Mizaru, Kikazaru, Iwazaru (Do No Evil)

by Fallswithgrace

Summary

“I hope you don’t mind some additional company, Miss Bloom,” Hannibal says as he hangs his coat on the back of a chair. “Will, I’ve told you about Miss Alana Bloom, my TA. Miss Bloom, this is Will Graham, my significant other.”

Alana leans forward with an outstretched hand, beaming with recognition. “Hannibal’s mentioned you, Will! I’m so glad we can finally meet. Please, call me Alana.”

Will shakes Alana’s hand, answering with a less than polite but totally honest, “He has?” Flattering though the thought may be, it’s also out of character with Hannibal’s impersonal politeness.

“We got onto the subject of Florence, and how could I not mention meeting you?” Hannibal says charmingly.

“Hannibal said it’s where he became a man,” Alana grins, and her suggestiveness is not lost on Will.
“I guess that makes the two of us,” Will says, and deciding to indulge Alana elaborates, “I was just an innocent college student with absolutely no plans to be seduced by an exotic doctor in training.”

“It was a joint effort, my darling.”

The effects of Will and Hannibal having developed a relationship 20 years prior in Florence. Prequel coming soon.

Notes

I am very honored to share my thoughts and responses to Thomas Harris and Bryan Fuller's work.

Much of this short series of fun and dark episodes hinges around the question: what if Will and Hannibal had met each other as young men in Florence? In this scenario, they are still very much the same, their natures intact-- but they are also a little different.

Not yet shaped by life experiences that would have them build strong defenses against the other, how might Will and Hannibal have responded to a mutual attraction, loneliness for an equal, and the desire to enact pain and pleasure on each other?

Their relationship in this is still by no means "healthy" or "normal". They hurt each other, and they soothe each other, and they rip each other open again. On and on the cycle goes. They change each other. They resist the other's change.

So, the first episode is Will meeting Alana Bloom according to canon when she is Hannibal's TA.

The second is Hannibal meeting Will's colleagues (Jack Crawford, Beverly Katz, Jimmy Price, and Brian Zeller) at the BAU.

The third episode is Will and Hannibal together, and how Abigail enters their family.

How a twist in Will and Hannibal's first encounter ripples throughout the other character's lives, and of course, Will and Hannibal's.

The prequel to this when Will and Hannibal first meet in Florence and all that entails is coming soon.

Thank you for reading.
See No Evil.

I. Will.

It had taken some asking around—something that will almost certainly result in rumors spreading through the surgical residents’ gossip networks—but Will finally knows which call room of John Hopkins Medical Center Hannibal’s working tonight.

When he finds Hannibal, the other man is chatting amiably with unoccupied nurses. While other interns and doctors might not deign to address nurses with anything beyond sudden demands, Hannibal cultivates their respect and liking. No differently than his internist colleagues, they are instruments to cull information and also to foster Hannibal’s social influences. Hannibal is appealing to them, listening raptly, offering sympathy, and in reward he enjoys the possibility of delving into their psyches.

Will’s wearing something nicer than his usual cologne, so it takes a moment before the doctor registers his presence. Then, Hannibal is all attention and a contained but entirely authentic smile.

“Will,” he says, and Will and Hannibal walk toward each other, lips meeting halfway. Hannibal crafts his reputation with care, so he must not entirely mind the nurses’ surprised, pleasantly scandalized, and mildly disappointed faces.

Will’s glad he dressed nicer today, his hair combed into neat waves and his wool coat gray and trim. Hannibal is most definitely enjoying Will’s presentation.

“Thought I’d surprise you,” Will says.

Hannibal’s smile broadens. “Consider me very pleasantly surprised.”

“You’re not on call much longer, right?” Will asks, but he knows Hannibal’s schedule.

“No,” Hannibal says slowly. “However…” he trails off, and Will refrains from gaping in horror. He hopes to God that Hannibal hasn’t picked up a colleague’s shift, though that would be highly unlikely for Hannibal, who is more prone to exacerbating other’s distress than enabling their frailty or incompetence.

Fuck. It’s one thing rushing into Hannibal’s arms and then beating a quick retreat; it’s another thing entirely to have to make awkward small talk for who knows how many hours with his boyfriend’s nursing associates.

“I promised Miss Bloom I’d meet her for drinks tonight,” Hannibal admits.

A pause. Then, “You did what?”

“She has been very helpful with my students,” Hannibal says of the TA. “I can request another time,” he adds, a hand firm and searching on Will’s waist.

Will groans, considering. Though he has no plans for ingratiating himself with Hannibal’s wide circle of acquaintances, he is a little curious to meet the woman whom, Hannibal let slip, is considered on some parts of campus as having an affair with the intern.
Well, maybe his designs aren’t exclusively curious.

“Fine, “ Will says, because he’s also okay with whiskey. It was a bit of a drive over.

“Excellent,” Hannibal says, and he bids the nurses goodnight. They return his well-wishes, staring at Will the entire time. He tries not to smirk too much.

The bar is casual, warm mahogany and full of what Will imagines are a number of John Hopkins related personnel, given how close it is to the facilities. When they find Alana Bloom, she nods to Hannibal and observes Will with surprise.

“I hope you don’t mind some additional company, Miss Bloom,” Hannibal says as he hangs his coat on the back of a chair. “Will, I’ve told you about Miss Alana Bloom, my TA. Miss Bloom, this is Will Graham, my significant other.”

Alana leans forward with an outstretched hand, beaming with recognition. “Hannibal’s mentioned you, Will! I’m so glad we can finally meet. Please, call me Alana.”

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“Hannibal said it’s where he became a man,” Alana grins, and her suggestiveness is not lost on Will.

“I guess that makes the two of us,” Will says, and deciding to indulge Alana elaborates, “I was just an innocent college student with absolutely no plans to be seduced by an exotic doctor in training.”

“It was a joint effort, my darling,” Hannibal says, and takes Will and Alana’s orders for drinks before heading to the counter.

“You guys have been together for some time then,” Alana observes.

“Just under five years.”

“Wow,” Alana says, and then corrects herself: “I don’t really date, so that level of commitment is very impressive.” Her psychiatric tendencies begin to show as she says soothing but probingly, “it must be hard with Hannibal in residence.”

Will hums. “It was harder when I was back in New Orleans and Hannibal was here in Baltimore.” Sometimes they were lucky with their schedules and Hannibal would visit Will at home over the summer… which became less than ideal when Will’s father finally clued in on their arrangement. He’d had no idea what to make of Hannibal then, and he certainly didn’t now. “Getting into George Washington University for my Master’s helped,” Will says, because he and Hannibal often take advantage of the less than an hour commute.

A warm palm sinks into Will’s shoulder, and he feels Hannibal behind him, massaging some of the tension from his body. Will briefly presses his cheek to the back of Hannibal’s hand— it’s been a while since he could luxuriate in the warmth of his skin, the sandalwood smell— and then he raises a hand to gently link their fingers together. As Hannibal sits down beside him, Will rests their clasped hands on his knee.

Alana sips her beer, trying not to look too obviously at the intimate interaction. Will sees straight
away that Hannibal likes her politeness but also her directness. She’s neither contrary nor a simple sheep.

“What are you studying?” she asks Will.

“Forensic Sciences.” Will raises his glass of whiskey—mmm, Hannibal got him the good stuff.

“Will spent a year after he graduated early from Tulane as an officer in New Orleans,” Hannibal says, because, of course, Hannibal will never let Will forget the fact.

Alana nods her understanding. “So you’re planning to go into law enforcement.”

Underneath the table, Hannibal’s hand has moved from sitting innocently (well, innocently for him) on Will’s knee to kneading Will’s thigh, his fingers dangerously light and searching on his inner leg. Slowly, Will circles his thumb over Hannibal’s wrist, not letting him move his hand any higher but also preventing Hannibal from terminating the close contact altogether.

“Yeah, something like that.”

“While you’ll no doubt be a great service to crime laboratories, I have yet to meet anyone with as acute an understanding of the human mind and its behavior. Even at John Hopkins. You could easily have gone into psychiatry,” Hannibal says lightly.

Will rolls his eyes. “But I didn’t.” From Alana’s expression, she can tell this is an old argument, less sharp than worn around the edges from frequent rehashing. “When we first met, he thought I was going into classics.”

“You did little to correct my assumptions.”

Will’s grin is all teeth. “Maybe I thought I’d scare you away,” he teases, and Hannibal responds by forcefully inching his fingers higher and higher up Will’s leg. “Anyway, I am not going to be a psychiatrist.”

“Miss Bloom is a perfect example of a well-meaning and effectual student of psychiatry.” Hannibal sips his wine. “Not only does she do great work with her patients— she also manages to guide my students through the neuroses of papers and exams. She’s compassionate and insightful. I trust she’ll make an excellent practitioner one day.”

Alana looks flattered by Hannibal’s assessment. “I hope that doesn’t lower your opinion of me,” Alana laughs to Will. “Between the two of us, though, Hannibal often feels more like the psychiatrist in training.”

“My point exactly,” Will states, and because present company and location forbids Hannibal doing exactly what he wants with Will’s nether-regions, he raises his hand to Will’s head and tangles his fingers into the younger man’s dark curls. Will laughs, loosened by the fantastic whiskey and better unwanted company than he’d expected.

Alana’s eyes are wide and gleeful. “To think the day would come when I see Hannibal any way other than—”

“The picture of politeness?” Will finishes.

“I carry myself with perfect comportment,” Hannibal chides Will, and then says to Alana, “I’d hate for my unruly boyfriend to give you any other impression, Miss Bloom. No amount of Florentine culture can diminish his true nature.”
“God forbid.” Alana gives Will a conspiratorial grins from over her rapidly disappearing drink.

“It appears I have to restore my image,” Hannibal says with a playful sigh, standing to refill Alana’s glass before she can protest.

When Will knits his eyebrows at Hannibal, the older man merely responds with a quite possibly telepathic *I think you’ve had enough to drink, you lovely terror.*

“My perfect gentleman,” Will quips. But, he’s okay with not getting drunk tonight.

“It is the first time I’ve seen him like this, you know,” Alana confides. Will reads her more carefully now: she respects Hannibal, his acumen, his poise, and his professionalism—a close mentorship with a man who doesn’t pressure her with sexual advances is a huge relief—though she’s also somewhat intimidated by Hannibal’s faultless carriage. Such composure and capability is an anomaly among graduate students as well as residents, and Alana works hard to meet Hannibal’s expectations. She’s ambitious, and the admiration of someone as obviously promising as Hannibal *means* something for any lucky individual in their program. Going out for drinks together has been in her plans for some time; while the activity satisfies a part of the woman that genuinely wants the other man’s friendship, it also more calculatingly serves the agenda of humanizing him and endearing Alana to the impressive and lofty idol that is Hannibal Lecter.

Will allows himself to be impressed by Alana’s drive, her anxieties, and her intelligence. He finds himself liking her, perhaps prematurely, but Alana is evidently warming up to him as well: an unforeseen variable in tonight’s encounter, Will’s only ever been a vague reference Hannibal made to a lover. When Hannibal mentioned them and Florence, he betrayed nothing of Will’s identity, not even his name, which Will knows because Hannibal does not betray close aspects of his nature. Will soothes Alana with his casualness, his attractiveness, his cynical intelligence, and the rough but loving way he pokes and prods at a somewhat exasperated but equally fond Hannibal.

Alana’s comprehension is clearly surface-level, however: to think that Will softens or humanizes Hannibal is a fundamental misunderstanding of their relationship. Yes, they might destabilize and challenge and unmake the other, but they also draw out the other’s darkness, coax their lethal hungers, encourage the other’s singularity among plethoras of the mundane and unworthy.

“He changed me, I changed him,” Will answers. “We change each other.”

“Relationships are... tricky,” Alana laughs somewhat somberly. “We all desire to be understood and loved by someone, but that kind of companionship is hard to come across. Eventually people realize a relationship isn’t discovered: it’s made. It’s understandable, then, when someone wants to change their partner. But, often, they don’t want to be changed, too.” Will knows this woman personally fears such a thing.

“It wasn’t always so easy,” Will admits, “but sometimes, just when I think I can’t live with him, I’m also reminded that I can’t live without him. I feel the most myself when we’re together.”

“And he feels the same way,” Alana says with a certainty Will finds irresistible; even so, he tamps down a scoff.

*Yeah, you’d think that,* he wants to say. The last time he tried to put a ring on Hannibal, however, the man had gently but firmly insisted he retry at some undecided future date. So Will didn’t insert his proposal as esoteric poetry into a magnificently reconstructed corpse. Of all the transformations they’ve subjected each other to, Will is still painfully direct, whereas Hannibal stubbornly demands grand, masterful gestures.
Will’s a little unnerved when Alana’s eyes shine with a light that suggests she’s been reading his mind. Well, some of it. Damn— Hannibal’s rejection had rattled him more than he thought.

“So,” she says with too much casualness, though Will’s also beginning to suspect she started drinking before they’d arrived, “any special reason for your visit today, Will?”

This is why Will doesn’t like psychiatrists.

Hannibal, of course, uses this exact moment to make his re-entrance. As he extends Alana her new beer and tries to discern the thread of conversation, Will settles an arm around Hannibal’s waist and lays his head onto the man’s chest.

“Anything for my darlin’,” he says. And, because he likes Alana but also no longer withholds from tending to his darker nature, Will starts, “So, Hannibal tells me people think you two are having an affair,” to which Alana flushes and almost noiselessly chokes on her drink.
II. Hannibal.

The phone rings while Hannibal is between sessions and recording his thoughts. This is lucky for Hannibal’s caller. Once Doctor Lecter’s patients have entered his office and he has seated himself across from them, nothing will disturb their appointed hour. Hannibal gives his full and undivided attention to the task of cultivating his patients’ true nature (this is not to say that his other trains of thought, as Will so fondly puts them, aren’t running concurrent, deviant paths toward other amusements).

And so Hannibal picks up the phone, decided that he will end the call strictly before his next appointee and no later, as demands his sense of courteous professionalism.

Franklyn Froideveaux might consider himself lucky as well. The man seems to be running on no shortage of good graces. Hannibal is curious as to when his reservoirs will inevitably come up dry.

“Hannibal,” Alana says.

“Miss Bloom.” This is surprising. Alana knows he has regular appointment hours. “For what reason do I owe this pleasure?”

Hannibal is mildly irked when he hears a jolt of static from the other end. Alana is obviously in
the middle of another activity. One might consider it rude to be preoccupied during a conversation.

“Um, I wanted to give you a heads up,” Alana says hurriedly. “Before the ambush.”

“Ambush?” How intriguing.

“Yes. I… may have inadvertently sent the head of the Behavior Analysis Unit at the FBI to your doorstep.”

With one hand, Hannibal holds the phone; with his other, he loosely lifts his scalpel, running his forefinger down the silver spine.

Alana sounds breathless in a genuinely apologetic fashion—not a fearing for her life one, the particularly helpless and choked quality of which Hannibal knows well like a recursive melody—so the doctor supposes his blade won’t be necessary for this upcoming encounter. It is somewhat of a pity: a hunt would give him something to look forward to during Franklyn’s session. Not that elevating the other man’s distress to awesome new heights isn’t enjoyable. Though, Hannibal has dwindling patience for the accompanying tears and sniveling.

“Jack Crawford, I presume?” Hannibal feigns slowness in his recollection. “Will has told me a little about him. They are working on a case together.”

“Yes, which is why Jack approached me about consulting.” Alana sounds irritated, and Hannibal believes he knows the cause. “He says that he’s worried the case will be too much for Will’s imagination to take on its own.”

“The details Will shared with me are sensational,” Hannibal allows, for he predicts a splendidly sensational climax. “But, Will was also a homicide detective before he entered the FBI, and now he lectures on cases that are exceptionally difficult, both to investigate and process.”

Alana sighs. “I want to believe that a part of Jack is really looking out for Will, and he might be…but I also think he wants insider info about the workings of Will’s mind. An insider other than Will.”

“It would not be the first time,” Hannibal says, and he puts on a show of exasperation.

Alana chuckles tersely, but Hannibal can tell that she is upset. “Yeah, it’s a small blessing that Frederick Chilton hasn’t been involved. Yet.”

A small blessing for Will’s restraint and an immense one for Doctor Chilton’s wellbeing.

In their acquaintance, Alana has often defended Will’s empathy against trespasses by Frederick and his ilk, even when it meant resisting acting on the temptations of her own psychiatric curiosity. Hannibal has allowed Alana the luxury of developing their friendship largely out of her respect for him and Will. That, and she is very pleasant to have for dinner… though Hannibal suspects no matter what turns their relationship may take, that will continue to be true.

“I told Jack that I’m Will’s friend, I have been for over a decade,” Alana continues. “I recommended other practitioners nearby. I thought he’d asked one of them… and then this afternoon he expresses an interest in your paper, ‘Evolutionary Origins of Social Exclusion.’”

“Ah,” Hannibal responds. “You were torn between two conscientious impulses. One: to spare me an unfruitful encounter with Agent Crawford. The other: to guard the privacy of mine and Will’s relationship, as you believed it was not your place to divulge it.”
Alana laughs. “And now I feel guilty for receiving a free, impromptu session.”

“Your consideration pays for itself, Alana. Don’t worry. I will take care of Agent Crawford.”

When Alana wishes Hannibal good-bye, she is no doubt reassured he will explain to Jack why he cannot take an intermediary position between Jack’s demands and Will’s psyche. Hannibal has other ideas.

The last encounter he had with a member of the FBI was incredibly stirring. Though Hannibal enjoys the soothing intimacy of his and Will’s relationship, he also relishes Will’s bloodlust. Very little compares to the thrill of Will’s ruthless, whole-hearted pursuit of Hannibal, the demands the other man’s nature makes to wound and undo and penetrate the other. Hannibal finds equal pleasure in pushing Will to his physical and emotional limits. Hannibal can neither control nor predict the nature of Will’s breaking and reformation. With every joint, violent shattering, there is a possibility for Will and Hannibal’s constituent pieces to intermingle and fuse in fearful and tantalizing transformation.

Unlike Jack, FBI trainee Miriam Lass had shown up at Hannibal’s office two years ago without warning. She was polite and clever, making remarkable leaps in logic that inevitably fell short of Will’s but were unparalleled among her flock. She was special, not at all like Hannibal’s preferred prey, so he had planned to make special arrangements for her. That was until—

“Professor Graham?”

“Miriam Lass?”

Will, like Miriam Lass, and apparently a majority of FBI-related personnel, also showed up suddenly. Will, however, had a tendency to do that throughout their relationship. Hannibal never had plans to meet anyone like Will in front of the Primavera that afternoon twenty years ago.

That was in part why Hannibal remained in the upper levels of his office’s library, his shoes already removed, curious about what events might pass in the re-encounter between the FBI professor and trainee.

He could observe that Will was not as amused about the situation as Hannibal was. Miriam Lass’ face he could not see from his vantage point, but the smell of her drive and fear was more potent than it had been during their conversation— ah. She’d found his Wound Man drawing. Clever girl.

“Did Jack send you, too?” Miriam asked Will, her voice even. She believed that she was receiving aid in her quest.

“Doctor Lecter is my psychiatrist,” Will lied with perfect calm and ease, though Hannibal recognized Will’s expression of concentration—the concentration of a fisherman. “Why would Agent Crawford send you here?”

“I’ve been asking some of Jeremy Olmstead’s former physicians about him… in connection to the Ripper murders.” Miriam Lass suspected that Hannibal was the Chesapeake Ripper, but she was acting so as not to alert a potentially overhearing Hannibal. Hannibal applauded her intelligence. He watched the trainee turn his drawing toward Will in the hopes of silently communicating her revelation to her ally. As clever as Miriam Lass might be, however, she was not clever enough.

Will was dissecting Miriam Lass’ words and compounding that knowledge with his unique insights: Jack had sent the woman to look into the Chesapeake Ripper, but he did not send her
specifically to Hannibal. Therefore, he did not know her current location.

“It’s irresponsible for the Bureau to send a trainee to officially investigate like this,” Will prompted further, putting on the guise of an admonishing professional. What more he read in Miriam Lass’ countenance apparently told Will all he needed to know: this was no sanctioned event. Thus, there would be no larger organizational involvement, no trail back to Hannibal. Or to Will.

Before Miriam Lass could even detect anything untoward, Will wrapped himself around her and applied a very precise and lethal chokehold. Though it bore a passing resemblance to Hannibal’s own twist and snap technique, Will desired a closer and more sustained intimacy with his prey. He needed to feel their bodies fight and break and lose oxygen, he needed to see the surge of emotions in their eyes, because to kill for him meant to connect and to hurt. So, he would make himself open to his prey at the same time as he manipulated their own vulnerabilities to break them. The admirable and unfortunate Miriam Lass deserved no less.

Only when Will had finished empathizing with his victim and loosened Miriam Lass’s corpse onto the floor did he raise his eyes to meet Hannibal’s.

“You were careless,” Will said about the drawing. It was both crueler and more forgiving than the truth: you were curious. Hannibal might have accepted his pardon, even his reproach. Except…

“Sending Miss Lass on her way so soon makes me appear discourteous, Will.” Hannibal’s own instincts were too excited and his burgeoning plans so disappointingly thwarted.

Will was no less animated. His eyes, a perfect storm of bright and sharpness and dark, Hannibal still recalls vividly. “Really? I think she narrowly avoided some very bad company.”

Hunting with Will and hunting Will were and are the tantamount experiences in Hannibal’s existence. With teeth, claws, fists, and knives they came at each other. Will by then was familiar with Hannibal’s scalpel, and he also knew just where Hannibal kept every heavy object and sharp edge. Hannibal almost lost his stag statuette that afternoon when Will embedded the antlers in Hannibal’s upper leg (Will never forgets to remind Hannibal just how found he is of the idol and how much he would miss it). Will had likewise gained a new appreciation of Hannibal’s ladder when the doctor dislocated Will’s shoulder on the rungs.

With every resumption of their ongoing combat, Hannibal is still never clearer about how brutal biting turns into brutal kissing and bone-crushing grabs into fierce, groping hands. He does not complain. He and Will have never had a conventional intimacy. Will described it that day as well as either of them were capable of:

“We’re always hurtling from an edge. Falling. I wonder what happens… when it’s over, and we finally reach the bottom.”

“You speak as though we won’t survive the impact,” Hannibal had answered.

“Maybe we do. Maybe we don’t.” Will gave Hannibal that hoarse, cutting laugh of his and kissed him, pressing the doctor against his desk covered with sliced papers and scarlet spots. “For now, let’s just enjoy the plunge.”

The closing transfiguration before the Chesapeake Ripper’s current intermission was tragic and comical and magnificent.

Hannibal can admit with no ego that his own work is a masterful feat. He flourishes the profane with elegance and the horrific with beauty. He imagines that without Will, the Chesapeake Ripper
“murders”, as Miriam Lass had called them, might have entirely consisted of transforming the vessels of the rude and partaking in their flesh.

The work he and Will do together, a combination of unprecedented designs and desires, cannot be described or understood by law enforcement or average onlookers. It can only be appreciated. Only feared.

Will was not working for Jack then, so Hannibal has to guess what the senior agent saw: his protégé, illuminated beneath a beam of moonlight and starlight in the observatory. Her eyes were plucked from their sockets so that silvery tracks of ceaseless water could pour down her wan face. Will had engineered the ingenuous pump. In one hand she lifted the lens of a telescope, and with the other she drew a film of blood across the glass. Hannibal removed her kidney and carved intricate, lacy patterns into her unseeing countenance.

Will describes it as such in his classroom: Miriam, she who wept bitterly an ocean of tears. She was also a prophetess, sister of Moses, who received her Lord’s visions and also his wrath. Miriam Lass was the object of the Ripper’s reverence and irreverence. Though she prophesied him, she had to be punished, and now she can no longer lead lesser beings to salvation.

That fate, or Alana, should bring Jack Crawford to Hannibal now gives him several amusing avenues of opportunity. The doctor is resolute in utilizing all of them after his door opens and Jack calls Franklyn by Hannibal’s name.

Hannibal waits in Jack’s office the next day, examining photos of the Minnesota Shrike’s work. The doctor smells Will the moment he walks in with the senior BAU agent.

Will’s scent is comforting and tantalizing: pine nettles, musty books, and the sharp tang of steel. As Hannibal turns away from the bulletin board, Will’s confusion (or what Hannibal suspects was initially confusion) has transformed into fond and familiar exasperation.

“I don’t think this is a good idea, Jack,” he mutters. Will is cataloguing Hannibal’s appearance. He appears surprised by how the other man has traded his paisley ties and ox-blood suits for a more modest coat and sweater. Though he probably hadn’t intended for Hannibal to pick up on this thought.

Dearest, rude Will.

Will reads Hannibal’s reserved smile and thoughts of endearment with his usual nonchalance, though Jack interprets this as the special agent’s dismissive attitude.

“I know you don’t like psychiatrists, but we need a second opinion for the case,” Jack insists.

Will’s blue eyes unflinchingly meet Hannibal’s maroon ones.

“I believe what Will is trying to say, Jack,” Hannibal translates, “is that while I can consult on the case with Will, it would be unethical for me to treat my husband in a professional capacity.”

This makes Jack pause. Face still stubbornly set, he blinks between Will and Hannibal. It’s the only slip in his otherwise statuesque composure. “‘Husband?’”

Sighing, Will raises his hand and flashes his wedding band. Hannibal produces an identical ring on his own finger.

Will gives Hannibal the look, his eyebrow cocked wryly and lips pursed. I know you’re so pleased with yourself, the look says.
“Forgive me for the deception,” says Hannibal, “but I never get the chance to surprise Will at work.”

The senior BAU agent is no doubt sifting through his more nebulous circumstances for new profits. “You withhold the consultation fee, and you’re free to surprise Will for the rest of this case,” Jack negotiates. He is beginning to rise in Hannibal’s estimation. Hannibal’s tempted to even have the man for dinner.

Hannibal’s husband shoots him another look. They don’t need the consultation fee, not with the money they make between Will’s teaching and Hannibal’s practice. That’s still not taking into account all the inherited wealth that Hannibal has stored away and multiplied to the nth degree. Even when Hannibal is extravagant, Will knows he’ll never be wasteful. Both have known poverty too painful to be otherwise.

No, the concern-for-my-husband’s-financial-whimsy look disguises a far more complex series of communications.

_Don’t let them see; don’t let them know._

So Hannibal silently smiles back, appearing to submit himself to Will’s judgment.

“You’d better make it worth our time, Doctor Lecter,” Will finally says.

“Of course, Special Agent Graham.” Hannibal raises his arm, and at that Will finally rolls his eyes. He does not shake his hand.

“And please, don’t psychoanalyze me,” Will emphasizes.

Hannibal in return supplies Will with a look he gives his husband as freely and as frequently as his home-cooked meals. _Anything for you, my dear._

“You two’ve been married for a while, then,” Jack deduces once they head down to the lab.

“Fifteen years, almost,” Will says.

Jack nods. “You’ve got the whole non-verbal communication down to an art, I’ll give you that.”

The stench of formaldehyde and decomposition in the lab is… not ideal. Hannibal is at first grateful when he realizes Will must shower before he leaves work and risks bringing the sharp, rotting odor back into their home. The dogs are no doubt grateful as well. Never have Hannibal’s sentiments been so aligned with the creatures.

Hannibal later feels a slighter prickle of irritation when he observes Will’s cool vindication. Hannibal’s demeanor may not change, but Will knows his spouse’s fine-tuned olfactory senses are suffering.

“Look alive! We’ve got a fresh pair of eyes,” Jack says as he gathers his crime scene investigators. “Doctor Lecter; Agents Katz, Price, and Zeller.”

The agents review their findings: the body was gored post-mortem and the liver replaced after being removed.

“She has liver cancer,” says Hannibal.

Agent Price blinks at him. “Yeah. How’d you know?”
“The body is not so deteriorated it hides the scent.”

Agent Zeller stares outright. “You’re saying you can… smell cancer?” Hannibal does not appreciate the tone of Will’s co-worker.

“Even over all the other competing *fragrances,*” Will says, barely grinning. Hannibal enjoys his tone only a little more.

Agent Katz laughs in awe. “And I thought determining time of death by insect activity was impressive! No offense,” she says to Will.

Will shrugs and closes his eyes. Though Hannibal and Will’s mind palaces share many rooms, the sights Will experiences as he reconstructs others’ violence and transubstantiation are his alone.

“Our cannibal loved Elise Nichols, and he loves his other victims,” says Will. “He has someplace special to prepare them, with an antler room, probably a cabin. He needs to take his time. He’s fastidious. He’s a ritualistic and practiced hunter. Like everything he hunts, he wants to… honor the girls and all their parts.”

“A consumer can honor their meal and still debase the source,” Hannibal offers.

“It’s not murder. It’s the opposite to him. He cares for them. He wants to keep a part of them inside of himself,” Will responds.

“He doesn’t intend to harm, but to treasure. To safeguard and absorb,” says Hannibal.

“Yes,” says Will.

Hannibal looks at the drained, silvery doe. “His is an act of love and possession. Who can’t he let go, Will?”

Will looks at Hannibal. “A daughter. Same features as Elise Nichols and the other girls: hair color, eye color, height, weight. She’s an only child. She’s eighteen or nineteen and leaving home. He’s not savoring her for the end. He’s protected her from his impulses for so long, but now he can’t bear for her to leave him. She’s his golden ticket.”

“So,” says Jack, “add that to the piece of metal we found in Elise Nichols’ clothes, and we’re looking for a construction worker who’s the father of a college-aged girl. She’ll have a strong physical resemblance to the victims.”

Will nods. “We’ll need to run an analysis on the metal to narrow down which construction sites use that kind of pipe. Personnel files should show the rest.”

“The seven other missing girls,” Jack starts, even though he knows, “we’re sure they’re dead?”

“They wouldn’t survive his desires for closeness.”

Jack holds only the slightest pause. “What about remains? Their families want something. Anything. Where would we find them?”

Will reads Elise Nichols one more time, the antler moss like precious velvet stopping her wounds but her white hide otherwise pure and unblemished. “He won’t dispose of anything in the usual ways, to distance himself from evidence. He can’t waste or destroy them. If there are remains, they’ll be turned into something the killer uses regularly and gives his affections to. Tools… household items. He’ll have integrated them completely into his own life.”
Jack looks grim but satisfied. “Good job, Will.”

Agent Katz looks radiant. “You know, you’re not what I was expecting for the guy who wrote the standard monograph on crawly critters and bodily decay rates.”

Will easily assesses the other agent. “I guess I don’t seem like a guy who gets into killers’ heads for a living either, then?”

Agent Katz smiles broadly. “Honestly, yeah. I thought you’d avoid eye-contact and be kinda unstable. Or something. You’re a lot more… well put-together.”

Will crosses his arms and leans against the gurney. “You can blame Doctor Lecter a little for that.”

Hannibal supposes that Will must enjoy the agent’s brutal honesty, something Will has always had an affinity for. His and Hannibal’s familiar repartee has also softened him to the other man’s encroachment into his work space.

Agent Katz whistles. “Didn’t think that was one of the takeaways from doctor-patient dialogues. I’m tempted now. Have any open sessions, Doctor Lecter?”

“I’m afraid Will’s the only non-patient of mine who receives personal grooming advice,” Hannibal responds, adding tactfully, “and access to my personal wardrobe.”

Will doesn’t roll his eyes, but the crinkle in his forehead suggests he’s half-way there.

“I knew I saw a wedding ring!” Agent Price exclaims, and whips an open palm to his groaning colleague. “Twenty-five big ones, come on.”

Agent Zeller bristles. “Ten, twelve maybe. What? You were half-right—at best. Like you would have guessed who his spouse was!”

“I could have guessed. No, really!” Agent Katz protests at her fellows’ glares. She looks back between Will and Hannibal. “You guys paint a pretty picture together, and in more ways than one.”

Oh, if only you knew, Agent Katz.

“When Will was reading the killer, you had this whole thing going on,” the woman muses. “That back and forth. It was almost telepathic.”

“That could have easily been because Doctor Lecter was his psychiatrist,” Agent Zeller complains.

Agent Katz shakes her head. “No, that wasn’t it. More like a long-term relationship, you know, where you read and influence the other one’s mind? Mutual reciprocity. Or like and like?”

Hannibal is impressed by Agent Katz’s interpersonal awareness, which is more acute and developed than her flippant demeanor initially suggests. She may beguile and surprise the doctor yet.

“Folie à deux,” Hannibal suggests. “It’s a French psychiatric term that roughly translates to ‘madness shared by two.’” He does earn Will’s cautionary glare at that.

“Well, I was thinking ‘birds of a feather,’” Agent Katz says with a rogue gleam in her eyes, “but I’ll leave the diagnosing to the shrink and hubby.”

Jack can’t help but laugh. “Well, I guess all long-term couples are a little mad then,” he says with
fond reminiscence. “After ten and counting years together, you either become more like your partner, or one of you dies trying.”

Agent Price turns with renewed triumph on his less than pleased compatriot. “Now it’s thirty-five!”

Agent Katz gives Will a sartorial up-and-down. “Are appearances the biggest takeaway?”

Yes, Agent Katz’s quick mind will be something Hannibal attends to quite closely in the future.

Will grins, a perfect arch of diversion and disregard. As his hand slides down the metallic table where Elise Nichols’ body lies, his wedding band catches the neutral white lights. He shares a look with Hannibal.

“We wouldn’t want you to know all our secrets,” he teases charmingly. “Now would we, Hannibal?”

And never will they: the elusive, singular, maddeningly contradictory, and completely unified halves of the Chesapeake Ripper.

“No, dear Will. It’s best to keep others guessing.” The bone of Hannibal’s exposed teeth glints in Will’s ring. “Where else would be the fun?”

Chapter End Notes

A little note: Cassie Boyle does not die in this iteration, because Hannibal shares his thoughts about Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ victims with Will in the lab. Thus, it makes the canonical Copycat Murder redundant and unnecessary, because Will does not need the "enlightening" (aka, Hannibal for taunting and experimental) comparison between Cassie Boyle and Elise Nichols’ treatments.

This will have some other impacts in the next chapter. Nicholas Boyle does not go after his sister.

And yet, even without killing Nicholas Boyle, Abigail Hobbs gets drawn inextricably into the lives of Will and Hannibal as their daughter.

The first chapter was Murder Boyfriends, the second chapter Murder Husbands, and the upcoming third chapter Murder Family.

Stay tuned and thanks.
Speak No Evil (Part I)

Chapter Notes

After Part 1: Murder Boyfriends (See No Evil) and Part 2: Murder Husbands (Hear No Evil), we've now arrived at Part 3: Murder Family (Speak No Evil).

I'm especially excited to start this arc in the established relationship between Will and Hannibal.

I've broken down this part into 4 chapters, as I realized it actually required more fleshing out of Abigail's character and how she could develop convincing, nuanced father-daughter dynamics with Will and Hannibal. I think there's a lot of potential for that in the show that never was fully examined.

I've tried to keep Abigail as close to canon characterization as I could. Funnily enough, she is already a perfect, daughterly synthesis of Will and Hannibal, in some ways. In the 1st season of the NBC show, like Will, she was haunted by guilt and death (and being manipulated by Hannibal, also like Will). She even has some of Will's rudeness and bluntness. However, in the show, she is also like Hannibal. Killing is in her nature, and she is manipulative, too, and a seasoned huntress.

Keeping those attributes in mind, I've also tried to flesh out her own, unique perspective from the character's dialogue and personality we see in the show.

So, these next few chapters will cover the whole arc of season 1 if Abigail had been allowed to actually develop a deep, powerful, familial relationship with the Graham-Lecter couple. Will and Hannibal are already married at this point, so I think that would also introduce a daughter more smoothly into their lives, an older daughter who could take care of herself but also grow with them.

Thank you for reading. I am excited to hear your thoughts and opinions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Speak No Evil (Part I)

III. Will.

“That’s what you were so smug about,” Will realizes. Well, he’s realized it for a while. But it’s only when Hannibal’s lips finally trail down to the underside of Will’s scruffy jaw— pressing hot, open-mouthed kisses to the column of his neck— that Will can finally make his revelation known.

“Will, whatever do you mean?” Hannibal says. He nips Will’s throat with his incisors.

Oh, you know exactly what I mean. Will decides to indulge Hannibal’s feint at obliviousness— it makes luring him into Will’s snare, the trap of his mind, all the more enjoyable.

“You’re not usually so self-satisfied on those appointment days,” he continues. Franklyn Froideveux’s name goes unsaid. The last time the Graham-Lecter couple was in bed and Will had spoken it aloud, Hannibal’s libido was gone for the entire night. Will doesn’t want to go that far.
“I couldn’t figure out what it was,” Will continues, lacing his fingers through his husband’s hair. It’s lighter now than when they first met. He still enjoys how silken the silver-gold strands feel to his touch. Some things never change, Will thinks, as he tugs the pale locks and a delicious groan is torn from Hannibal’s throat. “Maybe, it was me, being exceptionally good…”

Hannibal’s voice is gravel when he says, “You always are…”

“Or maybe it was you, being exceptionally bad,” Will says, clawing the scars on Hannibal’s back, the muscles in his shoulders.

Hannibal shudders with obvious delight at the feeling of Will’s nails raking into him. “My dear, not everything is about me indulging my nature.”

‘Indulging my nature’ being euphemistic for mutilation, murder, and cannibalism. “No?”

“Of course not,” Hannibal says. “Much of my ‘smugness’, as you call it, comes from having you by my side.”

Not Hannibal’s most clever gambit at misdirection, Will thinks, even if the sentiment softens a part of him. It’s also not his husband’s most cogent argument. After all, Will is deeply intertwined with Hannibal’s indulgence of his nature. Will’s often by his side, covered in blood, splitting bone, and arranging sinew in grotesquely beautiful displays.

Will gets the sense that Hannibal is only half paying attention to his words. The rest of Hannibal is presently consumed by other activities. The doctor’s broad, warm hands frame Will’s hips, and he pulls down the elastic of Will’s boxers with his teeth.

Gasping at the feel of Hannibal’s mouth, all rolling tongue and sweet pressure, Will’s inclined to let it go. The waist-down part of him is completely preoccupied. Even so… “What…would you have done? If I’d said ‘no’?”

Hannibal looks torn between being pleased that his husband is already losing his voice and wary of where his still too sharp mind is leading. “I would have left.”

Will grins, little breathless moans escaping his lips. “I don’t believe you,” he says in a tone that he knows, from the jerk of Hannibal’s shoulders, is pushing him toward the edge. Wrapping his ankles firmly around his partner, Will abruptly flips Hannibal onto his back, and he forces his weight on top of the other man.

Wasting no time, Will kisses Hannibal sloppy and hard, running his tongue along the back of Hannibal’s upper row of teeth and biting and tugging at the sensitive flesh of his lips. Incredible heat and friction and relentless movement builds between their lower bodies.

“Whatever you’re planning,” Will growls into Hannibal’s mouth, “we’re too close to this case now. Both of us.”

Hannibal laughs, his voice so low and gruff that only Will will ever hear it. “I plan… that both of us will enjoy ourselves yet, dear Will.”

Even then, Will had the suspicion their nightly activities weren’t the enjoyment Hannibal was referring to, at least not completely.

Now, he knows it beyond a doubt. After they leave the office, they pull up in the Hobbs’ drive, and a woman stumbles through the door, blood staining her modest outfit. She collapses onto the patio, dead at Will’s feet.
Not even pausing to glare back at his infernal spouse— he knows Hannibal will be wearing a perfectly pleasant, unfazed expression— Will follows the broken trail of crimson deep into the belly of the Hobbs’ homes. While the evidence of Mrs. Hobbs’ fatal injury ends in the quaint living room, whimpering and cooing voices and frantic breath emanate from the kitchen.

“Garrett Jacob Hobbs,” Will says, his gun raised. “FBI.”

His eyes wide and shining like saucers, Garrett Jacob Hobbs says nothing. He only holds his quivering daughter tighter, the side of his gaunt face pressed against her hair like a pillow, and then he moves the knife—

A bullet rips through Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ throat. And then, for posterity, as Abigail Hobbs slips out of her father’s arms, Will clips the other man’s shoulder with another bullet and his cheek with a third.

Even entering into the thrall of death, Garrett Jacob Hobbs holds his daughter to him: his unsteady fingers are looped into the hem of her flower-patterned blouse.

“See…?” He gasps. Will never breaks eye contact with his prey; he never does, not until the end. “See?”

“Yes.” Folie à deux, called madness of two, not because of a shared psychosis: because of the lives sacrificed madly to keep the two together, and the lives lost madly to rip the two apart. “I’ve always seen it,” says Will.

Garrett Jacob Hobbs dies, crumpled against the corner of his counter.

Will slips his gun back into his holster. He’s wearing gloves as he turns the handle of the other hunter’s blade in his palm.

When Hannibal crosses the linoleum, he bends over the hunter’s prone daughter. Poppy red trickles from the thin cut on her neck.

“It appears you stopped Mr. Hobbs from delivering the fatal blow,” says Hannibal.

Her breath going from fierce to soft and trembling, Abigail blinks at the ceiling. She barely sees Hannibal and Will. Then, she succumbs to unconsciousness.

“Shock,” Will mutters, more gently than he thought he would. An impulse passes through him to brush Abigail’s wild, raven locks into place, and he firmly fights it down. He will not be possessed by Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ ghost.

Hannibal looks at him curiously, having of course noticed the momentary and uncharacteristic affect. “Yes. The neck-wound won’t be a threat to her life. Some stitches should suffice.”

“Yeah,” says Will. “They should suffice for you, too.”

Will doesn’t sink the blade in, because when Will and Hannibal would have entered the kitchen, a frantic Garrett Jacob Hobbs would only have had a fraction of a second to slash his desperate blade. The entreating doctor wouldn’t have gotten close. No, he’d be too careful for that. But the knife could reach him, with a sudden, forceful lunge. The cut Will makes into Hannibal’s upper arm is much the same: swift, little more than a graze, tearing the other man’s sleeve so that it darkens with a halo of blood.

Hannibal doesn’t move, doesn’t even flinch, not once. Only his gaze follows Will’s strike from
start to finish. When Will drops the knife back by Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ knuckles, the dark of
Hannibal’s pupils yawns hungrily.

“An ambulance is on its way,” says Will. Before he rises to his feet, he removes his gloves and
traces the edge of his husband’s wound with gentle reverence. “Get this seen to when they get
here.”

Hannibal loosen a flash of razor-sharp teeth. “Of course.”

IV. Hannibal.

“You can’t ask her right now, Jack,” argues Alana. “We have to create a safe place for her first, or
you won’t get any answers.”

Alana and Jack are too civilized to demonstrate the intensity of their true feelings, so Hannibal
attends primarily to the intangible aspects of their current conflict. The atmosphere in the room
buzzes like wine and its many notes: Alana’s defensive anger, bright and astringent citrus; and
Jack’s righteous fury, so heavily herbaceous and earthy it dominates his palate.

“I respect your sympathy for her, Doctor Bloom,” Jack equivocates badly. “I hope one day you’ll
appreciate my lack of it.”

Alana’s frown just barely deepens, but the tart, biting odor fizzles violently. “You really think
Abigail Hobbs helped her father kill those girls?”

Hannibal knows it’s true, though he has yet to draw an explicit confession from the young woman.
He hopes he may soon. Not, however, in the hallowed halls of the FBI, and not for Jack’s noble,
lawful causes.

One reason is very familiar to Hannibal, and therefore very straightforward: he enjoys tending to
and witnessing the true natures of extraordinary beings. As a young woman who snared virginal
maidens to deposit them into the bottomless chasm of her father’s love, Abigail Hobbs is certainly
extraordinary. She is the fairytale heroine and villainess all at once, earning the support of her
rescuers and the scorn of her victims.

The other reason is...less familiar to Hannibal, and far more complex: Will appears to have a soft-
spot, even the beginnings of paternal affection, for Abigail. Will denies it as the last influences of
Garrett Jacob Hobbs on Will’s empathy. Hannibal allows that it may be partly that. But Hannibal
knows something else. Will has always had an affinity for the vulnerable and the scrappy. He
picks up mutts that easily bear their claws and teeth to snap at fools, well-wishers and violators, but
also need shelter from the beatings of the world. Abigail Hobbs is not good, and Will knows that.
Will feels a desire to protect her because she is not good and she somehow survives the bad people
and dark things abound, conflicted by her pragmatism and guilt, manipulation and affection.

Much like Will himself.

A far more naive and simple Will, but endearing nonetheless.

“How was she when you saw her?” Hannibal asks Alana.

“Surprisingly practical.”

Jack jumps on that. “Suspiciously practical?”

“I would suggest you can be practical without being a murderer,” Hannibal replies to Jack, which
at least partly applies to this case: Abigail is indeed practical and only a murderer by proxy.

“I think she’s hiding something,” Alana admits.

Astute as he knows Alana is, Hannibal will not let her get too far. “It may simply be her trauma.”

“Yeah. It could also be more.” Alana folds her hands over her pale knees. “She has a penchant for manipulation. Withheld information to gain information. She demonstrated only enough emotions—to prove she had them.”

That Alana can read all this in Abigail, Hannibal sees, indicates a darkness that has the potential to grow in Alana as well. The seeds have already been planted: her intelligence, her self-control, and her passion. They only need to take root and be nurtured so what was once vibrant might deepen and darken. The bright bud into the baroque bloom, as it were, one with cool hues, ruthless thorns, and a determined stem that throttles all other competing branches.

What would be the proper conditions for such a transformation? How far would the petals need to be plucked back, how hard the stem snapped? How intimate would the hands of the gardener need be to cultivate this lovely, betrayed flower?

“You said it may be more than trauma,” says Hannibal. “Yet you question her involvement in the murders her father committed.” Today will not be the day when Alana recognizes and embraces the more horrific beauty of a person’s nature, including her own.

“What I’m questioning is her state of mind,” Alana argues, more to Jack than her fellow physician.

When Jack answers, he’s addressing Hannibal more than Alana: “I want Will to talk to her.”

Alana does not like that. “Jack! Not yet!”

Hannibal admires Jack’s grand likeness to a statue. What a sight he would be, his grave and unyielding face shattered into rubble. “I think the power to make the decision in this room lies with me. You’re not Will Graham’s psychiatrist, Doctor Bloom. And I definitely can’t ask Doctor Lecter’s medical opinion.”

“In this room, yes,” Hannibal allows. “But outside it, the decision to confront Abigail ultimately lies with Will.”

That being said, Hannibal suspects that the currents in Will’s stream are imperceptibly but inevitably carrying Will closer to Abigail, much like the moon gradually brings in the tide.

There is one very unwanted presence among them, however:

Freddie Lounds.

And Hannibal had already shown the courtesy of pointing out her rude behavior earlier.

“Will Graham captures insane men because he can think like them,” Freddie Lounds is saying as Hannibal and Will enter Abigail’s room. “Because he is insane.”

As behooves a journalist, Freddie Lounds could benefit from more precise wordsmithing. Will Graham is not, as she so crudely puts it, insane. Will Graham captures unsafe men because Will Graham is not safe.

Because Will Graham is exquisitely, incomparably, and tantalizingly dangerous.
“Leave the room,” Will commands curtly, not even looking at the redhead. “Special Agent Will Graham,” he says to Abigail.

“By Special Agent, he means not really an agent,” Freddie Lounds cuts in. “Why is that, Mister Graham? What kind of monsters need to be stalking the innocents for Jack Crawford to let you loose?”

Well, apparently Freddie Lounds’ language is improving— she’s almost there.

“We really must insist,” Hannibal states, and the woman is sensible enough to finally retreat, even if she foolishly leaves Abigail a card. If only she had left it with Hannibal.

“Abigail,” Will says. Though Will bears himself with his usual deliberate aloofness, Hannibal can sense something unique: there is softness in his voice, and a blunt force that tries to bury it. “This is Doctor Lecter. Do you remember us?”

As Will stands across from Abigail, Hannibal is struck by their uncanny physical resemblances. Both have skin so pale their hair appears black and their blue eyes even more striking, though Abigail’s are flooded with ethereal lightness and Will’s are roiling with the changing hues of the sea.

“I remember you,” Abigail says. Then the blinding brightness in her gaze, like water illuminated by lightning, is almost familiar. “You killed my dad.”

V. Abigail.

It feels... like she’s in a dream.

That’s the best way Abigail can describe it. Hah, she’s not even hopped up on hospital meds anymore. Now, it’s just her and an ugly, fat bandage and the butchered last mark her father left on her.

The man was a perfectionist. He’s probably rolling over in his grave at his unfinished work. Well, he would be, if they weren’t dissecting his body in some lab for violent criminals. That’s where Abigail suspects he is anyway. She tries not to dwell on it. The vision of her father’s bullet-ridden body, otherwise so much like how he used to be, but also stiff and bone-white in a metal cabinet, isn’t stuff she needs in her upcoming nightmares. She has plenty of material for those already, thank you.

It’s easier thinking of her mother’s ashes. There’s a little grief there, but mostly relief.

She’s glad one of them could get it, at least.

Abigail could almost believe she’s also dead, though, or in some other world as she sits on a bench in a garden with her father’s killer and the man who witnessed her father’s murder.

Surrounded by death, Abigail’s life has never been so strange and so consistent. It’s nice, in a way, given she’s trapped in a mental hospital.

Though you might say Abigail’s had constant exposure to unassuming psychopaths and would therefore know better, Will Graham doesn’t look like what Freddie Lounds described. He’s steady and quiet and gruff. He seems smart, but he’s also down-to-earth and blunt, like Abigail. She likes that, though she can’t honestly decide if those qualities make up for the fact that this man shot her father to death. Maybe, it’s the icing on the cake— it probably would be for most people, but Abigail’s not like most people.
Doctor Lecter is like Will, but he’s also not like Will. His presence is grounding. Maybe it’s the psychiatrist thing, though Alana Bloom didn’t strike Abigail the same way. Doctor Lecter isn’t eager to start some sort of friendship like the other woman. He’s poised, attentive, and careful. It would be harder to deceive him, Abigail thinks. She’s glad he’s not her psychiatrist. Unlike Doctor Bloom, it’s also practically impossible to get a read on the man, who’s additionally the most strange, exotic thing Abigail—a born, raised, and never-left Minnesotan right in America’s frosty heartlands—has ever seen.

Abigail doesn’t think she’d ever forget a man like him.

Accent and all.

“I saw my dad kill my mom,” says Abigail as they sit together surrounded by bushes and flowers. “He was loving right up to the second he wasn’t. Kept telling me he was… sorry. To just hold still”—

Abigail’s back in her father’s arms, his knife against her, but what he whispers into her ear isn’t what he said that afternoon. It’s their conversation from Abigail’s first real hunt, the death of the beautiful doe—

“Keep the blade pointed up. Damage the organs, you’ll ruin the meat. Nice and easy. Big breath”—

— She wants to gag, but Abigail doesn’t move. She doesn’t want Will Graham and Doctor Lecter to see it. She really doesn’t want to reopen the wound on the side of her throat. “He was gonna make it all go away,” Abigail finishes, keeping her voice even.

“You say he was loving,” says Will, his eyes directly on Abigail’s. Abigail doesn’t think she’s felt eyes so penetrating. Suddenly, she wants to flinch away, and her first instincts are to shut him out. But also, if this man could understand her, could tell her she’s not a monster… “And I believe it. That’s what you brought out in him.”

Abigail can’t suppress her scoff. It’s not fair that the man who murders her father is the one to tell her exactly what she wants to hear. Will says she brought out love in her father. “It’s not all I brought out in him,” she argues all the same, because no matter what Abigail denies, that’s true.

Even though she’s uncomfortable under Will’s unrelenting gaze, Abigail’s not someone who fidgets, so she doesn’t put up that particular act. “I’m gonna be messed up, aren’t I?” She says. Then, more honestly, she adds, “I’m worried about the nightmares.”

Abigail’s never had nightmares before, even with everything. Guess that says something about her. Another thing not to share with Doctor Bloom.

Doctor Lecter comes more clearly into her sight now. His voice is low and reassuring, even if his face is still damnably blank. “We’ll help you with the nightmares.”

“You’re not my doctor,” Abigail can’t stop herself from saying, like she needs to defend that fact, the only sure ground she has in her new, precarious—well, more precarious—position.

Instead of taking offense, Doctor Lecter smiles. Abigail really hopes he’s not treating her like a child. It wouldn’t be good if he thought of her as something weak and breakable. She’s unnerved when he seems to pick up on her peeved attitude, saying gently but firmly, “That’s right. However, Will has experience overcoming nightmares.”

Will scoffs in a way that is eerily familiar to Abigail. “Yeah,” he says disdainfully, “it’s best if I
Abigail had sensed it before, but it’s really apparent to her now. Doctor Lecter and Will Graham are comfortable with each other, more than usual colleagues. They’re close. Abigail can’t ever imagine herself being that way with her psychiatrist; sorry, Doctor Bloom. Given how weirdly Will, her father’s shooter, reminds Abigail of...herself—well, she expected something different. Especially considering the type of person Abigail strongly suspects Will’s psychiatrist is.

“Will is not my patient,” Doctor Lecter says, again invading Abigail’s thoughts. Is it the psychiatrist thing or his other set of skills? “If his comments are a cause for concern.”

“It’s a good thing for the both of us,” Will answers coolly.

“I can’t say I disagree,” Doctor Lecter replies, adding, “as I still get to keep you all to myself.”

Will’s...surprised. It’s a new look on him. He blinks.

Abigail does, too.

“You’re married?” Abigail examines the wedding rings with an altered perspective. She looks between the two men. Doctor Lecter nods affably, and even though Will doesn’t appear outwardly happy, he’s regained his composure.

“Does that bother you, Miss Hobbs?” Doctor Lecter asks, but again not like he’s taking it personally, speaking more with the tone of somebody talking to a patient.

“No.” Abigail’s tempted to say she’s surprised, but now that she knows, she’s not surprised. It makes sense all of a sudden: Doctor Lecter and Will, both so similar and so different. Both equally soothing and unnerving to Abigail, though with varying reasons why.

What’s weird is that Abigail realizes now she’s in a pretty garden between a married couple, the three of them together almost as if they could be...a family. Or something.

On top of everything else, that association’s too much. She’d prefer to be surrounded by the two men who are just her father’s killer and the man who watched her father die, who’s also probably a killer.

The other picture is just too much. Too pretty.

Together, both are too perfect.

She decides to break the first one.

“So, killing somebody,” Abigail says evenly, returning her attention solely to Will. “Even if you have to do it, it feels that bad?”

Abigail had been searching for wounds, but it doesn’t appear that she’s found them. If Will felt bad about killing people during his job, it’s something he’s numb to now, maybe long ago. Or is it because he’s been so close for so long to a man who likely murders for enjoyment? She wishes the parallels between her and the agent would stop. It’s hurting Abigail’s head.

Abigail kind of admires him. She kind of wants to be like him. She kind of resents him.

“It does, and it doesn’t,” Will replies, but his tone is gentler than it’s been at any other point in their conversation. Can he tell she feels bad about her father killing those girls? She hopes it’s just that,
and not her other complicated quagmire of feelings about her father, about Will, about Doctor Lecter.

“And you’re okay with that?” Abigail asks. The hurtfulness has ebbed out of her words. She wants to know. Who better to tell her how to be okay with killing people?

Yeah, Abigail thinks. Who fucking better?

“It depends,” says Will. “On who’s killed, and who’s doing the killing.”

It’s honestly a relief when Doctor Bloom accompanies Abigail in her return home with Will and Doctor Lecter. It’s also really strange. Stranger than the fact that Abigail is in her house, the place she’s lived since birth, and all her family photos are blank and CANNIBALS greets her in ugly red spray paint from the garage.

Doctor Lecter and Will were in her home before, even if that was on the day when everything fell apart, so that’s probably why they appear less out of place than Doctor Bloom, who’s smiling and very gentle to the point of walking on glass with Abigail.

“Did they finally let me back because it’s not a crime scene anymore?” Abigail asks, looking around the emptied place. Everything’s in boxes, though probably not everything, guessing from the amount. It’s the stuff they’re letting Abigail take back from her old life.

“Revisiting the traumatic event can help the experiencer of the trauma heal and actually prevent denial,” says Doctor Lecter, but Doctor Bloom isn’t nodding. She’s making a very subdued face.

“Am I here to find evidence?” Abigail corrects herself.

Doctor Lecter smiles. “It was one of many considerations.”

What is that smile for?

“Are we going to re-enact the crime?” Abigail adds excited energy to her voice. When she turns around the room, boxes of objects at her knees, she feels like a child surrounded by toys, deciding the nature of the game. “You be my dad,” she says to Will, still in the role of game master and detached from more unsettling feelings.

“You be my mom,” she says to Doctor Bloom, because, the truth is that both women are only pale, barely there specters in Abigail’s current reality.

And, to Doctor Lecter—

“And you be the man on the phone,” Abigail declares.

Doctor Lecter accepts the conferred role with a demeanor of distant politeness. And utter indecipherability. He gives every appearance of graciously putting up with the ramblings of a traumatized young woman. Abigail doesn’t think that’s it, though: he doesn’t associate himself with her father’s death and pain because he doesn’t feel any compassion for the man he killed.

He’s sympathetic, which allows him to feel a degree of investment in others. But he’s not empathetic. He might not have any compassion at all, even if his behavior suggests otherwise. Every pawn has an agenda that Doctor Lecter dissects intimately, but his aim is to conquer the other pieces. He’s just playing a game, after all.
Abigail knows that feeling well.

Great—now, she’s not just like Will Graham; apparently, she also has some weird, antisocial kinship with Doctor Lecter. Will’s spouse.

What does that say about all of them?

“Abigail,” Doctor Bloom says consolingly. She doesn’t understand the nature of the game. “We wanted you to come home to help you leave home.”

Really? Maybe Doctor Bloom did, but Doctor Lecter and Will Graham are oddly and irritatingly not accomplishing that. Abigail vents her frustrations by rifling through the messy contents of her cardboard container. “You won’t find any of those girls, you know?”

“He would honor every part of them.”

At first, Abigail thinks the words came out of her mouth. They’re exactly what she was thinking, after all. But she didn’t say that.

Will is standing at just the right spot where the afternoon light falls through the windows, and his silhouette is suspended in illuminated particles of dust. He looks like something from a dream, insubstantial and very present. He sounds like something from a dream, too, one he and Abigail are sharing.

“He used to make plumbing putty out of elk’s bones,” Abigail says, sure it’s her voice this time. There’s no way Will could say that. “Whatever bones are left of those girls are probably holding pipes together.”

The thought doesn’t bother her. In fact, it’s eerily calming, thinking those girls are totally gone from Abigail now. They can’t tell anybody about her father and all his secrets. Or… Abigail’s. When Marissa comes into Abigail’s home-not-home, all dark haired, pale-eyed, and wind-chafed complexion, Abigail almost wishes she was gone just as completely. She talks about things that Abigail can’t deal with now: school, friends, hunting, and her father. Abigail can’t keep a lid on her feelings with Marissa’s intimate, concerned words prying them free with a scalpel. It’s too much. She doesn’t want to see Marissa now.

She’s not sure when she ever will want to see her again while they’re both alive. No, no. She likes Marissa, unruly, fun Marissa. She’s on Abigail’s side, which is something she poorly needs. Abigail just requires more time, more distance, and more control to be okay again.

She needs to get her head straight, given her father almost chopped it off.

And it’s not getting easier to do that when the next day in the cabin, Will says things about Abigail’s father he couldn’t possibly know.

“Otherwise,” Will states, “it was murder.” Abigail hears herself and her father verbatim.

“Is it weird?” Abigail counters. “Being in my father’s head all the time?”

Will raises his eyebrow. “Is it?”

Abigail knows a challenge when she sees one, and she does not back down. “He was feeding them to us,” says Abigail coolly, trying to rub the agent raw. She mostly succeeding in nicking herself. “Wasn’t he?” Her voice gets softer.
Doctor Lecter answers: “It’s very likely.”

When Abigail whips away from Doctor Lecter to Will, she finds himself captured by the hooks of his gaze again. She sees something, then, in the words she and her father repeated to each other all the time on their hunts. But they’re different now. They’re also the realities she’s always known, the very substances she’s always touched and felt—

“Abigail!”

Abigail doesn’t heed Doctor Bloom’s cry, and she rips through the dry trees and the tall grasses back to her front door. They’ve left it unlocked, so when Abigail hurls herself through the entrance, it collides with the side of her house in a violent shudder. Abigail doesn’t jump at the noise. She’s on her knees by the couch. It’s the most comfortable seat in the house, warm under the sunlight, and perfectly worn to the weight and shape of her body.

“Oh, my god.”

Abigail doesn’t say another word. Instead, she curls herself so tightly over the shredded pillow in her arms, she thinks she might snap. Bent over, her hair falls into her face, indistinguishable from the pillow’s other ebony, silken contents.

“*None of her is gonna go to waste.*”

Her father did succeed in killing her, Abigail might think... if she wasn’t wracked with angry, terrified, guilty sobs. He wasn’t capable of just leaving her there. No, no, he’d never waste Abigail. She thought she always kept a safe distance from the altar of her father’s sacrifices, but she’s hurled herself down with every other girl, she realizes, and they’re all a tangled mess of pale limbs and pulverized bones and digested flesh and indigestible locks deep in the man’s cavernous belly—

Abigail sobs harder. The petting sensation she’s feeling on her head isn’t helping anymore, so she envelops herself in the presence surrounding her, gripping hard and weeping fiercely.

“I wanna go home,” she gasps through the bile in her throat and the bitter tears.

“I know,” says Will, and he lets Abigail hold him tighter. She’s clawing at his back, her wet nose pressed into his collar.

“Please,” Abigail chokes, “take me home.”

“You are home, Abigail,” Doctor Lecter says.

Abigail doesn’t wrench herself away from Will to face the rest of their party. She’s sure Doctor Bloom is watching with sympathy and concern, wondering if she should intervene but deciding ultimately that will only further agitate her patient.

Doctor Lecter is cryptic. Abigail can make out his legs. He stands firmly at Will’s side as the other man holds Abigail and lets her fall apart in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

So, most obvious deviations from canon: again, there is no Copycat Killer, so Marissa
does not die. That doesn't mean Hannibal won't address her rudeness in the future, but... no immediate death for her. Nicholas Boyle does not die, because his sister isn't killed. That doesn't mean Abigail will not be forced to face the consequences of killing someone herself in the future.

Thank you for reading.
Speak No Evil (Part II)

Chapter Notes

Here we are at Part II of the Murder Family. I’m very excited to delve more into Will and Hannibal’s relationship with Abigail, and how she could develop a daughter-like familiarity with the long-term couple.

Thank you for reading and sharing your thoughts.

Speak No Evil (Part II)

VI. Will.

Will is not in the mood to be working on the murders of the Turner family or the larger Lost Boys’ case. That doesn’t mean Jack would refrain from sending him to the Turner’s macabre dinner table. All the affiliated guests were sedate, aka shot dead over soup, blown apart by their missing clansman.

Will never connected with the concept of family before. As a boy, it seemed to him as foreign as an ill-fitting suit, and he’s only slightly vindicated to see it fitting more like the jagged teeth of an iron maiden against the Turner’s corpses.

Alana doesn’t seem happy about Will’s involvement with the case, either. Or maybe it’s another of Will’s involvements she’s worried about.

Will sits in a chair in a dark corner of his and Hannibal’s living room when Alana enters the kitchen for a beer with her colleague. She doesn’t see Will, but Hannibal definitely knows he’s there. Which is why Will suspects his general greeting becomes tailored for a far more specific line of inquiry:

“Interesting day with Abigail?”

Will’s going to get Hannibal for this.

From the familiar glug of Hannibal’s home-brewed concoction, Alana must have taken a good, long drink. “Yeah, with grief work,” she says. “Trauma, intervention. It’s all on course. I think she might be wrestling with a low-grade depression.”

Will remembers holding Abigail, her quaking, sobbing body in his arms. Even then, he’d seen Alana’s concern. But not just for her patient. Alana didn’t ask Will if he was shaken up or anything like that, but she had adamantly led their path back to the girl’s hospital, like a shepherdess of an errant flock. Will both obediently and dividedly returned Abigail through her sliding, metal doors.

“Perhaps,” muses Hannibal, “it’s best Abigail is released from clinical treatment.”

*Fuckin Hannibal.*

“Released where?” Alana protests. “Back into the wild?”
Hannibal speaks methodically. “Spending each day immersed in tragedy may be doing her more harm than good. She should be out, finding her footing, giving her the confidence to move forward.”

Alana appears to have been waiting for this. “I know you’re not suggesting abandonment.”

“No,” Hannibal says. “I’m not.”

Alana sighs heavily. “Hannibal, this is a girl who was very attached to her parents. You stepping in as a surrogate would only be a crutch.”

Alana pauses. Will can tell that she’s trying to maintain her medical authority over her patient, but she’s also cautiously vacillating between professional and personal territories.

“Abigail’s already wrestling with a desire to depend on Will,” Alana analyzes. “It makes sense that she feels an attachment to the person who saved her life. Will represents security for her, comfort. But, she’s also powerfully driven to reject him as the man who killed her father and took comfort away from her, however fraught it was.”

“You’re worried that Will’s gotten too close.”

“Maybe,” says Alana. “I’ve never worked with Will on a case before this one. But I was... surprised by how he reacted to Abigail. He practically raced after her from the cabin. He let her cry so hard and long in his arms that she passed out.”

Yeah— Will had been surprised at that, too.

“Do you think he would have acted the same with another victim, from a different case?” Alana asks. She hurriedly qualifies her entreaty with the claim, “I’m not saying Will’s a cold person,” like Hannibal’s the kind of spouse who’s more disturbed by Will’s indifference than by him cradling some strange child in tender embrace.

“I mean, honestly,” Alana laughs, trying to ease some of the tension, “I don’t even know how you guys managed to cap your stray population at four.”

Hannibal is less amused by this observation. “With frequent trips to shelters and hand-deliveries to good owners, Alana,” the other man sighs. “Measures that were any less concentrated would have led to our home becoming the stomping grounds for twenty dogs. Easily.”

Alana scoffs good-naturedly. “I think seven’s more likely, even for Will.”

Will is aggravated to hear Hannibal say nothing in reply, likely holding onto his own reservations for the often negotiated mutt situation.

Alana allows herself to luxuriate in their moment of levity a bit longer. “Abigail’s good at making people want to protect her,” she says.

“Do you believe she’s manipulating Will?”

Will knows that Jack thinks so. Unlike Alana, the senior agent has made no attempts to hide his thoughts about how foolish and self-defeating any kind of affection for Abigail would be.

How Alana responds is not what Will expects:

“If Will doesn’t have total power over his feelings, it goes both ways. Abigail might have gotten
too close, too. I think she needs to figure things out for herself in a safe, clinical environment.”

Not torn a single shred in choosing between the two doctors, Will heeds Alana’s sagacious advice. He maintains his distance from Abigail’s safe, clinical environment. In fact, he very wisely and whole-heartedly dissects another set of outsiders ripped from their original families to create a dissonant new one.

“Captor bonding is what keeps them together,” Will says over his food. “A passive psychological response to a new master has been an essential tool for a million years. Bond with your captor, you survive. You don’t… you’re breakfast.”

Hannibal lifts his eggs and meat to his lips, thoroughly chewing and swallowing before he replies. “Is that what you’re concerned will happen to Abigail, Will?”

Will grits his teeth. “This isn’t about Abigail, Hannibal.”

“I think it very much is. You call them ‘lost boys’. Abigail’s lost, too. And perhaps it’s our responsibility, yours and mine, to help her find the way.”

Will laughs sharply. “Because you feel so much responsibility for her. You’re tortured over whether you could have acted differently and maybe her real parents would still be alive.”

Hannibal, of course, doesn’t dignify Will’s outburst with a response.

Will gnaws at his protein scramble. “I only felt the way I did because of Garrett Jacob Hobbs.”

Hannibal sips his coffee, his red sweater almost Christmassy against the opaque glow of their frosty windows. Will would have thrown that accusation at him next—Hannibal would truly suffer being called kitsch—but his husband beats him to the punch: “Your empathy may have been the trigger, but there are marked similarities between you and Abigail. She shows no reluctance to verbally lash out against those who would attempt to trespass her mind. She sees the darkness in other people, but she desires closeness from them as well. She changes to fit her circumstances, even if her essence remains the same. She’s rude, rustic, very smart, and very charming. She’s like you. She’s also like the vulnerable types of creatures you’re compelled to defend.”

Will ignores the majority of Hannibal’s insights. “So you agree with Alana and think I’m treating Abigail like a stray,” he deadpans, “which is only slightly more believable than her being my surrogate daughter. I never wanted a daughter. We never planned to have children.”

“That’s true,” says Hannibal. “Our lifestyles have never been suitable for children.”

Will’s voice is hard, but not with regret. He knows who he is, and he accepts it. “We might be capable of love, Hannibal. But our love is equally capable of violence. We can’t nurture something. We can’t cherish it. If it was possible, we’d love a child, fiercely. And then we’d break it, maybe even just to get at each other.”

“We’d need something that could withstand the force of our love,” Hannibal states, but his tone feels oddly argumentative. “Abigail Hobbs has already been broken by one father, and she has come back together again. Her nature is not so fragile that she would be broken a second time. We might help her, fortify who she already is. Then, she can do the rest to defend herself.”

Will feels their dogs around his knees. The thought passes through his mind of whistling and setting them on the man across from him. He wonders how ravenously they’d hunt his partner, both the mutts and Hannibal as extensions of Will himself.
“She knows you called the house,” Will says.

Hannibal barely smiles. “Yes.”

“She knows you’re a serial killer, like her father.”

Hannibal hums. “She suspects.”

“And thanks to your other indulgences, she suspects I’m married to a serial killer,” Will growls. “She suspects a serial killer is happily married to the man who proved himself fully capable of killing her father. Without hesitation or remorse.”

Hannibal’s eyes are stunning maroon, the vividness amplified by his crimson attire. “You are not simply worried that we will break Abigail, Will. You are worried she may also break us.”

Will’s hands run over Winston’s fur, and he tosses Zoe a juicy morsel of meat. She snaps it in her hooked underbite. Will knows about raising things that can be simultaneously soft and hunt to kill.

“Abigail baited those girls so that her father could kill them,” says Will. “She’s good at drawing information from her victims, which she employs to destroy them. Her father’s victims wouldn’t be the last ones she manipulated and betrayed in pursuit of self-preservation.”

Hannibal lures Ellie away from Will’s ankles by dangling his mostly empty plate. Bounding over to Hannibal, Ellie’s hair is even more perfectly coiffed and cloud-soft, evidence of the doctor’s careful morning grooming. She licks his plate dry. Max waits patiently at Hannibal’s outstretched hand; he knows that when Hannibal offers food, it’s one at a time, no exceptions. Then, Hannibal lowers an empty bowl to the mutt, and Max jumps on it.

“Her proclivities toward violence are another way Abigail is not unlike the Lost Boys you aim to discover and apprehend with Jack,” says Hannibal. “So, why haven’t you helped him arrest her, too? Why haven’t you told him Abigail helped her father kill?”

 Fuck.

“It wouldn’t be in good taste,” Will answers slowly, “seeing as it’s almost the holidays.”

Hannibal gathers their dishes and migrates to the kitchen. “So you’re giving her a gift. Pretty paternal, Will. I must admit, I may have acted paternally, too.”

Will pauses and watches Hannibal’s back as the other man bends over the sink. “What?”

“I delivered them to Port Haven Psychiatric this morning. A magnifying glass and fly tying gear from you… and a set of whetstones and hunting knives from me.”

Will stalks to the kitchen, warning the dogs away with a high sound and the usual motions. He leans backward against the counter so that he can look into Hannibal’s face. The other man’s eyes are shielded from forced contact as he scrubs the traces of flesh from their cutlery. How ideal for Hannibal. Will doesn’t know if it’s deliberate yet.

“You gave her something from me,” Will hisses. The magnifying glass and fly tying gear are maddeningly like something he would have given Abigail.

“And… you gave her something from you, too,” says Will. The whetstones and hunting knives. They fit Abigail’s skill sets, but they are also very aligned with Hannibal’s. “That is pretty
Will grabs a rag and coaxes Hannibal into passing him the slippery dishware.

“Abigail is a skilled hunter,” Will reads. “She knows how to prepare meat, so the parts of her prey she can consume don’t go to waste. She’s manipulative, and she also lacks mercy. She likes people, yes. She doesn’t want to be alone. But she really likes messing with others just for the hell of it. She might have nightmares about the dead girls now, but when she’s awake she’ll have no problems living with what she’s done. Because her true nature isn’t benevolent. She’s a survivor. She’s a predator.” Will crookedly raises his brow, concluding, “she’s like you, too.”

Will still can’t meet Hannibal’s eyes. The other man is elevating their china into cupboards. “I would feel safer if she were… protecting our interests,” Hannibal gently protests.

“You want her under your thumb.”

Hannibal dries his hands victoriously. “I believe I’ve been saying that all along, Will.”

“And what I’m saying,” Will argues as he leans over the counter, unwinding the strings of Hannibal’s apron and drawing him into Will’s immediate vicinity, “is that she’s advantageous as a daughter in more than one way to you.”

“I never wanted a daughter.”

Hannibal’s expression doesn’t shift, he doesn’t even blink. But their eyes finally meet. And Will can see into him. He makes out shades of stirring parts of Hannibal he suspects the other man doesn’t yet see.

Will gently kisses Hannibal’s immobile face, and then he rejoins the dogs in the dining room.

“That’s what I said, too.”

VII. Hannibal.

Hannibal is ruminating over what Will said to such a degree that he does not find time to visit Abigail at her hospital like he initially planned. It would have been fun to get a response, both from Abigail and Will, concerning Hannibal’s gifts to them. Abigail’s gift, though expensive, was mainly material and therefore quite different than Will’s. Hannibal’s gift, test, and experiment for Will was the opportunity to cultivate a relationship with a daughter so much like him, the object of Will’s affections and begotten of his violence.

What Hannibal had not anticipated was the gift Will would reciprocate onto Hannibal: knowledge about his spouse so convincing and so unprecedented… that Hannibal is not entirely content to receive it.

Even so, Hannibal’s careful plans are not laid to waste. During a late night in his office, almost a month after he’d arranged for such an encounter, he discovers Abigail Hobbs hidden in the upper floor of his libraries.

“Hello, Abigail.”

Abigail’s weight creaks on the scaffold. “How… did you know it was me?” she asks.

Hannibal is leaning against the edge of his desk. “Hospital called. You climbed over the wall. Where else would you go to? Home is no longer an option.” Hannibal approaches the ladder,
beckoning to Abigail as she stares at him from the ledge. “Come down from there.”

Slowly, Abigail descends from her heights.

She turns to face Hannibal.

“Ah,” he remarks, pleased. “I see you properly received your gifts.”

Abigail is holding a hunting knife of premium alloy, the blade elegantly carved and sharpened. It’s a knife particularly suited for gutting. In Abigail’s trained, steady hands, it looks just as appropriate as Hannibal thought it would.

“Why… would you give me this?” Abigail asks, the knife still raised at Hannibal’s mid-section. Still, she doesn’t dare step closer to him. In that way, she is obviously a fledgling huntress, equipped with all the right weapons but inexperienced in boldly using them.

Abigail is also too young to read through her foe’s leisurely posture to see the equally deadly blade he conceals. “Why do you think?”

Abigail is a more docile patient than Hannibal imagines Will would have been. “You wanted me to try to kill you.”

“Did I?”

Abigail nods her head. “Most people would be more upset right now.”

“Would you prefer I get upset and defend myself, Abigail?” says Hannibal lightly, but the words have a strong effect on the girl: she tightens her posture, mouth a tense line, gripping the handle of her tool more firmly.

Poor, amusing Abigail. She’s only made such an act easier.

“If you came here to kill me,” Hannibal continues patiently, “I could fight back, and it would be purely self-defense. The authorities would vouch for me. Doctor Bloom as well, though she’d be disappointed. They would say you were taking after your father.”

“You called my father,” says Abigail. “What did you say to him?”

“A simple conversation, ascertaining if he was home for an interview.”

The flat side of Abigail’s blade shines in the dimmed lights of Hannibal’s study. “I think,” she whispers, “you called the house as a serial killer. Just like my dad.”

“I’m nothing like your dad,” chides Hannibal. It’s the truth, after all. Though he and Garrett Jacob Hobbs shared some similar past-times, their aims and art have no kinship.

“What about Will?” Abigail argues, and now she sounds more uncertain. Even hurt. “Is he like my dad? Is he… like you?”

Hannibal smiles. “What do you think, Abigail?”

Abigail swallows hard. “Will knows what you are, just like he knew what my father was. So, he must be with you for a reason.”

Hannibal strides forward, and Abigail leaps back. “Do you suppose Wil...
to their deaths?"

“I didn’t know!” shouts Abigail. “I didn’t know what he was doing, and I didn’t help him kill them.”

Hannibal tuts, and he moves in closer, predicting that Abigail’s desperation and anger would have made her looser, more willing to truly draw her blade. She tries to lunge with it. Hannibal is glad to observe that once she decides to strike, she puts all her force and dedication behind a precisely-aimed blow. She would have fatally gutted any lesser opponent. His gift appears to not have been wasted.

Hannibal catches Abigail’s hands down to her wrists and holds them firmly so that the point of the blade hovers between the doctor and the young woman.

Fear as sweet and cloying on her as raw honey, Abigail twists with all her slight body, understandably urgent to wrench herself free. But she can’t even release her blade now.

“You knew what your father was, Abigail. You had a choice to be with him. You did not have to help him kill those girls, but you did. Because that was how you received your father’s love.”

“I didn’t…”

“You try to avoid it. You cannot admit it, even to yourself,” Hannibal says soothingly. “It is cruel of you to deny your love for your father, even after death. We all love in different ways, some more outwardly destructive than others.”

Abigail’s eyes are bright and shining, and she shakes her dark head. Her frantic pulse beats like a bird in flight.

“Will,” she says, quietly. “Will is like you.”

Hannibal neither confirms nor denies this. “You are very like Will.”

Abigail’s pale face twists into a grimace. “Did he try to stab you, too?”

Now that is a charming question. Abigail is a fast learner. She would be very pleasing to instruct.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to ask him,” says Hannibal. “Though I don’t suggest asking him in the same manner you asked me.”

“Because he’d defend himself,” Abigail murmurs.

Again, no confirmation or denial. “You watched Will defend himself against your father,” Hannibal answers to summon images of Will’s bloodletting and lethal efficiency, as well as his capacity to wound Abigail by approximation. But, Hannibal also evokes something else: “In the moment Will killed him, he was also protecting you, Abigail. Will is fond of you.”

Abigail huffs with what might be a voiceless laugh. “Why? Because I’m the only good, untainted thing in his life?”

“Will would not be so fond of you for those paltry reasons.”

“You’re lying.”

“No matter how many lies you tell me, I will not lie to you,” Hannibal promises. It’s no loss to Hannibal. Veracity and reality are also art forms, superbly malleable, and so Hannibal would be
remiss not to exploit how genuine utterances are so simultaneously liberating and incriminating. “Will is protective of you, your true nature, and not some idealized image of you. As am I.”

Hannibal removes his hand from Abigail’s and folds it behind his back.

Abigail stares, eyes wide, shoulders rising and falling dramatically. Her gaze flicks like the flash of a wing back to her freed knife, and then it settles on Hannibal’s face.

She opens her mouth. She closes it silently. Then, she opens it again. “Are you saying you gave me this to protect me?”

No lies. “Protecting others and the self is one function of a blade. I chose it as my gift because it reminded me of you. Your skills were sharpened over the course of many hunts. You are very adaptable to different situations, ones that would break less sharp or versatile tools. If your aim is to craft, you craft; if your aim is to attack, you attack. As a former surgeon and a chef, I am very partial to multipurpose tools. They comply with my needs but they are also resilient to pressure and other circumstances. I find such blades extremely valuable. And I am loathe to waste valuable things.”

Abigail would be a superb student, Hannibal thinks, as she hangs on his every word, paying close attention to his tones and mix of metaphor, symbolism, and plain statement. She seems to find Hannibal’s assessment agreeable, and she follows it to the letter:

“And things that are valuable to you,” she whispers, “you don’t let other people break them or lock them up?”

“That,” says Hannibal, “is very much against my nature.”

Slowing her breath, Abigail looks down at her knife once more. Then, she lowers it. Carefully, she wraps it in the satchel with the other blades she received from Hannibal. Hannibal is happy to observe that she’s taken care of them and arranges them in proper order.

“What happens now?” Abigail asks into the dark study.

Hannibal decides being firm and magnanimous has served him well with Abigail before, and he will endeavor to do the same now. “I will not report to anyone the nature of our conversation. If I did, they would see you as an accessory to the crimes of your father. The hospital was looking for you, and so you should return.”

Hannibal puts on his coat and grabs his bag. Deftly, he draws his ring of keys.

Abigail blinks nervously. “You’ll… take me?”

Abigail doesn’t shiver when Hannibal places an arm at her back to guide her out of his office. Once they’re in his empty reception area, Hannibal places his bag down onto the floor and he turns around, showing his back to Abigail as he unhurriedly locks the door. He examines the knob. He twists it once. The door doesn’t budge. Then, serenely, Hannibal lifts himself back up and he moves to face Abigail. Her gaze feels as prominent on Hannibal now as it had been when she was examining him moments before, the doctor poised with painful vulnerability, an open invitation for Abigail to strike. And she didn’t.

Hannibal has made a show of trust. Abigail has decided to meet his trust.

How curious.
“It would be irresponsible for me to leave a young lady to go back all that way alone,” says Hannibal.

Abigail reaches up to fix her scarf. “I don’t want to go back. I don’t like sleeping there.”

Abigail and Hannibal leave his building and enter the chilled night air. When they arrive at Hannibal’s car, he opens the passenger door for Abigail, and she slides in.

“You have to sleep in your own bed, Abigail.”

Hannibal shuts her door, and then he enters the driver’s side. When he starts the ignition, he rests his hands on the steering wheel, tapping his fingertips gently on the leather. He does not start driving.

“It isn’t my bed,” says Abigail. She buckles herself in.

Then, Hannibal decides then to press slowly on the gas and pull out of the parking lot.

Abigail is illuminated by stripes of passing streetlights. “Where are we going?” she asks, but with a stronger voice now, if a bit somnolent, a bit wondering.

“Home,” says Hannibal. “My home. And Will’s. You can spend the night with us. I think you’d enjoy it if we cooked for you. It may ease you into sweeter dreams.”

VIII. Abigail.

Abigail has no idea what to expect when she pulls up at the Graham-Lecter abode in Doctor Lecter’s car.

She should be optimistic, she supposes, seeing how she’s still alive.

She’s not sure if that’ll change when she’s in the house.

It doesn’t feel like a place she’d ever enter living. Her home had a big plot of land, but that was it, because her father raised and caught everything they ever needed. He was completely self-sustaining—well, he was supposed to have been.

The Graham-Lecter house is huge and at the outermost edges of a beautiful Baltimore neighborhood. Special agents must make a lot of money, or psychiatrists, or both. Every house they’d passed by on the drive was like a mansion, but this one, though large, isn’t opulent. The last streetlamp barely reaches Will and Doctor Lecter’s grounds, so what’s easily visible from the road is mostly dense, piney blackness. The gnarled branches of tall trees wind over the facade, painting the ochre stone with shadows. Abigail can smell the last of the flowers no doubt dark and withering in the bushes, and the dewy grass is also pungent. She didn’t think posh neighborhoods could feel so earthy.

Her old home smelled a little like this.

As Doctor Lecter and Abigail approach the front door, she realizes that the house is right against a clearing, the backyard blending into woods.

The inside of the house is no less impressive, but it’s illuminated by warm lights bouncing back on polished wood.

Doctor Lecter hangs his coat. He lifts Abigail’s from her shoulders, placing it in a large closet by
the entryway. He doesn’t remove Abigail’s scarf. Nor does he insist that Abigail leave her purse. Her knives are still stored inside.

Good.

As Doctor Lecter leads Abigail through the foyer, he calls out, “I’ve brought back something special.”

“Dessert?”

That’s Will’s voice.

Doctor Lecter smiles, and he ushers Abigail into a room that is somewhere between a massive library and a living room.

“That’s not quite,” says Doctor Lecter to his spouse.

Will reclines in an armchair, a red pen in one hand and a stack of papers on his knee. He’s still dressed in an informal button-up and slacks like when Abigail last saw him on the job, but the air around him is less guarded. It’s mellower, and somehow fiercer.

He has a pile of dogs at his feet, watching Abigail excitedly but not removing themselves from their master.

Will is the most obviously surprised she’s ever seen him.

Now that Abigail thinks about it, Doctor Lecter hadn’t called anyone between their encounter in his office and the drive back home. Abigail had initially thought this was because he didn’t want her to suspect he was setting the police on her knife act—or worse, the FBI, eager to apprehend and prosecute their violent criminal’s equally disturbed daughter. She hadn’t even imagined Doctor Lecter would need to get in touch with his husband.

Doctor Lecter hadn’t either, evidently.

“I don’t,” Will says slowly, knitting his forehead, “think that’s dessert.”

“You would be correct, my dear. I was hoping we’d prepare a little something for Abigail instead.”

Will is already rising to his bare feet and stretching out his legs. The dogs don’t even budge around him. Will senses Abigail’s attention to them. After expelling a short sigh, he whistles into the air a very precise, warbling pitch that must be one of a dozen commands.

The dogs race toward Abigail. At first, Abigail lowers her palm and lets the mutts scent the intruder with their cool, damp noses and lick her with their warm, satiny tongues. In no time at all, Abigail is on her knees, scratching their ears, rubbing their furry bellies, and her face hurts. She’s smiling. Hard. She hasn’t smiled this long and intensely in God knows how long.

Buried in the soft hair, wagging tails, and pure warmth, Abigail only gradually realizes Will is standing over her and subjecting her to his usually intense, impenetrable gaze.

That breaks Abigail out of her reverie.

Also— Abigail can’t locate Doctor Lecter.

At least, she can’t until his voice cuts into her exposed back.
“I met Abigail at my office and thought I should invite her here.” Abigail doesn’t even feel Doctor Lecter’s breath anywhere on her, but he sounds so close, as if he were whispering right into her ear. A strand of hair should be disturbed by his exhalations, her goosebumps raised by some proximity to other flesh. Instead, Doctor Lecter’s words cast Abigail into an unnavigable void. “She was adamant not to return to the hospital.”

Abigail doesn’t blink, doesn’t move.

Doctor Lecter said he and Will were protective of her. Guess it’s time to see if his words are as truthful as he claims.

“In the hospital, I keep having bad dreams,” Abigail explains. “I see them. My father’s victims.” Is that too much? Abigail’s not entirely sure, but it feels good… saying it. “They keep telling me he should have killed me, so he wouldn’t have killed them.”

Abigail is transported back to those dreams now: the metal skeletons of foldable chairs are filled with Abigail’s broken, coal-eyed clones. The mockery of a support group first invites her worries and her fears into the air, and then they unleash their damning grief line by painful line, ring around the terrible rosy, demanding that Abigail’s body be cold and lifeless… instead of theirs.

“In the hospital, every day,” says Abigail, willing the image away, “I wake up. And I hear my dad’s voice. Like he was kneeling next to my bed. Whispering to me that he killed girls again and again so he wouldn’t have to kill me.”

That’s why she can’t bear to be laid up on that hospital mattress anymore.

Even if that meant hiding in the office of a man she suspected of being a serial killer. Abigail thought she’d be safer armed, but it’s clear that Doctor Lecter never had less than complete control over the situation.

Was that really why Abigail went there, so desperate to drive her father’s words out of her head, his ghost out of her room, that she didn’t mind getting hurt? Killed?

That isn’t like her. People on the news call her horrible things, and Abigail knows the nurses and other patients are thinking them, but no one ever accuses her of being suicidal. Abigail resists every other evil thing they denounce her as, but it’s true that she doesn’t want death, and she never, ever wanted the death her father desired for her. She survived him.

Or at least she thought she did.

She isn’t being herself.

It’s getting harder… to tell who she is anymore.

And that’s the reason Abigail hates her father the most.

Abigail rolls her jaw. She clenches her teeth. Her back molars grind quietly and her gums ache. “What was so wrong with me,” she asks in a low voice, “that he wanted to kill?”

“There’s nothing wrong with you, Abigail.”

Abigail blinks back into waking. Will’s eyes bore into her. Was this what it felt like, when bullets tunneled through her father’s body? It hurts, but the invasive sensation also feels like it’s releasing some pressurized thing threatening to tear her apart.
“You don’t know that,” says Abigail. She shouldn’t say this. She wants Will on her side. “You said, I brought out love in him. I don’t know if that’s a good thing. I mean, look what he did for love!” Abigail laughs. “I brought the monstrous love out of a monster. Doesn’t that make me a monster, too?”

“I know what monsters are,” Will replies. “It takes more than being loved by one… to become a monster yourself. That takes two.” Will turns to Doctor Lecter. “Hannibal. I think the stew will be easiest for her to get down. We have some leftovers.”

Emerging from Abigail’s shadows, Doctor Lecter rolls up his sleeves and heads to the kitchen. As the doctor passes his spouse, Will stops him with a firm hand on the other man’s shoulder. The look he gives him is… hard and complicated. Abigail can’t read it entirely, and before she can even tease apart some of its layers, Doctor Lecter has removed Will’s fingers, kissed his husband’s knuckles, and he disappears to prepare the food.

“I don’t remember seeing a dog in your house,” says Will abruptly.

Abigail experiences some emotional whiplash, and she doesn’t know if he’s talking about during her father’s slaughter or afterwards. “That’s because we didn’t have one.”

“But you like them.”

“Yeah,” says Abigail. She’s surprised with a nudge: one of the bigger dogs with thick chestnut hair is pushing his muzzle against her leg. Abigail reaches toward him, stroking his fur out of his eyes and throat.

Will looks pleased by this.

So he’s going the animal therapy route? Well, Abigail’s experienced worse treatment strategies.

“Sometimes, friends would join us on hunts, with their dogs.” Friends meaning her dad’s friends goes unsaid. “Do your dogs hunt?”

“Sometimes.”

A medium sized dog with a luxurious, glossy coat licks Abigail’s fingers delicately. Abigail must be giving Will a disbelieving expression.

“Sometimes, they don’t,” Will groans. His tone is very dry. “Animals appeal to Hannibal for one of two reasons: aesthetic or utilitarian. I don’t care about our dogs’ use value, and I definitely don’t do anything for their appearances. They could continue to look like mud-matted strays for the rest of their lives, and I wouldn’t give a damn. Because of that, my dear husband and ‘our’ fancy dog groomer hates me.”

Abigail has a sudden vision: Doctor Lecter is sitting with his exotic, fancy fabrics in a squeaky salon chair. He’s flipping through some cheap magazine, the picture of politeness, when a suds-soaked canine shakes itself dry on his loafers. Doctor Lecter barely glares. Looking down his nose at the ratty creature, he calmly kicks the water off the tip of his toe. He then continues his reading.

Abigail fights down a hysterical giggle.

It's too much.

Abigail wants to laugh harder and more violently when she imagines an equally vivid likeness of Doctor Lecter coming toward one of the negligent salon workers and drawing a hunting knife out
of his shiny briefcase, just like the one he’d given Abigail.

Will’s wearing a crooked grin.

Abigail’s smiling, too.

At something she definitely shouldn’t be smiling about.

Huh.

She should probably stop.

“So,” Abigail deduces more safely. “You’re the one who takes the dogs hunting, then.”

Will nods. He points to the dog at Abigail’s hip. “That one’s Winston. He’s the leader of the pack when I’m not.”

As Will gets onto his knees, Winston comes over to him. Just like that, Will is suddenly so... different. He’s not sarcastic or cold. He’s tender and caring. He smiles openly at his animal companion, his eyes soft. With reassuring, slow hands, he strokes his dog’s fur. Winston is the most precious thing to him in that moment, Abigail can plainly see it. Anyone could.

Abigail’s heart hurts. Her mouth feels dry.

She guesses Will doesn’t see a conflict between loving his dogs so completely, and then sending them on violent hunts where they hurt other things and get hurt themselves.

No, no, no! — Will’s not like her father.

He isn’t her father.

“Strays aren’t like the pedigree breeds,” Will’s saying. “They’re not pure. They’re not uncontaminated by the ways of the world. They scavenge. I grew to appreciate that they could hunt, too, if they needed to.”

Will gives Winston a final scratch, and then he’s picking the dog fur and dander from his knees. “They’re not patient enough to fish with, that’s for sure,” he says wryly.

“Doctor Lecter said he wanted me to have the hunting gear.” It’s a better, falser way of describing them instead of knives. “The fishing equipment is from you?”

Will smirks. “Yeah, well, gifts have a funny way of getting to their recipients. You might say it’s outside the power of the gift giver.”

Abigail feels disappointment and relief that Will’s implying it was Doctor Lecter, and not Will, who wanted Abigail to have that gift. It’s probably a good thing. If Doctor Lecter’s gift of knives was a metaphor for how he thought of Abigail, a capable and flexible weapon, then Will giving Abigail a lure... wouldn’t have boded well for her relationship with the FBI’s special agent.

“I don’t know how to fish.” Will can’t think she has any experience that could compare with baiting her father’s victims. None whatsoever. It’s already bad enough that they know she can hunt.

But her voice is also a bit... wistful.

Will is looking at her strangely now.
Abigail averts her gaze, ostensibly scoping the room. She tries to raise the walls above her feelings.

Apparently, Doctor Lecter and Will are just as good at scaling Abigail’s mental fortresses as she is at scaling her hospital ones.

“You’ll need a teacher,” Will says softly. He pauses. “My dad taught me how to fish. I didn’t have anyone else.”

Then, Will’s palm is on Abigail’s shoulder, and he leads her out of the study.

The Graham-Lecter dining room is much bigger than the one Abigail grew up in. A mahogany dining table is long and tall on the polished floor, big enough to fit a whole party. The aromas are absolutely incredible.

Doctor Lecter ladles stew, caramelized into amber sweetness, in a bowl at the head of the table. He gestures Abigail over and pulls out her seat.

Abigail clutches her spoon tightly, feeling famished.

“Please get started, Abigail,” says Doctor Lecter, flapping his own napkin open. “You could do with a bit of sustenance. I know you’ve had a trying day.”

Doctor Lecter would know, of course. He is a doctor. Among other things.

Abigail’s tempted to agree with his prognosis. It’s been eventful.

“You’re sure I can stay overnight,” Abigail checks, looking from the doctor and then to Will. She’s exhausted and hazy from the constant flood of adrenaline.

Will shrugs, slurping down some tendon and a chunk of potato in his soup. “We have the extra room. If you want to stay the night, you can stay. Give yourself a couple hours before you go to bed, though. Don’t want indigestion combined with the stuff of your nightmares.”

Abigail she has to gulp hard, twice, to pass down her broth.

Doctor Lecter probably overheard Abigail and Will’s earlier conversation, because he says, “perhaps you can peruse some of Will’s manuals on the finer techniques of fly fishing. Before you use your equipment, you’ll need proper guidance. I am glad”—the doctor skims the surface of his stew with the sharp edge of his spoon, separating the meat from the liquid and fat—“that you’ve already started using your other gifts.”

Abigail peels apart her loaf of bread. “Yeah. They’re nice.”

Doctor Lecter smiles. “Good. I bought them with the intention of you using them for a very long time.”

That shouldn’t make Abigail as reassured as she is, but she’s practically sighing around her dinner roll. She sinks a little lower into her seat.

“I won’t be able to talk about this in my next session with Doctor Bloom,” Abigail states, indicating the room, her dinner companions, her bags of weapons, and the entire night. “Will I?”

“One must endeavor to do what they think is best for their doctor-patient relationship,” Doctor
Lecter equivocates. “What do you think is best, Abigail?”

Abigail sips from her glass. “Doctor Bloom thinks it’s best if I don’t get close to either of you.”

Will laughs scornfully. “Hell, she might be right. Alana thinks you’re burying something down with every ounce of your strength.”

Alana. Will’s friends with Doctor Bloom? That’s news to Abigail. Doctor Lecter must be too, then. “Does she think,” Abigail asks carefully, weighing this recent information, “that you and Doctor Lecter will help me keep it buried?”

“Please, Abigail, I am your friend, not your doctor. Call me Hannibal.” Hannibal presses on, “and as your friend, let me ask you this: do you feel that we are close?”

“Closer than I expected.”

That’s for sure. Abigail wouldn’t be having dinner with her father’s killer and another man she tried to gut if she didn’t feel some confusing and irresistible combination of fear, interest, and familiarity. Nor would she have ever dreamt of it.

Hannibal looks intrigued at that. Abigail supposes it’s both rude and flattering. “Yes. We feel close to you as well.”

“So you’re saying… those close to each other, keep each other’s secrets? You keep mine, and I keep yours?”

Will lifts his bowl and wolfs down the rest of his stew. Then, his dish lands loudly on the tabletop. “We’re not helping you keep anything buried, Abigail.” Will speaks with incredible self-assurance and plainness, like a teacher lecturing about something painfully dry. If anybody in the classroom of Will’s language doesn’t get him, that’s on their obliviousness, not the lesson plan.

Will’s eyes change. They’re flintier now, even if his voice has equally persuasive conviction: “and you’re not helping us keep anything buried either.”

A shudder so violent courses through Abigail that her spoon rings like a bell against her platter. Abigail’s not sure if she’s chipped the ceramic.

Will’s not moved by her sudden fear. He won’t release the hold his terrible eyes have on her. That was his goal, Abigail realizes.

That’s when she knows:

Will is like Hannibal.

They’re different, but the same.

“If you want to stay close,” Will goes on, calmly, patiently, “you can stay. But…” Will pauses. The biting hooks of his gaze loosen from where they’d dug into Abigail and pulled at her with enough force to rip her apart.

Will points his spoon at the door. Hannibal doesn’t appear happy with the uncouth gesture. Will ignores him. “If you want to go,” Will says, “go.”

Will… isn’t just talking about leaving the house, though. Abigail can see that in the softening features of his face.
He’s almost whispering now: “Jack Crawford isn’t going to arrest you. I promise.” Will’s convinced. “You’re free from the FBI, and you’re free from your father, if you want to be.”

Abigail swallows.

Her eyes feel wetter than she wanted. Her cheeks are dry, though, thank god, and her voice is steady.

“Hannibal said… you two wanted to protect me,” says Abigail. “Is that true?”

Will freezes. Then, he looks across the table at his husband. The earlier expression he’d worn, the warning one he’d shown Hannibal in the study, has... changed. It’s like Will’s putting together a puzzle, now, or he’s translating a difficult foreign passage.

Hannibal smiles placidly. Abigail’s not sure if he can betray anything other than consummate, clinical detachment. Though it’s surprisingly easy to call him Hannibal, Doctor Lecter still has a strong, capital D in her mind. His demeanor gives absolutely nothing away. At least, not to Abigail.

But Will— Will sees something.

Will pushes himself from his chair, softly groaning. Then, he grabs his empty bowl, and Abigail’s, and Hannibal’s.

As he passes Hannibal, his hand is again on his husband’s shoulder, but he stops this time to press a quick kiss to the doctor’s lips. Hannibal smiles a little broader, his fingers on Will’s hip.

“He’s right,” says Will to Abigail. “I’m also protecting you from overeating.”

As Will drops the dishes into the kitchen sink, Abigail hears Will mutter, “Not that Hannibal brought dessert, anyway.”
Speak No Evil (Part III)

Chapter Notes

Here we are at Part III of the Murder Family and the continued dynamics of a married Will and Hannibal and their fledgling fatherly relationships with Abigail.

Thank you for reading and sharing your thoughts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Speak No Evil (Part III)

IX. Will.

Will knows he should probably be more polite when he reminds the staff at Port Haven Psychiatric Facilities for the fourth goddamned time that he is, in fact, allowed to take Abigail out for the day. He’s not sure if they’re more worried about something unfortunate happening to their patient, or that their patient might do something unfortunate to Will.

Yes, Will says, he’s done this for the last couple of months, he knows what’s going on with the girl, and he’s fine. He and his husband even went through the bureaucratic hoops to become her legal guardians. Will didn’t know this fun fact at first; Hannibal was compelled to reveal it to him after their last visit to the ward—well, the gossiping nurses did, actually. Hannibal explained that the hospital forbade Abigail from going out on her own, especially after her last escapade to Hannibal’s office (aka, confronting the good doctor with one of his generously gifted knives, which amused Hannibal to no end), and their becoming her fathers was the easiest way to restore her freedom.

Will can only imagine how Alana will feel about that.

If he has any say, Jack is never going to find out. He thinks Alana would probably be sensitive enough not to tell him, if she did learn the truth.

Let’s be honest—when. When she finds out.

That on top of everything else is probably why Will’s skull is threatening to crack open unless he chokes back handful after handful of Advil.

“Are you sick?” Abigail asks him. She’s probably heard the rapidly-diminishing contents of his bottle clacking through his coat their entire way to the stream.

“No. Just tired,” Will groans. He puts an arm forward to halt Abigail. “Don’t forget—tread the riverbank lightly, and wade the stream quietly and slow.” Will guides Abigail into the water.

“You don’t want to warn the fish.”

Abigail gives him a face, but she does as Will says. Will knows she’ll keep her comments until they’ve sufficiently lured out their catches. She’s quickly become a competent fisherman. At this point Will barely has to correct her form. She’s a fast learner and doesn’t mind the waiting game, adept at silently hooking her trout with her rod held firm but delicately enough so that the fish can’t run while she plays them.
When they’re preparing to hunt, that’s when Abigail lets her verbal barbs fly. Abigail makes what appears to be innocent chatter, but she’s really trying to coax Will into missing his deer. When they lift their rifles to the forest canopy, she grins with far too much caustic joy as he just clips the wings of a passing bird. She’s bold and incisive, never holding back, letting her quippy tongue act as the other instrument in her violently playful arsenal. Will is happy to offer equally competitive rejoinders, not mentioning when he notices the brittle branch that inevitably crackles under Abigail’s heel and scares off her doe. When she glares at her mentor, he only raises the corner of his temple.

As they make their way back to the house with their prey, Abigail gracefully leaps over fallen branches and drags Will through the brush. She disguises her handiness as impatience when she’d really trying to get him to trip under the weight of their kills. She mildly protests when Will guides them through some sharper bramble, elbowing him and racing ahead. When Will catches up, he helps disentangle the dead leaves from Abigail’s hair, and she smiles, eyes bright and alive.

Will smiles, too.

He enjoys it all far too much.

Will’s not sure if he should be upset about how Abigail reels in her blunt behavior just a bit more for Hannibal. She’s perfectly clean by the time she makes her way into the kitchen, because she knows Hannibal won’t tolerate dirt or debris in his sanctified domain. Will observes that a mixture of fear and respect drives Abigail to follow Hannibal almost word for word. They’re preparing fillets and seasoning vegetables, and she cuts her fish per her mentor’s exact instructions. Taking Abigail’s dexterity into consideration, Hannibal had originally wanted to teach her how to play an instrument like the harpsichord, but Abigail preferred preparing her kills. It helps that Abigail’s already good with a knife and has fun cooking increasingly complicated dishes with her teacher.

While part of Abigail maintains picture perfect obedience, she also hasn’t been afraid to angle her prongs and cleavers innocuously in her head chef’s direction. Well, somewhere between innocuously and audaciously. Hannibal appreciates her candor. If he rests his hands just a little too long or stands too close to the young woman’s moving blades, well, Abigail very conscientiously manages not to nick him.

It’s a deadly game they play that Will shouldn’t be watching so fondly as he sips his whiskey and tries to tamp down his migraine.

Will wanted to do some more hunting with Abigail and clean the fish with her himself, but now he’s struggling not to wince when he blinks.

When Abigail leaves the kitchen to clean herself up, Will drops his aching eyes into his hands and enjoys the blessed blackness. He feels Hannibal’s fingers massaging Will’s upper arm, and he hears his husband take a whiff.

“Don’t worry, you gourmand. I’ll shower before dinner.”

“I smell a fever,” Hannibal gently reprimands, lifting Will’s face and brushing back his curls. It takes Hannibal’s touch for Will to realize his hairline is damp with sweat. “If you are sick, you may have over-exerted yourself with Abigail.”

“I told her we’d go out today. I couldn’t just leave her in the hospital.”

Will knows how much Abigail hates that place, tormented by night specters. Honestly, he can’t even imagine being stuck in an insane asylum. On the way in on the transport convoy, he’d
probably dislocate his thumb to get loose of his handcuffs and make an efficient if brutal escape. It’s very likely Will would kill somebody to get free, hopefully Chilton, Will’s first sacrifice. Chilton has always said he wants to know how Will’s mind works, and how better to understand it than by experience?

Will lowers Hannibal’s palms from his scalp so that they lay over Will’s eyes, shielding him from the light.

*That’s better.*

“I’ll be fine as long as it’s not a brain tumor,” Will laughs dryly.

“Your current case,” says Hannibal, moving his fingers slowly around Will’s temples as he keeps him covered in dark. “The angel-maker.”

“Yeah. His angels are supposed to protect him when he sleeps. He’s afraid of what his mind will do to him… when he’s alone. He feels abandoned.”

“Perhaps in the way the creations of gods feel abandoned,” Hannibal says. “Are you worried about abandoning Abigail, Will?”

“We’re not her gods.” *Even if we did orphan her.*

Reading his husband’s thoughts, Hannibal replies, insistently, “And through us she has returned to having family once more.”

Will leans his face into Hannibal’s palms, letting the other man take his weight as his neck and shoulders fall. Maybe it’s the post-hunting lethargy, or it’s the sleepless week and fever-pains, but he doesn’t have the fight in him today. “Maybe, my brain’s playing tricks on me, too, just like the angel-maker. We’re playing this game of family with Abigail, and I like it. It feels right. But, it can’t last.”

Still wrapped in sweet blindness, Will feels the hum of Hannibal’s throat as the other man leans over Will to kiss the top of his head. He keeps his mouth pressed against Will’s waves. “I don’t see why it can’t, Will.”

Will decides to list the least complicated sources of their untenable domestic environment: “Alana. I can already hear Alana saying how shockingly rude it would be of you, taking her patient away from the hospital without her permission for months. She’ll probably just pity me. And then there’s Jack.”

“I believe Alana can be reasoned with. And I have plans to make Jack more amenable to our situation.”

That is enough for Will to leave the comfort of Hannibal’s caresses to glare at the other man’s attractive, irritating face.

“What plans?”

“I invited Mr. and Mrs. Crawford for dinner,” Hannibal says, kissing the insides of Will’s palms and nibbling the pulses in his wrists. “We’ll use the fish you and Abigail so kindly procured. I know *Trout a la Meunière* is one of your favorites.”

Will knows that the fish will taste divine with their flaky flesh. They’d practically melt under generous brushings of bubbling butter, and the sharp notes of acidity from the lemon juice and
crispness of the parsley will balance the muddy notes of the stream.

Will also knows that Hannibal has planned a less sentimental dish for another course, one equally rich, buttery, and delicate. Given his esteemed guests, it would most likely be a minimalistic and brutal foie gras. Hannibal has a kill he’s been saving for such an occasion: a liver that was so beautifully fattened it would require very little preparation beyond a sauce and warm figs.

“And you wanted to debut Abigail as what exactly?”

“As a young woman no longer under her father’s shadow,” Hannibal explains. “Reformed, as it were, in the care of her new guardians.”

Will scoffs. “We’re barely her guardians. Just on paper. And we’re definitely no guardian angels.”

“How fortunate that your angel-maker has not received our protection, then,” Hannibal charmingly replies. “Are you well enough, or should I cancel?”

“If it’s going to happen anyway, might as well give ourselves the home field advantage.” Will thinks. “Does your sous chef know about our evening plans?”

Hannibal smiles. “No time like the present,” he says, and waves Abigail over from the hallway. She’s either sensed that Will needed to recollect himself or she didn’t want to encroach on their moment of intimacy. As she seats herself between the two men, her smirk indicates teasing, but her face bears traces of real concern.

“Tonight will be special, Abigail,” Hannibal says. “We’re having Jack Crawford and his wife for dinner.”

Though Abigail’s demeanor doesn’t betray much, Will can sense that she is not happy about this development. Her nervousness plays through in the flutter of her pale brow. “I thought it seemed like too much for the three of us,” she replies.

Why hadn’t Will thought of that? He must be sicker than he thought. That, or he’s just used to Hannibal’s extravagant meal preparations for parties as big as fifty people, parties Will avoids by citing other engagements with whiskey, the dogs, or corpses, and resentfully pantomimes through on the off-chances his tactics fail.

While Abigail puts up a good act, she’s doubtlessly performing various mental calculations: being anywhere near Jack Crawford brings her no pleasure, but Will and Hannibal said she needn’t fear him, even if she still doesn’t trust her “guardians” and their intentions. Will might even offer to take her back to the hospital, despite Hannibal’s plans, but he won’t. He also knows that Abigail doesn’t back down from a challenge, because it means a chance for her to slip into the water with her unruffled, oblivious fish.

Jack is the head of the Behavior Analysis Unit for a reason: he’s friendly and considerate in front of his hosts and wife, even as the daughter of a major criminal, one whom he suspects of being an accomplice to her father’s murders, shares his dinner table. Though Abigail lacks some of Jack’s expertise, she withholds from being anything other than a little shy, well-mannered, and occasionally a bit theatrical with her wit and charm.

She helps Hannibal carry out the first course and sets it before Jack’s calm and multilayered inspection.
“Thank you, Abigail,” Hannibal says, and he pulls out her chair when Abigail returns to her place.

Hannibal begins distributing plates with food. “Mrs. Crawford, your husband introduced you as Bella. Are you an Isabelle or an Annabelle?”

“I’m a Phyllis,” Bella replies. “Jack only calls me Phyllis when we disagree.”

Abigail gives Will the barest look: she’s picked up that Hannibal only calls him “William” under similar circumstances. Will fills her glass with pomegranate juice, returning her look with his own, and though she doesn’t quite smile, the corners of her lips quirk up.

“So named Bella for your beauty,” Hannibal responds.

Will allows his spouse to glide his hand along the line of Will’s shoulders, touching the edge of Will’s curls as he does so. Will even indulges him by reaching for him and pressing his fingers back. _La piu bella del mondo_ was the phrase Hannibal had used for him, once upon a Florentine dusk twenty years ago— _the most beautiful in the world_. He was never a subtle man, present deliberate display included.

“We were both stationed in Italy,” Jack recollects, watching his wife fondly. “I was army, she was NATO staff. All the Italian men kept calling her ‘Bella, Bella, Bella’. Well, I wanted her to be my Bella.”

“Hannibal and I also met in Italy,” Will says over his wine.

Abigail looks a little surprised. “Really?”

“Yeah,” but that’s all Will’s going to give away to present company.

Jack chuckles. “Well, how about that? Maybe we crossed paths and didn’t even know it.”

“Maybe,” says Will. “What strange workings of the world, if their paths could have intersected before this moment. ‘I doubt it, though.’

“Would I be a horrible guest if I skipped this course?” Bella says about the foie gras.

“Too rich?”

“Too cruel,” Bella answers.

Jack protests, but Bella stands firm.

“I have no taste for animal cruelty, which is why I employ an ethical butcher,” Hannibal says.

“An ethical butcher? Be kind to animals and then eat them?” Bella says with acute disbelief. She deserves a commendation from NATO, Will thinks.

“Hannibal would know,” Will says. “My husband always oversees each aspect of our meal preparation.”

“No need for unnecessary suffering, isn’t that right, Will?” says Hannibal. “Human emotions are a gift from our animal ancestors. Cruelty is a gift humanity has given itself.”

“The gift that keeps on giving,” says Jack, and his eyes dart over to Abigail.

Abigail holds herself perfectly still. It’s Jack’s presence, but also Hannibal’s words, Will thinks,
that keep her cautious and steady even as the stream rises and pushes against her.

“You’ll enjoy our next course, Bella,” says Hannibal. “It’s trout that Abigail and Will caught fresh this afternoon, barely seared with browned butter and almonds.”

“Jack didn’t tell me you two had a daughter,” says Bella.

“She’s a recent addition,” Jack refrains from growling, his features stone. “I believe.”

Great.

Bella Crawford strikes Will as exceedingly self-composed and intelligent. She’s more than a match for Jack, likely keeping her husband on his toes when she wants him to see and deceiving him when she doesn’t. Now, it appears to Will, there is something she doesn’t want Jack to see, and she may have hidden it more competently from Will as well had it not been for the unexpected presence of Abigail, his and Hannibal’s happenstance daughter.

Resentment, fear, regret, and acceptance are what Bella feels most poignantly now. An ending.

“Your perfume is exquisite,” Hannibal says to Bella as he pours her wine. “Similar to the aroma on the earth just after lightning strikes. Is it jar?”

“That is some nose you have there, Doctor.”

“He’s quite the charmer,” says Jack, smiling.

“My husband, always the charmer,” says Will, not smiling.

Abigail’s poised and restrained expression isn’t dissimilar from said partner. “You have to have a keen nose in the kitchen,” she says.

“Very true, Abigail,” Hannibal replies, serving her a generous portion of the trout. He explains to Bella and Jack, “I first noticed my keen sense of smell as a young man. I was aware that one of my teachers had stomach cancer before even he was.”

Ah— so cancer’s the ending Bella has come to accept, even if she has not accepted Jack’s place in that final, tragic arch of her story. Will reads that, to Bella, there is no tragedy, because the story is really very dull. The ending is always the same, and that same is it always ends.

Will knows that feeling.

A part of him accepts it with Bella’s grace.

But, another part, a part Will is increasingly losing control over, is fighting the inevitable bottom in the plunge toward oblivion.

“I imagine it’s difficult,” Bella says to Will. “Keeping anything from your husband.”

“Even the most intuitive of partners can be deceived, if you try hard enough,” Will answers her. “Love makes fools of us all.”

Jack doesn't comprehend the nuances in Will and Hannibal's words, nor does he discern his wife’s more acute reactions to them. Will supposes he’s still trying to control himself in Abigail’s presence and determining how to proceed with his errant special investigator.

Over the remainder of the meal, Will smiles at Bella, stares at Jack, glances over at Abigail,
completely ignores Hannibal, and wants to chug a hundred more pills of Advil.

Will thinks he’s lucky, for a time. And then he’s really not, standing over his criminal’s mutilated genitals and anticipating Jack’s ire. Will can’t tell him whether the angel-maker’s still pursuing other victims or how he’s even choosing them. His head fucking hurts. It doesn’t help that he’s trying to get inside the mind of a guy with a terminal illness.

“I need to know that I can depend on you, Will,” says Jack.

Will watches the bloody angel dangling above them, a flayed bauble to help distract Will from his ceaseless aching. “Do you have reason not to?”

“You seem haunted. This case, and the last one with the Lost Boys. I need to know that Abigail Hobbs isn’t the one haunting you.” Jack doesn’t mince his words.

Will doesn’t want to have this conversation, so he decides to do some good and empathize with dear old Jack.

“Well, family’s complicated,” Will says, putting on a show of averting his gaze to the angel-maker’s oozing castration when he’s gauging Jack from the corner of his eye. “You want something from them, but they don’t always want to give it to you. It’s a constant back and forth. You think they’re close one moment; and the next, they’re drifting away.”

That sends Jack stalking away pretty quick, so Will can enjoy the heavenly desecration overhead all by himself.

“Alana gave me a similar talking to,” Hannibal shares with Will as they sit in Hannibal’s office.

Will thought Hannibal would be more discommoded by Alana’s scolding, but he actually seems excited. He’s proud. “She called me shockingly rude, just as you predicted. Really, your mind never ceases to fascinate me, Will.” Hannibal’s eyes are practically sparkling.

“Gee, thanks, dear.” Will really wishes Hannibal would keep something stronger than wine in his office. “She’s dying, isn’t she? Bella.”

“Yes,” says Hannibal. “She confirmed it during our last appointment.”

“She made you her psychiatrist?” Too bad. “I thought she seemed cleverer than that.”

Hannibal ignores that criticism. “She resents Jack because he cannot save her. But she also loves him and wants to shield him from her loss.”

“We want to be saved by the people we love,” Will says. “And we want to save them. There’s a reason Jack can’t understand the angel-maker. Unlike our disbeliever, Jack never loses faith in his cause. No matter what he does or how anyone else views his actions, it’s for the common good. He’s incredibly driven to save people, because he can’t bear to fail them.”

“His killer’s victims, Miriam Lass, and his wife,” Hannibal concurs. “Those he fears failing the most, and fights the hardest and most cruelly to save, are those he loves.”

“Yes,” Will says in a low voice. “It’s terrifying to think that you could have stopped someone you care about from being destroyed, but you did nothing. That’s what Jack thinks. And that’s where he and Bella disagree. Because, for Bella, it doesn’t matter if you think you did something or nothing, because nothing could have been done. Sometimes, you can only... watch it happen. The end.”
Will’s headaches and lack of sleep are too much, so he doesn’t stop by Port Haven Psychiatric Facilities.

He doesn’t see Abigail.

Jack learns about the end his wife sees when they interview Mrs. Budish.

Then, they find a corpse raised on fishing lines from the rafters of the angel-maker’s childhood barn.

It’s so quiet, not that the body would make a sound.

Maybe it’s Jack’s silence. Maybe it’s Will’s.

“This’ll be the last one.”

The mutilations are like the others, clumsy wings raised from jagged cuts of flesh from Budish’s back. Blood streaks desperately down Budish’s shoulders, and his white face is turned over his collarbone, his wrists feebly raised.

“It’s Budish?” Will barely registers Jack’s voice.

Will’s approaching Budish. “He made himself into an angel. It wasn’t god, it wasn’t man. It was his choice to die.”

However, this end is oddly dissatisfaction. It’s too desperate, too quick, executed in the dying throes of a paranoid, pain-stricken man. This display lacks the elevation of Budish’s last kills, transforming demons into angels for protection. This still looks sad and broken.

“Will?”

Drawing his knife, Will slices the end of the fishing line from the rafters. Budish’s body slides down, landing on his knees back to earth with a profound thud.

“Will!”

Will raises the edge of his blade to Budish’s pliant face. “This isn’t your design.” Will gives the other man in a vermillion crown of thorns. The son’s divine suffering, abandoned down on earth with the monsters, before he’s saved again. With perfect serenity and patience, Will works the point of his weapon from one end of Budish’s forehead over to the other, carving a jagged path. The forsaken son’s nightmares have been released from his soul and skull, washing his face with crimson waters, a baptism, a purification.

Salvation.

Divine love.

And as the climax, Budish’s face bursts into flames.

“Will!”

Will blinks.

Budish’s face isn’t aflame. Will isn’t carving him. The body’s still… floating there. Just how Will and Jack found him.
“What’s going on?” Jack is saying. He’s been saying it for the last minute, maybe more. Will just didn’t hear him. Or he heard him in an entirely different way. “Your mind went somewhere else.”

Will doesn’t know what’s going on. He doesn’t know what he just hallucinated. No, he does know: he imagined taking a practiced knife to a corpse and embellishing it with the Chesapeake Ripper’s designs, right in front of Jack Crawford, as if his presence and cries meant nothing in the world.

“I’m sorry,” Will gasps, swallowing. His throat is dry. His head is thick with swollen cotton. “I didn’t get enough sleep. I’m fine.”

Will’s not fine.

He can’t stop himself from visiting Abigail in the hospital and taking her hunting.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asks him. “You look pale. And sweaty.”

That explains why the breeze is so chilling against his aching flesh.

Will laughs. “If you want to head back, just say so.”

Abigail shakes her head. “No,” she says, and then more hesitantly, “I was looking forward to this. I thought you were really sick or something. You didn’t come.” She doesn’t voice the for a long time part of her thoughts.

“Sorry. I’ve been busy,” Will lies.

Abigail stares at him like she can see through him, and then they wade further into the woods.

Will enjoys losing himself in treading the wintry forest path, guiding Abigail along as they precisely track down their prey. The earthy odors and frost are freeing, the restrained crunch of dead leaves under his boots receiving almost all his attention, and Abigail alternates between cutting jokes and seriously listening at his side.

It feels good.

Then— there’s a sound.

“There.”

Will shushes Abigail, and she crouches low behind the branches. Bending his knees, Will carries his shotgun carefully, scanning the creeping greenery and fallen trees for the camouflaged presence of their prey. It’s elusive, strangely invisible, but Will hears it suddenly. Its breathing is sharp and fierce. It’s so loud it sends the entire thicket into vibrations.

“Something’s… not right.”

“Will?”

Moving forward over gnarled roots and rocks, Will follows the shuddering sound. Soon, his steady pace has turned into running, and he bounds over the obstacles in his path, his rifle ready in his hands. The bushes and branches don’t stop him— he’s tearing through them, his breathing strong but controlled, because whatever he’s hunting now, it’s not some easy prey; it’s something huge, a predator in a thicket of obsidian antlers. The ground shakes as if something equally massive and lethal, also crowned in dark and spires, is galloping by Will’s side. He thinks he can
hear something softer pattering in the sylvan refuge.

The kill he’s going for, though, it requires all his energy, all his appetites. Will needs to shoot it. No, stab it, use his hands. He needs to kill it— he needs to hunt it down—he needs to know—

“Will!”

He’s stopped. Something’s stopping him. That’s not right. Will’s body is ready to violently launch itself free, digging his heels into the crumbling earth, when he turns around and suddenly it’s—

“Abigail.”

Abigail’s face is pressed into Will’s back, but he can see her eyes are wide. Her face is pale with terror. Shaking, she holds Will as best she can to her, pulling him back.

Will feels the very tips of his feet dangle from a ledge. Will stares. It’s not a long fall, but it’s a sheer enough drop, a violent valley hidden beneath the brush, that he could have broken something on the way down, maybe even his neck.

Shaking a little himself, Will tries to inch back. He has to ease Abigail’s hold— she’s still afraid he’ll tumble down without her.

“Abigail.”

Will shifts to wrap an arm around her, and she finally loosens her hold. With shining eyes, she stares into Will’s face. At that moment, lost in fever and a dream, Will cannot read what she sees. And then, together, they walk back from the edge.

X. Hannibal.

“Smells delicious.”

Hannibal is turning broth in a large pot over the stove. Beside him, Abigail’s hair is tied back and her blue eyes are fixed on the chicken she is deconstructing with her knife. With a strong, solid blow, she separates the joints.

She blinks in surprise. “The bones are black, too. I thought it was just the outside.”

“Silkie chicken. It’s been prized in China for its medicinal values since the seventh century.”

“What’s in the broth?” Abigail asks.

“Wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates and star anise,” Hannibal explains, beckoning Abigail over. With the edge of her knife, Abigail pushes the shredded meat from the cutting board into the remaining ingredients of the soup. Hannibal extends his hand, and Abigail places the handle of the blade into his palm, taking the ladle instead to stir.

“This has got to be nicer than hospital food,” says Abigail. “I’m sure he’s missed your cooking.”

Hannibal knows that Will has gone without it for almost a week.

After Abigail and Will had returned from their hunting adventure sans prey, Hannibal suspected something occurred. He’d told a shaken Abigail to rest in the guest bedroom she’d made more and more her own before dinner (she was only too glad to get some respite from the day’s events). Then, Hannibal guided a fever-fragrant Will into their study, at which point Will divulged the truth
about nearly tumbling to severe injury, possibly death, from his auditory and visual hallucinations.

Hannibal passed Will his notebook and a pen and asked him to draw a clock.

“We’ll need to get you to the hospital,” Hannibal said at the results.

“Before or after dinner?” Will replied with a weary smirk.

“You have encephalitis, Will. Your brain is inflamed, causing headaches, sleepwalking, hallucinations, and spatial disorientation. Soon, you will lose time and have seizures.”

Will groaned. “I’ve already been losing time.”

Hannibal closed the notebook and crossed his legs. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You know why.” The look Will gave him was no duller from exhaustion. “You suspected I had encephalitis over a week ago. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Really, Will’s mind was exceptional. Will must have read Hannibal’s current appreciation, and linked it to the doctor’s patient discovery of Will’s beautiful, illuminating illness.

Encephalitis made Will no lesser of aim. The sudden, vicious stab wound he’d executed with his fountain pen, deep in a very delicate and potential fatal point in Hannibal’s side, ascertained that once Will delivered himself to the hospital, Hannibal would need to carefully nurse his own wound for a while. It gave his husband about a week to restore his more even tempers.

How Hannibal marveled at Will’s mind.

“Anything to speed up Will’s recovery,” Hannibal says to Abigail now. “Which is why you will be joining me to raise Will’s spirits.”

Hannibal is also very thankful that Abigail prevented too great harm from befalling his husband.

The higher quality food, Abigail’s company, and even Hannibal’s presence seem to elevate Will’s mood. He doesn’t resist when Hannibal brushes his hair out of his gaunt face—Will could become a little more accommodating to hospitals, if only for his own good— and he even accepts the food ceremoniously.

Ceremoniously enough for Hannibal’s resentful spouse.

“You brought me chicken soup,” Will says.

If getting back at Hannibal will improve Will’s complexion, then Hannibal will graciously accept the blows, verbal and physical. It would be preferable not to reopen the latter, however.

“Abigail helped prepare it,” says Hannibal.

Will smiles at the girl. “You’re getting to be my regular life-saver, you know that?”

“Yeah, well. Even Steven.” Abigail is sitting on the side of Will’s bed, grateful to see him again, even if he still appears a little weakened and sickly.

It had taken some time and effort for Hannibal to calm her down that night when he told her Will had to be hospitalized.

He may have even given her tea infused with psilocybin. The psychotropic drugs allayed
Abigail’s nerves and allowed Hannibal to concentrate on treating his own demanding injury.

Will doesn’t need to know that, however. Abigail knows not to tell him.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” says Abigail.

His grin tender, Will reaches a hand forward and slowly pushes Abigail’s hair back behind her ear. “Thanks, Abigail.”

Abigail smiles and places Will’s hand down on the bed, squeezing his fingers. “I almost thought I wouldn’t catch you in time. You were running so fast I barely kept up. And then you slowed down. You looked like you were going to shoot something. But, you didn’t.”

Her true question is unvoiced.

*What were you hunting?*

Hannibal places a hand on Abigail’s back, and she looks at him, ever the devout follower of his cues. She is very charming that way. Hannibal immensely enjoys teaching her, whether in the kitchen, in emotional manipulation, or with the many uses of a knife.

“I’ve been helping Hannibal take care of the dogs,” Abigail reroutes astutely.

What a delightful girl. Hannibal feels the tension in Abigail’s back relax under his circling palm.

“I’m sure the dogs appreciate that,” Will laughs. He looks at Hannibal. “Alana tells me you’ve been busy picking up my work from Jack.”

Ah, yes— that would also explain Will’s good mood. Hannibal had to endure Abel Gideon’s proclamations of himself as the Chesapeake Ripper (Hannibal is planning his response, though he deemed it wise to wait for Will’s contributions to repudiating their joint imposter), while Will avoided Frederick Chilton and his unsuitable expressions of desire to dig into Will’s mind. Hannibal would appreciate it if the other man would be less blatant about his invasive manner in front of Will’s husband, badly clinical though Frederick no doubt is. He supposes having fed Frederick that prime tongue will suffice for now.

“Jack is no longer confident Abel Gideon is whom he claims to be. He is investigating what appears to be another Ripper murder that occurred outside Frederick’s sanatorium,” says Hannibal.

Frederick’s ire at that had also helped ease Hannibal’s, a little.

“The Chesapeake Ripper?” Abigail responds.

“You’ve heard about the Ripper?” Will asks.

Abigail nods, but there is hardness in her face. “I’ve read about him in the hospital. He’s like my dad.”

_Not a very flattering or accurate assessment_, Hannibal thinks.

“He eats them,” says Abigail.

...*Ah.*

Will appears to be watching Hannibal and Abigail carefully, but he makes no efforts to intervene,
leisurely drinking his broth.

“Jack Crawford would no doubt dislike my discussing the particulars of the case with you,” Hannibal evades. Mentioning the hounding agent does the immediate trick of dampening Abigail’s interest in the subject.

However…

Hannibal is curious to get her opinion.

“What the media reports is that the Ripper mutilates his victims and takes trophies from them. It is not believed that he consumes them like your father did.”

“Doesn’t he, though?” Abigail muses. “I heard in one of his kills he took a liver. My dad also tried to take a liver from the one victim they found who was still whole. The Ripper’s taking the organs you can eat. I bet he does it with all his kills.”

What a sharp, unconventional mind. Abigail is drawing from her own experiences as a huntress, determining which parts of the body are valuable for consumption. She’s also not afraid to connect the valid aspects of her father’s violence to other violations. She can view dispassionately the beauty and horror others would mislabel, condemn, and flee from, trapped at the surface while they entertain their sheep-like moral values.

Hannibal had not expected her to be so keen, especially in this way. It’s almost thrilling.

When Abigail’s gaze prods Hannibal for more material, eager to continue the game, he holds himself back, explaining, “as I said, my lips are sealed about the current investigation.”

Abigail looks disappointed and ready to provoke Hannibal into further revealing his hand. She shares his deadly, goading sense of fun, and Hannibal finds himself disappointed as well not to indulge her.

Abigail appears not to be dissuaded, however.

“Do you teach on the Ripper, Will?” she asks the professor.

Will raises his eyebrow at Hannibal’s evident amusement. “Occasionally. There’s not much to teach.”

Abigail frowns. “He’s killed a lot of people.”

“Yes, but there aren’t any sound profiles on him.” Will is thinking. Hannibal reflects that marriage has changed both he and Will more than either of them intended—or maybe it’s Abigail’s presence in their lives—because he generously continues, “The Ripper murders have a distinctive theatricality. Murder, elevated to art. They require in-depth anatomical knowledge and brutality. But there is no consistent pattern among the victims, no way to determine who he’ll kill next. The Ripper is as unpredictable and contradictory as he is unique.”

Abigail smirks, reverting to her more caustic companionability with Will. “You know a lot about the Ripper considering his lack of ‘sound profiles.’ Get inside his head a lot, Will?”

Hannibal will not let Abigail proceed through her sport unchallenged. “Will did much the same for your father’s case. And others, working with Jack Crawford. Once he rejoins this case, I’m certain he’ll apprehend the criminal.”
“So you agree with Agent Crawford?” Abigail asks. “That he’s the Ripper?”

“The available evidence suggests many similarities between this victim and the Ripper’s other kills,” Hannibal responds.

Abigail has been training herself to see through Hannibal’s vagaries and metaphors for kernels of useful, self-preserving information, so she must sense his lack of interest or conviction in that hypothesis.

“I guess you could tell,” she replies tactfully, adding with an appeal to Hannibal’s pride, “if the Ripper has anatomical know how, he might be a surgeon, just like you were. You could probably tell another surgeon’s style apart from someone else.”

_Clever, persistent Abigail._

Hannibal smiles with his teeth. “I’d hate for the wrong man to get all the credit and blame.”

“You know,” Will says the next time he and Hannibal are alone at the hospital, “we never planned to have children, but I’m not surprised you’re the one who likes playing games with them. You’ve always liked playing with people.”

“Abigail is a very bright young woman,” Hannibal answers. “She needs suitable challenges for her intelligence to continue to grow.”

“It’s easy to forget in games that power dynamics shift,” Will says firmly. “Don’t give her too much, or she’ll have no trouble overtaking you.”

Hannibal plucks wet grapes from their stems and places them in a bowl for Will. “I love Norton grapes. Same color inside and outside. Peel it, and the flesh is also purple. Not like other grapes where the flesh is white and the color comes from the skin.”

Will bites the grape in half and examines its dark, jewel-like interior. “A grape with nothing to hide. Not a very apt metaphor for our situation, Hannibal.”

“It is no metaphor, Will. Darker grapes are richer in antioxidants, so they should speed up your recovery. If we are to return to metaphors, you were a charitable game master with Abigail, too. You read her much of the rule book.”

Will chews on his fruit. “Well, I’m recovering from an inflamed brain.” In other words, another one of Hannibal’s slip-ups. “And you’re the one Abigail still suspects of being some kind of killer.”

“Abigail knows that you are capable of killing. She’s experienced it first-hand, while she can only guess with me,” Hannibal argues. Then, he admits, “it is very tempting to show off in front of one’s daughter. I believe you felt the same.”

Will laughs. “Well, I don’t think this revelation will be earning us any ‘good ol’ dads’.”

“I believe I know something that might,” Hannibal offers. “Since you are indisposed, I thought I’d take Abigail to the opera.”

Will does not look impressed. “I think this is the first time I’ve felt lucky about getting encephalitis. I don’t think Abigail’s the opera type, either.”

“Not yet.”
Hannibal prepares to depart when Will has slipped into sleep, but he’s stopped by his husband tugging on his sleeve.

Will’s voice is still thick with fatigue as he says, “Abigail asked… what I was hunting. Before.”

Hannibal touches Will’s brow. “Did you see it in your dreams?”

“Yes. I was with a stag.” Hannibal’s statuette, Will’s favorite. “And we were going after… something else. It was shaped like a man, but it wasn’t human. It was shadow, sharpness. Flesh and death. The stag was the same. Covered in raven feathers. They were exceptions among their kinds. Different, but the same. Unparalleled predators.”

“You were hunting me,” says Hannibal fondly, and Will draws his spouse lower so their lips meet.

Will’s tone isn’t entirely settled when he says, “it wasn’t just us,” but he bids Hannibal farewell without clarification.

“Opera?” Abigail says with some confusion when Hannibal tells her the evening’s plans. She even seems a little dismayed, much like Will suggested. “I’ve never been to the opera.”

“It is never too late to enjoy fine music and performance, Abigail.”

Abigail seems to appreciate the shimmering, midnight dress Hannibal has gotten her enough to be persuaded to join him, though not without a doubtful and distinctly familiar, “And Will likes the opera?”

“I did try to introduce him to its charms,” is all Hannibal says in concession.

Abigail observes the drawing that Hannibal started while he was waiting for the young woman to get dressed. His visit to the hospital had inspired the myth within him.

“That looks like me and Will,” she says with awe, though she doesn’t touch her reflection. “We don’t use bows, though.”

“Do you know the tale of Apollo and Artemis?”

Hannibal slips Abigail’s coat over her shoulders. She shakes her head, and Hannibal allows her to take the unfinished drawing to the car to observe while they drive to the venue.

“In Ancient Greek legends, they were twin gods. Both were deities of archery, wilderness, and wild beasts.”

“They were hunters,” says Abigail, examining her and Will’s painstaking likenesses. In the drawing, just as they do in life, Abigail and Will share an uncanny resemblance between their dark hair, light eyes, and fierce expressions. A deer, often associated with Artemis, is depicted winding around Abigail’s legs.

“Yes. They were as companionable as they were oppositional. Apollo was also the god of sun, while Artemis was the goddess of the moon. He represented truth and prophecy”— so much like Hannibal’s insightful spouse —“while she exemplified new beginnings in the planet’s cycles between waxing and waning, life and death.”

Before Hannibal and Abigail forfeit the car to a valet, he decides to add, “She later became associated with the protection of young women.”
Abigail’s scent becomes hot and cold, sharp and smooth. If Hannibal could sample the lunar phase in all its exquisite variations, he imagines this is what it would taste and smell like, right down to the astounding change in temperature. A perfect appetizer to a promising piece of music.

“I’m not sure if I fit that metaphor, then,” Abigail says calmly.

Hannibal offers his hand to Abigail, and she takes it, lifting herself from the car. He keeps her fingers in his elbow as they navigate the darkness to the museum. He has always found her hands particularly beautiful, and they are even more lovely in the moonlight. Abigail does not remove them, likely using her physical intimacy as another way to connect and to decode Hannibal’s messages through the supplemental signals of his body.

Hannibal is very happy to maintain the proximity of his intelligent company.

“Artemis was not without her contradictions, Abigail,” he says. “Mortals would pray to her for deliverance from illnesses that she herself bestowed onto them. She protected women in labor and also killed them during it.”

Abigail laughs, saying, “It sounds like she could have used a good psychiatrist. Did she have a messed up father?”

“Zeus was known as a less benevolent progenitor than others,” Hannibal says, “but it was her sister, Athena, whom he ate, not Artemis.”

“That’s good, at least,” says Abigail, still trying to decipher the significance of Hannibal’s allusions. “Even if she was conflicted, at least she was powerful. Women who hunt should be. Especially women who are also skilled with knives.”

“That she was,” Hannibal says, “and that they are.”

Abigail watches the opera-goers decked in finery with a trepidation and disdain very similar to a younger Will’s, so much that Hannibal is compelled to add, “Will was your age when I first took him to an outdoor opera in Florence.”

Abigail seems very surprised by that admission. She weighs it in her mind, and she decides to hold Hannibal’s arm more firmly as they enter the museum over the elegant, marble staircase. “At dinner with Agent Crawford, Will said you two met in Italy. You got together when he was eighteen?”

“Yes,” Hannibal answers with a wink. “I was twenty-six at the time.”

Abigail responds with a grin, delightfully scandalized. As they get seated, Abigail gathers the courage to ask more confidentially, or more daringly, given the earlier contents of their conversation, “you two have been together that long, and you didn’t want to raise a baby?”

“Neither of us had traditional family backgrounds. I lost my parents as a boy, and Will alone helped his father get by. We grew up very much by our own strengths. We did not believe we had the proper resources to nurture a very young child.”

Abigail stares at Hannibal, bewildered by the intimate turn the game has taken. “I didn’t know. You were an orphan, too.”

Hannibal takes Abigail’s hand, pressing it briefly. “We are both survivors, Abigail.”

Abigail presses his fingers back, gently.
And then the performance begins. Hannibal is glad he’s taken Abigail: the music is magnificent, a swell of virtuoso and emotion such that Hannibal loses himself entirely to the sensation. As he rises to his feet and gives a rousing applause at the end of the soprano’s delivery, Abigail rises with him, watching carefully and clapping along.

It isn’t long before Mrs. Komeda locates them and begins her investigation of the stranger at Hannibal’s side.

“This isn’t your usual date, Hannibal,” Mrs. Komeda says, “though she’s just as lovely as Will.”

Abigail smiles, remaining distantly polite and considering.

“I’m afraid Will has been taken by sudden illness. This is Abigail, mine and Will’s ward.”

Mrs. Komeda puckers her crimson lips in mischievous glee. “Well! I must say, she looks just like your daughter. The Graham eyes and Lecter etiquette. Maybe this charming creature is just the muse you need to throw one of your exquisite dinner parties.” Mrs. Komeda folds her arms under her chest. “You know. Like the ones you used to have.”


“It’s a dinner party, not a unicorn,” Mrs. Komeda complains.

“Oh, but the feast is life,” Hannibal answers. “You put the life in your belly and you live.”

Abigail is watching Hannibal closely, dissecting his words like she always does. Hannibal enjoys her intense, analytical transfixion, and he takes her hand into his elbow again, patting it securely as Abigail presses against his side. “I do have a new sous chef. Perhaps a feast will be coming your way soon, Mrs. Komeda.”

“Well, thank heavens for that,” Mrs. Komeda exclaims, and she places a firm hand on Abigail’s shoulder. “You are a gift sent from the gods, my dear.”

“Well and I feel the same.”

Abigail mimics Hannibal’s smile perfectly.

That is when Franklyn decides to make his inelegant entrance, subjecting Abigail to his voyeurism and awe. Hannibal is not surprised, having scented Franklyn’s particularly nervous odor a couple rows back.

What is unusual is the fellow by Franklyn’s side. Tobias Budge. He is calm, cold, and detached. The only interest he expresses in the party is in Hannibal, who of course comes off as the night’s supreme personage. Hannibal shakes the other man’s hand politely, knowing a predator when he sees one.

Judging by the way Abigail’s hand tightens ever so slightly in the crux of Hannibal’s elbow, she has sensed a hunter’s brutality in the other man, too.

Franklyn really needs to attend better to the lions in the room, though obviously he could never be a match for Abigail.

Franklyn does have the grace, however, to wait a full other appointment to dig deeper into Hannibal’s personal life.
After Hannibal strongly suggested that he not.

“I discovered we are cheese folk,” Franklyn says excitedly. “I saw you shopping for cheese. I didn’t say hello, because you were so uncomfortable the last time I did.”

Hannibal patiently replies, “The city is very small.”

“Yes. Jose’s. I gotta say, I was surprised when I saw you were alone. I expected to catch you with Mr. Graham or your daughter.” Franklyn says this in a rush of breath, eager to impress Hannibal with the nature of his personal violations.

“You overheard us at the opera,” Hannibal says, his tone not obviously scolding.

Franklyn has enough meager social intelligence to appear a little abashed. “I guess I should have put two and two together after seeing Mr. Graham at your office all this time. I thought he was your patient. He didn’t act like one, though.”

Franklyn is recalling Will’s blunt rebuffing of the other man’s attempts at friendship, which Franklyn had advertised then as “the perks of group therapy buddies”. Needless to say, Will was not convinced, and continued to outright ignore or smartly shirk off Franklyn in any unfortunate re-encounters.

“No, Will is not my patient,” says Hannibal.

“You and your husband have a beautiful daughter,” Franklyn tries to share obsequiously. And then he stammers, “I didn’t mean that in an inappropriate way or anything! I mean, in a totally friendly way, I think she’d be a beautiful person. I care deeply about friendship.”

Franklyn rambles on, trying to save his appearance as one who does not make uncouth comments about his psychiatrist’s family, “My friendships with other men are also very important to me. Tobias is my best friend. He’s not a cheese guy, though.”

Ah, yes. Tobias. “Do you desire Tobias sexually?”

“No, god no!” Franklyn cries, and then remembering himself, frantically backtracks, “not to be defensive or anything! I’m sure you and Mr. Graham are great together. He looks like he’d make a fantastic partner. I mean, I-I-I tried things, too, in the past— not that I’m looking at Mr. Graham that way!”

Franklyn is having a very difficult session, it seems. First he miscommunicates being physically attracted to Hannibal’s daughter, and then his husband.

“You care about Tobias deeply, despite your differences,” Hannibal says. “He’s your best friend, but you’re not his.”

Franklyn’s eyes are shining. “Well, it’s sad when you say it like that.”

“You often worry about being alone?”


“It can.”

It is the wisest thing to have ever come from Franklyn’s mouth. Thankfully, Hannibal has not felt the most devastating aches for companionship since some time. He had barely survived the power
of such undoing feelings twenty years back, nor the loving violence of their exceptional inspiration. Now, Will stirs within him the more settled, equally pleasurable, and still inexhaustible essences of met and unmet longing.

Abigail, too, has become a stronger source of need in Hannibal’s life than he predicted. Will might have foreseen it, though. He has a way of uncovering parts of Hannibal the doctor hoped to suppress.

Hannibal once had a young girl under his protection and tutelage, one he loved dearly and one whose impact on Hannibal’s life and feelings he could not negotiate.

Abigail will not be that.

But she offers something different for Hannibal.

“Or so, that’s what Doctor Du Maurier tells me,” Hannibal explains to Will. “She said that it’s nice when people see us. That it’s natural to want to see if Abigail is clever enough to scale my walls. Not just her hospital ones.”

Will has returned from the hospital on antibiotics and strictly ordered bed rest for the next couple of days.

“Bedelia, huh?” Will scowls, his voice low from exhaustion.

Though Bedelia puts on the appearance of Madonna-esque benevolence, Will has seen through her, reading what Hannibal already knows: instead of protecting vulnerability, Bedelia craves crushing it, often with her bare hands. It’s a primal rejection of weakness that is every bit as natural as the nurturing instinct, one Bedelia has already acted on. It puts her at odds with Will’s simultaneous defense of vulnerability and exploitation of it against those who would abuse girls like Abigail or strays like Will’s mutts.

Hannibal is fond of Bedelia, and also of pushing Will to see what he might do to Hannibal’s psychiatrist one day.

“She has been insightful in the past,” says Hannibal, because Bedelia does have an exceedingly good grasp of Hannibal’s nature, aside from Will, Chiyoh, and possibly Abigail now.

“Yeah, well, you two both know about tongues getting fatally detached,” Will says, referring to Bedelia’s murder of her patient and the tongue Hannibal had placed that one time as a bookmarker in a Bible. Will had his fun with that slight against the Almighty, too. “Which is more in character than the recent feat I heard you pulling.”

Hannibal thinks back on the last couple of days. “You mean my saving Mr. Silvestri’s last victim? I did work in the ER, Will.”

Will grins, picking at his pomegranate. “Is having a daughter inciting your healing instincts? I would have never guessed.”

Will pops a fleshy seed into Hannibal’s mouth. Hannibal’s tongue lingers around Will’s finger before he bites down on it, breaking the skin.

Will gently removes his finger from Hannibal’s mouth before placing it in his own, slowly sucking the blood with the juice of the fruit.

“Mrs. Komeda suggested we celebrate Abigail with a feast,” Hannibal says.
Will breaks open the hard husk of another segment of pomegranate. “Meaning, you want to run out and get supplies. We won’t be able to conceal it in the Silvestri butchers.”

Hannibal walks his fingers around Will’s body to the small of his back, drawing him close. “Who said anything about concealment, dear Will?”

“This is about Abel Gideon,” Will says, wrapping his arms around Hannibal’s shoulders.

“Frederick also deserves a little professional scolding for his ploys, don’t you think?” Hannibal knows that Will would be all too happy to get back at Frederick for violating a patient’s mind. As demonstrated by his strong feelings toward Bedelia, too, Will’s bloody wrath is particularly dedicated to keeping manipulative physicians in line. Hannibal was also kindly reminded of this.

Will presses his lips to Hannibal’s, coaxing the doctor’s mouth open, and Will’s tongue tastes tart with fruit and salty with blood. “It’s not wise to draw that sort of attention to ourselves right now.” Will’s not completely disagreeing.

Hannibal kisses Will harder, already beginning to walk him back toward the counter. “You think that once Jack is no longer distracted by others he will look in a surer direction?”

Will hops onto the counter, curling his legs around Hannibal. His fingers begin to open the buttons of Hannibal’s shirt, but his mouth doesn’t leave Hannibal’s, sucking and nipping. His caresses linger to admire the healing stab wound he’d given his spouse. “Jack won’t,” Will says, his scent even more aroused, “but Abigail is already pointed our way.”

Hannibal works his hands down the sides of Will’s waist and onto his thighs. He opens the front of Will’s jeans as Will licks Hannibal’s jaw. “You may be right. She has an unerring intuition for those with more violent appetites.”

Will has to capture his husband’s face to stop him when Hannibal bends low. “What do you mean?”

Hannibal decides merely to tease Will’s pleasure with hot breath while he answers. “At the opera. Franklyn was eager to greet us for the evening. As was Franklyn’s friend, Mr. Tobias Budge. A musician.” Hannibal has done some research. They do need new strings for their harpsichord, which Mr. Budge will surely be all too happy to supply. “He seemed most interested in me. Abigail was interested in him as well. She suspects Mr. Budge and I are somewhat kindred spirits.”


“Not in that way. In terms of Mr. Budge, I think you and I can share.” Hannibal hopes burying his face, all eager tongue and open mouth, between Will’s legs answers the rest of Will’s questions.

“Well, then,” Will gasps, tightening his fingers in Hannibal’s hair. He moans low and slow. Hannibal has missed this since Will’s hospitalization, and he tries to convey how much he relishes his husband’s return home. Will seems to have missed Hannibal just as deeply.

“Tobias Budge’s more theatrical side may need… encouragement… to show itself… someone to serenade to. He can be his own grand climax. A beautiful, terrible performance. And we need… dinner preparations. Careful ones, though. Not a lot. No party. Just the three of us… that’s enough. That’s all we need. Maybe Chilton, too. I know… how much… he enjoys your cooking.”
Hannibal groans, Will so delicious on his tongue and so desperately clutching Hannibal’s hair. “I am loathe to compare with Frederick. But, my dear, you must know how much I also like the way your mind works.”

“I don’t think that’s the only part you like, darlin’.”

Blood is still on Will’s lips.

His exquisite Apollo.

“Indeed. How can I… when there are so many delectable parts to choose from?”

XI. Abigail.

“So, what happened to college? You still taking a break?”

Abigail looks up from her laptop. “My dad happened to college. Or he happened to the girls at all the places I applied to.”

“Damn, that sucks.” Marissa’s tone isn’t convincing. Abigail can tell she’s half-listening, given that she’s also forgone her spoon to lick the remainder of her chocolate pudding straight out of its blood orange peel. “This is crazy good, by the way. You sure you’re not gonna have any?”

“It’s fine,” Abigail replies, even though the bitter cocoa and a hint of citrus smell really appetizing right now. “It’s for you. When I said you liked chocolate, Hannibal said he’d prepared just the thing. Something special. He always tailors his food to whoever’s eating.”

“Lucky me.” The sigh that leaves Marissa’s mouth as she finishes the dark, sticky, sweet substance is pretty indecent. “Wow. I’ve never had anything like that. You don’t know what you’re missing. I mean, I guess you can cook now, too.”

“Some things. Not fancy Italian desserts like that.” Sanguina-something…? Hannibal had said the name too fluently for Abigail to even discern the syllables. She’ll have to ask him for the recipe next time. She wonders what he mixed with the chocolate: it smells so much more decadent than regular pudding.

“I wish I could cook,” Marissa pouts. “Not like my mom would teach me. She’d probably scream my head off for making a mess out of her perfect kitchen. She’s such a bitch sometimes.” Marissa lifts a pale, sugar-coated pastry. “You know what this is?”

“A ladyfinger.”

Marissa gives her a look. “Really, Abigail?”

“That’s what it’s called,” Abigail says coldly.

“Hey, I just thought you were embracing cannibal jokes now. What? Too soon? Sorry.” Leaning back against the wall, Marissa chews and considers. “Look. I mean, you’re doing good, really good. I thought you were over your dad. Not that I’m sure anybody could get over what your dad did.”

“I don’t think about my dad,” says Abigail, which is true. Now, it finally feels like his lips aren’t always whispering into her ear, his teeth chattering so close to her skull.

“Good. Why are you still stuck in here, then?”
Good question.

It’s definitely not by Abigail’s choice.

It’s actually getting more and more unbearable to be trapped in the hospital, but not because her dad’s still haunting her or the other nightmarish ghouls continue to cry out for her blood. Thankfully, it feels like Abigail’s regained control over that part of her psyche. She’s pushed the woe and fury of her specters somewhere far, far away in her, in a place so distant and dark, they’re just stars, taking lightyears for their pain to reach her again.

What’s driving her crazy is that she finally feels free, liberated of her father and everything else, and she’s stuck in place. Her dad might have ruined her name forever, but Abigail doesn’t care what other people think all that much. Her father couldn’t take away her level-headedness, her cunning, her determination, or her skills in the hunt, and now she can fish and cook and somewhat appreciate opera on top of everything else. Hannibal was right about the blade thing—she feels more capable and sharp than ever. He must be a really good psychiatrist. Like a quality knife, Abigail’s training herself to survive whatever comes her way, even if it’s worse than her father—not that that’s likely.

If she has to stay anywhere while she’s stuck in limbo, she’d prefer the makeshift room she has at the Graham-Lecter abode. It smells warm and toasty like cider, and persistently dusty with animal dander, even though Abigail has helped Hannibal try to clean all traces of their pets with impressively strong chemicals and every type of appliance. Abigail keeps notes and books on a shelf Will built for her. There’s a manual on sailing she hasn’t been able to get through completely due to all the new terminology, but she thinks she can persuade Will to teach her that soon, too. She’d love to sail. It would give her the ability to go anywhere, when she’s not with Will and Hannibal. She keeps the lures she’s learning how to make with Will on her windowsill and the whetstones Hannibal gave her on a desk with cookbooks and her hunting gear.

She’s always carrying at least one of her knives on her person.

“They sold my parent’s house. Maybe I can get an apartment with the money. It doesn’t have to be permanent. I’ll apply to new schools, and then I’ll be on campus during the fall.” Abigail pauses, trying to give the appearance of open-mindedness and mild manners. “What do you think, Doctor Bloom?”

Based on Doctor Bloom’s expression, Abigail’s already got her answer. Doctor Bloom never gives away much, forever poised and kind, but her features will tighten by a muscle or two. Now, her lips are like something painted onto a doll.

“You're progress has been very impressive, Abigail,” Doctor Bloom concedes before saying, “but, you need to take your time to heal more fully in a safe, supportive environment. You’ll be dealing with a unique set of challenges once you leave the hospital.”

While being the known daughter of an even more well-known killer is one of them, Abigail suspects that’s not the only compromising factor.

“Is this because of Will and Hannibal?” Abigail asks. “Do you think I’d bother them? I’ll be self-sufficient. I won’t be their burden.”

“Nobody’s saying you’re a burden, Abigail,” Doctor Bloom protests.

Abigail looks neutral, even if her feelings are a bit rockier. “But you would recommend against me living with them, if that's what I wanted.”
“Just not right now,” Doctor Bloom explains gently. “Given your relationship with your father, it wasn’t unlikely that you’d become suspicious and resistant to developing deep bonds with other potential father figures.”

“But…” Abigail reads, “it also wasn’t unlikely that I’d form attachments too quickly and not with the right people.”

“I have no reservations about Will and Hannibal. They’re good people.” Doctor Bloom speaks resolutely. Abigail’s not so sure if she’s as confident about that last point, personally. “They’d be good for you.”

“They are good for me,” Abigail agrees, and Doctor Bloom smiles softly.

“I just think you’re still in a delicate position,” Doctor Bloom says. “You might raise your expectations too high for any new father figures, and then you’ll be disappointed when they can’t meet them. It’ll be even harder to regain your ability to trust a third time around. Your relationship with your father was very extreme. Knowing who he was now, you might look back on your memories and feel intensely afraid, but also intensely protected and valued. You know your father was capable of great violence, against yourself and others, but you still might be looking for a love like his in other parental figures.”

“I don’t think Will and Hannibal will be like my dad,” Abigail argues.

Doctor Bloom purses her lips a little more. “You told me you go hunting with Will.”

Abigail suspects that Doctor Bloom also reprimanded Will for that, too.

“It’s different than hunting with my dad.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. We go fishing, too. I never did that with my dad. When Will and I hunt, sometimes we take the dogs with us. I never had dogs before.”

“Will does love his dogs,” Doctor Bloom chuckles, though Abigail suspects this personal allowance is to soothe her patient.

Abigail decides she’ll capitalize on her fondness for the two men, though. “Hannibal’s teaching me how to cook, too. He says maybe we’ll throw a party sometime, and I can help feed everybody. I heard their dinner parties are great.” Abigail goes for envious and innocent curiosity. “Have you been to one?”

“Once or twice,” says Doctor Bloom, but she seems eager to return to her patient’s experiences, not her own. “Is that important to you? Sharing a meal with Will and Hannibal?”

“It seems like a good way to overwrite what my father secretly fed me at our dinner table,” Abigail says curtly.

This macabre invocation seems to do the trick of disquieting Doctor Bloom, but it also works against Abigail, too.

“You say you’re not projecting your previous relationship with your father onto Hannibal and Will. But, you also cannot use them to try and chase your memories away. Again, it’s too much to expect them to do alone. You must work at mediating those memories and feelings yourself.”
Abigail curses her clumsiness: usually she’s better at playing Doctor Bloom than this, especially with Hannibal’s guidance. Being trapped in the hospital is driving her insane, though.

“I want to do things for myself. Being with Will and Hannibal isn’t about running away or hiding from my dad or myself. I’m not. I can be myself with them.” *Not like she was with her dad.* Abigail might have been comfortable enough in her old life. She was used to its patterns of punishment and pleasure. It was her reality, the only one she’d ever known. But, somewhere in the back of her mind, she was vigilant, conscious of the way her dad wanted her: compliant and loving. His darling. Abigail learned to hunt from his perspective, so as frightening as her father might have been, she had an inkling of just how much to reveal of herself to remain wanted, like the hopeful glimpses of a doe in the thicket; but, she also camouflaged herself and pulled far enough back to evade her avid, hungry hunter, at least until the end of their terrifying sport.

Sometimes, she fooled him, and sometimes, she fooled herself, too. She was either completely in control or completely out of it. How many times was she so close to death, and didn’t even see it?

As many games as she plays with Will and Hannibal, as many acts as she puts up in front of them, Abigail is reassured and anxious that they’ll always see some true part of her (she hopes it’s the right true parts). It’s not that they’re smarter than her dad, per say. They’re just so different from him. They’re intuitive, aware. Both of them know human nature too well. But, they appreciate the person they’ve learned Abigail is, with her calculated charm, abrasiveness, distance and closeness.

They won’t devour her out of some impotent need or heartbroken spite.

She hopes.

And Abigail thinks she sees some true part of them, too. Even if they don’t show her all of it.

“I want the money from my parent’s house to do something for myself, too,” Abigail insists. “If I can’t get myself set up in a new place right away, I can at least put some of it toward my college funds. I can start preparing for my future. *Independently.*” Even while Abigail’s caged.

Doctor Bloom looks sad and dismayed by that, which doesn’t make sense to Abigail.

She’s hiding something. What isn’t Doctor Bloom telling her?

When their session is over, Doctor Bloom hesitates before asking, “Has a woman been here trying to bother you, Abigail?”

“What kind of woman?”

Doctor Bloom is unwilling to share too much of her knowledge, but she’s forced to elaborate: “red hair, very persistent.”

Abigail immediately knows who Doctor Bloom is talking about: Freddie Lounds. She hasn’t seen her since that first time.

Doctor Bloom must have run into her on the way in and scared her off.

“I don’t think I’ve met somebody like that,” Abigail lies.

That’s one way to get information.

Abigail still has her card, so it’s not difficult to reach the reporter with some lie about needing to
talk to someone about the horrible things her father did. Abigail has been researching Freddie, especially as she’s looked into the Chesapeake Ripper’s kills on TattleCrime.com. They were fascinating and terrifying on an unprecedented, grand scale, even alleviating some of Abigail’s worries. Her father’s crimes couldn’t compare to these, even if Abigail still knows that the Chesapeake Ripper cannibalizes his victims, too, despite what everyone else may say. Maybe she can offer that insight to Freddie, if she needs to. She doesn’t want to give everything away, though.

“It’s great hearing from you, Abigail. I was expecting your call,” says Freddie when she arrives. She’s just how Doctor Bloom described her: shockingly red-headed and persistent. “Do you feel like finally getting your story out there?”

“Do you really think what I say will change how people think of me?” Abigail scoffs. “I’m a monster’s daughter. I’ll be lucky if I even get a little money from my parent’s place. I can’t imagine who would buy it.”

“Yes. Murder houses don’t fetch big money in today’s real estate market.”

“The people who go on your website might eat it up, though,” Abigail adds charmingly.

Freddie enjoys that. “Even if they did shell out major cash for it, you wouldn’t see any of it.”

What?

“What do you mean?” asks Abigail.

Freddie looks mildly shocked and outraged. Abigail can’t tell how much of it is manufactured. “The FBI didn’t tell you? The families of your father’s victims filed wrongful death suits. That means they get everything, Abigail. Every penny.”

Doctor Bloom did not tell Abigail this. Probably because she thought it would set back her progress.

Damn.

Abigail’s thinking. “Let them take all of his money. I don’t want any of it.”

“You can make your own money, Abigail,” Freddie leads.

Abigail sees where she’s going. “How much would I get if you wrote a book about me? About my dad?”

“Plenty,” says Freddie. “Money aside, you need to tell your own story. Perception is everything. Get your truth out there. I’m just the one to help you tell it.”

Abigail hears a caveat in her voice. “But you have some suggestions. What? Especially grisly details about my dad’s kills? Weeping confessions of remorse, me saying I wish I’d died instead to amp up people’s sympathies? Will that raise my sales?”

Freddie seems surprised by Abigail’s response. “It might,” she replies in brutally honest kind. “I was thinking more about including your thoughts on your father’s murder by Will Graham.”

Oh.

Abigail becomes more guarded at that.
“I’m not talking about Will.”

“I hear he visits you here often,” Freddie offers. She’s no doubt bribed some of the staff. “Is he trying to lessen his guilt? Seek penance from his victim’s surviving kin?”

“I’m not talking about Will.”

Freddie generously imparts more of her covert information. “I hear Will Graham and his husband have even gone as far as becoming your guardians.”

Abigail clears her face of emotion. “That’s just for legal purposes.”

“They take you out of the hospital a lot. You’re close to them.” Freddie appears concerned, nurturing. “Do you really think that’s wise? People might look at you the wrong way, getting friendly with your father’s murderer, even if your dad was a monster. They’ll call you colder and more heartless than they do already. It’s another strike against your character.”

“Which is why I should vilify Will in my book. Make myself the victim. Say I hate him for killing my dad,” Abigail says.

“You would only be sharing the truth. Otherwise, people will think you’ve traded one criminal father for another. It’s not a good track record.”

“Will isn’t a killer,” Abigail argues, even though it’s not strictly true. He did shoot her father to death. “Do you have any proof?”

“Besides what Will Graham’s done to your father and others like him? No.” Well, that’s a relief. Abigail’s not sure why yet, though. Is it because Will’s not a killer or because Freddie doesn’t have enough evidence to implicate him?

“But I know these things, Abigail,” Freddie insists, impassioned. “I write about people like Will Graham for a living. I can see who they are, even when others can’t. That’s why I’m trying to protect you.”

Going for the heartstrings tactic? Abigail can pull uncomfortably on other people’s feelings, too. “If this is how you investigate, I doubt you’re a good enough writer to actually convince people to buy my story.”

Freddie only smiles with cold politeness, apparently used to fending off criticism of her work and approaches. “You might change your mind soon. I have a feeling you could use a little windfall coming your way. You’re a smart girl. Consider it.”

When Freddie finally leaves, Abigail presses her face into her pillow, thinking hard and controlling her breathing. Well, she got answers, alright, and she’s back to square one— her father has taken everything away from her, leaving Abigail with no future. She’s in the black abyss of his belly again, and she didn’t even feel the sting of his teeth.

Even in death, her father continues to undo her.

He’d be so happy knowing Abigail has no life without him.

Abigail wishes she could kill him.

Not like Will, though. Not with a gun.
She wants to be the one who slit his throat.

If the FBI knew about what happened to her parent’s house, did that mean Will knew, too, and he’d kept it from her? That doesn’t seem like him. If he did know and he lied to Abigail, then Will’s just as bad as her father, trying to contain her out of some sick, twisted sense of love.

Abigail couldn’t take that.

She can’t take it.

Abigail scales the hospital walls and finds herself at the Graham-Lecter door. She knocks, turning Freddie’s card in her hands as she waits. She still didn’t rip it up, even though she was sorely tempted.

“Abigail.”

Will is looking at her for a moment like he doesn’t recognize her.

She’s taken aback.

“Sorry. I... I didn’t know where else to go,” Abigail explains.

Will’s eyes dart back inside, and then he opens the door.

“C’mon,” he says, calmed. “You’re gonna catch your death out there.”

Before they go further into the house, Will shouts, “Hannibal!”

Slowly, Hannibal replies, “yes, Will?”

“Abigail’s dropped by.”

Abigail hears something close— a window, maybe? — and then Hannibal’s voice responds, “she’s just in time for dinner.”

Abigail finds Hannibal seated at one side of the dining table, watching Abigail carefully and sipping his wine. Will’s barely touched his food.

There’s an extra plate, also almost completely uneaten, at the head of the table.

They couldn’t have been expecting her. There’s half-drunk wine with the third table setting.

“Did I interrupt something?” Abigail asks.

“Not at all,” Hannibal says as Will removes the other plate and glass and transports them to the kitchen. “Our guest just left.”

Hannibal removes the chair, inviting Abigail to sit.

“He hardly ate anything,” Abigail responds, curious. She knows Hannibal doesn’t like wasted food. Everybody finishes what he puts on their plates because it’s been prepared with the utmost care and precision.

“An urgent call of sorts. He had to leave suddenly.”

Hannibal smiles more broadly. “I am not too sorry to see him go. Intriguing though he was, Will and I much prefer your company.”

Will brings Abigail a plate of food. There’s crab meat, mussels, and sausage mixed with saffron rice, and on Hannibal’s plate she can see the shell of the gutted crustacean, pincers raised as if mid-combat, even in death.

“Crab stuffed with sausage pilau,” says Hannibal. “Otherwise known as paella on the rocks.”

Abigail considers the salted baby squid sitting in empty mollusk shells. They look like they’re being gobbled up.

“What’s wrong?” Will asks, straight to the point. “You said you didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“And I don’t. They sold my parent’s house, but apparently all the money is going to the family members of my dad’s victims. Doctor Bloom wouldn’t tell me, but she knew.” Abigail turns to Will. “Did you know, too?”

Will frowns and sighs. “No. Jack’s not really forthcoming with me anymore when it comes to your case.”

Abigail’s relieved, but also concerned that Agent Crawford is hiding things about her from Will. Did he find out something about her father’s murders and doesn’t want Will to interfere? She’s too afraid to ask. Will doesn’t know either about her involvement in her father’s crimes, even if he suspects. She’s never told him; she doesn’t think she can ever tell him. Especially now.

Everything’s too uncertain.

“Freddie Lounds knew,” Abigail says.

Will grimaces and makes his distaste for the journalist even more evident with his icy tones. “Freddie’s got a way of pulling information out of thin air. Almost as if she just made it up.”

“So you think she’s lying.”

“No,” says Will. “But she wouldn’t have volunteered that precious nugget out of the goodness of her heart. She’s using it as leverage. What did she ask from you in return?”

“She wants to write a book.” Abigail steadies herself, keeping her fingers from violently clutching her fork. “About my dad and me. And you.”

Will gulps down his wine. “Figures.”

“She wants me,” Abigail starts, “to tell the truth. The truth about you, too.”

“And what truth is that?”

That you’re a killer.

Abigail decides not to say it. “She knows that you’re both my guardians. That we spend time together. She says if it gets out, it won’t look good for me.”

“Then, we ought to have Miss Lounds for dinner at some point. Set the picture straight for her.”

Hannibal carefully outlines his meal plans: “a salad of dark greens and root chips to promote Miss Lounds’ continued good health. And roasted tenderloin. Bloody, I think.”
“Sounds delicious,” says Abigail.

“I’m sure our guest would appreciate the meal even more if you helped me prepare it, Abigail.”

Hannibal lifts a piece of spiced sausage to his mouth. The browned meat oozes luscious fat, soaking the rice. He chews thoroughly, savoring and swallowing completely before he explains, “Like many, Miss Lounds has a fascination with Will’s mind. She cannot understand how Will thinks, so she fears him and tries to get others to fear him as well. If she succeeds, it’s because the average person is already eager to believe the worst in others, so the most flattering light is shone on their own behaviors.”

Abigail knows that. She’s been experiencing no shortage of people writing her name on the wall and hurling stones her direction so they can prove to everyone that they condemned the monster’s daughter. Not that they would have done better. Or survived as long.

“Freddie peddles in sensationalism and click-baiting, not quality journalism,” Will growls, “which is what she’ll do with you, too, Abigail. You don’t need our permission, or our approval. But if you open this door, you won’t be able to control what comes through.”

Abigail laughs hollowly. “It sounds like I’m just losing control over everything.”

“Not quite,” Hannibal argues. “You always have a place with us here, Abigail. You are also very clever, so you’ll have no trouble pursuing a higher level in your education when the time is right.”

“Doctor Bloom says I need to discover myself more before I can live with you.”

“Why not discover yourself here?” Hannibal asks. “I’d like to think of our home as a learning environment for you, as well as a place of comfort.”

“So you’re saying I shouldn’t follow my psychiatrist’s advice,” Abigail tests.

“A fruitful relationship with one’s psychiatrist isn’t necessarily a passive one. You must take an active role in your own treatment. Therapists often learn the most about themselves through shared experiences with their patients.”

Abigail nearly jumps out of her seat when Will barks with laughter.

“Yeah,” Will says with a devilish grin. “I’m sure in treating you, Bedelia’s learned a whole lot about herself.”

Hannibal ignores Will. “I think you could use something sweet,” the doctor says, placing a hand on Abigail’s shoulder before he rises to get dessert.

Abigail hesitates. “You and Will have some. I don’t have much of an appetite.”

“A drink, then. To help settle your mind before you go to sleep.”

Hannibal leaves, and Will draws Abigail’s hand from her fork, brushing his thumb along the back of her knuckles.

“You don’t have to stay forever,” says Will. “But you’ve got somewhere to go back to, if you need it. Think about this place as... your boat on the sea. When you’re in the dark, this place’ll be floating beside you.”

The stress must have been getting to her worse than she thought. When Abigail wakes up the next
day, it’s late in the afternoon. Ellie is dozing at her feet, no doubt lulling Abigail into deeper somnolence. At least she was able to get peaceful, dreamless sleep for once. She wishes Will or Hannibal had woken her up, though. If Doctor Bloom hears that she’s escaped again, it’s only going to get harder to gain her trust and Abigail’s independence.

Max and Zoe greet Abigail as she meanders around the house. Will and Hannibal must be at work.

Abigail lounges around on her laptop. She’s finding it hard not to scroll through TattleCrime.com. She’s impressed and disgusted by Freddie’s writing. No wonder she has so many followers. Abigail can already envision the contents of a book, one she decides, though, not Freddie. Abigail forces herself away from the website, searching the Graham-Lecter library. She skims a psychiatric tome, trying to parse out relevant information for her situation, but this dry, formulaic text isn’t as insightful or creative as Hannibal.

She’ll just ask him what to do about Doctor Bloom. He’ll know. He should only have one more patient.

Winston is parked resolutely at the door, and he resists Abigail’s attempts to move past him. “It’s okay, Winston,” Abigail insists, stroking his head and knocking him playfully with her knees. He’s a good guard dog, keeping careful watch over the house when his masters are away. “I’ll be back soon.”

Abigail finds Hannibal’s Bentley parked outside his building. There’s one other car. Hannibal’s regular appointments should have been over by now, but he’ll wrap it up soon. Hannibal is very timely. Abigail can wait.

She enters the reception area, empty as usual, and—

Something’s... off.

Abigail doesn’t know what it is. She can hear quiet, calm talking coming from the office even if she can’t make out the contents of the conversation. It sounds like it always does outside Doctor Lecter’s sturdy door. So what’s this strange feeling?

Walking closer to the office, Abigail sees something glint on the hardwood floors.

She’s completely frozen.

Blood.

It’s blood.

There isn’t much. Only a dozen small, scarlet droplets form a broken trail over to Hannibal’s door.

Then she hears a cry, followed by a crash. It’s muffled, like a body meeting the ground.

And there’s much more crashing and slashing.

It’s hard to distinguish what’s happening in the office from the fierce pounding in Abigail’s ears. It’s like fireworks. Everything’s sharp and dull at the same time. Booming and blooming. So close and so far away.

Abigail… can’t hear her own breathing, only the rhythms of things rupturing.
Abigail’s throat is tight like the skin on a drum. If she swallows, it might burst open, right from the delicate bit of skin her father carved into her.

She can’t blink. She can’t speak.

Somehow, her hand is already ducking into her purse, covertly clutching the handle of her knife.

She doesn’t know what’s going on, she doesn’t know, but Abigail can hear raised voices. There’s shouting, cries raised at unfamiliar pitches and physical extremes, but some of them have to be Hannibal’s, though Abigail’s never heard him sound like this before. He’s not low or careful. No. He’s rough and ferocious. He sounds more beast than human.

Abigail doesn’t know… what’s happening. There’s a sharp whooshing in the air. It’s like a tornado is tearing up the office behind the closed door. There’s the thudding of flesh meeting blow by blow, the sharp shattering of wood, the heavy clatter of books no doubt hurtling from the shelves—

The door creeps open just a crack and the noise explodes. Abigail’s deaf from the violent eruption. She can only see.

See—

The man crawling out on his belly into the waiting room.

Abigail’s pulls out her knife and holds it behind her back.

The cacophony of violent conflict buffets her on one side, and on the other, she’s wholly attuned to the sluggish, wet sounds of the man dragging himself toward her. She can’t look away. She mustn’t overlook anything.

“Please,” the man wheezes, lifting his face. Abigail recognizes him— it’s the man at the opera. Hannibal’s patient. “Oh, thank god! Help, help, please. Please! H-he… he tried to kill me!”

Abigail swallows hard, and her voice is quiet, but it’s also surprisingly even. “Who?”

The man looks like he’s going to cry, and Abigail doesn’t know if it’s from physical or emotional pain. When he rolls feebly onto his side, she can see that he’s bleeding from a stomach wound. It looks like a whip lashed through him, but longer, sharper, more steely and fatal than rope.

“Tobias!” the man wheezes. “He’s… been killing them…”

Abigail slowly advances toward the man, and he laboriously inches toward her, clawing the ground with his stubby fingers, smearing the floor with blood. Hannibal would hate the mess. Abigail comes toward him quicker so he can’t spill any more blood on Hannibal’s spotless floors.

“Tobias said… he killed someone…” The man coughs. “The cops were looking for him! Please… please, you need to call somebody, right away! Police, anybody! Tell them there’s a murderer here.”

Abigail is hovering over the man now, and he flops onto his back, winded. With wide eyes, he feels his gash and then raises his palm, shaking violently, over his face. It’s coated with blood. “Oh god, oh god, oh god....” the man whimpers, “a-am I going to die?”

Abigail doesn’t know. The stripe of blood stretches wide across the man’s girth, but it’s shallower
than a knife wound. The blood blossoms into the man’s jacket, absorbed somewhat by his thick tweed. He could die.

But he might not.

The man sobs, gritting his teeth, screwing his eyes shut. Tears race down into his beard. “I tried to stop him, help him! He wouldn’t let me!” His face is scrunched up in terrible anguish. “He’s a psychopath! I should have listened…! D-Doctor Lecter said that I’m attracted to psychopaths—!”

Then, by degrees, the man’s features begin to clear. His eyes gradually lift open. He’s fixated on his crimson palm, blinking hard, sniffing, panting, his face pale and moist with tears and sweat. He looks as dumb and wet as a newborn child.

The man’s voice comes unbearably slow. Abigail hears it like the final sand in an hourglass pushing through a punishingly small opening. His words are just as choked and in vain, trying to extend time when it’s always contracting, always moving closer toward the end.

“W-when Tobias tried to t-to kill me… Doctor Lecter said… ‘I wanted to do that… for so long.’”

The man is breathing harder now, his chest violently rising and falling; he’s hyperventilating, Abigail thinks. His pulsing throat is the gleaming underside of a fish waiting for the sweet, cruel release of the cleaver as it flops on the chopping board.

“A-and Tobias said… Tobias said, ‘I told you I would.’”

There’s a loud, terrible crack and squelch, and a howl of pain echoes from the office.

It doesn’t sound like Hannibal.

It’s not Hannibal who’s hurt.

Why isn’t that surprising to Abigail?

“Tobias,” Franklyn gasps in recognition, peering through the crack in the door. His slowly comprehending gaze slides away, settling back on his drenched fingers, saying, almost like he’s in a trance, in a session, “T-Tobias…wanted me to pass his message… onto Doctor Lecter… that he wanted to… cut someone’s throat and play it like a violin…! He wanted me… to tell Doctor Lecter.”

There is what sounds like a sickeningly final crash—the end of all noises—but Abigail barely hears it.

She can only hear the soft, liquid click of the man’s eyelids as he blinks into knowing. “Doctor Lecter wanted to kill me. Like Tobias. He’s a killer. Like Tobias.”

“No…”

The man’s voice is high and breaking with sheer panic. “He is, he is! Oh my god, he is! They both are! Both of them, together!” The man is crying softly and then wailing at the top of his lungs into his weakly balled fists. “I-I-I h-have to call somebody, I have to tell somebody—”

“No.”

“Don’t you understand?” he cries angrily. “There’s two killers in there, in that room! Doctor Lecter’s office! We gotta stop them! Or they’re going to kill us!”
The man is staring up at Abigail’s face now.

“I… know you. You’re… Doctor Lecter’s daughter—”

The man is suddenly hurling himself away, flinging his weary, leaking, frantic body as far as he can. He grunts with high pain and high anxiety. His eyes are round and glossy with shed and unshed tears, and he frantically whips his head, side to side, front and back. He’s like a man treading water no matter how high he lifts his sinking chin.

A ceaseless string of paranoid no’s and oh god’s leaves his wet, trembling lips. “I’m surrounded by killers! I’m surrounded by psychopaths.”

Abigail is moving forward, and the man is scrabbling backwards. “He’s not a killer.” I’m not a killer.

The man shakes his head desperately. Spittle flies into the air as he breaks into hysterical laughter. “Yes, oh yes, Doctor Lecter’s a killer, Tobias is a killer, everybody’s a killer! Y-you’re probably his accomplice! You help him!”

The man suddenly leaps at her, throwing Abigail off-balance. He’s heavy, too large and too sweaty on top of Abigail. At first Abigail thinks he’s trying to tear her apart with his bare hands, but he’s digging at her coat, looking for something, maybe a weapon, maybe a phone. Abigail struggles, her arms pinned behind her. She tries to dislodge the man, kicking her legs, and the man’s focus abruptly shifts. He falls on top of her with his crushing palms, holding her down, not sure where to grab. Then, his thick hands land around her neck. His weight and frantic energy and fear and betrayal are all coming down, hurrying onto Abigail, she can’t breathe, and Abigail doesn’t know if he’s trying to contain her or get her phone or strangle her—

His eyes turn huge and white.

Abigail doesn’t know what he sees.

And then she knows. She sees.

But she only sees the handle. The rest of her knife is buried deep in the wound on the man’s belly. She’d even forgotten she was carrying it.

A part of her did.

She must have… pushed him off. Because, suddenly, the man is falling onto his back again, gurgling. His soft hands collapse onto his spurting wound. Blood bubbles down his cheek. His eyes are vacantly fixed on the ceiling, his body trembling so hard, so soft, and then.

And then he slows. His body becomes still, stiller.

The only thing that moves then is the blood soaking his jacket.

Abigail knows what death looks like. She knows. She’s seen it enough. She’s held a hunted body through its death throes often. The final, peaceful stillness is now as it was then, and the trickle of blood sounds like a currents in a stream.

He’s dead. This man is dead.

And Abigail.
She’s alive. Alive. Alive.

Because, she.

She... she—

“Abigail?”

Abigail shudders violently, like a glitching toy, and she jerks her face toward the study.

Hannibal is standing in the doorway.

Abigail can glimpse a fraction of the wreckage in his office. Chairs are shattered, upturned. Books have been torn open.

A body lies on the floor.

Just like in the waiting room.

No, not just like.

Abigail killed this one.

“Abigail.”

Hannibal is breathing a little hard, but otherwise he is exactly as Abigail knows him. His voice is calm and controlled, even soothing, and his face is blank. Is he in pain, Abigail wonders? He’s got a cut lip and other superficial wounds. His hair is wild, and his clothes are disheveled. A spot on his thigh is damp and dark with blood, but he ignores it completely, standing straight and tall.

Maybe, Hannibal can’t feel pain.

Can Abigail?

“Hannibal.” Abigail is limp and weak on the floor. She realizes she’s still holding the knife. The man is dead by her knees. His eyes are open, but he does not see. Abigail’s blade is dark and shining with his blood. “I-I...”

“Now, what’s happened to Mr. Froideveaux?” Hannibal’s tone is light, conversational. It’s like he’s caught Abigail sneaking into his office on any regular work day.

“H-he... he came at me.”

“Did he try to hurt you?” Hannibal politely asks. “Franklyn was never good at understanding personal boundaries.” His voice has a gently chiding quality to it, as if he is mildly irked by his patient’s inappropriate behavior.

“Yes. No. I-I don’t...” Abigail is holding the knife, looking at it drip blood back on the other’s body. “I don’t know.”

“Really?” Hannibal says, intrigued. He’s not bothered at all. If anything, he looks pleasantly surprised. “Well. As you have seen, Franklyn suffered many neuroses. His intense intrapersonal conflict and subsequent habit of sending contradictory signals was another of them.”

“He’s dead.”
“Yes. You’ve killed him.”

Abigail is barely breathing. “I didn’t…! He could have hurt me, he was trying to—I don’t know. I didn’t mean to!”

“Didn’t you?”

Hannibal is walking forward, and Abigail jolts. Shushing her, Hannibal bends at his waist over the body.

“You gutted him, Abigail. This isn’t self-defense. You butchered him.”

“I didn’t.”

“You stabbed him where Mr. Budge had already wounded Franklyn. How very clever.”

“I didn’t mean to…!” Abigail tugs at her hair, and then she violently pulls her hands away, feeling the sticky, warm blood on them.

And, then, she looks at Hannibal. Hannibal looks back at her.

“He said you were a killer.”

“I was compelled to kill Mr. Budge in self-defense.”

“The man I… he said you tried to kill him.”

“I made no such action.”

Abigail reads Hannibal’s words as carefully as she’s always read them. She knows he will not lie to her—he will simply embellish the truth, have it wrapped with an opaque candy-coating. “You wanted to, though.”

“Occasionally.”

Abigail stares. “Why?”

Hannibal sighs. “He was a very troublesome patient and an equally irritating man. He even refused my referral to other psychiatrists. It was very difficult to get rid of him.” Hannibal glances at the body, almost with… pride. “Though you seem to have been very competent at that.”

“You’re glad he’s dead,” says Abigail.

“A good psychiatrist does not attempt to steer the outcomes of their patient’s treatments. I also enjoy stories with unconventional endings.”

In other words, yes.

“You’re glad even though you didn’t get to kill him yourself.”

“Yes.”

“… You’re glad I killed him.”

Hannibal smiles fondly at Abigail and her knife. “You did not waste my gift, dear Abigail.”

“I killed him. I-I killed someone…!”
“You did. Are you glad you did it?”

Abigail laughs at that—she shouldn’t be laughing.

She must be saying so, or Hannibal’s reading her mind, because he says in his perfect psychiatrist’s voice, “An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior.”

“Normal behavior?” Abigail huffs. “This…this isn’t normal, none of this is normal! I killed a man…b-because he could have hurt me, he wanted to call the police. He could have told them I was a killer, that you’re a killer…!”

Hannibal tilts his head, his hands folded behind his back as he ignores the body lying mouth agape and belly-up at his feet. It’s as unremarkable as office décor to him.

“You killed him to protect yourself. He was a danger to you.”

“…Y-yes.”

He stares. “You killed him to protect me. He was a danger to me.”

Abigail catches her breath. Her hands are loose at her side. Then, slowly, slowly, she nods her head. She stares back. “…yes.”

Hannibal appears to consider that. Then, bending low, he extends his hand to Abigail.

Abigail looks at it, blinking. She doesn’t…she begins to raise one hand, to place the handle of her knife in Hannibal’s palm, like she’ll do when they’re cooking, when Abigail’s done cutting and it’s Hannibal’s turn. Hannibal softly shakes his head. She switches her knife to her other hand. With her free fingers, Abigail grabs Hannibal’s, and he lifts her to her feet. Then, he carefully wraps his arms around her, petting Abigail’s hair as the side of her face presses against his warm chest.

Abigail doesn’t think she’s crying. Her breath is slow, quiet, and too calm. She can see all too well. But, then, she feels the blossoming wetness of her tears on Hannibal’s shirt, and she clutches his back, trembling, with her knife still in her hand. Abigail buries her face against Hannibal, not sure if she’s even weeping or falling asleep.

Hannibal holds her and strokes her dark hair.

Chapter End Notes

So, like in the NBC show, Abigail still kills in this universe, though her first victim isn’t Nicholas Boyle, it’s Franklyn Froideveaux. While Hannibal’s perspective in this fic isn’t particularly flattering toward his patient, I actually enjoy how different Franklyn is from everyone else in the show. Alas, he still had to die. Like Nicholas Boyle, he is an "innocent", therefor creating some conflict in Abigail over her murdering him.

For those with sharp eyes, the dessert Marissa’s eating? That’s Sanguinaccio Dolce, the blood pudding that Hannibal served Frederick Chilton, which he described being made out of cow’s blood, though "only in the derogatory sense." So, Marissa still receives Hannibal’s admonishments for her rudeness, in some form.
Hannibal's not exactly father of the year, nor husband of the year with his encephalitis
tactics. That's kind of to be expected, though.

Thank you for reading and sharing your thoughts. Until next time, as this fic moves
toward its conclusion!
Chapter Notes

We have now arrived at part four of Speak No Evil and the Murder Family.

This chapter is a little different from the others. It includes Will and Hannibal's perspectives, but because Abigail's section got so long, it'll be included next time.

We'll see Will and Hannibal's ruminations on their own complicated relationship, how they've changed over the years, Abigail's identity, and her struggles. Also, Will and Hannibal's very different parenting modes.

Thank you for reading and sharing your thoughts!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Speak No Evil (Part IV)

XII. Will.

There are so many bodies in the lab, dead and living. Bits of the corpses that were crumpled like wads of tissue paper and reassembled to create a massive, Inferno-esque totem pole have been deconstructed on shining metal tables. Lab technicians buzz around them. Every time they poke at the thawing, rotten flesh, it breaks down that much more.

Will doesn't think he's seen this high a body count at one time and place, which is an impressive feat, considering his and Hannibal's repertoires. He decides to focus on the novelty of that at the moment. How had Price and Zeller described it? Oh yeah. The corners and maddening middle pieces in a human jigsaw puzzle.

Will much prefers dealing with this puzzle than the other one he's gotten himself into.

That puzzle's left him drained of his physical and mental stores. Abigail's, too. He's taken to staying up even later in the study, because when the inevitable sound of gasping breath and rustling sheets comes, he can slip by the crack in Abigail's door and check on her. While she's still possessed by the violent throes of her nightmares, she pants, partially bent over her mattress, her dark hair a torn curtain over her face. Ellie will be resting by Abigail's feet, and Winston's become a regular fixture at the end of her bed.

Even when the bedroom is charged with the terrible atmosphere of her dreams, Abigail never cries out or breaks down; instead, she sits, thinking, maybe dissociating, as she watches the dark trees reaching out with impotent, black fingers beyond her window.

Beverly, on the other hand, appears to have no dissociative instincts whatsoever. Quite the opposite. Hannibal did tell Will he admired her acumen before. Her light-hearted and devil-may-care attitude notwithstanding, she also has the sensitivity to catch Will sans Price, Zeller and a million other buzzing forensics personnel.

“So,” she says while they enjoy the diminished odors of a less morbidly populated end of the lab. “You okay?”
Will raises his eyebrow. “Are any of us possibly okay doing what we do?”

Beverly leans against a gurney, returning Will’s look with her own arched gaze. “Human totem pole aside, I was actually going more for the ‘my husband was almost brutally murdered by a guy who plays people’s vocal chords like a cello’ angle. That’s not an everyday occurrence, even in our line of work.”

*You’d be surprised.*

“Hannibal’s fine.” Will doesn’t scoff, because even though Beverly has a dark sense of humor that nearly rivals Will’s, he doesn’t think even she would let that go down without real concern. Hannibal isn’t who Will is worried about. Or, if Will’s worried about his husband, it’s for an entirely different set of reasons. “He’s a survivor, always has been.”

“I saw that,” says Beverly, smirking. “Good for him, and you, too. Not so good for the Maestro.”

Beverly is really intelligent. Will would prefer that something didn’t happen to her, though.

The agent is a little more halting but no less acute with her next line of inquiry: “What about Abigail? She okay?”

Will’s not surprised when she asks. While he never brings up Abigail, Beverly has probably overheard at least one session where Jack continues to berate Will for their close contact.

“She must have been pretty freaked out when she heard about what happened.”

“Yeah. It’s… not easy for her.”

“I know her last dad ate people and everything, but still, it was probably hard losing the guy.” Beverly crosses her arms. “Do you think this has brought it back up again? Almost losing you and Doctor Lecter?”

Will groans, running his hand through his hair. “It’s not what I wanted for her when Hannibal and I got involved in Abigail’s life.”

“No kidding,” Beverly responds. “She’ll be okay, though, you know? She’s a fighter. Wish I was that level-headed when I was a kid. My baby sister probably feels the same, a hundred times over. Plus, Abigail’s not alone. She’s got you and the doc.”

That’s exactly what Will’s worried about.

He thought they were being careful. It was almost clichéd how he had fallen into the trap of folk wisdom and child-rearing advice that said, despite your best laid plans, children would do what they liked. They were uncontrollable. Unpredictable. They were myths Will never thought would apply to him and Hannibal. But, Will hadn’t anticipated Abigail coming to their house that night when he and Hannibal were having what was supposed to be Tobias Budge’s final supper. It gave the killer a chance to escape from their dining table before his hosts could acquire ingredients for their next meal and a centerpiece.

Will even let Hannibal *drug* Abigail that night to make sure she wouldn’t get caught up in it all the next morning. Will never let Hannibal drug anybody Will cared about. He didn’t have fond memories of Hannibal’s easy and non-consensual drug dispensations. You might say that in the past, Will even had severe reactions to them—*violent ones.*

Encephalitis continued to take an unexpected toll on Will’s strength and stamina despite his
continued hunts with Abigail and running with the dogs. His reflexes were strong, so Tobias didn’t manage to strangle him with piano wire the next day. The killer also hadn’t acted like Will foresaw. Tobias was calm and judicious, if a little over-ambitious, but not that day. His impulsivity and sheer recklessness was out of character. He’d leapt at Will the moment the special agent had entered ‘Tobias’ shop. He didn’t even pause to determine if Will was accompanied by other officers, which Will, of course, wasn’t. Tobias must have been spooked when he learned the Chesapeake Ripper was two men, not just one, and he’d barely escaped from their jaws over dinner. He’d desired to strike up a partnership with Hannibal, too, but any company Hannibal wanted was occupied exclusively by Will.

Having thought that he’d taken care of Will, who next would the spurned, reckless Tobias go see but Hannibal? Hannibal says Tobias was also there for Franklyn.

Abigail robbed him of that opportunity, though.

Which brings Will to his recent dilemma.

“Not too far, Applesauce!” Alana calls out presently. She and Will are walking their dogs, and the frost crackles under their feet as the mutts leave a million prints in the trampled grass.

Will whistles into the air, and Winston proceeds to circle around Applesauce, creating a path for her away from the brush. Zoe trails behind Applesauce, not quite snapping at her heels but still close and mindful of any sudden movements.

“How long will it take before mine can do that?” Alana laughs.

Will shrugs, watching his mutts coach the new pack member safely round and round. “Gets easier with practice. I know dogs.” Will sends another whistle into the air, and Max bounds over to him, passing by Will’s knees before he curls up at Alana’s ankles.

“I’ll say.” Alana fiercely scrubs Max’s long hair with her palms, and he wags his tail.

Will knows that this isn’t why Alana invited him over, though. He’s still pretty aware, even though he’s going on seven cups of strong caffeine and another two hours of uninterrupted sleep. Abigail’s averaging about the same. He always knew they were similar, but he didn’t want it to be like this. Last night, again, Will heard Abigail loudly wake in her room. She’d jolted into tortured consciousness three times that evening. Like every other instant, Will ambled over to her, leaning against her door frame. He didn’t even need a watch— Will tracked the ebb and flow of moonlight on the floor as records of the intervals of Abigail’s nightmares.

Abigail’s expression was hard to see, partially obscured by her raven locks. It was both like and unlike Will’s and the nightmares he used to have.

“You’re worried about another of yours straying off?” Will asks Alana, nursing his thermos.

Alana tries to appear playfully defiant but comes off mostly as fatigued. “They do say spouses sound like each other after a while.”

“Believe me, you wouldn’t have gotten Hannibal over here with an invitation for dog walking.”

Alana huffs good-naturedly before she confesses, “I’m worried about Abigail. She’s always been careful. She shares herself in parts, for her own protection. But now I feel like she’s retreated further inside again. It’s not entirely surprising after what almost happened to you and Hannibal, but… I may have pressed her too hard about being involved. I was concerned that if she got attached too quickly without processing her feelings, she wouldn’t be able to distinguish what she
desired: from you and Hannibal, from her deceased father, and from herself.”

While Will has no answers to two of the three queries, he can at least say, “Her father had a… profound impact on her life.”

That’s probably why this situation with Abigail is also so befuddling, given that his own relationship with his father was painfully simple: fish together, sail together, and exchange maybe a couple of words before lapsing into blessed silence. The most common sounds between them were the cranking of wrenches and the revving of engines.

Will doesn’t know what it’s like being a father. He’d like to be a decent one, but he’s pretty sure he’s already failing on account of the basic requirement to protect your children from having to gut total strangers. Even if they were Franklyn, which Hannibal has already used as a consolation with Abigail. It doesn’t appear to be helping.

“She might be afraid of losing what she has with you two,” says Alana. “While that fear is natural and it gives her an opportunity to grow, she could pull away completely. And if she can’t be close to you two, she may rethink the depth and value of her other interpersonal relationships.”

“I’m afraid of losing what we have, too,” Will breathes into the late spring air.

Alana smiles sadly and bites her lip. Her hand finds Will’s, and he clasps her fingers back through his glove.

“How has she been? With you and Hannibal?”

Will laughs gruffly. “She puts on a brave face.”

“Don’t take on too much either, Will. You and Hannibal might care for her, but you aren’t responsible for this.”

Oh, they are.

Though not in the way Will usually assigns terrible responsibility onto his spouse. Hannibal is of course deriving an ungodly amount of amusement from the situation, but even he couldn’t have contrived this. At least, that’s what Will hopes, for Abigail’s sake, Will’s sake, and unquestionably Hannibal’s.

Hannibal’s office reflects the man himself: even after a tousle, it has returned to a state of calm poise. Almost as if no disturbance ever occurred.

“Cleaned up nicely.” Will falls into his armchair.

“You would know. Fortunately, I didn’t have to dispose of your favorite statuette.” Hannibal indicates the iron stag that sits on its polished cherry stand. Though it’s still gleaming dark, Will wonders how much blood has tainted its hues over the years. “It was very convenient during my confrontation with Mr. Budge.”

“Alana did say that spouses begin to pick up each other’s behaviors.” Will strokes the fabric of his armchair. “I’m glad these didn’t get too banged up. It’s strange, I… I see you so often, sitting beside me like we did in the Uffizi gallery twenty years ago. But we’ve also sat across each other like this over the years.”

Will looks over at Hannibal, blue converging with maroon. All tints and shades. “Haven’t we?”
“We have.” Hannibal folds his hands over his knees, the perfect exhibition of a physician’s decorum, were it not for the fond gleam of remembrance in his eyes. “These chairs hold among their molecules the vibrations of all our conversations ever held in their presences.”

“All the exchanges,” Will says, and then more roughly, more low, “the petty irritations, deadly revelations. Flat pronouncements of disaster.”

“The grunts and poetry of life,” says Hannibal.

“They witness our… becomings.”

“Are you concerned about what they saw when they witnessed Abigail’s becoming?”

“Oh, I’ve seen enough myself to know just how Abigail feels about that,” Will scowls.

Though Will had been dazed by his wound and distracted with cleaning and rearranging Hannibal’s study so the right DNA evidence and bodies remained, he’d witnessed Abigail standing over the balcony. Her eyes were glazed over, like another statue in Hannibal’s office hovering among his upper echelons of books. She didn’t panic, she didn’t speak, but some of the silvery marks of tear tracks were still present on her face.

It was the same look then that she currently wears after she’s torn from sleep and sits in bed or in the kitchen, pulling herself together and dealing with the night terrors. Just like last night, like clockwork—no, not like clockwork; Will still needs more time to fully restore his faith in that bind to reality.

Abigail returns to her nightmares as surely as the moon rejoins the black sky.

“Her becoming is a process, Will. But to kill has always been in Abigail’s nature. You and I know this. She has nurtured it with her father before us. We are not changing her into something she was not meant to be.”

“It isn’t our place to decide.”

“If not ours, then whose? Who knows Abigail better than you and I? Or the burden she bears?” Hannibal pauses before he says, “we are her fathers now, and we will serve her better than Garrett Jacob Hobbs.”

“Or we’ll finish what he started.”

“Your last case, the human totem pole,” Hannibal reads. “Mr. Wells’ one act as a father was to destroy his son. Rather than shore up his legacy, he murdered it himself, with a knife to the heart and a grand head on his monument. Are you worried this will be our one act as fathers, Will? To destroy Abigail? Or are you afraid this will tarnish all our live’s works?”

“Not everything is about Abigail, Hannibal.”

“No, it’s not,” Hannibal agrees and argues, “Everything is about Abigail and you and me.”

Will knows he shouldn’t be saying this, because crimson has just been spilled across Hannibal’s hardwood floors. It’s nothing, though, not compared to the blood that Will and Hannibal have split of themselves and each other in this space: uncleansed, it would become a torrent, the last, hungry waves at the edge of a cliff overlooking the sea.

“Are we really that different from Garrett Jacob Hobbs?” Will asks. “You care about Abigail, as
much as I do. Maybe more. But you have a history, Hannibal. Of loving someone like a daughter and sacrificing her.” *Sacrificing the feelings she evoked in you.* “Abigail reminds you so much of her.”

Will found them that day in the office with Hannibal holding Abigail, and while Will recognized the calculation in the gesture, he also could see it wasn’t just that. Hannibal stroked her dark hair like he stroked Will’s, like he might have reassured his other charge, once upon a time. Will gauges the risk with Hannibal: if he grows too attached, first as a mentor, a protector and then as a caretaker, once Abigail is his own, could he stop his feelings before they consume everything? It’s not something Will fears for himself. He’s never had to fear it for anyone else, none except…

“Mischa, Abigail, even Chiyoh,” Will says. “It’s all... blurring together.”

Hannibal’s eyes flicker between dark and light and his fingers are tense on his armrests, but he doesn’t pounce. He watches Will intently.

Will doesn’t know if he’s testing him too much when he rises from his arm chair and sits on his husband’s lap, curling himself against him. It takes a moment, but eventually Hannibal eases, if only a fraction. He places one hand on Will’s lower back and the other circles the muscles in his thigh, massaging out Will’s tension.

Will presses his forehead against Hannibal’s and closes his eyes. “And me, I’m not any better. I understand Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ *attachment*. His love was devastatingly simple. He just treasured his daughter in their own little fantasy world, where nothing could touch them. Where their family only needed each other. He’d harm her to get there, but he didn’t know any other way to need. And when his attachment threatened to destroy him, he did what he always did—he tried to take her down with him.”

One of Hannibal’s hands has migrated up from Will’s back to his hair, smoothing the dark waves.

Will laughs and kisses Hannibal’s brow, pronounced like pure bone. “You know what Chiyoh told me? At our wedding reception. ‘There are means of influence other than violence.’”

“Intriguing choice of words,” Hannibal says, “as that was also the night she shot you.”

Will’s shoulder remembers the younger woman’s bullet keenly, though his chest is grateful it didn’t find its true mark. At least he got to medicate himself with whiskey and get out of dancing in front of their insufferable guests. “Yeah, and you said ‘atta girl.’ Intriguing choice of words from the groom, too.”

Hannibal flashes his teeth. “Do you believe she’s right?”

“She is,” says Will. “But for us, those means are always… inextricably linked back to violence.” Will laces his fingers through Hannibal’s hair. He runs his hands down the marks on Hannibal’s face, on his neck, around his collarbone. Will knows these scars in every manner, tactile, visual, and penetrative, every way save the process of repair. His kisses and caresses are his salves, the initial strike of the knife his devotion. “We desire and deny each other in every way, because our needs are insatiable. Everything that can happen has happened. It has to end well, and it has to end badly. It has to end, every way it can.”

And Will couldn’t imagine it any other way, the sublime thrill and terror of it, the quiet sense of power. The endless, peaceful, exhilarating fall. That’s the only way it can be for him and Hannibal. Abigail, though—
Will feels Hannibal’s lips in the dark. He touches the scar on Will’s abdomen through his shirt; Hannibal had carved it and sown it back together. “We don’t have an ending, Will. Abigail hasn’t given us one. Not yet.”

Will tries to keep those words in mind when he hears the familiar clamor of Abigail wrenched from fitful sleep. What’s unfamiliar is the soft clatter of the door pulling open and shut.

When Will finds her, she’s in the wooded section of their grounds. The shallow clearing merges into sprawling preserves. Abigail watches the house.

Her pajamas are thin, but Will knows she’s used to frosty weather where she’s grown up. Likewise, Will barely threw on a long-sleeved top and jeans over his underclothes. He doesn’t offer Abigail a sweater, instead letting her look out through the darkness.

“It’s like a boat when all the lights are on,” says Will. “The house is sailing through the night. It’s hard to get that in the city.”

Will sits on a log, and Abigail sits beside him.

“Does it make it hard like that?” she asks quietly, steadily. “Your empathy?”

“Sometimes.”

Will knows that it’s not in Abigail’s nature—she’s more like Hannibal, observational, charming, and clinical. It has enabled her to survive where others would fall apart, watching them die from a distance.

Or she could before.

“Aren’t you afraid because of it?” Abigail asks.

The wind moves through the trees, separating the ebony strands in Abigail’s hair and sighing through her sheer scarf. They’ve hunted so frequently in these woods that it is hard to distinguish Abigail from the tangled trees and creeping boughs.

“When you’re in their heads,” Abigail says, “and you have to kill them, you’re also empathizing with them. Feeling what they feel.”

Abigail shudders, but it’s not the temperature of the breeze. “You said it didn’t feel bad when you killed my dad. But you felt it, didn’t you? The experience killing him, and his experience dying.”

Will can see it now—Abigail’s nightmares, Franklyn’s astounded face as he bleeds over her, gasping around her knife. In that moment, Abigail had been closer to a kill than she’d ever been before. The proximity, the knowing, all the sensation continues to overwhelm her, like a stain of blood that hasn’t dried: it just sits, stagnant liquid, becoming more malodorous the longer you try to look the other direction, and then, it laps at your feet before the waves swallow you whole.

Will knows that feeling, too.

“I did.” Will sighs. “You’re not wrong. My empathy used to be all about fear.”

Had he not met Hannibal, Will might have been an old hand at fear.

“It was probably the worst when I was your age. I thought that I was afraid of everyone else, at first. I could imagine all their feelings, no matter how dark. To see them meant seeing what I
could do through them, feel through them. I thought they were responsible for what I experienced, but I realized that what I feared wasn’t others. It was myself. My own nature, similar, dissimilar… everything I was capable of.”

“Did that make it easier?”

Will laughs. “No. It terrified me. I tried to run from myself, get lost wherever I could.” That’s how he ended up across the Atlantic, in Florence of all places.

“What changed?”

_Hannibal broke me. Then, I broke him, and then we put our pieces back together._

Will doesn’t think he should say this. He shares instead, “Something hard. Something… painful. I was pushed to the limits of my sense of self, so far I almost thought I’d reached the breaking point. Maybe I did. But when I got there and past it, fear wasn’t possible. Not anymore. If everything that can happen, happens, then you can never really do the wrong thing, Abigail. You can’t be afraid of what you’re capable of doing, because you’re just doing what you’re supposed to do.”

Abigail watches Will carefully, and he says, “I knew who I was, and I knew who I wasn’t.”

Abigail’s breath is a silvery, wispy clash of elements, hot and cool, and it’s not strong enough to stay. “I don’t know… if I know who I am anymore. My dad was supposed to push me to my limits, but he didn’t. I wasn’t really afraid. I liked my life. When he brought his knife to my throat, I… don’t think I was at my breaking point, not even then. Even though I should have been.”

Will knows. “Why didn’t you break, Abigail?”

Abigail eyes are now flickering, bright and expressive. She bites her bottom lip. “Because… I helped him. I knew what my dad was. I knew what he did. I… I knew. And I knew it was them or me. That was how I kept myself together. I might have fed my dad all the other pieces, but I… I could be intact.”

Fierce light streaks down Abigail’s face now even if her posture is rigidly straight. Will pulls an arm around her, and she leans against him, her face still set defiantly.

“I thought that was what I was supposed to do. What am I supposed to do, Will?” Abigail asks with a heaving breath. “If this how it’s always going to be, then I don’t know if I… can take it. Finding out who I really am. Maybe, I don’t need to know.”

Will presses his mouth to the side of her hair. It’s smooth and black. “You don’t have to do it alone.” _You never have to do it alone._

Though Abigail controls her breathing and her tears, she shakes. One of her hands tightly clutches the back of Will’s shirt, hard enough for her nails to bite into his skin through the fabric. “You can’t promise that. You can’t be with me… in my nightmares.” Abigail sniffs and inhales deeply.

“No. I’ll be beside you, though.”

When Abigail returns to her room, she stares at the ceiling for hours before she slips into sleep. Will doesn’t think he gets more than yet another two hours at her bedside, which is why he could believe he’s delirious when Hannibal announces they’re having Freddie Lounds for dinner. And not in the way Will would find palatable.
“Why?” is all he asks, leaving his husband to interpret every aspect of his incredulity.

“It was Abigail who suggested Miss Lounds share a meal with us,” Hannibal says. “She has been very insistent about the book.”

“Well, I’ll take Freddie’s book and shove it down her—”

“And” — Hannibal lifts a fork with a piece of roast meat to Will’s lips— “it was you, I believe, who told Abigail to test her limits.”

Hannibal almost quirks his brow.

Fuck.

“This isn’t just testing Abigail’s limits. This is testing mine.”

“That may be Abigail’s goal. She has been emboldened to push past multiple limits to discover who she is”— as Abigail approaches the kitchen, Hannibal makes a show of giving his husband a kiss to whisper against his mouth, smilingly— “and who we are.”

Will’s not sure what’s worse.

Having Freddie at his table, without any other exacerbations, is already pretty damned high on his list of avoid-at-all-costs activities. He almost has to admire her unnatural risk-taking and self-preservation instincts, especially when it turns out she’s a vegetarian. Will tries to get some satisfaction out of Hannibal’s imperceptible irritation, but mostly, he’s empathizing with his spouse.

Freddie appears to misunderstand one aspect of his annoyance, because she asks, “Are you still angry I called you insane? The libel laws are clear, Mr. Graham.”

Will looks at Freddie, but he also peers over at Abigail as he sips his wine. “Insinuation is such a grey area.”

Abigail is calm and controlled, sampling her pomegranate juice just as Will does his wine. To Will’s perpetual chagrin, Hannibal is rarely wrong about one’s nature, and even if Abigail’s been unmoored by her killings, she doesn’t let the currents sweep her away. Will knows that look: having slipped, she’s back on her feet in the stream, ready to play with the fish.

Freddie smiles. “We’re all pathological, in our own ways.”

Aren’t we all? What numerous and complex pathologies could be ascribed to each guest at this delightful dinner table? Will discerns a number of them, like reading down a menu for a fine restaurant and decoding the technical jargon for the entrees. He’s learning, however, that he hasn’t discovered the components of each recipe, especially with Hannibal’s new sous chef at the chopping block.

“You choose the version of the truth that suits you best and pursue it pathologically.”

“Everyone decides their own version of the truth,” Freddie protests, lifting scripture directly from the Unholy Book of Journalism. “I’m here because I want to tell Abigail’s version of the truth.”

“See that you do.”

It’s incredible how Abigail is so much herself and so much like Will and Hannibal, which only
serves to remind Will of how carefully she ought to tread. Hannibal and Will’s natures often invite
cataclysmic entanglements. The more intimate, the more profound repercussions for all involved.
Tragedy, violence, and love, tied together in a tangled, influential, and manipulative web.

“I don’t have anything to hide,” Abigail says, her face a little pale but her eyes also alight.

She always was more openly confrontational with Will out of her two surrogate fathers. Will
enjoys it, but it also drives him crazy.

“Everyone has something to hide,” Freddie argues, “but I won’t tell anything you don’t want me
to.”

Hannibal eats a sliver of his meat, medium-rare. “You must understand our concerns. We care
about Abigail. Our only thought is to protect her.”

Will wonders which method of protection is less conventional—defending a girl’s innocence on a
trashy murder-porn website or gifting her a knife to gut a former patient. He finds that he prefers
Hannibal’s methods, but he may be a little biased.

“This book is about her innocence,” Freddie says. “I want Abigail to have a future.”

“That’s what we all want,” Will says.

“Well, we all want what’s best for Abigail,” Hannibal sums up.

“Great,” Freddie smiles, lifting a shaving of rainbow beet to her lips. “This is possibly the finest
salad I’ve eaten in my life. Shame to ruin it with all that meat. My compliments to the chef.”

“Abigail played as great a part as I in preparing our meal,” says Hannibal, deferring to the young
woman across from him.

Abigail smiles with Hannibal’s cool reservation.

“Too bad we couldn’t arrange this lovely evening sooner,” Freddie says.

_Hah!_ Freddie _does_ choose the version of the truth that suits her best and pursues it pathologically.

She daintily nibbles on a slice of lotus root. “I would love to hear your story, too, Doctor Lecter.
It sounded like you had quite the confrontation with the Maestro.”

“Two stories for the price of one,” Will observes, flicking his blade to cut the fine rim of fat
binding his meat. “Careful, Freddie. It’s three courses, not an all-you-can-eat buffet.” The flesh
falls apart, strand by tender strand.

Freddie offers Will her usual half-lidded superciliousness. “I suppose Doctor Lecter has you to
thank for the outcome of his ordeal. He’s probably used to his husband bringing all kinds of work
back home.”

Freddie is less intuitive than Will begrudgingly conferred onto her if she believes Will’s dragging
Hannibal into any involuntary acts of violence. What mayhem Will subjects Hannibal to is
embraced by his spouse whole-heartedly.

“I could have had the perfect headline for your story, actually. _Monstrous Maestro No More: Second Fiddle to Baltimore’s Murder Husbands._”

Okay, Freddie’s not completely off, because Will’s going to kill her.
“It wasn’t murder,” says Abigail easily, and swallowing her drink, concludes, “It was self-defense.”

Hannibal smiles back at her, cutting his meat.

“It’s too bad your patient didn’t have the same defenses. Or expectations,” Freddie adds, alluding to Will again. “Had you treated him for a long time?”

“Long enough that it was not the end I anticipated for Mr. Froideveaux. Though colleagues warned me not to have conventional expectations for his treatment. Now that it can no longer do him harm, I don’t mind saying that he had a volatile mix of fraught interpersonal histories, obsessions, and anxieties.”


Will suspects Freddie isn’t concerned with Franklyn as an individual, given that his case is shut and sealed, no truth left to be invented, no story to be told.

Not for Abigail, though.

“You wrote something about him on your website,” Abigail tells Freddie, wonder in her expression.

“I did.” Freddie’s never one to pass up bragging about her achievements as an accomplished author. “The Maestro may not have gotten Doctor Lecter, but he still got just what he wanted: the perfect human instrument to render his composition. I’m sure Mr. Graham and the FBI know all about it.”

The last comment is pointedly irreverent about the FBI’s failure to apprehend their criminal before Hannibal, a civilian, was forced to do him in. True to her word, Freddie invents her own narratives. But, it allows Abigail to segue into Will’s insights, and Will reads that this was in part why Abigail invited Freddie to their table: Abigail knows Hannibal will not lie to her (however indirectly he suggests any numbers of truths for Abigail to sort through in their outrageous game). Will does lie, however. Will doesn’t plan on stopping, either. He’s good at lying, and Abigail’s probably sensed that. So, what better way for Abigail to fact-check than enlisting the acute and insufferable Freddie-TattleCrime.com-Lounds?

Alana was right. Spouses do pick up each other’s quirks, because while a part of Will is preparing his response, another voice in his mind proudly calls out clever girl.

“Why was he the perfect human instrument, Will?” Abigail asks. Her voice doesn’t waver.

She barely moves when Will lets his eyes sink all the way down into Abigail. Will doesn’t let Abigail go easily, however.

“Tobias Budge’s first victim was a member of the Baltimore Metropolitan Orchestra’s brass section, Douglas Wilson. Budge opened his throat and prepared his vocal chords by shrinking and tanning them. The same way one classically treats catgut string. He was a skilled musician trying to create a new instrument from an ancient technique.”

“Yes, and no. Franklyn Froideveaux was found with notation inscribed on his tongue and down his throat. It matched other original compositions in Budge’s shop. The killer also removed anything non-muscular or fatty from the intestines, increasing their elasticity, just like catgut
strings. He didn’t entirely accomplish his designs, however. Lean physiques yield the toughest gut, so Froideveaux’s intestines weren’t ideal. Budge did what he could with them to create an ongoing piece of music, one that neither satisfied the artist nor the instrument. His last piece was a song that goes on forever, awaiting completion.”

That was how Will had explained the absence of some of Franklyn’s intestines from his corpse. Hannibal had procured the ones he determined most fit for consumption; they transformed the remainders of his patient into Tobias’ tortured, unconsummated sound, the last cries of an artist whose fame exceeds him in death, his melody wrought to the splendid instrumentation of other, more skilled performers.

Abigail is placing this knowledge together with what else she knows: that she gutted Franklyn, and Will and Hannibal somehow had to disguise the wound and the body, because any murders that could be identified as her own would invite Jack’s arrest warrant.

“I saw the pictures,” says Abigail, baiting Freddie for confirmation with her breathless, awed, terrified tones. Abigail’s the master maestro now, because she’s composing just the sounds that transform into a sweet, sycophantic rhapsody in Freddie’s ears.

“Every killer has their own style,” Freddie agrees, in her own unbearable way. “The Maestro was a psychopath, but he was also a poet without words, a craftsman without traditional tools. Some killers are terrified. You can tell that they were driven by the passion of the moment. This man’s murder wasn’t panicked. It was performative, demanding witnesses. My viewers are just the audience to enjoy his music.”

“Whether they comprehend it or not is a different story,” says Will.

“Careful, Mr. Graham. It sounds like Abigail gets something out of my website. What do you think, Abigail? Do you understand?”

“Yes,” says Abigail, her knife and fork at the edge of her plate. “I think… I do.”

XIII. Hannibal.

“What is it?”

“Jamon Iberico,” Hannibal says as Abigail observes the leg. It’s long, spanning Abigail’s entire arm-length and severed at the thigh. “You may prepare the skewers”— Hannibal points to the sharp points of metal —“before we slice the pig.”

Abigail begins to thread meat and vegetables, taking time to spear the sweetbreads and move them all the way up the shafts.

“It’s really valuable, right? Jamon Iberico. That’s what it said in the cookbooks.”

“Yes. Their breed is descended from wild boars. When they are young, the pigs’ lives are idyllic. They roam the fields of ancient oaks to feast on plump acorns that ripen and fall to the ground. That is until the end of the season, when the last acorn has fallen. The luckiest pigs are those who are born at a point when the acorns are just beginning to grow, and they can enjoy their delicacies all season long.”

Once Abigail has completed threading her harvest, she joins Hannibal. They move in concert as she lifts her palm at the same moment as he lowers the knife’s handle into her grasp. Without hesitation, she wraps her fingers securely around it.
“One must use a very sharp blade to cut the flesh,” Hannibal explains. As Abigail begins her knife work, Hannibal’s hand is around her wrist, gauging the speed and motion of her cut. Once the blade has completely penetrated the first layers of skin, a shaving so thin it curls in on itself falls into Abigail’s palm. Dark pink flesh and creamy fat stripe the ribbon.

“See?” says Hannibal. “Beautiful.”

Abigail takes a bite. “There’s a kind of… unreality to it. Don’t you think? The way the pigs live, happy to be fattened. And the way the farmers let them lead those lives, and then they slaughter them.”

“The unreality of taking a life.” Hannibal watches Abigail take another cut, rotating her hunk of flesh as she does so. “Those who die when we have no other choice, we know in those moments that they are not flesh, but light, air, and color.”

Abigail considers that, and Hannibal places a hand on her elbow. “That will do for now, Abigail. The rest of the ham we serve on the bone.”

As Hannibal outstretches his palm, Abigail delivers the handle of the weapon to him. She arranges the curls of flesh on a wooden block. Hannibal chops seaweed.

“Light, air, color,” says Abigail, primping the shavings to resemble a loose scattering of rose petals. “Isn’t that what it is to be alive?”

Hannibal lets the motions of the cutting move through the ligaments in his arm, from his shoulder down to his wrist. “Do you feel alive, Abigail?” He stamps the final cut and sweeps the seaweed into a bowl.

As Hannibal massages the rubbery cranium of an octopus, twisting the legs covered in suction cups until they are loose and limber, Abigail watches. Her own hands carefully crack the joints in the necks of steamed prawns, but she doesn’t decapitate them: instead, she leaves them to be pulled apart by their guests, their final consumers.

“Sometimes, I feel like it. But I used to see my life one way. Now, I don’t know if that’s what other people see. It’s gone so many different directions. Whose reality is my own?”

“Does it matter what anyone else thinks? Take Miss Lounds’ readers, for instance. They cannot assert that you are living, or how you live, any more than your own experience dictates.”

“Am I the pig?” Abigail asks. “Or the farmer?”

“I can assure you, Abigail,” Hannibal smiles. “You are no simple pig.”

Hannibal hands the knife back to Abigail, and as she slide it away from his palm, the blade lingers by his wrist. Hannibal can almost feel his protégé searching for the flutter of his pulse.

“Jamon Iberico isn’t a simple pig, though,” Abigail responds thoughtfully, her voice steady. “It’s expensive, difficult to obtain. It’s valuable, but still— it gets eaten. That’s exactly why it gets eaten, and why it’s valuable in the first place.”

Dear Abigail.

“So she’s testing you, too, huh?”

“So it would appear,” Hannibal tells his spouse. “She is discovering herself, her reality and our
own. Both are very subjective things.”

Will has chosen to sit at Hannibal’s desk while he leafs through a psychological volume from Hannibal’s library.

“Do you think Abigail has Cotard’s syndrome, too?” Will laughs, his voice rich and dark. “Guess I’ll keep an eye out if the skin rips off her arm.”

Hannibal leans against his desk. “Your killer’s physical degeneration is likely linked to her Cotard’s syndrome, as those afflicted with it believe they are dying or putrefying. They cannot recognize themselves. It’s a misfiring in the areas of the brain that recognize faces, and also in the amygdala, which adds emotions to these recognitions. Even those closest to your killer would seem like imposters.”

Will’s chuckle has a harder edge before it steels into the worn roughness of a serrated blade. “So she reached out to someone she loved, someone she trusted. She felt betrayed, became violent.”

“She can’t trust anything or anyone else she once knew to be trustworthy.” Hannibal lets Will scan through the description of the illness before he asks, “Is that why you were out at the crime scene in the middle of the night, Will? Because this young woman also doesn’t know who she is, or if she can trust the world around her?”

Will sighs. “We know that what’s going on with Abigail is psychological, not neurological.”

“Some would say that’s more complicated. Symptoms of neurological diseases can be identified with the right technologies, while psychological ones require different treatments.”

“Our killer and Abigail have one similar ailment: struggling with taking a life,” Will says, and he reclines fully in his chair. Hannibal can tell the exact moment the thought crosses through his mind to kick his still muddy heels onto his husband’s desk, but Will reigns in that impulse. He must be more concerned with his two young women than he is with provoking Hannibal. “They’re both struggling to measure themselves by their actions. Neither of them killed whom they intended to kill. Is killing a symptom of their nature, or is it the disease?”

“What did you tell your killer, Will?”

“I told her all that I could,” Will says quietly. “That she was alive. I just hope that she heard me. She wasn’t savage. She was lonely, desperate. Sad. When I was empathizing with her and I looked into a mirror, I looked right through me, past me, as if I was… as if I was just a stranger.”

“Sometimes to be alive is all we can be. It is more bearable when we know we are alive, and we are not alone.”

“Yeah,” Will answers. “Yeah.” He allows Hannibal to distract him by kissing his spouse, and then Will presses him back against the desk without letting go.

Bedelia doesn’t appear too surprised to be alive when Hannibal shows up at her door the next night, nor should she be. Hannibal has often enjoyed her elegant, detached demeanor. Usually when they meet for their early morning sessions, the sun strikes Bedelia in such a way that her golden hair and dawny complexion are illuminated with a soft, heavenly glow. Now, the lamplight and darkness paint a greater likeness to the glorious dispassion of her character, a beautiful and terrible vision much like Hannibal himself.

“Good evening.”
“Hello, Hannibal,” Bedelia returns, and she opens her door wider for her guest. “Please, come on in.”

Hannibal lays the dish out on a table between him and Bedelia. “*Tête de veau en sauce verte.*”

“Smells like a bonfire,” says Bedelia as the fumes waft around her. The odor of roasting meat also wrings Bedelia with a truer kind of divine aura. It’s not one in the ethereal upper atmospheres but another deeper, down below, where the flames melt flesh and demons rip tongues from sinners.

Hannibal knew it would be an appropriate dish. “I smoked the veal on a pyre of dry hay. It imparts a unique smoldering flavor to the meat and to the room.”

“This is an unexpected treat,” Bedelia observes, and she pours herself and Hannibal full glasses of wine. “May I ask why it’s gracing my dinner table, and not yours and Mr. Graham’s?”

“Since you refuse invitations to our dinner table, this is the only way I could cook for you.”

Bedelia takes a long drink. “We both know why that’s the case.”

Will and Bedelia have come a long way in flaunting their animosities toward each other, semi-polite pretenses aside.

“It’s late. I don’t expect you’re the type of spouse to leave your husband to go hungry.”

“You are correct. Will is involved in a case. He was just speaking with the mother of his killer. The young woman is suffering from Cotard’s syndrome, though her past physicians failed to identify the source of her physical and mental illnesses or provide adequate treatment. It is how she reached the point of killing.”

“Walking corpse syndrome,” Bedelia outwardly ruminates. “The patient usually denies their own existence or some part of it. Their reality is distorted and fixates on their own deaths or the deaths of those around them. Some even believe”— Bedelia leans further over the uncovered platter, observing the marrow bones filled with flesh rose-buds, the empty mollusk shells— “that they are condemned to damnation.”

“Yes. Will is committed to saving this young woman from herself.”

Bedelia crosses her legs, easing back against her seat. “Do you feel that his level of commitment is unusual?”

“Not entirely,” says Hannibal. “Will has always had an affinity for the vulnerable. He wants to protect this young woman, even if she has killed, because she is vulnerable in every way. Her body fails her, as well as her mind.”

Bedelia says nothing, swirling her wine. Though she won’t give it language in front of Hannibal, she knows just how similar and how different her empathy is from Will’s. What would it take, Hannibal wonders, for his colleague to more fully admit to her destructive instincts, a preference to eradicating those in need rather than aiding them? She has done so before, and Hannibal suspects that their continued relationship is another way in which Bedelia fulfills her more violent appetites.

“But you don’t believe that’s all,” Bedelia finally says.

“He may also be projecting his desires to save Abigail onto this young woman.”

“Your ward.”
“Yes.”

“Why do you believe your ward is similar to this case?”

“I didn’t say I did. I’m talking about Will.”

Bedelia purses her lips ever so slightly. “I cannot talk about Mr. Graham’s perceptions of your ward. We both know that he will not take kindly to my endeavors to do so. Much as you think your husband is projecting his desires to save Abigail onto this other young woman, so you may be projecting your desires to save Abigail onto Mr. Graham.”

Hannibal admits that Bedelia’s logic is sound. “Abigail, like this young woman, has been faced with death. That has caused her to doubt her sense of self. She is not certain what it means for her to be alive, because she sees destruction and creation as separate instead of intertwined. She believes she is alone.”

“Do you believe she is alone?”

“She is not alone. Will and I are standing right beside her.”

“Yes,” says Bedelia, thinking. “Some might see your pattern, Hannibal. It affects the depths of your relationships with certain patients.”

Bedelia does not say those who are more prone to violence, but Hannibal suspects that the words linger on her alcohol-saturated tongue. Bedelia does always know how to enlighten and amuse him, though her next thought could be more dangerous:

“It could also be argued… that a similar pattern affects your choice of family. Will Graham, and now Abigail Hobbs.”

Hannibal has to admire the ways in which he and the other doctor mimic each other’s leisurely, poised decorum all the while they skirt more volatile arenas of discourse.

“Would you argue that, Doctor Du Maurier?” Hannibal politely inquires. “I have colleagues who often express professional envy at my husband, and now my daughter. They believe I am drawn to examine them.”

“They are psychologically compelling subjects, the same as you are,” admits Bedelia. “You may desire to examine them. Analyzing another’s nature is an inherent part of your own… as it is your husband’s.” Bedelia’s tone is remarkably consistent, even as Hannibal smells the bitterness, bewilderment, and muted fury that’s invoked by memories of her one-time patient. It hits the air like the strike of a match on a stick of incense. “But, I would argue your choice of family is not for scholastic reputation, nor is it a matter of choice at all. Family so often isn’t. What Abigail makes you feel, like Mr. Graham, is a force of mind and circumstance.”

“Love. It pays you a visit or it doesn’t.”

“Same with forgiveness,” says Bedelia, “and the same with betrayal.”

“Do you believe that Abigail has betrayed me, Doctor Du Maurier?”

“Do you?”

Hannibal moves to refill Bedelia’s empty glass, hovering over her as he does so. His psychiatrist barely stirs.
“Abigail is a very good student,” says Hannibal. “She has quickly adapted her skills to the kitchen, and to our conversations as well. She is very capable, very smart.”

“You are nurturing a potential you see in her. You have passed down your skills to Abigail. You taught her what you know.”

“She realized very early on that she saw things differently, felt things differently.”

“So did you.”

“I see aspects of myself in Abigail,” says Hannibal.

“Do you worry, like this other young woman with Cotard’s syndrome, that as Abigail begins to doubt herself,” asks Bedelia, her glass at her lips, “she’ll begin to doubt you, as well?”

Bedelia truly is an intriguing creature.

“Your veal is getting cold,” Hannibal says.

Bedelia takes her plate and tastes the meat. “Controversial dish, veal.”

“Those who denounce veal often cite the young age at which the animals are killed, when they are in fact older than many pigs going to slaughter.” Hannibal relishes the spiral of flavors in the roulade and parsley sauce.

“Who decides when the animal is ready for slaughter? Is it the farmer who raised the calf, or the executioner? Or are they one and the same?”

“I’m afraid I can only confirm the decisions that occur in the kitchen,” Hannibal says graciously.

“What are those decisions?”

“The veal was roasted on a pyre of hay. Pyres are often sites for the rituals of death, but also rebirth. One is a part of the circle of life by burning away the old, and becoming reborn.”

“Rebirth. How does one administer such a thing as a resurrection?” Bedelia wonders. “In moderation, forest fires are beneficial. They kill overgrowth and allow new plants to blossom. If the fires are too great, they swallow up everything in their paths and leave only ashes.”

“Fire to the human body can be very healing. Cauterizing a wound, for example. The side effects are temporary, while the body is protected from infection or bleeding out. It helps one fight the crises of normal life.”

“Abigail Hobbs does not present you with problems from normal life,” Bedelia says emphatically.

“Some would say the problems of family are very normal.”

“Family is idiosyncratic. It is conditional on our own experiences of family. A family unit passes down values or genetics to its members that they may alone possess.”

Hannibal smiles. “Family is not societal; it is social.”

Bedelia sips her wine. “It may be the least and most normal thing to exist. And therefore the most fragile.”

Hannibal wonders how both Bedelia and Will would react to realizing they share the same
thoughts. He suspects it would not be happily. He decides to share this insight with his psychiatrist at another time. She has already given him much to consider.

When Hannibal returns to the house, he’s not surprised that Will is still away. He said he’d be consulting Donald Sutcliffe, whom Hannibal had suggested to Jack in order to learn more about his killer’s disease. Will disliked Sutcliffe’s cruel ambition as early on as Hannibal’s residential term at John Hopkins, so Hannibal can only imagine the psychological punishments Will is slowly and thoroughly inflicting on the other as he determines more about his killer.

What is surprising, when Hannibal enters the house, is that there are two odors. One is familiar: it’s the pine, frost and hospital fabric conditioner that regularly perfumes Abigail. The other is a sickly stench like spoiled meat, overripe fruit, and unclean breath.

Both are coming from Will and Hannibal’s room.

_How curious._

Though a crack in the door, Hannibal can see that the dogs also occupy the master bedroom, but they remain growling lowly. They’re waiting rather than attacking either intruder. It means that not only Abigail, whom the dogs know, but also Georgia Madchen, the dying, lost stranger, are no cause for immediate alarm. Georgia does not intend to murder any of the inhabitants at this moment.

Abigail may not know that yet. The crime scene Will described has a strong resemblance to this one: Abigail lies on her stomach on the floor, breathing hard, gazing maybe two or three feet away where Georgia hides under the bed. All that it is missing is the splatter and pool of blood.

This may be as good an opportunity as any to witness how Abigail’s true nature progresses.

Winston’s eyes flick over to Hannibal as the man leans easily against the doorway. Hannibal communicates his usual cautionary gaze to Winston, and the dog returns to monitoring the scene.

Her hands propped against the floor— Abigail has apparently been too surprised to grab her knife — she tries to calm her breathing, not moving an inch. Though Georgia is incapable of sensing it, her company has every muscle ready to pounce even as she remains low to the ground.

“I… I know who you are,” Abigail whispers. “Will told me about you.”

Hannibal wonders how much Will disclosed on his case. Knowing about Georgia Madchen also means being cognizant of the Glasgow smile she cut into her victim’s face to try and wrench the skin loose like a mask.

Abigail doesn’t break eye contact throughout her encounter, even as her shoulders shake. The dogs surround both women. Hannibal suspects that Abigail is able to maintain some calm from their presence.

“You’re Georgia Madchen.” Abigail’s eyes shine brightly, and she moistens her lips with a flick of her tongue. “Right?”

Abigail is drawing now on her experiences befriending other young women, recalling the exact details of their names, their lives, and their homes for her advantage. Hannibal is impressed by her acuity, especially in potentially life and death situations.

“I know who you are. They’re looking for you, Georgia. Your mom and Will.”
That appears to startle the other assailant, because Abigail says quickly, “it’s okay, it’s okay, you don’t have to be afraid, Georgia. They’re not going to hurt you.”

Silence fills the room, and Hannibal can smell it: Abigail’s fear, but also her cunning, her determination. Over the odor of Georgia’s deterioration, he can also scent a desperation, confusion, and the desire to rely on any anchor of reality.

“Will wants to find you. They want to help you. I want to help you, Georgia.”

By repeating her name, Abigail evokes Georgia’s humanity and reinforces her tenuous identity. She won’t let her to forget it. It also establishes Abigail as her tether.

*What a clever girl.*

Georgia’s voice is low and broken, her jaundiced face gleaming like the cratered moon. “I don’t know who I am… I don’t remember. It feels like a long time since I’ve been myself. I don’t think… I ever was.”

Abigail’s scarf shifts. It’s the only indication she’s swallowed Georgia’s words.

“My mom… doesn’t know me. No one does.” Something breaks out of Georgia’s shredded throat, more shattered, darker. “Am I alive? I think… I killed her. My friend.”

Abigail doesn’t blink, gazing beneath the bed at her reflection. “You didn’t mean to hurt anyone, Georgia. You didn’t know.” Her voice is soft, sympathetic.

“It feels like… a horrible dream… all of it.” Georgia’s breath is quaking as she says, “I don’t know who’s dead, who’s alive. Am I alive?”

Her spine a tense but supple rod, Abigail says, “You’re alive.” Her voice is delicate, but appealing, certain, a silver line hanging over the water. “I don’t know… what that means for you, but I know you’re here. I’m here. I’m alive, too, with you. Together. You’re not alone, Georgia.”

The top of the bed doesn’t move, but Hannibal watches Georgia shudder from its cavern, gazing into Abigail’s eyes. Neither draws away from the other. Abigail is bathed in moonlight, while Georgia lies parallel to her in shadow.

Hannibal texts Will, and he waits until the young women have shared a long period of stillness before he moves ever so slightly into Abigail’s sightline.

She controls her reaction just enough so as not to alarm Georgia.

Will and Jack appear with the rest of their FBI assistance and remove Georgia from the house. Hannibal shares how Abigail discovered Georgia and calmed her, which appears to impress Jack. Though Hannibal knows Will wants to stay and soothe Abigail, and certainly to talk with his husband, he decides to make sure Georgia obtains necessary assistance for her condition first.

Which leaves Abigail and Hannibal in the house alone together.

“I don’t believe you’ve eaten,” says Hannibal.

Abigail shakes her head. The dogs gather around her feet. “No.”

“Let’s prepare a late supper for you, then.” Though Hannibal has eaten with Bedelia, he will partake.
As Abigail settles on a stool in the kitchen, Hannibal passes her brioche to carefully hollow out in the center. Abigail deposits the bready innards into a bowl.

Hannibal slides blood sausage into a pan, and the fat sputters.

Abigail watches him. “You’re making breakfast for dinner?”

“High life eggs,” says Hannibal. “A chef in Spain named Muro claimed he invented it in the nineteenth century. Taste is not only chemical. It’s also psychological.”

As Hannibal angles toward his sous chef, she follows the line of his body to stand before the stove, sliding the bread into the pan. It sizzles with the hot fat. Abigail is between Hannibal and the burners as he grabs an egg and tosses it into the air. He catches the fragile shell on the edge of his knife, and it splits in two. The ridges barely crumble into smaller fragments, and Hannibal gives the slippery contents a moment to flow into the gutted remains of the bread.

Abigail watches him the entire time.

“Would you like to try?”

He flips the knife so that the blade is between his fingers, and the handle faces Abigail.

“Yes.”

Abigail takes the knife.

“It’s all about timing.” Hannibal grabs another egg. “If you catch the egg too soon, it will burst all over the pan. And if you catch it too late, you’ll only get the shells. Your blade must be precise. Ready?”

Abigail nods, and Hannibal tosses the egg into the air. With a calm, single stroke, Abigail makes contact between the shell and the spine of her knife, and the egg splits in two. The yolk is intact, gold flowing over an effluvium of pure white.

“Very good.”

“Sausage and eggs,” Abigail murmurs, “was the last meal I had with my parents.”

“I know,” says Hannibal. “This meal is to new beginnings.”

Hannibal and Abigail are seated at the dinner table as they begin their meal.

“I did not expect to see you tonight,” Hannibal says.

“I didn’t think you and Will would be away,” Abigail replies, cutting her brioche and letting the egg yolk pool around it. Her bread absorbs it, becoming just as powerfully yellow as Georgia’s diseased flesh.

“I had an impromptu evening session with my psychiatrist, and Will was working late on his case. As you saw.”

Abigail chews and swallows. She chooses to address the first point. “You mentioned that you have a psychiatrist.”

“I’ve had one ever since I became a psychiatrist myself. She is very good. I would recommend her to you if I wasn’t already confident with Doctor Bloom. Psychiatry, after all, is about finding
the right fit.”

“They say that about family, too,” says Abigail. “Either it fits, or it doesn’t.”

“Indeed. Many people cannot search for a family that fits like they can a psychiatrist, however.”

“Some can, and some can’t. Did you?”

“My psychiatrist would beg to differ. In her view, my family found me. A force of mind and circumstance.”

Abigail pauses, and Hannibal draws his knife through his blood sausage. He lifts the barely seared meat to his mouth, and he savors the warm, juicy flesh.

“It looked,” Abigail says slowly, “like you were checking how your family fit. How long were you there? When I was with Georgia?”

“A while. Long enough to observe how you de-escalated the situation. Will would have been proud. I am also very impressed.”

“Did you think I would?” asks Abigail.

“I was curious.”

“What if she’d hurt me?”

“She didn’t. Just like Franklyn didn’t.”

Abigail’s eyes don’t waver. “You were watching then, too. You didn’t just come in after I’d killed him. You watched me do it. You watched him attack me.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I told you,” says Hannibal. “I was curious what would happen. I was curious how you’d handle the situation, just like tonight. I was curious what it would reveal about you. Franklyn is more important for you gutting him, Abigail. As is Georgia Madchen for you manipulating her. You have shown that you can kill when it is necessary, and you have other means when it isn’t.”

“Why did you really call the house?” Abigail asks. “That morning?”

“Come now, Abigail. You know why.”

“You… were curious.”

“Yes.”

Abigail glances down at her plate. “How many people have you killed? Out of curiosity?”

“Many more than your father,” Hannibal replies, smiling. “Is that what you think?”

Abigail doesn’t allow Hannibal to completely surpass her with his deflections and sidestepping. “What about Will?”

“I cannot answer for Will,” says Hannibal. “You will have to ask him.”
Abigail laughs now. “I don’t think I need to ask him. I think I already know.”

“What do you know, Abigail?”

Abigail’s eyes are like fragments of ice, flashes of lightning. “I know… that you’re the Chesapeake Ripper. Both of you.”

*Clever, clever girl.*

Hannibal dabs his napkin against the corners of his mouth. Once he has cleaned his lips, he places the napkin on his plate, and his utensils on top of it, folding his hands before him.

“And why,” he asks, “would you think that?”

Abigail gulps from beneath her scarf. “You and Will hid the body.”

“What we did for you.”

“You mutilated it.”

“To hide your strike.”

“You’re used to it,” Abigail asserts. “You carved up the body just like a practiced killer. But not just any practiced killer. Just like the Ripper. It was theatrical. It was beautiful and horrible.”

“Mr. Budge did the same, and we intended to pass off the body as Mr. Budge’s for your sake,” Hannibal argues. “What makes you think our work then was the Ripper’s?”

“You concealed it in the other man’s murder. But you did something with the organs. Not just any organs: intestines. You didn’t just prepare them like an instrument. You took some of them away, too. There isn’t much you can do with intestines. You can’t sell them. You can’t transplant them. You can only... eat them. I know what the Chesapeake Ripper does, it doesn’t matter what everyone else says. He *eats* them.”

“Who,” Abigail asks, cutting into the sausage, “are we having for dinner, Hannibal?”

Hannibal’s smile is all teeth. “I think you already know, Abigail. A pig, freshly slaughtered. As I said, it’s high life eggs. You might even say, they’re also new life. Will you let yours go to waste?”

Abigail doesn’t lift her cut of sausage right away to her mouth. “Why?”

“You know how I feel about waste, Abigail.”

“Do you do it for the same reasons as my dad?” Abigail asks, her voice trembling this time, though it’s hard to distinguish her mix of tones: fear, sadness, and anger. Loyalty and betrayal. It all smells so sumptuous over Abigail’s first kill.

“I told you before. I am nothing like your father.”


Hannibal untangles his hands to sip his wine. “Cannibalism is not always as straightforward a concept as it seems,” he philosophizes broadly. “Many cultures use the term to refer to man eating his fellow man. Is it cannibalism when the producer and consumer are unequal?”
“And the people you kill… aren’t your equals.”

“What do you know about the Ripper? What has Will told you?”

“His kills are graceful. Brutal.” Abigail’s eyes are moving now, following the lines of her plate. “You don’t… love them like my dad did. Do you?”

“The Ripper may think parts of his kills are worthy,” Hannibal lightly circumvents. “Even if the containers as a whole are not.”

“How do you decide who’s worthy?”

“How does anyone decide what’s worthy?” asks Hannibal, redirecting Abigail’s addressee. “Beauty, intelligence.” Hannibal turns his red wine. “Courtesy. The opposite values might denote the unworthy.”

“Ugliness. Obliviousness. Rudeness.”

“Yes.”

“Does Will eat them, too?”

“As I told you, you must ask Will.”

“Is that why he eats them, too?”

When Hannibal says nothing, Abigail asks in a soft voice, “Please. Hannibal.”

Hannibal decides to be generous but neither confirms nor denies her direct entreaties. After all, he doesn’t intend for the game to be over so soon. “Will has a remarkable imagination, as you know. He can take on any perspective. Beautiful.” Hannibal lets the appreciation show in his tones. “Pure empathy.”

“He said it used to terrify him,” Abigail argues.

“It did. Is that all he said?”

“No. He said… he was pushed to the breaking point, and… it didn’t scare him anymore. He knew who he was.”

“Yes. I think you know the feeling of fear when one gets too close to others. When we transgress our personal boundaries. It can be as liberating as it is undoing. It is much easier to maintain a distance. Because Will no longer feels fear, he only feels closeness. But nothing like your father’s sense of possessive love. Will’s experience is to see someone else entirely, and to see himself. His is an all-knowing sense of empathy. It’s power: calm, total, and intimate power.”

_It was what he felt when he killed your father. It is how he feels when he consumes others._

While the words go unsaid, Hannibal can tell that Abigail is beginning to read them, trying to pass through the game and all its puzzles.

“Not you, though,” Abigail says with such compelling certainty.

“No,” Hannibal agrees. “I don’t feel for others as Will does. What do you think I feel, Abigail?”

superior tastes.”

Hannibal smiles. “You know me very well, Abigail. You are like Will, but we are also very alike.”

“I’m not like you.”

“When you hunted those girls for your father, you knew what he was doing. And you also knew he was eating them. You knew you were eating them. How did it feel surviving when they could not? To survive on them? I think it felt powerful.”

Abigail’s eyes are wide with brightness. “I… never wanted my dad to kill them.”

“Who did you want to kill, Abigail?”

“I wish I’d killed my dad,” Abigail answers fiercely. “I wish I’d killed him, for killing my mom, for killing those girls, for making me a part of it. All of it. But… I didn’t. Will did. You did.”

Hannibal finishes his wine and does not rise to refill it. “Do you want to kill us, too, Abigail? For making you a part of what you think we are a part of?”

Abigail is breathing hard, her hands flat on the sides of the table. Every emotion rising from her is beautiful, dark, intense, and subtle.

“Are you going to kill me?” Abigail asks instead.

“No,” says Hannibal, his one direct answer. “I thought you’d simply stay over for tonight. Then, you can choose to have breakfast with Will and me in the morning. Is that agreeable to you?”

“I… I don’t know.”

“No need to come to any hasty decisions.” Hannibal gestures to Abigail’s plate. “But try to eat your dinner. I would hate to throw it out when it gets cold.”

As Hannibal rises from his seat to place his dishes in the sink, the pans and utensils scrubbed clean in the dishwasher, he turns to watch Abigail at the table. At first, she merely looks straight ahead, her eyes on nothing. The dogs sit by her feet and smell the food.

Then, with her fork held rigidly aloft, Abigail takes a bite.

Chapter End Notes

So, here we are! A lot’s going on, including Abigail’s Chesapeake Ripper revelations. I’m going to keep mum on where those lead, at least until next week.

Also, Bedelia appears, whom I adore as a character. In my head-canon, Will and Bedelia have one session after she's killed Neal Frank. Because Bedelia has a tendency to get through difficult sessions (aka Hannibal) with wine, and Will gets through general hardships with alcohol, they both end up spiteful, raw, and uproariously drunk. They also manage not to kill each other, but boy do they get close. Hopefully, I'll write this episode soon, too. Also Will and Hannibal’s wedding, featuring Chiyoh.
Freddie Lounds doesn't receive a lot of love from Will here, but I actually like and despise her character? I mean, she's alive, and she canonized Murder Husbands, all of which deserves some credit. Chilton for the same reasons.

So, next time we'll pick up from our cliffhanger with Abigail.

Until then, thanks for reading!
Here we are at Part V of Speak No Evil and the Murder Family!

Very excited to share this segment. It picks right up from Abigail’s revelations about the Chesapeake Ripper and includes thoughts from Will and Hannibal.

Thank you for reading and sharing your thoughts!

Speak No Evil (Part V)

XIV. Abigail.

While Abigail’s staring at the ceiling for hours, her weary mind begins to transition into a hazy state of semi-consciousness. In her daze between nightmarish waking and evasive dreams, she misses the dogs. When she cuddles with them in her comforters, it’s always easier to sleep. A part of her wishes the mutts could be present, and another part is glad they aren’t with her right now. Will said he hunted with them, right? How often did they hunt and—

Who?

If they were commanded to do so, would they hunt Abigail?

Abigail thinks she’s going blind, her eyes getting lost mapping the cracks in the plaster overhead. At some point her mind either accepts the nonsensical pattern of fissures, or it overloads processing them, because when she’s finally unconscious, it doesn’t feel like peace. She doesn’t dream. She doesn’t even have nightmares. Blackness just… overtakes her.

Is this what it feels like, being eaten alive?

Her father’s specter always gave her a different impression of the experience. Then, it always daunted her like a terrible gnawing, her entire body restless with the urgent need to prize herself free from his stomach muscles and jaws.

This? This being eaten?

It’s nothingness.

It’s like… death.

As she sleeps, Abigail can’t remember a damn thing. It’s terrible, and it’s better.

Abigail feels the change over breakfast the next day. It’s not that the contents of the meal are any different: Hannibal has still prepared cuisine that smells damnably good. Sticky buns sit at the center of the table, glossy with the early morning sun. There are grapes and cubed melons wet with sauces, and Abigail’s orange juice has been freshly squeezed.
Will sits at one side of the table with his usual stack of student papers on his knee, a moving pen, and a cup of strong coffee. He must have gotten home at some point last night. Abigail hadn’t heard him.

As she approaches, Will looks straight through her. She doesn’t think he got much sleep, either. His blue eyes are ringed. His gaze is even more pronounced, deep from the caverns of his sockets, scoping Abigail’s darkness and pain and sadness and anger and too complicated feelings entirely.

Will doesn’t say a word.

Abigail eats her meal in silence. Hannibal mutely sips his own drink as he skims a newspaper unfolded over the table. Out of the corner of her eye, Abigail reads how it mentions how Georgia Madchen was captured, but she suspects it doesn’t say everything.

It wouldn’t communicate how Georgia asked Abigail am I alive, and Abigail answered that she didn’t know. But at least they were together. At least they were here.

Abigail knows and doesn’t know what here means anymore. The sensations of the rooms— the smells, the sights, the occupants, and the sounds— are all familiar but also irrevocably altered.

If Abigail took her tea cup and dropped it on the floor, would it make a sound? Who would hear it shatter and pick up the broken pieces to put it back together again?

Abigail doesn’t know. All she knows is, at some point, while time slips slow, viscous and heady like molasses, she gathers her things from the closet. The dogs see her off at the door, but they are silent. Maybe they don’t bark, maybe they do. Hannibal opens the door for Abigail and drives her back to the hospital. Will doesn’t go with them, which isn’t unusual, but now it’s profound. When Abigail finally reaches her room-not-room in her home-not-home, she collapses into her mattress and sobs.

Her throat is raw.

The pillow is scalding hot with her tears, like she’s drenched the cotton in boiling water.

It feels so good and indulgent and self-pitying that Abigail curses her wild, ferocious cries.

She’s always known this, ever since she met Will and Hannibal.

She knew Will was a killer of a sort: he shot her dad to death. She suspected Hannibal was a killer, because what sort of man would call her house on the day of her father’s murdering spree and then give her a set of hunting knives to remind her?

Abigail always knew. And she’d chosen to be with them anyway. It was easy to fall into a life with Will and Hannibal, even if death and murder were looming apparitions. She knew the feeling. She’d experienced it her whole life. She liked it enough to have wanted to survive it, and she’d really liked it when she was with the Graham-Lecters.

It was fun, hunting, fishing, and cooking. Abigail enjoyed being with the dogs. She’d never had real animal companions before. Just prey. She relished her games with Will and Hannibal, because she never had somebody older whom she could caustically joke with like Will, or someone who would push her mind and lethality with the charm of Hannibal. Abigail fell into it all, acting the part, sharing their meals—

Even when Abigail sobs painfully hard and her lungs feel like they’re going to swell through her
ribcage, she doesn’t feel the urge to throw-up.

She knows what it means to eat human flesh, too. She’s always known.

Though she’s never known it to taste so good.

And to have such a powerful, god-awful aftertaste.

Abigail knows and doesn’t know what she expected to find in the Graham-Lecter house that night. After she’d killed Franklyn, Will and Hannibal cleaned up the body and hid it without a second thought. That was enough to foment Abigail’s other vague suspicions about their general capacities to kill. People didn’t just perfectly clean up bodies and nonchalantly arrange them to resemble other crazy, vicious serial killers. Sure, Will had experience analyzing the works of such deranged minds, and Hannibal had a thorough understanding of abnormal psychology and the hands-on training of a surgeon. But, it’s one thing to understand how to kill, artfully and deliberately, and it’s another thing to put it into practice.

Abigail knows that. And she doesn’t.

It had been easy finding out more about what happened to Franklyn on TattleCrime.com. Abigail knew how to look for it. She just needed to pop open her laptop. But it was also hard. She’d given herself a couple of days to wait, because maybe the story wouldn’t be up right away. Maybe she wasn’t ready to see the pictures yet. Would she recognize her kill?

She did recognize it, viscerally and immediately. Abigail stared at the laptop, and her heart pounded in her chest. She wasn’t sure if it was the adrenaline of guilt or the thrill of returning to the scene of her crime.

He had the same face, the same dumb expression. He had the same wound across his gut. But Abigail also recognized something else, something that sent the chemicals and blood coursing through her just as potently. It looked like the Maestro’s other kills, but it also looked like kills she’d been staring for months. When she’d looked at them then, it made her feel better about her father and his crimes, because nothing could compare to these:

The Chesapeake Ripper.

Abigail knew. And she didn’t know.

But she knew… Freddie Lounds would have something. Freddie always had something, even when Will and Hannibal didn’t. So Abigail pursued the journalist, reeled her into confirming her suspicions. She drew exactly what she wanted and feared. Even Will shared it with her, though he held things back, because he’d never feed his fellow fisherman too easy or too great a catch. Will always made her work for it.

But she figured it out: she’d gutted a man, the Ripper gutted the same man, and he didn’t use all of his intestines when he was done cutting him open and dressing him up to be some murderous masterpiece. That fact… stayed with Abigail.

After last night, Abigail knows and doesn’t know what she discovered.

Hannibal and Will left no evidence. Abigail didn’t even need to thoroughly search the house to know that. Hannibal and Will gave her a key. They practically invited her to wander in whenever she wanted. They hadn’t retracted their unconditional welcome, even after Abigail expressed an obvious and incriminating interest in the Maestro’s last kill to Freddie, the prolific journalist, though only a partially credible one.
It meant Will and Hannibal had nothing to hide.

Hannibal was always a fastidious cleaner; Abigail helped him pour over every inch of the house with chemicals, the reason then being to clean animal dander. *Hah!* Hannibal still probably considered it traces of animals, of some sort. Hannibal and Will would also leave no evidence of their meals, because of course they ate everything, or their guests ate everything, and their dogs and cleaning agents finished the rest. Hannibal hated waste. So did Will, in a way, and he never neglected to feed the dogs.

Though Hannibal hadn’t lied to Abigail over their fateful dinner, just like he promised so long ago, he still didn’t say a single explicit thing. Everything, like it always was with Hannibal and their instructive games, had been vague, almost nonsensical. Incredible truths easily attributed to colorful metaphors, warning disguised as life lessons. In the realm of law, it gave Abigail nothing actionable. He hadn’t confessed to any crime, nor had he confessed to anything on behalf of Will.

Abigail left the house possessing only what she knew of herself, her own kills, and what she knew of Will and Hannibal.

Any certainly incriminating thing they’d done linked back to her murders, and she didn’t even have evidence that they’d done it.

Just the words of a murderer’s daughter.

All of it was terribly hilarious. At some point, Abigail converts from sobbing to laughing hysterically into her pillow. What a sight she must make. Abigail howls harder. What on earth could have happened, the nurses and other patients must think, to make the murderer’s and cannibal’s daughter finally crack so hard?


Abigail thinks this is what Will meant by breaking.

He’s right.

It’s painful, and she’s learning something. Was it something she ever wanted to learn? Who knows? Abigail doesn’t, and she doesn’t seek second opinions.

Not the next day, or the day after.

Not the next week. Not from Marissa, not from Freddie, not from Doctor Bloom.

And not from Will and Hannibal.

Likewise, they don’t approach her offering them.

They don’t come back for her at all.

Is this how they’re choosing to leave it?

Is this how she’s choosing to end it?

Abigail doesn’t *f*uck know. And… she does.

Every night Abigail enters a dreamless sleep that’s more terrible and complete than any drug could bestow upon her. Not that she’d market it as a cure for the troubled mind— though hers is quieter,
it doesn’t feel any less full of dark, complicated thoughts.

So many different times, Abigail is on TattleCrime.com, and instead of wanting to get in touch with Freddie, she’s tempted to text Will. She wants him to pour over his kills and analyze them with her, just like he does in the classroom. How did he and Hannibal find themselves plucking out eyeballs and constructing human fountains with empty sockets for spouts? Abigail wants to ask Hannibal every question she couldn’t ask him before in the kitchen, like the different flavors of the body, and if personality can be tasted in somebody’s kidney or heart.

Abigail doesn’t ask them these things, though. She reviews images and articles about the kills when she isn’t distracting herself with other things. She fills out applications for schools. She considers Freddie’s book and whether it’s actually a good idea or if it’ll destroy her. She navigates Doctor Bloom’s concerns, which she does semi-competently, but apparently not well enough, because Doctor Bloom obviously senses something is up with Abigail and her guardians. She thinks it’s because of all the death she’s been experiencing since she’s known Will and Hannibal.

She’s partly right.

And because Abigail can’t talk with Will or Hannibal, part of her burns to tell Doctor Bloom. She needs some part of herself to be known, and if it can’t be in a book or with her two make-shift father figures, then Doctor Bloom seems pretty tempting.

But what would she even tell her? Your two oldest friends mutilate, murder, and consume human flesh for fun? They’ve fed me the products of their hunts, and I even helped them prepare their rarefied dishes, on occasion?

It wouldn’t endear her to Doctor Bloom, Abigail thinks. She’s not sure what it would accomplish. She doesn’t know what she wants to do. She doesn’t know how she feels.

She doesn’t know how she ends up at Doctor Bloom’s doorstep one night when the spring snows are especially cold and high.

It looks just like home.

And it doesn’t.

The time during which Abigail stands on Doctor Bloom’s patio and waits seems strange, simultaneously collapsed and expanded. For so long, the moment just stretches out into nothingness, and Abigail watches the ice drift. Then, as the door creaks open, everything happens all at once.

“Abigail!”

A man is parked right beside Doctor Bloom.

He’s a cop. Not just any cop. He’s one of those agents in black that was investigating her empty home, dissecting her former life.

It’s one of Agent Crawford’s FBI personnel.

“Should… I come back?” Abigail asks warily.

What is an FBI agent doing at Doctor Bloom’s place?

One who isn’t Will?
“It might not… be safe for you here, right now,” says Doctor Bloom, her dark lips tight. Her eyes flicker out toward the snow, and she pulls the door further open, saying, “but it might not be safe for you to go back like this, either. Come in, Abigail.”

Doctor Bloom shuts the door, and Abigail enters her home. It’s just like Doctor Bloom: cozy, striking the right balance between orderly and friendly.

A dog even bounds over to Abigail’s feet. She’s not like Will’s, waiting for a signal to determine the nature of her intruder. This dog is just like Doctor Bloom, warm and open. She comes over to strangers without even sensing danger or fearing harm to herself.

It’s irritating and heart-breaking all at the same time.

When Doctor Bloom guides Abigail into the kitchen, the agent follows her, his eyes flicking toward the window even as the curtains are drawn shut.

Abigail must be staring obviously enough for Doctor Bloom to explain her situation first before prying into Abigail’s. “It’s nothing, hopefully. Just a case that’s gone… kind of south. A former patient of mine, actually. Not that I treated him more than once or twice.”

“He’s that dangerous?” Abigail asks.

Doctor Bloom hands Abigail a mug of tea and swirls her own heavy cup with honey and a squeeze of lemon. “Do you know about the Chesapeake Ripper?”

Yes.

Yes, yes, yes.

“I’ve heard about him.”

Doctor Bloom sips her drink. “There’s a man. Abel Gideon. One of his psychiatrists convinced him he was the Chesapeake Ripper, and for a time, he believed it. Now, he doesn’t. He got loose, and the FBI thinks he’s getting back at all his psychiatrists for their treatments and interviews.”

That’s… not what Abigail had been expecting. She doesn’t let out a sigh of relief, though. Her body is still fraught with tension.

Abel Gideon. Why is that name so familiar…?

Oh, yeah. Hannibal and Will had talked about him.

Hannibal didn’t think he was the Chesapeake Ripper.

Of course. Hannibal would know. So would Will. And he said there were no sound profiles on the Ripper. He would be the one to write them, Abigail supposes.

Wait—

“He’s going after his former psychiatrists?” Abigail asks. “If he’s not the Ripper, what’s he doing once he finds them?”

Doctor Bloom sighs. “Abel Gideon was in Baltimore Psychiatric Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Two years ago, he killed his wife and her family. His crime is now considered impulsive, but he also mimicked a Ripper kill a couple months ago. He killed a nurse.”
“How did he kill her?” Abigail asks.

Though Doctor Bloom appears hesitant, she shares all the same: “he gouged her eyes out and stabbed her with different medical instruments to replicate the Wound Man study. It’s one of the Ripper’s famous kills.”

Abigail swallows her drink. It burns as it goes down her throat.

She knows that kill. She’s researched that kill.

“If he doesn’t think he’s the Ripper anymore,” Abigail asks, “what’s he doing, when he finds his psychiatrists?”

“I shouldn’t be telling you this while the case is ongoing.”

Something horrible then. Okay. That’s why Doctor Bloom was reluctant to let Abigail in, even with her armed and specially trained guard.

Abigail licks her lips, even though they’re still moist with tea. “What about Hannibal?”

“It’s okay,” says Doctor Bloom quickly. “Hannibal never treated Doctor Gideon. He wouldn’t go for him. I’d call for Hannibal to get you, but he’s helping Will investigate.”

If Hannibal was helping Will, and they were still searching for the killer right now, it meant Gideon was acting fast.

And he was very dangerous.

Doctor Bloom reaches over the counter to squeeze Abigail’s hand. She doesn’t voice her apology, probably not to unsettle Abigail, but Abigail sees it in her soft, frightened eyes.

“So,” says Doctor Bloom after a pause, “why’d you decide to drop by?”

Abigail’s not sure how to explain it, so she thinks hard, taking in all the new information that’s suddenly come upon her. “You said you were worried about me before. About me losing track of myself.”

Doctor Bloom reverts back to her kind, concealed, and clinical demeanor. “Do you feel that you’re losing track of yourself, Abigail?”

“I don’t know,” says Abigail. “I always thought I knew who I was, but now I think I was just really good at fooling myself.” Along with fooling everybody else. “I’m afraid. And I’m afraid that, I’m not afraid.”

Abigail won’t say too much though, because she can already tell that Doctor Bloom is sifting through her trauma and associations with violence for something, something her patient doesn’t want her to find. “Fear of the unknown is natural, Abigail. Your current circumstances are unknown. You’re still learning about your environment and how you belong within it. Your identity. Why do you fear your lack of fear?”

“Because everybody expects me to be damaged,” Abigail says. “But I’m not.”

“You fear what they’ll think of you if you’re not damaged?”

“I’m afraid they’ll think I should be.”
“There is no universal response to pain or trauma, Abigail,” Doctor Bloom states calmly. “We all have different tolerance levels and different ways of expressing when the harm becomes too great for us to take.”

*I don’t know when it’s too much, Abigail* thinks.

*I don’t know when it’s too much harm for me to inflict on others, either.*

Abigail turns her warm ceramic in her hands. It feels like human flesh, the heat of blood radiating through the thick, protective covering of bone and skin.

Abigail doesn’t know what she’s looking for here in Doctor Bloom’s kitchen as snow falls outside and a killer roams around mutilating his psychiatrists. She’s not here for an analysis of her feelings. That’s never been the aim of her game with Doctor Bloom, and trying to pretend it is now doesn’t provide Abigail with anything genuine or satisfying, even if Doctor Bloom is smart. If she wanted a therapist to actually discuss the darkest of her feelings, she’d go to Hannibal.

Doctor Bloom seems acute enough to pick this up, because she says, “We don’t have to have a session right now. It’s okay if you just wanted to get away for a while. I imagine the hospital feels pretty stifling.”

Abigail’s grateful for that, at least. Is she looking for a friend in Doctor Bloom? It doesn’t feel like that, either. If she is, then her friendship is for a very specific reason. Abigail develops friendships because such intimacy is instrumental. It’s fun, or it’s helpful. What would Doctor Bloom be instrumental as? An ally?

Someone to confess to about Will and Hannibal?

Even if Doctor Bloom didn’t believe her right away, Abigail suspects some suspicion would enter her heart. Maybe, if she combed through enough of her recollections and associations, she’d locate something confusing, odd. Incriminating. Maybe, she’d get the rest of the FBI involved, and they’d dig and search Will and Hannibal to—

To what?

At Abigail’s legs, Doctor Bloom’s dog suddenly perks to attention, and she goes over to the window.

“Applesauce?” Doctor Bloom asks, her tones curious and cautious.

Applesauce begins to whine. Then, she barks and leaps to claw at the windowpane.

The special agent barely shifts open the curtains to peer into the night. He checks his phone. “There’s no sight of Abel Gideon at this side of the house.”

“Sorry,” Doctor Bloom says to Abigail, but her posture is a little too tense, the way she drags Applesauce back to her side too firm. “She’s new. She sometimes gets jumpy.”

“She’s beautiful,” says Abigail, because what else is there to say?

Doctor Bloom smiles. “She was a stray.”

“Like Will’s dogs?”

“Yeah. I might have been inspired by him.”
Will’s dogs are beautiful, reliable, too. Abigail would much prefer to be with them right now, because there’s an icy feeling coursing up her toes to the crown of her skull, a cold sweat percolating at the base of her spine. Like when she killed that man, or when she confronted Georgia.

Or right at the moment when her father lifted his knife to her throat and whispered his loving apologies, leaving shivers running from her ear to every imaginable end of her body.

That feeling.

“She might settle down if we get her to my bedroom,” Doctor Bloom says, rising to her feet. “It’s just upstairs.”

Abigail imagines telling Doctor Bloom that she doesn’t want to go upstairs. She wants to stay on the ground floor, as close to the door as possible.

But, she also has bad memories of kitchens, so she lets Doctor Bloom lead the way upstairs.

Everything is perfectly sweet and secure.

It’s just like Abigail’s home had been moments before her father stabbed her mother again and again and ruined their living room forever.

Applesauce begins to settle down once she’s on her bed with Doctor Bloom, and that seems to calm the psychiatrist, or she’s putting on a good show for Abigail. Abigail doesn’t think so. Doctor Bloom doesn’t have Abigail’s instincts or her experiences with near death.

“Maybe, we should—”

And then there is a thud, a terrible occurrence of thudding. It’s different than it was in Hannibal’s office. The sounds are rapid and sharp, too quick to process. Applesauce starts barking at the door, and when Doctor Bloom begins to stand in a swish of her blankets and skirts—

The special agent hurtles into the room. He’s stumbling, half-running. Abigail doesn’t see him clearly because he’s moving so forcefully and fast. But she sees enough:

His eyes are wide, and blood is streaming from the wound he’s desperately trying to cover on his neck.

He looks so much like the man Abigail killed.

Doctor Bloom has a moment to gasp before the agent frantically falls on top of her, either to protect Doctor Bloom or to seek assistance for his injury. He’s probably losing balance or some other control of his muscles, because he’s gripping her so suddenly and so hard that Doctor Bloom staggers back, her face white, slamming against the wall—

And suddenly, a man emerges behind the agent. He viciously stabs him in the back, delivering a startlingly powerful strike for a man so short and stocky. It’s impressive to watch. Abigail distantly thinks he must have a great center of gravity or powerful, crazed intent to kill, because—

The force of the blow and the agent’s jerking body and deadening weight sends him toppling forward. Doctor Bloom cries out and tries to release his grip. They fall, and it’s no more than a sigh of curtains and a smattering of glass like starlight. It’s like the night has swallowed them up.

Abigail angles toward the opening. The sheer cotton fans into her face with a couple snowflakes.
Maybe that glimmering is the broken windowpane. Doctor Bloom is lying in the snow with the
dead agent beside her. She doesn’t move, her dark hair splayed out around her.

Abigail feels the tickle of cool air. And then, she feels hot breath on her neck, but before she can
turn around—

There’s a prick in her neck, right through her scarf.

She wakes up groggily and with darkness still in her eyes, back in Doctor Bloom’s kitchen.

It must be a nightmare. All her nightmares happen in kitchens.

“Interesting scene for a nightmare. Probably says a lot about you.”

Abigail didn’t realize she’d been speaking. She didn’t even think she could through the dryness in
her mouth and the heavy feeling in every muscle of her body, including her face. That’s probably
why it’s hard blinking into wakefulness.

But she must be conscious and speaking, or dreaming really vividly, because a man is addressing
her.

The same man who killed the agent and sent Doctor Bloom falling out the window.

“That was the fault of the FBI’s incompetent human resources, not me;” the man’s answering now,
his eyebrow angled ironically in his square face. “And I thought Frederick hired terrible people. I
believe agents are supposed to protect their details, not break their spines.”

Abigail sees it more clearly now: Doctor Bloom is strapped in a chair, much like Abigail. She’s
tied at the waist with cushions propped against her, but her bindings look less like restraints than
support. Her skin is whiter and clammer than the snow, and her eyes flicker, half open, before
shutting in a whisper of dark lashes.

“Her spine is broken?” Abigail asks, her voice stronger than she thought it would be.

“Many of her bones are broken,” says the man, sighing dramatically. “It’s hard to tell without the
proper equipment, and I’m afraid I only had a chance to grab the bare essentials from Carruthers
and dear Frederick. I’ve given Doctor Bloom some morphine, but she can’t receive proper
treatment here.”

“Are you going to let her die?” asks Abigail. “Or are you going to kill her? Isn’t that why you
came?”

The man seems to consider. “I wasn’t fully decided. You see, I’ve been having something of an
existential crisis, deary. You’re young, so maybe you understand. Or you don’t. It all started
when a couple of incompetent psychiatrists started shuffling things around in my head, like they
were moving furniture, except they were actually moving memories of things I did and didn’t do.
Who knows? One very bad psychiatrist decided he’d do a whole make-over and rebrand the entire
real estate to sell it for major bucks! What do they call those? Oh, yeah. Fixer-uppers. Except,
he wasn’t trying to fix things up. He just broke everything apart. I don’t think anything can live in
my hovel now, not even me.”

The man ambles leisurely over the kitchen counter. He withdraws a sharp knife from a block.

“You’re Abel Gideon,” says Abigail.
“Am I?” Gideon replies. “I don’t really know who I am. I don’t know if I will ever be myself again. I don’t know if I’ve got any self left over. It’s a terrible thing to lose one’s identity. You think you’re a square, and then suddenly everybody tells you you’re a circle, and then it turns out you’re neither. You’re water. Everybody was just sticking you in an ice tray to put the perfect shape in their decanter. Without the icebox, you’re fluid spilling all over the place.”

This man’s metaphors are worse than Hannibal’s, and it’s giving Abigail a headache. Well, a worse headache than the one she has already.

She knows what it’s like to lose an identity.

“What are you now?” Abigail asks.

“Now I’m you,” says Gideon, twirling the point of his knife like a baton in the air. “We’re both here, looking at Doctor Bloom.”

Gideon begins to inch his knife very close to Doctor Bloom’s pale, semi-conscious body.

“If you’re me,” says Abigail. “You shouldn’t kill Doctor Bloom.”

Gideon crosses his arms, drumming the fingers of one hand over his bicep. “You’re really not as good at this as the other docs. I appreciate the attempt, though. If I had a chance to save Doctor Bloom, I might do it to. Once upon a time I know I would have. She’s not like the others. She’s beautiful, sublime really.”

“Then why?”

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Gideon says. “I spent so long being him, it’s getting hard to remember who I am when I wasn’t him. But if I could kill her like he would kill her, then maybe I could understand him better.”

Gideon slices a button at the top of Doctor Bloom’s collar. Her breath is fiercely shallow, and she trembles all over. Abigail thinks she can see her lips moving. Is she whispering something? Does she know what’s happening?

“After I killed that nurse, it became easier to envision how to kill like him,” Gideon says conversationally, and he showily twists the handle of his blade so that it pirouettes in his palm. “He kills to suit his victims, you know? Brings out their better natures. He’s like a psychiatrist, but a good one. I know just how I’d preserve Doctor Bloom’s beauty, even after that clumsy buffoon tried to destroy it. I took care of him by the way,” Gideon promises.

He marks one long, thin line across Doctor Bloom’s sternum, applying just enough pressure to break her skin but nothing more. “You know those cooking shows, where they take a melon or a tomato and they carve it into a flower? I think I’d do the same with Doctor Bloom’s heart. A little snip here and there, and... voila! I wouldn’t just toss it out like Frederick’s organs. The Ripper would want to transform her into something even more delicate and lovely.”

This man wants to carve Doctor Bloom’s heart into a showstopper. He’s apparently dissected his other psychiatrist.

What does he plan to do with Abigail?

She needs to delay him, just for a little longer.

“That’s a difficult technique,” says Abigail. “You can’t go back if you make the wrong cut. It’s
not like surgery.”

The man laughs. “You sound like a chef.”

“I’m learning.”

“What are you suggesting? Do you want to demonstrate some knife-techniques for me?” Gideon tuts.

“There’s fruit,” Abigail says, “in the bowl. They say practice makes perfect.”

Gideon blinks, and then he smiles. “Who are you? I take it you’re not Doctor Bloom’s daughter or sister. Not that family relationships are my forte. I mean, if somebody had given me advice when I butchered my terrible wife and her awful kin, I might have taken it and made something attractive from her at the very end.”

Abigail gulps. “I’m not her family.” That’s probably safer to say, given that this man wants to brutally kill Abigail’s doctor.

Gideon actually does swipe an apple from the counter and begins to peel it, very skillfully and quickly. He’s good with a knife. He knows just how to twist his wrist to sever the rind from the flesh.

“You know, I feel like I’ve seen you before,” Gideon muses. “You must have one of those faces. Or you’re some kind of famous. Are you on daytime tv, by any chance? Or the news? Frederick never splurged on prime television.”

“I’m Doctor Bloom’s patient,” says Abigail. She’s not saying she’s Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ daughter. Killers aren’t always so companionable, despite Will and Hannibal’s partnership.

“Well!” Gideon huffs. “You’re one of the lucky ones. She won’t try to scramble your brains. Well, at least she can’t anymore. What’s wrong with you?”

This wasn’t the distraction Abigail was hoping for. She decides to go with it though, picking up on Gideon’s cues. She just needs a little more time, especially now that he’s distracted carving his inanimate produce and not a worrying less animated Doctor Bloom.

“I… don’t know who I am either,” Abigail says, deciding honesty will color her tones better. “Or, people keep telling me I’m something I don’t want to be.”

Gideon lifts a slice of apple into his mouth with his blade supporting the fruit. “And what’s that?”

Abigail tries not to breathe too hard. Her heart is hammering in her chest. “A killer.”

Gideon’s eyes widen comically, and he chews his apple, carving the rest of the fruit’s soft, white flesh. He’s easily sculpting a geometric pattern of undulating ridges, larger at the base and tighter at the bottom.

Just like a flower’s bloom.

“They say appearances are deceiving,” Gideon finally settles on, sounding thoughtful. “Are they right? Are you a killer?”

“I don’t know,” says Abigail.

“It’s a very simple question.”
“Is it? I see them, visions and pictures of people I’m supposed to have killed, but I don’t feel… responsible. Not the way people want me to, or the way they think I should feel.”

“How’s that?”

Abigail laughs. “Guilty. Wrong. Like I need to turn myself in or to heal and move on. Should I… be feeling that way? I didn’t want them to die… did I? I don’t know, but their deaths stay with me. They’ve changed me. I’m not the same. Maybe, I never was the person I made everyone else think I’d been.”

Gideon knits his brow, tossing his highly decorated object into the air. “I see what you mean. There is a simple solution, though.”

“What?”

“Act the part,” says Gideon. “That, or take your identity back, one piece at a time.”

Abigail doesn’t lick her lips, doesn’t blink. She barely moves. “Would you help me… take back the pieces?”

Gideon thinks. For a moment, all Abigail can hear is Doctor Bloom’s tortured breath. “Well, I was hoping to get closer to the Ripper, but I suppose I’m open to other collaborations. It’s very tempting to start fresh when your page is already filled with everyone else’s scribbles. What kind of pieces are you thinking?”

Abigail’s surprised this man is acquiescing so easily, but he must be hovering pretty far over the brink. So is Abigail. She doesn’t want to startle him. She needs to work into this easy, charming, and slow. “Maybe… an ear?”

“That’s a pretty tiny piece,” Gideon almost protests.

“Ears are like flowers,” says Abigail. “They’d look good with the heart.”

Gideon grins. “You are an aspiring chef, aren’t you? Well, an ear it is. I hope you don’t mind if you watch, and I direct the show.”

“That’s okay,” says Abigail. “Thank you. For helping me… put myself back together.”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” Gideon says, and he swerves around, lifting his knife below Doctor Bloom’s earlobe.

That’s when Abigail’s knife finishes sawing through her bindings.

She’s glad she always carries one with her, and she’s very glad she carefully hid it when she discovered Doctor Bloom’s agent. It seems like Gideon didn’t learn about her concealed weapon either.

As Gideon begins to push his blade very precisely through the shell of Doctor Bloom’s ear, Abigail creeps behind him and she buries the blade in him.

Gideon must have seen her coming, because he’s turned enough so that Abigail’s stabbed his side, not in the center like she intended.

Gideon grunts in pain, quickly grabbing Abigail’s hand as her knife is embedded in his waist—he’s strong, really strong—and then, he flings her back against the counter.
One of his hands is around Abigail’s throat, and the other holds his knife at the base of Abigail’s neck.

Abigail claws at his vice-grip on her windpipe, her eyes on his unwavering blade, still wet with apple juice and a kiss of blood on its edge.

“Well,” Gideon laughs, almost good-naturedly. “Appearances are deceiving. I think they’re right about you, though. You are a killer. Aren’t you? You didn’t hesitate at all. You were good at it. If I didn’t drug you beforehand, I might have given you a ten out of ten. You could’ve nicked something really important. I did say you should take back the pieces.”

“Y-you also said... you wanted to kill like the Ripper... so you could understand him better,” Abigail chokes. “I want to kill you... so I can understand myself better.”

“You don’t feel bad at all, do you?” Gideon asks with genuine curiosity.

Abigail tries to shake her head when she realizes she can’t. “No. No. I’m not ashamed of myself. I never... have been.”

Gideon rips the scarf from Abigail’s throat.

“Well,” he says, eyeing her scar, “it still looks like you need a little work done on you. You’re incomplete. Shame. I kind of like you. Kids also aren’t really my thing, but I don’t think the Ripper would care. You’re young. Maybe, you’ll bounce right back.”

And then Gideon draws his blade across Abigail’s throat. She watches in some distant way as blood sprays, slashing through the air in a broken, crimson wave. It goes all over the underside of her jaw, into her blouse, into the corners of her lips and—

Into Will’s face.

She doesn’t know what’s happening. She’s falling, and the fall is fast, and it’s long. Blood is everywhere, so hot and cool at once.

Gideon’s no longer holding her. Did he let her go?

No. She thinks she heard a gunshot.

It’s hard to tell over the rush of blood, sloshing like the stream when her face is pressed right against the water.

She thinks she hears Will say her name. He’s hovering right over her, like when she has a nightmare. Like when she stumbles while they’re fishing. Like when she’d laid in her kitchen, back in her old home. Will’s with her and on his face is the same intensity and concern as every other iteration where he and Abigail have been together like this, in each possible universe.

He’s pressing down on her neck. She can’t breathe. But, he isn’t strangling her.

Will’s trying to stop the bleeding. Abigail can feel it flowing now, all around the base of her skull, creeping wet into her scalp, dying her hair even blacker than it already is. She wonders how much blood it would take to flood the linoleum floors.

Hannibal comes into her sight then, and he replaces Will’s hand with his own.

Will’s looking fiercely at Abigail before he fades from the corner of her darkening eyes.
Abigail opens her mouth. She tries to say something, but Hannibal shakes his head, watching with eyes so intent and unreadable, and his broad hand is firm on her throat.

She thinks she hears his voice even though the haze.

XV. Will.

A series of ambulances cut through the snow. They pull up at the curb with police cars. The flashing red and blue has transformed into a dizzying, staccato kaleidoscope of hues and illumination splitting off, multiplying, and shattering as they bounce off crystals of ice. Flakes are still falling to the earth. They glow azure with the night and crimson with the…

Will watches as two stretchers emerge, one after the other, from Alana’s front door. On the first, Alana rests. Her eyes are closed, her breathing strained. There is no color in her skin for the wintry landscape in all its effulgence to reflect.

On the other stretcher is Abigail. Her neck is bound and bloody. The strobe lights dance around her. She’s conscious, but barely. Does she see Hannibal, Will wonders, as his husband follows her into the ambulance and disappears behind its doors?

Will doesn’t follow him or Abigail. There isn’t anything he can do at the hospital, no care he can dispense or doctors he can oversee as his partner is capable of doing. The ambulances disappear down the road, and like the needle of an IV exiting the body, a sense of quiet, not quite intact normalcy returns to the cul de sac. A wound remains, a puncture. It’s small but deeply burrowed. Just like the final vehicle.

Wherein Abel Gideon lies.

Will made sure when he shot that Gideon would live.

Emergency medical personnel and officers board the rear compartment, and Jack stands outside the ambulance, his shoes buried in the bank and his arms crossed.

“It’s full up in there,” he says when Will looks through the open doors.

“Seems like there’s plenty of room.”

“Not for what you’re going to bring.”

“What would I bring, Jack?”

“Will,” Jack says sternly. Snow dusts the brim of his gray bowler.

“Would you prefer that I go inside and reconstruct the crime scene?” Will nearly laughs. He feels the violent, irreverent thing squirming under his throat, more terrible and bloodthirsty than a scream.

“Seems pretty straightforward to me,” Price pipes in before Beverly elbows him.

Zeller clambers down from the patio and joins them on the frosted lawn, silver ringing his beard and his hands rubbing together to generate heat. The repeated clap-and-slide gesture summons a man burning through prayers. “Three victims. Two attempted, one deceased. Must have been getting into the swing of things after Doctors Carruthers, Carson, and Chilton.”

“Carson was the Ripper, remember?” says Price.
“Oh, yeah.”

“Would have been nice if the Ripper left us a gift pointing here, too,” says Beverly, before she looks a little apologetically in Jack’s direction.

While Hannibal had bequeathed Carson’s corneas to remind Jack of the site where the blind monument of Miriam Lass once stood, he hadn’t hurried on Chilton’s behalf. Will also hadn’t done much to hasten Jack’s discovery of the disemboweled psychiatrist.

“The Ripper didn’t think Gideon would be here,” Will argues. “Gideon respected Alana. He didn’t want to shame her, not like his other physicians. Not like the Ripper shames his victims. Gideon went… off-script.”

“He went out of his mind,” Zeller corrects, and Will doesn’t fight him.

Will wonders how long Gideon waited outside the window, the parting in the curtains offering lacy glimpses of Alana, before his desperation and mania ushered him indoors.

“We also have two murder weapons,” says Beverly. “Both knives, but only one matches the wounds on Agent Earley’s body.”

“So the other knife was used to stab Gideon,” Jack says, glaring. “It’s a hunting knife, Will.”

“Abigail’s hunting knife.” They’ll find her fingerprints there.

“Why was she carrying a hunting knife with her?” asks Jack.

“A young woman’s gotta take care of herself,” Beverly says.

“Maybe mace wasn’t her style,” Zeller offers.

“You know, they call it mace because the tear gas is supposed to be as painful as getting pummeled by the actual medieval weapon,” Price explains. “So, hitting a guy with a face-full of mace is basically bludgeoning him.”

“Accidentally spraying yourself being the equivalent of whacking yourself with a spiky, steel club,” Zeller muses. “Yeah, that sounds about right. Might be better than accidentally stabbing yourself, though.”

“There was nothing accidental about this stabbing,” says Jack with even more credible steel in his voice, and his investigators say nothing.

When Will reenters the kitchen, he closes his eyes. But before the pendulum starts cutting through the decay and suturing of the present moment, his mind goes back, briefly, to the stream. Will’s standing there in his waders, and Abigail’s beside him, her rod held aloft. She turns to Will, and her usually raptured, victorious expression changes. The scar on her neck opens wide, streaming vermillion and tainting the water. She isn’t alarmed, though. Everything that was sharp and vibrant about her—like the novel, unseasonal chill at the end of autumn or the onset of spring—dulls, diminishing. Abigail’s lids slowly lower, and her body sinks down, buried in the waves before Will can catch her.

Will shakes his head and tries again. He’s in the fading light of the kitchen. The empty chairs are occupied once more. Alana is bound to one and Abigail to another. Will has a knife in his hand, and he strolls leisurely over to the doctor.
“I don’t want to hurt you,” says Will, rolling the handle through his fingers. “Everything’s so unclear. I just want to see you. I want to see him. I want to see me.”

Will draws a line through Alana’s skin, and then he turns around. Abigail is looking at him, her lips moving. Her eyes are fierce, coaxing, calculating.

“I didn’t anticipate you, though,” Will says. Abigail smirks in challenge, tilts her head over to a bowl of fruit. Will smiles. “You’re a surprise, but not a confusing one.” Will grabs an apple and peels it, slivering it with diamonds and floral ruffles. “You’re as lost as I am. As alone as I am. And that makes things clearer. I don’t mind helping you. Maybe, it’ll save me, too.”

When Will resumes his work on Alana, brushing her dark hair back to place his knife behind her ear, there’s a flicker of movement in his periphery. He swivels around, and something pierces him. He grabs the source of the intrusion.

It’s Abigail, breathing hard, still somewhat unsteady on her feet. He did drug her, after all. It’s impressive that she’s standing at all, much less driving a blade through him. Where did she get that blade, by the way? Doesn’t matter. Will wraps his arms around her and dedicates his keen attention to the young woman instead.

“You’re full of surprises,” he hisses as Abigail struggles. Her nails bite into his hands, and she’s saying something. Her gaze is full of defiance. He likes that. “If I break you, it’s not because of the Ripper.” Will tears Abigail’s scarf away and it flutters to the floor. “I want to see. If you shatter, will it mean you finally get the last of your pieces? Breaking you is the same as breaking myself. After all, you and I are the same. We’re changing together. This is my design.”

Will slits Abigail’s throat, and her blood splatters across the both of them.

He opens his eyes, and there are only stains on the linoleum.

Other than communicating his insights on Gideon to Jack, Will drives back with the senior agent in silence.

He suspects Hannibal will have a long night in the hospital, so instead of going for whiskey, Will grabs his gun and heads down to target practice.

Beverly has a mug of coffee in one hand and her other on her holster when she asks, “Mind if I join?”

Will shrugs and they go down together.

Beverly’s comfortable with a gun. She nails her target where it hurts. "Gotcha."

Will’s always preferred a rifle or a knife to a pistol, so while he shoots well enough to incapacitate his prey, he doesn’t hit the forehead or chest dead-center as often as he would like. With one bullet he pierces the throat, and the other side. Then, he shoots the silhouette straight between the eyes.

Beverly whistles, impressed. “If I had teachers who shot like you— well, I’d have been a better student.”

Will doesn’t need to see Beverly’s report card to respond, “You were the top of your class.”

“Yeah, and I fell asleep in the front row just to rub it in their faces,” Beverly scoffs. She scans Will’s posture. “You’re tight.”
“Rotator cuff issues,” Will reminds her, rolling his neck. “Happens when you get shot.”

Beverly pushes her eyewear past her hairline so that Will can fully appreciate her disbelief. “You weren’t this tense the last time we were here.”

“The last time we were shooting something, it was after Abigail’s throat was slit and she was in the hospital,” Will replies, and he raises his Glock, pulling the trigger. His bullet lands just below the sternum.

“So, some things stay the same.”

“And some things change. She wasn’t bleeding all over the floor last time.” Will puts another bullet through a ring in the target’s gut. “Last time, I... I got there sooner.”

“You got there in time today, too, Will,” Beverly insists, and she places a hand on his shoulder, guiding his weapon down. “Look, you can tear this bastard a new one, if you want. I’ll tear mine a new one, too. All night long, if that’s what it takes to get ‘mace in the face’ out of my head. Jimmy won’t stop singing it. Just... have faith that your doc is gonna help her pull through, alright? Abigail, too. I’m amazed she held out as long as she did.”

“She distracted Gideon. She was talking to him.” Because Beverly’s aware of the stabbing, Will adds, “she got to him before he got to Alana Bloom. His knife will have Alana’s blood on it, too, not just Abigail’s.”

Beverly frowns and replaces her visor. “You’d think it was bad enough breaking her back. Hope Jack gets something out of him.”

It’s almost three in the morning when Will retires from the range and finds Jack sitting in his office, flipping through documents as a photo of his wife keeps vigil at his desk. He and Will make eye contact, and the special agent comes through his door just as Jack beckons him inside.

Despite Jack’s skepticism over Will’s attachment to Abigail, he doesn’t doubt his analyses, so he elides confirming Will’s readings of the crime scene. “Gideon’s surgery went well. The morphine didn’t make him chatty, per say, but he talked. Apparently, he wasn’t successful in luring out the Ripper.”

Will knows this is why Jack’s so dedicated to the case—the Chesapeake Ripper haunted Quantico even before he befell Miriam Lass and was promoted to Jack’s personal demon. Then, Jack’s determination only intensified to vanquish his adversary to all that was pure, all that was innocent, and all that was good in Jack’s world.

Once upon a time, Jack’s rhetoric about the perils of the Ripper’s non-brand of evil and the imperative to save others, no matter the cost, might have swayed Will. That time has passed, however, or it never came to be. They’re words both twenty years too late and too early. Jack isn’t the great benefactor to Will; he doesn’t hold the keys to his salvation.

Will’s been enjoying falling over the edge for some time, and he only wants one other person in his embrace as they descend together.

Jack, though—he’s a man on a narrow bridge. One pillar is in ruins. Another more vital and beloved crumbles beneath his feet as the dark rises to caress his overpass. Maybe, soon, it’ll come all the way up or he’ll be lowered down to meet it halfway so it can swallow him, too.

“Did you really think he would be?” asks Will.
Jack rubs his face. “I don’t know. Maybe. If not, those doctors died just so Gideon could return to the asylum. He might have killed everyone on his van the first time around, but it was a hell of a joyride he took us on. All for nothing.”

“We solve cases for something,” says Will. “Death doesn’t follow a set of procedures or need just cause for its outcomes. It doesn’t need a reason. It just happens.”

Jack sighs and his fingers trace the rim of Bella’s photo. “That’s why we’re here in the first place,” he says.

Will folds his arms, leaning back in his chair. “Yeah.”

“If we were at your place, Hannibal would have poured the wine already.”

“You shouldn’t tempt your subordinates with alcohol during work hours, Jack. They might take you up on it.”

Jack chuckles. “Not tonight. Bella’s expecting me… whether she wants me around or not.”

“She wants you,” Will says. “Whether you care if she wants you around or not.”

“Funny. Your husband said the same thing, after I tried to get him to tell me about their sessions.”

Will raises an eyebrow, and Jack smiles, saying, “Don’t worry. I didn’t get him to violate his ethics for me.”

Oh, he’s already done that.

“It’d be hard to blame you, if you tried,” says Will. “The fear of loss is a powerful motivator. A dangerous one, too. You project yourself forward to a point where you no longer see what you care about, when in the present, it’s still right in front of you. To be driven by the dread of loss means living between times. Between the deaths of those you love. You can’t change it because part of you refuses to. An obsession with a vision where the future becomes and became the past.”

“A self-fulfilling prophecy,” Jack nods slightly, and he folds his files, looking at Will. “I’ve always wondered. You’re a bright guy, Will. Heard you were level-headed from the guys at Homicide, too. You could have been in the field at Quantico much earlier, but you chose to stick in the classroom.”

“You’re wondering why I didn’t go out there to save people,” Will says, and to his credit or his reliably unflappable character, Jack isn’t dissuaded from his line of inquiry. “Maybe I thought I could save people from the classroom, too.”

“Takes more time.” More time where people are killed and killers go free, Will reads in Jack’s omission.

“I know what I’m doing when I analyze killers,” Will says. “I don’t feel like I’m saving people when I get behind a gun.” Saving’s usually the last thing on Will’s mind behind any weapon.

“Being in the field doesn’t always mean getting behind a gun.”

“It did the first time,” Will says in a low voice. “And it did today.”

A clock ticks from a shadowy corner of Jack’s office, and he tilts his head back like he’s gulping a shot of whiskey. He and Will sit there for a long time, luxuriating in the faint sound of minutes,
hours deepening and then lessening the darkness.

“Work ended a while ago,” Jack says finally. He waves his hand. “Go home, Will. Another time.”

Will does go home, briefly. He greets the dogs and gets them settled back in after he stuffs a bag with clothes and food. He spits froth and blobs of toothpaste into the sink before he leaves, and he can’t tell if the pink tint is from the blood in his own mouth or from Abigail’s neck. The traffic to the hospital has gotten denser, even though daybreak is still auburn smoldering behind the flared, tattered edges of clouds. Will reaches the hospital, driving down the spiral of the parking garage. Stripes of LEDs and dawn flit over his windshield. Parked, he thrusts his bag over his shoulder and hurls the door shut as he stalks the potholes and concrete.

An attendant at the front desk tells Will Abigail got out of surgery. “Room 408.” She gestures at the end of the cerulean passageway toward an elevator.

Will decides to burn some energy over the stairs. The metal steps feel solid beneath his boots. How hard would he have to stomp to dent them? How far would a body need to fall?

When Will finds the room, a little bit of daylight is just beginning to lighten the blue paint into a tentative eggshell color. Abigail lies on her bed, strapped to machines with needles and plastic cords. The underside of her jaw is translucent, her veins red and inflamed. They’ll probably start bruising in the next couple of days. Gauze winds around a bandage sealing her throat.

Hannibal sleeps in a chair across from Abigail, his hand in hers.

Will watches them. Hannibal’s breath has its characteristically gradual rise and fall. Abigail’s heart rate is lower than Will might have expected after surgery. He’s glad the procedure didn’t stress it much. He follows the peaks and valleys of the bright lines on her monitor. Heart rate, blood pressure, oxygen saturation, respiration, and temperature. Every measure is neon and clinically variegated, though none reflect the rich actuality of blood, how it conflagrates icy skin with its surreptitious heat.

When Will sits on the other side of Abigail, he slips into dreams. Beeping and footsteps transform into the clopping of hooves, and a hollow, winged drumbeat.

Neither Will nor Hannibal are habitually sound sleepers, and their occupations have trained them to be alert at odd intervals with scarce rest. This time, Hannibal wakes first. Will comes to consciousness with Hannibal brushing Will’s hair out of his face.

“Hey,” Will says, stretching in his chair.

“Hello, Will.”

Will kisses his husband, brushing his thumb along Hannibal’s cheekbone. Hannibal cups the back of Will’s neck, tugging his spouse’s lower lip into his mouth with his teeth, before he draws away. Will smells bad coffee, but he doesn’t taste it on Hannibal. Hannibal offers the paper cup to Will instead. It buckles around the hot liquid.

“Abigail’s alive,” Will observes as he sips. Tasteless.

“She will recover.”

Will doesn’t like Hannibal’s tone.
“But, she’s not recovered yet.”

Hannibal pauses. “She’s in a coma. She’ll be hospitalized for at least two or three weeks.”

Will groans. “Jesus Christ, Hannibal,” he drawls, running his fingers through his scalp. Will reigns his accent back in. “Tell me.”

Hannibal seats himself more comfortably in his chair, and somehow he manages to evoke the armchair in his office. The minimalist wood and cheap fabric is elevated to patterned silk and sturdy, carved mahogany. “Abigail was in respiratory distress. She had hemorrhage and hemoptysis. However, her condition wasn’t too unstable. She was also intubated without any problem. It’s important that we watch her for the next twenty-four hours.”

“I’m ahead of you there,” Will says, and he points to the bag.

Hannibal leaves the room to change and consult with staff. Will parses through the doctor’s notes at the foot of Abigail’s bed, pausing to massage the twisting out of his neck. When Hannibal returns, he wears a vest and slacks, and his hair is loose without his products. Will lifts the ashen strands away. Like a jungle cat, Hannibal moves his face against Will’s palm, kissing the tips of his husband’s fingers and inhaling his scent.

“You were firing a gun, my dear.”

“I needed to keep busy.”

“I endeavor to heal a wound, and you long to make one.”

“You’ll get your chance,” says Will. He takes Hannibal’s hand, the one that had maintained pressure over Abigail’s severed throat, and he bites the calloused palm. He notices that Hannibal removed his wedding ring. He probably got blood under that, too. “It wasn’t satisfying, anyway,” Will murmurs as he gnaws a new band around Hannibal’s finger. He barely breaks the skin, and then licks the wound.

“I didn’t think it would be,” Hannibal responds in a low, rough voice, letting his husband work through his violent stirrings. His fingers flex to accommodate the swirl of Will’s tongue and the edges of his teeth. “You are not looking to put distance between yourself and your prey. Though it is a good thing you used it in this instance.”

Will sighs, releases Hannibal’s finger, and glances at Abigail.

“I should have seen it sooner. Gideon going after Alana.”

“It is difficult to predict the behaviors of a man who does not act like himself or any self.”

“If he’d just followed the Ripper.”

“Your empathy follows the lost mind even as it winds deeper into the forest. It does not correct or illuminate the path, however forged in darkness.”

“Abigail shouldn’t have been there— she wasn’t on any of those paths,” Will hisses, draining the rest of the caffeine. “She likes hiding in the brush, cutting across the paths. It meant when she and Gideon collided, it was head-on. Both were damaged.”

“‘Una candida cerva sopra l’erba verde m’apparve, con duo corna d’oro, fra due riviere, all’ombra d’un alloro, levando ’l sole a la stagione acerba,’” Hannibal recites fluently.
While communicating in medieval Italian was one of the few skills Will did not acquire during his time in Florence, he recalls enough to translate, “‘A white doe.’ One of Petrarch’s sonnets.”

Hannibal elaborates: “‘A pure-white doe in an emerald glade appeared to me, with two antlers of gold, between two streams, under a laurel’s shade at sunrise, in the season’s bitter cold. Let no one touch me, she bore written with topaz and diamonds around her lovely neck.’”

“‘My Caesar’s will has been to make me free,’” Will finishes.

“One of Abigail’s behaviors is to be unpredictable,” Hannibal says. “Luckily, her unpredictability is predictably forceful.”

“It has quite the impact. She stabbed him, you know.” Will would convey more irritation were it not for the fact that he’s immensely relieved. “With one of your gifts.”

Hannibal smiles broadly. “She is a very quick learner.”

“Going from stabbing Franklyn to stabbing Gideon is leaping several plateaus.”

“When you empathized with him, did you feel her stab you, Will?”

Will laughs. “Don’t be jealous. She’s already tried to stab you, too.”

“I did tell you she’d be able to defend herself.”

At what cost?

Will crumples the pale sleeve of the coffee cup. He turns it in his fingers, and then he tears the paper along its weakened seam.

“I remember the end of ‘A white doe,’” Will says. He flicks a fragment of the cup onto the floor. “‘Already toward noon had climbed the sun, my weary eyes were not sated to see, when I fell into the stream and… she was gone.’”

There’s red again. It’s not just Abigail’s veins beneath the thin veneer of her flesh, though. Blood leaks from the fractured ruby collar under Abigail’s chin. It’s too great a force to be contained. It pours over her, dying her gown and soaking the downy mattress until it’s bloated, weighty crimson.

Will blinks, and the dark substance evaporates before it floods the bed and trickles to Will’s feet. Sighing, he rests his head on Hannibal’s shoulder. He tries to remember something else.

He tries to forget.

XVI. Hannibal.

Though Hannibal has a stronger affinity for graphite and scalpels, he enjoys the opportunity to return to clay. There’s nothing like physically molding something into form. After massaging the thigh meat with herbs, folding it with spiced vegetables, and binding the roulade with twine and large lotus leaves, he severs his block of clay. The wire slips easily through the soft, red, earthen compound.

Hannibal sculpts vines and foliage with precision. They encircle the ceramic log as new growth on a fallen stump before Hannibal sets the piece to bake. It is with some regret that his malleable material must be hardened before it is broken. Hannibal feels no loss at the shattered vessel,
however. Despite the surface-level artistry, it holds something even more delectable within, much like the clay vessels of man and their contents.

As Hannibal waits for the dish to dry, he composes a platter with Roman and purple cauliflowers. He does little to prepare the vegetable besides shaking free the beads of moisture. They’re so much like a crown of mauve and verdant jewels, studded and peaked to naturally uncut geometric perfection.

Hannibal adorns the rim of another platter with marrow, grapes, and Lady Apples. The apples are subtle but zesty. Also very bite-sized. The thigh goes on top of the aromatics, dusty fumes wafting around it as the meat emerges from its kiln. The ceramic smells warm and exquisite. Just like Eve’s sunbaked flesh as she roamed uncovered and unashamed at the day’s zenith in the garden.

Hannibal’s guest of honor sits at the head of the table. Hannibal lays the dish before him, leaving it momentarily intact. Even before the food graces his lips, the odors appear to prematurely captivate Gideon’s tongue. The muscles in his brow and jaw twist as if an invisible sculptor decided to play with this kaolin lump. Post-procedure and medication, Gideon’s complexion bears a greater resemblance to silica than the vivid, terra cotta container of his severed limb. At some point, Hannibal’s guest regains control over his unabashed organ and speaks.

“Long time no see, Doctor Lecter. I assume you’re not acting in the FBI’s interests tonight.”

“I only consult for them on occasion, but otherwise I am self-employed,” says Hannibal. He grabs his mallet.

“Hard to be self-made in this day and age,” Gideon reflects. “Hard to have anything, isn’t it? Rare to get it, hard to keep it. A damn slippery life.”

“Rest assured, Doctor Gideon. The occasion won’t slip by you. My apologies for the delay. Our other guest will be ready shortly.”

“I feel under-dressed,” says Gideon, gesturing to the robes.

“On the contrary,” Hannibal says, lightly tapping Gideon’s clay-encrusted thigh. Gideon glares and gulps. “Your presentation is very fine. As you know, one must also be comfortable while they are recovering from surgery.”

“As I know,” says Gideon slowly. He fingers the cord of his IV. “Didn’t even feel a thing. Like plucking out a baby tooth.”

“If the bullet had entered you just a little further in, you might have gotten a fracture in your vertebrae. You’d have never been able to walk again.”

“Lucky me,” Gideon breathes. “Now I get to enjoy my legs in every which way.” Gideon appears less eager to discuss the topic of his thighs, so he instead muses, “if you’re not doing this for the FBI, then I have to assume Will Graham isn’t, either. Unless this counts as overtime.”

“Will’s compensation for our present meal is not monetary.”

“Didn’t think that was the reason he picked me up. Not that I suspected I’d be treated to a candlelight dinner, either.” Gideon mumbles, “So, you’re colleagues and accomplices. The twin halves of the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Yes,” says Hannibal. “And we’re married.”
“Huh.” Gideon’s eyes widen and swivel over to the wedding ring. “Imagine that.”

Will enters the kitchen with his waves still a little damp and the heat of the shower palpable on his skin. Hannibal assumed he would merely throw on his flannel and jeans, but divested of flyaway blood and hospital fumes, Will has dressed to the occasion. His shirt is evening sky with pearlescent buttons. His cufflinks are silver and sapphire, gleaming against the sleeves of his svelte, onyx jacket. Will grins a little when Hannibal makes his appreciation apparent.

“You’ve cleaned up nicely,” Hannibal says.

The edge of Will’s eyebrow raises like the arch of a raven’s wing. “I had a feeling you were going for theatricality.” He runs a finger down the rôti de cuisse. “The tale of man. We’re molded from clay and to clay we return.” Will rubs the dust between his thumb and fore-finger and tastes the salt.

“And from it we re-emerge ever more succulent.”

“In Christian myths, clay slip is probably one of the saddest anointments,” Will notes. “After the creator breathes life into his work, he also condemns him to death.”

“It’s a laden symbol.”

“Laden with other laden symbols.” Will grabs a piece of fruit from the platter and tosses it into the air. “Clay and apples both spring from the earth.”

What an unassuming guillotine, one that severed man’s head from the whole of Eden, watering the earth with nutrients for his tortured, intriguing crop. Reminding his husband of their meal-time etiquette, Hannibal tosses a paring knife through the air. It lands in the apple just as Will catches it. The point of the knife hums between Will’s fingers. Will leers into the metal’s reflection.

“It can signal death, but not always an unwelcome one,” says Will, turning the apple so he’s holding the knife and using it to bring the fruit to his lips. “Eve fed her husband the tonic of mortality, but an apple in the mouth of a suckling pig means… celebration.”

Hannibal kisses his husband’s knuckles before turning Will’s palm against Hannibal’s more hungry open mouth. “You do know me so well.”

Will sits to Gideon’s left. He doesn’t even glance at the guest he very courteously picked up from his hospital room. Gideon, on the other hand, is blatant with his fascination and bewilderment.

“Unconventional habits tend to make or break a marriage,” Gideon observes. “I suppose your quirks weren’t a recent development.”

“Not recent, no,” says Hannibal.

“Depends what kind of developments you’re talking about,” says Will.

“You appear to have a number of them, but I was referring to my recent development,” says Gideon. “Or my recent deconstruction.”

“Allusions to cannibalism comprised most of Hannibal’s courtship,” says Will wryly.

Gideon’s brow furrows. “Hasn’t scared you away, though, has it, Mr. Graham?”

“It’s an acquired taste,” Will replies airily, “the puns more than the food.”
“It is you who put Dante into our wedding vows, Will,” Hannibal reminds him. “La vita nuova. His beloved consuming Dante’s burning heart.”

“I wouldn’t cook yours.” Will unfolds his napkin. “I’d feed your body to the dogs… and I’d eat your heart raw. After all, I missed the chance to twenty years ago.”

Hannibal flashes his teeth and controls himself in front of their guest. Part of him almost wishes Will had dressed down. He is very tempting to lay back on the table in his bleak, decadent finery. He’d look and taste exquisite, disheveled, moaning, and adorned with skulls, rib cages, flesh, and fruit.

“I guess I should consider myself lucky,” says Gideon, blinking at his hosts. “My ex, too.”

Hannibal pounds the curvature of the sculpture, and the clay cracks. He continues to chisel away at the shell and peel the leaf back until the cooked flesh is exposed.

Hannibal flips the carving knife. Gideon watches the handle float before his eyes. He makes no motion to grab it, though Hannibal knows any attempt to do so will be met with Will’s immediate, violent restraint.

“Would you like to do the honors, Will?”

Will shrugs, rising from his seat and turning the knife. The edge of the stainless steel slips through the meat with the frictionless caress of water. Had there been bone, Will would have maneuvered as close to it as possible. He produces a juicy, meticulously trimmed cut.

He slides it onto Gideon’s plate.

Gideon stares at his portion before asking, “Do you believe marriage has changed you for the better or the worst, Mr. Graham? I’m inclined to think all that gabber about better halves is a myth. I’m living proof. For as long as I qualify as that.”

“Fear not, Doctor Gideon,” Hannibal replies as Will delivers pieces of flesh onto his porcelain. “You’ll enjoy many courses in your last supper with us. You did rob us of our other dinner companion.”

Gideon grimaces. “I hope you don’t mean Frederick.”

“Chilton won’t be missed here,” Will scowls, giving himself a piece of Gideon’s thigh and pouring sauce onto it. “We’ll savor his absence, however long it lasts.”

“Doctor Bloom, then.”

“Abigail Hobbs.” Will’s voice is hard, and he spears his meat with a fork.

Gideon appears confused, and then his face clears. He’s the most happy he’s been since he entered the home of his hosts. “So, that’s who she was! Miss Hobbs. Last I checked, she was the Shrike’s daughter.”

“She is also under our protection,” Hannibal says, sipping his wine.

“Daughter of the Chesapeake Rippers,” Gideon reflects. “Why am I not surprised? Might have mentioned it during our chat. Suddenly feels like a very one-sided conversation. Did I kill her?”

“You didn’t,” says Will, chewing.
“Good,” says Gideon vaguely. “I’m not just saying this to flatter her dads, but she’s got spunk. Vivacity.”

“Such a loss,” says Hannibal, passing his knife through the thigh, “would have been a terrible waste. The tragedy is not to die, Abel, but to be wasted.”

“No wasted opportunity there,” says Gideon. “Miss Hobbs helped me get the Ripper’s attention after all. Or do you treat all your victims to a meal first?”

“You’re the exception,” says Will. “For now.”

“What a treat.” Gideon’s fork and knife still rest in his hands, poised at the circumference of his plate.

“I am glad you think so,” says Hannibal. “You did not waste Abigail, and so we will not waste you, Abel.”

Gideon stares at his serving before he cuts a piece and takes a bite. It turns against the bulge of his cheek before it passes down a knot in his throat.

“My compliments to the chef,” he says gruffly.

“I admit that it is unconventional, cooking with clay,” Hannibal indulges. Will furrows his brow at the witticism, as if to argue, I told you so—cannibal puns. “I would like to have taught Abigail the technique.”

Hannibal and Abigail had cooked her first kill together, so it only makes sense that she would continue to hone her skills and enjoy the labors of her most recent attempt. Hannibal imagines that Abigail would like the involved process, from tenderizing the raw meat to pummeling spices and binding the roulade. She’d be very skillful and whimsical, he thinks, in creating a work of art from the clay.

That missed chance is perhaps the greatest waste from their meal.

“Miss Hobbs said she was an aspiring cook,” says Gideon. He fixates on each piece of meat lying on his plate like a stray watches a long-dead bird. Then, they enter his mouth and rejoin his body.

“Did she?”

“Gave me some pointers when I was going to make Doctor Bloom’s heart into a flower.”

“Atta girl,” Hannibal says fondly.

Hannibal wonders what it would be like, demonstrating proper mukimono techniques to carve petals from a heart with his protégé. Hannibal thinks that with some initial difficulty, Abigail would excel at slicing bows in the robust organ to become the flower’s delicate, elaborate ruffles. After making her cuts, she’d pry the flaps of muscle loose with her fingers, unfolding them to become a regal blossom.

Hannibal can envision her satisfaction with her piece.

“She also stopped you from doing it,” Will says.

“I thought she might’ve been trying,” Gideon admits with no resentment. “Didn’t expect her to have a knife, though.”
Hannibal has been waiting with dwindling patience for the FBI to process and return his gift. “Abigail is a capable, clever young woman.”

“Helps in various circumstances. Did she have to be before or after her daddies dearest?”

“What do you think, Abel?”

“She was very sympathetic to my plight,” Gideon muses. “Said she didn’t know who she was, either. People thought she was a killer, but she wasn’t sure.”

“That wasn’t it. Not all of it,” Will says expressionlessly, though his scent is complex, shifting, a pattern of guardedness and concern, care and apathy, shimmering light and dark like the sea. “She didn’t just surprise you after she stabbed you. You admired her. Feared her.”

Will hadn’t divulged this to Hannibal, and Gideon appears enthralled by Will’s empathy.

“You know, even in our one-on-ones, Frederick wouldn’t shut up about you. Will Graham, Will Graham, Will Graham,” says Gideon. “Thought he was trying to make me jealous. Your rejections, Mr. Graham, rile him up, and I quote, ‘like a freshman pulling at a panty girdle.’”

Will isn’t surprised, though wrath, disgust, and bloodthirstiness flare from him. Hannibal does not regret delaying his clue to Jack and the FBI, though he would have preferred being Frederick’s personal physician in addition to his apprehender.

“Credit where credit is due, though. You’re right, Mr. Graham. Before today, you see, I had the smallest semblance of an inclination toward self-preservation. It was just a tiny morsel of self-awareness, but still—it didn’t like when the girl who stabbed me said she didn’t feel bad about doing it. Or trying to kill me at all. She said she wasn’t ashamed or remorseful, not one bit.”

“Really?”

Discerning Hannibal’s delighted tone, Will cautions his spouse with a glare.

During the next meal Hannibal and Gideon share, Will is absent, and Hannibal’s guest mentions, “I’ve sensed some mixed parenting styles.”

“Partners can be together for over twenty years and still have their differences,” says Hannibal. “Though a chef will endeavor to produce a meal to the best of his abilities, taste is subjective.”

“Not sure if this menu takes mine into account,” says Gideon, staring at his other leg resplendent and raised over a long platter of sugared fruit, sauce, and gingerbread leaves. His face tightens. “You really are…the Devil. What does that make your husband?”

“According to Miltonian lore, the Devil had a relationship with Sin,” Hannibal offers without hesitation. Will’s disavowal of virtue is one aspect of his suggestion, though his ability to tempt and undo Hannibal in every way, pleasurable and painful, is another. “Sin, however, was the Devil’s creation. As much as I’d like to reserve that honor, Will’s violent appetites have never been solely mine. It is together that we have come into damnable being.”

“Who’s Miss Hobbs, in this scenario?”

“Death. Death is the child of the Devil and Sin. She is born with the loss of innocence. The holy fall from grace.”

“Huh. How fitting. My death smells of candy apples and thyme.” Gideon’s words are terse.
“Smoked, glazed, and served on a sugar cane quill,” Hannibal elaborates, cutting a cube of meat and placing it, quill up, on Gideon’s plate. “Falls off the bone.”

Gideon observes the chunk of gleaming, tender flesh. “With these rarefied dishes you so carefully prepare… do we all taste different?”

“Everyone has their flavor,” says Hannibal.

“And your favorite? No, let me guess. Mr. Graham. He didn’t seem shy about offering you a taste.”

“There is no flavor like Will’s, for his are special and many,” Hannibal smiles. “I’m afraid describing them all would not be appropriate to the dinner table.”

“Mr. Graham’s flavors aren’t appropriate to the dinner table, but mine are.”

“Will’s flavors feature here during very special occasions.”

Gideon hums wearily. “I’m guessing they also get an exclusive invitation. Fancy wine, good music, flowers, and a table for two.”

“Are those not our present circumstances, Abel?” Hannibal asks.

“I’ve learned enough about the Ripper to know you don’t feel they’re the same,” Gideon says mercurially. “How about Miss Hobbs? Has she given you a taste? She’s a smart girl, so something tells me she hasn’t.”

Hannibal wipes his lips on his napkin. “Appreciating a meal entails more than consuming it. One must be aware of how skillfully it was made, and they need just as carefully attend to the fragrances and presentation.”

“Everybody gets et, though, eventually,” Gideon argues. “Be he fat or be he lean. With my last leg standing next to me, I should still wrestle with the urges to fight or flee.”

“It’s called terminal restlessness. The body fills with adrenaline and feels compelled to go-go-go.”

“Did Miss Hobbs feel the same urge to go-go-go from your kitchen, after your cute little cooking sessions?” asks Gideon. “We don’t know each other well, but she didn’t strike me as the passive type. Or, by the time we’d met, had she already gone up and gone? It’d probably be best for her. It’s too late for me. She’s might be comatose, but I’m posthumous.”

“You’re not dead yet, Abel,” Hannibal says firmly. “You still have to eat.”

Gideon groans. “You do sound like a father. Poor Miss Hobbs. At this point, there is absolutely nothing I have to do. She, however.”

“Do you regret failing to kill Abigail, Abel?”

“Do I?” Gideon muses. “Dunno. Killing her, keeping her alive. Not sure which one would spoil the fairytale more. Bring your little gingerbread house crashing down. If Miss Hobbs is Death, whose death is she?”

“Whose death indeed.”

To reward Gideon for his rudeness and insights, Hannibal allows him to watch the doctor tend to his cochlear garden. He brushes Gideon’s nutrient-rich frond with crimson liquid, and the pucker
and slither of the snails is very satisfied.

“All this effort to make me tastier,” says Gideon, eyeing his arm and its diners.

“Oh yes. And you are making them tastier.”

“And I you. Imagine how you must taste. Frederick was trying to get into Mr. Graham’s head when he should have been dying to get into his stomach.”

While Gideon is likely alluding to Frederick dissecting Will’s gut, a far more pleasant image of Will chewing Frederick’s flesh and swallowing it to dissolve in his stomach acids comes to Hannibal’s mind. He doesn’t think Will would be adverse to this invasive treatment. “You’re becoming brighter, Abel. Dying hasn’t dulled you one bit.”

“The snails are certainly having a lovely experience, fattened on me in a red-wine marinade. They have no idea they’re going to be eaten. We do. Does Miss Hobbs? Seems like an occupational hazard, being the Rippers’ daughter.”

“You seem very interested in Abigail.”

“If you think I’m escaping my reality, Doctor Lecter, I’m not,” Gideon hisses. “I’m surrounded by me wherever I go.”

“Very true,” says Hannibal as he guides Gideon’s wheelchair back upstairs.

Hannibal allows Gideon to watch as he cleans his harvest, removing the snails’ waste, severing their membranes to free the animals of their husks, and repeating the process of soaking and massaging the supple organisms.

Hannibal decides to entertain Gideon’s curiosity.

“A Miyabi is a tactile instrument,” Hannibal says about his blade as he stamps the heel through parsley and then pounds the flat of it against garlic. “The knife you were stabbed with, Abel, is called Loveless Drop Point. It’s Abigail’s favorite of the set I gifted her.”

“I was stabbed with a gift from the Chesapeake Rippers by the Rippers’ daughter.”

“Yes.”

Hannibal sweeps the herbs into a bowl with softened butter, and after beating them, fills the mollusks with some of the cream. The snails are returned to their shells and lathered with more seasoning before they enter the heat of the oven.

“Loveless is a small knife, perfect for Abigail’s grip. In addition to its size, it has subtle lines, not like other ostentatious blades. It can easily hide in plain sight.”

“I noticed that, by not noticing that.”

“In the name, Drop Point refers to the lowered tip. It’s designed to gut an animal without damaging the innards. Abigail is very good at this, you see.”

“Always thought my fate rested on a fine line. Didn’t realize that line was buttressed between disembowelment and dismemberment. Guess it’s reassuring, though. Seeing where one finally falls.”

Once the snails are cooked just enough, Hannibal places them in the compartments of large, halved
nautilus shells.

"Forty years ago, Loveless also used a steel far more sophisticated than its contemporaries. Beautiful, strong, almost completely resistant to the elements, and with excellent control. No finer or more fearsome blade has been developed since. I hope mine will be returned here, in time."

Hannibal escorts Gideon to the dining room and serves his guest his consumable consumers. Gideon flicks his fork against his plate in protest.

"Would you rather I extend you the same kindness as the escargot?" Hannibal asks.

Gideon glowers. "Eating me without my knowledge? Well… I find knowing to be more powerful. You’ve already gone to great pains to inform me how I almost perished."

Hannibal pierces the soft flesh of the mollusk and lays it on his tongue. The acidity and sweetness of the vegetables and wine that Gideon consumed are present, though delicate, in the snail’s austere preparation.

"My cooking may not impress you—"

"You mean me cooking—"

"But, perhaps you’ll be flattered to learn I have not once visited my psychiatrist since our meals began," Hannibal explains. "You’ve been just as keen to examine my feelings, especially those about my family."

"I’ll patiently await my degree. It’s not like I’m going anywhere."

"If being eaten with your knowledge empowers you, do you not suppose Abigail feels the same way?"

"Sounds like New Age parenting," Gideon says. "Or maybe the Salem Witch trials. Is it considered empowering, letting your daughter know, someday, you’re going to eat her?"

Hannibal gestures to the table. "What’s beautiful about the snail, Abel, isn’t just its edible flesh. Nautilus shells are nature’s expression of perfect proportionality. When you bisect them, they reveal the Golden Mean. Da Vinci considered it to be the most aesthetically pleasing and ordered of compositions. Balance. The snail eats you, you eat the snail."

"So you’re not just fascinated with eating Miss Hobbs. You’re fascinated with when she happens to you, too." At length, Gideon sucks his escargot from its coil. "I wonder…if she’ll allow it. Not that snails are the only ones who prefer eating in company."

"You’ll be happy to know that, other than you, my only company is Will," says Hannibal.

"So Miss Hobbs is off the table?"

Hannibal answers, "I don’t mind placing myself on hers."

"Yeah, you wouldn’t." That’s Will’s voice over the rasp of the door. "It’s only polite, after all, to let your sous chef finally show you what you’re made of."

Will reaches the end of the hallway and approaches the dinner table. Hannibal smells frost and melting snow as Will bends to kiss his spouse. Hannibal also scents Abigail’s hospital room.

"Mr. Graham," Gideon says to his other host. "You’ve made it for supper. Thought it might just
be the two of us.”

Will plucks a snail from the bowl of the nautilus shell and eats it. “I know when to keep my husband waiting.”

“That you do,” says Hannibal as Will sits across from him, like Will has always sat across from him. Though, perhaps, not like always.

During one of their last nights together in Florence as young men, Will and Hannibal had been on opposite ends of an empty table. There were no sounds of eating, only harsh breathing from disposing of Will’s first kill. Well, that was one source of their exertion and agitation. Hannibal remembers the sight of a young Will, his eyes a maelstrom, shoulders raised and crimson smearing his face. Though there was a tantalizing quality to the consummation in his violence, there was also something else—a bitter note.

Were he capable of smelling it, Hannibal’s bloodlust would have had the same acridity. Like the toxicity in crushed berries and their juices. The sour-sweet spiral of betrayal, forgiveness, lust, wrath, desire, despair. So beautiful, even in that moment, but also debilitating in a way Hannibal had only ever known once before. He had not let that dear aching consume him then. He couldn’t. So, he had consumed it instead.

Twenty years ago, Will and Hannibal crossed what appeared to be the never-ending expanse of polished mahogany to wreak their retribution and soothe their thwarted need. They moved to wound each other. To kill. To have. To change. To mourn.

They survived that dinner, somehow. Hannibal could never predict Will. They have survived many similar and dissimilar meals since, sharing each other’s company as they sit facing in each other’s direction. Never looking away, no matter what they see. No matter what they know.

Presently, as Hannibal and Will eat their snails imbued with Abigail’s victim and her assailant, what else do they partake?

What measure of love? What measure of loss?

Chapter End Notes

So, Abel Gideon returns, Abigail’s throat is slit yet again (more like the very first episode of Fuller’s series this time around), man returns to clay and bullets are returned to targets. Poor Alana also is pushed out a window in this universe as well. Everything cycles, back and forth, time and time again. The fantastic world of Will and Hannibal.

Loveless Drop Point is a real, very exquisite, and very expensive blade. It seemed too perfect for Abigail.

Will and Hannibal cobble together two translations of Petrarch’s "A white doe". One translation reads:

A pure-white doe in an emerald glade
Appeared to me, with two antlers of gold,
Between two streams, under a laurel’s shade
At sunrise, in the season’s bitter cold.
Her sight was so suavely merciless
That I left work to follow her at leisure,
Like the miser who looking for his treasure
Sweetens with that delight his bitterness.

Around her lovely neck “Do not touch me”
Was written with topaz and diamond stone,
“My Ceasar’s will has been to make me free.”

Already toward noon had climbed the sun,
My weary eyes were not sated to see,
When I fell in the stream and she was gone.

Another very similar translation writes:

A white doe on the green grass appeared to me, with two golden horns, between two rivers, in the shade of a laurel, when the sun was rising in an unripe season.

Her look was so sweet and proud that to follow her I left every task, like the miser who as he seeks treasure sweetens his trouble with delight.

"Let no one touch me," she bore written with diamonds and topazes around her lovely neck. "It has pleased my Caesar to make me free."

And the sun had already turned at midday; my eyes were tired by looking but not sated, when I fell into the water, and she disappeared.

I've chosen to largely use the translation that mentions the stream because of Will and Abigail and them fishing together.

We'll have our final chapter next time.

Thank you for reading and sharing your thoughts!
Speak No Evil (Part VI)

Chapter Notes

Hello, all! I'm happy to post the final part of the official story-line of Mizaru, Kikazaru, Iwazaru (Do No Evil), though I foresee some additional episodes in a separate coda not too far in the future! A prequel with Will and Hannibal meeting in Florence is also already 80% written and should be uploaded shortly in the new year.

Apologies for the delay, and my utmost thanks for everybody who has stayed along with the story, either by reading or sharing comments and insights. I'm eternally grateful for your interest and support.

Here it is.

Thank you for your time and thoughts!

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Speak No Evil (Part VI)

XVII. Abigail.

The darkness is so complete that, at first, Abigail is convinced she can’t be dreaming: she must be dead. Though, what would she know? Abigail was never a routine dreamer. Too pragmatic. Her friends accused her of lacking a healthy imagination, because, in Abigail’s experience, a good huntress and long-term prey didn’t indulge in fantasies, couldn’t entertain could’ve-been, should’ve-been scenarios— they exploited the realm of the possible as long as they could in order to kill. In order to survive.

Over the last few months, as Abigail’s been forced to adapt to nightmares, even the shadows they cast over the dome of her mind were diminished by blood-bursts, pale silhouettes, and flutters of dying respirations.

This darkness is different. It seems insurmountable, until the moment it isn’t:

Until the black cupola parts with fissures of light.

Abigail’s eyes, blinking too fast, fill with a harsh glow. Her initial instinct is to recoil, but her limbs are heavy and numb and stuck with plastic and needles. Damn. Everything is fuzzy— soft, soothing shapes that make up plain walls, paintings, doors, windows. A hospital room, Abigail realizes, cursing her belated reactions.

Not so belated, though, that Abigail can’t recognize Agent Crawford sitting directly across from her in all his familiar stoniness.

“Hello, Abigail,” Agent Crawford says in a low voice and promptly goes silent.

Now it feels like Abigail’s dreaming.

An argument wages outside the door. Abigail watches silhouettes gesture energetically at each
other through the glass before a woman sweeps in, facial muscles pinched in exasperation and shutting down her phone like she wouldn’t mind if it never again saw the light of day.

“They don’t want us to keep her too long,” she tells Agent Crawford, and folds her arms as she lands haphazardly on top of Abigail’s bedside table. Abigail’s pretty sure hospital hygiene and regulations say her ass shouldn’t be there, but she doesn’t even need a moment’s consideration to decide not to point it out. “The doctors still want to examine her.”

Agent Crawford huffs with skeptical laughter. “And that’s who you were on the phone with?”

“Well, he does have intimate knowledge of one of Abigail’s doctors. But I think you know what he had to say.”

“I’ve heard his piece.” Agent Crawford turns his brutal gaze back to Abigail. “And now it’s time to hear yours.”

Abigail sucks in a great mouthful of breath and promptly chokes.

“Easy, kid,” the female agent says, bending over Abigail with a bottle and straw. Her voice is lighter now, but not reassuring. “Take it slow. You’ve been out for a while.”

Abigail fumbles around the straw and struggles to swallow. Her throat is filled with edges sharp and shining. She doesn’t know how the liquid goes down her esophagus instead of just spilling out.

“How long?” she asks, her voice quiet and raspy.

“About a month. You were in a coma. They let us know when you started coming to. Do you remember waking up?”

“Not really. It’s just light, color, sound…” Abigail’s weary eyes rove across the room, and fragmentary, familiar sensations return to her. Presences at her bedside, keeping watch. Evergreens and frost perfuming the air more potently than any generic, store-bought bouquet. A never-ending stream of banter and mundane conversation and quiet attentiveness that made Abigail ache. “…I wasn’t sure if I was really alive.”

“You’re alive,” says Agent Crawford. “Do you remember what happened that night you were attacked, Abigail?”

Abigail peers back through her sleep, being drugged, being slashed, and every other hazy half-memory. “I was with Doctor Bloom. Abel Gideon… found us at her house. He tried to kill her. He tried to kill me. I thought he did.”

“He didn’t. Will Graham shot him, and Doctor Lecter saved your life by stopping the bleeding.”

That wasn’t just her dream-memories, then.

“Will and Hannibal… saved me,” Abigail whispers before she can stop herself.

“Yeah. They did,” says the other agent before she lapses into silence.

Abigail really needs more water, so she angles her chin and the agent feeds the straw to her mouth again. It’s lukewarm.

“When they arrived at the scene, Abel Gideon had already been stabbed,” Agent Crawford says.
“Who wounded him, Abigail?”

“I did,” Abigail responds, well-aware that they’ve found her knife and her fingerprints on it. She feels a brief pang in her chest being separated from it— will she ever be reunited with the trusty blade? “He was trying to kill Doctor Bloom. He wanted to cut her up like… a fruit, he said. He didn’t want her beauty to go away after…”

Agent Crawford and the other agent’s expressions don’t waver, as if they’re used to comparable mutilation.

Abigail asks, “Is she alive? He said her back was broken.”

“She’s alive,” Agent Crawford says. “She’s recovering in this hospital. The doctors say with intense physical therapy, she should be able to walk again, maybe make a full recovery.”

“She says you saved her life,” the other agent claims, casually impressed. “You distracted Gideon from doing, well, you know.”

So Doctor Bloom had been conscious, though hopefully not for all of it. Agent Crawford’s face only shifts a muscle, but enough to betray that he isn’t entirely pleased with his colleague’s admission. She shares a short look with her superior and gives a slight shrug of her shoulders, and he almost sighs.

Abigail doesn’t ask why they’re here. It’s not for Gideon, she can see that.

She waits for the inevitable:

“We found train tickets, Abigail,” Agent Crawford announces. “Purchased by your father. Two tickets for the same train lines that one of his victims was using, Elise Nichols. We also discovered more instances of your father crossing with other victims. At every point, he had dinner receipts for two and two hotel rooms near the same campuses. We know your father wasn’t travelling alone when he found his victims. Now, tell me. Who was he travelling with?”

“It was me.” Abigail barely fidgets, which is helped by her general infirmity. As she lays strapped to her bed, Abigail wonders how Agent Crawford sees her— to him, is she prone, vulnerable, weak? Or is she another manner of broken girl: removed from the auspices of pity and condemned to the contemptuous realms of foolishness, moral depravity, a victim who no longer can separate herself from her assailants?

The fierce longing arises in Abigail to square her shoulders and give the agent her defiance. She settles for her gaze, uncompromising, and laced by naïve, sweet confessions falling from tremulous lips: “I applied for schools at the places my dad’s victims went to. Schools in Minnesota. My dad went with me for the orientations. They weren’t far… from my home.”

Abigail’s choices in schools and travelling plans might look incriminating, but they were also natural for a girl who grew up in Minnesota and planned to remain in the state. Parents accompanied their children all the time to visit prospective schools, nothing uncommon about that. It wouldn’t be a long-shot to conclude that what Abigail and the dead girls shared between them was purely a tragic coincidence.

Did the FBI have actual evidence of her interacting with the girls, or were opportune times and locations all the concrete knowledge they possessed?

“You were travelling with your father,” Agent Crawford confirms with an apparent lack of emotion. But Abigail hears his accusation— she feels his deadly certainty fall over her.
“Yes,” Abigail mutters, damning herself for choking. If she didn’t know about the bandages, she would think it’s the noose sitting around her throat and coiling ever so tight. “He didn’t want me to go… to my schools alone. He helped me apply, told me where to go.”

“Your father was very involved in your life.”

“He was,” Abigail says, because there’s proof of this, too, but thankfully it extends earlier than her father’s killing spree. “He always wanted me… close. That was just the way he was. He was protective. He was worried something would happen to me when he wasn’t looking.”

“Did you ever find that unusual?”

“No. I told you. It was just the way… he was. That was the way he loved me.”

“You said you didn’t know any of the victims beforehand. During your travels with your father, did you ever come into contact with these girls?”

“No.”

“Abigail.” Agent Crawford is more strident with his next inquiry: “Did you know that your father was seeking out particular victims?”

“I didn’t,” Abigail hisses through her constricted windpipe. The other agent observes Abigail, immobile and brazenly poised. “I didn’t know.”

“Did you help him choose the girls?” Agent Crawford insists like he can’t hear Abigail. “Were you the bait?”

“I wasn’t,” Abigail states resolutely. She won’t give that away, she won’t, she won’t.

“You grew up hunting with your father,” Agent Crawford says, digging through the bruises in Abigail’s heart. “He was the one to teach you how to kill. He taught you the value of a life. You were good at killing.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“You knew how to weigh a life. And how to balance one life against another.” The dead girls, you. “You knew how to take one. You accepted it.”

Agent Crawford’s words blanket Abigail like six feet of snow. She struggles against the glacial, crushing pressure.

Every part of Abigail aches. She thinks quickly about what she can do, what she’s adept at. She thinks about Hannibal’s game. She switches roles and plays against herself. “I don’t accept what my dad has done,” Abigail says carefully, her voice profound with real pain. “I don’t think I’ll ever accept what he did,” she emphasizes honestly.

Abigail coughs abruptly, curling over herself, and the other agent ducks over her again with the straw. Abigail latches onto it, taking a steady gulp. The agent touches Abigail’s back.

“So you’re saying you had no idea your father was killing anyone?” Agent Crawford says, his voice firm, not desisting or doubtful one bit. “You didn’t help him kill those girls.”

Abigail breathes, raw. She decides to add something that’s more incriminating, but she knows Agent Crawford will see this, too, as the truth, because it’s just that: the pure, hard, and terrible
truth. “I loved my dad, but if I knew everything he would do to me… I would have killed him first.”

Agent Crawford says nothing, and Abigail can hear the hospital machines blink and buzz. There’s dull chatter from beyond the door of her room, the stifled falling of footsteps, and the passing silhouettes of patients and nurses.

Will she eventually be hearing the clink of handcuffs against the side of her bed, Abigail wonders?

“Doctor Bloom,” Abigail says after a while. “She’s been treating me. We’ve talked. What… does she think?”

“She thinks you’re damaged. And that you don’t want people to think you’re damaged.”

*Great.* Abigail knew she shouldn’t have shared anything with her doctor.

“Well, she’s right. I was wrong. Abel Gideon broke me. He did it better… than my dad did.”

“You’re not broken, Abigail,” the other agent insists, even when Agent Crawford gives her a reprimanding glare. “You still got all your pieces.”

“It’s true that I never wanted my dad to do what he did,” says Abigail, shaky with fear, excitement, and pain. Is this the thrill Hannibal feels when he weaves his honesty with deception? She doesn’t think she could ever lie so competently with Will’s understanding, his bold dispassion.

The thought of them hurts. Abigail is tender and apprehensive and unyielding all over.

“Doesn’t anyone believe me? Doesn’t anybody want to help me?”

When Abigail looks back on this moment, she’ll still never be surer about what exactly made Agent Crawford give this away. It’s most likely a crazy constellation of factors. Like Will said, everything that can happen, happens, in every possible way.

Abigail knew then that the agent’s wife was dying from cancer, so maybe that made him weaker, more sentimental.

He also had evidence of Abigail’s attempts to aid Georgia Madchen and Doctor Bloom, and she sensed he was an avid seeker of goodness in the world. He upheld righteousness at his own cost. He wanted to protect victims of violence and madness even when he didn’t completely see the flawed nature of those he sought to protect, because his justice was flawed, too.

Maybe, it was witnessing the dying ideal of his family, his love that destroyed itself from the inside out, and he couldn’t watch Will and Hannibal endure the same without knowing he could do something about it—not like his own powerlessness to save his wife. If there was one thing he couldn’t tolerate more than evil, it was powerlessness.

Agent Crawford might have been struggling with a sense of powerlessness in his lack of any real evidence to tie Abigail to her father’s crimes, beyond the circumstantial.

It was... miraculous, really. That moment defied all laws of logic and physics. It’s like, instead of remaining shattered, the tea cup came back together:

“Will and Hannibal believe you,” Agent Crawford finally says. “They said you couldn’t have done this.”
The other agent apparently views this as permission to speak, because she adds, “Doctor Bloom,
too.”

Abigail doesn’t know if Will and Hannibal’s testimonies will seem too personal, too biased, for
Agent Crawford to entirely take into consideration. Doctor Bloom is treating Abigail
professionally. But, Agent Crawford might be concerned that she’s following her feelings, too.
Abigail doesn’t know, and she doesn’t speak, waiting through the silence until Agent Crawford and
the other agent leave her room and don’t come back.

But someone else does.

“Abigail.”

Abigail wakes up, and she realizes it wasn’t just her dream, because he’s really here.

“Will,” she says.

Will sits at her bedside. He occupies the same chair where Agent Crawford sat.

“Hey.” Will’s smile is a seesaw, one edge falling with tenderness and the other rising incisively,
and his brow is scarred with the evidence of its perpetual furrowing. His eyes are as sharp as ever,
even though the circles around them are dark and wide.

As Will shuffles, Abigail realizes there’s a book in his lap and he’s been reading to her.

“What…” Abigail asks slowly, still stunned and her throat so dry, “were you reading?”

“Flannery O’Connor,” says Will, flashing the spine of the book. “Alana says when she was your
age, she was obsessed. Even tried to raise peacocks, but they were stupid birds.”

“They look stupid,” says Abigail, because they do seem like fussy, useless animals. “Not… like
dogs.”

“No, not like dogs.” Dog hair glints on Will’s elbows and the hem of his shirt, like it always does.
“Sorry I couldn’t bring them in. The hospital wouldn’t let me.”

“Not even for animal therapy?”

“I don’t think I’m qualified to give those kinds of medical opinions.”

“What about Hannibal?”

“Hannibal, either,” says Will. “Not in this case. They already put up with him enough in the
operating room.”

Abigail doesn’t know how to respond to that, so she asks instead, “How’s Doctor Bloom?”

“Getting… stronger,” Will says, something gentle and hard in his voice. “I don’t know if she’ll be
the same after this.”

“Will any of us?” Abigail tries to laugh.

“Probably not,” Will says with a chuckle.

Abigail doesn’t have enough moisture to shed blood or tears. “Is Agent Crawford going to arrest
me?”
“No,” Will answers with total conviction. “You’re not going to be arrested, Abigail.”

“He knows I was with my father when he found those girls,” Abigail argues with more morbid energy than she intends.

“He doesn’t have enough evidence to get a conviction,” Will replies, calm in the face of her desperation. “And you wouldn’t give him more. He also lacks the support of other professional opinions.”

“Yours?” Abigail asks. “Hannibal’s?”

“Both.”

Abigail must be licking her lips again, because Will grabs the same bottle she relies on and hates. Abigail bends her head with begrudging care and drinks slowly. Will lets her take her time, closing the distance to sit by her side on the bed. It’s comforting feeling his weight sink the mattress down with her.

“Abel Gideon tried to kill me,” Abigail says finally when she releases for air.

Will doesn’t blink, but his face sets a little harder. “I know.”

“You… stopped him.”

“I tried to.”

“Hannibal stopped the bleeding.”

“He did.”

“Why?”

“‘Why’ what?” Will asks with a weary flourish of teasing.

Abigail’s chest flares with a blossom of precious pain. “You protected me. Why?”

Will smiles with fondness and exasperation. “Hannibal told you we were going to protect you, didn’t he? We did. That’s what we were supposed to do.”

“Even though I know,” says Abigail, insistently.

Will’s face closes off a little, but he still lets his gentleness and concern bleed through. “Even though you know.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier letting me die?”

Will gives her a look. Abigail almost protests instinctively, as she’ll do when her mentor deliberately riles her up. It’s stupid, she knows—voicing this question, seeking a response, it goes against every self-preserving impulse Abigail possesses and has honed. But, suppressed, unspoken, the unknowing will cut like a knife from the inside of her throat, with no hospital capable of containing the blood loss, healing the rupture.

“Wouldn’t it?” Abigail asks with quiet, perilous force.

“It’s never been easy letting you die, Abigail,” Will says finally, sighing. “Isn’t that how we got here in the first place?”
“I don’t know,” Abigail says, before a memory blurred with fear and pain resurfaces of her lying on the linoleum floor of her home, the cracks in the ceiling floating overhead like directionless constellations. Will had been a momentary voice, a shadow, the deafening crack of bullets. Hannibal a trick of the light.

Then, in Doctor Bloom’s kitchen, they became real. Abigail’s blood flowed around her body, transfiguring her with a monstrous outline of a shape, and she saw them as they were.

“It’s true,” says Will. “I never wanted you to die. Hannibal didn’t want it, either.”

It’s not a promise for the future. Abigail knows that. Even if he worded it that way, Will was capable of lying to her outright, not like Hannibal. Nonetheless, the tension in Abigail’s shoulders loosens when Will gingerly draws the dark hair from her face, his touch fleeting and soothing and, Abigail is certain, kind. In Will, there has always been kindness, resistant and fearful. To give kindness for Will, like his empathy, means giving up a part of himself. How much has Will forfeited to Abigail already? How much has she forfeited for him? Too much, too much, Abigail thinks— she fears too much.

“What?” Will asks softly.

“It’s just…” Abigail struggles to speak. Then, she says, “Even Steven.”

There was another time, in what feels like another world, when Abigail and Will been in a hospital together. Will was the one laid up in a flimsy gown, feverish, grinning, and Abigail perched at his side, enjoying when Will named her his life-saver.

Will, eyes wide with surprise before his brow crinkles, replies, slowly, “Even Steven.” He pats Abigail’s hand. “Now you’ve got to focus on your own recovery. And that means,” Will says when Abigail opens her mouth, “save your questions for later.”

Abigail begins to roll her eyes before the effort makes her dizzy. “You mean save your questions for Hannibal.”

“That’s the mind that outwitted Jack Crawford,” Will replies.

Silence binds Abigail suddenly like a gag.

Will notices. “Does it bother you? Getting away with it?”

Abigail thinks it would be more fitting turning that question of her errant FBI agent instead, but she tactfully refrains from commenting on Will’s lawful propriety.

“Whenever I’m sleeping,” says Abigail, “I see them come in and take me away. I close my eyes for five minutes, and they’re handcuffing me to my bed, telling me my court date. I don’t dream about anything else.”

“There’s the thrill of guilt, the thrill of success,” says Will with professorial objectivity. “And then there’s the fact that a person might feel proud, constructing an artifice so great that they are concealed, but it’s not enough. They’re not satisfied, because art yearns to be recognized. It demands, like we do, to be seen. To be understood, even when we cover ourselves up so we can’t be.”

Will doesn’t say anything else. The silence is palpable, seismic, like you could measure it with the precarious scribbles on Abigail’s monitors.

“You,” says Will. “I can’t tell you what you need, Abigail. What’s right. That’s subject to your judgement, not mine, not your father’s, nor anyone else’s. That being said, I told you… I know what loving a monster’s like. I know from both perspectives. Sometimes, when you have a love like that, it means making a mutually unspoken pact. To ignore the worst in each other in order to continue enjoying the best.”

“After everything they’ve done,” Abigail asks, “can you still ignore the worst in them?”

“Maybe you can,” says Will. “And you can’t. Maybe, you hate what another person makes you do. The pain they put you through. Maybe, you crave hurting them for a part of their very nature. Maybe, you push each other so far, it sometimes feels like you’re both going to shatter.”

Will pauses and says, “But, they see you. They see all of you, like nobody’s ever seen it before. And they accept you. You’re not alone anymore, and you can’t go back to being any other way. You need them. They need you. You ache for each other, and the wrong thing becomes… the right one.”

Abigail doesn’t know if Will’s empathy is reaching inside her right now to reflect all her thoughts and feelings, but she thinks it’s more, too.

Will’s always been a little like her, after all.
And she’s always been a little like Will.

He says, “Love is being fully aware of another human being and being fully unaware of what either of you will become.”

“And that’s… okay?”

Will smiles. “I don’t know, Abigail. You’ve got to decide it yourself, whether you embrace knowing and not knowing the nature of your becoming.”

Abigail doesn’t know what she’s embracing when at length she mentions, leadingly, “You were right. Hospital food is terrible.”

“It’s god awful.”

“What’d you bring?”

Will unpacks highly decorated boxes from his bag. Chrysanthemums unwind across the dark lacquer, each petal sharp and precise. When Will opens the box, little, delicate pieces of edible art are arranged inside each compartment.

“Sakizuke,” he says. “It’s part of kaiseki cuisine. It’s the appetizers in a full-course meal.”

Sometimes, Abigail forgets that Will must know about fine cooking, too, after being with Hannibal for so long.

What have both of them become?

“It’s beautiful. What is it?”

Nothing here looks obviously like human flesh, but Hannibal’s the master of presentation and illusion, not only when it comes to cooking.
Will barely raises his eyebrow. “Crab and sea urchin. Some kind of citrus vinaigrette, too. Want some?”

Abigail nods stiffly, and Will hands her a box. Taking the chopsticks, Abigail decides to eat, because she’s really hungry after all this terrible hospital food and she needs something more pleasant to pass down her throat than water, tepid broth, and Gideon’s knife.

The food tastes delicious. It’s smooth gliding down her tongue. Hannibal probably knew she’d want to eat something soft, something she didn’t need to chew.

Will crosses an ankle over one knee and eats, too.

“What happened to Abel Gideon?” Abigail asks.

Will chews on his fish. “He was taken into custody.”

“So he survived?”

“We don’t know,” says Will, and he sips something with a potent, flowery fragrance, maybe saké. “He was recovering from his surgeries when he disappeared from the hospital.”

Oh.

Abigail lifts what looks like a maple leaf from a compartment of her box, and she eats it. It’s been pickled with something sour and sweet.

“So he just… vanished?”

“They haven’t found him.” Will’s voice never deviates from his teacher’s tones, or his special agent’s persona. But Abigail knows what happened to Abel Gideon.

“Do they have any leads?”

“No.”

“Who would want to take him?”

“There is other family of his deceased wife, though years have passed since he killed her. He also killed a lot of people during the time of his escape. Those close to the deceased doctors might have held grudges against his slayings and brutality. It’s more likely that he escaped himself, though. He managed to do it the last time.”

Abigail swallows her crab, and it glides into her stomach almost effortlessly. “How did he do it last time?”

“He killed his guards in the van.”

“And this time?”

“He killed the officer staged outside of his room,” says Will. “It must have been the middle of the night, because nobody else was there. No one heard a thing.”

Will’s lying to her— two people definitely heard something. Abigail eggs him on anyway. “How do they know he killed the guard?”

“DNA evidence. It was like his last kill. Fast, brutal. Sloppier, either with pain, infirmity or
“Where would he have gone?”

“The FBI are still figuring that out,” Will calmly and neutrally replies.

Abigail finished the rest of her meal and rests her box on her knees. Her tongue lingers on a piece of candied kumquat skin, bright and acidic. After a moment, Will takes her container away.

“I don’t think he got out by himself,” Abigail says. “I think the Ripper took Abel Gideon. Gideon was trying to lure the Ripper to him that night. He wanted to know who he was. I think he finally drew him out. The Ripper would’ve wanted to confront the man who stole his identity. If the Ripper had taken him, Will… would that be the reason why?”

Will crosses his arms. “If the Ripper had taken Gideon, he might have done it for the sake of his reputation. Performance and image are very important to him. But, he might have done it for other reasons, too. The Ripper tends to punish his victims. The more beautiful and cruel his work, the greater the original transgression. His kills are specifically tailored to circumstances.”

“How,” Abigail asks, “would he have punished him?”

“It’s hard to say,” Will muses broadly. “The Ripper is very unpredictable. We’ll have to wait and see if a body turns up and if it matches the Ripper’s other kills. Unless we catch Gideon first.”

Except Gideon’s already been caught.

Abigail begins to feel the fatigue creeping from the soft depths of her pillow through the hardness of her skull, and Will sees it, too. He packs up his bag and puts on his coat.

“You’ll come back,” Abigail asks quickly. “Won’t you?”

“Yeah. You’re not being…” Will considers, deciding on, “left behind.”

When Abigail comes to waking the next time, it isn’t Will who’s reading to her:

It’s Hannibal.

Abigail doesn’t understand what he’s saying, even if his lilting voice is soothing and deep. There’s a book on his lap, but the words aren’t English. Hannibal’s long, skillful fingers touch the rim of the gold-leafed paper as he turns a page. He’s immaculate as usual. The last time Abigail had seen him, his hair was sweeping into his face and his hands were covered in blood.

“Hannibal,” Abigail says easily.

Hannibal smiles. “Hello, Abigail.”

Abigail’s gotten stronger, so she tries to prop herself up a little higher on her pillow. “What are you reading?”


Abigail notices that Will’s reclining on the couch across from her bed, a blanket tossed over him.

“Looks like it worked,” Abigail observes. Will’s a light-sleeper, alert at the slightest noises, so he might be feigning it now, but he breathes like he’s deep in the holds of a dream.
“I’m glad. Will has not had many restful nights.” Hannibal folds the book silently closed. “I hope you don’t mind if it’s just the two of us.”

“No. Thank you for saving me.”

Hannibal leans over Abigail and surveys the bandage still wrapped tight around her neck. He appears to approve of the bindings, because he makes no efforts to adjust them. “You were cut very deeply. Gideon’s blade entered just where your father’s did. That was likely his purpose. Will wasn’t sure the bleeding could be stopped in time.”

“But you thought so.”

“I have seen many wounds in my life. I have operated on very grievous ones. And you are not so easily broken, Abigail.”

“A versatile blade,” says Abigail.

“Yes,” Hannibal says, approvingly. “A very handy one. You’ll be happy to know that you can have your knife back, now that it’s no longer being processed as evidence.”

“Does it bother Agent Crawford?” Abigail asks. A part of her still isn’t confident that the FBI won’t tear her from her hospital and put her in front of a jury or directly in some insane asylum.

“That I stabbed Gideon?”

“If your aptitude with a blade disturbs Agent Crawford, it is not enough to combat his burgeoning beliefs of your innocence. They grow in him day by day. He lacks true evidence that you were an accomplice in your father’s crimes. And you protected yourself well.”

“You and Will helped.”

“We did. It only meant vouching for your exceptional character. Nothing too difficult.”

Hannibal places his book down to grab something, but it’s not the same boxes Will brought last time. Hannibal withdraws a container with amber-tinted liquid, slowly ladling it into two candy-red bowls.

“Will told me how little you enjoy hospital cuisine,” Hannibal explains, pouring with a strict posture and effortless grace. “This is suimono. The broth is intended to be refreshing. It cleanses the palate.”

Abigail takes the bowl. The contents steam her face. Slivered vegetables float on the surface of the clear soup with a piece of pink meat.

“What are the ingredients?” Abigail asks in the same manner she’ll always employ when seeking knowledge from Hannibal in the kitchen—curious and impartial.

“Oxtail, eggplant, and mushrooms,” Hannibal answers in identical tones and passes Abigail a stout spoon like she’s never held before. Dipping into his own bowl, he explains, “We say itadakimasu to convey our respects to the chef before we partake.”

Abigail has Hannibal repeat the phrase, and she tries to say it to the best of her abilities.

“Itadakimasu.”

Abigail sips the meat from the shallow pool of gold in her utensil. It’s light, with a hint of spice,
maybe onions or pepper, pricking Abigail’s lips instead of hitting her in the back of the throat. It stings; it feels good; she feels like she’s alive.

“Can you tell me another story?”

“What kind of story?” Hannibal asks.

“The story of what would have happened to Abel Gideon,” Abigail says calmly. “If the Chesapeake Ripper had caught him.”

“Interesting story for a mealtime.”

“I think that’s the best time to tell it,” Abigail replies.

Hannibal flashes his teeth and lowers his food, the vibrant slip of flesh wavering around the edge of his scarlet ceramic like a fish gnawing the edges of its enclosure. “Let it be a fairytale, then. Once upon a time, there was a garden. It was no ordinary garden. This garden didn’t contain plants or flowers. It was a cochlear garden, containing many, many snails. They preferred eating in company, you see.”

“We all do,” says Abigail, trying to follow along.

“Man and animal are alike in this respect,” Hannibal agrees, nodding. “Once, these snails might have been fattened on herbs and vine leaves. In our tale, though, they feasted on a delicacy nourished by acorns, oysters, and Marsala. The ancient Romans fed their animals the same to improve their flavor. Like all of us, what the snails ate greatly influenced and enhanced their flavor. So, the snails continued to eat and to be eaten. They were very delicious. Eventually, the meal was over, as all meals must come to a close, no matter how fine the cuisine. Because, over time, the consumers’ hungers were satisfied, even if an aching would remain.”

Abigail’s having a hard time unpacking this particular set of concrete, open-ended, and very symbolic narratives. Hannibal appears to enjoy her confusion.

“I think now you should tell me a story, Abigail,” he says. “The story of a young woman who survived Abel Gideon, the man who once claimed to be the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Abel Gideon didn’t want to kill me.”

“Why do you think so?”

“He was a surgeon,” Abigail says. “He knew exactly how to cut me. He wanted me to live.”

“But he wanted Alana to die.”

“Not really. He didn’t do it because he wanted to.” Even though his attempts to transform Doctor Bloom’s heart into a macabre rose suggested otherwise. “He didn’t know what he wanted, other than figuring out who he was. That’s why he didn’t try to kill me. Because I said I just wanted to know who I am, too.”

“And have you figured it out?” Hannibal inquires, politely encouraging.

“Even if I did,” Abigail hesitates, swallowing, “people will… see me and my scars. They’ll think that’s the story of who I am.”

Abigail doesn’t think she’ll be able to cover her newest wound as well with sheer fabrics, though it
doesn’t mean she won’t try. She’s used to dressing up the grotesque with the charming— maybe this time she’ll use veils with spritzes of white asphodels, tangles of forget-me-nots.

“The day my dad cut me,” Abigail muses, “I was wearing flowers. Blood to water the garden.”

Hannibal is obviously amused by Abigail’s analogy. It’s easy to slip back into the game.

“Scars do tell a story,” he says. “Everybody has them. The present conceals, but scars and breaks betray our pasts, allude to our futures and whether or not we remain whole. They’re like fractures in china. Tea cups are delicate things.”

“Do you have fractures, Hannibal?”

“Many. Will does, too.”

“Who… gave them to you?”

“They came about as a result of the events of my youth and in my work as a cook, an artist, and a doctor. Fractures are as much physical as they are mental. They can also be produced by violent encounters with foes or with loved ones.”

“So, Will, then,” Abigail states with no horror, only dryness. “He said sometimes people who love each other also try to break each other.”

“He has certainly carved the deepest marks,” Hannibal shares. “I’ve left my marks on him, as well. I like to think that we have left marks on you, Abigail, and that you have also left your marks on us. Presently,” Hannibal gestures to his sleeping spouse and back to Abigail, “we are a complete set of unbroken porcelain.”

That’s probably true, though Abigail’s feelings about it are a little less straightforward than Hannibal’s.

“Do you plan to hide yours, Abigail?” Hannibal asks. “They are evidence that you’ve come apart and back together again. Some might find you strong, admirable. Remarkable. Others might find you dangerous.”

“Maybe I am dangerous,” says Abigail. “Gideon said I was a killer.”

“You said Gideon did not stab to kill you. Did you stab to kill him?”


Hannibal, of course, isn’t upset about that one bit. He looks very happy that his protégé is refining her existing skills so quickly, a knife learning every way it can cut.

“Did you understand yourself?”

“At that moment?” Abigail asks. “I think so.”

“What about at this one?” Hannibal asks.

A soft groans floats from over from the other side of the room. Hannibal approaches and bends over Will as the waking man groggily kicks off his blankets, muttering something. It doesn’t sound like English— Italian?

Abigail commits the sounds to memory like a song— il mio amato mostro, il mio amato mostro, il
mio amato mostro— knowing, with enough research, she’ll be able to discover what they mean. First, however, she raises her bowl, and catching Will’s eye, says:

“How you’re hungry.”

It’s some time before Abigail sees Doctor Bloom, but eventually, her psychiatrist decides to visit Abigail.

Will was right. She’s changed, and it’s not just the wheelchair and haircut.

Doctor Bloom has her same composure, but the temperature of her smile is colder. What kindness and excitement she continues to impart onto Abigail is more withholding. She’s been betrayed, and not just by anyone: a patient, someone onto whom she administered care and devotion, however little or temporarily. Abigail’s glad she wasn’t the one who betrayed her, because just as passionate as Doctor Bloom is with her friendship and service, she’d probably be just as dedicated with her revenge. Abigail wonders if Doctor Bloom would have agreed with whatever treatment it was that Hannibal and Will subjected Gideon to, if she knew. Abigail’s not telling her psychiatrist this, however.

“How long until you can walk again?”

“In time,” says Doctor Bloom indifferently. “I’ve told you before. All wounds heal differently.”

“Did you expect yours? From Doctor Gideon?”

Doctor Bloom’s smile is the furthest reaches of ice— it’s not pale or fragile. It’s solid, dark, and resolute. “I had a colleague visit me right after my fall. He told me, you cannot see what you will not see… ‘until it shoves you out a window’. I’ve always enjoyed the term defenestration. Now, I get to use it in casual conversation. It’s a little more graceful than what happened to my colleague. His situation would be more aptly described as having his organs hand-picked for a rotten gift basket.”

It appears that Abigail will have to continue to revisit her expectations of psychiatrists, Doctor Bloom, her colleague, and Hannibal as evidence of this. Abigail thinks she likes this change in her psychiatrist, but her ability to see the worst in others now definitely makes her more threatening. Abigail says vaguely, “He’s lucky he’s alive.”

“We all are,” Doctor Bloom nods. “And we’re all changed for it. At least I wasn’t changed in the worst possible ways.” Doctor Bloom doesn’t appear to share Gideon’s perspective that his surgical floral designs would have been more beautifying than horrendous.

Something kinder returns to Doctor Bloom’s demeanor now, because she says softly, “I’m glad you’re alive, Abigail. I’m sorry this happened to you while you were under my watch.”

“I’m alright,” says Abigail. “Will says sometimes we need to be broken before we know who we are.”

Doctor Bloom smiles sadly. “Will’s often right. He knows a lot about dogs, but even more about people. That’s why people hurt him the most.”

Though this remark is incredibly perceptive, Abigail doesn’t think Doctor Bloom realizes that it’s Will spouse who’s done a lot of the metaphorical and probably physical breaking. Given her reaction to her former patient’s betrayal, Doctor Bloom would probably never be able to tolerate someone she loved hurting her so deeply without trying to destroy them back entirely. Abigail
understands a little better about those you love utilizing their closeness to wound you as well as to administer the salve dulling the pain.

“You said you were worried that people thought you should be damaged,” Doctor Bloom says. “Are you still concerned?”

“Are you?” Abigail asks, not quite succeeding in stifling her resentment. She still hasn’t forgotten what her psychiatrist shared with Agent Crawford.

Apparently, Doctor Bloom doesn’t feel like playing up the personally deflective physician today, because she reflects, “I don’t think I’m concerned. To break is... terrible. But, it’s allowed me to see the beauty in things I thought were too unstable for me to love before. I believed I was incompatible with people like that, but I was afraid I’d get hurt if I invested in them, and now I realize we’ll just be broken together.”

“Double the hurt,” Abigail says with more grim humor than she’d meant to reveal. “Just for you two? Or, for the people who wronged you?”

Doctor Bloom is not visibly put-off, and she answers with chilling grace, “Let’s just say, we’re all in this together.”

Abigail thinks about that and decides to make her observations of the woman outside the door known. “Is that who your friend is?”

“I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable,” Doctor Bloom says, but there’s a playfully obstinate arch in her brow.

“Hannibal brought extra food.” It’s advantageous to have Doctor Bloom on Abigail’s side, even a more darkly insightful one, so Abigail will work her indebtedness and gratitude to her patient.

“It’s impossible to say no to Hannibal’s cooking,” Doctor Bloom admits, and she invites her guest inside.

The woman is like Doctor Bloom: striking, elegant, and even more composed. She’s emotionally withdrawn in a way that Abigail admires and envies, and she dresses with a somberly expressive and majestic flair that almost rivals Hannibal’s.

The woman sets up most of the dishes on a table that Doctor Bloom can easily reach with her wheelchair while Abigail arranges the courses per proper order. Her strange guest seems mildly impressed by the very formal lunch, at least as much as her stoic comportment suggests.

“Abigail,” Doctor Bloom says once they’ve distributed bowls of citrus soup with edible flowers. “This is Margot. Margot, this is Abigail. She’s Doctor Lecter’s ward.”

“Doctor Lecter?” Margot asks with some surprise. “You’re his daughter?”

“That was not what Abigail was expecting.

Doctor Bloom is smiling a little deviously now when she says, “Margot is one of Hannibal’s patients. I actually met her when she was coming in for an appointment.”

The outcome of Abigail’s last encounter with one of Hannibal’s patients was less than fortuitous for that patient, so hopefully circumstances have improved. Unlike Franklyn, though, Margot
seems very keen and suspiciously blank.

She picks up on Doctor Bloom’s story, adding, “I thought that Alana was one of Doctor Lecter’s patients. She had that face. I tend to walk out of Doctor Lecter’s building in a very similar state.”

“What kind of state?” Abigail asks.

“Raw,” says Margot. “Like my past self and present self are coming up against each other.”

“She wasn’t wrong about my state of mind,” says Doctor Bloom. “I was talking with Hannibal and Will. Sometimes, it feels like who I was before and who I am today are co-existing. But, they’re two great ice caps in one narrow strait.”

“At least one of them is going to be worn down,” says Margot, lifting the curled edge of Doctor Bloom’s dark hair from her face, “because no matter what, it appears that both of us are still on course to the same action.”

“Even if you hate and love it, at least it’s not lonely,” Abigail supposes.

Margot laughs. “Now that sounds like Doctor Lecter.”

Abigail’s not sure entirely what to make of that response, so she replies, “Hannibal is an unconventional psychiatrist.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he was also an unconventional father figure. Can’t say that I’ve had conventional experiences. Papa disowned me because he thought I’d ruined his legacy.”

Margot’s speech does have the lofty kind of elevation of a woman who grew up with means and money, and it also has the deep resentment of one denied the fulfilment of her birthright.

“My dad tried to kill me because he couldn’t let his legacy go on without him,” Abigail responds.

Margot has impressively expressive eyes considering every other subdued feature of her face. “I guess I’m not too surprised about you being Doctor Lecter’s daughter, then. He’s also unconventionally… protective.”

That’s very true, but Abigail isn’t going to share just how unconventionally protective Hannibal is with Doctor Bloom. She also doesn’t want to betray how just how unconventionally defensive she is of herself regardless, even if Doctor Bloom may have already caught a glimpse of Abigail with her knife. Abigail wonders if this other woman is the same.

“I guess Hannibal’s brand of unconventional also includes three course meals for lunch,” Doctor Bloom observes, eating her pickled vegetables.

Abigail chews on a slice of pink radish. “Will and Hannibal have been bringing me the entire course while I’ve been here. It’s supposed to be savored slowly and deliberately. This is naka-choko, a palate cleanser, and ko no mono are the seasonal vegetables.”

“Delicious,” says Margot. She has very refined manners as she lifts her chopsticks to her mauve lips. “What’s the theme of the meal?”

“Spring.”

“Spring is the season of rebirth,” muses Doctor Bloom, and the cherry blossom floats in her soup. “The end of one life that starts a new one.”
Margot says drolly, “Even Doctor Lecter’s cooking has a message. A very persistent one.”

“Abigail’s a good cook, too.” Doctor Bloom adds, stroking Margot’s knee with a soothing hand. She might be sympathizing with the other woman’s strains as a patient, or some other chapter of her life. Hopefully it’s not some awareness of just how Hannibal ends new lives to construct others. “Maybe we can try some of her cooking, sometime. I’m sure I can get Hannibal and Will to invite us over for a dinner party. I miss the dogs.”

“You know,” says Margot, her face blank. Her tones are far more complex, like a dusky bouquet: there’s aloofness, airiness, and bewildered amusement. “You look familiar, Abigail. Doctor Lecter doesn’t keep photos of family in his office. I either know you, or I know of you.”

Even if Doctor Bloom and Margot are close, it appears that Doctor Bloom hasn’t divulged anything about her patient, at least when she’s not analyzing Abigail for Agent Crawford and the FBI. Abigail believes Agent Crawford is the more dangerous of the two recipients of her personal information, but this woman also possesses something uncanny.

Doctor Bloom tightens her hand in Margot’s, her face tense. “Margot—”

“I’m the one who didn’t kill all those girls,” Abigail answers for her. “That was my dad.”

Doctor Bloom appears to be considering how to navigate the situation between her lover and patient, but Margot doesn’t seem ill at ease. If anything, her prim posture, originally like a steel spire, now unwinds.

“People are in therapy for all kinds of reasons,” Margot muses easily. “At least, I know I have them. Family’s probably the biggest one. Mine prefers pigs to people. I try not to have high expectations for family. If I valued them, I wouldn’t have tried to kill my brother.”

Doctor Bloom sighs, but she doesn’t look upset with the nature of the admission. More with the terrible source of the feeling itself. She wasn’t kidding when she said she’d opened her eyes to beautiful, broken things.

“You don’t sound like you regret it,” Abigail observes. “Did he have it coming?”

“Did he ever,” Margot answers with surface-level dispassionate cheer and a pit of something darker, more agonized, more hopeless. It doesn’t sound like the attempt on her brother’s life has rid Margot of her feelings, and neither has therapy. They weigh in her ringed eyes, the choker around her neck, and the biting and longing edge of her husky voice.

“Would he have it coming again?” Abigail hazards.

Doctor Bloom’s face doesn’t give anything away, neither reproach nor recognition.

“I’m still considering it,” says Margot. “I need to decide if the pros outweigh the cons first. Plus, I’ve been receiving a lot of encouragement. ‘If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.’”

Abigail wonders if her psychiatrist gave her that advice.

“Doctor Bloom does tell me that healing from trauma takes all different kinds of forms,” Abigail volunteers of her own physician.

“I think we’re all working through some issues,” Doctor Bloom says easily. “I’m putting an emphasis on self-preservation.”
Abigail agrees and wonders how that’ll affect her own treatment. “You evolve. Adapt. Change your strategies.”

_You spill blood, sometimes by your own hand or someone else’s._

“I’m considering adding to mine,” says Margot, looking at Abigail a bit more wistfully this time as she mentions, “I wouldn’t mind having a daughter. Maybe it’ll happen, if I’m lucky. Someday. Once my future’s more secure, I think I’d like the chance.”

Doctor Bloom clasps her lover’s hand tighter, and then they help Abigail clean the empty dishes. A single flower remains in a bowl.

Now that Abigail knows a little more intimately how Hannibal prepares his meals, she wonders just how much of Freddie Lounds’ reputation is owed to ruthlessness, cunning, or plain luck. She guesses journalism is usually a mix, with luck balancing out what other unfortunate side effects the ruthlessness and cunning beget.

Today, she’s evaluating how lucky or opportunistic it is when Freddie pops in just as she’s taking out the next lunch Hannibal has prepared for her.

Guess they’ll see if meat was still off the menu.

“Checking in about the book?” Abigail asks once Freddie seats herself liberally on Abigail’s bedside.

Freddie smiles. “Actually, I was here checking up on a related story. One you and I share. Abel Gideon.”

Freddie looks pretty intact for her part in that story, at least more outwardly so than Abigail and Doctor Bloom. “How did you get involved with Gideon?”

“Let’s just say, I got some hands-on nursing experience. There’s a first time for everything, though no first time is quite like being taught by a psychopath.”

“Stress can be a good motivator,” Abigail observes wryly. “Helps on tests. Did you pass?”

“I survived, and my patient did, too, so you might say I passed with flying colors,” Freddie charmingly agrees. “I think I’ll stick with journalism, though. A good story is meant to be told as much as it’s supposed to be experienced.”

“I guess that’s true.” Abigail inverts the lid on her heavy ceramic bowl. She doesn’t see Freddie leaving soon, and she is curious about what opportunities this woman might afford Abigail, so she asks, “Are you hungry?”

“I don’t say no to a good story or a good meal,” Freddie answers as Abigail hands her a sturdy vessel.

_‘Tome wan_. It’s vegetarian.” Freddie is extremely lucky, because nothing on Hannibal’s table is ever vegetarian. That, or the fact continues to be secretly true in the present dish.

Freddie dips the jagged teeth of her bamboo shoot into her miso. “So, Doctor Lecter’s bringing you food. You’ve been in the hospital for a while. Is he helping out with that, too?”

If Abigail had any money before, it’s definitely been consumed by hospital fees, so obviously Will and Hannibal are paying for everything else. If Freddie’s trying to appeal to Abigail’s guilt or her
desire for independence, though, she’s not going to prevail so easily— after all, Abigail’s worked hard to be where she is. She’s played the game, and now she’s siphoning some of the rewards of Hannibal’s trials for having emerged from their very difficult and life-threatening entanglements. Will doesn’t care how much it’ll take for Abigail to recover.

“Will and Hannibal have a lot of money,” Abigail says effortlessly.

“A smart girl should always have a little of her own.”

“And a very smart girl knows the smart way to make it,” Abigail reads.

“You are a very smart girl, Abigail,” says Freddie. “Don’t you want to be one with money and nothing to hide?”

“I think you’d prefer I was one with everything to share. Sharing that turns into more money for two very smart girls.”

“Sharing does have its profits. After all, right now, we’re sharing with each other,” Freddie insists. “I already shared my experience with Gideon. How about you share yours?”

Abigail wonders how much Freddie’s already combed from her impressive networks that have proven before to extend as far as the FBI’s headquarters. Sharing is a two-way street, so Abigail expects that her admissions might also shed some light on her situation with Agent Crawford and her case at large.

“I was with Doctor Bloom when Gideon attacked us. He killed an FBI agent. I think he was stabbed in the throat and back, but he might have also been killed when he fell out of the window. Doctor Bloom fell out with him. Gideon drugged and bound me and wanted to perform on her while I watched.”

“Gideon did strike me as a man eager for an audience,” Freddie says. “I got to watch him remove a man’s organs. The patient also got to watch.”

So that was Doctor Bloom’s unfortunate and resented colleague. He didn’t appear to have Freddie’s good luck, even if he rivaled her tenacious grip to the world of the living. Whatever good that did him.

Not that Abigail’s one to judge.

“Gideon wanted to cut Doctor Bloom open to make a flower out of her heart.”

Freddie doesn’t appear horrified at all by the news. She offers very sweetly instead, “Going by Doctor Bloom’s good health— well, better health than any results of Gideon’s open-heart surgery — it seems like you made a subpar assistant.”

“I wasn’t as helpful as you were,” Abigail replies, and she’s not surprised when Freddie just continues to look good-naturedly and raptly back at her.

“No, you weren’t. But I don’t think that would’ve made Gideon want to kill you. He’s killed nurses before, but he made it pretty clear he was breaking away from that part of his past. And burning down any bridges. Do you know why he tried to kill you, Abigail?”

Freddie seems genuinely curious, but with this woman it’s always hard to tell how much of it is concocted. Abigail supposes she’ll test it out.
“I don’t think it was because he didn’t like me. He said he liked me enough,” she says, “even after I stabbed him.”

Freddie’s enormous eyes do widen at that. *Huh.* So that didn’t make it through Freddie’s FBI informants. Maybe that was a good sign that the FBI was moving past her violent actions. Hopefully, it meant that their focus had shifted elsewhere to other more innocuous, or at the very least non-lethal parts of her character.

“He still slit my throat, though. He was a little more successful than my dad. Gideon almost managed to kill me.” Abigail is still convinced that some part of Gideon didn’t intend to kill her, but with his erratic personality, it was hard to say.

“But, you survived. Just like with your father. It would be a great ending to your book. Gives it closure.”

“Gideon’s not like my dad, though. He doesn’t have closure.”

“Depends on who’s talking. Some people would say Gideon’s closure was the best kind. They might even dream of it. A highly-exposed death means you live on in people’s imaginations, even after you’re brutally murdered.”

“Murdered?” Abigail asks. “Didn’t Gideon disappear?”

Freddie doesn’t blink. “You don’t know?”

*Know?*

“Know what?”

Freddie arranges herself for the report of her tale, crossing her hands over her knee and donning a mask of sober engrossment. “Gideon’s body was found. Looks like he got what he wanted after all: an audience with the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Abigail calmly withdraws her laptop and opens Freddie’s website.

The image that appears before her is undoubtedly the Ripper’s.

Freddie’s eyes glow with the blue glare of the screen. Abigail is reminded of the night lights that attract moths; there’s the same tawdry luminance in her gaze.

“The Ripper was particularly cruel to his imposter,” Freddie narrates. Abigail distances herself from her own thoughts, feelings, and analyses, far more complex than Freddie’s, because she still desires to know the journalist’s perspective and misapprehensions. It would be best to get as much information as she can. “Even I was surprised by how terrible his wrath was. He severed Gideon’s arms to the shoulders and his legs to his pelvis. All while Gideon was alive. What was left of the body was just a head and a hunk of flesh. It makes sense that the Ripper isn’t a conventional grudge-bearer. He took back much more than his pound. He put Gideon’s remains on a mound of shells, broken glass, and torches. His only kindness was that he didn’t burn the body.”

“Burning the body wasn’t part of his design.”

The image is still vibrant in Abigail’s mind when she turns to find Will in the doorway.

He’s composed and disdainful as he regards Freddie’s presence.
“Mr. Graham,” Freddie says with a slightly more charismatic register in her disregard. “How good of you to join us.”

Will cocks his brow. “I’d say it’s good of you to join us, given that I’m paying for the room. But, even then, we both know that it wouldn’t make the sentiment any more true.”

“Freddie wanted to talk about the book,” Abigail says nonchalantly. “With my dad at the beginning and Gideon at the end.”

“It’s always heart-warming to hear a story about a young woman thwarting two men’s attempts on her life,” Freddie smiles. “It’s also a cautionary tale of how people close to you aren’t always what they seem.”

Freddie doesn’t even know how right she is.

“Your writing is about morale, not morals,” Will says. “Raising morale means cultivating a particular set of truths. Subjective ones as opposed to factual.”

Abigail asks, “What was the truth of the Ripper not burning Gideon, Will?”

Will leans against the doorway with his hands in his pockets, off-handed and easy. “He was using other parts of Gideon for fuel.”

“Fuel for what?”

“Fuel to feed a transformation into a delicate kind of beauty.”

“I didn’t realize now the FBI’s categorizing complete dismemberment and mutilation while the victim’s still living as delicate,” Freddie replies. “Makes me wonder what qualifies as indelicate.”

“Maybe you’d prefer to share some tips on indelicacy, Freddie. You’re proficient at it on your website.”

Will pulls up to Abigail’s bedside and shares her screen, ostensibly to take apart Freddie’s language or to watch the crudely magnified photo in all its gory details. But he doesn’t need the photo to see. He’s already experienced the crime in a far more intimate way.

Hannibal has, too. He’s even told Abigail how.

“The shells surrounding his body,” Abigail says. “They’re snail shells.”

Gideon’s amputated torso lies on a bed that unwinds into a great spiral of snails, their dark, hard exteriors and slimier flesh illuminated in spots with the other gleaming shards of glass. He’s located in the center of a pattern that perfectly mimics the invertebrate’s distinctive, coiled form.

Once upon a time, there was a garden.

“A cochlear garden,” says Will, manifesting the fairytale. “The Ripper didn’t just disassemble Gideon. Gideon’s mind and physical form were already in pieces. What the Ripper made sure of was that his body, parts and all, was completely consumed. The mollusks consumed his absent limbs, leaving only the core of him behind, and the animals continued to eat his flesh in the Ripper’s final tableau.”

So, the snails continued to eat and be eaten.

“Snails are considered a delicacy,” says Abigail.
“They are. But not just to people.” Will points to the fragments of brightness in the photo. “The Ripper surrounded Gideon’s snails and flesh with the light of fireflies. Fireflies eat snails when they’re developing from their larval stages. When the snails die, the result is a mature firefly, a creature of radiance and preciousness. The sacrifice has to be significant to engender the scale and singularity of the transformation. Gideon’s sacrifice was, even if it wouldn’t mean the fireflies lasted. Fireflies lead short lives. Their lives in the dark are as uncertain as they are impermanent.”

One reading of Will’s words feels characteristic with the Ripper’s killings: the Ripper took Gideon, the profane and inferior, and created something terrifying and beautiful. His death was cruel and abused all his vulnerabilities, made him the most undone and remade a person could be. Or, less than a person could be.

Another reading of Will’s thoughts feels weirdly almost like a kindness to Gideon: a man whose identity was rocked and reduced until it had about as much structural integrity as a snail was given the ability to transform into something fleeting and beautiful. But that would be... uncharacteristic of the Ripper.

But it’s definitely no more startling than Abigail’s other interpretation of this kill: the Ripper was using Gideon’s death to celebrate and mourn the occurrence of a new life. The Ripper destroyed the old to cherish and witness this emergence of something so dear and pale and fragile. A new life that might not stay. That might leave the lives of the Ripper.

Over time, the consumers’ hungers were satisfied, even if they feared an aching would remain.

Abigail’s not sure which reading to believe, or which one benefits her to do so.

“If Gideon’s death is a sacrifice anyway,” Freddie says, “it only makes sense that Abigail transform it into something useful, like part of her own story.”

Abigail could argue that Gideon’s death is already that sacrifice to her tale.

She answers instead, “I’m not sure if it would be the end or lead to another chapter.”

“Stories are difficult that way,” says Will, gently. “Nobody sees the end… because it’s hard when they do.”

The day before Abigail’s supposed to be released, she thinks Will and Hannibal will wait to meet her in the morning. As the evening sets in, however, Hannibal shows up alone with his boxes.

He fills tea cups with mild, boiling liquid and arranges cubes of the most colorful jelly, amaranthine and burgundy, on platters with dragon fruit and other cuts of berries. Though Hannibal is steadfast with decorum, this time he sits on the edge of Abigail’s bed and allows them to eat there instead of at her little table.

“Mizumono. It’s the dessert at the end of the meal.”

Abigail’s not surprised to hear it, but still she asks, “Is this… the last meal?”

She tastes the confection. It’s cool to her tongue, sweet, tart, melting away with one final, bitter note.

“It can be,” says Hannibal, slicing his gelatin. “I was hoping you’d have dinner with Will and I back home to celebrate your leaving the hospital. That would be our last supper. Would you like that, Abigail?”
“Will thinks it would be smart.”

She’s seen it in Will’s smile and his eyes the last time he was at the hospital. He was the fisherman preparing himself to pull away.

But he was also the man caring for the young woman who had become like his daughter:

The huntress, the fisherwoman. The firefly.

“What do you think?” Hannibal asks.

“I think… we’re as good to each other as we know how to be,” Abigail reflects. “I don’t even know who I’m going to be tomorrow. If I’m going to be tomorrow. I’m… changing.”

Hannibal sips his tea. “As with all things in the natural world, you’ll adapt now and mutate later. Even if you know the state of who you are today, you can’t predict who you’ll be tomorrow. You’re defined up to now, but not beyond.”

“That thought should frighten me,” says Abigail in a voice that is both strong and breathless. She smiles. “But, it doesn’t.”

The moonlight is setting her bed aglow with such resplendence that it’s like the fabric is coming undone, dissolving into particles of light that mingle with the atmospheric darkness until they’re both just fading. There are no borders between the tangible and intangible, because those realities are constantly coming apart and winding back into each other. It’s incredible and terrifying.

“I think I always knew that. I knew who I was, up to a point, day by day. One day, I’d be going to school with my friends, hunting with my dad. I was innocent. And then, another day, I was killing girls who looked just like me, but who weren’t me. One moment I was dead, the next I was alive. On and off, again and again I’d go.”

Abigail laughs, because she can’t help but think it, too, with the radiation from her window bathing her pale skin from her toes up over her neck. The halo suffuses her flesh. “It was like I kept going back and forth between being immortal or a hallucination or a ghost.”

“An imago,” says Hannibal. “The final stages in a transformation. It is also the image of a loved one, buried in the unconscious, carried throughout all our lives. An ideal. Or the concept of an ideal.”

“I was my own concept, but I wasn’t ideal,” Abigail says. “I was… undying.”

Hannibal strokes Abigail’s hair. “You have never been easily broken, Abigail. You cannot preserve entropy, because it gradually descends into disorder, but still, you are forever restored. Abigail Hobbs was dead.”

“Long live Abigail Hobbs,” Abigail smiles, touching Hannibal’s arm with her fingertips. “That was my dirty little secret. Now you see me, now you don’t. I was dead and alive all the time, as long as only I knew.”

As Hannibal moves his hand across Abigail’s dark locks, just sweeping the back of her neck and ear, he muses, “There is a thought experiment called Schrödinger’s box. It’s a paradox. Everyday things are in a state of quantum superposition where one does not know when reality collapses into one possibility or another, as long as it does not interact with the external world. Once it’s observed, it lapses into life or death. It cannot be both.”
“I was the paradox… and I denied the paradox,” says Abigail. “I killed people, girls who were so much like me, and it made me hate myself. But, it also made me feel like I finally existed as myself, no one else. Not my father’s daughter. Not a victim or someone blind. I could defy him, live beyond it all. I didn’t kill for him. I killed… for me. I killed so I could be myself. And… I needed that, no matter what. No matter how much it hurt me or anyone else. Everything else was nonbeing. Not like when I killed Franklyn and tried to kill Gideon. I didn’t feel ugly or like some distortion of who I was. I felt good. I felt good because I could be me.”

When Hannibal’s hand gradually leaves her hair, Abigail catches it over her knee. She knows that Hannibal likes her fingers, and he admires them presently with his own deft touch. He’s always thought they were so skillful, clever, and lovely—he said he couldn’t bear if she lost one, which, thinking about it, was a high compliment for Hannibal.

“If Will is afraid?” Abigail asks. “That being who I am means hurting myself or… hurting you two?”

The beams of nightly luminescence throw stark shadow and light on Hannibal’s face.

“Will has a metaphor for our relationship,” says Hannibal with his usual calm and poise. “It’s one he’s had for a long time. He and I are holding each other while we fall from a cliff. Our fall neither stops nor begins— it is a perpetual descent.”

Abigail’s lips twist into a smile. “That’s a weird way to describe loving someone.”

“It is singular, isn’t it?” says Hannibal, fondly. “After all, you know that love takes many forms, none less true than the other. Every family loves differently. Every love is unique. Isn’t that right, Abigail?”

“Still, Will’s afraid?”

“Not for us. He enjoys it. He doesn’t need to fully comprehend the nature of the fall, or when we are destined to crash into the depths below. If it’s the two of us, he can simply lose himself to the experience: the thrill of feeling so very alive, and feeling so very close to death. Stretching forever backwards and forwards in time. Much as you experienced.”

Hannibal pauses, and Abigail knows why. He looks considering for himself and almost sympathetic for Will.

“However, there isn’t a place for you falling between us.”

For a moment there is so little noise that Abigail almost thinks she hears the breeze rustling the bed sheets, but it couldn’t be. They’re not even slightly disturbed. If anything, Abigail catches the sound of Hannibal’s skin against hers, the melody of the friction between their forms.

“Does the fall have to involve me, too?” Abigail can’t help but think somewhere deep, far back in her voice are the petulant, nervous tones of a young child.

_Do I have to die, too, Dad?_

And like any responsible father, Hannibal smiles kindly. He brushes Abigail’s closed wound, his fingers sure around the back of her neck.

“Yes, Abigail.”

Then, both of his hands move away.
Abigail swallows. She feels so cold. Hannibal’s warm palms aren’t close anymore.

“I don’t think...I have to fall, though,” Abigail says.

The thought is coming to her, clearer now, more compelling.

“You and Will were already falling from the edge before you even met me. You couldn’t have dragged me down with you. I think, instead, I’m... I’m already at the bottom of the cliff.”

*I want to be there* is what Abigail doesn’t say. She shares her other hopes instead, her voice almost excited, energetically adding to the scenario, “Will could have taught me how to sail.”

Abigail can see it. Will, sitting patiently on the shore as he guides Abigail into tightening knots and steering a small, floating vessel against more powerful currents.

“So, when you guys finally reach the water,” says Abigail, “I’ll be waiting with a boat to carry us away. Somewhere safe. Some other world.”

It would have to be, wouldn’t it? For the three of them.

Abigail looks at Hannibal now. His hands are deft and lightly scarred all over from the power his extremities have executed, as a doctor and as a killer and as a chef, over countless lives. “And you could have taught me first aid.”

He’d do it, Abigail thinks, just like Hannibal’s led Abigail around the kitchen. He’d be patient and thorough, his medical supplies shining and clean, mentoring her in how to perfectly disinfect open flesh and in knowing when the time is right to seal a wound.

“So I could fix you guys up,” says Abigail, “when you get hurt from the impact.”

Because, they will be. They always are, the two of them. The three of them, but Will and Hannibal had patched her up last time.

Hannibal’s face is still the same unwavering thing Abigail has known. But there’s something in it now, too, peeking through the veil. It’s something she’s seen once or twice, but it’s always been directed at Will alone. It’s not only pride. It’s possessiveness. A caring.

*Love.*

Suddenly, Abigail’s throat is tight. She thinks she wants to cry. Hannibal’s usually not so open to Abigail, so she can be the same, closed and careful, like she longs to be. She doesn’t know how to be this other way, because love comes with letting herself get hurt, again and again and again. It was never her first instinct anyway, so she can’t negotiate the rush of uncontrollable feeling and the desire to crush its dear, deadly source.

Maybe Hannibal knows, too.

He might even feel the same way.

“Dear, clever girl.”

Hannibal doesn’t touch her. Maybe he thinks he’ll break her.

Maybe he does think that she’ll break the both of them.

The meal is over.
The next day, Abigail packs her things and returns to the Graham-Lecter abode for however long that lasts. She needs to prepare for a dinner, after all, even if it’s the last supper.

The dogs are happy to greet her, acting no differently than they’ve always done with Abigail. Will acts no differently, too. They share the study together as she scrolls through her laptop and he prepares lesson plans and grades essays. When Abigail’s strong enough, they hunt and they fish. Doctor Bloom visits once and apologizes for not being able to participate in their dinner party, but she seems excited to be with Margot. They still prepare for the occasion. It’s one Abigail’s not entirely sure she expected.

Agent Crawford is invited to dinner.

Abigail and Hannibal prepare lamb.

She can’t tell if this is Hannibal and Will’s final gift or test.

The guest of honor sits at the head of the table. The normally emotionless and hostile agent is radically transformed to Abigail as he chuckles and eats his veal. He looks more human than Abigail’s ever seen him, even over the first reluctant meal they shared. He’s tired. His wife couldn’t make it, he said, since the chemo’s been rough on her, especially today.

“She thinks your good cooking will be wasted on her,” Agent Crawford offers as his apologies.

“I’ll prepare her something special,” says Hannibal, slicing the meat. “For another occasion.”

Agent Crawford smiles sadly. “That’s very kind, Hannibal.”

Since Abigail sits at the other end of the table, she sees it all so clearly: Hannibal feeding his guests his very involved dinner preparations, Will sipping whiskey over cuts of meat, using his knife only when his teeth aren’t enough for the job. Agent Crawford is right across from Abigail, and he appears to be... friendly, now. Trusting. Maybe it’s a new strategy, maybe it’s a new mindset. Abigail’s not sure.

But, if he believed Abigail about her father, he’d possibly believe what Abigail would tell him now, or at least absorb enough of it.

She’s free, in a sense. Free from her father, the Minnesota Shrike.

Only Will and Hannibal know her crimes. And only she knows their’s.

So, what about the Ripper?

Is she free from him?

Over the course of the conversation, Agent Crawford comes to asking Abigail if she wants anything special to celebrate her new life. After all, they’re all here for her.

Abigail draws her fork through her spring lamb. The ruby juice is sparkling on her plate.

“I haven’t said it before,” Abigail starts.

“Oh.” Agent Crawford’s tones are leading and exaggerated. He’s putting on his best engaged-and-friendly-with-kids persona. He grins. “You keeping a secret from Will and Hannibal?”

The agent lifts a strong hand and beckons Abigail closer. There’s a straight path between them. “No need to be afraid. You can tell me.”
“It’s not a secret,” Abigail says. “It’s a surprise.”

Will leans back in his strong oak chair. His ankle is poised over one knee. He looks perfectly relaxed.

Arranged just so, he could also leap to his feet and be anywhere in the room in a flash of movement, like a torrent.

“Oh?” says Hannibal, echoing Agent Crawford. He cleans the tines of his long, silvery prong. Hannibal crosses his legs and doesn’t even angle his chair toward the young woman. He’s as he always is: holding himself elegantly still, unfazed, because he’s curious to see what happens next. “What surprise would that be?”

They’re all here at the table together, in perfect concert: Abigail and her two fathers who killed her old one. Her monsters and caretakers.

Agent Crawford could be her savior. He could take her away from here. Or he could be her damnation, with the right set of betrayers, two of whom presently sit at either side of him.

But.

Abigail’s not someone who needs to be saved.

And she doesn’t want to leave.

Not in that way.

She has another going away, another destination in mind:

“Florence.”

Abigail gestures to a drawing framed at the corner of the room. It’s in Hannibal’s beautiful graphite. When Abigail admired it before, he’d told her it was a view of the city from an old military fort where he had coaxed Will into dancing, or Will had very likely lured him in.

“I was hoping… we could go there. I’ve heard a lot about it,” Abigail confesses.

“Hannibal and I,” Will says, as if to explain to Agent Crawford, but he’s not talking to Agent Crawford at all. He’s putting the pieces together. “We met in Florence.”

“I want to see it,” says Abigail. She catches her reflection vividly from her plate. Her eyes are only a little lighter than their usual shocking brightness. Her face is the same and unassuming, but… there’s also something stirring under the smooth surface. Beneath the icy pallor, there’s just the traces of flushing, an edge of nervousness and anticipation. It’s like blood seeping through crystals of snow.

“It would be fun to visit,” Abigail almost laughs. “The three of us. Strange, maybe. I’ve never been outside of the states before. I want to see what Will and Hannibal saw. Maybe, it would be a little different this time around, but also a little the same.”

Hannibal smiles politely. There’s the deliberate quality of a memory on his face, but there’s also something else. It’s the look of a man making plans for the future. “It’s not the time of year tourists are usually abound. It would be colder and starker. But still very beautiful.”

“I’m not sure if it’s too late for tickets,” Abigail admits. She couldn’t have thought this far ahead.
The words are coming less planned from her now, driven by associations of hopes and fears and wild expectations of a life she never thought she’d have. “But maybe, if everything’s sold out, we… we could sail there. Could we do it?”

She looks ever so slightly at Will. She’s a mix of confidence and timidity, pleasure and pain. “Will? Do you think the three of us could make it across the Atlantic?”

Will hand is suddenly in Abigail’s. Just like Abigail thought, it only takes him a sliver of a moment to get across the room. He’s reaching across the table right now, his posture not even strained, and he looks complacent. But he’s also fond. He appears so knowing. So loving.

His blue eyes see into Abigail. Abigail wonders if she’d ever be able to look back into his with the exact same understanding.

Abigail makes an abortive gesture to tighten her clasp around him, and Will more firmly presses his fingers when hers falter and weaken. He’s holding her together with the certainty and the unwavering quality of a man stopping a flowing wound. He caresses the back of her hand with his warm thumb.

“Yeah,” says Will, his voice tender and inviting. “We could do that, Abigail.”

“The sooner the better,” Hannibal adds, “for Will to start teaching you how to sail. It is a skill you can practice all your life.”

“Good,” says Abigail, her voice hoarse. She coughs, clearing it. She’d planned to let Agent Crawford see this, the intimacy and happiness of this makeshift family, but at the same time she wants to close the blinds around him. This part of the performance is over anyway, even as the fairytale still remains. “I’d like that. And you can start teaching me how to patch people up, Hannibal.”

Hannibal exposes a flash of silvery teeth. “We’ll put off your lessons for the morning. I don’t think they’ll be necessary tonight.”

Will suddenly barks with laughter, startling Abigail. Noticing, he pats her hand firmly, once, twice, and a third time, before he squeezes the very tips of her fingers and repositions himself in his chair.

“No,” says Will, grinning sharply, “I think that’s enough for tonight.”

Chapter End Notes

So, here we are at the end! I thought it would be most appropriate to end with Abigail’s point of view. If the first chapters were a spin-off of season 1 of Hannibal, then this one kind of re-envisions the second one from Abigail’s perspective, which we never see in the show.

Thank again for reading! I appreciate any and all thoughts.
Do No Evil (Illustrations from Hannibal's Journal)

Chapter Summary

For everybody who has kept along with the story and for those giving it a look, I wanted to include some artwork with portraits of the Murder Family according to the symbolism of their characters and the story: See No Evil for Will, Hear No Evil for Hannibal, and Speak No Evil for Abigail. Just until the written work with other Murder Family episodes and Will and Hannibal's whirlwind romance in Florence are uploaded.

I'm also dying to upload a visual journal of everyday life in the Graham-Lecter household by Hannibal, but we'll see...

Thank you as always for reading and sharing your thoughts!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!