The Shape of Me Will Always be You

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The Shape of Me Will Always be You

by MissDisoriental

Summary

They’ve survived their clifftop plunge; now Hannibal’s vanished and Will’s pining. In the midst of new threats and a re-emergence of old ones, it takes a series of unexplained events to help Will realise Hannibal is closer than he dared hoped for.

Podfics here and here

Animation

Translations Deutsch | 中文 | Ελληνικά | Magyar |  | Русский | Polski | Cymraeg

Fanart masterpost
Chapter Notes

I've had some issues recently with this fic being re-posted on other websites without my permission. While I appreciate the interest in sharing it, I'd really prefer if people please don't do this! Thank you :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
THE SHAPE OF ME WILL ALWAYS BE YOU

BY MISSDISORIENTAL

The Shape of Me
Will Always be You

A Hannigram Fanfic by MissDisoriental

THE SHAPE OF ME WILL ALWAYS BE YOU

BY MISSDISORIENTAL
I dreamt about you today.

At least I thought I did. Maybe it was more like dreaming while awake. You came into my hospital room and pulled up the shabby plastic chair, wincing a little at the scraping sound as you pulled it across the floor towards my bed. Then you folded yourself into it, crossing your long legs just so, and you…watched me. Just sitting: sitting and staring. You were wearing one of those ridiculously flamboyant suits that would look like hell on anyone else, but lent you a certain exotic, rarefied glamour. It’s been so long since I’ve seen you in one of those suits, I’d nearly forgotten about them. Years since I’ve seen you wearing anything that wasn’t institutional issue or splashed in scarlet. So initially I was looking more at the suit than I was at you. You wouldn’t have liked that, I don’t think. You’re such a narcissist.

You didn’t fit it in at all in this drab setting, all your color and energy completely misplaced. When I looked at your face you seemed attentive, a very faint smile playing around your mouth. You always were so inscrutable. Sphinx-like. I never really knew what you were thinking.

“What are you doing here?” It probably wasn’t the best thing to ask you – demand of you – but then I didn’t know what else to say.

“I wasn’t aware I needed to provide a reason.”

“You always have a reason though, don’t you? You have a reason for everything. And you’re here and you’re not even real.” Now I’ve looked at your eyes I can’t stop staring, trying not to get lost in them. You notice my fascination, and my reluctance (of course you do), and that faint smile grows ever so slightly broader. You relish it (narcissist).

I close my own eyes to get away from yours, and in the darkness I hear you push back the chair and prowl towards the bed. You’re sauntering, lithe and cat-like (I can’t see you but I know that you are), and I feel the mattress dip as you sit down. I sense your breath on my face, incredibly light, barely
there, your spidery fingers brushing over my cheekbone, and I breathe in again and open my eyes. At least I think I do, maybe they were already open. And of course you’re not there. There’s a gloomy dribble of light from under the door, and the blinking of the heart monitor, and footsteps, and muttered voices, and all the sounds of sickness and death, but there’s no you, and you are spectacularly loud in your absence. The room screams with its lack of you.

I take a deep breath, and it hurts, and I untangle the IV line to grab the glass of water next to the bed. My hands are shaking.

It’s almost unbearable that even my mental version of you still manages to remain several steps ahead.

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Kade Purnell is sat next to the bed, sat on your chair (it’s always going to feel like Your Chair now, I can tell). She’s been here nearly an hour, barking questions at me like a dog. *Yap yap yap.* I can’t tell how much of her defensiveness is down to genuine reservations about the statement I gave (which wasn’t *exactly* lies, as opposed to a liberal manipulation of the truth…sort of like Bullshit Lite), and how much is her just being a dick for the sake of it - bludgeoning me with her authority simply because she can. Maybe she just wants to feel that she’s been thorough, ticking boxes and crossing/dotting the requisite amount of t’s and i’s. I’m not sure really, she’s hard to read. Although I suppose with one dead and mangled serial killer, one missing one, and a half-dead FBI profiler washed up on a beach, that the thoroughness is not entirely unreasonable.

She says something predictable and (probably) pre-scripted about an “exhaustive, official enquiry” – rehearsed, no doubt, to instil exactly the right amount of dread and compliance. (If I try hard enough I can even imagine her practicing it in a mirror beforehand, perfecting the various purses of lips and furrowing of eyebrows). She’s obviously trying to intimidate me, and I promptly zone out, because seriously, who cares? They won’t catch you. If you’re still alive, you won’t let them find you unless you want them to – it will all be part of the game. If you *are* still alive. No, you’re not dead though. You’re *not*. I have absolutely no objective evidence for assuming this, but I believe it nonetheless. I’d know if you were dead, wouldn’t I? I’d just know.

“You were extremely lucky Mr Graham,” she says; grudgingly, as if I’ve been lucky just to annoy her, as if my good luck is a matter of immense personal dissatisfaction. I am quite impressed, in spite of myself – such meticulously measured venom. Not as good as yours of course, but not bad. Not bad at all. I’d give her a good seven out of ten.

“Someone found you,” she continues. She’s still dwelling on how lucky I am, as if I care. “Pulled you out the water, dressed the wounds on your face and chest…” She trails off, uncertain how to proceed. She doesn’t say that this random good Samaritan was you, but she doesn’t need to, because of course it was. When I shut my eyes I’m certain I can even remember it. Your hand on the back of my head, cradling my skull, as calm and efficient as always but spiced underneath with an air of carefully controlled desperation, because I’m not responding to you and you’re struggling to locate my pulse. “Breathe, Will”, you said, “Breathe for me, I need you to breathe.” You’re holding the gash in my cheek together with your long fingers, making an airtight channel into my mouth so you can perform CPR. “I need you to live Will,” you were saying, “I need you to live for me.” On second thoughts, perhaps I invented that last part. In fact I almost certainly did; it doesn’t really seem like the sort of thing that you would say.

My mind starts to drift, and I imagine what you would do if you were here, how you would take her apart with perfectly constructed little verbal parries and quirks of a single pale eyebrow. Or, more likely, just literally take her apart, probably with your bare hands. With one bare hand tied behind
your back…

She’s staring at me now, with barely concealed distaste. “Did I say something to amuse you Mr Graham?” she snaps.

Her staccato voice jolts me back into the room, like nails down a chalkboard, and I blink at her, disorientated. “I’m sorry, what?” I say stupidly. Behind my eyes, you are smirking at me.

“You’re smiling. I wasn’t aware this was a laughing matter. So – did I say something to amuse you?”

Oh God, why do people ask questions like this? It’s not as if she expects, or wants, a truthful answer. I briefly wonder what she would do if I said “yes, actually, you are – enormously so,” or even “yes, and guess exactly how many fucks I give about that. Count them. Done?”

“I wasn’t smiling,” I say instead, “I was grimacing. I’m actually in a considerable amount of pain. Ma’am.”

She stares at me, clearly disbelieving, and not particularly impressed with the blatantly piss-taking ‘Ma’am’. She’s not going to pursue it though, she can’t really be bothered. She’s going to let it go, so in return I arrange my face into a suitably earnest expression and give her my full attention. Quid pro quo. It’s not like it’s really worth imagining what you would do anyway. I never was all that reliable at predicting you, was I? You’d probably be just as likely to take me apart as her.

“Yes, well…” she says. She gathers her purse up in a fussy way and clutches the strap. She’s losing control of this exchange, and she knows it. What she really wants, clearly, is to just tell me to fuck off. The fact that she can’t, and is desperate to, is actually extremely satisfying.

We stare at each other, sizing each other up. “Thanks for stopping by,” I say finally, dismissing her. It takes my last shred of self-control to not start smiling again.

Her thin, feral face twitches, and she rakes her eyes up and down my body in poorly concealed contempt. We’re not really done here, I know this - I haven’t really won. Fuck it, though, I’ll deal with her later. And a fleeting victory is a victory nonetheless. Right now I just want to close my eyes and not open them again for a very, very long time.

“Wishing you a speedy recovery Mr Graham,” is all she says (yeah, right), then she stands up, drawing herself to her full height, impressive in her glossy heels, and glowers at me (she really does – there’s no other word for it) and does a neat little spin on her toes and heads to the door. I achieve my ambition of closing my eyes and just lie there, feeling vaguely martyred. I’m disgusted to realise my hands are trembling slightly, and ram them under the covers. She closes the door sharply behind her. Her heels sound all the way down the corridor in little self-important thrusts, click click click, and I imagine what it would be like to spear her through the heart with one of her own over-priced stilettos. I try to feel shocked at myself afterwards, and can’t quite manage it. “A little vulgar Will, don’t you think?” I hear you say, but I know you’re smiling in spite of yourself.

Some time passes. I don’t know how much. And then there’s noise outside the room and when I hitch open an eye I can see a tall silhouette through the frosted glass. It’s a man, I can tell from the build – broad shoulders, powerfully built. It’s not going to be you, I tell myself, it’s not, oh God… and the door opens all the way, and of course it’s not you. It’s Jack (resplendent in overcoat and that ludicrous fedora hat) and radiating awkwardness. In fact he’s practically vibrating with it, rippling off him in waves. His hands are clenched awkwardly behind his back as if he’s clutching something, and for a surreal/appalling moment I think he’s brought me flowers. He hasn’t of course (thank God), it’s rather that he doesn’t know what to do with his hands. He unfolds them round to the front of his body and clasps them round his stomach, then lets them go entirely and they swing at his sides like
“Well, Will…” he manages finally, and his words run together and trip over themselves in the effort to escape his mouth so it sounds all garbled: *Wellwill.* I feel my lips twitch again. When did I become so hysterical? I never used to laugh. “*So solemn Will,*” I remember you once saying, “*so serious all the time.*”

Jack gives it another go, battling on undeterred. I’ve got to hand it to him. “Hey Will” he says (better), and then after a pause, “You look like hell” (not so much).

“Yeah?” I say, “I just got back.” I don’t really mind though. I do look like hell. At least he doesn’t ask me how I’m feeling when it’s obvious that, by any commonly accepted criteria, I feel like seven shades of shit.

He snorts a bit at that, and gingerly draws up the chair (your chair) to the side of the bed. Whatever resources he corralled to get him this far have clearly expired, because he falls silent again, clasping and unclasping his hands (of course). I stare back at him, suddenly struck equally dumb. I can’t think of a single thing to say to him, and he clearly can’t either, and I start wondering if we’re just going to gaze at each other until the ward closes for the night and a nurse appears to escort him out, magnificent in his stony silence.

Jack looks unhappy, because of course he does, and emits a long rumbling sigh. “How’s that doing?” he says finally, gesturing at his cheek to correspond to where the dressing is on my own. I try to shrug in response, and end up regretting it because it sends shivers of pain all over, radiating out from the stab wound in my chest. Fucking Francis Dolarhyde and his vicious, grinning little knife. “Could’ve been worse”, I manage finally (although probably not much worse). “They don’t think the scar will be too bad.” Not that I really care either way. It’s just another brand, another mark traceable back to you, like your handprints all over my body. A duelling scar: earned in combat.

“You can cover it up anyway with that mangy little beard of yours”, says Jack, and I huff out a laugh, because what else can I do? His awkwardness is now reaching levels of intensity that are positively operatic, and I find myself feeling sorry for him. “It’s okay Jack,” I say finally, “You know none of this is your fault.”

“I know,” he says, which pisses me off a bit, because I was expecting at least some level of protest. It serves me right, I suppose - I should have known there was no way I’d get the chance to be magnanimous with him.

Jack sighs again, so I sigh too to keep him company. “Hell of a scene you boys left behind”, he finally says. “A total bloody mess.”

That’s one way of putting it I suppose. “Caught you the Tooth Fairy, though, didn’t I”, I reply. A pause. “In a manner of speaking.”

Jack smiles a bit. “Yeah you did.” He pauses as well. I glance down at his hands, and of course they’re spiralling and twisting together. “Will, you also lost us Hannibal Lector.”

I stare at him for a moment, shocked into genuine silence. I can feel my mouth working uselessly; I must look ridiculous, like a fish gasping for air. I bet you’ve never looked like I do now, have you? Not once in your entire life. “For God’s sake Jack!” I manage finally, “I didn’t lose Hannibal Lector. It wasn’t like I forgot to put him in the back of the car and then drove home and was like ‘Oh! Where did Hannibal Lector go?’” I pull in a deep, raw gasp of air. “I got stabbed and thrown off a cliff.” I pause again. This time I definitely do not add in a manner of speaking.
He’s undeterred by this (of course), splendid in his sense of righteous endeavou...
Thanks to the fantastic Petra1999 there’s now a vocabulary guide to this fic available [here](#), so if English isn’t your first language and you’d like a guide while you’re reading it’ll hopefully come in useful for you :-}
Another six weeks limp by before they discharge me from the hospital. This is patently ridiculous – it’s hardly medically necessary – but I get the sense that Jack wants me somewhere secure where he can keep an eye on me. Unspoken, but equally obvious, is that the hospital is a contained space that they can stake out in the event of you turning up to finish the job. The idea is risible; as if you would ever stumble into such an elementary snare. As if they would catch you, even if you did turn up.

You don’t turn up.

There is a small but steady trickle of visitors. Alana comes, bringing an earnest little boy with her bright eyes and mop of dark hair. He drags your chair into the corner of the room and makes some kind of fort out of it with his mother’s coat, his vivid, bird-like eyes peering out through the folds. There’s something very droll about his intense little face. I smile at him, but he just stares at me owlishly and refuses to smile back. I don’t blame him, I probably look terrifying: wild-eyed and haunted with a shiny scarlet scar snaking across my cheek. Afterwards, he’ll probably beg Alana not to make him visit again. Zeller and Price stop by and are almost (but not quite) as awkward as Jack, although they thaw out more quickly and convincingly.

“Your hair’s too long Will,” Price says, squinting at me critically, “you could tie it up in bows at the moment. Aw, you probably should, it would look so pretty.” I shoot him a quick glance, but he doesn’t mean anything by it, it’s just teasing. He’s right anyway; I am crossing onto the wrong side of ‘unkempt’ (have already crossed). He sits on the edge of my bed and pilfers all the grapes from the fruit basket than Alana brought, and I laugh and make a feint of punching his hand away. I suppose it could be worse. At least my room is sleek and spacious – in fact it’s so well-appointed that it’s a complete certainty that the Bureau is picking up the bill, because there’s no way my creaking insurance would stretch to something like this. Actually, am I even still insured? I make a mental note to check. Not that it really has the same urgency as it once did – it’s safe to say that my injury rate will be falling exponentially now that you’re no longer around.

Out of everyone, it is Molly who is conspicuous in her absence. It’s obvious someone has been talking to her (someone almost certainly being Freddie Lounds), and I feel genuine guilt and grief that this awareness doesn’t distress me more than it actually does. I can’t blame her. I don’t. It’s not like I’ve made any attempt to contact her myself.

Kade also turns up again and this time refuses to sit, opting instead to either loom over me or pace around the room. She tells me that forensics have done a further sweep of the clifftop scene, and would I like to amend my statement? It’s such an obvious ploy that I nearly laugh in her face – of course they haven’t found anything new, and certainly nothing to incriminate me. I’d hardly be sat here if they had.

“No, I’m good,” I say (I sound glib, I know, but I can’t help it). “I stand by everything I’ve already said.”
She just looks at me quizzically, but I refuse to look away, and eventually she drops her eyes first. I can really be quite single-minded when I want to be. You would have been pleased. “You know, your parents selected your name with great prescience,” you once told me. “William. It means ‘determined warrior’ in the original Germanic.”

“Yeah?” I replied.

“The word ‘will’ itself means fortitude and resolve. Strength of character; force of will.” You smiled a little. “‘Willpower,’ you see?”

“Sounds like the world’s worst superpower.” I was feeling awkward by that time and was joking to try and cover it up.

“I suppose to you, at times, that it is,” you replied. You sounded thoughtful. “The gifts that you have; you don’t always find them easy to bear, do you? Perhaps one day you could.”

“‘Gifts’ in the plural?” I said, confused. “I thought you meant my empathy?”

“I do,” you replied, in the same calm tone, “but I also mean your great capacity for darkness.”

If anyone else had said that it would have sounded vaguely ridiculous, but your clipped English managed to imbue it with just the right amount of reverence and menace. At the time I didn’t entirely understand what you meant – although of course I found out eventually.

Another unavoidable factor extending my hospital tenure is that I don’t actually have anywhere to go. The Wolf Trap house is long since sold – the first of many casualties – and I can hardly shamble back up Molly’s driveway (it doesn’t actually feel like my driveway…I wonder now to what extent it ever really did). And even if I could, would I want to? No, probably not. The person she knew, her “sweet man” – I imagine how your lip would curl at that – is gone. He fell off a cliff and was washed away. The ocean claimed him. Full fathom five thy father lies, Of his bones are coral made, Those are pearls that were his eyes. Where’s that from? God, what’s the matter with me, it’s not like I’m in the habit of dredging up pretentious tags of random poetry. You’d know, of course. You always knew things like that.

The Tempest, that’s where it’s from.

Money is an issue, but not insurmountable. I’m not naïve enough to think I’ll be welcomed back to Quantico anytime soon, but I still have some savings, plus a reliable series of royalty checks that are trickling in from various monographs (reassuringly inflated since I’ve been in the news again – morbid curiosity has its market value, just like anything else). Even so, a part of me rebels at the idea of stifling in some suburban pile. I find myself scanning adverts for the decidedly wrong kind of apartments in the distinctly wrong part of town. Gravitating towards the unsavoury and secluded, telling myself it’s the privacy I’m seeking: the kind of neighborhoods where no one notices or cares and questions are never asked. I reiterate that it’s nothing to do with finding the type of property that you could drift into undetected, and sometimes I almost convince myself that it’s true.

Alana offers to help me move, but I have so pitifully few belongings now that it’s hardly worth her while. Pulling her across the city for the sake of a couple of tattered boxes would make the whole thing almost unbearably farcical. It’s not because I don’t want to give her my address. Is it? No, I’ll have to give it to Jack anyway. That’s not the reason.

The apartment is truly awful. I bet someone’s died in it, probably more than one person. Probably
quicker to list the tenants who didn’t die in it. Even the building sags between its neighbors, like a drunk man being propped up between two grudging accomplices. I amuse myself imagining what you’d say if you saw it, standing in the centre of the living room in your fucking horrible pristine suit, rolling your eyes in horror. You’d have a stroke. You’d hate it. God, how you would hate it. You with your $1,500 bottles of brandy, and your Florentine leather shoes, and your furniture pillaged from the 19th century. You were such a pretentious bastard, flaunting your wealth and taste like a blunt instrument, all wielding with the force of your personality. I bet you’ve never had to stay somewhere like this in the whole of your pampered life. No, actually, that’s not true is it? You were poor once weren’t you, devastatingly so. When you were very small, before your aunt and uncle claimed you. I remember you telling me about it, very pragmatic and matter-of-fact. You had an intense look in your eyes while you were speaking, but nothing else gave you away. Your voice didn’t falter once. I didn’t offer any sympathy, because I knew you’d hate it, but I still felt sorry for you – for that waifish child you’d once been. I wonder where you are now: whether you’re curled into a dirty corner in some godforsaken tenement or queuing for a mattress in a homeless shelter, tired and tattered and massaging the bruises on your arms? Somehow I doubt it. It’s incredibly hard to imagine you in such surroundings. You’re too resourceful, too cunning, no one can pin you down and claim you. The only reason you’d ever be in such dire circumstances is if you deliberately chose to be there.

Maybe I’m not being totally fair to you anyway. It’s not like you ever tried to make me feel bad for being less well-bred than you were. I know you harboured your aristocratic fastidiousness towards the glow of flannel and dog hair that surrounded me back then. The creaking car and the whitewash peeling off the fence. The aftershave with a ship on the bottle. You could have belittled me over it if you’d wanted to, you had enough opportunities. But you never did. I never felt like you looked down on me. Those sorts of things weren’t important to you, I don’t think. You weren’t a snob in that way.

After a week and a half in the apartment the boxes remain unpacked, but there’s beer and food (not much, but some – largely of the deep fried, processed, and powdered sugar variety that would make you start twitching with horror), and two chairs, and an internet connection. Jack calls me twice, and Alana once, but I don’t phone them back. I scan the pages of TattleCrime, spending far more time on the comments than the actual articles. I don’t need to read those, I was there; I know what really happened. I lose track of the number of times people refer to you and I as Murder Husbands (Freddie should start a merchandise range with that one, she’d make a fortune). Several people speculate on whether or not we were actually fucking, and if so for how long, and who topped who (you, of course, being the consensus opinion). I groan out loud and run my hand over my face. It’s actually pretty mortifying.

The comments seem fairly split as to how many people believe I was in on the whole thing and helped you fake your death. ZombieCannibal99 thinks that I was the one who died and the current Will Graham is actually Hannibal Lecter in a wig and non-prescription glasses. I raise my eyebrows at that one. FBI_Unmasked argues that I have got you a secret job at the Bureau as an expert profiler, except that no one else knows it’s you. Apparently I intend to exploit your insights as my own. There is a touchingly earnest account of how ID badges can be convincingly doctored, as if a fake badge were the single most implausible part of the theory. Most people agree that you are still alive. I toy with the idea of setting up a fake profile and weighing in myself. It is surprising how many people have a username with some variant of mine (numerous The_Real_Will_Graham’s and WillGraham2015’s), a substantial number of whom are actually claiming to be me and teasing the truth about what really happened that night. Far fewer do the same for you - even as an avatar you seem to command respect. Finally I snap and tell Graham666 “You’re full of shit. I know for a FACT that Will Graham could not have climbed back up the cliff because he has a morbid fear of
lichen and would rather drown than touch its grisly furry surface.” TheTruthIsOutThere promptly logs on underneath and adds that *everyone* knows Will Graham hates lichen, duh, who doesn’t know that, and that Graham666 is indeed full of shit. I blink at the screen several times then turn the laptop off. I realise, belatedly, that I am actually extremely drunk (lately, I am often drunk).

Occasionally I scan up and down the threads to see if there’s anyone who could feasibly be you, concealed behind a keyboard and an innocuous screen name, but nothing ever stands out.

God, when did I become so pathetic – drinking myself into oblivion and scavenging on TattleCrime? I’ve turned into the type of person I used to despise. I know I need to get a grip, start preparing for the rest of my life, but I don’t know how. I don’t yet know what my life’s going to be like without you in it. It’s not like before, when I always knew exactly where you were, even if I didn’t see you. For once my imagination is failing me. There’s an empty space, a wound. A great bleeding gash where you ought to be.

My evenings nearly always end in the same way, which is me closing my eyes and imagining you. Most of the time you resolutely refuse to appear, but not always. I watch you walking in, eyes darting around to inventory the room. You take in my gloriously squalid surroundings and quirk an eyebrow at me. “Oh dear Will,” you say. You sound amused. Your accent is slightly thicker than I remember it, heavier on the vowels. W-i-ll. You carefully fold yourself into the chair opposite mine, stretching your legs out in front of you and steepling your fingers under your face.

“Fuck you,” I say cheerfully. I raise my beer bottle at you in a mock toast. I am gaining a ridiculous amount of petty enjoyment at your disdain for my shitty apartment.

You just smile at me. You look fond. I recognise that expression, I’ve seen it before. You used to look at me like that quite often. At first I found it a bit creepy, I’m not sure exactly when that changed. I smile back at you and drink my beer.

“You’re drinking too much,” you say. I smile again and ignore you, taking another swig. There’s a silence now, but it’s quite companionable. I always liked that about you, you never felt the need to fill up silences with social platitudes and bullshit. I look over at you and you’re just sitting there, watching me and taking me in.

“You sent me your broken heart,” I say suddenly. You glance up at that. “In Italy. In the church.” Why am I telling you this? It’s not like you don’t already know.

“I did.”

“Why?”

You don’t answer. You just sit, watching me, that goddamn smirk on your face. You’re waiting for me to figure it out. You know that I will.

“To have a broken heart implies depth of feeling,” I say. My voice is starting to slur slightly and I cough to try and cover it up. “You don’t feel like that though, do you? You’re not like other people.”

“Assuredly I am not.”

“Bedelia said you were in love with me.”

“Did she?” you reply with polite interest.

“Why did you leave me behind?” I say. “You bastard. Why didn’t you take me with you?”
"But I never left you behind.” You sound thoughtful. Or maybe you’re just growing bored with me, with this… whatever this is (fucked if know). “Something is always going to keep me near you, even if we are not together,” you add. Now your voice is lightly contemplative; it’s impossible to tell whether you’re being sincere or not.

“Bullshit,” is all I say.

“You needed proper medical attention.”

“So did you.”

“But I am not like other people – I believe we have already established that.”

“You’re in my head,” I say petulantly. “You can’t keep having the last word.”

“Very well. Whatever you wish.”

“I do wish.” I’m really very drunk now. Extremely drunk. I take my glasses off and close my eyes, shrugging my shoulders and letting the muscles flex and bend. Everything hurts. I hear you moving towards me, feel your fingers carding through my hair, massaging the scalp. Your thumb trails over the sensitive skin beneath my ear.

“Your hair is very long.”

“I’m aware,” I say carelessly, even though I’m pleased you’ve noticed - that you’d take the time to notice a stupid little detail like that. Then I realise with a jolt (of something very like mortification) that I am getting more satisfaction from talking to you in my head than I do from talking to real people in the real world. Real, non-maniacal people. I additionally realise that this thought doesn’t actually bother me anywhere near as much as it should. It really should bother me. But then It’s not like I’ve got anything better to do, is it. This is my design.

“Goodnight Dr Lecter,” I say aloud. But this time the room is quiet and there’s no reply, because of course you’ve already gone. It’s just me in an empty room in the worst part of town, lost in an imaginary reverie with simultaneously the best/worst person I have ever met in my life who has tried to kill me on several separate occasions (and saved my life on a few more), and who I don’t even know for certain is still alive. My eyes are damp and stinging, but I tell myself I’m not crying. I’m not; definitely not. And not waving, but drowning.

I find a piece of paper, scrawl “Sort out life” on it (underlined three times and with two exclamation marks) and prop it against the kettle so it’ll be the first thing I see when I come into the kitchen tomorrow.

As I stumble through a drunken approximation of getting ready for bed, I allow my thoughts to stray back to you (of course). I’ve thought about it a lot, you know: what was going through my head when I pulled us both over that cliff. I also think a lot about what was going through yours, albeit hesitantly, because that part’s much harder to pin down. The things I remember most are the feel of your hands – one on my back, one on my hip – and your silence. Your silence was striking; you never made a sound as we went over, not once. You didn’t struggle or anything, you just let me pull you down, like you were reconciled to that fact that of course it would all end like this. You kept your arms around me the entire time, my head tucked against your chest.

I’d finally crossed the line hadn’t I? No wonder you were so pleased. Once it was you who delighted, me who tolerated; and then along came a Great Red Dragon and my delight in the slaying of it. And the realisation of that was utterly annihilating. The hum of satisfaction as the knife went in,
you and I hunting together – how alive I felt, truly fucking alive in the midst of all that death. Curiously (or not?), I don’t remember the important things – hitting the water, sinking under, getting ashore again afterwards – but I remember your hands and your silence, and the awful inevitably of it all. _Can’t live with you, can’t live without you._ I wanted to die and I wanted you to die with me. I do remember that.

When I woke up in the hospital it felt like the ultimate betrayal – you’d outsmarted me yet again. Your game, your rules…and the play doesn’t end until you say so. Even the ocean obeyed your whims and spat us both back out, because that’s what you wanted. Now that I’m here, a lifetime away from that hideous, exhilarating night - with the shock, the pain, the adrenaline, the blood (black in the moonlight) and the _delight_ - I can feel glad about it. Or maybe not glad, not exactly - just no longer as angry. I suppose I’ve got another chance, thanks to you. The really big question, of course, is what I plan to do with it. That’s the part I’m not ready to face yet. Eventually, of course, I know I’m going to have to – another reckoning. The alternative in the meantime is this weird liminal space, where I’m going through the necessary motions, marionette-like, making all the right jerks and twitches to convince people I’m still the same Will Graham as the one who dived into the sea. Whereas I (and you) really know that’s not the case.

The sane bit of me (which is also still in there, somewhere) knows I need to finally let you go, and perhaps one day I will. Just not quite yet.
I wake up the next morning with a pounding skull and the distinctly unpleasant sensation that something may well have crawled into my mouth and died in the middle of the night. God, this is pitiful – I’m too old to be behaving like this. I lurch into the kitchen to forage for aspirin, and immediately spot my note propped up accusingly against the kettle looking (if possible) even more shrill and exclamatory than it did last night. Then I feel an irrational surge of irritation towards my drunken self for being such a sanctimonious asshole, even though I know the sentiment is the correct one. I’m like a swimmer foggily and hesitantly moving skyward to try and break the surface (literally and metaphorically, really, because isn’t that what we must have done that night?) I need to make a conscious choice to start living again. I know this. I know it. I can’t keep pretending I don’t.

The problem is that I don’t have any clear sense of purpose, but at the very least I need something to fill up my increasingly aimless day before I run mad inside my own head. I suppose I could say I owe it to you (I could say that… I suppose). After all, you made sure I survived our mutual descent, you obviously intended me for something. God, though, where do I even start?

The apartment strikes me as even more dismal than usual this morning with pale, watery sunlight seeping through the thin curtains to showcase all the cracks and damp patches, so I decide to head out for a while. I keep my eyes cast down, glancing up every so often to observe the streets in short gasps. After about 20 minutes I begin to realise how paranoid I’m feeling about someone recognising me, so I pull up my the collar of my coat to hide my face. This feels better, until I catch a glimpse of myself in a store window and decide that if people weren’t looking at me before, then they definitely will be now because I look as shifty as hell. As a compromise I fold the collar back down but rummage in my pocket for my hat, tugging it low over my forehead. I cut across the park, and there’s a man on a bench reading a newspaper that has your mugshot splashed on the cover and a headline that runs along the lines of: FBI STILL BAFFLED. He catches me staring at him and gives me an accusing look, so I turn away and carry on walking.

I end up in a tiny coffee shop that’s trying a bit too hard to flaunt its trendily independent sock-it-to-the-man credentials, but is otherwise cosy and quiet. I’m the only customer, and I end up making idle small talk with the waitress. She’s wearing a handwritten name badge with a smiley face proclaiming “Hi! My name’s Sarah” and she keeps giggling at everything I say and tapping my arm when she wants to make a point. I know she’s trying to flirt with me, and she’s actually really pretty in a wholesome, rosy-cheeked kind of way. One upon a time I might have tried to hit on her just for the hell of it, although the very idea now makes me feel exhausted. I help her with her crossword puzzle instead. She has the same newspaper with you on the front, but at least I’m prepared for it this time and carefully avert my eyes to the sugar bowl on the counter.
“Within cupid’s arrow, a rare infection,” she says. “Twelve letters, starts with ‘e’ and ends with ‘s’.”

“Endocarditis,” I say before adding, a bit pointlessly, “endo means within.”

“Nice,” she replies. I can’t tell whether she’s genuinely impressed or is politely trying to ignore the fact that (even to myself) I sound like an insufferable smartass. I proceed to get both ‘autopsy’ and ‘malaria.’

“You’re really good with the medical ones aren’t you.” Now she’s beaming at me again, beaming even harder than the little emoticon on her badge. “Are you a doctor or something?”

“Not at all,” I say vaguely. “I only know them ‘cos they have to do with death.” Oh fuck, fuck, I actually said that out loud didn’t I? At times like these I wonder how I’ve managed to survive the past few decades whilst bearing a level of social cluelessness that’s so high it’s potentially terminal. I hold out my hands, palms upwards. “Shit, I’m sorry,” I say, “That sounded incredibly weird. I work in law enforcement. Forensics. You know, like…” I flail a bit, trying to think of a reassuring forensics analogy that won’t freak her out, and fail resoundingly. Are there any reassuring points of reference for forensics?

“Oh,” she replies slowly, “you mean like that show CSI?”

“Yes!” I say, a bit too eagerly. “Yes, exactly like that.” Well actually, no – not exactly.

She smiles and giggles, equilibrium restored, and while I’m glad to see her happy again, I still sigh internally and wish I could tell her that she’d be better off trusting her initial instinct and flinching away from me because I am, in fact, both disturbed and disturbing. I don’t belong in her world, which is peopled by those who are reliable and sane and nice. I am none of these things, I’m merely in disguise. I leave soon after and she drops heavy hints about stopping by again for a coffee on the house and another crossword challenge, and I tell her I’ll see what I can do, although even as I’m saying it I know that there’s no way I will.

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It’s a bizarre sensation, as if the world has been pacing on ahead without me (which essentially it has) and I’m trying to flag it down and clamber back on. After some deliberation, my first step is a silent pact with myself that the next time someone calls, I’ll pick up. In the grand scheme of things it’s a pathetic goal, but I need to start somewhere. A day or two drags past with nothing, and then the phone goes and it’s Jack. My heart sinks a bit – I was hoping it would be Alana. I’m not holding out much hope that Jack will say anything that I particularly want to hear, but breaking my resolution on the first try doesn’t bode well either, so I press the accept button.

“Hey Jack.”

“Will!” he says, as if he’s actually happy to hear my voice (he can’t possibly be. Can he?). “Long time no speak. I was starting to think you’d run off again.”

“No,” I say, “I’m right here,” which is actually pretty stupid, because where else would I be?

“Crime scene,” he replies, without further preamble. “One home invasion and one dead home owner. I’d like you to take a look.”

Considering his manner with me at the hospital this was not what I was expecting at all, and I am genuinely taken aback. “Really?” I manage finally.

“Yes, really,” says Jack. He sounds a bit impatient. I can hear a conversation in the background
behind him, the sound of a phone ringing. “There’s no one else and I’m guessing you could probably use the work. Ready for it?”

I feel a sudden surge of affection for him. Good old Jack. Why does he trust me so much? It’s not like I’ve done anything recently to deserve it.

“I’m ready,” I say (I’m not).

“You better be,” Jack replies. “I’m going out on a limb for you here Will. Asking you back wasn’t… well, let’s say it wasn’t a unanimously popular decision. I can’t carry you through this one.”

“Jack I’m fine, I can do this,” I say, and I’m pleased at how convincing I sound. “No one needs to carry me.”

You carried me once didn’t you, stumbling over the snow from Muskrat Farm. We were shaken and sore with assorted injuries and sublimated exhaustion, and I was drifting in and out of consciousness. Partly all the drugs I’d been given, but mostly the shock as well, I guess. My mind was shutting off; wisely, it had realised it was no longer an advantage to be aware of what was happening to my body. God knows what had happened to you, they didn’t exactly treat you kindly either did they? But there you were: trudging on with steady, irrepressible purpose, me hanging limp in your arms. My eyes drifted open every so often, and once I saw you gazing down at me. You caught me looking and smiled, rolling your eyes at me. “For such a slender thing, Will, you are much heavier than you look,” you said in mock annoyance. But you still carried me, you didn’t put me down once. That was one of the reasons for your success, I suppose: you never quit, not at anything. You probably didn’t know how, airily sailing through the limits of anyone else’s endurance.

“Will?”

“Yeah, sorry, I’m right here.”

“You sure you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I reply, as if saying it enough times can conjure it into reality. Jack proceeds to ask me if I want a ride, and I tell him I’ll make my own way, so he gives me the address and hangs up. I put my phone down, carefully replacing it onto the table, and then stand for a moment, taking a few deep breaths. There’s a weird thrill of energy vibrating through me. I don’t know what’s going to happen.

Okay, first things first. I dig out a shirt from one of my cardboard boxes (still largely unpacked, merely scavenged in as and when needed), and make a desultory attempt at ironing it. It’s a shame I can’t iron my face as well, which is marginally more crumpled than the shirt. I know I look like shit. I’ve lost a lot of weight and my eyes are now too large in my face, my cheekbones jutting out like a balcony (although still not as distinctive as yours). At least I finally cut my hair. I couldn’t face a barber so I did it myself last week in the smeary bathroom mirror, sawing away with a pair of nail scissors. It’s certainly a lot neater, but I can’t help feeling that it actually makes me look worse. The curls softened my face before - the shorter cut makes me seem more gaunt than ever, all planes and sharp edges.

I locate my glasses on the bedside table and cast a final glance around my dingy little living room before scooping up my keys and heading out to confront whatever perdition has been conjured up at the other end. Time to go to work.

On the drive over, I wonder what the hell I’m doing.
I see the flashing lights before I turn into the road, and pull up to the standard flotsam of police
cordons, paramedics and anxious-looking neighbors clustering together in packs for protection. The
FBI presence isn’t immediately obvious, but then I notice Jack prowling around the periphery,
barking out orders to his various minions. He raises a hand in greeting when he spots me. “Ah, Will!” he says, “Thanks for coming out. Glad you could make it.”

“No problem,” I reply. I sound a bit too earnest: it’s embarrassing. Then I nearly add something
about being ‘glad to be here,’ but fortunately realize in time how inappropriate that might sound: no
normal person is glad to be a crime scene (especially unfortunate given the whole ‘I know everything
about death – even in Latin’ comments at the coffee shop). Jack pats me briskly on the shoulder. If
he’s still harbouring any reservations, he’s not going to broadcast them here. As far as any onlookers
would be concerned, he’s genuinely pleased I’ve showed up. I know this veneer of unity is as much
for his sake as mine – he needs to stand by his decisions, after all – but I’m still grateful.

“Not your usual,” Jack says. He gestures at the house. “In fact this is probably a bit tame for you. But
I figured I’d start you out on something small.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You’re breaking me in?”

“Yeah, something like that,” says Jack, unabashed. He shrugs. “Local police called it in. It’s a low
crime area and there’s something a bit off about the body.”

“How so?”

“Face was covered with some kind of tribal mask. They think it’s premeditated, staged to look like a
burglary.”

“Okay then,” I say, “show me where.” Jack leads the way and I follow, trying not to trail after him
too awkwardly. To my great relief I don’t see anyone I know, although one of the cops we pass at
the gate is staring at me, and I suspect he’s recognized me from somewhere. He looks incredibly
young, little more than a teenager – scrubbed, shiny face with raw pink cheeks and practically
bristling with earnest idealism. There’s something touchingly pathetic about him; he looks like he
ought to have a plastic pistol and a toy badge. I try to remember when I was last that innocent and
enthusiastic, and fail spectacularly. (Was I ever? Probably not).

“Hey!” he calls out. Oh shit, he’s following us, bouncing up the path like an enormous uniformed
puppy. “Hey! Will Graham! You’re Will Graham aren’t you?”

I briefly consider denying it (‘No I’m not, but I’m aware of the resemblance – happens all the time
actually. It fucking sucks’), before realising that I can’t very well insist that I’m someone else with
Jack standing right there. The net result of all this is that just enough time passes before I answer to
make it look as if I’ve been struggling to remember what my name is. “Y-e-s,” I say eventually
(grudgingly). The inflection in my voice tips up at the end, so it sounds like I’m asking a question.
Christ. Jack is looking at me with a ‘what the hell’s he playing at now?’ expression on his face.

“Man!” says the embryo police officer, “Man, this is so cool, seeing you in person. I’ve read all
about you.”

“Yeah?” I say. “I’m the one who didn’t kill all those people.” I yearn to give Jack a deliberately
snide look at this point, but decide not to push my luck.

“Cool!” says the child, undeterred, and I give him a nod and smile (which is meant to be friendly – I
swear it is – but goes a bit wrong halfway through and probably just looks like I’ve got a nervous tic. I have a surreal mental montage of him regaling his colleagues with this exchange later on: “Yeah I met Will Graham, it was totally him. Twitchy little weirdo, seemed to have forgotten what his name was…” For an awful minute I think I’m going to start laughing.

“Don’t you have some statements to be taking Officer?” says Jack pointedly. A spiteful, shitty part of me wants to rub it in (‘yeah, Officer, don’t you have some statements to be taking?’) but I don’t, because he’s just a kid and none of this is his fault.

He now swivels the spotlight of his boyish awe upon Jack, and I take the opportunity to duck out the way and head towards the property. As I go I can hear a breathy “…absolutely Mr Crawford, right away Sir.” The house itself is spacious and affluent looking from the outside, entirely incongruous with tragic, violent death.

“Victim is Andrew Atherton,” Jack tells me when he catches up. “White male, 42 years old, divorced. Well-paid job as an investment banker. No criminal record, no known criminal associations. Main hobbies travelling and wine-tasting.”

“Why does it get called ‘travelling’ as opposed to saying ‘my hobby is going on vacation’?”

Jack ignores me: “According to his neighbours, an all-round decent guy.”

“People always say that when someone dies. Doesn’t mean anything.”

“It doesn’t mean he wasn’t either,” says Jack. “The Perp came in through there by the way,” he adds, pointing out a small casement window that’s about five foot off the ground. It’s not immediately apparent, partially obscured behind a trailing sycamore tree, and Jack has to gesture a second time before I spot it. I’m usually more observant than this, it’s slightly embarrassing. Jack gives me a look. “You okay?” he says.

“Fine. I’m fine.” (I should just get a recording made; write it up on a pasteboard sign). “Where’s the window lead to?”

“You okay?” he says.

“Utility room.”

“Uh huh.” I take a moment to track the footprints leading towards it. *My footprints don’t deviate, I walk with purpose. I break the window to gain entry. A casual intruder would be unlikely to notice it, but I am familiar with the property and I know exactly where I’m heading. It’s an excellent choice because it is secluded; I am extremely unlikely to be noticed when I prize it open.*

“What’s inside?” I ask.

“Andrew Atherton,” Jack replies. “Or at least what’s left of him.” He leads me into the living room, and I take in the sight of the late, lamented Mr Atherton, sprawled across the floor with a halo of blood around his head and his face obscured by an elaborate wooden mask with a raffia mane.

“Unexpected,” I say.

“Very.” Jack turns to the forensics crew. “Okay everyone, clear the scene for a few minutes. Will? Tell me when you’ve got something.”

I nod absently to Jack, but I’m already closing my eyes and entering the right mind space (which is not truly right, and never has been, as opposed to deeply wrong). I’m panicking, the acid rising in my mouth. *My hearts throb; this isn’t what I intended. This is not my design.* I open my eyes again, blink a few times. Then I go outside and find Jack. I’m surprised to realize that nearly 15 minutes
have passed.

“It’s a burglary gone wrong,” I tell him.

“What, seriously?” says Jack, “And your reasons are…?”

“He knew to head straight for that hidden window,” I reply, “which means he was already familiar with the house. But not from surveillance – this area’s too built up, someone hanging around with no reason to be there would get noticed. Check on any reports of loitering and so on, but otherwise I’d say you’re looking for someone who’s had prior access to the property. A laborer, tradesman… something like that. Squeezing through the window took a level of agility, so he’s going to be reasonably young and athletic. And it takes a degree of planning and confidence to raid a house in broad daylight, so we can be pretty certain he’s done it before – he’s probably already on the system with a history of breaking and entering.”

“Okay, I’ll flag up the B&E,” Jack says. “What else?”

“The primary intention was non-violent: the burglary. The front room’s been tossed so there’ll be valuables missing; you might be able to trace them. The killing of the homeowner was secondary and unintended, in the sense that it wasn’t the motive for entering the house. The offender thought it was empty. Mr Atherton should have been at work, it was the middle of the day.”

“We checked. His employers said he called in sick,” says Jack.

“Okay then, that’s why. He was in his bedroom, maybe he was asleep or the television was on – at any rate he didn’t hear the breaking glass from the window, but he did hear the disturbance in the living room. He comes downstairs and confronts the Perp, and that’s when it turns into homicide, because the offender needs to protect himself and eliminate the witness. Again, it suggests that he was known to Mr Atherton; he knew he could be identified, so pay attention to the possible tradesman link. Plus if he was anticipating an empty house he wouldn’t have tried to disguise himself in any way. See if the bullets match a gun belonging to the victim. If not, it means he brought it with him, so check for this in any previous offences when you go through the records; anyone arrested for burglary carrying that type of gun.”

“What makes you so sure Atherton wasn’t targeted?” says Jack.

“The body,” I say impatiently. “There’s no sign of sexual or ritualized elements, no attempt to torture or humiliate the victim. This wasn’t personal. The Perp wasn’t looking to derive any emotional satisfaction from killing him. A gunshot wound to the head suggests the only motive was to despatch him as quickly as possible, but it’s also far too clumsy for a professional hit – look at the defensive wounds on his hands. The furniture’s turned over; there was a struggle. The killer panics and shoots him, but it’s not clean. See the bullet holes in the wall? He didn’t get him the first time, the first few shots went wide.”

“So if it’s burglary why is the rest of the house untouched?” says Jack. “Why only this room?”

“Because now he’s been disturbed and has a dead body on his hands. He needs to make a quick getaway, so confines his search to the room at hand.”

“And the mask?”

“The mask isn’t significant; it already belonged to the victim. See the empty hook on the wall there?” I point at it, and Jack sighs out an agreement. “You said yourself that he enjoyed travelling, he almost certainly picked up the mask himself. Check with his friends, but I’m pretty positive that the mask is
incidental. The Perp simply puts it over Mr Atherton’s face so he can detach himself from what he’s done, and minimize the presence of the body while he remains in the room and searches for valuables. The burglary appears controlled and methodical, but the murder is not - he came here to rob, not to kill. He’s not acclimatized to violence – at least not this level of lethal violence – so he needs to depersonalize the victim and just grabs the first thing to hand. I wouldn’t be surprised if he closed Mr Atherton’s eyes before the mask went on.”

“So,” says Jack, “…it really was just a burglary gone wrong.”

I smile wryly. “You weren’t kidding when you sad this was a lot more tame than the usual, were you Jack?”

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Outside the house it’s starting to get dark, and there’s a raw, metallic feel to the air. I prop myself up against the wall and take a few deep breaths: my temples are starting to throb with the familiar beginnings of a headache, and I’ve left my painkillers at the apartment. But it’s okay, it’s fine. I’m fine. I am. I came here, and I did my thing, and it was fine. There’s a high-pitched ringing in my ears, and I start to think I’m getting a migraine before I become aware of the vibrations in my pocket and realise it’s actually my phone going off. Look at me: two calls in one day. I feel like Miss Congeniality herself.

The caller display says ‘Alana Bloom,’ and I smile in spite of myself. “Hi Alana.”

“Will!” she says, “so good to hear your voice.”

“I’m at a crime scene,” I blurt out.

There’s a pause, and then Alana answers: “Is that so?” She doesn’t exactly sound happy about it.

“So, um, how are you doing?”

“I’m fine Will,” she replies, her voice carefully neutral, “to be honest I’m more concerned with how you’re doing.”

“We should catch up some time,” I tell her, instead of giving her an answer.

“That would be great,” she says, immediately seizing on this. “How are you fixed for tonight?”

“Oh, yeah, sure. Tonight,” I reply before I can stop myself. “Why not.”

“Okay, great.” She sounds surprised that I’ve agreed so readily (although not as surprised as I am – what the hell was I thinking?). “How does eight o’clock sound?”

“That sounds fine,” I say gloomily. “I can be with you by eight.”

“Excellent. I hope you don’t mind but I’ll have someone with me – someone who really wants to meet you.” I open to my mouth to protest, but she’s already rattling off the name of the bar and telling me not to be late. Then she hangs up.

I let my head fall back against the wall and sigh out loud. Another of the local cops is walking past and gives me a weird look, which I ignore. What’s the matter with me? Why does this feel so difficult? It shouldn’t be this difficult, should it? It’s just a drink with an old friend (and an unknown someone, who ‘really wants to meet me’).
I give myself a mental shake and unfold myself away from the wall. I need to go. It’ll be good for me; dutifully I begin to trudge back towards my car. Then I notice that the policeman is still staring at me, and have to resist the urge to just walk over and punch him in his fucking face. I hate it (I do…I really do)…but I can’t deny the sense of crushing disappointment I feel whenever my phone rings, and it’s never, ever you.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

So, after 10,000+ words of scene setting (how did that even happen)…THE PLOT OFFICIALLY BEGINS *rolls drum* Enormous thanks, as always, to everyone who has stuck with this so far. I initially planned for two updates this week, which has subsequently doubled because your lovely, thoughtful encouragement is like authorial crack.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The bar that Alana has named is both expansive (high ceilings with swaying pendulum lights, wood-panelled walls stretching off to a vanishing point) and expensive (starched white cuffs flashing watches like delicate wafers of gold; the women brittle-looking with immaculately painted faces), and as soon as I cross the threshold I suspect that I’ve made a horrible mistake. I can’t see Alana anywhere. I know that I am spectacularly out-of-place in my ancient jeans, battered coat and DIY haircut, and it seems inevitable that one of the innumerably sleek staff will soon realize this and ask me to leave (good).

Ah, there’s Alana. Has she has spotted me, or can I still make a run for it? No, she’s seen me – her eyes lock with mine over the top of the crowd, and she heads over, arms curling around my back in a fragrant hug. She looks delightful: happiness suits her. Following behind her is a tall man, who peers at me over her shoulder with unabashed curiosity. I stare back meditatively, sizing him up.

"Will," she says, disentangling herself and turning to gesture at him, “This is a very dear friend of mine, Dr Michael French. We did a residency together at Hopkins.” So this is the person who wants to meet me. Why? He doesn’t look like the type of person who’d be all that interested in the type of work I do. Not that you can tell that by looking at someone of course, he could be anyone underneath. I briefly amuse myself with the thought that he’s actually ZombieCannibal99 from TattleCrime.

"Of course I know who you are Mr Graham," he says (right on cue). He pumps my hand vigorously. “Alana has told me all sorts of impressive things about you. It seems that you’re quite the dragon-slayer.”

Michael French is lithe and distinguished looking, with a neatly pressed suit and elegant coils of silvery black hair. I’d say he was in his mid-forties. He’s also English – all cut-glass vowels and affable smiles and nods of the head – so I try to be charitable and put that down as a cultural reference, and therefore the reason he thinks he can refer to someone as a ‘dragon-slayer’ without the kind of self-consciousness any self-respecting person ought to surely feel at saying such a ludicrous thing. “Please, call me Will,” I say. It appears his smiling and nodding is a bit contagious because I’ve started doing it myself.

Alana fortunately intercedes (no doubt compelled to prevent myself and Michael French continuing to smile and nod ourselves into a frenzy) and asks me how the case went. It’s a bit of an unfortunate question, but I can’t really blame her because the only other alternative is ‘so what are you doing with yourself these days?’ and there’s no way Michael French wants to hear an honest answer to that, for all his smiles and chivalrous world-weary charm. Besides he’s a friend of Alana’s (a dear
friend, no less), so maybe crime scenes won’t shock him too much. I still err on the side of caution though, partly because I don’t actually want to talk about it, and partly because I don’t feel I’ve got the measure of him yet (what’s he really after?).

“Fine, thanks,” I say, “it went fine. I think it should be resolved fairly quickly now.” So that’s that. I realise I am not exactly helping to oil the conversation along, and should add something else, but I don’t know what to say. Both Alana and Michael are looking at me encouragingly, smiling and nodding for all they’re worth (Christ).

I opt for the coward’s way out and gesture at the bar “Anyone want a drink?” I ask.

Alana swirls her wine glass to indicate that she’s fine, but Michael French says “No, no, let me. I insist. What are you drinking Will?”

“Oh thanks,” I say awkwardly, “a beer would be good.”

“Right you are,” he replies, and strides off to the bar with the determination of A Man on a Mission. Alana and I escape to a side booth, and I take my glasses off and run a tired hand over my face.

Alana regards me contemplatively. Here it comes, I think. She takes a deep breath: “Honestly Will. A crime scene? After everything that’s happened, you really think that’s wise? You’ve gone through absolute hell and the first chance you get you’re getting submerged in death and horror.” She frowns and takes a fretful sip of her wine. “Sometimes I think I should kill Jack Crawford.”

I just blink at her without answering. The main thought I’m guiltily aware of is that she’ll have to join a queue, because you’d get him long before she can. I wisely decide to keep this particular insight to myself, and instead make an impatient gesture with my hand. “It wasn’t like that,” I say. It’s not that I don’t appreciate her concern, but the implication that I’m so feeble I’ll just roll over at the first command from Jack is hugely irritating.

“So what was it like then?”

I put my glasses back on and regard her over the top of them. “What else am I supposed to do?” I say, “I’m good at this.”

“I know you are. I also know that it nearly destroyed you before.”

“Yes, well…that was before.”

“Well now I’ve walked back again,” I say irritably. “Everything’s different now. Everything. Molly and I haven’t spoken in months, I’m going out of my mind on my own in the apartment…” I long to add ‘and Hannibal’s gone’ but this would be utter madness so I don’t. “I need something constructive to do,” I add lamely. “Jack called, and it seemed like a viable option.” I quite like the sound of this so I say it again (although at this point I’m no longer sure which one of us I’m trying the hardest to convince). “Working for the Bureau feels viable. It’s as simple as that. At least for the short-term, until I figure out something else.”

Alana looks as if there’s a lot more that she could say, but at this point Michael comes back with the drinks – a beer for me, and a glowing amber concoction in a slim glass for himself – and I’m so relieved to call time on this awkward heart-to-heart that I find I’m actually pleased to see him, and dole out a big smile in response. He smiles back and pushes the beer in my direction. “Cin cin,” he says.
“Santé,” says Alana. She sounds frustrated.

“Cheers,” I reply, and down about half of mine in one go.

Michael glances at us both. “I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything?” he says.

“No it’s fine.” I smile at Alana, slightly apologetically, so she’ll know I’m not trying to dismiss her. “We were just catching up on a few things.”

She smiles back at me, and briefly puts her hand over mine. “It’s really good to see you Will,” she says, and I can tell she means it. Michael smiles too, and for a moment we’re all just sat there, beaming at each other like the goddamn Brady Bunch. No one starts nodding though, so at least there’s that. Privately I congratulate myself on my general tendency to avoid socialising at all costs, because it’s really fucking exhausting.

Alana asks Michael how his clinic is going, and I try so hard to look interested it’s almost painful. Inevitably I overdo it, because he suddenly stops talking and looks closely at me before saying “Are you all right Will? You look a little tired.” It’s true, I do – I am – but I still feel irritated with the way he points it out. It always strikes me that when people say ‘you look tired’ they may as well be saying ‘you look like seven shades of shit.’ I amuse myself by wondering what would happen if you were here. Probably nothing much, not really: you’d be charming and confident, and we’d all hang onto your every word. Later I’d drown out the noise of everyone else and talk to you on my own, so I could bask in the voltage of your highly-tuned regard centring solely on me. Although if I’m honest, I can’t really imagine you ever willingly submitting to an evening like this.

Michael has now launched into an anecdote about his colleagues – something convoluted about an inebriated nurse and a night shift at the ER – and I zone in and out, making sure I laugh at the appropriate times. I keep waiting for him to start grilling me about my work (or, infinitely worse, about you) but he doesn’t. He’s obviously more polite and/or restrained than I gave him credit for – either that or my obvious weirdness has scared him off. Instead I ask Alana how Margo’s doing, and she tells us about plans for breeding race horses and getting a training centre going. Alana is pleasant and engaging to listen to, and I become a bit more animated, telling her how happy I am that things are going well for them both. She buys the next round of drinks, and I get the one after that. I sneak a look at my watch whilst stood at the bar: I’ve been here for nearly two hours, which is a sufficiently respectable amount of time that I can soon make my excuses and then fuck off and leave them to it.

Alana and Michael have their heads together when I return to our booth. I deposit the various glasses in front of them and slide back into my seat. Michael looks up at me and smiles. “Do you care for opera, Will?” he says.

“No really, no,” I say bluntly. Alana shoots me a look. I catch it and throw it back at her. What am I supposed to say? I’m just being honest: I don’t give a shit about opera. Michael is looking at us both in turn, a quizzical little smile on his face. “Sorry,” I add a bit lamely, as a concession to Alana and her obvious disapproval.

“No need to be sorry!” he says gaily, as if I am just being charmingly eccentric as opposed to rude and ungracious and socially awkward. “It’s just that I have tickets for Tosca on Friday, and my usual opera crony has let me down at the last moment.” (Oh my God, who the hell has opera cronies? Even you would have drawn the line at that). He sighs heavily, laboring the point. “Alana was going to oblige me, but it seems she’s not available either.” Alana sighs too, in carefully choreographed regret, and I am struck with the horrible realization that they hatched this out beforehand between them. I wonder who the instigator was: whether Alana has been making a charity appeal on behalf of her tragically isolated friend, or if he was sufficiently intrigued by what he read in the press to seek out an introduction. Either way, this is a blatant set-up. There’s no way that someone like him can’t
find a more suitable recipient for his opera tickets.

“It’s very kind of you,” I say, carefully selecting each word, “but I’m afraid it would be a bit wasted on me. It’s a shame to deprive someone who’d be able to truly appreciate it.” It’s not a shame (at all) – I couldn’t give less of a shit about the deprivation of the unknown opera cronies – but I am determined to behave myself in front of Alana.

“Oh but I disagree Will!” he says, “I can’t accept that at all I’m afraid. I think you would be an extremely worthy recipient.” Is he for real? For a second, I marvel at the level of self-confidence that enables someone to be so obvious, and so utterly unconcerned about it. I could tell him to ram his tickets up his ass and he’d just chuckle jovially and I’d be the one left feeling embarrassed, slinking away to re-live my shame in private. I hate the way he’s worked it round to imply that I am being modest and self-denying (which he can rally against) as opposed to conceding my original point (which would be game over) in that I just don’t like fucking opera.

“Honestly,” I say, “it’s really not my thing.”

“What operas have you seen?” he replies smoothly.

Oh God, it’s going to be like this, isn’t it? I need to either give up and accept defeat; or man-up and tell him ‘no’ in a way that’s so decisive he’ll finally abandon the whole stupid plan. He’s still talking, waxing lyrical about orchestration, and a particular soprano, and how I simply must give it a go, because he’s sure I’d utterly love it, and even if not then it’s only a few hours lost, and he would be so terribly grateful if I took that goddamn ticket off his hands. My head is starting to hurt. Alana keeps looking at me, smiling encouragingly.

I don’t respond immediately, which is fucking fatal, because it gives him the chance to dive in and spin my lack of refusal into a definite acquiescence. “I’ll meet you at the Hall at seven o’clock,” he says, giving me a chipper little nod. At least he didn’t offer to pick me up I suppose. Although maybe I should insist on it – he’d either get his wheels stolen while he was ringing the buzzer, or take one look at my shit-tip building and get the hell out of Dodge. Either way, I could then get back to my usual Friday night plans of getting drunk and trolling TattleCrime.

Ironically, it’s actually this realization that makes me start to change my mind. My level of socialising is terminal; in fact I’ve seen autopsies with marginally more life in them. Wasn’t this part of my resolution about Will Graham’s Brave New World? I said I wanted more things to do, I even told Alana that; and which she may make a point of reminding me of if I persist in saying no. What’s the worst thing that can happen, anyway? (Oddly enough, even my relationship with you doesn’t appear to have cured me of asking such loaded questions). Maybe I’ll even enjoy it? (Although admittedly, probably not). But it’s not like I can’t survive an evening masquerading as an opera crony. I can survive most things, after all. I even survived you.

“Okay then sure,” I say finally, before I can change my mind again. And then, dredging up my last reserves of good manners: “Thanks.” I remember your observation that “whenever feasible, one should always try to eat the rude,” and struggle to hide the most godawful smirk. If he has the gall to look triumphant, I think, then I really will tell him to fuck off. But he doesn’t. He just smiles, raises his glass to me and says: “Thank you Will, I shall be delighted to have the pleasure of your company.” Then he turns to Alana and starts asking her about the BSHCI budget, as if the last ten minutes didn’t even happen. I tip my head back against the cool fabric of the booth, and wonder for a brief moment what the hell I’ve let myself in for.

I know it’s ridiculous, but I almost feel like I’m being disloyal to you. As if you would have cared either way.
The phone call comes in the middle of the night, my cell buzzing shrill and insistent on the scuffed gate-legged table propped next to the bed. I bolt upright, disorientated, and fumble around for it. There’s the unmistakable sound of breaking glass as a beer bottle tumbles to the floor. “Fuck,” I mutter to myself. I look down at my phone (successfully retrieved): the number is withheld.

“Lo?” I say. I cough a few times to clear the tiredness out of my throat. “Hello?”

There’s no response. No breathing, no nothing.

“Hello?” I say again, annoyed. Still nothing. The silence is complete. Even the room is silent, no sounds from outside the window, no noise in the building. I might be the only person awake in the entire world: me and whoever it is on the end of the line.

You?

I nearly say your name, but stop myself just in time. It’s hardly likely to be you. Silent telephone calls aren’t exactly your style, you’d be more likely to leave a few artfully arranged body parts on my doorstep. And if I say your name I’ll give you away, not to mention myself, to the person on the other end.

“Who’s there?” I say. I’m going for demanding and assertive, but am too confused and sleep-addled to properly carry it off, and I realize that I sound more anxious than anything else. There’s still no reply. I glance at my alarm clock, glowing a ghostly blue in the darkness: 02.33. What am I doing, why don’t I just hang up? 02.34. I wait to see what the caller will do. A sudden flare of competitiveness makes me feel that I shouldn’t be the one to crack first and end the call. I consider making some smartass remark (‘Quite the conversationalist aren’t you?’) but somehow the levity doesn’t feel right. 02.35. It’s the eeriness of all the silence, it’s oppressive. It’s making me feel unnerved, this voiceless presence at the other end of the line, and suddenly the spell breaks and I just want the whole thing to stop. I abruptly hang up and switch off my phone. Then I pull the blanket over my head and wait for sleep, which is a long time coming. A car finally goes past the building, and the headlights dip and swim across my wall like a phantom shoal.

By the time the morning comes I feel as if I could have maybe dreamt the whole thing, except for the call display - a permanent reminder of a missive from the middle of the night.

Chapter End Notes

I am English myself, so no offence intended to any British people reading this (Rule Britannia!). Did all your English Literature teachers make you watch that BBC adaptation of David Copperfield featuring Hugh Dancy in a truly unspeakable wig? Do you all have weird rustic neighbours who refer to people as dragon slayers non-ironically. No? Oh, just me then.

And, speaking of which…Brit-picking I have heard of, but what about American-picking? I keep making Will swear like a Londoner and need to go back and change it (I also had to take away his mobile and give him a cell phone instead). If anything jumps out at you, please let me know and I’ll change it.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I wrote much of this during a l-o-n-g train journey, and a load of schoolkids got on just before London and proceeded to play ‘Nyan Cat’ on a sodding loop. So the soundtrack for sections of this chapter wasn’t something suitably august and dramatic, but Nyan Cat. Just thought I’d throw that one out there. (If you’re not familiar with the Nyan Cat song, go and look it up on YouTube. Go on. I’ll wait).

“Compose Hannigram fic to the sound of Nyan Cat” *crosses item off bucket list*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Friday approaches I start to agonize about the trip to the opera with Michael (which is absolutely not a date, oh my God), and alternate between enthusiastically cursing him and Alana for pushing me into it, and myself even more for allowing the pushing to happen in the first place. I feel like I’m sleepwalking into this, blindly staggering into some new disaster because I’m too passive (and exhausted and demoralized) to take control of my own life. Maybe there’s an aspect of him (very, very slightly) that reminds me of you – the European sophistication being most obvious – but there’s no doubt the main reason I’m even considering going is that I’m bored and restless and lonely.

I don’t have his number, but I could get it off Alana and cancel. I could be light-hearted and casual about it, the way that normal people are (“let’s take a rain check Michael!”), like it’s no big thing. I could say I’m sick, except he’s doctor and he’ll ask what’s wrong with me…he might offer to come round. I could tell him I have to work (no, of course I can’t say that – I don’t have a job, and he probably knows it). I could say I’ve recently got a job, completely unexpectedly…Oh God, no - just no. Even as I’m spiralling and floundering, I know deep down that I’m not going to do any of these things. As it is, I excel myself in the end by not only making it the opera, but making it on time.

Michael is hovering in the foyer of the auditorium and his face breaks into an enormous smile when he sees me.

“It’s very good of you to come tonight Will,” he says, shaking my hand. “I know you weren’t terribly keen initially. I’m afraid I somewhat pressganged you back there.”

“It’s okay,” I say, “I’ve become seriously reclusive lately, I need to start getting out more.” I wonder whether I should leaven this (frankly, spectacularly depressing) disclosure with some kind of joke, but the only recluse references that come to mind aren’t remotely funny; and besides I can’t really be bothered. I shrug my shoulders instead: “It was good of you to make the effort.”

He looks a bit deflated at that (not surprising really, seeing as I’ve made him sound like some kind of social worker), but honestly though; what did he expect? He’s too suave and self-possessed, that’s his problem, he’s probably used to people falling over themselves to get him to take them out. It won’t do him any harm to have to work for it for a change. He recovers quickly nevertheless and compliments me on my suit, telling me I look very nice in formal wear. I know I should reciprocate, but it seems like that might get perilously close to flirtatious banter – and while I’m not the greatest with social cues, I’m not completely fucking oblivious – so in the end I just smile and thank him.

“It let us go in,” he says with mock formality. He places his hand lightly on the small of my back when we pass through the main doors, but removes it fairly speedily and otherwise doesn’t try and
We have a drink before the performance begins, and Michael starts asking me about my teaching work, and where I grew up, how I met Alana, and my thoughts on homeland security. Nice, safe subjects; slightly dull. Nothing about encephalitis or copycat killings, certainly nothing about you. He’s obviously done some research on me, because he’s aware of several of my articles, including the more obscure ones, and even asks me about fishing. I can’t decide whether I find it flattering or invasive and over-eager; possibly a bit of both. His knees brush against mine under the table, and I don’t immediately pull away. Michael is fucking beaming. Normally I’d hate it. I should hate it. But there’s something about being the focus of such radiant high regard that’s pretty intoxicating. I realise that I must have been lonelier over the past few months than I allowed myself to acknowledge.

He has excellent seats at the front of the House (of course) and I am relieved when we sit down and the lights finally dim, because while he’s proving marginally more bearable than I thought he’d be, I have absolutely reached - and exceeded - my small talk threshold. Onstage the performers caper and parade in a kaleidoscope of mantua dresses, embroidered breeches and sweeping cloaks, swaying slightly as they brandish ornately carved crucifixes. Briefly, I remember the church in Italy. God, this is going to be boring. You would have loved it. You’d have been fucking rapt.

Michael speaks Italian (naturally) but has “taken the liberty, Will” of procuring me an English translation of the libretto so I can keep track of the plot if I wish. I virtuously study it in the dim light, feigning an intelligent level of interest. Vissi d’arte: I lived for art. It sounds a little like you. I’ve never really had much to do with classical music. I remember you showing me your theremin once; me leaning over and picking out the opening riff to Smoke on the Water, and you looking like you were losing the will to live.

You were the complete opposite because you loved music, you were at the opera constantly. I never usually recognised the type of stuff you played, either on records or on an actual instrument (because of course you were a talented musician yourself). Actually, no, there’s that one time I did. It was a playful, light-hearted little tune, and it stood out because it was so far removed from the rippling harmonies and thundering arias you normally favoured; you were whistling it to yourself as you brewed us coffee. “Isn’t that from a children’s piece?” I said. I couldn’t remember the name, but I thought I might have seen it on TV once.

If I squinted – and if such a thing were feasible – I think that you perhaps looked faintly embarrassed. “It is indeed for children,” you said, “but I remember it from when I was a child. My sister was extremely fond of it. Peter and the Wolf. Petya i Volk.” Of course your Russian accent was flawless. I still emitted an involuntary snort of laughter: “You sound like a Bond villain.”

You gave me a long-suffering look in response. “Such things you say to me,” you replied. But you were smiling, you didn’t really mind. You always liked that I wasn’t afraid of you.

On stage the soprano, emoting wildly, plunges a dagger into the chief of police. Questo è il bacio di Tosca: This is Tosca’s kiss. Before long, Act 3 is drawing to its awful climax. Tosca flees from the soldiers and hurls herself over the parapet into the sea, reunited with her lover in death. I flinch in my
seat. Michael leans over and whispers whether I’m all right? “Thanks,” I tell him blankly, “I’m fine.”

We go to the theatre bar afterwards, and of course it’s filled with the type of people that I’d usually avoid on pain of death. High Society – a setting in which you’d be in your element, owning the room; and I just want to grab a tray and pretend to be a waiter. Michael propels me forward, and I can feel numerous eyes swivelling towards us, taking us in. I try not to cringe away from them. Of course they all know who he is, so now they want to know who I am by proxy. Suddenly I am longing for silence and solitude and the cool night air on my flushed face. The evening has been too intense, and I can’t stop imagining you being here. You would have been here once, not that many years ago. Any of the tall dark men could be you.

“I really ought to be going,” I say, a bit wildly.

Michael looks disappointed (again), but doesn’t push it. “Of course,” he replies, “I’ll walk you out.”

“There’s really no need…” I begin, but before we can start arguing about it we are interrupted by a tall, rangy man who radiates the same air of authority and entitlement as Michael, clapping a pale, doughy hand on the latter’s shoulder. He’s going to delay my departure, I can tell, but in a way I’m quite grateful for his interruption. It’s grounded and steadied me; I was nearly on the verge of a panic attack before. Focussing on him I find myself anchoring back into the room, like a dash of cold water in the face - calmer and more myself (whoever the hell that is nowadays). I immediately see that he’s older than Michael is, far older than me (even older than you – ha) and reminds me a bit of a rocking horse: all heavy bones and teeth and rippling silver hair. “Michael French!” he says, “Where on earth have you been hiding, doctor? You missed the last two performances.” At this point he notices me for the first time, despite the fact I’ve been desperately trying to sidle away, and his eyes run over me approvingly. It’s so blatant, I shift a bit with embarrassment. I really hope I’m not blushing. “It seems you’ve been otherwise engaged Michael,” he says with an absolute fucking leer, “and I must say I can completely understand why.”

“We’re not…” I begin loudly, just as Michael says: “On the contrary Johnathan, I’m afraid Will is an extremely recent acquaintance.”

So get your mind out the fucking gutter, I (do not) add. It’s ridiculous that two men attending the same (boring, pretentious) event should automatically be assumed to be dating. I could be Michael’s wingman for the nubile opera cronies for all this old asshole knows. I try and remember if anyone ever mistook you and I for a genuine couple when we were spending so much time together, and if I would have minded if they had. Yes, I would – certainly in the early days. I’d have fucking hated it. Johnathan is just looking at us both with a disbelieving ‘yeah right boys, whatever’ expression on his face.

“Will works for the FBI,” says Michael, still heroically battling to save this conversation when it clearly ought to be allowed to slink away and die quietly.

“Oh, what fun,” gushes Johnathan in response (is it fun? How is it fun?). “I know how that one goes: ‘I’d tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.’” He beams at us both as if he’s just minted the most perfect epigram since Oscar Wilde himself.

“Actually – no,” I say in a bored voice, “that’s M15 not the FBI.”

There is an awkward pause.

“Anyway,” I add, “like I said, I really have to be going.”
“Johnathan, I’ll be with you in a moment,” Michael says, “I’m so sorry about that Will,” he murmurs to me in an undertone.

“It’s fine,” I say, even though it’s not. “Don’t worry about it.”

“He’s rather incorrigible I’m afraid.”

“He’s a stupid old bastard,” I reply, and we both laugh.

We get to the foyer and I have a sudden feeling he might try and kiss me, so I take a few steps back for risk-management purposes. If he notices it he doesn’t give any indication. “Thank you Will,” he says, “I’ve had an extremely pleasant evening. If you’re agreeable, I really would like to do it again sometime.”

His sincerity is a bit embarrassing, but I still find myself agreeing, shaking his hand and thanking him for donating the ticket. It’s the least I can do, really, when he went to so much trouble.

*****

I arrive home and sling my jacket over the chair, then automatically check TattleCrime whilst waiting for the kettle to boil. Freddie has updated twice today. There’s the usual speculative piece about you prefaced with your mugshot (of course you would manage to take a flattering mug shot), but it’s just a re-working of previous theories and hyperbole so I don’t bother reading the whole thing. There’s also a new article about me, with a picture furtively snapped at the Atherton crime scene. It’s not exactly what I’d call a good photo. My eyes look manic, and there’s a frantic, guilty-looking hunch in my shoulders. I look a bit demented to be honest; possibly it was while I was contemplating punching out the policeman. It’s obviously been chosen with care (unless I actually just look like that all time, and no one’s pointed it out to me yet). Not surprising either way, as the general gist of the article is that Jack must be nearly as crazy as I am to have let me anywhere near one of his crime scenes. Jack’s actually in the picture too, although mostly cropped out – the side of his overcoat is hovering in the corner of the frame.

TheUsualSuspects has written (almost certainly sarcastically) that I am ‘cute’. “Thanks,” I say out loud.

There are the inevitable puns about Graham Crackers.

In a fit of irritation I log on with my fake profile and type “OMFG, Will Graham has been arrested again. Feds outside his house for 30mins. Just left in unmarked car.” I sit back and wait for everyone to progressively lose their shit, until finally the Administrator logs on (bingo!) demanding who I am and how I know this (it’s vaguely depressing that everyone, including her, seems to take an obsessive interest in staking out Will Graham’s house as a given and doesn’t question that part). I reply “Check with Ms. Purnell ASAP.” I am pleased with this touch: Jack Crawford would be too obvious – everyone knows who Jack is – but mentioning Kade implies just the right amount of insider knowledge for Freddie to think about taking it seriously, and I smirk to myself at the thought of all the wasted hours this will (hopefully) entail. I consider adding something exclamatory (‘Another travesty of justice!’) but decide not to push my luck.

I scroll back to the top of the page and finish reading the original comments about the article. The summations about me are of two main types: incredibly unflattering, or creepily enthusiastic. Maybe I should be worried (should I be worried?). And then, just underneath something entirely different. Underneath all the variants of “he’s a misunderstood genius!” and “he’s a fucking psychopath!” a user called Maniloa has written: “The mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by.” I push back my chair and spring away from the laptop as if I’ve been stung.
I remember that exchange extremely well. Of course I do, it was the first time I properly spoke with you. You turned up at my hotel room, brandishing Tupperware so you could get me to eat human flesh without realising it (start as you mean to go on, I suppose). And you making me laugh with that wickedly apt analogy about Jack and the teacup. And me being torn between: “Well, thanks, I guess. It’s better than being a teacup” and “Wait, what…did you just call me a mongoose?”

Snakes and mongooses, it’s not that rare a combination. Is it? Is that a thing people say? I don’t know. Could anyone else be aware that you’d told me that? It’s not in the public domain, I’m sure it’s not. How could it be? I try to remember if I ever told anyone myself. Maybe at the BSHCI. Maybe Chilton – but it doesn’t seem very probable. Why would I have bothered telling him trivia like that? I was fighting for my life (thanks to you). And even if I did, he’s hardly in a position to do much about it now. And surely he wouldn’t do it like this? I go back to the laptop to bring up Google and spend a truly surreal ten minutes entering various combinations of your name and mine along with ‘snake’ and ‘mongoose’ to see if the information is already out there, if someone else could possibly have known. Nothing comes up beyond the current page on TattleCrime, and I experience a disorientating brew of deep relief and anxious disappointment. It still doesn’t mean it’s you. It could be a coincidence (unlikely though, surely?). It could be someone fucking with me (more probable). It could be you fucking with me. God, is it though? Is it you? I want it to be (desperately), yet the idea that it could is completely crazy-making.

Maniloa…what the hell does that even mean anyway? I pull up a new tab and type it in. My hands are shaking. I spell it wrong the first time and end up with listings for tourist destinations in Manila. Here it is: Maniloa, the Samoan God of…cannibalism. What, seriously? I scan down the website: Maniloa laid traps for humans and ate them; when they took revenge and murdered him, they were cursed with cannibalistic urges themselves. I’m smirking now in spite of myself: it’s too ridiculous, I can’t possibly take it seriously. It must be a set-up, it has to be, it’s far too hackneyed for you.

But then again…what if it’s not. I rub my eyes, knead my thumbs into my temples – try to think. What if this is just your version of a private joke? You knew I’d check. How many people on TattleCrime are going to know what ‘Maniloa’ means anyway? It sounds made-up, it doesn’t even seem like a proper word. No one except me would give this comment a second thought – the site is full of random bullshit, it’s hardly the weirdest thing on here, not by a mile. It wouldn’t stand out to anyone else.

I sit for while, chewing the ragged skin around the edge of my thumb and trying to decide what to do. I should reply in kind shouldn’t I? Something about teacups (how the hell has my life reached the point where I am deliberating whether to use a fake profile to troll TattleCrime and describe myself as a teacup? Christ). But then wouldn’t it be obvious that we were talking in code? It would, wouldn’t it - it would attract attention. It has to be something that’s not too esoteric, but something that’s specific enough that you’ll know it’s me; that your message got delivered.

First, though, I have to set up a new profile because the username of my previous trolling one was ‘Will_Graham_Is_A_Righteous_Badass’, and if Maniloa really is you then you’ll never let me live it down when you find out.

I sit there for fucking ages while the moths rattle crazily against the bare lightbulb overhead, and I finally type: “Pointlessly obscure, don’t you think? And what happens when the snake and mongoose switch places?” I hit submit before I can change my mind. My new screen name is ‘Primavera.’ Surely that will be enough? My heart is pounding in my ears.
Brave boys, I mutter illogically to myself, are not afraid of wolves.

Chapter End Notes

ETA. Many thanks to mandarino for help with the Italian :-)
Chapter 6

Waiting, and watching, and dreading, and hoping.

I stay awake until 4am, fortifying myself with cold pizza and scalding coffee, and obsessively refreshing TattleCrime to scan the comments section. Nothing. Is it you? It is you, isn’t it? It has to be you, it has to be is pounding through my head on frantic, breathless repeat.

To pass the time whilst I wait, I trawl back through the older threads for any other comments ‘Maniloa’ may have made. It takes a while as the site doesn’t have user profiles and there’s no way to establish posting history. I have to check each page manually, but I can’t locate anything else - the only evidence Maniloa even exists outside of my own head are the 12 hit-and-run words that I’m currently fixating on. There’s no avatar next to the user name, just a blank black box. Eventually I wear myself out with anxious anticipation and fall asleep over the table, waking up at midday with an agonizing cramp in my neck. My reply is still there, unclaimed. There has been no response.

I swipe my hand over my face, trying to chase away the surge of disappointment. I’m being premature aren’t I? It’s only been 24 hours, give or take. It doesn’t mean you won’t respond at all, maybe you’re just not able to at the moment. Perhaps you only have limited access to the internet (although the thought of you being subject to the same constraints as normal people doesn’t feel convincing somehow). Maybe something’s happened and you want to reply but can’t. Actually, this seems even less plausible – that anything could happen to you over which you didn’t have complete control. Although that’s not totally true either is it? After all; I happened to you.

I realize I hadn’t totally prepared for this. I’d considered anger, or forgiveness, or mocking, or disdain, or something cryptic and impenetrable – and I’d rehearsed my reactions to all of these scenarios with varying degrees of success – but I never seriously thought that you wouldn’t respond at all. Or maybe that is your response: muteness. Maybe your answer is to disregard me. No, surely you wouldn’t do that. What would be the point? Even as I’m saying this to myself, I know that it’s probably exactly the type of thing you would do.

Picking through all this make me feel tired again and I up dozing for a while, fitfully coiled up in my chair. I hope I might dream about you, but I don’t.

In the evening my cell phone rings. I sprint across the room to pounce on it, and have to swallow down my intense disappointment when I see Alana’s name on the screen. “I was just thinking about you,” she says, then adds mischievously, “how was your date with Michael?”

“It wasn’t a date,” I practically yell.

To do her justice, she backtracks immediately. “I’m sorry Will that was a stupid thing to say. I didn’t mean to tease you, I was just hoping that you’d had a nice evening…” she trails off awkwardly and I immediately feel bad for snapping at her. “He’s a good guy and he thinks you’re really interesting. I figured you could probably use a new friend right now.”

“I know,” I say. “Thanks.” None of this is her fault.

“Any word from Molly?”

“Divorce papers.”

“Oh Will, I’m so sorry.”
“Yeah, me too.”

“Want to meet up sometime and talk about it? I’m here if you need a friendly ear. Or a drinking buddy - we can drown our sorrows together.”

“I hope you don’t have any sorrows that need drowning Alana?”

“I’ll find some.”

“No, don’t. Mine won’t go down without a fight, I may need assistance.”

“We can go and drink that moonshine they serve at the Bureau bar. It could sink the Bismarck so your sorrows won’t stand a chance.”

We talk a bit longer then I tell her I’ll be in touch and hang up. I check TattleCrime again: there’s still nothing, and I feel a new surge of hopelessness. How can I possibly go and sit with Alana, fabricating a whole narrative about my emotional life that’s fit for her to hear? You hovering between us the entire time, unknowable and unnameable – the truth laid out in the silences and the gaps between the words. There’s so much I want to tell her and can never possibly say.

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Four days after the TattleCrime message I get a call from Michael. I didn’t give him my number, and am slightly irritated that he’s just gone ahead and tracked it down anyway (Alana again, almost certainly).

“Hello Will,” he says politely, “how are you doing?”

“Fine thanks,” I reply. I don’t ask him how he is, and there’s a slight pause as if he’s waiting for me to reciprocate. When he realizes it’s not going to happen (well done Michael), he ploughs on undeterred: “I hope you had a pleasant evening the other week?”

Oh God, are we really going to do this - I told him it was fine, why does he need to hear it again? Petulantly, I refuse to play along. “What can I do for you?” I say.

“Oh don’t worry Will,” he replies. He’s laughing, he doesn’t care that I’m a rude little shit. Christ, does anything ever faze this guy? If he was here he’d probably give me a clap on the back. “I don’t actually expect you to do anything,” he continues, “I simply thought it would be nice to touch base, as you Americans so charmingly say, and see if you were available to meet for a drink sometime? Say tonight, after work?”

I know I’m being ambushed again, but needless to say am now feeling vaguely ashamed of my previous abruptness, and therefore allow him to chivvy me into meeting him at the same bar we went to with Alana – which he was probably counting on from the start – and I realize that my social awkwardness has not only grown pathetically predictable but, as an added bonus, has morphed into guilt-tripping me into actual socializing. I sit across from him feeling sulky and hard done by, which after one beer tumbles into a sense of maudlin self-pity, and after several more into outright depression.

“You seem very preoccupied,” says Michael (which I guess is one way of putting it). “I sometimes detect a real sense of absence in you Will, like a part of you is wandering away from the rest of us.” He quotes softly: “Away from earthly cares.”

“Sometimes I feel like half a person,” I blurt out. I’m getting so drunk that the lights in the bar have started to swim and shimmer in duplicate. I amputated the other half, I think. I tore it out and hurled
Michael looks at me, pensive and solemn. “If you don’t mind me saying so Will,” he says at last, “you seem to me like someone who has had their heart broken.”


If he ever calls me on it, I can always pretend I was talking about Molly.

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One week after the message. I am finally starting to accept that it’s no good and you are not going to acknowledge me. That perhaps you never intended to. That you could simply be amusing yourself and it’s all part of some larger game that I won’t know how to play. But why would you do that? Why bother? You saved me after all…you could have just left me to die, but you didn’t. There has to be a reason for it, for all of this (doesn’t there…surely there has to be?), but I can’t figure it out.

“No word yet on Lecter,” sighs Jack, tossing the report sheets onto his desk. “It’s like he’s just disappeared from the face of the goddamn Earth.”

“Yeah,” I say absently, “he can do that.” I stare out the window at the way the birds are swirling past, wind-tossed and wild, swooping and plummeting like kamikaze pilots. My reflection is very pale, and I know I can’t go on like this.

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Two weeks after the message. I get another call from Jack to consult on an emerging pattern of serial homicides. I consider telling him no, but turn up in the end because it’s actually a relief to have something else to focus on beyond the frenzy that’s brewing up inside my skull. The offender is poisoning the victims and mutilating the bodies post-mortem; the combination of assault methods is highly unusual (thus interesting) and I spend many hours sifting through the files.

On the way out I bump into Sanderson, the new CSI sub-lead. He doesn’t like me, not to put too fine a point on it. The ostensible explanation is because I am allowed unrestricted access to the lab, whereas he has to call ahead and pre-arrange permission (I overheard him once bitching about it to Jack: “But how come he gets clearance?” he kept saying. I was sort of hoping Jack would smack him down with something along the lines of ‘Because he’s Will Graham and he’s a goddamn genius,’ but of course he didn’t). In fact, I know that the real, unspoken reason for Sanderson’s dislike is that he doesn’t trust me and thinks I’m awkward and weird (to be honest, he’s not entirely wrong). He spots me now and jerks his head towards the stack of papers I’m carrying. “You got a permit to remove those?” he asks.

I look at the files and then look back at him. “No.” I say. I wait patiently for him to realize that there is, in fact, fuck all he can do about this.

Oh yes, there we go. “Yeah…well…you should be careful,” he says crossly, “that’s evidence pal.”

“Actually, it’s technically not, it’s secondary summation data,” I say. “Pal.” I give him a (awkward, weird) smile and disappear into Price’s office, slamming the door with a smugly triumphant bang. Initially it appears that the only shared characteristics the victims had were that they were young, male, and physically attractive. A bit of digging, deductive logic, and a series of delicately-worded phone calls ultimately reveals that they also all worked as part-time escorts.

“Prostitute fixation and/or morality complex, possible religious zealot,” says Zeller, “We should get someone to pose as an escort. Lure him out then dogpile his sorry ass.”
“We don’t know it’s not a woman,” muses Jack. “They do say that ‘poison is a woman’s weapon’
don’t they? Although yes, I agree: statistically more likely to be a man.”

“I still think we should get a fake escort,” says Zeller, doggedly reluctant to abandon the plan.

“You could always do it Will,” adds Price. “You know, take one for the team? Put the booty up for
duty.” I choke on my coffee. Price pats me kindly on the back.

“Will could do it,” says Zeller hopefully.

“For science,” adds Price.

“Yes, he could, but he is most emphatically not,” says Jack.

I can’t help laughing: in spite of everything, it’s actually quite nice to feel like part of a team again. I
need to go back to work. I should. Shouldn’t I? I should start working regular cases. I’m so bored I
take the virtually unprecedented step of typing up all my impressions about the murder series for Jack
(on fucking headed paper, no less) and leave it with his secretary in a neat little envelope. I’ll go in
and see him some time, tell him I want to consult on a regular basis. “Love and work are the
cornerstones of our humanness” according to Freud. It’s not like I’ve got anything else in my life
after all.

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Three weeks from zero. I finally garner enough motivation to meet up with Alana, and as soon as I
see her I wonder why on earth I didn’t arrange it sooner. We find a homely downtown bar,
comfortably shabby and welcoming – the type of place with peeling posters on the wall and Bob
Marley pounding out of the jukebox. It’s nothing like the stilted, pretentious one we went to with
Michael, and I can feel myself starting to unwind a little, the tension seeping out of my chest and
shoulders. The barman tries to hit on Alana, and we confer about his awful pick-up lines over
whiskey chasers, giggling like schoolchildren. I volunteer to get the next round, then Alana decides
she wants to derive more comedy fodder from the barman’s woeful seduction efforts and heads off
for the subsequent one.

“Godspeed comrade,” I say, and we exchange a clumsy high-five; Alana is laughing so much her
cheeks have gone pink. While she’s gone I check my phone and am surprised to see four missed
calls from Jack. Something must have happened. It’s not like him to be so tenacious – usually he’d
just leave a peremptory message and expect me to call him back. I gesture at the screen when Alana
returns. “I better get this,” I say.

Jack answers immediately. “Will!” he snaps. “Why the hell haven’t you been picking up your
phone?” His voice is very serious and I feel a sudden swell of dread.

“What is it?” I say sharply. “Jack? What’s wrong?” Alana’s eyes are darting over my face, alarmed
and watchful.

“There’s been an incident Will,” Jack says without further preamble. “Matthew Brown broke out of
police custody two hours ago.”

At first I am so preoccupied with my relief/disappointment that he’s not calling to say that they’ve
arrested you (again) that I don’t fully absorb the implications of this. “Matthew Brown?” I repeat
stupidly. I hear a little startled gasp from Alana’s direction.

“He was being transferred to a new prison and overpowered his guards during transit,” Jack
continues. He doesn’t add ‘just like you did’ but I wonder if he’s still thinking it.
“Shit,” I say instead.

“Quite.”

“Are the guards still alive?”

“Yeah, but only just. He obviously wanted to be out of there as quickly as possible. His priority was to subdue rather than kill, but that’s just for the time being – God knows what he’s going to do now he’s out. We’ve issued an alert, road blocks, the usual.”

“Anything I can do?”

“No not yet. I’ll let you know.” There’s a pause. “Watch yourself Will,” says Jack, “You know he might come after you. I’m thinking I’d like to put a security detail outside your apartment.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. Thanks.”

“No problem,” he replies. I don’t say anything else, and after a brief silence he hangs up.

I carefully replace my phone in my jacket pocket and turn to Alana. “That was Jack” I say unnecessarily (of course she knows it was Jack). “Matthew Brown’s escaped.”

“Oh God.” She looks horrified.

“Yeah.” I don’t know what else to add. The name of Matthew Brown is a conduit for all kinds of horror and hopelessness, channelling a tiny subterranean cell, a charnel house in a courtroom, and a death warrant signed from me to you. I feel like the room’s starting to spin and I clutch the side of the table, try not to fall, try to keep my tenuous grip on gravity (and reality) intact.

“Will…?” Alana is saying. Her voice seems very faraway.

“How did you feel,” I suddenly blurt out, “when you discovered what Hannibal really was?”

She flinches a bit at that. “Wow,” she says, “not what I was expecting you to come out with.”

“Yeah, but how did you feel?” I can’t let it go. God, what’s the matter with me, why am I asking her this?

“Probably a little like you did,” she replies after a pause, “except at least you managed to figure it out for yourself.”

“And no one believed me,” I can’t stop myself saying.

“And no one believed you.” She takes a tense gulp of her wine. Her hand is quivering – just a little – and she places it flat on the table to steady it. “I don’t know… I hardly know what to tell you. I felt horrified. Shocked. Angry. Humiliated that I didn’t see it sooner.”

“I was mostly angry,” I say. Angry, fascinated, exhilarated, terrified, excited…and it changed everything, but not in the way it did for her. I drain my own glass. “Do you think he’s coming back?”

She looks at me meditatively. Finally she says: “Not if he has any sense.”

“I think he might come back sometime…I do. I think he might.” I’m muttering now, partly talking to myself, and she has to lean in to hear me.
“You almost sound as if you want him to,” she says finally. She’s frowning.

“The game’s not over yet,” I reply. I’m frowning now as well (mostly at myself for not shutting the fuck up). I know I’m going to bitterly regret this conversation tomorrow morning when I’m sober. I can see myself already – hunched in my apartment in convulsions of embarrassment and anxiety, picking over the carcass of my drunken confessions – but it’s like a dam’s been opened and I can’t stop the emotions of the last few weeks gushing out.

“You should have some water,” is all Alana says. “I’ll get you some. Otherwise we might lose you tomorrow to the hangover from hell.”

“No,” I say urgently. I grab her sleeve. “Don’t go, don’t leave me.”

“Okay.” She sounds anxious; she’s not totally sure what’s going on with me. She takes my hand and rubs her thumb over my knuckles, “Okay Will. What do you need? Tell me how I can help you.”

“Matthew Brown came back,” I say irrationally. And suddenly the whole thing is too much, and I’m shaking and shaking, and why aren’t you here?

“Shh, shh,” Alana pulls me closer to her, stroking my shoulders, gentling me in the same way she would soothe her child. “It’s okay Will. You’re just exhausted and overwrought. You need some rest.”

And then she suddenly she just pulls back and looks at me. And she says gently, apropos of nothing: “You loved him, didn’t you?”

She doesn’t say a name, but then she doesn’t have to. It’s there, unspoken (unspeakable). We both know she means you.

I can feel a broken sob threatening to work its way up my chest, and in that moment I despise myself utterly. I slowly let my head sink into my hands, my shoulders trembling.

“It’s okay Will, shh, it’s okay”, she says (even though it’s clearly not, oh God). But if she’s even half as horrified as I suspect she must be, she at least has the self-control not to show it. It’s not much consolation, but it is some.

Later she helps me navigate my leaden arms into my jacket, pulls me into a final embrace, and deposits me in a cab. She stands by the road and watches it pull away, her scarlet coat a bright splash under the streetlight. I slump back into the seat and watch the roads and cars roaring past the window. There’s a full moon, and the city looks drowned and pale. I know that the battalions of regret and shame will soon come trudging in but right now, in this moment, I am comfortably numb.

“It’s not over yet,” I think. I trace my finger against the glass. “You’re still out there somewhere. You’re waiting. I know you are.”

You and I. We were wildly opposing counterparts: north and south, left and right (and wrong). You the unstoppable force, me the immovable object. We were like polarities weren’t we, drawn together by nature and instinct. Like matter and anti-matter…opposites attract. ‘Matter’ means something counts, it means it signifies. It means it wasn’t all for nothing. “Matter does not really exist,” you once said to me, “the concept is entirely contradictory, an abstract universal.” Well fuck you, fuck you, because for once you were wrong. Because it means something. It matters. What we had matters. It counts, it signifies. It does. It exists and it matters, and it wasn’t all for nothing.
That night, I dream about you.

*I'm watching you draw, your pencil dancing over the paper in quick decisive flicks, each mark made with incredible purposefulness. I find myself fascinated by your hands: they're beautiful, the hands of a surgeon, musician, or sculptor. Somehow it doesn’t sound quite right to say that a man can have beautiful hands, but you really have.*

“What are you drawing?” I ask.

“You.”

“May I see?”

Wordlessly you pass it over. The figure in your sketch looks savage and wild. I am splattered and dashed with blood, staring intently out from the paper; and I immediately understand that this version of me was created to stare from the page and see you, see the reality of you, what you really are beneath the human suit you wear. You sat there for hours, meticulously crafting this, knowing that its pencilled eyes would watch you with carnage and adoration. If you’ve been whispering into my chrysalis, then this image is undoubtedly the lurid butterfly that ripped its way out at the end – monstrous and outrageous, and shaped in your image. It’s fiercely and grotesquely beautiful.

“It’s amazing,” I say.

“Yes?” You sound intrigued. “I assumed you would be disturbed by it.”

I know that disturbance would be the normal response – the right response – but I also know that I no longer really care about being either normal or right. I stare back at you, keeping my counsel and saying nothing. Abruptly – noiselessly – you uncoil yourself out of your chair and start moving towards me. It’s frightening, how fast you can move when you want to. I stand up myself. Falter. Then I take a few steps back until I am hemmed against the wall, but you still keep coming. You’re only slightly taller than me, but your presence is so substantial that you seem to fill the room. We’re close enough now to touch. I know I could escape if I really wanted to – kick you in the groin, punch you in the stomach – but even as the thought occurs to me I know that I’m not going to do any of these things; that I’m not even going to try.

“Turn around,” you say. Your voice is soft and caressing, and when I obey you let out a small sigh, so low it could almost be a hiss. “Good. Now place your hands in front of you and brace yourself against the wall.”

“Are you going to hurt me?” I ask. I am calm though, despite myself; like I don’t really care one way or the other. Why am I so calm? I don’t understand, although I suspect you would know.

You press you mouth up against the back of my neck, and I can feel you smiling against my skin. “That depends,” you say. “Would you like me to?” You reach up to where my hands are pressed in place against the wall, and curl your fingers around my wrists. Your hand is so large you can grip them both at the same time – your beautiful surgeon/artist/slaughterer hand. Your other hand trails thoughtfully down my abdomen, and my breath hitches in a shuddering gasp.
“So sensitive,” you say. You slowly glide a single, long finger below the waist of my jeans, and massage small circles against my left hip bone. I gasp again, and let my head fall back onto your shoulder.

“You are so responsive, it is rather beautiful.” You’re purring into my ear, soft and terrifying. “And yet we have barely even begun.”

“Oh God,” I say.

“No,” you reply mockingly. “Just me.”

My entire body is screaming with tension and need, delirious with rival instincts: fight/flight/freeze/submit. You’re going to pin me in place with a single hand and fuck me against a wall, and I know that this is a really bad idea and not something that I should be doing (at all) – and that I should care about this (a lot), yet I don’t.

“Please,” I say brokenly. “Please…”

“Please what, Will? What are you begging for?”

I shake my head. I can’t bring myself to answer, can’t put into words that I want (need) this from you, that I’m riven with hate and love and desire. Irrationally, I believe that naming it will be the single defining moment that changes everything; that once I utter it aloud then all my power and control will devolve to you. Game, set and match.

“Tell me,” you persist, “I want to hear you say it.”

I wake up suddenly and it’s shocking, almost physically painful, clawed hands wrenching me out of sleep. What the hell is happening to me? I am almost painfully hard, and am about to head to the shower to take care of it before the events of last night come crashing in on me, and I groan out loud in a particularly vicious brew of hangover, horror, and utter mortification. I fumble around on the bedside table to check my phone. No calls or messages. Is this a good sign or a terrible one? Either/or. Oh fuck.

For a few seconds I feel a bit overwhelmed by how utterly appalling all this is. It’s far too much to even consider processing without coffee, so I wrap a blanket round my shoulders to stave off the worst of the cold and stagger towards the kitchen. I look out my bedroom window on the way and immediately spot the black car parked opposite. There are two guys in the front seat, sipping from take-out cups and gazing laconically across the road – almost certainly Jack’s security detail. He didn’t waste any time, I’ll give him that.

Once I have caffeine I feel slightly more prepared to start the unenviable task of raveling through my various problems. Problem one: hangover. I ferret out some Berocca tablets and wash them down with the coffee.

Problem two: having incredibly realistic erotic dreams about you. Although in retrospect maybe this isn’t so much a problem as a natural (inevitable) progression, so I decide that I’m not going to let it bother me too much (or, indeed, at all). While admittedly not a regular occurrence, it’s not even the first time it’s happened – and at the very least demonstrates that my unconscious mind is a lot more honest about things than my waking one. It’s not like I wasn’t aware of the tension thrumming between us. Of course I was: at least towards the end. In turn, I’m pretty sure you were aware of it long before me (as you were with just about everything else, you smug bastard), although you never
mentioned it. Why didn’t you? Were you afraid of the reaction you’d get? It seems unlikely – I can’t really imagine you caring about things like that. More probable is that you were playing a long game. Or maybe you just didn’t care all that much. That’s also a possibility, I suppose. You always seemed to be above the type of things that drove normal people to distraction. I remember someone confiding their romantic woes to you at one of your dinner parties, and how you just watched them as the story rambled on, bored and amused and fascinated in turns: the way a scientist might look while scrutinising a lab rat.

Anyway, shit – problem solving. Where was I?

Problem three: infinitely more troubling at this point is my drunken confession to Alana. There’s going to be some serious fallout over this, I can tell – I already feel exhausted imagining the earnest, anxious conversations she’s going to force me to have. And what if she tells Jack? I frown at this, chewing nervously on my thumb nail. No, she wouldn’t do that. Would she? No, I don’t think she would. You’re not here. She doesn’t need to. It would humiliate me, freak out Jack (the spectre of an insanely angry Jack immediately floats into my mind and I quickly tell it to piss off) and it would achieve absolutely nothing constructive. It wouldn’t would it? Surely she won’t. Shit.

Problem four: for present purposes, most problematic of all. A deranged murderer with a frenzied obsession/grudge against me (at this point I’ve sort of lost track), who has escaped custody and right now could be fucking anywhere. The scale of this problem is so immense, that I don’t even have the words to discuss it with myself. This is such bullshit: who the hell has problems like this? (well…me, obviously). Right now I feel if I’m at the mercy of events; which is utter shit, because I of all people know that events – just like you – have absolutely no mercy in them at all.

This is a spectacularly awful realization (not to mention a resounding Own Goal in terms of trying to think constructively), so it is at this point that I make an executive decision to say ‘fuck it’ to the impromptu problem-solving session, and abandon it entirely in favour of stumbling into the shower and jerking myself off frantically, almost guiltily, my back slumped against the coolness of the tiles. It doesn’t take long, and I come so hard I nearly black out.

As I’m dragging a towel though my hair afterwards I think back again to my dream. As well as being more honest, my unconscious self has a damn sight more awareness than I do, because deep down I know beyond reasonable doubt that – had that scene been real – I would have been begging you in a heartbeat.

After two days there’s still no news, and the spectre of Matthew Brown continues to linger over everything with no resolution in sight. I feel unbearably twitchy, a constant state of restlessness in which I can’t stop looking over my shoulder. It reminds me of a game I played as a kid called ‘What time is it Mr Wolf?’ One player would stand with their back turned, and the other kids would creep towards them in a pack. The kid at the front turned round every so often, and if they spotted someone moving then that kid was ‘out.’ But eventually, with an awful inevitably and a shriek of satisfaction, someone's hand would smack down on the first player’s shoulder while their back was turned: and they never even knew it was coming, they never saw it on time. I always hated that fucking game.

Ever since Jack’s phone call, I have been playing Mr Wolf with Matthew Brown.

I remember your words, again and again: Brave boys like him are not afraid of wolves. But deep down it’s no good, because I am. I’m afraid.
Michael calls me again the next evening, and I notice that my sighs of irritation are growing (slightly) more subdued each time it happens. Maybe Alana was right – it’s actually quite nice to have a friend.

"God forbid we become friendly," you once told me. "I don't find you that interesting," I replied. You just looked at me meditatively, biding your time, an intense little glint in your eye: "You will."

“How are you?” he asks when I pick up the phone. “I’ve been concerned. Alana told me about this Brown character – dreadful business.”

I can’t help laughing at this spectacular level of understatement. “Yeah, it’s pretty shit,” I say. I wonder if Alana told him anything else, but quickly dismiss this as paranoid.

“Would you care for some company?”

“Thanks, but no. I prefer staying in at the moment.” I shrug, even though he’s not there to see it. “You know how it is – battening down the hatches.” (I wince a bit when I hear myself say this: I sound like some old asshole in a string vest waving a shotgun). Nevertheless I’m familiar enough with his tactics by now to anticipate a polite objection, and sure enough he offers to drive over. He never can take no for an answer. At some point (perhaps not too far off) this mannerly persistence is going to spill over into domineering and irritating, but at the moment there’s something vaguely reassuring about his desire to see me. It makes me feel like less of a lost cause.

He arrives an hour later with a bottle of wine and delicious smelling take-out stacked in a series of neat little boxes. He's obviously taken aback at the state of the apartment, and I find myself warming to the fact that he’s sincere enough not to labor out a series of lying platitudes about how shitty it is. He prowls around whilst I try and marshal sufficient clean plates and cutlery for us to eat the food, and I take it all in through his eyes and ears: the sirens howling outside the window, the shouts from the street; the uncovered bulbs and the leaking pipes; the general air of squalor and hopelessness that coats everything like a layer of dust. He comes back and draws up a chair to the greasy Formica-covered table. “Not what I was expecting,” he says lightly.

“No, I guess not,” I reply, although I’m intrigued, in spite of myself, as to what exactly he did expect.

“So what washed you up on this particular shore?” he asks. “I can’t help feeling that you’re here from choice rather than necessity.”

I’m surprised at this, because it shows a level of acuteness that I wouldn’t have actually given him credit for. “I wanted to go to ground,” I say at last – which is almost, though perhaps not quite as bad, as when I was ‘battening down the hatches’ earlier. Maybe I should just concede the inevitable and look into founding a Doomsday cult. I could call it The Terminal Grahams…No I couldn’t, that sounds shit.

“Will?” he says. “You’re not listening to me.” Oh dear, he sounds annoyed (I knew my inveterate vagueness was going to piss him off eventually).

“Sorry,” I say. “I was just…” wondering what to name my Doomsday cult. “Um, I was just… thinking.”

“I was asking you if you felt you needed somewhere reclusive to conceal yourself for a while?”

“Yeah, something like that,” I reply. It was meant to deflect him, but even as I’m saying it I realize it’s essentially true.

“That’s good,” he says (is it? Surely it’s not). “Because if it had been a question of money…”
Oh hell no. He can't really believe that he can ride in here like the proverbial white knight waving his checkbook around. Does he? Does he think that he can buy me?

“It’s not a question of money,” I say firmly. The fact that he could even hint at it, however decorously, makes me feel uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry Will,” he says, “that must have sounded terribly patronizing. I simply meant that I am… well, I am financially comfortable, shall we say, and have always been very happy to help out a friend should they require it.”

Once again his reaction makes me second-guess myself, and I wonder if I am just being unnecessarily defensive and ungracious towards a kind person who simply wants to try and make my crappy life a bit less miserable (and has the financial comfort to do so). I still can’t quite bring myself to apologize, but I smile at him and say it’s fine (and it is…sort of).

After the meal – which is so luscious and appetizing that to call it take-out seems like kind of an insult – we pour the rest of the wine and I suggest putting some music on before remembering that I no longer own a CD player. We sit in the chairs instead (God, I need to get a sofa at some point. Why don’t I have a sofa?), but if he’s in agony at my Spartan hovel then he’s no longer showing it. I tell him about some of the cases I’ve worked over the years, carefully selecting and editing as I go (in fact it’s all neatly bisected – before you and after you, of which the latter isn’t mentioned at all). He appears interested and asks intelligent questions, and I reflect on how nice it is to actually have a sentient audience after all those nights declaiming to empty space. Several times he allows his gaze to linger over my mouth, and I know he wants to kiss me.

I avert my eyes hastily, pretending I haven’t noticed. In this respect I’m actually starting to feel vague nudges of guilt about him. I try to push them away, and sometimes succeed, but invariably they always come back, nagging and chafing like something stuck in my teeth. I know that the right thing – the kind, straightforward thing – would be to level with him and be clear that I can’t give him what he wants. But every time I consider it I pull back. Because if you tell him that you’re not going to fuck him, my conscience hisses at me, then he’ll get bored and leave and you’ll be alone again. On bad days I can’t decide which is worse – the fact that I’m willing to use a perfectly nice man who deserves better; or the fact that I’ve grown so pathetically, desperately lonely that I’m prepared to lower myself to being so clingy and needy towards someone who, in my previous life, I would have gone out of my way to avoid. Briefly, I’ve even considered giving it a go. I remember reading about Queen Victoria’s advice to her daughter: “lie back and think of England.” I could lie back and think of Baltimore (or the FBI, or the Washington Monument, or, more likely, lie back and think of you). Maybe it wouldn’t be that bad; I haven’t had sex in ages, I might even enjoy it. But even as I’m crafting a case, I know there is absolutely no way I’m ever going to go through with it. Because the only man I can ever imagine taking me to bed is you – and at this point, I no longer even try to deny it to myself.

*****

One week after his escape, and the absence of all things Matthew Brown is nagging against my nerves to such an extent that I finally cave in and go to see Jack myself. I know realistically that he won’t have heard anything – he’d have told me by now if he had – but just sitting and waiting is becoming unbearable and I need something concrete to do. Jack doesn’t seem surprised to see me, even though I haven’t been invited. He sends one of his minions to fetch us coffee, then gestures at me to take a chair.

“How are you doing?” he asks.

I shrug. “Pretty well, all things considered.” Not that this is particularly true, although I don’t suppose
he really wants to hear how I am. I wonder what he’d say if I told him about you, for example; how I spend all day talking to you in my head (not that this is a remotely sensible question to ask, because I know exactly what he’d say). Mentally I now imagine you walking into the room, all long limbs and languor and pressing a finger against your lips as if to encourage me to keep you to myself. *Discretion is the better part of valour,* you’d tell me. Or perhaps you wouldn’t. God knows what you’d actually say….maybe you wouldn’t say anything at all? But it’s still so easy to envisage it, even though I never saw you perform a similar gesture in real life.

“Will?”

“Yeah?”

“You listening?”

Seeing as I can hardly tell him that I’m not I clear my throat a few times, grasping around for something practical. “Thanks for sorting out the guys at my apartment,” I eventually reply. “It’s good to know they’re there.”

“You’re welcome. Let’s hope it’s an unnecessary precaution.”

“Yeah.” I wait a little, then add carefully, “I don’t suppose you’ve heard from Alana have you?” I’m trying to sound unconcerned and casual, but miss it by a mile. Even to myself I seem nervous and paranoid, gnawing my bottom lip and refusing to look him in the eye.

Jack looks surprised at first, then a bit suspicious. Of course he does – I’ve practically gift wrapped this one for him. “Why would I hear from Alana?” he says. “Has something happened?”

“Long story,” I reply (Christ, that sounds even worse). And then: “It’s fine, no reason” (which is now getting so enigmatic that I couldn’t blame Jack if he simply phones her right now: ‘*Alana,* he’ll say, ‘I’ve got Will here acting like a cryptic, shifty asshole. Tell me what the hell’s been going on’). I’m such a fucking idiot sometimes. Of course Alana wouldn’t have called me out to Jack. The Patron Saints of Bullshit intervene to deliver me at the last moment, and I think to add: “She was with me when you called the other night. She was worried. I wondered if she might have got in touch – I was pretty freaked out myself and wasn’t all that supportive.” I hold out my hands in a ‘you know how it is’ gesture so he’ll think my reticence was due to embarrassment at losing my shit and leaving poor Alana high and dry. I realize that this account has the unexpected bonus of being (mostly) true.

Jack nods, more satisfied now that he’s got an explanation he can understand. “To be honest there’s not much I could tell her that she’d want to hear,” he says. “There’s no news and no new leads. Sonofabitch could be anywhere.”

Something about his tone gives me the horrible feeling that I now know exactly what turn this conversation is about to take, and sure enough Jack starts to talk about you – unsurprising, I guess, seeing as you are the resident sonofabitch (who could be anywhere). “Pretty unbelievable to have them both running around,” says Jack, and I wonder if he’s worried about how it might affect his job– two maniacs off on the lam on his watch.

“Yeah,” I agree feebly. Well it is, isn’t it – unbelievable. I can’t really give him any comfort there. Cautiously I add: “Weren’t you thinking he was dead?”

“I can’t assume anything,” says Jack, a bit pompously. “We don’t know he’s dead; we don’t know he’s not dead.”
“I guess.” So in other words Jack, you know precisely fuck all.

“I was pretty rough on you in the hospital, wasn’t I?” Jack adds after a pause. It’s a rhetorical question. He knows he was, he doesn’t need me to confirm it. I find myself nodding anyway.

“But you understand why?”

“Yeah, I understand,” I reply. And I do. I’m hoping that if I give in easily then he’ll just drop it, but of course he doesn’t.

“Before all this started. I came to see you that time, and you told me to my face that you were considering running away with him. You could have lied about it, you could have just said nothing, but you didn’t.”

God, this is excruciating. I reach up to remove my glasses and realize that I’ve already taken them off. “I know,” is all I say.

“And now?”

“Now what?”

“Would you still go?”

I stare at him, blinking stupidly. I consider saying ’go where?’ to prevaricate a bit longer, but there’s no point pissing him off any more than necessary. “Of course not,” I reply earnestly. What else can I possibly say?

Chapter End Notes

ETA Jan 2018

Hugs and thanks to the amazingly talented greendaygirl for making some exceptionally beautiful art for this chapter, which you can feast your eyes on here :-(
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Warmest of welcome to all the new readers, it's lovely to have you onboard! And enormous thanks, as always, to everyone who has left comments/kudos. You are all helping enormously with my motivation *throws you flowers*

A few days later the press have grown self-righteous and shrill (bad), and politicians have begun asking questions (also bad), and Kade Purnell is having a coronary (fucking spectacular); so Jack convenes a crisis meeting about Matthew Brown. After several hours of polite discussion, a truly pointless ‘teambuilding exercise,’ a series of scrappy disagreements, a lot of earnest scribbling on flipcharts, and an elaborate ‘schematic representation’ (spread over five PowerPoint slides in stark sans serif font), the emerging consensus appears to be that no one has a fucking clue 1) what’s going on, or 2) what to do about it.

“Well,” I say. “That was productive.” I’ve turned my empty Dixie cup onto its side and am attempting to flick rolled-up balls of tissue into it like it’s a miniature soccer goal. I’m trying to remember similar meetings about you. Did they hold one straight after our plunge from the cliff? They must have done, it would have when I was still in hospital. I’ve been to one or two since then, but nothing ever happens. The consensus for these meetings tend to be ‘missing, presumed dead,’ although I know Jack doesn’t really believe it.

“With any luck Brown will be someone else’s problem soon,” says Andrews, one of the new trainee agents (small, fierce, ambition radiating from every pore like body odor). “He may well have fled abroad.”

“I’d be surprised to be honest,” I reply. I try to be tactful, because he’s young and keen and I don’t want to snub him in front of everyone in his first month on the job. Nevertheless, it needs to be said. “It’s a good suggestion,” I add, even though it’s not, “but I think he’s too disorganized. That kind of flight takes considerable planning and resources.” In other words: it takes someone like you.

“Well, even so,” he persists, “it’s highly likely that Brown’s several states away by now. People like that don’t come back to smell their own shit do they?” He looks round the table, as if daring anyone to contradict him. “Why do you think that psycho Lecter ran off to Europe the first chance he got?”

Hmm. Now I wish I’d just told him that his idea was crap. “So that’s your solution?” I say instead, “Hope he starts killing people elsewhere, just so long as it forces someone else to take responsibility for him?” He gives me a hurt expression and I flick a bit of tissue into the Dixie cup with unnecessary force.

“Will’s right,” says Jack, “our position on this can be summarized in two words.”

“Fuck all?” I ask.

Jack gives me a filthy look and smacks his palm down onto the table, although doubtless the look would have been even filthier had I used my originally intended two words: ‘jack’ and ‘shit’. “Urgent priority,” he snaps.
“Well at least we know what the common denominator is,” says Sanderson in a pointed voice. “We should just dangle Graham in front of them as live bait.”

“Sanderson!” thunders Jack. “That’s completely out of order.”

“Yeah,” adds Zeller virtuously, “you’re just jealous because Will’s got better game than you have.”

“Better psycho game,” says Price with relish.

Everyone automatically turns to look at me. I do absolutely nothing to help the situation by starting to laugh.

“I don’t see what’s so goddamn funny,” says Sanderson.

“No you’re right,” I reply, “it’s not funny, and in fairness your plan is amazing; absolutely amazing. I would suggest a large Perspex box in the middle of Times Square. Like…”

“…Like David Blaine,” supplies Price helpfully. “With his game face on.” He reaches over and neatly flicks a tissue ball into the cup.

“Exactly,” I say. “Good shot by the way.” Price and I exchange a not-very-discreet fist bump.

“All right that’s enough,” snaps Jack irritably. “Will, Sanderson, sort yourselves out.”

I want to snap ‘well he started it,’ but am aware that there is no possible way of doing this that won’t make me sound like a sulky five-year old, so have to content myself with scribbling ‘bullshit’ in very tiny writing all over my PowerPoint handouts.

“I got game,” Sanderson says to Andrews in an undertone, having obviously taken Zeller’s comment to heart. “I’ve been doing online dating and the ladies have loved it.”

“Yeah?” asks Andrews. “Any luck yet?”

“I’m messaging a chick from DC. Grade school teacher, absolutely gorgeous,” says Sanderson. He shoots me a triumphant look. “We’ve not met up yet but I’m taking her to dinner next week. We’ve been getting along pretty nicely over the phone in the meantime, if you catch my drift.”

“Remarkable,” I say loudly, “I knew love was blind but I didn’t realize it was deaf as well.”

Unfortunately I appear to have forgotten that Jack (unlike love) is not remotely deaf. “Will!” he bellows, “I said knock it off! If I have to tell you one more goddamn time…”

But I’m not listening anymore, so never actually discover what it is he’ll do if he has to tell me (one more goddamn time). I’m thinking about you and Matthew Brown. Both of you are currently shrouded in a conundrum so thick it’s like fog, through which the outline of things are only very faintly visible. I turn the various pieces over in my mind like a 3D puzzle box of bone and skin, sharpening my perception at both ends. Fundamentally, I suspect very strongly that Andrews is wrong (and that I am right)…but not for the reasons I claimed.

Both you and Matthew Brown are still close by. And not because of narcissism, or rapacity, or wrong-headed gloating; or all the other theories that articles (written by people like me) suggest. You’re around because I am. I’m the orbit that’s drawing you in. Like to like. I’m certain of it. The more I think about it, the more certain I feel that it’s true. It’s knowing what either of you are intending to do about it which is proving frighteningly elusive.
“You just came here to look at me. Came to get the old scent again,” you once said to me. “Why don’t you just smell yourself?”

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I have my outpatient appointment in the afternoon, so drag myself over to the hospital to meet with Dr. O’Connor. “Mr Graham!” she says, when she comes to retrieve me from the waiting room, “You’re looking much better than the last time I saw you.” She sounds genuinely happy about it (she’s a nice woman), although it’s not actually as reassuring as she intends it to be because the last time she saw me I was doing a convincing imitation of a corpse so the margin for improvement wasn’t really all that impressive. I have to sit on her exam table in an embarrassingly gaping hospital gown whilst she prods my abdomen and chest. “I’m pleased with this,” she says, tapping the scar on my cheek, “that’s healing very nicely indeed. You’ll need a final follow-up with the maxillofacial unit, but I’d say you’ve been extremely lucky with that one.”

“Great,” I reply vaguely. To be honest I don’t really care. The scar occasionally itches and throbs, but mostly I forget it’s there. In my more eccentric moments I’ve even convinced myself I sort of like it: a romantic duelling scar, earned in combat.

Dr O’Connor examines the reading from the ear thermometer, then peers a bit closer at my face and frowns. “You’re a little feverish,” she says. She palpates my neck and shines a light in my eyes. “Any rashes? Vomiting? Headaches.”

“Occasional headaches.”

“Oh yes, that’s quite typical for you isn’t it. Didn’t I see encephalitis mentioned in your file?”

“Yeah, a few years ago.”

“My goodness. That must have been rather unpleasant.”

“You have no idea,” I say, because – seriously.

“No other symptoms?”

“No.”

“Wheezing, chest pain?”

“No, not at all.”

“Fine.” She puts her thermometer on the table then snaps her penlight back into her coat pocket with an efficient little click. “Nothing to worry about, I shouldn’t think, just a freak winter virus.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Freak virus?” I say incredulously. Oh my God: this is so typical. Most people obviously get normal viruses whereas I have managed to incubate a freak.

She can obviously tell what I’m thinking from the expression on my face and tries (and fails) to stifle a laugh. “Don’t worry,” she says, briskly patting my arm, “you’ll be fine, I promise. You just need to look after yourself a little better.” Her voice takes on a slightly hectoring, motherly tone: any minute now she’ll probably call me ‘young man.’ “You could do with gaining some weight for a start,” she says, “you’re far too thin young man” (oh for God’s sake). “Plenty of protein, that’s what you need. You’re not a vegetarian are you?”

I have a horrible feeling I’m going to laugh. “No,” I say. “I’ve actually eaten some pretty, um, exotic
meat over the years.” Oh my God, I think, shut up you morbid fucker.

“My husband ate crocodile whilst in Australia,” she says. “Apparently it’s a little like salmon.”

I fantasize about saying something like ‘crocodile is for the weak’ but of course I don’t. While I’m gathering my clothes together she tells me to get myself home as soon as we’re done and eat something nutritious. “You need to take better care of yourself better young man,” she says (recurring).

“I’m planning to,” I say. Am I though? God, no, probably not.

“And wrap up warm,” she adds, “there’s a storm on its way.”

I glance out the window. She’s right: the sky looks swollen and bruised and there’s a vicious wind beginning to brew. It’s frigidly cold and I’ve left my scarf in the meeting room (where Andrews and Sanderson are no doubt currently fighting over who gets to set fire to it). The freak and I drag our respective sorry asses home where I bump into Mr Haversham who lives on the floor below me. In the miserable, delirious weeks following my discharge from hospital I used to wake him up a lot with my constant pacing in the middle of the night. I could tell he felt bad mentioning it, like he was inconveniencing me by politely asking me to stop pounding on my floorboards at 3am. I ended up concocting some bullshit story about how it was part of a Vipassana walking meditation…I may even have said that I was considering training to become a Buddhist monk (I was pretty drunk at the time). I remember it now and blush slightly.

“William!” he says; he never does call me Will, and I’ve long since giving up asking him. “Just the boy I wanted to see. How are you doing? You look a little peaky.”

“Not too bad, thanks,” I say. And then: “I’ve got a freak virus.” (Oh my God, why did I say that? Why?). He takes a cautious step back.

“Oh no, it’s fine, it’s nothing,” I add hastily. Why am I defending the freak? It’s like I’m getting protective towards it. Christ.

“Well,” he says. “Well...”

I try and help him out. “Did you need me to give you a hand with anything?” I ask.

“Oh, yes!” he says, perking up again. “My boiler’s broken, darned inconvenient in this weather. Would you come and take a look? I’d be real grateful. You seem like you might be good with things like that,” he adds hopefully.

This now means that I have officially become the type of person who arouses the sentiment: ‘Wow, yeah, look at that guy: that’s a guy who definitely knows all about boilers’ amongst their casual acquaintances. I sigh, and tell him I’ll stop by tomorrow morning.

“You’re a good boy,” he says. “I’d have done it myself once, but you know how it is.” He brandishes his arthritic hands, gnarled and twisted as twigs. I nod absently (I still want to ask him: what is it about my appearance that makes you look at me and think: ‘knows about boilers’?).

“It’s a dreadful thing to be old,” he says. I nod again. I guess it is. But surely it’s worse to die young?

He starts tottering up the stairs, then pauses and turns round. “You coming in son?” he adds. “You don’t want to stay out here. There’s a storm coming.”

That’s the second time someone’s said that to me today, as if I care. They don’t understand that the
storm has already hit. It hit years ago and left me bleached and stranded: you standing in the centre as the calm eye. I suddenly feel, with complete certainty, that I absolutely cannot bear to go and sit in my horrible apartment with the wind howling outside and the walls closing in on me. “I’m fine” I say, “I just need to…” I make a meaningless waving motion with my hand, as if this will adequately convey all the things I need to do. “I’ll come inside in a minute.”

He nods and renew his uncertain progress up the stairs; I can almost hear his old joints creaking as he goes. He showed me a photo of his wife once, fresh and pretty with 1940s-style victory rolls in her hair and a blouse with a sweetheart neckline. She died of typhus when she was in her 20s and he nursed her. He never married again: her photo was still in the centre of his mantle gazing out at us serenely; her young face frozen in time. He was a Pacific Rim vet, a hero. He saved lives. And now he’s stuck in a crappy building like this, all alone with his arthritic hands and dependent on an asshole like me to fix his boiler.

I lean back and let my head rest against the wall. The rain’s coming down in earnest now, pounding angrily against the sidewalk, and there’s an unmistakable snarl of thunder on the horizon. The normal sounds of other peoples’ lives waft faintly through the windows overhead: clattering pans, a baby crying, a man telling someone to “Get your goddamn feet off the couch, how many more times?” He sounds a bit like Jack. There’s the tinny sound of a radio coming from the janitor’s office, a young, yelping female vocalist: “Spend my days locked in a haze, trying to forget you babe, I fall back down, gotta stay high all my life to forget I’m missing you.” Christ, what a load of bullshit.

I know that I’m crying, but with all the rain coursing down my face it’s easy to pretend I’m not. So much rain: I’m soaked to the bone. My clothes feel heavy and my hair, which loses its curl and gets longer when wet, is plastered to my forehead and tangling in my eyelashes. Go inside, I think, go inside and get a fucking grip on yourself. I tip my head back further, close my eyes, let the rain throb down onto my face. I part my lips slightly so I can taste it. There’s something so raw and elemental about the rain.

Just one more minute, I think, one more minute and then I’ll go.

I open my eyes and lower my head back down, and that’s when I see a figure at the far end of the street. He (she?) is positioned underneath the convenience store awning, not making any attempt to conceal themselves. They’re just stood there, arched and poised, hands thrust in the pockets of their long coat.

I immediately feel a spike of adrenaline, even though there’s no real need. It’s not like they’re doing anything particularly suspicious. Perhaps they’re just sheltering from the rain: someone caught on their way home from work without an umbrella, checking their watch and sighing with irritation. They’re probably inspecting me right back, wondering what the hell I’m doing slumped against the side of the building with my face in the air.

It won’t do any harm to check though, right? I peel myself away from the wall, and begin walking towards the figure. At first it doesn’t move at all: a silhouette solidified, tall and slim and immobile. But after I’ve taken a few more paces then it suddenly twists sharply on its feet and strides away, the coat hem swirling around at the abruptness of the movement.

“Hey!” I shout.

They don’t flinch, don’t turn, just keep walking away; it’s like I never even made a sound.

“Hey, wait up!” I pick up my pace and start to run, just as the figure disappears around the corner. The weight of my soaking clothes is slowing me down, but I sprint down to the end of the block in pursuit. There’s a crackle of lightening, and it’s as if the sky’s about to split and sizzle in two. My heart is pounding in my ears, a crazy pulse of hope/fear/intrigue.
Shit, where’d they go? The road’s deserted. How is that even possible? They were right there. I take a few faltering steps forward then stop; I want to run but there’s nowhere obvious to run to. The quarry has flown. Something inside me suddenly snaps and I scream “Who are you?” into the soaking, empty air. God, I sound like a complete maniac. What if it’s just a random passerby? But then again…what if it’s not. The rain’s so heavy now it’s bouncing off the surface of the road like bullets.

I scan the street to try and gauge where the mysterious figure might be, so preoccupied that I don’t even see the cab bearing down until the lamps are blinding me and the horn is screaming in my ears, just fucking standing there like the proverbial rabbit in the headlights. Someone grabs me and yanks me out of the way, and we plunge over onto the sidewalk, him half on top of me.

“Hey!” he says. He has a round amiable face, his head as bald and shiny as an egg. I stare back at him, blinking stupidly. “Hey buddy!” he repeats, a bit louder this time. He pats the side of my cheek. “You okay?”

The cab pulls to a halt in a screech of tyres and the driver leaps out. “You fucking moron!” he shouts, “I nearly hit you! What’s your damn problem?”

“What’s my problem?” I say hazily. “How much time do you have?” The driver and the bald guy exchange concerned looks. My nose is bleeding: it tickles. I reach up to wipe it away.

“Look kid,” says the driver in a kinder voice, “you want me to call someone for you?”

“Yes,” I reply, “but I don’t know his number.”

“Jeez,” says the driver.

“Where do you live?” asks the bald man gently. “Are you local?”

“I just live round the corner.” I take a deep breath, trying to pull myself together. “I can be home in less than a minute; I’ll go home now. Honestly, I’m fine, it just gave me a shock. I’m really sorry for troubling you both.”

“Watch yourself next time,” says the driver. He join forces with the bald man to help haul me to my feet, then hesitates when he sees me up close. “Say, you look real familiar.” He’s so close, squinting right in my face. “Don’t I recognize you from somewhere?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I say, even though I know he’s almost certainly recognized me from the news coverage. “I’m pretty sure we haven’t met before.”

“You look like that FBI guy, whatshisname…?”

“No, that’s definitely not me,” I say quickly. I wonder whether I should invoke the freak to try and get rid of him (biological warfare), but he’s already turning away and opening his car door.

“Well, take care of yourself kid,” he says, “I hope if we do meet again then it’s not with your skinny ass underneath the wheels of my cab.” He sticks his head out the window at the bald man. “You need a ride anywhere friend? On the house.”

The latter hesitates and looks at me. “Go ahead,” I reply, possibly a bit quicker than would be considered totally polite. “I’m fine, I can be home in no time at all.”

“Well, okay…If you’re sure you’re all right on your own?”
“I’m sure,” I say. “Thanks again”. I watch them as they drive off. The street’s still deserted, no sign of anyone at all. I’m all alone. Slowly, I begin to limp back to the apartment.

Nothing’s happened, not really. Nothing conclusive – it really could have just been a random pedestrian. I couldn’t go and tell Jack about it and expect him to take it seriously. There’s no evidence: no prints or DNA, no scene-of-crime, no words exchanged. But none of that can alter the unmistakable sense I have that something is shifting. Has already shifted.

“There’s a storm coming,” I mutter to myself under my breath. I feel a weird thrill of dread. Coming coming, ready or not.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Last update before Christmas - wishing a wonderful festive season to all those who are celebrating, and a peaceful and happy few days to those who aren’t. See you soon!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It increasingly occurs to me that your voice has started to become more conspicuous and persuasive in my head than my own is. At times this troubles me: it means there’s nowhere I can get away from you, that even my own brain is unsafe and treacherous (because surely it must be – I always lose my own arguments with you, after all). Yet at other times I like it, because it’s means I can carry you with me and therefore don’t feel quite so alone. At these times your strength and magnetism feel infectious, and I can wear the idea of you like armour. Having you in my head is a fantastic, grotesque secret that fortifies and sustains me; and the fact that my thoughts have a smoky accent, wax philosophical, and spurn morality becomes the most thrilling enigma that no one else can understand or steal away.

Effectively I know that all this, taken together, cannot possibly end well, but I’m trying to condition myself to stop worrying about the future too much. What’s the point? I remember an old adage my high school math teacher used to trot out when we started to whine at her about test scores and college admissions: “Life’s so short, worrying’s a waste of time – you could go home tonight and get knocked over by a bus.” Although admittedly the endings I envisage for myself are far more colorful and horrifying than expiring beneath the wheels of a rogue bus. They are also more likely to happen. In retrospect, that was actually really shitty advice. I try to remember what happened to that teacher, and fail to manage it. I kind of like to think she got knocked over by a bus (filled with failed math students), but suspect that this is one irony too far.

“Be careful what you wish for.” That’s another one. Who said that? My dad, probably, it has just the right amount of melancholy pessimism for him. “Be careful what you wish for Son, you might just get it.” I’m not being careful what I wish for (even though there’s no guarantee I’m going to get anything), and I don’t care about that either. There’s a spectacular lack of caution in my wishes, and I don’t give a shit.

What did you say? “I imagine what you see and learn touches everything else in your mind. Your values and decency are present yet shocked at your associations, appalled at your dreams.”

If you come back – if you do – then I’ll deal with all the madness and wonder and wanton carnage that you’ll with bring wandering in your wake. I’ll deal with it, I know I will. I just need you to come back first.

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The case with the murdered escorts gets wrapped up and, contrary to Zeller’s predictions, is neither the work of a religious zealot or a moral crusader, but a sad, sagging middle-aged man who killed male escorts simply because they were vulnerable and easy to access (which is exactly what I told Jack, and have to struggle not to go around reminding everyone of when they shake their heads and say “well, I didn’t see that one coming”). He sits in the interview room, peppering the table with sweaty handprints, and blubbers softly into a series of disintegrating tissues. “I never meant it,” he
keeps saying. He blinks at me through his thick pebbly spectacles, beseeching and teary. “I just wanted them to stay with me, but they wouldn’t. They wouldn’t, and I got mad, but I never meant it.”

“Looks like he’s going with the ‘It’s not my fault Your Honour, they were mean to me’ defence,” says Sanderson afterwards to Price. He turns to me and gives a curt (grudging) nod: “Nice work in there Graham. You cracked him wide open.”

“What a loathsome bastard,” says Zeller in disgust.

Zeller’s right – and he is – but underneath their contempt for his lumbering soddeness and blatant inadequacies – at life, at relationships, at murder, at everything – I can still see the simple, sordid tragedy of a horribly lonely man whose grief and rage have curdled into cruelty and mindless, pointless violence; where the lives of his victims were all sacred and sought after, until suddenly they weren’t, and then they were all equally worthless and dispensable. Physically, emotionally and intellectually it would be impossible to find someone more different to you than this man. And yet, and yet…I know you were lonely as well. You also wanted someone who would stay with you, someone who could understand and appreciate you. Someone like me. You had tears in your eyes when you stabbed me. They were unshed, but they were definitely there. You thought I was going to stay with you, but at the last moment I let you down. You felt betrayed by me, I know you did, but something more than that too: hurt. Wounded. You wanted me to stay with you, and I wouldn’t.

I can’t decide whether reflecting on your putative vulnerability in this way is making me feel better or worse, so in the end I leave the building to find the nearest bar and drink myself completely and blissfully oblivious so I don’t have to think about it anymore. Alana and Michael both call in the interim, and I take a perverse satisfaction in cutting them off, one after the other.

*****

A few days later I receive a message from Jack, typically terse: “I need to speak with you immediately. Can’t call at the moment – come into my office as soon as you get this. Text to confirm.” I dutifully type out a response and wonder what he wants. Jack’s messages always verge towards the wrong side of bossiness and bombast, so over the years I’ve lost the capacity to distinguish between what’s true calamity, and what’s simply him stamping his feet for the sake of it. The fact he hasn’t called makes me assume the latter, although given everything that’s happened recently it’s probably better to err on the side of caution and head over anyway (and to be honest, it’s not as if I have anything better to do). My car’s at the garage, so I get the train instead then jump on the subway for the final few miles. It’s hot and dusty in the car, and the screaming metal and flickering lights grate on my nerves in a way that they never used to.

A man gets on at the next station and sits opposite me, and I realise with a pang that he looks a little like you. Not enormously so – not enough to be confusing – but it’s definitely there in the prominent slab of cheekbone and the curl of his top lip, and I find myself staring at him anyway. He realizes about two stops in and flashes me a look of anxious irritation, but I can’t stop looking. I keep waiting for him to call me out on it (possibly punch me – it’s not like I don’t deserve it), but he doesn’t; eventually he just makes a show out of fussily flapping open his newspaper and lifting it to cover his face. Occasionally he takes little surreptitious peeks around the edge to see if I’m still staring (I am). A nervous flush has started to spread along the top of those high cheekbones of his, and I know I’m being a complete dick but can’t bring myself to look away. At the next station he stands abruptly and leaves the train, and I muse over whether it really is his stop or if I’ve just freaked him out so much he’s got off early. He’s left his umbrella propped up against the seat and I briefly consider if I should chase after him with it, but ultimately decide that I’ve messed with the poor guy’s head enough for one afternoon, and that the sight of me charging after him down the platform brandishing a long
object with a point will probably finish him off entirely. Weird to think that I’ve now become a part of his day; that he’ll probably go home tonight and tell his wife about it, embellishing it with little details in the way that people do: “Honey, the oddest thing happened this morning. I was on the subway and this scary-looking guy just wouldn’t stop staring at me; it was the darnedest thing. I thought he might have wanted to knife me – he looked crazy enough for it – so I got off early and was late for my meeting …” It makes me wonder about all the various adaptations of you that would have existed in other people’s anecdotes over the years: my account of you, Jack’s, Alana’s, Chilton’s. A great composite of identities, none of them ever entirely capturing the whole. I wonder what they would have talked about if they’d sat down together – all those versions of you – whether they would have recognized each other if they’d met in the street.

Jack’s office is empty when I finally arrive. I stand outside it for a while, aimlessly shifting from one foot to the other and stifling the urge to kick his door (it’s a close call: the only thing that stops me is the idea of Sanderson/Andrews getting hold of the CCTV footage and laughing their asses off about it later). Eventually I lose interest entirely and head across to the lab. Price is there, meticulously sorting his mail into little stacks. “Hey Will,” he says when he sees me. “What brings you here?” (The asshole. He’s probably doing it on purpose – I wouldn’t be surprised if he was in there the whole time, listening to me shuffle and sigh outside his door). Price just nods, not really paying attention.

“I don’t suppose you know what he wants?” I say.

Price shrugs. “No idea, I’ve been at the court all morning. Only just arrived myself,” he vaguely gestures at his overcoat, which he hasn’t yet had a chance to remove, and I nod in response – I probably should have guessed that. “Wait here if you like,” he adds. “Coffee?”

“Thanks, that’d be great.”

“Well you know where the kitchen is,” he waggles his eyebrows at me, obviously delighted that his set-up’s paid off so well. “I’ll have one too while you’re at it.”

I smile and roll my eyes, but don’t object. I actually like it that he just treats me like one of the guys. There’s still no sign of Jack when I return, so I drop Price’s coffee on his desk and receive a grunt of acknowledgement. I slump into the nearest chair with my cell to start scrolling through the comments on TattleCrime (of which there is nothing of interest – of course) and try not to sigh too loudly with boredom. Price looks up. “Today’s paper’s on the desk if you want,” he says.

As I scrimp for the copy of the Post (already submerged by all the crap on Price’s desk), a stack of papers dislodges slightly and my eye is caught by the glossy sheen of photographs. The top one is of Alana, waving a wine glass and grinning into the camera with her head on one side, and I can vaguely make out myself and Zeller in the background. When were these taken? I don’t think I remember it. The second one is Jack, wearing an awkwardly curated photo smile, and looking massively incongruous with a lop-sided Santa hat on his head (although it’s still marginally better than that fucking awful fedora). Christmas then. When did I go to a Christmas party with these guys? Maybe in the encephalitis-era, when I had no goddamn clue what I was doing 90% of the time. That, and the fact that nothing less than an inflamed brain would have feasibly got me to suffer through an office party.

“Hey! Mind if I look at these?” I ask Price.

He glances up absently to see what I’m talking about. “Oh, those,” he says. “Yeah sure. They’re
pretty old now. Zeller’s taken Sanderson’s advice a bit too much to heart and wants a picture for his
dating profile – he figured it wouldn’t hurt to look a bit younger.”

I huff out a laugh (although fair play to Zeller for being proactive – internet dating is probably the
type of socially constructive thing I should be doing…even though there’s no fucking way), and
retreat back to the chair to begin leafing through the photos. The next one is of Beverly, and my heart
gives a painful clench. She looks so happy, her face slightly shiny from the lights, beautiful dark hair
swinging over her shoulder. I don’t recognise the people in the next few: a blonde woman with a lot
of fuchsia pink lipstick; a young guy with prominent teeth and a slightly manic expression (and a
truly execrable Christmas sweater: a reindeer with a pom-pom for a nose), his arm slung awkwardly
around the shoulders of a strikingly attractive girl with brightly coloured beads woven in her
dreadlocks. Lab techs, most likely, or grad students long since departed for better things (…unless
you killed them first for being rude or incompetent. Wait – did you kill them? No, surely not).
There’s Jack again, no longer sporting the Santa hat, but with a garland of blue tinsel clumsily strung
around his neck like a feather boa. Everyone strikes me as oddly ousted and displaced compared to
their current incarnations; like refugees from the past.

Then at the next one my whole body jolts, because it’s a picture of me and you. I don’t think I’ve
ever seen a photo of us together before, beyond the ones in the news that tend towards the matching-
mug-shot variety. Neither of us are looking at the camera. I’m staring at something out of frame with
a faint smile on my face, and you are staring at me. We’re sat at a table with the various detritus of
revelry strewn across it: paper plates and empty bottles, a disposable camera, the innards of an
exploded party popper (Christ. I bet you loved that). My hair is falling into my eyes, and by my
standards (admittedly low) I look quite relaxed – the top two buttons of my shirt are undone and I’m
lacking the usual anxious clench around the shoulders. You look utterly detached and elevated from
the surroundings, your long fingers curled over your knee. I’m struck by how young I look, even
though the photo can’t be all that old. The past few years have withered and aged me, obviously.
Why can’t I remember any of this?

“Will!” says Price. He’s standing right next to me, and I realise I have no idea how long he’s been
there, trying and failing to get my attention. He cranes his neck to see what I’m looking at, and
grimaces slightly when he realises. “Shit, sorry,” he says, “I completely forgot that was in there.”

“No, it’s fine,” I say, making a feint of shuffling the photos, then as he starts turning away filch the
one of you and me and crumple it into my pocket.

“Jack just messaged me,” says Price, “he’s on his way over. Says you should wait here.”

I check my own phone, and sure enough there’s two missed calls from Jack. “Will!” he booms when
he finally arrives. “Where the hell have you been?” This is typical – as if I haven’t been sat here for
over half an hour waiting for him.

“I’ve been right here,” I say irritably. “I went to your office first – your empty office – and had no
idea where you’d gone.”

“You should have waited.”

“You should have told me how long I’d be waiting for.”

Price is glancing from one of us to the other, like someone at a tennis match.

“Knock it off,” says Jack taking a step towards me. He gestures with his finger, brandishing it like
it’s a loaded gun. “This is serious, and I have zero time for you and your attitude.”
I raise one of my eyebrows (a sardonic gesture, I have come to realise, that I have inherited entirely from you) and insolently stretch my legs out in front of me, refusing to break eye contact. Jack takes a breath, visibly trying to calm down. His face is creased with worry, and I suddenly feel the first faint twinge of unease.

“Okay,” says Jack, “I’m sorry. Let’s start this again. Look, Will…something’s happened, and I need you to try and stay calm.”

The twinge kindles into a flare, a blaze of emotion flickering and scraping through my body, and I immediately think of you. Oh God, he’s going to say they’ve caught you. Or worse, that they’ve found you, they’ve found your body, beautiful and reckless and lifeless. Twin versions of me skitter though my mind simultaneously: me approaching your cell (walking towards you with a manufactured confidence that I don’t actually feel); me at your funeral (stiffly formal in a borrowed suit, blank with anguish but screaming inside). It’s so real that for a moment I can smell the prison disinfectant; see the waxy lilies languishing on top of the casket.

“This morning we received a package,” Jack says. I stare at him dumbly, watching his lips as they open and close. Package?

“It was posted two days ago from the Baltimore area,” Jack continues heavily, “and contained this letter.” He brandishes a zip-locked evidence bag with something white inside. “There was also an unsealed envelope. There was a badge in the envelope.” Christ, he’s spinning this out. ‘Fucking what?’ I want to scream.

“We ID’ed the badge 20 minutes ago, and there’s no doubt that it belongs to one of the officers who was assaulted when Matthew Brown escaped custody. Will, it’s from him. It’s from Brown.”

My stomach gives a sickening lurch, but my face doesn’t move, and I silently hold out my hand for the evidence bag. Jack passes it over, then hesitates and pats me on the shoulder. The letter is on plain A4 paper, each letter carefully stamped in blocky letters with red ink, and I stare and stare at the message, and the awful implications woven throughout each starkly printed capital: “TELL WILL GRAHAM I’LL BE SEEING HIM VERY SOON.”

Chapter End Notes

I actually had a teacher during my GCSEs who trotted out that line about the bus…what a total hack.
Welcome back everyone. If you celebrate Christmas, I hope you all had a lovely festive few days.

There’s a long silence, and I grow absurdly aware of all the tiny insignificant sounds in the room: the staccato beeping of the phones next door, the whirr and drone of the printer; the chirpy, bright voices of the lab techs in the corridor. It’s such an incongruous soundtrack: there should be sirens and screams, and you telling me that the game is afoot with that little anticipatory smile on your face. I’m grinding my teeth so hard that my jaw feels as if it’s about to lock.

“I know,” says Jack sympathetically. Exactly what it is he ‘knows,’ he doesn’t choose to elaborate.

“Actually, you don’t,” I snap, “You don’t know.” I abruptly get out the chair and start to pace around the office. Even in the midst of the delirious adrenaline charge of fear-and-shock-and-anger-and-oh fuck, I’m still keenly aware of the cool, coursing relief trickling through the back of my brain: that this is absolutely nothing to do with you.

Jack gives it another try. “Well, what we don’t know at this stage is that this is intended aggressively. He never tried to hurt you before – quite the opposite in fact.”

“Oh, well that’s all right then. When you put it like that, why am I even worried?”

“He’s an arrogant little prick,” says Jack. He looks at the letter in disgust. “He thinks he’s the one in control.”

“To be fair,” I say, “from where I’m standing I’d tend to agree with him.”

Jack, unsurprisingly, chooses to ignore this. “It’s to our advantage that he’s acting out in this way,” he says, “it shows he’s getting cocky. If he’s getting cocky then he’s going to mess up, and when he messes up we catch him.”

“For God’s sakes Jack,” I snap, “please tell me you’ve some semblance of a plan that goes beyond ‘we wait for him to mess up.’” I pick up the evidence bag with the letter, and slam it down again on the table: I’m aware that I’m acting like a hysteric, but I can’t bring myself to stop. “This postmark is local. He’s still in the area!”

“It’s okay Will,” Jack says soothingly, “I understand that this is unsettling for you…”

“Do you?”

“Yes, of course. But we’ve got your back. I’ve got you back. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I give a snort of humorless laughter: “Forgive me if I don’t find that terribly reassuring.” I don’t expect Jack to let me get away with that, but he just sighs heavily and pats me on the shoulder again – I have to summon a momentous level of self-control not to shake him off.

“I’ll make sure you get a firearm,” is all he replies.
I take a deep breath of my own, struggling to get my temper under control. “Okay,” I say finally. And then: “Thank you.” I know I’m not being entirely fair, taking far more out on Jack than his due portion of the blame (although really, whose fucking fault was it that I met Matthew Brown in the first place – except you, and you’re obviously not here to get your fair share either).

There’s a knock on the door and Sanderson comes lumbering in with Andrews bringing up the rear. Marvellous. “Brought you those dactylography results…” he says (of course he can’t just say ‘fingerprints’, the fucking moron). He takes a look at me, Price and Jack, whose faces are all arranged in tragic variations of ‘the shit has royally hit the fan’ and his sentence trails off. “What’s going on here guys?” he asks.

Price fills him in whilst Jack and I stare aimlessly round the room (him out the window, me at the ceiling) and by the end of it I can tell Sanderson’s struggling not to smirk. “Oh man,” he says, “Man, you are so screwed.”

“That is enough,” snaps Jack. “Sanderson, if I ever hear you speaking to a colleague and fellow agent in the way again, you’ll be looking for a new job.” Sanderson opens his mouth to protest, then shuts it again. “Will…” he hesitates as he realizes he doesn’t actually know what to tell me to do. “Sit down and chill out.”

“Sir,” pipes up Andrews, “I’m sorry to interrupt but I came to tell you that Ms Purnell called. She’s waiting in your office.” Jack gives an almost imperceptible eye roll. “Okay, all right,” he says. “Will!” He pats me briskly on the shoulder again and makes his exit. From his tone it’s impossible to deduce whether he means ‘Will! We’re done here – fuck off!’ or ‘Will! Sit in this chair and stress yourself out until I come back!’ In the end I decide to opt for the latter and collapse into a mutinous heap. Sanderson and Andrews retreat into a corner as Jack leaves, and start conferring together in low, earnest voices. Every so often they glance over at me, and at one point I hear a distinct “freak” from Sanderson.

My shoulders stiffen immediately. “How about coming over here and saying that to my face,” I say sharply.

“How about you calm down and behave a bit more professionally?” replies Sanderson in a horrible unctuous voice.

“How about I ram your fingerprint results – oh, I’m sorry, your dactylography – up your ass?” Two lab techs walking past slow down and peer at me curiously through the open door.

“Nothing wrong with using the correct terminology,” says Sanderson pompously. He practically puffs his chest out. “It’s important to be precise with these things Agent Graham: without precision, people get sloppy. Accuracy and correctness should be at the absolute heart of everything we do.”

If he starts chanting ‘Fidelity Bravery Integrity’ at me, I think, then God help me I really will do something with his fucking dactylography that will shame the memory of William Herschel.

“As the motto goes…” ploughs on Sanderson.

“Yeah, all right, save it J Edgar,” I snap (because in retrospect – ugh, no).

“You don’t know what he was going to say,” says Andrews from the depths of his corner. Everyone turns to look at him and he goes quiet again.

“I’ve got a pretty strong suspicion,” I reply sarcastically.

“There’s a certain four-letter word that you should bear in mind,” says Sanderson, gleefully laboring
the point. “To suspect is not the same as to…”

“Shit?” I say.

“Piss?” suggests Price.

Sanderson is mouthing furiously.

“No, I’m just kidding,” I say, “…I meant ‘fuck’.”

“The word is know,” says Sanderson, who’s gone very red in the face. “That to suspect is not the same as to know.”

“Well, who knew?” says Price.

“Who knew,” I agree, “I must have been sick when they covered that session at the Academy.”

“And you a lecturer,” adds Price with mock regret. “Amirite?”

“Screw you, Graham,” snarls Sanderson, “you think you’re so goddamn smart.”

“I don’t think,” I hiss at him, “I know. So do us both a favor and get out of my fucking face.”

At that point Jack comes back, and everyone immediately goes quiet and studies the floor in the manner of high-school kids getting busted by the principal. He narrows his eyes and looks at each of us in turn. “What’s going on here?” he says.

“Nothing,” replies Sanderson, “Sir.”

As a concession to Sanderson for not choosing to add: ‘Graham also threatened to ram my fingerprints up my ass Sir,’ I agree that nothing is, in fact, going on.

“Well, make sure it stays that way,” says Jack, who’s clearly not buying it but is prepared to play along (at least until he can prove otherwise). “Will, how are you doing?”

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to relax. “Fine,” I say, “I’m fine.”

“Good,” Jack replies. “I know this seems bad but we’ve got it under control.”

“My ass,” I mutter under my breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“Okay…Look, I wanted to tell you this in person, and I have,” says Jack. “There’s nothing else to be done here – you should get home, get some rest. Where are you parked?”

“I don’t have my car,” I say, “It’s in the shop, the brake light’s gone.” Somehow this pathetic minor detail takes on a crushing significance, and I feel an absurd urge to cry: as if a broken brake light is a signifier for all my vulnerability. Calming down was a mistake – I’m better off angry.

“That’s no problem Will, I’ll have someone drive you.”

It’s kindly meant, but the idea of being escorted home by an eager junior agent – like some kind of helpless, docile pensioner – feels intolerable. In my mind’s eye I see myself tucked up on the back
seat of an unmarked car, failing to respond to bright, meaningless small-talk, as they shepherd me
back into my horrible neighborhood and I shake my head before he’s even finished speaking. “No,
it’s fine,” I say, “Thanks Jack, but I’ll get a cab.” (I’m clearly not going to get a cab – it would cost a
fucking fortune – but Jack, with his enormous managerial salary, obviously takes this for granted).

“You sure?”

“Of course, there’s plenty that go past here.” I can get a train back, just like I got in. I’ll make my
own way. If I can get myself home it means I’m still in control – and this is vitally important, because
I know that in order to survive whatever might be in store, I’ll need to maintain every shred of
control I can possibly wrangle.

“Fine,” says Jack. He nods approvingly – I can tell he likes that I’m retaining my independence
(when he doesn’t like it, it ceases being ‘independence’ and morphs, less charitably, into ‘rash
stubbornness’; or if I’ve particularly annoyed him: “Will, you reckless little asshole, sort yourself
out”).

This time all he says is: “If you wait on a few minutes I’ll get the paperwork to sign off your gun.
You can pick in up in 48 hours.” I nod and thank him, but his version of ‘a few minutes’ stretches
out into 20, then 30, and I eventually grow tired of the stifling atmosphere in the office, Price’s
constant darting glances of awkward sympathy, and the glowering presence of Sanderson (who is
probably deliberating the most effective way to give Matthew Brown a good tip-off). In the end I
decide I need to get some air and go outside to stand in the street and take in great gulping lungfuls.
Some of the passersby cast me curious glances, and I feel like screaming at them to fuck off. Their
faces look blurred and quavering – any of them could be Matthew Brown. Oh shit, oh shit. Don’t
have a panic attack, I think, don’t you dare. Christ, not here.

“Will!” someone says, “Will Graham!” and I spin round on my heels like I’ve been shot. If I had a
gun I’d have drawn it by now. I can’t see anyone, am I hallucinating? Oh please not that.

God, no, it’s Michael – what the hell is he doing here? “I hope you’re not following me,” I snap. I
don’t actually mean it, but I’m so tensely wound that it comes out far more hostile than intended.
Unsurprisingly he looks a bit hurt. I also realize how arrogant it makes me sound – as if I consider
myself and my shitty life so endlessly fascinating than a high-ranking doctor can think of nothing
better to do than trail around the city after me to try and get the latest updates on it.

There’s an awkward pause. “Look, I’m sorry,” I say feebly. “Believe it or not that was meant to be a
joke.”

“Well, okay,” he replies slowly. He doesn’t sound convinced.

“Seriously,” I say, “just ignore me. Today’s been….” I wave my hands around with the effort of
trying to mint a suitable adjective that can adequately capture the monumental, epic shittiness of the
day, and ultimately find it’s beyond me.

Michael quirks an eyebrow. “That bad?”

“Worse.”

“Are you all right? Will? What’s happened?”

“Well…” I say. I scroll through variations of: 1) ‘an absconded murderer has written to the FBI to
announce their intent to track me down’ and 2) ‘I have an obsessive fan who killed people to impress
me and now he wants to stop by’ and 3) ‘to be honest with you Michael, I suspect that as of today I
may be officially fucked’ and in the end just settle for “It’s a long story.”

“Anything I can do?”

“Probably not.” There’s not really much that anyone seems able to do is there? Not even Jack Crawford and his federal fucking Bureau. Of course there’s probably something that you’d be able to do, but you’re not here are you (you bastard).

“Perhaps a drink?” Michael says. “I know a very nice place not far from here. You don’t have to tell me what’s going on if you don’t want to, but you look like you could do with something to help you relax.”

“I don’t have my car with me,” I reply stupidly.

“If that’s your only reservation, then I can assure you that it’s no problem at all. I’ll run us over in my car, and then take you anywhere you wish to go afterwards.”

I hesitate again. I suppose it’s not a bad idea. It’s not like the alternative – sitting up all night in my apartment cataloguing the various ways Matthew Brown might break in – is particularly appealing either.

“Okay,” I say. I drag my hand through my hair. My fringe falls forward and gets caught in my eyelashes and I blow it out of the way. I feel like I’m going a bit mad. “Shit, I’m sorry.” I tell him, when I see him staring at me. “It’s just been a really difficult day.” And this is just the first day, I think desperately. Realistically, it’ll probably only get worse from here.

I text Jack to say I’ll stop by tomorrow to sort out the forms, then meekly follow Michael to his ridiculously expensive-looking convertible: all gleaming chrome and glossy red paintwork. I almost feel like I should ask for a trash bag to sit on before putting my crappy clothes anywhere near the upholstery. “Come along now Will,” he says briskly and I have to bite my tongue not to snap back something rude in response. Calm down, I say to myself, chill out, he’s just trying to help.

I obediently reach out the handle then briefly go rigid – it’s only a flicker in the corner of my eye, but for a moment I can almost swear I see the tall silhouette from the other night. I spin my head round, lashing like a whip: and of course there’s nothing there.

You’re being paranoid, I think. Promptly followed (unhelpfully) by: But just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you.

“Will?” says Michael. He sounds like he is making heroic efforts to remain patient.

“I thought…I saw someone,” I say. “There.” I gesture at the stairwell a few feet away from the car; God, I sound so hysterical.

He makes a (somewhat exaggerated) performance of peering around. “No,” he says, “it all looks clear to me.”

“Look, please don’t patronize me,” I say (pretty politely, all things considered), “I know how I sound but I’m sure I saw someone.” This isn’t entirely true – I’m not as sure as all that – but his manner is annoying me. Although I suppose it’s not really his fault, he doesn’t know about Matthew Brown’s most recent shit bomb (and he doesn’t know about you at all).

“But Will,” he says, “how could there have been? If they’d moved away that fast we would of heard them.”
“Not necessarily…” I say, but find myself falling silent. Maybe he’s right. Or not? Fuck.

“Well if there was someone,” says Michael, “Then surely that’s all the more reason for us to get going ourselves.” I can’t really argue with the logic of this, so he pulls round to open the passenger side of the car and practically shovels me in. I don’t say a word as he pulls away, just let my head fall back against the seat and gaze mindlessly out the window. Please come back, I think. I recite it over and over like it’s a mantra, an article of faith; as if by saying it enough times I can conjure it into reality. Magical thinking. Please come back, please come back, I think. Please, please. I need you.
Huge thanks to the wonderful thejennire for making a very lovely gifset to go with this chapter. If you want to hop over to Tumblr you can check it out [here] :-D

Michael drives us (in increasingly uncomfortable silence) to one of the exclusive, elegantly lacquered bars that he seems to favor. It’s quite late by now but I’m relieved to see that the place is still fairly empty: the idea of being saturated with well-bred revellers at the moment is actually pretty unbearable. Just as we sit down, my phone rings. “Sorry,” I say – the first words I’ve uttered since I got in the car – “I really need to check this.” I’m expecting to see Jack’s name, and feel a light spinning sensation in my stomach when instead the display reads: ‘Number withheld.’ Immediately I remember that silent, anonymous call in the middle of the night; I was so sure it was you. I’m still sure – sort of. Without saying anything else to Michael, I spring up and practically sprint towards the door before pressing ‘accept’.


“Look,” I hiss urgently, “I know it’s you. Why won’t you speak to me?” I don’t really expect whoever’s on the end of the line (you?) to fall for something so obvious, and of course there’s no reply.


“Please say something.” I’m trying not to plead. The strain of the day is telling in my voice, and just for a second I think I might have heard an intake of breath through the receiver. I want to say your name so badly, but I know I can’t – deep down, despite the ardent desire to believe, I’m still not sure enough to take that step – and if it isn’t you then the consequences could be dire. God, it could even be Matthew Brown. I experience a lurching, sick feeling at that – but no, it couldn’t be, the first call came when he was still in prison. I look at my watch. One more minute and I’ll hang up.

What are you even doing out there? You must be lying low, keeping out of sight; surely even you wouldn’t find it easy to blend so seamlessly into the normal world a second time? (Even as I’m thinking this, I know that if anyone were able to accomplish this seemingly impossible task, then that person would of course be you). Your face is so distinctive – maybe you’ve altered your appearance, had plastic surgery? Maybe you have accomplices who are helping you. Chiyoh perhaps, or others that I don’t even know about. God knows how you manage to inspire this kind of loyalty. I, of all people, should be able to answer that one but I know that I can’t, not really. I just feel it without understanding why. Perhaps the people who get close to you learn to stop asking questions like that.

It’s now been three minutes since my self-imposed deadline. Through the glass panels on the door, I can see Michael moving towards me. He’s worried, he wants to check on me (he’s also being controlling and inquisitive, but I guess he means well). “Look, I have to go,” I say into the silence, and then as an afterthought (because fuck it, why not?), “I miss you.” Then I hang up.

*****
“So,” says Michael when we’re sat back down again, “would you like to tell me what’s gone on?”

The words themselves are meek enough, but there’s something about the way he says it that gets right under my skin: it reminds me of my grade school principal waving accusingly at a broken window and demanding explanations. “I believe that’s your soccer ball isn’t it William? Would you like to tell me what’s gone on?”

“Not really,” I say.

“I might be able to help.”

I snort with laughter at that, and even to my own ears it sounds a bit hysterical. Christ, I think, get a fucking grip on yourself. “No Michael, there is absolutely nothing you can do.” I pause. Oh to hell with it, I may as well tell him – there’s no real reason not to, for all the difference it’ll make. “It turns out that Matthew Brown has announced his immediate intention to look me up,” I say, “and beyond Jack Crawford hoping that he may decide to do this while I’m sat in the Bureau – on the promising investigative grounds that he’s ‘an arrogant little prick’ – then there doesn’t seem to be much that anyone can think of doing to stop him.”

“Oh,” says Michael, and he sounds so deflated that I have a horrible feeling I’m going to start laughing again. “Oh Will, that’s dreadful. I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks,” I say. I dole him out a slightly morbid smile and take a swig of my beer.

“Aren’t they doing anything to protect you?”

I feel a bit guilty at that. “Actually they are. I’m getting my gun re-issued, and Jack’s put a security detail outside my apartment.”

“But no one’s shadowing you?”

I smile a bit at his use of the word ‘shadowing.’ It sounds so quaint and old-fashioned, like something that dapper agents in 1950s films would do – shadowing away in film noir trench coats and three-piece suits for all they were worth. “No,” I say, “that type of thing is incredibly expensive.” Not that I would have accepted it had it been on offer. As awful as it is to admit, I know that my reluctance is borne out of the vague, ridiculous hope that you’re going to turn up; and not wanting to be surrounded by the FBI’s finest if you do.

“I hardly think that expense is a sufficient excuse,” says Michael primly, “not in a situation like this. There ought to be people following you right now. Doesn’t your boss care at all about his team’s wellbeing?”

“He cares,” I say, a bit defensively (because while I’m happy to bitch about Jack myself until The End of Days, I slightly resent Michael doing it). “He’s always emphasizing that we need to work together and watch each other’s backs. You know; ‘strength through common purpose’ – the lab techs actually call him Union Jack.” Michael raises his eyebrows and looks politely bemused. Oh yeah, he’s English isn’t he? Oh God, perhaps he thinks I’m being racist.

There’s a slightly awkward pause, then Michael pats me gently on the arm like I’m a confused and ailing elderly relative (which is probably appropriate, because it’s exactly how I’m starting to feel). “Well,” he says, “I see what you mean when you say there’s nothing I can help with – and unfortunately, I’m inclined to agree with you – but should anything occur; well, you know where I am. If you wished for somewhere to stay, for example...” He doesn’t finish the sentence, but lets it dangle there meaningfully and gives me a pointed look.
“Thanks, but that won’t be necessary,” I say quickly (because seriously – no way). “It’s extremely kind of you, but I’m actually fairly safe in my apartment with the agents outside.” Even as I say this, I wonder how true it really is. It’s not like the building’s a contained space: about 30 other tenants live there, there’s people coming in and out all the time. Any one of them could be Matthew Brown, concealed beneath a Fed-Ex uniform or a plumber’s overall, and no one would know until Price and Zeller turned up to categorize my mangled corpse (no doubt with Matthew Brown himself still crouched over it, snapping a self-congratulatory selfie to toss off to later).

“Well, bear it in mind,” Michael says bossily, and I tell him I will (I won’t). Nevertheless, it actually is really kind of him – albeit somewhat naïve – because the reality is that having me as a roommate means the potential of Matthew Brown rocking up to make three. Or even you to make the world’s most awkward foursome. Actually that might not be true – you and Michael would probably get on like a house on fire. You could have long, pompous conversations about opera and wine-tasting whilst Matthew Brown and I get drunk on cheap beer and start scuffling like bear cubs on the couch over who supports the best baseball team. Oh God, I think, shut up. I’m going losing my mind, I must be, I feel like my brain’s on fire (again).

I have one more drink, but switch to Coke after that because I’m already hovering on the edge of a meltdown and can no longer afford the luxury of blunted reflexes. “You shouldn’t drink that Will,” says Michael: he actually puts his palm over the top of my glass. “Caffeine will make you more anxious.”

“Yeah?” I say, “And spinach will make you strong, and, and…” Hmm, what other modus ponens propositions do I actually know? Shit, I wish I’d never started this. “…And Kriss Kross will make you ‘jump, jump,’” I eventually add, “And at this point I don’t actually care.” I honestly have no idea what I’m talking about: a part of me is observing this exchange in horror, waving its hands and shouting ‘no, no, shut up you fucking idiot! Also – update your pop culture references, you sound like a sad old man.’ On reflection, I decide to take its advice. “Please don’t tell me what to do,” I say instead. My tone sounds incredibly pompous, and I secretly feel a bit pleased with myself for managing to carry it off.

Michael sighs. “I’m just trying to help Will,” he says. Oh God, now I feel like a jerk (a pompous jerk…Christ). He always has an unfailing ability to make me doubt my own reactions. I lower my eyes and stare at the outline of my cell phone through my jacket, hopelessly willing it to ring.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Michael continues, like the last few minutes never happened (which all things considered, is probably for the best), “how did you first cross paths with this Matthew Brown?”

I glance up and regard him meditatively. Oh come on, I think, no way. No way you don’t know about that. How can he have a virtual mental index of every article I’ve ever published (including that disastrous one on skeletonized insect larvae that even I’ve tried to forget about) and not know about that? Is this supposed to be some kind of test, probing how honest I’m willing to be with him when forced? Or does he simply want to give me the opportunity to volunteer my version of it? Or does he just genuinely not know? (But how can he possibly not?). It feels like a trick question somehow…or am I just being oversensitive and suspicious? He coughs politely, and I realize I’ve been silent for quite some time.

“Well…” I say. “Well.” I feel a sudden surge of exhaustion and in the end decide to dodge it entirely, simply settling for: “That’s a very long story.”

“I’m not in any rush,” he says.

“I’m sorry,” I reply sharply (I’m not), “but…”
“…But you don’t want to talks about it.” He sighs. “You know, you say that all the time Will. You say it a lot. I really wish you felt more able to trust me.”

“I have trust issues,” I say. “I just sound tragic and resigned (also incredibly paranoid: memories of the Doomsday cult come rushing back unbidden…perhaps I should try and recruit him as the first member).

“Yes, you certainly appear to,” he replies, and just like that I’m feeling irritated again. Does he think I owe him an explanation?

“Not without good reason,” I say defensively.

“I’m sure your reasons are excellent Will. I simply wish you felt able to confide in me about them.”

Michael is looking at me expectantly, and I idly wonder what he would do if I simply cut to the chase and said ‘Look…why don’t you just piss off?’ I don’t of course. Instead I just wriggle around uncomfortably in my seat: I probably look like I’ve got gas. Oh God, why didn’t I just go straight home when I had the chance? Even sitting up all night planning for the impending Matthew Brown Apocalypse couldn’t have been worse than this courteously controlled interrogation. In fact if Matthew Brown turned up now I’d probably be quite pleased to see him. ‘Come on you little shit,’ I think, ‘you tried to get me out of the BSHCI, the least you can do is get me out of this.’

“You seem lost in thought again,” says Michael, and I realize I have absolutely no idea how long I’ve been sat there staring at the table top having a whiney imaginary conversation with Matthew Brown. He’s not wrong anyway – I get so lost in thought it’s sometimes a struggle to haul myself out again. I need a ball of thread, like Theseus and the Minotaur: except that it would almost inevitably always lead back to you.

“I’m fine,” I reply, which is such an enormous, colossal lie that Michael simply raises his eyebrows. Fuck this – I’m going to hide behind the Fifth Amendment. “I’m going to the bar,” I say, a bit desperately, “do you want anything?”

He frowns slightly, no doubt in irritation at the clear bullshit evasion strategy which this obviously is. “Thank you,” he says eventually, “I’ll have another glass of the Mourvedre.”

“No problem,” I reply, and bolt away so fast I nearly trip over the neighboring table and break my fucking neck. The bartender is as sleek and well-groomed as a store-front mannequin, and I can’t overcome the feeling that he’s scrutinizing my crumpled clothes and slightly manic expression with resentment and asking himself how the hell a hobo like me managed to bullshit my way past the doormen and into his pristine premises. I’ve already forgotten the name of the wine Michael asked for but can’t possibly face going back to check, so end up enduring an excruciating few minutes gesticulating at the bartender going “it starts with an ‘M’!” in an increasingly fraught way, whilst he polishes the same glass over and over with a crisp white cloth saying: “Merlot? Malbec? Montepulciano?” like some kind of Stepford Wine Wife. My spirit breaks long before his does, and in the end I just get a Zinfandel, because – who fucking cares anyway?

“Oh, perhaps sir meant Mourvedre?” says the barman triumphantly as he’s handing me my change, so I make a big performance out of dropping a single cent into the tip jar.

Michael gratefully accepts his drink when I get back – to be honest he totally overdoes it, as if I’d
given him the Holy Grail as opposed to a glass of the wrong wine – but if it doesn’t taste anything like he was expecting then he’s too polite to mention it. Instead he activates the whole Wine Bore routine: sloshing it round the glass, sniffing it, then finally sipping it daintily and smacking his lips (*like a chimpanzee*, I think bitchily – then promptly feel guilty). He is in fact, rather uncharacteristically, knocking back one drink after the other. While he’s not drunk, he’s definitely taking on a florid, rambling edge, and I decide that my Matthew Brown bombshell must have unsettled him more than I intended.

“Are you okay?” I eventually ask. He nods, but doesn’t elaborate. The silence starts to stretch out and become awkward, and I pick up one of my empty bottles and busy myself with peeling the label off, trying to ease each section away without splitting it.

“You look very appealing doing that,” says Michael suddenly, and I realize with embarrassment that he’s been watching me the whole time. “Frowning and practically pink-cheeked with concentration. Like Cassatt’s painting of the young woman sewing in the garden.”

I smile vacantly – because really, what the hell am I supposed to say to *that*? – and tug on another strip of label, which promptly breaks. Fuck. I put it down and wonder how I can politely extricate myself.

“You know Will,” he’s staring at me, smiling with an intensity that’s somewhat unsettling, “you really are a very beautiful man.”

Oh shit, shit, here it comes. “Look, Michael…” I say.

“No, don’t,” he cuts me off, touching a finger lightly against my bottom lip. “Don’t tell me ‘no’. You always say ‘no’ don’t you? I could be incredibly good for you Will. There’s so much I could offer you. Show you. Do for you. I’d take care of you…I could make you feel so good – just give yourself an opportunity to find out.” He moves his hand away from my mouth to tangle in the curls at the back of my head, and I instinctively jerk away from him. His face immediately shuts down.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “look, it’s not you,” (oh God, that sounds so lame – and to be honest, it actually is him). I try it again. “Michael, I think you’re great and I’ve really enjoyed getting to know you, but this, this is just…I’m sorry but I can’t. It’s just not going to work.”

“It’s perfectly all right,” he replies, but his voice sounds tight and strained. Shit.

“I’m sorry,” I say again, as if repeating it is going to make any difference.

He sighs at me. “You look tired,” is all he says in response. “Perhaps this is a natural time to draw the evening to a close. Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

We walk into the empty parking lot in silence. *He’ll be fine*, I tell myself, *he’ll have someone else in tow within 24 hours whereas I’ll be going back to a lifetime of solitary drinking, TattleCrime trolling, and sad wanking over a serial killer*. I have no idea whether this is true or not – and he certainly doesn’t look ‘fine’ –but somehow my own pathos has always been easier to dwell on than other people’s. We reach his car and I loiter awkwardly in front it: the prospect of dragging this out for the time it takes to get me home is actually pretty unbearable. “Look, it’s kind of you to offer,” I say, “but there’s really no need to drive me. It’s totally out of your way – everywhere’s out of the way for my place, unless you’re a crack dealer or want to score some stolen hubcaps.” *Oh God, shut up*, I think to myself, *you’re making it worse.*

“How do you know if it’s out of my way or not?” He gives me a bland little smile. “You don’t know where I live.”
“Honestly,” I say, a bit desperately, “I’m fine to get a cab.” If Jack fell for it then hopefully he will too.

There’s a pause while he stares at me, and I’m gearing up for the inevitable ‘no, no, I insist’, but in the end he just frowns and nods. “I’ll tell you what Will,” he says, “I can see you want to leave so I won’t detain you much longer. However, I have a small gift for you in the car” (at this point I’m pretty sure my mouth falls open in dismay), “and I’d like to give it to you before you leave. Don’t worry, it’s just a token.”

He politely bends round me to open the door and rummage in his glove box, and I know that whatever lingering sense of guilt I feel for not levelling with him sooner is being punished tenfold by how incredibly fucking awful and awkward this all is.

He retrieves what’s he’s looking for and then straightens up and puts his arms behind his back, almost coyly, and I have a surreal image of him asking me to choose which hand I want like a child would.

“I do hope we can continue to be friends after this,” he says. His voice is measured and courteous, but he’s standing too close, looming into my space. I take a step back, but he moves forward in tandem, hemming me up against the side of the car. He looks at me meditatively. “I’m sorry Will, I truly am,” he says. “I really didn’t expect it to come to this. But you know, you’re not giving me much choice are you?”

I open my mouth to yell, but he’s moving towards me – he’s so fucking fast, how is this happening? He’s gripping my throat and pushing a cloth over my face, and suddenly he’s not there anymore and it all goes still; there’s nothing but confusion, and fear, and a throbbing echo at the side of my skull. And then there’s nothing at all but blackness.

Chapter End Notes

*SPOILER WARNING*

Please don’t read any further if you don’t want even slight clues about what happens next…

…Okay. Hello there. So, not really spoilers as such, but more like a reassurance for anyone who, like me, really dislikes unpleasant cliff hangers of this type – please rest assured that Will is essentially going to be okay. That is all. Hugs.
I really don’t want to open my eyes, because I know whatever I’m going to see will be hideous – and that once I wake up, there’ll be no more delaying and whatever nightmare is in store will properly begin. But my body’s fighting to move, pulling me back into consciousness; and there’s no doubt that groping blindly in the dark is going to become its own kind of unbearable before too long. I’m aware that I’m propped against the headboard of a bed, hands in my lap and my legs stretched out in front of me. I’m fully dressed, but my clothes feel itchy and confining, as if they’re too small. The back of my shirt is damp and clinging with sweat. When I finally crack open an eye, I immediately see that Michael is standing in front of me, swirling a glass of what looks like brandy.

“Sleeping Beauty,” he says. He raises his glass to me in a demented attempt at a toast. “Welcome back.”

I try to speak, but only manage a kind of groaning noise. My stomach is curdling in fear. What the hell has he done?

“Chloroform,” he says regretfully. (Did I say it out loud, then?). “I apologize – it’s a little crass, as I’m sure you’ll agree, but sometimes the old ways are the most expeditious; as well as retaining a certain vintage charm.” What the fuck is he talking about? My head feels like it’s being crushed in a vice and there’s an oily sheen of nausea hovering beneath my rib cage. A bead of sweat trickles down my face, and I clumsily try to wipe it off before realising that my hands are cuffed. None of this makes any sense, and I stare down at my hands in confusion, as if they’re alien things that don’t belong to me. Michael is observing my feeble struggles with obvious amusement. “If you need to vomit”, he tells me, “there’s a bucket at the side of the bed.”

The thought of throwing up in front of him feels unbearably humiliating. But then what difference would it make in a situation as dire as this? It doesn’t matter, why do I care so much? Oh God. I take a few deep breaths, try to fight the panic and stay in control, the way you once taught me. My name is Will Graham, I’m in Baltimore, it’s around midnight. I’m going to get out of this (I am) and in order to do so I need to be able to think.

I try and ground myself, take in the surroundings. Establish an exit point, I chant in my head, assess the scene. There’s some soft classical music playing in the background, and a fire flickering in the grate at the end of bed. The room is done out in dark, rich colors, it looks expensive and sumptuous: gilt frames, damask curtains and an elaborate reproduction of Rodin’s The Kiss on a plinth by the fireplace. Candles too – Christ. It’s a grotesque parody of seduction. He’s had time to arrange me like this, he’s confident he won’t be disturbed. I deduce we must be at his place. This realization, whilst undeniably basic, still gives me a faint surge of confidence. I can think, I can rationalize. If I
can still do these things, then I can get myself out.

He carefully sits down next to me on the side of the bed and runs a hand through my hair; I jerk my face away and his clicks his tongue with irritation. “Don’t be like that Will,” he says.

“What do you expect?” I try to hiss, but my mouth is still thick and sodden from the chloroform and the words tumble over themselves, garbled and clotted.

“You really have been trying my patience,” Michael continues, as if I haven’t spoken. “That blushing, coy maiden act of yours was incredibly charming at first, I’ll admit, but such things grow tiresome extremely quickly.” He actually sounds genuinely offended. He starts stroking my hair again, but this time I grit my teeth and allow it. Let him think I’m submitting – if I don’t struggle, he’s going to mirror me and subconsciously relax too, and if he relaxes he’ll let his guard down. By 6am this morning, I vow to him silently, I’ll have you in a fucking body bag.

“Truly Will,” he continues conversationally, like the goddamn psychopath he actually is, “you have been the most appalling tease. How long did you expect me to tolerate it? You get on your back for Hannibal Lecter, and then believe you can constantly deny me?”

I jolt at that, and he must have registered the look of shock on my face, because he starts to laugh. “Oh yes, of course. You thought I didn’t know about him?”

“I didn’t…we never…”

He just smiles and flicks the side of my cheek with his forefinger, each word punctuated with a spiteful little prod: “I. Don’t. Believe. You.”

I don’t say anything. I’m not going to discuss you with him. “I know an awful lot about you Will,” he continues. His eyes narrow. “Much, much more than you think. I’ve been waiting for this for quite some time. I’m a patient man, but I’m afraid I’m not very used to being denied receiving exactly what I want. Do you know how frustrating it is when someone won’t behave as you expect them to, behave as they should? Of course you do,” he carries on, not waiting for a response, “you’re very wilful yourself aren’t you? Will-ful,” he smirks at this, as if it’s the funniest fucking thing anyone’s ever said. Forgot 6am, I think, revising my earlier promise – 5am at the latest.

“I appreciate control and power in all things,” Michael adds calmly. His voice is completely steady, we could just be sat in a bar nursing a beer, two guys out on the town. “And I confess that I find the idea of exerting these things over you to be almost unbearably appealing. Seeing, however, as you refuse to offer…then I shall just have to take what I want. You can hardly say that I didn’t give you ample opportunities to agree of your own accord.”

I can feel a scream bubbling up into my mouth, wild and lethal, and it takes every last bit of self-control I can muster to swallow it back down. If I start screaming now I am afraid I won’t be able to stop. How could I not have seen this in him? Christ, how could I not have known.

“My dear Will,” he says. “You look terribly anxious. Now be a good boy and listen to me, and I shall tell you what’s going to happen. You are going to stay here tonight as my guest. During that time I am going to make use of that beautiful body of yours – repeatedly – and even though you don’t really deserve it, I am going to be extremely good to you and make sure you enjoy yourself. Tomorrow morning there will be copious DNA evidence of your enjoyment all over my bed. You know as much about male physiology as I do, I’m sure, and for that reason you will therefore be aware that I can bring you to orgasm whether you want to or not. You will then get dressed and go home, and you will tell no one what has happened. If you do, then I will express my great sorrow to the police that you are telling such terrible lies about me, and assert that we have been seeing each
other for some time and that you came here of your own volition. I will tell them that we had consensual sex, and that you asked me to handcuff you. I will refer them to the forensic evidence of your extreme enjoyment to indicate that you had no complaints at the time. I may even imply that you had already threatened to blackmail me by fabricating a rape charge, and how sad I am that you have been disturbed enough to actually go through with it. I will describe my embarrassment and upset that I allowed your various attractions to distract and deceive me from realizing your true character—and I will be extremely convincing. You may choose to try and pursue it beyond this, of course, but everyone will advise you against it and remind you that it be a very foolish idea. Because in a court of law, when weighing the word of a respected medical doctor with no criminal record against—well— you..."

I stare back at him, mute and uncomprehending. I can feel my eyes widening.

“Now tell me Will, is this in anyway unclear?’’

“No,” I say carefully. “No, it’s pretty clear.”

“Splendid,” he says. “Then we have an understanding.”

If I’m going to act it needs to be soon. Although my head is clearing, the effects of the chloroform haven’t entirely shifted. Fuck, I have to be more alert than this is I’m going to fight him off. I need more time.

He moves towards me and flicks open the top button of my shirt, and I pull away. “Not yet, please,” I say, I take a few breathes, deliberately making them sound shaky. “I still might throw up.”

He looks at me thoughtfully, but then he just nods. He’s buying it: the fucking idiot. “Water?” he says.

“Please.”

He opens the door of his en suite: there’s the sound of a tap running and I take advantage of his absence to give the handcuffs a vicious tug. Pain shoots up my arm and I briefly fear that I’m going to black out. I take a few more deep breaths, imagine you, imagine what you’d do to him if you were here. Stay here with me, I think desperately, don’t leave, please, I need you. In no time at all he’s back, and he raises the glass to my lips. A few droplets run down my chin and he wipes them away with his thumb, almost tenderly.

“You know, you really do look terribly pale,” he says, “Perhaps I gave you too high a dose.” He sighs fretfully—my sickliness is inconveniencing him. He puts his palm on my forehead and frowns when he feels how clammy it is. He thinks it’s the chloroform—he doesn’t know it’s actually the pain in my thumb.

He pulls back, but keeps a hand on my shoulder, scrutinizing me at arm’s length with his eyes narrowed. “Perhaps a few more minutes,” he says.

“How many people have you done this to?” I ask him, even though I don’t think I can really bear to know.

“Oh not all that many, really,” he says absently, as if we’re talking about some minor infraction; the number of speeding fines he’s acquired.

“Because you like, no, you need the control,” I say. “So you exert power over people, show them that no one has the right to say no to you. And most people don’t say no. So the ones who do have to learn their place, because you can’t tolerate any kind of threat to your self-esteem can you? You
think that justifies what you do, it’s how you give yourself ‘permission’.”

“Are you presuming to profile me Will? Hardly the right time.” He frowns and takes a step towards me; he thinks I’m being insubordinate. “You know one thing that you are extraordinarily good at is running your mouth. I think I should like to see if it can’t be put to better uses.”

I ignore him. “You perpetrate enormous violence using sex as a weapon.”

“I suppose you could put it like that,” he replies, “If you really wanted to.” He actually looks amused.

“Fine,” I say. Then I jerk back my head and bring it crashing into his face. He howls and staggers away from me clutching his nose, and I get to my feet, swaying slightly, and punch him in the stomach as hard as I can with my uninjured hand. He starts to crawl across the floor, then rolls onto his back gasping and whimpering. Blood is streaming out of his nose, which even from here I can see that I have broken.

He stares at me stupidly, blinking and mouthing. “You slipped the handcuffs,” he says finally.

“Of course I slipped the fucking handcuffs.”

He gives a half-laugh, that’s more like a sob. “Not as delicate as you look, are you?”

“Not really,” I tell him, “Although you wouldn’t be the first one to make that mistake.” I look at him with disgust, imaging the unknown others he’s preyed on. “You utter bastard.” Then I pick up the Rodin sculpture and don’t even hesitate before I bring it smashing down onto his head.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year Fannibals!

PS. Sorry to anyone who might have been expecting Himself to turn up in this chapter on a rescue mission and are feeling disappointed :-( The events in this section are not self-contained and form a wider plot point, but I also felt that Will is sometimes very vulnerable in this fic, as well as frequently controlled/manipulated by other people, so wanted to give him a chance to apply his own agency. Rest assured that the countdown to the Grand Entrance has officially started...

Hugs to all those who would like them, and see you on Tuesday.
Welcome back for anyone who chose not to read Chapter 12, thank you for taking care of yourselves. If you skipped it rest assured that Will has escaped and, physically at least, is basically unharmed.

Speaking of which, sorry for another update that’s much shorter than usual (technically this is actually the second half of Chapter 12, but I decided to split in half to make it easier for people to miss it out if they wanted to). Normal length will resume in the next instalment.

I don’t remember getting home, although I obviously managed it somehow because I’m slumped over my kitchen table with my door keys clenched in a rictus grip. My left thumb is still dislocated from where I slipped the handcuffs. Oh yeah...I should probably do something about that shouldn’t I? Mechanically I feel for the metacarpal bone and push the phalanyx back over the head, then strap the thumb to my index finger using duct tape. I feel remarkably little pain as I do this, and I know I am dissociating. The handcuffs are still suspended from my wrist, so I dig out a paperclip and arduously pick the lock.

There’s hardly any blood on me, and this is a surprise because I expected much more. Regardless I strip off everything I’m wearing and dump it in the trashcan. I never want to feel those clothes on my skin ever again.

Now I’m cold. I get into the shower, turn up the temperature gauge and flail into the scalding water. My forehead is bruised and swollen, and I know by tomorrow it will be screaming with pain. Right now I feel nothing.

Afterwards I dress myself in ancient jeans and a sweater, reassuring in their age and bagginess, and pour myself a glass of scotch which I knock back in one go. The whiskey is smoky and crisp, and it burns a bit as I swallow. It’s good. I pour myself a second, even larger one. I’m too exhausted to stay awake, but too overwhelmed to sleep, and I’m fraught, and cheerless, and hopeless, and lifeless...and right now it feels as if nothing will ever be okay, ever again. And I don’t even care.

Eventually I fetch a blanket from the bed and huddle in my chair. After a while I shift again, pulling the blanket over my head, wrapping it around myself into a makeshift cocoon. I close my eyes. Where should I go? I concentrate on imagining you, imagine you walking into the room. You’re not wearing your usual flamboyant attire, your clothes are simpler and vaguely funereal: an inky black suit and deep blue shirt. You make a noise of regret as you take in my appearance – the bruises, the rapidly swelling hand, the way my eyes are glittering in my pale face.

“You are hurt,” you say.

“Not really,” I reply. “You should see the other guy.”

“Someone did this to you?”

“Technically they’re defensive wounds.”
“I see.” Yeah. You probably do. “And from whom were you defending yourself?”

“A maniac,” I say. “Another one. I seem to attract them.” I start to laugh, even though it’s not remotely funny. I realize I am still in shock. Maybe I’ve been in shock since I first met you and it’s now become so normal that I can’t reliably tell the difference.

You sit down in the other chair, stretching your long legs out in front of you. “How did you feel when you attacked him?” you ask.

“I felt good.” That’s true, I did. “He deserved it. It was justice.”

“It felt righteous?”

“Yes.” Christ, this is deranged, I feel like I’m going insane. “Why am I even talking to you?” I say desperately. “You’re not here. You’re not real.”

“I am real to you right now, in this moment, which makes me subjectively true. Just as Abigail was real to you in Italy. The possible, the existent, and the necessary form a set within human perception and human sensibility. You are constructing me because you need to.”

I take another slug of my whiskey. My hands are shaking and I don’t know how to make them stop. “I blame you for this,” I finally say.

“Why do you blame me, Will?” You don’t sound angry or defensive, just curious. You genuinely want to know.

“I wouldn’t have let him get near me in the first place. Not if you were still here.”

“You used him as a substitute for me?”

“Yes. No… I don’t know. Maybe.”

“How? What was it about him that drew you in?”

“He was interested in me.” God, I sound so pathetic.

“We all have a desire to feel that we are necessary, wanted… that someone yearns for us. It is a very powerful thing to be the focus of someone’s esteem and interest. Humans have a profound psychological need to belong.”

“He seemed so normal. At least relatively – I think you re-calibrated my sense of what’s normal.”

“You trusted him?”

“Yeah, I trusted him. Kind of. At least I trusted him not to pull something like that.”

“Yet he betrayed your trust in the worst way possible.”

“Maybe not the worst way,” I say, “I think you still have the monopoly on that one.”

“You really think that?”

I take another gulp of the whiskey. “No,” I say, "not really.”

“You were my equal, though, always. I didn’t wish to destroy or diminish you; rather raise you up. Elevate you. See you become everything you are capable of becoming. I gave you freedom. When
one loves something, one lets it go.”

“And now you’re not here.”

“Not yet. But something is always going to keep me near you, even if we are not together.”

I have a sudden, helpless feeling that I’m going to cry. God, I’m not going to cry am I? I blink furiously against the tell-tale sting. “I don’t know where you are,” I say instead. “I don’t even know if you’re still alive. I think about you, I dream about you, I’m carrying you around 24 hours a fucking day and it’s suffocating me.” I suddenly remember, in Florence: ‘We’re conjoined,’ I told you, ‘I’m curious whether either of us can survive separation.’ I hurl my empty glass across the room at where I imagine you are sitting. It soars through the air and splinters against the wall, and there’s almost something perfect about the way it explodes into a hundred shattered slivers, each one catching the light.

You also watch its descent. “It will not gather together again,” you say.

“Fuck you,” I reply. “This is your fault, it’s all your fault. I can’t do this anymore, I can’t live like this.” My voice is growing louder, tinged with desperate misery. “I don’t want this! I don’t want you.” It should be a relief to say it aloud, it should be freeing. Why don’t I feel these things? I take a steadying breath. I need to survive the separation; here, in the real world. I know what I have to do.

“I’m done Hannibal,” I say quietly. “I’m letting you go. I don’t want you here. I don’t want to talk to you, I don’t want to remember you. I don’t want to think about you ever again.”

“Will,” I hear you say. That’s all, just my name. Then I hear the scrape of your chair pushing back. You take a few steps towards me and pause, as if you want to say something else. But you don’t.

I put my hands over my face. I know you’re leaving, you’re walking away, and despite everything, I still don’t want to watch you go. “Come back, come back,” I whisper into the empty air. “Come back to me.” I love you. But it’s no good, and of course you’re not there.

*****

Waking up the next morning is agony. Worse than getting stabbed, worse than wrenching my thumb out its socket, worse than falling off a cliff. Worse than anything. “Stop being so melodramatic,” I say out loud, “stop catastrophizing.” But how can I not, when this is a catastrophe?

I’m not miserable that I’ve killed a person and don’t care about it at all; and I’m not particularly miserable that I’ll almost certainly have to answer for it, while someone (probably Jack) stands over me and laboriously explains the laws pertaining to ‘unreasonable force.’ But I am miserable at the fact that I am horrifically infatuated with someone who’s crawling into my head as the utterly antithesis of everything that I ought to value; who I desperately want to see, whose presence would almost certainly be my undoing, and yet whose sheer, wretched absence is driving me slowly, exquisitely and excruciatingly mad. I am so fucking miserable about this that it’s difficult to breathe, and I want to open my mouth and scream, except I’m afraid that if I do I’ll never be able to stop and will be screaming every day for the rest of my life.

I remember, unbidden, the quote from Tarryn Fisher that I once heard Alana say. What’s the difference between the love of your life and your soulmate? One is a choice and one is not.

I realize that I’m clutching onto my hair so hard that it hurts, and force myself to take a few deep breathes to calm down. “You’re okay, you’re okay,” I mutter to myself. But I’m not, I’m not. I don’t think I ever can be again. I don’t know how. I don’t even know if I want to be, and the awareness of
that is one of the most terrifying things I’ve felt so far. This is what you meant isn’t it, when you said that if I followed the urges I kept down for so long, "cultivated them as the inspirations they are," then I would become someone other than myself. You’re both the abyss and the light at the other side, and you’ve made me feel unravelled, undone: like only you can take me apart and put me back together afterwards, all at the same time.

The weight of carrying so much feeling is unbearable, and I slowly sink to the floor at the foot of the bed. I crouch to make myself as small as possible, wrap my arms around my head. I want to cry to get some of the tension out, but I can’t even manage it.

The thing is, I never knew myself as well as I did when I was you.

And then I went into a dark place with you, and I brought something back.
Fan Art!

Chapter Summary

“I Miss You” by Alice Under Wonderland

Gorgeous readers, one and all, we now have stunning Fan Art!! Enormous love and thanks to the beautiful Alice Under Wonderland, who has absolutely made my year less than one week in - please give her all the kudos for being so generous and brilliant, and sharing something so very lovely.

Then please form an orderly queue to give Poor Sad Will a hug (and feel very free to shake your fists at me for being so awful to him in the first place).
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Subscriptions have gone right up since posting the picture of Sad Will and I am starting to suspect he has mystical powers – I intend to put this theory to the test and will inform you of any results. E.g.:

Me: Can I borrow an obscene amount of money please?
Bank Manager: No
Me: *shows picture of Sad Will*
Bank Manager: Dammit. Cash or cheque?

Likewise please keep me updated if you encounter any unexpected phenomenon in which Sad Will is implicated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The morning drags on, and I eventually pull myself together sufficiently to get showered and dressed. Outside the window I can still see the agents propped up in their unmarked car. This time they’re parked to face the opposite way down the street, but are otherwise a carbon copy of the previous few days: same carefully-arranged inscrutable faces, same take-out coffee cups. The events of the past 24 hours reinforces my initial sense that their presence is of precisely zero value, and I feel a childish urge to saunter over and point this out to them.

God, this going to be a long day, I can tell.

I really need to get back to the country, that’s the problem. I’m not suited to city living, I’m fading away amidst all the glare and chrome and exhaust fumes. I need rivers, fields, and an open sky; a picket fence and spiralling trees and the sound of silence. And dogs. I really should have got an apartment that allowed pets. I should have done that. Why didn’t I?

Maybe that should be my next project – find somewhere more suitable to live. My budget isn’t what it once was but I’ll manage somehow. As enterprises go, this one feels a bit more promising than the last few I’ve come up with (go back to work; meet new people; stop obsessing about you…none of them have exactly been working out as planned, have they?). Real estate is nice and dull and dependable. Maybe best to wait awhile until the Matthew Brown situation becomes clearer, but after that…? I feel pleased with this idea, something solid to cling onto. I could go online this afternoon (and not open the bookmark for TattleCrime while I’m there) and have a provisional look. Maybe drive out over the next few days. I give myself a little affirmative nod to emphasize the fundamental safe, sound, solidity of this plan. It’s all pretty convincing, and I half-believe it myself, even though I know – deep down – that none of this is going to happen. That I’m deceiving myself, blindly and blithely, like someone watering shrivelled flowers long since dead. Because for all the soundness of this plan, it still can’t accommodate the two enormous elephants in the room: you, on the one hand; and the body of Michael French (and a bad taste Rodin sculpture covered in my fingerprints) on the other.

I force myself to sit down again and ponder this. Objectively, the issue with Michael would weigh far more heavily on most people’s ‘what the fuck do I do now?’ meters, but I actually find it easier to contemplate than the issue with you. In fact it’s practically straightforward in comparison; unlike you,
he’s not shifting sands beneath my feet. I feel like I know where I am with this one. I can pin it down; I can pin him down. You, on the other hand, I cannot simply define by only your crudest, maddest edges. I can’t define you at all.

I just want you to come back.

To be honest, I should just go and see Jack – tell him everything. It was self-defence after all (at least morally – legally it wasn’t, because he didn’t actually threaten my life, but Jack will never know that). Yeah. I really should tell Jack. Screw all that twisted bullshit Michael came out with – Jack will believe me. He didn’t believe me last time. No – no this is totally different. When weighing the word of a respected medical doctor with no criminal record against – well – you. “He will believe me,” I say aloud in a small, doubtful voice, “I know he will.” No I don’t. My hand hovers over the phone. “Go on,” I say to myself. And then the phone rings, and fucking hell, it’s actually Jack.

“Homicide,” says Jack before I can speak, “I need you to take a look. White male, killed in his own home: it’s bad, the body is a complete mess. Alana will be pretty upset, Zeller says she knew the guy.” I let out a long, low breath as he tells me the address and asks me to come over as soon as possible. I don’t even flinch.


Mechanically I pick up my keys and pull on my coat. I am an indifferent actor in a bad play, watching myself stumbling through the performance. This was, of course, inevitable. In fact it was so inevitable that I’m perversely relieved that it has come to a head so quickly, freed me from the burden of further decision-making.

As I lock the apartment door I can’t help thinking how delighted Freddie Lounds is going to be when she discovers (because surely she will) that her predictions have come true, and that I am finally investigating my own crime scene.

*****

Michael French is sprawled on his back in his once-pristine kitchen in a pool of his own blood, and the grisliness of the tableau notwithstanding, I am still overcome with a powerful urge to kick him in the balls. Strikingly however, he looks different from when I last saw him. Extremely different. Different to the extent that someone has removed his hands and inserted them inside two crudely sliced incisions within his abdominal cavity.

“Shitting hell,” I say absently. Because really, this is not what I was expecting at all.

“Well, that’s one way of putting it I suppose,” says Jack, “although I was hoping for something a bit more substantial.”

I’m not really listening, letting my eyes skim over the curdled puddles of blood that have gushed and flowed around the body.

“So he bled to death from the amputations?” I say.

“No shit Sherlock,” says Price, just as Zeller adds: “Good to see someone’s expensive forensic education wasn’t wasted.”

I ignore them both, because of course what it really means from my point of view is that his heart was still beating when the knife sliced in. It means he regained consciousness to get himself into the kitchen. Which means that I wasn’t actually the one who killed him – either he had a fucking
adamantine skull, or I was too drugged up and delirious to hit him as hard as I intended. I am simultaneously both relieved by this and really, really disappointed.

“Distinctive mutilation pattern, isn’t it?” Jack is saying. “Remind you of anything?” I drag my attention back into the room. What’s he talking about? He doesn’t think it’s you, does he? It’s definitely not you. It’s far too simplistic and crude, no artistry at all. Not to mention that if you knew what he’d tried to do to me, there’s no way you would have let him off this lightly.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I reply. “And the answer is no. Absolutely not. It’s not Hannibal.”

“Actually I agree, and I wasn’t thinking that,” says Jack tartly.

“Oh,” I say, “okay. Sorry.”

“What I was thinking, however, is that the ostentatious nature of displaying the body rings more than a few bells,” says Jack. What? What the hell’s the matter with him today? He’s not usually quite this severe and pompous.

Zeller looks at Jack: the penny is beginning to drop. “Oh,” he says, “which means a latent copycat?”

“Which means Matthew Brown,” I say gloomily (because – well, obviously). Jack opens his mouth but then changes his mind halfway through and just nods instead – he knows I’m right. He thought the same, he just wanted me to confirm it.

“Shit, wow, so he really hasn’t gone anyway then?” says Zeller. “Still right here in Baltimore. I did wonder whether that letter was a bluff.”

“That’s crazy,” says Price, “he could have gotten clean away. He could have been anywhere by now. He could have been in…” he snaps his fingers, obviously trying to think of somewhere outlandish. We all wait patiently. “He could have been in Bognor” says Price triumphantly.

“Bognor? Price, what the hell are you taking about?” says Jack.

“It’s in the UK,” says Price defensively, “my mom has family there.”

“Whatever,” says Jack. He sounds impatient. “Look, Matthew Brown doesn’t need a reason to do anything. He’s out of his mind.”

Matthew Brown. Right now, I actually feel a bit grateful to the little bastard. I can still picture him, lurking in the bowels of the BSHCI. The way he peered so eagerly at me with his pinched rat-like face, yearning for my attention and approval. The bars made the allusion even more convincing – a rodent in a cage, desperately trying to earn a kindly look from its owner. So much trouble over such a feeble, fawning thing…and for a second I wonder why I’ve given him so much power through the force of my fear. Then I look at the bloody mess on the floor and remember – yeah, that’s why.

Rats are vicious and cunning. They’re hard to kill. They carried bubonic plague and brought down half of Europe. He nearly brought down you. It’s stupid to underestimate them.

“So, what I want to know is: why this guy?” Jack is asking.

Reluctantly, I look down again at Michael (rest in pieces). Well of course it can’t be a coincidence. Can it? I want to believe it is, but I know there’s absolutely no way – no way at all.

“And then when you consider the note…” muses Jack, who thinks I’m still listening.
I snap my head round at that. “What note?”

Zeller looks surprised. “Are you kidding me?”

“What goddamn note?” I almost yell.

“Jeez Graham,” says Zeller, “it’s right there.”

How could I not have seen it? It’s in an evidence bag now, smeared with scarlet and placed on the counter, but the block-print letters are a screaming claxon call to sound the alarm. They’re not exactly the same as the previous ones – cut out of newspaper print rather than handwritten, and thus black instead of red – but it’s enough. It’s more than enough. I lean over so I can read it, my heart pounding crazily in my ears: “FOR TOUCHING WHAT HE SHOULDN’T HAVE TOUCHED.”

Oh. Oh fuck.

“Okay Jack,” I say, “I think I may have some idea of what went on here…”

*****

“Man, that totally sucks,” says Zeller. He puts his hand on my shoulder. “I’m really sorry that happened to you.”

“Thanks,” I say, “I’m fine though. He didn’t hurt me.”

“He wanted to though.”

“I hurt him more,” I say. I’ve told Jack about the head butt and the punch (though have neglected to mention smashing his head in – Matthew Brown can have that one on the house). As it is, I’m still on the right side of ‘reasonable force.’ Mentally, I give myself a resounding high-five.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” asks Jack.

I shrug. “I was in shock. And I guess a part of me had accepted what he said – that no one would believe me.” This is actually true (the bastard), although there remains the undeniable issue that I thought I’d murdered him and didn’t wish to advertise the fact. Legally I should have stopped once he was incapacitated. I could have called the cops, waited outside the apartment until they turned up. I could have done that, but I didn’t. Not that I really care anyway: screw the law. I throw a contemptuous glance at the mangled remains of Michael French, and silently telegraph: fuck you.

“You should have told me,” Jack persists.

“Shut up Jack,” says Price, “leave him alone.”

Jack, surprisingly, backs down. “You should go,” he says to me. “You’re a victim in this too. You don’t need to be here.”

“It’s okay, I’m fine,” I tell him. “I’m involved whether I like it or not.”

“Yeah, I guess you are,” says Jack heavily. “You’re the motive aren’t you?”

Price frowns. “Hang on, hold up. So what you’re basically saying is that Graham now has two psychopaths who are trying to flirt with him?”

Everyone turns on cue and looks at me.

“Actually it’s technically three” I say, gesturing at Michael’s body, “if you count the dead one on the floor.”

Jack’s mouth twitches a bit at that, and he gives me a lop-sided grin. “You sure you’re okay Will?” he says. “This…” he waves his hand at the mess on the floor, “would be a hell of a lot for anyone to handle.”

“I’ve handled worse,” I say, which is so undeniably true that Jack doesn’t even bother to push it. Even as I’m saying it I can’t decide whether the fact I’ve dealt with worse is somewhat reassuring or horribly depressing. In fact it’s becoming such a staple part of my coping repertoire that I may as well standardize it when I introduce myself: “Good to meet you! My name is Will Graham, and you ought to know that I am continuously handling something worse.”

That aside, what’s bothering me far more at the moment is how the hell Matthew Brown knew about Michael in the first place (which is, in fact, a rhetorical worry, because of course I know how – he’s been following me). He must have been lurking in that parking lot the whole time, hidden in plain sight, watching and waiting and primed to make his move. He probably heard me on the phone, and my stomach turns over unpleasantly at the thought. Thank God I had the sense not to say your name. He must have had a car in order to trail Michael, though I don’t remember seeing one. Fuck, he could be outside the building right now.

Or – and this is worse still – he didn’t actually know about last night at all, but was simply aware that I’d spent time with Michael and wanted to do something about it. Which would mean that this isn’t an avenging angel act of retribution, but simply deranged jealously and possessiveness. The newspaper print in his note would actually confirm this – he had enough time to plan it out and prepare beforehand. If that’s the case then anyone could be targeted next: Jack, Alana, Zeller or Price. You? (Again). The thought makes me feel a bit sickened, and I lean back against the wall and tilt my head towards the ceiling.

“Will?” Jack is looking at me with concern.

“Yeah.”

“You look exhausted. Go home and get some rest.”

This is the second occasion in the last 24 hours that he’s told me to ‘go home and get some rest,’ and it sounds even less appealing than it did the first time round. I’m sick of resting and waiting: it’s seems like it’s all I’ve done so far and it’s accomplished exactly fuck all. I want to scream and rend and tear at something. “This is such bullshit,” I say.

“You’re right, it is.”

I pound the heel of my hand against the wall in frustration. “I’ve had enough,” I say. It’s true: I have. I’ve had more than enough. Fuck all of this.

“You know Jack,” I suddenly blurt out, “this sounds crazy, but I actually just wish he’d just come at me. Come out into the open.”

Jacks stares at me evenly. “Yes, that does sound crazy.”

I shrug. It is what it is. “I want this finished.”

“Of course you do, we all want that. But Will, I’ve know you’ve proven yourself pretty bullet-proof
“And knife-proof. And cliff-proof. And…”

“Yeah, okay, I get it: you can handle yourself. But this – this is different. This is incredibly dangerous. And I absolutely forbid you to do anything stupid.”

“Is that your speech?”

“That’s my speech.”

“It’s good. Good speech Jack.”

Jack gives me an exasperated look. “But...?” he says.

“But – define stupid,” I reply. “In a situation like this, give me an operational definition of what the smart option is.”

“The smart option,” says Jack beadily, “Is not parading yourself around as live bait in the hope of luring out Matthew Brown.”

Parading myself? I nearly start laughing at that. What does he think I’m going to do? I have a fleeting, ludicrous image of myself trudging up and down Pennsylvania Avenue in a ‘Hey there Matthew Brown!’ sandwich board.

“I can’t lure him out even if I wanted to,” I say instead, trying my best to sound reasonable. “I can’t do anything except what I’ve done so far – he’s going to appear when he thinks the time is right. What I’m saying is that I wish it would just happen. The waiting is worse.”

Jack is nodding sympathetically, but I’m no longer paying attention. I can feel a weird thrill of energy running through me: a flicker that kindles and turns into a flare. What I omit to add out loud is ‘maybe Matthew Brown will realize that it’s not all that smart to piss off someone who imagines killing people for a living.’

God, I’m ready for this. I am. I won’t make the mistake of underestimating him, but I won’t keep cowering either, lingering on in a perpetual state of dread and doubt. And if it’s the realization that he could pose a threat to you that has helped trigger this sea-change in attitude, then fuck it: bring it on.

The sudden surge of resolve and determination that courses through me is so powerful it makes me light-headed, and I have to briefly close my eyes. It’s like a hit, like getting high: I feel so far removed from the broken, despairing shadow of this morning. The spectres of Michael French and Matthew Brown skitter through my head, their separate attempts to control and manipulate me; how the first one failed and the second won’t be allowed to succeed. Then I think of you, of the torturous twists and turns of our ongoing danse macabre: of where you are now, what you’re doing, and whether you’re thinking about me. Of the way you used to watch me, touch me, insinuate and persuade: wind me up and watch me go; your unwavering belief that I could become something more than I already am. And for the first time in months I’m suddenly aware – with a jolt of energy, of fire and inspiration – that I’m no longer possessed by a crippling sense of misery and uncertainty. Because finally, fucking finally, I am in possession of myself.

*****

I half expect to awake the next morning and find that my resolve has withered away during the night, but after flexing and prodding it, I’m relieved to discover that it’s still firmly intact. The renewed sense of purpose is incredibly liberating. It’s like I’m slowly coming back to myself, breaking out of
my stifling cocoon: ready to hunt and track and trail whatever it is that's out there.

I get out of bed with much more energy than usual. The first thing I’m going to do with my resuscitated resolve is contact Alana, because I’m tired of being timid and wary about her reaction. She can say her piece about that night in the bar, and I can either accept it or not. The second thing I’m going to do is lie in wait for Matthew Brown, and I’ll be ready for him when he comes. And then…then I’m going to find you.

Coming, coming, ready or not. I tap it out as a rhythm on the kitchen counter with my knuckles. I sent you away, I can invite you back in again – on my own terms. Jack would say I’m being reckless and he’d probably be right. I’m like someone idling along the edge of a cliff (another one), eyes closed and whistling to myself with my hands in my pockets, believing I’m untouchable – invincible – that I can’t ever fall. Other people might miss their footing and plummet down but not me, because I’m not like other people and can’t be contained by the same rules.

I realize that I am falling back into this belief with blind faith, a type of mindless, unquestioning constancy that's both irresponsible and stupid. And yet, and yet...is it really such a bad thing to have faith in? You once said I was unique, and I know you always believed it – even when everything went to hell you never stopped believing it – so why shouldn’t I agree with you? In the most literal sense it’s true, anyway – there’s only one of me. I’m Will Graham. I’m from the Old Germanic Willelm meaning ‘bold warrior.’ I am young and smart and fast, with empathy and autonomy and imagination. I am sovereign and self-commanding; relentless and resolute; I have dark impulses and inspiration; I am centre stage, curtain up and this is my design. And I am absolutely sick of being fucked around with.

As I button up my shirt I realize that I’m smiling from the sheer pleasure of not feeling afraid. I think, if you were here, you’d actually be quite proud of me.

Chapter End Notes

Bognor is quite restrained for the UK, considering we also have (amongst others) Shitterton, Ugley, Crapstone, Sandy Balls and Scratchy Bottom.

Rule Britannia is all I’m saying.
I call Alana that afternoon to arrange to meet, and as soon as I hear the tone of her voice – quavering and tearstained – I realize that Jack must have told her everything. I feel like a complete shit: I’ve been so preoccupied with my rambling confessions on the night of Matthew Brown’s escape that I completely forgot about her link with Michael. This recent development is going to devastate her.

I spot Alana as soon as I walk into the coffee shop; and the depth of her devastation is immediately apparent, branded in every feature like a stigmata. She’s hunched over the table, hands clasped around her mug so tightly that her knuckles are white, and I take a circuitous route so I can approach her from the front to avoid startling her. When she looks up at me I can see that her eyes are pink and swollen; the sleepless shadows underneath them so pronounced they could almost be bruises. “Oh God, Will,” she says. She reaches out one of her white-knuckled hands, fumbling blindly for mine. “I’m so sorry Will. I’m so, so sorry.”

“It’s okay...Honestly, it is. It’s not your fault.” I pull out the other chair and sit down, my hand still gripped in hers.

She stares at me, pale and anguished. “What an utter nightmare this has been,” she says. “I could scarcely credit what Jack was telling me. I still can’t: this hideous, distorted version of Michael that none of us ever knew existed. I mean he was really interested in you. He asked me about you. A lot. But he always seemed so respectful about it. I just thought he would understand you, could be a friend for you...that you might not be as lonely.” Her voice cracks. “How could I not have seen...I mean, I didn’t see it. I didn’t know.”

“Neither did I.” I say. I make my voice as gentle and non-accusatory as possible. “He was incredibly convincing.”

“Just like Hannibal,” she says faintly.

Ah. I knew that there would be an excavation of what happened with you – a stratigraphy of regret and shame and remorse – but wasn’t sure whether she would broach it quite so soon. Perhaps I should have; she’s pretty fearless that way. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve underestimated her.

“Just like Hannibal.” I have to agree with her, because it’s true. I add, a bit lamely, “It seems as if there’s something in the water at Hopkins.”

“That’s not funny Will.”

“No,” I agree, “it isn’t really is it?”

“I can’t believe this has happened to you,” she says. “Because of me. You’d never have met him if it wasn’t for me.”

“Alana, don’t. Please.” I tighten my grip on her hand. “Don’t do this to yourself. You were being a friend to me. You were being kind and considerate, like you always are...like you always have been.” As an afterthought I add: “And don’t confuse it with what happened with Hannibal.” I notice that my voice doesn’t catch on your name, and tuck this away as a small achievement. “It’s two entirely separate issues.”
“That just means I was utterly taken in twice,” she says in a small voice.

“That’s how people like them become so incredibly successful: they have a flawless mask of normalcy.” I realize that I’m starting to talk like a textbook – and also that I really hate bracketing you and him together – but that right now it’s necessary; that I need to do it for Alana’s sake. “I’m trained to spot predators,” I continue (for all the fucking good it’s ever done me), “and he completely had me taken in as well. I actually felt sorry for him.” God, I did as well didn’t I – all those evenings reproaching myself for leading him on.

“But you’re okay now?” She sounds so frail and young and uncertain, it’s awful. I hate that someone’s made her feel like this, like she can no longer trust her own judgement.

“Of course,” I say (with a flippancy I don’t remotely feel), “I thoroughly kicked his ass.”

She smiles a bit and reaches for my hand again, and I feel a renewed surge of admiration for her. She’s not ashamed of her vulnerability: she can feel it, and flex with it; and because she bends she won’t break. I can’t help comparing it with my own brittle veneer – the cavalier pretence that everything’s fine, when I’m really cracking and rupturing inside. I don’t really know how to explain the complexity of my real reaction, I don’t have the words for it. I was fucking terrified, and ashamed, and repulsed, and I couldn’t quite believe that it was actually happening. But when I thought I’d killed him it made me feel sick-ecstatic-thrilled-alive; and I know that should trouble me, but it doesn’t.

“Look,” I say, “I didn’t just want to talk to you about Michael” (to be totally honest, I never really wanted to talk about him at all). “Alana, I’ve been thinking about our last conversation.” She looks at me blankly. “You know, in the bar? The night we got the news about Matthew Brown?”

“Oh,” she says. She’s visibly dragging her mind from the horrors of the present to the distress and confusion of the past. I wait patiently, twirling a sachet of sugar between my fingers like a miniature baton. “Look, Will,” she says at last, “I pushed you too far over that, I’m sorry. I had no right to say what I did. You don’t have to clarify anything…You don’t owe me any kind of explanation.”

“I know. I know I don’t. But I’d like to be honest with you about this. I’d like to be honest with myself about it.”

“Oh, she says. She’s visibly dragging her mind from the horrors of the present to the distress and confusion of the past. I wait patiently, twirling a sachet of sugar between my fingers like a miniature baton. “Look, Will,” she says at last, “I pushed you too far over that, I’m sorry. I had no right to say what I did. You don’t have to clarify anything…You don’t owe me any kind of explanation.”

“I know. I know I don’t. But I’d like to be honest with you about this. I’d like to be honest with myself about it.”

“Okay, I guess. If you’re sure. Just as long as you…” She trails off. “Thank you Will. I appreciate that you trust me. I don’t feel like I deserve it.”

“Of course I trust you,” I say. “You’ve always been a good friend to me, and I’ve always trusted you.” I fall silent after that, because I suddenly realize that I’m not sure how to proceed, but she doesn’t prompt me: just waits, patient and quiet.

I draw in a deep breath then let it out again. “He made me feel alive,” I say finally. “He still does. He understood me in a way that no one else ever has, and I never knew myself as well as I did when I was with him. He didn’t make me feel the best, or happiest, or safest...but he made me feel the most.” I sigh and lean back in my chair. “I know he didn’t make me a better person Alana, but I felt like he made me a better version of myself. No one else has ever wanted the darkness in me, never even wanted to acknowledge it, and he…admired it. It was like the greatest acceptance and the ultimate freedom.”

God, it really was. You were so many things: phantom, demon, fallen idol, faithless friend, malign energy tempered by thoughtful smiles, tender touches that wound without warning, broken promises and earnest endeavours – both problem and solution – completely, utterly and unrepentantly deficient in all morals, ignoring all maxims…yet with an intense, unbridled virtuosity that burnt so brightly it
sometimes hurt to look at you. In a deeply fucked-up way, everything was just better with you. I was better with you: lived larger, thought sharper, ran faster, loved fiercer and was more loved. It’s both as simple and as convoluted as that.

She nods slowly, thinking about what I’ve told her. “It sounds incredibly powerful,” she says finally. “Intoxicating. I don’t think I’ve experienced something quite like that, I guess hardly anyone has. I’m not going to say you’re lucky, because I’m not sure that you are, and I know you’ve paid a very high price for it…”

“Still paying,” I say.

“Still paying,” she takes a careful sip of her coffee, grimacing slightly at how hot it is. “But you found someone who understood you, and captivated you, and was captivated by you…” She sees me staring at her. “Well of course he was,” she says, “It was obvious.”

“I guess.” I hesitate and lean back in my chair, trying to maintain eye contact. “Do you think he’s still alive?”

“I don’t know. They never found a body did they? Unless there’s firm evidence to the contrary, I’d say it’s probably safer to assume that he is.”

“Don’t you ever worry that he’ll come after you?” I know it’s a fucking awful question, but I can’t stop myself.

“Yes,” she says simply. “He gave his word didn’t he? But Will, what am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know…Run?” Run, run, fast as you can.

“Run where? He’d always find me if he wanted to, just like I found him.” She sighs and pushes her hair back from her face. “Oh, I’ve taken sensible precautions of course. Our house has the best security that money can buy – and you know that really is the best. And I always carry a gun.” She briefly shows it to me: a neat little pistol nestled in her purse. “The thing is, if I spent my whole life in hiding – even if that were possible – then he’s already won by default. Even in the past few months, there’re so many precious experiences that I would have missed.” She gives me a significant look. “I would have lost all that, he’d have taken it away.”

“Even so…”

“Will, you know as well as I do what Hannibal is. You know better than anyone. Do you really think he couldn’t find me wherever I go?”

“It would slow him down.”

“It’s not about that with him. He could know exactly where I am and still not strike for years; it’s all part of his grand mise-en-scène. And in the meantime I refuse to eke out a half-life where I’m constantly glancing over my shoulder. Besides,” she adds with an awful simplicity, “We both know that he’s going to come to find you long before he looks for me.”

“Possibly.”

“Definitely. And I imagine you’ll be waiting?”

Instead of an answer I just sigh.

“Look Will,” she says. “I get it. I do. I don’t condone it, and I don’t particularly like it, but I can
understand it. Everything you described: of course you miss it and want it back. You can love him and how he made you feel without loving what he did and what he was.”

“I don’t know if it’s quite as simple as that.” It’s not an easy thing to admit, but I’ve promised myself the truth.

“I suppose it isn’t,” she concedes. “But Will, you said you trusted me, and I trust you as well. I trust you to do the right thing. I think you’ll know what that is when the time comes.”

“You’re taking a lot on trust, Alana.”

“Of course. What else is there?”

“There’s him,” I say.

“There is. And there’s also you.”

I look earnestly at her. This woman. “You know what he used to say?” I ask.

“What?”

“He said that ‘the most beautiful quality of a true friendship is to understand, and be understood, with absolute clarity.’”

She smiles at me, and takes my hand again, and we sit like that for a while; drinking our coffee, enjoying the clarity.

*****

On the walk back home I run through in my mind how I’m going to find you; where you could be. It’s not an easy task. In fact, if I’m brutally honest, it’s probably somewhat impossible – but I won’t allow myself to give up hope. I found you before, I can find you again. What I’ll need more than anything else is patience and perseverance. And time. The last one is especially easy, because I have it in abundance: an extravagant, stretching surplus of time. I’ve got the rest of my life (or yours, whichever lasts the longest).

When I get home I sling off my coat and scavenge around in the fridge for last night’s leftover pizza, which I eat one-handed whilst scanning TattleCrime. There’s nothing, of course, but I’m so used to this by now that it’s lost some its power to bruise. Of course you’re not going to make it easy for me: why would you? It’s cold and draughty in the living room, so I brew myself a coffee and stand at the window to drink it, automatically scouting out the security detail. Oh yes, there they are. I’m about to turn away, my mind already drifting (wide-eyed and wondering) back to you, but something about the scene catches and snags at me, and I suddenly go very still as the pieces grind and slot together. I look out again, peering closely. It’s so dim and dusky out there, I can’t see properly. It can’t be. I realize I’m speaking out loud.

I snatch my cell phone from the table and pelt out into the hall. The elevator won’t come, no matter how hard I mash the buttons, and in the end I lose patience and sprint down the stairs so fast I nearly break my fucking neck. I’m only wearing cords and a thin shirt, and the icy air slices through my arms like a razor blade as soon as I leave the building. Mr Haversham is tottering up the steps, hugging himself against the cold, “William!” he says, “Just the boy. Would you mind…?”

“Sorry, can’t stop!” I yell. I don’t even know if he’s heard me, my words are picked up and carried away by the spiteful gusts of wind that are blowing the trash down the street and swirling it round the steps, and I’m running and running and running, desperately hoping I’m wrong and knowing, even
as I make my helpless wish, that I’m horribly and inevitably right.

Close up the agents look oddly peaceful, their eyes closed, dipped back softly against the seats like sleeping children. Each of them has been shot in the head: despatched and discarded with ruthless efficiency. The gunman must have knocked on the window. They wound it down. He was plausible, convincing; maybe asking for directions, pretending to be a tourist: ‘Hey guys! So sorry to bother you. I wonder if you could help me out?’ They never saw it coming.

On the windshield, tucked under the wiper blade is another note. The same stiff white paper, the same grid-like capital letters: NO ONE CAN WATCH YOU BUT ME.

I slowly stand up, back away from the car, carefully take out my phone. My legs are trembling from the force of the sprint, but my hands are steady. Now – long after the worst has already happened – I am strangely calm. Jack answers almost immediately. “You need to get over to my place now,” I say, “both the agents have been shot. Yeah of course it’s Matthew Brown. Yes, I’ll wait inside.”

But I don’t. I stand next to the car for the entire time it takes the cavalry to arrive, stand with the cold and the shock, and the sheer fucking blinding rage that Matthew Brown continues to exist. “I’m going to get you, you bastard,” I hiss aloud to the frozen empty air. “I swear to God, the last thing you will ever see is my smiling face as I choke the life out of you with my bare hands.”

Maybe this is what Jack meant by ‘parading myself.’ Logically I know I’m vulnerable standing out here, yet I feel oddly protected, swathed and stayed by the steely links of my incredible anger. Matthew Brown, I decide, is no longer the predator, but the prey.

I hear the sirens first, then see the patrol cars snaking round the corner, and when Jack walks up, snuggly muffled against the cold, I’m still stood there in my silent, vengeful vigil, the red flashing lights illuminating every clench and twist of my murderous face.

Chapter End Notes

To those commenters who’ve been considering harnessing the persuasive powers of Sad Will – I sincerely hope your interviews etc., go amazingly well. I am personally considering keeping Sad Will in my glove compartment in case I ever need to use him to get off a speeding fine. # Sad_Will_is_Still_a_Badass

In other news, I’m way behind the times with this (as usual) but I’ve just seen an interview about the ‘Hannigram Almost Kiss’ scenes from S3. Oh my word, Scott Thompson is hilarious: “the homoerotic tension between Will and Hannibal is CRAZY, but no one ever says: ‘like, will you guys fuck already’?!” Sing it brother. Amen. The internet hears you.

It would likewise appear that the Messrs Mikkelsen and Dancy are captaining a full Armada of ships for this one as well. Just sayin.’ Sorry, you are probably all well aware of that, but I only watched Hannibal for the first time very recently and was largely oblivious to the cast & crew opinions. BUT NOT ANYMORE.

Also, why has this footage not been released to the viewing public? I demand to know. Someone contact Edward Snowden.
“I Know You’re Out There Somewhere” by Alice Under Wonderland

Hello lovely readers, what time is it? IT’S SAD WILL TIME.

Yes, OMG, the gorgeous Alice Under Wonderland has done us proud yet again with more Sad Will (why did Sad Will cross the road? Answers on a postcard). She is a bright shiny star, and I salute her unreservedly and send enormous electronic hugs of gratitude for being so fabulous.
Chapter 18

I've just realised that I've misspelt 'Purnell' all the way through this – it’s actually Prurnell...But I’m going to leave it because I am a lazy hack fraud.

Jack is wearing his angry/concerned face – it’s now so familiar that I’m beginning to suspect he just grabs it and puts it on whenever he see me, the same way someone would reach for a certain scarf or sweater. “What the hell are you doing out here Will,” he says, “I thought I told you to wait inside? You must be freezing, you idiot. Go and get a coat for God’s sake.”

“I’m fine.”

He prods my arm, which is numb and icy: I’m virtually petrifying in front of him. “You’re not, you’re halfway to hypothermic,” he says crossly. He snaps his fingers at one of the paramedics to bring him a shock blanket. I am slightly envious: if I snapped my fingers like that they’d just laugh (then tell me to fuck off). Jack fussily drapes the blanket round my shoulders, tucking it under my chin like I’m a child. It’s downy and warm, and although I feel (and no doubt look) like a bit of a fool I don’t take it off.

“Shock blanket,” I say. “So how’s that work?”

“Damned if I know.”

“How is a blanket supposed to recalibrate my cognitive faculties?”

“Take more than a blanket with you,” agrees Jack. He pats my shoulder. “I’m sorry you had to see this Will. It’s the last thing you need.”

He holds out his flask of coffee, and I take a deep draught which I promptly choke on when I notice that Freddie Lounds has materialized next to us flourishing a dictaphone. For fuck’s sake. Prurient curiosity is positively rolling off her in waves and I experience the (increasingly familiar) sensation that the Universe does, in fact, hate me and will take any opportunity it can to piss me off.

“Mr Crawford.”

“Ms Lounds…Industrious as ever.”

“Mr Graham.”

“Freddie…If you publish a photo of me in this blanket I will literally kill you.”

She smirks delightedly. “Is that a threat Will?”

“Well, yes, clearly it is,” I say. “I don’t remember saying I intended to kill you metaphorically.”

“Are you hearing this?” she asks, turning to Jack.

“No,” says Jack unhelpfully.
“Any comment to make?”

“We have no statement to make at the present time,” Jack and I chant in perfect unison.

“Bullshit. Come on…is it him? My readers will want to know. The public has a right to know”

“‘Him,’ only narrows it down to around four billion people,” I snap. “So very broadly speaking: yes”… And then promptly feel like punching myself in the face, because of course the smart thing would have just been to say ‘no, absolutely not’ instead of setting her up to (inevitably) clarify:

“Hannibal the Cannibal? Chesapeake Ripper back from the dead and back on the rampage?”

“No,” says Jack. “Does it look like that to you?”

“Not for me to say what it looks like, Mr Crawford,” she says, shooting me a glance of pure malice. “But considering the enormous FBI presence – rather incongruous for a random homicide – not to mention that it’s all happening outside his wife’s house…”

“Did you just call me Hannibal Lecter’s wife?” I yell. Unfortunately I’m so pissed off I don’t realize until too late that my voice has grown progressively louder, and consequently everyone in the vicinity (and possibly some of those beyond it, including the people inside the building and maybe even the dead agents as well) all heard the last part. Sanderson and his forensics crew have turned round to stare: two of them have their mouths open. I kind of want to add ‘why does everyone assume I’m the wife,’ but needless to say desist on the grounds it will not improve the situation (at all).

“All right, that’s enough,” says Jack. “Ms Lounds my official statement, upon which you may quote me to your heart’s content, is that two adult males have been found dead from gunshot wounds inflicted by a suspect, or suspects, unknown; and that we are actively pursuing several lines of enquiry. Got that? Good. Now get out of here, we’re done. And if you mention Will in your piece I’ll personally see to it that you get an injunction slapped down on your site within 24 hours.”

Even Freddie Lounds can’t withstand Jack when he activates full-on ‘And lo! I shall brook no argument!’ mode and she obediently (albeit reluctantly) melts away into the crowd, wielding her goddamn dictaphone in front of her like it’s an assault rifle. Jack sighs and pats me on the shoulder.

“Ignore her,” he says, “she’s just baiting you for a reaction.”

“Yeah, well…she got one.”

“She sure did.” He gives me a sideways look and cracks a grin. “‘Wife’?”

I can’t help laughing (even though, oh God, it’s really not all that funny), then immediately stop when I notice that Kade Purnell is determinedly picking her way through the cordon in our direction. What the hell’s she doing here? I half wish Freddie would come back (Matthew Brown would also do, at a push). Jack and I groan simultaneously and exchange matching ‘oh fuck’ looks.

“Well, well, well Mr Graham,” she says when she reaches us (for some unknown reason I find myself nodding each time she says ‘well’). “Still proving yourself to be the proverbial trouble magnet aren’t you? Seems like you just can’t catch a break.”

“Looks that way,” I reply. I’m going for haughty and aloof, which is extremely hard to pull off whilst swaddled in a fluffy blue blanket, but I give it my best shot.

She gestures at the car. “This is a spectacularly bad result Jack,” she says. Well, yes – obviously. I shuffle my feet with irritation. Jack has more self-control than I do, and merely gives a long sigh. “It
certainly is,” he says.

“I suppose you hardly need me to tell you that the apprehension of Matthew Brown has now become a matter of the upmost priority. This looks bad for us Jack. Very bad indeed.”

“Put me onto it,” I pipe up, just as Jack tries to kick me in the shin to get me to be quiet. “I can guarantee I’ll apprehend him into…” (I nearly say ‘a body bag’ and manage to backtrack at the last minute) “…into a holding cell as a matter of the upmost priority.”

“No,” she says sharply. Her eyes are gleaming in the glare of the headlights. “No, I don’t think so. You’re not coming within spitting distance of the Matthew Brown case.”

I open my mouth to protest. “That’s final,” she adds.

“Why not, when I’ve got the best chances of catching the little bastard?”

She raises her thin, pencilled eyebrows. “Colorful terminology you have there Mr Graham,” she says, “Is that how you’d normally refer to someone escaped from psychiatric custody? He’s a very angry, damaged young man.” Oh for God’s sake. She’s enjoying this just a little too much.

“Actually he didn’t escape from a psychiatric unit,” supplies Jack helpfully, “he was being transferred to a federal prison.” I make a mental note to high-five him for that later.

“And don’t give me that crap,” I add. “First and foremost he’s a narcissistic, entitled prick who’s eliminating people for absolutely no better reason than satisfying the deranged ego trip he currently appears to be on. Do you actually believe what you’re saying, or is it just because he’s targeting me and you’re trying to piss me off?”

“Will…” says Jack in a warning tone.

“People aren’t driven to behave like he does for no reason,” she says primly.

“Agreed, but there are also many people who are far more hurt and damaged than him, and don’t behave like that at all.”

“Censure and judgement perpetuate the cycle of violence. He needs understanding.”

“Did you read that in a memo somewhere?” I say with heavy sarcasm, “I suppose you’d say he needs a hug as well?”

“Will…” says Jack, again. He should just a recording made.

“Who knows?” She gives me a venomous smirk. “Perhaps he does.”

“He needs a hug in the face. With a brick.”

“Just ignore him,” says Jack a bit desperately, “he’s in shock.” He gives me a look that clearly translates as ‘shut the fuck up you idiot’. As annoyed as I am, I know he’s right (reluctantly, I also know that I’m showing a fatal lack of strategy in allowing her to get to me as much as she has). I retreat a fraction, making a point of mutinously (and ostentatiously) rearranging my blanket.

“He’s certainly in something,” says Kade, (go on, I urge her mentally, say ‘in the shit,’ you know you want to). “Carry on talking like that and the first thing he’s in is…a considerable amount of trouble.”

I have a horrible feeling Jack’s going to force me to apologize, but he just grabs me by the elbow and starts pulling me away. “Come on Will,” he says with forced heartiness, “let’s get you to one of the
“Yes let’s,” I say, “I need a new blanket, this one’s run out.” He tugs me so hard I stumble over, hissing under his breath “For God’s sake, leave it. Don’t give her any more reasons to come after you.” I obediently shut up (better late than never) and we conceal ourselves behind the ambulance whilst Kade begins barking out orders into her cell.

I let out a long, angry sigh. “He’s not going to stop Jack. We need to do something.”

“Look – Will…we have the situation under control.”

“Balls.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I said…”

“I heard very well what you said,” growls Jack.

“Then why ask me to repeat it?! I’m starting to yell now, and Sanderson and his forensics crew turn round and stare at me (Part Two). I glare back defiantly until they look away. The wind is threatening to blow the note out of Andrews’ hands – as if Matthew Brown is mocking us all through elusion by proxy – and Jack and I face up and glower at each other, bristling so hard I’m sort of surprised we don’t catch fire.

“May I remind you,” he says in an angry, low voice, “that I lost two men tonight. Good men. Men with families, men whose spouses I shall have to visit after this and inform them that their husbands have been lost in the line of duty. May I also remind you, Agent Graham, that these men were in the line of duty protecting you – under my orders – and that a little professional courtesy right now would not go at all amiss.”

I should feel guilty at this – I know I should. A better person would apologize now and back down; but I’m not that better person, and I can’t. So I don’t.

“And may I remind you,” I say, “that the whole reason I’m in this situation at all is because you dragged me into it. The only reason I’m not still married, and happy, and several light years away from all this bullshit, is because you dragged me into it. You never hesitate to drag me into anything as long as you think I can be useful do you Jack? To hell with the consequences, just as long as I can be your party trick and pet psychopath spotter whenever it’s convenient and will make you look good.” (This is definitely below the belt: while Jack’s always been concerned with cracking the case and saving lives, he can’t fairly be accused of being a publicity seeker or glory hunter; or, for short, a Dr Chilton. Also…‘psychopath spotter’? What the hell am I even talking about?). I lower my voice a bit. “Look, Jack, just stop telling me that it’s fine, and stop telling me you have things under control, when it’s completely obvious that you don’t.”

“So what would you prefer Will? You want me to become as hysterical as you are?”

“Yes!” Actually this is patently untrue. The idea of Jack becoming hysterical (as I am) is fairly appalling…although it would at least be a golden opportunity to slap his face.

“Yes I do,” I say (I don’t), “because at least it would be more real. I’d rather you levelled with me. I hate this patronizing, condescending, appeasing…”

“Supercilious,” says Jack. He smirks a bit. “I thought I’d throw that one out, in case your mental thesaurus is running out of inspiration.”
“Supercilious,” I say. I sigh again and lean back against the side of the ambulance. “Stop treating me like a child.”

“I will when you stop acting like one.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Seriously? You get many of your children to go out profiling serial murderers?”

“What can I say? You’re an unusual child with rare gifts.”

“Now you sound like Hannibal.”

“Christ,” says Jack, “I hope not.”

I huff out a laugh. I think Jack and I often forget that when we’re not bickering, we’re actually quite fond of each other.

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After a few hours the first of the patrol cars start pulling away, and Jack leaves around 30 minutes later. He tells me to get my ass into my apartment and stay there, and that if he hears any more about me running round town on a Matthew Brown bounty hunt then he’s going to come round and handcuff me to my table himself. Then he gives me a hug, and tells me I’m a pain in his butt.

“Thanks,” I say, “I do my best.”

“And your best is admirable,” replies Jack. He looks at me carefully. “Take care of yourself kid,” he adds.

“Always have, old man.”

He pretends to shake his fist at me, then gets into his car. Our eyes meet as he pulls away and he mouths ‘go inside!’

As I head back towards the building I notice groups of the neighbors clustering together, watching the proceedings in small, cowered packs: Mr Haversham, the Ramirez family, the old lady who lives opposite me whose name I still don’t know but who tells me I remind her of her son every time I see her. Nice, normal people – genuine and capable and well-meaning, and just about as far away from me and my shitty life as it’s possible to get – who’ve all had this madness brought screaming down upon them because of me. Their faces look drained in the flickering lights of the police cars, a chiaroscuro of doubt and fear. ‘I’m sorry’ I want to say to them, ‘I didn’t know any of this was going to happen. How could I possibly have known?’

At that moment I want to speak to you so badly it almost hurts, and I have to take a deep breath to steady and settle myself. As I push open the door I catch sight of my reflection in the glass pane. I look hollow. Strained. Defiant yet desperate.

As soon as I’m indoors, I know that Jack’s advice isn’t going to work. I’m too wired to just sit down tamely and wait; it feels like the walls are closing in on me. I realize I’m still wearing that bastard shock blanket and have a childish urge to drop-kick it across the room. I slump onto my chair and flick on the television, fretfully hopping from one channel to another: all the local news channels are talking about Matthew Brown. There are a couple of sitcoms, each featuring mannequin-like actors with identikit shiny hair and large white teeth, and a simpering documentary about meerkats (with the highly improbable title of ‘Nature’s Little Scallywags’). The meerkats are bounding all over the screen like they’re on crack, and I know I should find it cute and adorable but it’s just really irritating
so I switch it over. The next one is a cookery program – none of the food looks anywhere near as impressive as yours. “Oh fuck this” I say out loud. I stand up, sit down again, and then finally grab my coat and head for the door. I’m going to ignore Jack’s instructions – handcuffs be damned – and after wandering round the streets end up going to a local dive bar to play pool against myself for over two hours until my wrist is aching and I’m practically cross-eyed from staring down a cue. I’m just starting to contemplate leaving (and go where? Shit, I don’t know), when I take a step back from the table and my shoulder jostles against a towering, mean-looking guy in frayed denims and a Slipknot shirt. It’s only a slight nudge but he immediately coils round like a whip. “Fucking watch it, pretty boy,” he says with a sneer.

“You fucking watch it,” I say. Which, as comebacks go, I admit is pretty dismal – but he nevertheless looks a bit deprived that I’ve denied him the anxious apology he was no doubt expecting as his due. At that point I decide that I’m not going to leave after all, just to piss him off further, and defiantly park myself by the bar. It turns out to be a mistake though, because I am promptly pressganged by a verbose and miserably drunken man who practically lashes me to my stool and insists on recounting – in long, torturous detail – an argument he’s had with his boss. The story is distinguished by being both incredibly complicated and irredeemably boring.

“And then he says – get this – he says that I can just go to the convention by myself…”

“Wow,” I say. “Imagine that.”

“And then he walks out! Just leaves! But before he went, he told me…”

“Yeah, that’s rough.” I’m starting to yawn so hard I may dislocate my jaw.

“…And that I should just trash the portfolio for all the use it was…”

“Oh my God,” I say, “what a bastard.”

“No, no man, it was my girlfriend who said that.”

“Oh…right. Sorry, I misheard you.”

“That’s okay, it’s noisy in here,” he takes a melancholy swig of his beer. “Thanks buddy,” he says, “You’re a really good listener. You a therapist or something? You’re really empathic, you know?”

His sinks his head into his hands, and I am sorely tempted to join him. “Yeah,” I reply gloomily, “you’re not the first person to think that.”

He looks up at me, smiling boozily. “You’re a decent guy,” he says, “I should get you a drink. S’least I can do. What you having?”

“Thanks,” I say, “but I’m fine. I really have to be going.” I leap off the stool like a fucking gazelle and head for the door before he can object. The night air is cool on my face, and I linger for a few moments trying to get my bearings before striking off in the direction of my apartment. I only get a couple of blocks before someone calls out at me.

“Hey, hey mister!” Christ, it’s the guy from the bar in the Slipknot shirt, with two – no, three – friends. They might even be brothers – they all have the same squinting eyes (a bit too close together) and coarse simian slants to the jaw. I roll my eyes inwardly. I suppose ‘mister’ is at least a grade up from ‘pretty boy.’

“Got any cash to spare?”
“No.”

“Oh really? You sure about that?”

I pretend I’m thinking about it. “Yeah, thanks, I’m sure,” I say cheerfully.

He takes a menacing step toward me: “Last chance to change your mind pal.”

“Oh, seriously, fuck off,” I say. “I have no money, and with no job I have no immediate prospects of acquiring any.” As an afterthought I add, “So actually, I should really be asking you to give me some, pal.”

One of the sidekicks gives an incredulous snort of laughter, and asks: “Is this guy for real?”

I know I should be frightened (and that provoking them is a profoundly stupid, stupid thing to do), but really, it’s all a matter of perspective. Considering the things I’ve seen (not to mention done… Christ) over the past few years, a handful of brawlers in a back alley somewhat lose their impact. To be honest, I resent it more than anything else. After everything I’ve been through, I want to say, just give me a fucking break.

Nevertheless there’s also four of them and only one of me, which are not good odds by anyone’s standards (apart from you, of course, who would probably consider one against four as excellent odds and a mildly enjoyable challenge), and it’s compounded by the fact I don’t have a weapon and no immediate opportunities for improvising one. So in the end I adopt the most sensible remaining option, which is to make a run for it. I’m fitter than they are, not to mention spending the last few days primed on massive reserves of adrenaline, and I manage to clear the alley long before they can process what’s happened and make a fumbling attempt to catch up with me. The street stretches out as long and straight as an arrow in both directions – there’s no way they won’t see me if stay on the road, so I double-back down an adjoining alley and locate a convenient dumpster to fling myself behind. I’m pleased to see that I’m hardly out of breath at all, no mean feat considering the only exercise I’ve had recently is pacing round my apartment and running my mouth.

I can hear them at the end of the block, cursing me out with grunting variations of “Where’d the little shit go?” and I bide my time before their voices grow fainter and I’ll be able to emerge from behind my dumpster with some semblance of a dignified exit. Honestly, what a fucking day.

And then, just then. That’s when it happens.

It’s the footsteps I hear first, the unmistakable crunch crunch crunch of feet on gravel; not troubling to be quiet, but gliding with a sufficiently light touch to not be immediately conspicuous either. It’s like a droning metronome, getting closer and closer with a grotesque inevitability…and worst of all (worst of all by far) it’s punctuated by a horribly familiar voice that croons: “Hello. Mr. Graham. In trouble again I see?”

My mind goes blank, it really does. Of all of the crappy, awful timing…it’s like some enormous cosmic joke. I have a sudden image of myself over the past day: talking with Alana and Jack, Freddie and Kade; of watching the neighbors’ stricken faces; pretending to listen to that man’s ridiculous meandering story at the bar…all the while feeling so safe and unconstrained within my own conjecture and imaginings, my own spectacular ignorance; completely and utterly unprepared for this. That this night – of all fucking nights – was the moment it was going to happen.

But of course I don’t express any of this. I just turn my head round to face the speaker, and as I do so I slowly and deliberately get to my feet.
“Hello Matthew,” I reply evenly. “Long time no see.”
Chapter Notes

A note on language: this chapter contains the word ‘mad’ to refer to people with mental health difficulties. Just want to emphasise that I’m not condoning pejorative terms like this, and it isn’t me speaking but rather a particular character, in a specific context.

Other than that, on with the show! Enjoy, my lovelies.

Matthew Brown offers his long pale hand to help me to my feet, which I pointedly ignore. “So we meet again!” he says. He sounds deliriously pleased about it.

I lean down and brush the grit off my knees. “Yeah, seems that way,” I reply when I straighten up.

“You don’t seem very pleased to see me Mr Graham.”

“Why would I be?”

“I don’t know… a bit of gratitude might be nice. Technically I went to prison for you.”

I yearn to retort ‘yeah, well, I didn’t ask you to!’ but there doesn’t seem to be any way of saying it that won’t sound impossibly childish, so in the end I don’t say anything (especially because – technically – he did).

“I’m not angry with you about that by the way. Or not much, at least.” He bares his teeth at me in a jagged smile.

“No reason why you should be,” I snap. “It’s hardly my fault you got caught.”

“No, I suppose that was Mr Crawford wasn’t it? I’ll be having words with him later.” You fucking won’t, I think. “But there’s no rush is there?” He looks at me as if he’s waiting for me to confirm it. “First things first!” he says.

“First things being…?” I experimentally prop myself against the wall – I’m trying to look casual and unconcerned, as if getting ambushed by him is no more than a minor inconvenience – but realize it makes me appear much shorter than he is (not good) so promptly straighten up again.

“I want to talk to you,” he says earnestly, “and I want you to listen. I want to tell you about my plans.”

“Yeah, I’ve been seeing quite a lot of your plans.”

“Were you impressed Mr Graham? You ought to have been. I did it for you, all of it. You know that right?”

“I know it. You were hardly subtle.”

“It was my homage.” He lingers lovingly over the word, rolling it round his mouth before spitting it
out. “My homage to you. All those people – those invasive, interfering little people – all trying to worm their way into your space, like they had a right to be there; like they thought they could understand you in the way that I can. It was presumptuous. It was disrespectful.”

“What do you know about that?” I say. God, the way he’s talking about me is so fucking creepy: like I’m a dementedly cherished possession that he’d rather destroy than allow anyone else to have.

“Those guys outside your house. Spying on you. And that man. The way he followed you – following you all the time, desperate for your attention. You didn’t know about him did you, how he stalked after you when he thought you couldn’t see him? But I knew.” Without taking his eyes off my face he reaches into the pocket of his coat and draws out a long slim knife, its serrated blade gleaming wickedly in the moonlight like alligator teeth. He doesn’t do anything else, doesn’t threaten me with it, but he clearly wants me to know it’s there. My heart sinks a bit further, but I force my voice to remain steady.

“That man,” I ask carefully, “The one who was following me. What else did you know about him?”

He looks a bit puzzled and absently returns the knife to his pocket. “What do you mean?” he says.

“You’re telling me you killed him just for following me around?” The inflection is light and barely-there, but I want to confirm whether what happened to Michael really was an act of retribution (which is going to complicate things ever-so-slightly) or simply Matthew Brown’s own special brand of psychopathy (which won’t complicate anything at all).

“Well of course,” he says, his face clearing – like he’s relieved I’m finally starting to get it; starting to get him. “He presumed. He thought he was good enough to be in your world.”

Christ, I fucking knew it. Nevertheless, I’m still glad – being in the position of forced gratitude towards Matthew Brown would be a bit much, all things considered. “You seem to be doing quite a bit of presuming yourself,” is all I reply.

“Oh, I know what you’re going to say,” he interjects and I watch, fascinated in spite of myself, as his eyebrows knit together in a petulant frown. “You think I failed, don’t you? I know it didn’t work out before, but I’ll make it up to you: I’ll prove myself. I want you to know that I’d do it again. For you I would. Kill Dr Lecter I mean.”

“You can hardly kill him ‘again’ when you failed so entirely the first time round,” I say lightly.

“I got very close though didn’t I?” He pauses and looks at me – he wants to hear me say it.

“I guess you did.” I tell myself I’m just playing along, but I know that I’m not; not really. If it weren’t for Jack, of course he would have killed you.

He nods, satisfied now he feels I’m giving him due tribute for a job (sort of) well done. “I would if you asked me to,” he says. He looks so hopeful at the possibility of pleasing me that for a second I am genuinely taken aback by the intensity of his regard: white-hot, cold-blooded and merciless. Why are you doing this, I want to ask him, what is it about me?

He’s staring at me again now, that fucked-up little smile playing around his lips, and it takes a gargantuan amount of effort not to flinch away. Fuck, it’s so cold. There’s steam billowing from a ventilation grid on the wall, and the way it catches the light and swirls around makes him look vaguely infernal and other-worldly. There’s a horrible, grinding industrial noise droning out from the building next door, which only adds to the surreal nightmarish quality of the whole scene, then from
the top of the alleyway comes the sound of voices, and my eyes automatically flick towards it: late night revellers, weaving their way home as the bars start to close. One of them is drunkenly serenading the others while a woman guffaws with raucous laughter, and a man’s voice says “Frankie! You’re unbelievable!” over and over again. Their very existence feels so far removed from mine that I may as well be observing them from behind a pane of glass: Exhibit A ‘How Normal People Live.’

Matthew Brown follows my gaze, then gives me a truly gruesome smile. “Don’t get your hopes up,” he says. “You’re on your own now, just like you always were. No one’s going to come for you. No one knows you’re here. It’s just you and me.” He beams delightedly: “Like old times!” He takes a step towards me and I resolutely refuse to shift, watching and waiting and holding my ground. He stops instead and regards me impassively, a weird glint in his twitchy little eyes. “Speaking of old times Mr Graham,” he says, “I know you’re still obsessed with him. With Dr Lecter. I know that you are.”

For fuck’s sake. “Now what makes you think that?” I ask. I’m impressed at how neutral and non-committal I manage to sound, as if it doesn’t matter; like I couldn’t care less either way.

“What do you know about experiments?” he says.

“Enough.”

“Because I was curious, so I ran an experiment,” he replies. “In a classic experiment, you have your independent variable, and you manipulate it, and then you observe the effect of the manipulation on your dependent variable.”

“Are you planning on getting to the point anytime soon?” I say, “Because life is a short and precious thing.” But my heart is pounding in an unpleasant skittish way, because I suddenly think I know exactly where this is going.

“You were my dependent variable,” he says.

“Oh yeah?”

“Oh yeah. And my hypothesis was confirmed by the incredibly quick response you made to my cryptic little message on TattleCrime. You really did jump right onto it didn’t you? I knew you would.”

Oh God, I was right – and my heart almost shatters, because I was so sure it was you. My previous loathing for him, already volcanic, reaches a new pitch of intensity at the way he’s forced his blundering way into our private danse macabre. Of course, I don’t allow even a glimpse of this to filter into my expression. Instead I say, in a bored voice: “Oh, so that was you. Thought so. The screen name was a little obvious, don’t you think?”

His looks a bit deflated at that. Good, cocky little shit.

“I told you about that conversation didn’t I, whilst I was at the BSHCI? Or were you just listening in to one of my session with Dr Chilton,” I’m actually talking to myself more than him, working it out as I go along. Fuck, how could I have forgotten that? But even as I ask myself, I know exactly why: I forgot about it because I wanted to believe in you so badly. I consider asking him about the phone calls too, but hold back just in case. If it was him, I’m not going to provide the set-up for his gloating satisfaction; and then, if it wasn’t him…?

“Out of interest,” I say, curious in spite of myself, “how did you get internet access in prison?”
“I see you haven’t been following my progress,” he says, clicking his tongue in a pastiche of regret, and before I can say ‘of course not, why the hell would I bother following your progress you tiresome asshole?’ he adds: “I got myself transferred didn’t I: psychiatric facility. The doctors are so easy to fool, they’ll believe anything you tell them, anything at all. And of course I learnt from the best.” He swoops over in a ridiculous theatrical bow before righting himself and smirking: “The amenities in a hospital are far more generous than prison.”


“Of course not,” he says, “but they’re so much more flexible. I had a smart phone smuggled in.” Shit – a phone. Then it must have been him. But if so, how could he possibly have known my number?

“So you’ve got your own fans now then?” I say instead.

“One or two.”

“Good for you,” I say drily.

“Of course the staff figured me out eventually,” he says. “Realized I was faking: not mad but bad. I’d say it was a shame, but of course the trip back to the prison had an extremely good outcome. So you see,” he grins dementedly at me, “it wasn’t a shame at all.”

“I guess you could say that.”

“I guess you could, Mr Graham.”

“You may as well call me Will,” I say. “Every time you say ‘Mr Graham’ I expect to turn round and see my father.”

“I should probably call you Agent Graham,” he replies fawningly, and I start to regret ever saying anything – because seriously, as if I give even the slightest shit what he calls me.

“Why go to all that trouble?” I ask instead, even though I’d decided, only moments ago, that I wouldn’t. “Why do you even care? Why bother with any of this?”

He looks genuinely surprised at that. “Because it’s you,” he says simply. “Because you understand me. You’re a hawk, just like I am. Because we…”

I know he’s going to say some variant of ‘we’re the same,’ or even ‘we belong together’ if he’s aiming to wax poetic –and I can’t stand the thought of either of them, so I cut him off before he can get any further. But even as I’m doing so, it’s impossible to ignore how similar he sounds to the way I talked to Alana about you.

“You’ve killed three people in the past week just to prove to me that I understand you?” I say instead. “Do you have any idea how fucked up that sounds?”

He prowls in a circle around me, and I turn in tandem to remain facing him. “Of course,” he croons, “but I know that you understand, even though you’re pretending you don’t. You’re as fucked up as I am, and I know you understand.”

“No,” I say. “I’m not. I’m nothing like you.”

“But you are,” he replies. “You really are. I suspected it when I read about you, and then they brought you in and I knew. I recognized it the first time I saw your face.”
I wonder, somewhat hysterically, how long I might be able to spin out “You are!”, “Am not!”, “Are too!”, “No I’m not – fuck off,” until either the sun rises and we collapse from exhaustion (having agreed to call it a draw); or I can devise a way of wiping that goddamn smile off his face on a terminal basis. It’s tricky: there’s nothing to hand I can use as a weapon, and unless I can catch him off guard I don’t fancy my chances at trying to take him down unarmed. I’m fairly strong (but then so is he); and he’s fuelled with a reckless, ruthless determination (but then….so am I). I run my eyes up and down his wiry frame, trying to establish a point of attack, when my attention suddenly catches on a flickering movement at the top of the alleyway. Oh God, it’s one of the muggers from the bar. What the fuck? I can’t decide whether I should be relieved or horrified. And what the hell will Matthew Brown do? He has his back to the street and hasn’t noticed anything yet, but the guy is now staring down the alleyway and inevitably spots me. “Hey, he’s over here!” he shouts triumphantly. He starts running towards us. “Hey, guys! I found him!”

Matthew Brown spins round, eyes gleaming, and he flashes a vulpine smile, sharp little teeth gleaming in the moonlight. The guy from the bar is smiling too, but some primitive hind-brain instinct is clearly starting to alert him to the fact that this is something he really doesn’t want to be messing with, and his conquering grin starts to fade as he takes a step back, just as Matthew Brown takes a step forward.

“I guess you did,” he says in a deeply creepy sing-song voice, “but you know….find-ers aren’t always keep-ers, despite what you might have heard.” He glides forward slowly, and there’s almost something graceful in the way he does it, something balletic, then he jerks his arms out to snatch the guy’s head in a vicious twist. There’s a repulsive sound of grinding bone, and the guy’s eyes briefly bulge with shock before he immediately crumples to the ground, his neck broken. The whole thing happens in an instant: one minute he’s leering and looming, the next he’s dropped down like a puppet with its strings cut. It reminds me of a nature documentary I once saw, a praying mantis pitching forward to claim its prey. Matthew Brown has exactly the same robotic impulse, the same eerie reflexes; his movements appear fitful and inhuman. I clasp my hand over my mouth to stifle the groan of shock I instinctively want to make.

“Well, that’s that,” he says briskly. He turns to me and I quickly move my hand away from my face, trying to look unconcerned. “Everyone seems to want a piece of you,” he continues, “but they can’t have you. You’re mine. I found you first.”

I stare back at him, look him directly in the eye. This is it; moment of truth. I’m ready for this, I think, damn right I’m ready. I’m almost quivering in anticipation. Briefly I remember that conversation with you: “How would you do it?” you asked. With my bare hands.

Matthew Brown is talking again: still fucking talking. “I want you to come with me,” he says. He takes a step towards me. “Somewhere we can discuss things properly. Not here.”

“Well then you have a problem,” I reply evenly, “because I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“I can force you, Mr Graham.”

“You can certainly try, Mr Brown.”

He smiles at me, almost pityingly. “It wasn’t a request. You know you don’t actually have a choice here, right? You owe me Mr Graham. You owe me. I’ve been pretty patient with you so far, but you really ought to drop that attitude of yours while you still can.” A delirious part of me wants to feign incomprehension (Attitude? Moi? How very dare you?), but I just carry on staring at him, taut and watchful, every single muscle strained and poised and ready. He stares back, and briefly raises his hand as if he wants to touch me, but then changes his mind at the last minute and lets it drop back down to his side. “Although to be honest,” he says, with another crooked smile, “I didn’t really think
you’d come without a fight. I would’ve been pretty disappointed if you had.”

I smile back. “In that case,” I say, “I’m so glad I haven’t disappointed you.” This time my smile is more genuine, because in my mind’s eye I have already worked out exactly how this is going to go. He has his back to the street again, and the result is that I now know something crucial which he does not. At the top of the alley, the remaining crew from the bar have started assembling. Any second now – any second – they’re going to see their fallen comrade, and they’re going to come running. And the moment they do, then I am going to grab Matthew’s Brown’s hateful rat-like head and ram it into the fucking wall. And after that I’m really going to start on him. I feel a thrum of anticipation, and I know I should be repulsed and shocked by it but I’m not. Subtly I shift my shoulders around, calculating the amount of leverage I’ll need, the best angle to come at him. I know I can do this: I want to do it.

Ah, show time. Slipknot sees the crumpled figure on the floor at about the same time he sees me, bellowing out “Joe! Joe! What the fuck’s going on!” – and there’s such genuine anguish in his voice that I actually feel a brief twinge of sympathy for him. Matthew Brown makes a vaguely irritated noise, as if three half-crazed assailants are nothing more than a small aggravation, and I’m literally pivoting on my heels ready to punch him when a bullet whistles past my ear and imbeds itself in the wall in a flare of brick dust. It only misses me by inches. Oh fuck, fuck. I didn’t factor in for a gun. A gun is the proverbial unknown variable in one of Matthew Brown’s deranged experiments. How the hell was I supposed to know they had a gun? They didn’t use it before. Instinctively my training kicks in and I duck down and to the side, and another bullet fires out, this time ricocheting off a pipe. My foot tangles in the jacket of the dead guy – Joe – and I stumble slightly, grabbing the side of the dumpster to save myself from pitching over entirely. The Slipknot guy is bearing down, roaring like a maddened bull, his two friends (brothers?) following at the rear. “I’ll kill you!” he screams, and it’s like a mantra. “I’ll kill you, you bastard. I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you.”

“Don’t you fucking touch him!” screams Matthew Brown.

And then suddenly it all goes completely to hell, as someone with incredibly strong arms (really strong, fuck) grabs me from behind and spins me onto the floor with such force that all the breath is knocked out of my body. Oh my God, I think, here it comes – and I’m suddenly hit with a crushing, agonizing sense of irony, because of all the potential endings I envisaged for myself I never really imagined it would happen like this: incapacitated in a back alley after a mugging gone wrong. I close my eyes, wait for the inevitable blade or boot in the face, but nothing happens. Something (… someone? Shit, what’s going on?) pushes me behind the dumpster and I can hear shouts, screaming, the sickening crunch of cartilage grinding against bone, the gun discharging again, and loudest of all my own desperate attempts to drag some air back into my lungs. It’s utterly hideous, like those dreams where you want to run but can’t. Can’t fight, can’t run, can’t scream, can’t do anything. All I can do is lie there with this carnage unfolding around me and wait until it’s my turn. Someone shouts “stay there and don’t move.” Who? Do they mean me? Is it Matthew Brown? God, what the hell is going on? Someone else shouts too, but I can’t make out what they’re saying – from where I’m lying I can’t even see anything because that fucking dumpster’s in the way.

There’s the clatter and rattle of running footsteps, and I have a feeble flare of hope that it’s the cops. Surely someone’s heard the disturbance by now? It’s so damn loud, Jack must have heard it all the way from Quantico. Please be you Jack, I think wildly, I’d be so grateful, I’ll never smartass you ever again. Most people appeal to God in moments like this, bartering his intervention in exchange for bargains they’ll never keep. Why the hell am I invoking Jack Crawford? No, the footsteps are getting fainter – the person’s running away, not towards. I think I can hear more punching before realizing it’s just my own heart thrashing crazily in my ears, the arteries pulsing and thrumming. Oh shit, shit, that’s bad, that’s really bad. If someone cuts me (if Matthew Brown cuts me with that spiteful little knife, the blade like grinning teeth) then my heart’s pounding so fast I’ll bleed out in
minutes in a back alley: all my imagination, all my empathy – my whole life gushing out into the gutter of some godforsaken back alley. I imagine Jack and Zeller and Price: their shocked, frozen faces as they wheel me into the mortuary. Alana would cry. Perhaps you’ll read about it in a newspaper, sipping vespétrò on some foreign balcony with a Panama hat tipped over your forehead. Would you cry too? I feel a sudden surge of helplessness. Oh God I don’t want to die here: not here, not like this. Not on my own. Not without you. This is your fault, it’s all your fault. Why didn’t you let us pitch down in each other’s arms so the ocean could claim us? Why couldn’t you have just let us go together? We should have gone together. It was my fucking design.

If I squint I can focus enough to see a few feet in front of me, and the first thing I notice is the Slipknot shirt of the guy from the bar. He’s curled on the floor, almost neatly, but while his face is in shadow I can still see the twisted, unnatural angle of his neck. His eyes are still open, it’s like he’s staring right at me in a sightless, glassy gaze. Is he dead? Was it Matthew Brown? Oh fuck, I bet it was, I bet it was Matthew Brown…he did this, and now he’s coming back for me. I roll onto my back, still struggling to draw air into my aching lungs. The moon is sharp and flinty overhead, like a piece of bright bone in the sky, and I can see my breath rising in little frozen clouds. The stars are very vivid too, chips of shiny ice in the darkness, but I don’t know the names of the constellations. You would have known. “I believe some of our stars will always be the same” – was it me who said that once or you? I think it was you. Oh God, I must have hit my head when I went down, I can’t think straight. I’m so painfully and pointlessly aware of numerous stupid, irrelevant details: the blunt nudge of the paving stones underneath my head, how my left foot is wedged underneath my right leg, and the way my fingers are tingling and throbbing from the biting cold. Get up, get up Will, I mutter desperately to myself, fucking get up NOW. In the corner of my eye the shadows are solidifying, and I realize that someone’s leaning in front of me proffering their hand; and I blindly reach out and grab their wrist, clinging on, pulling it towards me to see who it belongs to.

And I look up.

And it’s you.

Chapter End Notes

:-D

ETA August '17

Enormous hugs and thanks to the wonderful tictactoes for creating this stunning art for the chapter of Himself looking like a total badass. Oh my word, just look at that suave f****r. Will is still behind his dumpster and I like to think it’s because he’s expired in an unconscious heap due to the power of murder boners…um, I mean the power of LERVE. No, wait. Emotional overload from nearly getting his head kicked in. Yeah, that. That’s what I mean *cough*
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Oh my God.

Oh God. *Oh God.*

I’ve imagined this moment *so many times,* scripted and rehearsed and re-played in my head exactly what I would say to you. Something noble and dignified, slightly enigmatic – teacups and time and the rules of disorder – in which I’m far more articulate than I ever am in real life, and that generally all conclude with an enormously unrealistic version of you that looks suitably abashed and respectfully hears me out before earnestly apologizing and begging for my forgiveness (which I eventually magnanimously bestow, and then we make out. Wait…what?). And now you’re really here, really in front of me – *God you really are* – and all I manage to croak out is a singularly unimpressive: “Hannibal, what the *actual* fuck?”

Your features flicker in that usual inscrutable way, and I can’t quite tell whether you’re struggling not to laugh, or struggling not to reprimand me for cursing at you – and if it’s the latter, then you may well regret coming back to life, because if you do then I swear to God I’m going to kill you again myself. I’m still gripping onto you, my hold so tight I can feel the delicate bones in your wrist grind together. It must be hurting you, but you don’t pull away.

“Kaip gera vėl matyti tavo veidą,” you say quietly. “Hello Will.”

“I *don’t* believe this,” I whisper. My voice cracks a bit on the last part, dry and rusty. I sound very hesitant, very faint and faraway.

“You have to believe it,” you say. “It is happening.”

“I didn’t…I wasn’t…God. Shit. *Shit.* How are you even *here?*”

“Because the time was finally right,” you reply. You scan up and down my features for a few seconds, then your eyes lock into mine. I stare back at you numbly. I want to touch you properly – touch your face – but I don’t.

“God, you’ve really come back,” I say instead. “You’re really here in front of me.” My voice cracks again. “I’ve imagined this…so many times.”

You smile at that, and it’s one of your rare genuine ones. “As have I,” you reply, “and here we are.” And then we just look at each other and don’t say anything at all. My heart is pounding in my ears, and there’s nothing except your angular face, and your dark eyes, and the feeling of your wrist beneath my fingers.

I want to shout at you, and fling my arms round you, and kiss you, and punch you, and ask you where the hell you’ve been when I needed you (*fuck, I needed you so badly*), but I don’t because I don’t really know how. Then from a few blocks away comes the familiar wail and drone of sirens, and we both swivel our heads towards it at the same time. “Will, listen to me” you say, in your usual calm tone (how the hell are you so calm?), “I imagine there is quite a lot you would like to say to me, and I will be very happy to answer any questions you may have, but here is neither the time nor the place. Are you able to walk?”
I wonder what you would do if I said no? I’m half-tempted to try it just to shake the smooth surface of your fucking preternatural composure, but of course I don’t (and besides, it wouldn’t bother you anyway would it? You’d just sigh and shrug, then fling me over your shoulder and stride off).

“Yeah, I can walk,” I say in a low, husky voice that doesn’t sound like mine. “Help me up.”

“Then let us go,” you reply. You neatly pull me to my feet like I don’t weigh anything at all, then quickly move my head from one side to the other with your finger and shift the front of my coat around to inspect my shirt. I realize belatedly that you’re checking for injuries; you give a satisfied nod when you don’t locate any.

“Your home is much closer than mine,” you say, “is there likely to still be a police presence outside?” I open my mouth to ask you how the hell you know where I live (let alone about the police presence outside), but ultimately don’t bother because – of course you’d know. I check my watch.

“I’m not sure,” I reply slowly. “I don’t know…Possibly. They might not have all left yet.”

“That is rather inconvenient,” you say with a slight frown, “but not insurmountable. You will have to go ahead and let me know when it’s safe to proceed.”

“Jesus, are you kidding me?” I hiss. “You’re on the top of the FBI’s Most Wanted and you’re planning to just stroll into an active crime scene? Are you out of your mind? Why don’t we go to your place?”

“You worry too much Will,” is all you say.

“One of us clearly has to,” I reply sharply. But as usual I find myself aligning my will with yours’ (‘willpower’…yeah, right. My ass), falling in with your priorities and preferences like there’s no feasible alternative (and to be honest, when it comes to you, there usually isn’t). The apartment is close, and we don’t exchange a single word on the way there. I keep holding my breath and need to remind myself to let it out, all the while stealing short, furtive glances at you. You’re just striding along, impervious, like you don’t have a care in the fucking world. My hands are shaking and I ram them into my coat pockets to hide it.

When we get to the top of my block I grab your sleeve to stop you walking any further and gesture for us to crouch behind a parked car. I loiter at the side of it, sticking my head up every so often. I also realize, too late, that I’ve forgotten to drop your sleeve and am still clinging onto it – not unlike a needy five year old (Christ) – and have to force myself to let go. The crime scene tape is waving forlornly in the wind, but the car’s been removed and there’s no sign of anyone else. Nevertheless, in my mind’s eye I can still picture all the cops and cordons and goddamn Kade Purnell, and consequently can’t quite bring myself to venture out. It’s not the suavest I’ve ever looked in my life: in fact it strikes me that I bear an unfortunate resemblance to one of the meerkats from that fucking documentary. It’s possible you think the same because you’re looking at me with your eyebrows raised so high they nearly get lost in your hair.

“I’m so glad you think this is funny,” I hiss.

“My apologies Will,” you say (you don’t sound remotely apologetic), “but your vigilance is hardly necessary – there’s nobody there.”

“Okay,” I say slowly; because actually there really isn’t. “It looks good. I’ll go in first. Do you have a cell phone?”

“I do.”

“Give me the number. I’ll text you if it’s clear.”
You hold out your hand, palm up, and I wonder what the hell you’re doing before I realize you mean for me to give you my cell so you can type your number in. I watch you while you’re doing it, the way your hand flicks nimbly over the keypad and how elongated your fingers are. You don’t look all that different from the last time I saw you. Your hair’s probably longer than I remember it, and your face is a bit thinner (and hence more sculpted) than it was previously, as well as covered in stubble as opposed to your usual impecable close shave. But your appearance hasn’t radically changed, not at all. No doubt the lack of disguise is a statement: a nonchalant ‘catch-me-if-you-can’ defiance. But how the hell has no one recognized you; how can you blend in so seamlessly? I’ve temporarily forgotten that you’ve had a lifetime’s practice.

You pass the phone back and smile at me thoughtfully. “See you very soon Will,” you say. I just nod, and dash out from behind the car into the building. There’s no one here; no real reason we couldn’t have just gone in together. But I realize that I’m trying to buy a bit of time alone to sort out the skeins of my scattered self. Right now I’m unravelling like a dropped spool of thread.

As usual the elevator is out of order so I drag myself up the stairs – and as luck would fucking have it, Mr Haversham opens his door when I go past and peers short-sightedly at me over the top of his security chain.

“William!” he says. Although I’m cursing inside I still feel a perverse smugness that I was right, after all, to go in first. I make a mental note to make sure you find out about it (with suitable dramatic embellishments if necessary).

“Hey,” I say, “everything all right?” my voice sounds shaky and I cough to try and cover it.

“Fine, fine, seeing as it’s you. But I’ve been feeling worried after all that ruckus this evening. I don’t mind telling you William, I’ve been extremely concerned.”

“Look,” I say. I cough again. Shit, why can’t I get a grip: it’s only Mr Haversham. “I’m sure everything’s fine,” I add, trying to sound earnest and sincere, “the cops were very thorough. But if you hear anything else don’t open your door again. I’ll give you my number – call me if you’re feeling anxious and I’ll come and check it out.” I rifle through my pocket for a bit of paper, and end up with my bar bill from earlier in the evening. Shit, it already feels like another lifetime ago.

“I certainly will,” he says, “you’re a good boy.” Oh God, I think, I’m really not. He’s still there, blinking and smiling at me in his usual benign way. “You’re used to things like that aren’t you?” he says, “Terrorists and things like that. Don’t you work for the government?”

“Sort of.” I’m beginning to desperately sidle up the stairs.

“Bunch of crooked sons of guns,” he says.

“Yep, they sure are.” Give it much longer and I’m going to be practically sliding up the bannister.

“Thanks for this,” he says, brandishing the slip of paper. He turns it over to see what’s on the other side, chuckling when he sees the extensive list of drinks. “Good to be young,” he says.

“I guess.” Right now I feel older than he is.

“I’ll surely call you. Thank you William.”

“You’re welcome,” I say, and dive round the corner of the stairs. Then I have a sudden flare of anxiety and stick my head back round (meerkat redux. Christ) and call down: “And remember not to open your door!”
When I’m safely inside I whip out my cell to text you the apartment number. My hands are still shaking and it takes a few attempts to get it right. I add: “Give it 10 more mins, neighbor is still awake” then as an afterthought “BE VERY QUIET” in pointlessly haranguing capital letters. If I had the energy I’d invent a gun-toting body-building neighbor just to ram the point home, but in the end I can’t be bothered. Not that it would really matter if Mr Haversham saw you: not from your point of view at least. I’d be far more concerned for his wellbeing than for yours.

Your reply comes within seconds: “Understood.”

I let my phone fall out my hand, then sink onto the floor with my back against the wall. I take a few shuddering breaths then reach up to remove my glasses, only to realize that I’ve already taken them off. The apartment is pale and ghostly with the moonlight streaming in, but I can’t bring myself to do more than switch on a tiny table lamp. I close my eyes and when I open them you’re standing in front of me, and I jump so hard it takes me several seconds to land again. How the hell can someone as tall and broad as you are move so quietly? It’s fucking creepy. Perfect predator I think to myself. I suddenly feel a bit desperate. Even though I know it’s not possible, it somehow seems like you’ve grown taller since I last saw you; as if you’re pure, solidified energy, occupying every last atom of space in the room. Maybe it’s because I feel that much more diminished myself.

I’m half expecting you to make fun of me for being so freaked out, but you don’t. Actually you’re not looking at me at all; you’re staring around in the gloomy half-light, cataloguing the surroundings with small quirks of your head. You give a visible shudder at the sight of the kitchen. “Will,” you say at last, “your apartment is…truly terrible.”

“I know,” I reply. I don’t know what else to do, what to say. If this was a film we’d fall into each other’s arms and embrace while orchestral strings soared in the background. This isn’t a film. We don’t embrace. I just stare at you. I’m biting the inside of my mouth so hard I can taste blood. I don’t even know how much time has passed. How long have we been here like this? It’s so utterly unreal. The director should call “cut, it’s a wrap; nice work guys” and then we could go back to our real lives and none of this would be happening.

You, on the other hand, still look completely and utterly unconcerned (as if the last time you saw me was over wine and canapes with a piano tinkling in the background, rather than falling off a fucking cliff). You move away from me until you’re standing in the centre of the room, then remove your coat and neatly hang it over the back of one of the chairs. Your clothes are much simpler and starker than they used to be (slate grey suit, black shirt) but your presence and self-command are as imperishable as ever. I know I should say something, do something, but I feel too entranced and mindless. And you are so calm and controlled it makes an even harsher contrast: highlighting my uncertainty and self-consciousness in a horrible, grating way. Then suddenly I remember your initial words in the alley, how callused and unfamiliar they sounded: perhaps you’re not as wholly calm as you appear, because your reaction when you first saw me apparently made you forget how to speak English. The knowledge that you’ve unintentionally revealed yourself (a bit) gives me courage.

You’re still watching me, meticulously classifying the mental struggles that must be telegraphed across my face like fucking Morse code. “Well,” you say at last. “We must begin somewhere I suppose. I expect you have questions?”

I open my mouth then close it again. I have an urge to proclaim ‘you’ve really come back’ – just to assert that it’s true – but resist it because I know how much it irritates you when I state the obvious. Instead I take a deep breath and let it out again. Shit, shit, where do I even start?

“Well are you here?” I say eventually, “Why now?” This is good; I feel pleased with myself: straight and to the point.
“Excellent, I see you intend to begin simply,” you reply. You gracefully fold yourself into the chair and steeple your fingers in front of your face, regarding me over the top of them. “I am here because I have been wondering about you, and have been intending to contact you for some time once certain arrangements had been made.” (What ‘arrangements’? I think. Oh fuck).

“As it is,” you say, “I am here now because circumstances have moved quicker than anticipated. I was aware you would likely require my assistance.”

“How? How did you know about any of that?” Tentatively I haul myself off the floor and creep over to the opposite chair to yours. I sit down gingerly, coiled up inside myself like a spring.

“Naturally I was aware that Matthew Brown had escaped.”

“How?”

“It is hardly a secret Will,” you say. Oh yes of course; it’s been covered extensively by the media hasn’t it. I even saw the most recent footage myself this evening – Matthew Brown’s fucking rat face plastered all over the local news channels.

“You and Uncle Jack appeared in some of it,” you continue (giving, not for the first time, the truly unnerving impression that you can actually read my mind). “I could observe you quite clearly behind the broadcaster’s shoulder. You were having an animated discussion next to an ambulance.” You smile very faintly, Sphinx-like and inscrutable as ever, but at least you don’t mention that fucking ridiculous blanket.

“That was only a few hours ago,” I say sulkily. “How did you get here so fast?”

“Because I was already here. Obviously ‘lying low,’ as they say. But here nonetheless.”

I blink at you, my lips slightly parted; I probably look a bit half-witted. “You were?”

“Yes indeed, because my concern is not a recent thing. It began in earnest when I discovered that someone was contacting you posing as me,” (my mouth falls open again) “because inevitably there was a high likelihood it had not been done with benign intentions. Perhaps I was being overly cautious about the outcome – but I have lately come to realize that this is becoming a custom of mine where you are concerned, seeing as you are constitutionally incapable of keeping yourself out of trouble.”

This is a bit fucking much, so I snap: “Trouble which you’ve always gone out your way to put me in, Dr Lecter,” before pausing and thinking back over what you’ve just said. “You saw the message on TattleCrime?”

“No,” you say, “Not TattleCrime.”

“Then how…?” Oh, of course: the phone call outside the bar that time with Michael. Me, desperately urging down the phone into silence: 'Why didn’t you answer my message; why contact me in the first place?’

“So that was you” I say.

“It was,” you reply smoothly, “also the call in the middle of the night.” You don’t look anywhere near as embarrassed by this admission as you should.

“Why?” I ask, but I think I already know the answer.
“I wanted to ascertain that you were well – and to hear your voice,” you say. You smile and shrug, an elegant curl of your right shoulder.

“How very sentimental of you,” I say, but I’m smiling too in spite of myself. “Why didn’t you ever say anything back…return the favor?”

“There were several considerations Will – be reasonable. I couldn’t be certain your phone line wasn’t being monitored for one; I took a significant risk contacting you at all.”

“You thought Jack…”?

“There was a possibility. Besides, while I was quietly optimistic, I could not of course guarantee a positive reception from you. I intended to wait a little longer before making contact; and would have done so, had Mr Brown’s tedious amateur dramatics not forced my hand.”

“So you were following me then? How long for?”

“Only very recently,” you say. “Hardly anytime at all.” So that figure in the rain…it wasn’t you. Either Matthew Brown, or – probably more likely – Michael. Shit. Essentially this means that I have been obsessively stalked three times in as many months (which even by my demented standards is fairly impressive).

“It seems my timing was impeccable”, you continue (I can almost hear you thinking: ‘as usual’), “because I am very glad I was able to be there tonight.”

“I had it under control.”

“Forgive me, Will…but you quite obviously did not.”

“I wanted to be the one who took him down,” I say. I can’t help cringing at the whiney tone that’s crept into my voice.

“Ah yes, indeed. He is your kill isn’t he?” Your choice of words makes me flinch, but I don’t actually contradict you. “You shouldn’t trouble yourself on that score,” you add, "your time will certainly come.”

I glance up sharply. “What do you mean? He’s still alive?”

“Indeed he is.” You pause and give me a searching look. “I was going to say ‘unfortunately’, but perhaps from your point of view it is actually very fortunate indeed.”

I don’t quite know how I feel about this (or at least don’t want to examine it right now), so instead I ask why you didn’t kill him yourself. “I would have done so very readily,” you say (you actually look quite cheerful at the thought of it), “but in the chaos of the moment it became a matter of priorities, and I was more concerned about you not getting yourself shot. He made his escape while I was dealing with the others.” Despite everything, I’m still struck by how casually you say ‘dealing with the others,’ as if taking out three maddened aggressors with your bare hands in under ten minutes (whilst I was flat on my back and planning my own funeral behind a dumpster) is no big deal.

“Did he know it was you?” I ask instead. “Did he see you?”

You frown very slightly – it’s obviously agony for you to admit that you don’t know. “I’m not certain,” you eventually reply. “If he did, he gave no indication.”
Now I’m frowning myself. “I wish I’d known they had a gun,” I say.

You stretch your long legs out in front of you and give me a slightly sardonic look. “To be frank Will, it was probably for the best - seeing as you are such a magnificently bad shot.”

“Oh shut up,” I reply, even though I’ve started to laugh. “I would have got them eventually. Maybe ten bullets each.”

“Well, it was certainly for the best that I was there, as I cannot imagine a good outcome whilst you called a halt halfway through proceedings to request his spare ammunition.”

“I suppose you have your uses,” I say. “Cannibal ex machina.”

You roll your eyes and give me another one of your long-suffering looks. “You are an utter horror when you wish to be,” you reply. “And besides, I prefer deus ex machina.” But you’re smiling while you say it.

I smile back (a bit) and then fall silent, mulling things over and biting my nails, darting the occasional glance at you from underneath my eyelashes. I realize that this is probably one of the most straightforward conversations I’ve ever had with you: none of the usual subtext or metaphor, no abstract threats or torturously convoluted double-meanings. Does this mean we’re past all that now and can just communicate at a mutual level? Or is it all just part of your game? You’re still watching me: my move, then.

“That night,” I say eventually. The night I tried to kill us both. “Why didn’t you take me with you?” I know I sound slightly petulant but I can’t stop myself.

“You would have wanted me to?”

“I…I don’t know.”

“Your injuries were both serious and excessive; you needed immediate medical attention. Contrary to what you wish to believe you are not, in fact, indestructible. Besides, there was little point in forcing you to accompany me.” You give me a thoughtful look. “You had to come of your own accord.”

“And you were that certain I would? That I wouldn’t turn you in?”

“Of course,” you reply airily. Why is it that your arrogance is insanely attractive when it would be repulsive in anyone else? I don’t contradict you though. We both know you’re right.

“I thought of you often Will,” you finally say. “Don’t imagine that I did not. As you once had occasion to remark, it would appear that we are ‘conjoined’…whether we like it or not. Being apart from you is never comfortable or easy.” You quirk an eyebrow at me. “It would appear that it is no longer entirely my natural state.”

I don’t quite know how to respond to this so I just stare mutely back at you: your gaze is still as sensuous and mesmeric as ever, still every possibility of getting lost in it. I remember the words I imagined you saying the night I thought I’d killed Michael: ‘something is always going to keep me near you, even if we are not together.’ God, I want to tell you how much I’ve missed you, how bleak and barren everything’s been without you here, but I don’t know how: I don’t have the words for it. I want to share a silent acknowledgement with you. I want to drift away together through that twisted, outlawed wonderland of ours that blazes away on the horizon, way beyond what passes for the ‘real world’...and I can’t. I close my eyes and fall silent again, and when I open them you’re still staring at me. You’re so motionless you could almost be a waxwork of yourself.
“Poor Will,” you say lightly, when you see me looking at you. “You appear even more waifish than usual. I imagine you have had an extremely difficult time?”

“Yeah…you could say that.”

“More, on occasion, than you felt able to bear?”

“Yes.”

“You considered giving up?”

“Yes.”

“Yet you didn’t, did you. Why not?”

“I thought…I don’t know. I hoped it would get better.”

“What else?”

“Jack…Alana…”

“What else?”

Your voice in my head.

“I’m not sure,” I whisper, and you just stare evenly at me. But you know, don’t you? Of course you know. We fall quiet again, and the only sounds in the room are the rain against the window, the ticking of the clock over the mantle, and the very faint sound of your breathing. God, you’re really breathing aren’t you; your heart’s still beating. Please don’t ever stop. There’s still life in you. And in me.

“There is clearly much more to be discussed,” you say eventually. “I expect you would like to hear about where I’ve been all this time. And there are several things that I particularly wish to talk about with you.” You give me a significant look and my heart sinks a bit. “But not now,” you add after a pause. “You look exhausted Will, you should rest. You have had a very trying evening.”

A very trying evening…I guess that’s one way of putting it. But you’re right. My limbs are leaden and my neck feels like its buckling from the weight of everything going on in my head. I could probably slump into bed and sleep for a year.

Bed? Oh shit. “Look, I don’t have a spare room,” I say. “You can take my bed. I’ll sleep…” I realize, belatedly, that I don’t actually have a sofa either “…in the living room.”

“I beg your pardon but you will do no such thing,” you reply. “I would be a very inconsiderate guest if I turned you out of your own bed to sleep in a chair.” You briefly flick your eyes towards it, in a gesture which clearly translates as ‘especially in a shitty chair like that.’ “We can avail ourselves of your room together,” you say. I must look a bit taken aback at that, because you smile and add: “It will hardly be the most unlikely accommodation I have taken while I was away.” Your eyes gleam at me a bit.

“Okay,” I say eventually. I run my hand through my hair: what does it even matter in the grand scheme of things? “I’ll find you something to sleep in.” As a bit of petty revenge I rummage around for the most hideous sleepwear I possess, not least my oldest, rankest t-shirt (complete with a faded Queens of the Stone Age logo peeling off the front).
“Charming,” you say when I hand it all over, “thank you Will. These are practically festering in front of my eyes.” You smirk a bit, then deftly roll everything up into a ball and pitch it at me so it lands on my head. But you put them on anyway (irritatingly managing to look louche and glamorous when anyone else would look like a hobo) and stretch out on the bed next to me, basking like a panther and still looking gloriously unconcerned by the whole thing. I perch next to you and draw my knees up to my chin, curling my arms around my legs. I want to clutch a pillow or wrap myself up in a blanket, but can’t bear the thought of doing something so infantile in front of you. Neither of us says anything for a while.

“You are thinking so strenuously I can practically hear you,” you say finally.

“No, I’m really not,” I reply. “I’m trying not to think at all.” At the moment thinking almost seems dangerous – but then I’m sort of afraid to feel as well. Mostly I’m just aware of an overwhelming sense of wanting. I want you, all of you: I want you majestic and imperious but also wild and untameable; provocative and playful, yet grave and enigmatic. I want you glacial and lethal, I want every mood, every memory, every outrageous thought and suggestion: every day and every hour for the rest of my life. I want you to console me, and complete me, and transform me… and I want to let you. But how can I possibly admit any of this to you? Christ, I can barely even admit it to myself. My temples are starting to throb with the weight of it all, and eventually I unfold my taut, tired limbs and creep under the covers, lying down with my back to you and hunched in a ball. A part of me is expecting to wake up and find that this has all just been another dream: that’s it’s actually feasible for you to be both present and absent at the same time. I suppose, to be honest, that this would actually be entirely possible for you - you’ve never been restrained by sense, order and sequence in the way that normal people are. You always were an exercise in reconstruction, from the very first day I met you.

You are silent for a while and I wonder if you’ve fallen asleep, before I hear you say: “I trust all this means that you have finally got the urge to kill me out of your system?”

I start to laugh at that, but it goes wrong somewhere in the middle because I suddenly find myself gasping helplessly for breath. Oh God, I think desperately, please don’t cry, please, please… don’t fucking cry. At first you don’t make any response, and I’m starting to worry that it might actually prove possible to die of embarrassment, when I suddenly feel your arm wrapping around me; your chin on my shoulder, your hand resting lightly over my stomach, and the tip of your cheek softly pressed against mine. Your skin is surprisingly warm. Somehow I always expect you to be cold to the touch, but you’re not. I hesitate, then, trembling slightly, I move my hand over yours. “It’s all right now Will,” you say, in a gentle voice I don’t remember you using before. You entwine your fingers with mine and just hold on.

And I want to laugh and cry together, because it’s wrong, it’s not all right – of course it’s fucking not – it’s light years away from being all right. And yet at the same time…it is. It’s beautiful, it’s perfect, it’s the best thing that ever happened – the teacup gathering back together.

Chapter End Notes

“Tai gerai matyti jūsų veidą vėl” means “It’s good to see your face again” in Lithuanian. At least that’s what Mr Google’s translation page claims, although we all know Mr Google’s translators tell unspeakable lies and in reality it could just as likely mean “Upon my word, my lawnmower is broken.” So… suspension of disbelief and that.

[ETA. Mr Google’s translators have now been called out on their bullshit. Many thanks
to Cosmobubbles for the correction!)

PS. I just told DH (my perennial partner-in-crime) that I was about to post this chapter and he’s left a voicemail message warbling “Hear the drums! Hannibal comes!” from The Phantom of the Opera. What a comedian, OMFG
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Sorry to the numerous people I lied to in the comments by telling them not to bother checking for an update until the end of the week - I've had some unexpected time off am so back again early :-)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I wake up, and it’s quiet, shadowy and still; and I draw breath and wait for the customary, crushing sense of depression to come trampling in – *time to haul your ass out of bed and deal with another shitty day*. When it doesn’t I blink, then make a small gasping noise as it all comes careering back in a kaleidoscopic rush: the dead agents, the alleyway, the muggers, Matthew Brown…you. *You*. Oh my God.

You’ve come back haven’t you? You really have. You’ve come back, and you’re here…and I have absolutely no fucking idea what’s going to happen next.

Actually you’re not here: the other side of bed is empty. I bolt upright and listen and – of yes, there you are. You’re in the kitchen (of course), I can hear the tinkling sound of crockery and a spluttering, wheezing noise that must be the kettle (my kettle, like everything else, is shit, and always sounds like it’s dying when it tries to boil). I imagine you waking up first and watching me sleep: the idea is simultaneously both appealing and unnerving. I know that when I get out of bed and go into the living room that *you’ll be sat there waiting*…and I’m not sure if I’m quite ready to face you yet, so I sink back down and pull the cover over my head.

It feels humiliating, because I know I’m being perverse. I’ve spent the past few months absolutely *yearning* for you. I’ve been talking to you in my head, and pining and fading, and generally going mad from the lack of you…and now you’re actually here and I’ve suddenly lost my nerve. Maybe the yearning is part of the problem: I don’t want you to know how much I’ve missed you. You’d see it as a vulnerability, something you could exploit. Would you? I think so. Yeah, you probably would, almost certainly you would. I’m not yet ready to trust you yet with my vulnerability (or at least no more than can possibly be helped). It would be like serving you up something pink and raw and fragile on a plate.

I make another huffing noise and bad-temperedly fling myself onto my side. The crockery sounds have stopped now, it’s all gone silent and still. What are you doing? I start chewing my thumb nail and allow my mind to wander back to the previous night: your arm around me, chin propped on my shoulder, your fingers tangled in mine. Is this what we’re going to do now then? But…that’s not us, we were never like that. Well, no, we were once. That night on the cliff: your hand on my hip, your cheek stroking rapturously against my hair. What about before that? I remember you touching my hands a few times, your spidery fingers tracing over mine. Actually if I’m honest you were always pretty tender with me, even if you were hurting me. Especially if you were hurting me…God, what a head-fuck.

I know I’m going to have to face you eventually, but heroically decide to put it off for as long as possible by having a shower (because, not to put too fine a point on it, I fucking reek) and getting
dressed, and searching for my glasses (which I finally locate inside my shoe. What...how?), and attempting to do something with my hair because it looks like some malignant hair goblin has crept in during the night and electrocuted it. Then I sit on the bed and fret anxiously, because I am clearly a gigantic coward who can’t face walking into their own living room. Get your shit together, I tell myself sternly. As an added incentive I try to make my inner voice sound like Jack. I finally decide, as a compromise, that I will indeed leave my bedroom (willpower and all that...like a fucking champion) but will then promptly leave the apartment to give myself a bit of breathing space (because the way I’m feeling right now I need something more akin to Kryptonite than paltry mortal willpower to be able to cope with you). The bottom line is that if I didn’t care so much – about you, about what you think of me, about what’s going to happen next – then this would be a hell of a lot easier. But I do, and so it’s not.

Eventually my bashfulness is starting to embarrass even myself, so I give myself a mental punch in the face and force myself into the living room. Of course, the first thing I see is you: you’re sat on one of the chairs with your eyes closed and your hands clasped together (probably sauntering around your memory palace and imagining you’re in Salar de Uyuni, or the Sistine Chapel, or the lost city of fucking Atlantis – or pretty much anywhere except my crappy apartment, which is looking even more sorry for itself than usual in the harsh winter sun). I’ve not made any noise, but your eyes immediately flick open.

“Hey,” I say a bit awkwardly. I’m suddenly remembering how I clung to you in the middle of the night and am feeling self-conscious. I’m also aware that I’m slouching, so try to straighten up and look a bit more dignified.

“Good morning Will,” you say briskly. You narrow your eyes and give me a quick look up-and-down; it’s a bit intimidating and I find myself drooping and shrinking against the doorframe again under the intensity of your stare (dignity being evidently overrated).

“Did you sleep well?” you ask.

“Yeah, thanks.” I’m about to add ‘I slept like the dead’ but change my mind at the last minute, because I know you’ll probably crack that slightly reptilian smile and I can’t cope with it at the moment. I cough to try and cover it up, and the general effect is that I’ve just swallowed a fly and am proceeding to choke on it. I see you raise your eyebrows a fraction.

“Are you all right Will?”

“Fine!” I say, cheery as a gameshow host. “Yeah, I’m fine.” Oh my God, this is terrible. “Look,” I say, trying to regain some control over the conversation (although the words ‘horse,’ ‘stable door’ and ‘bolted’ all come to mind in a rather unfortunate way), “I’m heading out. For a while. Y’know…to the store. Do you need anything picking up?”

You sigh gently and let your eyes roll up towards the ceiling (you sound like a balloon deflating: where you always this much of a drama queen or is it a recent development?). “I need an extensive number of things,” you say languidly, “but it will be much easier if I simply acquire them myself.”

Fine. Whatever. “I’ll be back in about an hour or so,” I say. I hesitate, and look back at you as if I want to add something else (I do, but I’m not sure what), but in the end just slink away in silence.

“I hope you have a pleasant time,” you say. You close your eyes again and tip your head against the back of the chair. I can’t tell whether you’re making fun of me or not, but in the end decide to accept it as cordial and simply reply: “Thanks. I’ll see you in a bit.”

I ignore the elevator and run down the stairs instead, two at a time, to try and burn off some excess of
all my nervous energy. It’s cold out and I pull my collar up, my breath coming out in little frozen puffs. People jostle past me, elbowing me out the way: a woman on her cell phone juggling a briefcase in her other hand, a tall man with a baby self-consciously slung round his chest in a little harness. It’s just a regular day, business as usual; it doesn’t mean anything special to them. None of you have any idea what’s just happened, I think, the whole world’s changed overnight and none of you know, only me. I run and run until my legs are trembling and my lungs feel like they’re going to burst, then lean against a wall and drag in painful shards of icy air. I’m aware I have a big smile on my face. I’m anxious and conflicted and fearful, but simultaneously I want to cry out in triumph and punch the sky.

I wander round for a bit longer, wearing my mercurial mood like a badge of honour, then eventually force myself to calm down and head to the local market to pick up a few staples: bread, milk and so on. I hesitate over the deli section, but ultimately decide I’m not even going to bother with the kind of pretentious crap you’d want to eat – you can sort that out yourself – although as a concession buy a French press and a bag of Rio Oro coffee beans. The next thing I do is head to the Goodwill and attempt to scout out a couch. I don’t think I can cope with having to sit across from you in those chairs for hours on end (I really don’t), and it seems like I should at least give you the opportunity to have your own place to sleep. I know that if you accept this alternative arrangement I will be both relieved and disappointed; it’s one thing imaging us having sex, but the reality…God. I can control my mental version of you. Just…sort of…actually no I clearly can’t can I, so what the hell would even begin to happen with the real one? My brain fogs over a bit, and I don’t notice the assistant saying “Can I help you sir?” in a polite, nervous tone until I realize I’ve just been standing in the middle of the floor like someone tragically struck down with paralysis.

I stare at her over the top of my glasses. “Couch?” I finally manage.

“You want to buy a couch sir?” she says. She has now adopted a tone of voice I imagine she only ever wheels out for the elderly or suspected cognitively infirm.

“Yes!” I say. “Couch! Thanks!”

“Our furniture is all displayed on the lower floor,” she replies in a kindly voice. “Would you like me to show you?”

“No, that’s fine, I can manage.” I sound suitably earnest and she looks quite relieved (she’s grateful she won’t have to escort me into a basement while I ramble incoherently to myself, only coming back to sentence in order to emit occasional enthusiastic exclamations about couches). There’s a good selection of furniture and I spend a bit of time browsing before opting for the largest couch they have; an attractive Chesterfield style sofa upholstered in quilted brown velvet. There’s some cigarette burns on one arm and the springs sag a little in the middle cushion, but otherwise it’s in surprisingly good condition. The clerk rings up the sale, then asks if I have a van with me. A van? Shit. How the hell could I have forgotten that I’d need a way to get the bastard thing home again?

“We do deliveries,” he says, correctly interpreting the look of dismay on my face. “I could get it to you for the day after tomorrow: 15 bucks extra.”

“Great,” I say, “Thanks.” Two more nights: I suppose it could have been worse (better).

I take a deep breath before I open the apartment door, stealing myself for the fact that you are going to be there, then nearly have a fucking heart attack when I go inside and find you sat in the living room…with Mr Haversham. My mouth drops open in horror and I have to remind myself to close it again.
“Ah, there you are Will,” you say casually. “What a time you’ve been. Although it hardly matters, because I have been having the most fascinating conversation with your neighbor.” I am immediately struck (and am grudgingly impressed) by how much you have managed to subtly alter yourself. The most obvious is your accent, which now has a crisp English lilt, but it’s also your body language and general demeanour; you’re both you and nothing like yourself. It’s actually kind of creepy.

“Hullo there William, it’s been a real pleasure meeting your relative here,” says Mr Haversham. He turns back to you, looking perplexed. “I’m so sorry, I forgot what the connection was?”

“You’re both you and nothing like yourself. It’s actually kind of creepy.

“Not at all,” you say. “The fault is entirely mine, as I believe I neglected to mention it.” You and he both swivel your heads and look at me at the same time, with similar expectant expressions on your faces. Right, great… thanks for that.

“This is my… um… my uncle,” I say. “My dad’s older brother.” You look slightly pissed off. Ha. It’s actually a bit ridiculous – you’re clearly not that old (not to mention looking nothing like me) – but Mr Haversham is buying it anyway.

“My!” he says, “The older brother! You are incredibly well-preserved aren’t you?” This is too much and I know I’m going to start laughing, so have to dive into the kitchen to splutter in private.

“What’s the matter with William,” asks Mr Haversham in concern.

“His father passed away recently,” you improvise smoothly, “he gets very overcome mentioning him.”

“Well if that isn’t the greatest shame,” Mr Haversham says dolefully.

“It was the most terrible tragedy,” you reply, laying it on with a shovel.

“You know, I wasn’t aware that William’s family came from the Old Country,” muses Mr Haversham. “He never mentioned it. I guess his mother was an American?”

“Yes, quite right. The Grahams are actually a very ancient and well-established line.”

At this point I have a horrible feeling that you are going to start telling him how a splinter group of the original Grahams packed up their – ancient, well-established – shit and all piled over on The Mayflower (partly in revenge for the whole elderly uncle bit, but also because you’re an enormous narcissist even when pretending to be someone else) so I force myself to sober up and go back into the living room.

“Sorry about that,” I say.

“Not at all William, don’t mention it,” tuts Mr Haversham sympathetically. “Blood is thicker than water after all.”

“Indeed it is,” you say. You give me a vaguely unsettling smile. Mr Haversham remains cheerfully oblivious, looking from one of us to the other with a delighted expression on his crinkled face.

“You know,” he says thoughtfully, “I think I can actually see a bit of a resemblance…although I’m guessing that William takes more after his mother’s side?”

“Oh certainly, in many ways,” you reply, “yet it must be said that Will and I also have numerous interesting similarities beyond the surface level of appearance.”

I’m now starting to feel slightly tense from the effort of keeping up with a conversation that’s clearly
running on two different levels at the same time, so deliberately turn to Mr Haversham and ask if he’s okay and does he need anything? He immediately starts apologizing for disturbing this touching family reunion (Christ) and announcing the original reason for his visit: whether I could possibly tighten the washer on his kitchen tap when I have a moment. “I’ll gladly pay you,” he says.

“Don’t worry about that, I’d be happy to do it. I’ll come down in about an hour.”

“Oh, there’s no rush,” he replies. “Don’t let me disturb you anymore than I already have.” He arduously prises himself out of the chair and shakes your hand. “I’m so sorry,” he says again, “I’ve forgotten your name.”

“Again, I failed to mention it,” you answer cordially. “My apologies. I am Will’s Uncle Jack.” Oh fuck you.

We both stand and watch him leave with matching fake smiles on our faces. “So,” you say in your normal voice when he’s gone, “it would appear that the beautiful and brilliant Will Graham has an entirely secret life running around as a helpmeet of old men.”

“You mean like you?” I say. “My old yet incredibly well-preserved Uncle.”

“As my young and incredibly poorly-behaved nephew, it is entirely my prerogative to put you over my knee,” you say serenely. I go a bit pink at that and you smirk.

“Seriously, though,” I say, “don’t you dare do anything to him.”

“Why would I do anything to him? He was perfectly pleasant and courteous.”

“Like that’s ever stopped you.”

“In my opinion, it would in fact be a kindness to ‘do something to him,’” you reply, “as he is old and lonely and his life has become a burden to him.”

“Don’t give me that crap. Like mercy’s ever made you do anything either.”

“I am not proposing to be merciful. It is merely an observation.”

I feel like you have somehow got the better of me, and can’t quite work out how, when you suddenly yawn and stretch. “Your bed is truly abominable,” you say, “I have slept on paving stones in the Soviet bloc that were more conducive to a good night’s rest” (I strongly suspect that this is not hyperbole – you almost undoubtedly have).

“I’ve been sorting out a couch,” I say. “You can sleep on that. It’s really big. It’s nice,” I wave my hand around a bit to emphasize the point, how nice it is. “It’s…brown,” I finally manage. You look unconvinced.

“You could always go back to your own place,” I say crossly, “if this isn’t good enough for you.”

“It is perfectly fine,” you say, “I apologize. You must disregard my occasional grievances.”

“Don’t worry,” I say, “I will.” I go into the kitchen and start hurling dirty crockery into the sink with unnecessary violence and making a huge amount of noise. You prowl in after me and stretch again, your muscles flexing underneath the fabric of your shirt, which is slightly too small. Wait – I look a bit closer at you. “For God’s sake,” I say. “Are you wearing my shirt?”

“I’m afraid so,” you reply. Your regret is obviously nothing to do with getting caught borrowing my
things without permission, but more to do with wearing something that wasn’t hand-stitched in a Milanese grotto a century ago by fucking elves.

“Great,” I say sarcastically, “I’m so delighted that you’ve been rummaging through my stuff while I’m out. Do you have no boundaries at all?” You just give me a look which I translate as: ‘of course not – don’t be ridiculous.’

“I restricted my rummaging to the bare minimum to accomplish the task at hand,” you say, “namely the top drawer of your bureau.” You pause and look at me carefully, waiting for me to process this, and I realize…of course – oh fuck! – the drawer where I stashed the photo of us that I stole off Price. The photo that no one else was ever, ever meant to see. From the smug look on your face this is clearly no longer the case.

I draw in a deep breath, torn between the dual imperatives of absolute outrage and profound humiliation. I opt for the former, as the latter might end up with something truly terrible (including, but not limited to, actually starting to cry). “You know what?” I say, “Fuck you.” I go out the kitchen (I am rapidly running out of places to storm in and out of) and go into my bedroom to lean in front of the window, my chin propped against my forearm. You come in behind me and put your hand on my shoulder. I shake it off.

“T’was sorry Will,” you say, “that was clumsy and unkind.”

“Oh, so you’re doing apologies now?” I say sarcastically.

“Evidently I am,” you reply. “Perhaps you will have to throw me off a few more cliffs.”

I give a small huff of laughter. “Who are you, and what have you done with Hannibal Lecter?”

You place your hand on my shoulder again. “I was actually immensely pleased,” you say. “I’m glad you kept it.”

“I didn’t keep it, I stole it.”

“You did? Even better.”

“No…not really.”

“Of course it is. It shows a willingness to improvise that is highly commendable.”

“Oh, I say sulkily, “you’ve had your fun out of this, why don’t you just drop it?” I turn round and try to push past you, but you press your hand against my chest to keep me in place, and I immediately go still.

“Very well,” you say, “I suppose you are entitled to some kind of retaliation. Would you like to know what I did?”

I raise my eyebrows at the (frankly) extreme unlikeliness of this. “Quid pro quo?” I say.

“I am deeply ashamed to confess that I succumbed to nostalgia and procured a bottle of your atrocious aftershave,” you reply, and I snap my head up in surprise. “I wish I could tell you that I wore it myself, but I’m afraid there are some limits to which even I am subject. Nevertheless the mere sight of it alternatively evoked feelings of profound affection and deep exasperation, and therefore reminded me of you in the most charming way.”

Although I’m still pissed off with you (and genuinely taken aback, because – really?) I can’t help
laughing, not least because of the expression of mock-seriousness on your face. “Thanks I guess,” I say, “I’m touched, Dr Lecter.”

“You are welcome, Agent Graham” you reply. “I thought you would be pleased to know that you had caused me a level of discomfort.”

“I’m delighted, actually. You have no idea.” And then suddenly the levity’s all gone and we both fall very quiet, just staring at each other, and I hear myself saying (apropos of nothing and without even intending to): “Why aren’t you angry with me?”

You smile slightly. “You expected me to be?”

“I don’t know...Yes.”

“In the way you are angry with me? For leaving you.”

“I’m not,” I say feebly.

“Of course you are. It is entirely obvious.”

I realize there’s no point disputing this further, and just shake my head helplessly. “But what I did. I mean, I tried to kill us both...I tried...I...”

“You did, most enthusiastically. Fortunately you were not successful.”

“Aren’t you, God, I don’t know...why aren’t you angry?”

“Because I understand the impulse that led you to do it. And, more to the point, the transformation which will result – your need to rise up from your own ashes. Why do you think I went to such trouble to ensure your survival? I could have left you to die, could I not? But I didn’t.”

“I know. I know.”

“That said, perhaps there was a certain level of self-interest involved – as you have doubtless ascertained by now, I want you alive because I prefer you that way. But it was for your own sake too, do not doubt that.” You reach out and idly tuck a strand of hair behind my ear and I can feel myself quiver. “The phoenix must burn before it can arise,” you say.

“I don’t know what you mean.” I can’t quite look you in the eye. My desire for you? The desire to unleash my own violence, my own darkness, to kill someone else? Both? Neither?

“Aren’t you, God, I don’t know...why aren’t you angry?”

“Of course you know,” you reply. “You just don’t wish to acknowledge it. But you will. And in the meantime, here we are.”

Yeah, here we are. And I cough awkwardly, because I’ve suddenly become aware of how close we’re standing, how much in my space you are. You don’t look even remotely fazed (you wouldn’t would you?). Oh God, we’re so close, we’re practically breathing each other’s air. Friends don’t do this, they don’t get so close. People only get this close for one reason. But then you’re not like other people are you, you never have been. And in that moment I feel the full force of my own ponderous, shambolically graceless normality. Me desperately uninspired; you eternally fascinating. Me shackled and inhibited by rules and rationalization; you devising and discarding your own rubrics of cascading and fiendish complexity as you go along. You light on your feet; me casting a shadow. And that no matter how fast I run I will never, ever, ever be able to keep up with you...even as you’re leading me in delirious pursuit towards dark, forbidden places that I can’t quite admit I want to go to.
You’re watching me, carefully and mercilessly, as if you can peer into my mind and casually rifle your long fingers through whatever it is you find there. “Yes, it is a dilemma isn’t it Will?” you say, even though I’ve been silent the entire time. “You have my sympathy. You are at liberty to select your own course, but what you are not able to do is select the repercussions that inevitably come with it. You are facing the discord between imagination and reality; between how you wish things were and how they really are. What values are you able to compromise? Which side should you select? Perhaps you should take consolation in the fact that a choice free of consequence is no choice at all.”

_I know about consequences, I think wildly. I know about cause and effect. About penalties and outcome, and aftermath, because you went away and I had to live without you…that was my consequence. God, you’re not going to make this easy for me are you? I have a sudden, random recollection of the dream I had about you all that time ago: ‘Tell me…I want to hear you say it.’ It’s one of my sudden flashes of insight, and in that moment I realize that that for all your sensuality and insouciance you’re not actually going to push for anything: you’re going to wait, patiently and plausibly, and let me come to you. You won’t coerce, you’ll influence and encourage, just like you always have with everything. Plant the seeds and then see what happens, _Wind me up and watch me go_. In other words: this is all on me…which is exactly what you always intended. My breathing’s sped up and I know you’ll be able to see the way my rib cage is moving and falling underneath the thin material of my shirt. I glance up at you from under my eyelashes: uncharacteristically timid. Oh God, I don’t know what’s going to happen._

You’re watching me, and then you smile again. “So much to think about, isn’t there Will?” you say. “Razing the old to raise the new.” Then you slowly and deliberately lift my hand to your face and kiss the back of it. Your eyes never leave mine the entire time and I feel my mouth go totally dry. “Don’t worry,” you say, “it will all become clear in time.” Then you lower my hand back down and walk away.

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I stay in the bedroom for a long time, not quite willing or able to process what’s just taken place: instead I adopt the highly productive strategy of running my fingers though my hair until it’s almost vertical, then bracing myself against the window frame and proceeding to freak out as quietly and discreetly as I possibly can. My hand feels like it’s been branded, and it seems impossible that you haven’t left a mark behind; an imprint, red and raw and signifying ownership. If anyone else did that it would be vaguely ridiculous (I can immediately imagine Michael failing spectacularly to carry it off), but you have inevitably managed to take a hackneyed gesture and spin it into something sinister and menacing and profoundly erotic (oh _God_). Everything you’ve said has left me feeling bewildered and anxious and frightened – and enormously and guiltily turned on – and _I really_ can’t stand the thought of leaving the room and having to look you in the eye. But there’s no doubt I’ll have to eventually (and that the longer I leave it the worse it’s going to be), so I finally force myself to go into the living room…where rather than facing up to you I spinelessly proceed to behave as if nothing has happened.

You obliging play along, cool and complaisant as ever, though I can’t help feeling my inability to address the situation is entertaining you enormously. Nevertheless – and counterintuitively, after such an incredibly overwrought encounter – it feels as if the tension has finally peaked and broken, and as the afternoon ebbs into the evening I realize I’m starting to behave (a bit) more naturally around you. I go and fix Mr Haversham’s tap, and am even able to smile and nod politely as he sits watching me in his battered wooden chair and waxes lyrical about me having such a distinguished relative.

“I’m glad you enjoyed talking with him,” I say. “Some people find him a bit…intimidating.”
“Oh when you’re as old as me you stop caring about things like that. Folks are just folks. Anyway he seemed very charming. Very nice and friendly. He mainly just wanted to talk about you, how you’d been.”

“Oh yeah?” I turn round and fiddle with the compression valve so he can’t see that I’m starting to blush (Christ).

“Oh yes. He was very interested. Anything I could tell him.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Well, I said you were very frail when you first moved in, like the first gust of wind would’ve carried you straight off. Of course he knew you’d been in the hospital. ‘That poor boy,’ I said to him, ‘pacing the floor in the middle of the night.’ But then I explained how you’d told me it was a sort of, what did you say it was? Walking meditation?”

I stare at him with an expression of dismay that must be almost comic in intensity, and his kind face crumples slightly. “Oh dear,” he says, “I do hope I didn’t say anything out of turn?”

“No, no, honestly, it’s fine.” I guess it could have been worse – at least he didn’t tell you all that bullshit about pretending to train as a monk (for fuck’s sake). “What did he say?”

“Nothing, I don’t think. He just smiled.”

“Yeah I bet he did.”

“He said he’d come back to keep an eye on you. I told him ‘that boy’s a good boy and could probably use someone taking care of him.’”

“Oh Mr Haversham, you didn’t. I really don’t need taking care of.”

“Happen we all need a bit of that, in one way or another. You seem a bit lonesome William, if you don’t mind me saying so. There’s nothing like family.” He casts a sad, solemn glance at the photo on the mantle, the sweetheart blouse and victory curls as serene and ageless as ever, and I feel so bad for him that I end up staying a lot longer than I intended, allowing him to show me recent pictures of his son and daughter-in-law (looking smug in front of the Lincoln Memorial and surrounded by assorted progeny in matching baseball caps) and desperately pretending to feign a mannerly interest in the son’s shitty self-righteous opinions on Homeland Security. I escape as soon as is politely possible, then virtually sprint back upstairs again: you’re lounging elegantly in your chair and the very sight of you makes me smile in spite of myself.

“So, apparently you intend to keep an eye on me?” I say as I close the door.

“Most certainly. At least one – possibly both.” You give me one of your uniquely enigmatic looks, which could be a smile (but might not be) and then return to reading the newspaper, which is at least two days out of date. I feel a bit guilty at that – you must be unbearably bored – although the guilt promptly turns to petty irritation when I notice you’ve filled in all the crossword clues I’d abandoned as unsolvable. You’ve also completed the Sudoku...then designed your own on the advert on the facing page (the model’s forehead is covered in meticulously neat little numbered squares). I hover briefly nearby: I want to go over and touch you in some way – ask you to touch me – but can’t summon up anywhere near enough courage, and in the end the moment passes and I go and check my emails instead. I put the laptop on my knee, surreptitiously pulling my chair a bit closer to yours. I stretch my legs out and occasionally our feet brush together.

Later we switch the evening news on to see if there’s any updates about Matthew Brown (there
isn’t), then you lean back in your chair with your eyes closed, probably strolling around in your memory palace again and no doubt attempting to get away from me going ‘incredibly well-preserved’ in a fake English accent and dissolving into cackling laughter. I watch you for a while, almost hungrily – absorbing you, soaking you in – then force myself to look away and check the street. I peer furtively out the window but there’s nothing there: no shadowy figures, no flashing lights, no dead agents. No live ones either: I’ll put money on the fact that Kade Purnell has intervened to stop Jack issuing any more. I consequently experience the completely novel sensation of feeling something other than insane levels of rage towards her.

God, it’s hard to settle. How do you manage it so effortlessly? I drift aimlessly back towards my chair and manage to knock my empty coffee cup off the arm, at which point you promptly come back to life and start fretting again for the fiftieth fucking time about the state of my kitchen. From the way you’re acting, it’s like I’ve got live Ebola cultures growing in there.

“This is getting really old,” I say. “If you don’t like it, sort it out yourself.”

“I fully intend to,” you reply, “in a day or two. I’m currently recuperating. I’m afraid I’m not quite as resilient as I used to be, at least for the time being.” I feel a bit bad at that, because I’d actually briefly forgotten that less than a day ago you took out three highly aggressive crazy people with your bare hands (four including Matthew Brown) to save my hapless ass from getting shot. Not to mention getting shot yourself a few months back…

“Don’t forget the cliff,” you say, and I literally go bright red.

“How the hell do you do that?”

“It is not so very difficult. Not least because you are, on occasion, utterly transparent.”

“Not always.”


This feels like a compromise of sorts, so I offer to order some food from the place that Michael once brought his appetizing (enormously overpriced) boxes from, in what now seems like another lifetime ago. We eat it in comfortable silence, then I put the television back on and doze a bit in front of it. I dream, very vividly and relentlessly, about you: your old house, your old life. You’re in your kitchen, chopping and dicing something on the counter. I walk up behind you, but I know without looking that it’s me that you’ve got laid out: my brain is in a white porcelain bowl with a cloth perched neatly on the top, and my heart is lying in a little Le Creuset dish, pulsating and raw. I open my mouth to ask you what the hell you think you’re doing, but my voice is drained out by the wail of sirens and people shouting through loudspeakers: “This is the FBI! Come out with your hands up.” You calmly move past me, kiss my hand, then pull on your coat and walk outside to greet them.

“You’ve finally caught the Chesapeake Ripper,” you say; you sound perfectly relaxed about it. I yell at you through the window but you can’t hear me, and I can’t follow you because all my organs are on the table and I need to gather them up first and put myself back together. But I don’t know how; I don’t understand anatomy like you do, I never did. I watch as Jack pulls out his handcuffs and Sanderson moves forward to manhandle you into a patrol car. I scream at them to stop, but they can’t hear me either…and I wake up with a start so violent it wrenches the muscles in my neck. I can see you watching me from the corner of my eye.

“We need to talk more,” I say abruptly. I’m breathing very fast.

“We shall,” is all you reply. You uncoil yourself from your chair and walk into the kitchen, making a
detour on the way back so you can pause and place your hand on my shoulder, briefly stroking the back of my neck with your thumb. I can feel my lips part slightly, and it takes every shred of self-control I possess not to cling onto you and bury my face in the front of your (my) shirt. Instead I lean back into my chair and rub my hand over my face. The news is still playing in the background: the anchor’s hair is so large and coiffured it practically fills the screen: “And finally!” she says, “There was good news for local businessman John Anderson when he received the prestigious…” She sounds genuinely delighted, how can she pretend to care so convincingly about this bullshit? I lean over and turn it off then start biting my nails. God, I really want to believe this is going to end well, I really do. I want to hope, even though I feel I’m tempting fate in doing so. Although, really, what’s the point of hoping anyway? Hope is avoidant and escapist. It lies to you. It's complacency: it’s bad luck. I need to do, not hope…Christ, I sound like fucking Yoda.

“What’s going to happen to us?” I say softly. It’s clearly rhetorical, I don’t actually expect you to answer, but you glance up anyway and give me a thoughtful look. “Something extraordinary,” you say.

I know you’re right. Today was the start of a new chapter…a whole new book. The old one’s finished and discarded – thrown off a cliff and into the sea. And it’s only as I’m brewing a coffee later on that I realize it has taken less than 24 hours for me to stop questioning the fact that you and I have become an ‘us’ – one life, one fate, one unit together: my lot inextricably thrown in with yours.

One plus one equals one. Equals ‘us.’

Chapter End Notes

Apologies, American readers, if this bears absolutely no resemblance to the way your charity shops work (my entire knowledge of them comes from that Macklemore song *cough*).

Enormous thanks also to my lovely amigo Bea, who went over this for me this afternoon. Yes, for the first time ever, a chapter has actually been PROOFREAD. Woo! Any remaining mistakes are mine, although it is entirely thanks to her eagle eye that you didn’t have Will saying “wants it” in the manner of Gollum. *shudder*
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Another update came out on Wednesday, so please check that first if you haven’t already :-)  

Current chapter rated for the following:  
F for Fluff  
B for Bickering Murder Husbands Bitching at Each Other Besottedly  
S for Will being a Sassy Little Shit

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Where were you,” I say. “For all that time…where did you go?”

We are sat at the table eating cereal (at least I am – you took one look at it and literally shuddered, and are instead sipping fastidiously on a cup of black coffee). I went to bed before you did and you weren’t there again when I woke up; I’m starting to seriously question whether you actually sleep at all.

“Not here, for the most part. After the necessary recuperation…” (at this you give me a pointed look over the top of your cup as a substitute for ‘after you threw me off a cliff’), “I mostly crossed borders; namely Canada and Mexico.”

“How did you manage that? The whole world was looking for you.”

“Hardly,” you say, although I can’t help feeling you secretly adore the idea of the whole world (or at least three quarters) being in hot pursuit. “It was not particularly difficult. I disguised myself of course, as well as a number of other elementary precautions, but in asking me how I did it you have to bear in mind that I have a nearly infinite number of resources at my disposal.”

“Like what?” You give me another look. This one I interpret as ‘oh, please…you tiny simpleton.’

“A substantial fund of money, of course,” you say instead, “my considerable intellectual abilities,” (I roll my eyes on cue), “and a complete lack of fear or trepidation. ‘To be successful, one must merely project an image of success’.” I can almost hear you putting squeamish air quotes around such a trite expression, but I know immediately what you mean.

“You’re so self-assured that no one thought to question you.”

“Precisely.”

“Nevertheless,” I concede, “it’s pretty impressive.”

“Thank you Will.” You tip your head slightly to one side. “I must confess that I agree with you.”

I smile and take a thoughtful sip of my coffee. “So what’s your plan?” I ask. “Or plans plural; I suppose you have more than one.”

“Indeed I do,” you say crisply. “I don’t imagine you need to hear them all at once.”
“What about right now…Are you going to stay here?”

“I shall, if you’ll have me.”

“Sure,” I say lightly, like it’s no big thing. “That’s fine.”

“Thank you,” you reply. “You may live in a hovel but I suppose that it at least has the personal touch. It also has you in it, which is an added advantage as your company is extremely diverting when you are not being hugely exasperating. I’ve grown rather tired of being itinerant, it will be nice to have a more permanent base.”

“So where’s all your stuff at the moment?”

“It is currently in a hotel outside the city limits, from where I will collect it before the reservation expires next week. Although I do not currently have a substantial amount of ‘stuff’ – at the moment I observe the maxims of travelling light.”

“Well at least you’ll have to collect my aftershave,” I say cheekily, “it would be a shame to lose it now after you’ve been devotedly carrying it round all this time.”

“Certainly I must collect it,” you reply calmly, “or else the bottle might get broken. In the resultant environmental disaster, lives will almost certainly be lost.”

I throw my spoon at you, which you neatly catch one-handed and place back down on the table. God you’re so annoying sometimes.

*****

Around midday I perform my obligatory Matthew Brown Watch. It’s as frustrating as ever: still nothing about him on the local news channels, and nothing in the papers either. We’re playing a waiting game again.

“Yes, there remains the considerable inconvenience of Mr Brown, which will undoubtedly need to be dealt with eventually,” you say when I tell you. You give me a slightly condescending look. “It is a great pity that you have managed to attract an admirer who is so ardent, yet has so few attractive or admirable qualities.”

“Oh my God, you can talk,” I say crossly. “You and your goddamn ‘Tooth Fairy.’” We briefly roll our eyes at each other as if to say ‘oh yeah – that little bastard.’

“I concede your point,” you say loftily, “but at least he had the compensation of considerable artistry and originality, not to mention a certain measure of cunning. A precision tool, one might say. Yours is more of a blunt instrument.”

“Oh do shut up,” I say, “he’s not ‘mine’, and I’m not going to argue with you over which of our respectively deranged super-fans was the most impressive.”

“Which means I win by default.”

“Which means…” I start to say, but then my cell goes off and the opportunity is lost. Wordlessly I show you the caller display: Jack Crawford.

“Certainly you should answer it.” You actually look pretty delighted, as if the idea of me making polite, stilted small-talk with Jack while you’re sat right there is giving you an enormous amount of satisfaction.
I hesitate a bit, but I suppose I’m going to have to speak with him eventually and press ‘accept’. As an afterthought I turn on the loudspeaker, so you can keep track of any updates: if indeed there are any (probably not).

“Will!” he says, “How are you doing? I’ve been wondering about you.”


“Good. That’s good Will. I’m glad to hear it. When are you going to stop by for the firearm clearance?”

Shit, I’d completely forgotten about that. “Anytime,” I say, “when’s convenient?” I exchange a significant look with you: a gun is undoubtedly going to come in useful.

“How about tomorrow, 10am?”

“I’ll be there.”

There’s a pause, then Jack lets out a sigh. “I’m afraid there’s still no news,” he says eventually. “We’ve got a big team working on it, but no fresh leads as yet. Don’t let that worry you though, Will. We’ll get him long before he can get to you I guarantee it.”

“Yeah,” I say feebly. Now you look like you’re struggling not to laugh and I angrily wave my hand at you to be quiet.

“Sure you’re okay?” says Jack again.

“Yeah, honestly, I’m fine.”

“Yeah, honestly, I’m fine.”

“Well, good. Good. That’s good.” He pauses for a second time, then lowers his voice sympathetically. “Look, I don’t mind telling you that the emphasis of this is focussed on the murdered agents, and of course Brown himself. No one’s particularly concerned about that bastard French. We’ll do what needs to be done because we have to, but there’s no doubt he got what was coming to him.”

“Thanks.”

“After what he tried to do to you… I’d happily kill him myself.” Out the corner of my eye, I can see you stiffen very slightly.

“Thanks Jack, I appreciate it.” I glance at you and you stare back at me quizzically with your eyebrows furrowed.

“Well, okay,” says Jack in his normal voice. “Look, the other reason I called… about those agents. Look, Will, you know if it were up to me…”

“… You’d re-issue some more. But Kade Purnell says I can go fuck myself?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s pretty much it.”

“That’s okay, it’s fine. I understand.”

“I’m sorry about it Will, I really am. I did my best for you on this one but my hands are tied.”

“It’s okay Jack, honestly,” I say, trying not to sound too fervent. We make a bit of meaningless
small-talk, then I tell him I’ll see him tomorrow and hang up.

“So,” I say.

“So?”

“So…that’s good. Sort of.”

“Certainly it is good. A gun is good, a lack of surveillance is good, and the continuing freedom of Matthew Brown is excellent.”

“Why?”

“‘Why,’ Will? Are you seriously proposing that you would prefer Uncle Jack apprehends him before you have a chance to get to him yourself?”

I don’t quite know how to respond to that (essentially because I know that you’re right and I don’t particularly want to admit it) so I just make a noncommittal grunting noise and begin a big performance of pretending to check the messages on my phone, scowling with concentration as if there’s something of monumental importance in there. You’re just looking at me – of course you’re not falling for it, why am I even bothering?

“In the meantime,” you continue, “we wait. There is no particular rush, and there are several other things that require my attention in the interim.”

I look up sharply. I can’t quite bring myself to ask what I really want to know (i.e., ‘do you have any plans to start serially murdering the ruder members of the citizenry anytime soon?...And by the way please don’t because I can’t possibly be bothered to get off my ass to investigate it’). But there’s no doubt I’ve been miserably preoccupied with what your long game is going to turn out to be – or even your mid-game…God, even the next 24 hours would be better than nothing – not least are you going to leave again?

“Yeah, about that…” I say, and then trail off because I can’t think of a way to phrase it that won’t sound incredibly anxious and clingy.

“Oh, there are various loose ends to be dealt with in addition to Matthew Brown,” you say airily. “To begin with; I need to give my regards to Dr Bloom.”

Oh shit, shit. I swear my heart actually skips a beat at that. “You can’t,” I say in horror.

“I most certainly can. I gave her my word.”

Alana’s sincere, pretty face flashes into my mind, and I can feel myself starting to panic. “Don’t you dare!” I yell, and you immediately take a step towards me. I might have stood my ground against Matthew Brown, but this time it’s game over and I instinctively shift backwards – the sheer menace of you, Christ.

“Do I ‘dare,’ Will?” you ask politely. “Are you presuming to tell me what to do?” Your voice remains at the same calm, conversational tempo – you could be musing on the weather – but you take another deliberate step forward. “Because if you are, I would strongly suggest that you consider how foolish that would be.”

I stare numbly back at you. This is all starting to feel vaguely surreal, as if I’m not really involved: just a bystander, watching this fucking idiot that looks a bit like me from the other side of the room as he embarks on an unbelievably half-assed suicide mission. I know I have to say something, do
something, intervene in some way. But what? What should I do? To be successful, I think irrationally, one must merely project an image of success.

“You can’t,” I say quietly, “I won’t let you.” I want to add something swaggering and affirmative (‘and that’s not a threat but a promise!’), but there’s absolutely no way I’ll be able to carry it off.

I expect you to laugh at me for the clearly bullshit posturing that this actually is, but you don’t. You take a few more steps towards me, but this time I force myself to stay still, resolutely staring at a patch of wall just behind your right ear. You don’t seem angry – more amused/intrigued than anything else – but there’s no doubt that I’m pushing my luck beyond all sane limits. God you could kill me right now couldn’t you, there’s no way I’d be able to fight you off. How had I forgotten about this – how completely fucking terrifying you can be? My heart is pounding so hard I’m convinced you’ll be able to see my pulse throbbing in my neck. You’re just staring at me thoughtfully.

“What a remarkable boy you are,” you say at last. “Look at you: you are extremely afraid, yet see how you pitch on regardless. You really have no respect for your own limits do you?”

It seems like there could be problems with either confirming or denying this analysis, so in the end I don’t say anything at all, and have an experimental attempt at squaring my shoulders at you instead (Man vs. Boy-Man).

“Why this dramatic surge of interest in Dr Bloom’s welfare?” you ask. You narrow your eyes at me. “Are you renewing your romantic aspirations towards her?”

“No,” I say. “No, it’s nothing like that.”

“What then? You are being extremely chivalrous on her behalf.”

“She’s been good to me,” I say simply, because it’s true. “A good friend. These last few months… you have no idea what it was like.” Briefly I think of Michael and my voice falters a bit. You immediately detect the tremor and look at me curiously.

The silence stretches out, taut enough to snap, and I pull out one of the chairs and sit down. I’m hoping it will look casual and conciliatory, but the reality is I’m no longer confident in the ability of my legs to stay upright. You lean back yourself, one hand resting on the other chair, and continue your scrutinizing observation. I feel like you’re literally peeling the layers back in my skull.

“Very well then,” you say finally, “as a favor to you, I declare a formal cessation of hostilities against Alana Bloom. At least for the time being; I can’t guarantee that I won’t want to renegotiate with you at a later time. But rest assured you have at least secured her a reprieve. Certainly I am obliged to her for taking such good care of you in my absence.”

You pin me in place again with one of your incredibly intense stares – like a poor, dead butterfly cleaved to a display card – then turn round and disappear into the kitchen. My knees are going to buckle, I can feel it. I take a deep breath then go into the bathroom and throw up, running the tap loudly so you won’t hear.

*****

Afterwards I stumble into the bedroom and collapse on top of the bed, where I lie in a trembling heap for a very long time: just staring blankly at the ceiling and asking myself over and over again what the hell I think I’m doing. There are no easy answers – no answers at all – and it’s like trying to solve some impossible mythic task: carry water in a sieve, wrap up fire in paper…express the
inexpressible. Because fundamentally I know it’s madness: this is all madness, it’s fucking deranged. Why am I doing it? Why am I still doing it? God, what’s wrong with me?

There are so many things that I could do instead: should do, ought to do. I could call Jack. I could call Alana. I could turn you in (I could turn myself in). I could go out into the living room right now: “Look here,” I could say to you, “this Bonnie and Clyde bullshit isn’t going to work, you need to leave. I don’t want you here. I don’t want this. I don’t want you.”

In my head I imagine doing it: how I’d look you directly in the eye; the way I’d stand (assertive – feet firmly planted, shoulders back, head straight); how I’d strike my right fist against my left palm to punctuate the most important points. You’d listen attentively with that impenetrably blank expression on your face. You wouldn’t interrupt while I was speaking, and when I was finished you wouldn’t try and talk me out of it. “Most certainly Will,” you’d say, “whatever you wish.” You’d put on your coat, then walk out the door and down the stairs; and you’d look incredibly elegant and imposing while you were doing it. I’d gaze at you as you left, watch you as you walked away, but you wouldn’t look back. The only trace you were ever here at all would be one of my shirts dusted in a faint trace of your cologne; and I would never wear it again, never wash it, just push it to the back of my closet and tell myself I never liked that shirt anyway.

I’d move back to the country like I originally planned, get some dogs, do some fishing. Jack would call every so often and we’d bicker at crime scenes while Sanderson and his team stared at me in dislike with their mouths open and mutter behind my back about how weird and unstable I am - how it’s impossible to like or relate to me. Price and Zeller would say how pale and thin and miserable I looked, and that my hair’s got too long and needs a cut, and Alana would worry about me. When I was in town I’d visit Mr Haversham to fix his taps and reminisce about you: “Remember when you met my uncle that one time?” I’d say, “Remember how distinguished and charming you thought he was? Remember how he asked you about me; he came back because I needed him didn’t he? Remember how he wanted you to tell him how I’d been?” I’d get knocked down by cabs in the rain, and people would stand over me and ask “Are you okay kid, is there anyone we can call for you?” and there never, ever would be. Matthew Brown would come back for me with his grinning little knife, and I’d either fight him off or not, but no one would step out of the shadows this time to fight with me. I’d spend my evenings either drunk or numb or miserable, and my days reckless and out of control; and I’d be doing it all to try and fill the enormous, gaping hole in my life where you should have been. It’s a hole that I’d regularly tumble into, and pace around in, and smash my head against the side of, and then when I climbed out I’d virtuously tell myself that I’d done the right thing, and that the further away I am from you the better, and good riddance you bastard…and I wouldn’t mean a fucking word of it.

Because I know that it’s no good, not really. My conscience, my rational brain, is attempting to persuade me into believing something that my mind, heart, body and soul all know is a hopeless, helpless lie. The way I feel and think about you isn’t going to expire. It’s not going to die. It’s not going to go away. I can club it and pound it and kick it all I want, it just limps off and lays dormant, recuperating and convalescing, then comes back twice as vital as before and wrecks me.

*****

Later I pull myself together, or at least pretend to (though I’m no longer certain whether I’m working harder to convince you or myself) and go into the living room, ostensibly offering to make you a coffee as if nothing’s happened. You’re watching me in a vaguely calculating way, and I know you’ve added several more variables to your ‘what is Will going to do now’ equation (doubtless with suitable moderators, confounders and mediators just for the hell of it…you smug shit). The sheer force of your presence is scorching me, making me feel as exposed and helpless as an exhibit in a glass case.
Oh God, this day is turning out to be really fucking long; how can it possibly only be mid-afternoon? I decide I need to devise a way of avoiding you that won’t look really obvious, and after rejecting several possibilities as too lame (going to the store), too complicated (pretending I need to see Jack), or too exhausting (visiting Mr Haversham), elect for sitting in front of my laptop and feigning immersion with work. Ultimately this turns out to combine all the worst qualities of the other options, firstly because I don’t actually have any work (I end up playing online Minesweeper and have to keep minimizing the screen every time you walk past), but also because I manage to spill coffee on the laptop, at which point the temperamental bastard neurotically begins to hibernate and won’t turn on again. Shit, have I actually killed it? I try switching it off and on with the main power button and it promptly boots up and displays a truly incomprehensible list of options and belligerent requests for command prompts, and the only thing I can think of typing is ‘I’m_Not_Goddammed_Bill_Gates_You_Know’ followed by ‘You_Ungrateful_Shit.’ God, this is actually extremely bad: I’m going to need reliable internet access, and while I like to think I have several varied and interesting skills, resuscitating erratically self-centred shitty laptops isn’t really one of them. I’ll have to take it into the office and ask one of the IT guys to take a look. Actually, maybe this could be convenient – a genuine reason to leave the apartment.

“Look, I need to go out,” I say, “I’ve damaged my laptop, I’ll have to drop it at the office.” As usual you’re basking in your chair, eyes closed and hands folded neatly across your chest. I’m starting to realize that you’re harnessing all the practice you must have come to rely on in prison: drawing from your vast reserves of internal space to entertain yourself.

“It’s important,” I say, even though you haven’t indicated otherwise. “We need the internet.”

“Surely they will have left by now?” you say without opening your eyes. And you’re right (of course you are); it’s already gone 17.30.

“Shit.” I experience the highly familiar sensation of being at the end of my rope, and have to strongly resist the urge to boot the laptop across the room.

“Don’t concern yourself,” you say languidly, “you can take it tomorrow and consult your phone in the meantime.”

Again, I know you’re right, but feel like making a big deal out of it just to be awkward. “It’s still annoying,” I say petulantly.

“Agreed, but that is not the same as disastrous.” After a pause, you add: “Would you like me to take a look at it?”

“What? You’re telling me you know about computers?”

“A little, not an extensive amount.”

“How?”

“I am somewhat competent in a substantial number of areas,” you reply. “One never knows when various scraps of knowledge will come in useful.”

“You mean like being in hiding and needing to repair a laptop with a caffeine aversion,” I ask sarcastically.

“Indeed,” you say, “exactly like that. For example, I know that you will need to remove its battery and dry it out before attempting anything further.”

This leads to the problem of how to dry it out: you refuse to let me put it in the stove (“that is a truly
cretinous suggestion Will”) and naturally I don’t own a hairdryer, so in the end you just drain off the excess coffee, wipe it down, and prop it by the halogen heater. I fantasize that it’s staring at me with a triumphantly smug look on its evil little silver face.

“I’m going to lie down,” I say at last, “I’ve got a headache.” This isn’t even a lie, I really have: my skull’s being nudged by the familiar cramping pain and a series of bright dots are starting to swarm in my peripheral vision. Migraine, most likely. Shit.

“Do you need anything?” you ask.

I’m going to say that I probably need my head removing, but decide not to (no point encouraging you) and instead go and crouch in the bathroom, resting my head against the cooling tiles of the porcelain and trying very hard not to throw up again. I dry swallow a couple of painkillers, then slump against the wall and regard myself critically in the mirror. I look a bit feverish: my eyes are glittering and there’s an unhealthy flush mottling my cheekbones. The shadows under my eyes are so pronounced they look like bruises. God, I need to go to bed.

I sleep fitfully for a few hours, but it’s not really any good: I keep jolting awake from nightmares, and while I’m too hot with the covers on it’s too cold with them off. It’s very quiet in the room, and the air feels clammy and confining. Why am I having to go through this on my own? You’re not lying next to me, and in spite of everything I have an overwhelming, childish urge to simply see you and be comforted. I stagger into the living room like a small, bespectacled zombie and of course, there you are: propped up as usual in your chair. You’ve turned the tiny table lamp on, and your face looks even more unworldly than usual in the shadows: all hollows and sharp angles, slightly infernal.

“Will?” you say immediately, “what is the matter?” You sound completely coherent, and it lends further fuel to my private suspicions that you don’t actually sleep at all, just suspend yourself in the gloom with your eyes open like a giant bat.

“Can’t sleep.”

You sigh, but not in an inpatient way. “Come here,” you say.

Where? There’s absolutely no way I’m going to sit on your knee (Christ), but I shuffle over nonetheless and collapse in front of your chair in a defeated heap. You lift your coat from where it’s hanging over the back and drape it round my shoulders. It smells nice: like fresh air and cinnamon and cedar wood, and that undefinable scent that’s distinctly you. I’m vaguely aware of what an enormous display of submission this is – curled up at your feet like one of my own dogs – but I can’t really bring myself to care; or at any rate, not enough to do anything about it. You gently grip the top of my arms and manoeuvre me so I’m sitting squarely between your knees, then move your fingers underneath the fabric of the coat to massage my shoulders. I can’t stop glancing down at your hands: the shape and strength of them, and how pale my skin always looks next to yours.

“How tense you are,” you say.

“Oh yeah? I can’t think why.”

You politely ignore me, and continue kneading your thumbs into my trapezius muscles. It aches but is quite pleasurable at the same time, and I writhe a bit underneath your hands.

“Be still,” you say briskly.

I make a small noise of protest but do as you say before becoming horribly aware that – oh my God – I’m getting an erection aren’t I? Christ. I mentally telegraph threats, entreaties and bargaining offers
to my treacherous hard-on, which remains cheerfully oblivious and continues to take a completely uninvited interest in proceedings. I can feel my face growing warm with desperate embarrassment, thank God you can’t see. This means I can’t stand up anytime soon, although I can’t help feeling that you probably know anyway.

“This tension will hardly be helping with your headaches,” is all you say. What’s that supposed to mean? What do you mean by that? Musculoskeletal tension? Or sexual tension? Oh God, I bet you mean sexual tension don’t you. I bet you do. You conceited, self-satisfied…oh fucking shit, I’m so turned on.

You go quiet for a while, moving your hands in a comforting rhythm, spine–to scapula–to masseter muscle, before suddenly saying: “Jack Crawford. What did he mean before; when he expressed his wish to kill that man on your behalf?”

Oh God. That sovers me up immediately; I knew you’d picked up on it but wasn’t sure if you’d actually say anything.

“Will?” Temporarily, your hands go still. “What happened to you?”

I pull my legs right up so I can prop my chin on my knees, then after a few stammering false starts manage to supply the edited highlights of what went down (taking great care not to mention Alana’s role in any of it). You remain silent throughout, but your hand is gripping the armrest so tightly your knuckles have gone white. It’s a minor gesture by anyone else’s standards, but I can tell at once that you’re incredibly angry. You sigh heavily when I’ve finished and lean back in the chair.

“It is a very fortunate thing for him that he is already dead,” you say at last. You put your hands back on my shoulders, restlessly tapping your fingers up and down as if you’re playing the piano. “At the very least, this will require an additional degree of chastisement for Matthew Brown.”

“Why?”

“Because in prematurely disposing of this appalling individual, Mr Brown has deprived me of the opportunity to do it myself.” (I privately smirk a bit at that). “Let me see your thumb,” you say.

I proffer it up and you examine the joint, palpating along the phalanx bone. “Hmm, yes that has been reset very well – you did a good job. You are a resourceful boy aren’t you?” Gently you flex it from one side to another. “Movement and sensation all as normal I assume?”

“It’s fine.”

“Certainly it is very minor compared with what might have happened.”

I shudder involuntarily at the undeniable truth of this, then awkwardly swivel round so I can look at you. You’ve let go of my hand, and I have an irresistibly mad urge to seize hold of yours again.

“Did you know about him?” I say. “Before, I mean…when he seemed normal.”

“No.”

“Would you have done anything if you had?”

“I would not. It has never been my intention to enforce your social life.” I suppose it hasn’t, has it? No, I guess you wouldn’t have done anything. You’d have just planted seeds of ideas and whispered in my ear, then waited for me to do it myself.
“That said,” you add, “I may be enforcing it from now on.” You put your hands back on my shoulders and resume tapping your fingers. It’s an unusually fidgety gesture for you: you’re obviously still extremely pissed off. Matthew Brown, I think with satisfaction, is going to be at the receiving end of the most momentously gruesome ass-kicking in human history.

“This should not have been allowed to happen,” you say tersely. “How was he able to access you in the first place?”

Oh fuck, trust you to pick up on the fact that I’d deliberately left the details vague. “I met him…in a bar,” I say cautiously (which, technically at least, is actually true).

“You did not.”

“What?”

“I know you did not, because I know you; and I therefore know that there are no conceivable circumstances under which you would allow a strange man to ‘pick you up’ in a bar.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you don’t know me as well as you like to think.”

You don’t even bother responding to this. “You know you will end up telling me eventually. You always do.”

“I have told you.”

You tap away for a few more seconds. “Someone brought the two of you together didn’t they?” you say thoughtfully. “Someone you trust, and think well of – hence your compliance, in the first instance, of tolerating his attempts to impose on you. And you are reluctant to disclose exactly who made this most unfortunate introduction, because you are concerned about the type of reprimand which could be meted out as a result.”

Oh for fuck’s sake.

“He was a doctor,” you continue. “Affluent from the sounds of it, and with certain feeble pretentions to culture and good taste…Well, naturally it must have been Alana Bloom.”

“It wasn’t.”

“It obviously was.”

“It wasn’t, and what difference does it make anyway? It wasn’t their fault. They were just as shocked and upset by what happened as I was. Probably even more so.”

“Somehow I doubt that. Alana Bloom needs to urgently revaluate her social circle.”

“It wasn’t Alana!” I practically shriek.

You sigh slightly at this and briefly place your hand on the back of my neck. “Calm yourself,” you say gently. “I gave you my word, and while I will not deny that this knowledge would have influenced my readiness to give it, our agreement still stands.”

“It wasn’t Alana,” I say mutinously. You just make a non-committal noise and resume massaging my back. I close my eyes and tip my head towards you, and you briefly move your right hand from my shoulder so you can smooth my hair out of my eyes. “It wasn’t her fault, there was no way she could have known,” I add in a small voice.
“See? I knew you would tell me eventually. You did well to hold your counsel for a full two minutes.”

“You promised!”

“Indeed I did.” You sigh again. “As you have no doubt perceived I am extremely unhappy about this Will, but it does not detract from the more important issue – which is that you are safe now.”

“Am I?” I say gloomily.

“Of course you are. I will not allow anything of that nature to happen to you ever again.”

Neither of us says anything for a while. On the floor below, Mr Haversham has his radio on and the faint strains of a violin come lilting through the floorboards.

“Talk to me,” I say eventually. “Tell me about when you were away.”

You obligingly start to recount a story about your time in Juárez (something about corruption in the Policía Federal, a retired insurance broker, and a regional recipe for chilaquiles), but your voice gradually begins to grow rumbling and muffled, as if you’re speaking underwater, and I realize I’m starting to drift off again.

“Look at you,” you say, amused but fond. “Like a sleepy little child.”

“I’m wide awake,” I mutter. It comes out more like ‘M wi’ ‘wake.

“Yes, of course you are. My mistake.”

I can feel my head sliding sideways onto your knee, but can’t quite stop it on time. You don’t mind though; youstroke my hair, and then run your fingers over my cheekbone.

“I’m really glad you came back,” I say quietly; so quietly you have to lean in to hear me. I wasn’t planning to just blurt it out like that, but I guess you know anyway.

You tug on my hair, very gently, then adjust your coat so it’s wrapped more tightly around my shoulders. “Yes Will Graham,” you say softly after a pause, “as am I.”

And maybe it’s because I’m tired and my head hurts; or because the last few days have drained me beyond every reasonable limit and my defences are down; or maybe it’s because I’m just exhausted from the helpless, pointless, aimless agony of fucking denying it. But all I can think, with a glaring and blistering sincerity – even though I know I shouldn’t, oh God I know – is: please don’t let go of me again. Please. Never let go.

Chapter End Notes

Following DH’s sterling Phantom of the Opera example, he and one of my more deranged friends have started shortlisting Will’s theme song for the next few chapters: so far including ‘Always’ (partly because of the sappy lyrics, but mostly on the grounds that they think “Jon Bon Jovi was pretty fit back in the day”), anything by The Fine Young Cannibals (“obviously”), ‘I Need a Hero’ (“ditto”), ‘Sexual Healing’ (“yeah baby”), and ‘I’m So Excited’ (“because Will’s about to lose control and he thinks he likes it”). Sheesh.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It turns out that the headaches and vomiting weren’t completely random, because I wake up in the morning feeling like seven shades of shit and am forced to self-diagnose a reoccurrence of the freak virus. I’m also lying in bed, which leads to the inevitable – mortifying – realization that I fell asleep (on the fucking floor) and you had to carry me in. Christ.

You frown over me and lay your palm on my forehead. “I don’t suppose you have a thermometer do you?” You don’t actually wait for a reply before adding: “No, of course you don’t.”

“It’s the freak,” I say hazily. “It’s come back for another go, the crafty little bastard.”

You give me a slightly incredulous look. “I beg your pardon?”

I give you a potted history of the freak, and Our Life Together So Far, and your reaction is virtually identical to Dr O’Connor in that you are obviously trying, and failing, not to laugh. Bedside manner my ass.

“Did you actually say the Hippocratic Oath?” I ask sarcastically, “Or did you just mouth the words while everyone else recited it?”

“What do you think?” you say, amused (because…well, yeah). “Regardless, I am not particularly surprised by this. Stress and fatigue are bound to have compromised your immune response. Not to mention subsisting in this hovel, in the manner of someone determined to renounce all the comforts of modern civilization.”

I cough and swat your hand away. “Enough of the ‘hovel.’”

“It is natural all this has left you susceptible to a virus.”

“To a freak virus.”

“A freak virus, indeed,” you say, humoring me. “I shall have to go and acquire a few supplies.”

I grab your wrist. “No, don’t. You can’t go out, not yet.”

“Why not?”

“You need to disguise yourself. Properly, like you did before. There could be people watching this place. Freddie Lounds, Matthew Brown…” the rest of this increasingly plaintive speech trails off into a feeble wailing noise and I just sit there dolefully, suddenly feeling tremendously sorry for myself.

I expect you to contradict me (or laugh at all the wailing), but you don’t. “All right Will,” you say, lightly touching my cheek with your fingertips, “don’t agitate yourself. I will go and speak with that very obliging neighbor of yours instead.” I watch you as you shrug on your ‘Uncle Jack’ persona, then glide out the room and disappear for about 15 minutes. When you return you're holding a brown paper bag. “Mr Haversham was greatly saddened to hear that you are indisposed, ‘William’,” you say. “And was extremely eager to assist in any way he could.”

I squint at the bag. “I hope you offered to pay him for all that.”
“Of course I did. But he would not accept it – he feels that it is the least he can do after all the little tasks you have been performing for him so tirelessly.”

“Okay then, great. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” you say.

I look at you warily. “You’re not going to start lecturing me on taking better care of myself, are you?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Doctors always say that to me.”

“I am not intending to say it myself. Not because I don’t think it’s true, but because I know you will pay absolutely no attention.” You help me to sit up then proffer a glass of water and some small white capsules.

“What’s this?”

“Ibuprofen, you need something anti-inflammatory. The other is paracetamol. It should be sufficient, I can’t imagine antivirals will be required.” I mumble something. “I beg your pardon?” you say.

“I said I need anti-freak.”

“You are completely and cheerfully deranged,” you reply, patting me on the head like I’m a puppy. “I am going to prepare some food for you and your freak – which you will eat, even if I have to force-feed you both myself – and then you will try to get some sleep.” You smirk a bit. “Doctor’s orders.”

I mutter “actually, you were struck off” under my breath as you’re leaving, but it’s a bit half-hearted because the sensation of being looked after is actually extremely pleasant.

*****

The delivery guys from the Goodwill roll up later in the day with the couch. I’m half-asleep when they ring the buzzer, and by the time I’ve worked out what’s going on it’s too late and you’re already sorting it out yourself. This time you have transformed into a gracious, extravagantly grateful persona who twitters at them in broken English with a rippling French accent (Uncle Jacques?). There’s no real need for you to do it, you’re probably just showing off, and I try to come up with an uncomplimentary comparison to give you shit about later. The best I can come up with is the candlestick in Beauty and the Beast, but belatedly realize I’m going to have to keep the reference to myself because there’s absolutely no way you’ll get the reference.

“Guillaume!” you shout from the other room. “Où voulez-vous cela? Près de la fenêtre?”

“Ouais, d’accord!” I call back in my awful high school French, “La fenêtre.” As an afterthought I add “Merci, grand-papa.”

The delivery guys leave, and you appear in the bedroom doorway soon afterwards and raise your eyebrows at me. “Grand-papa?” you say.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I reply innocently. “You’re obviously projecting.”

You smile and sigh. “Another one of your extraordinary triumphs of wit,” you say. “I take it this
means you are starting to feel better?”

“Thanks, a bit.”

“That’s good.” You sit on the edge of the bed and put your hand on my forehead again. “You’re still rather feverish,” you say. “Mr Haversham lent me a thermometer, will you allow me to take your temperature?”

“Ugh, no. No way. I have no idea where that thermometer’s been.”

“I would sterilize it, of course.”

“I don’t care. What if he’s used it for anal thermometry?”

“The correct term is rectal thermometry, and seeing as he is neither a dog, cat, infant, or unconscious, I would say that is highly unlikely.”

“Put it in your own mouth then,” I say sulkily.

“You are a truly terrible patient,” you reply, although I can tell you’re trying not to laugh.

“To be fair, you’ve historically proven yourself to be a truly terrible doctor.”

“Touché,” you say with a smile. You ruffle my hair, and I have to resist the urge to pull away (not because I don’t like it, but because it’s so oily it should have distressed sea birds in the middle and disapproving Greenpeace campaigners camped round the edges).

You give me a final eye-roll, then stand up and flex your shoulders. “I am going to make you something else to eat,” you say, “you are far too thin. By the way, did you remember to contact Jack Crawford?”

“Jack? No, why?”

“If you recall, you told him you would collect your gun from him this morning.”

“Oh shit. I did, didn’t I? I totally forgot. Can you pass me my cell?”

You locate it in my jacket pocket, but pause before handing it over. “Would you like me to do it for you?” you say craftily.

“No. No I would not.”

“I could you know. I think I could pass as you extremely convincingly.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“Or what?”

I try, and fail, to muster a convincing threat. “I’ll transmit the freak to you.”

“Now how will you contrive to do that?” you say, and you sound like you’re almost fucking purring. I have a horrible feeling you’re going to say something suggestive about bodily fluids and can feel myself starting to go red, but in the end you just smirk at me again and pass the phone over. I laboriously type out a message to Jack, apologising for standing him up and asking him to contact me as soon as possible to rearrange. I’m nibbling on my bottom lip as I do it, and suddenly I don’t feel like laughing anymore. The necessity of being armed has forced the real world to intrude, chiming in
the miserable reminder that both of us – for all intents and purposes – are playing this game on borrowed time.

****

The freak begins to retreat again within 24 hours (no doubt merely biding its time…although it’s possible that it’s simply scared of you as well), and I take immediate advantage of its departure to head over and collect the gun from Jack.

“Will!” he says when he sees me, “Glad you could make it.” He pauses, then peers closer. “You look like complete shit.”

“That’s good, thanks.”

“Hope you’re feeling better now?”

“Yeah, the worst it passed off pretty quickly,” I say. Screw you freak.

“Can’t say I’m surprised you got sick,” replies Jack mournfully, “the stress of all this must be really getting to you.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Oh my God, he has no idea. “I suppose there’s no news?”

“No, nothing. Although that might not necessarily be a bad thing; could mean he’s lying low. No news is good news, as they say.”

“They also say that ignorance is bliss. Personally I’d rather know.”

“Fair point,” replies Jack good-naturedly.

“It’s not over yet,” I mutter, half to myself.

“I know Will. I know it’s not.”

I gesture at the gun. “Thanks for this. I hope I won’t need it, but…”

“…But you’d rather not take the chance. And I agree.” He sighs heavily and then puts his hand on my shoulder, regarding me at arm’s length. “Look after yourself Will,” he says. “You know where I am if you need anything else.”

“Thanks,” I say, but my voice has gone very quiet because I’ve suddenly noticed your Wanted poster on the wall behind his head and have been hit with a crushing sense of being the most appalling traitor. I lower my eyes and stare at the floor. Poor Jack, luminous with all his ‘Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity.’ He should have just given me 30 pieces of silver.

****

I pass Sanderson on the way out, and he discreetly sticks out his foot to try and trip me over. I swerve round it easily, then turn back and shoot him an incredulous look (the gun is practically burning a hole in my pocket and it feels like a great pity that I can’t literally cap the stupid bastard).

“What, seriously?” I say, "are we 12 years old or something?"

“I don’t know what you mean,” he replies stiffly. I hesitate for a second. Is he bullshitting me? Or was it genuinely an accident and I’m just being paranoid? Not for the first time (and, no doubt, not for the last), I am briefly overwhelmed by my own crushing sense of being different – not like other people, not anywhere near. How do you manage to wear it so lightly? You make it look good. No
one would ever behave like this with you.

Sanderson gives me a look of intense dislike before I have time to make up my mind one way or the other. “Jeez Graham, you’re a prickly little shit aren’t you?” he says (which makes me sound like a malevolent hedgehog). “You always assume people are out to get you.”

“To be fair,” I say, “on the basis of prior experience they usually are” (which possibly qualifies as Biggest Understatement of the Year, followed only by ‘Houston, we have a problem’ and ‘nothing at this dinner party is vegetarian’).

He gives a snort. “Yeah, I guess maybe I can’t really blame you. Both your crazy admirers are still running around aren’t they? I mean two? Seriously man, one would be bad enough but you seem to be working your way through the FBI’s top five Most Wanted, not to mention that dead guy from the other month. How the hell do you manage it?”

“I have no idea,” I say gloomily.

“I’d be shitting myself if I were you.”

“Aw that’s bullshit, man. Don’t give me that crap. You can’t tell me you’re not scared right now.”

“I’m used to it,” I say lightly, “you’d be surprised.” Fleetingly, I remember Jack’s words all those years ago: ‘Will Graham deals with huge amounts of fear. It comes with his imagination.’

“Damnit Graham, you’re a real little weirdo aren’t you?” says Sanderson with disgust, abandoning all pretences at civility.

“Unashamedly so,” I reply. I start to walk off, but can’t resist adding over my shoulder: “And for the record – less of the ‘little’.” I consider adding a click and wink, but doubt my ability to summon the necessary swagger to carry it off – he’d probably just think I was sincerely flirting with him (Christ). Nevertheless he still looks like he’s about to spontaneously combust – mission accomplished – so I dive down the stairs and head outside. Out of habit I scan the street up and down, but there’s nothing out of the ordinary (except for an extravagantly drunk man stood in front of a large cargo truck, gesticulating wildly and accusing it of being Optimus Prime). God I could do with a drink, I really could. I can’t really contemplate doing it with you though: it’s actually pretty impossible to imagine something as mundane as simply sitting down and getting hammered together. Perhaps I should pick up some packs of beer just in case? Actually, no, you probably won’t drink beer will you; or at least not the cheap crap I typically pour down my neck. Wine then. Oh shit, no, not wine, you’ll be even fussier about that than you are about beer. I sigh at the seemingly impossible task of finding something that you’d actually deign to put anyway near your pretentious mouth. Oh fuck it, I’d rather just stay sober.

Instead, on a whim, I head over to a costume store to try and find something you can use to disguise yourself. It’s not actually as easy as I expected it to be, because it has to be subtle to avoid drawing unwanted attention, and this place clearly doesn’t cater for subtle. How did you manage it before? With effort I dredge out something from my memory about CIA agents being issued with a disguise kit, nicknamed ‘the Dagger’ – so small it can reputedly fit inside a paper bag. I look it up on my phone: the contents are classified. Fine, whatever. Fuck you CIA. In the end I buy a theatrical make-up kit (which claims on the lid to be ‘professional quality’ though I have serious doubts), a pair of glasses with clear lenses and spray-in hair dye (I really want to get a wig, but know that you’re far too vain to agree to it). Likewise I suppose there’s no way you’ll agree to wear any thrift store clothes, but I guess you must already have something in your luggage that you’ve been using. At
heart I know this is probably more for my benefit than yours, because there’s no way I can feel as relaxed about you sauntering round in the open as you appear to be. Anyway, it’s one thing to do it at border patrol, quite another in a city where you could literally walk right into Jack (Christ). The store clerks are both deeply irritating and make a big performance out of stacking my purchases in a pointlessly symmetrical pile inside the bag. Sure, okay, but how am I supposed to – oh, like I fucking care. Carry on assholes.

You’re basking on the sofa when I get back, and you seem quite pleased – albeit in a slightly patronizing way – that I’ve gone to the trouble of getting you disguise materials. “Very good Will,” you say, “extremely industrious. I shall go out in a day or two.” My face falls a bit at that (I can’t shake the feeling that if you leave you won’t come back again), although I can hardly say anything when I bought it for you in the first place, so go and check my emails instead. At least you got my laptop working again. It doesn’t seem any the worse for wear after being submerged in coffee: if anything, it’s slightly better-behaved than before.

I automatically have a quick sift for Matthew Brown updates, even though I don’t expect to find anything. And of course there’s nothing: not on the news, not on TattleCrime, not anywhere. God it’s frustrating, how has he managed to vanish so entirely? I don’t even bother telling you (you won’t care) and instead try to think of a way to pass the evening. What though? You don’t seem particularly disposed to talk and I can’t concentrate on the television. On an impulse I revert to my original Plan A and ferret out the remains of the bottle of Scotch from the kitchen cupboard (the sight of it immediately reminds me of the night I thought I’d killed Michael…God). The door is jammed and it takes a few almighty yanks to get it fully open. Fuck this apartment. One of us (i.e. me) is going to have to sort it out at some point.

I take the bottle over to the sofa, clutching it protectively as if it’s the Elixir of Life as opposed to shitty bin-end whiskey, and pour myself an enormously large glass. Entirely as expected, you take one look at the label and politely refuse (you don’t actually wince, but it’s kind of a close thing). I still can’t completely switch off, but things actually feel quite peaceful and companionate for once: just sat amicably side by side, me sipping my drink, you sketching, the only noise the faint scratching of your pencil and the occasional car sweeping past outside. I keep hoping you might touch me in some way, but you don’t. It’s so quiet, so still.

“I wish you’d come back sooner,” I say eventually. I probably wouldn’t be so upfront with you if I wasn’t becoming slightly (somewhat…very) drunk, but the alcohol is softening everything, blunting and blurring some of my sharper edges. And besides: it’s true. I do wish that.

“Yes, I’m aware,” you reply. “And I would have done so, had I realized the kind of difficulties you were in. But I’m afraid that even I am not completely omnipotent.”

“You still haven’t really explained why.”

“Indeed; I have not.”

I suppose I should be vaguely grateful to Matthew Brown (the little shit): that fake message was the catalyst after all. But you could have come back for me long before that. Why didn’t you? I take another swig of my Scotch, turning the pieces over in my head. Why are you being so evasive; what clues are you feeding me? And suddenly I give a bitter half-laugh because – obviously – it’s clicked into place. “You know, I think I can guess,” I say. “Or at least some of it.”

“Yes?” you say politely.

“It wasn’t just practical was it, these ‘arrangements’ you keep hinting at – which is getting really
annoying by the way. It was something else as well...you wanted me to miss you. Didn’t you? You wanted me to see how desperate and aimless and dull everything was without you, so that when you did come back I’d be more likely to go along with whatever you wanted me to do. You were trying to make me feel out of control.” (I don’t add: and you succeeded beyond your wildest fucking dreams). “You set yourself up as both the problem and the solution. It was part of your design”. I wave my hand around a bit to emphasize my point. Even as I’m speaking I’m aware that I already knew that this was the case, but couldn’t quite bring myself to push it to its logical conclusion. How many moments like this have I had with you? Fragments and clues that are meaningless on their own, but combined together can spell out the truth in painfully bright lights. Randomly I remember watching you in the back of the ambulance that time (‘oh – surgical skills’) and you staring right back (‘so you’ve made that connection have you? One step closer to working it out...interesting’).

You’re just looking at me. “I’m right aren’t I?” I say.

“You are not entirely wrong.”

“God, I knew it. You are such a manipulative...shit.”

“’Manipulative’ is a tediously emotive word. Is it manipulation, or simply tactical strategy? A means to justify a particular set of ends.”

“So you’re admitting it then?”

Instead of answering you just regard me thoughtfully, your eyes slightly narrowed. “You know Will,” you say at last, “you really are endlessly fascinating. You are to be congratulated. I’ve spent a lifetime perfecting my disguise, yet until I met you I was unaware that, in many respects, I have actually been longing to find someone whom it was not always possible for me to deceive.”

“Oh come on!” I say bitterly. “You love deceiving me. You fucking love it.”

“But I love your moments of clarity even more.”

I knock back another mouthful of Scotch (by now I have abandoned the glass and am just necking it straight from the bottle) and regard you sceptically. “How? How does that work?”

“Because,” you reply smoothly, “I have an odd affinity with you.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

You pause. You’re still staring at me. “Are you familiar with the expression ‘two sides of the same coin’?” you say eventually.

“Of course.”

“Well then. We are very different, and yet we are the same. Discrete and dissimilar, yet closely related expressions of a single idea – all at the same time. It is the perfect paradox.”

“Perfect paradox,” I repeat slowly. Oh God, I’m so drunk. How am I so drunk?

“Consider my situation before Jack Crawford was obliging enough to bring me to you,” you continue. “Someone with the most supreme vices; made for exceptions, not for rules; and a human realization of the most extreme ideals and fulfilments. Yet I am surrounded by dull, blind, mechanical people who are completely unable to comprehend me. No one has the imagination to appreciate it. And then one day, this small, shabby boy comes in…”
“I’m not small,” I say (I don’t actually bother disputing the ‘shabby’ part).

“You were back then. You were shrinking inside yourself.”

“Yeah?”

“Indeed. This diminutive, tattered little person, snapping and snarling and not even able to look anyone in the eye – yet as soon as I saw him, I thought ‘if I turned my own coin, then he would be on the other side’.”

I am a bit overwhelmed by this, but I understand exactly what you’re saying – because I felt the same. In my case, it was like I’d been playing chess against myself my whole life, jaded and lonely, until one day you came in and took your place at the other side of the board.

“So you see Will,” you add calmly, “that we are the same, you and I. We are the ‘soul mates’ in Plato’s Symposium; a zero sum game. Each of us is fascinated by our opposing qualities, but also by the mirror image. And neither of us can completely distinguish and appreciate our own substance until we observe it reflected back in the other.”

Can’t we? I stare at you, silent and thoughtful. My head is spinning slightly, as if I’m dreaming and spiralling within my own body, and this time it’s not just from the alcohol. It’s like everything’s in slow motion, and there’s nothing except me, and you, and the culmination of all this tension, and yearning, and beguilement, and madness. I don’t actually know how to respond, how to express what I’m feeling, everything that’s within me: it seems that no matter what I say it won’t be enough. Except that I’m suddenly glad about the last few months. Glad for every moment of fear and anguish and loneliness. Thankful for every bad dream, every second of self-doubt; each hangover and headache; all the solitary mornings and humorless, lifeless evenings; all the scars, stress, and shadows; all the pining and aching and longing. Happy for the times Sanderson laughed at me, or Jack shouted and sighed, or all the people who’ve tried to break me and drag me down…grateful for all of it, for every fucking miserable awful second, because it all brought me back here to you.

You’re looking at me, you’re waiting…I need to say something. Oh God, why can’t I say something? I don’t know what to say, that’s why. I’m not like you, I never have been: I can’t deconstruct things the way you can. So in the end I don’t say anything at all, I don’t even try. I just lean forward and kiss you instead.

Chapter End Notes

1) “We are the ‘soul mates’ in Plato’s Symposium.” Well apparently they actually are, because Wikipedia includes ‘Hannibal’ in its list of film/TV with a soulmates theme, goddammit. Ship Hannigram. Ship it FOR PLATO.

2) The chess analogy is not mine – I’ve just read a S2 era interview with HD and stole it from him. Although he also said that Hannibal and Will have a deep “platonic love” (yeah RIGHT *guffaws*) so who cares what he thinks anyway. Changed your tune by S3 anyway didn’t you, you little thespian bullshitter (*cough* cliff outtakes *cough*).

3) “Guillaume! Où voulez-vous cela? Près de la fenêtre?” = “William! Where do you want this? By the window?” Although I think he really meant to say “voulez-vous coucher avec moi, ce soir” and got embarrassed when he messed it up. Incidentally my French is utter crap (although probably still marginally better than Mr Google’s
Translators of Lies) so please feel free to correct any mistakes :-)  
(ETA Huge thanks to Randomfangirl14 for doing just that :-x)
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

This chapter is l-o-n-g. It was actually going to be two separate ones (you’ll be able to spot where the original break was going to be), but then I thought of you all my lovelies, and I said to myself: “don’t end it there…you twat.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Even you, with your paranormal levels of composure, must be slightly taken aback when I hurl myself at you across the sofa (not unlike – it must be said – that face-hugging beast from the Alien movies), but of course you still manage not to show it. In contrast I’m completely overwrought, panicking really. I don’t entirely know what I’m doing: it’s like I’ve just initiated it and then discovered halfway through that I’m utterly out of my depth. Fortunately you seem to realize this as well, because you immediately take control by cradling the back of my head and gently stroking my jaw, teasingly brushing your lips against mine before slowly sliding your tongue into my mouth. I gasp slightly and tilt my head back, finally summoning the courage to let my tongue move against yours and you make a humming noise, soft and approving, and move your hand beneath my collar to caress my neck. Most people would see stars, but I’m so drunk I see 4th of July fireworks. My heart’s hammering so fast it’s becoming difficult to breathe.

You’re rubbing my back now, very tenderly and rhythmically, the way someone might soothe a frightened animal: you’re trying to calm me down, you can tell I’m freaking out. You kiss your way down the side of my face murmuring something, low and affectionate, in a language I don’t recognize. Have you forgotten how to speak English again? Perhaps you’re not quite as calm as you seem. At least you must be somewhat invested in this, because I know I taste like horrible cheap whiskey and I don’t know how you could stand it otherwise.

Oh God, we left it too long didn’t we? I left it too long (but then…so did you). We should have done this when we first met, screwed the obsession out of our systems in the initial few weeks and then chilled out and moved on. You could have fucked me a few times on the couch in your office, and I could have gone down on you in the men’s room at the FBI. People would probably have guessed and we wouldn’t have cared (actually that’s not true. I would have cared – enormously – but right now I’m unwilling to undermine this alternative reality I’m laying out). God, it would have been so different. We could have finished all the arguments with make-up sex rather than trying to kill each other, and you would have eventually got busted (or not) and I would have visited you every so often in prison to bicker with you over the visitor phone, bitching and sparring yet gazing into each other’s eyes the whole time. You would have smiled at me, I would have pressed my palm against the glass, and Freddie Lounds would have taken covert photos of me leaving and run snide articles about me being a prison widow. And now we’re here instead, and we’ve made it mean too much. Too many things have happened, the pressure is too high. Too much significance and expectation, too much you and too much me…just too much. Oh God, I might hyperventilate (please don’t). The intensity with which I want this (and want to take a step back from it, yet can’t) has taken me completely by surprise and it’s fucking terrifying. I’m far too drunk to get an erection, but I don’t even care. Right now, in this moment, I know I’d let you do whatever you want, to me, to my body; I’d do whatever you asked for, I couldn’t stop you, couldn’t bring myself to say ‘no’. I’d let you cut me and bite me, tie me up, hit me; I’d get on my knees for you and suck you off, I’d let you choke me and pull my hair and come on my face, I’d let you bend me in half and fuck me over the sofa...oh
shit, I didn't say any of that out loud did I? Did I say that out loud?

You hold me for a bit longer, running your hand up and down my spine and rubbing your cheek against my hair (I’ve just gone very still with my head tucked against your chest; it’s like someone’s taken my batteries out), when eventually you pull away. “Not like this Will,” you say. “Not tonight. I want you fully aware, and you’re not.”

I jerk my head up at that, and only narrowly avoid knocking myself out on your forehead (because in a collision of your head and mine, there’s no real question as to which would come off worst). Then I just sit blinking at you, slightly uncomprehending. What, are you kidding me? What the fucking hell is this? No way. No way is your self-control that strong…is it? (Yes). Despite my panic, which is now borderline delirious, it suddenly feels very important that we don’t stop (mainly because, if we do, I don’t know if I’ll ever summon enough courage to try it again). In my frenzied state I can only see a binary choice: 1) now or 2) never.

“I am aware,” I say hazily, “I’ll prove it to you.” I try to think of a way to demonstrate this – how spectacularly aware I am – but nothing immediately comes to mind, and I end up getting lost in thought to the extent that time passes and the seasons change, and I’m still sitting there frowning with my mouth open looking like I’m just on the verge of saying something incredibly profound.

Eventually you clear your throat politely. “No, Will, you are far too drunk. You don’t know what you’re doing. I am not going to take you like this, when there is every chance you will wake up tomorrow and regret it. Or – more to the point – when you can shift responsibility to the alcohol rather than owning the decision yourself. Surrendering when you are completely inebriated is not surrendering unequivocally, and I will not be happy with anything less.”

“Ugh, stop it, that sounds really creepy.” I try to scowl at you, but the end result is negligible because I’m no longer completely sure what my face is doing. Surrender? Oh, yes, I get it…I do get it don’t I? “You want to hear me say it,” I announce triumphantly (I’ve temporarily forgotten that this was my dream version of you, and that the actual version doesn’t know what the fuck I’m talking about).

You give me a quick look. "If by that you mean I want you to give yourself to me without reservation – and not because you’ve artificially reduced your inhibitions with half a bottle of execrable whiskey – then yes. Yes, I want to hear you say it.”

“This isn’t just you being ethical about my consent is it?” I smirk a bit at the idea of you being ethical about anything. In fact it suddenly strikes me as the most hilarious thing ever and I start giggling in a rather demented way. “It’s about submission isn’t it?” I say at last. I get unsteadily to my feet and you stand up with me, maintaining eye contact. I peer at you, as if by looking closer I can get behind the exterior and glimpse what’s underneath. “It’s about submission, and how genuine you think it is. You want to take all my defences away. It’s about me completely submitting myself to you.”

“Sentiently submitting. Yes – partly.”

“No, wholly. You can’t deceive me remember? You said so yourself.” I try to give you a shove against your chest, but stumble instead and nearly hit the decks. You dart out a hand and catch me on the way down.

“Oh God,” I say, “you’re such a cock tease.” And then I realize that I’ve just said the word ‘cock’ in front of you and start giggling again even worse than before.

“Will,” you say gently, “go to bed.”

“Are you going to come with me? Platonically, obviously.”
“Yes, if you wish.” You tap me lightly on the end of my nose – my eyes start crossing as I try to track your finger. “Although if you vomit on me at any point you will be extremely sorry.”

“I wouldn't really. Not as sorry as you would be.”

“Indeed, that is probably true,” you say, “so please don't. You should drink some water.”

“Ugh, stop being so doctorly. It doesn't suit you.”

“Stop being so adolescent,” you reply. “Imagine if your students could see you now.”

“I don't think they'd care to be honest. They wouldn't notice how drunk I am because they'd be far more bothered about the fact I've been trying to seduce the Chesapeake Ripper.” As soon as I've said this my face falls, because – oh my God. (Also: I've just called the Chesapeake Ripper a cock tease…Fuck my life).

“Trying yet failing,” you say sanctimoniously, “although it was an admirable attempt.”

The mention of students has reminded me of something else now, but I’m so drunk I can’t remember what it is. Something to do with Freddie Lounds and a crime scene…oh yeah that’s it. “One other thing you need to know,” I add with extreme seriousness. “And it’s very important. You need to know that I am not your wife.”

You wait a few seconds without speaking; I like to think it’s because you’ve been struck dumb with the emotional power of this epic speech, but the reality is that you’re probably just trying to keep a straight face. “No,” you eventually reply. “You are certainly not that.”

I nod very firmly: certainly not.

There’s a long and fantastically awkward pause. “Well then,” you say. “I’m glad we’ve cleared up that particular misunderstanding.”

I’ve started blinking now, struggling to focus, only it’s getting increasingly difficult because there seems to be two of you. On reflection I decide I’m not particularly happy about this – it’s not like one isn’t more than enough by anyone’s standards. “Do you want know what your real problem is?” I add accusingly. “Because I – me – Will Graham of the FBI – am going to tell you.” I wave my hand at you for emphasis but unfortunately it goes a bit wrong because it looks like my arm’s on fire and I’m trying to put it out. I briefly lose my train of thought and stare at my hand in vague confusion: you’re also looking at it with your eyebrows raised.

“All right,” I say, determined to give it another go. “Do you know what your problem is?”

You start smiling again. “Please enlighten me.”

“You are a sad, boring old man who has lost his libido,” I say triumphantly, “that is the problem.”

Your lips start twitching again like you’re struggling not to laugh. “Well, you are an impetuous, overly-excitable young man who cannot hold his alcohol. You are a bacchanal.”

“I am not a bacchanal…wait, what does bacchanal mean? Did you just call me a wino?”

“Not that I am necessarily surprised,” you continue cheerfully, “considering that appalling stuff is only several degrees removed from methylated spirits. I myself am now in excess of the legal driving limit merely from kissing you. You ought to have pre-booked a liver transplant earlier in the evening. Of course you would first require a liver – would you like me to try and obtain one for you?”
“Well you should have pre-booked a…a…sex transplant.”

“Oh indeed, so they are finally available? The advances in medical science are truly astounding.”

“Sex transplant,” I repeat mutinously.

“Yes, I heard you the first time. It doesn’t make any more sense on a second attempt, but I give you full marks for perseverance. Wait there, I am going to get you some water.”

You disappear into the kitchen and there’s the sound of you rifling through the cupboards. “What are you doing?” I yell. “Are you looking for your sex drive?” You return a few seconds later with a glass, still smirking (possibly even more than before), then hold my head in place to make me drink it before tenderly stroking my face and wiping some stray droplets from my bottom lip with your thumb.

“You know Will, you really are incredibly charming, even like this,” you say. You lean forward and I shiver as you lightly run your tongue over my ear and whisper: “In fact you are positively edible.”

“All right, you weirdo,” I say, “point taken. I’m going to bed.” I make an attempt to walk off but promptly stumble again and you put your hands on my hips, steadying me from behind. I can’t stop myself arching against you, my head falling back against your shoulder, and you wrap your arms around my chest, two fingers dipping underneath my shirt and stroking my collarbone. I make a small (highly embarrassing) moaning sound.

You lightly kiss me on the temple and I make the same noise (except a bit louder this time…God). “Dear Will Graham–of–the–FBI,” you say, “you really have done extremely well tonight. I’m proud of you; I did not anticipate you acting so quickly. Once again you have exceeded my expectations.”

When you say that I clumsily turn round and try to focus on your face, but it’s becoming a struggle because of the way my eyes are starting to cross. “What does that mean?” I say at last. “I suppose this is all just a game to you, isn’t it? One of your ‘experiments’?” I go to the trouble of making exaggerated air quotes with both hands as I say this; and despite how drunk I am, am still aware that I look like a fucking idiot while I’m doing it.

“No Will,” you say softly, “not at all…at least not in the way that you mean.” You look very serious, although by the time the morning comes I’ll start to wonder if I dreamt that last part.

*****

I wake up with a hangover sent straight from Satan himself, and the events of last night float around my pounding head in disparate fragments that gradually coalesce into a truly appallingly composite of disbelief and mortification. How could I have said those things, done those things? (Because I was smashed out my fucking skull, I helpfully remind myself). Oh God, you were right to stop me. I hate admitting this but it’s true: I’m not totally ready for it, not really. But I want to be…Why aren’t I? Why the hell aren’t I ready? The only thing worse than the pain in my head is the sense of confusion and uncertainty that I want something so badly yet am utterly terrified about what it’s going to mean for me if I have it.

Getting up and speaking to you seems paramount to testing the hypothesis of whether or not it is actually possible to die of embarrassment, but in the end I’m spared having to summon the courage to face you because you appear in the bedroom anyway, holding a glass of water and some white tablets.

“You look terrible,” you say.
“I feel terrible.”

“Then you have achieved perfect symmetry and should be congratulated.”

“Hilarious. A bit of sympathy right now would be marvellous, doctor.”

“I thought I was unsuited to bring doctorly? Besides, I’ve brought this haven’t I?” I drink it in one go, then take a few moments contemplating whether to throw up or not.

You sit next to me on the bed and regard me thoughtfully. “Admit I was right,” you say.

“You were right.”

“Excuse me? I didn’t quite hear you.”

“Ha ha.”

“I really would appreciate you repeating yourself. I should like to record it and use it as my phone alert.”

“I’ll vomit on you,” I say feebly. “I have the means, motive, and opportunity.” I roll over so my head’s on your knee, and you gently rub my temples.

“You always push yourself beyond your own limits,” you say at last.

“So do you.”

“Yes, but I have a very well-attuned awareness of what my limits are; and they are few and far between. You are still discovering yours.”

I don’t quite know what to say to that, so remain silent. You slip your hand down under my t-shirt to stroke my chest, and I draw my breath in sharply.

“This is a very substantial thing for you,” you say. “You haven’t acknowledged the extent of it yet, but you will. You must.” And I know, without being told, that you’re talking about a lot more than just sex. You’re thinking of whether I’ll consent to join you – to cross onto your side, to fully merge. It’s me acknowledging that I don’t just want you physically, but that I want everything else you’re offering; everything you represent…and the answering, yearning echo it represents in me. Admit that I enjoyed killing him. Admit that I enjoyed you watching me. Admit that I want to do it again. Admit it, admit it, admit it.

You dip your hand a little lower and I gasp, my eyes widening slightly. “And you have my word for it Will,” you say softly, “that when you allow yourself to do so, we shall become completely unstoppable.”

There’s a long silence, you just stroking my skin and me lying with my eyes closed leaning up towards your touch and listening to the faint sound of you breathing. What I finally say is: “You’re already unstoppable, your brake cable was cut at birth. And please can I have some more water?”

But what I’m actually thinking, completely contrary to my better judgement, is: I hope you outlive me, because I don’t want to know a second time what my life is like without you in it.

*****

I spend the next few days warily circling round you (to which you appear completely oblivious) and jumping and twitching anytime we’re within touching distance. Of course you don’t try and touch
me: you don’t need to, because you know that eventually I’m going to come to you. So basically I know that you’re waiting – and you know that I know – and it should probably be really awkward and uncomfortable between us, but it’s not. What is uncomfortable (profoundly so) is the prickling, aching intensity of my own doubt and apprehension. In fact I fucking hate it. I suppose it’s partly my own fault for not acknowledging to myself sooner that, of course, nothing can ever be straightforward with you: even something as relatively mundane as having simultaneous orgasms needs to turn into a goddamn Fibonacci equation. The only time you give yourself away is when I occasionally catch you looking at me with a very faint smile on your face (my interpretation of it alters depending on my mood: sometimes I think it’s affectionate, at other times I persuade myself it’s vaguely sinister). But you never mention anything, and – because I am obviously a massive coward – neither do I.

So needless to say when something does eventually happen (because inevitably it does – by this point it can’t not), it’s absolutely nothing like I expected it to be. It’s early evening and you are reading on the sofa while I have my head on your lap. I’m honestly not quite sure how it ended up there – one minute I was sat with my feet pulled up and my chin resting on my knees, then I started slowly migrating towards you like you were a fucking magnet, and finally I was half lying on you with my legs folded around the cushions. That said it doesn’t feel weird (maybe it should – it really probably should. But it doesn’t. We fit together quite comfortably, and the realization of this makes me feel calmer and more contented than I have in days). The night is unusually quiet once again, and there’s little to hear except the rain dashing against the window and the rustling of you turning the page. One of your hands is carding absent-mindedly through my hair.

After a while you put the book aside and tip your head back against the sofa. You’re not asleep, I can tell from your breathing. Perhaps you are in your memory palace. Your hand begins to move again, stroking rhythmically through my hair, occasionally caressing the back of my neck, and you trail your other hand down onto my shoulder, then glide it along my arm. I make a little rumbling purr-like sound (which I wasn’t intending on, but can’t quite stop in time), and you trace your hand against my waist, my ribs, my hands and wrists, briefly allowing our fingers to entwine together, before moving back to my shoulder again. The touching is still (just) on the side of ‘affectionate’ as opposed to ‘erotic’, but nevertheless I can feel myself getting incredibly hard. Christ. You’re going to notice this any minute, you probably have already. I decide that if you say anything to make me feel self-conscious about it (‘Ah ha! So what do we have here?’) then I am getting off this fucking sofa immediately and leaving you to it, but of course you don’t. You just make a soft, pleased sound, and push the heel of your hand against my groin so I’ve got something to arch against. I make a low moaning noise and thrust up my hips. At the same time my head tips back against your knee and you put your hand on my forehead, lightly massaging the top of my cheekbone with your thumb. This should be humiliating – being so needy, helplessly grinding against you until I almost certainly come in my jeans like a teenager – but it isn’t, it doesn’t, it just feels so good, I don’t care.

You let this go on for another minute or two and by now I am making deep, desperate gasps and rocking frantically against your hand before you suddenly stop (Christ…sadist, obviously) and shift a bit so you can lean forward and place a light kiss on my lips. I instinctively open my mouth but you pull back instead and say, very gently for you: “Is this it then Will? Are you ready? Do you want me to take you to bed?” I open my eyes at that. You are looking down at me, smiling quite tenderly. In all the years I’ve known you, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you smile as much as you have over the past few days.

Naturally enough (for God’s sake) I find that I still can’t fully commit to an answer. Do I want you to? (Yes, yes, yes…but no). Oh God, I think helplessly, I’m scared: I’m scared, I’m scared. I can’t do this…but I can’t not do it. I appreciate that you aren’t assuming, but to be honest I actually wish you hadn’t asked; just let things run on and see what happened (in other words: exactly like before, only with momentum for me to hide behind rather than alcohol). The request to bind myself to a
decision has jolted me out of the oblivious state of feeling and into the cold, cognitive world of rationality and consequence. I blink a few time and then struggle to sit up, and you press your palm under my shoulders to help me. I look at you and run my hand through my hair, gnawing anxiously on my bottom lip. You watch me patiently. In the end I hedge my bets and settle for: “Yes. Sort of. I’m not sure.” (Christ…what the fuck was that?).

You’re carefully observing my face, and it seems to me that you look rather fascinated: as if you’re monitoring my mental agonies and neatly formulating to yourself all the possible ways that this is going to go. However, all you actually say is: “Have you ever done this before?” The unexpected change in tone – the fact that you’re bothering to ask the type of thing a normal person would – suggests to me that you’re deliberately shifting the focus to give me a few seconds to get my shit together.

“What, seriously?” I say, “Of course I have. I was married for nearly three years, remember.”

You smile, rolling your eyes slightly, and give one of my curls a gentle tug. “Of course I do not mean at all,” you reply. “But with another man?”

“Oh,” I say. “No.”

You just nod, as it that was what you were expecting. I feel a bit naïve, although I know it’s not what you’re trying to do.

“I suppose you have?” I ask, a bit accusingly (it’s irrational, but the thought somehow annoys me).

You shrug. “I have always been a student and seeker of sensation, in all things. In this, my only limitation is a consenting adult. Asides from that, I have never closed myself off to any kind of exploration.”

“Oh for God’s sake.” I roll my eyes. “That’s just a rarefied way of saying you sleep around.”

You playfully flip the side of my nose with your long finger. “You are such a brat,” you say. “And I don’t regret for a single moment having taken sexual pleasure to the extreme – I have lived it to the full, as I do with everything else.”

I fall quiet for a bit (partly because hearing you say ‘sexual pleasure’ in your precise, aristocratic voice has briefly made my brain short-circuit), then glance at you from under my eyelashes.

“So…” I say. I clear my throat. “So. We’re actually going to do this then?” Christ, this is terrible. Why am I being so gauche? I have a sudden mad urge to hide my face in the front of your shirt. This is not how I expected this to go, at all. In my fantasies of you, you were always far more aggressive and dominating than you are being now, and I was far more self-possessed and冷却ly acquiescing. I can’t even attribute it to some latent sexuality crisis (I almost wish I could, it might be easier. Mightn’t it? Surely it would). But I can’t, because this has nothing to do with the fact you’re a man; it’s the fact that you’re you. Then I suddenly remember something inconvenient, and to my disgust realize I am blushing slightly. “Look, we can’t. I don’t have…um, I don’t have anything.” Oh God, how could I not have thought of that before?

“That does not matter.” I must seem a bit panicked at that, because you sigh, and give me a thoughtful stare. “Will,” you say, “please don’t look so alarmed. I have never forced sex upon anyone in my life, do you really believe I would start with you? And even if you did have ‘anything’ – I can almost hear you putting careful quote marks around the word in deference to how absurdly self-conscious I suddenly feel about saying ‘condoms and lube’ – “on consideration, I do not think it would be a good idea tonight.”
Oh God, not this again. I still feel like you’re messing with my head, despite the fact I can’t quite work out how. Then I see the way you’re looking at me, thoughtful and appraising, and I think actually…maybe no. Maybe that’s not it. Maybe this is more part of your strategy. You know that I’m poised and ready to bolt, so you’re going to lure me in slowly – bit by bit, piece by piece and infinitely patient – at a speed which you feel I’ll be able to tolerate. Because too much too soon and you know that I’m going to be overwhelmed. And if that happens, then I’m going to run.

You’re still watching me, smiling slightly. You know what I’m thinking; you always know. “You need careful handling Will,” you say, as if in confirmation. You then add, “Even though you can’t quite admit it,” just as I’m opening my mouth to snap: ‘No I don’t, piss off.’

“As such,” you continue, “I want you to have more time to reflect on exactly what this is going to mean for you.” You give me an intense look, and I don’t say anything in response, just stare at you mutely. I can’t, I think piteously, I can’t, I can’t…For God’s sake, I threw us off a cliff because I couldn’t bear to reflect on it. You’re asking too much, just like you always do; you always want too much from me.

I must look pretty wretched, because you suddenly lean in and kiss my forehead. “Forget about past events,” you murmur softly (oh Christ, why am I always so fucking obvious?). “The past is a foreign country, as they say: people do things differently there. Can you forget about it Will? At least for tonight? I believe that you can, you are endlessly resourceful after all. There is no hurry, and in the meantime I propose that we begin slowly.” You say the word ‘slowly’ with a lascivious flourish that goes directly to my groin.

“I am not going to touch you at all…yet,” you say, pulling back and looking me straight in the eyes. “But you can touch yourself can’t you? Run your hands over your body, take control of your own pleasure. You’re so aroused, I know you want to, and I want to see it. I would like to watch you. Would you do that for me?”

Oh. Fucking. Shit. I’m glad it’s dimly lit in here, because there’s no way I’m not blushing again. “Yes,” I say slowly, “yes, I can do that.” I realize I am starting to feel vaguely unhinged: what am I even saying? When did I become so shameless?

You just keep smiling at me, calm and conspiratorial, and there’s something vaguely hypnotic about it which means I can’t look away. Without any self-consciousness at all you unfasten your shirt and cast it onto the floor, keeping your eyes fixed on my face the entire time. Your muscles are incredibly well-defined, and I know that must be at least partly from years of flinging corpses around (and that a realization like this should be the most enormous boner-killer in human history, and it’s not having that effect on me. At all. Shit). You don’t take off anything else. I’m vaguely disappointed by this, but also relieved, because I know that you’re right and anything else would almost certainly be too much for me to cope with. As it is, I’m glad that you’re taking control of everything; it’s much easier to be passive, to be directed by you. You pull me closer with one hand and calmly pull my t-shirt over my head, lightly tracing your fingers up and down my ribs before trailing downwards, and I can feel myself quivering. When your hands rest on my belt you pause and look at me for confirmation. “Yes?” you say.

I open my mouth but suddenly find that it’s impossible to speak, so just nod instead. Oh God, God, God this is so surreal, I can’t fully believe that I’m doing it. An aspect of me is stood to one side, observing what’s happening and mouthing in horror: I am literally and metaphorically beside myself. It’s incredibly vulnerable to be naked in front of you, but also serves to highlight that I actually feel profoundly defenceless with you all the time and that this is really just another form. Skin is just that: skin. It’s not like you don’t see me anyway; having my body exposed is nothing in comparison with the way you’ve exposed my mind – exposed me – carefully and meticulously stripping away every
single defence from the day I met you. My heart’s begun to pound wildly, a frantic SOS rhythm that’s harmonized by the part of me that’s stood watching, panicked now and screaming: ‘Oh shit. SHIT! What the hell are you DOING? Put your fucking clothes on and get out now!’

You’re probably aware of at least some of this (you definitely are), because you cup your hand to the side of my face and give me another one of your searching expressions. “Don’t look so anxious Will,” you say. “There is nothing to be afraid of. Nothing is going to happen to you tonight of which you are not in complete control.” (But how can that be true when I’m never in control around you… when I never have been). You smile slightly, then slowly and deliberately run your palm down my chest and over the jagged knot of scar tissue on my abdomen. You don’t glance down as you do it – of course you don’t need to, you know exactly where the knife went in.

My breathing speeds up, and your smile broadens as you move your eyes away from my face and examine my body. “Such a sumptuous palette of scars,” you say admiringly. “Our scars have the power to remind us that the past was real. They anchor us…we all need to be anchored, Will. Except on you they’re not imperfections are they? More like embellishments.”

“I don’t…I don’t know.”

“They would most likely appear sad or unsightly on most people,” you add thoughtfully, “yet you lend them a certain distinction. Like craquelure on a particularly arresting portrait. You wear them well. Or perhaps more like patina on stone: testimony and witness-bearing to your rather extraordinary resilience.”

“Most of them are your responsibility,” I finally manage.

“Yes indeed,” you reply, “I am to be sincerely commended.”

I say nothing, which is probably the absolute worst thing to say.

“Look how wide your eyes are.” You sound enthralled: a glint of energy in your deadpan voice that’s not usually there. “You’re trembling. You really are frightened aren’t you?”

I dart my tongue across my lips. “Yes,” I reply faintly.

“How interesting. You know you could leave if you wanted to; you could walk away – you could run away. You know I would not try and stop you.”

“I know.”

“Yet here you stand.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me, Will Graham, what are you most afraid of right now; me? Or yourself?”

“You know what,” I say quietly.

“Of course I do. The question is: do you?”

I don’t answer, just stare at you almost pleadingly, and you stare right back – staring and smiling – then with an almost tormenting slowness pull my face towards yours so you can kiss me. It starts off gentle, almost sweetly chaste: me stood there, ungraciously and unresponsive as a statue with my mouth slightly open; you stroking my jaw to encourage me to relax and softly brushing your lips over mine, occasionally caressing them with the tip of your tongue. Then you lick very slightly into my mouth
and I make a helpless moaning sound, at which point you abruptly pull away and look me directly in the eyes. For a few seconds everything goes still, no movement, no noise, as if the whole room is holding its breath: we just gaze at other. And oh – oh fuck – I don’t think anyone has ever looked at me that way in my entire life. It’s longing and passion and hunger, spiced with something indefinably dark and menacing, and at that moment something inside me snaps and I move towards you at the precise second you move back to me. We meet in a clash of teeth, moaning and gasping into each other’s mouths, pillaging and ravaging like we’re trying to devour one another – immediately finding a perfect rhythm as you grind your hips against mine and I cling onto your shoulders and arch into you: my nails clawing and scraping against your skin until it makes you hiss, you tangling your fingers into my hair so you can jerk my head back and tug on my bottom lip with your teeth before forcing your tongue so deep into my mouth it’s difficult to breathe. The chemistry is fucking unbelievable, like voltage: intense and undeniable, our desire for each other so fierce and urgent it’s like a living thing, like a third person in the room. Oh God, is this what everyone else always saw? Alana, Freddie, Bedelia, even Chilton – why people always assumed, always watched us and wondered. And any last doubts I have about backing out are extinguished at that moment because I can’t get enough of you, I don’t think I’m ever going to be able to get enough. I’m parched for you but drowning in you; the fiery heat of you mad and wild (wildfire…please don’t burn me all at once), your fierceness craving to corrupt me and cast me out into something new. Malicious, delicious, and gorgeous, and ferocious, and oh God, oh God, oh fucking hell.

Without letting me go you move back onto the sofa, roughly pulling me on top of you, then shifting so you’re sat lengthways with your legs stretched out. Without any visible effort you spin me round and manoeuvre me so I’m leaning against you with my back to your chest, and I cry out again in the helpless disbelief and desire and yearning of it all. You rest your chin on the top of my head, then bracket your ankles round mine so that when you widen your legs mine are forced open too. I just let you, pliant and submissive as a marionette: I’m so overwhelmed, so heady and besieged, that it’s impossible to think straight. You’ve already said that you’re not going to touch me yourself (and I know that once you’ve said something you always see it through), yet I don’t think I’ve ever felt so passionately, desperately turned on in my entire life. For a few seconds I just lie there stricken, staring at the ceiling, listening to the ragged, shuddering sound of my breathing.

“Oh God,” I finally manage. My voice sounds faint and shocked. “Oh God. I didn’t…I wasn’t…”

“Breathe, Will” you say caressingly. “Just breathe. Take your time: we have all night and I want you to enjoy this.” You run your palm over my chest, then slide it lasciviously across my stomach which is smooth and slick from where I’m leaking pre-come all over myself. “So wet already,” you murmur into my ear, “that is rather lovely. You need this so much don’t you? You are aching for it.”

Oh fuck it’s true, I am. I moan again and arch back against you, desperate for as much contact as possible, relishing how good your skin feels against mine; and when you slide two of your fingers into my mouth I suck them in an urgent, helpless way that I don’t entirely feel in control of. I’m still trembling slightly, but I reach out and take hold of myself, rubbing my thumb around the head of my cock – the initial jolt of pleasure is so intense it’s almost shocking; it almost hurts – and we both make a deep groaning noise at exactly the same time. Normally I’d consider improvising and spitting into my hand for some lubrication, but I’m soaking myself so much already that I don’t even need to, and it feels so incredibly good that I find my rhythm almost immediately, thrusting forward to fuck into my fist and then pushing back against the smooth, hard muscles in your chest.

“Good boy, that’s perfect,” you say. “Keep going. Just like that.” My skin is already growing slick and glistening with sweat, and you glide your hand over my ribs, across my hips, and tantalizingly up and down my thighs – touching me everywhere except where I really want you to – and by now I’ve totally lost it, jerking myself off frantically and absolutely desperate to come. You move your legs further apart so mine are forced wide open, and I feel utterly debauched and wanton and it’s
fucking fantastic.

You rub your cheek against mine and smooth my damp hair out of my eyes. “How fearless and adaptable you are,” you say, “see how well you can attune to whatever circumstances you find yourself in? Yet the difficulty with that, of course, is habituation; the current provocation grows insufficient, despite the initial stress of it, and you find yourself wanting more. That is the origins of escalation Will…How should we escalate? Perhaps next time I’ll put my fingers inside you. Would you like that? Just one at first, I think. Just enough for you to feel what it’s like; and for me to feel how smooth, and tight and perfect you are. Enough to tease you; to torture you with pleasure. Make you rock your hips back against my hand, make you plead for more. And you would beg me, wouldn’t you Will? You would beg me so beautifully it would be impossible to resist you.”

“Oh yes. Oh God. God.”

“I know, it feels so good doesn’t it?” you murmur into my ear. “Look at you: you are so stunning like this. You have no idea.”

“Oh, oh,” I’m practically wailing now, my voice gone high and young. There’s no way I’m going to last much longer and my back curves up against you like a bow string. “God, I’m so close, I’m going to…oh God.” I let my head fall back against your shoulder, gripping my cock almost feverishly as my hand speeds up and hearing the tacky, viscous noise of skin thrusting against hot, damp skin.

“That’s right Will,” you say, “flawless. You are doing so well. Quite brilliant. So good for me, aren’t you? Doing exactly what I told you to do.” You kiss the side of my face, then tug on my ear lobe with your teeth. “It is rather perfect seeing you this way. So beautiful. Vulnerable. Desperate. All those lovely noises you are making; they might be the sounds of distress as much as desire. And the way that you are writhing and shuddering against me you could almost be struggling; like something fragile and breakable fighting for its life. I would have to keep clinging onto you through the final throes, wouldn’t I; hold you in my arms until you grew silent and still? And yet there is so much life in you.”

I cry out again, then bite down on my hand to try and subdue all the frantic noises I can’t stop myself making. You firmly pull it away and keep it gripped in yours. “No,” you say, “don’t hold back. I want to hear you.” Oh fucking hell, it’s all so intense – the emotion so raw – I’m almost hyperventilating. Every single nerve is spasming, every muscle taut and strained: it’s close to being too much and yet it’s nowhere near enough. God, how is this even possible? It shouldn’t be possible: you haven’t even touched me, yet I’m completely undone. And over the pounding of my heartbeat and the almost sobbing groans I’m making, I can hear my own voice, fierce and desperate, gasping out something which I don’t want to admit to, but which I know is hopelessly, helplessly true: “This…all of it…it feels so good. Oh fuck, fuck, I want this, I want it, I want you.”

When I say that you make a low, possessive sound deep in your throat, then haul me up so your mouth is resting against the curve where my shoulder and neck meet. You briefly lave your tongue over the skin, pressing and probing as if you’re trying to take my pulse, then you bite down, hard – hard enough to draw blood. It hurts and hurts, oh God it really hurts, and I cry out almost wildly, desperately thrusting my body back against yours as my hips give a final, frantic shudder and I start to come. You hold me through it, one arm wrapped tightly around my chest and the other stroking my hips. I’m vaguely aware that you’re saying something, but despite the urgent intensity of your tone I can no longer make sense of the words. Instead I let myself slump into you. I’m shaking uncontrollably, can barely even hold myself up. Everything feels so intense.

For a while there is complete silence, broken only by the sound of my ragged, panting breaths. I might almost be in shock. Oh fuck, fuck, I can’t quite believe what I’ve just done.
You just make a slight sighing noise, and pull me tighter “Exquisite,” you finally say, almost reverently. “Ecstasy and abandonment are quite extraordinarily flattering on you. You should see yourself: how perfect you are when you permit your instinct to take over and simply let yourself feel. To take what you need without shame or reservation.” And despite being so hopelessly overwhelmed, I’m still aware that (once again) you’re talking about a lot more than sex; that you’re thinking back to that night on the cliff, and the way I looked slathered in blood and sweat and the scent of victory (as opposed to how I look collapsed on your chest having just shot my load all over myself…which right about now I should probably be starting to feel self-conscious about and – oddly for me – clearly don’t).

You keep your arms wrapped round me until I’m no longer shaking and my breathing’s slowed down to something less reminiscent of cardiac arrest, stroking whatever bit of skin you can reach and occasionally kissing my head and murmuring things in (another) foreign language. I want to turn over so I can see you but it seems to require more effort than is physically possible, so I settle for curling one arm over yours and stretching the other behind my head because I have a sudden weird urge to touch your face. You press your mouth against my palm, and I can feel the sharp, sculpted line of your cheekbone. I realize, idly and pointlessly, that I don’t think I’ve ever touched your hair before. It’s somehow softer than I expected it to be, less coarse than mine. I know that someone (you) is going to speak eventually – is going to have to speak – but I want to delay it for as long as possible, because it feels like as soon as the silence is broken then the real world will start screeching and cranking back to life and all the fucking madness is going to start again. I feel protective of the silence, I want to preserve it as something rare and precious and wonderful, because for the few remaining seconds that it lasts I can pretend that you’re not you, and I’m not me, and we’re just two normal people holding onto one another on a crappy second hand sofa.

Eventually you swing yourself round so you’re sat upright, bringing me with you in a series of smooth, effortless gestures as if I don’t weigh anything at all. I brace myself for something devastating, but all you say is: “Shall you be all right if I leave you for a moment?” and instead of my usual ‘of course, why wouldn’t I? Duh, don’t be ridiculous’ I just nod, slow and stupid (even though I don’t actually want you to go and leave me alone with the knowledge of what I’ve just done). You vanish into the bathroom, reappearing soon after with an antiseptic wipe and a damp cloth which you use to clean the bite mark and the tacky mess on my stomach respectively. I just sit there and let you. You’ve also brought a glass of water that you hold up to my mouth, cupping my face with your other hand to keep me steady. The only non-chaotic thought I’m currently aware of is: ‘thank fuck I chose such an enormous sofa.’ The second, in close succession, is that I should offer to sort you out as well (oh God, why didn’t I think of that before? I’m so crap at this aren’t I…why am I so crap at this?). I’d be a lot more enthusiastic about it if I wasn’t feeling so completely stunned and enthralled, but it seems like a dick move to not at least suggest it. I make a vague gesture at your body and cough a few times to try and get my voice working. “I’m sorry, um, do you want me to…?”

“Don’t worry about reciprocating,” you say softly. “Tonight was about you. I want you to rest now – you look exhausted…and somewhat overpowered.” You reach down the side of the sofa and pull out the shock blanket (that blue bastard. Oh my God…fucking typical) and wrap it round my shoulders. You kneel down in front of me and I try, and fail, to think of something to say; ultimately just allowing myself to slump forward so my forehead’s resting against yours, and childishly reaching out for your hand. You squeeze mine gently, returning the pressure, and I stare down at our clasped hands and feel oddly at peace. Our fingers are so tightly tangled together it’s hard to tell whose are whose just by looking: where you begin and I end.

“The commencement of your ‘Becoming’,” you say. “Congratulations Will.” There’s a smile in your voice – I know you’re not being entirely serious – but at the same time there’s no doubt that an enormous line (oh my God, fucking huge) has been crossed; that this is just the beginning, and that after tonight nothing is ever, ever, ever going to be the same again. And that I should probably care
about that, and what it’s going to mean; that I want to care about it. Yet right now…I don’t. I just sit there: sit with your breath on my face, and your dark eyes right in front of me, and your skin touching mine. I stare at our hands; entwined and interlocked: you and me. The destructive opposites, the zero sum game, the unstoppable force and the immovable object. The empath. The sociopath. But also underneath it all, underneath all of that, and right now in this moment – just one and the other: just you and me. Just us.

Chapter End Notes

Sssh. Listen. Can you hear that whirring noise? You can? Well that’s the sound of Thomas Hardy spinning in his grave, because I just put an oblique Tess of the D’Urbervilles reference into a slashy fanfic *sniggers* HANN-I-GRAM! HANN-I-GRAM!
Chapter Notes

Hello dearest readers.

*Takes deep breath and squeals*

WE HAVE MORE FAN ART!! Please treat your lovely selves and pop over to Tumblr to see what the wonderful Cinabre has made for us to accompany Chapter 23. How fantastic is this?! I love it as much as Hannibal loves Will. Please join me in giving her enormous thanks and applause for being so talented and generous and lovely (and many thanks also to Elica for sharing it :-D ).

ALSO, thanks to her I now know that while Sherlockians have the Hiatus, Fannibals have the HeAteUs. I hadn't heard that before - OMFG, I love it.

I wake up next morning bleary-eyed and vaguely exhilarated, and drowsily roll onto my side to reach out for you only to find that – as usual – you’re not there. This time however you’ve a left a note, written in elegant navy blue cursive on the back of my (unpaid) phone bill. The letters run vividly and authoritatively across the page, much in the way you do yourself:

Dear Will, forgive me for not being with you when you wake up, but you were sleeping so peacefully I could not bring myself to disturb you. I have gone to run several errands. Do not trouble yourself; I will be very careful.

There’s no indication when you wrote it, so you could have been gone for minutes or hours; and be returning any time now, or…never? No, of course you’ll come back, why wouldn’t you; from your perspective this has finally started to get interesting. I sit up to stretch and flex my aching shoulders. You’re right, this bed is fucking awful, no wonder you virtually never sleep in it…although will you be sleeping in it more from now on? Will you be staying here? I frown slightly and run my hands through my hair. It’s genuinely impossible to imagine such mundane domesticity: bitching over whose turn it is to empty the trash, and whether you’ve been using my razor or not, and how much of your expensive aftershave I’ve stolen, and “honestly Will, I appreciate your intrepid scientific spirit, but is it really necessary to cultivate penicillin in every single mug we possess?” And then retiring to the same bed every night at the end of it all, where I’ll steal the covers and you’ll leave the light on so you can read until 2am, and I’ll get irritated (“your legs are too long, you take up too much room…get your elbow out my face, it’s like sleeping with a sack of wrenches”), and you’ll make an amused noise and finally turn the light off and pull me towards you…and then what? And what about after that? What are you going to expect from me? What am I going to have to say, have to do? Who will I have to be? God, I feel so out of my depth: the necessity of inhabiting a brand new space that has you so firmly at the centre of it. It’s like being deposited in the middle of a foreign country: I need to navigate your customs, learn your language, become naturalized: understand how to be a citizen of you. I don’t regret it though. Do I? No…I don’t. Not any of it. In fact the absence of regret is startling (probably troubling). I’m feeling several things: self-conscious, confused, excited, apprehensive, doubtful, turned on, slightly embarrassed. But if I’m being honest with myself (and there’s no real reason not to be), then no: regret isn’t one of them.

On the contrary I’m aware that I’m actually acting in a vaguely pathetic way – smiling faintly to...
myself, lightly touching my face with my fingertips, gazing into the distance, reimagining the way you looked just before you kissed me. Then I suddenly think of Alana, who on more than one occasion undoubtedly sported a similarly besotted expression to the one I’m currently wearing, and that sober me up immediately. God, you wouldn’t…would you? I think back to last night, the rapturous way you held onto me, your touch, your face, the sound of your voice, how intense you were. Surely you couldn’t have faked that? (You could). But even so, why bother? I frown slightly, gnawing at a bit of rough skin round my thumb. Is that all it was: you amusing yourself? Manipulating me just for the hell of it, just to prove that you can? I almost wish Alana was here so we could compare notes (wait, no – no I don’t…What the fuck?). Besides surely the liaison with her was just a way of getting to me. I bet you’d never have got off your smug, lazy ass and made the effort if you didn’t know I was already interested (you malevolent…shit). I start to mentally compare your behavior and demeanour around me and Alana, but the only conclusion I can firmly draw is that you’ve either tried to kill me or fuck me over on a much more regular and elaborate basis than you have her (which by your standards could be interpreted either way as a gesture of antipathy, amorous intent and/or benevolently friendly interest). Oh fuck this, fuck all of it. It’s too much, I can’t do this now.

I glance down at your note again, which (ridiculously) I am still holding onto. You haven’t signed it, but as evidence goes it would still be pretty damning and I know I can’t keep it, so I read it over one more time, then rip it up and get out of bed to drop it in the trash (there’s also the fact that I was considering stashing it in the bureau alongside Price’s photo in the manner of a love-struck teenager, and this is so deeply mortifying that it’s an even better reason to get rid of it than the risk of it turning into Exhibit A). Afterwards I go for a piss and catch sight of myself in the bathroom mirror. I look like I’ve been in a fight: there’s a bite mark on my shoulder and several livid bruises sucked into my neck that I don’t actually remember you putting there. I also have the most spectacular sex hair I’ve ever seen in my life (unfortunately my sex hair never looks tousled and erotic, only wild and vaguely ridiculous), so I flatten it with water and comb it through, and despite all the agonizing I realize I’ve got a stupid grin on my face. This gets even worse when I briefly amuse myself by imaging how much Freddie Lounds would pay for some photos from last night.

In this respect…we’re surely going to be having actual sex at some point. Aren’t we? Oh God. That means I need to buy supplies. I haven’t felt this uptight since college; since before college. Since I was a teenager. Christ. Surely the store clerk won’t say anything. They don’t, do they? That only happens in lame sitcoms, not in real life. Briefly I torment myself with images of a smirking pharmacist calling out to a colleague “Do we have any lubricant in stock? This gentleman wants to buy some” (and me, defiant, shouting back even louder: “Yes, my good woman, please procure me a metric ton of lubricant because I will definitely need it for the inordinate amount of anal sex I intend on having – with Number One on the FBI’s Most Wanted. Do you accept MasterCard?”). No, shut up you fool, it’s fine. Of course they won’t care, they won’t say a word. Belatedly I decide we probably don’t need condoms anyway: I had all my blood work done at the hospital and it’s impossible to imagine you having something as vulgar and plebeian as an STI. More to the point, we’ve already bled all over each other’s open wounds on several occasions so it’s a bit late now anyway (oh God, that is so fucking revolting…how the hell is this my life?). Nevertheless I realize I can’t go out and make the necessary arrangements because there’s only one key, which of course you’ve taken. I wonder if this is one of the ‘errands’ you referred to – the thought is both vaguely embarrassing and surreally hilarious. In the end I spend a highly irritating 15 minutes trying to find my glasses (the stupid bastards should have legs rather than arms considering they’re always strolling off somewhere unlikely), then go back to bed and fall into a deep dreamless sleep, and when I wake up you’re lying next to me on top of the covers reading the newspaper.

“Hey,” I mutter. I can feel myself smiling; I anticipated feeling excruciatingly awkward at the sight of you, and now that you’re here am pleasantly surprised to realize I don’t – not at all. Surely that’s a
good sign? Without even thinking about it I roll over so my head is propped on your chest and you wind your arm round my shoulder, holding me close.

“Good afternoon,” you say. You wave the headline at me (which is yet another shrill account of the FBI’s failed attempts to catch you) and roll your eyes. I snort out a laugh. “What time is it?” I ask.

“Nearly one o’clock.”

“Shit, is it really?”

“You slept extremely deeply. You clearly needed it; I imagine you have not been sleeping well recently.”

“I never sleep well.”

“You did last night,” you say, slightly smugly. “I suspect my presence had something to do with it.”

“No, it was more likely the incredibly good orgasm – self-administered, I might add – that did it.”

“So orgasms have a sedative effect on you, do they?” you reply. “That is extremely interesting to know. Someone should inform Jack: considering that I am capable of administering even more pleasurable sensations than you are yourself – and you may take my word upon that – he may agree to hire me as a form of occupational health to keep you under control in the field.”

“Shut up, oh my God. You’re completely mad. So am I.”

“We are,” you say. “Folie a deux.”

“Something like that.” I roll over again so I’m staring at the ceiling. I can feel your rib cage rising and falling underneath me: the sensation is unexpectedly soothing, and I move my hand behind my head so you can take hold of it, your long fingers running over mine. “So…last night,” I say finally (because surely it would be weird not to at least mention it). “Is…um. Is that the type of thing we should be, y’know. Talking about?” Smooth, I think, sarcastically. For God’s sake.

“Not at all,” you reply, “talking too solemnly about sex,” (I wish I could overcome the urge to start sniggering like Beavis and Butthead whenever I hear you say ‘sex’), “intellectualizes – and thus enervates – what is better explored through a physical lens: the prism of the body and the senses. Anything hedonic, any sensual pleasure in life,” (oh God, I’m actually blushing now…fuck), “should be felt and experienced rather than debated.”

“Oh,” I say (what, seriously…that’s it?).

You start to stroke my hair with one hand and give the newspaper a rustle with the other, and I don’t need to look at you to know you’re smiling. I clear my throat awkwardly. “Okay then. Yeah,” I add. “When you put it like that.” Despite a vague sense of deflation (although really, what did I expect… that we were going to have a cosy ‘no you go first, ‘no, you..’ type of chat about it?), I don’t actually feel dismissed by this. To be honest I’m sort of relieved, considering I’m pretty terrible at the stilted morning after conversation at the best of times. Not that I genuinely believe you’re going to let me off this lightly – of course you’ll be mentioning it at some point (and I imagine you’ll have plenty to say). Only you’re biding your time; you’ll do it when it suits you, and it’ll be in a weird, abstract, Machiavellian type of way that will thrill me and chill me and utterly mess with my brain. In fact in a way you’ve already started – you’re dismissing the physical aspect because it’s not as interesting to you as the psychological one. Fuck it though, I’m prepared to play along. I tip my head back and let my eyes fall closed.
You tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “You seem extremely pensive,” you say after a pause. “I recognize that look: it makes you appear very young and ingenuous. It is rather endearing.”

“Ugh, no it doesn’t. I appear enigmatic and badass: you’re making me sound like a 12-year old.”

“No, not at all. It is rather that I find the contrast amusing: the ingénue exterior compared with what I know is going on in here.” You tap the side of my forehead.

I make a grunting noise in lieu of a response then turn over again so I’m lying on my front. Your comment about occupational health has made me remember myself in the alleyway on the night you came back, invoking the celestial aid of Jack Crawford when most people would be making bargains with God. Unfortunately though, I have taken it too far and begun imagining what would happen if I shouted ‘Jack!’ as opposed to ‘God!’ at all kinds of critical and inconvenient moments (including, but not limited to, moments of sexual gratification).

“What are you sniggering at?” you say.

I open my mouth, then wisely close it again. “Nothing.”

“Hmm.” You look at me closely. “You have remembered something that is amusing you.”

I eventually tell you (admittedly it sounded a lot less weird in my head) and you look vaguely appalled. “Do not even joke about such things,” you say. “With the exception of God, who I suppose must be permitted to inveigle his way in where he is not wanted, as he does with so much else, the only name I permit you to shout at such moments is my own.”

“Noted.” As an afterthought I add (because fuck it, why not): “I look forward to it.”

“Excellent.”

Nevertheless I can’t resist doing an experimental “Oh Jack! Jack” and you look like you’re losing the will to live.

“If you persist with this rather horrifying trajectory,” you say with mock severity, “then I shall record you doing it and forward it anonymously to the FBI.”

I snort again. “Okay, I’ll stop.”

“Good. I would be very obliged if you did.”

I imagine Jack’s face after downloading the audio file and nearly start laughing again, so roll away to try and hide it and lie on my back. You stretch out next to me, long and lithe and propped up on one elbow with your chin cupped in your hand.

“Where did you go this morning?”

“Primarily, I collected my luggage from the hotel,” you reply. Idly, you trace your fingers over the bruise marks on my neck, and I lean up into your touch. “It is very pleasant to have my books again.” I glance at the bedside table and sure enough a pile of them have appeared. The top one is bound in dusty looking green leather and has a medieval script on the spine: *The Collected Writings of Wilham of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha*.

“That looks almost unbearably boring,” I say.

“It is, indeed, not terribly stimulating, although some of his ideas about morality and humanism are
quite intriguing. I acquired it from an antiquarian dealer while I was away.” You lean over and press a brief kiss to my forehead. “I admit that it primarily caught my eye because of the portmanteau on your name: ‘Wil’ and ‘Ham’.”

“Did it? I could give you a portmanteau name as well. I could call you Hector.”

“You could indeed, as long as you do not expect me to answer.”

“You should be pleased. Wasn’t Hector an enormous badass? More impressive than Wilham of Sex-Coburg and Goth.”

“It is Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, and while I’m sure you make a very good point nothing will induce me to respond to ‘Hector’.”

“Well I’m glad you’ve been reunited with Wilham,” I say, “but I still wish you wouldn’t go out. I’m worried about someone recognizing you.”

“No one recognized me. I adopted a different accent and availed myself of your extremely expeditious disguise kit. Remember that I have extensive experience with this kind of thing; it is hardly the first time I have been ‘on the run’.”

“Even so…” I sigh fretfully. “Maybe we should leave? Go someplace else.”

“Certainly we can do that.”

“I need to sort a few things out first…I mean I can’t just go, it would look odd. People would notice. But maybe we should…At some point. Maybe.”

“Whatever you like,” you say.

I fall quiet again, biting my nails. The reality of what I’ve just said has come crashing down: if I run away with you – if I really went through with it – then what would the fuck would that actually mean? What sort of life would we have? More to the point, what sort of person would I turn into? And I know you’ve got your own plans (you’ve dropped enough cryptic hints after all) so how do they fit it? I know I’m being ridiculous; of course we can’t stay here forever. At some point I’m going to have to commit to a decision (and I already know what it’ll likely be). Just…not commit right now.

You’re watching my face carefully: naturally you have immediately worked out what I’m thinking, the sudden surge of doubt. “There is no rush to go anywhere,” you say at last.

“Yeah…” I glance at you in silent acknowledgement. “In the meantime though just, you know, be careful.”

“I am always exceedingly careful.”

“You seem to be forgetting that Jack Crawford – as in ‘oh! Jack!’ – is practically next door. And it’s not like it was the last time. In fact it’s nothing at all like that; I’m an accessory now.” Shit, I really am aren’t I? “Oh my God,” I add faintly as this fully sinks in, “I don’t want to go to prison.”

“You will not go to prison.”

“You don’t know that. How can you know that? You always said you would never go to prison, and look how that turned out.”
“If you remember – and you certainly ought to, considering you were there – I went entirely by choice.”

“I don’t care! It’s all right for you, everyone’s terrified of you – they don’t put you in solitary for your own protection but for everyone else’s. How long do you think I’d last in prison?”

“Will…”

“I’m law enforcement, according to you I look about 12…”

“Will…”

“Oh my God, I’d be murdered in the first week. Someone would have to adopt me to stop me getting murdered. I’d have to be some con’s prison wife…” I pause and look a bit closer at you. “Are you laughing?”

“No.”

“You are! You totally are!”

“Will, you must calm yourself,” you say. “You are not going to go to prison, I shall not allow it.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot how much influence you have with the district attorney. That guy fucking loves you.”

“I shall not allow it,” you reply, “because in the unfeasibly unlikely event of me being apprehended I will tell anyone who will listen that I coerced Will Graham into everything, and was forcing him to act entirely contrary to his wishes. That is if anyone ever linked it to you at all, considering there is no means to retrospectively prove that I have been here all this time.”

“Yeah, well…what am I supposed to do if you went to prison?” If you left me again.

You look at me carefully. “I have no intention of going to prison,” you say at last. “Nor anything else that would entail someone taking you away from me.” You slide your hand down my chest under the covers.

"Stop it," I say crossly. “Stop trying to placate me.”

“You really want me to stop?”

Fortunately I am spared the embarrassment of adding 'no, actually, now you mention it...carry on' by my phone going (saved by the bell).

“Jack!” I say. You pretend to swat my head.

“You okay?”

“Thanks, I’m fine. I’m good.” I realize it’s true – I am – and I smile in spite of myself. “What can I do for you?”

“Have you been on TattleCrime recently?”

As soon as he says that, I am decidedly no longer fine: I feel my stomach turn over in a horrible, nauseous way and dart a quick glance at you with wide, panicked eyes. “No,” I say weakly, “what’s happened?”
“That bitch Freddie Lounds has done another number on you.”

“Oh, okay,” I reply, almost cheerfully (fine status reactivated). I thought he was going to say something about you – a sighting, a rumor, the whispered beginnings of a trail where X marks the spot. Freddie Lounds’ invariable screed along the lines of ‘why the hell hasn’t someone locked this psychopath up yet?’ is relatively low down the list of priorities.

“It’s pretty bad,” says Jack irritably, as if I’m not taking it seriously enough. Why’s he so pissed off? It’s not like he’s the one that she’s arguing should be tied up and dropped down a well (or a variation thereof…but not before having his head opened up so Medical Science can study his fucked up brain). “Look, you probably shouldn’t read it, but I just wanted you to know that I don’t take it seriously.” He pauses then adds: “It won’t affect anything.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. Jack.” I can’t help grinning again, and you roll your eyes at me.

“Just…watch yourself,” Jack replies. He doesn’t add anything else, and after a brief silence he hangs up. I put the phone on the bedside table then bury my way underneath your arm again.

“Freddie Lounds has done, and I quote, ‘a number on me’,” I say.

“Has she? How amusing. We should read it.”

“Why?”

“Because it will be interesting to know how close she has come to the truth.”

There are several ways of interpreting this, none of which are particularly appealing, so in the end I don’t answer at all and just get out of bed and wrap myself up in the shock blanket (the shock blanket, like the freak virus, has turned into a ubiquitous yet acceptable irritant…I clearly have pronounced Stockholm Syndrome tendencies) and shuffle over to the laptop. I expect you to follow me but you don’t.

Freddie was obviously sufficiently cowed by Jack’s warning to not mention me in her initial coverage of the agents’ murder, but has shown no such restraint this time round. Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing? screams the headline, with a photo of me looking more than unusually manic. I roll my eyes in advance. It’s pretty much a re-hash of the standard invective, albeit with some vicious embellishments: for example, she makes a great play of emphasizing that you haven’t been found yet but were last seen with me, your “known associate.” The conclusion she wishes the readers to draw is obvious, but she’s just stopped short of saying anything actionable (shame…the first amendment can kiss my ass). On the other hand, Sanderson’s voice is clearly recognizable behind several quotes from “an exclusive source within the FBI” about how creepy and unpredictable I am. Suddenly I feel bad for laughing at Jack. It was good of him to call and show solidarity: hardly anyone else in his position would have done the same.

Out of habit I scan through the comments (it’s the usual split between ‘Genius! Give the guy a medal!’ and ‘Psychopath! Throw him down a well!’), and I’m about to call you over so I can give you shit about the line “Graham, who was admittedly instrumental in the apprehension of the notorious Chesapeake Ripper…” when my eye suddenly catches a comment at the bottom blaring out in the familiar capital letters. I can feel myself growing very cold all over, and I don’t even need to look at the username to know I’ll see ‘Maniloa’:

“TICK TOCK TICK TOCK MR GRAHAM. THERE’S A RECKONING COMING. YOU AND ME. YOU’LL BE HEARING FROM ME SOON.”
“Look at this!” I yell.

“What?” you ask calmly. You stroll in through from the bedroom, still holding the newspaper (I suspect you are collecting and cataloguing some of the more lurid quotes about yourself to stash in your memory palace – no doubt a new wing is currently in development).

“It’s him!” I say, stabbing my finger at the screen. You lean in closer to read it, your hand on my shoulder, and in spite of myself I let my head fall to the side so I’m nestling against your arm. “Yes, it certainly appears to be,” you reply. After a pause you add: “Another theatrically loaded message: how tedious.”

“It is. It definitely is.”

“I agree: it definitely is.”

“Well aren’t you bothered?”

“No, not particularly, and nor should you be.” You lean forward to read the message again. “His reliance on feeble rhetoric is truly appalling. I have disposed of people for far less.”

“Oh God, you’re unbelievable.”

You ruffle my hair in an exceedingly patronizing way. “My dear Will, as are you. I would have expected you to be much happier about this; isn’t it what you’ve been waiting for?”

“Yes, but…” But it’s different now. I want to lounge around with you on the sofa with no clothes on, and not have to worry about one or both of us getting shanked in a back alley by Matthew Brown. I give you a frown that’s meant to be impatient, but probably comes across more as doleful and tragic. You’re just staring at me, looking (if possible) even more Sphinx-like and inscrutable than usual.

“Is that your poker face?” I say irritably. “You should take that to Vegas. You could win us enough money to pay for some bodyguards and a really good attorney.” Even as I say this I realize I am not entirely joking…at the very least, I bet you can count cards like a fucking boss.

“You are capable of managing it,” is all you reply. You wave your hand around in a rather complacent way. “I am more than capable of managing it.”

“Oh yeah, because you managed him so successfully before.”

You frown at that – needless to say you hate being reminded of one of the few times somebody got the better of you. “Well, if you recall,” you say, “he had the advantage of surprise on that occasion, and that is an advantage which he has now lost.” You give me a sardonic smile. “Be reasonable. Even I could hardly have supposed that you had been flirting with him so industriously the entire time to coerce him into acting on your behalf.”

“I did not flirt with him,” I say mutinously.

“Well, at the very least, employing your formidable ‘powers of persuasion.’ Shall we refer to it as that instead? It actually sounds worse you know; it has a rather unfortunate euphemistic quality to it.”

I open my mouth to yell at you, but you sail on impervious. “Most people would have taken recourse to the legal system and petitioning the mercy of the FBI. But not you. Really Will, what a cunning boy you are; I must confess that I have passed many amusing moments picturing you tirelessly and
manipulatively fluttering your eyelashes at Matthew Brown through a set of bars in the service of securing your revenge.”

“Oh for…”

You quirk an eyebrow at me. “I suppose you made that charming blue jumpsuit work to your full advantage?”

I am sorely tempted to throw my coffee mug at you, but ultimately resist on the grounds that you’d only catch it and sling it back again (no doubt going for a head shot and taking me out in the process). “Sometimes I loathe you,” I say, “you do know that, right?”

You give me the most appalling smirk and then flick your eyes up and down my body in a way that makes me start blushing. “Yet even with such an appealing incentive,” you add, “we see that he was ultimately unsuccessful and fate thoughtfully intervened on my behalf.”

“Yeah – fate. It was hardly anything you did.”

“On the contrary, it was because I had an ensemble of eager little rescuers who were touchingly keen to take my word over yours and come running to my assistance. As you see, it is incredibly difficult to try and outwit me; even you have never been entirely able to manage it.”

“God, you’re so vain. Clinical and pathological narcissist. Do you have insurance on your ego? Do you have to pay excess baggage on it every time you need to get on a plane to flee the country?” This is actually putting it mildly: your ego is so enormous and all-consuming that’s it’s like a third person in the apartment; I should probably be asking it to contribute to the rent.

“You are quite correct, as you often are” you say in a self-satisfied voice. “My ego, inevitably, is obliged to be proportional to the scope and breadth of my numerous capabilities. Hence it is naturally somewhat magnified in size. Examine your Nietzsche and you will see that it is an entirely sensible position to take.”

“Oh Christ, they better not arrest you again; they’ll have to charge the two of you separately. They’ll need to give it its own cell.”

“Dear me Will, how terribly rude you are.”

“Yeah, well…eat me.”

You just give me a rather evil smile, and at that precise moment someone knocks loudly and bad-temperedly on the door. I jump so hard I nearly fall off my goddamn chair.

You look as if all this is entertaining you enormously. “It would indeed be an excellent thing if that were Matthew Brown on the other side,” you say, “but I’m afraid that is probably too much to hope for.”

“Yeah,” I reply weakly.

You smirk at me. “Shall I answer it?”

“What? No! Jesus. I’ll get it. No one’s supposed to know you’re here, remember?” I frantically tug on some jeans and replace the shock blanket with a t-shirt (these items are still strewn around the sofa from last night – I can’t help blushing slightly at the sight of them); and the knock comes again, loud and peremptory. You just sit there, watching me with obvious amusement.
“So anxious,” you say, smiling at me broadly. “Don’t worry Will. If you do end up in prison, I promise to come and visit you unfailingly.”

“That’s not funny. How is that funny?” I open the door. There’s a tall, rangy man stood outside: angular and fleshless with pale, slightly bulbous eyes, and wearing a pair of dingy dungarees with the rental agency logo on the breast pocket. He gives me an intense look from head to foot – it’s like his bulging eyes are literally crawling over me – and I instinctively shift a bit further behind the door.

“Mr Graham?” he asks, “You Will Graham?”

“Yeah.” I consider snapping ‘who wants to know?’ but ultimately decide not to: no point in looking overly defensive.

“The Building Super sent me to check up on you pal. Heard reports you’ve been subletting?”

“What?” I ask stupidly. “Subletting? No. Absolutely not. No way.” I sound so incredibly fervent that the only thing missing is an earnest salute followed by ‘Scout’s Honour Sir! And God Bless America!’ Christ, don’t overdo it, I think to myself.

He consults his sheaf of papers, making a big performance out of licking his thumb and arduously flicking through each sheet. “Tall, dark-haired guy been seen on the premises,” he finally says and I can feel the blood draining away from my face. Fuck. Fuck! I stare at him numbly. How is this happening?

“Oh, yeah?” I force myself to sound as casual as possible. “That would have been my Uncle. But he left last week, went back to Europe.”

“Mind if I come in and take a look?”

“You got some ID?” He rummages round in his pocket and produces some. Shit.

“Oh, yeah?” I say grudgingly, “But you know that you’re not allowed access to the property without 24 hour notice right? So…” (so fuck off).

He eyes the bruises on my neck and smirks. “What’s the matter pal? Am I interrupting something?”

I seize on this almost gratefully. “Yeah, actually, you are. My girlfriend’s visiting from out of town, so, y’know…” I wave my hand around a bit, trying to aim for a kind of shitty macho camaraderie, but am way too anxious to carry it off. I almost certainly look deeply weird: he probably thinks the girlfriend is of the inflatable, wipe-clean variety and has just been delivered from out of town in a cardboard box.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it buddy.” He gives me a horrible leering look, and I shrink a bit further behind the doorframe. “Tomorrow then.” He doesn’t say anything else, just keeps staring at me, and in the end I can’t stand it anymore and slam the door in his face.

I go back into the living room and run my hands through my hair. I can vaguely see my reflection in the window: it’s now standing on end and makes me look like I’ve been electrocuted. You’re just lounging on the sofa, looking completely unconcerned.

“Shit. Shit! Someone knows you’re here!”

“Oh the contrary, they most certainly do not know,” you reply calmly. “They suspect someone, yes, but not who. If that were the case, your entire building would be swarming with the FBI.”
This is undeniably true, but I still don’t like it. “Something’s wrong,” I say uneasily. “It is. It doesn’t make any sense. How could anyone have reported seeing you?”

“Your neighbor perhaps?”

“What, Mr Haversham? No. No way.”

“Yes, I am inclined to agree. He appears far too fond of you for that.”

“Do you think it’s got anything to do with that internet message?”

“I have no idea,” you say, “but it will be fascinating to find out.”

“How the hell could anyone know? You’ve barely left the apartment. You’ve barely left that chair.”

“Or, for that matter, this sofa,” you add innocently.

“That’s not funny.” Absently I rub at the marks on my neck, this time with dismay rather than satisfaction. Shit, I’ll have to find something to cover them up before anyone else sees them.

“You should have applied a cold compress this morning,” you say. “It would have broken up blood clots and reduced the swelling. Of course it is too late now.” You look revoltingly smug about it.

“Great, thanks,” I reply, “thank you for that utterly pointless advice.” I fling myself down next to you on the couch, and you pull me against your chest and wrap your arms around me.

“Is it so pointless?” you murmur into the top of my head, “I am sure it will be of great benefit in the immediate future.”

I can feel myself starting to blush, and bury my face in your shoulder to hide it. “We should leave,” I say. “Tomorrow, as soon as possible. We should go to a hotel…somewhere out of town.”

“Of course, if you wish.”

“You go first and I’ll meet you there later. I don’t want to risk us being seen together.”

“Naturally not. Although I would suggest you delay a little longer; if you desert your apartment immediately after that inspection it will look suspicious.”

“Yeah…okay. But you have to find somewhere tomorrow. Then you’ll be out the way when that guy comes back.” I start biting my nails again, anxious and fretful, and only belatedly realize that I’m clinging onto your shirt with my other hand. Realistically I know the most sensible thing would be for you to go while I stay here (for you to just go, full stop), but already that’s out of the question and I dismiss the thought as soon as it occurs. Because it’s still like before, like that night on the cliff, like it always has been: we sink or swim together.

“I suppose it was the presence of your enormous ego that raised the alarm,” I say mournfully. “Ironic considering I wasn’t even charging you rent for it.”

“You are a ridiculous boy.”

“You are a ridiculous narcissist.”

“Brat.”

“Old man.”
“If I am an old man,” you say, “then that virtually makes you a sort of catamite; although admittedly a rather elderly one. I shall have to start calling you Ganymede. Or would you prefer the Latin equivalent?”

“Gross. Don’t you dare.”

You give me another patronizing hair ruffle. “Don’t be so despondent Will, such agonizing is premature. We have a plan; there is nothing about the immediate situation that is without remedy, or deserving of significant alarm.”

“I guess.”

“Well, you may be guessing but I am not. My position is based on careful and impartial consideration of the facts.”

I sigh and stare at the wall straight ahead. There’s a patch of damp that looks a bit like the outline of California. You’ve stopped ruffling my hair but have kept your hand on my head, and the weight of your palm is oddly reassuring.

“Stay with me,” I say abruptly.

“When?”

Always. “Tonight.”

“Oh, I thought we had just agreed that?” You uncurl my fingers from your shirt, one by one, then take hold of my hand, examining it as if it’s some foreign, fascinating artefact. “And numerous nights thereafter I should think. You have already discovered that I am not particularly easy to get away from.”

But you’re easy to lose track of, I think. Oh fuck, there’s so much I could lose isn’t there: life, liberty, mind. Sense of self. You. What will I do if I lose the other half of my equation? What would you do? Shit, I’m overreacting aren’t I? Nothing’s really happened after all. Not really. Some self-righteous asshole has reported me to the rental agency and Matthew Brown has left just one of numerous bullshit messages. You’re not concerned (but nothing ever concerns you). It’s okay. Isn’t it? It’s fine. But it’s no good, not really. Because deep down I know that it’s not.

“I can see that you are unhappy about this,” you say, “and considering everything you have been dealing with in the past few months it is unsurprising that your resources are running a little low. Console yourself that you have a considerable advantage now which you did not have before.”

“What?”

“Well, obviously, you have me. I am going to appeal to that rather hackneyed expression ‘strength in numbers’ – because now there are two of us.”

“There’s always been two of us.”

“Yes, but we have hardly always enjoyed our current level of cooperation.”

“Hmm,” I say absently. I want to tell you that this isn’t entirely comforting, because what’s mostly bothering me is the fact that I now have your welfare to worry about rather than just my own. But I don’t know how to tell you that without sounding appallingly sentimental (and anyway you’d probably just be offended on the grounds that I’m appearing to question your status as an unassailable badass). Instead I shift my head off your shoulder and haul myself upright.
“All will be well,” you say, as if we’re discussing renewing the mortgage.

“Yes,” I reply vaguely. I want to touch you in some way but can’t quite summon enough courage to initiate it (which is actually pretty fucking ridiculous…considering what I did in front of you in this exact spot less than 24 hours ago all bets should now officially be off). I clear my throat self-consciously, and shuffle about a bit; drawing my knees up under my chin, then wrapping my arms round my legs, before finally abandoning the whole thing and putting my feet back on the floor. I can’t stop staring at your lips, and finally glance up only to realize you’re staring equally fixedly at mine. Then we move our gaze upwards at the same time and our eyes lock together.

“Please,” I can hear myself saying.

“Come here Will,” you reply softly. “You know you can have this; you don’t need to ask.” You put your hand round the back of my head to draw me towards you and I can’t stop myself making a small moaning noise, because I need this so much and still can’t quite believe I’m allowed to do it. We entwine into one another as naturally and easily as if we’ve been doing it for years (as if we’ve always done it, as if we’ve never done anything else), and while the kiss is deep and slow and gentle – none of the frenzied urgency of last night – the passionate sincerity is exactly the same. The sensation of your tongue lapping against mine is incredible and I helplessly arch myself against you, whimpering slightly at the loss when every so often you pull away so you can trace your lips against my cheekbones, my eyelids, my forehead, your touch so incredibly light it could be just the brush of eyelashes. You keep murmuring my name, low and rhythmic: “Will…Will…Will,” one hand stroking the side of my face, the other running up and down my back, sometimes shifting up so you can caress the delicate skin behind my ear, or slide your fingers underneath my collar. Oh God, it’s so good to be in your arms like this: it feels like it’s where I’m supposed to be. It feels like everything, ever; yet it doesn’t feel like anything else. I press up against you, craving as much contact as possible, frantic to be close to you, and you seem to instinctively realize what I need and curl your arms around my back, holding me tightly – so tightly it starts to hurt, and it’s still not enough. Your lips feel so good against mine, your mouth is so warm, your body so heated and hard and heartening; and I cling onto you with both hands as if you’re the single lifeline in the abyss. Oh God, I want you to understand. Please hear it, please know. And into every movement, every sigh, every breath, I desperately pour everything that I’m not able to tell you in person.

I need you.

Don’t leave me.

You frighten me.

I’m frightening myself.

I want to protect us and I’m scared that I can’t.

I want us to stay and I want us to leave.

I want to know you but I don’t know how.

I want to feel sure.

I want too much.

I just want you.

I want you, I want you; I want you all the time. And I know that I shouldn’t but I do.
The afternoon limps on and I’m feeling progressively pissed off and restless, wishing that the day would just end so we can start over again tomorrow. You’ve promised me you’ll leave first thing in the morning and find a hotel, and it’s clear that you now consider the matter settled.

“Why wait?” I say tetchily, “Why not just go now?”

“Because there is no real reason, at present, to suppose that the inspection was anything other than what it appeared to be: in which case there is no need to leave. If, on the other hand, it served more nefarious purposes then it is highly likely that the building is being watched in the expectation of you or I vacating the premises. In which case, it is far more sensible to leave early tomorrow when all your neighbors are departing to their tedious little jobs and it will be easier to merge into the crowd.”

All this without once glancing up from your book.

Even though I know you’re right I’m finding your composure highly aggravating, so end up storming (possibly even flouncing) out of the living room and hurling myself onto my bed so I can sulk in private. I put the radio on and they’re playing Nirvana – I don’t even particularly like Nirvana, but it reminds me of being at college (when life was that much…simpler) so I crank it up and let the shrieking riffs wash over me. Your head appears round the door almost immediately (you still manage to look dignified whilst you’re doing it, despite the fact such a thing shouldn’t be theoretically possible). “Will,” you say politely, “that noise is…ungodly.”

I scowl at you, but turn it down anyway. Once you’ve left I turn it up again. God this is such bullshit. It’s the waiting I can’t stand. That and the not-knowing – I can’t get a proper grip on what’s going on and it’s driving me crazy. I try calling the rental agency, but they won’t tell me anything: “We treat all reports or complaints about existing tenants in the strictest confidence” chants the administrative fascist who answers the phone. I can tell he’s literally reading some bullshit spiel from a piece of paper, and in the end I lose patience and hang up. The only other thing I can think of doing is speaking with Mark, the janitor, so I have a shower and put on some fresh clothes, then head out to track him down. He’s lurking as usual in his dingy little office, and I ask him if he’s aware of a new inspector from the rental agency but he says he’s not. “Don’t look at me bro,” he says, “I just work here.”

I pick up a ruler on his desk and anxiously fidget with it. “Yeah, but there was something off about this guy. He was really…odd.”

“You think anyone regular wants to stick working for a shitty company like this. I mean look at me!” He guffaws uproariously, although I don’t really get what’s meant to be so funny. I smile at him thinly and give the ruler a particularly elaborate twist, upon which it promptly snaps. I look down at its mortal remains in genuine dismay. “Oh, shit,” I say, “I’m really sorry.”

“Jeez, man, watch it.” He snatches back the ruler (now in two halves, so technically rulers plural) and gives me a dirty look. “Why’d you care so much anyway? You say you’re not subletting so what’s the big deal? Just let him inspect your place – job done.” At that point his phone goes off and he flaps his hand at me to be quiet. I stare at the logo on his overalls, trying to mentally compare it with the one I saw on the inspector earlier. It looks exactly the same, as far as I can tell: if it was a forgery, it was expertly done. Who could have had resources for expert forgery? Surely not Matthew Brown. Oh Christ, what am I talking about – ‘expert forgery’? It would have been easy enough to steal. From down the receiver I can hear the sound of a scolding female voice, and Mark keeps rolling his eyes and grimacing at me. I just stare back, numb and expressionless.
“Women!” he says when he hangs up. “Can’t live with ’em…can’t kill ’em either.” He pauses awkwardly when I don’t respond. “Hey man, it was a joke.”

“You should do my job,” I reply sharply, “and you’d realize why I don’t think it’s funny.”

“Oh, jeez, chill out,” he says irritably. “Don’t take your crazy stress out on me. If it was just your uncle stopping by then you ain’t got no need to worry.” He gives a snort of phlegmy laughter. “I mean, come on, someone like you? No one’s gonna believe you’d be shackled up with another guy!” He laughs again, and I long to tell him to fuck off, but in the end just turn round and leave in silence.

*****

It’s only nine o’clock, but already the day feels like it’s never going to fucking end. You’re still sat on the sofa, engrossed in one of your (incredibly boring looking) books and I feel equally envious and resentful that you can be so completely unconcerned. I sit for a while and watch you, fascinated in spite of myself. Your reading speed is phenomenal: it’s like you can just run your eyes up and down each page.

“Why are you so comatose?” I ask accusingly.

“Why are you so relentlessly energetic?” you reply without glancing up. “You are constantly running around; no wonder you are so thin. It would benefit you enormously to sit still once in a while and simply…contemplate.”

I can’t think of a suitable rejoinder to this except for something incredibly juvenile (along the lines of ‘contemplation is shit’) so in the end I don’t answer at all, just start pacing round again. At one point I stumble over my briefcase, and take a perverse amount of satisfaction from throwing it in the air then drop-kicking it across the room. It lands almost perfectly by the side of the table.


You finally lower your book and give me a pointed look over the top of it. “You need to try and relax.”

“I am relaxed.”

You don’t even bother responding to this obviously bullshit statement, just raise a single sardonic eyebrow.

“I am reasonably, fairly, at least somewhat relaxed.”

“No indeed. You are reasonably, fairly, and at least somewhat hysterical.”

“I am not hysterical,” I say witheringly. I give you a look that would quell a lump of granite (and which needless to say rebounds off you with no obvious effect). Instead you just keep staring at me, with that faint half-smile on your face.

“There is nothing more to be done at present,” you say. “We have established a course of action, and can begin to instigate it in the morning. In the meantime your constant agonizing is entirely pointless.”

“I don’t understand why you’re not more bothered.”

“Because it would not achieve anything.”
Once again I know you’re right but can’t bring myself to admit it, so renew my increasingly demented pacing. It must be driving you mad (to be honest I’m actually starting to piss myself off).

“Will,” you say at last, “come here.”

I hesitate slightly. Pride makes me want to delay: to take a stand, hold my ground; not automatically comply with whatever you tell me to do. But you’re just sat there, watching and waiting, and for all my intrinsic resistance I still can’t stop myself obediently walking over and parking myself in front of the sofa. Technically I’m in the dominant position – standing up and looking down on you – but I might as well be on my knees for all the difference it makes. You don’t say anything at first: just look at me, dark and luminous as always, and I find myself shuffling awkwardly from one foot to the other; longing to say something, to try and take control, but simultaneously finding it completely impossible to do anything except stand there – docile and pliable – and await further instructions. You briefly put your hands on my legs to make me stand still, then lean back, stretching your arms behind your head.

“As I remarked, Will,” you say at last, “you really need to turn your mind away from Matthew Brown et al.”

I open my mouth to object, then close it again.

“We are in agreement with this, yes?”

“Y-e-s,” I say reluctantly.

You smile again, and there’s something about it that’s both slightly threatening and incredibly enticing, all at the same time. I can’t draw my eyes away from you. “Very good,” you say smoothly. “Now – take off your shirt.”

“What?”

You don’t repeat yourself, just carry on looking and smiling – smiling and looking – and I find myself automatically reaching up for the top button, fumbling to obey what you’ve told me to do. “Wait,” you say. “Not like that. Do it…slowly. Start with the cuffs. Fold them back, I want to see your wrists.”

“My wrists?”

“Yes. You have beautiful hands, very slender and well-shaped. See?” you reach out a finger and run it up and down my forearm, over my wrist, and along my knuckles. “Look how long and delicate your bones are. So fragile and willowy, yet capable of great potency. These little hands. There is so much ferocity in them, isn’t there?”

I don’t answer immediately and you glance up. “Yes,” I say faintly.

“Yes.” You lean back against the sofa again, regarding me. “Carry on please,” you add. “Just the first few buttons at the top. Pull the collar down and show me your throat. A little lower. Perfect, that’s very good Will. Keep your eyes on me. Now undo the rest, one at a time. Be careful, don’t tug the buttons off. You’re nervous aren’t you? See how your hands are trembling…your ferocious yet fragile hands.”

I don’t answer immediately and you glance up. “Yes,” I say faintly.

“Yes.” You lean back against the sofa again, regarding me. “Carry on please,” you add. “Just the first few buttons at the top. Pull the collar down and show me your throat. A little lower. Perfect, that’s very good Will. Keep your eyes on me. Now undo the rest, one at a time. Be careful, don’t tug the buttons off. You’re nervous aren’t you? See how your hands are trembling…your ferocious yet fragile hands.”

I swallow – hard – and finally manage to navigate unfastening the whole thing, hesitating for a few seconds before glancing up at you anxiously. You lean forward very slightly and fix me with one of your concentrated stares. “Take it off,” you say.
I raise my hands to obey, lose my nerve, waver again; and then finally let it slide off my shoulders and fall to the floor. You make a vaguely regretful noise, immediately picking it up and pleating the fabric into neat, precise folds.

“Don’t be so careless,” you say, “I am very fond of this shirt. The shade of blue is extremely flattering: it complements your eyes and complexion rather wonderfully. It deserves more considerate treatment.” You lay it down, almost tenderly, by the side of the sofa, then return to running your eyes over me adding, almost like it’s an afterthought: “Now please take off everything else.”

Oh God. I falter slightly – I feel so intensely self-conscious, I almost can’t bring myself to do it. My hands really are shaking now and it takes several scrabbling attempts to unfasten my belt; it’s like even my fingers are freaking out and won’t obey direct orders. I suspect you’re relishing my discomfort. It doesn’t matter how long it takes me, you’ll just wait – serene and smiling – you’ll wait as long as you need to. You’ve already been waiting haven’t you? You’ve been waiting for years. I have to awkwardly lever my jeans to avoid catching on my – incredibly obvious – erection, which is already flushed and throbbing and leaking wetly at the tip and I feel like I’m going a bit mad: the heady combination of feeling incredibly vulnerable and panicky and unbelievably turned on. You stretch back languorously, observing me with unconcealed satisfaction.

“I believe that this rather excites you,” you say. “You like it don’t you? Displaying yourself, showing me how beautiful you really are. And that makes you feel ashamed, then guilty; and then somewhat unnerved. And then, finally…it frightens you. Doesn’t it Will? Because your better judgement, and all your wonderful morals, are screaming at you that you should not be enjoying it quite as much as you are.”

“Oh God, don’t,” I say piteously, “don’t do this now.” This endless fucking metaphor. All right, I think defiantly, I admit it. I enjoyed killing him. I enjoyed the fact that you enjoyed it. And I was so horrified by that I threw us both off a fucking cliff. What do you want me to say? Nevertheless as soon as I’ve asked you to stop I immediately regret it, because if there’s one thing that’s likely to encourage you it’s being told to leave it alone. But to my surprise you actually do stop (I guess, as always, you have a flawlessly tuned sense of exactly how far to push). You’re still smiling, but instead you put both your hands round my waist and pull me towards you, delicately massaging the jut of my hip bones with your thumbs. The sensation makes me tremble.

“Come here,” you say quietly. I stumble slightly as you tug me forward, and allow you to manoeuvre my body so I end up sitting on your knee facing you, my own knees resting on either side of your thighs. You push my hair out my eyes, then hold my head firmly in place – one hand on each side – so my eyes are exactly level with yours.

“My dearest Agent Graham,” you say, “one day – and that day will be quite soon – you know that you are going to have to admit it.”

I stare back at you, blinking a bit stupidly. You hardly ever blink; it’s one of the many subliminal signals that make you so intimidating. “I know,” I finally say in a hushed voice, and even those two tiny words seem to take on a momentous significance, because it’s the first time I’ve really conceded that there’s something to admit.

You lean forward and kiss me lightly on the forehead. “That’s very good Will,” you say.

This is all now getting way too intense, and I’m increasingly desperate to do the non-verbal equivalent of changing the subject, so on a whim I clumsily unbutton your shirt and run my hands, somewhat shyly, over the chiselled lines of your torso. It’s actually pretty daunting: a highly visceral reminder of how strong you are (and the fact that, if you put your mind to it, you could crack me in half with no effort at all). You’re watching me do it, amused but affectionate, seeing how far I’ll have
the courage to go. I can’t actually bring myself to try and fully undress you – it feels like too much of a power shift, and while you’d almost certainly allow it (I think…I think you would), I’m not sure that I want to attempt it. Besides, it’s starting to look as if I have a previously untapped submissive streak a mile wide – which of course you’ve picked up on – because the clothing disparity is actually turning me on even more (oh God). You lean forward again, gently tugging on my ear lobe with your teeth, and I gasp and let my head tip back. You laugh slightly at that, reaching out to tangle your fingers in my hair, pulling it until it’s just on the cusp of being painful.

“I find the way you do that rather captivating,” you say. “You are so sensitive. See how rapturously you respond to even the slightest of touches? The contrast is fascinating: the most perfect arrangement of artless naivété tempered by utter dissolution and shamelessness. How do you manage it?”

There’s a pause, and I realize with mounting embarrassment that you actually expect me to answer this (frankly, impossible) question. “I…I don’t know,” I reply.

“One of your many dichotomies I suppose,” you say, amused. You trail your hands down my ribs and grip my waist and I can feel myself starting to quiver. “So…now that I have you here, what should I do with you?”

I hesitate. My mouth has gone totally dry. “I don’t know,” I say again.

“My poor Will. You don’t seem to know very much at this precise moment do you? That is rather uncharacteristic. Although I must admit that I find you rather appealing this way. Not to mention the distinction it confers; no one else gets to see you like this do they.”

I just shake my head, a bit helplessly, and you place a hand on the back of my neck, gripping it gently yet firmly. “You still haven’t answered my question,” you say.

I close my eyes and lean back into your touch. “Anything,” I hear myself replying.

“Anything?” you repeat smoothly. “You know that if you are unable to express a preference then I’m afraid it means you are placing yourself entirely at my discretion? Which is rather courageous of you, isn’t it – all things considered.” I whimper very slightly and you move your hand away from my neck so you can place one of your long fingers over my mouth, rubbing my bottom lip with your thumb.

“Open your mouth Will,” you say. And of course I obey immediately, letting it fall open so you can slide your finger inside, flicking my tongue and sucking it almost ecstatically as I gaze at you submissively from under my eyelashes. You stroke my back with your other hand, and I’m vaguely aware of how tightly I’m clinging onto your shoulders. It must be hurting you by now, but you don’t even flinch.

“So beautifully pliant,” you say, “I believe I could do anything I chose to you when you’re like this and you wouldn’t stop me. Would you? You wouldn’t even try. One day we shall have to fully put that to the test won’t we; explore how far you really would be willing to go.” I make another small moaning noise and you pull your finger out my mouth, wet and glistening, and slowly and torturously glide your hand down my spine and over my ass.

“Oh fuck,” I think, as I finally catch on to what’s going to happen: and then I really do cry out as I feel your slick finger running insistently round the rim, gently stroking to test how tense I am, coaxing the muscle to relax, before sliding into the tight heat of my body, right up to the first knuckle, caressing and exploring in a way that’s both careful yet incredibly persistent.

“Oh my God,” I say faintly. I’m now gripping your shoulders so hard my fingers are aching, and you
move your face round to kiss my wrist.

“Does it feel good?”

“Yes…Yes.”

“Has anyone ever done this to you before?”

“No.” I gasp again and bear down on your shoulders for leverage, frantically pushing my hips back against your hand, exactly as you predicted I would.

“Have you ever done it to yourself?”

Oh for fuck’s sake – is nothing sacred? “Yes,” I say in a small, reluctant voice. Absurdly, considering the situation, I still feel embarrassed admitting it. And this is fatal, because of course you can tell and persist even further.


“In…in the shower. Please don’t, this is…just stop…”

“How many fingers did you attempt?”

“Jesus, I don’t…I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember; so it was endeavoured some time ago and not repeated? You didn’t like it then. It didn’t satisfy you?”

“I don’t…shit, why do you even want to know?”

You curve your finger to the side and I cry out again. “I am curious,” you say.

“Ah…Oh God…No, okay? It wasn’t like this.”

“Not like this,” you repeat. You reach out your other hand to cradle the back of my head, holding it in place. “Don’t close your eyes,” you say, “I want to watch you while I’m doing this. You shouldn’t be so self-conscious Will. We shall have to work on that; you need to take more pride in how wonderfully unique you are.”

“I can’t…I’m not…”

“But you are,” you say. “And right now you feel exquisite. Like wet silk tightly stretched and wound around me. I can already imagine how perfect you are going to feel when I’m really inside you, when you let me take you for the first time.”

I can’t even answer this, so let my head fall forward onto your shoulder to hide my face. “You’re growing so relaxed,” you say caressingly. “So open. So receptive. It’s as if your body is trying to draw me in. It hasn’t taken you long has it Will? One would think you were extremely used to this, as if you did it all the time. You can feel it as well, can’t you? How little resistance there is?” You remove your finger almost entirely then slide it back in with a deep thrust, and I give a low moan and desperately arch my spine so my hips push harder against your hand.

“That’s right,” you say softly. “It feels good doesn’t it? You enjoy it so much. In fact I think you are ready to take a little more now, would you agree?” God, the sound of your voice is turning me on to an almost insane degree; you could be simply reading out of the telephone directory and it would still be driving me crazy. You kiss my shoulder, then slip your finger out of me – I make a small whining
noise in protest at the sudden absence – and reach around for your coat, which as usual is hanging over the back of the sofa. I blink in confusion, wondering what the hell you’re doing, and become highly aware of the harsh, almost ragged, sound of my own breathing. I’m growing light-headed, and am still grasping your shoulders in a desperate attempt to steady and ground myself. You’ll probably have bruises tomorrow. It’s still too much to process, even last night didn’t fully prepare me. How is it possible you can have this delirious effect on me? I didn’t expect…God, I didn’t know.

You retrieve a small plastic bottle from your coat pocket, which I can immediately see is lubricant. Oh, so you did get some after all – you crafty bastard. You drizzle it over your fingers with a slight flourish, and then over my cock as well, although you do it straight from the bottle and don’t actually touch me (oh fuck, fuck, please touch me, this is torture. You’re obviously doing it on purpose). The lube is clear and plain, thank God, vaguely medical looking: I don’t think I could have coped if it had been brightly coloured and smelt like synthetic fruit, I really don’t. You slide you fingers between my legs again, slick and smooth, but this time you just stroke me for a while, deliberately teasing and provocative; pressing against the opening but moving away again whenever I think you’re finally going to push inside. I can feel myself starting to make small whining noises, thrusting desperately against you hand.

“Tell me,” you murmur into my ear. “Ask me for what you want.”

“Oh God, please, just…”

“What?”

“Please…I can’t.”

“Yes you can.”

I falter again. I know you’re doing it on purpose; you want to overwhelm me, break down my inhibitions. Oh Christ, I feel like I’m going mad. “Please. Please,” I finally say. My voice sounds so raw, so frantic. “Oh fuck. Please…I want your fingers inside me.” I make a deep gasping noise, more as a way of expelling the tension than anything else, and renew my rigor mortis grip on your shoulders. “Oh God, I want it hard, deep…I want you to make me feel good…I want you to make me come.”

“Very good. You are an obedient boy, aren’t you?” you say. “I think that can be managed,” and you reach down with your other hand and spread me open so you can slide your thumb inside. My whole body tremors convulsively, and you pull out, teasing me again, before slowly working in two fingers and caressing me from the inside, almost like a massage. I cry out helplessly and you tug on my bottom lip with your teeth, simultaneously hooking your fingers forward and rubbing in small circles against my prostate. Oh God, shit, fucking hell, it feels so good.

“Mmm, you like that don’t you?” you say. “See how you are spreading your legs and pushing against me. Look at you Will; completely overwhelmed by the pleasure of it. I wonder if you could come just from this? One day we shall have to try it. I will lay you out you over my knees again, just like you are now: explore your body, touch you like this for as long as it takes, but refuse to give you anything else. Do you think the stimulation would be enough? Do you think you could? I can already imagine how you would look, so utterly desperate and wanting, pleading me for release. I wonder how long you could bear it. Would you beg, do you think?”

“God, you know I would. You know…”

“I do.” You kiss my forehead. “So beautiful, Will. I would like to know what you are thinking right now.”
“I can’t…I can’t think…”

“No, I don’t accept that I’m afraid. I believe you can. You are so clever aren’t you? Such a lovely, quick mind: it never truly goes quiet. I believe that you can, and I believe that you will; because you know that I want to hear it and you like to please me, don’t you?”

“I’m…God, I don’t know. I’m just thinking how good it feels.”

“Where does it feel good?”

“ Everywhere, all over. My whole body. Like a pressure building up.”

“Yes, you’re so close aren’t you? And if we can keep you like this for a little longer it will feel even better. Tell me, are you surprised by how much you enjoy it?”

“Yes.” I gasp again and give my hips another violent push, and you put your hand on my neck to keep me steady, curling your fingers around so you stroke the side of my throat.

“But it’s not just the physical sensation is it?” you say. “You know most men would find it pleasurable when done correctly, so that part doesn’t entirely bother you. There is something else isn’t there?”

“Yes.”

“And what is that?”

“You. I didn’t think...ah, God, it’s because it’s you.”

“Yes. You weren’t fully prepared for that, were you? You thought that when the time came you would be able to resist. That all your morals and reason, and your fine good judgement, would supervise you more effectively.”

“Oh God, I know. I know.”

“You did not anticipate I could overtake you so entirely?”

I bite my lip and shake my head. You’re so relentless. I can’t quite bring myself to look at you.

“And yet you find yourself craving it. Don’t you? The way I can make you feel. The way I can get inside you.”

“Oh fuck you. Christ, why are you doing this? You already know, you’ve always known.” You don’t respond immediately, just slide your hand down my face, and I can’t stop myself twisting round and grasping at it with my teeth, desperately trying to bite you. You make a sighing sound so low it could almost be a hiss.

“Quid pro quo Will,” you say. “You must be aware that I find you utterly fascinating in return?”

“I don’t…I’m not sure. I don’t know.”

“Do you not? You really are quite singular, aren’t you – so extraordinary, yet so unaware of it. It doesn’t matter; you are simply going to have to learn. It won’t be difficult. You are so clever after all. Such a young, inventive, ingenious thing as you are.”

You shift your thumb so you can stroke the slick taut skin around where your fingers are sliding in and out of my body, then press down sharply on my perineum and this time I almost scream with the
pleasure of it, frantically thrusting my hips so I can fuck myself on your fingers. “Beautiful,” you say caressingly, “just like that. That’s perfect.” Up until now you’ve basically been rocking your fingers in and out of me, but now you keep entirely still, letting me do all the work and set my own pace. I moan again, wild and needy, and you return your hand to the back of my head so you can pull me forward and kiss me; hard, almost bruising, like I’m being invaded. You keep on holding my head in place, your fist clenched in my hair, possessively forcing your tongue into my mouth, and I can taste a faint coppery tang from where my top lip has caught against your teeth. I desperately want to touch myself, but don’t quite dare: somehow it feels as if you’ll stop me, like I have to wait for your permission, and I find myself breaking my mouth free from yours and moaning “please, please, please” into the side of your face.

“Please what?” you ask. “What are you begging for?” You press your teeth against my throat. My hands aren’t restrained and you haven’t tried to stop me: there’s no real reason I can’t do it myself, yet despite the shame and submission, I know I’m going to say it anyway. “Please,” I gasp again. My voice hitches. Christ, I sound like I’m about to cry. “Please let me come.”

“Good boy,” is all you say, and it’s both vaguely disturbing and incredibly thrilling: your mouth is pressed against my forehead and I can feel you smiling against my skin. You push me backwards, almost roughly, and I have to renew my grip on your shoulders to stay balanced. You’re staring right at me, and it’s so fucking intense I can feel my own eyes widening slightly; like my skin might start blistering under the heat of your laser-sharp scrutiny. “Oh God,” I say, “You. You’re so…you’re so…” But I can’t quite articulate what it is that you are. “I am,” you reply. Without taking your eyes off my face you reach round to stroke my cock, which at this point is so hard and aching it’s actually uncomfortable, and I’m so far gone that even the briefest touch of your hand is enough – it’s more than enough – and I cry out your name as I come all over your chest in a series of hot pulses that are so fast it’s actually vaguely embarrassing. You don’t seem to mind though. “My God Will, you are quite perfect,” you say. You sound slightly breathless yourself. Likewise I can hear myself, the almost-sobbing gasps that I’m making, and at this point my entire body gives out and I slump forward, exhausted, trembling and panting onto your shoulder. You wrap both arms round me and the harder I shake the tighter you hold onto me.

“It was so good,” I whisper helplessly, “you make me feel…it’s too much. I can’t…I want you so much.”

“It’s all right,” you say soothingly. “It’s all right Will. You were wonderful, you did so well.” You stroke my sweaty hair and kiss the top of my head, then rest your cheek against my temple, running your hands up and down my back. I feel so fucking raw and overwhelmed, it’s almost unbearable, and I can’t stop clinging to you. I’m painfully aware of the division that’s ratcheting around my head: one part confused and fearful, the other half ecstatic and exhilarated. I feel like I’m starting to split in two. Starting: one day I actually will, and it’s going to be both exquisite and excruciating, and I know it’s going to hurt – the only question is how much. But I still don’t let go of you, won’t pull away. I can’t. I don’t want to.

“You appear to have ground to a standstill,” you say at last. There’s something unfamiliar in your tone and I can’t quite interpret what it means, so I just stay slumped over your shoulder with my face buried in your neck. You don’t say anything else, simply hitch your arms round me and spin me over so I’m flat on my back on the sofa (I make a feebly confused ‘oof’ sound at the suddenness of it… fuck knows how you can manoeuvre my weight so easily. But you can). Then you sit next to me on the very edge of the cushion: your face over mine looks very severe in the half-light. I’m expecting you to make some smartass remark about how spaced-out and stupid I’m being (again…Christ), but
you don’t. Instead you lightly touch my cheek then vanish next door: I can hear a tap running and
assume you’ve gone to wash your hands (not to mention your chest), and am not expecting you to
reappear, as you do in a few moments time, with a selection of bedclothes that you proceed to wrap
me up with. Normally I’d find this almost unbearably annoying and embarrassing, but right now I
just let you. Oh God though, seriously, I really need to get a fucking grip at some point or our entire
sexual contact is going to be solely comprised of you (expertly) getting me off and then administering
shock blankets and psychological first aid afterwards. On an impulse I grab your wrist. “I’m sorry
this is so one-sided.” I finally manage to say. My voice sounds scratchy and hoarse from all the
yelling and I can feel myself blushing. “I want to. I will. It’s just…you know…”

You give me a slightly unreadable smile and reach down to tilt my chin up with one finger. “You do
not need to apologise,” you reply. “I entirely understand that this is not straightforward for you; it has
only been a short time since we re-negotiated the boundaries of our relationship in this interesting
way, so it is unsurprising to me that your mind is taking a little longer than your body to accept it.” I
can feel myself blushing even harder when you say this, accompanied by a somewhat surreal sense
of irritation at my body, as if it’s being devious; betraying me in some way by colluding with you.

“Besides,” you add after a pause, “I do not view this as a transaction; you do not owe me anything.”
You move your hand away from my face and gesture towards the sofa. “I should like to stay here
with you for a while, would that be agreeable?”

I nod instead of answering, and hitch bit closer to you. You lift me out the way so you can sit down,
then pull me towards you so my head’s cradled in your lap and you can run your fingers through my
hair. You retrieve your book from the side of the sofa, and proceed to read sections of it to me:
something to do with Polymaths in the Renaissance (it’s actually touchingly optimistic of you to
assume I’d be remotely interested in that crap). Plus big chunks are in Italian so I can’t understand a
fucking word you’re saying, but I don’t care about that either because I just like to hear you. Your
voice is quite different when you’re reading it: still with that rough, smoky edge, but flowing and
undulating in a way that it never does when you speak English.

Lying here with you like this it’s actually surprisingly easy to forget that I’m a weird fuck up and
you’re an enormous maniac, and instead imagine that we’re just two normal people (I can’t bring
myself to say ‘couple’) who’ve just had sex (except we haven’t…yet). God, it’s unbelievable –
unfeasible – how far things have shifted. My entire world’s moved so far in the past week I’d need a
Fed-Ex van to bring it back again. It’s actually pretty crazy: rather than wanting something I can’t
realistically have, I now have something I shouldn’t reasonably want. I know this. I know I shouldn’t
want you, want us, want this (whatever the hell ‘this’ actually is). Yet I do: probably more than I’ve
ever wanted anything. And I want you to want me too, to fight alongside me, to watch over me –
and be watched over – and most of all to never leave again. Because the simple truth is that I don’t
know anymore what I’d do without you.

“What are you thinking?” you ask. You’ve stopped reading and are looking down at me: of course
you’ve noticed the intense expression on my face, the way my eyes have lost focus as I retreat into
myself.

I hesitate. I can’t possibly tell you any of that. Can I? Christ, no…definitely not. “Amongst other
things,” I finally say, “I’m thinking that I must be mad.”

“Of course you are,” you say briskly. “You should be grateful. ‘Madness comes from the Gods
whereas sober sense is merely human’.”

“Oh yeah? And ‘whom the Gods would destroy they first make mad.’”

“No one will destroy you, not even the Gods. Let us consider that even I was not entirely able to
manage it.”

“That’s not as reassuring as you probably intend it to be. Also – did you just compare yourself to the Gods?”

You smirk slightly. “I do not intend it to be reassuring. It is merely an objective fact.”

“Is that all we’re left with then?” I say tonelessly. “Trading objective facts?”

“No, not all,” you trace your finger down the side of my face and I briefly close my eyes. “We also have our subjective interpretation of all these detached, impartial facts. In addition we have one another. Objectively, we are forging a new type of alliance. Subjectively you may decide that this is the very best thing that could have happened to you, or the very worst.”

“As usual there’s a lot of emphasis on me in the conversation. What about you?” I sigh slightly. “I suppose you already know?”

“Of course I know. I have known for a very long time.”

“And?”

“And that even as an adversary, the world is far more interesting and gratifying when you are in it. As an ally it promises to be infinitely more so.”

“Subjectively speaking?”

“Subjectively speaking, of course.”

“Subjectively speaking,” I say, “I don’t have a fucking clue what’s going to happen to me, and…”

“…And that bothers you.”

“Yeah. Yeah it bothers me.”

“But?”

“But…I’m open to finding out.” And it’s true: I am.

“A voyage of self-discovery,” you say. “I can guarantee that it will prove immensely entertaining. And of course you continue to have the advantage of myself as a most conversant and experienced guide.”

I shift my head slightly so I can look at you. “Meaning what? To find myself I have to lose myself in you?”

“You have already found yourself Will. Your true self that is; you just don’t want to acknowledge him. Your true self is not what you believe yourself to be – or even what you wish you were – but what you have spent your entire life trying to hide from yourself and conceal from the world. Not that it is entirely your fault of course; you have constantly been surrounded by people who reward you for pretending to be something you are not.”

“No. No, that’s not true.”

“You don’t want to acknowledge him,” you repeat ominously, “…yet you have always recognized aspects of him in me. You knew it immediately, just as I did. It merely took you longer to admit it.”
“Aspects, maybe,” I say sharply, “but I’m not like you. Not really.”

“No, indeed you are not. You would be much happier if you were.”

“I’m fairly happy right now.”

“And long may you remain so,” you reply. “Just be mindful of the fact that to constantly renounce and disavow one’s true self is one of the greatest acts of self-violence which it is possible to inflict. It requires a degree of audacity to examine oneself Will, and considerable fortitude to tolerate whatever pain might result from the knowledge. But it is far preferable – far more profitable and admirable – than the agony of constant, mindless denial.”

“Do we really have to do this now? I’m not you’re patient anymore, remember.”

“Technically you were never my patient.”

“Thank God,” I reply sulkily. You make an amused noise and tap me on the forehead.

“There are no right or wrong choices,” you say, “not for people like us. It is not merely a question of true or false, correct or incorrect: the road less travelled or the path not taken. None of the usual rules apply.”

“So what do we do then?”

“We simply make our choice,” you say. “And after we have made it, we make it into the right one.”
Chapter 27

I sleep so deeply I end up doing a convincing imitation of a corpse, and when I wake it’s to the sound of you moving quietly around the bedroom. It’s still dark outside, although you must have got up a while ago because the bed’s fucking freezing. I blearily pull up the cover until only the top of my head’s sticking out, and am starting to contemplate drifting off again when I feel you smooth back my hair and lightly kiss my forehead.

“I shall see you very soon,” you say. “Be sure to look after yourself in the meantime or I shall be very displeased.”

I push the rest of my head above the cover. “Did you just kiss me goodbye?”

“Well,” you reply, “let us consider: I pressed my lips against you just prior to departure. So you must examine the data and draw your own conclusions.”

“You kissed me goodbye,” I say rather wonderingly.

“Your powers of deduction are truly intimidating.”

“No, it’s just…I dunno, it’s just not the sort of thing I imagined you’d do. Have you done it with other people?” Oh God why did I say that last past? It makes me sound like a needy, insecure asshole (which I obviously am, although there’s no need to advertise the fact quite so enthusiastically).

“Yes, of course – but rarely as sincerely.” You ruffle my hair. “Go back to sleep Will, you look completely exhausted. No doubt all the mental energy you have expended in the past few minutes has worn you out.”

“Hilarious. Some people actually consider me to be quite smart you know…I’ve got degrees and everything.” I start to retreat again, before changing my mind and abruptly re-emerging. “You’ll text me won’t you? When you arrive? Let me know where you are?”

“I shall.”

I struggle to sit up and glance at you dolefully. “Be careful won’t you?” I say. I’m so tired I keep blinking at you, and I can’t help thinking it must be making me look incredibly pathetic, like something doe-eyed and diminutive from a Disney cartoon (for fuck’s sake).

You sit down next to me on the bed and put your hand on the side of my face. I promptly start blinking again. “I believe we have already had this conversation,” you say, “and my determination and capacity to be careful have not altered in the meantime.” You smile slightly. “Are you batting your eyelashes at me, or do you have a nervous twitch?”

“I’m not…it’s…oh for God’s sake.”

“Where are your glasses?”

“I don’t know,” I say gloomily. “I never know where they are. I need two pairs: one to wear, and one to use to find the other ones.”

You flick your eyes round the room and immediately retrieve them (in a typically unlikely place: this time underneath the windowsill), then put them on the bedside table.
“You could always wear them on a chain round your neck,” you say innocently. “It is a style which that elderly neighbor of yours manages to carry off extremely well.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha.”

You sit down on the bed again. “What time is the inspector arriving?”

“Well, I said 24 hours. So I guess around 3pm?”

“Then you must likewise be careful. Your judgement is usually fairly reliable and it may be that your reservations about him were not entirely unfounded.” You frown slightly. “To be frank, Will, I am not particularly happy leaving you alone but regrettably, in this case, it is unavoidable. You have Jack Crawford’s gun to hand?”

I nod and you give me a serious look. “If you are at all concerned, then you must contact me immediately.”

“Thanks, but it’ll be fine. I can handle it myself. You really shouldn’t come back here.”

“Will…” you say severely.

“Okay, yes. All right. Fine. I’ll call you.”

“Be sure that you do.” You stand up and flex your shoulders. “I believe I shall miss this hovel; it has acquired a rather pleasant set of associations. You are going to remain here tonight, yes?”

“Yes. Like you said, no obvious changes to routine. I’ll go to the office tomorrow then meet you afterwards.”

“Excellent.” You look down at me and smile again. “You look utterly tragic, like a photograph from some sort of charitable appeal. Such dejection is really quite unnecessary; the situation is under control.”

“I know,” I say (even though I don’t).

“Everything will be well,” you reply. “I shall not allow anything unfortunate to befall either myself or you. And we both know that I am never wrong about anything.”

“Well, actually, I think you’ll find there was that one time…”

You lightly press your finger against my top lip. “It will be fine,” you say. “One way or another.”

I open my mouth again to protest, and you roll your eyes at me. “Stop agonizing. One more word and I shall be obliged to gag you. Perhaps using one of those forensic anti-bite masks; I always thought you looked particularly charming in those.”

“I’d like to see you try,” I say crossly (although I have a sneaking suspicion that you may well try: no doubt you carry one — if not several — around with you on a permanent basis in the way that other people carry spare change or sticks of gum).

“I’d like to see you try,” I say crossly (although I have a sneaking suspicion that you may well try: no doubt you carry one – if not several – around with you on a permanent basis in the way that other people carry spare change or sticks of gum).

“But how would you attempt to stop me?” you reply thoughtfully. “I know – perhaps you could improvise a garrotte out of the chain you will have to acquire to hang your glasses on.”

“Oh my, aren’t you hilarious this morning? I take it all back. I won’t miss you at all.”

“Yes you will. As I will miss you, despite your extensive talents for being aggravating,” you lean
down again and press your lips against the top of my head. “But it will only be for a short while; I shall see you again tomorrow.”

Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow. And although I promised myself I wouldn’t, I nevertheless find myself clinging onto you because even though I’m desperate for you to vacate the apartment, I still don’t want you to leave. A hell of a lot can happen in 24 hours.

“I don’t want you to go,” I mutter into your hair. Christ, I sound so pitiful; why am I acting like this?

“I must. I will come back.”

“When are you leaving?”

“In about 15 minutes, I thought. The volume of people will peak around then; it will be easier to merge in.”

“Come back to bed. Please. For 15 minutes.”

You give me a quick look – you’re probably surprised that I’m initiating for once (to be honest, I’m fairly surprised myself). Then you follow it up with a slow smile that’s so incredibly amatory and suggestive it should probably come with an age-restriction warning.

“Well done Will, I applaud your sense of enterprise,” you say. “I did not entirely expect it; it would appear that the process of breaking you in is proceeding somewhat quicker than anticipated.”

If anyone else said that to me I’d tell them to fuck right off, but when it’s you my immediate feeling is ‘Oh God yes, break me in: then break me afterwards, I don’t care.’ You sit down again on the bed, and I gaze at you for a few seconds before hesitantly reaching out to start unfastening your shirt. My hands are steady this time, although I’m biting my bottom lip and am aware I probably have an almost comically intense expression on my face. You just watch me, still smiling and completely at ease. God it’s all right for you, I bet you’ve never felt awkward or indecisive in your entire life. I probably wouldn’t either if I looked like you; like something that’s been chiselled in a workshop, angled and sculpted, perfectly fine-boned and fierce (why do you have to be so perfect?). My pulse is starting to speed up, every nerve throbbing and tingling. Come on, I think, it’s fine. It is. I can do this. This time I am not going to need a shock blanket. I refuse to need a shock blanket.

I take a deep breath and reach for your belt when you suddenly grab my wrist. “Wait,” you say, “come out from under there; I want to see you.”

Although I falter a bit at this, I recover much quicker than previously. It’s your tone, I think – how intense and sensuous you sound. It makes me feel more self-assured, emboldened by the knowledge that I want to look desirable for you; that I want you to want me. Fuck it anyway…it’s hardly like it’s anything you haven’t seen before. I push the covers back and shift myself so I’m kneeling in front of you, aware that I’m trembling very slightly (one part the cold, two parts nerves, seven parts: incredibly turned on). You run your eyes over me approvingly and I find myself basking under your gaze, arching my back and allowing my legs to fall a little wider apart.

“You are such a beautiful thing aren’t you? You really should not be so self-conscious.” You pull me towards you and kiss me in an incredibly filthy way; yanking my head back by my hair so you can push your tongue deep into my mouth, pushing and probing until I begin to moan and gasp for breath, then gripping my waist and forcing me against you so I can grind my hips against yours.

Eventually you pull away, still looking more composed than anyone in this situation has a right to be,
although there’s an unmistakable glint in your dark eyes. “So,” you say caressingly, “how would you propose to spend the remaining 12 minutes?”

I gaze back at you, blinking slightly (again…for God’s sake) and somewhat stunned from the passion and intensity of kissing you. To be honest I hadn’t actually planned this far ahead, mostly because I was assuming/hoping you’d just take the lead as usual and sort something out yourself. I have a vague idea that I want to jerk you off, but in spite of myself can’t quite start the necessary proceedings because I’ve been inconveniently overpowered with a crippling surge of performance anxiety. I’ve only ever done this to myself, never on anyone else, not once, not one single time. Oh God, what if I’m crap at it? I’m probably going to be crap at it. I suppose, to be fair, it would always be daunting to do this for the first time with another man, and now I’m trying to instigate it with the singularly most impressive and intimidating example of maleness that I’ve ever encountered (and considering my assorted encounters over the years that’s actually saying a fuck of a lot). There’s also the fact that I really want to make it good for you, and have unhelpfully chosen this precise moment to start questioning whether I possess the necessary skills to pull this off. Pull it off? Oh God, shut up you fucking idiot.

Some of this miserable conflict must be showing on my face, because you give me one of your weirdly compassionate looks (that I still can’t believe are totally genuine…I can almost imagine you practicing them in the mirror when I’m asleep and scoring yourself out of ten) and push me down with one hand on my chest until I’m lying flat on my back. You lie next to me, casual and graceful, and as long and lithe as a panther. “You do not have to,” you say. “Don’t try and force yourself.”

“I do want to,” I say. “I do. I really want to.” I reach out again for a second attempt at unfastening your belt, doing it extremely slowly in order to buy myself a bit of time and deliver a hastily constructed mental pep talk (although unfortunately it ends up containing the phrases ‘get a grip’ and ‘how hard can it be?’ and the tragically escalating levels of unintended innuendo makes me want to start laughing with nervous hysteria). Although I probably could laugh if I wanted to, you wouldn’t mind. You don’t care about conventions; you delight in everything that’s outrageous and absurd. You’d be fascinated by my laughter, you’d want to know why (and what, and how), but you wouldn’t really care; you wouldn’t be affronted. A normal person would take offense, but you never will. You’ve never cared how weird and inappropriate I am, have you? You relish it, encouraging and inciting ever greater extremes. You break the boundaries other people aren’t even aware of.

Oh Christ, look at you. You’re so…God. I lean in frantically so I can kiss you again, trying to taste you, savour everything about you that’s extraordinary. You’re so striking: your face, your voice, the way you move and speak and think. How did I never acknowledge that before: how stunning you are? I feel a bit lightheaded with longing. I want to absorb you, to crack open your bones and crawl inside you. You kiss me back, on and on, pressing me down with the weight of your body, then finally reach behind you to get the bottle of lotion off the bedside table (it’s just suggestively sat there right next to a box of tissues…oh Christ that is so embarrassing. I should have hidden that. Why didn’t I hide that?). You pull away briefly and drizzle some over my fingers, rubbing my hand together with yours to warm it up, then take hold of my hand and wrap it around our erections so I can jerk us both off at the same time. I make a helpless gasping sound as my breath catches in my throat. The sensation is unbelievably intense, and I can’t quite believe I’m actually touching you like this; that you’re allowing – encouraging – me to do it (I’d also vowed to myself that I wasn’t going to start comparing cock sizes but it’s impossible not to because you’re so much bigger than I am. Oh shit, you really are…you can’t possibly fuck me with this, you’ll kill me). Then I give my fist an experimental thrust and we both groan at exactly the same time, and I lose track of everything except how good it feels. The surge of pleasure is feverish – overwhelming; and I have a sudden sense that I could stay like this forever; could die like this.

“There you go,” you say. “That’s it. Very good Will.” I give a half-laugh that quickly turns into a
gasp. I want to wrap my legs round your back, grip you as close as possible, but the angle’s wrong. You curl your hand over mine, stroking my fingers and massaging my knuckles with your thumb. You don’t try and force the pace though, just let me move how I want to. Oh fuck, it’s completely perfect, so slick and wet and smooth. You feel incredible, and I feel incredible because of you, each one of us enhancing the other: it’s like we’re joined together, muscle entwined with flesh shot through with bone. You hook your other arm under my back and round my shoulder, resting you weight on your elbow. It’s unbelievably intense like this; your face only inches away, your eyes boring into mine. It’s like I’m breathing your air, inhaling you in. It should be unsettling – being this intense, this fixated – but it’s not. Your hair has fallen over your forehead and I reach up to push it back because I want to see your eyes. God, I need to come, I’m so close; yet even as I’m frantically chasing it I know I don’t entirely want to, because the moment I do then it’ll all be over and you’ll leave.

“It’s really good,” I say faintly, and I can hear my voice catching. “It feels so good.”

“I know.” You lean down and kiss the space between my eyebrows. “For me also.”

“Oh God. Fuck. I’m going to…oh God.”

“Yes,” you say, “exactly like that. So beautiful, Will. Keep your eyes open, let me look at you.”

I tip my head back, bearing my throat – knowing how vulnerable it makes me look but not caring – and helplessly canting my hips towards you as my breath hitches and I frantically jerk my hand over us both, drawing leverage from my entire arm until my shoulder aches. We’ve already found a natural rhythm, syncopated to each other’s movements and the raw passion of it seems to have slowed down time, drowned out everything else: all I’m aware of is you. Seeing you like this, feeling your desire, the mutually fervent pleasure, has driven me completely wild; there’s something so exhilarating about watching you come apart at the same time as me.

“I want more than this,” I can hear myself saying, and there’s an urgent intensity to my voice that’s strange and unfamiliar. “Oh God, I want more, I want everything. I want you inside me, please, I need it.”

“Soon,” you reply softly. You lean down again and run your teeth down the side of my face, and it’s like the most gloriously brutal caress. “I want that too.”

“Oh God, yes, soon. Please.” I have a sudden image of myself on my hands and knees at the edge of the bed with my legs spread apart, you stood behind and gripping my hips as you fuck me. The thought is such an enormous turn on that it nearly makes me come.

“Very soon.” This time you begin sucking the side of my neck, so roughly that it hurts, and I know it’s going to leave the most fucking awful bruise and the idea that you’re marking my skin, that you’re branding me as belonging to you – that people will see, will know that someone’s done this to me – is enough to finally tip me over the edge and I cry out desperately as I start to come, spilling and pulsing over our entwined hands. You’re much quieter than I am, just tighten your grip on my shoulder then close your eyes with a deep groan, but it seems in that moment that it might be the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen in my whole fucking life; shit, if I could it would be enough to make me come again. You briefly let your forehead rest against mine and I let out a long shuddering breath then bury my face in your neck.

“Oh God,” I say. My voice sounds frayed and raw. “That was…that was….”

You turn my head round so we’re looking at each other, then give me a slow smile. “I concur,” you reply after a pause.
“Yes. Oh my God.” This time I do actually laugh and run my hand through my hair, remembering just in time to use the left one (because rubbing copious amounts of ejaculate onto my head would not be a particularly dignified note to end this on).

“And now you are preverbal.” You kiss my forehead, then stand up and neatly pluck a tissue from the bedside table to clean your hand before starting to dress with brisk efficiency. I draw another deep breath then roll my head round so I can watch you, my cheek resting on my am.

“I really must go Will,” you say. “I imagine it is rather obvious that I would prefer not to, but we are one minute from the appointed deadline. Stay there and get some rest.”

“Yes.”

You see me looking at you and pin me in place with one of your intense stares; even now you have such carefully controlled menace. “You look very peaceful,” you say finally. “Liberating, isn’t it, to discover that one’s yearnings are shared and mutual yearnings? That one does not have to yearn alone.”

I just gaze back at you. I don’t know what to say.

Briefly you pause in fastening your shirt and run your eyes over me. “In a way, of course, it is easier not to long for anything,” you add. “Because longing for what one cannot have is so corroding: all the hungering and coveting that propels us onwards and incites our worst behaviour. As such, it is an excellent thing to identify exactly what it is that one wants, because until you are aware you will never be in a position to obtain it. And in the interim will settle discontentedly for something less.”

“I know,” I finally say. What else is there?

You crouch down by the side of the bed so my eyes are on the same level as yours.

“Only you,” you say softly. “Only you Will. It was always you. No one else would ever have endured for this long, and here you are.” You reach out and run your finger over the scar on my cheek. “You have already shown me that you can survive. But tell me; do you think you can thrive as well?”

I stare back mutely, wide-eyed and unable to articulate what I’m feeling; then finally pull myself towards you so I can kiss you again, frantically and urgently, until you gently unhook my hands from your shoulders and lay me back down on the bed. You smile slightly, a faint gleam of teeth. “I will see you tomorrow,” you say, and I watch you go and already miss you.

*****

I fall deeply asleep after you leave, clinging onto your pillow (which is almost unbearably pathetic… but at least you’ll never know) then haul myself out of bed at midday to have a shower and make a desultory attempt at tidying up (mainly focussing on the sofa and the assorted clothes strewn round it – not to mention the dubious stains on top of it – so it looks a bit less like something from The Last Days of Rome). I’ve been aware of you performing various bits of cleaning and straightening ever since you arrived, so it actually looks far less squalid than it did before you came back; in fact I appear to have created more chaos simply by walking from one room to another, not helped by the fact I’ve tripped over the wastepaper basket and can’t be bothered to clean it up again. Ultimately though, I lose interest halfway through and decide to leave most of the rooms as they are. It’s not like I care if he thinks I live in a shit tip (which, considering that I clearly do, is probably just as well). Anyway, he’s hardly coming to check the condition of the apartment. Oh God…it only.
Fuck, I wish I could calm down about this. Maybe it is just a regular inspection? It might be. It could be. The guy was weird, for sure, but perhaps that’s a reassuring sign: if this was a set-up, then wouldn’t he make more effort to appear normal and inconspicuous? I know there’s no chance that Mr Haversham reported us, but someone else might have seen you – possibly the night you first arrived, when I was so freaked out that the Creedence Clearwater Revival could have been sat in the vestibule thrashing their beards and I wouldn’t have noticed. Subletting though…it’s such a weirdly specific accusation. Surely no one seeing a stranger going into my apartment on a single occasion would assume that?

Now I wish I’d told him to come earlier so I could get it over with; if I wasn’t so wary of attracting unwanted attention I’d just fuck the whole thing off and go on the run myself. I slump onto the sofa and start biting my thumbnail. You've already texted to say you've found a hotel and will meet me there tomorrow, and I keep taking out my cell to re-read it the message. I want to call you to hear your voice and be reassured, but can’t quite bring myself to do it – you’ve only been gone a few hours, it would look incredibly anxious and needy. God I really hate this place now without you here. It’s like you’ve left and taken all the oxygen with you.

Thirty minutes until he turns up. I’ve now bitten my thumbnail down to the quick, so switch over and make a start on the other one. My neck’s tingling slightly on the right hand side, and on an impulse I rummage around in the closet to locate a scarf as I don’t think I can bear the idea of him staring and leering at me again (particularly after this morning, which now makes me look like I’ve been gnawed). It’ll probably come across as a bit eccentric, but fuck it – anyway, it’s not as if it isn’t freezing in here. A demented part of me fantasizes about just telling him the truth, which probably wouldn’t help things all that much in the long run but would at least have the advantage of wiping the creepy smile off his face on a terminal basis:

ME: [Adopts self-righteous tone] So – all those marks on my neck that you were commenting on in a somewhat sleazy and inappropriate way.

HIM: I wasn’t.

ME: [Wags finger in manner of smug asshole] I think you’ll find that you were.

HIM: Yeah, okay, I guess I was.

ME: Well…do you remember the Chesapeake Ripper case?

HIM: [In horror] Of course I do. The mere mention of it strikes terror into my very soul.

ME: Well.

HIM: Well what?

ME: [Winks]

HIM: You don’t mean…?

ME: [Winks again]

HIM: Oh my God! What have I done! [Puts head in hands]

ME: [Triumphantly] Yes! I am currently in the pre-consummation stage of a sort-of-relationship-but-not-entirely with the Chesapeake Ripper! Picked the wrong fucking apartment to inspect this time didn’t you, you stupid shit.
[Door flies open. Inspector drops to knees and begs for mercy]

YOU: [Walks in looking incredibly badass] Hello Will. I believe you phoned me?

ME: Yes, this individual has been rude to me. Very rude. Somewhere between ‘profoundly’ and ‘inexcusably.’

YOU: [Smoulders erotically menacingly]

HIM: Forgive me! [Grovels]

ME: No fucking chance. [Cackles maniacally]

…Although at this point it all breaks down somewhat, because God knows what you’d actually do – if I directly told you to dispatch someone you’d undoubtedly say ‘no’ just to be awkward (or, more likely, encourage me to do it myself). In fact we’d probably just stand there bitching at each other, with you looming about in the background going “discover your true self Will!” like that old man in Star Wars (except in reference to murderous impulses rather than The Force) while the inspector took advantage of the resulting confusion to make a crafty exit down the fire escape. Oh shitting fuck, he’s going to be here any minute now.

In the end he rolls up at 3.02 on the dot, radiating petty officialdom – but also, unfortunately, something indefinably more sinister – and this time he barges straight past me as soon as I open the door.

“Watch it,” I snap.

He gives me another beady look. “Sorry buddy,” he says, “but I wasn’t going to take the chance that you wouldn’t let me in again.”

“I would have let you in yesterday,” I reply sharply, “if you’d followed the proper procedure and given me 24 hours’ notice.” Oh Will…you shameless bullshitter. Nevertheless it’s actually quite enjoyable to pull rank for once, so I deliver a pompous mini-lecture on following civic procedures – at one point I think I actually wag my finger at him – until I realize it makes me sound like Jack (if not like J Edgar Hoover himself. In fact if J Edgar Hoover and Kade Prunell had a liaison, then I would probably sound like the resulting offspring, and this thought is so horrifying that I promptly shut up).

He’s been watching me the whole time, a weird little smile on his narrow Harlequin’s face and a beady glint in his wide distended eyes. “Yeah, well,” he says, “I was over here anyway and thought it was worth a shot. Save a return journey, y’know? Can’t blame a guy for trying.” He gives a nasty braying laugh. “You’d be surprised how often it works out – most people don’t know their rights.”

I am now literally dying to recycle my previous fantasy scenario (‘Picked the wrong fucking apartment to inspect this time didn’t you, you stupid shit’), but manage to resist the urge. Instead I gesture at the empty room. “See?” I tell him. “Just me.”

He nods and makes a deeply irritating ‘hmmm’ noise, and I have to grit my teeth as he strolls round each room making an inflated performance out of examining everything. I stare at him closely while he’s doing it, trying to work out if I’ve seen him before. The best I can manage is that there’s something vaguely familiar about him, but it’s nowhere near marked enough to lead anywhere and in the end I have to let it go. More likely he reminds me of someone else – realistically, there’s no way I could have completely forgotten someone like him if I really had met him previously.

“Find me pretty interesting, do you pal?” he says suddenly.
“What?”

He waves his hand at me. “You’re really staring.” Oh balls.

“Am I?” I say vaguely.

“Yeah. Yeah you are.”

“Sorry,” I reply airily, “I didn’t realize.”

He narrows his eyes slightly at me, but doesn’t pursue it. “Better check your bedroom now,” he says instead. Ugh, gross, oh my God. Belatedly I wish I’d made more effort to clean up the bed because it probably looks somewhat…orgiastic (along with the sofa I now have a matching set of debauched furniture). I can’t bear to follow him in, so just stay in the living room, propped up against the wall with my arms folded and knocking the back of my foot against the skirting board. I wish you were here, I really miss you. Shit that sounds so pathetic.

“Your girlfriend left pretty quick,” he says when he comes back.

“Yeah, well, like I said: she was just visiting,” I snap. “What difference does it make? Are you telling me I’m in trouble now for not subletting?”

“No reason.” His eyes catch on a pile of papers on the table, and he leans over as if he’s trying to read them.

“Hey, knock it off,” I say crossly.

“Sorry pal. Just curious. Only perk of this damn job is rifling in other people’s lives.” I find this an incredibly odd thing to say and am about to tell him to leave when he sees your book, which I have stupidly forgotten to remove. He raises his eyebrows. “Interesting reading you got there. Bit of an intellectual, are you?”

Really I should just tell him to fuck off – it’s not like I need to explain myself – but because I am anxious I unwisely go into defensive mode and open my mouth to start justifying it. And then I realize I don’t have a goddamn clue what to say, and end up going “sort of,” then taking off my glasses and polishing them vigorously on my shirt as if to say: ‘behold, asshole, my fucking intellectual spectacles.’

“Nice,” is his only response. “Not just a pretty face, are you?”

“Excuse me?” I say, followed by a sound that is not entirely unlike a boiling kettle. I find myself wondering, somewhat hysterically, what would happen if someone said the same thing to you…not that anyone would ever dare.

“Chill, pal,” he replies, “I’m just messing with you. Just messing. It’s good to be smart. I wish I was smart. I’d not be doing this if I was smart. My family’s real smart: brother and father both doctors. But not me, I just do this. Just go round other people’s houses like this. I’m no one, really. So you know I don’t mean nothing by it. You just don’t look the type, is all.” He starts chuckling in a highly patronizing way, and I wonder if I should try and augment my intellectual credentials by pointing out that I’m actually a lecturer for the FBI (but wisely decide it wouldn’t do all that much good considering that the Polymaths of the Renaissance aren’t really renowned for being much help in the solving of violent and serial crime). Oh God, what’s he still doing here; why can’t he just fuck off?

“Look,” I snap, “if that’ll be all…?”
“Yeah, yeah,” he replies. He’s still staring at me. Now I really do wish you were here: all you’d have to do is turn round in your chair and raise a single eyebrow and he’d be shitting himself and vacating the building quicker than I could say ‘bogus intellectual.’

“I’m actually pretty busy,” I say sharply (my nails won’t just bite themselves, after all). “You wanted to look round, and you have; so if there’s nothing else…?”

“No,” he says, “there’s nothing else.” But he still doesn’t move.

“Right then,” I snap. “You can obviously see that no one else is living here, so I think we’re done.”

“Yeah, sure,” he answers. “We’re done.” He walks towards the door, with me following up at the rear ready to manhandle him through it and down the stairs (head first) if he shows any signs of changing his mind. He lingers in the hallway, so I slam the door just in time to hear him say “See you around Mr Graham.”

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**Option 1: Regular inspection.**

- **Reasons why**: Occam’s razor.
- **Reasons why not**: The simplest theory is almost never, ever the best one. Simple theories are shit. Fuck you Occam, and your razor too. You are shit. Your razor is shit. Complexity is a more realistic way to go.

**Option 2: New or returning enemy, currently unidentified.**

- **Reasons why**: Because fuck my life, that’s why.
- **Reasons why not**: There is absolutely no reason why an (as yet) unknown person wouldn’t want to kill me and/or you. But why make contact in this convoluted way?

At this point I try and calculate all the assorted enemies you and I have made over the years (both separately and in combination) but ultimately give up when I realize that it is both hugely depressing and mathematically impossible.

**Option 3: Matthew Brown.**

- **Reasons why**: A significant known threat. Still at large. Hates you, loves me (in a ‘I love your face, I’d like to put it on my mantelpiece’ kind of way). Most straightforward and obvious option (note to self: consider re-evaluation of Occam’s razor).
- **Reasons why not**: It doesn’t make sense that he’d send an accomplice rather than coming himself. How would he even get an accomplice? And isn’t all this a bit too subtle for him?

Oh fuck, I really don’t know what to think about this. After 15mins of mental effort, I realize that all I have manged to establish is the following:

1. Occam’s razor is shit (except when it’s not).
2. You and I are almost universally hated.
3. Matthew Brown wants my face on his mantelpiece.

I finally crack and decide I’m going to call you after all, and if it makes me seem insecure and pathetic, then I’ll just have to deal with it. It’s 6pm anyway, I’ve managed to hold out nearly all day. Briefly I think back to this morning, remembering myself lying underneath you and basically begging you to fuck me. Now that I’m here on my own I feel self-conscious about it. I don’t know if I even meant it (yes…probably). Do I really want that? (Yes…almost certainly). Would it be a
mistake? (I can’t even bring myself to answer that). Oh God, why does everything always have to be so goddamn complicated? My head’s starting to hurt, pounding like the bass beat in some shitty nightclub.

I press the button and you answer almost immediately. “Will,” you say sharply, “are you all right?”

“Yeah I’m fine. He’s gone. He left ages ago.”

“Good. Did anything happen to cause you concern?”

“No. I mean he was weird, like last time…”

“In what way ‘weird?’” Your voice sharpens like a chisel. “Did he try and do anything to you?”

“No, no, nothing like that. It’s just… I don’t know.” I take my glasses off and let them fall off the sofa (where I will probably never find them again) and run my hand over my face. “I forgot to move your book.”

“Alternatively it could be proposed that I forgot to take it with me.”

“He asked about it.”

“And?”

“I said it was mine.”

“So what is the difficulty?”

“Nothing, I suppose. I just…I just have a bad feeling about it.”

“Yes, I am aware. You sound somewhat shaken Will, and considering that you are not a person who lacks in fortitude there is obviously something about this situation which is unnerving you. Why don’t you drive over here and stay with me? It would only take you half an hour or so.”

Shit, I want to so badly, but it somehow feels embarrassingly weak to admit that I can’t manage a single night on my own. Instead, I summon a colossal level of effort and manage to say: “I’m fine. Thanks, but I’m going to keep to the plan and stay here.”

“Whatever makes you most comfortable,” you reply. “But contact me if you change your mind.”

“I will,” I say (I won’t). I stare numbly at your chair; I can almost imagine you sitting in it, regarding me with that thoughtfully quizzical expression on your face: ‘Come here. Take off your shirt. Let me touch you.’

“What’s the hotel like?” I ask. I get up and sit in your chair, pulling my knees up under my chin.

“It is adequate. It is not a hovel.”

“Marvellous.”

“No doubt you will turn it into one when you eventually arrive.”

“I’ll do my best. I know how enormously fond you are of hovels.”

“Only those with you in them,” you say, “and even then there are limits. For example, if you bring your appalling aftershave with you then you will be denied entry.”
“I don’t need to bring it, I can just use the bottle you’ve been carrying around all this time. If you can bear to let go of it for long enough that is. You should probably just wear it around your neck on a little chain…like me and my glasses.” (Speaking of which, where have those fuckers gone now?).

“I can already tell I am going to regret admitting that to you. You are truly merciless in identifying a weakness and exploiting it.”

“Three words: pot, kettle and black.”

“That is, indeed, undeniably true.”

I sigh and before I can stop myself say (again): “Be careful won’t you?”

“I believe that this has been ascertained. I suggest writing ‘Dr Lecter is continuously and inordinately careful’ on the front of your glasses as an aide-memoire. When you manage to find them, that is.”

“How did you…It’s fine. They’re right here.”

“Of course they are there, in a purely metaphysical sense. You just don’t know precisely where. Get some rest Will, you sound even more exhausted than usual.”

“Okay, maybe that’s a good idea.”

“And be sure to eat something.”

“Yeah.”

“Actual food – not something you foraged from a gas station and which is currently fermenting at the back of your refrigerator.” From the tone of your voice, you make it sound as if acquiring food from a gas station is a sign of the most unspeakable depravity.

“Yes, dad. Anything else? I’m not actually completely incapable you know. Are you going to start tying my shoelaces and holding my hand when I cross the road?”

“In matters of self-care you are, in fact, somewhat incapable: your assortment of freak viruses being a case in point. However I draw the line at holding your hand when crossing the road. Or at least until you can reliably locate your glasses and are less likely to myopically stroll under the nearest truck and take me down with you.”

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to mock the afflicted?”

“Of course they did, I simply ignored them. Are you yawning?”

“No.”

“You are either growling – which as a concept is appealing yet highly likely – or you are completely worn out and unwilling to admit it. Are you going to get some rest?”

“Yes.”

“And some food?”

“Yes.”

“And refrain from crossing any roads whilst blinking short-sightedley into the traffic?”
“Oh for God’s sake.”

“Splendid. Then I shall see you tomorrow, and ensure that I am extremely careful in the interim.”

After I hang up I double-check all the doors and windows are locked, then put Jack’s gun next to the sofa and curl up on the cushions, ignoring the shock blanket (even in a crisis situation there are limits) in favor of covering myself with my jacket. Your book is still lying on the floor, and I pick it up and idly leaf through it. God, what a load of boring crap. But it smells very faintly of your (pretentious) cologne, and I find myself clutching it like it’s a kind of talisman; something to give me strength for whatever might lie ahead.

I feel wretched, and it’s not just for my own sake, but for you. For me and you: for us. For the fact that we’re a symbiont circle, intertwined and interlocked, and that whatever happens to one of us is going to affect the other. Having only just got you back I can’t bear the idea of losing you again. Oh God, I think, something’s wrong. It is…it is. I just don’t know what. But it’s like a countdown’s started somewhere, like a timer’s been tipped: sand inexorably trickling down the hourglass. How much longer until zero?
I finally stress myself into a state of nervous exhaustion and fall asleep on the sofa, clutching your book like it’s a goddamn soft toy (for fuck’s sake), waking up about an hour later with a crick in my neck and the first stirrings of a headache creasing across my forehead. I blearily fumble around for my glasses, which I have a vague idea ought to be on the armrest yet needless to say are not…the little bastards.

“They were underneath the sofa,” you say. “I have placed them on the table for safekeeping. You should utilize your skills as a dog owner and train them to return to your whistle on command.”

“Thanks.” I rub my eyes, rake my fingers through my hair and then…Hang on. Wait one fucking minute. I swivel awkwardly onto my side, and there you are – sat in your chair staring at me.

“Wait. What?...You’re here!”

“Observant as ever, Will.”

“Yes – there is the small issue that you’re not supposed to be here. And how did you get in? The door was locked.”

“I took the precaution of having a second key cut when I left you the other morning.”

“Oh yeah, right – ‘the errands.’ You could have just asked you know; I would’ve got you a copy myself.”

Instead of answering you nod your head towards the book, which (mortifyingly) I am still holding onto. “Do you find that to be an effective sleep aid?”

“Yeah, actually, because it’s so incredibly boring. They should sell it on prescription.”

You just give me your patented ‘My dear Will, we both know that’s complete bullshit’ smirk, but (thank God) decide not to push it.

“Well,” you say, “I changed my mind. I decided I would keep you company during the final night in the hovel.”

“Did anyone see you?”

“They did not.”

I can’t help smiling (I suspect in a somewhat corny, sentimental way), and you smile back (except you look poised and enigmatic, and about as corny as a slab of granite). I roll off the sofa and start gravitating towards you, but manage to tangle my feet in the shock blanket on the way there and dramatically stumble sideways. You dart out the chair with one of your unnervingly fast movements and catch me before I pitch over entirely. I don’t try and get free straight away, just let you hang onto me.

“Are you all right?” you ask.

“I’m fine. I’m really glad you’re here.”
“Yes, I suspected you would be. It was clear that you were not happy being alone but could not bring yourself to admit it.”

“I would have been okay by myself,” I say defensively.

“Of course you would, you are extremely capable in many ways. Notwithstanding the fact that you are constantly being outwitted by your glasses and this blanket.”

“And you as well, I suppose. That means you are the spiritual brother of my glasses and the shock blanket…Are you really sure no one saw you?”

“Quite sure. As we agreed on several occasions, I was extremely careful.”

“How sure?”

“Will,” you say patiently, “I am sure.”

“Okay. Okay, good. So what are you going to do now?”

“I shall stay here tonight and return to the hotel in the morning. In all other respects the original plan still stands: you can go to your office tomorrow, drift about for a bit pretending to be an upstanding investigative official, and then join me afterwards.”

“Excuse me,” I say irritably, “but I do not drift about. I stride. Purposefully. I swagger around like the emperor of purposeful investigative official…ness.”

“You do not. You drift. You are terminally vague.”

“I am not!”

“I’m afraid that you are. You should be proud of it – it is part of your charm. More importantly it also means that people underestimate you, which gives you a persistent tactical advantage. Your formidable mental acuity is masked behind an exterior that is somewhat…”

I narrow my eyes at you.

“…confused.”

“I do not come across as ‘confused’!” I give you a shove against the chest, which needless to say has precisely zero effect. “Could it be the case that you’re actually being rude?”

“No. I am merely being candid.” You give me the most godawful smirk and coil yourself onto the sofa. “If you wish to retaliate, I declare myself willing to hear any reciprocal criticisms you might have.”

I briefly consider it, but ultimately decide not to on the grounds that whatever I say you’ll only come back with something ten times worse. “Tempting, but no,” I reply. “I’m going to have a shower, and sulk, and then get something to eat, and then generally drift about in a state of advanced confusion.”

“That all sounds charming. I am sure you will enjoy yourself immensely.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I shall read,” you reply, gesturing at the Renaissance Polymaths, whose severe bearded faces now seem to be glaring accusingly at me from the front cover of your book as if they’re all taking your side against me as well.
“Enjoy. I hope you and the Polymaths are extremely happy together.”

“I am sure we shall pass the time very agreeably.”

“You can have pompous, judgemental conversations in Latin about how confused I am.”

“Not in Latin,” you reply, “we are on more informal terms by now. We shall discuss your confusion in Florentine Italian.”

“Okay, great. That’s great.”

“Off you go now, young Will.” You wave your hand at me. “I believe you wished to have a shower and sulk before ordering some food, and I would not be averse to eating something myself. So please do be prompt.”

“All right, I will in a minute. Chill out.”

“Don’t forget your glasses,” you add, slightly maliciously.

“I wasn’t going to.”

“I’m sure – except that you currently have no idea where they are.”

“I don’t need them to have a shower. Or sulk.”

“That is a very fortunate coincidence isn’t it?”

“I do know where they are.”

“You do not,” you say without glancing up from your book.

“You’re such a complete pain in the a…Ah! There they are,” I collect them from the top of the table.

“I told you.”

“On the contrary, I believe you will find that I told you – when I placed them there after you lost them the first time. You look very fetching when you are asleep by the way. And with four older men too.” You briefly brandish the Polymaths at me who look, if possible, even more disapproving than before. “What a little harlot you are.”

“I was not sleeping with them. They put me to sleep.”

“Hmm,” you say, “I believe you have showering and sulking to attend to.”

I go into the bathroom and dig out a clean towel, but can’t stop myself sticking my head round the living room door and adding: “I was not sleeping with them.”

“They report differently, I’m afraid,” you reply. “It is somewhat inconvenient for you: four against one. I rather fear that the maxim of ‘a gentleman does not kiss and tell’ was not existent in their day, so their discretion cannot be counted upon. Would you like me to leave and take them with me?”

“No,” I say in a small voice.

“That is commendably brave of you. You are going to be sadly outnumbered all evening.”

I slump down onto the sofa and rest my head against the arm so I can stretch my legs across your knees. “I can’t be bothered to have another shower.”
“So you are going to skip straight to the sulking?” You put your hand on my thigh, idly rubbing it with your thumb.

“Yes. Not that I can be bothered to sulk about the Polymaths either; technically they belong to me anyway.”

“Oh yes, that inspector.”

“He was so weird. Something’s not right.”

“What specifically is alarming you? Asides from the fact someone reported it in the first place? And please be more precise than ‘weird’.”

“You think I’m exaggerating?”

“No, not at all. I take your concerns extremely seriously, but I can’t extrapolate without possessing the facts. Yesterday you were sufficiently convinced that it was a normal inspection to let him into the apartment. Something has happened since then to change your mind.”

“Not exactly… I mean it could’ve been. It might have been a regular check.”

“Except?”

“Except he was weird. And Occam’s razor is shit.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing. Look, it was…” I frown and drum my fingers against my chest, trying to find a sensible way to articulate it. “It was his manner for starters. Creepy. Overfamiliar; like he was constantly laughing at some private joke. He commented on these,” I gesture at my neck, “and made a big point of wanting to look in our… my bedroom.”

“And you think this behavior indicates an imposter, as opposed to a genuine employee who is somewhat socially and interpersonally… challenged?”

“He said I was more than a pretty face,” I say indignantly.

“I suppose we must own that to be true,” you reply, “although I am extremely unhappy with him speaking to you in that way. What a pity it is that I was not there.”

“He wouldn’t have said it if you’d been there. He’d have been too busy booting my ass out of the apartment for subletting.”

“So you do think there is a possibility it was genuine?”

“No,” I admit gloomily.

“No. I am inclined to agree with you.” You stretch your arms behind your head. “On consideration, I do not believe anyone reported seeing me; whoever he is, he knows who I am, suspects that I have returned, and believed this to be a promising place to begin searching.”

I sigh unhappily. I’d suspected that too, but didn’t want to believe it; the fact you’ve now said the same confirms it – constructs it as real. “Why?” I ask. “What makes you so sure?”

“I am not entirely sure, because it is never wise to theorize without full possession of the facts. However his rather inexplicable attention to these gentleman,” (you gesture at the Polymaths. Fuck
those guys…the miserable big-bearded bastards), “strongly suggests it. It is the type of reading material that would be associated with me rather than yourself.”

“So why draw attention in that way? Why make it so obvious?”

“Why indeed? Most likely it was a form of power play; he was trying to belittle you and make you uncomfortable. But it was unlikely to be the main purpose of the visit; he wanted to ascertain whether I am, or have recently been, in the building. However the lack of any more definitive action strongly suggests that it was only reconnaissance; he does not know for certain that I have been here. Probably the accusation of subletting was simply a bluff to determine your response. This means we must consider someone who not only knows us both, but is aware of my rather inconvenient regard for you.”

“I’m so glad I’ve caused you inconvenience.”

“No more than I have caused you, I would imagine.”

“Even Stevens,” I say absently.

“Quite. Of course the timing could be a coincidence, though it is highly unlikely. You say that nothing similar occurred before I came back?”

“No, nothing like this. Although I’ve had people following me.” I frown slightly. “But that could just as easily have been you…or one of the other two.”

“Oh yes, you do seem to prove rather irresistible to certain types of disreputable people. It is quite fascinating; why do you think that is?”

“God knows. You’re one of them, why don’t you tell me? On second thoughts don’t, I’d rather not know.”

“So you have Matthew Brown, and I have this mystery caller. We are evenly matched for the time being.”

“Well thank God for that. I’d hate to think of one of us feeling left out.” I stretch my arms and tip my head back further until it’s dangling over the edge of the armrest. “You know he said something to me that night,” I add, half to myself. “He said ‘You’re on your own now, just like you always were. No one’s going to come for you. No one knows you’re here.’”

“Well, once again he was wrong; because you were not on your own and someone did come.”

“Yeah.” I briefly think of Freddie Lounds and am tempted to respond with something flippant about having a monumentally badass Murder Husband on standby, but can’t quite bring myself to in case you don’t get it. “What if he sent him round?” I say instead.

“Again, please, with fewer pronouns.”

“What if it was Matthew Brown who sent the inspector?”

“That is also a possibility, I suppose.”

“Do you think he saw you in the alley? Do you think he knows you’re back?”

“You have already asked me that, and my answer has not changed in the meantime.”

“What if he did and he tells someone? Tips off the FBI?”
“He will not tip off the FBI.”

“Yeah, but what if…”

“Will, Matthew Brown does not perceive the FBI as his natural ally. It would be about as likely as you going to him in preference to Jack Crawford. If he knows that I am here he would come for me himself.”

“Or send someone else.”

“Or send someone else. You know in retrospect your quick thinking about providing 24 hours’ notice is a great shame. The inspector could have come in and we…”

I give you a nudge with my foot.

“Very well, I could have escorted him from the premises.” You shoot me a look that could be interpreted as ‘your constant denial about this is somewhat endearing’ but might equally be, ‘nice try but you’re fooling anyone, you dick.’

“Escorted him from the premises in a casserole dish. There’s still a hell of a lot about this which doesn’t make sense.”

“There is. I imagine that it will become clear in time.”

“Yeah,” I answer gloomily. “I imagine it will.” The discussion about being followed has reminded me of that night in the rain, the shadowy figure poised and vigilant. There’s a storm coming. I fall quiet, turning over various possible scenarios in my head before the silence is abruptly and dramatically broken by the sound of raised voices and shattering glass from outside the window. Our reactions are immediate, disparate and typical: I give a startled gasp and nearly jump out of my fucking skin, whereas you sharply flick your head round then jump to your feet, simultaneously grabbing my shoulders and pushing me onto the floor behind the sofa.

“For God’s sake!” I hiss. I’ve landed awkwardly and it takes a few seconds to try and swivel my knees round to get enough leverage to stand.

“Do not move.” You’ve already turned the light off and are looking out the window.

“I can…”

“Will,” you say ominously, “please do not make me repeat myself. You will stay exactly where you are until I tell you otherwise.”

I guess what you really mean is: ‘until I tell you it’s safe to come out,’ and despite the stress of the situation I feel absurdly touched by this (albeit also extremely suspicious because – why?) then I just go quiet and let my head fall back against the floor. God knows what’s going on: I can’t see a goddamn thing because the sofa’s in the way. It’s all gone quiet now, the noise cut off as if someone’s flicked a switch. If that’s Matthew Brown, I think, with a sudden surge of adrenaline, then I’ll fucking well kill him myself. I proceed to spend an enjoyable few minutes planning the various ways in which I might accomplish this, and all the while you are completely silent: watchful and still.

Finally I can’t stand it any longer. “What’s happening?” I hiss.

“Nothing…yet. The street appears clear.”

“Maybe it is nothing? This area is rough. People are always fighting and breaking shit.”
“Hmmm.”

“I want to come out.”

“You are not coming out. Now be quiet.” You actually sound quite frightening (God knows how you manage it: it’s not like you even need to raise your voice, just imbue the tone with something indefinable that’s soft and subtly understated yet still clearly tantamount to ‘do not even think about fucking with me’). This time I really do shut up and wait (sort of) patiently until you appear overhead and offer a hand to help me up.

“Nothing?” I ask.

“Nothing visible. That is not the same as nothing at all.”

“No…I know. I know it’s not.”

“Are the windows all locked?”

“Yes, I double-checked earlier.”

“Good.”

“I thought you weren’t concerned?” I ask fretfully. “You said you weren’t worried.”

“At this point I am not prepared to take any chances. As I told you, I trust your judgement. Since meeting that inspector you feel that something is wrong and I am disposed to agree.” You frown slightly. “The sooner you are out of this building, the better.”

“The sooner we are out of it.”

“Yes, granted; except I have more confidence in my ability to deal with any trouble which might arise.”

“Are you claiming to be concerned for my welfare?” I can’t help saying. “That is…ironic.”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” you reply. “Although in my experience irony is seldom absent from life’s more taxing situations.” You turn the light back on, then fold yourself onto the sofa and resume reading your book as though nothing has happened.

“Well…okay then,” I say. I go over to the window myself and hold a temporary, nervy vigil, peering out from behind the curtain and into the street. You’re right of course; there’s nothing to see. Maybe it really was just kids or crack dealers, or whatever the hell happens round this neighborhood on a nightly basis. Or maybe it wasn’t.

“Move away from the window, please,” you say suddenly; and I automatically obey, propping myself against the table instead. I keep darting anxious glances at you, resplendent on the sofa and so vibrant and present and whole. I can’t bear the thought of anything happening to you. I’d rather it happened to me; I wouldn’t leave the same kind of gash in the world that you would. As soon as it’s daylight we’re both getting out of this fucking place; briefly I curse myself for being so stubborn and not just joining you at the hotel like you originally suggested. It’s my fault you’ve come back here. I feel like going over to you and slumping in a heap at your feet with my head on your knee, but of course I don’t. You’re just sat there reading, completely oblivious.

“I could order the food now?” I offer, mostly because I can’t think of anything else to do. “Have you any preferences?” Ugh, grim…maybe not the best thing to ask you.
“Whatever you like,” you reply absently. You follow it up with some weird foreign word.

“What? What does that mean?”

“It is a term of endearment, I suppose,” you reply, without glancing up from your book. “It does not translate precisely. ‘Little one’ would be a close approximation in English.”

“Oh my God, I am not little.”

“It is merely a figure of speech.”

“I’m nearly as tall as you are.”

“There is no shame in being diminutive,” you reply placidly. “Have you never heard the expression ‘small yet deadly’?”

“I am not small!”

You look like you’re struggling to keep a straight face. “I am only teasing you Will,” you say, “now be a good boy and be quiet.”

“And don’t call me a boy. It’s infantilizing.”

“Well, you are younger than am I; so to me you appear rather boyish at times,” you finally look up at me, “particularly when you are throwing one of your spectacular tantrums.”

“Oh for God’s sake.”

You put your book down and this time you actually do laugh and hold out your hand. “Come here,” you say. I shuffle over and you pull me next to you on the sofa and wrap your arm around me. “Now truly Will,” you add, “please be quiet. You are, on occasion, enough to drive someone to drink.” I guess it could be worse – at least you didn’t say ‘enough to drive someone to murder.’ You’ve lost interest in me now, deeply engrossed in your book, and I want a way of getting your attention again that’s not too obvious (and won’t drive you to drink and/or murder), so disentangle myself from your arms and go and sit in front of the heater with my legs stretched out.

You look up immediately (result!). “Are you cold?” you ask.

“Yeah.” It’s true actually, I’m fucking freezing.

“Hardly surprising. You are still far too thin; you can’t efficiently retain your body heat.”

“Please don’t offer to feed me up.”

“I shall certainly be feeding you up once I have access to a kitchen equal to the task. Unfortunately that may not be immediately forthcoming whilst we are dependent on either hovels or hotels. However, it will not always be the case.” You give me a thoughtful look, but I can’t face asking you what you mean (not that you’d explain anyway; if you wanted to tell me you would). You don’t say anything else, and in the end I just order from the same restaurant service we used before (which you inevitably complain about, at one point acting like I’m trying to coerce you into eating something I’ve just foraged off the side of the road). You arrange the sofa cushions and an assortment of blankets on the floor in front of the heater, and we eat it there off our knees and drink wine out of mugs because I don’t have any wineglasses. I actually really like the way the light flickers across the room: as if we’re two bandits on the run, crouched in front of our camp fire.
“Why are you being so nice to me?” I suddenly say, apropos of nothing.

You give me one of your vaguely unsettling smiles. “Because you have not given me any reason not to be.”

There’s a slight pause before you start telling me about an art dealer you met while you were away; but after a while you stop talking entirely and just stare at me, and I can feel myself unfurling under the intensity of your gaze. Although I’m not drunk, the alcohol’s gone to my head and given me a warm, hazy feeling (although you can hardly start bitching about it after what I’ve done over the past few days).

“You’re thinking about all the pornographic things you’d like to do to me aren’t you?” I say, “I can tell.” I smirk and try and do my best imitation of your accent: “You are, on occasion, utterly transparent.”

You give me a withering glance, but I can tell you’re trying not to smile. “If that were true you could hardly blame me,” you reply, “when you are lounging in front of me as flushed and loose-limbed as you are, and gazing at me so invitingly with your big eyes.”

I choke slightly on the wine. “Oh my God, I am not doing that.”

“I regret to inform you that you absolutely are.”

“I’m not.”

“I’m afraid that you are. It is nothing to be ashamed of: if you weren’t so captivated by me, your life would have been far less interesting.”

“Ugh, shut up. I am not…It’s not…” You raise your eyebrows at me. “God you’re so vain,” I finally say.

“Naturally I am vain. I have an excessive and varied amount of things about which to be conceited, and a lack of vanity would be tantamount to ingratitude. At the moment I have you, which has brought me no end of satisfaction.”

I realize I don’t quite know how to respond – these unexpected compliments are still feeling a bit leftfield, not least because I’m not all that great with receiving praise at the best of times (my standard response being to either laugh awkwardly, or begin to earnestly and logically point out why the person is mistaken). I can’t help feeling I won’t get away with either of these strategies on you, so consider saying ‘you don’t have me’ instead (because, seriously – it makes me sound like a possession: as if I’m your goddamn Bentley or something). But as soon as I’ve thought that, I realize that I’m actually not completely averse to the idea (oh God)… so in the end I don’t answer at all; just give you a small smile instead. It’s so warm and tranquil with the flickering light, the locked doors and windows keeping everything out: like being inside a cave. I stretch my legs in front of me and flex my toes, and you pick up one of my bare feet and stroke along the arch.

I watch you doing it for a while: your hands are so graceful, you move them like a musician does. “We were therapist and patient once weren’t we,” I say idly. “Look at us now.”

“A ‘contrasting combination’,” you reply with a slight smile. “Although it is not the only one that applies.”

“What do you mean?…Or do I not want to know?”

“Merely that the ‘therapist-patient’ dichotomy is not the only relevant one, either now or in the past.
For example, I would add ‘teacher and student.’"

“Huh, I bet you would. I suppose you consider yourself the teacher. Which I dispute by the way, you arrogant…” I trail off, trying to think of an appropriate insult; you wait with an expression of polite expectation on your face. “You’re an ass,” I finally say.

You raise your eyebrows. “You really do have the most colorful vocabulary when under the influence. Are you going to suggest I look into the possibility of a ‘sex transplant’?”

I can’t help blushing a bit at that (which is doubtless what you intended). “No,” I reply quickly, “I’m nowhere near that drunk. And anyway, you are. But I still maintain that I’m not your student.”

“Not at all. In this instance the pairing applies to us both, as I have certainly learnt several interesting things from you. My other suggestion is ‘enabler and enabled.’” You give me a slightly unsettling smile. “Your turn, I believe.”

“Bullshitter and bullshitted,” I say with a flourish.

“Eloquent, Will,” you reply. “Again, that is clearly both of us. I’m afraid you cannot entirely claim the moral high ground there.”

I frown for a bit and chew my thumb nail. “Hunter and hunted.”

“And which is which?”

“Well I’m the hunter, obviously. I work for the FBI and you’re the FBI’s Most Wanted.” I wave my hand at you as if to imply ‘you do the math.’

You look as if there is a lot more you could say in response to this, but ultimately just smile instead (albeit in a vaguely sinister way). “Very well: cat and mouse.”

“Oh, I guess that one’s pretty indisputable,” I say irritably. “Why are we playing this game anyway? It’s shit. This is a shit game.”

“Ah, you are sulking now because you feel the comparison does not reflect well on you.”

“Not necessarily. Mice are vicious…Vicious little furry bastards.”

“Oh yes, of course, I forgot.”

“Well, they are.”

“Holy terrors, indeed.”

“I was ‘instrumental’ in apprehending you, remember,” I say. “Even Freddie Lounds agrees.”

“Oh well, in that case I suppose I must concede defeat,” you reply. “If even Freddie Lounds agrees. Nevertheless, the thesis is still somewhat undermined by the small fact that I turned myself in.”

“Because of me!”

“Yes,” you smile at that and begin stroking my feet again. “Once more you have me at a disadvantage, because that is undeniably the case. This is why the estimable Bedelia du Maurier always considered you to be my greatest mistake.”

“Am I?”
“Perhaps in some ways,” you reply thoughtfully, “although I hope you will prove to be much more than just that. It rather diminishes you, after all, to consider you as merely an error in judgement.”

“Thanks,” I say, “I guess.”

“You are most welcome. Now, I have one more.”

“What?”

“*L’amante e l’amato,*” you answer. “The lover and the beloved.”

I blink a few times, then just stare at you: I can’t tell if you’re being serious or not. “And which is which?” I ask automatically.

“What do you think?” You give me one of your blank, wide-eyed stares, then softly quote: “‘Loving someone liberates both the lover and the beloved.’”

I frown slightly; once again it feels as if you’re inventing new rules to a game that I ultimately won’t know how to play. “I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean,” I finally say.

“Don’t you?”

“No. You don’t…You can’t…You’re not like that.”

“Aren’t I? And what about you; what are you like?”

“I don’t know, but…not like that – not like you.”

“So I am not like that, and you are not like me. We would appear to cancel one another out.”

“We’ve always cancelled each other out,” I say tonelessly.

“Yes indeed,” you reply. “Yet here we are all the same.” And then you just stare at me again, and I stare back.

For a while neither of us says or does anything; just sit there gazing at one another, our breathing oddly synchronized, your dark eyes fixed on my face. It’s started to sleet, splashy white flakes pock-marking across the window. *There’s a storm coming.* And I stare at you, staring at me, and am suddenly overwhelmed by an awful, helpless urge to cry because I have *absolutely no idea what’s going to happen to us.* It’s like gazing down an elevator shaft: realms of darkness and no way of guessing how far the emptiness goes.

I don’t know the future, or what’s lying ahead; and the only thing that feels really distinct and indisputable is that we might not come back from it. You could get caught and caged tomorrow; I could get shot/stabbed/fed to mutant pigs next week. It’s not like either of us has the type of lifestyle that lends itself to excessive forward planning. Without even thinking about it I lean into you and kiss you with a sort of blind, miserable desperation, and I remember what you used to say: “*The thought that my life could end at any moment frees me to appreciate the beauty and art and horror of everything the world has to offer.*” At the time I thought you were talking crap, but now I have a painfully acute sense of exactly what you meant. And it’s this that makes me realize, with a sudden surge of clarity, just how much I actually want you. God help me, but I do. I want all your beauty, all your art and horror; the best of you, the worst of you; the wonderful and the terrible; all of you, all the time.

I entwine my arms round your back and press myself against you; and I think about you carrying me
to safety over the snow, of your constant fascination with everything I said and did; of the way you always believed I could be something more than I am, when no one else ever really accepted me for what I already was. I think about all the glances, and touches, and smiles; the synchronicity, the shared, unspoken understandings, and the fatal, magnetic pull that never ever went away. “If I saw you every day forever, Will, I would remember this time...Freeing yourself from me and me freeing myself from you, they’re the same.” Then I think about all the terrible, awful, unspeakable things, and the fact that I still fell in love with you anyway. That we both fell: fell into the ocean, fell to our deaths, but then still rose again together. You with blood on your face; me with wide frantic eyes, staring into a future where I couldn’t live with or without you. The recognition, the reservation; the aimless, pointless agony of it all. “I want you to know exactly where I am. And where you can find me.” That you were the past and I thought I’d buried you, when all I ever did was bury myself alive. And I think about how I was slowly wasting away when you weren’t here and how everything revived the moment you came back.

If I could I would offer you something, a tribute, a gift, something to honor you. Ideally it would be something peerless and incredible: suns and moons; gold, frankincense and myrrh. But of course I don’t have anything like that; the only thing I have to give you is myself.

Me: “I wondered if you could see it too; I wondered if our stars were the same.”

You: “I believe some of our stars will always be the same.”

And I think about that night in the alleyway: the way I gazed at the constellations, the last thing I thought I’d ever see, helpless and hopeless and flat on my back waiting to die. And how I turned round, and there you were; both of us finally underneath the same stars. And, for once; in alignment.

Oh God, it’s no good – I want this. I do. Ever since you came back I’ve been thinking ‘I can’t’ and now it’s more like ‘I have to. We need to. I can’t bear it if we don’t.’ I don’t know what the implications could be. I don’t know what it could lead to. I know I could end up regretting it, that it could be a mistake; a huge one, the biggest mistake of my fucking life (me, who’s made so many mistakes). But it doesn’t seem to matter – not now, not anymore – because it feels like I can no longer take for granted that we have an indefinite amount of time left together...and I can’t renounce you a second time. I kiss you and kiss you, and all I’m aware of is the overwhelming sense that I want you to hold me and have me; I want to see your face over mine; I want to feel you inside me; I want to wrap my legs round your back and cry out your name. For the next few hours I want you to take me over completely. And I want to let you.

The first day you came back, when I asked you what was going to happen to us, you told me “something extraordinary.” Right now, this night, in this moment, this is my something extraordinary. The past can’t be changed, the future’s an unknown quantity, but the present can be controlled. A present is a gift; so this is mine. And I feel a sudden certainty that if I wasn’t ready before, then I am now.

Chapter End Notes

I saved myself scrolling through Amazon Instant this week by finally discovering an online shooting schedule for the original dialogue. And some of the stage directions made me snort with laughter because they could have come straight from this slashy fanfic. Thus:
“Hannibal maneuvers Will onto the couch.”

“Hannibal moves away and comes back with water in a glass. He tenderly holds it to Will’s lips.”

“Will endures the pain beneath Hannibal’s touch. The intimacy is striking.”

“[…] Will does so. Pliable to Hannibal’s wishes.”

And that’s just one episode. Bahaha. Even the stage directions ship them. And if the latter fails then the cast/crew step in to save the day: e.g. Digestivo script says Hannibal carries Will over his shoulder, but they clearly all said “the hell with THAT shit” and shot a bridal lift instead (and probably high-fived each other afterwards).

This is why, in nautical terms, Hannigram is known as The Ship That Sails Itself.
I’m not exactly sure how you detect that the energy in me has shifted (I never know how you work out even half the things you do) but it’s obvious that you have realized, because you suddenly pull away and look at me meditatively, one hand still cupping the back of my head – literally holding me at arm’s length. Your eyes are ever so slightly narrowed.

From outside the window comes the faint wail of sirens - tearing towards someone else’s emergency - and while I automatically flick my head towards the noise, yours doesn’t move at all. God knows what you’re thinking: I’ve never really been able to read you the way I can other people; the way that you can read me. But the silence starts to limp on and on, and it’s obvious that you’re waiting. You are waiting, aren’t you? You’re waiting for me to say something; to tell you what I’ve decided. I open my mouth and close it again, then just gaze numbly, unsure of what to do. I’m uncomfortably aware of how undone I must look: flushed, dishevelled, wide-eyed, and my hair hopelessly tousled from where you’ve been running your fingers through it. Christ, why can’t I say anything? I feel a wave of contempt for myself that I’m being so hopelessly inept; that I can’t take control of the situation the way I’d like to (the way you would if our roles were reversed). I don’t even fully know why. Maybe it’s because you always overpower me, or because I don’t trust myself with you, or because I want you so much it stuns me. Maybe it’s because there’s still a part of me that’s afraid of you. Maybe it’s just you – you in all your fierce and formidable and fantastic entirety. It’s not me, it’s you…a self-defeating twist on the ultimate, pointless cliché. Oh God. Oh fucking hell. And all the time you’re just looking at me, the same inscrutable expression on your face.

“You have made your decision haven’t you?” you finally say, when it’s become painfully apparent that I’m not going to do anything myself. You smile slightly, the faintest quirk of your mouth. “And now that you have, you are – unnerved.” Your voice is very measured, very controlled. Almost clinical. If it was anyone else I’d say you were trying to disguise your own feelings. But you’re not anyone else. You don’t need to do that, do you? You’re not like other people.

I draw in a breath through my teeth. “Yes.”

“Yes you have, or yes you are? Or both?”

I hesitate, but there’s no point lying to you; you’d know immediately. “Both,” I say. I’m proud that my voice sounds almost as steady as yours does. Chameleon-like: you’re not the only one who knows how to use a mask.

You tilt your head back, observing me, and it takes an enormous amount of willpower to not begin wilting under the intensity of your stare. The way the light catches your eyes makes them look like they’re glittering.

“Yes, you’ve committed yourself,” you say after a pause, “and having done so the commitment frightens you. Appals you, even.” You tug my head very slightly, your fingers twisting into my hair. Any harder and it’s going to hurt. “Yet you are going to do it anyway, aren’t you? Either your objections are not strong enough, or you are sufficiently resolute to disregard them.”


Your smile becomes fractionally broader, and I can’t tell whether you’re pleased by my response, or
intrigued, or simply amused; possibly all three. You tug my head back a bit further, only this time I flinch and try to pull away.

“Christ, stop doing that,” I say, “you’re hurting me.” Even as I’m speaking I’m bracing myself for the flare of pain when you inevitably do it again; but to my surprise you don’t (although you don’t let go either… and I can’t quite bring myself to move away entirely). There’s yet another silence while you stare at me, and now your face has closed down and there’s absolutely nothing in your expression to indicate what you’re thinking. It’s pretty remarkable really: you have no tells at all, your countenance as level and serene as a sheet of glass. I may as well just be staring at myself.

“You know I often envisaged you while I was away,” you say eventually, “and whatever guise you appeared in there was a common refrain.”

“What?”

“You were always victorious,” you reply. “Triumphant and exultant – and with no respect for your own limits. None at all.”

I smile as well then, I can’t help myself. “No, none at all.”

“And I in turn respect your disrespectfulness,” you say lightly. “One should never allow fear to govern one’s choices. Although you never really have, have you? If that were the case you would hardly be sat here now.”

“I guess not.”

Of course you pounce on this immediately. “So why are you then?” you ask. “All this threat and uncertainty distilled into a single moment; jeopardy in its purest form… What is the appeal?”

“So tell me Will,” you say, “where do you think all your disrespect is going to lead you?”

I hesitate again, but the answer’s so obvious there’s no real reason not to admit it. “To you, I suppose,” I say simply. “Where else did it ever lead me?”

“Yes indeed,” you reply. “And perhaps that is another mutual combination; two heretics together. Two people with no respect for the customary order of things. After all, there are some who would consider you my greatest mistake, yet here I am too.”

I want to add something about being glad that you’re here, that it could never have been anyone else except you; but it sounds so horribly sentimental that I can’t quite bring myself to do it. Instead I lean back and allow my head to press against your hand. I realize my eyes are shut, although I don’t remember closing them.

“Fear is not a reason to cease and desist,” you say softly. “It is the inspiration to strike out.”

“I know.” My eyes are still closed. “God, I know.”
“Very good,” and you tighten your grip on my hair. “Will Graham; once more unto the breach.”

“Yeah…One more time. And always with you” (and how many more times after?). I smile slightly at the complete insanity of it all, and finally open my eyes and tip my head forwards so I can look at you properly. You still seem so calm, so composed: smooth and impassive as liquid metal. It’s good – grounding. It makes me feel safe. You’re going to have to be in control for both of us.

“Always with me,” you repeat, before adding: “yet always me with you. Are you ready to fall again?”

“Yes,” I reply, quiet but firm. “Of course.” And it’s true; I am. God knows where or how I’m going to land, or when. Broken, shattered and deformed beyond recognition…or as something else entirely, elated and complete, more whole than I ever was before. I don’t know. More to the point: I don’t care.

“Don’t you?” you ask, and I realize I said the last part aloud. “Do you really not care? Not even a little?” You sound sardonic now; you’re making fun of me. Fuck you.

“Maybe,” I say. “Maybe a little. But still not enough.” You look intrigued, even though this is surely going exactly as you expected: first the realization, then the doubt. Doubt followed by anger. Anger followed by acceptance. And then, ultimately, the acquiescence.

“You’ve scripted this out to yourself beforehand, haven’t you?” I find myself saying. “Planned exactly what you wanted to happen, then manoeuvred it round so you can feed me all the right lines.”

“No.”

“Of course you have. You think you know me so well.” I actually imagine you doing it; in fact it’s probably what you were plotting to yourself all those times you were sat in the chair with that fucking smile on your face. You think you’re so goddamn smart (although of course this doesn’t really hold up, because you don’t just need to think it; you actually are. And I should never, ever allow myself to forget that).

You stare at me for a few seconds without replying, your eyes flicking over my face in a way that’s deeply unnerving; and I both love it and hate it at the same time.

“I do know you,” you finally say. “But you, on the contrary, don’t entirely know yourself – and that is one of the things which makes you so incredibly fascinating. Yes, I have an idea of what you are thinking; and yes, I have shaped your perspective in a certain way. But I have never known entirely what you will do. If I could predict you as precisely as that I would not be here now. And neither would you.”

“Oh yeah? So where would I be?”

“You would be dead,” you answer bluntly. “You would never have survived me in the way that you have.”

I look back at you: your power and energy, the way you hold yourself, the unspoken threat that’s engraved into every movement. You’re so endlessly self-assured. “That’s a logical proposition Dr Lecter,” I say, “and while I agree with the antecedent, you’re still missing something.”

“Yes; what am I missing?”
“The consequent.”

“Which is?”

I lean forward slightly. Look you straight in the eyes. “Who says you would have survived me?”

This time you really do smile. “That’s good Will,” you say. “Very good. You are learning.”

The atmosphere is now so highly charged it feels flammable. I draw in a deep breath and there’s another beat of silence while we look at one another, ready to fall.

“Fortes fortuna adiuvat,” you say. “Fortune favors the brave. And where there is unity there is victory.”

I can hear my pulse throbbing in my ears. Yes, I think. Yes, yes, yes.

Very slowly and deliberately you remove your hand from the back of my head, trailing it down my cheek and throat and then grasping the collar of my shirt so you can pull me towards you, your gaze locked into mine the entire time. You start flicking the buttons open with your other hand, but I grab you before you can finish and pull you onto the floor on top of me so I can kiss you; it’s as if I can’t bear to break the contact for even the time it’ll take to get our clothes off. The kiss grows rough and heated very quickly, and at times it’s like we’re fighting each other (to an extent I think we actually are): me digging my nails into your shoulders and trying to seize hold of your wrists and wrap my legs round yours; while you’re scraping your teeth across my throat, biting and sucking bruises into my skin, pinning me underneath you and twisting my hair in your fist to keep my head in place. I make a low moaning noise and you hold me down even harder, gripping both my hands in one of yours and pinning my arms above my head. I arch my back up towards you, trying to pull myself free, and you push the heel of your other hand against my groin until I’m gasping helplessly into your mouth. There’s no way we’re going to make it as far as the bedroom now, no way at all. Although it actually feels suitably surreal that after all the years of grandiosity, madness, and grotesque baroque splendour we’re finally going to do this in front of a flickering electric heater on top of a pile of tattered cushions and the shock blanket. The reality is that it’s all happening too fast, ridiculously fast really – I know it is – but I can’t bring myself to wait any longer. We’ve already waited too long. We’ve waited for years. We’ve been waiting since the first time we met.

Eventually we pull away to draw breath, both of us panting slightly, and I stare up at you with my lips parted. Your face is only inches above mine and I want to touch it – the way I would do, and have done, with other people – but can’t quite bring myself to with you. That sort of gesture doesn’t feel entirely right, the same way I wouldn’t pet a wild animal. Your eyes are incredibly piercing, it’s unnerving. You’re so striking. And terrifying. And unknowable. And I need you more than I’ve ever needed anyone else.

“Please,” I say quietly. “Please. I want… I want…”

“What do you want?” You spin it out into a languorous drawl, which in your smoky voice sounds almost impossibly seductive: What. Do. You. Want.

And at that precise moment I grind to a halt, even as I’m opening my mouth to reply, because I’ve suddenly realized I have absolutely no idea what to say. ‘I want you to fuck me?’ No, far too vulgar for you. ‘Make love’ (cringe); ‘take me’ (makes me sounds like Scarlett O’Hara); ‘have sex’ (no, too stilted and formal); ‘shag me’ (Austin Powers. Christ); ‘intercourse’ (oh my God, NO… just no). In the end I simply settle for: “You. I want you.”

And you say: “You can have me, Will, whenever you like. All you need to do is ask.”
We stare at each other for a few more seconds, then you kiss my forehead in an unusually tender way – in fact it’s so tender it immediately makes me suspicious – and I lie prone on my back, staring at the ceiling with my arms stretched behind me and a vague refrain of ‘Oh God, oh shit, what am I doing? What the fuck am I doing?’ running through my head. Which is, in effect, a pointlessly rhetorical query (little more than a tokenistic show of objection), because I know exactly what I’m doing. And knowing that, am going to do it anyway.

You lean over me again and resume unbuttoning my shirt, staring down with another unreadable expression on your face, and on an impulse (and without even fully meaning to) I seize your wrist, because I’ve now abruptly hurtled from ‘what am I doing’ to ‘what are you doing’ and realized there’s one more thing I need to check. You pause and glance at me, calm and composed as always.

“I…I want to ask you something,” I say.

“Yes? I am listening.” You arrange your features into what I privately think of as your ‘therapist face.’ Honestly, you’re such a bullshitter.

I pause and dart my tongue over my lips. Oh hell, it’s so difficult. For fuck’s sake, why am I even doing this now; what’s wrong with me? Why is my timing so ridiculous? I should have said this before. Way before. Or even after (way after), when I could have been more reflective. Or just anytime, really, because any other time would have been preferable to the actual time I’ve chosen to do it. I huff out a breath, and you watch me patiently, and I finally just make a show of gesturing back and forth between the two of us.

“You,” I say. "This. You being like this.” You raise your eyebrows at me. I can’t help feeling you’ve already worked out exactly when I’m trying to ask you, but are going to force me to stumble through the whole thing anyway just to be a dick about it.

“Y-e-s?” you say encouragingly.

“How do I know this isn’t all an act?” The words come tumbling out in a rush, as if eager to escape before I can change my mind and recall them back again: How do I know this isn’t all an act. I take another deep breath. “Weren’t you like this with Alana? Exactly like this?” As well as with God only knows who else…probably half of Baltimore. “How do I know you’re not just…How do I know?”

Even as I’m asking (and cringing) I’m aware of the miserably undeniable fact that if you turn round now and say ‘Okay, fine, you’ve got me. I’m massively manipulating you – again. So what? Now stop whining, take your clothes off and get on your back’ (or a more eloquent version thereof) it still wouldn’t be enough to make me leave.

You look at me carefully: you don’t seem irritated, or mocking, or even defensive; just thoughtful. Intrigued, even. “It is not an act Will,” you eventually say.

“But how do I know that?” I keep my voice reasonably composed, but inside I feel a bit desperate. Christ, I’m so fucked up; why do I even care? Of all the possible reservations, this should hardly be top of the list.

You just shrug slightly. “I cannot prove it definitively, of course; you have to decide for yourself. I would suggest you console yourself with the knowledge that the short-term outcome would be exactly the same regardless; you will be able to experience a considerable amount of physical pleasure, as well as the emotional satisfaction of knowing you had the courage of your convictions.”

You give me a slightly unsettling smile. “You should be less concerned with my motivations than your own. After years of shouting into a void you are finally starting to listen to yourself – it would be something of a pity to deny the message as soon as you’ve uttered it.”
I must look unconvinced; because you briefly press your hand to the side of my face again, and in spite of myself I close my eyes and lean into the touch, allowing my cheek to rub against your palm.

“Will,” you say quietly, “I am not trying to deceive you.” You pause, and then add (with uncharacteristic candour): “Not this time. After everything that has happened, what would be the point?”

*There doesn’t need to be a point, I think,* you’d do it anyway just because you can. But you’re right, of course you are; ultimately I need to decide for myself. And the truth is that I’d already decided before I even asked you. I know you’d never force me; I could walk away right now. But I won’t (can’t) because I want this too much.

I let my eyes fall closed again, feeling unexpectedly peaceful now that the last kernel of doubt has been acknowledged, examined, and ultimately discarded. You wait to see if I’m going to make any further objections; and when I don’t, kiss my forehead again and resume removing my shirt. From there you proceed to undress both of us, and I just lie there and let you. The mood’s shifted again now, softening into something that’s mellower and less fraught and I realize, with something almost like surprise (why?), that now the frenzied urgency has eased off I’m actually incredibly nervous. Why am I so nervous? I’m trembling; it’s embarrassing. “I can’t stop shaking,” I say.

“I don’t mind. In fact I find it rather endearing. It is partly fear, but also desire. Pleasure and pain – they are so closely aligned. Pleasure without conscience; pain without principle. You know about both don’t you?”

“Oh of course.”

“Yet you want to know more?”

“Oh God, yes.”

“I thought so,” you reply smoothly. “Come here then.” You pull me upright and manoeuvre me round so my back’s against your chest, coiling your arms around me as I twist my head so I can kiss you. You’re so strong that I know there’s no way I could get free even if I wanted to (I don’t want to) and there’s actually something incredibly soothing about being held and contained. I find myself gasping into your mouth – if I could I’d entwine my hands over yours, but I can’t move my arms because you’re pinning them down. You keep me like that for a while, seeing how long I’ll tolerate being held in place and rubbing your face against my hair, then eventually shift one of your own arms so you can trail your hand downwards. You stroke across my ribs, my hip bones, finally letting your fingers slide over the scar on my abdomen; and it makes me cry out with a weirdly thrilling combination of desire and fear. You let go of me entirely then, pushing me forward until I’m on my hands and knees and placing one hand firmly on my neck while running the other one up and down my back. And I’m acutely aware not only of how submissive I’m being, but by the fact that I would never, ever, ever be like this for anyone else except you.

“Open your legs Will,” you say softly. I make another small moaning noise as I obey, and you place your palms on the inside of my thighs to spread them even wider before leaning over and kissing my shoulder blade. “You are so beautiful,” you murmur into my skin. “If only you could see yourself now.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so ultimately don’t say anything and allow my head to fall forward and hang between my arms because it feels like there’s too much going on inside it for my neck to bear the weight. I’m still trembling and you stroke my chest, encouraging me to relax; then leisurely begin to kiss your way down the ridges of my spine, occasionally letting your teeth scrape lightly over the skin. Your breath feels surprisingly warm; humid, almost. Christ it’s so intense. I expect you
to stop when you get to the small of my back, but you don’t and continue moving downwards. No, you’re not…are you? You wouldn’t. Oh my God, you fucking are. I make a helpless gasping noise as I feel you spread me open with both hands, running your tongue in a slow, lascivious glide straight across my ass in a way that’s incredibly ardent and utterly overwhelming, then rapidly switching to a series of lingering, lapping kisses that leave me trembling and delirious and completely unhinged.

“Oh,” I say in a faint voice, “you can’t do that.”

You move away briefly and kiss the side of my thigh. “Just let yourself enjoy it. I can assure you that I am myself. I have wanted to do this to you for quite some time.”

“Oh God,” I say weakly. Now you’re alternating between languorous flat strokes and more delicately deliberate thrusts, running your hands up and down my thighs and forcing my legs further apart, then narrowing your tongue so you can ease past the tight ring of muscle until I’m wet, wet everywhere; and it feels so shameful, and pleasurable, and almost unbearably intimate, that my arms give out entirely and I end up slumping forward and moaning your name directly into the cushion. You pull away again and lean over me, kissing the base of my neck beneath my hair, and reaching up at the same time with your right hand so you can rub your finger in slow, teasing circles before pushing deep inside me. I’m so slick and wet that it slides in with total ease.

“Oh God,” I say again.

“You enjoyed that?”

“It was…it was…” and then you stroke my prostate and my brain promptly short-circuits and I can’t say anything at all.

“I thought you would; once you could overcome your initial disconcertment.” You curl your finger round again and this time I nearly scream at how good it feels. “It is incredibly satisfying helping you push past your boundaries. I am immensely looking forward to seeing how much further we can go.”

“God, yes. Please…please. I want you to. Anything, I don’t care. I want it so much.”

“I know you do. And I shall.” You kiss my shoulder blade again, briefly withdrawing your hand so you can lean over to retrieve the lube from the side of the couch, and I realize – slightly hysterically – that I actually have no idea what it is I’m agreeing to; if you’re still using metaphors, or whether you really are just talking about sex this time. God knows with you…it could be either. What other limits might you be planning for me to break? Maybe you want to blindfold me, handcuff me, hurt me. Tie me up. Choke me. Hit me. Maybe you want to get someone else involved and let them fuck me in front of you; you’d probably just watch, not participate yourself but simply direct my responses into a suitable tableau so you’d be in vicarious control of the whole thing (get on your knees for him Will; spread your legs; show us how much you enjoy it). The thing is I probably would. If you wanted me to, if you asked…for you I probably would. I spiral off into an increasingly frenzied inventory of all the things you might want me to do (and which I’d inevitably struggle to say ‘no’ to) and almost don’t notice you’ve come back until I feel your leg against mine. Oh God, God. I’m unbelievably wired: over-sensitized, each nerve shuddering, almost painfully aware of everything: how warm and damp my skin feels and how cold the air is against it; the rough texture of the carpet under my knees, the smooth fibres of the blanket beneath my hand. It’s both ecstatic and slightly frightening. I hear the sharp ‘click’ of the bottle lid as you open it and pour some of the lube onto your hand, then moan helplessly as you work two fingers inside me: it feels so good, so intense and invasive, it’s almost too much.

“Please,” I gasp out. “You have to stop. Please, stop, you’re going to make me come.” I sound
vaguely panicked, a distraught combination of genuinely wanting to make it last until you’re inside me; humiliation that I’ll ruin everything if I come too soon; but most of all a sense of something like fear that I’m getting so completely out of control. I’m expecting you to make me beg – or even force me to come anyway, just for the hell of it – but you don’t.

“It’s all right Will,” is all you say. You smooth your other hand up and down my back and across my shoulders, finally wrapping your arm round my ribcage and leaning over to press your face against my hair. “Relax. Breathe. That’s it, that’s good. You are doing so well.”

“It’s just…” I shake my head a bit desperately. “It’s so intense. It feels so…”

“I know,” you reply. But you don’t. How can you possibly know? I want to tell you that I’m not used to this, have never felt like this before – that I’m not sure how to cope with it – but can’t bring myself to because the admission feels too exposing. You still have your fingers inside me, but are moving extremely slowly and gently; enough to feel pleasurable but not to overwhelm.

“Just relax,” you say again, and in spite of myself I make a small whining noise and push my hips back against your hand. “That’s very good. Perfect. Let me make you ready for me.”

“I’m sorry,” I mutter helplessly. “I’m just…it’s…ahh…it feels so good.”

“It will soon feel even better.”

“Oh God,” I say, and make a sound that’s half a laugh but could easily swing the other way and become a sob.

“Take your time Will,” you reply. “There is no rush. None at all. We have all the time we need.” You kiss my neck again then abruptly pull me upright again so we’re both on our knees, my back resting against your chest – you’ve obviously worked out that the close contact with you calms me down. You wrap one of your powerful arms round my torso, then let my head lean onto your shoulder, rubbing your face against my mine as you gently finger me open with your other hand.

“How does that feel?” you ask.

“Good. Oh. Really good.”

“You are so sensitive aren’t you? It is a very fine line between not enough and far too much.”

“Yes…I think so,” I say vaguely. I’ve tipped my head so far over your shoulder I can see the wall behind me. I can’t bring myself to admit that this level of rapturous response is hardly typical; that the only person who’s ever made me feel like this is you. It’s actually pretty crazy – the concept of being fucked by another man, even (especially) if that man is you, ought to seem bizarre and troubling. Shocking, even. If it were anyone else I’d have freaked out and left ages ago. But despite a faint, residual swell of anxiety I want this more than I know how to express.

“Tell me when you think you are ready,” you say.

When exactly was I ready? Never…Always? I don’t know. I push my face into the side of your neck so your jaw is resting on the top of my head. “Now,” I say, “Please. I want you to do it. I want this.”

You don’t answer immediately, just keep touching me in the same slow, tantalizing-tormenting way. I’m really starting to shake now, my muscles spasming and my skin growing slick with sweat. I need this – you – so much.

“God, let’s just do it,” I say. “What are you waiting for?”
“You are sure?”

“Yes. Christ, do you want me to beg?”

“Not on this occasion,” you reply. “There will be ample time in the future for you to beg me for what you want. Beg me to begin; beg me to stop. Pleading…imploring; yet always so defiant and rebellious in spite of it all. You will never stop fighting me will you?”

“No.” You remove your fingers almost entirely, then suddenly force them back in with a deep thrust that makes me groan and arch myself against your chest.

“Good,” you say. “I am very pleased to hear it. I don’t want you to.”

“I won’t. You know I won’t.” I reach up behind me so I can thread my fingers into your hair, tugging your head backwards like you did to me. You let me do it, tightening your grip around my chest until it becomes difficult to breathe, before suddenly snapping your head free and leaning forward.

“You are so beautifully broken aren’t you?” you murmur, straight into my ear. “Yet never broken-spirited. The two things are not the same. Did you know that? All these pieces of you, yet you are not truly fragmented; the light shines through your slivers and cracks. Luminous in all your damage.”

“Just like you. You’re even more fucked up than I am.” I writhe up against you, curving my back and grasping the side of your neck with my right hand.

“Perhaps. Perhaps not,” you say. “We shall have to find out. There is no one quite like me Will. But equally, of course, there is no one quite like you. That is why I didn’t know I was looking for you until I found you. You felt it too, didn’t you? It just took you longer to admit it.”

Oh fuck, fuck, you have no idea. And I want you to know; I want you understand. On an impulse I roughly jerk my body forward then back again, forcing you to lose your balance so you fall backwards and take me down with you. I twist round sharply, swinging one leg over you so I’m straddling your chest, then lean forwards and grip both hands round your throat. You just smile beatifically as if I’m kissing your hand as opposed to being in a position to throttle you; I suppose, for you, this is probably tantamount to foreplay. I can feel your pulse beneath my fingers, how steady and regular it is and I want to make it race. Take control of your heartbeat; take control of you. For a while we just stare at each other, and I don’t think I’ve ever been so turned on in my entire life.

“Interesting,” you finally say. “Tell me, how far would you dare to go?”

“You know how far I’d go. You know better than anyone.”

“Yes, but I want you to go further. And you will, won’t you? When the time comes.” You put your hands on my waist, digging your fingers into my skin until the pain makes me draw in my breath. “You will relish every second of it,” you say. “And how I shall relish watching you; a falconer with my own bird of prey. And you know that you will always return to me at the end of it. Every single time.”

“Yes, God. Always.”

“Always,” you repeat. You hitch your shoulders forward and effortlessly pull yourself up, taking my weight along with yours so I’m forced to shift until we’re sat face to face with my thighs bracketing yours on either side. You take hold of my hands and pull them away from your neck, then twist my arms behind my back and pin them there. I lean forward but you keep me gripped in place, your face just inches away from mine. I want to kiss you, bite you, touch you – I don’t even know – and you
deliberately move your head away whenever I get close.

“I’m ready for this,” I hiss at you. “I want it. I want you.”

“Good,” you reply. “Because I intend to have you. For once we are in complete accord.” This time you slide your tongue into my mouth and let me kiss you although you still keep my arms pinioned behind my back; and it’s urgent and passionate and painful and frantic – terrible and incredible – all at the same time.

You eventually pull away, and I notice that even you are starting to look slightly undone (fucking finally). You briefly press your forehead against mine, then let go of my hands so I can move my arms again. My shoulders are screaming, I’ve definitely wrenched a muscle. I don’t care though. The pain somehow feels appropriate; it should hurt.

“Get on your back for me Will,” you say, and your voice sounds low and intense. “I want to see your face, and I want you to be able to see me.”

“Yes,” I say. “Yes.”

You hitch your arms round my shoulders and lower me backwards onto the floor, then change your mind and lift me onto the cushions so my body’s slightly tilted up, spreading my legs wide apart and then kneeling back between them. You look down at me, taking your time as you stroke the lube over yourself, fixing me with one of your concentrated stares. And I don’t know whether you’re giving me a chance to prepare myself, or if you’re simply dragging it out to be tormenting, but either way I’m not willing to wait anymore and abruptly hook my legs round your back and tug, pulling you forward by the arms at the same time so you can pretty much thrust straight inside me in one slow, smooth movement. I’m so slick and receptive that the initial stretch is uncomfortable but not painful. In fact it actually makes me feel a bit shameless, the way I can take you this easily with no resistance at all. Jesus, fuck, it’s so good. I gasp out your name and arch my back up as far as I can, letting my head tip over the cushions and fall onto the floor.

“Oh,” I say faintly. I sound shocked, like I can’t quite believe it. “I can feel you.”

“And I you.” You let out a low breath. “You feel so perfect Will.”

You run your hand up and down my thigh, giving me a few moments to get used to the sensation before starting to move your hips. You do it slowly at first, then I make another moaning noise and push myself towards you and you speed up, building to a harder and more relentless rhythm and using your thumb to stroke the tight, slippery skin that’s stretched round your cock where you’re fucking me.

I cry out, almost incoherent with the pleasure of it, and snap my head back against the floor. “I like it, oh, I like it, it’s good. It feels so good. I didn’t think… God.”

“There you go,” you say, “I knew you would enjoy that. My beautiful boy.”

“I didn’t think…” I say again. But even as I’m speaking the words they feel wrong – they have to be – because I must have known it would feel like this; that we’d be so good together. I glance down at us, how our bodies are joined – merged together – the way I’m rocking my hips towards you and spreading my legs so you can take me. You, inside me.

“You are stunning like this,” you say softly. “As if you were made for me.” You slide your hand underneath my cock and push against my abdomen, feeling the tremors deep in my body as you fuck me, and I can hear myself crying out over and over (oh, oh). My legs are trembling and you lift them
up so I can wrap them round your back.

“You feel incredible,” I frantically push myself against you, trying to take you as deep as possible, and you hold onto my waist to give me some extra leverage. “You feel so good inside me.”

“Yes,” you say. “This pale, slim, scarred and infinitely precious home for the inside. Look at you. Look how beautiful you are.”

“It was always you,” I sound slightly wild; I don’t even really know what I’m saying. “Oh God, it’s always been you.”

“I know.”

“Always…Fuck, never anyone else.”

“For me also, Will.”

“There couldn’t, there wasn’t…”

“You belong to me now,” you say. “If anyone so much as attempts to touch you, I will kill them.”

“Oh God…yes.”

“I was never prepared to let go of you.”

“Never, I know. I know that now.”

“From the first moment I laid eyes on you…”

“Please…yes.”

“…I knew I would never give you up.”

“I know, I know, oh God.” I arch my back, and you grip my hips again and push my legs down towards my chest so you can fuck into me even deeper, my body stretching open to take you in. It’s almost too much; the emotion, the pleasure, the yearning, the need. The fact that we’ve wasted so much time and I don’t know how much longer we have left. That no one thinks we should be together and the whole world is against us. That the whole world can’t keep up with you. That I can’t keep up with you. That people want us both dead, and we’ve both tried to kill each other. And that none of these things can change the fact that this is one of the single most perfect moments of my life; second only to lying on the ground in a back alley, frozen and terrified and turning round to see your face.

I don’t move or make any sound, but I can still feel tears seeping out from under my eyelashes and running down my cheekbones and into my hair. You notice immediately of course; asking me what’s wrong and whether you’re hurting me, and I just keep shaking my head, slightly desperately, saying “nothing, it’s nothing, I’m fine. Please don’t stop,” trying to disguise how close my voice is to breaking. Oh fuck, fucking hell, fuck everything, this is unbelievable: what I am doing? I’m a grown man who is crying while lying naked on top of a shock blanket.

“Will,” is all you say. You look at me almost rapturously, reaching down and wiping the tears away with your thumb; but thank God decide to show some mercy for once and don’t actually push me to explain myself. Instead you lean forward and run your tongue over where the remaining tracks have dripped into my hairline, and I press myself up against you as if I’m trying to force some of the emotion from my body into yours. I’m really shaking now, the wave of desire building up deeper
and stronger than I’ve ever known it before, and I can feel my body contracting and tightening round you.

“I’m going to come,” I say, a bit desperately, “I’m close…I’m so close.”

“I know you are my love, I can feel you. Take some slow breathes, it will make the pleasure more enduring; more intense. That’s right.” You run your fingers down my face. “Deep…slow.” You move your hand down so you can take hold of mine, knotting our fingers together. I gaze up at you, adoring and frantic. I can’t quite cope with the passion of it – how good it feels, how overwhelming, how feverishly perfect – and you stare right back.

“I believe I could stay like this with you forever,” you say quietly. You take my other hand and lift them both up so they’re on either side of my face, tightly held in yours.

“I know,” I answer brokenly. “I know, I know.”

You angle your hips slightly and I cry out again, desperately canting my body towards you. My stomach is soaking from where I’m leaking pre-come over myself, and you let go of my hand so you can reach down and begin stroking my cock, moving in perfect counterpart to the rhythm of you moving inside me.

“You’re very close now aren’t you?” you say. “Quivering right on the very edge. I want you to let go for me; let yourself feel it. I want to see you.”

“Oh God yes, yes, oh God.”

“Show me,” you say.

I gaze up at you; my eyes are so wide and staring it’s straining the muscles in my face; but I can’t close them, can’t not look at you. It’s you, it was all for you. Everything, all of it, all the time. I’m not sure if I’ve said it aloud, but I know you understand anyway; I know you can tell. “Oh,” I say, and my voice sounds so intense, burning with a raw urgency I don’t entirely recognize. “Oh God, I’m coming, I’m coming.”

“So beautiful Will.” You tighten your grip on my hand, and then push into me again with a long, particularly hard thrust at exactly the right angle. You make a low noise, deep in your throat, and I know you’re coming as well; and that it’s because of me – that you feel like this because of me. That it’s you, me, us, oh God. I cry out again and again, clinging onto you with all four limbs, pivoting myself towards you, trying to ride out the aftershocks. And all I can think is ‘I won’t let you leave me and I won’t let go of you. Never, not ever again.’

For a while we just lie there, you still on top of me with my arms and legs wrapped round your back, and although your weight is starting to hurt it doesn’t occur to me to ask you to move. I can feel your heart beating from where you’re pressing against my chest, and I wonder whether you can feel mine. I don’t want to move, don’t want you to let me go; and I draw in a breath, ragged and panting, and bury my face into your neck.

“It was good,” I whisper against your skin. “It felt so good.”

“It was. There was never any possibility it could have been anything else. We are, as they say, a perfect fit.”

I make a humming noise in agreement, although it turns into a whine as you pull out of me; and you kiss me very tenderly on the forehead, as if in sympathy. Christ, I’m really going to feel it tomorrow. In fact now that it’s over I’m acutely aware of various aches and soreness radiating across my whole
body; I’ll be walking bow-legged for days (I don’t care).

“It hurts?” you say.

“A bit…not much…I’m fine.” I don’t expect you to be solicitous about this, and of course you’re not. Although you do lean over and smooth my damp hair out of my eyes, then kiss me very gently and slowly.

“Dear Will,” you say, “I don’t think I will ever forget how you look right now.”

Even though you’ve been doing all the work – whereas I’ve effectively just been lying on my back and wailing – I still sound like I’ve just run a marathon whereas you are hardly out of breath at all. In lieu of an articulate verbal response (potentially not physically possible) I raise my eyebrows at you.

“Peaceful.” You smile down at me. “As if all the noise in your head has been turned down. Sated, and serene, and beautiful. And mine.”

“Yes,” I say quietly. “I know.”

I don’t specify exactly which part I’m referring to, and you don’t ask me to clarify, but we both understand nonetheless. Of course I’m yours. I always have been, even before I wanted to be. You pull a blanket over us then pull me close so I’m resting against your chest, and I let my head settle into the curve of your shoulder trying to slow my breathing down and clinging onto your hand. I feel slightly blurred and out-of-focus – dreamlike, almost, like staring through smoked glass – and my sense of myself has shifted in a way that, right now, I don’t want to examine too closely. Not that there’d be much point anyway. I chose this. Chose to give up, chose to hang on. Chose to jump and fall, chose to let you pull me up again – and then chose the aftermath with all that it implies. Made my proverbial bed and laid and lied in it. And none of it changes the fact that I want you, and need you, and I don’t fucking care about anything else. Hazily I remember your words when you first came back: Perhaps you should take consolation in the fact that a choice free of consequence is no choice at all.

“What are you thinking?” you say eventually.

It’s not an idle, affectionately post-coital request (‘tell me what’s on your mind baby!’), of course it’s not. You’re intrigued; you genuinely want to know. I can almost feel you brandishing your psychological scalpel, and I don’t think I can bear being mentally deconstructed so soon after you’ve physically taken me apart. I try to devise a decoy statement that you’ll be satisfied with, fail utterly, and in the end settle for a somewhat half-assed: “Not much. Nothing…I don’t know.” Oh hell, what does it matter anyway? Why do you care so much?

“I suspect you cannot quite believe what you have done,” you reply crisply. “You are trying to process it.”

“Partly,” I finally mutter, half to myself. I stretch my hand in front of my face, watching the way the light from the heater reflects and blinks though my fingers. “Yeah, okay, you’re right. I mean, I didn’t expect this to happen. I didn’t intend to do it. Not yet. Not so soon.” I sigh slightly, then hitch a bit closer to you.

“So what moved you to change your mind?”

“Because I thought we might die over the next few days,” I reply vaguely; and there is a long pause as I feel myself go rigid with horror at the fact that I was actually tactless and stupid enough to say that aloud in such a blunt, context-less way. I can’t bring myself to look at you, but all you do is
laugh – as usual, you’re not offended by my horrific awkwardness. Why aren’t you offended? You really, probably should be offended.

“Ever the optimist Will,” is all you reply. “We shall not die, at least not within the next few days.” You tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “And if we do, at least we can die happy.”

Afterwards I doze a bit in the warmth of the fire with your arms wrapped round me, before you finally wake me up and make me get into bed. You prop yourself up on one elbow, and I lie on my chest and twist my face round so I can gaze at you. I’m acutely aware that I feel absolutely no regret – none – aside from the fact I didn’t do this sooner. It can’t have been wrong. It wasn’t. How could it be wrong when it felt so undeniably right?

You catch me staring and smile at me, thoughtful and watchful as always, idly trailing your fingers up and down my back as if you’re carving a pattern into it. The moon’s very bright and has filled the room with an eerie sheen, making us look as if we’re ghosts of ourselves. The only sound is the occasional car sweeping past and the patter of the sleet against the window. It’s so cold, it’ll probably snow soon.

“I look at you now,” you say eventually, “and a particular word comes to mind.”

“Which is?”

“*Chrysallid*.”

“What? Oh yes…of course. You’re talking about metamorphosis – are you waiting for me to emerge from my chrysalis by any chance?” I smile a bit at the memory. “Not a very subtle metaphor.”

“No, perhaps not; but then subtlety doesn’t suit you particularly well. Although, that said, you are undoubtedly calmer than I have ever seen you since I came back. Like an unwound coil. Some of that nervous energy has dissipated.”

“Yes. Yes, I suppose it has.”

“Replaced with what, do you think?”

“You’ll have to wait and see.” I smile again and you just nod in response, as if finding my ambiguity highly satisfactory.

For a while we simply stare at each other, inventoring each other’s faces, and neither of us says anything at all. I suppose there’s no need, not really. We’ve already told each other all there is, mostly without speaking a word. Or – have we? Actually no, maybe not; not quite all – not everything – and I’m suddenly aware there’s one more thing I need you to know. It’s a leap of faith, but I’m going to do it anyway.

“You know, when you were gone I talked to you,” I say quietly. It feels like a confession; it is. It’s also a declaration. “I talked to you *all the time*. Out loud, in my head; your voice became more real than my own was.”

You don’t answer immediately, just continue stroking my back. “I know,” you say finally. “I know you did Will. I was listening, in my own way. And I heard you.”

Neither of us says anything else, but by unspoken, mutual consent we migrate towards each other and remain as close as possible (my head on your chest, your arms wrapped around me, our legs
tangled together) and when I wake up in the morning, for the very first time, you’re still lying beside me.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to larissabernstein for the kindly loan of her Latin skills!
I wake up the next day with a strange composite of dazed incomprehension and blatant euphoria. It’s The Morning after the Night Before…and in purely temporal terms it’s like any other morning, ever; and yet it’s also like nothing else. I’ve never seen a morning like this one, and I never will again – because now there will never not be a time when we haven’t touched each other in that way; merged like that; wrapped ourselves around one another; exchanged that depth of recognition and longing and force of feeling. There will never not be a time when I haven’t surrendered myself so completely, and been empowered (liberated?) by the capitulation. It reminds me a bit of those old posters I used to see peeling off the walls of college dorm rooms: ‘Today is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life.’ So what did that make last night then? The funeral pyre, the wake for the old one? *He had a good run. We gave him decent send-off.* I don’t know. Maybe.

Briefly I think of the Nina Simone song my dad used to play, bourbon in one hand and cranking up his old Dansette stereo: *It’s a new dawn, it’s a new day, it’s a new life for me. And I’m feelin’ good.* Carpe diem: seize the first day of the rest of my life, and all the endless possibility, and opportunity, and infinite potential. And you. God, always you.

I tilt my head so it’s resting on my arm, and spend a long time simply enjoying the novelty of being able to watch you while you’re sleeping (not unlike, I belatedly realize, some kind of creepy stalker). The pale winter sun’s falling directly on your face, like your own personal spotlight. On consideration, I decide that you don’t look vulnerable in the way most people would. Even your stillness telegraphs something imposing; as if waking you would bring severe consequences, like a slumbering giant in a folktale. *Do not disturb*, I think (already disturbed). If you actually *are* asleep…you could well just be lying there plotting with your eyes closed. In which case you almost certainly know that I’m gazing at you, and are internally smirking to yourself.

I turn over a fraction so I can see you more clearly, unobscured by the corner of the pillow, and moving as quietly as I can so as not to rouse you (either from sleep, or into suspicion as to what I’m up to). I can feel your breath on my face, how warm it is in the frigid morning air. It strikes me that I really wish I could draw, because I’d like to record the way you look right now. A photograph wouldn’t do it; it would have to be something created by hand, painstakingly and stroke by stroke; a labor of love. I spend a few moments imagining it: it would need careful shading to capture the ridge of your cheekbones, smudged over with the thumb, then softer pencilled lines for your eyelashes and the curl of your mouth. I’ve never seen you draw yourself, and wonder if you ever have. One day I’m going to ask you – I’d like to see how you’d interpret a self-portrait. Now you’re frowning slightly, a faint crease between your eyebrows as if your dreams are puzzling you. Your breathing is very shallow (are you *really* asleep?).

I desperately need a shower, and caffeine, and to go for a piss (not necessarily in that order), and while I don’t particularly want to move I’m starting to feel uncomfortable at staring at you for so long without you knowing because I have a vaguely-defined sense that you wouldn’t like it. Actually, no, that’s not right – you’re so vain you’d fucking love it (in fact you’ve probably been offended that I haven’t done it sooner). Why the discomfort then? I chew my thumbnail and decide that yet again I’m transposing my motives onto you, because it’s actually my own fascination that’s the source of the discord. I’m not used to acknowledging this level of dependency on someone. It’s unsettling. But then – at least I’m acknowledging it. That’s got to be a good thing, right? I remember your words from the night before last: *to constantly renounce and disavow one’s true self is one of the greatest*
acts of self-violence which it is possible to inflict. My Self, inextricably entwined with Your Self. One plus one equals us. Equals oneself.

I’d quite like to kiss you before getting out of the bed, but it feels a bit too syrupy and mawkish so in the end I don’t. You have one leg and one arm draped over me, and I reluctantly disentangle myself, then creep around the bathroom and kitchen trying to make minimal noise. I can’t actually be bothered to get dressed yet, so sling the shock blanket round my shoulders instead. I really should have a robe. Why don’t I have a robe? Normal people possess things like robes and slippers (and wine glasses, and DVD box sets, and matching towels) and I am never likely to acquire any of these things. Although normal people also don’t have ecstatic sex with notorious serial killers either. So… yeah.

I brew myself a coffee, wincing slightly at the twinge of pain in my shoulder. In fact my whole body’s aching and limping from having the living daylights fucked out of it, and I don’t care at all because it was you who did it and it’s like I can still feel you. I take the mug and stare absently out the window, smiling to myself; at the thought of last night, and today, and tomorrow, and the knowledge that you’re asleep in the next room in a bed I’ve just got out of. The wooden frame of the ledge is the same color as your eyes. Oh God, last night was…God. I’m so absorbed I lose track of my surroundings until I feel something coiling round my waist from behind, and nearly jump out of my fucking skin until I realize it’s your arm and that you’ve prowled over without me hearing you.

“Good morning,” you say. You’re right, it is. This is a good morning.

“You startled me.”

“Yes. I did, didn’t I?”

“You don’t need to sound so smug about it. As achievements go, it’s not one of your greatest hits.” I place the mug on the windowsill, then turn round and bury my face underneath your chin and let you put your arms round me properly. It feels incredibly natural and instinctive to do this: I was anticipating a level of awkwardness and am relieved to find it’s not there. You stroke my shoulder blades through the thin fabric and I can’t help grinning into your chest at how utterly wrecked we both look: me swaddled in the shock blanket like ET with a Morse code of bruises on my throat, and you with a towel slung round your hips and covered in scratches from where I was clawing you last night.

“Aren’t you cold?” I ask, mostly because I can’t think of anything else to say.

“Not particularly.”

Oh. Okay then. So that’s that. Although, really, what did I expect: ‘Yes, I am simply expiring with cold, but am only wearing a towel regardless because I have lost the ability to dress myself’? Now I’ve exhausted my only conversational salvo and can’t think of anything else to come at you with, except for a somewhat ridiculous urge to announce “Hey! We just had sex!” (Why? You were there after all…it’s not like you don’t know). Silence is obviously preferable, and I bask in how comfortable it feels to just press myself against you and not say anything. Actually I’ve always liked that about you; the way you’re unconcerned by silence. You’ve never been one to ramble on about bullshit just to fulfil social expectations. I lean into your chest, letting you take my weight, feeling the way my breath speeds up at how light and delicate your touch is as you run your hands up and down my back; dipping between the folds of the blanket to caress my hip bone, then moving up to stroke the sensitive skin at the base of my neck.

Eventually you kiss me lightly on the forehead then pull away and stroll into the kitchen to make yourself a coffee. I blink a few times then pick up my own mug and follow you in.
“So,” you say blithely, “today we vacate the hovel.”

You’re not going to mention last night are you? I knew you wouldn’t. Not that it really matters: whatever the implications prove to be you’ll enact them rather than discuss it. Show-not-tell. Up until recently I would probably have felt anxious about this, but now am simply sanguine; content to leave it as it is. It’s not like you’re in control of everything, after all – not even you can manage that. I smile to myself and take a sip of my coffee. Today is the first day of the rest of my life.

*****

The next half hour mostly passes in amicable silence: me nibbling absent-mindedly on a piece of toast and you sipping several cups of black coffee while you scan through yesterday’s newspaper, your eyes skimming up and down each page at the usual preternatural speed. You touch me quite a lot in an unselfconscious way: trailing your long fingers over mine when you pass me my cup, resting a hand on my shoulder when you walk past, or letting your feet graze against mine under the table. After a while you disappear into the bathroom and I can hear the shower running. This makes me smile again, because it’s almost inevitable that you’ll be in there for ages elaborately grooming yourself (like a Geisha or Hollywood grande dame, or similar). You’ve even managed to find a cologne called Égoïste, then caught my eye when you found me staring at it as if daring me to laugh at the name (which I did…obviously). To be honest I find your preoccupation with preening and adorning rituals somewhat hilarious, although it’s actually quite endearing that you have some humanizing foibles. I remember seeing your bathroom once in your old house; it was groaning with mysterious-looking potions in glass bottles with expensive foreign labels. You’ve managed to acquire more since you moved in here, because they keep appearing unexpectedly in the bathroom; squatting on the counter in disapproving contrast to my own assortment of aftershave That Dare not Speak its Name, drug store shampoo (“Will, are you aware that this abysmal stuff smells like embalming fluid?”), ancient, tatty razors (“for humane reasons these tragic things really ought to be euthanized” – said with a straight face), and a half-used tube of moisturiser long since encrusted and dried out (no comment at all for that, although I once caught you staring at it with an expression on your face best described as ‘horrified fascination’). The moral of all this being that I think your fastidiousness is both affected and entertaining, and you find my dismissal of overpriced toiletries to be somewhat barbaric; as if I’ve just crawled out of a cave to pick fleas off myself. In the midst of all the madness and bullshit, I find the idea of sharing mundane discrepancies like this to be utterly delightful.

There’s no way I’m going to disrupt The Sacred Sacrament of Grooming and Anointing while it’s in full flow, so on an impulse pull on some jeans and the blue shirt that you profess to like so much, and go to the pharmacy on the corner for some cheap concealer to cover my spectacular collection of bruises and bite marks (mainly because I can’t face seeing Jack with a neck that looks like something out of The Story of O). I find it incredibly weird-looking, like flesh-colored lipstick. A ridiculous amount of time passes while I peer witlessly at the various shades until the assistant takes pity on me and bustles over to help me out, efficiently selecting one of the paler ones and handing it over. I take a look at the name: Porcelain Doll (Christ).

On the way back I pass Mr Haversham’s door, and the thought of his helplessness and solitude – and the fact I’m no longer plagued by either of these things – induces a twinge of guilt that makes me stop and knock so I can check he’s still got my cell number. “I’m going to be, um, working long hours over the next few weeks,” I tell him, “really long – so I might not be around much. But if you need anything, just give me a call. If I’m not in my apartment then I can try and stop by.”

“Well, if that isn’t the nicest thing!” he says. “You’re a good boy William, a very good boy. It’s most appreciated, it surely is.”
I have a horrible feeling he might try and pat me on the head, or something equally excruciating, and am trying to find a polite way to extricate myself when he suddenly gives me a beaming smile and adds: “I hope I’m not speaking out of turn, but you know how I worried about you when you first moved in; and…well, I just want to say that I’m mightily pleased you’re not on your own anymore.”

“What? Sorry, I don’t quite…”

He starts to chuckle. “You sounded like you and your young lady had a good time last night.”

What. The. Fucking. Hell? Oh. Oh shit! Those bastard sound-amplifying floorboards. I really hope he’s just assuming, as opposed to the truly mortifying alternative that I actually sound like a woman whilst in the throes of orgasm (there’s no way the hypothetical ‘her’ refers to you, after all). He sees how red I’ve gone and chuckles again, then claps my shoulder in a ‘we’re all goddamn men of the world together’ type of way.

“No need to be embarrassed Son,” he says, “you’re only young once. What’s her name?”

“Hann…ah,” I say. My voice rises very slightly on the last syllable so it sounds like I’m asking a question. Oh God…Fuck my life.

“Well, well,” he says, “I wish you all the best. I’m sorry I embarrassed you.” He pats me kindly on the arm.

Mr Haversham, I think, you have no idea.

“I hope I get to meet her at some point,” he says, and my mind goes a bit blank because technically ‘her’ would appear to be me. I make some vaguely affirmative sounding noises, then make my escape and bolt into the apartment, slinging my coat over the back of the chair. You have (finally) emerged from the bathroom and are draped over the sofa making quick, pencilled notes in a book with a foreign title. Anyone else would look sprawling and ungainly in that position, but naturally you manage to look as if you’re posing for an El Greco portrait.

“Ah, you are back,” you say without looking up. “Did you accomplish what you needed to?”

I slump into my chair and stare at you over the top of my glasses. “Oh, it was fine,” I say gloomily. “I’m fine. Everything’s fine. Turns out my sex voice has led the whole building to assume that I’m actually a woman, but it’s fine. My name is Hannah, by the way.”

“Will,” you say mildly, “what are you rambling about?”

I tell you about the conversation, and by the way your mouth starts twitching I can see you are making a truly heroic effort not to laugh. “I can honestly assure you that you do not sound remotely feminine,” you say eventually (although I notice that you don’t even pretend there was a possibility he meant you). “That is not what happened. Rather your neighbor heard you making a particular sequence of noises, and even though he did not actually hear a woman he automatically assumes one was present owing to his conventional ideas about the type of relationship he would expect you to have.”

Hmmmm, in that case I suppose it could have been worse (“well, William, sounds like someone had a truly momentous masturbation session last night”). Then I think more about what you’ve said and glance up at you, intrigued in spite of myself.

“A ‘relationship’?” I say. “Is this what we have then?”

“A relationship is a close association based on commitment, solidarity and meaningful interaction,” you reply, “so certainly yes.”
Ugh, you’re such a shifty bastard. I clear my throat. “That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean then?” you ask innocently.

Oh shit: I really set that one up for you didn’t I – game, set and match. Now I deeply regret saying anything in the first place. “It’s okay. It’s nothing, forget it,” I reply awkwardly. I sound unpleasantly reminiscent of my 14-year old self (who was also a mindless asshole much of the time, so it appears my development in this regard has been rather limited).

You look like you’re trying not to laugh again, and I have a sudden urge to punch you (and probably would, if I didn’t know you could flatten me in five seconds without even getting off the sofa).

“Don’t look so perplexed,” you say. “I am teasing you, of course. I know exactly what you mean, and the answer is both yes and no. Yes in the strictly conventional sense” – you say ‘conventional’ in the type of tone people usually reserve for ‘genocide’ or ‘Guantanamo’ or ‘genital warts’ – “in that we are emotionally attuned, interpersonally attached, and sexually intimate.” (At this point the 14-year old promptly reappears, because even though I’ve now had a succession of ecstatic orgasms with my legs wrapped round your back – in which I allegedly sound like woman – I still can’t hear you say the word ‘sex’ in your clipped, concise voice without blushing).

“However,” you continue, “’relationship’ is far too prosaic a term. That is it what normal people have, and you and I have never been that.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I reply vaguely.

“We are epic,” you say, pronouncing the word with relish. “We are the stuff of myths and legends. Comrades and co-conspirators, and elevated far above the normal arrangement of things. At a different point in history, people would have composed ballads and poetry about us.”

“Saying what narcissistic assholes we are? In heroic rhyming couplets?”

“You are being flippant because you are discomfited; you cannot readily accept praise. But nevertheless, you know I am right.”

I can’t help smiling. “You clearly think you are, so I suppose that’s all that matters.”

You obviously agree with this analysis (obviously) because you nod briskly at me, as if to say ‘well that’s settled then,’ and ask me what time I’m planning to leave. As per the plan I intend to head over to see Jack in the afternoon then meet you afterwards at the hotel you’ve found. Contrary to agreement, however, you’re now being serenely insistent that you leave after me.

“I should leave last,” I say patiently.

“No.”

“But it was the plan.” (Even to myself I sound slightly ridiculous, as though The Plan is a sacred artefact of such unfeasible complexity that it can’t possibly be deviated from).

“I am aware; but I have amended the plan.”

“You can’t just amend the plan,” I say, “it was good. It was a good plan. It would have helped avoid trouble.” (Now I am making The Plan sound like it’s imbued with mystical preservative properties, as if I’m Harry Potter).

“The only rationale was to reduce the likelihood of someone seeing me. I did that yesterday by
departing early, and can achieve it just as well by leaving late. Besides, I don’t want you to stay here on your own.”

“Look,” I say heavily, “no offence but you really don’t need to keep doing this. I’m more than capable of looking after myself. You don’t need to protect me.”

“It affronts you? To be protected?”

“No,” (yes), “it’s just…it’s not necessary.”

“With respect, I am more able to deal with any difficulties that might arise than you are.”

“So you’re saying you’re unequivocally more capable than I am? How incredibly not-vain of you. It’s not really true though, is it?”

“It is undeniably true.”

“Oh come on, it’s not. It is not true. I have dealt – successfully – with constant difficulties; most of which, I might add, have been caused by you. I dealt with that inspector when he first turned up; I dealt with Matthew Brown…” I run on with an exacting, methodical, and escalating list of illustrative examples of how I am genius coper extraordinaire (including a list of the various people I’ve killed over the years – I fling this in at the end like it’s a DVD bonus feature), and you just sit there and wait patiently until I’ve run out of breath.

“You must humor me then,” you say when I finally wind down, “because I have seen how unforgiving the world can be, and when a suitable occasion arises I like to safeguard things which are precious to me.”

“Um…Okay. Thanks. Thank you. But it’s still not necessary.”

Your smile grows fractionally broader. “No,” you reply, “I suppose it isn’t really, is it? From now on I shall be more economical with my concern.”

There’s something about your expression that doesn’t quite sit right with me, and I narrow my eyes at you, turning the facts over in my head: your insistence on defending me, buffering yourself between any latent threat. How uncharacteristic it is, the fact I’ve been letting you...

“Oh God,” I say, as it slots into place. “You’ve been doing it deliberately haven’t you?”

“How so?”

“The way you’ve been…” I wave my hand about a bit trying to think of a suitable word, “…coddling me?” You politely raise your eyebrows. “Being so overprotective. Treating me like I’m vulnerable and…and violence-averse. You want to push me to the point where I’ll be motivated to go the other way and prove you wrong.”

“Would I do such a thing?”

“Um, let me think,” I say sarcastically. “Yes.”

“I do not mean in terms of manipulating you.” You shrug as if to say ‘because obviously that goes without saying.’ “I mean whether you believe I would lower myself to apply such woefully trite ‘reverse psychology.’”

“Yes, actually. Yes you would. You just wouldn’t call it that. You’d say you were doing a
‘paradoxial intervention,’ then justify yourself by spouting something convoluted about reactance.”

“Oh, indeed?”

“Yes – indeed. It would hardly be the first time. Remember? You even left a gun on the table as an added incentive.”

You start smirking again. “That is not exactly what I was doing back then,” you say. “You are confusing the issue. And I have no intention of referring to interventions, paradoxical or otherwise.”

“But?”

“But – if I were going to say anything, it would be about choice and free will. The ultimate reactance against determinism.” You give me a look that’s positively beady. “You know quite a lot about that don’t you?”

“Please don’t quote something I said to you in art gallery over four years ago.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s different. It’s different now. Everything’s changed.”

“Yes, but your competing imperatives remain the same.” You smile slightly. “At least they have been up until now.” You don’t actually say ‘until last night’ but I can’t help feeling you’re thinking it anyway.

“Okay,” I answer wearily, “you’ve made your point.” (Don’t you always, oh my God). “Anyway it’s irrelevant, because whether or not you admit you’ve been doing it on purpose, it doesn’t change the fact that the safeguarding isn’t necessary. I can take care of myself.”

You steeple your fingers under your chin and stretch your long legs out in front of you. You’re so self-contained; it’s irritating “Why did you tolerate it?” you ask.

“I didn’t.” You raise your eyebrows. “I didn’t…entirely.”

“Because it was easier than asserting yourself? Or for some other reason?”

I frown, unwilling to answer immediately; and you lean back again in your chair watching me.

“You were not yourself when I found you in that alley,” you finally say. “You must concede that to be the case. I could tell immediately; I did not even need to speak to you to know it.”

I yearn to snap ‘well whose fault was that?’ but resist the urge because it’s too juvenile and I know I’d regret it. But something must still show in my face because you look at me carefully, then unwind yourself from the sofa and come and stand next to my chair. It’s weird; even after everything that’s happened the sight of you darting towards me still triggers an involuntary twinge of fear. Classical conditioning. I get to my feet as well so we’re on the same level.

“You were not yourself,” you repeat. “Not in that alleyway, and not afterwards. Ever since I came back you have been incredibly skittish; tense and wary, and taut enough to snap. Yes?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Not maybe; definitely. It was apparent that you had lost confidence in yourself. And given that your Self is so rare and singular, it is rather unforgivable to not wish to breathe life into it again.”
“I didn’t…I don’t know. I didn’t feel that different.”

“Because you do not know yourself as well as I do. You don’t realize your own potential – yet.”

“Yes…well. Even so.” You start smiling again. “Are you going to admit it or not?”

“Admit what?”

I screw my nose up at you and you laugh. “You should not do that,” you say, “it is both incredibly rude and impossibly irresistible; I cannot vouch for my self-control.”

“Okay, so tell me this then: do you think your ‘woefully trite reverse psychology’, (you roll your eyes in a long-suffering way), “has been successful?”

“I think that you shall be extremely successful. And that my presence facilitates that.”

“Very sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Of course. But also of you; I always have been.” You look thoughtful. “I am not a faithful person as a rule; I am not a believer and I pledge my allegiance to very few things. But I have faith in you.”

“To do what?”

“To be true to yourself. And to inhabit your natural state.”

“Which is?”

“Your capacity for greatness. That you will become a great version of yourself, rather than a mediocre version of someone else.”

“And is that the person you really want?” I say pointedly. “Not the version of me that’s stood here, but some hypothetical, idealized edition?”

“No, on the contrary; I see him all the time. There is a call in me which finds an answering echo in you, and that is something which has never fully gone away. Even when you are not yourself. Even when we are at variance; even when we are not together.”

I give a slow nod at the undeniable truth of this and you make a quiet sound that might (possibly) be a sigh. “I confess that it is one of the few occasions in which I miscalculated,” you say, “because I underestimated the toll the separation would take on you.” You pause, and then add like it’s an enormous concession (which I suppose it is): “As well as on myself.”

I look at you steadily, and you look back at me; and it feels like a further recognition has been acknowledged and exchanged. You smile in a rather feline way and lean your head back.

“As you wish,” you say. “I shall leave shortly. Perhaps you ought to keep your car here, at least for the time being. It will draw less attention to the fact that you have left. Of course that means you will have to rely,” you shudder slightly, “on public transport.”

“I’m sure I’ll cope.”

“Yes,” you reply, “I am fairly sure that you will”. You grab me and spin me round against your chest, briefly burying your face in my hair, and it should be ridiculous but it’s not and I can feel myself laughing and leaning into you, wrapping my arms round your back and tilting my face up so you can kiss me.
You’re right; we’re not like normal people, not anywhere close. We’re never going to do the things that regular lovers do. We’re not going to walk down a beach hand in hand, or stare at each other over candle light; we won’t be sharing the same popcorn bucket at the movies and making out in the back row, and we won’t have a joint car and a nice house in the suburbs. I’ll never meet your relatives; you won’t be coming to my office Christmas party as my ‘significant other.’ We won’t have pension plans or retirement packages or sit on PTA boards. But I don’t care about any of that crap, because I never actually wanted normal. I only ever wanted you.

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After you’ve left I shovel some clothes and other assorted shit into a backpack and realize that I’m smiling to myself like an idiot. I can imagine the way you’d stare at me if you were here (“do not be an idiot Will”), but it wouldn’t really matter because I feel like I’m your idiot now. Oh Christ, I sound ridiculous – put a few beers in me and I’ll be writing our initials inside a love heart on some random wall (God, I’m not actually going to do that…am I? No. No, I’m definitely not doing that. Fuck).

I glance at my watch: time to get going. Although there’s a strong rationale for maintaining routine and keeping contact with Jack, the idea now seems awkward and troubling; as if he’ll somehow be able to look at me and immediately tell exactly what I’ve been doing (and who with). Oh shit, yeah – my neck. I go to the bathroom mirror and laboriously dab the concealer over the worst of the bruises. It takes ages because I keep smudging it in the wrong places and can’t get it to blend smoothly (God, what an utter pain in the ass). Afterwards I gaze at my face meditatively; it’s as if I expect myself to have altered in some way and am vaguely surprised that I haven’t.

I take your advice about the car, leaving it where it is and heading over on the subway instead. It reminds me of the last time I made the journey, the day I found out Matthew Brown was after me. God, so much has changed since then, it’s like a whole different lifetime ago. I even find myself glancing absently around the car for the guy I stared at so fixedly before who looked a bit like you; a drably monochrome copy of the real version. Sorry about that, I think, you were all I had to look at. But not anymore.

On the way to the office I wonder what you’re doing right now and whether you’re thinking about me. Maybe you had a point in what you said before; you really do have a whole mythos that’s risen up around you. You’ve become your own urban legend and nothing has ever been able to hold you back. And yet…you’ve never been able to hold me back either. Not entirely. Not altogether. And now I’m about to walk into the world’s foremost centre of criminal investigation and tell people a completely false account of myself and my circumstances, and I’ll be able to make them believe it and accept it without question. Nothing can touch me and no one can pin me down. Then afterwards I’ll meet you at the hotel and you’ll pull me onto the floor and take me apart; then you’ll reconstruct me afterwards and I’ll do the same for you.

Me and you; us. We’re loftier than the law, larger than life, shrewder than reason, tougher and fiercer than the FBI, or the ocean, or a Great Red Dragon; and we’re even stronger than ourselves, because we’re better together and when we work as a unit then nothing can stop us. This is our design.

For the first time in recent memory I feel like I’m no longer casting a shadow. There’s a sharp winter sun overhead, and a sense of anticipation in the air, and I walk sturdy and sure and unassailable, letting people step out of my way. I’m attuned and alert, in control of myself and what’s around me, and I strive high, imagine well, and dare greatly. And no one is going to hurt me without my permission ever again.

Brace yourself world, I think. Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter are back.
Many thanks to kajhitten for suggesting the inclusion of Egoiste :-D

Huge also thanks to Fannibal Bea for suggesting my splendid new profile picture! (And then formatting it to A03 dimensions, because I am splendidly shit with computers). I’m told this is a genuine publicity shot and has not been Photoshopped. But of course they’re only Dude-Bros and it could just have easily been Jack posed in the same way as Will, amirite? AMIRITE?

Spoilers: I am, in fact, wrong.

ETA I’ve changed the picture since first writing this and people have been asking what it looked like so [here it is](#). Go on Will, you little scoundrel. EXTEND THE LONG ARM OF THE LAW.
The building’s quieter than usual, although someone – almost certainly Sanderson – has printed Freddie Lounds’ ‘Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing?’ article and pinned multiple copies on the staff notice board (each one laid over the other in fussy geometric lines). I stare at it with amused irritation and it strikes me – not for the first time – what complete and unrepentant outsiders you and I are: the major difference being that you wear it well, and make it seem enigmatic and glamorous, whereas with me it leads to crap like this. I consider unpinning it all, but it would take ages and ultimately I can’t be bothered, because really – who fucking cares anyway. It’s not like most of the building isn’t secretly thinking it.

I run up the steps two at a time, and in deference to The Plan obediently head to Jack’s office to fill him in on Matthew Brown’s most recent display of bullshit. As usual he’s not in and his secretary’s only insight is a ‘how the hell would I know?’ shrug (“Thanks,” I say sarcastically; “you’re welcome” he replies), so I wander down to the lab instead. Price and Zeller are both there, bickering amicably about a skeleton that’s just been uncovered during a parking lot renovation: the latter is loudly claiming that the statute of limitations for human remains is 80 years, after which there is no obligation to investigate the circumstances of death.

“The parking lot was built in the 1960s,” declares Zeller, as if that settles it.

“So?”

“So…so, it’s not exactly recent.”

“It’s hardly ancient history either,” answers Price, who loves a challenge.

“There’s no way those remains are any less than 81 years old.”

“Rubbish. We can’t possibly tell that without isotope analysis.”

“Well,” says Zeller, brandishing the photos in a sort of frenzy, “back me up. Tell him we should refer this straight back.”

“1000 years if he’s a day,” I reply without looking at the picture.

“See? Will agrees that it’s Palaeolithic.”

“Absolutely,” I say. “Injuries entirely consistent with being speared by woolly mammoth tusks.”

“That’s a brilliant theory Agent Graham,” sniffs Price, “except that the parietal and temporal bones are clearly fractured, which is ‘entirely consistent’ with blunt force trauma to the side of the head.”

“My mistake. I meant to say trampled by a woolly mammoth.”

“You two are ridiculous,” says Price sanctimoniously.

“Well, to be fair, it’s not like we don’t have enough to do without wasting time on cold cases. Zeller’s right, refer it back.”

Zeller’s no longer listening to either of us, but is talking to the photograph instead. “You better be
more than 80 years old,” he says mutinously, “you shrivelled bastard.”

I hold out my hand for the pictures; the angle they’ve been taken makes the skull looks like it’s grinning. The next one has a construction worker in the background wearing a look of dismay that’s so intense it’s almost conical.

“We could always sneak back tonight and dig a new hole to stick him in,” I say. “We can tell Jack that archaeologists made off with it.”

“Shut up Will,” answers Price in a martyred voice.

“Maybe he interred himself deliberately. They were wild bastards back in the 60s – there’s probably a load of weed and flower power in the next hole.”

“I am not investigating the murder of Piltdown Man,” says Zeller to the photograph.

Price opens his mouth to protest, then suddenly hesitates and peers closer at me with narrowed eyes. “Will,” he says after a pause, “are you aware that your neck is absolutely smothered in hicckeys?”

“No. No it’s not,” I say with mock solemnity. “I’ve got scabies. And fleas. Both are highly contagious; would you like them as well?”

“You’re full of shit,” says Price smugly. “No wonder you’re being so chipper. My suspicions were first aroused when you didn’t come in here like usual – lurking in a corner looking monumentally tormented and pissed off.”

“Who’s full of shit?” asks Zeller, finally putting down the photos.

“William Graham is positively overflowing with excrement of the male bovine variety, because he’s pretending that the hicckeys on his neck – which he’s inexpertly tried to cover up with ladies’ cosmetics – were put there by a combination of fleas and Sarcoptes scabiei.”

“You know the Latin name of the scabies mite,” I say in an awed voice.

“Professor Maggot told me,” replies Price; Professor Maggot being an (unkind) nickname for Earl Johnson, the senior forensic entomologist. He’s actually a decent guy, despite a somewhat troubling obsession with flyspecks and larval colonization. I remember once getting stranded with him at a Loudoun County crime scene during a blizzard: he whipped some photos out his briefcase which I expected to be of his wife and kids but that turned out to be newly acquired close-ups of the American carrion beetle in Glorious Technicolor. We ended up getting spectacularly drunk in the hotel bar and he proceeded to tell me way more about the mating cycles of the blowfly than anyone could ever possibly want or need to know. “They’re horny little beggars Will,” he kept saying, “complete randy bastards. You’ve got to hand it to them.” I have a horrible feeling we ended up drinking a toast to the blowfly’s sexual prowess. Actually, yeah. Yeah we definitely did. It may even have been my idea.

“Why have you and the Maggot Man been talking about skin infestations in Latin?” I say (partly to deflect attention from my neck, but mostly to try and blot out the awareness that I did something much worse with him).

“Don’t change the subject. And don’t try and pretend that it was scabies and Pulex irritans who’ve been nibbling on your skinny jugular as opposed to a lusty young lady.”

“Pulex irritans?”
“The human flea. In its Latin binomial,” says Price smugly. “It is also known as a ‘cosmopolitan flea’.”

“Christ. I bet the long winter nights just fly by in your house.”

“Stop evading the question.”

“All right, you’ve got me. It was Kade Purnell; our beloved and cosmopolitan leader. She adores me, she’s obsessed. That’s why she’s always trying to get me locked up; she doesn’t want anyone else to have me.”

Price narrows his eyes again. “Why are you being so secretive?”

“Oh, let me think. Could it be because it’s absolutely none of your business?”

“There’s no need to raise your voice,” replies Price piously. “I’m not deaf. There’s no reason you can’t bullshit me quietly.”

“When do you plan on going to bed?”

“Who says I’m bullshitting you?” I say with a smirk.

“Because while I’ve heard worse stories than your combined explanation of scabies and Ms. Pulex irritans, I could count them on the fingers of one slightly abnormal hand. You agree, don’t you?” he adds, turning to Zeller, “Will is bullshitting us – his dear friends and comrades – about the state of his sex life.”

“Will has a sex life?” asks Zeller, feigning disbelief.

“His neck certainly does.”

“If Will has a sex life below the neck,” replies Zeller, “then this skeleton is no more than 79 years old.”

“I’m not offended by that by the way,” I say, “in case you were wondering.”

“No offense intended. It’s just I figure this guy,” he brandishes the photo, “sees more action than you do.”

“Go on Will,” says Price, “regale and enthrall us with the graphic details. We need to get our vicarious thrills somehow.”

“Believe me, you really don’t want these details,” I reply (because – fucking hell) when the door opens and the head of one of Jack’s trainees, Natasha (“call me Tash!”) comes peering round the side. Price and Zeller loyalty abandon their interrogation and promptly resume bickering over the parking lot skeleton.

“Oh Mr Graham!” she says. “Wonderful, I’ve been looking for you. Do you have a few minutes? There’s something I was hoping you could help me out with.”

“Sure,” I say, “no problem.”

“Great, that’s great!” She beams at me in a touchingly eager way. “Thanks so much. I’m having trouble with a few things and it’s an area that I thought you might know a bit about” (which inevitably means it’s going to relate to something depraved).

I give a slightly triumphant look to Price and Zeller, who obediently melt away whilst Natasha-call-me-Tash draws up a stool and proceeds to earnestly ask how criminal definitions of severity relate to
constitutionality. We have a cosy back-and-forth about aggravators, intent and victimology; and I try to spin it out for as long as possible in the hope that Bad Cop and Worse Cop will become preoccupied with something else so I can make a crafty escape and take my neck with me. At least that’s the plan; one can only hope (that one being me…I am the one).

“Well,” I say, with a level of enthusiasm that’s probably (certainly) bordering on inappropriate, “the issues around terminology are very interesting, because analogues like ‘heinous’ or ‘outrageous’ have withstood repeated legal challenges…” and she’s nodding away and bombarding me with smart, insightful questions (in fact we’re getting on like a house that’s both on fire and surrounded by heinous and outrageous arsonists) when Sanderson comes swaggering in and inevitably fucks it all up. He pauses dramatically on the threshold, as if he expects someone to provide him with a drumroll, and Natasha gives him a nervous, wary look and hastily thanks me before abruptly leaving herself.

“Brought you those ballistic results you asked for,” Sanderson says sulkily to Price when he finally realizes no one’s going to acknowledge him. Then he spots me, and his eyes flicker in a malevolent way.

“Oh, hey Will,” he says. “Pretty surprised you’d be so shameless as to show your face in here. Not after that fantastic coverage on TattleCrime.”

“Yeah, it was wasn’t it?” I say. “I thought I came across rather well. Not so sure about the ‘exclusive anonymous source within the FBI’ though; he sounded like a bit of a dick.”

“Yes, where could she have got those quotes from?” asks Price.

“I suppose she got them from somewhere,” says Sanderson evasively.

“Yeah, I suppose she did,” I reply with heavy sarcasm. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Well, all I can say is that it’s just as well not all of us are determined to drag this division’s name through the mud,” says Sanderson airily. He turns to Price, effectively dismissing me and Zeller as unworthy of further notice. “Did you see my interview with Jenny Jones?”

“Who?”

“Jenny Jones. The crime correspondent for East Coast Update. They were doing a special on forensics and invited me on to talk about my work on the Abbott case. The producers included the Judge’s concluding comments at the end, it was great.”

“Oh,” says Price. “No.”

“It was great man. Really great. Kind of thing that could get me promoted – catch the eyes of the guys at the top, y’know? I said to her afterwards, I said: ‘honey, you ever need to know how this all works, and how it’s done right, you come to Rick Sanderson.’”

Oh for God’s sake. I have a horrible feeling I’m going to start laughing, because surely the only thing worse than a massive narcissist is a narcissist who insists on expounding their narcissism in the third person (and I have just had a night of rapturous sex with the most unapologetic narcissist in the known universe, so I Know What I Am Talking About). Also – Rick? Does that mean his full name is Richard? Oh please let it be Richard; that means I could legitimately call him Dick.

Sanderson (Dick?) beams round the room in a highly irritating, self-satisfied way. “Yeah, what can I tell you,” he says. “It was pretty special. They’re even going to reuse some excerpts for their Pick of the Week.”
“Prick of the Week?” I ask. Price and Zeller start snorting in unison and have to hold the photos of the parking lot skeleton over their faces to try and hide it.

“Hilarious, aren’t you,” says Sanderson sarcastically. “You know Will, envy’s a pretty pathetic emotion.”

“Envy?”

“Damn right envy. I can’t really see you on TV somehow.”

“To be honest neither can I,” I reply. “If I wanted to be on TV I’d have joined Miami Vice rather than Behavioral Sciences.” Even as I’m saying this I’m hoping no one gets round to pointing out that I actually have been on the television – several times – only it tends towards footage of me being manhandled into the back of assorted police cars with a ‘oh for God’s sake, not again’ expression on my face.

Sanderson has obviously decided that the whole envy tactic isn’t going to yield dividends, so changes strategy and gestures contemptuously towards my neck instead, grimacing all the while in a shitty, accusing sort of way. I internally roll my eyes: for someone so adept at concealment, I’m clearly monumentally crap at using actual concealer. Why the hell didn’t I just wear a scarf? Or band aids? Or a…neck brace? I briefly stray off into an interesting fantasy about where I would acquire (i.e., steal) the latter, when Sanderson clicks his fingers in front of my face.

“Earth to Graham,” he snaps, adding: “what the hell is that?” after I’ve stubbornly refused to acknowledge the pointing.

“Fleas,” says Zeller.

“Scabies,” says Price. “Will is a host organism.”

“Fleas and scabies,” I confirm. “Both highly contagious.”

“Oh yeah? I figured you’d been holding a vacuum cleaner against your throat to fake the fact someone would be crazy enough to want to give you a hickey.”

“Fascinating theory,” I say, “but this time sadly wrong. I look forward to reading about my various parasites in forthcoming TattleCrime articles. Tell Freddie that I can give her the Latin names if she wants them.”

“Hey man, it wasn’t me who spoke to her.” He walks over to the door, then pauses and adds over his shoulder, “Although I’d buy a few beers for whoever did. It’s about time someone finally had the guts to tell the truth about you.”

“There’s nothing as sad as drinking alone,” I call after him as he leaves. “Christ, I’d like to punch that guy in his fucking face.”

“Why the face,” asks Price, “what’s wrong with in the balls?”

“Fair point.”

“You’re smaller than him, mind, you’d need to work out a bit first. Why don’t you sign up for the physical?”

“Ugh, and go sweating through the woods on an assault course? No way. Anyway, I don’t need excess muscle mass to get the message across. If all else failed, I’d just have to make it recreational
and get someone to lend a hand” (or do it myself with my Own Bare Hands – already latticed with slim white scars from a similar confrontation – and which is starting to feel like an increasingly appealing option. Shit, no, I don’t mean that. Do I? No. No, definitely not. Much).

“Don’t look at me,” says Price, interrupting this interestingly morbid train of thought, “I abhor all physical violence. I’ll cheer you on though.”

“So will I,” adds Zeller, “right to the bitter end. Then I’d help carry you to the mortuary after he kicks your ass.”

“Thanks, I’m touched. I hope you’d also weep over my corpse when you autopsy it.”

“He would,” says Price, “then he’d drop tears into the Foley cathether and contaminate the sample, so we’d have to start over irrigating your…”

“Okay, I get it. Zeller, don’t cry at my autopsy. Show some respect for the dead.”

Zeller gives me a pointed look. “Seriously Will, don’t let Sanderson get to you. He’s an idiot. He’s not worth it”

“Yes, I know.”

“He’s just jealous because you’re prettier and smarter than him,” says Price in a consolatory voice. “Even if you do have sexually predacious scabies.”

I start laughing at that, even though I suppose it’s probably not all that funny. Because the fact is that Sanderson doesn’t merely dislike me, he hates me; and while a trivial thing like envy might be the kindling, the accelerant comes from somewhere much murkier and rawer. I suppose I should be used to it by now: to being hated. Bizarrely though, no matter how many times it happens (and despite my best efforts to the contrary), it’s never enough to fully quash the faint, hopeful part of me that just wants to be liked and accepted and believes that one day it might finally happen. Other people manage it, the part forlornly says to itself, surely it’s not that much to ask. I briefly think back to the chronic, ambivalent nihilism I experienced on first meeting you: the wretched sense that you would inevitability catch on to the wary mistrust that everyone else seemed to feel and not want anything more to do with me, coupled with a pathetically hopeful optimism that maybe – just maybe, just this once – it might not happen.

I can see Price and Zeller looking at me with coordinating expressions of gloomy sympathy; and while it’s undoubtedly well-meant it’s also deeply irritating, and I make an abrupt, executive decision to say “fuck The Plan” and opt to join you at the hotel right now rather than waiting until evening. I can always call or email Jack about the message – it’s not like it matters all that much in the grand scheme of things. I say goodbye to Price and Zeller then head off; and have to resist the urge to lose my temper when I see Sanderson propped against the wall in the corridor lying in wait. I stride straight past him and he abruptly seizes my elbow and pulls me back.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I say in a low, angry voice. “Touch me again and I’ll…”

“And you’ll do what?” he replies mockingly. “Jeez, look at you man. Who do you think you are? You think you’re so goddamn smart. Think you’re something special.”

“I know I do,” I say sarcastically, “I’m my biggest fan.”

“Well you’re not as smart as you think you are.”

“Yes, everyone always says that,” I answer in a bored voice. “I don’t really see it myself.”
“You know Will, if you were genuinely smart you wouldn’t piss me off so much. You’d make a bit more effort to get on my good side.” He takes a step towards me and makes an insolent gesture of straightening the collar on my jacket. “I have friends in high places.”

I reach up, slowly and deliberately, and knock his hands away. “Oh yeah? Where? Do they live at the top of a tower block?”

“You’re going to get what’s coming to you,” he says, and he’s practically snarling. Jesus, what the hell is this?

“You think you’re in control, don’t you?” he continues, “Always so goddamn arrogant, think you know what’s going on. But you’ve got no idea about anything.” And there’s something about his tone – intense and venomous – that makes me hesitate.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask slowly. He’s bluffing, surely? He must be.

“You’ll find out man. When you’re least expecting it. You’ll find out.”

I opt to dismiss this as typically blustering bullshit, and am turning round to walk away when he hisses: “Don’t you turn your back on me.”

I take a deep breath. “We’re done here Sanderson,” I say, with a level of equability I certainly don’t feel. “Go back to your office.”

He takes another step towards me and I can see a vein throbbing in his temple, his dead-eyed malevolence: the loathing so sour and palpable it’s as if it’s curdling him from the inside. “You know I’ve been hearing a lot about you recently,” he says, “and it seems like you’ve caught the eye of quite a few people.”

I can’t help frowning at this – genuinely confused as to what the fuck he’s referring to – and he gives a barking laugh. “Yeah, I can’t say I share the same fascination; a little weirdo like you. Looks like you don’t totally get it either. Even Will Graham is over Will Graham. If you want my advice, you really better start praying that everyone else gets over you as well.”

Outside the window the groundskeeper is blast-cleaning the sidewalk, and the buzzing whine of his equipment is eerily magnified in the silence of the corridor. Sanderson is still staring at me; scenting blood. Fuck all of this. I lean forward, get into his space.

“Unlike you,” I say quietly, “I don’t need ‘friends in high places’ to make a point. So consider this as a final warning: do not keep pushing me. Because you won’t like it when I push back.”

“I could say the same to you,” he replies. His voice doesn’t falter, but he still shifts away very slightly. There’s something in my expression and I know he can see it.

“Then it looks like we understand each other,” I say. “Doesn’t it?”

There’s another beat of silence while neither of us moves, and there’s nothing except the wailing drone from outside like a warning siren: prepare, take cover, the onslaught’s about to begin.

“I’m not going to mess with you myself man,” he says at last. “You’re way too much freak for me. But from what I hear it’s not me you should be worrying about.” He lets out a humorless laugh. “You know, anyone else and I’d feel sorry for them. But not you. Not. You.”

I stare back meditatively, trying to take the measure of him – how much is posturing and how much is real? Sanderson, you’re finally getting interesting. Then there’s a clatter of footsteps and Jack
comes striding round the corner in his usual forceful way, nearly careering into both of us in the process.

“Will!” he says. “Just the man. I heard you’d stopped by, glad I caught you. There’s a few things I need to…” He pauses and looks from one of us to the other, taking in the bristling antagonism. “What’s going on? Is there a problem here?”

“No,” I say, without taking my eyes off Sanderson. “There’s no problem.”

“No problem Sir,” Sanderson adds. He stares right back at me.

“That’s not what it looks like from where I’m standing,” says Jack sharply.

“It’s fine. What did you want to see me about?”

“It’s related to the Matthew Brown situation.” He’s still looking at us both, a crease of angry concern between his eyebrows.

“Your office?”

“Yes. You good to come now?”

“Of course.” I finally turn away from Sanderson. “I’ll be right there.”

Jack hesitates again, then nods and moves off at the same time as Sanderson also makes to leave. On an impulse I dart out and grab the latter’s elbow, my grip so tight I can see him wince. “I’m glad we had this discussion,” I say quietly. “I feel it’s clarified a few things, don’t you?”

Jack’s now halfway up the corridor, and spins round in annoyance when he realizes I’m not following him. “Will!” he calls out. “You coming?”

“Coming.” I say, then quickly lean forward again, tightening my hold on Sanderson’s arm even further. “I don’t know what the hell all this is about, but if I need to find out then I will. And in the meantime, these people who are so interested in me? Do me a favor – tell them I’ll be waiting.”

Then I turn round and walk away.

Chapter End Notes

Describing a skeleton of uncertain age as “Piltdown Man” is not mine I’m afraid, I stole it from ‘A Touch of Frost’ (which English readers may fondly remember as featuring Del Boy in a dirty beige mac).

In other news, I can’t believe how this has got WAY longer than originally planned. Considering a novel is anything of 40k+ words this means I’ve sort of written 3 Hannigram novels since December. OMFG.

#Skills you should keep to yourself
#Skills you should never put on your CV
#Life skillz
#Britain’s Got Talent?
Well that escalated quickly
Jack and I traipse up to his office in grim-faced silence. “You going to tell me what that was about?” he says when we get inside.

“Anderson...” I begin, and then promptly grind to a halt.

“Yes? What about him?”

Now that I’ve started I realize I’m not entirely sure how to proceed. I push my glasses up the bridge of my nose (it seems the bastards are now actively trying to run off) and look at Jack thoughtfully. “Does he...?”

Jack raises an eyebrow.

“Is there anything about his background that’s...I don’t know...anything that stands out as odd?”

“What do you mean exactly? I can’t give you details from personnel files – you know that.”

“Come on Jack.”

Jack sighs. “The short answer is ‘no.’ Not at all. And I’m very good at picking up on that sort of stuff.”

_You’re not really though are you?_ I can’t help thinking. “Well, are you aware if he has any...” I flail around a bit. _Connections? Anyone influential?_

“’Connections’? What’s this about Will? And no, I seriously doubt it. What sort of connections could he possibly have? His background’s hardly what you’d call High Society; he came up through one of those Cane Foundation programmes.”

“What? Oh, those scholarship things.” I’m actually genuinely surprised by this as the competition for them is so fierce – he’s clearly nowhere near as stupid as he looks.

“That’s the one. For people who aren’t as smart as you are, but just as socially and materially... disadvantaged.”

“Thanks; you’re making me sound like a war orphan.”

“The American Dream,” Jack replies sardonically, “highest goals and aspirations achievable for all – if you’re prepared to work hard. And keep that to yourself about the programme grant; I shouldn’t really have told you.”

“It’s hardly something to be ashamed of.”

“I guess,” says Jack vaguely, obviously growing bored with this line of discussion.

“And does he?”

“Does he what?”
“Work hard?”

“Yeah. He’s good. He’s good at what he does.”

“Hmm.”

“So now we’ve established that he works hard and you’re a smart war orphan, are you going to tell me what’s actually going on here? What’s he said to you?”

“Nothing really, I guess. I don’t know.” (Yet…I’m sure I’ll find out).

“Well he’s clearly said something.”

“A sort of veiled threat I suppose; he hinted he knows people who are out to get me…Maybe I’m overreacting,” I add, partly to appease Jack but partly as a concession to myself that it might actually be the case.

“I don’t like the sound of that Will. Do you want me to get him in here?”

“Thanks, but no. Or at least not yet. I’d like to try and sort it out myself.” I sigh slightly. This is completely impossible, as if there’s a sheet of glass separating us. Jack no longer feels like someone I can openly confide in – not as long as he’s wearing that badge.

“Try not to get too paranoid,” says Jack in his best ‘Will’s-being-difficult’ voice.

“No? I’d probably be dead several times over by now if I wasn’t.”

“How can someone be dead several times over?”

“You’re such a pedant sometimes Jack, did anyone ever tell you that?”

“And you’re a paranoiac,” Jack replies cheerfully. “Look, Will, seriously – try not to wind yourself up too much. I don’t know exactly what Sanderson’s said to you, but I can honestly tell you that there’s nothing in his background to cause me any concern; he wouldn’t be here if there was.” He seems touchingly oblivious to the fact that I’m still here, meaning this safeguard effectively equates to ‘fuck all.’ There’s another pause and I start tugging at a loose thread on my cuff, then glance up and realize he’s staring at me so self-consciously put it down again.

“Be vigilant by all means,” Jack says pointedly. He’s now adopted his sermonizing tone; he might as well be standing over me and forcing me to sing Kum Ba Yah.

“Did you get that from a fortune cookie?” I say to try and distract myself from this (appalling) mental image.

“No. All of us directors got sent on an occupational wellbeing seminar – I got it from there.”

“Great. Thanks Dr Crawford” (thanks for nothing, that is – my occupational wellbeing got kicked in its sorry ass years ago).
“You’re welcome.”

God, this conversation’s starting to get tedious. “So what’s this about Matthew Brown?” I say.

“Oh, yes. Okay. So, now you’re here I’d like you to take a look at some files for me.” He hesitates. “About Michael French.”

I try not to sigh again. The truth is that I’d rather gnaw off my own feet than look at the casefile on Michael fucking French, but Jack might think it’s odd if I say no and I’ve clearly got a vested interest in staying on his good side for as long as possible (which realistically is…probably not all that much longer). He reaches into the filing cabinet to retrieve it, and I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the highly polished plaque on his desk: I look almost impossibly pissed off, so summon a supreme effort to compose my features into something that could (just about) pass as politely professional interest.

Jack dumps the folder in front of me and claps me on the shoulder. “You sure you’re all right with this?”

“Of course,” I say. I fantasize about adding something along the lines of ‘are you telling me it would matter if I wasn’t?’ but manage to resist, because there’s absolutely no point starting an argument.

“I’ll be honest with you Will,” says Jack, as if being honest is some kind of enormous concession and I should be grateful, “this isn’t really to do with Matthew Brown.”

“Well, obviously,” I say irritably (my vow to stay on my best behavior rapidly starting to wither on the vine). “They had no connection beyond me. Nothing in this file’s going to help catch him; this is about French himself.” Oh yes, of course. I glance up at Jack. “You want to go for posthumous convictions don’t you?”

“On form with the smarts today aren’t you? Yes we do. Not in terms of an actual trial of course.”


“But in the interests of justice, we thought…”

“You mean increasing the closure statistics.”

Jack gives me a look. “Sorry,” I say sheepishly.

“Of course it would help if the other victims came forward.”

“I wasn’t his victim.”

“No shame in being victimized.”

“Of course there’s not, I know that. It’s just…” I wave my hand around a bit. “Come on Jack, give me a break.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, it’s fine.” I flick the file open and run my eyes down the pages. Simultaneously I decide I won’t bother referring to the Matthew Brown message now; it wouldn’t really achieve anything in practical terms, and it would also mean having to explain the significance of the screen name (Christ). Not to mention the teeny tiny little omission of never telling Jack about the alleyway ambush when it happened. Maybe that was a tactical error in retrospect, although – fucking hell – pretty understandable all things considered. I take my glasses off and run my hand over my face.
Okay then: the Michael French file (for God’s sake).

“You’ll have to tread very carefully when reaching out for anyone else,” I say. “He wasn’t opportunistic. He selected people meticulously. That was part of his MO: finding,” I frown slightly, “victims whose testimony he thought would carry less credibility than his; or at least who he believed he could terrorize into submission. You need an emphasis from the outset that people will be taken seriously.”

“All men?”

“No, not necessarily. Remember it was about power, not sex, so it doesn’t rule out targeting women. But I couldn’t say for sure – it wasn’t exactly something he discussed with me. Hey,” a name in the file catches my eye and I brandish the paper at Jack. “It says here he did a residency with Abel Gideon.” Jack and I sign simultaneously and roll our eyes at each other.

“Oh God, yes,” says Jack, “I forgot about that. Keep it to yourself all right? The press would have a field day.”

Don’t tell the press, don’t tell anyone Sanderson got a scholarship…I’m getting a bit bored of other people’s secrets, I’ve got more than enough of my own. Not least the dual identities I’m currently sitting in Jack’s office with: the person who’s going to hide out with you in a hotel (so we can fuck like rabbits) and the one who’s supposed to be working with the US Government to catch you. Although two identities seem quite frugal by your standards: at one point you probably had as many as you had acquaintances. I have a horrible feeling I’m smirking so try and keep my face straight.

“Jeez, that was a crazy few months,” says Jack. He looks a bit guilty (good). “Feels like a lifetime ago.”

“Hmmm,” I say. “Crazy.” I suppose this is probably the point that I ought to be having some serious reservations (“I sat in Hannibal Lecter’s cobalt blue drawing room with Leda and the Swan over the fireplace and you having a fit in the corner”) and needless to say I don’t. Both the people in this file are dead whereas you and I are so incredibly alive. “They really are putting something in the water at Hopkins,” I eventually add. Jack, like Alana, doesn’t seem to find this particularly funny (I make a mental note to try it out on you later).

There’s an awkward silence and I tip back the chair so I can stretch my legs out. “Jack,” I say with mock seriousness, “why does nearly everyone I meet want to either kill me or screw me over?”

“I don’t,” says Jack, “if that’s any consolation. At least I don’t most of the time.”

“That’s pretty understandable I suppose. What can I tell you? Take a ticket and join the back of the queue.”

Jack gives a crooked smile, then leans across his desk to pat my wrist like I’m an ailing pet. “Don’t worry Will,” he says. “We’ll get him. We’ll get him eventually.”

I smile back vaguely, and let my eyes drift over to the window: the first flurry of snow has started, dirty grey flecks like feathers. Jack’s still watching me, and idly I wonder whether he’s referring to Matthew Brown or you: two discrete adversaries and two totally different types of dismantling.

*****

The hotel turns out to miles away, taking goddamn ages to reach without a car, and I get a shock when I finally arrive because it really wasn’t what I was expecting: opulent, in a rather garish and vulgar way – not your style at all – and more ostentatious than seems entirely wise. It’s the type of
place that makes me want to start chanting Trade Union anthems, but I need to be on my best behavior (again...whatever the hell that actually is) so conceal myself behind a vase of sickly-looking Easter lilies and try to look casual and unconcerned (in fact I put so much effort into looking casual and unconcerned that it first becomes strenuous, and then physically painful). You’ve said you’ll meet me in the lobby, but as yet there’s no sign of you. Instead a group of trust fund types, all shiny hair, big teeth, and Tommy Hilfiger, come and park themselves a few feet away, yapping away in well-bred, loudly self-confident voices.

“We’ll have access to a private beach,” says one of them, “so of course we’ll be skinny dipping every morning. Do you have any idea how divine water feels on your naked skin?”

I have to resist a powerful urge to lean over and say “I do, actually – every morning in the shower.” God this place is awful: the lilies make it smell like a funeral parlor and the lobby resembles a mausoleum where crystal-drop chandeliers and imitation marble go to die. I have an image of us being trapped in a series of equally mindless places for the indefinite future and feel my heart beginning to sink. What’s taking you so long anyway? Oh…oh, okay there you are. In fact I can’t believe I didn’t spot you sooner as you’re virtually in my direct line of sight. Then after a few seconds I understand exactly why, because you’re doing that thing where you alter all your body language and demeanor and turn into someone else. It’s both artful and fascinating and incredibly creepy. You’re wearing the fake glasses I got you (which suit you surprisingly well…how the hell do you manage it?), and a loose-fitting navy suit and pale blue shirt with the top few buttons undone. You’re lounging against the wall scrolling through your cell phone and people keep staring at you, but not with suspicion as opposed to barely concealed (in some cases extremely poorly concealed) admiration. You don’t glance up once, but I know you’re completely aware of the commotion you’re causing and are mentally high-fiving yourself (it serves you right that I have now rolled up in resplendent scruffiness to bring the side down). I abandon the trust funders – now waxing lyrical in a rather nauseating way about the merits of Southampton vs. East Hampton – and launch myself out from behind the vase.

“Good afternoon Will,” you say without looking up.

“How did you…”

“I can smell you of course. You are extremely distinct.”

“Ugh, do you have any idea how weird that sounds?”

You finally put the phone away and give me a quick up-and-down glance, chased up with one of your slow, slightly sinister (yet undeniably sensual) smiles.

“I would also tell you that I know you have been here for several minutes, hovering only a few feet away,” you reply, “…but I imagine you would find it ‘weird,’ so I won’t.”

I can’t help grinning at that (and the fact it’s really good to see you), but the moment is lost because one of the Trustafarians promptly ambles over and deposits himself in between us, loudly asking if he can borrow your lighter. From the way he’s eyeing you up, and the insinuating tone of his voice, it’s apparent that he’s hoping for an entirely different type of conflagration later in the evening. How is it even possible to ask for a cigarette lighter in a manner that’s tantamount to foreplay? (Surely it shouldn’t be possible…I am grudgingly impressed in spite of myself). Nevertheless – hell no. Find your own devastatingly suave sociopath, you presumptuous hipster shit.

“He doesn’t smoke,” I say firmly.

The guy initially looks a bit nonplussed, then shoots me a look of such intense contempt that I’m
sorely tempted to either punch him or whip out my (expired, and thus invalid) badge and perform an impromptu (citizen’s) arrest on the grounds of being an unbearably smug asshole.

“Well, I didn’t ask you,” he says – he clearly wants to add ‘you obnoxious little peasant’ – “and I know he smokes because I saw him.”

I give you an incredulous ‘what the hell have you been doing now?’ glance (it involves raising both eyebrows so high they get lost in my hair) and you return it with a ‘wouldn’t you like to know?’ shrug (which necessitates an elegant hitch of one shoulder and a blank wide-eyed stare). You gracefully uncurl yourself away from the wall and draw yourself up to your full height, upon which the hipster gives a slightly amorous sigh and I swing back round again.

“Well, I am telling you,” I say evenly (you overly-privileged trust fund capitalist whore asshole), “that he doesn’t have a lighter to hand.”

“And I’m saying that I didn’t ask you. He can tell me that himself.”

“He won’t,” I say possessively before you even have a chance to respond. You give me a sceptical look and I realize….oh yeah. Now I have to qualify this somewhat improbable remark with a reason why not. Why not? Fuck.

“He doesn’t speak English,” I finally add with brilliant improvisation (now go take all your stolen capital and set it and yourself on fire with someone else’s lighter).

“Oh what is this?” demands the hipster, “are you telling me you’re his translator or something?”

He and I both swivel back to you at the same time (like kids appealing to an adult to settle a dispute over who gets the last candy bar) and you make a very faint noise which the hipster probably interprets as irritation, but which I know is you trying not laugh. You open your mouth and shoot me a slightly evil glance. If you start speaking English now, I think, I will literally kill you. I don’t care if I have to round up a posse of hipsters to help me do it, you and your ‘fuck-me’ cigarette lighter will not leave this hotel alive.

Fortunately (for you) you decide to be charitable for once, and promptly launch into a stream of something incomprehensible that sounds like it might be Dutch, or possibly German, but is most likely neither. I give the hipster a triumphant stare.

“See?” I tell him, “not one word.” I note with amusement that he now looks almost incandescent with irritation, his fists are actually clenched. Imagine caring so much about a cigarette lighter; people are weird.

“Look, bro, why don’t you shut up for a minute?” he says.

Well really; how incredibly rude. I raise my eyebrows. “Well, bro, why don’t you fuck off?”

“What did you say?”

“I said…” I begin with exaggerated patience, but at that point you intercede in Dutch-German-neither and I can’t resist turning to the hipster and adding sanctimoniously: “He’s saying ‘why doesn’t this tiresome person fuck off?’”

“He is not saying that,” replies the hipster almost plaintively. (No, to be honest, most likely not… God only knows what you’re actually saying). You add something else unintelligible whilst giving me a pointed look, and although you’re almost certainly bristling at being rudely referred to as ‘he,’ (not to mention the fact I’m acting like a jealous, controlling idiot who wants to drag you into my
cave) I can’t help feeling your irritation is marginally outweighed by amusement at the fact that me and this pampered asshole are basically squaring up to have a fight over you in a hotel lobby. Nevertheless we’re now at a logical impasse because I can hardly appeal to you to back me up when I’ve sworn blind you can’t speak English…in fact I’m starting to wish you’d just revert back to your normal self and say something terrifying so the guy realizes that of all the cigarette lighters in all the world, this is one he really doesn’t want to be borrowing. Fortunately a pending crisis/homicide is averted because the hipster’s gaggle of friends have been alerted by his raised voice and materialize to shepherd him off. He beams me looks of upper-class hatred the entire time; I frown back at him and he drops his eyes first.

“Please do not say *anything,*” I hiss at you. “Not. One. Word. And since when do you smoke?”

“It was not a cigarette, it was a cigar: French *Cuvées.* I am not averse to them on occasion. Besides some art dealers were at the adjoining table and I wanted a reason to linger and listen to their conversation.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“What, that’s your answer? That’s what five-year olds say. Did you check me in?”

“No, I thought you would prefer to not appear on the records; I have procured two key-cards so will give you the spare one. Officially, however, I am staying here alone.”

“Oh, great, thanks. That’s probably better.”

“Come along then,” you say. “I suppose I should be thanking you for defending my honor against the marauding hordes.”

“Oh please drop it. Actually no, don’t – you *should* be thanking me. You have to hide your usual rabid persona at the moment so you need me to defend you.” I smirk slightly. “For all intents and purposes you are currently *neutered.*”

“*Am I?*” you say, briefly transforming back into your real self; and I am promptly on the verge of collapsing at your feet in a lustful heap when the bellhop appears and you abruptly switch back again. You begin an animated conversation with him in another language I don’t recognize: it’s all guttural consonants and heavy vowels, and makes you sound like you should be reclining in a leather chair with a Persian cat informing Mr Bond that you’ve been expecting him. I have a horrible feeling I’m going to laugh, and you spot this immediately and give me a tap on the shoulder with your finger and say something that sounds like it might well be a more eloquently multi-syllabled version of ‘fuck off.’ I’m tempted to prod you back, but resist because I know you’ll just do it again (and probably take me out in the process), and surely the whole point of this enterprise is to be as inconspicuous as possible as opposed to starting a (second) fight in (another) unspecified foreign language in the foyer of an incredibly upmarket hotel. You say something else to the bellhop, who looks at me and smiles in a slightly shifty way, and I can’t help suspecting you’ve just told him something deeply unflattering (like “this is my simpleminded American relative; he knows nothing but he means well”).

The bellhop’s beady black eyes are now crawling all over me, and it’s this – combined with the realization that this new persona of yours is going to be an insufferable asshole – that makes me cut my losses and leave you to it, drifting off instead to examine the large aquarium at the other side of the foyer. I can hear the bellhop starting to laugh (no doubt in response to you saying: “see, there he goes, the sad little man – he has an adorable affinity with fish”) and I’m internally rolling my eyes
when another staff member appears and asks me what I’m doing, and can she help me at all? Oh for God’s sake, fuck all of this. I should have just stayed at the apartment and had a cosy evening in with the inspector, Matthew Brown, and Occam’s razor… with the Renaissance Polymaths we’d have had enough people for a bridge party.

“Thank you,” I say tersely, “I’m fine.”

“Are you a guest here?” she asks. From her tone it’s evident that what she really means is ‘why is a scruffy little shit like you polluting my pristine lobby? And get the fuck away from those fish while you’re at it.’

I smile politely (at least that’s the intention; it probably comes out more like a tortured grimace) and open my mouth to reply, when you abruptly materialize at the other side, the bellhop following at the rear (now – inexplicably – carrying a large potted fern). “He is with me,” you say firmly.

Her manner is far more cordial with you (of course), but she keeps looking from one of us to the other and bleating “well, it really is against hotel regulations Sir…”

“He will not be here long,” you reply smoothly.

“Well,” she says, “well…we like to accommodate our guests Sir. And seeing as it’s you, I guess an allowance can be made.” She glances at me again and I have an overwhelming urge to tell her to piss off. (Also – ‘seeing as it’s you’? This is only the second time you’ve been here, how the hell have you already managed to bullshit everyone so convincingly?).

“I am extremely obliged,” you say, “your establishment’s reputation for tractability has not been exaggerated.” You give her an enormous tip (my eyes widen slightly at the sight of all the bills) and she practically starts purring at you.

She turns to me. “If you could perhaps avoid the lobby area? If it’s no trouble?”

You give her a quick look, then glance at me, then back to her again. “Most certainly,” you say, just as I’m opening my mouth to protest.

“Thank you Sir, I’m so glad you understand. How did your meeting go? Will you need to stay with us for a bit longer?”

“Oh, it was somewhat unproductive,” you reply languidly. “It is possible I may need to extend the reservation.”

“Well, you just give me a call if you need anything. Have a nice day Sir.” She nods at me. “Sir.” Whatever.

The bellhop solemnly hands you the fern, which you receive with a gracious nod as if you’re simply accepting expensive tributes as your due (which, come to think of it, is exactly what you’re doing) then he stands watching us as we walk away, the woman next to him with her arms folded.

“What was all that about?” I ask as we get in the elevator (I can’t even face asking you about the fern).

You remove the fake glasses and put them in your pocket, then give me a slightly incredulous look as if you can’t believe I can possibly be so dense. “Oh the source of the consternation is perfectly obvious,” you say airily, “…they believe you to be a sex worker.”

I open my mouth extremely wide to dispute this, and promptly manage to start choking on my own
spit. You wait patiently until I can breathe again.

“Christ! They do not think that!”

“Of course they do. We look extremely incongruous together in this context. It is apparent that I am bringing you to the hotel as my temporary ‘guest’; someone who is noticeably younger than I am, and who is considerably less…formally attired.”

“Scruffy. You mean scruffy don’t you? Why don’t you just say scruffy. You mean I look like I spend all day on my knees for wealthy Europeans in exchange for crack.”

“Well, I should not have expressed it quite so explicitly myself. But essentially – yes. Not in the general course of things you understand, only in this specific context.”

*Only in this specific context.* I narrow my eyes at you. “Did you make them think that on purpose?”

“Don’t be absurd, of course I didn’t. Unfortunately they had already assumed it independently.” You give me an acerbic look. “It is rather a shame we were delayed so long in a pointless altercation over a cigarette lighter. However, now they have been so obliging to conjure up an explanation for your presence they will pay no further attention to you. As such, allowing them to continue believing it was,” you smirk slightly, “…expeditious.”

“It was not. It was ostentatious. We’re drawing attention to ourselves completely unnecessarily.”

“On the contrary, ostentation is good. Once again I have created a persona that will linger in people’s minds and take on a life of its own that they will be unable to connect with an image they might come across in the news. Behaving in a subdued, guilty way invariably attracts the wrong type of attention – immodesty and insinuation are far more effective deceptions.”

I suspect that you are going to start cross-referencing your extensive experience of ingeniously outwitting the law (again…yawn), and I try to cut you off but you sail on regardless. “In respect of your second concern,” you say, “this hotel is extensively tenanted by middle-aged individuals with younger companions. Why do you think I selected it? It is all opulent artifice wrapped around a thoroughly disreputable core.”

“Did you just admit to being middle-aged? Anyway, I think we should move to somewhere with a little less ‘opulent artifice’ – they’d be more likely to look for you in a place like this.”

“They most certainly will not, because I would never be in such a vulgar, gaudy establishment by preference. Consider also that after last time they would know that I would be aware of that – thus assuming I would do the opposite and seek out a hovel.”

I can’t help laughing at that. “Actually, that’s exactly what you did do; as you never tired of pointing out.”

You politely ignore me. “Besides, it is hardly an issue as I can guarantee they will not expect me to still be in the country, let alone this close by. We are hiding in plain sight, which is the most efficient concealment of all.”

“Not indefinitely.”

“No, I agree with you there. But I do not intend for us to stay here indefinitely.”

The elevator stops and we get out. “It’s just as well we’re not,” I say gloomily, “considering that the whole staff now has me down as some kind of rent boy.” Unfortunately, however, I have managed
to share this disclosure with my usual genius level of bad timing, because a lacquered old lady and her son (or, if you’re right, youthful ‘companion’) are walking straight past and hear the whole thing. My mouth falls open in extremes of dismay, at exactly the same moment as you roll your eyes heavenwards then exchange a sympathetic glance with her as if to say ‘you can see what I’m dealing with here; what can I do?’ She smiles supportively at you, then shoots me a deeply disapproving look. “Oh my!” I hear her muttering as she turns the corner.

“Excellent,” you say with an enormous smirk. “Well done Will. Sterling work, indeed. Do remind me what were you saying about us being ostentatious?”

“You can talk,” I say (unreasonably), “this is entirely your fault.”

“Not entirely. I believe you must take some portion of the blame. After all it was not me who self-identified as a rent boy at the sort of pitch that usually only canines are able to detect.”

“Oh God,” I say faintly. “I did, didn’t I?”

“Most assuredly you did. I witnessed the whole thing, so am afraid I can’t give you any reassurance there. Console yourself that at least Freddie Lounds will never get to hear of it.”

I have a brief image of what the headlines would be, and am torn between wanting to laugh and sink down to the floor with my head in my hands.

"It is nothing to be ashamed of,” you say innocently. “You are merely showing an extremely liberal-minded support for the oldest profession.”

“Oh my God, if you don’t shut up, I’ll…”

“…charge me double?”

I stop walking and glare at you with my arms folded.

“Very well,” you say, although I can tell you’re internally smirking to yourself. “I apologize. I empathize with your discomfiture at having informed the entire 22\textsuperscript{nd} floor that you are a rent boy. I will not mention it again.”

“Good.”

“It is probably better if you also refrain from mentioning it. At least not at such an extravagant timbre and volume.”

“Oh God, how is this my life? In the last few months I’ve been pinned as your husband, wife, accomplice, and rent boy.”

“As diverting at that may be,” you say, “you are in fact none of those things.”

“What am I then?”

You look at me carefully. “My equal,” you reply, “someone in whom I met my match” (adding – because this is you after all) “or at least as close to it as anyone has previously managed.” As if to illustrate the point you pause at the door, then move aside so we can walk through together rather than me having to follow you in.

“Thank you,” I say.
“You are welcome.”

We stare at each other for a few seconds, and I realize I’m starting to feel uncomfortable (mostly because of a wary sense that you’re being disingenuous in some way, yet not wanting to be ungracious enough to accuse you directly). I clear my throat awkwardly and gesture at you. “So what’s with the fern?”

You give me a slightly pitying look. “It is not a fern,” you say, “it is a juniper bonsai. Very lovely and unusual. I wish to examine it and shall return it tomorrow.”

“Seriously?”

“You have no appreciation for natural beauty,” you reply with asperity, although by that point I’ve kind of stopped listening, because I wouldn’t know a juniper bonsai from The Day of the Triffids (and am quite happy with that, thank you very much). Instead I have a quick look round the room – which is not a room as opposed to a suite, complete with separate bedroom, bathroom, sitting area and galley kitchen – then fold myself onto the sofa with my chin propped on my knees. You sit next to me with your body slightly arched round so you can watch me.

My face is starting to ache and I realize it’s because I’m frowning so hard. Now that I’m finally sat still with space to think the crushing irritation and mundanity of the past few hours – Sanderson, the hotel, even Jack – is really hitting me. Maybe a week ago it would have been bearable, maybe even 24 hours ago. Now it feels hateful. Jarring and grating and stifling, as if I’m being forced to be the wrong person and live the wrong life. I am, it is; it’s unliveable, unsustainable. It’s not how things should be.

“This is so frustrating isn’t it?” I finally say.

“It is.”

“We have to hide, and when we’re not hiding we have to pretend to be other people. We can’t just be ourselves.”

“You should not be so concerned with the absurd and the trivial. Learning to disregard other people’s opinions is exceedingly liberating.”

“No, it’s not that.” And it isn’t: it’s far worse. This morning’s surge of purpose has shone a harsh, remorseless spotlight on how intolerable it is to keep masquerading as something I know I’m not. I hunch my shoulders slightly and run my hands through my hair.

“What are you thinking?” you ask.

“That we’re in suspended animation. This isn’t living, it’s existing; we’re just biding our time. We used to really thrive. Now we’re hiding out in hovels and hotels with the ‘absurd and the trivial’ like normal people. It’s awful.” God, it really is. This isn’t us; we ought to be somewhere fierce and fiendish with bright lights and cacophony. “It’s suffocating,” I say.

“It will not be forever,” you reply serenely.

“Hmmm.” Now I’m thinking of how I was when you first came back: the chronic timidity, the constant wariness, the reluctance to take a stand, or commit to a course, or make any kind of purposeful action. That person feels like a pale imitation now, a phantom version of myself. You’ve purged him out of me: dead and buried.

I’m expecting you to respond to this outpouring in some way, but you don’t say anything else so I
pick your newspaper off the floor and browse through. There’s a big picture of Jack on page 4: I brandish it at you sardonically and you smirk.

“It is not our job to stay out of Jack Crawford’s way,” you say, “it is his job to stay out of ours.” There’s another pause and I glance up; you look extremely thoughtful. I raise my eyebrows as a prompt.

“To be frank, it hardly matters,” you add at last, “because Uncle Jack and his cohorts shall soon become entirely irrelevant.”


“I suppose this is as suitable a moment as any, seeing as you have obliging prefaced the conversation,” you reply, and there’s a smile in your voice. “They will become irrelevant because I want to leave. I want to leave – and I want you to come with me.”

There’s a beat of silence and I go very still. “Where to you want to go?” I ask quietly.

“Europe; at least initially. Italy, France, Spain…there are so many possibilities. I want to show you Florence and Granada and Toruń, lay you out and make love to you somewhere beautiful. There is so much I would like to show you Will.”

I draw in my breath. So. This is it then: the moment of truth. This is what we’ve been working up to ever since that first “Hello Will” on the floor of a back alley. It’s both the beginning of something and the end of something else; and the proposition that’s going to change everything. Whatever I’m about to commit to in the next few minutes will spiral my entire life onto a new trajectory; and whatever I opt for there’s no way I’ll ever be able to take it back. I twist my head round so I can look at you directly. I need to see you to have this conversation. I need to really see you. But the seconds stretch out and I still don’t respond. I’m vaguely aware that less than a week has passed since I last considered the possibility of leaving with you, only to dismiss it out of hand as too overwhelming to contemplate. And now?

You’re just watching me, attentive and impassive as a waxwork of yourself; if you’re apprehensive about my reaction you don’t give any indication.

“I expect you have questions?” you eventually say.

“Yes…No. I only have one.” You’re just a few feet away but the distance between us suddenly seems vast. I feel like I want to touch you but can’t quite bring myself to move.

“And what is that?”

“What would it mean?” I say, and you narrow your eyes very slightly; boxing clever. “In the long-term? For me. What would it mean for me?”

“Be more specific please.”

I take a deep breath. “Say I come with you; that I really go through with it this time, knowing that I had to leave everything behind, and that I could never go home again. And say that we’re living together somewhere, and we’re dependent on each other, and everything has to be synchronized and acknowledged…”

“Not necessarily, there is…”

“Don’t do that, please. Not now. Just hear me out.” You incline your head in agreement and I flex
my shoulders, trying to dispel some of the tension that’s building up. I look at you, straight in the
eyes (an all-seeing I). “What would you expect me to become?”

You frown slightly – it’s almost imperceptible, just the lightest crease around the forehead, but I
immediately sense that whatever you were expecting me to say it wasn’t that. It’s good to know I still
haven’t lost the capacity to surprise you.

“Yourself of course,” is all you reply. “Or at least a more completely realized version.”

“But that’s exactly my point,” I say with energy. “I’m myself, me – I can’t be a reflection of you.
And that’s what you want, isn’t it?” I hesitate, expecting you to interrupt, but you don’t. “What you
do…You see death as art, as arbitrary, your grand arrangement; everyone’s equally deserving. It’s
not like that for me.”

Your mouth quirks into an extremely faint smile. “It’s not,” I say. “I’ve only ever killed someone
because I had to.”

“Someone’ implies the singular.”

“Fine. I’ve only ever killed people because I had to.”

“Oh yes,” you say. “I know you were forced.” You pause, then look me directly in the eye. “But no
one forced you to enjoy it, did they?”

My mouth goes totally dry; I feel like you’ve just slapped me in the face.

“For it to make you feel so ‘alive’, if you recall,” you continue, relentless as ever. “You once told me
I could not reduce you to a set of influences, that you were not a product of anything. But that was
not entirely true, was it?”

I hesitate. “I don’t…I mean, if it was really justified…”

“With the resolution of what? I am not some type of vigilante Will.” You cut me off sharply – your
eyes flashing in that unnerving way you have – and I flinch in spite of myself, pulling slightly away.
Remember what happened last time I said ‘no’ to you? Oh Christ, fuck, why do I allow myself to
keep forgetting how utterly terrifying you can be? Selective memory at its most high risk.

“I know. I know you’re not.” I pause again. I can hear my heart thrumming crazily in my ears. “But
I’m not…whatever it is that you are.”

You look at me meditatively, and I realize I’ve been holding my breath and need to force myself to
let it out.

“No, indeed you are not,” you eventually say. “Curious isn’t it? Because in spite of it all, in spite of
everything…” you pause, allowing the silence to express the inexpressible, all the terror and madness
this moment’s built upon, “…united we stand. There is a fine line between beauty and horror. We
have deleted this line. You – and – I.”

“I know,” I say, a bit helplessly, because this is my version of Rome to which all paths lead (”Don’t
go inside, Will…Stay here with me.” And me: “Where else would I go?”). “God, I know that.”

“Do not appeal to God; he will not listen to you. Better to pray to yourself, for yourself.”

I suddenly feel like screaming. Oh fuck you…fuck you and your constant verbal parries and
sanctimonious theorizing. Why do you have to summon a calculating, complacent response for
“Isn’t that a bit obvious for you?” My voice has gone very low. “I would have thought that went without saying. Of course I have to defend myself – who else is going to do it; who else has ever done it? You?”

“In my own way.”

“Oh yes – your way. That’s what I’m trying to tell you; I’m not prepared to always play everything your way.” You narrow your eyes again, and as an afterthought I add: “And you can’t keep punishing me for it.”

“Can’t?”

“No,” I answer quietly. “You can’t.” You don’t reply immediately, just look at me, and this time I refuse to drop my eyes first.

“If you think I want you to accompany me merely as something mute and passive to mould in my own image then you are mistaken,” you finally say. “If you were as malleable as all that you would hardly be as intriguing as you are. I am not interested in trying to recruit you as an acolyte, but rather enlist you as an associate. That is a potential I have seen in you for a very long time, although what path you ultimately select is something over which I inevitably have only limited control. And yet none of this alters the affinity we share. Does it Will?” You steeple your fingers under your chin.

“We are a confederacy, you and I. A perfect synthesis – and greater than the sum of our parts.”

I let my breath out softly. “Yes… I know.” I’ve known for a long time haven’t I? The definitive forbidden knowledge. And because forbidden – irresistible

“Equal in energy, equivalent in compulsion… identical in our strength of purpose.” Your voice is hypnotic, and you say it as if it’s a mantra, an article of faith, as if it should be chiselled into stone or inscribed on parchment. A universal truth: the sun will rise, the tides will flow, and you and I are the same and we belong together. And I can’t contradict you because I know that what you’re saying is right.

Your eyes are boring into me and I find myself helplessly begin moving across the couch towards you as if drawn by an unseen thread: the old, irresistible pull, like you’re my center of gravity. You are though… always were and have been. You’re my Muse, my undoing, my redemption, my purposeful disarray and dark mirror image. You’re everything. If I’m aware of what fulfilment and completion are, then it’s because of you. We’re what love would be if it was set on fire. Aren’t we? You and I.

“Yes,” I murmur and I know I’m talking to both of us. Yes, yes, yes. You curl your hand round the back of my neck, stroking my throat with your thumb.

“A unique alliance,” you say. You brush your lips against my ear and I quiver against the touch. “An unsplittable atom.”

“I know. Christ.”

“Of course you know. Look at you: small, solitary and striving. Yet you will never stay with the herd will you? Not when you could lead the pack.”

I don’t reply immediately, just let my cheek rub against your hair, focussing on the way your hand is trailing up and down my spine – and you eventually pull away and manoeuvre my shoulders so we’re looking at each other. You’re staring at me, gazing really, your eyes flicking over my face as if
committing each feature to memory. I suppose if I don’t go with you then that’s all you would have. It’s all either of us would have; memories of one incredible night (our first and our last) followed by a stilted farewell on a hotel sofa. And the knowledge – hard-won and realized too late – that for the rest of our lives, no matter how long we look and how far we search, there’ll be no appreciation for me like yours and no acceptance for you like mine.

“It may not be particularly easy,” you say at last, “at least initially.” And I know you’re talking about far more than simply getting out of the country.

I take another deep breath and look at you. This is it now.

“That’s okay,” I say. “We don’t really do easy, do we?”

“We do not.” You run your finger down the side of my face.

You knew anyway didn’t you; you’ve always known. You didn’t really need to ask. “I’ll come with you,” I say, enunciating each word slowly and carefully so there can be no mistake. “I will. I want to.”

You just smile. “Then tomorrow we begin preparations to depart.”

I close my eyes and let my head tip back so I’m staring at the ceiling. There’s a strange thrill of energy running through me and I realize that I’m smiling too: prepared for another plunge and ready to fall.


Chapter End Notes

I re-watched some of S3 last week to give my angsty writer’s block a kick up the arse. Poor Will – I haven’t seen it for a while and had forgotten how much his insight sometimes lets him down.

Will: Is Hannibal in love with me?
Bedelia: Yes
Hannibal: *cough* Yes
Bryan Fuller: Yes
The Internet: Yes
The World: Yes
The Universe: Yes
Scott Thompson: Would you guys fuck already?

Final consensus: Yes
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Huge thanks to the enormously talented RenJaegerjaques for making beautiful fanart to go with this chapter. If you’d like to you can feast your eyes on it [here].

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the end we don’t (can’t) wait until morning. I dig my laptop out my backpack and you brew some coffee so strong it’s like rocket fuel, and we settle round the table and descend down the rabbit hole of border patrols, ferries, flights and fake passports. I’d forgotten how synchronized we can be when tackling the same problem; anticipating one another’s questions and coordinating and communicating at a level that’s so instinctive I’m not always entirely aware it’s happening. Although as the hours roll on it becomes obvious that it’s going to prove far less complicated than it should be, because you appear to have most of the logistics laid down already.

“Those plans you kept hinting at,” I eventually say. “This was it wasn’t it? Me running off with you. You were counting on it before you even came back.”

“Do not say ‘running off’ – you make us sound like teenage lovers. We are not running anywhere. We are mastering providence and controlling our destiny” (said with the inevitable grandiose flourish).

“We’re absconding.”

“I am; you are not. Unless you have been behaving extremely badly and are keeping it to yourself, you are not wanted by the Government.”

“Not yet, anyway…I will be when people find out.”

“When they find out? Not if? You are assuming it as a certainty then?”

I realize I’d taken for granted that Jack and co. would somehow just know I’ve run off (to master providence, control destiny etc.), not to mention with who. The decision is so fateful and momentous that it seems unfeasible other people could remain unaware of it. But of course you’re right; there’s no real reason for them to find out – I could just disappear, if I wanted, and no one would ever discover why. I frown a bit at the bleakness of this idea, and you notice and reach over to close the laptop.

“This is more than sufficient for one sitting,” you say. “It is now so late it has become early.” You push your chair back and stretch luxuriously, then prowl over to the kitchen area to run a glass of water. I flex my aching shoulders and stand up too, loitering by the side of the couch so I can watch you. You’re so distinctive (unlike me, who is practically the dictionary definition of ‘nondescript’). It doesn’t seem possible that people won’t recognize you.

“Are you going to disguise yourself again?” I say abruptly.

You glance up. “Yes, I expect so.”
“Good.”

“You sound anxious.”

“No, I’m not.” You narrow your eyes at me

“I’m fine.” Now you raise your eyebrows as well. “You really should use ‘Rasputin’ as your new alias,” I add irritably. “You’ve already got the manic stare for it; all you’d need to do is grow a sinister despot beard and you’d be good to go.”

“Wonderful. Thank you for your input.”

“Ra-Ra-Rasputin, Russia’s greatest love machine …”

“Do be quiet Will.”

“You know, you should make a bit more effort to be polite to me,” I say. “Remember I’m almost certainly the one who’ll be choosing your retirement home.”

You smile slightly. “Noted.”

“So how much longer do you think we’ll need to stay here?”

“I am not sure yet. As long as it takes.”

“You managed it very quickly before.”

“Yes, but some additional precautions are necessary now you are accompanying me.”

“Rough estimate?”

“Perhaps another week. Two at most.”

Although this is exceptionally brief given the complexity of what we’re proposing, it still seems an unbearably long time. Now I’ve committed myself it feels intolerable to wait another week (two at most). I know my anxiety is contradictory, each source competing with the other: I want to get going (because I want to start my new life with you) and I want to get this over with (because if we wait too long I might lose my nerve and change my mind).

“Business as usual in the meantime?” is all I say instead.

“Certainly. Although the proverbial ‘low profile’ is preferable. Perhaps tell people you intend to take a vacation?”

“Okay, yeah, that could work.” A vacation from which I’ll never return. I actually have pathetically little to arrange from my own end: rented accommodation, no family, no close friends that I can’t bear to leave. I sigh again at this rather mournful image.

“What exactly does ‘business as usual’ entail for you at present?” you ask. “Are you going to see Jack Crawford again?”

“I don’t know to be honest. Probably. I haven’t decided yet.” I can’t help smirking. “Speaking of ‘business,’ I don’t know how you’ll be able to look that woman in the eye when you go downstairs. She thinks you’ve been up all night with a scruffy male prostitute and a juniper bonsai.”

“I am sure I shall be able to bear the shame,” you reply airily. “It is hardly the worst thing anyone has
ever accused me of.”

I huff out a laugh. “No, I suppose not.” You prop yourself against the kitchen counter and gaze off into the distance with one of your blank thousand-yard stares (no doubt inventorying the accusatory highlights from the Golden Years) and I run my eyes over you. You look so imposing and sculpted and impressive; and right now you’re all I have. I realize – with something like latent embarrassment – that I am starting to feel enormously turned on.

There’s a long silence: you gazing into the distance, and me gazing at you. “S-o-o-o,” I suddenly hear myself saying. “If those people downstairs were right; if I actually was a sex worker…?”

You promptly come back to life, swivelling your head in my direction and arching an eyebrow. “If you were?”

I can feel my eyes start to widen in a vaguely manic way with incomprehension at what I’ve just said (because I just said that out loud, and you’ve totally heard me). Oh holy fuck, what am I doing – what possessed me to say that? It’s too late to back out now though (…oh well).

“Yes,” I say after a small pause. “If I was…what would you do with me?”

“What an entirely fascinating and unexpected question,” you reply. You abruptly straighten up and move towards me in that flowing, terrifyingly purposeful way you have; and I experience the familiar surge of overwhelming desire and automatic dread, inadvertently taking a step backwards before realizing that there isn’t actually anywhere to go.

“If you were?” you repeat thoughtfully. “If you were selling yourself to me…What manner of transaction do I think we would have?”

I clear my throat, suddenly nervous and uncertain. Oh God, I can’t quite believe I’ve gone ahead and instigated this. I know I’m blushing. When did I become this shameless? I’m torn between wanting to high-five myself for being uncharacteristically salacious and daring, whilst also suspecting I should immediately call the whole thing off and solemnly apologise for being an enormous pervert. Shit – shit! What if you’re thinking that as well? Maybe that’s why you came over so quickly – you’re about to start lecturing me for being an enormous pervert. Oh God, it’ll be awful. ‘Will Graham,’ you’re going to say, ‘I am disappointed in you. Since when did you become such an enormous…’

“So where would I have been fortunate enough to acquire you from?” you ask, and I promptly stop berating myself (as you) for colossal perversity and focus on your face instead. You smile very slowly then begin to pace round me in a leisurely circle, like something enclosing its prey.

“What an entirely fascinating and unexpected question,” you reply. You abruptly straighten up and move towards me in that flowing, terrifyingly purposeful way you have; and I experience the familiar surge of overwhelming desire and automatic dread, inadvertently taking a step backwards before realizing that there isn’t actually anywhere to go.

“If you were?” you repeat thoughtfully. “If I were paying you to give me your body; if you were selling yourself to me…What manner of transaction do I think we would have?”

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“What would you have been loitering around on a street corner?” you say after a pause. “I suppose I would have driven past and noticed you. Yes, of course I would; you would have stood out immediately wouldn’t you? Hovering a little apart from all the others. Slightly forlorn. Beautiful. Vulnerable. But with that proud defiance in spite of it all that makes you utterly irresistible. ‘There is something about this one’ I would have said to myself. ‘There is something special about him.’ And then I would probably have hesitated, asked myself whether I was making a mistake. ‘I could ultimately regret slowing down,’ I might have thought. ‘Regret stopping. Regret approaching him and letting him into my life.’ But then I would have caught your eye through the glass and it would be impossible to say no to you.”

I don’t answer, just keep staring straight ahead. I’m no longer blushing but my ribcage is rising and falling far quicker than it should and I know you can see it.

“You would walk over immediately wouldn’t you? As soon as I pulled up; there would be no
question I was there for you. Would you try and negotiate, do you think, or simply open the door and get straight in?”

I swallow. “I’d get straight in.”

“Yes, I rather thought you might. You wouldn’t be entirely easy about it though would you? Your eyes would have grown large and wide with apprehension, and if I watched you I would be able to see the way your breathing had sped up. Much as it has now.” You reach forward and I flinch slightly, but all you do is take my glasses off and place them on the table. “But you wouldn’t try to escape, would you?” you add after a pause. “Wouldn’t use those long legs to run away? You wouldn’t tell me you had changed your mind. You’d just sit, quiet and still, and allow me to take you away.”

“Yes.”

“Yes. So now I’ve brought you here and you’re stood, trembling slightly, awaiting your instructions. Why do you do this I wonder? Not just for the material benefits; you look resourceful enough to obtain those in other ways if you really wanted to. No, there is an element of choice here isn’t there? It is not just blind desperation. Something about it fulfils a need in you. What could that be, I wonder? What drives a young, capable, educated, moral person into a situation like this?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you not?”

“No.”

“Really? Do you truly not know? Perhaps it is more that you do not want to. At any rate we may have a clearer idea by the time you leave. So, what is your name?”

“Will.”

“And do you have a surname at all?”

“Graham.”

“Do you know what the name ‘William’ means?”

“It means determined,” I say, chanting the old, familiar words. “A warrior.”

“Quite right. Well, William Graham, are you a warrior?” You trace your finger over the scar on my cheek, faded by now but still visible. “You certainly have the battle scars for it.”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes I do. And yes – I am.”

“Excellent. And what exactly would you say I am?”

“I’m not sure,” I reply slowly. “I don’t have a word for what you are. I haven’t figured it out yet.”

“But you will won’t you?”

This time I look at you. “Yes.”
“Yes, I am quite certain you shall: you appear to be someone who is quite extraordinarily insightful. At least when it comes to others; I am not yet convinced how adept you are at turning all that stunning acumen towards yourself. But you will certainly run your beautiful mind ragged attempting to work me out. I wonder what your conclusions shall be. And what will they tell you about yourself? After all, you were so extremely willing to come with me. Your better judgment told you not to didn’t it? But you ignored it and let me bring you here all the same.”

“Yes.”

“It appears you made an exception, just as I did for you.”

“Yes.”

“How very interesting. And do you think you may come to regret it?”

I look up at you again. “No,” I say. “Not really.”

Your smile grows broader at that, but you don’t pursue it further. “So,” you say instead, “now that you are here I would attempt to make you feel welcome. You have already removed your coat, so I would invite you to take off your jacket as well.” You stand behind me and ease it off my shoulders, and I push back against you. “I would urge you to make yourself comfortable,” you say, running your hands across my hips. “But of course that is essentially impossible, isn’t it? You cannot allow yourself to fully relax, because you don’t yet know what’s going to happen.”

“No.”

“Indeed, you are in the rather unenviable position of being certain only of your own uncertainty. You look rather nervous Will Graham; see how tense the muscles around your jaw are?” You briefly press your fingers against the side of my face, then stroll off to the kitchen area and open one of the cupboards. I stay rooted to the spot, not even turning my head, and you return a few moments later with a glass of wine which you manually place into my hand by folding my fingers around it. I drain it in one go, and you remove the glass and place it on the table.

“I imagine you don’t usually drink when you’re working, do you?” you say. “You need to keep your not inconsiderable wits about you. Especially on a job like this. Because you are such a perceptive boy, and you know that something about me does not quite…sit comfortably with you.”

“Yes.”

“Yes. But you’ve accepted the offer regardless, because you don’t want to appear ungracious – appear rude. Do you?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Of course you don’t. And you are thinking that numbing yourself slightly with alcohol might not be an entirely bad choice, because you don’t know exactly what I am going to ask you do to. Tell me; do you think I am going to hurt you?”

“No…But I know that you could. If you wanted to.”

“And why wouldn’t I want to?” You put your hand on the back of neck and I close my eyes and lean into your touch.

“I don’t know,” I say, a bit breathlessly. I let my head fall back against your shoulder and you press your face against mine.
“Let us consider then. There are several reasons aren’t there? It could be I never intended to, because even though I’ve just met you I find you incredibly fascinating; far too fascinating to damage in anyway. Or it could be that I initially anticipated doing so, but am re-evaluating because it seems a terrible waste to dispose of something as rare and captivating as you appear to be. Or perhaps, after all, it is merely for practical reasons; that causing you any kind of harm in a crowded hotel carries a high risk of detection. What do you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t you?”

“No.”

“Then we shall have to find out, won’t we?”

“Yes.”

“Yes? So eager aren’t you. Do you have any idea what you’re actually agreeing to?”

This time I moan slightly and push up against you again, increasingly desperate for contact. My throat is completely exposed and you curl your fingers round it, bearing down with a light but persistent pressure.

“You are very trusting aren’t you? I would say that it is rather ill-advised…although it is not naivety, more like a finely-tuned streak of recklessness. You are gambling your wellbeing on the expectation that I won’t harm you; only use you, pay you, and let you go – release you back into the wild.” You move your other hand over my groin, massaging my erection through the fabric of my jeans and I gasp loudly and tip my head back further over your shoulder.

“But you would not meekly submit in any case, would you?” you say.

“No, I’d fight you. I’d fight back.”

“Yes indeed – you would fight back. You are a warrior after all, are you not? Who knows, perhaps you might even be successful. There are not many people for whom I would suspend disbelief about the likelihood of such an outcome, Will Graham, but perhaps you would prove to be one of them. What do you think?” You move your hand from my throat, and trail it down my ribs and across my waist. “Despite this somewhat frail exterior, you have rather remarkable reserves of agency. Don’t you? You know how to get your point made.”

“Yes.”

“Oh yes, you do. But do you really think you can trust me?”

“I have to,” I say quietly, “I don’t have a choice.”

“Do you not? But you chose to be here.”

“I didn’t.” My voice sounds raw and urgent. “I just couldn’t choose not to.”

When I say that you make a sighing sound so low it could almost be a hiss then spin me round, quickly and roughly, so that I stumble and have to grab onto you to remain upright. You hold me in place, wrapping your arms round my back, and kiss me in an urgent, painful way: teeth and tongue and hot breaths. I can hear myself – the panting, desperate noises I’m making – but you seem to quickly regain control of yourself and pull away, stroking my hair so roughly it makes my head jerk
“Well, I suppose that since I am paying all this money for you I am entitled to see what kind of return I can expect to receive,” you say. You briefly tighten your grip on my hair then let me go entirely and take a step backwards. “Take your clothes off.”

“What, here?” I say stupidly.

“Of course here, I think the floor is good enough for you. I am hardly going to take you into my bedroom as if you were some kind of romantic attachment. I am very fastidious about such things – only someone tremendously special would warrant such treatment. Do you think you could convince me you are special enough?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“I applaud your self-confidence; we shall have to see won’t we? In the meantime you are going to have to work very hard to make your case. Get undressed.”

You lean back against the couch with your arms folded and I take a few deep breaths, trying to reorient myself. Oh God everything’s so intense. You’re so intense. You’re all-consuming, and it doesn’t even matter anymore because I want you to consume me…and I want to let you. My hands are shaking slightly and I end up fumbling over my shirt buttons, but I mutely obey your instructions then shuffle back a few paces so you can look at me.

“Very good,” you say crisply. “This is all extremely promising so far. However before we proceed I want to ascertain how clean you are – would you be very affronted if I inspected you?”

“What the fu…Yes, actually. Yes I would.”

“Really? Well, I’m afraid you are just going to have to grit your teeth and tolerate it,” you reply dismissively. “One can never be too careful, and I have no idea where you have previously been – or with whom. Hold out your arms please. No, not like that; turn them over, palms upwards.” I grudgingly do as you’ve told me, and you run a finger down each forearm.

“No track marks,” you say. “So, exactly as I supposed, you are not supporting a drug habit. That is one of the more common exigencies that would drive someone to do this – but not you. Although you are nearly thin enough for it.” You smooth your hand over my cheek. “You have attractive bone structure, but it is rather too near the surface. You have not had anyone to take care of you, and you clearly do not take care of yourself.”

“I do, actually.”

You ignore this, instead ruffling your hands through my hair. “Your hair is very clean isn’t it? In fact you are generally very clean. So, Will Graham: who cares enough to wash but not enough to eat, and who doesn’t use drugs but who needs to satisfy another type of habit…are you at all repenting of your decision to get into my car?”

“No.”

“Good. That’s very good Will. Now, tell me, how detailed and extensive should my examination of you be? I would like to hear your opinion.”

I look at you a bit helplessly and shake my head.

“What would you advise if you were in my position?” you persist, merciless as ever.
“I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not in your position, am I?”

“You cannot imagine it? But you appear to be so very imaginative.”

“I…I don’t know.” You lean back and look at me. “I don’t.”

“Don’t you? Very well, I shall have to use my discretion then won’t I? Perhaps I should tell you to get on your hands and knees and spread your legs for me; what do you think? Ah, you are blushing. The idea both embarrasses and excites you doesn’t it? Then I think that is where we shall have to begin. Get on the floor please.”

I blink at you idiotically, stupefied and dazed with arousal, and too overwhelmed to immediately process what you’re saying. You raise your eyebrows and then nod curtly towards the rug, and I let my legs fold under me, almost gratefully, and buckle onto the floor. You kneel behind me and run one hand up and down my back.

“You are entirely exposed like this,” you say. “How does it make you feel?”

“Exposed.”

You slap me, quite hard, on the side of my leg and I make a yelping noise. “Do not be flippant,” you say sharply.

I draw in a ragged breath. Breathe out. I need one of your grounding exercises (complete shit that they were): say my name, my location, note the time. Draw a fucked up clock. “I feel defenceless,” I say at last, and I hate how unsteady I sound. “Panicked, like I can’t protect myself.”

“Yes, indeed, because you can’t control yourself. If you could you would not be in this situation. You want to protect yourself from yourself, and you can’t.”

“No.” It’s impossible to keep the slight tremor out of my voice.

As soon as I say that you abruptly lean forward so your chest is bracketed against me and kiss my temple. “Then I suggest you do not try,” you murmur into my hair. “You are so striking in your imperfection. Embrace the strength your vulnerability gives you.”

I moan something unintelligible in response, and you press your face against the back of my neck so you’re speaking directly into my skin. “You are indomitable,” you say quietly. “Only a fool would mistake your vulnerability for weakness; it is going to be the origin of all your advancement, audacity and alteration. Hard things shatter; remain lithe and adaptable and you will never truly break. Revel in your inner strength and be uniquely you.” Then you pull away again and resume stroking my back as if the past minute never happened.

“So,” you say, “I believe I was about to examine you. Are you going to let me, or are you going to get dressed and leave?”

I groan again, stunned and unsteadied by the intensity of it all, and allow my head to droop forward so it’s hanging limply between my shoulders. “I’ll let you. You can…I want you to.”

“Excellent.” You push my legs wider apart and I hear you spit onto your fingers – the gesture is so madly incongruous that I raise my eyebrows in spite of myself – then give a long, helpless sigh as
you slide one long finger straight inside me.

“Does that hurt?”

“No. No it feels…ahh, it feels good.”

“If anything hurts you will tell me immediately.”

“Why? So you can stop, or make it worse?”

“Clever boy. You will have to wait and see, won’t you?”

I shake my head in response, then moan loudly as you twist your finger round and the stroking and pressing becomes more insistent. Your skin feels so warm. Oh God, it’s really good, I could probably come just from this. Just from one of your fingers inside me, I think it would be enough…a bit longer and it’s going to be enough.

“Your muscles are rather tight,” you say, almost conversationally. “You are not used to this are you? It is not something you offer regularly in the course of your occupation?”

“No…never to anyone else.”

“But you will to me.”

“To you. Yes.”

“Yes – and very enthusiastically.” You take your other hand off my back and rub my stomach, which is embarrassingly slick and sticky from where I’ve leaked pre-come over myself. “You are an impetuous boy aren’t you; look at the mess you are making. Tell me, do all your clients excite you this much?”

“No, God no. Just you.”

“Hmmm. How extremely gratifying; you really are quite irresistible aren’t you? I think I am going to keep you after all. However, since you have been kneeling down it seems you have managed to dirty the floor as well as yourself. It is hardly fair to expect the hotel maids to deal with it; you are going to have to clean it up yourself.” You pause, slightly sadistically. “With your mouth.”

“What?”

“Please do not make me repeat myself.”

Fucking shit. I can feel myself flushing; partly with the utter shame of it, but also from something like guilty humiliation that I’m not going to refuse. And it’s not just because I asked you to start this whole scene in the first place and it’s a bit late to start complaining; it’s because you want to see me do it, and that means I want to do it too.

“Go ahead,” you say. “Taste yourself.”

I hesitate again before obeying, dropping down to basically lap against the rug and feeling fantastically wanton and depraved, grinding my hips against your hand the entire time. There isn’t much so it doesn’t take long. What if I come on you later and you make me lick that up as well? Oh God, shit, I totally would…you’d run your hands through my hair while I was doing it and tell me how beautifully brazen and shameless I am. I emit an involuntary whine at the thought of it, and in turn you make a sound that’s close to growling, pressing your face between my shoulder blades.
“The sight of you doing that…” you say. You reach round with your other hand and roughly jerk my head up, sliding your thumb between my lips. “What else can you use your mouth for? Should I ask you to get on your knees for me? Stroke your jaw so I can feel your beautiful mouth moving around me as I push into you. Would you do that for me?”

“Yes. God, yes, I would.”

“Do you know how to do it? Not just in the abstract, but practically.”

I blush again. “No…not really.”

“No, I suppose you are more accustomed to being the recipient aren’t you? Rather unusual for someone in your profession; even in your deficiencies it would seem that you manage to be unique. I shall have to teach you sometime won’t I; would you like that?”

“Oh yes,” I say faintly.

“Yes what?”

“Yes please.”

“Well, perhaps it is for the best in any case because I want to have you tonight and one might have ended up precluding the other. I imagine you brought your own supplies didn’t you? In that hideous bag you have been carting around.”

I nod instead of answering, trying to ground and steady myself by focusing on the way your hand feels on my back; how deft your touch is and the slight calluses on your thumb and index finger. Then you shift it upwards to curl round my neck again, and your fingers are so long and dextrous that I’m abruptly aware of how you could crush my throat right now without any effort at all. Oh shit, fuck…fucking hell, it’s so intense. I make another inadvertent whining noise, then bite my lip to try and hide it.

“Excellent,” is all you say. “You have an admirable sense of forward planning. Remain exactly where you are please.”

You move away to retrieve the lube from the backpack, then I hear the rustle of fabric as you get undressed yourself. You deliberately take your time about it, letting me simmer into a desperate state of feverish anticipation – and it takes an tremendous amount of self-control to obey your instructions and not simply turn round and yell at you to fuck me before I pass out.

“Please,” I can hear myself saying. “Please, please, please.” Oh God, I didn’t want to beg…I promised myself I wouldn’t beg. I faintly hope that I’ve managed to sound irritated rather than frantic. But ultimately I still can’t stop myself, the words beginning to run together until I’m just groaning rhythmically, and you place a steadying hand on my back. Your touch is gentler than before, and it suddenly feels that whatever game we’ve been playing is starting to wind down: replaced by the older, far more familiar one, of you being you and me being me, and still no clear idea of what the rules are except that we’ll be playing it every single day for the rest of our lives.

“Stay as you are, on your hands and knees,” you say at last. “I want to watch myself taking you.” Your tone is incredibly possessive and I moan loudly and shamelessly as you spread me open and slide deep inside me with a single hard thrust.

“Oh yes, yes,” I say. I brace myself on my forearms, tilting my hips and pushing back almost desperately.
“Perfect.” Even your voice is no longer totally steady. “You take it so well, don’t you? How very striking you are. I wish you could see how you look right now. So responsive. Receptive. As if your body really craves me inside you.”

“I do. God. Don’t stop.”

“So eager. Look at you; how close you are already, yet we have barely even begun.”

“I know, I know. You feel so good.”

“Oh yes?” you say caressingly. “How much more of me do you think you could take?” You run your finger round the skin where we’re joined together, giving a sudden abrupt push, and my entire body goes rigid as I realize what you’re suggesting.

“No!” I sound panicked, like I’m coming undone (I am). “I can’t. Don’t, please, I can’t do that. It’s too much. I can’t take that much, I can’t,” but even as I’m saying it I’m arching my back and pushing my hips towards you.

“You are quite certain you can’t?”

“Yes. No.” I’m whimpering nonsensically. “Oh God, I just want you, I want you.”

“I know you do,” you reply. You wait a few more seconds to see if I’m really going to say no, then reach over for the lube with your other hand. “And you know you can tell me to stop if you need to – although perhaps that is an unnecessary precaution, because I do not think you will.”

You do it extremely slowly, stroking my back with your other hand and pressing down on it in a soothing way every time I cry out. You begin with just the tip of your index finger, coaxing and insinuating to make me accept the intrusion until you’re inside me up to your knuckle – my body stretched around you in an almost impossibly combined circumference. I can hear myself gasping, but the main thing I’m really aware of is whiteness: spectral white noise filling my head, white hot heat in my body, white light sparking in front of my eyes; and when you thrust your hips again I strike my hand against the floor and practically scream.

“Oh fuck, fuck, it’s so…it’s…oh, I can really feel you. Oh God.”

“So. You like it after all don’t you? How remarkable you are.”

“It hurts.” It does, it does, and I don’t even care.

“Yes indeed,” you say. “Exquisite pain.”

“You like it too,” I gasp out through gritted teeth. “You like hurting me. You always have.”

“Because I know you can take it. No matter how much I’ve hurt you it’s only ever made you stronger.”

“Shit, keep telling yourself that.”

“It is true – your courage is infectious. You bear pain admirably.”

Oh fuck, of all the crappy awful timing. “Don’t,” I say piteously. “Don’t do this now. I don’t want to think…it’s too…for God’s sake, for once why can’t you just stop.”

You ignore me, holding the back of my neck as I struggle against your grip and letting me moan and writhe with increasingly helpless pleasure as you fuck me into submission. “All the agonies and loss
and senseless suffering which has gripped you by the throat over the years,” you say, “yet see how every adversity nurtured some latent power? You have an uncontainable instinct that holds you up, elevates you into something extraordinary.” You push into me again, almost violently, and I cry out over and over as you lean forward and whisper directly into my ear: “Why do you think I risked everything to come back for you?”

Your hips are slamming up against me and it’s like your voice is literally coiling into my head – I’m so filled by you that I can’t contain it all, can’t think, can’t be, there’s nothing except you – and I can feel myself starting to lose it completely. I’m aware of the noises I’m making, breathy and broken and desperate, begging you to fuck me (please, please, please), telling you how good it feels, how much I need it, pounding my whole weight against you and frantically trying to chase a release that feels just seconds away. You hardly even need to move now, I’m doing all the work for both of us. The awareness of it all is phenomenal, as if every nerve is alight: nothing hurts, everything hurts; it’s the best thing, it’s the worse thing; I’m blessed and cursed and damned and exalted and I don’t even need to touch myself because simply fucking myself on you is going to be enough to make me come. My fingers are scrabbling helplessly against the floor – arms quivering so badly it’s becoming difficult to hold myself up – and you eventually have to lean down and hook an arm round my torso to stop me pitching over. My skin’s so slick with sweat your hand slides over me, and the when you dig your teeth against the back of my neck I can feel my whole body begin to tremble and tighten around you, the sensation more than enough to start tipping me over the edge.

“I’m close,” I gasp out, “I’m so close, ahh, I’m going to come.”

“Beautiful,” you say – and then immediately pull away from me. I make a small, bereft wailing noise at the sudden loss, pushing back into an empty space. I can feel myself blinking in confusion; my eyelashes damp with unshed tears of pleasure/pain and my throat raw and hoarse.

“Oh fuck, no,” I say desperately. “What are you doing? Please don’t. Please… I need it, I need…”

“It’s all right I know exactly what you need. Not like this though – I want to see you. I want you to be patient and wait a little longer. Can you do that for me?”

You lean over and kiss my shoulder blade, then move away entirely so you can sit upright with your back against the couch. I stay slumped where I am, panting and shaking and too overwhelmed to do anything, and in the end you have to reach out for me and lift me onto your lap; gripping my hips and carefully guiding me down until you’re deep inside me again. You keep your eyes fixed on mine the entire time and I can feel my own eyes widening at how feverishly intense it is, trembling and gulping in desperate gasps of air as you run your hands up and down the ridge of my spine.

“Breathe Will,” you say quietly.

“I can’t, it’s… it’s just so…”

“Just breathe with me.” You give me a few seconds to calm down, and I hide my face in the side of your neck. “Is this good for you?”

“Oh yes, oh God. God.”

“Move your hips so you can really feel it.” You put your hands round my waist to help me, and I make an experimental rocking movement.

“Perfect,” you say. “I want you to ride me like this. Take your pleasure.”

“Oh yes,” I sigh into your hair, “yes, yes, yes.” You gently push me upright so it’s easier for me to
move and I arch myself towards you, almost sobbing at how good it feels as we hit a perfect rhythm: you curving up to meet me whenever I push down. You kiss me with incredible care and thoroughness – brutal-hard, then tender-gentle – and right now it’s as if there’s nothing alive in the world except for us: no other sound, no other movement, nothing except for the helpless gasps I’m making, the sound of my hot damp skin sliding against yours, your occasional murmured words of praise or encouragement. It’s like scouring a piece of wood, burnishing and sanding off one another’s splintered edges each time we touch. Christ, why weren’t we doing this years ago? We should have done this years ago. We’ve wasted so much time. I suddenly feel a bit desolate, weighed down with the silent reproach of all those miserable, twisted, misused years. The sense of them is so acute it’s as if they’re actually stood there watching me: shrouded and tattered and accusing, like as many dead bodies.

“Open your eyes Will,” you say softly – and I realize you can tell that’s something’s shifted; that I’m retreating into myself. You say my name reverently, as if it’s something sacred; my dull, ordinary name, which pronounced by you is elevated into something hallowed and extraordinary. “Stay here,” you add. “Stay right here with me.”

You’re gazing up at me with a very intense expression, and when my eyes meet yours you reach up to stroke my face. I take your hand, entwining our fingers together; and I look down at you, staring up at me. Your eyes are very bright, almost glistening, and it’s like you’re seeing me: stripping back the layers and artifice and really seeing me for everything that I am – everything that’s flawed and fucked up and crumbling – as if it’s endlessly artful and fascinating, something beautiful. Your life’s endeavour, your masterpiece. A work of art. I say your name but you don’t respond, just carry on gazing at me with your lips very slightly parted…and I feel with a sudden surge of clarity, fierce and unmistakable, that right now I’m everything to you. Right now I’m your whole world. In that one look you’ve cut out your heart and put it in my hands.

The awareness of this – the power it gives me, the openness it confers on you – is overwhelming. I fall into you, whimpering slightly, at exactly the same moment as you move forwards so you can pull me against you and wrap your arms tightly round my back. We rock against each other for a while, searching out each other’s mouths almost frantically, then you hook your arms over my shoulders and lift me up and forwards, pushing me onto my back so you’re on top of me. The way I’m confined by your weight makes me feel safe, and I wrap my legs round your waist, trying to pull you as close as possible.

“We are going to be so good together,” you murmur into my hair.

“We already are.”

“And always have been. I knew you would come to me eventually. I was always prepared to wait; to wait for as long as it took.”

“You were?”

You draw back a little so you can look at me, then smile slowly and smooth my damp hair out of my eyes. “Of course,” you say. “You were worth waiting for. So much potential Will. But a piece of artistry requires infinite time and patience.” You push into me and I moan softly and tip my head back so you can kiss my throat. “Ho visto l’angelo nel marmo e scolpito fino a quando l’ho liberato,” you say.

“I don’t know what you mean. Oh God, don’t stop, that feels so good.”

“Michelangelo’s words to Benedetto Varchi. In regards to creation; the virtues of patience and vision, and the necessity of waiting: I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.”
I go very quiet, just gazing up at you, and you stare back with that faint, inscrutable smile on your face.

“You’ve been waiting a long time,” I say eventually. “You’ve been waiting years. I thought you’d given up on me…Maybe you should have done.”

“No.”

“It’s won’t be easy,” I say quietly. “It can’t.” It can’t and almost certainly won’t. Because you frighten me. And I frighten myself. And I don’t know how to be with you because I don’t know what you want me to be.

“Naturally,” is all you reply.

I remain staring up at you. You have that look in your eyes again, and I suddenly remember my words from years ago: “You’re right, we are just alike. You’re as alone as I am. And we’re both alone without each other.”

A long beat of silence, just staring, our eyes skimming over each other’s faces. We both look sad; we shouldn’t be sad right now. “Please.” My voice has gone very low and you have to lean in to hear. “Promise me you’ll never stop waiting.”

There’s a pause, then you repeat my name as if it’s the words of a prayer and press your forehead against mine. And I desperately cling onto you, grinding up against the heat of your body and finally having the most intense orgasm of my life with one of your hands cradling my head and your other arm wrapped underneath my back. I can’t stop shaking afterwards and you smile down at me, stroking my face and murmuring something in a language I don’t recognize while I gaze pleadingly into your eyes the entire time and try to silently convey everything that’s going on inside.

All this started with a salacious hypothetical: What kind of transaction would we have? Me trying to be daring; gleefully pushing my boundaries in what was supposed to be a mindless sex game and which you’ve manged to weave into something imbued with a far deeper meaning. Because the simple truth is that I really am giving myself to you – mind, body and soul – and I think I know what you’re giving me in return. I’m bartering with you for the biggest thing I have to offer anyone – My Self – and you’re repaying me in kind. We’re both just material beings after all; even you – easily tattered and rended and difficult to patch back together. But we were ready to die for each other and now we’re ready to live for each other as well.

Neither of us will ever, ever say it: I love you. But it’s there all the same…and I know that you can feel it too.

*****

Afterwards I fall asleep on the floor with my head on your chest, waking up after an unspecified time to the realization that you’re picking me up and depositing me on the sofa. I mumble bad-temperedly and you laugh.

“I was going to put you in the bed,” you say, “but I knew you would wake up before I could manage it and be outraged.”

“I don’t like being carried.”

“Oh yes,” you say, “your infamous independence.” You smile at me and I smile back, and it strikes me that while neither of us are going to make any direct mention of how gloriously intense that all was, we’re still both aware and are pretty damn pleased about it.
You raise an eyebrow as if acknowledging what I’m thinking (surely not though…not even you. For God’s sake), then crouch down next to the sofa and ruffle my hair. “Look how flushed and bright-eyed you are,” you say fondly. “You look wonderfully debauched like this. Rather elegant too – elegiac, yet still bold and mischievous.” You give me a slightly malevolent smirk. “Like the Sidler etchings of the Victorian rent boys.”

“I don’t think Victorian rent boys have the monopoly on this.”

“Perhaps not. But there is an undeniable air of waywardness; one of the ‘panthers’ which whom Oscar Wilde used to dine.”

“Dine?” I say. “You just can’t help yourself can you?” This is actually an understatement; I suspect you have entered some secret competition which requires bringing oblique cannibalism references into every conversation.

“Where you are concerned,” is all you reply, “evidently not.”

“Anyway, how do you know what Victorian rent boys looked like? Did you see them first hand? You’re thinking back to your youth aren’t you; all Hansom cabs and gaslight.” I pretend to affect surprise. “Were you Jack the Ripper?”

“My dear Will, you must realize that this constant harping on my age does not reflect particularly well on yourself. It means you are obliged to add ‘gerontophilia’ to your existing list of mental peculiarities.”

“I may as well, I suppose. The more the merrier. Anyway, what about your peculiarities – does everyone in Victorian London go to so much trouble to satisfy their own sex workers?”

“When they look like you then almost assuredly yes.”

“You should ask me for your money back. Not that I’d give it you, you understand, but you should at least ask.”

“Well, the sight of you in flagrante is so beautiful it really its own reward.” You tug me forwards so there’s room for you on the couch too then lie behind me and drape one arm over my chest, lightly trailing your fingers over my skin – and it makes me realize how touch-starved I’ve been, because at times these soft, simple caresses feel almost as good as the sex.

“I am going to have you again before we leave,” you say. “Repeatedly. How much do you think you could take?”

I have a sudden lurid image of myself being fucked up against a wall, so exhausted and sated I can barely stay upright, and you wrapping your arms round me and using all your incredible strength to hold me in place. The thought of it is an almost unbearable turn on.

“I could take it,” I say.

“I am quite certain you could, although I give you fair warning that you will barely be able to walk straight afterwards.”

“Just as well I don’t have anywhere to be then isn’t it?” I roll over a bit to give you more room and notice that the newspaper is only a few feet away, still facing up on page 4. “Oh God,” I say in feigned horror, “Jack just saw me come.” Then my phone suddenly goes off, shrill and insistent, and I jump so sharply I knock the back of my head against your chin.
“Dammit,” I say irritably, “who the hell’s calling me at 3am?”

“There is only one way to find out,” you reply in a bored voice, as if random calls in the middle of the night are the most tediously mundane thing imaginable. I disentangle myself from your arms, grumbling under my breath the whole time, and try to hunt down my cell. This turns out to be easier said than done, because it’s in my pocket, and my pocket is attached to my jeans, and God only knows where they ended up – and by the time I finally locate it (and have stubbed my foot on the table and yelled ‘shit!’ and you’ve closed your eyes and adopted a look of nobly resigned suffering more suitable for a martyr tied to a stake), it’s only seconds away from going to voicemail. I frown at the screen; the number’s not withheld, but neither is it a recognized one from my contact list.

“Hello?” I say cautiously. For a surreal moment I imagine it’s going to be another of the silent calls, and have to remind myself that this can never happen again, because from now on we’ll be together.

“William,” replies a quavering voice, “is that you?”

Oh for God’s sake. “Hey there Mr Haversham,” I say, struggling not to sound irritated. “You okay?”

“I’m sorry to disturb you at this hour, but, well…”

“Don’t worry, it’s fine” (it’s not). “What’s the problem?”

“Well…well I heard a commotion out front. So I went to take a look…”

“Yes?” I say, with a level of feigned patience that’s fucking epic.

“I mean I probably shouldn’t have but…I…oh, Son, it’s your car.”

I immediately go cold. Christ of course it was going to be something serious, how could I be so complacent? All the sex has made me stupid. “What about my car? Mr Haversham? What’s happened?”

“Someone’s gone for it William…I mean really gone for it. Slashed the tires, smashed the windscreen. And, well, I’m sorry to say they’ve just been real mean and splashed red paint all over. Everywhere. Looks just like blood. You never saw something so awful.” (Well…to be honest I probably have). Oh fuck. I glance at you and you raise your eyebrows.

“And…and…”

“What? Mr Haversham? What else?”

“Teeth, William.” His voice spirals into a wail. “Human teeth. Just scattered there on the hood.”

“Jesus.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that, it was…oh, it, was…”

“Mr Haversham, please, it’s okay but I need you to think carefully. Was there a note anywhere? Did you see a note? In capital letters? Did you see anything like that?”

“No. No…I don’t think so. No note. Oh I don’t know! I don’t know William.”

“It’s okay,” I say soothingly, “it’s fine,” (Christ, it’s clearly not, but what else can I possibly tell him?). “Are you in your apartment now?”

“Yes, yes. I’ve locked the door.”
“Good. That’s very good, that’s great. Have you called the police?”

“No William. Oh, I should have done that shouldn’t I? I oughtn’t to have called you first, I should have…”

“It’s okay, it’s fine, you did the right thing. You’ve done everything right Mr Haversham. I’ll call them now.” (I won’t. I need to see the scene myself – undisturbed and first-hand – before a load of district cops have tampered the fuck out of it). “I’m not in the city at the moment, but I’ll come back first thing tomorrow. I mean today, this morning. Stay in your apartment in the meantime and don’t open the door if anyone knocks.”

“You never saw anything like it William,” he says piteously, and I consider reassuring him on that point before realizing that it will accomplish exactly two things (‘jack’ and ‘shit’) in terms of making him feel better (‘Fake blood and human teeth! Why, my dear Sir, that’s nothing. Let me tell you about the time I…’). Oh fuck, I’m getting hysterical. Do not get hysterical. I murmur a few more soothing platitudes then hang up and place the phone on the table very slowly and carefully.

You pull yourself upright and look at me with your head slightly to one side. “What has happened Will?”

Oh God, of all the conversations in all the world, this is not one I can have while I’m naked. I grab your coat and wrap it round my shoulders, and you wait patiently. “My car’s been vandalized,” I say at last. “You know, just the usual – tires, windscreen, red paint and human teeth.”

“Oh,” you reply. And this is such a fabulous level of understatement that I give a snorting laugh and immediately feel calmer. I can’t help appreciating the way you just take this in your stride rather than losing your shit and freaking out like anyone else would (and which I am fairly tempted to do myself). I take a deep breath, encouraging myself to relax, trying to get back into the version of myself from five minutes ago (the real version). It’s weird really, like the late night phone call reignited an entire response set from months ago. It’s fine, I think, soothing the stubbornly frightened part of myself in the same way I soothed Mr Haversham. Everything’s different to how it was before; you’ve forgotten that you’re not on your own anymore.

“Matthew Brown?” you say.

“I’m not sure yet. Probably.”

“But not definitely? Interesting.”

I laugh again. “I suppose that’s one way of putting it.”

“Oh yes, most certainly it is interesting. And not, I suppose, entirely unexpected.”

“I’ll have to go back and check it. You know that right?”

“Indeed you must go back.” You stretch your arms behind your head. “Not least because Jack Crawford will come to hear of it otherwise and assume some harm has befallen you. It would be extremely inconvenient to arouse his attention quite so soon.”

“Yeah,” I say gloomily. “Matthew Brown sure has epically shit timing.”

“Matthew Brown is epically execrable in most instances. No artistry at all.”

“If it was him.” Images of the inspector (acting on Matthew Brown’s half-witted behalf?) flash into my mind, closely followed by Sanderson’s venomous, crooning voice: “from what I hear it’s not me
you should be worrying about”. Christ, this sucks. Why, for once in my shitty life, can’t things be straightforward? I just want us to be able to leave. Now. Right away. Why can’t we leave…is it really that much to ask? We’ve already gone through so much to get to this point, several lifetimes worth of trial and misery. I look at you a bit helplessly and you give me a grim smile.

“I suppose things will become clear,” you say. “They must. It cannot be long now.”

“Yes, I know…It’s going to really start soon isn’t it?”

“Oh yes,” you say. “It is going to start. It has already started.” You stretch again, like an enormous jungle cat, and frown into the distance. “We must compose ourselves: the curtain has risen and the performance is ready to begin.”

Chapter End Notes

A bonus Italian reference for beautys_punishment and Cannibalinthetardis who’ve both been in Italy recently, and Mandarino who keeps a kindly eye on my Italian translations :-)

The angel quote is famously attributed to Michelangelo (although in the interests of full disclosure it’s been romanticized over the years and the words in the original letter are far more pragmatic. Bah). For anyone interested in such things, ‘Coffee With Michelangelo’ by James Hall is very accessible and well worth checking out. Seriously, Michelangelo was an utter badass in a piss-me-off-and-I’ll-paint-you-on-the-Sistene-Chapel-with-a-serpent-chewing-on-your-penis* sort of way and I loooove him.

*This is true – he totally did this. Don’t piss off Michelangelo.
Chapter 34

It’s too early to go back to the apartment, but I’ll never be able to sleep now. I pace around for bit in an aimless kind of way; then belatedly realize I’m still wearing your coat – and the fact I’m naked underneath it makes me bear an unfortunate resemblance to a sex offender primed for a spot of indecent exposure – so opt to have a shower instead so at least I can be naked with dignity. I flail under the water for ages, dousing each aching muscle in turn and relishing how spacious and gleaming the stall is after the squalor of the apartment; and get so absorbed that I don’t notice you’ve prowled in behind me until I feel your chest pressed against my back.

You don’t say anything and neither do I. You just reach out for the soap then rub it between your hands and start washing me in a leisurely, casual way; as if it’s the most natural thing in the world, as if we’ve been doing it for years. Your hands are so coiled and powerful – even engaged in a soothing gesture like this it’s incredibly obvious – but the slipperiness allows your palms to glide straight over my skin and I can feel my eyes flutter closed with blissfulness at how good it feels. Oh God, I’m clearly insatiable; if it were physically possible I’d be hard again by now (and no doubt proffering myself to you on all fours). Although I bet you probably could, if you wanted – no doubt your refractory period is supernatural, just like everything else. I sigh happily, which turns into a gasp when you trail your hand down my spine and gently slip your finger inside me. It’s not entirely clear whether you’re trying to start something (re. a supernatural refractory period) or you’re just being incredibly conscientious in the task of cleaning me up; but I still let out a low moan and let my head fall against your shoulder, trembling slightly, and arching my back to meet the long slide of your finger. “That feels really good,” I say quietly.

You wrap your other arm round my torso and lightly rub your cheek against mine. “I know; you like it so much. Do you remember the first time I touched you like this?”

“Y-e-s.”

You make an amused noise then kiss my temple and withdraw your hand, reaching out again to the caddy for the hotel’s complimentary shampoo. You begin washing my hair without being asked (as if I’m a five year old), and I’m about to snap at you to stop before realizing that I actually quite like it.

“You hair is getting long again,” you say.

“Hmmm, I know. I’ll cut it.” I press up against you without even thinking about it, and screw my eyes closed to stop the shampoo seeping in. “Maybe I could shave it off,” I add as an afterthought. I suppose I should really; it’s such an easy way of altering my appearance. Although I don’t even bother suggesting the same to you because you never will (in fact you’d probably rather be arrested first).

“No, it is fine,” you say. “It rather suits you. You know the trains will begin running soon? You could leave in just over an hour.”

“Yeah, I will.”

“No be too downcast. This is extraordinarily inconvenient, but hopefully will not delay our departure.”

“God I hope not,” I say gloomily. But surely it will; how can it not? I tip my head back slightly and you brush your fingers over my cheekbone. “I’m still waiting for you to admit it, by the way.”
“Admit what?”

“That leaving my car behind was terrible advice.”

“Oh yes,” you say. “It was rather terrible, wasn’t it?”

“It was disastrously bad.”

“Well, every cloud has its proverbial silver lining. Imagine all the satisfaction you are going to derive from reminding me of it at regular intervals for the rest of our natural lives.”

“Every hour, on the hour.”

“Excellent.” You push my head under the spray to rinse the shampoo off (although possibly just as revenge) and I squirm a bit under your hands.

“You should really use conditioner,” you add.

“Ugh, that is never going to happen.”

“It would make your hair a little less…”

I prod your leg with my foot. “I suggest you choose the forthcoming adjective with extreme care.”

“…unruly.”

“To be honest unruly hair is very low on my list of priorities right now,” I say with some irritation. Then I brace myself for the inevitable pompous sermon about how There Is No Reason To Appear Anything Less Than Soigné At All Times, but you’ve obviously lost interest in my hair (I can’t blame you…it’s as boring as fuck when all’s said and done) because you suddenly spin me round so we’re facing each other. My feet slide perilously on the tiles and you have to grab my arm to stop me falling over; your grip’s so tight it makes me wince.

“You know, you could always just ask me to turn round,” I say. “You don’t need to manhandle me every time you want my attention.” I briefly consider the attractions of getting to the point where I could manhandle you right back, but promptly abandon it on realizing I couldn’t possibly be bothered to commit to the years of weight-lifting it would inevitably require.

Naturally enough you completely ignore my motion for cessation (forthwith) of all manhandling. “I was intrigued by what you said before,” you say.

I push my hair out my eyes and squint at you through the shower spray. “I said a lot of things.”

“When you told me that you didn’t choose to be here, you just couldn’t choose not to be. You were being genuine.”

“I was. I know.”

“I should like to hear more about that.”

I can’t help groaning inwardly, because the shit has just royally hit the fan and typically you’re more interested in opening up my head than having a practical conversation about the shovelling of said shit. I reach behind me and turn the water off. “I don’t know what you expect me to say.”

“I do not expect anything in particular,” you reply. You follow me out of the shower and casually knot a towel round your hips. “I am merely interested in whatever you might wish – or not wish – to
divulge.”

I sigh a bit and grab a towel myself, drying off quickly and efficiently (unlike you, who’ll just preen around for ages in a robe like a Geisha girl) and attempting to delay for a bit longer – because quite frankly I can’t face having an earnest conversation about determinism at 4am after some maniac’s dumped teeth and fake blood on my car. Although if I’m going to be living with you on a permanent basis then I suppose I should get used to it…the expression ‘thin end of the wedge’ comes to mind. I grab some clean clothes from my bag and start getting dressed, feeling increasingly self-conscious at the fact that you’re blatantly stood there staring at me. In the end I can’t bear it anymore. “Please don’t,” I say.

“Don’t what?”

“Do…this. Do what you’re currently doing.”

You don’t reply, just continue pinning me in place with one of your intensely contemplative looks, and I sigh again because I know what you’re thinking; you’re remembering what I said to you once before, in another city, another country (another lifetime): “Even as the possibility of free will dissipates, my experience of it remains the same. I continue to feel and act as though I have it.”

“I know what I’m doing,” I finally say. “I have made a conscious decision.”

“You are conscious of your choice, yes. Of the actions which will result – less so.”

“Perhaps.”

“And of the causes through which those actions are influenced, even less.”

“I guess. Can you honestly not say the same? Can anyone?”

Of course you don’t answer this, just look thoughtful. “I expect you would like to renounce it?” you say at last. “Your volition. Your responsibility.”

“No. No, I wouldn’t actually. Okay, so maybe I’m not fully aware of all the determinants which have brought us here – brought me here – but it doesn’t change the fact it’s an autonomous choice.” You’re still staring. God, this is like being in some shitty philosophy seminar. “I said I wanted to leave with you and I meant it,” I add.

You don’t say anything in response, and I drop my eyes first and begin fastening my shirt. Vaguely I wonder whether you’re concerned I’m going to change my mind (again), but somehow it’s difficult to imagine you being plagued with the type of insecurities that normal people have.

“I’m going to collect some more clothes when I go back,” I eventually say, a bit awkwardly. “Did you leave anything you need picking up?” I don’t expect that you actually have, but the silence is becoming oppressive and it’s the only thing I can think of to break it that doesn’t involve teeth, determinism, or the disclosure that your manically intense stare is starting to freak me out.

“No, I brought everything with me. And do not take too many clothes. Jack will go through your apartment when he realizes you are missing and you do not want to arouse his suspicions. Make sure your leave your passport somewhere he can easily find it.”

“Yes, I know.”

“I will begin arrangements for a new passport today. I shall need a signature from you which I can copy. Not your true one, obviously.”
“Obviously. Why do you feel it necessary to tell me not to use my real signature on a fake passport?”

“You are quite right. I apologize.”

“It’s fine,” I say, because it’s suddenly occurred to me that maybe – just maybe – you’re genuinely concerned about getting out the country successfully and this brooding over details is your way of showing it. The fact I’m inferring such mundane concerns (just minutes after discounting you as capable of them) makes me realize, with a jolt of surprise, that I’m attempting to humanize you.

“Is there a pen anywhere?” is all I say.

You hand me yours, a gleaming Montblanc fountain pen with a slim gold line running down both sides. I blot the paper on the first few attempts.

“It is because the nib adapts to the angle and style of its owner’s handwriting,” you say. “The pen is a monogamous instrument.”

“Not anymore. It’s just cheated on you.”

“It is at your disposal,” you say with a smile.

I smile back vaguely (because only you could anthropomorphize an overpriced pen with such impressive gravitas… for some reason Hamlet declaiming to Yorick’s skull comes to mind), then push back the chair and begin ferreting through the backpack for Jack’s gun before realizing – too late – that it’s wrapped in the t-shirt I gave you the first night you came back. I don’t want you to know I was sentimental enough to bring it, so in desperation position myself so my ass is blocking your view in the vague hope you’d rather look at that instead.

“Excellent,” you say, “I was about to suggest the gun myself.” Oh for God’s sake. You’re going to say something aren’t you? Any minute now… any goddamn second. I hastily try to fabricate an alternative sentimental scenario for packing it, but the only thing that comes to mind is that it was the treasured possession of some (unspecified) dearly departed, and I can’t help feeling that the truth is actually preferable to claiming I’m carrying round a festering Queens of the Stone Age t-shirt because it once belonged to a beloved corpse. At any rate the agonizing is a waste of time because you don’t mention it after all. Instead, entirely as predicted, you pull on one of the hotel robes and stretch yourself out on the sofa with your eyes closed like a commercial photoshoot for luxury living. I gaze at you, a bit wistfully, and can’t help thinking what a better complement the hipster from yesterday would make as opposed to me with my nightmares, night sweats, unruly hair, festering t-shirts, and propensity for attracting maniacal stalkers with fistfuls of human teeth to merrily scatter on my car like fucking confetti. Not that you care about the maniacs, I amend to myself; in fact you probably quite like them. As for the rest though, God knows. I suppose I could at least cut my hair and try to acquire some clothes that make me look less like a cerebral lumberjack.

Neither of us says anything, and for a while I just stand there watching you. You are rigidly still and appear to have gone into battery-saving mode, but then you abruptly come back to life again and reach for your phone. Hideous shrieking opera music immediately starts blaring out of it, and you bask down again contentedly on the couch like the cat that got the canary; every canary—all the canaries. It’s completely awful, like a load of squalling old tomcats (old tomcats fighting their way out of a set of bagpipes), but I feel like I can’t ask you to turn it off without looking like some sort of enormous philistine so reluctantly elect to suffer in silence instead. Not that it would be possible to sing that loudly if he was really dying. It really wouldn’t be possible; human lung capacity reduces perimortem at a percentage volume of…
“You are still here,” you say pointedly.

“Yeah, I guess I should get going soon.” Now it’s come down to it I no longer want to leave. “I’m not sure how long I’ll be.”

“No indeed,” you reply. “Hopefully it will not be too time-consuming, but it is hard to know for certain.”

“Yeah.” I hesitate for a few more seconds, opening and closing my mouth like a fish; an unpleasant thought is nudging at the back of my skull, and whilst it seems a bit outlandish I can’t quite shake it off. “The car,” I eventually say.

“Yes?”

“What was done to it.”

“Hmm.”

I take a deep breath. “The fact it was teeth. Teeth. You don’t think…?”

“No.” You open your eyes and give me one of your supercilious looks (which you must have been cultivating while you were away because it’s turned into a sort of leer). “I think that is highly unlikely, considering his condition when we last saw him.”

“I’m hardly suggesting a supernatural explanation,” I say irritably.

“No, of course not. I am being glib; I apologize. But nor do I think anyone is acting on his behalf.”

“Did he have any family?”

“I have no idea.”

I frown a bit, nibbling on the rough skin around my thumb. It’s actually really difficult to imagine someone so profoundly unlovable having a troupe of outraged relatives waiting in the wings and howling for vengeance. I don’t even bother canvassing the possibility of him having friends. Although…

“What about fans?” I say.

“I don’t know Will. But surely the memento is too tenuous. Why teeth rather than some kind of bombastic dragon symbol? Someone wishing to avenge him would hardly refer to a despised media nickname.”

“Yeah I guess.”

“You are not convinced?”

“I’m not unconvinced. I don’t know. I could be wrong. I probably am.” It’s hardly like it would be the first time.

“Or you may not be, although I have to say I do not think it is particularly plausible. Nevertheless, I respect your judgment; your perceptions are sometimes mistaken, yet you inevitably reason correctly from them in the end.” Which sounds somewhat flattering, until it’s pared down to its basic translation of: ‘you often fuck it up, but generally manage to salvage a solution from a mountain of wrong information. Good for you – keep that shit up.’
“It’s just – there’s something that’s been bothering me.”

“And what is that?”

“Matthew Brown,” I say. “That night in the alleyway…You know he was on the internet pretending to be you?”

“I do know that, yes.”

“Well I asked him how he got access to a phone and he said someone smuggled it in for him.”

“And?”

“And I said it looked like he had his own fans now and he said yes.”

You crack your eyes open again. “Did he?”

“Yes. Yes he did.”

“Interesting.”

“Do you know what I’m wondering?”

“What are you wondering?”

“I’m wondering if there’s a chance Matthew Brown is the dog chasing the car, when what we really want is the driver.”

“Hmmm.”

“Is that all you’ve got to say? We still don’t know if the inspector was genuine. And there’s this guy at work…” I fill you in about the Sanderson Situation, and you look profoundly irritated.

“Perhaps I should introduce myself to him before we leave,” you say when I’ve finished.

“God, no, don’t do that! ‘Low profile,’ remember. You said so yourself.”

“I did. But I do not like the idea of someone being so incredibly rude to you.”

“It’s fine.”

“I beg your pardon, but it is not fine.”

“It is, really. I don’t care.”

“Well I’m afraid that I do.”

“Don’t. Please. Don’t overcomplicate things. Let’s just get this shit with my car sorted and go.”

“But we have not left yet,” you reply languidly, “we are still here.”

“Yes, well, I’m not thinking about where we are. I’m thinking about where we’re headed.”

When I say that you snap your eyes open again, then abruptly get off the couch and draw yourself up to your full height. It’s actually quite intimidating. I inadvertently take a step back; and of course you notice immediately and arch your mouth into a very faint smile. “Come here,” you say.
I hesitate, but even as I’m obeying I can’t help thinking how much I’d like to respond with: ‘No. You come over here…you officious, lazy bastard.’ And one day I will – just, not today.

“Closer,” you say.

Now I’m nervous; I can’t work out where you’re going with this. I shuffle a few paces forward then stop again.

“Closer.”

“Why? What do you want?” You don’t answer, just keep staring at me with that faint half-smile, and I dutifully move forwards until I’m stood directly in front of you.

You reach out and deftly tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Why are you suddenly so unsettled?”

*Because you’re fucking terrifying when you want to be.* “Because…because I don’t know what I’m going to find when I get to my apartment.”

“But that is in the future. Why are you so nervous right now?”

I sigh, but I know there’s no point lying to you; you’d know immediately. “Because I’m still not used to this,” I say, slightly awkwardly. “How different it is.”

“Your reactions are very ingrained aren’t they?” You briefly look thoughtful. “Entrenched yet near the surface; buried in shallow graves.”

“If by that you mean there’s still a lot about the situation that I need to come to terms with, then yes.”

“Yes. You claim to be discounting where we are in favor of where we are headed, but I am not entirely convinced it is not the other way round.”

I glance up at you sharply. “That’s not true.”

You open your mouth, almost certainly to begin disputing this, and I have an overpowering urge to ask you why – just for once, just this one time – you can’t simply shut the fuck up. I lean forward and kiss you instead, and while it’s initially intended as an underhand silencing technique I get lost in it very quickly (embarrassingly so) and end up gasping into your mouth and hitching my entire body against you until you have to put your hands on my waist to keep me steady and prevent me toppling us both onto the floor. I make a moaning sound and you wrap your arms round my back and press your face against my neck; I can feel you smiling into my skin.

“You are very responsive today, aren’t you?” you say. “And as charming as it is, you know that what I am saying is right.”

“You always think what you say is right. You are tautological. You are a classic redundancy of propositional logic.”

This makes you laugh, but I know you’re not done with it yet; you’re nowhere near done. “I suppose I should go,” I say, with a reluctance that’s only partly feigned. “The sooner I get this sorted out the better.”

“Yes, I suppose you should.” You let go of me and lean back against the wall with your arms folded. “Please be careful.”

“Yes, of course.”
“And do not be too hasty in discounting what I have said.”

I open my mouth and close it, then settle for simply nodding in response.

“Good.” You tilt your head back slightly, then add: “I shall wait for you.” And I don’t know whether you mean today, or if you’re referring to what you said last night, but I just smile anyway – because I know that you will.

*****

I genuinely intend to get the train, but at the last minute say ‘screw the expense’ and get a cab most of the way home instead. It’s stupid really, there’s no way I can afford it. But while I know you’d give me the money if I asked, you’re already paying for the hotel (at God-knows-what exorbitant rate) and the idea of being dependent on you for handouts – or at least any more than is absolutely necessary – is pretty unbearable. The driver keeps trying to engage me in conversation the whole time, and I keep shutting him down, until it starts to turn into a sort of competition over which of us can be the most persistently socially awkward and oblivious.

In the end I drown him out by replaying your comments about free will, and this is ultimately successful because they’ve bothered me more than I want to admit so it’s easy to get absorbed in considering them. Everything you’ve said so far suggests to me that you don’t think I really know what I’m doing…and a part of me is now asking the same question. I scowl to myself, tugging away fretfully on the same strand of hair. I meant it when I said I’d go with you; I really meant it. I know I did. So what’s your problem? What did you say; that I’m unconscious of “the causes through which those actions are influenced” (God, you’re so affected – why can’t you just tell me to get my shit together the way a normal person would?). Maybe you feel that I haven’t fully thought through the implications. Briefly I remember last night: “No matter how much I’ve hurt you it’s only ever made you stronger.” And me, frantic: “I don’t want to think about.” Maybe that’s the issue: I haven’t allowed myself to think about it. Not really, not in the way I probably need to. In fact that’s almost certainly your whole point: you want me to look my decision in the eye and truly comprehend what it’s going to mean for me – including the tsunami of shit and misery it’s been built on in the first place. Except that I don’t want to, because then I might lose my nerve and change my mind…And I don’t want to change my mind. Oh God, this is entirely your fault. The whole reason you stayed away this long was to increase the chances of me going along with your Grand Scheme when you finally did bring your smug, self-congratulatory ass back again. And now that I have agreed – agreed to something you’ve wanted for years – you’re making me question it. Or, no…not making. More like encouraging. Suggesting and implying. In other words you’re doing what you always do. I sigh again, then realize I’ve still got your pen in my jacket pocket and take it out and cling onto it in a rather pathetic way.

The cab pulls up, and the driver is still waxing lyrical about football scores and laboring under the mistaken impression that I’ve been listening to a fucking word he’s said. “A pleasure talking to you son,” he adds cheerily as I pay him. Oh God, I feel guilty now… I spent the second half of the journey ignoring him and the first half imagining different ways to garrotte him with his seatbelt. I give him an overly generous tip (the wages of guilt), and he drives off and leaves me standing on the deserted street with my shoulders hunched and my hands in my pockets. A spiteful gust of wind is blowing the trash down the sidewalk and from a few blocks away I can hear the unmistakable drone of a police siren. I sigh, almost imperceptibly. Time to go to work.

The car’s parked in an alley at the side of the building, and despite the daylight and the sounds of the city in the background it’s still unnerving – even for me. Briefly I picture Mr Haversham, with his gnarled old hands and arthritic joints, creeping down in middle of the night like a withered version of Magnum PI. I hope I’m as badass as that when I’m his age (if you live that long,
my inner pessimist unhelpfully supplies). I double-check in both directions to confirm that no one’s watching, then inch up hesitantly to see the extent of it. Jesus. It’s bad. It’s really bad; no wonder Mr Haversham was so freaked out. Nevertheless after the initial wince of distaste wears off, the first thing that strikes me is how incredibly staged it all is. It’s too symmetrical, too precise. Too controlled. This isn’t something that’s been done in blind anger, but carefully and meticulously for maximum effect. I have no idea whether this is a good sign or not…not that there can really be a good aspect to this. Most likely it’s simply irrelevant. Fucking hell though, it’s so weird. Really eerie. God knows what Jack’s going to say when he sees it. And the awareness of this starts bothering me all over again, because the last thing I want right now is to become the focus of Jack’s attention. Oh to hell with it, we’re leaving anyway, who even cares anymore? If I get rid of the teeth then it’s only regular vandalism and a splash of red paint – I could just mention it to Jack in passing, say it was some local kids (then he can start grousing and ranting about how shiftless the younger generation is; he’d enjoy that…I’m practically doing him a favor).

I feel pleased with myself for this plan, as if I’ve just dodged a bullet. I take a series of photos on my phone so you can see it if you want to then, shuddering slightly, gather up the teeth. I was kind of hoping they’d turn out to be plastic (or animal) but there’s no doubt that they’re human (and real), and at that point my conscience gives a guilty twinge. Maybe I should tell Jack after all; if these belong to murder victims – which surely they must – then they’re important evidence. I hover a bit longer, then with a miserable wrench force myself to replace them on the bonnet. I suppose it doesn’t have to overcomplicate things; it should be easy enough to pin on Matthew Brown. It probably was him, there’s no real proof to the contrary and it’s still the likeliest explanation. Then it’ll be just one more event to add to the file and Jack won’t pay as much attention as he would have done otherwise. But there’s absolutely no sign of a note, and the absence of one concerns me.

Despite selflessly choosing To Do The Right Thing, I still can’t face speaking to Jack quite yet so opt to delay a bit longer by collecting the clothes I need and leaving my passport in the equivalent of a ‘hey, over here FBI, see how entirely in the country I still am!’ location. I haul myself up the stairs and waver for a bit outside Mr Haversham’s door before my conscience gets the better of me – again. Shit. I hate my fucking conscious sometimes – and dutifully end up knocking. After he’s freaked out for a bit (and I’ve tried to calm him down again), and I’ve refused a drink (while thinking he clearly needs one), and he’s repeated several variants of me being ‘a very good boy’ for checking up on him (and I’ve reproached myself internally for being A Very Big Fuck Up for causing it to happen in the first place), I finally get to sit down and already feel utterly exhausted. He eases himself onto the sofa and sits there clutching his stick between his knees, peering anxiously at me over the top of his glasses. It occurs to me that the same gesture probably makes me look equally confused and doleful, and make a mental note to stop doing it – like, right fucking now.

“I hardly know what to think,” he says. “Who would do such a wicked thing?” He stares at me, blinking in bewilderment, and I realize he’s expecting me to answer.

“I don’t know Mr Haversham.”

“Wicked. Plain wicked.”

I make a non-committal noise, but the fact is I no longer really relate to these kinds of adjectives, superstitious and antiquated as they are. Words like ‘wicked’ and ‘evil’ are a distraction – dark forces, Original Sin, all that bullshit – a convenient means of detaching, displacing and explaining away. It’s lazy and inelegant; the notion that ‘evil people do evil things because they’re evil.’ Finding a humane explanation for inhumanity is far more interesting. Briefly I think of my own maladjusted surplus of humanity – empathic and imaginative to a dysfunctional degree – and how it became submerged by your inscrutable capacity to both conceal and showcase your own moral vacuum.
“People can be dreadful can’t they,” says Mr Haversham with feeling. Yeah – sing it, brother. He knots his hands together, then jerks them up and down as if stroking a phantom pet. “There are some terrible things in the world,” he adds.

“Yes. Yes there are.” Well I can’t really argue with that can I? Me, of all people, should know about the terrible things. I’m soaked in them, marinated in them; I trail my fingers through them on a daily basis.

“Dreadful that it should be your car, a nice young man like you.”

“Y-e-a-h.”

“You watch yourself, won’t you William?” And I tell him I intend to, even though I lost the fortitude to watch myself quite a while ago. Why would I even need to anymore; you scrutinize me more than enough for the both of us. Although of course the problem with that is that you keep most of your findings to yourself, unleashing them in bursts or doling them out in short sips – basically whenever it’s most convenient for you to thrust your opinion in my face like a loaded gun. I try to work out at exactly what point I handed my sense of myself over to your (highly dubious) stewardship, and belatedly realize that Mr Haversham is anxiously staring at me.

“You’ve gone very quiet,” he says. “You must be so worried. I’m sorry that this has happened to you.”

“It’s fine,” I say. “I’ll be fine. Thanks, though. I appreciate your concern.”

He nods at me, his old head bobbing up and down like a Halloween apple, and I allow myself to gently tune out while he starts pronouncing over how the city’s going down the pan and the country’s going to the dogs, and that something like this would never have happened under President Carter, and how evil people can be, and don’t I think it’s a terrible shame? By the end it’s starting to sound faintly biblical, as if he thinks a vandalized car is a signifier for The End of Days and we’re all going to hell in a handcart; and I keep trying to nod at the right points and make commiserating sounds, even though I’m not really listening to a word he’s saying. About how wicked it all is. How evil.

I called you evil once didn’t I? Because you were so destructive, I said. You didn’t care. “Evil is just destructive?” you replied. “Storms are evil, if it’s that simple.”

Except you were right and it’s not. It’s nowhere near that simple is it? Not anywhere close.

I make my escape from Mr Haversham as soon as is decently possible, then drag myself up the final flight of stairs to my floor. Oh fuck, I’m so tired; I’ve had virtually no sleep for the past 24 hours. My limbs are like lead and my brain is stuffed with cotton wool and cement, and I have to take a moment to prop myself against the wall and rub my temples which are pulsing and throbbing in a herald of the familiar start of a headache. I aimlessly rummage around for my keys, then pause outside the door of the apartment to send you some photos of the car with a brief explanatory note of: Lk @ ths.

Your reply comes a few seconds later: You appear to have misplaced your vowels.

“Well why don’t you kiss my ass,” I say out loud, “you pedantic…” and then I look a bit closer and go extremely still – because it’s incredibly obvious from the thin parallel scratches that someone’s picked the lock.

A thin trickle of fear and anticipation flashes up my spine like iced water and I carry on standing
there, taut, immobile and frozen in place; each nerve straining. There’s no sound from beyond the hallway, no way to know if whoever broke in is still there. They could have fled by now, they could be long gone. Or they could be right behind the door, grinning and leering and lying in wait, listening to me breathing and lingering on the other side. I slowly reach down into my coat, trying to be as quiet as possible, and for a truly hideous moment I think I’ve left the gun at the hotel before realizing it’s in my pocket – on the opposite side to where I’d usually put it. I was too distracted when I left, that’s the problem. Too distracted by you. Christ I need to be smarter than this.

I take a deep breath – frozen in place, wavering over my various options – and knowing full well that whatever I choose right now could have irreversible implications. Do not collect, I think wildly, do not pass Go. I could just leave, I suppose… I could do that. Creep away silently down the hallway, then run down the stairs and call Jack. Or just run: run back to you, then gloss it over afterwards and pretend it never happened. But even as I’m thinking it I know that I’m not going to do either of these things. Firstly, because this could be a chance to finish it; it could be the chance we’ve been waiting for. And secondly, deep down in a part of me that I’m reluctant to fully acknowledge right now, I know that I want this confrontation. I want the opportunity to unleash myself. If you can’t move heaven – raise hell.

I take another deep breath, covering my hand with my sleeve to preserve any possible prints, then gingerly push the door open with the very edge of the handle and wait. Nothing.

A bit further.

Nothing.

Shit, it’s almost an anti-climax: all dressed up and nowhere to go. I’m not entirely sure what I was expecting, only that it wasn’t this stretching silence. Maybe an eerily sing-song “Hello Mr Graham!” Maybe that. I draw in my breath one last time, then push the door fully open and step inside. My body’s gone onto autopilot, like it thinks it’s doing a training exercise:

identify, establish, protect, secure, survey the scene, check the periphery, control physical threat with minimal contamination.

Any minute now Jack’s going to flick the lights on and bellow “cover your corners Will!”

From the sight and sound of things, it seems just like it did when I left it yesterday. Gloomy and dim because all the curtains are drawn, dust motes dancing in the weak dribbles of sunlight, junk mail piled precariously by the door, a faint buzz of static from the refrigerator like a drowsy fly. If I close my eyes I could probably see aftershock impressions of you and me from the past few weeks, moving and speaking and touching each other, like flickering images on a film reel. But that’s just the sight and sound of it, because the first thing that alerts me – immediately and shockingly – is the smell.

It’s unmistakable and I’ve encountered it far too many times to ever be in any doubt. It’s the smell of the abattoir, of the charnel house. The smell of slaughter. It means that somebody is dead or dying and I realize, with something like horror, that it immediately associates itself with you.

My heart is pounding madly but my hand is steady, and I keep the gun primed straight in front of me and follow behind it into the living room. And it’s in there that I find him.

The last time I saw him I was in his office. It was less than a week ago: I broke his ruler, and he told me I was crazy and stressed and stupid, and that no one would ever believe someone like me could be sleeping with another man. Then I left and forgot all about him, and now he’s here…right here in front of me. Mark. It’s Mark. It’s the janitor. It’s Mark the fucking janitor – suspended from my curtain rail, cruciform style, with his entire torso hacked open.

“Oh shit,” I say faintly.
And at almost that exact moment my phone goes off. I numbly reach into my pocket to take it out, not once taking my eyes off the grotesque tableau in front of me. Finally I glance down. It’s a text. Number unknown.

*Hello Will. Isn’t this fun? I hope there’s room for one more to join the party.*

And then a few seconds later, another one:

*Expect me.*
Chapter 35

The sane, sensible, effective thing to do would be to call Jack; and this is undoubtedly the course of action that a sane, sensible, effective person would take. So needless to say I do the exact opposite and call you instead.

“It’s been set up to look like you,” I say bluntly.

“Hmm,” you reply. “Hardly.” You actually have the nerve to sound affronted, as if preserving your maniacal reputation is the most important issue at hand.

“Look, who’s the forensics expert; me or you? Take my word for it, people are going to assume. Of course I can tell it’s not, but…seriously. No one else will. Or at least not until I’ve had to spend hours convincing them.” I already feel slightly sickened and depleted at the thought of it. “On the other hand you might get lucky, and they’ll think it’s me instead.”

“No note?”


“You are certain?”

“Of course I’m certain! God, I’m looking right at it.”

“What do you mean ‘you are looking right at it?’” you ask sharply “Do you mean to say you are still in the building?”

“Yes, where else would I be?”

“You should leave immediately.”

“It’s fine. I’ve checked the whole place – there’s no one here.”

“On the contrary, the speed with which that message arrived is strongly suggestive of someone watching you.”

“Look, remember what we discussed about the whole ‘over-protective’ thing?”

“Will,” you say, “I assume you would rather I did not come over there myself?”

“What? No! Of course not.”

“Well if you wish it to remain that way, then you will leave the building and wait in the street. Stay on the phone until you are outside.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” I say sulkily, “it’s fine.” But I pretend to obey anyway (partly because I secretly quite like it when you go all masterful).

“Are you leaving?”

“Yes,” I say, while remaining exactly where I am.
"Are you nearly outside?"

"Yes."

You sigh. "You are not, you little liar. You are still stood exactly where you were, gazing at an amateurishly mangled corpse."

"Where are you, are you still in the hotel?"

"I am."

"Well, you should stay there for the moment. Don’t go out." Even as I’m saying this I realize that we are starting to fuss over each other like a pair of old women; it’s possible you think the same because there is a slightly awkward pause.

"You have contacted Jack?"

"No, not yet. I will though. I’ll have to."

"Of course."

I open my mouth to say something conventional and formulaic about being glad we left yesterday, but then change my mind halfway through because I’m not glad at all. I wish we had been here; we could have finished it there and then. I could have explained to Jack that someone had broken in, that it was self-defence and yeah, okay, the body’s been mauled around a bit, but it’s not my fault – look, I’ve just caught you a dangerous criminal you ungrateful old shit, stop lecturing me about excessive force, you should be giving me a goddamn medal. As an afterthought I invent a medal-giving ceremony and force Kade Purnell to make an excessively servile, ass-kissing speech about how amazing I am while I look suitably modest. I smirk at this image, and add a few more press photographers and some additional superlatives for Kade Purnell to choke on.

"Are you still there?"

"Yeah. I’m still here." I sigh heavily as reality reasserts itself; what’s actually happened rather than what-might-have-been. "Oh shit. Shit, this is really bad."

"It is, indeed."

There’s another pause. "We won’t be going anywhere for the time being,” I say. “Will we?"

"I am afraid not. This is not the kind of thing from which it is possible to simply walk away.”

I sigh again. “Look, I should probably get going. I’ll talk to you properly tonight – we need to decide what we’re going to do.” I hesitate and take another look at the ghoulish, swinging spectacle in front of me and shudder. “And then try and work out what the hell is going on. But I really need to call Jack.”

"Yes, of course. Be careful."

"Always am," I reply. It doesn’t sound even remotely convincing.

You don’t say anything else, and after a pause I hang up before dialling Jack’s number and giving him the most concise-yet-comprehensive summary I’m able to muster (“Oh shit!” he says. “You’re not wrong,” I reply). I ignore your instructions to wait outside the building, but as a compromise sit on the floor in the hallway with my back against the wall. I take your pen out of my pocket again,
turning it over and over in my hands.

The fact hasn’t escaped me that – thanks to you – there’s a high probability people will assume I was somehow involved in this. I’m under no illusions about what my reputation is (not to mention that as alibis go, I am well and truly fucked). Maybe Jack won’t buy it, but plenty of other people will. In fact I can already see the next few days as if I’ve already lived them: the CSI team rolling up and me having to sit tamely by and tolerate them rifling through my apartment – my life – and no doubt flinching and raising their eyebrows, then exchanging loaded glances with one another that of course Will Graham would live in such a weird, horrible place. The gleeful headlines on TattleCrime. The conversations that are going to cut off mid-flow as soon as I walk into a room. The fact that you and I are now trapped here for the indefinite future, because if I abruptly vanish after this then the whole FBI really will be after me. And caught with the helpless, hopeless, sickening knowledge that someone is hunting me, and probably you as well, and that for the time being there is nothing at all I can do about it except wait. Hello Will…Expect me…Expect me. And that for as long as you and I are together, this is the type of thing that’s going to happen over and over and over again.

I close my eyes and tip my head against the wall, then promptly have to jerk it upright at a clatter of footsteps and someone saying “Hey, Will!” It’s the girl that lives two doors down from me. I haven’t seen her since you came back, but before that I used to bump into her quite regularly; I helped her with her groceries a few times, fixed the valve on her air conditioning…neighborly stuff. She dropped a couple of hints about us going for dinner sometime, but nothing ever came of it and she wisely desisted when she began to realize how utterly shattered and bereft I was. Oh God, I can’t remember her name. Something to do with flowers, I think. Rose? Daisy?

She smiles at me, although it’s a bit of a nervous one. I don’t blame her – I probably look slightly unhinged. “What are you doing down there Will?” she asks. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say. “Thanks. I’m just, um…waiting to meet some friends.”


“Honestly, I’m fine.”

“I haven’t seen you for a while.”

“No,” I reply unhelpfully.

“I thought you might have moved out, got a new place.”

“No, still here.”

“Yeah, so…what have you been up to?”

“Oh, you know,” I say vaguely. “This and that.”

“Well okay,” she replies, and I immediately recognize the look she’s giving me, because it’s one I get a lot. It’s the ‘My God, you look utterly wrecked…you poor tragic bastard’ look. Sure enough she adds: “A group of us are going to try that new bar tonight, the one on the corner of Main Street. Do you know it? They’re nice guys and you’d be welcome to join us. If you’re free? I mean, y’know, if you wanted?”

“Thanks,” I say, “that would’ve been great but I’m afraid I’ve already got plans.” God, have I ever.
“Oh well, no problem. Some other time.”

“Yeah, sure. Some other time.”

She hesitates again, then doles me out another smile and makes her exit. I numbly watch her as she walks off and she swings her hips a bit; she knows I’m looking at her. She’s wearing a knitted cap in rainbow stripes and her purse has little embroidered flowers down one side, and in that moment she seems like a mocking, hopelessly unobtainable symbol of the type of life (happy, healthy, safe and sane) which I am never, ever going to be able to have. As opposed to the type of life I’m currently living, which involves crouching on the floor guarding the entrance to a horrific crime scene and contemplating a future where, if you have your way, I won’t just be gatekeeping crime scenes but actively creating them. This is what you meant isn’t it? It’s what you were warning me about, to consider what I was really choosing. Because I guess you don’t want half-measures this time; I have to be either in or out. I always felt so strongly that I didn’t want normal – didn’t want rainbow wool and embroidered flowers – but as I hear the sound of the sirens wailing outside, I’m suddenly not all that confident that I really want this either.

Oh God, I wish you were here. Things would make more sense if you were here; you’d make it right. By which, of course, I mean wrong.

*****

Outside in the street some idiot is blaring ‘Hot Stuff’ by Donna Summer from their car stereo, and the soundtrack is so surreally incongruous that even Jack’s lips are starting to twitch with amused disbelief. “Sometimes I feel like I’ve wandered into a David Lynch film,” he says.

“Yes,” I reply gloomily, “I know exactly what you mean.” In the corner of my eye I can see one of the forensics team dragging your chair across the floor and have an overpowering urge to yell at him to get his hands off it. As anticipated it’s unbearable having them here – in fact it’s even worse than anticipated – yet brooding on its unbearability is also utterly pointless because I have no choice except to bear it. It’s like being invaded: pillaged and exposed, then ultimately discarded to sift through all the leftover shards. Jesus, why can’t they just get the job done and fuck off? I’m aware that Jack is looking at me with a concerned expression on his face. He can’t believe it’s happened, I don’t think; he wasn’t expecting things to escalate so quickly. Although to be honest neither did I. In fact the only person not surprised was you.

Jack (like me) finds the absence of a note strongly suggestive that this is not Matthew Brown’s handiwork. He is also (like you) inclined to discount my lingering Tooth Fairy anxieties. His favorite theory (as expected) is that it’s you. I keep giving him reasons why I don’t think it is, and he keeps shutting them down with “but look at it; just look at it” and I have to politely point out that I am, indeed, looking at it; upon which he starts repeating “well, let’s see what Price says back at the lab” in a highly condescending way until I want to scream. He wants to believe it, that’s the problem; his biases are skewing his judgement. He wants to think that this is his moment to finally catch you – captured, caged and displayed – with him vindicated in the process as an additional bonus. You’re his Great White Whale, the prize trophy that always eludes him one last time. He’s not even all that interested in the car, doubtless because it doesn’t fit his theory (even he has to admit that it’s the last thing you would ever bother to do). Matthew Brown signs his work, according to Jack, so if he’d done this there would have been a note. There almost certainly was a note on the car, but it was out in the open all night; it probably blew away. Don’t I remember how the same thing nearly happened with the note on the agents’ windscreen? How Andrews had to grab it back before the wind carried it off? “This doesn’t fit with Brown’s previous sequence,” says Jack, nodding sagely, and despite my best efforts to the contrary the current tally, nicely and neatly docketed, remains car: Matthew Brown; corpse: You. Cars and Corpses…it sounds like some 1950s detective novel. Christ. My cell
is practically burning a hole in my pocket, but agonizingly I can’t tell him about the text because if I do he’ll confiscate my phone on the spot to trawl through the call log – and there’s no way I can risk anyone finding the exchanges with you which I have stupidly (stupidly) failed to delete.

“They think time of death was around 18.30,” Jack says, before adding (inevitably), “but Price will be more specific back at the lab.”

I realize I am anxiously and absent-mindedly tapping my hand against the wall in rhythm to ‘Hot Stuff’ (and how incredibly inappropriate it looks) so blush and force myself to stay still. Then I process what Jack’s said and start to frown. 18.30 is oddly precise (and high-risk, and thus incongruous – stuff like this is infinitely more likely to happen at night). In fact it’s as if the perpetrator watched me leave the FBI yesterday and wanted to time it for when I’d most probably be back. I inadvertently turn and glance at Sanderson, but he’s earnestly talking to one of his CSI team and behaving exactly like he always does. Surely he’s not that good an actor (he’s not you…or, come to think of it, me). Now he’s virtuously inspecting the couch with a scalpel and swabs, and the realization of what he’d say if he knew exactly what I’ve been doing on it (not to mention with who) makes me emit an involuntary snort of laughter that I have to hastily try and turn into a cough. God only knows what the samples will come back with. Oh well, I’m a young(ish) single man with a functioning libido, there’s no reason why I can’t jerk off on my own goddamn couch if I want to. At least I won’t be the one – unlike some people – who’s forced to spend hours analysing the results of my efforts through a high-precision forensic microscope. I give Sanderson a rather manic grin and he looks uncomfortable and drops his eyes first.

“Well, at least I was with you yesterday afternoon,” I say, “so I could hardly have done it.” I suppose I may as well bring it up first. I’m expecting (hoping) that Jack will laugh at this but he doesn’t; and my heart sinks a bit.

“Actually you could have. It would have been tight, but you could have done.” He holds up a hand. “It’s okay, I know you didn’t, but we need to cover all bases.”

“Oh come on Jack, if I had anything to do with this don’t you think I’d have gone to the trouble of creating a plausible alibi?”

“I know Will.” His voice is gentle – sympathetic. “But I’m not the one you might end up needing to convince. And given the potential link with Hannibal…”

“Yeah, I know,” I say gloomily. Images of Kade Purnell immediately come to mind; and God knows who else. It’s not like I wasn’t expecting it.

“So let’s just make sure we’ve got you covered straight out the gate. Where did you park your car at the Bureau?”

“I didn’t, I came on the train.”

“Okay, well what route did you take? You might show up on the CCTV.”

My heart sinks even further. “Well, obviously I didn’t come home last night Jack.”

“Obviously. So where were you?”

“I went to a bar.” I lower my voice confidingly. “I went home with someone.”

“Okay, who? Where does she live? We’ll get over there and have her alibi you.” He hesitates and clears his throat. “Well, not alibi, as such; not as formal as that. But you know…” he trails off awkwardly, and I have a truly awful feeling that I’m going to laugh with nervous hysteria because
my brain has unhelpfully supplied an artistic representation of what his face would look like if I told him where I really was.

“I can’t remember,” I say. “I’d had a lot to drink.” Shit, that sounds so lame; it needs to be something more convincing. Oh yes, I know. I lower my voice even further, as if I’m feeling miserably shy and self-conscious, adding an anxious clench to my shoulders for extra effect. “Look, Jack, I mean I’d had a lot. The thing is, it wasn’t a woman…it was another guy, and…”

“Oh, okay, I see,” says Jack. “I see what you mean.” If he’s taken aback he’s too tactful to show it.

“It’s not exactly something I make a habit of, but I was really drunk, and he offered me a ride home, and…and…” And what? The stars were bright and the moon was full? I don’t actually have enough (i.e., any) experience with casual sex to take this touching story any further. I wave my hand around a bit instead. “You know how it is.”

Jack clearly doesn’t know how it is (at all) but kindly claps me on the shoulder anyway. Mission accomplished.

“Your personal life isn’t anyone else’s business,” he says, “so I appreciate your reservations about this. But Will, seriously, the sooner we can officially put you out of this the better, so if you remember anything…”

“I know Jack. God, I wish I could but I was so out of it I can’t even remember his name.” I pause for a few seconds, imagining this phantom version of myself who goes out and has mindless, drunken sex with total strangers in exchange for a free ride home (whilst his janitor is being brutally eviscerated on his curtain rail) and try to look suitably contrite on his behalf. Then I remember what I was actually doing, at which point my phantom self and I abruptly change places and it’s him looking morally outraged and me staring at the floor and wondering how the fucking hell I’ve ended up in this situation. How did I end up in this situation? It’s not like my Year Book entry identified me as ‘Student Most Likely To…alibi himself for a murder by having ecstatic sex with FBI’s Most Wanted (whilst pretending to be a rent boy).’

“Oh God,” I say, with genuine frustration. “How has this happened? Again. This is all so messed up.”

“I know Will. I know it is.”

“You don’t really though, do you?” I sound incredibly bitter but I can’t help myself.

“Well, no. I suppose not.”

“You don’t know what it’s like to stand in your living room while all your colleagues rifle through your stuff and have your boss demand you alibi yourself for carving up your janitor.”

“Will…”

“And no one believing that you had nothing to do with it.”

“Will…”

“If this had happened in anyone else’s apartment…”

“Look,” says Jack heavily, “I know what went on was bad – really bad – and I know I let you down, but come on. What would you have done in my position? The real responsibility for everything that happened to you hardly lies with me does it?” I fretfully run my hands through my hair and Jack
shifts on his feet, as if positioning himself for the knock-out punch. “We know exactly whose fault it was.”

As soon as he says that, it’s as if all the energy goes seeping out of me. “Yes,” I say quietly. “I know whose fault it was.”

“So if he is trying to frame you again…”

“He’s not. I’m certain it isn’t him.”

Jack sweeps on as if I haven’t said anything “I’m afraid it means that when a situation like this occurs people are going to raise questions. And they might not seem legitimate to you – or fair – but it won’t stop people asking.”

“I know,” I say, because this, at least, is indisputable.

There’s another pause while we both stare at the floor. “I’m sorry Will,” says Jack eventually, “I really am.”

“Thanks. Me too.”

“I still blame myself. You’d never have met him if it wasn’t for me.” I don’t know what to say to this, so ultimately don’t say anything and just continue staring at my feet.

“I’ll have someone drive you to the Academy,” says Jack kindly. “You can stay in one of the student rooms.”

“No. No, I don’t want to go there.”

“Well you can’t just go wandering off. Not after this. You know you can’t, don’t be so naïve.”

“Okay,” I say miserably, because what choice do I have. “I guess that makes sense.”

“Stay as long as you like – as long as you need.”

“Thanks.”

“We’ll help you find some new accommodation, although you’ll have to keep checking in with me. You know that right?”

“Yeah, I know.” I pause. “Jack?”

“Hmm.”

“You know I had nothing to do with this don’t you?”

“I know it.”

“Tell the others won’t you? Price, Zeller.”

“I’ll tell them.”

“And that TattleCrime headline…someone pinned it on the staff board. Can you make sure it’s been taken down?”

“Of course.” He puts his hand on my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. “I know this is a shock Will,
but it’ll all work out. You’re not officially a suspect, and you’re not going to become one – not on my watch.” I catch his eye and he has the grace to look embarrassed. “You’re the victim in this. And it’s not as if we’re lacking alternative options.”

“Look,” I say, “about that…”

“Will, it’s understandable you want to convince yourself that he hasn’t come back, but you need to at least prepare for the possibility. We all do.”

“I know, but…”

“If I’m wrong, I’m wrong; but I’d rather not take the chance. I’ve already liaised with the field office. The operation on him has been reinstated back to maximum priority.”

“Oh,” I say faintly.

“And for heaven’s sakes keep it to yourself. The press is going to go ballistic when it breaks – complete frenzy – and we need to keep it quiet for as long as possible.” He looks exhausted just at the thought of it.

“I’ll keep it quiet,” I say. My voice doesn’t sound like mine. “Not. One. Word.” I can’t help noticing that neither of us are saying your name, as if it’s a bad luck talisman that shouldn’t be spoken aloud. He. Him. Like some urban legend or horror movie figure: say his name five times and he appears! There’s still no doubt who we mean. There was only ever one, wasn’t there? Only ever you.

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Despite Jack’s instructions about not wandering off I promptly do exactly that, and stumble out into the street for some air. I feel like I could throw up. There’s a crowd of people gathering opposite, drawn like magnets to the cluster of sirens and police cars and staring with unashamed curiosity at the safe, vicarious thrill of someone else’s catastrophe and I feel like screaming at them. Are you happy now? I want to ask them, Is this what you were hoping to see?

I’m numb. Shell-shocked. Like I still don’t entirely understand how everything’s gone completely to hell so quickly. I built a cocoon around us the past few weeks and now real life has reasserted itself like a knife shearing through the casing, flesh and bone. It’s like being shaken awake, like being slapped in the face. A raw and searing reality check. Because of you…because of you. Jack, looking pitying and resentful: “We all know whose responsibility it was.” Because of you, some people will think I was involved in this. Because of you, it’s feasible that I might have been. Because of you, I almost certainly will be in the future. And while I can blame you for the first premise, I can’t entirely blame you for the second – for the fact you just nurtured something that was already there – and I certainly can’t lay the last one at your door because I chose it myself. I stood in front of you this morning insisting how clearly and consciously I chose it. I lay underneath you last night staring into your eyes while we had sex – no, made love, Christ, because surely that’s what it was? – telling you how much I wanted you and everything you represent.

All those walls you built around yourself, brick by brick, layer by layer, one after the other your entire life. Me; finally someone capable of climbing over them. Look before you leap, people often say. I never really considered what I was going to find on the other side. I didn’t expect I was going to find myself there.

I take your pen out of my coat pocket again (your pretentious, overpriced, monogamous pen) and cling onto it, the exact same way I know – oh God, oh fucking hell – I’d cling onto you if you were here. I was so glad when you came back…so glad. Dazzled and delirious, like looking into the sun. I
couldn’t see beyond the flare. I still can’t. I’m blinded by the light. Oh God, you knew this would happen, didn’t you? It’s why you asked, why you wouldn’t stop pushing it; wouldn’t let it go. “I didn’t choose to be here,” I told you last night, “I just couldn’t choose not to be.” You knew I hadn’t really acknowledged the enormity of what it was going to mean. And it is enormous; it’s fucking huge. The last time I felt something so huge, so enormous, I tried to kill us both. I threw us off a goddamn cliff.

He’s going to take me over, I think irrationally and desperately. He already has. If I go back now he’s going to take me over and there’ll be nothing left of myself and if I leave then I’ll never come back again. He’s waiting. He said he was going to wait for me. He always does what he says he will. I’m his ‘imago’: “buried in the unconscious, carried with us all our lives.” He won’t let me leave him. And I don’t want to, but I’m frightened of what will happen if I stay. I can’t be what he expects me to be but I can’t be on my own without him. I tip my head against the wall, almost relishing the pain of the brick scraping through my hair. He. Him. You. Because it is you, isn’t it? It’s always been you.

But I love you, I think; and there’s no denying the helpless simplicity of it. You’re my lover, my beloved, the love of my life. It could almost be at the level of cliché. It would be, if it weren’t for the final, terrible twist. “Dear Dr Phil, I am confused, please advise. I have fallen in love with the wrong person. We have many mutual interests, incredible chemistry, are intellectually compatible, and he understands and values me in a way that no one else ever has. However, there is a problem…The problem is that he kills people and cannibalizes them, so if I want to be with him then what does that make me? What should I do?”

Oh Christ I don’t know. I don’t know what to do; I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know what’s going to happen to me. I don’t know. That’s the truth: pure and simple. Except when it comes to my life nothing is pure, and it’s never, ever simple.

I stumble round the corner of the building into the alleyway and stand with my back to the street, desperately trying to pull myself together – even though it seems like the harder I try the more I unravel. A few tears are starting to sting my eyelashes, and I realize I don’t entirely know what I’m crying for: me, you, or us. Maybe none of them, maybe it’s more for someone who’s not involved with any of this: the person I was supposed to be. I’m not mourning something that’s happened, but the loss of something that never had a proper chance. Then for a brief moment I think of my dad, and this is fucking fatal because it’s enough to nearly make me start sobbing for real.

“Hey,” someone says, and I spin round self-consciously. It’s the elderly homeless woman who sometimes shows up round here; the city outreach team periodically roll up to coax her into some hostel or clinic or other, but she always come back again. She’s staring at me with frank interest, her head slightly on one side like a bird’s, wisps of silvery blonde hair blowing across her face like feathers.

“Hey. Hey! You there. You okay honey?”

“No,” I say. “Not really.”

“Hurts, don’t it?”

“Yes.” I take my glasses off and stick them in my pocket, then drag my hand over my face. “Yes, it does.”

“They reckon it gets better.”

“Do they?” I say. “That’s good to know.”
“What you doing out here?”

“I live here.”

“Your momma know you’re out? How old are you?”

“Old enough,” I reply wearily. “Definitely old enough to know better.”

“No fool like an old fool,” she says.

I can’t help smiling at that. “Yes, you’re probably right.”

She smiles back at me, delighted with my response. “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread. You know that one?”

“I’ve heard it, yeah.”

“You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.”

“Abraham Lincoln.”

“Fool on the Hill.”

“The Beatles.”

“Fool for love. You got anyone that loves you honey?”

“I don’t know...I’m not really sure. Love’s quite a funny one isn’t it?”

“How you mean boy? You mean funny ‘ha ha’, or weird funny?”

“Weird. I mean weird funny.”

“Fool’s paradise,” she says.

“Oh yeah. I definitely know that one.”

“Will!” bellows Jack from the end of the alley. “What the hell are you doing? I’ve been looking all over for you, get back here!”

“Who’s that? Is that your daddy?”

“No,” I say, before adding (disloyally): “thank God.” I rifle through my pocket and give her all my remaining cash, and she waves her hand at me as if giving me a benediction. I hope she is; I need all the help I can get. I trudge back up the alleyway towards Jack, but then pause before I reach him and dash out a hasty text to you with one finger and thumb: “JC taking me 2 Acadmy. I’ll b in touch when I can. They r looking for u, u need 2 go NOW.” I’m expecting you to reply with something supercilious about grammar and missing vowels but you don’t. No doubt you’re just sat there reading it with your eyebrows raised. ‘So Will has lost his nerve again,’ you’ll be thinking, ‘just as I expected – how terribly tedious.’ You’ll probably turn up in my room tonight with a carving knife to finish the job. No, no you wouldn’t do that. You wouldn’t. You’re not going to hurt me. You care about me, you…”

“All units are on alert,” says Jack. “If he’s here, we’ll find him. God, just imagine it.” He actually rubs his hands together. “The arrogant bastard. Well he’s overstepped this time. You really are his
weak spot aren’t you Will; he just can’t help himself. Will? Are you listening to me?”

“Yes, Jack. I’m listening.”

Jack frowns and peers closer at me: how pale I am, how haunted, my eyes doubtless pink and swollen around the edges. “You good?” he asks uncertainly.

No, not really; not all that good – but then not entirely bad either. In fact that’s the whole problem, isn’t it? If you were here you’d probably say something about having the courage to acknowledge one’s darkness before experiencing the power and possibilities of one’s light. But I don’t know if I have the right kind of courage… You always gave me credit for being better than I really am.

“I’ve got a good feeling about it this time,” Jack says happily. “I really think we’re going to get him. I really do.”

“But you?” I answer weakly.

“Do you?” I answer weakly.

“Damn right I do, even his luck’s got to run out sometime.” He pauses, then frowns again. “Will, I have to say, you look terrible.”

But I am terrible; just like you are. Two terrors together. “I’m finding this a bit much,” is all I say.

“I’m not surprised. Look, why don’t you get going? I’ll have someone drive you over now. Get some rest.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I think I will.”

“And something to eat.”

“Yes. Thanks.” Christ, is that all I can say? Yes, yes, yes, thanks, thanks, thanks. I don’t want rest, or food, or a room at the Academy: I just want you. I want you to put your arms round me, and use lies to tell me the truth, and take all the wrongness and fashion it into something that’s right with your hypnotic voice and dark soulless eyes. I want you so badly it almost physically hurts. Except, of course, that I can’t, and none of that is going to happen. Because for your own sake you need to go; you were so certain they’d never look for you in city – and until today they wouldn’t have done. So you have to go; and after today, it’s impossible for me to go with you because Jack won’t let me out of his sight. It’s so fucking ironic that after everything that’s happened the decision has finally been taken out of my hands. Although maybe ironic isn’t quite right, because it feels more related to cowardice than anything else. I can frame it to myself as ‘I can’t go with you’ rather than ‘when the moment finally came I didn’t have the courage to accept you.’ I’ll have to sit in a tiny student room at the Academy and fade and pine away all over again, and know that you’re out there somewhere – dynamic and daring and larger-than-life – and that the scrutiny of the FBI and my own crippling fear is keeping us apart for a second time. At least we had those two nights together, I suppose. At least there’s that.

Jack deposits me in the back of a squad car, and I end up lying on the seat with my coat pulled over me. The driver’s a young police officer, especially wrangled over for the job. He doesn’t know who I am, just assumes I’m a trainee being driven to the Academy building on the strictures of the mighty Jack Crawford.

“You okay buddy?” he says. “It’s not all that bad a place you know, from what I hear. You don’t need to look so down!”

“I know it’s not so bad,” I say numbly.
“So who died?” he says, “It’s only the FBI - you look like someone died!” He thinks he’s being funny.

I ignore him and roll over so I’m looking at the seat. He coughs awkwardly then turns on the radio, and I lie with my eyes open, running my fingertips over my face and imagining it’s you touching me instead. “Only myself,” I mutter under my breath. “Only myself.”
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Just to say that sections of the following are not intended as an objective commentary/analysis on the show, rather an exploration of how my version of Will might be thinking in the context of this particular story. As such you might not agree that these dynamics were being conveyed onscreen and 100% respect to you if so! :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s growing dark by the time we reach the Academy and the building looks wan and sickly in the glow of the streetlights, as if it’s been dipped in flour. I automatically reach for my luggage before remembering that I don’t actually have any, then give the most cursory possible thanks to the driver before trailing inside and collecting the key that Jack’s rung ahead to have left out. My footsteps echo eerily through the deserted corridors and I see no one the entire time except for a lone janitor, dolefully swirling dirty water across the parquet floor with a mop. He lifts his head and stares silently at me as I walk past and I ignore him.

I find the room with some difficulty, and then promptly wish I hadn’t because it’s a deeply depressing identikit of soulless student accommodation everywhere: single bed, hard and narrow as an ironing board; a small smeary window; and a scuffed, rickety desk with a plastic chair and a battered Anglepoise lamp the same shape and color as someone’s kidney. I take off my coat and drop it on the floor, then go into the dingy ensuite bathroom and stare at myself in the mirror for a long time. You’re right: my hair needs cutting and I’m still too thin. I look like shit.

“What are you doing?” I ask the reflection; this person in the mirror who looks like a waif. Who’s thin and pale and wrecked, whose hair is too long, and who is making insane decisions, and who’s fallen in love with a monster and doesn’t care what that makes him. “What the fuck are you doing?” I say.

The silence is oppressive because of course I can’t answer this question, and in the end I draw back my fist and smash it into the mirror; then gaze at my sad Picasso face, mournfully distorted in the shards. My hand’s bleeding, black-blood-in-the-moonlight. I don’t care.

Now the basin’s full of glass and blood, and even though I’ve only been here 10 minutes I’ve already managed to make the room look like a crime scene. Oh fuck, what’s Jack going to say? Maybe I could tell him that I tripped, that it was accident, that…and then I realize I don’t give even the slightest shit what Jack’s going to say; he can say whatever he fucking likes and I’ll just tune him out. After all, there are so many worse things to break than a mirror. A promise. A confidence. A heart. I take a deep, jagged breath (do not cry, do not cry) then from the other room I hear the chime of my phone and have a powerful sense, without even looking, that it’s a message from you.

I immediately feel myself starting to quiver, the tremors reverberating through my whole body. Oh God, you know don’t you? Of course you do, you probably knew before I even left this morning. And you’re not going to be happy…you’re going to be angry with me; you’re going to be furious. Variations of what you might have to say start skittering through my head –

You will regret this…
I am going to punish you…

Do you really think you can say ‘no’ to me?...

– and I make a small whimpering noise, a helpless pre-emptive of the pain and fear and chaos that’s inevitably lying ahead. Maybe you’re going to turn up tonight in my soulless little student room: blazing like a fiery avenging angel, eyes flashing and knife in hand. You probably will – there would be a kind of synchronous inevitability in it that would appeal to you. You’d cup my face again with your palm and gaze at me, and I’d just let you. You wouldn’t raise your voice. I wouldn’t try to run, because where would I go without you? This time you’d probably kiss me: you couldn’t before, but you would now. And last time you couldn’t kill me, but this time you probably will. Hold me, thrill me, kiss me, kill me. Oh God, oh God. But even as I’m thinking it – even as my hands are trembling, and my stomach’s churning, and the acidic spike of fear is twisting through me – I still know I’m not going to call Jack and tell him where to find you; that I’d let you come for me first before I’d turn you in.

I take one final hopeless look at my jagged face in the mirror then stumble out of the bathroom, jerky and numb as an automaton, and fumble blindly for my phone. I suppose it’s only fair that you’ll be angry. I deserve it; I’ve let you down again. I’ve let us both down. My heart’s pounding as I stare at the screen and I’m right, it is you:

_Calm yourself, everything is fine. They will not find me. And unless you want me to I will not leave without you._

I read the message through three times then slowly place my phone on the desk, careful and cautious as if it’s made of glass. Well…okay then. A part of me wants to laugh, because after the agonizing of the last few hours the simple, benign sincerity of those 22 well-chosen words comes perilously close to anti-climax. And then I feel like crying, because of course I know what it really means. You’re entirely aware that I’m sat in a room somewhere freaking out; you know what I’m thinking. This is your way of saying that you’re waiting for me, just like you said you would. It means that you have confidence in me to make the right (wrong) decision. You’re not going to threaten or coerce. You’re just going to wait. And in that moment I have a sudden sense of how much I must really mean to you, because it’s obvious that unless I’m prepared to come to you consciously and wholeheartedly then you’d rather I didn’t come at all.

Now my legs feel like they’re going to give way, so I sit on the bed and run my hands through my hair. “I don’t know what to do,” I say; and I hate how small and piteous my voice sounds. But it’s true, so I say it again, and then again; as if by acknowledging it enough times the Universe will take pity on my humility and proffer up a solution. The sense of confusion is crushing, like trying to unravel an impenetrable Zen kōan: _I can’t live with you but I can’t live without you. I can’t go with you but I can’t stay here on my own. In accepting you I can’t accept myself._ I can. I can’t. I will. I won’t. I half want to smash something else to expel the tension, but there’s no point in fucking up the room any more than I already have, so settle for pounding my heel against the floor instead until the person next door bangs on the wall and yells at me to keep the goddamn noise down.

The pressure of it all is unbearable, and in the end I’m so wrecked and overwhelmed that I collapse backwards onto the bed and run my hands through my hair. “I don’t know what to do,” I say; and I hate how small and piteous my voice sounds. But it’s true, so I say it again, and then again; as if by acknowledging it enough times the Universe will take pity on my humility and proffer up a solution. The sense of confusion is crushing, like trying to unravel an impenetrable Zen kōan: _I can’t live with you but I can’t live without you. I can’t go with you but I can’t stay here on my own. In accepting you I can’t accept myself._ I can. I can’t. I will. I won’t. I half want to smash something else to expel the tension, but there’s no point in fucking up the room any more than I already have, so settle for pounding my heel against the floor instead until the person next door bangs on the wall and yells at me to keep the goddamn noise down.

The pressure of it all is unbearable, and in the end I’m so wrecked and overwhelmed that I collapse backwards onto the bed and fall asleep on top of the covers, fully clothed and with my feet still on the floor. Inevitably I dream about you. You’re standing by the side of the cliff, imposing and statuesque with your hands in your pockets. I can see you very clearly, even though it’s completely dark where I am because the light’s missing – it’s all surrounding you. I want to go towards you since it feels like the right place for me to be, but I can’t because it’s impossible to move. Something’s holding me back, weighing me down. _Just one step._ I think, _just one_; but I can’t and you don’t make any attempt to reach me yourself. I try to say your name but I can’t even manage
that, and in the end you just turn and start walking away without looking back. I want to tell you not to go, not to leave me again, but whatever it is that’s preventing me is too powerful and I end up sinking helplessly onto the floor. *It can’t end like this*, I think frantically, *not like this, not after everything: you walking off and me sinking down...it wasn’t supposed to end like this.* I open my mouth to call out to you but I don’t have any words for it and it’s at that point that I wake up: humiliated and gracelessly, screaming and flailing and gasping for breath. The person next door promptly bangs on the wall again. “Why don’t you fuck off!” I yell.

My clothes are drenched with sweat and the sensation is clammy and awful, so I strip them off and go and douse my face with water. My hands are shaking and the water splatters onto the floor, and I make a half-hearted attempt to mop it up before realising that I don’t care; that these tiny details don’t matter. That nothing else *matters.* My phone’s still on the desk and I want to call you and hear your voice but know there’s no point. I can’t expect you to solve this one for me; I need to find an answer on my own. And you obviously believe the same which is why you haven’t contacted me yourself.

This makes me think about you, and what you might be doing right now. I realize that it’s impossible to say; you could be doing anything. In fact the only thing I can say for certain is what you *won’t* be doing, which is crumbling and unravelling in the way that I am. Then I have an unnerving sense that somehow you already know what’s going to happen, as if I’m just going through the motions – limping and mutilated and miserable – to drag the remains of myself over a finishing line that you’ve already established weeks ago. You were certainly pushing it enough back at the hotel; by your standards it was positively *unsubtle.* I frown to myself and replay your words from this morning in my head:

*I expect you would like to renounce it? Your volition. Your responsibility.*

*Your reactions are very ingrained aren’t they? Entrenched yet near the surface; buried in shallow graves.*

*You claim to be discounting where we are in favor of where we are headed, but I am not entirely convinced it is not the other way round.*

When I thought about you before it pushed me over the edge, but now doing the same thing is calming me down; easing me onto a trajectory that’s quieter and more contained than a few hours ago. In fact I’m starting to feel vague contempt towards myself for my previous meltdown: collapsed against a wall and ready to give everything up on a panicked, self-pitying impulse. It was your message that started the change I think: as usual, you know exactly the right thing to say. If you’d threatened me I would have acquiesced; conversely, if you’d commanded what I should do I would have rebelled. As it is, the fact you’ve left me alone to choose my own conclusions has inspired the realization that I owe it to us both to at least try to unravel my current crisis. *I can figure this out,* I think. *I can, one way or the other. All the information is there.* I take a few deep breaths, the way you once taught me to do, and begin to mentally scroll through the events that brought me here; deconstructing everything in reverse.

**Number one:** You deliberately stayed away so I would miss you. And I did. I missed you so much I was half-maddened with it.

**Number two:** When you finally came back the intensity of the relief was such that I would have done anything you said. And I did. Because I agreed to leave with you.

**Number three:** You knew I agreed without fully acknowledging the implications. And that wasn’t good enough because you want me with you through informed choice. It’s just like everything else, just like you refusing to touch me until I was capable of fully consenting to it: the constant refrain of *‘I want to hear you say it.’* So you set me up to start questioning my choice. And I did.
Three, two, one…go.

All those ominous reflections about free will. And you were right – of course you were – because if my decision had been a clear, conscious one I’d hardly be sat here now. The premise wasn’t sound, and so the conclusion fell apart at the first sign of external pressure. My proposition was wrong. If $p$ then $q$: logical rules of inference. A transformation rule. And it’s then, in that moment, that I finally know what I have to do.

It’s something so simple on one level yet so monumental on another because I have to compel myself to do what I’ve deliberately and actively avoided….which is look beyond the glamour and beguilement and scrape off the surface gilt and face up to the full reality of my situation. Who you are. Who I am. The exact nature of what it is that I’m ultimately going to accept or renounce. You told me this morning that I wasn’t thinking about the determinants, so that’s what I’m going to have to do. I have to really think about it. So I wrap myself up in a blanket and I lie on the bed, and I stare at the ceiling. And for the first time since I woke up in a hospital bed to find you gone, I really force myself to think about it.

I don’t spare you and – because I can’t hide anymore – I don’t spare myself.

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Act 1: You Seduce Me. It’s 2013 and you haven’t happened yet. My entire life revolves around intuiting depravity from the point of view of the depraved and it’s getting harder and harder to make myself look. “No one’s asking you to look alone,” Jack says. “But I am looking alone,” I tell him. “And you know what looking at this does.” I am fragile and sensitive, and increasingly tormented by the flagellation I impose on myself in order to unmask monsters. My mind is breaking. And then suddenly things change and the world shifts and you’re finally there – and I’m not looking alone anymore. You become a sounding board, a source of ballast, all the while devising your own elliptical aspirations for what’s going to happen to me. You bide your time, and stick to your silent agenda, and you ask: “Is it hard imagining the thrill somebody else feels killing now that you’ve done it yourself?” My mindset is distorted and dysfunctional – monstrous – yet still immensely effective and it gets the job done. I come to you for help, and you engage with me because you respect self-determined people who try to take responsibility for themselves. You know my occupation is crushing me. “I don’t care about the lives you save,” you say, “I care about your life.” You watch me all the time with a faint smile on your face and I continue to comprehend all the predators around me, blithe and oblivious, and never notice the one that’s nearest and deadliest until it’s too late. So I point a gun at you and you just stand there, tranquil and composed in the line of fire, waiting to see what I’ll do…as if you’re willing to sacrifice yourself in the service of me becoming the killer you always aspired me to be.

Act 2: I Seduce You. I am increasingly haunted by the exhilaration I know I feel from taking someone’s life – even though they deserved it, even though it was necessary – and you scent this immediately and exploit it to maximum effect. I decide your sympathy is just a deeply fucked-up form of avuncularism, in which you feign interest in my welfare while simultaneously relishing my unravelling. Ultimately I realize this is wrong, because you know that the people Jack sends me to pursue end up destroyed by what they are; and you believe I have a choice to not be demolished in the same way. You want to hack away at my self-hatred and make me accept myself the same way you accept yourself. It’s your version of consideration and care. We are destructive opposites. I’m overly empathic; you’re non-empathic. I need someone to cultivate me and you want to be the nurturer. I’m a volatile clutter of consequence and principles and you have the topography of a lunar landscape: cold, curious, and impersonal. You like my uniqueness but also, paradoxically, my similarity to you. You want to rescue me and decipher me, and you remain fascinated by my darkness; seduced by the shadow. You’re my dark mentor, I’m your pitch black protégé, even
though the way I feel about you horrifies me and we can’t stop hurting each other. I lure you into a false sense of security, then attempt to lure you in. It fails, and I go back to you anyway. We ‘break up’ and you kill our surrogate daughter because her life is less important than proving a point to me. We can’t stop hurting each other. We are devastating and complex and mutually destructive; and we’re both trapped in the grim, tortured anguish of a romanticism we will never be able to have. It’s just craving, and rage, and an unnerving unbridled passion; and we stare at each other’s faces and can’t stop hurting each other.

Act 3: Mutual Seduction and Destruction. I am now thoroughly mutilated by you, physically and mentally. I finally walk away from you, and I get married and it breaks your heart. You continue your pursuit of systematically destroying everything that’s close to me so there’s nothing left in my life but you, and it’s at this point I definitively realize that there is nothing you can do to me that’s bad enough to prevent me coming back again. I stop trying to break up with you and we finally stop hurting each other; and I realize that I’m no longer angry and you’re no longer resentful. I don’t see the world the same way you do, but I can assume your point of view, and I finally meet you on equal ground and accept you for what you are. The Byronic anti-hero, mad, bad and dangerous to know: the hyperintelligent outcast who strolls around humanity, and is in love with it and fascinated by it, but never really part of it. That you’re sadistic yet virtuosic; that you reject all conventions, slaughter your adversaries on a whim and elevate death into art; yet still retain a preternatural level of magnetism and attraction in spite of it all that surpasses my reason and reservation. You retain your own moral code, it’s just not like anyone else’s – you never were the villain in your own mind. But I still can’t accept what that makes me. And so we go over the cliff, which was where it was all supposed to end.

Except it didn’t.

The muscles in my back are starting to ache in protest, and I realize I’ve been lying like this – prone and immobile – for over an hour. Replaying and rehearsing the story of us: a gothic, grand guignol tragedy in three acts. They call it a Three Act Tragedy for a reason, don’t they? Screenwriting 101 – tragedy always comes in threes. A three act structure: the Setup, the Confrontation, and the Resolution. The tension escalates. It reaches a conflict, and then peaks in the climax of Act 3. Three logical parts: before, during and after the action. A beginning, a middle, and an end. It’s not meant to go on indefinitely. There isn’t supposed to be an Act 4.

Oh God I’m so tired…so tired. It’s the weight of carrying everything, I think: all the baggage. All the unresolved emotions and beliefs and memories. All the hurt and mistrust, the suspicion and fear, the dread and the doubt. I want to put it down. I want you to help me. I think about your message again: I will not leave without you.

‘Emotional baggage’; it’s such a trite expression, redolent of pop psychology and daytime TV. But it feels true all the same. As if I’m being weighed down by sacks and strong boxes and wrought-iron chests, each one brimming with misery and horror and constant second-guessing. Condemned to carry them around – arduously and forever – unless I can make a conscious decision to cast them off. In fact I’ve been carrying them for so long now it feels normal; I can no longer tell what the difference is. I close my eyes again and this time I make an effort to imagine you: your face, your voice, how you move and hold yourself, the way it feels when you touch me. So much that is peerless, and flawless, and disturbing and degenerate…so much you. Yet you always defied a simple, binary division between good and bad. They’re entangled in you, not always possible to tease apart; interconnected and interdependent, and harmonious because of it. Like your relationship with me. One resolution I feel I’ve finally made in the last hour is that you want to protect me from myself, and while your methods have been insanely bad they come from a place of genuine benevolence. You’re both protagonist and antagonist; you aspire for me to reach my potential, it’s just not a potential that most people would agree with (or even comprehend). “No one can be fully
aware of another human being unless we love them,” you once said. “With that love, we see potential in our beloved. Through that love, we allow our beloved to see their potential. Expressing that love, our beloved’s potential comes true.”

This in turn makes me remember the Emerson quote that my 10th grade English teach had pinned on his wall: What lies behind us and what lies ahead of us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us. I saw that goddamn quote every day for over a year, and never really thought about it until now. But it’s almost frighteningly apt, because that’s surely the whole point. It’s what you were trying to make me acknowledge; what you’ve always tried to make me acknowledge. What it is that lies within me and the fact that while I’m not like you, I’m not like other people either. I’m from the Old Germanic Willelm meaning ‘bold warrior.’ I have dark impulses: a killer instinct with autonomy, empathy, and an inspired imagination. I am sovereign and self-commanding; relentless and resolute. Like you I defy simple categorization. We’re both self-sustained and self-conceived, and always have been.

I never stopped going back to you did I? No matter what you did or said, it was never enough…never fully enough. Then I think about how I felt before I met you, and how I felt while I was resisting you, compared to how I’ve felt since you came back and I tried to accept you. Compared to how I feel now. I’ve never connected with anyone the way I did – have – with you. Never even connected with the concept of family; something so foreign, like an ill-fitting suit. No mother, my dad constantly exhausted and preoccupied, consumed with a dated, worn-out sadness and disappearing every evening in a nimbus of diesel and resin and resignation. Me, his fondest hope and proudest wish: “Will’s smart,” he would tell people. “He’ll do something with his life.” It would kill him if he could see me now…see where I’ve ended up. But then I don’t even entirely know where I started; I’ve never really belonged anywhere. Briefly I think of my childhood, the nomadic aimlessness of it: the way we constantly packed up and trekked off, trudging from one shipyard to another – whenever the next pay check was. “Always the new boy at school,” you once said, “always the stranger.” It was a statement, not a question. You saw that in me from the very beginning: the emptiness, the restlessness…the yearning for someone to really relate to. All the hollow pockets of emptiness waiting to be filled. I run my hands through my hair, massaging my temples and trying to ward off the throb of a fledgling headache. This has to be about me. Not about you.

Fucking hell this is so difficult. Nebulous and indeterminate: like trying to snatch smoke. But I suppose that if I’m not entirely sure what I do want, it’s at least easier to grasp what I don’t. “I don’t need to be that person,” I say out loud, and I know I’m referring to two separate versions at the same time. If I closed my eyes I could even imagine them; these twin variants of me. The one who sees life as eternally and pointlessly disposable in the way that you do, who’s wild-eyed and deadened and has unquestioningly handed himself over to you. Then there’s the one who lives in constant denial about who and what he really thinks and feels and is pulling so far the other way it hurts. I don’t have any true affinity with either of them…they’re like the cartoon angel and devil, one perched on each shoulder with me in the center. And this becomes the second resolution of the evening because I know you think the same. You’ve said so enough times. In fact you’ve hinted at little else ever since you came back. You’ve been saying it the entire time:

*I understand the impulse that led you to do it. And, more to the point, the transformation which will result – your need to rise up from your own ashes…The phoenix must burn before it can arise…Razing the old to raise the new.*

*Your true self is not what you believe yourself to be – or even what you wish you were – but what you have spent your entire life trying to hide from yourself and conceal from the world. Not that it is entirely your fault of course; you have constantly been surrounded by people who reward you for pretending to be something you are not.*
To constantly renounce and disavow one’s true self is one of the greatest acts of self-violence which it is possible to inflict. It requires a degree of audacity to examine oneself, and considerable fortitude to tolerate whatever pain might result from the knowledge. But it is far preferable – far more profitable and admirable – than the agony of constant, mindless denial.

I have faith in you... To be true to yourself. And to inhabit your natural state... That you will become a great version of yourself, rather than a mediocre version of someone else.

There are no right or wrong choices, not for people like us. It is not merely a question of true or false, correct or incorrect: the road less travelled or the path not taken. None of the usual rules apply... We simply make our choice and after we have made it, we make it into the right one.

If the cliff was the first crash and burn then today has been the second. I hit rock bottom this afternoon, and now where else is there to go but back up? My true self and your true self. Me. You. Us... We make our choice then make it into the right one. You’re the ultimate siren song, and maybe you are drawing me towards one type of devastation; yet you’re also poised to save me from another. I think again of my two doppelgängers, the angel and the devil, one too right and one too wrong.

And I know then that if I do this, if I really go ahead with it, then I do it for myself; that you can have some of me... but not all. Not everything. I mark this up as resolution number three, then finally roll over onto my side and stare at the wall, drawing my knees up to my chest and trying to make myself as small as possible. I feel like I’ve put myself on trial. Put us on trial. And I still don’t have any clear answers; no simple boxes to put us into to. Effectively, we’re both Guilty and Not Guilty, because whatever it is that we are – good and bad, right and wrong, a human hall of mirrors – is shifting and indeterminate and constantly altering according to the context.

This is me, I think; and the raw undeniability of it is both agonizing and exhilarating. It is. Like it or not, this is who I am. I’m an inheritor: I have the power to give myself up.

And if this is me, then it’s also you. I still don’t know what’s going to happen. I still don’t know what it’s going to mean for me. But in that moment I have a sense of peace and clarity which I haven’t experienced since you came back – possibly ever – because it’s the acceptance that comes from making an informed choice. Acceptance of you, and acceptance of myself... because it’s no longer possible to do one without the other.

I feel like something symbolic is required – some grand gesture that can convey the enormity of the moment with all its gravity and consequence – but I don’t have anything to do. What can I do in a faceless little student room? What could anybody do? In the end I roll off the bed and dig my badge out of my pocket and lay it on the desk, where I know I’m going to deliberately leave it behind. Leave it behind when I go tomorrow and head back to you.

It’s such a trivial act in many ways. It’s not as if I’m going to stop seeing Jack, at least in the short-term. It’s not going to affect anything in real world terms – no one would care about it except me. But it still feels like the right thing to do, because it represents the fact that when I walk out this room in the morning I’m going to be leaving a part of myself behind. And I know that regardless of what happens in the future I’m going to remember this moment for the rest of my life, because of the choice that I’ve finally reached which has been a lifetime in the making.

Then I lie on the bed and close my eyes again, wrapping my arms round myself, and in my head I imagine you. You’re standing there in the same way you were in my dream: very motionless, very watchful, still with the light around you and your hands in your pockets. Your eyes meet mine and I gradually realize that you’re waiting; you’re waiting for me, just like you said you would.

“This is all I ever wanted for you Will,” you say. “For both of us.”
You stare at me for a bit longer, then you hold out your hand.

In my mind’s eye I drop my baggage and go running towards you. And finally, for the first time ever, there’s nothing holding me back.

Chapter End Notes

“…the hyperintelligent outcast who strolls around humanity, and is in love with it and fascinated by it, but never really part of it.” Not my original concept - I got this idea from comments by MM (I think, although may have been BF) who refers to Hannibal as being like a fallen angel. I had to study Paradise Lost for A-Level and it nearly killed me, OMFG, but at least it finally came in useful (and it also goes to show that there is NOTHING which cannot be Hannigrammed, dammit).

“Hold me, thrill me, kiss me, kill me.” Also not original but, um, the title of a U2 song. I know *blush* Sorry Will. Sorry everyone.
Chapter 37

I doze fitfully for a while, completely worn out and overwhelmed with the enormity of what I’ve just subjected myself to, yet – perversely – too wired and raw to properly sleep. My thoughts constantly stray back to you, but this time in terms of the present rather than the past or the future: what you’re doing right now, what you’ve done in the past few hours…whether you’re thinking about me. The idea of speaking to you after everything that’s happened makes me feel acutely self-conscious but I ultimately concede the inevitable and reach for my phone anyway. It’s not my fault: I need you. I can’t wait any longer.

You answer almost immediately. “Good morning Will.”

This makes me cringe a bit, because I’d completely lost track of how late/early it was. “Did I wake you?” I ask.

“Yes.”

I can’t help smiling at the matter-of-fact way you announce this. “Sorry.”

“It is fine, I require very little rest. What is the matter?”

“I can’t sleep.”

“Yes, clearly. What else?”

Despite my previous determination I am uncomfortably aware that now it’s come down to it I don’t have the first fucking clue what to say. Although that’s pretty understandable, I suppose: how can I even begin to explain the last few hours? How could anyone? In the end I settle for the excruciatingly obvious and mutter: “It’s been a weird sort of day.”

“Certainly.”

There’s a long pause and I wrap a strand of hair round my finger and stare mindlessly into space, listening to you breathing on the other end. “You know they’re looking for you?” I eventually add. “Jack thinks it was you.” Why am I telling you this? It’s not like you don’t already know.

“I am aware, yes. But there is no sense in leaving when the scrutiny and attention are this high. It is far better to stay out of sight and wait until it recedes again – which it inevitably will.”

“I guess.”

There’s another pause. Oh God, this is agony. I’m going to have to say something aren’t I? There’s no way you will, you don’t care about awkward silences. You could sit there and say nothing for hours. In fact you’ve probably already fucked off into your memory palace to kill some time while I try and get my shit together. I heroically open my mouth, and then abruptly and feebly close it again.

“You have to lay low,” I eventually say. “Don’t go out. Don’t do anything.”

“Yes,” you reply crisply. Because clearly this needs pointing out and without such stellar advice you’d almost certainly be dropping into the FBI to invite Jack for dinner. For fuck’s sake.

“I don’t know who’s doing this,” I add, slightly desperately.

“I know.”
“You do?”

“No.”

“Know what?”

“I know that you don’t know.”

“I thought you meant you know. No?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

There’s another pause of a length and magnitude that’s positively epic. I open my mouth again but the only thing that comes out is a strangled bleating sound, not unlike a choleric sheep. I blink in confusion that my vocal chords are physically capable of emitting such a magnificently fucked-up noise, and you finally take pity on me (either that or you can’t bear listening to anymore bleating).

“I expect you have been somewhat preoccupied for the past few hours,” you say pointedly. And then, when I still don’t respond: “You have been having your crisis, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” I reply in a small voice. I wait to see if you’re going to add anything further, but you don’t. “Your set-up paid off extremely well,” I finally say. “I should probably have just kept quiet.”

“If you had not said what you did then I would have found something else.”

“Yeah, I guess you would. This whole thing, it’s been…” I trail off, uncertain of how to proceed whilst also aware that anything I disclose is going to feel like an anti-climax after such a momentous series of private revelations. “Why did you do it?” is all I eventually say.

“Because I wanted to see what would happen.”

I find the dispassionate way you announce this to be deeply irritating, as if the agony of the past few hours has just been part of some convoluted thought experiment that you’ve set up for your own amusement. “Well, you were right,” I reply (because naturally you are going to expect this to be acknowledged). “You really were.” (Once more for the road). “But please don’t keep doing it. I’m not something for you to manipulate so you can ‘see what’ll happen.’ If you want to raise something with me, just say it. You know? Directly.”

There’s another pause, and I can easily imagine the blank, impassive expression you’re currently wearing. “I am afraid I cannot guarantee that,” is all you reply. “Besides, in this instance it was entirely necessary. Not least because it would have been extremely inconvenient for you to display a similar catastrophe of conscience after we left.”

“Yeah…yeah I know.”

“And this was not a suitable topic for discussion; it is something you had to decide for yourself.”

Once again I know this is true, but am still feeling frustrated with the whole ‘Because I wanted to see what would happen’ bit so don’t answer immediately.

“And are you satisfied with your conclusions?”

God, what a question. “Yes. I think so,” I reply after a pause. “As much as I can be. It’s…it’s a big thing. Huge.”
“Of course. Why do you imagine I instigated it?”

I sigh again. It’s obvious that this has been yet another example of you being tormenting in the service of promoting my wellbeing but now I feel even less inclined to discuss it properly than I did before. “I did tell you it wasn’t going to be easy,” is all I reply.

“You did. You also asked me to wait for you.”


“You are welcome.”

There’s another silence. “Are you angry with me?” I finally ask. My voice sounds strained.

“Why would I be angry?”

“Because…you…oh come on, you know why.”

“I am not angry. It was inevitable that it would happen, which was why I decided to expedite the process.”

“Yeah.” My head’s starting to hurt and I suddenly feel exhausted, like I can’t bear to talk about it anymore. At least not over the phone – no doubt you’ll have plenty to say in the forthcoming weeks (months…years). In fact speaking with you is confirming that while I feel better than I did a few hours ago – better, in some ways, than I ever have – I’m experiencing something like an emotional hangover. I have a sudden urge to announce this (“I’ve got an emotional hangover!”) but fortunately desist at the last moment. Mostly because it sounds like something a character from a daytime soap opera would say (I can already imagine them: overly expressive and demonstrative, waving their hands around in an intense way. Emotionally incontinent. Oh God, does that mean I’m emotionally incontinent too? It probably does). And in this respect I don’t think I could bear listening to you repeat “I beg your pardon Will? An emotional hangover?” in tones of amused incomprehension.

I clear my throat rather awkwardly instead. “So…what are we going to do now?” I say.

“Very little,” you reply briskly. “As you quite rightly suggest I am going to ‘lie low.’ You, on the other hand, are going to tell Jack that you wish to find alternative accommodation but will remain in regular contact with him. You will then come back to me as soon as you can. We shall consider the evidence, albeit in its limited form, and consider who may be responsible for our current interesting predicament. And in the long-term we shall wait for the first convenient opportunity to present itself, at which point we relocate ourselves to Europe as originally planned.”

“Okay,” I say vaguely. There’s no way it can possibly be that simple, but somehow anything seems feasible when you’re involved. “I hope it’s as straightforward as that.”

“Oh, it will almost certainly not be,” you reply airily. “But given the current circumstances, that is all we are able to do. When circumstances change, we shall have to do something else.”

“Okay,” I say again.

There’s another pause. You know I’m not being entirely open with you, but for whatever reason have clearly decided not to push it. “And how do you feel now?” you say.

“Oh God, please don’t use that voice.”

“What voice?”
“Your therapist voice. You must know there’s no way I’m going to fall for that.” Then I brace myself for your irritation at the fact I’m being a rude little shit, but you just make an amused noise instead.

“If I appear therapeutic,” you reply, “it is because I am concerned for your emotional state. You sound somewhat overwrought. Hardly surprising, I suppose; you have been abruptly forced to come to some difficult realizations.”

Difficult realizations. I guess that’s one way of putting it. “Sorry,” is all I say, because I am. For all of it – for everything.

“It is fine.”

“Is it?”

“Of course.”

There’s another silence. “I just wish I could sleep,” I say piteously. I sound almost unbearably pathetic, but I can’t help it; the recent battalion of strain and miseries have left me reeling and slightly delirious. And considering my inability to put all that into words, complaints about insomnia feel like a convenient – albeit ridiculously oversimplified – proxy for all the demoralized exhaustion.

“Then I propose finding some means of helping you relax,” you reply. You’re still using the same soothing, therapeutic tone – honestly, you’re such a shameless bullshitter. “How many pillows do you have on your bed?”

“One.”

“Is that all? The FBI’s pretensions to hospitality are truly barbaric. Prop it against the bedstead so you can lean back. Make yourself comfortable. Are you doing that?”

“Yes.”

“Have you done it?”

“Nearly. God, hang on.”

“Also,” you add, like it’s an afterthought, “please remove any clothing.”

I can feel myself starting to blush. “I, um, yeah. I already have.”

“Excellent. Are you warm enough?”

“It’s fine.”

“Good. Now, you are going to require both hands so kindly turn your phone onto loudspeaker and place it somewhere you can hear me clearly. Have you done that?”

“Yes.”

“I am going to give you a series of instructions and I would like you to follow them precisely. Do you understand?”

“Well yes, of course I understand,” I say irritably. “It’s a pretty simple request. I’m not stupid you know.”
“No, indeed you are not. However, you are wilful. In this scenario I expect you to be entirely obedient. Do you think you can do that?”

“I don’t know. It depends. It depends what you want me to do.”

“I am afraid that is not the game. You are going to have to agree without knowing the terms in advance.”


“Very good. Now, lie back and close your eyes. Take some deep, slow breathes. In through the nose and exhale through your mouth.”

“Oh Jesus, you’re not going to make me meditate are you?”

“No.”

“Or ask me to give you my name and location? Because if you ask for my name and location then I’m hanging up right now.” For good measure I add: “Then I’m going to set my phone on fire.”

“I am not intending to do that. Now please be quiet and follow my directions – which, if you recall, you agreed you were going to do.” I don’t reply to this but settle for scowling at the phone (which provides a childish level of satisfaction, even though you’re probably entirely aware that I’m doing it). “Whatever you are doing please stop,” you add, as if to prove the point (for God’s sake). “I want you to relax and turn your mind away from the exigencies of the past few hours. And I am going to choreograph the process.”

“Okay, yes. My eyes are closed.”

“Good. Now, place your hands on your abdomen. Focus on the way it rises and falls when you breathe. Are you doing that?”

“Yes.” My palms are cold and I shiver slightly, so rub them together to warm them up.

“Do that for a little longer. In – and out. Now, I want you to run your hands over your torso. You will begin at your throat, please, and then move across your collarbone. Now further down. Pay attention to how firm and well-defined your muscles are. Can you feel that? How soft your skin is? The way your hipbones dip slightly? The narrowness of your waist? You feel so fragile and breakable in some ways don’t you, yet you are silk around a steel core. I want you to take some time and simply discover your body. See yourself with your fingertips. How does that feel?”

“It…it feels. Weird. Strange…I don’t know.”

“Only because you are not used to it.”

“Hmmm.”

“Continue as you are. Do not stop until I tell you. Now, I want you to imagine me coming across you like this. Perhaps several years ago, around the time we first became acquainted. I could have called by your house unexpectedly – you know how discreet I can be when necessary, so I could very easily have walked in without you knowing I was there. Found you on your bed with your eyes closed, running your hands over your body; tentatively exploring yourself, just as you are now. It would be obvious how timid and uncertain you were. That it was not something you do regularly, or even at all. In many ways it is such an innocent way to touch oneself, but it feels far more audacious to you because it is not about simply meeting a need. You would normally do that in the shower
wouldn’t you – quick and efficient. Utilitarian, one might say; something that you do because you have to. Not slow and luxurious. Not like this.”

“No…”

“Remember, you are only to touch your chest for the time being. Do not disobey me because I will know immediately.”

“I know you would,” I say, a bit breathlessly. “And I won’t.”

“Good boy. I can guarantee that if you are patient I will make it worth your while. Now, I believe I have just walked in on you? You haven’t yet realized that I am there but of course you will eventually, so I do not have long to draw whatever conclusions I wish to make. Tell me; what would I have been thinking when I saw you?”

I let out a slightly shaky breath at the idea of it. “You’d have been thinking how vulnerable I looked,” I say. “And that you liked it.”

“What else?”

“I don’t know.”

“On the contrary – you do know, but you are too modest and self-deprecating to tell me. Very well. Firstly, I imagine I would have spent some time simply watching you. I know your body very well now, but I didn’t back then so I would have taken advantage of the opportunity to admire you. You are physically beautiful; and as ignoble as such a reflection is in some ways – especially as it is my most immediate one – it would be pointless not to acknowledge it. But that is not all I would have been preoccupied with. I would have reflected on how you are the quintessence of several qualities which I particularly admire. You are discerning, highly intelligent, sensitive, thoughtful, imaginative, and strong-willed. You also have a rather wonderful capacity for darkness.”

“Oh…yes.” I smile to myself and slowly trail my fingers across my hip bone, imagining that it’s you. My skin feels warm and flushed, as if holding a mirror over myself would make the glass mist up.

“Yes. So, I am looking at you and considering how very singular you are.”

I smile again. “Actually, you know, you should probably just go. You’re being very rude. And creepy.”

“Naturally I should, but I am going to do nothing of the kind. Since when have I ever done what I ought to do?”

“I guess. Anyway I don’t want you to go, even if you have just broken into my house to spy on me while I’m naked. My dogs are shit at guarding me though…I should fire the lot of them.”

“In this instance they have done you a good service.”

“Mmmm, I suppose so. How long would you have stood there for?”

“As long as I could. As long as you were unaware I was there.”

“I would have realized eventually. Even I’m not that vague.”

“Of course you would. In fact you have realized now – you have finally opened your eyes and seen me. And it is somewhat disconcerting for us both, because you immediately freeze and look
horrified. I can tell you are struggling with several different imperatives, because they are all flickering across your face at the same time. You are humiliated of course. And bewildered; how has such a thing been able to happen? But also shocked. And the reason you are shocked is because you can’t quite believe the fact I am watching you excites you so much. All of this in a few seconds. Imagine the way you would have gazed at me.” (You lay the very faintest emphasis on the word ‘imagine’ in acknowledgment of the fact that had this really happened several years ago I wouldn’t have been inviting you to join in, as opposed to hunting for a blunt object with which to take you out).

“You can immediately tell by my face that I want to touch you,” you add after a pause. “And more to the point, you want to let me.”

“I do. Shit, I wish you were here.” My breath hitches as I run my fingers over the scar on my abdomen.

“Well, in this scenario I am here. I would have walked over and sat next to you on your bed; and you would have immediately moved aside to make room for me without even realizing you were doing it. In the entire time we have not exchanged a single word, but I would know I needed to do something to settle and reassure you; to let you know that everything was all right. I would probably have touched your face, so that is what I want you to do now. Use your right hand. Run your fingers through your hair, then slowly trail them across your forehead and down your cheek. Be very gentle. Now stroke your lower lip with your thumb. Open your mouth slightly. Are you doing that?”

“Yes.” My voice catches a bit.

“All the time I am caressing you I am still staring,” you say, and your voice has dipped to such a low, resonant tone that it sounds like you’re purring. “Still admiring how beautiful you are. But now I would also be considering how you are going to look even lovelier when you are moaning and pleading.”

“Oh,” I say faintly. “Would you really have been thinking that?”

“Most certainly.” You allow your voice to fall even lower, which in your smoky accent sounds almost impossibly sensual, and I find myself gasping into the darkness. “Tell me,” you ask, “are you very wet for me?”

“Oh yes, yes.” My breath stutters and I let my head tip backwards, eyes screwed close. “I really am.”

“Good, I imagined you would be. Use your fingertips. Taste yourself.”

I hesitate for a few seconds, and then lightly trace my hand across my stomach where I’m leaking pre-come all over myself. Even though you’re not there to see it I can feel myself blushing furiously.

“I suppose you are feeling self-conscious?” you say smoothly (right on cue). “I can assure you that you have no reason to. In fact I must tell you that I anticipate the idea of tasting you myself with a considerable degree of satisfaction. You would like that wouldn’t you Will? The idea of me taking you into my mouth; swallowing you down? I suppose you would want me on my knees for you?”

“Oh fucking hell. That would be…yes.”

“Someone who delights in the consumption of human flesh,” you add, in the same languorous tone as before. “How does that make you feel?”

This makes me groan out loud. “God, you’re so twisted.”
“Yes, I dare say, although I am not the one who is currently naked and writhing around at the thought of it. There is still some lingering fear in you isn’t there? I can often smell it on you. You’re frightened of me and you’re frightened of yourself. It is a potent aphrodisiac, isn’t it – fear? Although of course in this alternative scenario of ours all this exquisite fear is still to come. You have no idea about any of that… not yet. You are simply lying and gazing up at me, hoping that I’m going to touch you but too shy and diffident to directly ask for what you want.”

“I would have asked,” I say, suddenly defensive on behalf of this alternate version of myself and the idea he would have just been blushing and wilting over the bed in mute adoration. “I would probably have demanded it.”

“Would you? Go ahead then.”

Oh for fuck’s sake. Now I not only feel awkward, but have the additional advantage of knowing it’s entirely my own fault for not keeping quiet in the first place. “It would be different if you were actually here,” I finally say.

You make a non-committal noise at this. “What a shame Jack Crawford was so inconsiderate to whisk you away with nothing but the clothes you were stood up in,” is all you reply. “You have no possessions with you at all do you? Nothing you can use for lubrication. Not that it really matters, I suppose. We are simply going to have to improvise. Necessity is the mother of invention, so invention it shall have to be. Brush your index finger along your lower lip. Now open your mouth and slide it in. While you are doing that, use your left hand to spread your legs further apart. Stroke your palm along the inside of your thigh in the way I would have done. Be very gentle. Keep your right finger in your mouth and move your left hand back to your chest again. Press your skin very lightly; I want you to imagine that it is me brushing my lips against you. You can touch yourself wherever you like above your waist; wherever you would most want to feel my mouth on you.”

“Oh God.”

“I would advise leaving God out of this for the time being. And the fact you are speaking suggests you have disobeyed my instructions. Never mind, I suppose we may as well make use of it. If your finger is wet enough then I want you to put your hand between your legs and slide the tip inside yourself. Only the tip though; no deeper than the first joint. Do it very slowly and carefully. How does that feel?”

“Oh. Oh. It feels good.”

“Excellent; it is supposed to feel good. Now remove your finger entirely and stroke it around the muscle outside; can you feel how you are starting to relax? Now slide it back inside again and caress yourself. I want you to alternate like that for a few moments. This is exactly the way I would have opened you up with my tongue. Seeing as we have no other way of making you ready for me I would have had to take my time about it wouldn’t I? Probably stroking your stomach at the same time, gently pressing down on your hips; trying to reassure you. I can imagine how flushed you would have looked. Partly with embarrassment, but also from arousal. You would have been extremely shocked; the fact I was touching you in such an incredibly intimate way. But you would have let me do it all the same. Wouldn’t you?”

“Oh yes, yes, I would have let you.”

“Yes, indeed you would. Your body is very wise – it knows what you need, just as I do. In fact by now some of the apprehension would have ebbed away. You would be abandoning your reservations and simply allowing your mind to lose itself in how pleasurable everything feels. It is intrinsically forbidden of course; you know you should not really be permitting me to do this. Yet
how liberating for you to discover that you no longer care. You would have started to shake by this
time I suppose, fine tremors running through your whole body. And making those beautiful noises
that you always try to suppress and in which endeavour you are never entirely successful. Although
you would not really need to articulate any verbal encouragement because your entire body would be
doing it for you. The way you respond to me is entirely captivating; even more so than I imagined. I
wonder how consciously aware of it you are? The way you open your legs wider and push your hips
forward; how you arch your back and press yourself against me? It is very beautiful, I hope you
never stop doing it. Although perhaps I should not have told you – you may try and censor yourself
from now on.”

“No…no I won’t. I don’t think I could.”

“Good. Otherwise I might have to train you back again. How are you feeling now? Do you think
you are ready for more?”

“God, yes. Please.” My heart’s pounding so fast; surely you can hear it. Hear the energy, the voltage;
hear how my entire body comes alive for you.

“Use your left hand this time; make your finger as slick as you possibly can. Now slide it all the way
inside yourself. Do it slowly. Tip your head back. Now remove it almost entirely and then…push
back in again. And again. And again. Remember – slowly. In. And out. So obedient, aren’t you
Will? Now slide it in again but this time curl your finger upwards; try to stroke your prostate. Can
you do that or do you need me to guide you?”

My fingers aren’t as long as yours so it’s not quite enough, but I still make a low moaning noise
instead of responding; and it’s almost like I can hear you smiling down the phone. “I assume that
means you have been successful,” you say.

“Oh. Oh fuck. It feels so good.”

“I know it does. How I wish I could see you now; so hard and wet and wanting, pale skin glowing
like ivory in the moonlight. Next time we are together I will make you prepare yourself so I can
watch you. You really are endlessly watchable. Although you are so impatient, I suppose you would
try to hasten through it because you could not wait for me to be inside you. I would have to force
you to take your time and do it slowly. I think I shall have you on your back, like you are now, with
your head resting on my knee so I can stroke your hair and observe your face very closely. All the
little variations of expression. Are you going to let me do that?”

“Yes. Yes, yes. You know I will.”

“Excellent. I shall catalogue the entire thing to review and peruse at leisure on future occasions. For
example, I shall always remember the way you looked when I took you for the first time; you were
so beautiful lying underneath me. I wonder if you would have been the same several years ago?
Somewhat similar, I suppose, at least from the point of view of the physical sensation. No one had
ever touched you like that before, had they?”

“Never. No one except you.” My breath stutters. “I’m glad it was you. I’m glad you were the first.”

“Yes, you are an exquisite tabula rasa. I can break you in however I like.”

My breathing’s become very hoarse and ragged and I’m aware of how I’m arching my back and
curving my neck against the pillow, helplessly and hopelessly overwhelmed at how good everything
feels. Not just good: right. I’ve never experienced this before – never felt this kind of berserk,
passionate yearning for anyone. 24 hours ago it might have unnerved me but after tonight’s
revelations I simply accept it, and it’s as if I can feel any lingering inhabitations and restraint begin to shatter and splinter away. “I want you to,” I finally manage to gasp out. “I want that so much.”

“I know you do,” you say softly. “And I shall. Now, I imagine by this point we would both have lost control of ourselves somewhat, so I want you to move your hand faster, as fast as you can; really allow yourself to feel it. Push your hips upwards if it helps. You’re so close now aren’t you? Can you feel the way your body is starting to constrict, becoming taut? Gripping around your finger? That is exactly how it feels for me when I make love to you. You really are utterly perfect.”

I groan again and speed my hand up, picturing how completely debauched I must look right now: draped across the bed and ecstatically fingering myself open. Then I imagine how you would stare at me if you were here. The hunger. The possessiveness. I’d want you to take me exactly as I am; under-prepared, not fully ready. It would hurt and I’d like it. The desk is exactly the right height for you to bend me over it, holding me down by the neck and forcing your thick, hard cock deep inside me. I know you’d like watching yourself, how tight I am, the way my body has to stretch and distend in order to take it. Oh God, God. “Please,” I finally manage to gasp out, “please, let me come. I can’t wait anymore, I need it.”

“Mmmm, you really do don’t you? You are aching for it. Very well, go ahead. Touch yourself. But do not be quiet; I want to be able to hear you.”

“Oh shit, you should be here. It should be you doing this.” I’m really starting to shake now. Shaking…falling apart. You: the one who’s going to put me back together. The only one who ever could.

“It soon will be,” you say.

“I want you. I want to feel you.”

“You shall, I guarantee it. Tell me what else you want.”

“Oh God, I don’t know, I don’t know – everything. I want to ride you…hard. I want it to hurt.”

“Then I will make sure it hurts.”

“And I want you to bite me again. Mark me. On my neck, somewhere people will see.”

“Yes my love.”

“I’d get on my knees for you as well. I know you want me to – you act so superior, like you’re above all that, but I bet it makes you hard each time you think about it. Would you come down my throat or over my face? You’d love to watch me choking on your cock wouldn’t you – seeing how deep I could take it.”

“Both of those options are rather compelling,” you say smoothly, “but perhaps I might not elect for either of them, at least not right away. After all, I have not done with you quite yet.”

“You mean you want to fuck me. Well I want to be able to fuck you…Oh God, I want that so much. Would you let me do that?”

“Yes my love.”

“But at this point my mind goes completely blank because the idea of being able to do that to you – that you would actually let me – is such a phenomenal turn on that my hips give a final rapturous shudder and I start to come almost immediately, crying out so loudly that the person in the other
room bangs on the wall again. “You can still fuck off!” I shout back.

“Who is that?”

“Someone next door.” I take a deep breath and let it out again. “Oh God, that was…God. It felt so good.”

“Do not have a shower,” you say, “I want you to sleep exactly as you are.”

“Gross,” I reply, even though I know I’m going to do it anyway. There’s another pause and I can feel myself grinning into the darkness.

“So how do you feel now?” you ask.

I have a horrible feeling I’m going to start laughing – possibly even giggling – from the sudden heady surge of endorphins. Endorphins, oxytocin…biochemical pair-bonding. That and the fact I feel happy (me, who never feels happy); that it’s you and me, us; and that as monumentally fucked up as my decision is, I still know it’s the right one. I have a sudden yearning to tell you that I love you, but can’t quite bring myself to do it. “Suppose that had really happened,” I say instead, rather dreamily. “Someone might have come round and caught us.”

“Perhaps. I imagine they would have been rapt at how perfect we look together. Not that I could have tolerated anyone one else seeing you like that. I would have pulled a blanket over you to cover you up…”

“Like an outraged Victorian father.”

“…Like an outraged Victorian father. And then I would have killed them as a penalty for such misplaced prurient curiosity.”

“Says the person whose misplaced prurient curiosity started it all in the first place. You should have just left me to jerk off in my deserted farmhouse in peace.”

“That is different.”

“How is it different?”

“Because you belong to me.”

I smile at that, but then suddenly remember my earlier resolution and feel compelled to contradict you. “Actually I don’t,” I say firmly. “I belong to myself.”

This makes you laugh, but in an affectionate rather than a mocking way. “I perceive you have been coming to an entire series of realizations,” you reply. “No wonder you sounded so strained.” I wait for you start interrogating me about it, but all you say is: “Do you think you shall be able to sleep now?”

“Yes, I think so. Hopefully.”

“Do not end the call. If it will help you to relax then simply leave your phone connected and I shall do the same. You can know that I am watching over you, albeit in a somewhat removed fashion.”

“It’ll cost a fortune.”

“We shall be long gone by the time the bill arrives,” you reply briskly. “And considering everything else we have done, exactly how far up the charge sheet do you imagine an unpaid telephone bill will
I wake up again in the early hours of the morning and automatically roll over and reach out for you before reality reasserts itself and I remember where I am. I rub my hand over my face then hunt out my phone in the vague chance you might still be awake, only to find that it’s gone flat – and that of course I don’t have my charger with me. For a few moments I feel desolate, because my need to be with you right now is so strong it’s like a physical ache. I can almost feel it in my body, like I’m craving you. I hazily consider where I could locate a payphone to call a cab before remembering, with a groan of dismay, that I gave all my money to that homeless woman and my credit card is still at the hotel. Then I lie back fretfully on the bed, trying to imagine that you’re lying next to me, wrapping my arms round myself and pretending it’s you before starting to feel uncomfortable and self-conscious at how absurd I’m being. The silence is oppressive in the uniquely barren way an unfamiliar sleeping space always manages to be. How many hotels rooms have I lain in exactly like this, staring into the darkness and listening to the pulse and throb of my own heartbeat? I can see a sliver of the moon through the window, like a bright piece of bone in the sky, cold and raw-looking and slightly vaporous from all the fog. There’s a door swinging somewhere, a plangent thud-thud-thud in the middle of the night.

Oh God, this is all such utter shit. Why am I trapped here? Why does everything always have to be so complicated? The miserable crisis over you has momentarily obscured the fact that I’ve spiralled right back into another waking nightmare: that someone is hunting me (us?), that my home has become a horrific crime scene, that there’s no way we can leave until it gets resolved and – for the foreseeable future – there’s no pending solution for any of these things.

I can feel myself starting to grow despondent and it’s at this point that I give myself a mental shake. This kind of catastrophizing is utterly pointless. Besides, the main thing is that I’ve finally reached a resolution about you – nothing is more important than that. We’re together again and we’re going to stay together. All else is secondary. I give a small, determined nod at the reassuring truth of this and then resolve to discard the other things. Tomorrow I’m going to have to devise a bullshit cover story for Jack, find a way of getting back to you with no phone and no money (for God’s sake), and then figure out what might be going on and how to deal with it – so right now the best thing to do, the only thing, is to rest. I turn onto my side and coax myself into contemplating sleep, except that the fucking door is still swinging. It’s distracting. I make a weird, tired growling noise with irritation at the interminable thud-thud-thud, then suddenly pause halfway through and frown. Because actually it can’t be a door. And the reason it can’t is that it’s gradually getting louder. As if it’s edging up towards me, gaining and getting closer. And it’s then that every single hair on the back of my neck stands up because I realize it’s not a door at all. It’s footsteps.

They’re quiet at first, and so measured and deliberate that it doesn’t seem feasible a human being could be making them…no one walks that slowly and ponderously. But as they draw closer then it becomes unmistakable as to what they are: someone is coming down the corridor. Someone is coming down the corridor, slow and deliberate and echoing, and in that moment it seems like the most sinister fucking thing I’ve ever heard in my life.

It’s just one of the trainees, I think. They’re probably drunk, that’s way the pace seems so odd and unnatural. Any minute now they’ll drop their keys and swear, and that asshole in the next room will start bitching at them to keep the noise down. But they don’t drop their keys. The person next door doesn’t wake up. There’s nothing except me, and the darkness, and the sonorous, echoing footsteps. Which get louder and louder until they suddenly cut off abruptly – right outside my room.

I draw in a sharp panicked breath and bolt upright, darting my eyes towards the door. Oh shit, did I
lock it? I’m not sure. No, I must have done…it was automatic, that’s why I can’t remember doing it. Oh fuck. *F*uck. Please, please let me have locked it. And even as I’m watching I see the handle starting to creak downwards. It’s slow and inexorable, and I stare helplessly at it as if hypnotized, listening to the shriek of metal as the mechanism starts to move and then, oh thank God, thank fuck, the lock catches and the door remains closed. The surge of relief, however, is only momentary. This could well be a delay as opposed to a real reprieve, because this is almost certainly the same person who broke into my apartment – which means that they know how to pick a lock.

It feels like hours have passed, even though it’s just a few seconds. My heart’s pounding frantically in my ears and I slide out of bed in one smooth movement, pulling on my clothes as soundlessly as possible as I try to strike a desperate balance between speed and silence. Oh *sh*t*, I don’t know where my glasses have gone. I can hardly see what I’m doing but I daren’t turn the light on because it’ll radiate out from under the door and give whoever’s on the other side advance warning: this has to be done by stealth if it’s going to be done at all. Where’s my fucking coat? I finally remember that I dropped it on the floor, and frantically rummage through the pockets for the gun. I waste valuable time tying my shoes, but it’s too big a risk not to: there’s a good chance I might end up needing to run, and I’ll do that far less effectively with bare feet. Fight or flight, the elementary survival rules. Oh *sh*t* fucking hell.

There’s a faint noise from behind the door, a rattling sound of something small hitting the floorboards, followed by a hideously creepy chuckling sound. Then silence again. I finish tying my laces and straighten up…then suddenly freeze completely rigid because someone’s crooning my name. Their voice is muffled through the wood of the door and it’s impossible to say who it is; I can’t even tell whether it’s male or female. It’s low and rustling and sibilant, more like a hiss than anything else: *W-i-l-l-l-l*. Jesus. Even by my abnormally high threshold, it’s profoundly unnerving. To my disgust my hands are shaking slightly. *Who are you?* I can’t help thinking. *Why are you doing this?*

Everything falls quiet again and I take another deep breath: flexing my shoulders, and bracing myself to do what needs to be done, and the fact that there’s no one else to do it but me. *Right then, you piece of utter *sh*t*. I snap the safety off the gun, then edge towards the door, reaching out with my other hand to slowly turn the key. Slowly, so slowly, when all I want to do is fling it open. The glacial pace, whilst essential, is utterly tormenting…and Christ it’s still as loud as fuck despite it. Surely there’s no way they don’t know what I’m doing? I wait a few more seconds – take another breath, briefly think of you – then throw the door open, shielding my body behind it as a prelude to a possible knife or bullet.

And – nothing. The corridor is empty in both directions. Christ, how is it even possible. I strike my hand against the wall in frustration, and then go tense and rigid again at the unmistakable sound of a door swinging closed. I immediately pelt off in the direction of the noise, knowing in spite of myself that this is crazy, is utter madness – plunging around in the dark in pursuit of a deranged, highly dangerous assailant – yet unable to relinquish a chance to finally end it. *Think!* I mutter desperately to myself. *If it was me, where would I go?* I don’t know the layout of the student block, that’s the problem – it’s only the first time I’ve been here myself. Mentally I try to retrace my steps from when I arrived; constructing a hastily assembled 3D map that’s almost certainly wrong in its details, but in essentials suggests the main exit is through the next corridor, down the stairs, and to the left. Surely that’s where they’re headed? They’re trying to make their escape; they must be…if they wanted a confrontation they would have waited for me to leave the room. They know how to pick a lock but chose not to. They could hear that I was awake because why bother saying my name otherwise? This is about intimidation rather than escalation – at least for now. This is their design. I have a sudden strong sense that I’m right, and head off in the general direction of the exit, keeping to the centre of the hallway the entire time to minimize the chance of someone being able to reach out from one of the shadowy doorways to grab me as I go past. I make a wrong turn halfway, ending up in
what looks like a changing room; and for one appallingly delirious moment think I’ve walked into a
den full of hushed, shadowy adversaries before realizing it’s just uniforms swinging silently on their
hangers. There’s the sound of another door shutting, much closer this time, and I charge off again,
my muscles starting to sting painfully from so much running. But what else can I do? The unknown
person will be running too, and if they can do it so can I. They’re just running to avoid detection; I’m
running for my life. For your life and mine.

Now I’ve found the stairway I was looking for, and leap over each of the bannisters at the corners to
gain a few extra seconds. There’s a clatter of footsteps as the door slams closed on the ground floor,
and I summon a final, desperate spurt of energy to accelerate further and reach them before they can
disappear into the night. So close, so fucking close; it’s going to be unbearable if they get away for a
second time. Christ, this is agony; my lungs feel as if they’re about to burst. But I don’t falter,
running and running in frantic, feverish pursuit until I reach the main door – at which point I’m
moving so fast I can’t stop in time, and need to double back when I go skidding past it. The cold air
is like a knife on my face and I whip my head back and forward, skimming my eyes through the
shadows for any sign of movement. My whole body is hurting, a frail shell of skin pooling with fear,
lactic acid and adrenaline. I turn my head again, every single nerve straining, then twist the gun
round in my right hand, trying to reassure myself with the sweaty nub of metal in the handle and
briefly flexing my fingers to loosen them up in case I need to fire. Thank God I’m wearing dark
clothes: a white shirt would have caught the streetlights and lit me up like a beacon.

There’s nothing…nothing. But they must still be close by. The road stretching out from the driveway
is clear, and there’s no way I wouldn’t see them if they’d taken the main exit. My best guess is that
they’re crouched round the side of the building, possibly in the alcove by the parking lot, and it’s
there that I need to go next. My legs are trembling from the effort of such frantic sprinting, and I
mentally allow myself exactly 30 seconds to recover before setting off again. Come on you can do it,
I think, you’ve hurt worse than this…far worse. Fucking MOVE.

It’s so cold I can see my breath billowing in front of me in small spirals, then there’s a clattering
sound from a few feet away and I flinch and nearly pull the trigger before realizing it’s just a trash
can toppling over. Oh God, I can’t help it but I’m frightened. I am. Although maybe that’s good –
fear will help keep me alive. Fear is going to sharpen my senses and strengthen my purpose; and, if
necessary, then fear is going to propel the energy to run for my life. I swipe away my hair from
where it’s blowing in my eyes, then slowly begin to edge along the wall in the direction of the
parking lot, scanning around the entire time for any signs of movement. I no longer have any idea
whether I’m stalking them or if I’m being stalked myself, and Jack’s assorted advice on conflict
situations starts rattling round my head: improvise based on your surroundings, keep low and use
cover, be disciplined with sound and visibility. His endless emphasis on honing decision-making…
how the wrong decision can lead to injury or death. He’d go insane if he could see me now. Not that
his own decision-making’s been that great. I wonder if this is how he felt when he was in your house
that night? It must have been. It’s certainly how I felt. And remembering that situation gives me a
sudden surge of courage, because there’s surely no way that whoever’s out there can be anywhere
near as dangerous as you. If I can survive you then I can survive anything; when it comes to self-
preservation I hit the ground running on one singular day in 2013 when I walked into Jack’s office
and there you were.

I now have no choice but to abandon the cover of the wall and head out into the open, and it’s at that
precise moment that the car appears. I actually hear the roar of the engine before I see the vehicle
itself – it’s as if it comes out of fucking nowhere, rearing into my line of sight like something spectral
and unworldly; a phantom coach in a horror film. I’m momentarily dazzled by the headlights and
there’s a fraction of a second where I’m staring directly at the windscreen and whoever’s inside will
be staring straight back at me. Then I have to fling myself backwards as it sweeps past to avoid being
hit, breathless with pain as my leg crunches against the wall. The windows are tinted so it’s
impossible to see who the driver is, whether there are passengers – even the plates are unreadable in
the inky blackness. I leap back up to my feet, ignoring the burning flare of pain in my leg, take
careful aim and fire – and there’s a satisfying \textit{crack} as the bullet hits home in the rear window. But it
doesn’t shatter and the car doesn’t slow: the glass is obviously bullet proof. I fire again, hoping
against all probability that I can take out a tire, but of course the laws of moving targets prevail and
the shot goes wide. The entire thing is over in less than a minute and then it’s just me alone in the
darkness, the car vanished through the gates in a screech of metal and then everything’s silent once
more except for the low droning sound as the engine fades away. Then even that’s gone, and the
only thing I can hear is the ragged gasps of my own breathing.

Fucking, \textit{fucking} hell. I feel like screaming in frustration, except what good would it do? Because the
simple fact is that I was too late, and they got away – and now there’s nothing more to be done
except reluctantly limp back inside the building, cursing the pain in my leg almost as hard as the
disappointment that this unknown antagonist has slipped the net for a second time. Now that the
chase is over the inevitable sense of shock and fear are starting to course through me and I’m
humiliated to realize my hands are shaking again. I tuck the gun into the waist of my jeans and shove
my hands deep into my pockets to conceal the tremor, then trudge back towards the room because I
can’t think of anywhere else to go. I get lost again on the way back and end up near the porter’s
office, but I eventually find the right corridor… and then dramatically stiffen at the brittle crunching
sound as I crush something underfoot. I know even without looking what it’s going to be, and sure
enough on bending down I see that it’s teeth. Nowhere near as many of them as before – but enough.
Just there, scattered outside my door.

The sensation it fills me with is bizarre, neither wholly one thing nor entirely the other. On one hand
it’s anger – \textit{outrage} – that someone is doing this, making me want to attack and rend and lose
control. And on the other it’s a sense of anguished, helpless foreboding that makes me want to seek
shelter somewhere, close my eyes and cover my ears and pretend that none of it is actually
happening. Except, of course, that it is happening. And it’s going to keep on happening. And asking,
hoping, praying for it to stop simply isn’t an option.

Mindlessly I take some tissues from my pocket and begin to gather up the teeth before anyone sees
them. I know I should contact Jack but I don’t know where to find a phone at this hour…and even if
I did the only person I really want to speak with is you. In turn – and more pressingly, considering
yesterday’s debacle – I can’t shake the sense that this isn’t something he can safely assist with. It’s
too closely linked to you (to us), as if involving the FBI is going to risk bringing the full force of
retribution down on us both. Instead I peer beneath the bed then frisk the bathroom and inside the
closet to confirm that the room really is empty. Then I lock the door and begin mechanically
attending to my various injuries. The cut on my hand from where I broke the mirror has opened up
again, so I rinse it under the tap then raise it above my head until the bleeding stops. There’s a pack
of toilet paper in the bathroom and I rip it open with my teeth and use the soft, cling film-like
wrapping as a makeshift bandage. My leg’s easier: pulsing and throbbing, but only bruised rather
than sprained or broken, so I simply take off my jeans and drench a towel with cold water then wrap
it round my knee. Then I drape a blanket round my shoulders and slump down onto the floor with
my back to wall and the gun at my side and keeping a desperate, wakeful vigil until the first streaks
of daylight begin to slither in through the window.

I can’t bring myself to revisit what’s happened too closely, not least because I’m unhappily aware
that they’ve almost certainly texted me again and until I can charge my phone there’s no way of
knowing what new gauntlet’s been thrown down. So mostly I think about you instead. About how
glad I am that I made the decision I did, and how I want to see you and touch you, and to let you
touch me, to lie underneath you and stare into your eyes. Then I think about how unobtainable you
are in many ways, as if mere mortals can’t really expect to claim you; as if you don’t truly belong to
the world but to something more ineffable and out of reach. Then I think about how unbearable it
would be if anything happened to you; and then, conversely, if something happened to me and I
don’t see you again.

And then after that I make myself stop thinking. Think about nothing. Think about not thinking at all.
I finally fall asleep against the wall, hunched in a crumpled pile, and awaking a few hours later with a crick in my neck and a mounting sense of desperation. The first I attempt to ignore; the second I quickly dismiss. Now’s not the time for despondency and self-pity, both indulgences I can no longer afford. What’s required is action, a steadiness of nerve and a sense of purpose. I can’t waver, or falter and I can’t question myself too closely, because whoever’s out there has no limits and no restraint – and so neither must I.

My reflection in the cracked mirror looks pale and drawn, shadowed from sleeplessness and with creases of anxiety around my eyes and mouth, and I crouch over the sink and douse my face with water to try and chase them away. Then I have a stinging cold shower and quickly inventory my assorted objectives for the morning. First: find a phone charger, because it’s highly probable that last night’s visitor has texted again and I’d prefer to discover what they have to say sooner rather than later. Failing that, use the phone at reception to call Jack so he can authorize a money transfer from the petty cash and I can get a cab back to the hotel. The thought of the latter makes me frown, but I can’t devise a better solution: whilst I’d rather avoid Jack entirely, I can’t contact you from an FBI phone (and even if I could, the idea of you leaving the room to take the money to the lobby makes me shudder). Then I remember that I’ll have to contact Jack regardless, because I can’t just walk out of here without letting him know.

I feel more in control with some clear tasks to focus on so vacate the room with a purposeful stride (carefully cultivated in the spirit of ‘fake it ’til you make it’) and head downstairs to attempt to forage a phone charger. I only get as far as the hallway before someone shouts my name: a tall, burly guy in his mid-20s, all tan and teeth, who without even speaking manages to radiate an air of officious, self-satisfied entitlement. I take one look at him and promptly loathe him on sight.

“Hey!” he says. “Mr Graham?”

Oh God, who is this fool? I’m briefly tempted to deny it and claim to be someone else – anyone else, anyone would do…anyone except Mr Graham – but before I even open my mouth he’s ploughing on regardless. “It’s you isn’t it? I did your class on psychocriminology.” He actually sounds rather pissed off about it.

“You gave me some really bad grades.”

“Oh,” I reply vaguely, “…did I?” I’m about to commiserate but then abruptly change my mind; after all, it’s hardly my fault if he was shit.

“You don’t remember?” He sounds slightly incredulous, as if he thinks I should have been crying myself to sleep about it every night ever since.

“Yes,” I say.

There’s a long pause so I make an executive decision to call time on this thrilling conversation and begin sidling off (I do it in a rather needlessly convoluted way that involves pretending I’ve just spotted something on the noticeboard that has aroused an uncontrollable level of fascination) when he suddenly changes tack and loudly asks whether I have a minute. “Well, maybe one,” I say reluctantly, “but I really have to…”

Chapter 38
“Great!” he replies, clearly taking this grudging offer as complete carte blanche. “Look, Mr Graham, there were rumors all over campus last night – everyone’s freaking out – and I figured you might know.” He pauses dramatically and I raise my eyebrows. “Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“That he’s come back?”

“No,” I practically shriek. There’s a slightly awkward pause. “Ask Jack,” I add in a voice that, with considerable effort, comes out several octaves lower that my previous one and sounds more like myself and less like a kettle coming to the boil. “Jack will have the official position on it.”

“Mr Crawford? Should I? Do you think he’d mind?”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t mind,” I say, although even as I’m speaking I realize I’m now effectively condemning Jack to a steady stream of over-eager trainees camping outside his office to harass the hell out of him about you. Oh well. Technically it’s his fault for being so insistent about it in the first place. In fact it definitely serves him right. “Yes, you should absolutely ask Jack,” I add. I realize I sound slightly gleeful, so make an effort to arrange my features into something appropriately solemn and anxious.

The student shifts his weight from one leg to the other, jerking his keys about in the pocket of his jeans (at least I assume it’s his keys…the alternative doesn’t really bear thinking about), and clearly desperate to bombard me with further questions while I’m equally desperate to change the subject but can’t actually think of anything to say. Then I catch sight of his ID badge and peer a bit closer with confused disbelief because it would appear that his name is…Demonic? Oh, no: Domonic. Domonic Taylor III (Christ there’s a whole dynasty of them?). Well, I guess that was pretty obvious – people aren’t really called Demonic (are they? No, surely they’re not. I’d know if they were. Someone would have told me). Then I realize I’ve been staring far too long and clear my throat awkwardly.

“That’s an unusual way to spell Dominic,” I blurt out.

“Not really Mr Graham.” He sounds a bit defensive. “Have you never heard of Domonic Brown?”

“No,” I reply. “To be honest I thought for a second that your name was Demonic.” Oh shit, I didn’t actually mean to say that. Now I’ve pissed him off. Hmm, yes, I’ve taken it too far…I may have gone too far in a few places. I entertain myself in the resulting silence by trying to work out whether I was born with such extravagant levels of social awkwardness, or have simply acquired them through years of hard work and application.

“Excuse me…” he finally says.

“Nothing!” I say brightly. “Look, I don’t suppose you have a charger that would fit this would you?” I brandish my cell at him in a vaguely manic way. I don’t actually expect that he has but it seems worth a try – and anything is better than standing around between the twin perils of you on the one hand and the fact that I just accused him of being named ‘Demonic’ on the other.

“Um, yeah, sure,” he replies after a pause.

“You have?” I sound almost comically incredulous, but I can’t help it as it seems unfeasible that something might actually be about to work out for once. Because as a smart person (me) once said (right now, for the first time) assuming someone is called Demonic does not auger well for future social intercourse.

“Yeah, give me a minute.” Well: glory be. He rummages around in his backpack and produces it,
and I practically snatch it off him before dashing over to the nearest power socket to ram it in. The wait is agonizing, but eventually my cell splutters back to life and – sure enough – there’s a text. Another unknown number from what’s undoubtedly another burner phone, and this time only a single word: *Soon.*

*Soon what?* I think. *You pointlessly cryptic asshole.* And then the phone goes off again with a second message:

*Do you want this to stop Will?*

Well – yes. Obviously.

And then a third:

*Because this is just the beginning.*

“Well fuck you,” I say out loud. “Not you,” I add hastily, then gesture vaguely at the phone. “I mean this.” He gives me a rather uncertain look, and I can already imagine the conversations he’ll be having with the other trainees afterwards: ‘Yeah, I saw Will Graham this morning – what a total weirdo. He was dossing down in the student block for some reason. Then he asked to borrow my charger and told his phone to go and fuck itself.’

There’s another long and fantastically awkward silence, and I turn my cell off to power it up faster whilst pondering the interesting problem of how I can get him to fuck off (or even fuck himself along with my phone – why not?) yet also convince him to let me keep his charger before doing either of these things. He’s still staring at me, and I defiantly stare back, when my eye suddenly catches on the surveillance camera in the corner of the hallway and I nearly palm my hand against my forehead because – of *course.* Christ, I’m so stupid, I should have thought of that before. Why didn’t I think of that before? And who can I ask about it? Oh God there’s no one to ask about it other than this asshole. This means I’m going to have to be *nice* to him.

“Look, um, *Domonic,*” I say, as politely as possible, “I need a favor. Two actually. I’d like to borrow your charger for half an hour – I’ll leave it for you at the reception desk.” He raises his eyebrows as if to say ‘*No, I don’t think so*’ and I furrow mine right back in a reply that translates as ‘*Well tough shit you little bastard, I’m taking it anyway; why don’t you cry about it?*’ Then I remember that I’m supposed to be being nice to him and smile rather insincerely. ‘The second thing is the CCTV footage for this place. I need access to it. Do you know who could help me out with that?’ he doesn’t answer immediately and I shift impatiently on my feet. Oh God this is actually pretty excruciating, with the bad grades hovering in the background like silent spectators (that, and the fact he’s just watched me telling my cell phone to fuck itself).

“I guess I *probably* could,” he says. He doesn’t add anything else and I’m starting to grow slightly desperate. In fact I’m probably only several seconds away from demanding he go and fetch his shitty papers so I can fraudulently regrade the lot of them. I wonder if anyone would care if I murdered him to death right here in the hallway…I bet no one would care. In fact they’d probably stand round and cheer me on.

“Well, you can or you can’t,” I say firmly, “but I’m incredibly busy so a straight answer either way would be *appreciated.*” Then I give him the best teacherly frown I can possibly muster and he backtracks immediately.

“No problem Mr Graham. Sure, no problem at all. You’ll need to speak with Len.”

“Who?”

“Not me,” I say with exaggerated patience.

“He looks just like you Mr Graham. You know, like…” he trails off, and I try to guess what he was about to say (bespectacled? Bad-tempered? Perpetually pissed off? Object of enthusiastic fascination to the criminally minded…?), before he briefly revives again to add: “Some of us had this running joke that…” Then he sees the expression on my face and falls quiet for a second time. “I’ll introduce you,” he says quickly, “come on, it’s right this way. I should warn you though, he’s a bit of a dumbass.” Which, quite frankly, is clearly a bit of a ‘dumbass calling the kettle dumbass’ situation.

We trudge over to the office in complete silence and he obediently presents me to the previously unknown Len (who doesn’t appear remotely dumb as opposed to briskly efficient, and bears only minimal resemblance to me… I think. I hope. Oh God, do I really look like a security guard? Maybe I do. I probably do… Why did no one tell me?), and I put in an earnest petition to view the surveillance footage from last night. Domonic hovers around the whole time and I keep wondering how to get rid of him, including whether I dare do it with something outrageously condescending ('thank you Taylor, that'll be all') which will put him firmly in his place (whilst also preventing him from taking his charger back).

“You want the footage from last night Sir?” asks Len. “Just last night?”

“Last night?” repeats Domonic, like it’s only finally occurred to him that this is a rather odd request.

“Yes, between midnight and 5am.”

“Why?”

Oh my fucking God, you annoying shit; you’ve totally brought this on yourself. “All right that’ll be all Taylor,” I say sharply (nodding towards the door for good measure in a blatant ‘piss off’ gesture). Ah ha ha – like a boss. He briefly looks distraught, as if I’ve slapped his face, and it’s a pretty safe bet that no one’s ever spoken to him like that in the whole of his pampered life. Nevertheless he still shuffles away and leaves his charger behind, which is what is generally known as A Good Result.

Len is starting to look a bit wary and nonplussed so I casually lean back against the wall, keeping my body language relaxed and open to subliminally telegraph that everything’s fine and it’s no big deal (even though it’s not, and it is). “You can contact Jack Crawford if you need clearance,” I say airily, whilst secretly praying that this is exactly what he won’t do. Fortunately he recognizes my name from the teaching roster and waves me in without any problem, and I escape into the back office (fucking finally) to begin the anxious task of sifting through the assorted footage. I’m forced to endure the highly unedifying sight of my own miserable self trundling through the corridors – Christ, I look utterly wrecked – and then for a long time there’s nothing at all. My eyes are starting to cross from skimming through the numerous camera feeds whilst my fingers grow stiff from flicking across the control pad, and still there’s nothing. Where are you, you bastard? I mutter to myself, where are you, where are you? There’s the janitor with the mop; there’s me again. I remember my words to you the other day – “I’m hardly suggesting a supernatural explanation” – yet surely no spectral apparition could be as elusive and intangible as this person seems to be. The only thing of interest is that the noise-sensitive neighbor in the adjoining room turns out to be none other than my newfound soulmate Demonic Taylor III, and the knowledge that I spent most of the night yelling at him to fuck off makes me crack the first genuine smile of the day.

Then my breath hitches as I scroll to the next screen, because I’ve finally found what I’m looking for. The figure’s tall and slim and shadowy, swathed in a long dark coat and a sweatshirt with the hood pulled over the face to obscure their features, virtually sauntering through the main door like
someone without a care in the world. Even now, hours later in broad daylight and knowing that they’re long gone, the sight is deeply unnerving. I force myself to stare at it, frowning and gnawing my bottom lip, trying to cast my mind back to that night in the alleyway. I think it’s the right height and build; it might be Matthew Brown…it could be him. But then, really, it could be anyone. Anyone at all. It could be me. It could be you, if it was a bit taller. It could be that inspector. It could be the figure I saw outside my apartment the night I nearly got hit by the cab (could it?). And then I freeze rigid in spite of myself, gaping in mute horror as the flickering image on the screen suddenly pauses and slowly and deliberately looks up to where the camera is. And then waves.

The sight of that crawling, reptilian figure waving up at me – a big black space where the face should be – is so unbearably creepy that I can’t stop myself fumbling to switch the footage off. I hit the wrong button and pause it instead, and it hovers there in front of me; spluttering in static like a large pulsating insect. My heart’s starting to pound, a throbbing pulse of fear and anger, and I have a sudden strong sense that I need to speak to you right now. To hear your voice, be reassured. You won’t be afraid – not like I am; you won’t care about hooded figures slithering down corridors in the middle of the night. How tedious, you’ll say, these kind of amateur theatrics are incredibly vulgar. I have disposed of people for far less. My phone should be powered up by now. I take a deep breath and switch it on, berating myself for being so spiritless and fainthearted, but it’s obviously done no good because when the text alert abruptly goes off I still jump so hard I knock the phone onto the floor. I’m hoping it’s going to be you, but the flare of anticipation immediately dies when I see it’s another unknown number and another text message. No…no, not just a message. This time they’ve sent a photograph. The reception’s bad so it takes longer than usual to load – “come on,” I mutter, “come on, come on” – and then when it does I wish it hadn’t because of everything I’d braced myself to see it wasn’t…myself. My stomach literally lurches over at the sight of it: my own depressingly familiar face and features, vulnerable and oblivious, and deeply asleep with my head drooping to one side. Underneath the text reads: Watch out Sleeping Beauty. Next time it’s your teeth.

And then a few seconds later:

*If you want to be left alone Will then bring me Hannibal Lecter.*

*****

My head is hurting and my hands are shaking, and I abandon the security office and escape into the grounds, seeking out a bench where I can sit in relative solitude to try and pull myself together. The air feels fresh and crisp after the murky gloom of that cramped little workspace and I take some deep bracing breaths, gulping it down like it’s water and desperately trying to coax myself into courage and calmness. It’s okay, I think, I can figure this out. I can deal with it. I always have. I always do. But oh – oh fuck – it’s even worse than I feared, it truly is. Because this isn’t really about me at all, it’s about you. It’s about you, being hunted by someone who is relentless and cunning and ruthless, and who’s clearly not going to stop, not now and not ever; not until they’ve got you.

And pretty much anything would have been better than that. 

For a hideous moment I think I’m going to have a panic attack. My breathing’s sped up and I’m digging my nails so hard into my palms they’re leaving marks – tiny crescent moons that telegraph dread and distress – and I stare at them numbly, flexing my fingers and struggling to calm down. Oh God, I’m no use to anyone like this; not to you, not to myself. That’s enough, I mutter out loud. Get your shit together. Do it! Think. Fucking THINK.

I take another deep breath, attempting to unravel the various skeins. *Think*, I mutter again, *think*. I’ve always been able to do that; always been able to reason and rationalize. It’s my one real strength, one
thing that’s never (entirely) let me down. I try to use you as my motivation, and this makes it easier because I know that I don’t want to return to you empty-handed and trailing for a solution; how much better, instead, to present a clear-cut case. You’d like that. You enjoy it when I figure things out. I ponder over what you’d say if you were here, imagining you sitting opposite with your head slightly tilted and your gaze stroking over my face. You’d steeple your fingers under your chin, long legs stretched out in front of you.

“So, Will, tell me; what is the issue of most immediate concern?”

“All of it,” I say out loud.

“Then you shall have to prioritize won’t you? Arrange the pieces according to their value.”

Yes, that’s what I need to do – prioritize. It’s what I did last night; it worked then and it’ll work now. I lean back against the smooth, worn wood of the bench, frowning over the various fragments of our current crisis. For purely tactical reasons it’s essential I figure out how the hell they were able to get a picture of me while asleep, so that’s where I need to start. I feel like I could throw up but grit my teeth and force myself to look at the photograph again, scanning for any possible clues as to where it was taken. It’s difficult and there’s not much to go on; the shadows make it impossible to tell anything about the fabric or color of the bedclothes and there’s no other background detail at all. I grimace at the photo then look away into the distance, turning the image round in my head then glancing back at the screen again. Something’s not right; it’s just out of reach yet catching on my awareness, tugging and clutching at me like a fretful child: notice me! Then I frown and peer closer, because – oh shit, of course, I know what it is. It’s me; it’s the way I look. It’s the fact that my face is even thinner and my hair even longer than it is now, that the scar on my cheek is marginally more livid. Which means…it’s post-cliff jump but not entirely recent. What else? I adjust the brightness on the phone display, and this makes it much easier to see how waxy my skin looks; pale and pallid. And then I let out a long whistle because I suddenly know exactly where it comes from: Michael French’s house.

The memory of that night briefly makes me feel nauseous again. The shock and fear, the physical pain, and worst of all – worst of all by far – the despairing realization that maybe you were never coming back. I can hardly bear to think about it, but of course I’m going to have to and I compel myself to review the various options this new information presents. He obviously took some pictures of me whilst I was unconscious (God, that’s so…ugh), which could therefore mean that Matthew Brown stole his cell phone to retrieve the photo and that the figure on the CCTV and Matthew Brown are one and the same.

Or it could mean that this person knew Michael French, was there that night, and took the picture themselves?

Or it could mean that Matthew Brown knows the current person and gave them the photo and/or the phone itself?

So in other words, it could mean pretty much anything. But I still feel marginally calmer – and also somewhat triumphant – because despite trying to terrorize me into believing they’ve got unhindered access I know that they don’t. At least they don’t yet. Oh God, don’t start thinking that. It’s really not helpful; how is it helpful? Shut up.

I run my hands through my hair and sigh loudly to try and expel some tension, then pull out the notebook that I borrowed (stole) from the security office and force myself to think clearly and rationally, coralling together the most relevant points:

1. *How did they know which room to go to – or access an FBI building so easily? Sanderson?*
2. Significance of teeth? ‘Tooth Fairy’ reference or something else?
3. Role of inspector/Matthew Brown/Michael French? Linked? How?
4. No contact from MB since last internet message (same day inspector turned up – relevant?). Where’s he gone?
5. Motive for targeting H via me?

At that last one I put the pen down and take another labored breath. Thank fuck I listened to my original instinct and didn’t tell Jack. Because whoever this is knows about us. Or at least they think they do; because if they really knew they wouldn’t waste their time baiting me to hand you over (as if I could, even if I wanted to. As if anyone could hand you anywhere). But nevertheless…they know enough.

It’s at this point that I decide I’ve reached my absolute limit and need to speak to you before doing anything further. The prudent thing, of course, would be to wait and speak with you in person – I’m already taking an enormous risk by going back to the same hotel, so compounding it by calling you in the vicinity of God knows how many embryo FBI agents is incredibly reckless. But I know I’m still going to do it anyway. There’s no one in earshot; and besides I’ve always been a reckless asshole so why break the habit of a lifetime? You answer on the second ring and hearing you is enough to immediately make me feel better, comfort flowing back into me like a blood transfusion.

“Your phone expired, I suppose,” you say.

“Yeah.”

“What is wrong?”

I blink in confusion in spite of myself. “How do you know anything’s wrong?”

“Your voice.”

“What do you mean ‘my voice’? I only said one word.” You don’t bother responding to this, so I slump back against the bench again and without further preamble describe what’s happened in the most concise and dispassionate way I can. You listen patiently without interrupting although I can hear you sighing to punctuate certain points: the occasional intakes of breath, sharp as razorblades.

“So. It is even more severe than supposed,” you say when I’ve finished.

“I know. I know it is.”

You sigh again only this time it’s more like a hiss. “And you are quite sure you are unharmed?”

“I told you, I’m fine. Just a few bruises. It’s nothing.”

“It is very fortunate it is not more than that.” There’s a pause, and I try to imagine how you might look right now: the impassive, glinting stare. “You have managed things admirably Will,” you eventually say, “but I want you to come back here to me as soon as possible.”

“I’m going to. I would’ve done last night but I don’t have any money – I need to call Jack to sort out a loan.”

“Good, do it immediately. I agree with you there by the way; better not to acquaint him with this recent development.”

“No, not after that last message.” Now I’m sighing myself. “We’re on our own with this one.”
“Indeed.”

There’s a pause and I suddenly feel like screaming: screaming at the sheer, shitty, aimless, pointless unfairness of it. “I should probably go,” is all I say instead.

“Please be careful.”

“Yes. You too…God, be careful yourself. Remember that it’s you they’re really after.”

“I know,” you reply in a bored voice. “It is extremely aspirational of them.”

I can’t help smiling at that. You big, arrogant maniacal bastard.

“Will.”

“Yes?”

“Come back as soon as you can.”

“Yes,” I say quietly. “I’m going to. I am. I’m coming back.”

“Then I shall see you soon,” you reply. You don’t add anything else, and after another pause I hang up and begin walking back towards the building. My footsteps pound out a rhythm on the paving stones and I run a mantra through my head in time to it, reassuring in its repetitive, soothing cadence: *I’m-coming-back. I’m-coming-back. I’m-coming-back.* Because it’s true; I am. I’m coming back to you.

*****

I don’t particularly relish the idea of speaking with Jack but it’s got to be done so I call him from the lobby, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other. The occasional pack of trainees goes humming past, shiny faced and eager, and I slink a bit further against the wall so they won’t notice me. God he’s taking his time, what’s taking so long? Pick up, you annoying old…

“Will! I was just about to call.” Yeah right: I bet he wasn’t. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” I say, bit too quickly. “I’m good. Much better after some sleep.”

“Okay. I’m glad to hear that.” Now he sounds a bit sceptical.

“Honestly, I am,” I say, even though I know there’s no way he’ll be satisfied with this bland, meaningless response. He’s not the head of Behavioral Sciences for nothing after all; in fact he’s almost certainly revving up to launch into a cross-examination about how I *really* am, and the idea of it is both irritating and exhausting so I promptly cut him off by plunging straight into the practical.

“Look – Jack. I really appreciate you arranging the room for me but I’m going to find somewhere else.”

“What? Right away?”

“I keep running into students.” Well – one student. But such a noxious specimen that he surely counts for at least 10 more. I tip my voice up slightly, inflecting it with a tinge of anxious discomposure. “It just feels…weird. I don’t like it.”

“Even so…”
“I can’t handle it right now,” I say piteously, then hold my breath as I wait to see if he’s going to fall for it.

Jack lets out a heavy sigh. “To be honest Will I’d rather you stayed where you are…”

I go for broke and emit a mournful whiney noise and he sighs again. “…But if it’s what you need at the moment then I guess it’s okay.” I can’t help smiling at such an unexpectedly prompt resolution to this particular hurdle (and which goes to show that if you’re the Emperor of bullshit then I am still Archduke and Chief Ambassador).

“Let me know where you end up,” Jack says bossily.

“Oh course.”

“I mean it Will. You call me immediately – soon as you’re settled.”

I bite my bottom lip, struggling against an urge to snap. “Yes,” I say carefully. “No problem.”

“Good.”

“About that. Could you arrange for them to advance me some money from the petty cash? I left my card at the, um, at the apartment.”

“Sure, how much do you need?”

“One twenty should do it.”

“I’ll call them as soon as I hang up,” says Jack, radiating largesse.

“That’s great, thank you. Thanks Jack.”

“You’re welcome.”

There’s a pause and I watch as another mob of trainees goes flocking past, their voices buzzing with intrigue, then promptly flinch as I hear your name and realize exactly what it is they’re discussing. “So, any updates on…?” I hesitate slightly. “Him?”

“Nothing. But don’t let that get you down. It’s still early days – plenty of time to close the net.”

Close the net: what a stupid expression. As if you’re some kind of hapless prey that they expect to lure in and pounce upon at the last moment. You’d rip the net open with your bare hands…you’d probably eat the net. “Are you doing anything…particular?” I ask cautiously. “Any special measures?”

“No, just the usual. There’s still not enough to go on.”

“Let me know if I can help in anyway.” A few days ago I would have felt like the most appalling traitor saying this. Now I simply accept it as inevitable and that I’m only doing what needs to be done. A form of Darwinism; survival of the fittest. Nature red in tooth and claw.

“I’ll let you know,” says Jack. “Thanks Will. Most people would be running a mile.” And I am… only not in the direction he thinks.

“Sure,” is all I say. “No problem.”

“And Will…”
“Yeah?”

“You know he could come after you?”

“Yes. I know.”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about it; if he can, he’s going to head to you.” I don’t respond, because what can I possibly say? “So if you see anything, if anything happens – anything at all – you get in touch with me right away. It doesn’t matter how small it is, you get in touch. You won’t be wasting my time.”

“Of course Jack, right away,” I say vaguely. “You know I will. Thanks.”

*****

The hour’s not that late but it’s still growing dark outside, shadows stretching and lengthening as they lick across the landscape. Winter dusk. The streetlights are starting to flicker into life and I stand in front of the Academy to wait for the cab, the only stationary figure amongst the crowds of moving ones and the only one facing away rather than towards. I know I must look fixed and impassive: guard up and game face on. But what else can I do? The stakes have been dramatically raised and I have to be ready. Whatever level of violence is necessary…whatever type of aggression. It no longer signifies, because I will do whatever I have to do to protect you and to protect myself. You-me-us. Nothing else matters.

Someone clears their throat politely and I reluctantly turn round. It’s another trainee, tall and pale with her hair scraped back into a neat little bun and smiling apologetically. “Hey there,” she says. “Sorry to disturb you, but I couldn’t help myself. You’re Will Graham, aren’t you?”

I regard her impassively. “No,” I say. “I’m not. I just look a bit like him.”

Then I turn away from her and gaze out into the distance, rooted to the spot with my hands in my pockets, letting the dead leaves swirl round my feet and my hair blow into my eyes. And when the cab arrives I get in and don’t look back, knowing my badge is still in the room where I left it: unclaimed and unwanted. Just a discarded, melancholy relic from someone else’s life.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

This is one of the very few sections where I feel genuinely limited by only being able to portray the perspectives of a single character. With that in mind, I’d like to emphasize that my intent as the author is that everything in this chapter is fully consensual, agreed-upon and happening within mutual boundaries. However, I was concerned that some readers might not experience it that way, so please proceed with caution if anything that could appear like coercion would distress you. I’ve deliberately split it up, so if in doubt just read the opening paragraphs for the plot development, and then skip straight ahead to the chapter break. Take care of yourselves my lovelies.

The journey back is interminable – fucking endless – and I’m crazed with anticipation the entire time because my need to be with you is growing so fierce and frantic it’s virtually making me quiver. Surely it shouldn’t take so long? We seem to hit every red light and it’s made even worse by the need to improvise countersurveillance measures to ensure we’re not being followed (namely pretending I have to stop at intervals to use assorted restrooms and then anxiously scanning the parking lots for any reoccurring cars). The agony is compounded by the cab driver being a bombastic asshole who keeps soliciting my (withheld) agreement on his assorted shitty opinions, obviously being mentally at war with the Middle East, Mexico and North Korea (and no doubt the British Redcoats, the Mongol hordes and the Vikings as well). He invariably follows these up with bad-tempered observations about how some people should learn to get their bladders under control, and I fantasize about telling him to fuck off (or even better to piss off) but ultimately just tune him out and imagine you instead. I wonder what you’re doing right now. Are you as impatient as I am? No…no, probably not. You’ll be waiting though, I know you will: impassive and watchful, biding your time and smiling to yourself.

We eventually reach the hotel (fucking finally) and I hurl a handful of bills at the driver then leap out the car without bothering to close the door, tearing across the lobby to catch the elevator before the doors close. “Sir! Sir!” someone shouts but I ignore them and prize myself through, nearly getting my foot trapped in the process. I mentally and extravagantly curse every single person who gets in or out, as if they’re all part of some larger confederacy determined to be as tormenting as possible, and then proceed to sprint down the corridor when I reach the right floor; swerving round the housekeeping trolley as I go and fumbling in my pocket for the key card because I don’t want to waste time standing still to find it.

My heart’s thrumming with anticipation as I fling myself into the room and slam the door behind me, collapsing against it panting and with my hair tumbled forward into my eyes. Where are you? Where the fuck are you? If you’ve gone out, you bastard…oh, no, there you are. You’re stood by the window, poised and sculpted as always; and I’m so struck by how elegantly composed you look that it briefly makes me wish (although not really) that I hadn’t run so fast and could therefore have made a more seemly and dignified entrance. You spin round immediately then break into a slow, amatory smile; and I open my mouth to say something before realizing I don’t have any idea what to say. I get as far as “I…” and then trail off. I – what? I came back? (Well, yes, obviously). I love you? (Nooooo, I can’t). I missed you? (Doesn’t even begin to capture it). I’m sorry? (But are you?). All of those things, none of them…or something else entirely?
There’s a beat while we just stare at each other (you tall and imposing; me shrinking and longing) and I’m starting to panic because I don’t know what to say. Why don’t you say anything? You’re always fucking talking…why choose the worst possible moment to discover verbal self-restraint (for God’s sake). You’re still smiling, I’m still panicking. Then I make a helpless noise, yearning and high-pitched from the back of my throat: at which point we both move forward at the same time, meeting halfway across the room in a melee of breath and hands and mouths. For one distraught moment I’m afraid I might actually cry with relief (Christ) and have to bury my face in your shoulder to hide it while you stroke my hair until I calm down.

“I changed my mind,” I hear myself saying, “I changed my mind.” And then, much lower: “Don’t leave without me.” The last part’s so quiet I’m not sure if you’ve even heard; maybe I don’t really want you to. But I’m glad I said it anyway.

You don’t reply, just tilt my head up so you can cradle my face between your hands and smooth your thumbs across my cheekbones. Then you smile again, the faintest curl of your mouth, and I stare at you numbly, too overpowered to say anything else; too beleaguered to even smile back. Thankfully you sense this and don’t press for further explanations, leaning down to kiss me instead, very gently and slowly. I sigh into your mouth, tipping my head back as you trail your hands down my spine…at which point something snaps – ignites – and now it’s no longer gentle and slow and opposed to frenzied and harsh and we end up careering towards the bedroom without letting go of one another (tearing at each other’s clothes and leaving the stereotypical trail of shirts and jackets on the way) while I gasp all manner of embarrassing bullshit at you that I’ll almost certainly regret later but in the passion of the moment feels entirely suitable and necessary: ‘I’ve come back…I’m staying…this time I’m staying…I want you…I want you so much…make me yours again…I want you to take me apart.’

*Take me apart:* well, of course, you can do that. Of all the people in the entire world to address such a request you’re probably the most unsuitable possible choice. No one should ever say that to you; no one but an idiot or a masochist would even consider it (and I don’t really believe I’m either of those things…most of the time). But I’m saying it anyway, craving and urging it, because I want – need – to surrender myself and am utterly revelling in the freedom the submission promises to give me. The last 24 hours demolished me, and right now I don’t want control or autonomy, don’t want to take responsibility for myself, or my choices, or anything. Instead I want to purge myself of the pain and turmoil and I want to show you that I really am sure this time; that (at least for the next few hours) I trust you enough to let you take me over and then take me apart. That you’re everything I ever needed, and until last night couldn’t admit – or even recognize – that I wanted. And that all this is complete derangement, and I’m utterly deranged – and so are you – and I don’t care because we can be deranged together.

We literally fall into the bedroom, my legs hitting the back of the bed with such force that the impact knocks our mouths apart and I lose my balance and stumble backwards, instinctively grabbing you to keep steady which means you go down as well. You land rather neatly (me, not so much) and I’m gasping, jagged and rough, already on the verge of losing control (*already…*Christ) while you lean back slightly, propping yourself upright on one elbow you can watch my face. I can’t quite bring myself to look at you, so I stare at the ceiling instead. Your index finger is tracking up and down my chest, probing the various scars, and it hurts yet I don’t want you to stop. There’s a long, intimate stretch of silence while neither of us moves or speaks, and the quiet anticipation of the moment feels like the prelude to something enormous: the calm before the storm. Our prologue to Act 4, oh God, oh *God.*

“So,” you say after a pause. “Am I to understand that you wish to be dismantled?” Your expression is smooth and composed but I know you’re not as calm as you appear. Probably no one else would detect it, but I can tell immediately. It’s your voice – the unmistakable current of energy underneath
the deadpan delivery that’s not usually there.


“Wish it? Or need it?”

I draw in a shaking breath and hold it in, wincing as you scrape a fingernail across my collarbone. Stop it…oh what’s the point, you’re not going to. I realize my eyes are shut, even though I don’t remember closing them. How long have we been lying here like this? It could be hours, or days, or a lifetime; like we’ve never been anywhere else. Seconds and minutes have lost their significance: time has both stopped and hurtled forward, so it feels like all kinds of things have taken place yet I’m not certain what they are.

“Will?” you say sharply. “I asked you a question.”


It’s pointlessly cryptic, but you immediately understand what I mean. “Oh yes,” you say casually. “All the noise in your head.” You lean over me and kiss my forehead, then begin moving downwards – temple, cheekbone, jaw, throat – and I gasp at each time your lips brush against my skin. When you reach my shoulder you pause, then add: “But it is more than that isn’t it?”

“I…”

“Your beautiful, self-destructive disposition: you both desire and require.”

“Yes. Yes.”

“Sense and intellect say no, but you disregard them anyway and pursue your own course. Don’t you Will? Plunging ahead…losing yourself in your own labyrinth.” You begin sucking a bruise onto my sternum, taking your time as if savouring every sensation. “It really is incredibly fascinating to see you do it.”

Is it? No – no, it’s not. You’re wrong. It’s not fascinating, it’s wild and furious and elemental. It’s brutal, a battleground: even though the war was fought last night all alone in a soulless student room at the FBI. Now you’re saying something else (crooning and menacing) and I know you’re not done yet with deconstructing me…but I don’t want to hear anymore right now, so roll onto my side to kiss you instead, hungry and desperate, relishing the faint coppery tang from where my top lip has caught against your teeth. Oh God, I’d do anything for you right now, anything. The sense of giving up and handing over, surrendering myself – the voluptuous passivity and mindlessness of it – is both exhilarating and frightening. I want to completely acquiesce, and the thought of it is thick, molten desire. And with my limited experience I can’t devise a more complete display of submission than kneeling in front of another man and sucking him off, so that’s exactly what I decide I’m going to do (then ruin it by breaking the kiss and informing you of my intentions in a rather horrifyingly formal and earnest way, which is only a few degrees removed from putting it in writing on headed notepaper). You don’t say anything, just flick your eyes over my face, but I can tell that you’re intrigued (and pleased…obviously pleased. Gratified). We could stay as we are on the bed, but I know you’d prefer to literally have me at your feet; and that’s what I want too. It feels thrilling, but also daunting, and when I hesitate (having temporarily lost my nerve) you put your palm on top of my head and push me down onto my knees. The way you do it is abrupt – rough – and I feel a surge of fear because on the other occasions we’ve had sex there’s always been an underlying thread of consideration and care in you that now feels totally absent. I asked you to dismantle me and that’s
clearly what you’ve decided you’re going to do. Tear me into tatters.

Now I’m on the floor – oh God, I really am (surreal). What would Jack say if he could see me now? (Christ, no, don’t think that. Fuck). I shift slightly, a flare of pain and disorientation: my knee’s still hurting from last night and it’s protesting at having to bear so much weight. Then my lungs finally find air and I moisten my lips with my tongue…and promptly realize I’m now nervous for another reason (from one extreme to the other) because I’m going to be crap at this, I know I am. I definitely am: adoringly fellating someone into ecstatic abandon almost certainly requires skills that I don’t possess. I can only offer enthusiasm as opposed to technique, never having done this before (and with only limited experience of being a recipient…oh Christ, I’m so tragic. Why am I so tragic?), but I want to do it to you so badly it’s making my head spin. For a few mortifying seconds I go rigid and immobile, caught between two concerns of such spectacular variance that they’ve briefly cancelled each other out and made me grind to a confused halt instead. And I have no doubt you can clearly read all the anxiety and uncertainty and physical discomfort; and likewise no doubt that you’re going to disregard all of them.

“Open your mouth Will,” you say quietly. I glance up at you, self-conscious and uncharacteristically timid (me but not-me); yet while I’m still unnerved the sound of your voice is enough to dispel the lingering doubt, and I lean back on my heels, tilting my chin towards you and parting my lips – head further back, mouth wider open (oh yes, yes, oh my God) – letting you slide your cock further and deeper until I can’t take anymore; at which point I dip my head again so you can see it laid flat across my tongue. Your face…you look utterly rapt: as if you can’t quite believe what you’re seeing. It’s so rare for you to give yourself away like that – your mind is so much subtler than the mask of skin which covers it – and the knowledge you’re affected to that degree (and are unable to hide it) gives me a surge of courage. I wrap my lips round you, slightly unhinged at how good it feels, how much I like doing this (so thick and hard, so much you, fuck) and the sound of you sharply drawing in your breath goes straight to my groin.

It vaguely occurs to me that I ought to use my hands as well but they’re shaking and I don’t want you to see it, so brace them on my knees instead (ow) and focus on dipping my head, forcing myself to take you as deep as possible. The soft, quiet sounds you’re making are almost as good as the feel and taste of you, and I experiment between licks (lapping, slow, delectable) and sucking movements (wet, noisy, ecstatic…oh my fucking God), and the way you rake your hands through my hair and say “good boy,” low and approving, emboldens me to make an experimental attempt at swallowing round the head of your cock (which doesn’t go at all well on the first few attempts, though I persevere). You stroke my jaw, murmuring the occasional words of praise or encouragement (or, embarrassingly, guidance) and then press your fingers along my neck so you can feel the way it’s contracting around you; and when I make another moaning noise you briefly press my nostrils closed to make my throat open up. My eyes widen with alarm, because now I can’t breathe properly and it hurts – my mouth feels raw, I can’t manage it, it’s too much – but even so I don’t pull away. You’re really starting to snap your hips against me now, your movement becoming faster and more unforgiving as you thrust across my tongue and hard palate with force. We’re badly out of synch: you pounding harder when I’m trying to snatch some air, pushing into my mouth until my eyes well up; and I don’t know if I can take much more but in a heady mix of devotion, desire and pride I don’t want to ask you to stop. Maybe you wouldn’t stop anyway, even if I asked? Maybe you’d twist your fingers into my hair and force me to take it. Oh shitting fuck, I’m so turned on. You must love the fact that being on my knees for you like this excites me so much (do you? Love it, I mean. I hope you love it, because I know I do). I let my legs fall wider apart to make it obvious, moaning wantonly around your cock at the way my entire body is tensing up, hard and shivering, making itself ready for you.

My eyes are really watering now so you reach down and smooth the moisture away with your thumb while I stare back up at you, earnest and worshipful. I know you want to fuck me (and that your self-
control is absolute), so you won’t let yourself come. Hardly anyone else would be able to manage it, but you can. Another time though…I briefly imagine myself – naked, kneeling, quivering with desire – gazing upwards with my lips parted and letting you come on my face. It would feel like I was your territory and you were marking me; I’d want you to run your fingers through it afterwards then slide them into my mouth so I could lick it off. I make an involuntary whining noise at the thought of it, and it’s at that point you finally pull away, leaving a thin glistening trail of saliva across my cheek that I make no effort to wipe off.

“Oh God,” I say faintly.

You stare down at me for a few seconds as I stare back, then you rub your thumb across my mouth which I know must look flushed and swollen. My breathing is very loud in the silence of the room – more like panting, really – and it takes a supreme amount of self-control not to just slump forward and cling onto you.

“Very good Will,” you say. And I don’t know whether you mean the way it made you feel, or the fact I overcame my reservations and did it at all, or both (or neither) and can’t think clearly enough to try and work it out, or even care.

“That was rather beautiful.” You’re smiling now, slightly sardonic. “Just look at you; completely overwhelmed already. So astute and ingenious – so endlessly clever – yet your bright mind has currently abandoned you, hasn’t it? All your autonomy and self-determination, they are of no possible service to you. And such a burden most of the time; you may as well give them to me. You know you can trust me as a suitable custodian. Then you won’t have to do anything at all. All you’ll have to do is let go.” You sound like you’re purring and I dart a quick glance at you. Christ, you can’t possibly be serious. Can you? But your face, as usual, gives absolutely nothing away.

“You do look extremely appealing like this,” you add, “one might almost say – edible. Although sadly you shall have to adjust yourself. I am going to the kitchen and will return in a moment – when I do I expect to find you on the bed on your hands and knees. Yes?” I nod mutely to show I’ve understood and you promptly stride off, leaving me trembling and clumsily hurrying to obey your instructions. You return quickly as promised, carrying a glass bottle which I can see is oil of some description.

Excellent,” you say when you see me. “So tractable and compliant. Although – on consideration – I’m afraid I must disturb you as I believe the arrangement could be improved.” You stand there for a few moments, as if composing a tableau in your head, before heaping several pillows into a neat, precise pile. I watch you do it, then allow you to lower me over them so my hips are tilted up and my face is pressing against the mattress.

“Comfortable?” you ask.

I wonder what you’d do if I told you I wasn’t? Maybe you’re hoping I’ll say no so you can deny me permission to move…Maybe it’s a trick question? “I’m fine,” is all I say, adding as a (grudging) afterthought: “Thank you.” Anyway, I’d rather lie like this: I don’t think my arms would hold me upright. You’re not touching me though. Why aren’t you? Why are you making me wait? I suck my lower lip into my mouth and bite down until it hurts, unconsciously spreading my legs apart and trembling uncontrollably with anticipation while my chest heaves and my breathing speeds up. And even though I know what’s going to happen – am expecting it, desperate for it – I still can’t stop the helpless, keening gasp when I feel the cool, drenching slickness of the oil and, seconds later, the slide of one of your long fingers pushing straight inside me as you massage the skin outside with your thumb; my whole body jolting with how good it feels.

“Always so tight,” you say languorously. “Not that there aren’t certain advantages, of course, but
variety has its appeals as well. What do you think?”

“Oh God, I don’t know.”

“Don’t you? Perhaps I am going to have to train you into being more receptive, just as the French gentlemen did for their lovers at the Roissy château: a true spirit of exigency and enterprise. Would you like me to describe it to you?”

I gasp again. I can feel myself constricting beautifully around your finger and thrust back against your hand, my entire body gently swaying. “Yes,” I finally manage to say.

“Yes what?”

“Yes please.”

“It is actually very simple. You would be required to have a plug inside you, just here,” you slide in another finger, hooking them upwards until I moan even louder, “which would be selected on your behalf, and inserted on your behalf, and which you could not remove without permission. It would be somewhat uncomfortable at first, I suppose, although your body would learn to adapt. And then as soon as you could accommodate it, it would be replaced by another of more impressive dimensions; just the same procedure as before. On and on, you see, over the course of several weeks; increasing width, and with it heightened – how shall we put it? Accessibility? That would be an interesting experiment for our new life wouldn’t it Will? Of course you would be expected to stay in the house the entire time; how diverting to know that you would be there every evening, waiting for me to come back and attend to you.”

“Jesus,” I say faintly.

“How would you like that? Wandering around a villa all day in some foreign land, nothing at all to concern yourself with beyond looking beautiful and making yourself ready for me? Not that such a thing would suffice indefinitely of course; you belong in the wild. You wouldn’t do well in captivity, would you? But perhaps as a short-term measure.”

You begin to move your fingers faster and in a way that’s far more probing and insistent; deft and dexterous and so incredibly pleasurable that I can feel myself starting to unravel. “Please,” I say. “Oh God, just…God, I can’t wait any longer.”

“Really?” you say. You spin it out as if you’re rolling the word around your mouth: r-e-a-l-l-y.

“Then it is going to be rather inconvenient for you, I’m afraid, as you are going to be required to wait.”

“No, I can’t, I…”

“It is not particularly relevant whether you can or you can’t,” you reply in the same disinterested tone. “Because I am not consulting your wishes in the matter. If you are not able to opt for self-restraint than you are simply going to have to endure.”

“Oh God, it’s too much, I…”

“Please be quiet Will,” you say crisply, “because if you aren’t I shall be obliged to gag you.” You pause, consideringly, and I automatically recoil. “Do you want me to do that?”

“No! No, please, I don’t want that.” Christ, the idea of it. It summons up an involuntary, horrifying memory of being forced to wear a forensic mask (the silence, the soundlessness, the helplessness of being neither heard nor listened to) and my breath hitches with panic. Normally I’d tell you to fuck
off – “oh yeah? Just try it, see what happens” – but in this mindset I can’t. Not now. Not like this. And on the basis of our previous, albeit limited, experience this has always been the point at which you’ve intervened in some way (some gentle touch or tone, some manner of reassurance, however fleeting) but I know that this time you’re not going to, because tonight that’s not what I asked for and it’s not what we agreed on. It’s on the tip of my tongue to try and call it off; tell you that it’s too much, that I want to get dressed and go, that I want you to be kinder and more predictable. But I don’t, of course I don’t. Instead I just close my mouth and swallow, hard. And then nod.

“Very good,” you say. You give me a few moments to pull myself together and then add, almost casually: “So, how close are you to being dismembered? You wanted it – needed it – so badly. From my perspective you are still in one piece, although there is plenty of time yet. Do you have an opinion either way? Oh of course…I told you not to speak didn’t I? Tell me: are you really that afraid of being gagged?”

I close my eyes and still don’t reply – because, fuck you – and you make an amused noise and run your other hand up and down my back, tracing the ridges of my spine as if you find each and every one incredibly fascinating. “You’re still thinking aren’t you? In fact you are doing it so strenuously I can practically hear you. Yet surely that is the point of all this; to bring you to the point where everything goes mute and the noise disappears? Why do you fight so hard? Always so defiant and rebellious, even against your own interests.”

I shake my head, then change my mind and nod instead; and you make another low sound which could be amusement (or might not be) and resume rocking your fingers until I’m nearly screaming at how good it feels. “Spread your legs for me please,” you say. “No, not like that; is that really the best you can do? Wider – show yourself off.”

I make a whimpering noise as I obey, which promptly turns into a choked-off gasp when you push a third finger inside me, stroking and pressing. “Next time I shall expect you to perform this task yourself,” you say. “I would like to see the way you slide those lovely slim fingers inside your body. And you did agree to, if you recall.”

“I know I did…I will.”

“Indeed you shall. But as for right now…” you trail off, leaving the implication hanging in the air as both a threat and a promise, then place your free hand between my legs and roughly knock them even further apart. You keep me like that for a while – twitching and quivering with desire and a weird kind of panicked self-consciousness – before leaning over and kissing my neck. Then you kiss your way down my spine, stroking the inside of my thighs the entire time, and trailing your mouth lower and lower until you reach the small of my back…and then proceed to spend ages eating me out, spreading me apart with two fingers so you’re basically fucking me with your tongue until I’m almost sobbing with pleasure and so slick and wet and open that I feel you could just slide straight inside me right now and I’d be able to take it. It’s just as well you made me lie like this; if I could I’d be snatching fistfuls of your hair and thrusting myself against you. You wouldn’t like that, would you? Wouldn’t like to be directed. My legs are completely slick with the oil and saliva and my stomach’s soaked and slippery from where I’m leaking pre-come over myself, and I’m just so wet, so wet everywhere…Oh shit, oh fuck, it’s…God. Your tongue feels warm and firm, all long stokes, shallow dips and deep thrusts, expertly probing me as if I’m something delectable, and I’m so far gone I find myself scraping my teeth against my hand and frantically grinding my hips against the fabric of the cushions to try get some kind of relief. And of course you notice immediately, pulling away and gripping roughly onto the back of my neck to keep me still.

“Did I give you permission to do that?” you say sharply.
“No.”

“No. So why are you doing it?”

“Because I want…I need…”

“Always so impatient aren’t you? No self-control at all.”

“Please,” I say. “Please.”

“Please what?”

“I…I…”

“There is no use in begging if you cannot tell me what you’re begging for,” you reply serenely, and for a few hysterical seconds I wonder whether I’d dare to turn round now and just tell you to fuck off. You delay a bit longer, no doubt enjoying the way I’m starting to quiver and shake, then abruptly tug me upright so I’m slumped against your chest, one arm wrapped round my torso and lightly but firmly gripping my throat with your other hand. Your breath is hot on my skin and it makes me shudder. You kiss my ear, my cheek, my forehead, and I’m starting to make small whimpering noises at how intimate it feels after all the controlling abrasiveness when you suddenly – shockingly – bite down hard on the side of my neck. I can literally feel your teeth slicing through the thin, delicate skin and I cry out in pain and alarm, automatically thrashing to free myself from your grip and pull away. “Shhh,” you say caressingly. “It’s all right. Be still.” Your voice is so low I think I can feel it vibrating against me. Surely I can’t, though? It wouldn’t be possible. You stroke my chest and kiss the side of my face, making soothing noises the entire time – and I’m just beginning to calm down when you do it again.

I groan even louder than before, only this time don’t even attempt to struggle; just sink back limply until you’re bearing my full weight and my hand’s hanging down over your shoulder. You tighten your hold on me and I moan again – a faint plea that might be your name, helpless and defenceless yet oddly contented in it – as I realize that I have no idea how much of this is real: whether it’s part of a domination game, or you simply want to harm me and the desire to do it outweighs the trouble of stopping yourself. Then I wonder passively, almost idly, whether you really are going to hurt me. Seriously hurt me. Hurt me in a way that will need more than antiseptic and band aids to fix. Briefly I think of the knives in the little galley kitchen. Perhaps I should have asked you to give me a safe word. But right now, oh fuck, I don’t care about feeling safe…I only want to feel you. And it’s not as if safety was ever something you were offering; you’re not safe, you’re dangerous, so fucking dangerous – danger solidified. This is more what I imagined sex with you would be like; exhilarating yet high-risk, like sky-diving, like plunging off a cliff: just close my eyes and hope I can hit the ground unbroken. The world has contracted, tapered away, and now there’s nothing except your arms round my chest and your face against mine and the thin line of blood seeping down my throat.

“Please,” I can hear myself saying. “Please-please-please.”

You grip onto me even tighter and kiss my forehead, like a pastiche of affection, despite the fact I’m bleeding, and in pain, and frightened, and possibly more turned on than I’ve ever been in my life. “Do you remember what you asked for?” you murmur onto my ear. “Take me apart, you said. Make me yours again. Is that what you want? Is that what you’re begging for?”

“Yes. God you know it is, you know.”

“Of course I do. But I want to hear you say it.” You let go of me then and shove me forward so I’m on my hands and knees; and I can’t help thinking that after everything that’s happened you must find
it almost unspeakably gratifying to have me laid out in front of you like this, helpless and frantic and
desperately begging you to fuck me. You must feel triumphant, anyone would; you’d hardly be
human if you didn’t. Even you. Then I wonder if you’re going to belittle me for it, say something
debasing and complacent to emphasize exactly who’s in charge of the situation (and mostly always
has been); and if you do whether it would be enough to break the spell and make me want to stop.
Or would I simply submit to it, passive and resigned and riding out the bitter humiliation? It frightens
me that I can’t tell.

I’m really shaking now, practically senseless with need yet reconciled to the fact you’re going to
prolong things even further. But either you’ve got bored with tormenting me, or you simply can’t
wait any longer yourself, because before I have time to prepare myself you’ve pushed my legs apart,
held my hips in place, and then thrust so deep inside me I can feel the taut line of your stomach
pressed up against my skin. It’s almost, but not quite, painful; and I make a low wailing noise that
goes on and on and on. “Oh yes.” I finally say, and my voice catches. “Yes, yes, yes.”

“Yes,” you repeat, and it’s like an echo: both of us finally in agreement for once. You fuck me like
that for a while, holding me down by the back of the neck and forcing me towards the bed until my
forehead is pressed against the mattress. My eyes are welded shut, my breathing ragged and frantic –
my entire body a kaleidoscope of sound and motion. I could almost be outside of myself, helplessly,
hopelessly and deliriously lost in the sensation: strained and taut as a bow string from one of those
fucking deranged cellos, and shriekingly discordant and out of tune. I’ve realized that you’re
probably not going to let me come, and this is enough to induce a panicky desperation that’s
simultaneously tempered by the fact I feel stung by your comments about having no self-control and
want to prove you wrong. I’ve gone completely rigid – fraught, silent, stretched enough to snap –
and you reach round to knot your long fingers into my hair, jerking my head back until I gasp with
pain. “Make some noise for me,” you say. “I want to be able to hear what I’m doing to you.” I’m
initially too stunned and overpowered to process what you’re saying, so you wrench my hair even

I obediently make a moaning sound and then find that once I’ve started I’m not able to stop,
ultimately producing an incoherent stream of helpless gasps interspersed with bouts of begging
(“Ahhh, please, I need it…I need you…harder…faster…please, please”) and incredibly ardent
flattery (“It’s so good, you feel so good, you feel incredible, oh God, I love the way you fuck me, I
love it”). Maybe I am going to come after all…maybe just you inside me is going to be enough. A bit
longer and I think it might be enough. You’re tilting your hips at exactly the right angle and I can feel
myself getting tantalizingly close (writhing, quivering, rhythmic) before you abruptly stop and pull
out, leaving me to make a yelping noise at the sudden loss, then flipping over onto your back and
roughly pulling me down on top of you. It feels like being pierced and I practically scream, throwing
my head back as you grip me by the waist to keep me upright, your thumbs digging painfully into the
jut of my hipbones.

“Go ahead Will,” you say smoothly, and for a few seconds I almost hate you for how in control you
still sound. “Move. Show me what you can do.”

“Oh God, just…just give me a minute. It’s too much. I don’t think I can.”

“I’m afraid I don’t accept that,” you reply. You grip my waist even harder, forcing me back and then
forward in one fluid motion, and the jolt of sensation is so intense that I cry out again and have to
cling to the bedstead to prevent myself collapsing sideways onto the floor. You keep me like that for
a while, rocking myself against you until I find a rhythm that’s good –God, it’s really good – and
skimming your eyes over my face as if cataloguing every nuance of every expression. Can you see
it? How the physical sensation, along with the mental awareness of hovering on the edge (and ready
to fall), is so intense that it’s almost too much to take. Then I feel a wave of pleasure ripple through
my entire body, and, oh, that’s it, that’s nearly it.

“You’re so close aren’t you?” you say approvingly. You already know, you can tell; why are you asking? You’re meticulously tracking every hitch and tremor, you know exactly just how close I am.

“Yes…yes. Please, I think I can…if you…please, just let me…”

You don’t answer, merely wait a few more seconds until the timing meets your exact satisfaction, then grab my waist and roughly pull me off you; tipping me over so I slam onto the mattress and you can climb on top of me. For a while you don’t do anything further, just pin me in place by holding my hands down in yours, and I feel utterly bereft without you inside me – empty and unmoored. I stare at your face instead to compensate for the loss, helplessly aware of how much I need you – oh God, I really need you – and eventually making a desperate, breathy sound that’s hazardedly close to a sob. I can’t tell you what I want, or don’t want, can’t beg anymore; I’ve lost the capacity to do anything except lie back and let you dismantle me. I close my eyes. I’m losing myself, I don’t think I’m even capable of finishing now; I couldn’t come if I tried. I don’t care. I don’t care about anything except you.

There’s a pause before you let go of my left hand, trailing your fingers down my face and smoothing the damp hair off my forehead; and the tenderness of the touch is enough to make me open my eyes again. I moan quietly when you push inside me, arching my back as much as I can beneath your weight and wincing at how sore and over-sensitized I feel: my entire body one stripped, raw nerve. Exquisite pain.

“It hurts,” I can hear myself saying. My voice is so faint, it doesn’t sound like mine. “You’re hurting me.”

“Yes? And yet you do not want me to stop do you?”

“Don’t stop.” I wrap my legs tighter round your back, then to be on the safe side cling to you with both arms as well and claw at your shoulders. My eyelashes are damp. I’m not crying though. Am I? I don’t know. “Please,” I whisper into your skin, “don’t…ever…stop.”

You pull back and give me a little crooked smile – sharp-toothed and gimlet-eyed – but you do stop and reach out for the bottle of oil (I suppose, unlike me, you have a perfectly tuned sense of exactly how much I can and can’t actually take). The slippery smoothness of it is a blissful relief and I arch upwards again, angling my head to the side so you can scrape your teeth down my throat. I’m gasping, or perhaps it’s you; perhaps we’re both gasping together, synchronized with breath and pulse aligned.

“So responsive,” you say. “I wish you could see yourself now. In fact I am going to buy us a mirror; something antique with sun-kissed wood which has witnessed all kinds of sensations throughout its life. I am going to make you gaze into it, because I want you to be able to see how beautiful you look when I do this to you. I want you to stare into your own eyes. Such striking eyes Will. And so much written in them: all the dread and darkness, and the joy of potential.”

Our faces are symmetrical, lips just centimeters apart; and I mutely stare back at you, slightly uncomprehending. I can’t focus on what you’re saying. I can’t think. I have a smattering of bruises from where your sharp hip bones were pressing into me the other night: their tenderness is making me wince. That’s all I can focus on, the ache from two day-old bruises. I saw them this morning; they were already beginning to turn an ochre color. I want to tell you how much I want you and need you, that you frighten me and I like it; and I can’t do any of these things. All I can think about is the bloom of bruises on my hips and how yellow they are. Oh Christ, I feel like I’m going mad.
“How do I look?” I eventually manage. That’s better; that’s good. It’s what I’m supposed to say. Although I’m mostly asking because I genuinely want to know. I want to know how you see me; I want to know everything.

“Slightly bewildered at first; you frown very faintly here,” you kiss the space between my eyebrows. “It shows that you’re still not quite used to the sensation. And I confess I enjoy that, because it’s a reminder that no one else has ever done this to you except me. Then you begin to look shocked, as if you can’t quite believe how good it feels. And then, finally, you lose yourself completely. Your mind and body depart from one another and you give yourself over entirely to the feelings, the desire, the fact that you are no longer in control of what you are doing.”

“Oh God,” I say breathlessly. Because I know that you’ve segued away from sex; you’re basically describing what I looked like when you watched me kill someone. Your face over mine looks vaguely infernal, a Dark God demanding burnt offerings, and suddenly, finally…it’s too much and I can feel myself starting to crack open. I’m too raw and flayed, too over-sensitized, and more than anything else: too exposed. Your intense scrutiny is like the edge of a knife: as if I don’t have anything left to hide from you, and nowhere to hide it even if I did. I twist my face into my arm so you can’t look at me and you catch my chin with my hand and force me to turn me round again. “No Will,” you say quietly, “You can’t keep concealing yourself. Let me see you.”

For a few beats neither of us says anything, just gaze into each other’s eyes, then you lean over me to get something off the floor and I just lie there staring at the ceiling, almost paralysed, listening to how harsh and fast my breathing’s gone. You reappear holding my belt, and with your other hand move my arms above my head. “Hold onto the bed frame,” you say. Oh shit, shit, you’re going to tie me up aren’t you (and I’m just going to let you. Why am I doing this? God, what’s wrong with me?). Wildly and irrelevantly, I start thinking about how you never used to wear belts in the Time Before, because – of course – you didn’t need them as all your suits would have been bespoke. Fucking hell, why am I thinking that? How does it matter? It doesn’t matter, oh God…why won’t you let me hide myself? With quick efficiency you neatly tie my wrists to the headboard so my arms are pinned in place and I can’t fully turn my face away.

Your eyes are boring into me. They’re so intense – your eyes. Deep and fathomless. Bright-edged flints, the color of dark amber. “Please…don’t…” I whisper. Christ, I sound like I’m about to cry. “I can’t. It’s too much, I can’t…”

“But you can,” you say caressingly. “You’ll do it for me, won’t you?”

I stare back up at you, wide-eyed and frantic. I need you – love you – so much. I want to tell you so. Why can’t I tell you? Everything that’s brought us here, oh fuck. I wonder if you’d untie me if I asked; if I really pleaded? I don’t know. I don’t care enough to find out. And I can hear my voice, tense and desperate in my own ears, virtually chanting with a cadence of raw desperation: “I want you to see me, I want you to, I want it.” And you replying, gentle yet intense: “I know, I shall – I do.”

I’m beneath you, impaled by you, and you feel so good – you feel perfect. You lean forward and kiss me, brutally hard, and the taste of your mouth is so exhilarating that’s all it takes and I give a low moan and start to come, spilling all over myself in a series of hard hot pulses even though neither of us has touched my cock. “Oh fuck, fuck, fuck, I’m coming,” I cry out (as if it’s not entirely obvious), “I’m, oh, I’m…” then I can’t speak at all and just arch my back up until it makes the muscles in my arms scream in protest. I’m clenching round you with the aftershocks, and then hear you sigh and I know that you’re coming as well; that we’re both going over the edge together. “Oh God,” I whisper, and then find I can’t stop. “Oh my God, oh my God.”
You’re gazing down at me at me almost rapturously. “Beautiful,” is all you say. You reach up and unfasten the belt, then hook your arm round my shoulders and gather me up against your chest. I gasp into your skin, eyes screwed tightly closed and everything – finally – gone quiet.

“You feel better?” Now you’re stroking my hair. It’s nice; you’re being nice to me again. Not that it matters. It never really mattered. I always went back to you whether you were nice to me or not. I love you, I love you. “Yes,” is all I say, because it’s true. My voice is totally hoarse and I cough a few times to try and bring it back to life again, then pull in a lungful of air. “I needed that.” (Cough). “I really needed it.”

“I know.”

And that’s it, that’s all the response you’re going to give: you knew. Yeah, I guess you probably did. Maybe I didn’t even need to ask: take me apart. You’d have done it anyway. No doubt that’s why you appreciate etiquette and boundaries so much, because it heightens the pleasure of demolishing them. I huff out another long breath and you let go of me and turn onto your back while I collapse next to you in a trembling heap: stunned and exhausted, yet peaceful and protected, and **wrong wrong wrong** but completely and utterly right – all at the same time. I half want to thank you, but can’t quite bring myself to because no matter how sated and blissful I’m feeling, there are limits to how far patronage can go. It’s not like I’m a charity; you were obviously having a pretty good time yourself. (Besides I can’t thank you for being a complete bastard. It would set a precedent. You might start to expect it… I’d have to spend my life in a constant state of gratitude for your perpetual bastardry: “Will, I’ve just taken out an entire township. What do you say?”; “Thanks. Thank you”; “Yes, I should think so”).

I realize I’m starting to feel a bit hysterical so make a conscious effort to calm down before rolling onto my side to get nearer to where you’re lying. I don’t really know anymore what I’m feeling, apart from being cold everywhere except where my skin is touching yours. In the end I clamber on top of you and tuck my head beneath your chin in the way a child would (Christ), feeling horribly self-conscious at such a blatant display of neediness yet not enough to actually stop myself doing it. You don’t seem to mind though: you put one hand in my hair and curl your other arm over my shoulders. And I still can’t say anything sensible, but it doesn’t really seem to matter anymore because just knowing that you’re here is enough.

I shake quite badly afterwards and you take me into the ensuite and make me get into the bathtub where I sit, stupefied and silent, until you slide in behind me and tug me back against your chest. The warmth of the water is relaxing and the close contact reassuring; and gradually I feel myself beginning to thaw out.

“You collar bones are awful,” I say after a while. “It’s like lying on a stack of coat hangers.” It is as well. You’re all sharp angles and slanting edges.

“Ah, there he is,” you say fondly. “I was wondering when Will Graham was going to reappear. Welcome back.”

“I didn’t actually go anywhere.”

“Didn’t you? No, I suppose not; perhaps it is more that you remain where you are yet someone else arrives instead. You become so pliant and tractable, so unlike your customary self.”

“No, I don’t know. It’s just…me.”
“Ah, I cannot agree with you there I’m afraid. There is never only one, of anybody. No unitary self. ‘You’ means more than one; it can mean hundreds. Every human being is composed of numerous selves. Even me.” There’s a slight pause. “You, of all people, have certainly met a number of them.”

This immediately reminds me of a thought I had about you months ago, during that miserably frenzied period when I thought you weren’t coming back: sat on the subway and musing over all the various adaptations of you that existed in other people’s anecdotes…a great composite of identities, none of them ever entirely capturing the whole. I’d wondered what they would have talked about if they’d sat down together – all those versions of you – whether they would have recognized each other if they’d met in the street.

“I suppose so,” is all I say.

“It is not a matter of supposition. You, for example, have a moral self and an immoral self, amongst many others, which up until now…” you pause here again for emphasis, “…have existed in constant friction and conflict.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Do you?”

“Of course,” I say sharply. “I know better than you do; I wouldn’t be here now if I didn’t know. It was something I spent a lot of time last night trying to reconcile.” I sigh slightly at the thought of it: all those agonized hours.

“And it would appear you succeeded. The aim is not to remove these aspects – you are not trying to hack them out, like as much diseased tissue – merely grow more aware of them. And then, once aware, to cooperate and communicate. Attain a sense of balance in the system.”

“Even you haven’t entirely managed that.” I smirk slightly. “Your benevolent self is in a constant state of exile. Your compassion for me is ‘inconvenient,’ remember?”

“I am hardly likely to forget.”

For a while neither of us says anything and you silently massage the tense muscles in my shoulders, digging your thumbs into the various knots. “Regarding my initial point,” you finally say, “you obviously experience relief in devolving your autonomy, at least temporarily. It is precisely how I imagined you would be. You find your capacities and competencies difficult to bear, so naturally there is a level of solace in relinquishing them. And of course I am an excellent choice of recipient.”

“Oh God, don’t even go there.” I prod you with my foot, and you tap my chest in retaliation. “What you said before…do you really think I have no self-control?”

“Only in certain circumstances. Generally you are a model of discipline and self-command. It is hardly surprising you lose yourself so entirely: partly for the reasons I named previously, but also because you are not really accustomed to physical pleasure so it easily overwhelms you. And of course I am enormously overwhelming.” You say this last part in an incredibly self-satisfied tone, and I want to make some smartass remark about you being an enormous and overwhelming narcissist but ultimately desist because – it’s true. You do overwhelm me. You always have.

“Besides,” you add, in a rather patronizing way, “young men are not generally renowned for their sexual continence.”

“Oh come on, I’m not as young as all that. Or do you mean I have to wait until I’m as ancient, oh sorry – I mean as mature – as you?”
“Oh, you shall hardly have to wait *that* long,” you say. “You shall soon be quite altered, take my word for it. Habituation and experience will certainly yield dividends. Indeed, I intend to take full advantage of it while I can – doubtless in a month or two I shall be struggling to keep you under control.” You pause and when you speak again you sound thoughtful. “You seem so young to me in many ways, yet in others are undoubtedly what would be considered ‘an old soul’. It is a paradox. I should like to see you blend the two more effectively; perhaps one day soon you shall. Come into your own power: to not merely survive, but thrive also.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, I know you will. Remember what I told you; razing the old to raise the new?”

Which is partly what tonight was about: dissemble down to the essentials. Deconstruct. Review. Reconstruct. But I don’t actually respond beyond a vague humming noise, then close my eyes and allow my head to tip back further until my forehead’s nestled into your shoulder. Now I’m thinking about what I said to you the other night. At the time it felt true – it *is* true – yet simultaneously I know it’s yet one more paradox: because while I belong to myself (always) and not to you, there’s no doubt I’m still yours.

Eventually the water grows frigid and my fingertips are so shrivelled I look like I’ve got leprosy (which you point out in lingering – and frankly, revolting – medical detail), so we get dressed and go into the kitchen to brew some coffee, then sit and drink it in companionable silence. Later on I furnish you with a more detailed account of last night’s chase, and then produce the list I wrote at the Academy so you can frown over it.

“How safe do you think we are here?” I ask. The awareness that I’ve been located twice in a row is bothering me, but equally the idea of staying somewhere else and leaving you behind feels out of the question.

“As safe as anywhere I suppose; at least it is a contained, controlled space. In some respects this person did us a good service by staging that feeble display in your apartment, as you can now stay here with me without attracting comment. It would be hard to explain your presence in a hotel otherwise.”

“Hmm. Maybe we should go somewhere else soon; keep on the move.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“No one followed me here though. I checked.”

“Good. As tiresome as it is you are going to have to continue such vigilance.”

“At least I know how. I had to have a course on countersurveillance; we all did.” God it was boring at the time (delivered via prehistoric-looking PowerPoint slides and a miserably subdued monotone from a thin, hunched guy who clearly didn’t want to be there either). Needless to say I’m thankful for it now.

“And do not give the address to anyone except Jack Crawford.”

“Oh shit, I was supposed to call him and tell him where I am.” My cell’s in the living room. That’s miles away. “I’ll do it later,” I say vaguely. Then I take a swig of coffee and realize you’re staring at me over the top of your own cup with your eyes slightly narrowed. It’s annoying. Maybe I’ve got something on my face…why can’t you just *tell* me. “What?” I say defensively. “What are you looking at?”
“You, of course. You are extremely easy on the eye…albeit, at times, somewhat tiresome on the ears.”


You just smile instead of responding then deliberately swivel your gaze away and focus into the distance with one of your thousand-yard stares. I glance at my watch; it’s only seven o’clock. How is that possible? It feels like I’ve been here for days. I make some more coffee and do the newspaper crossword, studiously ignoring you when you keep reading it (upside down) to pre-empt the answers, and later you take my hand and lead me into the bedroom and we make love again; only this time it’s far more gentle and tender, just slowly rocking against each other. It’s beautifully silent, the only sounds the pattering of the rain against the window and the soft gasps I can’t stop myself from making as you bring me closer and closer and closer to the edge. Your face over mine is very intense and I find myself reaching out to touch it at the exact moment as you do the same to me: lightly stroking and skimming as if we’re reading one another with our fingertips the way a blind person reads Braille. I close my eyes and cry out when I start to come and you pull me very close against you and hold me through it, calling me dearest, my darling, my love, and pressing very faint kisses against my eyelids.

Afterwards I can feel myself starting to grow overwhelmed again and have to burrow underneath your arm so I can hide my face in your shoulder. You don’t say anything, just run your hand up and down my back.

“I didn’t expect it to be like this,” I finally say by way of explanation. “It’s so…”

“Natural?”

“Yes. I wasn’t prepared for how natural it would feel.”

“Were you not? I was.” (Well, obviously…you smug know-all). “It was an entirely instinctive progression.” You pause, and then quote: “‘Our souls already knew each other. It is only our bodies that are new’.”

There’s another silence and I hunch a bit closer, turning slightly so I can look at you. “I’m glad you came back,” I say quietly. “So glad.”

“I know precisely what you mean,” you reply. “In fact you may wish to preserve this moment for posterity, because it is a rare instance of my capacity to empathize rivalling yours.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think?”

“Well, I can probably guess but, you know…” I adopt my best approximation of your accent: “I want to hear you say it.”

You smile at me. “Simple,” you reply. “Because you came back too.”
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

Enormous thanks to everyone who’s left kudos and shared such generous and encouraging feedback in the comments. It does wonders for my Writing Mojo (technical term) and is a major reason I’m able to keep churning out these l-o-n-g chapters every week. You rock, indeed you do - hugs for all!

Afterwards we refuel with more coffee, and then even though it’s not that late I go back to bed because I’m yawning so hard I may dislocate my jaw. You prowl in after me and I end up hunched in a ball next to you with your arms round me and my head on your shoulder. Now I’m coming back to myself (in other words now that I’m no longer in…? What? What should I call it? My Sex Self?…No. No, I can’t call it that. It sounds shit) I don’t entirely like being positioned this way because it makes me feel so subservient – as if you’re Heathcliff and I’m Cathy (for God’s sake). But considering there’s no way you’d ever put your head on anyone’s shoulder (unless it was to chew their neck) then it’s either this or lying vertically like cutlery in a drawer. Anyway, I suppose I don’t mind it all that much, not really. I sigh happily and eventually grow so relaxed that I fall asleep, vaguely aware of you stroking my hair and saying something quiet in an unfamiliar language.

I wake up a while later to find myself alone, so yawn and stretch then spend a few unedifying moments tormenting myself with whether I slept so heavily I might have drooled on you – oh God, what if I did? Shit…I bet I did – before consoling myself that in the grand scheme of things it’s probably the least of what you deserve. Anyway I know for a fact that you’ve been covered in worse (and often from more than one person at a time) so you probably didn’t care all that much. I tug my jeans on but can’t locate my shirt, so take a certain satisfaction in rifling through the closet and stealing one of yours instead. Then I catch sight of my hair in the small mirror over the bureau and cringe at how wild it looks, veering off in improbably angled tufts that are attempting to defy the known laws of physics. Every effort to wrestle it under control is met with such stubborn resistance that I grow tempted to tell it to fuck off and stop being such a dick; until I realize that I am not only fighting with my hair, but have accorded it the status of malevolent sentient being (which as a choice of activity seems both Unnatural And Wrong) so eventually leave it as it is and finish buttoning your shirt instead.

When I get to the collar I pause, then absently run my hands over the marks on my neck. It’s actually quite liberating to plummet if there’s someone waiting to break the fall (I bet Jack didn’t get told about that in his occupational wellbeing seminar). Then I try to ascertain whether I feel any different from a few days ago and realise that I don’t…not really. I went through several hours of absolute hell. I came to a final decision. I came back. I let go entirely and broke a few more boundaries with you that I wasn’t previously aware of having. You obviously feel I still have some areas to delve into in order to become more ‘empowered’ (which is good on one level, except that your ideas about me becoming empowered are invariably…troubling), and yet my own private reflections have convinced me of the necessity of following my own course and not being blindly led by you. Which you also appear to approve of; so now I’m slightly confused (I’m invariably fucking confused – no wonder I don’t feel any different). To be honest I’m not really sure what I was expecting, only that after such a momentous series of internal shifts it doesn’t entirely make sense to feel so tranquil yet, simultaneously, so refreshed and restored. I frown over this for a while before remembering what you said previously – “natural… an entirely instinctive progression” – and decide that maybe that’s...
the reason after all. I don’t feel particularly different because I’m just evolving, naturally and inevitably, to where it is I was always supposed to be. It’s the person I was before who felt wrong. The benefit of being shattered is how the slivers and fragments become both refining and defining. They forge character: battle scars and badges of honor. The breaks are the places that let the light in. What was it you said before? Luminous in all your damage. Blemished and broken and thriving in spite of it, because mental and physical scars don’t belong to the dead or the dying. The message of scars is something else entirely. They say: I survived and endured.

It’s totally quiet outside, silent and still. What are you doing? I miss you (pathetic). So I go into the living area where I immediately find you basking on the sofa: eyes closed, arms neatly arranged across your chest, and looking not unlike a statue of a medieval knight positioned on top of a crypt. Your eyes promptly flick open as I walk in.

“Good evening Will,” you say serenely.

“Hey.”

“My shirt is very becoming on you.”

“Oh yeah, sorry, I probably should’ve asked.” Although I’m not all that sorry – not really. After all, it’s hardly like a lack of permission has ever stopped you.

“It is fine. I rather like seeing you in it.”

“What time is it?”

“Around ten o’clock I should think.”

“That late?”

“Yes.” You close your eyes again and smile beatifically. “You clearly enjoyed yourself. You virtually passed out afterwards.”

You sound almost unfeasibly smug so I grunt in lieu of a response (because the last thing your massive ego needs is encouragement) and shuffle into the kitchen area to get a glass of water. Then I realize I’m actually feeling pretty smug myself, in that I’m mentally congratulating myself on the fact I’m now having the type of sex in which I pass out afterwards when my previous notions of erotic boundary-pushing was leaving the lights on. I wander back into the main room when I’m done and stand for a few moments sipping the water whilst watching you; you’re almost unnaturally still and appear determined to turn the sofa into your own private monument/mausoleum/shrine (oh God, no, not monuments…fuck those things).

“I’ll go and see Jack tomorrow,” I eventually say. You don’t answer. “We’re obviously stuck here for the time being so it makes sense to carry on as normal.”

“Very good,” you reply in the sort of absent tone that indicates you don’t really give a shit either way.

“You mustn’t go out yourself.”

“Yes, as discussed.”

“You’re very relaxed about it. Aren’t you going to lecture me on being careful?”

“I am not. I thought we had agreed I was to be more economical with my concern? Besides it is
hardly necessary: you are able to pick locks, slip handcuffs and operate firearms, albeit with a rather
deplorable aim. You are additionally competent in disposing of people with an array of varied and
interesting methods, including – but doubtless not limited to – stabbing, choking and bludgeoning
over the head with bad taste *objet d’art*. You are assertive, resourceful, unusually intelligent and,
should all these devices fail at the same time, have a backup strategy in that you have proven yourself
to be an excellent runner. And more than any of these things, you are slowly coming into your
natural capacities. It has been increasingly obvious of late.” At this point you smile slightly. “You
have the look of an inheritor about you.”

“Yes.” Now I’m smiling too. “I know.”

“Good. You ought to know it.”

You close your eyes again and promptly vanish into whatever internal landscape you’re currently
inspecting, so I approach the sofa/shrine and sit in front of it with my legs crossed and my chin
cupped in the palm of my hand, fidgeting with the frayed hem on my jeans and simply taking the
opportunity to stare at you. There’s something quite fascinating about watching you this close up. It’s
partly the novelty, I suppose: I’m still not used to the fact I can do it. Your shirt sleeves are rolled
back and I can see the smooth lines of muscle in your forearm. You have a series of slim white lines
along the side of the ulna bone; elderly scars. I wonder how you got them? Then I blush when I
realize I’ve stopped tugging the loose thread on my jeans and have been absentmindedly twitching
the fabric round your elbow instead, trying to arrange it into symmetrical lines. It must be (almost
certainly is) annoying you, but you don’t ask me to stop. Odd to imagine that one day it’ll just be
customary, that being close to you will have neither novelty nor newness, but just be routine. I quite
like the idea of that: happy to barter the loss of stirring new sensations for the comforts of habit and
familiarity. Then I remember that a whole legion of antagonists (on both sides of the law) are
determined to stop us attaining that, and begin irritably drumming my fingers on my knees instead.
All this waiting…I can’t stand it. I want to grab that bastard on the CCTV and rip them apart with
my bare hands and I can’t.

“This sucks,” I say abruptly. “There’s nothing we can do.”

“It is, indeed, a waiting game.”

You don’t say anything else, and eventually my legs begin to cramp and I decide to get up and
forage for food instead (I’m also disappointed because I was hoping you were going to respond with
“it does, indeed, suck” as the idea of hearing that in your precise, aristocratic voice is beyond funny).
I make a subdued snorting noise at the thought of it, and you open your eyes and give me a beady
look. I raid the mini-bar and furtively devour all the chocolate, chips and peanuts (I can see you
watching me with a rather appalled expression on your face), then finally open a bottle of the hotel’s
expensive-looking beer.

“Do you want one?” I ask.

“Thank you, no.”

“Are you sure?” I examine the bottle. “Look how pretentious it is.”

“I shall bear that in mind.”

I take a swig of it (it’s pretty good, although in no way justifies the outrageously inflated price-tag)
and allow my eyes to vaguely drift around the room – then promptly slow them down and back them
up when they reach the coffee table. “Oh for God’s sake,” I say, “why have you still got that fern?”
“It is not a fern, it is a…”

“Juniper bonsai. Whatever. I thought you were going to give it back?”

“I fully intended to return it,” you say blithely, “but you were so deeply and repetitively – one might even say tediously – insistent that I not leave the suite.”

“So you’re basically saying it’s my fault you’ve stolen an expensive bonsai?”

“On the contrary, it was you who said that. Although on purely pragmatic grounds I would not necessarily disagree with you.”

“You’re so embarrassing, I can’t take you anywhere.” I lift your legs out the way to make room for myself then sit down. “What are you doing anyway?”

“I am lying on the sofa.”

“Okay, great.”

You smirk slightly. “In which attitude I am reflecting on our current circumstances.”

“We could always discuss it. You know – out loud.”

“We discussed it previously. I am now reviewing the information.” You tip your head back as if dismissing me, so I leave you to it and scroll through my phone to see if there’s anything of interest on TattleCrime (there isn’t), or any notable news headlines (there aren’t) and then, in desperation, at the pay-per-view service in case there’s anything you could feasibly be persuaded to sit through (no chance). Christ, this is frustrating; I need something to do. All the doing has been on the other side: they’re acting and we’re being acted upon. Although I suppose it’s worse for you; at least I can go out.

“Don’t you get bored?” I say abruptly. “Being trapped in here?”

“It is not ideal, certainly.”

“I could bring you something tomorrow, if you wanted? Books or whatever?”

“Thank you for the consideration, but I have everything I require. You forget that I have adapted to spending prolonged time in a single room.” You announce this quite matter-of-factly, clearly not anticipating or requiring any commiseration, but I feel bad for you all the same; it must have been unbearable at times. That and the fact you did it for me. Well not for me, I quickly amend, maybe more like because of. But even so. I have a sudden urge to put my arms round you, but am worried you might protest against anything that could be interpreted as sentimental – or, God forbid, sympathetic – so in the end I get off the sofa and wander off before the temptation to fling myself at you gets too much.

Now I’m feeling maudlin. Bored and maudlin, with a helping of anxiety on the side – a singularly shit combination. I migrate back to the mini-bar and decide to drink some of the miniature spirit bottles (they’re actually pretty absurd-looking, like toy alcohol). Unfortunately in doing this I forget that I haven’t eaten anything substantial for nearly two days; the net result being that it goes straight to my head and I get far drunker, far quicker, than would generally be considered wise. I sit down by the shrine again, feeling increasingly dejected and fretful (and also somewhat ludicrous, because drunken misery looks more dignified with a glass of wine or a mug of beer than it does sipping minuscule bottles of Jack Daniels). I sigh mournfully and you crack your eyes open.
“Do not to be too despondent,” you say.

“I suppose I need to keep my spirits up,” I reply with impressive stoicism, which is only slightly marred by the fact I begin cackling halfway through (because – spirits. Jack Daniels. Comedic genius) and you shut your eyes like a store front closing down.

There’s another long silence and I start to feel morose again. “I’ve lost my glasses,” I proclaim loudly (I do this in a deeply over-the-top way: it’s the sort of tone in which most people would say ‘why have you forsaken me Lord?’).

“Oh? That is very out of character.”

“It’s not my fault,” I say self-righteously. Is it? It doesn’t feel like it is, but then…who else’s fault could it conceivably be? I frown to myself at this metaphysical dilemma then promptly cheer up when a solution presents itself. “It’s because I’m in my head so much,” I announce triumphantly. “Like Einstein. Einstein was always misplacing his stuff.” I’m not actually sure whether or not this is correct, but decide to stick with it anyway – it’s not like he’s in any state to contradict me. “It’s because my mind is on Higher Things,” I add.

“Yes that is probably true. Although I imagine Higher Things are of limited consolation if you are unable to see them.”

I prod your foot with my index finger. “Can you look for my glasses?”

“It is an extremely tempting offer,” you reply, “but no.”

“Please?”

You stretch your arms behind your head, then turn round and give me a slow, sardonic smile. “No,” you say.

“Fine. I don’t care anyway. Vision is overrated.”

“Indeed; you are a born philosopher.”

I lose interest in my glasses after that and go back to the mini-bar instead to drink the vodka. It’s pretty good; expensive I suppose. Oh well, you’re the one who’s going to have to pay for it. I decide this also serves you right, and drink the miniature rum as well. Then I find my glasses (on top of the mini-bar – result!) and have another drink to celebrate. By this time I am, regrettably, beyond inebriated; and end up slumped on the floor having an animated conversation with myself about how I’m a goddamned genius, and one day Jack will realize how he completely took me for granted, and then – fucking hell – won’t he be sorry, goddammit. After a while I get bored with how one-sided it is, so add in Jack’s dialogue, and then finally Kade Purnell’s as well. I decide that it’s actually pretty impressive, like some sort of postmodern theater soliloquy. Like something Heiner Müller might have come up with. God I’m good.

“You are, at least, in distinguished company,” you suddenly announce, which surprises me because I assumed you weren’t listening. “History books are teeming with remarkable individuals whose talents were underappreciated. You are not the first and are hardly likely to be the last.”

“That’s easy for you to say. Everyone respects you; even the people who don’t like you…Actually no one likes you, do they? Except me. But they all respect you.”

“You are too concerned with other people’s trivial opinions.”
“Yes, well.” I frown to myself, and then peer at you owlishly over the top of my glasses like someone in anticipation of imparting profound wisdom. “Players-gonna-play and haters-gonna-hate.”

“Indeed.”

“Straight up. Word.”

“Excellent,” you say. “I am so glad that has been established.” You look like you’re losing the will to live, and recline back on the sofa with your arms neatly folded behind your head. I watch you for a while. You’re so incredibly still. And I’m so incredibly drunk. Oh God how I am so drunk? This is awful. I didn’t have that much, did I? No, not nearly enough to be so drunk, those bottles were tiny. They looked like tiny bottles belonging to the tiny people in Gulliver’s Travels. The Lilli…? What were they called? Lilliputs? The Putins?…Fuck it. They were small. I remember the remit of establishing sobriety through exhibiting balance and coordination, and decide to reassure myself that I’m not as drunk as I’m starting to fear I might be through demonstrating these skills via the symmetrical stacking of objects. This is clearly a brilliant plan: a simple, yet elegant, demonstration of balancing precision and finesse. But where? I can’t use the table…it’s covered in ephemera for illegally fleeing the country. I look at the table mournfully. Then I look at you. Then at the table. Then I look at you again. I bet you wouldn’t mind. You’d probably approve. It’s a show of initiative. You like initiative. You’ll probably be pleased. I creep over towards the sofa with exaggerated stealth, and proceed to see how many items I can arrange on your chest before they tip over. I manage my cell phone, a pen and note pad, a pack of tissues, a Dixie cup, an empty Jack Daniels bottle (tiny) and my glasses, then lean back on my heels feeling immensely pleased with myself.

“Will,” you say without opening your eyes, “you are being almost unbearably irritating.” You sit upright so everything falls off, which strikes me as a surreal combination of both hilariously funny yet catastrophically tragic (given the display of skill that was required to arrange them there in the first place).

“You’ve destroyed my balancing finesse,” I say accusingly.

“I am sure I will eventually learn to live with the guilt.”


“Why would it give you such satisfaction to hear me say ‘fuck’? There you go, I have said it; was it everything you hoped it would be?”

I spend some time considering this. “I’m not sure yet.” I eventually reply. “Can you say it again and I’ll tell you?”

“Will,” you reply waspishly, “I would be extremely obliged if you could hasten the inevitable and drink yourself into unconsciousness. Either that or go to bed.”

“N-o-o-o.”

You sigh in a long-suffering way, then retrieve my glasses from the floor and carefully slot them over my face. “Although it is rather fascinating seeing you like this,” you add after a pause, “of such pleasures it has often been said that a little goes a long way. In fact I should venture that being arrested was preferable to enduring much more of it. But then of course there is always the chance they would collect you at the same time and force me to share a cell with you as additional punishment.”
“Can you hear me when you do that? When you go into a memory coma?”

“Regrettably, yes.”

“Can you zone out completely if you want to?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you?”

“It depends on situational factors; some are easier than others. It is generally more difficult around you, because – contrary to my better judgement – I am so attuned to be aware of what you are doing.” You give me a slightly evil look. “A comparative analogy at the present time would be a caregiver automatically primed to respond to an infant.”

“I’m not an infant.”

“No, indeed; you are being far more tiresome.”

I frown at you. “I don’t think you should get an infant,” I say seriously. “If someone ever gives you an infant you should tell them you don’t want it and give it straight back again.”

“Your advice is noted.”

“No infants for you.”

“Indeed.”

“You’d need constant babysitters every time you flee the country.”

“Yes, I suppose the fact you are self-sufficient is some consolation. Now please be quiet.”

“You are so boring,” I say reproachfully. “You are dull. You are no fun at all.”


“You should have a drink.”

“Thank you for the offer, but no. I have to say that your current condition is not a very persuasive inducement.” You then proceed to deliver a severe mini-lecture about the effects of alcohol on the brain, and my eyes start crossing with the effort of following what you’re saying because it’s full of words of more than three syllables. Oh God…you’re still talking. Why can’t you just be quiet for once? I have a vague memory of a kid at school whose grandmother owned a parrot: an African grey with a long scarlet streak in its tail (we used to sneak round at weekends and teach it to say ‘shit’ and ‘fuck’). When she wanted it to be quiet – which was quite often after it started saying ‘fuck’ all the time – she’d put it back in its cage and drape a cloth over the top. The point being: why has no one invented a human equivalent? Someone really ought to invent a human equivalent.

“What are you smirking at?” you say.

“Nothing.”

“You should go to bed.”

“I will in a minute. Actually, no. No I won’t. Stop trying to get me into bed. You keep trying to get me into bed. You’re so devious. If you want to have sex with me you should just say so.”
“I do not wish to have sex with you.”

“Fine. I don’t wish to have sex with you either. You can have sex with yourself…By the way do we have any pieces of cloth?”

“I beg your pardon?”

I end up telling you about my parrot theory (with far more detail and consideration than it possibly deserves) and you give me a withering look. “You are certainly welcome to try,” you say, in a tone that clearly implies ‘and if you do, little man, I will end you.’

“Well, please stop lecturing me about alcohol,” I say crossly. “You’re so superior. You always think you’re better than I am. You think you’re better than everyone, just because you eat the rudes.”

“Rudes?”

“Yeah…I mean no. I mean, what’s the plural for ‘rude’?”

“The plural for rude,” you reply, “is ‘rude’.”

“Oh. Is it?”

“Yes.”

There’s a pause. “Are you sure?” I say.

“Entirely sure.”


“Well, I suppose I ought to be quiet then. Whilst I have received more menacing threats in my life, they have been few and far between.”

“Why can’t you be quiet for once? You’re always talking. You never stop.”

You give me a rather malicious smirk. “Dear me Will, how dreadfully rude you are.”

Oh yes, very good. Well done. I see what you did there, you malevolent old…shit. Why do I love you so much? You’re not even remotely loveable; it must be because I’m so drunk. But that can’t be right, because I also love you when I’m sober. It must be because I’m unhinged. “It’s hard to be polite to someone,” I say pointedly, “when all you want to do is punch them in their face.”

“Indeed it is,” you reply, “yet see how well I am managing it?”

“You’re so annoying sometimes. Have I ever told you that?”

“I believe you have mentioned it once or twice, yes.”

“Well you are. You’re annoying. And authoritative. And you’re a terrible know-all. And you’re smug. And manical. And your accent is stupid.” I frown again, perplexed. “…I don’t know why I love you so much.”

There is a long and spectacularly awkward silence and I can feel myself going pale with horror that I not only dreamt up that disastrous speech, but then went ahead and delivered it right in your face. Oh my fucking God, why did I say that? ‘Embarrassment’ doesn’t even begin to cover it. Humiliation
comes a bit closer, but still doesn’t adequately capture the full extent. Mortified. Yeah. That’s probably better. Mortification. My sole consolation is that I have finally achieved my lifelong ambition of rendering you speechless. Oh God…you really are. You look like someone’s hit you over the back of the head.

“Right then!” I say. “Sorry about that. I’m a bit drunk. Very drunk. I’m extremely drunk. Sorry. I’m going to bed. Bye!” I proceed to escape towards the bedroom as fast as my drunken limbs can be persuaded to carry me so I can at least die of shame in private, when from behind me I hear the rustling sound of you getting off the sofa.

“Will,” you say, “come here.”

I go still and then reluctantly turn round and shuffle over, glancing at you anxiously the entire time and bracing myself for the inevitable scathing lecture about romantic love being a meaningless cultural hoax and social construct, and how I should kindly shut the fuck up and get over myself. But all you do is reach out your hand and pull me close, then hold onto me very tightly.

“My dearest Will,” you say.

“Am I? Your dearest?”

“You are.”

“Oh,” I say. “That’s good.”

“Indeed you are. The inimitable Will Graham; how is it that you have been able to subvert every expectation I have about myself – demolish each barrier, vanquish each defence – and yet I don’t begrudge you your success? What a fool I was to think I would ever be able to give you up.”

“Why did you then?” You don’t answer, just stroke your hand up and down my back; and I peer up at you, blinking from underneath my hair. “I’ll tell you why,” I say plaintively. “It’s because you’re stupid. You put me down and then couldn’t remember where you left me.”

You laugh slightly at that. “Perhaps. Although you see that I did find you again; just as you found me. You always were prodigiously good at finding me, weren’t you?”

“You always have to have the last word?” I mutter into the front of your shirt. “You always want the last word. You’re so annoying.”

“Yet here you are nevertheless.”

“It’s because I’m unhinged,” I say sleepily. “But I do love you. So much.” And then I pass out.

*****

I wake up next morning with the most hideous hangover that alcoholic vengeance could feasibly devise – suffering which is only compounded by having to endure the humiliation of crouching over the toilet bowl while you stroke my hair with one hand and simultaneously deliver an unbelievably portentous sermon about the penalties of excessive alcohol consumption (while you don’t actually say ‘let this be a lesson to you young man – and bear in mind that temperance is close to godliness’ you may as well do). I can’t even tell you to stick your advice up your ass because I’m afraid if I open my mouth I’ll throw up. Afterwards I slump against your leg and you briskly pick me up and carry me into the bedroom. I want to struggle but ultimately desist on the grounds there’s no point making myself look even more ridiculous than I already have and miserably allow you to deposit me on the bed. Needless to say you don’t do it gently and tenderly as if I’m something infinitely delicate.
and precious, but sling me down unceremoniously like I’m a sack of old bricks – in fact I hit the mattress with sufficient velocity to bounce a few centimetres off it.

“Oh God I’m so wrecked,” I say when I land again. “You probably should have left me where I was.”

“You would have been in the way,” you reply airily. “I hardly wish to climb over your insensate form every time I wish to use the bathroom.”

Whilst this is undeniably a fair point I can’t face agreeing with you so pull the covers over my head instead and curse whichever prehistoric asshole ancestor first tried brewing hops. After a while I briefly re-emerge.

“Look, I’m really sorry,” I say gloomily. “I can’t believe I behaved like that.”

“I accept your apology.”

“Thanks – thank you. I know I was awful. I’m such a terrible drunk.”

“You are, indeed, uniquely appalling.”

“Yeah, I know. I know I am.”

“Although that is not untypical amongst introverts. All your repressed emotions and impulses find a convenient outlet.” You lay a subtle emphasis on the last part, which I deliberately pretend not to notice.

“I assume you’re not implying I behave like that all the time in order to spread it out a bit?”

“No,” you say firmly. “I am not suggesting that.”

“Good. Because quite frankly I don’t think I could survive the public shame.”

You just give me a thin smile (although it’s all right for you because you have no sense of shame at all – none) and neatly arrange yourself on the bed, poring over one of your foreign books and politely ignoring my occasional anguished groans. You actually stay with me most of the morning, which I gratefully accept as the colossal concession it is because I look, feel (and to someone with your olfactory capacity, no doubt smell) like the north end of a south-facing cow. But not that any of this even remotely matters in comparison to the massive (drunken) elephant in the room…in that I’ve not only done what I vowed I would never do, I’ve done it by accident in the singularly most inappropriate and hideous way possible. Oh God, fucking hell, how could I have done that? How could I?

I wonder if the humiliation of it would have been better or worse if I’d been sober? Not that I would ever have done it if I’d been sober. But it would have been hypothetically better, because at least it would have had pathos. It would have had dignity. I could have been a dignified subject of unrequited love (with pathos) as opposed to a paralytic…prick. I could have been like something out of a poem, and have instead relegated myself to something out of a cautionary tale for prohibition. Because while I admittedly don’t remember much, what I do remember is that at no point did you say ‘I love you’ back. You didn’t even pretend to. And while I can try and delude myself that it might be because you didn’t want to reciprocate when I was roaring drunk, I know that this is false reassurance and the real reason is because you simply don’t see things that way. On one or two occasions, when I’ve been burning with desire and your face is over mine, when you’ve been gazing into my eyes, then it’s easy to seduce myself into believing that maybe you might; that right then, in that moment, it’s possible that you could. But like all dream states it gets chased away by the daylight
and becomes harder to take seriously. Perhaps it’s also that the jolt of recognition for my own feelings was so profound it was easy to transpose them onto you without real justification. My emotions are like fledglings in a nest – newly-hatched, gaping-mouthed and dependent – and which contemplate wings while never being fully able to fly. Strange to consider you in comparison, who has virtually no emotional life to speak of. In fact in the cold light of day it makes me feel presumptuous. To want that, to hope for it. Because I’m fundamentally so ordinary and you’re so… you. An object of indefinite idealization. You’re the genuine artwork, with all your different hues and tints – from Stygian to luminous – whereas I’m toiling away with a palette that’s far more conventional and commonplace; a lot of labor for little result.

These are not reflections designed to inspire feelings of cheer, so I try and rally myself a bit. After all, it’s not like it’s your fault – you just can’t, and I can’t force you to (although equally I can’t force myself not to). But then I wouldn’t feel hurt and rejected if a blind person couldn’t see me, so why feel these things because you don’t love me? Maybe I should feel sorry for you? (At this point I steal a covert glance at you, looking smouldering and impressive and the least likely object of pity that it’s possible to conceive, and realise that this is not going to be a successful strategy). Nevertheless I really shouldn’t be too despondent about the fact that you don’t (can’t) love me. It’s not like you don’t care about me – even I can see that. You obviously like having me around because you’d have left by now if you didn’t. You came back for me. You waited for me. I know I mean something to you. I mean a lot; perhaps more than anyone else. I know I do. Just not as much as you mean to me…and not in the same way. But you care for, and about, me. You respect me. Cherish my interests fiercely, invest in my welfare tirelessly. That’s enough isn’t it? Some people don’t even get as much as that. It’ll have to be enough.

But even this can’t overcome the new source of misery which is the idea of you telling me so – because I know at some point (and sooner rather than later) you’re going to take me to one side and patiently explain why I need to lower my expectations. In my head I try to imagine it; the way you’ll sit, the compassionate expression in your eyes which flickers in and out occasionally, and that I’ve noticed before in the past. “Now, Will, you appear to be laboring under some misconceptions…” No – no, you wouldn’t be as abrupt as that. “Will, I’ve very flattered by your high regard…” Hmm, no, too coy and contrived. Oh fuck it, I don’t know, but however you do it, it’ll be in a way that’s thoughtful, yet decisive, and which leaves no room for further misunderstanding. You’ll be kind about it I guess – you weren’t displeased that I said it, after all; you’re obviously prepared to tolerate my passionate devotion. You’re just not going to reciprocate. Then I’ll have to pretend that it’s okay, and yes, I get it, it’s fine, no problem. And I’ll be wilting inside the whole time, stranded in my crash site of unrequited love, and have to act like I’m not. Oh fuck, no, I can’t do that. I don’t want to pretend with you anymore. I’ll have to be sincere in how I feel about the way you (don’t/can’t) feel, and keep it dignified and restrained, and then put it away and move on. And yet I don’t know if I can bear it. It’ll be devastating. And excruciating. And mortifying…But mostly devastating. Why couldn’t I have kept my stupid mouth shut, the way I’d always intended? We could have just gone along as we were.

*****

Later I start to feel rather less ruined and haul myself out of bed and into the shower. I have a persistent sense that there was something important I needed to do – and have no goddamn clue what it was – but it seems like too much effort to remember, so go and join you in the main room instead and end up on the sofa with my miserable head in your lap. Doing this feels lame (because it is: it is lame. I am lame. I am behaving in the Way of the Lame), although it’s reassuring, and has the considerable advantage of minimizing opportunities for eye contact. I estimate that I have apologised 14.5 times over the course of the day for behaving so horribly, the 0.5 resulting from the final occasion where you cut me off halfway through and said (for the fourteenth time) “Please don’t trouble yourself Will, it is fine.” But it’s not fine. It’s terrible. I’ve been aware of
you glancing at me almost constantly, smiling benevolently and generally being more reflective and gentle than you usually are. And it’s making me feel worse because I’m convinced that you feel sorry for me. Oh God, I bet you do. I bet this is pity. You’ve dug out your compassionate self from whatever basement packing box it was stored in and are preparing to let me down gently.

“Feeling better?” you eventually ask. You trail your fingers over mine and I automatically take hold of your hand, then promptly wish I hadn’t and try to contrive a way of dropping it that won’t look incredibly obvious.


“Will, please do not apologise anymore; there is such a thing as ‘laboring the point.’ All you did was drink alcohol on an empty stomach. It is not so very dreadful.” You briefly go silent, but I know you’re not done; for some reason the expression ‘pregnant pause’ comes to mind (pregnant with mortification). Oh God, here it comes.

“Anyway,” you say. “Now that you are finally sober, I should like to revisit some of your observations from last night.” You smile down at me and tuck an errant strand of hair behind my ear. Why does my hair do what you tell it to? It never listens to me. Then I realize that you’re staring at me – staring and smiling – and that as much as I want to avoid it some kind of response is required.

“Would you?” My voice has gone faint (with horror).

“Yes,” you reply. “I would.”

“Well, sure, okay,” I say, with a heartiness that’s entirely feigned (and which you will immediately be able to see right through…why am I even bothering?). “That’s fine. But just give me a minute, would you, I need to check my phone. It’s been going off for the last half hour.” At which point my cell obediently chimes again (thank you, phone) and I pull a rather hapless: ‘see? What can I do here?’ expression. Of course this is the point at which most normal people would say “are you kidding me? Leave your fucking phone, you socially inept shit,” but you are not a normal person, and I experience the somewhat novel sensation of feeling enormously thankful for this. Anyway the means may have been socially inept, but the ends have still been attained (thank God for my complete lack of social skills, they never let me down). As expected you politely take your arms off me so I can stand up, and I fumble around for the cell desperately hoping that it’s something important which I can spin out for as long as possible or, failing that, something that I can lie about being important, and possibly spin out for even longer. Oh God, I know you’re staring at me. You’re thinking how gauche and ridiculous I’m being. You’re going to get irritated. Any minute now you’re going to get annoyed. And then you’ll be…

“Will,” you say.

“Yeah?”

“Calm down mylimasis. Everything is fine.”

“Oh.” I say stupidly. “Is it?”

“It is. Now please check your phone – and if you would be kind enough to come back here afterwards, I shall endeavour to convince you how eminently fine everything is.”

“Well,” I say. “Okay then.” I open my mouth then shut it again, not entirely sure what’s going on (and not daring to hope), when I catch sight of the phone and immediately frown. And it’s not even the numerous missed calls that have shocked me (startling as this is) – it’s the list of abbreviated text
Call me NOW...

Where the hell are you...

Check TattleCrime, call me to …

GET IN TOUCH ASAP OR…

I’m despatching a patrol car if you…

A cold sliver of fear snakes up and down my body, and I immediately flick to my phone’s browser, which promptly (and typically) refuses to load. For God’s sake. “Have you seen my laptop?” I say abruptly. Then I spot it myself and dash over to boot it up, impatiently drumming my fingers the whole time. The TattleCrime site is slow to respond; the servers must be busy. Christ, come on, come on. I can immediately tell something’s wrong from the amount of comments on the latest update – about ten times higher than it would usually be – and I click on it in a frenzy of anticipation then go totally rigid, because…Oh. Fucking. Hell.

“How?” you say sharply. “What is the matter?”

I swallow heavily, trying to chase away the surge of shock and revulsion, and then wordlessly turn the screen round so you can see for yourself.

**Grisly End for FBI Profiler?**

*Early reports suggest that Will Graham, controversial FBI profiler and TattleCrime favorite, was found murdered this evening. A formal statement is yet to be made and FBI officials refused requests to comment, although a source at the scene claims that the body was horrendously mutilated…*

You read it in complete silence and I keep glancing at you, waiting for you to start deriding how tedious it all is – how banal and vulgar, and honestly, such clumsy theatrical displays are beyond contempt. But you don’t. Your expression is ostensibly calm, but I know you well enough to immediately spot the faint tightening of the muscles round your jaw; the frown, imperceptible to anyone else, flitting around your eyebrows. It’s like a change below the surface of water that remains smooth. Oh God, you’re so angry. You’re furious. And it’s probably this that disturbs me more than anything else, because I know that if they’ve got to you then it means that things really are spiralling out of control.

“So,” you say darkly when you’ve finished. “The stakes have been raised again.” Your eyes meet mine, and your expression softens slightly. “Someone is going to answer heavily for this.”

“I know. Shit.” I run my hands through my hair, forcing myself to shift into action mode and rapidly compiling a strategy plan. Christ, this is terrible. “Okay. I need to speak with Jack now; right away. He’ll start an alert for me otherwise.”

“Yes,” you reply. “That is very sensible.” I give you a grim look and you stare back, taut and watchful, as I snatch up my cell and turn on the loudspeaker so you can follow the call too.

“Will Graham, for Christ’s sake,” bellows Jack when he answers. “The last thing I told you was to check in with me first chance you got, and instead you disappear for 24 goddamn hours and don’t pick up your phone. Jesus Will. For a second we thought…” his voice briefly falters. “We really thought it was you.”
“Okay Jack, I messed up. I’m sorry.”

“What were you thinking…”

“Nothing!” I snap. “Look, I forgot, okay? I’m not under arrest, and I’ve got no legal obligation to do anything and I forgot.”

You come up and stand silently behind me and wrap your arms round my waist, resting the side of your face against mine. I hold onto your wrist with my free hand and then promptly have an irrational urge to confirm that I didn’t accidentally turn FaceTime on. Not that you’d care; you’d probably just say ‘good evening’ and wink at him. Jack would then empirically demonstrate whether there is any scientific truth to the claim of spontaneous human combustion and I’d have to be the referee. Oh God, shut up, I didn’t turn FaceTime on. I take a deep breath, forcing myself to calm down.

“Jack? You still there?”

Jack sighs heavily, obviously struggling to bring his angry relief under control. “This is bad Will. It’s really bad.”

Oh…is it? Thanks for that penetrating insight Jack. “Please, what’s happened?” I say instead. “Tell me what you found.”

“It was…God Will. It was awful. He looked just like you. A bit older I guess; how you might look in a few years’ time. But there was a definite resemblance. The clothes, hair, everything. And he was carrying your badge.” Behind me I can feel your entire body going rigid before you tighten your grip round my waist.

“My badge?” I repeat stupidly, and then my stomach turns over because – oh God. For a few wretched seconds I fall completely quiet, struggling to bring my feelings (shock-guilt-fear) under control. “His name’s Len,” I add tonelessly. “He was a security guard at the Academy. I…I must have forgotten to take my badge with me. He must have picked it up.”

“For God’s sake Will, you just forgot it? You know better than that.”

“I only saw him yesterday morning; I saw him just a few hours ago.” I swallow again. “What did they do to him?” There’s a silence at the end of the line. “Jack. What did they do?”

Jack clears his throat and when he speaks his voice has shifted into the detached, dispassionate monotone of forensic pathology; a device to sanitize and separate, as if the clinical language can dilute the horror. We all do it; I’ve done it myself. “He was subdued with a blow to the back of the head. Post-mortem mutilation was a deep incision above the hyroid bone. His tongue had been pulled down so it protruded through the wound and out the throat.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. And we all know where we’ve seen that before. Matthew Brown’s getting quite promiscuous with his copycat inspirations; first the actual Chesapeake Ripper and now the counterfeit one.”


“Oh shit, I’m sorry Will, I should have said earlier. It was definitely him. There was a note.”

“Saying what?”
Jack falls momentarily quiet again and when he speaks his voice sounds tight and strained. “Sleep tight Mr Graham.”

“Nice.”

“Yeah. Capital letters, same paper. We’ll run some tests and compare it with the others, but I’ve got no doubt it was him.” He hesitates again. “There’d also been an attempt to amputate the limbs. He didn’t complete it though. Price will have a better idea back at the lab, but we think he was either disturbed halfway through or simply didn’t have the right tools with him to finish it off.”

“Right.”

Jack sighs then adds, a bit pointlessly: “Of course that type of thing’s a lot harder than it looks.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah, there were human teeth scattered round the body. Teeth, you see,” says Jack, before proclaiming (in a somewhat smug way), “I told you your car was Matthew Brown’s job.”

“No. No, that’s not right,” I realize I’m shaking my head, even though he’s not there to see it. “It doesn’t feel right. Jack, it proves what I told you before. More than one person’s involved. It means that Matthew Brown knows the person who killed the janitor. They’re cooperating – working together.”

“What? Hannibal and Matthew Brown? Doesn’t seem very likely to me Will.” Oh Christ this is hopeless, why am I even bothering?

“I need to see it,” I say firmly. No, not it…him. Len. Len the security guard, obliging and efficient, whose only fault was being in the wrong place at the wrong time and having the misfortune to look a bit like me.

“No Will,” replies Jack. “Absolutely not.” He’s dropped his voice to a soothing, avuncular tone, as if he thinks I’m in shock and need consoling.

“Jack, I can help. It’s a bit late to start being anxious over my wellbeing – don’t you think that’s ship’s already sailed?” Yeah, sailed and sunk in the fucking harbor. “Do you want to catch him or not?”

“I’m not arguing with you about this Will. You’re not seeing it. That’s my final word.”

I sigh at that, because I immediately know that it’s pointless to pursue it further (it being his final word and all. Christ, what a drama queen). “Well can I see the forensic reports?”

“No. There’s no need; and besides, you’re not on the case – I can’t just go handing them out. How would the guy’s family feel?”

“There’s nothing you can tell us with this one. It’s pretty obvious what the motivation was.”

“Look, if this is because of the way I was outside my apartment, then I promise you I’m fine. It’s…”

“I’m not arguing with you about this Will. You’re not seeing it. That’s my final word.”

“Where are you now?” he says instead of answering. “Give me the address.”

Oh fuck off Jack. “I’m in a hire car,” I reply, the lie coming quick and plausible. “I’ve been sleeping in that. Right now it feels safer being itinerant.”
“Well you can stop that kind of idiocy right now. I want you at a known address first thing.”

“I’ll find a motel tomorrow.”

“You’ll find one tonight.”

“No,” I say, politely but firmly, “I’ll find one tomorrow.”

“Will, stop being difficult.”

“I’m not. This is not me being difficult for the sake of it, Jack, it’s me doing the best I can to cope with an insane situation.”

Jack sighs, which I take as the first sign of weakness and therefore an ideal time to drop in a compromise to seal the deal. “I’ll stop by tomorrow,” I say. “I can stop by every day if you like. But you need to give me some latitude for managing this. It’s me they’re targeting, not you.”

“They? Don’t you mean ‘him’? Oh, I see – you mean Hannibal as well.”

“Whatever. Yes.”

“I assume nothing’s happened there?”

“No,” I say lightly. “Nothing at all.” Well…apart from one or two things. I tighten my grip on your wrist.

“So have you still got the gun, or did you leave that somewhere too?”

“Come on Jack.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry. It’s just…Seeing that mess tonight. We really did think…”

“I know,” I say. “I know you did. But it wasn’t.”


“I intend to.”

“And come in tomorrow.”

“Of course.”

In the background I can now hear what sounds like it might well be Price and Zeller, and the idea of Jack passing the phone to them and subjecting me to a repeat performance of ‘we thought it was you/well it wasn’t me/yes but we thought it was’ is completely exhausting so I tell Jack I need to save my phone battery owing to the lack of plug sockets in my non-existent hire car. He accepts this immediately (thank God for my capacity to speak fluent bullshit) and I let out a long breath as I hang up.

“So,” I say, with a levity I don’t actually feel, “it would appear that Matthew Brown has fired me as aspirant Right Hand Man.”

“It is always the deepest love that transforms into the most intense hatred; rather than lionizing you he demonizes you instead. You are the adored object who spurned his attentions – rejected him – and caused him pain. Now he intends to convey the pain back to you.” You really do frown this time. It’s
somewhat unnerving; it’s a long time since I’ve seen you so coldly coiled and furious. “Of course in doing so he will soon realize that he has made a fatal error of judgement.”

“I am going to kill him,” I mutinously. “I am going to kill him with my goddamn bare hands.” I realize I’m flexing them, and then glance up and catch your eye. You’re staring at me. “With my bare hands,” I repeat, enunciating each word so there can be no mistake.

“That is certainly a promising place to begin. Although I’m afraid I can’t allow you to keep the satisfaction entirely to yourself.”

“Why not?” I say sharply. “You think I can’t handle it?”

“No, you mistake me. On the contrary I am quite certain that you can. But after everything he has done I intend for my own hands to substantially contribute to the process.” You give me a pointed look. “I am proposing a mutual enterprise for purely hedonic rather than practical reasons.”

And then I realize exactly what you mean – joint hunt, shared kill – and a proposal that would have recently horrified me (terrified, repulsed) now appears not only rational, but highly appealing as well. More than that: energizing. I don’t think I could possibly have felt that way 48 hours ago…but it’s no good going back to two days previously. I was a different person back then. “I wonder if I could lure him out,” I say thoughtfully.

“Well, it is a hazardous plan – some would say reckless – but not incapable of success. Of course you should have to be extremely precise with your strategy.”

“I don’t actually have a strategy. Not yet.” Not beyond the bit where Matthew Brown (and friends) get dismantled into their component parts.

“In which case we shall have to devise one. Although we must not be too precipitous – as much as I am longing to give my regards to Matthew Brown I am not entirely easy about this situation. There is still a threat beyond him which remains unaccounted for.”

I nod in agreement – the hooded, waving figure on the CCTV obliging flashing into my mind – and you lean against the table, flexing your shoulders and looking almost unfeasibly grim and forbidding. Then you glance downwards and raise an eyebrow at the laptop. “Ah,” you say. “And here he is.”

I leap forwards and peer at the screen myself, still with the TattleCrime tab on view…and where the comment section is now frenziedly updating courtesy of Maniloa: RIP MR GRAHAM. As we stare at the screen another one appears: RIP MR GRAHAM. And again RIP MR GRAHAM. The knowledge that Matthew Brown is doing this live – crouched somewhere in a darkened room, face contorted with all the rage, relish and energy of resourceful infatuation – has an unsettling, crawling feel to it; and in spite of myself I shudder.

REST IN PEACE. REST IN PIECES.

“The little bastard,” I say quietly.

THERE’S A RECKONING COMING. YOU OWE ME.

YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT’S REALLY GOING ON.

BUT YOU’LL FIND OUT.

ARE YOU READING THIS NOW MR GRAHAM?
IS HE WITH YOU?

I draw in my breath sharply at that one. “He doesn’t know,” I say quickly, more to myself than you. “He suspects, but he’s not certain. He’s just guessing. If he knew he’d have addressed you directly, he wouldn’t have been able to help himself.” Then I realize I have subconsciously stepped in between you and the laptop and blush at how totally stupid this is.

YOU SHOULD RUN. YOU SHOULD BOTH RUN.

ARE YOU RUNNING YET?

GET. SET. GO!

“Christ,” I hiss under my breath.

EXCEPT THAT YOU HAVE A PROBLEM. BECAUSE...

...THERE’S NOWHERE TO RUN AND NOWHERE TO HIDE.

NEXT TIME IT’S GOING TO BE YOU.

THEN HIM.

TICK TOCK MR GRAHAM.

You put your hand on my shoulder. “Turn it off,” you say, and there’s a lethal thread of anger in your voice, white-hot and ruthless. “He can have nothing to say that is possibly worth hearing. And to be frank, his presumption in addressing you like this is testing my self-control to a quite exceptional degree.”

“I will in a minute,” I say stubbornly. But all that comes up is TICK TOCK, TICK TOCK over and over again.

“You wish to deconstruct him? On this occasion I’m afraid that will have to be more your purview than mine, or I might destroy your computer.” You lightly press your mouth against the back of my neck. “It is late. Come to bed.”

“Soon.”

You kiss the back of my neck again, but respect the choice without trying to dissuade me, and I pull up a chair after you’ve left and keep a wary eye on the page. I’m considering whether to respond: initiate contact, suggest a meeting. Spring a trap. But it’s a difficult call – whatever else he is, he’s not stupid and I could just as easily end up walking into a fatal set-up as I am in establishing my own. Because ultimately I know that I’m right, and you’re right (and Jack’s wrong), and Matthew Brown is not operating alone. I don’t know who the accomplice is (or how many of them there are, or why they want you in the first place, or why they’re targeting you via me…) but I do know that they’re lying in wait: cruel and cunning and infinitely patient.

There’s still nothing new on the thread. Tick tock, tick tock. I’m growing restless again so switch off the lamp then wander over to the window to gaze out at the cityscape: the stars, the stretch of sky, the glow of the lights on the horizon, cars crawling past like illuminated ants. All the trees are bare and the branches straggle in the sky like blackened bones. I sigh and press my forehead against the glass. You’re out there somewhere you bastard, I think. You’re someone’s friend, or colleague or relative. You live somewhere, you belong to someone. Where are you? Then over from the table comes the pinging sound of a new update and I run back over to the laptop, eyes narrowing as I read it.
I KNOW YOU’RE THERE MR GRAHAM.

This makes my skin crawl, and even though I know it’s impossible I still can’t stop myself scanning around the room. Then I glance at the webcam…surely there’s no way? The firewall hasn’t been disabled or uninstalled, and there’re no obvious signs of hacking; but to be on the safe side I dampen a wad of tissue paper and press it over the lens where it’ll harden into a little white mask.

WHY WON’T YOU TALK TO ME? YOU TALKED TO ME PLENTY BEFORE.

“Fuck you,” I tell the screen.

I KNOW HOW YOU’RE LOOKING RIGHT NOW. I KNOW THE LOOK ON YOUR FACE. I KNOW YOU.

My fingers are now literally twitching with the urge to type a response, but I force myself to hold back. RESTRAINT, RESTRAINT. The tipping point is coming; no sense in acting rashly from anger and frustration only to destroy the delicate derangement of the balance.

THE COUNTDOWN HAS STARTED. YOU CAN’T STOP IT NOW. THERE’S NOTHING YOU CAN DO.

COMING, COMING, READY OR NOT.

“Oh we’ll definitely be ready,” I hiss under my breath. “You have no idea how ready we’ll be.”

I wait a bit longer but there’s nothing else, and eventually Maniloa begins getting swamped by other users demanding to know who he is, and why is he being such a dick, and all The_Real_Will_Graham’s and WillGraham2015’s that I remember of old (God, another lifetime ago) begin logging on and enthusiastically line up to offer to kick Maniloa’s ass for him. I leave them to stage a virtual Will Graham Raid on my behalf and stretch my legs out, allowing the chair to tip back so I can stare at the ceiling. I’m remembering your words the night my car was vandalized: “The curtain has risen and the performance is ready to begin.” They have an almost prophetic resonance with my own reflections in the Academy room, when I was musing about the centrality of a drama in three acts; before, during and after. The beginning, the middle and the end. Well, you were right and I was wrong, because things have moved forward. It’s the official start of Act 4.

The future doesn’t exist yet: choice, not chance, and destiny is only there to be mastered. No fate but what we make.

Centre stage, curtain up, go.
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

A warm welcome to the new readers and another huge collective thanks to everyone who’s will-ing me on via kudos and comments. OMG, getting to the end of this monster novel length fic is like the last lap of a marathon and your encouragement and feedback is undoubtedly helping me to stagger over the finishing line :-D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I eventually fall asleep slumped across the table and wake a few hours later with crippling spasms in both shoulders and a plunge of wary expectancy that descends the second I open my eyes, sharp and corrosive as acid. Irrationally, considering rest is a pretty essential requirement, I still feel like I’ve negligently fallen asleep at my post and blindly fumble for the laptop with one hand and my glasses with the other. I am gratified to see that the Virtual Grahams have been up all night with increasingly ardent offers to kick Maniloa’s ass down Pennsylvania Avenue and back again (fly my pretties, fly), but from Maniloa-I’m-going-to-eviscerate-you-with-my-bare-hands-you-loathsome-rodent-faced-bastard-Brown himself, not one single word. Deliberate? Or has he simply got bored? It’s impossible to say. I gnaw on my bottom lip, scanning up and down the thread, then in a spirit of nostalgia look to see if ZombieCannibal has joined the fray – s/he indeed joined at 02.36 and has basically been offering to kick everyone’s ass, including Jack’s and Kade Purnell’s; although I’m pleased to see that the Virtual Grahams have all been standing their ground (it’s actually pretty interesting…a bit meta). Then I feel depressed rather than nostalgic because it’s dredging up memories of those wretched lonely evenings waiting for a message from you that never came; so have to remind myself that everything’s fine (sort of) and that you’re right here, right now, asleep in the next room where I should be. I want to go and join you but have a half-formed idea that I ought to monitor the website – combined with a suspicion that I may be too tired to actually move – and before I can make up my mind either way I fall asleep again, and don’t wake up until the morning when you place a cup of coffee in front of me.

“Keeping the night watch?” you say. Sleep has obviously done nothing to sate last night’s anger, and if anything your voice is shot through with even more menace than before (carefully-controlled and caustic). It’s actually rather unnerving, even though I know it’s not directed at me.

“Something like that.” I rub my hand over my face. God, I feel wrecked. “Not that he said anything of interest; just more of the usual bullshit. You were right. I may as well have gone to bed.” I straighten up, wincing at the flare of pain in my cramped muscles, and you stand behind me and begin to massage my neck and shoulders.

“My advice was correct for myself, not necessarily for you. You contain your anxiety more effectively by remaining vigilant.”

“And you?”

“I don’t experience anxiety – at least not the way in which most people understand it.”

“So what do you experience?”

“You might call it…anticipation. I have trained myself to tolerate uncertainty; cultivate an open state
of mind that can abide with enigmas and inconsistencies."

“That actually sounds quite appealing.”

“It has its uses. The opposite of certainty isn’t doubt, after all, but imagination; a blend of curiosity, enquiry and mental tractability.”

“What about me?” I hear myself saying. “When it’s about me you seem to get… I don’t know. Not anxious exactly, but…”

This makes you laugh. “Oh, well, that is certainly very true,” you say. “You have caught me out there. Your interests occupy their own little inconvenient niche in my consciousness, as does so much else where you are concerned. For example, I’m afraid I must insist on giving you money for cab fares when you go to pay your respects to Uncle Jack. You should not be loitering around subway stations at the moment.”

“Yeah, thanks.” You dig your thumbs into my shoulder blades and I squirm a bit under your hands. “I guess I should look into picking up some ID from my apartment – it would be good to hire a car for real.”

“That would probably be wise.”

“Can you move to the right a bit? Ow. It hurts.”

“Here?”

“Bit further down. Yeah, that’s it.”

“You should not sleep draped across tables.”

“Something else to punish Matthew Brown for, I suppose.”

“Certainly.” You briefly tighten your grip on my shoulders. “The behavior of himself and his confederates warrant considerable reprisal. The frustration comes from the forced delay in administering it.”

“I know, but what can we do?”

“Nothing – yet. The pieces are not fully arranged on the board.”

This makes me frown, because even though it’s not anything I didn’t already know it’s still frustrating to hear it pronounced in such a flat, immutable way. “Of course if I were able to move about as previously…” you add; which surprises me a bit, because it’s not like you to brood over pointless hypotheticals.

“But you can’t,” I say sharply.

“Indeed I can’t.”

“Speaking of which I should head off soon myself, I might as well get it over with. Oh God, Jack’s going to be unbearable.”

“Although probably no more than usual.”

“Are you sure you don’t want anything picking up? I don’t mind stopping off in town.”
“Thank you, no. Just bring yourself back and that will be more than sufficient.”

“Developing quite the sentimental side aren’t you? Where have you been keeping it all these years?”

“It has always been there: hiding in plain sight. As I remarked to you the other night there is never only one, monolithic version of anyone. No single self. I am not entirely incapable of sentiment, you were just not able to recognize it before.”

“No…I know. Although to be fair you hardly demonstrated it in conventional ways.”

“Oh, well, if it is convention you require then you would have been better off bartering pointless pleasantries with that vapid wife of yours.” You briefly press your face against my hair then reach over me to retrieve your own coffee. “The charms of uncertainty, remember? You prefer paradox and enigmas, just as I do.”

I lean back in my chair until my head is resting against your chest, and you put your cup down and replace your hands on my shoulders. “Speaking of uncertainty…” I say.

“Yes?”

“This whole situation.” I gesture at the laptop. “It’s one mass of uncertainty.” Although it’s more than that really, isn’t it? It’s anarchy. Chaos. Not that I want to use those words – they sound too melodramatic, even if they are true. “We still don’t really know what we’re dealing with,” I add instead.

“Agreed.”

“So…” I take a deep breath. “I want to be certain that we both emerge from this in one piece. That we don’t get hurt, and don’t get caught, and just leave. It’s more important than anything.”

“Thriving, free and unfettered,” you reply. “Yes, indeed. Let us both hope for that particular certainty.”

Neither of us says anything after that, and I tip my head back even further until I feel your shirt buttons pressing against the tip of my forehead. My eyes are closed so I don’t know what expression you’re wearing: I don’t even know whether you’re looking at me at all. Maybe you’re staring into space. The call with Jack disrupted last night’s conversation didn’t it? What we talk about when we talk about love. Wasn’t that the name of a film? I can’t remember. The moment’s lost now anyway; I may never know what you were intending to say. It’s probably just as well.

*****

Completely contrary to preference I force myself to get showered and dressed and then reluctantly leave you sketching on the sofa and the Virtual Grahams patrolling TattleCrime to go outside and wait for my cab. God it’s so cold. I do the best I can with my clothes (hat pulled down, scarf yanked up) then ram my hands in my pockets and stamp my feet to try and pound some warmth into my toes. The weather’s so raw and frigid. It’s not like this situation would’ve been any better if it had happened in summer, but the gloomy atmosphere is hardly doing anything to elevate my mood. The dark mornings, short days and early evenings; the rimey, frozen layers that saturate every surface, the way the sky’s a constant bruise and the wind scrapes against the skin. And the length and depth of the shadows – in fact maybe it’s that more than anything else. Ominous weather. Sinister.

The cab arrives on time and I huddle in the back while the driver grunts out something that’s meant to approximate a greeting, although he brightens up when I give him the address.
“Hey, cool man,” he says. “You a Fed?”

“No. Not really.”

He squints at me through his mirror. “You look like that guy, whatshisname…”

“Well I’m not,” I say abruptly.

“You don’t know who I’m going to say.”

“I’m not anyone you would have heard of.”

“I guess you couldn’t tell me if you were him,” replies the driver cosily. “I’ve seen those documentaries. I’ve seen them on Discovery. You can’t tell anyone who you really are, can you? Even your families don’t know.”

I’m about to point out that he’s getting confused with the CIA, but then change my mind and give him a conspiratorial eye-roll instead through his mirror, at which point he looks ready to burst with excitement. It’s a harmless enough lie, I suppose. It’ll make him happy; give him an anecdote to tell his friends about later. But really it’s more than just that: it’s because what he’s said has resonated with me. I am in disguise. I’m not ‘that guy’…not anymore. And no one understands what the reality is, they just think they do. The only one who truly knows is you.

Jack actually gives me a hug when I go into his office so I hug him back for a lack of anything better to do, at which point we both start to get awkward at exactly the same time and stand around for a few moments clearing our throats at each other in a hyper-masculine sort of way. I take my coat and hat off, but having learnt the hard way last time make sure I retain my scarf.

“Dammit Will,” says Jack. He claps me on the back so hard I nearly go flying, then grabs my shoulders and flings me into the visitor’s chair. “It’s good to see you. How are you holding up?”

“Pretty good. All things considered.”

“Sore throat?” asks Jack, gesturing at the scarf.

“Yeah, a bit.”

“Not getting sick again are you? You look a bit pale. What was that virus you had last time?”

“That would be the freak virus,” I reply with suitable dramatic flourish.

Jack nods sympathetically. “You still got your insurance package?”

“It’s fine.”

“Let me know if you need anything.”

God this is actually pretty excruciating. I wish he’d stop being so nice to me. “Thanks,” is all I say.

Jack settles himself in his chair and then peers at me rather intensely. “So – Matthew Brown.”

I raise my eyebrows and politely wait for him to continue, but he doesn’t say anything else and after a while I’m forced to put them down again. “Matthew Brown…?” I say to try and jog him on.

“The analysis on the note came back an hour ago and it definitely matched the others.”
“No surprise there then,” I say absently.

“None at all.”

“No leads either, I suppose?”

Jack grin wryly. “None at all.”

“I still don’t think Hannibal’s involved,” I say after a pause; not because I think he’s going to listen to me, but just so I can tell myself that I did what I could.

“I know you don’t. If I was you I wouldn’t want to believe it either. But I never really thought he was dead.”

“Yeah, you said at the time.”

“If you’ve got any alternative theories I’d be happy to hear them,” says Jack kindly.

“Not really. Not beyond the significance of the teeth.” And as you’ve already pointed they’re not as significant as all that, because why teeth rather than dragon symbols? Jack’s staring at me, smiling and nodding in a patronizing yet well-meant way – a teacher trying to coach a dull-witted pupil – and I feel a swell of irritation which I know is completely unfair. After all, he doesn’t have even a fraction of the information that I do…and there’s no way I can possibly tell him. If I was him I’d think exactly the same: that I’m refusing to accept the most plausible explanation because I can’t face the idea that you’ve come back. If only he knew (although thank God he doesn’t).

“You think it’s someone with a grudge against you?” prompts Jack. “Because of the Dolarhyde case?”

“I don’t know. I admit it doesn’t seem very likely.” Jack shrugs: you said it, not me. “Did he have any family?”

“Yes, but estranged. No contact since he was a kid. And trust me Will, even if they wanted to acknowledge him they’re the last people to be demanding retribution. They’d be more likely to give you a medal.”

I just shrug instead of answering. It’s not like I’ve got any leverage to influence what Jack thinks; it’s not like I even want to be here. This whole conversation is a hall of mirrors, and not only demoralizing but pointless. Because the simple fact is that not even the FBI can help me with this one.

*****

And then after that…nothing. It all goes quiet. The expression ‘lulling into a false sense of security’ comes to mind. That, and ‘waiting for the other shoe to drop’ and ‘phony war’ (‘You have forgotten the Sword of Damocles,’” you say when I tell you about it), and assorted other stupid idioms that do nothing to adequately capture the awful sense of foreboding that hangs in the air like fog. Because obviously it’s not over, and clearly this is just a reprieve, and it occurs to me more than once that the delay is all part of the endgame: a deliberate form of psychological torture. I say me rather than us, because naturally you take it in your stride and don’t evince any particular thoughts about it one way or the other beyond the enormous satisfaction you are going to derive from turning Matthew Brown and associates into a gastronomic apex (you don’t actually put it as bluntly as that, although it’s entirely obvious what you mean). Before I found your composure enormously irritating but now, like so much else, I experience it completely differently and see it as consoling and reassuring instead. Being around you calms me down and makes me feel more confident, and I absorb your self-
possession like a plant seeking sunlight. Courage from osmosis.

“I am not so very calm,” you say when I point this out. “But at present my capacity to act is limited – and fully acknowledging the extent of the restriction would drive me quite demented with irritation. Hence I subdue it and bide my time.” You smirk a bit. “Like Kipling’s Elm tree, I ‘hateth and waiteth.’”

“Don’t say that,” I blurt out.

“Why not?”

“Because… I don’t know. It sounds so bleak.”

“I dare say. But I am afraid it is true nonetheless.” You narrow your eyes at me. “Ah, I see; it strikes a rather melancholy chord for you doesn’t it? The notion of me hating and waiting. Come back to the present Will. The past is like a foreign country, the languages and customs are different and the people are not the same.”

Now I feel self-conscious and clear my throat a bit awkwardly. “I guess I can see it at times,” I add after a pause. “Your voice, your body language. Sometimes you look tense.”

“Do I? How interesting. I was not entirely aware.”

“Although clearly much more than I realized.” I smile, a bit ruefully. “It wouldn’t be the first time my observation skills have faltered around you.”

“Not necessarily; no one else would have observed half so much.”

“You seem pent-up.”

“I am. But I assimilate the worst of it and direct it into more constructive channels. Partly for my own sake, but also for yours – because it would be very objectionable for you to have to tolerate my unchecked rage on a permanent basis.” You give me a rather unsettling smile, and I wonder which past display of ‘unchecked rage’ you might be about to allude to, but in the end you don’t say anything and return to your book.

“I suppose you need a vent,” I say lightly.

“I suppose I do. It is a pity that one is not immediately forthcoming.” You pause and frown. “Would you happen to have a pen?”

I throw one over to you, which you neatly catch one-handed before beginning to make notes in the book’s margin. “I’m afraid I am rather disposed to protectiveness where you are concerned,” you continue. “Possessiveness, one might say. Although it does not do me particular credit, in that it leads me to objectify you in a manner not entirely dissimilar to Matthew Brown: the sense that you belong to me, and that anyone else attempting to acquire you being quite intolerable. It is a somewhat primitive, primal sensation that I am not really accustomed to. Nevertheless, there it is.”

“To be fair, it’s not like he’s trying to take me for dinner and a movie. He wants to kill me.”

“Indeed, I am aware of what his intentions are,” you say, and the angry undertone has returned to your voice.

“Well then. I’d say your reaction is appropriate. It’s what anyone would think.”
“That signifies nothing – what other people would think. From my perspective, the imperative conflicts with what I am used to and my sense of myself becomes ensnared within its placement to you. Ownership, you see; and all which that implies.”

“You don’t own me,” I say firmly.

“I know. You have already said so.” This time you look up and smile slightly. “I find it a constant source of aggravation.”

“So I guess the moral of this conversation is that I won’t like you when you’re angry? Which I’m afraid I already knew.” Then I add, a bit flippantly: “In the way you won’t like me when I’m psychoanalyzed.”

“I like you most of the time,” you reply, “even when you are psychoanalyzed. However it must be acknowledged that my anger and your psychoanalysis are somewhat different animals.”

“Now there’s a paradoxical statement. It could be said that historically they’ve been rather interlinked.”

“I suppose one could say that,” you reply. “If one wanted.”

“One does want.”

“And heaven forfend that one does not get what one wants.” You roll your eyes at me, but you’re smiling while you do it. “Very well, I concede your point.”

I smile too and take a sip of my coffee. “What do you want,” I hear myself saying.

“I want us to leave here together,” you reply, “and preferably sooner rather than later. I also want to dispense retribution against Matthew Brown and colleagues for their unspeakable rudeness. And while the latter may not be immediately forthcoming, it shall hopefully emerge before the former is attained.” Your eyes gleam at me over the top of your book. “In other words sooner rather than later.”

*****

To keep Jack happy I have to maintain a daily pilgrimage to the office, which alternates between tiring, irritating and a source of resentment (as shorthand: a massive pain in the ass), although I don’t really feel able to say no. Then the next week our field office wins some crappy commendation award, which is good (in a boring sort of way), the only drawback being that nobody seems to know exactly what it’s for. Price and I confer, and secretly conclude that it must be ‘Biggest Federal Balls Up of the Year Award’, considering that numbers One and Six on the FBI’s Most Wanted are technically our responsibility (…although admittedly more some people’s responsibility than others). We re-read the memo several times and consult the Handbook of Forensic Services – it takes a while to locate the latter: we finally find it wedged behind the water cooler – and ultimately decide that it’s for something impenetrable involving ‘capacity building’.

“What the hell does that even mean?” asks Zeller.

“God knows,” I reply vaguely, “perhaps it’s for the ‘Biggest Capacity Building Balls Up of the Year’?” We all start cackling and Jack, unfortunately, chooses that exact moment to walk in.

“What’s that about a balls up?” he says beadily.

“It’s just Will, being inappropriate and over-sharing,” Price replies in a virtuous tone.
“Yeah,” says Zeller, “too much information man.”

“Have you seen a doctor?” adds Price, at which point I start sniggering again, although not entirely for the reasons they think.

Jack looks decidedly unimpressed. “This lab is getting more and more like a kindergarten,” he says waspishly. “Will, you’re grinning like an idiot, what the hell’s the matter with you? Why aren’t you being intense and moody?”

“Because his bal…” begins Price.

“Because, I’m delighted about our award-winning capacity building,” I say. “Delighted.”

“Ecstatic,” adds Price, just as Zeller says: “Euphoric.”

“Knock it off, the lot of you,” growls Jack. “This is good for us. You won’t be laughing if Behavioral Sciences are downsized and you all get fired.”

“Will doesn’t actually work here anymore,” Price supplies helpfully.

“Well he consults here,” says Jack in a testy voice, “and if we get closed down he’s going to have to go and consult at the Walmart.”

“He could go and consult for the Redskins’ stadium,” replies Price thoughtfully. “He could have lots of empathetic, tormented insights about the state of their balls.”

At this point Jack (wisely) gives up and tells us he expects us all to turn up for the presentation and attend the drinks reception afterwards. This produces a series of synchronized groans. “I don’t want to hear anything else,” says Jack. “You’re all going, and that’s final. And you are going to wear suits and look smart and presentable as representatives of the Federal Bureau of Investigation which you allegedly are. And Will, for God’s sake get a haircut and shave that fluff off your face.”

I open my mouth to protest, and Jack brandishes a bossy finger at me as if it’s a loaded gun. God, he’s going to turn into the ultimate grumpy old man if he’s not careful.

“I like your fluff Will,” says Price in a stage whisper. “It’s very dashing.”

“Off!” says Jack.

“Off with his fluff!” adds Zeller, and we all crack up again, although later I find myself casting anxious glances at my reflection in the men’s room mirror and wondering if I actually look as much of a hobo as everyone seems to think. I tell you about it when I get back to the hotel and you look at me thoughtfully.

“You’re hair is fine,” you say at last (I smirk a bit at this because I know you like my hair – I’ve seen you staring at it before, and you often tug it when we’re having sex, and stroke it when we’re not). “That said, I can somewhat sympathize with Jack Crawford regarding your aversion to razor blades.”

“Fine. So you also think I look like a homeless person?”

“No, although you appear to think that yourself,” you pause and look thoughtful again. “Would you let me shave you?”

“Ugh, no, that would be weird. Why would you even want to?”

“Because I like your face. Your bone structure: the way your features feel beneath your skin.” You
shrug elegantly. “Humor me,” you say.

“The event’s not ‘til next week.”

“Then I will have to do it several times.”

Which means I’ll need to let you have at me with a sharp object. In spite of myself I’m not sure how comfortable I am with it, but of course I still let you anyway. We end up doing it in bed, with you straddling me as I lean against the headboard, your knees on either side of my chest. I’m completely pinned in place underneath you: it feels like a f**ked-up trust exercise. You hold my head still with one hand and meticulously scrape away along my face and neck, and although you don’t so much as nick me I feel vaguely unsettled the entire time.

“God, hurry up,” I say. “You’re crushing me, you weigh a ton.”

“Do not be so impatient. Immaculate results require a level of investment.”

“‘Immaculate results’? You’re shaving my face, not painting the Sistine Chapel.”

“Well, you are a work of art. In your own strange little way. Why are you fidgeting so much? Are you nervous?”

“Not as much as I probably should be.”

“And why should you be?”

“Because you, a cutthroat razor, and my throat are all hanging out together.”

You give me a slightly wolfish smile, but all you actually say is: “You are, on occasion, utterly ridiculous.” You move off me and replace the razor in a bowl by the side of the bed, staring at me contemplatively.

“How do I look?”

“Very charming,” you say. “Antinous, or a young Raphael. Nevertheless, I’m afraid I must admit that I preferred you before. Not that you don’t look rather beautiful like this, but it makes you appear much younger than you are. Fragile – more vulnerable. And because of that you will attract negative attention.”

“Is that so?” I say irritably. “It’s just as well I can look after myself then, isn’t it?”

“It is,” you reply with a smile. “As I have previously had cause to observe you are what is known as ‘small but deadly.’”

“I am not small.”

“No, you are just not entirely large.”

“Meaning you are, I suppose? That implies I’m the brains of the operation and you’re just the muscle.” I pull myself upright and flex my arms. “God this ceremony is going to be dull. I wish I didn’t have to go.”

“It may do you good; provide a distraction.”

“Distracting does not equate with desirable. Breaking my leg would also be a distraction.”
“Very true,” you say. “Although speaking of distractions, you will be pleased to observe that I have returned the bonsai.”

“You didn’t? You mean you left the suite? You said you…”

“It is fine. I did it during the night so there was no one around to witness the return of stolen goods except assorted staff who know me anyway. In fact it was the same individuals who were on duty the evening you arrived, so it could be said that they know you too.”

“Hilarious. You mean they know me to be a sex worker?”

“At any rate, they were very pleased to have it restored. In fact they were so pleased I was able to negotiate an exchange. Something else for the room.”

“I can’t believe you’ve been standing around in full view in the lobby having conversations with those stupid people.”

“‘Conversation’ implies reciprocity so is not a suitable word. Rather they talked while I listened and envisioned their stuffed and seasoned faces simmering in a braisier.”

“How charming.”

“Isn’t it?” You take my hand and kiss the back of it in a mock-serious way. “Tell me, would you like to see what I acquired in exchange?”

Oh God, knowing you it’s probably literally someone’s face in a braisier. I’ll have to pretend to be delighted (‘wow, amazing, my very own face in a braisier. You shouldn’t have’). “I don’t know,” I say cautiously. “Do I?”

You give a slow, leisurely smile then lightly trail a finger along my cheekbone. “Certainly you do. In fact you could not merely see, but additionally perceive and observe. One might even say comprehend.” Your face is so close to mine your breath is skimming my eyelashes and I’m expecting you to kiss me so part my lips in anticipation – but you just smile again then stand up and stroll into the other room, returning a few moments later with a large Louis Philippe style mirror.

“Ohhh,” I say.

“Oh yes,” I hear myself saying, and when you begin unfastening my shirt – lingering and leisurely – I spin round and crush my mouth against yours, frantically tearing at your clothes whilst also trying
to rip my own off because the separation posed by the fabric is unbearable. My eyes keep sliding back to the mirror the whole time; and contrary to expectation I don’t feel remotely self-conscious because I’m so transfixed by how incredibly erotic the whole scene is – how good we look together. I end up kneeling in front of you with my back against your chest, gasping and trembling as you slowly jerk me off with one hand while caressing my face and throat with the other; and I watch myself as you watch me.

“It feels good doesn’t it?” you say quietly. “To see yourself? Look into your own eyes Will. Admire what is written in them.” You remove your hand from my face and slide your index finger into my mouth to wet it, then stroke in slow teasing circles for a few seconds before pushing it deep inside me. I gasp something unintelligible in response, then falter slightly because I don’t quite know how I want to move: down onto your hand yet forward into your fist, but backwards as well because the taut, strong lines of your chest are enticing and I want to feel as much of you against me as possible. My skin is so warm and damp. I’m starting to quiver, so cling onto you to stay balanced.

“You like it too don’t you?” My voices sounds heavy: dark and resonant. “You love watching me.”

“I do.”

“You’ve always loved it. You never could take your eyes off me.”

“And yet you noticed but never objected?”

“No…ah…I didn’t”

“One might therefore conclude that you liked it.”

I moan instead of answering and let my head fall back against your shoulder, twining my arms around so I can tug your hair; it must be hurting you but you don’t try and stop me. Talking is becoming a real effort now, each word punctuated by the desperate panting sounds I’m making…Oh God, everything feels so good. “Were you imagining fucking me?” I finally gasp out.

“Not entirely. It was more like a motif than a specific action: simply the idea of possessing you.” You press your finger upwards, slick and smooth, and expertly use the tip to rub my prostate; and I moan again, spreading my legs wider apart as I arch my entire body against yours. Your hand’s wet now from where I’m leaking pre-come all over you and the slippery softness of it is blissful as you ease me towards complete abandonment. Oh God, I’m so close, I can’t possibly last much longer.

“Didn’t…quite succeed…did you?” I manage to say.

“I did not. I never imagined that hearing you announce ‘I belong to myself, not to you’ would give me such satisfaction, and yet it does. You have conquered and subdued me but I find I don’t resent it. I am entirely content in defeat.” You brush your lips across my temple. “Tell me mylimasis; are you going to press the triumph, or show some mercy?”

“You don’t deserve any mercy…oh, oh, that feels so good.”

“I don’t believe you are quite so pitiless. Are you Will? You are not going to exploit your victory in such a mercenary way. What might you deign to accept as a tribute, do you think? Would you allow me to breathe you in, let me explore all that dark terrain inside yourself? Sleep in my arms, let me hold you and know you?” My face is tilted sideways to rest against yours, and you gently nudge me so I’m facing towards the mirror. “Open your eyes,” you say quietly. “Look at yourself. You are exquisite; such dangerous and lethal beauty with a slim, dark soul. Perfectly designed to fascinate and inspire…and so very vulnerable, yet always unbowed and unbroken. A little wild thing. Would
you let me interpret your sense and feeling in the way that you have breached mine?”

“Oh God, yes, yes. Always.”

Your eyes meet mine in the mirror. “You overpower me,” you say.

And that’s enough. It’s more than enough. I’m so – oh. I can’t think anymore, can’t speak. There’s nothing except you. I can hear someone gasping your name and realize it’s me; then I’m falling back onto you, shuddering in your arms and crying out desperately as I start to come… and its silhouettes laced with malign shades, white light bleeding black, shadows with the light behind them and youyouyou.

“That’s it,” you say gently. “I’ve got you. Lean back against me. Oh Will.”

I find I can’t quite speak afterwards so don’t even try – what is there to possibly say? – and just pull you down onto the bed instead so I can kiss you, pillaging your mouth as if my life depends on it and roughly clawing my fingers along your neck and chest. Eventually you flip me onto my back so you can get on top of me; and I lie gasping underneath you, my breath harsh and ragged, straining my neck upwards to try and reach your mouth and practically snarling each time you deliberately shift your face just out of reach.


“I never left.”

“No, perhaps not; merely in hiding. After all, I believe we have agreed that there is never only one – of anybody.” This time you let me kiss you until I lose myself in it and I eventually fall asleep, sated and exhausted and face down on the mattress, while you lie next to me and stroke my hair then smooth your palm up and down my back. I wake up a few hours later to find that you’re still there, poised and still as if you’ve been watching me the whole time; and I stare up at your face and love you. Then I drag you upright and we do it all over again, except this time with the positions reversed; degenerate and passionate as I curl myself adoringly over your back, biting your shoulder hard enough to break the skin and tasting the faint tang of your blood as I stare at you smiling at me through the mirror.

*****

I’m vaguely hoping that Jack will forget about me attending the award ceremony (or come to his senses and realize that I am the worst possible person to have present) but as usual my luck does not hold up and I receive the formal invitation a few days later. It’s snugly packaged in a glossy, embossed envelope and is composed, somewhat ludicrously, in the third person: “The Cane Foundation requests the pleasure of the company of Mr Will Graham, who is kindly requested to RSVP at his earliest convenience…” I stare at it and blink in confusion. Does that mean I have to RSVP in the third person as well?

Mr Will Graham is very sorry that he is unavailable…

It is with considerable regret that Mr Will Graham is not able to attend …

‘Speechless with grief’ does not adequately capture the crushing disappointment of Mr Will Graham…

Mr Will Graham is currently bedridden in a state of catatonic misery because he is unable to…

Hello this is Dr Hannibal Lecter. You haven’t heard from me for a while, but it is my sad duty to
inform you that Mr Will Graham has actually died of disappointment and will therefore be unable to RSVP at his own or anyone else’s convenience…

“What do you have there?” you say. I show it to and you scan it up and down then roll your eyes.

“Yes, exactly,” I say gloomily.

“It is being hosted by The Cane Foundation; isn’t that the same institution which awarded the scholarship to that very disagreeable colleague of yours?”

“Sanderson? Yes. Yes it is. God, your memory is supernatural.”

“So he will be there? And you shall have to endure his company all evening.”

“Yes. Aren’t I lucky?”

You neither confirm nor deny this, but just give me a slightly beady look and ask me where the venue is and what time I expect to return to the hotel. This turns out to be the first of numerous questions, as you end up taking a completely unexpected level of interest in the whole thing. I mull this over and ultimately decide that it’s because you’re feeling wistful at the thought of a tinselly, flamboyantly pretentious event that you won’t be able to go to and are opting to live it vicariously through me (in other words…exactly like a pushy stage mother).

“Do you want me to teach you how to dance?” you ask when I tell you the name of the string quartet that’s been hired (musicians who I’d never heard of, but the mere mention of which make you look more wistful than ever).

“No,” I say. “No I do not.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind taking the female role”

“Why are you saying that like it’s some kind of enormous concession? If you didn’t it would mean I’d have to preface all invitations with ‘sorry, you should be aware that I only know the female steps.’ I have absolutely no intention of dancing with anyone,” (I shudder a bit at the thought), “so there’s really no need. But don’t think I’m not grateful for offering to teach me to dance like a woman.” You just sit there looking serene, and I’m actually quite surprised that your insane levels of possessiveness are being so equanimical at the idea of me dancing with anyone who’s not you (although it’s possible that you’re just trying to find an excuse to murder someone). Later on you change tack and start pestering me about ensuring I look presentable, which is a refrain you keep returning to with tedious regularity over the next few days. I silently vow that if you attempt to touch my hair in anyway (including, but not limited to, actually trying to comb it as if I’m a toddler) then strong words will have to be exchanged – because, seriously. Fortunately you don’t go that far, although you do start twitching with horror when you see the shirt I’m intending to wear (you literally do twitch: it makes quite amusing viewing).

“Will Graham,” you say severely, “if you persist in being exposed to public view in that…in that sartorial abomination, then I will permanently and irrevocably disown you. And how is it that no one of your generation is aware of the correct way to fasten a tie?”

“Oh God, who cares? It’s only one shirt, for one night. I never mind what I wear.”

“Yes,” you say, “that is painfully apparent. When we first met you looked as if your mother was still choosing your clothes for you.”

I try, and fail, to look offended, ultimately starting to laugh instead. “That doesn’t mean I’m going to
let you choose my clothes for me. Anyway you can talk – most of your outfits were completely ridiculous. You looked like you had a criminally insane person living in your closet telling you what to wear.” For good measure I add: “As well as maintaining your interior décor.”

Your lips quirk at that. “You are a terror,” you say.

“You love it, you liar.”

“I suppose I do,” you reply. “I must be criminally insane.” You re-fasten my tie for me in a series of quick, efficient flicks and then wave me off. I feel like a teenager being sent to the prom.

“This is going to be awful,” I say dolefully. “I should have called Jack and pretended to be sick.”

“You could indeed have done that but you did not. You feel a sense of loyalty towards him and don’t wish to disappoint.” You look a bit smug. “You have only yourself to blame.”

“Thanks. I’m so glad we had this conversation, I feel much better now. Any other comforting insights to offer?”

You look thoughtful. “Not particularly,” you eventually say. “It is an evening of forced confinement with FBI officials and government representatives. Hieronymus Bosch himself could not envisage a more perfect image of hell.”

“That’s great, thanks.”

“You are welcome.”

“I bet you’d still have gone if you could,” I say pointedly.

“Indeed, I would have accompanied you if I could; but there will be plenty of opportunities for such things in the future.” You coil yourself onto the sofa and smile at me beatifically. “And in more convivial surroundings which less closely resemble hell.”

Although I automatically scowl at you I’m not really listening because I’ve suddenly realized that this is the first evening we won’t spend together since I came back and I don’t really like the idea of leaving you. Then I promptly feel embarrassed for either noticing or caring. I bet you don’t care. “What are you going to do?” I say instead.

“I shall wait here for you to return,” you say innocently. “What else would I do?”

*****

Christ this is dull. I down several glasses of wine to try and douse my social anxieties then Price and I play tic-tac-toe on the back of our menus during the speeches before switching to Hangman when the presentations get going. I win the first three games (‘bullshit,’ ‘boring’ and then ‘zephyr,’ just to be a dick about it) and he wins the next one with ‘smartass’ (although only because I thought he was trying to get his revenge for zephyr with ‘saintess’). He draws some curly hair and a pair of glasses on the hanged man and I give a snort of not-very-discreet laughter, at which point Jack whips round and gives us his patented ‘There are 25 ways to kill an adult male with one’s bare hands and I know them all, you little shits’ glare. He must be practicing it in the mirror because it seems to be getting more exaggerated every time he does it.

“You’re drunk, Graham,” hisses Sanderson accusingly across the table.

“And you’re an asshole,” I reply in a bored voice, “but at least in the morning I’ll be sober.”
“If I were you I’d prefer to stay drunk. The shit’s really hit the fan where you’re concerned hasn’t it? Don’t worry though, we’re all here to help you get back on your feet.”

His tone is ostensibly civil but it’s very obvious that what he really means is ‘fall flat on your ass.’ I stare at him warily, but as usual it’s impossible to intuit how much is blustering bullshit or whether there’s a kernel of genuine threat in there. Although he’s still wrong (also as usual) because I’m not drunk – and never will be again as long as you’re within a 1000 yard radius. As soon as possible I escape into the reception room to locate an obliging pillar to hide behind and daydream about you (in an admittedly mawkish and embarrassing way) until I can decently leave without Jack losing his shit. Then I spot Alana over by the bar: she looks happy and beautiful – radiant in a shimmering sienna dress that’s so close-fitting it’s as if molasses has been drizzled over her body and left to set – and the sight is enough to overcome my social allergies and make me head over.

She makes a sweet little ‘ooh’ noise when I tap her on the shoulder and I find myself cracking the first genuine smile of the evening. “It’s really good to see you!” we chant in unison.

“You seem so well Will,” she keeps saying (the level of tacit surprise that I actually look well for once is somewhat dispiriting, as if it’s something I shouldn’t really be capable of). “You’ve lost that fine-drawn look you had. The last few times I saw you, you were...well ....”

“Yeah, it was a difficult time.”

“It sure was. But look at you now! You look great. So what have you been up to? Tell me everything.”

“Oh y’know,” I reply vaguely. “Stuff.” This is obviously not good enough, so she attempts to narrow it down by enquiring after my work, apartment and love life (and I promptly lie about the status of all three), before we end up getting cornered by some random senator who clearly doesn’t give a shit about the FBI and is only there for the free booze. I know Jack will never forgive me if I tell a senator to fuck off, but it’s increasingly tempting because she proceeds to industriously flirt with me while her husband flirts with Alana. Then they switch over halfway through, so it’s the husband who keeps staring meaningfully into my eyes and squeezing my arm when he wants to make a point, whereas the senator is telling Alana what a picturesque couple she and I make, but isn’t it true that monogamy can be somewhat confining, and doesn’t Alana agree? I crack first and start to cackle with laughter in an extremely rude way, and Alana apologises for me saying I’ve had too much to drink while struggling mightily to keep a straight face herself. Then the husband starts dropping heavy hints about having a rest in their hotel suite, and I solemnly tell him it’s not a good idea because I am prone to dual stress incontinence whenever I’m drunk, at which point Alana really does start laughing. Unfortunately they don’t recognize this for the ‘please stop sexually harassing me’ statement it obviously is (instead construing it as some kind of tragic medical problem) – and Alana looks like she’s going to choke with mirth, and I’m mentally configuring the risk-benefit ratio of telling a US senator to fuck off during an FBI reception, when further social annihilation is finally and fortunately averted by a tall, dark-haired man in a tuxedo who abruptly descends on me crying “Will! Will Graham! Great to see you again” – and I gratefully allow him to shepherd me off even though I don’t have a fucking clue who he is.

“Hey, remember me?” he says. He tells me his name (which I can’t quite catch over all the noise –it’s either Tim or Tom), and I can see from his lapel button that he works for the Cane Foundation, but beyond that…fuck all.

“Of course I remember you,” I say with fake sincerity. Which of course is fatal because I’ve now committed myself to The Lie and am going to have to stand by it until we go beyond the point of no return and it becomes obvious that I had zero awareness of his existence before 10 seconds ago. Oh
well. I can feel my phone go off and am hoping it might be you. “Excuse me a moment,” I say.

Are you intending to return any time soon?

Can’t leave yet, another hr maybe. Btw, every1 here misses u enormously & hopes to see u soon.

What a comedian you are.

Thx.

I look back up at Tim/Tom, who’s resolutely refusing to take the hint and is still standing there beaming at me. “Sorry about that,” I say.

“No problem Will, I can imagine how in demand you are.”

I can feel my phone buzz again with another message. “Sorry,” I add, “just one second.”

“Take all the time you need, please.”

Incidentally, what do you mean ‘btw’?

Brotherhood of Timber Workers.

I beg your pardon?

Kidding. Btw = ‘burn the Wiccans.’

Have you been drinking by any chance?

Not as much as necessary to survive this crap. Btw = ‘by the way.’

You are a strange boy.

I smirk to myself, then reluctantly put my cell back in my pocket. “Sorry,” I say again, even though I’m not.

“It’s fine, honestly.”

“So,” I say, “um, how’re things?”

“Great Will. Everything’s just great. Yourself?”

“Great,” I say a bit helplessly. So that’s that. What are we supposed to talk about now that we’ve established how mutually great everything is? What do people talk about? Now I wish I’d said everything was shit…I wonder if it’s too late to tell him that I’d like to change my answer?

“Good turn out,” he says, gesturing at the hordes of guests.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Well, you guys should be celebrated. You do admirable work Will. Admirable.”

“Admirable,” I say, nodding away.

“You yourself, for instance…” he pauses meaningfully and I realize I’m still nodding so force myself to stop. “Well, it goes without saying your reputation precedes you.”

“Of course it does!” he says merrily. “Of course it does Will!” Oh God, this guy’s such an idiot; why can’t he just fuck off? Why am I standing here being polite to him when all I want him to do is fuck off? My problem is that I’m fundamentally a shit person trapped in a nice person’s body. Mentally I add ‘social masochist’ and ‘bastard in non-bastard body’ to my scrolling list of psychological hang-ups, and he stands there beaming at me the entire time. Thankfully the promise of rescue promptly arrives in the shape of Jack, who claps me on the back before turning round to greet this over-zealous asshole (whose name turns out to be neither Tim nor Tom, but Dorian. What?...How?), and I patiently wait for them to establish how great everything is, and what a good turnout, and isn’t the FBI admirable, before trying to extricate myself. Unfortunately though, this strategy is foiled by the fact Jack’s having none of it, actually putting his hand on my shoulder to make me stay still.

Dorian is still vigorously shaking Jack’s hand. “Rather a treat to see Will here,” he says. Dorian; what kind of stupid name is that anyway? It’s even worse than yours. I bet it’s not even his real name; he probably just uses it to makes himself more memorable. I bet his real name is Wayne, or Kevin, or…

“Will?”

“Yeah?”

“I was just saying that I was hoping to convince you to do an interview for the Foundation’s bulletin. Perhaps you could help me persuade him, Jack?”

“I’m sure he’d be delighted,” says Jack pointedly, just as I’m opening my mouth to object.

“We’d be so thrilled.”

“I can imagine – Will always generates a lot of interest wherever he goes.”

“Yes, he’s quite the celebrity isn’t he?”

“I’m sure he deserves it,” Jack replies in a hearty voice.

I’m now getting to the point where I feel it’s only sensible to tell them that they’re getting on perfectly well without me so why don’t I just leave them to it, when Sanderson appears (never rains – pours) and also greets Dorian before turning deferentially to Jack. The compulsion to discuss me in the third person as if I’m not there is obviously infectious, because he promptly starts doing it too.

“Sorry to interrupt Mr Crawford,” he says, “but Senator Smith and her husband have requested that Agent Graham escort them to their limo.”

Oh God, not those two again. The fuck? I glance over in horror to where they’re stood; they actually wave at me. Christ. I give Jack a beseeching look, which I intend him to translate as: Please don’t make me do this. Jack’s answering frown implies: Are you kidding me? Get out there right now – and be nice about it.

I open my eyes a bit wider: But look at them. They’re so lame.

To which Jack’s eyebrows respond with: Will Graham, I’ll count to three and then I’ll kick your ass.

I knit my own eyebrows: Come on Jack. Don’t be a dick.
Jack takes a step forward: *One…two…*

“Okay, *fine,*” I say.

“That’s my boy,” says Jack sardonically, before adding in an undertone: “And don’t even *think* about wandering off. If you’re not back here in 15 minutes I’m coming out for you myself.”

“Honestly Jack, it’s like you think I don’t actually *want* to be here.”

Jack pats me on the back in a horrendously patronizing way. “Off you go,” he says. “And be nice. Remember, she’s influential. Here you go Ma’am,” he adds in a louder voice, “Agent Graham is delighted to be at your disposal.”

“Doesn’t Will have lovely manners,” says the senator loudly. “Anyone who says that young people today don’t have lovely manners simply doesn’t know what they’re talking about.”

“And not a second more than 15 minutes,” hisses Jack in another bossy undertone; which quite frankly is some obsessive compulsive bullshit right there. I’m tempted to stick my arms and legs out like a dog that doesn’t want to be taken to the vet, but ultimately concede the inevitable and accompany them downstairs. Fortunately Jack’s 15 minute curfew spares me any further invitations to come back to their hotel, although I still have to stand and shiver on the sidewalk while the parking valet fetches their car and they torment me with long, boring stories about their kids.

“Our youngest starts at Stanford next fall,” says the husband. “And our eldest has just had her first baby.”

“A grandmother! Imagine that,” trills the senator, obviously waiting for a rejoinder along the lines of ‘*there’s no way you look old enough Ma’am*’ that I resolutely refuse to give (and wouldn’t have done even if it were true. Which it is not).

“Just adorable,” says the husband smugly.

“That’s nice,” I reply with false enthusiasm.

“Oh yes, it’s lovely. Do you have any children?”


After they’ve gone I lean against the wall and relieve my feelings by mentally and extravagantly cursing the FBI, Stanford, the Senate, and parking valets respectively, then force myself to contemplate going back inside. “But I don’t want to,” I mutter under my breath. I sound somewhat ridiculous, like a petulant child, but I can’t help it because it’s true: I *don’t* want to. The weight of the mask I’m forced to wear around those people is growing increasingly tiresome, chafing and scratching and begging to be ripped off and trampled underfoot. How am I supposed to stand it? How could *anyone* stand it for so many years?

On an impulse I whip out my cell to text Jack (*getting some air to clear my head – back by half past*) and fire it off before I can change my mind. It’s not like it’s entirely untrue; while I’m not drunk I’m undoubtedly feeling a bit flushed and hazy, so perhaps some fresh air really might help? I’ll walk around the block; maybe two blocks. And then I’ll go back. My cell chimes in my pocket: Jack. *If you’re not in here and charming VIPs by half past then I’m sending someone down.* I can’t tell if he’s joking or not. Surely he must be? A bewigged and besuited corpse would be better at charming VIPs than I am.

It’s so cold. Possibly it’ll snow again soon. That would be nice; the roads might get blocked and
we’d have an excuse to stay in the hotel. My mind easily drifts over the possibilities of this, footsteps echoing mournfully in the deserted street, and it’s only the sight of a gaping alleyway to the left that conjures up a sudden, vivid recollection of Matthew Brown and reminds me that I should have stayed closer to the venue. Actually I should probably, definitely have stayed closer. I’m a fucking idiot sometimes: no wonder someone tries to kill me on an average of 4.2 times a year. I abruptly turn to head back, and it’s at that exact point that someone grabs my arm, clamps their hand over my mouth (irony!) and I’m being pushed up against a wall and trying to yell before I realize that it’s you.

“Christ!” I hiss. My voice comes out in an embarrassingly high-pitched squeak, and I clear my throat to try and hide it. “You scared the living crap out of me, you complete...dick. What the hell are you doing here?”

You stand across from me, the slight smile on your face not remotely detracting from how ominous and imposing you look – shadows and half-light always suited you – and after so long in the hotel and apartment I realise there’s something rather unnerving about seeing you out in the open without warning. I’m no longer used to it: it’s like stumbling across a wild animal that’s escaped from its cage. Nevertheless I can still feel fear giving way to anger. “Are you mad?” I hiss. “You do realize that half the FBI is literally two blocks away.”

“You have the most wonderful gift of overstatement,” you reply. “It is hardly ‘half the FBI,’ as opposed to Uncle Jack and some hand-picked acolytes.”

This is all now starting to feel vaguely surreal. It’s your composure, I think – the total lack of concern. It’s diluting my grip on the situation: alkaline calmness that neutralizes the acidic fear and irritation. I suppose you’ve always lived in the eye of the storm: catch-me-if-you-can. Stupidly and pointlessly I realize that I’m getting ready to protest that I am in no way one of Jack’s acolytes – handpicked or otherwise – but before I can manage it you just pull me close and murmur into my ear, “It would also appear that even the thought of seeing you does appalling things to my self-control,” and my mind briefly goes blank so I can’t say anything at all (which is doubtless what you intended). Instead I snatch your arm and roughly tug you a few paces away into the alley. You allow me to do it, although I’m under no illusions that you’re only humoring me and could easily pull away if you wanted to.

“This is crazy,” I whisper furiously. “Jesus, do you actually want to get caught?”

“I will not get caught.”

“Do you want me to get caught?”

“I will not allow that to happen either. To borrow your phrasing, I would murder ‘half the FBI’ before I allowed anyone to take you away from me.” You pull me back towards you so I’m tucked against your chest. “You’ve been sitting with Jack Crawford haven’t you? I can smell him on you.”

“Oh God, don’t do that, it’s so weird.”

“Who else have you been talking to?” You kiss the side of my mouth. “I imagine you were the centre of attention the entire time. Everyone staring at you,” (kiss) “yearning for you,” (kiss) “captivated by how beautiful and unique you are. I can tolerate them looking, but they are absolutely not permitted to touch. I would destroy anyone who tried.”

“You wouldn’t have to,” I say irritably, “I’d do it myself. For God’s sake! You need to leave now.” I’m clinging onto the lapels of your coat, and the awareness of it is somewhat confusing: as if I want you to stay and go at the same time.
You reach up and begin to loosen my grip, delicately unhooking one finger after another. “I shall leave when I have accomplished what I came here to do,” you reply smoothly. “This is not an impulse of the moment. It is as I remarked to you several days ago; as long as my capacity to act in certain directions is limited then I intend to channel the impetus to act into more promising channels.”

“Channels?”

“Well, perhaps more like a small tributary.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I say helplessly. “You need to go. Right now. Please. This is insanely risky.”

“Dearest Will,” you reply, “you speak as if I’m engaged in some kind of reckless speculation.” Now you’re stroking my hair, pulling so hard my head’s starting to jerk back. “It is, in fact, a calculated interaction with uncertainty. When have I ever taken a risk that was not entirely successful?”

“Oh, let me think…how about when you stood next to me by the side of a cliff?”

“Yet see the dividends that risk ultimately paid?” you say. “And if I am not much mistaken, here comes our channel now.” I’m vaguely aware that you’re staring at something over the top of my shoulder, but before I can turn round you crush your lips against mine and in spite of every better instinct I find myself arching up against you and moaning wantonly into your mouth. Which is exactly how Sanderson finds us when he turns round the corner a few seconds later.

Chapter End Notes

Huge hugs and thanks to puzzleboxes for the gorgeous art for this chapter, which you can check out here if you’d like to :-D

Speaking of which, has everyone already seen this striking fanart? Wait…what do you mean it’s not fanart? What? What’s that you say? It’s the official soundtrack cover that Dino de Laurentis posted? Oh. Well, okay then. But they’re obviously still just dudebros and platonic besties aren’t they? AREN’T THEY? Amirite? For realz.
#Bromance
#JustChillingAndKillingWithMyBro
#Hannibro
#MostPlatonicAlbumArtSinceTitanic

And finally, speaking of Bros, many thanks to the wonderful cosmobubbles (who saves me from Mr Google’s Translators of Tears and Bullshit for the Lithuanian dialogue), who supplied me with the loveliest explanation of what ‘mylimasis’ actually means.
Expect to see it appearing regularly from here on in :-) 

Right, I’m done. Woo! See you soon.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

1) Ridiculously long chapter ahoy! Seriously, it’s 13k words. Blimey. Make yourselves comfortable my dears.

2) I suspect everyone in this fandom is fairly unshockable, but please be aware that this chapter contains a canon-typical crime scene. There’s loads of forewarning though, so it’ll be easy to skip it if you prefer.

3) All the hugs and thanks to FannibalBea for my new profile picture, which she made on the grounds that this fic is basically (and I quote) “Sassy Will on sass steroids” xD

There is a prolonged, agonized pause in which I stare numbly at Sanderson, and Sanderson stares silently at me, and you just stand there watching us both and looking gloriously unconcerned by the whole thing. I can hear the wail of sirens from a few blocks away, and for a few anguished seconds assume that they’re coming to claim us before reminding myself that there’s no way Sanderson’s been able to call anyone…yet. My heart’s pounding in my ears. How has this happened? I can’t quite believe it’s happened; I think I’m in shock.

Sanderson recovers himself before I do. “Jeez! What the fuck is this?” he says. His gaze is darting from one of us to the other, and I recognize the exact second he realizes who you are because his eyes widen fractionally and he takes a step back. He doesn’t run though (why?...Why the hell doesn’t he run?). Then I process the way that he’s looking at me, and of course I know exactly why: it’s because he thinks my presence muzzles you in some way. That catching us unexpectedly – seemingly vulnerable and compromised – gives him an advantage and, consequently, that me being here dilutes the threat posed by you. What a fucking idiot.

“So,” he says, and lets out a low whistle. “Will Graham shacked up with the Chesapeake Ripper. What the hell, pal? Are you some kind of gay?” He takes a step closer. Christ, is he out of his mind? “You know I always believed those rumours about you,” he says, “that you’re not quite right.” He taps the side of his head. “Seriously though…You and him? Seriously?”

There’s a beat of silence, and shock and confusion notwithstanding it’s still not difficult to summon a response. “I guess I’m not,” I say. “And yes we are.” My voice sounds incredibly calm and controlled, and I take a step closer to you without even fully realizing that I’m doing it. United we stand.

“Okay.” His eyes are still flicking from me to you. “Okay, I get what’s going on here.”

“I am so glad,” you reply smoothly. “When Will has given you such a pithy summarisation, it would be a great shame if you did not.”

This interjection has a striking effect. It’s as if up until that point it was just between me and him, and now you’ve suddenly entered the game and the whole dynamic shifts. The impact on Sanderson is palpable: it’s not as if you’ve said anything threatening, but the mere sound of your voice is enough to make his bravado temporarily falter and he swallows and takes a step back, his tongue darting nervously over his lips. “Look guys,” he says, “I’m not going to make trouble for you. Okay? Live
You’re just staring at him with an expression of polite interest on your face. You actually look vaguely amused. He glances at you again and goes quiet.

“Please – do continue,” you say.

“Okay…look. I know even Graham’s not crazy enough to do anything to me with Jack Crawford just five minutes away,” (you smile and nod appreciatively at that) “and I don’t want any trouble. How about a deal, you wanna do a deal? Reciprocity? Y’know?”

“A wonderful principle,” you say.

“I won’t say anything, okay. I won’t tell anyone. Not a word…” he trails off and looks at you again.

“And in exchange…?” you say encouragingly.

“How about a bit of cash? Just to seal the deal? Then you know you can trust me: a helping hand, y’know? You help me; I help you.”

“Excellent,” you reply cheerfully, as if it’s the most fucking amazing plan you’ve ever heard in your life – and your smile, if possible, gets even broader. “I believe we have acquired an understanding, Agent Sanderson.”

You lightly roll the ‘r’ in his name, which in your smoky accent manages to simultaneously sound both menacing and ever-so-slightly erotic (wait…what?). God knows how you’ve managed to work out it’s him from my shitty description, but you obviously have. And then as soon as I’ve thought this I feel like slapping my palm against my forehead – because of course, how could I be so fucking stupid? It’s not a coincidence at all, it’s the sole reason you’re here. You always said you were going to get him and although I told you not to you never actually agreed. But I didn’t seriously think that you would. The risk…the danger of it…I really didn’t think that you would. Maybe it’s not so much that I’m stupid, but that I gave you more credit for restraint and discretion than you actually deserve (despite the fact you’ve always blatantly rejected both these things).

Sanderson is still watching us, the familiar, complacent smile beginning to twitch around the edges of his mouth. Of course the arrogant prick doesn’t find it remotely suspicious that you know who he is; he probably assumes that everyone from you downwards on the FBI’s Most Wanted live in constant terror of him showing up. “Great!” he says, “That’s great.” And in that moment I feel an overwhelming surge of pity and contempt for how spectacularly he’s underestimated who and what he’s dealing with. He actually thinks he has some semblance of control in this, that you are taking him and his proposal seriously. He doesn’t realize that you’re just playing with him; a cat idly swiping at a mouse before it rips it to pieces.

“So, we’re good then?” he adds. “You help me, I help you.”

“Of course,” you reply smoothly, “that sounds like a mutually beneficial arrangement.” You hold up a long finger. “If you would be so kind as to give us just one moment?”

You put your hand on my back and turn me slightly towards you, lowering your voice so he can’t hear. “Yes?” you say. Your eyes are bearing into me like glowing coals, and I know that I should say No, that I should tell you to give him the fucking money and we can make a run for it. We can go tonight, right now, right this minute. I know I should do these things but I don’t; of course I don’t. Instead I hesitate for a few meaningless seconds. And then I nod. Because even though this is the final line – especially curated by you for the purpose – there’s no doubt I’m ready and willing to
cross it. I’ll cross it with you, and what’s more we’ll get away with it. We can make it look like a street brawl, a mugging gone wrong, and no one will ever know. Because we can do that. Because we can think quicker, and run faster, and fight harder than anyone else – and because we’re special, and the normal rules don’t apply.

You stare back at me for a few seconds and a glint of recognition flickers between us like a flame sparking on gasoline before you abruptly turn back to Sanderson. “Excellent,” you reply in your normal voice. “We seem to have reached an agreement.”

Sanderson glances triumphantly at me, his face twisted in a crooked sneer, but I ignore him because I’m too preoccupied with you. I can’t stop looking at your lips; if he wasn’t here I’d kiss you again. I’d push you up against the wall and claim you: savage your mouth and scrape my fingers over your skin. Devour you. Because this is it now, it’s really going to happen. We’re really going to do this. We’re going to take him down – you and me – and it’s not wrong, it’s right, because he’s tried to mess with us, and no one messes with us, no one…

I quickly swing round to look Sanderson straight in the eyes and he immediately sees what’s written on my face. He flinches. I stare at him. You stare at me. Sanderson takes a step back, so I take a step forward…and promptly flinch myself, because from a distance – but getting nearer, getting closer all the time – comes a horribly familiar voice shouting “Will! Will! You there?”

While Sanderson and I both go rigid you just make a vaguely irritated noise, as if Jack’s imminent arrival is a minor inconvenience as opposed to a total fucking disaster. There’s a fractional pause where your eyes meet mine, then we both shift into action at the same time: me sprinting to the end of the alleyway while you pinion Sanderson against your chest and clamp down over his mouth with your other hand. It’s accomplished in seconds, and I’m aware that you’ve got him silenced and immobilized before I even get there.

“I need to go,” I call over my shoulder. “Now.”

“Naturally you must go,” you say calmly, “I shall deal with this from here. I really would advise you to remain quiet, Agent Sanderson,” you add to the latter, who’s currently writhing in your grip like a fish on a line. “I can guarantee that shouting will not improve your situation.”

I hesitate, and my eyes meet yours again. “I would have stayed,” I hear myself saying.

“I have no doubt at all.”

I give you one last, yearning look and then pitch off down the street, straining my ears like a fox and trying to work out where Jack is. My heart’s pounding with an unmistakable flare of panic, yet I’m still amazed at how fundamentally calm I’m being: the sense that while this is a latent catastrophe, I’m confident I can deal with it. Then Jack yells again and I calculate that he’s only in the next street; any minute now he’ll be coming round the corner. I come to a dead halt, forcing my breathing to slow down, and then run my fingers through my hair to muss it up, flick open the top few buttons of my shirt, and compose my neck and shoulders into a suitably defeated-looking hunch. As an afterthought I spit onto my fingers and then dampen my forehead to give it a damp, unhealthy sheen. Any minute now, any second. Three, two, one…


“I know you did. I’m sorry. I got sick – I think I’ve had too much to drink.”

“What, that’s your reason? Remind me how old you are again? And you still should have come back
I know, but I was embarrassed. I didn’t want Senator Whatshername to see me like that. Or anyone else.”

“Honestly Will…” He sighs and pats me on the shoulder. “It’s really not your week is it?”

“When is it ever my week?”

“You want me to sort you out a ride? I’ll get a trainee to drive you.”

“It’s fine, I’ll get a cab.” I sigh mournfully then push my glasses up with a forefinger; and Jack’s face begins to arrange itself into the sad, avuncular expression that it often acquires when I strike him as being particularly pitiful and tragic – and which is a sure sign of victory on the horizon.

“I worry about you, you know,” he says after a pause. “Don’t go wandering off like that. Not at the moment. Not with those two still at large.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” In fact I actually am because I feel bad for lying to Jack; the net result being that I look more woebegone than ever (and then nearly ruin it by smirking because I’ve imagined the expression on your own face if you could see me now).

“Come on then.” He pats my shoulder again and we begin to trudge back towards the venue. “I’ll call you a cab; you are officially released from charming VIPs.”

“I’m awful at charming VIPs Jack. Get Price or Alana to do it.”

“Oh I don’t know, you’re not so bad. Dorian for one is going to be a bit desolate when you don’t come back; you seem to have quite a fan there.”

“He’s an idiot. And there’s no way I’m doing an interview for their glorified corporate newsletter.”

“No he’s fine, he’s a decent guy. Maybe a bit sycophantic but he means well. He was seconded to the press office for a while and got just as starry-eyed over the personnel he met while he was there.” Jack sighs like someone with the weight of the world on their shoulders. “A lot of these naïve clerical types romanticize what we do without really understanding it.”

“I guess,” I say vaguely, not really caring one way or the other.

“Speaking of which I don’t suppose you saw Sanderson? I sent him out first to look for you.”

“Why did you do that? You know we don’t get on.”

“I know it, but he offered.”

“Did he?”

“Yeah, he did. And I was annoyed with you so decided it probably served you right.”

“Thanks Jack, that was thoughtful of you.”

Jack barks out a laugh, then turns his head to give me a conspiratorial grin. It’s actually quite touching – he hardly ever smiles like that anymore. “Suppose we don’t let him know you’ve turned up? Probably won’t do him any harm to wander round the streets for a bit.”

“No, I guess not” I say lightly. “No harm at all.”
I return to the hotel afterwards and fall into a deep, dreamless sleep; and when I wake up next morning your side of the bed’s still empty. You must have come back at some point though because you’ve retrieved my glasses from wherever I left them and placed them on the bedside table. Then I hear faint sounds from the main room, so wrap a blanket round my shoulders and shuffle in – and there you are, standing by the window with a cup of coffee. You turn round when you hear my footsteps.

“Good morning mylimasis,” you say. I smirk a bit at that, because unbeknownst to you I’ve finally worked out what you’re saying (it wasn’t as phonetic as I’d hoped it’d be so took several attempts, laboriously typing approximations into the internet). It’s a term of endearment in your native language (noun: darling, beloved, favoured one); like it or not, your sentimental side is showing. Shit, last night was a close call. I go up behind you and wrap my arms round your waist, burying my face between your shoulder blades.

You put one of your hands over mine and massage my wrist with your thumb. “What has brought this on?” you say, amused.

“Nothing.” My voice is muffled by your shirt.

“Will?”

“It’s nothing.”

“It is quite obviously something.”

I sigh into your shoulders but still don’t answer. The thought that’s pacing through my mind is I don’t want you to get caught, but I’m reluctant to voice it. It sounds too anxious and needy (neurotic, even) and besides, I already know what you’d say: something along the lines of “But I shall not be caught” (possibly adding “unless I choose to be”); all delivered in your typically haughty, overconfident way. I often feel like your arrogance is dangerous, akin to the hubris so beloved of Greek tragedists; in fact you of all people should know about the morals painted there in such stark and bloody shades. Pride comes before a fall. The tragic (anti)hero. Although admittedly your arrogance has served you extremely well so far.

Instead of expressing any of this I just pull you round and spend a few seconds gazing at your face before leaning in and kissing you. This is my way of saying ‘I’m glad nothing happened and that you made it back safely,’ because finding the words feels strenuous – and potentially too fraught with verbal pitfalls that you’ll be irritated by or deliberately misconstrue. The kiss starts off leisurely and measured, the way I haven’t kissed anyone since I was a teenager; kissing someone for its own sake rather than a means to an end and simply relishing the novelty and newness of it. You reciprocate accordingly, but it gradually grows more heated because now I’ve started thinking about how you were last night…the menace and power and energy. And not to put too fine a point on it, it’s turning me on to an extent that’s almost embarrassing.

Of course you immediately intuit this because you pull my head back with both hands and kiss your way down my face while murmuring something typically grandiose about mortality and desire being intertwined. I suppose I should be used to your weird sermonizing by now (and it’s not like expounding links between the spectre of death and the urge for sex is even the most dubious observation you’ve ever made…didn’t Freud say something to the same purpose?), but I still crush my mouth against yours to make you stop. Shut up, I think, be quiet can’t you; just for once. Maybe it’s because I can’t find any words of my own and resent that you can. Or perhaps it’s because I want to consume and take control – of you, of myself – and that means I can’t talk, or think, but only do.
and be. I’m expecting you to protest in some way but you don’t; instead allowing me to roughly tug you into the bedroom and not even complaining when I tug so violently at your shirt that I rip some of the buttons off. I’ve gone a bit wild and brutish but I don’t think you mind; I think you like it (that you’ve always liked it). We stumble backwards in a tangle of limbs, losing mutual balance and mooring as I push you onto the bed, and I feel extremely thankful that I’m only wearing a blanket because undressing is a waste of time and I can’t wait a second longer than necessary. I need you now.

“You may have me now,” you reply, and I realize I’ve said it out loud. “Of the numerous virtues we are told to aspire to, I find self-restraint to be particularly overvalued.”

“Except when I have to demonstrate it for you. You’re so full of shit.” I lean over and begin sucking a bruise onto your throat, all teeth and tongue and panting, helpless desire. You feel so good; your entire presence like a scorching, bright-bordered bite.

You’re cradling my head with one hand and scoring along my spine with the other. “How extremely gratifying to have you like this,” you say softly.

“You’re congratulating yourself, I suppose.” I drag the flat of my tongue across the bruise I’ve just made. “It’s what you always intended isn’t it? Bringing me into your bed.”

“No mano meilė, because the reality is far more satisfactory; you brought yourself.”

Your hand begins to slide further down my back and I make a low moaning noise. “True,” I manage to say (because it is). “I knew exactly what I was doing.”

“You invariably do. Besides, it is not so much my bed as opposed to ours.”

The concept of this (us…ours) seems so intrinsically right that I don’t even bother responding and begin laving your collarbone instead with a hard, bruising kiss; scraping my teeth against your skin and grinding my mouth and body against yours until it makes you draw in your breath. I’ve never really had you underneath me like this before and it’s making me a bit wild. “God, I want to fuck you,” I hear myself saying when I come up for air. “I want that so much. Would you let me do that?”

“Oh yes, I will allow that very happily,” you say. “How bold you are starting to become. It is exactly as I supposed. Remember how timid you once were? You would tremble whenever I so much as touched you. Yet look at you now.”

“Mmmm, that’s a good idea,” I say. “Look at me now.” I haul myself upright so I’m straddling your chest and plant my arms on either side of your face, holding down your hands in mine. “Not as formidable as you like to think, are you?”

You smile up at me, then gently disentangle one of your hands and use it to smooth my hair out of my eyes before brushing your thumb over my bottom lip. “Indeed, you have brought me down. I am suitably humbled.”

“To the victor, the spoils,” I say, which makes you laugh, and then I lean down and kiss you again. I take my time about it because I like kissing you: the taste and feel of it and the ever present sense of the danger it entails. I know how lethal you are (beautifully fine-boned and fierce); know that you could turn savage and wounding at any moment. And I love the fact I can bait this threat and emerge (mostly) unscathed. It’s like having a tiger by the tail. I sigh into your mouth as I slide my tongue against yours and then release your hands so you can smooth them up and down my back. You dip lower each time until you’re stroking my hips, and the lightness of your touch is delicious and makes me shiver and immediately want more. I’m slightly too cold but it doesn’t matter because it’s making
my skin more sensitive and heightens the sensation of your fingertips. It’s kinetic; incendiary. The air feels like it’s snapping with electricity…so much heat and need. I never knew desire could be like this, never experienced this sort of passion: unbridled and untamed. No wonder you derive such sensuous ardour from food; the language certainly corresponds (hunger, crave, consume, thirst, appetite…). Perhaps one day it’ll be calmer and more leisurely; we’ll get to the point where the urgency wears off and we can take our time and spend patient, tender hours over it. Just lie in bed and explore each other without the frenzied yearning. But that day is not today. It’ll take months. Maybe years. Maybe it will never happen at all (I don’t know if it will…I don’t think I’ll ever not be desperate for you). I’m getting rougher now, clawing against you as if I’m trying to pierce your skin and reveal what’s inside, and you abruptly curl your arms round me and pull me close against your chest. Your lips are slightly swollen from where I’ve been kissing you.

“Such dark impulses,” you murmur into my hair. “The more elevated the light is, the longer the shadow which is cast. And you are such a very brilliant light. Aren’t you Will? All burning fragments and blazing shards. What would it take to fuel the inferno even further?” Your hand is wound round my neck now, holding me in place, and although I like the way it feels I still frown because I know you’re about to begin deconstructing me and I don’t want to hear it. I abruptly tug my head free instead and press my fingers over your mouth.

“Don’t,” I say sharply. “Just…don’t. Not this time.”

There’s a beat of silence and I brace myself for the fact you’re not only going to refuse, but start pushing it even further. You are aren’t you? You can never take no for an answer. You are aren’t you? You can never take no for an answer. I’m staring down at you, panting slightly, and I can only imagine how I must look: skin flushed and damp, my pupils blown wide. Not that you’re in a much better state. You’re staring right back with one of your inscrutable smiles and then for once in your life (fucking finally) you stop talking. You keep gazing at me though – gazing and smiling – then move your hand away from my neck to tangle in my hair, reaching to the bedside table with the other to retrieve the lube (it takes you a few attempts because I’m still draped over you and it restricts your movement, but I can’t bear to lose contact for even seconds more than is necessary). You press the bottle into my hand, which briefly makes me hesitate because I’d assumed you’d insist on preparing yourself (control freak) and was already gearing up to argue to the contrary. And now you’re going to let me; you want me to do it, even though I don’t really know what I’m doing. Oh God, I really don’t. I flick the lid open with my thumbnail, trying to think about how you touch me. I can’t just rock my fingers in and out, because you never do that; you stroke and caress, seducing my body to open up for you. In fact it never feels like preparation – labored through as a necessary chore – but something pleasurable in and of itself; something to appreciate and linger over.

And the last part, at least, won’t be difficult; because as soon as I’ve rubbed the lube between my fingers to warm it up – and kissed my way down your thigh; and felt how hard and wet and aching I am myself; and then finally slide my index finger into the smooth, tight heat of your body; and made a deep gasping noise as the breath rips out of me, because oh my God – then I realize that I love doing this. Is it normal to enjoy it so much?…I bet it’s not normal. I withdraw my finger almost entirely, stroking and rubbing in slick, teasing circles before pushing back until my hand is flush against you and then do it again…and again. And while I’m hardly expecting you to moan and scream the whole way through it like I would myself (and you don’t) I can still tell that you like it from the way your breath speeds up and you arch your back towards me. The sight of it is intoxicating, and I groan out loud and can’t stop myself leaning over to kiss you again: tugging on your bottom lip with my teeth and stabbing my tongue into your mouth before urgently kissing my way down your throat. You tip your head back to give me better access.

“You,” I whisper into your skin, “you’re so…” But I can’t think of the right term. You defy classification; even words can’t get the better of you. You’re just so…you. Unique. One-of-a-kind. I
settle for the prosaic instead (“I want you so much”) then lean back on my heels to give my arm more leverage, adding a second finger and trying to push deeper so I can rub them against your prostate. Ah, there we go: oh God, look at you. You’re perfect. “I want to fuck you until you come from it,” I hear myself saying, “and I want to come when I’m inside you.” It occurs to me that I might sound somewhat ridiculous, like a low-end porn movie, but I don’t even care.

“Good.” Your voice has gone so low and resonant it sounds like you’re purring. “I want that too.”

“Stay on your back, I want to see you.” I lean over to kiss you again because your mouth is irresistible, still working you open with my fingers and relishing how receptive you feel (and then have to be extremely careful stroking the lube onto myself with my other hand because I’m so far gone there’s a very real risk I’m going to inadvertently make myself come). “You feel so good,” I say. “You’re so ready aren’t you?” Then I take a deep ragged breath, and you move your long legs further apart so I can kneel between them. I feel a bit lightheaded. I can’t quite believe I’m about to do this; that you want me to it. And in a weird way I almost don’t want to go ahead, because as soon as I do then it’ll be over and can never occur again: the experience of having you for the first time. It can only ever happen once. I want to draw it out, make it last. Then I see how you’re staring at me – heavy-lidded with desire – and I know I can’t possibly delay any longer and thrust forward in one smooth movement…thrust in deep…and I’m inside you – I really am – and oh.

“I…” My voice cracks. “You feel…God. Oh fuck, that’s so good. I can’t….”

You groan about the same time as I do, a rich vibration deep in your throat, arching your neck and tilting your hips up. You want me even deeper (harder, faster), I know you do; even though you’ll never condescend to ask for it. You’re never going to beg me the way I beg you but you want it all the same. And I want it too; I want to push you as far as you can possibly go.

“Oh Will,” you say softly, just as I gasp out “Oh, yes.”

You look completely undone, about as overwhelmed as I’ve ever seen you (except, perhaps, for the very first time, down on the floor in my old apartment), and I lose control a bit then. I can’t help it – a sheer, knife-edge of need – and I’m grabbing your legs and pushing them back towards your chest, practically bending you in half so I can fuck into you even harder, and you’re letting me do it – and oh God. My skin’s so damp with sweat it’s sliding against yours. I can barely breathe now; my heart’s thundering in my ribs and my muscles are stinging, but the desire for you is so powerful I can’t bring myself to care. I initially lose synch with how you’re moving and the rhythm falters, but somehow it doesn’t matter because we manage to find an equilibrium anyway even though the balance is an intricate one (I need to be grounded and steadied; you need to be taken out of yourself), and I push down as you thrust upwards; my spine curving like a bowstring as my head tilts back. I’m so in love I can’t think.

“Beautiful,” you say, and your breath catches slightly. “So beautiful, Will.”

You rock your hips upward again to meet mine and we both moan helplessly at how good it feels. We really have merged…I don’t know anymore where you start and I end. I’m dimly aware that I’m gasping over and over again, and when I’m not doing that I’m chanting your name with an imploring, fervid earnestness that sounds like the word of a prayer – and despite the heady rush of it all I’m still conscious of you saying mine. And then I’m telling you that you’re everything, and I need you, and nothing is as good as the way you make me feel; and that it’s you, it’s you, it’s always been you. And you’re reaching towards me so we can thread our fingers together and saying “I know my love, I know, I know.”

I’m really close now, Jesus, I can’t possibly go much longer. My whole body’s trembling and contracting, wound up taut and tight with the first sharp waves of pleasure which are building up and
taking me down. “Touch yourself,” I say urgently. I sound decisive; authoritative…more like you than myself. “Now. I want to see it. Make yourself come for me.” Surely you won’t obey? But remarkably – and in another series of firsts – you actually do what I’m telling you without arguing… and you look so incredible…and I’m so close…and so are you…I can literally feel your body tightening round me, oh fuck, fuck…and we’re going to come at the same time, we are, I know we are, and it’s going to be perfect. And, oh God, it is. It’s perfect. You and me. We’re perfect.

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Afterwards we loll around on the bed, touching each other’s faces and tangling our legs together and bickering amicably over who’s going to get a flannel to initiate the clean-up (technically me, even though I can’t be bothered), and who’s going to make some coffee (allegedly you, even though you clearly can’t be bothered either), and I’m trying to contrive a way of making a cheap joke about your erstwhile remark of being “very careful about what I put in my body” (but can’t think of a way to do it that won’t make me sound like a creepy sex pest) before realizing that I haven’t asked you a single question about what happened with Sanderson. Then I worry that this is highly unsuitable post-coital conversation, before taking a look at you and remembering that you’re not going to give even the slightest shit. On the contrary it’ll probably reenergize you enough to go and get the coffee.

Initially I attempt to lecture you for going in the first place, which is utterly futile because it is impossible to lecture you on anything. “There was no point discussing it with you beforehand,” you say in a bored voice. “You would have initiated your shrewish, scolding mode, much as you are doing now…”

“I am not shrewish.”

“…much as you are doing now, and insisted I did not go.”

“So why did you?”

“Oh, several reasons,” you reply airily. “Your wellbeing for one. I know your social anxieties compel you towards alcohol, and after last week’s rather appalling display I was not going to risk the chance of you reeling around in the street demanding Matthew Brown to help locate your glasses.”

“That’s not funny. And I wasn’t drunk.”

“No, indeed. But there was a fair chance you might have been.”

“You were looking for Sanderson weren’t you?” I say instead of acknowledging this to be the case.

“Well naturally I was looking for him. I told you I would. He was unpardonably rude to you. More to the point he had been threatening you for some time, and here we have an event hosted by his sponsoring organisation at which he was certain to attend. You know that I was never entirely easy about the intruder in the Academy building; as we surmised, it was extremely likely that they had FBI links in order to gain access so easily.” You smile in a rather sinister way. “And before you enquire as to how I recognized him, you should be aware that he is featured on the website of East Coast News and was therefore very easy to identify in advance.”

“Oh yeah. The Prick of the Week.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing. How did you know he was going to follow me out?”

“Because I know you, and that there was a good chance you would find the whole affair a strain and
wish to escape it for a while. Admittedly I did not know for certain he would pursue you, but given the evidence so far I felt there was a high probability. And so it proved."

“In other words you made a lucky guess.”

“And where is the shame in that? Have you never known the success and satisfaction of a lucky guess?”

“It was still insanely risky.”

“It was not. I was in control of the situation the entire time. Nothing was left to chance and if I had believed there was a serious risk of apprehension I would have remained in the hotel. Besides, it yielded considerable benefits – also planned for, I might add – because he and I had a rather interesting conversation after you left. Of course I was very insistent on being told exactly who these ‘friends’ of his were who claimed to be so preoccupied with you.”

“And?” I roll onto my stomach and rest my head on my arm so I can stare at you. You’re lying on your back with the sheet ruffled over your hips and look almost unfeasibly poised and glamorous. You’re so striking. How did I never acknowledge it before?

You give me a long sideways glance as if you know exactly what I’m thinking (you probably do… you vain old bastard) and stretch your arms behind your head. “Well, it is rather as you supposed – perceptive boy that you are. Much of what he told you was certainly an exaggeration. He is, or should I say was, merely a very little cog in a very large machine and he conceded that he had embellished the situation in an attempt to rile and unsettle you.” At this point you pause and frown. “However, there is no doubt that he was performing surveillance on someone else’s behalf.”

“So that is why he followed me out last night?”

“Yes. Of course I was very eloquent in persuading him to tell me where these summons were coming from, but I am satisfied he genuinely did not know. All he could say was that it was a series of communications ‘on behalf of an executive from the Cane Foundation.’ He was told to report what you were doing and pass on anything of note, but was not aware of any explicit threats to do you physical harm. According to him, he believed they were trying to gather evidence against you to instigate some manner of legal proceeding.”

“On what grounds?” I say indignantly.

You smile at me and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “On no particular grounds that he could account for, aside from being Will Graham and of therefore intrinsically dubious character.”

“Do you think he was telling the truth?”

“I think he believed he was. Whether or not he was mistaken in his belief remains undetermined. Nevertheless he was clearly committed to the role and received certain small favors in return for his vigilance – the television appearance, for example.”

“Oh, of course. No one could understand at the time why he’d been asked.”

“Well now it is clear why. And we were entirely correct when we nominated him as the means by which the intruder was able to enter the Academy building. He admitted that it was he who sent the key code combination.”

“Yeah, that was fairly obvious. But what you said before – how could he possibly not know? I mean, who were the emails coming from?”
“From someone identified only as ‘Mr Phillips,’ to whom, for example, he sent the Academy codes and who in turn was acting as an emissary for our unknown executive. Mr Phillips appeared in person only twice, and does not appear to be in any way remarkable.”

“What, seriously?”

“Indeed, I am perfectly serious.” You stretch out your arms, knotting your fingers together until the knuckles crack. “I agree that it was all highly credulous and misconceived on behalf of Agent Sanderson. However it appears that he felt a certain loyalty and obligation towards his former benefactors and it was that – combined with a native dislike for you, I’m afraid – that ensured he was never moved to question his commission too closely. Avarice and envy operating on a weak mind. Although as we see, it did not work out particularly well for him in the end.”

“I guess that’s one way of putting it. He didn’t factor for you, did he?”

“He did not.”

I smile slightly – no one can ever fully factor for you – then run my eyes over the curve where your shoulder dips into your neck because I’ve just noticed it’s latticed with small grazes. “Did he do that?” I ask.

You glance down to where I’m gesturing. “I am not entirely sure. I suppose he must have done; I was not aware at the time.”

Poor Sanderson, I think (although not really) – futile right until the end.

You’ve already lost interest in the grazes. Instead you yawn and stretch, which makes me smile again because there’s something endearing in seeing you display the same bodily frailties as anyone else. You’re tired aren’t you? Of course you are: you’ve been up all night being maniacal. Or at least partially maniacal; you must have been very disappointed that you couldn’t work your favored kind of artistry on him and been forced to lower yourself to making it look like a sordid, run-of-the-mill street homicide. Then I think: how incredibly fucked up. And then I smile, because it is and I don’t care. Equally fucked up is the unspoken acknowledgement that you deliberately crafted a situation in which we could kill someone together – and if Jack hadn’t shown up your plan would have come off perfectly – and that I don’t care about that either. On an impulse I wrap my arms round you and pull you towards me until your head’s resting on my shoulder; only realizing afterwards that I’ve completely reversed the established position in which I always lie on you. It’s possible you don’t like it, although you’re not sufficiently offended to move.

“I hope it takes them a while to find him,” I say after a pause.

“Please do not trouble yourself.” Your voice is slightly muffled against my skin. “I told you I would take care of it and I have. You have nothing to be concerned about.”

“I’m not concerned.”

You make a slightly sceptical sound. “Are you not?”

“Okay…a bit. Maybe.” I trace a circle on your back with my fingertips. “It’s just I knew him. I mean I hated him, but I knew him. I worked with him…there’ll be questions.”

“Which you will answer entirely convincingly.” You yawn again then settle your head against me in an uncharacteristically compliant way (in fact it’s so uncharacteristic it makes me a bit suspicious). “Do not give it anymore thought Will. It’s not as if it was any great loss to the world. After all, he was unspeakably rude.” So that’s that.
Except, of course, that it’s not

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The phone call comes that afternoon when I’m in the back of one of my interminable cabs, ignoring another insufferable driver, and contemplating yet one more meaningless discussion with Jack. I’ve said goodbye to you. Kissed you. Got as far as the door then returned to kiss you again, and you’ve laughed affectionately and stroked my face and remarked that I’m getting sentimental in my old age (and I’ve told you that you ought to know; being not only old but also sentimental, and in denial about both). Everything routine: business as usual. There’s nothing special or memorable about the circumstances, nothing to herald how the mundanely insistent ringtone from the depth of my pocket is the catalyst that’s going to change everything.

“Will!” yells Jack when I pick up. “Where are you?”

“Where I usually am – in a cab on my way to see you.”

“Well turn it round! I need you at the southwest corner of 81st and 6th. Now.” He draws in a deep breath. “There’s been another one.”

“Another what? Matthew Brown?”

“No, no,” says Jack impatiently. “Not him. Look, you need to prepare yourself, but – Will…it’s a classic Ripper scene. He’s back. There’s no doubt this time. Will! Will? You still there?”

Am I? No…I don’t think I am. I’m miles away by then; miles and miles. I’m on the steps of a courthouse, cocooned inside an unfamiliar suit (borrowed for the occasion), with flashbulbs in my face and shrill demanding voices in my ears: “Can you confirm or deny the rumors Mr Graham? Can you confirm or deny?” I have an attorney with slicked back hair and an oily plausibility who says “Just tell them the truth Will, just tell them what happened” even though there’s no way I can. They’ve pushed to hold the trial in Virginia this time so they can go for the death penalty, and you watch me the entire time from the dock. I watch you back – we watch each other – we constantly gaze into one another’s eyes and everyone notices; later, Freddie Lounds writes articles about it. But it’s still not over and I have to watch some more: watch you being sentenced, sent down, led off and taken away. “I could smell your atrocious aftershave all the way through the court case,” you say in the months that follow, when I’m stood on the other side of the cell (still watching) with my palm pressed against the glass…

“Will?”

I blink a few times. “I’m here Jack,” I say mechanically. “I’m coming, I’m on my way.”

“Brace yourself,” he replies after a pause. “It’s a bad one.”

“Is there any other kind?”

Jack doesn’t bother responding to this. I don’t blame him; it was a stupid thing to say. “Look, there’s something else you should know.” There’s a short silence, then he just blurts it out in his usual brusque way: “The victim’s Rick Sanderson.”

“Ohhh.” I spin out this little utterance skilfully: the right amount of regret (not too much though – Jack knows I didn’t like him) tempered by shock and foreboding. Who’d have thought so many lies could be imbued in a single syllable?

“He’d been…well. You can probably imagine.”
“Yeah,” I say, even though I’m not sure that I can.

“Just get here as soon as you’re able. And Will?”

“I’m still here.”

“For God’s sake be careful. We found the body close to last night’s venue. It could be a coincidence but it’s highly unlikely – I think Lecter went there to look for you.”

“I’ll be careful,” I say in a flat, perfunctory voice that doesn’t sound like mine and Jack’s still talking but I’m not listening anymore because the only thing I can focus on is: Why did you do it? What the fuck were you thinking? The bitter resentment and anger I feel towards you in that moment is absolute. In my blind, trusting naivety it never occurred to me that you wouldn’t just dump him somewhere secluded and make it look like a mugging gone wrong. Or made an exhibit of him, but left him somewhere he wouldn’t be found. Or basically anything other than what you’ve actually done: which is to casually and knowingly bring the full scrutiny of the law down on both of us. I think of my own words to you, only a few days ago: “I want to be certain that we both emerge from this in one piece. That we don’t get hurt, and don’t get caught, and just leave. It’s more important than anything.” And to me, it was.

And why, for God’s sake, am I even asking why you did it: I know exactly why. Because fuck the consequences, and fuck me, and fuck our chances of getting out of here together: when it came down to it nothing was more irresistible, or more important, than an opportunity to taunt the FBI and showcase how relentless and uncontainable you are. That was your priority – your bottom line – and it was more significant than anything else. “See?” you’re telling them. “I can tear apart one of your own, and I can do it on your doorstep; and with all your resources and regulations, and all your moral motivation, and all the Fidelity, Bravery and Integrity tacked to your tunics you are still completely powerless to stop me. Look at me and despair.”

The scene’s utter chaos when I arrive: news vans, police, FBI vehicles, and assorted morbid spectators and connoisseurs of horror who flock to violent tableaux like moths to a flame. Someone’s shouting “Get back! Get back!” through a loudspeaker, his voice crackling and distorted through the static, and everyone’s faces are lit up like Halloween lanterns from the flickering lights of the ambulance and patrol cars. Freddie Lounds’ splash of red hair is unmistakable, and I duck to the side to avoid her. Christ it’s pandemonium, surely they should have secured it better than this. Why isn’t anyone doing anything? The air is thick with fear and anticipation, whipping the crowd towards frenzy, and the fevered pressure of it is making me start to panic myself. I can’t see Jack anywhere.

“Hey, there’s Will Graham!” someone shouts, “It’s Will Graham, right there!” and I flinch and start to walk faster even though they’re wrong; and I’m not who they think I am, and never really will be again. That version died the night you came back. I should leave a wreath for him in the alleyway: In Memoriam. The person who walked out that night wasn’t the same one who walked in.

I head blindly towards the cordon and am promptly stopped by a district cop, who bodily deposits himself between me and the crime scene tape. He looks strained and tense: out of his depth. He’s used to traffic violations and breaking and entering, this is too much reality for him. “Dammit pal,” he snaps, “what’s your problem? Get back.” Then he peers a bit closer and coughs nervously. “Ah, I’m sorry Mr Graham, I didn’t recognize you. Go ahead, Mr Crawford’s back there.” He lifts up the tape so I can duck underneath and Jack appears out the shadows, his breath coming out in little frozen puffs. A young officer promptly bustles up with an umbrella to hold over us both, and he waves them away with an impatient flick of his hand.

“Glad you could make it,” he says. “Thanks for coming so quickly.” But what else was I supposed
to do? I just nod to show that it’s fine, and he puts his hand on my shoulder and steers me down the street towards an alleyway (another one). It’s started to rain in earnest now, the drops setting up a grim, droning rhythm as they pound onto the sidewalk and ricochet from the car hoods. The water drags my hair over my dripping forehead and I have to keep swiping strands out of my eyes, but the dismal weather does nothing to disperse the crowd. Of course it doesn’t: people want to see this. They want to be able to say they were there. “I was on the scene the night the Chesapeake Ripper came back; I saw it all. I didn’t believe he was really dead. The Feds never know what they’re doing…”

“Come on Will,” says Jack, “its back here.” It being Sanderson…or whatever it is that’s left. The CSI team are hovering around, pale and spectral in their white overalls, and it feels like they’re turning to silently stare at me as I walk past. I catch the eye of a few of them: they look shocked and numb. Of course they do. They knew him – we all knew him. Their cowed muteness and frozen faces are disconcerting, as if I’m passing through a gallery of stunned rictus masks. I could be at an exhibition, a preview show. It would be called something like Agony or Existential Dread: it would get enthusiastic reviews for being raw and uncompromising and the critics would commend it for its hallowed, tender depiction of life and death.

We reach the alleyway and Jack pushes me forwards. The tarpaulins are up. Flaring lights on tripods. Smell of blood. Raindrops rattling off every surface like the sound of bullets. The forensic photographer is crouched to my right and there’s a stark, whirring drone every time the camera fires.

“Look at that!” says Jack. “I mean just look at it. Tell me that’s not him.”

And so I look at it. And I know that I can’t disagree this time – because who else could it possibly be? And Jack’s staring at me, and then everyone’s staring at me, and I’m ignoring all of them and just staring at this: your gift and installation.

Sanderson has been displayed against the wall: mouth pulled open as if in lamentation, head tipped backwards, throat curving like a parabola, and sightless eyes gazing ardently towards the sky. It gives him an attitude of fervour and animation that he never had in life, as if he’s beseeching to something greater than himself; a supplicant seeking absolution. Like a medieval saint – an icon carved on a wall by a master mason to instil the right amount of dread and piety amongst a congregation who are too fearful and superstitious to question whether or not Thy Will Be Done. Agony and ecstasy. The skin on his limbs has been meticulously pulled away, then arranged in raw, reeking folds in his grasping, outstretched hands – the ultimate uncovering and exposure, nothing more to hide behind – after which a filigree of veins and tendons have been removed and entwined across the body like latticework. It’s unmistakably you; your autograph is carved into each rend and tear. And it’s tragic and visceral and artful and pitiless – exactly as it should be.

“Come on Will,” urges Jack, and even though he’s stood right by me his voice sounds as if it’s far away. “It’s him, isn’t it? He’s definitely back.”

“Yes,” I say quietly, because there’s no possible way I can deny it without looking either desperate, or deluded, or defensively guilty. “Yes. He’s back. Yes it’s definitely him.”

“I knew it,” says Jack triumphantly. “What did I tell you? That arrogant bastard. Well he’s just signed his own arrest warrant. Price! Get me Kade Purnell on the phone, we need this as maximum priority. It’s definitely him…”

And I just stand there in silence – because it definitely is. He. Him. You. And in that moment I feel like the countdown’s started for us both.

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By the time I get back to the hotel I’m drenched and cold, and dizzy from cataloguing your various crimes one after the other: It’s going to be even harder to leave; you’ve jeopardized everything; they’re going to catch you; they’re going to take you away from me. I’m so angry I’m almost incandescent with it and I sprint down the corridor and burst through the door like a missile: burning and flailing with righteous outage. Because I am right. I am so fucking right and you were so, so wrong. You’re in your usual spot by the window and spin round sharply when I come in.

“How could I not?” you reply languorously. “After he behaved towards you in such a very disagreeable way?”

“Bullshit! Don’t do this, don’t you dare. Don’t you dare pretend you did this for me. You did it for the same reason you do everything else – because you wanted to. Because it’s amusing. Because you have to prove how much smarter you are than the rest of us. Because you’re you. This is nothing more than a massive ‘fuck off’ to Jack and it’s going to ruin everything. You could have just stuck him behind a dumpster and no one would’ve known. Made it look like a mugging gone wrong and no one would’ve known.”

“Indeed I could have done that,” you reply calmly, “and yet I did not, so it is hardly productive to repent of it now. After all, it is not as if I can go back and reassemble him again.”

There’s a faint smile on your face as you say this, and I think it’s that which does it: the smile. The scornful, supercilious, arrogant fucking expression on your face. The fact that you’re looking down on the rest of us, secure and unquestioning of your own rightness, your complete removal from rules, regulations and reality; marvelling at the sordid, stupid concerns of the little people below you. What fools these mortals be. And it’s what makes me move toward you in three quick strides and do something which, if I’m totally honest, I’ve been longing to do for years; which is to punch you full in the face. You sway back slightly but make no move to retaliate, and I hit you again; even though I know you’re just toying with me – that you could take me down anytime you want to (and you will) – and that the only reason I’m able to do this at all is because you’re allowing it. Sure enough when I try to shove you in the chest, you reach out with one of those eerily fast movements and grab hold of my right hand, spinning me around so my arm is twisted behind my back.

“Do you intend to calm down at any point?” you say. Your voice is completely level, utterly unconcerned.

Stubbornly I refuse to reply, instead trying to wrench myself free. You give my arm a sharp twist, and I gasp in spite of myself.

“Will? I asked you a question.” You pull my arm back a fraction higher, and suddenly my anger is doused because I’m starting to panic. Fuck, fuck, why do I keep doing this, why do I keep forgetting what you really are?

“Stop it! Please, you’re hurting me.” To my enormous shame, my voice catches with distress.

“Are you going to control yourself?”

“Let me go, you’re hurting me!” I’m really panicking now; my voice has taken on a harsh, desperate edge. “Please! For God’s sake, you’re going to break my arm!” For a truly hideous moment I think you’re actually going to do it, and I even have a frenzied image of what it’s going to be like when the bone snaps – the sound it’ll make; the grinding agony of it – and I’m opening my mouth to pre-emptively scream when you move your hand down and let my arm drop with it. After a few seconds you let go entirely, and I stumble desperately away from you. I’m breathing very fast, and I don’t
need a mirror to know how pale I’ve gone, how wide my eyes are.

There’s a long silence, punctuated only by the sound of my harsh, grating gulps of air. “You look utterly terrified,” you eventually say. “Did you really think I would hurt you?”

“You already have.” My voice is perilously close to a whine and I cough to try and hide it (of course I actually started it – technically it was self-defence – but I don’t feel like seeing it from your point of view). God, my fucking shoulder is agony. I cradle my right arm with my left one, and glare at you from under my fringe. “Did I think you would hurt me? Christ, how can you even ask me that? After everything…after…” the recollection of what ‘everything’ actually entails makes me feel a bit sick, and I can’t bring myself to start reeling off a list of escalating horrors for fear I really will lose control. Instead I settle for: “It’d hardly be the first time, would it?” and let the implication just hang there, unspoken (unspeakable).

“No, indeed,” you say calmly, like it’s no big thing. “But circumstances are altered now.”

“Are they?” I say pettishly.

“Of course. Not least, because you are no longer posing a threat to me.”

I go very still then; I feel like you’ve slapped me in the face. “And if I was a posing a threat…?” I say incredulously.

“The then it would be different, of course,” you reply. “Can you honestly not say the same for yourself?”

“You’re not different though, are you?” I say quietly, and when you take a step towards me I automatically dart back.

“Will…” You sound tired, as if all this is too wearisome for words. Or maybe you’re just bored. I can’t tell – with you I so often can’t. “That is hardly the only reason.”

You look thoughtful – pensive, even – but all I can envisage is one of your interminable, torturous deconstructions and the idea makes me want to scream. “Don’t,” I hiss. “God, just don’t. Don’t.”

“Very well. Indeed, it is hardly the right time; once again we are miring ourselves in the past.” I stare at you warily and you stare back. “Come here mylimasis,” you eventually say.

“No way.”

You don’t say ‘please’ (of course), you just carry on watching me, and my goddamn traitorous feet start obediently ferrying me over before my brain catches up with them. You move behind me and palpate my shoulder then lift and flex my arm, rotating it at the joint. “Do you feel that?” you ask.

“Ouch, shit, yes.”

You press your thumb down under my collarbone, then let go of me and take a step back. “You are fine,” you say calmly. “No muscular or skeletal damage; ligament and tendon integrity all maintained.”

“What…that’s it?”

“Yes, that is it. If you want to leave I won’t try and stop you.”

“I don’t trust you.”
“No? Then perhaps you should go.”

I slump down into a chair and put my head in my hands. How has this day gone completely to hell so quickly? You move until you’re standing beside me and I struggle to resist the urge to fling my arms round your waist. Why is it that you still feel like the most solid, dependable thing? I have a sudden, ridiculous memory of being a kid when my first dog died and wailing underneath a tree in the yard, helplessly hugging onto the trunk with no real prospect of comfort beyond seeking anchorage and security. Except then I was eight and now I’m burning through my 30s. I feel you place your hand on my (allegedly undamaged) shoulder, and I want to shake you off but I can’t.

“This is fucked up,” I say in a low, intense voice. “We’re so fucked up.”

“We are,” you reply smoothly. You don’t sound remotely concerned about it.

For a few seconds I stare down at my feet, tapping my fingers against my knees in a fidgety, pent-up gesture that I can’t seem to control. I want to ask whether you actually care about me at all, about us – and if so why did you pull such a fucking stupid, pointless stunt? – but can’t quite bring myself to do it. Partly because it’s exactly the kind of petulant rhetoric that will make you disdainful, but more because I’m too afraid that’ll you’ll tell me something I don’t want to hear. Instead I take a deep breath, trying to calm down.

“I’m sorry I hit you,” I eventually say. “I shouldn’t have. I was angry.”

You don’t respond; you’re waiting. You know I’m not done.

“It’s just…” I falter, but what else is there now but the truth? I tilt my face up so I can look at you. “Sometimes I hate the way you make me feel,” I say quietly.

You don’t flinch or anything, just continue regarding me with that same impassive stare. “I know you do Will,” you eventually reply, “and yet you love it also. You need it. That is what your difficulty is.”

And while I’m aware that this is true I still can’t bring myself to agree with you because right now I’m done. I shrug your hand off my shoulder instead and stand up.

“I’m going out,” I say abruptly. “I can’t be here right now.”

“You can’t leave the hotel. It is not safe.” Your voice is so flat and measured, and your shirt sleeves are rolled up, and your hair’s smoothed back from your forehead – and all you need is a glass of wine and a jacket slung over your shoulder to look like you’re posing for a photoshoot to advertise executive urban living. Because you’re just fucking stood there; stood there exactly as you always are, chiselled and lithe as a statue, and regarding me with that blank, expressionless mask that I know so well and will never learn not to loathe. Aloof and unrevealing…you never give anything away. Maybe you never will, no matter how much I ask.

*****

I ignore your instructions to stay inside – you can fuck right off, considering you’ve hardly taken your own advice – and stride through the lobby and out the main door. I feel too shocked and miserable to arrange a cab, even if I did have enough cash for one (which I don’t) and even if there was anything on earth that could compel me to go back and ask you for some (which there isn’t), so I just trudge down the driveway instead and strike out into God knows where. I can hardly bear to examine the previous scene too closely, but certain realisations are clawing at my subconscious
nevertheless, poking and jabbing like small fiends with claws and fangs. Namely: ‘I won’t hurt you because you are no longer posing a threat to me’; and, ergo, if I was you’d hurt me in a heartbeat. It doesn’t seem to matter that this was a purely hypothetical statement premised on past events and historical versions of ourselves (where I admittedly was your single biggest threat, just as you were mine), and that your rigidly logical mind is always going to respond to the literal query at hand.

Because even though I knew it was the case, and that nothing is more important to you than preserving your own irrepressible Self – and that telling you I loved you was a ridiculously ill-conceived thing to do – I still feel like you’ve crippled me. And possibly the worst thing of all is that despite this awareness, I’m going to go back anyway. Because where else would I go except back to you?

This makes me sigh out loud in a self-pitying way, but I know I’m not even going to bother trying to talk myself out of it (been there, done that). Nevertheless, for the sake of sanity and self-respect I know I can’t go back immediately. At least not tonight. I garnish this decision with all kinds of lofty, majestic rationalisations (they involve assorted sentiments concerning pride, and having boundaries, and dignified withdrawal and would not be entirely out of place in an earnest self-help book with a title like ‘Be the Best Version of Yourself!’), but deep down I know my main motivation is none of these things, but rather a petty passive-aggressive desire to punish you in the only way I can think of, which is denying you access to me. Withholding myself, like I’m a possession that you’ve mistreated so are no longer permitted to have. If you can’t play nicely with me then you can’t play with me at all. Oh God, what a stupid metaphor. Shut up.

The thing is…maybe I’m not being entirely fair to you. It’s not like this business with Sanderson has really changed things; thanks to the set-up at my apartment Jack was looking for you anyway (and then, as now, has no fucking clue where to start). You were already a ‘maximum priority.’ While I’m still more inclined to see it from my point of view than yours – and am extremely disinclined to consider whether I’ve been unreasonable – there’s no doubt a major part of my resentment simply stems from the fact you did something I wasn’t anticipating. You deviated from my mental script for how you were expected to behave. And possibly that’s part of the problem, because you’re never going to be or do what I expect (and if I’m brutally honest with myself, I don’t think I even want you to; because then it wouldn’t be you). There is never only one of anybody; God, no wonder you’ve been chanting that so excessively in the past week. This, in turn, makes me remember the highly idealized, unrealistic version of you that I created during the months you were gone. And the fact that – of course – the actual version didn’t correspond to my mental portrait any more than the man on the subway who I stared at so excessively on the basis of a passing physical resemblance. Any more than the photograph of you did (stolen from Price, then concealed and cherished as a sentimental avatar for what I wanted the real you to be). My own feelings have shifted so radically since that night at the Academy that it’s hard to remember that the existent you – the living, breathing, autonomous version – is never going to neatly anticipate and slot into place with them. Maybe I can resent you for it…but I don’t know if I can really blame you for it.

I’ve been walking for about 10 minutes now – head down, hands rammed in pockets – and realize I’m running out of well-lit road to safely proceed on, so am forced to stop and dolefully consider my (lack of) options. I suppose I could call Jack; ask to borrow some money for a motel. Although I’d have to go to his place first to collect it…perhaps I could stay with him instead? (An unedifying image of myself and Jack in sleepover mode like teenage girls promptly and unhelpfully springs to mind). I could do that I suppose. Then I could go back to you tomorrow; I’ll have calmed down by then. I could talk to you, try and figure things out. I turn round, gazing into the horizon where I can still see the hotel lit up like a beacon. I should call Jack and order a cab from the lobby – safer than doing it here. And then in the distance I see the approach of the night bus, and this is an even better plan because I have enough money for the fare into town and then can just walk to Jack’s place instead.
The fact a solution has presented itself in such a prompt, unexpected way cheers me up; and I rest my head against the bus’s grimy window and muster a vague feeling of optimism which persists down the length of the highway, and endures through the suburbs and into the city...only to promptly and spectacularly dissolve when I put my hand into one pocket, and then the other, and realize with a sick lunge of dismay that I’ve forgotten to bring the gun (again). Oh God, this is unforgivably stupid. It’s bullshit of epic proportions. A Giza Pyramid of Bullshit. A Rhodesian Colossus of Bullshit. Then I spend so long berating myself (Hanging Gardens of Bullshit, Elgin Marbles of Bullshit, engraved Elf Palaces of Bullshit...) that I don’t realize we’ve reached the terminal until I see the driver is glaring at me and waiting for me to fuck off so he can lock up his crappy bus and go home himself.

Once outside I stick my hands in my pockets again, shifting my weight from one foot to the other and trying to summon a sense of courage and calmness. It’s fine, I say to myself, Jack’s place isn’t that far away and no one could have followed me here. This, at least, is undeniable; no one got on the bus when I did and I was the last passenger to get off. The streets are bleak and unwelcoming, it’s true; but it’s not like deserted streets are the most shocking things I’ve ever had to deal with (if only), and as a general rule I’m more than capable of handling myself. Although even so...no sense in taking unnecessary risks. I’m not hugely familiar with this part of town, but there’s what looks like a 7-Eleven in the distance and those places often have ATM machines – I can draw some cash and call a cab. I strike off in the direction of the neon signs (Following Yonder Sign seems like a suitably postmodern pastime...it’s the sort of thing a freestyle poet might make something of) when from a few yards away I hear someone shouting “Hey! Hey buddy!”

I stiffen slightly but carry on walking, mostly because no one ever shouts ‘hey buddy’ at me (they’re far more likely to shout ‘stop or I’ll shoot’) but also because on the off chance it is aimed at me I absolutely don’t want to talk to them. They shout again, and I ignore them again, and then there’s the sound of footsteps and a hand comes crashing down on my shoulder. I coil round like a whip and am confronted with a large, bald man who’s beaming at me as if I’m his long-lost relative – and I have absolutely no idea who he is.

“Well, hey, isn’t this the darndest thing!” he says. “What are the odds?”

“I think you’re mistaking me for someone else,” I answer irritably. “We haven’t met before.”

“Well that’s nice! Pretty interesting life you must have if people save your ass so often their faces all blend into one!” His smile falters slightly. “You really don’t remember me do you?”

“No. I thought we’d established that by now.”

“Well I remember you,” he says. “Last time I saw you I was pulling you from under the wheels of a cab. I have to say, kid, you’re looking a lot better these days.”

I stare at him for a few more seconds, and then – oh, of course. That night in front of my apartment...The shadowy figure in the rain. And then instinctively I take a step back.

He frowns when he sees this, then steps back too and holds up his hands in an appeasing gesture. “Okay, sorry pal, I’ve misjudged this haven’t I? I’ve freaked you out. I didn’t mean nothing by it. It’s just I saw you walking past and it was such a coincidence...”

But that’s exactly the problem, because it’s too much of a coincidence. Way too much. Was he trailing me in a car? I flick my eyes around, and then reproach myself for wasting time with trifling details because of course it doesn’t matter how he got here as opposed to the fact that he is here...and I have to work out a way to deal with him.

“Let me buy you a drink,” he says, “there’s a bar near here I know, nice place, stays open til...”
“No,” I say abruptly. “Thank you but there’s somewhere I need to be.” I turn away and begin to walk off, straining my ears the whole time for any tell-tale footsteps to suggest he’s following me. There are none, and when I glance over my shoulder I can see that he’s still stood where I left him, speaking into a cell phone and making no attempt at pursuit. I feel a bit foolish then – possibly I’m overacting and he really is nothing more than the Good Samaritan he initially appeared to be. But there’s no way I’m prepared to take the chance and quicken my pace until I reach the ATM, where I’m furious to realise that my hands are shaking. Shit I can’t wait here for a cab, it’s far too exposed. What about that bar he mentioned? He said it was nearby. A bar means people (witnesses) and safety and…oh God, how could I be so fucking careless to get myself into this situation?

I listen carefully and think I can detect a hum of voices and the throbbing drone of a sound system. Northwest direction, possibly a few blocks away. There’s no sign of the bald man – no sign of anyone – but I frantically rummage through my pockets anyway to see if there’s something I could feasibly use as a weapon. There’s literally nothing – not even a set of keys which, at a push, could have gouged someone quite effectively – and then I jump violently at a sudden clattering noise before realizing it’s nothing more than a tin can blowing down the sidewalk. Calm down, I mutter grimly to myself. Don’t lose your shit, stay focussed. I scan the surroundings instead for something to improvise with and finally settle for an empty beer bottle; broken open and it becomes a makeshift knife. It’s not ideal but I’m hardly in a position to cavil over substandard weaponry, so dart over to pick it up and draw back my arm to smash it against the wall. In my mind’s eye I’m already imagining getting safely to the bar, calling you, calling a cab, arriving back at the hotel, walking into the room and into your arms. Your face against my hair, my lips brushing against yours: “Look, I’m sorry I stormed off. Let’s figure out what to do next, let’s go to bed, let’s make love…”

This is what I am expecting to happen. This is what I am hoping will happen.

But hope is always passive and acquiescing, and is never a substitute for action and foresight. Trusting in a good outcome (because I deserve a good outcome; we deserve it) is a waste of time. As you would probably say if you were here (if only you were here): Man makes plans while God laughs. Purposeless and senseless and useless…all because of the futility of hope.

So when it happens I don’t waste time lamenting the unfairness of it all. I just close my eyes and think of you, and that I love you and refuse to leave you, and silently vow that I will do whatever it takes to find my way back to you again. This is what I think when an arm snaps round my neck in a choke hold. When my own already-aching arm is viciously twisted backwards so I’m forced to drop the bottle. And when the voice of Matthew Brown whispers damply in my ear, in a mockery of tenderness: “Now Mr Graham, you really won’t be needing that.”
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

Hello lovelies, happy Saturday.

Please be aware there's a warning in this chapter for sustained psychological/physical threat that some people might find distressing. I usually try and split off sensitive material but unfortunately it wasn’t possible with this one – so if you’d rather give it a miss, feel free to contact me in the comments and I’ll happily give you a plot recap.

“Got you,” says Matthew Brown. “Got you, Mr Graham.” He croons out the words with a stilted little exhalation, like a sigh of pleasure, and then twists my arm so extravagantly it makes me hiss with pain. “Don’t even think about shouting,” he adds; his breath hot and damp and delivered straight in my ear. “If you do I’ll cut you. I know how.” He unfolds his elbow from my neck and slides his hand beneath my coat to deliver a savage jab in the ribs. “Right here. I know the proper angle to reach your heart. You’d be unconscious in less than a minute, dead in five.”

“I won’t shout,” I reply in a flat, monotone voice.

He shifts his weight slightly, replacing his arm round my throat with an even tighter grip than previously. “I wonder if I can trust you?” he says. “Yes or no? You’re not really all that reliable, are you? Not really. Not when all’s said and done.” He pushes me a bit harder, and I bite my lip to stifle the groan of pain I want to make as my forehead scrapes against the wall. “Are you?”

“I guess not.”

“No, you’re not. I know you’re not. So can I genuinely trust you? What would you do if you were me?”

I don’t answer. “I asked you a question Mr Graham. I said: what would you do?” His voice spirals into a grating shriek, and the venomous, feral madness in it is even more frightening than the sensation of the knife stroking down my ribcage. The compulsion to scream, to fight, to tear myself away is almost overpowering but I force myself to resist; because I know beyond reasonable doubt that if I do anything to inflame him further he’ll lose control and kill me on the spot. The irony is that he’d probably regret it later, but he’d still do it anyway – and it’s not as if the subsequent remorse would do me any good.

“It’s not about trust,” I reply slowly. I allow my body to slacken, relaxing the muscles carefully and deliberately and one-by-one so he’ll be able to feel the lack of resistance: a (grudging) appeasing gesture to try and deescalate the situation. “You don’t have to put any confidence in me because I don’t have a choice. You made it very clear that if I make any noise you’ll kill me.”

“Oh that’s good Mr Graham,” he says. “That’s very good. You always had a smart answer for everything didn’t you? ‘I don’t have to trust you because you don’t have any choice’; yes, that’s very good. You don’t have free will do you?” he sniggers at that, and pushes his face into my hair. “No-free-will-for-Will. Go on: say it.”

“Say what?”
“That you don’t have free will.”

Christ. I’m about to refuse, but have had enough experience with tormentors like him to know that what he’s really craving isn’t to hear me say it, but to savour the humiliation of forcing it out of me with assorted threats and coercion. And while I can’t do much else at the moment, one thing I can do is deny him the satisfaction. So I parrot “I don’t have free will,” in a flat, calm voice; and as predicted he immediately loses interest.

“You’re surprised, aren’t you,” he says instead.

“Yes, very.” Whatever.

“You didn’t expect to see me.”

“No.”

“I’m the last person you expected to see.”

“I didn’t expect to see you.”

“You’re lying. You’re just telling me what you think I want to hear. You knew I was going to come for you. You just didn’t know when.” He makes an odd snuffling sound in my ear that might be a laugh (or a groan, or fuck knows what), then digs his spidery fingers into my arm; and the nonchalant intimacy of it is so appalling that I have to literally screw my eyes closed with the effort of not screaming. Except I can’t scream, because if I start screaming then I won’t be able to stop, and then he’ll stab me and then…I take a thick, painful breath, forcing myself to calm down and tasting blood on the exhale even though I’m not sure whether it’s from where I’ve been biting my lip or where he pushed my face against the wall. Oh God. God.

My sole consolation is that he’s completely unaware of this internal anguish; still fucking rambling on as if we’re two dear acquaintances who’ve just been reunited against all odds. “So, here we are again Mr Graham,” he says. “It’s like we can’t keep away from each other. Things go wrong, and people intervene, but we always find each other in the end. It’s like fate. Isn’t it Mr Graham? Isn’t it like fate?”

“I suppose it is,” I reply tonelessly; because I know that he’s not entirely wrong. What’s meant to be will always find a way…just like you and me.

“I found you,” he says, obviously delighted that I’m agreeing with him. “Finders keepers.” Then he drags his face against my hair again – and I’m wondering whether I’ve got enough leverage to smash the back of my head into him in the hope of breaking his nose – when there’s the clatter of approaching footsteps and my heart gives a hopeful lurch. Both of us turn towards the noise at the same time, and my eyes widen with surprise to realize that it’s none other than the large, bald man from a few minutes ago; shuffling and ponderous and as yet completely oblivious to the fact that he’s all primed to act as Knight Errant for a second time. Oh God, is he actually going to? Or is he going to run? (I wouldn’t entirely blame him…but please don’t, please).

He does a double-take when he sees us (in fact it’s so pronounced that under happier circumstances it would be comical) and then grinds to a halt, glancing warily from one to the other. “Hey! What’s going on guys?” he says. “Is there a problem here?” And I have an hysterical urge to yell ‘what do you think, you fucking idiot’ – because if the sight of me in a choke hold, blood trickling down my forehead and arms pinioned by a leering and ranting Matthew Brown isn’t indicative of ‘problematic’ then I genuinely don’t know what is.
“Oh there’s no problem here,” replies the latter, at exactly the same moment as I gasp out: “Please. Please, you need to help m…” And then my voice trails off and the final flicker of hope withers and dies because the bald man makes absolutely no attempt to assist – instead leaning back on his heels as his face twitches and he starts to laugh.

“Sorry Will,” he says, “I’m just messing with you. Again! Twice in one night. What can I say; I’ve got a fucked-up sense of humor.” I blink stupidly at him, shocked into silent incomprehension, and he turns round to Matthew Brown. “Nice work, you got here very quick. I was getting ready to take him down on my own.”

“I was nearby anyway.” The shiftless bastard is still clinging onto me with a rictus grip, as if he’s forgotten that this big bald fucker is actually an ally and has no intention of taking his prize off him. It reminds me of a child cleaving its sticky-fingered grip to a favorite plaything: Mine. Mine. You can’t have it.

The two of them are now exchanging gloating looks – smug co-conspirators who’ve collectively managed to accomplish the unexpected – and I abruptly remember my last sighting of the bald man: stood in the street and talking into a cell.

“You were on the phone to Matthew?” I say incredulously.

Instead of answering, he jerks his head towards the adjacent alleyway (fucking alleyways…fuck them all). “Get him in there Matt. It’s as good a place as any to wait until the others get here. Stupid bastards. If this goes wrong I know who I’ll be blaming.”

“Who?” I can’t help saying. “Who sent you?”

Now he glares at me, his bald head gleaming in the sickly orange streetlight as he shakes it from side to side. “Shut up Will,” he says tersely. “Seriously buddy – shut your mouth. You don’t get to ask the questions here. Now move yourself. And don’t even think about trying anything or I’ll break your goddamn legs and carry you over.”

He pounds his fist into his palm as he says this to demonstrate the sincerity of the suggestion (then follows it up with a leering smile to emphasize the satisfaction he’d take from doing it), and I have no choice but to allow myself to be marched across the road and down the alleyway. My heart is crashing in my ribs and despite the cold a thin trickle of sweat is snaking its way down my spine. Oh God I’m frightened. I can’t help it, I am. I don’t want to die here. Not here. Not like this. Helplessly I wonder what you’re doing right now. I’ve been gone ages; you’ll know something’s wrong. You’ll know I ignored your instructions and left the hotel. Will you be worried? You don’t really worry as such, do you? But you’ll still know something’s wrong. I’m so sorry, I think wretchedly. I was angry with you for doing something that might have separated us, but now I’ve done something far worse. Please keep your promise: wait for me, wait for me, wait for me…

“Okay, this is far enough,” says the bald man, and I realize we’ve reached the end of the alley: a t-shaped junction with bricks, boards and other assorted detritus at the intersection and two narrow walkways (one leading left and one right) and everything wrecked, and reeking, and coated in the type of straggling vegetation that spontaneously appears on trash and damp. The analogy that comes in mind is crypt – the decay and desertion, and the fact our faces are so pale and bleached in the moonlight…oh fucking, fucking hell – and I have to fight another lethal, overpowering urge to scream.

“I’m going to try the others again,” the bald man is now saying, “no one’s picking up.” He takes his cell out his pocket and holds it to his ear, wearing a look of angry impatience the entire time, and Matthew Brown tightens his grip around me.
“You know Mr Graham, this is all your fault,” he mutters. He sounds genuinely upset about it. “We could have been happy together. We could have been a team, you and me. The whole world would have taken notice of us.” And while my initial instinct is to mockingly refute this I ultimately don’t respond; because despite the wretchedness of the situation – despite everything – I’m still aware of a surge of genuine pity for him. And it’s mostly because when I look at him in that moment I see a sad, skewed version of myself. How I might have ended up if you hadn’t come back. If you’d rejected me the way I rejected him.

“I would have protected you,” he adds plaintively. “I would have stopped things going as far as…” he trails off and I crane my neck to try and look at him.

“What?” It’s impossible to stop the impatience leaking into my voice. “What’s this all about? Why are you working with these people?”

“Because…”

“That’s enough,” barks the bald guy, abruptly returning the phone to his pocket. “Shut your goddamn mouth Matt, you’re forgetting yourself. You don’t tell him anything.”

“Let him finish,” I snap.

Now the bald man swings back to me. “I beg your pardon,” he says quietly. His mouth makes a little popping noise over the ‘p’ sound and his eyebrows have come down so hard his forehead is furrowed into shiny folds. And I think: oh shit, I really shouldn’t have said that.

“Let him finish,” he repeats mockingly. “Will Graham thinks I should let him finish. You’re an arrogant little bastard, aren’t you?” He saunters up until he’s stood directly in front of me and I can feel my heart starting to pound again in a nauseous, panicky way. Matthew Brown wraps his arms even tighter around my chest, propping his chin on my shoulder, and there’s absolutely nowhere for me to go. The bald man cranes so far forward I can smell the rankness of his sweat, see the tiny beads of perspiration on his shiny hairless forehead; and I draw in my breath as he slowly and carefully removes my glasses and tucks them into my pocket. Then he steps away again and gives me a vicious, leisurely smile before drawing back his hand and slapping my face so hard it makes my eyes water.

“Aw, you’re not going to cry, are you?” he says mockingly, and I open my mouth to tell him to go and fuck himself before deciding that – as satisfying as it might initially be – I have absolutely nothing to gain by antagonizing him, so wisely close it again.

“Better,” he says approvingly. “Don’t be so impatient Will. You’re going to find out exactly what’s going on, but it’s going to be on our schedule – not yours. Give him to me and go wait on the road,” he adds to Matthew Brown. “Make sure no one comes. And keep an eye out for the others, they might not find us otherwise.”

“What about Mr Graham?”

The bald man snorts contemptuously. “I think I can handle him, don’t you? Just go.”

They pass me between them as if I’m so much cargo, and I reflexively try to wrench myself free upon which the bald man crooks his elbow round my throat and squeezes so hard I start to choke.

“That’s enough,” he hisses, “fuck me about any more and I’ll snap your little neck.”

I obligingly go limp and still, which makes him laugh. “That’s it,” he says encouragingly. “That’s nice. Are you going to be nice for me baby? It’ll be easier for you if you are.”
Matthew Brown is looking at us uncertainly. “Don’t you do anything to him,” he says.

“Why, because you want to do it yourself? I’m not going to touch him – the Boss wants him in one piece, so that’s how he’s going to arrive. No need to damage you in transit, is there Will? Not now that you’re behaving yourself. Although make no mistake; you’re really only needed from the neck up, so give me any trouble and you’ll seriously regret it. Do you understand?”

My mouth’s bleeding from where he hit me; my tooth has caught against my cheek. I spit the blood onto the paving stones, cringing with the humiliation of having to perform this function in front of the two of them, and then defiantly tilt up my jaw and force my voice to sound as composed as possible. “Yes,” I say. “You’re not exactly being very subtle.”

“Then shut the fuck up and hold still. Matt, why are you still here? Get onto the road.” The latter begins to obey, then hesitates and looks at us again. “Don’t do anything to him,” he repeats. “I was told that I could have him once Dr Lecter’s found. I was promised.”

“That’s nothing to do with me. And I said I wasn’t going to hurt him – not unless he makes me. Creepy little bastard,” he adds once Matthew Brown has slithered off. “Working with maniacs like him was never meant to be part of the deal.”

“No?” I say sardonically. “What a shame.”

He adjusts his grip so I’m pinioned tighter against him “I bet it doesn’t bother you does it?” he says. “I guess you’re used to it.”

“I guess you could say that.”

“There’s tough guys, and there’s dangerous guys, and then there’s people like him,” he adds, almost conversationally. “It’s a different league.”

“I know,” I reply vaguely, even though I’m not entirely listening because I’m so struck by the change in his demeanour now that we’re alone. He’s reverting to something less abrasive and more conciliatory: closer to the benign stranger who pulled me away from the cab. Interesting. Matthew Brown obviously unnerves him, then, and he feels a need to over-compensate to stamp his authority over the interactions. Insecure – a limited taste for genuine violence; in it for the money more than anything else. And clearly most comfortable around those who submit and prop up his idealized image of himself as someone not to be trifled with…hence why he was so thrilled when I immediately appeared to yield to him. And this gives me a surge of energy, because it’s something I can use.

Slowly and carefully I begin to droop a little (not too much, not enough to be obvious) but enough to make my frame shrink down slightly, as if I’m beginning to wilt. I’m now in the highly surreal situation of feeling terrified and having to try and remain internally calm, yet simultaneously exhibit exaggerated external terror. Jesus. I make myself go rigid, followed by an experimental whimpering noise for good measure. He falls for it once. What a fucking idiot.

“Chill out kid,” he says. “I don’t think they want to hurt you. Just talk to you. Behave yourself and you might even make it out afterwards.”

“No I won’t. You know I won’t.” I work a slight tremor into my voice, then cough as if I’m embarrassed and want to hide it.

“I don’t know shit.”

Now that I don’t believe. In fact… “You’re Mr Phillips aren’t you?” I suddenly blurt out.
He hesitates, then when he answers he sounds a bit taken aback. “Who the hell told you that?”

Actually he did, just now, because it was only a lucky guess. But who cares. Briefly I think of you this morning: _who hasn’t known the success and satisfaction of a lucky guess?_

“Rick Sanderson,” I say instead.

“That stupid bastard.”

“He had his eye on me as well didn’t he; how long have you been paid to watch me for?”

“Long enough. You should be grateful; you’d have gone under that cab if I hadn’t. It’s fortunate for you that you were needed alive.” He tightens his grip round my neck then awkwardly fumbles in his pocket with his other hand to locate his cell. “Finally!” he snaps into it, “Why the hell didn’t you pick up, I’ve been calling the past 20 minutes. Look, we’ve got him…no, not him, the other one. For God’s sake hurry up with the van…What are you talking about? Get here now.”

Oh shit. _Shit_. That really doesn’t sound good. Immediately the statistics start spiralling through my head: _if perpetrators remove the victim from the primary crime scene then homicide or serious injury almost inevitably follows_. If they’re planning to move me they most likely don’t intend for me to make it out afterwards; and if he gets me inside that van then I'm in serious trouble.

I manufacture another whimpering noise and allow myself to slump back against him, my head falling against his shoulder. As anticipated, I can feel his grip on me begin to loosen ever so slightly; subconsciously he’s mirroring my lack of resistance and allowing himself to relax. _Shit_, I’m going to have to time this _extremely_ carefully; make a move too soon and he might still overpower me. Make it too late and…the van. Mentally I size him up, a bit like comparing character stats in a video game. He's big, but also flabby – under-conditioned. And what he may have in brute force I exceed in speed and a certain wiry strength. Critically we also have very different motivations: he's obviously hired help who's fighting for a pay cheque, whereas I'm fighting for my life. And for you. Of course for you. Always.

“For what it's worth I hope they let you go,” he says after a pause. “From what I gather you seem like a good kid.”

_You keep thinking that_, I say to myself, _if it makes you feel better._

“I got a shock when I saw you the first time,” he continues. “You were younger than I thought you’d be. I was expecting someone in their fifties – maybe even older. You really are just a kid. Why’d you want to go get yourself mixed up in all this shit?”

“This shit has a tendency to mix itself up with me,” I reply. I add a defiant little inflection to this statement; a convincing replica of false bravado. Then slowly, almost imperceptibly, I dip my head down so my jaw is resting in the crook of his elbow. It takes the pressure off my throat and makes breathing easier, and I spend a few desperate seconds planning my next move. There’s no point biting him, his coat’s so thick he wouldn’t feel it (shame). Not enough leverage to properly kick either; it would just alert him to an escape attempt without guaranteeing a successful getaway.

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“I was warned not to talk to you,” he adds, cheerfully oblivious to what I’m trying to do. “They said you can get into people’s heads and fuck about with them. But you seem harmless enough to me. Too bad for you that I’ve got you trapped in here.” I obediently sag a little more against his shoulder and feel a surge of triumph as his grip, correspondingly, slackens just a fraction more. “I can’t let you go Will. But if it were up to me…well, put it this way, I’d have preferred they sent me after someone else.”
Oh shut the fuck up, you stupid bastard; as if I care about your worthless remorse. This is it though… the time is now. I can’t delay any longer. He’s still pinning my arms in place at the top, but I can just about bend them upwards and so that’s how it’s going to have to go: quick, forceful, and with a hope that the element of surprise will be enough to carry it through. I briefly think of you to give me courage, take a deep breath, and then abruptly raise both hands at the same time to seize his elbow joint, tugging it to the right and swinging my whole body weight along with it to give me traction. Oh yes, fucking yes… His elbow springs loose from my neck like a door hinge and I twist his arm up behind his back before delivering a vicious kick to his right knee joint. He goes down immediately, weighty and lumbering as a sack of cement, and I give him a second kick in the ribs when he hits the ground.

The whole thing’s accomplished in a heartbeat and he clearly can’t quite believe it’s happened; how he’s plummeted from upper hand to bottom deck with no warning, and all at the hands of someone so seemingly frail and harmless. Insult added to injury. I stare down at him, my mouth curling with contempt as I contemplate my next move. I’m longing to question him – demand the answers that have been so long coming – but it’s impossible because I have to be swift and silent if I’m going to avoid alerting the attention of Matthew Brown, currently keeping lonely vigil at the top of the street.

The bald man – ‘Mr Phillips’ – is still flailing around; wallowing where he belongs in the filth and abandonment of a back alley. He’s hissing something at me (“You…you…little…” ) but is struggling so hard for breath that the words won’t properly come. Possibly I’ve broken his ribs; punctured a lung. I drop down soundlessly, crouching on my heels so I can look him straight in the eyes and knowing full well that it’s going to be the last thing he’ll ever see. “You know, you made one major mistake,” I say softly. “I’m not trapped in here with you; you’re trapped in here with me.”

He’s staring wildly – mouthing and gaping; eyes wide and incredulous – and I stare straight back while leaning in even closer. “As you said yourself…fuck me about, and I snap your little neck.”

And then I reach down and grab his head; and with neither significant remorse nor substantial hesitation, that’s exactly what I do.

It’s over in seconds and as I straighten up there’s the roar of an engine at the top of the alleyway. Matthew Brown’s fucking voice pipes out: “Over here! Over here!” and the van screeches to a halt as a tall figure deftly leaps out, briefly illuminated in the flickering glare of the headlights. It’s impossible to tell who it is, even whether it’s male or female, except that it’s long and thin (almost unnaturally so – an optical illusion created by the shadows). The light’s in their favor – I can’t make them out clearly, but they will absolutely be able to see me – and there’s a beat while we face each other. God knows how I must look: the proverbial rabbit in the headlights, eyes wide and staring as my chest heaves with the shock and strain of what I’ve just had to do. Then the figure braces itself (the shoulders go down, the knees tense) and they begin to run…and for the rest of my life, I know I will never forget the surge of dread I feel at the sight of that long, crawling shape charging down the alleyway towards me.

I’m unarmed, outnumbered and outdone; and while there might be a certain reckless valour in accepting a confrontation, the only sane remaining option is to get away as fast as fucking possible. I sprint off down the narrow walkway then swerve sharply to the left, fear adding a spurt of adrenaline that helps me clear the entire thing in a matter of seconds. Then I’m back on the main street…only to realize (with a swell of horrified disbelief) that fear and disorientation have led me to effectively backtrack, and rather than exiting on the other side as anticipated I’m adjacent to where I started off – with the van parked up only yards away.

“He’s there!” yells Matthew Brown, and I swear under my breath and take off again in the opposite direction. The road stretches out as straight as a hair part and there’s absolutely nowhere to duck and hide, nowhere to conceivably lose them. Then there’s a roar behind me as the engine fires up. I’ve
got a minute, maybe less, and then it’ll manoeuvre round to come to claim me – and the horror and helplessness of the situation is nearly enough to make me sink to my knees and give up. I can’t outrun a van, they’re going to get me, they’re going to get me, I can’t stop it, there’s nothing I can do...

It’s started to rain now. The deserted streets are black and glistening and my feet pound out a desperate, despairing rhythm as I sprint past the empty shops and boarded-up windows, blank and unfeeling as blind eyes in dead faces and impervious to the scene that’s playing out in front of them. Tomorrow people will be walking down this piece of road: mothers with their children, cops, store owners, students bartering for cool credentials by hanging out in an ‘edgy’ part of town. None of them will have any idea what took place here; my terror and anger won’t leave any answering echo. There’ll be no testimony, no acknowledgement, and I won’t have a witness; my final moments on earth and no one will know. Then I think of you, and how the last memory you’re ever going to have of me is striking you in the face and telling you I hate the way you make me feel; and in that instant I know that I’d give anything – life, liberty, sanctity, sanity, anything – to be able to take it back. And so I think of you and I run; I run like I’ve never run before in my entire life.

I reach the end of the block and veer to the right, then spot some railings that I can climb over and at least get myself off the road. I catch my coat on the spikes at the top, and there’s an ominous ripping sound of fabric before I tug myself free and land on the other side. Sprint down the walkway, swerve round the large metal trash can, for God’s sake don’t trip, don’t fall, don’t falter – fucking run. Run for your life. I hear the van screech past and thank God, oh thank God, I obviously timed it so the inhabitants didn’t spot my descent from the railings because it carries on without slowing down. They’ll realize eventually though – it’ll be evident I’ve vanished down a side street. The reprieve probably buys me seconds only, but I can make them count. I have to; I have to make them count… oh God. Someone help me. But of course no one’s going to – I have to help myself.

Now I’m in a dingy little yard that looks as if it’s attached to a restaurant or fast-food place: fetid crates of kitchen waste stacked in the corner, the stench of which briefly makes me gag. Frantically I look around but there’re no windows I can smash (all protected by iron grilles) no doors to break down (all reinforced metal). No doors, no windows, no chance, nothing. I grope through the darkness, holding my breath against the foul, putrescent smell, and then clamber on top of the crates so I can hoist myself over the wall and drop down into the street below. This takes far longer than I would like, but it’s essential I lower myself rather than jumping because a sprained ankle could literally kill me. No one’s around and I give myself the luxury of drawing a few painfully labored breaths. My legs are shaking from the lactic acid and my fucking lungs feel ready to burst. (What if they do? How would it look and feel? Would they slowly sigh and sink in on themselves, deflating like tired balloons; or rupture apart, splashily and showily like scarlet glass? You would know. Oh God, why aren’t you here? I need you, I need you). Then a rumble of voices behind me sounds a warning that the pursuers have located the railings, just as I did, and I have no choice but to force myself to take off again. Oh fuck, fuck, this is agony. It’s unbearable. I’ve fallen into a pit of horror and pain and terror and I can’t climb out of it. I can’t do this, I can’t.

“You can,” I imagine you saying. “Yes you can mylimasis. You must. If you cannot climb out then you shall simply have to dig deeper. Descend to the darker depths; the infernal level where the shadowy things are. Linger with them. And then emerge. Because if you cannot find a way out then you will just have to create one of your own.”

You wouldn’t give up would you? You never gave up, not once. I don’t think you even know how; you probably couldn’t give up if you wanted to. And so I summon up my last possible reserves of strength and pelt down the sidewalk towards another alleyway. I have a vague memory of an interview I once read with a professional cyclist, talking about how he pushed himself beyond his body’s pain threshold. He kept repeating the importance of micro-goals: focus on the long-game and

the task becomes overwhelming, but concentrate on a smaller, more attainable target and the sum of the parts becomes greater than the whole. An artificial deadline triggers the limbic system, and the limbic system means primal, visceral power – and so I force myself to forget about returning to the hotel and instead simply garner all my effort and motivation towards reaching that goddamn alleyway before Matthew Brown and friends can make it over the wall and see me.

My entire body is screaming in protest, but I manage it all the same; and by the time I hear the buzz of their voices in the street I’m behind a dumpster and taking a few essential minutes to get my breath back before taking off again. I keep thinking I can hear shouts of ‘there he is!’ and am no longer sure if it’s really there or a mirage wrought out of fatalistic dread and enervation. I lunge down one road, then up another one, then across a dimly lit sidewalk, then over another set of railings; fearful that I’ve lost my bearings then certain that I’ve recovered them; swerving round streetlights and leaping over kerbstones; briefly in a state of hopeful fortitude, predominantly in the most crushing fear and doubt…but the entire time driven by a tumult of desperation that lends a speed and fleetness of foot I genuinely didn’t think myself capable of. Eventually I exit onto the side of the highway and take a few moments to slump against a fence. There’s still no sign of the van, but I daren’t allow myself to fully hope. What I need is somewhere secure to hide, somewhere to wait out the night – or no, not the night, not as long as that; just an hour would be enough – then I can emerge and find a way of getting back to you. I need to get back to you, that’s all that matters…and then I nearly jump out of my sweaty, shivering skin as a sleek black Lincoln abruptly goes racing past. Its paintwork is gleaming in the moonlight, and I numbly watch as it slows down and pulls over, briefly pausing before reversing back towards me.

“Will!” calls out a male voice. “What a surprise! What on earth are you doing here at this hour?”

By now I’m borderline delirious with pain and exhaustion, and can only stare uncomprehendingly before eventually realizing that it’s that obsequious asshole from the other night. What was his name? Oh yeah…Dorian. Dorian, who knows Jack, and who wanted to interview me, and who was seconded to our press office, and who at the time seemed to have been beamed down as a form of Divine Punishment but who is rapidly and spectacularly redeeming himself. Because aside from you, I don’t think I’ve ever been so glad to see someone in my fucking life.

“I’m just on my way back from an assembly dinner. Jack Crawford was there and…” He’s winding his window further down as he’s speaking and at this point his smile begins to falter – no doubt because he’s finally got a proper look at me and taken in the full extent of how utterly crushed and overwhelmed I am: the blood on my forehead, my shaking legs and heaving chest. Maybe he thinks I’m on something. I wouldn’t entirely blame him if he just drove straight off again.

“Um…are you okay Will?” He sounds extremely doubtful.

“No, not really,” I say. “I’ve had a rough night.” Which I suppose is one way of putting it – although admittedly a spectacularly shit way.

“Well, I’m sorry to hear…is there something I can do? Can I give you a ride anywhere?”

I’m actually heading towards the passenger door before he’s finished making this offer (to be frank if he hadn’t made it I would’ve been tempted to car-jack him) but then in spite of myself, I hesitate. And the reason I do is because I’ve just remembered that he works for the Cane Foundation. Then I think: don’t be so stupid and paranoid – so do God knows how many other people. But it’s the same organization that bribed Sanderson. Yes, but by Sanderson’s own admission it was only ‘Mr Philips’ and the unknown executive who were involved. Dorian’s not an executive, just an underling in the Communications Team. But I don’t know anything about him. Jack vouched for him (“decent guy…naïve clerical type…a bit sycophantic but he means well”). But then Jack gets it wrong 80%
of the time. Shut up and get in the fucking car.

“Will?”

“I…no. Thank you. It’s fine.”

“Well, hope to see you around soon,” he begins to wind his window up, then hesitates and pokes his head back through. “And do consider that interview won’t you? We’d be so thrilled. Here, let me get you my card…”

From behind me comes a squeal of brakes and I whip round in an agony of anticipation, but it’s only an elderly station wagon about to run a red light. Oh fuck all of this. “You know what,” I say suddenly, “a ride would be great. Can you take me to the Academy building? Jack got me a room there while my apartment…you know, never mind. It’s a long story.”

“Could you give me directions? I don’t really…”

“I’ll give you directions. Thanks.”

“No problem Will.”

“Thanks,” I say again. My legs are still trembling with the effort of so much running and I awkwardly fold them into the footwell to try and hide it. Then I give him the directions and sink into a defeated silence, anxiously twisting my fingers together and obsessively checking the road behind us in the wing mirror. *Objects in the wing mirror are closer than they appear;* I realize I’ve grown so convinced I’m going to see the flare of the van’s headlights that it feels like it’s already happened. Briefly I glance at Dorian, benignly fumbling with the dial on his stereo and conscientiously mirror-signalling-manoeuvring at every single junction; and feel a twinge of guilt at what I’ve allowed him to inadvertently drag himself into. God knows how I’m actually going to get access to the Academy, but there’s no way I can risk asking him to drop me at the hotel. I’ll call Jack if/when I arrive, tell him what’s happened. Oh shit, no, I can’t call Jack – this whole thing is too closely linked to you. Fuck it, I’ll smash a window and climb in if I have to. Oh please, please, please let me arrive. I’ll never be so happy to smash a window in my life. It’ll be the most joyous destruction of government property since the Boston Tea Party. Then I’ll call you; I’ll tell you that I’m sorry and that I love you – soberly and seriously this time, and to hell with the consequences – then I’ll explain what’s happened and how I’m going to come back as soon as I can…

There’s a blaze of lights in the mirror and I literally go rigid and draw in my breath before realizing that it’s just a camper van with what looks like students inside. The passengers are drunk and shout something as they go past that’s both incredibly boisterous and completely indecipherable.

“Stupid kids,” I mutter. Not because I care either way, but because it strikes me as the sort of thing that I ought to say; an offhand, conventional observation that a normal person would make. Dorian doesn’t respond, which I find a bit odd, and I’m wondering if he simply didn’t hear (and am considering whether I should repeat my – admittedly not very brilliant – remark simply on the grounds that this is the first time I’ve been passably sociable in recent memory and it seems a shame to let it go waste) before I properly take in the surroundings for the first time…and go completely cold.

“This is the wrong way for the Academy,” I say sharply.

“I know it is.” He doesn’t even glance at me, doesn’t take his eyes off the road. “That’s because we’re not going to the Academy.”
Oh God. No…no. It can’t be. It fucking can’t (it can). “What do you mean?” I reply after a pause. My voice is flat. Mechanical.

“I mean,” he says calmly, “that I’m taking you somewhere else. And please don’t waste your time trying to get out before we arrive; there are child-locks on all the doors.”

For a truly hideous moment I feel like I could actually cry: a toxic combination of shock, exhaustion, fear and outrage that courses through me in a tidal surge that threatens to overwhelm me utterly. But there’s a time to fall apart, and there’s a time to get it together; and this, undeniably, is one of the latter times. On an impulse I give the door a tug; but of course it holds and he makes a martyred sighing sound when he hears the snap of the handle.

“I did tell you,” he says. “You can’t get out. Not until I let you.”

Rather than concede that this is, indeed, the case (because fuck that) I suck in another lungful of air, desperately fighting to stay calm when all I want to do is scream in panicked frustration. “You’re part of all this, aren’t you?” I say instead. “Sanderson, Mr Philips…Matthew Brown. You. Who else?” I’m not expecting him to answer (and he doesn’t) but it hardly matters because the whole time I’m talking I’m slowly and carefully pulling out my seatbelt.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself Will,” he finally replies, apropos of nothing. “I received a call explaining what had happened so my sole purpose for being here was to find you. I know you’re regretting getting in the car but I would’ve taken you by force if I had to. Admittedly you made it easier for me, but the end result was always going to be the same.”

“A gun, I suppose?”

“Of course.”

“Right,” I reply; only I’m not really paying attention because I’m too intent on fastening the seatbelt without him noticing. Desperate times equal desperate measures, and I’m about to brace myself to do the only remaining thing I can think of: which is to reach out and grab the wheel until the car goes into a spin, overpower him in whatever way I can, and then smash my way out through the fucking windscreen if I have to. It’s insanely risky, and has extensive potential to go disastrously wrong, but despite all of that it also retains a chance of success. And any chance, no matter how slim, is better than no chance at all; because if he gets me to whatever destination he has in mind, then there’s no doubt I won’t be coming out again. The belt slots into place with a loudly treacherous click, and I twist my body round towards him when he immediately lashes out and seizes my wrist.

“Don’t Will,” he says, in the same calm tone. “Don’t do that. Take a look at the top of the belt. Go ahead: look. Can you see where it’s been cut? How frayed it is? This has been a long time in the planning, do you think something like that would be left to chance? That belt won’t protect you. Because I know you, and I know how smart and reckless you are; so when I saw you I pulled over. And I cut it. And then I picked you up so it would be all ready for you when you got in.”

I go very, very still.

“Do you understand Will? If you make me crash the car then the belt won’t hold; you’ll go straight through the windscreen. It would be a shame to destroy that pretty face.” He finally glances round and looks at me. “Although you wouldn’t survive anyway, would you, so I don’t suppose you’d care all that much. Anyway it’s your call. What do you say?”

“What do you want me to say?” I rasp this out from between gritted teeth. “How about ‘fuck you’?”
“Don’t be like that Will. It’s really not as bad as you think; if you’re sensible and cooperate, then you’ll get through this just fine.”

“Don’t patronize me,” I say sharply. “We both know that’s not what’s going to happen.”

“No, I’ll tell you what’s going to happen. I’m taking you to meet my employer, and you’re going to finally find out what’s been going on. You’ll enjoy that won’t you? I know how curious you are. And after that, you’re going to give very clear details about the particular rock that Hannibal Lecter is currently hiding under. And when you do that – but only when – then you can go home. See? Not so bad at all.”

He reaches over and I wince in expectation of him trying to hurt me in some way, but all he does is flick on the stereo so the car begins to flood with opera. It’s sonorous and sinister: all crashing chords, shrieking strings and voices wailing like something from an abattoir.

“I just adore Donizetti,” he says in the same bland voice as before. “Don’t you?”

I don’t answer, just gaze numbly out the window at the deserted streets: ghastly pale in the moonlight, rain-slick with water as black as blood, and without a living creature anywhere. No one to see what’s happening; no one to care what becomes of me. The helpless entrapment, the isolation, the screaming music is all like something out a nightmare, and yet I am strangely calm. Long after the worst has already happened, long after. And see how calm I am.

I’m thinking about you, about what I imagined you saying to me: If you cannot climb out then you shall simply have to dig deeper. Then I think about what you actually did say, your eyes meeting mine in the mirror: “vulnerable, yet always unbowed and unbroken.” And it fills me with a sense of grim resolution that’s so powerful it makes me close my eyes and draw in my breath. Because this is not going to happen. Because it’s not even an option. Because you’re mine and they can’t have you. And because I know that as of now I will go as deep and dark as I need to go; and if I can’t find a way out – then I’m going to have to make one.
The remainder of the journey passes in brooding silence with Dorian completely ignoring me (and me ignoring him right back) while I stare aimlessly out the window and gnaw my bottom lip as I watch the streets slide past. I’m expecting us to drive for a long time – that he might even take me across states – so am surprised but relieved when the car pulls up after only 20 minutes outside a dilapidated-looking warehouse that’s clearly our destination. Here we are then: ground zero. The building is narrowly crooked with a scuffed, shedding cement render that exposes the bricks underneath like a face with its skin peeling off. Ancient signage announces it to have once been a repository for textiles and dye, and the homophone nature of the latter word feels ill-omened and disturbing. Then I reproach myself for being so stupid; as if being a repository for candy or plush toys would have made the situation any less desperate. Any less dire.

The main entrance is boarded up – in fact every entrance we pass is inaccessible – and I mutely allow myself to be marched around the back of the building, constantly aware that he’s got the gun trained between my shoulder blades. At one point I stumble on some debris and he seizes my arm to stop me falling over then won’t let go of it again. I can feel his fingers digging into me the entire time and it makes me want to scream.

Eventually we reach a shabby wooden door that overlooks the parking lot and he drags me through it into a small, airless room that’s lit entirely by candles and which reeks of stale beer, sweat and tobacco. There are four shadowy figures crouched round a table, three of who abruptly push back their chairs and saunter over as soon as we enter. The waft of air causes the candles to flicker and gutter, and I immediately recognise the pinched little face of Matthew Brown as the only one who remains seated: cagey and watchful, never taking his eyes off me. The other three are unfamiliar, distinguished only through being collectively burly and brutal-looking and all wearing long black coats like crappy Matrix cosplayers. Together they give Dorian a sardonic round of applause as he hauls me in and the humiliation of being paraded in front of them in this way is almost unbearable.

Dorian smirks in acknowledgement before asking “Any news yet?” News about what? Does he mean you?

“None at all,” replies the tallest of the three men; and while the other two hang back he prowls straight over and plants himself in front of me, squinting and leering, before reaching out and giving me an insolent pat on the cheek. The ancient acne scars pitted across his skin give his face a cratered appearance, and I can clearly see that his nose has been broken on several occasions and badly re-set on all of them. I stare back at him, completely unmoved by the crude attempt to intimidate. On the contrary: bring it on. Whatever’s waiting for me in this building is ultimately going to prove far more menacing than the likes of him; and I’m reluctant to squander my fear so early on.

“And here he is in person,” he says mockingly. “You did a good job on Philips didn’t you, you little shit.” He spits neatly at my feet, then pivots back on his heels and clenches his right fist – and the fact he’s about to punch me is so clearly telegraphed that it’s almost embarrassingly easy to side-step and send him pitching into the empty black air. I kick him in the kidneys as he goes down and he makes a feeble attempt to snatch my foot (at which point I kick him again – because why the fuck not) and Dorian has to drag me off.

“Leave it Carl!” he snaps. “Remember your goddamn instructions – we deliver him unharmed.”

The latter lets out a wheezing huff of air then grunts out: “Just as well,” as if he’s been extremely generous and the fact I’m wanted unharmed is the only reason he’s graciously permitted me to kick the shit out of him.
There’s a pause and I’m aware that everyone is now staring at me. “Bring a flashlight,” says Dorian finally, and for a surreal moment I think he’s talking to me until I realize it’s addressed to Carl. “I’m taking him upstairs now. Mr Cane is already waiting.”

He brandishes the gun towards the doorway in a ‘move yourself’ gesture, and I reluctantly obey whilst frowning to myself at the new conundrum this information presents: because while the name strongly implies the Chairman, or CEO, of the Cane Foundation it’s completely meaningless beyond that and I have literally no idea what I – or more to the point, you – have done to piss him off so extremely that he’d be prepared to go to all this trouble. Although doubtless I’ll soon find out.

Carl clumsily hauls himself to his feet and shoots me a truly evil look (which I return with gusto), and then holds the door open for Dorian who forces me in front of him with the gun to my back. Carl follows behind with a torch and we toil our way up several winding flights of stairs until reaching a cavernous, empty room with a bare concrete floor and scuffed plastered walls. The only source of light is from a series of spindly studio lamps, all plugged into a droning generator which is growling and rumbling in the corner like a large black dog. Most of the room is too dark to see anything, but two empty chairs are clearly visible in the feeble patch of light that the lamps have managed to muster, and I’m forced into one of them before having my wrists lashed to the armrests with zip ties. The use of the latter makes me quail inwardly because I was hoping for handcuffs. Handcuffs I could have got out of. These…not so much. In desperation I clench my fingers to try and create a bit of give, but of course they both notice and force my palms down flat against the wooden arms of the chair before tightening the straps. There’s no way I can use my teeth to shim the locking-bar; and no means of getting enough leverage to snap them. Oh fucking, fucking hell.

“There we go,” says Dorian when he’s finished. “Not long now Will.”

“Yeah, not long now Will,” adds Carl. “I hope you don’t get bored in the meantime. How about I come pay you a visit later?”

Oh Christ, I hate this asshole. I tilt my face up so I can look at him. “Yes,” I say calmly. “How about you come pay you a visit later?”

Their footsteps get fainter and finally disappear, and then from the depth of the darkness comes an eerie panting noise. I go completely rigid, straining my ears. Is it someone laughing? A few more seconds go past. Silence. Perhaps it was only the heaving rasps of the generator? I take a few deep breaths, but seeing that escape is currently impossible I don’t waste time or energy in struggling. Instead I brace myself and begin to methodically rehearse the field training for anticipating pain and injury. It’s been a while since I’ve practiced it, but the fundamentals are still there. First I force myself to imagine the worst, lingering over the details to speed up the release of adrenaline, cortisol and endorphins: nature’s painkillers and the only remaining resource to draw upon. Simultaneously I slow my breathing and focus on a crack on the floor, trying to instil a dissociative state. The latter doesn’t work, so I try to retreat inwardly instead by picturing you: imagine us talking, making love, fighting together side by side…

“Will!”

The voice is male and vaguely familiar and comes slicing through the shadows as sharp as a knife. I jerk my head up and peer into the darkness, but there’s nothing to see except indefinite stretching.
gloom punctuated only by a dribble of moonlight seeping in through a narrow window at the far end of the room.

“Extraordinary,” says the voice. “I’ve been watching you all this time and you haven’t struggled once. I’m disappointed Will. I was looking forward to seeing you panic and you’re just sat there taking it all in your stride.”

“I’m sorry I’ve disappointed you,” I reply with feigned politeness.

“Perhaps I was unrealistic though. That’s it isn’t it? I set my hopes too high.”

“Perhaps you did,” I say carefully. Where the fuck is he? I can’t see anything – can’t even judge how far away he is because of the way the acoustics in the empty room echo and amplify the sound. His voice is slightly odd: a weird, lilting cadence at the end of each sentence, yet simultaneously rather clotted and thick, as if his mouth is too full of teeth.

“Well, Will Graham, I suppose it’s not the first time you’ve been in a situation like this,” comes the reply. “In fact the last time wasn’t all that long ago was it? Hence the zip ties; I wasn’t going to make the same mistake Michael French did. He underestimated you didn’t he?”

“Yes. He did.”

“So did Phillips. I’m not angry with you about that by the way – just in case you were wondering. I warned him to be careful with you but he obviously didn’t listen. I suppose you could say it served him right. As soon as the van pulled up and I saw Matthew on his own, I knew something had happened. And sure enough…”

All the while he’s talking there’s the slow pounding of footsteps which get closer and closer; then I flinch and pull in my breath as a long pale hand abruptly appears out of the darkness and takes hold of the empty chair, dragging it across the floor with a screeching noise that sets my teeth on edge. There’s the rustling sound of him sitting down, but the chair is pushed into the shadows so I can’t make out his face.

“So,” I say when it becomes clear he’s not going to add anything else. “Are you going to tell me what I’m doing here? Who are you?” I’m pleased at how calm I manage to sound.

“Would you really like to know?”

“Yes,” I reply with exaggerated patience.

There’s another silence – this one stretching out for a length that’s almost tormenting – then he finally pulls his chair forward so he’s in the light and I can see his face. And my mouth drops open in spite of myself, because of everyone I was expecting the one person I didn’t seriously consider was the inspector from my apartment. Only very different from previously: clean-shaven, and wearing an impeccably tailored suit as opposed to the dingy cap and overalls. He starts to laugh when he sees my surprised expression then waves his gaunt, spindly hand towards my wrists.

“I’m going to take those off now; consider it a gesture of goodwill. That and the fact you’re going to need your hands later. But don’t even think about trying anything.” He slowly and deliberately reaches into his jacket pocket and retrieves a small, gleaming pistol. “If you do, then I’ll have no hesitation in shooting you where you sit. Not to kill you, you understand; just somewhere nice and non-fatal. Your kneecap, perhaps?”

“I won’t try anything.”
“Be sure that you don’t. Because what you should also know is that even if you did manage to get downstairs there is only one serviceable exit; and it’s currently being guarded by the gentlemen you met when you arrived. Plus Mister Matthew Brown as well, of course. To be candid, Will – may I call you Will? – you’d be safer up here with me.”

“Okay, I get it. You’ve made your point.”

“No, not really; not yet. Although I shall. Before tonight’s over, you may consider my point to have officially been made.” He replaces the gun in one pocket, and then removes a slim silver knife from the other one which he uses to slice off the zip ties. “May I call you Will?” he says. “Or do you prefer Mr Graham? Agent Graham, perhaps? William–Billy–Bill …?”

“Will is fine.”

“Excellent. See what good friends we are already?”

I rub my aching wrists; trying to encourage the blood to start flowing again and wincing at the deep indentations (already starting to turn purple). Then I glance up at him pointedly. “So what should I call you?”

Instead of replying he returns to his own chair and takes out a cigar, meticulously snipping off the end with a guillotine-style cutter. “Would you like one?” he says.

“No.”

“Suit yourself. They’re very good.” He twirls the cigar cutter around in his free hand, occasionally bringing its jaws together with a sharp little click. “Remarkable,” he says. “You could take someone’s fingers off with this.”

I immediately feel a sick twist of fear; but he just sits there, benignly sucking on the cigar as if it’s a stick of liquorice and smiling at me through the smoke. “I suppose I owe you an apology,” he eventually says. “I was very rude to you when I came round that time wasn’t I? But I was kind of fascinated to see and speak with you close up. You weren’t like I was expecting you to be.”

“No?”

“Oh no.” He gives me a long, slow smile. “Not at all. And besides, it’s not every day you get to observe Will Graham in his natural habitat. I’m afraid I just couldn’t help myself. You knew something was wrong didn’t you? You just didn’t know what.”

“Yeah, I knew.”

“And so you vacated the premises. You managed it very well, the pair of you; I’ll give you that. Always one step ahead. I was rather disappointed to come back again that evening and find you gone. Although at least it gave me an opportunity to go through your apartment very thoroughly – far more thoroughly than I could while you were stood there watching me. I suppose I should apologise for that as well; rifling through all your belongings the way I did. And then leaving a dead body in your living room! Poor Mister Janitor. But he saw me steal the uniform I used when pretending to be the inspector, so he had to be removed in case he identified me later. And I did need someone to leave suspended from your curtain rail. I suppose you could call it killing two birds with one stone.”

“Good for you.”

“Ah, now you’re being sarcastic. Don’t I get any credit Will? None of this has exactly been very easy to arrange. Mind you, not that I expected it to be easy. Not when one’s quarry’s is an FBI agent;
and when that agent also happens to be Will Graham. And then when you consider the capacities of
the other one.”

I suppose that’s one way of putting it. “I know,” I say. “He’s not exactly the best choice of
adversary.”

“He certainly isn’t. But then we don’t always have the luxury of choosing our adversaries.
Sometimes they choose us.” He takes another deep drag on his cigar, then leans back in his chair and
regards me contemplatively. Over in the corner the feeble studio lights begin to splutter and flicker as
the power supply dips and it makes his face look like it’s rippling; as if there are small insects beneath
the skin, scurrying over the planes and angles of his skull. “So,” he adds after a pause. “Can you
guess who I really am?”

“No.”

“Go on…have a guess.”

“How can I possibly guess?”

“But you have been guessing; Rick Sanderson overheard you telling Jack Crawford all about it. I
wish I’d seen it myself Will; you stood in your apartment with that doleful little face of yours,
earnestly explaining yourself while a mutilated corpse was swinging from your curtain rail. Perhaps
you could re-enact the scene for me later? Although Rick apparently did a very good job of
impersonating you to Phillips, who kindly relayed it all to me, so I suppose I didn’t miss out all that
much. You thought I was something to do with the Dolarhyde fiasco didn’t you?”

“Initially, yeah. I thought there was a small possibility.”

“Because of the teeth?”

“Yes.”

“Yes. I can’t tell you how much that made me laugh; Phillips must have thought I’d lost my mind.
Can you really not guess what the significance was?”

“No.”

“Oh Will, you’re not even trying. What do we use our teeth for? What’s their sole purpose?” He’s
staring at me quizzically, but sails on regardless without waiting for a response. “Eating, Will. Biting.
Consuming. And in turn, who do we both know who’s renowned for doing all those things on a
rather grand scale?”

“Right. Okay. I get it.”

“Somewhat crude symbolism, I grant you, but they did make an effective display. To be honest I
really would have preferred tongues but they’re so much harder to come by. Mind you, I was only
intending to use the teeth on your car; but once Rick Sanderson overheard you discussing your
quaint little Tooth Fairy theories at the crime scene then I decided to just run with it. I couldn’t help
myself.” He smiles whimsically. “Run with it. You’re a pretty good runner aren’t you Will? You had
me bothered for a few minutes at the Academy, you really did. For a while there it looked like you
were going to get me. What would you have done if you had? Turned me in or taken matters into
your own hands?”

“You probably already know the answer to that.”
This makes him laugh. “I surely do,” he says, briefly lapsing into the roughened, guttural voice he used when pretending to be the inspector. Then he flexes his shoulders, as if shrugging off the levity, and reverts to the calmly sardonic persona of previously.

“So. We’ve established that I’m nothing to do with the late, lamented Red Dragon; and we’ve established that there’s a figurative theme which centers on your repulsive cannibalistic friend rather than yourself per se. So what do you say now? I gave you little hints Will. You can’t say I didn’t play fair. I told you myself that my brother was a doctor; right to your face in your apartment. Don’t you remember? And when I sent Matthew after your unfortunate lookalike, I was very specific about what I wanted him to do. Colombian necktie; amputation of the limbs? Ringing any bells? Honestly Will – Francis Dolarhyde. You were so preoccupied with vengeful relatives weren’t you? Only you got the wrong one.”

And I stare back at him meditatively, forcing my face to remain composed as everything else slots into place. The fact that I felt there was something familiar about him when he came to the apartment; and how I concluded that he wasn’t recognizable in himself, but that he reminded me of someone else. And then the morning after the inspection, going through the Michael French file with Jack just before the janitor was murdered…and reading who the latter had done his residency with. “Keep it to your own selves,” Jack said, “the press would have a field day.” And how I’d paid virtually no attention to it at the time beyond a weird coincidence – yet…fuck, of course.

He’s still watching me, smiling and nodding. He knows that I know. “Still nothing to say? What about the name of my Foundation? Admittedly I had to amend the spelling. Cain has such negative associations that the Board unanimously voted no. But it’s still there in its essentials. Cain and…”

I sigh heavily. “You’re Abel Gideon’s brother.”

“Very good Will. See, you got there in the end. Better late than never.”

“And – what? You’re out for revenge?”

“Oh Will, what do you think? You are aware, of course, what that…that thing did to my brother?”

“Yes. I’m also aware of what your brother did to numerous other people who didn’t deserve it. Your own sister-in-law, to name but one.”

He waves this point away with a flick of his hand. “But that’s for their families to do something about Will. You can hardly expect me to avenge the wrongs of the world; I’m far more interested in my own wrongs. My wrongs are infinitely more motivating than those of other people, just as your wrongs are more motivating to you. Both our wrongs were briefly righted, weren’t they? There he was for years, rotting away in a little glass box. No more Dr Lecter. But then he escaped, didn’t he? Because of you.”

“Hardly,” I snap.

“Now, now Will. He’d never have been let out of that little box at all if you hadn’t suggested it. And look how careless you were; you hardly did a very good job of keeping an eye on him.”

“And you think I know where he is now?”

Instead of answering he just smiles and takes a long, lingering drag on his cigar before pulling his chair a few inches closer. I’m longing to push my own further away but force myself to remain still.

“What do you know about sharks Will?” he asks after a pause.
"Fuck all," I say, “to be totally honest."

“They really are fascinating creatures. Mercenaries of the ocean; the most perfect killing machines. Do you know how sharks hunt?”

“I don’t know…Don’t they detect vibrations in the water?

“Quite right. See, you do know a little bit about them; I thought you would. Killers do interest you, after all. So – first they locate their prey, then they stalk it, and then finally they claim it. Partly, as you say, by identifying electrical pulses, but they do something else as well. Something which elevates them into the most perfect predators. They smell blood. A shark’s perception for blood is so powerful it can distinguish a single drop in an Olympic sized swimming pool. Nothing excites a shark so much as the scent of blood.”

“Right. Great.”

“You don’t really care do you? You think I’m waxing lyrical for the sake of it. Although you should care Will, you really should. Shall I tell you why? It’s because I took my entire inspiration for the current enterprise from the shark. It’s why I sent Michael French your way. And then Matthew Brown. Because I said to myself that if I can torture Will Graham enough then Hannibal Lecter is going to smell the blood and come slithering all the way back again. And I was right wasn’t I Will? Because he did come back.”

I stare at him silently and he starts to laugh. “That was what is known as a rhetorical question. I know perfectly well that he’s back. I just don’t know precisely where. Although I will soon, because you’re going to bring him to me.” He smiles thinly and takes another drag on his cigar, delicately but deliberately blowing the smoke in my face. “Matthew told me that someone staged an intervention on your behalf in the alleyway. He didn’t see who it was, but then he didn’t need to. I immediately knew. That’s why I decided to pay my house call. You thought Matthew had sent me, didn’t you? When all along it was me who sent him.”

“So what you’re basically saying is that Hannibal is too big a target for you to go after directly and you’ve decided to try via me instead?”

“Exactly so.”

“You have no design,” I say sarcastically.

This makes him laugh again. “Poor Will – I’m afraid you’re what is known in the trade as ‘collateral damage.’ But then you never did have a very auspicious relationship with our good Doctor, did you? In fact that’s where I first saw you; when I was visiting my brother at the BSHCI. I walked right past you in the corridor. You won’t remember me of course, why should you? You were rather preoccupied yourself at the time if I recall.”

“So that’s how you know Matthew. It was you who gave him the phone in prison, wasn’t it?”

Briefly I remember the conversation with you at the hotel; the fact that I was right all along: “I’m wondering if there’s a chance Matthew Brown is the dog chasing the car, when what we really want is the driver.”

“Well of course it was,” he says complacently. "I was always very eager to recruit him; he was absolutely perfect. Idolaters make by far the best associates. It’s dangerous to try and purchase allegiance, because there’s always a chance someone can come along and buy it for an even greater sum. Fanatics, on the other hand…well, you don’t have to buy their loyalty with money because it comes in abundance through the force of their obsession. You know a bit about that don’t you?”
“Well you miscalculated with Michael French.”

“No, not at all. Although his own idolatry wasn’t to me, admittedly, but rather to abusing and overpowering other people – people just like you. I was very subtle about it naturally. In fact all I really had to do was show him a photograph, because I knew you were exactly his type: nice and waifish-looking, but sufficiently smart and opinionated to make the satisfaction of bringing you down that much more enjoyable. Oh, and then I suggested Alana Bloom as a suitable person to make an introduction. But that was it Will - that was all. I sent him your way but never in a style which could be proved. Poor Dr Bloom had to shoulder the guilt for that one. That said, his demise was always part of the plan. Although by the time Matthew arrived you’d done a pretty good job yourself hadn’t you? What a little tiger you are.”

I ignore this, and instead think about your words this morning. “And Sanderson’s idolatry was avarice and envy.”

“Yes, quite right. Very good Will. Poor old Sanderson; he didn’t make a very good end, did he? How did you find out about that by the way? Jack Crawford or Hannibal the Cannibal?”

“Jack called me.”

“Hmm, I’m afraid I don’t quite believe you. Knowing you, you were probably there when it happened. At the very least I can’t help feeling you knew all about it long before the official announcement.”

“I was at the scene; I verified it to Jack.”

“Will.” He makes a particularly vicious swipe with the cigar cutter and the cracking sound snaps around the room. “Don’t try my patience. You’re wasting both our time by pretending you’re not protecting him.”

“What makes you so convinced I’m protecting him? Do you actually know what he tried to do to me?”

“Oh yes, I know. I even saw. Not that I had the monopoly there – so did anyone with an internet connection, thanks to Ms Freddie Lounds. Carved you up very thoroughly didn’t he?”

“Well then.”

“Well what? You see Will, if your version is true then it can’t quite explain why you had his belongings in your nasty little apartment, or bruises all over your neck, or a bed that had obviously… well, you know even better than I do. You seem to be forgetting that I saw it all first hand. Have you really been letting him fuck you all this time? You have, haven’t you? Go on Will, you can tell me. Did you like it; did you enjoy yourself? I suppose you must have done. What’s the attraction? Explain it to me. I must admit I find the appeal somewhat easier to understand from his perspective than yours.”

I refuse to answer, just stare at him defiantly, and he starts to laugh again. “You’ve got some nerve, haven’t you? I’ll give you that. It’s a shame you’re always one step away from getting yourself killed. What’s Dr Lecter thinking of? If you were mine I wouldn’t be letting you run around into trouble the way you do.”

“I’m not his. I’m not anyone’s. And I can take care of myself.”

“Oh yes, except when you can’t. Take now for example; look where you’ve ended up. Not that it changes my admiration for you. I do respect you Will. I have the greatest respect for you.”
“I’ll let you know,” I say pointedly, "when I care about having your respect."

“You should care. Why do you think you’re still in one piece?” He makes a suggestive jab at me with the cigar cutter. “You could be in all sorts of agonies right now and you’re not. Although make no mistake – you’re going to be if you don’t play along.”

“What do you expect me to do?” I say carefully.

“Firstly I expect you to be smart, and understand that you’re not going to be able to get yourself out of this one. I won fair and square and you’re going to have to play the game by my rules. And once you’ve understood that, then I expect you to take your understanding to its logical conclusion and to contact Dr Lecter and tell him to come here and get you.”

“You’re joking? You can’t seriously think he’d willingly come and rescue me knowing it’s a trap.” Even as I’m protesting, I’m trying to convince myself that you would; of course you would…but I don’t know how believable it really is.

“Well naturally I don’t think that Will; I know he’s far too fond of himself to voluntarily walk into harm’s way. That’s why you’re going to send him a nice casual message asking him to meet you here, so he’ll come sauntering along expecting to find no one except your harmless little self – only my welcoming committee downstairs are going to be getting to him first. And then…what? What do you think? I’ve told them to bring him to me subdued but unharmed. I can do anything I like to him after that, anything at all. Perhaps I should get you to do it?” He looks thoughtful. “Now there’s an idea.”

I stare back at him, silent and wretched, and he beams back like the fucking maniac that he is. “Take your cell phone out your pocket Will,” he adds.

“I don’t have it with me.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I kill you,” he says. “Obviously.”

“You’ll kill me anyway.”

“If you don’t I’ll kill you slow. Anyway, don’t you want to see him again before you go?” He laughs sardonically. “Jesus Will, what a love story – two psychopaths who found each other against the odds. Although I guess you’re not a real psychopath are you? Not like him. It’s like you just help man the decks when the rest of them are busy.”

I still refuse to move, and he sighs heavily. “You’re not going to be difficult about this are you? Don’t be a martyr for him, Will. You know he’d never do the same for you. If you’re going to martyr yourself you should at least choose a worthier cause. What about my cause? What about vengeance and justice? They’re an excellent cause. And to be perfectly honest with you; if you don’t do it then I’ll just take your phone and do it myself.”

“It’s locked.”

“Oh Will, don’t be so stupid. You think I can’t get someone to unlock a cell phone? All you’ll do is slow me down at the price of an incredibly unpleasant demise for yourself. You know I’m going to
get him eventually with or without you. Look at all my resources; all my capacity. Look how simple it was for me to get you – you might not be up to his standards but you’re hardly an easy target. No Will, the most you can do is hinder me; but you can’t ultimately stop me. Consider yourself as a shortcut. A shortcut might be the most convenient route, but it doesn’t mean it’s the only one. Did you learn nothing from your entanglement with the Verger clan? The infinite potential of money, power and a desire for vengeance?"

He stares at me and I stare back; but in spite of the feigned defiance I still drop my eyes first, because in that moment the complete desperation and helplessness of the situation is threatening to completely overwhelm me. There’s no question I’m going to lure you here; I’d never do that, no matter what kind of punishment he holds over my head. But none of it would change the fact that I’d never see you again once he’d killed me; or that he could still find you afterwards. You’re only an hour or so away, and if they don’t know about the hotel by now it surely can’t be that much longer. Oh fuck, fuck, if only there was some way to warn you. Why didn’t we think of that before? We should have thought of that before, how could we be so remiss? A code word; something to alert the other that there’s a problem…and then my eyes widen with relief as it suddenly occurs to me exactly what I can do.

And it’s so incredibly simple – thank fuck for my shitty texting etiquette. Because what I know, and he doesn’t, is that virtually every text message I’ve ever sent you has been followed up with a supercilious commentary about bad grammar and missing vowels, or ‘what does that ridiculous acronym ‘btw’ mean?’; and therefore sending something impeccably spelled and incredibly formal is an effortless yet highly effective way of warning you that the message isn’t coming from me and that someone’s got my phone and is trying to trap you. It’ll immediately alert you that something’s wrong and give you the opportunity to either come here, properly primed and prepared, to sort it out (oh God, would you?); or else leave me behind and make an escape.

Slowly I reach into my pocket and he nods approvingly. “Give it to me when you’ve finished,” he says. “There’s no signal back here so I’m going to have to stand by the window to send it. Remember Will; nothing’s been left to chance. You can’t send him a warning. Nothing can leave that cell without me seeing it first.”

I just nod vacantly to show I understand then chew on my bottom lip, trying to devise something that’s suitably stilted and artificial yet convincing enough not to arouse his suspicions that it’s actually a put-up job:

*Hi! I hope you’ve had a pleasant evening. I’d like to see you – can you meet me at the warehouse on the corner of 22nd street? Please come as soon as is convenient. Apologies for texting so late, by the way, but it’s rather important. Thank you. Will.*

For good measure I delete ‘Will’ and replace it with ‘WG’ then add ‘xxx’ at the end. Surely that’ll be enough. Of course it is – it’s more than enough. There’s no way you’ll ever believe I sent that myself. It’s the electronic equivalent of a gigantic red flag.

I hand my phone to him and he glances at the message then raises his eyebrows (no doubt at the extravagant row of x’s). “Perfect,” he says. He uncoils himself from his chair then slowly begins to move towards the window, walking backwards the entire time and brandishing the gun to prevent me trying to spring at him. He finally disappears as the blackness swallows him up, then there’s a little chime as the message is sent. So that’s it. It’s done. Now you know.

He returns straight away and hands me my cell, which I wordlessly replace in my coat pocket. “What are you going to do if he doesn’t turn up?” I ask.
“I’ll keep you here as long as I need to of course – you’re my live bait. And if we really can’t lure him in, then I’ll have to find some other means.”

“You said you wouldn’t hurt me if I sent the text,” I say drily.

“Oh yes, I did didn’t I?” He smiles in an extremely unpleasant way. “It looks like I was lying. But let’s not be so pessimistic Will, we’re getting ahead of ourselves. There’s no reason to think he won’t come. Everyone knows you’re his weak spot.”

“Not really.”

“No, you’re right, perhaps that’s not the best way of putting it – weak spot implies some depth of feeling. If that’s what you genuinely were, I would have had you send a straightforward SOS; but we both know he wouldn’t have responded to that.”

“Right,” I say, then lean back in the chair and stretch my legs out on front of me. To an outsider I look like I’m bored and cramped and trying to get comfortable, but the reality is that I’ve been submerged by a flood of miserable hopelessness that completely subdues the brief flare of triumph over the trick with the phone. Because even though that text actually was a coded SOS, you still won’t come. I know you won’t. You virtually said as much this evening: everything’s fine…just as long as I’m not posing a threat to you, at which point I can fuck right off. I was even thinking it as I left the hotel; how nothing is more significant to you than preserving your own irrepressible Self. How an opportunity to taunt Jack with a hacked up corpse was more important to you than allowing us to safely escape together. How you’re never going to risk your own life to preserve mine. How you don’t love me. How you can’t.

Some of my anguish must briefly show on my face because he suddenly leans forward and gives me a weirdly compassionate look. “Sorry Will,” he says, “you don’t have much luck, do you? But you know that as long as you’re running round with that freak show people are always going to try and use you to get to him. Haven’t you worked that out by now?”

“I guess not,” I say.

“I would let you go if I could. But you know that’s not possible.”

“Of course.”

“You’re a witness, you see.” He rolls his eyes at me then begins the process of lighting another cigar. “I knew you’d recognize me eventually; I avoid personal publicity for obvious reasons, but you’d have come across a photograph at some point and realized what was going on. Once I’d let you see me there was no question things had to move fast.”

“You took an enormous risk in coming to the apartment yourself.”

“Not really – at least not in the short-term. What would you have done after all; told Jack Crawford that the Chairman of the Cane Foundation disguised himself as a building inspector to poke around your bedroom? He would have taken that extremely seriously, wouldn’t he?”

“What’s your real name?” I ask, instead of conceding that this is undoubtedly the case.

“Joshua Gideon. By which moniker, incidentally, I am still known to my family and close associates. You could say that ‘Cane’ is my public persona. But it really hasn’t been that difficult to keep the link quiet. My brother died several years ago and was never truly notorious – the media interest in Abel Gideon expired quite some time ago. No one really cares Will. Some new villain always comes along for Jack Crawford to send his pack in pursuit of; and interests shift and the public’s taste for the
macabre shifts with it. Except for our Dr Lecter of course; I suppose we need to make an exception for him. The interest there is inexplicably consistent. Even you finally became interested, didn’t you?”

Again I refuse to concede the truth of what he’s saying and shift the subject once more. “Why didn’t you just force your way in the first time?” I ask, even though I don’t care.

“Because it would’ve been playing my hand too soon; I wasn’t sure he was actually with you. Besides, I’m not stupid – what would I have done if I’d burst in and found him sat in your living room? I was hardly likely to be able to take the two of you on single-handed.”

“Then why were you so disappointed when you came back the third time and found us gone?”

“Because, obviously, when I came back the third time I didn’t come alone. No, no, no Will – you’ve got it all wrong. The purpose of the first and second visits were simply to confirm my suspicions, which they did in abundance, and then instigate the next phase. Therefore your car. And then the janitor. And then the night at the Academy building. And then your ill-fated doppelgänger. And then – here we are. It’s like poetry Will. Every stanza rhymes with the other.” He grins again. “Matthew sent you a poem didn’t he? My unfortunate brother related the conversation to me: how you let the love go to waste. I have to say you backed the wrong horse there. Matthew Brown would have been a better bet than Hannibal Lecter. So much ardour; such a very devoted fan. But you wouldn’t go with him would you? Even after everything he’d done on your behalf…He wasn’t quite so big a fan after that.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Are you thinking of the TattleCrime messages? Don’t be too offended by those; I don’t think he really wants to kill you. At least not anymore. He told me as much in the van; once he saw you again he changed his mind. So touching. He seems to think you and he are going to stride off into the sunset together.”

“Right,” I say sarcastically.

“Or, perhaps more accurately – wrong. Really Will, how do you manage it? You’re like catnip for psychopaths. They all love you, don’t they? Jack Crawford should follow my example and start using you as live bait as well; it would improve his closure statistics rather wonderfully.”

“So what would you have done if Matthew really had kidnapped me that night? Wouldn’t it have been a bit premature for your plan?”

“No, because the intention was always to let you go again. Remember what I told you before about the sharks? Weren’t you listening? It was always essential to keep you alive; I only wanted to keep breaking you a little bit more each time. A little bit more blood. Although as it turned out it was Dr Lecter who was premature; he came rushing to the rescue even sooner than expected didn’t he?”

“Yes,” I say, and by some miracle I manage to keep my voice completely steady.

“Not that he’d come to the rescue if it were genuinely contrary to his own interests. Hence the need for that charming little message I’ve just sent on your behalf. You did very well there Will, I wish I could give you some kind of reward. Are you sure you won’t have a cigar? No? You really should have something to celebrate with. Ah, he’s going to get quite the shock when he walks in and finds an ambush isn’t he? Even he’s not totally indestructible after all; Matthew proved that beautifully the first time round.” He chuckles sadistically to himself, and I think: at least I’ve spared you that.
“And so – we wait,” he adds. “We wait as long as we have to. You may as well make yourself comfortable.”

I suppose I may as well – considering I’ll be waiting for something that’s not going to happen. I wonder what you’re doing right now? Probably preparing to leave the hotel. You’ll already be packed; just the essentials, nothing too cumbersome. You know you need to travel light. You won’t slink away though: you’ll stride out the main door, head held high, and then disappear into the night. People in the lobby will stare admiringly as you go past because of how striking you are, but you won’t care. You’ll just ignore them. Maybe you’re waiting for the cab, slightly impatient, tapping your foot with your hands in your pockets. You don’t like waiting do you? You get bored so easily. I wonder if you’re feeling sad? Yes of course you will – or at least as close to it as you’re capable of. You’ll be grateful that I tried to warn you though. Or maybe not grateful, exactly…you don’t really do gratitude. But you’ll respect me for it. It showed quick thinking; you like that. And you’ll appreciate that I did what I could for you.

You’ll be anxious about me, I guess. Or no, maybe not anxious. How did you phrase it again, the morning after they found my murdered lookalike? “You might call it…anticipation. I have trained myself to tolerate uncertainty; cultivate an open state of mind that can abide with enigmas and inconsistencies.” You’ll miss me though, I know you will; you’ll blend the twin demands of holding on and letting go. I wonder if you’ve taken something of mine? A memento of some sort. I bet you have. A shirt or a book, some aftershave with a ship on the bottle. Something like that; something to remind you of me. You’ll never admit it to anyone, but you’ll carry it round with you…or at least until you meet someone else. Then it’ll start to lose its value, and you’ll begin to look at it less frequently, forget to touch it as often as your custom once was. You’ll stop taking it out of whatever drawer it’s concealed in, let the dust gather over it, allow the sun to fade it out. And then, one day, you’ll abandon it entirely and leave it behind; forgotten and forsaken. The new residents will be unpacking their stuff and stumble across it. “Look what someone’s left here,” they’ll say, and then they’ll toss it to one side and forget about it too. My wing in your memory palace will start to crumble…

From downstairs a clattering noise cuts harshly through the silence and both of us promptly jump. Cane/Gideon, or whatever his fucking name is, frowns and then abruptly pushes his chair back and stalks over to the stairwell to yell “Keep it down!” and someone shouts “sorry Sir” in response. I watch numbly, no longer entirely engaged with what’s happening – just remain where I am, drained and lethargic, and imagining your face while wishing I’d properly told you that I loved you when I had the chance. The expression heartsick comes to mind: as if all sense and feeling have been hollowed out and left me ailing and disorientated. Because you’ll finally be going somewhere that I can’t follow you. Because you weren’t just a muse, or a realization, or a passing thought or idea or inspiration; you were everything. And because you meant so much I couldn’t comprehend or express it and now I’ll never have the opportunity to let you know.

“My apologies Will,” he says when he sits down again. “They’re a bit rowdy. Overexcited I suppose. It’s not every day you get to take down the Chesapeake Ripper: they’re nearly as eager about it as I am.”

I stare back at him silently. Well fuck them, I think with a sudden surge of anger, and fuck you too, you stupid bastard; and your dead dismembered brother as well. Oh God, why am I being so defeatist and maudlin? I can’t give up this easily. Fuck me, too. There has to be a way out of this, I have to find one…make one…some window of opportunity. Christ, it’s not like he’s indestructible. But if I overpower him, then how would I get out afterwards? I can’t fight my way through all the people downstairs. You could. But I’m not you; and you’re not here.

“He’s taking his time isn’t he?” says Cane, brandishing my phone accusingly as if I’m responsible
(even though I actually am). “And still no answer to your message. I suppose it’s a good thing from your point of view; the longer he takes to show up, the longer you get to live. I’ve come to a decision about that by the way – I’m not going to do anything to him, at least not at first. Because you’re going to do it yourself.”

“No,” I say, without even thinking about it. “No, I can’t do that.”

“You can, and you shall. Because if you don’t, then I’m going to do something unspeakably painful to you as a form of persuasion. I suppose you think you know about pain – about agony – but you don’t. Everyone has a breaking point Will, even you. I don’t care how long it takes. But I’m going to carry on until you get to the point that you’ll be begging me to let you hurt him. And of course he’s going to get to watch the whole thing. Although admittedly, knowing him, he’d probably enjoy it.”

“No,” I say firmly; and even though I won’t be called upon to put it to the test, there’s no doubt the resolution is unassailable.

He stares back thoughtfully (either admiring my determination or deriding my stubborn self-sacrifice; it’s impossible to tell) when there’s a sudden sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. Oh God, please…could it possibly be you? I swing round in an agony of anticipation, which promptly stutters and dies when the pinched, wizened face of Matthew-fucking-Brown abruptly appears.

“What the hell do you want?” demands Cane irritably, and it’s interesting to see how chinks and cracks are starting to appear in his previous self-possession. Obviously the endless waiting is starting to get to him too.

“I wanted to see Mr Graham,” replies Matthew Brown with almost pitiful simplicity.

“Well now you’ve seen him; so go back downstairs.”

The latter ignores these instructions with a level of oblivion that’s almost impressive, and I process the way he’s gazing at me while replaying his words in the alleyway: “I was told that I could have him once Dr Lecter’s found. I was promised.” The idea of recruiting him as an ally is a bit fucking much, all things considered, but right now I’m desperate enough to try anything.

“You may as well let him,” I say loudly. “Considering I’ll be dead before morning.”

“What?” Matthew Brown takes a few steps forward; I’m pleased to see that his fists are clenched.

“Ignore him,” says Cane. “He’s lying to you.”

“Why the hell would I lie about it?” My voice is shot through with a shrill bolt of indignation that’s not entirely feigned. “What would be the point?”

“Matt,” replies Cane in a shitty, overly-reasonable tone, “who are you going to believe; him or me? Haven’t I always done right by you? What’s he ever done? He lied to you and manipulated you from Day One. He’s doing it now. Seriously, just ignore him. You wait up here with us if you want to; see that I’m telling you the truth.”

“You should go Matthew. He’s going to kill me, and then when your usefulness has expired he’ll kill you too. We’re both collateral damage.”

“Will,” says Cane quietly, “one more word out of you and I’m going to slice your tongue out. Do you understand, you stupid little bastard? Is that clear enough for you? Shut. The. Fuck. Up.”

“Don’t talk to him like that,” hisses Matthew Brown.
“You’re right Matt, of course you are. I’m sorry. It’s just I hate the way he’s trying to play you. Treating you like you’re an idiot. Look, everyone’s getting a bit overwrought; we should all calm down. The others will be bringing Dr Lecter upstairs before much longer, at which point you two can leave.” He gives me a sneering look. “Together.”

Matthew Brown glances from one of us to the other then neatly drops down to the floor next to my chair with his legs crossed. His whole physique is tightly coiled and menacing and in spite of myself I can feel my body automatically arching away. “Don’t even think about fucking around with me Mr Cane,” he says softly. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Of course not. There’s no problem here Matt; only that we’ve got Will Graham plying his usual brand of bullshit. He’s so arrogant he can’t bear not having the upper hand, so he’s going out of his way to pretend he’s in control. Isn’t that right Will? It’s a bit pathetic really. He can’t admit that you’re the one in control, and always have been. That’s why you were able to find him so easily.” Now he turns to me and his expression hardens. “I know exactly what you’re trying to do Will,” he says, “and while I give you full marks for initiative you need to stop it now. You’ve lost. Accept it.”

There’s a long pause as he chews broodingly on the end of his cigar, while Matthew Brown gazes at me and I scowl at the floor and try and formulate my next move. No one stirs or speaks. The lights keep flickering as the generator splutters, and I decide that this may well be my best chance – wait until the lights dim again and then make a lunge for Cane. Matthew Brown is an unknown variable who may either help or hinder, but if necessary I’ll take them both on. The element of surprise could go in my favor and if I move quickly enough I can knock him off his chair before he’s able to reach for the gun. Of course, deep down, I know that the chances of success for this enterprise are virtually non-existent; but if I’m going to die there's no question I’d rather go fighting. Even though there’s no real chance. Even though it’s not a question of ‘if’ as opposed to ‘when’ – because even if by some miracle I take them both down I’ve still got to make it past the gang on the ground floor.

There’s another clattering sound from downstairs, louder than the previous one, and this time Cane flings down his cigar with irritation. “For Christ’s sake,” he yells, “keep the goddamn noise down! Why not just announce yourselves with flashing neon signs?” Then he coughs and shifts awkwardly in his chair, as if he’s regretting losing his composure in front of me. “Hired help,” he adds laconically. “It’s so difficult to find truly competent employees. What a shame they’re not all like you Matt.”

But Matthew Brown doesn’t reply. He’s not even looking at us. Instead he’s swivelled round and has gone rigid with shock, his mouth hanging slightly open.

So I look up as well, and –

“To be honest I don’t think you need to worry about that anymore,” I say lightly. “Your men are already dead.” My voice is lifting up as the crushing loss and grief dissolves away, and despite my best efforts my eyes have started to sting with the emotion of the moment, because I really didn’t dare to hope…

“What do you mean?” He looks at me sharply. He’s facing in the opposite direction to me and Matthew Brown; he can’t see what we can. “What the hell are you talking about?”

There’s a brief silence, followed by a light tread of footsteps. And then the shadow in the corner solidifies and steps out into the light.

“Really Mr Cane,” you say. “I think it is perfectly clear.”
Chapter 45

Hello my lovelies. Please be aware there’s another warning in this chapter for graphic violence.

“But MissDis, we didn’t expect there to be violence in this chapter.” Said absolutely no one. Ever.

Ah ha. Seriously though, I prefer to err on the side of caution for my trigger warnings – so if anyone wants to avoid the content then please feel very free to give me a shout in the comments for a plot recap.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There’s an electrified pause, and for several seconds the tension is so incendiary it seems a single strike would be sufficient to set it alight. No one moves or speaks: the only sound is the growling of the generator; the only activity the flickering of the studio lights. Suspended animation. With the exception of you (coiled and poised, leaning back to flex your shoulders), everyone is soldered in place so tightly we could almost be effigies of ourselves. You carry on watching us. The generator emits another tortured, seismic groan. The lights dip again. And then we finally all splutter back to life at the same time and gasp “You!” in tones that run the full range from rapturous delight (me) to stark dread (Matthew Brown) to astonished disbelief (Cane); and all the time you’re just stood there with your head slightly tilted to one side in a way that makes the shadows skim across your face and accentuate all its planes and sharp angles. Your eyes are darting over me and I can see you frown as you inventory my bruised cheek, bloodied forehead, and the swollen ligature marks mottling both wrists. Matthew Brown mutters “oh shit” under his breath, but otherwise no one seems able to summon sufficient presence of mind to speak to you. Although I decide to absolve myself of that because I don’t really need to; I just need to look at you (looking at me) and that’s enough. It’s more than enough. You came back for me. We can join forces. You’re here, and you’re real, and you’re going to help fix things…and you came back for me.

Of the three of us it’s who Cane recovers himself first. “What the hell?” he finally says. “What the fucking hell is this?” You raise your eyebrows. “You can’t just walk in here!”

“No?” you reply. “And yet you see I have done precisely that.”

“Well Dr Lecter…it would certainly appear that way.” He clears his throat then smooths down the lapels of his jacket, playing at casual. But he’s frowning in spite of himself, clearly not comprehending how you can possibly be stood in front him, gloriously free and unfettered, having overpowered all four gang members unaided. “How much did it cost you to pay those guys off?” he finally says; and Matthew Brown and I forge a brief and unexpected alliance by exchanging incredulous glances with one another in unspoken acknowledgement of: ‘Oh fuck, if he really thinks that then he has spectacularly underestimated what he’s dealing with.’

From the look on your face you obviously feel the same. “Oh yes,” you reply after a pause, “your colleagues downstairs. They were kind enough to inform me exactly what has been going on.” You smile in an extraordinarily sinister way. “I’m afraid that Will is right and you shall have to consider their employment terminated; nevertheless we had the most illuminating discussion beforehand.
Indeed, Mr Cane, you truly have been wasting everybody’s time.”

“You arrogant bastard.” Now he’s gone white and pinched with rage; little dents in both nostrils, eyebrows furrowed so tightly it makes his forehead convulse. The comparison to your own anger, so carefully controlled and menacing, is extremely striking.

“It is very curious,” you reply idly, as if he hasn’t spoken, “to consider the occasions that excite such passionate and frantic displays of grief.” You pause and inspect your fingernails, as if he and his whole twisted endeavour are too tiresome for words. “Not that I don’t understand the loss of a sibling; I have experienced it myself. But to so tenderly and ardently deplore the loss of such a sibling as yours; I find that a little less comprehensible.”

At this point you abruptly take a step forward and Matthew Brown shifts uncomfortably on the floor. Cane, to do him justice, doesn’t move at all; although there’s a tell-tale tic in his jaw, the muscles twitching and spasming as he grinds his teeth together.

“It rarely happens that a person departs this life who is truly deserving of all the opprobrium that the law and media can heap over his bones,” you add. “Yet your late brother was undoubtedly such a one. Be honest Mr Cane; this is not really in the service of grief and commemoration at all, is it? It is less to do with genuine sorrow than it is with vengeful pride. I suspect you did not shed a single tear at your brother’s loss.” You smile again. “Or perhaps I am wrong? Perhaps you go and pay your respects every month at your family vault. Do you have such a thing? Are his remains languishing there for you to wring your hands over at suitable intervals? Rather unfortunate if so, considering that there were not that many remains…remaining.”

Cane has been growing paler and angrier throughout the whole of this speech, and when you get to the last part he draws in his breath in a sharp little stutter as if he’s ready to combust (and I do absolutely nothing to help the situation by emitting a loud snort of inappropriate laughter at the whole ‘not many remains remaining’ bit).

“Say that again, you evil fucker,” he snarls. “Say that again and I’ll blow your head off.”

“Will you?” you say politely.

“I will Dr Lecter – very happily. I’ve got a gun.”

“Oh yes, indeed,” you reply. You roll your eyes heavenward as you say this, as if to imply: look at all the fucks I absolutely do not give about that; they’re literally falling from the ceiling. “You know perfectly well you are not going to shoot me. It is too quick and clean, it defies the purpose of your whole enterprise. It would signify failure. My punishment has to be more severe, doesn’t it?”

The pragmatic way you announce this – so matter-of-fact and fearless – is simultaneously highly surreal and deeply sinister. I watch Cane closely to see what impact it’s going to have, ultimately deciding that it’s something akin to disorientation: he can’t get a proper grip on the situation and is clearly disturbed and wary, yet is likewise trying not to show it while still clinging onto the (doomed) possibility that he can gain control over you in the way he originally intended. It’s actually rather fascinating to witness how his previous sardonic self-possession is starting to crumble and unravel; he could almost be a different person, and it makes me wonder which is truer to his natural character and which is just a marque that he drapes over his real self to achieve a particular effect. I can almost imagine him trying them out in front of a mirror, posing and frowning, trying to decide which persona will best suit his purposes for a given task. Then I remember your recent, oft-repeated refrain – there is never only one, of anybody – and marvel at your uncanny ability to cleave, bloody and merciless, through the facades and posturings of everyone around you. Strange to think how much I used to hate it when you did it with me…but not anymore.
Cane opens his mouth and closes it again, finally managing a slightly ineffectual: “Yes it does have to be more severe.” I glance at him disbelievingly before realizing that Matthew Brown is doing the same.

“Yes. Quite,” you reply. “As I said. So, now you have me here; you have achieved what you set out to do. How do you propose we proceed?”

You take another step forward, slow and deliberate, and if the expression ‘be careful what you wish for’ could be heuristically rendered then the expression that flits over Cane’s face in that second would epitomize it. And yet, despite that, I know he still hasn’t fully grasped the extent to which it’s Game Over. Because he really does have no idea what he’s dealing with. He thinks the normal rules still apply; that he can still wrest back some semblance of control. That the fact he’s armed is enough. That a gun is any kind of match for us.

“You know, besides from the narcissism and a shared taste for crude violence you are very different from your brother,” you say. Your voice is low and rhythmic – almost hypnotic in the way the words curl out of your mouth. “You are intemperate and ungoverned, and it is that which is going to be your downfall. He at least had a certain grace under pressure. He also had the good manners to recognize when he had lost.”

Cane’s face twitches at that: an ugly spasm of rage and restless, thwarted aggression that can’t bear to be told ‘no’ and can’t concede a point or relinquish a preference. “You think I’ve lost?” he hisses, and his voice is low and threatening. “You arrogant shit. You really think you can just saunter in here and start dictating the terms? Are you out of your mind?”

But of course he’s wrong: not least because that’s exactly what you can do, but because in beaming his entire reserves of vindictive wrath in your direction he’s made a critical omission. Because he believes he’s just dealing with one person, when in fact there are two…and always has been. All the time he’s speaking he’s groping towards his pocket for the gun, anger making him ungainly and uncoordinated, but you’re not even looking at him – you’re looking at me. And I’m looking at you. And the exchange of information between us is as quick and efficient as if it were spoken aloud; because before Cane even has time to process what’s happening then I’m springing out my chair and diving towards his. I don’t even think about it – it doesn’t seem necessary to feel fear. I can hear him screaming at me, wild and venomous, and I land neatly on top of him, forcing him to collapse backwards as I grab his wrist before he has a chance to reorient himself and fire. Then I jump to my feet while he’s still flailing and stamp down on his hand to force him to drop the gun. You nod approvingly and move forwards, reaching us in three quick strides, then roughly grab his shoulders to haul him to his feet. He kicks out behind him the whole time, feral and desperate as he tries to wrench himself free.

“No,” you say sharply. “I don’t think so.”

“Dorian! Carl!” he yells. “Christ, get up here now!” And if it was anyone else I’d pity a level of denial that’s so self-deceiving and absolute. You, on the other hand, merely sigh impatiently then grip him by the torso with both hands and make a quick twisting movement. It’s so fast I can barely process what you’re doing; in fact what I’m more aware of than anything else is the sound: the sickening crunching noise as the bones grind together, before he screams again and crumples against you. And I think: oh Christ, you’ve just snapped his spine.

“You see Mr Cane,” you continue, in the same calm, precise tone as before, “you have not only been unforgivably rude, you made a fatal error in judgement when you attempted to acquire Will. Unfortunately I am operating under certain time constraints which make it impossible to demonstrate the full extent of my displeasure. For that you should consider yourself extremely fortunate.
Nevertheless I think the point can still be reliably made.”

All the while you’re talking my eyes are flicking from you to Cane; and it strikes me that while your anger is on my behalf, my own outrage is reserved for what he was intending to do to you. And I’m so furious it’s taking my breath away. I feel impassioned with it: murderous. Oh God, everything’s happening so fast. I know that this is the point at which I could (should?) walk away, that I could leave it to you to finish the job – I know I don’t need to intervene, that the outcome would be the same with or without me. But none of these things make any difference, and what’s more I don’t even try to justify it to myself. What I do instead, without even fully thinking about it, is reach into his jacket pocket to retrieve the knife he used to cut the zip ties. I can feel your eyes bearing into me the whole time but when I glance up your face is smooth and impassive as a sheet of glass, doing nothing to either discourage or persuade. Good…that’s good. I don’t want this to be part of some unspoken pact with you; if I do it at all, it has to be of my own volition (even though we’re acting together, perfectly aligned and synchronized, and all the better for it). I pass the knife to my right hand, quick and deft, and then without further hesitation I thrust it into his abdomen and sear to the left so I can slice it open, springing backwards to avoid getting covered in the resulting splash of blood and gore – at the exact moment as you twist his head back and rip his throat out with your bare teeth.

It’s over in seconds and he collapses in a crumpled, bloody heap as you casually lean over and whip out his pocket square to clean your face before dropping it disdainfully onto the floor. I stare at you numbly, listening to the sound of my breathing: loud, rasping pants of shock and exhilaration combined. That’s it now. I’ve done it – I’ve crossed and re-crossed the line. And it’s good. It’s right…it’s glorious. He had it coming and it was right. There’s a certain savage grace to it; I always thought so. How swiftly, simply and beautifully a human body can be breached and broken apart. I glance up at your face to see how you’re taking it but you’re not looking back at me; you’re staring behind my shoulder. Why aren’t you looking at me? You should be looking. And it’s that point I realize…oh fuck.

There’s a horrible, loaded pause, and then: “Please do not be so foolish Mr Brown,” you say. “You have also lost. There are many varieties of loss aren’t there? Losses of pride, and face, and faith, and devotion. All painful in their own way; all desirous to be avoided. But it does not alter anything. Resistance to the loss cannot defer the inevitability of the loss itself. And it is inevitable; because you know he is not going to go with you.”

“Mr Graham?” says Matthew Brown pleadingly. “Will?” I turn round very slowly, and sure enough he’s stood there with the gun pointed at us both. It’s obviously this which catches my attention first, yet in that brief moment what really resonates with me is how young and uncertain he sounds; and for a few seconds I get a wretched, haunted glimpse of the child he must once have been – hopeful and yearning – before the arrival of whatever abuses and betrayals that took hold and twisted him into what he is now. It reminds me of your erstwhile observation that “some monsters are not born, but made.”

“You have taken your window of opportunity,” you continue smoothly, “and for that I must congratulate you. Utilizing the distraction posed by Mr Cane shows an admirable presence of mind. But it is not going to be enough to get you what you want.”

He doesn’t answer, doesn’t look at you; it’s like he’s forgotten you’re even here because he’s so preoccupied with me. “You’re not going to?” he asks, and he sounds bewildered. “Mr Graham? You wouldn’t? Not like that…not with him.”

I stare at him and he stares back at me. “Yes,” I reply after a pause. “I would.” There’s nothing else I can say, no other answer I can give; nothing left now except the truth, and in this respect I know that
I’m really addressing all three of us. And then very slowly, and exceedingly carefully, I begin to position myself so I’m standing in between you and the gun: firm and resolute, and in the line of fire.

“Will,” you say sharply.

“You used me.” He sounds less angry than he does uncomprehending; being forced, as he is, to dismantle the whole house of cards that’s been arduous years in the making. Built up painstakingly and piece by piece, lie by lie, one deluded hope after another. “You manipulated me the whole time,” he adds. “You pretended you understood when all you ever really wanted was him.”

“I know,” I say. “I know I did.” But I can’t bring myself to say that I’m sorry.

“Mr Cane was right.”

“Partly. Not about everything.”

He takes a step towards me, the gun trembling and veering in his hand. He’s gripping the handle so tightly his knuckles have gone white, gleaming in the murky gloom like four little Death’s heads. “You think I’m just going to let you walk out of here without me?” He gives a bitter half-laugh, although whether from genuine amusement, bravado, or simply maddened delirium it’s impossible to say. “Walk out of here with…with him?”

“Yes,” I reply firmly, “because you don’t have a choice. You know he’s right; you know I’m not going to walk out of here with you.”

Instead of acknowledging this he bares his teeth in a crooked little smile and turns to you instead. “And you’ve got a short memory,” he says. “Or is it just selective? Or are you just stupid? He sent me to kill you! He’s fucked us both over! Look at him! Look what he’s done!”

For a highly surreal few seconds I have an image of him abruptly transferring all his thwarted desire wholesale from me to you (‘you’re a hawk, Dr Lecter, just like I am’), united in righteous indignation at what a shit I’ve been to the pair of you. You don’t reply, and because I daren’t take my eyes off him I have no idea what your expression is doing: whether you’re angry, or simply amused, or even merely bored – too bored to dignify his outpouring with any kind of response. Matthew Brown falters then hesitates, the gun still pitching and shuddering like something tempest-tossed, and it occurs to me that the reason you’re not replying is to confuse and disorientate him by withholding any meaningful interaction. It’s not entirely dissimilar to my own strategy in the alleyway, where I likewise curated my response in the service of obstructing his expectations. It’s obviously working…possibly it’s working a little too well. “Why don’t either of you say anything?” he screams. “God, you two are so fucked. You’re fucked. You deserve each other.”

“I know,” I say quietly. My eyes are darting over him, profiling every hitch and tremor. The bastard’s going to take a shot at you, I can tell. I prime myself, ready to react. Bend my knees very slightly. Lean forward. Pull my shoulders back. Any second now, any second; three, two, one…And then I spring towards him just before he pulls the trigger, aiming for his waist so I miss the bullet trajectory and swinging him round and down onto the ground. We hit the floor in a tangle of limbs, a twisted parody of a pair of lovers, and I seize his head and pull it forwards before abruptly smashing it down onto the unforgiving concrete. There’s the cracking sound of splintered bone, and there’s blood, and shock and – surprising, considering everything’s he’s done – there’s even pity. But there’s no remorse and there’s no regret because he, of all people, should have known that I’d kill to protect you. I let go of his head, allowing it to slump against the floor with a callous thud, then I get to my feet and try to even out my breathing before turning round. You’re still stood exactly where you were, poised and watchful and illuminated in the glare of the lamps. My whole body’s trembling and I flex my arms and shoulders, forcing myself to calm down.
Silence. The lights still gutter and dim. The generator still growls. And you’re just standing there, and so am I.

“So,” you finally say. Your voice is very low and intense.

“So…? What? What do you mean?”

“You,” you say quietly. “You were magnificent Will. I knew you would be.”

There’s another beat while we stare at each other without speaking. Your eyes are gleaming slightly in the half-light and I gaze at you, rapt and silent, on and on, with my own eyes wide and my lips slightly parted. I’m thinking of the last time we were like this: stood on a clifftop; bloodied, battle-stained and victorious. Me, fatalistic and wary; you, ecstatic yet forbearing. The resignation. The fall. The end of everything and the beginning of something else. Maybe you’re thinking about it too. Then even though I know the memory of it will probably wake me up every night for the rest of my life in a cold sweat of cringing embarrassment, I can’t stop myself running towards you and burying my face in your neck whilst murmuring in a voice that’s perilously close to breaking: “I didn’t think you’d come back for me.”

I half-expect you to reply with some sort of brisk refutation (‘Of course I came back Will. Do not be such an idiot’) but instead you wrap your arms round me, just like you did that night; and in a single moment it’s as if we’re mirror images of ourselves, replaying the scene over and over except this time it’s the right resolution.

“How could I go without you when it would mean leaving one of the best parts of myself behind?” you reply. “Don’t you remember what I told you mylimasis? Have you forgotten already – there is never only one, of anybody.”

“I know,” I say. My voice cracks slightly. “I know, I know.” Oh God, you’re so perfect. You’re perfect, and beautiful and wonderful and terrible, and you’re mine. I bind my arms around your shoulders and kiss you, arching my body into yours. Your hands are skimming everywhere – my hair, my face, my back, my hips – as if there’s multiple versions of you all enveloping me at the same time. There is never only one, of anybody. But right now there is just one: one of you, one of me, me-you-us, the two explosive halves of the one inconceivable whole. I keep breaking my mouth away from yours so I can say your name (“Hannibal, Hannibal, oh God”), just to remind myself that it’s really you; that you’re really here; that this version – the one that risked everything to come back for me – is just as vivid, true and knowable as all the others.

You pull me tighter against you, tangling your long fingers into my hair so you can tug my head back and kiss my throat, and I’m gasping at how good it feels and trying to grind my hips against yours when in the corner of my eye I detect a flicker of movement. A reckless impulse in me wants to ignore it and remain focussed on you, but I know I can’t so awkwardly lever my face to the side to ascertain what it is…and promptly experience a queasy jolt of shock to realize that it’s none other than Matthew Brown, mutely staring at us from his prone position on the floor. Matthew Brown: wistful, uncomprehending, and very much alive. Or at least temporarily – there’s blood seeping from his mouth, and his skin has taken on a waxy, pallid sheen – but there’s no doubt he’s sentient and aware. Aware of what we’re doing, of what we mean to each other, of exactly what it is that’s between us. If he was in any doubt before he’s certainly not now, and I defiantly close my eyes to block him out. Because I know that I should care that he can see us; that I should feel (ought to feel) subdued and ashamed, yet I don’t. In fact the lack of shame is intoxicating. Because of course what it really means is that I belong to you, and you belong to me, and that it’s inherently right and exactly how it should be; and the judgement and censure of the whole wide world can fuck right off. I forget about Matthew Brown and bury my mouth in yours again, only pulling away again to gasp out:
“You. Up against the wall.” My voice sounds coarse, roughened with desire.

Now you pull away and catch hold of my head with both hands, smoothing your thumbs across the top of my cheekbones. You’re smiling broadly…you’re smiling so much, you look delighted; you’re luminous with it. “So accepting of yourself,” you say. You trail your fingers down my face and I close my eyes again and lean into your touch. “So assenting to your impulses. This was all I ever wanted for you Will: to become a more perfectly realized rendering of what you already were. To be a great version of yourself rather than a mediocre version of somebody else.”

“I know.” I kiss you again, tugging on your bottom lip with my teeth. “I know, I understand it now.” Then I seize hold of your coat with both hands and you allow me to push you up against the bricks, sighing slightly and tipping your head back as I rub my face against yours while frantically scrabbling to unfasten your belt with one hand and undo my own with the other. I use my foot to knock your legs further apart then scrape my teeth along the side of your throat before dragging my tongue across your skin, trying to taste you. We don’t have any lube but I can already feel how slick and wet I am with pre-come which should help; and anyway with time and diligence there’s always ways round it. I finally pull away to spit onto my hand and work one slippery finger inside you, trying to strike some kind of balance between speed and consideration, then follow it up with a second one to properly get the job done. Now I’m basically fucking you with my fingers, rocking my hand against your body and I love doing this…I love it…Oh God, I’m so turned on. Sex and death: the two strongest human drives. There’s a cut on my other hand from the fight earlier; I’m bleeding. I’m going to get my blood on you, inside you, and somehow this feels strangely appropriate. My blood is my life force, an essential element – the building blocks and blueprint of me. You can have it, I want you to. Take me, I think, take all of me; take everything.

There’s a streak of moonlight filtering in through the window, eerily silver and sharp as a knife blade. The sight of it reminds me again of that night on the cliff, and it’s just as beautiful now as it was then. I roughly pull you back against me and press my face into your throat again. “You’re perfect Hannibal,” I mutter into your skin. “You’re so perfect.” And you are. You’re perfect in all your fantastically flawed, fucked-up imperfection. I’m vaguely aware of you murmuring to me, alternating between praise and encouragement, but I can’t fully focus on what you’re saying because I’m so delirious with love (and life – our life, yours and mine – and the sense of liberation, and oh God). I make a helpless moaning noise as I take hold of my cock and push myself into the tight heat of your body and you gasp out too and brace your arms against the wall, arching your back towards me as if you can’t get enough of it; as if I’m the best fuck you’ve ever had. I love the sound of you doing that; I want to make you do it again. You really like it don’t you? That’s good, that’s perfect, I want you to like it…I like it too. I take hold of you by the shoulder and hip bone, using the resulting leverage to thrust into you as hard and fast as possible.

“Oh yes,” I say. “God, that’s…oh. Oh fuck.” I shift myself forward again and wrap one arm round your torso and reach round to start jerking you off with my other hand in tight, quick strokes; circling my thumb over the head of your cock, slippery smooth with pre-come and relishing how hard you are – that you’re as turned on as I am, that you want this as much as me – and frantically trying to match the movement of my hand to the slamming rhythm of my hips. You groan slightly and tip your head back against my shoulder, and I twist my face round so I can cover my mouth with yours, occasionally pulling away to scrape my teeth against your skin. “You’re mine,” I can hear myself saying, “they can’t have you, I won’t let them, I won’t, I…oh fuck, fuck, you feel so good…you feel amazing…you’re perfect, you’re perfect, you’re mine, you belong to me.”

“Always,” you’re saying. You sound completely enthralled – undone and unravelled – as if the usual icy cold persona has dissolved and someone else has taken its place. There is never only one, of anybody. “Oh Will,” you say. “Will.”
I cling onto you (on and on) trying to unfasten your shirt so I can trace my fingers over your skin. I give up in the end and just rip it open instead, aware of the pinging sound as a few buttons hit the floor. You feel so warm. Humid, almost...somehow I always expect you to be cold to the touch but you’re not. I wrap my arm even tighter, digging my fingers into your ribs and vaguely aware that holding onto you is now the only thing that’s keeping me upright. Then I thrust into you again and again, gasping at the way I can feel your body clenching round me; the way you shudder at how good it feels...so in love I’m delirious with it and finally crying out your name as my hips give a last frantic jolt and I start to come. Although you’re not quite there yet are you? Oh God, I’ve fucked the timing up, I’ve come too soon; I should have tried to last longer. I can’t stop thinking of all the occasions you’ve done this to me – how good you’ve always made it – and the fact that I want to do the same for you. Then I kiss the back of your neck and abruptly drop to the gritty floor and rest on my knees like a supplicant so I can push your legs further apart and begin eating you out; alternating between slow, lascivious lapping movements and more deliberate, probing thrusts with the point of my tongue; noticing how yielding and receptive you are from where I’ve been fucking you. I’ve never even done this with a woman before, let alone another man, and it’s initially slightly bizarre; not least because I’m aware I can taste my own come (surreal). But I still can’t stop myself moaning aloud at how debauched and insanely intimate it feels as I slide my thumb inside you so I can lick around it...and you thrust backwards against my face and come almost immediately, gasping out a string of foreign words as you pound your hand against the wall. I can hear my heart thrumming in my ears and have to grab your coat to haul myself to my feet so I can slump against you, taking a few deep breaths. My own orgasm was so intense my legs are still trembling; I need to lean on you. But then why not when we slot together so well? We do, don’t we...a perfect fit. I know you can feel it too. For a few seconds neither of us speaks and there’s nothing except the sound of our breathing; breath and pulse completely aligned. Oh God, oh fuck. I love you, I love you. And I know that I can’t lose this again, that I can’t lose you; those parts of you that are part of myself. That I couldn’t survive it a second time, and wouldn’t even want to.

“We need to leave,” I say. My voice is quiet, slightly muffled because of the way my face is pressed into your neck. “Together. As soon as possible. I can’t wait anymore. I can’t.”

You take my hand from where it’s pressed over your chest, close to your heart, and then lift it to your mouth so you can kiss the back of it; lightly running your tongue over the scuffed, scraped wounds on my knuckles. “I know, mylimasis, you say. “But it is still not feasible, not yet. You have to realize that. We need to be patient a little longer.”

“No,” I say stubbornly. “It’s not just about patience; not now. Christ, doesn’t tonight prove that it’s not?”

“If we leave now then we take the FBI with us. It can’t be done, Will.”

“It can. It can. There’s a way we could do it.” I take a deep breath – because I know that there is – then grab you by the shoulders so I can lever you round. Look straight into your face. “There is a way,” I say, low and intense.

You narrow your eyes at me. “And what is that?”

I take another deep breath. “You have to try and kill me.”

*****

There’s a long, long pause; and you just stare at me, while I stare back, and we mechanically begin straightening our clothes without once taking our eyes off each other. The silence is taut enough to snap.
“I don’t think I have the pleasure of understanding you,” you finally reply. Your voice is incredibly terse and clipped. “You don’t know what you are saying.”

“I do.”

Now you give me an expression that translates as ‘you can’t possibly be serious’ and I return it with one that telegraphs: ‘just look how fucking serious I am.’

“Please don’t patronize me,” I add irritably. “I know exactly what I’m suggesting. And it’s the only way.” Now my voice is speeding up, the words tripping over themselves to escape before I can change my mind and gather them back again. “Just think about it. There’s no way we can cover up what happened tonight – it’ll all come out, all of it, everything. How he thought I was the best way to lure you here, that he used me to get to you, that I’m your weak spot... It’ll hang over me for the rest of my life. Or at least it would if I walk out unharmed. If, on the other hand, I’m one of the casualties…”

“No, Will.”

I rattle on as if you haven’t spoken. “No one’s going to believe I fought off six people on my own; they’ll know you were here. And Jack might give me the benefit of the doubt if I walk out in one piece but no one else is going to. What happened in my apartment proves that – how quick they all are to link me to you. I’ll have FBI agents following me round for months. Years even. Daily check-ins with Jack… You know how it would be.”

“And the alternative?”

“Jack finds me here; I tell him you attacked me. Then I tell them, I don’t know… that you’ve gone to Mexico again. Yeah; that they need to look there. That you thought you’d killed me.” You glance up sharply. “It’ll solve both problems, God, don’t you see? They look for you in the wrong place and they don’t look for me at all. It removes all the suspicions, confirms I’ve been a ‘victim’ in this all along. Even Kade Purnell would be convinced I had nothing to do with it. So when I do disappear then it’s ‘Will’s on extended vacation’ rather than alert Interpol. I leave hospital and we can finally get out of here and no one’s going to try and find us because they’d never even know that they needed to look. It brings things full circle and then ends it.”

I finally run out of breath and just stand there staring at you, awaiting the response. For the first time in ages (possibly ever?) you actually look uncertain.

“It is certainly a very adequate plan in its essentials,” you eventually reply. “But in its practicalities…”

“A non-fatal injury…non-critical, even. You can do that. You did it before.”

“Yes, but…” you frown. “You would really be prepared to go so far?”

I take another deep breath. “Yes,” I say. “For you – for us – I would. But you have to be prepared to do it too.”

For a few seconds you neither move nor speak; just stand there frowning to yourself, a faint crease of uncertainty running between your eyebrows. Then you abruptly reach out and pull me close to you, holding onto me very tightly and kissing the top of my head. “How remarkable you are,” you say quietly into my hair.

“It’s the best way,” I repeat. “It is. And it’ll be worth it in the end.”
“Indeed it will.” You let go of me, then change your mind and pull me back to kiss me again before straightening up to your full height and abruptly shifting from tender and affectionate (still somewhat unfamiliar) to detached and dispassionate (far more customary; and somewhat reassuring given what’s about to happen). “There is a strong smell of cigar smoke in here,” you say. “Who was it?”

I gesture at the bloodied tangle on the floor. “Him.”

You stride over and root around in Cane’s pocket to retrieve his lighter, and I wonder what the hell you’re doing until I realize you intend to sterilize the knife. And then I understand that – yes – this is actually going to happen, it really is, and feel a brief twist of fear.

You glance up at me. “Go downstairs Will,” you say. “I shall join you in a moment.”

“Why? Why not here.”

“Because the paramedics will reach you faster,” you reply; and I just nod in mute agreement before turning round and running down to the ground floor, taking the steps two at a time. I know that the main entrance will be a slaughterhouse by now (and don’t relish the idea of being cut open on a floor awash with the blood of four other people) so locate another, smaller room with a bare concrete floor and start unfastening my shirt with fingers that are clumsy and trembling, yet resolute in spite of it all.

You join me a few moments later and nod approvingly; either at the fact I’m already prepared, or that I found a clean(ish) venue for what we’re about to do. Possibly both. Oh God, oh God, oh fucking hell.

You’re holding a bottle of scotch, which I recognize from the room the gang were waiting in and assume you’ve retrieved from there. You silently hold it towards me and I take several deep draughts, coughing slightly as it stings and burns the back of my throat. “Lie down,” you say. “I know it is difficult, but you have to slow your breathing as much as possible. It will decelerate your heartbeat and reduce the bleeding.”

I nod again then drop to the floor and take a few leisurely breaths, trying to remember why I’m doing this and imagining the outcome after we’ve escaped – safe and free – and how it’s all going to be worth it in the end. You take hold of my hand and lightly kiss it, then place your own over my chest, counting the gaps between each outbreath. Your skin is warm, slightly callused on your thumb and index finger. “That’s good,” you say. “A little longer like that.” You pull my shirt fully open and pour some of the alcohol over my skin to sterilize it, then lean back on your heels.

“You need to do it twice,” I say abruptly. “One injury isn’t enough. It has to look like you were trying to kill me.”

You open your mouth as if you’re about to argue, and then slowly close it again. You know that I’m right; although you don’t look very happy about it. Now you’re leaning over me once more, flicking your gaze up and down my torso. A strand of hair has fallen forward into your eyes and you push it away with your forearm.

“All right,” you finally say. “Now, this is what I’m going to do. In the first instance I am going to make an incision in your diaphragm. It will cause an amount of blood to be expelled from your mouth, although I can do it in such a way that will avoid damaging or flooding your lung. In other words it suits our purposes because it will look far more serious than it is.” You sigh slightly. “Although it is serious enough. Please lean to your right.”

“Why? It’s more comfortable like this.”

“The base of the right lung is higher than the left. It is safer to do it there. However, it is very
important that the lung is deflated. On the count of three I want you to exhale as much as you can, then do not breathe in again until I tell you. Yes?"

“Yes.”

You pause. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” I say. “Yes, I trust you.” My eyes briefly meet yours and you smile at me, suddenly gentle again as you stroke my hair. Then I screw my eyes tightly closed and feel you trail your hand over my ribcage before you remove it entirely and the sharp tip of the knife pushes down instead.

“Ready?”

No. “Yes,” I reply tonelessly.

“It will be over quickly Will; it will not be a deep wound.”

“Just do it,” I snap. It’s occurred to me that you’re reluctant to go ahead and are trying to delay as long as possible.

“All right. Remember; on the count of three: breathe out. Three. Two…”

I screw my eyes even tighter and when I hear you say “One,” push all the air out of my lungs and clamp my teeth into my hand so I can’t cry out as I feel the blade slicing through my skin and invading my chest. The pain is ferocious, like a bright white flare, and I can’t prevent the keening wail that spills out of me at how much it hurts. But just like you promised it’s accomplished very quickly and before I can even take my hand out my mouth you’ve withdrawn the knife and are kissing my forehead.

“Good boy,” you say, “you did extremely well. That’s it, it’s over.”

“No.” My voice sounds faint and I can taste blood seeping up just like you said it would. I start to cough, whining at the resulting blaze of pain in my chest; and now the blood is trickling out my mouth and down my face. It tickles. I mechanically reach up to wipe it away. “You need to do one more. You have to.”

“Yes, I know,” you reply in a voice that’s now become just as flat and toneless as mine. You kiss my face again, briefly pressing our foreheads together, and then I feel the sting of the knife against my stomach: a little below the navel and angled downwards.

“This is going to hurt,” you say grimly. “More than previously.”

“I know. Christ, just do it. What are you waiting for?”

“Will – my love – I am contemplating stabbing you in the abdomen in such a way that ensures I avoid damaging your kidneys, spleen, liver and intestines. Missing the iliac, aorta, mesenteric and vena cava vessels would be an additional bonus. Are you really sure you wish me to rush it?”

I huff out a laugh, even though it’s not remotely funny, and you arch over and kiss my face for a third time. “Just keep breathing slowly,” you say. “You are doing so well. Very soon you are going to be in hospital, and not long after that you are going to be with me; which is exactly where you belong. And it is where you are going to stay, because I shall not allow anyone to take you away from me ever again.”

“Yes please,” I say, a bit stupidly. I’m starting to feel hazy and unfocussed, and breathing is
becoming far more of an effort than it should be. Yet despite your warning it seems less painful than before when the blade carves into me. Maybe I’m going into shock. Or maybe it’s just the fortification of relief and pending liberation; that soon all the barriers will be dismantled and we really can be together. Blood and shock and pain are a small price to pay, after all. And we’ve already paid such a high premium in all these things. The scene on the clifftop. The scene in your kitchen. Both finally revised and amended: smoothed over into something right. We’ve rewritten our own history.

“That’s it my love;” I hear you saying. “It’s over.” I’m vaguely aware of you making cuts in the material of my shirt to correspond to where the injuries are and then re-fastening it. That’s good; I’d forgotten about that. It would have looked suspicious otherwise.

“Now phone Jack,” you say. You’re pressing my cell into my hand. “Do it now. We want assistance here as soon as possible.”

“No…no. You need time to get away.”

“Will – if it is a case of you bleeding to death or me making my escape, then I’m afraid one necessarily outweighs the other. Call him now please.”

“It would take at least two hours for me to bleed to death,” I reply stubbornly. “But more likely six.” Then I realize how weird that sounds and falter slightly. “Leave first and then I’ll do it.”

You sigh impatiently and pluck the phone out of my hand. Then there’s a pause before I hear you saying: “Good evening Jack.” Oh fucking shit, you haven’t…?

“My apologies for ringing at such an unsociable hour,” you add (you don’t sound remotely apologetic), “but it would have been remiss of me to leave without paying my regards. You might wish to come to the old dye repository on the corner of 22nd street as soon as possible and collect what is left of Will Graham.” There’s a pause while you stroke my hair with your free hand and when I glance up I can see that you’re smiling. “Oh naturally Jack,” you say. “And while I’m afraid that I am not able to greet you in person I am very confident that another occasion shall present itself…You know how agreeable I have always been to having an old friend for dinner.” Then you give the most appalling smirk and hang up.

I blink a few times. “I can’t quite believe,” I finally say, “that you just did that.”

“I suspect Jack Crawford cannot quite believe I did it either,” you reply. “You and he can have lots of incredulous conversations about it at a later date; no doubt you shall enjoy yourselves immensely.” You dial out again and clear your throat, and this time when you speak you’ve adopted an American accent and are slurring and shuffling your words: a highly convincing facsimile of someone drunk and desperate. “Ambulance!” you say, “You need to send an ambulance right now! The warehouse on 22nd street! There’s a guy here stabbed in the chest. You need to come round the back, to the parking lot, the other doors are boarded up. Lady, I didn’t do nothing, I only came here to sleep for the night, I didn’t do nothing…” You roll your eyes while the operator barks some questions down the phone and then hang up.

“Wow.” I say feebly. “Good work. You could go into acting if the whole ‘notorious fugitive from the law’ thing outlives its appeal.”

“Indeed. Remember the official story is that some unfortunate homeless person discovered you.” You lean over and press your lips against mine. “And now I must go my dearest. But I shall see you very soon.”

“Wait for me,” I hear myself saying.
“Always,” you reply. And then you’re gone.

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After that things move extremely quickly. It seems like only a matter of minutes before I hear the wail of sirens, then there’s flashing lights flickering through the window and bathing my face in neon blue – and the next thing I’m aware of is Jack crouching over me chanting: “Will! Will!”

“I’m right here,” I reply. I’m touched to see that his expression is crumpled with concern.

“Dammit Will,” is all he says. He’s actually gripping onto my hand. Good old Jack – still cheerfully oblivious. “For God’s sake!” he yells over his shoulder, “Where are the paramedics?”

“They’re right here Sir,” comes a female voice. “Only the primary entrance is the crime scene…”

“I don’t care!” bellows Jack, who’s working himself up into a familiar frenzy. “Let them contaminate it! We’ve got an agent down and I want medical attention here right now.”

“Yes Mr Crawford,” replies the unknown woman, “of course, I understand. Okay, come through!”

“Jesus,” says another voice. “Jesus. What the hell happened here?”

“The Chesapeake Ripper,” says someone else.


I close my eyes as an oxygen mask is pushed over my face and a different voice asks “What’s his name?”


“Okay Will,” says the paramedic. “We’ve got you buddy. Try and stay awake okay?” He scribbles something onto the label of an IV bag and I wince as a catheter is pushed into my hand. “Can you feel that? Can you move your arms and legs?” I nod weakly as another paramedic unbuttons my shirt and presses some sticky plastic discs onto my chest while strapping a blood pressure cuff to my other arm.

“Vitals are stable,” she says. She sounds slightly surprised.

“You hear that Will? You’re doing great. We’re going to get you something for the pain, okay?”

“Is he going to be all right?” Jack’s asking.

“He’s been incredibly lucky,” replies the woman in an undertone. “Whoever did this wasn’t messing around; he ought to be dead. It’s a miracle they missed the major organs.”

I smile slightly at that (safely concealed behind the oxygen mask). I suppose you are pretty miraculous, in your own way.

“You’re going to be fine Will!” bellows Jack right in my face.

“Please Sir, move back a bit,” says the paramedic. “Give him some room.”

Jack obediently steps away and I moan softly as they hoist me onto a stretcher, even though whatever they’ve given me is already kicking in and the pain is receding to leave a smooth, velvety serenity in its place. Moving is a huge effort but I need to do it before they take me off, so arduously
fumble up and pull the mask to one side. “For God’s sake Jack, get onto border patrol,” I say. “He’s heading to Mexico. It’s where he’s been all this time. Get an alert out.”

Jack nods rather than answers, then barks out some instructions to one of the agents behind him. “And Jack…” I say when he’s finished.

“Yeah?”

“Make sure this gets into the press. Would you? I want him to know that he failed again.” It occurs to me that I’m maybe overdoing it a bit, but it feels essential to establish antipathy towards you; that, and a conviction that you believed you’d killed me. And it’s not entirely inconsistent with what my old self might have wanted; another gauntlet thrown down. Another reason to reignite the danse macabre.

“Sure Will,” says Jack kindly. “I can understand that. To be honest I probably couldn’t keep a lid on it even if I wanted to. Freddie Lounds is going to have a field day.”

He makes as if he’s going to follow the stretcher out, when someone shouts “Sir! Mr Crawford! Come upstairs, you need to see this.” Jack hesitates and then glances at me.

“Go ahead,” I say. “I’m going to be fine; you said so yourself.”

The paramedic gently reaches over to replace the oxygen mask and I twist my head to the side as they carry me out to try and get a sense of what’s going on. There are FBI agents everywhere and the smell of blood and death is overpowering. I get a brief glimpse of Dorian, Carl and the other two (unknown and nameless, and destined to be forever so), heaped in the corner in a tangle of bloodied, mutilated limbs. Despite the haste with which it must have been done there’s still a certain artistry to the arrangement in the way the bodies twist and undulate together in a despairingly intimate tableau. If it were splinters of a sculpture as opposed to human flesh – rendered with chisel and hammer rather than a knife – then onlookers would be in raptures of aesthetic admiration. Mortality and morality writ large through massacre. “Shades of Moore,” they’d say. “Touches of Géricault.” And all of it done for my sake. Although admittedly, as gifts go, it’s deeply idiosyncratic…most people would just send flowers.

“You’re going to be fine Will,” says the paramedic again.

And I smile once more beneath the mask, because I know that I am.

*****

Once at the hospital I’m rushed straight to the ER, and from there to the OR; and the next thing I’m conscious of is lying in a narrow bed in the recovery room while a group of doctors flutter around me, chirping and squabbling like seagulls in their white coats. My chest and abdomen are swaddled in layers of gauze and sundry dressings and I feel weirdly exposed, wishing that I could pull the sheet up to my neck to conceal myself.

“No,” says one of the doctors in an imperious English accent that sounds vaguely familiar, despite being muffled behind a surgeon’s mask, “you are quite wrong Dr Maitland. I would suggest the administration of dipyrone, intravenously, as far more suitable…” Oh Christ why can’t they shut up and fuck off? I close my eyes again and begin to stray towards sleep. I dream about you – that you’re sat next to me holding my hand – and then I dream that I’m right back in the same hospital bed that I was in after we plunged from the cliff, and that I’m about to wake up to find you gone and a whole nightmare about to begin. So then I don’t want to wake up at all and keep my eyes screwed closed. But it doesn’t do any good because I can still see it so vividly: the empty plastic chair that I wanted
you to be sitting in; Jack and Kade Purnell interrogating me; Alana and her little boy; Price and Zeller…everyone but the one person that really mattered.

“Why did you leave me?” I say hazily.

“I did not,” you reply. “I am right here. Obviously. Do not be so tiresome.”

That makes me snap my eyes open and sure enough you’re actually there: smiling slightly sardonically and with your elbows resting on the side of the bed.

I open my mouth and then close it again. “What the fuck?” is all I manage to say.

“How eloquent you are on morphine.”

“When…How…?”

“Because I did not want you to wake up alone,” you say. “Although for obvious reasons I cannot remain much longer.”

Mindlessly I reach out to touch your face to ascertain that you actually are real (you are) and you patiently let me run my fingers over your cheekbones and forehead. Then I screw my eyes closed and open them again. Then I clear my throat and try to get my scattered thoughts into some semblance of logical order.

“Hello Hannibal.” I finally say.

“Good evening Will. You look much better. Your doctors have done an entirely adequate job.”

“I still don’t understand how you’re here,” I blurt out. How did you manage to get in? And then: “Oh my God, did you murder my guard?”

“I did not; there is no guard. In fact there is no security at all – it is clear that your plan worked even better than anticipated and that as far as Jack is concerned the threat is over. Besides, I would not have murdered them even if they had been there. I would hardly wish to telegraph my presence.”

You give me a pointed look. “Not again.”

“Oh? Are you conceding my superior judgement by any chance?”

“Not entirely. I still maintain that the business with Agent Sanderson made very little difference in the larger scheme of things; they were looking for me anyway courtesy of Mr Cane’s ridiculous exhibition in your apartment. However, I understand why you were so angry.”

I smile slightly (because you are conceding it, whether you want to admit it or not). “I thought I was dreaming but you really were holding my hand,” I say instead. “Weren’t you? Just now.”

“Possibly.”

“You totally were. I bet you were sobbing and imploring over it as well.”

“Certainly not.”

“You’re such a liar. You’re nowhere near as maniacal as you pretend to be. There you were, prepared to die for me…” Then I remember that, oh shit, you really could have died and trail off.

“And yet you see I did not die. And neither did you.”
“I thought you despised stating the obvious.”

You smile and gently stroke my forehead. “I do as a general rule, but on this occasion it won’t do any harm to remind ourselves of the obvious.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone – about you being a massive liar and a sentimental pushover. And unrepentant stater of the obvious.” You roll your eyes at me in a long-suffering way. “By the way, were you that doctor who was being a complete dick to all the other doctors?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny.”

“It was you. I bet it was. I recognized your Uncle Jack voice.” I rake my hand through my hair, wincing as the IV line catches, and you carefully disentangle it before reaching for the water on the bedside table and holding the glass to my mouth. I choke slightly on the final sip and you wipe the stray droplets from my bottom lip with your thumb.

“Thanks,” I say. “Oh God, what a completely insane 24 hours.”

“Yes, I agree. Even by our standards it was somewhat ludicrous.”

I huff out a laugh, and then on an impulse take hold of your hand. “Thank you,” I say. “For coming back.” My voice is very quiet and you have to lean in slightly to hear.

“Of course. You can hardly think I would have left you there?”

“I wanted to warn you,” I say, rather than admit that this is exactly what I did think.

“Which you did extremely effectively with that enterprising text message. Not a ‘btw’ to be seen. Remind me again what that stands for?”

“Bolsheviks Trample Warsaw.”

“Oh yes, of course.”

“Not really. It means Barricade The West Wing, then Buy Tonic Water.” My vision is starting to grow dim. It must be all the painkillers. I grip onto your hand a bit tighter.

“I must go mylimasis,” you say. “It is too great a risk to return again, but you shall be discharged before much longer. I have removed myself to another hotel – you will find the address and room number on a piece of paper in the locker.”

“You picked the lock on my hospital locker? Have you no shame at all?”

“None at all,” you reply briskly. “And neither have you.”

“I’ll get in touch,” I say. “Before I leave. I’ll let you know I’m coming.”

“Yes, do,” you reply. “I shall await the news with great anticipation.”

I can feel myself begin to fade out and am vaguely aware of you gently separating your fingers from mine and pressing your lips against my forehead. I want to ask you not to go – not to leave me – even though I know you have to; but before I can I’m asleep again, and when I wake up the next time it’s Jack by the side of the bed instead.

“Hey Will,” he says in an uncharacteristically soothing voice. “How you doing buddy?”
“Good. I’m fine.”

“That’s a relief. I spoke to your doctor; she’s really pleased with how the surgery went. Honestly Will, I think you’ve got a charmed life.”

This makes me laugh, because in the usual scheme of things the absolute opposite would generally be considered the case. “How’d you figure that?” I ask.

“Because no one’s come up against him as often as you have and lived to talk about it afterwards,” replies Jack with chilling simplicity. “No one. By rights you should be dead several times over.”

“As you remarked yourself not that long ago: ‘how can someone be dead several times over?’”

Jacks snorts at this and then actually ruffles my hair (Christ). “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I know it.”

“Maybe he wants you alive more than he knows,” says Jack thoughtfully.

“Maybe. Or maybe he just keeps fucking it up.”

“He doesn’t fuck things up,” says Jack. “I can’t help thinking that this is like last time; that he let you survive for a reason. That he’s not done with you yet.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be making me feel better? Anyway I don’t care what he wants because I’m done with him. I’m leaving after this Jack; somewhere he won’t find me.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Although it won’t be forever, you know that right? We’ll get him eventually. Border patrol has been alerted and we’ve already got a lead in Mexico – a definite sighting confirmed in Juárez from a few months back.”

This makes me struggle not to smile because I remember you telling me all about it: that night in my apartment when you first came back, slumped in front of your chair while you massaged my shoulders. It seems like a whole lifetime ago. “So you’re focussing the effort there?” I say. “That’s good.”

“Yeah, we’ll pick him up before too long – long before he can come back and try again. Do you want another security detail in the meantime? For peace of mind? Kade Purnell will bitch about it but she won’t say no, not after this.”

“Thanks Jack but it’s fine. He won’t be coming back anytime soon.”

“Yes, and if you’re leaving anyway…” He sighs. “Maybe I’m wrong and nothing else will happen. Maybe his interest’s burnt itself out.”

“Maybe.”

Jack inclines his head and gazes at me from under his eyebrows. “But maybe not, yes? We know we can’t assume anything where he’s concerned.” He pauses and frowns, drumming his fingers on the bed cover in an uncharacteristically fidgety gesture. “He called me you know.”

“Oh,” I say. “Did he?”

“Yeah, he did. Just called up my cell from yours, casual as anything, and told me to come over to the warehouse and get you. I was convinced I’d find you dead. Hearing his voice again after all this time…” He shudders slightly. “I don’t scare easily Will, you know I don’t, but just hearing it. It
reminded me of something my grandma used to say when I was a kid. She’d give this little shiver every so often, and then she’d go ‘Jack! Someone just walked over my grave.’ Used to give me the creeps. But that’s exactly how I felt when I heard him on the phone: like someone had walked over my grave.”

“But you knew he wasn’t dead.”

“Yeah, I knew. But…ah, I guess I don’t make any sense.”

“No, I’m sorry, you do. You make a lot of sense.”

“He’s a scary bastard,” says Jack, reverting to flippancy to conceal how unsettled he is.

“But it’s more than that isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s like he’s just there…that uncanny omnipresence he has. But then you never really believed he was dead did you? Even when everyone else assumed he had to be. You had no proof, no real reason to know…it was like you just felt it. I guess that’s what I’m trying to get at; the presence he has. Like he’s always just there; that he’s always going to know more about us than we do about him. It’s eerie.”

“Yes.”

“You get it huh?”

“I get it.”

“I guess you do. You get it better than anyone…But then there was always something extraordinary between the two of you. At first I used to think it was because you could both see things a certain way that the rest of us couldn’t. But it was more than that. Wasn’t it? In the end…it was a lot more than just that.”

“Yes,” I say. “I know. It was.”

Jack clears his throat, suddenly looking a bit embarrassed, and pats me on the hand. “Anyway,” he says with forced heartiness, “don’t worry about all that now Will. Just concentrate on getting yourself fixed up.”

I give him a vague smile instead of replying, allowing my mind to gently tune out as he starts holding forth about some new procedure for evidence documentation that everyone’s losing their shit over. “It’s outrageous,” he says. “Typical bureaucrats, sat there behind their desks, no idea what it’s really like in the field…”

“Hmmm,” I say. “Ridiculous.” Poor Jack. He thinks I’m listening but I’m not. I’m thinking about the curious synchronicity of it all; how it’s literally gone full circle. Me lying in a hospital bed. Jack in a chair looking awkward. Everyone wondering what’s become of you: the omniscient, eerie presence that briefly appears to instil terror and chaos before melting away into the shadows. It’s so similar now to how it was then, and yet it’s also nothing like it at all. Because back then you were absent and inattentive and of unknown motivation. And now you’re present and vigilant and knowable. And you’re everything.

Chapter End Notes
As always a huge collective thanks to everyone who’s shown their support via kudos or comments, OMG. This is my first serious attempt at creative writing – and first ever attempt at fanfiction – so the feedback is invaluable and much appreciated. In fact this monster fic is starting to feel like a bit of a team effort, as there’s no way I could keep churning out these l-o-n-g chapters without your support, suggestions, and encouragement. Speaking of which, honourable mention for this chapter goes to lara for spotting a certain omission which has now been corrected :-(
Note to Readers

Sorry to put this out as a notification but I wanted to save people the hassle of checking for this week's update. I'm afraid some utter twat has driven into the back of my car* and given me some righteous whiplash so no Hannigramming has been done. I'm on the mend though and normal service will resume next Saturday so please check back then for Chapter 46. See you soon! MissDis x

*How terribly rude of them, yes? AND WE ALL KNOW WHAT HAPPENS TO RUDE PEOPLE AROUND HERE. Mwah ha ha. Although admittedly it’s going to be more a case of getting my dad to sort out my insurance and kicking them up the arse with it. But even so. Sheesh.
Many thanks for the lovely get well messages – they put such a big smile on my miserable English face that I’m reserving them for posterity as Chapter 46. Following FeatheredWraith’s splendid advice I also intend to ask the other driver for his business card. Just to, y’know, store in my rodelex of rudes.

Anyway, we’re back in business my dears – have a ridiculously long 14.5k word update as thanks for being so supportive and fabulous :-) Whiplash 0 – Hannigram 1. YEAH BABY.

Recovery is both slow and painful; and then ultimately painfully slow, in that I end up with a postoperative infection which threatens to extend the hospital stay indefinitely. I remain in denial about it for the first 24 hours, stubbornly trying to convince myself that the pain and light-headedness are normal, before a nurse notices how flushed and feverish I look and dutifully raises the alarm. I glare at him the entire time as if it’s his fault and then promptly feel guilty.

“Staphylococcus!” shrieks the consultant once the dressing has been prized off and he’s probed at the inflamed, scarlet skin. He sounds fascinated, even borderline excited, as if the staphylococcus bacteria is a dear friend of his with whom he’s finally been reunited after a prolonged and pining absence. In the tradition of the freak virus I gloomily contemplate the high likelihood of it turning out to be some malevolently badass antibiotic-resistant strain.

“Rather a risk factor with emergency surgery I’m afraid, Mr Graham,” he finally says. He’s gazing at my abdomen with rapt interest rather than my face, to the extent I feel like asking him whether I should just go and leave him and the staphylococcus alone together so they can get reacquainted. “We have an infected hematoma here and the beginnings of an abscess.” He still can’t take his eyes off the wound; and I start to consider whether the ‘we’ actually excludes me entirely and refers to himself and the bacteria on the grounds that they are intimate friends and comrades.

He prods me again and peers a bit closer. “It doesn’t look like a deep incisional,” he adds, “but we’ll need to keep an eye on it and run a culture test.” Now I have an image of him and the staphylococcus skipping off to the lab together hand-in-hand. Oh God, this is awful. I miss you so much I can barely breathe.

The days turn into a week. There’s still no sign of me being discharged and I can’t even call you because there’s no cell reception in my room and making contact via the hospital phone is far too risky. Everyone assumes I’m depressed when the reality is I’m merely enormously impatient and pissed off. In an act of small, pointless rebellion I pickpocket the nurse’s micropore tape and spend ages playing Cat’s Cradle with assorted pieces, concertinaing them into increasingly elaborate spools and fractals until I lose interest and unravel the whole thing and wind it into your initials instead; then ultimately scrunch it up and heft it into the trash can (partly on the grounds that someone might see it, but mostly because it was a ridiculous thing to do in the first place). Then I lie in my bed and brood, growing progressively surly and fretful to the extent I begin to gain a reputation for being ‘difficult.’ A case in point is when one of the nurses keeps trying to shave me (which I resist with equal vigour)
until it looks like it’s going to turn into a battle of epic and heinous proportions.

“Do you have some sort of shaving fetish?” I say irritably. “I don’t want a shave. And if I did I’d do it myself.” She doesn’t respond to this (why not? why doesn’t she respond...Has she got a shaving fetish? An actual one?), but later I see her lurking in the corridor conversing with a colleague and casting me dark looks. I glower back at them, and they glare at me in gimlet-eyed unison, until I start to fantasize that they are conspiring to knock me unconscious and remove all my facial hair by stealth.

Dr O’Connor comes by to check on me a few days later. The last time I saw her she was diagnosing me with the freak virus, so I am not exactly overwhelmed with joy when she comes into the room.

“Oh Will, not again,” she says. “You seem determined to keep the trauma unit going single-handed.”

I consider replying with something along the lines of having a high-risk lifestyle but can’t think of a way of doing it that won’t make me sound like some kind of smug macho asshole from a late-night cop serial, so finally just settle for looking suitably chastised instead. “Perhaps I should put that on my resume,” I add. Perhaps I actually should.

“Well don’t think we’re not grateful for your loyal repeat custom.” She pulls out the chair by the bed then doles out one of her motherly smiles and taps me on the wrist. “I was wondering how you were going. You missed your last few outpatient appointments.”

“I know I did. I’m sorry. I’ve had a lot on.”

“It certainly seems that way.” She gives me another smile (this time of the sardonic, smartass variety and which I can’t summon the energy to reciprocate) before adding: “Some good things as well though, I hope? I’m guessing so – you know, current surroundings notwithstanding, you’re still looking better than when I last saw you.” I raise my eyebrows incredulously and she laughs. “Seriously, you do. You obviously took my advice about gaining some weight. And you’ve lost all those shadows under your eyes. You look like you’ve finally been taking care of yourself. Or else someone’s been doing it on your behalf.”

“Possibly.”

“Well whatever the reason, keep it up.”

“Yes.” And then I actually smile back at her. “I intend to.”

She returns the smile, and for a few seconds we just beam at each other like a pair of sentimental old bastards. “You’ll be out of here before you know it,” she says.

“God I hope so.” At least she hasn’t mentioned the Freak; I was half-expecting her to actively enquire after its wellbeing. For a lack of anything better to say I add: “The nurses keep trying to shave me. Could you ask them to stop?”

Now she looks like she’s trying not to laugh (rather than accepting the coercive removal of my facial hair as the affront to dignity and forbearance that it clearly is). Although her bedside manner was always crap; almost as bad as yours. “I’ll have a word,” she says.

“Thanks. Oh…and would you be able to get me a notebook and pen? If it’s no trouble.”

“Sure, it’s no trouble. I’ll have an orderly bring them by.”

She keeps her word about the writing materials, but not about telling the nurses to fuck off and shave
themselves if they’re so keen to wield a razor at something (or if she has they’ve clearly ignored her and me and my stubble remain obliged to sleep with one eye open). On the other hand the pen and paper cheer me up, and I prop myself against the bed frame with the notepad resting on my knee and proceed to scribble long letters to you despite there being no possibility of sending them. It’s ages since I’ve written something by hand like this, and there’s a quaintness and quietude in arduously scratching out each character with a nib and ink as opposed to typing into a piece of ingeniously wired metal. Mostly there’s nothing particularly profound them. Your absence is striking, I write, I’m no longer accustomed to the lack of you. It’s strange isn’t it? Do you think so too? I tell you about what I’ve been doing (admittedly very little), the progress in the treatment and how terrible the food is. I feel like a character in a novel – something epistolary, perhaps from the 1800s – where an interior world is gradually regaled and unfurled via correspondence. I can’t use your name so I address them all Dear You. ‘You,’ after all, could be anybody: ‘you’ might be anyone in the world, even though there only is (and only ever was) one. Reflecting on this makes me pensive, and eventually I end up composing a long, detailed account of all my deliberations during that torturous night at the Academy building where I finally made the choice to cross over: my entire sense of self spilled out onto a piece of faintly ruled A5 paper with a leaking old ballpoint pen. I write about the realisations I made, the thoughts and feelings which were so entwined within you and myself. My take on all those years before The Fall. Like you I defy simple categorization, I write. We’re both self-sustained and self-conceived, and always have been.

I’m not sure whether or not I’ll ever show it to you. Perhaps one day.

*****

A whole three weeks after the showdown in the warehouse I’m finally discharged. I’ve managed to lose most of the weight I gained since you came back and in many respects look as wan and frail as I did when I left hospital the first time round (post-cliff plunge and minus you), except now there’s a luminous optimism and buoyancy about me that was completely absent before. I text you, as promised, to let you know I’m on route and then hobble into a cab and proceed to fall asleep in the back seat with my forehead pressed against the window. Everything hurts but I still have a smile on my face.

The new hotel is even more gilded and ostentatious than the previous one, which I can only interpret as chosen on the grounds of wishing to telegraph a massive, cosmic ‘fuck you’ to Jack. You’re waiting in the lobby for me when I arrive even though I told you not to (although I privately concede that it was stupid of me to expect otherwise, considering how impossible it is to tell you to do anything). You’re leaning against the wall with one of your typically inscrutable, deadpan expressions and appear to be oblivious to all the people and activity around you. I know you’re not though – not really – because your face immediately arranges itself into a broad smile when you see me limping in. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you smile as much as you have been recently; there’s still a part of me that expects your features to crack from the strenuous use of unfamiliar muscles. Then you abruptly straighten up and walk over, reaching me in a few rapid strides before I’ve been able to fully shuffle past the main desk.

“Good morning Will,” you say.

“Hello Hannibal.” Now I’m smiling too.

“So, they have finally let you go.” You rest your hand against the side of my face and regard me contemplatively. “I would tell you how well you look, but I am afraid I would be lying.”

“Thanks.” I collapse against you and prop my head on your shoulder. “Anyway, why let that stop you? You’re constantly lying.”
“You need a shave,” you reply.

“Oh God, not you as well.”

“What? It is true.”

“Good to see you too.”

“Of course it is good to see you; it still does not detract from the fact you require a shave. The two circumstances are not mutually exclusive. Now come to our room and I can greet you properly away from all these people.”

You rest your palm on my back and shepherd me into the elevator and I lean against you and allow you to take most of my weight. As the doors open a tall man in a suit tries to elbow his way in front of me, and you raise your eyebrows then give him one of your ‘don’t even think about fucking with me, or I will murder you to death’ stares. He falters, then apologises and stands aside, awkwardly shuffling from one foot to the other. “I’ll wait for the next one,” he finally says.

The elevator moves off and I can feel my mouth twitching with the effort of trying not to laugh. “Don’t,” I say without looking at you. “Don’t even think about it.”

“If you insist.”

“I do. I insist. Let’s just get away from here as soon as possible without getting into any more trouble.”

“That sounds extremely ambitious,” you reply, but there’s a smile in your voice as you say it. You curl your arms round me and rub your face against my hair and I close my eyes and cling onto you – and in the end we’re so preoccupied we miss our floor and have to start over. The guy from the lobby gets in on the way down; he realizes it’s you just as the doors slide close and promptly looks like he’s about to cry.

When we reach the suite I collapse onto the sofa (wincing and gasping at the flares of pain that refuse to be pacified regardless of how tentative I am on their behalf) and you make coffee for us both before prowling over and sitting down too. I shuffle aside to make room and you gently pull me against you so I can rest my head on your knee.

“It is good to have you back,” you say.

“Thanks. It’s good to be back.” I fidget around a bit more, trying to get comfortable. The hem of my jeans is catching on the cushions: I’ve lost so much weight my clothes don’t properly fit, as if I’m masquerading in the belongings of an older and more capable sibling. “No trouble, I take it?” I ask. “No pressure from Jack?”

“You know there has not been. I would hardly be sat here now if it were the case.”

“I guess. It just seems, y’know…a bit too good to be true.”

“Goodness has nothing to do with it. It is prudence and foresight that take the credit, because we concealed the trail extremely carefully.”

“Speaking of which – just now. You haven’t been waltzing around in the lobby the whole time have you? Seducing hipsters and stealing bonsais?”

“I do not waltz anywhere,” you say with dignity. “And as to whether I have left the suite, which I
assume is what you are really asking, then the answer is no. I have remained inside on an almost permanent basis. At least physically; mentally I have usually been somewhere else entirely.”

“Where did you go?”

“Oh, all manner of places. Here – there; far and away. You were often nearby too. You were invariably captivating, occasionally exasperating, but always entirely yourself.”

“That’s good.”

“It is. Three weeks is a long time to be separated; I had anticipated a fortnight at most. I suppose there were complications of some kind?”

“One or two.” I arduously reach down and rummage in my pocket, then present you with the papers summarizing my treatment history and outpatient regime that I persuaded Dr O’Connor to prepare for me (ostensibly on the grounds I was finally taking an interest in my healthcare – the real reason being that I knew you would want all the details and it saves me the trouble of reciting them). You leaf through the pages with your usual rapid speed, frowning at intervals and making the occasional irritated noise.

“And please don’t insist on changing the dressings,” I say. “I can do it myself.” You neither dispute nor concede this, merely giving me a rather beady stare over the top of the paper; and I smile internally at the idea that – of course – you are going to insist on doing it yourself and – of course – I am going to let you.

“They provided you with pain medications?” you say.

“Yes. And a script, although I’d prefer not use it. I’m going to start tapering the dose as soon as possible.”

“Yes that is probably wise. This class is extremely addictive.”

“I know.” I run my fingers over the back of your wrist. “I’ve got enough addictions as it is.”

“Yes, indeed. Incorrigible aren’t you?”

“No more than you.”

Now you put the medical notes to one side and reach for your coffee, lightly stroking my hair with your other hand. “Am I though? You were so sceptical that I would come back for you that night. You did not believe me so inveterate where your wellbeing was concerned.”

I clear my throat, slightly awkwardly. “Can you blame me?”

“I suppose it would be rather unreasonable of me if I did.” You take a sip of your coffee then move your hand from my head to my waist. “You are so thin. They have not been feeding you properly.”

“I didn’t feel like food most of the time. They did their best.”

“Then their best was inadequate. They should have given you parenteral formulae if you were unable to eat.”

“I’m fine.” I give you a prod on the arm. “Stop fussing. And you don’t need to feel guilty.”

“I do not feel guilty. While unfortunate it was unavoidable – and done at your request. Although that does not imply I don’t feel regret at seeing you in such a diminished state.”
“Think of all the fun you’re going to have by being controlling and officious while I recover.”

“Very true.” You give me one of your sardonic half-smiles then resume absent-mindedly stroking my hair. When I glance up I realize that you’re staring at me, and you smile again when you see that I’ve noticed.

“How very beautiful you are Agent Graham,” you say.

“I guess I need to be Dr Lecter. It compensates for your excessive beastliness.”

“Oh yes, very good. Your gift for satire is remarkable.”

“Thanks.”

“How fortunate I am to be condemned to a lifetime of your 
\textit{bon mots}. I must remember to congratulate myself at some point.”

“Well, when you’ve finished doing that you should also remember that famous dialog at the end of 
\textit{King Kong}. Do you know it?”

“Happily, no.”

“\textit{Twas beauty killed the beast},” I say with a grin. Which makes you choke on your coffee, and so all in all can be considered a good result.

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Despite the possibility of finally leaving the country being so tantalizingly close, there’s no question of me doing any substantive travelling in my current state. The idea of being entombed in a hotel suite for the requisite recuperation time seems unbearable, no matter how luxurious and well-appointed it is, so you end up organizing the rental of an isolated lakeside cabin for me to complain and convalesce in. The online advert promises \textit{‘stunning scenic views’} (which I don’t care about because I’d rather look at you) and \textit{‘thrilling outdoor pursuits’} (which I’m far too fucked to even contemplate); although the one thing that genuinely does appeal is the solitude that lies behind the soothing promise (flowing across the website banner in extravagantly cursive font) of a chance to \textit{‘escape the crowds and enjoy peace and tranquillity’}.

This leaves the problem of how to get there; and because my car’s still impounded for forensic testing there’s no alternative but to hire one. (“How terribly tedious,” you say; to which I remind you that it’s technically your fault for murdering the CSI team leader. “Oh…yes,” you reply, as if it had slipped your mind entirely). Instead you use your excessive collection of fake ID to inveigle past the rental company and we leave in the evening and drive through the night like a pair of bandits. Sitting up front is increasingly uncomfortable, and after half an hour of my agitated sighing and fretful squirming you pull over and make me lie on the back seat and sling your coat over me.

“Try and get some rest Will,” you say as you restart the engine. “As fond as you are of disregarding your own limits – and as frustrating as your current limitations must be – you need to be a little more pragmatic. You are recovering from major surgery.”

“I’m fine.”

“You are not fine.”

“I am.” I reach out and prod you on the thigh. “If you don’t stop haranguing me I’ll throw you out the car.”
“That is highly unlikely in your current state.”

“Then I’ll throw myself out the car.”

“Yes, I suppose you probably would,” you reply, amused. “What excessive lengths you will go to in order to make your point.”

“How much further away is it?”

“Another two hours, I would think.”

I sigh a bit more then shift about on the seat, trying to find a way of arranging my legs that won’t aggravate the pain in my stomach. In my final position I can just about see your profile round the corner of the headrest: the tip of your nose, the curl of your top lip. “Thank you,” I say. “For arranging this. I really appreciate it.”

“You are welcome.”

“It’ll be good to get away.” I half-want to add something like ‘and spend some time together,’ but it feels like the type of trite, conventional phrase that is impossible to say to you. And besides it’s not really necessary because I know you’re aware of it anyway. I smile to myself and watch the way the bruised, inky sky skims past through the window: vivid moonlight, scattered stars. It reminds me of your words from years ago – “I believe some of our stars will always be the same” – and I mentally reproach myself for being so cloying and sentimental. But I’m still smiling while I do it.

The cabin is spacious and secluded, and rather beautiful in a raw, rough-hewn sort of way. It’s surrounded by fir trees that wrap around it like sheltering arms and the front porch is only a few yards away from the lakeside. And it’s completely perfect because there’re no people (except you), and no hassle (except that generated by me), and the only sounds are the cawing of assorted birds, the whining of the wind in the chimney and the lapping of the water. I can feel myself starting to relax for the first time in recent memory and spend much of the first week sat in a chair with a blanket spread over my knees like a pensioner.

“This is what is sometimes referred to as karma,” you say the first time you see me do it. “I am afraid your relentless jibes about my age have rebounded on you. You look as if you have escaped from a retirement home.”

“Well you would know I suppose.”

You smirk. “Do tell me when you require assistance to the bedroom for your afternoon nap.”

“Hilarious aren’t you?”

You smirk again then come and stand behind me, placing your hands on my shoulders, and I rest my cheek against your forearm. “You shall soon be back to full strength,” you say. “It will not be long now. You are, after all, virtually indestructible.”

“Again, you should know.”

“Yes. I have established it beyond all reasonable doubt.” You kiss the top of my head. “As you have for me; we really must call a mutual armistice on testing one another’s durability.”

“Sounds good.” Briefly I rub my cheek against your arm; the faintest hint of pressure. “Please would you make me a coffee? I’m really thirsty.” In fact I’m not, and don’t particularly want any coffee, but the turn the conversation’s taken has made me uncomfortable and I don’t particularly want to
confront it. What you’ve tried to do to me…what I’ve tried to do to you. What we’ve done to each other – none of it goes away. We can’t undo it. It’s beyond help, and beyond remedy; but not beyond pain and grief despite it. I carry it with me all the time – our whole history literally carved into my body in a skein of unsightly scars.

But then what else is there? I don’t even know. At the very most, perhaps, we could salvage something from it: razing the old to raise the new, as you told me when you first came back. And at the very least I suppose I should try not to constantly repent it. I saw a bumper sticker about that once: When your past calls, don’t answer – it has nothing new to say.

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After a while I decide I actually quite like being an invalid: there’s a lack of expectation or responsibility in it that entirely suits my current mood (having had to bear the weight of both these things for far too long) and I enjoy the fact that for once you are taking care of me in a simple, straightforward way without the usual lethal subtext or concealed, convoluted clauses that I’ve come to expect from you. In this respect (and despite your protestations to the contrary) I know you are feeling something that might not entirely be guilt, but is not completely removed from it either.

I leave all responsibility for maintaining and managing the cabin to you, which doesn’t raise any objections (until I refer to it as ‘housekeeping’: which makes you bristle and me laugh), although I can’t quite work out whether the capacity for cosy domestication is genuine or just one of the many personas that you can step into and wear for a while as needed. After a while I decide it doesn’t really matter because the net result is the same regardless and the possibility of it being a carefully calculated façade doesn’t remove the pleasure of benefitting from it. You prepare a steady stream of small but nourishing invalid meals for me, and help me into the bathtub, and patiently listen to me complain about how much pain I’m in whilst keeping a vigilant eye on both wounds and changing the dressings with a touch that’s surprisingly deft and gentle. If you find my fractiousness irritating you never say so. Instead you perform all the requisite cleaning and cooking with a faint smile on your face, and if I wake you up in the middle of the night with screaming nightmares you never complain about it.

The weather is still unseasonably cold and raw, although now it feels cosy and atmospheric as opposed to disheartening and ominous in the way it did previously. The cabin is equipped with both a wood-burning stove and a cavernous stone fireplace, and I derive a degree of guilty pleasure from sitting in my chair and officiously ordering you around in the fetching of coal and firewood. Contrary to expectation you prove to be highly proficient in attending to both (although the fact you are also terrifyingly adept at using a hatchet does not come as a surprise). “Of course I know how to build a fire,” you say when I mention it. “I learnt how to do it when I was very young.”

You announce this extremely casually, obviously not imbuing it with any particular significance; but it still makes me thoughtful because it’s so hard to imagine you having something as commonplace as a childhood, the same as anybody else. Briefly I try to envisage it: you as a solemn, dark-eyed little boy with an angular face and obscure impulses, unknowable and unfathomable to all the adults around you. The idea makes me feel sombre and sad, because while I don’t really know the full extent of what you endured in your early life, I’m still aware that terrible things have happened to you. And yet I also know that none of these things, neither in whole nor in part, can fully account for what you are. It’s impossible to distil you into your component features – nature or nurture – because you defy categorization. You’ve nurtured your own nature. You’re constantly recreating and reinventing yourself. I begin to frown over this (and what it might mean for me); and you finish building up the fire and turn round, raising a single eyebrow when you see me staring at you. Doubtless you can guess what I’m thinking. But you don’t say anything about it and neither do I.
I’m so aching and frail that sex in entirely out of the question, so the intimacy is much more low-key, and possibly more profound because of it. I spend a lot of time lying with you – or even on you – which surprises me at first because it’s not something I’ve ever done with anyone else (or encouraged anyone else to do with me); and it doesn’t matter whether you’re on the bed, or the sofa, or on the bench out front, I can still be relied upon to track you down and drape myself into your space. Often I fall asleep in your arms, and I know that you like it because of the way you remain prone and still to avoid disturbing me – even though you’ll never admit it. If I have my head on your knee then you stroke my hair or trail your fingers over the scar on my cheek; and if my back’s against your chest then you rub small soothing circles over my arms and hips. When I’m feeling a bit stronger then it evens out more, and occasionally you’ll deign to rest your head on my shoulder, or prop yourself against me and lie with your eyes closed while you stroll around your memory palace and I wrap my arms round you and listen to the sound of you breathing.

On one such evening you fall asleep on the sofa and I manoeuvre you round so your head’s on my knee. You’re going to be cramped when you wake up; your legs are so long you don’t fit properly and are coiled up at a strange angle. But you look unusually restful and I don’t want to disturb you, so ultimately decide to leave you to it and idly scroll though the TV channels instead, trying to find something to pass the time until you wake up (upon which I’ll have to humor you when you insist you weren’t asleep but preoccupied with Profound Thoughts in a subterranean wing of your memory palace) and we can go to bed. It’s ‘Cult Movie Night’ on WPX and I half-watch Hedwig because I have vague memories of seeing the first half with an ex-girlfriend, then getting a phone call midway through and never finding out how it ended. In retrospect I think I annoyed her the whole time (“who’s that?” I kept saying; “but why is she so pissed off with him?” “I don’t get it…” ). My sensibilities have obviously failed to mellow in the intervening years because I still find it too strident and surreal to fully engage with, although the lyrics to one of the songs finally snag my attention because they’re so weirdly apt. I listen to them with my eyes closed, ignoring the capering images on the screen in order to focus on the assorted sensations: something that’s melancholy and disturbing, yet also synchronous and elevating; all these things, all at the same time. One part sad, one part regretful and one part hopeful. Partly inevitable, partly predetermined. Partly me and partly you.

Last time I saw you
We had just split in two
You were looking at me
I was looking at you
You had a way so familiar
But I could not recognize
Cause you had blood on your face
I had blood in my eyes
But I could swear by your expression
That the pain down in your soul
Was the same as the one down in mine

That’s the pain
Cuts a straight line
Down through the heart
We called it love
So we wrapped our arms around each other
Trying to shove ourselves back together

You wake up abruptly some time later, doing it in a graceful yet slightly sinister way in the same manner in which you do so much else: one moment you’re flat out on my knee, then a few seconds later you’re bolt upright and scrolling through your cell phone as if you’ve been wide awake the whole time.
“I hope you enjoyed your nap,” I say innocently.

You give me a rather withering look. “I was not napping. I do not nap.”

“You were snoring,” I say (which is a total lie, but has the benefit of being one of those highly convenient lies which are impossible to disprove).


“You are a truly terrible individual,” you reply in a martyred voice.

“And that is a shameless case of the pot calling the kettle terrible, which is unparalleled in the annals of human bullshit.”

“Indeed.” Then you narrow your eyes even further until they’re just two little glinting slits. “And you are being facile to conceal the fact you are preoccupied with something. You look pensive. What is the matter?”

“Nothing,” I say. I reach out, a bit awkwardly, and take hold of your hand. “I’m fine.”

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A few days later we go for a walk round the lake. At least you walk while I hobble; really I need a cane of some sort but am too proud (i.e., stubborn) to agree to it. There’s a gnarled wooden bench a few yards back from the shoreline so I sit on it and grumble to myself about the pain in my chest while you stand by the edge of the bank with your hands in your pockets, staring out at the choppy grey surface. You seem quite fascinated, and I wonder whether you find expanses of water soothing in the way some people profess to. Or maybe it’s the destructiveness of it – merciless and arbitrary – that appeals to you. I wonder if you like looking at the sea? There’s so much I don’t know about your preferences, although I suppose there’s years ahead to find out; a whole lifetime to learn to know you. One lifetime – yours and mine. The time of our lives.

You’re still fixed in place, poised and still, and the positioning of it reminds me of the way I imagined you that night in the Academy building. In fact it’s so similar it’s almost eerie: as if you’ve rifled through my mind and are recreating the scene just to see what will happen. I was so resolute that night wasn’t I? I’ve never really described it to you, all the conclusions I came to…that chaos with Matthew Brown cleaved its way between us before I had an opportunity. I watch you for a bit longer: angular and composed, like a still-life version of yourself. I wonder how consciously done it is? Whether you deliberately arrange yourself to look as striking as possible or if it’s just natural grace. Everything you do is so considered that it’s hard to imagine even something as simple as your posture to be entirely accidental. But then it’s likewise difficult to credit you being genuinely preoccupied with whether people find you attractive or not. But then you are an enormous narcissist…Oh God, who knows. Who cares. It’s hardly as if it matters. Not in the way that other things matter. I frown to myself all over again, imagining how it would be if I wasn’t watching you from a bench by an isolated lake but from a pavement café in the heart of some foreign city. Watching you as you watch the world. Human life flowing past you like lake water; the same rapt, scrutinizing expression on your face. The same impersonal observation. And then with a sudden surge of inspiration (or recklessness, or caprice, or fuck knows what) I know what I have to do. In fact it’s so obvious that I can’t quite believe I haven’t done it sooner. After a while you come and sit beside me and I lean forward and cup my chin in my hands.

“I’ve been thinking,” I say.

“Yes?”
“About what happens after this. After we leave; abroad I mean.”

“And what are your conclusions?”

This makes me smile a bit in spite of myself; I’ve always appreciated your capacity to cut straight to the point. Anyone else would be: ‘oh, have you?’ or ‘that sounds interesting, why don’t you tell me about it’, or ‘let me tell you what I’ve been thinking.’ I probably would myself. But not you.

“They’re not conclusions as such,” I say, even though they essentially are (no point in antagonizing you straight off, after all). “More like suggestions. Preferences, I suppose.” I fall silent, trying to decide the best way to proceed and you wait patiently without trying to pre-empt me. You’ve turned up the collar of your coat against the cold and the material runs in black, parallel lines beneath your cheekbones: in profile you look as if you’re gagged – pinioned in a forensic prison mask – and the association makes me flinch. “I don’t want you to get caught again,” I blurt out.

“Naturally. I am not particularly eager for it myself.”

“The idea of it,” I say.

“Quite. Although I can hardly be caught ‘again’, considering …”

“Yes, you turned yourself in the first time. I know, I was there. Even so.”

“Even so…? What?”

“After we leave.” I hesitate again. “No more tableaux; no displays. At least not anytime soon. I mean it – what the hell would Jack say if he heard they’d found a Ripper scene in Europe? Because he would hear about it.” In the corner of my eye I can see you swivel round; the blackness of your collar has disappeared and you’re looking at me full on. And despite my best efforts I’m aware I’m starting to feel intimidated but force myself to pursue the point regardless. “Wait,” I say. “I’m not done.”

“No, I rather thought you were not.”

Now I take a deep breath because the most difficult part is still ahead. You wait silently, and I realize I’m knotting my fingers together in an anxious, fidgety way so cram my hands into my pockets to hide it. Then I dart a quick look at you to see how you’re taking it – but as usual your expression gives nothing away. “I want you to change your conditions,” I eventually say. Oh God, this so difficult; I half-wish I’d never started it, even though there’s no real question that it had to be done.

“And do you plan to elaborate at all?” you reply coolly, “Or am I going to be required to guess your meaning?”

“Hang on can’t you? I’m trying to find the best way of describing it. How I feel about it. It’s… complicated. And it’s not like I have some grand speech prepared; I didn’t actually plan any of this.”

“So you have been seized by the impulse of the moment?” Now you sound amused. “How interesting.”

“Is it?”

“Of course it is.”

“Okay, well…” I lean back against the bench, then turn round so I can look at you directly. “Do you remember when we first discussed this? That time in the hotel. You said you weren’t some sort of vigilante, and then you…” I’m about to say ‘and then you lost your shit’ but resist at the final
moment, because there’s no point being any ruder than necessary. “…And then you got irritated.”

And then I wondered whether you were going to rip my head off.

“Yes, I remember.”

“So I said: ‘I’m not whatever it is that you are’.”

“Indeed. I am hardly likely to forget.”

“Well, it’s true. I’m not. You know that I’m not.”

“And therefore?”

“And therefore – I’m asking you to revise your criteria.” There’s another pause. “And the reason I’m asking you is because I don’t know whether I can stay with you any other way.”

So. That’s it. I’ve said it…and it’s like everything’s slowed down: the scudding of the water, the cawing of the crows in the naked tree limbs; as if the whole world’s just shrunk and distilled until there’s nothing fully alive or truly animated except you and me. I don’t regret it though, not really. It had to be said. Briefly I think of my resolutions that night in the Academy – the pledges I made to myself – and I know I had to say it.

You’re just staring at me, your head slightly angled to the side. I can wait; it’s your move, after all. Bishop takes Knight, Rook to King’s Rook: check. “Interesting choice of phrase Will,” you finally say. “That you ‘don’t know.’ Not ‘I can’t’ – not definitive. Rather you suspect you would not be able to; but there is still some sliver of doubt.”

“No…no,” I reply with some energy. “You’re missing the point.” You delicately raise your eyebrows as if to dismiss the possibility of such a thing. “You are. It’s you that I want: I want to be with you, and I want you to be with me.” Oh Christ, that’s so embarrassing – why did I say that? I sound like some grizzly romance novel. I clear my throat awkwardly. “You know that by now. You know that, right? But I don’t…I don’t want everything that comes with it.”

“No?”

“No. I don’t want it because it’s not who I am.” There’s another pause while we stare at each other. “If it was warranted,” I hear myself saying. “If it was people who had it coming. If it was justified – then yes. I’ll even help you.” (Am I actually going to?...Well, yes. Obviously). “But that’s it. That’s all. Not because they’ve failed to meet your arbitrary standards of worthiness.”

“My standards of worthiness,” you say crisply, “are not arbitrary.”

“Then it has to be a standard I’d agree with,” I reply. My voice is impressively firm. “You have to discuss it with me.”

“I have to discuss it with you and it has to be justified? So you, Agent Will Graham-of-the-FBI, are to be the author and arbitrator of justice. Tell me; what do you think qualifies you for such a position?”

“Stop it,” I say sharply. “For God’s sake, stop doing that. What qualifies you either? That’s exactly what I’m saying – we have to be synchronized. I mean, just look how that fiasco with Sanderson ended up. This has to be a genuine partnership. Not you doing whatever the hell you want because you always think you know best, regardless of how it might affect me. I can’t…I can’t live with you under those terms.”
“A compromise?” you say, with a very faint smile.

“Yes, I suppose so. How hard can it be? I imagine you’d be the first person to insist that what you do isn’t clinical or pathological – that you don’t have some kind of neurotic impulse you can’t control.” And you would, I know you would. Eloquently and at length. “So prove it. Prove that just because you don’t want to stop doing what you do doesn’t mean that you can’t choose to do it differently. And this isn’t just me taking a moral position.” You raise your eyebrows again. “Okay, it’s not entirely about me taking a moral position. It’s about pragmatics. It’s about the fact I don’t want them to catch you.”

There’s a long pause while you stare fixedly at the water and I stare at you. I realize I’m holding my breath and have to force myself to let it out again. God, my fucking chest is agony. Finally you turn round and run your eyes over my face.

“If anyone endangers your wellbeing, or mine, then I shall destroy them utterly,” you eventually say. “That is fixed and non-negotiable.”

“Yes, of course. Fine.”

“Regarding the rest…” You frown slightly and look thoughtful. “I will agree to it in principle. My condition is that it is open to arbitration; that the boundaries are revisited at intervals. I am prepared to give you my word that I will not enact anything without discussing it with you first. However, you must be willing to grant an audience to whatever I might propose, and give it full and fair consideration.”

“Yes,” I say slowly. “I can agree to that.”

You give me a slightly sinister smile. “It may be that you discover that you have not lost the capacity to surprise yourself.”

“Maybe. But maybe not; and maybe you wouldn’t want me to. You said yourself that you don’t want me to come with you as an acolyte – something passive to mould in your own image. You wanted an equal.”

Now you smile again, and this time it’s one of your rare, genuine ones. “Indeed I did.” You reach out and run a finger down my cheek, hovering briefly over the scar before trailing downwards. “I must have taken leave of my senses. Remind me again what you were saying about me not being pathological.”

“Tough. You’re stuck with me now.”

“It would certainly appear that way. Perhaps Matthew Brown was correct in his surmise that we deserve one another.”

“I don’t know who else would have us,” I say lightly. I feel somewhat shaken, yet simultaneously calm, and the combination of opposing impulses feels disorientating until I take a look at you and see how entirely serene you appear. “So is it a deal?” I add.

“It is a deal.”

“Okay…Good.”

“Good, indeed. I suppose you are congratulating yourself on your negotiating skills?”

“Not really.”
“No, you don’t have much grounds to I’m afraid. I consider myself to have had a far more favourable transaction.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, because I have only made a relatively minor concession. Had you pushed for a greater advantage in your own interests I would probably still have agreed to it. I, on the other hand, have gained *you* while surrendering very little. And not only your current self, but also your future incarnation – who has agreed to collaborate with me in all manner of interesting ways. Yes, I consider myself to have arranged our recent covenant extremely well.”

I can’t help laughing at this and you stretch back on the bench in a self-satisfied way. “See?” you add. “I did warn you that it is extremely difficult to try and get the better of me.”

I roll my eyes at you, and you smirk back in response; and after that we just sit in silence for a while and watch the lake. I feel extremely calm and contented, struck by the sense that for the first time in ages I’m preoccupied with neither the past nor the future, but simply enjoying the present. I have a sudden urge to describe the feeling to you, but when I glance over I can immediately see that you have that slightly blank expression on your face. I hesitate, and then reach out and touch your arm.

“Where have you gone?” I say.

You promptly come back to life and turn your head so you can look at me. “I have been thinking about you,” you reply after a pause.

“Why? I’m right here.”

“Yes…” You hesitate for a few more seconds, and the gesture is so uncustomary that it immediately grabs my attention.

“I was in the Uffizi, inspecting Leonardo’s *Annunciazione*. The impossible perspective of the Cyprus tree; the way the branches curve into the palace wall. There is an exquisite rhythm to it. How he must have savored the pleasures of creating the scene, one brushstroke after another.” You sigh slightly. “To be frank, Will, sometimes when I am around you I feel obliged to situate myself somewhere else. You are so beautiful and unique. And as such, in a purely temporal way, you are inaccessible – unobtainable – because I can never entirely subsume you. Nevertheless there are aspects of me which wish to take possession of you completely and entirely; and yet I know if I allowed myself to do that, then I would hurt you.”

I suppose I ought to be shocked or disturbed by this disclosure, but I’m not – after all, it’s not like it’s anything I didn’t already know. There’s a silence and I watch you for a few more seconds: the way the wind is blowing your hair back from your face and how dramatic your profile looks against the pale, bleached blue of the sky. Then I shift a few inches along the bench so we’re closer together.

“You won’t hurt me Hannibal,” I say firmly. “Do you know why?”

“Why?”

I move a bit closer still and allow my feet to brush against yours. “Simple,” I say. “Because from now on I won’t let you.”

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Shortly afterwards we go for another walk around the lake (you striding, me hobbling) then head back to the cabin (you lingering for me to catch up while I tell you it’s fine, go ahead, I’m walking
this slow on purpose), whereupon I lie down for a rest (which is absolutely not a nap) and you go and prepare dinner (and manage to conjure something delicious from only frozen fish, canned vegetables and a pot of mustard).

“The glaze on the salmon is made with brown sugar,” you say. “It is extraordinarily simple. Albeit distressingly basic. We are running very low on supplies.”

“I’ll go to the store tomorrow.”

“You are able to drive?”

“I’ll be okay for a short distance. You shouldn’t go yourself, you’re too…distinctive. And strangers will stand out more in a place like this.”

“Agreed.” You take a sip from your wineglass and then wince slightly and put it down again. “This stuff is utterly appalling.”

“Tastes fine to me.”

You don’t respond immediately, just give me a withering glance (which is extraordinarily over-the-top: more suitably reserved for someone who was knocking back their own urine because nothing more palatable was to hand). “Wait until we have visited Italy and France,” you say. “Then you will not be drinking such vinegary rubbish as this and pronouncing it to be ‘fine’.”

“You don’t need to go to Europe to get good wine.”

“My dear Will, how on earth would you know?”

I defiantly take another mouthful then roll my eyes at you over the top of the glass. “I'm not sure how you manage to sound quite so fond when you’re actually insulting me.”

This makes you smile. “Because where you are concerned, I evidently am,” you reply. “I am very foolish and very fond. Leave the dishes, I shall do them tomorrow.”

“I’ll do them,” I say; because really it’s the least I can do considering you’ve been doing everything else. You give me a quick, appreciative nod then vanish into the living room; and when I peer round the door a while later you’re stretched on the floor in front of the fireplace with a book in your hand, a blanket draped over your legs, and your back composed and neat against the base of the sofa. Your feet are bare, and I find myself staring at them because I haven’t really seen them before (they’re long and slender: fine-boned with slightly high arches). You haven’t noticed me yet – you’re still reading, staring quite intensely at the small print. I wonder if you’ll need glasses when you’re older? Despite my constant teasing about your age it’s difficult to imagine you being genuinely old: streaks of grey in your hair, your spine starting to sag. It’s hardly seems feasible that you won’t always be as present and powerful as you are now. Nevertheless there’s something about the casualness of the whole arrangement that I find extremely appealing.

I push the door fully open and you glance up and smile at me when I come in, then lift the blanket as an invitation for me to come and lie next to you. I arrange myself with my back against your chest and my legs tangled up in yours, and you prop your chin on my head and wrap an arm round me while resting your book on my chest with your other hand.

I prod your foot with mine. “You have a high instep don’t you? Don’t your feet ever hurt?”

“Pes cavus,” you say. “And no, not particularly. They are not so raised as all that. Besides, I am extremely proficient at ignoring pain. Just like you.”
“Hmm.”

“Why the sudden interest in my feet?”

I suppose it does sound a bit ridiculous when it’s put like that, and I do nothing to improve the situation by attempting to clarify: “It’s not your feet, as such, it’s you.”

“It is not my feet, as such, but me?”

“Yeah, okay. That sounded weird didn’t it?”

“It did. I’m afraid I can’t really reassure you on that score.” You shift your hand slightly so the tip of your index finger skims beneath my collar: it’s the lightest possible touch, but it still makes me shiver. “I suppose what you actually mean is the familiarity it implies,” you say. “Glimpsing all these tiny details of one another’s selves and lives. None of them are particularly profound in isolation, but the sum of them is something altogether more meaningful.”

“Yes exactly. All these pieces of you.”

“And which pieces would those be?”

“All of them. I’ve never really experienced you as a composite before, you’ve always just been you. More like... like a brand than an actual person. These past few weeks have been like discovering what’s behind the façade. And it makes you more knowable. More human.” I hesitate slightly, suddenly concerned I’m being really insulting, but if you’re offended you don’t give any indication. “That you’re not just this detached, unearthly representation that people admire, and are afraid of, but who’s totally removed from the rest of us. Removed from real life.”

You make an amused noise. “A graven image?”

“But that’s just it, you’re not. Not anymore. Not to me. It’s that you have the same...” I hesitate again. “Some of the same impulses as everyone else. That you have your idiosyncrasies. Different perspectives, and emotions, and memories, and a childhood, and...”

“And feet.”

“Yes, those too.”

You rub your chin against the top of my head. “I know exactly what you mean,” you say. “You are essentially learning to know me. Which is something very few people have ever been permitted to do.”

And lived to tell the tale, I silently amend. Out loud I say: “I’m glad you understand.”

“I do. You were very clear. You are also correct. Most people do experience me in a highly removed way, because they have neither the impulse, intelligence, or inspiration to fully understand me.”

There’s a pause. “That’s why you were lonely,” I eventually say. “Isn’t it? Before you met me?”

You kiss the top of my head instead of answering and in the resulting silence I gaze at the flickering light of the fire and re-play your words from that fateful night when I first lunged at you across the sofa: “Consider my situation before Jack Crawford was obliging enough to bring me to you. Someone with the most supreme vices; made for exceptions, not for rules; and a human realization of the most extreme ideals and fulfilments. Yet I am surrounded by dull, blind, mechanical people who are completely unable to comprehend me. No one has the imagination to appreciate it. And then one day, this small, shabby boy comes in...This diminutive, tattered little person, snapping and
snarling and not even able to look anyone in the eye – yet as soon as I saw him, I thought 'if I turned my own coin, then he would be on the other side'."

“It was the same for me,” I finally say. “Exactly the same. It just took me a lot longer to acknowledge it.”

“I know Will. As you once observed, ‘we are both alone without each other.’ Although of course it is more than that, isn’t it: more than two wounded, misunderstood individuals seeking solidarity? It is far more.” You begin to trail your hand across my chest. Slip it down to rest on my hip bone. Move it lower. “It is the fact we are a confederacy; a perfect synthesis. And greater than the sum of our parts.”

“Yes. We are, I know.”

“Remember what I once told you: ‘Achilles wished all Greeks would die, so that he and Patroclus could conquer Troy alone. It took divine intervention to bring them down.’ There is a fine line between beauty and horror, Will. Yet see how we have demolished this line. You. And. I.”

“Yes,” I say again, a bit breathlessly; then I tip my head back against your shoulder so I can begin kissing the side of your throat. Oh God, now I’m turned on. That doesn’t seem good…Surely that’s not good; it might mean I’m getting some sort of grandiose, megalomaniacal complex. I bet it does mean that. Oh shit, I can’t turn into a grandiose megalomaniac. There wouldn’t be room in the cabin for two…one is more than enough. Nevertheless, grandiose concerns notwithstanding, I can’t get past the sudden realization that we haven’t had sex in over a month and that I need to jump on you at the earliest moment of mutual convenience (or, more realistically in my current state, ask you to jump on me)…but either way if I don’t get off in the next 30 minutes I may actually die.

You obligingly tilt your face towards me so I can kiss you properly, sliding one hand beneath my shirt and the other one across my groin. I gasp as I push my hips into your touch, and you make a pleased noise when you feel how hard I am. Then I brace myself for the fact I’m about to be called out for being in possession of erotically-charged megalomania, but all you actually do is kiss my forehead and say: “It has been quite a long time. Several weeks at least. Are you sure you finally feel ready?”

“Oh God, what do you think – you’ve got your hand on the evidence right now. Aren’t you supposed to be a doctor?”

“I am. And in my considered medical opinion you appear to be in urgent need of all the attention I can possibly give you.” You’ve fully unfastened my shirt by now – doing it one-handed, dextrous as ever – and lightly run your palm over one of the bandages. “Nevertheless. I am going to have to be gentle with you aren’t I?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so – how awfully disappointing for you.” I lightly tug on your earlobe with my teeth. “Do you actually know how to be? Shall I give you instructions? An operating manual?”

“On the contrary; I am well aware of how to handle something which is both delicate and precious.”

“Ugh, shut up, I’m not delicate.”

“No, indeed. You bend yet you never fully break.”

I hold out my arms so you can remove my shirt entirely and then lean backwards again, arching myself against you like a cat. “I’ll be back to full strength again soon,” I say. “Then you can start mauling me about again.”
“Would I do such a thing? Besides, you know you will be mauling me back with equal vigour.”
Now you’re unfastening my jeans as effortlessly as the shirt…and I know I should be disturbed by the fact I’m entirely aware of how you’re so adept at undressing an inert body, and yet I’m not. Not at all – I don’t care. Instead I close my eyes and allow myself to make small blissful sighs at the way your hands are skimming all over me – the touch unbelievably light and agile, yet still as searing as if your fingers are white hot – and I feel myself starting to quiver as I push up against you. I have a vague sense that I should really be doing more to help move things along (climbing out of your lap, turning round, trying to get your clothes off…just something, as opposed to nothing. As opposed to fuck all) but right now simply lying with my back against your chest and your arms cradling round me feels perfect and I can’t summon the presence of mind to move. Anyway, you don’t seem to mind. You stroke along the side of my jaw then brush your thumb over my bottom lip and I open my mouth so you can slide two fingers in, sucking on them almost ecstatically and spreading my legs apart so you can caress the skin along my hips. Although despite the constant intimation you don’t touch me anywhere else, and I can feel the balance beginning to tip away from anticipation and more towards discomfited impatience.

“Oh come on,” I finally gasp out. “What are you waiting for? I need…” And then I realize I don’t know exactly what to say, because I can’t specify; all I really know is that I need you.

I feel your lips pressing against my forehead in an unusually gentle way. “It’s alright Will,” you say softly. “I know exactly what you need. And you know that you can trust me to take care of you. But I want us to take our time; I would like this to last as long as possible.” There’s a pause and when you speak again your tone is rather wry. “And that means I am trying to muster all my self-control.”

“Oh…fuck self-control,” I say (and am about to add ‘fuck me instead’), when you abruptly lift me up and manoeuvre us both onto the floor, arranging yourself in a long graceful line alongside me and propped up on one elbow. I gasp, startled by the suddenness of it, and you smile down at me for a few seconds before leaning over and kissing me with incredible care and thoroughness. It starts off tender and leisurely, just a warm, sensuous slide of tongues and mouths; but rapidly grows hungry and messy and passionate as I pant into your mouth and tug on your bottom lip with my teeth, folding my arms round your neck while you make a low groaning sound, deep in your throat, and tangle your fingers into my hair. You pull away first, letting out a long sigh as if you’ve been holding your breath the whole time, before briefly pressing our foreheads together and beginning to kiss your way down my face.

“I know you despise being carried,” you murmur into my skin, “but I would be very appreciative if you could waive the prohibition, just this once, and allow me to take you to bed.”

I’m about to open my mouth to agree, but then the sudden sense of another circle being completed flits across my mind and I grab your wrist instead to stop you lifting me up. “No,” I say. “Here – by the fire. Just like the first time.”

This makes you smile and lean over to kiss me (again) and I writhe helplessly against you, frantically scrabbling at your shirt to try and unfasten it. “It is almost impossible to leave you like this,” you say (you sound genuinely regretful), “but I need to go into the kitchen for one moment. I shall not be long.”

“Oh God, don’t you dare be long,” I reply, even though I’m assuming that you’ve gone to retrieve something that can double as lube and your absence, though incredibly frustrating, is unavoidably necessary. You return quickly as promised, elegantly shrugging off your clothes as you go, and holding a small glass bottle of what looks like olive oil which you place next to the fire to warm up. You look incredibly dramatic and impressive in the flickering half-light from the fireplace and I promptly lunge myself at you in a mindlessly craving, yearning way – then yelp with pain as my
stomach wound gives a sharp twinge of protest.

“Ah, be careful,” you say. “Lie down. Here.” You retrieve some cushions from the couch and gently prop them beneath my head then stroke my hair out of my eyes. “That really hurt you didn’t it? Your face has gone white.”

“It wasn’t so bad.”

“Hmm. I suppose you know what I am about to say?”

“’No respect for my own limits’ by any chance?”

“Indeed.”

I take hold of your shoulders so I can tug you towards me, wrapping my arms round your back and running the flat of my tongue across your throat where your pulse is throbbing beneath delicate skin. “No – are you really? That makes a nice change, you haven’t said it for at least ten minutes.”

“Well it bears repeating. And so tonight I do not expect you to do anything at all apart from lie back and allow me to expend every possible attention on this beautiful body.”

“Oh. Okay then. Yeah, I think I can manage that,” I say; then promptly hiss out a breath through my teeth as you start to kiss your way down my torso. You do it incredibly slowly and suggestively and I’m really, really hoping you might suck me off (oh God…would you?) but can’t quite devise a way of asking for it that won’t make me begin blushing and stammering like a teenager. How do people ask for that? I mean how do people ask people like you for that? ‘I would be very obliged if you would kindly fellate me within an inch of my life?’ Oh shit, I don’t think I can ask, I feel too self-conscious…I really don’t think I can. Maybe I could just grab your hair and…no, I can’t do that, you wouldn’t like it. You’ll lose your shit and tell me to fuck off. You’ve nearly reached my waist now; are you going to? Oh…oh shitting, fucking hell you actually are. Oh God. I groan extremely loudly (and embarrassingly) when I feel you cradle my cock with one hand and expertly run your tongue around the head (how? How the fuck are you so expert at this…you shifty bastard, oh my God). The palm of your hand feels firm and warm, and you keep me like that for a while, letting me quiver and gasp as you alternate between an insanely pleasurable flicking movement with your tongue followed by slow licks – then shallow dips – then beautifully long, languorous sucks – oh shit…and entirely taking your time as if you’re savouring every last second of letting me fuck your mouth, as if I’m something delicious that you can’t get enough of.

“Oh yes,” I say. I’m shuddering now: my head’s thrown back and I’ve got one arm flung over my face…I feel like I’m going to snap. “That’s incredible. Your mouth, oh God…” and you sigh around me as if you’re really enjoying yourself (are you?) before abruptly swallowing me down for the entire length. I can literally feel my cock slide against the back of your throat, and it’s at that point I lose control entirely and begin thrusting into your mouth in a sort of frenzy until you have to gently put your palms on my hips to keep me still. It’s so gloriously, unbelievably, spectacularly good that I grow afraid I’m going to ruin everything by coming too soon; and you must realize that I’m growing half ecstatic, half overwhelmed, because you promptly stop and lean back on your heels before reaching out for the oil instead. You smile at me while pouring it onto your fingers and then bend over to kiss my forehead.

“You taste exquisite.” There’s a slight sardonic twist in your voice.

“Jesus fuck,” I say feebly.

“Good, yes?”
“You know it was.” (You smug old bastard). “It was…oh my actual God.”

You laugh at that, slowly trailing your clean hand up and down my ribs. “Spread your legs for me Will,” you say softly. “Wider. Show me how much you want this. That’s right. Very lovely – perfect. Let me take care of you.”

“Yes. God. Yes, I want you to.”

You kiss my knee and I make a long, low moaning noise as you slide one slippery finger deep inside me, stroking and caressing for a few moments before pulling out nearly all the way and thrusting back in again. At the same time you use your thumb to stroke the taut slick skin around the rim, occasionally pressing down hard to match the movement of your index finger, and I cry out again as my eyes practically roll back in my head.

“Beautiful,” you say softly. “You like it so much don’t you? Look at me Will; keep your eyes open. I want to watch you while I’m doing this.”

I obediently do as you’ve asked, and then immediately wish I’d done it sooner because seeing you actually enhances everything. It should feel too intense – staring at you like this; it should be too much. But it’s not. You gaze at me a while longer, our eyes locked together, then you kiss me very deeply and tenderly before shifting downwards so you can kneel between my legs and swirl your tongue around where your finger is sliding into my body. I gasp helplessly, automatically pulling my legs up towards my chest to give you better access and feeling an immediate flush of wetness on my abdomen from where I’m leaking pre-come over myself. You carry on for a while longer, sucking and lapping at me as if I’m something delectable – and when you remove your finger entirely and begin to slowly slide your tongue inside me instead I practically scream at how good it feels, planting my feet on the floor again to give myself some leverage so I can grind my hips towards your mouth. You stroke my legs while you’re doing it, eventually pulling away entirely so you can resume rocking your finger in and out of me, and all the time kissing my thigh and murmuring: “Do you like that my love? Does it feel good for you?”

I groan instead of responding and you work in a second finger, using the pads to stroke against my prostate. “Oh yes, yes,” I say faintly. “Don’t stop, please don’t stop.”

“You are perfect like this, Will,” you say. “So beautiful. So responsive.”

“Oh God…it’s…” My voice hitches slightly and I take a few gulping lungful’s of air, desperately trying to stay in some semblance of control, and vaguely aware of you reaching up with your free hand to stop me from biting my bottom lip.

“That’s right,” you say gently. “Just breathe. In and out. It feels so good doesn’t it? Look at you, you’re trembling with it. So much pleasure, it is almost too much. You’ve been so patient but you need to let go now don’t you? Tell me what you want me to do for you.”

I want to say ‘hold me, make love to me’ but my nerve fails as its feel far too awkward and contrived to say such a thing out loud, so I just spread my legs further apart instead in the vague hope that you’ll get the idea. Which you do (thank God), because you raise your eyebrow in a rather endearingly provocative way and then position yourself so you can press soft, open-mouthed kisses across my collar bone while continuing to slide your fingers inside me.

“Come up onto my lap,” you say. “It will take the pressure off the injuries and be more comfortable.” You brush your lips along my throat. “And I want to be able to watch you.”

The sensuous tone of your voice is driving me a bit wild. It’s good, I like it. I love it: I want to be
Then you press your fingers upward again and I make a breathy moaning sound as I arch my back towards you. “You mean you want to watch me riding you?” I manage to gasp out. “Fucking myself on you – you want to watch me come from it.”

“That is quite a supposition my darling. How wonderfully obscene you are. I can’t decide whether to praise or punish you for it; possibly both. Let us see when you are fully recovered.”

“You can. I’ll let you.” I lever myself up on my elbows so I can scrape my teeth along your shoulder. “But only on the condition I can punish you back again.”

“That might well be possible. You know how difficult I find it to say no to you.”

“Yes, but you’d enjoy it as well you liar. You know you would. Oh God, hurry up, please…just…I want you so much.”

“What do you want mylimasis?”

“This. Like this, on my back. I want to be underneath you.” Oh God, you’re so stunning. Look at you. Look at yourself.

“Whatever you want,” you say. Now you’re stroking my face, gently pushing my legs apart with your other hand, and when I close my eyes you lean forward and place soft kisses on my eyelids; your breath warm against my skin. I’m so relaxed and receptive that you can sink deep inside me in one smooth thrust with no resistance at all – and you feel so good, you feel incredible – that I can’t stop myself crying out at the helpless, hopeless pleasure of it. You gasp yourself, soft and low, and begin to skim your fingers up and down my chest. “Perfect,” you say. “So perfect, Will. Look how well you take it – as if your body was made for me.”

I give a panting half-laugh at that, rolling my hips towards you to try and make you gasp again. “You’re such a narcissist,” I finally manage to say. “How do you know your body wasn’t made for me?”

“That is also a possibility. It would appear that we were made for each other.”

“Oh…yes,” I say quietly. I wrap my arms round you, and you gaze at me with that intense, bright-eyed expression that I’ve only ever seen a few times. Your breathing has sped up again – ragged and harsh – and I can tell from the taut, quilted muscles in your jaw that you’re really struggling against the desire to simply let go entirely and fuck me into the floorboards.

“Please…just…just…move,” I say. “You won’t hurt me. I’ll tell you if you are.”

“You know perfectly well that you will not.”

“I will. I’ll tell you. Please. I need this so much.” I reach out blindly towards you, and you catch hold of my hand. “I need you,” I say; and in those few seconds I sound more vulnerable and yearning than I would have thought myself capable of. With anyone else I would feel angry and humiliated by it; I’d regret it immediately, I’d try to take it back. But right now I don’t care. I’m losing myself in you – losing, lost, uncovered, undone– and I don’t care, it doesn’t matter. Oh God, it doesn’t matter.

“All right, Will,” you say quietly. “I have you. Whatever you want my love.” You lean over carefully so you can rest your weight on your elbows rather than me, and I gasp and tip my head back as you begin to move inside me – very slowly at first, very gently – but gradually building up to a smooth, fast rhythm. I’m trailing my hands down the long curve of your spine, across your shoulder blades; caressing along your arms; stroking over your chest. My eyes are closed but each
touch is instinctive – unseeing yet intuitive – because I don’t need to watch what I’m doing, I just know: I know you. Our limbs are sliding together, warm sweat-slick skin and sensation, and our breathing has sped up and our movement grown more heated and urgent…and it’s ecstatic, agonizing, heart-breaking perfection. You reach over and cradle my face, tilting my chin up towards you. “Look at you Will,” you say softly. “Still just as achingly beautiful as the very first day I saw you. And so extraordinary yet so unaware of it. You are mine now, you belong to me. You belong to me and you are everything.” And then you keep saying it, like a chant; as if you can’t stop yourself, as if you don’t even fully realize you’re doing it: “You are everything Will. You are everything, everything.”

Now I snap my eyes open so I can look at you, and there’s something in your face that’s deeply unfamiliar – open and artless, almost vulnerable – something that speaks of a longing which is simultaneously both pained and hopeful. I never really imagined it could be like this: with tenderness and devotion, face-to-face and heart to heart, with your eyes locked right into mine and my pulse racing beneath yours. My breath catches in my throat and I murmur your name while curling my legs round your back, feverish and frantic, trying to pull you as deep inside me as possible. Oh fuck, fuck, I’m so close now. My whole body’s clenching and tightening in anticipation and it makes you feel huge inside me, almost too much to take; but even as I’m chasing towards orgasm I also don’t want to come – not yet, not quite yet – because I don’t want this to ever be over.

“It feels so good,” I gasp out. I sound a bit desperate. “Oh it’s so good. Oh God, God.” And it is – it is – it’s pleasure beyond desire. It’s wanting to taste you, inhale you, breathe you in and out, consume you, possess you, protect you; make you mine. And it doesn’t frighten me, wanting someone this much. It would have in the past but not anymore. Once it would have been light-headed panic and shamed self-consciousness, and wanting to turn out the lights and hide my face. Now I feel secure and sensuous – audacious – illuminated by the light of the fire and filled with something like wonder at a sudden blaze of pride and self-acceptance that’s both complete and absolute.

You’re watching me: there’s a faint smile on your face, and in that moment I know that you can see it too. You lean down again to kiss me, and I tip my head back as far as I can so you can swipe your tongue along my neck. Then you bury your lips against mine and plunge your tongue into my mouth and I make a helpless moaning noise at how good it feels. You’re snapping your hips downwards as I arch mine up; then I’m pulling my legs towards my chest – or maybe you’re pushing them back – so you can fuck into me as deep as possible…and your cock feels so hard, so hot and thick and heavy, I shouldn’t be able to take this much, but I can, I can. And I’m going to come, I’m so close, I don’t even need you to jerk me off, I don’t need to touch myself, just having you inside me is going to be enough.

“Oh God,” I can hear myself saying. My voice is pulling away from me, gone high and young. “I – I’m going to…oh…oh…”

You draw in your breath and I’m vaguely aware of your fingers ghosting over my face. You’re murmuring my name; I can hear myself gasping yours. You’re gazing at me with your lips slightly parted; I’m staring back with wide, frantic eyes. I say: “I’ll never not want this” at the exact moment you say: “I shall never stop wanting you.” And there’s nothing beyond this exact moment – no miserable past or uncertain future, no remembrances or anxieties, no resentment for past wrongs or remonstrance for misdemeanours yet to come – we’re both outside of time, it’s just now, just this, it’s just each other.

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Afterwards we lie in front of the fire without speaking, occasionally stroking each other’s faces –
light, skimming touches with silent smiles – and I listen to the crackling and spitting sound as the logs collapse into the embers. I’m slowly coming back to myself; which in many ways is not a good thing because it inevitably makes me less blissful (considerably) and more questioning and cynical (a lot), but I suppose it doesn’t really matter because you don’t care about getting caught on all my rough, splinterly edges. I can be as doubtful and querulous as I like – I’ll never need to worry about trying to keep you happy in that way. It’s colder now the fire is dying down; I shiver abruptly and hitch a bit closer to you, and the tenderness in the way you retrieve the blanket and wrap us both up in it makes me smile.

“I still find this all a bit surreal,” I finally say; after which it occurs to me (too late) that in the grand scheme of post-coital discussion this is a rather terrible observation to make. It’s true though. It is surreal. How have we ended up this way?

“Yes, I suppose it is. When one considers everything that has happened.”

“All the things you did…that you tried to do…” But my voice trails off because I can’t quite bring myself to say it: all those things.

“I did,” you reply lightly. “As did you. Our past association has not been particularly creditable. And yet, nonetheless: here we are.”

“Here we are.”

“Curious isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“You know it. I just wonder if it’s really a case of ‘despite’ or ‘because’? Remember Poikilos: ‘The best relationships in our lives are the best not because they have been the happiest ones, they are that way because they have stayed strong through the most tormentful of storms.’”

“And the steepest of cliffs,” I add, because I can’t help myself. This makes you smile, although I can tell you’re trying not to. “Yes indeed,” you say. “Those too. So much has changed for you, hasn’t it?”

“God, yes. Everything. It’s like the world’s tilted.”

“Someday I should like to hear more about how the transition came about. The process. What you were thinking.”

“I’m not sure, it’s hard to say.” I frown a bit, puzzling over this. “If I tried to describe it, it probably wouldn’t make much sense. I wouldn’t know how to tell you.” I reach round so I can run my fingers over your face again. I suppose I could give you the letters I wrote in hospital, but even then…I don’t know if it would be enough. “To be honest you would have had to feel what I did,” I finally say, “otherwise you’d never really be able to know.”

You reach up yourself and catch hold of my hand, circling it within yours and running your thumb across my palm and down my wrist. Then you press your lips against it and I can feel you smiling against my skin. “That really is not a barrier,” you reply.

“Why not?”

“Because I did feel it with you mylimasis.”
“Oh,” I say, a bit stupidly. “Did you?”

“Of course. I always have.”

There’s a pause as I watch the way the firelight flickers over your features, glancing and dancing as if it’s trying to caress your face, and then: “I love you,” I hear myself saying. “I love you so much.” And then: “I can’t help it, I do. So much.”

I feel your lips brushing against the top of my head. “Aš tave labai myliu,” you say.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Yes you do Will. But I could say it to you in every language I know and it still would not be enough. Do you know why? Because they are just words.”

“But words matter,” I say hesitantly. “Language is thought; it constructs reality. People perceive the world according to their words. It matters.” I’m aware I’m contradicting myself considering I’ve just pleaded the exact opposite on my own behalf: how describing what I felt in words would be impossible compared to the emotional experiencing of it. Even so…it’s only three words after all. “It matters,” I repeat after a pause.

“But does it?” you say gently. “Very well then. Of course I love you. How can you even need to ask? I love you because you deserve to be loved. You deserve to be loved irrationally, entirely, truly, madly and deeply – loved well and loved often. What words would suffice to describe it; how does one approximate ‘love’? Shall I tell you how the most perfect and beautiful perspectives I have ever had in my life are the ones I shared with you? That for years I yearned for you contrary to comprehension, to judgement, to expectation, to peace of mind or freedom of choice, to hopefulness, happiness, or contentment; contrary even to my own sense of myself? And yet how none of that could change the fact that the first time I discovered something I could faithfully yearn for was the day I discovered you? That I am haunted by the idea of you whenever we are not together; yet while the loss of you is unimaginable I would rather be driven mad by the image of you than not have you at all? But it is still just words, Will. You know what an infidel I am. I have always found the idea of sacrificing oneself in the service of faith to be as amusing as it is senseless. To be a Martyr, to offer up mind and body in such a way; to offer up autonomy itself…the notion both entertains and appalls me. And yet haven’t I kept faith with you, and forfeited my entire wellbeing for it? Haven’t I allowed you to vanquish and overpower me in my devotion? Life, liberty, the performance of philosophy: all subsumed in your interests, simply because your potential to flourish and prosper has grown more dear to me than my own. I always celebrated my mind as the most finely-tuned and impeccably nuanced instrument and yet you, Will Graham; your every thought, mood, action and idea – every expression of yours, every time you look at me – have been like hands that dart across the keys and show neither mercy nor restraint in it. If I were to survive for a hundred years then I would desire you for each and every one, and if I were to live for a thousand then I would fill the entirety of them endeavouring to have you and hold you and know you. I will crave you as long as there is life in me, and if there is life beyond death then I would crave you still. I could tell you all of this at length Will, all these words, but it would still be insufficient because what I prefer to do – what I shall do – is to show you.”

There’s a long silence and I can feel a tell-tale sting prickling at the back of my eyes so bury my face into the curve of your neck to try and hide it. When I finally speak my voice sounds faint and overwhelmed: “I…I don’t know what to say.”

“Then say nothing.” You cradle me against your chest and kiss the top of my head. “It hardly signifies anyway my love – there is no real need. They would only be words.”
I grip onto you even tighter, even as you’re clinging onto me, and the song lyrics from the other night rattle around in my head: “We called it love/So we wrapped our arms around each other/Trying to shove ourselves back together.” You’re right; they are only words, and maybe the right word hasn’t even been conceived yet. Maybe it can’t be properly described. Whatever it is…whatever it is that compels us towards one another; which binds my existence around you, and your entire being around me. Like love set on fire, fused together, something forged in pain and incomprehension, kindled with beauty and horror: something fervent, infernal and unknowable, something that doesn’t belong to real life. And yet, and yet…at the same time something so deeply human, the sort of thing that could happen to anybody. The sort of thing that happens everyday: just two people who needed to find each other because they couldn’t be complete in any other way. One person with no empathy and one with too much. One person who needed guidance and one who yearned for someone to guide. One volatile and unpredictable; the other cold, curious, and impersonal. The destructive opposites: the empath and the sociopath, the hunter and the hunted, the unstoppable force and the immovable object. But still just two people for all that. Just two striving hearts and two unique minds – just Hannibal and Will, just you and me. Just us.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to spam you with author notes my lovelies but there’s only one chapter left after this to pack it all in!

1) Many thanks to Libertine for drawing my attention to the lyrics used here (“Origins of Love” by Stephen Trask; no copyright infringement intended). Regular readers of my rambling author notes may remember my merriment at seeing ‘Hannibal’ listed on Wikipedia as media with a soulmates theme, so this song is extremely apt #ShipHannigramForPlato

2) As a general response to some recent queries: I am totally happy (and honoured) if anyone wants to translate this, either in whole or particular sections; and/or write any fics based on it (e.g. someone suggested re-writing a scene from Hannibal’s POV which would be amazing, OMG). Consider permission as granted. My only request is to please link it back to the original on AO3 as a Related Work – otherwise Sweary First Person Will is at your complete disposal.

3) “Aš tave labai myliu” = “I love you so much.” Thanks, as always, to cosmolights for saving me from Mr Google’s Translators of Lies and Bullshit for the Lithuanian. And seeing as this is my penultimate note, repeated retrospective thanks to Cannibalinthetardis, larissabernstein and mandarino for likewise saving me with the French, Latin and Italian. Not that Mr Google’s Translators cater for Latin – but we know if they did it would all be lies and bullshit.
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

Sorry, sorry – many notes!

1. Housekeeping Corner

My account’s a bit buggy at the moment, so if anyone’s messaged me and not received an email response, please check the comment section where your reply will be waiting to you. I always like to answer anyone who’s kind enough to write to me, but for some reason the email notifications have been going astray.

Also, to all the lovely readers who’ve told me they plan to print/download this when it’s finished – I’ll be doing some corrections this week that I haven’t had time to fix yet, but the Director’s Cut will be done by next Saturday :-)  

2. ‘The Readers are Fabulous’ Corner

Enormous thanks to the wonderful Featheredwraith who’s created the most gorgeous, evocative fanart to accompany Chapter 19. How perfect is this?! I absolutely love it and it made me squeal so much I nearly did myself a bodily injury.

Lipsticktrace recently made my day by observing that the themes in The Shape of Me were reminiscent of this beautiful song which I am now going to shamelessly hijack as the unofficial soundtrack :-) Although not as shameless as THIS GODDAMN SOUNDTRACK.

And before we get going – many thanks to beautys_punishment for first telling me about kintsugi, which exactly suited my purposes for this final chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Exactly one month after arriving at the cabin we begin packing up to leave – and there’s a sense of thrill and anticipation in the whole performance of filling bags, emptying the refrigerator, and checking the car that practically crackles and thrums. None of the arduous grind that usually accompanies the conclusion of a vacation even remotely applies, because the whole episode has really just been a prelude to something far more significant. In fact, if anything, we’re glad to go. The plan is to return to the city and briefly camp out in another hotel, whereupon I can return the hire car and collect my own (finally released from forensic testing), then tie up some assorted loose ends and say my goodbyes (which you think is completely maudlin and pointless, and I secretly attribute to you resenting me paying attention to anyone who’s not you). Then after that we head up north to spend some time (currently unspecified) in Canada to wait for the FBI scrutiny to dwindle even further. And then after that – we go.

“So where do you want to head first?” I say. “Not Italy?”

“No. That would probably not be particularly wise. Although I should like us to visit eventually.” Then you pause and look beady. Oh God, here it comes...
“Do remind me why it is so very necessary to see Jack Crawford and cohorts in person? It would be far easier to email or telephone.”

“It would, yes, but I don’t want to. I want to see them. We’ve been through this.” I resist the urge to roll my eyes, before wondering what you’d do if I wagged my finger at you…It would probably be worth it just to see the expression on your face. “And there’s no need for you to make the trip as well,” I add. “You can just as easily stay here if you prefer.”

“Of course I will accompany you,” you say. “Obviously.”

“Good. I want you to…Just as long as you stay out of sight.”

“Again – obviously.”

“Well, okay then,” I reply. “Anyway it won’t take long, a day or two at most.” Of course you’re right and it would be easier to phone or email. Certainly if the original round of escape plans had gone ahead then they wouldn’t even have had that much – I’d have simply disappeared and no one would have known why. But now that the taint of suspicion has been removed (purchased at a painfully high cost I amend self-righteously, noting the recurring twinge in my stomach wound) and a facsimile faked death is no longer necessary, then I prefer this course of action. It’s hardly feasible that I’ll be able to sustain any meaningful level of contact with Jack or Alana, but I prefer them knowing I’m alive. Even though they’ll never be able to understand just quite how alive I really am – finally happy, finally healthy; protected, prosperous, safe and sane. And loved. I glance over at where you’re preparing to chop some more firewood to get us through the final evening and looking, if possible, even more intimidating and impressive than usual (although no doubt secretly sulking despite it); and I can’t help smiling to myself.

Later on we sit on the bench out front and I drink the remains of the vinegary wine while you flick your collar up and give me the occasional look of fond exasperation. It’s still icy and raw despite the chiminea smouldering nearby, and after successive shivers I finally concede defeat and go back inside to rummage for a blanket. I opt for the plaid one on the sofa as the most convenient (even though we’ve had an excessive amount of sex on top of it), and am surprised to notice your sketch book lying on the coffee table on my way back out. I haven’t really been aware of you drawing while we’ve been here: you must have been doing it to pass the time in the first week when I was as asleep nearly constantly. Furtively – and a touch guiltily – I pick it up. It’s exactly the kind of book I would have expected you to own: thick creamy paper, slightly yellowed with age on the fore-edge, and bound in glossy leather the same deep vermillion as blood. You’ve written your name on the flyleaf and I study it for a few moments, noting the indentation on the stem of the H from the force with which you pressed down the pen; the slight dot of ink where the nib dashed away to the right. Everything you do is so dynamic and purposeful, even something as simple as an autograph that no one was ever supposed to see beyond yourself.

On leafing through it’s immediately apparent that most of your sketches are of me, attentively depicted and rendered in every conceivable way. Some from life (dozing on the front steps of the cabin with the blanket over my knee), some from memory (in your old office, leaning pensively against your desk with my hands in my pockets), and some plucked purely from imagination (in a piazza, ornate and dimly lit in the manner of the 18th century; my feet treading across the flagstones as I stare at something out of view). There’s me looking angry, and me looking forlorn, and me with a bright, hopeful smile that I’m only rarely aware of producing but which you’ve obviously noticed and captured perfectly. Each picture has been executed with a remarkable level of care and detail – a labor of love…a love letter, each and every one – and the awareness of this suddenly makes me feel guilty; as if I’m blundering, with clumsy fingers and uncouth, peering eyes, into a part of yourself that you haven’t explicitly invited me to see. I carefully replace the book on the table and head back
outside instead where you’re still sat exactly as you were when I left you – poised and watchful, illuminated in the glow of the chiminea. The sight of you makes me smile and I go and sit next to you so I can rest my head on your shoulder. You curve your arm round and stroke my cheek (lingering, as always, on the scar) before moving your hand to my hair, and I tilt my head so I can watch you: how absorbed you appear, as if you’re meticulously cataloguing each sensation.

“You’re very beautiful aren’t you?” I say thoughtfully, even though it makes me cringe because it’s not the type of observation I’d readily make to a woman, let alone another man. But it’s true; you are. I suppose you shouldn’t be really. The component features don’t work in isolation – you have too many bones and sharp angles, planed and fleshless as a Medieval saint. But combined together they create something that’s undeniably striking.


“But not like you though. I’m actually pretty ordinary looking. Nondescript.” I’m not even being self-deprecating – it’s not false modesty, it just feels like the truth. I’m not like you. No one is.

“I must disagree with you there I’m afraid,” you say. “Although I suppose it is not customary to describe male attractiveness as beautiful. Handsome would be more typical.” You pause, and I wait with genuine interest to see if you’re going to add some slang epithet like ‘hot’ or ‘sexy’, but of course you don’t. “Although you obviously assume that whenever I call you beautiful I am talking about your physical appearance only, and I am not. Naturally you have a beautiful face and form, but it is far more than that.”

“Oh?”

“Well of course it is, don’t be so tiresome.” You tap me on the forehead in an affectionate way. “I, of all people, am hardly going to be so preoccupied with only the aesthetic; at least not when it comes to human beings. You know how attuned I am to what lies beneath the superficial surface of things – and there is no escaping the fact that even the finest and most sensitive features in the world all have the same grimly leering skull behind them. No, when I say you are beautiful I mean your entire self. Your mind, your percepts, your emotions, your rules and reasoning. Your morals, even. The entire way you conduct yourself is quite extraordinarily lovely.”

“Thank you,” I say quietly.

“I dare say you would not be to everyone’s taste…”

This makes me laugh. “Are you playing cannibal bingo again by any chance? Because if you are, then you can stop that shit right now.”

“…not to everyone’s taste,” you continue languorously, “just as I am not; just as no mortal is ever going to have the good fortune to be universally adored and well-regarded. But as far as I am concerned you are singularly and strikingly perfect; even in your extreme imperfection. And of course I am generally regarded as an impeccable arbiter of such things.”

“By who?”

“By anyone with good judgment.”

I can’t help smiling at your monumental arrogance, which would be repellent in anyone else yet with you manages to be inexplicably charismatic. “Although you didn’t always think that,” I add after a pause.

“No?”
“No. You could have destroyed me; you certainly tried to at several points.”

“If you truly believe that then you are sadly over-estimating my capacities. Or, more likely, underestimating your own. Do not perceive yourself the way in which the Jack Crawfords of the world are disposed to: as this sad, beautiful, sensitive thing that is poised to be utterly crushed. That is not what you are.”

“Not anymore.”

“You never were. You are a fragile rock. Vulnerable yet imperishable.”

I can’t help feeling that you’re letting yourself off the hook just a little bit too much with this speech (and am trying to decide whether or not I can be bothered to call you out on it) when you gently squeeze the back of my neck and I slacken and go still, contentedly leaning into the touch.

“Interesting,” you say, smoothing your hand over the skin. “I have observed this before with you – pressure, just here, often exhibits both a soothing and inhibiting effect. Rather like a small feline.”

“Small feline? God, have you heard yourself? Why can’t you just say kitten?”

“Very well; like a crotchety, conspiring kitten that subsists in a permanent state of rebellion. Possibly the runt of the litter.”

“Did you just call me a runt? You did, didn’t you – an actual runt. Anyway that would make you a lumbering old maternal feline, so you really didn’t think that analogy through at all.”

“No,” you say thoughtfully, “evidently not.”

“It’s quite a depressing image isn’t it? An ancient, careworn festering feline, constantly preoccupied with the welfare of…”

“…of the runt. Yes, quite.”

I move off your shoulder and lie across the bench, arranging my head on your knee so you can stroke my hair, and then stare up at you and roll my eyes. You roll yours right back. “You’re so annoying sometimes,” I say.

“Ah. The runt is roused.”

“Yes – don’t you dare rouse the runt.”

“Indeed, I do not dare.”

I smirk at you then idly take hold of your hand so I can press our palms together, noting the longer length of your fingers and how pale my skin always looks next to yours. “I wonder which one of us would win in a fight?” I say with a grin.

“I don’t know; I do not intend for us to ever find out. I suppose I am physically stronger than you are. But of course it is not merely a question of brute strength but also of resourcefulness and vigour; in which accomplishments we are fairly evenly matched.”

“I’d have to give you handicap points for your advanced age.”

“And I you for your advanced feebleness.”

“The clash of the Titans,” I say. “Although seeing as it’s purely hypothetical I like to think it would
be me. The good guy always wins after all.”

“You are quite welcome to think that, considering that it is hypothetical and mutually agreed to remain so.”

“Hmmm, yes. This bench should be considered the formal site of the armistice.”

“All hostilities must cease sometimes, I suppose, especially when the warring parties begin to explore one another’s views. Conflict thrives on miscommunication.” You’ve got one hand in my hair and the other on my waist; it’s nice. A bit longer and I could probably fall asleep like this. “Interaction and exchange, on the other hand, create respect. And respect enables sympathy and consideration. And empathy.” You lightly take hold of my hand in yours and run your thumb over my wrist. “And they do say that without empathy there can be no forgiveness.”

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We arrive in the new hotel in the early hours of the morning and then have to wait in the parking lot for the reception to open before stumbling inside half-dead with tiredness. I’m so exhausted my legs refuse to coordinate for the final few yards and you end up having to practically carry me to the entrance, despite not being in a much better state yourself. It’s entirely obvious how things stand between us from the way in which I lean against you and you stroke your palm across my shoulders – neither of us makes any attempt to hide it – and the receptionist runs his eyes over me in an approving way and darts some coyly suggestive smiles in my direction; until you glance up from signing a (fake) name in the register and shoot him a look of such total menace that he clears his throat awkwardly and hands the key over without another word.

“It is just as well for him that you set your conditions for my conduct prior to arrival,” you say grimly when we’re in the elevator; and I can’t help finding the possessiveness tremendously thrilling, even though I know I shouldn’t. We collapse onto the bed without even getting undressed, but while I could happily sleep through to the afternoon I set the alarm on my cell for 6am and force myself to get up when it goes off. We’re only here for one more day and there’s a lot to be arranged.

The first thing I do is return the hire car and retrieve my own, then take the latter to the garage to confirm it’s up to the long drive ahead. It’s rather freeing to have my own transport again after the endless succession of cabs (and fucking eternal parade of unbearable cab drivers) and I wind down the window and tear up the freeway with the stereo blaring and a grin on my face.

The second thing I do is go back to my old apartment. In some ways it’s a bit of an anti-climax; I was anticipating stirring memories and profound realizations, and all I really end up thinking is how utterly shit it is and thank God I won’t have to live here anymore (although the sight of the sofa musters a genuine smile). I have pathetically few belongings so it takes very little time to compose three hasty piles: one for the trash, one for the Goodwill, and one to take with me. The first pile grows far more prodigiously than the second, and nothing really goes into the third except a few clothes and books and the shock blanket. I hesitate over packing the latter; but while it might be a malevolent fluffy blue bastard it also has a rather rousing set of associations (a silent witness, in fact), and I can’t quite bring myself to leave it behind.

The third thing I do is stop off on the floor below mine (not that it is my floor anymore, and never will be again) so I can say goodbye to Mr Haversham.

“William!” he says when he opens up and I’ve given an account of my presence on his doorstep. “Well if that isn’t the nicest thing!”

He rests his hand on my back and shepherds me into his cluttered little living room, where I allow
him to fuss over me without complaint and force myself to drink the tea he provides despite the fact it’s the color of furniture polish and has a few specks of tea leaf floating on the surface.

“You were really nice to me when I first moved in,” I say. “I wanted you to know how much I appreciated it. It was a difficult time.”

“Ah, it surely was.” He pats me kindly on the wrist. “You poor boy.”

“Yeah.”

“You looked like the walking wounded. We used to say that when I was in the army: the walking wounded, we’d say. It means injured but ambulatory, that was the official term, but we’d have it as well for the boys that seemed okay but were hurting inside of themselves. You know…emotionally.” He peers at me, trying to establish whether I grasp his meaning. I suppose his generation never really discussed psychological issues; he doesn’t realise that this sort of terminology is bartered daily now, beloved of everyone from chartered counsellors to TV talk show hosts.

“I understand,” is all I say. “And you’re right. I was.”

“But look at you now!” he replies merrily, as if realizing that the conversation has taken a prematurely depressing turn and is determined to resuscitate it. “Look at you now William! You look grand!”

“Thank you, I am, I’m doing much better.” I smile at him to prove it and then take a cautious sip of the tea without grimacing, which as a feat of endurance meets proportions that are fucking epic – if not Olympian.

“You surely are,” he says happily. “There’s nothing like family is there?”

“Sorry, what?”

“Your uncle. You sure perked up when your uncle came to see you.”

“Oh yes, of course.”

“Your Uncle Jack.”

“Y-e-a-h.”

“And your young lady. You have a young lady now don’t you?” His left eye swivels around in what may very well be an approximation of a wink. “What did you say her name was?”

I carefully replace my teacup in its saucer to conceal the fact I’m beginning to feel a bit desperate (hardly surprising given that Uncle Jack and the Young Lady are technically the same person… which as a concept is so spectacularly wrong that it shouldn’t even be thought, let alone spoken aloud). “What about you Mr Haverham?” I say quickly. “How have you been?”

“Well that’s just it William, it’s the grandest thing. My boy is back in Maryland now; back at last. He and his wife have just bought a fine old house out by Baltimore and are mighty keen for me to go and live with them. Spend some proper time with the grandchildren; isn’t that the grandest thing?”

“That’s really great,” I say. “I’m so pleased for you.”

“Well I’m pleased for you too Son, I surely am. You know, I wish we could go back and give this good news to our old selves. A time machine, William! You know what I mean? Say to ourselves:
‘chin up boys! It’s bad now but it won’t be that way forever. Something good is just on the horizon, if you can just stick it out a bit longer.’ Wouldn’t that be a thing; if you could do that? If your future self could go back in time and give a bit of comfort, a bit of reassurance, to your sad self in the present.”


*****

The fourth thing I do is stop by the office to say goodbye to Price, Zeller and Jack. The latter, as usual, is nowhere to be found so I leave a message with his secretary and head down to the lab instead.

“Will!” shrieks Price when I walk in. “My God. How are you?”

“I’m fine. I’m good.”

“You can’t possibly be either of those things,” says Price firmly.

“You can’t,” agrees Zeller, nodding vigorously.

“I can.”

Price and Zeller raise their eyebrows in carefully coordinated scepticism and fold their arms.

“Okay, whatever. I’m terrible.”

“Well of course you are,” says Price in a cosy voice. “Of course you’re terrible. The Thug Life chose you Will; you did not choose It.”

“Right…Thanks for that.”

“Jeez Will,” says Zeller sympathetically. “That was something else. I mean seriously. I couldn’t believe it when I heard.”

“He really couldn’t,” Price adds.

“Well, you couldn’t either. You said you thought it was some elaborate practical joke.”

“I did not.”

“You did, you said…”

“Look,” I interject, “it’s fine. It happened, and I got through it, and it’s fine. And I’m fine. Except when I’m terrible, obviously. But overall it’s mostly fine.”

“It’s not really though is it,” says Zeller. “No one knows where he is now.”

“No, I guess not.”

“He could be anywhere,” adds Price in a theatrical whisper. We all briefly fall silent, as if expecting you to demonstrate this by dramatically appearing from one of the examination rooms.

“Well he’s not here,” I finally say. “Although admittedly he could be pretty much anywhere else. And I’m delighted to say that as of this afternoon that is officially no longer my problem. You can
have him all to yourselves.”

“So it’s true then?” asks Zeller. “You actually are leaving? Giving it all up?”

“Yes, it’s true. I don’t know why you’re so surprised. I walked away from it for three full years.”

“Good for you Will,” says Price.

“Thanks.”

“We’ll miss you – it’ll be weird not having your tormented little bearded face round my lab all the time.”

“I’ll try and stop by every so often,” I say, even though I know I can’t.

“So what are you going to do? You’re too young to retire.”

“Write, probably. At least in the short-term. Textbooks or monographs, that kind of thing. Maybe.”

“I know,” says Zeller eagerly, “you should write your autobiography.”

“Yes!” Price actually claps his hands together. “Yes, you should absolutely do that. Think of all the money you’d make.”

“You could call it *Sex and Death,*” suggests Zeller.

“No I couldn’t. How could I? Where does the sex part figure?”

“Because sex *sells,*” replies Zeller. “Who’s going to buy a book called *Death*?”

“But I wouldn’t call my autobiography *Death,*” I say patiently.

“No, Zeller’s right, you need a reference to sex. It doesn’t matter that you never have any, people won’t realize until after they’ve bought it, at which point you can take the money and run.”

Natasha-call-me-Tash then comes into the lab looking for Jack, and we spend the next ten minutes discussing what I’m going to call my phantom autobiography. Zeller is sticking with *Sex and Death* whereas Price prefers *Murder and Sexual Favors.* Natasha thinks *Date With Depravity* has a certain ring to it. After that we decide what I’m going to wear when I go on the Conan show to promote it, and all the glowing, watery-eyed tributes I’m going to pay my FBI colleagues when I deliver my acceptance speech for the Pulitzer Autobiography prize. Jack turns up halfway through and demands to know what all the noise is about.

“Will’s rehearsing his ‘I’d like to thank the Academy’ speech for when *Empathic Murder Sex* wins an Oscar for best adapted screenplay,” says Price. Jack opens his mouth then closes it again.

“I hope you’re going to put some thought into who’s going to play me,” adds Price. “Because it should be someone with the right amount of gravitas, coupled with a certain whimsical charm. Intelligent as well, obviously.”

“Obviously.”

“Well, I wouldn’t mind if he was bit of an idiot in real life – don’t think I’d mind about that Will, I know actors are all a bit vapid – but he has to be able to portray intelligence convincingly. He has to have gravitas. And if he’s boyishly good-looking that would be desirable but not essential. Because really it’s all about…”
“The gravitas. Yeah, I get it.”

“I’ve missed something haven’t I?” says Jack.

“Not as much as Will is going to miss if he doesn’t hurry up and write *Empathic Murder Sex.*”

“*Empathic Murder Sex*?” repeats Jack slowly.

“Or do you think *Sex and Death* sounds better?” chips in Zeller. “Because I think *Sex and Death* sounds way better.”

“Jack,” I say, a bit hysterically. “Have you got a minute? I’m leaving soon – tomorrow, probably – and I’d like to see you before I go. Is that okay?”

Jack says that he has, and it is; and I gradually manage to extricate myself from Zeller and Price via a series of slightly awkward handshakes which devolve into even more awkward hugs, and ultimately conclude with mutual vows to keep in touch via email (and which I hope might prove to be possible, at least in the short-term, even though it doesn’t seem all that likely). After that I escape into Jack’s office and slump down into one of his perennially uncomfortable visitor chairs – which I’ve always been convinced (and will forever more remain so) that he keeps that way on purpose in order to discourage actual visitors.

Jack smugly settles himself into his own luxuriously upholstered chair and beams at me from the other side of his desk, but I’m not really paying attention anymore because I can’t stop my eyes flicking to the empty chair on the left. If I focus hard enough I could almost imagine you sat next to me: slightly quizzical, the faintest of smiles on your face. Approving yet contemplative: “Not fond of eye contact?” Trying to establish the measure of one another; you with somewhat greater success. Centre stage, curtain up – go.

“Will?”

“Yeah?”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry, just…thinking about stuff.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” says Jack. “All things considered. So – you’re really off this time?”

“I really am.”

“It’s the right thing. But we’ll get him Will; we’ll get him eventually. Don’t feel like you’re being exiled.”

“I don’t. And it’s not just about him, it’s about me as well.” And this is actually true, although not in a way that Jack could even begin to understand.

“I hope you’ll come back some time – we’ll miss you. I’ll miss you. And not just because of the work. You know that, right?”

“Thanks.” I hesitate and then glance up at him from over the top of my glasses. “I’m sorry Jack.”

“For what?”

*For everything.* I think. *For the betrayal. For the abandonment. For not being the person you thought I was – and for not caring about it.* “I feel like I’m bailing on you,” is all I say instead.
“Well you can stop that right now. You’ve done your bit Will. You’ve more than done it. These gifts you have…they’ve not exactly been very easy to bear. But you forced yourself to use them anyway. Look at the difference you’ve made – the lives you saved.”

“I guess.” Briefly I think about you, of your words all those years ago: “I don’t care about the lives you save. I care about your life.”

“I made a mistake when I asked you to come back,” says Jack. “I should have left you alone. I’m not going to make that mistake again. You deserve a bit of happiness finally. So go. Go on.” He grins and waves his hand at the door. “You have my blessing. Not that you need it of course.”

And I suppose that’s true – I don’t need his blessing. Although as I’m smiling at him and shaking his hand, and letting him give me a fatherly hug and then even ruffle my hair (Christ), I can’t help feeling that I like to know I’ve got it all the same.

*****

The fifth thing I do is stop by at a downtown coffee shop that I haven’t been in for months, where I wait to keep a pre-arranged appointment (humming to myself and occasionally smiling at nothing) until the bell on the top of the door chimes and Alana walks in. As expected she looks pale and strained, and she slumps into the seat opposite me and takes my hand in a way that entirely lacks her usual self-possession.

“Oh Will,” she says.

I open my mouth to reply when the waitress materializes out of nowhere and proceeds to make a big performance (frustrated drama student, almost certainly) of offering the day’s specials in all their convoluted glory. I stop paying attention halfway through – the last thing I’m consciously aware of is ‘double-shot, decaf, vanilla soy’ – until Alana snaps at her to go away.

“Oh God, that was really rude wasn’t it?” she adds when the waitress has retreated in a fog of (theatrical) indignation. “I shouldn’t have spoken to her that way.”

“It was self-defence. I would have done it myself, if I hadn’t already lost the will to live after ‘frappe mochaccino macchiato’.”

“I know right? When did coffee become so elaborate? It used to be just two types: black or white.”

“And now ordering it is only marginally less complicated than breaking the Enigma code.” I take a sip of mine and then brandish the mug. “Presenting the asshole beverage. I suppose it means we’re getting old; we’re failing at the 21st Century.”

Alana gives me a sad smile then squeezes my hand. “I can’t believe how well you’re looking Will. Seriously, when I got the call from Jack, I…Well. You can probably imagine.”

“Probably.”

“So – he’s…he’s back.”

“Well, he was. For one night.”

She looks a bit sick; I can’t say I blame her. “God, Will. I want to ask what happened to you and at the same time I feel like I can’t bear to know.”

“That’s okay. Anyway, you don’t really need to know; I didn’t invite you to meet me for a post-
mortem. I wanted to say goodbye.”

“Oh yes, you said on the phone.” She smiles, making a visible effort to appear more cheerful on my behalf. “I’m glad you’re getting away Will, you deserve it. You need it. I’ve never known you take a proper vacation before. Do you plan on going abroad?”

“At some point.”

“How far? Think you’ll make it to Europe?”

“No. I don’t know. I haven’t decided yet. I might go to, um…” Oh God – where do people actually go? “Um Hawaii,” I eventually manage. I falter slightly, not sure how convincing this sounds; it hardly seems like the type of place I would visit through choice… I have a sudden ludicrous image of myself wearing a lei while brandishing a flamboyant cocktail in sickly primary colors. “I’ve always wanted to see Maui,” I add, a bit lamely.

Alana (who has of course seen Maui) waves her hand in dismissal of this. “You could do that anytime,” she says. “It’s only a few hours away. Go to Europe Will, you’d love it.”

“I have been before you know.”

“Yes, and look what the circumstances were. You need to lay a few ghosts. So don’t go to Italy.” She gives me a pointed look. “In fact leave the Mediterranean, everyone goes there. Why not try the Scandinavian countries instead. Or Eastern Europe? Prague is so beautiful. Or Bucharest. Bratislava? Dubrovnik has the most breath-taking views of the sea.”

“Thanks, they’re good suggestions.”

“I know, what about Germany? A neighbor of ours has just come back from there. His wife’s a medievalist at the university; apparently she could get by with bits of Anglo-Saxon and Middle High German…”

“Yeah, great, thank you.” I wave my hand around a bit. “Look, Alana…”

“What.”

“That wasn’t the only reason I asked you here.”

“No?”

“No. Okay, so…do you remember the last time we met in this place? Just after that whole Michael French thing?”

“Of course. I wish I could forget.”

“We were talking about Hannibal. What he said to you; what it meant. What it could mean.”

“I remember it Will.”

“Well… I wanted to tell you that it’s okay now. I can imagine how you must have felt when you heard he was still alive, but you don’t need to. Forget about him – live your life. Free. Without fear. He’s not going to come back for you.”

She goes very still, and when she speaks her voice is low and intense. “How do you know?” she says – at which point I falter slightly and she abruptly leans forward, her face blanched and taut.

“How do you know?”
“He had me in that room for over an hour,” I say. Then I reach out and place my hand over hers again. “Alana, I know. I wouldn’t tell you if I wasn’t sure.”

She draws in a small, shaky breath and looks down at her lap. When she glances up again her eyes are wet. “Thank you Will,” she says.

“For what?”

“Because I know that somehow this is to do with you. That you made it happen – that it wouldn’t have been possible without you.”

I shrug awkwardly, as if I think she’s giving me too much credit, and she gives me a pre-emptive shake of the head in return: “No one else could have asked him in a way that he’d have taken seriously. No one.”

“He gave me his word,” is all I say. And you did; just not in the circumstances she thinks.

Now she runs one slim hand over her face and fumbles in her purse for a tissue with the other. “Thank you,” she says again. “It’s not just for me, but…”

“Your family. Of course – I understand.” There are little smears of mascara underneath her right eye, like a smattering of freckles, and I reach out and wipe my thumb over them before briefly resting my hand on the side of her cheek. “I might not see you again for a while,” I say. “I mean a long while. I don’t know when I’m coming back.” I hesitate again. “To be honest Alana, I might not come back at all.”

“Really?”

“Really. But… I’ll think about you. I won’t forget you – please don’t forget me.”

“Never.” She rests her hand over mine. “How could I?”

“Give Margot my love won’t you? Tell her…tell her… I don’t know. Tell her whatever you think she’d want to hear.”

“Then I’ll tell her you’re doing well. And that you’re going to be happy and safe. And that we owe you everything for what you’ve done.”

“I really didn’t do all that much; not really. I just did what I could. And it was no more than what you tried to do for me.”

“And, ironically, he did the rest,” she says. “Although it’s not truly about him is it? That conversation Will, the one we had all those months ago. Do you remember what I told you? I said that I trusted you to do the right thing, and that I believed you’d know what that was when the time came. Well – I still trust you.”

“Thank you. And yes, I do remember that.” I smile a bit ruefully. “I told you that you were taking a lot of trust. But you were right, because I have done the right thing. For once in his life, Will Graham has done the right thing. We should have one of those ridiculous coffees to celebrate.”

“It’s on me.” She squeezes my shoulder on her way to the counter, and I smile to myself again as I think about you: about your face, your voice, about me with you, and you with me. Because of course Alana’s correct, and so am I, because I have done the right thing. Finally. Finally – I’ve done the right thing.
The last visit I pay is the most difficult, hence delayed until last, and involves travelling to a small holding cell, six foot by eight foot with steel walls and a panel in the door through which I can look in and behold what’s inside. I’m not really allowed – technically I shouldn’t be here at all – but Jack managed to swing it for me and the guard’s prepared to turn a blind eye for 20 minutes as long as I don’t touch the glass, don’t approach the glass, pass nothing through except soft paper – no pencils or pens, no staples or paper clips – use the sliding food carrier, no exceptions…

“I know the drill,” I say sharply.

“Of course Mr Graham, apologies Sir. But it’s procedure – I have to run it by you.”

“So you’ve run it by me. Now please can you leave?”

“Well…” he scratches his head, looking uncertain.

“Mr Crawford said unrestricted access. Any problems take it up with him.”

“Okay Sir. Sure. You – you just bang on the door here when you’re done.”

“I’ll do that,” I say, even though I’m no longer looking at him, instead preparing to begin my lonely pilgrimage down the corridor. The cell I want is at the very bottom and shrouded in complete darkness: there’s nothing to see through the Perspex window except pools of black, but I know that its occupant is expecting me. I pick up the intercom phone that’s suspended next to the door and clear my throat.

There’s a long, limping pause, and then: “Hello Mr Graham.”

“Hello Matthew.”

“Here you are…Large as life.”

“Yep.”

“I can see you Mr Graham.” He draws in his breath then pushes it out again in a sighing, sibilant hiss. “I see you.”

“I guess you can.”

“Come to gloat?”

“No,” I say.

“No? I wouldn’t blame you if you had.”

“I haven’t.”

Another pause. “So why are you here?”

And isn’t that the question? Because while I told Jack that the answer was “closure”; and while I’ll tell Matthew himself that it’s because I’m sorry how things have worked out and that I hope he can finally get the help he needs (and there’s a small element of truth in both); the real reason is that he’s my own personal cautionary tale: a customized warning about the importance of not becoming so enslaved to the idea of someone else that I lose all ownership of myself. Of not constructing the image of the Other to suit my own needs and preferences…of staying true to myself before
devolving all autonomy and stewardship to something beyond me. I always saw a symmetry between his fixation with me and mine with you; I thought it both times in both alleyways. And so I’m here because if the last few weeks have been about coming full circle then this is the final loop and swirl. And as with all the others, it’s one that leads back to you, drawn by me, and completed by both of us.

“I didn’t tell anyone,” says Matthew Brown; and it’s as if he’s just read my mind. “What I saw you do. With him. I didn’t say.”

I satisfy myself with making a vague, non-committal noise in response to this; partly in case anyone’s listening in on the call, but also because I know that it’s a complete lie. Jack came to see me about it two weeks after my first operation. He looked miserably concerned and foreboding the entire time, sitting by the bed for ages without speaking while pleating the cover into anxious little folds.

“Matthew Brown’s out of the ICU now,” he said eventually.

“I know. I got the phone call.”

“Lucky little sonofabitch. Head injury like that should have killed him.”

“Yeah.”

“We’ve been questioning him. He told us everything about Cane – or Gideon – the whole thing. Jesus Will, you were right all along. I should have listened to you.”

“You always say that Jack, until the next time – when you just ignore me again.”

He laughed at that then pulled the chair even nearer to the bed; I remember how the scraping of the feet against the floor set my teeth on edge. In fact I remember that more than anything else: not feeling guilt (because I had no remorse about any of it), and not fear or anxiety either (because I knew that we were unstoppable and so anxiety didn’t apply). Just the scraping sound of four plastic feet across the linoleum, and Jack’s unhappy face when he said: “Brown came out with a striking account of what happened in that warehouse.”

“Yeah?”

Another pause and then: “Will, I need to ask. You need to tell me. Did Hannibal…Did he…Do you need…?”

“What Jack?”

“Did Hannibal assault you?” (Deep breath from Jack; frown even more pronounced). “Not physically. I mean…I mean sexually.”

“What? No. Of course not, why would you even think that?”

“Brown was pretty adamant that he saw the two of you…well. I mean obviously that couldn’t be consensual, so…”

“Jack, it’s fine, I promise you. Don’t take Matthew Brown too seriously.”

“I can get you someone else to speak to? A doctor? Or a counsellor? I appreciate I’m probably not the…”

“Jack, he’s either inventing it wholesale as some of kind of sick deflection, or else he saw me
struggling and put his own construction on it. In fact it was probably the latter. You know he’s obsessed with me. He’s projecting.”

“He’s certainly obsessed. He won’t stop talking about you. It’s ‘Mr Graham this’ and ‘Mr Graham that.’ Unbelievable how far some people are prepared to go; a bit tragic really. It’s just like before, like he wants to court you. He seems to think what he’s done is a legitimate form of devotion. Of love.”

“Love is a weapon of mass destruction,” I replied. “I know.” And that was when I decided I needed to see him one final time.

“You and me,” Matthew Brown says now, crooning softly into my ear. “You and me Mr Graham, chewing the fat in the BSHCI. Just like old times.”

“Not quite though, is it?” I reply, but he doesn’t respond. He wasn’t actually supposed to come back here – the preference was for prison rather than hospital – but the psychiatric evaluations recommended against it. Jack says that he’s faking. I think he just thinks that he is.

There’s another long pause, and I’m wondering whether he’s hung up, when his voice abruptly comes hissing down the receiver: “How could you do that?” he says, low and venomous, and I know he’s talking about you. “How could you Mr Graham?”

How could I not? I think. It was determined; it was destiny. It’s what I was always supposed to do.

“You’re not the person I thought you were.”

“I know,” I say. Because in fact I’m not the person I thought I was – and for the first time ever, I’m actually okay with that.

“You’re not a hawk at all. Are you? Are you? I don’t even know what you are.”

“I’m just me,” I say.

“Just you,” he repeats tonelessly. “Just Will Graham.”

Another long silence follows this announcement, and I begin to contemplate simply hanging up myself when the quiet is destroyed by a loud, aggressive thud – and I flinch in spite of myself as his face abruptly rears out of the gloom and presses up against the side of the window. His skin looks yellow, parchment thin and stretched over his bones, and his eyes roll around in their sockets as his mouth gapes open in a wet, scarlet snarl like a rabid dog. The sight is at once grotesque – like a ghastly, grinning Death’s head – yet also strangely pitiful; and the contempt I imagined I’d feel begins to dissolve away to be replaced by something much closer to compassion.

“I found you once.” He’s not using the phone anymore; I can hear his voice, rumbling and muffled through the screen. “I got out of here once. I got out of here and I found you.”

“Yes, you did,” I say calmly. “And I sent you right back again. For your own sake I strongly suggest you don’t try a second time.”

For a few beats we stare at each other, and I know that I’m done here. “You’re right Matthew,” I finally say. “I’m not what you wanted me to be. So do yourself a favor – all your ambitions, all your hopes and aspirations. Keep that stuff for yourself. Don’t heap them onto anyone else; don’t just give them away. Trust me, it’s what I’m going to do.”

“I found you.” It’s as if I haven’t spoken. “I found you.”
“I know,” I say. “But you still didn’t find what you were looking for.” I can hear him screaming at me as I walk away but I’m not disturbed by it and I don’t look back. Even if he did escape a second time, even if the pursuit reignited all over again – he still wouldn’t be successful. He can’t find that person again, simply because that person no longer exists. He died that night on the clifftop; the ocean claimed him.

I reach the end of the corridor and then bang on the door for the guard to let me out. Out, out, out into the light.

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I’m so keen to leave the BSHCI that I practically run to my car and then keep my foot pressed down on the pedal the entire way back to the hotel. This is it now; only a few more hours and we’re leaving. Oh God, we really are. I run up to our room when I arrive and promptly discover you asleep on the bed: elegantly draped across the top of the covers with one hand curled up close to your face and the other arm resting behind your head. I take a few seconds just to watch you, because it’s still quite striking to see you asleep. In fact up until recently there’s no way you would have allowed me to catch you like this: as if any moment of vulnerability had to be fiercely guarded. I fold myself over your back and kiss your neck, and you make a tired-sounding noise and reach round to run your hand over my face.

“Hello Will,” you say. “Revoltingly over-energetic as usual, I see.”

“You mean because I’m disturbing you from your old man nap? Get up.” I press my lips against your skin. “Today’s the day.”

“I am well aware.”

Your accent comes out stronger when you’re tired; thicker on the vowels. It’s quite endearing. I try to think of something else to say to make you do it again. “Why are you asleep in the afternoon?” I ask. “You never even sleep at night.”

“Because you were not here and I grew bored. You were gone a very long time; I assume you have accomplished all you wished to?”

“Yes. I’ve had a busy day.”

“Jack, I suppose?”

“And the rest. I saw Alana; she thinks we should go to Germany.” You quirk an eyebrow. “Okay, you pedant, she thinks I should go to Germany. Although I guess I could allow you to tag along.” I stretch out next to you and prop my head on your shoulder. “She said she had a friend who went to Germany and got by with speaking bits of Anglo-Saxon. Don’t you think that’s impressive?”

“I do not, I think it is ludicrous. Like going to Italy and speaking Latin.”

“Can you speak Latin?”

“I can read Latin. One does not converse in it, because it is a dead language.”

“So? You love dead things. Come on, get up.”

“There is no need. We are not leaving for several more hours; how over-excitable you are. Although it does rather suit you – in fact it is very pleasant to see you so carefree.”
“You should get used to it. I’ve decided I actually quite like not feeling tormented on a permanent basis. I intend to take every possible opportunity of being carefree.”

“Excellent,” you say. “No doubt it will be an interesting divergence to my own more sober state of mind.”

“Maybe.” I run my hand up along your arms then down over your ribcage and you shift slightly under the touch. I wonder if you’re ticklish? Oh my God, that would be hilarious; one day I’m going to have to find out. “Although I bet it’ll annoy you eventually,” I add with mock severity. “You’ll want me to be more earnest and restrained.”

“Who knows what is going to happen. I am not a clairvoyant.”

“You probably will. You’re so severe when you want to be. You’ll go back on your word and try to turn me into your acolyte after all.”

“And how do you imagine I would accomplish that?”

“I don’t know. You’d probably try and take me over the dining table while shouting Hannibal ante portas.”

Your mouth twitches at that as if you’re struggling not to laugh. “Do be quiet, you little horror,” you eventually say.

“Or else what?”

“Or I shall take you over the dining table.”

“Going to take me over a table are you? What a filthy mouth you have; where have you been keeping it all these years? Do you psychoanalyze people with that mouth? Anyway, how do you know I wouldn’t take you first?” I hitch a bit closer to you and rest my head on your chest; I can hear your heartbeat through the fabric of your shirt. There’s a companionable silence as you massage my shoulder blades and I tap an absent-minded rhythm onto your collar bone with my index finger. “It was strange today,” I eventually say. “Talking about you with different people – it felt odd.”

“Yes, I imagine it would have done.”

"There is never only one of anybody. Now I understand more what you meant.”

“I suspect you always understood. It was only the experiencing of it which was difficult.”

“Everyone is afraid of you. Your name instils so much dread and doubt in people.” And all of them referring to different versions; a great composite of identities, none of them entirely capturing the whole.

There’s another pause: you’re still stroking my back, I’m still tapping your chest. Your skin’s so warm. “And what about you?” you eventually say. “Are you afraid?”

My eyes are closed but when you say this I abruptly snap them open. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised (of course it’s the type of thing you’d be aware of) and so I don’t answer immediately, giving the question proper consideration and turning it over in my head – inspecting at all possible angles. “I don’t entirely know,” I say at last. Tap tap tap on your collar bone. “Maybe a little. Or at least parts of me are.”

“It is understandable.”
“Parts of me which are afraid of parts of you.”

“And yet; you do not allow the fear to govern your choices.”

“No.”

“No, indeed. Besides fear is not a reason to cease and desist. It is the inspiration to strike out.”

“I know, you said something similar before. That night, the first time we…y’know. But it’s not always easy. It’s a very pleasing paradox – it’s a good phrase – but not entirely practical as an axiom. You must see that?”

“It is a process,” is all you say.

Instead of replying I turn over so my chin is propped on your sternum and I can look at you directly. You smile down at me and rest your hand on my hair, winding a few strands round your finger while continuing to stroke my back with the other one. “You’re so different like this, aren’t you?” I eventually say. “So…gentle. And candid in it.”

“Yes; I am entirely sincere.”

“Why are you never like this outside?”

“Because it would not serve any purpose. Besides, the location is irrelevant; I am not like this because I am indoors, I am like this because I am with you.”

I smile at that, then haul myself a bit further up so virtually my entire weight is pressing on you, taking hold of both your hands in mine and resting them on either side of your face. Now you’re pinned in place beneath me; but while you could haul yourself free with virtually no effort at all, I know that you won’t.

“Are you happy?” I hear myself asking.

“Extremely.”

“No reservations at all? No concerns.”

“Of course I have; they simply do not preclude my sense of contentment. But naturally I have spent many hours considering the various contortions into which the future could arrange itself. I think about you constantly. I think about myself in relation to you; of you to me. The shape of things. The sights I would like to show you and the expression on your face when you behold them. The way you look when you are happy, or thoughtful, or restive. Your eyes. Your smile. What settings would complement you best; places in which we are most likely to thrive. I have taken us all around the world without leaving this room.”

“I can imagine,” I say, even though I can’t – not entirely. Instead I lean over and press my lips against your forehead. “And it sounds exhausting. You’re always in your head so much. You need taking out of yourself every once in a while.”

“I dare say I do. Are you going to assist?”

“Yes, if you’ll let me.”

“Always,” you reply.

There’s a beat of silence and then: “I’ve got you,” I murmur into your hair. “I’ve always got you.”
My voice is extremely quiet; so quiet it’s hardly possible that you’ve heard me. Not that it matters – I know you understand anyway. You knew before I did. I turn my head so I can kiss you and we just lie like that for a while, me half on top of you with your fingers interwoven with mine, breathing in each other’s air and exchanging silent vows and understandings without having to speak a word. Eventually you push back against me so you can sit upright and I remain on your lap with my legs on either side of yours and my arms hooked round your neck. Then you just smile at me and I smile back: my hair’s fallen into my eyes but I don’t want to let go of you to brush it off so twist my mouth upwards instead to blow it away, which makes you laugh.

“Аš тave labai myliu Hannibal,” I say. And even though my accent is appalling and the vocabulary is patched together from the Internet (and the whole enterprise is, in all honesty, as corny as fuck), your entire face lights up at the sound of it. I slowly lean forwards and kiss you, stroking my tongue against yours with a slow languid rhythm, and finally releasing my grip on your shoulders so I can unfasten your shirt. Then I start to laugh as well at how much I’m fumbling with your buttons, ultimately just giving up and attempting to tug it over your head instead.

“Oh God, get this off,” I say, but you don’t because you’re too busy trying to remove mine, and although we do finally manage (somehow) to take each other’s clothes off it’s in the most circuitous and convoluted way possible because no one wants to lose contact for the time it would take to undress efficiently. I have a vague sense that the lube is still in my backpack and blindly fumble around to try and locate it while you kneel behind me and kiss my neck. My skin feels so sensitive that your touch is electrifying and I gasp in a rather desperate way, letting my head tip back against your shoulder then twining my arms behind me so I can tug your hair and rub my face against yours.

“Get on your hands and knees for me,” I say, low and intense. “Please. Would you do that?” And rather than answering you demonstrate that you will by simply kissing my forehead and then arranging yourself that way (which I wasn’t totally expecting). I crouch behind you and drape myself over your body – circling my hips against your leg so you can feel how hard I am; so you can know how much I want you, that I want you all the time – then stroke your chest and kiss the base of your neck while slowly working two fingers inside you with my other hand.

“There you go,” I say softly. I press upwards and am rewarded with a sharp intake of breath. “Does that feel good?”

“Perfect.” You move your legs further apart, pushing back against my hand as your breath hitches again. Oh God; I could listen to you doing that forever. “But then it always does with you.”

I hum in agreement and begin to kiss my way down your spine, noting all the assorted scars (which one day I’m going to ask you for an account of – each and every one) and the delicate patches of freckles (like constellations of stars); and moaning slightly as I begin to lap my tongue around the smooth, slippery skin where I’m fingering you open…and then promptly realize why you always use oil for the same purpose because the lube tastes terrible. But I don’t really care because the sounds you make when I do it are such an incredible turn on that all I can think is how much I want to make you do it again…and again…and again. I reach out so I can take hold of your wrist with my left hand; then decide I like the extra contact (and that I want to hold onto you as much as possible) so replace my fingers with my tongue in order to cling onto your thigh with my other arm. And I’m breathing so fast (panting, really) and arching my back as I grind my mouth against you – sensuous, shameless – experimenting with warmly wet kisses and delicate licks, coaxing the muscles to relax so I can thrust my tongue inside…and this time you actually moan (you really do), and oh fuck, God, I need you so badly. You’re right – I have no self-control at all. I pull away, slightly reluctantly, then grip onto your hips so I can flip you onto your back; marvelling, in spite of myself, at how completely pliable you’re allowing yourself to be.
“I’m sorry.” I’m laughing again now – giggling, even – but I can tell you like it from the way you smile and your entire expression softens whenever you hear me do it. “I can’t wait any longer. You said yourself I have no self-control. Oh God, this going to be over in a few minutes – possibly seconds. Apologies in advance.”

You don’t say anything and the silence is so uncharacteristic that I glance up at you, suddenly anxious that I’ve done something wrong, but you’re just smiling at me: very soft, very tender, yet slightly rapt as well, as if the sight of me captivates you. And I suppose that maybe it does: you look captivated simply because you are. I smile back for a few seconds and skim my hands up and down your legs, noticing the way my breathing has sped up, before leaning over and kissing your knee then sliding my fingers inside you again and circling my thumb outside to match the rhythm. I’ve just had an unexpectedly filthy image of what it would be like to watch my come leaking out of your body after I’ve fucked you, and the thought of it is so arousing it literally makes me groan out loud and rock my hand even faster without fully realizing that I’m doing it. Fucking shit, I’m so turned on. It’s ridiculous really, like a teenager. Surely I’m too old to feel like this.

“Oh God, look at you,” is all I say.

You just keep smiling. Why are you so mute? Usually it’s impossible to make you stop talking. But you haven’t taken your eyes off me once – very focussed, very intense – and it suddenly occurs to me that maybe you’re simply feeling so much that you no longer find it necessary to speak. Just like before: it is only words. “Words, words, words,” as Shakespeare wrote, and ultimately they’re all superfluous, all those words – it’s the feelings that matter. I never really gave you much credit for having any emotional life did I? It’s hard to imagine you brimful of sensation. But you have that bright-eyed expression again, your eyes tracking over me, and in that moment I know I’m right.

On an impulse I take hold of your hand and kiss the back of it then lean over and slide my tongue along the length of your cock, which is flushed and hard and lying flat along your stomach, wet and delicious at the tip. You make a sighing sound that’s so low it’s almost a hiss and I draw a shuddering breath myself and ease forward so I can sink into the tight, smooth heat of your body in one long thrust. The way it feels is phenomenal and my eyes start to widen with something like surprise. It’s not entirely my fault though; it’s only the third time I’ve done this, I’m not really used to it yet. “Oh yes,” I say faintly. “You’re so…Oh God, that’s…that’s…” But I can’t say what it is because I don’t really know how to describe it. No words – none. I know you understand.

I’m still kneeling between your legs and it’s too far away from you so I drop forward, resting my weight on one hand and stroking your hair with the other while sucking a bruise onto the delicate skin of your neck. Broken capillaries, blood hastening its way upwards…Love bites: they call them that in Europe don’t they? Little marks of love, made with one body onto another, from me to you. You tip your head back to give me better access, skimming your fingers up and down my spine…trailing across my waist…caressing my face…Your hands are so warm and your touch unexpectedly gentle and I cry out again, a bit desperately this time, because it’s so much to process and there are no words, no language, no way to properly explain it. I just search out your mouth instead so I can kiss you again, deeply and thoroughly, occasionally pulling away to tell you how good it feels or to gasp out your name; rolling my hips, rocking myself inside you and moaning at the sensation of your cock, slick and hard, as it presses against my abdomen each time I push down. And then I’m not sure exactly which one of us it is who loses control first, whether it’s me or you, or if both of us go together (I think it’s that, I think it’s both of us; I think we’re urging each other on), but it’s like something just fucking ignites. And suddenly it’s no longer slow, tempered with tender yearning, but wild and passionate – frantic, urgent – and I’m clawing against you with my fingers and thrusting into you so hard I can feel your sharp hipbones digging into my skin; and you’re tugging my head back by the hair and scraping your teeth against any part of me you can reach. You look amazing like this; the way you come alive during sex – still graceful but with a molten, unrestrained energy
that’s not always apparent at other times. I’ve never been this rough with a partner before, but it’s not aggression – not from a desire to wound – but from a desire to love. From fervour; from the need to demonstrate devotion. I can’t get enough of you, I can’t I can’t. Let me own you, claim you: this is how much you matter to me. And I know it’s the same with you. My eyelashes are slightly damp. I’m not crying though. Am I? I don’t think I am. Oh God, we’re being so loud – the noises we’re making, the way the bed frame is being flung against the wall – and if anyone is in the room next door then they’ll be in no doubt as to exactly what we’re doing. And I don’t care, I couldn’t care less: fuck them, let them hear. Let them know – let everyone know.

“I love you.” I’m grabbing your hands, threading our fingers together. “I love you, I love you.” It’s like free-floating, like falling; my love for you could be my downfall and it would be such a glorious descent I wouldn’t even care.

“More than I thought possible,” you reply, and your voice catches slightly. Is that why you didn’t speak before? “More than sense and reason. More than I have words to tell you.”

“I can’t,” I whisper, “I can’t…” Even though I’m not sure exactly what it is that I can’t do. I can’t get enough of you; I can’t have a proper life without you in it; I can’t let go of you a second time? All of it; all of that plus everything else. I move forward again so I can bury my mouth in yours. I’m so far gone I’ve lost the rhythm, my movements growing fraught and erratic as my hips start to stutter; but it doesn’t seem to matter and for the first time ever you come before I do (I can feel the hot, damp pulse of it against my stomach and it makes me moan with helpless, hopeless desire). I’m not far behind though, and when it hits the sensation’s so intense I practically black out. There’s a single tear snaking down my cheekbone and you wipe it away with your thumb then gently tug me towards you so our foreheads are pressing together. Then you wrap both arms round me and hold me close against your chest and we just stay like that for a while: me trembling slightly and you stroking my shoulders and murmuring snatches of something quiet in a foreign language. My head is tucked beneath your chin and from where I’m lying I can still hear your heartbeat. Strange that this is the organ most closely linked to love – there must be a reason for it but I don’t know what it is. You’d probably know. It’s just a mass of tissue after all. Ingenious and tireless and perfectly constructed, but still just insensate flesh for all that: valves and atriums, ventricles and fine blue veins…what is it about all that which can possibly signify love? And yet it does, even though there’s no way to make a heart give up its confidences, no way to fully understand why it yearns and pulses in the way it does. Because there isn’t, is there? No way to splice it up and examine it, even you couldn’t dissect that. The anatomy of a love story.

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About an hour later we have a shower and I scrub your back for you and ask about some of the scars, although it turns out you can’t recall the exact provenance of all of them (the unspoken implication being that you’re such an insurmountable badass that you can’t reasonably be expected to remember every altercation you’ve ever been involved in); then I watch you washing your hair and provide a running commentary on the pointlessness of purchasing such ridiculously overpriced shampoo (which I refuse to use on principle; because – seriously), and which you politely ignore. After that we get dried and dressed and sprawl around on the sofa – at least I sprawl; you seem to be attempting it and then give up halfway through – and bicker amicably over who’s going to drive, and where the first rest stop should be, and the virtues of finding a motel vs. driving in shifts while the other one sleeps. It turns out both of us prefer the latter: continuous flight until the destination is reached. Oh God, it’s really not long now; it’s already beginning to grow dark. Really not long at all…and then we go.

To kill some time I wander over to the kitchen area to make myself a coffee, but the lid on the jar is as stiff as fuck and I can’t twist it off. There’s no way I’m going to ask you to do it though (no way at
all) so decide to just have a glass of water instead. You prowl in after me and fill up the kettle, then begin to carefully spoon out some highly-scented tea leaves from a box on the counter (another fucking teacup – for God’s sake).

“What’s that you’re drinking?” I say. Oh hell, you’ve spotted the coffee jar. If you get that lid off on the first try…

“Lapsang souchong.”

“I don’t know how you can bear it. That stuff’s like wood smoke.” You have as well; you smug bastard.

“It is an acquired taste, certainly.”

“What’s wrong with regular tea?”

“There is nothing wrong with regular tea. That does not mean I should not choose to drink this. How charmingly illogical you are.”

“How adorably patronizing you are.”

“Yes,” (smirk) “I dare say. Coffee?”

You brandish the jar at me and I can’t help laughing. “No, thanks, I’m fine with water. And you don’t need to look so triumphant – it was only because I’d loosened the lid for you first.”

You smirk again then return to the living area and stretch out on the sofa, fastidiously sipping on the tea the whole time, and I lounge on the floor at your feet and tip my head back onto your knee. Possibly I look slightly ridiculous, although you smile down at me in an unusually benevolent way.

“So,” I say. “Do you think Europe’s big enough to handle us?”

“Oh, I expect it will prove too small eventually,” you reply airily, “at which point we shall simply have to find somewhere new. And somewhere new after that.”

“And after that?”

“Somewhere new again.”

“I think I see a pattern emerging here. Always on the run.”

“Yes, most likely.” You brush your fingers against my cheekbone and I briefly close my eyes. “But always running side by side.”

And then a few hours later – that’s it. The afternoon has melted into evening and the sky begins to streak with scarlet and purple, and we really are getting ready to leave. The bags are packed, I’m in a scarf and thick jacket and you’re wearing your coat and a black fedora hat of the type Jack sometimes favors. Seeing you in it reminds me of lying in the hospital post-cliff leap, critically regarding his and wondering if you could get away with something similar (the answer, naturally, being yes). It actually looks rather dashing on you, like a matinee pin-up from a film noir: espionage in smoky bars where the women have hard, bright faces and scarlet lipstick and everyone double-crosses everyone else. Not that you couldn’t blend into such a world if you wanted to. You could blend in anywhere, seamless and secret, the most lethal adversary that no one sees until it’s too late. Unless I was there too, of course – because I would always see you. I smile to myself at the image and you walk over and remove the hat so you can push it over my forehead.
“That hair of yours is distinctive,” you say.

“That face of yours is distinctive. You should put a hat over it.”

“I shall bear that marvellous advice in mind. Do you have everything?”

I automatically do the glasses-keys-wallet touchdown. “Yes, I just need to get my laptop.”

“Go on then. I have settled the bill so after this we can depart directly.”

Yes – we really can. We smile at each other, and then I leave you by the door and head back into the kitchen area to retrieve the laptop. You’ve washed up all the crockery, extremely conscientiously (and, as far as I’m concerned, utterly pointlessly – the charges are exorbitant enough to cover housekeeping after all), and I’m reaching over onto the counter to get the computer when I catch my sleeve on one of the units and manage to knock your teacup onto the floor. It shatters on the tiles, upon which I promptly go rigid and still. I know I’m being ridiculous – it’s just a broken cup, after all – but the significance of it makes me feel discomfited and awkward, and I position myself to try and hide the pieces; even though you’ve heard the noise and have strolled over regardless.

“So,” you say thoughtfully when you see it. “Another broken teacup. How ironic.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I’m furious to realize I’m blushing very slightly. You’re not looking at me though; instead you’re leaning down to pick up some of the shards, turning them over in your long fingers and regarding them meditatively. I watch you do it, oddly fascinated by how dextrous you are and the way the ceramic seems to snap and writhe in your hands.

“Fate and circumstance have returned us to this moment when the teacup shatters,” you say, then after a few more seconds you glance up at me and smile. “Are you familiar with the concept of kintsugi Will?”

“No.”

“It is a form of Japanese art: repairing shattered pottery with gold lacquer in a style which honors and elevates the breakage rather than concealing it. It is the art of embracing damage; of celebrating it – of seeing the beauty in broken things.” You lean back slightly and run your eyes over me. “There is a strange resonance isn’t there. Tell me, do you remember what I said to you that night in your apartment?”

I nod mutely because I do remember it; of course I do. It would hardly be possible to forget: “You are so beautifully broken aren’t you? Yet never broken-spirited. The two things are not the same. Did you know that? All these pieces of you, yet you are not truly fragmented; the light shines through your slivers and cracks. Luminous in all your damage.”

“Kintsugi considers the cycle of rupture and repair as something to acknowledge, not disguise,” you add. “The bonds portray the item’s history, which in turn is rendered more resilient and beautiful by what it has endured – the philosophy implies that nothing in life need ever be considered truly broken. Whatever that might happen to be: an object; a person; two people; the relationship between them. The more it is fractured the finer and more eternal it becomes.” You’re smiling at me now, still turning the pieces over in your hand. “You see? Sometimes a teacup can gather together again.”

Now I’m smiling too. We’re both smiling. “Yeah,” I say at last. “I guess it can.” Because it’s true: it can. It has. New forms, new vistas, fresh opportunities and renewed potential. A second chance. A novel outlook – unlike anyone or anything else – with a form and figure that defies expectation and makes the impossible true. No one else could manage it, but we can; we’ll rewrite the past and
redesign the future. Reshape it – our future. The shape of me and the shape of you, combined.

I hold out my hand and you take it, smiling as our eyes meet and our fingers entwine together.

“Come on then,” I say. “We’re ready now…Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

When I started this story I really doubted anyone would engage with it. I deliberately avoided reading other Hannigram fics so as not to be overly influenced/intimated by what other people were writing, and only gradually realised quite how idiosyncratic The Shape Of Me really was (not least the weird 1st/2nd person style, Will’s sassiness dial being turned up to 11, and Himself being offstage for nearly half of it). I had no track record as an author, no links with the fandom – and all in all was so certain it wouldn’t find an audience that I was pretty much just writing it for myself. But then people did read it! And they left fantastically encouraging and helpful feedback. And by the end of December I realised I was no longer writing it for myself, I was writing it for all of you. The way people have stuck with this over such a long period is amazing, and I seriously doubt I could have finished it without the support (special thanks also to Team Sassy Will who all stoically commented week after month and continually kept my spirits up – you know who you are, and you’re all wonderful). And, of course, enormous thanks to the artists who so generously shared their beautiful work.

Also, I have a favour to ask the Fannibals. I’m brand new to this fandom and don’t have any online presence, but would love to find a way to share this with more people now it’s FINALLY FINISHED. So if you’ve enjoyed it and would be willing to give it a mention via Tumblr or a Twitter rec that would be extremely wonderful and much appreciated.

Most of all, though, I couldn’t possibly end this without sending heartfelt hugs and thanks to everyone for making the last eight months so much fun and for giving me a wonderfully warm welcome both to AO3 and the Hannibal fandom. Please do keep in touch if you’re so inclined for the next monster-length fic...by which point I intend to have taught myself how to write in the 3rd person :-D

MissDis x

Works inspired by this one

- Hunger Pangs by thecannibalofz
- The Shape Of Me Will Always Be You by Kess
- Cover Art for 'The Shape of Me Will Always Be You' by CrazylNh0v3
- The Shape of Me Will Always Be You (fanart) by tictactoes
- Discretion is the Better Part of Valour [Fanart for The Shape of Me Will Always be You] by greendaygirl
- Playlist for The Shape of Me Will Always Be You by creativelivings
- The Sassy Will Gallery by MrsSteampunk
- Cover for MissDisoriental's "The Shape Of Me Will Always Be You" by MarieCee
- Cover Art - 'The Shape of Me Will Always be You' by prescients
- The Shape Of Me Will Always Be You by Lowrie
- Mirrored (fanart for 'The
*Shape of Me Will Always be You' by MissDisoriental* by puzzleboxes, *(Podfic) The Shape of Me Will Always be You* by Andthe_cellabration. Book Cover for MissDisoriental's 'The Shape of Me Will Always be You' by DeLaRun, *Will in the marble* by RenJaegerjaques, Cover for The Shape Of Me Will Always Be You by TheRogueTrader

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