Summary

Hannibal smells her first. Nearly buried beneath the pungency of the cheap colognes mounted on a nearby display case is something totally incongruous: the sticky-sweet dough scent of the cinnamon pretzels sold down on the mall’s first level. He parts the suits with both hands, hangers squeaking on the bar, and looks down at the young girl squatting on the floor in the middle of the rack.

Or, Will loses his daughter at the mall. Hannibal returns her to him.

Notes

This is my first time writing Aleksandra "Tiny" Graham, the child that kittygirl and I birthed together and whose debut can be found here. She is so important.

Kaledanvers asked for single dad!Will. Kittygirl, as always, provided the inspiration.

Title is from the song of the same name from the Life of Pi soundtrack.

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

Hannibal is browsing a rack of suits when he finds the child.

He smells her first. Nearly buried beneath the pungency of the cheap colognes mounted on a nearby display case is something totally incongruous: the sticky-sweet dough scent of the cinnamon pretzels sold down on the mall’s first level. He parts the suits with both hands, hangers squeaking on the bar, and looks down at the young girl squatting on the floor in the middle of the rack.

She has the left leg of a pair of suit pants crumpled in her sugary fist. Hannibal thinks idly that her parents will have to pay for the item.

“Would you like a napkin?” he offers.

Her surprise at being discovered fills her entire face for one alarmed second before the expression cuts out and her sprite-like features become utterly unreadable. “Yes, please,” she says.

He withdraws a clean handkerchief from the pocket of his own pants. The girl’s eyes follow the movement; her attention snags on the robin’s-egg windowpane of his suit. He watches her blink back and forth between the daring plaid and the muted paisley of his tie before extending the handkerchief.

She releases the pant leg to take it from him. He observes without comment as she carefully wipes her stubby fingers, syrupy with the sugar melted by the heat of her palm, and folds the handkerchief back into an inexpert square before returning it to him with a serious, “Thank you.”

Hannibal holds out his hand. She takes it. He barely has to exert effort to pull her up to her feet, helping her duck under the suits and out of the rack.

Standing upright, she’s only just taller than his waist. Her denim frock is rucked up in the back, so he kneels to pull it down for her. That puts their faces close together—he notices the sugar crystals stuck to her chin and uses the handkerchief still in hand to brush them off before straightening back up.

“I think you’re lost,” he says. “Am I correct?”
She nods solemnly and her curls tumble across her cheeks. “I can’t find my daddy.”

“I’m sure he’s trying very hard to find you.” Hannibal gestures toward the suit rack. “But I don’t know that he would have found you in there.”

Her seriousness cracks a little. “Yes, he could,” she says. “My daddy can think like me and then know where I am and come get me.” She sounds very certain. “He could find me there.”

Hannibal regards her closely. The instant she registers his scrutiny her young face becomes impenetrable once more. In that moment Hannibal realizes he is intrigued. As this is not his shopping trip—he does not buy outlet mall suits—he decides to involve himself.

“Let’s make it easier for him, shall we?” he proposes, and reaches out.

After a long, suspicious pause, she consents to curling her fingers into his. Her hand is still sticky with residual pretzel sugar. He adjusts his grip and leads her out of the men’s department.

They come upon Alana sifting through cocktail dresses. There is a staggering number of blouses and skirts in her cart, all in jewel tones a tad too visually aggressive for the non-threatening persona he understands she is trying to cultivate as a psychiatrist.

She sees him first. “I thought judging every piece of clothing in the store would have kept you longer —” Then the girl peeks out from behind Hannibal’s leg. Alana sweeps aside her surprise and finds a smile with admirable speed. “I see you’ve made a friend.”

“Indeed I have,” Hannibal says. “Only a moment ago she rescued me from some truly appalling pinstripes.” He squeezes the girl’s hand softly; on instinct, she returns the pressure. “As thanks I will be returning her to her father, a task which I regret to say will steal me away from helping you choose your dinner party attire.”

“You weren’t helping much anyway,” Alana says with cheek, but she’s looking at the girl, already consumed with her usual quick concern. “Would you like me to come with?”

Hannibal has no intentions of sharing the role of savior. “That won’t be necessary.” A long friendship has taught Hannibal that Alana will attempt to shoulder her way past his dismissal, so he wastes no time pivoting on one heel. “Please continue your shopping,” he adds. “I’ll rejoin you
He pauses long enough to turn the girl around—twirling her carefully by the hand, which elicits an involuntary and quickly stifled giggle—before leaving Alana where she stands blocked off by her cart, looking disgruntled by their departure.

Both the girl’s mary janes and his own dress shoes click on the polished linoleum floor as they make their way out of the store, slipping into the stream of mall-goers flowing from department to department. They are immediately swallowed up by the noise and stench of the crowd—Hannibal feels the girl’s fingers tighten in his and looks down to find her hunching her thin shoulders and clutching the hem of her frock. The fabric rides up again.

Hannibal can almost taste the girl’s anxiety. He can also see that she is unaccustomed to wearing dresses.

“It must be a special occasion,” he observes, pitching his voice above the general din. “That’s a pretty gown.”

She looks up at him. “Today is Keke’s birthday.” She straightens a little as she explains, “She’s having a princess party, so Daddy got me a princess dress.”

Perhaps some of Hannibal’s incomprehension shows on his face in the split second it takes him to slide between expressions, because she unclenches her fist to show him the procession of sea creatures sewn into the border of the frock. “I’m a sea princess,” she clarifies, stoicism melting away. “I know all the fishes and whales and sharks and I talk to all of them and take care of them.”

“Oh,” he says with appropriate gravity. Experimentally he adds, “A very important princess.”

Color floods her small face and he watches her struggle to bite back a grin. When she ultimately fails, she tucks her chin to her chest and lets her curls fall forward to hide her pleasure. Something in the gesture makes it seem inherited.

Hannibal mulls over the feeling that blooms in his chest in response to her unassuming girlishness. It occurs to him that he finds her charming.

When he sees that the buckle on one of her shoes has come undone, he puts himself in front of her to
cut a swath through the crowd—the people thin out as they separate from the throng and head onto one of the balconies overlooking the mall’s lower level. There is a polished bench against the concrete balustrade; Hannibal lets go of the girl’s hand to grab her under the armpits and lift her onto the seat.

He kneels to redo the buckle. “I should introduce myself. My name is Hannibal Lecter.”

“Nice to meet you,” the girl says, allowing him a small smile. He sees the instant she relaxes some of her reticence. Her simple sunniness is engaging. “I’m Aleksandra.”

She shifts to the side to make room for him on the bench. He folds the corner of her frock into her lap so he doesn’t sit on it before lowering himself down beside her.

“An important name for an important princess,” he says, and enjoys the way she ducks her head again.

The experience is novel. Hannibal does not, in general, associate with children—his professional and personal lives revolve around adult clientele and adult pursuits. He has read a non-trivial amount of literature on the brains and behavior of children, but it has been a long while since he has spent any significant time around one.

He finds the directionless feeling of uncertainty involved in changing that very agreeable.

“When did you last see your father?” he asks.

Aleksandra’s mouth twists wistfully. “In the game place. I was playing with Keke and Daddy said he was gonna be right back but when the game was over he was still gone.”

“You went to look for him,” Hannibal guesses.

She nods. “He was taking so long. I got scared,” she admits. “But I couldn’t find him and there were so many people so I ran away.”

Hannibal considers her. “You said your father would think like you and then know where you
“Daddy goes to that store sometimes,” she explains. “He lets me play in the clothes.” She speaks with confidence. “He would know.”

Privately Hannibal is of the opinion that her father would alert the mall police, which is what he intends to do. “I’m sure he would,” is what he says.

Aleksandra looks at him closely. Her face shuts a little. “Do you believe me?” she asks, like a test.

Hannibal sees that he has underestimated of her young perception. “I believe he would look very hard to find you,” he says. “I believe he is doing so now.”

Aleksandra relaxes a little. “How are we gonna find him?”

“We’re going to ask for help,” Hannibal says. He spies a uniformed officer loitering by the entrance to a jewelry store. He points so that Aleksandra can see her. “We’ll go to that woman and tell her we’re trying to find your father.”

At that, Aleksandra looks a little abashed. She scuffs her shoes together. “Daddy told me to tell a grown-up if I got lost,” she confesses. “I was scared and I forgot.”

Hannibal reaches over to gently stop her from scraping marks into her mary janes. “That’s alright,” he says. “We’ll do it now. Together.”

“Okay.” She slips her hand into his, this time without prompting. He rises to his feet and helps her down from the bench, fixing her frock for her again. Excited with purpose, she starts tugging him toward the security officer. “Let’s go!”

He allows himself to pulled, briefly setting his weight against her only to keep her from barreling into the legs of the mall-goers passing back and forth, and they make it to the other side of the crowd without mishap.

The officer is very accommodating—she gives Hannibal her full attention as he explains the
circumstances and has a very encouraging smile for Aleksandra upon their introduction. She radios in their situation and receives a fuzzy message in return informing them that one Will Graham just reported his daughter missing.

Aleksandra squirms and pulls on his arm. “That’s my daddy’s name,” she whispers urgently.

Hannibal has heard it before. He sifts through his memory, following the echo of the name back through the rooms of his mind until he locates the source: Alana in his study, languid with wine and reclining on a chair many months past, mentioning the man in a discussion about publishing papers. Hannibal recalls how quickly her lips had sealed once she realized what she’d said; she has been careful not to mention him again.

He gives Aleksandra's hand another squeeze. “Then we’ll be seeing him very soon.”

He’s correct. Within minutes another officer rounds a corner and crosses the food court with a man in tow—Hannibal has only the chance to make out thick-framed glasses and flannel before the man blurs into movement, rushing over.

“Tiny!”

Aleksandra detaches from Hannibal. “Daddy!”

Will Graham snatches his daughter up from the ground and folds her into a hug that looks almost too tight for the small girl. She wraps her arms and legs around him and clings with matching ferocity; her frock rucks up in the back but Hannibal does not reach out to fix it for her.

He expects a predictable dialogue—*I was so worried* or *don’t you ever run off again*—but instead Will Graham pulls back far enough to look his daughter over and says, “I had no idea where you were. I looked over by the suits but you weren’t there.”

Aleksandra wiggles around in his arms until she can look at Hannibal. “Mr. Lecter found me,” she says. “He helped me.”

Will Graham follows her gaze and looks at Hannibal as well.
And Hannibal imagines he has a marginal understanding of what being flayed feels like.

The man's attention snag on the robin's-egg windowpane in the cloth of his suit, but not for long. He takes in everything else—the careful part in Hannibal’s hair, the precise remnant of stubble on his face, the deliberate width of his stance, the constructed emotion on his face. Hannibal has the distinct impression that the man is prying at the seams of him.

Will Graham’s reaction at whatever he sees fills his entire face before the expression cuts out and his features become utterly unreadable.

He shifts Aleksandra to one arm so he can shake hands with the security officers and thank them before he approaches Hannibal. Something in his slow tread—heel to toe, like a man trying not to make noise—reminds Hannibal of an animal approaching a predator.

“You found my daughter,” he notes.

“In the suits,” Hannibal confirms.

“Thank you,” Will Graham says. He does not look Hannibal in the eyes. “Thanks for looking out for her.”

“She might have done just as well if I hadn’t stumbled upon her,” Hannibal says. He gives Aleksandra a wink and she beams at him.

Will Graham observes the exchange grimly.

Hannibal attempts charm to soften the look directed at him. “Hannibal Lecter,” he introduces himself. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Will Graham. Nice to meet you,” Will returns, but his tone makes it sound like a lie. He does not offer his hand. “I appreciate what you did.” He looks less appreciative and more wary.

The hairs on the back of Hannibal’s neck lift as he considers what this man may have seen in him to make him so. “It was no trouble.”
There’s an awkward pause between them, the silence that falls between strangers. Then Will says, speaking now to his daughter. “I think we should go home. That’s enough excitement for one day.”

Hannibal anticipates some dissent from the girl, a plea to return to playtime, but she just tightens her grip around her father’s neck and nods. “I have to tell Keke goodbye,” is all she offers.

“Alright,” Will says. “We’ll tell Keke goodbye.”

He readjusts his grip on Aleksandra and returns his attention to Hannibal, eyes rising no higher than his jaw. “Uh, again, thank you.”

“It was truly my pleasure,” Hannibal says. He understands Will is attempting to take his leave. To facilitate the process, he says, “Now that our little adventure is over, I believe I’ll return to my shopping.” He looks at Aleksandra. “And I’m sure you must get back to princessing.”

Aleksandra buries her blush in the side of her father’s neck. She says, smile in her voice, “Thank you for helping me find my daddy, Mr. Lecter.”

“You’re very welcome,” Hannibal says, not falsely. He nods at them both. “Mr. Graham. Miss Aleksandra. Have a lovely rest of the day.”

“You too,” Will says, looking relieved to part. He turns around without further delay and strides off, presumably toward the arcade. He does not look back.

Aleksandra does. She lifts her head and stares at him as her father puts distance between them. Her smile dims the farther they get, smoothing back out to her earlier unreadability, but just before they head down the escalator toward the first level she lifts one small hand up and gives him a wave.

He returns it. Then she and her father disappear.

Hannibal takes his time retracing his steps to the department store. As he walks he thinks about the efficiency and immediacy of Will Graham’s scrutiny, how he clearly absorbed information about Hannibal like a black hole devouring light. The exact nature of that information, he does not know.
He finds Alana in line to check out, her cartload much reduced. She barely finishes greeting him before asking about the girl.

“You found her dad? That was fast.”

“He was also searching for her,” Hannibal says. “A Mr. Will Graham, with whom I believe you’re already acquainted.”

“Will?” Alana echoes, surprised. “That was *his* daughter?” There’s something like wonder in her face. “Two years I’ve known him and I’ve only ever heard about her.”

Hannibal recalls the way Will clutched Aleksandra close like Hannibal meant to pluck her from him. “He seems very protective of her.”

“Definitely. I’ve never even seen a picture. Huh.” For a heartbeat Alana looks guilty; then she squares her shoulders. “You know, Will is my friend—at least I’d like to think so. You might have noticed I don’t really talk about him.”

“I have.” Hannibal waits.

“Will is special,” she says, and then grimaces as though she regrets the word. “He has a special mind. I think people like you and me have a hard time seeing past that.”

Hannibal sees what she is getting at. “I don’t believe Mr. Graham and I are likely to cross paths again,” he reassures her. “Even if we do, I have no intention of persuading him onto my couch.”

Alana seems pleased. “I’m glad.” She relaxes into a grin. “Who knew you were good with kids?”

Hannibal is perfectly aware of the itch of dried sugar on his palm. “To her credit, Aleksandra seems to be a good child.”

“Uh-oh,” Alana says. “Only took her ten minutes to steal your heart.”
“I’ll have to endure without it.” Hannibal thinks of the wariness in Will. “I doubt Mr. Graham will be letting her out of his sight.”

“Probably not,” Alana agrees. “But if she happens to get lost again, he’ll know who to call.”

Aleksandra’s stoic, sprite-like face rises to the forefront of Hannibal’s mind, and then her flustered smile. Hannibal nods. “Indeed he will.”
Chapter 2

Hannibal hears someone in his waiting room.

He has no appointments scheduled for this hour, a quiet time that he typically uses to transcribe patient notes with the windows open to clear his office of the married odors of the day’s visitors. Occasionally he will use his tablet to listen to Mahler or Stravinsky as he works, but today he sits in silence as he applies new stickers to the slim spines of his record books. The shuffling of feet through the door is easily heard; he finishes smoothing his thumb over a large red dot before standing from his desk chair and moving to the office door.

Will Graham is on the other side.

His face is unreadable behind the deliberate barrier of his glasses. He’s traded his flannel for a cheap button-down and an absolute eyesore of a tie, but he looks much the same as he did when they met—ruffled and tired and as closed off as a live clam.

“Sorry to drop in,” he mumbles. He does not look Hannibal in the eyes. “Are you expecting someone?”

“No at this time,” Hannibal says. He recalls the quiet desperation in Alana’s request to keep his attention away from Will Graham and adds, “Please come in.”

Will walks into his office like a paroled man walking back into prison. “I looked you up,” he explains without apology. “Couldn’t remember where I’d heard your name.”

“We have a mutual acquaintance,” Hannibal offers. He sweeps his arm out in a gesture meant to indicate the entirety of his office, a general invitation to wherever Will would like to put himself—meek patients generally make a beeline for the chair, melodramatic patients for the chaise lounge. Will throws his things on the chaise and bypasses the chair entirely.

“Yeah,” he says. “Alana Bloom mentioned you once.” He sounds grudging, as though reluctant to reconcile Alana with that relationship; his surliness does not disagree with Hannibal’s suspicion that some live wire of tension lies between Will and her. “You’re colleagues.”

“For a number of years I had the challenge of being her mentor,” Hannibal reveals. “Now I have the
privilege of being her friend.”

The words sting—Hannibal can see it in the way Will’s careful non-expression cracks a little, the muscle in the corner of his thin mouth ticking once. Hannibal tries to be discreet about appreciating the brief flicker of envy that casts the shadow of a grimace on Will’s face.

“A privilege indeed,” Will says, striding over to the ladder leading up to the mezzanine. He says the words like they’re teeth pulled sans anesthesia.

Hannibal entertains and then rejects the idea of following Will, making his leisurely way back to his desk instead. He considers Will as he runs his hand along one flat rung, his back turned to Hannibal, bold in a way that contrasts starkly to how he kept his body square back at the mall.

Will does not ask for permission before he starts to climb.

Hannibal wonders if the boldness is manufactured, if Will is in fact trying to put himself on higher ground. “Truthfully,” he says, turning away and letting Will to construct his sense of security, “you and I have two friends in common.”

Will’s steps, slow and measured, are barely audible overhead as he explores Hannibal’s library. Once again Hannibal receives the impression that he’s trying to be quiet. “True,” Will allows. “That’s why I’m here.”

Hannibal picks another record book up and resumes his stickering. “I trust Miss Aleksandra is well.”

It is not difficult to retrieve the smell of her, babyish and confectionary-sweet, as he has done it on several occasions in the two weeks that have passed since they met. The memory of her has served as entertainment during the stagnant hours of stale appointments; he has relived the feeling of being intrigued by her odd solemnity, of being charmed by her shy pleasure, lingering in particular on how she looked as she spoke of her sea creature friends. Hannibal rarely devotes consideration to the fantasies of children, but Aleksandra’s enthusiasm, whimsy aside, was not completely childish. He admits that he has wondered after her.

“She’s just fine,” Will says, much too defensively.

In an instant Hannibal reads years of Will fending off the suspicious concern evoked by single
fatherhood. He does not mention it. “I’m glad to hear it.” He wonders what has brought Will Graham to him on his daughter’s behalf, this man who looked at him once and fled. “How can I help you both today?”

Will’s footfalls halt completely. Hannibal removes the sticker he accidentally creased and applies a new one before turning around.

Will is looking down at him. His eyes are fixed on Hannibal’s chin but it is the most direct he has been thus far. “You made a real impression that day.”

Hannibal cocks his head, caught off guard. “A positive one, I hope.”

Will snorts. “Too positive. She hasn’t stopped talking about you.”

Hannibal does not have an immediate reaction to that.

Will doesn’t wait for one. He turns away to continue his circuit around the mezzanine, touching his fingers to random books on the wrap-around shelf as he goes, staring at the titles like he’s looking for something. “Tiny doesn’t—Aleksandra doesn’t do well with strangers,” he says. “She’s shy, rarely makes friends. She gets intimidated.”

Hannibal has yet to discern which expression is appropriate. He does not interrupt.

“When I couldn’t find her,” Will continues, voice hard on the words, “I wasn’t worried that I’d lost her. She’s a smart girl—I knew she’d find somewhere to wait for me. I was worried she’d be terrified, that she’d panic.” He turns at the end of the mezzanine and returns to where he stood before. “But she was fine.” He looks at Hannibal’s nose this time. “You kept her fine.”

Hannibal finally settles on modesty. “I found her very brave.”

“And she found you very interesting,” Will shoots back, like an accusation.

Hannibal realizes that the feeling blooming in his chest is something very similar to pride.
“I don’t find you that interesting,” Will continues, a sting for Hannibal in return. “But she’s infatuated.” He leans forward to brace his hands on the railing. “She’s been begging me to thank you properly.”

Hannibal thinks about the gritty scrape of sugar between his palm and Aleksandra’s. Flattered as he is, he sees no reason to pretend as though returning her to her father had been an inconvenience; altruism doesn’t interest him overmuch, after all. “That is quite unnecessary.”

“Well, I thought so too,” Will says, shockingly. Hannibal is somewhere between amused and piqued to find that this rude creature is the same suspicious one he met at the mall. “But she’s been insistent.”

He raises his chin, almost defiant. “So here I am.”

For the span of a heartbeat Hannibal is completely bemused by the defiance. Then he recalls Alana’s professional guilt, and the intention behind this visit becomes clear.

“Well, I thought so too,” Will says, shockingly. Hannibal is somewhere between amused and piqued to find that this rude creature is the same suspicious one he met at the mall. “But she’s been insistent.”

He can tell by the silence that settles in the office between them that that was very much not what Will expected to hear.

He appears to be derailed, his turn to be caught off guard. After several moments he recovers his intention and looks at Hannibal askance. “My daughter disagreed.”

Hannibal attempts charm again, though it had no appreciable effect the last time. “She is a sweet girl. Her thoughtfulness is touching but excessive.”

Will frowns. “Psychiatrists are an acquired taste which I have yet to acquire. This is kind of an exclusive offer.”

Hannibal is fascinated by his confidence in his own desirability. Intrigued by Alana’s request to keep his distance, he too had researched Will Graham. He discovered only that Will was a reclusive FBI
Academy professor and that he had work relations with Behavioral Science Unit head Jack Crawford; the related Tattle Crime articles had been more disparaging than informative where Will’s special mind was concerned. Aside from his eloquent submissions to several forensic journals and a half-buried record of successful police work in New Orleans, Hannibal had uncovered nothing substantially interesting about the man. Nothing to explain his popularity among Hannibal’s colleagues—nothing to explain the sacrifice in his presence now.

“And I am pleased to be its recipient,” Hannibal demurs. “But I maintain that there is no need.”

Will looks at him as though this is a novel experience. People like you and me, Alana had said—Hannibal can only assume that it has been a small few that have rejected the chance Will now extends to him. Once again he tries to be discreet about appreciating the surprise that slackens Will’s tough unreadability.

After a moment, Will speaks.

“At the risk of sounding like an arrogant ass,” he says, looking slightly less than churlish for the first time since he arrived, “I don’t usually get that response.”

Hannibal enjoys the small vindication of being proven right. “As we don’t seem to find one another that interesting,” he says, yet another petty sting, “I regret to say it appears that you’ve wasted your time.” He thumbs down a small green dot like a pointed punctuation mark.

Above him, Will says nothing for a good while. At first Hannibal believes he has offended him, but the look on his face is more contemplative than affronted. Just when the quiet stretches long enough to be uncomfortable, Will leans forward to brace his elbows against the mezzanine railing.

He says, “You’re good at manufacturing responses, but I bet you’re better at it when you’ve had a chance to plan them beforehand.”

Hannibal blinks. He puts down the sticker ream in his hand. “I beg your pardon?”

Will looks at him with glazed eyes, like he’s working on a mental equation as he speaks. “You have some kind of emotional malfunction—no.” He starts again, recalculating. “You have some kind of social malfunction. Your emotions are perfectly functional—they’re just not linked up to the right responses. So you have to manufacture them.” His eyes flick for a split-second to Hannibal’s brow. “You’re very good at it. Given the time you can probably craft them close to genuine. But on the
spur of the moment, you have to work fast.” He shrugs. “Your responses are good approximations. But they’re shallow.”

Hannibal is returned to the feeling of being flayed alive, to that moment in the mall when he felt the tectonic plates of his persona being pried up. Apparently this is what Will Graham saw underneath.

Yearning and violence well up in Hannibal together, the violence from some place of self-preservation and the yearning from some place of under-stimulation. It's been a long time since someone has glimpsed anything below the suit Hannibal has stitched for society; no one has ever seen it for shallow before. Though there are deeper and darker things Will could have seen in him, Hannibal feels a pulse of brief animal tension, tension that comes from the awareness of a threat. He is hit at the same time with a tidal rush of curiosity as he all at once becomes very, very interested in Will Graham.

In that moment Hannibal wants equally to hurt him and bid him continue.

He wrestles the savager urge into submission. He admits at length, “Your insight is formidable.”

Will looks something like triumphant. “That’s the response I usually get.”

Hannibal does not bother being discreet about appreciating the weary vindication in Will’s grim smile. “You’re empathetic,” he guesses, honing in on Will’s small flinch at the words. “With excellent projection.”

“I’m imaginative,” Will retorts, visibly bitter. “With attention to detail.”

“Associations come quickly to you,” Hannibal continues, intent on how Will suddenly straightens and pulls his arms back to his body. “You perceived all of that in two meetings.”

“The peacocks with the most ornate trains have the greatest success in the wild,” Will throws back. “Anyone could have perceived that, if they looked beyond the plaid.”

Hannibal is distantly insulted but more urgently enamored. He recalls some of Aleksandra’s first words to him, her assertion that her father could find her. That he would think like her. Hannibal wonders if Will can think like anybody.
Several things become clear: the BSU involving an Academy professor in federal cases, Alana’s protective plea. Hannibal begins to comprehend Will’s incredulity at being rejected, his certainty in volunteering his mind to absolve him of debt. He reconsiders the magnitude of Will’s offer.

He appreciates it now for what it is: a chance to peer into a mind more dynamic than he knew, a chance to glimpse his reflection in a mirror of humanity, a chance to know how he appears as a wolf among sheep. A chance to sit across from someone who by several accounts has the potential to pull apart the rest of his persona, to see him. A chance he has never been presented with before.

Hannibal is aware, from Will’s own admission, that this opportunity will probably never come again, that it is a one-time deal. He is equally aware, however, that one time will not be enough.

Not ten minutes ago Hannibal was prepared to dismiss Will as a rude and unfortunate relation to an agreeable little girl—at the present moment he wants to wrench open the bone cavity of Will’s skull and observe whatever strange mechanism is inside, to analyze the processes that allow Will to analyze him, quickly and penetratingly and—perhaps if given the time—completely.

He doesn’t have to know Will Graham, however, to know that he has no intentions of letting Hannibal in his head. He may be offering himself up to placate his daughter but he will almost certainly let Hannibal in no deeper than he looked into Hannibal. It is Hannibal’s bad luck that he wants to see down to the core of Will’s gift.

He cannot do so in one reconciliatory meeting. He thinks that he maybe could do so in many.

Therefore Hannibal makes the decision to play a long game.

“I disagree,” he refutes at last. “I don’t believe just anyone can see what you see.” Certainly not to the same degree, at the same speed, with the same clarity. “It appears that you are unique.”

Will bears the words like an insult. “I look at the evidence,” he argues, as tiredly as if he’s repeated the disclaimer many times before. Then he seems to remember his purpose. “I’m sure you’d like to know what else I see.”

He makes his way back around the mezzanine, footsteps heavy now like he can’t stop dragging his feet. The way his expression wavers between troubled and determined indicates that he is bracing himself. He reaches the ladder and begins to descend, much slower than he climbed up.
“I would,” Hannibal admits. He waits until Will is halfway down to the ground before he adds, “But a card will still suffice.”

Will pauses on one of the rungs for a beat. When his feet touch the floor once more he turns around and stares at Hannibal in stalled comprehension. “Really,” he says.

Hannibal looks back at Will evenly. “Perhaps you’ve been bullied into therapy in the past. I prefer the people that enter this office to be here willingly.”

Will does not react to the prod about past psychiatric abuse. “I’m here willingly,” he insists.

“As willing as martyrs generally are,” Hannibal allows.

Will shoves his hands in the pockets of his slacks and says nothing.

“I don’t consider your suffering to be compensation,” Hannibal says. “Especially not for a favor I was glad to perform.” He picks his sticker ream back up. “It is enough to know I was able to help Miss Aleksandra find her way back to you.” He shrugs a shoulder, more cavalier than usual. “The card would be purely for your peace of mind.”

He is not being false. He had no expectation of reward when he came to Aleksandra’s aid; he was simply fulfilling his own minor whim. Will is a father, however, and despite his best efforts at clinging to his mistrust, it is clear that the words burrow down to some soft part of him.

“Aleksandra won’t be satisfied,” he sighs finally. He says it like a last attempt.

Hannibal gives Will a closed-mouth smile, appropriately tame. “I am confident that she’ll come around in time.” He tips a wrist up to check the hour. “Speaking of time, I expect you’ll need to return to her soon.”

The words seem to jolt Will into motion. He checks his own watch. “You’re right,” he observes, sounding surprised. “I’ve got to go pick her up.”
“I won’t keep you,” Hannibal says serenely. “I would hate for you to be late.”

Will looks a little bewildered as he retrieves his things, glancing a few times at Hannibal as he gathers up his bag and jacket. He frowns behind his glasses, eyes glazed again like he’s trying to rework the equation.

When Will is ready Hannibal puts down his stickers to direct him to the patient exit. He walks abreast of him to keep him from feeling threatened by his presence at his back, moving forward at the last step to open the door for him. “Thank you for stopping by.”

Will looks disgruntled. “Thanks for your time,” he manages, as ungraciously as the last time they parted.

“It was a pleasure.” Hannibal entertains and then rejects the idea of mentioning that Will is welcome to return at any time—he fears that would make him all too transparent to Will, who has already looked beneath his skin once. Instead he says mildly, “Have a safe drive.”

“Thanks,” Will says distantly, crossing the threshold, his expression settling back into unreadability by the time he reaches the other side.

Hannibal dips his head. “Please give Miss Aleksandra my regards.”

Will gives a curt nod. He leaves as unceremoniously as he came.

Hannibal waits until the front door of the building swings closed before he returns to his office and then his desk. He takes a seat, beginning to reach for his stickers and then changing his mind halfway through the motion, leaning back in his chair instead and closing his eyes.

He spends several moments committing his second meeting with Will Graham to memory. He focuses firstly on internalizing Will’s words, and secondly his expressions. When he is confident he has concretized the most significant details, he grabs the last of his record books and finishes his stickering.

In the time that had lapsed between his introduction to the Grahams and his unexpected appointment today, Hannibal had thought largely about Aleksandra, about her adult seriousness, about that one moment of perception when she had known him for a liar, sparing hardly an afterthought for her
father and then only wondering about the reason for his intuitive wariness. He realizes now that Will could possibly turn out to be the most interesting person he has ever met.

It was difficult to decline Will’s grudging offer, but Hannibal has long been convinced that patience rewards more fully than haste. He can only hope that the opportunity he buried today will be a seed that bears fruit in the future—that in turning Will down in his reluctance, he has cultivated a chance of Will returning voluntarily.

He is unsure if he’ll see Will Graham in his office again. He considers hope healthy, either way.
Chapter 3

Will returns to Hannibal’s office the very next day.

He arrives just after the first of Hannibal’s afternoon engagements ends, a long-standing appointment with a patient of several years with acute paranoia and a husband whose thirst for other women remains unslaked by his wedding band. Marital troubles are generally too tedious to hold Hannibal’s attention for long, but Mrs. Oort responds quite attractively to his counseling suggestions. He believes it is possible that this is the year she will finally cut out her spouse’s lying tongue.

Hannibal escorts her to the exit ten minutes ahead of schedule at her request. Though he is normally unimpressed by lapses in commitment, in this case he is happy to let her go early. He finds the way she fiddles with the blade he knows she carries on her person quite promising.

It is on pure impulse that he decides to cross the room over to the patient entrance after she has gone, compelled to check the waiting room though there remains a half-hour until his next appointment. He hears rustling beyond the entrance as he nears and realizes that for the second day in a row he has an unexpected visitor. He adjusts the patterned pocket square at his breast before opening the door.

Will Graham is, again, on the other side.

“I don’t have a lot of time,” he says without greeting. He is dressed in another button-down and tie combination of stock quality, but this time his glasses are hooked in his collar and he’s more or less looking Hannibal in the face through his curls. In his arms is a small box.

The desire to drag a scalpel through that rude mouth is much reduced compared to the last two occasions they have seen one another. Hannibal believes he is getting used to Will. “By all means then,” he says easily. “Please come in.”

As he steps aside to let Will carry his burden over the threshold, Hannibal considers this pleasant surprise. Last night he stayed late at his office—after checking the lock on his pharmaceutical cabinet and arranging the records for his upcoming appointments, he had taken a glass of wine to the hearth at the back of the office and thought exclusively of this unassuming professor’s shrewd peek behind the curtain of the human performance that he stages for the world. In managing his desire for Will to come back to him, he had allowed himself to think of Will’s return solely in terms of weeks, a month at most of curiosity at being gently spurned to earn Will’s presence again. He never imagined he would earn it so soon.
This time Will does not go to the chair or to the chaise lounge or to the mezzanine ladder, but to Hannibal’s desk. One of Hannibal’s unfinished sketches, a landscape exercise of Mongryong spying Chunhyang on her swing, takes up most of its top face—Will uses the side of his hand, not his ink-dotted fingertips, to push it to the side so he can set the box down.

“Allright,” Will says. “I don’t normally deal in I-told-you-sos, but Miss Aleksandra was pretty unhappy with me yesterday.” He gives Hannibal a flat look. “She had some strong thoughts about you rejecting our thanks.” The our thanks is said with only slight sarcasm.

Hannibal cocks one brow. “You told your daughter that I refused your barely consensual offer at therapy?”

He watches with extreme interest as a flush blooms across Will’s face. “Of course not,” he grumbles, stiff with indignation. “I’m not completely inappropriate. I told her that you appreciated the thought but preferred not to be thanked.”

Hannibal can imagine the scene—Will in the face of his daughter’s grave eagerness trying to explain that the man she feels so compelled to do right by does not need her thanks, parrying her hurt questions with vagueness so as not to reveal that his method of conveying her gratitude was to allow one free look inside his coveted brain.

“Have I upset her?” Hannibal asks, genuinely interested in the answer.

Will snorts. “Very much so.” Before Hannibal can make the obligatory apologies, Will steps back from the desk and gestures for Hannibal to step up, as though the entire space were not Hannibal’s to move around in as he pleased. “It may or may not surprise you to know that she’s not really the type to take no for an answer.”

Hannibal moves dutifully into the space that Will vacated, admitting wryly, “I am not totally taken aback.”

“Alleksandra decided to take things into her own hands.” Will indicates the box.

Hannibal examines the outside of it. It’s a poorly-wrapped piece of recycling, cardboard edges showing through cheap gas station gift paper, and it has a retrofitted, crooked lid with a half-dollar bow taped on top. It is certainly the work of a child. Though the presentation is lacking, Hannibal has a great deal of respect for the effort involved.
“She’s a sweet girl.” Hannibal has said the words before. He would not have expected a child to be so meticulous and perseverant about their gratitude—he has known adults quicker to forget much bigger favors than the one he paid to Aleksandra.

“Yes, she is.” Will does not attempt to mask his pride. “And she made me promise to watch you open it, so…” He waves a hand. “Open away.”

It is clear what is not being said—Will’s purpose is fulfilling his daughter’s purpose, nothing more. When it is concluded, his visit will be too.

Hannibal finds the thought mortally unsatisfying. He has spent most of his waking moments in the last twenty-four hours being consumed with curiosity for this surly professor and his bloodhound perception. To think that their acquaintanceship will be so prematurely and permanently terminated without the catalyst of his daughter’s attention is beyond disappointing.

Nevertheless, Hannibal lifts up the lid.

At first the contents are totally bemusing: two envelopes and a figurine. Hannibal picks up the envelopes first. One is labeled with his name in careful, capital letters and the other says, inexplicably, *Tiger Sharks*. He opens the one addressed to him.

It reads:

*Mr. Lecter,*

*Thank you for helping me at the mall. You are so nice. Daddy said you don’t want me to say thank you but I made you some presents anyway.*

*Love,*

*Aleksandra Graham*
There are no spelling errors in the message, although one or two letters are written backwards. Hannibal brings the page an inch closer and inhales the baby-sweet scent that lingers on the paper, comparing it to the smell he remembers from the mall. He refolds the letter with care and sets it to the side.

The second letter is much longer. He reads it once at speed and then again, slower—true to its title, it is a comprehensive sermon extolling the virtues of tiger sharks. Hannibal is very impressed with the girl’s education—she has seen fit to give him a few sentences each on the animal’s anatomy, habitat, behavior, and diet. It is written at an early elementary school level and Hannibal is certain that she asked her father to help her with much of it, but the same grown passion he saw in her before is clear here. He is particularly delighted by her conclusion: tiger sharks are dangerous and beautiful, so I love them.

Will waits for Hannibal to finish before he prompts, “It goes with the gift.”

Hannibal places the paper down with the other and reaches obligingly into the box for the figurine: a tiger shark made of clay. It is of absolutely abysmal artistic quality. Misshapen and unevenly textured, incorrectly fired and coated in far too much glaze, it is a very ugly piece. Hannibal lowers it reverently to the desk.

“I imagine Miss Aleksandra put a great deal of time into this gift,” he says.

He has no qualms about admitting to himself that he is very touched. He receives gifts on a semi-regular basis: tchotchkes from acquaintances advertising their chic trips abroad, polite mementos from guests who have enjoyed a spot at his table, the various tokens of a social life in a city with an elite community of respectable size. It has been a long time since he has received something like this, however, offered totally without motive and totally with care. He can practically taste the heart in it, and it is heady.

Will makes a derisive sound in the back of his throat. “The shark took a while. The letters took a couple minutes.”

“This is all very impressive,” Hannibal says honestly. “I had no idea of the scope of Miss Aleksandra’s knowledge and ability.” He gives Will a closed-mouth smile to avoid alarming whatever animal intuition informed Will’s former wariness. “Your daughter is more exemplary than I imagined.”

He is being effusive, but he is not being untrue. Before, his lingering fondness for Aleksandra was a nebulous thing, formed by an intriguing first impression and the simple random charm bestowed
upon a precious few number of children in the world. Now he realizes its shape is the active desire to see her once more.

“Yes, she is,” Will repeats shamelessly.

Hannibal returns the lid to the box, closing it as much as it will close before walking it over to the bookcase near the door the office’s adjoining bathroom, where he stores most of his personal effects during the workday until he leaves for home. He has no desire to throw the box away—it is too endearingly awful. The letters he clips together and places on the table closer to the hearth; though he has already memorized the contents, he plans to read them again.

He keeps the lopsided tiger shark on his desk, moving the sketch of Chunhyang to the stand behind the patient’s chair so that he can situate the figurine where it will receive attention.

“Of course, I take back my earlier statement,” Hannibal says once he is satisfied the shark is in no danger of falling from the desk corner to the ground. He decides that more flattery will not go amiss. “A card could never eclipse this.”

Though Hannibal is not a fan of smugness in others, it is much more flattering on Will’s face than his usual orneriness. “I'll let Aleksandra know.”

“Please do,” Hannibal says with feeling. “And please have my thanks for taking the time to bring this to me.”

Will was looking somewhere around Hannibal’s temple but at that he ducks his head. It is clear that he, like most parents, finds courage in spades when it comes to his child but little to none for himself under the spotlight of attention. “It was important to her that we repay you,” he says as dismissively as he can manage. “Now we have.”

Hannibal does not fail to notice the use of the word we, nor the lack of derision accompanying it this time. The gratification that it brings is soured by Will’s meaning.

“Yes, she is,” Will repeats shamelessly.

“Indeed.” Because the alternative is letting Will leave in finality, Hannibal takes a risk and adds, “Helping your family has brought me nothing but pleasure.”

Yesterday he would have not said something so ingratiating, wary of Will seeing the compliment for
what it was and fleeing from Hannibal’s attempt to infiltrate the fort of his hostility. He would argue that his hand was forced, however. He deliberates between which expression to pair with the words for a brief second before schooling his face into a mask of flippancy.

Not a moment too soon—Will’s head snaps up and his eyes pass over Hannibal with intensity, trying on reflex to penetrate his intention. Hannibal has learned not to be false around the Grahams—Will finds no lie under his mask, shallow though it may be. A meeting ago he might have made a retreat. Today, though he looks a little suspicious, Will says shortly, “I’m glad.”

They are left then in a strange pocket of silence where they stand on opposite sides of Hannibal’s desk, business accomplished but conversation unresolved. Hannibal has a hundred things he’d like to say and the awareness that none of them will further his cause—Will is inscrutable once more, locked away behind a bastion of stoicism, eyes on Hannibal’s upper lip and glazed with that calculating sheen from last time.

Hannibal has no idea what is going on in Will’s head, though the fact that Will has not yet fled the premises is perhaps a sign that his resentment at being present is not as great as Hannibal had thought. Perhaps his rejection still needles him with confusion, provoking him to interest, as Hannibal had hoped. He savors the tight-rope feeling of balancing on the edge of Will’s mistrust and his grudging curiosity, a razor-thin ledge.

There is a split second when Will’s deliberation, whatever it may be, makes his gaze flick up to Hannibal’s. The contact is startling. Will’s eyes are blue but dark like the sea; Hannibal experiences something like the shock of hitting water. He feels, for no discernible reason, overwhelmed.

Abruptly Will tears his eyes away. “Well, thanks for your time,” he says in a rush, adjusting the jacket he never took off. He had been relaxed as he watched Hannibal open his daughter’s gift, softened by appreciation for his daughter from another, but now he is a coil of sudden tension. “I’d better get going.”

“Of course,” Hannibal says at length. He’s in the middle of wrestling with a great wave of yearning to pull Will’s eyeballs tenderly from their sockets and look through them like peepholes at whatever shook him so. It takes a monumental effort for him to simply say, “And I have another patient to see.”

It’s an out, and Will takes it. He fumbles with the strap of his messenger bag as he makes his way to the door, pulling it open before Hannibal can get it for him. “Good luck with that,” he mumbles, and then winces. “Goodbye, Dr. Lecter,” he says with much more conviction, and disappears through the patient exit.
Hannibal watches him go. He does not move until the sound of the building's front door closing reverberates through the room and back to him. He is stalled by the terrible idea of that being his last glimpse of Will Graham.

He wants inside Will's head even more than he did a day ago. He takes a moment to inhale and exhale through the desire before turning around and pulling his desk chair out.

He takes a seat. There are still fifteen minutes remaining until his next patient arrives; usually he would use such an interval to prepare his notes for the appointment, but instead he picks up Aleksandra’s gift to him.

The figurine is as ugly as Will's manners. Still Hannibal cannot entertain the thought of the Grahams being done with him.

He was willing before to be passive, but he fears that complete compliance will see him sitting in inactivity when he should be in pursuit. He wonders if perhaps the situation calls for a change in approach.

He looks at the shark in his palm. According to Aleksandra, tiger sharks practice lurking as they hunt, snatching up their prey when they have come within reach.

Hannibal concedes that it's a strategy worthy of consideration.
It is a mild day in Baltimore. The sun overhead is insistent without clouds to dissuade it from its noonday enthusiasm, but the wind that blows off of the Atlantic is cool enough to keep Hannibal comfortable in his peacoat as he clicks down the sidewalk, toting a bag from the china shop he patronizes a few times a year.

Within it are ten teacups.

Five days ago he destroyed the sole remaining cup of the last set he bought. He had been cooking medallions of genuine venison backstrap, a departure from his meat of choice, as he had used the very last of the dishonest bank teller in his freezer for a stew meant to encourage Alana’s health after her recent bout of illness. The smell of the meat had, as it sometimes still did, put him in a mood. He had been compelled to snag a finger in the delicate neck of the cup’s handle, lift it from where it sat artistically on the bookshelf next to his wrap-around counter, and fling it to the floor.

The action had been, as always, singularly unsatisfying. He waited until the meat was done to clean up the snowfall of porcelain splinters and shards on the tile.

When he returns home from his day trip downtown, he’ll wash each cup in the set by hand and set them to dry on the windowsill while the afternoon light slants into the kitchen. It’s a little past noon now—he has plenty of time to drive back in time to catch the long sunshine. He will then place the cups in decorative pairs on the bookcase, within easy reach should the urge visit him again. At last he will make a quick meal for himself before indulging in a nap, as he knows from experience that after handling the teacups he will be unproductive for several hours.

It is a ritual he has maintained since long before he moved into his Chesapeake home, and it is one he expects he’ll continue.

Hannibal does not yet feel ready to fold himself into his Bentley and begin the ritual anew, however. The cold bay air is refreshing; it gusts through the city buildings and blows out the stench of gasoline that fogs the streets. The chilly sleet of the past few months has finally cleared up and the sky has revived from its sickly winter pallor to a freshly swept spring blue. The day is pleasant—he does not wish to spend it caged in his car.

He decides to extend his walk. Instead of continuing down the last few blocks to the garage in which he parked, he turns onto another pavement and follows it down to a main street.
The crowd immediately thickens—others have obviously also been inspired by the fine weather to make a day out of the city. There is an increase in ambitious street vendors parking their wares on the sidewalk—probably a few without licenses—and in the number of children and dogs. Hannibal generally keeps his errands to the higher-end neighborhoods of Baltimore, admittedly to avoid such conditions. However, though the stink of street litter and body odor is decidedly more apparent among the throng, he does not turn back. He merely holds his wares closer to him to keep them from getting crushed in the stream of people and continues on.

It is for this reason that he stumbles across the Grahams.

He sees them just outside a quaint little pub, seated at a table in the fenced-off outdoor eating patio. Hannibal knows the establishment—it has won several awards in its seventeen years of existence as one of the city’s most exemplary burger spots. Hannibal does not enjoy burgers but he does respect craft—his eye is caught by the banners of excellence displayed in the storefront window and from there slides to the father and daughter at the patio’s very last table.

He notices Will first. He is dressed like he was at their first meeting, in comfortable flannel lazily buttoned over a white shirt and denim curiously threadbare around mid-thigh. His glasses are nowhere in sight. There is a split second in which Hannibal has difficulty identifying him; he realizes that it is due to the utterly genuine, utterly unfamiliar smile on Will’s face.

Aleksandra is seated across from him. She is kneeling in her chair in order to see over the table and bring her food and drink within reach of her short arms. Like Will, she wears pants and a thick sweater the same spring blue as the sky, and she looks much more comfortable than she did in her dress.

She is talking seriously at her father, explaining something between quick, peck-like bites of her fries and necessary sips from her drink. Will is listening to her with dutiful attention and endless fondness.

In one glance Hannibal sees more than he has gleaned in several meetings—without the panic of separation and relief of reunion, without the filter of distance and remoteness of secondhand messages, the bond between Will and Aleksandra is blindingly clear. She sees no one else but her father as she makes her solemn way through her words, and he sees no one else but his daughter as he watches her articulate her young but clear thoughts. The world beyond their table is insignificant—they are a scene unto themselves. A humbly remixed Madonna and child. In their microcosmic solitude, they are beautiful.

Hannibal is surprised to realize that he covets them.
There are hundreds of people milling around the street without the slightest idea as to their nature—a man whose mind teases Hannibal with glimpses of extraordinary and terrible ability and a girl whose earnestness stretches beyond her years. Hannibal looks closely at the thread of possessiveness winding itself tighter around his thoughts of the two—he wants them entirely for himself, wants his fingerprints and his alone on the virgin gyri and sulci of Will’s brain, wants to drink Aleksandra’s sweet spirit to the last drop.

He considers his options. He could continue his walk, a futile exercise in exorcising the fugue that visits him without fail on the days when he retrieves new cups, though it has never worked before. Or he could take advantage of the gift-wrapped second chance to cross paths with the man he had anticipated having to play a long and delicate game of cat-and-mouse with, the one he would have been willing to chase all the way into the bowels of the FBI Academy if necessary.

The choice is not difficult.

He does not do anything so rude as walk up to their table—instead he crosses the street and keeps to the edge of the crowd where the plaid of his pants beneath his jacket will make him noticeable. He is careful to slow his pace near the restaurant so as to give ample time to be noticed.

To his pleasant surprise, Aleksandra spots him right away.

She reacts in stages. She is interrupting herself with another fry when her attention snags on the windowpane of his suit. Her big eyes, sea-dark like her father’s, blink wide in surprise before, quite without her permission, a smile cracks her seriousness and she jerks upright in her chair.

“Mr. Lecter!”

Hannibal savors the feeling that blooms in his chest at her elation. She lifts one small hand up and waves urgently at him—the sight returns him to the memory of folding her sugary palm in his own. Her curls bob around her face as she squirms, pleased.

Will twists around in his chair at Aleksandra’s shrill cry. His eyes snap to Hannibal as though magnetized, picking him out of the crowd with oracular speed. The smile that he wore for his daughter shrinks to something surprised and cautious, and he looks immediately more like the man that Hannibal has started to know. He is clearly caught off guard, so Hannibal forgives his lack of acknowledgement and obligingly returns his attention to Aleksandra, still waving.
“Hi, Mr. Lecter!” she calls again. Hannibal returns her smile with one of his own and raises his free hand to wave back. He makes as though to leave it at that and continue on his way, until Aleksandra’s sprite-like face grows desperate and she starts beckoning him over.

Satisfied, Hannibal dips his head and obeys the summons.

He weaves through the crowd, embracing and then discarding the brief thunderclap of anger that peals through him for an instant when a distracted mother clips his china bag with her child’s stroller. He makes it to the restaurant front without further incident and walks the length of the patio’s fence until he reaches the last table.

“Good day,” he says when he can be heard over the noise of the street.

“Hello,” Aleksandra blurts, wrestling with her smile. She is trying to school her face into composure but her girlish pleasure is clear in the flush that rouges her small cheeks. Hannibal notices that in the time since they met she has lost a tooth.

“It’s good to see you again, Miss Aleksandra,” Hannibal says, adding a wink because he thinks it will fluster her. It does.

He turns to Will, watching the last of his unfettered contentment be locked away behind his usual sulk. “Hello, Will.”

It is a thrill to see him again. At their last abrupt parting Hannibal had considered that he might have to actively engineer another encounter, that he would have to pursue Will as he tried to retreat from their acquaintanceship and risk making him feel hunted. Such aggression could easily backfire. He has the feeling that Will is the type of prey to turn when cornered.

“Afternoon,” Will replies gruffly, but it is not the true hostility from before. His gaze flicks up to Hannibal’s, and the split-second eye-contact is as startling as it was that last meeting in Hannibal’s office—Hannibal feels once again peculiarly overwhelmed, and he assumes it is mutual by the way Will jerks his attention over to Hannibal’s ear instead.

Standing above his coveted Madonna and child, inflicting discomfort and delight upon them respectively, Hannibal feels a sense of power so potent it is dizzying. With perfect pleasure, he says, “An interesting coincidence that I should cross you both in the city.”
Aleksandra launches into explanation. “Daddy and I just went to the aquarium!” She thrusts a hand into her pocket and pulls out a crumpled ticket stub to hold aloft as evidence. “Daddy promised he would take me and it was awesome!” She ticks off with her chubby fingers, “They had birds and jellyfish and spiders and snakes and turtles and dolphins and even sloths!” She tells him with reverence, “My favorite was the sharks.”

Hannibal soaks up her zealous prattling, tasting her enthusiasm. “That sounds like a wonderful time,” he offers. “I’m sure the sharks’ favorite was you.”

The words ruin Aleksandra for a few seconds; she ducks her chin to hide the way she glows. Hannibal turns to Will, who is watching him with hawk-like attention as he flatters his daughter.

“I seem to have interrupted your fun,” Hannibal says, gauging, thumbing the thread of his welcome to see if it is in danger of snapping.

Will waits a beat too long before surprising Hannibal with, “You’re not interrupting.” His voice is as gruff and inhospitable as ever, but Hannibal knows he’s not lying. He has quickly come to learn that Will wastes no time on platitudes. Though Will considers him with that calculation from back in Hannibal’s office, he is not put off by his unexpected presence.

Hannibal tries not to betray his exhilaration at the fact that Will seems to feel something like curiosity for him too. He had worried that he might represent only a debt to be repaid and an ordeal to be endured to Will, who despised professionals of his kind on principle, but it appears as though his pretense of reticence was successful in securing Will’s attention.

He dips his head modestly before turning back to Aleksandra.

She has recovered and is looking up again. He looks at her in time to catch the expression on her face as she watches the small exchange between him and her father, before it smooths out into something solemn.

“Did you get your presents?” she asks with concern.

Hannibal adopts the same seriousness and nods. “I did. They were lovely.” As he expected, this provokes a girlish blush. “I keep the tiger shark in my office,” he adds, “and everyone who sees it asks me who the talented artist is.” Hannibal gives her a closed-mouth smile, mild enough to keep her father from stirring. “I am forced to tell them what an impressive little girl you are.”
Aleksandra hides behind her curls as she sinks down in her seat, overwhelmed a second time. Hannibal wonders if he should have been more frugal with his praise, but he is far too intrigued by Aleksandra’s debilitation to entertain regret.

Will reaches across the table to pet her hand, visibly half-amused and half-alarmed by her embarrassment, and the touch seems to revive her enough for her to shyly manage, “Thank you, Mr. Lecter.”

He allows himself a bigger smile. “You are very welcome.”

“I told you he liked it,” Will says, encouraging Aleksandra back to her former enthusiasm. She perks up some.

“I thought you were fibbing,” she admits.

Will exaggerates a scoff. “I never fib.” He eyes her. “And neither should you.” A soft pinch to Aleksandra cheek draws a small giggle from her.

Hannibal soaks up every second of their interaction.

“I don’t fib!” she protests, smiling with gap-teeth. “I’m honest.”

“Good girl,” Will says, ruffling her curls before taking his hand back. “Impressive little girl, I mean,” he amends wryly, eyes flicking to the side to glance at Hannibal.

“It’s true,” Hannibal offers, sliding tentatively into the conversation slot Will left open. Aleksandra returns her attention to him and this time it is beaming.

“Thank you,” she repeats sweetly. She wastes no time before following up with, “Do you wanna sit with us, Mr. Lecter?”

The invitation suffuses Hannibal with a smug sense of accomplishment—more artful than
shouldering his way between the Grahams is being welcomed among them—but Will jumps in before he can celebrate his acceptance.

“You can’t ask people to drop what they’re doing to hang out, Tiny,” he reprimands gently, brow furrowed a little. “Dr. Lecter is probably busy.” But Will’s voice is not disapproving and he offers nothing else to close the matter.

Hannibal can see in Aleksandra’s face the way she intends to make a mile of the inch Will has left. She is not immune to that childish determination to take permission all the way up to her father’s explicit no. He finds himself curious to see what Aleksandra looks like in persuasion, and to see how Will fares holding out against his daughter’s will, but he is aware that standing passively by would be less than tactful.

He makes a split-second decision to repeat the strategy that brought him success before: rejection.

He says with genuine regret, ”Indeed, I can’t stay.” It is true: he has a log of meat slow-cooking in the crock pot at home that he needs to return to, and he still intends to set his cups up in the afternoon light. “On another day I would have loved to take a seat.”

The invitation to stay was progress enough for today. To accept it now would be greedy and premature—it could be more advantageous to let the opportunity ripen.

Aleksandra looks a little crestfallen. Hannibal is both gratified and discomfited by her sorrow; he analyses the feeling with great interest.

“Next time, Tiny,” Will says quietly, reaching across the table again. This time Aleksandra doesn’t perk up, though she does give a wan smile.

“Okay,” she says quietly, and sits back on her heels.

Hannibal considers her small, sad face. Impulse prompts him to hook the handle of his teacup bag in the crook of his elbow and lean across the patio fence to take up a clean napkin from the Grahams’ table, folding it with nimble speed. Aleksandra watches with wide eyes as he creases the paper into the bare silhouette of a fish.

The look on her face when he presents it to her is something that he memorizes instantly.
“Oh,” she murmurs, catching the fish in her palms like it is something precious. She examines it from all angles, careful not to crush it in her chubby fingers, before telling him with painful earnestness, “Thank you, Mr.—thank you, Dr. Lecter!”

“A small gift for you in return,” Hannibal says, stepping back. “Hardly as good your gift to me, but I hope it’ll do for now.” He bows his head much like he did the first time they met.

When he steals a look at Will, he finds him going back and forth between him and Aleksandra’s brightening expression, his own sweetening with a parent’s tenderness as he receives the secondhand pleasure of his daughter’s happiness. When he notices Hannibal’s attention, his face smooths over into careful impenetrability, but Hannibal has seen enough to know that he has won something very significant between the Grahams.

He has no inclination to press his luck, so he says, “I should leave.” The sun is starting to tip toward the horizon. He looks at Aleksandra as he says, “I look forward to seeing you both again sometime.” His gaze darts to Will and he looks at him with perhaps more meaning than he intends.

Will meets his gaze for only a moment before his own flits downward. He stares at Hannibal’s chin for longer than necessary, almost enough to make the parting awkward. “So do we,” he says eventually.

It makes Hannibal swell with a feeling like a victory.

“Bye, Dr. Lecter!” Aleksandra says, once again as lively as she was when she flagged him down.

“Goodbye, Miss Aleksandra,” he replies. “Goodbye, Will.”

Will’s pupil-less eyes are almost luminescent in the daylight. “Bye.”

Hannibal takes a last look at them before turning on his heel and walking on.

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The afternoon sends bars of sunlight through the windows of Hannibal’s home. He dims the fluorescents in his kitchen to allow the natural light to rouge the room; then he retreats to the armchair in the corner with a hot chocolate embittered with cocoa shavings and spiked with whiskey, meant to bring his nap upon him faster. From that vantage point he observes the white glint of the chinaware marching in a pale procession across the windowsill and settles in to wait for his cups to dry.

He has done everything he planned to do—purchased and put away his new teacups, gotten his affairs together for the week, assembled the recipe of a dish he will debut at an upcoming spring social. It has been a full day and he is tired, but he would change little about the outcome of his outing. Seeing the Grahams again had been an unforeseen delight; being accepted at their table had been beyond his expectations. He has high hopes for the evolution of their relationship—for he fully intends to see it evolve.

For now he is content to relive the details of the encounter, however—the pink of Aleksandra’s tongue through her patchwork teeth, the strands of gold in Will’s sunlit curls, the excited tremble in Aleksandra’s voice, the weight of Will’s eyes on him in consideration. It was a good meeting, all the more satisfying for being the child of coincidence. Hannibal sips his chocolate and is pleased.

The ring of his phone intrudes on his moment.

He sighs, only briefly thinks about letting the call go to message, and then sets his chocolate to the side to stand and cross the kitchen to where his phone lies on the counter. When he checks the screen, the number is unfamiliar. He answers dutifully.

Will’s voice is tinny through the speaker. “Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal had not thought the day could be improved. “Will.”

“Yeah,” Will mumbles, awkward. “Sorry to bother you on your personal cell. Figured you wouldn’t be at the office.”

“You figured correctly,” Hannibal says, and, since things have been going so well, adds, “You aren’t bothering.”

“Good,” Will coughs. There is a beat. “You might have noticed, but Aleksandra was glad to see you today.”
“As glad as I was to see you both.” Hannibal wonders if perhaps the whiskey has made his tongue a little loose, but he figures he has earned some boldness.

Will allows it, anyhow. “Thanks for stopping at our table. Not sure how you did it but you managed to charm her even more the second time around. She hasn’t put that fish down since you gave it to her.”

Hannibal imagines Aleksandra popping fries in her mouth with one hand and cradling the fish to her chest with the other. “I’m happy to hear that it pleased her.”

“How gratifying,” Hannibal says. He takes a sip from his hot chocolate instead of offering anything else, because he can sense the question that Will has yet to articulate.

Indeed, Will pauses for a few moments before swinging the conversation around to his purpose. “Well, I won’t waste your time, doctor. I’ve got a favor to ask.”

“I’ll grant it if I can,” Hannibal pledges. “What can I do for you?”

Will hesitates a little. “Aleksandra would like to formally invite you to lunch.” A pause. “Aleksandra and I.”

Hannibal has to take a moment to fully assimilate the depth of his good fortune.

Perhaps his short silence strikes Will as the beginnings of a polite refusal, because he goes on to explain, “We understand that you’re a busy man. Tiny was just—Aleksandra was just so happy to cross paths with you again. I figured if you had the time we could arrange something.”

Hannibal files away the information that Will sounds lovely when he is embarrassed.

He employs a great deal more nonchalance than he feels. “A proper meeting would be nice,” he quips. “One with no time constraints, no impending responsibilities. No looming fear of applied psychiatry.”
He can practically hear Will’s blush through the phone. “Exactly,” he says gruffly.

“I would be honored,” Hannibal assures him. “You and your daughter have been nothing but gracious.”

Will snorts. “You started it.”

Hannibal allows a smile. “When and where will our lunch take place?”

“Saturday after next?” Will proposes. He sounds apologetic as he says, “Aleksandra’s not one for indoor places. If I suggest a park, will you suddenly have an appointment that day?”

“I enjoy the occasional meal outdoors,” Hannibal says. He sees all the potential in the opportunity before him. “Please. Allow me to bring the food.”

“Out of the question,” Will says levelly. “We’re treating you.”

“Dessert, then,” Hannibal insists. He thinks of bringing the Grahams a dish of tavuk göğsü or chocolate-and-foie-gras, the meat of his own selection of course.

Will agrees with reluctance. “Nothing fancy.” He says it like an admonishment.

Hannibal concedes to himself that Aleksandra’s presence will warrant something simpler. “As you wish.”

“Good.” Will sighs and his breath sounds staticky in the receiver. “I appreciate you doing this. I know Aleksandra and I sort of stumbled into your acquaintance; we can do more than randomly impose on you, I promise.”

“You have never imposed on me,” Hannibal says sincerely. “I’ll mark down the date.”
“Thank you.” Will sounds as amiable as Hannibal has ever heard him. “I’ll let you go then.”

“Thank you,” Hannibal says. “Please tell Miss Aleksandra the same.”

“I will.” After a heartbeat. “Goodbye, Dr. Lecter.”

“Until later, Will,” Hannibal returns. The click of the line announces the end of the call.

Hannibal waits until he is done with his hot chocolate to turn his mind to savoring the intoxicating triumph of Will’s call, of the day in its entirety. In mere hours he has come from wondering how to meet the Grahams again to being willingly solicited by them both. He nearly cannot believe the sheer luck of it.

The whiskey has lent a sleepy weight to his limbs but his mind feels energized and inspired. He rifles through it for a dessert recipes that will fulfill his needs. As he searches, he thinks of his Madonna and child, offering him a peek into their microcosm. Success tastes as sweet as the residue of his drink.

Eventually he decides to take the route of sentimentality. He gets up from his chair, places his cup in the sink, and begins making his way through his house up to his bedroom, ready to lie down. He saves Will’s number to his phone on the way.

As he prepares for his rest, he thinks of a dipping glaze to go with cinnamon pretzels.
The Saturday of the lunch date with the Grahams arrives at speed, dawning a pleasant pink before ripening clear and blue. Hannibal breakfasts on clotted cream on biscuits with jam, checking the weather as he eats; he is pleased to note that the day will remain fine well into the afternoon. As he dabs at his mouth with a napkin he entertains thoughts of how Will and his daughter will look saturated in sunlight and reclining on grass with his food in their bellies, and is intensely glad for the good weather. Such a start is promising.

This is a day of importance for him—his first planned meeting with Will and Aleksandra. He has already made considerable headway into the effort of endearing himself to them; this is his chance to concretize his place in their lives. He sips his glass of coffee and enjoys the sense of pressure.

After breakfast he showers and dresses at ease. He forgoes pomade and a sharp suit for slacks and a light sweater, keeping it deliberately casual; he has seen enough of the Grahams to know that it will take him far. Then he returns to the kitchen for the most important part of his preparations.

He uncovers the dough he had woken up early to mix and allow to rise, kneading it vigorously to deflate it before turning it onto the flour he spread across his counter. He separates it into several pieces, enough for the whole lunch party, and rolls them into ropes that he laces together with care. Lastly he brushes the dough with brown sugar flakes and cinnamon, allowing the pretzels to rise before sliding them into the pre-heated oven. Then he washes his hands and retreats to the kitchen corner chair to wait.

When the pretzels emerge, they will be similar—though superior in taste and quality—to the candied pretzels sold down on the mall’s first level.

Hannibal is confident that the gesture will not be lost on Aleksandra.

He is looking forward to seeing both her and Will again. He passed the two weeks since his city encounter with Will and Aleksandra in very high spirits, alternately making plans to punish the cobbler who mishandled his wingtip bluchers last Tuesday and perfecting his pretzel dough recipe. Though he fully intends to take the damage out of the cobbler’s hide, not even his lazily-mended shoe soles brought down his good cheer. He is admittedly delighted with the direction in which the winds of fortune are currently speeding him along; several of his acquaintances commented on his conspicuous cheer, and also on the candied pretzels he kept bringing for them to try.

Will had called him again in the interim to negotiate specific a time to meet up and give him directions—he had been brisk, probably between classes, but he had asked Hannibal at least twice if
he still intended to make the lunch. Hannibal found the notes of hesitancy in Will’s voice as he checked and double-checked very appealing.

The park is farther than Hannibal anticipated, but he is unperturbed—when twenty minutes have passed he removes himself from his thoughts and the corner chair to take out and wrap his pretzels in wax paper and stack them in an insulated lunchbox to keep them from going too cold. Then he puts a light coat on over his informal slacks and packs the Bentley for the hour-long drive.

On the way from metropolitan Maryland to borderland Virginia, he listens to a live recording of *O Sole Mio*. It feels appropriate.

He arrives at the park at half-past noon, turning off a winding little rural road onto a parking lot of gravel. The faint spring mugginess envelopes him the moment he steps out of his car, bearing the scents of fragrant wildflowers and pungent weeds just pushing up through thawed soil. A glance around shows him a long meadow of manicured switchgrass dotted with tufts of bluestem, enclosed on one side by the road and on the other by a forest edge. At the end closest to him is a plastic playground in bright colors, a long line of swings, a merry-go-round, and a sandpit.

Will and Aleksandra are waiting by the sandpit.

Will is wearing jeans and a plain tee, sandy at the knees and hands. Aleksandra matches him, but she has sand up to her elbows and on her plump cheeks and in her dark hair. They are flushed with what he imagines to be a recent bout of laughter. They turn in sync at the sound of Hannibal’s car door shutting.

It is intensely gratifying to watch Aleksandra light up like a firecracker at the sight of him, to watch Will stand a little straighter as Hannibal approaches with his lunchbox. Hannibal shifts his grip on it to wave; both Will and Aleksandra return the gesture, though Aleksandra fairly wrenches her shoulder in her enthusiasm. The closer Hannibal gets, the greater the hunger in him grows—not the belly hunger he knows intimately, but a yearning sweeter and darker than appetite, the same covetousness that stole over him for the Grahams before.

Aleksandra breaks from her father’s side to rush up to Hannibal, her small feet kicking through the switchgrass, calling his name as she comes.

“Dr. Lecter!” She stops in front of him and graces him with an unrestrained grin, a departure from her usual solemnness. For a moment the sentiment in her face makes Hannibal think that she’s going to hug him, but her boldness seems to falter and instead she thrusts one hand forward.
Amused, Hannibal takes it. “Miss Aleksandra,” he replies. Her palm is gritty with sand grains. He thinks of their first meeting.

“You came,” she says, girlishly pleased.

“I did.” He folds his other hand on top of their clasped ones. “I hope I didn’t miss lunch.”

Aleksandra shakes her head, making her curls tumble around her cheeks. “Nope! Daddy said the fish is almost ready.” She looks back to where Will is making his way toward them and wiping his hands off on his jeans. “He was just playing with me a little,” she explains.

A mild breeze carries the scent of cooked brook trout to Hannibal. He looks over and notices that one of the park’s fire-blackened grills is smoldering with recently burned coals. The clean-water aroma tells him that the trout is fresh, which prompts him to add a few observations to the vault of knowledge on Will Graham he is slowly filling in. Apparently Will is a fisherman, which is only a degree removed from a hunter. The information pleases Hannibal.

Finally Will reaches them. “Dr. Lecter. Glad you could make it.”

He, like Aleksandra, looks just as charming as Hannibal thought he would in the honey-light of the bright day. The workman’s clothes fit him much more organically than the cheap khakis and button-downs; there is a quality in him better accessed by the grass underfoot and the distant treeline, than by the mall or Hannibal’s office or the crowded Baltimore streets. Hannibal is discreet about looking his fill, but he does look.

“You're just in time.” Will does not offer his hand, but the fidgety way he picks at the sand grains in the webbing of his fingers fascinates Hannibal beyond the care for courtesy. “Aleksandra has already set the table, so to speak, so you can put that down if you want.”

He’s referring to the lunchbox. He gestures toward the grass near the grill, where the long stretch of lawn is interrupted by the red-checkered square of a blanket. On it are several tupperware containers, still closed to protect their contents from the ants that will inevitably try to raid their picnic.

There is a wooden table with attached benches nearby, provided by the park directly next to the grill for the service of lunchers such as themselves, but Hannibal imagines that Aleksandra asked for something more picturesque and is almost certain that Will was compelled to indulge her. He doesn’t
mind; he is merely glad that he left his couture suits safe from grass stains and insects back in Baltimore.

“Thank you,” he tells Will, stealing a last glance at him before he steps aside to take his suggestion. The flush on Will’s face, the product of sun and shared mirth with his daughter, softens his customary prickly look into something less contentious. Hannibal reflects on the idea of seeing that look more and more.

Will doesn’t miss the scrutiny, but instead of steeling his expression against it like he had during his first visit to Hannibal’s office, he ducks his head in something that might be a cousin of shyness. “No problem,” he mumbles, and then turns away. “I’ll get the fish and we’ll eat.”

While her father goes to the grill, Aleksandra leads Hannibal to the picnic, starting to skip before slowing back down to a sedate pace. The way she peeks over her shoulder at him leads Hannibal to believe that she is trying to be on her most mature behavior; the thought makes the corner of his mouth quirk upward.

“I’m happy you’re gonna eat with us today,” she says as she approaches the blanket, kicking off her dirty tennis shoes before stepping on it. “Daddy told me that you’re really busy and you might not be able to come, but you did.”

Hannibal follows her lead. He wore shoes and socks that he has long considered throwing out, anticipating an afternoon on the grass, so he feels no qualms about stepping out of his old loafers. “I am usually very busy,” he admits, setting his lunchbox on a vacant corner of the blanket behind the other containers. This close up, he can identify cheesy macaroni, greens soaked in pungent vinegar, spiced rice, cinnamon sweet potatoes, and cornbread—a regional meal. “But I very much wanted to spend a little time with you and your father.”

Aleksandra beams. Speechless with pleasure, as he has come to learn she sometimes gets, she ducks her head, an echo of Will, and starts helpfully peeling off the tupperware tops, releasing plumes of steam from the still-warm side dishes. The collective aroma that arises informs Hannibal that only the macaroni is pre-made—the rest has been cooked by hand. He is delighted by the revelation.

Will arrives at the blanket with the fish on a large platter, crackling with heat. “Hope you guys are hungry.”

Hannibal was deliberately frugal at breakfast. “I am.” He lowers himself to the blanket, folding his legs in front of him.
“Me too,” Aleksandra pipes up, dropping to the ground and crossing her legs as well.

Will looks between them, eyebrow raised, and muffles a snort. He doles fish out onto paper plates, declining help, serving Hannibal until he motions his satisfaction. Then he starts fixing his daughter’s plate, inviting Hannibal to take as much as he wants of everything else.

“Sorry if this isn’t up to your speed,” he tells Hannibal, meaning the food, though he sounds less apologetic than he does defensive. “It’s a little humble. Just warning you, since you seem like the five-star type.” He does not say it like a positive thing.

“I enjoy food in all its permutations,” Hannibal assures him. “Judging by the smell alone, I’m grateful to be sharing your table.” He looks down at the blanket. “Figuratively speaking.”

“Daddy cooks really good,” Aleksandra promises solemnly.

Hannibal smiles. “I can’t wait to see.”

Lunch commences. Hannibal finds that Aleksandra is correct—Will’s food is very bold, immodest in flavor and generous in spice. The Cajun inspiration is undeniable. The taste falls just short of overpowering, but after some consideration Hannibal finds it to be refreshing. He says much the same. “I had no idea you were so culinarily accomplished.”

It’s hard to tell in the brightness of the day but Hannibal thinks that Will pinkens a little. “I picked up a few things,” he demurs. He says it so guardedly that Hannibal feels the impulse to pry his mouth apart and search his teeth for the secrets that he bites down on.

Aleksandra starts to speak, pauses to swallow her food, and then announces, “Daddy is teaching me.” She informs Hannibal that she helped candy the sweet potatoes and was allowed to pour the vinegar on the greens.

“Very impressive,” Hannibal says, enjoying her crooked, gap-toothed smile. “What else have you learned?”

The meal proceeds with the conversation dominated by Aleksandra, her small voice gaining strength
as she answers Hannibal in a growing torrent of words, more than he has ever heard her speak at one

time. He eats and listens sedately as Aleksandra tells him about how Will lets her make her own

school lunch now, about how she now helps Will make food for the seven dogs they have at home.
Eventually she gets carried away by the tide of her own explanation—she also tells him that her

teacher said cooking is like science, that playing in the science corner is the best part of school, that
her favorite science is marine biology—she trips over the word and Will has to help—and that one
day she wants to live in the ocean.

After a while Will laughs and cuts her off. “Your food’s getting cold,” he chides her mildly. “Less
talking, more eating.”

She obeys, but between dutiful chewing continues to tell Hannibal the little things about her and Will

that he has been greedy to know, things he otherwise would have had to work slowly and
meticulously to extract from her father: she waits in the after-school program at her elementary
academy for Will to pick her up (Will works late), she sometimes gets to visit Will’s work on the
weekends (Will occasionally works overtime), when Will has to leave town she stays with a lady
named Beverly (Aleksandra has no other guardian). It is an offering of information that fulfills
Hannibal as viscerally as their shared meal.

He can’t show his fulfillment, however. In the corner of his eye he can see Will watching him like a
hawk, observing his reactions to Aleksandra’s innocent rambling, probably waiting for tells. He has
already peeled back the skin of Hannibal’s person suit once; Hannibal has no doubt that the smallest
slip will be thoroughly dissected. He has worked hard to outwardly scale down his fascination with
the Grahams to a mild interest more suitable of a man only incidentally involved with them, and
knows that if Will were to see how intent he truly is on swallowing every morsel of them he possibly
can, he would take his daughter and withdraw like a fish darting away from a bait hook before the
bite.

Hannibal combs his expression into one of polite interest and rakes the bulk of his dark emotion
back. Will will see his mask for shallow, as he has before, but as long as he doesn’t glimpse what’s
underneath, there will be no problem.

At length Aleksandra seems to run out of steam. She recovers some of her shyness and sputters to a
halt, stuffing a chunk of cornbread in her mouth when her train of thought peters out. She is nothing
less than adorable with her sprite face flushed and plump.

Hannibal reassures her. “That’s all very interesting.”

She has to chew a little before she can offer up a meek, “Thanks, Dr. Lecter.”
“You’ve been a wonderful host, Miss Aleksandra,” Hannibal continues. He sets his plate down and leans across the blanket to retrieve his lunchbox, adding, “Both of you have. The meal was excellent, and the company superb.” He opens the box and takes out three pretzels, still warm, and a lidded bowl of glaze. “Allow me to do my part.”

Aleksandra gasps. “Daddy, look!” She holds her hands out reverently to accept the pretzel that Hannibal offers to her. “It’s just like the mall ones!” She blinks owlishly at him. “You made it?”

Hannibal nods. “I did. Cooking is a hobby of mine too.”

Will takes one as well. “You’re full of hidden talents,” he says, tone indecipherable.

Aleksandra dips one loop of her pretzel in the glaze and takes a bite. Glaze smears the corners of her mouth. She has barely tasted the pretzel when she hums and exclaims, “It’s delicious!” She turns to her father. “Daddy, it’s the best pretzel I ever had!”

“Oh yeah?” Will has a bite. He turns to Hannibal. “She’s right.”

Hannibal bows his head. “You’re both too kind.” He cannot keep all of his smugness from showing.

Aleksandra licks her fingers when she finishes her pretzel, a breach of manners but a compliment nonetheless. She turns her big blue eyes on Hannibal. “Can I have another one?”

Hannibal brought several more pretzels, anticipating such a request. He defers politely, however. “If your father says it’s alright.”

They turn to Will and catch him licking his fingers as well, pretzel completely gone. He puts his hand down and coughs a little. “Maybe later,” he tells his daughter. “You’ve had enough sugar for now.”

Aleksandra looks disappointed but she says, “Yes, daddy.” A second later she perks up. “Can I go play?”

“Of course.” Will gropes behind him and comes up with a package of hand wipes. “Let me wash your face and then you can go.” He wipes both his fingers and hers before swiping the wipe over her
Aleksandra scrambles over to where she left her tennis shoes. “Thank you, Dr. Lecter,” she says again as she slots her small feet in her shoes and carefully redoes the laces. “Your cooking is as good as Daddy’s!”

Hannibal will take it. “That is high praise.”

Will looks amused. “Go play.”

Aleksandra leans over to give him a kiss on the cheek and then runs off to the playground.

Hannibal and Will watch her go. She launches onto the jungle gym set, dashing up the rubber-covered steps and skipping across the set’s mini bridge to its slides. She leaves a thin trail of sand as she slides on her knees back down to the ground. Though she is the only child in the park, she looks perfectly content with her play, circling the playground to do it again.

Fondness rises in Hannibal’s chest. He analyzes the feeling with great interest.

Beside him, Will says, “I guess you really can do no wrong.”

Hannibal blinks, turning to him. “I beg your pardon?”

“Tiny. Aleksandra,” Will elaborates. He gathers up the used plates, puts the lids back on the tupperware, and flicks away the ants that have congregated around the food that Aleksandra accidentally dropped on her side of the blanket. “She’s totally enamored with you.”

Hannibal turns back to the playground. At the same moment Aleksandra glances up from choosing another slide to wave at him.

Several responses occur to Hannibal at once. “The feeling is mutual,” is the one he chooses as he waves back. “Miss Aleksandra is quite a singular child.” He pauses for effect. “I hope I don’t show myself as callous when I say that she is the only child that has made any kind of significant impression on me.”
Though Will looks at him with something like caution, he is unavoidably softened by the words. “Not at all,” Will says. “I didn’t care for kids much myself before she came along.”

Hannibal feels greedy curiosity well up in him like blood in a cut, but he tames it and asks none of the questions about Will’s personal past that climb his gullet. “She is sweet and intelligent—more agreeable than most of my adult acquaintances.” The corner of his mouth quirks. “Present company excluded, of course.”

Will is startled into a laugh by the quip. “Flatterer,” he accuses without heat. “Thanks for lying.” He looks back at his daughter, a reflexive smile tugging at one cheek. “But you’re right. She’s great.”

Right then, Tiny shouts. “Dr. Lecter! Dr. Lecter!” She appears to be done with the slides, and is instead standing in the middle of the gym set.

Hannibal raises his voice in return. “Yes, Miss Aleksandra?”

“Come over!” she pleads. She jumps off of the jungle gym stairs and heads for the monkey bars, feet kicking up the playground’s carpet of wood chips. “Please? Watch me try the bars!”

She wants to impress him—that is a good sign. “I’ve been summoned,” Hannibal says, dipping his head to Will exaggeratedly and climbing to his feet. He steps back into his loafers. “Excuse me.”

“Sure thing,” Will says, wry. He stays where he is but Hannibal can feel his eyes burning into the back of his spring sweater. He knows without returning the gaze that Will is looking at him harder than he ever has before, and realizes abruptly that the next few minutes will most certainly be a test.

Hannibal wipes nonexistent crumbs from the front of his sweater and walks forward. He is determined to pass.

He reaches the monkey bars as Aleksandra does. She climbs the short ladder attached to the bars and stretches up to grasp the very first rung.

Her hands look very small around the bar. “I’ve never done the whole thing before,” she admits. “But watch me.”
“I will,” he promises, standing to the side.

“Okay!” she says. Hannibal watches her concentrated face as she pulls herself to the next rung one arm at a time, short legs dangling as she swings forward. She does it again, and again, in between rungs looking at Hannibal to make sure he’s still paying attention.

“You’re doing wonderfully,” he assures her, taking a step with every bar she passes. Her focused face cracks briefly into a grin before sealing back up into attention.

Eventually momentum isn’t enough to carry her farther and she hangs there four bars away from the end, elbows shaking. “I can’t do it,” she says eventually.

“You can,” Hannibal says easily. “Allow me to help.” He steps forward to grab her under the armpits, lifting her easily over to the next rung so she can grab it. They repeat the maneuver. He carries her through the remainder of the monkey bars until she reaches the other side.

“You did it,” he tells her, taking his hands away once she’s secure on the bar’s other ladder.

Aleksandra pouts a little. “You helped me.” She climbs down. “Daddy has to help me too.”

“But you got very far by yourself,” Hannibal points out. “I’m very impressed.”

Her pout turns into a small smile. “Thanks, Dr. Lecter.” She rubs her hands on her pants, no doubt trying to dissipate some of the soreness left by the friction of the bars. Then she reaches up to grab one of his and tugs him in another direction. “Now let’s go to the swings!”

Hannibal follows obediently. Aleksandra picks the swing closest to the playground and shimmies into it, waiting until Hannibal is stationed by the swing’s poles before pumping her legs to build up a pendulous motion. “I can go really high!”

“I’m sure,” Hannibal agrees, watching her gain speed. A crackle of wood chips at his side announces Will presence as he walks up to join them.
“I think I’ve already mentioned how she can be a little demanding,” he says, lifting an eyebrow at Hannibal. “Thanks for humoring her, but it’s unnecessary.”

“It’s no trouble,” Hannibal objects. “I enjoy being regaled.”

“Hi, daddy!” Aleksandra interjects. She lets go of the swing’s chain for a second to wave. “Will you push me?”

Will leaves to stand at her back, catching her when she swings toward him and giving her a mighty push forward. She whoops out loud as she gains another few feet of height.

Hannibal just watches them for several swings, enjoying the free humor in Will’s face as he entertains his daughter’s whims, the simple happiness in Aleksandra’s round face as the wind whips her curls into her eyes. When Aleksandra is least suspecting, Hannibal takes a calculated risk—he surprises her by stepping forward and grabbing her ankles on the upswing and sending her back to Will with some force.

Aleksandra shrieks in delight. Will is surprised yet again into laughter. Hannibal feels a throb of pride; satisfied with his brief and seamless inclusion in their play, he retreats back to the side of the swing to simply watch Will and his daughter until Aleksandra digs her feet into the wood chips to slow herself to a stop.

After the swings, Aleksandra tugs them over to the merry-go-round, where Hannibal and Will take turns spinning her in different directions, making her squeal and eventually stumble off in giggling dizziness. When she’s done with that, they go back to the sandpit; Aleksandra manages to talk Will and Hannibal into a sand castle contest, which Hannibal wins by virtue of Aleksandra’s decision. Will attempts to contest the ruling and he and Hannibal are told to settle it with three rounds of rock-paper-scissors, whereupon Will wins and Hannibal dutifully gives up the prize—a bracelet of wildflowers.

It is apparent after that that Aleksandra is tired. She tries to suggest another attempt at the monkey bars, but Will, spying the way she rubs at her eyes, informs her that he thinks it’s time to pack things up.

“But daddy,” Aleksandra says urgently. “I don’t want to leave.” She tries to think of an argument in favor of staying. “You didn’t see me on the monkey bars!”
“I did see you on the bars, kiddo,” Will soothes. “You were awesome.”

Aleksandra looks at Hannibal. “I think I can do it by myself this time,” she says, earnest.

Hannibal shares a quick look with Will, whose intense regard leads him to believe that this may be an addendum to the test. “Perhaps you can show me next time,” he suggests. “Unfortunately I believe we’re done for today.”

Aleksandra looks as though she wants to protest but instead latches onto the implication of Hannibal’s words. “Next time?”

Hannibal glances over at Will. Will looks at Aleksandra’s upset face and agrees, “Next time.”

That placates Aleksandra long enough for all of them to return to the picnic blanket and gather their things. Aleksandra stacks all the tupperware in the bag that she and Will brought while Hannibal returns his lunchbox to order. Will scrapes the dead coals out of the grill he used and trashes them. When he returns he shakes out the cleared picnic blanket and folds it up, leaving the spot of grass that they appropriated for their lunch with no indication that they were there.

Like a gentleman Hannibal carries the bulk of Will and Aleksandra’s things to their car, ignoring Will’s protests. He scans what he can of the vehicle as he sets the things in the trunk once Will opens it; he sees fishing equipment, a cartoon-themed book bag, a booster seat, a box full of graded papers, and more dog hair than he knew could congregate in one place. Then he backs away to let Will shut the door.

“Thanks for all that,” Will says. “And thanks for coming.”

“Thank you for inviting me,” Hannibal returns. “I enjoyed myself tremendously.” He takes the wrapped pretzels out of his lunchbox and hands them to Will. "For you to distribute as you see fit."

Will smirks a little. "They’ll be gone before tomorrow." As he takes the pretzels, his rough fingers brush Hannibal’s. The contact is split-second but it reverberates down Hannibal's arm nevertheless. Will is quick to take his hand back; perhaps the sensation is mutual. Neither of them acknowledge it.

Will steps aside to let Aleksandra come forward. It’s obvious from the solemnity that has crept back into her expression that she doesn’t want to go, however worn out she may be.
Hannibal dons as much charm as he knows will pass through the Graham’s perceptivity unscathed. “It was lovely to see you again today, Miss Aleksandra.”

He is surprised when she takes a step closer and throws her arms around his legs, hugging him tightly. “Thank you for playing with me,” she says quietly.

Taking a second to think, Hannibal pushes her back gently by the shoulders. Before she can feel hurt, he kneels on the parking lot gravel and returns her hug properly.

“I hope to see you again soon,” he says, letting her go and standing back up. He can feel Will’s eyes practically scraping him. He turns to meet them. “I hope to see you both.”

Will’s response in long in coming. “Same here,” he says finally. His tone is considering.

He turns to herd Aleksandra into the car, waiting for her to climb into her booster chair before handing her the pretzels so he can buckle her in. Her face is glum but when Will steps out of the way she takes the opportunity to tell Hannibal one last time, "Goodbye, Dr. Lecter!" When Will closes her door she waves at him through the window.

"Today meant a lot to her," Will divulges, leaning on the driver's door with his keys in his hand. "I appreciate you agreeing to this." He pauses. "I appreciate you treating her so well."

"I can't say it enough," Hannibal replies. "It was a treat to meet you both here." He looks at Aleksandra in the car and gives her another wave. He believes that some forwardness will not go amiss now, after a noonday spent accommodating Will's daughter. "I confess that I too hope there will be a 'next time'."

For a few heartbeats the look on Will's face is ambiguous. Hannibal maintains his own placidity and waits. Will then says, once again sounding considering, "I'm sure there will be."

"Wonderful," Hannibal declares. "Then I shall let you go."

"Sure," Will says, opening the car door. He pauses before getting in. "I'll...call you at some point."
Hannibal is suffused with satisfaction, for Will follows up his promise with the same almost-shy head duck from before. "I look forward to it."

That is the end of it. Will nods and shuts himself in the driver's seat. Then the Grahams are pulling out of the gravel lot and onto the winding road, turning the opposite direction Hannibal must go back to Baltimore. They disappear around a bend into the treeline and are gone.

Hannibal walks over to his car, opening the back to put his cooler in before folding himself into the driver's seat. He does not close his door or start the car immediately, instead choosing to do as he did after his first meeting with Will in his office—he dutifully and diligently commits every detail of the lunch to his formidable memory. The air has heated up with the passage of the sun overhead and the heady aroma of the park's wild vegetation lays thick on him while he leans against his seat's headrest and thinks.

He believes that he accomplished his intentions today. The strides he has made with Aleksandra today are significant—he was the focal point of her attention for the majority of the day, which means that he has thoroughly won her affections. In the process he forsook some interaction with Will, but it was not a loss; though he and Will spoke only sparingly and shallowly, Hannibal knows that all that he did today with Aleksandra, all the ways that he indulged her, will linger in Will's mind. They will be a tipping weight on the scales of Will's future decisions. As far as Hannibal can tell, the scales are already bent in his favor.

He marks the lunch down in his mind as a success.

He has the remainder of his day to celebrate it, once he finishes the drive back to his home. His schedule is clear—he considers what he would like to fill it with. He turns the key in the ignition and rolls out of the parking lot, mulling over several tantalizing ideas as he drives until one arises that gives him pleasure to match that which his date with the Grahams inspired in him.

There is a lazy cobbler that he is dying to make another appointment with.
The Academy is a bleak-looking building, a bulky concrete fortress grayed by rain and snow to the color of ash. Hannibal is not quite impressed by the forbidding facade as he walks up the sidewalk carrying, once again, his insulated lunchbox, this time filled with ceramic containers of black bean and cactus soup with shreds of what he will call chicken. Swarming around him in buzzing clouds like gnats are faculty and students and field agents; some of them glance twice at his bold plaid and the ones with better instincts glance twice at his unassuming smile. Most of them pay him as little attention as though he were invisible as they make their quick and purposeful ways across the facility ground.

He has had the thought before: he feels the same amusement walking among them that a wolf might among sheep.

It is a kind of tickling thrill. These are the people who spend hours trying to reconstruct his profile out of the shadows he casts on the tableaus he leaves behind. He is showing them his bare face. They have less than no idea. The notion makes him giddy.

It is only after he enters the Academy that he is accosted, and only for his badge-less-ness. Meekly he lets himself be pulled aside to submit to an identity verification and a quick inspection of the contents of his lunchbox. Then he is sent on his way with instructions to retrieve a visitor pass so that he can stalk the halls in search of Alana’s temporary office.

Her guest-lecturing tenure began only last month, and she is still holed up in the pitiful closet they emptied out for her first few weeks until a more suitable space becomes available. Hannibal has listened patiently to several tangential rants about the Academy’s benign neglect for her and her research. His initial attempts to remind her that her proposal is being fully funded were met with more tangents. He has learned to keep his input to noises of sympathy only.

Alana’s latest phone call informed him that she was battling both her latest psychiatric journal article draft and a particularly tenacious seasonal cold, made worse by the spare, spiritless confines of her closet-office. Hannibal had listened to her sniffle on speaker phone while slicing up his unfortunate cobbler. The soup had been a split decision made in a spasm of compassion; Hannibal is bringing it to her now as a pleasant surprise in an otherwise dismal day. He looks forward to sipping her gratitude like barolo.

The directions he was given are unclear, however, and he ends up turned around in the hallways. Somehow he finds himself in a corridor with doors that lead to lecture halls built like theaters, one of them spewing a flood of students as their class apparently ends. He waits politely to the side as they pass, intent on retracing his steps once the rush subsides to a trickle.
He is turning his nose up to escape the smell of a particularly athletic cadet when he sees Will Graham.

Will is toting a leather tablet bag stuffed with papers, a laptop and what looks like a lesson planner tucked under his arm, his other hand clenched around a paper cup of pungent coffee. His glasses, which he had not worn during their lunch date last month, are back and digging red lines into his nose; his work clothes, the cheap button-down and creased khakis, have returned as well. He is visibly tense, and he keeps his eyes on the ground as he follows his students out of the classroom. He looks very much like an ornery professor.

Hannibal is, as on every other occasion he has been serendipitously reunited with Will, delighted. So many times in his life has he had to exert careful effort and manipulation to cross paths with his quarries that his string of simple fortune refreshes him deeply. He barely wastes time on the decision whether or not to approach.

“Will.” He speaks over the din of the full hallway. “Good morning.”

It’s only going on noon but already Will looks haggard with effort and exhaustion, as though an hour and a half of speaking in front of a few tens of attentive students has drained him. Knowing what he does of the man, Hannibal supposes that that is probable. At the sound of his name, Will looks up.

“Dr. Lecter?” Surprise flits across his face. Hannibal watches him jerk into better posture, the same way he did when they met in the park, and wonders if it is self-consciousness or unconscious mimicry. Will tucks his coffee close to himself as he wades through the stream of cadets over to Hannibal’s side of the hallway. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to see Alana,” Hannibal explains, lying just a little by omission. During his preparations for this visit he had hoped, of course, to catch at the least a glimpse of Will Graham in his workplace on this quaint journey, but that needn’t be said. “I see that you’re teaching today.”

Perhaps unwittingly, Will makes a face at Alana’s name. “One class down, one more to go,” he answers grimly, agitation clear in the way he thumbs the chewed rim of his cup. He eyes Hannibal and his lunchbox, probably making the necessary inferences but still asking, “Alana, you said. Why come so far out of your way?”

“The goodness of my heart,” Hannibal says dryly. “And no little sense of intrigue at the prospect of seeing the inner mechanism of the FBI close up.”
“A groupie, huh?” Will observes, one eyebrow. Hannibal keeps his face clear but the way Will chuckles lets him know that his indignation was not unseen. “My apologies for the, uh, crude label.”

“I prefer voyeur, if label you must,” Hannibal returns. It elicits another laugh; the sense of accomplishment at putting a reluctant smile on Will even at his dourlest lifts Hannibal’s chin.

“Noted,” Will says wryly. He indicates the lunchbox and shrugs a little. “Maybe you’ll get a tour for your troubles.”

“That would be an agreeable compromise.” Hannibal shrugs a little too. “Alana is sick, however. She may not be up to it. I’m prepared to go without for the time being.”

Will’s eyebrows come up. “Didn’t know.” He shuffles his feet. “Tell her to get well for me.” The way he says it makes it clear that he has no intentions of transmitting the message himself. Hannibal tries to be inconspicuous about scrutinizing him for more clues as to the nature of the tension between Will and Alana.

“She’ll appreciate it,” he assures Will. “I assume you’re loaded up on work, if you can’t tell her yourself.”

Will shuffles his feet. “Things are a little hectic today. They have been for the past few weeks.” He looks a little guilty. “Which reminds me—sorry for not being in contact. We’ve had a lot going on.”

Indeed, Will hasn’t reached out to Hannibal since their lunch date, though Hannibal is almost certain Aleksandra has inquired about him and their promised ‘next time’. That had been half a month ago. Hannibal had on multiple occasions (while organizing his home library, while dispensing tissues to an emotional patient, while supervising the re-tuning of his harpsichord, while lurking in his car to memorize the schedule of an impudent catering waiter) thought of calling the Grahams himself. Instead he had waited with taut patience.

“I trust everything is alright?” Hannibal asks with concern. He hopes that Will doesn’t mean some sort of personal tragedy—while on the one hand he would love to observe the Grahams in the midst of turmoil, he would rather not have to compete for their attention.

“Everything’s fine,” Will clarifies. “There was another birthday party—one of Tiny’s classmates. And there was this recital—she had a big part in her school play and we had to make all of the
rehearsals plus the two performances.”

Hannibal is relieved by the inanity. “How busy,” he sympathizes. “I can understand your difficulty—please don’t apologize.” Fondness makes him nosy. “I had no idea Miss Aleksandra was an actress.”

Will snorts inelegantly. “She’s not—the stage terrifies her. I told her she didn’t have to do the little auditions they organized for the kids, but she was stubborn about trying. Ended up scoring one of the pigs.” At Hannibal’s blank face, he adds, “It’s an adaption of The Three Little Pigs.”

Hannibal is intrigued by Aleksandra’s obstinacy in the face of her own trepidation. “And which pig was she? What was her house built from?”

Will smiles. “Brick.”

Hannibal smiles back. “Please give her my congratulations.”

Will murmurs something demure on Aleksandra’s behalf but they’re both aware that he’s perfectly comfortable accepting his daughter’s praise. Hannibal adds, “I can imagine her in costume. The visual is fatally precious.”

“The real thing was killer,” Will tells him. “I’ve got pictures somewhere.” His hand gropes at his pocket as though to retrieve his phone before he seems to realize what he’s doing. He clears his throat. “Well. It was worth the running around.” A yawn overtakes the end of his sentence which he tries to smother with his wrist. “Even if I’m still recovering.”

He shifts his coffee to his other hand to unhook his glasses from his face and dig a knuckle into one eye. He looks very tired, and attractive that way. Hannibal uses his distraction to look Will full in the face and memorize the lines around his thin mouth. He makes a decision.

Though he hasn’t eaten in hours (he wanted an empty belly for his meal with Alana), he unzips the flap of his lunchbox and withdraws one of the sealed soup bowls.

“Allow me to help speed up your recovery,” he says, and holds it out.
Will pauses rubbing. He lowers his glasses and looks suspiciously at the bowl. “Is that your lunch?”

“No,” Hannibal says easily. “As of now, it’s yours.”

Will is shaking his head before Hannibal even finishes. “I can’t take that.”

“I insist.” Hannibal holds the bowl closer to Will’s free hand. Will tries to shy away.

“You really don’t have to do this,” Will says. “I was on my way to the cafeteria.”

“Nothing there will do you as much good,” Hannibal says with confidence. He waits until Will’s shifting eyes flick up to his to say, “I would like it very much if you ate it.”

Will looks a little recalcitrant. It occurs to Hannibal that he might be the first in a while to be attentive to Will’s well being. “Don’t go hungry for my sake,” Will grumbles. Some switch seems to flip and he becomes prickly as he hasn’t been since their introduction. “You’re not obligated to take care of me.”

Hannibal decides to play dirty. “I’m sure Miss Aleksandra would be very upset with me if I didn’t.”

Will’s eyebrows climb his forehead in disbelief and he stares hard at Hannibal for several seconds. Eventually he heaves a big sigh. “You’re as bad as her,” he accuses under his breath, hooking his glasses in his collar so he can take the tupperware.

Hannibal doesn’t smile but it’s a near thing. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Will gives him a look. Hannibal is struck suddenly by the informality of Will’s naked irritation. He keeps his delight to himself and watches wordlessly as Will brings the bowl up to his face. “What is it?”

Hannibal accepts his testiness serenely. “Black bean and cactus. My own recipe.”

He speaks casually but inside he is a riot of thought. He has been feeding Alana his own recipes for
quite some time (and been quietly amused by her innocent appreciation for as long), but he had not anticipated offering Will any for some time. He has just handed the fruits of very ignoble efforts to an affiliate of the FBI. He has just handed evidence to the most perceptive man he knows. The man he thinks often about prying apart to analyze in excruciating detail. Excitement raises the hairs at the nape of his neck.

Will huffs. “Should’ve known, with your flair. What's wrong with chicken noodle?”

“Banal,” Hannibal replies, deliberately snotty. He enjoys yet another reluctant laugh from Will.

“Of course,” he says, hand coming up to wipe the smile off his face. “If the other one’s Alana’s, what will you eat?”

Hannibal is flippant. “I’ll make do.”

Will looks at him consideringly. It is not the wary perusal from the mall or the fierce scrutiny from the park, but something much less tense. Much softer.

Hannibal wishes that he could continue standing under the beam of Will’s attention, to see what Will is trying to shine a light on in the shadow beneath his congenial mask, but the window of time before his next appointment is closing and he still wants to enjoy Alana’s compliments over the soup. “I should be off,” he admits, and the disappointment in the words is genuine. “I still need to give Alana hers.”

Will snaps out of it. “Right.” He clears his throat. The openness that had made his face luminous during his search beyond Hannibal’s smile closes and the cast of reticence returns. “Don’t want to keep you.”

Hannibal would gladly be kept, but Will is already shuffling around the various items overflowing from his arms and preparing to depart, his head down to let his curls fall forward. In a flash Hannibal sees the curve of Aleksandra’s sweet cheek in Will’s.

“Nor I you,” he says, adjusting his lunchbox as well. He gestures toward the soup bowl. “I hope it’s to your tastes.”

He fiercely regrets the fact that he can’t stay to watch Will eat. He wants to see the moment Will slips
the first spoonful between his lips, the moment the juices from the cobbler hit his tongue. He can imagine it perfectly (and will when he returns to his office) but it won’t be the same as witnessing the real thing. He consoles himself with the determination to bring Will many, many more tupperwares.

One corner of Will’s mouth quirks against his will. “Judging by the last thing you made me, I think I’ll love it.”

Hannibal wants to tenderly wring Will’s throat and collect the drips of lovely wryness from his twisted vocal chords. He is very proud. “I would love to know the final verdict.”

It is the request that he had forced himself not to make during the half-month that Will had kept him in the dark—the request for a call. Will thinks about it. “Can I reach you on your cell after seven?”

Hannibal smiles. “I’ll be perfectly free.”

Will nods. “Guess I’ll talk to you then.” He does an awkward shuffle halfway between leaving and lingering. “Goodbye, Dr. Lecter.”

“Goodbye, Will,” Hannibal returns, and watches Will make his way down the hall after his students.

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Hannibal shoulders open his front door, hands busy with the straps of his cloth shopping bags. He pauses in the foyer to set them down so he can shrug out of his light coat and stretch his fingers. His palms ache from the lines cut into them by the weighty groceries—his shopping trip was very productive. He now has the ingredients to make the dishes he had planned for the impudent waiter (chops with balsamic reduction and tenderloin in dijon marsala sauce), and he is very eager to get started.

He feels inspired after the incident with the soup. Alana had been very liberal with her compliments (and a little artificial, he suspects, as her tastebuds were likely nonfunctional at the time), but what had stayed with him was the knowledge that as he sat at Alana’s small desk gamely eating the lunch she brought, somewhere else in the Academy Will Graham was consuming his.

That was yesterday. Hannibal had been thoroughly distracted by the thought of Will with his belly full of his so-called shredded chicken, satisfied and unwitting. Alana had noticed and commented on
his preoccupation and lack of food. He thought about lying to avoid her inevitable wrath but decided that riding the tide of her outrage could prove entertaining.

She’d been taken aback when he’d dutifully described his encounter with Will, explaining his sacrifice. From there he’d had to add his account of the lunch date they’d shared earlier and admit that he and the Grahams had become something like close.

“I’m…honestly very surprised by your friendship,” Alana had admitted, and beneath the shock in her voice was something dark like envy. Hannibal was delighted by it. “I really expected Will to rebel at being in the same room as another psychiatrist.”

She had eyed him balefully so he assured her, “As per your request, I never approached him as a psychiatrist. Only as a friend.”

Her lovely mouth had thinned a little. Hannibal had a mighty desire to pinch along that exposed nerve; not for the first time, he wondered if Will and Alana had ventured into some kind of short-lived, ill-fated affair. The thought did not entertain him very much.

Alana disproved his theory. “I tried that approach,” she admitted. “But he smelled my professional interests from a mile away.”

Hannibal prodded her with his inference. “He’s kept you at arm’s length ever since.” Perhaps unwittingly, she made a face.

“Never got to know him well enough to get more than his daughter’s name,” she said, giving him a look. “But I guess that was the way past his defenses.”

Hannibal had smiled at her and taken another bite.

He has spent many years amusing himself by serving Alana one dish after another, or offering her drinks from the keg that he ferments himself, but with Will now in his acquaintance his attentions have shifted. With Will, the stakes are raised. And Hannibal does love a good gamble.

He is about to hook the bags on his arms again so he can take his perishables into the kitchen when his phone rings in his suit pants pocket.
Premonition suggests that it is someone he is very anxious to hear from. He sets his groceries back down and answers.

“Hello?”

“Dr. Lecter.”

Naturally, it’s Will. His voice is a little hoarse, as though he’s been instructing all day, and he sounds as embarrassed as he had the last time he called.

Hannibal smiles. More and more he begins to enjoy Will’s more-or-less constant chagrin. “Will. I’m happy to hear from you.”

“Oh, thanks.” Will clears his throat. “This is a good time?”

“It is,” Hannibal says, stepping around his bags so he can sink down on the foyer’s lone chair. “What can I do for you?”

“Well,” Will says on a self-depreciating laugh. “I’m just calling to give you your verdict.”

Hannibal savors the moment. He had his doubts about whether Will would follow through on granting this trivial call, especially given the almost three weeks of silence before their run-in yesterday. He can hear Will holding his breath across the line and realizes that Will too understands the implications of indulging him this whim.

“Wonderful,” Hannibal says, lingering on the word. He enjoys his own sense of expectancy. “I await your judgment.”

Will snorts. He says without preamble, “It was amazing.” He sounds conspiratorial as he points out, “You already knew that.”

Hannibal has indeed heard the words countless times before, but they sound much different from
Will’s mouth. He stifles a sigh of pleasure. “You’re too kind,” he demurs.

“I’m really not,” Will says emphatically. Hannibal has to agree, but that need not be said.

“You’ve kindly obliged me,” he insists.

“By kindly stroking your ego?” Will asks, dry.

Hannibal points out sagely, “It can be difficult to stroke one’s own.”

Will coughs out a surprised laugh. “I guess you’re right.” His tone is one of charmed disbelief. “Glad to be of service.” He seems as relaxed as he is surprised by the spot of blue humor.

“Was there enough?” Hannibal asks of the soup.

“More than,” Will replies. “I’m not a big eater.”

Hannibal makes a pleased noise, and also makes a note of that. “I’m glad you were satisfied.”

“Are you?” Will asks. He is, to Hannibal’s delight, teasing. “Now that I’ve told you what you want to hear?”

Hannibal thinks about Will in his home after a trying day at work, setting his things down so he can dig his cellphone out of his pocket, pushing buttons indecisively before punching in Hannibal’s number. He thinks of Will’s low laugh on the other end of the line. “More than,” he smiles.

There’s a pause. Hannibal can hear Will take a breath through the receiver, about to say something else, but he’s cut off by a noise in the background—a small voice. “Just a second,” Will grunts instead.

Hannibal can hear what must be Aleksandra in a series of high murmurs through the phone, her words tinny across the reception. He remembers their last meeting, her excitement at seeing him, her ill-hidden imitation, her enthusiastic inclusion of him in her play; the recollection suffuses him with
fondness. Will’s voice grows distant as he pulls away from his phone to answer his daughter. Hannibal can’t make out any of their short back-and-forth except the sound of his name.

He is pleased by Aleksandra’s intrusion. Though he might have preferred to see how long Will would volley insignificant jibes with him or how at ease Will would become despite his usual apparent discomfort with calls, he sees this unforeseen variable as an interesting introduction into his phone experiment. He waits patiently through Will and Aleksandra’s distant dialogue to see how it will affect the maturation of the conversation.

Will returns shortly, sounding very hesitant. “Tiny walked—Aleksandra walked in from playing.” Apologetically he explains, “She got it out of me that you’re the one on the phone.”

Hannibal can guess where this is going. He smiles.

Will is silent for long enough that Hannibal can tell he is fiercely debating with himself. “She’s asking if she can speak to you,” he admits eventually.

The words are like a reward. Hannibal waits an acceptable amount of time before he says, “Certainly.”

In the first place, he is as gratified as always by Aleksandra’s compulsion to grasp at every chance to interact with him. In the second, he knows what it means that Will ultimately decided to grant her this chance. His relationship with the Grahams only gets sweeter, he muses.

“Brace yourself,” Will mumbles quickly, and before Hannibal can respond there is a cacophony of muffled static as the phone transfers between hands.

Then Aleksandra speaks.

“Dr. Lecter?” She sounds very small over the line.

Clinically, Hannibal probes the spike of affection that prods at him even as he greets her, “Hello, Miss Aleksandra.”
“Dr. Lecter!” she gasps, no longer small. “Hi!”

“It’s good to hear from you again,” Hannibal says easily. “How have you been?”

“I’m good!” Hannibal can hear some of the dogs of which she spoke back at the park respond with yips to her loud excitement as she launches right into a question. “Did you know I was in a play?”

“Your father mentioned it,” Hannibal says. He eyes the groceries on his foyer floor but ends up offering, “Would you like to tell me more?”

“Yeah!” she exclaims, before hesitating. “Actually. Daddy said I can only talk for a little bit.”

“That’s fair,” Hannibal says. “Maybe you can tell me later.”

“Oh!” she says brightly. Courteously, she echoes his words with as much seriousness as she can muster, “How have you been, Dr. Lecter?”

“I’m very well, thank you,” Hannibal says, amused.

Suddenly she drops her voice, and the sound of her exhales in the receiver lets him know that she’s cupped her small hand around the microphone. “I have a secret,” she whispers.

Hannibal is unperturbed by the non-sequitur. “Will you tell me?” he asks, equally quiet.

“Uh-huh.” Even lower, she breathes, “I missed you.”

The visceral reaction that grips Hannibal in response to the words is unanticipated. He returns the sentiment quite honestly. “And I missed you.” Curious, he asks, “Why is that a secret?”

Aleksandra sounds shy. “One time when I was asking Daddy if we could play at the park again, he said that I talk about you a lot. Sometimes when I ask Daddy something too many times he says no, so I don’t ask anymore.”
Hannibal interprets—Will doesn’t yet know what to do about his daughter’s attachment to him. Both Hannibal and Aleksandra are walking thin lines by testing him.

Hannibal enjoys risk, however. “He did promise a next time. I think it’s okay to ask.”

“Really?” Aleksandr says, half-hopeful and half-doubtful.

“Really,” Hannibal says. He lowers his voice again to confide, “Maybe I’ll ask too.”

Aleksandra makes a happy sound. “Thank you, Dr. Lecter!” Before she can say anything else, however, Will’s voice breaks in, unintelligible but clear in intention.

“Oh,” Aleksandra says. “I have to give the phone back now.” She sounds disappointed.

“Thank you for chatting with me,” Hannibal says soothingly.

Aleksandra puts her mouth close to the microphone a last time. “I’ll ask,” she promises under her breath.

Hannibal smiles. “Wonderful. Goodbye, Miss Aleksandra.”

“Bye, Dr. Lecter!” Aleksandra says in a rush, and there’s the crackle of static again.

Will gets back on the phone. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be,” Hannibal protests. “I enjoy listening to her.”

“You bring out the loquacity in her,” Will says, a little stiffly. To Hannibal’s disappointment, it seems as though the intermission of Aleksandra’s time on the phone had rewound some of Will’s regular tension. “Well, we’ve kept you a while.”
“It’s no problem at all,” Hannibal lies. He is sure that some of the vegetables that he brought home are wilting, but he doesn’t feel too terribly inconvenienced. “I’m grateful you called.”

Will softens a little. “Since we got the ego stroking out of the way,” he says, “I just wanted to ask where to return your tupperware.”

Hannibal sees the gold in the opportunity he’s been presented. He doesn’t waste it. “Do you have a pen? I’ll give you my address.”

“Go ahead.” Hannibal waits for the sound of distant shuffling paper to end before he obliges. “Great,” Will grunts, breath audible like he has the phone wedged between his ear and shoulder as he presumably writes. “Can I stop by next week?”

“Anytime you’d like,” Hannibal says. “Phone me beforehand and there should be no problem.”

“Will do,” Will promises. “I’ll let you go now.”

Hannibal interrupts his hasty goodbye to emphasize, “Thank you for indulging me tonight, Will. And Miss Aleksandra, of course.”

It slows Will down a little. “Sure thing. It was, uh, no trouble.”

"I'm pleased to have that next time," Hannibal continues, for the sake of risk.

There's a beat before Will huffs out an aborted laugh. "Same here," he admits, and then adds quickly, "Have a good night, Hannibal."

They both seem to realize at the same time that Will has used his first name. To Hannibal, it is another kind of tickling thrill.

Suddenly he feels confident about saying, “I look forward to seeing you next week.”
Will clears his throat again. “You too.”

“Goodbye, Will.” Hannibal relishes the next split second of taut tension. Then Will makes a nondescript noise of agreement and hangs up.

Though Hannibal would prefer to take a moment to attend his thoughts, he wastes no time pocketing his phone and getting to his feet, bending to gather up his groceries again. It’s a short but arduous trip to the kitchen where he unpacks his food and puts it away at speed. When that’s done he goes back to the foyer to hang his light coat and clean up the moisture from the floors where some of his spritzed ingredients dripped on the boards. Only then does he retire to his study for a small rest.

Taking a seat in the armchair pulled up the study's desk, he turns his thoughts on next week, on the prospect of welcoming Will into his house. He wonders if Will will come alone or if he will bring his daughter, if he will hand the dishes over at the door or if he can be coaxed to come inside. He can't decide if the thought is exciting or intimidating. Perhaps Hannibal's home will betray the things that his face does not, and Will will see him too clearly. He reflects on the rooms that have the potential to give him away —certainly the kitchen heads the list. He tries to imagine Will scrutinizing his chopping block or his oven; then he tries to imagine Will on his chopping block or in his oven. He is intrigued by all of the possibilities.

Hannibal reaches across the desk to drag a notepad and fountain pen over to him, taking down the first ideas for small, simple food plates that occur to him. He decides that when Will comes calling he will lure him inside, reluctance or not. He is too tempted by the thought of observing Will standing inside the life he has built and seeing whether he will take it apart nail by nail like he takes apart Hannibal's facade dermal layer by dermal layer. He pauses writing only to wonder if his curiosity could lead him to the same fate as the proverbial cat.

Then he resumes. Satisfaction brought the cat back, after all.
Hannibal’s house is redolent of cinnamon and vanilla. He has just removed his wine-poached pears from the saucepan he simmered them in and retired both the fruit and the Riesling syrup to the refrigerator to cool. The kitchen doors have been deliberately left open—he wants the perfume of tonight’s dessert to suffuse his home before Will’s arrival in approximately one hour.

Will had called as Hannibal was taking his lunch at a bistro near his office. The phone rang just after Hannibal’s last bite of orecchiette; their conversation had been very brief, as they both had mere minutes before the need to return to work became urgent, but they managed to set a time for Will’s visit and also squabble good-naturedly over Hannibal’s emergent bad habit of going out of his way for the Grahams, in Will’s words (naturally Hannibal had made no promises about stopping). The call left him invigorated.

The decision to prepare the pears was made out of necessity—the fruit would have spoiled soon and he had an open bottle of white wine left over from his last dinner party. He would have preferred to make something savory (something with meat) but it is a weeknight and he has no time to slow-cook any of the vacuum-sealed packages sitting in his freezer.

Again, Hannibal consoles himself with the thought of Will bloated with his food some other time.

He retires to his study to arrange it, optimistically, for company. He gathers up some unfinished sketches, carts a few Durkheimian texts back to their proper place in the library, and straightens the couch cushions that he skewed yesterday when he slipped into a nap working on particle physics equations. There is no guarantee that Will will agree to step inside and indulge his invitation to dessert, but Hannibal believes that preparation is never waste.

In the case that Will stays, they will eat in here. Hannibal does not, as a rule, take food beyond the entertaining rooms in his house, but he doesn't want to foist the entire potential revelation of his kitchen on Will all at once. He retrieves two coasters for the drinks he will serve with dessert; he can’t bring himself to go as far as ruining his wenge table.

He spends the remainder of the hour on his tablet, rereading Will’s monograph on insect activity and time of death. He feels positive about the circumstances—no matter how the evening proceeds, Will will know the way to him. The thought pleases the part of him that has been ruminating on the image of Will rubbing his blunt fingers across his tired mouth. Time passes quickly with Will’s written words filling up tomes in his head, volumes to be stored in the room being slowly appended to his vast memory palace.
He interrupts himself when seven o’clock approaches. Back in the kitchen, he takes the pears out of the fridge, sampling their chilled cloying scent as he carries them to the counter. The syrup comes out next, and after it warms to fragrant malleability he drizzles it over the pear flesh, restraining himself from too much artistry.

He finishes just in time—he’s barely done flicking his sticky fingers under water from the sink faucet when the doorbell chime announces Will’s arrival.

Hannibal is interested in the electric frisson of excitement that arcs up his spine as he makes his way to the front of the house. He is not prepared, however, for the volt he feels when he opens the door.

Will looks a little haunting in the chiaroscuro shadows pinned between the spent dusk and Hannibal’s porch light, so darkly baroque with the lines in his face and the permanent sadness in his eyes exaggerated. He’s back in flannel and frayed jeans but he is no less magnetic than Hannibal imagines Giovan Battista was to Caravaggio. In his right hand is a grocery tote bag and in his left hand is a bottle of wine of no trivial cost. With his glasses missing, Hannibal can see the way his natural frown lightens to something less sullen as they briefly meet eyes.

“The wine store staff told me this wasn’t too neanderthal,” Will says in lieu of greeting, hefting the bottle.

Hannibal considers him openly. “Good evening, Will.” He can’t help that he sounds a little keen. “They didn’t lead you astray. Do you have the time for a glass?”

Will hovers over his answer despite the fact he is nearly hovering over the threshold. Seemingly without thinking he lifts the tote bag carrying Hannibal’s tupperware like a shield against the question.

Hannibal cajoles, “You’ve chosen a good white for dessert.” He holds out his hand.


Hannibal steps to the side and gestures Will inside with his free hand. “I was presumptuous.”

Will wipes his walking boots on Hannibal’s doormat in a reticent shuffle. “I think I should have known that you would presume.”
“I think you should have,” Hannibal agrees, a tease.

Will gives him a look over his shoulder as he steps inside and sheds his nylon jacket, so casually exasperated that Hannibal spends a short moment preening at how developed their rapport has already become.

He tucks the wine under his arm and takes Will’s jacket from him to hang it up in the foyer’s coat closet. When he turns back around, Will is standing in the center of the front room looking like he’s trying not to touch anything. No one has ever stood in Hannibal’s foyer in flannel and boots before, but Will doesn’t necessarily look out of place flanked on either side by impressive replicas of the Riance bronzes.

“Shall we?” Hannibal says, too appreciative of Will’s discomfort to try to assuage it. “This way, please.”

He leads Will out of the vestibule, passing by the grand staircase and down the hall under the second floor’s furnished balcony. “Please excuse any lingering disorder,” he apologizes. “I’m still cleaning up the evidence of my last soiree.” They pass a few rooms crowded with chairs that need to go back into storage, but nothing is really disorderly—Hannibal simply enjoys a risky pun, as well as how difficult Will seems to find small talk.

Will scoffs. “Obviously never been a parent, if this is a mess,” he mumbles. “You’re excused.”

They don’t enter the checker-floored conservatory, clear of its party trappings and host once again to his harpsichord, but instead walk into the dining room, around the sturdy, expensive dinner table and along his herb wall. The effect of the home is likely wasted on Will, who came to him in workman’s clothes, but Hannibal always enjoys showcasing the life that he has built here, a mask of stone and wood and art to match his mask of flesh.

He raises the dining room lights to a dim glow so he can cross to the tall wooden hutch in the corner and pull out two glasses and a cork opener. “If you would pour the wine,” he asks politely, “I’ll retrieve dessert.”

He waits for both Will’s nod and his second-long nervous look at being abandoned before he slides open the kitchen doors, and slips inside.
The tupperware he unloads onto the counter. The dishes have been kindly and meticulously washed; he is pleased. It takes no time to grab their plates and return—he gets back quickly enough to see Will finish carefully pouring the second glass, a crease of active concentration on his brow. He looks very unpracticed but he makes sure no drop spills on Hannibal’s tabletop. Hannibal does not allow himself to pause at the door and watch like he wants.

“This way,” he announces, nodding in the direction of the study.

“Not here?” Will asks, corking the wine and bringing it along with the glasses.

“I’m making an exception.” Hannibal gives Will that same sliver of a smile before turning down the hallway.

He can feel Will considering him as they retrace some of their steps through the house; he wonders what Will is thinking, what he is embellishing the image of Hannibal that he has probably sketched in his mind. When they reach the study Hannibal bumps the door open with his hip and gestures Will through first, following close enough that his nose tickles with the scent of poorly-selected aftershave.

“This is nice,” Will says almost immediately, honestly.

Hannibal, circling Will to lead him to the couch, is surprised. He arranges their dessert on the table and admits, “I wouldn’t have thought my tastes would be to yours.”

Will scoffs. “You know, I’m a little less provincial than you think I am.” He sets down the wine. “Not much less, but still.” He indicates the entire room. “I meant that this is…comfortable.” He sounds considering. “Lived in.”

Hannibal’s eyebrows raise. He watches Will eye the length of the couch as though he can see Hannibal there checking his derivations. He feels exposed until Will takes a seat, galvanized by the thought of Will’s augural eyes on the equations he doesn’t show to anyone.

“You’re right,” he admits, siting down on the other end of the couch instead of pulling up an armchair as planned. He is satisfied by the way Will stiffens a little at the proximity. “Many parts of this house are used almost exclusively for entertaining. I often end my days in this study, however.” He points toward the draped windows. “It’s very charming in here when the sun sets.”
Will follows his gesture. Hannibal thinks that he can imagine it perfectly. “I bet.” He shifts in his seat. “We get some good views in our house too.” Looking uneasy at his own voluntary admission, he picks up his dessert a little awkwardly. “What’s this?”

Hannibal copies him. “Poached pears.” Habit has the rest of the list of the ingredients leaping to the tip of his tongue, but he restrains himself.

Will shakes his head. “Always a production,” he mutters, and doesn’t seem to notice Hannibal’s eyes darting over to him as he digs his fork into his dessert.

They take their first bites. Hannibal treats it like he does every bite of food he takes—he carves a careful half inch out of the pear flesh with his fork, drags it through the syrup, waves in front of his nose, and places it delicately on his tongue. He doesn’t swallow until he identifies each of the flavors that he tipped into the saucepan. He decides immediately that the dessert is a success.

Beside him, Will makes a quiet, indescribable noise. Hannibal takes that as agreement.

“Wow,” Will volunteers. He’s not quite finished chewing but Hannibal doesn’t mind. “I mean I figured, after the pretzels and the soup, but wow.”

Hannibal preens a little. “Have it with the wine.”

Will complies. He says, “Have you considered leaving psychiatry for a restaurant?”

“Many times.” Hannibal takes another bite. “It’s difficult to choose between people and food, however. I prefer to combine the two.”

He is perhaps a little too liberal with himself with Will directly across the couch from him. When Will passes a glance over him, he has to put a lid on his giddiness.

“Can’t say I even have the choice,” Will huffs. “I can do southern comfort food and that’s it. Can’t get away with dessert, certainly not like this.”

“I’ve had your fare,” Hannibal disagrees. “I beg to differ.”
Will is amused by fare. “A man after my own heart,” he says, and then looks uncomfortable.

Hannibal is after his mind, but it occurs to him that perhaps he can’t have the latter without the former.

“I have to admit that I wish Miss Aleksandra were here,” he announces after another bite. It’s his way of asking after the girl, whom he hasn’t heard from or about since their short moment on the phone. He has missed her bell voice and the way she raises it in delight whenever they reunite. “I take a lot of pleasure from her reactions. I think she would enjoy this.”

Will takes another slow bite. “She does have a sweet tooth,” he says eventually. He looks closely at Hannibal but finds only genuine concern. “She would have loved to come, but it’s past her bedtime. I left her with a friend.” He fiddles with his fork as he admits, “I did make time for a glass.”

The confession is gratifying. “A glass and a bite,” Hannibal corrects, hefting his plate.

“Give you an inch,” Will mumbles, but he’s almost smiling.

Hannibal could not be more pleased. Will has never been so relaxed in his presence, with his head bent over his plate, the back of his neck decidedly vulnerable. The lamplight and glow from the small fire in the corner of the study lend a rosiness to his cheeks that looks almost like cheerfulness.

Hannibal knows he cannot ruin the mood with greedy curiosity. Though he wants to map the inside of Will’s malleable mind—specifically that supple place that Will molds around the edges around other people—he inuits that any probing questions will put Will on his scent. It wouldn’t do to be sniffed out, not when things are going well.

He sticks to safe ground. “How is Miss Aleksandra? And the pack that I’ve heard so much about?”

It’s the right thing to start with—like all parents, Will seems inexorably pulled to talk about his brood. “She’s good—more than, really. There’s a school field trip to the zoo coming up and I can’t get her to focus on anything else.” He chuckles a little. Hannibal remembers Aleksandra’s excited recount of their time at the aquarium and shares a smile. “The pack is giving me hell. Weather’s getting warm so there’s enough fur around the house to make seven more dogs.”
“You have a large family,” Hannibal observes.

Will shrugs. “That’s the benefit of living in the middle of nowhere—there’s room enough for all of
us.” He scrapes up the last of his pears and takes a long drink from his glass; it’s not cultured but also
not unforgivable. “Turns out farmhouses are great for both kids and animals.”

Hannibal is taking mental notes. “I’m sure it could get lonely in isolation, even with a full house.”

There’s a pause before Will says, “We have everything we need.” Almost right away he shoots back
with, “And you? You can’t possibly fill this house by yourself.”

“I don’t,” Hannibal agrees placidly, and adds nothing else. Will’s visibly unsatisfied curiosity tickles
him.

Will adds, “Unless you bring home a lot of company.” It’s impolite but asked with enough self-
consciousness that Hannibal feels warm.

“Not recently,” he says baldly. He takes another sip to swallow his amusement. “Work has kept me
busy.”

Will pursues the subject change. “How’s that going?”

Hannibal lets out a breath like a sigh. “Ninety percent banal and a meagre ten percent interesting, but
nevertheless going well.”

Caught off guard, Will is not quick enough to stop a laugh. “That’s not very professional.”

Hannibal makes a dismissive face. “A good mind comes long only so often.” He does his best not to
give Will a meaningful look. “And your own work?” He keeps his interest transparent enough to be
pressure-less if Will decides not to answer. The air between them is so relaxed that he feels
comfortably daring.

Instead of balking, Will mocks. “Ninety percent banal and ten percent interesting.” He seems to
realize his own flippancy a moment later, admitting, “I prefer it that way. I don’t exactly look
forward to the things that constitute interesting in my field.”

His grimace looks a little hunted. If Hannibal had to guess, he would say there’s a good chance that Will suffers from nightmares. All he knows of Will’s work is that he receives the occasional call from Jack Crawford; if the BAU needs help, he can only assume that the things Will sees are quite interesting indeed.

“Be careful, Will,” he admonishes mildly, smiling. “Or this might turn into therapy.”

Will chuckles, much revived by the wry warning. “I’m sure you wouldn’t mind.” He drains his glass and puts it on the table with his cleared plate, looking a little disappointed that he’s finished. Exaggeratedly he asks, “Are you scamming me into a session, doctor?”

“Naturally not.” Hannibal looks Will in the face. “I’ll have you willing or not at all,” he says evenly, taking another sip.

Blood rises hot to Will’s cheeks; Hannibal has embarrassed him. He ducks his head in his familiar way, letting his curls screen his flush, and sidesteps that new territory. “Speaking of, how did you get into therapy?”

Hannibal obliges him by subsiding, deciding that a judicious application of pitifulness might work in his favor. “After many years of performing surgery, I was haunted by one too many mistakes with a scalpel.”

“You were a surgeon.” Will’s eyes raise. “Makes sense.”

Hannibal cocks his head. “In what way?”

Will shrugs, like he spoke ahead of himself and doesn’t understand his meaning either. “Takes a certain type.”

“Alas,” Hannibal says. “To have sunken a type.”

Will snorts. “I only meant surgery seems like it would suit you.” He grimaces. “Yikes.” He tries
again, “You’re a very precise man. I can see you in an operating theater, making perfect incisions.” His gaze gets faraway for a moment, like the rest of that thought is on the horizon.

“I did take quite a bit of pride in my work,” Hannibal admits. “I hope you don’t think it arrogant of me to say that I was one of the best.”

“Of course you were,” Will says, amused. “You seem to know your way around a knife.” Hannibal begins to get goosebumps, but Will does not linger there. “Judging by what you do in the kitchen, anyway, if there’s any comparison to be had there.”

“I’ve become very familiar, yes,” Hannibal says, but offers no more footholds.

“You do incisions of a different kind nowadays,” Will accuses mildly. Hannibal is briefly alarmed before Will adds, “Alana told me you’re very good at digging in people’s heads.”

Hannibal feels a brief twinge at the thought of the two of them together that is just as quickly soothed by the knowledge that they were talking about him. “A carry-over, I suppose,” he demurs.

Will gives him a macabre half-smile. “Is it different, opening up brains instead of bodies?”

The easy languidness brought on Hannibal by the wine burns up in a sudden spark of adrenaline. Though Will is doing nothing but smirking at him across the couch, that same mix of yearning and violence wells up in him again; some kernel of paranoia taking root in his gut makes the gleam of firelight in Will’s eyes seem clairvoyant. He is dismayed and excited at once.

“Only in that there’s no anesthesia for therapy,” Hannibal says. “My patients do a lot more squirming nowadays.”

“Psychiatrists are sadists,” Will shrugs. He’s barely teasing when he says, “You probably enjoy it more.”

“You may be right.” Hannibal laughs to dissipate his own tension, finishing his own glass with a last long sip. “But the real reason therapy is preferable is that it hasn’t killed any of my patients so far.”
Finally Will’s naturally dour face curdles into something approaching compassion. Hannibal watches Will react to the nuance of regret in his voice and wrestles with the strong desire to tug on the thread of Will’s empathy and see where it leads. Instead he equivocates, “How did you get into teaching?”

Will shrugs. “How does anyone get into academia?” He recounts an abridged version of his time as a cop; Hannibal knows the bare bones of the story but Will’s version has flesh—his seven-semester undergraduate degree, his brief first job at a morgue, his initial water-boy position at the police station, his rise through the ranks, his introduction to field work. “Louisiana started to feel too small, so I left for grad school in D.C. Used a little elbow grease at George Washington and got into the federal crime lab.” A little haltingly, he says, “Being a parent and an investigator was hard. The Academy was a better fit.” He shrugs. “It’s treated me well so far.”

It takes willpower for Hannibal not to gorge on the offering of details; he is especially tempted by the peak at how Aleksandra fits in with what he knows of Will. “George Washington is a good school,” he offers. “I have several indispensable acquaintances there. Not in forensics, I’m afraid, but the classics.”

Will surprises him by saying, “I might know one or two—I did extra work for that department grading essays.” At Hannibal’s look, he explains, “I was a little under-stimulated before single-parenthood.”

Hannibal is, unbelievably, even more intrigued. “For which professor?”

“Edgewood.” At Hannibal’s noise of familiarity, he adds, “Literature was my strength.”

“You realize of course that you’re required to explain how you managed to win him over,” Hannibal says with interest. “I’ve never met a man so aggressively elitist regarding his field.”

Will does not bother with modesty. “He enjoyed my impromptu analysis of the Gallo-Romanization of the Greek pantheon.”

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. “I thought he considered the topic a bit of a dead horse?”

Will shrugs. “I managed to give him something to think about.”

“Tell me your secret,” Hannibal implores. “I’ve been trying to impress him for years.”
Will snorts. He comments about how far imagination goes with Edgewood, who has none. Hannibal feels no need to defend the professor, who certainly has no vision when it comes to food, but plays devil’s advocate with a defense of Edgewood’s criticism of the Western claim to Greek and Roman cultural heritage. From there they launch into a very opinionated discussion about the validity of the Western canon, and from there to the dangers of cultural superiority complexes. Hannibal is so focused on the way that Will’s enthusiasm brings more and more color to his face that he quite forgets the time.

He comes back to himself when the light burnishing Will’s profile and hair with gold dims; the fire in the corner of the room has gone out from negligence. A glance at the clock informs him that they have been talking at length, confirmed by the streaks of long-hardened Riesling glaze crossing their dessert plates.

Will glances at his watch at the same time and makes a rude noise. “Shit.”

“I apologize,” Hannibal says, getting to his feet. “I had no idea it was so late.”

“Not your fault,” Will says, standing too. He pulls his phone out of his back pocket and sends a rapid text. “I should have been paying attention.” Some of the usual stress has returned to his posture but he sounds disappointed as he adds, “I need to get back to Aleksandra.”

Hannibal is satisfied that he is not the only one unfulfilled by the sudden halt to the evening. “Have I inconvenienced you terribly?” he asks.

Will shakes his head. “This was great,” he says, and then seems a little self-conscious.

“I would hate to make you any later,” Hannibal says, though he wouldn’t mind. He motions to Will to leave their dishes where they are and ushers him out of the study, leading him through the house back to the foyer. “Are you fine for the drive home?”

“Completely fine,” Will confirms, waiting for Hannibal to cross over to the closet and extract his jacket. “I shouldn't keep my babysitter waiting any longer.”

Despite his words, he puts on his jacket with minimal haste. “Thanks for having me over,” he continues as he dresses. "Dessert was fantastic."
“It was my pleasure.” Hannibal lowers his voice conspiratorially. “I enjoyed having you on my couch.”

Will smiles a little. “Didn’t mind it myself.” He scuffs one heel on the doormat. “Might have to change my opinion on therapy.”

It’s only a joke, but that is Hannibal’s plan.

“Now that you’ve been to my home, don’t be a stranger,” he implores. The more he sees Will in the shadows of his grim house, the more he thinks that Will blends in. He’s very interested in the thought of Will in front of his Assyrian relief, his Ferrier, his small-scale Bernini.

Will pauses. “If you say so.” He stands empty-handed in the doorway, pausing halfway through the door. “We’ll have to finish that talk.”

What Hannibal hears is see you soon. “I heartily agree.”

Will finally steps onto the porch, back into the Caravaggio light. “Goodnight, Hannibal.”

Hearing his name is still a tickling thrill. “Goodnight, Will.” Hannibal gives him a closed-mouth smile. “Give Aleksandra my best.”

Will nods at him one last time before disappearing into the dark.
Chapter 8

Hannibal is back at the Academy. His pass bounces against his lapel as he retraces the route he took by chance during his last visit, this time toting a briefcase holding only one item of real significance. The empty hallways tell him that he has arrived in the middle of class time, but he has no objection to waiting in the back of the dimmed room that he rediscovers after several patient minutes of wandering. He loiters in the short shadowed corridor that runs beneath the classroom’s theatron; in the darkness he can freely watch Will.

Pacing across the dais at the front, haloed in the light from the tall projector screen at his back, Will looks almost like he had last week on Hannibal’s porch, though the shadows in his face are cut by the glint of his glasses. Hannibal wishes his face were bare—he has come to appreciate Will’s ubiquitous frown—but Will has masks of his own. That he allows Hannibal the occasional looks beneath is a victory in itself.

He is here to score another small victory. He has come to give Will a gift—rather, he has come to give Aleksandra a gift through Will. It’s been a long time since he’s seen her in person. He misses her sad eyes and dark curls, so very like her father’s—her sweet, open delight, so very unlike her father’s. He knows that children are fickle creatures whose whims and wants change like tides; he does not want her to forget her infatuation with him. She and her father will come to him hand-in-hand or not at all; he thought it would be wise to stoke the flames of her affection with a present, as personal an offering as the one she gave him a few months prior.

Truthfully, he wanted to stoke Will as well.

Hannibal is a greedy man. He enjoyed that night with Will in his home, intimate in its confinement and suggestive in the firelight, but it had been little more than a taste. The amiable conversation, though an achievement, had hardly slaked his appetite for the things he knows Will keeps buried deeper even than the morsels he had shared with wine-stain on his mouth. Will’s snide insights, his thinly-veiled taunts, had only whet that appetite.

So far he has experienced Will’s lightning-fast read of him at his office, an act of aggressive martyrdom, and Will’s languid barrage of questions in his home, an act of ruthless curiosity—Hannibal is hungry for more. He wants to know the things that drove Will from the field to the classroom. He wants to know the mechanism that generates Will’s perception, the gyral paths he takes to arrive at the prescient conclusions that Alana had wanted to hide from him.

After months of restraining his curiosity, Hannibal wants some reward.
Will’s smell had lingered on his couch. It had been maddening to sit there the next night and remember Will chopping away at his solemn story of leaving surgery, testing his regret for chinks. He doesn’t even think Will had done it intentionally—emotional interrogation is what he does. Sitting there again, Hannibal had tried to remember the drop-gut feeling that Will’s casual observations had inspired, but he couldn’t recapture the precariousness, the jeopardy.

He wants it again. That’s the nature of his relationship with the Grahams—he wants as much from them as he can wring out. He wants more of Aleksandra’s sweet affection and he wants more of Will’s mantic awareness. He wants Will in the belly of his home again, and he wants Aleksandra there with him.

The line has been cast; he thinks that last week Will bit the hook, and Aleksandra a long time ago. He’s there to reel them both in.

Today Will looks different than Hannibal has seen him before. He is not the distressed father that Hannibal first met, nor the prickly self-sacrifice who invaded his office, nor the cautious guardian that invited him to lunch. He’s certainly not the man that licked Hannibal’s dessert from his Christofle flatware less than a week ago. He realizes then how much Will also knows about trading person suits; for his students, Will is someone else entirely.

The way he paces with his hands clasped in the small of his back reminds Hannibal of a chief of surgery he used to work under as a young man—a man as sterile and humorless as his tools. Hannibal has seen Will taut with tension and stiff with mistrust, but never so rigid. His words sound bitten off, like he doesn’t want to spare his students anything more than he must.

He is lecturing on an old case, a manhunt in the early 2000s for a serial killer in Baton Rouge who sent the police eight letters claiming responsibility for fifteen murders. The victims spanned an age range from ten years old to thirty-seven; each was tortured, mutilated, and sealed in a box left on the docks of various active warehouses. Five of the victims suffered additional post-mortem assault, though there was no obvious selection process for the special treatment. When the victims became progressively younger, public uproar and vigilante violence threw the city into riot, which had the unfortunate effect of complicating the killer’s discovery and arrest.

Will’s description of the detective work used to capture the serial killer is curiously superficial; for a professor, he does not linger overmuch on the details. Hannibal is confused by his brevity until he realizes that Will is speaking to a class made up mainly of students with a respectable amount of investigative experience. They are not taking his class to learn about procedure.

“Donald Parker is not difficult to profile,” Will digresses, and that’s when Hannibal sees all the students start to take notes.
Before his eyes, Will’s posture changes. His shoulders slump perceptibly inward and his steps across the lecture stage become halting and nervous. Behind his glasses his eyes become somehow beady, and he gives the off-putting impression of skulking.

He abandons the topic of police work in order to talk about the imprints of Parker on his victims—the suggestion of impotence and inferiority in the mutilation, the sense of emasculation in the blunt brutality, the sexual dysfunctionality in the postmortem violence. Hannibal finds it slightly banal until Will’s focus switches abruptly to Donald Parker himself.

“He wanted to be seen,” Will says, with enough emphasis and certainty to sound profound. “He spent thirty-seven years as a tired footnote in his own life.” His hand clenches around his presentation remote. “He wanted everyone to finally see him.”

He describes how Parker punished those who didn’t acknowledge him the way that he deserved, those whose eyes passed over him in disrespect. He describes the giddy apprehension of the months of preparation before the first time: the purchases he hid from his disinterested wife, the obsessive visualizations and nightly dreams of the deed. He describes the primal high and premature violence of the first murder, and how Parker hadn’t meant to end it so fast. He describes the beginning of the permanent craving, the desire to do it again and immediately. And the blinding feeling of power when he wasn’t caught.

Will describes things he should have no way of knowing, but does.

Hannibal listens to him and feels restless with agitation and excitement both. The person at the front of the room is both Will and not—for the first time, Hannibal is seeing Will empathize.

It is creepy, which he had not anticipated. Will sounds nothing like himself; impossibly, he resembles the foul, wormy man projected on the screen behind him more and more the longer he speaks. The way he talks directly out of Parker’s mind, channeling his remorseless savagery and his cruel glee, raises the hairs at Hannibal’s nape.

Hannibal can feel the atmosphere in the room thicken as the students grow tense, but the scratch of pencil on paper never stops. It is apparent now to Hannibal that Will has brought these students the closest they will ever come to a killer, no matte what kind or caliber of investigators they become. In twenty minutes Will reshaped the inside of his head to that of an esoteric murderer and spoke with more authority and awareness than the men and women that finally apprehended Parker from an unrelated traffic violation.
Once again, Hannibal feels for Will something sweet like bloodlust and ugly like yearning.

 Abruptly Will stops talking. In the next second the modest beep of his watch goes off, announcing the end of class.

 “We’ll stop there,” he says curtly. His posture straightens and his voice is his own again; all signs of Donald Parker bleed out of him as he strides from the edge of the dais back to his lectern. He presses a few buttons on the stand and the lights in the room’s electric sconces go up.

 The students begin to pack up; Will offers no further dismissal beyond a reminder that dissertation proposals should be run by him prior to the deadline. Hannibal steps aside to let the students trickle out of the room, his eyes on Will as he plants himself behind his desk. Hannibal sees a few students toss meaningful glances at Will as they leave, but no one approaches the desk.

 When everyone else is gone, Hannibal steps out of the shadows of the classroom’s entrance. His shoes click with every step toward the front of the room, but Will’s head is already bent over his work, and his knitted brows are visible over the rim of his glasses. He is once again the ornery teacher Hannibal last saw him as here, pale with fatigue and visibly afflicted with a headache.

 Hannibal is as attracted to the visual as he always is; beneath the familiar magnetism is the electrifying, newfound knowledge of what lies beneath.

 His shadow falls across Will’s desk. Will does not look up. “Make an appointment with me during office hours.”

 Somewhere along the way Hannibal has become inexplicably fond of Will’s perpetual rudeness. “I’m afraid I only have so much time to linger.”

 Will’s head snaps up. “Hannibal.”

 His entire demeanor changes—the storm cloud at his brow disperses and his downturned lips part to form a small bow of surprise that Hannibal cannot take his eyes off of. He is delighted by the way Will snatches the glasses off of his face.

 “I—Sorry.” He’s flustered, pinkening around the edges. “Sorry, if I had known—” That sentence goes unfinished. Will shrinks back inside his shell of belligerence. “What are you doing here?”
“Making a social call,” Hannibal says, resting his suitcase on the desk. “I came to drop something off.” He cocks his head. “Not before a little eavesdropping, naturally.”

Will, whose flush had dimmed, glows again. “How long have you been watching?”

Hannibal clicks open the buckle of the suitcase. “Long enough to learn a thing or two.” A wink earns him a few rapid blinks in response. “Your lecture was very instructive. Very compelling.”

That is the absolute least Hannibal could say of it. He feels charged, as though he's some negative node and Will across the desk his positive. He thinks of the echoes of another man in Will’s voice with equal parts titillation and jealously.

Will avoids his look. “Is that so?”

“It is.” Hannibal, per usual, enjoys seeing Will off-balance. “You’re not like any professor I ever had.”

It’s true. The last half of Will’s lecture that he managed to catch stimulated him more than the entirety of his Parisian education. So far Will is not like anyone Hannibal has ever known at all, but Hannibal is still working on teasing out the full extent to which that is true.

“That’s what they all say,” Will says, just a little bit brittle. Hannibal wonders if he’s always this uncomfortable after coming back to himself.

“May I attempt another compliment, or will it fall as flat?” Hannibal asks with humor, pleased when Will blurts out an aborted laugh and scrubs a hand over his drawn face.

“That depends,” he says, unfurling a bit. He looks at Hannibal with false suspicion. “You angling for a free lesson?”

That is exactly what he’s been angling for. “Some one-on-one instruction?” Hannibal dares, a little less than proper. “How could I refuse?”
“Classes are for the enrolled, you know,” Will says, this time without defensiveness and instead with the bowed-head pleasure he’d radiated in Hannibal’s study. When he pushes back in his chair and rises to his feet to be of a height with Hannibal, a part of Hannibal immediately misses the view.

“Yes, Professor,” he says mildly.

“Smartass,” Will exhales, fidgeting; his gaze skitters away from Hannibal’s again and falls instead on his bag.

“What’s in the case?” he asks, planting a hand on his desktop so he can lean in for a look. There is a second in which Hannibal is provoked by the sudden proximity of Will’s paper-cut mouth and the long line of his vulnerable throat.

He recovers, tilting the open maw of the briefcase out of from Will’s sight. “Allow me my dramatic reveal,” he tuts.

Will leans back, amused and sheepish. “Of course. What was I thinking.”

Hannibal sets the case down so he can pinch the edges of the heavyweight paper pressed carefully between two straight edges in the bag. It’s been bound with fixative so that when he eases it out, the sweeping charcoal lines of the sketch he’s drawn don’t smear. Carefully, he lays the paper down on top of the piles of essays and folders of notes on Will’s desk.

Will inhales sharply when the sketch is laid flat. The hand that supported him on the desktop moves to hover over the page, though he doesn’t touch. Several seconds pass as his quick eyes flit across the sketch’s painstaking detail; eventually he raises his head and gives Hannibal a look of muted awe.

“It’s Tiny.”

Indeed, on the page is Aleksandra, whom Hannibal had drawn wearing the dress he first met her in. There are seven gray dolphins surrounding her image, highlighted in white charcoal so that they gleam almost wetly on the paper. There is the suggestion of open water around them in the lacy foam around Aleksandra’s face, the filmy bubbles around a few of the dolphins’ spouts. Hannibal has been scribbling at the sketch in between appointments for maybe a week; he hadn’t know what he was creating at first, but once the image manifested he realized that he was drawing a gift.
“Miss Aleksandra is quite the muse,” Hannibal says. “I hope I haven’t overstepped any boundaries.”

Will shakes his head, still looking at the sketch. “It’s beautiful.”

“I hoped she might be flattered,” Hannibal ventures. When he considers it, he doesn’t know anything significant about the girl’s interests other than her passion for the sea; he is relying on her captivation with him to endear her to his present. “If you would give it to her for me.”

“Is there anything you’re just mediocre at?” Will scoffs, eyes on the babyish curve of his daughter’s paper cheek.

“Plenty, unfortunately,” Hannibal says. “I’ve been making a concerted effort to keep you from finding out what.”

Will’s eyes finally leave the paper to flit up to Hannibal’s face. Quieter, he asks, “Been trying to impress me?” His eyes drop as soon as the words leave his lips.

Something in the space between them changes, narrows; the force of their dipole strengthens. The corners of Hannibal’s mouth lift since Will cannot see. “Has it been working?”

Will ducks so that his curls fall forward, as he does. He’s no longer pink but his face twists into a stunted grin he can’t manage to hide.

“If I don’t say yes, will you keep trying?” he returns, a curious brightness in his eyes when he finally lifts his head.

It’s Hannibal’s turn to be caught off guard.

He looks at Will across the desk. His blazer hides the worst of his atrocious posture, but it can’t hide the thread of tension in his shoulders, the way he leans forward again for Hannibal’s answer. Hannibal realizes that Will is asking more than one question, and that Hannibal has the chance now to move this in a direction he had only considered while watching Will thumb a sticky bit of poached pear into his mouth.
“Most certainly,” Hannibal says.

At that, Will seems to sigh at the seams. Hannibal wonders when the last time Will allowed himself to flirt was. Will gives him a small smile with enough distress behind it that Hannibal realizes he must be the first risk Will has taken in a long time.

The thought thrills Hannibal. This is the fruit of the seed of curiosity that he had planted in Will long ago in his office, cultivated with patience and encouraged with, at times painful, nonchalance. Now they are even, for Will is the biggest risk he’s ever taken too.

Will looks tired and moony-eyed across the desk. Behind his guardedness is a vulnerability that begs Hannibal silently to be careful with him.

Hannibal will have a great deal of fun deciding whether or not he’ll comply.

Eventually Will returns his gaze to the sketch. “She’ll love it.”

“I’m very glad.” Hannibal trusts too much in Will’s acerbity to think he is just being kind. “I hope she’ll forgive me for taking so long to return her kindness.”

He picks up the drawing by its corners again and slips it between the two straight edges that Will produces from the piles on his desk. Will’s thumbs brush the outside of Hannibal’s hands as he slides it into Will’s messenger bag; in the wake of the touch goosebumps rise visibly along Will’s arms. Hannibal can’t help himself; he makes sure to brush against him again when he pulls back.

“I’m afraid I can’t linger,” he says while Will is still shivering from the brief touch, withdrawing from the edge of the new territory he has acquired today. “I have an event to prepare for.”

“Always in demand, huh?” Will says, a little disappointed if the way he abruptly starts rubbing his goosebumps away is any indication. “You didn’t have to come all the way out here.”

“I wanted to,” Hannibal admits. It is much easier to navigate conversation with Will when he is not sidestepping the potholes of his latent attraction, or the crevices of his formidable obsession. “I would much rather be here than assistant curating on a favor.”
“That’s…a high compliment, coming from you,” Will says, surprised. He is pink again—as easily overwhelmed by kindness as his daughter.

Hannibal treads more heavily. “I thought I would fortify myself for the night ahead.” It is an admission of what Will’s presence has become.

Will reads that in his face and looks somewhere between pleased and nervous. “Have I fortified you?” he asks lowly, perhaps not intending to say it out loud.

Hannibal smiles with teeth. “You have.”

Will ends up walking Hannibal to the parking lot, leaving his things and locking the classroom door behind them with a key that may not be expressly his to use. He talks himself down from his fluster by asking Hannibal questions about the favor he is off to fulfill. Next week the display of Crivelli’s fifteenth-century polyptych will go live—Hannibal will spend tonight sketching layout plans for the exhibition. The curator is a woman who gave Hannibal a densuke watermelon for his birthday the year before; he is compelled to do this in return.

He wishes perhaps that her favor had fallen on a different night, but that is because Will is standing in front of him next to his Bentley looking at him with something new and skittish in his eyes.

“Please let me know what Miss Aleksandra thinks,” Hannibal requests.

“She’ll love it,” Will says again. “Let me know how tonight goes.”

Hannibal pauses to savor the request. It’s been a long time since he has had someone to answer to. “I will,” he agrees.

He has walked and been walked by enough companions to cars and front doors that he knows how he likes to handle goodbyes of the kind, but he thinks that Will, no matter how inviting his deep-sea stare, would not take such forwardness very well.

He settles for sliding the blade of his hand across Will's wrist as they switch places so he can reach his car door, enjoying the way it makes Will jump. "Thank you for the escort," he says wryly, unlocking the Bentley with a short blare.
Will rubs his neck self-consciously. "It's what southern boys do." He seems to grow impatient with his own mild suffering then, adding, "I shouldn't make you any later though."

“And I should let you get back to your work,” Hannibal says easily. He doesn’t want to tempt his incredible fortune any more than he has. “Goodbye, Will.”

Will gives him one more look through the fan of his lashes before cupping the wrist that Hannibal touched and turning around. “Bye, Hannibal.”

Only after Will disappears through the Academy doors does Hannibal fold himself into his car, dropping his briefcase into the passenger seat and notching his key in the ignition. He spends a purposeful moment assessing his collection of disks in the glove compartment before choosing Best of Schubert and sliding it into the stereo. Then he puts his seatbelt on, leans back in his chair, and smiles.

He has the reward he came for and more.

Satisfied, he nudges the volume on Schubert higher, and pulls out of the Academy lot.

Hannibal does not wait, as he usually does, for the applause echoing in the theatre to decay, nor for the Montgolfier chandeliers to fully revive before he gathers his ticket stub and program, rises from his aisle seat, and makes his way to the opera house lobby ahead the rush of the other guests.

The click of his wingtips on the checked marble floor is muted by the red carpet of the short staircase leading to the opera house’s entrance. In the time since he last passed through the lobby a team of caterers has moved in, now making the last aesthetic adjustments to the arrangements of food and drink on tables brought into the chamber sometime during the premiere of Les Troyens. Hannibal nods to the staff as he sidesteps their final preparations and makes for the entrance, pushing the tall glass doors open and stepping out into a cool night.

A breeze lifts up the ends of his tuxedo jacket as he reaches into his pocket for his phone. He only has a few minutes before any given acquaintance of his notices his absence and comes looking; he wastes no time turning his phone back on and thumbing through his notifications.
There’s only one of import—a text from Will.

It was sent the better part of an hour ago—Hannibal as a rule does not put his phone in any other mode than off when he attends performances. He hadn’t realized that Will had replied, though he had been partially distracted during the intermission by the hope that Will would.

He never made much use of the text function before Will. Alana will occasionally text him to confirm lunch plans (and Franklyn Froideveaux, who had mysteriously gotten hold of his number, still sends him the odd unanswered text from whatever number Hannibal has not blocked), but in general Hannibal uses his phone for calls and for reading the news when he is delayed in traffic.

The texting began last week the day of Hannibal’s Academy visit. Will was the one to launch it that night with an unmistakably smug, Told you. She loved it. Minutes later Hannibal’s phone buzzed with a picture attachment—Aleksandra, ecstatic, holding his sketch of her and the dolphins by the very corners, smiling big enough to show off the threat of big front teeth about to descend. Hannibal had pored over the picture, taking in the colorful streaks of marker on Aleksandra’s chubby fingers, the signs of play and wear in the knees of her pants.

Hannibal had felt tight in the chest when he replied, I’m very glad. The likeness doesn’t compare. Will had sent the obligatory thanks of a proud parent, and then asked after Hannibal with more conversational ease than Hannibal had ever seen from him.

The prospect of a listening ear at the end of his day was novel, the chance to vent his annoyance with the art museum staff and fatigue from hours of brainstorming refreshing. Hannibal is no stranger to ending an evening with another person, but it’s been a long time since that has meant anything so releasing as expressing himself to one. Just Will’s wry, No rest for the wicked, was enough to gentle Hannibal away from the temptation to follow the storage department head home to make note of where he lived.

They have been texting intermittently since.

For the past day and a half they have been in staccato conversation about the serial murderer Will is lecturing on next week, a man who terrorized Boulder, Colorado for five years and who inspired nine different psychiatric papers following his arrest and subsequent diagnosis. Will has been flattering Hannibal by asking his professional insight on the man and goading him by ruthlessly debating his every argument. It is one of the most entertaining and infuriating discussions of his life. This afternoon his barber had to ask him twice to turn his head in order to tear him from besotted thoughts of eating Will’s tongue from his mouth.
Will’s text reads, *NPD? God, that’s trite.*

Hannibal reads it fondly and thinks that he would like to get his fists around Will’s lungs while he’s still breathing.

His intention is to defend himself to Will when he starts a reply, but instead he finds himself typing, *If only you were here to deride me in person.*

Will’s response is quicker than he expects. *Aren’t you at Les Troyens?*

*It would be greatly improved by your vitriol, he says.*

Will sends an emoticon with sunglasses, and then, *I try.*

Hannibal exhales a laugh. He takes a moment to debate the wisdom of asking before he sends, *Allow me the honor of taking you to the next show.*

Will’s reply is slow but predictable. *I think I’d cramp your style.*

*You could only improve it.* Hannibal looks up at the swing of glass doors, but it is only an elderly couple leaving the venue. He chooses boldness. *Something tells me you’d be dashing in a tuxedo.*

The next reply is a long time coming. Hannibal imagines Will might be ducking his head again.

*I could be persuaded, Will says finally, if you come fishing with us.*

Hannibal thinks of Will’s grilled fresh fish from their picnic in the park and is pleased by the reminder of how much Will knows about being a predator. If he’s not mistaken then this is another test, like the one Hannibal passed when he made Aleksandra shriek with delight on the swings of a playground an hour away from his home.
"Hannibal!" The woman who leans through the opera house doors to call for him is only the first in a long list of people who will clamor for his attention by the time the night is through. "There you are! Come inside, we absolutely must have your opinion on these dolmades!"

Hannibal spares a moment to consider wrapping pieces of her in vine leaves before returning his attention to Will. He believes that he just won himself two dates.

*Nothing would please me more,* he responds, before pocketing his phone and slipping back inside.
Chapter 9

The fishing trip happens after the rains let up.

Spring officially descends on the east coast in a series of gales that turn the Atlantic lowlands into marshes. Virginia drowns in floods and Hannibal can’t make the drive out to the Grahams for two and a half weeks. The half-month of gray-bellied skies means that Hannibal receives an album’s worth of photos and a novel’s worth of messages instead: some snapshots of Aleksandra in fish-print wellies dragging a dog out of a puddle, a good-humored text from Will about how he slipped in the Academy lobby in front of some students, a clip of Aleksandra shouting Easter well-wishes, a badly focused picture of Will building a fire in what must be the Graham household.

Hannibal consumes every message like a starving man.

Each one is a little intimate portion of the veritable feast to which the Grahams do not give invitations, that one that lay behind Aleksandra’s first shuttered expressions and Will’s rude fortifications. They are a selective family and Will is a tentative man—it has taken Hannibal this long to be allowed these very private samples of their very private life. To Hannibal’s knowledge, he is the only one to have been allowed them.

He had gone hungry for the first few months of his acquaintanceship with the Grahams, teased with glimpses of Will’s ability and moments of Aleksandra’s adoration, unfulfilled by those meatless, rationed interactions. What he is being served now, though not exactly his first craving, seems like a natural complement. Now that he is regularly fed—no more than two days go by at a time without his phone buzzing with a notification from Will—he feels almost spoiled, almost gorged.

(Almost. Hannibal has a big stomach.)

The freely-given peeks into the secret rooms of the Grahams’ lives both motivate and mock him, however, each a reminder that it is only circumstance keeping him from his long goal of looking even closer. Hannibal passes the slow minutes between appointments admiring photos of Aleksandra’s latest loose tooth, of Will and her with handfuls of lightning bugs, of Will slow-cooking dog food unawares. Hannibal languishes in a rare state of impatience for the entire two and a half weeks.

Alana notices his distraction when they carpool to a luncheon hosted by a retiring faculty member of George Washington’s psychology department. Dr. Garcia was Alana’s mentor before she switched concentrations and came under Hannibal’s tutelage; at eighty-three she is still one of the sharpest minds Hannibal knows, but she has no culinary cunning to speak of. Hannibal sits in the passenger’s
seat of Alana’s Prius with a fat ceramic pot of asparagus risotto in his lap, prepared to save himself and the other potluck-goers from two hours of insincere compliments and intestinal distress.

Alana plays Norah Jones at modest volume to leave room for conversation as she drives. After the fifth minute of Hannibal staring unseeing at the landscape blurring beyond his window, she says, “I think I know that look.”

Hannibal stirs. “Pardon?”

“The look on your face,” she explains. “I’ve seen it before.”

Hannibal can guess what look she means. After a second of thought, he concedes that she probably has seen it. She had been around, after all, for his brief affair several years ago with a Professor Dumashie visiting from the University of Ghana. He has enjoyed several companions, quite without restraint, since that time, but he has not been nearly so smitten with any after her. Until now.

“And what do you make of it?” Hannibal asks. He doesn’t see any need for denial.

Alana gives him a look somewhere between amused and exasperated. “That you took my request to stay away from Will Graham as a challenge.”

Hannibal chuckles. “You make it sound like I made a pursuit of it. I’ve done no such thing.” As far as lies go, it’s fairly white. “I’ve been entirely passive, in fact.”

“Whenever I see Will now, he’s on his phone,” Alana says pointedly. “Texting. Wearing the same look. That doesn’t sound passive to me.”

*The same look.* Hannibal is delighted. “I assure you, there is nothing professional about my interest in Will.”

Alana makes a noise of disbelief. “Doubt it. I’m worried that you’re just waiting on the right moment to show it.” She eyes him in short blinks, keeping the bulk of her attention on the road. “I know you, Hannibal. You’re manipulative like that.”
She does know him. “Will is hardly manipulatable,” Hannibal assures her, though it’s only true up to a point. “Believe it or not, I am perfectly satisfied with being insulted on a daily basis.” Alana blurts out a helpless laugh. “Unless and until Will makes it professional, I will continue to enjoy pictures of mutts.”

Though she has trouble reining her smile in, it is clear that Alana is not reassured—as she shouldn’t be—but she doesn’t press her suspicions. She is too busy putting on a brave face over her saltless sea bass for the rest of the afternoon to bring it up again.

No one else notices anything different in Hannibal’s demeanor. His patients continue to afflict him with banal anxieties, responding only slowly to his gentle, hindbrain suggestions. The promising student from John Hopkins that has been coming to him for academic advice catches a rain cold and begs out of their appointment. Two of his acquaintances accompany him to a philharmonic performance and fawn fatuously over his opinion on the show.

It is a long two and a half weeks.

Hannibal wakes up on the first tremulously sunny day to follow the deluge, sees a watery sun through the last of retreating storm clouds outside his window, and reaches for his phone to ask Will when he may call upon him and his daughter.

They settle on the upcoming Sunday, which arrives just as sunnily as projected. The brief chill that the rains brought back dissipates quickly in the golden air, not likely to return until sometime after September. The day will almost certainly be humid and mosquito-laden later, but the morning sky is cloudless and lovely. Hannibal thinks it is a wonderful day for another picnic.

The drive to the Grahams’ house is charming. Even though the land on the sides of the road is sodden and pungent in places, the touch of the sun on the wild hop clover and whorled aster patches raises a perfume over the uncombed fields that lie between the ever-thickening copses that Hannibal passes. Since he has once again forgone pomade for his date with the Grahams, he lowers his windows in order to let the warm air tousle him and give him a scent that the Grahams’ pack will accept. The hour-and-a-half-long trip passes almost like a hay dream.

When he arrives, the Grahams are outside.

They have a long driveway hemmed at the street by coppiced shrubs that stretch needling finger-like sprouts toward the sky; the pavement turns to gravel the closer he drives to the house, a quaint former farmhouse surrounded by secretive trees, and runs in a car-trodden line beside a well-manicured lawn. There are their seven dogs running back and forth on the grass, tantalized by the big bone
Aleksandra holds aloft in her hand. Hannibal can hear her high laugh every time she feigns a throw and the dogs sprint across the yard. Through the bars of sunlight slanting through his windshield, he can see Will leaning cross-armed against the lawn’s big tree, smiling. All of them look up when the Bentley comes into view.

“Dr. Lecter!” Aleksandra cries, dropping the bone and ignoring the dogs’ resultant clamor.

Hannibal slows to a careful stop but Aleksandra is sensible and waits until he is parked to dash over to him. He barely has time to extract himself from his car before she throws her arms around his legs. He hasn’t been embraced by her since their last picnic; he wastes no time kneeling on the pebbly driveway and returning the hug.

“It’s good to see you, Miss Aleksandra,” Hannibal tells her. She has on high socks to keep burrs from scraping her shins, three band-aids on three separate limbs, and a very new pair of glasses that look large on her round face. As always, the sight of her makes him feel monstrously fond.

She beams. “I missed you,” she tells him plaintively, right as Will arrives at their huddle.

“Hannibal,” he greets. Like that day in the city, the sun above him spins gold strands in his curls. The smile he wore for Aleksandra mellows into something small and private that he offers to Hannibal above his daughter’s head.

Hannibal finds he is still affected by Will’s use his name—it sounds much different in person than over text, somehow still new, not the least because Will’s mouth is busy with the stem of what smells like an apple, if the nectar on his lips is anything to go by.

Will notices the quick attention before Hannibal returns his greeting. “Good to see you, Will. Thank you for the invitation.” He looks around at the fallow fields beyond the farmhouse, at the well-tended house, at the clean pack. “Your home is lovely, like your family,” he adds, squeezing Aleksandra’s small hands before standing.

For an instant, both Will and Aleksandra share the same look of pride. “Thank you for coming,” Will says genuinely. The last text he had sent was a picture of him and Aleksandra smiling around a newly washed dog. Hannibal feels a terrible yawning fondness for them, dressed now in grass-stained play clothes, pink-faced from the sun.

“It was hard to wait for you to come visit,” Aleksandra admits. She scuffs the ground with the toe of
her sneaker until Will lays a gentle hand her shoulder for her to quit.

“I’m very glad to be here now,” Hannibal tells her. He shifts his gaze from her to Will, who is looking at him with that same uneasy eagerness that he had back in his classroom, the truth leaking from his pelagic eyes that he shares his daughter’s sentiment too. Hannibal inhales the Grahams’ collective scent, only just overpowered by the pungent weeds and new blossoms miles-thick around them.

He had missed this.

The dogs come over to gang up on him. They surprise him by hovering instead of prodding him with damp, investigative noses; they’re too well-trained to smear his khaki pants.

“They’re curious,” Will says apologetically, stepping forward with the intent of calling them off.

Hannibal forestalls him by sticking his hand out to the closest one, a shaggy brown mutt with intelligent eyes. He has never inspired much affection in animals, but the dog deigns to put its muzzle in his palm. His first thought is for the tongue lolling close to his fingers, before he notices the Grahams’ react. In the corner of his vision, he can see them almost visibly melt.

“I’m curious, too,” Hannibal says, conscious of the opportunity. “Who might this be?”

“That’s Winston.” Aleksandra sounds enthralled. “He doesn’t like strangers, but he likes you!”

Hannibal does his best not to peek at Will’s appraisal. “How lucky for me.” He brushes once through Winston’s long scruff before gesturing to the rest of the pack. “And everyone else?”

Aleksandra introduces him to each dog in turn, pulling his hand gently down so that they all get a sniff. Hannibal has committed the names to memory by the time she is done and won’t soon forget them, but listens patiently to each little story about every dog that she offers anyway. He enjoys her earnest expression and the soft way Will looks at her hand in his hand, and doesn’t interrupt.

Finally Will eases in the suggestion, “How about we let Dr. Lecter get out of the heat?”
Aleksandra brightens; the dogs’ tails wag at her body language. Sounding very much like she had asked to do the honors, she asks, well-rehearsed, “Dr. Lecter, would you like to come inside?”

Hannibal shares a glance with an amused Will and accepts the invitation with gravity equal to her own. “I would love to.”

He goes around to the backseat of the Bentley to retrieve his portable freezer before following Aleksandra across the yard, politely sidestepping Will’s attempt to help. He has to watch his footing in order to avoid tripping over canines, but otherwise reaches the farmhouse’s swept porch without incident. Aleksandra leads the way in a curious little skip, clearly wanting to run but wanting more to seem like a big girl. She reaches the screen door first, swings it open, and beckons everyone into the cool indoors.

Hannibal’s first impression is the scent. The house smells just as much like dog as he had expected, but also like the mystery southern spice that informs Will and Aleksandra’s natural scents. The living room into which the front door opens up directly is very faintly flowery too—Hannibal spies several jars of tiny wildflowers sitting on odd surfaces.

They alert him to the rest of the room’s personality. Most of the floor is taken up by hairy dog beds; most of the desk and mantle tops are taken up by towers of books, although the table pushed up underneath the window is scattered with tiny implements and craft items of what appears to be a fly-making station, a half-finished fly magnified by the big glass poised over the tabletop.

He is impressed by the Grahams’ lack of self-consciousness as they take him into their home. Aleksandra launches into immediate explanation, “Here’s the living room. Down the hallway is the kitchen and the dining room and the bathroom.” She ticks off her chubby fingers. “Upstairs is my bedroom! And Daddy’s bedroom. That’s it.” A thought occurs to her. She asks seriously, “Do you want some lemonade?”

“You got all that?” Will snorts, managing to swipe Hannibal’s freezer at last. He starts down the hallway, making the decision for everyone. “We still have to put together our lunch. Let’s cool off in here.”

Hannibal has no time to protest Will’s blunt hosting, because Aleksandra slips her palm into his the moment it’s free and tugs him forward. He doesn’t resist her lead. He sees now that the Grahams have realized they have free reign of him; he would like to be put off by their forwardness but he is long past that.

In the kitchen, Will sets Hannibal’s things on the counter before reaching into a cabinet for three
glasses. At the same time Aleksandra lets go of him to push a stool up to the refrigerator to retrieve ice from the freezer, which she drops into the glasses that Will holds out to her, all without words. Hannibal watches their seamless movement with interest. Will pours the fresh, pungent lemonade and Aleksandra takes a glass to Hannibal.

“Thank you both,” Hannibal says, impressed.

“You’re welcome,” Aleksandra says brightly. Carefully gripping her own glass, she pushes her stool over and climbs it so that she can sit on the counter by where Hannibal stands. Unbalanced by the one-handed hold, she wobbles a little, so Hannibal reaches out to stabilize her gently by the shoulder. With his help she avails herself of the counter space next to him, using both hands now to gulp her drink. Instinctively Hannibal moves close enough for her swinging legs to swish his khakis, in case she tips again.

When he looks up, he discovers Will is watching them in between removing tupperware and groceries from the fridge. Their eyes meet; Hannibal notes quickly that Will looks conflicted. There’s something determinedly guarded in his eyes, but affection is what wins on his grudging face.

He’s the first to break the shared look. “We’ve got egg salad, hoppin’ john, and biscuits already made,” he informs Hannibal. “The obligatory sweet potatoes, of course.” He stacks each container as he lists it. “All we need now is the fish.”

“And dessert!” Aleksandra pipes up.

Hannibal admits,”I brought dessert.” He gestures to his portable freezer. “Fruit popsicles. I made them myself.”

Will frowns a little and protests. “As our guest…”

“How could I come to you empty-handed?” Hannibal interrupts. Aleksandra wriggles excitedly next to him, so he helps her move her stool in order for her to get a look inside his freezer. It steams faintly when opened; within, there are ten or so wrapped popsicles resting in a tray to protect them from travel. While Aleksandra exclaims and tries to guess the flavors, Hannibal steps back and says lowly to Will, “I suffer, perhaps, from the overwhelming need to provide.”

“Self-diagnosis, doctor?” Will asks a little thinly, unbalanced by the insinuation. He looks both annoyed and, less perceptibly, hopeful, and is probably unaware that the latter shows on his face.
Hannibal isn’t sure what Will would do if he knew.


Will snorts, the snit in his brow momentarily loosened as he bends to remove a cooler from a lower cabinet. “Can’t argue with that.”

“I’m sure you could,” Hannibal remarks, smiling at Will’s indignant Hey!. He gestures toward the tupperware on the counter, “Shall I assemble the food?”

Will looks like he wants to pursue Hannibal’s invitation to banter, as they have become accustomed to doing over text, but he must catch a glimpse of Aleksandra in the corner of his eye, staring at him and Hannibal with an intensity that suggests she is analyzing every word they bat back and forth. Instead he says, “If you don’t mind. Aleksandra and I need to get ready.”

“Of course,” Hannibal says. He watches Aleksandra slide down off of the counter obediently and take up the hand Will stretches out to her; they leave the kitchen together, Aleksandra looking back at him with the mysterious beginnings of a smile.

Hannibal returns it.

He waits until their footsteps on the hardwood hallway become creaking steps on the house’s old staircase before he begins to snoop. He looks first through the drawers and cabinets, but finds nothing interesting beyond some appliances that, from the smell, must be used to handmake dog food. Then he moves to the pictures on the refrigerator and the wall, where he has much more success.

There are several progress reports pinned up by magnets; Aleksandra is too young to receive letter grades, but her marks in whatever trivial system her elementary school uses are almost all perfect. He straightens the folded papers to read the handwritten notes on the margins—apparently Aleksandra is the model student, apart from a curious inability to socialize with other students. Hannibal is not really surprised by the information.

He looks briefly at the waxy pictures of Aleksandra and Will in Disneyland, in Central Park, in what appears to be New Orleans, and lingers instead on the faded, frayed photos that he finds hidden behind a crayon drawing and a pad of shopping list paper. Aleksandra is just a baby in most of them: mid-run in a walker, mid-bounce in a jumper, asleep in a floor pen. She is a very smiley child.
There is only one picture with Will. He looks wildly different, despite the fact that no more than six or so years could have passed since the snapshot was taken. No beard, no glasses, much shorter hair. A smile as big as Aleksandra’s, whom he has in his lap with her small fist around a wad of his shirt as they pose in what looks like a bedroom. And just visible outside the corona of the reflected camera flash in the mirror behind them is the right half of another man, smiling too.

Hannibal is pricked by a feeling so venomous that it paralyzes him for a moment—a jealousy so potent that muscles in his forearms and calves, strong from hunting, seize. There is no evidence of a third person in the house, or indeed in the Grahams’ life, but for a moment, he is murderous.

The feeling spoils a little of that giddiness he felt upon being inside the Grahams’ innermost refuge for the first time, that greediness he has for them at long last slaked by the opportunity to peep. Suddenly he is very aware of just how much of the Grahams he still doesn’t know, and upset by it. More than ever, he wants to see Will—beard, glasses, and all—in his home again, with Aleksandra too.

The groan of floorboards above him informs him that his brief window of investigative freedom is over. He gathers the foods for their picnic into the cooler and closes the lid on it and his freezer, setting both down by the kitchen door. He folds Aleksandra’s stool and returns it to its apparent place beside the refrigerator, and is placing his empty lemonade glass in the sink when Will and Aleksandra return.

They look, in a word, adorable. Rather, Aleksandra is adorable, and Will by virtue of their matching outfit is also. Both of them are britched in waders, Will’s dark blue and Aleksandra’s light green. Hannibal understands suddenly why so many of Will’s casual pants look frayed. Aleksandra is holding a box of fishing equipment, most of which Hannibal is unfamiliar with, and beaming at him with her curls pushed back by a headband.

“We’re ready!” she announces.

“So I see,” Hannibal appraises, making a show of looking them over. Aleksandra does a bashful turn so he can see the sea turtle design on the back of her wader. Will turns a little red when Hannibal’s eyes rove over him but does his own wry turn, sans design, to make Hannibal smile.

“Let’s head out,” Will says, taking the cooler from Hannibal who holds it out helpfully, their hands brushing. On dangerous impulse, Hannibal extends the contact much longer than their brush of fingers at the Academy. Will’s lashes droop in surprise, but his pull back is significantly delayed. “If we leave now,” he recovers, disengaging them not too quickly, “we’ll get to the stream after the heat and before the dark.” He clears his throat and starts the exodus from the kitchen.
Hannibal watches him go, admiring, and notices a second later Aleksandra watching him in turn. He also clears his throat. “After you.”

Her unreadable expression morphs into a grin. She nods and follows her father. He picks up the rear, tucking his freezer under his arm and looking at them both, so similar from behind, both topped with curls. He thinks again of the man behind the flash and wants to hold both Will and his daughter by the back of the neck.

They leave the house in a crowd. The dogs, amassed by the front door in anticipation of being let out, lead the charge. Out in the yard, their excitement, obediently stifled in the house, revives, and they weave in and out of Hannibal and the Grahams’ legs as they circle the house and set out on the small trail that parts the forest.

The walk to the river is beautiful. The trees form a sunlit tunnel latticed with branches and softly carpeted; their route, less a path than a memory of footprints underneath the dead things of winter, is made clear by the pastel flowers fencing it on either side. From the way both Will and Aleksandra drag their fingers unthinkingly along the few bushes and ferns cluttering their ways, he sees that they take this walk often.

Aleksandra drops back once to tell him confidently, “You’re gonna like it.”

“I already do,” Hannibal replies, and enjoys her short giggle and the way she walks faster to escape her giddiness.

After ten or so minutes, they reach the stream. The forest opens into a meadow bound on one side by a ribbon of water. At the sight and smell of it, the dogs take off; some of them dash across the meadow directly into the white-churned water where the stream trips over small rocks and forest detritus, some of them sprawl in grass beds soaked in sunshine. Aleksandra looks like she wants to run after them, but she dutifully goes to a certain bare patch of earth and sets down the equipment box first, waving Hannibal over.

“This is it!” she tells him when he reaches her. “This is our favorite spot.”

Hannibal enjoys passing from the afternoon light into the sudden shade of a bough overhead. “It’s lovely,” he tells her, setting down his freezer. Will joins them with the cooler.
“Here we are,” he says, reaching into one of his big pockets for a checkered plastic tablecloth. He snaps it open and floats it to the ground. Without needed instruction Aleksandra kicks off her shoes and stands on the cloth while Will puts their things on the corners to keep it from flipping in the mild breeze. “You are now officially on a Graham family fishing trip.”

“A true honor,” Hannibal acknowledges, putting his freezer on one corner. “What happens next?”

“Daddy catches the fish,” Aleksandra pipes up. “And then we cook it and eat it!”

“I usually have Aleksandra gather firewood while I’m in the river,” Will explains. “We fire it right here.” He lifts a challenging eyebrow. “We keep it primitive.”

“How refreshing,” Hannibal replies mildly. “I look forward to having your fish again.”

Will seems to be trying to hold onto his goading look instead of looking pleased. “Coming right up,” he announces, walking around the picnic cloth to drop a hand on Aleksandra’s head. “Help me set up, Tiny? Then you can show Dr. Lecter around.”

Aleksandra beams. “Yes, daddy.” She reaches into the equipment box with confidence and extracts a number of supplies that Hannibal has knowledge of but no practical experience with: hooks and line spools of various sizes, jars of several kinds of creatures that could be real or synthetic. She gathers the necessities in her small arms and follows Will as he sets off toward the water.

Hannibal takes the make yourself at home that Will tosses back to him as an invitation to explore. This is one of the Grahams’ precious places; the opportunity to snoop like he had in the kitchen is too rare to ignore. He takes the moment alone to start walking the edge of the meadow, and is surprised when Winston trots up to join him.

The dog keeps pace at his side. It doesn’t bark or sniff or do any of the things that Hannibal imagines a dog might given the stimulus of the outdoors and free reign of the woodland. When he stops to admire a stalk of dutchman’s breeches, Winston stops too, waiting on his haunches until Hannibal rises from his kneel and resumes his circuit. He is not well-versed in the behavior of animals, but he thinks that that must be curious. It occurs to him as he stops again in front of a single, surprising twin leaf blossom that Winston is not merely following him, but watching him.

The thought amuses him. They do say that animals can tell.
Some grassy rustling informs Hannibal that he and Winston have been joined. From behind him comes the whisper, “Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal turns to see Aleksandra half-hidden behind a tree. Her waders are wet up to her waist; she must have gone reasonably far into the river to help her father while he set up. She gestures for him to come closer; he and Winston obey.

“I want to show you something,” she says, as quietly as before. “It’s a secret.”

Hannibal looks back at the meadow. The other dogs are still lounging in the sun and Will looks at ease in the water. His solid stance suggests a deep well of patience; he looks like he belongs in the middle of the stream, like he emerged there and could stand there forever. He looks like a painting. He also looks occupied.

“Lead the way,” Hannibal tells Aleksandra.

She leads him to the other side of the meadow, passing the opening in the trees through which they had come, instead coming to what looks like an impenetrable gate of trees. She slips through a hidden space between two trunks and, just out of sight, says, “Look!”

Hannibal bends down to peer agreeably into the space through which she disappeared. He is genuinely impressed when he sees her.

She has managed to find a stout tree with a hollow big enough for her to sit in. With a twig caught in her headband and leaves sticking to the damp material of her waders, she looks as sprite-like as ever.

“Watch this.” She curls her short legs up and brings her arms in and is suddenly difficult to see, balled completely up in the hollow. “This is my hiding spot.”

“Very impressive,” Hannibal remarks. “How lucky of you to find it.”

“I haven’t shown my daddy yet,” she tells him conspiratorially. “Sometimes when fishing takes too long I come here.” She wiggles a little. “It makes me calm.”
Privately Hannibal acknowledges the gravity of the moment—he has been given something by Aleksandra that Will has not, a gift he thinks not one other person in the world can claim. The feeling of triumph that comes with the realization is overpowering. He swears solemnly, “I promise not to tell.”

She pries herself out of the hollow and squeezes through the tree gate to rejoin him. “Thanks, Dr. Lecter.” She has an indeterminable look on her face; Hannibal wonders if it felt strange for her to divulge herself in such a way. Eventually she reaches up to grab his hand and says, “I can trust you.”

Hannibal feel something growing and tangling inside his ribcage. “Yes, you can.”

They walk back to the meadow proper hand-in-hand, Winston at their side, and return to Will holding up two fish proudly.

“It’s our lucky day,” he announces.

Hannibal takes the liberty of starting a fire while Will guts the fish and Aleksandra unpacks the cooler. There is a blackened patch of earth not far from where they placed their picnic that he correctly assumes to be their habitual hearth; he piles an assortment of natural kindling within the ring of rocks encircling the pit and strikes a spark with the survival bracelet that Will hands him from one of his pouches. Will grills the fish while Hannibal helps Aleksandra make everyone’s plate, and then the Grahams wiggle out of their waders in order to sit down with Hannibal for their meal.

It’s a wonderful lunch. Hannibal may not be enamored with the overpowering smell of dog that worsens as the pack comes closer, summoned by the fish, or with the disposable dishes and lack of table, but he is in wonderful company, which is more than he can usually say about the meals he takes. He watches the way Will helps his daughter avoid fish bones and feels Winston hovering at the tablecloth at his back and is satisfied.

The first few bites are accompanied by a chorus of pleased noises all around, and talk is briefly suspended until the greater part of their afternoon hunger is sated. Then Hannibal coaxes Will into conversation, to make sure he feels included despite having stood alone while Hannibal and Aleksandra became secretive.

“How’s work?” he asks, because it seems right given how very domestic it feels to be sharing the sunshine with another man and his daughter over a home-cooked meal. Something passes across Will’s face too quickly for Hannibal to recognize it, before Will gamely launches into a nonchalant tirade.
Hannibal had been privately hoping he could hear more in the vein of what he had seen that day in the Academy. That had been awesome, in the way that visiting a cathedral was awesome—beauty evident in buttresses and ribbed vaulting, and ugliness surprising in the stained glass scenes or gargoyles carved among the angels. Will steers clear of anything like Donald Parker’s mind and looks like himself for the entirety of his spiel; Hannibal realizes the likelihood that Will has never and will never bring anything about what he does back home to his daughter.

No matter. Hannibal is perfectly intrigued by the shape of Will’s mouth around his diatribe anyway.

As Will complains lightly, Aleksandra sets aside her empty plate and crawls across the tablecloth to where Hannibal lounges. Without taking his eyes off of Will, Hannibal moves his arm; Aleksandra takes advantage of the adjustment and slides herself into the new space between his hand and his leg. Winston, alert, dares to put a paw on the edge of the tablecloth, attending Hannibal’s other side. Aleksandra wiggles until she’s leaning very lightly into his elbow, and then they sit comfortably together, attention still on Will.

Will’s eyes snap to them. Hannibal marvels at the sublimity of the situation; he could not have planned it. Aleksandra has visualized the suggestion that he has been sending Will for a while—that he fits in with their little family. At the same time that he revels in the inadvertent advance that Aleksandra has made for him, he feels softened, like wax over a flame. It is not an unpleasant feeling; he thinks it must be something like what Will feels too.

Emotion flickers across Will’s face again, no less identifiable this time but possibly more interpretable. The tension in his brow on his otherwise relaxed face tells Hannibal that he is only trying to seem unaffected by the sight of him and Aleksandra together, content.

Lunch concludes when the sun starts tipping too far toward the west, threatening to flee below the tree line. They work together to pack up what food remains in the tupperware and throw out the fish skeletons, shaking out the tablecloth and folding it neatly for reuse. When everything is ready to be taken back, Hannibal takes out popsicles from his freezer and passes them around. They partake as they walk home.

“It’s been a wonderful day,” Hannibal says aloud. “I see why you do this regularly.”

“Had fun, huh?” Will asks, looking at Hannibal and then at Aleksandra who is walking between them. “I’m glad.” After a long moment, he adds, “It was nice to have you there.” He grimaces like the words have put him in peril but doesn’t retract them.
“You should come with us again!” Aleksandra exclaims, skipping a little ahead. “And again, and again!”

Hannibal chuckles. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Aleksandra takes that as a yes and crows. She dissolves abruptly into laughter as the dogs take the opportunity of her distraction to try to beg her for her popsicle, Toast daring to raise up and paw her thighs in petition. She runs away, prompting the pack to follow her like they had with the bone, and the scene restarts where it had paused upon Hannibal’s arrival. Hannibal can’t help but watch her, her headband sliding and letting her curls come forward, her chubby face radiant.

Will draws in close to him. “You really made her day by coming out here with us.” He gestures absently back toward the meadow. “I know she likes to come with me, but I think having a friend made all the difference.”

“I’m happy to hear it,” Hannibal says. “I feel the same way. Miss Aleksandra is a good host, and an even better companion.” He looks sideways at Will, not missing the opportunity to poke. “And you, Will? How was your day?”

Will smiles his reluctant smile and looks away. “Tolerable, I guess.”

Hannibal has time to admire Will flushed with something almost as tender as bashfulness before a crack breaks the drowsy, woodsy silence. Aleksandra turns around, pales, and pipes up, “Watch out!”

Will reacts, fistiing his hand in Hannibal’s shirt and pulling him close, just before a branch overhead breaks from its tree and slams into the ground.

They go stumbling with the momentum of Hannibal’s weight. Will clips his shoulder on a tree bole as he trips back and the brake puts them in bodily contact. Hannibal’s freezer swings off of his shoulder and strikes his leg, but he’s slow to notice with Will’s face suddenly inches apart from his own.

He’s never been this close to Will before; in fact, he can’t remember when he has ever touched Will beyond a brush of hands. This close, he can smell the river water on him, and the spice beneath that.
Will separates them quickly. Hannibal follows his lead and straightens himself out, slinging his freezer across him while Will rights the cooler’s cap that had popped off when he tripped over it. They are mostly composed by the time Aleksandra reaches them at a sprint.

“Daddy!” she exclaims, panicked. She crashes into his leg and hugs him hard enough to cut off blood flow. “Dr. Lecter,” she says plaintively, looking at him with big eyes. Addressed to them both: “Are you okay?”

“Of course, Tiny,” Will says, low and soothing to take some of the urgency out of her voice. He reaches out to fix her headband and she lets him. “You were sharp—nobody got hurt.”

Her distress is unabated. “You have a good eye,” Hannibal offers as well. “How fortunate that we had you looking out for us.”

She still looks unhappy but doesn’t cling so tight to Will. The dogs gather around, nosing her and brushing against her. That seems to help; she pets Angus and Dakota, the nearest to her, and takes a breath.

“Come on,” Will says. He turns his daughter away from where the tree branch fell. “Let’s get home—it’s getting late and we have to get ready for school tomorrow.”

They resume the walk home, this time with the dogs hanging around them. Aleksandra goes back and forth from being suction-cupped to Will’s side and clutching Hannibal’s hand, still jittery. Will rubs her back whenever she is near, but she is too much like him, too liable to get stuck in the mud of a bleak mood.

Hannibal stops to put his freezer down the next time she passes close to him. Following intuition, he reaches down to grab her gently and swing her up onto his back. She wraps her thin arms and legs around him automatically, clinging like an octopus.

“Is that alright?” he asks. At her surprised nod, he says, “Now you can protect us from up there.” Without seeing her, he can feel that some of her anxiety is appeased in the way that she relaxes her tight grip on his collar and lets her chin rest on his shoulder.

Though laden with both Aleksandra and his freezer, Hannibal feels curiously light. He turns to Will, who is staring. “Shall we?”
“We shall,” Will says slowly, and they keep going.

It’s not long until the farmhouse comes back into view, welcoming in the ruddy afternoon light. As they cross the yard, the dogs release from their escort formation and get to frolicking in their own grass again.

“Thank you, Will,” Hannibal says when they reach the porch. “I’m sure that would have made for an unpleasant bump.”

“Don’t mention it,” Will says. The conflicted look has returned to his face. His touch is very light when he reaches out to help Aleksandra down. For a moment he simply looks at Hannibal, doing some sort of mental calculation; Hannibal is about to ask about it when Will reaches out to swipe his hand down Hannibal’s back.

Hannibal is charged by the unexpected contact, like their dipole has activated again. Will is quick to explain, “There was some schmutz. From Tiny’s waders.”

“I see,” Hannibal says. His back tingles, as though with static electricity.

Will wastes no time turning away. “Here, Tiny.” He gestures for Aleksandra to follow him into the house, where he helps her out of her gear, crossing the room to hang her small waders over the back of the chair to his craft desk.

He speaks to Hannibal without necessarily looking at him. “Would you might sitting with Tiny? I need to clean everybody else off.” He gestures at the dogs milling around the yard, a little muddy at the bottom where they stepped on the soft ground of the river bank.

“Of course not,” Hannibal says. He would be disappointed by Will’s sudden reticence if it weren’t for the color still in his cheeks. Will nods and disappears out the door.

Hannibal takes a seat on the couch and Aleksandra immediately joins him. She rubs at her ears behind her headband so he helps her take it off and massages the bright imprints it left behind. “Better?” he asks, and she nods and leans into him.

They sit in silence for a few minutes, her holding his wrist tightly as though she thinks he might leave and he observing by the marks on the floor that suggest there used to be a bed in the living room.
Will comes back inside after setting food and water on the porch for the still-wet dogs and checks on them.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, blinking at Aleksandra’s unwillingness to move very far from Hannibal.

“Certainly,” Hannibal assures him. “Just resting after our full day.”

Will looks like he’s considering the use of our. He murmurs an affirmative and then goes upstairs to take off his own things.

When he is gone and the creaking footsteps above inform them that he is closed in a room overhead, Aleksandra breaks the quiet. “Do you wanna kiss my daddy?”

Hannibal is not prepared for the question. He has no immediate response for her; instead, his hand lifts in a reflex and settles in her hair, brushing her curls down.

He is must proceed carefully here. He could upset everything he has worked for up to this point by answering wrongly.

Speaking very slowly, he admits, “I like your daddy very much.” There is very little risk involved in the admission; it’s something that Will likely already knows.

Quickly, before Will returns, Aleksandra scoots even closer and squeezes him with surprising strength. “My daddy likes you very much too. I know it.”

Hannibal pets her again. “And do you like me?” The question serves the same self-preservationist purpose as his charcoal drawing of her with the dolphins; in case he has misstepped in any way, he wants her infatuation with him to remain at the forefront of her thoughts.

She nods. Quietly, she whispers, “I love you.”

The words pierce Hannibal like an arrow, and instead of blood blooming from the wound, his dark greed for the Grahams wells up. Aleksandra has spoken with a child’s inappropriate timing and
depth of feeling, but she has spoken honestly. Hannibal can’t remember the last time he heard those words with that purity of meaning.

(Or perhaps he can.)

He is hyperconscious of this moment, this milestone. He is in the Grahams’ home, just returned from a family outing; he has their affection, spoken and unspoken. All of the jealousy he felt standing in the kitchen and seeing a young and frayed version of Will smiling with his daughter at another man evaporates, because, whoever he was, Hannibal has almost taken that man’s place.

Will returns to the room. “I think it’s time for a nap,” he says when he sees Aleksandra almost curled up in Hannibal’s nap. Aleksandra must be tired, because she raises no protest.

“It’s also time for me to prepare to leave,” Hannibal says. “I have patients tomorrow that will need me alert.”

Will smiles a little at that, since he is privy to the fact that that is hilariously untrue. “I’ll make you coffee for the road.” He comes to the couch to lift Aleksandra into his arms, who follows his tug after a quick tightening of her grip on Hannibal and a secretive, “Goodbye, Dr. Lecter.”

Will takes Aleksandra upstairs and Hannibal takes the liberty of going back to the kitchen, where he puts the remainder of the popsicles where they’ll fit in the Graham’s freezer. Alone in the kitchen, he resumes his scrutiny of the dozen happy moments captured in retrostyle polaroids and disposable pictures.

He finds the snapshot of Will and Aleksandra with the man again. He flicks it with a finger and it slips out from under its magnet, tumbling to the floor and landing face down.

Hannibal kicks it lightly under the refrigerator.

Moments later, Will comes in the door. His gaze flickers to the fridge in a way that might be habit, but he doesn’t notice the difference.

He simply goes to his coffee maker and says, in that tone from his texts and the one that Hannibal knows to be his version of coquetry, “I believe we were last discussing your misinterpretation of Clive Lystig’s case?”
Hannibal feels acute lust for Will’s blood, among other things. He smiles. “I believe we were.”
Chapter 10

The bruise on Hannibal’s leg lasts for two weeks after his Sunday with the Grahams.

Though it isn’t big, it’s deep, a purpling triangle going yellow at the edges where his freezer slammed into his calf. He hadn’t felt the pain in the moment—his attention had been on the puff of Will’s surprised exhale on his chin, and on the unexpected flecks of green and yellow in Will’s eyes. On the way home from Wolf Trap, when the exhilaration from Aleksandra’s unexpected, premature declaration began to wear off, the bruise began to ache. Since then Hannibal has watched its colorful progress with interest.

For the first few days after the fishing trip, it’s his sole reminder of the picnic, since all the texts and photos that had brightened the gloomy weeks of monsoon are summarily cut off.

His message on Monday asking after the Grahams goes unanswered. His follow-up text on Tuesday receives the same treatment. The unexplained radio silence at first confuses, then concerns, and ultimately irks him. He assumes for a while that the Grahams are busy, before it occurs to him that the silence is deliberate.

There are any number of reasons why Will would chose to cut him off. One leaps immediately to mind—Hannibal has to wonder if Will discovered his missing photo. It isn’t as farfetched a possibility as it would otherwise be with anyone else. Will is the one person who could find it and intuit what happened, see it and divine Hannibal’s guilt.

But some feeling—perhaps just optimism—leads Hannibal to believe it’s something else. Will and Aleksandra live their lives in orbit around each other, with no gravitational evidence of anyone else, and Will hadn’t seem to see the difference in his refrigerator collage; Hannibal isn’t convinced that the photo was special enough to the Grahams to demand attention, let alone demand this silent retribution.

He still hasn’t figured out the problem by the time Will starts talking to him again.

Communication reopens with the same lack of warning with which it had closed. By Saturday, Hannibal receives a text about a dinner mishap and an attached photo of Angus and Gizmo covered in spaghetti and sauce, with all the wry humor and easy familiarity of the exchanges before the silence. There is no mention of or allusion to Hannibal’s unreturned messages or the almost-week of no contact whatsoever.
Hannibal would kill to know why Will shunned him. Instead he responds with equal nonchalance, asking when the Grahams decided to forego plates.

Several days pass. In that time Hannibal adds slabs of a neighborhood solicitor to his freezer (a hasty action fueled by his lingering displeasure at being ignored) and, by complete coincidence, is also contacted at his practice by authorities around the same time. The fear of the latter being connected to the former alarms him enough that he spends the first minute of the conversation with the officers stroking the pencil sharpener hidden in his sleeve.

Then they explain that they’re investigating the killing of one Mr. Oort at the hands of his vengeful wife. Hannibal discreetly slides the sharpener back onto his desk and quite enjoys the twenty-minute acting exercise in which he pretends that Mrs. Oort’s sessions had been going very well, that he had no idea her jealousy was murderous. When the officers leave, Hannibal makes a note in his calendar to visit Mrs. Oort when possible to congratulate her.

He is enjoying a lamb breakfast tartlet a week or so after that when his phone blinks with a text from Will, as much a part of his daily routine now as his ablutions. His response, an idiographic argument to Will’s nomothetic assertion, traps them for a few habitual back-and-forths. Only after they cycle through their usual points does Will mention that he’s busy.

*Hang on,* he types. *Getting ready now. Going shopping later.*

Knowing Will, Hannibal assumes he means shopping for Aleksandra. *Where to?*

*Capitol,* Will tells him. He explains that he means to make it a day trip, to take his daughter to a store or two and then maybe around the National Mall.

*We could add a surprise,* Hannibal suggests. He is so forward with the Grahams now he can hardly remember that fateful day when he declined the invitation to Will’s mind for the prospect of more. A prospect yet to become reality.

That is how he comes to be waiting on a D.C. pavement in the shade of flowering trees next to two shabby gentlemen singing beautiful Purcell and stinking of marijuana. Will calls him when he and Aleksandra find parking and, after paying the gentleman a few sincere compliments, Hannibal goes to meet them in front of the entrance to an underground cafe.

Aleksandra reacts as hoped—she shouts and launches herself at him. “Dr. Lecter!”
They indulge in the requisite enthusiastic hugging. Aleksandra looks at him with their shared secrets brimming in her eyes but doesn’t let any of them spill in the excited stream-of-consciousness rant that follows her greeting. She tells him about the rounds of testing at her school, the attempted assimilation of yet another stray, the turtle that her elementary class adopted—she talks about everything that happened in the last few weeks except their secret conversation. Hannibal pets the unruly curls at her nape and listens indulgently.

When the flow of words trickles to a stop, Hannibal adjusts Aleksandra where he’s got her perched on his hip and looks at Will. “Is that so?” he asks mildly.

“Yup,” Will says. “I think she covered it all.” He’s wearing his glasses again, but he meets and mostly keeps Hannibal’s gaze with one side of his mouth tipped upward. Something about him looks even softer today, or perhaps it’s just that Hannibal is now looking at him with the knowledge of what Will looks like in his home, madonna flanked by a chorus of canines. Will looks up through his lashes not with coyness but with a secret of his own, one that Hannibal would bite out of him if there wasn’t also the same feeling in Will’s gaze as the one in his gut.

Hannibal notes with satisfaction that they’re apparently no longer hiding their growing sentiment, and compares the realization to the odd week of silence.

“It sounds like you two have been occupied,” he says, a toe in the water.

Will’s bland look reveals nothing. “I suppose so,” he says noncommittally.

Hannibal resigns himself to his curiosity. Whatever that lost week was, he won’t find out from Will.

Will steps forward to take Aleksandra from his arms. “Aleksandra has certainly been occupied—with growing. The weather’s getting warm and she’s too big for her clothes from last year. Needs a whole new wardrobe. You’re a real beanstalk, aren’t you, Tiny?”

Aleksandra laughs when Will gently pinches her round cheek. Hannibal admires them, a Cimabue in three dimensions.

“Well then,” Hannibal says, patting Aleksandra’s knee and Will’s elbow at the same time. “If you’ll allow me, I know just the place.”
The walk is pleasant. It’s a beautiful day in the city and the presence of the Grahams beside him improves it. Will asks him about work—for a few weightless seconds Hannibal imagines telling Will about the police, but Aleksandra is with them. In the best of worlds, Will would react with interest, but Will had shown too much revulsion in his classroom for Hannibal to expect Will to be anything but upset by Mrs. Oort’s ascension. *Ah, well*, Hannibal thinks. *With time.*

As soon as they reach the boutique, most of Will’s ease and Aleksandra’s excitement dissolve into that peculiar unreadability they both share. Hannibal has made them uncomfortable—he can only assume that Will rarely shops in this part of the city and Aleksandra is reacting like a thermometer to her father’s mood.

He holds the door to the shop open. “Please,” he says, beckoning them ahead of him. The Grahams look at him with almost twin reluctance but step forward anyway.

The boutique is cool and gently fragrant. It’s not terribly large—there are perhaps ten racks of children’s clothing with one dressing room at the back and a short podium in front of a trifold mirror. Hannibal has never actually been inside before, but he knows the owner, a close friend who also runs the formalwear shop to which he will take the Grahams next; she had given him directions to this place when he called her for her recommendation after his tartlet.

Hannibal turns to Aleksandra, who is holding her father close and looking reservedly around the unfamiliar store. “What’s your favorite color, Miss Aleksandra?”

“Blue,” she volunteers.

“And would you like blue pants or a blue skirt? A blue shirt or a blue dress?” Hannibal asks. She perks up a little, intrigued by the options. Hannibal holds his hand out. “Let me help you decide.”

He feels gratified when she wiggles out of Will’s arms and comes to him.

At that moment the owner emerges from the back. “Hannibal!” Mrs. Ganim greets him warmly. Her lipstick and hijab complement the dress stretching over her round belly. “So good to see you.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Hannibal says, laying his hand across his chest as she comes over. “I trust you and the baby are well?” He gestures to his companions. “Allow me to introduce my good friend Will Graham and the lovely Miss Aleksandra. This is Mrs. Ganim.”
Mrs. Ganim likely knows his feelings for the Grahams the moment he squeezes Aleksandra’s hand and touches Will’s shoulder, but she doesn’t let any mischief show through her kind eyes. “So wonderful to meet you both.”

Will looks a little surly at first but is more than courteous when he puts his hand across his chest and inclines his head. “Nice to meet you,” he says genuinely, unlike when he had first spoken the words to Hannibal.

“Oh, aren’t you just the prettiest,” Mrs. Ganim tells Aleksandra softly, somehow anticipating Aleksandra’s embarrassed pleasure before it makes the girl duck behind her curls. “What are we here for today?”

Will explains, “She’s getting to be a big girl now. She’ll need a new outfit or two for the rest of the school year.”

Hannibal notices the understatement. He wonders if Will has not yet realized that he will be sponsoring this trip.

“They grow up so fast,” Mrs. Ganim sympathizes, smoothing a slim brown hand down the curve of her stomach. She talks directly and encouragingly to Aleksandra, “Would you like me to show you some clothes that I think you’ll like?”

Aleksandra is a little wide-eyed when she nods. Hannibal has noticed that the elfin Mrs. Ganim often has that effect on others. He keeps a hold of Aleksandra’s hand as she follows Mrs. Ganim to the first rack.

Will keeps pace with Hannibal, occasionally combing his fingers through his daughter’s curls as she watches Mrs. Ganim pull clothes out in awe. Hannibal takes in the experience of walking in step with Will, separated only by Aleksandra’s thin shoulders.

Mrs. Ganim sees Aleksandra’s well-used pants and pulls out several overalls, skorts, and capris for her, impeccable jean and corduroy cuts. She matches them to airy long-sleeves and blouses with designs from bees to dogs to cacti, holding them out so Aleksandra can touch the prints and feel the sensible lace trim at the cuffs. Aleksandra is caught somewhere between overwhelmed and delighted,
and in time lets go of Hannibal’s hand to carry some of the outfits that she is taken by.

Mrs. Ganim pauses at the end of the rack. “Let’s try some of those on,” she suggests, looking to Will. He nods and she leads Aleksandra gently toward the dressing room.

Will and Hannibal take a seat on the short bench provided opposite the dressing room to wait; they end up with their thighs pressed together. Hannibal doesn’t pull away from the pressure and is glad when Will keeps his leg where it is as well.

“Your friend is lovely,” Will says. “You seem like good friends anyway.”

Hannibal very carefully doesn’t look amused. “I frequently go to Mrs. Ganim for my own shopping. Her taste and talent is peerless—she and her husband have sold me some of my favorite pieces.”

The surliness fades. “I guess I’m embarrassed,” Will says, flushed now.

Hannibal finally smiles. “There’s no need to be. I made the same gaffe only months ago.”

Will looks up. Their faces come unexpectedly close; Hannibal sees the green and yellow flecks again. “Really?”

Hannibal nods since it brings them even closer. “I don’t think Alana appreciated the insinuation.”

Will laughs, leaning back. “That’s way more embarrassing.”

Hannibal accepts the retreat since Will’s smile is uncommonly big and authentic. Hannibal’s admission has both relaxed him and put some knot of tension or excitement, of the same kind as that time in Will’s classroom. A part of Hannibal is glad for the fact that Will has stewed in loneliness for so long; now he falls apart so easily from the bone.

The ladies make their return. “Here she comes,” Mrs. Ganim hums, leading Aleksandra out of the dressing room.
Tiny steps forward wearing a denim frock with a long-sleeve printed with jellyfish underneath. She won’t look up from the ground, no more natural in a dress now than she was when Hannibal first met her, but the smile on her face betrays her extreme pleasure. Her chubby fingers play excitedly with the hem of the frock. She asks them, “Is it pretty?”

“Wow! Sure is!” Will exclaims, shouldering enthusiasm for his daughter. “Tiny, you look great!”

Hannibal gives her a smile. “It suits you very well.”

Aleksandra beams, turning a little pink. “I like it so much,” she confesses.

“Then we’ll get it,” Hannibal says firmly, to Aleksandra’s small gasp of delight. “What else would you like?”

Mrs. Ganim takes Aleksandra back into the dressing room and changes her into four other outfits which are all flaunted before Will and Hannibal. Mrs. Ganim has perfect intuition and excellent taste, and Aleksandra is a wonderful model; all of the clothing flatters the little girl. In the end Mrs. Ganim lays all the sets out before them: the denim frock with the jellyfish undershirt, some durable khakis and a shirt embroidered with sand-dollars, green corduroys and a tee with dinosaur print, a skort and a sea foam long-sleeve, and a light pair of overalls with a dog sewn on the front. Aleksandra walks back and forth between them, agonized by the choice she thinks she has to make.

Hannibal ends her struggle. “We’ll take them all.”

Both Will and Aleksandra’s gazes snap to him. Will doesn’t embarrass either one of them by vocalizing the automatic refusal that clearly leaps to his lips, but it’s a near thing. Aleksandra may not perfectly understand that this is no bargain outlet, but she can sense that Hannibal’s offer is very generous.

“Really?” she asks quietly, hopefully.

“Of course,” Hannibal assures her. He turns to Mrs. Ganim. “Would you be so kind as to show us some evening-wear for Miss Aleksandra?” He winks at Will and his daughter. “The Grahams have a promise to keep to me. Miss Aleksandra will need something for the opera.”

They spend twenty more minutes watching Aleksandra twirl through five gowns suggested by Mrs.
Ganim to match the girl’s eyes. Aleksandra has quite the time, even losing some of her discomfort outside of her usual pants. She’s less excited about the dresses with ruffles at the shoulders but adores the ones with puffed skirts; in the end she chooses a chiffon, scalloped dress in navy that flounces when she turns.

Mrs. Ganim congratulates Aleksandra on her choices. “You’ll be a princess,” she tells her sweetly, gathering all the clothing to take to the register.

Aleksandra buzzes around her father on the bench, ecstatic, while Hannibal checks out. Will very carefully doesn’t look over while Hannibal is paying.

Mrs. Ganim gives Hannibal a soft, knowing smile and sighs across the counter, “Don't let those two get away, Hannibal.”

They leave the store laden with four bags of new clothes and Aleksandra’s packaged dress looped over Hannibal’s shoulder. Aleksandra alternates between skipping down the pavement, unable to contain herself, and falling back to thank Hannibal again and again. Hannibal appreciates her dedication to gratitude; he returns every hug she stops him on the sidewalk to give him.

Will looks somewhere between enamored with his daughter’s pleasure and peeved at the sight of Hannibal draped in purchases. Hannibal is too amused by Will’s mood to gentle him out of it, so he declares, “I’m afraid we’re not finished yet,” leading them down another street and into a store that he knows intimately.

Mr. Ganim greets him and, seeing the bags, asks if they’ve just been to his wife. Hannibal nods and indicates Aleksandra, “We needed new clothes for the spring.” He doesn’t look around to see how we landed with Will.

“Excellent,” Mr. Ganim says. “I hope you’re satisfied with your purchases, though I’m sure this young lady could make anything look lovely.”

Predictably, Aleksandra smiles and hides behind Hannibal’s pant leg. Hannibal agrees, “Too true. And now we’re here for her equally lovely father.”

Aleksandra makes a noise between a gasp and a giggle. Hannibal can’t imagine what might be running across Will’s face. In for a penny, in for a pound, he thinks.
Mr. Ganim comes out from behind the counter with his tape slung across his neck; he directs Will toward the one part of the store that is clear of mannequins flaunting sharp cuts and wrapped bolts of fabric displayed like book spines. Will casts a red look back at Hannibal, but he follows.

Just as with Mrs. Ganim, Will is adequately courteous during the entire time he has his measurements taken, a process that Aleksandra is thrilled by. “It’s like Cinderella,” she tells Hannibal, a comparison he won’t be sharing with her father. He wonders who the evil stepmother overworking and under-valuing Will is.

Mr. Ganim disappears with Will into the back and returns him in a black sample cut. Hannibal is extremely taken by the way the cut brings out the meat on Will, dispelling the illusion of his perpetual hunched thinness, but he is even more taken by the quiet anger that simmers behind Will’s eyes. He looks straight back into Will’s stormy expression with the mettle of an old salt.

“How do you like it?” he asks mildly.

Will frowns. “It’s wonderful.”

Hannibal considers him and then Aleksandra at his side, holding her gown carefully and possessively close to her. “We’ll take it in heather,” he tells Mr. Ganim.

In the end he pays for the suit as well as a pair of derby shoes in cognac on impulse. He particularly enjoys the look of Will dark-eyed and upset next to him at the cash register.

Aleksandra skips out the store door ahead of them, beaming. Will hangs back with Hannibal who rearranges Aleksandra’s new clothes on his arms in order to hold Will’s new footwear. Hannibal pretends to be involved in the act; he’s not sure what exactly Will is upset about, but he enjoys being in proximity to his raw emotions.

While his daughter is occupied with spinning her sealed gown around, Will leans in to Hannibal’s side, bringing his spiced scent closer in order to say quietly, “I’m not as impressed by a deep wallet as you seem to think I am.”

Hannibal notices that the green and yellow flecks in Will’s eyes have intensified. His attraction to Will spikes, as well as his desire to bite through the knob of his adam’s apple.
“I don’t think you are,” he counters easily. “If you could be won by things like that, I might be a little less taken with you.”

The tide of Will’s immediate blush washes out the scowl on his face. Those stormy eyes widen. Whatever indignant dismissal he was going to follow up with is lost to the wave of his shock. And after it, more of a tsunami, comes a mortified pleasure exactly like his daughter’s.

Before Will can gather up the words, Hannibal leans in even closer to add, “But truthfully, I can’t imagine being less taken with you.”

He leaves a speechless Will behind to ask Aleksandra if she would like to end their day with some ice cream.

Half an hour later he is standing fast against the sugar rush that has Aleksandra tugging him up and down the sidewalk and asking for a piggyback ride despite Will’s amused reprimands. When Will ends up finding his voice, he starts off telling Aleksandra, “Hey, Tiny, you know how to behave. Calm down please.” After a while of Aleksandra talking a mile a minute and pulling insistently on both of them, a resigned Will tells Hannibal, “You earned this.”

He looks giddy and uncomfortable with that giddiness, hovering near Hannibal but keeping the shopping bags between them like a barrier. Hannibal thinks that might even be better than his humiliated anger from before. Occasionally he bumps Will with a bag to watch him scatter.

He’s about to ask Aleksandra for her dress so she doesn’t damage it in her excitement when he feels a tap on his arm.

It’s a woman, quite old and wrapped in a scarf despite the warming weather. “Excuse me,” she says. “I don’t mean to bother.”

Hannibal hears her accent and responds in French, “It’s no bother.”

Her wrinkled eyes light up. “I only wanted to say that you have a beautiful family.” She looks staunchly supportive, and as pleased as if she were the one being complimented.

Hannibal, caught off guard, can only say, “Thank you very much. I happen to agree.” He feels the way Aleksandra must feel holding her new dress.
“Then you’re as smart as you are lucky.” The woman smiles at Will and waves at Tiny. “Have a wonderful day,” she says, needing nothing else, and continues down the sidewalk in the opposite direction.

When Hannibal turns back to Will, he finds out him wide-eyed and embarrassed. He realizes he should have known Will would have many talents.

Also in French, he says, “She was very nice.”

Will mumbles an agreement, “She was.”

“Not just classical languages then,” Hannibal says in English.

“French creole,” Will admits. “The Greek was for flirting.”

Hannibal’s reacts to that information like a shark scenting a drop of blood in water, but Will doesn’t elaborate. Maybe he sees the flicker of dark curiosity in Hannibal’s eyes; that pained flusteredness is replaced with shy self-satisfaction, as though Will were pleased at being the one to leave Hannibal on the hook.

“Well,” Will says instead, “we’re only a couple blocks from our parking garage. I think it’s time to head home and put all of our new things away.”

There’s enough irony in his voice to make it clear that he is not quite pacified, but Aleksandra squeals and starting spinning around again nevertheless.

“I will pick up your suit,” Hannibal promises, gently stopping Aleksandra with a hand on her shoulders so she doesn’t trip over her gown.

Part of Will looks like he wants to protest, and a bigger part looks enchanted with the idea that he doesn’t have to. “Thank you,” he says, trying out acceptance.
Aleksandra comes in for a hug goodbye, only slightly less distraught than usual at their parting due to the artificial happiness of what should be the tail-end of her sugar high. She gets in several more thank-yous by the time Hannibal transfers the shopping bags to Will in order to pick her up.

She clings to him strongly, burying her head in his neck and quieting down for a moment. With her mouth hidden from her father, she whispers to him, just like last time, “I love you.”

Hannibal stays to watch Will and Aleksandra walk off together, making their way through the weekend crowd. Jealousy for them claws at him from the inside when he can no longer see them between the other, meaningless city-goers, but he’s consoled by the knowledge that the next time he sees the Grahams, they will be covered entirely in his things.

At the last minute, Hannibal changes the opera to a ballet.

After some thought he determines that it might be too much to expectant a young child to be entertained for the entirety of Carmen with only sporadic moments of action. Though Aleksandra is by all accounts a very well-behaved child, Hannibal has no desire to test the limits of her obedience or fidgetiness. He secures three tickets for Swan Lake, whose music she may already be familiar with, and texts Will about the date and venue change.

When he sees them in the theater’s crystal-lit foyer, he decides he has never spent a large sum of money on anything worthier than the Grahams.

Will is devastatingly handsome, a spirit in light-dappled gray under the chandelier. Aleksandra behind him, a teardrop of blue, looks like the shower below a raincloud. They wear the fine clothes like their departure from sensible hand-me-downs and stock cuts is physically painful, but they’re radiant nevertheless. Hannibal knows none of the gathered socialites pay the two newcomers any mind, but in his eyes they Grahams walk toward him lit with the spotlight of his pride, pleasure, and possessiveness.

Aleksandra gives him a delicate hug for once, careful of creasing her gown. The ringlets of her curled hair fall in her smiling face when he tells her, “You look royal, Miss Aleksandra.”

Will accepts Hannibal’s hand on his shoulder with a nonchalance so brittle Hannibal could crack it with the wind from a wink. Will can slip into another person entirely, but he can’t slip out of himself,
so unsettled by the twinkle of the champagne flute extended to him as a courtesy. Hannibal slides his palm down to Will’s strong wrist to see if it will make him walk out on him or lean closer, and Will shudders hard with indecision between the two. A few of Hannibal’s nosiest acquaintances catch sharp-nosed notice of them suddenly as they leave the foyer together.

Aleksandra sits with unexpected stillness throughout the whole performance in the seat between Hannibal and Will, at first with her hands clasped neatly in her lap and then, when her enchantment with the feeling of royalty fades, tucked just as neatly into Will’s lap. She latches onto him with her attention still on the stage, but frees one hand to link with Hannibal’s across the armrests, bidding him move into her vacated space. Her small palm gets sweaty, but Hannibal doesn’t let go, just moves over.

His fingers end up against Will’s ribcage, laced with Aleksandra’s and pushed into Will’s heartbeat. Neither of them do anything about it, though the pulse skips once.

By the time the ballet ends, Aleksandra has made not one complaint, but instead fallen asleep. When the lights come on Hannibal helps Will maneuver through the theater seats with Aleksandra slumped into his chest, directing them back to the lobby where the crystal effect makes the Grahams look dreamy again.

Will makes a request for the bathroom before the drive back to Wolf Trap; they successfully transfer Aleksandra into Hannibal’s care while he does so. Hannibal is quite astounded by the weight of Aleksandra in his arms again, this time with her chubby fingers curled into the expensive fabric of his haute suit. Her soft breaths are just barely audible; gently he fixes her gown where it rode up in the back, relishing the sense of déjà-vu.

He does not relinquish her as he and Will walk out to their vehicles. He is aware that many people at the venue observed him carrying another man’s child out; he lets them look. It would have been enough to parade the Grahams in public wearing the couture evidence of his claim, but this is much better.

At the car he helps secure Aleksandra in her seat. When he straightens back up Will closes the car door, which puts them as close together as that day in the woods.

“She had a great time,” Will tells him. “The new dress, the dance. You made her night.”

Hannibal wonders if Will often expresses himself through his daughter. “I’m glad. I know this may not be her scene exactly, but I wanted her to enjoy herself.”
“She did,” Will assures him.

Hannibal smiles. Will’s eyes flick down to his mouth. For a second Hannibal wonders if Will has some depth of courage he’s been hiding under his reticent surface.

In the end Will leans away, just like at the boutique but this time slower, maybe more reluctant. “I’ve got to get her home,” he sighs.

“You do,” Hannibal agrees, stepping aside so Will can cross to the driver’s side. “Of course, we’re even now.”

Will stops with his hand on the door handle. “Even?”

“I’ve gone fishing, and you’ve come to a performance,” Hannibal explains. “Even Steven.”

Will considers that. His pause has the quality of charging, like a battery hoarding energy. At length he says, not with energy but with confidence, “I don’t think we have any use for obligation anymore. I think we’ll meet up again soon.”

Hannibal’s smile grows teeth. “I think you’re right.”
Chapter 11

Hannibal is accustomed to being the subject of village gossip. In fact, he puts in quite a bit of effort to remain so, because—as illuminated by Will during one of their very first meetings—the most ornate peacocks have the greatest success in the wild. Never has a rumor brought him more satisfaction, however, than the one circulating right now: that eligible, eccentric bachelor Lecter has finally found himself an eligible, eccentric little family.

It is the first and only rumor that Hannibal intends to prove true.

Several days after the ballet, he has lunch with two very dear friends, a Mrs. Sharifi and a Mrs. Zheng who have together received the most invitations to his table of all his acquaintances. Mrs. Zheng masterminds the meeting and Mrs. Sharifi bullies Hannibal into attendance; they are a fearsome team for a pair of elderly women who spend most of their time languidly enjoying the art scene of the Atlantic seaboard and the rest spoiling grandchildren. Hannibal would have gladly shown up even if Mrs. Sharifi hadn’t kidnapped him from his office and driven him straight to the small Mediterranean restaurant where Mrs. Zheng had reserved them a table.

They are both adept conversationalists; they don’t come around to their real purpose until after lunch has been cleared away and after they’ve argued good-naturedly about whether or not Hannibal has gained weight since they last saw him. By the time dessert comes out, they’ve already made several quips about Hannibal slowing down; he can’t count how many times they’ve dropped the words domestic and tamed.

It’s always enlightening, hearing these women discuss him as he appears. He would never have considered himself the one tamed.

They finally pounce. “You know we jest,” Mrs. Zheng says. “Truly, you seem ten years younger—it must be the young blood you keep around yourself now.”

“She’s right,” Mrs. Sharifi hums. “You looked very fresh with that babe in your arms.” She’s referring of course to Hannibal bringing Aleksandra out to Will’s car that night at the ballet, an act that many of his garrulous acquaintances saw and, presumably, spread.

“Miss Aleksandra does refresh me,” Hannibal admits to the delight of the women. Now that they’ve sighted their white whale, they brandish their hooks.
“Aleksandra, is it? How precious. We’re very glad for you.” Mrs. Sharifi pats him familiarly. “But also very hurt, you understand.”

Mrs. Zheng sighs with drama. “I can’t believe I had to hear all about it from Mr. Cassady of all people.”

“There was nothing much to hear until that night,” Hannibal fibs.

“Oh, don’t make it worse,” Mrs. Zheng moans.

Mrs. Sharifi scolds him, “There’s no such thing as a divorcé or widower who takes his daughter on a first date. Let’s have the truth.”

Hannibal smiles; it’s been a long time since he’s been able to sell these ladies anything. “If you must know,” he says lowly, and they both lean in. “This has been a long-term endeavor.”

They both gasp. “When were you going to deal us in?” Mrs. Zheng demands.

“I don’t have all the cards,” Hannibal informs them. “This is one of the most delicate games I’ve ever played. There are many rules to be learned—I’m afraid if I break one, the game will be over.”

They make sympathetic noises. “Children always complicate things,” Mrs. Sharifi says sagely.

“You may be surprised,” Hannibal tells her. “The child has been the easiest part.”

Both of them laugh at him. “Oh, Hannibal,” Mrs. Zheng croons. “Then you must realize that you’re going to win for sure.”

They finish their samali cake. Hannibal grabs the check despite the genuine protests of his companions. He feels compelled to show his gratitude—as usual, they’ve given him more than just a good meal.

“We’ll want to meet them,” Mrs. Zheng says on the way out in a tone that brooks no refusal. “As
soon as you have them.”

“Good luck, Hannibal.” Mrs. Sharifi winks. “Though I don’t think you need it.”

Hannibal kisses both of their hands. He doesn’t think so either.

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They have developed a bit of a routine.

Hannibal receives a call from the Grahams about once a week, usually on Wednesday evening which is Aleksandra’s day off from the after-school science program she participates in. Will always asks him in his latent drawl, more and more undisguised as he becomes more and more unguarded, if Hannibal is busy, at which point Hannibal always responds that he is not. (Once Will called while Hannibal was tenderizing the meat of an incompetent pharmacist, who used to steal from Hannibal’s anti-inflammatory refills, with raw papaya; Hannibal had stopped cooking to assure Will he was free.)

Will then will put Aleksandra on the phone; she will proceed to greet Hannibal with such an enthusiastic cry that her voice will go tinny over the connection. After that she will ramble anywhere from ten to thirty minutes about everything under the sun, her most popular subjects the dogs or what new marine biology concept she has taught herself that weekend. She always ends the call with a whispered, furtive *I love you* that Hannibal knows she is hiding from her father.

It usually happens that when Will takes back the phone, they end up entangled in either energetic debate or earnest confession. For all that Will hides behind bifocals and ennuied posture, he can’t seem to stop himself from picking friendly fights, too entertained the contests only Hannibal seems to engaged him in; his drawl becomes most apparent and most attractive after Hannibal has prodded him a few times with the pitchfork of devil’s advocacy. When they’re not provoking one another, they’re sharing simple stories about their days, two men gone years without true companionship at home.

Sometimes they talk about psychology—Will is just as educated as Hannibal, but his opinions have the fleshiness of firsthand experience, while Hannibal’s have the sterility of clinical experience. They have completely different ideas about things like the influence of behavioristic concepts in therapy or free will, which they dispute to the marrow for the simple pleasure of doing so with someone else. Sometimes they talk about anatomy—Hannibal’s medical knowledge cannot be matched, but Will makes up for his inexpertise with irreverent comparisons of human and insect anatomy that amuse Hannibal for reasons Will probably does not suspect.
Sometimes Will, if the call runs long and he has to put down the phone to put Aleksandra to bed, will tell Hannibal things he otherwise keeps locked up in cranial confinement. It’s been a while since he started complaining to Hannibal about his job, about grading assignments and about department bureaucracy and about the things that his students didn’t see. He had even mentioned on the odd occasion how he found his job unsettling enough that he would quit if he didn’t think he was making a difference. Hannibal had been thrilled the first time Will admitted that he hated looking into criminal minds in front of people like an exhibit in deranged museum, the first acknowledgement of that thing that lay between the two of them, the thing Hannibal had refused in order to receive.

Only recently had Will begun telling Hannibal about the unofficial part of his job, details redacted—the part that tears him away from his classroom to other states and makes him look.

The BAU had not turned Will down like Hannibal did; instead they took the great tool of Will’s mind and put it to use. To ill use, Hannibal thought, but he never interrupted those few times when Will recounted episodes of new police tape, fresh evidence boxes, and enough blood to drown in. It feels almost like the climax of a story, the high point of all Hannibal’s work thus far, to hear Will haltingly describe the handiwork of a man with a mycological obsession, the first real application of Will’s singular ability that Hannibal had ever been privy to. The medical feat had been impressive itself, but more captivating than the intravenous sugar water by far is Will’s single assured statement that the murderer had wanted the connection.

Since then he has told Hannibal the bare bones of several other cases he has helped bury, and the neural pathways he has walked in order to do so. There was no longer the need for pretense or prevarication; Hannibal went straight for the kind of questions that he wanted to ask months ago—like who Will wanted to connect to. He fully anticipated being hung up on each time he dared press for a little more, but it could have been that the memory of Aleksandra’s small hand in Hannibal’s had power—Will had begun to answer him.

It was more than Hannibal had dared to dream of.

They are coming closer to the resolution of that first moment when Will looked at Hannibal and saw that he has seams. Hannibal has spent the past few weeks learning just how many seams Will has pulled up; it’s only a matter of time before Will unravels him too. Right now Hannibal dares to hope that by then, Will will not balk at what he uncovers.

On those nights Hannibal typically does not fall asleep, too invigorated by the meeting of minds to settle his. He finds himself inspired again. He draws the way he used to as the mute charge that would hide in the secret passageways of his uncle’s mansion—he produces artwork in such volume that he has to purchase new files to store it in. Those days when he doesn’t have much work, he draws until the pencil becomes too slow a medium and he feels compelled to sit at his harpsichord.
Hannibal floats on a feeling of victory for weeks. He has accomplished what tens of psychiatrists only dreamed of—he has been granted access to Will’s strange and beautiful mind.

What he hadn’t expected was for the bloodthirst and the yearning to remain.

He realizes that somewhere along the line the desire to pry open Will’s skull for a feel of his brain had fused with the desire to pry open the Graham’s tightly clasped family for a feel of their intimacy. Somewhere along the line gaining access to Will’s ability became inextricable from gaining access to the Grahams’ hearts. Miraculously, he has accomplished the former.

All that remains is the latter.

Fortunately he believes he can achieve it with the same tactic. He decides to make his next move the fulfillment of a desire he’s had for weeks now: the Grahams together in his home.

He invites Will and Aleksandra to his next dinner party.

The plans were already in place; Hannibal always throws a spring bash. It will be his first time seeing Will eat his meat in person; the knowledge that Will had gotten back to health on his broth those months ago no longer satiated him. He needs the real thrill of Will running his fingers along his person stitching; he wonders if Will will be able to see something in his eyes across the dinner table.

Hannibal’s conundrum is what he will feed Aleksandra. He has never had a small child at his table before, only adults and one guest’s apathetic teenaged son. He doesn’t think she will appreciate most of the things he usually stocks his table with. He will have to make her a separate menu. He will also have to decide whether he will serve her meat too.

Before he can make a decision either way, Will replies to Hannibal’s offer by declining it.

*Neither me nor Tiny would do well at that kind of thing*, his text reads. Hannibal is prepared to feel disappointment until Will follows it up with, *But we can help you set up.*

Will and Aleksandra drive over the day before the party. Will knows the way. He informs Hannibal when they’ve put the dogs away and get in the car; an hour later, the house chime announces their
arrival. When Hannibal opens the door, he finds Will in boots and a pullover so comfortably used that it can only be worn in defiance, and Aleksandra pushing her glasses up so she can marvel.

“Wow,” she sighs, drawing out the vowel. “Your house is so fancy, Dr. Lecter.”

“Thank you,” Hannibal says. “Would you like a tour?”

She is careful not to touch much as she wipes her shoes off and hands Hannibal her small coat, following him out of the foyer with her arms down by her sides. She takes in Hannibal’s jarring decor with wide eyes: the long spears of twin mounted gazelle horns, the mobile of shark teeth, the gypsum relief of Ashurbanipal Hunting Lions. He realizes suddenly that she usually sees in him soft sweaters with loose hair. Her face becomes increasingly unreadable; he wonders if she is a little afraid.

They go through the front parlor, where Aleksandra gasps at the plushness of the chaises and the shine of the Reed & Barton tea set, and then through the library, where Will and Aleksandra stand in the light coming through the window just like Hannibal has wanted. Aleksandra is somewhere between delighted and disconcerted; she really is just like her father.

As he leads them around, Hannibal does a thought experiment. He imagines his house without the Italian artwork, without the Gupta sculptures, without the replica shotel. He imagines instead a little desk in the corner of the study behind his, a stool for the high sink in the mudroom, a shorter coat hook in the foyer. Childproofed, his house would be less impressive, but also less formidable; while he does so enjoy a good visual taunt, he has to admit the merit—and, perhaps, the attraction—of a full and tame home.

After he shows the Grahams through all of the rooms on the ground floor, he explains how best he could use their generous help.

“Tomorrow a team of caterers will come to help me prepare the meal,” he tells them. “Today I need to prepare the house.” He turns to Will. “If you don’t mind, I could use your help taking a few table leaves and some chairs out of storage.” He turns to Aleksandra. “I would be honored if you would set the table when we’re done.”

Will looks glad for the manual instructions; Aleksandra looks ecstatic at being instructed at all. She stands to the side while Hannibal and Will pull back the panels along the dining room wall, revealing the storage pantry that holds Hannibal’s party furniture. Will picks up two solid-wood leaves by himself and brings them to where Hannibal is carefully separating the pieces of his dining table. Hannibal is first and foremost into Will’s malleable mind, but he does look. Between the two of them
the table goes up in a matter of minutes, now with the capacity for fourteen.

Aleksandra rushes in after them, excited. She lays out the place mats Hannibal gave her, smoothing each one, and after that the napkins. Hannibal folds one into a flower just to amuse her. She laughs, and laughs harder at Will’s attempt to replicate it. She puts down the silverware precisely; Hannibal only has to show her the order once. After that come the appetizer plates. Hannibal fully expects Aleksandra to drop at least one in the process, but she is very careful. The last things to go up are the candelabra.

“You’ve done a wonderful job,” Hannibal tells Aleksandra. The decorations on the table are mostly symmetrical, for the work of a young child.

“Thank you,” she says bashfully, before the prospect of more distracts her. “What else can we do, Dr. Lecter?”

They go from room to room together, Hannibal and Will rearranging furniture or bringing more in and Aleksandra putting out Hannibal’s usual party effects: coasters, more wastebaskets, candles, tissues, hand creams, and more. There are a few things Hannibal will undoubtedly have to go back and straighten; still, working alongside the Grahams is an engaging experience, even fun. With the exception of some of the furniture, Hannibal probably could have gotten the work done faster alone, but there is something to be said for the spontaneous, hilarious breaks in between: Will crouching to line up his head with some mounted antlers for Aleksandra’s benefit, Aleksandra pretending to read Hannibal’s book on quantum foam, Hannibal consenting to a game of nonsensical hopscotch on the patterned floor of his conservatory. He laughs more than he has in a long time.

When the decorations are done, Hannibal tells Aleksandra that she may wander if she chooses, which Will approves. She takes off like a shot, while Hannibal and Will retreat to the kitchen.

Hannibal feels a certain way as Will enters and immediately starts looking around. It’s Will’s first time in the room, but he is sure that Will has already identified it as the heart of the house, not the belly. Hannibal feels electrified when Will’s eyes come to rest on the line of teacups on his shelf.

Without looking away, Will observes, “You spend a lot of time in here.”

While he could have inferred that from tales of Hannibal’s hospitality and how many times he has called while Hannibal was cooking, Hannibal thinks that he sensed it instead.
“That’s right,” Hannibal says. “Cooking is my passion.”

“More than minds?” Will asks, sharp.

“Far more,” Hannibal says easily. “Present company excluded.”

“By the house, anyone would guess hunting,” Will prods by habit. He may not even realize that he is picking at Hannibal’s threads.

“There’s something to that,” Hannibal admits, both exhilarated and uneasy. “But the real reward happens here.”

His fingers brush his end-grain cutting block. Will’s attention finally leaves the teacups to follow the motion.

“I’ll need some clean dishes for the refreshments,” Hannibal mentions.

Will goes obligingly to the sink. “I’ll dry.”

They wash and dry several mini plates and dipping saucers together, Hannibal soaped to the elbows and Will damp up his strong forearms. They move relatively fluidly around one another. Will stacks the fine dishes on the rack with as much care as his daughter had shown those in the dining room. Hannibal enjoys the opportunity to watch him work. Will’s hands are blunt but his fingers are nimble; Hannibal can think of many uses for them, both things that he knows Will would be horrified at and things he hopes Will at present would not object to.

“I recently read a paper discussing a standardization of RGB analysis of biological colors,” Hannibal says, just to extend the moment. Will gratifies him by responding with his normal contention.

While he spools into a tangent about the usefulness of such a project, using examples from entomology as he is wont, Hannibal admires him. Will in repose is something in himself, but didactic Will is attractive for many reasons. Will in mid-lecture will expand from his habitual huddle, his knowledge and his ideas taking up space. Sometimes without thinking he will take off his glasses, when his mind feels too confined by the arms, and Hannibal will have trouble deciding whether to look at his stormy eyes or his reddening mouth.
It doesn’t take long for Will to notice Hannibal’s close attention and go bright with a flush. He looks out of place in Hannibal’s house, dressed down and still a little sweaty from the work, but it’s a mismatch that Hannibal finds complementary. He’d like to prove some rumors true.

“Will,” Hannibal interrupts, fond.

Will trails off. “You started it,” he shrugs.

“I’d like to kiss you,” Hannibal tells him honestly.

The kitchen falls quiet. Only the swish of Hannibal’s dish cloth in the sink is audible. Hannibal continues washing. Will is still beside him, maybe shocked or alarmed. Hannibal hands him in the next dish.

After a moment, Will reaches out slowly to take it from him. He swallows. “I know,” he says eventually.

Hannibal doesn’t say anything. Will seems to be struggling, grappling with words fighting to get out. Hannibal sees that familiar, giddy distress start to rise in Will again, until his face, pulled in two directions, is grimaced.

“I’d like to be kissed,” Will admits.

The confession sounds like it’s been dredged up from the mires in him, something buried that was not supposed to be exhumed, like a coffin desecrated by disinterment. It sounds like something he did not want to see the light. Hannibal wonders when he buried it.

He can hear what Will is not saying. There is too much resignation in his voice, too much apprehension in his posture. He will not be kissed, not here and not today.

A few distant notes from Hannibal’s harpsichord break the quiet.
“Tiny,” Will blurts out, like a swear and a relief both at once. “Sorry,” he says, throwing down his towel. “I’ll get her.” He flees from the kitchen.

Hannibal doesn’t immediately follow. He finishes scrubbing the last plate before drying off his hands and letting the water out of the sink. It doesn’t feel like a mistake to have told the truth; he wonders nevertheless if his forthrightness will have consequences.

He finds Will and Aleksandra in his conservatory. Aleksandra looks small and guilty where she stands next to the harpsichord, Will a figure of judgment behind her.

She explains like a martyr, “I’m sorry, Dr. Lecter. I touched your piano.”

She sounds very ashamed. Ordinarily Hannibal would feel very strongly about someone touching his things without permission. However Aleksandra is in shame exactly as she was in gratitude—genuine and effusive and pure. He doesn’t think he has the ability to get angry with her at all.

Instead, Hannibal says, “That’s quite alright.” He goes over to the bench and takes a seat, gesturing toward the space leftover. “This is actually a harpsichord. Would you like me to show it to you?”

The offer surprises Aleksandra, who hesitates at first to answer. Then she nods and comes to sit subdued beside him.

Hannibal decides to cheer her with a few startling seconds of fast-flitting Scarlatti, his fingers flying across the keys. The flurry of brittle notes makes Aleksandra jump and let out a delighted noise. Hannibal smiles at her candid reaction and finishes the run with a trill.

“It sounds quite different from a piano, doesn’t it?” he asks her. He does have a baby grand in the enclave under the house’s staircase whose voice is ponderous and romantic, but he has found that he prefers the crisp chiding of the harpsichord.

“So different!” Aleksandra agrees. “You play so good, Dr. Lecter.”

“So well,” Will corrects her where he stands a little apart from them. Hannibal looks at him mildly to avoid making him as skittish as he had in the kitchen. Will’s face is unreadable but the lines of his body suggest that he is ready to run again.
Hannibal turns back to Aleksandra. “I’ve practiced a lot,” he understates. “In fact, I’ve been practicing something very special lately.”

He starts to play the melody he’s been tinkering with for a while now. It’s fairy-like, a triple-meter prance with false crescendos and flirty devices in the lower octaves. There’s a great deal of improvisation since he hasn’t yet finished the song to his satisfaction, but the work in progress flows better than what he has written down so far now that he has the pleasant pressure of performing it in front of the two who inspired it. He finishes on an arpeggio, a run that trails off into gentle ambiguity since he has no ending yet. Hannibal is hoping the ending will be happy.

Aleksandra’s eyes are wide throughout the whole thing. She gives him a round of fervent applause. “That was beautiful,” she says, earnest. “What song is it?”

“It’s mine,” Hannibal tells her. “I made it up—for you and your father.”

Aleksandra gasps. “Really?” The look on her chubby face is so stricken with feeling Hannibal worries she will tell him that she loves him right here with her father in the room. Instead she dives into his side and flings her arms around him, squeezing with all her small strength.

Hannibal returns the embrace, rubbing her back gently. He can’t deny that her affection feels good. It’s been a very long time since he’d been hugged by someone who meant it like this.

“Thank you, Dr. Lecter,” Aleksandra says with tenderness.

“You’re very welcome,” Hannibal tells her, pushing an errant curl out of her eyes. “It’s my pleasure.”

Movement in the periphery draws his attention away from her idolizing eyes. Across the room Will looks almost pained with desire. By his expression he seems ready to either snatch Aleksandra away or give Hannibal what he’d wanted in the kitchen. He does neither; instead he waits until Aleksandra pulls back and skips over to him.

“Did you hear that, daddy? Dr. Lecter made us a song!” She grabs his hand and tugs excitedly. “Isn’t it so nice?”
“It’s very nice,” Will agrees quietly, petting her. His eyes flick over to Hannibal. “Dr. Lecter is very nice to us.”

At that moment Hannibal’s door chime rings through the house. For a moment he is confused—and ready for anger, at the intrusion—before he realizes that it must be the crew he hired to help him with tomorrow’s catering. They always arrive the day before to drop off supplies.

“I’m sorry,” Hannibal says, meaning it. “I meant to tell the caterers to arrive a little later.”

“That’s alright,” Will says. “We should probably get ready to go.”

Aleksandra’s face collapses. “Already?”

“We’ve been helping Dr. Lecter for a while,” Will points out. “It’s time for us to leave so he can finish preparing for his party.”

Aleksandra turns sadly to Hannibal, who nods. “That’s true. But I’ve never had as much fun preparing for a party as I have today with you and your father, Miss Aleksandra.”

That consoles her a bit. “I had fun too,” she says quietly. “I wish I could stay,” she adds, even quieter.

Hannibal feels the need to grab her small hand, but Will is leading her toward the door, gently ignoring her disappointment, so he follows. There’s some gratification in watching the Grahams walk before him through his home, but truthfully he is disappointed too.

Hannibal shows the caterers in and into the kitchen, leaving the Grahams to get ready at the door. While the crew, long familiar with him, begins setting up, Hannibal comes back to give Will and Aleksandra his farewell.

He kneels to Aleksandra and receives another hug of huge strength. She is very discreet; though she doesn’t give him her usual goodbye, the words are in her face nevertheless. She has her jacket back and her glasses pushed up and looks so very much like Will that he feels the need to sigh.
Hannibal does not hug Will but he does step in to pick a thread off of Will’s jacket for him. “Thank you for coming,” he says. He tries not to sound too meaningful as he adds, “I hope next time you can stay and enjoy.”

Will seems torn between separate impulses, ready to say both yes and no. The giddy distress is back. He is either afraid of Hannibal or of himself. “We’ll see,” is all he gives, before he and Aleksandra turn and leave.

Hannibal returns to the kitchen and gives what few directions to the catering crew that they need. They go shortly with the commitment to return at three o’clock sharp the following afternoon, as usual. With them gone too, the house is silent. After some moments of indecision, Hannibal goes back to the conservatory to sit at his harpsichord again.

He is not accustomed to doubting himself. As he picks out a few forlorn notes, however, he wonders if Mrs. Sharifi and Mrs. Zheng were wrong after all.
Chapter 12

This time Hannibal is less surprised when he is treated to another week of radio silence.

Once more, it happens without warning. Will texts him the night of the party after everyone has gone home, and then not again for six days. There is nothing in his message hinting at the sudden taciturnity to come; Hannibal senses Will’s usual dry coquetry through his words right up until it cuts out.

After the conclusion of the party, once his satiated guests have spilled out into the temperate night full of excellent wine and a poor telemarketer, Hannibal pulls off his evening jacket and shrugs out of his suspenders, lowering into an empty dining chair for a moment before he starts the long process of putting his house back together. The catering crew is soon packed up; he waits for them to finish their generously provided portion of the cleanup before starting his own.

Right as he intends to push himself back to his feet to escort the crew to the door, his phone buzzes with a thoughtful check-in: How did it go?

The party had been a success as usual; his kahlua roast was a big hit. Hannibal always enjoys sitting among herds of sheep in their own clothing, but his night had been improved by all the small reminders of the day before: of Aleksandra concentrating on utensil placements, Will flexing under the weight of his furniture. They were there in the corners of every room, teasing Hannibal with the memory of shared laughter. The night could have been improved only by their presence.

Hannibal says as much. It would have been perfect with you both.

Will hasn’t responded since then.

At least this time Hannibal is able to form a theory: Will is pulling away. In the headlong charge into Aleksandra’s good graces Hannibal had failed to realize how deep the fears of single fatherhood really ran, the mistrust that suspected both bad luck and good. He had been thinking of Will as like him, a man who had gone too long without touch of body or mind, but in fact Will is more like a bear with a cub and more needs than just his own. To Hannibal the way forward looks clear and inviting, but Will, his natural paranoia amplified by parenthood, sees traps lurking ahead.

Hannibal had thought the obstacle between him and the Grahams would be gaps in his person suit, snagged on the places where he and the Grahams don’t fit. Instead it’s the knowledge that they fit all
He spends that silent week wondering if he should regret telling Will that he wanted to kiss him, and also following around the man who sells him his saffron at inflated price. It is six days of trying—and failing—to find patience for Will’s pace.

The week after that Hannibal gets a call from Alana.

It has been a while since they met up with one another. During their last joint excursion they visited an art collection, more avant garde than the showings Hannibal usually attends but a refreshing departure from stale Romantic homages. He particularly liked the display of Tran Nyugen’s giant, acrylic women, and ended up purchasing a piece for Alana as congratulations for her transition to a full-time psychiatric position with the Academy. Hannibal’s expectation when he sees her name on his phone screen is that she is calling to thank him for the print.

Instead she tells him that Aleksandra is sick.

She calls him on a rainy, appointment-free evening that he had anticipated using to finalize the date on which he would abduct a heedless landscaper who, in the course of shaping up his neighbor’s lawn, pruned several of Hannibal’s imported, extremely carefully tended Acacia dealbata with a negligence that may or may not have killed them. Hannibal is considering a weekend a year or so out to avoid suspicion when he answers his phone.

“Good evening, Alana,” he greets on speaker phone, distracted by his calendar.

“Hannibal, I need your help,” she says without preamble. “It’s Aleksandra.”

Hannibal experiences a strange split-second of vertigo. In the span of one heartbeat his inventive mind conjures no less than twenty different anxieties. He pauses to marvel at how long it’s been since he felt such an instant of vomitous distress.

“What’s happened?” he asks neutrally. He turns off speaker phone.

“She’s with me right now. Will is out of town,” she explains, her voice low. Something urgent in Hannibal relaxes; he realizes with interest that it was the impulse to retch. “He went to Michigan for a consultation. He usually leaves Aleksandra with his colleague Beverly, but she’s on the team too.
So I have her.”

Hannibal assimilates both the information and the implications. Something ugly rises up in him at the thought of Aleksandra compromised, some ancient, rusty protectiveness with sharp edges. With it comes the sting of hurt—he hadn’t even known Will was going away. Will had said nothing to him and asked nothing of him; the thought dredges up something even uglier.

He keeps his thoughts out of his voice. “What’s wrong?”

Alana sounds worried. “She’s sick.”

Hannibal frowns. A thousand textbook pages burr past his mind’s eye. “Her symptoms?”

“She’s had a fever for…about three hours,” Alana reports. “Thirty minutes ago she started vomiting. I’ve called Will and he’s making arrangements to come back now, but in the meantime she’s in a lot of discomfort.” Her voice lowers even further. “She doesn’t want to go to the doctor. She said she doesn’t like going without her father. I think she needs you to come over.”

Hannibal cannot enjoy the victorious swell of feeling the words raise in him. “I can be there in twenty minutes,” he says, pinching his phone between his ear and shoulder as he goes to the foyer to put on his coat and shoes. “Is she drinking?”

“Not well,” Alana sighs. “She seems pretty dehydrated. I’ve tried to give her sips of water, but she’s slightly delirious and not very cooperative.” She admits, “She doesn’t know me. I think she’s a little frightened here.”

“I’ll help her,” Hannibal promises, speaking none of his thoughts: that Aleksandra knows him, that he has seen more of the girl in the last month alone than Alana ever has, that he should have been the indisputable choice in the first place. “Please leave her be until I arrive.”

“Will do,” Alana confirms.

Hannibal wastes no time driving over, even with the hazard of rain. As he drives he lays his thoughts out in order like a tibia next to a patella next to a femur. In this way he can consider his own slitted rage and fanged ache with his usual clinicality, the same detachment with which he is used to splitting skin and pulling bone.
He arrives at Alana’s home having miraculously obeyed all traffic laws. Her tidy cottage with its white wooden trim has always struck Hannibal as antithetical to her character, but today he hardly spares the quaint house a glance as he crosses her front pavement in several quick steps to knock on the door.

Alana answers without delay. “I told her you were coming,” she says. “She’s barely awake but anxious to see you.”

Hannibal takes the invitation to step into her foyer, shaking raindrops off of his shoulders. “Has there been any change?”

Alana shakes her head. “But I think seeing you will help.”

Hannibal shrugs out of his shoes and jacket, feeling a muted sort of pride at the words. He is about to follow Alana down the hall before she turns to stop him.

Her face works thoughtfully for an instant, a reflection of some inner conflict, before she confesses, “When I called Will to tell him about Aleksandra, he may have insinuated not to involve you.”

The pride pops like a bubble. Hannibal is surprised by how deeply the news cuts. “I see.”

“I made a judgment call,” Alana says without self-consciousness. “Until he gets back, I think you’re what she needs.”

Then she takes him into her guest room.

She doesn’t cross the threshold but stands to the side, gesturing instead for him to go on ahead. Hannibal nods to her and carefully nudges the door open, preventing the hinges from squeaking out of predator’s habit.

Aleksandra lies in dusk-light on the other side.
She is very small on the room’s modest bed; the long shadows in the room emphasize her diminutive shape under the covers. Her glasses are on the nightstand beside her, her bare face bright red even in the gloom and so clammy that her curls stick to her cheeks and neck. She’s shivering hard enough to make the blankets quiver. The room is cloying and Hannibal can smell the illness on her.

He walks on silent feet across the rug over to her bedside, yet when his shadow falls across her damp face, before even opening her eyes, she sighs, “Dr. Lecter…”

Hannibal pauses.

Slowly she stirs, blinking against the hall light let in by the open door. Her eyelids are red-rimmed from fever and likely a few tears. ”You really came,” she mumbles.

"Hello, Miss Aleksandra." Hannibal comes to kneel down at the bedside. "I heard you needed a friend.”

“I don’t feel very good,” she whispers. “I miss my daddy.”

“He’s on his way,” Hannibal soothes. “In the meantime, you have me.” He reaches out and stops with his hand hovering over her head. "I'm going to feel your forehead, if that's alright."

"Okay," she says. Her breath smells stale. "I'm cold."

When Hannibal places the back of his hand on her face she feels like a brand. He doesn't have to reach for the thermometer he brought along to determine that she’s a few degrees hotter than she should be. At his touch, however, some tension in her thin shoulders relaxes; she is glad to see him.

"You'll feel better if you drink a little water," he cajoles.

She makes a face. "I don't want to. My tummy hurts."

"Just a little sip," Hannibal says. "I'll stop your tummy from hurting as best I can."
"Thank you, Dr. Lecter," she says dreamily. "I heard you're the best doctor in the world."

Hannibal wonders who told her that—Alana or her father. “That’s very kind of you to say.” He tucks a curl behind her flushed ear. “I will try to be.”

He spends the next few minutes refreshing the guest room air, turning on the overhead fan, and cooling Aleksandra down in increments. Alana brings him yogurt at his request, the children’s kind which Will dropped off with his daughter, and Aleksandra eventually agrees to eat it with her water after Hannibal obligingly reads her the fun fact on the side of the tube.

After that she falls back into a thin sleep, lids trembling with the roving movement of her blue eyes underneath. Hannibal slips into the attached bathroom to run lukewarm water into a bowl and pilfer a washcloth; this he wipes her forehead with, watching the moisture almost evaporate on her hot skin before dabbing more droplets onto her neck and face.

Alana comes in once Aleksandra has sunk into true sleep, her feet no longer moving fitfully under the covers. She comes to stand by Hannibal as he works, watching him for a few wordless seconds before speaking.

“Will found a flight,” she announces softly. “He’ll be here in a few hours.”

“Aleksandra will be thrilled to hear it,” he replies, plucking the girl’s flyaways from her damp skin and smoothing them back. When that’s done, he grasps her small hand.

Alana makes a noise of agreement. Then she says, “I told Will I asked for your help. He took the news...neutrally.”

Hannibal has never seen Will angry but he has a feeling that that doesn’t bode well. Alana leaves him to imagine exactly how the next few hours may end.

The remainder of the night is relatively calm. Aleksandra isn’t wildly ill; Alana could have administered the same treatment that Hannibal has: cool food and drink and company in the large, dark room. The real ailment was Aleksandra’s anxiety, festering without the balm of her father’s presence. It means something that Hannibal was able to provide the cure, but he’s not sure Will will see it that way.
Aleksandra has a nightmare a little before midnight. The peace induced by the fan and washcloth is perturbed by dozens of tremors which eventually escalate to twitches. Her eyes begin moving under her lids again. At first he squeezes her palm in his, letting her feel the pressure of his presence. This helps for five minutes or so, before her fever dreams grow vivid enough to toss her head on the pillow.

When the first whimper leaves her, Hannibal takes a seat on the bed and slides her very gently into the crook of his arm.

She is truly tiny. He hasn’t held anyone so little in decades. Holding her transports him across years and miles, back to a starving, lonely ice age. Back to the last time he hugged a shivering girl. His chest tightens and his vision, usually excellent in the dark, begins to dim. As he cradles Aleksandra through her nightmare, a very old one descends on him.

They pass through it together. In several minutes her body quakes stop and she goes limp in his hold, her head drooping on his chest. She drools a little as she relaxes into true, undisturbed rest. He doesn’t mind—his own terrors seep out of him too.

He ends up dozing with her for the better part of an hour before the click of Alana’s front door rouses him. He hears Will come into the foyer, pausing only to kick off his shoes before heading down the hallway. Somewhere behind him Alana sighs, whatever quiet greeting she meant to give going unheard.

Hannibal makes the decision to stay put. When Will opens the door to the guest room, he finds Hannibal with a protective arm around his daughter and Aleksandra’s thin arms wrapped around him in turn.

“Good evening, Will,” Hannibal murmurs, not bothering to clear the sleepy husk from his voice. He glances at the bedside clock. “Good morning.”

A part of him expected Will’s eyes to darken from sea to storm, or perhaps harden from water to flint. Instead they shine with the same terrified giddiness that Hannibal has seen in him since the moment he first approached Will not as stranger to stranger or doctor to case, but man to man. Hannibal keeps forgetting to factor in Will’s fear.

In the next moment, Will’s face becomes unreadable. “Good morning,” he replies, neutral indeed.
Hannibal almost wishes Will were angry instead. “She was running a high fever,” he explains, gently tightening his grip on Aleksandra. Her arms twitch as he closes their embrace and rises to his feet with her. “I cooled her down. She’s been sleeping it off since then.”

A feeling of finality descended upon him the moment Will spoke. He brings Aleksandra to Will, memorizing her weight and warmth, wondering with unusual pessimism if he will get to experience this again.

Will takes her from him; she goes easily, transferring her hold from Hannibal to Will without waking up, instinctually burying her face in her father’s neck. She sighs very softly, as if this whole night she had been holding her breath.

“Thanks,” Will says, in the exact same tone of voice he used when Hannibal first returned Aleksandra to him, in the mall all those months ago.

This time he makes fleeting eye contact from behind the returned barrier of his glasses, flecked with drops of rain. Though they’re standing as close as they were in Hannibal’s kitchen, this feels nothing like that moment in front of the sink. There’s nothing bared in Will’s eyes anymore except resolution—in a moment of his own prescience, Hannibal thinks it’s the resolve to never bare anything again.

“Goodbye, Hannibal,” Will says, muted.

“Goodbye, Will,” Hannibal replies. He reaches out slowly—so as not to spook—and pets Aleksandra’s tousled curls back into order. “Goodbye, Miss Aleksandra.”

Something in Will’s iron facade wavers, some weakness in the structure bending for a moment. Then the unreadability returns and he turns to go.

Hannibal watches the Grahams leave, fists clenched hard enough to draw blood.

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Hannibal gets a call on the way home. He knows without looking that it’s Will.
He doesn’t answer—he thinks that he already knows what Will has to say. Instead he plays *Sono andati?* at volume and waits until he reaches his house to listen to the breaking of the gossamer bond he has built with the Grahams for the last half-year. For the remainder of the drive he remembers the warmth and company of Aleksandra curled into his side, her fever heat banishing some of the freezing cold of his oldest memories.

When he arrives, he sits down at the dining table, places his phone on the glossy woodtop, and plays his messages.

It goes much as he expected: Will tells him without fanfare than he is withdrawing from their friendship.

The message isn’t long. In it Will informs him that Aleksandra has become very attached to him, dangerously so, and that he doesn’t want her to be disappointed by her naive expectations of Hannibal. He maintains that it isn’t fair to hold Hannibal to his daughter’s wishes and projections, and it isn’t fair for her to be strung along. It is his opinion that he can best protect her feelings by cutting out further contact with Hannibal—putting a stop to the play dates and surprise visits and gracious culinary gifts. Will ends the message by thanking Hannibal for putting up with them and wishing him all the best in the future.

Hannibal listens to the message twice before he deletes it.

He sits at the table for a very long time, his mind carefully blank. When he eventually stirs, he realizes that he has reopened the wounds in his palms.

He gets up to get ready for bed. First he goes to the drawing desk in his conservatory and very carefully gathers up all the sketches still in progress, ten different permutations of Will and Aleksandra blended with the hundreds of classical scenes painted on the walls of his mind. The topmost sketch is of a deer and its fawn loping ahead of a pack of unthreatening dogs. He slides all of them into a folder and drops them behind the conservatory’s clawfoot couch.

Next he closes the top to his harpsichord, shutting the lid on sheets of the melody he’s been steadily penning since the time Will came to his office bearing gifts. The pages wrinkle and he lets them.

Then he goes upstairs to dress his hands.

He lies in bed testing the razor sharp edges of his emotions and is distantly fascinated. In the time
it takes him to finally find sleep, he introduces a few new rooms to his mind palace; the ceiling of Aleksandra’s glitters with the light reflected off of the calf-deep water on the floor; eels and seaweed brush his ankles whenever he steps inside. For the time being he keeps the door to Will’s shut, passing by it to observe the shadow that leaks from the crack at the bottom.

He manages only a half-hour of sleep before he wakes again, muscles trembling with the strength of the black feeling that lifted him by the throat out of his dreams. Aching in his teeth, he decides suddenly not to wait his usual careful year.

Instead he gets redressed, drives three-quarters of an hour, and makes the landscaper who killed his hedge truly suffer, though his anger at the man’s rudeness was long spent. Despite the fact that his methods are impeccable, he decides not to display this kill. He can acknowledge that he doesn’t trust himself right now.

By the time he returns home the sun still hasn’t risen. He goes to work in the kitchen anyway. Most of his trophies he packages and runs down to the freezer, but some he keeps to make into a very early breakfast, breathing in the metal and salt scents of the meat and his spices as he cooks.

His first bite tells him that the landscaper recently smoked. The taste, despite his best and not inconsiderable effort, is utterly subpar.

He forces himself not to waste.
Chapter 13

The rains return.

The warm relief from the monsoon of several weeks ago reveals itself to be a brief sunny spell in a trans-seasonal, relentless downpour. The lower eastern seaboard sinks and squelches in one long plain of mud. Time seems mired as well; for Hannibal, the month since the night in Alana’s house goes by very slowly.

He passes the eternity busier than he has been since medical school: he hosts two cocktail parties in as many weeks, accepts an invitation to deliver a short address to Johns Hopkins pre-med, launches a reorganization of his stickered library of patient notes, escorts a colleague to a conference in Chicago, begins the process of publishing a small book of French poetry, and experiments for the second time in his life with the taxing art of glassblowing. He spends precious little of the month at home, dashing instead from his office to the university to lunch dates to soirées to the shadows behind the homes of his next sounder.

It is all disappointingly dull.

Hannibal puts a great deal of effort into living life in technicolor, sparing no expense and spurning no luxury. He considers austerity or melancholy to be wasteful. He promised himself a lifetime ago never again to live in the leeching white and horrible shadow of his cold, cold boyhood. The way the color has faded from his lifestyle in a short few weeks alarms him.

Alana visits him in his office in the middle of the grayscale month, her berry lipstick a sudden, welcome pop. He sees a little less of her now that he no longer lingers around the Academy, a loss he genuinely regrets. Before, she used to be his biggest thrill: cultured, self-possessed, and dangerously, deliciously suspicious. That day she is a balm.

“Taking it hard?” she asks, one of few with the mettle to be mean to him.

Hannibal pauses to taste the sour notes of pinched anger that swill in his skull at her pink smile. He can only assume she has already intuited the fallout of their last meeting. “Anyone would, having been granted such rare friendship.”
Alana doesn’t even purse her lips—the half-life of her jealousy is apparently very short. “I told you,” she says, somewhere between sisterly and sympathetic.

“You did,” Hannibal concedes. That’s when she reveals the gift she had hidden behind her back, a gourmet licorice he has been too busy to buy for himself.

“I’m sure it’s better this way,” she says. They share a dark, glossy twist. “You’re no family man.”

Hannibal chews before answering. “Old dogs can, in fact, learn new tricks.”

Alana laughs, either at his dry tone or black tongue. Afterward she looks thoughtful. “Will would have figured out your tricks eventually.”

Hannibal doesn’t mention that that is Will Graham’s intoxicating appeal. When Alana leaves, he feels no better than before.

The summer solstice approaches unusually dim and dreary, and his moods reflect it. The single bright spot among the dark clouds is the birth of Mrs. Ganim’s baby. The moment he receives the news of her tricky delivery Hannibal goes calling with the gift expected of him: a hearty meal—made with true lamb, since she is still in the hospital. The pleasure of meeting the new child is quickly extinguished by the reminder of the child he has not seen in weeks.

Hannibal is forced to admit to himself by the month’s end that he is depressed.

The despondency is ill-fitting, like a garment he outgrew a long time ago. He takes pride in being the happiest person he knows—apathy is a betrayal of the hard work he invests in his own gratification. Though he lives exactly as he had before all the small serendipitous encounters that had little by little begun spoiling him, most of his indulgences and pleasures turn to ash in his hands and on his tongue.

The Grahams have ruined him.

The magnitude of that truth is frightening. He has known them for only a short time, and yet the sporadic lunch dates and coy texts had somehow wormed into him like vines through cracks in stone. They have infiltrated his structure, ruined the integrity of his foundation. For all his careful constructions, he is, for the first time in decades, in danger of some sort of collapse. All because of a rude oracle of a man and his lamb-like daughter.
Hannibal realizes in the middle of a patient session that he resents them for it.

This was meant to be his hunt, his pursuit of the first mind to make him both yearn and fear in his life. Somehow the trap has closed around his own foot, and the Grahams have left him to bleed out in it. He *resents* them for it.

The feeling is foul even for Hannibal. It takes like sour old wine, particularly after the sweet notes of Aleksandra’s laugh and the full body of Will’s terrified giddiness. Usually he enjoys tasting the flight of his own emotions. This time he feels rather like gagging.

It’s during the anniversary of Will’s call that Hannibal in his resentment nearly makes a mistake.

On that night he is in an ugly mood, needled and raw from a long day at work. The perpetual storming of the past month finally bursts through the facade of the building in which he practices; the floorboards of his office swell up crookedly and bleed water under the press of every step. He had intended to go home after his last patient and prepare his cooler; instead he stays well into the evening to move what sensitive furniture and materials he can to the mezzanine and arrange for maintenance in the morning.

By the time he pulls into his driveway, his fingers twitch in a phantom clutch around the desire for a scalpel. He resolves then to slake the urge tonight, and heads inside to retrieve what he needs.

On his covered stoop is an envelope.

Somehow Hannibal knows exactly what it is at a glance. There is no return address on the outside but as soon as he lifts the old parchment to his nose he knows who it is from. It takes him five tries to turn his key in the lock.

He opens the envelope in the foyer, unable to wait until his study. Within it is a small slip of paper, less a letter than a note. When he opens it, he finds one line of precise script.

*The hyacinth is dead.*

Hannibal had stopped writing to France a long time ago. He used to break pens scribbling novels and
novels’ worth of messages after his flight from his uncle’s Parisian apartment. He never received any letter in return. Only when he began to suspect his envelopes might be going straight from the post to the hearth did he wean himself off the habit.

He recalls the hyacinth. The memory of long dark hair spilling across the small, curly flowers has not faded in all the years since that moment; he can remember the red of his aunt’s lips on that night, the same shade as the petals. It took years for that color not to illicit a response in him.

He realizes after testing the bladed edges of his fury that she meant to hurt him. He doesn’t know how she knew the note would find him like this, peeled and agonized like an exposed nerve, but he’s sure she meant to make it worse.

When Hannibal resurfaces from his anger, he finds himself on the hunt. His supplies are in the trunk of his car; he is in the driver’s seat, already on the road. He watches the blanching of his knuckles on the steering wheel with interest, noticing after a while that he is halfway to Wolf Trap.

By the time he reaches the farmhouse, his fracturing thoughts have shattered into a maelstrom of angry slivers, each shard cutting away a little more of his control. All of the emotions that have been muted black and white during the past month slam back into color at once.

The grayscale bleeds red.

His clean-suit is folded neatly in the passenger’s seat. For several wild, kaleidoscopic moments Hannibal wonders if he will do here what he has done in the dark of countless homes before, and he says it aloud to test his resolve: *I will kill Will and Aleksandra Graham.*

The words are extremely uncomfortable, like a dissonant note hanging in the air. For a moment Hannibal feels like his old self again, poised as he likes at the edge of each moment, never sure into which decision he will fall. Then the discomfort overwhelms him and he feels, as before, a little like gagging.

It’s just as well that the farmhouse is empty.

Hannibal looks at the dark windows and quiet shutters and remembers that it is Tuesday, that the Grahams are at Aleksandra’s math club practice.
His anger dissolves. After the past listless month, he doesn’t have the energy to maintain it. In its place is a bruise-deep melancholy, so very like what he had felt leaving Paris decades ago.

As he had admitted to himself back then about Lady Murasaki, so he admits to himself about the Grahams now: he would sooner kill himself.

He puts the Bentley in reverse and goes back the way he came.

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The day of Hannibal’s trip arrives with the worst of the storms.

He packs as methodically as he cooks. His clothes must last for the duration of his flight to Prague; he wants his suits crisp when he arrives in the Czech Republic and connects with Mrs. Zheng and Mrs. Sharifi. He knows that if he attends their standing lunch appointment with so much as a wrinkle in a pant leg they will spend the entirety of the meal cooing over him, an unwelcome maternal departure from their usual merciless teasing. He intends to enter Prague as lordly as he would otherwise.

The trip had been the women’s surprise, a gift intended to lift the fog he has been wandering in for two months now. They are among perhaps four people shrewd enough to notice Hannibal’s funk, and the only two with the means and motivation to act on their concern. No one else would dare.

At first Hannibal considers turning down the week-long jaunt through historic squares and cobbled lanes between bright-roofed buildings. Though Prague is one of his favorite cities, he doesn’t feel equal to the traveling and socializing. Lately he has been quite taken with exploring the steep edges of the permanent hollow in his gut. It has been a long time since he’s experienced such a slump—he is intrigued by how far he has plummeted. He thinks about staying home and plumbing the depths of his sunken spirits, like a child enjoying a mud hole.

When he realizes the risk of refusing them, he accepts instead.

He concedes that a change of scenery may do him good. Every day for two months he has thought of the Grahams, an obsessiveness that doesn’t become him. He is tempted to mourn all the painstaking, roundabout effort he put into seducing them, all the time he spent with his open palm before them trying to soothe their cautious reticence like one of their strays. The truth is, however, that he had enjoyed it—delivering meals at the Academy, sponsoring their entertainment, suffering
his name in the local gossip rags. All of it.

The only thing he truly mourns is them.

Somewhere on his bed his phone rings.

Hannibal frowns. It’s a rude hour for calls—the sun set a while ago, and the storm has turned the night black as pitch. He finishes laying down another suit before he rises to retrieve his phone where it vibrates on the duvet.

He stops at the side of the bed, taken aback.

Will’s name is on the screen.

Something inside Hannibal unclenches, like a fist opening finger by finger, at that same time that something else seizes. He spends a few precious moments trying to hunt down the feelings responsible, before he realizes that the call is approaching the final ring.

“Good evening,” Hannibal picks up and says.

It feels surreal. Of course there had been some thread of nebulous optimism coiled in him over the past two months, some distant expectation that the Grahams would not truly have washed their hands of him. But the reality of the crackling connection is jarring.

After a moment, Hannibal adds, “How may I help you?”

Like any call before the night in Alana’s house, Will doesn’t bother to return the greeting. Instead he says, voice dark and frantic, “Tiny is missing.”

For the second time, Hannibal feels assaulted with a nauseating vertigo that threatens the vulnerable column of his throat with a rising plume of burning, scorching bile. His phone creaks ominously in his grip.
A thousand petty possibilities had occurred to him at the sight of Will’s name, forking out from his deep-buried hurt like the roots of a tree, but the fascinating urge to vomit prompts him to reply, “I will be there in an hour.”

He arrives in a perilous, illegal forty-five minutes. The wheels of his car make a terrible noise as he jerks into the Grahams’ pebbled driveway and tosses the gear in park. Through the windshield he can see the dogs running up and down the length of the porch, too well trained to dash over.

Will stands on the porch steps, utterly soaked.

Hannibal hadn’t bothered with an umbrella. He’s mostly soaked too by the time he makes it across the lawn, mud ruining his wingtips and suit pants.

“She ran away,” Will says as soon as Hannibal is within earshot.

Hannibal walks directly up to him and closes the distance between them until Will is forced to retreat beneath the porch’s awning, until his bare feet leave the old splintered wooden for the welcome mat, until he’s standing in the halo of the warmth spilling out of the open front door. Hannibal would like to take him by the shoulders, roped with shivering muscles visible through his thin, clinging shirt, and shake him until his eyes fell out of his wonderful skull. Instead he shrugs out of his jacket, still dry on the inside, and slings it over Will’s head.

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“Tell me inside.”

They go through the house to the kitchen, trailing water where they shouldn’t, and the dogs crowd around the table where Hannibal directs Will to sit. Hannibal rifles through the cabinets he memorized his last time there for the ingredients for a simple soup. Will explains over the clatter of pots.

"She was upset,” he says. “It was my fault—I got her worked up.”

Hannibal lights the stove. “When was this?”
“Two hours ago,” Will guesses. “She slipped off sometime after I put her down for bed.”

“Why was she upset?” Hannibal asks, disappearing briefly into the laundry room to retrieve a towel. This he gives to Will, who takes it like someone awakening from a nap, blinking and staring at Hannibal.

Will’s voice is mostly even. “She missed you.”

Hannibal’s quick, efficient movements pause. He looks at Will.

“I told her we wouldn’t be seeing you anymore,” Will says. “So she ran away.”

There is a remarkable amount of accusation in his voice, but none of it aimed at Hannibal. He sits shivering on his kitchen chair, curls limp and dripping, strong forearms clasped together, eyes hurt and storming as hard as outside.

Hannibal takes a page from Will’s book. He imagines the Grahams in Aleksandra’s room, burnished by the soft glow of her nightlight. Will’s fond look betrayed by the knot of tension in his brow. Aleksandra’s small face tightening in anguish. He has never seen her yell at her father, but she must have sobbed, maybe rolled in the sheets in a tantrum. Will may have waited until she tired herself crying before getting up and closing the door behind himself.

Something blooms in Hannibal’s chest, awful and pleasing. He thinks it’s gratification.

He wants to ask if Will foresaw any other outcome than this, if he had really not known about his daughter’s love. Instead he asks, “Do you have any idea where she is?”

On another day Will would have been annoyed. Today he rubs his cold hands on his cold face and says, “I’ve turned the house upside down and combed through the fields around the farmhouse, but she’s not here. I can’t find her.”

Saying it aloud shatters his unthinking obedience. He shrugs out of Hannibal’s jacket and gets to his feet, his clear intention to head back out. Hannibal dumps the last of the fixings into the soup and catches him by the arm.
Electricity crackles between them at the contact, leaping from the droplets sliding down the curve of Will’s cheek to the rainwater slicking Hannibal’s mouth.

Surprised, Hannibal tightens his grip to the point of pain. He had meant not to touch Will at all tonight, too unsure of what he would do if he did. Will’s skin is icy under his palm, but beneath that the warmth of his blood and body rises to meet his.

Just like the last time, two months of gray despondency snap suddenly back into color. He can see the pores in Will’s face, the pink of his lips, the gold flecks in his eyes. Two months without this, two months expecting never to have this again—something inside Hannibal yawns wide.

“She’s a child, and it’s raining,” he says reasonably. He opens his hand; the marks of his fingers on Will’s arm go white and then red. He pushes on his handprint to get Will back into the chair. “She can’t have gone far.”

Will’s eyes are wide. He’s seen the chasm under his skin, the free-fall where his humanity should be.

“Stay here,” Hannibal says. If he listens, he can hear the terribleness in his voice too. “Watch the soup.”

Will stares up at him with the same yearning and fear Hannibal has known for months.

“I will find her,” Hannibal promises. The way he says it sounds frightening, and also like the truth. “You should run a hot bath. I think Miss Aleksandra will be quite dirty when we return.”

The dogs stay behind as Hannibal exits the kitchen and follows the trail of wet footprints back to the front door. He steps out again into the deluge and heads with certainty toward the small trail that parts the woods surrounding the farmhouse.

If Will the oracle couldn’t find his daughter, then Hannibal assumes that she’s not thinking to let Will find her; she’s thinking to let him find her. He follows his memory back to the stream.

The tunnel of trees shrugs under the weight of the downpour; water has erased the boot stamps that shape the unmarked trail. The weight of his passage raises translucent worms and bird bones from the rain-lashed mud. Protected by boughs, the pastel flowers huddling in the tree roots still fence the path helpfully on either side.
After ten minutes, he reaches the stream. The meadow lies flattened by the storm. The stream has escaped its banks and spills onto the grass, no longer a sidling ribbon but a writhing snake.

Hannibal crosses the meadow to the other side, past the opening through which he had come, up to an impenetrable gate of trees. He leans down to look through the hidden space between two trunks.

He sees nothing there. “Miss Aleksandra,” he calls above the wind.

For a moment there’s no response. Then Aleksandra unfolds from the hole in the tree bole.

“Dr. Lecter?” Her teeth click around his name in violent shivers. When she leans forward, Hannibal can see that she’s lost a shoe.

“That’s right,” Hannibal says, opening his arms. “Our secret, hmm?”

She sobs and launches herself through the gap in the trees, latching onto him. She weighs little to nothing, yet Hannibal feels like he’s holding half the world. The dirt on her cheeks and spurs in her hair smear onto him, but he doesn’t mind. He hugs her until the worst of her shivers pass before lifting her up.

She cries for half of the walk back, clinging. Hannibal expects she is exhausted, perhaps sick again, and is processing both her distress and relief through her tears, warmer where they hit Hannibal’s throat than the raindrops flicked down from the tree tops.

When they are close to home, Hannibal says gently, “No need for that.” She draws in a shaking breath and stops.

After she is calm, she explains, “I told my daddy that I love you. He got upset and told me we can’t see you again.” She hiccups but the tears don’t return. “I was so sad and mad, so I ran away.”

Hannibal tuts. “You’ve worried your father and me very much.”
Aleksandra pulls back to look at him earnestly. “I knew you could find me. I knew you would think like me and find me.”

Something warm and eldritch fills the chasm.

“Our father wasn’t truly upset,” Hannibal says. “Only afraid.” He tucks a stray curl behind her ear. “But you and your father don’t have to be afraid, because I love you too.”

Will is waiting on the porch steps again when they return.

He doesn’t say anything as Aleksandra drops out of Hannibal’s arms and dashes across the sopping lawn. He just snatches her up from the ground and folds her into a hug as impossibly tight as the one in the mall. He closes his eyes, smelling his daughter’s soft neck, before looking over her thin shoulder.

Hannibal stands in the middle of the yard, flayed by that gaze. Will takes in everything—the ash streaks of Hannibal’s wet, wild hair, the stubble marching across his face, the width of his stance, the naked emotion on his face. Hannibal knows that Will is prying up the seams of him again, and lets him look.

Will’s reaction to whatever he sees fills his entire face. He lets it remain, naked too.

They go inside.

Will takes Aleksandra straight upstairs to the bath, both of them silent. Hannibal goes to the kitchen, pleased to find the soup still hot. He stands on the sink mat to avoid making a puddle as he ladles out three bowls, eavesdropping on the eventual sounds of washing and tub draining.

When he returns to the living room with a scavenged tray, he finds Will and Aleksandra in a blanket in front of the fire, a towel draped across her short hair. Her glasses are back on her face, Hannibal notices as he hands over her and Will’s bowls.
“Thank you, Dr. Lecter,” she says softly, adoringly, and nothing more.

She eats in Will’s lap. The dogs join them shortly. Hannibal is prepared to run interference but they do nothing more than flop down to donate fur and heat. The dog Winston sits faithfully between Hannibal and the Grahams.

The drowsy warmth and quiet send Aleksandra quickly to sleep. Hannibal reaches over to take her bowl from her, and the moment his hands are free one of her chubby ones takes his in a grip, not sticky with sugar but sweet nonetheless. The three of them sit that way, Aleksandra leaning into her father’s chest and clutching Hannibal close, until her head tips down and her breaths come in slow gusts.

Hannibal thinks with affection that he would do monstrous things for them.

Will breaks the silence.

“She was premature,” he offers. “She came at thirty-two weeks—so small, like a doll.” He smoothes a hand through Aleksandra’s dry curls. “That day on, I called her Tiny.”

He adjusts a little so he can pull something with his other hand from his back pocket. Aleksandra doesn’t even stir. Will holds up a picture—the one Hannibal had flicked under the fridge.

Hannibal is too content to feel caught. He wonders how long Will has known.

“I met her father at George Washington.” Will makes a wry face, but it’s bitter. “Classics department. Edgewood’s TA at the time.”

That is knowledge Hannibal probably shouldn’t have. He stops himself from making a noise and waits for Will to continue.

“We hit it off.” Will is trying for casual but the words clearly take effort. “It was supposed to be no strings, but we were careless. He got strange when the test came back positive, but stuck around for the first year. He saved the money for the farmhouse, insisted I buy it, moved us in, and then disappeared.”
Will pauses for a long time, curling a little around Aleksandra so that his spine shows through his new shirt. Hannibal looks at the knobs of bone and thinks of biting them tenderly out.

Eventually Will admits, “Despite my best efforts, I ended up like my father after all.” It takes him another few minutes to speak. “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Will looks over at Hannibal across Aleksandra’s head. Hannibal goes still. He realizes he has never felt threatened by Will until now.

“I carried her. I raised her. I love her,” Will says, holding the words to Hannibal's throat like a knife. “She’s my world.”

If it were ever in question, Hannibal knows now that he will kill for the Grahams.

Will doesn’t react, though the sentiment must be written on Hannibal’s face. He lets Hannibal gently disengage from Aleksandra’s lax hold and stroke her cheek before he stands up with her, looking like the Madonna of Bruges from below.

“Put your clothes in the dryer,” Will tells him. “I'll bring you some pajamas.”

Hannibal doesn’t mention his flight in the morning; he simply nods. Will turns and carries his daughter back upstairs, trailing dogs in his wake.

Alone with Winston, Hannibal begins to undress in front of the fire. His clothes are waterlogged and ruined, but the loss means little; he drops them in a careless pile by the hearth. When he’s down to his briefs, he crouches in front of the flame and leans in close enough for his clammy skin to feel singed. The chill evaporates from his limbs, replaced by the heat of anticipation.

He knows the moment when Will reenters with a change of clothes. He hears the barest of exhales behind him, and smells a new note in Will’s woods-and-spice scent. He pauses to enjoy the change in the atmosphere, a heaviness like a few hundred extra torr, before turning around.

Will has a small tower of fabric in his arms: a towel for Hannibal’s damp hair, a large shirt and threadbare sweatpants, and sheets for what must be a pullout-bed in the couch in the corner. Hannibal ignores the towel, letting his bangs drip onto the hair on his chest, but takes the pajamas. He gets only as far as slipping on the pants before Will drops the sheets and steps in close.
He admits, “I made a mistake.”


He steps even closer; the distance between their bellies shrinks to inches. Will’s breathing picks up. When Hannibal speaks, it’s in a grotesque, devoted whisper.

“Do you understand that I adore you and your daughter?” he asks. “Do you understand that I have always intended to keep you both?” Impossibly his voice lowers. “To keep you safe, keep you content, keep you for myself?”

The words are doting but Hannibal knows his face is not—he can feel how darkly and terribly his affection shows through his eyes, knows it by how the fear rises in Will’s eyes in response, followed on its heels by excruciating desire.

Will says, “I understand.”

“After I kiss you,” Hannibal warns him, “you’ll be mine.”

Will looks stricken, like an animal whose senses are tingling, like a mouse twitching between the cheese and the trap. Free to do so once again, Hannibal gulps down his discomfort, a man in a desert finding water. It tastes even sweeter than he remembers.

The air in the room gets heavier. It threatens to bend Hannibal’s knees. He sees Will tremble and thinks that in a moment the pressure will crush him and he will collapse directly into Hannibal’s arms.

Hannibal steps away. “Think on it. Carefully.”

Will folds out the couch for him in smooth, economical motions, but his wrists are shaking and the back of his neck is so bright that it’s hot. He makes the bed for Hannibal and drags Winston away to the rest of dogs shut up in the kitchen. Hannibal watches him from the fireside, dangerously tempted by the giddy lines of Will’s lips and throat.
“Goodnight, Hannibal,” Will breathes when he’s done. He sounds nothing like he did in Alana’s house.

“Goodnight,” Hannibal replies. If he names him, he won’t be able to help himself. Will must be able to tell, because he flees.

Downstairs on the sofa bed, Hannibal lies down in a straight line. He does not sleep but waits for sunrise.

Chapter End Notes

For clarity's sake, Will is a trans man and gave birth to Aleksandra.
Morning comes like a gift.

The sun crests the treeline to the east and spills gold, ambrosial light through the farmhouse windows. The heat of it makes the drenched fields beside the house steam, raising a dreamy mist over the dawn. Hannibal stirs at the light’s warm touch from the trance he had laid in all night—he sits up on the Grahams’ pullout bed and spends a quiet hour enjoying the promise of a bright, cloudless day. Then he swings his legs over the bedside and gets up to make breakfast.

The house creaks underfoot as he makes his way to the kitchen. Out of habit he starts to walk on cat’s feet, before he decides he likes the idea of the Grahams’ home announcing him as he goes.

The dogs all stand up when he opens the kitchen door. Without Will pressuring them onto their best behavior, most of them trot over and jump up his legs in greeting. Resigned, he pets the ones he can reach until he can make it to the fridge where he had glimpsed a leftover container of meat slivers yesterday during his hunt for soup fixings.

He bribes the pack with scraps to keep quiet while he works. The dogs all congregate where he tosses the meat to the floor, with the exception of Winston. In the light coming through the kitchen’s yellow curtains, his golden fur shines angelic. Hannibal pets him once and smiles fondly at the way the dog ducks from his touch.

The kitchen is brackish with the smell of cooking bacon by the time Will and Aleksandra come down.

They walk in hand-in-hand, still sleep-creased and soft in their pajamas. Aleksandra’s small grip on her father is clearly ironlike even from across the room; her other hand rubs at her eyes behind her glasses. When she sees Hannibal at the stove in her father’s clothes, she stops. Her expression is at first unreadable, until the memories of last night light up her face like a beacon.
She breathes out a soft, pleased, “Good morning, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal realizes that she understands perfectly the tectonic shift that has occurred among the three of them. “Good morning, Miss Aleksandra,” he replies.

She grins at him with chubby cheeks. “Call me Tiny!” she demands, pulling on Will’s hand. There’s something like a challenge in her eyes next to the bright adoration, no longer a secret.

Hannibal steps away from the stove long enough to hold out his arms. Aleksandra lets go of her father and skips over to fill the gap, throwing her short arms around Hannibal’s middle. They squeeze each other without reservation.

“Good morning, Tiny,” he says into her bed-messy curls.

The sun rises again in her face.

He looks over her shoulder. Will stares back at him from the threshold. His eyes are as blue-green as sea glass, and as brittle. That familiar terrified giddiness can be seen in the pulse hammering in his throat, the muscles jumping in his forearms, the parting of his mouth at the tenderness in Hannibal’s voice curled around the shape of his daughter’s private name.

All the hunger Hannibal had meditated away hits him in the gut once more.

Though his night was sleepless, he feels invigorated with possibility. He had sampled the memory of Will’s shivering want over and over again like a dogeared page in a book, lying there on the sofa bed for hours knowing only the gnawing in his belly. Months of melancholy have left him famished. The look in Will’s eyes last night before he ran and the look in his eyes now whet his appetite sharper.

“Shall we eat?” he asks.

Tiny sets the table while Will herds the dogs toward their own food bowls, filling them with a canine stew he has obviously homemade. The olfactory experience in the kitchen intensifies, but Hannibal doesn’t mind. The last time he worked in tandem with the Grahams, Will had taken his daughter and fled Hannibal’s den. This time he is in theirs and none of them plan on running at all.
Tiny makes them all sit on the same side of the table as they breakfast. She props her feet up in Will’s lap and snags Hannibal’s borrowed shirt in her small fist, touching them both at the same time as she forks food a little clumsily into her pleased face. The contact is like a conduit, electricity arcing between the three of them as though they make a closed circuit.

With a full, sticky mouth she rambles about her dreams, launching into a description of the forest she ran through all night and the faeries who had played with her there. Then she switches to recounting a book of fairytales she’d found in the library, which reminds her of a cartoon she’d begun watching whose protagonist she wanted to be for next Halloween. When she pauses for a long drink of orange juice, Hannibal catches Will’s eyes over her head. He is already staring when Hannibal flicks his attention toward him.

Will looks as sad and stressed as always, and also ravenous. He doesn’t look away.

Hannibal finishes his meal but feels nothing close to full.

He helps clear breakfast away, washing dishes while Will dries. Tiny flits around the kitchen, distracting them with a pitchy rendition of some pop song, sometimes ducking between them to grab their legs in ferocious and possessive hugs. She’s ecstatic, and it’s contagious.

Will dips a hand in the sink and blows soap bubbles through the tunnel of his thumb and forefinger to delight her. Hannibal makes her laugh by dumping a handful of suds on her nose.

The sound of the Grahams’ laughter in their family-warm house is intoxicating.

Eventually Tiny goes to let the dogs out and jump around in the backyard with them. She insists she can put on her shoes and jacket by herself and doesn’t need help keeping the pack in the yard. Will looks sallow with last night’s resurgent panic, but ultimately allows her out, listening to her pleased, reedy whistling until the back door closes.

Alone, like a short circuit, Will and Hannibal share a look that sheds sparks.

Hannibal asks, “How did you sleep?” He imagines Will on his mattress, fistimg the sheets, curled and cramped around the ache of indecision and desire.

“I didn’t,” Will admits.
The fear in Will’s eyes from the previous evening seems to have festered overnight; it’s rotted into something as fetid and sickly as the desire Hannibal feels roiling inside himself. Hannibal could eat him where he stands.

“Good,” he replies, crossing the kitchen. His hands itch with the sensual need to pull back Will’s eyelids for a deeper look. “Neither did I.”

He stops right before Will, only a bar’s width of sunlight away, just enough room for dust motes to spin between them. They’re standing as intimately as they were in front of the hearth. It feels as though static jumps across the thin space, little shocks that prick Hannibal closer and closer.

“What have you decided?” Hannibal asks him.

He hadn’t meant to say it. His intention had been to wait out the week before speaking of their whispered, fire-lit conversation; forcing Will’s hand was rude. But the need to know had twisted his tongue.

Will stares as though Hannibal is hurting him. “Nothing,” he murmurs.

No less than Hannibal expected, but much less than he wants. “Be kind, Will,” he requests, feeling tortured in turn. “I need your decision.”

His breath ghosts across Will’s upturned face, rustling the sleepy curls there, blowing cool across the sheen of sweat above his lip. Will grunts as though Hannibal has taken a gutting knife to the vulnerable flesh of his belly.

“I’ll decide soon,” he promises, the battle between the impulse to fight or flee noticeable in his grimace. “Soon.”

Hannibal has to step back to avoid doing something violent and foolish. “Soon,” he echoes.

By the time Tiny slips back into the farmhouse with the pack at her heels, Will and Hannibal have begun getting ready for the day. Will directs her to do the same. Hannibal has loose ends to attend—he is sure Will should be at the Academy by now. Details like that seem minute compared to the tidal
yearning looming large and devastating above Hannibal, waiting to crash.

He dresses in the day clothes Will sets out for him for his drive back to Baltimore. Her other father’s, he informs Hannibal, a harder challenge than Tiny’s. I’ve been meaning to get rid of them.

*Thank you*, Hannibal says simply. *I’ll dispose of them for you.*

Though he has no patients to see today or the next several days, his schedule cleared for the duration of his missed trip, he has work to do. First he must apologize and explain to Mrs. Zheng and Mrs. Sharifi that he will not be joining them abroad—his flight to Prague left hours ago. Somehow he doubts they will be put out. After that he must prepare his house, because something in his hungry gut tells him he should make ready.

Tiny tears up a bit when she comes down from her ablutions and sees him trying to pull his shoes out from underneath a dog.

“You’re leaving?” Her voice is quiet but despairing.

“I have work to do,” he says gently, “but I will certainly be back.”

“You have school, Tiny,” Will reminds her, coming down the stairs after her. “I called the attendance office to give you a half-day, since last night was so...” He fumbles when he looks directly at Hannibal looking at him. “...intense. But you still need to go.”

Will looks at Hannibal like he’s a both wish and a nightmare. In a shockingly crude spike of heat, it makes Hannibal want to pull the sofa bed back out for more than meditation.

“Oh kay,” Tiny says grumpily. Instead of gathering her book bag, however, she darts across the living room and throws herself around Hannibal in another desperate hug. She whispers into his stomach, “Promise you won’t leave me and daddy alone.”

Hannibal pets her curls. “I’ll never leave,” he promises, not quite sounding sweet.

Across the room, Will shudders.
They all exit the house together. Hannibal walks the Grahams to their car, obliging Tiny with another hug before loading her into the backseat. Will crowds against the driver side as surreptitiously as he can, just enough to smell him: acrid with animal unease and heady with conflicted desire. Will doesn’t immediately escape into the driver seat.

Hannibal waits to pull out of the driveway until the Grahams do, both of them waving through the window before taking off. Once he’s out on the road, Hannibal plays Rachmaninov at volume to bloodlet some of the pleasurable tension in his throat, gut, and groin.

He smiles the drive home, an optimistic creature at heart—he has a good feeling that he won’t have to wait long now.

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It takes even less time for Will to decide than Hannibal expected.

He’s working at home in his study when Will rings his doorbell. A mere day has passed since that night in Wolf Trap; in that time he has been productive. He left messages with Mrs. Zheng and Mrs. Sharifi sincerely apologizing for squandering their kind gift, informing them that some pressing matters arose. He knows they will know.

He has also tested a recipe for a new meringue, finished reading a book of native Alaskan fables, ground some meat in his basement freezer into patties, worked examples of the Lorentz transformation, and put the finishing touches on his harpsichord ode to the Grahams. It is like his month of frenzied activity without Will and Tiny in reverse—he converts his anticipation into activity as he waits.

He is sipping a fifty year old Sauternes, an absolute indulgence to fit his giddy mood, and penning a new itinerary for the week into his calendar—one that will hopefully involve Tiny’s sweet company when the chime that peals throughout the house interrupts his planning.

Somehow he already knows who it is.

In the foyer he pauses to inhale deep, enjoying the faint tingle in his fingertips and the slow-rolling warmth in his belly before he opens the front door.
Standing on his stoop is, naturally, Will. Like Hannibal, he has prepared—his beard has been trimmed and buttered, his button down is fitted instead of mall stock, and his glasses are nowhere in sight. For once he isn’t slouching. Some live wire of running current has straightened him upright, an energy close to his usual fear but darker. He is alone.

“School,” he explains without prompting, before Hannibal can greet him. He wastes no breath. “I’ve thought about it.”

The hairs on the back of Hannibal’s neck rise. “And your decision?” he asks.

Usually Will acts a little like prey, tense and wary and ready to jump. Right now danger rolls off of him in waves. He looks Hannibal in the eye.

“There’s something wrong with you,” he tells him.

Hannibal’s pulse stutters.

He is a wizened animal with good reflexes—his hands flex with murderous intent before Will is done speaking, afraid for one gutting moment that Will is here just ahead of the police. That he knows, way too soon.

“I don’t know what it is,” Will continues. His blue eyes are ice cores, layered and dark. “I’ve been trying to figure it out.” He squints. “I thought a step back would help, a few steps back, but you’re good. Very good.”

Hannibal relaxes before immediately tensing with understanding. All those sudden weeks of radio silence—all those withdrawals were periods of study. Will’s attempts to piece together the clues and puzzle him out, like looking at a painting from a distance to get its meaning. Hannibal fights the beastly urge to lash out and crack Will’s beautiful neck.

He doesn’t bother denying it. “And when you do figure it out?” he asks. Because Will surely will—he’s very good too. “When you know, will you run?” He hopes by then he will be allowed to rake his fingers through Will’s pink brains, by then Will will want to do the same to him. And to others. Together.
“Probably,” Will concedes. He sounds tired. “But I’ve realized you’ll give chase.”

Hannibal doesn’t deny that either.

Will holds up his fist, something crumpled between his fingers. When he opens his hand, shredded paper falls out. The pieces settle on the ground—Hannibal sees that it’s a picture. The missing snapshot from the fridge, torn apart.

Will announces, “I’ve also realized I don’t care.”

Fast as Will can blink, Hannibal grabs Will’s pressed shirt and pulls him across the threshold. “Yes,” Will blurts, right before their lips touch.

The first kiss is harsh. It’s a clash of skulls—Hannibal pulls back to savor the ache in his teeth and the throb of his chin before taking Will’s mouth again. It’s as electrifying as he imagined—Will kisses like he’s dying and Hannibal’s the one killing him.

Without warning Will leans back, breaking the contact. He reaches up to cup Hannibal’s cheek in his rough palm; Hannibal is startled into stillness. The hold is sweet at first, before Will’s blunt fingernails dig in and his crushing fisherman’s strength catches Hannibal’s jaw like a vice.

One corner of Will’s chapped lip wells with blood. He licks it off, making Hannibal jerk, but doesn’t let him go anywhere.

His voice is low as he tells Hannibal, “I’m yours now, like we agreed. But if you hurt my daughter at all, in any way, I will kill you.”

The threat is not idle. He is perfectly serious. He is more beautiful and terrible than Hannibal knew.

Hannibal says, “Wonderful.”

Will stares at him for a moment before pulling him back in.
They make it fully into the house and Hannibal closes the door behind them without pausing their kiss. Will kicks off his shoes blindly, licking at the seam of Hannibal’s lips. Hannibal directs them through the house, his hands low on Will’s back, moving them slowly toward his bedroom. They get as far as the stairs before he feels the need to push Will against the wall and speak into his swollen mouth.

“I’m going to give you and your daughter the world,” he says. He’ll give them things and places and people, jewels and blood and bones.

Will pulls him down to the floor.

He settles between Will’s legs, kneeling on the stair below him. The position can’t be comfortable for Will, the wooden lip of a step digging into his back, but he doesn’t complain. Instead he hauls Hannibal bodily against him, pulling them flush with a heave that makes his biceps bulge through his shirt.

His power startles Hannibal. He’s strong like he moves a man’s weight around all the time—like he too hauls bodies in his free time.

The thought makes Hannibal burn.

He gets one hand in Will’s curls and the other around his hip, which he grips hard enough to bruise. In return he is bitten on the mouth hard enough for his own blood to bead on his tongue. The pain makes him buck, and that makes Will groan into the curve of his jaw.

Hannibal kisses him again, metallic. “Even Steven.”

Will huffs and slots their groins together again.

They rut a few times, base and carnal. The bounds of Hannibal’s experience are fairly wide, but he has never felt so peeled and raw. They are still clothed, doing nothing more than grinding, and Will is already raising tides of need under his skin like the moon raising tides in the sea.

“Let me please you,” Hannibal says into Will’s beard, sucking a mark under his ear.
Will digs his nails into Hannibal’s sides. “What do you want?” He sounds a little wary but mostly hopeful.

“To eat you whole,” Hannibal answers honestly.

Will shudders. He unhooks his heels from the backs of Hannibal’s knees to spread his legs and give him room. “Fine,” he says, as curt as usual, but Hannibal can smell his excitement and doesn’t mind.

He picks apart Will’s belt and opens his pants, mouth watering already. There’s a wet spot darkening the fabric of Will’s briefs; he can’t help but drag a finger across it, getting it damp. He looks up at Will for permission again, just to be sure.

Maybe Will misinterprets his look because he asks, “Second thoughts?” His tone is defensive, a hair’s breadth away from self-conscious.

Hannibal wonders how many past lovers have disappointed Will, how many have only seen him as the sum of his parts—how many Hannibal will have to kill.

“I am most assuredly no longer thinking,” he says, dipping his head.

Brushing his lips across Will’s crotch makes Will grunt in surprise and arousal, breath hitching when Hannibal’s nose brushes the covered swell of his cock. When Hannibal tilts his head to suck him through his briefs, Will drops a hand down to muss his hair and pull him closer. Hannibal takes it as a command and sets to business.

The briefs and pants come all the way off so Hannibal can have room to work. Uncovered, Will smells like old soap and new musk, spicier now that he’s starting to spill. Hannibal’s months-long hunger hits him all at once.

He laps at Will, taking long draughts of him. Will’s thighs crush his shoulders and he makes a noise, so Hannibal reins in his enthusiasm and starts licking delicate patterns across Will’s tip instead, which makes him twist and writhe underneath him. To keep from being bucked, he brings his hands down to pin Will’s legs back, using his thumbs to pull Will apart and bare him to his ministrations.

Will only lasts a few minutes trying to keep quiet and aloof, swallowing his sounds. Before long he’s murmuring for Hannibal to suck him harder, move his tongue faster. His gasps and guttural whispers
make Hannibal’s lounging slacks uncomfortably tight. He swipes, questing, across Will’s wet hole, but when Will makes a noise in the negative, he drops his slick thumb to Will’s ass and rubs him there. That’s when he starts to sweat along all the places where he and Hannibal touch.

Hannibal surfaces to say, “You taste divine.”

Will can’t look away from his shiny mouth. “I’m close,” he says helplessly.

Hannibal proceeds without mercy. His service turns evil—he blows cool air across Will’s groin, he scrapes his sharp teeth across Will’s thin skin, he pulls the hood of Will’s cock back to lick him past pleasure and into pain.

Will tugs hard on his scalp once, twice, and then comes.

Hannibal continues to work his cock until he kneels him back—then he drops down to drink Will up where he’s gushed. Will allows it until the tremors of his climax die down, before he gets a hand under Hannibal’s chin and draws him up.

“Let me please you,” he echoes Hannibal.

His callused hand cups Hannibal through his slacks, rubbing and squeezing his balls when he finds him already fully hard.

Hannibal is still licking Will off of his lips. He knows he’ll be soon to follow.

“I won’t be long,” he says without shame, coaxing Will to press his shaking legs together.

He pushes his slacks down to his knees. They have nothing with them here on the stairs. Hannibal suspects they will have another round later, one where he can be inside Will or Will inside him; for now he rubs his cock with Will’s slick and slots it into the space between Will’s thighs.

He ruts there like a beast, clutching Will’s legs together to winch the squeeze tighter. Will breathes open-mouthed below him; Hannibal eats up his blown expression and hurries along. Will notices his attention and darts suddenly into motion.
He braces a hand against the stairs and seizes Hannibal’s nape with the other, bending himself to look directly into his eyes. The intensity of his gaze makes Hannibal shudder.

“You’re mine too,” he tells him, sealing the thing between them.

Hannibal groans and comes like that.

Will huffs out a laugh at him as he spurts into the crook of his hip, patting the back of his hot neck. Hannibal leans in to hush him with another kiss, greedy for the press of lips now that he’s allowed. They pant there, lazy and filthy on the stairs, until they’ve got their breath and Will announces the bruise forming on his back from the step beneath him.

Hannibal stands them both up, earning Will’s glare when he uses the edge of his button-down to wipe up the worst of their mess. “I went to a tailor for that,” Will grouses.

“I’ll buy you twenty,” Hannibal reassures him, gesturing up the stairs. “Shall we?”

Will rolls his eyes but goes.

In his bedroom they shower together. Will makes mocking commentary about his luxury products and Hannibal licks at the scab on his lip until it threatens to reopen. They indulge in a brief grappling match for Hannibal’s loofah, until Will puts a parental stop to the slippery wrestling.

“We’re too old for shenanigans,” he scowls, the most pleased Hannibal has ever seen him.

“That’s not how you felt earlier,” Hannibal says serenely.

Will pinches his side, as secretly cruel as Hannibal suspected, before kissing him to take away the sting.

Afterward they lie wet and nude on Hannibal’s bed. Slowly the glow fades from Will until he’s grimacing like normal. Hannibal strokes his damp curls and waits for him to speak.
“I have to go get Tiny soon,” he says.

Hannibal hums. “Will you tell her your decision?”

Will makes a face and dodges. “How has today changed things?”

“Nothing has to change,” Hannibal says. “We may still run into one another at opportune times and schedule sporadic lunch dates as before.” He puts his nose behind Will’s ear. “But we could add a few more sleepovers if Tiny is amenable.”

Will is quiet for a worryingly long time. Then he observes, wry, “You have the room for us.”

Hannibal thinks of the floor space for dog beds in his sunroom, the wall space for an aquarium in his conservatory, the desk space for fly crafting in his study. The work space for another person in his basement, eventually.

He kisses Will long and deep. “That I do.”
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

For those asking about the title of this fic:

The novel and movie "Life of Pi" is one youth's beautiful, untrustworthy account of great trauma and impossible survival. The song on the soundtrack from which the fic's title derives is deceptively sweet, and I thought the juxtaposition encapsulated Hannibal's terrible love for the Grahams quite well, since his affections are beautiful and untrustworthy too, something the Grahams must learn to survive.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal checks the lock on the door to his office a final time before gathering his coat and bag. The waiting room is empty; all of his usual Thursday appointments have been rescheduled. He already issued his apologies to his patients weeks before, when he first learned he would need to clear this afternoon with enough time to make the drive out to Wolf Trap by the afternoon.

An hour later he pulls into the parking lot of Tiny’s elementary school a few minutes ahead of schedule, noticing and taking the space next to the Grahams’ car. Will is in the front seat, fixing his collar in the mirror. Hannibal comes around to his side, but Will finishes fussing with himself before deigning to acknowledge him and open the door.

Rude—Hannibal will make him pay for it later. Perhaps that is what he’s counting on.

Will gets out and kisses him once, a short, chaste brush of lips that Hannibal finds acceptable for the location. They’ll greet each other properly when they get home to the farmhouse. They wait for a school bus to pass before crossing the lot to sit at a bench in front of the school.

“She likes the pizza joint by our house,” Will says. “We have enough time for a few slices of Hawaiian before we have to get her back here. Performers need to be backstage a half-hour before the play starts.”

This time last year Tiny had been a pig in a brick house; now she’s the mermaid in the school’s first production of Hans Christian Andersen’s adapted classic. She’s spent the past several weeks practicing her lines in front of every mirror in the house and belting out songs while doing her homework. Hannibal isn’t quite sure where the shy girl in the last elementary play has gone.
“We have enough time for a few slices of pizza napoletana,” he corrects. “I won’t pay for Hawaiian.”

Will smirks at him. “She’ll ask for Hawaiian and you’ll pay.”

Hannibal drops a hand down to Will’s knee and squeezes. “I’m building an immunity to her begging.”

Will simply shrugs. “You’ll pay.”

The school bell rings loud and piercing. Within minutes a flood of kids bursts through the front doors, rushing in a herd toward the parking lot and buses; Aleksandra is one of them. When she notices Will and Hannibal, she breaks away from her clique, a recent development, and dashes over.

“You’re here!” She squishes them into a hug and then launches into a rundown of how her day went and how the night will proceed as though she hasn’t told them a hundred times before. They listen to her indulgently before Hannibal quiets her nervous energy with an affectionate hair ruffle.

“Come on, Tiny,” Will says, grabbing her hand and tugging her toward the car. “We gotta leave now if we want time to eat. It’s pizza night!”

Tiny gasps and looks at Hannibal. “Really?”

Usually he insists on making every meal among them; Will and Tiny don’t complain about his exacting standards, but he knows sometimes they long for simpler fare, what he normally considers junk.

“Really,” he says, taking her backpack for her. “Get whatever pizza you like.”

“Even Hawaiian?” she asks, eyes shining.

Hannibal can see Will laughing in his periphery. “Even Hawaiian,” he sighs.
As they cross the parking lot, Tiny reaches out to take both of their hands, walking tucked between them as she prefers, resuming her babbling. As has become habit, Hannibal and Will offer noises of acknowledgment while sharing a fond look above her head.

Hannibal’s gaze slips. Over Will’s shoulder he sees another parent staring at their family, lip curled. They lift their chin and look away, pulling their child in the other direction.

Hannibal can feel the way his expression changes, can feel an ugly and evil intent press against the back of his eyeballs, drip like venom from the tips of his teeth. Several tableaus come into his mind at once—perhaps an ode to Goya for the sake of theme. On instinct he commits the parent’s face to his considerable memory.

In the next second he returns to himself. Will is looking at him.

The way he has frozen like a rabbit before a trap means he has felt the pulse of Hannibal's anger and bloodlust, an antenna picking up a rogue signal. The look on his face—glazed eyes, like he’s working on a mental equation—means he’s already trying to calculate what exactly it was that he saw in Hannibal's blank stare, a calculation he has attempted before.

Hannibal smiles fondly at him and waits for his reaction. He is prepared to catch him if today is the day Will figures it out, if today is the day he tries to take his daughter and run.

Instead, without looking away, Will asks Tiny, “How about a milkshake to go with that Hawaiian? His treat.”

Tiny yells in approval. “Thanks, Hannibal,” she says, hugging him and pulling her father in.

Hannibal and Will end up face to face in the embrace. Hannibal leans forward to peck him with a kiss, unable to resist. Will stares back at him, equal parts suspicious and smitten, before returning the favor. Tiny giggles underneath them.

It’s only a matter of time before Will knows. Hannibal enjoys the delicious, dreadful anticipation rotting in his gut at the thought.

“To the Hawaiian then,” he says, leading them toward his car. The Grahams follow.
A huge thank you to everyone who has made it here to the end! It's been almost three years since I started this fic. I could never have anticipated all that would occur in that time, making the gap between updates frankly embarrassing, but I'm so incredibly grateful to all who stuck with this story and saw it through. I tried to respond to all of your generous feedback but know that no matter what, I appreciate you all!

See you in the next fic!

I also exist at t-pock.tumblr.com.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!