The Voices and the Shadows

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The Voices and the Shadows

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Summary

“The Chesapeake Ripper? The serial killer? That’s a grisly thing to find at the bottom of a drink. Most people say oblivion ...or possibly sex.” Hannibal sips his wine again. “Why are you thinking about a murderer on your birthday, Will? Is it part of your degree?”

“He is a part of my degree by my own choice. My supervisor didn’t approve, but...” He sighs. “I insisted.”

AU where Will—a Masters student studying the Chesapeake Ripper—gets drunk on his birthday and meets an intriguing man at the bar.
Dr. Hannibal Lecter sits at the hotel bar, sipping a glass of Bâtard-Montrachet.

When Will Graham stumbles in, he's already a bit tipsy. He runs into a woman, apologizing as he almost knocks down her drink. She glares at him, but he doesn't notice, already tripping over someone else in his way. The celebrations have already ended. His friends are gone. He’s supposed to be on his way back home... But this feeling of... not thinking, not having to unintentionally analyze everything his empathy throws his way...

It's something he wants to continue experiencing. Just for a little bit longer.

And so, he somehow makes it to the bar, sits down heavily on a chair, and manages to order himself another drink.

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Hannibal is aware of the man before he sees him. He moves in a cloud of whisky fumes and bad aftershave, tripping over his own feet, apologising blurrily to a bar patron, stumbling into another.

Drunk, and rude.

And heading to the bar, to drink some more, though he's clearly had enough.

Hannibal isn't hunting tonight; his larder is full, and he has no dinner parties planned, but perhaps he will strike up a conversation. Perhaps he will ask for a business card. It never hurts to be prepared. He lifts his wine glass to his lips as the man sits heavily in the seat beside him.

He glances over, expecting to see a middle-aged businessman out on a heavy night, a salesman drinking free booze on an expense account, and sees...

Oh.

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Will rests his head on the cool bar counter, starting when the bartender places his drink in front of him. He groans, and sits up straight, unintentionally catching the eye of the man sitting next to him.

Their eyes meet for barely a second.


But Will isn’t paying attention to all that.

His eyes are fixed on the man's hair. His immaculate hair that he wants to touch. And mess up.

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The drunken stranger is wearing a suit, but it sits slightly wrong on him, betraying the fact that he usually dresses more casually. White shirt, dark tie, no wedding ring, that atrocious aftershave. He drinks good whisky, though; Hannibal can scent aged single malt, Scottish.

None of that particularly matters.

What matters are his eyes, blue and clearer than they should be. What matters is his mouth, generous and mobile. What matters is his hair.

He has the curly dark hair of an Endymion, dishevelled and brushing his collar, unused to a comb. This man is both soft and hard, reckless and frightened, arrogant and vulnerable. Hannibal turns his body towards the stranger, almost imperceptibly, and he relaxes slightly to echo the other man's posture: both subtle invitations to conversation.

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Will blinks as this man's shadow echoes in his mind. Familiar, and yet so distant and strange. If he had been sober, he would've wondered if his attraction to the man is physical or based on the depths he can see.

The alcohol in his body peels away his skin, and he can almost see it disintegrating around him as his reserve melts away. The dangerous man has a calm air around him, and it doesn't take long for Will to relax. He gazes up at the man, not quite meeting his eyes.
“Your hair. It's nice. But it's too perfect.”

Hannibal Lecter puts down his glass of wine. He turns to face the man, glad of a chance to observe him frankly.

“I'm not often accused of a surfeit of perfection.”

“You should—” Will raises his hands until they're hovering over his own head. He tangles his fingers in his hair and makes an abrupt, shaking motion “—make it slightly messier. Like this.” Will tilts his head to the side, eyeing the man critically.

“You would look nice with your hair falling over your forehead. Like… Like this…”

He leans forward, his hand hesitantly reaching out, fingertips inches away from the man’s face.

… Only to lose his balance and fall off his seat, planting his face right into the man’s lap.

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Hannibal watches, astonished, as the stranger faceplants straight into his lap. He stares at the back of the man's head, surprised, amused and...aroused. He should not be. This man is drunk and rude. But if he stays where he is, he will very quickly become aware of Hannibal's reaction to his proximity. Hannibal takes the man by the shoulders and rights him, helping him back into his chair. “You've had a few drinks tonight, yes?

Will grins widely. “It's my birthday today. I don't usually... drink this much. But it helps with the voices and the shadows.” Abruptly, he changes the topic. “Your hair—no, you are… too perfect. It's almost fake—no—unreal.”

Hannibal straightens his suit.

'Fake'. What an interesting term.

Dr. Du Maurier had used something similar, in their session this afternoon; although 'fake' was too vulgar an expression for her. She had spoken of his 'artifice'.

“Our appearance is the mask we present to the world. Clothes, hair, manners: we choose them as aspects of the personality we would most like to have. And yes: our hairstyles too. You are very perceptive for someone who's drunk so much. And happy birthday.”

Will laughs. It’s hollow, humorless laughter.

“Perceptive? You could say that, I suppose.” He shakily extends his hand, “Will Graham.”

Hannibal enfolds the other man’s hand in his and shakes it. “Hannibal Lecter. Are you an actual hairdresser, or do you just impersonate one when drunk?”

He laughs again. “I’m a Masters student. Criminal Psychology.”

“We share an interest in human nature. I’m a psychiatrist.”

“A… psychiatrist.” Will downs his glass of whisky.

“An off-duty psychiatrist. Tonight, I'm just enjoying a drink.” Hannibal tilts his glass in a salute to Will. “And considering changing my hair style.”
Will orders himself another drink. “Since you are a psychiatrist... you might be familiar with my supervisor.” His eyes light up as his mind catches up with his words. “… And you are? Considering changing your hairstyle?”

Hannibal also signals to the bartender for another drink.

“You seem so vehement, it might be good to take your advice.” He inclines his head closer to Will. “Why don’t you show me what you mean?”

And instantly, Will leans forward again, his fingers gently carding through Dr Lecter's hair. His hair, so carefully styled, falls over his forehead. Will sits back, satisfied. His lips curve into a small smile.

“Perfect.”

Hannibal has to catch his breath when Will touches his hair. It’s a ridiculous attraction. This man is drunk and rude. But there's something. The contradictions. The perceptiveness. There's an interesting mind there, beneath the fog of alcohol. Will is beautiful, of course.

But... *the voices and the shadows*. There is something.

Hannibal says, fully aware that he is flirting, “Is there anything else you would change, since you're at it?”

Will looks at Hannibal, his eyes roaming up and down his body. He reddens. “I... No. Not really.”

Hannibal observes the thorough examination, the flush on Will's cheeks. The attraction is not unreciprocated. He smiles.

“I'm glad I pass inspection.” He takes a long sip of his wine, aware how the action brings attention to his mouth. “Since I changed my hairstyle, may I ask you a question?”

Will turns redder, dragging his eyes away from the man's lips. “What would you like to know, Dr Lecter?”

“Hannibal. Call me Hannibal.”

The name rolls off his tongue. “*Hannibal*.”

There's a distinct pleasure for Hannibal in hearing his name on those lips. He savours it briefly.

“You're not habitually a heavy drinker, Will: even on your birthday. What are you looking for in the bottom of that glass of Scotch whisky?”

Something about Dr Lecter... something about this situation, the whisky, the bar, the day—it makes Will bold.

“I'm trying to find the Chesapeake Ripper. Or perhaps I'm trying to find peace from him. I can't... tell at this point. I'm either running away from him, or I'm running to him.”

“The Chesapeake Ripper? The serial killer? That's a grisly thing to find at the bottom of a drink. Most people say oblivion ...or possibly sex.” Hannibal sips his wine again. “Why are you thinking about a murderer on your birthday, Will? Is it part of your degree?”

He takes a long sip of his whisky. “He is a part of my degree by my own choice. My supervisor didn’t approve, but...” He sighs. “I insisted.”
“Why?”

He shouldn't be saying this. Will's voice lowers to barely a whisper.

“Because he's... different. His art—his message—is more important to him than his kill. It's like poetry. Solving every murder tableau is like a puzzle. He’s... I feel as if…” Will straightens, as if suddenly remembering where he is, who he’s talking to.

“You feel as if you have a connection to this killer?”

Another long sip. Will closes his eyes. “That's an... understatement. I feel like I can understand him.” He backtracks, “No—that’s not true. I can understand anyone. But I feel like when I look into his mind, he looks back into mine. That never happens.”

Shadows and voices. And one of the shadows, one of the voices, in this young man's mind, is Hannibal’s own. The Chesapeake Ripper’s. Now Hannibal understands his attraction. He leans on the bar, a movement that brings him closer to Will.

“You can understand anyone?”

Will opens his eyes, and asks the bartender for another drink.

“Anyone.”

“But you want to understand the Ripper.” Hannibal turns to the bartender. “Please put this young man's drinks on my tab.”

Will starts. “Oh, you don't have to do that. And... yes. Usually, my ‘ability’ is a curse. I rarely want to use it. Understanding comes with a very heavy burden.” His voice is almost dazed. “But the Chesapeake Ripper…”

“... Is different.”

Will smiles. “He’s different. He's... magnificent. The way he kills is dispassionate, cold. But his art is…” He swallows.

“I sincerely hope you meet him. One day.”

“If I meet him, I’ll die.”

Hannibal toys with the stem of his glass. “What makes you say that?”

“Something tells me he wouldn't like me very much. His tastes seem very... singular.”

“Then I've changed my mind. If he will kill you when you meet, I hope very much that the two of you will stay away from each other. It seems to me that the world is more interesting with you in it.”

Hannibal sips his wine. The conversation has sharpened his senses.

“But suppose you are wrong?” Hannibal asks. “Suppose this murderer, this damned man, wants what you can offer him? Suppose he wants to be understood?”

Will’s eyes, dazed and wide, momentarily sharpen.

“I said that he will kill me if we ever meet. But I never said that dying will turn our meeting into a
Hannibal gazes at Will. He is probably brilliant, possibly suicidal. His mind is a labyrinth which Hannibal would love to explore. How quickly this attraction has grown from physical to mental, within the space of a glass or two of Montrachet. But this topic, delicious it is, is also dangerous. He leans back in his chair.

“You mentioned that I might know your supervisor. Is it Dr Bloom?”

He shakes his head. “Dr Frederick Chilton. He’s...” Will sighs.

“Ah. I know Dr Chilton very well. In a professional capacity. I would prefer Dr Bloom as my supervisor, myself.”

Will sighs again.

“Dr Chilton spends less time helping me with my research, and more time poking around my mind. He wanted my thesis to explore my ‘ability’. It would give him an excuse to conduct experiments with my consent, since the papers and the thesis would be written by me.” Will closes his eyes, and rests his head against the cool bar counter.

“But you said your Masters degree was in criminal psychology. You're a remarkable criminal if you're walking around loose.”

“Pardon?”

“I'm sorry; I didn't express myself well. I meant that most theses in criminal psychology don't focus on the student. If they did, one could assume that the student was a criminal.” Hannibal glances up and down Will’s body quickly, then looks at his wine. “It turns out that I'm one of your teachers.”

His eyes shoot open, and he sits up so fast he nearly falls. “I—What—I beg your pardon?”

“I've been invited to give a series of guest lectures to postgraduate students. Mostly about Thorin Sunderson: the Delaware Strangler? You've heard of him?”

He nods. “I have.”

Will closes his eyes for a few seconds, as if he has to draw out the information from his mind. “Impulsive, reckless, sensitive ‘psychopath’.” The last word is said with disbelief. “His passion wasn't for the victims, but the reasons behind each kill. Got caught, but only because he let himself get caught.”

This is my design. He recites each word dispassionately, as if he's reading a script. Will opens his eyes. “Interesting killer.”

Hannibal raises his eyebrows, impressed. “Yes. He was very interesting. I was his psychiatrist. I can only speak about him because he gave me permission, shortly before he died. He killed himself in prison.”

For an inexplicable reason, Will feels fear settling cold and heavy in his stomach, contradicted by the hot excitement causing his heart to beat erratically in his chest. Will takes another long sip of his drink. “I would've liked to meet him.”

“He would not have killed you. You were not his type. You are, apparently, much more the Chesapeake Ripper's type.” Hannibal smiles. “In any case, I'll be your guest lecturer next term. I'd
“I’ve been rather looking forward to it, until tonight.”

“Regardless, I would’ve liked to meet him.” Will turns, meeting his eyes for the second time this night. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No.”

“Then why are you not looking forward to being a guest lecturer?”

“Because it is distinctly awkward, professionally speaking, when a lecturer is attracted to his student.”

Will’s breath catches in his throat. “Even when the lecturer is only teaching for a few lectures?”

Hannibal gazes at him. “Interesting.”

Will flushes, but he doesn't break eye contact.

Hannibal holds his gaze for a long, silent moment, full of unspoken words. Then he looks down at his hand on the bar. “You have had a great deal to drink, and I've perhaps had more than is wise.”

“Yes. But no matter how much I drink, my mind doesn't shut up. It doesn't stop.”

“Do you want to make your mind stop, Will? Do you want to silence your judgement, for a space of time?”

“That was my intention tonight. Drinking... dulls my senses, but it never stops them. My memories and thoughts remain.”

“Nevertheless. I should not take advantage of you. I shouldn't have spoken about attraction.”

“But you did speak about attraction.”

“And I notice that you have not spoken about it.”

“One can express a lot without saying a single word.”

Will’s eyes, blue eyes, seeing so much. His first action was to breach Hannibal's artifice, to mess up his mask. What would Will perceive if Hannibal let down further guards? The thought is almost too exciting to bear. Hannibal stands.

“I think, given our relative positions, that this is becoming dangerous.”

“You don't seem like someone who'd be afraid of danger, Doctor Lecter. Regardless, if you choose to leave, I'll have to find myself an alternate option to help me shut down my mind.” Will gestures to the bartender for another drink.

Hannibal puts his hand on Will's wrist, stopping his request for a drink. “I think you should stop drinking whisky.” His fingers are remarkably strong, though his grip is gentle.

Will turns his head to look up at Hannibal. “What else do I have?”

“I think,” says Hannibal Lecter, "that it's safe to say that you can have whatever you want.”

Chapter End Notes
Next chapter... What Will Graham Wants.
What Will Graham Wants

Chapter Summary

*Will shakes himself. Dr Lecter is his professor next term. These ideas are unethical. And his mind, his thoughts—his very dangerous thoughts—are already possessed by someone else.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will looks at the bartender. “May I have another whisky?”

Hannibal stares at Will. The rudeness, the *cheek*. He has more or less propositioned the man, and he asks for another drink. He considers leaving right now. Going home, collecting certain items, and returning to follow Will's drunken route home.

There's a spark in Will's eyes. Once again this night, his eyes sharpen. He looks at the bartender. “Make that two, please,” Will says.

Hannibal hesitates. Then sits back down. “Is this a birthday request?”

Will considers lying. He decides against it. “Actually, both drinks were for me. But you're welcome to stay, Doctor Lecter. If that's an appropriate birthday request?”

Hannibal makes up his mind, though he may revise his decision at any time. He takes the second whisky that Will has ordered for himself, and takes a sip of it. “You're allowed a certain amount of leeway on your birthday.”

Will stills for a moment, his grip on his glass tightening. He suddenly relaxes, smiles at Hannibal, and takes a long sip. “Thank you for staying. I should... probably leave after this drink.”

“So should I. I've an early appointment tomorrow. I only meant to stay for one glass of wine.”

“I'm sorry for keeping you.”

“I'm staying willingly.” Savours his whisky. “This is a very interesting conversation.”

“And you're a very interesting man.”

Hannibal raises his glass in a toast. “Happy birthday to you. I hope it has been a good one.”

Will raises his glass as well. “Thank you for spending it with me, and for listening to my drunken ramblings.”

“On the contrary; you're remarkably coherent for someone who started the conversation by falling into my lap.”

“I've tried drinking my thoughts away before. It didn't work. It doesn't work now. It affects my motor abilities and speech patterns, sometimes my actions, but rarely my thoughts and my mind. It
stops the voices though. At least for a little while.”

“Whose voices, Will?”

“Everyone. Snippets of motivation, reasons. Little things I get from their body language, or their conversations. And then... there are the more prominent voices. Voices I've studied and analyzed; I understand them and their choices. I don't want to. And then... there's my own voice. It mingles and merges with the others, until I can't tell who I am, and who I'm mirroring.”

“From your reaction when I said I was a psychiatrist, I am guessing that you've had therapy for this lack of filter.”

“Most psychiatrists are rarely interested in helping me. I gave up on therapy years ago.”

Hannibal takes another sip of whisky. “May I make a suggestion?”

“By all means.”

“Since you were so kind to suggest a change in my hair style. You don't wear a suit very often, do you?”

“Not very often, no. I prefer casual clothes.”

“I thought so.” Hannibal leans forward. Hooks a finger in the knot of Will's tie and loosens it. Smoothly, he unties it and pulls it out of his collar. He puts it in the pocket of Will's jacket, and then flicks the top button of Will's shirt open.

“That tie does you no favours. You're better without it, and you look more comfortable.”

Will's heart skips a beat at the proximity. Without meaning to, he leans into Hannibal's touch. “I'll keep that in mind, Doctor Lecter.”

“Hannibal.”

“Isn't it inappropriate for a student to call his professor by his first name?”

“As I said: you're allowed a certain about of leeway on your birthday.”

“If you say so, Hannibal.”

Almost imperceptibly, Hannibal’s fingers tighten on his glass. “I do.”

Will downs his whisky in one go. Suddenly feeling very warm, he unbuttons another button on his shirt.

“Good decision,” says Hannibal. “A casual shirt makes the suit look rakish, rather than uncomfortable.” His eyes linger only slightly too long on the exposed V of Will's skin.”

“Thank you. I'll keep that in mind for next time, Hannibal.” Will leans in again, and cards his fingers through Hannibal's hair, attempting to style it back to what it was before. “You can keep your hair all... perfect for the others. But if we're ever in the same room again, where no one knows us, you can break that state of perfection. If you want to.”

“Do you think we ever will be? In the same room again, outside of our formal roles?”

“I'm not sure. But I... would like that.” He doesn't know why. He barely knows the man. But
something about him is dangerously familiar. The intensity of Dr Hannibal Lecter's gaze, for some inexplicable reason, is calming. As if he belongs in Will's mind. As if he's always been there.

“We shall have to see how fate decides to unspool itself.” Hannibal tips up his glass and drinks the last of his whisky.*

“Then... I suppose it's time for us to part.”

“That would be wise. Yes.” Hannibal makes no move to go.

Will’s body doesn't move an inch. “I should go.”

“We certainly shouldn't drink any more.”

“Yes, that... would be a good idea.”

Hannibal signals to the bartender and gives him a credit card. “Do you have a lift home?”

Will shakes his head. “I was going to call a cab. Or walk.”

“I'll walk too; I've drunk too much to drive.” Hannibal stands, and waits for Will.

Will takes a deep breath, and stands. Almost instantly, a wave of dizziness hits him and he stumbles, holding on to Hannibal for support.

“Are you all right?” Hannibal steadies Will. He is very careful to keep his hand on Will's waist, outside his jacket.

“I just... need a moment... to get used to standing.” He leans heavily against Hannibal.

“Some fresh air will help.” He puts his arm around Will's shoulders, and guides him outside.

The cool, fresh air feels good on Will’s skin, but the dizziness worsens. The cars passing by blur into one line. The noises warp around him, until everything sounds twisted. Will presses his body against Hannibal's, burying his head in his chest, listening to the comforting, steady beats of his heart.

Hannibal gazes down at Will, surprised at the physical contact. It's an act of trust. Almost childlike.

...Almost.

He breathes in Will's scent. It's largely whisky at this point, but so close to Will, he can also detect the scent of his shampoo, his laundry detergent, the peanut butter sandwich he had for dinner (—on his birthday?), and underneath, the scent of Will's skin. He isolates the scent, inhales it. It warms him.

Will’s hands clutch Hannibal's jacket, and he closes his eyes, merely resting his head on his chest. Will doesn't know how long he stays like that. But eventually, his breathing evens out, and his erratically beating heart steadies He doesn't pull away, but he lifts his head from Hannibal's chest to look up into his eyes. His cheeks are flushed.

“I'm sorry, I...”

“It's all right.”
Will doesn't pull away from Hannibal. His lips part slightly.

Hannibal looks at Will's lips. He can taste what it would be like to kiss them. Or trace them with his tongue.

“We should get you home.”

Will’s fingers momentarily tighten on Hannibal's jacket before he lets go. Will takes a small, unsteady step back. “It's all right. I'll be fine on my own.”

“Having paid for that birthday whisky, I would be morally culpable if you were to come to harm before you arrived home.”

Will laughs. “Who would harm me?”

Hannibal says, seriously, “You know better than most people that there are monsters out at night.”

Will leans closer again, his hands on Hannibal's chest. He slurs, his voice barely a whisper. “How do you know I'm not a monster at night?”

“I don't. You're a stranger to me. As I am to you.”

“You don't have to walk me home. What if you get attacked when you're leaving?”

“We monsters are safe in the dark,” says Hannibal playfully. “But if it makes you happier, I'll call a cab at your house.”

“That would make me feel better.”

“I very much want to make you feel better. It's your birthday, after all. Which direction?”

Will blinks. He looks to the left, and then to the right. “It's—close to... the café. I don't know which direction that is.”

“What street is it?”

“The one with the café.”

Hannibal laughs. “The name?”

“The... Lion's Den?”

“And you are Daniel, delivered from predators for your innocence.” He touches Will's elbow. “I know it; it's this way.”

Will looks at him, puzzled. “My name's not Daniel.”

“Shall we walk?”

“Walk where?”

Hannibal looks at him steadily and considering. “Would you like to come home with me, instead?”

Will tilts his head to the side. “Will you psychoanalyze me?”

“I'll give you coffee and the guest bedroom. The psychoanalysis can wait till the morning. My
house is much closer, and you've had a lot to drink.”

Will interlaces their fingers. “Okay.”

Hannibal starts walking, not removing his hand from Will's. “You're very trusting. Does it ever get you into trouble?”

Will laughs. “Trusting? I barely talk to anyone. I can't stand social interaction. I can immediately dissect every word they say to me. I know what they all really think. I don't even trust myself. How can I trust anyone else?”

“You're talking to me. Do you know what I really think?”

“What?”

Hannibal smiles. “Evidently not.”

“But you are... different.”

He glances at Will as they walk, and tightens his fingers slightly on his. “As are you.”

A drop of water falls on Will’s hair. He looks up, blinking as more drops of water trickle down his face and neck. “It's raining.”

“We're nearly there.” As he speaks, the rain turns from a shower to a downpour. Hannibal unbuttons his overcoat and opens it, wrapping one side of it partly around Will. “Quickly—we'll get soaked.”

Will presses closer to Hannibal. The rain is freezing. “We already are.”

“Here. It's just here.” Arm and overcoat around Will, Hannibal guides him up the steps of an imposing, tall-windowed brick house. They stand in front of the door, cold rain hammering down onto their heads.

“My door keys—they're in the pocket—” He reaches with his left hand into the right-hand pocket of his overcoat, the side that is around Will. For a moment, he is effectively embracing Will. Then he retrieves his keys, releases Will, and unlocks the door. “Please come in.”

Shivering, Will steps inside the warm house, his body tingling where Hannibal's arms wrapped around him. The inside is as imposing as the outside. Striking, grand, and formidable. Rare paintings and rarer books. And once again, he gets a mere glimpse of what he observed earlier in the night. Arrogant, confident, dangerous, cold... Familiar. Deeper than what the image reflects. Is this a mirror or a shadow?

And yet, once again, this isn't what he's paying attention to. His observations register, but they don't echo in his mind. It's as if they've been here this whole time.

Will carefully slips off his shoes and socks, not wanting to get Hannibal's floors wet. It doesn't help, considering the fact that they're already dripping water everywhere. “Thank you.”

“You're soaked through,” says Hannibal. “I'm soaked through. I'll get you some dry clothes.” He hangs up his sopping overcoat.

Will opens his mouth to protest, but Hannibal is already gone. He takes off his jacket, and hangs it up next to Hannibal's overcoat. Will grimaces, looking down at his soaked shirt; it sticks
uncomfortably to his skin.

Within a few minutes, Hannibal reappears. He's changed into loose trousers, a red v-neck cabled sweater. His hair, wet, hangs over his forehead in the same way Will arranged it, earlier. He holds out a bundle of clothes, and a towel. “These should fit, more or less. I'll show you to a guest bathroom.”

Will’s breath catches in his throat as Hannibal walks in. The sweater hugs his form, and Will has to drag his eyes away from him. Will holds the bundle of clothes close to his chest. “Thank you.”

Hannibal waits for Will to move. Finally, he prompts him. “...This way? To the bathroom?”

Will starts, his cheeks flushing. “Oh. Right. Yes, sorry.”

Hannibal shows him to a marble-tiled bathroom, with a vast bathtub, a tall mirror, orchids in pots. “Have a bath if you--like. I'll make coffee. Unless you prefer tea?”

“Coffee is fine, thank you.”

“Coffee it is.” Will's shirt has stuck to his shoulders, his chest. He can see the pink skin through the white material. A hint of a darker nipple. Hannibal swallows and nods. “There's shampoo, extra towels, a spare toothbrush. Please make yourself at home.”

Hannibal's gaze lingers, and Will feels his heart trying to beat its way out of his chest. He nods, and Hannibal leaves, gently shutting the door behind him.

Just minutes ago, he was shivering. And how, his body feels too hot. He peels off his clothes, and starts running the bath. As he sinks into the warm, soapy water, he ponders upon this strange attraction. This strange man. He closes his eyes, and gently lathers the shampoo into his hair. He wonders what it would feel like if his hands were replaced by Hannibal's. Hannibal's hands are slightly bigger, rougher. His fingers are long. Like an artist's fingers. Or a surgeon's. He thinks of his own hands on Hannibal.

His thoughts take him elsewhere, and Will shakes himself. Dr Lecter is his professor next term. These ideas are unethical. And his mind, his thoughts—his very dangerous thoughts—are already possessed by someone else.

Carefully, he stands and steps out of the bath, wrapping himself in the soft, fluffy towel. Will quickly dresses himself in the trousers and the white shirt Hannibal left him. The shirt is slightly loose on him. He rolls up the sleeves, and leaves the top few buttons unbuttoned. His wet hair falls over his forehead. He drains the tub, gathers the towel and his wet clothes, and steps out of the bathroom. Barefoot, Will follows the smell of coffee. It lands him in the kitchen, where Hannibal is.

Hannibal has made coffee, and thick sandwiches of freshly-baked bread and crispy home-cured bacon. He has almost resorted to another shot of whisky, because a very large part of himself wants to forget about control. Or at least, explore the ramifications of letting his control slip.

Whisky would help. The taste of whisky on Will Graham's lips would help.

But it's not wise, and it's not safe, either for him or for Will.

Hannibal pauses, slicing a tomato garnish for the sandwiches. Why is he thinking of Will Graham's safety? Will Graham is in the most dangerous place he could possibly be. Hannibal brought him here. And no one knows he is here.
Will Graham's safety is obviously not high on Hannibal's list of priorities.

He slices the sandwiches into quarters, and looks up when Will enters the room.

Will looks at Hannibal's hand, holding the knife, and his mind jumps on what he was thinking about in the bathroom. He swallows. “Hello.”

“Hello.”

Hannibal had not been thinking about seduction when he selected dry clothes for Will. He'd been thinking about warmth and comfort. But his white shirt, on Will Graham, looks like an invitation to sin.

He clears his throat. “I've made some food. I thought it would help to soak up the alcohol.”

“Oh—you didn't have to do that. I'm feeling better already. But thank you, Doctor—Hannibal.”

Hannibal pushes a plate with a sandwich to Will, over the kitchen island. “How do you take your coffee?”

“Usually black. But cream and sugar tonight?” He's doing a lot of things differently tonight.

Hannibal pours cream, stirs sugar, passes Will the cup. “Would you like to take it into the living room? I've built a fire.”

Will takes his cup and follows Hannibal to the living room. “This is cozy.”

“I'm not trying to seduce you,” says Hannibal.

“This is still cozy.”

Hannibal glances at his watch. “It isn't your birthday any more.”

“Does that mean I've run out of birthday favors?”

They sit, together, on the sofa in front of the fire. “Are there any that you have not yet received?”

“I'm not sure.”

“You don't strike me as a man who would forget, Will.”

“I haven't forgotten. I'm unsure about its feasibility. A favor shouldn't cause someone else inconvenience.”

“Inconvenience is a price gladly paid, for a favour freely given.”

“You've given me too many favors. I can't ask for more.”

“What would you ask for, Will?”

Will averts his eyes. “Nothing.”

“Nothing is surprisingly difficult to give.” Hannibal nods at Will's plate. “Eat your sandwich.”

Will takes a bite. A barely suppressed moan escapes his lips. “This is... amazing.”

“Thank you. If I'd known I was going to have a guest, I'd have cooked something more
“celebratory.”

“No, this is—it's perfect. More than I could ever ask for. It's /brilliant/.”

Hannibal sips his coffee. His is black. “Now that your birthday's over, what was your best present?”

“The fact that I didn't have to see Dr. Chilton today. He gave me the day off.”

Hannibal smiles. “Any day without Frederick Chilton is a gift indeed.”

Will sighs. “Just a few more months, and I'll be done with him. And then I can move on to my PhD with a different supervisor.”

“Oh? Have you got another supervisor lined up?” He takes a bite of his own sandwich. His own appetite for food is, surprisingly, not keen. He's hungrier for the sight of the orange firelight flickering on Will's skin; warming the tones of his hair.

Will laughs. “No. None of them want to work on the Chesapeake Ripper. They all say it's too hard of a project. But I can tell that they're afraid of being 'targeted'. This fear makes them inadequate supervisors, because it's unfounded. The Ripper would never target someone making an intellectual, feasible argument, with valid evidence and facts. He'd target someone twisting evidence to fit their thesis, or coming up with outrageous theories to be noticed by the-psychiatric community. He'd target someone using his name to make baseless arguments for success. And if these doctors, psychiatrists, and professors fail to recognize that, they're not suitable supervisors.”

“It sounds as if you are very close to the Chesapeake Ripper,” says Hannibal quietly.

“I have him in my head.”

“It sounds as if you almost...admire him.”

*Does admiration even begin to describe it?*

“That doesn't bother you?” Will asks.

“Admiration is never a sin. We admire what is best in a person or an act; in what we admire, we see echoes of the divine.”

Will doesn't say anything. His eyes trail down to the floor. He swallows.

“Yes, Will?”

“Admiration isn't a sin, but…”

This goes beyond admiration.

“What is the sin?” asks Hannibal. "Fascination? Emulation? Desire?"

*D) All of the above.*

“I can see the Ripper. I can feel him, understand him. I want him to see me as well. In every way.”

“You want the Ripper to see you with his eyes? His mind? His hands?” A pause. “...His knife?”

“Anything and everything he will give me.”
Hannibal's chest is tight. His well-ordered mind is racing. He has encountered masochists before, and suicidal patients. He has, professionally and otherwise, met people who are attracted to psychopaths, to murderers, who seek out danger and drama and pain, who see romance in the chaos of what others think are evil minds.

Will Graham is not like that. Even drunk, he is logical and analytical. Passionate, but rational.

He is...enchanting.

Hannibal clears his throat. “I think it's time we went to bed.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter...Intoxicated
In the half-light he looks at Will's naked body with the eyes of the Ripper, and he touches Will's naked body with the hands of Hannibal Lecter.

Will looks back up to Hannibal, only to look away again. He hesitates.

“I'll show you to your room,” says Hannibal.

Will stands, not trusting himself to open his mouth. Hannibal leaves the dishes in the living room, to tidy up later. He walks with Will up the stairs, saying nothing, words racing in his mind. They pass his bedroom, and he pauses outside the guest room door. “This is yours. I'm next door if you need anything.”

Will gathers up his courage, his heart racing in his chest. “I do need something, actually. If you don't mind.”

“What is it, Will?”

“I'd like you to kiss me.”

“Have you not had your birthday kiss yet, Will?” His voice is loud in his own ears.

Softly, breathlessly, Will answers: “Not yet.”

“And this birthday kiss…” Hannibal matches his tone to Will's. Quiet. Intimate. “Is it on your forehead? Your cheek?”

He leans forward, so his lips are a breath from Will's cheek. The scent of his skin is overwhelming. His skin and coffee and bacon and Hannibal's own shampoo.

“Your cheek, Will? ...Or your mouth?”

Hannibal is standing close to Will. So close, and yet not close enough. Almost touching, but not quite. Will's body is hot, almost burning. He gasps out, “My mouth, please. My mouth.”

The smallest of smiles. Hannibal moves his head so that his lips hover above Will's. He touches him nowhere else: only with his breath, from his lips to Will's lips.

He whispers, “You are drunk.”

Will whispers back, their lips lightly brushing against each other as he speaks. “I know.”

“It's no longer your birthday.” Hannibal draws the tiniest fraction closer: still not touching, but enough so that the front of Will's shirt brushes against his sweater.
Will can't wait any longer. “Hannibal, please.”

The plosive of the 'p' kisses Hannibal's lips. The plea is all he needed. He closes the slight gap between them and presses his lips, partly open, with infinite gentleness, against Will's.

Will's hands move on their own accord, until they're resting on Hannibal's shoulders, pulling him closer. The kiss is soft, gentle, but it lights a spark in him. A strange kind of desire.

Will moans against his lips, his hands sliding from Hannibal's shoulders to his hands. He squeezes them for a second before placing them on his waist, prompting Hannibal to touch him.

The invitation is too blatant, too tempting for Hannibal to refuse. Hannibal tightens his hands on Will's waist and draws him up against him, so that he can feel Will's heartbeat. He kisses him harder, just a little bit harder, the tip of his tongue touching the inside of Will's upper lip.

Their bodies are pressed intimately against each other, separated only by their clothes. Hannibal's lips swallow down his moans. Will closes his eyes, and opens his mouth wider to allow him access.

Hannibal meant to keep control. He means to keep control. But Will's mouth—and the sounds he is making in his throat. And his eagerness to open himself, not only to Hannibal, but to Hannibal's true and secret shadow, to the Ripper in his breast.

It is too much to withstand. And Will doesn't know he's the Ripper, he didn't declare his desire as a seduction but as a deterrent. As a warning.

Hannibal tightens his hold on Will's waist with one hand and with the other he cups Will's face, holds him so he can kiss him more deeply.

The kiss is gentle and rough at the same time. Will feels hot and cold and utterly ruined. And he never wants to stop kissing Hannibal. He's drunk, on more than just alcohol. Desperation claws at him, and he feels his body reacting to Hannibal's touch, feels his need to breathe grow by the second. Will’s hands are buried in his hair, and distantly, he hears an echo of something.

He pulls away, breathing hard, lips still brushing against Hannibal's.

Hannibal is crazy. He is crazy. He's not ready for the kiss to end. He's drunk on the taste of Will. “More. Don't stop.”

Eyes still closed, Will whispers against Hannibal's lips. “I could be aching for someone else. Doesn't that bother you?”

“Right now,” says Hannibal, “you're here with me.”

“And what if one day, I'm with him? With the Ripper?”

In answer, Hannibal walks forward, forcing Will to step back against the shut guest bedroom door. He fists his hand in Will's hair.

“Right now.”

He kisses Will's lips.

“You are here.”

Another kiss, deeper and longer.
“With me.”

He tilts Will's head back and kisses him passionately, his own heart pounding in his chest.

And Will feels the Ripper in his head, but he also feels Hannibal. And there's a shadow that's so familiar, a shadow he can't resist anymore. His heart is pounding, blood is rushing through his body, and Will kisses him back. He lightly bites Hannibal's lips, tugging at his sweater, wanting to feel his skin.

Will's hand touches him on his bare skin beneath the sweater, on his rib cage, and Hannibal shudders. He pushes up Will's shirt to run his hand up his spine.

Will moans, loudly. Almost frantically, he kisses Hannibal again, his hands roaming over his skin.

With a groan, Will pulls away. “You feel like him. Like the Ripper.” And he kisses him again, his hands leaving Hannibal's skin only to unbutton his own shirt.

Hannibal pushes Will's shirt off his shoulders and bends to kiss his neck. “I feel like me. And you feel like you. Will Graham. Birthday boy. Who wants his present.”

Hannibal pulls back a little. “Will. I have to ask you something.”

Will follows Hannibal as he pulls back, continuing to kiss his neck.

“Will.” He takes Will's head in his hands, and looks him straight in the face, meeting his gaze. “Before we do anything else. Do you want this, now, with me?”

Will looks into Hannibal's eyes. “More than anything.”

Hannibal has to catch his breath at the beauty of it. He kisses Will's lips, and then pulls off his red sweater. “To my room, then.”

And immediately, Will’s hands are on Hannibal again. He barely hears him speaking. “Now, Hannibal. Please.”

“In my room.” He grabs Will's hand and pulls him the few steps down the corridor into his bedroom. Past a full suit of Japanese armour on a pedestal, pausing only to drape his sweater on a nearby chair, and pulls him down onto the blue bedspread, side by side, his hands running over Will's bare chest.

Will places his hand on Hannibal's neck, and leans in to kiss him again, running his tongue over his bottom lip.

Hannibal moans. He has not anticipated this desperation. “A few hours ago I had no idea of your existence. And now-you're in my bedroom and I can't wait to get your clothes off you. My clothes off you.”

Breathlessly, he gasps out, “Do you like that, Hannibal? Me wearing your clothes?”

“Not quite as much as I anticipate liking you not wearing any clothes.” He pulls Will's open shirt off his arms, and begins working on his trousers.

As soon as his trousers are off, Will frantically starts working on Hannibal's. Kissing, the whole time kissing.

Will Graham is delicious. The scent of his skin on Hannibal's tongue. Flavoured with whisky and
lust. He can't stop putting his mouth on him: mouth, cheek, neck, ear, hair.

Clavicle, chest, nipple, hollow of his shoulder.

Belly, navel, lower.

Kissing, sucking, lightly biting, Will's moans in his ears like music.

And Will is louder than he's ever been in his life, almost lost in his pleasure. His mind isn't racing like it usually does, his own thoughts aren't buried under all the other voices. He can hear only himself, he can feel only himself.

And Hannibal is both of his selves. As they touch and explore and give each other pleasure, he feels his person suit fading. Not disappearing, but fading. More than it has with any other lover.

In the half-light he looks at Will's naked body with the eyes of the Ripper, and he touches Will's naked body with the hands of Hannibal Lecter, and even this secret, partial unveiling is a release. A pleasure. A climax of its own.

It is, undoubtedly, the most passionate night Will has experienced. Their bodies fit together beautifully, and he can't get enough. He can never get enough.

***

Dawn light is filtering through the curtains when Will slips into sleep. Hannibal lies beside him, head next to his on the pillow, looking at his sweat-dampened hair, his lips red and swollen from kissing, his exhausted body which Hannibal has touched and tasted all over.

Will is smiling as he relaxes into sleep. Hannibal feels an answering smile on his own face. He wonders if Will is dreaming about Hannibal Lecter, or the Chesapeake Ripper. Or both.

Hannibal allows himself the luxury of a very long time of uninterrupted observation of Will Graham. Then he slips out of bed, pulling on pyjama bottoms and his red sweater from the chair. He walks noiselessly to his office, where he opens his laptop and begins to type.

Twenty-five minutes later, he closes the laptop again. His footsteps back to bed are quicker, more impatient. He climbs in beside Will and curls around him, spooning up against his body. He falls asleep to the rhythm of Will's breath.

***

When Will wakes up, his body is warm and pleasantly sore. His mind is clear. He's sated, and happy. He opens his eyes to see the sunlight filtering through the curtains, and instantly flinches, suddenly becoming aware of his pounding headache. He turns around, burrowing closer to Hannibal and burying his head in his chest, away from sunlight. He groans, his cheek rubbing against the soft material of Hannibal's sweater.

Will’s hands slip under Hannibal’s sweater. His voice is muffled and sleepy: “Why are you wearing clothes?”

“So you can take them off again?”

Will opens his eyes, and climbs on top of Hannibal, kissing him deeply. “Good morning.”

“Good morning.” Hannibal kisses him back. “This is not the result I expected when I stopped off for a glass of wine after work.”
Will smiles. “And this isn't what I expected to happen on the morning after my birthday.”

“Was it a happy birthday, in the end?”

“A very happy birthday.”

“It was very happy for me, too.” He kisses Will's jaw. “Are you hungry?”

Will’s stomach grumbles. He flushes.

“I'm a very good cook,” Hannibal says.

“It seems like you're good at everything.” He runs his fingers through Hannibal's hair. “So perfect it almost seems fake.”

“Nothing I did last night with you was fake.”

Will kisses Hannibal again. “That was real.”

“Possibly more real than you will ever know,” says Hannibal.

The words send a shiver down Will’s spine. “I might know. One day.”

“You might.” Hannibal nuzzles him under the ear. “Our most urgent reality right now is breakfast. What do you like?”

“I wouldn't mind anything. May I help you with breakfast?”

“Under one condition.”

“Yes?”

“You wear my shirt and nothing else.”

Will’s heart skips a beat. “All right. I suppose I can do that.”

“Mmm.” Hannibal gives Will a long kiss before getting out of bed. He finds the shirt on the floor and passes it to Will.

Will smiles at Hannibal, and puts on the shirt. He doesn't bother buttoning it up. He carefully rolls up the sleeves before crawling out of bed as well.

In the kitchen, Hannibal puts on coffee, gives Will half a dozen eggs to crack in a bowl, and as he cooks sausage, he watches his new lover. He is physically beautiful; Hannibal would love to draw him. But it's his mind that attracts Hannibal. Will's mind, and his fascinating desires.

He says, pouring coffee: “How's your head this morning?”

Will glances at him, his lips curved into a small smile. “Better than it was before. Thank you for asking.”

Will’s eyes linger on Hannibal. His sleep-mussed hair. His eyes, crinkling as he smiles. Will wants to kiss him.

“No regrets?” asks Hannibal.

“None whatsoever.”
“Nor I.” Hannibal hands him coffee, their fingers brushing. “Am I still sharing space in your head with a serial killer? Or have I managed to oust him, temporarily?”

“He's always there. Anyone in my head would be sharing his space. But right now, he's... quiet.”

“The Chesapeake Ripper is always quiet,” says Hannibal, seriously. “Except for when he wants to make a noise.”

Softly, Will says: “He's not quiet in his own mind. And he's not quiet in mine.”

Hannibal chops onions, cuts herbs, shreds cheese, slices vegetables, with a graceful efficiency. “What are your plans for today, Will?”

Will watches Hannibal as he works with the knife. “Today, I was supposed to work on some research. Some old case files on the Ripper. But Dr. Chilton might call me in. So... I'm not quite sure what I'm doing today.”

“I had patients, but I've cancelled them. Officially, I have the flu.” Hannibal holds out his hand. “Are you finished with those eggs?”

“What if your patients need you?” Will hands him the bowl.

“They're rescheduled for tomorrow. I don't think I'd be a very effective therapist today. There's too much on my mind.”

“Too much on your mind? Is this because of me?”

Hannibal whips the eggs into a froth and pours them into a hot omelette pan. “It's entirely because of you. And what I hope we might do again immediately after breakfast. If Dr Chilton doesn't call you in.”

“Then I hope more than anything that Dr Chilton doesn't call me in.”

“So do I.” He leans over the kitchen island to quickly kiss Will.

Will kisses him back, pecking his lips one last time as he withdraws. For a few minutes, they work in silence.

“You know, you're very good with a knife,” Will says.

“I've had a lot of practice. I've been cooking from an early age.” Hannibal deftly swirls the eggs in the omelette pan and scatters the filling on the top. He's about to turn it when his phone rings.

“That's bad timing, whoever it is.” He turns the omelette swiftly anyway, and slides it onto a warmed plate. “Forgive me, Will. I should check that this isn't one of my patients. I hope it's quick; this omelette should be eaten hot.” He reaches for his phone on the counter, checks the screen, and without a change in expression says: “I apologise. I have to take this call.”

“Don't worry about it. Take all the time you need.”

“Thank you.” Hannibal swipes the phone and speaks into it. “Good morning, Frederick. How are you today? Ah. Well, yes, I can understand why you would feel that. Have you spoken to Wendy?”

As he listens, he props the phone up on his shoulder and slices four oranges, efficiently twisting them on a juicer.
“Yes, I contacted her as well. No, I haven't had a chance to check my email. I've had a busy morning.” Glances at Will, and smiles. “But evidently she agrees with me, if she told you that.” He holds up a glass of orange juice for Will.

Will almost stops breathing. His body tenses. Frederick. Dr Frederick Chilton.

He knew Hannibal might be familiar with his supervisor, but he never thought they'd be familiar enough to have each other's numbers. And he certainly didn't think Hannibal would be familiar with Dr. Wendy Gold. And if they're talking about Dr. Gold, then it has to be Chilton on the phone.

As he calmly sips his orange juice, his mind is racing. When Hannibal said he'd be a guest lecturer, it didn't occur to Will that he'd be this familiar with the faculty. Will doesn't particularly mind. But Chilton...

Hannibal continues speaking into the phone. His voice and body language are both totally relaxed.

“No, Frederick. You're overreacting, in my opinion. It has nothing to do with you, and more the fact that I... Of course you have an interest, but it's hardly…”

Chilton's voice is audible to Will through the phone; though the words are indecipherable, the tone is clearly furious.

“Now? That's not necessary; despite what you think, I have no desire to usurp… Yes. Yes, he's here, actually. Do you wish to speak with him?”

Will freezes. His eyes are fixed on Hannibal. Quietly, so his voice doesn't carry over through the phone. “What's going on?”

“Pardon me, Frederick.” Hannibal covers the phone with his hand.

"It's Dr Chilton. He's upset because I've been assigned as your PhD supervisor.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter...Moral Flexibility
Moral Flexibility

Chapter Summary

“*You've already displayed a certain...shall we say 'moral flexibility'? But I don't want to influence you. Carrying on an affair while we are in a student/teacher relationship could damage your future career, and my present one.*”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will stares at Hannibal. “You’re my PhD supervisor?”

“As of this morning: apparently so. I imagine you’ve received an email about it yourself. Of course, it's only if you consent.”

Dr Lecter is the only research-practitioner he's met so far who could possibly supervise Will’s thesis. If not him, then he'll have to work with Dr Chilton again. For three years.

But he's currently in his supervisor's kitchen. Half naked. Wearing nothing but Hannibal’s shirt.

He... doesn't know what to do.

Hannibal holds up a plate. “Omelette?”

Will quietly takes the plate. He sets it on the table, and sits down. He doesn't say a word.

Hannibal puts a dish of sausages on the table, along with a bowl of fruit: more coffee, more juice. Then he sits across from Will with his own plate. “I thought you'd be more pleased about getting rid of Chilton as supervisor.”

“I am.” He looks up from his plate to Hannibal. “But I want two things, and I can't have both.”

“Last night you wanted two things, and yet you seemed satisfied with only one.” Hannibal cuts a bite of omelette. “Tell me what those two things you want are, Will.”

“I want you to be my supervisor. I've talked to over thirty different professors, psychiatrists, and research-practitioners. None of them understand the Ripper. You are, perhaps, the only person I can work with.” He looks away. “But if you are to be my supervisor, we can't touch each other again.”

“It would be unethical.”

Will swallows. “The right thing to do would be to find another supervisor.” He knows he can't.

“I haven't known you for long, Will, but I've been very impressed by the elasticity of your mind. I'm surprised you're seeing things in such a limited way.” Hannibal sips his coffee, taking a moment to savour it.

“It seems to me that we have three options,” he says. “You can refuse me as your supervisor, and
we can carry on sleeping together. You can accept me as your supervisor, and we halt our sexual relationship for ethical reasons. The third option is that we can carry on both relationships—academic and personal—and keep the details private.”

Could it be that easy?

“And you don't have any problems with this? WHATSOEVER?”

Will feels a wave of dark amusement pass over him. One of his greatest desires is for the Chesapeake Ripper to see him. And yet, he's having qualms about something not nearly as great in magnitude.

“You've already displayed a certain... shall we say 'moral flexibility'? But I don't want to influence you. Carrying on an affair while we are in a student-teacher relationship could damage your future career, and my present one.” Hannibal puts down his cup. “We do have a fourth option.”

“And what is that?”

“We could stop this relationship now, today. As of this minute. You get dressed, leave the house; we pretend it never happened. And in three years, when our professional relationship is finished, we resume our sexual one. How are you with delayed gratification, Will?” He takes a bite of sausage.

Will thinks of the night they shared. He looks at the man he's told more about himself than he's told anyone in years. The man who could silence the voices in his mind.

When he speaks, he's louder and more vehement than he intended. “No.”

“That's a no to which option?”

“I don't want to walk out of here right now.”

“So you'll refuse me as your supervisor?”

Will’s eyes, sharp and blazing, are on Hannibal. “You know I can't do that either.”

“You care too much about the Chesapeake Ripper, not to give him the very best you can offer.”

He doesn't even try to deny it. It's true. “Then we'll have to go with the third option.”

Hannibal breathes in, deeply. Savouring.

“Take off your shirt,” he says.

“It's your shirt.”

“Take off my shirt.”

“I haven't had my breakfast yet.”

“Breakfast will wait.”

Will says, playfully, “But you spent so much time and effort on making breakfast.”

“That was before I developed a strong and irresistible urge to have you on the table instead.”
Will sips his coffee, seemingly unmoved. Hannibal watches him, steadily, without looking away, a spark in his maroon eyes.

In response, Will puts down his coffee cup, stretches, and walks over to the kitchen counter to get himself a glass of water.

“By the way, Will?”

“Yes, Hannibal?”

“Technically, I'm your supervisor now. Dr Chilton was so piqued that he wasn't keeping you for your PhD that he turned you over to me immediately, in a huff.”

Will puts his glass of water in the sink. “You're my Masters supervisor as well?”

“I have been for the past twenty minutes.”

“What you're implying, basically, is that I need to listen to you. Is that it, Doctor Lecter?”

“I'm not implying anything. I'm saying that I know what's best for you.” He begins picking up dishes, and moving them aside to clear a space on the table.

Will leans against the counter, and watches him moving the dishes. He smiles.

"You could say 'please'.”

Hannibal smiles as well.

“Mr Graham. Please take off the shirt you are wearing, and please come over here so that your supervisor can fuck you on the kitchen table.” He pauses. “Please.”

Will doesn't take off the shirt. He slowly walks over to where Hannibal is standing, and leans close to him. Softly, he whispers: “One more time. Nicely.”

Hannibal bites his lip. He can barely breathe. Will is so delicious, so perfect, so...rude. “Please, Will. I want you now, very badly. Please.”

Will takes off the shirt and lets it drop on the floor. “Now kiss me, please.”

Hannibal shoves his hands into Will's hair and pulls him to him roughly. But when he kisses him, it's tender, gentle, as if he has newly found something infinitely precious and wants to cherish it.

Will's hands tighten on Hannibal's sweater, and he moans into the kiss. It's soft and gentle, and not at all what he expected. But he loves it, and he wants more. Will's whisper is low and desperate against his lips. “Hannibal.”

Hannibal whispers, running his hands down Will's naked back: “Have you made the right decision?”

Will arches into his touch. “Yes, I have. Yes.”

“Yes. You have.”

And Hannibal pushes Will down onto the table. A dish is knocked off and shatters on the slate floor but neither of them notices.
Will’s gasp is deafening to his own ears, drowning out the sound of a plate being knocked off the table. And it occurs to him that for the next few years, this is man he’ll be spending most of his time with. Professional and personal. The thought sends a tingling sensation down his body.

As Hannibal gazes at Will Graham, lying on his kitchen table like a delectable feast, he reflects with great satisfaction on how much time they will be spending together. He will be Hannibal’s student, his lover...perhaps something else, as well. And the Ripper will be with them, always: a constant tension, shadow, excitement, secret.

The thought of how much power he has over this young man makes him nearly shiver, even as he touches Will’s hot skin, even as he bends to taste it. He is going to spend the foreseeable future learning every aspect of Will's body and mind. Every aspect, all open to him.

He smiles. And then he glances up to Will’s eyes, and his breath catches, and he is reminded that Will Graham has power over Hannibal, as well.

Will’s eyes close, and he stifles a loud moan, biting down harshly on his lip. A small drop of blood drips from his mouth, trailing down his neck, pooling at his collarbones. He bites down again, harshly, and another drop paints his lips red. This time, the almost breathy moan does escape him. His eyes shoot open, meeting Hannibal's gaze with startling intensity. His name sounds like a prayer on Will's lips. “Hannibal... Hannibal...”

Hunger flares in Hannibal at the sight of Will's blood. He swallows thickly. This isn't the time to—these hungers aren't appropriate to display. Not now. Not yet. “You've hurt yourself, Will.” He takes a linen napkin from the table and presses it to Will's lip.

Will’s hand lightly touches Hannibal's wrist. Breathlessly: “I don't mind. Just kiss me.”

Hannibal looks from the cut on Will's lip, to the blood on the napkin. The blood that remains on his skin. As he watches, another bead of blood wells up on Will's lip. “It's not that you merely don't mind. You want me to taste your blood.”

Without meaning to, Will bites his lip again, barely noticing the fresh blood trickling down. “Does that bother you?”

“I find it...interesting.” He carefully touches the bead of blood with the tip of his tongue. It is rich, salty and sweet. Hannibal barely restrains a shudder through his entire body.

Will’s voice is curious, fascinated: “What do I taste like?”

Hannibal tastes again, a sweep of tongue along Will's lips. His voice is almost drugged. “Like honey in the lion.”

Will moans and tangles his hands in Hannibal’s hair, pulling him in for another kiss. He wonders if the Ripper would think the same. If the taste would satisfy him. If he'd understand Will's fascination. The thoughts light a new kind of fire inside him.

The blood slicks their lips, and Hannibal feels Will tasting it, too. His hunger is almost unbearable.

“Hannibal. Please.”

He sucks on Will's lip, drawing more blood from it, and presses Will down onto the table with his body.

Hannibal's kitchen table is sturdy. It's Danish, wood and metal, modern and built for use as much
as style. Nevertheless, under their combined weight and movement, and at their climactic moment, the table collapses, spilling Will to the floor with Hannibal on top of him, plates crashing around them, cutlery clattering, food spattering on the tiles.

It barely interrupts them.

Afterwards, when they're both catching their breath, limbs entwined, on the floor, Hannibal reaches for a pomegranate that has rolled off the table. He splits it open with his hands and feeds the faceted ruby seeds, one by one, into Will's mouth. Their juice stains his lips as red as his blood has before, and Hannibal licks that off, too.

Hannibal makes them another breakfast, though by now it's lunchtime. They bring this one back to bed, and Will insists on feeding it to Hannibal, bite by bite, his fingers sticky, both of them laughing, dropping crumbs on the perfect sheets. They doze off together, and wake together hungry again for each other, and it's Hannibal's turn to feel drunk, from their bodies moving and exploring, from Will's sudden laughter, from the sharp scent of his skin, the quick glance of his eyes, that yearning deep underneath it all that he is trying to hide from Hannibal, or trying to hide in part, at least. Hannibal feels drunk and happy, almost reckless but not quite, burning with the consciousness that this is only the beginning, the first baby steps of all they will do together.

They're lying in bed, Will's head on Hannibal's shoulder, his fingers toying with Hannibal's chest hair, Hannibal beginning to consider what—or whom—they should have for dinner, when there are two matching noises from opposite sides of the room as both of their phones vibrate at once.

Will lifts his head from Hannibal's shoulder, nearly groaning as his phone buzzes. Hannibal's hand, lazily stroking his back, stills. They both look at each other, reluctant to draw away from this embrace.

With a sigh and a soft kiss to Hannibal's shoulder, Will crawls out of bed to reach his phone, shivering as the warmth leaves his body. He picks up his phone, pausing to glance at the screen. Hannibal sighs and picks up his own phone from the bedside table. “Ah. Do you see what I see?”

Will makes his way back to bed, eyes fixed on his phone. He burrows closer to Hannibal. “I have an email from Dr Gold.”

“So do I.” He puts his arm around Will. “Shall we read them together?”

He kisses Hannibal's jaw. “Can't we read it later?”

“Are you worried about what Dr Gold might have to say?”

He sighs. “Not particularly worried. But when we read the email, the bubble will break.”

“We cannot stay in a bubble forever, Will.” Hannibal kisses his cheekbone. “Sooner or later we will have to deal with the repercussions of the decisions that we have made.”

Will sighs again, and switches on his phone. “You're right.”

“I often am.” He kisses Will again before opening the email.

Dear Mr Graham,

I am sorry to inform you that Dr. Frederick Chilton, your current Masters supervisor, is unable to continue his role as a mentor for your research. The Department of
Psychology takes full responsibility for the inconvenience this has caused you. I have personally chosen a suitable supervisor for you; you do not have to re-apply into the program, and you can continue working on your graduate thesis without further disturbances. You will continue working with this supervisor for your PhD.

A meeting has been set up for tomorrow at 12:00 PM, in my office in the PNB Building. You will be meeting your new supervisor, Dr. Hannibal Lecter. Once your thesis project has been approved by Dr. Lecter, and once the official documents have been signed, I will forward the changes to the faculty. Unfortunately, Dr Chilton is unable to meet with Dr Lecter to discuss the specifics of the research you have been conducting for the past two years. Once again, we apologize for the inconvenience this transition will cause you.

Your belongings have been packed and sent to your new office in BPB Room 401A. Please don't hesitate to email me if you have further questions, or if you are unavailable tomorrow at 12:00 PM. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Dr. Wendy Gold
Dean of Psychology.

Hannibal has been reading along on his own phone, his smile growing wider by the second. “Are you very inconvenienced by this development, Will?”

Will puts his phone away and presses a soft kiss to Hannibal's lips. “I don't know; do you think I'm feeling particularly inconvenienced?”

Hannibal puts his own phone away and slips a hand underneath the sheet to touch Will. “You don't feel inconvenienced to me.”

A deep, shuddering breath. “I don't know how we're going to hide this from everyone else.”

“We shall both have to be very careful about what appearances we put on for the view of others. How experienced are you at dissembling, Will?”

“Dissembling?” Will smiles. “I pretend every single day to have a kind of burning hatred for the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Hannibal smoothes a smile. “As a psychiatrist, I often have to conceal my true feelings from my patients. It sounds as if we both have practice. Though we'll have to be vigilant over ourselves.” He stretches, and props himself up on his elbow to look Will in the face. “Fortunately, I'm free at noon tomorrow to meet my postgraduate student for the first time. Do you happen to be free to meet your new supervisor?”

“Mmm. I suppose I can clear my schedule to meet this man.”

“I wonder if you'll get along with him. Academically, I mean.”

“If he's anything like Chilton, I'll hate him. And if this doesn't work out, there's always Dr. Stern in Georgetown.”

“Believe me, he is nothing like Dr Chilton.” Strokes down Will's shoulder. “Frederick was very angry. He threw you out in a pique.” Hannibal pretends to do a double take. “Dr Stern? In Georgetown? Really?”
“I've never been happier in my life to be thrown out.” Will smiles. “Yes. Dr Stern in Georgetown. He seemed interested. I was going to meet with him next month.”

“You wouldn't like him. He's bald as a billiard cue.”

“But he's very intelligent. And I don't care if he's bald; I won't be sleeping with him.”

Hannibal smiles, and pushes Will onto his back in the bed, rolling over him. “You mean you don't sleep with all of your academic supervisors? No wonder Frederick’s so moody.”

“Is that all I would have to do to make Dr Chilton more compromising? I should’ve thought of this before.”

“It's not too late. You could make it up to him. He might take you back if you did a strip tease for him in his office.”

Will laughs. “I doubt he'd be satisfied. I'd have to give him full consent to experiment on my mind for him to take me back. But what about you, hmm? If you were angry, can I strip tease my way out of trouble?”

“That would be highly unethical.”

“Hm. I'll just have to make sure I don't get into trouble then.”

“We shall both have to make sure we don't get into trouble. To be serious for a moment: there are several very perceptive members of academic staff in the department. Dr Bloom, for example. We shall have to be continuously on our guard when in public.”

Will’s smile fades. “We'll have to be very careful. We could both lose our careers.”

Seriously, looking into Will's eyes: “There's still time to change your mind, Will. The documentation hasn't gone through yet. You could object to my appointment, if you wished. You could ask for Dr Stern instead, or we could engineer our meeting tomorrow so as to give the impression that we are academically incompatible. It would be the safest, and easiest path for us both.”

“This project—the Ripper—deserves nothing less than my best. I can't do that with a supervisor who's afraid of being targeted. Dr. Stern is brilliant, be he doesn't understand the Chesapeake Ripper. This will hinder my performance. I'm sorry to say, but you're stuck with me.”

“I'm sorry to say that you're stuck with me. You, me, and the Chesapeake Ripper. We're an interesting threesome.”

“Then maybe don't ask me again if I want to back out, Dr Lecter? I've made my decision.”

“And I will do everything in my power to ensure you don't regret it.”

“I doubt I'll regret it. I don't even regret working with Chilton. It got me here, didn't it?”

“It certainly did.” Hannibal kisses him thoroughly, then says, “You should go home tonight. We should not be together tomorrow morning.”

Will kisses him back, running his hands over his shoulders. Will nods. “I should go home.” He sighs. “To my empty bed.”

“It's best if you sleep in an empty bed tonight. And if I do the same. We want clear heads for when...
we meet tomorrow. And you…” Hannibal presses his body against Will's, and kisses him. “...You
do not make my head clear.”

Will's lips curve into a small smile. He wraps his arms around Hannibal and closes his eyes. “Ten
more minutes. And then I'm going to leave.”

“Maybe twenty.”

Will laughs. “If I stay for twenty minutes, it'll be harder for me to leave.”

“You're right. Leave now, or you'll have to stay for another hour.” Hannibal touches the small
wound on Will's lip with his tongue.

Will kisses him. He whispers, “You'll need to let go of me for me to leave.”

Regretfully, Hannibal rolls off Will and lies, naked, on his own side of the bed.

Will sits up and climbs out of bed. He stretches, and looks around the room.

“... I don't have clothes.”

Hannibal's smile is like a cat's with cream. “Don't you? What happened to them?”

Will reddens. “...I put them in the laundry but forgot to wash them.”

“We have, to be fair, been rather distracted for the past twenty hours or so. You'll just have to wear
some of mine.”

Will sighs. “’Distracted’ may be an understatement. And thank you, I appreciate that.”

Hannibal gets out of bed. He walks, naked, to his wardrobe; hesitates; goes to a chest of drawers
instead. He takes out a pair of pressed boxer shorts, a grey cashmere sweater, a pair of soft flannel
trousers, a carefully rolled pair of socks. “These aren't too obviously mine, are they? In case you're
seen on your way home.”

Will stares, tilting his head to the side. “They're not very obviously yours. But they're very
obviously... not what I wear. But I highly doubt I'll be seen when I'm going back home.”

Hannibal is still looking like a cat with cream. “I am very much looking forward to seeing you in
your natural habitat.”

“Natural habitat?” Will smiles. “Which one?”

“When you're not all dressed up for your birthday. Or in your birthday suit.”

He doesn't know what his natural habitat even is. “I suppose you'll find out soon enough.”

“I look forward to finding out many things about you, Will.” Hannibal reaches for his own clothes;
picks up the red sweater, and puts it back down as having had rather too much use recently. “I'd
rather not call you a cab from this address; do you mind catching one outside the restaurant on the
corner? It's all in the name of discretion.”

“I don't mind catching one from there. If anyone ever gets suspicious, it'll be good to never have
any evidence that can be used against us.”

“You're thinking like a criminal, Will.”
He wonders which one is in his head right now. Or if it's just him. Will shoots Hannibal a teasing smile. “One could say that what we're doing is... criminal.”

“Not quite criminal. But certainly we want to avoid detection.” A quick glance. “It could almost enhance your insight into the Ripper's state of mind.”

Will looks at him. “Yes. Perhaps. Perhaps not, because the Ripper doesn't consciously hide, does he? For him, it's almost an instinct. When he "hides", he hides in plain sight. On the other hand, I'm consciously hiding in the shadows. It's the opposite of what he does, and it's what gets people caught.” Will starts dressing.

“You're very good,” says Hannibal. “I wonder if you know exactly how good.”

“Good enough to be accepted as your postgraduate student, Dr Lecter?”

Hannibal closes the gap between them swiftly. “Good enough for anything you set your mind to.” He kisses the side of his mouth.

Will finishes getting dressed, quickly putting on the socks. His shoes are still by the front door, where he left them. “I should go now.”

“Yes. I'll see you tomorrow, at noon. When you will be a stranger to me.”

Will kisses him again. With a small smile, he leaves.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter...Perfect Strangers
Perfect Strangers

Chapter Summary

_Hannibal Lecter dresses for this meeting with Will Graham knowing that, if Will chooses to take it, Hannibal is under his power._

...There is a possibility that Hannibal may be the only survivor of this meeting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day, Hannibal dresses with care.

He dresses with care every day, of course, but today his three-piece suit is more than a veil: it's a fortress. He is, he knows, at the most delicate stage of this negotiated relationship with Will Graham. He is, for now, at a disadvantage. Email timestamps, phone records, will confirm that he knew he was Will Graham's supervisor at the same time that Will Graham can testify they were deeply embroiled in a physical relationship with each other. Whereas Will only formally knew later, when they'd received the email, just before he left.

It is an oversight; a mistake. He should have compromised Will more deeply. Hannibal Lecter dresses for this meeting with Will Graham knowing that, if Will chooses to take it, Hannibal is under his power.

He knots his paisley tie and double-checks it in the mirror. He thinks back to the decision that Will made, in his kitchen, the day before. When Will chose to break every law of the world he belonged to, by accepting Hannibal both as his academic supervisor and as his lover. When they consummated that decision and broke his kitchen table.

At the time, he'd taken it as a good symbol: Will's scruples and ethics breaking under the weight of his desire, both for Hannibal Lecter and for the Ripper. But now...perhaps it was just a table breaking. Perhaps Will Graham, with all of his talk of being attracted to the Chesapeake Ripper, was merely setting a trap.

Hannibal finishes knotting his tie, checks his suit for creases, and slips a finely honed silver scalpel into his breast pocket. He thinks of Will Graham's face, and hopes he won't have to use his blade.

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There is nothing particularly unusual about the day. He wakes up to dreams that others would consider nightmares; he goes on his morning run with his dog, comes back home, quickly showers, and leaves. He doesn't remember to eat breakfast. He spends an hour at the library, typing away furiously on his laptop, a fresh cup of coffee in his hand. Black, with no sugar, and no cream.

And finally, he puts on his glasses, and arrives at Dr Gold's office at 12:00 PM. Sharp.
He looks, for all intents and purposes, entirely unapproachable.

***

Hannibal arrives a few minutes before noon. He wants to have complete mastery of their surroundings, know every escape route, vantage point, weapon. There is a possibility that he may be the only survivor of this meeting. So when Will arrives, he is already sitting in one of Dr Gold's office armchairs, chatting with the department head and Dr Alana Bloom, who has been asked to be present. They are drinking coffee that Hannibal has brought, and when Will walks in, they all look up.

With three solid knocks on the door, Will briskly enters the room. His eyes pass over Dr Lecter and Dr Bloom, and settle on Dr Gold. He briefly meets her eyes, before firmly shaking her hand. “Good afternoon.”

Hannibal didn't expect to feel anything in particular when Will entered the room; he was fully prepared for the situation and was looking forward to it, with his usual curiosity. But when Will walks in, wearing glasses that Hannibal has never seen and an unapproachable, almost arrogant expression that Hannibal has never seen either, he's hit with a visceral slam of attraction, a full-body memory of what they have experienced together in the past two days. His face betrays nothing as he stands to be introduced to Will, holding out his hand for Will to shake.

Hannibal looks... perfect. Too perfect. His hair is meticulously styled, his paisley tie perfectly knotted. His face is expressionless, but his posture warm and approachable. He looks... completely in control.

And Will feels a kind of satisfaction at knowing what the man looks like when he lets a bit of his control slip. When his tie lies discarded on some chair, when his hair hangs over his forehead.

And when their eyes meet, Will doesn't look at him the way he looked at him last night. His gaze lacks warmth. When they shake hands, it's short and impersonal. Will looks at him the way he looks at anyone else.

Not interesting enough.

They exchange pleasantries; Hannibal pours Will a cup of coffee from his flask. As Dr Gold explains the situation that they already know, Hannibal reflects on what a good liar William Graham is. How well he hides his emotions...if there are any indeed there to begin with.

This could be an elaborate trap. Will Graham is, possibly, clever enough to conceive-and execute it. Because this sort of dissembling is almost impossible for anyone but a professional actor, or a sociopath. Or for someone like Hannibal Lecter.

But Hannibal has never met anyone quite that much like himself before.

There is no trace of the impulsive, passionate man whom Hannibal had in his bed yesterday. Instead, Hannibal can see why Frederick Chilton said, in his angry phone call, that Will Graham was on the autistic spectrum. The avoidance of eye contact, the almost abrupt way he speaks, the way he shrugs off or ignores social niceties...and yet this affect was absent, or almost absent, in all of his previous interactions with Hannibal.

Hannibal Lecter smiles, and discusses Will's research and his plans, and observes him closely without appearing to do so. He wonders if it's reckless of him to find Will even more attractive, now that he's seen the other man's ability to lie.
The meeting doesn't take very long. By the time it's 1:00 PM, Dr. Bloom is already taking out the documents. She glances at Will and Hannibal. "I'm assuming that no one has any objections? You will both be signing the document?"

Without looking at Hannibal, Will says, “I'll be signing the document. As long as Dr Lecter is comfortable working on the Ripper.”

“I have no objection to working on anything you would like to, Will.” Hannibal takes a heavy fountain pen from his pocket, next to his scalpel, and signs the document with a perfect calligraphic signature.

Wordlessly, Will takes out his own ballpoint pen, and signs the document. It's settled. They're stuck together for the next few years.

Hannibal smiles and stands. “Well, Mr Graham, I have an hour spare right now. Shall we go to my office and begin to review your research to date? Although Dr Chilton declined to assist with the handover, I'm confident that a student of your calibre should be able to quickly agree an action plan for the remainder of your degree.”

Will barely looks at him. He quickly shakes Dr Gold's hand, and nods at Dr Bloom. And then he leaves the room, the sound of the door shutting behind him just a bit too loud.

Hannibal watches him go, his eyebrows slightly raised. “What a charming young man.”

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Will leaves the building, making a short stop at a cafe to get himself coffee before continuing on his way to Hannibal's office. He lets himself in, and immediately goes to 401A. His office. Will pauses as he takes in the various cartons and boxes. Dr Gold was definitely not lying when she said that Chilton sent over all his belongings. A few things seem to be missing, but he's certain they'll show up in a few days.

A few minutes pass as he picks up some files, sorting them in the order they're supposed to be in. Will looks at the time again. Dr Lecter is late. With a small sigh, he picks up a file and settles on his desk, flipping through the pages as he waits for Hannibal.

By the time Hannibal arrives, half an hour later, Will has gone through several files and has stacked them on his new desk. Will hears Hannibal entering the office, humming, and he takes a few moments before he appears in the doorway of 401A. Hannibal glances around the room, hands in his pockets, smiling.

“Do you always work so untidily, Will?”

“Have you always been a perfectionist, Hannibal?” He glances up at him. “You're late.”

“Dr Bloom wanted to speak with me privately.”

“Is this something I'm not supposed to know?”

“Yes.” He enters Will's office and picks up a file Will has discarded, not yet opening it. The file is about one of Chesapeake Ripper's first kills. The copy of an official document. There are notes scribbled on almost every empty space not covered by text. Will has never showed some of these files to anyone.

“And you're still telling me?” Will asks.
“Of course. If we have to deceive everyone else, we must try to be totally honest between ourselves.” Hannibal still doesn't open the file, but taps it against his other hand. “Alana and I have worked together extensively before. She knows me better than almost anyone else. She was...concerned that I had taken you on as a student.”

Will raises his eyebrows. “Concerned?” His eyes follow Hannibal's movement as he taps the folder.

“She wasn't concerned about my motivations. She knows that I am always scrupulously professional.” His lip twitches infinitesimally. “She was concerned about my working with you. She says that you are brilliant, but difficult. That you have made very few friends on campus. That several of your fellow students have expressed the opinion that you may be unstable. That Dr Chilton has repeatedly complained of your truculence. And finally…” He does smile at this: “She warned me not to psychoanalyse you.”

Will's lips twitch. “It's very nice of her to give you a few warnings before we start working together. I suppose she clearly knows all of this about me. Just like she clearly knows how ‘scrupulously professional’ you are.” He smiles. “Tell me, Dr Lecter: What do you think?”

“I think you dismiss Dr Bloom's perceptions too quickly. She's a skilled observer. She may have based some of her comments on your behaviour in our meeting. She clearly picked up on something unusual, although she attributed it all to you rather than to any tension between us. It would be well to weigh our behaviour carefully, when watched by Dr Bloom.”

“I'm not dismissing her perceptions. She's right in many ways. And she'll most certainly be watching.”

“Are you unstable, Will? Do you feel unstable?”

“I'm not unstable.” And he isn't. No personal distress, no impairment. Perhaps he's different, uncaring; but not unstable. Are nightmares even nightmares if one enjoys them?

“I've seen no signs of it, myself. But I barely know you, Will. We barely know each other. And I've been warned not to psychoanalyse you.” He smiles, picks up Will's empty paper coffee cup, and sniffs it. “Not the best coffee on campus.”

“I don't have the best experiences with being psychoanalyzed.” Will sighs. “The coffee serves its purpose by keeping me awake.”

“How did you sleep last night?”

“The way I sleep almost every night.”

“Almost?”

“On rare occasions, I don't dream.”

Very quietly, Hannibal asks: “Of what did you dream in my house, Will?”

“Maybe this is a conversation for another time.”

“Maybe it is.” Hannibal looks at the unopened file in his hand. “May I see your work?”

A small pause. “You may.”
Hannibal smiles. He has been somewhat formal and alert since entering the office, but now he visibly relaxes and looks as if he is anticipating a treat.

“I'll get some cups from my office. I have more coffee in my flask.” He leaves the room.

Will wonders if it's a good idea to have more coffee on an empty stomach. He sighs as Hannibal leaves the room, and returns to sorting his files. His elbow hits a small carton, and he swears under his breath as it falls on the floor, hundreds of pictures of crime scenes spilling out. Will kneels down, and starts picking them up, organizing them the way they were before.

Hannibal returns with two cups, his flask and a small paper bag. He sees Will kneeling on the floor amongst glossy photos. “Would you like a hand?” He kneels beside Will and reaches for a photo.

“I—it's all right—” But it's too late. Hannibal is already kneeling beside him. The photo he's holding is The Wound Man. Among the photos is a copy of the original Wound Man drawing.

Hannibal gazes at the photo. Looking at his work doesn't arouse him; rather it reminds him of the satisfaction of creating it. It gives him a quiet sense of a job well done, the world set right. He remembers the insertion of each instrument into this hunter's body, each one a reversed echo of the arrow he'd extracted from the man when he'd been Hannibal's patient. Each one precise, delicate, calculated, aesthetically pleasing.

He regards his work and he feels Will watching him regard it, and there is a satisfaction in that, too.

He carefully puts the photo to one side and picks up the replica of The Wound Man. “I have seen this before.”

“It's one of his very famous designs. One of my favorites, but not my most favorite. I can never understand the motive. It's quite—” Beautiful, magnificent, full of meaning and intent “—artistic. But I've always wondered why he chose this drawing.”

Hannibal could answer this in many different ways. He could mention the victim's sarcasm; his contempt for his own injury and the cavalier way in which he treated the ER staff. He could talk about the beauty of all these instruments of torture and healing. He could mention how the multiplicity of wounds obscures how important the surgical wounds are.

Instead he says: “It's instructional.”

Will raises his eyebrows, puzzled. “How is it instructional if the victim died before he could learn?” A small pause. “Unless... the victim was alive when he did it? A sedative, perhaps. Or, at the very least, something that would stop the victim from talking.”

“Do you have the post-mortem report?” Hannibal holds out his hand for it.

Will sighs. “They refused to give it to me. I'm still working on getting it. For some reason, this is the only one I've been unable to acquire. All the other requests for documents were cleared. It might have something to do with the FBI trainee who got involved.”

“Reportedly the FBI are notably protective of their own. Who was the trainee, and how were they involved?” Hannibal shakes his head. “—Forgive me. I'm sure this is all in your notes. You asked me a question: instructive to whom? Even without an autopsy report, I'd surmise that these wounds were inflicted post mortem. That's the Ripper's normal procedure, isn't it? He's a killer, but not a sadist. The point of the killing is the victim's death and their transformation, not their pain. If this killing is instructive to the victim, it's only in a metaphorical sense.”
Hannibal picks up the reproduction of The Wound Man. “I've seen this drawing before in textbooks. It was used to teach surgeons about wound placement. It's an educational tool. That's why I say this murder is instructional. It's teaching the observers, not the victim.” He gazes down at the drawing. “Do the police know about this connection, by the way?”

Will looks at Hannibal with a strange expression on his face; one that can only be described as admiration.

“You're... right. The victim was transformed to something more. Something better. And this transformation elevated him to a different level. He was more useful in death—as an instructional tool—than he was in life. And he was... more beautiful in death, transformed into an art piece, than in life.”

Will shakes his head. “I don't think they ever made the connection. And I'm not going to help them with that.”

He freezes.

Hannibal puts down the drawing. “Will? Are you all right?”

Will quickly picks up the photos and stands. “Yes.”

“You don't want anyone but yourself to catch the Ripper, do you?”

With his back to Hannibal, he closes his eyes. “I don't want to catch him, Dr Lecter.”

“You want to meet him.”

“Yes.”

“You want to know him, and for him to know you.”

“That can't happen if he gets caught.”

“You're not writing a thesis. You're writing a wish list. And in the process you're actively obstructing justice.”

Hannibal stands, straightening his clothes. “No wonder you didn't want Dr Chilton or Dr Stern to supervise you.”

Will turns around, fists clenched. “Wish list? Wish list? This is not a... wish list. This is me trying to understand him. This is something I'm putting effort and time in.” His lips curl. “I'm not begging him to see me. I'm not asking him to establish contact. I'm telling him that if I wish to, I can find him. I can catch him. You are oversimplifying my thoughts without having an ounce of knowledge about me, or my past. And as for obstructing justice... Who decides what justice is? Or morality? For all we know, this is the Ripper's version of justice.”

Will looks at him, his eyes blazing. “I didn't choose Chilton or Stern because they wouldn't understand.”

“And you think I do understand, Will? Or did you agree to work with me because you have power over me? Because you could ruin my career with a word, and therefore you know I will let you do exactly as you like?”

“I don't know if you understand, but I do know that we share a fascination for the Ripper.” Will
struggles to keep his voice steady. “I would gain nothing by ruining your career.” He's nearly shaking now. “If I wanted someone to merely allow me to do whatever I wanted, I would stay with Chilton. I would let him conduct whatever experiment he wanted to conduct on my mind, in exchange for secrecy. I'd let him look into my thoughts—but that's not the point, is it? He would see, but he wouldn't understand.” A deep breath. “I wanted someone to guide me. I can't receive guidance if my adviser merely lets me do what I want.”

There is a small pause.

Abruptly, Will speaks, “You—I'm leaving.” He reaches for the door.

Quietly, Hannibal says: “I do understand you.”

His hand pauses on the door handle. “You don't. Or you would never say that I want to ruin your career, Dr Lecter.”

Will's anger is real; not manufactured. Blackmail has honestly never crossed his mind...and Hannibal has no reason to kill him, after all.

Will Graham wants only to be understood. By the Chesapeake Ripper, and by Hannibal Lecter.

“I asked because I wanted to know the truth. Because I had to know the truth. And now I know it. You are not the only person who will take risks in order to be understood, Will.”

Will doesn't quite know how to respond to that. He closes his eyes, resting his head against the door, his hand still on the handle.

“You wanted to provoke a response to gauge my honesty. You got what you wanted. I'm going to leave now.”

“No: I asked a direct question. It was rude, but necessary. I've said already that we have to be honest with each other, since we're deceiving everyone else. I had doubts; I expressed them; you assuaged them. I'm sorry to have made you angry.”

Will sighs, and opens his eyes. “You made me very angry.”

“I'm usually much easier to work with,” says Hannibal.

“Forgive me if I'm not entirely convinced.”

“I shall have to prove it to you.” Very softly, Hannibal adds: “It isn't wise to touch you in our office. But I want to, very much.”

“Touching me would do nothing. Our physical relationship is separate from our academic one.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. It is.”

Hannibal has very different views on this, but he decides to let it drop, for now. “Shall we get on with our academic relationship, then?” He picks up the file again.

Will sighs, and walks back to where Hannibal is standing.

“Tell me how you discovered this drawing of The Wound Man.”
“It's from surgical texts from the Middle Ages,” Will says. “I thought these texts would be something he'd be interested in. Finding The Wound Man drawing was an accident.”

“How many more of these 'accidental' insights have you had?”

“Not many. I don't know him well enough.”

“But you will.”

“Maybe. I hope so.”

“Show me what you do know. I said I had an hour, but I have all day. I want to see what you've learned.”

Will looks at him, and then walks over to the back of the room. He picks up a carton, full of more files and papers, and puts it on the table. “This is everything I know that I've written down. But it's hard to put into words. It's all in my head.”

Hannibal nods. “Talk me through it. Don't worry about logic, or reason; give me your feelings, your gut instincts.” He goes to the desk, pours two cups of coffee. He opens the small paper bag he brought in and takes out a dozen perfect purple figs, velvet and plump and so fragrant Will can smell them from across the office. “Come. Tell me everything.”

Will slowly walks to the desk, and sits down on one of the chairs. He takes a small sip of his coffee, and starts talking.

By the time he's done, a few hours have passed. He talks without inhibitions, about everything from the Ripper's design to the meaning behind them. His temperament, his nature. How he's the kind of man to create his own path. He talks about how people perceive him, about how wrong they all are to label him as a psychopath. And finally, he talks about his design.

“They're wrong, I believe, to say he's an organ seller. The Ripper would find that incredibly inelegant. Implying that he sells the organs contradicts his whole design. Elegance is the most important thing. Elegance, beauty, art, meaning, intelligence.”

There is a small pause. Will sighs, and clears his throat. “... And that's it.”

Hannibal has been listening and watching with fascination. Will is full of life as he speaks; there's a light in his face and animation to all his movements. And he doesn't know everything, in fact there are huge gaps in his knowledge; but he knows much, much more than Miriam Lass did, and Miriam Lass, with better physical reflexes, would have captured him.

Hannibal Lecter is sitting next to the one man who is uniquely qualified to admire his life's work; and, if he wanted to to remove Hannibal's freedom forever. But he does not want to.

The sun has set while they've been talking, or rather while Will has been talking. Will, though still animated, looks tired, running on nerves and caffeine, and the single fig he'd managed to eat between words, forgetting about it between-bites.

“Thank you, Will. I believe that is extraordinary. I'm going to enjoy working with you.”

Will smiles. “I hope you do. We'll be working together for a few years.”

“But no more, for today.” Hannibal stands and stretches. “If you can make your way to my house I'd be pleased to make you dinner. But I won't blame you if you'd rather go home to bed.”
“I think I might stay here for a few more hours. I need to sort out my files.”

“As you wish.” Hannibal picks up his flask, and goes to the door. His face betrays no emotions. “Goodnight.”

Will gives him a small smile. “Goodnight.”

Hannibal leaves, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: He Would Eat My Heart
Chapter Summary

Will can't see his face, but he knows that the Ripper is smiling. "You are not a victim. You are a student, choosing to observe from a victim's body." And as the words leave his mouth, the Ripper leans over and kisses Will's lips, almost tenderly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As soon as Hannibal leaves, Will leans back in his chair and closes his eyes. His mind is overwhelmed with thoughts of the Ripper. This is the first time he has been able to freely talk about him. It was... liberating.

And yet, it's immensely overwhelming. Too much to process, to know. Like he had too much of something too fast.

Slowly, he sits up, and starts organizing the files. And as he sorts the papers, he sorts his memory palace. Gradually, the random passages of information in his mind begin to settle down.

Will stays there for four more hours after Hannibal leaves. He is tired, physically and mentally. By the time he reaches home and collapses on his bed, it's 1:00 AM. He's asleep as soon as his head hits the pillow.

And like almost every night, he dreams of the Ripper.

***

He dreams of thick, warm blood, slowly trickling down a man's feet, rapidly cooling and drying on the wooden floor. It reminds him of Hannibal's eyes. The color of drying blood.

He dreams of the Chesapeake Ripper, a faceless man. His dark silhouette standing over Will's naked body, slowly turning him into The Wound Man. His eyes are deep and familiar as they stare into Will's.

"It's instructional, Will."

Will gazes back, eyebrows scrunching. How is it instructional if he's the victim?

He can't see his face, but he knows that the Ripper is smiling. "You are not a victim. You are a student, choosing to observe from a victim's body." And as the words leave his mouth, the Ripper leans over and kisses Will's lips, almost tenderly.

He feels a knife cutting a line down his torso, and he feels the Ripper's hands gently reach inside his chest. A hand closes around his heart, squeezing tightly. Will's pained gasps are swallowed down by the Chesapeake Ripper's lips.

He whispers, against Will's lips, "Do you think I could do this to a living man, Will? Would all my victims be so pliant and willing?"
The hand around his heart tightens. And the Ripper twists his wrist, and wrenches Will's heart out of his chest.

Hot blood spills on the table, dripping down to the floor. And the Ripper, with Will's heart in his hand, merely smiles and brings the organ closer to his lips. He takes a bite, and the heart continues to beat. From a distance, Will feels pain.

"Do you see, William? Do you understand?"

***

When Will Graham wakes up, at 5:35 AM, he's drenched in sweat and painfully aroused.

And when he calls Hannibal, at 5:36 AM, he's breathless and delirious. He gasps out: “My heart. He would eat my heart.”

When Will wakes up again, he doesn't recall the dream. He doesn't remember the phone call.

He does, however, remember the Chesapeake Ripper. He remembers his arousal.

Will doesn't know what to think.

***

Hannibal is not happy when he leaves Will at the university, and goes back home. He should not be piqued by having his invitation to dinner refused. Especially as Will refused it in order to spend more time with Hannibal's own secret work.

But he is piqued. He is disappointed. He is…

Is it possible to be jealous of one's own self?

Nevertheless, he expects Will's knock on the door as he prepares dinner: confit of leg, with pommes de terre sarladaises cooked in the rendered fat; a bitter, refreshing salad of endive and blood orange. He makes enough for two, and eats alone, sipping his Burgundy, gazing at the perfectly-presented dish across the dining table, rapidly cooling.

After he has finished eating, he scrapes Will's full plate into the kitchen bin.

Hannibal Lecter does not wait for phone calls. He does not listen for a knock at the door. He enjoys his own company. He goes to his study and catches up on the work which he neglected in order to spend two days with Will Graham, looking up every few minutes at an imagined sound of a visitor, and thinking about Will sitting surrounded by photographs of Hannibal's work. Thinks about those scenes of beautiful death coming to life in Will's mind, so that Will can experience them as Hannibal has, and does: with all his senses, with all his intellect.

He wonders what it would be like to watch Will at an actual crime scene. In a scene that Hannibal has created. He wonders what he would see in Will's face.

Distracted, it takes him a good deal of time to catch up with his work, and this distraction adds to his annoyance. Will Graham is rude. He is arrogant and obsessive. He has a strange power over Hannibal Lecter, which Hannibal has some difficulty in precisely defining to himself.

And the worst part of it is that Hannibal finds it attractive, to be partly in Will Graham's thrall. It has happened so very rarely in his life.
Finally he gives up working and stands, pushing his chair back. He says aloud, to the silent room: “I may have to eat him.”

***

Unusually for Hannibal, it takes a good deal of time to fall asleep. Unusually, for him, he dreams.

His dream is of glossy photographs, scattered on a floor, but they are not crime scene photographs. They are shots of Florence, Paris; Lecter Castle, John Hopkins, galleries and dissecting rooms and operating theatres, lecture halls and schoolrooms, the rooms where he learned and trained and became, and all of those rooms are empty.

When his phone rings at 5.36 am, he awakes certain he is in his uncle's library and it is only when he sees Will's name on his phone screen that he remembers where he is, although he cannot quite understand the leap his heart makes.

His voice, when he answers, is calm and detached, divorced from his thoughts. “Good morning, Will.”

Will gasps on the other end of the line. He is panting, his voice shaky and intimate with fear and...desire?

"My heart," Will gasps. "He would eat my heart."

And then the call disconnects, before Hannibal can respond.

Hannibal knows who 'he' is. He knows it is himself. He would know even if he didn't know Will's obsession, because as soon as the words enter his mind he is thinking of Will's heart.

The feel of it in his hand, warm and wet and muscular. The scent of it. Its flavour.

Hannibal lies back down in his bed, this bed he has shared with Will, and thinks not of empty rooms, but of recipes.

***

It isn't until after his morning run that Will realizes that he... may have been rude to Hannibal last night. He may have unintentionally implied that sorting the Ripper's files was more important to him than dinner with Dr Lecter.

Will wonders if it would be appropriate to show up at Dr Lecter's house on Saturday morning. He does want to apologize, but he doesn't want to dig himself a deeper hole by being rude. Again.

Will sighs. He looks at the flash-drive connected to his laptop. He does need to show Dr Lecter his thesis... And he does need to apologize. There is no question about that.

He stands, and walks over to his liquor cabinet. He takes out an unopened bottle of his favorite whisky. Highland Park 18 Year Old. He feels that Hannibal would appreciate this whisky, more than others would. He makes his decision.

And thus, he quickly gets dressed, wearing a light sweater and trousers. He takes his flash-drive, the whisky and the clothes he borrowed from Hannibal, and leaves. On his way, he makes a short stop at Mrs Harrison's to drop off Luna.

In less than twenty minutes, he's standing outside Hannibal's door, ringing the doorbell and shifting
nervously.

Hannibal opens the door. He's been prepping in his kitchen; he still wears his apron around his waist, and the sleeves of his rust-coloured shirt are rolled up to his elbows.

“Ah. Good morning, Will.” His voice is courteous: no more.

Will swallows. For a moment, he just stares, not really know what to say. He opens his mouth. Closes it. Opens it again. Closes it.

Softly, he says: “I'm sorry.” He holds out the whisky bottle, not meeting Hannibal's eyes. “I realize that I was rude last night.”

Hannibal opens the door, and steps back for Will to enter. Will glances at Hannibal, and walks inside. The house is full of a rich aroma of cooking.

“Do you mind coming through to the kitchen?” Hannibal asks. “I'm in the middle of something.”

The house smells... amazing. Will suddenly realizes that perhaps he should've called before coming to Hannibal's house. “Do you have plans for tonight? I apologize if I interrupted you.”

“Tonight is a long way away.”

He leads Will to the kitchen. The broken table is gone, as is the clutter of broken dishes. Instead, there's a rug and a leather armchair, a small table beside it with an open cookery book. Hannibal takes the whisky bottle as Will offers it wordlessly again. “This is a nice malt. Thank you. Coffee?”

The table is gone. Will reddens. He had forgotten about the table. “Coffee would be great, thank you.”

Hannibal pours a cup and hands it to him. “Do you mind if I cook? Timing is a little bit crucial on some of these recipes.”

“Thank you.” Will takes a sip of his coffee, and places the cup on the table. “Would you like some help? This seems like a lot of work for one person.”

“I enjoy cooking. It relaxes me. This morning, I'm trying the same cut of meat prepared three different ways, to see which I prefer. Please, have a seat, I don't need help—unless you're experienced in grilling anticuchos?”

Will sighs, and sits down. “No experience. Sorry.” He shifts awkwardly in his seat, unsure of what he's supposed to do. Normally, he wouldn't care. But Hannibal is... different.

Hannibal goes back to the counter and begins threading chunks of precisely-cut meat onto skewers. “You can help me by tasting, if you like. Thank you for your apology, Will. I appreciate it.”

“I—” Will swallows. “—My personality is somewhat obsessive. Last night, my mind was... After talking so much about the Ripper, everything was too much. I needed to sort out not just the files, but also my memory palace, and—” Will pauses, realizing that he's rambling. He stands. “I'll taste, if you want me to.”

“Please relax. It's not ready yet.” Hannibal lights a small charcoal brazier that he's set up under the kitchen fan, and then turns to put a sauté pan on the hob, melting butter in it. “Tell me, Will. Which relationship of ours brings you here? Our academic relationship, or our physical one?”
“Both. I wanted to apologize for how I acted last night. And I needed to give you a copy of my thesis.” Will suddenly remembers that he already emailed a copy of his thesis to Hannibal. Last night. “I... The latter may have been an excuse to see you.”

He wishes the ground could swallow him right about now.

Hannibal is lifting a skewer of meat to place on the grill. He looks up at Will, and for the first time, he smiles. “I’m glad to see you too.”

Will really doesn’t know what to say to that. “...I should leave.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just feel like I should.”

“The Chesapeake Ripper won’t begrudge you a few hours with a friend, Will.” He puts the meat on the grill, and immediately a mouth-watering scent fills the air.

Will shakes his head. “For once, this isn’t about the Chesapeake Ripper.” It’s about you. “I don’t particularly want to leave, but I don’t know if you want me to be he—” He stills. “That smells delicious.”

Whilst the meat is grilling, Hannibal slides two more slices of meat into the sauté pan to pan-fry. “I invited you to dinner, Will. And I never break a promise, or rescind an invitation.” He bends and takes a covered casserole out of the oven. “Though this may be more like brunch.”

And Will is filled with crushing guilt. He wonders how long it’s been since someone was this kind to him, despite his rudeness. “But what about your dinner party?”

“I’m not having a dinner party. I’m trying out recipes, for my own personal pleasure. And now, I hope, yours.”

He turns the meat in the sauté pan, and quickly lifts out a parcel of steaming meat from the casserole dish, and slices it. A whole new rich scent fills the air. He plates it, drizzles sauce, transfers the sizzling pan-fried meat to the plates as well, scattering over a green topping. Then he removes the skewers from the grill and puts one of each on the plates.

“Do you mind coming through to the dining room? I seem to have lost my kitchen table, somehow.”

“You’re cooking for your enjoyment?” Will says, puzzled. “Did you know I was going to come here?” His mind catches up with Hannibal’s words, and he flushes. Will wordlessly follows him to the dining room.

The table is set for one; Hannibal swiftly adds a place setting and puts the plates down, across from each other.

“So, this is an experiment.” he says, taking his seat. “The same cut of meat, prepared three ways. Stuffed with mushrooms and braised in a red wine sauce; pan-fried with gremolata; and marinated and grilled in the style of Peruvian anticuchos. You must tell me which you prefer. I’m really quite curious about your taste.”

Will looks at the plate. Something stirs at the corner of his mind. Something familiar. “What cut of meat is this?”
Hannibal slices into his food and raises a morsel to his lips. “It's heart.”

A shiver runs down Will’s spine. His chest tightens. Will doesn't know if this is fear or pleasure. He feels as if he's missing something.

Will takes a bite of the first one. He nearly moans. “This is... very good. You're a talented chef.”

“Thank you. It's one of my hobbies.” He savours his bite of grilled heart. “We've engaged in several intimate acts, but we hardly know each other, Will.”

Will tastes the other two. They're just as good. “I think the first one is my favorite.” Will glances at him. “You're right. We hardly know each other. Would you like us to know each other better?”

“Yes, I think I would like to know you much better.” Hannibal tastes the braised heart; considers. “Which one did you try first, and like best?”

Will smiles. “I would like to know you better as well. I like the one stuffed with mushrooms and braised in red wine sauce.”

“Coincidentally, that is also my favourite.” Hannibal smiles at Will across the table: a warm, genuine smile.

Will takes another bite. He chews, and swallows. His cheeks are slightly red. “You have a very nice smile.”

“You have a very nice blush.”

“I don't blush.”

“I beg to differ.”

“I don't.”

“You blushed when you begged me to kiss you.”

“Did I? I don't recall. And I'm fairly certain I didn't beg.”

“That's right,” says Hannibal. “I'm sorry. You begged later on.”

“That's funny. I really don't remember begging.”

Hannibal takes another bite of heart. “Perhaps you need me to refresh your memory.”

“Or maybe you need to refresh your own memory.”

“So we're both agreed: we need a little refresher.”

“But we haven't finished brunch.”

“Let's finish brunch, then.” Hannibal carries on eating, insouciantly.

Will shifts in his seat. He takes another bite.

“Unseasonably warm for this time of year, isn't it?” says Hannibal.

“Very hot.”
“That's obviously why your cheeks are flushed. Since you never blush.”

“Of course. I shouldn't have chosen this sweater for today. It's meant for colder weather.”

“Yes; I'd definitely say you're overdressed.”

Will smiles. “I happen to rather like this sweater. I think I'll keep it on.”

Hannibal finishes his last bite; he lays down his cutlery. “Have you eaten heart before, Will?”

He still has a little bit left. “No. But I do like it.”

“I'm glad. It's an interesting cut of meat, not only for its flavour and texture, but for its significance.”

“The heart…” Will says. “It's an intimate organ, isn't it?”

“Aristotle said the heart was the seat of all emotion. In modern times, we know that our emotions come from our brains, and yet we persist in using the heart as a metaphor for love. Perhaps it's because of our cardiac response to desire. When we are with someone we are attracted to, our hearts beat faster. Our circulatory system accelerates; we feel agitated; we blush. The heart feels very powerful at these times; as if it is controlling us, not the other way round.” Hannibal folds his napkin. “But it is just another muscle, after all.”

“The symbolism and the meaning behind the heart are both very powerful. It may be just another muscle, but our first instinct is to think of it as a symbol of love. Consuming a heart to aid the beating of your own heart is something…” Will struggles for the right word. “It's...Intoxicating.”

“Perhaps even arousing.”

Will’s heart skips a beat, but he doesn't even know why. “I don't know.”

“Oh course, these are lamb hearts that I've cooked. Not human hearts. Eating a human heart would be...unthinkable.”

Will hesitates. “Do you think... Do you think the Ripper eats the organs?”

Hannibal looks at Will steadily, without blinking. “What makes you say that?”

“It's... It's a beautiful and elegant concept, isn't it? Consumption is the ultimate form of both flattery and contempt. One can feel so much love and respect for an individual that one wants to consume them; make them yours forever. On the other hand, you can feel so much contempt that you want them to, quite literally, give you their life. They will be more useful in death than in life. They hate you, but they're keeping you alive. It's ironic. Almost amusing. Irony and elegance. It's the Ripper's design.”

Hannibal has not missed the shift in Will's pronouns, from 'one' to 'you'.

“Which do you think it would be if the Ripper ate you, Will? Flattery, or contempt?”

“No.”

“What would it be?”

“He'd eat me because I'd appreciate the beauty.”
Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: You See Everything

Note: I made the stuffed hearts recipe, here: https://twitter.com/LegoHannibal/status/727587730666958848. It was delicious.
You See Everything

Chapter Summary

Hannibal feels Will trembling, gasping for breath, his skin slick under Hannibal’s touch, and Hannibal knows without a shadow of doubt that Will Graham is dreaming about the Chesapeake Ripper whilst unknowingly in the Chesapeake Ripper’s bed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In all this discussion of hearts, Hannibal Lecter's heartbeat has been calm and steady. But now, it accelerates. Because eating Will Graham would be fitting. It would be the consummation of his desire to be noticed and understood.

Will eats his last bite. He doesn't look at Hannibal, and he doesn't say anything. An answer isn't needed.

As he lays down his knife and fork, Hannibal reaches his hand out across the table, palm up, to him. Will places his hand in Hannibal’s, and looks up at him.

“Will you tell this latest insight of yours to the police?” Hannibal asks.

“No. This news would spread like wildfire. People will panic, and they'll never even find him. It will do more harm than good. And I don't want him found. He's already killing people; how much worse is it that he's eating them?”

Hannibal squeezes his hand. “Are you counting the Ripper's sins?”

Will squeezes back. “I'm not sure of that yet.”

“Are you counting yours?”

“There's no point. I have no one who depends on me. No one who would be affected by my sins.”

“How interesting. Both of us are without family. Do you think like calls to like, Will?”

“That's an oversimplification, isn't it? We could both be alone for very different reasons.”

“That's very true. However, in my practice I have found that whatever its cause, loneliness has a remarkably similar result.”

“And what is that?”

“Introspection. A certain distance from the agreed rules and morals of society.” Hannibal smiles slightly. “A tendency to pick up strangers in bars.”

“One can be bolder when one has nothing to lose.”

“And bolder still, when one has everything to lose, but no one to care whether it is lost.” Hannibal looks at Will's hand in his. “What are we doing, Will? For a man who made a bold decision to
carry on a secret affair with his academic supervisor, you are remarkably reticent.”

“Reticent?” says Will. “I'm not this open with anyone. Most people don’t even think I’m capable of feeling anything but irritation and pride. I... don't know what we're doing. But I know that you make me feel more like myself. Sometimes... my pretense consumes me, until I don't know who I really am. Sometimes my personality belongs to someone else. But being honest with you helps me remember.”

“Are you close to being your true self, with me, in this moment?”

“Not entirely. But closer than I am with anyone else.”

“I could say the same.”

“And where does that leave us?” asks Will.

“It leaves us...here. The two of us. Alone, in this room together, with the taste of the hearts we have eaten on our lips.”

Involuntarily, Will licks his lips. “We know nothing about each other.”

“Sometimes, ignorance can be liberating. It allows us the space to be who we would like to be, even if only temporarily.”

“Is this what it is?” asks Will. “The promise of ignorance, a mutual pact to not ask questions, so we can experience a few moments of freedom?”

“I think we're moving beyond ignorance in our relationship with each other, Will. Perhaps that was what our first night together was about. It's not quite true any more.”

“Is it more than what you're comfortable with?”

“Not at all. The more I learn about you, the more intrigued I am.”

“But do you want me to learn about you? You are a private man. More so than me.

“You're here in my home. We're having a conversation. How else would you learn about me?”

“I don't know. But I like learning about you.”

Hannibal smiles. “Now is the time when I could stroke my thumb across your hand and say an overtly suggestive line about things you could learn about me.”

“Then why don't you do that?”

“I'm not certain you are comfortable with it, Will. I have no desire to always take the role of the pursuer. I pursued you yesterday, and you declined. I'm content to wait until you would like to pursue me.”

Will smiles. He squeezes Hannibal's hand, and stands. He walks around the table until he's standing in front of him. Hannibal shifts in his seat to look up at him, and Will grips his chin, gently tilting his face up. And he leans down, their lips brushing against each other. His tongue traces Hannibal's bottom lip, and Will kisses him. Softly at first, and then harder. With his other hand, Will takes hold of his tie and tugs upward, until Hannibal is standing. He pulls him closer, one hand cupping the back of his neck, the other firmly around his waist. He winds his fingers through Hannibal's hair and tugs lightly, positioning him so he can kiss him harder.
And suddenly, his body is hot and his blood is rushing, and he's pressing Hannibal against the table, biting his bottom lip until their mouths are slick with blood. And Will is tasting him, knowing that he's being tasted in return. He's enthralled and intoxicated, and he can barely think. Will knows he can never have enough of Hannibal. There is barely any space between them, and Will's moans are swallowed by his lips as their bodies rub against each other. They pull away for a moment, breathing heavily, their lips swollen and stained with blood.

And as they kiss again, he realizes that his supervisor's lips are possibly the most addictive thing he has ever experienced.

This. This is what Hannibal has been waiting for, since the moment Will Graham last left his house. Talking with Will is a pleasure, eating with him another one—especially something so charged with significance as a heart. But this is...

He's been craving Will's kiss, even as he wondered whether to kill him, even while he was cooking him in proxy. His abandonment and hunger are unutterably delicious, especially juxtaposed against his reticence in company and his seeming indifference yesterday. This Will, grasping him and kissing him, biting him and tasting him, is nearly the same man who called him this morning and spoke about the Ripper eating his heart in words of fear and hope.

Hannibal kisses him, hard and urgently, and murmurs, “Upstairs.”

Will pulls away for a moment, desperation clawing at him as he struggles with their clothes. “Too many layers.”

Hannibal pulls off Will's sweater. “I told you it was too warm for this.”

Will’s body is hot underneath the sweater. He kisses down Hannibal's jaw: “And not too warm for what you're wearing?”

“It is now.” Hannibal pulls off his own tie, reaches for his apron strings.

Will takes his hand and pulls him in the direction of the stairs. Hannibal drops the apron on the floor, following him.

And by the time they reach the bedroom, Hannibal's shirt lies discarded on the stairs, and Will's trousers are long gone. He runs his hands down Hannibal's naked back, pulling him closer. He whispers, against his lips. “You are... intoxicating.”

Hannibal divests Will of his boxer shorts. “You used the same word to describe eating a heart.”

Will kisses his neck softly, following the gentle press of his lips with a sharp bite. “They're both intoxicating in different ways.”

Hannibal walks him backwards towards the bed, kissing the whole time. “We don't have drunkenness for an excuse, today.”

Will pulls him on the bed with him. “We didn't have drunkenness for an excuse when we chose to continue our sexual relationship.”

“And we've signed the papers, now. We're committed to our academic relationship, and the standards it implies.” He looks down into Will's eyes. “This is another barrier we're crossing. We have no excuses left.”

In response, Will kisses him. “We've already crossed this barrier, Hannibal. And I have no regrets.”
“Nor do I.” He grasps Will's curls and tilts his head back to nip at his throat. “You're intoxicating to me, too. I'm normally much more deliberate.”

Will closes his eyes as teeth graze against his throat. “However—whoever—you are right now... I like it.”

Hannibal puts his palm on Will's naked chest, on his beating heart. “Who do you think I am, Will?”

And suddenly, Will’s heart starts beating faster and faster, almost as if it’s anticipating something. He says, breathlessly, “You are Dr Hannibal Lecter. But everyone has different versions of themselves. Versions they present to different people, in different situations. Whoever you are right now, whether or not it represents your true self... It is a version I like. It feels real. It feels more... right than the others.”

Hannibal fits his body more closely against Will's, whilst keeping his hand on his heart. Hannibal has felt Will's pulse speed up. He wonders if some instinct is telling Will who he is; if his heart is responding to cues that his head has not yet perceived.

“I had different plans for today,” he says.

Will shivers. His heart continues to beat wildly in his chest. “What kind of plans?”

“They involved a lot more cooking.” He gazes down at Will Graham beneath him, in his bed. “Right now, I much prefer this.”

Will leans his head up to kiss Hannibal. He cups the side of his face with his hand, thumb stroking his cheek. “Me too.”

His kiss, his caress, is surprisingly tender. Hannibal absorbs it; absorbs the warmth between them. He turns his head so that his nose brushes Will's wrist. Smells the scent there where his blood runs close underneath his skin.

Will Graham's heart would, he knows, taste delicious, stuffed with mushrooms; braised in red wine. It would be both tender and robust, finely-textured and strong. But he has no reason to kill Will, and many to let him live.

His intellect. His work. His passion for the Ripper. And this. This between them, right now: his body close, his breath in Hannibal's ears. He would preserve this passion between them. He would enjoy it, to its fullest extent.

He reaches down, pushes off his own trousers and underwear, and presses the length of his naked body against Will's.

Their naked bodies press against each other, and Will can't help the deep, shuddering moan. His hands map out the lines of Hannibal's body, almost reverently. His broad shoulders, the firm muscles of his arms, the the hard line of his spine. Will touches and learns and remembers every part of Hannibal's body, just as Hannibal does the same to him. Their minds are more open than they have ever been.

And for the first time, he feels something he has never felt before: reciprocity.

Their movements echo each other’s. Their gasps and the pattern of their breathing. The sounds they make, both conscious and involuntary. Will's body isn't as broad as Hannibal's; he is slighter and an inch or two shorter, his muscles lithe and his chest nearly hairless. His face is rough with stubble.
whilst Hannibal's is smooth-shaven. But the two of them move as if identical, touching each other in the same places, in the same way, anticipating each other's cravings.

It's...an equality. Somehow. And something which Hannibal has never quite felt before.

***

It's barely afternoon when Will slips into sleep. He doesn't mean to, but the long nights, the stress, and his carelessness have taken a toll on him. Hannibal's bed is warm, and Will is comfortable and relaxed. It isn't hard to fall asleep.

His mind, however, is the opposite of relaxed. He dreams again.

*He dreams of a hot mouth kissing his neck, razor-sharp teeth ripping apart his skin. His chest is hollow. His beating, bleeding heart rests in the palm of the Ripper's hand. A small part is gone, consumed by the monster. The Ripper caresses his heart with a finger, and *squeezes*. Tenderness, followed by something that can be either pain, or pleasure.*

Will's eyes close and he throws his head back, an anguished groan escaping his lips. The Ripper tenderly cards his fingers through Will's hair. "Shh. Will. You asked for this, didn't you?"

And Will moans again, but this time he isn't sure if it's a moan of anguish or pleasure. He gasps out: "Yes. I want this."

*I thought of taking your tongue. You're fond of that particular piece of my work, aren't you? Your favorite.*

And when the Ripper kisses him again, Will is ready for the sharp pain. He's prepared to feel the hot blood spilling out of his mouth, running down his neck and chest, trickling down his esophagus, into his stomach.

*Instead, the kiss is soft. Gentle. Will's heart, resting in the Ripper's hand, is beating wildly.*

*The Ripper chuckles. His voice is barely a whisper. "Not yet. I enjoy the sound of your voice. And not your brain. Your mind is too beautiful. It'll be the last."

Will can barely breathe. He's trembling violently, his hollow chest is tightening. And yet, he lies still.

*"What will it be today, Will? Your eyes? Your lungs? Or your—"

*The Ripper suddenly stills, turning away from Will. From far away, they hear a ringing sound. The Ripper's eyes fall on Will again, and his mouth stretches into a slow smile. "It seems we'll have to wait."

And Will wakes up, his hair damp and his body trembling. He is, once again, painfully aroused.

Downstairs, the doorbell rings again.

***

Hannibal doesn't mean to sleep; he means to stay awake and watch Will. But with Will curled around him, and his body sated, he lets himself drift off. His sleep is light and dreamless, and he never loses the consciousness of Will nearby, touching him, their limbs entwined. He wakes up when Will groans.
Hannibal opens his eyes. Will's head is thrown back on the pillow. He is asleep. The expression on his face is ecstasy. Or perhaps torture. Hannibal knows from experience that both extremes are very, very close indeed.

Underneath his eyelids, Will's eyes move rapidly back and forth. Hannibal does not move. He watches Will closely. His forehead is damp with sweat. His breathing is rapid and shallow. He clenches his teeth and his hands; his body goes rigid, so rigid that Hannibal's leg, between Will's, is squeezed almost the point of pain.

Will opens his mouth and Hannibal is prepared for another groan, even a scream, but instead Will says, aloud and clearly: “Yes. I want this.”

It was his answer, on their first night together, when Hannibal asked to make sure of his consent. But Will is not dreaming of that. There is no smile. There is instead, a depth of yearning that makes Hannibal's own heart wrench in his chest.

Entwined so intimately with Will, he feels it when Will goes fully, instantly hard. He also feels Will trembling, gasping for breath, his skin slick under Hannibal's touch, and Hannibal knows without a shadow of doubt that Will Graham is dreaming about the Chesapeake Ripper whilst unknowingly in the Chesapeake Ripper's bed.

Will's mouth opens again, as if to scream or to plead, but before a sound emerges, the doorbell rings downstairs.

***

When Will wakes up, he's almost delirious, in a state between full awareness and deep sleep. He buries his face in the crook of Hannibal's neck, his voice clear but shaking. “He's not taking my tongue yet. He likes listening to me talk. My lungs—or eyes, or—something. I don't know what—”

The doorbell rings again and Will shudders, his body going slack. At the same time, Hannibal's phone rings. Dr Alana Bloom.

Hannibal ignores the door and his phone. He is entirely focused on Will. His words and his body, the blank expression in his eyes.

“He won't take your tongue,” Hannibal says. “Nor your eyes, nor your heart, nor any part of you. Not now. Not yet. He wants you to know him, and right now you know him best while intact. Right now you are safe.” He grips Will’s shoulders. “Will? Do you hear me? Right now, he won't take anything but your attention.”

It takes a few minutes, but the words register, and Will’s trembling subsides. His heart rate eventually steadies, and Will burrows closer to the Ripper. He murmurs, almost inaudibly: “But you already have my heart.”

And with that, he slips back into sleep.

Hannibal, staring, watches Will as he falls back asleep. His phone stops ringing, but he barely notices. Will's hair is damp with sweat, but his face is peaceful. Against Hannibal's hip, he is still fully aroused. Hannibal does notice these things, but he is not thinking about them. He is thinking solely about Will's last words.

*But you already have my heart.*

Who is the ‘you’ in that sentence? Will has been referring to the Ripper, the Ripper in his dream,
as ‘he’. Was he, then, speaking to Hannibal? Saying that Hannibal has his heart?

Or was he speaking to the Ripper?

Or was he…speaking to both of them? Does he know that Hannibal is the Chesapeake Ripper?

And if Will knows the Ripper’s identity, does he know it consciously, or only in dreams?

And the heart…the heart, as they had discussed over their meal, is a potent symbol. Does Will mean that the Ripper will take his heart and eat it? Or does he mean that he loves the Ripper? Or does he mean that he loves Hannibal? Or both?

Every possible interpretation of this utterance is potentially, in some fashion, dangerous.

Hannibal does not know Will well enough to interpret these words with any degree of safety. Moreover, Hannibal does not know how he himself feels about any of the interpretations.

And this uncertainty is possibly the most dangerous thing of all.

***

Will doesn't immediately dream after he drifts into sleep again. But when he does, he's not lying on a surgical table anymore.

*He's sitting on a leather armchair. The only light in the room comes from a fireplace. He shifts in his seat, surprised when chipped pieces of dried blood don't fall from his skin.*

Will looks down. *There isn't a hole in his chest. Hesitantly, he places the palm of his hand on top of his beating heart."

"I don't need your heart to be physically in the palm of my hand, Will." The Ripper's lips stretch into another slow smile. "Just as I don't need your eyes on the floor, looking up in admiration"

Will's eyes, fixed on the dark figure, widen. The Ripper gazes at him, his head slightly tilted to the side.

“*Yes. Lovely. Just like that. Beautiful, beautiful eyes, bright with knowledge and intellect. You see everything, don't you?* His soft whisper is loud in Will’s ears. "*Now make sure they don't stray."

And at 6:12 PM, Will Graham wakes up peacefully.

***

Hannibal is sitting in bed beside him, propped up on pillows, reading a book. He looks over at Will as he wakes. “Hello.”

Will looks at the time. He blinks. “I’ve been asleep... for a long time.”

“You clearly needed it. I've enjoyed watching you sleep."

“I... surprisingly slept well today.”

“You were dreaming.”

Will sits up. “I dream almost every night. I don't remember what I dreamed of, but it wasn't particularly violent tonight.” He glances at Hannibal. Hesitantly: “Did I wake you?”
“You did earlier. But I didn't need the sleep. You don't remember your dreams at all?”

“I'm sorry for waking you.” He shakes his head. “And I never remember my dreams.”

Hannibal smiles, though this is not how he feels. He is uncertain whether Will is telling the truth. “It's a pity never to remember your dreams. They are often a useful guide in waking life.” He puts down his book, and pushes Will’s hair gently back from his forehead.

Will closes his eyes, a soft smile on his face as Hannibal brushes back his hair. “I'm glad I don't remember my dreams.”

“Are you glad about the reality in which you have awoken?”

Will's hand finds Hannibal's, his thumb gently stroking the inside of his wrist. “More than just glad.”

Hannibal listens to Will's words, looks in his eyes, analyses his actions. He has had years of experience in the art of concealment, and none of it is helping him right now. He leans a little bit closer. “Show me.”

Will cups Hannibal's cheek with his hand, tilting his face so they're looking into each other's eyes. “I don't know who you are when you're with me. But I know who I am when I'm with you. And it's the closest to being myself I have ever experienced. My mind is often full of shadows and voices that aren't my own. These... imprints of people, they quiet down during the times we are together. They also quiet down when my focus and attention is on the Chesapeake Ripper. You seem to understand, as I hope the Ripper will.”

Hannibal traces his finger down the side of Will's face. “I could almost be jealous of him. If I were a jealous man.”

Will turns his face to kiss Hannibal's finger. “But I'm with you now.”

He puts his finger that Will has kissed to his own lips, kissing it in return. “And I'm with you. Would you like me to run you a bath?”

Will leans in and kisses Hannibal's lips. “Only if you'll join me.”

Hannibal kisses him back, then gets out of bed, naked, and walks to the ensuite bathroom. In a moment, Will hears the water running.

Will watches him leave. He stretches, and gets out of bed as well, standing to follow Hannibal to the bathroom. Hannibal is sitting on the side of the tub, testing the water with his hand. He smiles at Will and pours a small amount of a golden liquid from a glass bottle into the bathwater. A spicy, woody fragrance fills the air. Then he stops seemingly remembering something.

“Were you planning on going to the university tonight?”

Will sits down as well, on the other side of the tub. His hand reaches down to touch the water. “I was planning to. I needed to pick up some files. I remember most of the files by heart, but this is a new one. I need some more evidence.” Will sighs. “But now…”

Hannibal holds up the small bottle. “This is my own personal fragrance of bath oil. If you're going to encounter someone we both know, you shouldn't bathe in it. You would smell of me.”

“I can always go tomorrow morning. I have a small meeting, but it's informal.”
“All right.” He pours a small amount more in, and caps the bottle, then swirls the water with his hand, releasing the scent. “I’d like to go through all the files with you, sooner rather than later. If you like, we can drive over later when the building is closed, and pick them up to bring back here.”

Will glances at him. “Someone is bringing me some files. They're not mine. I haven't even seen them yet.”

“Some new evidence about the Ripper?” Hannibal turns off the water, and steps into the bath, holding out his hand for Will.

He reddens. “I... I can't exactly use this evidence in my thesis. Mainly because I'm not supposed to have it.” He takes Hannibal's hand and steps into the bath.

Hannibal settles against the side of the bath as Will sits between his legs, his back to him, leaning back against his chest. He drizzles water onto Will's shoulders. “You're obtaining it illegally?”

Will is glad Hannibal can't see his face. “Yes. You won't report me?”

“Of course not. I'm as interested as you are.” He cups water in his hand, and pours it over Will's chest. “Would you like me to come with you? It may be safer.”

Will turns his head to press a small kiss to Hannibal's neck. He closes his eyes and leans back against his chest.

“I'd love for you to come with me. But the man I'm meeting is... not a good man. I'm unwilling to put you in danger. I won't be in danger, because he and I are…” Will pauses, struggling for the right word. “—Friends. I know his nature only because of my intuition. The fact that he knows I can... see him might be the only reason why he has agreed to do things like this for me. He will not hurt you, because he isn't perceived to be dangerous, and hurting you will break the mask he has created. But you will know something about him, and you will have power over him. He won't like that, Hannibal.” Will pauses again. “And you might already know this man. He works with Dr Chilton. His name is Matthew Brown.”

“Matthew Brown.” Hannibal repeats the name, his voice neutral. It's also neutral when he lies: “No, the name isn't familiar.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Matthew Brown
Chapter Summary

_Hannibal slips into the bar, resisting the urge to wrinkle his nose at the scent of cheap beer, cheap sweat and cheap perfume. He takes a seat in an empty booth by the door, lit only by a neon bar sign, and watches Will as he walks across the room to meet a man at the bar. Hannibal can't help but recall a scene a few days ago. The bar was very different, and one of the men was different, but the constant is Will Graham. Going to meet another man who he may or may not know is a killer._

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“When is your meeting with Matthew?” Hannibal asks. “Soon?”

Will opens his eyes. “In...three hours?”

“Then we have plenty of time. Lie back into the water; I’ll wash your hair.”

Will lies back, his body relaxing. “You're very good with your hands, you know.”

“Thank you. I enjoy using my hands on you.” He strokes water through Will's hair and reaches for a bottle of shampoo. “So you'd prefer it if I didn't come along to your meeting?” He drizzles shampoo onto his hands and begins massaging it into Will's hair.

Will’s eyes flutter closed as Hannibal's fingers gently massage his scalp. “If you want to, you're more than welcome to come. But if something happened to you, because of me…” His body isn't so relaxed anymore.

“Protective, are you, Will?” Hannibal uses his thumbs to rub lather all along Will's hairline, kneading his scalp with his fingertips. “I'm glad you don't want to see me hurt.”

“Of course I don't want to see you hurt. He's a dangerous man, Hannibal.”

“If that's true, I'm also concerned for your safety. Would you allow me to drive you to the meeting, and stay in the car?”

Will’s voice is unsure. “I've been working with him for two years. I'll be fine.” He adds, softly: “But... all right. If that will make you feel better.”

Hannibal rests his hands loosely around Will's neck, his fingertips meeting at the front. He leans around and kisses Will's lips, gently. “It would make me feel better. And...touched, Will. This is a gesture of trust on your behalf. Believe me, I feel the honour of it.”

Will turns his face towards Hannibal and kisses him back. His voice is a soft whisper against Hannibal's lips. “This is the first time in years that anyone has shown so much concern. How can I say no?”

Hannibal smiles. “You can't.” He goes back to lathering the shampoo in Will's hair. “I'll stay in the
car. I have no wish to interfere.”

He turns his head again, so he can look into Hannibal's eyes. “Thank you.”

Will's eyes are unguarded, soft and blue. Hannibal is...unprepared for the genuine emotion he sees there. “Thank you, Will.” He kisses him, softly.

Will deepens the kiss, lightly biting Hannibal's bottom lip.

Hannibal murmurs, “We've got three hours. We could do a lot in that time.”

Will whispers, “I know. That's why I kissed you.”

Hannibal groans and holds Will by his shampoo-sodden hair, kissing him long and sensuously. Will turns his body as much as he can, kissing Hannibal's jaw, as his hand travels lower.

Hannibal’s breath catches. “If this is what I get for showing you concern, I am going to show it much more frequently.”

Between kisses, Will asks, “How much do you think we can do in three hours?”

Hannibal remembers how desperately aroused Will was at his dream of the Ripper. The thought arouses him too, even more than he already is. “I...imagine we can do quite a bit in three hours.”

And Hannibal is right. They can do quite a bit in three hours. And they do. They move from the bathroom, to the bed, to the shower. And now, three hours later, his hair still slightly damp, Will looks at the time. They need to leave. In five minutes. And he can't find half of his clothes.

“Hannibal? Have you seen my sweater?”

Hannibal is in the bathroom, in front of the mirror, reaching for a comb to tidy his hair. Will has washed it twice, and it is thoroughly messed up. He looks at his hair, falling over his forehead: this version of himself, which Will knows.

“I think I left your sweater in the dining room.”

With a quick "Thank you", Will rushes downstairs to the dining room. The dishes have been cleared. The table is spotless. His sweater is nearly folded over his chair. Will swiftly puts it on, not bothering to fix the creases, and rushes upstairs. On his way back to the bedroom, he finds his trousers and Hannibal's shirt. He puts on his trousers, and places the shirt on the bed. He laughs. “There's a pattern. I always have to hunt for my clothes when I'm here.”

Hannibal comes out of the bathroom, buttoning his cuffs. His hair is falling over his forehead. “That's a pattern which I hope to continue. Are you ready to go?”

Will smiles as he sees him. In two swift steps, he's kissing Hannibal again. “I like your hair.”

“Someone mentioned that I should try to be less perfect.” Kisses him back. “If you do much more of that, we'll be late.”

Will sighs, and pulls away. “It seems that whenever I'm with you, I don't want to leave.”

Hannibal catches his hand, and brings it to his lips. “Nor do I. We seem to have built a very enticing bubble for ourselves, Will. And inside this bubble, we can ignore almost every consideration of reason and convention. It's very seductive.”
“For me, this bubble is more... real than the world outside it.”

“You feel more comfortable outside of convention. And so do I, in many ways.” Hannibal reaches for his car keys. “Shall we go?”

Will straightens, attempting to fix his clothes and hair. “I'm ready to go.”

Hannibal drives them to the meeting point: a bar a couple of miles from the university. It isn't the type of place that Hannibal would frequent: noisy with students, most of them drinking half-price pitchers of beer. He parks the car outside, and turns off the ignition.

“I'll be waiting for you here. Please be careful, Will.”

Will wants to lean over and kiss Hannibal. But he can't. Not when they're outside. Instead, he gives him a small smile, squeezes his hand, and steps out of the car. And instantly, Will's posture is stiffer. He's not uncomfortable, he's not scared. And yet... He's somehow different. There's no warmth in his eyes. He's closed off.

He walks inside the bar. It's loud, full of undergraduates. In the corner, he spots a figure. The man is shorter than him, but more muscular. He's dressed in black. A bit of warmth returns to Will's eyes. “Matthew.”

And Matthew Brown turns, his lips curving into a barely noticeable smile. He nods. "Will. A drink?"

He shakes his head. “Not today. I'm in a bit of a hurry. I apologize.”

Matthew gazes at him. "Chilton's lab is a lot less interesting without you. No place left for good conversations."

“I miss our conversations as well, but I can't say I miss Chilton.” He sits down, taking his glasses out of his pocket.

Matthew hands him a neatly packed folder, full of copies of official files. Will slips on the glasses as he opens the folder, flipping through the pages. “Everything seems right. Thank you, Matthew. I really do appreciate—”

"You don't need the glasses, do you?"

Will considers lying. “No. I don't.”

"But you still wear them."

“I have my reasons. Thank you for the files.” Will stands again, and so does Matthew.

“I hope you can stay for a drink next time. We haven't had the chance to discuss more ideas.”

Will nods. “Next time.” Matthew gives him a small smile, and he smiles back. And he turns around, making his way back outside.

***

When Will leaves the car, Hannibal waits only until he has gone inside the bar. Then he gets out and follows him. He slips into the bar, resisting the urge to wrinkle his nose at the scent of cheap beer, cheap sweat and cheap perfume. He takes a seat in an empty booth by the door, lit only by a neon bar sign, and watches Will as he walks across the room to meet a man at the bar. Hannibal
can't help but recall a scene a few days ago. The bar was very different, and one of the men was different, but the constant is Will Graham. Going to meet another man who he may or may not know is a killer.

Hannibal watches as they greet each other. Will's manner is very changed from even a few minutes ago: he is reserved again, more like the man whom Hannibal met in Dr Gold's office than the man who has shared his bed and bath all day. This causes him no small measure of relief, although he hasn't the leisure to decide what that relief might signify.

Matthew Brown, on the other hand, is positively welcoming to Will. His face lights up when he sees him.

Matthew Brown, who has been on Hannibal's radar for some time. Whom Hannibal followed one snowy night to a warehouse outside of Baltimore, where he watched with interest as Matthew Brown pistol-whipped and tortured a man tied to a chair, beat him and bullied him and buried him in a shallow grave beneath the dumpsters in the back of the building.

This Matthew Brown smiles at Will as if he sees Will as something—someone—special.

And Hannibal doesn't need to see any more. Before the file has changed hands, he has left the bar and is back behind the wheel of his car, listening to Mozart on the MP3 player, waiting.

***

The closer he comes to the car, the more his body relaxes. Will opens the door and steps inside, taking off his glasses. His lips curve into a small smile. He holds up the folder. “He got me a lot of files this time. Quite nice of him.”

“I'm glad. I'm looking forward to seeing what he gave you.” Hannibal starts up the car. “Shall we go back to my house or do you want to look at them in private, first?”

“Can we go back to your house? If you don't mind?” Will's eyes fall on the bar again. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat, not really knowing the source of his discomfort.

Hannibal's eyes are on the road as he drives, but he feels Will's movement. “Earlier, when you were speaking of Matthew Brown, you hesitated before describing him as your friend. Is your relationship so complicated?”

Will glances at him, shaking his head. “I... He was the only individual I willingly interacted with in Chilton's lab. I like him well enough. He's... interesting, and he does quite a lot for me. I suppose that makes us more than acquaintances. But his—” He pauses. “—His intensity is sometimes unsettling. Somewhat uncomfortable. As much as he does for me, the fact that he does so without asking questions is... strange.”

“Although we like to think of humans as being naturally altruistic, usually we are not. A favour is rarely granted without expectation of some return. Perhaps you have something which he values?”

Will pauses, considering. “Matthew has never asked for anything in return but company. His kindness could potentially be a cost to him, and yet he continues to extend it to me.” Will looks away, watching the passing cars and buildings. “I don't know what he would ask me for, Hannibal. I think he knows that I recognize something in him that others don't. He might ask me to understand. To empathize. Or perhaps he'll ask me to... see him, know him.”

“And how does this make you feel? That he may require this of you?”
Will glances at him. “I'm not sure. He's an interesting man, but I don't know if I'd like to know him better. It's... flattering that he wants me to see him. But this knowledge comes with responsibility. And I'm not certain if I care about him enough to carry this responsibility.”

“Yet you'd take on this responsibility gladly, for the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“I think we've both agreed that the Chesapeake Ripper is... different.”

Hannibal signals to pull into his driveway. “And do you think that, like Matthew Brown, the Chesapeake Ripper wants you to understand him? That he wants to be understood? Or does he want to remain smoke and shadows?”

“What I know about the Chesapeake Ripper comes from his crime scenes. I don't know enough about his mind to understand his desires and motives.” A long, shuddering breath. “But who doesn't want to be seen? It must be lonely, when people see only one side of who you are. Lonely, and frustrating. There must be a constant desire to show someone. And this desire can't be fulfilled because it has consequences.”

His voice is almost dazed. Will is unsure if he's talking about the Chesapeake Ripper or himself.

“But if the Chesapeake Ripper does want me to see him,” Will continues, “I think he'd want me to see only him.”

And he stops, abruptly. He doesn't know where that revelation came from. Something echoes in his head, the voice fading away as soon as he tries to grasp its meaning.

When Will speaks again, his voice is softer, unsure. “He'd want my attention only on him. But does that even matter? He doesn't know I exist.”

“I know you exist.”

Hannibal stops the car, and turns the keys in the ignition.

“I know you exist, Will. Do you feel that I see you? Beyond the one facet that you show to everyone else?”

“You see... more than others do. Much more.”

He turns to Will in the now-dark car. “I look at you, Will, to understand, not to judge. I accept your dark desires. I see the ambitions you refuse to show. They... intrigue me. According to your own calculations, that means I am responsible for you. But it doesn't feel like a responsibility. It feels like a privilege.”

Will gazes at him, his eyes wide. “I... see you as well. And for the first time since discovering the Ripper, seeing you is something I would willingly do. Again, and again.”

“I want you to see me. For the layers to peel away, one by one.” Hannibal reaches over and strokes Will's cheek with the backs of his fingers. “There are shadows in all of us, Will. Places where the light doesn't reach.”

Softly, hesitantly, Will says, “But if the Ripper wants me to see only him... Would he hurt you if he knew I want to see you as well?”

“We are running many risks in pursuing this relationship between us, Will. This is another risk I am willing to take. I'm not afraid of the Chesapeake Ripper. It may be foolish to say so... but I'm
And suddenly, Will isn't so calm anymore. “But I'm afraid for you.”

“I appreciate your concern, Will. But it isn't necessary.”

“Why not?”

“Because I make the decisions that lead to my own fate. Because if you're not afraid of the Ripper seeing you, I'm not afraid for him to see me, either. I would rather live my life with my eyes open, than closed.”

“I'm not afraid of seeing the Ripper because I want him to see me. Because I would do anything for him to see me. And while I don't care about the Ripper's victims, I would care if you ended up being one of them. However, despite how much it would hurt me, I would still go with the Ripper if he asked me to.” He looks away from Hannibal, his hands trembling. “Do you understand?

“I understand. You told me all of this the night that we met. And I became involved with you anyway. In fact, it was one of the reasons I became involved with you. I have never met anyone quite like you.”

Will swallows, eyes fixed on the window. “Maybe you should stop being involved with me.”

Hannibal's voice is very, very quiet, and very, very controlled. “Will. In all the time since I have met you, have I ever yet made a decision for you? Have I sought to change your mind in any way about the path you should take? Or have I, rather, asked you at each stage what you wanted? Allowed you to choose your own way?”

“I made a suggestion,” Will says sharply. “I'm not telling you what to do. Don't make me feel horrible for being concerned for you because I care.”

“I don't make you feel anything you don't choose to feel.” Hannibal gets out of the car.

Will also gets out of the car, following Hannibal. “Are you angry?”

It's dark. His back is to Will. Hannibal allows himself a private smile. But when he turns to Will, his face is serious again. “I'm not angry. I can't be angry with you, when you are expressing concern for my welfare and my happiness.”

Wordlessly, Will closes the space between them and wraps his arms around Hannibal. He rests his head on his shoulder, and closes his eyes.

This behavior is... unlike him. Or perhaps it's like him. He doesn't know anymore. Will doesn't know where he begins, or where he ends.

“I don't want you hurt.” It's strange. Will has barely known Hannibal for a few days. He doesn't care for most people he knows. But this feeling of being seen is... too beautiful, too pure to turn away from.

“I won't get hurt.”

Hannibal laces his fingers through Will's hair, and moves his head so that they can look into each other's faces. In the darkness, his eyes are shaded into seeming holes, and his high cheekbones leave dark hollows underneath. To Will, his face looks almost like the face of a skull.
“And if I do get hurt, Will, it will be the result of choices I have consciously made. Risks which I have knowingly taken. I choose to see you. I choose for you to see me. These are precious choices, and they are worth paying for.”

And Will leans up to look at Hannibal. He cups Hannibal's face in his hands and kisses him. “This is the most anyone has ever done for me. I don't deserve you.”

“You deserve everything you get, Will.” He kisses Will back, gently. Then his lips quirk in a smile. “You can repay me by doing a brilliant job on your PhD. So I can bask in reflected glory.”

“Repay you for risking your life and career by doing well on my PhD? That seems unfair.”

Hannibal kisses his forehead, then his eyebrows. “You can possibly repay me in other ways as well. Shall we go inside?”

Will squeezes his hand, and they walk inside Hannibal's house. He takes off his coat, and places the folder on the table.

Hannibal reaches for a bottle on the sideboard, and pours them two snifters of Armagnac. He gives one to Will, and sits on the sofa, waiting for Will to join him.

Will sips his drink, and sits down next to Hannibal on the sofa. The events in the past hour have unexpectedly drained him. He feels an odd kind of... pressure. Pressure to balance himself in a way that he can continue his relationship with Hannibal, without causing him harm. Pressure to work harder, to push himself in his projects, to not let the Ripper slip away from his mind.

And finally... pressure to understand his relationship with Matthew, before he's pushed too far into something he wasn't even aware existed. With a sigh, Will takes a longer sip of his drink, and closes his eyes.

Hannibal reaches out to put his arm around Will, and then seems to think better of it.

“Will? I...given our discussion just now, I think...I think it's important for me to tell you something.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Every Single Bit of Him
Every Single Bit of Him

Chapter Summary

Hannibal has been speaking the truth, or a truth.

But what he has just said to Will is so very truthful that he did was not aware of it himself until he spoke it aloud.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will opens his eyes, and slowly turns his head to look at Hannibal.

“What is it?”

“It's...I should have told you earlier. But I…” He swallows, and takes a sip of his drink, seemingly to calm himself. “You'll know sooner or later, and it's better that you hear it from me, than from anyone else.”

Will sits up. He puts his glass down on the table in front of him, and gazes at Hannibal. “What do you have to tell me?”

“I…” He looks down at the floor. “…haven't been entirely honest with you.”

Will gently cups Hannibal's cheek with his hand, angling his face up so he can look into his eyes.

“About what?”

“I...the reason I'm your supervisor. It wasn't Dr Gold's idea. It was...at my request.”

For a moment, there is silence. His breath catches in his throat. When he speaks, his voice is rough.

“I...beg your pardon?”

“The night we met, I truly didn't know who you were. You were an attractive stranger. When we started talking about what you were studying, your name rang a bell to me. I knew you by reputation. Dr Chilton...is not always discreet.”

Will stills.

“And you were his pet project. I didn't know what the subject of your studies was; I only knew how great an interest Chilton took in you, personally. In your mind. My interest in you was purely personal. But when you started talking about the Ripper, I became interested in your studies too. As we talked, as we—made love, I began to realise that you and I were a perfect fit, academically. The thought of helping you, mentoring you, was quite exciting. So I…” Hannibal stops. “I'm sorry about this, Will. It sounds terrible now.”

Will’s face is entirely blank. His eyes are focused on Hannibal's, but inexplicably empty of emotions.
“I called the arrangement a ‘coincidence’,” Will says. “You didn't correct me.”

“I...wasn't sure what form our relationship would take. I wanted to work with you academically, and also to go on with our personal involvement. Yet I knew that it was breaking ethical boundaries to do so. I didn't want to influence you in your choice, by letting you know how much I wanted to work with you.” Hannibal takes a precisely-calculated pause. “So I...it was a lie of omission. I am very sorry for it. In my defence, I never expected Dr Gold to make the decision so quickly. I expected to have some time to talk with you about it beforehand. To see how you felt about the idea. But Dr Gold pre-empted that discussion.”

Will closes his eyes, momentarily burying his face in his hands, hunching over with his elbows resting on his knees. A few seconds pass, and he sits up again. Will wants to stand up and leave. And yet...Hannibal's words are genuine. He did want to work with Will. He did want to continue their sexual relationship.

What he didn't tell Will was how big of a part he played in setting up this arrangement. And Will is angry, he is furious at the lie of omission. The little, harmless white lie.

But this is the same man who, barely ten minutes ago, told him that not even the Ripper's threat would hold him back from continuing their relationship. The same man who went with him to the bar, just to ensure his safety.

The same man who is willing to see him, even though Will is seeking the eyes of someone else.

And Will, despite his—infatuation? Obsession? Need? Love?—for the Ripper, wants to see Hannibal Lecter as well.

It's dangerous, for both of them. It could end with both of them losing their lives. And while Will is prepared to give his life to the Chesapeake Ripper, he isn't prepared for the loss of Hannibal's life.

This... is an opportunity. To spare Hannibal's life. To make it less dangerous for him.

Will turns to look at Hannibal, his lips parting.

“I'm sorry,” he says. “I can't.”

“I'm sorry, Will. I should not have kept this from you. I should not have requested to work with you without consulting you. But I think it's important that you know the depth of my decision to be involved with you. That I've been willing to go against my own moral code, to do so.” His lips twist slightly. “To me, that's more radical than risking my life.”

And Will closes his eyes, refusing to look at Hannibal. “I'm sorry. I can't do it.”

There is a small pause. Will’s chest tightens as he continues.

“I'm sorry for letting myself be selfish. I... I can't. It could kill you, but I can't let you go.”

Hannibal looks astonished for a moment. And then he smiles. He touches Will's hair. “Truly?”

Will swallows. Hannibal's gentle touch is more painful than pleasurable. He nods, jerkily.

Hannibal pulls Will into an embrace. He whispers into Will's hair, “I'm sorry for lying to you.”

Will’s eyes are screwed shut. He doesn’t move, doesn't wrap his arms around Hannibal. “Please
“Don’t die.”

“I have no intention of dying.” Hannibal kisses his hair. “But you know, better than most, that it’s the inevitability of death that makes life so sweet.” He lowers his voice. “You never feel so alive as you do when you are contemplating the Ripper.”

Will rests his head on Hannibal’s chest, listening to his heartbeat. “The Ripper allows me to be myself.” He murmurs, to himself, “But is that worth your life?”

“Perhaps I... Perhaps I never feel quite so alive as I do when I am contemplating you.”

As soon as the words leave Hannibal’s mouth, he stiffens. He has been speaking the truth to Will—or a version of the truth, a version that omits a rather large and very pertinent fact. Even then, he has admitted out loud that he is the Ripper, albeit in a way that Will has not been able to understand. He has been speaking the truth, or a truth.

But what he has just said to Will is so very truthful that he did was not aware of it himself until he spoke it aloud.

Will Graham makes him feel alive. Makes him feel challenged, stimulated, playful, deadly serious. In that way, Will Graham has become, somehow, vital to him. This is almost unprecedented, and certainly very dangerous.

He detaches himself from Will, stands, and goes to the sideboard. “Would you like another drink?”

Will feels him stiffen. And as Hannibal pulls away from him and stands, he feels the loss. His heart beats rapidly in his chest. If Hannibal feels even a percent of what he claims to feel... Will’s chest tightens.

“I shouldn’t, but thank you for asking.” And with that, he stands and pulls Hannibal back into his arms.

The physical contact shakes Hannibal. He wants to pull away: to have some space to process what he has just admitted. But pulling away from Will now could risk destroying everything he has been at pains to build up. So he steps into the embrace; he holds Will.

Will closes his eyes. Softly, he whispers, “I know it’s overwhelming. I feel it too. For him. For you.”

Hannibal allows himself to give into impulse. He seizes Will’s face and covers it with passionate kisses: his cheeks, jaw, forehead, hair, eyes, mouth, chin, mouth again, mouth again, hungrily, as if he would devour him.

He feels his texture, tastes his skin, the inside of his mouth, feels his body pressed against him, the quickening of Will’s breath, the beating of Will’s heart, his scent, the marks he has left on Hannibal’s body, the marks he seems to have left on Hannibal’s mind.

And Hannibal knows. If he is to have Will Graham, he must have all of him. Every single bit of him.

It must all belong to Hannibal Lecter, and belong to him willingly.

The intensity catches Will off-guard.

And for a brief moment, Will is unsure whether he is being devoured, or if he's devouring
Hannibal.

He realizes that they are devouring each other, tasting and taking parts of each other they can't show to the world. So once again, despite what his mind tells him to do, Will opens himself up. He peels back his own layers, and helps Hannibal peel back his. His hands tug at Hannibal's clothes, his mouth leaves biting kisses down his throat, and Will feels... intoxicated.

Hannibal doesn't want to do this. It wasn't his plan. The wiser path would be to send Will away for the present: to have space and time to think and plan, to work out the intricacies of the strings he must pull and the suits he must don and remove to preserve himself and keep Will in his grasp. He doesn't want the distraction of Will's hands on him, his lips and skin and frantic, hungry breath in his ears. He doesn't want to notice the way they tear at each other's clothes like predators tearing at flesh. He does not want to have Will match him, strength for strength, caress for caress. And yet all of that is what he wants more than anything else. He manages to gasp, “Will.”

And then they fall together, half onto the sofa, half onto the floor, toppling over the table that holds Matthew's file.

The fall seems to bring Hannibal to his senses. He pulls away from Will. His hair is dishevelled, his tie dangling from his open collar, his jacket and waistcoat abandoned on the floor, his belt and flies undone. “This is...not a good idea.”

And as soon as the words leave Hannibal's mouth, Will disengages himself, away from reach. “I—Okay.”

He's confused, worried, guilty about the twinge of hurt he feels. His face, however, is blank. Like it is every single day.

Hannibal sits heavily on the sofa. So much of what he has done tonight has been dissembling. But this is not, at all. This is how he really feels.

“Will, I don't want to stop. I don't want...ever to stop.”

His breath is coming quickly. “But we've—I feel that we have made some decisions tonight. We both need some time to come to terms with the ramifications of those decisions. This—” He straightens his clothes, or what remains of them. “—is impulsive. It is wonderful, and exciting, and...” He swallows. “It stops us from thinking.”

And Hannibal wonders if he is, indeed, thinking rationally at all. Every bit of his body wants to continue what Will and he have started. Every possessive instinct in his mind tells him to keep Will close, as close as possible. But he also knows that right now, he is acting impulsively.

And Hannibal is not yet ready for the Chesapeake Ripper to impulsively take Will Graham. Not tonight.

Will swiftly slips his sweater back on, pulling his trousers up and zipping them. “All right. I understand.” He gives Hannibal a small, somewhat strained smile.

The rejection doesn't bother Will. What bothers him is that for once, he doesn't automatically understand. And if he can't understand Hannibal, he can't decipher what he's thinking, of feeling. He doesn't know what he did wrong, if he did something wrong.

The ability to empathize is something Will often uses to balance his lack of concern for social etiquette. If he can't understand Hannibal, it makes him entirely unpredictable.
But isn't that what drew Will to him in the first place?

Will hurriedly puts on his shoes. “I'll—see you some other time?”

Hannibal has to resist going to Will. Has to resist kissing him and removing the clothes he has just put back on. And Hannibal is not used to having resist impulses. He is used to choosing what he does, quite carefully.

“Will, nothing has changed between us. Nothing is wrong.”

“Yes, I—realize that.”

He does not reach for Will's hand. He does not breathe in his scent. “Shall we meet on Monday?”

He picks up the folder. “Yes, Monday. Monday is good.”

“At the university, or here in my house. As...you wish.”

“Anywhere is fine. I don't particularly mind.”

“The nature of our interactions is significantly different depending on whether we are in public, or in private.”

“It depends whether the matter we have to discuss on Monday is of academic nature, or something more personal.”

Hannibal stands. He removes his undone tie. “It's always personal, Will. It's only whether we allow others to see, or not.”

Hannibal folds his tie carefully. “Why don't I take you to lunch, and we can take it from there. I'll phone you to let you know where I've made reservations.”

Will gazes at him. “All right. Lunch on Monday.” And with that, he straightens his clothes. “I should leave now, Hannibal.” He pauses, wondering if he should kiss him before he leaves. Will decides against it, and heads for the door.

“Will.”

Hannibal wants to go to Will and kiss him goodbye. If he did, he might never stop. He doesn't. “Until Monday.”

Hannibal stays where he is until Will Graham leaves, and he does not move for several minutes after that. He is sifting through desires and intentions, memory and anticipation, musing on the particular light in Will's blue eyes when Will sees and understands. It is only a few minutes, but he follows a complex and contradictory train of thought to its conclusion.

And then he puts down his tie, tucks in his shirt, leaving the top buttons undone, slips on his shoes, and quietly, unobtrusively, follows Will out of the house.

***

It's dark and cold outside, but Will decides to walk home. He breathes in the cool, fresh air, lost in his thoughts. He knows that he lives in two extremes of life. And that his lack of balance, his unusual intensity, throws people off. But this wasn't the case tonight. Or was it?

The fact is that—for the first time in his life—he doesn't know. Reading Hannibal is like rea—
And Will stills, stopping in his path, turning his head to the left.

He heard something.

The noise was soft, barely loud enough to be heard, but it was there. Hesitantly, he takes a few steps in the direction of the park on his left. All thoughts of Hannibal and the Chesapeake Ripper fly out of his head.

A very small puppy lies behind the bushes. An injured paw, soft fur painted with drying blood. Will's heart breaks.

He should contact an ethical animal shelter, he shoul—But the puppy makes another soft sound, and Will can't help himself.

“Hello, there.”

The puppy whines, trying to stand up on its injured paw. Will leans down, holding out his hand to be sniffed. A small, hesitant sniff, followed by a few more. Will smiles. As gently as he can, he picks up the puppy, avoiding the bloodied paw. He smiles wider, fluffing the puppy's ears.

“Leon.”

With growing horror, he realizes that he just named the dog. Slowly, he straightens. He doesn’t have a choice anymore. It’s out of his hands.

And thus, Will starts walking again, holding the puppy in his arms. Leon twists his head, licking his hand. The night is silent except for the two of them.

Will realizes he spoke too soon when his phone rings, harshly breaking the silence. Leon whines. Softly, he whispers, “Shh. It's okay.”

Irritated, he picks up his phone without looking at the name on the screen.

“Hello?” A familiar voice greets him. “Matthew?”

His steps slow down, the brisk walk turning into a stroll. “I apologize, I can't come to the bar right now.” A small pause. “No. Is something wrong?”

“I left my—” His free hand instantly goes to his back pocket. His wallet isn't there. “I don't have it.”

Will doesn't remember taking out his wallet. He didn't even order a drink.

He lets out a long sigh. “No... I... I can't come right now. Could you meet me tomorrow? I'm free all day tomorrow. I'll let you know where we can meet.” A longer pause. “Thank you. I'm sorry Matthew, I realize this is inconvenient.”

His steps pick up the pace again. “Thank you again. I'll see you tomorrow.”

Will places his phone back in his pocket, trying to recall if he ever took out his wallet. He didn't. Pushing the thoughts away, he smiles at Leon.

“Don't worry. I forgot my wallet, but I'll never forget to feed you.”

The rest of the walk back home is uneventful. He opens his door and Luna immediately rushes to him, jumping enthusiastically. Her paws barely reach his thighs. Will smiles, bending to pet her.
“Hello, my darling.” Will's stress melts away, the weight on his shoulders disappearing. He straightens up, kicking the door behind him, laughing as Luna jumps again.

***

A puppy.

A puppy?

A puppy.

Hannibal watches from the shadows as Will lifts a dog from the bushes and cradles it to his chest. It's dark, but even the dim lights from the streetlights are enough to show Hannibal that Will's face has transformed completely. His features are soft, full of compassion; he's not closed off at all. His voice, when he speaks to the dog, is gentle.

Hannibal remembers Will mentioning his dog, casually; remembers having a short discussion about whether Hannibal was a dog person or a cat person.

Hannibal, personally, sees no particular need to be either.

But now he sees what Will meant when he said he was a 'dog person'. He can understand how a lonely man might find great satisfaction in caring for a fellow abandoned creature. He sees how a dog offers unconditional companionship; never judges. How someone like Will Graham, who eschews most human company, might like instead to be part of a pack.

And they're hunters, too: dogs.

Predators who like to kill in the company of others.

Musing, following some distance behind, but close enough to hear Will on the quiet street, he's surprised when Will's phone rings. But he is not surprised to hear who is calling. He hears the marked change in tone when Will speaks to Matthew Brown, and it makes him smile.

His smile changes nature, when he hears what Matthew has to say.

The clumsy lure he is dangling in front of Will.

Hannibal pauses in the shelter of a dark alley. He knows Will's address already. And Will, with the burden of an injured puppy, is unlikely to go anywhere else tonight, other than perhaps an after-hours vet. He's arranged to meet Matthew tomorrow, to collect his wallet. Hannibal stands in the darkness, and watches Will walk away, talking to the dog.

Then he turns around, and heads in the opposite direction.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: A Lover Scorned
The bar they visited earlier is, if possible, even noisier and stinkier than a few hours ago.

This time, however, Hannibal doesn't slip into the dark booth by the door. He walks up to the bar, where Matthew Brown is sitting on the same stool he was occupying earlier. He has several empty bottles of beer at his elbow, and he's staring moodily at a sports game playing on the television mounted over the bar. Hannibal takes the empty stool next to his, the same one that Will sat upon. He speaks to the barman.

"Scotch on the rocks, please."

The scotch, when it comes, is somewhat less than smooth. He drinks it with a slight grimace, and then glances to his side, seeming to see Matthew for the first time.

"Aren't you one of Dr Chilton's students?"

Matthew is clearly in a foul mood. "Who wants to know?" he growls, and knocks back the rest of his beer.

A lover scorned.

"I'm a colleague of Frederick's. I've seen you in his lab, when I've dropped by. I never forget a face. MSc? PhD? Postdoc?"

"MSc," he grumbles. "Maybe not for much longer."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Chilton doesn't have so many students that the loss of one is not felt. Are you here with friends?"

"Not anymore." Matthew's face is like thunder.

"My friend has not yet turned up." He smiles at Matthew. "Perhaps I can buy you a drink, and you can tell me about your work."

***

As soon as he's done fixing up Leon, Will picks up the folder. The puppy snoozes on his lap as he flips through the files. Barely halfway through the first file, Will stills. This... can't be right.

A new kind of fire burning inside him, Will goes through the first file faster than he thought possible. And the next. And the one after that. The files... somewhat makes sense, but nothing else does. Nothing.

While the facts seem right, they don't feel right.

But no matter what, this is a file from the FBI. Jack Crawford is an intelligent man and he's been studying this for years. Will can't dismiss the evidence, especially since he hasn't seen any of the fresh crime scenes. He'll... He'll need to book an appointment.

He'll send Hannibal an email.
And so, Will frantically reaches for his laptop, putting it on the arm of the sofa so he doesn't wake up Leon.

Dear Dr. Lecter,

I apologize for taking your time over the weekend, but new evidence from the FBI greatly affects my thesis and research. While the facts do coincide with the relevant dates and times of the Ripper murders, I'm having a hard time connecting these to the Chesapeake Ripper's thought process and motives. The academic profile makes sense, but I am skeptical of the evidence.

The head of the BSHCI—Dr Chilton—claims that the Chesapeake Ripper is one his inmates, Dr. Abel Gideon. Factual evidence and the primary profile fit Dr Gideon, but the layers I associate with the Ripper are missing. I strongly believe that this man is not the Chesapeake Ripper. However, ignoring the FBI would be irresponsible.

I will be scheduling a meeting with Dr Gideon over the week. I would like to meet him, and find out what possessed him to connect himself with the Ripper. I have attached PDF copies of the files to this email. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Will Graham

MSc Candidate
Department of Psychology

And he shuts his laptop, harder than he usually would, feeling more than just offended on the Ripper's behalf.

Unbelievable. Unbelievable.

Why not just believe any other man who happens to be a surgeon and happens to match the dates? He sighs, disappointed at such bold conclusions derived from a working profile. His lips curl as he looks at the folder.

Will considers his own anger, and wonders how it will compare to the Ripper's rage.

***

Hannibal is just starting the engine of Matthew's car when his phone vibrates. He frowns and takes it out of his pocket, intending to turn it off and remove the battery—cell tower pings are such a nuisance for providing physical evidence—when he sees Will's name on his screen. He's sent Hannibal an email.

He feels a certain stab of curiosity, and despite his intentions, and the rather more pressing item of business immediately at hand, he opens the email.

He reads Will's words with a mixture of emotions. Dr Abel Gideon? The Chesapeake Ripper? That second-rate uxoricide with a sweaty-handed grip on the scalpel? Who was caught within hours of his crime?

How...dare he? How dare Jack Crawford, and Frederick Chilton?
What...incalculable...incompetence and ignorance...?

And pretention to greatness…

He closes his eyes and feels the Ripper's cold anger and contempt. Welcomes it.

And yet it's tempered by Will Graham's words. Will's utter disbelief that Gideon could create such beauty. His outrage, barely reined in by the formal wording of his email. Will doesn't know who the Ripper is...but he knows who he isn't. He speaks aloud in the car, “This little token may be just what he needs, after this news.”

His passenger does not disagree.

Hannibal turns off his phone and takes out the battery. And as he drives, he plans. The problem is that he's been spontaneous; and whilst there's a value in spontaneity, tonight has suddenly become much more important. Hannibal is good at improvisation, but will he be able to produce exactly the effect he wants?

He's still deep in thought when he arrives at his destination. He turns to his passenger, who has been remarkably accommodating at not interrupting his thoughts.

“Perhaps I'll let your talents inspire me. Let's see what you've got up your sleeve, shall we?” He pops the trunk, and gets out of the car to look inside it.

And as he gazes down into the trunk of the car and what is there, Hannibal Lecter smiles.

***

When Matthew Brown wakes up, he is tied to a chair in a familiar warehouse, and Hannibal Lecter is standing in front of him, a gun in his hand.

“Hello, Matthew. You've been here before, haven't you?”

Matthew's eyes are wide. He can't speak because of the tape over his mouth.

“You can just nod, or shake your head. But you don't need to answer, anyway. I saw you here. Your little playdate with your friend. Were you planning the same sort of playdate with your friend, Will Graham?”

Matthew shakes his head frantically.

“No. Possibly not. Not with Will in the chair. You'd want him beside you, wouldn't you? An equal in your pleasures? You'd want to watch Will Graham's face at the same time that the life went out of your victim's. You'd want to see the total understanding in Will Graham's eyes. You'd want him to share everything you did and felt. You'd want him to see you. Wouldn't you?”

Slowly, Matthew Brown nods.

“Because that's his gift. And that is why you love him. Love is being naked before someone. Skin removed, flayed, with every nerve exposed. Open to their sight. That's what you wanted, isn't it, Matthew?”

Matthew is shaking his head. No, no, no, over and over, but Hannibal knows it is out of fear, and not out of denial of the truth he is speaking. He can see that it's the truth, in the terror and yearning in Matthew's eyes.
Hannibal looks down at the gun in his hand, and back at Matthew.

“If my primary motivation were justice, I would give you the sort of death which you gave your victim. You pistol-whipped him until his jaw was broken, until his face was pulp, until he had no teeth and no nose and he choked on his own blood. You enjoyed that, Matthew. If I were just, I would see if you enjoyed having it done to you. But I am not just.”

Matthew Brown is shaking his head, but he can hardly hold his head up. His entire body is trembling. He is soaked with sweat. He is a strong man who has never pictured his own death, and for that, Hannibal could almost pity him.

Almost.

“Justice matters less to me than beauty. It matters less to me than...I suppose you might call it romance.”

He crouches down in front of Matthew. His gloved hand tilts Matthew's face up, so they can see each other eye to eye. “And so I am going to give you not what you did, but what you long for. I am going to allow Will Graham to see you. That should make you happy. Shouldn't it?”

He puts down the pistol. And then, Hannibal Lecter gets to work.

***

Will goes to sleep not long after sending Hannibal the email. He dreams about anger.

His own anger, hot and wrathful and passionate. And the Ripper's anger: cold, calculated, and utterly ruthless. And together, they are... perfect. When he wakes up, he remembers holding Dr Chilton's tongue in his hand, hot and bleeding. No more lies.

There is nothing unusual about the day. He checks on Leon's paw and takes a short walk with him. Later, he runs with Luna. Will calls Matthew, and leaves several messages about meeting to pick up his wallet. He receives no response.

Halfway through the day, he checks his mail, knowing that he should be receiving a confirmation of enrollment letter for his PhD. Instead of a letter, he finds a neatly wrapped package. It's completely blank. Someone must have manually dropped it off. Curiously, he opens it.

Inside is his wallet.

Just his wallet. No note, no letter. Will wonders why Matthew didn't bother calling or coming inside. Or perhaps he came when he was out running. At... 7:30 AM? Will shakes his head and walks back inside his house.

He tries reading through the files, but abandons the idea quickly, becoming more frustrated with the outrageous claims.

His phone battery dies, and he doesn't bother charging it. Without any work to do until he has an opportunity to meet with Dr Gideon, Will spends the day bonding with Leon. By the time it's 6:00, he's snoozing on the sofa with his dogs.

His dreamless sleep is broken as he wakes up to a soft knock on the door. Leon, sleeping on his stomach, wakes up as well. Will picks up the puppy and stands up, sleepily rubbing his eyes as he opens the door.
Hannibal Lecter stands on his doorstep, wearing a sweater and a blazer. He takes in Will's tangled hair, his wrinkled t-shirt, his sleep-soft face, the puppy in his arms. He thinks he detects a spark of gladness at his presence.

“Will. You're all right.”

Will gazes at him, confused. He rubs his eyes, and steps away so Hannibal can come inside.

“Pardon?”

Hannibal wants to kiss him until all of that sleepiness disappears. Instead he walks in. “You haven't seen the news?”

“No. I was taking care of Leon, and then we fell asleep.” Will smiles. “He's my new puppy. I found him last night.”

Hannibal gazed at the dog. “You found a puppy last night. That's what you did after you left me?”

“I was walking back home and I heard a noise. He was injured, and…” Will looks at Leon. “He's so small, Hannibal. I couldn't just leave him.”

Hannibal nods, seemingly distracted. “So you haven't heard the news?”

“No. What's on the news? But before that, I should change.” Will looks down at his shorts and t-shirt.

Hannibal shakes his head. “Don't worry about it. Where's your computer? It's on the television, but somehow, as always the internet rags have the juiciest details.”

His smile fades at Hannibal's urgency. “I—All right. My laptop is on the table.”

He touches Will's elbow. “Before we look, you may...find this difficult. I'm very sorry, Will.”

“I... don't understand.”

“You will. I think...you may understand a great deal more than I do.” Standing close to Will, he opens his laptop and finds Tattle Crime. The headline is huge, screaming:

**RIPPER PLAYS AND FLAYS!**

“I'm afraid...that this one may come close to home, Will.”

The Chesapeake Ripper killed again. It has been years since he last killed. And he killed again. Last night.

For a few seconds, Will feels pure, unadulterated joy. This incident wipes out all the possibilities of Dr Abel Gideon being the Ripper. And while this may be far-fetched, perhaps this is a reaction to the FBI's bold claims. The Ripper does listen to what is said about him, and he responds.

And if the Ripper has killed, this means that there might be two more kills for them to look forward to. Suddenly, his lips stretch into a wide smile. He's intoxicated, and exhilarated at the idea that there is more to learn, more to know. This is another opportunity to connect with the Ripper, another opportunity to see.

A powerful feeling stirs in him, and his chest tightens as his heart beats faster and faster. Will realizes that this reaction isn't something he should be displaying, and if it were anyone but
Hannibal, he would be fighting a losing battle to keep his face carefully blank. How does one hide happiness? Exhilaration? Love?

It's only when Will sees the name of the victim that he freezes.

Matthew Brown.

At this point, one would expect his happiness to fade away, and his excitement to turn into horror and despair. Matthew Brown was his friend. One of the only individuals Will used to talk to. A man who went to great lengths for Will, without ever asking anything in return.

At one point in his life, Will had wondered how much power the Chesapeake Ripper would have over him. How much the Ripper would have to do before Will would turn away. Today, his friend is dead, transformed into the Ripper's design.

And Will's happiness far outweighs his despair.

He should be furious. He should be angry. And yet, the intensity of his despair when compared to his happiness is like... Like mild disappointment.

For his... friend.

And that is why he freezes. Because his happiness doesn't fade, his despair doesn't overpower him, and he chooses the Ripper over Matthew—one of his only friends—as easily as one would choose something trivial. Like what to eat for lunch. The guilt isn't as powerful as his happiness, but it weighs down on his shoulders heavily.

And if Will could turn back time, he would change nothing.

He would let Matthew die again, because the Ripper is more important. And what this says about him is more horrifying than Matthew's death will ever be.

He doesn't feel the hot tears trickling down his cheeks until his vision blurs, causing him to blink.

Will wants to scroll down to see the images of the Ripper's art. He wants this more than anything else. His chest tightens again, and what he feels is pure need. He wants to see the Ripper. He aches for it. But he needs to prepare himself, for the guilt that will surely follow.

Guilt at how Matthew's death will make him feel. Guilt at his lack of despair, his lack of empathy for Matthew. Guilt at his jealousy that his friend saw the Ripper, in his full power. Guilt at his resentment for Matthew, that Will might never see the Ripper, never be elevated into art.

It's too much. He's feeling too much.

***

Hannibal does not miss a single nuance of the expressions that cross Will's face.

First, the joy. The exhilaration. Will's face lights up like an angel's, and his eyes shine with something like... love.

Something stirs in Hannibal's chest: something warm and unaccustomed and starving, and he gazes at Will as Will begins to gaze at his work and he thinks, very clearly, that if Will Graham looks at anyone else in this way, anyone, Hannibal will kill them.

He may not be able to resist killing them immediately, with his hands.
He opens his mouth to speak—though, incredibly, he doesn't know what he's about to say—and then he sees the guilt descend.

He sees Will realise that the Ripper's victim is his friend. He sees tears well up in Will's eyes and although on some level this makes him angry, he cannot deny that Will Graham's tears are as beautiful as Will Graham's smile.

And the most beautiful part is that he, Hannibal Lecter, is the cause of both.

“Will.” He touches Will's shoulder, gently but firmly. “You're upset. This is too much; I shouldn't have let you see this. Not without preparing you.” He shuts Will's laptop, and leads him to his worn-out sofa. “I'm so sorry about your friend.”

“I'm not—Matthew—I'm not upset about Matthew's death. He's.... He's been elevated to something... better. I'm upset that I don't care. That all I feel is happiness at the Ripper's return and jealousy that I didn't cause it.” Will chokes out, barely able to breathe. “He has so much power over me. What if—if you are killed and I still don't care?”

And merely seconds after the words leave his mouth, he answers his own question.

“I know that... every instance, no matter what time or place, I will always choose him. But I can't choose him over you, and I can't choose you over him.”

Hannibal has been trying to give Will, and himself, space. But at this he has to touch him. He wipes the tears from Will's face, with gentle fingers.

“I hope you will never have to choose.”

Will pulls away from Hannibal's touch. “It's too much. Everything is... too much.”

“We should wait until you are calmer, before you read the news.”

“I want to... I need to see his design.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The Ripper's Design
“Yes. I want yo—” Hannibal stops himself. “I want to see it, as well. But slowly, Will. You should not be overwhelmed. I'll read it to you, from the website. After I get you a glass of water.” He leaves Will on the sofa, and picks up the laptop from the table on his way to the kitchen.

When Hannibal comes back, Will's eyes are closed, and Leon is sitting on his lap. He sits down next to Will, and gives him a glass of water. “Do you feel well enough to continue?”

“Thank you.” He sips his water. “I'm always well enough for the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“I'll tell you the details, as I gathered them from the news and Tattle Crime. There were photographs, but it's better if you're prepared before you see them, since you know the victim personally. Or at least...one of the victims.”

Will's head snaps up. His voice is hoarse. “More than one?”

“The only one who's been identified by name in the press is Matthew Brown. The police were called in the early hours of this morning to an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of Baltimore. A security guard had found Brown's car, and then the murder scene. Matthew was tied to a chair in the centre of the warehouse. He'd been flayed. All his skin removed. Are you all right, Will?”

Will's eyes are unfocused, but his mind is in overdrive, constructing a scene only he can see.

Softly, he whispers, “Keep going, Hannibal.”

“Presumably, he had some identification near his person, or they identified him by his dental records, as there were no fingerprints. The reports don't say what happened to his skin, whether it was present at the scene. They do say that his eyes were removed, with surgical precision. They were placed at his feet. Looking up at the body.”

Eyes. Eyes. Will’s face lights up at the spark of recognition. “He's been elevated. He's been seen, but not just by the Ripper.”

“He's been seen by the Ripper. And by himself. And by us, as well. Without his skin, bare to everyone. There's more, Will.”

“Bare to the world, stripped down to the core, vulnerable. The Ripper gave him what he wanted.” It's almost as if he's forgotten that Matthew was his friend. He wants to know more, he's aching for more. “Tell me everything.”

“His legs were taped to the chair, but his arms were free. One of his arms was around another body, also taped to a chair. This body hasn't been identified. But it wasn't flayed. It had suffered massive cranial injuries—but not recently. Apparently this body was in an advanced state of decomposition, and showed signs of having been recently exhumed. Police found an empty hole in the parking lot behind the warehouse, under a dumpster. Possibly a shallow grave.”

And suddenly, he's not Will Graham.

His mind collapses, his marble forts disintegrate, only to rebuild into walls. The architecture is
different, unfamiliar, but he can read it. He's Matthew Brown. His eyes are dazed, but his voice is strong.

“I want to be seen. I want to be recognized by... someone. I want to be loved for who I am, for the killer I am.” The connection is... intimate. He feels fear, and hope, and need. “I want them to see me, and I want them to like what they see as they stand next to me.”

“This is my design.”

And the connection is broken.

Hannibal watches this with admiration. For a moment, Will is not himself. He is Matthew Brown, speaking Matthew's most intimate thoughts and desires. Understanding them in the way that Hannibal himself understood them, as he was peeling back Matthew's skin. “You said, last night, that Matthew wanted you to understand him.”

“He did. And I... do understand him.”

“Do you like what you see, through his eyes?”

“It's... I see the expression of carnal desire. It is what it is. Beautiful in its own way.”

Hannibal leans forward. “And this is Matthew you see. When I told you about the second corpse: you saw Matthew's design. The papers are calling the second corpse a heretofore undiscovered victim of the Ripper.”

Will can't help it. He throws his head back and laughs.

“The Ripper is showing the world Matthew Brown's innermost desires. The second body can't be a Ripper murder. It's obvious. Unbelievably obvious. It was buried. The beauty of the Ripper's design is the art, the beauty of human emotion and desire. He's making Matthew's wishes come true. The second body is a gift to Matthew Brown. It's his inner self, the physical representation of his need. The whole display is a gift to his victim, and a message to his victim's... Lover? Friend? Object of desire?”

Hannibal wants to seize Will and kiss him. He does not. He keeps his face and voice neutral.

“Perhaps all three. If that's so, then the Ripper didn't stop at one gift. There's more.”

His breath catches in his throat as his heart beats rapidly in his chest. His pupils dilate, and his cheeks flush. “Tell me.”

“Matthew's left arm was around the decomposing body. But his right arm was around another body, also taped to a chair. This person...was alive.”

Will’s heart rate accelerates. “I—Alive?”

Hannibal’s voice is soft, but clear. “The media is saying that this is the first person ever to have survived the Ripper.”

A wide range of emotions flare inside him. He has so much to say, but not enough knowledge. “What did the Ripper do?”

“According to the reports, this person is completely unharmed. They haven't identified him. He's been taken to hospital.”
“Which hospital?”

“John Hopkins.”

“Did the article say anything else?”

“It strongly suggested that this person may be the only one in existence who has seen the Chesapeake Ripper's true face.” Will has frozen, his mind clearly racing. Hannibal cannot help but ask, “Do you find the Ripper's design beautiful, Will?”

And Will gazes at him, eyes blazing.

“Beautiful? Beautiful is... It's too inelegant, it's not enough. No word is enough. I found his design meaningful. Exquisite. Bewitching. But saying these words takes away what I feel, because they are too... narrow. Too small. They're not enough. How does one even begin to describe a color no one has seen? His design isn't a blend of what I know, but something without a reference point. Impossible to explain. Beyond comprehension.”

“And how do you feel about the man who may have seen his face? Been touched by his hands? The person whom the Ripper allowed to live?”

“I want him dead.”

Hannibal has to shut his eyes for a moment. It is...bliss. Will hasn't even hesitated.

“You would complete, yourself, what the Ripper has left incomplete? You would alter his design? Make it your own, instead?”

“He leaves nothing incomplete. Whoever was left alive... They will die. Either by the Ripper's hands, or someone else's.” Will's hands. But he doesn't say that.

“Your hands are shaking.”

“I'm feeling too much.”

“At least there's proof now that Abel Gideon isn't the Chesapeake Ripper. Your email last night was...furious.”

Shortly, Will says, “I was furious.”

“It's an egregious presumption.”


Hannibal’s lips curve into a small smile.

“Chilton is going to be absolutely incandescent with rage,” Hannibal says. “He's not having a good week. First he loses one research student to me, then another to the Ripper. And now his pet suspect is no longer plausible.”

Will nods, distracted. His heart rate is still above normal, his hands are still shaking. “If he ever thought his suspect was plausible in the first place, it's his own fault that his plan has crumbled.”

“What would you like to do now?”

Will swallows, his mouth suddenly very dry. “Hannibal... Did they say anything about the time of
“The reports didn’t say, but it was obviously sometime between the time you met him in the bar in the early evening, and late last night when the security guard discovered Matthew’s car. I'm sure more precise details will be released in the next few days.”

Will is nearly breathless as he speaks, “I... Last night, Matthew called me. He said I had left my wallet at the bar. We planned to meet today, but before we could set a time or place, my wallet had been delivered here. I assumed he dropped it off this morning and left, but... He was dead by then, wasn't he?”

“Someone...has done you a favour, Will.”

“The... The Chesapeake Ripper.”

Hannibal holds Will's gaze whilst he watches Will understand how very close the Ripper has been to him.

“If he had left your wallet on the scene, you would have been a suspect. He was being considerate. He was letting you know that he knows who you are.”

And this moment is... five years of Will’s life. Five years of seeing, understanding, yearning, falling in love. Five years of being alone, five years of hoping. And Will doesn't know what to say.

Hannibal is content to watch him. All his work last night: it was all for this moment.

Will’s lips part and his eyes close, a single tear spilling from underneath and trickling down his cheek. Will doesn't know if the Ripper knows him, or even if he's seen him. He doesn't know if this favor was anything more than just a favor. This reaction is utterly illogical and irrational. Senseless. Unreasonable. Unfounded.

But...five years.

Hannibal should not be so happy. He should not have focused his work so closely on one person. It is a risk.

Too specific. Too traceable. Too revealing.

But...half a lifetime.

That long and more, since he had someone to kill for.

Will’s breaths are coming out in short gasps as he squeezes his eyes shut, clenching his fists so hard that his hands shake. His happiness is unfounded. The Ripper doesn't know him. He... This was just a favor.

But he wants more. He longs for more. He wants anything and everything the Ripper will give him. His attention, his love. He wants—needs—the Ripper to know him. And he knows how to capture his attention.

He'll do anything. Absolutely anything.

Hannibal asks again, “What would you like to do?”

Will’s voice is dazed, almost lost: “I... I don't know.”
Hannibal takes his hand. Slowly, and deliberately, he raises it to his lips. “Whatever you wish to do, I will help you. If you ask me to.” He kisses each of Will's knuckles.

As he looks into Hannibal's eyes, he realizes there is one thing he can't do for the Ripper. He can't give up Hannibal. And everything comes crashing down.

This is the point where he should send Hannibal away. Will should stop their relationship before he loses him. Instead, he squeezes Hannibal's hand. His voice is barely a whisper.

“Could you stay with me tonight?”

Hannibal closes his eyes in pleasure at the question. “Yes. Yes, I will.”

The guilt weighs him down, but Will manages a small smile. “Thank you.”

Hannibal squeezes his hand back. When he speaks, his voice is quite different. “If I'm staying the night, I think it's only polite that you introduce me properly to these dogs.”

Almost immediately, Will’s smile is brighter. “This is Leon.” He strokes his fur, picking him up to cradle him against his chest. “I found him last night.” Will bends to pet the small dog sitting close to Hannibal. “And this is Luna.”

Gravely, Hannibal greets them. “Hello Leon. Hello Luna. The lion and the moon. What poetic and alliterative names.” Luna raises her paw for him to shake, and he smiles. “They are well-mannered creatures.”

Leon licks his face, and Will laughs. “Yes. I love them both very much.”

“And yet you only met Leon last night. You are quick to loyalty, Will, when moved to be loyal.”

“I've found that I live in extremes. There aren't many individuals I'm loyal to. Last night, I decided to take Leon.” Will smiles. “And that's it. My decision has been made. I'm not going to look back.”

“He seems to be very pleased to have been chosen by you.” The mood has lightened enough that Hannibal feels it is safe to lean over and kiss Will on the cheek. “As am I.”

“And I'm very pleased to have been chosen by you. As your lover, and your student.”

Hannibal’s lips quirk. “You may not be glad in a moment or two.”

He raises his eyebrows. “And why is that?”

“Because if I'm staying, I'm about to ask you what's for dinner.”


Will tilts his head to the side, thinking about what's in his fridge. “I might have to go grocery shopping.”

Hannibal smiles. “Please don't worry. I'm not really hungry, and I'm teasing. It would be rude to turn up at your house unexpectedly, with explosive news, and demand dinner.” He strokes a finger down Will's cheek. “You're quite enough to satisfy my appetite.”

“From what I've seen, your appetite is insatiable.”

“What do you have an appetite for?”
Will pretends to consider the question. “You?”

“You say that as if you're not quite certain.”

“I'm very certain.”


“I'd like you raw, Dr Lecter.”

Hannibal's smile widens. He leans closer, his lips millimetres from Will's, anticipating his kiss. As soon as his mouth touches Will's, Leon the puppy jumps up, tail wagging, frantically licking both of their faces. Will laughs, picking up Leon and kissing the top of his head.

“You're feeling a lot better than yesterday, aren't you?”

“Are you talking to me, or the dog?”

Will looks up, startled. “Oh—Sorry—I was talking to Leon. But how are you feeling?”

“I feel that it's a privilege to have seen the Ripper's work through your eyes.”

“The Ripper's work is a privilege to see in any way or form. I fear that my eyes distort the vision.”

Hannibal puts his arm around Will, and draws both him and Leon to rest against his chest, leaning back on the sofa and resting his chin on the top of Will's head.

“I may be wrong, but I think you see him clearly.” Luna jumps up onto Hannibal's lap and noses underneath his arm as well, cuddling close between Will and Hannibal. “Are your dogs always this affectionate?”

Will burrows closer to him, wrapping his arms around Hannibal as well. He closes his eyes, listening to the steady beats of his heart.

“Luna is only affectionate towards a few people. I haven't known Leon for long, but so far he's been very affectionate.” Will smiles. “Last night, I woke up to him sitting on my chest, inches away from my face. Luna is very protective. Around a year ago, there was a time when…”

And as Will talks, his body relaxes. By nature, he isn't a person to willingly talk about himself. But with Hannibal, it's easier. He doesn't feel the need to hide. Without meaning to, he finds himself revealing little snippets about himself. About his life. For the first time, social interaction isn't a chore. It's... comforting.

He shares little stories that are utterly irrelevant, his voice soft and drowsy, his Louisiana accent slipping through the cracks. And, to his surprise, Hannibal listens. Every little irrelevant detail. Finally, Will yawns and a comfortable silence settles between them.

Hannibal's eyes are closed. He's constructing a room in his mind for Will Graham.

Adding colours, scents, textures. He builds it from the floor up, meticulously, every brick imbued with Will's voice and mind and body, smiling at the low huskiness of his voice, the softness of his hair, the weight of his body, and the way his words ramble and reveal.

The beauty of trust. The intricacy of warmth.
He's weary from last night's exertions, and halfway between waking and sleep, but he hears nearly every word. Except the last few sentences, where he slips into slumber.

Not long after, Will also drifts into sleep. It's hard not to, despite the emotional turbulence of the day.

He doesn't dream.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: A Delicate Balance
Hannibal wakes to the sensation of something wet on his cheek. “Ne dabar, Cesar.”

He opens his eyes. He's lying on Will Graham's sofa, and Will is asleep next to him, head on Hannibal's chest, limbs entwined. The puppy perches on the arm of the sofa, licking Hannibal's face.

Will stirs as Hannibal wakes up. Surprisingly, he is well rested. He opens his eyes to see Luna, calmly lying on both Hannibal and him. His lips curve into a small smile and turns his head and kisses Hannibal's neck.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning.” He turns his head to kiss Will, and winces. “I think I've got a crick in my neck.”

He lifts his head from Hannibal's chest, stretching. “My right arm is numb. We must've been quite drained last night to fall asleep here.”

Hannibal sits up, rubbing his neck. “I didn't even take off my shoes.” Leon jumps up to lick his face again. Hannibal catches him and addresses him. “I thought you were my horse, asking for a sugar cube.”

Will glances at him. “You have a horse?”

He smiles. “Not any more. When I was a child. I felt the dog licking my face, and I dreamed it was Cesar. It was a pleasant memory. How are you, this morning?”

Will smiles as well, his lips curving. “Cesar. Did you name him? What was he like? And I am... surprisingly well-rested this morning.”

“He was a very good horse. Loyal, and strong, and fond of sugar.” He puts down the puppy, stands, stretches, and checks his watch. “It's later than I thought.”

Luna jumps off his lap and Will stands up as well. “Would you like breakfast?”

Hannibal smiles again. “I have a patient in an hour, but I find it difficult to say no when you offer me anything.”

Will kisses him, lazily walking to the kitchen and getting to work. He doesn't bother with an apron. Twenty minutes later, fresh waffles are on the table, with maple syrup, whipped cream, and chocolate sauce. With a small smirk, Will places toast and peanut butter next to the waffles. He pours them both coffee.

“Hannibal?”

Hannibal pulls out a chair at the table. “This looks...tempting.”

Will raises his eyebrows. “Really?”

“Did you expect me to say something else?” He drizzles a little maple syrup in an artistic fashion
on a waffle, and takes a delicate bite. “Delicious. Thank you.”

Will generously pours the maple syrup over his own pancakes, along with some chocolate sauce. And whipped cream. He takes a bite. It's incredibly sweet, complimenting his black, unsweetened coffee. “Are you very busy today?”

Hannibal observes Will's crimes against food and makes no comment. He swallows another bite of waffle. It's simple, but fresh and well-made, and the coffee is unsubtle, but full-bodied and strong. All of it tastes much better than it possibly should, because of the man sitting across from him.

“I've three patients, and then I believe I have a lunch date.”

Will glances at him with a smile. “Really? A lunch date? What a coincidence. I have one too.”

“Have you? I hope you enjoy it, and that your companion is sufficiently charming.”

“I hope you enjoy yours too. My companion is, surprisingly enough, a professor and a psychiatrist. That should say a lot, as I tend to avoid psychiatrists.”

“You should. They're trouble.” Hannibal takes a last bite of his waffle and sip of coffee, and stands. “It's rude to eat and run, but I'll be late. You'll have to let me know how your lunch date goes.”

Will stands as well, taking their plates to the sink. “As long as you tell me about yours.”

As Hannibal walks to the door, Leon suddenly barks, limping to him with his injured paw. “What's the matter, little foal?” Hannibal asks the puppy.

Leon whines, attached to Hannibal's leg. Will watches from the kitchen, leaning against the counter. “He wants to go with you.”

Hannibal looks down helplessly at the tiny dog. “Can you...distract him with food, perhaps?”

Will crouches, holding out a homemade dog treat. He whistles. “Leon?” The puppy doesn't budge. “Will? I've got a patient in fifteen minutes. I don't know if he likes dogs.”

He walks to them, bends down, and strokes Leon gently around the ears. Almost immediately, he lets go of Hannibal. Will picks Leon up. “Sorry about that.”

“I'll take it as a compliment.” He kisses Will on the mouth. Leon immediately starts licking both their faces. “Thank you for breakfast. Au revoir.”

Will kisses him back. “I'll see you in a few hours.” And with that, Hannibal leaves.

***

Half an hour later, Hannibal is feeling...not quite uncomfortable, but not his collected self.

He has come straight to his office, without even any time to brush his teeth or his hair, and although he has changed his shirt and tie for the spares that he keeps in the closet behind his bookshelf, he is very conscious that his suit is creased, his hair is less than immaculate, his chin is rough, his shoes touched by mud, and his tie does not match his pocket handkerchief.

Many of his patients wouldn't notice even if Hannibal's tie and pocket handkerchief were wildly
conflicting—they're far too concerned with their own neuroses to notice anything about Hannibal other than him being a sounding board for their problems. But this patient... this patient is somewhat different.

Franklyn Froideveaux has been staring fixedly at Hannibal since he walked in the door. Now, he stops mid-flow, in the middle of an anecdote about shoe shopping with his mother two years before she died, and says, “Are you listening to me?”

“Hmm? Yes, of course, Franklyn. You were speaking of how your mother's left foot was a full size larger than her right.”

“A size and a half,” says Franklyn. “You're not listening at all, are you? You're distracted by something. What is it?”

“I can assure you: I am giving you, and your mother's feet, my full attention.”

As Hannibal says it, he catches a whiff of Will's scent that still remains on his jacket, from where he slept on Hannibal's chest all night.

Franklyn shakes his head. “There's something different about you. You've got a look about you.” He appears to be becoming agitated. “You've met someone, haven't you? You're all…” He grimaces. “Loved up.”

“Franklyn, even if I were 'loved up', which I certainly am not, it would be none of your concern. I am your therapist.”

Franklyn's face crumples. “Why does everyone have someone? Why does everyone have someone, except for me?”

Hannibal represses a sigh. “Let's talk about this train of thought, Franklyn. Why have you jumped from talking about your mother's shoe size, to a contemplation of your romantic state? What connection is there in your mind between these topics?”

Franklyn bows his head, overcome with despair. His eyes widen. “And is that—is that dog hair on your trouser cuffs? Have you got a pet now, too?”

Hannibal glances down and sees several long white hairs on his trousers. Swiftly, he plucks them off and drops them into a tissue. “No. No, I haven't got a pet.”

“I can't even have a dog to love me,” wails Franklyn, tears coursing down his cheeks. “I'm—I'm—I'm... allergic.”

Hannibal represses another sigh, and hands him the box of tissues.

***

The hours after Hannibal leaves pass slowly. Will cleans the dishes, checks up on Leon's paw again, and goes for his run. It isn't until later that his eyes fall on his wallet again. Personally delivered by the Chesapeake Ripper. Gently, Will picks it up. Why would the Ripper give it back? He could have just left it on Matthew's body. It would be perfect. The Ripper could have framed him for this murder.

He could, but he never would. It's inelegant.

And why would the Ripper want someone else to take credit for his art? Da Vinci wouldn't want
the Mona Lisa to be credited as anyone else's creation.

Slowly, hw opens his wallet, wondering if his hands are exactly where the Ripper's were. A small piece of paper falls out.

Will picks up the piece of paper. Matthew's scrawl stares back at him. "Dear Will…"

The words are written almost lovingly, reverently. Will doesn't quite know what to think. He wonders if the Ripper read these words as well. He would have, if he opened his wallet. Or perhaps he simply asked Matthew if the wallet belonged to him. Perhaps Matthew told him about Will. The questions are endless, and the answers impossible to find.

Despite the lack of information, he does know one thing. Whether or not Matthew mentioned him, the Ripper did Will a favor, and the favor had nothing to do with whether or not he knows Will. The Chesapeake Ripper does have his own idea of a moral code. His every action has a calculated reason, and the drive behind every reason must be felt entirely. If Will has done nothing wrong, the Ripper has no reason to harm him. Actions without reason are dangerous, and must be avoided.

With a sigh, Will's eyes fall on the note again. Should he go?

And before he can answer the question, his phone vibrates. Will debates ignoring the call, but he hesitates. Not many people call him.

With a sigh, he picks up his phone. “Hello?”

The man's voice is deep and authoritative. "Mr Graham. This is Special Agent Jack Crawford. FBI."

The conversation lasts for more than forty minutes. By the end, Will is drained and tired. Agent Crawford is persuasive, commanding. It's hard to say no, especially when the man holds so much sway over his career. But it isn't Crawford's position or authority that leads to Will giving in.

"Official FBI documents on the Ripper for your research. Access to crime scenes. Are you certain you don't want that?"

And as Will speaks into the phone, his heart races. “I have a condition.”

It isn't until later when he's getting dressed for their lunch date that Will realizes he should've probably asked Hannibal before pulling him into this mess.

***

Hannibal, in a fresh suit and a fresh pocket square which very definitely goes well with his tie, arrives early at the address he has given Will for their lunch date, and waits outside for him. Will shows up exactly on time, wearing black trousers and a blue shirt, the top few buttons undone and his sleeves rolled up. He smiles when he sees Hannibal.

“Hello.”

Hannibal has to modulate his smile to something discreet and suitable for a student/supervisor lunch appointment. Loved up indeed.

“Hello, Will. Thank you for coming.”

Will holds out his hand to shake. “Dr Lecter. Hope you're doing well this afternoon.”
“Very well, thank you.” He shakes Will's hand, almost impersonally. “I had a good night's sleep last night, which is always refreshing. Shall we?”

He gestures behind him. They stand in front of a nondescript row of shops.

“I also woke up feeling quite well-rested.” Will looks at the shops. “Where are we eating today?”

“Here.” He pushes open the door of the smallest, pokiest shop on the block, and immediately the scent of fresh fish assails Will's nostrils. Hannibal leads Will past a counter full of ice and fish, replying in Japanese to the men and women cutting up the fish with long, sharp knives. At the back, there's a sort of cubby hole with a few plastic chairs and tables crowded together. Every chair except for two is occupied with people having frantic conversations. They sit down at the last table.

“I hope you like fish, Will?”

Will's eyes are bright as he takes in the atmosphere, the smell, the place. The amount of people, however, does make him somewhat uncomfortable. The fact that he can't understand the language is almost a relief. What would normally be piercing screams in his mind is a dull roar. Easier to ignore, easier to focus on one person.

He breathes in, taking in the distinct aroma of fresh fish. He instantly likes the place.

“I'm very fond of fish, actually. Whenever I can, I try to take some time off to go fishing. It... relaxes me.” He pauses for a short moment, the silence filled by the conversations around them. “My father used to work on shipyards. I grew up eating a lot of seafood.”

“This is the best seafood in Maryland. It's all raw. I hope you don't mind that.”

A man appears, greets them, and puts a teapot and two cups on the table. He and Hannibal exchange a few words and he goes off, only to reappear a few minutes later with a tray bearing slices of sparkling-fresh fish, each type like a jewel. Hannibal indicates each one.

“This is blue-fin tuna, razor clam, sea urchin, sea bream, scallop.”

He hands Will a pair of disposable wooden chopsticks in a paper sleeve.

Will pries apart the chopsticks, glancing down at his plate. “I don't mind raw—” He pauses, an unexpected flash of memories coming back to him. One of his many dreams that slipped away from his mind. “—raw... fish.”

Hannibal catches the hesitation. He pours them both a cup of steaming tea, and waits for Will to continue, or to eat.

“Thank you.” Will sips his tea, catching Hannibal's eyes. He takes a bite of the blue-fin tuna.* This is... exceptional. “How did you find this place?”

“I buy my fish here. They supply several good restaurants around here, and only recently started serving sashimi on-site.” Hannibal samples a sea urchin, savouring the briney flavour. “If you see anything you would like, just ask and they will let you try.” He nods to their fellow customers. “These are almost all chefs and restaurateurs. I'm interested that you're a fisherman, Will. It's an intellectual sport.”

He takes another bite. “This is delicious. Thank you for bringing me here, Dr Lecter. I don't quite
see the intellectual aspect you're implying. Fishing comes naturally to me. I don't think when I fish. It's why it's so relaxing. I can... let go of my thoughts, and just concentrate on the water, the fish. It does require patience and concentration, but it's very rewarding. Relieves my stress. The whole point of the activity is to focus on the world around me, instead of the interpretations of the world we live in.”

Hannibal picks up a slice of scallop with his chopsticks, and smiles. “A bit like being closely surrounded by people who are not speaking your language? Their unintelligibility removes from you the responsibility of having to listen to them? Everyone here does speak English, so we unfortunately cannot return the favour to them.”

Will glances at him. “Is that part of why you chose this place? Listening, for me, isn't just an activity. It's taxing. Tiring. And most of them are voices I don't want to listen to. But there's more to it than just that, Dr Lecter. Pardon me, but your interpretation is an oversimplification. When I don't listen to others or think of others, I can listen to myself and I can focus my attention. This focus is what relaxes me.

“While having multiple trains of thoughts—not all of them mine—gives me a lot of perspective, it drowns out my own voice. When I focus on someone else, I focus on only them. Rarely, my train of thought is similar enough to someone else's that it resurfaces. Even rarer is when they give me the same attention I give them. Fishing is about focus, patience, concentration. It's almost like... practicing for the real world. It's my brain practicing the most natural thing to all animals. It's quite liberating.”

Hannibal is smiling, delighted. “It's instinctive, but also intellectual.” He holds up a slice of tuna. “The person who caught this would say that in order to catch the fish, he had to think like the fish. He had to be the fish. A good fisherman respects his prey. Admires it.” He pops the slice in his mouth; chews; swallows. “And enjoys it.”

“A good fisherman lures his prey. He respects his prey, and recognizes its strengths. But most importantly, the best fisherman is invisible.”

Hannibal is smiling quite broadly now. “And are you a good fisherman, Will?”

“I’m good enough.”

“I'm willing to bet you're better than that.” Hannibal nods to the remaining fish. “What's your favourite?”

Will smiles. “I like the sea bream. And you?”

“I'm partial to the sea urchin—for the colour as much as the flavour. We taste first with our eyes.” He meets Will's gaze -or a fraction of a second too long—no more—and then looks back down at the fish. “Do you like oysters?”

“Oysters are all right. I don't mind them, though I don't have them very often.”

Hannibal speaks a few quiet words to the waiter. “I'm glad you joined me, Will. It's good to have this opportunity to get to know you better. Do you have any questions for me?”

Will glances at him. “Is there a place in this world that you like more than everywhere else?”

“A place that I like, or a place that I admire?”

“Somewhere you feel comfortable. A place that you admire, but also a place you enjoy being in.”
He struggles for words. “A place you have lived in, or a place you would like to live in?”

“There are many, according to mood and purpose. The Uffizi Gallery in Florence, although one could not live there. I find it both peaceful and stimulating. To live, however…” Hannibal closes his eyes. “A house, on a cliff, overlooking the sea, with tall windows.” He opens his eyes again, and smiles. “But I do not have such a house. Perhaps I will have to build one.”

Perhaps to Hannibal, it was just an answer to Will's question. But in that moment, as Will looks into Hannibal's eyes, he understands him more than he has since they met.

The waiter, who is also one of the owners, returns with a dish of opened oysters nestling on their half shells, and more fish, pink-fleshed, silver-skinned, pearly white. “Are you attempting some psychoanalysis on me, Will?”

“Just asking a question. I want to know more about you. After all, we'll be working together for a number of years.”

“Yes. We will. In all probability, we'll be getting to know each other's tastes very well.” Holds up a shell. “Oyster?”

Will picks up a shell as well. With his chopsticks, he carefully spears the oyster out and puts it in his mouth. He doesn't bother with the cocktail sauce or the lemon. He chews and swallows. “It's good.”

Hannibal tips his oyster straight from the shell into his mouth, savouring the texture and the flavour before letting it slip down his throat. “Oysters turn irritants into pearls. Is that what drew you to criminal psychology as a subject? The hope of finding beauty in what the world considers unnatural?”

“I didn't expect to find beauty. I didn't want to find beauty. I wanted nothing to do with psychology. I found beauty by accident, and it sparked both my interest and my drive.”

“Beauty has its own trajectory. Its own logic. Perhaps you didn't find it by accident. Perhaps it found you.”

“It found me, and perhaps I was able to see it in a completely different light. However it happened, I was enchanted and I've never looked back.”

“What do you hope to do with your degrees once you've got them? Do you want to do practical field work?”

Will glances at him, stiffening. “I—thought I would continue researching serial killers. I thought about being a professor. But the decision has been made for me, it seems.”

“What do you mean?”

He sighs. “… Have you heard of Jack Crawford?”

“His name was in the files you sent me on Saturday. He's the head of the Behavioural Analysis Unit at the FBI.”

Will shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “He called me this morning. He said he wanted me to help with the Ripper case. I… refused. And you and I both know my reasons for refusing to help the FBI catch the Ripper. Agent Crawford was very insistent. I continued to say no, and then he offered to allow me full access to all of the Chesapeake Ripper's files and crime scenes. I… couldn't say no to
that, Dr Lecter.” He swallows, averting his eyes. “But I did make a demand. I said I would work
him only if... you agreed to accompany me to the crime scenes, as my academic supervisor. And as
a psychiatrist. I'm sorry. I... should have asked you before pulling you into this. You don't have to
do this.”

Hannibal puts down his chopsticks. “I think you have done exactly the right thing, Will. Jack
Crawford is a powerful man. He can help you immeasurably. And the access he promises you will
be invaluable to your thesis. It will all help you to see your subject's face.” He takes a sip of tea.
“And I...I am curious.”

Will glances at Hannibal. He wants this to help him, but he doesn't want this to help the FBI. The
last thing Will wants is for the Chesapeake Ripper to be caught. But the information Jack Crawford
is offering is too valuable to turn down. He'll have to strike a... very delicate balance between
giving them enough information for them to think of him as valuable, without giving away
anything to jeopardize the Ripper. It won't be easy. He'll have to deliver a flawless performance.

He sighs. “What are you curious about?”

“I'm curious about what information the FBI has on the Chesapeake Ripper. I'm curious about how
Jack Crawford operates. I'm curious about what you will do. How you will...perform to ensure that
your own aims are met or at least not frustrated, whilst you are servicing the needs of the FBI. I'm
curious to meet the person who survived the Ripper. I wonder if we will be allowed to do so.”

Will stiffens. The person who survived the Chesapeake Ripper. There is a slight pause as he opens
his mouth to speak, not entirely trusting his voice to be even. “I'm... curious about this individual as
well.”

Hannibal catches the tremor in Will's voice; understands the yearning that has caused it. Perhaps
even the jealousy. And the thought that Will Graham would be jealous of a person who has seen
the Ripper and lived... His own tremor is internal, and imperceptible, but he still rises, oysters
uneaten on the plate. “Perhaps we should discuss this elsewhere.”

Suddenly very aware of his reaction, Will averts his eyes. He stands as well. “Where would you
like to go?”

“Have you time for a walk?”

“I have two hours. After that, I have a meeting with Agent Crawford.”

“The FBI is impatient to make use of your expertise.” Hannibal leads Will out of the shop, bidding
a cordial goodbye to the owners. No money has changed hands. He walks with Will down the
street, towards a leafy park.

Will zips up his jacket as they walk out. He glances at Hannibal. “They're desperate. The Ripper
didn't leave a trace. As usual.”

Hannibal says nothing until they are in the park, alone, a good distance from any other people.
Then he speaks, quietly. “The Ripper did leave a trace. He left it with you.”

“I have no intentions of repaying a favor with betrayal.” His lips twitch. “One could argue that my
life would be in danger if I were to give in this piece of evidence for investigation. Self-
preservation is a human instinct.”

“Your wallet may have forensic traces of the Ripper on it. And the time of its delivery would give
the FBI some idea of his movements after he murdered Matthew. This isn't a favour that the Ripper
gave you, Will. Either this is the first mistake he has ever made...or he has given you his trust.”

When he looks at Hannibal, his eyes are blazing. “I don't think the Ripper would give his trust to someone he doesn't know. But if that is what he has done... the last thing I want to do is break that trust.”

“If you break that trust, it may be the last thing you do.”

“Then I won't be breaking that trust. My ideas for the last thing I'll do before I die are... very different.”

Hannibal's voice is hushed. He should possibly not ask this question. It may betray too much of him. But he seems less and less able to resist temptation, as far as Will Graham is concerned.

“What...are your ideas for the last thing you will do?”

Will doesn't answer. He turns his eyes away from Hannibal. “If it isn't too much to ask... Will you accompany me to my meeting with Jack Crawford? Requesting my supervisor's presence wouldn't be considered unusual or inappropriate.”

“Of course I will. It will be my pleasure.” He pauses. “Surely you don't think I would be repulsed by any of your desires, Will.”

“Not… repulsed. I…”

They are passing a stand of trees. With almost preternatural quickness, Hannibal seizes Will's wrist and pulls him into enough so they can both smell the salt tang of oysters on the other's lips, and whispers, “I would like to know. Please.”

A surprised gasp escapes his lips as he suddenly finds himself close to Hannibal, away from prying eyes. His voice is barely a whisper. “You would hate me if you knew.”

Hannibal’s mind is full of a thousand imaginings, each one more beautiful than the last. He searches Will's eyes and he sees in his mind, Will's face painted red with blood. He sees Will's fingertips dripping with it. He sees a smile, full of dark delight and pain, on Will's lips. He sees all of this: how right it would be. How fitting and perfect.

He pulls Will closer, one hand at the back of his neck, and kisses him. He can almost taste that dark delight and pain.

It makes him almost unbearably hungry. He whispers, between increasingly desperate kisses, “Does it seem to you that I could hate you?”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: A Clearer Picture
Hannibal's lips are on his neck, and before Will knows it, the words are spilling from his mouth. His voice is low and desperate, a soft whisper decorated with harsh gasps.

“I want him to know me, to see me. I want him to see the parts of myself that I have never shown to anyone else. He'll hear every nonexistent whisper, he'll see every invisible shadow. And I'll know him, just as he knows me. The light will leave my eyes, but I'll live forever as his art, as a part of him. His only painting with the ability to gaze back into his eyes. Before I die, he'll want me as I am. We'll be painted red with warm blood, and he'll see me.”

As Will continues, his voice is a trembling whisper, almost frantic. “Maybe he'll... kill me, or maybe he won't. But if he does, I wouldn't mind, because he'll never achieve with another creation what he'll achieve with me. I wouldn't mind, because I'll live through him, and I'll be immortal in his eyes. *His* eyes are the only ones that matter.”

Will's hands are tightly clutching Hannibal's jacket. He should stop. He needs to stop.

These thoughts—dark and enchanting and enslaving, both his freedom and his cage—have been put into words for the first time. And Will, Will feels relief, agony, longing, fear. His mind begs him to stop, but he doesn't. He keeps talking. He needs to.

“Before I die, I want to be free. I want to be his, and I want him to be mine.”

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Hannibal is shaking. He feels as if his grip on Will is the only thing keeping him upright. Will has put his own desire into words. To see and be seen; to be, for the first time, equal with another person.

“You desire the ultimate consummation. A moment of unrestrained intimacy. A...twinning of souls. Never to be alone again.”

Hannibal wants it. He wants it so badly that he knows, in this moment, he would and will do anything to make it happen. He wants to whisper his truth into Will's ear, here in the shelter of these trees; to seize a blade and show Will its sharp poetry, to feel Will's heart beating under his hand, quick with revelation and love.

He puts his hand on Will's chest now. Through his shirt, through his living body, he feels it pound. In his mind he names its chambers and vessels. He looks into Will's blue eyes and he sees the most profound and simple of truths. And Hannibal wants all of this. He wants it, powerfully, right now. Regardless of risk. Regardless of logic and reason and prudence, regardless of the careful chain of events he has set into motion.

Hannibal closes his eyes and for a moment, he teeters. Between safety and passion. Between wisdom and desire. He could reveal himself as the Ripper right now. Right now. In all his red and glorious beauty, and be known at last by someone worth the knowing. After all these years, it could happen right now. His own heart thumps with the joy of it, and he bends to kiss Will again. To whisper the truth. To reveal himself and to reveal Will. To lay both of them bare.
His mouth is about to touch Will's, when he hears a dog bark.

It's far away, a distant everyday noise, but it's enough to make Hannibal pause for a split second. And enough to remind him of reality. Of his plans. Of all the reasons why he should delay this union until the time is right.

Hannibal straightens. He kisses Will, instead, on the forehead, like a blessing.

“I will help you to find the Chesapeake Ripper. I promise you. And I always keep my promises, Will.”

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Will's eyes close as Hannibal's lips touch his forehead. His chest tightens, his heart beating wildly in his chest. He takes a small step back, his eyes wide. Hannibal's seemingly endless acceptance is shocking, worrying. He is... concerned about the consequences of this acceptance.

Will Graham's life belongs to the Chesapeake Ripper, but Hannibal Lecter's doesn't.

The Ripper can take him, but not Hannibal. Never him. He takes another step back. Perhaps Hannibal is as interested in the Ripper as he is. Or perhaps he's interested in Will. Either way, this... interest... can hurt him. It will hurt him. Hannibal should be repulsed, disgusted. Instead, he wants to help. If he were a better man, he would have turned Hannibal away. But Will Graham is selfish. His eyes are wide with not horror, but hope. The crippling guilt weighs him down.

“You... are not disgusted. You don't feel hatred.”

For a moment, when Will steps back, Hannibal thinks that he may have said too much. A normal person would never encourage Will to seek his own death. But then he sees Will's expression: it is hope. Will doesn't care whether Hannibal is normal or not. He may wonder about about Hannibal's motivations, but he doesn't care.

He can only see the Ripper.

And this single-mindedness could, possibly, be as dangerous and reckless as Hannibal's own desires.

“I told you Will: I can't hate you. I accept your desires. They intrigue me. I can't say that I wish for you to be killed by the Ripper. But your journey to find him—and what you might find out about yourself, as you seek him—I find that interesting. Possibly too interesting. As a doctor, it's my duty to try to save you from your self-destructive urges. As a philosopher, I believe in the inviolable right of every person to choose his own destiny.” He lowers his voice. “And as your friend and lover, I simply want you to be happy. Which should I choose?”

In that moment, Will's eyes shine with clarity. “There is no reason why you can't follow multiple trains of thoughts. As a philosopher, you can stand by me as I walk down my path. As a doctor, you can ensure I don't fall. And as my lover and my friend, you can make me happy by the mere act of not turning me away.” Will swallows, averting his eyes. “Or you could turn away right now and ensure that you don't fall with me as we walk down this path.”

It takes every ounce of his strength for him to say this. Will doesn't want Hannibal to walk away. But if he doesn't try, the guilt will continue to weigh him down until he crumbles.

Hannibal tilts up Will’s chin with his finger. He is touched by Will’s apparent eagerness to sacrifice him in his cause. There is a streak of ruthlessness in Will Graham that bodes well for the
future.

Gently, he kisses Will’s lips. “Shall we go see Jack Crawford?”

His resistance falls apart. This will be the last time Will asks Hannibal to step away from him. He merely nods. “Jack Crawford isn't a man we should keep waiting.”

Hannibal Lecter thinks about the future. Of the beautiful moment that awaits them both. He kisses Will once more in anticipation.

Will’s lips curve into a small smile as he returns Hannibal’s kiss. “If we continue, we might not leave on time.”

“One more.” Hannibal kisses him again.

As he deepens the kiss, promising himself he will only lose himself in the pleasure of Will's lips for a very short time, the undergrowth nearby parts, and two young men in hoodies stumble into the clearing beneath the trees. Hannibal senses them—or rather their overpowering scent of marijuana smoke—and instantly draws away from Will, but not before they have been seen. One of the men snorts and laughs, “Hey homos, get a room.”

And in that moment, when Will turns to glance at the two young men, something dark and completely unrecognizable flashes in his eyes. Will can almost hear the Ripper's voice in his head. Rude. Utterly, unspeakably rude.

Their eyes meet for barely a second, but Will sees himself ripping the man's tongue out. The world around him is suddenly dull, and he hears the deafening scream. He feels the hot, thick blood spraying on his face, trickling down his neck. He can smell it. Slightly metallic, a tinge of iron. He can taste it on his lips, bitter and sweet and coppery.

He hears the Ripper's soft whisper. "Very good, Will."

Most of all, he can feel the pride.

It barely lasts for a few seconds before Will's eyes narrow. The world, previously dull and dark, is suddenly bright again. He doesn't reach for the two young men. Instead, his hand reaches out to grip Hannibal's tie, tugging sharply and bringing him closer. Will tilts his head up and kisses Hannibal, right in front of the two gaping men. A low moan escapes him and Will doesn't even try to stifle it.

"What the fuck—"

And Will cuts him off with a louder moan, swallowed by Hannibal's lips. He hears them swearing, and wraps his arms around Hannibal. From the corner of his eye, he sees the trees parting as the men finally leave. He pulls away from Hannibal, breathless and flushed.

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Hannibal catches Will's glance. He sees the rage, the affront, and then the look that is almost greedy, almost lustful and he knows what that means. A swell of joy fills him as he watches Will wanting to kill these two strangers. For a moment, Will's face is murderous: his eyes narrowed, his lips set, teeth clenched, and he is glorious.

Perfect.
And then Will pulls his tie and he is kissing him. He's putting on a show but it's no less passionate for that. A kiss born out of rage, out of the same impulse as murder, and Hannibal welcomes it gladly.

He glances over Will's shoulder at the men to memorise their faces. Another time, if he meets them: another time, in darkness, and alone, he will get to know them better. Perhaps, if the time is right, Will Graham will help him. For now, he allows them to leave. He allows them to live. And when Will allows him to breathe again, he smiles at his lover.

“Very good, Will.”

A shudder passes through Will’s body. The three words make his heart beat faster than the kiss that preceded them. Will wonders if that's how the Ripper would say them. If that's how he would sound. For a small second, a shadow passes over them and Dr Hannibal Lecter is replaced by the Ripper. The eyes don't change.

Will's pupils dilate, his heart skips a beat. “They were rude.”

“And you were magnificent.” He places another kiss on Will's lips. “We should go, before we're discovered by someone who is likely to know who we are.”

Will glances down at himself, and then at Hannibal. He straightens his sweater, smoothing out the wrinkles, and then swiftly fixes Hannibal's tie and collar. “Let's go.”

Hannibal resists the urge to re-straighten his own tie and collar. He follows Will out of the undergrowth, waiting a few moments so they don't emerge at the same time. A glance across the park shows him the two rude men getting into a car; he files away the license plate number, and turns to Will.

“Shall I drive, or do you want to meet at Crawford's office?”

Will tilts his head, considering. “I don't think it would be strange for us to arrive together. I did request your presence.”

“And I am very glad that you did.” Hannibal takes his car keys from his pocket and leads Will to where his Bentley is parked. “On the drive, you can apprise me of what you'd like Agent Crawford to know, and what you'd like to keep him unknowing.”

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The drive isn't very long, but Will finds himself talking for the whole fifteen minutes. The time passes quickly.

“... I suppose I'll have to give him just enough information.” They pull up in front of the building. Hannibal parks the car, and they make their way inside. Will takes a deep breath, suddenly a bit nervous.

Outside of Agent Crawford's office, Hannibal touches Will's elbow discreetly. He gives Will a slight nod as Will knocks on the door. Jack Crawford is there, answering it, almost as soon as Will's knuckles have touched the wood.

“Mr Graham. Dr Lecter. Please, come in.” Crawford shakes them both heartily by the hand, smiling widely. “I've been looking forward to meeting you, Mr Graham. May I call you Will? And Dr Lecter, it's good to meet you at last. I read your paper on surgical addiction. Very interesting, very interesting, even for a layman. Please, sit down.”
Agent Crawford pats him on the back and Will's body tenses. He sits down, his posture stiff, his hand immediately digging into his pocket for his glasses. He jumps straight to the point. “What can we do for you, Agent Crawford?”

Jack sits behind his desk. “Dr Chilton says that your academic knowledge of the Chesapeake Ripper is second only to his own. And while I value Dr Chilton's opinion, I think it's time for some new minds to get to work on this case. Dr Chilton says that you have a unique ability to project yourself into killers' minds. A surfeit of empathy. This could be highly useful to us, if he's right. Is he right, Mr Graham?”

Will slips on his glasses. His lips are pressed into a thin line. His face is blank, neutral. Where Crawford can't see, his fists are clenched with barely repressed anger. Chilton. The audacity of that... sleazy, pretentious bastard.

“Dr Chilton has never personally conducted any research on the Chesapeake Ripper. In light of recent evidence, it's safe to say that the research he claimed he did is unreliable. Dr Gideon is clearly not the Ripper.” His voice is almost pleasant. “I'm the best authority you'll find on the Chesapeake Ripper. Except for the Ripper himself.

“The 'empathy' Dr Chilton spoke of is a larger than usual number of mirror neurons in my brain. The mirror neurons, along with a supposedly "unique cocktail of personality disorders and neuroses" allow me to accurately interpret an individual's personality and motivations. This further allows me to discern how the individual would react in a given situation. Using this knowledge, along with computational analysis from the lab, I can give you a profile. It's essentially the act of putting myself in another individual's shoes, while ideally maintaining my identity.” His lips curve into a small smile. “Far more complex than the word 'Empathy'.”

Will pauses for a few seconds. “And also, I don't 'empathize' with just killers. I can 'empathize' with anybody.”

Jack Crawford has been watching Will carefully, and Hannibal has been watching Jack Crawford carefully. He sees that Jack's clumsy question was not uncalculated...unlike Will's reaction to it. Hannibal is glad he is present.

Jack smiles and nods.

“Then you'll be able to empathise with me, Mr Graham. I have a killer on the loose. He kills in sounders of three. Two more lives are at stake, and you are uniquely placed to help us save them.”

Will answers before Jack can. Quietly, he says, “He only killed one person.”

When Jack Crawford pays attention, he pays attention. He leans forward, every inch alert. “Yes,” he says. “That's right. How did you know that, Will? Without access to the crime scene forensics?”

Will blinks.

“I saw the article and pictures on Tattle-Crime. I don't need anything more to come to this conclusion.”

Hannibal appears entirely relaxed in his chair. “I do. Whose victim was the second corpse, then? The partially decomposed one?” He looks between Jack and Will...but really at Will.

Without missing a beat, Will answers. “Matthew Brown. The body was at least a few weeks old. The design was amateur at best. Displaying Matthew Brown... That was the Ripper's design.”
This, of course, is an oversimplified version of the truth. Will doesn't think it would be wise to mention how the Ripper was writing a love letter, how he was fulfilling Matthew's wish of being seen by his lover, how he stripped him bare to be seen by the world.

Jack nods. “That's right,” he says. “There's forensic evidence that Brown killed the oldest victim. His name was Jerry Puia, and Brown's DNA was all over him, and over his grave site. He was pistol-whipped to death, died of cranial injuries, and the gun was at the scene. It's registered to Brown and it had evidence all over it. The Ripper killed Matthew Brown, and dug up his victim to pose with him. What do you make of that, Will? Why would he do that?”

Will hesitates, unsure of how much he should say without putting the Ripper in danger of being discovered.

“The Ripper was displaying Matthew Brown for what he was. He was helping Brown in his quest to be seen. He was doing him a... favor.” Will wonders if the Ripper knew Matthew. He had to. This connection could be... dangerous.

His voice firm, he continues, “There was no emotional connection on the Ripper's side. He found Matthew's desperation interesting, or even amusing. I doubt they ever met more than once. And if they did, it was years ago. My guess is that when the Ripper paid Matthew a visit again, after all these years, he found evidence of Matthew's attempts at acting on his desires. Perhaps he saw how Matthew hid the body, instead of displaying it. He found the contradiction ironic. Matthew Brown hid the body, despite his need to be seen. And thus, when the Ripper killed him, he fulfilled his last wish by displaying the corpse. Matthew Brown has been seen. For the first and last time.”

Blatant lies. Right in the face of Special Agent Jack Crawford. All for the Chesapeake Ripper.

Will admits that he's good, but he doubts he's good enough to fool the Head of the Behavioral Sciences Unit. His heart rate is steadily increasing, his clenched fists are shaking. And yet, his face doesn't betray his anxiety.

Jack Crawford is nodding. “You think the Ripper knew Matthew was a murderer, and set up the crime scene so as to expose Matthew Brown's crimes. That would fit in with what we know about the Ripper's motivations. He doesn't like people who are…” Jack gestures in the air, as if looking for the correct word. “Who are…”

“Pretending to be something they're not?” Will offers.

“He doesn't like pretensions.” Hannibal joins the conversation. “He prefers his own brand of honesty.”

“I'd really prefer it if people called 911 when they found a murderer,” says Jack drily. “Why'd he flay the body?”

Will exchanges a glance with Hannibal. He lies, “The Ripper is a sadist. This was his form of justice.”

No, no, no. The Ripper is not a sadist. He values art over pain. He flayed Matthew so he would be stripped to the core in front of the world. This lie, this blatant misinterpretation, leaves a bad taste in Will's mouth.

Jack nods. “This is very useful. Thank you. I wonder... The surviving witness is at Johns Hopkins. He hasn't been able to make a statement, or to say very much. He seems to be repressing his memories. I wonder if you both could come and see him, see if he'll talk to you?”
And suddenly, Will is very glad that Hannibal came with him today. He isn't sure in his ability to restrain himself once he sees the man the Ripper left alive.

“You want us to see him now?”

Jack nods. “If you wouldn't mind. For obvious reasons, this case hinges on him. Even if he doesn't recover his memory of seeing the Ripper, we might be able to find a connection between him and the other victims, that could point us in the right direction.”

Jack Crawford turns to Hannibal. “Dr Lecter, I hear you are very experienced in helping patients recover memories. Dr Chilton has tried already, but without any success. Perhaps you would lend us your talents.”

“I can certainly try. I'd be glad to help this person access his memories; though I warn you that they might be traumatic.”

Jack shrugs, obviously unconcerned. “All that matters is that we catch the Ripper before he kills again,” he says.

Will resists the urge to glance at Hannibal, taken aback at the passion with which Jack wants to catch the Ripper. He isn't very concerned about the consequences, as long as the Ripper is caught. Much like Will himself.

Will didn't expect this. Just as he didn't expect the deeply protective drive building up inside him.

“As a psychiatrist,” says Hannibal, “my concerns are different from yours, Agent Crawford. It must always be my aim to protect the interests and wellbeing of my patient. And if I try to access the memories of this witness, he will, de facto, be my patient. My efforts will only go so far as I feel is safe for him. Even if other lives are at stake. I hope you understand that.”

Crawford nods. It is not difficult to see the impatience beneath his apparent reasonableness.

“I'll tell you what I know,” he says. “The witness is twenty-four years old. His name is Andrew Marsh, and he's a sales clerk at a bookshop in Federal Hill. No criminal record beyond a speeding ticket last May. He's single, gay, lives with a female roommate who hadn't seen him since Saturday afternoon when he went to work. We know all of this because Andrew Marsh remembers everything about himself right up until leaving work on Saturday evening at seven o'clock.

“After that, his memory's a blank. No memory of how he got to the warehouse, who brought him there, how he got tied up. He was splashed liberally with Matthew Brown's blood; he must have been sitting right next to him when his skin was peeled from his body. But he was unresponsive when police got to the scene, and only came to himself in the hospital this morning. I hope you'll have better luck with him than we have so far, Dr Lecter.”

Crawford looks at Will. “Does the name ring any bells for you, Will, from your study of the Ripper's crimes?”

Despite his rage, Will feels some pity for the man.

Andrew Marsh was in the same room as the Ripper, and he.... doesn't remember him. It's a cruel fate, to be so close to the Chesapeake Ripper, to have the opportunity to study him, only to lose it all.

Of course, others might not see it this way.
Realizing that Agent Crawford is waiting, Will absentmindedly answers the question. “No. It doesn't ring a bell.”

But why doesn't Andrew Marsh remember? It is indeed possible that the man is repressing his memories, but it's... too convenient. The Ripper doesn't leave loose ends. Except for the wallet, and apparently Andrew Marsh. Was Marsh even conscious? And if he was, how did the Ripper know that he won't remember? Repressed memories aren't permanently repressed either.

The Ripper is too intelligent to disregard this. Either he intends for Marsh to be killed before he remembers, or he has ensured that Marsh won't remember for a long time. Enough time for the Chesapeake Ripper to come back and... and what? Both scenarios imply that he has a background in psychology. Clinical psychologist? Psychiatrist? Research practitioner? Regardless, if the Ripper doesn't take care of Andrew Marsh before he remembers, there will be trouble. The confidence is familiar, but this... lack of concern... is not.

Does this lack of concern—Is the Ripper confident that Marsh will die without his intervention? Will looks down at his clenched fists. He can say without a doubt that Marsh will die. Without the Ripper's intervention. But how does the Ripper know that?

His mind is going in circles. He can't say anything else without more information. His clenched fists loosen and he nearly slouches in his seat, letting out a resigned sigh, already exhausted at the thought.

Beside him, Hannibal is alert. “I assume that Mr Marsh was tested for the residue of amnesiac drugs?”

Crawford nods. “Nada. He was clean.”

“If the amnesia isn't due to drugs or a brain injury, it should be reversible. Eventually. Hypnosis could help. But the only sure remedy for temporary amnesia is time.”

“We haven't got time.” Jack Crawford stands. “The Ripper kills in threes. He'll strike again, soon. I'll drive us to Johns Hopkins.”

“Actually, I'd prefer to drive myself, if you don't mind. I have an appointment this afternoon so I may have to leave straight from the hospital. Would you like to come with me, Will, or Agent Crawford?”

Will stands as well. “I'll come with you.”

Crawford nods. "I won't keep you after we meet Mr Marsh, Dr Lecter. Will can drive back here with me.” He looks at Will. "I have some more things to discuss with you, Mr Graham, if you don't mind."

They leave Jack's office together. “It sounds as if you have big plans for Will Graham, Agent Crawford.”

Jack Crawford doesn't say anything. They exit the building, and Jack wordlessly nods at Hannibal and Will before walking to his car. Will, despite his unwillingness to meet with Jack later, doesn't protest.

His mind is far too busy preparing for their meeting with the strange man who survived the Chesapeake Ripper.
Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Andrew Marsh
Hannibal waits until they are both in his car and under way before he speaks. “Jack Crawford is as
determined to find the Ripper as you are. And he doesn't seem to care who he has to use in order to
find him.”

“We both have very different reasons for wanting to find the Ripper. I'm... worried. Agent
Crawford is a very intelligent man.”

“He is. And determined, and in many ways ruthless. I think he is very perceptive and insightful. It
will not be easy to conceal things from him. Then again, the Chesapeake Ripper has evaded him
for years.”

Will glances at Hannibal. “The Chesapeake Ripper is the Chesapeake Ripper. I have faith in him.
I'm worried about myself.”

“Are you worried that you might hurt Jack Crawford?”

“I'm worried that I'll slip up in front of Agent Crawford, that he'll see through me. I'm also worried
about what I'll do if I do slip up.”

“You will have to not slip up. And once Crawford knows you better, you will have to guard your
expression better. What realisation did you come to just now about the Ripper?”

Will turns to look at him, his eyes wide. “I—You saw that? I... realized that the Chesapeake Ripper
might have a background in psychology.”

Hannibal raises his eyebrows as he drives. “It's a truism that those who study psychology often do
so to understand their own mental aberrations. As those who become detectives do so in order to
sublimate and channel their own criminal urges.”

Will doesn't mention how he once wanted to be a homicide detective. Before he found the
Chesapeake Ripper.

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When they finally reach the hospital, Agent Crawford is already waiting for them in the parking
lot.

Jack nods at both of them and leads them into the hospital. A police officer is stationed outside the
witness's room. There's another inside the room—both of them armed to the teeth—and he goes
outside to wait with his colleague when Jack, Hannibal and Will enter.

Andrew Marsh is lying in bed, holding a book, but he's not reading it. He's slender, good-looking,
an African-American man in his twenties with cropped hair. He looks...normal.

“Hi, Agent Crawford,” he says, in a shy voice. His smile, even though it's only polite, digs dimples
in his cheeks.

Jack smiles back at him. His voice is gentle. “Andrew, this is Dr Hannibal Lecter and Will
Graham. How are you today?"

Andrew nods at Will and Hannibal. “I'm okay, I think. I don't remember anything, still.”

Jack nods at the many bouquets that decorate the room, with balloons and teddy bears. “You've got a lot of friends.”

Andrew looks embarrassed. “Actually, those are mostly from the press. They really want me to speak with them.”

Jack goes from pleasant to thunderous within half a second. “The press are vultures.”

Andrew shrugs. “I don't have anything to say to them anyway,” He says. “I don't remember anything.”

“One woman actually got into my room, though. She had curly red hair. The guards had to physically carry her out.”

Jack shakes his head. “Listen, Andrew. Will Graham has studied the Chesapeake Ripper's case more than almost anyone else. I've got him here to sift through what you do remember, or to see if he can find a connection between you and the Ripper, or the other two victims. And Dr Lecter is a psychiatrist. One of his specialties is recovering repressed memories. If you're willing, he'll try to help you with yours.”

Hannibal adds, gently, “But only if you're willing.”

Andrew nods. “I probably shouldn't want to know anything,” he says. “It's a terrifying thing, right? I was so close to death. But I do want to know. I feel like I should understand why I'm still alive.” He shudders, and turns to Will. “Mr Graham? You've studied the Ripper. Do you think...do you think he'll come after me again? Since he let me go?”

Will's face has been blank, but his mind is rushing. The Ripper choosing Andrew Marsh as a victim just seems... wrong. The Ripper choosing a second victim also seems wrong. This pattern is the only thing consistent about him. Could it be that simple? Could it be that he didn't kill Andrew just because this isn't part of his design? But if this isn't his design, why have Marsh there in the first place? Why go through the effort?

If this isn't his design, then it's... Matthew Brown's design.

Was Andrew meant to be Matthew's victim? If the Ripper was displaying Matthew to the world, then it isn't too much to assume that Matthew intended to kill Marsh. As far as Will can see, there would be no reason for the Ripper to kill Andrew.

Will gazes at Marsh. “You have as much of a chance of being killed by the Chesapeake Ripper as anyone else.” And he's telling the truth. His chances of being killed by the Ripper are not very high. Will suspects that at this point, perhaps he has a higher chance of being "killed" than Marsh.

Andrew visibly swallows. “I don't know if I like those odds, Mr Graham.” He turns to Hannibal. “I want to know what happened. If you can help me, then I'd thank you.”

“Then I will try to help you.” Hannibal pulls up a chair, close to Andrew's bed. He turns on the bedside lamp, and moves its shade so that the light points away from Andrew. “Would you mind turning out the overhead lights, Agent Crawford? I am going to try a type of hypnosis on you, Andrew. You will not find it alarming; you may not even be aware that I am doing it. You will feel relaxed and sleepy, that is all.”
Andrew Marsh nods. And then, suddenly, he frowns. “Do I... Do I know you, Dr Lecter? You look familiar to me, somehow.”

Before anyone can say anything else, Will intervenes. “Would it not be best for Agent Crawford and I to step out while you do this Dr Lecter? I'm concerned about how our presence will affect the recollection process.” He glances at Marsh, his eyes concerned. “And I do believe it would be unethical for anyone but a practicing psychiatrist to listen to Mr. Marsh as he tries to remember. Any information he reveals to us must be revealed willingly when he is completely in control, as opposed to being in a kind of trance.”

It almost pains Will to say these words. He wants to listen to what Andrew Marsh has to say. He wants to hear the firsthand report as he talks about the Chesapeake Ripper. But Will cannot deny that if Marsh reveals any relevant information, the Ripper's safety might be compromised. He can't allow that to happen. He can't let Crawford hear. If Marsh does remember, Will knows that Hannibal won't pass on the information to Jack.

Hannibal said he wants to help him.

And so, Will turns to glance at Crawford. “Unless, of course, you disagree.”

Crawford has been listening to Will with barely-concealed mounting anger. But when he speaks, his voice is pleasant and calm. “Mr Graham, may I speak with you for a moment in private? Pardon us, Mr Marsh, Dr Lecter.”

Jack clamps his hand on Will's arm and propels him out of the hospital room, and down the corridor. When he stops, his face is thunderous.

“What the hell are you playing at, Graham? This is my murder case, this is my witness, and nothing on God's green earth is going to stop me from hearing evidence. It is not up to you who gets to hear what Andrew Marsh has to say, and it especially not up to you to determine the ethics of this investigation. I'm going to give you two choices: you can leave right now and never come near my witness or my crime scenes again. Or you can get back in there, and shut the hell up until I ask you for your opinion. What will it be?”

Will's anger spikes, building up in his chest as Crawford speaks. With some difficulty, he forces it down, knowing he can't let it cloud his judgment. Will needs to find the Ripper. But he can't do anything if he's off the case. He has to pick the lesser of the two evils.

When he speaks, his voice is calm. “It was a simple question, Agent Crawford. We would have all understood if you had said that the importance of this case requires your presence in the room. Your witnesses will cooperate with you if you cooperate with them. It doesn't take me long to study an individual. Andrew Marsh will likely be more cooperative if you at least pretend to care about his rights and his power over himself.

Will pauses for a moment, considering his words before speaking again. “That crime scene reporter, she barged into his room and violated his privacy. He didn't like that. You are essentially doing the same thing. The only difference is that you have the law on your side. If you politely ask him if he is comfortable with your presence during this therapy, he will have less qualms about helping. My intention wasn't to challenge your authority. I was trying make your witness more comfortable by making sure he knows that we don't intend to just use him. I apologize if I offended you.”

“And how did you know that I wasn't about to say that?!” Crawford is slightly mollified, but still angry. “You have no rights here, Graham. You overstepped the mark. Until you've proven your
worth to this investigation, you don't get dispensation to decide anything, let alone question my actions or undermine my authority. My investigation. My way. Understand?"

“I apologize. I... need the Chesapeake Ripper to be caught. I got carried away in my passion.” He swallows. “The idea of being so close to him—the fact that Andrew Marsh might hold the key... I needed to make sure that...” Will sighs. “I apologize, Agent Crawford.”


Together, they go back to Andrew Marsh's room. Both guards still wait outside.

When they open the door, they see Hannibal sitting by Andrew's bed. The two of them are chatting animatedly about Dostoyevsky. Hannibal looks up, smiling, as they come in. “I think Andrew and I are ready to get started, if you're also ready.”

Andrew nods. “I'd like you all to be here. I want you to learn whatever you can, to catch the person who did this.”

Will and Jack both sit down, waiting for Hannibal to start. “Whenever you're ready.”

Hannibal turns to Andrew and speaks gently. “You have no need to be frightened, Andrew. You are safe here. As Dostoyevsky said, “Beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and devil are fighting there, and the battlefield is the heart of man.” Whatever is terrible in your memory, you have the power to make it beautiful. Do you understand?”

Andrew nods, and Hannibal begins his hypnotherapy. He speaks normally, if slightly more quietly and calmly than usual, helping Andrew to relax. In a surprisingly short time, and almost before Will and Jack know that the session has properly begun, Andrew is breathing deeply, eyes closed, hands relaxed on the bed.

Hannibal speaks to Jack and Will, his voice low. “It's best if the questions come from me. If you have anything you need to know, please tell it to me and I will ask.”

“Andrew, I'd like you to think back to Saturday afternoon. You were working at the bookstore, as usual. I'd like you to picture leaving the shop. Where were you going?”

Andrew speaks in a slow voice. “I was going home.”

The light is dim, and Hannibal, Will, and Jack are focused intently on Andrew Marsh, the only person to have ever survived the Chesapeake Ripper, as he searches for the memories he has suppressed.

“You were going home. You are safe, Andrew. Tell me what happened before you reached home. Tell me what's happening now, in your memory.”

“I've for coffee, in the place where I always stop.” Andrew smiles slightly. “I always stop there because there's this guy who gets his coffee there too. A really cute guy. But he's not there and I'm a little bit disappointed, so I leave the coffee shop and—”

Andrew's smile widens. “He's outside. Outside waiting for me. He's bought me a muffin. And he asks me if I want to go for a walk with him while we drink our coffee, and I say, yeah. He's really cute. He's wearing a long-sleeved top but you can tell he's got muscles? Like how the top fits him?”

“So where did you walk with him, Andrew?”
Andrew frowns. “I'm not really noticing? Because we're talking. He says he has a friend he really wants me to meet, and I'm all happy about that because he's never even spoken to me before and he wants me to meet his friends.”

“Did he say who this friend was, Andrew?’”

Marsh shakes his head. “Someone like him, he says. He says we'll have fun together. And I say, okay, sure, and now he's pulling me into this alleyway and I think he's going to kiss me, maybe! I'd like to kiss him. And I'm thinking, this is turning out to be a great day.”

Andrew lapses into silence. A long silence.

Will doesn't say a word. He's still, silent, barely moving. and yet, he's certain that his wildly beating heart can be heard by everyone in the room. Could it be possible that he was right? That... That Andrew Marsh was Matthew's design? That the Ripper was displaying the design as a message for Matthew's... friend? Lover?

Or is Andrew Marsh remembering what the Ripper wants him to remember?

Hannibal’s voice is gentle. “Andrew? What happened next? Did he kiss you?”

Andrew shakes his head. His eyes are suddenly full of tears. “He's pushing me up against the wall of the alley. Maybe he likes it rough, that's not my sort of thing, I'm going to tell him but he's got his hands around my neck and he's—he's choking me, he's choking me, and I can't see, it's all black but I can hear he's smiling.”

“Andrew? How can you hear that he's smiling?”

Andrew gasps. He almost seems to be choking now. His hands go to his own throat and he says, “Because he talks to me. He says... he says... "William is going to love meeting you.""

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And Will's breath catches in his throat, his chest tightening almost painfully.

No... No... No .

Matthew's note, the one he left in Will's wallet, is heavy in his pocket. He's the... the one Matthew did all this for. Will's the person Matthew wanted to be seen by. The... friend. Lover.

The Ripper left Will the message by displaying Matthew. The wallet... wasn't just a favor. Will feels a shudder pass through his whole body, he hears the whisper in his ear. "I see you, Will."

And he... Will glances at Hannibal. The Ripper made sure he had an alibi for the night.

In the note, Matthew asked him to meet him tomorrow. Is this what he was going to show Will? His design—Andrew Marsh? And he would have succeeded. Will would have seen him, if his plans hadn't been interrupted by the Ripper. It's all too much, too soon. Matthew wanted Will to kill with him. The Ripper helped Will see what Matthew really was.

But none of that matters right now. The Chesapeake Ripper knows him. The wallet was more than just a favor. The feeling of overwhelming happiness washes over him.

He's been noticed.

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Hannibal's attention doesn't waver from the young man in front of him. His voice is soft. “What happened next, Andrew?”

Andrew's eyes are closed now. “It's all black. It's all black. I don't see anything, nothing. I hear...a voice. A deep voice, but I don't know what he's saying. I hear...tearing. Something like tearing. I feel warmth on me. I feel safe now. The warmth is wet. It feels...nice. And then I open my eyes and there's a policeman. He says—he says—he says I should be dead. Should I be dead?” Andrew opens his eyes. They are wide and panicked. “Should I be dead? Should I?”

Hannibal covers Andrew's hand with his own. “No. You should not be dead. You should be very much alive, Andrew. You're safe. You're here in the room, with me. With Agent Crawford and Mr Graham. You can wake up, now.”

Andrew closes his eyes and when he opens them again, they are different. He is seeing what is real, instead of memories.

“You're safe, Andrew. You've done extremely well. Do you recall what we have talked about?”

Andrew nods. His eyes fill with tears again. “That...that cute guy. He wanted to kill me. He was going to kill me.” Andrew turns, not to Hannibal or to Jack, but to Will. A tear runs down his face. “Did...did the Chesapeake Ripper save my life?”

Will's voice is barely a whisper. “He was... exposing Matthew Brown, stripping him of his pretensions. In the process, he saved your life. He had no reason to kill you. So he didn't. Killing you would interfere with his own design, and would distort the image he wanted to display.” That doesn't guarantee that Marsh will stay alive. The Ripper leaves no loose ends. But Will doesn't voice the thought.

Andrew's voice is shaky. “He didn't...spare me because he thought I was a monster, like him?”

Will shakes his head. “No. He spared you because killing you would make it hard for anyone to interpret his—” Art, beauty. “—his crime

Hannibal speaks gently. “Mr Graham is saying that you weren't meant to be the Ripper's victim. You are alive because he didn't want to kill you. No more, and no less. You were Matthew Brown's intended victim, not his.”

Andrew laughs shakily. “That's some comfort, I guess.”

Jack Crawford is looking like he's drunk a hundred cups of coffee, and all of it has given him a stomachache.

“I think we've put Andrew through enough for now. In my professional opinion.” Hannibal turns to Andrew. “You should try to sleep. A mild sedative may help. I can arrange that, if you wish.” He stands, and looks at Jack and Will expectantly.

Jack moves to the door with some reluctance, and Will and Hannibal follow. Just as Jack opens the door, Andrew says, “Dr Lecter? I think...I think I just remembered where I recognise you from.”

Hannibal turns with a pleasant smile. “Yes?”

Andrew bites his lip. “I sold you a copy of Faust. I remember because there aren't many people in Baltimore who read Goethe in the original German.” He looks doubtful for a minute. “That was you, wasn't it?”
“Indeed it was. And I remember you as well.” Hannibal smiles. “I never forget a face.”

Andrew gives Hannibal a small, shaky smile. And with that, the three of them step out of the hospital room. Will is visibly shaken, for reasons not even close to what Jack Crawford probably thinks. He wants to go home. He wants to talk to Hannibal. But as Agent Crawford turns to look at him, Will knows he has no choice.

"Would you like to head back to my office for our meeting, Mr Graham?" Not trusting himself to speak, Will just nods.

Hannibal shakes Jack's hand, but he merely nods at Will. “And I have my appointment. You both have my number, if I can be of any more assistance. Will, we should talk about how this latest incident affects your thesis, when we've got time. Good day, gentlemen.” And Hannibal goes to his car, leaving Jack and Will together.

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The car ride with Jack Crawford is uncomfortable. No words are spoken. No words need to be spoken.

Will's mind is working so fast that he almost forgets to breathe. The Chesapeake Ripper has been watching him. And Matthew Brown was a message to... to him. There are too many things to think about and not enough time. Even the happiness he feels is dragged away by other thoughts and worries. The world around him seems dull compared to the images floating in his memory palace.

And thus, he barely notices when the car stops, stepping out only when he hears the other door slam shut. As soon as they're in his office, Crawford pours them both coffee. Will appreciates the gesture.

He's barely had a few sips of his coffee when a bundle of thick folders is placed in front of him.

"These are the most recent case files on the Chesapeake Ripper. They're classified. I will be sending you the rest of the files electronically. It's easier that way.” Jack pauses. He places another bundle of folders in front of him. “These are a few recent cases that I am handling. Your presence at the crime scenes would be very useful.”

Will stills, glancing up from the files. “You want me to... study murderers and serial killers that aren't the Ripper?”

“I want you to profile serial killers that aren't the Ripper. Despite your inexperience, you have talent that can be nurtured. Once you will complete your PhD, you'll be fully qualified for the job. Consider this an... internship. You'll be given a temporary badge. Full access to all of the Chesapeake Ripper's crime scenes.”

Will hesitates. He doesn't want to profile any other killers. He doesn't want to study their subpar paintings, compared to the Ripper's masterpieces. But with the path he's leading, connections with the FBI would be... useful.

But his eyes won't be constantly fixed on the Ripper anymore. His time will be divided.

Will steels himself. In the end, it will be worth it. He nods.

“I don't know how often I'll be able to help. My thesis is my priority right now.”

Jack Crawford smiles at him, pleased. "Of course. Studying the Chesapeake Ripper will still be
your primary job."

However, as Will walks out of the building, carrying piles of files he can barely see over, he wonders if he has made a mistake. He wonders if it's wise to divide his attention, despite the classified files he has access to.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Dreams

Thank you for reading. Good luck for the next one!
By the time Will is home, his thoughts are driving through his mind in circles. Will places the Ripper's files on his desk, and-the other ones on his dining table. After taking the dogs out on a quick walk, he practically collapses on his bed.

For once, Will wishes for company. Hannibal's company.

His eyes fall on his phone, sitting on the bedside table. Will closes his eyes. He shouldn't.

As he drifts into sleep, he finds himself wishing for Hannibal's warmth, his scent, his arms.

But when Will does slip from reality, falling into his dreams, he doesn't feel one pair of arms around him. He feels two.

A soft kiss is pressed to his lips. Will's lips curve into a smile. The smile disappears as another arm snakes around his waist, teeth lightly biting his shoulder.

"Wha—"

"Shh."

Will's eyes open. The first color he sees is the color of drying blood. Hannibal's eyes. Slowly, he turns to the side, seeing the same shade of maroon. On... on the Chesapeake Ripper.

Will opens his mouth again, only for the Ripper to capture the words from his lips.

His heart is suddenly beating wildly in his chest, his cheeks flushing.

Behind him, Hannibal chuckles. "Do you see? You don't need his heart in your hand to have his love and affection."

The Ripper pulls away, humming. His lips are painted red with blood. Is it Will's?

The Ripper sits up. "And yet, there is something beautiful about having his heart. The heart he would willingly give me."

Hannibal sits up as well, leaning against the headboard. "I cannot deny that it is beautiful." His hand reaches out to stroke the Ripper's cheek.

Will wants to scream at him to stop. Doesn't Hannibal know who this is? What he can do?

But Will doesn't move. He gazes at them, transfixed.

Hannibal's thumb strokes the Ripper's cheek and they draw closer to each other, their lips brushing. Hannibal kisses the Ripper deeply, licking the blood off his lips.

Will hears a low moan, unable to tell if it came from him or one of the other two men in bed with him. Breathless and more aroused than he ever remembers being, Will watches them, captivated.

Hannibal bites the Ripper's lips, drawing more blood as the Ripper squeezes the back of his neck.
And this time, Will knows that the moan comes from his mouth.

The two men pull away from each other, turning to look at him. "Do you like that, William?"

He barely has the time to reply before he's being pulled up and placed between them.

Will shivers as a hand runs down his back. Another one grips his chin and before he knows it, Hannibal is kissing him. Hannibal's lips are soon replaced by the Ripper's. And Will's body is hot, impossibly hot as it gets warmer by the second.

All he can feel is them. All he can hear is their groans. All he can see is their eyes.

The Ripper kisses Hannibal again, but Will can feel him. He can feel them both. And Hannibal touches the Ripper, but Will feels the burning trail of his fingertips on his own skin.

Teeth bite into his skin. "You're enjoying this, aren't you? Darling boy."

A desperate sound escaping him, Will buries his fingers into the Ripper's hair, pulling him closer to kiss him. A soft brush of lips is all he feels before his hands are behind his back.

"Impatient, are we?"

Cool, soft silk is suddenly tied tightly around his wrists. Hannibal's tie.

Hannibal runs a finger down Will's cheek. The Ripper's lips are on Hannibal's neck, sucking bruises onto his skin.

Will gasps out: “Touch me. Please.”

Teeth nip at his skin. "We are already are, aren't we?"

Desperately he says, “I can't touch myself. Touch me. Please, I—” Will groans.

Hannibal—The Ripper? Both?—whispers, "As you wish."

And Will wakes up with a gasp, nearly screaming as he comes.

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After their session at Johns Hopkins, hypnotising the man who is not the Chesapeake Ripper's only surviving victim, Hannibal leaves Will and Jack together and goes to his appointments. He has two patients to see, and he is attentive to them, courteous as always, professional and incisive as ever. But a large part of his mind is still in that hospital room, not with Andrew Marsh, but with Will Graham.

Whilst hypnotising Andrew, he did not look at Will. But he could feel Will's reaction, as if he were touching him.

The sensation of Will realising what Hannibal had done. That the Ripper had spared Andrew not for Andrew's sake, but for Will's sake, to show Will, above all others, what Matthew Brown had been. The sensation of feeling the shiver on Will's skin, the heat on his face, when he realised that the Ripper's gaze had rested on him. That the Ripper knew of his attention. Maybe even his love.

The thought of it excites Hannibal. He feels warm; an itch underneath his skin, an insistent desire.

At home, Hannibal resists calling Will. He wants Will to come to terms with what he has learned;
to think about every aspect, to dissect and appreciate every emotion. When he sees Will again, he wants to be certain that Will knows the magnitude of the gift that the Chesapeake Ripper has given him. He wants to be able to see the light of it in Will's eyes.

And so even though a very large part of him also wants Will Graham in his bed, beneath and beside him, Hannibal Lecter goes to bed alone that evening.

And alone, he dreams.

In his dream, Will Graham is spread out on Hannibal's bed, naked.

Will's skin is pale, his hair is dark, his eyes catch the light and burn with hunger. He lies, waiting for Hannibal.

Hannibal bends over him. His left hand traces a pattern on Will's body, from heart to navel, neck to groin, feeling the warmth of his skin, the way his heart is hammering, the way his breathing is shallow, the way the blood courses through his veins.

In his right hand, Hannibal holds a knife. It is not one of his shiny-sharp scalpels, nor a finely-honed cooking knife. It's a pocket clasp knife, with a bone handle. The hinge is well-oiled, the blade sharpened and re-sharpened until it is thin and flexible.

This knife was his father's, and his grandfather’s before him. It is a hunting knife, for gutting the spoils of the kill.

Hannibal has not held this knife for many years. It has been lost since he was a child. But he held it once, wielded it and learned under his father's instructions where to cut, how to bleed, when to sever.

Hannibal holds the knife up so that Will can see it. “Do you like my blade, Will?”

Will nods. His lips part in longing, but he doesn’t move, or strain towards Hannibal. There is nothing holding him there but his own desire and hope.

“This is my legacy. This is who I am.” Hannibal bends, and kisses Will softly on the lips. “I will show you. If you want me to.”

“Yes,” Will whispers, and Hannibal smiles.

With his left hand he traces the pattern on Will’s body again: navel to heart and down again, first with his fingertips, then the backs of his fingers, and finally with his whole palm. The ridges and dips, softness and hardness of Will’s body unfold themselves under his hand.

“Are you ready, Will? Do you want me?”

Will nods.

And carefully, tenderly, Hannibal inserts the point of his knife into Will’s navel, and cuts.

Will’s skin parts easily, and the blood wells up like sweet water from a spring. Will gasps—not in pain, but in the way that a man will gasp when first touched intimately by his lover, with surprise and pleasure.

Hannibal’s knife follows the path that his hand laid out, up Will’s abdomen, splitting him open: revealing soft coils of intestine, glistening viscera, the graceful white curve of ribs.
Will’s heartbeat is louder now, his breathing quicker with arousal. Hannibal’s own pulse and breathing match Will’s. He feels as if he is trembling with desire, but his hand on the knife is steady.

“I am going to touch you, Will, as no one else has ever touched you.”

Hannibal puts down the knife. And with both hands, he reaches inside Will Graham.

It is hot inside Will’s body. Hot and wet and slippery. Will moans and again, the sound is not of pain. It is the sound he has made in Hannibal’s bed before, as Hannibal has wrung pleasure out of him. It is not pain, but ecstasy.

And Will Graham, laid open, vivisected, is not hurt, not dying, but fully alive, under Hannibal’s hands.


“Yes, Will. Yes. I will give you everything”

And he reaches further, deeper, past the cage of Will’s ribs to reach his fluttering heart.

Will’s moans are louder, keener, his breath faster. His muscles have tensed, now. Every part of his body is grasping for release. But his eyes are open and they look into Hannibal’s as Hannibal curls his fingers around Will’s heart.

“Yes,” Will gasps, and Hannibal answers: “Yes.”

And he pulls Will’s heart out of his body and holds it in front of Will’s face so they both can see it.

It is still beating. The blood is still coursing through Will’s body. He is alive, as alive as Hannibal, every part of him singing.

“Now we eat it,” says Will, and Hannibal nearly drops the heart. Nearly staggers with the beauty of this perfect, perfect contradiction, this unbelievably wonderful impossibility.

The one person who sees Hannibal Lecter, all of Hannibal Lecter, and lives.

He kisses Will: the hungry, desperate, never-sated kisses that he has shared with Will in this bed. And then he brings the heart to both of their lips at once. It pulses against their mouths.

Together, they bite.

And Hannibal awakes, his own heart pounding, his body and sheets sticky, staring at the after-image of his own dream in the darkness of his bedroom.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry—a short chapter this time, but hopefully it’s worth it! (The next chapter is one of our personal favourites.)

Next chapter...The One Where Hannibal Loses Control
The One Where Hannibal Loses Control

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the dream, Will doesn't go to sleep. He can't. He takes a shower, cleans himself up, and goes for a walk with the dogs. At 6:02 AM, he sits down at his desk to look through the Chesapeake Ripper's files.

It is, of course, a terrible idea.

He's barely read a page before his thoughts start to wander. For once, he remembers every detail of his dream. Every touch, every sensation, every searing kiss. The Chesapeake Ripper. And Hannibal.

To his dismay, Will feels his body reacting to his thoughts. He swallows heavily, and pushes the files away. For now, it might be best to read through the other cases Jack has given him. Will stands up. He can feel his cheeks and neck reddening. How will he face Hannibal after this? How will he even look at Hannibal after dreaming about—about…

He didn't know this was something he desired. He doesn't want to admit to himself that this is something that excites him.

Will soon realizes that denial isn't quite the best option when his reactions betray him so spectacularly. His heart beats wildly in his chest. In his mind, he sees Hannibal, his lips brushing against the Chesapeake Ripper's. He feels two pairs of arms around him, feels warm blood against lips.

The harsh sound of his alarm interrupts his thoughts. Will reddens, pinching the bridge of his nose.

With the way this morning has been, he can't see Hannibal until he can resolve this. And he can't look at the Ripper's files without losing his concentration and focus.

With a deep sigh, Will opens the first file from the second pile, and starts reading about the Monster of Pittsburgh.

***

After his dream, Hannibal doesn't go back to sleep. He changes his bedlinen, and washes his sheets. He takes a very long, very hot shower. He makes himself coffee and a light breakfast. He opens patient files, and does not read them.

His dream is not a mystery to him. He knows exactly what his dream means. The only surprise to him is that he has dreamed at all. Hannibal rarely dreams, or rather he rarely needs to dream. His desires are not sublimated, and he hardly ever allows his fears to ripple the surface of his sleep.

This dream was a murder dream, and a sex dream. It was a straightforward expression of desire, and it is no surprise to Hannibal that he wants both to consume and to make love to Will Graham.

The surprising element is that Will Graham survived. And that Hannibal had to dream this, at all.

What is it about this relationship that he does not understand? Why, in that dream, was it Will Graham's survival that aroused him the most?
He puts down his patient file, and picks up another. He does not see this one either. He is tasting Will Graham's heart, he is savouring Will Graham's blood, and he is feeling a burning, longing weakness at the sensation of Will Graham tasting and savouring alongside him.

Hannibal swallows, hard. Without thinking, he reaches past his untouched breakfast and picks up his phone. Without breathing, he types in a text message.

*I want you so badly right now that I can taste you.*

He sends it to Will. And then he stares at the phone, astonished at what he has done.

***

Will is on the fifth page of the file. Unsurprisingly, he doesn't remember anything he just read. He doesn't even remember the killer's name. He's flipping back to the first page when his phone vibrates.

The message notification flashes on his lock screen.

He drops the file.

Will told himself he can't see him yet. Hannibal would know. He's perceptive and he's a psychiatrist, and—

*I can't stop thinking about you. I can feel you on me right now.*

—and it's a terrible idea, and there are many things he must think about it, and—

He sent it.

***

Hannibal has already started typing in a second text telling Will to delete, immediately, when Will's text arrives. He reads it, hands shaking. Hands actually shaking. This is ridiculous. This is what teenagers do. This is utterly indiscreet and stupid.

*I want you in my bed. I keep thinking about the sounds you make when I touch you.*

***

Will isn't thinking clearly. In his mind, he sees Hannibal's lips painted red as he kisses the Ripper.

*I want you to leave your marks on me.*

***

Hannibal’s father’s hunting knife, the one that was lost, its tip in the hollow of Will's navel. Hannibal texts so quickly he makes a mistake for autocorrect to catch.

*I want to touch parts of you that no one has ever touched before.*

***

Will’s heart is beating erratically, his cheeks are flushed.

*I'm touching myself thinking about you.*
Hannibal’s head is on the desk, for the coolness is provides to his heated face.

*Imagine it's me touching you.*

Will's breathing hard now, his body hot. He thinks of Hannibal. He thinks of the Ripper.

*I need you.*

Hannibal throws down his phone. He stands up, the chair toppling over behind him, grabs his car keys, and drives to Will Graham's house at a speed that would be dangerous if anyone else were on the roads this early in the morning.

He is thinking precisely nothing. Or nothing except for Will Graham's skin, Will Graham's lips, Will Graham's eyes, Will Graham's hand touching himself, and he stops the car and nearly runs up to Will's door and pounds on it and oh God, he is not in control of himself. He is not in control. He is panting, eyes dilated, cheeks flushed, and this—

This is dangerous.

There is someone pounding on the door, and Hannibal is here, and Will is rushing across his house, barely wearing any-clothes. He opens the door, pulls Hannibal inside, and presses him up against the wall, moaning when their lips meet.

“Will.” Hannibal shakes his head, as if he can negate the fact that he is here, erase all the words that he has sent, but Will's mouth is on his. Will is pressing him up against the wall, his body urgent. And Hannibal is kissing him back, lifting Will's t-shirt and sliding his hand between them to touch Will's stomach, the place where his knife penetrated in his dream. The skin is taut and perfect, like a drum.

He thinks of his dream, how hot and slick Will was inside, and he moans, gutturally, and bites the side of Will's neck.

Will moans as well, his hands fisting Hannibal's sweater. He hears a whisper in his ear, the Ripper's voice echoing in his mind. And suddenly, Will can feel the Ripper behind him, sharply biting his neck. He gasps out: “Harder.”

Hannibal bites harder, his teeth denting Will's flesh. There will be bruises. If he bites much harder, he will find the jugular, and Will's blood will gush into his mouth and drip down his chin. The thought is almost too much to bear.

So he pulls aside the neck of Will's t-shirt and bites his shoulder. He pushes up the sleeve of Will's t-shirt and bites his arm. He sees the red marks that his teeth leave behind on Will's flawless skin and he reminds himself that what he dreamed is an impossibility. He can either kill Will Graham or he can keep him alive. He cannot do both at once.

He gasps words that are both the truth and a lie: “I don't want to hurt you.”

And Will can barely breathe. He's almost drunk on the waves of pleasure that run down his body. He longs for the feeling of hot blood spilling from his body, trickling down his neck, warming his
skin. He longs to feel it on his lips, on his tongue. Blood rushes through his veins as his heart beats faster and faster, anticipating the moment as much as Will is.

“You're not hurting me. You're…” He groans against Hannibal's lips. “Don't stop. Please don't stop.”

And Will kisses him softly before tilting his head and biting Hannibal's neck, lightly at first, and then harder.

Will is pressing Hannibal against the wall with a strength that belies his slender frame. He bites Hannibal's neck and the pain is delicious, pure pleasure. Hannibal moans loudly. He closes his eyes and he sees, behind his eyelids, his dream. How he and Will held Will's still-beating heart in their hands. How they bit into it together, their lips meeting in a swell of blood.

Hannibal is trembling. If he had a knife, he would plunge it into Will's body to see if his dream could come true.

He does not have a knife. Instead he digs his nails into Will's shoulders and feels the little bit of his rationality that remains, slipping away.

Will feels a small, thick, hot drop of blood pouring from his shoulder. He moans, loudly. He bites down again on Hannibal's neck, the skin breaking under his teeth. Blood stains his lips, his mouth painted red.

Behind him, the Ripper whispers in his ear. "Yes, William. Yes."

There is no one behind him, but he feels someone's hot breath against his ear. His heart beats wildly in his chest. Will's hands slip under Hannibal's sweater and he gasps out his name, like a prayer. “Hannibal…”

“Will.” He pulls off Will's t-shirt with shaking hands. It is spotted with blood. When he kisses Will, he tastes blood on his lips. It's his own blood, and the taste of it is so erotic that he gasps out, without thinking: “I had a dream.”

Will’s voice is barely a whisper against Hannibal's lips. “Me too.”

Will's body is pressed intimately against his. He wants him closer still. “I dreamed...I was the Chesapeake Ripper.”

And Will moans as the words leave Hannibal's mouth, his pupils dilating, his body trembling. “What did you do as the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“I...cut you open.” Hannibal hardly believes he's saying this. “I ate your heart. You were alive. We ate it together.”

And Will suddenly doesn't know what to say, because Hannibal has dreamed of perhaps one of his greatest desires. To be devoured and consumed by the Ripper, to watch it happen without feeling his body weakening, without his eyes losing-focus. To see the Ripper bite into his heart, blood pouring down his chin.

And Hannibal... Hannibal has not only described Will's fantasy, but he has accurately depicted what he hopes the Ripper would do.

With a low, strangled groan, Will kisses Hannibal until he forgets who they are. Will sinks down to his knees, his hands quickly working with the zipper of Hannibal's trousers. And he licks his lips,
his eyes moving to look up into Hannibal's, and *tastes.*

Hannibal's breath catches in his throat. He leans heavily against the wall, his hands threaded in Will's hair, all the time watching Will's face, his eyes.

“Will…” The name is a strangled moan, drawn from him by Will's mouth, Will's hands, Will's eyes on him. He can feel the impact his dream has had on Will. How hungry it has made him.

And Hannibal Lecter has never come closer to revealing his secret shadow self, than in this moment. He teeters on the edge of it.

He has to bite down on his lip, to keep himself from shouting out his own true name. Grip Will's hair in his hands hard enough to pull strands of it out by the roots. Brace himself with all his strength against the wall. And yet he is still so close to saying it, so close to revealing everything to Will Graham, and the temptation is arousing and exciting, maddening and beautiful.

“Will… I…”

Hannibal groans in pleasure and pain. “Will.”

And Will doesn't know where he is anymore, or who is with him. He doesn't care. Hannibal—the Ripper? Both?—understands. He understands and accepts his desires and that's all that matters. Will's hunger, his eager lips, and Hannibal's moans.

They don't make it to Will's bed, or even to his sofa. When they are finished, they both are lying panting on the floor. Side by side, both slicked with sweat. Hannibal has red friction burns on his knees and Will is covered with bites and scratches.

Hannibal pushes a lock of damp hair out of Will's eyes and sits up. He feels shaky, shaken. Stiff, sore, and satisfied, but not sated. Not nearly sated...but possibly more sane. He can't quite believe what he's nearly revealed.

“That was... unexpected,” he says.

Will leans into his touch, closing his eyes. The Ripper has disappeared. “Unexpected, but not unwelcome.”

“Very, very welcome.” He kisses Will, lingeringly and tenderly, in contrast to their earlier urgency. “We must delete those text messages.”

Will nods. His lips curve into a small, amused smile. “Certainly not appropriate for a professor and his student, is it?”

“Very, very inappropriate. You probably shouldn't even have my personal number. A professor deserves a modicum of privacy.” He smiles as well. “And this is definitely out of office hours.”

“Would it be appropriate for me to seduce you during office hours, Dr Lecter?”

“Of course not. But it would be wonderful. You should try it, some time. My office hours start at nine-thirty.”

“All right. I think I'll try it. Will I get extra credit?”

“You'll get whatever you want.” Hannibal stands, his knees, hips and shoulders protesting. He stretches, naked, in Will's hallway.
Will's eyes follow Hannibal's movement. He stands as well, pressing a small kiss on his lips.

“I should go.” But he makes no move to pick up his clothes. Instead, he traces over the marks he has made on Will's body, with his finger. With his left hand. The same hand, that in his dream, he used to trace the path his knife would make.

“Can't you stay?” Will asks. “For just a little bit longer?”

“I have patients to prepare for. I have to shower and change.”

“I... All right. Fair enough.” Will leans forward, wrapping his arms around, closing his eyes and burying his head in Hannibal's neck. He stays there for a moment, breathing him in. A memory of his dream flashes in his mind and Will tenses, resisting the urge to stumble back. Instead, he kisses Hannibal again and pulls away.

Hannibal still doesn't make a move to pick up his clothes. “Will?”

“Hannibal?”

Hannibal was about to ask Will about his dream, the dream he mentioned earlier. But something about Will's small tension just now tells him that this would be an inopportune time to ask. He will wait, and choose a better moment.

“Merely...thank you. And we still have much to discuss. Jack Crawford, and Andrew Marsh, and Matthew Brown, and the Ripper. Perhaps you'd like to come to my office. During office hours.”

At the mention of the Ripper and his design, Will's pupils dilate. He swallows, nodding.

“Yes. I'll drop in...” Tomorrow? No, he needs time to process this dream, to understand. With his mind not being clouded with arousal anymore, the implications of his fantasy weigh down on him. He can feel the pressure, heavy and stifling, building up on his shoulders and chest. It's hard to breathe. He needs time to think. Will's chest tightens. Tomorrow is too soon.

As Will smiles at Hannibal, the soft curve of his lips hides the reflection of the hundreds of thoughts racing in his mind. “I'll drop in to see you in a few days? Perhaps a week? I need time to gather my thoughts about the Ripper.”

Hannibal blinks. Two minutes ago, Will was asking him to stay longer, teasing about seducing him in his office. Not much more than five minutes ago, he and Will were having urgent, explosive sex on the floor. And now Will is less than eager to see him again.

Hannibal picks up his clothes from the floor and begins getting dressed. Will is right. Things are moving too quickly. Hannibal has acted irrationally and unwisely. Even now, in the calm after the storm, he still sings with temptation, to touch Will, to tell him his secret acts and desires. And at the thought of several days without seeing him, touching him, Hannibal feels bereft.

None of this is good. It is not good at all.

“You're right. It's both discreet and wise to take a break from each other.” He pulls on his red sweater, smooths down the sleeves. Distance will help. He needs time to regain control. “A week—or two, if you need it.”

Will makes no move to dress himself. “I'll come see you as soon as I have a clearer picture of the Ripper.” Or, well, as soon as he can look at the Ripper's file or think of the Ripper without being reminded of his dream, without becoming hopelessly aroused, without thinking of the implications
of his desires.

Hannibal nods, briskly. He considers kissing Will goodbye; but with Will still unclothed, that may turn into more of a distraction. Instead he kisses him swiftly on the cheek.

“Until then. And...it's wiser not to send any more of those messages. Of course.”

Will nods. “I'll delete the messages.”

Hannibal thinks of the madness that must have seized him to write them in the first place. “We mustn’t be reckless. Au revoir, Will.”

And just like that, Hannibal is... gone, leaving behind a feeling of cold emptiness in Will's chest.

For a long time, he just sits on the sofa, his eyes blank and unseeing as his mind races. With his mind not clouded with arousal anymore, he can think. His body is still, his posture is relaxed, not reflecting the chaos that reigns in his mind.

Will knows his dream stemmed from a desire that can never be fulfilled. Looking back at even their first night together, Will remembers asking Hannibal: "I could be aching for someone else. Doesn't that bother you?"

And that has always been Will's concern. For years now, he has known that the Ripper will always be above everyone else in his life. Even as they reached a higher level of intimacy, he knew that one day, he will have to leave Hannibal behind.

One day, his affection for Hannibal could lead to his death. One day, Will's love for the Ripper will lead to his own death. Every scenario ended with their roads parting.

Not anymore. This dream…

He dreamed of the three of them, together. A world where Will can have both.

He knows that in reality, if he were to wish for both, Hannibal would die.

Hannibal would die, and Will would still follow the Chesapeake Ripper wherever he would take him. He would be in pain—it would tear him apart—but his love wouldn't fade. He would take anything his Ripper would give him.

And yet, this horrifying truth doesn't stop him from wanting. If he could have both of them, even for a moment, he wouldn't hesitate. It would end badly. Without question, someone will die. He knows this, and yet, he wouldn't hesitate. Despite the pain, the guilt, and the dread settling cold and heavy in his stomach.

Will thought that he would always want only the Ripper. But something changed, and now they are intertwined. Dr Hannibal Lecter, the Chesapeake Ripper, and Will Graham. They are connected by a thread, with Will holding on to the other two.

The day this thread will break, Will Graham will break with it.

Chapter End Notes
Next chapter... A Dinner Party
The next three days pass without any contact with Hannibal. Despite his efforts, Will isn’t able to pick up a single case file belonging to the Chesapeake Ripper. He feels cold, empty.

He tries sleeping on the first day, only to wake up after a series of dreams very much like the first one. He wakes up with the feeling of teeth on his skin, painfully aroused.

He doesn't try to sleep again.

Unable to work on his own thesis, Will throws himself into analyzing the files Agent Crawford gave him. These killers aren't half as interesting as the Ripper. They barely occupy his time, but Will forces himself to keep going. Anything to distract him from his life, anything to give him some time to sort his mind before he can dedicate himself to the Ripper and Hannibal again.

His mind is overloaded. There is too much. And... He hasn't even started thinking about how the Ripper knows him, how he's been watching him, what the address Matthew left for him means, or what Will wants to do with Andrew Marsh.

It would be better—healthier—to sort these thoughts out. Instead, he concentrates on the many files that belong to one of two killers; the Viper and the Maryland Throttler.

Thus, when Agent Crawford calls him in four days after his dream, Will goes gladly.

***

Dr Bedelia Du Maurier is impeccably dressed, as always. As almost always, she is calm and professional. Hannibal sits opposite to her, in appearance completely relaxed. Unusually, he has said nothing to begin their therapy session. He sits silently, time ticking by, until Bedelia raises a perfect eyebrow and says, “Nothing new to discuss, Hannibal?”

“On the contrary. I have a new lover.”

Bedelia raises her other eyebrow. “You don't usually mention your lovers to me.”

“That is because my lovers are not usually sufficient to disturb my mental processes.” Hannibal raises his own eyebrows. “No offence meant to you, Bedelia.”

“None taken. I have never had an ambition to disturb your mental processes.” Bedelia folds her hands in her lap. “Would you like to tell me about this lover, Hannibal? And how she—? He—?”

“He. How he disturbs my equilibrium. Yes.” Hannibal pauses as if he is thinking, though of course he has rehearsed this, like most of his conversations. “He is extremely intelligent, and exceedingly beautiful. He is probably—no, definitely—unstable.”

“And is his instability what disturbs you?” asks Bedelia.

“Not at all. It is one of the things that attracts me to him. I find it fascinating.”

“Are we discussing your lover, or a patient?” asks Bedelia.
“He is not a patient. Though there are certain aspects of our relative roles that mean our sexual relationship is not socially sanctioned.”

“Do you crave the forbidden, Hannibal? Or is it that you do not think that the rules of normal society apply to you?”

Hannibal smiles slightly. “This is also not what disturbs me. It doesn’t disturb him, either. In fact I’d say that it adds considerably to our enjoyment of each other. There is a beauty in corruption.” He pauses. “No, what disturbs me is the fact that when I am with him, I have an almost irresistible impulse to reveal myself to him. To tell him secrets that I have told no one else. To make myself vulnerable to him and to see if he will make himself vulnerable in return. I find this impulse to be...unsettling. I would vastly prefer not to feel it. And yet that impulse is the one that sets my heart racing. It is far, far more seductive and titillating than the risk of being found out by others, even though if we were discovered, it would have dire consequences for us both.”

He glances up at Bedelia. “I am at a loss to know where this sudden urge to self-destruction comes from.”

Dr Bedelia Du Maurier has been staring at Hannibal as he speaks, transfixed. Now, with his glance, her glacial features relax into a dazzling, rare, and very beautiful smile.

“Why, Dr Hannibal Lecter,” she says. “I believe that the symptoms you describe are what’s known as ‘falling in love.’”

***

When Will Graham stumbles into his office, Jack Crawford’s eyebrows rise so far up that they nearly touch his hairline.

He’s carrying a massive pile of files and papers—double the size of what Jack gave him. There are dark bags under his eyes, and multiple dark bruises—hicckeys, Jack realizes—covering his neck, above the collar. His glasses are at the tip of his nose, nearly falling off. Will’s hands are too busy to fix them.

At his feet is a small, whining puppy, trying to climb up his leg.

Jack decides not to comment. He merely helps him with the files.

With a short nod, Will sits down heavily on the chair. Almost instantly, the small puppy jumps on his lap. Will sighs, fondly fluffing his ears, looking up only when Jack clears his throat.

Agent Crawford slides a card across the table, along with a few papers. "Your temporary badge. As a graduate student, you may now consult on selected cases. As a profiler. Once you acquire your PhD, you may go through training at Quantico before you become an agent. If you want to."

Will hasn't planned that far into the future, but he nods, taking a sip of the coffee Crawford has poured for him. He looks down at the files, pushing his glasses up. “This is all I could do based on what you gave me. My reports are attached to the files.” He glances up at Jack. “I would like more.”

If Jack Crawford is surprised, he doesn't show it. "What about your thesis?"

“My thesis is still my priority, but I... have met a small obstacle. It will take some time for me to clear it up. While my thesis is mostly completely, my perception of the Ripper has changed. I'll only know what to change once the picture is... once the colors make sense. They hopefully will,
once he completes his cycle. Or perhaps when my mind catches up. I would like more files. To occupy my time until then.” *To take my mind off the Ripper until I'm ready.*

When Agent Crawford speaks, his voice is firm. "No." He waves his hand at the pile of papers. "This is more than what I expected you to do. You are not an agent, Mr Graham. I might ask you to consult on cases related to these two killers, but not more than these two. Your priority is the Ripper." Crawford pauses. "And you don't look well enough to handle more."

Will opens his mouth to speak again, almost desperate. He needs *something*, he needs more to distract his mind from the dream, Hannibal, the Chesapeake Ripper, and everything he needs to do.

Crawford cuts him off before a single word comes from his mouth. "No, Mr Graham. I'm sorry. I will look over your reports tonight. The reports I didn't ask you to write. If there is another case, I will call you."

There is a moment of silence, broken only by Leon's whines. Will strokes his soft fur, glancing up at Jack. “All right.”

"Thank you, Mr Graham."

Will stands, picking up Leon and pocketing his temporary badge. As he opens the door to leave, Crawford speaks again.

"And get some sleep tonight, Will."

The comment is unexpected, and-Will tries not to let it show on his face. He turns slightly. “Thank you. I will.”

He probably won't, but he appreciates the sentiment. And with that, he leaves, holding a whimpering Leon in his arms.

Outside, Leon continues to whimper. Will barely lasts half a minute. He holds Leon up, until he's staring into his eyes.

“You miss Hannibal, don't you?”

Leon whines.

“You smelled him. You're unhappy he didn't spend time with you when he visited. We can't visit him. I'm sorry, Leon. No. Things are complicated. I'm not ready.”

Leon continues to look at him. He makes another small sound, nearly shattering Will's heart.

“No.”

His ears droop. Will makes a soft, frustrated sound.

“Leon—I can't—” A soft cry. “Goddammit. Fine. *Fine.* We'll go.”

Thirty minutes later, against his best instincts, Will Graham finds himself ringing Dr Hannibal Lecter's doorbell.

Hannibal is arranging food on plates when his doorbell rings. He wipes his hands on a towel and goes to answer the door, wearing a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, no tie or jacket, and a white apron tied tightly around his waist.
When he opens the door he's unprepared for the rush of joy engendered in him by the sight of Will Graham on his doorstep.

The moment the door opens, Leon stops whining, squirming in his arms to jump up at Hannibal. Will finds himself mirroring Leon's joy, despite the small voice in his head telling him that he shouldn't be here. Will opens his mouth, not really knowing what to say. “Leon missed you. He... He smelled you when you visited a few days ago, and he's been looking for you ever since. He wouldn't stop whining today.”

Swiftly, Hannibal puts his finger to Will's lips to stop him talking. “Will Graham. What a surprise to see you. And your puppy, too. Please come in. You're just in time for dinner.” He removes his finger from Will's lips and stands back to let him into the house.

Will stops talking as Hannibal puts a finger to his lips. His nearly stumbles inside as Leon continues his attempts to jump out of his arms.

Will Graham looks a wreck. He has dark circles under his eyes; his hair is unbrushed, his chin unshaven. His clothes are creased and liberally sprinkled with dog hair. There's mud on his shoes. He looks perfect in every way, and Hannibal feels his pulse speeding up despite himself.

He remembers the delighted smile on Dr Du Maurier's face this afternoon, and his own, vehement, response. *I am not in love. I am merely nurturing an obsession for my own amusement.*

“Yes, please come through to the kitchen. We're having a beer as we cook. I'll set another place at the table.”

Will's eyes widen. He takes a step back. “Oh, I'm—I should have called. I'm sorry for intruding.”

“No at all. I've cooked plenty, and I think you will enjoy this dish. Please, Will. Join us.”

“I…” It would be rude to refuse, but Will doesn't want to talk to more people today. He doesn't want to talk to anyone.

Leon squirms in Will's arms, breaks free, and launches himself at Hannibal. At the same time, Dr Alana Bloom appears in the doorway of the kitchen, holding a knife and a glass of beer.

“What a sweet puppy,” she says. “You said he missed Hannibal?”

Will makes a conscious effort to smile. “I rescued Leon a few weeks ago. When I found him, he had an injured paw. I couldn't leave him alone at home, so I brought him to one of the first meetings Dr Lecter and I had to discuss my thesis. Dr Lecter was one of the first people Leon saw, other than me. He grew attached. The humans he interacted with before I found him were obviously not kind to him.” His smile fades, eyes shining with true compassion.
Alana gives the puppy one last pat. “Well, he's adorable. And Hannibal could use some more adorable in his life.”

“Pardon me?” says Hannibal. “I have plenty of adorable, thank you very much.”

Alana shakes her head. “No you don't, Hannibal. You have beauty, and culture, and good taste. You don't have cute.”

Hannibal sighs, and shakes his own head. “Come through to the kitchen, Will, and I will pour you a cute beer.”

“Thank you, Dr Lecter, but I shouldn't.” He wishes Jack had given him more files to work with. Coming here was a bad idea. Will suppresses a sigh. At least Leon is happy.

Leon is so happy. He wriggles in Hannibal's arms, wagging his tail and licking his face. Hannibal laughs, also happy. He hadn't been aware of quite how much he's been missing Will.

“No excuses, Will. You mustn't insult my hospitality. And Leon will also enjoy this dish I've cooked.”

Alana smiles at Will. “He's a wonderful cook,” she tells him, and then turns teasingly to Hannibal. “Though I've never known you to cook for a dog before.”

“There's a first time for everything, and how can I resist that little face?”

He carries Leon through to the kitchen, so that Will has no choice but to follow. An elaborate meal is in progress, with two beautifully-garnished plates awaiting their main course. The kitchen smells delicious, full of a rich, meaty scent.

And there is a brand-new kitchen table.

Hannibal pours Will a glass of beer. Then he picks up some bits of meat from a frying pan with a pair of tongs and puts them on a small plate for Leon, placing both plate and puppy on the floor. The dog eats enthusiastically while Hannibal readies another plate, for Will.

“It's always good to cook for an appreciative audience, even if that audience is canine.”

Will's face reddens slightly as they stop by the kitchen table, remembering what they did to the last one.

It is then that Will realizes that it's odd for a graduate student to show up at his supervisor's door, unannounced. He's fairly certain that he isn't even supposed to know Hannibal's address. His mind racing, he thanks Hannibal for the beer, and smiles down at Leon. Without taking a sip, he places the beer on the table, wondering if Hannibal will ask about the reason behind Will's presence.

Hannibal puts the finishing touches on all three plates and then balances them on his arms, like a seasoned waiter. He brings them through to the dining room and puts them down on the table, swiftly finding cutlery, napkin and a glass for the third place setting. He turns to Alana and Will, who have followed him (Leon is still busy licking his dish).

“Chicharróns, made in the Colombian style. I warn you—” With a smile at Alana “—they are not exactly calorie-free.”

Will glances at them. He knew Hannibal and Dr Bloom are well-acquainted, but their casual
interaction surprises him. Not knowing what to say or how he found himself in this situation, he stays quiet.

They take their seats at the table. Dinner is crisp, airy cubes of rich flavoursome meat. Hannibal watches with pleasure as Will and Alana take their first bites. He'd hoped Will would be here to share this meal with him, but he had promised himself to wait until Will contacted him, and meat won't stay fresh forever.

“This is delicious,” says Alana. “What's the meat, Hannibal? Is it pork?”

“It is from the belly. This is crackling, fried in its own rendered fat.” He smiles. “Though this animal was quite lean.”

Hannibal takes a bite of the crispy, savoury skin that he flayed from Matthew Brown.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter...Realization
Will glances up at Hannibal. His voice is more genuine that Dr Alana Bloom has ever heard. “It's delicious, Dr Lecter. Thank you.”

Hannibal smiles widely at him. “I'm very glad you're here to share this meal with me.”

In fact, Hannibal doesn't stop smiling throughout the meal.

He and Alana chat easily, and include Will in their conversation, about people they all know in common, and professional interests that they all share—Hannibal and Alana from their work, and Will from his studies. It isn't overly personal, but it is friendly, and touches on music, and art and theatre, and Hannibal laughs often, and refills their glasses. He appears relaxed, and happy, and at home.

Hannibal's laughter is contagious. Will's lips twitch into a smile, and he doesn't mind. He merely takes off his glasses, slipping them back into his pocket.

Hannibal notices Will's smile. It warms him as much as the sight of Will enjoying the fruit of the Chesapeake Ripper's labours.

He clears their plates and brings in dessert, along with Leon, who has fallen asleep on the kitchen floor. He places the puppy to snooze in front of the dining room fireplace, and pours dessert wine, and is happily discussing the highlights of the Christmas season at the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra with Alana, when Will feels a slight warm pressure on his left leg, between the cuff of his trousers and his shoe. A light touch over his ankle; almost a caress.

Will nearly drops his glass of wine, his eyes widening slightly. He glances at Hannibal, and then at Dr. Bloom, who hasn't noticed anything unusual. Slowly, he takes a long sip of wine.

A few seconds later, Hannibal too feels a gentle pressure on his ankle.

Hannibal doesn't even slightly stumble in his discussion of favourite Renaissance Christmas carols. He sips his wine, and Will feels Hannibal's toes slip up under his trouser leg, and touch the bare skin of his leg above his sock.

Will swallows. Slowly, his own foot lightly runs up Hannibal's calf.

Hannibal puts down his fork. “So, what are you doing for Christmas, Will? Do you have any plans afoot?”

Will nearly chokes. He glances at Hannibal, his lips curving into a smile as he puts down his glass. “I'll be working.”

Hannibal's foot caresses Will's skin. “All by yourself? Won't you see a single soul?”

“Dr Gold will have her department Christmas party,” says Alana. “You'll have to make the effort to come this year, Will. And you too, Hannibal. It's always quite the event.”

“I...will consider attending Dr Gold's party,” says Will. “My plans depend on how much work I
need to do on my thesis. And how much work Agent Crawford gives me.”

“I shall certainly come,” says Hannibal. “I enjoy Dr Gold's company. She always keeps me on my toes.”

Alana grins. “Speaking of toes…”

Will's leg stills.

“...Yes, Dr Bloom? Speaking of toes?”

She raises her eyebrows, laughing. “Dr Gold always hangs mistletoe all over her house for her Christmas parties. All over the place, even where you wouldn't expect it. So if you're single, watch out.” She looks teasingly, and more than a little bit flirtatiously, at Hannibal. “That goes for you too, Hannibal.”

Hannibal smiles back. “Don't worry, Alana. I am very good at spotting mistletoe, and I never give a kiss unless I mean it.”

Will sips his wine, slightly uncomfortable. Without warning, he stills at the sensation of something wet and warm sliding across his skin. A few seconds pass, and he feels a heavy weight on his leg. The weight shifts, and then disappears completely, only for the wet sensation to return.

Will glances at Hannibal, puzzled. He draws back his foot. A few more seconds pass before he yelps.

“Leon.”

Hannibal laughs. He slips his shoe back on and glances under the table to see the puppy licking Will's ankle.

“There is a reason I generally do not allow live animals in my dining room.”

Alana also laughs, and looks under the table. “He is adorable, Will. Oh no—he actually pulled off your shoe!”

Hannibal says, smiling and catching Will's eye: “A very naughty dog.”

Will reddens. “I—Ah, well. He's always naughty. But I don't have the heart to reprimand him. His eyes always get me.”

“It's always the eyes, isn't it?” says Hannibal. “Puppy dog eyes. I'm also finding myself strangely susceptible to them, lately.”

Alana laughs, and stands. “I'm sorry to eat and run, but I've got to go. Thank you for a lovely evening, Hannibal.” She turns to Will. “Will, can I offer you and Leon a lift home?”

“Thank you, Dr Bloom. That's very kind of you. I apologize for intruding tonight. I...came here to talk to Dr Lecter about my meeting Agent Crawford, but I suppose office hours would be a more appropriate time.”

Will stands as well, glancing at Hannibal. He doesn't want to leave. He should. He doesn't know what possessed him to come here in the first place. He... isn't ready. Not yet.

Perhaps that's why he came. Because he needs to be ready.
“You weren't intruding,” says Hannibal. “It's been a very pleasant evening. I'm happy for you to stay a little longer, if you'd like to discuss Agent Crawford.” Leon jumps out of Will's arms and runs to Hannibal, pulling at his trouser cuff. “Or to play tug of war.”

“All right.” Will looks at Leon, sighing, and then turns to Alana. “Thank you for the offer, Dr Bloom.”

Alana shakes hands with Will, and Hannibal walks her to the door, Leon trotting behind him. He returns to Will a moment later with Leon still at his heels.

“Well. It's just you and me. And the dog.”

Will wants to take a few steps forward and wrap his arms around Hannibal. He doesn't move.

Hannibal begins clearing the table. “Mistletoe. It's a parasite, you know. It batters on trees and feeds off them. Still: it's very pretty. Don't you think?” He hands Will a stack of plates.

Will carries the plates to the sink. “It isn't beautiful despite what it does, but because of what it does. It only does what it evolved to do. It's in its nature.”

“Have you been resisting your nature, Will?”

He stills, his back to Hannibal. “What makes you say that?”

“You have been given unprecedented access to the FBI's files on the Ripper. And yet you haven't wanted to discuss them.”

“It's not as if I don't want to look at the files.” He wants to learn every word, carve them into his heart. “I... I can't.”

“Why not?”

And what exactly is he supposed to say?

How is he supposed to say what he means in a manner that is delicate?

“Every time I try to sleep, I have... dreams. About you. And the Ripper.” He pauses, his back still to Hannibal. “...Sexual dreams.”

His voice is barely a whisper. “I... dream that we are having sex. The three of us. Together.” He clears his throat, his eyes fixed on the plates in front of him. “I—can't concentrate on the words in the Ripper's files.”

Hannibal's mouth is suddenly dry.

“Because...” He has to clear his throat as well. “Because you're fantasizing about making love to both of us.”

“I—Yes. Together. And... watching, as the two of you...”

Hannibal feels a wave of desire so strong that his knees go weak. He leans heavily against the kitchen counter.

His voice is gravelly. “You watch, as the Ripper and I...touch? Kiss?”

Will’s heart is pounding in his chest, his cheeks flushing. “I... Yes... And then you...pull me
between you, and we…” His eyes squeeze shut. “There's blood on your lips. And his. And mine.”

Hannibal is shaking. “How...how does it taste, Will?”

“Intermingled... My blood, and yours, and his... It's sweet and bitter, and... Incomparable. Like elixir.”

“And...and you…” Hannibal swallows hard. “And in that moment, in your dream, when the Chesapeake Ripper and I are making love to you, and to each other, through you, how do... How do you feel?”

Will doesn't even hesitate. “Complete.”

Hannibal has to close his eyes. What he is feeling is powerful, and exciting, and arousing.

But it is more than that. It seizes his heart, squeezes his lungs, twists in his belly. It casts a blinding golden light into the myriad chambers of his mind, and shows him the luminous truth which he has allowed to grow in the shadows.

He speaks, hoarsely, without realising he is doing so: “Bedelia was right.”

She was right.

Hannibal is in love with Will Graham.

Will barely hears him. He's speaking rapidly.

“And I... I needed some time away to think. I'm unable to even look at the files—or you—without thinking about... that. I needed to sort out my thoughts before I could even think of analyzing this, and ... Who is Bedelia?”

Only the pause, and the raising of Will's inflection at the end of the question, rouse Hannibal from his thoughts.

“I'm sorry? Pardon?”

“You said ‘Bedelia was right’... Who is Bedelia?”

“Bedel—? Oh. Dr Bedelia Du Maurier is my psychiatrist.”

He feels stunned, drunk, reeling. How did this /happen/? When?

Will wants to ask him what she said, what she was right about, but Hannibal doesn't seem to be in the right state of mind. He closes his eyes again.

“I... understand this might make you uncomfortable. I'm sorry, Hannibal.”

“I'm not uncomfortable. I've told you before, Will: nothing you can say, no desire or dream of yours, could shock me.”

His own feelings, on the other hand... Hannibal is still leaning heavily on the kitchen counter, not trusting himself to stand.

“I... can't concentrate, Hannibal. On anything.”

“Then don't.”
“And let myself be consumed by what I feel for both of you?”

*Consumed.* Hannibal nearly groans.

Instead, he propels himself across the kitchen and takes an unopened bottle of whisky from a cupboard “I think...that the two of us need to get drunk.”

Will turns, leaning against the counter. “Don't you have work tomorrow?”

“At some times, and in some circumstances, it is wisest to be unwise.” He opens the bottle and pours two large glasses. Hannibal hands him the glass, their fingers brushing. Will brings it to his lips, taking a long sip.

Hannibal gulps his whisky, welcoming the burn in his throat and the warmth in his stomach.

He's in love with Will Graham.

Somehow he has found the one person in the entire universe who has the best chance of catching him. And he has gone and fallen head over heels in love with him.

This is the stupidest thing that Hannibal Lecter has ever done in his entire life.

He drinks his whisky, gazing at Will. He should send him away, right now. Or else he should kill him. Eat his heart, as he wanted to do, not long ago. Stuffed with wild mushrooms.

It would be the best meal of his life.

He raises his glass to Will's. “Our desires define us, Will. Our desires and our dreams. You mustn't be afraid of yours.”

Will raises his glass as well. “My desires don't frighten me as much as the consequences.” And he takes another long sip.”I know what I want. But I don't know if madly rushing after my desires is wise. I don't know if I should have even told you.”

“I am glad that you told me. Your dreams are...extraordinary. You dream that you are intimate with me and a killer, at the same time. You dream things that most people would consider nightmares. And yet to you, they're a consummation. Why are you trying to avoid having these dreams, if they feel good to you?”

“Because if I were to go after these dreams, one of us will end up hurt. It's dangerous. For everyone.”

For Will, having the Ripper's attention—whether positive or negative—would be an honor. But now he has dragged Hannibal into this, and nothing is simple anymore. “This won't end well.”

No. This won't end well, Hannibal thinks. It is supremely foolish for him to have become emotionally involved. And yet...this feeling is exquisite.

“Dreams are fantasy, Will. They needn't translate into action, or reality. You can enjoy a dream, guilt-free. Unless you're ashamed of being aroused by violence?”

Will averts his eyes. “The more I dream, the more I want it to be reality. Day by day, my resolve will break. I don't know if it's violence that arouses me, or just the thought of experiencing anything at all with the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Hannibal wants to touch him. He wants, so very badly, to tell him the truth. Perhaps one would,
inevitably, lead to the other: touch to revelation.

Instead he finishes the whisky in his glass, and reaches his hand out for Will's glass. “Let me refill that for you.”

Wordlessly, Will hands him his glass. For a moment, he closes his eyes and leans against the counter. His body is more relaxed than it was before, the whisky clearly helping him ease the tension.

“I shouldn't have come here today.”

“I'm very glad that you did come here. It's been extremely revealing.”

Will opens his eyes. “Are you reconsidering our relationship?”

“Yes.”

If Will Graham only knew how much Hannibal was reconsidering everything at this moment, in the light of his realisation. Not only their relationship, but...everything. Hannibal Lecter has not been expecting to fall in love.

Will slowly nods. A few seconds pass before he reminds himself to breathe. He reminds himself that this had to happen eventually. No one has endless acceptance. And he doubts anyone would be happy to hear what he has told Hannibal today.

It's better this way. No one will get hurt.

The thoughts don't help. Logic is hardly a suitable balm for heartbreak.

His eyes meet Hannibal's for barely a second before he averts them again. “Okay.”

“That's all you have to say? 'Okay’?”

“I don't want you to die.”

“Your fantasy is not about my death. Your fantasy is about the opposite of death: life, and breath, and pleasure.”

“A fantasy is a fantasy for a reason. One day, I'll have to choose. And when that day comes—”

He swallows, unable to continue.

“Perhaps you won't have to choose. Perhaps the choice will be made for you.” Hannibal sets both their glasses on the kitchen counter, and opens the bottle of whisky. “I've told you before, I'm not afraid of the Ripper.”

He pours a generous measure into both of their glasses, sets the bottle down, and with a swift movement, undetectable from where Will stands, he crushes a tablet with his fingers and drops the powder into Will's glass.

“I'm much more interested in you, Will. Your fantasies, your choices, your decisions. Perhaps the Ripper is, as well.”

He tops up both their glasses with another slug of whisky, checking to ensure the powder has dissolved entirely in the amber liquid, and then turns around. “I know that when I am with you, I'm happy.”
He gives Will his glass, and sips from his own.

Will places his glass on the table. “And I'm happy when I'm with you. All the time we have spent together, I have felt free in a way I've never felt before. I've felt like myself. It's the first time in my life that I have let another person know me. And I never thought that I would feel so much for you. I've said this before. I will always choose him. But I can't choose him over you, and I can't choose you over him. I don't want to lose you, but I—I don't know what to do.”

Will swallows, his eyes burning. “What I want is impossible.” His hand shaking, he picks up his glass, almost scared that he'll drop it. “Every scenario ends the same way. I...”

It hurts, knowing that as he gets closer to finding the Ripper, he also gets closer to losing Hannibal.

“I... I don't know what to do.” And Will raises the glass to lips, drinking his whisky in one go.

Gently, Hannibal says: “The world has been changed by human beings wanting impossible things. Desire is a stronger force than wind, or sand, or water. It is stronger than time. There was a reason that God planted forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Without it, humans would have remained animals. But with temptation and knowledge, humans embraced their whole potentiality. They became complete. I feel complete with you, Will.”

Hannibal raises his glass to his lips, and then lowers it, frowning. “Do you feel all right?”

Will places his glass on the counter, leaning heavily against it as he feels a strong wave of dizziness pass over him. He struggles to keep his eyes open.

“I'm sorry, I'm—very tired. I haven't slept in a few days. It must be catching up to me.” The words feel strange. He wonders if he's saying them right. “I'm just a bit dizzy.” It's hard to keep himself upright.

Instantly, Hannibal sets down his own glass and goes to Will. He puts his arms around him. “You drank too quickly. Lean on me.”

Will lets him support his weight, his body limp against Hannibal's. The small movement is followed by another wave of dizziness, and he's suddenly unable to support any of his own weight. He's tired. So tired. His eyes close, and he clutches Hannibal's shirt with his hands, burying his head in his chest.

Slowly losing consciousness, he mumbles: “Just like when you took me home.”

Hannibal holds him tight, pressing a kiss to his forehead. He feels Will's muscles relaxing, his body becoming a dead weight. Such trust.

He remembers, briefly, the way that Will leaned against him on their first night together, when they left that bar together and the fresh air made Will even more tipsy. He remembers how sweet and exciting Will's weight was to him, even then.

“Come to bed, then. Come to bed and let me hold you while you sleep.”

Will tries to open his eyes, but everything is heavy. His voice is a soft whisper against as Hannibal's chest. “Yes, please.”

And he loses control of his muscles, slumping against Hannibal as consciousness leaves him.

As Will slumps, Hannibal scoops him up into his arms. He carries his limp body out of the kitchen,
up the stairs, to his bedroom. Pulling back the bedclothes, he lays Will on the bed and gently, tenderly, removes his shoes, and then his clothes. He folds them carefully and puts them on a chair, and then he kneels beside Will on the bed, gazing down at his naked, vulnerable body. So soft in sleep.

It would be so easy, right now, to slip a knife into that flesh. Reach inside. Hold Will’s heart, which he has eaten in proxy but only dreamed about touching.

Perhaps that would be the wisest thing to do, after all. He has dreamed it; desired it. He would be safer if Will Graham never knew about Hannibal's love.

But there is another, warring desire in his breast. A curiosity. A thirst for knowledge. He wants to know what Will Graham will do.

Hannibal bends and kisses Will's forehead again. His closed eyelids, his cheek, his lips which still cling to the taste of whisky. Will is warm, he is breathing, but motionless as the dead.

Hannibal whispers: “My darling. My...my beloved.”

He pauses at the word. He wonders at it passing his lips.

He says it again, aloud this time, not in a whisper. “My beloved.”

Will doesn't stir. He has not heard Hannibal. And this, of course, is why Hannibal can speak.

There's a tiny bark from behind him. Hannibal turns; Leon is there, in the doorway, a bundle of fluff. He wags his tail and scampers to the bed, looking up and panting. It's too high for him to jump up. Hannibal scoops him up and puts him on the sheet beside Will. The puppy instantly curls up against Will's chest, and Will, drugged as he is, instinctively curves his arm around Leon.

Hannibal gazes down at the pair of them for a long time.

Words are powerful—perhaps too powerful. Too dangerous. Actions are more revealing, but also more equivocal. He will do what he intended to do when he drugged Will's drink.

Hannibal pulls up the blankets around Will and tucks him in, along with Leon. He kisses his cheek again.

“Goodnight. Sleep well. Although your dreams are beautiful, tonight you will not dream. Tomorrow, you will wake, and I will be here, and you will dream again.”

And softly, Hannibal leaves the room, locking the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter...Everything I Feel
Hours later, when Will's eyes open, he feels fresh. The constant, dull headache is gone, and his muscles are relaxed. His sleep was restful and dreamless. The sheets are soft against his skin, and he's warm, but not uncomfortably so. He shifts slightly, smiling as he feels the steady weight of the arm around him. Will gently turns to face Hannibal. His eyes are still closed. He leans in, pressing a soft kiss to his neck, slowly moving up to kiss along his jaw.

He suddenly stops, his lips pausing as a stray thought of growing importance crosses his mind.

Why is he here?

He remembers going to Crawford's office with Leon. He didn't plan to drop by Hannibal's house, but Leon missed him, and—

His body tenses as he remembers.

He told Hannibal about the dream. He told him everything. They were discussing their relationship. And then... Then what?

They were drinking whisky. And he remembers feeling bone-deep tiredness, barely able to stand and keep his eyes open. He shouldn't have been drinking whisky. Not when it had been days since he slept.

He fell asleep in the middle of a discussion about their relationship. Right after barging into Hannibal's house unannounced, interrupting his dinner plans with Dr Bloom, and dropping a bomb by telling him about how he has fantasized about a ménage à trois with him and a serial killer. Wonderful.

Will wants to rip his hair out.

Instead, he stills once more as he realizes that somehow in the middle of this horrid moment of recollection, his fingers had betrayed him and started toying with the hair on Hannibal's chest. He removes his hand, cheeks reddening.

Eyes still closed, Hannibal catches Will's hand and puts it back on his chest. Sleepily, he murmurs, “Don't stop.”

Will feels his cheeks get warmer. He is glad Hannibal can't see. “Hannibal—Last night... I fell asleep.”

A smile touches Hannibal’s lips. “I know you did.” He hooks his leg around Will's and draws him a little closer.

“You're not angry? We were having an important conversation.”

“Which we may resume at any time you like.” Eyes still closed, kisses Will's chin. “Though I am quite enjoying our present conversation. Of hands, and skin, and lips.”

Will presses closer to Hannibal, his fingers once again playing with the hair on Hannibal's chest.
He kisses his nose. They should resume their conversation. It would be best not to delay it. But…

“I’ve missed this. I’ve missed you.”

“It’s been several days since our ill-advised adventure in explicit text messages.” Hannibal kisses his lips. “I’ve missed you too.”

He pulls away, his lips curving into a small, almost mischievous smile. “You mean when you **sexted?**”

Hannibal presses his lips together. “You must never, ever tell anyone that I did anything termed ‘sexting.’ Next thing, there would be rumours that I’d sent—” He winces. “Dick pics. It makes one nostalgic for the good old days of love letters written in scented ink.”

“And what if I do tell someone that you were sextin—” Will pauses, his eyes widening. “Wait. Did I just hear the word **sexting** leave your mouth? And **dick pics?**”

“Will.”

“Hmm?”

“Ground rules. What is uttered in this bed, stays in this bed. No further.”

“We weren’t sexting in bed.”

“We’re talking about…that. In this bed.”

Will kisses him. “I am really not the kind of person you usually date.”

Hannibal Lecter has never before fallen in love with the kind of person he usually dates. When he speaks, his voice is serious. “No. You are not.”

“I suppose not many people usually date graduate students with a passion for the minds and motivations of serial killers.”

“Only the most fortunate people.” He runs his hand down Will's naked back. “Do you call this dating, then?”

“I don't know. I would say that... perhaps this is closer to a relationship. You are my lover and my mentor.”

“And I hope, your friend.”

His voice is barely a whisper. “And my friend and confidant.”

“May I confide in you now?”

“Of course.”

“I was quite disappointed when you fell asleep last night, even though you obviously needed the rest. All night, lying next to you like this, I have been thinking about…” He lowers his voice and whispers intimate details in Will's ear.

Will's hand travels from Hannibal's chest to his shoulder, squeezing gently. He kisses him, whispering against his lips, “Have these thoughts been keeping you awake?”
“They've made it hard—” He corrects himself, smiling. “They've made it difficult to sleep soundly, yes. I've been very aware of you all night.” Kisses him. “I may have slept a little.”

Will swiftly pushes Hannibal on his back from where he's lying on his side, rolling over him. His hands run over his naked form as he kisses Hannibal's neck, lightly biting the skin. “We're both awake now.”

Hannibal arches up against him. “And no need for sexting, thank goodness.”

Will nips his earlobe, his voice low and intimate, “You did start it. And you were surprisingly good at it for someone who claims not to enjoy it.”

Gasping slightly, Hannibal whispers, “I never said I didn't enjoy the outcome.”

“Prove it.”

He is distracted by Will's body in such intimate proximity to his under the sheets. “Prove what? How?”

Will's hand trails down his chest, traveling lower to grip Hannibal under the sheets. “Show me how much you enjoyed the outcome.”

“I...would have thought that you held the evidence of my enjoyment in your hand.”

Will answers by kissing him again, his hand moving in a rhythmic motion.

Hannibal groans and tilts his head back on the pillow, closing his eyes. “See...you know exactly what to do without my having to send you text message instructions.”

He bites down on Hannibal's shoulder. Gasps out, “I know what to do. But there is certainly some pleasure in hearing you and watching you lose your composure. Or even observing the lack of control in your words. You're always so proper.”

“You want me to lose control. To let down my guard.” He groans as Will squeezes him.

“The...first time you touched me, was to mess up my hair. What...” He gasps. “What do you think you'll find, underneath?”

Will pulls back to gaze into Hannibal's eyes. The color reminds him of the blood on the Ripper's victims. His hand is stroking Hannibal faster now. “I don't know what your slip in control will bring. But whatever it is, I want it.”

“Go on then.” His breath is coming quickly, but his mouth quirks upward in half a smile. “Try to make me lose control. I put myself entirely in your hands.” His eyes gleam. “And your mouth. And whatever else you care to use.”

Instantly, the blanket is shoved to the side and Will is between Hannibal's legs, spreading his hands up his thighs. He gazes up at Hannibal, his eyes burning with passion he usually reserves for the Chesapeake Ripper. He wants to see what Hannibal would look like as he loses his composure, lets go of all control.

When his eyes are wild with hunger, rage, lust—anything but that calm, collected, perfect exterior.

Just hours ago, he was talking with Hannibal about reconsidering their relationship, putting a stop to his fantasies. Putting a stop to them because of the inevitable consequences. Because this won't end well. Will has not changed his mind. He still intends to finish their conversation. But right
now...

Right now, he is gazing up at Hannibal, imagining what he will look like once his masks break. Right now, a wave of excitement and arousal is passing through him, just at the thought of Hannibal's eyes, wild and unrestrained and feral. He wonders what Hannibal's eyes would look like if he were to experience the Ripper's cold, calculated rage.

He wonders how Hannibal's own rage would look. Or perhaps his hunger. How his lips would twist, how his face would change.

He can't resist the almost obscene noise as his lips close around Hannibal, tasting him. He realizes, at that point, that perhaps he is enjoying the act of pushing Hannibal over the edge more than he expected.

**

Hannibal tangles his fingers in Will's hair and abandons himself to sensation. His student is...very talented.

And Hannibal, despite his words about lying next to Will in frustrated desire all night, has in fact only been in bed with him for an hour or so before Will awoke. His little project last night had taken some time; he was cutting it fine.

Not many minutes ago, his fingers which clutch at Will's hair, urging him onwards, were engaged in another activity that though of a different nature, was equally intimate. His gloved hands had been hot with blood. Instead of bed linen and skin and lust, he had breathed in the scent of fear and long-rotting vegetation, and the coppery sharp fragrance of the inside of a human body.

Hannibal looks down at Will's face; sees the hunger there.

A heated desire to test the limits of control, a fierce, almost violent curiosity, mixed with total absorption in the task at hand.

Hannibal thinks that his own face may have worn an expression very similar to this, mere hours ago, as he worked meticulously on his gift.

It was not the first time Hannibal has slipped from a lover's bed to commit secret shadowy acts. Not the first time he has used sex as an alibi. But last night, now, is the first time he has wished that his lover had not stayed in bed behind him. The first time that curling up with a living person has felt like part of the act, not a resumption of a disguise.

For a fleeting moment, he wishes he had not worn gloves, had not washed himself so thoroughly before joining Will in bed. He wonders what Will's face would have looked like if he had come to him stained in blood, still bearing the signs of the Ripper's glory.

But this is impossible. Will is not yet ready. Perhaps he will never be.

For the present, Hannibal allows himself this: he clutches Will's hair tighter, pulling nearly to the point of pain. He strains his body upwards to meet him. And he keeps his eyes open, gazing into Will's, while he recalls in perfect detail what he has done, this night, for Will Graham.

He allows some of his emotion, his hunger, his desire, his...love, to show in his face. And even as his movements grow wild, as he's consumed in pleasure, a small detached part of him -wonders exactly how much Will is able to perceive and understand.
The look on Hannibal's face, the way his fingers clutch his hair almost painfully, the ways his eyes meet Will's—it all sends a rush down his body, his heart racing so fast that he fears it'll stop. His body is burning hot, the sheets beneath him feeling cold against his skin. When he told Hannibal he wanted to see him without his masks, without his control, he didn't know what to expect.

Will thought he was prepared.

He wasn't.

He wasn't prepared for the intensity of his gaze, the extent of his hunger and desire. In the back of his mind, he feels the presence of a familiar shadow. He can't name it.

The fingers clutching his hair tighten, bringing him out of his mind. Will welcomes the pain. Hannibal's face is more open than it has ever been, and Will can't take his eyes off him. He sees something, something that isn't hunger, or lust or desire.

He understands it, he has felt it before. And again, he can't name or explain it.

The intensity is startling.

No, Will wasn't prepared for this. But he also wasn't prepared for his own reaction to it. His arousal, excitement, his enjoyment. For someone who shies away from people and their emotions, this loss of control should have overwhelmed him.

But Will almost craves it. Now that he's gotten a taste, he wants more.

Hannibal's movements become wild, erratic, and as he releases, Will swallows every drop. When he looks up again, his own eyes shine with the nameless emotion he had seen on Hannibal's face.

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Hannibal sees Will's face, recognises it for a mirror of his own, and his heart makes a massive thump in his chest. He loves—he loves—he should have shown—he is feeling too much, far too much, and he pulls Will up along his body so they are face to face and he whispers, wildly.

"You see. You see."

He kisses Will, tasting himself on Will's lips, on his tongue, holding him so tightly that it is impossible to know whose heartbeat he is feeling.

"Will, I…"

Will can barely breathe. "I keep trying to tell myself to push you away. Instead, I end up doing the opposite. I can't push you away. Do you understand? I can't. I feel for you what I feel for him."

"That's what your dream meant." His heart is pounding. "Not just a desire, but a truth."

His resolve is breaking. "Truth can't be changed."

"Truth can only be hidden, or revealed." And Will Graham's truth is...the same as his own.

"Will…"

Hannibal's voice is rough. He holds Will close, as close as it is possible to be, tight against his heart. This truth, both their truth, together, opens up a universe, an infinity that Hannibal never
believed to be possible.

“Will...I...”

Will leans in, until their foreheads are touching, lips inches away. “Hannibal... Everything I feel for him...”

“.You feel for me.”

Will swallows. “You see my weaknesses. You've witnessed my... my obsession. But you still haven't turned away.”

Hannibal speaks hoarsely, hardly louder than a whisper. “I can't turn away. I won't. I—”

A phone rings, loud in the quiet house.

Will stills, his hands resting on Hannibal's shoulders, his heart beating wildly in his chest. Even though Hannibal was expecting this, his breath stops in his throat for a moment.

“That's...I think that's your phone.” At the foot of the bed, Leon barks.

Will climbs off of Hannibal, reaching over to the table next to his side of the bed. He reluctantly picks up his phone, his voice slightly rough. “Hello?”

The voice on the phone is hard and urgent. "Will? It's Jack Crawford. Where the hell are you? I'm outside your house.”

The urgency of Crawford's voice catches him off guard. “I—Agent Crawf— I'm at a friend's house.”

"What's the address? I'll pick you up."

Will climbs out of bed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “No—I'm not too far away. I'm already leaving. We'll meet halfway.” He turns, looking for his clothes. “I'm currently walking to a cafe—The Cottage. What's happening, Agent Crawford?”

"We have another Ripper scene. I'll meet you at The Cottage in ten minutes." Crawford hangs up.

He puts his phone down and turns to Hannibal. Without meaning to, his lips curve into a smile. “There's another Ripper scene. Where are my clothes?”

“I folded them on the chair. Will, I hope you don't allow yourself to look like that when you see Agent Crawford.”

“Thank you.” He turns again, quickly putting on his boxer shorts and trousers before rushing to the ensuite. He returns a minute later, hastily putting on his shirt. Will shoves his phone in his back pocket, picks up Leon, and looks at Hannibal.

“Look like what?”

“As if it's Christmas morning.”

His smile widens before he attempts to make it disappear completely. His lips twitch. “I won't look like this when I see him.” Leon licks his chin. Will glances at him before looking at Hannibal again. “Do you mind watching him for a few hours? I don't want to take him to the crime scene.”
“Yes, I do mind looking after the puppy, actually.” Hannibal gets out of bed, and walks naked to
his wardrobe. He selects slacks, a shirt, a sweater, a blazer and starts getting dressed. “If I recall
correctly, one of the conditions you stipulated to Jack Crawford when you agreed to work with
him, was that your supervisor would accompany you to all crime scenes. I will meet you at the
café, and go with you to see the Ripper's work.”

Hannibal can hardly wait. The smile on Will's face at the news was stunning...what will he look
like when he sees the Ripper's gift?

“Leon may stay here, in the kitchen.”

Warmth blossoms in his chest. He smiles again; it resembles the curve of his lips just minutes ago,
when Agent Crawford called to inform him about the Ripper. “Thank you.”

Hannibal smiles, gratified at Will's reaction. “There's no need to thank me. It's what I signed on
for, when I became your supervisor. And, though no one must know it, when I became your lover.”

“And I'm thanking you because even though you are my supervisor and lover, you don't need to do
any of this. But you still do. You don't have to put up with my obsessions, or my love for the
Ripper. But you understand them and accept them.” Will then kisses him, preventing him from
speaking further on the matter. “I'm going to go ahead to The Cottage now. I suppose you'll be
meeting me there a few minutes after I arrive, to avoid suspicion?”

“Yes. By prior arrangement. I prefer to have my meetings with students informally, in a café rather
than in my office. Please order me a double espresso.”

Will kisses Hannibal again. “Of course.” He gives Leon a kiss as well, and hands him to Hannibal.
“I will see you there.”

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The Cottage isn't far away, but Will finds himself walking briskly, wanting to reach the café before
Agent Crawford.

The weather outside is cool. He zips up his jacket and shoves his hands in his pocket, looking up at
the sky. It's supposed to snow later in the evening.

By the time he reaches the café, his cheeks and nose are red. He sighs, ordering a double espresso
for Hannibal and a regular coffee for himself. Realizing that they didn't have breakfast, he orders a
croissant for Hannibal, and finally settles down at a table in the corner.

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Hannibal is light on his feet. He'd like to follow Will to the café at a discreet distance but within
sight; he'd like to watch Will as he watches his prey. Able to observe him from a distance, to
calculate strength and weakness.

But it isn't advisable, when they are meeting with the FBI. Instead, Hannibal chooses a different
route to the café than the one that Will has chosen, and as he walks, he whistles Cosi Fan Tutti,
pitch-perfect, loudly enough so that several of the people whom he passes turn to look at him, and
smile. Were he not whistling, he would be smiling, too.

*I feel for you what I feel for him.*

Will Graham said it. Will loves the Ripper…and Will also loves Hannibal. As Hannibal loves him.
This is the reason for all the songs, all the poetry, the books, the paintings. All the art, all the knowledge, all the longing, through every age, distilled into one pure emotion: My beloved loves me.

And so Dr Hannibal Lecter has a spring in his step, a smile on his lips, a spark in his eye, a flush on his cheek, when he reaches door of the café at exactly the same time as Jack Crawford.

Crawford nearly growls at Hannibal: "What the hell are you doing here and why are you looking so goddamn happy?"

“Oh, hello Agent Crawford. Are you here for breakfast? Perhaps you'd like to join us.”

"I haven't got time for breakfast," Jack says, pushing open the door. He pauses mid-way through. "Us?"

“I have a meeting with my student. It's informal, so you would be very welcome, if you had time for breakfast.”

"If it's the same student I'm here to see, your meeting is cancelled," says Jack. He strides into the café and across to where Will sits at a corner table, Hannibal following. Hannibal is pleased to note the little flip of his heart at the sight of Will, after only ten minutes or so apart.

Will stands as Jack approaches. “Agent Crawford. Dr Lecter.” He hands Hannibal his double espresso and a tiny takeout container. He looks at Jack. “I didn't cancel my meeting with Dr Lecter because I was hoping he could accompany us to the crime scene, as my psychiatrist and Masters supervisor.”

“Crime scene?”

The doctor looks from Will to Jack, who nods once. "Fine," he says. "I get two for the price of one. Come on."

Hannibal drinks down his espresso. “I can see I should have made a flask. If we're going to look at the Chesapeake Ripper's work, we might need stronger coffee than this.”

Jack snorts. "What we're going to see is strong enough for anyone's stomach. C'mon, get in the car."

And as Will steps into the backseat of the car, his heart racing in his chest, he struggles to keep the smile off his face.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: The Forbidden Fruit
Jack drives in silence, out of the city. The landscape changes from buildings to fields. His shoulders are tense and his hands grip the steering wheel in a stranglehold.

Hannibal says, pleasantly, “What does your wife make of all these early mornings, Agent Crawford? Late nights too, I imagine.”

“She's used to it.”

“She must be very proud of you.”

"She's proud when I catch the bastards. She'll be proud when I catch the Ripper."

“Then for your wife's sake, I hope this is the Chesapeake Ripper's final crime.”

He glances into the back seat. Hannibal is relaxed, but Will, too, is tense, as tense as Jack Crawford—but for a very different reason. “This is a significant moment for your work, isn't it, Will?”

“I'll be submitting my thesis soon, Dr Lecter. When I submit it depends on whether or not the Ripper is able to complete his cycle. This particular crime scene will certainly be used as evidence. I hope there isn't a next one for me to use.” Will hopes with all his heart that there will be plenty more for him to use. “The Ripper doesn't know me now. But if he isn't caught before I submit my thesis, he... he certainly will.”

Will's voice is trembling, as if in fear. His hands are shaking. His heart is beating faster and faster. To anyone, it would seem as if he is frightened. His slight breathlessness and tense body could be mistaken for anxiety.

Fear and excitement, however, have very similar symptoms.

When Will speaks again, his voice is almost dazed, “The Ripper's attention is a... dangerous thing.” A beautiful thing. Just the thought of having the Ripper's eyes on him exhilarates him. “For all our sakes, I hope someone catches him soon.”

And that someone should be no one else but Will.

Hannibal glances at Jack. “There hasn't been anything in the news, yet. Or have I missed it?”

Jack Crawford shakes his head grimly. "The Ripper struck last night. We haven't got a precise time of death yet, but the scene—and it is a scene—was discovered only a couple of hours ago, by a woman out walking her dog. She probably missed stumbling across the Chesapeake Ripper at work by half an hour, at the most." His frown gets even deeper.

Hannibal muses, “It's fresh. And this will be the first time you have seen an actual crime scene in person, Will. You'll be able to experience the Ripper's work firsthand: not through photographs and descriptions, but in the flesh.”

Will doesn't reply. In the back seat, he is nearly vibrating with emotion. It appears to be anxiety, or tension..
But Hannibal Lecter knows that it is love.

"Great for your thesis," growls Jack. "I'm not sure I'm keen on the Ripper knowing that someone is studying him so carefully. This killer loves attention."

“A textbook narcissist. He wants the eyes of the world only on him and his creation. His murders are both intensely private and public.” Hannibal gazes out the window at the fields and trees. “Given this, it is interesting that he chose a rural location this time. His other scenes have been urban, haven't they?”

Jack nods. "The Ripper doesn't always take his victims in the city, but he usually displays them there, where they're sure to be discovered fresh. This is a frequently-used dog walking spot, though. We should be able to find enough witnesses to pinpoint his movements."

Jack pulls the car up along several other vehicles, outside a stand of trees. He gets out of the car and strides down a path into the woods, Hannibal and Will following. Even on the path, the ground is soggy underfoot, quickly soaking through Hannibal's Italian leather shoes. There are pools of stagnant water on either side of the path, reeds and cattails between the trees. The path is churned up with human and dog footprints.

Several people in white coveralls are attempting to measure prints in the mud. Jack shakes his head. "Not much chance."

The path is raised slightly ahead, and Hannibal and Will can see yellow and black crime scene tape, forensic experts busily at work—but from here the victims aren't visible. Hannibal glances at Will beside him. He murmurs, “Are you ready?”

Will's eyes sweep over the woods. Leon and Luna would enjoy playing here. Perhaps they would get slightly muddy, but he isn't concerned about that. It would be a relaxing trip for all of them.

Of course, the fact that the Ripper has been here is an obvious perk.

Will turns his head, his eyes falling on the tracks his feet are leaving behind. He wonders if he is retracing the Ripper's steps. His lips twitch, curving into a small, pleased smile before his expression changes to something more appropriate for the situation.

Will pauses for a moment, breathing in the fresh air, his heart skipping a beat as he smells something metallic along with the smell of grass and rain. He moves only when he realizes that Hannibal is waiting, not only for him, but also for his response. He quickly jogs up to him, so they're standing next to each other again.

“Ready? I'm not entirely sure. I don't know how I'll react.”

Hannibal says, quietly, so no one else can hear, “I am your balance, Will. If you feel unstable, or uncertain; too happy, or too fearful—I am here.”

Will takes a deep breath. He glances at Hannibal and nods, resisting the urge to interlace their fingers. “Thank you.”

Jack is ahead of them, surrounded by his team. He calls back, "Any time you're ready, gentlemen.”

Hannibal exchanges another glance with Will and walks forward, toward the cluster of people and the yellow and black tape.

“Oh, yeah, sure, why not invite a few more goggle-eyed spectators to tread all over the crime
scene,” mutters one of the agents, a slight man with short light brown hair, slightly greying at the temples. The dark-haired, taller agent next to him elbows him, and he subsides with a grimace.

Hannibal, however, is much more interested in Will Graham than anything else, including the bodies now visible in front of him.

He's seen these particular bodies before, after all.

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Just a few feet away, Will Graham can barely hear anything around him. His mind is completely focused, bringing forward the Ripper's design in preparation for the crime scene he is about to see.

There is not one body, but two.

Both slender, both pale-skinned against the foliage behind them, both naked, they are held upright by thin lines sewn carefully into their bodies.

They stand either side of a tree trunk, and the lines are attached to the branches above. From this distance, the lines are hardly visible; they could be alive and standing posed still as a painting, rather than held like puppets on strings.

The man is on the left; his right arm is raised, his hand in his hair as if he is scratching his head. He is looking at the woman, who stands to the right of the tree. In their left hands, both the man and the woman hold slim branches so that leaves modestly cover their genitals.

There are no visible wounds on their bodies, at least from this angle; no obvious signs of death. They look perfect, pure, and flawless, their eyes open and serene. The man has a beard; the woman has flowing wavy hair.

They could be alive.

In her right hand, the woman holds out something to the man, offering it to him: a red human heart.

Will is almost frozen where he stands, not a single part of his body moving.

It's... There is not a single word he can use to describe what he sees. Words would cheapen the Ripper's art. However, he can use words to describe how he feels.

Love, awe, happiness, pride, desire.

And... and jealousy. Pain.

The pendulum swings again, and Will feels his heart swelling with the love at the same time as it breaks. When his eyes open, they shine with unshed tears. The moment the world becomes clear, his body tenses again, losing the previously relaxed state. He pauses for a moment, trying to regulate his breathing.

Seeing a crime scene firsthand is perhaps one of the most overwhelming and intimate things Will has ever experienced. The Ripper's emotions, mixed with his own, bring forth an almost euphoric emotion within him, despite the pain he feels at what the Ripper's design represents.

However, the truth remains that he will gladly take anything the Ripper will give him. Even heartbreak.

To a bystander, watching Will come out of his daze is like watching a statue come back to life.
To Will, it feels like a flood of information entering his brain, ready to be analyzed and interpreted. It's exhilarating, beautiful, and painfully overwhelming. For a few minutes, he stands there, almost unaware that Agent Crawford and Hannibal are waiting for him to say something.

Will's face shows pleasure and pain, desire and jealousy. Hannibal glances at Jack, at the other agents clustered around the bodies, quickly trying to work out how much they can read of Will's emotions. How much he is giving away. But Jack looks merely impatient; the other agents variously interested or annoyed at this dishevelled, curly-haired young man standing, without explanation, in their midst.

Gently, Hannibal asks. “What do you see, Will?”

Will turns to Hannibal, his lips parting, “Love. Equality. It's a declaration and an offering.”

“To whom? Do you know?”

He shakes his head, masking his pain. “No.”

A slim, dark-haired woman in a leather jacket turns to them and raises one eyebrow. "If you could tell us whose heart that is, that would be a starting point. It didn't come from either of the bodies we've got here. The Ripper has taken trophies, though," the woman continues. Her FBI ID badge says ‘Beverly Katz.’

She points a blue-gloved hand at the head of the nearest body, the woman. Closer, it's possible to see that there is a fine tracing of red, a carefully-cleaned cut, along her scalp at the hairline.

"If you lifted up that piece of her forehead, her head would open right up, like a hinged box. Same with the man. Both of their brains are gone."

Jack Crawford has been staring at the scene, taking in everything, asking questions of his team. Now he strides to Will and says, more gently than either of them expected: "What can you tell us, Will? What's the Ripper's message?"

In his memory palace, Will sees the painting clearly. Unnoticeable to most, his voice trembles slightly.

“Adam and Eve, by Lucas Cranach the Elder. It's currently in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.”

Will sees her, offering the forbidden fruit to Adam. The fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. As he watches, it morphs, the solid red transforming into something fleshier, until a human heart rests in her hand. Thick, red blood pours down both their arms. Without touching it, Will somehow knows that the blood is warm.

And as Adam accepts it, he understands. He knows. He sees. They share the knowledge, and with their temptation, they acquire wisdom. Just like that, the future of humanity changed.

A low, distant voice echoes in his mind. Words that are not his own come to him as naturally as his own thoughts.

*Adam and Eve embraced their potential.*

The Ripper has tempted someone by offering his heart. And with it, he has offered them knowledge and wisdom. And this individual, if they were to embrace this knowledge, would be his equal. His partner.
The Chesapeake Ripper has fallen in love.

Will wants to close his eyes, and yet he wants to continue gazing at the Ripper's art for as long as he can. It gives him pleasure, and it gives him pain.

The Ripper made him fall in love all over again, at the very same moment as he broke Will's heart. He wishes for a companion; someone he knows, someone he thinks is worthy. And that companion is not Will.

He feels pain, hot and burning, but he can't look away. He won't.

His love doesn't come with the condition of reciprocation.

Thus, when he speaks, his voice trembles but it doesn't break. He lies almost effortlessly, "He is showing to the world how ignorant he thinks they are. They lack the knowledge he has, they lack the insight he has. Consuming the forbidden fruit changed humanity forever. He is implying that his way of life has beauty that most individuals are incapable of seeing. He's making a statement. A declaration." And an offer.

"He's taunting us," says Jack. "And he's broken his pattern. The Ripper kills in sounders of three. First Matthew Brown, and now these two. Yet there's a fourth victim: whoever donated their heart."

"I'd say it's a man," volunteers the dark-haired male agent, the one with beard stubble. "It's on the large side."

"We need an ID on these victims," says Jack; "That might tell us who the heart donor is. What do you think, Will? Based on what you know? Is this fourth victim an aberration, or do we have two more murders to come, to make another set of three?"

The Chesapeake Ripper is changing. If he is offering someone his heart…

Will’s own heart clenches.

It means that he wants to kill with this person. He wants to share his art, his life, his hunt.

His partner will not only see, observe, and understand, but they will also participate. As his equal. He wonders if the Ripper will teach his lover how to kill, if he'll gently guide them with his hands.

Or perhaps his lover is already familiar with the art.

With a sharp pang in his chest, he realizes that this might be one of the many areas where the Ripper's chosen partner might be more suitable than Will. They can understand him in ways he can't. Not yet.

He glances at Jack Crawford, meeting his eyes for barely a second. "Things are changing. The Ripper's pattern has always been the only thing consistent about him. Perhaps he is trying to show us that he is far too complex to be confined to a pattern or behavior. He can't be classified." No one can be classified. Human behavior can't be arranged into neat little categories and boxes.

Will continues, "And if this isn't a break in his pattern, perhaps this is the heart of a previous victim, saved by him for such an occasion. From previous cases, we have seen that the Ripper likes to be efficient. And if the heart does indeed belong to a new victim, implying that the Ripper broke his pattern, then it's interesting that he didn't display the victim's body. In this possible scenario, he left the heart and took a much bigger trophy. The whole body, and almost all the organs."
He pauses, his eyes not moving from the Ripper's tableau “However, as I said, things are changing. Last time was the only time he has ever left someone alive.” He takes a deep breath, fixing his glasses, “I would suggest looking at previous cases where he took his victim's heart. If the first scenario is implausible, I would suggest considering the second scenario and looking for a whole body.”

And with that, Will stops talking, glancing at Crawford again. Giving them two possible scenarios is more than enough. Whatever they find won't help them catch the Ripper. It will only help them decide whether or not the pattern has been broken.

Of course, only the Ripper knows the answer to that question.

There is a small moment of silence, broken by Hannibal’s voice.

“Things are changing. Perhaps this is why he chose a reference from Genesis: a new beginning. The dawn of knowledge. But Adam and Eve's fall was the ending of an era, too. The dawn of the possibility of tragedy.”

Crawford frowns at Hannibal's words. "I'd say this was tragic enough. If he plans to kill twice more to complete the pattern, we have to stop him first. He's been busy lately. Maybe he'll get careless.”

Hannibal nods thoughtfully at Jack. Yes. He has been careless already. It is the most careless thing he has ever done: Falling in love.

Strong emotions are struggling beneath the surface of Will's face. Hannibal had been craving the sight of Will witnessing his work, but now he craves being alone with him. He wants to know what Will really thinks. He wants to understand this sadness he sees under the barely-concealed exhilaration. He wants the luxury of uninterrupted scrutiny of Will Graham.

Is this what love is? Uninterrupted mutual scrutiny? The thought gives him pause. Because Will Graham doesn't yet see him clearly. Will Graham's love is not yet complete.

“Perhaps the Ripper has already been careless. Something is missing, here, isn't it?”

No sooner has Hannibal spoken the words, than there is a scream.

References:
1. *Adam and Eve*, by Lucas Cranach the Elder

Adam and Eve, by Lucas Cranach the Elder
Next Chapter: One of Two

(Sorry about this relatively short chapter. The next one will be way longer. Meanwhile, I will go sob as I think of how much these two love each other. Also, Will's obliviousness.)
Will is deep in thought as the agents and specialists continue to talk around him. His eyes haven't moved from the Ripper's design, his mind fixed on the scene with a kind of fierce, single-minded concentration. He closes his eyes for just a moment, trying to recall an image of the original painting. When his eyes open, he sees.

Eve was lured into tasting the forbidden fruit by a serpent. It promised her that she would not die. That her eyes would be opened forever.

Temptation.

In the painting, the serpent is between Adam and Eve, wrapped around one of the branches He doesn't see it. But the Ripper wouldn't—he wouldn't leave this out. Will's heart races. There is a deadly, poisonous snake on the crime scene right now. It is inevitable that someone will unintentionally threaten it. By being too loud, by disturbing its territory, by stepping on it.

This is the Ripper's design. And it's... exquisite.

Will swallows. Someone could get hurt. He should tell Jack.

He turns his body away from the crime scene, facing Agent Crawford's back. Crawford is talking to Hannibal. Will can see them, absorbed in their conversation. For a moment, he hesitates. Will doesn't want to ruin the beauty of the Ripper's design, his hard work. He doesn't want to tell them about the snake.

At that moment, Hannibal turns his head, meeting Will's eyes.

Within seconds, his hesitation vanishes.

He's not going to risk Hannibal's life. Never.

His decision is accompanied by a surge of terror. Panic spreads through him. Will strides forward. Distantly, he observes that he sounds frightened.

"Jack, we need to search—"

It's too late. His voice is interrupted by a scream.

One of the white-coverall-clad forensics collectors has fallen to the ground, clutching his ankle. Instantly, Hannibal is running towards the man. Just as instantly, Jack Crawford has drawn his gun and is running, too.

There's a single shot.

Hannibal kneels down beside the man, who is still screaming, though now there are words: "It bit me! Bit me!"

Hannibal immediately removes the man's boot and helps him sit up, propping his back against the tree between the bodies. He strips off his jacket and puts it over the stricken man, and says to the nearest FBI agent, "Call 911. —Did you see what bit you?"
Jack is crouching in the long grass nearby. "It was this." He pokes a long, thin, diamond-patterned shape on the ground. The shape is limp and lifeless. "Looks like a copperhead," Jack says. "They don't usually live in marshy areas."

Will crouches down next to them, glancing at Agent Crawford, more than just a little impressed. He regrets that the Ripper's snake had to die, but his relief at Hannibal's safety far outweighs his regret.

Will resists the urge to touch him. Instead, he turns to Agent Crawford. ‘I realized too late that something was missing from the Ripper's recreation of Adam and Eve. I... My reaction should have been quicker. I'm sorry.'

Jack swears. "I should have known it." He glances at the victim, who is pale and shaking as Hannibal minsters to him. ‘He booby-trapped a crime scene. As if laughing at us wasn't enough, now he has to put our men at risk.'

Kneeling on the wet ground, Hannibal is speaking softly to the snakebite victim. ‘Copperhead bites are rarely fatal. The ambulance will get here quickly, and they will have antivenom with them. You will be fine. Absolutely fine.’ He tucks his-jacket more securely around the bitten man.

Will's heart skips a beat. He doesn't know why. It could be his excitement, his exhilaration at the reaction the Ripper's design has elicited. It could also be Hannibal's gentle voice, his compassion, his caring nature.

Will nods at Agent Crawford. “I'm always willing to help.”

The ambulance arrives quickly, the paramedics carrying a stretcher to the victim over the muddy, sodden ground. Hannibal assists them, talking rapidly to the professionals, helping to reassure the victim. He walks with them to the ambulance and watches them load the victim inside.

Soon after, Will and Jack follow. Wordlessly, each preoccupied with their own thoughts, they get inside Jack's car. He drives them back to Baltimore, back to Will's house.

“I'll get out here,” says Hannibal, “if you don't mind, Agent Crawford. I believe that Will and I have much to discuss, with regard to what we have just seen, and Will's thesis. If you don't mind, Will?”

Will nods tiredly. “Quite a lot of changes have to be made.”

He is glad that the Ripper's pattern was never a big part of his research. He always focused on analyzing his work, instead of making predictions based on consistency and patterns.

Will glances at Crawford, not bothering to fix his glasses when slide down, obscuring his vision. “Change isn't always bad, Agent Crawford. I believe that he will be caught."

By someone. Except Will isn't so sure that he will be that someone anymore. After all, there is another person in the Ripper's life.

“I hope that the rest of your day is better,” Will adds. Crawford merely nods, his expression indicating that he doubts that this day could possibly get better. And with that, he drives away, leaving Will and Hannibal alone.

As Will unlocks his door, Hannibal says, “We do need to discuss your thesis, Will. We seem to
keep getting sidetracked.”

Will wordlessly holds the door open for Hannibal. He then walks to his kitchen, pouring two glasses of water. Giving Hannibal his glass, he leans against the counter, slowly sipping his own. Finally, Will sighs tiredly. “Can we do that later?”

“Of course. What would you like to do now?”

“I don't know.” Will swallows. “Hannibal... The Ripper…” He pauses, not wanting to think more about the latest crime scene until he feels ready. Quietly, he says, “Perhaps it is best for us to discuss my thesis instead.”

Hannibal walks over to Will. He takes the glass from his hand and puts it on the counter. Then he takes Will's hand and leads him out of the kitchen, to the living room, drawing him down to sit on the sofa. He sits behind him, and begins to massage his shoulders. “You are tense.”

Will takes off his glasses, carelessly placing them on the table. He closes his eyes, harshly running a hand through his hair, not caring as he manages to make it messier than it was before. “I'm fine.”

Hannibal digs his thumb into Will's muscles. “Really? Your trapezius says otherwise.”

For a long time, Will is silent. When he speaks, his voice is quiet, shaking. “He's in love.”

“The Ripper?”

“He's in love with someone. He wants them to know, he wants to see. He's offering them knowledge, and equality, and a place beside him. His tableau was not only a declaration of love, but also an offering. A gift. It's—”

It's everything Will has ever wanted.

“—He is giving them his heart, and the gift of knowledge.” Will stops talking, unable to continue.

“Tell me how you feel about this.”

He doesn't answer. But with Hannibal unable to look at anything but his back, Will's face crumples.

Hannibal can feel Will's sadness, his jealousy, and for a moment he is sad and jealous himself, even though he knows that this is proof of Will's love. “You wish he were offering his heart to you.”

“All these years, I never considered that... perhaps there is someone else in his life.” Will's voice is barely a whisper. For a moment, he feels lost. “Nothing will ever change how I feel for him. My love doesn't come with the condition that he will love me back. I am... trying to be logical. His attention is more than I could have ever hoped for. I never thought he would even notice me. I have nothing to be upset about, because I never had expectations. And yet, it causes me pain.”

“We may love unconditionally, but it is very hard to love without hope of reciprocation.” Hannibal continues to massage Will's shoulders. “Serial killers rarely sustain deep relationships with other people. Their affect tends to be shallow. Their romantic relationships are sometimes very intense, but usually short-lived. They obviously have problems with honesty and compassion, which tend to be vital ingredients in a successful relationship.” He pauses. “Do you believe that the Ripper can truly love?”
“I have never doubted that he can. Every individual has a different definition of love. He might love differently, but he can love.”

Will pauses. When he speaks again, his voice is quiet. “His tableau today... It was a risk, wasn't it? He broke from his pattern, publicly declared his love, and offered to let his beloved /know/ him. Instead of hiding his vulnerability, he proudly displayed it for the world to see. If the FBI look close enough, they will understand his message. If I didn't tell Jack what I told him today—if I didn't warp the image—they would know. He willingly took the risk. That is love, Hannibal.”

Hannibal swallows. Very quietly: “Yes. That is love.”

“The one he loves is very lucky.”

Will is facing away from him. Hannibal gently strokes his thumb down the nape of his neck, the vulnerable skin under his dark curls. His touch is slow, cherishing. “Perhaps he loves you.”

Will shivers, goosebumps rising on his skin at the gentle touch. “He can't. He doesn't know me.”

“He brought you your wallet. Breaking his pattern to do so.”

“That could always be a favor.”

“Does the Chesapeake Ripper do favours?”

“I—We really don't know that. Perhaps he has done someone else a favor. And if he didn't bring me back my wallet, I would be a suspect. He wouldn't let his work be claimed by someone else.”

“To whom do you think he was displaying Matthew Brown?”

Will shakes his head, his agitation growing. “It's impossible, Hannibal.”

Hannibal leans forward and kisses the back of Will's neck. “Do you believe you are so unworthy of being loved?”

“I don't thi—Please don't psychoanalyze me.”

“I'm sorry. I am very interested in your brain.” He sits back, only touching Will lightly with his fingertips. “And your heart.”

Will leans back against Hannibal. “It's all right. Though I'm not quite as interesting as you seem to think.”

He has foolishly given his heart away to two different people. How long before it breaks in half?

“I think that you are very interesting. I don't know the Chesapeake Ripper as well as you do, but I should think that he would find you interesting, too.” He puts an arm around Will's chest and settles him closer. “After all, it wouldn't be the first time that a killer was fixated upon you. Matthew Brown wanted you to murder with him.”

“I don't understand Matthew's fixation. I know Matthew wanted me to see him, but did he assume I would forget all about the Ripper?”

“I don’t know precisely what Matthew Brown hoped for, from you. But I can understand his fixation. Someone with your expertise, with your level of empathy, would be able to understand Matthew. To understand any murderer. I said that serial killers tend to have unsuccessful romantic relationships. They can never be fully honest with their loved ones. But you...you would see
everything. The honesty between you would be inevitable, and perfect. You would give even the most damned of murderers a place where they could be naked, and fully themselves. With no need to hide from the knowledge of their true selves.”

He pauses. “I can see why Matthew Brown would love you. I can see why the Ripper would love you.”

“If that is the case, then you are essentially saying that any murderer or serial killer would want me to kill with them. But I while I can see them, I can't accept them. The Ripper is different. He is a murderer, but his creations are...They are indescribable. I have loved each and every one of his creations. Others have never even interested me. The difference is that I /want/ to see him. I don't want to see the others. But I suppose he won't know that—won't know me—until I reach out to him and tell him that. I... need to defend my thesis. I need to reach out to him. He may love someone else, but I need to try. Like I have been trying for five years.”

Hannibal represses a sigh, and the impulse to hint to Will that there may be more direct ways of getting the Ripper's attention.

“As your supervisor, I'd be remiss if I didn't urge you to complete your thesis.”

Will closes his eyes, his mind going back to day the Ripper started his cycle. He pushes the thoughts away for now. “Does it still not bother you? That I want to get his attention?”

Hannibal pauses before replying. There are so many different possible answers, so many of them true:

You have his attention already.
I am delighted that you want his attention.
I want you to try to capture his attention as you have captured mine.

Instead he says, carefully: “I have said from our first meeting that I accept your desire to meet the Ripper. Why would that have changed?”

“Because I feel something for you, and it would bother me if you wanted someone else.”

Will can't see his face. Hannibal closes his eyes and smiles. “As it would bother you if the Ripper wants someone else?”

Will laughs, the sound hollow. “As it is bothering me right now.”

Hannibal kisses Will's neck again. He whispers: “You are the only one I want.”

Will whispers back. “And it's not fair to you that you are one of the two I want.”

“I promise you, Will. If my jealousy for the Chesapeake Ripper ever grows to unbearable proportions, I will tell you. If the jealousy is unresolvable, I will stop our relationship, and find you another supervisor. I have no desire to torture myself. But for now, right now, I am not jealous of the Chesapeake Ripper. I am grateful to him. He brought us together. He has allowed me to witness the workings of your intellect and your emotion. We say that we don't know if the Ripper performs favours, but he has done one for me, whether he knows it or not.”

Will puts his hand over Hannibal's, where it's resting on his chest. Quietly, he says, “I won't choose him over you. I won't leave you for him, Hannibal. And I won't let this torture you. I promise.”

“Thank you.” He puts his other hand over Will's. “I've put substantial trust in you, you know. Your
career would be less damaged than mine, should our affair become public knowledge. And whether he knows it or not, you've earned the Ripper's trust as well. You concealed your true insight into the Ripper's motives. If the FBI knew he had an emotional attachment to another person, they would seek to exploit that, in order to catch him.”

“There aren't many people I have cared for. And those I did care for are gone. I care for you, and I care for the Ripper. Leon, Luna. In my mind, that makes it all very simple. I will never willingly hurt any of you or betray your trust. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I did.”

Hannibal tilts Will's chin up, and kisses him on the lips. “I hope you never have to choose between those you care about. Meanwhile...it's nearly three in the afternoon, and Leon is still in my kitchen.”

Will breaks away from Hannibal, standing up. “I should go pick him up from your house. And then I must work on my thesis.”

Hannibal nods, also standing. He straightens his clothes, glancing down ruefully at his ruined shoes. “I also have work that I have been neglecting.”

“I'm sorry. I've made it a habit of interrupting your work and your dinner parties.”

He smiles. “Deliciously so. Although today my work was interrupted by the Ripper, not by you.”

Will kisses his cheek. “And like I said this morning, you didn't have to come with me.”

He grabs his keys, fluffs Luna's ears, and walks out with Hannibal, locking the door as they leave. In a few minutes, he's pulling up his car in front of Hannibal's house.

“Wait here,” says Hannibal. “I'll smuggle your dog out.”

A few minutes later he returns. The tips of Leon's white ears poke out of the top of his buttoned coat. He opens the car door and deposits the squirming puppy on the passenger seat.

“I enjoyed this morning very much, Will. Both seeing your talents at the crime scene, and being the recipient of your talents in my bed.”

Will's lips curve into a smile as he sees Hannibal and Leon. His cheeks redden slightly. “I'll email you my revised thesis.”

“I'll look forward to it. Give me a call if you'd like any advice, or if you have any additional insights about the Ripper.” Hannibal shuts the car door and goes into his house.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter...The Pretender
For the next two days, Hannibal is busy. He has indeed been neglecting his work, both clinical and academic, for Will. He's also busy filling his freezer with carefully-prepared meat, and researching recipes. He expects Will to call him soon, saying he has found the clue that the Ripper so carefully left for him but which no one has yet detected.

But Will doesn't call him.

Hannibal imagines that he is working day and night on his thesis, forgetting to eat, drinking too much coffee, thinking constantly of the Chesapeake Ripper. Thinking, too, of the person for whom the Ripper made the gift of Adam and Eve: the person whom the Ripper loves.

Will Graham is jealous of himself. As Hannibal, in Will's presence, has sometimes felt jealous of the Ripper.

The irony pleases him. Everything pleases him.

All of his plans are progressing nicely...despite, or maybe even because of, the fact that he has recklessly fallen in love. He is scheduled to have a session with Dr Du Maurier on Friday, however. He is not particularly looking forward to that. Bedelia is rather too perceptive in matters of Hannibal's heart.

Hannibal is sitting at the harpsichord with a glass of Tokay at his elbow, idly picking out a fifteenth-century ballata and considering whether he should cancel his appointment with his psychiatrist, when he hears a noise.

It's coming not from the front door, or the back, but from the French doors in his dining room. A quick turning of the knob.

Hannibal rises and takes a sharp letter-opener from the credenza before walking silently into his dining room.

It's dark outside, and the form at the glass door is only a shadow. As Hannibal watches, the form knocks rapidly on a pane. Hannibal, holding the blade behind his back in his right hand, flicks open the door lock with his left, and the person outside stumbles into the room, breathing hard.

Hannibal raises his eyebrows in surprise.

"Frederick? Why didn't you use the front door?"

Chilton's eyes are wide and his hands are shaking. His tie is askew. "Is he here?" he asks Hannibal frantically.

"Is who here, Frederick? Are you all right? Would you like a drink?" He reaches for the cognac decanter, slipping the letter-opener onto a chair.

Frederick shakes his head. "No. No drink. I came to this door so I wouldn't be seen. Are your doors locked? Your windows?"

"Yes, I believe they are. Why?"
Chilton sinks into a chair, gasping. "Abel Gideon has escaped from the BSHCI. He killed a nurse and used his ID. And his face." He shudders. "And the last thing he said to the orderly who'd brought him to the infirmary was that all he wanted to do was hunt down and kill every psychiatrist who ever meddled with his brain."

Chilton's voice sinks to a whisper. "He's already killed Paul Carruthers. The police called me to tell me. I'm next, Hannibal. He's coming for me, next."

Hannibal pours Chilton a glass of cognac, despite his refusal. "I doubt it, Frederick. Dr Gideon hardly worked with Dr Carruthers. They had a few sessions; no more. Whereas you have worked with Gideon for years. You have pushed and prodded his brain...from his point of view, of course. I hear that for some time, until Matthew Brown was found killed by the real Ripper, you had Abel Gideon convinced that he, himself was the Ripper. You've been inside Gideon's head more than any other psychiatrist in the world. He's not coming for you next. He's saving the best for last."

Hannibal pours himself a glass of cognac. "It's far more likely that Gideon is coming for me, next. As you'll recall, I interviewed him several times for my paper on narcissistic personality disorder in medical professionals. I had slightly more contact with him than Paul Carruthers did."

Chilton looks both terrified and relieved as he lifts his glass with shaking hands and downs the cognac. "You're right. He'd find us in order. He's a surgeon. Very...methodical."

Chilton gulps. "They told me what he did to the nurse. He..."

Chilton stands, panicked again. "I'm getting out of here. I'm going to my lake house until he's caught. You should get out of town too, Hannibal. Call the police, get them to send someone. Make sure you're safe."

"Yes, don't worry. I'll make sure I'm safe."

"I'll let myself out the front door," says Chilton. "I don't want to meet anyone creeping up from the back."

"Good idea. Take care, Frederick. Enjoy the lake."

Hannibal stays where he is, watching Chilton go. He waits until he hears the front door shut. Then he turns to the open French door, and addresses one of the shadows in the garden.

"Do come in, Dr Gideon. It's cold outside."

***

The two days pass by faster than expected. Will's mind is constantly occupied by the Ripper's latest piece of art. The exquisite design has taken over his mind, like vines growing on the walls of his memory palace.

He’s thrown himself into his work with a singleminded focus. In two days, he has revised his thesis and-added perhaps half of what he gained from the most recent tableau. Jack has sent him the lab and case reports as soon as they were available, and despite his diligence, he knows it will take him at least a week to fully analyze the information.

From what they found, there is no connection between any of the victims in the Ripper's recreation of Adam and Eve. Claire Sutherland and Peter Barrow were not connected in any way. Not to each other, or to any older crime scenes. The third victim—the one the Ripper took the heart from—has not been found yet.
Will sighs as he reads over the most recent page he has finished typing. The analysis is more than plausible, but parts of it are... wrong. And he knows they are wrong, because everything he has written has been carefully calculated to ensure that the Chesapeake Ripper does not get caught. He does not want to accidentally give the FBI any leads. He has effectively captured the meaning of all the crime scenes he has studied, but warped any sections of analysis that could be risky.

While Will knows that this is necessary to protect the Chesapeake Ripper's identity, he feels... uneasy. His thesis will not capture the Ripper's attention. Especially since the Ripper most likely does not know that his false analysis has been done on purpose. He needs to do something else.

The Ripper sent out a bold, risky, passionate message for his beloved. He must do the same.

Will closes his eyes, his heart beating wildly in his chest. The thought has been on his mind for a few days now. He doesn't know how he will do it, or what Hannibal will think. He doesn't care about the consequences. Nothing matters.

Nothing matters, as long as Hannibal isn't hurt and the Ripper sees him.

Will clenches his fist, nails digging into his palm. He has an idea. It's vague, and it unsettles him as much as it excites him, but—

His train of thought is broken by the sound of a chair scraping against the floor as another person stands up to leave.

Will swallows, slowly unclenching his fist. He knows without looking that there will be four crescent-shaped marks on his-palm. Will fidgets in his chair. Now is not the time to think about this.

The particular section of the Faculty of Science's library he's sitting in is oddly empty today. It's the topmost floor of the library—the silent studying area. He knows that most students prefer to work in one of the lower floors, closer to the-restaurants, coffee shops, printers, and computers. But despite that, this floor has never been quite so empty.

For the first time in hours, he looks away from the document on his laptop screen. Will's eyes fall on the digital clock at the top of the wall. 12:20 AM.

Ah.

The majority of students must have left to go home by now. And those who stayed are probably on the second floor, which is open for 24 hours. A quick look at the library's website tells him that the floor he's in will be closing in forty minutes. With a sigh, he closes his laptop. He will have to work in one of the study lounges for graduate students.

Quickly, he packs up his laptop and notebook. He carefully puts the case files in a thick folder. Just as Will is about to stand, he pauses again. He remembers that he... has an office now. Or, well, he has an office in one of the rooms of Hannibal's office. He could work there. He has the keys.

Will slips on his coat, slings his bag over his shoulder, and picks up the massive pile of folders. He takes the elevator down to the lobby, getting himself another cup of coffee before he makes his way to the BPB Building. Their office is on the fourth floor, and by the time he is standing in front of the locked door, he is struggling to balance the folders in his arms. Carefully, he places the coffee cup on the floor, using one hand to hold the folders and the other to steady the pile.

“Will?”
In the empty hallway, the sound of plastic folders crashing to the floor is deafening. Dr. Alana Bloom rushes to help him.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." She hands him a few of his folders as they stand.

His lips curve into a small, awkward smile. He hopes it doesn't look as forced as it really is. “It's all right, Dr Bloom. Thank you.”

Dr Bloom's smile fades as she looks at his tired eyes, slumping posture. Her gaze falls on the coffee cup on the floor. "Why are you are still here? It's very late to be working, Will."

Will shakes his head. “I need to defend my thesis soon, and there were changes to be made after the Ripper's latest tableau. I don't particularly mind. I enjoy doing this work. And the faster the Ripper is caught, the fewer people will die.”

Dr Bloom gazes at him, a small frown on her face. “Will, it is not your responsibility to cat—”

Her voice is interrupted as her phone vibrates in her purse. As her eyes fall on the screen, her expression changes from one of concern to confusion. With an apologetic glance at him, she picks up the call.

"Hello?" The voice on the other side is loud, forceful. Will can't hear the words, but the way Dr Bloom's face changes is indicative of the urgency of the call.

"Wh—" A small pause. "I'm at the Burkes Psychology Building at the university... My car? It's in the parking lot. Should I—" She pauses as the caller interrupts her again, the tone becoming increasingly urgent. "No, I'm not alone.... There is a student with me. Will Gra—Yes, Graham... Dr Lecter's student, yes.” Alana listens for a few more minutes before wordlessly handing Will her phone.

“Hello?”

Jack Crawford's voice is loud in his ear. "Did you ever work with Dr Abel Gideon?"

“Agent Crawf—”

"Did you, or didn't you?"

“I didn't.”

"But you worked in Chilton's lab?"

“Yes, I did, but—”

“Dr Gideon has escaped prison. He has already killed a nurse and of his previous psychiatrists, Dr Paul Carruthers. He's going to go after anyone who could have possibly meddled with his mind. Dr Chilton has been warned—I sent a car for him too, but he wasn't at his house. We don't know his whereabouts.”

And Hannibal? What about Hannibal? Will wants to ask, but Agent Crawford keeps talking.

"Gideon will go after other psychiatrists who worked with him. I'm sending a car for Dr Bloom to take her to a safe house. I want you to stay with her until the car comes, and then I want you to go home. Immediately. Do you understand, Graham? Immediately. You never personally worked with him, but I don't want to take any chances. Don't leave Dr Bloom before the car comes. And then go
“Is Ha—”

Crawford hangs up the phone.

Will hands Dr Bloom her phone. “The car should be here soon. We should stay here till we get the call.” He pauses for a moment. When he speaks, his voice is low, carefully controlled. “Did Dr Lecter ever work with Abel Gideon?”

Her voice is calm. "Yes. But don't worry about him, Will. Jack has probably sent a car for him as well. He will be fine."

Will resists the urge to say anything else, despite the panic bubbling in his chest. He doesn't care if Agent Crawford has sent a car for Hannibal. He needs to know if Hannibal is fine. He wants to leave, he wants to call him.

Despite everything, Will doesn't leave until the car comes. He makes sure that Dr Bloom is safe. She has been nothing but kind to him. And... Hannibal cares for her. His heart is racing, and he wonders if his fear is evident on his face. He doesn't care if it is.

As soon as they get the call, they leave the building. The agent shows them his badge, and wordlessly opens the door. Dr Bloom, however, pauses. "Will, would you like to come with me? It'll be safer than driving back alone."

Will shakes his head, losing his patience. “Thank you, but I will be fine. The drive isn't too long. It would be best if we just do what Agent Crawford has asked.”

With a small nod, she steps inside the car. "Go home as soon as you can. Don't linger in the parking lot. Stay safe, Will." And with that, she shuts the door. The agent starts the car instantly.

As soon as they're out of sight, Will pulls out his phone and calls Hannibal. His heart beats faster with each ring.

The call goes unanswered.

Will doesn't think. He doesn't have time to think. He runs to his car, disregarding everything Agent Crawford and Dr Bloom said. He doesn't go home. He drives to Hannibal's house.

Will drives as fast as he can, going beyond the speed limit. Despite his best efforts, it takes him far too long to reach Hannibal's house. As soon as he pulls up in front, Will runs out of his car. Every single light is off. He rings the doorbell. Once, twice, three times. No answer.

He rings the bell one last time, counting the seconds. Fifteen seconds pass without a single sound.

Without hesitating, Will picks up a rock and breaks the window closest to the door. Carefully, he puts his arm through the jagged hole in the glass, and opens the window from inside. He then places his hands on the window sill and propels himself up, using the push to climb through the window. Glass pieces scatter onto the floor, breaking under his shoes as he lands on the hardwood.

Carefully, he takes a few steps forward. The house is dark and eerily silent.

“Hannibal?”

There's no answer. The house is quiet as the grave, but as far as Will can tell, there is nothing at all
out of place. He still checks the whole house, just in case. It is just how he remembers it.

Will sighs as he makes his way back to the first floor, wondering how he's going to explain the broken window to Hannibal. He is just about to walk out of the house when he pauses, feeling inexplicably unsettled.

Will turns around, his gaze fixed on one of the few doors he didn't open. As far as he remembers, he has never seen Hannibal ever opening that door.

Once again, he doesn't hesitate. He doesn't want to take any chances with Hannibal's life. He walks to it, pushing down on the door handle. It's locked.

He swears under his breath, swiftly taking out his phone and switching on the flashlight. The door has an electronic, keyless lock. Entering the room probably requires an access code—at the very least. Unless Abel Gideon knew the access code, Will doubts he could have gained entry. A quick look tells him that the lock seems to be undamaged. From what Will knows of security systems, any damage to the lock would have activated the alarm.

Agitated, he takes another round of the first floor. Like the last few times he checked, nothing is out of place.

Knowing by now that no one else is in the house, Will switches on the lights. Instantly, he sees it. There is a half full wine glass on the harpsichord.

If this house belonged to anyone else, Will wouldn't be surprised. But this is Hannibal's house.

Countless images pass through his mind, of Hannibal being dragged out of his house against his will, of Dr Gideon injecting him with a drug to immobilize him. The familiar feeling of panic rises in his chest again.

He digs his phone out of his pocket and calls Hannibal one more time, resisting the urge to throw his phone against the wall when no one answers. Where could he be? Did Agent Crawford send a car for him too? Or did Gideon get here before that?

Will is about to call Agent Crawford when the eerie silence is broken by the sound of a phone ringing. It switches to the answering machine almost instantly.

"Dr Lecter?" The voice is Jack Crawford's. "I hope you're not at home, but I'm trying your home number because you're not picking up your cell. We've got CCTV footage that shows Abel Gideon in your neighbourhood at approximately 9 pm. We've searched the area, and we haven't found him yet. We will. But if you get this message, please leave your house immediately, for your own safety." The phone hangs up.

Agent Crawford doesn't know where Hannibal is. Gideon was spotted near his house a few hours ago. Hannibal hasn't been picking up his phone. The empty wine glass.

Will closes his eyes, feeling the wave of pain and anger wash over him. He has... never felt so helpless.

He has never felt so much pain.

Will makes his way to the kitchen, taking out one of Hannibal's knives. He doesn't know what he'll do with it. He doesn't even know where Gideon is. But the steady weight of the knife comforts him. He tightens his grip on it.
In his mind's eye, he sees what he will do to Gideon if a single hair is hurt on Hannibal's head.

There's a soft noise at the back door.

Will turns around, breathing hard. His grip on the knife tightens further.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter...What Will Would Do For Love
The door opens, and Hannibal steps in, dressed in an overcoat and scarf. He stops just inside the door.

“Will? What are you doing here? And why are you holding a knife?”

For a few moments, Will stands there, not moving. His gaze is fixed on Hannibal, checking him over for injuries. He swallows. His grip on the knife is so tight that his hand is trembling.

When Will speaks, his voice is tight. “You're... safe.”

Hannibal's first thought, upon entering his house, was that Will Graham has discovered who he is. And that the discovery has not caused Will delight, but fear. He thinks, seeing the knife, that Will has come to try to kill him. The prospect causes him some disappointment, but it's not unmixed with anticipation.

A small, detached part of him files away this fact in his brain: that Hannibal can love a person and still relish the thought of battling him to the death.

Then Will speaks, and Hannibal sees the truth: Will is not terrified of Hannibal, but for Hannibal. He steps forward, but Will holds the knife out still, his arm stiff, his hand fisted around its blade. He is trembling.

Gently, Hannibal curves his own fingers around Will's. “Give me the knife, Will.”

Will doesn't move, his eyes not straying from Hannibal.

Hannibal’s voice is quiet. “Give me the knife, darling. We are safe here.”

Will's grip loosens. “Abel Gideon... He was here. Looking for you.”

Hannibal shakes his head. He takes the knife from Will's hand, and puts it on the counter. “No. Dr Chilton was here. He warned me that Gideon was on the loose and looking for his former psychiatrists. Soon after, Agent Crawford called me to tell me the same thing.” He smiles slightly.* “He wanted to put me in a safe house.”

“Darling?”

“Yes?”

“No, you—called me... darling.”

Hannibal pauses. He bites his lip, as if self-consciously—although of course the endearment was deliberate, meant as a jolt, or a test. So he could see what Will would do.

“I...yes, I did. I'm sorry if it made you uncomfortable.”

Will's voice is loud in the silent house. “No—” He pauses. “No. It didn't make me uncomfortable.”

“You came to my house. To protect me.”
“You weren't answering your phone.”

Hannibal reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out his phone. He switches it on, and it immediately starts vibrating with texts and voicemail messages. “It's been off. I went to a concert. I'm sorry for worrying you.”

Will lets out a shaky breath. “I thought he... I saw the wine on the harpsichord, and I thought Gideon had…”

“You were afraid for my sake.” Hannibal savours this fact.

Even if he tries, Will knows he can't put the terror he felt into words. He felt helpless, hopeless. He thought he was going to be alone again.

Hannibal is the only person in the world who knows him. He knows more than Will's own family ever did—or ever will—know. Falling into that all-consuming, unfathomably deep pit of fear and loneliness is something Will never wants to experience again. Not for the first time, he finds it hard to put the magnitude of what he feels into words.

You were afraid for my sake.

In that moment, when he thought he had lost Hannibal, the magnitude of his fear turned him into something... not human. Something dark, and dangerous, and exhilarating, but so painful that he didn't know where he started or ended.

He wants to feel that exhilaration and intoxication again, but not if it is accompanied by pain.

“I don't want to ever lose you.”

Hannibal steps closer to Will. He takes Will's hand, and entwines their fingers. “You have not lost me.”

Before he can help it, Will tightly wraps his arms around Hannibal's waist. He closes his eyes. “I haven't.”

Hannibal whispers softly, “Would you have attacked Gideon, to save me?”

Will doesn't think before answering. “I would have killed him.”

This, too, Hannibal takes a moment to savour. He pulls Will tighter into his arms. “In that moment, you would have chosen me over everything that you have been taught to be true.

“Society teaches us to act. It teaches us to behave in a way that enables the individuals of our community to live in harmony. I learned a long time ago that acceptable social behavior isn't above those we love and care for.”

“When our loved ones are threatened, we react instinctively, and violently, to protect them. Your impulse is the same as the swan's, or the rabbit's, or the lion's. In the moment when death approaches, passion arouses the killer within us. It is in all of our nature to kill, when threatened. I...would also kill, for you.”

For Hannibal and the Chesapeake Ripper, Will would kill anyone. He would do anything. He knows this is a fact, knows it is a result of the intensity of nearly everything he feels, his tendency to get lost in the depths of his love.
He just never thought it would be reciprocated.

He doesn't know what to say. Hundreds of thoughts rush through his mind, and all he can say is this: “Does it worry you? How much we feel for each other?”

Hannibal answers without equivocation; without half-truths or whole truths buried in misdirection. He answers wholly. “Yes.”

“Does my instability bother you?”

“Your centre of balance is different from other people's. That does not make you unstable. On the contrary, you are one of the most consistent and focused individuals I have ever met. In that way, you are much like the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Will gazes up at him. “Most people wouldn't want a lover similar to the Chesapeake Ripper. Would you want to change how much we feel for each other? Does it frighten you?”

Again, he answers honestly, “It is the most exciting sensation in my life right now. ...I did not realise what I was missing in my life until I knew you.” Hannibal pauses. “Does it frighten you?”

“It frightens me how much I would be willing to do for you.”

They are on a delicate balance, he and Will. He does not want to push it too far, too soon. As promising as Will may be and as strong as Hannibal’s feelings have become, a single misstep, too much revealed, could destroy everything. So instead of replying, Hannibal presses Will still closer and kisses him. Tenderly, and with all the passion of a swan, or a lion, protecting his mate. With all the consummation he has felt over the past few hours, working alone, with Will in his heart and mind.

Will's arms tighten around Hannibal, and he kisses him back, pouring all his relief, love, pain, and fear into this kiss. One of his hands travels up Hannibal's back, his fingers tangling in his hair.

His low groan, however, is interrupted as his phone vibrates in his pocket.

Will breaks away from Hannibal, breathing hard. For a moment, he rests his head on Hannibal's chest, trying to control his breathing. He then pulls away, an apologetic look on his face as he picks up his phone.

"Graham. Where the hell are you? My agent said you never came back home.”

Will tries to speak. “I we—” One person is dead. We don't need another body. Gideon was spotted near your neighborhood. You were missing for two hours and you didn't make an effort to communicate with us. Why the hell did you not go home?”

Will closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. He slumps against the counter, tired. “I'm... at a hotel right now. My phone was dead; I just managed to recharge it.”

Jack's voice is loud, impatient. "And why did you go to a hotel instead of your home, where I sent an agent for you?"

“I got there before the agent. I didn't get out of the car, because I... saw someone lurking a few houses away. My dogs are with a friend, so there was no reason for me to go inside. I didn't want to take any chances, so I went to a hotel instead. I just managed to borrow a charger from someone. I was about to call you. I'm sorry, Agent Crawford.”
Crawford sighs. When he speaks, he is considerably calmer. "Are you safe?"*

"Yes. I have been here for an hour."

"Which hotel are you staying in?"

"I'm staying in—" Will opens his eyes, glancing at Hannibal for help.

Hannibal winces slightly. He mouths, "The Fairlight Hotel."

"—The Fairlight Hotel."

"Don't go back to your home until I call to tell you it's safe. And make sure your phone is charged. I will call you tomorrow." On the other end of the call, Will hears a door opening, accompanied by another voice. Agent Crawford promptly hangs up the phone. With a sigh, Will closes his eyes again, putting his phone back in his pocket.

Almost immediately, Hannibal's phone rings. Exchanging a glance with Will, he answers it.

"Agent Crawford, hello…. Yes, the lights are on in my house because I am home. —Yes, I know you advised me to stay away, but I wanted to—"

There is a loud commotion from the other end, audible to Will.

"Yes, I understand what you are saying, Agent Crawford. I am collecting a few items, and then I will check into a hotel. —Which one? The Ambassador, if they have a room at this hour. —Yes, I will go straight there… Many thanks, but I do not need an armed escort… Yes, I am certain, Agent Crawford. Goodbye, and I sincerely hope you catch Abel Gideon very soon." He hangs up his phone and puts it in his pocket.

"Well, it looks as if we are each spending the night in a hotel."

Will continues to lean against the counter, eyes closed. “How are we going to leave? If he knows your lights are on, someone must be watching from outside.”

“They missed you breaking in. You did break in, didn't you?”

Will opens his eyes, his cheeks turning red. “I... may have broken your window.”

“Evidently they're driving by to check up, and not staking out the house. In any case, my back door opens straight into my garage. We can go out that way and you can get into my car without being seen.” A wry expression. “You may have to crouch down in the seat well. I apologise.”

Will nods. “All right.” A small pause. “Is that why you came from the back door instead of the front door?”

“Yes, it's more convenient.” He bends and picks up a small plastic bag which he'd left by the back door upon entering. He crosses to the fridge, puts the bag inside, and pauses. “Are you hungry?”

Will shakes his head. His stomach protests at the mere thought of consuming anything. “Thank you, but I am not.”

“I'll go upstairs then, briefly, and pack some overnight things. Do you have any?”

Will shakes his head, putting a hand on Hannibal's arm. Worry seeps into his tone. “Can we hurry?”
“I'll be as fast as I can be.” He squeezes Will's hand on his arm, and then goes upstairs to swiftly pack a bag. He adds a spare toothbrush for Will, the one he has been using when he sleeps at Hannibal's house, underwear and socks.

For himself he packs pyjamas, a full change of clothes. In the bathroom he takes a little time to wash his hands and face very thoroughly and to inspect his appearance with care. Then he packs a toiletry case and goes downstairs to join Will.

Will's body relaxes as soon as Hannibal walks back inside. They quickly switch off all the lights, heading for the back door. Despite his lack of sleep, his mind is alert. “Are we actually going to different hotels? Is that wise?”

Hannibal unlocks his Bentley. “Well...you cannot afford the Ambassador, and I will not stay at the Fairlight.” He quirks half a smile at Will as they get in the car. “Fortunately, the Ambassador and the Fairlight share a service alley. A guest at the Fairlight who had a yearning to sleep on the 800-thread-count sheets at the Ambassador, could easily slip through the fire exit, if the door were to be left accidentally open.”

Will crouches in front of the Bentley’s passenger seat, hugging his knees to his chest. Despite his anxiety, his lips are curved into a small, amused smile. “You certainly thought this through.”

Hannibal presses the button for the automatic garage door, starting the car once he hears it opening. “Do you think I am so devious?”

Will turns his head to glance up at him. “I think you're absolutely wicked.”

“I return the compliment, Mr Graham.” Hannibal reverses out of the garage. “You take to deception like a fish to water.”

“Are you saying that I have a talent for deceiving people? Or are you saying that I am attracted to those who are skilled at manipulating and deceiving others?”

Once on the street, Hannibal spots the nondescript agency car and dips his headlights in recognition. He waits until he has driven a few blocks before checks his rearview mirror and answers.

“I am saying both. Your habitual presentation of yourself is a mask, designed to protect your psyche. Your stance, your lack of eye contact, your glasses with plain-glass lenses. And admit it: you enjoy the clandestine nature of our relationship. It adds to the excitement. It proves that you, and I are superior to those whom we deceive.”

Will glances at him, surprised. “This deception places us on a... different level of understanding; something that others will never know. And if they knew, they wouldn't be able to comprehend it. But how does that make us superior to those whom we deceive?”

“Knowledge is power. This is why God forbade the fruit of that tree to Adam and Eve: he did not want them to know their own strength. He wanted them to remain captives forever.” He glances down at Will. “When we deceive others, we make our own rules. Our own knowledge. We are rulers of our own world, and it is seen how we desire it to be seen.”

Will swallows, his nails digging into his palm. “The Ripper and I are also on a different plane of understanding, aren't we? I can understand his design. No one else can. We are almost communicating in a different language; a language only we can read and write in. I wonder if he'll see things the same way you see them.” He unclenches his fist, eyes fixed on the small crescent-
shaped marks on his palm.

“The lingua franca of your love. And yet you're doubtful that the Ripper is aware of your existence.”

“I have never communicated with him. He wouldn't bother knowing someone who has never bothered to use this language we share.”

Hannibal parks the car, and turns off the ignition. It is quiet without the throaty purr of the engine. “Then you think that the person to whom the Ripper left his gift, is someone who uses this language. Who is also a murderer.”

“They might not necessarily be a murderer. Perhaps he wants them to be. He's tempting them.”

In the darkness of the car, Hannibal swallows hard before he trusts himself to speak. “As Satan tempted Adam and Eve.”

“Yes. As Satan tempted Adam and Eve.” He doesn't know the individual the Ripper intended to tempt. Whether or not the intended recipient of the gift was tempted, the Ripper did succeed in tempting Will.

Hannibal’s voice is a soft whisper in the darkness, “I am...tempted right now.”

“As am I.”

Hannibal should not ask. It is not the time. Almost too softly to be heard, he asks anyway: “What are you tempted to do?”

Will closes his eyes. “I'm tempted to kill someone. For him.”

“To send the Ripper a poem, in the language you share.”

“My first time will hardly be something as beautiful as a poem. I'll be surprised if I manage to create anything at all.”

“A love poem only requires three words. The rest is elaboration. Only three words.” Hannibal takes a deep breath. “I love you .”

And Will’s heart is suddenly racing. He glances up at Hannibal, knowing and understanding and seeing. He realizes that the words are associated with a context. But..

I love you too .

He wants to say it, he wants to believe what Hannibal is saying. He feels warm, as if he's standing in front of a fire after years of wandering alone in the cold. As if he's wrapped in a blanket after hours out in the park with his dogs. Perhaps this is what it feels like to not be alone. To be loved. He wants to believe it. Is it so hard to believe? Hannibal has accepted him in ways that no one ever has. He has accepted Will's most carnal desires, his obsessions, his love for the Chesapeake Ripper.

Why is it so easy to accept his own love for Hannibal and the Ripper, but so hard to believe Hannibal's love for him?

I love you .

When Will speaks, he is struggling to keep his voice even.
“The poem I write... It won't be for just the Ripper. It will be for you as well.”

Hannibal wants to reach down and drag Will from where he is hiding in his car. He wants to kiss him and tell him over and over again, in every language he knows of words and of actions, of art and of science, that he loves him. That he has never felt this way before, nor expected to. Nor even hoped. That he has never been so full of joy and fear.

When he speaks, his voice is not entirely steady. “We're parked outside the Fairlight Hotel. Check in, go to your room, make your bed look slept in. In half an hour, the fire door to the Ambassador will be open. I'll text you my room number.”

Slowly, Will nods. With a quick glance out the window, he raises himself up from where he is hiding in the footwell.

He checks into the hotel in a daze, barely noticing the impatient glance the hotel receptionist throws his way. It isn’t important.

Not as important as Hannibal, or what he might have revealed. Not as important as their shared fascination for each other, or Will's seemingly endless and irrational list of things he would be willing to do for Hannibal and the Ripper. His mind only has time to consider the implications of everything that has happened today.

His jealousy, love, and rage have pushed him over the edge. This temptation to murder, to speak the language only they can understand... it isn't just a temptation anymore. Writing this poem is no longer a desire, but a necessity.

Whether or not he was the intended recipient of this seduction, he has fallen into the trap. And from even before he fell, this trap seemed more like a gift than something to run from.

While the Ripper may have intended to seduce another, Will has knowingly walked into the snare, keeping both his eyes and mind open. He doesn't know about the Ripper's beloved, but Will Graham will flourish in the knowledge he gains. He will flourish, because he has nothing holding him back. He will write his poem, for both the Ripper and Hannibal.

And one of the two may actually love him.

Will never expected or demanded reciprocity. But the mere feeling of it is thrilling, beautiful, exquisite. Without even knowing if he believes it, he is drunk on the feeling of it, his heart and mind both agreeing with the happiness it brings him. He feels as if he can do anything, as if the consequences don't matter as long as he continues to feel this way.

And thus, he doesn't even hesitate once he reaches his room.

Jack Crawford knows where they are. He may even visit them tomorrow, and if luck is with him, he may visit at an inconvenient time. The consequences will be dire if he suspects them. More so if they discover the text message Hannibal promised to send him. And yet, despite the consequences, Will does as he was told.

He makes the bed look convincingly slept in, and waits for Hannibal's message.

27.

And thus, Will switches off the lights and slips out of the room.
Next Chapter: All Yours

Can anyone guess what happens in the next one?

Sorry for the late update! The next one will be on Friday, as usual. Thank you for reading!
The fire door is open, as Hannibal said it would be.

It's too late for Will to run into any hotel guests, but he can't help the relieved sigh as he finds Hannibal's room without being detected. He knocks on the door, his cheeks flushed and his heart beating wildly.

**

Hannibal has been lying on his back on the pristine bed, trying to calm himself. He can't do it. He's too happy.

He thinks of Will Graham, knife in hand. Inscribing his poem on another man's flesh. Will Graham with blood adorning his face, rarer than rubies. Will Graham's eyes alight with the savage delight of feeling another person's mortality in his hands, running down his wrists, pooling on the floor at his feet. Will Graham's heart beating with elation and love. Will Graham, transformed by murder, all his desires fulfilled, elevated to his purest self. For Hannibal and the Ripper.

All for him.

When he hears the stealthy knock on the door, his heart leaps. He stands, and unable to keep himself from rushing with a lover’s impatience, crosses the hotel room and opens the door. With another glance around the hallway, Will steps inside the hotel room, his body lightly brushing against Hannibal's.

The room is enormous. There's a seating area, with two sofas, armchairs, a wide-screen television; a king-sized four-poster bed with silk drapery hanging from the posts; plush carpet, watered silk wallpaper; crystal vases of roses and lilies. Candles flicker in silver holders; soft violin music wafts through the air.

“They only had the honeymoon suite available.”

Will glances at the wine bottle next to a crystal vase; Seduction.

He wonders where the violin music is coming from, and if it will continue to play all night. Will can't help the short laugh that escapes him. Almost instantly, a clearly forced, neutral expression settles on his face.

It barely lasts for a few second. His lips continue to twitch. “Sorry.”

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. “You found your room at the Fairlight Hotel more to your taste?”

“No. But…” Will picks up the wine bottle, his lips twitching again.

“You should see the bathroom and the heart-shaped tub. I didn't expect it of the Ambassador, frankly.” He crosses to the table, where there's an ice bucket. “Champagne?”

Will places the wine bottle back on the table. “Yes, please. Thank you.”

Hannibal pops the cork and pours two flutes. He gives one to Will, their fingers brushing. “It's
Perrier-Jouët, I'm afraid. Not 'Blatant Lust'."

“I never thought I would hear you say the words ‘heart shaped tub’.” He takes a sip, “This is very good.”

“I can't say that I ever thought those words would cross my lips.” Hannibal sips the champagne, tasting it thoughtfully. “This would be better warmed from your skin.”

“You sound like you speak from experience. And yet, I don't think you've ever had anything warmed from my skin.”

“I've been warmed from your skin. It's...incomparable. But you're right; I should verify my theory before stating it as fact.”

“Be my guest. I'm all yours.”

Without dropping his gaze from Will's eyes, Hannibal says, “Are you?”

“And the Ripper’s.”

“In the language that only the three of us understand.” He does not step closer to Will. His voice is low, and rough, “Take off your shirt. Please.”

Will’s lips curve. He places the flute on the table behind him. Slowly, he unbuttons his shirt, without any kind of urgency. As he reaches the last button, Will glances up at Hannibal, gently shrugging his shirt off and letting it fall on the floor.

Hannibal spends a long moment gazing at Will. They have been often urgent, lately; urgent and uncontrolled. And tomorrow...things will change. Tonight, he intends to take his time, and savour.*

“You are flawless, you know, Will. You are beautiful. I wonder how aware you are, of your own physical beauty?”

Will's gaze doesn't stray. “I am not often called physically beautiful. That is what you are. You are beautiful, enchanting, exquisite in every way. Physically and intellectually. Your words excite me as much as your hands and your lips. I am enchanted by everything you hide, and everything you don't.”

“Aristotle equated physical beauty with inner virtue. I think we know differently. You and I are both attracted to the exquisite monster who dwells within the perfectly beautiful outer form.” He steps closer: close enough to feel the heat from Will's body, but not touching him. “You and I are both aware that neither of us is virtuous. But you…” He whispers, “You take my breath away.”

Will swallows. They are inches away from each other, and his body feels hot enough to be on fire. He feels almost drunk and light-headed, and he hasn't even touched Hannibal yet.

When he speaks, his voice is barely a whisper, “The darkest monsters are often the most enchanting beings. Are you a monster, Hannibal?”

Hannibal’s voice is also barely a whisper, hardly more audible than a breath, “What do you think?”

“I think you're dangerous. I think you... have certain experiences that allow you to be so accepting when it comes to my desires. But I don't know how dangerous you are.” A deep, wavering breath. “It excites me.”
“On the night we first met, your first impulse was to mess up my hair. You said I was too perfect. You saw that I was wearing a disguise.” He tilts his head, smiling slightly. The candlelight gleams red in his eyes. “Whereas when I first saw you, my first thought was to wonder how you would taste.”

“And how do I taste, Dr Lecter?”

“Sweeter than wine, and more intoxicating.”

Slowly, he raises his glass. He pours a thin stream of chilled champagne into the hollow formed by Will’s clavicle. The liquid is golden in the candlelight. Hannibal bends his head, and with infinite gentleness, drinks it from Will’s body, a slow kiss, the champagne warmed by his skin.

As Hannibal’s lips touch his skin, Will is certain that he can feel every beat of his heart. He closes his eyes. Breathlessly, he whispers, “And how does that taste?”

“It’s most odd. It’s delicious...but it makes me even more thirsty.” He pours champagne into the other side of Will’s collarbone and inclines his head again. As he drinks, a drop escapes the hollow and rolls slowly down Will’s chest. Hannibal follows it with his mouth, capturing the drop with his lips and tongue on the tip of Will’s nipple.

Will’s fingers tangle in Hannibal’s hair and he bites down on his lip, suppressing a moan. He gasps out, “Nothing is stopping you from drinking more.”

“I intend to drink all of you. Every single drop of you.” He pours champagne in a thin stream down Will’s chest, and licks upward, from his belly to his neck. “This is the best champagne I have ever tasted. Do you like it, too?”

Will bites down hard enough to draw blood. “I haven’t gotten the opportunity to properly taste it.”

In answer, Hannibal tips the last mouthful of champagne in his glass into his own mouth. Then, without swallowing, he kisses Will deeply, the bubbles tickling both of their tongues. Will runs his hand through Hannibal’s hair, cupping the back of his neck as he kisses him, champagne mingling with the blood pouring from his lips. His moans are swallowed by Hannibal’s lips, and when they both pull away, they’re breathing hard.

He whispers against Hannibal’s lips, “Delicious”.

The glass is empty. He guides Will’s glass to Will’s lips, watches as Will takes a sip, and then kisses him again, drinking the champagne from his mouth. “I’m still thirsty. I need to drink from every part of you.”

He snags the bottle of champagne from the ice bucket with one hand, and with the other starts pushing Will backwards towards the bed. Will falls back on the bed with a soft thump, pulling Hannibal on top him. His hand closes over his tie, lightly tugging to bring his head down, their lips meeting again.

“Your clothes,” Will whispers, “We need to take off your clothes.”

“No, Will. You’re wrong. We need to take off your clothes.”

But he does remove his tie and shrug off his jacket, before he proceeds to strip Will naked. Before doing anything else, Hannibal kneels next to him on the bed, gazing down at Will’s body.

Will is breathing rapidly; his cheeks are flushed. His skin is pale but it bears the marks that
Hannibal has made on it with his teeth and hands: healing but still visible, like a fresco painted over. Deliberately, Hannibal reaches for the bottle of champagne and dribbles it over Will. He smiles at Will's gasp as the cold liquid touches his heated body. And then slowly, deliberately, thoroughly, he gets to work on tasting every drop of Will Graham.

The champagne is cold as it trickles over his skin. But Hannibal's mouth is hot, and his lips leave Will's skin flushed and heated. He gasps and he moans, his eyes wide and his hands tightly clutching the soft bedsheets.

Hannibal's name is like a prayer on his lips. Or is it a sin? Will doesn't know. He doesn't care. He closes his eyes, his mouth parting, his back arching. “Hannibal.”

Hannibal kisses his way back up to Will's ear. He whispers. “Slowly. I intend to make this last until the sun rises. At least.”

Will groans, placing his hand on Hannibal's cheek, tilting his head and kissing him deeply. Hannibal kisses him, long and lingering, and then he whispers, “You said I'm dangerous. Do you trust me?”

“Always.”

He smiles, and kisses Will again. Then he draws away from Will, sitting up for a moment and reaching for something. Quickly, expertly and with surprising strength, he seizes Will's wrists, brings them up over his head and lashes them to the bedpost using his silk tie. Then, still fully clothed, he straddles Will's naked body and smiles.

“Now I can take all the time that I like. And all you can do…” He leans forward and kisses Will's lips, “...is to tell me how it feels.”

Will tests the strength of the tie around his wrists, tugging in the opposite direction. Surprisingly, it doesn't budge. He gazes up at Hannibal, waiting for the wave of fear to hit him. It doesn't come. He swallows, tugging one last time before speaking, his voice barely a whisper.

“This is what you did to me. In my dream. The dream I had about you and the Chesapeake Ripper. I never thought I would find this quite so exciting.”

“You like being in my power. Naked and helpless in my bed, while I am fully dressed above you.”

“Perhaps.”

Hannibal drops his hips back a little. “I'd say your enjoyment is rather...sizeable.”

“I—Ye—Perhaps.”

“I could stop, if you don't like it.”

Will shifts, gasping out, “No.”

“No, you don't like it? Or no, don't stop?”

Will tugs against the tie. His voice is breathless, laced with need. “Don't you dare stop.”

Hannibal smiles. He begins kissing a line down Will's torso, speaking in between kisses. “You dreamed of something similar to this: being tied to a bed, helpless, with me and the Chesapeake Ripper. My dream was similar, too. You were naked and helpless. But I was the Chesapeake...”
Ripper.” He bites Will's hipbone where it juts out from the skin, hard enough to leave a mark.

“In my dream, you and I both ate your heart.”

At this, Will moans, his back arching. In his chest, his heart beats erratically, almost in anticipation, almost as if it wishes to rip through his ribcage. He wonders how his heart tasted, raw and warm and bloody.

“Did you want to eat my heart? Or did your perception of the Ripper hunger for it?” A low groan. “And right now, Hannibal, I believe you are as helpless as I am.”

“In that moment, perhaps I did want to eat your heart. Tonight...my appetite is different.” He dips his head and gives Will a long, leisurely lick. “In what way am I helpless?”

Breathlessly, he whispers, “You are not in control of yourself. You are helpless to your body, your need, your physical desires.” Another low moan. “And... I am the cause of this lapse in control.”

Hannibal pauses mid-lick. He raises his eyebrows. In a normal conversational tone, “For that, I'm going to make you scream.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

Hannibal straightens. Deliberately, he gets off Will and stands by the bed, gazing down at Will's naked, straining body.

“Did I ever tell you that I used to be a surgeon?”

“You may have mentioned it once.”

Hannibal smiles. He kneels beside the bed, so that he and Will are face to face. Slowly, he draws a silver scalpel from his waistcoat pocket. He holds it up before Will's eyes, letting it catch the candlelight. “Look what I've got.”

Will's breath stutters, his eyes widening. His pupils dilate and blood rushes through his body, his head feeling light. “Will you be using that on me?”

He turns it around in his fingers, so that it glitters. But he doesn’t answer. Instead he stands and picks up his jacket.

Will stills completely. “Hannibal? Where are you going?”

“Oh—did you want me to stay?”

“I—Wha—Why wouldn't I want you to stay?”

Hannibal gazes pointedly at Will's arousal. “You look as if you want me to stay. But you say I'm out of control. And I've got a very sharp knife. Perhaps it's best if we're not in the same room together.”

“I said you are not in control. But I did nothing to imply that I don't like it.” Will’s gaze falls on the scalpel. “I am not opposed to seeing you on the edge.”

“Nor am I, to seeing you on the edge.” Hannibal takes his handkerchief from his jacket, and lays the jacket on a chair. “You and I relish pushing the boundaries of each other's control. And...you have tempted me to lose control in a way that I have never done with another lover. When I'm with you, I want to do things that I would have thought impossible.”
Hannibal approaches the bed again. Tenderly, with one finger, he traces along Will's cheek. “You say that you like it. But I will warn you, William: it is dangerous.”

He touches Will's lips with his fingertips, like a kiss. “Lift your head up for me, darling.”

For a small moment, Will doesn't move.

A long time ago, Will had resigned himself to a lonely life. He never thought he would feel this way for someone. He never thought he would give so much of himself to someone else. The thought of danger doesn't incite fear in him. Almost from a distance, he wonders whether or not this surprises him.

He feels nothing but anticipation.

The kind of fearless anticipation he would feel with the Chesapeake Ripper. Slowly, his eyes never leaving Hannibal's, Will lifts his head up.

Hannibal smiles. He murmurs, “Good boy.” Then he tenderly ties the handkerchief around Will's head, over his eyes.

Will's breath catches in his throat. He swallows, wishing he could reach out to touch Hannibal. The sensation of Hannibal's tie as it slides against his wrists is suddenly elevated. he sensation is accompanied by another abrupt realization. He is, at this moment, completely at Hannibal's mercy.

Will has placed his trust in him in a way that he has never placed his trust in any other individual.

When he responds, he is struggling to keep his voice even, “Does that mean I am the best student you have ever had?”

Hannibal laughs, a short laugh, “Yes. Yes, you definitely are.” He walks a short distance away, his footsteps muffled by the thick carpet. He returns immediately and Will can hear sparkling liquid being poured into a glass; the crunch of ice as the champagne bottle is returned to the bucket.

When Hannibal speaks again, he is close to Will's ear.

“There's a little champagne left. You may need to drink it.” Hannibal gently lifts Will's head. Feeling a cold glass at his lips, Will takes a few hesitant sips. The champagne somehow feels colder than before. “I may need to drink it?”

“It will help you relax.”

The cold glass is suddenly replaced with Hannibal's warm mouth. He kisses Will, deeply and thoroughly, until he is breathless and his lips are tender. Then he pulls away. Hannibal moves almost silently, like a cat, and for a moment there's no telling where he is. The bed dips and Hannibal straddles Will again, his weight settling on Will's thighs. He speaks conversationally, as if they are at his dinner table having a civilised meal.

“We were speaking of dreams. In my dream, you were just like this. Naked and spread out for me. For my pleasure. I ran my warm hand over your skin. Just like this.”

Hannibal caresses down the centre of Will's body, starting with his fingers at Will's bruised lips, then down his neck. Down his chest, between his nipples, down his belly to his navel where a thin trail of dark hair begins. To his groin, where he curls his warm hand around Will, and squeezes lightly.

“In my dream, I had a knife with a cold blade. I put it here.” Will feels something very cold, a thin
point, in his navel.

Without his eyes, Will is more aware of everything around him. Hannibal's lips, his hands. The soft cloth on his eyes, the sheets beneath his body. Even the gentlest of touches sends his blood rushing, and the softest of sounds sends his heart pounding. He can't help the soft sound that escapes his lips when Hannibal touches him, or the louder groan when he settles on his thighs.

The lack of knowledge about what is going to happen is thrilling, intoxicating.

Will flinches slightly as cold metal touches his skin. A slight movement is all it would take for the scalpel to cut through him, for warm blood to spill from the cut and trickle down his sides.

It’s dangerous. Will knows that Hannibal isn’t a good man.

And yet, all he feels is this burning, almost cruel kind of curiosity.

“You can see it, can't you? You can see my blood dripping from your hands. And you know exactly how to do it, don't you? How does it feel, to be controlled by your desires? To lose so much of your mask that you would reveal yourself to me.” The Ripper would kill him for this. “Years and years of building your image, crafting your mask like a sculpture, only for it to disintegrate in front of me.”

His voice is cocky, almost arrogant. Will's lips curve into a small smile. “We haven't known each other for long. And I am in your bed, tied and blindfolded, as you hold a blade against my skin. A far cry from the deceivingly controlled, respectable, restrained man I met on my birthday. How does it feel?”

Hannibal stares, unable to believe this. These words. This tone. From a man helpless, blind, naked under his knife. It is...unutterably rude. And yet...

“It feels...glorious. Like water after thirst. Like a first taste of freedom after years in prison.” His voice is rough as he speaks unexpected truths. “You want this as much as I do, don't you?”

Will’s voice is barely a whisper. “Yes. I do.”

Hannibal inhales sharply. A small sound, made loud by their proximity and by Will's heightened senses. He closes his eyes and sees it: Will's body opened to him, the darkness and brightness of his blood on the white sheets of this bed made for lovers, this bed made for vows and promises and pleasure. Will Graham surrendering to his knife—no, _greeting_ his knife, welcoming it like a caress, and Will is right.

Will has spoken the truth. Hannibal Lecter is not the same as the man who met Will Graham in a bar on his birthday and bought him a drink. Hannibal Lecter has...been changed.

Will Graham has changed him.

His hand is not steady as it holds the scalpel, the silver scalpel that Abel Gideon stole from the BSHCI and used to kill a nurse. And his voice is also unsteady, when he speaks.

“This is the honeymoon suite. It will be soundproof. You may be as loud as you like. No one will hear you.”

And while his warm hand holds Will intimately, the cold metal of the scalpel travels slowly, so slowly and precisely up Will's torso. There is no pain: not yet, anyway. Just icy cold, from Will's navel up to his heart.
Under Hannibal’s blade, Will’s heart beats erratically. He can almost pretend that the hand holding the scalpel belongs to the Chesapeake Ripper.

Almost, but not quite.

The scalpel is cold. So cold that he can nearly feel it cutting into him. But it doesn’t. The warmth of blood doesn’t drive the cold away. The anticipation is building up, and Will doesn’t want to wait. He wants to move his body, move it just enough for the blade to cut through his skin. Tension builds up in his muscles. He shifts, and the blade cuts him.

Warm blood oozes out of the cut.

Hannibal Lecter’s hands have never slipped, or wavered, before. This blood is not his design. “You made me cut you.”

“You were taking too long.”

Hannibal watches the blood welling from the cut he has made. It’s on Will’s chest, on the left side, exactly above his heart. The wound isn’t large or serious, but it is bleeding steadily, and Hannibal feels his mouth watering.

He bends down and puts his mouth to the wound to taste Will’s blood. He sips at it, as he sipped the champagne from Will’s skin earlier. And as he did with the champagne, he brings his mouth up to Will’s lips so Will can also taste.

Will doesn’t have his sight. He doesn’t have sight, but he has his mind.

He can imagine what Hannibal must look like, his mouth painted with blood. Will’s blood. A dark red color, very much like the striking maroon of Hannibal’s eyes. Their lips meet, and Will can taste it. Bitter, sweet, metallic, a tinge of iron. He is reminded of his dream, a low groan escaping him as a wave of pleasure runs down his body. When Hannibal pulls away, Will imagines that his own lips must be stained red, painted with the dark color of his blood.

Fear, and desire. The two, in Will Graham, are inextricably entwined. And, it seems, in Hannibal Lecter too. He gazes at Will’s face, smeared with his own blood, and he thinks about Will’s face smeared with the blood of another.

Both sights, real and imagined, are unbearably arousing. Hannibal kisses Will again, feeling the last bit of control in him snapping. His trembling fingers drop Abel Gideon’s knife, and he kisses Will hard, over and over, murmuring without hearing his own words.

“Aš negaliu tave užmušti; ne šįvakar. Jūs netrukus taps viskas Noriu jums būti.”

Hannibal doesn’t speak again: not in words. His mouth is busy on Will, kissing and tasting. His hands, normally skilled, are clumsy and desperate. He had intended to seduce Will slowly: to bind him, blind him, and bring him by exquisite degrees to pleasure.

But Will’s white skin, red with blood, the way he strains against Hannibal, his ragged breathing: they are too much to withstand. Hannibal needs all of Will Graham, all at once: deeper, harder, faster.

And Will screams, as Hannibal promised he would, but Hannibal screams too.

The sun is rising when Hannibal collapses on top of Will, who is still bound and blindfolded, and they both fall into an exhausted, drained, shaken sleep.
And the sun has barely risen when there is a hammering on the hotel room door.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Rather Tied Up
Will's eyes shoot open. For a few moments, he stills completely. He can't see.

A few seconds pass before he feels dull, throbbing pain on various different points on his body. His chest, a few places on his hipbone. Both of his arms. Most prominently, his wrists.

His wrists, which are still tied.

He startles once more as someone bangs on the door. When he speaks, his voice is soft and hoarse. “Hannibal?”

Hannibal starts awake and for a split second he does not know where he is. A noise, a warm body, the scent of blood…

And then Will Graham says his name and he knows everything. Abel Gideon, Will holding a knife in his kitchen, the desires and emotions they spoke aloud last night, his loss of control in this room. And the sleep: he never sleeps like that, unaware and vulnerable, like a child.

He sits up immediately, his eyes raking over Will's bound form as the person at the door hammers on it again. “Stay here. I'll get it.”

He touches his finger briefly to Will's lips, and stands, pulling the draperies around the four-poster bed shut to conceal Will and the rumpled, blood-stained sheets, the empty champagne bottle, the gleaming scalpel with the reddened blade.

While the person outside pounds on the door, Hannibal grabs one of the fluffy hotel robes hanging from a hook and pulls it on. He glances at his reflection in a mirror and wipes a trace of blood off his chin, before he walks barefoot to the door and opens it.

“Good morning, Jack.”

Will harshly bites down on his lip, his eyes widening under the blindfold. Jack Crawford.

Jack Crawford is in Hannibal's honeymoon suite hotel room, while Will is bound, blindfolded, and covered in blood and bite-marks on Hannibal's crumpled, bloodstained sheets. While they're both supposed to be hiding from Dr Gideon.

Will stays impossibly still, closing his eyes and trying to ignore the sensation of his face and neck heating and flushing red. Caught between embarrassment and dark amusement, he bites his lip again, preventing himself from making a sound.

Jack Crawford's face is absolutely stony. But Hannibal knows he is not missing a single thing: the lush honeymoon suite, the burned-down candles, the flowers, the empty champagne flutes, the drawn curtains on the bed. Hannibal's dishevelled hair, his unshaven chin, his nakedness under the robe. The blatant, carnal aromas of blood and sex.

Hannibal is silently grateful that he dropped Will's clothes on the other side of the bed, where they can't be seen from the door.
Jack's gaze travels around the entire room, lingering on Hannibal's own clothes tossed haphazardly onto the floor, and he says, "I've obviously disturbed you, Dr Lecter."

"Not at all. Not at all, it's fine, of course. What can I do for you, Agent Crawford?"

"I need to see Will Graham, immediately. I've been to his hotel room and he's not there."

Hannibal tenses. "You don't think Will's a target for Gideon, do you?"

Jack doesn't answer the question. Instead he says, "Have you heard from him since last night? Phone call, text, email, anything? He checked in across the road, at the Fairlight, but no one's seen him since. His car isn't in the parking lot."

Hannibal goes to his clothes and takes his phone out of his trouser pocket. He makes a show of checking it, then shakes his head. "No, no messages. Perhaps he went for coffee, or breakfast. I don't imagine the Fairlight serves very good coffee. Or maybe he went home to feed his dogs?"

Jack frowns. "Or maybe he's gone to meet his lover."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "His...lover?"

Jack grunts. "Last time I saw him, he was covered in love bites. Do you know who he's seeing?"

"It's really none of my business. I'm Will's academic supervisor, not his 'bestie'."

At the word, Jack's frown gets even deeper. "Right. Well, get dressed, Dr Lecter. Until we can find Will, I'm afraid we need you."

"My apologies—I'm rather...tied up at the moment, Agent Crawford." Hannibal glances at the bed.

"With all due respect, Dr Lecter, your fun and games are going to have to wait. We've found Abel Gideon."

Behind the draperies, Will's breath catches in his throat.

Abel Gideon.

For a small moment, he remembers the terror he felt just a few hours ago, when he thought Dr Gideon had found Hannibal. The steady and comforting grip of a knife in his hand, the blade tempting him to write a poem with its sharp edge.

Will does not yet know what happened to Dr Gideon, whether he is alive or dead. He does not know what he wants the outcome to be. All he knows is that he needs to see what Jack Crawford has found. He needs to see if Gideon can be his canvas.

"If you've arrested Dr Gideon, that's wonderful news. But you didn't have to deliver it in person, Agent Crawford. A phone call would have sufficed to let me know I'm out of danger. Of course I appreciate the personal touch." Hannibal glances at the bed again.

"We haven't arrested him," says Jack. "We found him. That's why we need Mr Graham, and you."

Hannibal frowns. "But you're consulting Will and me on the Chesapeake Ripper's murders. Not Abel Gideon."

"You'll see," says Jack shortly. "I need you dressed and ready, as soon as you can be. I'll try Will's hotel again, and meet you in the lobby in fifteen minutes."
Jack leaves, and Hannibal shuts the door firmly behind him. A few seconds after Jack's footsteps fade away, Will speaks.

“Do you think he might use us as bait?” A small pause. “And would you, perhaps, mind untying me and taking off this blindfold?”

Hannibal crosses quickly to the bed and pulls aside the draperies. He tugs off the blindfold and unties Will's wrists rubbing the skin where there are red marks from the tie. He helps Will lower his stiff arms, and kneads the sore muscles.

“I am so sorry, Will. I didn't mean to fall asleep like that. I hate to hurt you unnecessarily.”

He covers the lines on Will's wrists with kisses, as if he could heal them. He looks at the wound on Will's chest: it's a fine streak of red, scabbed over now. “I'll get something to clean that.” He gets up and returns a moment later with a bowl of warm soapy water and a soft flannel. Tenderly, he bathes the wound that he has made on Will's flesh.

“Does that hurt you?”

Will closes and opens his fingers, flexing his wrists. “It stings, but it doesn't hurt.”

He leans in and softly kisses Hannibal. “Don't apologize. You weren't the only one who fell asleep.”

“I don't like to think of you in discomfort.” He kisses Will. “You heard all of that, with Jack?”

“Yes. You're not even a little bit curious about who my lover is, Dr Lecter?”

Hannibal smiles. “I'm astonished that whoever it is would mar such a perfect neck by covering it in love bites. They obviously have very little sense of aesthetics.”

He sobers, and adds, “I suggest you dress and return to the Fairlight via a coffee shop.”

Will stands and stretches, his eyes raking over the room. He bends to pick up his clothes, quickly slipping them on, wincing as his arm muscles protest. Hastily, he puts on his jacket over his shirt and turns to Hannibal again, kissing his cheek.

“I'm going to go get myself coffee, and then I'll head back to my hotel room.” Without a glance at the mirror, he leaves.

Hannibal washes and dresses in fresh clothes. He knots his tie with care and tucks a pristine handkerchief into his pocket. He doesn't have time to shave; instead he spends a few minutes putting the hotel room in order. The chambermaids have, he is sure, seen worse; especially in a honeymoon suite. He has himself left much, much worse behind...though not in his own room.

He does not rehearse the reactions or the conversation he will have with Jack Crawford, soon. In his experience, the impression of spontaneity is more easily achieved when one has not chosen one's exact words beforehand.

He does allow himself a moment's recollection of his hours in this room with Will Graham. The conversation they had in his car, earlier. The idea of the poem that Will Graham will write in flesh; the savage light in Will's eyes as he imagined what he would do. The word "love" on Will Graham's lips.

And then Hannibal thinks of what they have waiting for them, and he smiles.
Whistling, he leaves the honeymoon suite and checks out of the hotel, the very picture of a very, very satisfied man.

He catches a glimpse of himself in one of the lobby mirrors and composes his face to wait for Jack and Will.

Will rushes to the closest cafe, thankful for the fact that not many people are out right now. The morning rush hours won't hit for another forty five minutes. The line isn't long, and there are only two people waiting before him. Unfortunately, the relatively relaxed atmosphere of the coffee shop allows the occupants to pay closer attention to each other.

Instinctively, he digs his hands into his pockets, looking for his glasses. He finds them just as the woman before him finishes ordering her coffee, moving out of the way. Will slips his glasses on just as he steps forward. “One medium coffee, ple—”

His hand stills mid-air, just as his words are cut short. The barista's eyes are fixed on Will's wrist. He feels his cheeks flushing. Instantly, Will shoves his hand in his pocket, pulling down the sleeve of his jacket.

“One medium coffee, please.” His body tense, Will swiftly pays with his card, ignoring the eyes on him as he waits for his order. As soon as the cup is in his hand, Will briskly walks out of the small cafe, nearly cursing as he glances at his reflection in the glass windows.

Disheveled hair. Wrinkled clothes, haphazardly thrown on. An old, fading mark on his neck. And, if he isn't careful with his jacket sleeves, vivid and rapidly darkening marks on his wrists.

As the elevator stops on his floor in the Fairlight, he considers making a quick trip home to change and fres—

"Where the hell have you been, Graham? You're making a habit out of disappearing."

The idea is instantly dismissed. Jack Crawford is standing outside his hotel room, his face expressionless.

Will walks to him. “I'm sorry, Agent Crawford. I didn't expect you this early in the morning. One of my friends expressed concern about me being alone in my hotel room. I was with him for some time, and decided to grab some coffee on my way back. If I knew my presence would be required, I wouldn't have left.” A small pause. “Is it the Chesapeake Ripper?”

Crawford ignores his question. "I want you to give me your friend's contact information. This friend seems to be the fastest way to reach you, and I can't have you disappearing without a trace when I need you for a case."

Will freezes. “He doesn't have a phone.”

There is a small moment of silence. Will raises the cup to his lips to sip his coffee, freezing once more as the sleeve of his jacket rides up again, brushing against the bruises on his wrist.

Taking a quick sip that burns his tongue, he nearly spills the drink in his rush to drop his hand back to its previous position.

Crawford's face is blank. When he speaks, his voice is laced with impatience. "Does this friend have an address? You were with him on the day the Ripper's last tableau was discovered."
When Will doesn't speak, he sighs heavily. "Graham. I am asking for the sake of efficiency. Your private matters are none of my business, but I need a way to contact you when your presence is required."

“I—That was a different friend.”

Will resists the urge to straighten his glasses. Crawford seems to be losing his patience, his gaze sharp and his voice forceful. "When I call, you will pick up your phone. Next time, make sure that it's charged. We can't afford to not reach you. Not when there are lives at stake. Do you understand?"

Will nods. Partially placated, Crawford nods as well. His expression remains tense. His voice is curt. "Good. I need you to come with me. We are already late, and Dr Lecter is waiting."

And with that, Crawford briskly walks past him, expecting Will to follow. When they reach the Ambassador's lobby, Hannibal is already there.

Hannibal smiles when he sees the two of them approaching. He makes obvious note of Will's appearance, for Jack Crawford's sake, and glances significantly at Jack before speaking to Will.

“Jack tells me you were in a hotel room last night too. I hope you slept well?”

“I had the best sleep I've had in days. And you, Dr Lecter?”

“I slept very—”

Jack interrupts them. "As nice as this chit-chat is, I need you two to get to work now. I'll drive."

"I'd prefer not to leave my Bentley in the hotel car park. Do you mind if I follow you, Agent Crawford?"

Jack shrugs. "Whatever. As long as you're right behind me. Will, are you riding with Dr Lecter, or me?"

He speaks without even thinking. “I'll go with Dr Lecter, thank you.”

“My car is already ready outside. Get your car out of the car park, Dr Lecter, and follow me as I drive." With a short nod, Crawford walks out of the lobby, to the main entrance.

Hannibal leans slightly toward Will. “You look thoroughly debauched. What's that colourful colloquial expression? Rode hard, and put away wet?”

Will's mouth falls open. He stares for a few seconds before snapping his mouth shut, directing a hard glare at Hannibal.

“And whose fault is that?”

“Entirely, and gloriously, mine. Shall we go to my car?”

As they make their way to the parking lot, Will sighs heavily. “Whenever I have been with you and Agent Crawford has needed me, I have always told him that I was with a ‘friend’. Today, he asked for my ‘friend’s’ contact information.”

Hannibal is amused. “Perhaps he's jealous of your ‘friend’. Since you always look so well-satisfied after seeing this person.”
“I told him that my ‘friend’ doesn't have a phone. He then asked for an address, because I stayed with this ‘friend’ on the night the Ripper recreated Adam and Eve.” Will sighs. “So I had to tell him it was a different ‘friend’.”

Hannibal unlocks the car and they get in. He leaves the car park, pulling up behind Jack, who immediately drives off, with them following. “You're a very sociable fellow, Will.”

He glances at Hannibal. “You have seen me interacting with people, haven't you?”

“I have. As has Jack Crawford. I wonder how plausible he finds your stories.” Hannibal considers. “Though you were charm itself with Alana Bloom, at my house that evening. Agent Crawford is very perceptive; I wonder if he also sees that your habitual diffidence is meticulously constructed for self-defence.”

Will raises his eyebrows. “What are you talking about?”

“You wear a mask, Will, as much as the Chesapeake Ripper must. His is to stop other people from seeing his true self. Yours is to prevent yourself seeing too deeply into other people's emotions and thoughts. But it hides your desires, too. It hides the monster inside you.”

Will’s breath stutters. “I don't like people getting into my mind, Dr Lecter.”

The tone of his voice and his rapidly beating heart betray his words.

“I don't like being psychoanalyzed, because most psychiatrists are wrong about me. They see what they want to see, and concern themselves with my unique way of thinking far more than they should.” He glances away. “You can see this... monster?”

They are following Jack out of town, down a road they have driven before.

Do I see you truly?” Hannibal asks. “Or am I like the others, merely seeing what I want to see in you?”

“One can't fully love someone until they are entirely known to them, stripped bare to the very core. Do you know me? Do you see me, inside and out?”

Quietly, Hannibal asks, “Do you want me to?”

“I do.”

Hannibal's hands tighten on the steering wheel. He has, suddenly, a lump in his throat. He swallows, and when he speaks again, his voice is rough.

“Jack is taking us on the same route we took to the Ripper's Adam and Eve crime scene.”

“But what does that have to do with Abel Gideon?”

It's been so liberating, so thrilling, to be truthful with Will Graham, that Hannibal is almost disappointed to have to dissemble.

“I suppose we shall find out,” he says. “And soon.”

Will closes his eyes. “If Gideon still believes he is the Ripper, he might think that the real Chesapeake Ripper is an imposter. If he does anything to the crime scene…”

“What would you do?”
Will swallows. “I don't think you would like to see me like that.”

“You just said that you wanted me to see you, inside and out.”

“I—I want you to see me, but I fear that you won't like what you see.”

“Is it worth facing that fear, to sound the depths of our feelings for each other?”

“Yes. Yes, but I don't want this to end.”

“I may be wrong,” Hannibal says. “But I feel that we are only just beginning.”

Ahead of them, Jack's car slows at the turnoff they took several days ago to see the Ripper's last crime scene. However, he keeps driving, slowly, until they reach another turnoff, also into the same wooded area, but about a quarter mile away. A single police car blocks the road, but when Jack pulls up, the car backs away so that they can pass.

Unlike the last time they were in this area, there are no cordons, no crowds of parked cars and officers and forensic specialists collecting evidence. Only the trees and the tall marsh grass, and them.

Jack parks the car and walks back to the Bentley, waiting for Hannibal and Will to get out.

Will glances at Hannibal, surprised that they have driven past the place where the Ripper had set up his tableau. Slowly, he gets out of the car, walking to Agent Crawford with Hannibal.

It's early-morning quiet, and cold. A raven croaks; there's the sound of rustling dry reeds, a distant aeroplane. Jack wordlessly stuffs his hands into the pockets of his overcoat, his breath clouding in the air. He leads them around to in front of his car, and nods to what is before them, arranged by the side of the road.

Even if Will weren't an expert on the Chesapeake Ripper, even if he had not spent years studying his work, poring over it lovingly, he would be able to recognise the artist behind this picture. The pen behind this poem.

Unlike the last tableau, which was in a hollow on a secluded path, this has been constructed on the side of the road. Like the last one, however, this consists of two people, nearly naked, carefully posed.

Beside one person is a pile of fruit, stacked high on a cloth. Beside the other is a slaughtered lamb, its neck sliced open, its belly slit, its heart lying on top of its entrails.

In the centre, the two people. The two corpses.

They seem to grapple with each other. One lies on the ground, his hand up as if to defend himself. The other holds up a wooden club, ready to strike the man below him.

Except they are both dead, wearing only loincloths, their skin turning grey under the morning sun.

Hannibal steps closer to the tableau, peering at the bodies. “That's...that's Abel Gideon.”

Jack nods. “And we don't have any problems identifying the other victim, either. I know him personally. He's a city councillor, a local businessman. Gordon Kane.”

Hannibal waits, every nerve singing, for Will Graham to react.
With barely a glance, Will knows.

This design could only belong to the Chesapeake Ripper. It has been meticulously created, each piece arranged perfectly, contributing to a design that can only be described as art.

With the end of this cycle, six people are dead, and Will Graham has never been happier.

Six lives, elevated in death, their bodies used to write a poem. They have been touched by greatness, redefined by the hands of an artist, a creator. Gordon Kane and Abel Gideon were physical tools, transformed into a language, a poem. Changed by hands that stripped away everything but their names.

The realization is unexpected.

And when it comes, the colors around him melt away, the world becoming nothing more than a dull, lifeless memory. Will closes his eyes, the image of the Ripper's tableau etched under his eyelids.

Cain and Abel.

References:

2. *Cain and Abel* by Sebastiano Ricci
Chapter End Notes

Next chapter...Cain and Abel
Cain and Abel

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The bodies are arranged beautifully. In Will's eyes, the Chesapeake Ripper's recreation outshines Sebastiano Ricci's painting. It expresses rage, anguish, jealousy, without overshadow the Ripper's message. A perfect balance.

The Ripper has used the story of Cain and Abel to paint his own picture.

They were the sons of Adam and Eve; one a crop farmer, and the other a shepherd. They both presented offerings for God, with Cain presenting produce from his land, and Abel presenting some of the firstborn of his flock. But God had regard for only Abel's offering. And thus, in jealousy and rage, Cain killed his brother.

It was the first murder.

Will is nearly trembling as the Chesapeake Ripper's design unravels in front of him, as he slowly untangles the carefully woven threads of not only the poem, but also his own mind.

This is another message to his lover. Another intimate poem of love. The Ripper is asking his beloved to commit their first murder. He is asking them to create something in the language they both share. To bite the forbidden fruit, to gain knowledge and transform, to become the Chesapeake Ripper's equal.

His partner.

With his recreation of Adam and Eve, the Ripper confessed his love and offered his heart. Now, he is asking his lover to respond, to accept or deny the offer.

Pain, sharp and hot, flares deep inside him. The Ripper's lover will respond. And Will Graham will understand every word, every emotion, every meaning behind the tableau that will undoubtedly be created. He will understand every correspondence of love between them, he will unravel every thread of affection.

This is his gift and his curse.

When Will finally opens his eyes, he is visibly shaken.

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Hannibal sees the emotion on Will Graham's face. To Jack Crawford, it will appear to be disgust at a brutal murder, empathy for the lives taken, the tragedy of death. Hannibal knows what the emotion really is. It is heartbreak. Despite all the hints that Hannibal has given him, Will cannot see that he is the one to whom the Ripper is speaking.

That Will is the subject of these love poems; that the Ripper is offering Will his heart, and calling for Will to reciprocate his devotion by offering a sacrifice of his own. Hannibal wonders, short of confession, how he will steer Will into the deed that Hannibal so desperately desires him to commit.

He wants to take Will into his arms. He wants to whisper, intimately: "You are the one. You are the
He knows that if he asks Will what he sees, his voice will reveal some of what he feels. Instead, he turns to Jack. 

“Kane and Abel. This is a sequel to the Ripper’s last murder, a pun on Gideon’s name. Turning the killer into a victim. And not just any victim: the first recorded murder victim. It's fitting revenge against someone who took credit for the Ripper's crimes. Our killer is saying that he, the Ripper, is first among murderers.” He presses his lips together in not quite a smile. “A common trait of sociopaths: narcissism and an exaggerated sense of grandiosity.”

Will’s eyes widen as his head snaps up to glance at Hannibal. Thankfully, Jack is not looking at him. His body is positioned in Hannibal’s direction, his eyes sharp and attentive. He misses the expression that crosses Will's face. 

This is a sequel to the Ripper's last murder.

Hannibal knows. He knows, and he's lying to Agent Crawford. For Will. 

For an inexplicable reason, the knowledge temporarily calms him. And thus, when Crawford turns to look at him, Will’s face is composed, not a single emotion slipping through for him to see. 

"What do you think, Will?"

Will lies, smoothly, “Dr Lecter is right. The Ripper is declaring his superiority over killers like Dr Gideon. Like the previous tableau, this is a declaration and a warning. He does not take kindly to others taking credit for his work. He has ended his cycle with a promise.”

Jack Crawford is frowning. "What's the promise, Will?"

“That he will not tolerate any insults against him. That he's watching, and listening. That two out of three tableaux in this cycle were at least partly inspired by... us, and not him.”

"I could wish that he'd heard of such a thing as the internet," Jack mutters. "Or taking out a personal ad." He gazes at the murder tableau for a moment, and then turns back to Will. "Is this a threat against us? Or against anyone who takes credit for his work?"

“It isn't a threat against us, but it is a warning. If we communicate with him, he will respond. But while we might use words as our mode of communication, he will use bodies.”

The silence after Will’s words is long, broken only by Hannibal’s voice. “Death is his chosen language, and the one in which he is most fluent.”

Jack says, "I don't want to communicate with him. I want to catch him. How can we do that, Will?"

He won't be caught now. Not now that he is in love.

Will’s chest tightens, his confidence melting as he feels another sharp pang of pain. “I—I don't know. I need time. To think.”

Hannibal glances at Agent Crawford, “Next time someone pretends to be the Ripper, you can set a trap for the real one, perhaps.”

Crawford exhales impatiently. "So why choose Kane? Did he kill him just for his name?"

Hannibal thinks of a drinks reception, a glass of red wine, his favourite dinner jacket. He says
Will sighs. “This tableau was about Abel Gideon. Gordon Kane was just... conveniently named. He is a sadist, Agent Crawford. He doesn't need a reason to kill beyond symbolism.” Yet another lie. The Ripper does nothing without a reason. Will wonders what Kane did.

“I knew Kane as well. I'd met him several times. And Dr Gideon. It's...a bit much to take in, I'm afraid.” Hannibal rubs his forehead. “I've encountered many dead bodies before, of course. But it's not often one sees one's acquaintance murdered.”

He leans back against Jack's car, feigning mild shock.

Will takes a step forward, his eyes wide. Before he can reach Hannibal, Crawford is already there, taking an orange shock blanket out of his car, his training kicking in without a single thought. He is talking to Hannibal in low tones, telling him to take deep breaths.

Will takes another step forward, his arm raised halfway, as if he’s unsure about what to do. “Dr Lecter? Can you hear me?”

“Yes. Yes, I'm fine, Will. Don't worry. I think...I just realised how close to death we have been. Gideon wanted to kill me and he was, in turn, killed by the Ripper. It's all very close to home.”

Will's chest tightens again, his fists clenching. He takes a deep, shaky breath, turning to Agent Crawford. “I believe we should take him home.”

Jack hesitates. "Yes. But before you go...can you see anything else, Will? Anything else of use?"

Will glances at the crime scene again. He doesn't need to. The Ripper's tableau is imprinted in his mind, but he still turns, memorizing the way it looks when it's fresh, beautiful under the morning sun. His gaze falls on the slaughtered lamb before he glances at Jack again. “In the Ripper's eyes, he is God. Dr Gideon was an acceptable sacrifice.”

And with that, he turns away from Agent Crawford and the crime scene. “Would you like me to drive, Dr Lecter?”

Hannibal nods. He stands upright, and with a slight hesitance to his gait, walks to the passenger side of his car.

"I will visit you in a few days, Agent Crawford, to further discuss the latest tableau." Will nods at Jack, taking the car keys from Hannibal and sliding into the drivers seat, gently closing the door behind him.

He starts the car, glancing at Hannibal. When he speaks, his voice is barely a whisper. To the other standing outside, it seems as if he is asking about Hannibal’s health.

There is no judgment in Will’s voice; only curiosity. “You weren't upset about Gordon Kane's murder.”

“And you lied to the head of the Behavioural Analysis Unit of the FBI. Those murders weren't a warning.”

“Because you don't want the FBI to know what the Ripper wants. That he's requesting a very specific reply.”

Hannibal bites his lip. Without answering, he reaches over and presses a button on the dash. “If
we're not following Jack, this will help get us home.” A GPS screen comes to life on the dash.

Will looks at the crime scene one last time. The gift the Ripper made for his lover. His hands tighten on the steering wheel as he closes his eyes momentarily, sighing deeply. Loosening his grip, Will opens his eyes, glancing at the GPS screen.

Their location is marked by a red dot in a green expanse. On the map, it is labelled clearly:

**ANDREWS MARSH.**

Will's body stills completely, his muscles tensing. His heartbeat stutters, his chest tightening almost painfully. The world around him suddenly feels slower, duller, irrelevant.

Two of the Chesapeake Ripper's tableaux, magnificent poems of love, created on a marsh by the name of Andrew.

Andrew Marsh.

The only survivor of the Chesapeake Ripper. The only one he allowed to live.

**Him? Him? The Ripper loves him?**

Will had hoped that perhaps...

His thoughts are knocked over by a wave of pain and humiliation. He has a sudden urge to run until he can't breathe, until his body is unable to move.

But Crawford is watching, Hannibal is watching

And thus, Will forces his eyes away from the GPS screen and starts backing the car. With a swift turn, he drives down the path they came from, past the murder tableau, past the police car that pulls back to let him pass. He doesn't look at the GPS screen until they're back on the highway. And when he does look back, the name is gone.

Gone from the screen, but it's imprinted in his mind. He'll see it when his eyes close, he'll see it in the dark, in broad daylight. It'll haunt him, follow him, taunt him.

Andrew Marsh.

The man the Ripper is in love with, the man he has unknowingly chosen over him.

Will Graham will always see the Ripper, but he will never be seen in return, never receive the unconditional acceptance and love.

**What is it? What is it, that makes him unworthy? What is he doing wrong?**

**What is he doing right?**

Will doesn't say a word, not until they've reached Hannibal's house. Knowing they have to keep up the act, he swiftly parks the car, walking to the other side to open Hannibal's door, helping him out. The shock blanket is still around his shoulders. Using Hannibal's keys, he quickly unlocks the door, closing it behind him once they're both inside.

“I will stay for one hour. After that, I will call Agent Crawford to tell him that you are fine, and then I will head home.”
Hannibal knows: Will has seen it. This final clue. This name that has floated between them for weeks now, searching for significance. Will has seen it...and Will is heartbroken.

Hannibal Lecter has no compunction about causing pain when necessary. It is a tool, a means to an end. Sometimes it is in itself, the end. Pain is clarifying. It creates purpose and action and beauty. But Hannibal Lecter takes no joy in causing this pain to Will Graham. It may be necessary...it might even be beautiful.

But it hurts him, too, like a keen scalpel to his heart.

“Will...what's wrong?”

Will takes a long, shuddering breath. “The place where the Ripper created his tableau... Do you know the name of that location?”

“Is it significant?”

“Is anything chosen by the Ripper ever insignificant?”

He still has the blanket draped around his shoulders. He takes it off and puts it on a chair. “What is the name?”

For the first time in weeks, Will's gaze falls from Hannibal's eyes. He hesitates. “It's a... marsh. Specifically, Andrew Marsh.”

“I see. What do you interpret as the significance of this fact?”

Will's voice is barely a whisper. “He is the one. He's the one the Ripper loves, the one he made those magnificent poems for.”

“You think that the Ripper let Andrew Marsh go...because he loves him?”

“Yes.”

Hannibal sinks into a kitchen chair, leaning his elbows on the table, his head bowed and his forehead in his hands.

Will's head snaps up, his gaze falling on Hannibal once more. He takes a hesitant step forward. “Hannibal?”

His words are muffled. “I can't do this. Not any more.”

Will pulls up a chair next to his, placing his hand on Hannibal's shoulder. “What can't you do?”

“I can't—” Hannibal lifts his head up so Will can see his face. His eyes are full of pain. It is quite genuine, although the cause of it is different from what he is about to express. “I saw your face at that crime scene, Will. You could hide it from others, but not from me. I see that you...you are heartbroken. You are devastated that the Ripper could love someone other than you. And just now, when you told me the name of the person that you think he loves: you are in pain. In torment. You are so jealous that you want to strike out in despair.”

Hannibal licks his lips. He takes a deep and shuddering breath. “After we saw the last murder tableau...Adam and Eve. I made you a promise. I told you that if I were ever to become jealous of your feelings for the Ripper, I would tell you. That I would not torment myself with it. At the time, I thought this wouldn't happen. I was quite willing to...accommodate your division of interest. But
just now. In that place. Named for...the person you believe the Ripper loves. I saw how you truly feel, and I…”

He drops his head into his hands again. “I'm sorry, Will. I never break a promise. I need to step back, and understand myself. I will continue as your supervisor, if you wish. But right now...for the moment…” He swallows. “That is all I can be.”

Will pulls his hand back, as if burned. No... No…

Not Hannibal too. Not him too. The Ripper will never love him, but Hannibal…

His voice is shaking. “You're not…”

“I am sorry.” Hannibal has tears in his eyes.

Will nods, not allowing himself to speak, not wanting his voice to break. He stands up, swiftly grabbing his jacket and keys. He fumbles with his keys, puts his jacket over his arm. Swallowing heavily, he takes a deep breath, a strange pressure building up in his head and chest. With difficulty, he swallows again. Will opens his mouth, closing it when his chest tightens, the lump in his throat preventing him from speaking.

It's as if he's fighting against his own body, his own reactions. He doesn't know if he's succeeding.

He does know that he didn't succeed today. If he had, perhaps they wouldn't be having this conversation.

The pressure in his head is now painful, traveling from his temples all the way to the back of his neck. He takes another long, deep breath.

“In one hour, I will call Crawford to let him know I'm leaving and that you are fine. There are no agents to see when I leave.”

Hannibal's voice is rough. “Crawford.” He clears his throat; a tear nearly falls. “I think Crawford suspects our affair. Or if he doesn't, I think he will very soon. If we were to continue. It's another reason…” Now, a tear does fall, onto the table. “Tell him you're leaving now. It's safer if you just go.”

Will's hand, hidden by the jacket draped over his arm, is shaking. Almost subconsciously, his other hand reaches for the jacket pocket, pulling out his glasses. “We won't have to worry about Crawford anymore. I'll... call him once I reach home. I hope you feel better, Dr Lecter. What happened to your friend is very sad.”

And he turns around, slipping his glasses on as he leaves, gently closing the door behind him.

He doesn't allow the first tear to spill until he is in his car, where Hannibal can't see. Doesn't allow the first sound to escape him until he's driving away.

But it doesn't matter, does it?

Despite his best efforts, his voice did break.
Hannibal settles into his usual chair in Dr Du Maurier's office. He says nothing.

Bedelia, however, is well-practised in this tactic. In fact, Hannibal Lecter saying nothing is quite an interesting development. The man is usually extremely good at using words to obfuscate; at turning an uncomfortably pointed question or observation back at his therapist.

She watches, and waits. The seconds tick by in her quiet office.

Finally, Hannibal seems to come to some sort of a conclusion, and speaks. “I nearly cancelled my appointment with you.”

"Oh?" she asks. "Why was that?"

“Because I did not want to discuss my romantic relationship any further with you.”

“Because you were uncomfortable with the notion of dissecting it?”

“No. Because you were right. Because I am in love.”

Bedelia keeps her ice-calm exterior, except for a slight twitch of her upper lip.

"Congratulations, Hannibal."

“You didn't think it was possible, did you?”

"I had my doubts."

“So did I. In fact I never considered it a possibility...until you mentioned it.”

"As I recall, you denied it vehemently. You said—"

“I was wrong. I am...every now and then.”

Bedelia tilts her head. "I know you are a man of passion, Hannibal. A man of emotion. But love requires a certain..."

“Vulnerability. Yes.”

He drops into silence again. Bedelia waits.

“This is what I was concerned about,” he says, “the last time we spoke. I was worried about revealing myself to him.”

"Are you still worried?”

“No. I have revealed myself to him. I have shown him, in great detail, who I am.”

Bedelia can't help herself. She leans, very slightly, forward. "He has seen your innermost self? How...how did he react?”
“With love. And with...despair.”

He smooths the crease in his trousers. “I have said that our relationship is...problematic. He does not quite understand all the implications of what I've shown him.”

Bedelia Du Maurier is aware that she must tread carefully here. That there are things that must not be spoken with Hannibal Lecter; should not even be thought.

She swallows, and chooses her words. "And how...will you show him, exactly what you mean?"

“I cannot. He has to work it out for himself. But I am helping him along...by breaking up with him.”

Bedelia frowns. "By breaking up with him? But you said that you loved him."

“Yes. He needs a push. He needs a reason to act.”

"You require a grand gesture on his part? A sign of commitment?"

Hannibal smiles. “You could say that.”

"And you are willing to hurt him, in order to elicit this gesture?"

Hannibal bites the insides of his lips. “It...is not only him that I am hurting.”

Bedelia blinks. She has said that Hannibal is a man of emotion, but these emotions are very rarely shown. She sees them mostly as ripples on his surface, echoes of great currents moving below.

This is not a ripple. This is pain.

She doesn't usually give straightforward relationship advice—you can get that from daytime television shows. But she speaks to Hannibal with the frankness that his pain demands.

"Hannibal, you can't manipulate someone into committing to you. That is not a relationship; that is coercion."

“I have stopped manipulating him. I have set him free. Because he is worthy of my love, I will wait, and hope that he will come back to me.”

"With this grand gesture?"

“With true understanding, both of me and of himself.”

"And yet you are in pain.”

“And yet I am in pain. Because I love him. And I miss him. And I am...afraid that he may not come back.”

Hannibal looks down at his hands. He looks almost helpless.

“Because now that I know I am capable of love...I do not want to be without it again.”

***

When Will wakes up, it's to the sensation of a blinding headache. He groans, shifting slightly, regretting the motion immediately as the headache worsens, pain traveling through him in waves.
His forehead rests on his arm, one of his cheeks pressed against a folder on his desk.

Belatedly, he realizes that his cheeks are wet.

Feeling something nudge the tip of his nose, Will opens his eyes. The room is dark, the curtains drawn. The only light comes from a small lamp on his desk. He blinks against the light, his vision blurry with the tears. A few seconds pass before he realizes that it is Luna's tongue, licking away the tears on his cheeks. His other hand reaches out to her, gently fluffing her ears.

Will's voice is hoarse. “I still have you, don't I? You won't leave me alone too, will you?”

She continues to lick his face, not moving even as he chokes down a sob, his body trembling violently as he gasps, his breath hitching. Will closes his eyes again, harshly biting down on his lips to prevent another sound from escaping him.

But he can't. Not when it hurts so much, not when the pain is past endurance.

He doesn't know how long he sits there, just as he doesn't know how many days have passed since the day he lost them both. The day he lost both the Ripper and Hannibal.

Five days? A week? Or is it more?

He doesn't know. He doesn't care. It doesn't matter, does it? Nothing has changed; the past few days have been a vicious cycle. It always starts with Will trying to lose himself in the case files he has, in an attempt to dissociate his emotions with his work and passion.

It ends with failure. It ends with the same thoughts, over and over again, repeating in his mind like a broken tape recorder.

What makes him unworthy? What is he doing wrong?

And when the thoughts don't haunt him when he's awake, they come back when he's asleep. Disbelief, anger, pain; they occupy his mind in equal amounts.

He wonders if he was wrong about Andrew Marsh, if the man is indeed more than what he thought. But Will Graham has never been wrong. He sees nothing in Marsh. Nothing that the Ripper would want to destroy, nothing he would want to elevate, love, or preserve.

Why, then, does the Ripper desire him?

Frustration builds up inside him, quickly morphing into anger. Why him? What does he have that Will doesn't? Is it Will's own weaknesses that are contributing to his failure to catch the Ripper's attention? Or is it something else?

Are the Ripper's eyes so intently focused on his beloved that they will never stray to see Will? Will swallows.

He needs to know. He needs to know if the fault is his own, if his own weaknesses are causing this, if he really is unworthy. The Ripper wants his beloved to commit his first murder. He wants Marsh to kill someone, to write a poem. And if Will commits his own first murder and kills Marsh before he can write his poem, the Ripper will kill him.

It will be appropriate.

If he can't have the Ripper's affection, he will have his wrath. If he can't have the gentle touch of
his hands, he will have his violence.

But, if he dies... *Hannibal*.

He raises his head from his desk, another tear trickling down his cheek.

Will loves Hannibal.

He doesn't want to leave Hannibal, doesn't want their last conversation to be about pain and separation. But he also doesn't want to cause Hannibal more pain. He never wants to see tears in his eyes again.

Perhaps it's for the best.

Will glances down as Leon whines, pawing at his legs. His lips twitch as he bends down to pick him up, holding him against his chest. His voice is barely a whisper.

"I'll find a good human for you. For both of you."

Leon licks his face happily, and Will's lips stretch into a small, sad smile. He presses a kiss on the top of his head. And then he reaches for one of the folders on his desk, and gets to work.

***

Hannibal reaches for the crystal decanter of Bordeaux, and pours wine into his glass and Dr Chilton's. Then he takes his place at this dining room table, unfolding his linen napkin onto his lap.

"You're looking well, Frederick. A few days at your lake house has evidently done you some good." He sips his wine, savours. "Or is it the relief in knowing that your former patient is dead, and therefore no longer out to kill you?"

"Probably both," says Chilton, regarding Hannibal over the rim of his glass. "However, you, Dr Lecter, look like hell. Have you been burning the midnight oil with your...*new student*?" Chilton puts derisive emphasis on the words. "Trying to decode the latest Chesapeake Ripper crime scene?"

In the pause between Chilton's words and Hannibal's opening his lips to reply, Hannibal sees the past eight days passing through his memory.

Will Graham leaving his house, face studiously impassive, his heart broken. How every time Hannibal's phone has rung, a text message has beeped, he has snatched up his phone, fruitlessly hoping it has come from Will. How he has perused the newspapers, listened to the radio, constantly refreshed Tattlecrime.com, waiting for news of Andrew Marsh's murder and quite another type of message from Will, one written in blood.

How he has been preoccupied with his patients, mechanical with his lecturing, remiss with his record-keeping.

How yesterday, walking from his house to his dry cleaners instead of driving (as if fresh air could conquer obsession) he caught a glimpse of a small white puppy, long-haired, with bright eyes, and his pulse had quickened and he had hurried forward, Will's name on his lips, only to find that it was an elderly toy poodle owned by a septuagenarian Cuban grandmother.

Hannibal does not sigh, though he wants to. He picks up his fork. "I haven't seen Will Graham in some time. He's been very busy, as you can imagine."
And Hannibal's bed, and Hannibal's life, have felt very empty.

He is merely waiting, he tells himself. He can be patient. All will be worth it, in the end. He has waited all his life for an equal partner. A few days...are nothing.

"Well something is bothering you, Hannibal," says Chilton, reflectively turning the stem of his glass in his fingers.

“How reassuring to see that your years of clinical psychiatric practice have given you such insight into the human mind.”

Chilton blinks at the retort, and its sarcasm. It is not like Hannibal Lecter to be rude.

Hannibal sees his reaction and immediately says, “I am sorry, Frederick. You're right. I have been feeling under the weather lately. Perhaps a virus.” Wryly, he adds, “Don't worry. I observed all good practice in hygiene when I prepared our dinner.”

Dr Chilton smiles, briefly, and picks up his own knife and fork. He cuts into his beautifully-prepared slice of meat, in a rich ruby-red sauce, and raises a morsel to his lips. "The virus certainly hasn't impaired your cooking skills," he says, taking another bite. "This is delicious."

“I thought you'd like it. I prepared it especially for you.”

Hannibal cuts into the meat on his own plate and takes a bite of Abel Gideon's lying tongue.

And as he eats, Hannibal can only think about how much better this meal would taste if he were sharing it with Will.

***

It takes Will longer than expected to plan; long enough that his mind and body both become restless for his design to come to life. One week has passed since Will made his decision.

His heart aches more every day, and desperation claws at him to make it end.

Somewhere out there, the Ripper is waiting for his beloved to write his poem, to declare his love and accept the gifts left for him.

And Will...

Swallowing heavily, his mind split between guilt and anger, Will stands. The official FBI files have been neatly placed on the shelves, along with his reports. The papers and documents left behind on his desk are the only evidence of his design and poem.

Slowly, he gathers them. He doesn't need them; they exist in his mind. Every word, every detail, every measurement and calculation. Making sure that the dogs are far away, Will carries the bundle to the fireplace.

The flames, bright and vibrant, swallow the words, slowly eating them away as the sheets of paper curl and crumble into ashes. With each lost section of his design, Will's poem slowly starts coming to life. His pain, burning like the flames in front of his eyes, is momentarily soothed as he steels himself, regaining his focus.

As the last sheet burns away, he stands, turning away from the flames. His eyes rake over his
almost unrecognizable home. Papers aren't strewn across the floor, newspaper articles and photos don't cover every surface. All the items have been neatly placed where they belong. The countless books he owns are carefully arranged in his bookshelves. His notes have been placed with the other folders.

Satisfied, Will picks up his bag. He fills up Leon's and Luna's bowls, and without another glance, walks out.

***

When Will comes back home nearly nine hours later, the sun is rising. Vibrant orange spills across the sky, soft rays of light gently caressing the melting snow. Ice on the sidewalk crunches under his stumbling steps.

With a trembling hand, Will unlocks the door. He limps inside, one hand clutching his bleeding side. Leon jumps on him, his excited barks filling the silence of their home. His lips curving into a barely noticeable smile, Will bends down to fluff his ears, only to wince and straighten.

When he speaks, his voice is hoarse. “Just a few more minutes. I'll take you two outside.”

As quickly as he can, Will throws his clothes in the washing machine and rushes to the shower. His wounds sting as warm water trickles past the cuts. The pain is sharp and piercing, a stark contrast to the dull ache he has become used to. The smallest of movements causes ripples of pain to travel through his body, extending deep below the surface of his skin. The bottom of the tub is soon painted red, the color strong and striking against the white. As Will steps out of the shower, he takes a deep, shuddering breath.

He cleans his wounds, places bandages on his bleeding cuts, and dresses in fresh clothes. His hands haven't stopped trembling. Hastily, he transfers his clothes from the washer to the dryer, thoroughly examining them for red stains.

The walk with his dogs is short, but it calms him. His hands don't shake as much as he unlocks the door. Will doesn't, however, try to fully compose himself. He knows that his appearance and shaken demeanor will be of use to him for the next few hours. Slowly, he walks to his desk, taking out the files for two of the Ripper's most recent tableaux. His grip on the documents is gentle, his eyes lovingly glancing over the words he has memorized by heart. Carefully, he places the files on his desk.

And then, without warning, Will harshly shoves them off, watching as they fall on the floor. He sits down on the chair, thinking of being on the other end of the Chesapeake Ripper's rage, hatred, disgust.

After today, this will most likely be the case.

It works like a charm.

Within minutes, Will is breathing harshly, his heart pounding in his chest. He swallows, closing his eyes and allowing the feeling to settle in his mind.

When he opens his eyes, his movements are wild as he grabs his phone, quickly dialing Agent Crawford's number.

Crawford answers after two rings.
"Graham?"

Will's voice is barely coherent. He gasps. “Agen—Agent Crawford. Agen—Mar—”

Jack's voice is louder, sharper. "Will? What's wrong?"

It's almost too easy. Will is breathing heavily now, knocking his chair back with a loud and heavy thump as he stands. The noise is audible on the other end of the line.

“The place where the Ripper created his last two designs—The marsh is named after Dr Andrew Gifford. The place... Its—called Andrew Marsh.”

Will's voice is suddenly louder, urgent and panicked. “The last tableau was about the first murder —Andrew was going to be the first murder of this cycle, but the Ripper spared him. He'll—He'll be finishing his work. Andrew is in danger. Andrew—”

A pained gasp escapes him as he trips over the fallen chair, breaking it and opening the wounds on his side. Blood seeps through his light blue shirt.

“He's in danger. You need to help him. He's in—He's in danger.”

"Will? Will—I'm sending someone over to him right now. You need to take deep breaths. He'll be safe. You mu—"

A broken sob. “No, no—He's in—He's in danger. Agen—”

Will's breath hitches as he struggles to breathe, the phone falling from his grasp. On the other end, Agent Crawford's voice is urgent. "Will? Wi—I need a team right now. Send an agent to Graham's house. Call Andrew Marsh, and send a team to his house. I want him under full security. Do you un—"

Will knocks over one of his vases, the sound deafening in his empty study.

"Will? You are having a panic attack. I'm sen—"

And with that, Will hangs up the phone, his movements calm once again. Hastily, he lifts up his shirt, ripping off the bandages and leaving them on the floor. Blood gushes out from his wound. A few feet away from the bloody bandages, Will knocks down his first-aid kit.

He leans against his desk, taking a moment to examine the room. A broken chair, broken vase, a small pool of blood on the floor. Used bandages, first-aid kit. A poor, shaky attempt at fixing himself up after a panic attack.

With a small, satisfied smile, Will sits down on the floor, resting his back against one of the legs of his desk. He doesn't have to wait long.

Within 20 minutes, he can hear tires screeching outside his house as a car pulls into his-driveway. A few seconds later, someone is ringing the bell, the sound becoming increasingly urgent as he takes his time to limp to the front.

Will sees the agent's eyes widen as he takes in his appearance. Bloodstained shirt, hunched posture, tired eyes. Will opens the door wider, stumbling slightly. The agent automatically reaches for him, righting him and helping him to the chair in his living room. He winces, clutching his side.

As soon as Will is sitting, the agent whips out his badge. “Agent Dario Castello, MD. I have been
Will's trembling voice is urgent. "Is Andrew Marsh safe?"

"Mr Graham, I'm going to have to ask you to take deep—"

"Is he safe?"

"Agent Crawford has sent out a team. He will be fine, Mr Graham." Agent Castello swiftly unzips his bag, pulling out a full medical kit with antiseptics and bandages. "I am a medical doctor. I'm going to have to ask you to unbutton and lift up your shirt so I can examine your cuts. May I ask how you got injured?"

Will's fingers fumble with his buttons, his hands trembling. He glances to his right. The door to his study is open. "I—I don't fully remember. I was panicking; I called Agent Crawford, and then all I remember is falling over the chair. I was bleeding. I tried to stop it, but..” He takes a deep breath, wincing as he pries his blood-soaked shirt from his skin.

Agent Castello's eyes rake over the study. The papers on the floor, the blood, bandages, chair. With a short nod, he quickly begins cleaning Will's wounds, his touch clinical, but gentle. He asks Will the standard questions. Does his chest hurt? Is he having trouble breathing? Is he feeling light-headed? Will answers all the questions, his voice quiet. Just as Will expected, the agent buys his story, sympathy building up in his eyes.

And just as he expected, ninety minutes after he called Crawford and seventy minutes after Agent Castello's arrival, another car pulls up outside his house.

Agent Castello tenses as the already open door is pushed further open, relaxing only once he turns to see Crawford. Jack's posture is rigid, his jaw tight. And yet, when he opens his mouth to speak, his voice is controlled. Almost gentle.

"Are you all right, Will?"

"Is Andrew Marsh all right?"

Crawford doesn't speak, his face carefully blank, concealing his stress and anger. Ignoring Will's question, Jack turns to Agent Castello.

"How is his condition?"

"I've taken care of his wounds. He is mentally shaken, recovering from a panic attack. He is, however, fully functioning."

Will's voice is louder, more urgent. "Is Andrew Marsh safe?"

Once again, Crawford doesn't answer. Will repeats the question once more, clenching his fists, a bead of sweat rolling down his neck.

There is a long pause. Will's eyes widen, his chest tightening. His hands are suddenly clammy, his breath hitching.

“He's—He's dead.” Will slumps against the chair, hunching over as he runs a hand through this hair, pulling harshly. “It's my fault. I should've—if I had figured this out earlier—”

Crawford's voice is sharp. "We don't know if he's dead. His body hasn't been found."
When Will raises his head, his tired eyes are red, his skin pale and clammy. “We need to—”

But he's interrupted as a phone rings, the ringtone harsh and familiar. Crawford swiftly picks up his phone, his features tensing further as he listens to the urgent voice on the other end. His jaw tightens, a vein visible on his right temple.

His voice is surprisingly steady. "I want you there. Now. Before the local police can touch the scene. Send me the details and the address. I'm leaving right now." Quickly, he hangs up, turning to Will and Agent Castello. "There's another crime scene."

There is a small beat of silence. Will slowly stands, his fists clenched and face pale. “Is it...?"

"We don't know. The body still needs to be examined. My agents will be there soon."

Will's voice is firm. “I need to be there.”

Jack's voice is impatient, "You are in no condition to be at the crime scene, Graham. You were barely coherent on the phone."

Harshly, Will says:”If it's Andrew Marsh's body that has been found, you need me there.”

"You're not well. You could contaminate the scene."

“Well or not, my insight won't be as valuable if the scene isn't fresh when I see it.” Will knows Crawford can't argue against that. Not when they are running out of time, not when they must leave for the crime scene as soon as possible.

Crawford grinds out, "Fine. You're coming with me. But not without a psychiatrist."

And with that, Crawford walks out, gesturing to Will to follow.

The satisfaction lasts for barely a few seconds. As they step inside the car, Crawford pulls out his phone again. "I'll be calling Dr Lecter."

For the first time in the past few hours, Will's reaction is genuine. His eyes widen. “There is no need for a psychiatrist. Agent Castello is a medical doctor, and Dr Lecter is very busy this wee—”

"I don't care. You are coming to the crime scene with a psychiatrist, or you're not coming.” Crawford puts in the address in the GPS as another agent starts the car. "I'm afraid you don't have a choice."

And with that, Agent Crawford calls Dr Lecter.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: This is Will's Design
If it's Thursday, 2 pm, it must be Franklyn Froideveaux.

Hannibal's patient is buoyant, bouncing on his feet as he enters Dr Lecter's office and sits with a satisfied grunt in his usual chair.

"You seem very cheerful, Franklyn."

Hannibal Lecter is far from cheerful, himself. In fact with every day that passes, he is more and more discomfited. He is more and more inclined to doubt himself, and the wisdom of his decision to break off his relationship with Will.

Yesterday evening, after his dinner guest went home, he finished off a bottle of Château d'Yquem and found himself drawing Will's face. Not even very well.

Somehow he has become a lovesick, heartsick idiot, and if something doesn't happen soon, he will—

"I've found a friend," says Franklyn. "We met at the opera. I'd expected to see you there, Doctor?"

"I have not been in the mood for opera, of late." He calms himself, aware that his words sound peevish. "Tell me about your friend, Franklyn." He resists asking if this friend resembles Michael Jackson.

Franklyn's broad, bearded face is wreathed in smiles. "He loves music, and he's very cultured, and he's very handsome—not that the way he looks matters, of course, I'm not attracted to him, but it's nice that if you're going to look at someone often, over dinner or the opera or the theatre, or even in their music shop, it's good to have someone aesthetically pleasing. I mean that's not why I chose you, either, Doctor, I've hardly noticed that you're—"

Hannibal could break his neck in less than two seconds. He could stab him in the eye with this pencil in less than three.

His hands curl, ever so slightly, around the arms of his chair and he opens his mouth to say something, possibly about how attractive Franklyn Froideveaux would look cut into steaks and cooked rare, with sauce poivrade, when his phone rings in his pocket.

Franklyn instantly looks affronted. "Dr Lecter, I'm surprised that you, of all people, would allow a therapy session to be interrup—"

Hannibal snatches the phone from his pocket, aware, if Franklyn is not, that this call has just saved his patient's life. The screen reads not "Will Graham", but "Jack Crawford."

"I'm very sorry, Franklyn, but I have to take this." He rises and turns his back on his patient. If Crawford is calling with the news of the murder that Hannibal hopes for, he is not entirely certain he will be able to keep the joy he feels off his face.

"Agent Crawford, hello."
"Dr Lecter. There is an emergency. I need Graham to look at a crime scene, but at the moment, I am unsure of his mental stability. We are not sure who the victim is, but judging by a recent disappearance, it could be a Ripper case. I need a psychiatrist. Are you available?" It isn't a question.

Happiness, entire and transcendent, floods Hannibal's body. Andrew Marsh is dead. Will has killed him: a gift for the Ripper, in return for all the gifts that the Ripper has given to him.

Hannibal draws in a breath of completion, and feels, for the first time since childhood, the wonder of love fully and knowingly reciprocated. And yet, he pauses.

"Will asked for me?"

Jack Crawford's voice is impatient, irritated. "He claims he doesn't need the presence of a psychiatrist. I disagree."

Hannibal blinks. So Will is still hurt and angry. And he has not yet worked out that Hannibal and the Ripper are one and the same. He had rather hoped...but no, this way is better. This way, Hannibal can reveal himself to Will. See the emotion and revelation in his eyes, firsthand.

"I see. Of course, I will be there. Please tell me the location."

"My agent will message you the address. I'll see you there, Dr Lecter."

Hannibal disconnects the phone and turns to his patient. "I apologise, Franklyn. I have to cut our session short."

Franklyn's eyes are wide. "Agent? You said Agent Crawford? Is this like secret agents, or...the FBI?"

"I can't discuss that, I'm afraid. Shall I reschedule you for an extra hour next Thursday?" Next Thursday, Hannibal will be too happy, too "loved up", to use Franklyn's expression, to mind being bored by Franklyn's neuroses for two hours.

He hurries Franklyn out of his office, and when he has gone, Hannibal himself hurries to his car, and drives to the address that has been sent to him, every fibre of his being humming with anticipation. Hannibal's Bentley pulls up in front of the woods just as Will and Agent Crawford are getting out of the car.

The road ends at the edge of the woods. A heavily used trail travels through the forest, marked by a small sign containing information about the species diversity and local vegetation.

Will swallows as another car pulls up behind Crawford's. He knows, without looking, that it is Hannibal's. For a few seconds, he doesn't move as Crawford turns and walks up to the car to greet him. He hears the car door opening and closing, unprepared to hear Hannibal's voice, unprepared to see him.

Will doesn't turn around when Hannibal arrives, but even so, Hannibal has to remind himself not to stare, not to feast his eyes noticeably at the sight of even the back of his head. "Agent Crawford. What would you like me to do?"

"Dr Lecter. Good afternoon." Crawford's eyes fall on Will, whose gaze is fixed on the trail sign. "I need you to ensure that he doesn't have another panic attack."

He lowers his voice. "When did he have the first one?"
“This morning. He was analyzing the Ripper's last tableau, and managed to connect the dots to reveal the message. The location of the last two tableaux has been a marsh named after Dr Andrew Gifford. Andrew Marsh. It wasn't a far stretch to deduce that Mr Marsh is in danger, if we take into account the latest murders. Will managed to call and inform me, but he was almost incoherent, unable to breathe. Regardless, he was right. Andrew Marsh has disappeared.”

Hannibal has to swallow down an exclamation of joy.

“He will be feeling anxiety and guilt because he failed to make the connection in time,” he says. “I'll speak with him.”

Hannibal walks past Crawford, up to Will, and glances into his face. Will is drawn, pale, an almost feverish look in his eyes. He is altogether beautiful. Hannibal speaks gently. “Will. It's good to see you.”

Hannibal's voice, his eyes, his scent. It hits him harder than expected.

Will planned for many situations and contingencies—today. He didn't plan for this. He couldn't. Not when he was focused completely on his design, unable to afford his pain becoming a hurdle for him.

“Dr Lecter. I apologize that you had to be called here today. I don't need a psychiatrist.”

Quietly, Hannibal says, “But you may need a friend.”

Before he can respond, Crawford's voice cuts through their conversation. "All right, gentlemen. We need to move."

Will is glad. For once, he had nothing to say.

With another glance at Hannibal, he follows Crawford through the trail. The snow here has already melted, leaving the ground damp and the trees wet. The woods are quiet, almost serene. As they walk, the trail becomes narrower, the trees become taller and broader. It takes a few minutes before the trail disappears completely, leading them to a different opening.

It's small, and they have to climb through it to reach the field. The pungent smell of decay reaches them almost as soon as they've climbed into the clearing. Will covers his nose with one hand, resisting the urge to cough.

A few feet ahead of them, Crawford curses as he sees the body, "That's not Andrew Marsh."

One of Crawford's agents—Brian Zeller, Will recalls—walks up to them. "It's a Viper crime scene."

Will takes a few steps closer to the body, one hand still covering his nose and mouth. The victim is male, roughly thirty years old. There is a deep cut, running from his chest to his abdomen. His upper body is covered in his own dried blood.

As Will examines the body, he can hear Zeller talking to Crawford. "Just like the previous victims, this one was poisoned. The body is a few days old. As usual, the heart was ripped out from the victim's chest. But—"

Price cuts in, "But the interesting thing is that a heart was placed back inside the chest cavity. A fresh, slightly mutilated heart.”
There is a small moment of silence. Crawford turns to Price, "Slightly mutilated?"

"It seems as if someone cut a small piece out. It's in the shape of a bite mark, but I'm ninety-nine percent sure that the Viper didn't actually bite it."

There is a moment of silence before Will turns to Crawford. "The Viper didn't do this."

Crawford's eyes are fixed on one of the reports, "You can go home, Will. This isn't a Ripper crime scene."

“No. But you gave me a bundle of files to analyze, most of them belonging to the Viper. I can help. I couldn't help Andrew, but…” Will clears his throat, gesturing toward the body. “This isn't the Viper's work.”

Agent Crawford closes the file with a sharp snap, his eyes sharpening and posture straightening. "What makes you say that?"

“The incision is nowhere as confident or neat as usual. One of the ribs is protruding out; a mistake that we've never seen the Viper make. The heart was ripped out, but a fresher one was placed back inside, indicating that either the initial one was preserved, or that the second one belongs to someone else.” A deep, shuddering breath.

“This... This is the work of a copycat. A devotee. One can argue that the first part of the tableau was to establish contact, while the second one was a... gift. The copycat is reaching out to the Viper, in a display of…” Will glances at the body, troubled.

Crawford's eyes narrow, "Attraction?"

“Affection.”

Price's voice cuts through the silence, "You're implying that he has a fan?"

Will nods. “A fan. Perhaps more.”

**

Hannibal is watching all of this with feigned detached interest. Inside, he is sifting facts, intentions, emotions. At this moment, he couldn't care less about the Viper or any fans he may have. It may have been a diverting puzzle at one time, but now, when Hannibal had been hoping for so much more, it is an irrelevance.

An irritation.

And yet...why would Will be so upset, or at the least pretend to be so upset, if the Viper had nothing to do with his own emotions and actions? Why would Hannibal have needed to be called here, at all?

He turns to Will. “You also expected to find Andrew Marsh's body here. Is there any connection, beyond your expectations?”

There is a flash of something in Will's eyes. It doesn't last long enough for Hannibal to see what it is. Will's head snaps to the left, his eyes fixed on the small opening they came from; the end of the trail.

A man bursts into the clearing, clutching a phone, his shoulders heaving as he gasps. Will
recognizes him as the agent who was driving the car. He comes to a stop in front of Agent Crawford, breathing heavily, his face red with exertion.

"The body—Andrew Marsh's body has been found. I got the call minutes ago. I tried contacting you, but there was no connection. The local police are keeping the scene fresh for us. They've locked off the area. The body is set up on the same marsh as the previous Ripper scenes."

The words have barely left the man's mouth when Jack Crawford is turning to the team, quickly laying out the plan.

"Price, Katz, Johnson, Campbell—I want you to stay here and examine the Copycat's crime. Zeller, Castello, Graham, and Dr Lecter—I would like you to come with me."

Ah. This is better. Clearly this Viper crime scene was a coincidence, a distraction. Hannibal walks with the others back to where the cars are parked, trying to catch a surreptitious glance at Will's face, and promising himself that once all of this is settled, he will make some time to track down the Viper and his fan, and make them into hors d'oeuvres.

**

Despite his control, Will feels his heart skip a beat. As he walks alongside Agent Crawford, his breath hitches in his throat, his chest tightening. Very soon, they will all see. His design will fall into place.

Crawford immediately turns to him, his voice forceful, but concerned, "Graham. Will you be able to see the crime scene?"

"Yes. I—I have to. I need to."

Agent Crawford gazes at him for a few moments, taking in his tired eyes, his tense body. When he speaks, his voice leaves no room for arguments. "You'll be going in Dr Lecter's car."

"I am absolutely fi—"

"I don't care. You are an advisory profiler. You have not gone through any training, and that makes your well-being my responsibility. Dr Lecter, if you don't mind?" Agent Crawford glances at Hannibal.

"Of course not. I agree. Will's safety must be a primary concern."

Jack nods at Will. No more words are spoken as he briskly walks to Hannibal's car, gently closing the door behind him as he slides into the passenger seat. He swiftly puts on his seatbelt, barely reacting as the belt brushes against the injury on his side.

Hannibal starts the car. "You have been hurt, Will."

"I lost my balance this morning."

"As part of your panic attack?"

"Yes."

He signals, and pulls out to follow Jack's car. "You are not a good liar, Will. Not to me."

Will doesn't answer, his eyes fixed on the scenery passing by.
“You’ve known about Andrew Marsh for two weeks. Even though you have feelings about him that you may well conceal from the FBI, you have no reason to panic about him now. The panic attack is a convenient fiction, as is the timing of your realisation.” Hannibal glances at Will: he has not slept in days, nor shaved, nor combed his hair. He has not been eating properly. He makes Hannibal’s heart ache. “What did you do to Andrew Marsh, Will?”

Once again, Will doesn’t answer. He closes his eyes, leaning back against the car seat. He wishes Hannibal would stop talking, he wishes he would stop reminding Will that he is currently the only individual in the world to truly know him. And perhaps the only one who ever will.

No. He can’t think about this. Not now.

Not now that his design is about to fall into place. He can’t allow his pain to hinder him. He can’t have second thoughts.

Will’s eyes are closed. He looks as if he is in pain. Hannibal cannot resist speaking the truth. “I miss you, Will. I miss you much more than I thought possible.”

Will’s heart sinks, his eyes shooting open. If he was masking his pain before, he isn’t now. “Don’t say that. You can’t say that.”

“It is the truth.” More quietly: “But it is unfair of me to say it. I am sorry. I had hoped...I had hoped, more than anything, that we could continue to be happy.”

Will closes his eyes again. He says nothing, knowing that Hannibal will catch the implications behind anything that comes from his mouth. He says nothing, because he knows he can’t change his decision, even if he does want to.

It’s too late. His plans have been set into motion.

And as he feels the car coming to a stop, Will knows that there is no turning back.

**

*What has he done? How has he done it? This poem to the Ripper that Will has written?*

Hannibal wants to hear Will describe it, explain his emotions and his actions, almost as much as he wants to see the outcome. But he’s silent, and Hannibal knows why.

Will has chosen the Ripper over him. As Hannibal has forced him to.

He parks the car behind Crawford’s, and waits for Will to get out. He does not intend to let Will out of his sight.

Will opens his eyes, blinking against the light. Slowly, he unfastens his seatbelt, his hand lightly gripping the door handle. For a small moment, he turns to Hannibal, meeting his eyes for the first time in weeks.

“I’m sorry.”

And then he steps out of the car, following Agent Crawford to the crime scene.

The marsh is, as expected, wet and slippery. His feet retrace the steps he took just a few hours ago. A few steps in front of him, Jack Crawford curses as he sees the body. Will allows himself a small wave of satisfaction before he pulls out his glasses, swiftly slipping them on. A policeman holds up
the barrier tape for them as they step closer to the crime scene and the body.

There is a long moment where no one speaks, the silence almost eerie.

The scene is, by no means, terrifying. Andrew Marsh looks calm, peaceful, beautiful. As if he is merely sleeping.

He has been placed on the damp earth. His skin is almost glistening under the sun as the mist condenses into dewdrops on his body. The sun shines down on him, making him appear almost ethereal. Even in death, Andrew Marsh is beautiful. There is not a single bruise on his body, not a single drop of blood on his skin.

The way he has been changed looks natural. As if he was meant to be this way.

As if there is nothing abnormal about the perfectly circular, cylindrical hole in the middle of his chest.

It seems almost as if someone ran a metal cylinder through him, cutting out a perfect circle, leaving his chest hollow. The hole has been filled up with damp soil. It is the same soil that fills the entire marsh. The only difference is that the soil in his chest is not of the same color. The outer layer of the circle, closest to his body, is red. The very center of the circle retains the natural brown color. It is a progression, from carmine to brown.

And at the origin of the circle, buried in the soil, is a single red rose.

Hannibal stops in his tracks. This gift, this poem, this fledgeling act of love.

It is one of the most beautiful things he has ever seen.

Oh Will, he thinks, and his hand involuntarily reaches for his beloved's, before he remembers himself. Instead, he glances at Will, hungry to see the emotion on his face, beneath the careful guard.

Surprisingly, Will's face is blank, emotionless.

The silence that fell upon them is broken by Zeller as he crouches next to the body, examining the hollow cavity.

"There's nothing in here. A small part of the lungs near the edge of the circle. The rest of the lungs were cut away. Like most of his chest, his heart is also missing." Zeller glances up at Jack, his voice low. "Could it..."

But he doesn't finish his sentence, the implication already dawning upon everyone else.

"I want a DNA analysis. Now." Jack's voice, loud and clear, cuts through the daze. Even Castello, his dark eyes unwaveringly fixed on the body, slowly blinks.

"Zeller, take the sample from the body. And call Price to take a sample from the heart left inside the Copycat's victim. The timing overlaps too much for this to be a coinci—"

“It isn't.” Will's voice is quiet, and yet, the grim tone commands attention. Crawford turns to look at him, his gaze heavy. “It's the same killer.”

"You're saying that the Viper's fan also admires the Ripper? Enough to kill his target for him?"

Will's gaze is fixed on the body, his eyes alert. “No. The Viper's fan is spiting the Chesapeake
Ripper.”

Sharply, Jack says, "How so?"

“In his previous tableaux, the Ripper established his superiority. He claimed that he is above the rest of the world. Better. Our Copycat, who is an admirer of the Viper, disagrees. This is a gift for the Viper, and a display of scorn for the Ripper. The Chesapeake Ripper declared to the world that Andrew Marsh is his. The Copycat is taking that away from him, in the most humiliating and offensive way possible. He took Andrew Marsh's heart, and placed it in a recreation of the Viper's design.”

A deep, shuddering breath. When Will speaks again, his voice is softer. “He's taking someone who belongs to the Ripper, and... placing him in a design that belongs to a different killer. In the Ripper's eyes, it will be like taking a piece of the Primavera and placing it on something akin to street graffiti. It's the... ultimate insult.”

He drags his eyes away from the body, gazing at Jack Crawford. “You will never catch the Copycat. The Ripper won't take this insult lightly. You should... expect another body soon.”

And with that, Will turns his attention back to the tableau, his own words echoing in his mind.

*If he can't have the Ripper's affection, he will have his wrath.*

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Truth
“Andrew Marsh's killer is committing suicide.” Hannibal's voice is steady. “Suicide by taunting a killer.”

Jack Crawford swears. "I don't give a fuck about these psycho bastards. As far as I'm concerned, they can kill each other until they're all gone. But this..." His voice breaks. "This was a fine young man. As far as we know, an innocent young man. Caught up in the games of not one, not even three, but four killers. Matthew Brown, the Ripper, the Viper, and...whoever this man is who killed him in the end." He gazes at the body. "What on earth did he do wrong?"

“Perhaps he did no wrong at all,” says Hannibal. “Perhaps he was merely at the wrong crossroads.”

Perhaps he was merely imperfect, and ready to be transformed into art, elevated into a gift. Or perhaps Andrew Marsh's destiny was to be manipulated into a deliberate provocation.

Will clenches his fists, turning his head away. “I... This wouldn't have happened if I had been quicker.”

Quietly, but loudly enough for the others to hear, Hannibal says, “You could not have prevented Andrew Marsh's death, Will.”

“I could have, if I worked harder.”

“This murder is not your fault.”

Hannibal steps closer to Marsh's body. Will has prepared him with such care, attention and love. Marsh's face is serene, as if he has died knowing that he is a tender, moving tribute to some great emotion. The centre of him has been removed neatly, with precision and skill, like an apple being cored. And Marsh was the apple in Hannibal and Will's Garden of Eden. He was the knowledge that Hannibal offered, and Will took.

Hannibal gazes at this corpse, this tribute, sees the beauty of the red rose at its heart, breathes the scent of fresh blood, snapped bones, cold flesh; earth, plants, fecundity and growth and decay.

He wonders how Will felt, with his busy hands and his subtle, violent mind. Did he feel close to the Ripper—the closest he has ever been? Did he smile as he worked; did he dip his head and let the tip of his tongue touch Marsh's blood, just to taste it?

Hannibal wants to know how this beautiful murder, this first taking of a human life, has affected Will. How it has changed him. Has he shoved the knowledge back into some hidden chamber of his brain, in order to deal with everyday life? Or has it coloured every corner of his mind and being, like wine mixed into water?

He looks across the corpse, at Will again. His face is impassive, despite his having expressed guilt. To the agents around them, it will appear as if Will is shutting down his emotions in order not to have another panic attack. But Hannibal knows that Will's mental state is far more precarious than the agents could know.
Will Graham has transformed. And Will Graham believes he is alone. Without Hannibal, without the Ripper, he will have no one to help guide him in this new way of life. And without guidance, he is in terrible danger.

Hannibal turns to Jack. “Agent Crawford, you asked me here to ensure that Will was safe. I think he and I need to talk.”

Will’s heart skips a beat. He doesn’t want to talk to Hannibal. He can’t.

Hannibal knows him better than anyone else in this world. Will doesn’t want to confront him, doesn’t want to face him. Talking will accomplish nothing. It will only hurt them both more.

Instead of choosing to live for Hannibal, Will has chosen to die for the Chesapeake Ripper. And even if he wished to change his mind, the time to do so has passed.

“It’s too late.” Will also turns to Jack. “Whether or not I wish to speak to a psychiatrist is my own decision. Right now, I feel unwell. I would like to go home.”

“I will take you.”

“That’s very kind of you, Dr Lecter, but it’s all right. I would prefer to be by myself right now.” Will glances at Jack. “I’ll call myself a taxi.”

Hannibal bites back a protest. He bows his head, instead, in acquiescence. “As you wish. Perhaps I can remain to help you, Agent Crawford.”

Agent Crawford, despite his watchful eye, is more preoccupied with the crime scene. Andrew Marsh’s death has added more fuel to his already burning fire. He nods, his mind prioritizing the file in front of him rather than their conversation. It certainly helps that Will chose the right time to leave.

"All right. I'll see you in a few days, Will."

Without another glance at the crime scene, Will turns around, his feet familiar enough with his surroundings that he barely has to think about where he is going.

Behind him, the voices slowly fade away. Will doesn’t, however, immediately call a cab as he said he would. Instead, his feet carry him to the other side of the marsh, to the very spot where the Ripper had set up his second tableau. And there he stands, thinking about what he has done, and what is to come.

***

It is cold. Over the past two days, since Andrew Marsh’s body was discovered, the temperature has plummeted. The streets of Baltimore are slick with ice, and the citizens walk bundled in thick clothing, features obscured by hats and scarves and gloves, their breath forming thick plumes in the freezing air.

It is cold, and Hannibal Lecter is wasting his time.

He has spent much of the last two days within sight of Will Graham’s house. In the street, his face hidden by scarf and hat; in a rented car, drinking coffee from a flask; in the café on the corner which affords a view of Will’s building, pretending to be absorbed in a book or working on his laptop.
Will has not appeared. He has neither gone in or out; the house is dark at night; there is no sign of
the dogs. But Hannibal doesn't know where else to look for him. He has been watching the
university too, but he thinks that if Will is avoiding him, he is less likely to go there than home.

Hannibal has realised that he does not know where else to look for Will. He doesn't know his
favourite places: park, café, restaurant, shops. He doesn't know if Will calls anyone else a friend.
They have met largely on Hannibal's own terms, Hannibal's own ground, and he is beginning to
understand that although he knows Will's true heart better than anyone, perhaps better than Will
himself, he knows very little about Will's actual life.

He tries the bar where they met. He tries the bar where Will met Matthew. He tries everywhere he
can think of, feeling increasingly like a lovesick fool, like a faint shadow of the practiced predator
that he is.

Will Graham wants to be found by the Chesapeake Ripper. But the Chesapeake Ripper cannot find
him.

***

Three days have passed since Will's design was displayed to the world. Three days since he left his
crime scene, since he stood at the very place the Chesapeake Ripper set up his second tableau.
Three days since the reality of the situation registered in his mind.

Will knows that the Ripper knows him. His wallet, which rests in his pocket, is proof.

The turn of events, however, has changed things. He killed the Ripper's beloved, displayed him in a
calculated design intended to disrespect and humiliate. He publicly declared the Chesapeake
Ripper to be an inferior killer. He manipulated the interpretation of his own design, letting them
believe that his heart beats for the Viper

He will die.

And yet, Will doesn't regret his actions.

His only regret is not catching the Ripper's attention before Andrew Marsh did.

Will doesn't know how long he has to live. Perhaps a few days. A few weeks, at most.

He spends the three days attempting to put his life in order. When he comes back home from the
marsh, the first thing he does is enlist his neighbor as the temporary emergency caregiver for his
dogs. He tells her it's a precautionary measure. He has already arranged for his belongings to be
sold upon his death, all the money going to an ethical dog shelter.

As soon as he makes arrangements for his dogs, Will heads to the university. He spends two days
in the library, working to finish his thesis. When he finally does finish it, he fills out the relevant
submission forms, and sends his thesis to be printed and bound, picking the fastest binding service.
Five hours. It's expensive, but money doesn't stand a chance against time.

Time, for Will, is priceless.

In the five hours he has to wait, Will doesn't submit his thesis. He can't. Not without Hannibal's
signature on the forms. He could, technically, make the electronic submission. However, it
wouldn't be valid if he hasn't given in the final submission form yet. Knowing that Hannibal won't
be at the university on a Saturday, Will plans to drop off all the items at Hannibal's office—the
forms, one copy of his bound thesis, and a flashdrive with the electronic copy.

With four hours left before he gets the bound thesis, Will spends his time running one last errand. And a few hours later, he walks back to Baron's Bookbinding, shivering in the cold weather despite his thick jacket and hat.

***

Hannibal checks his watch. It's getting dark and the weather is getting even colder. He's been sitting in his rented car for two hours, with no trace of Will.

He sighs, starting up the car and rubbing his gloved hands together. If he doesn't get back to his everyday life soon it could cause suspicion. He has patients, students, social engagements, obligations. He has neglected it all, trying to find Will.

He has a Baltimore City Orchestra fundraising social tonight. He agreed to go months ago. Glancing at the fading light in the sky, Hannibal decides to drop by the university to pick up some paperwork, and then to go home and get dressed to go out. Unless, of course, Will is at the university. He could check while he's there.

Hannibal is so consumed with thinking about Will that when he actually sees him, at first he doesn't realise it. But within a fraction of a second he has recognised Will's form, his gait, even the pattern of his breath as it bursts in clouds from his lips. He seems to be in a hurry.

Hannibal parks his car and gets out, walking rapidly behind Will but at a sufficient distance so as not to be perceived. He cannot help but take in the details of this man he has missed: his shoulders, tapered waist, the curls that escape underneath his hat, the way his feet hit the pavement. He follows Will, his heart pounding, breathing deep of the air behind him, trying to catch his scent.

***

The man at the counter smiles at him warmly, handing him a cloth bag with three bound copies of his thesis. "Good luck with your thesis defense."

Will allows his lips to curve into a small, sad smile. "Thank you."

And he walks out of the store, the smile slowly fading away as he heads to the Burke Psychology Building, where Hannibal's office is. Like many times before, he gazes at the campus: the buildings that have seen and heard so many things, standing strong as history was made within their walls. This time, he pays attention, memorizing and storing the details in his mind.

It's... strange how many new things he sees, things he had never considered important before. As cold as the temperature is, Will admires that too.

The frigid, biting wind. The snowflakes that fall upon him, melting as they touch his body. The feeling of numbness in his fingers and toes.

He is lost in the world around him, fully aware that he will soon be lost to the world. Fearless anticipation as to what is going to happen to him, coupled with the desire to have just a little bit more time.

As he approaches the building, the woman in front of him holds the door for him. Will smiles at her, thanking her. She smiles back, her lips curving beautifully, her eyes warm.

He realizes, at that moment, the feeling of invincibility he had been living with. All his life, his
meetings and interactions with people had ended with the confidence and promise that he will see them again one day. Or that even if he doesn't, they will exist somewhere in this world. Just as he will.

He will never see this woman again. Just as he'll never see Hannibal, or Jack Crawford, or Beverly Katz, Zeller, Price.

These thoughts continue to circle his mind even as he unlocks the door to Hannibal's office. He smoothly takes off his jacket, scarf, and hat, placing them with his gloves on one of the tables in the common area. Grabbing the flash drive, forms, and a bound copy of his thesis, he unlocks Hannibal's private office, walking inside to place them on his desk.

Hannibal has followed, silently, behind. He stands in his office door, now, watching Will put his work on his desk.

“You have finished.”

The unexpected voice takes Will by surprise and he turns around with a sharp intake of breath.

The first thing Hannibal notices is that Will looks different. His hair looks different. It's been recently cut and styled, curling on his forehead. He's wearing a fitted blue shirt and black trousers. His beard is gone, leaving his face with nothing but light stubble. The color of his shirt matches his eyes.

As Hannibal observes this, Will is frozen, his heart pounding in his chest, all color leaving his face.

Hannibal’s voice is gentle. Tender. Filled with compassion and love. “You are finishing everything you have started. You believe you have little time left. Yet Will...don't you want to savour the changes that the Ripper has wrought in you?”

A few seconds pass without a single word. Will doesn't move. His face changes slightly, betraying his anger. But he doesn't say anything. Not yet.

He places the last form on Hannibal's desk and pushes past him to walk out the door, his pace becoming faster as he picks up his jacket and briskly walks down the hallway.

Hannibal follows. “You expect me to sign off on your thesis just like that? Without discussion?”

Will doesn't answer, his pace increasing once more. He turns right into one of the hallways, the sounds of his steps fading away. When Hannibal reaches the turn, Will is nowhere to be seen.

The hallway is empty. Hannibal stops. An empty corridor; a row of doors. Slowly, deeply, he inhales. He has been as close to Will Graham as one human being can be to another. He knows the scent of Will as well as the scent of his own skin.

He pauses in front of a closed door. The sign on it says DR FREDERICK CHILTON. Without hesitation, he opens it and steps inside, closing and locking it behind him. A few seconds pass.

Suddenly, a small lamp is switched on, leaving the office dimly lit. Will's voice is low, frustrated.

“Why can't you leave me alone, Doctor?”

“Because I can't allow you to throw your life away without at least talking to you about it.”

“I'm not throwing my life away. And if I am, that's my decision to make.”
“If you've made your decision, if it is irrevocable, then why avoid talking with me about it? Are you afraid I will change your mind?”

“I have nothing to say to you. And no, Dr Lecter. I don't expect you to sign off on my thesis, just like that. It might be a better idea to read it first.”

“Does your thesis include an account of how and why you killed Andrew Marsh?”

“Of course not. My thesis isn't fictitious.”

“I have given you reason to avoid me. I'll admit that; and I regret it, bitterly. I have missed you, Will. A great deal. But I have given you no reason to lie to me.”

“You can't have it both ways. You can't push me away and then demand to know about my life and my thoughts.”

Will struggles to control his breathing. Why is Hannibal making it so hard for him? It was easier, when he didn't think he would see Hannibal again. When he didn't have to look into his eyes, knowing that this might be the last time.

It was easier to accept that both Hannibal and the Ripper want nothing to do with him. But Hannibal is here, telling Will that he misses him, after Will has made his decision and set his plans into motion.

And at this moment, he hates Hannibal as much as he loves him. He hates him for giving Will hope, crushing it, and daring to make him hope again. He hates him for not recognizing that the poem Will wrote was not just for the Ripper, but also for him.

But most of all, he hates him for making Will regret his decision. For making it so hard to say goodbye. For making him fall in love, taking it all away, and having the audacity to say he regrets it when they both know Will doesn't have time.

“Please leave.”

“No. I will not leave. Will, you killed Andrew Marsh, believing that the Ripper loves him. By doing that, you've made yourself a target for the Ripper. That, I can accept; it's what you've wanted all along. But by toying with the Viper, you've made yourself a target for that killer, as well. You are throwing away your life.”

Despite his best efforts, his voice is not as steady as he hoped. “I have nothing to live for. Not anymore. And I don't intend to be killed by the Viper. He won't kill his admirer, Dr Lecter.”

“You aren't his admirer.”

“Are you certain?” His lips twitch. “Regardless, the Viper only knows what the tableau showed him.”

“And from what you created, the Ripper cannot know that you love him.” Hannibal steps closer to Will. “You've changed yourself. You've allowed yourself to feel what the Ripper feels. To take a life: to experience the power and exhilaration and control of transforming another person to suit your design. You've become…”

Hannibal’s voice falters.

“You've become the very person whom the Ripper could see as an equal. Whom the Ripper
could...could love. And in the act of becoming that person, you've chosen to let him hate you instead. Or, to let someone else kill you, and to waste everything you have become and everything you could be."

Hannibal's heart is pounding; the pain and loneliness he has felt for the past days have eaten away at him, weakening his resolve, his resistance, his faith in his own judgement. If he hadn't sent Will away, would Will have let him help kill Andrew Marsh? Could they have shared that beautiful transformation together? Would they already have seen each other, known each other, for who and what they both truly are?

“Perhaps you've interpreted the Ripper's designs wrongly,” Hannibal says. “Perhaps he doesn't love Marsh. Perhaps he never did. Perhaps he loves you.”

Sharply, Will says, “The Viper will not kill me. I know he won't think of it, and if he does, I will kill him first.”

When Will speaks again, there is a slight tremble in his voice. “If he... If he did love me, then it's too late. Even if he did not love Andrew Marsh, he will know that that's what I believed. He will think of me as the person who wished to take his love—his happiness—away from him. I... would rather face his knife than his disappointment.”

“You want to take my happiness from me.”

“I—I want to take your happiness away from you?”

“Your tableau was tantamount to suicide. You are inviting the Ripper to kill you. You are tempting the Viper to kill you.” Hannibal’s voice has sunk low, barely carrying across Chilton's office. “I don't want you dead, Will. I want you living.”

Hannibal takes a deep breath. “I love you.”

The three words crush Will’s heart further, sending another sharp pang of pain. His voice is tight, strained. “Don't.”

Hannibal steps closer. He is breathing quickly, now. “Don't say that? Or don't love you?”

Will takes a step back, his voice low. “The words you said to me had consequences. Words can be taken back, but actions can't. Your regret doesn't change what I have already done. Now, you are just cruelly taking away the reasons for my actions.”

Will’s voice is soft. “You are a selfish man. You gave me your love. Then you ripped it away. And when I had finally started to make peace with my decisions, you came back to tell me they're wrong, simply because you are taking your words back. You can't be with me as long as I love him. And you know I will never stop loving him, just as I'll never stop loving you.”

A long, shuddering breath. “I can't have him,” says Will, “and I can't have you. And yet, you don't want me to have the peace of death. You want me gone where my love for him can't hurt you, but you can't stand the thought of me dying. And so, you are manipulating me by using your own love for me, and by attempting to make me believe that the Ripper could love me. You are saying that my actions will hurt you, but you want me to suffer for the rest of my life. Alive, but alone. And that is why you can't just take your words back. Words have weight, and they have consequences. Saying that you regret your words doesn't change the actions they triggered. Your regret is doing nothing more than making me feel hatred I don't want to feel. It's doing nothing but ripping apart my heart. Again.”
Will's eyes betray his anger, his pain. His voice is low, almost monotone. As if speaking any louder and allowing his tone to be his outlet will break his control. “I believe I asked you to leave.”

“No. I won't leave you to die. Not until you answer my questions.”

Hannibal is far from his usual controlled, masterful self. His cheeks are flushed, his body tense, his eyes blazing with a light that could be fury or passion. His voice is strained with emotion.

“If I had not asked you to leave,” he says. “If I had stayed with you, held you, loved you. As you wanted, and I…” He swallows. “And I wanted, too. If we were together… And if I had shown you and described for you how much I felt for you, without reservation. How very much I love you, even though I thought it was not possible for me to love. If I had done all of that, would you still have killed Andrew Marsh?”

Hannibal holds his breath. He waits to hear whether he has made the right decision, or a terrible mistake.

Will's fingers dig into his palm, his hands clenched so tightly that they are shaking.

“I had wanted to kill him the very first time I heard of him. I wanted to hold his fresh heart in my hand and sink my fingers into the flesh. Feel his warm blood pouring down my arms. Nothing you said would have changed that. I would have killed him. I would have killed him, despite my guilt at taking away the Ripper's love from him.”

Will’s voice is no longer calm, his eyes are no longer dry. “I fell in love with you, but that never changed how I feel for him. Please leave.”

Hannibal whispers, “How did you feel when you killed him? Was it despair? Power? Or did you feel love?”

“Please leave.”

“I need to know.”

“Why?”

Hannibal’s voice is ragged. “I need to know whether I poisoned that first act of violence for you. Whether it was torment, or whether you felt, truly, any of the exhilaration which you so dearly deserved.”

Will takes a deep breath, closing his eyes when his voice breaks. “I felt love when I killed him for the Ripper. And for you. I felt pain that he will never know I did it because I love him. I felt alone because I had to do it without you. It was... bittersweet. It wasn't how I imagined doing it. I didn't think I would be alone.”

And that is odd, isn't it? Because just a few months ago, Will was prepared to live his whole life alone.

Hannibal wants to go to Will. Cross the room, take Will into his arms, hold him tight and hard and close. Whisper the truth, beg forgiveness, gain absolution: feel Will's lips on his skin, his heart beating under his hand.

He cannot.

He has made a mistake, hurt Will too much, forced him to commit this act that they should have
done together—in love—apart.

He stays where he is, and says in a trembling voice: “You should not have done it alone. The Ripper should have been with you. I should have been with you. We should have acted with one heart, together.”

Hannibal is on the verge of a great confession, a momentous speaking aloud.

“I have not told you all of the truth,” he says.

“The truth doesn't matter anymore. I can't change what I've done, and you can't change what you've said.”

“No. But we can change the meaning of what we have done, and what we have said.”

Softly, Will asks, “Does it change how much you've hurt me?”

Hannibal flinches. He feels every last bit of the pain he has inflicted, in Will's voice, his eyes, even the scent of his skin. The loneliness he has forced upon this lonely man. This lonely man, whom he loves.

He could have confessed weeks ago, when he truly began to feel for Will. He could have confessed on the very night that they met, when Will confessed his own, unreciprocated love for the Chesapeake Ripper.

He could have chosen truth over deceit, free will over coercion, love over manipulation.

He did not.

And now...it's too late.

He bows his head. “No. Nothing can change how much I have hurt you, Will. I am so, very, sorry.”

Will's eyes are sad and tired as he gazes at Hannibal. His body is still tense, as if he is physically unable to relax. He doesn't want this to be the last conversation they have. He doesn't want this to be last thing he says to Hannibal. But lying would be an insult to both Hannibal and himself.

Will speaks the truth. “I will love you till my very last breath. But I can't deny that you have hurt me.”

“And the truth...” Hannibal says. “It will hurt you more. It will only reveal how far I have gone to force you to do my will.”

He takes a deep breath. “I'm sorry, Will. This is not what I dreamed for us. I hope that one day, you can forgive me. Love isn't coercive. Love is giving: as you have given yourself to the Ripper in your mind. Thank you, for everything you have given to me.”

He looks at Will, long and sadly.

“And goodbye.”

He hardly knows what he is doing as he turns and walks to the door.

And as Hannibal opens the door, Will's eyes close.

Despite everything, he can't watch him leaving. He doesn't trust himself to not stop him.
Next chapter: An Act of Love

We are nearly caught up with our Twitter role play here in this fic! We'll try to update on Friday as usual, but if we haven't had time to play, we may not be able to until later. Thanks for being understanding, and thank you SO MUCH for following!
Waiting

Hannibal walks out of Chilton's office, and he keeps on walking. Out of the building, across campus, onto the street, not pausing to button his coat against the icy wind, not acknowledging the students and colleagues he passes, not stopping when he reaches his car, but keeping on walking, with no aim other than movement.

His legs carry him away from the university, through neighbourhoods, past houses and shops and parks, but his mind is still. It dwells only in the room in his memory palace that he has furnished for Will Graham.

The room in his mind is impregnated with the scent of Will's skin, his hair. There is a ship in a bottle; a table made of mosaic like the shimmering scales of a fish. Upon it, a curl of dark hair sits in a mother-of-pearl dish; a crystal decanter filled with the golden single-malt that Will was drinking on the night they met. A marble Dog of Alcibiades and beside it, two terriers, one sculpted in moonstone and the other in topaz.

On the walls are the paintings that the Ripper recreated for his love: Cranach's Adam and Eve from the Uffizi, and Ricci's Cain and Abel.

As he walks, Hannibal adds another picture, a drawing in his own style: Andrew Marsh, lying beautiful and dead, a circle cut from his chest, a rose blooming in the centre where his heart should be.

He walks further, and the room is full of roses: dark red, their petals the fine texture of Will’s skin, their scent the rich perfume of his blood.

The room is not yet complete. He places a looking-glass on the mosaic table, framed in silver filigree, fine as fishing line, threaded with pearls like drops of water. It reflects the sadness he has seen in Will Graham's blue eyes. Sadness which Hannibal Lecter has caused and created.

He thought that he did not mind causing pain, when necessary. He thought that this pain would drive Will to completion, to becoming his true self, to an ending where they would both find happiness the likes of which neither of them has never known.

But this pain was not necessary. It was merely cruel. It hurt Hannibal, as well. And now Will doesn't want Hannibal.

Even if Hannibal told him the truth, that he is the Ripper, he wouldn't accept it. He wouldn't believe that Hannibal could truly love him. All Will Graham wants now, is to die.

It has started to snow. Hannibal doesn't notice. He passes a bench and without seeing it, sits down.

"Love is giving," he has said to Will. He thinks of how Will has given him his trust. Has given him honesty, frankness, has opened up his most secret heart to Hannibal.

And in return Hannibal has given back to Will, yes; but he has given cryptically, cleverly, constructing murder puzzles for Will to solve, tests of his loyalty and intelligence. He has only given what he has wanted to give, no more. And that is not, truly, love.

Love is giving what is difficult. Love is sacrificing one's own selfish desires. Love means giving one's beloved what they truly want, no matter the cost.
Will Graham, Hannibal's beloved, wants to die.

Will wants to die at the hands of the man he loves: the Chesapeake Ripper.

Hannibal, on the bench, bows his head. Snow falls on his shoulders and on his neck. Behind his closed eyelids he sees himself in the memory palace room he has furnished for Will. He is holding a silver platter. Steam wreathes from it; there is a delicious savoury smell. In the very centre of the silver platter, surrounded by roses, is a human heart. Stuffed with wild mushrooms; braised in its own blood and fine red wine.

Hannibal raises his head. He knows what he must do.

And painful as it will be, as excruciating and heartbreaking and final, there will be some pleasure in it, won't there?

Yes.

To see and be seen. To rip Will's precious flesh and know that he is giving his beloved the greatest gift of all. There will be pleasure as well as pain. It will be, above all, an act of love.

Hannibal stands. His hands automatically brush the snow off him, though he doesn't feel the cold.

“Dr Lecter?”

A man has paused in front of him and stares at him. Hannibal forces himself back to the present, and sees that it is Franklyn. He’s wrapped up in a woolly scarf and hat, and holds a large package under one arm, from which emanates the distinctive scent of a ripe Fourme d’Ambert.

“This isn’t your part of town,” says Franklyn. “Are you visiting the cheese shop?”

Hannibal glances around quickly. He is in a small park, six or seven miles from his house.

“No. Not today.”

“I just live round the corner,” says Franklyn. “Would you care to come in for a warm drink and to sample my latest find?”

“No. No, thank you, Franklyn. I should get home. I have a lot to do, and I am very…hungry.”

And with a nod to his patient, Hannibal strides off down the snowy street, his mind already on the preparations that he must make for his next meeting with Will Graham.

***

In a way, waiting to die is more painful than dying itself.

Every experience could be the last one before the inevitable journey begins. Every conversation, every emotion. He should be enjoying every second he has to experience this world. And he tries.

He spends most of his time outside, wanting to lose himself in his surroundings. On the first day, he realizes that he is unfamiliar with the names of many of the flowers he sees. He doesn't even know how they smell, or which time of the year they grow in.

There are... so things about this world he doesn't know. He wish he did.

With the curiosity of a child, Will is drawn towards the things he finds interesting. He allows his
fingertips to feel the texture of everything from rose petals to concrete. He explores his neighborhood, and visits the local shops he had never even thought of entering.

Will allows himself to experience the world in a way he wouldn't have if he hadn't realized how much he had been taking for granted. There are so many things he wanted to learn, and so many things he wanted to do. In his obsession and love for the Ripper, Will had forgotten his aspirations outside of this narrow field of vision. Simpler things—like learning how to cook something new, or reading a book of his interest—had become irrelevant.

Now that he has willingly given his life away to the Ripper, they are relevant. He thought he had time, and now he doesn't.

He chose the Ripper over the world.

The most terrible thing is that he would do it again and again.

The thoughts of what he would be willing to do for the Ripper send shivers down his spine. They exhilarate him, as much as they hurt him.

Will chuckles, his voice rough and the echo of his laugh humorless. What else is there left to do? He has done everything for a man he has never met, and nothing for himself.

And finally, after years, Will is trying to do something for himself. Exploring parts of himself he had neglected and forgotten. The parts he had lost when the Ripper helped him find himself.

He reads books that had once sparked his interest, drives to places he had always wanted to see. He even goes fishing, losing himself in memories he usually keeps locked in the darkest corners of his mind. Forgotten, untouched walls that are gathering dust and nearly crumbling.

_His father's gentle voice and barely-there smiles. Long drives in the backseat of an old car, leather seats that nearly burned with how hot they were after hours under the sun. Open windows, and the cool wind tangling his dark hair. His father's voice, when he chose to speak. His own voice, filling the silence, laced with the Southern drawl he tried so hard to get rid of. His feet in the cool water, loose jeans rolled up to his knees._

_The taste of warm waffles and maple syrup from some small breakfast place or the other. A warm chuckle at his grimace as he tried the coffee he insisted he would like._

"Don't like the coffee, Will? Maybe some orange juice instead?"

"... Sir? Do you not like the coffee? Would you like some milk or sugar?"

And Will looks to his right, away from the empty chair he had been blankly staring at. His voice is hoarse.

“Orange juice, please.”

His eyes return to the empty chair.

_"You'll get used to the taste. Or, like me, you'll learn to ignore how fu—awful it is." _

The waitress's eyes twinkle as she places the glass next to his plate. "Don't like the taste of coffee?"

He chuckles. “Most days, I drink too much. My mind is usually too busy to properly taste it. Not today.”
Will takes a sip of the juice. He can't bear it.

“The bill, please.”

"But you haven't—"

“I know.”

And as he walks out, the empty chair is imprinted in his mind. It follows him, even as he drives back home. Even as he goes out to buy his groceries, even as he cooks and sits down to eat. Even as he lies in his bed, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

It strikes him, at that moment, that he is eating and sleeping. Involving himself in activities that have nothing to do—with the Chesapeake Ripper, or even Jack Crawford's cases.

He is fixing his life, just as he is about to die.

But he is alone.

And this, Will realizes, is why waiting to die is more painful than dying itself. Because even when he strolls through the park, enjoying the nature around him as he always has, the lack of warmth in his hand is a constant reminder.

It would be less painful if loneliness was all he knew. If he hadn't gotten used to the sounds of someone's steadily-beating heart, an arm draped over his back.

The silence is so loud that he can't sleep. His room is quiet, and dark. So quiet that the sound of his phone vibrating is a relief.

Will doesn't immediately pick up his phone to check the notification. He doesn't want to. He hasn't interacted with anyone since…

He shuts down that line of thought, forcing it away before the familiar ache settles in his chest again. It has been two weeks since he interacted with... with any of his acquaintances.

It's easier this way. Any day could be his last, and it's easier for everyone if he just keeps his distance. They will know something is wrong the very moment they see him. Will is hardly a sociable man, but these days, it's harder to pretend. Especially when his mind can't decide if he's living in the past or the present; especially if the smallest details from the present are opening wounds that stopped bleeding years ago.

The longer he lives, the harder it becomes to go through the hours.

Will had prepared himself to die, and with each passing day, his mind is less prepared. There are moments where he wishes he had more time to live, and moments where he wants it all to end as soon as it possibly can.

Will hadn't expected the Ripper to wait this long. The day he left his message, he didn't imagine he would have even a week to live. Yet, seventeen days have passed without as much as a reaction.

The Ripper is many things, but he isn't predictable unless he wants to be. For all Will knows, months could pass before his death.

It would be a cruel punishment. Months of fear, months of guilt at breaking his beloved's heart, months of crippling loneliness and hatred, months of missing the feeling of warmth by his side,
months of—of waiting, and unknowingly finding reasons to live again, and—allowing himself to feel hope, and not being prepared to feel the Ripper's cold eyes and colder blade, and—

His hands are shaking.

He needs to stop thinking, he needs his mind to stop, needs to return back to stability and calm, and—

Will picks up his phone.

The screen glows in the dark, the email notification at the very top. His trembling hand makes it hard to read, and he takes a few seconds to decipher the words. When he finally does, the words don't make sense. He reads them again, but they don't change.

[Gmail
Dr. Wendy Gold
Urgent: Rescheduled Thesis Defense.]

He submitted his thesis two weeks ago. The committee probably hasn't even read it yet, let alone his supervisor. How have they even scheduled—or/rescheduled/—the date?

Before he can stop himself, his thumb is swiping through the screen and inputting the password.

Will ignores the small voice in his head that reminds him that this wasn't part of the plan; he had been prepared to be dead before he could defend his thesis. It will be harder now, if he knows the date.

Already, he wants to live long enough to see his years of work being analyzed and appreciated; wants the Ripper to know about it, to know how much time and effort Will spent on trying to understand him.

This is not a good idea.

He opens the email.

Dear Mr. Graham,

Your thesis defense had initially been scheduled for early April, which is the typical time-frame for all Masters students. Unfortunately, your supervisor has informed us that he will be away for the International Neuroscience Conference during that time. Two other members of your defense committee will be going on sabbatical, starting two weeks from now.

Unfortunately, that leaves us with two options for your thesis defense. I can arrange a time for next Thursday, the 12th, or we can arrange a date at the beginning of next semester. It seems that you have fulfilled all your course and degree requirements, which means that your defense is all that is left. While the second option will give you more time to prepare, it will also delay when you start your PhD program. The decision is entirely up to you. I have already booked time for the 12th. Please do let me know if the date is agreeable. If not, we will arrange another date at the beginning of next semester.

I hope you are well.

Best wishes,
This is not a coincidence.

Despite the warning signs in his mind, Will feels hope building up in his chest. Hope that perhaps he will see the conclusion of his years of work. That it all won't be for nothing.

Hope is dangerous.

And it won't leave him.

A broken, strangled noise escapes him. His grip on the phone loosens. With a sharp crack, the room is filled with silence again.

***

Hannibal isn't sure why he is waiting.

At times, even when an action is inevitable, delay can sharpen the appetite and enhance the pleasure of the result. But in this case, deferring action gives him no pleasure. It is necessary to kill Will Graham—he will love and honour Will Graham as he murders and eats him—but he does not delight in the thought of it.

For the present, Hannibal delights in nothing.

Food and drink have lost their flavour. Colour has leached out of the world. Music sounds out of tune; the people he encounters seem to be empty shells of human beings. At times Hannibal feels like an empty shell.

When he first resolved to grant Will's wish to be killed by the Chesapeake Ripper, Hannibal had imagined he would act quickly and decisively. He would wait for an opportunity, yes; but no longer.

But Hannibal has not even looked for an opportunity. He has not watched Will or followed him or tried to engineer a situation where Will would be alone.

Instead he has done nothing. Nothing at all, even though he knows that his inaction is deliberately drawing out the torture for both of them.

Tonight, he is sleepless again. He sits in his study, an untouched glass of cognac at his elbow, and stares at a journal he is unable to read. He is far away from this room, walking pointlessly through his memory palace.

A small sound makes him look up sharply.

In the leather armchair across from his desk sits a young girl. A child.

She is blonde and her eyes are the same shade as Hannibal's. Her face is heart-shaped, with high cheekbones. She was not there a moment ago, and the doors to the house are all locked, but Hannibal regards her without surprise.

When she speaks, she has a childish lisp, but her words are the words of an adult.

"Everyone you love dies," she says. "And your love dies with them. Is this why you delay killing Will Graham?"
Hannibal's voice is hoarse. “My love does not die.”

"But I did," says the girl. "And eating me didn't bring me back."

“It means you are always with me. As he will be.”

The little girl swings her legs in the chair. She twists the bangle on her wrist. Her lips purse and Hannibal remembers those lips on his cheek, he remembers her laughter in the garden, so very long ago.

"Is it any consolation?" she asks.

“No. But it is necessary. It is what he wants.”

"I didn’t want to die.”

“No. I did not want you to.”

"Do you love him as much as you loved me?"

“Yes.”

Hannibal’s voice cracks. The little girl regards him sadly.

“Then we will both be with you,” she says.

Hannibal bows his head in assent. When he looks up again, she is gone.

Hannibal’s phone buzzes. He reaches for it, relieved at the distraction, but he can’t read the email at first because his eyes are blurred with tears. He wipes them away impatiently and reads the message from Dr Gold about Will’s thesis defence. It’s been rescheduled for Thursday. So soon.

It seems Hannibal will see Will yet one more time before the last.

***

Hannibal dresses with care for his penultimate meeting with Will Graham. Dark brown three-piece suit with a subtle check. Burnt orange shirt and a silk tie in the same shade, in a lozenge pattern. A slate-blue pocket silk. Brown shoes with a high polish, his gold wristwatch with the brown leather strap.

He regards himself in his mirror. The waistband of his tailored trousers is loose. His jacket hangs subtly wrong. He has lost weight, since food lost its flavour. The hollows under his cheekbones are more prominent and his eyes look slightly hooded.

He is not certain he’d want to run into himself in a dark alley.

Experimentally, he messes his hair up, the way Will did the first time they met. It fails to make him look any better, and only brings up a sharp pain of regret and longing.

Hannibal combs his hair carefully back instead, and leaves the house.

It’s with a mixture of anticipation and despair that he looks forward to seeing Will again, this last time as academic supervisor and student. This last time, ostensibly, as friends. He wonders if Will will notice the changes in him. He wonders if there will be any changes in Will.
And with the thought, Hannibal’s emotions turn to pure longing. He has to pause on the steps to the psychology building to compose himself, so that his academic colleagues will not see his feelings so naked on his face.

When he enters the room and shakes hands with Dr Gold, he is almost entirely composed. But he knows that if there is anything to see, Will Graham will see it.

***

On the day of his defense, Will feels nothing.

The week passed by very slowly. He doesn't quite recall what he did. The days have blurred in his mind, each vague memory reflecting the tone of his thoughts. The need to know more about this world still remains. He still wants to see and experience more before he has to leave, but ever since the email, he hasn't enjoyed any of his attempts at doing so.

He hasn't been able to focus on anything but his defense. Now that he has the Chesapeake Ripper to concentrate his thoughts on, the rest of the world seems dull. Again.

The fact that the Ripper holds such a large place in his mind and heart fills Will with both anger and familiar adoration. The latter brings more anger.

It's the same old story. He loves a man who doesn't reciprocate his love. However, the difference between the past and present is his anger.

Now, he wishes the intensity of how he feels didn't leave him so blind to the world. He wishes the Ripper could see the mistake he made by loving Andrew Marsh.

Will wishes he didn't have to die alone.

And lastly, he wishes he didn't feel hope.

The defense has given him a last chance to express himself. It just so happens that this chance may slip away from his fingers at any given moment. He could die before he can say anything.

Over the last week, he very deliberately forced himself to not look forward to this day, fearing the worst. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't entirely help himself from feeling hope.

And even now, as he walks to the designated room, he can't help himself from turning his head at every sound. The tension doesn't entirely leave his body until he walks inside the room, knowing that he won't be alone.

Of course, his body tenses again as soon as he notices the people seated inside.

His thesis defense committee consists of five people. The chair of the department, Dr Gold. Two internal examiners, Dr Frederick Chilton—his previous supervisor—and Dr Alana Bloom. An external examiner, Agent Jack Crawford. And his supervisor.

Hannibal.

If Will said that he hadn't been thinking about Hannibal, he would be lying to himself. However, every moment he thought of Hannibal, he thought of his lover. He thought of his warmth, his eyes, his voice. The late nights they spent together, and the late nights he spent by himself, wishing for... someone.
Wishing for him.

Will had forgotten that they were playing another role.

And thus, when he noticed the bags under Hannibal's eyes, the way his clothes hang loose on his body, the way his face is composed, but his eyes aren't—When he notices these things, he does so as a lover. Not as a student.

He loses composure. He forgets his role.

It's... difficult not to.

*I will love you till my very last breath.*

Will wasn't lying. And seeing how haggard Hannibal looks, tired and unwell, something in his heart breaks again.

Will... knew this would happen. He knew that refusing to give up Hannibal would end with everyone being hurt. He did it anyway.

And now, he is as angry and hurt as he is in love. This wouldn't have happened if Hannibal hasn't asked him to leave. It would've been less painful if Hannibal hadn't taken his words back.

If Will hadn't been selfish enough to love Hannibal in the first place.

But it happened, and now they are here.

And they've both hurt each other beyond repair.
Wendigo

Chapter Summary

Dear readers: It's been two years today since we started this story, and now we're going to finish it.

Will Graham is giving his final thesis presentation about the Chesapeake Ripper to a group of academics, including his supervisor and former lover, the man who broke his heart, Dr Hannibal Lecter.

Chapter Notes

(Some vital reminder-information, for those who don't want to reread the 30 previous chapters: Will Graham is in love with both the Chesapeake Ripper and Hannibal Lecter, not knowing they're the same person. Hannibal, after murdering several people and displaying them in various biblically-themed ways to show Will his love, has broken up with Will, in order to goad him into killing someone. Will then committed murder in the style of another killer, The Viper, in order to goad the Ripper into noticing him and killing him. Hannibal is miserable. Will is miserable. Silly murder puppies.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Will can't stand seeing Hannibal like this. Can't stand living another day, just to be reminded of everything he did wrong. Seeing Hannibal's lack of composure—where even his carefully parted hair and blank face do nothing to hide how tired his eyes look—causes Will to falter.

Quickly, he averts his eyes. A quick glance around the room tells him that Dr Chilton and Agent Crawford still need to arrive. Slowly, he makes his way to the front of the room, placing his bag on the front desk and taking out his laptop to connect it to the projector.

For Hannibal, as soon as Will enters the room, no one else exists.

He has been so hungry for the sight of him. But seeing him isn't satisfying. Will looks healthy—he looks as if he has been taking care of himself better than he's used to. Ironically so, as he knows that Will expects to be killed at any moment. Hannibal would think, from how Will looks, that Will had changed his mind, that he has decided to live instead of die. Except for the sadness in Will's eyes.

Sadness that Hannibal knows he has put there himself.

He wants nothing more than to take Will in his arms and kiss the sadness away. But this is impossible. The only way he will be able to remove Will's sadness permanently will be in the moment when he kills him.

The prospect gives him little joy.
Hannibal tries to focus on appearing professional and detached. But he can't help but speak to Will, try to get him to look at him, more than with a cursory glance.

“How are you this morning, Will?”

Will merely glances at Hannibal before averting his eyes again, adjusting his glasses and fixing his eyes on his laptop. He answers honestly. “Tired. There were many preparations to be done.”

Sadly, knowing that Will will understand the double meaning in his words, Hannibal says, “It will all be over soon.”

A small, sad smile. Will doesn't mean to say anything, but he is speaking before he can stop himself. “Hopefully. But there is something about this journey, as hard as it has been. We all waited for our undergraduate years to end, but we missed them once they were gone. This is... similar. The feeling is bittersweet.”

Dr Bloom smiles. "You still have your PhD. You'll still be on this campus. The journey isn't quite over.”

Will doesn't know what to say. He merely nods.

Dr Gold claps her hands. “Well, aren’t we a serious lot this morning. Will, I understand you’re nervous, but you should be happy that you’ve completed your thesis ahead of schedule. And Dr Lecter, I hope you don’t mind my saying it, but you look like hell. I’m taking you out for lunch after this, whether you like it or not, and I’m going to make you eat every single thing on your plate. I know a place that does a great Reuben.”

“Thank you, Dr Gold. That’s very kind.”

At that moment, Dr Chilton and Jack Crawford arrive, both with almost-identical grumpy looks on their faces.

Dr Gold smiles. "Looks like the gang’s all here. Shall we get started, then? Will?”

Will swallows. “…A moment, please, if you don't mind?”

Hannibal has a difficult time not jumping from his chair and going to Will, to touch and soothe him. His hands tighten in his lap.

“Of course,” says Dr Gold, kindly.

“I have a finance meeting this morning,” says Dr Chilton, testily. “I couldn’t reschedule it with this being arranged at such short notice.”

“We’ll be finished in plenty of time,” says Dr Gold, kindly, while Hannibal restrains himself from standing and breaking Chilton’s neck.

“Thank you. It'll just take a moment.” Will grabs a water bottle from the table and leaves, gently closing the door behind him.

Hannibal can’t stand it. He gets up from his chair. “He is probably nervous. I’ll make sure he’s all right.”

He follows Will out of the room. Perhaps he can have one private word. A fleeting touch.

When Hannibal opens the door, Will is alone in the hallway. He is talking.
“—to leave. I can't do it with you here—Dr Lecter?”

“Will?”

“Did I take too long?” He starts walking to the door. “I apologize. I know we should've started a few minutes ago.”

He touches Will’s shoulder. “To whom were you talking?”

“No one.”

“To yourself, or to someone whom only you can see?”

He doesn't answer. “We should get started.”

“I know you feel you don’t owe me anything. And you don’t. But...I would very much like an answer. We haven't much time, and I would like to understand you.”

Shortly: “My father. Can we leave now?”

Hannibal remembers a long, lazy evening on Will's sofa, where they held each other and Will told him about his childhood. The remembered intimacy makes him ache.

He wants to explore Will’s vision, Will’s feelings. He wants to know why, so close to his own death, Will is communicating with his dead father: whether it is comfort, or torment.

But these conversations between them are at an end. He takes his hand from Will’s shoulder.

“Yes,” Hannibal says. “Let’s go back and finish this.”

Will gazes at Hannibal, taking in the dark circles under his eyes, the way his suit is slightly loose on him. He opens his mouth to say something, but changes his mind, closing his mouth again. He swallows, looking down at the floor. The moment passes.

Without another word, Will walks past him, holding the door open behind him as he enters the room. Hannibal follows him, inhaling his scent in his wake. He takes his seat again, barely noticing the keen glance that Jack Crawford shoots both of them.

"So, Will," says Dr Gold. "Go right ahead. We're all ready."

Will nods, placing the unopened water bottle back on the table. He clears his throat. “Thank you for your patience.”

He switches off the front lights, and then proceeds to switch on the projector. The screen glows in the dark, displaying the introductory slide. The picture is of one of his very first documented tableaux. It's gruesome. Will doesn't even flinch.

"An Analysis of the Chesapeake Ripper's Patterns: An Argument Against his Official Diagnosis and Proposed Motivation.

“The Chesapeake Ripper has always been diagnosed as a psychopath with limited emotional intelligence. Today, I will be providing evidence against this popular argument, as presented by Stone et al in their 2010 paper. As most of you have read, the paper primarily cites the FBI analyses of the victims' wounds, and uses the Ripper's clean, clinical approach to prove that he is undisturbed by the damage he causes."
“The Ripper has never made a mistake, and every incision and surgical technique has been perfect. Using a sample size of N=112, they had one control group with 'normal' psychiatric evaluations, and three other groups that belonged to different scales on the spectrum of 'psychopathy', displaying increasing interpersonal-affective traits.

“Each group was monitored for physical reactions while listening to audio tracks or watching videos to stimulate high-stress situations. They also performed a series of tasks with stress-related activities. Another study was performed with medical professionals on different scales of the spectrum, monitoring physical reactions while performing surgical tasks. Experience was controlled for; all professions had been practicing for the same amount of time. Both studies displayed a positive correlation between lack of physical stress reactions and severity of symptoms.

“They came to the conclusion that the Chesapeake Ripper's high degree of emotional detachment contributes to the lack of stress-induced mistakes.”

Will pauses. “They did not properly explain how they measured the qualitative traits of 'psychopathy'. They accounted for a limited number of symptoms. Their sample size was small, and their experiment was flawed. Lastly, they did not mention what each of the Ripper's tableaux represented, and barely grazed over what the Ripper was trying to communicate. Stone et al were trying to prove their experiment without having any physical information about the Chesapeake Ripper. As professionals in this field, we all know that symptomatology and etiology vary from patient to patient, and the breakdown of one patient's disorder does not apply to the other.”

He clicks to the next slide.

“Today, I will be using the Chesapeake Ripper's tableaux, their connections to art and history, his killing patterns, and my own experiment of varying manifestations of stress to prove that the Chesapeake Ripper cannot be diagnosed as a psychopath by the evidence provided by Stone et al.”

Will starts off by citing the earlier tableaux of the Chesapeake Ripper, and their references to highly expressive pieces of art and music. Slowly, with each tableau, he can paint a picture. A story.

He stops at the series of 2014 tableaux, and instead jumps to his experiment and the Ripper's highly controlled killing patterns. Just as he is finishing up his fourth section about the killing patterns, someone interrupts.

"Yes, yes, yes," says Chilton, glancing at his watch. "But in the interests of time, can we jump to the new stuff? The sexy stuff? The stuff you've been working with Dr Lecter and Agent Crawford on? What about the most recent killings and tableaux? Everything that's happened since you left my supervision? Have you made any progress on the Adam and Eve case, or Cain and Abel? Or don't you want to talk about the fact that this monster is still alive, and active and killing, and the FBI seems powerless to stop him?"

Jack Crawford growls and opens his mouth to speak, but Dr Gold intervenes. "It's not time for questions yet," she says. "And I'm sure Will was going to get to the most recent developments in his own time."

"Time," says Dr Chilton, "could be said to be exactly what we don't have, with a killer on the loose creating his own Garden of Eden, complete with snake."

There is a small pause before Will speaks. “Understanding the Ripper's past is essential for understanding his current motivations, Dr Chilton. His older tableaux are just as... sexy as you perceive the newer ones to be. The differences, however, are essential They make it very clear that
the Ripper's motivations have changed. The patterns are the same, but the colors are different. Are you able to spare ten more minutes of your time before I move on to this year's tableaux?"

Sexy. Hannibal, listening, closes his eyes for a moment, feeling all he has lost.

Chilton grimaces and rolls his eyes. "It's your show, Mr Graham. Proceed just as you like."

Will clears his throat, gaze falling on the projector again. "The Ripper's motivations can be traced back to his taste." The next slide is different. It isn't decorated with blood, but with paint.

The words slip effortlessly from his mouth, sweet lies that leave a bad taste. "From his previous tableaux, we know that the Ripper appreciates art. More importantly, he appreciates the complexities of emotions in art; rage, pain, amusement." And happiness and love. "It is interesting to note that to appreciate and replicate emotions, one must understand them. While 'psychopaths' can replicate emotional responses, what the Ripper has done this year is far more than just replicate.

"In the past, his work was almost mechanical in its execution; we couldn't tell what was highlighted. Was the murder about the victim or the arrangement? Was there a reason behind the arrangement? Were there any connections between the victim and the Ripper? We simply didn't know. What's different about the last three tableaux is that we know what's being displayed. Anger, amusement, pride, desire. He even went as far as taunting us. For the first time, the Ripper was communicating with us."

Will sounds exhilarated. He’s speaking faster now, his tone laced with a kind of passion that most in this room have not seen before.

"And when one communicates, especially after years of silent displays, it implies that there is motivation. As soon as something changes, the reasons are different. There was a train of thought that led to this moment, and this train of thought is what will lead us to him."

Will pauses, turning his body slightly to glance at the screen. "Adam and Eve, by Lucas Cranach the Elder. 1528."

He continues, his voice thoughtful. "The choice is very consistent with the Chesapeake Ripper's profile and his fondness for beauty and art. The fact that this is how he chooses to communicate and express his thoughts is... indicative of his taste. Perhaps he feels a connection to the painting—perhaps he has even visited the gallery to see the original. To be able to recreate it from memory implies practice and knowledge."

Will's eyes fall on Hannibal.

A shiver runs down his spine.

"The painting is currently in the—it's—"

—"Is there a place in this world that you like more than everywhere else?" Will had asked Hannibal, over the best sushi he'd ever tasted. "Somewhere you feel comfortable."

"There are many, according to mood and purpose," Hannibal had replied. "The Uffizi Gallery in Florence, although one could not live there. I find it both peaceful and stimulating."

"—it's in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy." Will clears his throat, pausing to sip some water. He feels nauseous. "It... stimulated the Ripper enough to inspire him to create a replica."
The next pause is longer as Will turns to change the slide again, showing a side-by-side comparison of the painting and the Ripper's tableau. He picks up copies of the crime scene photos, distributing them to the committee. His trembling hands are the only indication of his stress. When Will continues, his voice is steady and calm.

"The Ripper is implying that by biting into the forbidden fruit and embracing his violence and his desires, he—"

—"The world has been changed by human beings wanting impossible things. Desire is a stronger force than wind, or sand, or water. It is stronger than time. There was a reason that God planted forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Without it, humans would have remained animals. But with temptation and knowledge, humans embraced their whole potentiality. They became complete. I feel complete with you, Will."—

"—he embraced and reached his full potential," Will finishes.

A long breath. Has it always been so obvious? Has it really been in front of his face this whole time?

He continues. “Others who refuse to do the same are… animals, animals who are ignorant without the knowledge he acquired.”

Will does not yet feel the force of what he’s just understood.

It's as if the words coming out of his mouth were pre-recorded, playing seamlessly and unaffected by his jumbling thoughts. It's as if his entire perspective tilted to the side, leaving him to hold on to his meaningless words. His only anchor. Distantly, away from the numbness, he feels amusement.

What's a better way to improvise certain parts of his presentation than plagiarize the Ripper himself?

The rest of the presentation goes just as he had planned. Adam and Even, Cain and Abel. The forbidden fruit, the first murder. He doesn't get time to contemplate, to comprehend the upheaval of everything he had known and understood. He doesn't get time to feel, or to even think of anything beyond the identity he is now aware of. The truth that's been in his grasp the entire time, since that first evening in the bar. His birthday.

His concentration is focused entirely on his body. The pitch of his tone, the steadiness of his hands. The regulation of his breathing patterns, the movement of his legs as they carry him across the room.

And finally, his wildly beating heart as his eyes betray him.

As Dr Lecter's skin gradually darkens, black and leathery. As antlers protrude from his skull, growing bigger with every passing second. As his eyes become darker than the abyss.

As the Chesapeake Ripper looks into his eyes, and Will unflinchingly gazes back.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so very much for sticking with us. It's the continued comments and kudos on this fic, even during our hiatus, that made us determined to finish it. We love you!
Well Done

It is only a moment. A single one, where Will Graham talks about Cranach's Adam and Eve, and Hannibal sees him falter. Hardly at all. Will is nearly as good at masking himself as Hannibal is. If anyone else in the room notices it, they put it down to Will's nervousness at this presentation, upon which his entire degree hangs. But then Will glances at Hannibal, and Hannibal sees the knowledge there, entire, in Will's eyes.

Will knows. He sees.

At last.

In that moment, Hannibal feels more than he has felt for almost an entire lifetime. He is pinned in place by emotion, a helpless specimen on a dissecting table. He is not happy, he is not afraid. He is...everything. Open, exposed, a twisted mass of viscera, a raw beating heart.

If he felt less, he could leap up and confirm Will's belief. Slaughter this whole room of people, embrace Will over the corpses, his hands and mouth slippery with blood. If he felt still less, he could deny it. Pretend that none of it were true; keep his human veil intact.

But he feels too much; he feels it all. Pain, elation, despair, anger, loss, completion, love. In the moment when Will sees him, everything in him flies out to Will and offers itself, and Hannibal can only sit there, exactly as he is.

He is hardly aware as Will finishes his defense, as the others ask questions. The voices go on around him, and the shadows fill the room, of everything they have said and done and felt, all the shattered pieces coming together into the truth.

Will answers the last question, and the assembled experts applaud. Hannibal applauds too. He watches as Will turns to collect his papers and belongings.

Dr Gold turns to Hannibal. "You've done a fine job with that one, Dr Lecter. I wouldn't be surprised if for his PhD thesis, he solved the case."

"Neither would I." His voice is unsteady. He stands and goes to the front of the room, next to Will. In front of his colleagues, he holds out his hand for Will to shake. His true self is in his eyes for Will to see.

"Well done."

Will's gaze falls on the outstretched hand, observing from a distance as it enfolds his own. His mind, quiet and numb, falls into action as his thoughts come crashing down onto the forts of his memory palace. Rooms are destroyed and rebuilt, but the space they currently stand in remains untouched by the movement.

Well done.

Five years and endless hours of his work, the very reason of his life and his death, two words with the power to heal and destroy and take and give...

"Thank you." His mind is silent once more. "You gave me more of the Ripper's crimes to work with than I asked for. Not many supervisors to above and beyond to help their students."
“You are an inspirational student. Your passion for your subject—”

Dr Gold clears her throat. "Mr Graham, if you'll excuse us, your examiners would like to confer on what you've shown us today."

Hannibal does not move. His eyes still bore into Will's, his fingers still clasping Will's hand.

“I will see you soon? To discuss what you've learned?”

“I'll be waiting for your dissection.”

"Dr Lecter?" prompts Dr Gold. "Will?"

Hannibal lets go of Will's hand. He steps back to allow him to leave. He does not want this moment of perfect mutual knowledge to end. He is unsure, when they next meet, whether he will be kissing Will Graham, or killing him.

Or both.

“I’ll see you soon,” Hannibal says. A promise.

No sooner has Will left the room than Dr Chilton sidles up to Hannibal and speaks in a low tone. “My former student and you certainly seem to be sympatico, Dr Lecter. Is there, dare I say, a hint of an extracurricular relationship going on there?"

Hannibal gazes at the door through which Will has left. He does not know what Will feels or thinks. He does not know for how much longer Will is going to live. He speaks truthfully.

“He is my student. Though perhaps after today, he can learn no more from me.” He turns to the other examiners with a forced smile. “Is it time, now, for us to determine Will Graham's fate?”

It barely takes them half an hour to unanimously agree to pass Will's thesis, with distinction. Dr Chilton is the only one who tries to pick holes in Will's arguments, but he does so halfheartedly, for argument's own sake, rather than out of any real doubt that Will deserves his degree. Hannibal, chairing the discussion, offers few opinions. He hardly says anything at all. And once they're finished and getting ready to go, Alana Bloom puts her hand on Hannibal's shoulder.

“Hannibal,” she says, "don't take this the wrong way, but please go home and get some sleep. You look like you're coming down with something."

"No offense, Dr Lecter," says Jack Crawford, "but Dr Bloom is right. You look like shit warmed over, pardon my French."

Chilton represses a smile.

“Perhaps I am a bit under the weather. Thank you. Excuse me.”

But when he steps out of the room, he pauses, undecided. There's no sign of Will, although candidates often wait outside for unofficial word about how their defense has gone. What should he do now? Find Will? Or should he wait for Will to find him? And when they meet again...

Hannibal closes his eyes. In this moment, he cannot contemplate murdering Will, even if it is what Will wants him to do. Even if Hannibal's own life depends upon it. Will could have gone straight to the police, after all. He could be there now. Or he could be planning to contact Jack Crawford, whom Hannibal has just left.
And yet...that moment of perfect understanding. So infinitely precious and true. Will Graham is Hannibal's greatest danger, and greatest hope.

And so, he does nothing. He goes home. He needs to regroup, to think and to plan.

Perhaps, so does Will.

At home, he locks the doors behind him and goes straight to the keypad on his cellar door. He wants to ground himself, to see the instruments of his art, remind himself of who he truly is. When he meets Will again, he should be the Chesapeake Ripper. The mask should be gone; they should face each other as they are...for life or death, better or worse.

But as he is opening the cellar door, the front doorbell rings.

Will? Already? Hannibal turns immediately and hurries to answer the door, a hope and a dread rising within him.

But the man standing on his doorstep is not Will Graham.

“Agent Castello? What a surprise. What can I do for you?”

His first thought is that Will has informed the FBI. But if that were so, they would never send a lone agent to Hannibal's house. The house would be surrounded.

Has there been another murder? Has Will gone out and killed again, out of inspiration, or anger, or despair? Beauty flashes before Hannibal's eyes, and he has to work to keep his expression of mere cordiality on his face.

Agent Castello--Doctor Castello, he remembers, he treated Will's injuries after his supposed fall, which was an alibi for Will's murder of Andrew Marsh--smiles, and says "May I come in, Dr Lecter? I'd like to talk with you about Will Graham."


He is just closing the door behind Agent Castello, wondering if he has solved Andrew Marsh's murder, wondering if he will have to kill him, when Castello makes a sudden move and Hannibal feels a needle sliding into his neck. He grabs at Castello's arm but it’s too late. Hannibal collapses to the floor as everything goes black around him.

***

It was a perfect moment of irony—merely the coincidental placement of a few words and events—that brought out the truth seemingly from nowhere.

Or, perhaps Will should say, from everywhere. The truth was, in reality, simply plucked out in front of him, sitting in plain sight.

Was it willful ignorance on his end?

Or was he simply so blinded by his own insecurities and instability that he failed to recognize something that was practically gift-wrapped for him to see? Regardless, now he knows. And it's as if the plane he was standing on—the plane he built his foundations on—suddenly shifted, leaving him disoriented and unbalanced.

Will inhales sharply, walking wherever his feet take him.
Does it even matter where he goes anymore?

It feels as if his life has no direction anymore; as if he is left alone in an empty corridor with no doors. The pain feels like a sharp, twisting knife in his gut. Like it dug inside him and took something out, leaving a gaping hole and a broken teacup.

It feels like loss.

Loss is a strange thing. All one has is memories, and while these memories are attached to feelings, they are also detached from the conscious mind. In Will's case, the individual still lives. New memories can be written, and yet, this pain feels like loss.

The individual lives. Then whom is Will mourning for?

It doesn't matter.

Even if the present was gift-wrapped and in clear view of Will’s sight, the game went too far—Did it go too far? Can Will blame the Ripper for this when it is clearly his nature?—when Hannibal ignored his pain and continued to play.

Andrew Marsh was never the intended recipient of those gifts. Will was manipulated into thinking that he was. He was manipulated into killing him.

If this is what the Ripper wanted, he would have gladly given it to him. If he had asked. How is it that one can see their beloved’s pain every single day and still not do something to relieve it? Will would never—he wouldn't be able to bear it.

But Will is different, isn't he? He has a cruel condition. Empathy.

He spent five years proving that the Chesapeake Ripper is not a psychopath or a sadist. Proving that he is capable of understanding and expressing complex emotions.

Perhaps he was wrong.

He was using a language that Hannibal can't understand. And if wants to communicate his pain, he will have to cause pain.

When the clues and pieces flew into place, painting the truth as he sees it now, the picture remained whole for only a few moments of shock before disintegrating completely. Their disappearance left behind a strange kind of emptiness in Will’s chest. Those moments of emptiness were moments of inaction. Not because he was tied down by the magnitude of what he felt, but rather because he did not know what to do.

Now, that void is filled with anger.

Will is aware that apathy will hurt Hannibal more than his fury. Fury can only be felt when one cares enough to be taken apart in such a way. Apathy… will shake Hannibal to his very core, leaving him alone and empty, not dissimilar to how he made Will feel.

But that’s far from what Will wants right now.

He wants to see the Ripper on his knees, helpless and bleeding before him. He wants the weight of a knife in his hand as he plunges it deep into the Ripper’s heart. He wants to see Hannibal knocked down from the pedestal he stood on, stumbling onto the same ground as his lesser victims. Blood—warm, thick blood that’s black in the moonlight—pouring from his wounds, painting Will’s hands
as they wrap around Hannibal’s neck, squeezing and tightening as his breath hitches, as he chokes on his own blood, eyes wide open and staring—

A deep, wavering breath.

Noiselessly, he strides to his car, the door closing behind him just a little bit too hard. It’s dark outside, the full moon shining brightly in a sky without stars. The steering wheel is numbingly cold under his warm hands.

The car purrs to life and the night is suddenly different.

Rain pours down heavily, the thunder loud enough to drown out the sound of his father’s broken voice.

“I didn’t know how to tell you—”

“I trusted you and you lied to me for years.”

He pulls out of their driveway, his grip tightening on the steering wheel as the glass in front of him is dry once more, the sound of rain and thunder fading away.

Pressure begins to build up in his head, cheeks flushed and body so tense that he feels seconds away from snapping. Will feels every beat of his heart as it races in his chest, his anger and grief driving away any rational thoughts in his body. He almost feels disoriented, as if his body isn’t in his control anymore.

The short laugh that escapes him is almost hysterical. Can the Ripper blame Will for wanting his blood when he is merely following his instincts?

The car pulls into Hannibal’s driveway, and Will doesn’t even think twice about the traces he is leaving behind for the police to find. He merely gets out, breathing heavily, blinded by the haze that seems to be shutting down his thoughts.

It isn’t until he gets to the door that he stops, hand wrapping around the base of his knife.

The lights are off. The door is open.
When Hannibal wakes up, he's strapped to a table by his arms and legs. His jacket, waistcoat, shirt and tie have been removed, as have his trousers and socks, leaving him only in his underpants. It's a surgical table, and the restraints are padded and comfortable, though the light shining down on him is clinical, nearly bright enough to blind him. Beside him is an array of surgical instruments, impeccably clean, arranged with precise symmetry on a sterile cloth.

His surroundings are shadowed, compared to the blinding light shining down on him, but he can see vague forms: barrels, a wheelchair, hooks from the ceiling, as well as IV stands and cabinets of medical equipment. And, of course, the wine racks, the drying hams, the ropes of garlic, the damp hanging shapes of his cochlear garden. All the implements of cuisine and killing.

It's all entirely familiar.

Hannibal's head is pounding with the after-effects of whatever he was injected with, but he shows no pain at all as he raises his head and looks at Agent Castello. The FBI agent has put on a pair of latex gloves, a surgical hat and a plastic butcher's apron—it's not one of Hannibal's—and is standing by the side of the table, within reach of the surgical implements. He's holding a chest spreader, and watching Hannibal.

"Nice set-up you've got here," Castello comments.

"Thank you," says Hannibal, courteously, as if he weren't strapped semi-naked to his own operating table.

"You'd never suspect from upstairs," says Castello. "All the antiques and art. And then down here: chainsaws and meat hooks. And I had a look in your chest freezer. Not a pretty sight." He gestures at shadowy forms hanging from the basement ceiling. "How many of these hams and sausages were once people?

"All of them," replies Hannibal. "I like to be prepared for guests. And you, Agent Castello, are also a surprise. I'll admit that I never suspected that an FBI agent was the Viper."

Castello smirks. "Just two serial killers hanging out at murder scenes, eh?" His face suddenly soberes. "Or three."

As they talk, Hannibal is subtly testing the restraints on the table, more for form's sake than out of any actual hope. He fitted these himself, and has tested them many times on his victims. He also knows that this room is entirely soundproof, with only one exit. There is almost no hope of escape. His only chance lies in keeping the Viper talking. Using something he learns to manipulate him into making a mistake.

"You haven't killed me yet," he says conversationally. "I know you usually make two injections, one of a sedative and one of poison, leaving the characteristic 'snakebite' wound pattern on your victim's neck. But I assumed that the sedative was mostly for convenience's sake, so you could transport your victims fresh to wherever you planned to kill and mutilate them. This isn't true of me. You could kill me immediately, and you have all the tools you need right here. Why the wait?"

Castello's smile is wide and menacing. If Jack Crawford had ever seen that smile, Hannibal thinks, he would already have the Viper behind bars.
"You're the psychiatrist, Dr Lecter. Don't you already know?"

"The Viper doesn't torture," says Hannibal, stalling for time, thinking rapidly. Castello's remark about three killers is both suggestive and sinister, and Hannibal would like to lead him down the wrong path, if he can.

"Unlike the Ripper," says Castello.

Hannibal actually tsks. "I don't put my victims through any unnecessary physical pain," he corrects. "I'm much more interested in psychic pain. But you...you crave the moment where your victim is pliant and open under your hands. When you spread open their ribs and find their sacred, vital heart, and make it your own. I kill for art, and out of hunger and contempt. You, Agent Castello, kill out of love."

For a moment Castello's face is transformed: from mocking victor, to the expression of a man who, for the first time in his life, is understood.

Hannibal knows this expression. He has felt it on his own face...because of Will Graham.

Hannibal lowers his voice to an approximation of tender empathy. "I knew you would understand my love letter to you," he lies. "The heart of Andrew Marsh. I knew that you would come and find me."

And he waits, to see if the Viper believes his lie. Because if the Viper believes Hannibal killed those two men, for him...the Viper will kill Hannibal, instead of Will.

For a moment, it hangs in the balance. Castello gazes down at Hannibal, and Hannibal looks steadily back. Dark eyes to reddish-brown ones; one killer staring into the face of another.

Then the Viper cocks his head, and a sardonic smile grows on his lips. "Love is in the air, hey Doctor? We're all killing for love these days. Or should that be dying for love?" He puts down the chest spreader next to the other instruments and bends over Hannibal, smirking down at him. "It's very sweet that you want to save your boyfriend's life."

"I don't know what you—"

"Please, Dr Lecter. No more clumsy lies. They don't suit the elegant Ripper." He actually pats Hannibal on the shoulder with his gloved hand. "It was Will Graham who killed those men. I saw him afterwards. I treated him for wounds he sustained when he dared to kill someone, and copy me. To use my life's work as a mere message for the Chesapeake Ripper."

He spits out the last two words. All the mock-pleasantness is gone from his voice and he's pure lethal anger.

"Just watching the two of you at that crime scene, talking about the Viper and the Ripper, exchanging those glances. Mocking me as some sort of... flirtation. It's disgusting. Insulting. Vile."

His hands are fists now, his face a sneer.

"So that's why I haven't killed you yet, Dr Lecter. Because you're right: I don't torture my victims. I let them have a painless death. But you... You deserve torture. You deserve to be fully awake and aware when I prise your chest open and take out your beating heart. Because then, when Will Graham finds you, he'll know exactly how much pain the man he loved suffered. And he'll know how much he's going to suffer himself, when it's his turn."
And with that, Castello reaches for the scalpel on the tray.

***

Will walks through the house silently. Up till now, he hasn’t cared about concealment—has no desire even to think about what will happen to him after he kills his love Hannibal, and also kills his love the Chesapeake Ripper. The police can find him, they can shoot him, they can sentence him to the electric chair. He’s only focused on the knife in his hand, the blood that will spill over his hands.

But this…is not what he had planned.

Someone else has been in the house. The antique table near the door, with the bowl where Hannibal always puts his keys, is slightly crooked. One of the Turkish throw rugs is a tiny bit askew. Things that most people wouldn’t notice, but to Will, with his combined skills of observation and knowledge of Hannibal Lecter, they are as obvious as a neon sign. He holds his knife ready, not bothering to conceal it, and goes through the house to the place where Hannibal is most likely to be found: the kitchen.

It’s empty: no ghost of the meals that Hannibal has prepared here for the two of them to share. The new table stands spotless, replacing the broken one where the two of them made love, that first morning. The night after Will confessed his love for the Chesapeake Ripper and Hannibal had answered him in words that Will had thought he had understood, but now have an entirely different meaning:

“I could be aching for someone else. Doesn't that bother you?”
“Right now, you're here with me.”
“And what if one day, I'm with him? With the Ripper?”
“Right now. You are here. With me.”

Hearts cooked in red wine.

How many times did Hannibal say, or nearly say, that he was the Chesapeake Ripper? How many times did he confess to Will’s wilfully deaf ears?

“Perhaps you've interpreted the Ripper's designs wrongly. Perhaps he doesn't love Marsh. Perhaps he never did. Perhaps he loves you.

…I love you.”

Here in Hannibal’s kitchen, it’s so easy to hear what Hannibal meant. How he twisted words and half-revealed, how he manipulated Will into both loving him and leaving him.

And then the tableaux. How with one, he offered Will his heart. And with the other, invited Will to help him murder. And yet allowed Will to misinterpret, to believe that he loved someone else.

Will stands in the centre of Hannibal’s kitchen, knife in hand, and something is different. The door in the corner, the one that is always locked, is ajar. He goes to it and pulls it noiselessly open.

There are voices down the stairs, in the shadows.

Will slips off his shoes before he creeps down the stairs. Up until this moment, he’d have thought he was beyond surprise. But what he sees surprises him.

A vast basement fitted out for murder and cooking. Table saws, surgical instruments, hooks and
chains, cuffs and knives; wine and cheeses, preserves, ropes of garlic, dried herbs, smoked meats. Will sees, and understands, for the first time: *In all of those meals he has served me, I have been eating people.*

And, with the swiftness of instinct and memory: *I ate Matthew Brown. I ate his flayed skin, fried crisp.*

He has no time to work out how he feels about this.

Hannibal is lying on a surgical table, wearing only his underwear. He’s strapped down. A man is standing beside him, wearing surgical gloves, hat, and a plastic apron.

“When Will Graham finds you,” says the man, who Will recognises from behind as Agent Castello, “he'll know exactly how much pain the man he loved suffered. And he'll know how much he's going to suffer himself, when it's his turn.”

Castello reaches for a scalpel. And Will doesn’t hesitate. In one flash, he understands—*this is the Viper*—and leaps forward.

He buries his knife between Castello’s shoulder blades. Castello screams, and Will pulls out his knife, ready.

“You fucker,” hisses the Viper, turning around, hunched, head crooked, face twisted with pain and fury. “You twitchy little amateur fucker.”

He reaches for the scalpel again. And Will brings down the knife, slashing Castello’s arm. Blood spurts to the cement cellar floor: thick ropes of it, with its welcoming meaty scent.

“This is for Andrew Marsh,” Will tells him, and quite calmly, as if this was what he was born for, he steps forward and slits Agent Castello’s throat.
Hannibal, lying pinioned on the table, sees it all happen. Sees Will step into the basement, gleaming knife in hand. He looks so powerful: like a man who has finally stepped into his true role, assumed his full strength. There’s such beauty to his movements as he stabs Castello in the back. Cuts open his arm with no more than a casual swipe of the wrist. And delivers the coup de grâce across Castello’s throat with the grace of someone who exists for no purpose other than to spill blood. An angel of death.

The blood sprays over Will. Spatters his face, wets his hair, makes his hands into dripping red gloves.

It’s beautiful. The most beautiful thing that Hannibal has ever seen.

Castello falls to his knees. He clutches his throat, with eyes wide with betrayal. His mouth moves as if he wants to say last words, but then he crumples face-first onto the concrete floor.

Even if Hannibal weren’t tied down, he’d be motionless with the perfection of it.

‘This is all I ever wanted for you, Will,’ he whispers, in the silence left by Castello’s cessation of breath.

Will is standing in blood. He looks powerful, victorious. He gazes at his victim—the Viper, the man who would kill them both—and then looks slowly around the basement. All the appurtenances of food, and of murder.

“This is where the Chesapeake Ripper lives,” Will says. “Right here, underneath your home. Underneath everything that you do.”

“It’s where he’s been all along.”

“And yet you kept the door locked.”

Will walks to the table where Hannibal is bound. Almost absently, he still holds the knife in his hand, drenched with Castello’s blood. A drop of crimson falls from the blade and lands on Hannibal’s outstretched naked arm. It’s still warm.

“No one has ever opened that door and lived,” Hannibal says.

“That’s not an excuse. I didn’t want to live.”

“I wanted you alive.”

Will isn’t immune to this moment. He’s killed, in the lair of the Ripper. He’s baptised himself in the blood of their common enemy while the Ripper watches, and the Ripper has pronounced it beautiful. While Hannibal watches. His imaginary lover and his real one. Not long ago, this would have been a dream come true.

But this moment is nothing like he dreamed it would be.

“I told you from the night we met,” Will says, "that if the Ripper offered me death, I would welcome it. You took away my right to choose.”
Slowly, Will lowers the knife so that it rests across Hannibal’s throat. Between his jaw and his Adam’s apple.

Adam’s apple. Two corpses and a snake in a soggy field. That’s what Hannibal gave him instead of honesty.

“I came here to kill you,” says Will. “You deserve to die. I should kill you right here and leave you for the FBI along with the Viper. Two murderers for the price of one. And Jack Crawford knows both of you. It would be all his Christmases come at once.”

Hannibal’s maroon eyes gaze up at him steadily. With Castello, Hannibal tried to stall, to outmaneuver. With Will’s knife to his throat, there’s none of that. Because Will is right: he deserves to die. And dying at Will’s hand is a fitting consummation to everything they have done together, everything they have felt.

It would be a fitting consummation, to be killed by the man he loves. The only man he’s ever loved.

The knife’s edge dents Hannibal’s throat. Will watches, hypnotised, as it draws a thin line of blood. Drops trickle down the column of Hannibal’s neck.

“Go ahead,” says Hannibal. His voice is hoarse. “I want you to. I love you, Will.”

It’s those words that do it. I want you to. I love you.

Will is damned if he does anything that this bastard wants. Even killing him.

Will drops the knife, with a clatter, on the cement floor. Hands shaking now, though they were steady when he was killing Castello, he tugs at the restraints holding Hannibal’s hand to the operating table. One will be enough.

Hannibal pulls his hand free, shaking it to restore the blood flow. He reaches over to untie the other hand. His heart, which didn’t accelerate at the thought of death, is beating a rapid pulse at the possibility of life. Life with Will.

“I’m sorry,” Hannibal says, freeing his hand, and sitting up on the table. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I’m sorry I allowed you to be misled by what I did. I’m sorry I hurt you, and let you believe I loved Andrew Marsh. I only loved you. I’ve only ever loved you, Will.’

“What do you think can possibly happen now, Hannibal?” Will’s voice is croaky. He feels the weight of unshed tears in his throat, but he won’t let them fall. “Why do you even bother to apologise? Where could we go from here?”

“We could be together,” says Hannibal. “You and I and the Ripper. A song of death and love. I’ve wanted it ever since I met you, I think. I’ve wanted see you kill. I wanted to share that moment with you, watch your face as your feelings reached that apotheosis. I drove you away, instead. I made a mistake. But it doesn’t have to be that way, Will. You and I could start again, the way we were meant to. Equally, as partners.”

Will closes his eyes. He can see that so perfectly: the two of them, side by side. Like Adam and Eve, eyes full of knowledge, in their own peculiar Eden.

That is what should have happened. That was all he ever wanted, too.

In another world, another universe, he would press his mouth to Hannibal’s. He would kiss him
and untie his ankles. Together they would butcher Castello, and feast on him. They would lick his blood from each other’s bodies. Beautiful in victory. Truth between them at last.

But it’s too late.

“No, Hannibal,” says Will. “That’s not going to happen.”

“Please,” says Hannibal, and Will has never heard his lover sound quite so sad. Quite so desperate, and lonely.

It’s exactly the way that Will has been feeling. Because Will was lonely before he met Hannibal, but that’s nothing compared with how he’s felt since he’s found out that the man he loves twice over has been toying with him for his own amusement.

Slowly, he shakes his head.

“Goodbye, Hannibal.”

He turns and steps over Castello’s body. He doesn’t look back as he walks across the cellar and up the stairs. With every step, he hears an echo of his words.

Goodbye, Hannibal Lecter.

Goodbye, Chesapeake Ripper.

Goodbye, the voices and the shadows.

Goodbye, dreams and love, a beating heart in Will’s hand.

Goodbye, the Will Graham he used to be, who trusted and loved and thought that death would be a small price to pay, if only he could be seen.

Goodbye.
“So,” says Hannibal wearily, “tell me about your friend.”

Franklyn Froideveaux needs no more prompting. He’s off: Tobias’s tailoring, Tobias’s cello playing, Tobias’s cooking, Tobias’s great love for Spanish blue cheeses, Tobias’s little witticism he said yesterday about Mozart and Salieri.

Franklyn pauses, mid-rapture. “Dr Lecter? Am I boring you?”

“Of course not,” says Hannibal. He’s bored to tears. But even being bored is better than thinking about Will Graham.

How much he wanted Will Graham to kill him, for the sake of that single moment of mutual intimacy. How much more he wanted Will to kiss him.

How Will Graham walked away. Not even once looking back.

“You seem different,” says Franklyn. “Have you had a little falling-out with your petit chouchou?”

Hannibal tries not to wince at the personal question or the mangled French. “This isn’t relevant to your therapy, Franklyn.”

“Do you know what I did, when Tobias was miffed at me? It wasn’t anything important, of course; I’d merely called him when he was busy and he understandably was a little bit snappy. Tobias is a very polite person usually, but he is a trifle—” Franklyn lowers his voice and leans forward as if imparting a huge secret—“high-strung.”

“What did you do,” asks Hannibal, without any interest in knowing.

Hannibal knows what he should do. He should kill Will. Will knows his identity. He could betray him any day now.

And yet he doesn’t think that Will is going to betray him. Will is going to ignore him. He’s going to live his life without him.

And that is worse.

“Little gifts,” says Franklyn, sitting back in his chair, hands folded across his belly, the very picture of self-satisfaction. “I sent him some antique sheet music. A package of his favourite Queso Cabrales. He soon saw that I’d meant no harm, and we were fast friends again.” He leans forward and taps Hannibal on the knee. “Fast friends.”

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. Has Franklyn just touched him?

Has Franklyn just given him love advice?

“Little gifts,” says Franklyn again. “You’ll see. It will all work out in the end, Dr Lecter.”

***
What surprises Will is how alive he feels.

Before his thesis defense, in those days when he was waiting for the Ripper to claim him—kill him—he allowed himself to appreciate every moment. He started doing things for the sake of doing them, not to catch the Ripper’s attention. There was no need to spend hours bending over books, poring over photographs of crime scenes. He fished, he ate properly, he slept, he went for walks in the park. Will knew he had the Ripper’s attention; with that assured, he could start focusing on himself. He thought he only had a short time to live, and because of that, he lived every moment fully.

Now, things are different. Will knows the Chesapeake Ripper better than anyone else alive. He also knows Hannibal Lecter.

Hannibal thinks of him as an equal. And the Chesapeake Ripper doesn’t kill equals. He thinks of his victims as little more than pigs: fodder for his art.

Even though Will has provoked the Ripper by leaving him, Hannibal isn’t going to kill him. He cares too much. Ironically, the one person that the Ripper can’t kill is the one who has made him the unhappiest.

Will is safe. He’s safer than he’s ever been, since he started his work and his obsession with the Chesapeake Ripper.

He isn’t happy. But he’s safe.

Will goes for walks with Leon and Luna; he takes his clothes to the laundry; he shops for groceries and reads the newspaper. Sometimes he sits by the window and he thinks, in meticulous detail, of the murders he has committed. Andrew Marsh’s heart in his hand. Castello’s blood hot on his face.

Do those deaths excite him? No, not really. They’re facts, now: something that someone else can study. He sees how they would have excited him if he’d committed them with the Ripper—with Hannibal—by his side. Equally, as partners. But as it was, all of the beauty and horror of those acts has been robbed from him. All that remains are memories.

Memories, and waiting for Agent Castello’s body to be found.

The Chesapeake Ripper surely won’t pass up the chance to make artwork out of the Viper. That’s the one thing Will doesn’t know: what the picture will look like. But there will be one. In the past, Will looked forward to the Ripper’s tableaux with bated breath and delicious anticipation. Now…it seems inevitable, but not exciting. It will be a reminder of everything he has lost.

Still, he feels alive. He feels…powerful. In charge of his own destiny. For the first time in a very long time, he has his life stretching out in front of him, and no desire for death.

What is he going to do?

After three days, he receives formal notification that his thesis has passed, and that he has therefore completed the work for his master’s degree. Dr Gold writes that he is expected to transition seamlessly from his master’s work to research for his PhD; but Will has no interest in this any more. Why would he want to study the Chesapeake Ripper? He already knows everything he could possibly know.

He writes to Dr Gold saying he no longer wants to continue his studies, and contacts the university to say he’s dropping out of his course.
It hurts surprisingly little to give up everything he’s ever wanted. Maybe that’s because he’s already felt the pain, and all that’s left is an echo.

The same morning, he comes back from his walk with the dogs to find a small package on his doorstep. It’s carefully wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine. There’s no note, and when Will picks it up it’s surprisingly heavy.

While the dogs whine at his feet, Will unties the twine and unwraps the box. It’s a ceramic container containing fluffy scrambled eggs and glistening sausage. It’s still warm, and it smells delicious. Protein scramble. Breakfast.

Will pictures Hannibal cracking the eggs by throwing them in the air and catching them with the side of a knife. He remembers a dish of steaming sausages on the table during that first breakfast they had together.

Who were those sausages made of, he wonders, that first time?

He knows who these sausages are made of, as well as he knows who made them. Will carries the box to the garbage bins by the side of his building and dumps the whole thing in.

***

The next day, he has a message on his phone from Jack Crawford.

“I heard you’re giving up studying,” Jack says. “Let’s talk about you coming to the FBI. Call me.”

Will thinks carefully about this, though he doesn’t return Jack’s call that day. The FBI is full of restrictions, both in behaviour and thinking, but they have the puzzles, and he’s good at solving them. It would be a useful thing to do, working for the FBI. He would be of use. He wouldn’t get pleasure from it, but he doesn’t expect to get pleasure from anything any more, so what does he have to lose?

Except he would have to work on the Ripper case. And without any motivation either to find the Ripper or to hide his identity, working on that case would be its own particular hell.

The next afternoon, his phone rings again. It’s Jack. He doesn’t pick it up, because he still hasn’t quite decided what words to use to turn Jack down. He listens to the message though, and it says: “Will. It’s Jack. I’ve got to shelve that meeting for a little while. One of my agents has disappeared, and the shit’s hit the fan here. I’ll call you in a couple of weeks. Don’t call me, I’ll be busy.”

So that’s another possibility crossed off the list.

He goes out with the dogs to buy some whiskey, and when he gets home, there’s another package on his doorstep. This one is wrapped in silver paper and tied in purple ribbon.

“For fuck’s sake, Hannibal,” Will says, but he unwraps it anyway. He has to look. He always has to look. It’s his fatal flaw.

It’s a pie. Nestling in crisp wax paper, a perfect circle of glossy pastry with fluted edges and a lattice crust. He doesn’t have to peer underneath to know it’s a meat pie. Steak and kidney, maybe? Hannibal’s always liked organ meat.

It smells absolutely delicious. Despite himself, his mouth waters and his stomach growls.

Luna whines at his feet, and Leon looks up at him with his big dark liquid puppy eyes.
“Oh, go ahead then,” Will says, and he puts the pie down on the ground for the two of them to eat. It won’t be poisoned—Hannibal wouldn’t do that to the food.

He wonders if Hannibal is watching him feed this meticulous, exquisite gift to the dogs. He sort of hopes he is.

Then he realises he shouldn’t hope anything where Hannibal Lecter is concerned, and goes into the house with the dogs, slamming the door behind him, leaving behind silver paper and crumbs.

***

That night, he’s awakened by Leon. The puppy, who he’s allowed to sleep on his bed with him, suddenly jumps bolt upright, barks, and jumps off the bed, running full pelt for the door.

It’s still dark outside—some ungodly hour of the morning. Will, wearing boxers and a t-shirt, gets out of bed. “Leon, calm down,” he mutters, following the dog to the door.

Leon’s scratching at the front door and whining. His tail is whipping back and forth like crazy. From outside the door, there’s a soft rustle.

Will knows exactly what this means.

It means there’s a monster outside.

He yanks the door open and on his doorstep stands Hannibal Lecter in a pristine overcoat and scarf. He’s holding a large tomato-red casserole dish. There’s a red satin bow on the lid.


Will’s heart thumps hard in his chest. It almost feels like...joy.

Leon bolts between Will’s bare legs and leaps at Hannibal, whining, his tail wagging so hard that his little backside is a blur.

“Someone’s glad to see me,” Hannibal comments. He tucks the dish under his arm and bends to stroke Leon. “Gerai tave pamatyti, mano mažasis ponis.”

Damn Hannibal Lecter, with his gifts and his suavity and his good looks and his goddamn Lithuanian. “Why are you here, Dr Lecter?”

“I came with a gift. I didn’t expect you to be awake.”

“I’ve had enough of your gifts.”

“Ah, but you haven’t had this one yet.” Hannibal holds out the casserole dish.

Will takes it. It’s warm, and it’s emitting a delicious—and familiar—aroma. He unties the ribbon and takes the lid off.

It’s a heart, stuffed with mushrooms. Braised in red wine. Castello’s heart, cooked to Will’s favourite recipe.

“The serpent offered Eve the apple of knowledge,” says Hannibal. “I’m offering you the Viper’s heart. Out of love.”

Carefully, Will puts it down on the doorstep. He replaces the lid and lays the ribbon on top of it.
Then he stands upright, and punches Hannibal Lecter in the face.

Hannibal staggers back, blood spraying from his split lip. Then he straightens. When he speaks, his voice is wet and his teeth are bloody. “Did that feel good?”

“Yes.” Will shakes his bruised hand. “You’re an asshole, Hannibal. I was in love with you. I was in love with you, and I told you the first night we met, and you never told me who you were.”

“I should have.”

“Everything! The tableaux, the hearts, Matthew Brown, Abel Gideon, all the human flesh you made me eat! Were you laughing at me?”

“No. I was falling in love.”

Will launches himself at Hannibal, punching and kicking. “You think—that you—can give me—a heart—of a man—I killed—and I will—forgive you?”

Hannibal tries to withstand the assault, but Will is too furious, and his punches, though not well-aimed, have the force of anger behind them. A hard blow to Hannibal’s solar plexus steals his breath and makes him topple backwards onto the ground.

Will is on top of him immediately, his hands around Hannibal’s throat. Squeezing. Will’s throat is tight, as if he can feel his own strangling hands. Distantly, he can hear the puppy whining in distress.

“All I wanted,” gasps Will, squeezing as tightly as he can, “all I ever wanted was for you to see me and love me.”

Hannibal can’t answer. His breath is being choked out of him. But he looks up into Will’s face, his eyes burning, and he mouths the words:

I do.

Inside Will Graham, something breaks. The tears he feels as if he’s been keeping back forever burst out of him in a noisy sob. He loosens his grip on Hannibal’s throat and bows his head, defeated.

“I don’t know what to do,” he weeps.

Hannibal’s voice is a rasp. He says: “Kiss me.”

This is how everything began. With Will asking for a birthday kiss, from a man he’d just met in the bar. A birthday kiss, and no idea how his life would change, completely, forever.

Will Graham has been wondering what to do with his life, now that he feels so alive. In this moment, he makes a decision. A choice that’s all his own. He dips his head and kisses Hannibal.

Hannibal kisses him back. Lips bloodied and bruised. He wraps his arms around Will’s waist and hugs him tight and kisses him as if Will is the very air he breathes. As if his life depends upon kissing Will Graham.

Because his life does depend upon it.

Leon runs up to them and licks their faces. Luna follows, putting her paw on Will’s shoulder as he kisses Hannibal. Will doesn’t even notice. He’s too busy kissing the man that he loves. Both the
men that he loves.

On their lips, Hannibal’s blood and Will’s tears mix into something more delicious than either of them have ever tasted.

Will lies there in the cold on the ground on top of Hannibal. Snow begins to fall and melts on their bodies. In the dark, they’re voices and shadows, warmth and love.

“I love you, Will,” Hannibal says, between kisses.

“I love you, too.”

“What next?” asks Hannibal. He holds his breath, waiting for Will to decide their fate.

Leon barks.

“Let’s go inside,” says Will. “Let’s eat the Viper’s heart. And let’s start our happy ending.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is the last chapter...and it's Christmas.
It’s Christmas Eve, and it’s snowing. Will walks in a winter wonderland past houses lit up with twinkling lights. Trees festooned with stars and baubles. A group of carollers passes him by, wrapped in scarves and tinsel, happily chatting to each other.

Will isn’t much of a holiday sort of person. But tonight, he feels festive. He scuffs through the falling snow, a red scarf around his neck, snow settling in his curls.

Last year at this time he was spending Christmas Eve in the library, surrounded by crime scene photos and forensic data about the Chesapeake Ripper. He hardly noticed the glitter, the decorations, the celebrations going on around him. His plans for Christmas Day included obsessively reading psychological profiles, popping aspirin, and drinking too much whiskey. By himself.

Tonight, one year later, he’s got a bag of gifts under one arm, a bottle of wine under the other, and he’s going to a party.

Ahead of him, the carollers ring on a doorbell and as soon as it’s answered start singing “Deck the Halls.”

Will smiles and sings under his breath as he walks. “Deck the halls with bowels of Holly, fa la la la la, la la la la la.”

Cannibal jokes. That’s another thing that has changed since last year.

He rounds the corner, grinning, a spring to his step, and pulls a handwritten invitation out of his pocket to check the address. That’s it, there: number 25, the big white house on the little hill, with the huge wreath on the door and every window lit up with candles. Even from here, he can hear the sound of laughter and singing from inside. Will makes his way up the carefully-shovelled path and knocks on the door.

The door is almost instantly opened by a small beaming woman wearing a sparkly Santa hat. “Will Graham, as I live and breathe!” Dr Wendy Gold, his former head of department, says in delight. “I wasn’t sure you’d come to the party, since you’ve quit being a student.”

“Your Christmas parties are famous,” says Will, bending down to kiss her on either cheek, a move which delights the professor even further. “I couldn’t pass up the invitation.”

“Well, come on in,” she says. “You’ll know one or two people here, I think. It’s a reunion of your thesis committee. We’ve got Frederick Chilton, Alana Bloom, even Jack Crawford. And, of course, your erstwhile supervisor, Dr Lecter.” She twinkles at him.
Will’s heart leaps at the mention of Hannibal’s name, though he’d be hard-pressed to say exactly why. They were in bed together not two hours ago, after all: a lazy, seductive snowy afternoon, warm and drowsy in the heat of each other’s bodies while the weather raged outside. So he couldn’t possibly be missing Hannibal. And their last words to each other, between lingering kisses, had been “I’ll see you at Dr Gold’s party”. So he’s not surprised that Hannibal is here, either, even though they arrived separately for discretion’s sake.

Maybe his heart beats faster at the mere mention of Hannibal’s name simply because Hannibal Lecter makes him happy.

Dr Gold takes the wine and presents and relieves him of his jacket and scarf, leaving him in his soft red sweater. (It’s Hannibal’s red sweater. Will didn’t have anything red to wear, and the invitation said specifically to dress in Christmas colours. Will hopes that no one recognises it.) She gives him a headband, which has reindeer antlers on it. Against his better judgement, he puts it on.

“And we’ve got all kinds of things planned,” continues Dr Gold cheerfully. “Charades, carol singing, Secret Santa...and of course—” she lowers her voice to a whisper— “the mistletoe.”

“It’s a parasite,” Will says.

“Pardon?”

“Mistletoe. It feeds on its host. Of course—” and here Will lowers his voice to a whisper, too— “no one would dream of feeding on you, Dr Gold.”

She giggles and slaps his arm. “Oh, you joker. I never knew you had a sense of humour, Will. I always pegged you as more the obsessive type. Much as I was sorry to see you go, maybe it’s been good for you, giving up your studies.”

“I haven’t given them up,” Will tells her. “I’m still just as interested in the Chesapeake Ripper as I ever was. Maybe even more. It’s just that these days, I prefer to take a more...hands on approach.”

Dr Chilton passes, snagging a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. “Just be careful not to make the same mistake that my student Matthew Brown made, and end up dead and flayed,” he says drily. “There’s a danger in getting too close to the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Oh, I don’t think it’s possible for me to get too close,” says Will. He accepts the glass of champagne that Dr Gold gives him and he surveys the crowd for Hannibal. He doesn’t see him yet, but he does see Dr Alana Bloom, holding a beer and looking beautiful in a red wrap dress with a large silk poinsettia flower tucked into her glossy dark hair. She smiles at him and kisses him on the cheek.

“Will,” she says warmly. “How good to see you. You look...really well.” She stands back and gazes at him. “Really well. You’ve gained a little weight, you look well-rested, and...happy.” She beams at him.

“It must be the time of year,” Will says.

“It’s contagious, whatever it is,” Alana replies. “Hannibal is also looking much healthier these days. I was worried about him for a little while, but tonight he’s positively sleek. And his mince pies that he brought—have you tried them yet?”

He sampled one at Hannibal's house before he came tonight. “I haven’t seen Hannibal yet, so no.”

“They’re to die for. Made to the original medieval recipe, apparently, with real mincemeat in them.
And crusts made with lard.”

“Not exactly vegetarian friendly,” says Dr Gold. “Fortunately, I’m not a vegetarian. I’ve had six.” She pats her nonexistent tummy.

“I’ll have to try them,” says Will.

“How’s your little puppy?” asks Alana.

“He’s great.” Except for the fact that he chewed on Hannibal’s hand-stitched Italian shoes this morning. Will’s a bit worried about what will happen when Hannibal discovers that. Probably not much; as fearsome as he can be, Hannibal has a soft spot for Leon.

“Graham,” thunders a voice from the other side of the room, and the crowd parts to let Jack Crawford through. He’s unusually festive, wearing a red shirt and a green tie with his charcoal suit. He claps Will on the back. “Good to see you, Will, good to see you. I hope you’re excited to start at Quantico in the New Year.”

“Very excited,” says Will truthfully. He lowers his voice. “Any news on Agent Castello?”

“We found some interesting things in a storage facility that he’d rented,” Jack murmurs, close to Will’s ear. “I’ll catch you up on it later.”

“Hannibal must be sad to see you go as his student,” says Alana. “I know he took a lot of pride in your work.”

“Speak of the devil,” says Dr Chilton, looking distinctly underwhelmed as Hannibal appears, holding a silver platter of mince pies. He’s wearing a forest-green plaid suit with blood-red shirt, red silk tie and red handkerchief. Someone has, incredibly, tied a string of gold tinsel around his neck, but he wears it with his normal impeccable style.

Will’s heart flips over. His man, so handsome.

*His man. Forever.*

“Dr Lecter,” he says, cordially.

“Will,” says Hannibal, with equal cordiality. “Would you like a mince pie?”

“Oh, no thank you Dr Lecter. I’m really not hungry.”

“I’ll have another one,” says Jack, and Will watches as Jack bites into the minced pastry-clad remains of the man whom he and Hannibal killed together yesterday: one of the youths who taunted and bullied them months ago when they kissed outside the sushi restaurant. Will tracked him down, and he and Hannibal hunted together. It was one of the most beautiful and thrilling experiences of his life: seeing the Chesapeake Ripper in action, and bathing his hands in the blood of their victim as he reached inside his chest, and pulled out his hot dripping heart. A dream come true.

And only the first of many, many experiences like this that he and Hannibal will share.

“Delicious,” says Jack, munching on the person whose death he’ll be investigating tomorrow.

“I’m glad it’s to your taste, Agent Crawford,” says Hannibal. He turns again to Will, a gleam in his maroon eyes. “Are you sure I can’t tempt you to indulge? It’s Christmas, after all.”
Dr Gold coughs loudly. She points to a spot over Will and Hannibal’s heads.

They look up. Hanging from the light fixture is a bright green, white-berried sprig of mistletoe.

“You know what that means,” says Dr Gold, clapping her hands together with glee.

“Oh,” says Will.

“Surely it’s not appropriate,” says Hannibal. “After all, Will and I are—”

“Will’s no longer your student,” says Alana. “And Hannibal’s no longer your supervisor. In fact, there’s no professional link between the two of you at all.”

“You can get married if you want to,” drawls Chilton, and takes another glass of champagne. He gulps it down and reaches for a third.

Hannibal’s eyes narrow. “Why do I get the feeling that we’re being set up?”

“Set up?” says Dr Gold. “Surely not. I don’t make the rules, Hannibal. You’re under a sprig of mistletoe: you’ve got to kiss. It’s just the way it is. Christmas tradition.”

Hannibal catches Will’s eye. His own eyes are dancing.

“Well,” he says. “If that’s the way it is, who are we to argue with Christmas tradition?”

He hands the platter of mince pies to Crawford, and steps the last little bit closer to Will. He puts his fingers underneath Will’s chin and tilts it up. Then, slowly, he lowers his lips to Will’s.

Will shouldn’t. Unlike Hannibal he is the very opposite of theatrical. But maybe some of Hannibal’s joie de vivre has infected him these past months, or maybe it’s the Christmas spirit...or maybe he just loves Hannibal too much to be able to hide it. He kisses Hannibal back, not shyly but eagerly, wrapping his arms around Hannibal’s neck, opening his mouth to him, and pulling him closer.

Hannibal’s kiss is so intoxicating that it takes a moment or two for Will to realise that everyone around them (or almost everyone) is clapping their hands and cheering.

“I knew it,” says Dr Gold to a beaming Alana. “As soon as I saw the two of them I knew they were perfect for each other. But I knew they’d never think of doing anything while they were working together. They’re both far too professional. But now...”

“Far too professional,” agrees Alana. She wipes a tear from her eye. “I love a good happy ending.”

Frederick Chilton grunts in disgust. He takes the bottle of champagne from the waiter and slips through the crowd for a bit of quality time by himself.

Jack Crawford merely rolls his eyes. Like the good FBI agent he is, he’s known about this liaison for ages. At least since Hannibal and Will engaged in their little light bondage shenanigans in that hotel room. Still, as his wife Bella can attest, underneath his gruff exterior, he’s a born romantic. And even he has to admire the passion of a couple who can kiss under the mistletoe for this......long......

When Hannibal and Will finally at long last break apart, it’s to wolf whistles and applause. Hannibal laces his fingers with Will’s, and gazes at him with so much love in his eyes that it makes Will’s heart hurt. “Merry Christmas,” he murmurs, squeezing Will’s hand.
“Merry Christmas,” whispers Will, wondering if he’s ever meant these words so much before.

Then Dr Gold rushes up to them, kissing them both on their cheeks. “Mazel tov,” she says. She tucks a sprig of mistletoe behind Hannibal’s ear, and then another behind Will’s. “I am taking all the credit for this. I’m a justice of the peace, you know. Licensed for weddings. Let me know when you set the date.” She winks, then she turns to Alana and links her arm through hers. “Now, all that remains is finding you the perfect partner, my dear. Someone rich, good-looking, and smart. Did I ever tell you that I’m acquainted with the heirs to the Verger fortune...?”

The two of them wander off, and the rest of the guests turn back to their conversations, leaving Hannibal and Will and their sprigs of mistletoe. A little island of love in this celebration.

“That was easy in the end,” says Will, tugging Hannibal’s silk tie.

“Shh,” says Hannibal. “We’ve got to keep our cover as brand-new lovers. Pretend you can’t keep your hands off of me.”

That’s easy enough. He runs his fingers through Hannibal’s hair, messing it thoroughly, in the way he likes best. Then, with the attention of all the guests elsewhere, he kisses Hannibal.

“As brand-new lovers,” he murmurs against Hannibal’s lips, “maybe we should slip off somewhere more private. Like your house. Just to keep our cover.”

“Hannibal! Will!” calls Dr Gold from the next room. “Stop canoodling and join us! We’re about to play charades!”

“I think we’ve played enough charades, don’t you?” whispers Hannibal, sliding his hand up the back of Will’s—his—red sweater to touch naked skin. “I think it’s time for you and me to strip off our person suits.”

Will shivers with heat. “Stripping sounds like a very good idea to me.” Though he knows that Hannibal means more than just sex. He means the way they know each other, intimately and wholly, each other’s true selves. An acceptance and love that neither of them ever thought they would be able to find. He tugs on Hannibal’s hand. They grab their coats and, without disturbing the other guests, walk out into a world made new with snow.

Chapter End Notes

We started this story over two years ago, on 25 October 2015, and despite some very long gaps, now it is finished. Thank you so, so much for reading and for sticking with us.

My co-writer, @darlinghogwarts, has been a miracle of playfulness, angst and pure writing joy. I've loved collaborating with them every minute.

In the end, I picked up this story from chapter 33 onwards and wrote the ending myself, but it was 100% with my co-writer's cooperation and input, including the epilogue which we planned almost from the beginning.

I never would've finished this story without the continued comments from readers—either our original readers who read this story as a Twitter role-play, or our newer
readers here on AO3. Comments and support mean so much. It's impossible to
understate how important they are.

Thank you for reading this crazy ride of a story. I'm sad that it's finished. I love you
@darlinghogwarts, and I love you Fannibals everywhere.

Works inspired by this one:

We gladly feast on those who would subdue us by Jiwa

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!