carry him,” Will said. “By the way, do you have a few blankets and pillows I can borrow? I’ll sleep on the couch for tonight.”

“I’ll set you up in the master bedroom instead,” Hannibal said as he gently set Winston down.

“What about you?”

“I’ll sleep on the couch. And before you insist otherwise, may I remind you that you are a guest?” Hannibal said over Will’s attempt at a protest.

“No I—”

“I insist.”

“Thank you,” Will was forced to settle for. He was too tired to argue.

The master bedroom felt too massive. It was a cavern of neatly ordered knicknacks on furniture that was kept as pristine as fine china. The cherished furnishings were perched on a carpet kept lush by the lack of contact with dogs or anyone under the age of 20.

The bed itself was divine, though. The new sheets Hannibal had placed on it smelled like lavender, and the blue comforter was soft and warm. And before he knew it, he had drifted off to sleep and was hunting in the woods with Garrett Jacob Hobbs and Abigail.

The morning came too quickly. Will groaned as he glanced at the clock: 10:14 a.m. He hadn’t meant to sleep this late.

He wanted a few minutes in the warm blankets where he could ignore his throbbing eye and cheekbone. His cock was also throbbing, but for an entirely different reason.

“Good morning,” Hannibal said. It wasn’t the real Hannibal. The ghost standing in front of him had appeared out of thin air and was dressed in a robe and only a robe.

Will smiled slowly at the ghost of Hannibal. Hannibal smiled back.

“Did you sleep well?” Hannibal asked as he opened his closet door.
“Well enough,” Will said. *Just how many 3-piece suits does Hannibal own?* Will wondered as he stared at the closet contents.

“Did you dream about me?” Hannibal said as he looked back at Will with a flirtatious smile. Will should not be imaging this.

“Was I supposed to?” Will said. Hannibal selected a suit from the closet and hung it on the closet door. He untied his robe and let it slowly puddle to the ground.

Will was a dirty pervert who shouldn’t be imagining his friend like this and should really stop—damn, that was a nice ass. Will realized he had his hands down his boxers and had started lightly stroking himself without any conscious decision. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound.

The imaginary Hannibal let him look his fill as Will stayed in his warm cocoon of blankets and enjoyed the gentle glide of his own hand and the sight. He traced the long Dimples of Venus that cradled the base of Hannibal’s spine with his eyes, and longed to touch the curve of his ass that rested above thick, strong thighs.

Will abandoned the easy-going pace to search for lotion in the nightstand. There was more than lotion. There was massage oil and lube and condoms, all unpleasant reminders that Hannibal was intimate with someone, but it wasn’t Will. With the lotion on his hand he increased the pace and friction, going from lazy to purposeful.

He was getting close. He grabbed a couple tissues to prevent a mess and shoved down his boxers. Hannibal smirked at him. *Yeah, yeah, you know what you do to me, you bastard,* Will thought.

Hannibal selected a tie while pretending Will wasn’t there. He was still stark naked. Will began to run his hand over the head of his cock in a desperate rhythm. Hannibal bent at the waist, ostensibly to select a pair of shoes, and Will came staring at that perfect, perfect sight.

His imaginary Hannibal vanished, and Will was left sweaty with a wad of dirty kleenexes and a softening cock in a room so empty and vast that Will could swear he could hear the distant echo of his own heartbeat.

Will stumbled downstairs to the mouth-watering smell of breakfast. Apparently everyone else had beaten him there. To his surprise, his daughter was there.

“Abigail!” Will said. He had assumed she might take a taxi home after she was done, as they had agreed to leave Eva’s car abandoned by the cabin for the FBI to find.

“Dad,” Abigail said as she hugged him. She whispered in his ear, “Everything’s all set at the cabin.”

“She called me this morning asking for a ride,” Hannibal said. “I was happy to drive her here.”

“Thank you,” Will said, relieved to have Abigail back with the rest of them.

On the table were at least a dozen different platters and bowls. Most were small, containing things like jams and olives and spreadable cheeses. There was a pan of sunny side up eggs with slices of round sausage, and Will’s stomach grumbled hungrily at the sight of it.
“This isn’t cereal,” Chris said as he stared at something that looked similar to a pinwheel pastry.

“This is far more nutritious and more filling,” Hannibal said.

“So… no poptarts then?” Jesse said. Will doubted Hannibal even owned cereal or poptarts.

“You start with a bread as the base,” Hannibal said. “You can choose simit, the sesame-seed-coated bread rings, or the traditional pide, which is a plainer fare without oils or milk. You may add whatever you wish to the bread. There is also sucuklu yumurta, which is Turkish sausage with eggs, and kiymali börek, a pastry with minced meat.”

“This looks amazing,” Abigail said. “Is that apricot jam?”

Chris carefully spread some of the honey on a bread ring as if afraid of making a mess, but still managed to get some on his hands. C.J. eyed the slices of pita distrustfully.

“The bu-reck is pretty good,” Jesse said with a full mouth.

“Jesse, manners!” Will said as he motioned for C.J. to pass him the eggs and sausage.

It was delicious, a far cry from the toast and cereal he ate every morning. Will wished he could eat a breakfast more like this everyday.

He was so absorbed in eating it took Will a moment to realize something was wrong with Abigail. She had frozen in her seat. She was staring straight ahead, the butter knife smeared with jam poised motionless in her hands. It reminded Will of when food triggered his sensory overload.

Will glanced around to see if anyone else had noticed. Hannibal was helping Jesse break his bread ring into small chunks so he could try a different cheese and jam on each and was unaware.

“Feta is brined so it will have a salty taste to it, while lor is typically compared to cottage cheese,” Hannibal explained to Jesse.

“Abigail?” Will quietly said. She didn’t respond.

“What’s wrong with you now?” an impatient voice said. In Hannibal’s empty seat sat Will’s father. He held in his hands a newspaper with the headline “The Berlin Wall Tumbles.” He sat there with an irritable scowl on his face, peeking around the corner of the newspaper to stare at Abigail like she was acting this way just to make his day difficult. Will remembered that expression all too well.

There were dark circles under Abigail's eyes. Unlike the rest of them she probably didn’t get any sleep last night.

“Abigail,” Will said slightly louder. She startled and then looked at him. “Are you alright?” he asked her.

“Yes, sorry,” she said. “Just tired, and I thought I saw something.”

“God, she sees things, just like you,” his dad said with a disgusted shake of his head. “Don’t know how many times I have to tell you, it’s not real, none of it. If you were smart, you’d keep your head in the real world. But you never were smart.”

“Fig jam will be less sweet but has a more refined taste,” Hannibal said as handed the small bowl to Jesse so he could spread the dark colored jam on the last unadorned bread chunk. Jesse proudly looked at his horde of breakfast items ready to be consumed.
“Hey! You got honey on my sleeve!” C.J. complained.

“It’s not my fault, you shouldn’t have reached across my plate,” Chris said.

“Can’t I have quiet for five fucking minutes?” Will’s dad said. “I just want to read my newspaper in silence for five. Fucking. Minutes. Is that too much to ask?”

“I don’t have any other shirts with me, you dumbass!” C.J. said.

“QUIET!” his father roared, smacking the newspaper down on the dinner table and standing up to tower over everyone. Will flinched.

“C.J., don’t talk to Chris in such a manner,” Hannibal said sternly. “Hand me the shirt. You can borrow one of mine until I wash out the honey.”

While Hannibal sorted C.J. out, Jesse convinced Chris to mix all three cheeses together on his bread, which Chris promptly declared “tasted like what the battle against Rundas music would taste like if it were food.”

“Uh, awesome then?” Jesse said.

“Mostly just weird,” Chris said.

C.J. was now in one of Hannibal’s sweaters, which was way too large and made him look like a small kid playing grown-up. Hannibal stood nearby using a damp paper towel with dish detergent on it to clean off the honey.

“Well, the boys certainly keep things interesting,” Abigail said with a smile. “Dr. Lecter, the böreck is excellent. My compliments to the chef.”

“Thank you, Abigail,” Hannibal said as he finished his task. He left for a moment to throw the shirt in the dryer then came back to sit at the head of the table where Will’s father had been sitting a few minutes ago. His father was gone now. Hannibal sat calm and collected as he finally gathered food from what was left for his own breakfast. Unlike Will’s father, he didn’t hide behind a newspaper.

Everyone else at the table was now smiling over their half-finished plates of food, except for C.J. But he wasn’t actively scowling, and so it practically counted as a smile.

“This is great,” Will said, pointing at his food with his fork. “Thank you, again.” And he meant for more than just breakfast. Hannibal had doctored Chris’s arm, washed Winston, gave all of them a place to sleep, calmed down C.J., looked after Abigail when she needed a ride, and was probably the only person actually capable of keeping the boys out of trouble.

“My pleasure, Will,” Hannibal said with a pleased smile. “After all, the best start to the morning is a meal shared with family.”

Chapter End Notes

So I apologize profusely as there was no bed sharing. There were plot reasons for it, plus Hannibal going to back to bed after the arrival of Will and company didn’t seem in character.
Chapter Warnings: Abigail reveals that the scar on her neck is not the only scar her father gave her. No details are given other than she knows what an injury from a nail puncture looks like and that there are more scars.

Thank you to everyone who left a kudos or comment, it means a lot!
“You seem to spend a great deal of time cooking in your kitchen,” Will said. After breakfast the boys had been sent upstairs to get ready for their ordeal with the FBI, and Hannibal had retreated to the kitchen to prepare for the next phase. “What is it you’re working on now?”

“Eggplant, capocollo, and pesto pressed sandwiches,” Hannibal said as he slid grapes and persimmons into three sacks labeled C.J., Jesse, and Chris.

“You packed the boys’ lunch?” Will said. His hand skated along the counter as he surveyed the food Hannibal prepared.

“You’ll be glad I did,” Hannibal said. “Jack will be determined to find the killer and he will question the boys extensively. Meals will take second priority, so it is best to be prepared, unless you want them to be eating chemically treated beef and sodium-laden fries.”

Will huffed a laugh, and his mouth crooked in a shy smile, though his eyes fixed on the parchment paper Hannibal folded around the sandwich.

Hannibal wound twine around the wrapped food and tied it into a bow, trying to make the sandwiches as pleasing to look at as possible. In his kitchen, food was not merely substance for the stomach, but nourishment for the soul’s desire for beauty as well.

He observed Will out of the corner of his eye. He had been amused and charmed by Will’s ploy to snoop through the FBI files. Now Will has dragged three young killers into his home, and the last people these killers encountered had all died from a bullet to the head. He is not so cavalier with his life as to let his guard down.

It appeared in his bid to stir up Will’s natural instincts, Hannibal may have gotten himself labeled as prey. He’s more than intrigued, but he’d rather watch Will toy with others as his potential meal. There was little pleasure to be found by becoming a forgotten plate of steak. He wished to excite a different urge in his predator—the instinct to mate—and let Will feast upon his flesh in a more pleasurable way.

Will noticed the triple-tiered shelf displaying the lures and drifted close to it.

“Do you fish?” Will said, one finger lightly stroking one of the fly lures Hannibal had on the shelf.

“Only on occasion,” Hannibal said. “I would not consider myself the expert you are; you would have far more skill with a lure.”

“Very curious fish decoys,” Will said.

“Those are ivory fish weights, with a few inuit whale bone baitfish. Excellent examples of practical folk art from the early 19th century.”

“And the fly lures?”

“I make them myself, much as you do.”
“This is one of Major Traherne’s designs,” Will said in disbelief as his eyes followed the curve of the golden pheasant crest that served as the lure’s tail and the vibrant blue-tipped chatterer feathers that formed the belly. The butt of the lure were flame-colored Indian crow feathers buttressed by black ostrich herl. Two horns made from the fibers of a red macaw tail feather arched back from the head over large elegant wings. “The Black Argus; it’s beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Hannibal said, pausing from his food preparation to watch Will unobserved. Will stood entranced, eyes darting back and forth as he took in all the minute details of the tantalizing display.

He has the look of a fish mesmerized by a quivering lure that writhes in front of him, Hannibal thought.

“These feathers are nearly impossible to find,” Will said as he slowly brushed one of his knuckles along the Western Tragopan feathers that served as wings for the lure. “You can only get these from stuffed displays at least a century old, and then the feathers can be too brittle to reduce the rachides. But they have to be trimmed despite the risk if you want them to lay correctly.”

“It is lucky I’m so steady with a scalpel then,” Hannibal said. “My training as a surgeon served me well in that respect.”

Will inspected the other lures, picking one up and turning it over in his hand. It was a baitfish streamer fly, with a partial body made of greyish-brown fur, likely from a coyote’s tail. The rest of it had yet to be built.

“I don’t recognize which fish it’s supposed to be,” Will said.

“A Lyretail cichlid, found in Lake Tanganyika.”

“And what do you catch with it?” he asked, turning it over in his hands.

“There is a predatory fish known as Lepido elongatus, another type of cichlid. It is a solitary hunter. While the lyretail prefers to feast on biocover and plankton, the elongatus will frequently consume fish, including other cichlids such as the lyretail. It has also earned notoriety as it frequently hosts for interspecific brood-mixing.”

“You mean it steals other’s young to raise as its own,” Will said with an amused smile. “It eats the parents and adopts the children.”

There were slight muffled thuds of someone running down the stairs, and Hannibal could hear C.J. shout from the other room, “He stole my shoe!”

“Winston, be a good boy and drop C.J.’s shoe,” Abigail said in the distance. “Winston!”

“You’re using the wrong lure, though,” Will said as Jesse walked into the kitchen.

“Am I?” Hannibal said.

“You should use an attractor lure, not an imitation.”

“What’s an attractor lure?” Jesse said, wandering over to peer at the fishing equipment.

“An imitation lure convinces the fish he’s looking at an insect or fish he eats,” Will said. “The lure is made to look like a stonefly or maybe a grasshopper, something of that nature. An attractor lure doesn’t resemble any one thing, neither a specific insect or baitfish. For example, this lure is one.”
Will pointed toward the Black Argus.

“Oh. Why use it then, if it doesn't look like the food he eats?” Jesse said.

“An imitation lure will simply bring in whatever’s hungry, not just your intended target. And the fish already knows exactly what he’s going to be eating, so if he’s full he won’t take the bait. An attractor is something your fish has never seen before, with just enough hints in its shape to suggest it’s prey. The way I see it, instead of foragers or scavengers, only an active predator will bite simply because he’s too curious to resist.”

“The mark of a good fishman is his ability to select the appropriate bait,” Hannibal said as he watched Will guide Chris to the counter. “But not all fishermen choose to make their own lures. Tell me, is it the desire to create something molded by your own hand that compels you to do so?”

Is that why you have claimed these children? Hannibal wondered. Do you intend to shape them as you do your lures? Was it you who taught them to pull the trigger?

“Nothing that complicated,” Will said. “I make lures because I enjoy it.”

“Passion is your motivation then, not merely the satisfaction of creation or of mastery.”

Will nodded after a thoughtful pause in which he looked like he genuinely contemplated the answer. Lovely Will was such a fascinating creature. He looked at killers and did not see something to fear or control but something to cherish.

Hannibal had spent the previous night attempting to piece together Will’s intentions. Instead of sleeping on the couch as he had implied he would, he had locked himself in his study, combing through every bit of evidence in the reports trying to piece together the true story. He had assumed Will to be the real kidnapper, until he realized the Turner family was slaughtered mere hours before he met Will for the first time. Not likely Will could have managed to kill the family, travel back to Baltimore, and have everything cooked for the gala.

Had Will decided he could do a better job of training the young killers than some previous keeper? Or maybe he enjoyed solving a puzzle the FBI had yet to unravel.

The enigma of who Will Graham really was had buzzed around in his skull, keeping him too restless to sleep. He had resisted the temptation to gaze upon the object of his obsession until the early morning hours, when he could use the excuse of needing a change of clothes for the day from his room. He wasn’t sure if he would find Will awake, planning and brooding like Hannibal himself. But when he quietly opened the door to his bedroom, Will was fast asleep.

The comforter on the bed was twisted into a heap and pushed aside, like Will had been wrestling with a demon throughout the night. Sweat pooled near the collar of his white undershirt, and worry lines creased what should have been a relaxed face. Will’s dark hair curled around his face in a haphazard fashion, ruffled from his fitful tossing and turning. His forehead was glazed in perspiration, and shined in the dim light spilling in from the hallway.

Will was beautiful in the agony of his restless sleep. His wide pink lips and smooth skin was an arresting contrast against the bedsheets. Hannibal ached just looking at him.

He reminded Hannibal of the angels guarding the Ponte Sant'Angelo. He has the face of an angel, and the unrepentant heart of a devil, Hannibal thought fondly.

He could not bear being this close to perfection. He reached out to lightly caress his fingers against the curling ends of Will’s hair, careful to only brush the hair that had spilled onto the pillow. He did
not wish to run the risk of waking Will up, so he put no pressure behind his stroking fingers.

He stayed there longer than he should have, each second risking Will waking up and angrily demanding to know what Hannibal was doing. He eventually left the room with his favorite suit clutched in his hands, trying and failing to make the separation sting less by treating himself to his favored outfit.

Now Will was in his kitchen, and despite all he had observed, this man was still an intriguing paradox of deception and candidness.

“So, the kids,” Will said.

“They told me everything that had happened to them,” Hannibal said. He could not yet pin down which parts of their story was true, if any of it.

“I’m not sure what to do. I need to take them to the FBI and report how I found them, but there’s enough superstition and innuendo about my ‘unique mind’ floating around that some agent is going to get in his head that I’m the part of the equation that doesn’t add up.”

“There are some who would mistake any social isolation and disregard for social norms as a manifestation of sociopathy,” Hannibal said. “An overly simplistic view, but one that exists nonetheless.”

”A view I’ve encountered too many times,” Will said.

*What exactly are you planning, dear boy?* Hannibal wondered. *I suspect now why you chose to bring them to my house. If you wish me to play along with your game I will, but only by my rules.*

“Normally I would advise telling the FBI the complete truth, but in this case I could see how it could easily become misinterpreted,” Hannibal said. “If they judge you sociopathic they may assume guilt you do not have. The danger of every law enforcement department is the pressure of a high closure rate.”

“Your suggestion?”

“Say I found the children. Your diminished role in the story would lessen the amount of unwarranted scrutiny you would be subjected to,” Hannibal said. “I merely called you to help me with them since you lived nearby.”

“And Abigail checked the cabin to make sure there weren’t any more victims,” Will added. Hannibal nodded his agreement.

“I better round the boys up; it’s about time we got to them there,” Will said.

Hannibal busied himself with the last preparations for lunch. With C.J., Chris, and Jesse’s sack lunches safely stowed in a cooler, he also grabbed the pair of lunches he had made for Abigail and Will and headed to the Bentley.

He packed the cooler with the boys’ lunches in his trunk and mentally prepared himself for driving them to a very irate Jack Crawford. He had intended to simply hand Abigail and Will their lunches to store themselves, but as he walked past Will’s Volvo he noticed the ice chest in the back seat and thought to save them the trip out to the car.

He opened the lid to Will’s ice chest and stared. There was a severed section of human thigh carefully packed among partially melting ice. The meat was raw but had been bled, and very
carefully cut with the skin peeled off. And was that a liver he saw under the top layer of ice cubes?

“Eva, I presume?” Hannibal said as if he was at a dinner party and had just made the acquaintance of someone he had heard about from a friend. He carefully closed the lid and stepped back.

The boys scrambled out of the house to find Hannibal having an intrigued staring contest with the ice chest still sitting innocuously in the backseat of Will’s car.

“Um, what are you doing?” Chris said, panicked.

“I thought I might put Will and Abigail’s lunch in the cooler,” Hannibal said, careful to make it seem as if he had yet to open the lid, and was therefore still innocent to its contents.

“It’s full,” C.J. said irritably. He stepped between Hannibal and the car, blocking his way.

Interesting, at least one of the boys knows what dear William has been keeping packed in all that ice, Hannibal thought.

“Ow! Did you just hit my arm?” Chris whispered to Jesse. Hannibal pretended not to hear.

“Your arm, pretend your arm—” Jesse whispered back.

“Um, my arm hurts,” Chris said loudly. “A, uh, sharp pain. With a... burning sensation? Is that normal?”

“I better take a look at it,” Hannibal said, playing the gracious and naive host. Not as subtle as they perhaps should be. You still have much to teach them, Will.

“What’s going on?” Abigail asked, stepping outside and seeing the commotion.

“Dr. Lecter’s going to check my arm,” Chris said.

“He also made you and Will lunch that he wants to put in the cooler,” Jesse said.

“Oh, well, I can take care of the lunches for you,” Abigail said, taking the paper sacks from Hannibal forcibly before he could possibly decline. She smiled a deceptively innocent smile as she ducked out of sight to stow it away. “Let me pack them while you make sure Chris is alright.”

ALL the children know about what you’re keeping in the ice chest? Hannibal thought.

“Of course,” Hannibal said.

“Everyone ready to go?” Will asked as he bounded outside with Winston in tow. “Hannibal, you alright? You look a bit... stunned.”

“Perfectly fine,” Hannibal said. “I may, in fact, say I have never felt better.”

Quantico, Virginia
Behavioral Science Unit at the FBI

“You put your own life at risk, and the lives of civilians!” Will could hear Agent Crawford bellow
from his office. “Those boys could be killers!”

“They aren’t, Jack,” Hannibal said quietly. Only Hannibal could sound so dignified while being literally yelled at by the head of the FBI Behavioral Science Unit.

Will sat in a row of chairs in the hallway with Abigail, C.J., Jesse, and Chris. The door to Agent Crawford’s office was closed, so nothing could be seen, but sound traveled through the door just fine, if a little muffled.

“You have no way of knowing that,” Agent Crawford said. He still sounded irritated.

“Hannibal, I know you want to believe the best of people,” Alana said as Will heard the click of her heels like she was walking across the room, “but that was a terrible risk you took. You shouldn’t have taken them home with you; you should have called us immediately. We would have sent trained agents to make sure everyone was safe.”

“Handcuff them and put them in the back of a police car, you mean,” Hannibal said.

“I know, it sounds heartless. But just because they’re young doesn’t mean they’re innocent,” Alana said. “The evidence, at the moment, suggests otherwise.”

“You didn’t see the cabin they were kept in,” Hannibal said firmly. Will heard only silence for a minute then the sound of paper smacking down onto the desk, probably courtesy of Agent Crawford’s irritation.

“You still dragged your friend and his daughter into this,” Agent Crawford said. “And now we have a civilian with a bruised and swollen eye socket! Could you imagine the headlines if those boys had seriously hurt either one of them? There would have been internal investigations and plenty of national attention, all on this department.”

“I’m sorry, Jack,” Hannibal said very sincerely.

Will hung his head. He was the reason Hannibal was in trouble. Will did nothing but drag his friends down into the mud with him. Abigail reached over and squeezed his hand.

“He’ll be okay,” she whispered. “Better this than the alternative. Unlike us, Dr. Lecter has nothing to hide.”

Will nodded, but just because she was right didn’t make him feel any less bad about it.

“They said the evidence makes it look like we did it,” Chris whispered with a worried look.

“Only because they haven’t had time to collect the new evidence from the cabin yet,” Abigail said quietly. “Give them a couple hours, and they’ll have a different verdict.”

The next few hours were a blur for Will as the boys were called in one by one to speak with the agents. Chris was first, likely chosen so he could be free to get a radiograph of his arm afterward. Thankfully, the wide-eyed and pale look made him look like a frightened and harmless victim, rather than the cold-blooded killer they were looking for.

Not that it made Will any less tense. Will nibbled distractedly at his lunch, trying calm his nerves. They’ll be okay, he told himself.

Jesse was next. He had been uncharacteristically quiet since leaving Dr. Lecter’s house. He hadn’t said a word, other than a quick whispered conversation with C.J. that Will couldn’t even hear. He
kept glancing at Will, though whether he was looking for direction or reassurance, Will had no idea.

Jesse’s interview lasted longer than Chris’s, and when Agent Crawford escorted Jesse from the office and called in C.J., Will could have sworn the agent’s gaze paused on Will. C.J. left his session with his hands stuffed in his pockets and with a strange pensive look on his face.

“Chris, can we speak to you again?” Agent Crawford said.

Chris slowly got up from his seat and went back into the office. Abigail shot Will a worried look, and Will shrugged. After maybe 10 minutes, Chris dashed out of the office straight to Jesse.

“We were supposed to stick to the story!” Chris hissed quietly to Jesse in an accusing voice. Will’s heart lurched.

“Mr. Graham,” Agent Crawford said loudly, “may we speak with you?”

Will slowly stood up, heart pounding. What had Jesse and C.J. done?

As Will entered the room, Agent Crawford gestured for him to sit in a chair in front of a large desk. The office door closed behind Will with an ominous snick. He slowly sank into the chair as Dr. Lecter, Dr. Bloom, and Agent Crawford formed a line in front of him. Alana had a pinched worried look on her face while Hannibal looked deeply sympathetic. Agent Crawford leaned back against the desk, resting his hands on top of it as he looked at Will with a grave expression.

Did Jesse and C.J. tell them I killed Eva Blair? Will thought. Are they about to ask me just what exactly it is that I keep in my freezer?

“Mr. Graham,” Agent Crawford said, “we need to know if you had an affair with Mrs. Debra Turner.”

“What?” Will said confused. This wasn’t what he'd been expecting at all.

“Jesse’s mother. Did you have an affair with her, about 13 years ago?” Agent Crawford said. Will wasn’t sure what to say. He looked at Hannibal confused.

“I realize this is a deeply personal question, Will, but this may be very important,” Hannibal said.

“We also need to know if you had an affair with an Eva Williams, now Eva Blair,” Agent Crawford said.

“I don’t… follow,” Will said.

“The boys told us about their kidnapper’s belief that you were Jesse’s father,” Alana said. “Or, well, Jesse and C.J. told us, Chris didn’t mention it, but he may have been intimidated into silence by Mrs. Blair. It can be difficult at his young age to recognize a safe environment after such a traumatic experience.”

“Eva Blair was motivated to kidnap the children believing it was her opportunity to be the mother of your child,” Agent Crawford said, “after she initially lost that chance when you pressured her into an abortion, I’m guessing about 14 to 15 years ago. She was enraged when she found out years later you let another woman keep your baby, and she went into action to have the child for herself.”

“I didn’t pressure —” Will began indignantly before remembering he hadn’t slept with either of these women, and being indignant about being accused of forcibly pressuring someone he didn’t know into an abortion that never happened was stupidly pointless.
“Eva was a very sick woman, Will,” Hannibal said. “She may have imagined pressure where there was none, no one is accusing you of anything.”

“We suspect she had been kidnapping both the boys and the girls, probably looking to expand her stolen family,” Agent Crawford said, “until you adopted a daughter of your own. She, um, didn’t keep the girls anymore after that. She might have been incredibly angry. It would explain why she felt the need to leave Elise Nichols’ body to be found in her bed. She wanted the parents to know their daughter was dead. The day the Nichols found their daughter was the day Abigail went to live with you.”

“I know it is a terrible thing to imagine that you played any part in her motivation, but you must be honest with us about these women,” Hannibal said. “This does explain a great many deal of coincidences.”

*To them it would be an explanation as to why the cabin isn’t very far from my house. They’ll think she was secretly stalking me, Will thought. It would also be seen as a motivation for why she killed the Turners. And once she started killing, they’ll think she just didn’t stop.*

“It’s… possible,” Will said, not knowing what else to say and hesitant to contradict Jesse's story. Why had Jesse said such a thing in the first place?

“It’s possible?” Agent Crawford said.

“I have a habit of not asking for any names,” Will said, trying his best to give himself a plausible reason to not be sure if evidence turned up later contradicting the newest story. *Great, now I sound like the douchiest lay possible in front of Hannibal,* Will thought.

“Would photos help?” Agent Crawford said.

“I can try,” Will said thinking fast, “but I’ll be honest, there were a lot of them and it was a long time ago.” *And now I sound like a man slut, this keeps getting better and better.* Alana cleared her throat uncomfortably.

“I see,” Agent Crawford said. “Well, there’s an easy way to check. I’m ordering a paternity test. If we’re lucky, it’s positive. If it’s not, we’ll have quite a mess to sort through to get to the truth.”

Will rubbed one hand over his face. Christ, this was a disaster.

He ended up having to wait until everyone was distracted and in one of the labs before he could finally talk to Jesse.

“Jesse, why on earth would you say Eva thought I was your father?” Will said.

“It was Hannibal’s theory, sort of,” Jesse said. “They knew the Minnesota Shrike considered one of the kids special somehow. Hannibal suspected it was because you were the father of one of us, and he subtly tried to ask us about it. If the FBI wants to believe that, better to play along, right?”

“Why didn’t you *tell* me?” Will said. “And Jesse, as much as you want to give the FBI what they want, the paternity test is going to disprove all of it.”

“Maybe,” Jesse said. “But Hannibal accidentally mentioned they aren’t always accurate; they give false positives.”

“I don’t think it can be that common,” Will said doubtfully, but to be honest, he didn't know much about it. Maybe it could happen. “That was risky doing what you did. You should have discussed it
“You could have said no,” Jesse mumbled at the floor. “If the test comes back positive, I go to live with you. And what if you didn’t want to be my dad?”

“Jesse, of course I want to be your dad,” Will said as he gave Jesse’s shoulder a comforting squeeze. “Look, I wouldn’t count on the test ending the way you hope it will. I’ll see if I can fight for custody of you anyhow. But I’ll be honest, it’ll be an uphill battle. Judges prefer to place kids with their blood relatives.”

Will didn’t hug people very often, but he felt like he should make an exception in this case. Jesse clung to him fiercely.

“I don’t want to go back,” Jesse whispered. “I ran away, I wasn’t kidnapped. They’ll send me to live with my uncle, and it’ll be just like it was before.”

“We may not have a choice here,” Will warned, trying to keep Jesse from getting his hopes up. “But we’ll try.”

“Hey, kiddo,” a woman with long dark hair said, coming over to talk to Jesse. “Nice to see you alive and kicking. At this point we weren’t sure any of you kids would turn up still breathing. Name’s Beverly.”

Will had read her notes in the files on Hannibal’s desk. He had learned by reading those reports how she analyzed evidence, her thought patterns, and could even tell bits of her personality. But he still hadn’t imagined her personality completely correct, and the difference between the imaginary Agent Katz and the real one was jarring.

“I’ve also been told you get an extra-special DNA test,” Beverly said. “And who’s the lucky father? Or possible father I should say.”

“That would be me,” Will said.

“You know most people take the test when the kid’s born, not 12 years later,” she said. “Also, not usually because of a homicide investigation.”

“Lucky me,” Will said.

“Alright you two, I’m going to take this,” she said holding up an extra-long cotton swab connected to an empty vial, “and swab the inside of your mouth to get some nice samples of your DNA.”

“And then?” Will said.

“I’m going to clone you,” Beverly said.

“We’ll send it to a lab down the hall,” a man said with an eye roll as he walked by. “They’ll have the results in a couple days. I’m Agent Zeller by the way, and that’s Agent Price over there.”

Jimmy Price looked up from where he was collecting strands of hair with a tweezer from a pile next to a ripped-open pillow case. Likely he was getting samples for a DNA test to match which victims it belonged to. Looks like they found the evidence we left, Will thought.

After Beverly took the cheek cell samples for the paternity test, Will glanced around the room to find where C.J. and Chris were at. C.J. was slouched in a chair munching on the sandwich Hannibal had packed. He kept glancing into an adjacent lab. Only a glass wall separated the two rooms, making it
easy for Will to spot the four bodies covered in white sheets resting on metal exam tables.

One of those bodies had two separate sheets, one for the upper body and one for the lower, with the table visible between the two halves of the body. The poor bastard had been cut in two.

In the empty section of the lab, Chris was sitting on one of the tables, flanked on either side by Hannibal and Alana. Hannibal had his head bowed toward Chris as he talked to him in low, reassuring tones. Alana stood on the other side, her hand holding Chris’s.

Hannibal was a striking and formidable figure in his deep blue suit complete with red tie and pocket square. The cut of the jacket emphasized his broad shoulders, and the layers of thick fabric wrapped around him added to his solid build. And then there was Alana, who looked so dainty and fragile next to him.

_They look like a family you would see on TV, Will thought. The hard-working husband and his beautiful wife as they comfort their adored son. The perfect family._

The thought was unsettling.

Chris started getting ready to leave for the radiography, and Will watched Alana fetch Chris’s coat from a nearby chair. Alana was eye-catchingly beautiful today, as always. Will wondered where his life had gone so wrong that he went from admiring that beauty to feeling insecure and outclassed by it.

Her dress was her customary snug fit, hugging the curve of her body, while the vee of her neckline dipped very low, revealing a bit of cleavage. He eyed the pale exposed skin of her chest, too aware of how she fit the ideal of feminine beauty that Hannibal likely admired, while Will himself didn’t fit any sort of ideal Hannibal would be interested in.

.Focus, Will, he told himself. Now’s not the time to get distracted by thoughts of Hannibal Lecter._

“We’d like to take you to the hospital soon for an exam on your arm, just to be safe,” Hannibal said to Chris. “You did very well today. I know it must be difficult, after everything.”

“Will I get to see my mom again?” Chris said, looking from Hannibal to Alana. “I haven’t seen her in a year.”

“You’ll see your family very soon. Are you ready to go with Dr. Bloom? She and several agents will accompany you to your appointment.”

“To make sure I don’t hurt anyone,” Chris said.

“No, to keep you safe,” Hannibal said.

Now that the preliminary analysis of the cabin was done, Jack had quickly abandoned the theory the boys had willingly killed anyone. And Alana had voiced concerns about what trauma the boys may have endured, as it was clear from the crime scenes the boys had been forced to be there when Eva had killed their families. Hannibal wasn’t sure what to believe, but the nonchalance of the boys about the contents of Will’s ice chest made him suspicious.
“We’ll catch Eva,” Alana said, squeezing Chris’s hand comfortably. “She won’t ever harm you again.”

_How right you are. Soon Eva will be in the belly of the beast_, Hannibal thought. _She has been consigned to a prison far more secure than the ones you put so much faith in._

As Dr. Bloom left with Chris, Agent Katz walked over to watch them leave.

“You’re good with him,” she said, nodding in Chris’s direction. “I swear everytime I talk to him, he looks like he’s gonna hurl. What’s your secret?”

“Some people must be treated the same as you would treat a shy animal. Think of them more like a cat.”

“Oh well, there’s the problem. I’m a dog person,” Beverly said. “If you can’t train it to roll-over or chase its own tail, what’s the point?”

“I find the best way to befriend such a creature is to let it get used to your presence before you attempt too much attention or affection,” Hannibal said, watching Will out of the corner of his eye. “Subtlety can be key.”

“Are you saying I’m not?” Beverly said with a friendly smirk.

“And some may take more time to coax than others,” Hannibal said. He caught Will openly gazing at Alana’s breasts as she walked past him to get Chris’s coat. The smile left Hannibal’s face. _It seems my shy cat is not so shy around Alana_, Hannibal thought.

“So how do you know which ones to be subtle with?”

“If the similarities between them and a cat are unmistakable—”

“You mean if they hack-up hairballs and leave their latest kill on the porch?”

”As disconcerting as it is to find a dead mouse on the porch, the feline is simply providing a nutritious meal and teaching valuable hunting skills. It is instinct for them to bring bloodied prey home to teach their children how to hunt and keep them fed, and they try to do the same for their beloved owners,” Hannibal said. “The cat is trying to awaken the slumbering predator within you.”

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**Baltimore, Maryland**

**Lecter Residence**

Now that the chaotic day was over, Hannibal set about putting his house to rights and preparing for tomorrow. There was much to be done over the next few days if he wished this all to go according to plan. He stripped the bed sheets and pillowcases from both guest bedrooms and put them in the washer, and went to do the same to the master bedroom.

At the sight of his own bed, the memory of Will sleeping came to mind, and he smiled with fondness. He leaned over to see if he could still smell him from where his head had rested on the pillow.
The scent was there. It was the familiar blend of motor grease and canine and faint sweat that always seemed to cling to Will beneath the chemical tang of cheap aftershave, wrapped up in the warm animal scent that was Will himself. There was also the new earthy aroma of an unfamiliar forest and the unmistakable lemony perfume of winter honeysuckle.

*Now where would you have stumbled into winter honeysuckle?* Hannibal wondered. *It wasn’t in Virginia or Massachusetts, unless you were wandering around in someone’s garden.*

He also caught a faint whiff of the smell of semen.

*Naughty boy,* Hannibal thought in delight. *Did you pleasure yourself on my bed?*

Hannibal imagined Will touching himself and shuddering in ecstasy, whining with need. He’d be exquisite to look at. Hannibal licked his lips and basked in the scent.

He retreated to take a quick shower, determined to keep himself from doing something as undignified as taking his own pleasure while still fully clothed and kneeling next to the bed. He stroked himself while under the warm spray of water, gripping his cock firmly as he remembered the scent of Will’s spent passion clinging to his sheets. Will should have marked *him* with that scent instead of the sheets. He let himself imagine that he held Will in his arms while it had happened, as Will’s chest heaved and he gasped in pleasure.

*That is where you belong, dear Will. Not with Alana or in an empty bed. With me.*

He’d hold Will close as he came, letting him paint Hannibal’s skin with the beauty of his climax. Will would lay trembling in his arms afterwards, his eyes glazed in pleasure and gazing straight into Hannibal’s.

Hannibal came with a groan.

*Your beauty and wickedness are more than I know what to do with,* he thought through the haze of relaxation and pleasure seeping into him.

Afterwards he spent the next couple hours cleansing and preparing the house. The floor took the longest to clean, but even it eventually recovered from the invasion of mud. Hannibal looked around pleased at the gleaming white and grey marble floor and the fresh smell of citrus-scented cleaner.

He lit the parlor’s fireplace and gratefully sank down onto the couch with a wine glass in hand. After a few sips, he picked up a book from its resting place on the end table intending to read. He paused. Under the end table was one last muddy print.

Hannibal tapped one finger repeatedly against the glass in his hand as he tried to decide between ignoring it or letting it interrupt his reading. He slowly got to his feet, regretfully putting down the book and wine glass. The doorbell rang.

“I just stopped by to say thank you for your help today,” Will said when Hannibal answered his front door.

Stopping by Hannibal’s to say thank you had seemed like the most natural thing in the world, until he actually stood on Hannibal’s front porch. Then he felt ridiculous; most people said thank you with
a nice card, not by forcing the recipient to play host once again.

It didn’t help his nerves were shot to hell. It had been 4 hours since he had left C.J., Jesse, and Chris with the FBI agents. He felt anxious. What if there was something Will had missed, something that would implicate the boys?

“Of course, Will, I was happy to help,” Hannibal said. “You’ll also be pleased to know the boys’ families have been contacted and will be arriving tomorrow. Chris’s parents should be here by late morning, and C.J.’s grandmother and Jesse’s uncle will arrive in the afternoon.”

Will nodded miserably.

“Do you miss them?” Hannibal asked.

“They aren’t mine to miss,” Will said, avoiding the question. Will walked slowly through the entryway and parlor.

The floors had already been cleaned, every sign they had ever been there swept away and forgotten. He had hoped visiting Hannibal would bring some peace, but he was like the muddy footprints that Hannibal had scoured away, inconvenient and unsightly. He shouldn’t be here.

“I should get back to Abigail, she’s waiting for me,” Will said. Abigail wasn’t actually waiting for him. At the moment, Abigail was catching up on an entire night of missed sleep.

“Perhaps a cup of coffee before you go? You look too tired to be driving,” Hannibal suggested. Will nodded while he ventured deeper into the parlor. Coffee would do him some good.

“Did you draw these?” Will asked when Hannibal came back with a proffered cup, referring to the stack of drawings on the secretary table.

“Yes. I’ve always had a passion for studying the art of the masters,” Hannibal said. “And I’ve made my own foray into the art of sketching.”

“So you’re not only a therapist, but a FBI consultant, E.R. surgeon, skilled chef, and talented artist,” Will said with a self-deprecating smile, amused at how outclassed he was. “How do you even find time to learn all this?”

“I find a period of intense observation followed by practice is the best way to learn anything,” Hannibal said. “You cannot learn that which you do not observe. But you also cannot learn by merely observing, action is required eventually.”

“Anything you’re learning now?”

“Yes,” Hannibal said. He had an intense look in his eyes as he watched Will. He wasn’t sure what that look meant.

“Are you observing, Doctor, or have you moved onto action?” Will asked.

“I find that I’ve finished merely observing,” Hannibal said with a smile.
A really big THANK YOU to Katarra for beta reading! There were several sections in this chapter that really needed help, and she helped me figure out how to fix them, and I’m sooooooo grateful.

Thank you to everyone who has left a kudos or comment :)


Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I can’t thank Katarra enough for her help with this fic! Not only is she an amazing beta reader but her encouragement has been an enormous help :)

Omg everyone, your comments last chapter, I loved them so much!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wolf Trap, Virginia
Graham Residence

Will woke up to the smell of breakfast. He groaned, feeling emotionally hungover. Yesterday had been a mix of too much stress and disappointment; there was no quiet stream he could conjure up in his mind today.

As he stumbled into the kitchen in a T-shirt and pajama pants, he could hear Abigail talking to someone.

“—like Dad could have resisted fishing. We stayed at the Black Mountain Campground a couple nights.”

She’s talking about our vacation, Will realized. He could see Abigail was speaking into a phone that was tucked against her shoulder as she stirred something in a skillet on the stovetop. The tablet was sitting on the countertop next to where she was working, and the screen displayed a recipe titled “Sweet Potato Skillet.”

“It was. Did you see the photo of us at the waterfall?” Abigail said as she waved hi to Will. “Yeah, Setrock Creek Falls.”

Had she finally contacted one of her friends? Will had tried his best to keep her from isolating herself from her friends back in Minnesota, but she had seemed determined to forget them. Perhaps she was trying to forget everything from her life before she moved to Wolf Trap.

“Beautiful and informative. I learned more about lures than I thought possible; there’s a lure to mimic practically anything,” Abigail said. “I’m serious! There’s a lure that imitates a midge trying to emerge from a pupal sheath; it’s called Stuck in the Shuck.”

A midge struggling to pull itself out of the pupal husk and break through the surface film of the water was a prime target for a hungry fish. That final metamorphosis stage, when you transform into what you’ve been growing into all along, is more difficult for some than for others.

“We learned whitewater kayaking! Or I should say I learned whitewater kayaking, and Dad mostly learned how to paddle as far away from other kayaks as possible trying to escape one of the other students.”

Abigail laughed, and Will grimaced. People like Miss Mills, the kiyaking student who had insisted on trying to flirt with him, were a perfect example of why he hated being sociable.
“She was incorrigible! She even told him he had such strong hands, and he looked ready to abandon ship and swim for shore.”

He wondered how someone like Dr. Lecter, who flitted from social gathering to social gathering and regularly invited a mob of socialites to his home, didn’t get as fed up with people as Will did. While Will regularly offended people, he was pretty sure he never heard Hannibal speak with even so much as a hint of impoliteness or impatience.

“You find anything?” Abigail said into the phone, an abrupt change of topic.

Will should have relished his time at Hannibal’s house and the time he had with the boys while he had the chance. His mind had been so occupied by worrying and planning that his opportunity to enjoy those fleeting moments had slipped through his fingers, and now he could never recover them.

“There’s nothing we can do?” Abigail said, disappointed. “Well, thanks for looking into it. If you find anything that might help, let me know.”

“Who were you talking to?” Will asked after Abigail ended the call.

“Hannibal.”

“You were talking to Hannibal?”

“He asked to see photos from our trip,” Abigail said with a shrug. “And I asked him to check if he could find any way for us to adopt Jesse. Since, you know, Jesse said he wanted to stay with us.”

Will sat up straight and said, “And?”

“If his parents hadn’t designate a guardian in their will, he’d get some say in who the judge chooses,” Abigail said as she grabbed a couple plates and moved the skillet onto a hot pad on the table. “But his uncle is in the will as the appointed guardian. Not to mention there’s a rebuttable presumption that a blood relative is in the best interest of a minor when the courts have to choose. It doesn’t sound like there’s anything we can do about it.”

Will nodded, disappointed. It was what he had expected, but the sting when he heard those words meant some part of him had still hoped there was some sort of loophole they could have used.

Abigail piled both plates high with food. Ellie, who had been lying under the table flopped on her side, perked up at the sound of a metal serving spoon clanking against dishes. The small white dog rushed to Abigail’s side of the table, sitting on Abigail’s foot so Abigail would know she was there.

Ellie had learned quickly it was much easier to beg food from Abigail, who had never owned a dog, than from Will, who spent a half hour every day cooking the dogs’ meals from scratch and knew perfectly well how well fed his pack was. She’d been especially shameless about begging for food since their trip, and Will had this terrible suspicion Hannibal had cooked as extravagantly for his dogs as he did his dinner party guests.

“Mmm, smells delicious,” Will said. “What’s in it, besides sweet potato?”

“Tomato passata, bell peppers, oregano, a little bit of olive oil, and a lot of Eva.”
“Oh my god, Chris!” Mrs. O’Halloran said, running over to Chris and hugging him tight. Chris’s two sisters hovered nearby, the youngest with a hand over her mouth at the shock of seeing her brother again.

Hannibal and Jack watched the scene from across the room, keeping a respectful distance to give the illusion of privacy for the family’s reunion.

“One of the toughest parts of this job is always seeing the worst of people,” Jack said. “It’s nice to see the best sometimes.”

“It’s rare to see tangible proof of the ones we save,” Hannibal said. “Normally our only reassurance is knowing there won’t be another victim after the killer is apprehended.”

A phone buzzed, and Jack looked down at the lit screen of his cell phone.

“Excuse me, Doctor,” Jack said and marched from the room with a grim expression on his face. Hannibal watched him leave, then turned his attention to Alana, who was standing several feet away and watching the reunion with a smile.

*Time to make sure the lovely Alana is never an option for Will, Hannibal thought.*

“It’s nice to see a bit of happiness amidst all the sadness,” Hannibal said to her as he nodded towards Mr. O’Halloran. The man had both his arms wrapped around his wife and son, and looked to be blinking back tears.

“The reunions for C.J. and Jesse won’t be,” Alana said. “I’ve tried my best to prepare them, but it’s going to be a reminder their families are gone.”

“Life can be cruel, especially to those who don’t deserve it,” Hannibal said. “We spend so much time trying to play it safe, to make the best decision for the future we assume we’ll have, when in the end we can never predict how our lives might change.”

Alana followed Hannibal’s gaze to where Jack could be seen standing in the hallway and talking on his phone. There was only one person he’d answer the phone for in the middle of something like this. Bella rarely called, but when she did, Jack was adamant he be there for her.

“As difficult as it is for Jack to face Bella’s death, in the end he knows he’ll get the chance to grieve and to continue his life even in that grief,” Hannibal said. “I’d argue it’s much harder for Bella, who already knows she has run out of time to change anything she might wish to. If you were Bella, what missed opportunities would you regret in your own life?”

“Well, I think I’d probably have the same regrets as anyone else,” Alana said. “There’s never enough time to spend with the people we love, is there?”

“I would regret never having children, and I would regret not having a life partner to share my journey with.”

“I wondered when we’d talk about this,” Alana said. At Hannibal’s curious look, she elaborated, “Why you ended things. Not that I needed an explanation, but it’s unlike you not to insist on clarity. You’re saying you felt we had no future together?”

“Alana—”
“No, you’re right. We played it safe the entire time. Never let our feelings for each other impact our work lives, nor did we make any plans for the future. That says all it needs to, I think. And it’s not like I was wondering what prompted you to end it; the timing was a little hard to miss.”

“I hadn’t realized I was so transparent,” Hannibal said after a pause of uncomfortable silence. *If you know how I feel about Will, what else have you figured out that I didn’t realize?*

“Bella was your patient, you would have known about the cancer before the rest of us. If you found out just days before the fundraising gala, it would have been on your mind,” Alana said. “You ended it because seeing her go through this made you realize you couldn’t afford to play it safe any longer.”

*I’m not so transparent to you then. You claimed I was the one blinded by my faith in others, but instead you are the one groping in the dark. We are on different sides of the veil, Alana, and you can never reach through it to feel the true shape of me; that is why we had no future.*

“I’d argue you can’t either,” Hannibal said. “If you wait for the opportune time to build the life you want, you may find that time never comes.”

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**Wolf Trap, Virginia**  
**Graham Residence**

“This website says the court will choose a different guardian if there’s evidence of child abuse,” Abigail said as she tapped on the tablet. “Can we use that?”

“Not very likely,” Will said, scrolling down Peter Turner’s facebook page on his phone. There were photos of a group of kids squiring water guns and running around the backyard, his wife and daughter making silly faces at the camera, homemade halloween costumes sewn with care and accented with face paint and goofy grins, and a video of his son blowing out candles on a birthday cake.

“You can’t tell by looking if there’s abuse,” Abigail said.

“True, except I have the advantage of my empathy,” Will said. “The Turner’s may not be a perfect family, but they’re a far cry from abusive.”

“Okay, well… oh, here. In some states, you have to petition the courts to become a guardian even if you’re named in the will,” Abigail said. “And when the child is over 14, the potential guardian also needs the minor’s written approval on that petition for it to be valid. Maybe Connecticut—”

“Except Jesse isn’t 14 yet,” Will said with a sigh as he let his phone fall the short distance to the top of the table with a clatter. “I don’t know, maybe there’s nothing we can do.”

“That family isn’t prepared for a kid like Jesse,” Abigail said quietly.

“I know,” Will said. “They’re prepared for soccer games at 7 a.m. on a Saturday, spending more than they should on a family trip to Orlando, parent-teacher conferences every quarter where they’re reminded of how much one of their kids is struggling. What they’re not prepared for is an experienced killer.”
Harely, who had been happily chasing around a tennis ball, accidentally propelled the toy behind the bed frame and out of reach. The large brown dog whined loudly at the loss, and Will fished it out absentmindedly, telling himself once again this was the last time he would do this.

The tennis ball was damp with spit, as usual, and after throwing the ball down the long hallway leading to the stairs, Will wiped his hand on his jeans. Harley scampered after it, nails skidding on the hardwood floor as he shot right through the ghost of Hannibal, who was inspecting the blank walls of the hallway.

“This would be a ideal location for a family portrait collection,” the imaginary Hannibal Lecter said.

“Great, maybe you could do that. I don’t have time for it,” Will said.

“Do what?” Abigail said.

“Nothing,” Will muttered, embarrassed.

Abigail knelt next down to Zoe and ruffled her hair. The small dog, who was gnawing on a fish skin chew with a peculiar jaw motion due to an underbite, preened at the attention.

“We could fabricate child abuse claims,” Abigail said.

“Then he would lose his children too. We’re not doing that.”

Abigail picked Zoe up and and walked towards the chair closest to the empty fireplace. She glanced up at the chair and froze. The dog, sensing Abigail’s unease, sniffed at her face and smeared her wet nose across her chin.

Abigail snapped out of her daze. She sat in the chair closest to the window instead and settled with Zoe in her lap, holding the chew up so Zoe could more easily decimate it.

It’s as if Abigail saw someone already sitting in that first chair, Will thought. Someone she was afraid of. Are hallucinations contagious?

Was this something she wanted to talk about or would she prefer to ignore it?

“So what about talking to the uncle?” Abigail said. “Maybe he’d just give us Jesse.”

Looks like ignore it.

“Would you want your nephew raised by a reclusive man you’ve never met before,” Will said, “and who lives in the middle of nowhere?”

Abigail sighed.

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Quantico, Virginia

Behavioral Science Unit at the FBI

“Is what we’re looking at the Ripper?” Jack asked the assembled team.

Beverly raised an eyebrow as she looked between Brian and Jimmy. Jimmy stood with his arms
folded and his forehead wrinkled in contemplation, while Brian nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes, that’s what I’ve been saying, this is definitely the Ripper’s work,” Brian said.

“The similarities are unmistakable,” Hannibal said, as he glanced over the dead man on the examination table. He had never seen him before.

The laparoscopy to remove the victim’s kidney was poorly done, and he was annoyed to claim such negligent surgery skills as his own, even if it would help keep the FBI off his trail. Whoever had done it either had little to no training as a surgeon, or had all the skills of one Frederick Chilton.

Jack nodded slowly with a “hmm” sound that meant he had come to a decision.

“In that case, I want our best working on this,” Jack said as he strode from the room to fetch his famous profiler. “I’m getting Agent Lass; she’s now second in-command of this investigation, working directly under me.”

“I believe I read a Freddie Lounds article on her,” Hannibal said.

“Yeah, Lounds claims Agent Lass skirts the line between tenacious investigating and outright disregard for the law,” Beverly said. “She dug up some dirt on how she faced disciplinary action as a trainee for obtaining private medical records of the Ripper victims without a warrant. And apparently she felt how Agent Lass caught Eldon Stammets was a breach of privacy, even if that time she did obey the confidentiality laws. Well, technically.”

“And how did she catch him?”

“HEPAA permits the deceased’s medical records to be released to a medical examiner performing an autopsy. Technically that exception is so the examiner can narrow down cause of death to help determine whether or not there was foul play, but instead Lass had Brian and I use them to see if the victims had anything in common. They were all diabetics, and we realized the perp had put them into diabetic comas. The killer had to have knowledge of the victims’ medical condition somehow, wasn’t a far leap to pharmacist. But Freddie didn’t like she had requested medical records using what could be argued was a loophole.”

“And what do you think?” Hannibal said.

“Do you know how many times Freddie Lounds has been sued for libel?” Beverly said. “Besides, somebody’s gotta catch ‘em. Jack’s been training Lass for two years on how to catch the Ripper. If anyone’s gonna do it, it’s gonna be the best profiler, right?”

Hannibal supposed that Agent Miriam Lass would also confirm this to be his work, eager to lay another crime at the Chesapeake Ripper’s feet. This was more likely the victim of an inexpert illegal surgery than the prey of a ravenous killer.

The amateur surgeon had obviously bungled the operation from start to finish. The most noticeable being the improper sedation of the patient. The mutilation of the body, the primary similarity to the Ripper victims, had been committed by the victim, not the killer, when he had roused too early from anesthesia. He had clawed at the sutures in his own side, tearing small chunks of himself out like you would rip tails off a platter of shrimp.

The perpetrator had either limited access to medical supplies or limited knowledge. He or she had used silk sutures to close the hepatic duct; a material easy to purchase but was never to be used in the biliary tract. The salt in the bile exposed to the silk would form calculus over time, not to mention the silk would absorb any liquids, swelling and altering the tightness of the knots. The increased tension
could easily snap the sutures, rendering them completely ineffective.

The possible surgeon was so incompetent that they couldn’t even master extracorporeal sutures, in place of the more difficult intracorporeal, and had botched several knots whose half-hitches had loosened during tying.

Agent Lass and Agent Crawford marched into the room. Jack handed her a folder of the crime scene analysis, and she rifled through it. Her eyes kept darting to the cut just under the man’s ribs, and she was frowning.

“This isn’t the Ripper’s work,” Miriam said as she peered closer at that particular incision.

“There are 22 matching keypoints to the Ripper’s crime profile,” Brian said with a scoff. “Organ removal, body mutilation, display of the body—”

“No, think of this like molecular photofitting,” Miriam said. “If you use molecular photofitting to build a profile, you don’t flag someone as a suspect based on who has the highest number of matching attributes. You weight for significance, distinctiveness, and likelihood. You take into account standard deviations and the possibility of coincidence.

“And the most important signs are missing here. The Ripper mutilates bodies to hide his methodical accumulation of surgical trophies. None of the mutilation here disguises the flank incision used to remove the kidney, if anything it points right to it. And the Ripper is prone to dramatic displays of the body. He likes to use objects around him as tools to rework a living body into a dying sculpture, very specifically meant to invoke visceral reactions in any onlookers in the aftermath of his performance. And yet this body was just abandoned to marinate in a bathtub.”

“Molecular photofitting? I’m not familiar with the term,” Hannibal said.

“Also known as DNA phenotyping,” Jimmy said. “Say you collect some DNA at a crime scene, but it doesn’t match any suspects or entries in CODIS, the combined DNA Index System. You analyze the DNA’s genetic markers to predict eye color, hair color, skin color, even the general shape of the face of the perpetrator. You don’t need an eyewitness to get a police sketch anymore; the double helix is the only testimony you need.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t match because he got interrupted before he could remove the heart,” Brian argued. “It’s the Ripper.”

“The Ripper would have found a way to come back to finish it,” Miriam said. “He’s not afraid of getting caught; what he’s afraid of is mediocrity and banality. He wouldn’t leave his composition half-sung.”

“So this isn’t the Ripper?” Jimmy said.

“And this was for direct but less invasive access to the heart,” Miriam said, pointing with a pen to the cut she had been staring at earlier. “I’ve seen it before. It’s the same type of cut made for minimally invasive heart surgery. Whoever did this was concerned about limiting trauma to the body and reducing healing time. This man wasn’t supposed to die; he was supposed to live.”

“So if the victim was supposed to live,” Jimmy said, “the kidney wasn’t removed as a trophy for a job well-done.”

“Which means either our victim wanted to sell his own kidney, or he was abducted so the perp could sell his kidney,” Brian said, “or it was diseased and he couldn’t afford that kind of medical bill.”
“Really, who can anymore?” Jimmy said.

It was a shame Hannibal would never get to see one of Will’s victims stretched out and dissected on an exam table in the BAU lab. The various parts and organs in Will’s cooler suggested he ate all the body. Both Garrett Jacob Hobbs and Eva Blair had simply vanished into thin air, another name on the missing persons list.

No corpse to prove their death, which meant no homicide investigation, and therefore no chance for the FBI to build a profile. The only way to see the execution and evisceration of Will’s victims was during the act itself. No one would ever have a chance to worship the skill of his craftsmanship; it was a wasted performance with no audience.

“What I don’t understand is why he isn’t punishing us for Abel Gideon,” Miriam said.

“We have three known Ripper victims in the last week, I’d say he’s punishing someone,” Jack said.

“No, he’s just letting the world know he’s out there,” Miriam said. “Jack, he would have been enraged by the mere stupidity of suggesting Dr. Abel could ever be him. He should have done something by now to personally roast us. I don’t know, maybe publishing the article was too heavy handed and he saw right through it.”

“When Jack told me of your idea to use Tattlecrime as a way to prod the Ripper into action, I thought it was an excellent one,” Hannibal said. He had been impressed, but not enough to reward their efforts.

“How do you see the Ripper, Miriam?” Jack said.

“I see him as more like the Angel Maker than the Minnesota Shrike, to be honest,” Miriam said. “He’s less delusional, and more like a vigilante.”

Hannibal was neither delusional nor a vigilante. He was simply a bear or a wolf that feasted upon the sheep that had been sent out to pasture.

“A vigilante?” Jack said.

“He’s punishing some sort of offense. That’s how he’s choosing them,” Miriam said. “Whatever the transgression is, it’s something you and I or anyone else would consider innocent. It’s why vigilantes are better left to comic books.”

*I may chose my victims based on their offensiveness*, Hannibal thought, *but I do not punish the rude like a vigilante; I humiliate them.*

Will, though…

Had he played God, smiting the wicked for his own satisfaction? His two known victims had the same sin tarnishing their hands: the manipulation and abuse of children. He could have enacted divine retribution like the goddess Ammit and devoured the hearts of the unworthy, feasting upon the tough and muscled meat of that vital organ. Will had made the two sinners bow before him, and crushed them under his feat.

“Freddie Lounds says the way the FBI lets us conduct these investigations without oversight makes us tantamount to vigilantes,” Beverly said.

“If there’s anything everyone has in common, it’s the desire for retribution for perceived wrongs against us,” Miriam said. “In that way, the Chesapeake Ripper is just like us.”
“We’re not after retribution, we’re here to enforce the law,” Jack said.

“You said no one else would get the chance to shoot the Ripper when we caught him,” Miriam said, “because you’d do it first.”

“That’s not vengeance, that’s justice,” Jack said.

“It’s the same thing, Jack,” Miriam said.

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**Wolf Trap, Virginia**  
**Graham Residence**

Will lounged in the bathtub enjoying a warm lazy soak.

The swelling around his eye had subsided along with most of the pain, but the bruise had spread, slowly enveloping the entirety of the lower eye socket. The color of the bruise had deepened from an angry red to a mottled mess of black and purple and blue.

It wasn’t a bad sign. He knew that despite the ugly coloring of the bruise, the capillaries would have already healed. The increased size of the bruise didn’t worry him either. Some of the internal bleeding from the initial impact would take a couple days to rise up near the surface of the skin, where it would finally become visible.

He had too much familiarity with these types of injuries thanks to his years of service at the New Orleans homicide department. Working homicide required the inevitable investigation of a child’s death, and as a result, signs of child abuse. The quickest way to tell a murder from an unpreventable or unintentional death, like sudden infant death syndrome or accidental airway obstruction, was to check the body for signs of long term abuse. You learned to tell bruises from the naturally rough-and-tumble play of childhood from those left by an adult. You could sometimes, based on the bruise color, estimate the amount of time since injury. Pinpoint who left the bruises using that time frame as a reference point, and you had your primary suspect right there.

Ironically, he had gone from investigating homicide to committing homicide, and yet he had saved more children in the past few weeks in his career as a cannibalistic killer than in all the years he worked for law enforcement. In the homicide department, if you were called to investigate that meant the child was already dead.

“Deep in thought?” Hannibal asked.

Will turned his head to see the imaginary Hannibal Lecter standing next to the pedestal sink. He looked out of place in the cramped bathroom, his head nearly resting against the lower portion of the sloped ceiling where the high pitched gable roof cut into the second-story room.

“Hello, Doctor,” Will said with an easy grin. “Just enjoying the bedrest.”

“Relaxation is good for the healing process,” Hannibal said as he meticulously rolled up his sleeves. He kneeled next to the bathtub so he could whisper in Will’s ear, “Want me to help you unwind?”

Will suppressed an embarrassed snort and reminded himself this was a figment of his imagination not a real person, and there was no need to be shy.
“Please do,” Will said as he settled back to rest his head against the tiled wall.

He watched Hannibal lean closer and recalled how his deep brown eyes had looked bathed in that bright light while he had bandaged Chris’ arm. He realized he could make all the eye contact he wanted to now because this Hannibal was imaginary.

Hannibal slowly combed his fingers through Will’s damp hair, and Will tilted his head back to look straight up into his eyes. The ghost was smiling at him, the corner of the right side of his mouth tilted up.

Will could feel one of Hannibal’s hands settle on his chest, his wide palm and long fingers covering a much larger area than a woman’s hand. It felt nice, but part of Will’s brain was concerned it wouldn’t feel as good in reality. He’d never had any sort of physical intimacy with a man, only women, and he sometimes worried that he imagined it better than how it actually felt.

His breath hitched as Hannibal’s other hand continued to pet his hair. The open palm against his chest rested over the quickened beating of his heart.

“Care to tell me why you’re so tense?” Hannibal said.

“I’ll be less tense once we’ve eaten the last of Eva,” Will said. “I don’t like having evidence in the house in case of a warrant.”

“You should cook some chicken carbonara penne; it would be a good use for the rest of the thigh meat.”

“Oh what, you’re an expert on cannibalism now?” Will said amused, sinking lower into the water as he let his body become loose and relaxed. “The only people you’ve eaten are a little bit of Garrett Jacob Hobbs because I fed him to you.”

The thumb on the hand on his chest started making slow circles, dragging across his skin and making Will less relaxed and hurtling into a whole new sort of tension. Will’s hand crept towards his own cock—

“DAD, YOUR PHONE’S RINGING,” Abigail said from downstairs, her voice muffled by the distance despite shouting. “IT’S DR. BLOOM.”

“Dammit!” Will said startled, accidentally splashing himself when his arm slapped down into the water in surprise. Hannibal disappeared, Will’s tranquil state vanished, and so did the mood.

He stumbled his way out of the bathtub trying to towel himself off as fast as possible, worried it might be a phone call about one of the boys. He threw on the change of clothes he brought with him and managed not to trip despite nearly running down the stairs.

When Abigail saw him she tossed him his cell, and he quickly selected the most recent entry in his call history. Alana picked up on the second ring.

“It’s me,” Will said, because he’s awkward and doesn’t know how to talk on the phone like a normal person and he knew it. “I saw I had a missed call?”

“Hi, Will,” Alana said. “How are you doing? I know there must be a lot to take in; it’s been a crazy few days for us all.”

“Yes, uh, but I’m fine,” Will said confused. “You called me to ask how I’m doing?”
“Actually, I called to let you know you’re going to have to redo the paternity test. It’d be best to get it done tomorrow, if you’re available?”

“I don’t understand, was there a problem?”

“Your sample couldn’t be processed,” Alana said. “I think Jack mentioned specimen contamination. But if you’re to be at the lab anyways, I thought we could try to schedule for sometime in the afternoon. Chris goes home tomorrow evening so all the boys will be there, and I thought you might like the chance to say goodbye.”

“I’ll be there,” Will said swallowing around a tight feeling in his throat. “Are C.J. and Jesse going home tomorrow too?”

Abigail, who had been tying a fly, set down the hackle pliers she had been using to wrap a feather around the hook. She looked at Will as her hands slowly fell to her lap.

“Jesse won’t go home until we get the results of the test,” Alana said. “And C.J.’s grandmother won’t be here until tomorrow. Her flight was overbooked, and they forced her to fly on standby. He’ll be spending another day with Social Services.”

“Yeah, ok,” Will said. “Um, one o’clock good? Are they… alright? How are they doing?”

“I can’t tell you specifics, Will. There are privacy laws concerning minors in an FBI investigation,” Alana said. “But they’ve got me, and they have Dr. Lecter and their families; they aren’t alone.”

“Right, of course, I don’t…” Will trailed into silence and cleared his throat.

“I know it must be nerve-wracking not knowing the results yet, but we’re taking good care of Jesse, I promise,” Alana said sympathetically. “He and his uncle are staying at Hannibal’s tonight.”

“At Hannibal’s?” Will said. “Not a hotel?”

“Hannibal noticed Jesse does better in familiar settings. He’s really looking out for them, I promise. The boys and their families will be at his house for dinner tonight, and I’ll be there too. He’s promised to cook tapenade with Roquefort, and I believe he said a fig and mushroom galette. Jesse seemed pretty excited. Everything’s going to be fine, Will.”

She sounded like she was worried he thought they weren’t getting enough to eat or something.

Will felt like when he was nine and had just found out everyone but him had been invited to Jackie’s birthday party. That had been before he had figured out he was the kid no one invited to anything, and that he made people uncomfortable.

“Good to hear,” Will said. “I’ll be there for the… for the test.”

He didn’t really hear her say goodbye.

He had held that night at Hannibal’s in some deep place in his heart, but it wasn’t as special as he thought it was, was it? The boys would be back, Hannibal would cook, and the previous night would repeat itself but this time without Will.

“Everything alright?” Abigail asked.

“Dr. Lecter’s having another dinner party tonight,” Will said trying to sound flippant instead of bitter, “and we’re not on the guest list.”
Baltimore, Maryland
Lecter’s Office

“You simply have to wait until you can’t be caught,” Hannibal said.

“As intriguing of a thought that is, without a male heir I’d lose the entire estate,” Margot said as she abruptly stood up, too agitated to sit anymore. “I’ll have nothing. I’ll have less than nothing, I don’t have career experience or any decent way of supporting myself. He’s won; Mason always wins.”

The new restlessness and anger brimming under her skin was delightful to see. For weeks after the surgery she had done her best to appear detached from all emotion and seemed resigned to her fate. Alana must have re-ignited that fire.

“It’s not your heirs you need, Margot,” Hannibal said.

“You mean Mason’s? I think hoping he accidentally knocks up one of his sows is a little too much to hope for. Even if he had a son, why would that son care about me once he has the fortune?”

Hannibal studied her. Is she ready for the task I’m about to give her?

She had failed once at killing her brother. But now her brother had spayed her like he did his swine.

“I keep a painting of Catherine de’ Medici over the fireplace in my study. Tell me, have you heard of her?”

“I’m sure she was in a history lesson somewhere. Daddy hired us very expensive tutors,” Margot said as she slowly walked around the room with a humorless smile on her face. “I believe she was a French queen.”

“She was kept from any political influence for many years by her husband, King Henry II. Until he died.”

“And after he died?” Margot asked.

She will have no choice but to kill her brother if she does as I suggest, Hannibal thought, otherwise he’ll take more than just her motherhood from her.

“She became regent for a time. She was never without power again,” Hannibal said. “Throughout her life her sons followed whatever political council she gave them. After all, she had proven herself capable, and she was their mother. A son will listen to his mother, and he will care for her.”

“You’re saying I should be the mother of Mason’s son?” Margot said slowly and with amusement. “Rather unconventional therapy, Dr. Lecter. First you recommend murder, and now you’re recommending incest.”

“I said you should be a mother. I didn’t say anything about incest.”

“But you forget, I can’t be one now. Not anymore.”

“Human genetics are rather fascinating. The DNA between siblings are so similar, that a standard paternity test would not be able to tell you which one of two brothers was the father of a child. Both
would test positive. It means the genetics your brother passes on are your genetics too.”

“So my one chance to have a child that is both mine and Alana’s, or the closest we can get to it biologically, is from the very man who denied me the ability to have children in the first place,” Margot said. “Some might call that irony.”

“Some might call it justice,” Hannibal said.

“Is it justice to hand up the woman I love to be used sexually by my brother?” Margot said. “And why would she agree?”

“Alana already risks her safety just to date you. You made her aware of how dangerous your brother is. She would not take such a risk if she were not more invested than you realize. If she loves you, she will do this.”

“I won’t ask her to prostitute herself to my brother. I love her.”

“You misunderstand. All you need, Margot, is the sperm,” Hannibal said.

Quantico, Virginia
Behavioral Science Unit at the FBI

Hannibal walked into the lab. Jesse, C.J., and Chris were loudly discussing what Hannibal presumed was a video game, while Beverly was coaxing Will toward a lab station. Peter Turner was at the opposite side of the lab from Will and talking to Alana. Hannibal suspected that was no accident. The man hadn’t not been pleased to find out about his brother’s wife possible infidelity.

“How is Jesse doing?” Hannibal asked Peter.

“Seems fine. Well, as far as I can tell,” Peter said. “Kid doesn’t talk much.”

On the contrary he’s the most talkative of the three, Hannibal thought. He only doesn’t talk to the people he doesn’t like.

“And how was the overnight stay?” Alana asked.

“You know, I don’t know what it is about his place, but I haven’t slept that deep in years,” Peter said. “I’ve got insomnia; I’m more likely to be on Twitter at 3 in the morning than sleeping. But I don’t think I woke up even once last night. You’ve got some special, like what is that stuff, aromatherapy you’re using or something?”

“Nothing special, I’m afraid,” Hannibal said. “Most likely your journey here was simply that exhausting.”

Not much would have woken you up that night, not even when I swabbed your mouth for your DNA; I made sure of it.

“Dare I ask what Hannibal cooked for breakfast?” Alana said. “Or will I be jealous?”

Peter was quiet for a moment.
“You know, I don’t remember what we had,” Peter said.

Hannibal was not surprised. The dosage he had put into Peter’s drink the night before induced enough sedation that there would still be side-effects the next morning like short periods of amnesia.

“You’ve had a very stressful few days,” Hannibal said. “It can be difficult to recall small details when your mind is so distracted.”

When Hannibal made his way to the other side of the room, Will didn’t seem to want to look at him at first. He was fidgeting with his hands while Beverly prepared the labels on the DNA transport tubes and would only occasionally glance Hannibal’s way out of the corner of his eye.

“Hello, Will,” he said, forcing Will to acknowledge his presence.

“I would have thought you’d be here earlier,” Will said, “when the boys first arrived.”

“I had a therapy session with a patient I couldn’t reschedule,” Hannibal said. “How has your eye been? Have you been using a warm compress?”

“Yes, Doctor. And before you ask how I’m doing, I’m fine, and I’m just here to get my DNA harvested again,” he said with a gesture towards Beverly, who was tearing open the plastic packaging of a buccal swab. “Guess something went wrong the first time.”

“Can you believe the lab reminded me not to put the swab back in the plastic packaging?” Beverly said. “Like I haven’t been doing this for 9 years. Yeah, maybe I never administered a paternity test before, but it’s the exact same procedure as collecting DNA from a suspect. Some dumbass at the lab fucks up the sample and had the audacity to blame me for it.”

“You can’t put it back in the plastic?” Will said.

“No, because the swab doesn’t just pick up cheek cells but saliva too. You put it somewhere where it can’t breathe, like back in the packaging, and mold begins to grow. It damages the DNA beyond recognition,” Beverly said. “The reason mold doesn’t grow when you put it into the polyethylene cap is because its designed to be breathable. What did the lab tech do, stick it in a Vacutainer?”

No, I zipped it in a plastic baggie, Hannibal thought. And added a sample of my spit just to be sure it was unusable.

He watched Beverly collect the DNA sample from Will with avid attention. Will dutifully held his mouth open, passively taking the swab as it was thrust into his mouth and rubbed against the inner cheek lining. The slight bulge of his cheek from the firm caress within his mouth was captivating to behold.

“I’ll be happy to take that to the lab for you again,” Hannibal said when Beverly finished.

“Thanks,” Beverly said. “Tell them not to screw it up this time.”

Hannibal left the room with four transport tubes labeled “Graham, Will; DOB 07/24/76.” The pair in his hand were labeled by Beverly; the other pair hidden in his pocket were labeled by him. Of course, only two would actually make it to the DNA Molecular Laboratory.

And now, dear Will, I have given you another child.

Chapter End Notes
Like the show, Hannibal and Will are pretty much trying to raise a family together before they’ve even slept with each other, lollllll.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

My unending thanks to my absolutely amazing beta reader Katarra!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Wolf Trap, Virginia
Graham Residence

Will slapped the side of the printer in frustration.

“Piece of junk,” he muttered to himself as he checked the error code on the printer’s LCD display. All he wanted to do was print the stupid undergraduate admission forms. This was supposed to be the easy part.

He had been too agitated to just sit around, so now he was trying to catch up on all the things he’d been meaning to do for weeks. After tomorrow he would never see Jesse and C.J. again, now that C.J.’s grandmother had arrived and Jesse’s paternity results would be in. The knowledge sat heavy in his stomach, driving him to find one thing after another to work on, anything to forget.

Will would be left here in Wolf Trap. He had Abigail for now, but the months until she left for college were slipping by, tricking like water through a loose hull fitting.

“You’re a mechanic, surely you know how to repair it,” the imaginary Hannibal Lecter said.

“Not even printer technicians can fix them half the fucking time,” Will said. “Looks like it’s an error in the carriage encoder signal.”

“You spend much of your time mending things,” Hannibal said. “It has become important to you that you are able to do so.”

“Well, like you said, I am a mechanic. I’d be piss-poor at my job if I couldn’t,” Will said. “A carriage error means it could be an internal paper jam, the ink cartridges are misaligned, the purge cap needs lubricated, debris in the carriage head, the timing film is dirty, a corrupt print driver, or either the carriage motor or logic board has gone bad. So that really narrows it down.”

“I meant Abigail and the boys.”

Will let out a long exhale while he opened the right panel on the printer to take a look inside it.

“Someone needs to help them,” Will said as he rubbed white grease onto the printer’s sliders.

“And you have decided that someone should be you,” Hannibal said. “And so you’re going to send Abigail away to college as some sort of attempt at fixing her, and leave yourself all alone.”

“I have decided I will be a different father than Garrett Jacob Hobbs. I’m not going to cling so tightly to my daughter that I ruin her life and her happiness,” Will said as he turned the printer back on. “Besides, Abigail and the boys don’t need fixing; they need love. My father tried plenty to fix me, and it was never what I needed.”
“You craved for a love you were never given. Now you have found a daughter who loves you as her father. But less than a year of having it and you will allow it to be ripped from you.”

“No, I’m not—I’ll still see her on holidays. And after college maybe she’ll move somewhere nearby,” Will said as if convincing himself. “I’ll… I’ll miss her.”

“Like you miss the boys.”

Will nodded. The damn thing still wouldn’t print, so he started yanking out the ink cartridges so he could spray canned air to clear any hidden debris.

“I miss you,” Will confessed as he glanced over at the ghost of Hannibal.

“No need to miss me,” Hannibal said. “Call me. Invite me to your house or stop by mine.”

“What? No, I couldn’t—” Will said as Hannibal picked up Will’s cell from the nightstand and pressed a few buttons. Will heard the faint ringing that meant Hannibal had called someone.

“What are you doing?” Will hissed as he snatched his cell from Hannibal’s hands. “I can’t just call —”

“Hello? Will?” A voice on the other end of the line said. It was Hannibal; the real one.

Will snapped his mouth shut as he realized Hannibal had answered the phone while he was arguing with his imaginary version of him.

“Um, hi,” Will said.

“Is everything alright?” the real Hannibal said.

“Yes, just—” Will said as he scrambled to think of a reason he might have called. “We never rescheduled our evening talk after the vacation. Though, uh, maybe storming your house with three kids in tow counted. I’m going to hang up now.”

“I’d be happy to reschedule,” Hannibal said. “I’d suggest tonight but I’m attending a concert. Perhaps I could persuade you to join me?”

“Well, I—”

“Abigail mentioned she was interested in hearing an opera performance; this could be her chance. It’ll be at the Museum of Fine Arts.”

“She did?” Will said. She had never told him that, but Will wasn’t exactly the sort of person anyone ever thought to discuss opera with. “Okay. Um, what time?”

Now that Will thought about it, this was the kind of event you would want to take a date to. It sounded downright romantic: listening to the notes of a song permeate chambers filled with painted imitations of life and beauty. But would Hannibal bring Alana, and leave Will and Abigail to be the third wheel?

“The concert starts at seven—”

“Will Alana be there?” Will blurted out, because he liked to torture himself. There was a pause on the other end of the line. Oh god, had I sounded jealous?

“I’m afraid Alana has a prior appointment she is unlikely to be willing to reschedule. The clinic she is
scheduled with is renowned, and getting a consultation as fast as she did is usually impossible.”

“Okay,” Will said. He tried his best not to sound relieved. “I’ll see you at seven then.”

“See you then, Will.”

As he hung up, the imaginary Hannibal brushed the back of his fingers against the side of Will’s jaw.

“Stop that,” Will said in a voice that suggested he meant the opposite of what he said. Hannibal cupped his hand under his chin and turned Will’s head so they were looking at each other from inches away.

“Are you going to kiss me or not?” Will teased, still riding the high of the anticipation of his future outing with the real Dr. Lecter.

Hannibal bent his head down and their lips brushed. Will placed one hand on his chest, feeling the thick suit fabric underneath his fingers. Encouraged, Hannibal pressed his lips more firmly to Will’s.

It felt familiar. In fact, it felt exactly like when Will had kissed his last date, which was three years ago with a woman named Katherine. Same lips, same pressure, same everything because that’s the memory his brain was drawing its knowledge from.

This isn’t what it would really feel like, Will thought disappointed. I doubt Katherine and Hannibal kiss the same way, and I have no experience with what a man’s mouth feels like.

He slowly stepped out of the circle of Hannibal’s arms, his heart sinking.

“You know, when Dr. Bloom was my therapist, she said I was prone to unhealthy fantasies,” Will said. “Considering I’ve appropriated her boyfriend as my imaginary live-in lover, I’d say she really underestimated just how unhealthy.”

“You’re afraid your imagination is creating a reality that isn’t real,” Hannibal said. God, the man couldn’t leave well enough alone even when he was only a figment of Will’s imagination. “But have you ever considered the manifestations your mind creates see far more of reality than your eyes do?”

Will ignored him as he turned his attention back to the printer. There were things he just couldn’t fix. He couldn’t give Abigail back her life before her father became the Minnesota Shrike and sullied her hands with the blood of innocents. He couldn’t turn back time so Chris and Jesse and C.J. never left their families, and stayed out of the clutches of Eva. And he couldn’t make Hannibal love him.

But at least he could fix the printer. Maybe.

He lost himself to the familiar motion of tinkering with the mesh of mechanical parts. A few minutes later the front door banged open as Abigail walked in, fresh from taking the dogs on a walk around the property.

Winston, Buster, and Harley scrambled for the discarded dog toys lying around while Max came over to say hi to Will. He obligingly ran his fingers through the hair under his collar, helping him scratch his perpetual itch. Ellie made a beeline for the kitchen like her food bowl would have somehow magically filled with food in the past 45 minutes. Bandit proudly trotted by with a bone in his mouth. Will was a little concerned about the fact it was not a rawhide or rubber bone.

Predictably, Zoe had staked out the nearest patch of sunlight, lying on her side like her belly was a solar panel ready to recharge, and Abigail stepped over her as she made her way across the room. She raised her eyebrow as she walked by the folding table and noticed the printer’s innards spilling...
out onto the temporary workspace.

“I’m trying to get the stupid thing to work,” Will said. “I was going to print out applications.”

“Applications?”

“For you for... you know.”

“Oh, I’ve already filled some out,” Abigail said.

“You’ve been filling out college applications?”

“No, job applications,” Abigail said. “I only have a GED, so while I might eventually get a job as an aide or an assistant, I’ll probably have to start in retail or fast food first.”

“That is an absolute ‘no’ on the fast food,” Will said. “I worked at several in high school, and I know how the female employees get treated. Not happening.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about me,” Abigail said amused. “I can take care of myself.”

“That’s not what concerns me,” Will said. “I just don't want have to serve high-school-boy-stew because some jackass co-worker decided to make an inappropriate comment about you. Also, you need to get an education, more than just high school.”

“I plan to, but I can’t start college yet; I have to live here a year if I want in-state tuition,” Abigail said. “I mean, legally you can’t claim me as a dependent, so I figured if I live here, work here, and pay taxes here at least a year, I could start classes in January instead of September at a fraction of the cost.”

Well, at least one of the two of them had a plan for their life. Will’s own life felt like he was trying to navigate the Atlantic with a sailboat that didn’t have a chartplotter or a compass.

“Do you know where you want to go? Virginia Tech has some good programs,” Will said. “They require you to live in on-campus dorms for the first year, but you may not hate dorm living as much as I did.”

This is a good thing, he reminded himself. He could get used to his empty house again, for her sake. She’d make friends, get a start on a career path, and shake free from her past.

“I’m not going to Virginia Tech,” Abigail said. “I’m going to do online courses through Norfolk.”

“You’re doing online courses?” Will said. “You don’t have to do that. We’ll find a way to pay for —”

“What, so I don’t miss out on binge drinking, frat boys, and the freshman fifteen? I think I’ll live.”

“Would you really want to stay here, though?” Will said. From what he understood, most young adults wanted to move out of their parent’s home.

“Of course, someone's gotta help you take of the dogs,” Abigail said. “Besides, I can’t hunt on campus; there’s nowhere to hide the bodies.”
Baltimore, Maryland
Concert at the Museum of Fine Arts

“I should have worn a tux,” Will said as he distractedly pulled at his tie knot just a little to loosen it, accidentally leaving it hanging crooked.

“We didn’t have time to rent one,” Abigail said. “A black dinner vest is close enough, I wouldn’t worry about it. Here, you’ve got dog hair on the sleeve.”

She pointed at a spot, and he tried to brush the hair away while silently cursing himself. He forgot to use a lint roller before he left the house, too busy rehearsing in his head how the evening might go.

“Huh. I’ve never seen your curls this tidy before. I mean, usually at least one is out of place. Wait, is that… is your hair scented?” Abigail said as she leaned a bit closer to smell his hair. “Did you use hairspray?”

“It’s a hair cream, and it’s a common thing for people to use,” Will muttered.

“Yeah, but you don’t,” Abigail said. “Not to mention you just complained about not wearing a tux. You hate formal clothes. You’re wearing contacts instead of your glasses, and you had me put concealer over your black eye. Are you trying to impress someone?”

“What, no, that’s ridiculous. I don’t care about impressing anybody,” Will said. “Where’s Dr. Lecter, shouldn’t he be here already?”

“Dr. Lecter? Is that who—”

“I said I was not trying to impress Dr. Lecter,” Will said while Abigail smirked at him. “Besides that would be stupid, it’s not like he’d notice even if I waltzed in here completely naked. I’m pretty sure I’m off his radar.”

“You’re enough on his radar he’s headed this way,” Abigail said as she straightened his tie for him.

“That’s cause we’re meeting him here,” Will said.

Hannibal was indeed striding this way, dressed in a tux because unlike Will he was prepared for any and all social events.

It reminded Will of the first time he had met Hannibal. The man had been wearing a tux then too, but his hair had been stiffly slicked back and to the side. Tonight his hair was left loose and natural looking, his bangs falling over part of his forehead. Will loved the way it looked, the way it beckoned his fingers to comb through it, to play with it and muss it up however he wished.

“Will, Abigail, I’m very happy to see you both,” Hannibal said.

He was smiling, totally relaxed in the sea of people flowing around them while Will felt crowded like he was on a standing-room only bus instead of in an art museum. He felt nervous with Hannibal’s gaze raking over him, able to take in with a glance all the imperfections of Will’s wardrobe choice and the dreaded dog hair.

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“Let’s find our seats, shall we?” Hannibal said. The man seemed to be in a very good mood.

Hannibal selected chairs next to the aisle, and motioned for Will and Abigail to choose theirs first. Abigail sat in the third one from the aisle, leaving Will to sit in the middle between her and Hannibal. She was poorly concealing a smug smile.
Will looked radiant this evening.

It was obvious he had styled his hair. The short fringe on the top of his head was still permitted its natural curls, though the usual frizz and errant curls were tamed by product. The sides of his hair was straightened out, or as much as it could be, emphasizing the illusion of a perfectly groomed hairstyle. The normal facial hair had been shaved, leaving only the faint shadow over his lip where a five o’clock shadow had already begun to creep in.

His cheeks had a healthy glow like an expectant mother, which was appropriate considering the approaching due date of the paternity test result when Jesse would become the newest member of the family. A barely there smile curved up the end of his lips. He looked younger, making it appear he was more likely to be closer to Abigail’s age than Hannibal’s, if you didn’t notice the subtle signs of a retreating hairline around the temples.

His white dress shirt stood out in the crowd of black tuxes, drawing the eye to him. He wore a black vest and grey tie to make up for the lack of a tuxedo jacket.

“So, uh, how was your day?” Will said. As he spoke, he was staring at the program the aisle attendant had handed him on the way to their seats. He was fiddling with it, flipping it open and closed in a nervous gesture.

“Compared to recent events, rather dull,” Hannibal said. “But I would say the day has considerably improved now.”

Will nodded but didn’t offer anything to keep the conversation going.

“Our coloratura soprano tonight is Lenora Sela; I met her at a previous concert,” Hannibal said, reaching over to keep Will from closing the program again by gently enclosing his hand around Will’s, and pointed with his index finger so Will could see her photo on the inside of the program. “She trained under Maria Lombardi. Very talented.”

“I don’t actually know anything about opera,” Will admitted. Hannibal reluctantly let go of the warm hand, no longer having an excuse to keep it captive.

“Nor do you need to. An opera does not rely on knowledge, or even lyrics, to tell its story, but instead uses the melody and the tone of the singing,” Hannibal said. “An opera sung in Latin is just as moving as one in English.”

“The only thing I know about opera is that it’s supposed to be a very dramatic production.”

“Yes, the traditional operas are known for having sensational plots, which makes the story all the more captivating,” Hannibal said. “Many people appreciate the theatrics; a nice deviation from their own ordinary lives.”

“Yeah, well, I find my own life has too much drama.”

“Do you refer to the drama of finding the boys?” Hannibal said. “It would be understandable if you still felt anxious. The results of the paternity test will be ready tomorrow, and your life may be irrevocably changed as a result. I imagine you are quite eager to hear the verdict.”
“Eagerness would imply I was impatient for tomorrow, and I’m not,” Will said. “But eagerness also implies anxious longing, which is not an inaccurate description of how I’m feeling.”

Will turned his head away from Hannibal, as if ashamed by the admission.

“That’s an understandable feeling,” Hannibal said. “All of us feel a deep desire for connection to someone we love. It is natural to wish to be Jesse’s father.”

Will looked at him out of the corner of his eye while he considered that statement. There was some sort of war going on behind his eyes. He looked in equal turns hopeful and wary, and Hannibal pondered what exactly was going on in that mind of his.

The first strains of the orchestra began.

On the small wooden platform that served a temporary stage, the choir opened with *Viva viva il nostro Alcide*. Hannibal glanced at Will, who was consulting the program with a frown. The entire opera was in Italian, and Will’s only hope of following along was the summary.

Instead of actors and actresses, this performance was strictly a concert with vocalists and instruments. The singers wore formal wear, not costumes. A small orchestra was set-up to the side of the stage. Red satin twined like ribbon around the four columns around the stage, becoming an elegant minimalist background.

Hannibal always had a deep love for Handel’s work, but tonight he had a new appreciation for the libretto of this opera, *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*. It recounted Cleopatra’s seduction of Julius Caesar. To depose the current pharaoh—her younger brother—so she could become ruler of Egypt, she disguised herself as Lydia, a queen’s attendant, in order to get close to Caesar and begin her campaign of manipulation and persuasion.

*She knew Caesar could not have loved her if he first met her as Cleopatra. He would have been wary of her,* Hannibal thought. *He had to love her as Lydia first, to learn how to love her as Cleopatra.*

Caesar, of course, was smitten from the moment he first glimpsed “Lydia.” Cleopatra’s plan worked perfectly, except she begun to fall in love with Caesar in return and was now as seduced as he was. But her lover did not know who she truly was, at least until she was finally forced to reveal herself.

*If Will knew me as the Chesapeake Ripper, could he love me as I am?*

Will likely would not trust the Chesapeake Ripper. It was natural to be cautious about a serial killer, even if you were a killer yourself. It seemed far more prudent to teach him to love Dr. Hannibal Lecter before expecting him to love the Monster of Florence. But unfortunately, Will seemed inclined to keep even Dr. Hannibal Lecter at bay, and he did not know how to coax Will to let down his guard.

*Have compassion on my sad heart,* Cleopatra sang, *which at every hour calls you its dearest beloved.*

Before he met Will, Hannibal had never considered wanting a family. His sister’s death had taught him enough about pain and loss; he had assumed such desires to have died within him. But one could never predict love.

Now his house, which had once been his sanctum, felt more like it was becoming a mausoleum filled with relics from a life he no longer wanted. The guest bedrooms felt vacant, and the house too silent. He had hunted in solitude for so long, carefully constructing the mask of Dr. Lecter to hide the
Chesapeake Ripper behind, he never learned how to share his true life with a lover, but that didn’t stop him from wanting it with Will.

He could finally understand that desire others had to find a mate and to procreate. Hannibal had always considered such desires too pedestrian and base for himself, but now he wanted to create with Will. He wished join their hands together to carve art out of the bodies of their victims, to cook burnt offerings of human flesh to be served to the naive worshippers who ate at their table, and yes, even to build a family with him.

*Beauty more worthy of love will never be found,* Cleopatra and Caesar sang to each other, rejoicing in their love for one another.

The music beckoned him to sink into its embrace. It coiled around him, slithered in his ear and down his throat, filling him with new knowledge of the desires buried in his heart. His longing for Will and family was now burned into him like a brand, owning him in a way he would never have previously allowed. Hannibal had created a child for Will, playing his own role in helping Will fashion together their family.

*I planted the seed that made our child possible,* Hannibal thought. *Together we conceived the idea of Jesse as his child, and now it is about to become a reality.*

Through eyesight blurred by unshed tears, he turned to look at the object of his craving. Will was staring at him, eyes watching him instead of the concert, and his forehead wrinkled in confusion or maybe contemplation. For the first time in their acquaintance, it was Hannibal not Will who broke eye contact, glancing away before Will saw too far into him.

*When he looks at me, what does he see?*

Now that his attention was no longer directed inward, he could feel eyes on him. The hair at the back of his neck prickled. He glanced around the room subtly, trying to pinpoint the source of the feeling.

What he found was one of his patients, a man by the name of Franklyn, sitting on the edge of his seat and nodding along to the music. He kept glancing Hannibal’s way, gauging Hannibal’s reaction to the music and trying to copy it.

Hannibal ignored him. He settled closer to Will, letting the rhythm of the music and the emotion in his chest tangle up in each other, until he could not tell which was which.

After the concert, the audience was set loose to roam through the art collections. It quickly became clear the art was nothing more than an interesting backdrop for an increasingly social event; it seemed everyone was here to talk. Will fondly remembered the part of the evening where he could listen to a piano instead of the patrons.

He trailed after Hannibal and Abigail, both of whom seemed determined to charm every person they crossed paths with. Dr. Lecter dazzled a group of art patrons with his expertise on the classic masters while Abigail happily chatted with a violinist from the orchestra.

Will, on the other hand, felt stressed from an evening of trying to blend in with the crowd. He couldn’t quite manage the polished social niceties everyone else seemed to know by heart, and constantly fumbled his way through conversations. His frustration got the best of him, and he found
his face frequently slipping into a scowl.

“Mrs. Lombardi, it is pleasure to see you,” Hannibal said to an older woman with white hair. She looked as bored as Will felt. “Lenora’s performance was excellent, you should be very proud. Will, Abigail, I want you to meet Maria. She holds the distinction of being the best coloratura soprano you’ll ever meet.”

“Was one of the best,” Maria said. “I’m afraid these old vocal chords will never sing like they used to.”

“Nonsense, your singing is still very lovely,” Hannibal said.

“I have a lifetime of unintentional abuse and intentional overuse of my vocal chords, and there’s no pretending I’ll ever sound the same. That’s what incessant singing will do to you if you’re not careful,” Maria said. “You spend a lifetime doing what you love, and you have to live with the consequences.”

“The consequences of devoting yourself to what you love is negligible compared to the waste of living as anything other than your truest self,” Hannibal said.

“Oh, that type of thinking will get you into trouble,” Maria said. “Our truest selves are rarely fit for public consumption; I’d like to think deep down we’re all a bit naughty.”

Will wondered why Hannibal looked so pleased with her response; it wasn’t like her statement applied to him. It was hard to imagine Hannibal doing anything that could be classified as naughty.

“You, uh, have a fan who wants to say ‘hi,’” Maria said with a discreet nod towards a man who was cautiously approaching the group.

“Good evening, Franklyn,” Hannibal said to the newcomer, holding his hand out for a handshake.

Franklyn hovered around Hannibal with nervous energy and with an eager to please expression on his face. He reminded Will of Harley. Everytime Abigail came home, the dog would dance on hopeful paws while furiously wagging his tail, practically salivating for even a scrap of attention from his favorite human. Abigail, of course, smothered him in affection, as she did all the dogs. But while desperation was endearing from a dog, it was less so from a person.

Hannibal was too kind to act off-put by Franklyn’s behavior, even going so far to shake the man’s hand with a warm familiarity. Franklyn didn’t even have the sense to look ashamed of his embarrassing behavior.

Is this what I look like when I’m around Hannibal? Will wondered with embarrassment. Am I begging attention from a man who is too polite to show his discomfort at my insistent desire to be near him?

“So good to see you,” Franklyn said in a tone of voice that suggested he thought the secret to making everyone like you was just acting friendly enough. “This is my friend Tobias.”

Tobias stood next to Franklyn and looked smugly amused at his friend’s embarrassing behavior.

“Nice to meet you, Tobias,” Hannibal said as he also shook Tobias’s hand. “This is Will and his daughter Abigail.”

At the introduction, Hannibal’s hand pressed against Will’s upper back and stayed there, a friendly gesture that was perhaps Hannibal’s attempt to make Will feel welcomed into the conversation. He
shifted closer to Hannibal automatically, accidentally brushing his shoulder against Hannibal’s, and resisted the urge to jerk away in embarrassment. He tried not to be distracted from the conversation by the broad hand soothing his back and the shoulder against his.

“Oh! I didn’t realize—not, um, that it’s any of my business,” Franklyn said, then chuckled in that I’m-friendly-please-like-me way of his. “I don’t really know anything about Dr. Lecter outside of our appointments; I’m a patient. But don’t worry, I always vote Democrat.”

Will wasn’t really sure why Franklyn felt the need to tell them his voting habits.

“So I have to say I loved the performance. I could feel the emotion of the song just welling up inside of me,” Franklyn said with a deep affected inhale, as if trying to convey that his feelings from hearing the song were just too large to contain. “How about you; what did you think?”

“It was a very moving performance,” Hannibal said.

“Lenora is a talented singer, I always enjoy listening to her,” Tobias said to Hannibal. “As captivating as it was, Franklyn seemed to find you more interesting; his eyes kept wandering to you the entire time.”

Now I know why these two are friends, Will thought. Franklyn likes to embarrass himself. Tobias enjoys watching him do it, and then helps embarrass him some more while he’s at it.

“Though it was an excellent performance,” Franklyn said quickly.

“The melismatic passages in *piangero la sorte mia* were superbly done,” Abigail said. “When she thought Caesar had been murdered, and she swore that after her death she would haunt her brother for killing him, I loved that her treatment of the vowels was an excellent, if subtle, vocal reference to a wailing ghost.”

Franklyn smiled at her with a blank look, no comprehension on his face, but eager to agree with her.

“I consider coloratura one of Lenora’s strengths,” Tobias said. “She has a well-honed skill to convey the emotion she intends to her audience, even when they don’t understand the words.”

“I agree,” Franklyn said. Will barely kept himself from rolling his eyes. Franklyn leaned in towards Will and said, “And you?”

“She was upset for nothing, Caesar wasn’t actually dead,” Will said, and Abigail gave him a look. “But it was a nicely done song.”

*She had felt such despair, sure she would never again be with the man she loved, when in fact the joyous ending was right around the corner.*

Franklyn chuckled nervously like Will was the one making everyone uncomfortable. He then quickly glanced between Will and Hannibal with a baffled expression, as if trying to fit two puzzle pieces together in his mind but finding they weren’t a match.

*I know what you’re thinking. To be fair, I’m not sure why he’s friends with me either, Will thought. We’re nothing alike.*

“The draw of opera isn’t the plot, it’s the emotion, sung to you by the arias, the piano, the double bass. You’re meant to feel Cleopatra’s sorrow and her fear that she might lose her one chance to ally with a man as powerful and cunning as she is,” Tobias said, his eyes intently on Hannibal’s. “She knew that together, they could do anything.”
Something he said must have surprised Hannibal, because Hannibal leaned back with his head slightly turned to the side, as if trying to get to see Tobias from a new angle. It was the same look he had given the sculpture of a cage fashioned from an old baby crib in the contemporary art exhibit they had passed earlier. Will hated that sculpture. The artist treated the concept of parenthood with disdain, while Will still grieved his lost chance.

“So, how did you and Will meet?” Franklyn said, gesturing between the two of them. Will wasn’t quite sure why Franklyn seemed to find Hannibal and him such an interesting topic.

“We met at a social event like this one,” Hannibal said, “where we found we both had a knack for the culinary arts, and a similar palette.”

*Save for the one very large difference in the main ingredient,* Will thought.

“I’d say your cooking is a lot fancier than mine,” Will said. “Abigail mentioned she wanted us to cook for one of your dinner parties, but I’m afraid it’ll be nowhere near your level of refined.”

“My secret is to simply provide my guests with a new experience; a food they’ve never had before,” Hannibal said. “For instance, I find guests are always impressed with a serving of cervelle de vea.”

“Dare I ask what that is?” Maria said. “A rare type of fish, maybe?”

“Calf brains. They can be difficult to prepare; you have to be very careful removing the brain from the skull,” Hannibal said. “There’s a special tool that cracks the skull in half and extracts the brain in one piece.”

“You crack open the skull?” Franklyn said faintly.

“If you do decide to try your hand at such adventurous cooking, you’ll want to soak the organ in cold water first and make sure to remove as much of the membrane as you can plus any external blood vessels,” Hannibal said to Will. “If you’re going to fry it, I suggest coating it in an egg mixture with Gruyère and Parmesan.

“Do you eat brains very often, Doctor?” Will said.

“You eat fried baby cow brains covered in cheese,” Franklyn said with a devastated look on his face. “When I said we were cheese folk, this is *not* what I meant.”

“I’m beginning to suspect I should ask more questions before eating any unfamiliar dishes next time I’m at one of your dinner parties,” Maria said.

“And ruin the surprise?” Hannibal said.

Maria tsked at Hannibal good-naturedly.

“It was nice to see you,” Franklyn said, though the look on his face said otherwise. “I’m going to… leave. Um, see you at our next session.”

Franklyn and Tobias departed from the group while Maria shook her head in sympathy while watching them go.

“Are you going to introduce me to the pianist like you promised?” Abigail said to Hannibal, pointing out a young woman nearby.

“Of course,” Hannibal said.
Will didn’t follow the two of them fast enough. Maria cornered him, and the intrigued look on her face meant he was about to get dragged into a very uncomfortable conversation.

“You make the unflappable Dr. Lecter nervous,” Maria said with relish.

That was ridiculous; Will’s pretty sure he’s never even seen Hannibal nervous. He could probably be in the middle of a hurricane, and the man would just be annoyed at the inconvenience of getting his fancy suit wet.

“Last time I saw Dr. Lecter, he was with that girl,” Maria said. “Oh, what’s her name?”

“Alana?”

“Yes! And he was quite the charmer. He told her she was a flowering rose among thorny bushes. And then he quoted Pietro della Vigna’s poem *Amore, in cui disio ed è speranza* in the original Italian. Though he was so calm when he said it—not a hint of nervousness or even eagerness—you’d think he was discussing the weather.”

“Hannibal has a certain confidence many of us lack,” Will said, wondering if he was one of the thorny bushes Hannibal had mentioned.

“Oh my god, he told you *how to cook a brain*,” Maria said with a laugh. “I never even suspected he could be capable of that level of awkward, and I’ve known him for years.”

Great, all of Will’s scowling must have made Hannibal so uncomfortable, he was becoming as awkward as Will.

“It wasn’t awkward,” Will said. But if he were honest, he was probably the worst judge on what was or wasn’t awkward.

“You leave him a tongue-tied, nervous mess, or the closest Hannibal will ever get to that,” Maria said. Will didn’t know what to say. He had thought Hannibal was one of the few people who weren’t uncomfortable around him.

“I’m don’t know how to stop making him nervous,” Will said. “I’m not good at socializing.”

“Let him be nervous, my dear,” Maria said. “People are never calm about the things that truly matter to them; it means he cares.”

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Quantico, Virginia
Behavioral Science Unit at the FBI

“You’re C.J.’s grandmother?” Will said.

Whatever he had been expecting, it wasn’t *this*. He doesn’t think he’s met a more cheerful woman in his life. Pam Lincoln’s thousand-watt smile matched her sunshine-yellow shirt, and she patted C.J.’s arm like the doting grandma she was. C.J. tried to inch his way out of reach.

“Yeah, you’re nothing like him,” Jesse said. By which he probably meant the fact that she was actually capable of grinning.
“Takes after his father; he was a very grim man, bless his soul,” Pam said sadly. “But don’t worry, he’ll be grinning like a possum eating a sweet tater in no time.” She nodded to herself, all smiles, at her decision.

“Good luck with that,” Jesse muttered.

Abigail’s eyes were wide in disbelief. C.J. was leaning away from Pam like she was a noxious odor he was trying to avoid.

“Well, I’m very happy to hear that. C.J. is lucky to have you,” Peter said, shaking Pam’s hand. “I think I heard the boys are planning to keep in touch through some online games.”

“Oh, I don’t really like the idea of C.J. sitting in front of the computer or TV for so long,” Pam said. “But, well, I know he’s probably close with the other two boys. I suppose I can make an exception so he can spend time with his friends.”

“An exception,” C.J. said slowly.

“Children really shouldn’t have more than an hour of screen time; it isn’t healthy. People were made to be out in the sunshine,” Pam said. “Wouldn’t you rather see some wildlife? I’ve got a family of rabbits in my yard; I call the large grey one Hop-along Cassidy. Here, I’ve got photos.”

“An hour,” C.J. said.

“There’s better things to be doing with your time! I’ve got a whole collection of bird-watching books. I’m sure it’ll be a lot more fun than some silly game anyways.”

Will had assumed C.J.’s face was only capable of portraying three emotions: boredom, anger, and annoyance. Apparently he was wrong because he wore unmitigated horror quite well at the moment.

_Oh my god, C.J. is going to commit homicide within the week_, Will thought.

“Is Maine one of the states where teenagers get a say in who their guardian is?” Will whispered urgently to Abigail.

“You want to adopt C.J. too?” Abigail said.

“To be honest, I’m more concerned with preventing a future crime,” Will said.

“Um, yeah, it looks like C.J. has to approve whatever guardian was in his parent’s will,” Abigail said, consulting the bookmarked site on her phone. “He can suggest a different guardian to the courts if he wants to.”

“Graham!” Agent Crawford shouted from his office. “I’ve got the results.”

As Will walked towards the agent’s office, he saw Abigail hand her phone to C.J. He raised his eyebrows at her in a question. When Abigail hurried to catch up with Will, she whispered, “I left a certain family law website open to a pertinent question about teenagers and appointed guardians.”

The office was crowded. Peter and Jesse claimed seats on the left side of the room while Will and Abigail sat in the two seats on the right. Agent Crawford was lounging in an office chair behind his desk with Hannibal and Alana nearby, presumably as emotional support for Jesse, but Will suspected they’d have to be emotional support for him. He already knew what the test results would be, and he wasn’t ready to say goodbye.
“Congratulations son,” Agent Crawford said, scooting the paper with the paternity results across the desk to him. Will thought it was highly inappropriate to be congratulated on not being the father. Some men might desire a negative match because they didn’t want to have a kid or pay child support, but he would do anything to be Jesse’s dad.

He picked up the paper and looked at the results.

“Probability of paternity is 99.346%,” Will read out loud. “Interpretation: alleged relationship is not excluded.”

“What does that mean?” Jesse asked.

“If it’s ‘not excluded,’ does that mean I have to take another DNA test?” Will said once he got over the shock of reading the high probability.

“‘Not excluded’ is just what these forms say after the legal department gets ahold of them,” Agent Crawford said. “It means you’re the father, and we get to wrap up this investigation.”

“Oh,” Will said, dumbfounded.

I guess false positives really are possible.

He nearly got knocked off the chair, Jesse hugged him so hard. Will hesitantly hugged him back, unsure if he was imagining the whole thing. He felt another arm across his shoulders and hair tickled the side of his face as Abigail joined the group hug.

Will took a deep breath and committed this moment to memory, tucking it away deep inside his mind where his empathy couldn’t crowd it out, even when immersed in the thoughts and emotions of someone else. He had so little he considered immutable parts of his identity, separate from any outside influence, but this was something he could claim as only his to cherish.

He felt too deeply the fragility of this. Beauty and happiness were such rarities in his life, he half-expected it to be snatched away from him in the next minute.

Time slipped by too fast. Before he knew it, he was filling out his part on the “Order for Paternity and Legal Decision Making (Custody)” form, and his mind was frantically trying to solve the logistics of raising another child. Where would Jesse sleep? He needed to clear a room for him to live in, buy him a bed, enroll him in school, teach him to fish, introduce him to the dogs, maybe train him how to defend himself like he had taught Abigail. After all, Eva hadn’t been the best instructor.

When he finally finished the paperwork, Alana and Hannibal helped escort the new family out of Jack’s office, only to find Pam and C.J. still where they left them. Pam was visibly upset, her face contorted while she stared at C.J. in bafflement.

“I don’t understand,” Pam said. “What do you mean you want to stay here? I’m your grandmother!”

C.J. looked at Will like he was hoping he might be able to calm her down.

“Mrs. Lincoln, Jesse is like a younger brother to C.J.,” Abigail said. “He just wants to help look out for him.”

“Oh, actually—” Jesse said, but shut up as soon as Abigail elbowed him.

“He is?” Pam said.
“Jesse just really needs someone like C.J. in his life,” Abigail said as she put an arm around Jesse.
“He’d be such a help; he could stay with us.”

“Well—” Pam said.

“C.J.’s best chance at healing from the trauma he’s endured is to help Jesse with his own recovery,” Hannibal said. “It is a comfort to be with those who have shared the same hardships, and to discover together it is possible to heal from it.”

“But I’ll just miss you so much!” Pam said as she hugged him. C.J. did not hug back, but instead cringed like he’d just been embraced by someone covered in mud. “But if this is what you really want, and if you can really help the other boy, then I suppose I won’t stop you.”

“You’ll still have to get it approved by a family court,” Alana said to Will. “Both C.J. and Jesse. Don’t worry, Jesse’s will simply be a formality; courts always prefer to place a child with a parent.”

“And C.J.?” Abigail asked.

“Well, if both C.J. and the grandmother recommend him, I think it likely the judge will strongly consider appointing Will as his guardian,” Alana said.

And to think Will had thought he was going to be living alone again. He’s still not entirely sure how he’d gone from no children to three children in the span of months; it’s like he was collecting kids now instead of stray dogs.

“Congratulations, Will,” Alana said. “Want me to take a photo for you guys?”

“Yes,” Will said as he handed her his cell.

“Do you wish the DNA results to be in the photo?” Hannibal said. “It would be a memento of what brought your family together; I’ll be happy to hold it up.”

“Yeah, okay,” Will said as he slung one arm around Abigail and one around Jesse, pulling them close to him. “C.J., you want to be in the photo?”

“Fine,” C.J. said, “but I am not joining the family hug.”

After Alana finished taking the photo and handed him back his phone, he clicked through his photos app to see it. There he was, with his arms around two smiling kids with one unimpressed teenager hovering nearby.

As promised Hannibal was in the photo too, holding up the paper with the paternity test results. Apparently he had gotten within reach of Abigail, because she had snagged him with her free arm so she had one arm around Will and the other around Hannibal.

“Our first family portrait,” Abigail said as she admired the photo. “I think it looks rather nice.”

“Me too,” Will said with a pleased smile.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone! Like, the comments for this fic just blow me away. I
savor your comments like Hannibal savors Will’s scent no that’s weird, how about Will’s sass (that says sase not ass) still too weird an excellent glass of wine.

(Also, I’m going to point out that neither Will and Hannibal are normal gauges of human behavior, and most people do like people who are really friendly. Franklyn isn’t awkward because he’s friendly, it’s because he oversteps normal social boundaries. So if you are a super friendly person with social anxiety, do not take Will’s assessment of friendly people to heart!)
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Chapter warning for gore. See end of chapter notes for more details if you need to.

My apologies for the extended wait for this chapter, but my final draft of this chapter (or what I thought was my final draft) just didn’t feel right.

After some time contemplating it, I decided the problem was that this chapter had initially felt like it was just a way to get from Point A to Point B, setting-up the events of the next chapter (especially since the next chapter has some really exciting events, which made this chapter pale in comparison). I really want each one to be fun to read on it’s own, not just a way to move the plot forward.

So I did some editing. And some more editing. Removed a few paragraphs and added others, and I think I finally got it.

Exciting news! We’re nearing the end of the slow burn :) This chapter is still slow burn, but not much longer now, this fic is about to enter smut territory.

Also, since it’s been three weeks since I last posted and everyone has probably forgotten by now (especially since it’s a subplot only briefly mentioned here and there): Margot and Alana are secretly dating and planning to have a Verger baby. Will doesn’t know any of this, so he thinks Alana and Hannibal might still be an item.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wolf Trap, Virginia

Graham Residence

“Okay, anything that looks like this, we’re keeping.” Will said, pointing to a water pump impeller lying on his workshop table.

Abigail nodded, reaching for it. The two of them were working on emptying the upstairs room that was crammed with boat and engine repair equipment. The sheer amount of junk was daunting, and they only had a little over a week left to throw away, sell, or relocate it all to the barn. By the end of the next week, Jesse and C.J. would be living with them, and this would be their bedroom.

Consolidation was key. He needed to only keep what he’d likely use, instead of hoarding away every possible scrap piece and spare part.

“Some of these parts must break pretty often,” Abigail said. “You’ve got a lot of them in stock.”

“Boat engines aren’t like car engines—they constantly run in adverse conditions. Salt, heat, moisture; it all adds up. Engines want cool, dry air and minimal idle time,” Will said. “But what they need, and what they get, are rarely the same thing.”

“And if boat engines aren’t the only thing that rarely get what they need?”
“Are we talking about anything specific?”

He carefully made his way across the floor strewn with miscellaneous junk, cursing himself at how much of it there was. The barn was already crowded with the most frequently used equipment.

“I don’t know: you, your reluctance to let anyone help you—” Abigail said, labeling the plastic bin she had put the water pump impeller in.

“I’m fine,” Will said with his best attempt at a casual tone of voice that said ‘well-adjusted’ and ‘anxious-free.’

“You have nightmares nearly every night. I hear you pace the halls, sometimes, instead of sleeping. There’s a look in your eyes; it reminds me of what I saw in the mirror those last few months before I met you.”

“The haunted look of a trapped animal,” Will said with an uneasy smile that resembled a grimace. “The only thing more confining than being trapped in your own mind is being trapped in the mind of someone else. I’m sure your father’s mind wasn’t a particularly enjoyable prison.”

“You would guess right. Whose mind are you trapped in?”

“The minds of strangers and of friends; killers too. It’s been like this my whole life. It’s nothing new, or anything to worry about.”

“Dr. Lecter is a well-respected therapist. Maybe he can help you through the rough spots?”

“What good will that do?” Will said, dumping a couple spark plugs into their respective small bin. “It’s not like I can admit any of what’s actually going on to him.”

Bandit, who was hovering nearby with his ears tucked back, whined and shuffled closer to Will. The dog hated when Will and Abigail left on a road trip without him. Apparently carrying items down the stairs and into the yard and barn resembled the ritual of packing because he’d been beside himself the entire week.

“What about this?” Abigail said, holding up a red cylinder with a wire attached to it. “Keep or get rid of it?”

“Sell it. I’m not as likely to need it.”

“Maybe you should keep it? In case there’s a chance you might use it someday.”

“No, no, put it in the sell pile.”

“It’s just, I feel like we’re getting rid of a lot of things,” Abigail said, peering into a repurposed plastic paint bucket, which this morning had been filled with things like marine grade wire and a drive belt, but was now mostly empty. “You sure you don’t want to keep more?”

“Gotta make room somehow.”

He dropped a couple of old stained flannel shirts he kept as cleaning rags into a small duffel bag he wasn’t using. He grabbed the next one, turning back to the duffel bag in time to see Bandit dragging a ratty shirt back out.

“That’s not helping,” Will said to Bandit.

“What are you doing, huh?” Abigail said, ruffling the dog’s hair.
“He unpacks my suitcases everytime I try to pack for a trip,” Will said. “Now apparently my duffel bags too.” He snatched up the bag and set it on top of a now organized filing cabinet, out of Bandit’s reach.

“Do you think C.J. and Jesse will be ok sharing a room?” Abigail said.

“God, I hope so,” Will said. “Otherwise C.J. will have to move into the living room and I’ll end up sleeping in the barn.”

Abigail gathered an armful of things that they weren’t keeping and made her way downstairs, probably to add them to the growing sell-or-throw-away pile in the front yard. Will continued his quest to clear out the room, trying to decide what furniture he would need for the room. Beds and dressers for sure. At least there was already a built-in bookshelf along the east wall.

Originally built to be a master bedroom, this was the largest room upstairs, sharing the second story with a smaller bedroom that was Abigail’s and a small bathroom connected to the hallway. But while it was the largest room, it felt like such a small space to contain two teenagers. He hadn’t bought this house with the intention of ever having a kid, let alone three.

_Can this be enough for them?_ Will wondered. _A small house isolated in the middle of nowhere, cramped living spaces, and leftovers made of dead serial killers in the fridge. Is this really a good idea?_

He frowned when he realized Abigail was gone longer than it took to throw a few items in the junk heap. He decided to go find her, Bandit trailing behind him.

He eventually saw her when he looked out the living room’s front window. She was standing on the porch staring at the largest pile of items to sell, a miserable expression on her face.

“Everything alright?” Will said, coming outside to hand her a jacket. “It’s a little cold to be brooding outside, don’t you think?”

“It’s just, you have to get rid of all your things,” Abigail said.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Will said. “I mean, it’s just some of it.”

“I just kept pushing and pushing, trying to find a way that you could adopt Jesse. But I never stopped to think about what you wanted. And now to make room, we’re throwing out everything from your life.”

“That’s not what’s happening here. Besides, I wanted to adopt Jesse long before you even brought it up.”

“Did you? Or was it your empathy?” Abigail said, turning to look at him. Her eyes were slightly red, like she was holding back tears. “Maybe you were just feeding off what I wanted? I wanted it and so you wanted it.”

“My empathy doesn’t work like that,” Will said. Which was a lie. Sometimes he found himself doing things simply because of the force of someone else’s desire if he got far enough in their head. But it didn’t happen often and he didn’t want her to worry.

“I wouldn’t have thought clearing out a room full of junk would be upsetting. Aren’t there entire TV shows dedicated to convincing people not to hoard?” he said with a forced smile, trying to lighten the mood.
“I feel like I’m erasing any sign of your existence from the room,” Abigail said. “Like when my mom threw my stuff in the trash when she didn’t want me anymore.”

Oh.

Will remembered the day he had driven back to Abigail’s birth family’s house, a week after he had unofficially adopted her, planning on packing up her clothes and everything else that was hers to move to Wolf Trap. Abigail had moved into Will’s house the day her father died and her mother found out exactly what sort of prey her husband and daughter had been bringing to the family cabin. Her mother had told Abigail to leave and never come back, and she had yet to change her mind.

Mrs. Hobbs had taken one look at him the day he came to fetch Abigail’s things and said, “You need to leave.”

“I’m just here to get Abigail’s things,” he had said.

“Too late, it’s gone,” she said, angling her body to block him from stepping inside the house, keeping him out on the front porch. “I threw it all out; donated some of it.”

“What?” Will said.

“That monster is not my daughter. My daughter was good and she was kind. Whatever butcherer my late husband made out of her, it’s no longer her,” Mrs. Hobbs had said in a bitter voice. “As far as I’m concerned, my daughter is dead. And if you had any sort of decency, you’d leave me to mourn my family in peace.”

He had pushed past Mrs. Hobbs, intent on seeing Abigail’s room for himself to see if it was true. He found a mostly empty bedroom with a bed stripped of sheets and a dresser whose drawers were open and ransacked. The closet doors were open too, revealing its barren interior.

There was a partially packed box by the bed and he grabbed it, stuffing whatever was left in the room into it. A pair of shoes, a few shirts, a can of hairspray.

“Anything else left?” he demanded when he saw Mrs. Hobbs staring into the room, watching him pack the cardboard box with dispassionate eyes.

“No,” she had said. “Please, just go already.”

He didn’t believe her. He did a quick search of the house, and looked into the garage. There in the trunk of the car he found another two boxes, but in the end that was all he was able to find.

He brought it all back to Abigail. It was obvious it was just a small fraction of the things that had been in her bedroom. There were old mementos, favorite clothes, keepsakes from her childhood she would never get back.

“Woah, hey, this is nothing like that,” Will said to Abigail, wishing he could make her forget that day and all the sorrow she still carried. “This is just junk. There’s nothing here I wouldn’t gladly give up for you and Jesse and even C.J. This isn’t like what your mother did.”

“I’m taking over your life.”

“Yeah, well, I hear that’s part of being a parent,” Will said. “Believe me, my life’s better now than it was before. This is probably just what parenthood happens to be like.”

“I convinced you to hunt serial killers, and I turned you into a cannibal.”
“With some added complications,” Will allowed. He put an arm around her shoulder, tucking her into his side. “And this isn’t all that’s bothering you. Don’t think I haven’t noticed you’ve been hallucinating when you’re stressed. Abigail, what is it you’re seeing?”

“The girls I killed,” Abigail whispered. Her hand curled up into a loose fist against her mouth, a subconscious gesture to shield herself from the confession.

“The girls your father killed, you mean. I know he made you help him, but it was his hands around their throats in the end.”

“I picked them. You saw how my father used me as the lure,” Abigail said. “I’m the reason he needed to kill them. I helped him dispose of the bodies.”

“It’s not the same—” Will said.

“Don’t lie to me. I see them haunting me and I know I’m the reason they’re dead. But it’s okay, I’m going to fix it. My father always said it’s not murder if we honor every part of them. And we may have honored every part of their body, but not their souls. That’s what I still need to do, honor their spirits.”

“How do you honor something intangible, Abigail? You can’t cook it into a stew or stuff a pillow with it.”

“By taking a guilty life for every innocent life I ended,” Abigail said. “Eight dead girls, eight dead killers. Then their deaths will no longer be pointless. They’ll have to leave me alone then, right?”

“Guilt is not an easy thing to exorcise once it’s sunk its claws into you. Believe me, I’ve lived it,” Will said. “And emotion doesn’t listen to logic. I wish I could say otherwise, but there’s a chance it might not change anything.”

“But I have to try,” Abigail said. “Promise me you’ll help me, I need you to promise. Please, we’re already down to six left if we count my father.”

“Abigail—”

“Promise me.”

Will closed his eyes. The guilt she carried was not a burden he would wish on anyone. He wished she could see herself as he saw her: a woman strong enough to survive no matter what the odds. Despite everything her parents had done to her, she had never broken. She stared killers in the eyes without a flinch, unwilling to back down. But if this was what she thought she needed...

“I promise,” he whispered.

“Good morning,” Hannibal said, when Will opened the front door.

Will stood there, his pack of dogs loitering in the living room behind him, looking slightly bewildered. He was clearly not expecting company.

Will looked every inch the reclusive fisherman he claimed to be. He had not shaved in several days; the stubble on his face was slowly becoming an out and out beard. The long-sleeve t-shirt he was
wearing was slightly damp with sweat around the collar. He looked, in a word, scruffy.

“Uh, Dr. Lecter,” Will said. “Come in. I can just—do you want some coffee or something?”

“No, thank you. Abigail called me to let me know you could use some help getting the boys’ room ready,” Hannibal said. “I’d be happy to offer assistance.”

“She did?” Will said. “Um, well, you can help. We’ve just cleared out the last of what was left in the room and we plan to start painting soon. But I’m not sure you’re exactly wearing painting clothes.”

Hannibal looked down at himself. He was wearing his red sweater and a pair of chino pants, instead of his customary formal attire, in anticipation of the physical work.

_While my plastic suit would be the best clothes for painting, Hannibal thought, I’m not sure Will is ready to see what I wear when I hunt._

“It’s okay, you can borrow one of my t-shirts,” Will said. “Maybe some jeans. Hopefully I have something that fits. You’re bigger than me.”

Will’s mouth snapped shut and he turned beet red.

“Thank you, Will,” Hannibal said as he stepped inside the house.

As much as he enjoyed the opera, where he had Will at his side dressed to the nines and mingling in Hannibal’s world, a part of him was desperately curious to see Will in his natural habitat. He wanted to watch Will do repairs around the house, fish in a nearby stream, walk his pack of dogs, and he very much wanted to watch Will bring down his prey.

As he followed Will down the hallway towards the stairs, he noticed the photograph hanging on the wall.

“I see you have the photo Dr. Bloom took in the office of you and your children,” Hannibal said, and silently added “_and me_” in his head. “Photographs tell us much about who we are. They are a snapshot of time, a moment suspended for eternity, that we choose to keep. The desire to capture a moment in meticulous detail, to cherish it forever, is an act of tenderness and of love.”

“I know, I know, and the kids will grow up so fast, I get it,” Will said. “I told you, I’ll get around to adding more photos when I have time.”

“You must be thinking of someone else, I don’t believe we’ve discussed your chosen decor before.”

“Oh! I didn’t mean _you_, of course, I meant the other—um—the boys’ room is right upstairs,” Will said as he hurried up the stairs. “Like I said, we’re about ready to paint, but can’t decide on the colors. I thought a white wall was practical, but Abigail felt it wasn’t welcoming or personal enough.”

“Dr. Lecter!” Abigail said when they entered the room. “Here to help?”

The room was slightly larger than the living room downstairs, with two dormer windows and a slanted ceiling. There were two beds as well as two dressers, each on opposite sides of the room to try to give each boy as much space as possible. The room did desperately need to be painted; the off-white walls were marked by visible scuffs.

“With the dark hardwood floors and the white ceiling, I’d recommend a midnight blue for the walls,” Hannibal said.
“Perfect, especially with the dark wood bed frames and dressers,” Abigail said. “Maybe we should add a white rug, give a bit of contrast against the dark floors.”

“Yes, and brown curtains,” Hannibal said. “And if you haven’t bought the sheet sets and throw pillows yet, I recommend keeping with the color scheme—brown, midnight blue, and white—but with additional accents of periwinkle.”

“Throw pillows?” Will said.

“Alright, if we divide and conquer, we can get what we need in no time,” Abigail said. “There’s a Wal-Mart only 15 minutes from here. Hannibal can select the shade of paint, I can get the rug and pillows. Dad, can you get the sheets and comforter sets?”

“Uh, sure,” Will said. “You said brown and blue—”

“We can take my car,” Hannibal said as he and Abigail left the room, leaving Will still standing in the bedroom. “I hope you don’t mind, but we won’t be shopping at a Wal-Mart.”

“—and white and periwinkle,” Will said. “Periwinkle? What’s periwinkle?”

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Quantico, Virginia
Behavioral Science Unit at the FBI

“So you get to take Jesse and C.J. home today,” Jack Crawford said to Will. “The past few weeks have been unsettling for you, I imagine.”

He and Will were standing in the hallway next to the row of chairs just outside Jack’s office. It was hard to believe everything that had happened between the last time he had sat in those chairs and now.

“I’ll admit there have been a few surprises,” Will said.

“Look, Will—may I call you Will?—at the BAU I usually deal with the investigation, not with anyone’s personal life,” Agent Crawford said. “What happens after the investigation is none of my concern… usually.”

“Let me guess, you’re about to make an exception.”

“What I’m about to do is give you some advice,” Agent Crawford said, putting a firm hand on Will’s shoulder. “I had to do a little research into you, naturally, because of your history with the suspect.”

“And you didn’t like what you found,” Will said.

“I have concerns,” Agent Crawford said. “Jesse and C.J., what they’ve been through—well, you already know what they’ve been through, you used to work homicide.”

“I’m not unaware of what they’ve dealt with,” Will said. “And like you said, my specialty is homicide. I would think the experience I have would make me better suited, not less.”

“My concern isn’t that you worked homicide, it’s that you quit homicide,” Agent Crawford said. “It was too much for you. And when it came down to it, you couldn’t pull the trigger.”
There’s a body with ten bullet holes that says otherwise, Will thought.

“These kids, if they had gotten ahold of a gun, they’d have pulled the trigger on Eva to escape her, you understand? I know I would have,” Jack Crawford said. “You think you can understand them, that it’s not going to be too much for you? Because being a parent means you don’t get the option to quit, son. I want you to be certain before you take this on. You’ve been awarded temporary guardianship today, but in a little over a month’s time you’ll have permanent guardianship.”

“I have no intention of quitting.”

“Good,” Jack Crawford said.

“Jack, stop interrogating Will,” Alana said, walking up to them.

“Remember what I said, Will,” Jack Crawford said, squeezing Will’s shoulder before removing his hand. The amount of force he put into the motion suggested it was more of a gesture of dominance than reassurance.

“Do I even want to know what he was talking about?” Alana said.

“He thinks I can’t handle the boys,” Will said. “But he’s wrong.”

Alana smiled, but the smile quickly faded into a worried expression. She tapped a brochure she had in her right hand against the palm of her left. Will could only see the back of the brochure, where the staff photos were. The brochure listed a medical director, laboratory director, endoscopic surgeons—

“I’m very happy for all of you,” Alana said. “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this happy before. Having kids must be a life-changing experience.”

“It’s the best thing in the world, or at least it was for me,” Will said.

Alana looked at him as if he could give her the answer to some question on her mind. She bit her lip as she fiddled with the brochure in her hand.

“You didn’t ever worry about, I don’t know, if you were ready for it?” Alana said. “Was that something you were ever concerned about, or did you just know?”

“I think everyone has concerns about being a parent,” Will said. “But kids don’t need perfection; they just need someone who loves them for who they are.”

Alana nodded with a small smile on her face, the tension on her face easing. He’s not sure why she was asking or why she’s gone from fretful to relieved. An ugly part of his brain wondered if she doubted his ability to take care of the boys, just like Agent Crawford, and if he just passed some invisible test.

“Um, C.J. and Jesse are ready,” Alana said. She was practically upbeat now, glancing frequently down at the brochure with a smile that was growing wider by the minute. “You can sit in one of the chairs and I’ll go fetch them.”

Wolf Trap, Virginia
“Well, it doesn’t look like much, but here’s your new home,” Will said.

C.J. and Jesse climbed out of the car, getting their first look at the two-story farmhouse. It was a far cry from Hannibal’s mansion, and Will desperately hoped the boys weren’t comparing the two houses in their heads. Will’s small house and driveway were the only sign of civilization among the bushes and ancient trees that dotted a snowy field. Abigail jogged to the front door, opening it to let the dogs out to greet the new family members.

“You have six dogs?” C.J. said, as Ellie rushed toward him in her enthusiasm to say hello. He stepped back uncertainty.

“Of course not,” Will said. “I have seven.”

“What’s their names?” Jesse asked, picking up Zoe.

“That’s Bandit, and that’s Winston,” Will said, pointing to the two dogs. “And I see C.J. has already met Ellie and—Zoe, please stop licking Jesse’s face—that’s Max and Buster. Harley’s the one sniffing your suitcases.”

C.J. did his best to walk to the front door faster than Ellie could follow him, but the small dog had no intention of letting her favorite new human out of sight and trotted after him. Abigail dragged a couple of rolling suitcases towards the house, Harley and Max trailing close behind her.

A year ago, Will might have sat in a chair borrowed from the kitchen on his barren porch, a half-fixed outboard motor at his feet and a few of his dogs loitering in the yard. Now he watched his youngest son carry Zoe across a porch decorated with wood chimes hand-carved by his daughter—her preferred method of keeping her knife skills sharp between hunts.

Smiling to himself, Will whistled for the rest of the dogs and herded everyone inside. Jesse began a self-guided tour of the house, opening whatever doors he came across. Several of the dogs, unable to contain their excitement at all the chaos, crowded around Jesse and followed him as he made his way from the living room to the kitchen—perusing the laundry room and pantry on his way—then retracing his steps back to the hallway so he could go up the stairs.

“Cool! Is this our room?” Jesse shouted down the stairs a few minutes later.

That got C.J.’s attention. He did his very best to nonchalantly follow Jesse’s path up the stairs while looking as bored and apathetic as possible, but his eyes darted around to take in the details of every room he passed. Abigail and Will followed.

“We have to share a room?” C.J. said displeased, as he sat down on one of the beds in the boys’ bedroom. Ellie leapt up on the bed, lying down her head on his leg. C.J. looked like he was seriously debating whether he should scoot away from her or resign himself to his fate.

“Do you prefer staying at your grandmother’s?” Jesse said. C.J. grimaced and shut his mouth.

“I like it,” Jesse decided, looking around the room.

It did look nice, which was Hannibal and Abigail’s doing. In the end, they had chosen the paint, decor, rug, and sheet sets after it was decided Will was useless when it came to home decorating. Apparently a checkered comforter with alternating squares of dark blue and white with light blue trees and brown bears in the squares had not been what Hannibal meant when he gave Will the chosen color scheme.
Will was incredibly grateful that Dr. Lecter had volunteered to help. Getting a fresh coat of paint on the walls was probably something Will and Abigail could have managed themselves if they had to, but Hannibal had gone far beyond that. He had not only insisted on paying for the sheet sets, but had even donated some of his unused possessions—comfy spare blankets, a full-sized mirror, a floor lamp, and a few chairs.

Plus it had involved one Dr. Lecter painting in a very tight t-shirt that Will had graciously loaned him.

“Okay, first thing we need to do is establish some ground rules,” Will said to them. “Rule 1: No physical fights. I know I’m not going to be able to stop the verbal fights, but don’t even think about punching, shoving, any of it. Okay, rule 2: Don’t kill anybody.”

“But what about killing someone who’s bad?” Jesse said, raising his hand like a student in a classroom.

“Maybe some bad people, someday, when you’re older,” Will said. “But nobody kills anybody without permission from me.”

Jesse raised his hand again.

“Yes, Jesse?” Will said.

“But what if someone’s trying to kill me?”

“Um, yes, self-defense is fine. Rule 3—”

“What about self-defense against hearing anymore moronic questions?” C.J said with a glare.

“No,” Will said. “Rule 3: Weapons are not toys. I’ll train you how to use them, but you treat them with respect. You will use every safety precaution. Rule 4: Whenever I give instructions on what to say to the FBI or police or how to get rid of evidence, you follow the instructions to the letter. We’re not having a repeat of what happened with Eva’s investigation.”

“Does that mean you’re going to teach us how to hide bodies?” C.J. said.

“Don’t worry about the bodies. Abigail and I and the dogs will take care of it,” Will said. “Rule 4: We’re a family now. And that means we look out for each other.”

“We have the four of us now—” Abigail said.

“The eleven of us,” Will said. “The dogs, you forgot to count the dogs.”

“We have the eleven of us now,” Abigail said, “and we’re all in this together. The rest of the world may not understand us if they knew who we truly are, but we understand each other and that’s all that matters. You’ll never have to be anyone but yourself here, and you’ll never be unloved—that goes for all of us.”

Will swallowed hard as he nodded to himself.

For so many years I waded into a quiet stream in my head whenever the world was too much, Will thought. It was somewhere I was accepted, and somewhere I had peace. But now my quiet stream is no longer locked away in my mind; it’s here in this very house.

Will imagined water trickling into the room, more and more, until everyone stood ankle-deep in it
and then knee deep. The water was clear and calm like a spring creek fed by an underground aquifer.

The water flowed through the house, through the boys’ room and through Abigail’s room, glittering in spots from where the sunlight streamed in through the windows and reflected on its surface. It rippled around the legs of the beds, the sides of the dressers, and pooled in the hallway over the worn rug runner. The stream gently cascaded down the stairs like a tiered waterfall, fanning out to run over the downstairs floor and lap at the front door.

Now his quiet stream was no longer just his, but his family’s too.

Will saw Abigail, C.J., and Jesse gathered around the kitchen table, staring at the tablet Abigail held in her hands. He figured they were playing that game again; the one about coal mines or something, where everything looked like it was made out of blocks.

“Dad, you need to see this,” Abigail said.

He peered over her shoulder. That was not a game on the screen.

“Deadly Swan Song: Trombone player’s final performance as a gruesome human cello in shocking homicide case,” Will read out loud from Tattlecrime.com.

“What do you think? This could be our next hunt,” Abigail said. “I know we had to lie low while waiting for the courts to award permanent guardianship and for the investigation on Eva to wrap up, but that’s done now. Nobody’s paying any attention to us.”

“I don’t know,” Will said. “It’d be the first time the boys would be left at home while we’re chasing down our prey.”

“C.J. and Jesse been here for over a month now, it’s fine. The murder happened close by, just an hour away,” Abigail said. “It’d be a good trial run.”

Will peered closer at the main photo accompanying the headline. The body has been displayed in the middle of a concert hall stage, a cello neck protruding from the unfortunate victim’s mouth, creating an image both horrifying and beautiful. It was the kind of macabre artistry Will normally associated with a very specific serial killer.

Was it possible this was the work of the Chesapeake Ripper? A shiver ran down Will’s spine as he remembered the six Ripper kills from just a few weeks ago.

“ Weird, I didn’t know you could play vocal cords like a violin or something,” Jesse said. “What do you think that sounds like?”

“Probably stupid,” C.J. said, flipping through the online photos with a judgemental frown.


“If it sounded any good, humans would’ve made cellos out of animal vocal cords ages ago, idiot,” C.J. said. “There’s instruments made with pig bladders. If someone tried a bladder, someone else tried vocal cords first.”
“Oh,” Jesse said, disappointed.

The body may now look like a cello, but C.J. was right, it wasn’t made to produce a beautiful sound. This particular instrument sacrificed function for form. Why would the Ripper create something this flawed?

Vocal cords were like a wind instrument, not a string instrument. Sound was produced by air traveling through the vocal cords and the resonance chambers in the body—like the pharynx and mouth. Without a gust of air traveling through the resonance chambers, vibrations in the vocal cords would only create a very weak sound. And because this killer peeled open the trachea, the harmonics usually produced by air recirculating in the trachea were no longer possible. Not to mention—

“You can’t play vocal cords like an instrument anyways,” Will said. “Not unless you treat them first.”

“Like how you make catgut string?” Abigail said.

If this was the Chesapeake Ripper, Will wasn’t stupid enough to try to hunt him. Any serial killer who could elude the FBI for this many years and whose M.O. included “death by mutilation” was one Will intended to stay far, far away from.

“Woah, string can be made out of cat guts?” Jesse said.

“No, it’s usually made out of sheep intestines, or similar animals,” Will said. “A cat would actually be too small.”

“Well, who named it catgut then?” Jesse said.

Skimming through the article, he hunted for the information he needed. The victim was killed by blunt force trauma to the back of the head. No mutilation beyond the changes to the vocal chords and throat, all of which were post-mortem. No surgical trophies.

This was not the Chesapeake Ripper after all. This was someone else’s work.

“You going to hunt this one or not?” C.J. said.

“Give me a moment to think on it,” Will said, beckoning for Abigail to hand him the tablet. He flipped through the photos Freddie had posted as he walked into the living room.

Will closed his eyes and the pendulum swung.

The dead trombonist was sitting upright in a chair in his living room, the neck of a cello stabbed through his gaping mouth and splitting open his throat. Will walked in a slow circle around him.

“This is how I played you,” Will said, “but not how I made you.”

The pendulum swung again.

Now the dead man lay on a metal work table with his throat slit open, the skin peeled back to expose the vocal cords. Time reversed as the flaps of skin on the throat came back together, healing itself. Then everything paused, ready for Will to play his part.

Will picked up a knife and held it next to the throat, ready to cut and expose the vocal cords like the killer had done. When he looked at the man’s face he froze, knife suspended in the air.

The dead man’s face was now Hannibal’s. With a shocked exhale, Will stepped back, lowering the
knife. He should have figured his imagination would find some way to torture his own mind. Unable to bear it any longer, he looked away from the stark pallor of Hannibal’s waxy skin.

_This isn’t real, Will reminded himself. This is just your imagination._

He forced himself to look back at the corpse, willing himself to change the face back to the actual victim. Instead, the dead Hannibal slowly opened his eyes and looked at Will. The glass of his eyes were a clouded milky white, no life in them.

“What is it you want, Will?” Hannibal whispered through pale bloodless lips.

“Nothing, I—” Will said, shaking his head in denial.

“Show me what you want,” Hannibal insisted. “I want to know.”

Will fingered the knife in his hands, then raised it high and brought it down harshly into Hannibal just below the base of his neck, puncturing the flesh. He dragged the knife down Hannibal’s chest, splitting the skin open with a jagged burst of movement. He didn’t stop until he reached the end of the belly, letting the smell of the formaldehyde that had been used to embalm the body burn his nose, making his eyes water.

He reached his hand in between the bottom of the ribs, feeling the slippery inside of Hannibal. Will let his hands gently caress the curve of the liver and the stomach, some clotted blood squishing like jelly between his fingers, another reminder this was a dead man. His fingers stroked the inside of Hannibal until his searching hand felt the solid edge of the ribs. He rested his hand against the smooth bone, then grabbed hold of the edge of the ribs with both hands and sharply yanked.

The rib cracked, letting Will peel it back from the body until its jagged broken edge stuck up at an angle into the air. He reached for more rib bones, breaking them and tearing them away from the organs nestled within Hannibal. He worked his way up the sternum, cracking Hannibal open until he finally exposed what he wanted.

He reached into the chest and let his hand gently close around Hannibal’s heart, letting himself feel it cradled in his hand. Around his hand, the dead lungs suddenly inflated then exhaled as Hannibal began to breath. The heart awakened next, beginning to pump. Will laughed hoarsely in breathless disbelief and awe. He held the most precious part of Hannibal in his hands.

“This should belong to _me_,” Will gritted out, staring straight into Hannibal’s eyes.

“It already does,” Hannibal said, a tender look in his eyes, as life began to slowly seep back into him. “Do with it what you wish, Will.”

Will nodded. He grabbed the knife once more and frantically severed the arteries keeping the heart in place, cutting it free. He triumphantly held the heart up, no longer in Hannibal’s chest but now solely in Will’s possession. His knees threatened to buckle under him he was shaking so bad. He slowly kneeled down on the ground, still holding the organ.

Hannibal sat up, his chest and belly magically sewn shut with surgical thread. Will saw the misshapen lumps under Hannibal’s chest from where he had torn into his rib cage and left bones broken and snapped, his body now irrevocably changed by Will’s hands. Hannibal swung his feet off the table, setting them on either side of Will’s trembling form, bearing his vulnerable naked body before Will’s eyes.

Will met Hannibal’s eyes, then held the heart aloft in front of his mouth and bit into it. The walls of the organ tore beneath his teeth, blood smearing across his face. He held onto the heart with one
hand as he chewed his mouthful, and reached out with the other hand to clamp down on Hannibal’s thigh.

His hand squeezed involuntarily, digging into Hannibal’s leg muscle, as he swallowed the raw wet meat. He felt unhinged, fear and jealousy and desire all ricocheting around in his chest.

“I will devour you,” Will promised Hannibal.

Hannibal lips slowly curved up in a smile.

A hand touched Will’s shoulder and he violently emerged from the hallucination, sweating and shaking. Gasping for air, he put a hand against the door frame as Abigail stepped into his line of vision.

“Are you alright?” Abigail said.

Will nodded as he leaned his full weight against the living room door frame, still panting.

“We’re not going after this one; he’s an experienced killer,” Will said. “This was him learning a new instrument, and worse, he wasn’t performing for himself. This song, it was for another killer. There may be two of them now, too dangerous.”

“He’s killed before?” Abigail said.

“I’d say he’s been making catgut string out of human intestines for some time now. He’s much too experienced at shrinking and tanning. He built up experience,” Will said. “Before he made those vocal cords into string, he made human intestines into string. Before that, animal intestines were used. He would have wanted to get experience with killing the animal and then removing the gut—practice for his human victims—so he wasn’t buying these animals from a butcher’s block.

“He’s likely in the middle of Baltimore, so he wasn’t kidnapping and gutting sheep or cattle. The most likely animal to be both unmissed and large enough would be… well, it would be stray dogs.”

Abigail and Will looked at each other, and then looked over to the kitchen where several of their dogs were lounging around. Harley was trying to convince the boys to give him some of the pretzels they were snacking on and Ellie was lying at C.J.’s feet. Winston saw them looking his way and padded over to the living room. He wagged his tail and whined softly, probably unsure of why Abigail and Will were staring at him so intently.

“Nevermind, whoever did this, we’re killing them,” Will said.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter warning: Will imagines himself cutting the heart out of a dead body and then eating the heart raw.

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I’m sure Will imagining eating Hannibal’s heart (or visa versa) is one of those things that shows up all the time in Hannigram fic, but that’s because it’s such perfect imagery! Hopefully I still managed to put my own personal spin on it and made the scene unique enough.
My eternal gratitude to my beta reader Katarra!

And also thank-you to everyone who left comments and kudos! I absolutely love reading each and every comment ❤️
Welcome to 2019, everyone!

I had drastically underestimated how busy I would be during the winter holiday season, and how little time I would have to write and edit. Lesson learned. (I keep telling myself everyone else was probably really busy too, and some wouldn’t have time to read a new chapter anyways, so that’s the excuse I use to myself.)

Quick recap of where the fic is at (since it’s been a few weeks, and for those of you who had finals or traveled for the holidays, I realize it’s going to be difficult to remember what’s happened in every WIP you’re reading):

In Chapter 6, Tobias Budge met Hannibal and Will at the opera, and hinted at his desire to be friends with Hannibal. Will did not notice, and is still unaware that Hannibal and Tobias are serial killers.

In Chapter 7, Tobias killed a member of an orchestra (off-screen) and made them into a human cello to get Hannibal’s attention (just like in the tv show.) Will and Abigail have decided to hunt the serial killer who made this human cello, but first they have to figure out the serial killer’s identity. Will and Hannibal are still not dating yet, and there is much pining and UST.

Photos in the below moodboard:
Upper left; photo of Will and Abigail tucked into mirror frame; scene from chapter 2; manip by me.
Upper center; Will and Hannibal meet for the first time; scene from chapter 1; manip by me.
Upper right; Miriam Lass gets an important phone call; scene from a future chapter; manip by me.
Middle left; Will’s dogs on the porch; screenshot from the tv show.
Middle center; Black Argus lure; manip by me.
Middle right; The Chesapeake Ripper wearing a partially rolled-up mask; manip by me.
Lower left; Alana and Margot flirting at Hannibal’s dinner party; scene from chapter 1; screenshot from cast interview.
Lower center; C.J. and Jesse defend themselves; scene from a future chapter; manip by me.
Lower right; Hannibal makes lunch for Will and the kids; scene from chapter 4; manip by me.
Wolf Trap, Virginia
Graham Residence

“I used to stare at them for hours when I was a child,” Will said quietly, lying next to the bank of a stream. He was watching the night sky, drowning in the vast sea of stars above him. “The stars, they were so captivating to me. Shining down on cloudless nights; beautiful yet out of reach. Untouchable.”

“On the contrary, the stars touch you everyday,” the ghost of Hannibal said. He was lying next to Will, his lips brushing the curve of his ear. Will shivered, clutching a fistful of grass with his hands. “In a single day 60 tons of cosmic dust fall to Earth. And in it stardust from supernovas and dying stars. Carbon, nickel, oxygen, iron—the very bones of your body are made from the stars.”

The stars briefly glowed brighter, becoming dazzling pinpricks of light in a vast sky. Then they winked out, leaving the sky black, and complete darkness surrounded Will. He blinked and he was no longer lying on the grass but standing in his barn.

In front of him was the workshop table where he kept everything he and Abigail would need once they found their killer. Boning knife, meat cleaver, hand saw—the tools a butcher would need.

Will opened the door, blinking in the bright sunlight. He locked the barn door with a padlock, and
made his way to the house and inside. In the kitchen, Jesse and C.J. were sitting at the table while Abigail stood nearby, attempting their own version of homeschooling.

“This is the dumbest thing ever,” C.J. grumbled, staring in disgust at a math worksheet.

It had taken less than a week of homeschooling to learn C.J. had little love for math, or schoolwork in general. Jesse, on the other hand, soaked up any piece of knowledge he could get his hands on, but with the tendency to put what he learned into practice in unpredictable ways. He had already fixed a worn-out game controller using aluminum foil on the conductor pads, which Will only found out when he went to grill some fish in a foil packet, and was left wondering why someone had taken a hole punch to the roll of aluminum foil.

“If you’d rather learn this in a classroom with 20 other teenagers, just let me know,” Will said.

“Can’t do that; they’d send him to the counselor’s office. Daily,” Jesse said. He peered over at C.J.’s math worksheet filled with rational equations. “Uh, you realize that’s wrong—”

“You’re two years younger than me, you shouldn’t be this smart!” C.J. complained.

“Jesse, leave C.J. alone,” Abigail said. “It’s fine, C.J., we’ll just keep practicing.”

“This is stupid! How will any of this be useful?”

“Well, rational equations in gas laws are used to figure out what type of materials were used in an explosion or fire. Or to figure out a rough idea of how an explosion or fire will play out once started,” Will said. “OK, look, how about we change this.”

Will grabbed one of the worksheets and scribbled over the first equation, and wrote his own.

“We’ll start with something simpler. Say you found a femur, and you wanted to know which missing person it belonged to. First thing you’d want to know is the victim’s height, right?” Will said, “A human’s height is proportional to the femur in their upper leg. If someone is 68 inches tall, their femur will be approximately 17 inches. So if you find a 18.25 inch femur, how tall was the victim?”

There was a knock at the front door.

“We expecting someone?” Jesse asked, glancing towards the front door with the same rapt attention as the dogs.

“We’re getting the piano tuned,” Will said.

“Uh, none of us play the piano,” Jesse said.

“We need to do research into the music community in Baltimore, find out who would have the expertise to make their own catgut string,” Abigail said. “Who would know better than a music shop owner?”

“Safer way to find out what we need to know,” Will said as he walked over to the front door to let their visitor in, “than if we tried to sneak in to see the crime scene.”

Tobias Budge walked into the house, a polite smile on his face. He was dressed in a sharp suit and had the same air of sophistication as Hannibal, though with a less eccentric flair. His eyes immediately swept the room upon entering it.

He’s assessing the room like a man who wants to know where every person and piece of furniture
is, Will thought. *He has constant awareness of his surroundings, like maybe a cop or soldier would.*

“Mr. Graham, a pleasure to see you again,” Tobias said, then glanced at C.J. and Jesse, who he could see in the kitchen from his vantage point in the living room. “And would these be your other children?”

Will didn’t answer. *Something’s not right here. I don’t like it.*

“This the piano?” Tobias said, pointing to the old piano at the opposite wall of the living room. It had been there when Will had moved in. He had never bothered to get rid of it, and by now it was drastically out of tune, even to his own untrained ears.

“It is,” Abigail said with a smile, walking over and putting her hand on the piano top. She shot Will a look that clearly said, ‘*Why are you acting so weird?’*

“You know, you weren’t who I expected to call me for an appointment,” Tobias said as he opened the lid of the piano.

“Sorry to be a disappointment if you were hoping for someone else,” Will said, keeping a close eye on every micro-expression on Tobias Budge’s face, trying to determine exactly what it was he was seeing. “Who did you expect?”

There was a feeling in the pit of his stomach exactly like the first time he spotted Garrett Jacob Hobbs.

Will had been on a train in Minnesota, trying to relax despite the crowd of people in the train car. It was like airplanes: too cramped, too many people, not enough quiet. He had tried to go into his head and let himself fish in his stream, but his eyes kept going back to a man and a young woman, obviously a father and daughter. The man was cataloguing the other passengers too closely, watchful and with a purpose. The daughter’s eyes looked terrified.

His empathy had told him to pay attention, to step into the man’s mind and so he had. Now that empathy was telling him the same thing about Tobias Budge.

“I’m sure Franklyn talks about me in his therapy sessions with Dr. Lecter; he loves to talk about his friends,” Tobias said with a smile, but the smile had an unkind edge to it. “And so I thought I’d be on the Doctor’s mind more. Guess I was wrong.”

Will had watched Hobbs and Abigail on the train, unsure why his empathy had sounded the alarm, until Abigail had stood up and sat down next to a girl Hobbs had nodded at. Then Will was Garrett Jacob Hobbs. As he watched the two girls, the chosen girl’s face slowly changed, the tip of her nose thinning and the bangs of her hair getting longer, until she looked exactly like Abigail. Now two Abigails sat facing each other, talking and laughing. They were his daughters, and he loved them, and he couldn’t bear for them to leave.

The girl’s face morphed again, this time into the face of the latest victim in a string of disappearances that had been on the news, all attributed to a serial killer that had been dubbed the Minnesota Shrike. And then he knew who Garret Jacob Hobbs really was.

In the end it hadn’t been enough to save the newest target. The police refused to listen to him, his anonymous tip when uninvestigated, and when he went to save the girl himself, she was already dead. The only victim he’d been able to save was Abigail herself.

With a feeling of dread he stepped into Tobias’s mind. He watched his own hands try the middle C key on the piano. The chromatic tuner registered the sound as too flat.
He looked at the piano’s innards, where dozens and dozens of piano strings were strung in parallel diagonal lines. He slightly turned the tuning lever. The piano hammer hit the strings once more, testing out his adjustment to the C key, and a drop of blood slowly slid down the strings. Again he struck the key, and again the hammer struck the strings. More blood trickled down as all the piano strings began to thicken, the metal wires changing to a purple-tinged grey color stained by streaks of blood. The grey strings became fat and fleshy, growing a spiderwork of veins visible beneath a smooth tissue membrane.

The piano strings were now dozens of small intestines; row upon row of guts.

“—must know a lot of musicians,” he heard Abigail say as he jolted back into his own mind. Will strode over and put a hand on Abigail’s shoulder, squeezing her shoulder hard enough to signal to abort the plan.

“You could say that. The Baltimore music community is small enough to be a tightly-knit group; everybody knows everybody else,” Tobias said. “You met quite a few of them at the concert, I believe.”

“Some, yes,” Abigail said, looking at Will out of the side of her eye. Will wasn’t sure how to best communicate ‘this guy makes cellos out of people’ with his eyes, but something must have come across because Abigail’s eyes grew watchful, the way they did during the standoff with Eva.

“You had who is arguably the best pianist in Baltimore eagerly explaining to you the evolution of the harp and the violin,” Tobias said. “I imagine you probably regretted ever stepping foot in the instrument collection; I think he managed to get as far back as ancient Mesopotamia.”

“I wouldn’t say that; it was an interesting discussion,” Abigail said.

“Jesse, C.J., I need you to finish sorting the fishing lures in the barn, like we talked about,” Will said, raising his voice to easily be heard in the kitchen.

It was one of their codes. Jesse and C.J. wouldn’t be going to the barn, but to a designated hiding spot near Route 602, where they would wait for two hours. If at the end of that time they hadn’t heard from either Abigail or Will, they were to call Hannibal or Alana. Jesse slowly scooted his chair back from the table with a wide-eyed look, while C.J. glanced at Tobias with a scowl.

“Take Winston with you,” Will said. If worse came to worse, Winston wouldn’t let anything happen to them.

“Go with Winston,” C.J. said, practically shoving Jesse out the back door with C.J.’s backpack, which knowing C.J. was probably filled with every snack imaginable. At least the boys wouldn’t go hungry. C.J. stomped into the living room.

“What are you—” Will said.

“Jesse’s going to the barn, I’m not,” C.J. said as he casually leaned against the short bookshelf by the front window, the one with the shotgun hidden under the topshelf. Will didn’t like it, but he knew better than to argue when C.J. had that particular look on his face.

He tried to look as relaxed as possible. As long as Tobias didn’t suspect Will was onto him, he had no reason to string the piano with their guts instead. It was a long, tense appointment. By the time Tobias left, Will vowed he was getting rid of that piano and never inviting anyone into his house ever again.

“What was that about?” Abigail said.
“I swear everyone I meet is secretly a serial killer,” Will grumbled. “Come on, let’s go fetch Jesse.”

Baltimore, Maryland  
Chordophone String Shop

Hannibal quietly entered the shop, grabbing the shopkeeper’s bell above the door so it would remain silent. He didn’t want Tobias Budge to know he was here yet.

The shop itself was a restored Victorian home in the historic district. The wood tables and drawers scattered throughout were antiques, a good quality but nothing unique or eye-catching. This was a meticulous man with decent taste, but nothing on par to Hannibal’s own artistic palette. All of the instruments, of course, had catgut strings.

*Hiding the evidence in plain sight. You are a reckless man, Tobias.*

He could hear the strains of a violin from another room. The music stopped suddenly.

“Dr. Lecter, I didn’t hear you come in,” Tobias said as he entered the room.

“I didn’t want to interrupt your playing,” Hannibal said. “I recognize the tune: The Point of No Return. You’re a fan of the Phantom of the Opera?”

“Yes. I’m part of a community orchestra, and what better music to entertain the locals?” Tobias said. “Mystery, intrigue, danger, not to mention the typical love triangle.”

“The beautiful Christine caught between two men,” Hannibal said. “An honorable viscount named Raoul, a close friend whom she has grown to love, and the sinister Phantom, a man that inspires both her passion and her fear.”

“The Phantom may have inspired her passion for singing, but never her love,” Tobias said. “She loved Raoul, like any good heroine of the early 20th century. Anything I can do for you, Dr. Lecter?”

“It appears you sent an invoice to the wrong address,” Hannibal said, bringing said invoice out of his pocket and unfolding it.

“Did I?”

“A paid invoice for Will Graham for a piano tuning. You shouldn’t make a habit of sending your accounts to the wrong customers, it would be bad for business.”

“Yes, I can imagine why you’re concerned,” Tobias said, as he took the paper from Hannibal. “Tell me, how are Franklyn’s therapy sessions?”

“I am sure you are aware I cannot answer that; doctor-patient confidentiality,” Hannibal said.

“Not much confidentially needed when Franklyn tells me everything said during his therapy sessions. He considers me his closest friend.”

“Then you know he believes you are using him to send messages; messages intended for my ears.”
“Messages which you’ve been ignoring for weeks,” Tobias said. “Too busy hoping to play house with Will Graham? You don’t need a pretend family to go along with your pretend social life, what you need is a friend. Someone who understands you.”

“Nothing about my feelings in regard to Will Graham is a pretense,” Hannibal said. “And I don’t want to be your friend.”

“I saw you,” Tobias said with a triumphant smile. “Yes, at the bus yard.”

Hannibal went very still.

_The bus yard is where I left one of my recent victims for the FBI to find. If he saw me, then he knows I’m the Chesapeake Ripper._

“I have to say I was impressed,” Tobias said. “The two of us are both masters at what we do. We think alike, you and I.”

Hannibal had firmly kept his distance until now because Tobias was too impulsive. Those were the killers who got caught, no matter how smart they were. And now Hannibal had to face that he had been as careless as Tobias.

He was used to his secret being his own to keep, and had long since accepted the risk of what should happen if he got caught. But if he were discovered by the FBI now, he would lose Will and the children forever, and Will would be investigated too. The stakes had changed.

“It seems we both have secrets we keep,” Tobias said. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep your secret, just as you’ll keep mine.”

_A promise too easily broken._

“When I killed that trombonist I wore a mask, unlike you,” Tobias said. “It’s hard to know where video surveillance is anymore; anyone can get video cameras remarkably cheap. And there might be an unexpected witness. My advice to you? Maybe you should consider wearing one too.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Hannibal said.

_For years I delighted in not hiding my face while committing my crimes. I wanted to prove I was too smart to be caught, but he is right, it’s a foolish risk I can no longer afford._

“We can learn from each other,” Tobias said. “You need to start thinking about what truly matters. If Will Graham is Christine, you aren’t Raoul. You’re the Phantom and he’s going to try to escape you.”

“Will has no need to run from me,” Hannibal said.

“You mean you won’t let him him run,” Tobias said, amused. Then leaned in close and said, “I’m a music tutor, I know how to deal with distracted students. Kids—they always want to text something or post on Instagram—it’s hard to get them to concentrate on the sheet music. I’ve found it best to simply get rid of the distraction, take their phone away if I have to. You understand what I’m saying?”

“You’re saying you intend to take my phone away from me?”

“Will Graham is a distraction, and I intend to make you pay attention to what’s really important.”
“You sure it's him?” Abigail whispered as Will used a bump key on the deadbolt. It was three in the morning, and both he and Abigail were doing their best to pick the lock on the back door of Tobias Budge’s music shop.

“If it makes you feel better, we’re checking the basement before killing him,” Will whispered back. “That’s where he’s likely been making the catgut. If he has any human intestines he’s currently tanning, we’ll know he’s our killer.”

The deadbolt slid back into the door, and Will quietly opened the door.

“You’d think he’d have more security,” Abigail said as the two of them slipped inside the building, Will around the right door jamb and Abigail around the left, with their guns raised. They were in an empty hallway.

“No point when the door frame is wooden and there’s so many windows,” Will whispered. “Most burglars are going to use forced entry, not pick your lock.”

Kicking down a door was faster than picking a lock, but since Tobias lived in the second and third stories above the shop, silence was more important than speed in this case. He and Abigail walked down the hallway side-by-side, guns still up and ready if they should encounter an unexpected visitor, until they got to the front desk next to the stairs. They could see into most of the other rooms. The rooms were clear.

“He’s not going to want security cameras in place to record him dragging his ‘guests’ to the basement,” Will continued. “Or a security company calling 911 because something tripped an alarm.”

He looked around the unlit music shop. There was light from the outside street lights filtering in through thin curtains and shining down on the hardwood floor. String instruments like cellos and double basses were propped up on stands in every corner of every room, and the walls were lined with racks suspending violas and violins.

This place was a museum of the dead. Each violin, each cello, each dulcimer were strung with homemade catgut strings threaded through the fine tuner and the tuning pegs. He could see the afterimages of the deceased in the room.

A homeless man, with a hood over his overgrown hair and a blanket wrapped around him like a loose cocoon, was trying to keep warm in the Baltimore winter. He sat against one wall, next to the double bass strung with his gut. There was a young woman with short blonde hair pacing the room. Will guessed her face could be found on a Missing Persons list. Her shirt was torn apart around her stomach, and he could see the empty cavity in her abdomen. She was talking to herself, agitated and angry. A golden retriever sat near her, watching her restless vigil. The visible part of his belly was matted with blood.

He blinked and the apparitions disappeared. Abigail peered into the adjoining rooms as he carefully inventoried the front room, noting not everything was as it should be.

“What makes you say that?”

“Something happened here, today, in this shop,” Will said. “Something important.”

“What makes you say that?”
“What sort of front desk has a keyboard but no computer?” Will said, tapping his hand on the desk next to the aforementioned keyboard. “Something happened to the computer itself, and there’s been no time for a replacement.”

“Maybe it got sent in for repairs?” Abigail said. “Computers just stop working sometimes.”

“No, something happened, look at this,” Will said, rubbing his hand along the edges of a dent in the wall. The wall plaster had dented and chipped, and on the hardwood floor beneath there were deep scratches gouged into the otherwise pristine wood.

Will noticed a door on the far side of the front room with a sign labeled “Staff Only.” Will and Abigail walked quickly—guns still at the ready—across the room and Will silently opened it. He listened intently, peering into the dark room, but didn’t hear anything. An open door on the right led to the basement stairs.

He slowly descended the staircase, motioning for Abigail to follow close behind him. When he got to the bottom of the stairs, the overhead lights were off but several work lamps were on, dimly illuminating the room.

He could see jars of intestines sitting on freestanding metal shelves, a partially constructed violin on a desk, and an area near the back of the room sectioned off by partitions. He moved closer to the shelves, peering at the collection of jars. Tobias had harvested far more than Will realized.

“I’d say he’s definitely our guy,” Will said.

Something crunched under his feet, and he moved to the side. It was shards of glass near one leg of the shelves. Will nudged a couple pieces of the glass with the toe of his shoe, and noted a few empty spots on the otherwise crowded shelves.

He moved further into the basement, finding a massive sink full of soaking partially-tanned strings behind the partitions. Walking back toward the basement entrance, he swept his gaze over the workshop table and paused, running a finger along the crease where the desk and wall met.

“What’s wrong?” Abigail said.

“No sawdust. He assembles wood instruments but there’s no sawdust, not even in difficult-to-dust areas? Something else was cleaned up last time this desk was used; something that needed to be spotlessly cleaned from every nook and cranny,” Will said. “And if I had to guess what it was, I’d say blood.”

They left the basement, ascending the stairs to the living quarters above. The hallway at the top of the stairs was illuminated by moonlight, shining in from the window of an adjoining room. An ornate hallway runner snaked through the hallway and he could faintly see the large Victorian ceiling medallion above them, making him feel like they’d just stepped back in time 150 years.

“He’s not here,” Will said.

“How do you know?”

He pointed at a coat rack and the entry table with miscellaneous items scattered on it.

“No winter coat, and no car key fob,” Will said. Then he heard a sound; a floor creak in another room.

*Looks like I was wrong. He’s here.*
He motioned for Abigail to follow him and he moved towards where the sound may have come from. Will entered a living room crowded with furniture common to that bygone era. Like the hallway, the only illumination came from a couple uncurtained windows, casting everything in the pale light of the moon. In the center of the room was a Victorian fainting couch the color of red wine, and there was a body sprawled upon it.

*Another victim?* Will wondered. He quietly moved closer.

It was Tobias Budge himself, so bloodied and mutilated that some of his bones were visible. Thin piano wires glinted in the dim light above him, twinkling in and out of visible eyesight.

A shadow in the room suddenly moved, and a man stepped into the dim light. He was dressed all in black, including a black cloth mask over his entire face. Over the dark clothing was a transparent plastic suit, the kind that wouldn’t leave any DNA evidence behind.


“No point in leaving; he’s already seen our faces,” Will said. That’s what Will got for assuming the only person who’d see them would end up dead.

It was better to wait and suss out this killer’s intentions towards them. If he was going to try to kill them, better for him to try now, rather than let him track them down later. If he tried to kill them at home, Jesse and C.J. might get hurt too.

But after several long minutes of a silent standoff, the killer seemed merely intrigued by his unexpected visitors. Will’s curiosity got the best of him, and he snuck a glance at Tobias’s body.

Tobias looked like a victorian lady who had swooned, head lolling on the only arm of the sofa, which was similar to the inclined headrest of a therapist’s couch. The man’s right arm was up and arched high over his torso like a ballerina’s pose. The meat and skin had been scraped off the arm, leaving only the bones plus the ligaments and cartilage needed to keep them connected. The arm was suspended in place by piano wires lashed to the wrist, the radius, and the humerus, all of it tethered to a chandelier that was only partially visible in the deep shadows of the ceiling.

Catgut strings had been tied to the ulna bone, stretching down from the arm to something large and protruding from the right side of the chest. Will inched forward to get a better look at it, eyes never leaving the black-clad figure silently watching him. The figure made no move to stop him.

Once close enough he reached his hand out and gently touched whatever was sticking out of the torso. It was leather stretched across the rim of what looked like a bowl. But not a ceramic or plastic bowl; instead it had an exaggerated texture to it and was shaped more like an old WWII helmet. He could feel spiked hills and valleys on the “bowl” and it felt as rough as sidewalk concrete—

“Is this a *turtle shell*?” Will blurted out.

“I think it’s a tortoise shell,” Abigail said. “Or at least the upper half of one. This is an *arched harp*. Remember the display in the art museum? This is how the ancient Egyptians made their first lyres: a wooden arched harp with a tortoise shell.”

“The first lyres. So this is a beginning; an origin,” Will said. “But not the killer’s origin; he’s too experienced. Some other beginning. It’s a working instrument, like the human cello?”

“That cello would have been able to make a sound, but not a tune,” Abigail said. “There was no way to tune the vocal chords, there wasn’t a soundboard to amplify the string vibrations loud enough to
be easily heard, and I would think vocal cords and infrahyoid muscles would be too short to make anything but a weak higher-pitched sound when played like a string instrument.

“This, on the other hand, has even got the tuning levers and wraps,” Abigail said, pointing at wooden pegs and muslin cloth attached to the ulna bone where the catgut string was wrapped. “And there’s round holes in the leather, amplifying the sound, like f-holes in a violin. It’s got a dozen different strings. I’m pretty sure anything you can play on a baby harp, you can play on this.”

Will plucked a string to hear it. It made the same brief sound as a plucked guitar string. He took a closer look at the tortoise shell that served as a soundboard. Half of it was out of view, buried in the chest. Tobias’s skin was sewn closed tightly closed around it, maybe even attached to it. The exposed top half-circle of the shell was where the strings connected to a wooden spine in the leather.

The chest moved under his hand and he realized Tobias was still alive. He jerked away from the body, gun ready if Tobias should move.

“He’s still alive?” Abigail said in disbelief. “I don’t understand, there’s no room for his lung.”

“You don’t need both lungs to live,” Will said. “Even with only one lung, you’ll have decent respiratory function.”

Despite the shallow breaths, Tobias was motionless.

“You partially paralyzed him,” Will realized, glancing at the masked and silent killer. “You wouldn't want him moving and ruining the art you’ve made of him. That plastic suit you’re wearing, how you managed to keep him alive even after carving him into your own unique creation—it all speaks to a careful, meticulous type of planning. You took the time to prove you could do this better than him. But that’s not why you did this.”

The pendulum swung.

Will stood across from Tobias, the front desk between them. Tobias was talking, but the sound was too muffled and distorted to hear. Will doesn’t need to hear him, all he needed to know was the impact of the words on the killer.

“I don’t plan on killing you yet,” Will said, watching Tobias and his smirking eyes. “I want you dead, but I will wait until tonight. The shop will be closed, the streets dark, and you will be vulnerable.”

Tobias’s face blurred and then he became Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Will paused, brow furrowed.

Why Garrett Jacob Hobbs? Will thought, staring into Garrett’s eyes. The dull eyes stared back at him, glazed and cloudy with stagnant fluid from death and decay. Garrett reached for Abigail, pulling her to him. She struggled, sounding hurt and scared. He held the knife at her throat.

“See?” Garrett Jacob Hobbs said. “See?”

“I pride myself on my emotional detachment,” Will said, watching the unfolding scene carefully. “I never lose control of myself. Except… except this time.”

“Dad please, help me,” Abigail said, reaching one hand out to him. Will reached back, touching their fingertips together, then grasping her hand in his.

“You wanted to take something I loved,” Will whispered. Just like Garrett Jacob Hobbs, who had wanted to kill someone Will loved. Will raised his gun, and then he was back at the Hobbs’ hunting
“Wha—who is this?” Mrs. Hobbs said, voice frantic and grief-stricken as she looked around her family’s cabin. “Garrett! Oh god—you didn’t kill those girls, you didn’t—oh god. No, no—”

The body of Elise was on the table.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Hobbs said, as he held a knife to Abigail’s throat and blinked back tears. He wasn’t apologizing to Mrs. Hobbs. “I couldn’t watch you leave.”

Abigail looked at Will, face stricken with fear.

_He’s going to kill my daughter unless I stop him_, Will thought.

He was back at the front desk in the music shop, and his gun fired again and again. Garrett Jacob Hobbs stumbled back from the impact of each bullet.

“I lose control,” Will said, panting with adrenaline and rage, as he watched the body of Garrett Jacob Hobbs slump onto the floor. The body faded and then it was Tobias standing behind the desk again. Will knew what to do.

“It’s dangerous to attack him during the day, when the shop is still open and anyone could wander in, but I. Don’t. Care,” Will said.

Tobias broke eye contact and glanced to the side, a stupid mistake to make when facing a predator. Will quickly grabbed a cello spike from a nearby display table and moved to strike a deadly blow through the neck.

Tobias crossed his arms in front of his neck just in time, so the spike stabbed through his hand instead of his neck. He cried out in pain, his uninjured arm lashing out and knocking a computer monitor from the desk, shattering the monitor screen on the ground.

Will tried to grab him and the two of them grappled, before Tobias stumbled back and out of reach. He tried to flee. Will grabbed a nearby bust of whoever the hell it was—Beethoven, Bach, Chopin—from the table by the window. When he threw it, Tobias barely dodged.

“The wall is plaster, not drywall, so the break in the wall is small,” Will said. “After this fight, I will wipe down the sculpture, removing my fingerprints and putting it back in its place. I will put _everything_ back in its place. It is not just to prevent any trace of evidence. Later I will be unsettled by how easily I succumbed to this passionate moment, and I will wish to erase all signs of it.”

Tobias launched himself at Will, hands going for the throat, and the two stumbled, nearly falling to the ground. After a minute’s struggle, Will freed himself from Tobias, who knocked Will across the head with a fist and ran for the door labeled “Staff Only.” Will was in hot pursuit.

He followed him down into a dark basement, the lights turned off by Tobias to give himself an advantage: his pursuer will stumble around in the dark while Tobias would navigate the familiar room with ease. Will paused, panting harshly.

He slipped off his shoes; and silently advanced, sticking more to the walls of the room than the center. He listened carefully, but Tobias was as frustratedly quiet as he was. This would not be an easy fight, but he wasn’t frightened or apprehensive, he knew he would win. He would win because he was _better_.

A small corner of the room was slightly illuminated by the “power on” indicator of a surge protector,
and while moving too close to it would reveal his position in the room, a workshop table with a surge protector very likely meant one thing: power tools.

He moved toward it but a body collided with him, twisting a wire around his neck. Will struggled and thrashed, knowing with his injured hand Tobias wouldn’t be able to keep a sufficient grip on the wire as long as Will exerted enough force. He lunged forward with all his weight, hands gripping the wire just behind his neck to keep it from digging in too much. The wire snapped from Tobias’s hand while Tobias yelled in pain.

Will stumbled into a free-standing metal shelf unit filled with jars of intestines, propelled forward by the sudden lack of resistance. The jars teetered, a few falling and smashing on the ground.

Will turned and kicked Tobias in the stomach, knocking Tobias into the wall with an audible thump. As Tobias struggled to right himself, Will grabbed him in a tight bear hug, pinning Tobias’s arms beneath his own crossed ones. Tobias pushed all of his weight back against Will, unbalancing him. Will let himself fall while he still held onto Tobias tightly.

Once prone, he hooked his legs inside of Tobias's thighs so he couldn’t escape and moved one arm up from the chest to compress the neck with a chokehold, cutting off his air supply. Tobias thrashed and tried to gasp, anything to breathe, but Will was unrelenting.

The body eventually went limp. Will waited and then released the hold, not wanting to kill Tobias yet. But he was unconscious, which was what Will needed.

He dragged the body next to the workshop table and turned on a desk lamp. There was a table saw for fret slotting, various chisels and knives for carving wood, and a small soldering iron for the occasional repair work on electrical guitars.

“I’ve found exactly what I’m looking for,” Will said, glancing down at Tobias’s unconscious body. “I need to get my medical equipment from home; he’s going to need extensive surgery to transform him into what I’ve envisioned, and some blood transfusions to stay alive after I’ve remade him. But for now, I need to know he’s not going to escape, and that’s going to require some modifications to the body.

“I hang up the Closed sign in the music shop and I get to work.”

As any craftsman knew, creating a masterpiece relied on obtaining the right materials. He arranged Tobias on the ground, rolling him onto his left side and positioning the head so the man could breathe easier through his bruised windpipe. Removing Tobias’s shirt, he took note of where each vertebrae was. He couldn’t just paralyze him from the neck. With the further injuries he intended to inflict upon the chest, it could be lethal to paralyze the torso too, so he’d have to settle for a lower vertebrae to immobilize the legs at least. He removed Tobias’s belt to use as a makeshift tourniquet.

Will imagined the ridge of Tobias’s spine slowly morphing into the neck of a violin, the scroll of the neck originating near his tailbone. The outline of his ribs shifted and rearranged itself, beginning to protrude from the back until it became the body of the violin.

You will be my instrument, Will thinks. It’s all you’re good for anyways, Tobias—being played.

He turned back around to the table to find the violin lying on the desk. The pendulum swung and the instrument broke apart, time reversing while the pieces become nothing more than wedge-shaped wooden billets. It was time to assemble his creation.

I start with seasoned wood from old growth trees, Will thought as he folded Tobias’s vest over the
man’s right arm to act as a buffer then fastened the tourniquet in place. *I cannot use green wood to make a violin. The wood must have had time to dry out, evaporating the moisture lurking inside.* He elevated the right arm, milking the blood back into the main body.

*A violin is made of more than one type of wood,* he thought as he located the correct vertebrae on Tobias’s spine. *A soft wood for the front as it vibrates more easily, but a harder wood is used for the rib assembly. I select the wood I want, but I will need to trim them down to size.* The muscle of Tobias’s arm was bendable like spruce wood, and his spine hard like maple.

*And so I cut the billets down to size.*

“When he’s sufficiently paralyzed and the blood vessels in his right arm are cauterized for his later metamorphosis, I grab his winter coat, house keys, and the car key,” Will said, turning off the soldering iron with a blood-smeared hand. “The coat will cover the blood on my own clothes, and his car will be much closer than my own.”

Will began the search for Tobias’s car, taking his time to enjoy the biting cold air outside and the clear skies. It was easy to bask in the energy that buzzed in his veins and the satisfaction coiled inside his stomach. He pressed the unlock button on the car key until he heard a beep in a very small lot between the shop and a nearby pharmacy.

“I drive home and then return with *my* workshop tools—a rib retractor, whole blood bags, clam knife, bronchial blocker, chemical sanitizer, nasogastric tube, and of course, my Chef’s knife,” Will said, picking up the knife and admiring his reflection in it. A man in a black mask stared back at him from the knife’s surface. “The first place to begin is the ribs.”

*I construct the violin’s rib assembly out of thin strips of wood, blocks, and linings.* Will turned on the oscillating saw, peering into the incision in Tobias’s chest where he would split the sternum. *When I am finished, I give the glue time to dry to cement the pieces of the rib assembly in their proper place.*

After he had a stack of the front sections of Tobias’s right ribs, he set the remaining stumps of the ribs in place with metal plates and screws.

*I cut out the shape of the front and back of the violin from the billets.* With Tobias’s air supply successfully diverted to just his left lung with an endobronchial blocker, Will isolated and split the superior and inferior pulmonary veins.

*I gouge the front and back sections of the violin so each has a rough arch to it.* Will set aside the extracted lung, picking up the chef’s knife and inspecting the right arm. It was ready for him to trim off the meat. *Once I have the rough shape of the arch, I refine it with a scraper, smoothing it until the wood is the desired thickness.* He scraped at what was left of the flesh with a clam knife, and then fastened the bones firmly into place with small metal plates at the joints.

“Once I’ve constructed the body, it’s time to string my instrument,” Will said, positioning Tobias in place on the fainting couch. His body sang with pride as he tied piano wire to the chandelier.

*I created art out of ugliness,* he thought as he wound catgut string around bone. *I have created beauty.* For a moment, neither the past or future existed, only awe.

He could hear voices below him: company had arrived. After turning off the lights in the room, he silently crept to the windows, opening the curtains to let in the night. He waited in the darkness for the unexpected guests to make their way upstairs, curious to see their reaction to his art, anticipation in his bones.

*I have never felt like this before,* Will realized.
I have been Garrett Jacob Hobbs, internally flinching in fear everytime the phone rang, the doorbell buzzed; every time I heard a police siren in the distance. I have drowned in my own guilt and obsession.

I have been Eva Blair, haunted by my children’s other families and consumed with the fear my children would leave me for them, certain I would lose them. I’ve been Jack Crawford, driven by guilt and righteousness, living for the thrill of making killers pay for their crimes, but also mired in the inescapable knowledge there will always be more killers and more victims.

Beverly Katz, hiding her scars behind humor and wit. Alana Bloom, clinging to the security of rules and self-enforced boundaries. Abigail Hobbs, Brian Zeller, Freddie Lounds, police officers, store clerks, priests, doctors—and never once have I felt this powerful and at peace.

The realization jolted him, breaking his concentration and ripping the killer’s mind from him. He floundered, suddenly bereft of the moment he had immersed himself in. His body was shaking and trembling, overloaded by his experience.

The light feeling inside him grew heavy, the room closing in on him. His constant companions—fear, guilt, worry—were back in an instant, filling up the space that had just a moment ago been filled with wonder. It was unfair this killer enjoyed such constant peace and happiness, while Will himself spent his nights racked by nightmares and his days haunted by the dead.

He could hear music. Will looked around the room through the haze of the disorientation still clinging to him, and saw the killer next to Tobias’s upraised arm, strumming the strings and playing his instrument. The tune was slow and sweet, almost sensual.

Time passed. Will didn’t know how long or how short of time, his mind drifting on the waves of the music. When the music finally stopped, Will almost smiled. He noticed Tobias’s eyes were barely open, struggling to regain consciousness.

“I know why you chose to make this particular instrument,” Will said. He could feel the killer’s gaze on him. “A tortoise's shell is his home. Tobias meant to take that away from you, whatever you consider your home. He meant to destroy a home, so now his punishment is to protect one instead, keep it safe inside his body.”

The killer stepped away from Tobias and into the shadows. He reappeared a moment later carrying something—maybe a large toolbox?—towards Will. He was surprised when the killer handed it over to him. He opened it. Inside was the missing lung and the arm meat. The meat had been bled, wrapped in butcher paper, packed with ice, all so it wouldn’t spoil.

“You’re just like me, Will thought. You eat them too.

“Are you giving this to me?” Will asked. The man nodded.

Does he know what I’ve been doing, how I’ve been getting rid of the bodies?

He saw a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned to see Tobias weakly grabbing the chef’s knife from the instrument tray within arm’s reach, and before Will could move out of the way, he felt the bite of the blade in his upper thigh just below his groin.

He shouted in pain, removing the blade as he struggled to stay standing, and before he knew what he was doing, there was a gaping slit in Tobias’s throat, blood pouring out. Will frowned at all the blood now coating his clothes.

“Sorry for killing your harp,” Will said to the killer, stumbling in pain as he let the knife drop from
his gloved hands. “But you were only keeping him alive as punishment anyways.”

The killer seemed more concerned with getting a look at Will’s injured leg, crowding in on Will and shining a flashlight to illuminate the puncture wound. He grabbed a surgical towel from his instrument tray, and practically kneeling on the floor, pressed it to Will’s wound and applied pressure.

“What’re you—” Will said. “Oh. You performed a perfect pneumonectomy on Budge, you’re probably a doctor.” Now that Will was injured, he was too aware that this would be the moment the killer would attack them if he wanted to.

“Take the ice chest to the car and wait for me there,” Will said to Abigail.

No point in risking her safety, just in case. The man helped Will to a nearby chair as Abigail left the room. He debated how to best get his pants out of the way so the killer-doctor could tend to the wound. The wound was way too high up his leg to simply roll up his pants; it had cut him barely below some very vulnerable, and valuable, parts of himself that Will very much didn’t want to lose.

Will could cut a larger hole in the pant leg, but funds were tight right now and he needed these clothes for hunting, and no sense making it harder than it would already be to patch it. In the end, he sighed and shucked them off before sitting down in the chair. Maybe it was weird to feel more vulnerable in just his boxers. After all, it wasn’t like a pair of pants would stop a blade. Will pulled up the right leg of his boxers to expose the bleeding gash. The killer made no remark about it, just handed Will the flashlight and got to work.

He thought he could feel the man’s breath against his upper thigh and drifting up his boxers everytime the man had to lean in close while cleaning and stitching the wound. It was a weird, slightly distracting feeling. *Maybe I should have kept the pants on*, Will thought.

A topical anesthetic had been used to numb his leg, so he didn’t feel the bite of the needle but he could still feel the tugs on his skin as the needle danced back and forth, the thread pulling his skin back together. A gentle hand occasionally touched his arm—a comforting gesture—that Will concentrated on to help him pull his scattered mind back together too.

When the killer finished, he paused, still kneeling on the floor hunched over Will’s lap. He slowly lifted his head to stare straight at Will, eyes hidden behind the mask. After a moment, the killer took off his own gloves and put his hands back on Will’s naked thigh. Will could feel the heat from those hands burning into his skin; the thumb on one hand restlessly drawing circles on Will’s skin.

There was a silent question in the air. An offer.

It had been years since anyone had touched him like that. It was a terrible idea. But he could pretend the man was Hannibal, just to find out what it was like to have sex with men, just feel for a change. He hated being back in his own skin, alone with his fear and his worry and his doubt, but no—

*I should say no*, Will thought. *This isn’t some guy I found in a bar. I should, I should—*

He could still hear the music in his mind, and he could feel the phantom touch of strings against his fingers.

Will nodded.

The killer yanked down Will’s boxers, obviously strong and not afraid to manhandle, and buried his face in Will’s crotch. The man inhaled, luxuriating in Will’s scent. No woman he’d ever been with had ever done *that* before. Will shifted, feeling awkward.
A large, warm hand wrapped around him, starting an easy rhythm. Will closed his eyes to relax and let himself get hard, basking in the pleasure and the quieting of his own mind. The gentle friction felt as sweet as a tender embrace. A wet tongue pressed against the head of his cock and Will jolted, pleasure and animal need spiking in his veins. He opened his eyes to see the man had rolled his mask up above his mouth, though his head was angled down and Will couldn’t even get a proper look at his lips.

The tongue disappeared, and the lips pressed a light kiss where the tongue had been just moments ago. Then the man licked a broad stripe up him from the root to the tip. Will made an embarrassing grunt. The hand came back, affectionately stroking a thumb across the head, and then angling his cock as the man took him into his mouth.

He had forgotten how beautifully wet and hot a mouth felt wrapped around him. Will panted, almost in pain from how unfamiliar this level of pleasure felt to him. He listened to the slick, wet noises filling the room, and gripped the armrests of the chair he was sitting on.

He was tempted to let himself drift into the killer’s mind again. He shouldn’t. It didn’t matter how free he felt in this killer’s mind.

Instead he let himself picture this man as Hannibal. He pretended that there was no mask obscuring his face; that there blonde hair hanging down from his bobbing head and that those were Hannibal’s broad shoulders shoved between his legs. Will was making all sorts of embarrassing noises now.

His hands gripped the arm rests of the chair. It took only a second, too caught up in the sensations, and his control slipped, his mind tangling into the killer’s mind once again. He could taste the man’s desires on his own tongue, sweet and cloying. He felt ravenous hunger arc through his stomach, the desire to consume and be consumed, to be seen. It was the kind of hunger he never permitted himself to feel; he had done his best to starve it out of himself.

His legs, before spread as wide as possible to avoid even brushing against his partner, snapped shut around the man, trapping his torso in an embrace. Will’s hand dug into the killer’s shoulder, urging him on. Time stretched and slowed down, until his head tipped back as the pleasure finally crested, and a feeling as foreign as peace settled inside him—the feeling of a sated appetite.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter warning for gore: Will finds the body of a victim of the Chesapeake Ripper. He then mentally recreates the crime scene as the Chesapeake Ripper. Includes violence, mutilation, and non-consensual surgery/ body modification. The goriest moment of this chapter is when muscle gets scraped off bone, so heads up on that specific moment.

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Some modern arched harps are nearly identical in construction to ancient Egyptian arched harps. I’ve included a couple links to photos of these harps plus a link to a photo of an ancient Egyptian arched harp at the Met Museum.

This arched harp has the tortoise shell soundbox, but fewer strings and a different tuning system than the arched harp in my fic:
This arched harp has same number of strings and tuning system as in my fic, but a wooden soundbox instead of a turtoise shell: https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/43.2.1/

And finally an arched harp with a turtoise shell soundbox and the same tuning system, but a smaller number of strings: https://www.britannica.com/art/arched-harp/media/32696/4267

If you want to know what the arched harp sounds like, here’s a youtube clip: https://youtu.be/IbMd_rySyEU

Thank-you to Katarra for beta reading!

And thank-you to each of you who have left a kudos or comment! Your comments and kudos were a highlight of 2018, and make it a joy to write this fic :)
Hannibal savored the flavor of Will on his tongue; the taste of salt and sweetness still lingered.

He had discovered many years ago that meals were not merely composed of the food, but also the atmosphere surrounding the dining experience. It was why he made a production out of cooking and serving, and why he hunted the meat himself; it imbued the meal with purpose. Mix a deep hunger gnawing at your belly with the right company, and add a dash of memorable circumstances, and the resulting dining was indescribably good. Sex was no different. If he could taste one thing the rest of his life, he would choose Will’s essence on his tongue, whether it was the taste of his lips or his semen or his beautiful words.

This was getting dangerous. He was addicted and emotional, as loathe as he was to admit it. And now he was making decisions he never thought he would be tempted to make.

Hannibal had one important rule when he was the Chesapeake Ripper—never target anyone who could be traced back to Dr. Lecter. But as with everything else involving Will Graham, he had made an exception.

It could be dangerous for the FBI to investigate Tobias as a Ripper victim, especially with what Franklyn knew. It would have been better to have just left Tobias with a snapped neck or a crushed skull. The death would be written off as a burglary gone wrong; something the local cops would concern themselves with, not the FBI, provided Hannibal disposed of the half-tanned catgut in the
basement.

But Hannibal had wanted Will to see.

If he had left Tobias as just a regular corpse, the murdered music shop owner would barely get a mention in the local news. Certainly no photos, and similarly not worth the news headlines all the way over in Wolf Trap.

But as a Ripper victim, Hannibal’s art would be the main story on every news channel, as well as the lead photos on TattleCrime.com, splayed out in vivid color on a digital screen, all for Will to scrutinize. Will may never connect the dots between himself and why the Chesapeake Ripper chose Tobias Budge, but in the end he would have at least known what had been sculpted out of Tobias’s body.

By now he should have expected Will to surpass any and all expectations. Instead of seeing the photos on the news, Will had seen in person.

When Hannibal had first heard quiet voices drifting up from the downstairs of the music shop, just after he had finished stringing his new somatic harp, he was annoyed that he would have to interrupt his plans for the evening. He had slunk into the shadows, resigned to having more corpses than he had planned on.

Hannibal had stood there, silent and watchful, waiting for the intruders to make their way into the room. When it was Will and Abigail who entered, his heart skipped a beat. His pulse—unaffected even while he had severed Tobias’s lung from his arteries—sped up.

The past few weeks Hannibal had barely seen the object of his affection. Ever since he had adopted the boys, Will had been scarce. Hannibal understood; he must be busier now that he’s raising two more kids.

And now to see that lovely face and those brilliant, intelligent eyes after such a lack. His throat felt parched, and he longed to drink in Will’s presence deeply enough to gratify his thirst.

Hannibal stepped out of the shadows, revealing himself to Will. When they spotted him, Will froze as Abigail uneasily backed away. They both seemed as skittish as deer, but Hannibal knew better. They were mountain lions on the hunt. She said something too quiet for Hannibal to properly hear, and Will shook his head, whispering something back.

What does Will think when he sees me like this? Hannibal wondered. Competition? A threat to get rid of? Or someone much like himself?

Will seemed less interested in him and more interested in Tobias. He moved closer, eyes roaming over the masterpiece, though he seemed puzzled by what he saw, especially by the tortoise shell lodged in Tobias’s chest. In the end it was Abigail who recognized that the catgut strings and tortoise shell made an arched harp, and she explained to Will the instrument was a predecessor to the modern harp. Hannibal couldn’t help but smile, proud of her astuteness.

“So this is a beginning; an origin,” Will mused.

This is the beginning of us, Hannibal thought. Our lives together.

Will plucked a string on the arched harp with a finger, curious and contemplative. Hannibal watched his inquisitive boy inspect the gift he had made for him.

Tobias moved and Will jumped away like a skittish cat. The surprise left Will trembling and gasping
for breath. It took him a few minutes to regain his composure.

“That plastic suit you’re wearing, how you managed to keep him alive even after carving him into your own unique creation—it all speaks to a careful, meticulous type of planning,” Will had said, after he recovered from the shock. “You took the time to prove you could do this better than him. But that’s not why you did this.”

Hannibal could reveal who he was right now, all he’d have to do was remove the mask. But what good was it to love someone unless they were capable of seeing through the mask to the deepest parts of him? Hannibal would rather Will figure out his true identity on his own and prove to Hannibal that he was worthy of what Hannibal was offering.

Will closed his eyes and went very still. Hannibal looked at Abigail, silently asking for an explanation.

“He recreates crime scenes,” she said. “He closes his eyes and then in his head, he becomes the killer. I suppose that means he’s you at the moment.”

Fascinated, Hannibal watched Will closely. Will’s shoulders were slumped and his head was angled slightly down toward the ground. It was the same posture as a marionette dangling from its strings, awaiting the commands of its masters.

“I don’t plan on killing you yet,” Will said suddenly, eyes still closed. “I want you dead, but I will wait until tonight. The shop will be closed, the streets dark, and you will be vulnerable.”

Chills went up Hannibal’s spine. He had known he and Will were alike, and he had studied what he could about Will’s empathy, but to see the depth of Will’s skill in person was breathtaking. Hannibal may have gifted Will this harp, but now Will was harnessing the instrument and his empathy to compose his own sort of love song back.

It was only fair he returned the favor. The hang sang as Hannibal manipulated the strings, pulling from memories of late nights and the melodies that he had discovered playing on his harpsichord while lost in thought about Will.

“I pride myself on my emotional detachment,” Will said, still lost in the reconstruction in his head. “I never lose control of myself. Except… except this time. You wanted to take something I loved.”

Raising one arm parallel to the ground, Will’s fingers curled like he was pointing a gun. He recounted out loud the Chesapeake Ripper’s deadly fight with Tobias step-by-step. The details Will surmised were shocking in their accuracy. Intrigued, Hannibal glanced again at Abigail for the explanation on how Will could have known.

“He saw the missing computer, the glass shards in the basement, along with a few other things,” Abigail said. “The rest he got from seeing your final design for Tobias. And from watching you.”

Will was trembling again. Whatever he saw behind his closed eyes, it was so real that it overwhelmed his senses and left him in a freeze response—sweating, trembling, rigid posture. It was the price Will paid to inhabit the Chesapeake Ripper’s mind, and it was a beautiful sight.

“I will be unsettled by how easily I succumbed to this passionate moment, and I will wish to erase all signs of it,” Will said.

Oh, clever, clever boy. It was both awe-inspiring and alarming how clearly Will could see into him.

Will’s eyes opened, and he stared at Hannibal. There was sweat beaded on his forehead and he was
breathing raggedly.

“I know why you chose to make this particular instrument. A tortoise’s shell is his home,” Will said. “Tobias meant to take that away from you, whatever you consider your home.”

Dear Will, he meant to take you away from me. I could never let that happen.

“He meant to destroy a home,” Will said with a grim smile, “so now his punishment is to protect one instead, and keep it safe inside his body.”

Hannibal dragged this precious moment into the foyer of his memory palace. Standing on the raised sanctuary of the Norman Chapel in Palermo, he watched the devout worshipers silently praying in their seats. He turned his back on them to behold the chapel altar instead.

The mosaic of Christ Pantocrator towering over the altar became a mosaic of Will. His curling hair was wreathed in a halo of glory, one hand held up in a blessing and the other clutching a silver medieval hand mirror. Hannibal could see the faint reflection of his own face in the mirror.

The golden crucifix on the altar was Will weeping and nailed to a cross, his mind and body tormented by pain. Blood dripped from the cross into the sacramental chalice below. Holy Communion—the drinking of blood and the eating of flesh to become one body.

Back in the real world, Hannibal offered Will the sacramental bread of Tobias’s flesh. Will held the ice chest full of meat as if it were a precious thing.

“Are you giving this to me?” Will whispered. Hannibal wanted to assure him there was nothing he wouldn’t give him.

Tobias suddenly moved, and Hannibal could see a faint flash of light—the moonlight reflecting off the Chef’s knife. Will cried out in pain, and Hannibal mouth twisted into a snarl at seeing the knife embedded in Will’s thigh.

Furious, Hannibal advanced on Tobias. No one but Hannibal should make Will sound like that.

He never got the chance to make Tobias pay for his affront. Will grabbed the knife out of his own leg, arm moving in a graceful arc as he wielded the weapon. Tobias’s throat split open, blood cascading down and splashing onto Will and the floor.

The blood adorned Will like jewelry; the stain on the cuff of his sleeve reflected ruby red in the weak light, while the pool of blood spilling over his shoes and across the floor was a dark red, like precious garnets. Hannibal’s hands itched for drawing paper and a pencil.

Will mumbled an apology to him, but Hannibal hardly heard him. The doctor within him was too busy accessing the blood spilling out of Will’s leg wound, at a fast enough rate to worry him.

He quickly scanned the contents on his medical tray. The towel next to the extra ligature clamp was still clean, as it had yet to be used for anything. It was a better option than using a shirt or wasting time searching the house for the linen closet.

Getting down on his knees as if in supplication to a god, Hannibal cupped one hand around the back of Will’s thigh and firmly pressed the towel against Will’s wound with his other. It left his hand just next to the crotch of Will’s pants, comfortingly close to the warmth of Will’s body.

It felt right to be here, wrapped up in the scent of this man. The sheer intensity of the feeling was unexpected. Over the years, he had frequently indulged in affairs and one-night stands, in men and
women, and yet all of it had no more meaning than just another stitch in his person suit. With Will, however, it was different.

He felt desire for Will pulsing in the lining of his stomach, carved into his breastbone, grabbing at his beating heart. How could he satisfy a hunger that felt unending? Even if he explored every inch of Will’s mind and empathy, thoroughly bedded Will on his hands and knees on his bed, or stripped every last bit of flesh from his bones and feasted upon it as his dinner table, he fears he would still want.

When sufficient time passed, he checked under the towel. The blood had clotted as needed; it would be best to get Will off his feet.

There was a parlor chair in the corner, part of a matching set with the couch. He guided Will to it and urged him to sit by lightly pressing down on his shoulder. Will resisted for a second, shuffling on his feet in indecision before bending down and briskly removing his pants.

This was no striptease. Will movements were economical, and he seemed entirely oblivious that someone could be enticed by the sight of him only in his boxers. It was endearing how Will was ignorant of his own power over Hannibal. Will abandoned the discarded pants over the arm of the chair. He lowered himself down into the chair, scowling at the pain radiating from his leg.

Tugging up the leg of his boxers, Will revealed a muscled upper thigh and the newly acquired adornment. It would need stitches.

Hannibal fetched his medical supplies he had brought for Tobias’s transformation—including a surgical needle and unused thread. After sanitizing the needle and cleaning the wound, he got to work.

It was only through sheer discipline that Hannibal’s hands stayed on task; he wasn’t used to feeling distress at another’s injury. But he didn’t regret that Tobias had wounded Will. A wound like this would scar, leaving behind a permanent reminder on Will’s skin of the night they had met each other’s true natures for the first time.

Taking careful note of how shaky Will still was, Hannibal rested his hand against Will’s arm, letting Will feel his steadiness and strength, curious if his empathy would latch onto Hannibal’s calm and help settle down his mind. Will did seem to grow steadier, leaning into his touch, nourished by Hannibal’s assurance and self-command.

It felt like Hannibal was stitching part of himself into Will. He could feel the tug inside, as if the thread he was weaving into Will’s skin was wrapped around his own spine. With each new stitch, he felt the invisible thread between them stretch tighter, urging him closer to Will.

All too fast the knife wound was closed, and Hannibal knew he had to let go of him. But he hesitated, remaining where he was, curled over Will’s lap as if he were one of Will’s dogs begging to be petted.

Will didn’t tense up or lean away, and Hannibal decided to be bold. He removed his gloves—one of the intolerable barriers that existed between them—and rested his palms on Will’s leg, reveling in the warmth from the skin as his eyes traced the visible blue veins, a tantalizing reminder of warm blood and life.

How was it possible that an accident of biology and genetics could have created someone so perfect for himself?
Several emotions flashed on Will’s face: shock, hesitation, and yes, even temptation. Hannibal barely dared to breathe, hoping and waiting. After a moment of indecision, Will finally nodded.

In awe of what Will was permitting him, Hannibal impatiently pulled at Will’s boxers, barely needing Will’s help in getting them off. He was beautiful laid bare before Hannibal’s eyes, his legs splayed wide to invite Hannibal to look.

A patch of dark curling hair rested between his thighs, surrounding a large cock that was rapidly hardening under all the attention, blushing as red as his cheeks. Indulging himself, he basked in the scent of Will for a moment, resting his nose against the slight swell of muscle just above the root. The smell here was richer and damp, slightly soured by the smell of sweat, but still exquisite.

He fingers reverently trailed down the heated skin of Will’s length, soaking in the sight of him. Taking mercy on Will—who was beginning to look desperate—he began to stroke, leaving his fingers loose enough to keep it comfortable until he could find something to slick the way.

The rosy head was too tempting. He used his free hand to tug up the bottom of his mask over his lips—careful to keep his mouth angled down out of Will’s view—and let his tongue savor the taste of Will’s excitement. Will responded beautifully, twitching in pleasure. In gratitude, Hannibal pressed a brief kiss to this intimate part and traced his tongue along the vein on the underside, savoring the taste of flesh. Will’s stomach flexed as he made a low grunt, evidently enjoying Hannibal’s ministrations.

Originally he had intended to use his spit to help slick the way for a handjob, but now that he had a taste, he needed more. He rubbed his thumb against the now weeping head, delighted that Will was just as desperate for this as he was.

Will opened his legs further, and Hannibal shuffled his knees to move into the newly vacated space, grateful to be closer. He grabbed the base of Will’s cock, ready to gorge himself on it. Eagerly devouring Will, he cradled the sensitive head on his tongue. He kept going, letting him slip further into his mouth, reveling in the feeling of Will in his mouth.

He began his rhythm, trying to take in as much of Will as he could. He didn’t have the patience to slow down enough to fit any of it in his throat. Instead he kept a faster pace, letting it nudge near the back of his mouth, keeping one hand wrapped around the part he couldn’t fit. One day, he promised himself, he would take the time to swallow all of Will down.

He let the melody of Will’s satisfied groans wash over him. Legs pressed in against the sides of Hannibal’s ribs, and when he glanced up, Will ravenously stared back at him.

Gripping Hannibal’s shoulder tightly with one hand, he firmly guided Hannibal in a faster rhythm. His eyes fluttered shut in pleasure.

As the muscles in Will’s legs began to tremble, Hannibal concentrated on every flex of the cock in his mouth, hoarding the signs of Will’s pleasure. Will’s pelvic muscles rapidly contracted—likely to delay coming—but Hannibal showed no mercy. He needed to see Will come now.

Will cried out, fingers digging into Hannibal’s shoulder as he flung his head back and gave Hannibal exactly what he needed. He greedily swallowed it down, satisfied at the thought of filling his belly with Will.

Before long Will was dazed and sweaty, panting at the ceiling. Hannibal gently licked him clean, careful to finish before he could become painfully sensitive. Will’s chest heaved and his stomach muscles twitched, still shaking from echoes of pleasure.
Pressing his hand against the bulge in his own pants, Hannibal groaned. It would be too difficult to get at his own with the plastic suit he wore over his clothes. He was so close to coming it wouldn’t take much anyways.

He rubbed at himself through his suit as he licked his lips, chasing the taste of Will that lingered. And to think all those weeks ago—when he had changed the sheets Will had slept on in his room—he had believed it too undignified to take his pleasure while he was fully clothed and kneeling by a piece of furniture stained by the scent of Will’s pleasure. Now, he felt there was nothing undignified in it, not when his mind still echoed with the beauty of Will’s face contorted in pleasure. Quietly gasping, his orgasm overtook him.

The only sound left in the room was the soft pants from the both of them. Hannibal already missed the melody of their lovemaking.

He rolled his mask back down and gently redressed Will, who was still slumped and boneless in the chair. Will’s eyes were bright with pleasure, and seemed content enough to let Hannibal take care of him, though Hannibal suspected the orgasm was to blame for Will’s easygoing compliance.

“Do you do this often?” Will asked as he intently watched Hannibal zip and button him back up.

Hannibal shook his head “no.” He never had sex when he was his true self. Truth be told, he felt almost shaken by the intimacy. Will’s face scrunched up into a look that meant he was pondering his answer.

“So I’m special then,” Will said, in a tone that dared Hannibal to deny it.

Hannibal smiled, though it was possible Will wouldn’t even be able to tell, not with the mask back in place. He stood up, ignoring his aching knees and set about packing everything up to leave. After a few minutes, Will staggered to his feet, favoring his injured leg.

Hannibal grabbed the chair, prepared to haul it to his SUV. He could burn it later.

“Why are you taking—” Will said, then his face turned beet red. “Oh. We wouldn’t be able to get all the, um, DNA out of the fabric and wood, would we?”

So easily embarrassed. Hannibal positively delighted in the flush on Will’s face.

After cleaning up anything that could have their DNA or fingerprints, Will helped him pack up his surgical tools, both of them lingering in the comfortable silence. Perhaps no words were needed for what was building between them. Too soon, they left the music shop, going their separate ways.

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**Wolf Trap, Virginia**
**Graham Residence**

Will slowly woke up to the sound of clanking dishes and hushed conversation from the kitchen. Sleep still clung to the edges of his mind. He could vaguely recall dreaming of Hannibal’s large hands stroking his cock, and he smiled at the memory of it.

“Dad?” Abigail said. He blinked his eyes open, the light assaulting his eyes. His daughter was standing in the entryway to the hallway.
“Hmm?” Will said. She held up the tablet in her hand, but it was too far away for him to see anything on the screen without his glasses. He motioned for her to bring the tablet to him while he searched for his wayward glasses, finding them under the jacket he had dumped in a heap on the nightstand.

“It’s a Freddie Lounds article,” she said. “I think you’ll want to read it.”

Will grabbed the tablet and he had to blink a few times to adjust to the screen’s brightness. He saw an obnoxious red background and the familiar logo of tattlecrime.com before his brain even registered what he was looking at. There, near the top of the lead article, was a photo of Tobias Budge as he had been when Will had left him.

“The Chesapeake Ripper rips the Lethal Luthier,” Will read out loud. Then the words sunk in. “Wait. The Chesapeake Ripper?”

He had sex with the fucking Chesapeake Ripper??

*What the fuck have I gotten myself into?*

“The FBI has repeatedly assured us that investigations into the Lethal Luthier were underway, but in a great moment of irony, it appears it was the Chesapeake Ripper himself who hunted down the deadly craftsman,” Abigail said, reading the article out loud over Will’s shoulder. “Of course, that leaves us to wonder how anyone is expected to feel safe, as the only one capable of saving us from the Lethal Luthier was a savage serial killer infamous for the gruesome displays of his mutilated victims.”

Will covered the bottom half of his face with his hand and tried to breathe. Oh god, what had he done and how had he not realized? Who else but the Ripper would surgically remove a lung, just to make a body into an arched harp, all while the victim was still breathing?

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, after he had silently given himself a stern talking to. “If he was going to kill us, he would have done it then. And it’s not like we’ll ever see him again.”

“Did you show him the dead guy photo?” Jesse shouted from the kitchen. He heard a clatter as Jesse apparently abandoned whatever he was working on to sprint to the living room, Zoe and Max fast on his heels.

“I think Jesse and C.J. were impressed by the harp,” Abigail said. “C.J. seemed especially annoyed he didn’t get to see it in person.”

He could barely get C.J. to read his physics textbook; instead his son preferred articles about serial killers by *Freddie Lounds*. Will was officially the worst dad ever.

“It was even cooler than the guy who got his face eaten by a pig!” Jesse said as he leapt onto a corner of Will’s bed, prompting Zoe to jump onto it too. The dogs were absolutely not permitted on the bed, and Will should really tell her to get down. And he would, any minute now, despite how cute she looked scampering over Jesse’s lap and excitedly trying to lick his face. Jesse laughed as he dodged her attempts, using an arm to shield his face.

“A pig did what?” Will said, still trying to convince himself.

“Oh, there was some guy, and I guess he owned a meat packing company? He fell into one of his own pig pens,” Abigail said. “The pigs *attacked* him and ate off part of his face. They paralyzed him too. In unrelated news, I’m never going near a pig pen ever again.”

“This happened yesterday?”
“No, about a month ago. It looks like the family was keeping it quiet until he had the reconstructive surgery done. I guess he was in some specialized hospital, but he got released to go home today.”

She brought up the news article on the tablet and showed it to Will.

“He spent a career convincing people to dine on pigs,” Abigail said. “And now the pigs have dined on him.”

“Wait, is that the woman from Hannibal’s dinner party?” Will said. Abigail peered closer at the photo of the wheelchair-bound man and his entourage before her eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“When she introduced herself as Margot Verger, I didn’t realize she meant the Vergers,” Abigail said. “It says she’s his sister.”

Looking interested in the conversation, C.J. wandered into the living room as he tore open a bag of chips, immediately getting the attention of every dog in the room. C.J. glared at Ellie, who was doing her very best to look sad and underfed and really in need of whatever delicious food her favorite human was eating.

“That’s not a breakfast food,” Will said, like he actually expected C.J. to actually listen to him for once.

“It’s not breakfast, it’s lunch,” C.J. said through a mouthful.

“We didn’t get back here until 5 a.m.; I figured you could use the sleep,” Abigail said. “Now that it's your turn to homeschool the boys, I intend to catch up on my own lack of sleep. Oh, and maybe stop by the store? I don’t know how but we’re already out of ice cream, and dangerously close to running out of coffee.”

“Well, at least we won’t need to buy any meat,” Will said. “I guess if the grocery bill gets too high, we can always just hunt more often.”

“Actually, I wouldn’t worry about the grocery bill,” Abigail said, clearly pleased about something. “And I think we can afford to get the boys their own phones now, like we wanted to.”

“Yeah, with what money?” Will said as he moved to get up and winced from the pain in his leg, a lovely reminder of just what had happened yesterday. It was worse than a walk of shame—he got to do a limp of shame.

“I got a job offer this morning. Hannibal needs a secretary.”

“Hannibal?” Will said, then felt like an idiot for so obviously latching onto his name.

“Apparently his last one left and he never replaced her. We’ll have to move some of the boys’ studies to the evening, but I think we can make it work. Wait until you hear how much he’s going to pay me.”

“I’m not sure this is a good idea, Abigail. He knows about our financial situation, that might be why he offered the job.”

“Or because he knows me, and he knows I would be excellent at it. And even if that were the case, we don't have the luxury of refusing. We need the money, especially for C.J. and Jesse.”

Will couldn’t argue with that. His father had always despised anything that might smack of charity, but then, what hadn’t his father despised? Will never wanted his children to know what it was like to
skip breakfast just to make the food in the house last longer.

Which didn’t mean that the thought of Hannibal giving a job to Abigail because he pitied them sat well with him. It felt like a hot iron too close to his skin, uncomfortable and something he instinctively wanted to avoid.

“It’s okay to let people care about you,” Abigail said. “If Dr. Lecter wants to help, let him.”

Will feared one day Hannibal would regret his efforts to help.

“A man like Dr. Lecter doesn’t belong in our world, Abigail,” Will warned. “We need to be careful. He doesn’t deserve to get dragged into our problems.”

Especially when said problems now involved the Chesapeake Ripper. But he knew she had already made up her mind.

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**Baltimore, Maryland**

**Dr. Lecter’s Office**

Will trudged up the porch steps of Dr. Lecter’s office building. Instead of renting an office space in a run-of-the-mill business hub, his office was in a brick colonial mansion—likely built by some prominent 18th-century family—and it reeked of wealth.

He felt dwarfed standing in its shadow. Like Hannibal himself, it was an oddity among the crowd of skyscrapers, condos, and busy sidewalks that populated this part of Baltimore. It was a remnant of a bygone century, before houses were produced en masse like automobiles and phones.

He was here to drive Abigail home since he was the one with the car today. Which isn’t to say he didn’t enjoy the brief glimpses into Hannibal’s life he experienced every time he visited the office.

Abigail was stationed at a desk in the waiting room. A beautiful antique with a short hutch, the desk was a damn sight better than what you’d usually find in an office. A small lamp and tea set complete with tray were perched on top the hutch, along with a few potted plants that had apparently migrated here from Hannibal’s dining room herb garden. He could see an appointment book, a tablet, and other methods of record-keeping on the desk itself, yet no computer. Knowing Hannibal, it probably was to avoid ruining the aesthetics of the room.

Compared to the office itself, the waiting room was small but similar in size to Will’s modest kitchen. He had long since memorized the framed artwork in the waiting room. Most were reproductions of classic English and Japanese paintings, showcasing Dr. Lecter’s appreciation for culture and tradition. But two of the illustrations were done by Lecter’s own hand; both of a beautiful nude woman meticulously rendered with pencil, an unsubtle reminder of Hannibal’s taste.

“There’s another killer,” Abigail said quietly, walking past the couch and the pair of chairs that served as seating for whenever there was a waiting patient. “Hannibal’s been brought in on the case. Think you can get him to talk?”

“He probably talks about his cases with Alana; I doubt he’ll feel like opening up to me,” Will said. “But I can try.”
“I doubt he has; they barely see each other.”

“But aren’t they—” Will said, shrugging his shoulder and making a face to complete the question.

“I have yet to see her visit even once since working here, and Hannibal never talks about her,” Abigail said. “If they used to be together, I don’t think they are anymore.”

“Oh,” Will said. For no good reason his pulse sped up.

The door to the office opened, and Will glanced up to see the man in question poke his head into the waiting room.

“Abigail, Miriam Lass will need to be rescheduled—” Hannibal said before he noticed he had company. “Will, it’s a pleasure to see you. You are here to drive Abigail home, I assume?”

“Yeah, uh, had some business in Baltimore,” Will said. If you counted having a pathetic crush on your psychiatrist friend as “business,” it wasn’t even a lie.

“I’m afraid I have some files I wanted to organize, it’ll take awhile,” Abigail said to Will. “Hope you don’t mind waiting around.”

“In the meantime, Will, would you like something to drink?” Hannibal said.

“Oh, I’m sure he’s thirsty,” Abigail said with an oh-so-innocent look on her face. Will did his very best to pretend he didn’t hear her and hurried into Dr. Lecter’s office before she said something worse.

“So tell me, how are the boys?” Hannibal said, gesturing for Will to sit down in one of the chairs near the center of the room while he fetched a bottle of wine.

“Same as always,” Will said. *This morning Jesse used a cardboard box, a white plastic sheet, a Fresnel lens, and our tablet to project some video game’s walkthrough on the wall. And C.J. spent a worrying amount of time reading past articles on the Chesapeake Ripper.*

“And you and Abigail?” Hannibal asked as he poured some red wine in a glass for Will.

“Abigail has enjoyed working for you these past few weeks, and I am happy knowing she is satisfied with her job,” Will said, as he gently took the wine glass he was handed, the tips of his finger briefly brushing against Hannibal’s hand. “Thank you.”

With his own glass of wine in hand, Dr. Lecter retreated to sit across from Will in the other empty chair, buttoned up tight in a 3-piece suit and stiff tie. Hannibal was always so in control; Will wanted to break that calm. He imagined himself on his knees in front of Hannibal, ready to shatter him with his mouth. Just like the Chesapeake Ripper had done for Will.

“And so you find yourself content with your new family,” Hannibal said. Will watched as his imaginary self reached out to unbutton Hannibal’s pants and slowly pull down the zipper. “I am pleased to hear it.”

“And how have you been? Any new cases you’re consulting on?” Will said. “I imagine things get pretty interesting at the FBI.”

The real Will licked his lips as his imaginary self carefully reached through the slit of Hannibal’s boxers to pull him out. He was big and slightly plump from the attention of Will’s hand. He imagined himself looking up into Hannibal’s face, but that Hannibal was too busy to pay him any mind.
“We do have a case that is quite unusual,” Hannibal said. “A woman named Beth LeBeau was found drowned in her own blood. Her face had been slit at the mouth and her killer attempted to pull the skin of her face back.”

“Like he was trying to remove a mask?” Will said. “I’d say whoever killed her had not planned to. This was an act born of an impassioned moment.”

He wanted to see the reaction of Hannibal’s cock to a warm hand wrapped around it, and loved the idea of Hannibal’s thickness sliding through his curled fist. Too bad he could only experience it in his imagination. Maybe he should ask him on a date. But he could too easily imagine the humiliation of Hannibal’s rejection, or worse, Hannibal’s disgust.

Hannibal was a man who only wanted the best of everything, and that wasn’t Will. He may never treat Will the same if he confessed his feelings, and he wasn’t sure he would be able to stand that.

“Even more interesting, the killer never attempted to hide their identity,” Hannibal said. “No attempts were made to prevent fingerprints, and the killer’s dermal tissue was found under the victim’s fingernails.”

“A killer not afraid to get caught?” Will said.

Will pictured himself worshiping Hannibal with his lips and tongue, swallowing him down. How would it feel, his mouth stretched wide by Hannibal?

Will surreptitiously crossed his legs to hide the beginnings of his arousal.

“Or a killer who does not yet realize what he has done,” Hannibal said, nostrils flaring. “The skin tissue was too diseased to leave intact fingerprints or bleed when scratched, likely from an infection that has been left untreated. This killer’s sense of unreality and neglect of self could mean Cotard’s syndrome. Symptoms include a persistent belief on the part of the sufferer that they are already dead.”

Hannibal was so disciplined; Will bet it’d take more to make him lose his composure. He’d just sit there calm and collected while Will worked him, soaking up the pleasure but not being particularly affected by it. Will would have to get wet and sloppy, spit dribbling down his chin while he’d moan helplessly around that thick cock invading his mouth. Surely that would get Hannibal’s attention.

“The attempt to peel back the skin may very well suggest he believed she was not Beth LeBeau, but a stranger wearing her face. Cotard’s is a misfiring in the areas of the brain that identify faces and the emotions associated with them,” Hannibal continued. “He was unable to recognize the face of someone he loved. Instead, he saw only the mask.”

“And he wanted a peek behind that mask,” Will said.

He imagined Hannibal’s self-control finally snapping. Hannibal would put his big hand on Will’s head, grabbing his hair and holding him still as he ruthlessly fucked up into Will’s mouth. He’d take his pleasure and Will would have to give it up to him. Will would—

Taking a deep breath, he came back to reality. He needed to calm down before his excitement became unmistakably visible.

“A mask is a means of deception, but it can also be used to convey truth,” Hannibal said.

“Isn’t it Oscar Wilde who said, ‘give someone a mask and he’ll show you his true face?’”
“We all have a truth more freely expressed when we know we will not be judged for it,” Hannibal said. “What is this killer’s truth?”

“That it’s not just others’ faces he doesn’t recognize,” Will said, “it’s his own too. When he looks in the mirror he sees a mask, and he can’t tell what’s underneath.”

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**Greenwood, Delaware**  
**Beth Lebeau’s House**

Will carefully removed the crime scene tape from across the front door, leaving it intact so he could put it back in place when they left.

“If we aren’t here to hunt, why are we here?” Abigail said, shining her flashlight around the dark living room until they spotted the hallway that led to the bedroom where the victim had died.

“This killer needs our help,” Will said. “He’s ill, physically and mentally, and unless we get him to a hospital there’s going to be more deaths—others and maybe himself.”

“And you think he’ll come back?” Abigail said as they entered the bedroom. The floor was still stained with the victim’s blood, a large mess of red soaked into the wood floor.

“He’s going to look for his friend in the place where he lost her and had found a stranger in a mask instead,” Will said. “He misses her.”

“He doesn’t understand she's dead,” Abigail said. Will shook his head “no.”

The flashlight caught a glimpse of something under the bed; a pale face in the dark room. Will and Abigail froze.

“You’re alive,” Will said into the darkness. “I know you don’t feel like you are, but you’re alive.”

“We’re here to help,” Abigail said.

Whoever was beneath flung the bed towards them, and Will and Abigail scrambled out of the way. The figure darted for the bedroom door, and Abigail followed, grabbing hold of the killer’s arm. The top layer of skin on the arm slid off like a snake shedding its skin.

“Oh my god,” Abigail said horrified, the discarded skin dangling from her fist.

Will took up the pursuit. He had only seen a glimpse, but enough to tell they had gotten one thing about this killer wrong: this was a woman not a man. Abigail followed after, the two of them chasing the fleeing figure through the house and then outside into the night where they lost the trail.

“Split up, let’s see if we can find her,” Will said. “She’s likely frightened; if you find her, talk to her in a soothing, quiet voice and explain we want to help.”

Abigail nodded and began the search over near the shed while Will ventured into the forest. He imagined the trees might feel comforting to the woman; after all, pines and aspen can’t wear masks. A twig snapped behind him. He whirled around.

It wasn’t their killer; it was the Chesapeake Ripper dressed in that fucking plastic suit and black mask
Will gaped for a second, staggering a few steps back and stumbling over a tree root. Once he righted himself, he gestured at the forest around them and said, “If you’re looking for who killed Beth LeBeau, I’m sure she’s around here somewhere.”

The Chesapeake Ripper watched him silently.

“I, uh, didn’t expect to see you again,” Will said softly.

Perhaps he should be afraid. This was a killer who inflicted unimaginable pain on his victims and never showed mercy. He was cruel, calculating, a sadist. Incredibly intelligent. Unashamed of his nature. A talented artist, the likes of which no one even came close to, save for perhaps the infamous Il Monstro before he was locked away in a prison cell.

The Ripper slowly advanced towards him and Will fought the urge to back away, standing his ground instead. A hand softly touched his face, the man’s warm fingers pressing against his skin in an unexpected gesture of tenderness. You’re beautiful, those hands said as a thumb caressed his lips, Will’s mouth trembling against the digit.

After a heart-pounding moment, the hand retreated from his mouth to curve against his jaw, the thumb reaching back to now linger over the shell of his ear, tracing the shape of it. I want you, was the unspoken message.

The question was if Will wanted it too. He really shouldn’t. It didn’t matter if he’d already done it once, this was a bad idea.

The hand withdrew and he was left with an empty, aching pit forming in his stomach. He was tired of loneliness, of no one understanding him. Was it really so terrible to want this connection?

“Don’t stop,” Will blurted out. He blamed his cock for the lapse in judgement.

The Ripper unzipped his plastic suit just enough to fetch something out of a pocket of his pants and held out a blindfold.

“Uh, why would, um,” Will said with an uncomfortable laugh. Then the man held out a condom with the other hand. Will grabbed the foil packet and looked at the masked man with an “are you sure” face.

When he wasn’t given any response, Will slowly put the foil packet on the ground and took the blindfold, tying it over his own eyes. The Chesapeake Ripper adjusted the blindfold to his satisfaction, his fingers tenderly brushing against Will’s face once again as he tugged the strip of cloth in place.

Hands grabbed Will’s shoulders and slowly guided him to sit down on the forest floor. Letting the Chesapeake Ripper blindly maneuver him felt like a surrender, and Will gratefully sank into the quiet peace of relinquishing control.

A lingering kiss was bestowed, soft and gentle. A tongue lightly touched the seam of his mouth, a silent request for Will to open to him, and he did, oh god, he welcomed him right in, and the gentleness was gone in an instant. Desire and passion invaded his mouth.

Now that the kissing was deep and wet and perfect, Will couldn’t wait any longer, fumbling at his own fly to unbutton and unzip. He could hear the man unzip the plastic suit the rest of the way and then Will was left clutching at empty air. He made a desperate annoyed noise, but he could hear the
rustling of clothing that meant his partner hadn’t left him. He impatiently yanked his own pants and boxers off, ready for the man to return to him already.

When his hands felt skin again, the man’s strong bare legs bracketed Will’s own, and then a warm body sat in his lap, pressing against where he ached. Will embraced him, lips seeking out his mouth again. The man’s arm was moving; Will could feel the movement of his shoulder under his hands, but he wasn’t sure why or what he was doing.

Minutes slipped by as Will devoured him with kisses, pausing at one point to discard his shirt only to discover with slight surprise the brush of chest hair when he pressed against his partner once again. Then a wet hand touched Will’s cock, holding it still to slide the condom on. The hand was covered in lube, and Will realized what the man’s hand had been doing earlier.

As a hand spread the slipperiness over his length, the man shifted in his arms. Will groped with his own hands until he found his partner’s hips and held on. Slick heat gripped him as he breached the man, and Will cried out like he was the one being penetrated. The ring of muscle he was slid through was so tight, squeezing him in a firm grip.

Will’s hips shifted and moved, instinct urging him on, even if the position didn’t give him much leverage. His partner had to do most of the work; the man kept Will’s shoulders in a tight grip as he rose up and sank back down, again and again, going a little further each time. By now Will was sure his hold on his hips was hard enough to leave bruises.

After a blissful few minutes, a hand pressed against Will’s chest, and he let himself be slowly pushed until he was lying flat on the ground. The man adjusted his legs and planted both his hands on Will’s chest then began to really move, bouncing himself on Will’s cock.

Will tried to reign in his ragged breathing as he drowned in the smacks of their joined bodies and the jolts of a heavy body moving against him. The Chesapeake Ripper was nearly silent save for stuttered breaths every time Will’s cock hit perfect within him. But the air echoed with Will’s increasingly desperate whines and little grunts like he was in pain, and as embarrassing as it was, he couldn’t make himself stop.

Too soon he felt the building pleasure that meant this wouldn’t last much longer. Desperate, he groped for the other man’s cock, needing to make sure he wouldn’t be the only one coming. When he located what he wanted, the Ripper paused his movements for only a moment—letting Will get a firm grip—before eagerly resuming their coupling. Stroking the heated length in his hand, Will licked his lips and pleaded, “Come for me, please... please... for me.”

The man’s rhythm faltered, and tightened so perfect around Will. Will groaned as spasms stroked his cock, his chest and belly wet with the evidence of his partner’s pleasure. Surrendering to the moment, the building tension inside finally crested, time suspending as he filled the warm body clenching around him with a shudder.

When he came back to himself, he was still blindfolded and sprawled on the bare ground of the forest floor. He could barely feel the cold air thanks to the heat from their coupling, except for his soft cock which was tacky with lube and colder than the rest of him.

A hand tugged off his blindfold, and he blinked up at the masked man who had already put back on his clothes and plastic suit. Will gingerly removed the condom, tying it up and tucking it in the pocket of his discarded pants for disposal later. He shamefully gathered up his clothes.

He was such a fucking idiot. Here he was out in the woods, in the middle of the night next to a crime scene, having sex with the Chesapeake Ripper. They had probably scared off that poor woman if she
heard them.

After cleaning up best he could—both himself and around him—and dressing, Will staggered back towards the house annoyed that his legs were nearly numb with pleasure. He had royally fucked up; they’d never find her now. The Chesapeake Ripper silently trailed after him like a dog following its master.

To his surprise, he found Abigail and the woman sitting on the porch steps, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Abigail had given the woman her coat and had her arm around the woman’s shoulders.

“Are you alright? You were gone a long time,” Abigail said, then looked past Will to the Chesapeake Ripper. “What’s he doing here?”

“I did a really thorough search of the woods and apparently found the wrong killer,” Will lied. “Now that we found her, why don’t we do what we came here to do so we can go home?”

The Chesapeake Ripper slid a knife from the pocket of his pants beneath the partially unzipped plastic suit. Will did not like the way he held the knife, as if he intended to use it.

“What are you doing?” Will hissed. “We’re not going to kill her, we’re taking her to a hospital.”

He could feel the Chesapeake Ripper staring at him.

“You kill the way you do because you enjoy holding the power of life and death in your hands,” Will said. “But she’s already dead, or at least she thinks she is. You want to prove your power, help me heal her.”

Something told him the Chesapeake Ripper would do as he asked. Not because he agreed with Will, but simply because he was curious.

As Will led the woman towards his car, she shuffled forward with watchful eyes and legs tensed to run. She didn’t get close to either Will or the Chesapeake Ripper, instead keeping within inches of Abigail, nearly bumping into her several times.

She reminded Will of Heidee. Those first few weeks Heidee had been shy and easily spooked. When he’d first found the dog limping in the woods along Route 72, he had known the poor thing was in bad shape. The matted and greasy hair. That thin skeletal frame.

The woman, though, was even worse. What should have been the whites of her eyes had yellowed like aged paper, and there were pools of red from bleeding inside the eye. Her skin was ashen and slowly eating itself, her body dying a little more each day.

“Everything’s alright. We just… we need to get you to a hospital.” Will kept his voice gentle and his movements slow as he lured her towards his car like she was another one of his strays.

He motioned for Abigail to take over coaxing while he started the car to blast the heater. At least if nothing else, the warmth would draw her inside.

The Chesapeake Ripper didn’t try to impede Will and Abigail’s progress, but he kept close, watching the woman too closely. Will didn’t need to see his face to know the man was agitated, used to being the center of attention and feeling the first stirrings of bitterness.

It was always the more recent addition to the pack that resented a newcomer.

Will brushed his hand down the man’s arm as he walked by, a little bit of reassurance he hadn’t
forgotten about him. The last thing he needed was the Ripper deciding to get Will’s attention his own way.

Honestly, the man had no need to be worried. What should have been an ill-advised and oh-so-stupid dalliance with a serial killer was fast becoming an attachment.

Will could still hear the echoes of the music the Ripper had strummed on his finely crafted harp, a barely there melody in the quiet night. He felt attuned to the man, aware of every little movement.

How had this happened? Will was capable of one night stands. In college he had hid his empathy and dark humor, all so he could be “normal.” He had lured more than one woman into his bed with false-Will. He had never gotten attached to any of them.

But maybe it had just been too long since he had last experienced intimacy, physical or otherwise. The strain of pretending to be normal had eaten at him, so in the end, he had compromised. He’d behave enough to stay off people’s “danger radar” but would no longer perform the intricate dance to be exactly what people wanted. After he had abandoned that particular model of well-behaved Will, the sex had dried up.

He had gotten used to the lack of intimacy the same way the Louisiana boy, once accustomed to steamy humid nights, had acclimated to the barren winter up north. There’s no cold too cold to become numb to. All you gotta do is be in it long enough. If you’re really desperate, add a bit of whiskey, and your body forgets that -20 wind chill is supposed to be dangerous, which is how some poor fool died every year.

Will had stood out so long in the cold—of social isolation, in others’ wariness towards his empathy, and deliberate and accidental misconceptions of who he was—that he was practically hypothermic. Now he was no longer in that freezing wasteland alone. He had body heat from another warming him up, and the chill inside was chased away, at least for awhile.

Like the jaundiced woman currently darting into his car and warming herself by the heater vents, numbness only lasted until warmth came back. She had been running comfortable and unconcerned through the frostbitten ground in bare calloused feet and a ratty dress, until Abigail had wrapped her in her coat and she had warmed up enough to no longer tolerate the cold. Animal instinct had set it, driving her back to warmth.

The Ripper had stoked a fire inside him to heat him up, and now feeling was returning to what was once numb, causing phantom pain to lance through his chest, belly, and mind. The cold was now intolerable. He’d keep going back to the Ripper unless he had someone else—perhaps Hannibal—to keep him warm.

The woman spied the spare blanket Will kept in the backseat for the dogs, and she snatched it to drape over herself. He winced at all the dog hair he could see.

The Ripper took up a guard position by the open car door, hovering between the woman and Abigail. The way he stood—facing the woman and with his back to Abigail—suggested it was Abigail’s safety he was concerned about, not his own or the woman’s. Will’s not entirely sure how you’re supposed to feel when a serial killer decides to safeguard your daughter, but touched is probably not supposed to be it.

“The closest hospital is about 20 minutes away,” Abigail said, peering at her phone.

Will shook his head. “We’re taking her with us to a hospital in Baltimore. We don’t want her admitted near the crime scene; the police might be looking in the area for someone with her particular
health issues.”

“They can’t put her in a prison, can they?” Abigail said. “I mean, it’s not her fault.”

“In an ideal world they would get her the help she needs. But you never know how it’s going to go,” Will said. “If they’re afraid she’s still capable of killing, well, some would say being locked in the BSHCI is worse than a prison cell.”

Abigail glanced back at the woman with a worried look.

“We’ve got it from here,” Will told the Chesapeake Ripper.

Both the woman and the Ripper turned in Will’s general direction, and between the blanket she was bundled in and the Ripper’s determination to act like a dog guarding its master, it struck him that this wasn’t all that different from rescuing strays.

_Great, Will thought. I've gone from collecting stray dogs to collecting stray kids. And now stray serial killers too._

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who has read, commented, or left kudos so far! Your feedback makes writing this fic a lot of fun, so thank you :)

As to how Hannibal figured out when to be at Beth Lebeau’s house so that he could see Will, in a few chapters we’ll get to see Hannibal figure out when and where to be for the next hunt with Will and it’s the same process. So you’ll have to wait to find out!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Quick recap of where the story is at:

Alana and Margot are secretly dating, and plan to have a baby together. Will does not know this. As far as he knows, Alana’s dating history has only recently included Hannibal. Margot recently tried to kill her brother again, but ultimately failed.

Will and Abigail found Georgia Madchen. They took her to a hospital in Baltimore.

Abigail has started working as Hannibal’s secretary.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Baltimore, Maryland
Dr. Lecter’s Office

“You’re distracted today, Dr. Lecter,” Margot said.

“I apologize if I seem that way,” Hannibal said. He was sitting in his customary position—legs crossed and spine erect—in the chair opposite from Margot. It put his weight firmly on his backside, and he could feel the sharp but pleasant pain between his legs that still held echoes of pleasure. “Do you feel as if I’m not listening to you?”

“No, you’re paying attention,” Margot said slowly, taking her time to puzzle out what it was she was sensing. “But your mind is also somewhere else, far away from here. But I get it. Believe me, I understand the appeal of escaping the present.”

“There is a difference between a healthy distraction and a maladaptive fantasy. Which do you usually find yourself in?”

“Care to tell me the difference?”

“Far from conventional wisdom, a distraction does not take you further from your goal; instead it reveals to you what you truly desire,” Hannibal said. “It is your goal that must adapt, not your focus. But a maladaptive fantasy is the refusal to face reality.”

“I know what I desire; I just can’t seem to accomplish it.”

“Is Alana and your future child not enough then?”

“Not while my brother’s alive to threaten them,” Margot said. “So far I’ve been lucky; he doesn’t know about her. I take precautions; no taxis directly to her house, and she pays for, well, everything. We can’t risk him tracking the money. But there’s nothing I can do to stop him anymore; my brother’s got a damn bodyguard. The kind you don’t want to tangle with.”

“He’s learned just how dangerous you are.”

Margot smiled. “Yes, he has.”
After such a perfect night it was difficult to devote his normal attentiveness to his patients. Thoughts of Will kept invading his mind.

He remembered the grip of Will’s blunt fingers digging into his hips and the thickness of him sliding inside. Will’s lovely sighs still echoed in his ears, a soundtrack of wanton pleasure.

“When you last tried to kill your brother, you were arrested and assigned court-ordered therapy. He has not tried to have you arrested this time.”

“I would have said it’s because he wants me under his personal control, not a jailer’s, but his behavior has been erratic enough lately I can’t really say what he’s thinking.”

“He’s been behaving in a peculiar fashion?”

“He and Dr. Cordell—his shiny, brand new personal surgeon—spend more time planning dinner parties than actually working on his physical therapy. He’s spent over forty thousand renovating a guest house, despite the fact he doesn’t like guests. Which is nothing compared to the quarter of a million he’s recently spent on artwork, and once again, he’s not what I’d call a patron of the arts. He’s killed his prized pigs, at least a few of them. Their bodies were left on the pen floor to rot.”

“All of us process near death experiences in different ways. Each brush with death is unique, and so are our methods of coping.”

By the time the appointment was over, Hannibal found himself counting the hours until he would see Will again. The last time he had been this impatient he was still a young man and planning his first public artworks. He had been too eager then too and nearly found himself caught by one Inspector Pazzi.

As he watched her exit, he let himself regret for a second how essential it was that Margot and Alana be permanently bound together by a child. He was curious what Margot would be capable of if her brother knew about the future Verger heir still in utero. But he would not risk Will’s affection wandering back to Alana, and so Mason Verger would have to remain ignorant of the threat.

“Agent Lass will not be available for her appointment today,” Hannibal said as Abigail entered the room to scoop up a leather-bound book with patient notes. “She’s been called away on an urgent case.”

“Another killer?” Abigail said, climbing the ladder to the upper story so she could put the book back in its proper place on the bookshelves.

“Not that I'm aware of,” Hannibal said. “Perhaps a new development on a current case.”

She paused, hand still gripping the spine of the book that she had just placed on the shelf, glancing down towards him.

“Think it’s about the Chesapeake Ripper case? Or who killed Beth LeBeau?” she said, trying to sound like it was just an idle question of no importance, but not quite succeeding.

“Impossible to say.”

She nodded and climbed back down the ladder, returning from her quest of keeping the office organized.

“What’s this?” She asked as he handed her an envelope with “Will Graham” written on it. Hannibal’s handwriting was always an impeccable cursive, but he admits he may have shown off a
bit with the number of flourishes and swashes.

“An invitation, for you and Will,” Hannibal said. “I’m having a dinner party this Friday. I would invite Jesse and C.J., but something tells me they might be bored at this particular affair.”

“You guessed right. It’s fine, we’ll just order them some pizza for the evening.”

Such a mass-produced greasy product was hardly a substantial meal.

“I will be happy to send some food for the boys,” Hannibal said, which was a polite way of saying ‘you will not be feeding them that filth on my watch.’ “And I believe Will mentioned you wanting to help this time, with the food.”

“I did,” Abigail said, a delighted smile slowly spreading over her face. “Does this mean I get to cook some of it?”

“I have recipes for you,” Hannibal said, retrieving a keepsake box from a drawer and setting it on the desk. Carved into the top of the cherry wood was the Lecter family crest. Abigail peeked inside to look to see handwritten copies of select recipes from Hannibal’s personal collection. “Yours to keep.”

“Really?” Abigail said, flipping through the recipes. “Lou fassom, truffled duck consommé… got any suggestions for the dinner party?”

“As it happens, I do,” Hannibal said.

Wolf Trap, Virginia
Graham Residence

There was only one way for Will to escape the Chesapeake Ripper’s hold on him: he had to seduce Hannibal Lecter.

*If I’m too busy dating Hannibal, I’ll stop sleeping with the Ripper.* The upcoming dinner party was the perfect opportunity. All Will had to do was be the kind of person Hannibal would want, and hope it would be enough to convince Hannibal to date him.

*You’ve got your empathy, and you know what Hannibal likes,* Will thought. A little inspiration wouldn’t hurt either.

He thought of Hannibal at that first dinner party discussing at great length the art in Florence. Botticelli had been mentioned quite frequently.

Inspecting a blank area of the wall in his living room, he imagined the space filling up with the paintings of Botticelli. *Madonna and Child, Venus and Mars, The Annunciation*—at least a dozen paintings crowding the wall.

*It was the Botticelli paintings in the Uffizi Gallery that he mentioned,* Will thought as several paintings disappeared from the wall. Still too many remained. *He’d prefer Roman or Greek mythology to Christian iconography.* Many more disappeared, but it still didn’t narrow it down to one. *His favorite painting is probably one of Botticelli’s more popular paintings.*
The Birth of Venus and the Primavera remained.

That made it easy. It was difficult to imagine the Primavera as Dr. Lecter’s favorite; not when it romanticized a god kidnapping a nymph, forcing her to be his wife. Plus the blindfolded cupid. Hannibal didn’t seem the “you can’t help who you love” type; he had far too much self-command.

It would be The Birth of Venus; a respectable sort of painting for a respectable sort of man.

The painting was of the goddess Venus after the sea had quite literally given birth to her. According to myth, she was born a full-grown woman. She stood on the bottom half of a clam shell that had carried her over the ocean to the shore of an island. Still nude from her birth, she covered her nakedness with her hands in a show of modesty. Newly born and she already intuitively understood the demands of polite society.

Despite her attempts to cover herself, most of her body could be clearly seen, open and honest. Dr. Lecter was the kind to admire honesty. Will could easily imagine the goddess’s face as Alana’s. She had the same elegant poise, wisdom, and an air of patience.

Will was completely unqualified.

“You can fake it,” he quietly reassured himself.

First things first, he needed to clean house. Will grabbed what was left of anything incriminating in the freezer, dumping it in a heap in front of Abigail, who was flipping through Hannibal’s recipes and trying to decide what to cook for the dinner party.

“We need to use it up,” Will said. “Hannibal has a tendency to cook wherever and whenever, and the last thing we need is him going to our freezer so he can make a surprise batch of bacon and eggs, only to find a different sort of surprise.”

“Hannibal is coming over?” Abigail said with a raised eyebrow, sorting through the mess of meat wrapped in aluminum foil, trying to determine what all was there. “And staying for breakfast?”

“Ideally,” Will said.

He had his own preparations to do in the meantime. Trying to impress Hannibal meant, well, he was going to have to look less like the real Will Graham—in other words, less like a grumpy anti-social fisherman who hunted a very different kind of “fish.”

The stubble would have to go, and he’d need a haircut. He needed something nicer than his normal slap-dash clothing ensemble to wear. No flannel.

By the time he had decided his battle plan for the dinner party, he could hear Abigail talking to someone in the kitchen. Curious, Will peeked into the kitchen to see Abigail on the phone while cooking.

“Should I tenderize with salt?” Abigail was saying as she diced Eva’s heart into tiny pieces. Will already knew who she was talking to.

“Abigail!” Will said, scandalized. “You can’t ask an FBI consultant for advice on how to dispose of the evidence!”
Baltimore, Maryland  
Lecter Residence

An ornate gate—left open for the invited guests—marked the beginning of the stone paver walkway that led the way to Hannibal’s ridiculous house. Will and Abigail were early at Hannibal’s request, carrying various glass bakeware filled with food for the banquet.

“Hannibal asked we use the side door, the one that connects to the kitchen,” Abigail said. “Since we’re bringing food.”

Abigail walked confidently through the yard, her hunting coat snug over her dress as insulation from the cold. Thanks to her job as Hannibal’s secretary, she had been able to purchase a new dress for the night. If asked, Will would have described it as a nice blue dress, but Abigail described it as an “A-line midi” and “midnight blue with lace.” He’s not entirely sure what “A-line midi” even means. She had clearly been taking fashion clues from Hannibal not Will.

A matching lace scarf was draped around her neck, and the ends of it fluttered slightly in the breeze. While she still wore a high-collared shirt or scarf to keep her scar covered while out in public, at home the scarves now stayed in the closet. The scar has been slowly healing; it had already flattened and faded in color, though Will guessed it would never completely disappear.

Will himself had prepared for tonight as if he were a blank canvas and his empathy were a painter. He had used his carefully honed skills to turn his inspiration into reality.

Like the Renaissance oil painters who used a mixture of gypsum plaster and rabbitskin glue to prime a surface for painting, Will had worked to create the perfect blank slate to start from. Nipping and tucking his own dark, unpredictable nature and his rudeness away, he had smoothed out the wrinkles of his personality. The new persona had already begun to solidify and set like plaster. Unfortunately, he could see the occasional warped distortions from his inner nature stretching restlessly beneath the surface of the new Will, but he’d get better at hiding it over time.

Next a medium value tone was needed as a base coat; it was the color all highlights and shadows would be judged against. His chosen value tone was the essence of Venus: unshakable composure and refinement. No twitchy and sarcastic Will tonight.

He had built up the underpainting, defining the highlights and shadows and the vague shapes of his masterpiece. Witty, pleasant to talk to, and sensual without being crude. No dark humor.

The forms of the painting were fleshed out, built with multiple layers of partially transparent colored glaze. To give his face a soft, touchable appearance he had shaved his face completely before leaving the house. His hair was freshly cut, swept back behind his ears with a wavy fringe over his forehead.

The last details were added with small spots of opaque glaze. While the suit he wore was off the rack, he had it tailored to fit perfectly, and the light blue button-up underneath the black suit jacket was a flattering color.

Will and Abigail were in no hurry tonight, following a smaller walkway that veered away from the main path and twined through the side yard to their destination. As with all the mansions in this neighborhood, the yard was spacious and meticulously landscaped.

Winter had not released its grip on the garden, and while in a month the plants would be budding and green, for now they were slumbering. Will blinked, and in the long shadow of one of the ancient
towering trees a ghost appeared. It was the woman they had taken to the hospital just days before.

Her hand curved over the rim of one of the empty stone urns near the walkway that would be filled with bright flowers or greenery in Spring. What was visible of her arms and legs were as bone-thin as the empty tree limbs standing guard over the brown dormant lawn.

*Just hold on a bit longer,* Will thought. *You’ll heal and then you’ll blossom, just like these plants will.*

Rounding the corner, the path hugged the side of the house as it snaked behind an old brick building—as old as the historic mansion itself—that originally was perhaps a tobacco shed, but had been long since converted into a garage. Hidden behind it and away from prying eyes was a lengthy patio connecting both the dining room doors and the kitchen doors.

The shades for the kitchen glass doors were rolled up, and inside he could see Hannibal conducting the orchestra of prep cooks and waiters through the last-minute preparations. Hannibal’s evening suit was shielded behind a starch white bistro apron that had no doubt managed to come through the threat of wine, flour, and various sauces without a spot on it. Will doubted there was food audacious enough to stain Dr. Lecter’s clothing.

All it took was a quick rap of knuckles on the wood frame of the door, and Hannibal stilled save for a tilt of his head. As he strode over to welcome them inside, his hands firmly brushed down the sides of the apron as if he expected it to have wrinkled when he wasn’t looking and now it was up to him to tame the errant fabric.

“Will, Abigail, please come in,” Hannibal said with his usual grace and charm.

“Thank you,” Will said automatically as he stepped into the brightly lit sanctum of Hannibal’s home. It seemed at least some of Hannibal’s politeness had managed to rub off on him.

Despite his decision to be the embodiment of sophistication this evening, he already felt uneasy with so many strangers in the room. The hired help flitted back and forth chopping fresh fruits and vegetables, carrying wine from the pantry to chill in ice, and bustling about the kitchen cooking whatever food could not be made beforehand. Their black uniforms looked appropriate to wear to a funeral, save for the bright white chef skull caps and waist aprons on the prep cooks.

“—grateful for your assistance. I quite enjoyed your cooking the last time I tasted it,” Hannibal was saying. “I am eager to try it again.”

Will rolled his shoulders in an attempt to relieve his tense muscles and tried to concentrate on Hannibal, not the unwelcome spectators. Hannibal eyed the container that Will was holding onto with poorly concealed interest, and Will practically shoved the baking dish into Hannibal’s hands.

“Have to repay your kindness somehow,” Will said, and then nearly blurted out, ‘If you need me, I’m going to be hiding in the study.’ But tonight he was supposed to be some approximation of suave and social, so instead he said, “Your cooking looks divine, as always,” as his gaze swept over the plates of appetizers the wait staff had begun to carry out to the parlor.

Hannibal didn’t seem to be completely paying attention. Instead he lifted up the lid on top of the baking dish to get a look at the food underneath, like a child peeking under the wrapping paper of a present under the Christmas tree.

“This isn’t all of it, there’s still more I need to get out of the car,” Will said.

“I’ll get it,” Abigail volunteered as she set the food container she was carrying on the counter island. Will was sure she was looking forward to Hannibal’s verdict on their cooking efforts.
Fetching several wooden serving trays from the lower cabinets, Hannibal’s steady hands meticulously transferred Will and Abigail’s homemade appetizers, putting each piece exactly where he wanted it. First eggs stuffed with deviled ham(string) and garnished with chopped hard-boiled egg yolk were placed around a tomato carved into a lotus on a round serving tray. A long rectangular wooden tray was next, filled with chopped liver on toasted sourdough and sprinkled with bits of thyme and sage leaves. Zucchini cups—with asiago, spinach, and homemade sausage—were placed inside a circle of mint leaves and pomegranate seeds.

“Thank you for letting me borrow some of your equipment,” Will said as Hannibal finished the last adjustments. “The sausage stuffer especially.”

Will had insisted on making homemade sausage for the zucchini cups. The upside to sausage was it could be made out of almost any cut of meat that had the proper ratio of fat, making it a perfect dish for using up the less desirable or useful pieces. Plus the submucosa of the intestines made natural casings, which further emptied out what had been occupying his freezer.

“I trust it was sufficient for your needs,” Hannibal said.

“More than sufficient,” Will said. “And your advice was helpful and appreciated. It was an entirely new experience for me.”

“As with most things, it is easier to learn with someone with experience to guide you,” Hannibal said, inspecting an extra sausage-filled Zucchini cup that hadn't been placed on the serving tray.

“Like you suggested, I kept everything well lubricated,” Will said, referring to Hannibal's advice to lightly coat the piston gasket and cylinder interior with mineral oil to prevent the stuffer from becoming difficult to crank. And as for stuffing the meat into the casings—“And I fed the meat in slowly and evenly. Though it would have been better with a partner; someone to help hold everything in place while I pushed it in.”

“It is an exercise best performed by two,” Hannibal said with a smile. After a moment he bit into the zucchini cup, chewing slowly.

“It wasn’t as firm as I wanted it as first, but enough twisting solved the problem,” Will said. While it was possible to create one long coil of sausage, Will had wanted to make links. As a result, he had to be careful to leave it soft and not to completely fill the casing, so that when he twisted the coil into links, the sausage wouldn’t become so taut that it burst. Every six inches or so, he had pinched the casing and then rotated it to create the next link until the sausage was the desired length and firmness.

“You did an admirable job, especially for your first time. You should be proud,” Hannibal said, once he had swallowed the mouthful he had been savoring. “The art of sausage stuffing gets easier with practice.”

“Speaking of practice, anything I can help you with, Dr. Lecter?”

In response, Hannibal fetched several apples and cucumbers, placing the apples on a cutting board in front of himself and the cucumbers on the one in front of Will.

“I trust this is something you have more experience with,” Hannibal said with a glint of humor in his eye as he slid a chef’s knife over to Will. “But if you need a refresher, remember to keep your fingers curled.” He demonstrated, his fingers curled slightly in on the hand holding the cucumber so that the fingers stayed out of the knife’s way, and cut several slices. “Quick, confident strokes are best.”

“Oh don’t worry, I have plenty of practice at this,” Will said with an embarrassed chuckle. “I
promise my technique is flawless.”

Will looked up and realized Abigail was watching the two of them from one of the armchairs. He’s pretty sure she was trying not to laugh.

How long had she been there? He cleared his throat and started slicing the cucumbers while Hannibal cut the green apples into wedges and then carved the wedges into leaf shapes. Discreetly, Will checked the rest of the room out of the corner of his eye. All the prep cooks were silently going about their tasks radiating a sense of professional detachment, but he could swear at least one was fighting a smile. Well shit.

The chime of the doorbell shattered the quiet moment. He watched Hannibal quickly trade in his apron for a dinner jacket and leave to answer the door. Will inwardly sighed. The dinner party would be a lot more fun without the guests.

Will reluctantly trailed behind him. Abigail was beside him in a moment, wearing that look on her face.

“What?” Will said suspicious.

“Nothing. Just Hannibal seemed to enjoy the taste of your sausage.”

“Abigail!” Will hissed quietly. His face felt hot with embarrassment, and he hoped he wasn’t blushing.

As the guests arrived one by one over the next few minutes, Hannibal handled them with the same assurance as he had the food. Each guest was welcomed and appraised, like a cook inspecting a slab of meat at the butcher’s. Once the meat was fully assessed, it was carved and marinated with polite and flattering words and then slowly cooked by fine wine, mouth-watering appetizers served by attentive waiters, and a gentle waltz by hired violinists.

The guests were then properly paired, orchestrated together as a meal. Hannibal subtly encouraged Dr. Bloom and Dr. Sutcliffe to mingle together while pairing Margot Verger with Ms. Lombardi, like a chef might serve smoked porter and buttery garlic bread together with braised beef stew.

Speaking of, Will was pleased that Maria Lombardi—the retired opera singer Hannibal had introduced him to at the concert a few weeks ago—was one of the guests. But there was a new face here, one that made his stomach churn with apprehension. Someone easily recognized from Freddie’s relentless articles: Agent Miriam Lass, the rising star of the FBI.

Will gritted his teeth and reminded himself that he was going to be on his best behavior tonight, and joined the fray.

The party was two guests short.

Jack and Chilton had been tied up all day in court—as explained by Agent Lass—and the two may or may not arrive before dinner, if they would come at all. Worse, Will and Lass didn’t seem inclined to introduce themselves to each other let alone talk. For days now, Hannibal had been thinking of nothing but watching Will taunt the FBI agents with clever speech as he served them his victims, and this would not do.
But Will was engaged in conversation with some of the other guests—an unusual thing in and of itself—and it would be impolite to pull him away to introduce the two. Deciding on a different method to get Will’s attention, Hannibal called Abigail over to him with an slightly outstretched hand.

“Agent Lass! How are you doing?” Abigail said, joining the conversation as silently directed.

“Better now that I have Hannibal’s cooking to look forward to,” Lass said. She did her best to smile, but the exhaustion and stress were too heavy on her face to fully achieve it. “And thank you for inviting me, doctor. Crawford and Bloom had high praise for the last dinner party; I have to admit I’m curious to try it myself.”

Hannibal leaned forward as if imparting a secret and said, “It’s my pleasure, I’ve been looking forward to having you for dinner.”

“Well, maybe it’ll take my mind off things.”

“That bad?” Abigail said. “Is it the cases?”

“Jack warned me that this job would get to me, if I let it,” Lass said with a rueful smile. “That I should form calluses, because the frustration would wear me thin. He was right. I’m too agitated to even sleep at night. It’s hard to sleep knowing people like that are walking free.”

“You and Jack are very driven in your purpose,” Hannibal said.

“You know, the worst thing is I thought I understood the killers I tracked. Now, I’m not sure. The Chesapeake Ripper killing another serial killer? Doesn’t make sense. And the Minnesota Shrike? Can’t find her at all,” Lass said. Her gaze was unfocused, likely lost in the memories of the crime scenes. “I go through the evidence again sometimes, hoping to find some insight into where Eva Perli might have gone. But all I can think when I look at her jewelry made of bones and the pillows stuffed with human hair is how do I understand someone like that? Someone so twisted.”

Hannibal could smell Abigail’s distress, a sharp odor like grapefruit with a whiff of onion.

“Repurposing the body like that spells hunter to me, but how do you go so wrong that there’s no longer a difference between a person and a deer?” Lass murmured.

Will was here now, his hands protectively holding Abigail’s shoulders as if fighting the urge to hold her to hide her from Lass’s words.

“She would have eaten them of course,” Lass said. Then she realized where she was at. “God, I’m sorry, this isn’t an appropriate topic for a party. Forgive me; I’m much too tired.”

“I consider it an appropriate enough topic at my own dinner parties,” Hannibal said, making it sound as if he was reassuring her.

Lass nodded, her exhaustion making the movement small and absent-minded. She was no longer the bright, driven thing she used to be when she first became an agent. The Chesapeake Ripper and Jack’s determination to catch him had been taking bites out of her for years now.

Will looked pale and drawn, and Hannibal was unsure why. It was clear the FBI was still floundering after a dead woman and was no closer to finding the Chesapeake Ripper or Will and his daughter.

“Will and Abigail made some deviled eggs and zucchini cups, perhaps you would like some?”
Hannibal said, “At the risk of sounding trite, when all else fails, I eat my problems.”

“We’ll, uh, get some for you,” Will said to Lass, tugging Abigail along with him.

Lass frowned and fished a buzzing phone out of the pocket of her suit. She glanced at the screen.

“Looks like everything’s wrapped up from court,” Lass said. “Jack, of course, didn’t mention the outcome. Guess we’ll have to see.”

“Very welcome news. A dinner party without all its guests is like a meal without an entree—incomplete,” Hannibal said. “And I have full faith in Jack Crawford and the FBI. I am sure they persuaded the jury.”

“Oh, there’s no jury,” Dr. Bloom said, joining the conversation as she walked by to collapse in a nearby armchair. She looked as weary as Agent Lass. “It’s not a criminal case; I’m afraid it’s Dr. Chilton who’s the defendant. He’s being sued by one of his own patients.”

Alana winced as a waiter walked by with a platter of roasted stuffed onions with prosciutto and parmesan, ducking her head down into her loose fist as if to hide her nose. Hannibal could smell the garlic and onion from here.

“Dammit. Maybe a dinner party wasn’t the best idea. I’m sorry, Hannibal,” Alana said, rifling through her purse for a moment before giving up and turning to where Margot and Dr. Sutcliffe were still talking, “Margot? You didn’t happen to bring any of the mint tea?”

Margot procured a tea bag from her own purse and said, “I also have ginger gum if you need it. I’ll brew a cup.”

“No need,” Hannibal said, nodding to one of the waiters to take over the task.

Dr. Sutcliffe chuckled and said, “Women always think of the things we don’t. One of the many advantages of dating a woman.”

Hannibal pursed his lips. No one but him would have thought of hosting a dinner party so Will could feed his creations to his pursuers.

“What do you even fight about when you haven’t got a man to forget your anniversary?” Sutcliffe said, looking like he thought he’d said something particularly clever.

Margot didn’t smile. “No relationship is perfect,” she said, glancing out of the side of her eye at Alana.

“Some more imperfect than others,” Alana said, ignoring Margot’s gaze. “Sometimes the person you’re with isn’t the person you thought they were.”

Surprised, Hannibal glanced at Margot. Margot subtly pointed her index finger at her nose when she saw him looking, at the part of Mason’s face that had been eaten by the pigs after she had pushed him in. Ah, Alana must have pieced together the accident was not an accident. It appeared Alana was not taking this bit of news very well.

“If my ex-wife were here, she would toast to that,” Sutcliffe said, as Will and Abigail returned with a plate of appetizers for Lass.
“She tried her best to make me a more palatable husband, her words,” Dr. Sutcliffe was saying when he returned.

“I’m sure you’re more palatable than she gave you credit for,” Will said, as he handed over the plate to Agent Lass. He was sure Sutcliffe would make a decent enough steak.

Hannibal looked delighted, and Will realized with some guilt how rude he must have been at the last dinner party if Hannibal was so pleased by such a small effort. If only he had known what he really meant, he doubts he would look so proud.

“Excuse me,” Hannibal said as he left to answer the ringing doorbell. Will could see from the foyer it was Agent Crawford and Dr. Chilton at the door, and because Dr. Chilton had the unerring desire to talk to whoever least wanted to talk to him, he made a beeline to Will.

“Will Graham!” Dr. Chilton said. “Well, this is a pleasant surprise; I’ve been hoping to have a little time to speak to you.”

“Hello, Dr. Chilton,” Will said instead of ‘how unfortunate for me.’

“I don’t know if you heard of the BAU’s latest arrest,” Dr. Chilton said, leaning jovially towards him. “Another killer behind bars, thanks to, uh, yours truly.”

Be polite, be polite, be polite. It would be worth it to impress Hannibal.

“Congratulations,” Will said. Maybe he should attempt humor. “I suppose making an arrest is a good excuse for being late.”

Chilton’s smile abruptly vanished, and Alana tried to politely hide an amused smile behind a cup of tea a waiter had handed her a few minutes ago. Will suspected he had missed something important.

“No, that's not… there was—doesn’t matter.”

“While the rest of us were busy canvassing hospitals in another state for our killer,” Agent Lass said, “Dr. Chilton thought to check here in Baltimore.”

Please no.

“I didn’t think to check, per se, although I’m quite sure I would’ve thought of it eventually,” Dr. Chilton said. “I was simply explaining to one of the, uh, lovely young doctors about one of the criminal profiles I was working on—” Will mentally swapped out ‘explaining’ with ‘bragging’—“and when she realized one of the in-patients fit the profile, she notified the director, who notified the FBI.”

“I wasn’t aware of this,” Hannibal said. “Has the FBI released the name of the individual?”

“Georgia Manchen,” Agent Lass said.

He could hear Dr. Chilton still talking, but he couldn’t concentrate on the words. It was her, wasn’t it? The woman he’d tried to save. He’d sent her to a prison instead.

“—my expertise in profiling is, well, it’s quite sought after. Same with therapy, of course. And I can’t recommend therapy enough with your, uh, condition. You know, if you ever wanted a session with an experienced psychiatrist—”
“You’re right, I could always do a session with Dr. Lecter,” Will said.

Flustered, Dr. Chilton chuckled in disbelief and then glanced at Dr. Lecter as if at a loss for words. That was very rude, Will scolded himself.

“If everyone is ready, dinner is ready to be served,” Hannibal announced, and Will was grateful he seemed willing to ignore his faux pas.

“Perfect timing, this conversation has left me a little too hungry,” Will groused.

Perhaps Will had been ruder than he thought, because Hannibal seemed determined to keep a close watch on him while everyone relocated to the table, like a parent keeping an eye on a misbehaving child. He even pulled out Will’s chair for him at the dinner table as if to make sure Will sat where he was supposed to.

This time Will’s assigned seat wasn’t anywhere near Hannibal; in fact, now he was at the opposite end of the table. The only person further from Hannibal was Maria, who sat at the foot of the table. Will sat catty corner to the right of her, and Abigail was to the right of him.

Wasn’t it Dr. Sutcliffe who had once told him that the seats closest to the host were where honored guests sat? Tonight it was Alana and Margot on either side of Hannibal. Will swallowed the bitterness as he watched a server place a steaming bowl of soup in front of the women.

Scowling, Will poked at his own soup with his spoon before finally trying it. He couldn’t quite tell what the bead-shaped pasta scattered among the meatballs and kale were, but at least it tasted good. And the meatballs were better than any he’d had in his life. Kind of reminded him of that ground “beef” linguine he’d made out of Tobias, to be honest. That’s probably the difference homemade food made.

“So Hannibal tells me you helped prepare some of our dinner tonight,” Maria said, sipping at a spoonful.

“Uh, yeah, me and my daughter,” Will said, slightly gesturing towards Abigail. “We helped with the striped bass and a few of the appetizers.”

“Hannibal gave me the recipes, and dad and I got the ingredients; well, save for the mushrooms. That Hannibal gave us from his own personal garden,” Abigail said, a gleam in her eye. “We cooked it at home and brought it along.”

Considering the type of substitutions he and Abigail made to the recipes, there was no way he was going to cook them in Hannibal’s kitchen and risk getting caught and arrested.

“I’m surprised Hannibal let you get the ingredients,” Dr. Sutcliffe said. There was no noticeable emphasis on ‘you,’ but Will heard the unspoken implication just the same. “He’s always been very particular about his food.”

“Guess I’m a good judge of what Hannibal considers exceptional,” Will said like a dismissal.

Maria, stuck between the two of them, glanced at Will with a raised eyebrow. Fine, Will could try to behave himself.

“Dad and I caught the fish ourselves,” Abigail said, “straight from the Chesapeake Bay. We put a rice, giblet, and mushroom mixture between two fillets, wrapped it with bacon and placed it on a bed of tomato slices.”
“Oh stop, I'm eating, and you’re making me hungry,” Maria said.

He wondered again why Hannibal assigned him a seat so far away. Maybe Will had been simply too rude to the other guests.

“Well, you look gloomy,” Maria said quietly to him.

“I'm just wondering if I misbehaved,” Will said. “Looks like you and I have been exiled to the far side of the table.”

“Exiled?” Maria said amused. Will wondered why it felt like she was silently laughing at him. “You know very little about formal dinners I take it?”

“Not exactly my specialty. I tend to avoid any that aren’t Hannibal’s.”

“Well, in the twenty-odd years Dr. Lecter’s lived in Baltimore, no one has sat where I’m currently sitting,” Maria said. At Will’s questioning look she added, “The foot of the table is where the hostess sits.”

“You're, uh, the hostess?” Will said.

“My dear, at my age no one is going to mistake me for Dr. Lecter’s hostess. I’m old enough to be his mother,” Maria said with a delighted laugh. “Maybe if I was younger. But you have caused all sorts of complications.”

“I've caused—” Will sputtered.

“Leave it to Hannibal to throw a formal dinner party with two hosts. He can’t sit you at the foot of the table without disrupting the traditional male-female alternating seating pattern, and he's very old-fashioned that way. So he moved the hostess, or should I say second host, seat to where you’re currently sitting.”

*I'm a host?* Will thought. *I guess it makes sense, I did help cook part of the meal.*

“And you can stop suggesting I’m not a guest of honor,” Maria said. “The hostess has her own honored seats. Abigail and I are sitting next to you, which makes us your guests of honor.”

“Oh,” Will said.

“And of course the expectant mothers would be seated as guests of honor next to Dr. Lectern; this dinner is for them after all.”

Shocked, Will stared at her as the words slowly sunk in. He glanced towards the two women, both of them talking and laughing with Hannibal.

Alana was slumped in her chair and leaning away from the table, as if too exhausted to even eat. The dress she wore was cinched in under the breasts leaving the fabric so loose around the stomach it’d be difficult to notice a baby bump. But her hand was resting on her upper stomach in an unmistakable gesture. Hannibal had gotten her pregnant.

From here a ring wasn’t easy to spot, and it was impossible to make out details, but the glimpse he got suggested a simple engagement ring with a small diamond. It was difficult to imagine Hannibal reigning in his love for the refined and the extravagant to buy such a frugal piece of jewelry, but perhaps it was Alana’s partialness to the understated that won out in the end.
He wondered if Margot had gotten engaged too, and why her fiance wasn’t at the dinner party. Her dress, unlike Alana’s, was form fitting enough he figured it must be too early for her to be showing.

“I thought I was at the other end of the table because I’d been impolite or something,” Will said, feeling dazed. “I say things I shouldn’t sometimes.”

Maria rolled her eyes.

“You’re not rude, at least not my standard, or Dr. Lecter’s,” Maria said. “You want to know what I consider rude? How about someone who abuses his authority.” Jack Crawford chuckled at something Dr. Bloom was saying. “Or a man who takes great pride in his own incompetent work.” Will glanced at Dr. Chilton, who was once again boasting to Dr. Sutcliffe about the killer he’d “caught.”

“The only people who think you’re rude are people uncomfortable with truth,” Maria said. “You don’t dress up your words to be appetizing.”

Why would the unerringly polite Dr. Lecter concoct a dinner party filled with rude people?

“—Cotard’s and Capgras are both delusional misidentification syndromes,” Dr. Sutcliffe said above the din of conversation. “It’s a rare combination. You believe you’re dead and that other people are impersonators hiding behind a mask. Neither her, nor her actions, nor the other people are real in her mind. Imagine what we could learn from studying a mind like that.”

Will realized he was talking about Georgia Madchen.

“Well, with any luck, she’ll end up at the BSHCI. I would, of course, let you study her—” Dr. Chilton said.

“You’d call it *lucky* for someone to be sentenced to the BSHCI?” Will interrupted.

“Not what I meant,” Dr. Chilton said with a placating smile.

“Better than a dangerous killer on the loose,” Dr. Sutcliffe said as if Will was being naive.

“Excuse me,” Will said, getting up from the table.

He felt numb as he wandered from the dining room to the parlor. Abandoned by the guests, the room had been cleared of the appetizers and the lights shut off, leaving only the cold dim light of the streetlamps shining in from the bay windows.

He could hear a melody all around him.

BWV 535 if he remembered correctly. It was like he was listening to Hannibal’s record player again, like he had all those weeks ago while painting shoulder to shoulder with him while preparing for the boys’ arrival. The smell of freshly drying paint and Hannibal’s cologne tickled his nose as if he were still there.

But then the memory faded, and he glanced back to the harpsichord, watching the ghost of Alana play the melody with nimble hands, her fingers dancing with the rhythm.

On the ground next to his foot, a seedling pushed its way up through the marble floor. It was a lonely sprig of green among the large grey and white dappled tiles. The plant grew, the stems becoming tall and leaves unfurling as it got bigger. Tiny flower buds became large blooms, until a wild rose bush was sitting next to a console table littered with empty champagne glasses.
It’s thorns looked sharp and wicked.

Unlike Alana, who was as elegant as the Renaissance paintings on the wainscoted wall and as polished as one of Hannibal’s suits, the scraggly rose bush didn’t belong here. The plant had stubbornly refused to die, even though no one had planted it in rich soil or given it fresh water to drink. It had been asked to live in a world where people thought it should look like its domesticated cousins, the ones that had been bred for generations to produce more blooms with more petals for a longer season, all without any prickly thorns. It reminded Will of himself.

Will stumbled up the stairs, the music chasing him. Once in the study, he slammed the door shut and slumped against it, letting the darkness of the room cradle him.

“Getting upset, are you?” the gruff voice of his father said from the shadows.

Will blinked his eyes, and the fireplace roared to life, illuminating the silhouette of the man. Like Will, he tended to dress as an outdoorsman, his clothing sturdy and practical. His face was weathered from his years in the sun and the stress of a life always one step away from collapsing.

“Family life doesn’t suit you anyways,” his father said. “Not when you’re so… peculiar.”

“Aberrant, you mean?” Will said with a dry laugh as he flicked on the lights. He pushed past his father to sulk in one of the armchairs in front of the fireplace.

“Son, you’ve never lived in reality,” Martin Graham said, “And now look what a mess you’ve made. Garrett Jacob Hobbs, Eva Blair, Tobias Budge—”

“I didn’t kill Tobias Budge.”

“No, but you ate him.”

Will sucked in a fortifying breath, trying to keep the guilt off his face.

“Yeah, well, I’ve got a family anyways,” Will said defiant.

“A borrowed family. They’ll take the kids away as soon as they know,” his father said. “You’ll be locked in a prison cell and forgotten about. If you’re lucky, you’ll get a straight-jacket instead of the chair, but well, you’ve never been lucky.”

There was a quiet knock. Will glanced towards the closed door as it slowly opened to reveal Hannibal carrying a dinner tray into the room.

“It seems my dinner parties are especially difficult for you,” Hannibal said, coming over and peering at him as if he could determine the cause of Will’s distress simply by looking deep enough into his eyes. “Is everything alright?”

The first instinct was to reassure him that everything was fine. But Will no longer needed his polite, agreeable persona. Alana had already won and he had nothing to lose.

“Sorry, the food disagreed with me,” Will said darkly, thinking of Dr. Sutcliffe disagreeing that Georgia Madchen should not be in the BSHCI.
Will was brooding by the fireplace. He sat slumped forward in the chair, hands clasped together and his mouth twisted in a petulant frown. His eyes met Hannibal’s gaze-for-gaze.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Hannibal said, setting down the dinner tray on the cocktail table in front of Will. “I did want to compliment you and Abigail on your contribution to this evening’s dinner; it was delectable.”

“We wanted to provide a heart-y meal,” Will said, the corners of his mouth tugging up into a darkly amused smirk.

“And you succeeded,” Hannibal praised. Some of the tension in Will’s face eased, and he sat more relaxed in the chair. “I thought the two of us might enjoy the next course together. Hopefully this food will agree with you more.”

“It looks good,” Will allowed.

“Beef wellington with oyster and sherry pâté, and served with a side of beetroot and fennel risotto.”

Instead of a log, the “steak” filled pastries were single serving sized and caged by evenly spaced strips of pastry, like prison bars. A rosemary jus dribbled on-top gave the impression the meat was still freshly bleeding. From a distance the risotto—dyed red from the beetroot—resembled minced raw meat.

“Which steak would you prefer, the sirloin or the rump?” Hannibal said, bending over to remove the plates of food and silverware from the tray and meticulously arrange them on the cocktail table.

“I’ve found I’ve recently developed a taste for rump,” Will said, head tipped back against the armchair and settling deeper into it’s cushions. He sounded amused. Hannibal glanced up to see Will blatantly staring at him, but not at his face. Cheeky.

“A discerning decision; it’s a choice bit of hind-quarters,” Hannibal said. He took great pride in it.

“Do you wish a taste?”

“At least a nibble. I’m sure it’ll be a delight for my tongue.”

Hannibal slid the plate of rump beef wellington over to Will’s side of the cocktail table. Will took his time cutting into the meat, looking relaxed. When he eventually put a forkful in his mouth, their gazes locked. It wasn’t until after Will had swallowed that Hannibal realized he was supposed to be eating too.

It seemed there was a real possibility he was about to be occupied for the night, as soon as the dinner party ended.

“My compliments to the chef,” Will said in an almost sultry voice, holding up another piece of meat speared on his fork. “Lush, tender, and easily pierced.”

He didn’t really need to be there for the rest of the dinner party anyways; the waiters and prep cooks could handle the rest. They would have to be quiet enough the guests wouldn’t hear them.

“I’m glad it’s to your taste, Will,” Hannibal said. “I consider a great honor to satisfy your hunger.”

“Dr. Lecter!” he could hear Jack Crawford bellow from the hallway. Will blinked and broke eye contact. Hannibal tried to catch his eye again, but Will was glancing towards the hallway and away from him.
It had been a mistake to leave the door to the study open. Agent Crawford spotted them and marched inside. “There’s been an incident. Abel Gideon has broken free from his prison transport. He killed the guards, the driver, and god knows who else. I need you at that crime scene. Now.”

“Of course,” Hannibal said after a moment of staring Jack Crawford down. As typical, Agent Crawford remained unrepentant. “I cannot, however, abandon my guests so I will need a bit of time —”

They could make it fast if they had to.

“I told you!” Dr. Chilton said, storming into the room. “I warned everyone nothing good would come of this ridiculous lawsuit! I did nothing but try to rehabilitate a dangerous killer. And yes, that meant first I had to make him accept he was a serial killer, but I did not make him one despite what he says—”

Will rolled his eyes.

“—and he’s now played us all, just like I said he would!”

“I’ll let you take care of your other guests,” Will said, abruptly standing up. “Since it sounds like the party is coming to an abrupt end, mind if I take my dinner with me?”

“By all means. I’ll arrange for everyone to take the rest of the courses with them,” Hannibal said. This was not okay. “Of course, Will, you’re welcome to stay until I return—”

“No. But, uh, thank you,” Will said, grabbing his plate and making his way towards the door. “It was good to see—”

Will paused to turn around and almost came face-to-face with Dr. Chilton. He made a show of looking past Chilton to Hannibal.

“—you.”

He turned to look again at Chilton, and the look on his face suggested that statement had only been directed at Hannibal. And with that, Will fled the room.

Hannibal realized he had just been, to put it in colloquial terms, unintentionally cock blocked by Dr. Chilton.

“Well, I suggest you get your guests out the door as quickly as possible, Dr. Lecter,” Agent Crawford said. “We’ve got a killer to catch.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to Katarra for beta reading!

And a big thank you to everyone who has left a kudos or comment :)
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Chapter warning for graphic depictions of violence. See end of chapter notes for more details.

Summary of previous chapter: Alana is pregnant with the Verger heir and secretly engaged to Margot. Will mistakenly thinks Alana is engaged to Hannibal. The serial killer Dr. Abel Gideon has escaped police custody.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Wolf Trap, Virginia
Graham Residence

The police may not have been able to find Abel Gideon yet, but neither had Will.

After leaving a gruesome scene at the site of his escape, where he strung up the organs of the murdered guards on a tree like they were Christmas ornaments, Abel Gideon had effectively vanished. It was telling he had left his surgical trophies behind.

“If he still thought he was the Chesapeake Ripper, he would have taken the organs with him,” Will muttered as he read the TattleCrime article for the fourth time.

“Was he stringing up the organs to develop his own MO or something?” Jesse said, standing on his tiptoes to try to read over Will’s shoulder. Will just looked at him.

“What?” Jesse said. “I ask Abigail about this stuff all the time.”

“The Chesapeake Ripper would have done it better,” C.J. said in a bored voice from the kitchen where he was putting away the dishes. Sometimes Will was more than a little worried about what exactly went on in C.J.’s mind.

“No, he’s peacocking for the Ripper,” Will said. “It’s like roses and chocolates before a first date.”

“Do you really not like this guy or something?” Jesse said. “You’re sorta glaring at the tablet.”

Will was not glaring at the tablet. It wasn’t any of his business if another serial killer was interested in the Ripper. And the interest was purely because Abel Gideon needed to know who he was; it wasn’t actually a first date or anything. He doubted the Ripper would sleep with Abel Gideon even if it were. Probably.

The front door banged open, and Will nearly jumped out of his seat. Abigail stood there, her face pale.


“What a shame,” Will said dryly.

“And there’s another psychiatrist; they just found his body. He interviewed Gideon for a book,”
Abigail continued all in a rush. “Agent Crawford thinks he wants all the psychiatrists who interviewed or treated him. Alana Bloom, Hannibal—”

“Hannibal?” Will said, sharply.

“Dr. Chilton had an armed FBI guard and Gideon still got him, so they want to put everyone at risk in a safe house.”

“Good,” Will said. “He’ll be safe there while we hunt down our elusive prey.”

“But Hannibal refuses to go! He said he was sure there was nothing for him to fear from Abel Gideon, and he wouldn’t leave.”

_Goddammit, Hannibal._

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**Baltimore, Maryland**

**Lecter Residence**

“Stubborn bastard,” Will grumbled as he stomped up the porch steps, ignoring the rain that was intermittently patting his hair. “Can’t sacrifice just a little bit of his comfort, can he? He’d rather stay home and _die._”

“I mean, maybe Hannibal has a good reason to think he’s safe,” Abigail said, attempting to hold the umbrella over both of them and struggling to keep up with Will’s fast pace. “Maybe he never really interacted with Gideon?”

“If he gets himself murdered, I’m gonna _kill_ him,” Will said, stabbing the doorbell button. “Stupid, selfish asshole—what am I supposed to do if he dies, huh?”

He waited irritated for a few moments. Nothing.

“And Alana needs him, of course,” Will said belated.

He rang the doorbell again.

“Oh come on!” Will shouted when still no one answered the door.

“Hannibal gave me a spare key for emergencies,” Abigail said, “though I think this is more of an emergency than he ever planned on.”

The two seconds it took Abigail to unlock the door felt like two seconds too long if Abel Gideon was on his way. Will barged into the house, ready to shame Hannibal into packing up and relocating to a safe house right this instance.

“Oh my god,” Abigail gasped.

There was a vase of flowers smashed on the floor of the entryway, the clear crystal shards scattered on the floor and the flowers trampled. Some of the jagged pieces of glass were stained red, and was that _blood_ on the floor?

Heart in his throat, Will charged into the parlor. The room was empty.
“Hannibal!” Will called.

Something clattered in the dining room. Panicked, Will rushed in. There was a body on the dining room table. Not Hannibal’s, thank god.

It was the armed guard; the one that was supposed to be keeping Hannibal safe. The man’s belly was split open and things that were supposed to be inside him were bubbling up through the incision to try to be on the outside instead. The man turned his head slightly to look at them, hands clasped to his stomach to try to keep it all in, his face pale and sweaty.

“No, no, no—” Will said.

The dining table was covered in a white bedsheet and a kitchen trolley with surgical instruments sat nearby, like a parody of an operating room. A lamp whose shade had been tilted up served as an impromptu OR lamp. There was a discarded surgical mask lying next to Will’s feet.

“Where’s Hannibal Lecter?” Will demanded. “What’d Abel Gideon do to him?”

“Will! He’s barely conscious,” Abigail scolded as she fumbled for her phone in her purse.

The man weakly shook his head.

“Wasn’t here,” the man gasped out through the pain. “Lecter had to help-p Bloom with the profile. I was just… I was… here to secure the house. Gideon wanted—he wanted the safe house.”

“Abel Gideon broke in, but found you instead of Lecter?” Will said. The man nodded once and then choked on a gasp of pain. “And he tortured you because he wanted to know where the safe house is?”

“Once he… he couldn’t find Lecter, yes,” the man confirmed, face scrunching up in distress. “I told him, I told—” He made a horrible sound that was like a bitten off keen.

“You told him where the safe house is?” Will said. “Where? Where’s the safe house?”

“677031. Town—Township Road 140.”

I can’t believe Hannibal was actually right to avoid the safe house.

“Google Maps says that’s on the west side, outside of town,” Abigail said.

“He wants… he wants to meet—”

“Yeah, the Chesapeake Ripper,” Will said. “Too bad for him; he’s gonna meet someone else instead.”

Will grabbed Abigail’s arm, dragging her to the entrance of the dining room, out of hearing range.

“He’s not going to be conscious for much longer,” he said quietly. “Call 911, but when they arrive, stall as long as you can before telling them the safe house is compromised. I want a chance to introduce myself to our wayward killer before the FBI take him instead.”

“That’s gonna be one hell of an introduction,” Abigail said. “I should go with you.”

“No way to explain why both of us left a critically injured agent. And I’m not letting you hunt a man like Abel Gideon on your own.”
The drive to the safe house was agony. Too much rain, too much distance, and the clock was ticking fast.

He parked his car on a gravel shoulder far enough away that his prey wouldn’t see him coming. Making his way through the woods surrounding the property, he stayed as silent as possible, the rain helping to cushion the sound of his footsteps. It was late enough in the evening that darkness had fallen, and out here away from the streetlights and the hum of car engines, he felt at peace. It felt like he was night fishing, and nothing existed but him and the fish.

Abel was a very active predator in the middle of a hunt, and Will knew exactly where he would be.

When he reached the clearing surrounding the safe house, he could see his quarry standing in the pitch black yard. Gideon stood like a man captivated, staring straight ahead.

The curtains were drawn open in several of the windows, including the large dining room window, where Will could see Alana setting the table. The light inside spilled out into the night like a television in a dark room. Alana was the tv character performing her scripted role, unaware she had an audience.

This would not be an easy hunt. Will was too close to the house to shoot without someone hearing. He would have to fight Gideon man-to-man if he wanted his prey to himself.

Gideon, on the other hand, had the gun he had lifted off the agent he had attacked and no reason to fear using it. As long as he hit his target with the first shot, he could be long gone before any armed agents could descend upon him.

Now was the time to act, before Gideon had a chance to use his weapon.

The Alana who was folding cloth napkins faded away. Instead she became the Madonna in one of Botticelli’s paintings. He imagined Alana’s long dark hair partially hidden under transparent veils and a colorful silk maphorion that wrapped around the crown of her head. Her future child was no longer still forming in her belly but instead was swaddled in her arms.

He imagined from her gentle swaying and the movement of her lips that she was singing a comforting lullaby. The baby laying against her chest blinked sleepily. Back and forth she rocked until the infant was slumbering, safely wrapped in mother’s arms.

This was Alana’s future. She would hold Hannibal’s sleeping child in her arms; a child she would comfort and love and raise with Dr. Lecter. They’d be a family.

Gideon began to lift his gun, ready to aim.

*It’s not my responsibility to save her.*

It’d be easier to catch Gideon as he was fleeing; he’d be too busy trying to make a quick escape to watch for unanticipated company. Hell, he’d probably flee into the woods right into Will’s arms. And when the armed guards heard the second gunshot, they’d think it was Abel Gideon shooting a second time.

*I’m sorry, Alana. I’m too selfish in the end.*

The real Alana, still pregnant and setting the table, seemed to be talking to someone. *Hannibal* moved into view, balancing two plates of food that he delicately set on the table. Gideon took aim.

*No! Not Hannibal!*
Before he even knew what he had done, Will was across the yard and tackled Gideon to the ground. Despite the jarring impact as the two of them tumbled to ground, by some miracle the gun didn’t fire.

“Well, this is interesting,” Gideon said in a strained voice, trying to catch his breath after getting the air knocked out of him. “I didn’t expect a guard in the woods. Do you know what happened to the last FBI agent I encountered?”

“Not with the FBI,” Will said with a sneer.

“Oh? Concerned citizen then?” Gideon said with an amused smile as he and Will tussled for control of the gun. “You know, I don’t know if you know this, but there’s a escaped serial killer on the loose. I hear he’s quite dangerous.”

“I’m with the Chesapeake Ripper,” Will snarled in Gideon’s ear, as he bent Gideon’s hand at an unnatural angle to get him to drop the firearm.

Gideon stifled a yell of pain and let go. Will kicked the gun far away from both of them and got Gideon in a headlock with a hunting knife against his throat.

“Well, you’re not with me—at least I don’t think you are—so that means I’m not the Ripper. I still get a little muddled on that point.” Gideon jerked his head to the side to try and see as much of Will as possible. “And what are you, his messenger? An apprentice? A partner in crime?”

Technically, he hasn’t actually helped the Chesapeake Ripper with any of his kills yet, so he couldn’t claim partner in crime.

“It doesn’t matter,” Will mumbled.

“Your face is remarkably red at the moment,” Gideon noted calmly. “I know, you’re a fan. Maybe I really am him then; do you want an autograph?”

“I’m his lover,” Will snapped.

“That must be an interesting relationship,” Gideon said, because of course he could never keep quiet for even a minute. “Would you mind introducing me to your lover? I’ve been hoping to have a little heart-to-heart with him.”

“I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news,” Will said. “I eat killers like you.”

“I’d say you do.”

“Not like that,” Will said. His face was probably even redder now.

“Ah yes, the surgical trophies, they weren’t trophies at all were they?” Gideon said. “Of course, that makes sense. Sounds a little unfortunate for me; your plan is to make me into tonight’s main course, isn’t it? You know my late wife did used to say I always take things too far, and one day my goose would be cooked.”

Will saw in his mind what Gideon intended to do. He didn’t give Gideon time to grab the surgical knife out of his belt.

Hopefully the rain would wash enough blood from the ground before morning.
Will opened the front door quietly, mindful that it was past the boys’ bedtime. He had called ahead to let Abigail know he was alright, especially since his clothes were soaked with rain and blood; he probably looked a fright.

Abigail was sitting in one of living room armchairs with a book in hand. She took in his appearance with a glance, a worried expression passing over her face.

“The agent was dead before the ambulance even arrived,” she said, “so I never told anyone the safe house was compromised.”

Will nodded.

“Is it bad I’m relieved the agent died?” she said, as if she expected Will to have a better grasp of morality than she did.

“It was for the best,” Will said. “We didn’t even kill him. And, um, do we have space in the freezer?”

“Plenty of it,” Abigail said. “Want me to help?”

As they worked getting the meat bled and packaged for the freezer, Will struggled to keep his hands steady. He kept thinking of Alana, what he almost let happen to her. God, what had he nearly done?

Afterwards, when the blood that had been soaking his gloves finished swirling down the kitchen sink drain, he gripped the counter edge to steady himself, his knuckles turning white.

“What’s alright?” Abigail asked, grabbing bleach from under the sink. Cleaning up afterwards was her responsibility for now. Practice makes perfect, after all.

“Yeah,” he rasped, unwilling to tell her what he’d nearly done. The back door clicked shut as she left for the barn. Will ran a hand through his sweaty hair, tried to take in a deep breath. A hand touched his arm, and he whirled around.

No one was there.

But from where he was standing he could see into a small part of where the living room should be, and that was not his living room. Instead of drywall, there was floor to ceiling wainscoting made of dark cherry wood. As he crept closer, sunlight streamed in through arched windows and illuminated the space, revealing a simple but elegant wooden desk and chair resting on an oriental rug, and a leather armchair several feet away.

He was sitting in the armchair, or at least a past version of himself was.

This was Dr. Bloom’s office, and Alana herself was standing by one of the windows trying to look both welcoming and professional.

“I’m going to have to refer you, Will, to another psychiatrist.” She said it as nicely as possible but in a firm voice; it was clear she would not tolerate attempts to change her mind.

Will watched his past self smile in a way that was both self-deprecating and amused as he admitted,
“Because I kissed you.”

“Yes,” she said after a moment of awkward silence. He bet she had weighed in her mind the benefit and harm of further discussing the kiss itself and had judged it a distraction to the more necessary goal of ensuring that unstable Will Graham got the therapy he needed. “The psychiatrist I’m referring you to is one the best; he was once my mentor, in fact. You’ll be in good hands.”

To anyone else the comforting look on her face combined with the strong, measured cadence of her voice meant she was calm and unaffected. But Will’s empathy could see through it. He suspected she felt she had crossed a line by not cutting off their doctor-patient relationship until after he had kissed her. She had been gently encouraging him—at least until now—in his pursuit of her, perhaps motivated by her need to repair broken things. And he had been the perfect broken man for her to fix, or so he had let her believe.

His past self said with a dry chuckle, “I doubt even he can help me. Therapy doesn’t work on me, Alana, I know all the tricks.”

“Will—”

“Thank you. I know you did your best, but I’ll be turning down the referral.”

Alana frowned.

“I think you’re deliberately misunderstanding the purpose of therapy. It’s not about tricks.”

“No, it’s about fixing me.” He sounded more bitter about it than he remembered.

A shadow passed over Alana’s face, a strange mix of doubt and hurt and concern.

“Therapy is best described as an attempt to understand ourselves more deeply, and a place to heal. An opportunity to improve ourselves. My job is merely to provide a non-judgemental environment, and to educate when needed. I’m concerned to learn you believe that therapy is about fundamentally changing you.” She paused, probably making mental connections between the current topic and his recent actions. “Why, exactly, did you kiss me?”

“I thought that would be obvious.” It was supposed to be a reference to how desirable she was, but his attempt at humor fell flat.

“You do realize someone who wants to change who you are, not merely help improve or heal, is not someone you want as a psychiatrist, or as a dating partner for that matter.”

Alana only believed that because she didn’t realize who he really was. What he had nearly let happen to her tonight was all the proof he needed of how wrong she was.

The sunlight faded away, leaving him once again in his dark house in the middle of the night. Fear squeezed at his belly, some unnamable fear stoked by the fact he’d nearly seen a family murdered tonight. He was at the boys’ room before he even realized he needed to see them and know they were safe.

He cracked open the door. C.J.’s bed was closest, and he could see him fast asleep partially buried under the covers and an Ellie-sized lump in the comforter snuggled up next to him. At this point Will was going to have to accept no one obeyed the “no dogs on the bed” rule.

In the bed across the room, however, Jesse was not asleep. He was sitting up absentely fiddling with his phone, probably playing a game. Glancing up with a guilty look, he ceased his efforts at half-
heartedly tapping at the screen.

There was no excitement from staying up past his bedtime or the thrill of winning a game in his slumped shoulders, so Will figured it safe to assume that whatever this was, it wasn’t about the game on his phone.

Will walked quietly across the room and sat on the bed to ask, “Everything alright?”

“Can’t sleep,” Jesse said with a shrug. After hesitating a moment, he asked Will, “Do you ever have nightmares?”

Will could see the ghost of a figure out of the corner of his eye; a flash of white fabric and pale skin and dark hair. He knew who it was. The imaginary Elise Nichols slowly prowled behind him.

“Most nights,” Will admitted. Had Jesse been having nightmares?

“What are they about?” Jesse asked.

The days between when Will realized that Garrett Jacob Hobbs was the Minnesota Shrike and when he finally cornered Hobbs at the hunting cabin, Will had been tormented by nightmares of himself as Hobbs. Over and over he dreamt of killing Elise Nichols. Shooting, strangling, stabbing—no bodies had turned up yet so there had been no way to know how Hobbs killed his victims, so Will’s dreams had killed her in every way possible.

Her hair between his fingers, her skin underneath his palms, her blood coating everything became as familiar as the brush of his dogs’ fur when he reached out for them upon waking.

“How about we settle on the description ‘disturbing’ and leave it at that,” Will said.

The dreams changed after he actually found Hobbs. If he thought it was bad before, it was worse now.

The imaginary Elise Nichols finished circling around him and stood in front of him. She was alive and smirking: no bruises around her throat from a hand cutting off her air, her white dress was pristine and clean with no blood, no wounds punctured his skin. It was how she appeared now in his nightmares. Elise Nichols alive and well, because there had been a different victim.

At night Will was trapped in a nightmare world where Hobbs had tired of substitutes, and finally killed and ate his golden ticket instead. A world without Abigail.

“I dream about fire,” Jesse whispered.

Elise Nichol’s mouth opened to reveal small flames dancing on her tongue. The fire spread in seconds, consuming her tongue, then her lips. Her skin blackened and curled as it devoured her with no mercy. Will could feel the heat too close to his skin, and fought the urge to shy away from the fire—he didn’t want Jesse to guess what he was seeing. When the flames finally died down all that was left was a curled-up charred body on the ground, too small to be Elise Nichols. The body now looked like Colin Frisk’s.

“Am I right to assume this has to do with Colin?” Will said. “It must have been scary to watch him die.”

“I wouldn’t say scary; I was so angry at him,” Jesse said. “His stupidity was going to get us caught. I thought he deserved it. He couldn’t even shoot a gun right, and he was scared and weak... or, I mean, that’s what I thought at the time.”
“And now?”

“I don’t know. I mean, he was supposed to be my brother, then he was dead and gone. And I dream about him sometimes.”

Now that Will thought about it, it likely wasn’t just fear of death fueling Jesse’s particular nightmares, especially when it was a bullet that had killed Colin, not the fire. But burning the body in the fireplace is how Eva Blair and her adopted children had disowned Colin Frisk after he was already dead.

“Some dreams it’s him that goes into the fire, sometimes it’s going to be me,” Jesse said, discarding his phone in disinterest onto the bed.

“When what we fear might happen to us happens to someone else instead, our minds might try to find a way to blame the other person for what happened to them,” Will said. “If they deserved it, and you don’t, then it won’t happen to you, or so you want to tell yourself.”

Jesse nodded, and his face scrunched up like he was about to cry. Will was completely screwing this up.

“Jesse, listen to me,” Will said as he moved beside Jesse and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “What happened to Colin Frisk will never happen to you. Not because Colin did anything to deserve what happened to him, because he didn’t. It’s because this family is nothing like Eva Blair’s. There is nothing you could ever do that would make you no longer my son.”

Jesse did begin to cry then. Will didn’t know what to do; he felt so unprepared to be a father.

He remembered being eight and crying, hiding in his room, because none of his classmates wanted to talk to him. One boy in particular liked to call him a freak, and viciously pinched his arm on more than one occasion just to hear Will’s cry of pain. The others laughed like it was a joke, and the shame of it choked him every time he had thought about it. His father had pretended he didn’t hear the sobs.

Then he was fifteen. A woman was missing in their small town. There were policemen and search parties, but Will already knew it was for nothing. He saw in his mind what her husband had done, even if no one believed him. Over and over he’d see it; the man hit her, again and again, until she stopped breathing. He was too old to be crying then, but he couldn’t stop the tears regardless, and his father’s scorn had felt more painful than even the arm pinches.

He pulled Jesse into a hug, desperate to make sure he wouldn’t feel like Will had felt all those years ago. That he’d never feel shame for crying. It took long minutes until at last the quiet sobs died down to sniffles.

“Everything will be ok, I promise,” Will whispered.

Will kept holding him, hoping against hope Jesse wouldn’t feel alone and scared. It was a strange helpless feeling, wishing he could heal someone else’s anguish. Eventually Jesse fell asleep, and Will stayed long enough to make sure the nightmares didn’t immediately return.

He felt guilty admitting it, but Will wished he had someone to hold him through his own nightmares.
Baltimore, Maryland
Lecter Residence

Will lingered on Dr. Lecter’s front porch, neither knocking on the door or ringing the doorbell. It was hard to believe this might be the last time he would stand here.

Surely there was nothing wrong in taking a minute to commit to memory everything he was about to lose. Even the expensive stone work of the porch and the precisely trimmed bushes in the yard—which he had once found off-putting and intimidating—had become dear to him now. They were elegant and classic, just like Hannibal himself.

He rang the doorbell, and it didn’t take long for the master of the house to answer. To Will’s surprise, he was wearing only two pieces of a three-piece suit, an almost casual look, at least for Hannibal. He looked achingly good. Blue windowpane pants and vest perfectly tailored, and a brown paisley tie, the sort of thing Will wouldn’t normally notice, but today he made an effort to. He wanted every detail, just so he can hold onto them in his memory.

“Will,” Hannibal said, warm smile gracing his face. “I had been hoping you would visit, especially after that unfortunate interruption.”

“We can’t be friends,” Will said, bluntly.

Hannibal’s head jerked slightly away from Will, almost like an aborted flinch. For a second, Will could swear Hannibal’s mouth twisted into a snarl, but when he looked again to make sure, all he could see was Hannibal’s normal comforting gaze, though the smile was gone.

“I shouldn’t come over to your house anymore,” Will said with a bitter laugh. “Believe me, it’s for the best.”

“Will—”

“When’s the wedding?” Will said sharply, skirting around Hannibal and giving him a wide berth as he stalked inside and towards the parlor.

“I’m not sure what wedding you are referring to,” Hannibal said. Was he being belligerent? Or was it a poor attempt at humor?

“Alana,” Will said, which as much “obviously” he could fit into his tone.

“I don’t know of any set wedding date yet,” Hannibal said. “I can ask Margot the next time I see her, if you wish.”

Why would Margot know the wedding date when the groom didn’t?

“And the baby shower,” Will said. “When is it?”

He really ought to just shut up and leave. Not like Hannibal asked to deal with his crazy.

“I think there is a strong possibility they won’t have one,” Hannibal said. “Margot’s brother would be less than supportive of her decision, and he controls the family finances. May I ask why you want to know?”

“I was asking about Alana’s baby shower, not Margot’s,” Will said.
“I would consider the child will be both Alana’s and Margot’s, especially when they are married,” Hannibal said. “Will, I admit I’m not entirely sure what this conversation is about.”

“Wait,” Will said, more than a little confused. “Are you saying Alana is marrying Margot? And they’re having a baby together?”

Hannibal stared at him, as if truly baffled as to why Will was confused. Oh god, Alana and Hannibal really had broken up and she had moved on and Will had almost let her die.

“I thought she was marrying you!” Will blurted out.

Instead of immediately responding, Hannibal’s face turned calculating. No doubt he was adding 2 plus 2, so to speak, only instead of “2” he was adding up Will’s jealous and erratic behavior the past few months. Oh shit, he was going to figure out just how infatuated Will was with him.

“Did you think I was flirting with you, Will, while engaged to another?”

Oh god, Hannibal knew I had been flirting? And he had been flirting back?

“Regardless, I’m concerned by your decision,” Hannibal said. “I wouldn’t suggest ending a friendship. You’ve recently become a father to three, and a support network is recommended. And I, of course, wish to be a help to you.”

“What? Oh, um, disregard what I said,” Will said, his face probably beet red from embarrassment by now. “It no longer—never mind.”

“Because you thought I was to marry Alana,” Hannibal said, connecting the dots in his mind.

Will laughed unamused, running a hand through his own hair, leaving it disheveled and curling around his face. Hannibal very much wanted to kiss him. Instead, he cupped his hand loosely under Will’s chin, and Will obligingly tilted his head up to meet Hannibal’s gaze.

“I was about to prepare lunch. I would very much like you to join me,” Hannibal said. “As a date.”

Will’s smile—a rare beautiful thing to see on him—was there and gone a second, but it was enough.

“I’d be happy to, Doctor,” Will said. There was a mischievous but satisfied glint in his eyes, like a cat playing with a mouse before finally devouring it. “Oh, um, let me call Abigail first. I didn’t plan to be gone this long, and I don’t want her worried.”

“Oh god, Hannibal knew I had been flirting? And he had been flirting back?”

“Of course. I’ll be in the kitchen. Join me when you’re ready.” Hannibal let his gaze slowly sweep over Will, savoring the sight of him standing there, eager and wanting.

Taking a quick mental inventory of the kitchen, he realized due to the recent dinner party, his kitchen was unfortunately only stocked with the sort of meat that could be found at the butcher or the market. Disappointed, he fetched the bowl of oysters he had purchased fresh this morning. It was not the same as something he had hunted himself, but it would have to do. At least it was something still alive for Will to tame with a knife.

He fetched the ingredients—champagne, butter, chives—plus an assortment of Swiss chard, kale, and collard with garlic, white wine, and pepper flakes to braise as a side dish. He began to heat the
butter in a pan, letting it melt.

When Will joined him in the kitchen, he heard him mutter in an embarrassed sounding voice, “She wasn’t even surprised.”

“Abigail is a very perceptive young woman,” Hannibal said, placing the hilt of an oyster knife in Will’s hands. “Care to help?”

“Brings back memories,” Will said with a half-smile, gripping the knife with familiar and practiced ease. “One of the benefits of growing up where I did.”

Will grabbed a kitchen towel to wrap over his thumb, and pierced the first oyster at the hinge, rocking the knife to loosen the top shell.

“In Louisiana,” Hannibal said, remembering what Will had already mentioned about his childhood. “Any detriments? Or was it all benefits?”

Will finished swiping the knife through to separate the meat from the shell, and then he paused. His eyes roved back and forth, his mind working on some memory or revelation.

“I don’t know what I’m doing. This, here, with you,” Will said slowly. “It was never talked about in Louisiana, at least not in flattering terms. And I’m not personable, people don’t tell me about their lives, so even after I moved, no one ever explained how this feels or what to do with what I feel.”

Hunching his shoulders, Will continued his task, almost as if he wished to ignore what he had just admitted. Hannibal watched him, clever hands expertly manipulating the mollusks.

“It’s not any different than falling in love with a woman,” Hannibal said. “If you discount the discourteous things ignorant people might do or say about the relationship.” Will swallowed hard, probably taken aback by the open admission of falling in love.

“But I’ve never—it’s only ever been sex for me,” Will said. “I have no experience with these feelings, not even with women, not until recently.”

Giving into impulse, Hannibal lifted the hand Will clutched the knife with and brushed a kiss over the knuckles.

“Nor me,” Hannibal softly admitted. “But love is a pleasure we can explore together, if you wish.”

Chapter End Notes


Thank you to Katarra for beta reading and for the encouragement!

Thank you everyone for all the amazing comments last chapter! You guys are the best :)
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!