Captiva

by canis_m

Summary

Hannibal wants to give Will a child. Will's thinking about letting him. A sequel to "Au Jus."

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1

Baltimore in winter was no place to convalesce, said Hannibal. Nor was Virginia. By the week after his discharge from the hospital, Will had begun to feel it. Early in his treatment, when the fever had broken, its undertow had seemed to suck all body heat from him as it ebbed. He'd spent too many days in antiseptic rooms with the cold trickle of an IV in his arm, feeling as if he might never be warm again.

Back at home, swathed in a dogpile, with Hannibal's pot-au-feu on the stove, he felt better. He pulled on his wool socks and welcomed the lengthening days. But the nights came, and then a late-season winter storm that glazed his car doors shut, and not even Hannibal draped around him like an insistent shawl could banish the chill.

Whiskey would've helped. He wasn't allowed whiskey, not until he finished his course of meds. There was a doctor around to enforce the prohibition.


Will closed his eyes. He'd been so glad to be home. He hated to leave the dogs again. But he had weeks of medical leave left, and Jack hadn't called, and he was tired of being cold.

"Someplace not too far," he said. "Not too fancy."

"A seaside cottage," said Hannibal. "I have a place in mind. Leave it to me."

Even with Hannibal's help, getting ready to leave was a strain. Housecleaning, laying in supplies for the dogs and the sitter, enduring sad eyes from Winston and the others when the suitcase appeared--these efforts depleted whatever small reserves had begun to reaccumulate since he'd left the hospital. It would've galled him if he had the energy to be galled.

When the morning of their flight arrived, he let Hannibal bundle him into the Bentley like so much luggage. He fell asleep on the plane with his head on Hannibal's shoulder, glasses askew on his nose.

* 

The island was accessible only by water and air. A ferry traveled the bay between it and the larger Pine Island every couple of hours. Hannibal had chartered a boat. He'd flown down and back the day before to see that everything in the house was arranged to his satisfaction: utilities in order, kitchen and pantry and wine cabinet stocked.

When Hannibal said "cottage" Will's mind had summoned memories of the claptrap beachfront shacks and bungalows seen in Biloxi in his childhood. The house Hannibal had rented loomed over a tangle of cycads and sea grapes, three stories, with terraced open decks and a screened lanai overlooking the Gulf. A path of crushed shells mixed with sand wound from the back patio through scrub and sea oats to the beach.

"For a month," Hannibal said, when Will asked how long they had the place.

"A month?" He'd scheduled the sitter for two weeks.

"We needn't stay the entire time. The option is available."
"What about your patients?" There were fewer now than there'd been before Will's illness--Hannibal had admitted it when pressed--but some at least had survived the wave of referrals.

"I've arranged to keep a number of appointments via Skype," said Hannibal. "Others agreed to postpone."

"As long as you don't Skype from the hot tub," Will said. "You'll blow your cover."

They made a tour of the house--the impeccable kitchen, the loft with its bookshelf full of field guides and naturalists' memoirs, a gratuitous number of bedrooms--but Will chafed at enclosure. The nap on the plane and sun on his face had revived him. Hannibal had been right about the air: from the moment they stepped out of the airport it had settled on Will's skin, moist and close and familiar, gravid with the promise of nearby ocean. The forecast read sunny and 80s for an indefinite span.

Will glanced at the ten-day calendar before stowing his phone. He'd missed a heat while he was hospitalized. Since he couldn't take suppressants and had been unfit for exertion, the doctors had put him under until it passed. He remembered waking, groggy, to find Hannibal at his bedside, immovable as a stone lion. He remembered there being a lot of that.

He changed his long sleeves and chinos for a t-shirt and shorts, and went to the kitchen.

Hannibal was elbows-deep in a mixing bowl. His eyes warmed at the sight of Will. Will stared with blank envy at the glass of Sancerre on the counter.

"Soon," Hannibal told him. "If you're thirsty, there's agua fresca, ginger beer, and iced tea."

Will exhaled through his nose--a sigh like a punctured balloon--and tore his eyes away. "'M going to check out the beach."

"Shall I bring lunch down, or will you come back?"

"I'll come back." His glance fell to the breakfast bar, where a business card had been left perfectly centered on the placemat. He picked it up and read: Masters' Bait and Tackle. Fishing licenses, bait and tackle, rentals and repair.

"It's just up the road," said Hannibal, "and seems well equipped."

Will slipped the card into his pocket. He stepped around the breakfast bar, behind Hannibal, and wrapped his arms around Hannibal's waist. He rubbed his face into Hannibal's back, between his shoulder blades.

"This is good," he said, muffled. "You picked good."

Hannibal set down the mixing bowl and touched Will's hand at his waist. "I hoped you'd approve. I'm glad."

Will held the embrace a little longer, then stepped away. He left the kitchen through the sliding door that led to the upper deck and descended the outdoor stairs.

On the ground level was a patio paved in flagstone, with a covered gas grill and a hammock hung in palm-tree shade. Will made his way through encroaching sea grapes to the head of the path. The path led him through ecosystems in miniature, from jungle to scrub. It grew tapered and indeterminate as he approached the beach.

A pair of Adirondack lounge chairs sat a few yards from the juncture of beach and path. Beyond the
The sough and scent of it greeted Will, enveloping. He felt a foolish urge to charge forward and fling himself into it, this sea of his childhood, as he might've buried his face in a blanket put away years ago with other childish things.

He settled for abandoning his sandals and wading into the waves, ankle- and then shin-deep. The water was cool this time of year. Merely cool—still balmy compared to the Atlantic, let alone the Chesapeake Bay. His feet squelched in the wet sand. In his mind he could hear his dad's voice, reminding him to walk with care to scare up any stingrays in his path. *Shuffle your feet, Willy. Let 'em know you're coming. You don't want to get stung.*

Like the island, the beach had no public access except by boat. Figures were visible at some distance in either direction: a lone man surf fishing in one, a family with small children in the other. Will had waded only a little while before he caught sight of a roped-off section of sand, beyond the strandline, demarcated with stakes and posted signs. He had to draw closer to make out the text.

*DO NOT DISTURB -- SNOWY PLOVER NESTING AREA*

*THese birds, their nests and eggs are protected under Florida law*

Dire warnings continued in the fine print. Will scanned within the area marked off by the wooden stakes. At last he found them: two specked eggs, almost indistinguishable amid the detritus of seashells and driftwood twigs. No sign of the parents.

Wary of his own intrusion, Will retreated and returned to the surf.

* The next day he raided the bait shop as soon as it opened. He talked with the proprietor and a local charter boat captain who’d stopped in to buy live shrimp. Redfish Pass was the place, they said: the narrow channel formed when a hurricane had torn one island into two. Will rented his gear, bought a Florida license, and headed for the pass.

He was back at the house by late morning with two spotted sea trout in his cooler. "I caught dinner," he said, when Hannibal emerged from his makeshift office in one of the spare rooms.

Hannibal inspected the fish with pleasure. "Beautiful. What shall we do with them?"

"Not the knots," said Will. "Not this time." There had been, he could allow, a certain artistry in preparing fish such that they seemed to be either vomiting or eating their own tails. Seeing it once had been enough. "Please."

"Very well. No knotting."

Will returned the trout to the cooler and buried them in a mound of fresh ice. "I could throw them on the grill."

"The complete performance," said Hannibal. "Dinner caught in the wild, borne triumphant back to your den, and seared over an open flame. Ambitious of you."

"I'll wear one of those 'Kiss the Cook' aprons if you've got one." Will poured himself a glass of agua fresca and gulped it down. When the glass was empty he pressed it to the side of his face, craving its
coolness. His cheeks felt warm. Probably too much sun. "Felt good to get out there. I might've
overdone it."

"You're still recovering," said Hannibal. "It's why we're here. Have a nap, if you like."

"Yeah, I might. I better take a shower first." He turned as Hannibal leaned in to sniff the back of his
neck. "Can you even smell anything on me right now besides sunblock and fish guts?"

"I can."

Will hesitated. Hannibal's nose was a better gauge than the calendar, or even his own sense of his
physical self. "Am I getting close?"

"Tomorrow, I think."

Will set the glass on the counter. He shifted nearer to Hannibal. Hannibal mirrored the shift, then
slowly began to nudge Will backward, using the full length and breadth of his body, until Will had
backed himself up to the breakfast bar. Will looked into the diminished space between them with
lowered eyes.

They hadn't fucked, in the strictest sense, since before Will had gone into the hospital. After his
discharge Hannibal had spent the nights with him, had nestled and nuzzled and once or twice
brought him off with hands and mouth, and rutted against him with almost aggravating gentleness.
Will hadn't been up for anything else. It was going to feel good, he thought, to work up a real sweat.

Never in his life before had he looked forward to being in heat. Not until Hannibal.

"You want--" he paused. It was going to sound ridiculous. He didn't care. "You want an appetizer?"

Hannibal's focus on him seemed to sharpen, as if to dismiss everything in his field of attention other
than Will. To Will it felt like hot sun on his face.

"Did you have something in mind?"

"Nothing specific. Whatever you--"

Between one word and the next he was grabbed and hauled bodily onto the counter, Hannibal's
hands on his hips.

"--want," finished Will, breathless with giddiness more than surprise. His cock twitched in his shorts.
His legs splayed further apart. His hands landed on Hannibal's chest, then wavered upward.
Hannibal had been leaving his hair ungelled, more and more often declining to slick it back. It made
Will want to stick his fingers in it every chance he got.

Hannibal laid his palms flat on the counter, one on each side of Will's ass, and leaned in as if for a
kiss. At the last minute he veered to trace the stubbled line of Will's jaw with his lips, following it
back and upward to Will's ear. He caught and nipped the flesh of Will's earlobe, paused, gave a short
puff of breath that might've been a laugh. Then his fingers were at Will's shorts, undoing, coaxing
Will's thickening cock into his hand. With no other preamble he bent to Will's lap and took an
audible--theatrical--whiff.

He sighed. "Better. No sunblock. No fish guts."

It startled a laugh from Will--he was about to say no, he hadn't stuffed any guts down his shorts--and
then the laugh turned to a slack-jawed oh as Hannibal's mouth closed hot around him, sucking him
Will tipped forward, sinking over Hannibal's head and the slope of his shoulders. He curled his fingers like the claws of a kneading cat, dragged them up and down as much of Hannibal's back as he could reach, rucking the smooth pale linen of his shirt. Hannibal made a pleased sound and sucked harder.

"Oh God. Oh God, Hannibal--"

Will's heels banged on the cupboards below. He wasn't going to last--he was too pent up. He could barely even squirm; Hannibal had him by the hips and was holding him fast in place, with a strength that still took him aback, even when he'd come to know it intimately.

There was a brief reprieve when Hannibal let go to pull up Will's shirt and kiss his belly, licking at Will's navel as if he could tongue into it the way he liked to do with Will's hole, before nosing back down to the shaft. Then he had the head of Will's cock in his mouth again, and Will bent moaning over him, as if he could contain the inevitable outcome by folding himself in two.

When Will came, Hannibal swallowed him down. He pulled away wet-lipped and reared up to kiss Will, deeply, with the taste still in his mouth.

They slouched against each other for a little while, breathing. Will's head swam with the dim eddies of release. Hannibal gathered him close with hands firm at the small of his back, close enough to let Will feel how hard he was as he drew Will to the brink of the counter.

"Down now," Hannibal murmured. He pulled Will over the edge. Will wasn't sure his legs would hold when his feet hit the tile. Hannibal saved him the worry by pinning him upright, then turning Will to bend over the counter. He fitted himself against Will from behind, breathing hot breath on his neck. Will swallowed.

"You can--" His voice emerged wavery, smaller than he'd intended. "You can fuck me if you want."

"Hm. You won't be such a shy boy tomorrow," said Hannibal, "when you ask me to do that."

"I'm not shy."

"Chary, then. But I don't mind. I'm savoring the wait." He kissed behind Will's ear. For a minute the warmth of him vanished. Will heard a cupboard open and shut, a bottle twisted open. Then Hannibal was on him again, fingers hooked at the waistband of Will's shorts to shuck them down. "You'll smell more as you should when I'm done with you here. Will that do?"

Will groaned and slumped over his bent arms. His cock was doing its level if futile best to get hard again, just from the feel of Hannibal against him and the murmur of his voice. "Whatever you want."

What Hannibal wanted, it seemed, was to slather his cock with oil and fit it to the cleft of Will's ass, and to rub there, slick and hard and increasingly artless, until he came. He finished with tight jerks of his hips, breath stuttering. He nosed Will's hair and nape, then reached between them to spread his mess over the small of Will's back, for all the world as if he were smearing sunscreen.

He lifted his hand and put two fingers to Will's lips. Will made a helpless noise. Without further coaxing he caught Hannibal's wrist and mouthed the wet fingers, like a teething puppy with a toy. He felt Hannibal sigh against his hair, felt his face push back and forth among the flattened curls.

Releasing Hannibal's fingers, Will lowered his chin to rest it flat against the granite countertop. At this point the breakfast bar was holding both of them up. He waited, but Hannibal seemed in no
hurry to budge.

"Do I get to move sometime soon?"

"I don't know that I care to let go of you."

"You can not let go of me in the shower. Otherwise I'm gonna pass out right here."

"All right." Hannibal pressed a last kiss to the back of Will's head. "Sweet Will."

"You've got a funny idea of sweet."

"Have I? But you are sweet for me. You must know it. The way you open yourself for me, and your heart of hearts goes so wonderfully soft. It makes me want to do dreadful things to you."

"Yeah, okay. Tell me about the dreadful things when I'm more awake," said Will.

Hannibal half-carried him to the master suite. Will let himself be guided, handled, chivvied into the shower, lathered and rinsed and toweled down. In the hospital, during his treatment, he hadn't wanted physical help, not beyond what was necessary, but this was different. Maybe Hannibal was right: he did go soft. Soft in the middle, pliable throughout. With his hair still damp he crawled naked into the bed and was asleep before his eyes could fall shut.

* 

Waves lapped the hull of the boat. It wasn't a sailboat, but a fishing boat with an outboard motor, modest in size, like the smallish ones Will had seen at the bayside marina. A bimini top stretched over the center console to shade it. Lap of luxury, his dad would've said.

The bay was nearly placid, dim with twilight, silver-blue. Will stood in the prow, holding his casting rod, line in the water. He hadn't caught anything, but that didn't seem important. Just to be here, floating over the seagrass bed, surrounded by suffusive calm in all directions--that was enough.

A splash stirred the water to the right of him, beyond his peripheral sight. Will heard the blow of a wet exhalation, an indrawn breath.

A dolphin, he thought--but when he turned, there was no glossy gray shape, no vanishing dorsal fin. Something bigger and darker moved under the prow.

The horns emerged first, branched like a mangrove sapling. They rose up wet and gleaming with strands of seagrass caught among the tines. The ears appeared, and then the dark head with its ruff of feathers sleeked flat. Dark eyes gazed up at Will. The dark muzzle broke the surface like an alligator's snout.

The stag snuffled the air.

For a minute they stared at one another. Will could see the stag's forelegs treading water beneath the surface, trailing seaweed strands. The stag gave a slow blink. Then, as if it had seen what it came to see, it blew another dolphin-blow and surged away from Will and the boat, submerging out of sight.

In its wake he saw a speckled tail flip behind it, not feathered but finned.

Will didn't move, didn't speak, but what unfurled within him was a strange, unsurprised relief: the way he felt when one of the dogs had run off into the woods for hours, and at last come straggling home.
He woke to the feel of a hand stroking his hair. He mumbled--acknowledgement, not complaint--and rolled onto one side. Hannibal sat beside him on the edge of the bed.

"Time to eat," Hannibal said. "It's getting late."

Will peered at the bedside clock, then sank back into the pillow. He rubbed his face with both hands. "Jesus. If one orgasm knocks me out that hard, I don't know how I'm going to survive tomorrow."

"We'll manage," said Hannibal. "I've made a saffron pilaf to accompany the trout, a panna cotta for dessert, and lunches for tomorrow. If you feel up to it, I thought we might go for a stroll after you eat. Perhaps down to the marina."

"A stroll, I can probably handle," said Will, but instead of sitting up he flopped onto his back and lay flat. "How strange is it to miss a recurring hallucination?"

"Miss, as one misses an absent friend? What hallucination?"

"The stag--I'm not sure if I ever told you. There were stretches of time in the hospital that remained lost to him, conversations of which he had no memory."

"I would remember if you had," said Hannibal. He settled in like a child for a bedtime story. "Tell me now."

"I started seeing it...it must've been right after Cassie Boyle's body was found. The first time was in a dream, I think. Later I started seeing it when I wasn't asleep. A stag with black feathers on its body. Big. Like an elk."

"Was it frightening?"

"No, I was never afraid of it, it was...beautiful, actually. Sometimes it acted like it wanted me to follow it. Sometimes it followed me."

Hannibal had no difficulty with this. "In many traditions, a familiar spirit appears to a young practitioner of the shamanic arts. It guides him as he comes into his powers and learns to travel back and forth between realities. Perhaps your stag came to guide your passage to and from the other realm."

"The realm of madness," muttered Will. "It showed up in my dream, just now. I was...glad to see it." He didn't mention the part about the tail, how the stag's form seemed to be changing. Becoming something new. Some superstitious part of him shied away from saying it aloud, as if he might jinx the transformation before it fully came to pass. "I guess I didn't think I'd see it again."

"Well. Since relapse can occur in up to twenty-five percent of patients with your brand of encephalitis, you may yet see your friend again in the waking world." Hannibal patted Will's shoulder. "Take heart."

"Right. Thanks, Doctor." Will thumped him on the arm, then thumped again for good measure.

Hannibal caught hold of his hand before Will could draw it back again. "I know you don't like to think of it. But if it should happen, we'll be better armed next time. We'll recognize the symptoms, and have you well again as soon as may be."

His fingers curled around Will's. He held Will's hand and gaze until Will nodded.
"Now. Will you come and eat before our walk, or must I bring you lunch in bed?"

"No, I'm up. I'm up." Will heaved himself upright to make it true. "You want to parade around with an omega in pre-heat on your arm, is that it? Show off your nose candy?"

"Don't put on any pheromone mask," said Hannibal. "I want to be the envy of the island."

*

It bordered on risque, going out unmasked in pre-heat--not quite scandalous, but racy, like wearing tight pants that showed off his butt. Which was another thing Will never did, and had no interest in doing. But Hannibal looked so smug as they strolled along the walking path, even when their only audience consisted of a retired beta couple from the house down the way, out for a turn with their aged schnauzer.

Will crouched to let the schnauzer study his palm while Hannibal made small talk: the weather, where they were from, how long they were staying. Being sociable wasn't so bad with Hannibal around to do the heavy lifting, not when there was a dog in the mix.

"What's his name?" asked Will.

"Fritz," said the husband. "After der alte Fritz."

"Frederick the Great," the wife said. "He insists on calling the house 'Sanssouci.'"

"It's a fashion here to name the houses, yes?" asked Hannibal. "I've seen a number of signs."

Will glanced up from ruffling the dog's ears. "Does ours have a name?"

"Not that I know of." Hannibal smiled down. "Perhaps you might give it one."

*Housey McHouseface,* thought Will, but he didn't say it aloud. They said goodbye to the Fritzes and ambled on to the marina, where Hannibal angled transparently for Will's opinion of the boats. Will gave distracted answers. He kept casting his eye toward the surface of the water, checking for antlers rising from the bay.

*

He went to bed early after dinner. In the dense hours after midnight he woke, flushed and sweaty, heart racing in his chest. His hair clung in sticky coils to his neck, his brow. Fear scalded him--was it starting again? The fever, the liquid seepage of his mind--had it ever stopped?

Then he heard Hannibal's breathing, steady and slow at his side, and awareness came. Not sickness, not a relapse, not his brain roasting again over its own coals. Just heat.

Letting all his breath out in a rush, he flopped over sideways onto Hannibal, who twitched awake with a grunt.

*

On the morning of the second day, after the fervor had passed, Will cracked his eyes open to find Hannibal at the bedside, fully dressed in a seersucker suit. He squinted.

"You going out?"

Hannibal sat down on the edge of the bed. He put his hands in his lap, where they fidgeted slightly.
Will observed the fidgets, increasingly alert.

"There's no delicate way to put this," said Hannibal. He sounded rueful. "There was a mishap with one of the condoms last night. A breakage. I don't have emergency contraception on hand, but I'll go to the pharmacy on Pine Island, and that will be that. The ferry leaves in half an hour."

Will's head slumped back. He didn't groan, but he felt like groaning. He squinted again at Hannibal. "Why didn't you say something?"

"There seemed no benefit in telling you in the moment, only loss of sleep for you. The pharmacy was already closed. If you take the EC today there shouldn't be any difficulty. Within a five-day window the effectiveness rate is extremely high."

"Yeah, I know." Will knew from experience. He rolled himself out of bed. "Hold on a sec."

He straggled to the bathroom and dug into the kit that held his medications. There, buried at the bottom, he found what he was looking for. He checked the expiration date: still good.

Returning to the bedroom, he flashed the package at Hannibal. "Saved you a trip."

"Ah," said Hannibal. He had the grace to look chagrined.

"Jack always wanted a backup, and so did I." Will tore into the package. "Maintenance fucks were one thing, but if he'd put a bun in my oven, that wouldn't have gone well for anyone."

"I'd imagine not." Hannibal folded his hands. "Will, I apologize. I should've told you immediately."

"You didn't want to disturb my beauty sleep," said Will. "I get it." He gave Hannibal the eye. "I could use some coffee."

"Of course. At once."

* *

In the screened lanai off the master suite was an oversized daybed, roomy enough for two if the occupants were friendly, piled with cushions and positioned to face the view of the Gulf. After his shower Will installed himself there in his bathrobe, a fluffy towel tucked under his ass, which was still inclined to drip.

Hannibal appeared with a breakfast tray: more coffee, pain perdu with compote of mixed tropical fruits, a purplish orchid in a vase. Will started in on the French toast before pointing at the orchid with his fork.

"What's this. 'Sorry my rubber broke' in the language of flowers?"

"Something to that effect." Hannibal had traded his suit for pajama bottoms and a bathrobe of his own. He settled on the daybed next to Will. "It's edible."

"Course it is."

Will reached into the pocket of his robe and pulled out the contraception pill, still in its foil wrapper. He propped it on the breakfast tray next to his knife.

Hannibal blinked and looked at the pill with what appeared to be deep interest: curiosity, not concern. "Are you going to take it?"
"Do you want me to take it?"

"The decision is yours."

Will took a long drink of coffee. "You're good at saying the right things." He set the cup down. "Ever thought about having kids, Doctor?"

"Will. I'd be more than happy to have this conversation at another time, when--"

"When my heat's over. Because I'm not capable of rational discussion until then?"

"We both know that's not the case. Even so, your feelings may change. Mine have."

"So the rational course would be to take the damn pill, then think about it when my body isn't lobbying quite so hard in one direction. Then talk."

"That would seem wise, yes."

Will opened the foil packet and took the damn pill. Then, because Hannibal did a funny thing with his mouth when Will swallowed pills dry--a slight but discernible flattening--Will washed it down with coffee.

"Done. Time bomb's no longer ticking." If he'd expected relief in Hannibal's expression, he saw none. "You didn't answer my question."

Hannibal paused to excise a corner of pain perdu. "For most of my life, having children never seemed a likely or greatly desirable prospect. Before I came to know you."

"You weren't concerned about people questioning your alphahood?"

"No. What about you? No concern for the chiming of the biological clock?"

If Will had a biological clock, he figured the alarm had gone off years ago, and he'd been mashing the snooze button ever since. Until he'd caught brain fever, and the clock had melted altogether. In fairness, Hannibal was right--his first heat after recovery from a life-threatening illness was probably not the time to make reproductive choices, not when his genes were howling perpetuate with all their might. But maybe there was something to the clamor, timing aside.

"Not the kind of project I'd want to tackle on my own," he said. "Never had anybody to tackle it with." There'd always been the dogs, ever since he'd moved into his own house. The dogs had been enough for him.

"Had. And now?"

"Now you're fishing."

Hannibal set down his fork and curled his hands. He looked away, toward the swaying fronds of the potted palm in the corner, the slow rotation of the ceiling fan's angled blades. "If you were to say you would consider having a child with me, Will--even consider it--"

He broke off. His eyes grew bright. Too bright, and red around the edges. Will sat up, nearly upsetting the breakfast tray.

"Are you crying? Jesus, Hannibal. Don't cry." He reached across the tray for Hannibal's hand and clasped it, stroking the knuckles with one thumb. "You're right, we'll talk about it later. When we're both less hopped up on hormones. Okay?"
"Yes, all right."

Will set the vase and its flower nearer to Hannibal. "Here. Eat your orchid."

Hannibal gazed at him with sorrow to rival Winston's over an open suitcase. "That was for you."

"Okay, I'll eat the orchid."

Will picked it up by the stem. He thought about biting off petal by petal, *loves me, loves me not*, but that didn't seem like much of a question. It hadn't seemed like a question for a while. Maybe by the time it had occurred to him to frame it, he'd already known the answer.

There was nothing mystical in an alpha-omega bond, any more than there was in the one that made mothers gaga for their infants. A rush of oxytocin to the head. But regular flooding could shift neural tributaries in their courses. Repeated heats might distill the chemistry between partners to a potency that preserved the bond like summer fruit in liquor, if the match was right.

Will had read the literature. He'd never expected to become a case study, not of something like this. Not of something good.

He stuffed the entire flower into his mouth and chewed.

*
By the next day Will’s slick had trailed off nearly to nothing. At home he’d have been back at work if he weren’t on leave. He made for the beach and went swimming. The cool water and the exertion were bracing, buoyant. Emerging soaked and loose-limbed, he towed off his face and hair and flopped into the lounge chair to dry.

Hannibal joined him for a time, then returned to the house to start something in the kitchen. The sun was rising high when Will glanced down the beach and saw a small figure crouched near the plover nesting site.

The figure proved to be a boy of six or so, towheaded, with an intent expression. He crouched on the edge of the staked-off area, poking into it with a driftwood stick.

Will sank down next to him, trying for companionable. "What're you doing?"

"There's eggs."

"Some birds called plovers are nesting here. Why are you messing with their nest?"

"I'm not messing with it," said the boy, even as he retracted the stick. "I just wanted to see the eggs."

"Do you know what it says on this sign, right here?" Will pointed.

The boy shrugged.

"It says 'Do Not Disturb.' The reason it says that is these birds are endangered. If somebody messes with their eggs, they might not hatch."

"So?"

Little shit, thought Will. Probably a budding alpha, if not a future Evil Mind for Jack’s museum. Will managed not to wrench the stick from his hands and fling it into the sea.

"Where're your parents?"

The boy pointed toward a man in swim trunks who was storming up the beach toward them. Will didn't have to smell the guy to know at a glance what he was.

"What's going on, Jayce?" said the alpha. "Who's this?"

"I dunno."

Will stood. "Sir, if this is your son, he was disturbing the nesting site."

"Jayce, you run back to the chairs and find Mommy, okay? Mommy's got snacks." The boy dropped the stick and did as he was told. When he was out of earshot, the man rounded on Will.

"Look, I don't know what your deal is, but I don't appreciate strangers taking it upon themselves to discipline my son. If there's an issue, you talk to me first. You got that? What are you, the goddamn beach patrol?" The wind shifted. The alpha's face changed: hostility dissolved into surprise, then bemusement. "Ohhhkay. Whew, damn. We'll, ah, we'll let it slide this time, eh? Where's your—" He glanced past Will. His face cleared further with relief.
"Is there a problem?"

Will turned. Hannibal's approach had been soundless. His expression was bland, nearly genial. His sunglasses hid his eyes from sight.

"Just a little misunderstanding," said the man.

Will lowered his head. "This gentleman's son misunderstood the 'Do Not Disturb' signs to mean 'Poke With Sticks.'"

The guy smirked at Hannibal, alpha to alpha. "I think maybe somebody needs to head back to the house and cool down."

"Perhaps someone does," said Hannibal. "These birds are endangered. To disturb their critical habitat is a federal offense. My friend is a federal investigator. Would you like to take this up with the law?"

"You know what? Fuck you both." He jabbed a finger at Will. "You stay away from my son."

He stamped off, arms swinging. Ignoring him, Will hunkered down to peer at the pair of speckled eggs.

"Were they damaged?" asked Hannibal.

"They don't look obviously broken." Will stood and brushed himself off. "If we get out of here maybe the parents'll come back." He shot a final glare in the direction of dickwad and son, then started back toward the house, shoulders hunching as he went. "God. What if I had a kid and it turned out like that?"

"Parenting is a factor, I believe. You would teach a child to protect a nest, not disturb it." Hannibal stretched a hand toward him. "May I? Or would you prefer to seethe without interference?"

"No, go ahead. I don't actually enjoy being uselessly pissed off."

Will slowed to put himself within easier reach. Hannibal touched the nape of his neck, a mild reminder of calm.

"That's what I'd teach a kid, sure," said Will. "But you never know. There are kids who--say they find a baby bird lying on the ground. They want to help it. All on their own, by instinct or temperament or whatever. And there are kids who want to smash it. Or torture it. Cut it up to see what makes it tweet." He bit out the words. "The killers I've caught--none of their parents raised them to be serial murderers."

"Perhaps they should have."

Will huffed. "Reverse psychology?" Hannibal continued to stroke him, thumb and forefingers kneading into his trapezius, until Will arched his neck and let his head loll. "I listened to the interview with Garret Jacob Hobbs' sister. She said she always knew something wasn't right, ever since they were little. Didn't know he was eating people. But she knew something was off."

"What about Mrs. Hobbs?"

"She thought he was suffering from depression. She wasn't an accomplice, wasn't turning a blind eye. Not consciously, anyway. She didn't know. It wrecked her, finding out."

"She must have been very convincing."
"I was convinced. So was Jack. She wasn't the one who was helping him. The daughter was coerced into it, not that it'll help her much in court."

Now father and daughter were awaiting trial, and mom was in and out of psych wards for suicide attempts. Alana had sent Will updates now and then on her condition, at least before he'd gotten sick. His shoulders sank.

Hannibal tipped his head. "There are limits to familial influence, certainly. One can feed the caterpillar, but what emerges from the chrysalis follows its own nature, which may or may not reflect the parent's. Even so, personality is not fixed. Like behavior, it evolves, responds to context." He halted. They had come to the head of the path to the house. Hannibal withdrew his hand from Will's nape. "Any child of yours would be beautiful, Will. And I think you would care for it no matter its nature."

"That's how it works, I guess." Will thought of how baffled his dad must've been by the fruit of his loins, how he'd tried to do his best by Will regardless. Right up until he couldn't. "You don't know what you're going to end up with. It's still yours." He looked at Hannibal. "Are you going in?"

"In fact I didn't come down with the intention of meddling in your battles, only to tell you lunch is almost ready."

"Food sounds good." Food, and maybe sex, and then maybe a nap. Afternoon delight in three courses. If he was going to smell like a bitch in heat and get written off like one, he might as well act the part. "Do I smell heat-ish to you, still?"

"My nose is especially attuned to you, but it would be discernible to many, I think. If clearly on the wane."

Will winced. "I thought swimming would've washed it off. That asshole could tell right away. I hate that I can't tell. To me I just smell like--" Will ducked to sniff his own shoulder, then his armpit. "Ocean. Sweat."

"Ocean, yes. The teeming cradle of life."

"Salty," said Will. "Extra salt."

"Would you like me to dispose of him for you?"

"I'll let you know."

*

Hannibal requested pompano, to serve en papillote in the New Orleans style. The owner of Masters' claimed they were around, but Will spent two days working his and Hannibal's stretch of beach--keeping a corner of his eye on plover central all the while--without a strike. He caught whiting and more trout, but no pompano.

Wrong bait, that was the problem. In the end he caved and went back to the shop for a sand flea rake. As he stepped away from the register, returning his wallet to his pocket, the shop door jingled, and who should come sauntering through but the alpha from the beach.

Will kept his eyes down. Just as he moved to make himself scarce behind a display of trolling rods, the alpha spoke.

"Hey. Hey, Mr. Beach Patrol."
Will stifled a grimace. He stopped in his tracks. "What do you want?"

"Listen, I Googled those birds. Those plovers. I talked to Jayce--that's my son. We had a good talk. He knows not to mess with the nests."

The alpha sidled between Will and the door, leaning an arm on the display.

"Look, I was not at my best the other day. My son's teacher says he has behavior problems. 'Behavior problems'--he's in fucking kindergarten. It's tough, you know? We finally make it down here, first day at the beach, and what does he do, he goes straight for the endangered birds' nests. Christ." The man dragged a hand through his short, stiff hair. "Anyway. Sorry I gave you the brush-off. The way I spoke to you, that was out of line."

The set of Will's hackles eased. He reached up to adjust his glasses on his nose. "I may not have been at my best, either," he said. It was all the appeasement he was willing to offer, but it seemed to serve; the man looked relieved.

"So, federal investigator, eh?"

"FBI," said Will.


Jeremy gestured to Will's shiny new sand flea rake. "Having any luck?"

"Some. Plenty of trout. I'm trying for pompano."

"Pompano, that's good eating. So, you down here with your mate? You guys got kids?"

Will didn't correct the assumption. He wasn't sure there was any error in it to correct. The strength of his suspicion that there wasn't should have flustered him more than it did, maybe, considering that he and Hannibal hadn't discussed it in so many words. But the animal of his heart remained quiet, mute and content.

"No kids," he said. "Not yet."

"If you're thinking about kids, you gotta be thinking about savings. Here, let me give you my card. Just in case." Jeremy dug one out of his pocket and passed it to Will. "You want to talk college savings plans, you give me a call. Free consultation. Any time."

His eagerness to undo enmity was so palpable that Will's mouth twitched up at one corner. "Thanks."

"Good luck out there. Go catch a big one."

*

Back at the house, Will found a message alert blinking on his phone. The call log showed Jack Crawford's number. Will girded himself to listen to the voice mail, but it proved to be brief: give me a call back and little else.

He set his phone on the kitchen counter. Went to the refrigerator, opened it, stared for a while at the open bottle of Pinot Gris, then grabbed a bottle of ginger beer and shut the refrigerator door. He twisted open the ginger beer with a corner of his shirt and chugged a third of it down, hoping it might
soothe the unease in his stomach. He could hear Hannibal's voice emanating from elsewhere in the house--just the cadence of it, speaking to a patient, too muted by walls and spaces for Will to discern the words. Even that helped to steady him.

Leaving the sand flea rake on the counter, he went out to the lanai to make the call.

Jack picked up on the second ring. "Will?"

"Hi, Jack."

"How are you? It's good to hear from you. You're out of the hospital, right?"

"Been out for a while."

"Good, that's good. We want you on the upswing. You taking care of yourself?"

"As best I can," said Will. He took a swig of ginger beer and wiped his mouth. "I've had help."

"I'll bet. Listen, I don't know what all you've seen about this case in Maryland, the bodies we found in the river--"

Will hadn't so much as looked at the news since he'd boarded the plane. He didn't want to know about the bodies in the river. "I'm on leave right now, Jack."

"I know you are, but you're back at home, right? I figured you'd be going stir crazy, holed up in that house."

"I'm not at home. I'm in Florida."

"Florida? What're you doing down there?"

"Oh, you know." Will paced along the screened panels that faced the water, looking out unseeing toward the brightness of the Gulf. "Searching for my lost shaker of salt."

"Right. Well, I was going to have you stop by the lab, but maybe you won't want to fly back up for that. I'll have Beverly send you the files. She's got the photos."

Will closed his eyes. "I don't know that I want to look at any photos right now, Jack."

"Come on, Will. You know I wouldn't ask if I didn't need your help. We've got a lot of missing people. You're not sick anymore, right?"

"And I don't want to get sick again."

"You won't. It wasn't looking that made you sick. You had a disease. You got treated, now you're better. There's no reason you can't come back to work." Unless you're a shirker, the tone implied. And more than that: I did not spend all that time tapping your sweaty ass at the expense of my wedding vows just so you could pussy out now. "Is Dr. Lecter there?"

"Why, you want to talk to him about it? Get my alpha to keep me in line?"

As if on cue, Hannibal appeared in front of the sliding glass door to the bedroom. He cocked his head in wordless inquiry at Will. Volunteering for duty, as he had at Will's hotel room that morning in Minnesota. How can I be of help?

Some previous version of Will might have scorned to do what he was about to. He slid open the
door.

Jack was sighing. "Will--"

Will tossed the phone to Hannibal, who caught it in midair and brought it to his ear without missing a beat.

"Agent Crawford," said Hannibal. "Are you harassing my patient?"

Sic 'em, thought Will. His lips stretched in a humorless smile. He lifted the bottle of ginger beer and polished it off. He could hear placating sounds issuing from Jack.

"I understand," said Hannibal. "But you're not in a position to determine whether Will is ready to return to work. As a physician and his partner, I can't advise him to engage in any activity that may compromise his recovery." More noises on the other end of the line, the angry wah-wah of Charlie Brown's teacher in a snit. "No, I don't believe there's anything further to discuss." Hannibal glanced again at Will, eyebrows raised. Will shook his head. "Good day, Agent Crawford."

Hannibal cut off the call with a beep.

"'Good day,'" murmured Will. "I like it."

"Politeness can be the best offense." Hannibal frowned at the phone before handing it back to Will. As he drew closer, his expression changed, going sharp and flat. He leaned forward with nostrils flared. "Has someone touched you?" His upper lip thinned as if it wanted to curl. "That man from the beach?"

Will blinked. He'd known Hannibal's nose was something else, but this was something else again. "I ran into him at the bait shop. He apologized for being a dick, more or less. We shook on it." He stared at his own open palm. "You can smell that?"

"It's an unpleasant odor. From an unpleasant person."

"I'm with you there."

"Rival alphas chasing after you left and right. I'll have to be on my guard."

Will gave him a sideways look. "I'll go wash my hands."

He went to the bathroom to scrub off the invisible taint of Jeremy the financial advisor. When he made his way back to the kitchen, he found Hannibal had discovered the sand flea rake and was examining it intently, as a cat might inspect an unexpected object in its domain.

"If I'm to use this for cooking," said Hannibal, "I must ask you to instruct me in the method."

Will grinned. "It's not for you. It's for catching sand fleas. They're not fleas, actually, they're crustaceans. Also known as mole crabs. I use the rake to catch the crabs, the crabs to catch the pompano. In theory."

"You've done this before?"

"It's been a while. Don't worry, I'll get you your fish."

"I have every confidence that you will," Hannibal said.

The rake did the trick, as did the sand fleas. Within an hour of hitting the beach Will had caught a
two-and-a-half-pounder, hefty enough to serve as dinner for both of them. Like his dad had always
said: you could catch anything with the right bait.

Hannibal offered to fillet the fish straightaway. He also allowed--though Will was still tapering his
dose of Prednisone--that Will might have a glass of wine with dinner. Will had begun to feel his
mood was unsinkable, until he went into the master suite to clean up and made the mistake of
glancing at his phone.

There was an email from Beverly with an encrypted file attached. The message read:

*Jack told me to send you this, and he is the boss of me. Sorry, Will. You could always say the files
were corrupted. Hope you're getting lots of R&R. Say hi to Dr. Lecter for me. - Bev*

Will sank onto the bed. His stomach soured with resentment. A little at Beverly for caving, but
mostly at Jack for making her send the file. For knowing Will would find it harder to ignore it if she
did.

He managed not to let it ruin dinner. He dwelled instead on the wine, the first course of crab cakes
with citrus rémoulade, even the conch cornucopia--overflowing with orchids, the shells of moon
snails, the serpentine egg cases of lightning whelks--that Hannibal had arranged as a centerpiece on
the dining table. Hannibal unveiled the pompano *en papillote* with a flourish. His knife slit open each
swollen parchment pouch, releasing puffs of steam. The fish was delicious.

"In fact it's a very simple preparation," said Hannibal. "Though I wouldn't let on in front of a guest."

"This is way better than my trout."

"I enjoyed your trout."

"Still," said Will. He raised his glass. "Good teamwork."

Hannibal raised his in return. "To fruitful collaboration," he said.

* *

As they readied for bed a storm was gathering offshore. Will woke in the night to the rattle of rain on
the hurricane shutters, the hiss of wind gusts buffeting palm fronds. Thunder snarled in the middle
distance. Hannibal slept on, unaffected by the tumult. Will lay awake for a while, then slid out of bed
and padded from the room, phone in hand.

In the living room he found his way to the couch by the glow of the phone. He didn't bother turning
on a lamp. For a long time he only sat gazing out the window, listening to the rain, watching crackles
of lightning chase one another over the Gulf.

At last he unlocked his phone, brought up the email, and opened the encrypted file.

He read the case report. He'd just begun to scroll through the DMV photos when a gash of lightning
tore overhead. The thunderclap that followed seemed to crack open the shell of the sky. Will thought
of the plover nest on the beach, unprotected from the elements. He pictured a mother or father bird
braced over the eggs, shielding them with a hollow-boned body no larger than Will's hand.

He stared into the pale glare of the screen. When he looked up again, Hannibal was in the room,
standing by the sofa, as if he'd flickered into being between one thunderbolt and the next.

Will nearly dropped the phone. There'd been no sound--but Hannibal was barefoot, clad only in
pajama pants. The rain had smothered any other noise.

"Jesus," Will said. "About gave me a heart attack."

Hannibal sat down beside him, close against him, knee to knee. He laid his chin heavily on Will's shoulder. Its regrown stubble prickled Will's skin.

"I didn't mean to startle you." His voice was rounded, muzzy with sleep. "When I woke and you weren't in bed, I thought you'd gone wandering again."

Sleepwalking, he meant. Will put down his phone on the coffee table and fitted himself more snugly into Hannibal's side. "Storm woke me up."

"Were you looking at the files from Jack?"

"Trying to. Can hardly see anything on a screen that small. I might have to borrow your tablet."

"It's yours to use if you wish, of course," said Hannibal.

"But you wish I wouldn't."

For a minute Hannibal sat in silent concession. He lifted his chin from Will's shoulder, straightening his spine. "If you're unable to determine anything from the photos, even after seeing them on a larger screen, what will you do? Will you book a flight tomorrow?"

Will jerked his head, a reflexive recoil, then shook it with more deliberation. "No, no. I'm not getting on a plane. I'll look at the pictures. That's it. I don't--" He didn't want to go back, not yet. He'd wave his doctor's excuse in Jack's face like a truant kid if he had to. Closing his eyes, he hunched and took refuge in Hannibal's solidity. "It's good here. I feel good. I don't want to leave."

"Then you shouldn't."

Warmth descended on his hair: Hannibal's hand, stroking. Will let out a quavery sigh.

"Jack thinks I'm ditching. He said it wasn't work that made me sick, and I'm not sick anymore, so--get back to work." To Will it had felt as if being in the field and losing his mind were connected, inextricable, but correlation wasn't causation. He knew that. "Maybe he has a point."

The next lightning flash showed Hannibal's mouth set in a firm line of reproof.

"Jack disregards interpretations of the evidence that inconvenience him. Stress weakens the immune system, fosters inflammation. Not much is known about the causes of autoimmune encephalitis in absence of a tumor, but the stress of your work may have been a factor in the onset. We can't be certain. Nor can we rule it out." His hand slid from Will's hair to the side of his face, fingers brushing Will's earlobe, his cheek. "I meant what I said to Jack. Your condition is much improved, but I don't want to see a setback. Or a relapse."

"Neither do I."

Lowering his hand, Hannibal turned toward the window. "It's concerning to me that he has so little regard for your being on leave. What if it were paternity leave? Would he demand that you drop the babe in your arms to come running to a crime scene?"

"He wouldn't--" said Will, but he wasn't sure. The truth was, he didn't know what Jack wouldn't do, as long as it meant getting his man. He knew Jack loved his wife, had hated to give up his fidelity,
even if only the physical part. Knew he'd ponied up that treasure for the sake of loading Will into the starting gate, to let Will take off running at the shrilling of the bell. What else might he trade away, with even less compunction, of his own or of Will's?

Like an echo in the mind, Hannibal said, "If he won't respect such boundaries now, when will he respect them?"

"Maybe never," said Will. "I think some part of him will always feel like he has a claim on me. Because of--"

"Your previous arrangement."

Will nodded.

"Will you let him continue to impose?"

Will shifted on the sofa to face Hannibal, as if darkness were no impediment to looking him in the eyes. No obstacle to seeing him.

"You think I should quit?" Before Hannibal could speak, Will added, "I know it's my decision. I want to know what you think."

Hannibal clasped Will's hands in his. "Until now you've been willing to sacrifice your own health and well-being for the sake of your work, regardless of my feelings on the matter. Has that changed?" His voice went low. "What if the life and health you risked were not only your own?"

It stopped Will short. He could picture himself becoming a father, having a kid. His and Hannibal's--the pang he felt at the thought of it transfixed him. What he couldn't see was coming home with his head full of the next Garret Jacob Hobbs and trying to care for a child. Changing diapers. Spoon-feeding applesauce, or *compote de pommes*. Chasing away the nightmares under the bed. How could he, when he'd be dragging the nightmares home with him.

He drew a tight breath.

"I could...go back to teaching. Just teach." The schedule would be reasonable. Consistent. No need to drop baby at the drop of a hat to go haring after the latest murder spree. And no new monsters. Only the ones already in his head.

"It would be a comfort to me if you did," said Hannibal. He squeezed Will's hands. "Though I fear Jack might still haunt the doorway of your classroom, now that he knows the way."

Will sank against the sofa cushions with a voiceless expulsion of air. "Have to put you on guard duty. You on one side, Alana on the other. That might hold him. For a minute."

"Long enough to distract him while you escape from the back."

Will mustered a crooked smile. "Meet you in the parking lot in my getaway van." His hands were still wrapped up in Hannibal's. He turned and opened them so he could squeeze back. "I wanted to be an agent. For so long." During his twenties it had seemed possible, achievable, before his allergy to suppressants had developed. Will remembered the dull despair at his body's betrayal, the crush of hope when Jack had offered him a way around the rules. "Or thought I did."

"Each of us strays from the straightforward path at some point in our life. When I was in my thirties the idea that I might seek a career other than surgery had scarcely occurred to me."
"Do you miss it?" Will asked. "Being a surgeon."

"Parts of it, yes."

"The slicing parts or the dicing?"

He didn't need lightning to catch the look Hannibal leveled at him for that. "The adrenaline," Hannibal said. "The physicality. Using my hands as much as my mind. But the field has changed even since I left it. So much now is done with lasers and robotics, not a scalpel and the human hand. And had I never taken up psychiatry, Jack Crawford would never have invited me into his office to analyze you. So." He leaned down, bumping his forehead against Will's. "I have no regrets."

Will withstood the onslaught of affection for a moment, as long as he could, then ducked into Hannibal's shoulder. "Aw, shucks," he said.

The force of the storm was receding. The wind and rain had eased. The incomity of the hour began to reassert itself, settling on Will until his eyes ached. Hannibal nuzzled the top of his head.

"I'll make some tea. Something soothing. Then back to bed, yes? Your files will keep until tomorrow."

Nodding, Will sat up and released him to the kitchen.

By morning the storm had cleared. Before breakfast Will walked down the beach, following the trail of fresh sargassum and bivalves strewn up by the storm. The stakes around the nesting site remained standing, unbent. Slowing as he approached, Will saw a small winged shape skitter from the nest into the air.

The sun grew brighter as he returned to the house. He transferred his files to Hannibal's tablet and sat at the breakfast bar to pore over them, mug of coffee clutched in his other hand. He rearranged the photographs like pieces of a jigsaw, shuffling and re-shuffling, until the image of the puzzle coalesced.

He emailed Beverly: *It's a color palette. That's all I've got. Tell Jack the next file that comes through gets deleted unread.*

*He shut down his phone and abandoned it to the bedside table, unplugged.*
Hannibal had invited their neighbors--the ones with Fritz the schnauzer--for cocktails. He served a species of gin and tonic called *Genévrier des Sud* and miniature lobster salads in sorbet cups. The neighbors proved to be retired teachers--music and German, respectively--who'd been regular visitors to the island for a decade and more. They exclaimed over the lobster salad. They asked whether Will and Hannibal had seen the plover nesting site.

Will was beginning to think it took a village to raise a shorebird. "Will they hatch soon?" he asked.

It could be any day, the music teacher said.

Hannibal offered dinner, but the couple thanked him and begged off; they had reservations at a nearby club. After they left Will refilled his tumbler with Tanqueray and tonic--mostly Tanqueray--and wandered out through the sea oats to the beach.

A breeze flowed off the water, consistent enough to discourage insects that bit. The sky gleamed with the red aftermath of sunset, vivid and tending to purple. Will walked as far as the plover nesting site, saw the tiny heads and bright tiny eyes tilt at his approach. He halted and came no nearer.

He'd worried about moorings built on sand, and here was a pair of parents making their nest on it. Perilous, it seemed to him, but the storm had left them unscathed. It wasn't building on sand that endangered them. It was predation.

He made his way back to the twin lounge chairs to find Hannibal sitting in one of them, glass in hand. Hannibal's wardrobe had started to go native, finally: he still wore trousers, not shorts, but the shirt was Tommy Bahama, a botanical print in pale yellow and blue. Whether it was a good look on him or not, it made Will smile.

He rattled the ice in his tumbler. "You didn't bring me a refill?"

"If I had, how many would that make?"

"A couple," said Will. At Hannibal's look, he stuck out his chin. "I'm celebrating getting off my meds. My doctor gave me the all clear."

"Indulgent of him." Hannibal smiled faintly, his eyes following the waves where they curled and dissipated into foam.

Will set the tumbler down on the arm of the empty chair. He swayed a little as he made his way around it. Shit, he thought. He needed to get his sea legs back. Despite the wobbling, he managed to navigate himself into Hannibal's lap. Hannibal unfolded to accommodate, then gathered him in.

"Also," said Will, "my window for drinking adult beverages may be finite."

Hannibal went still. For a minute Will didn't dare crane his neck to look at him. The angle made it awkward, anyway.

"You've considered it, then." Hannibal spoke in a hush, as if they sat in a chapel, not on a beach.

"I've considered a lot. You're too smooth, and I'm too prickly. Maybe Junior can manage to hit the Goldilocks zone." There was a name for the books. Goldilocks Graham-Lecter. "What do you think?"
A pause, and then Hannibal was burying his face against the join of Will's neck and shoulder, pressing hard. His voice when he spoke was hoarse. "The smoothness is illusion. Surface only."

"I know. Still."

Hannibal's arms snaked around Will's midriff to clutch him. "When I thought I might lose you to illness, having only just found you--"

"Hey, hey. You didn't. You figured it out." Will did turn, then, throwing his legs sideways over Hannibal's thigh. He reached up and stroked the hair back from Hannibal's face. "I'm here because you did. If you take half as good care of a kid as you did of me while I was sick, we're gonna be fine," he said. "All of us."

Hannibal's gaze on him turned so liquid and shining that Will wondered how much gin he'd had. "I want a child with you, Will. To give you a child. For you to have our child. I want it very much."

Will curled an arm around his neck, bracing it against the back of the chair, and leaned in. What was it Jack had said, in that hotel room? It hadn't seemed much of a blessing at the time. "Have at it, Doctor. See if you can knock me up."

Hannibal clutched him harder. There was a wildness in the white rims of his eyes Will had never seen until now. Maybe it should've unnerved him. He nuzzled up to Hannibal's ear.

"Does that turn you on? It does, doesn't it. God. You want me to use the b-word?" He let his lips move wetly on Hannibal's earlobe and tried for his best omega porn-star voice. Just a hint of whimper to it. "Breed me, Hannibal?"

The noise this provoked in Hannibal's throat was less a growl than a gurgle. He hugged Will tight, palming up and down his body.

"Wicked," he rasped, "deplorable--"

He kissed Will, fierce at first, and then seemed to repent of the fierceness. The second kiss was slow and deep. Before Hannibal drew back he nipped at Will's lower lip, at the softened corners of his mouth. His eyes had gone wholly dark.

"We should go to the house. Before you cause a scene."

"Me? I'm not doing it on my own, here." Will bumped their noses together. "Should I start calling you 'Papa' in advance? Or did you want to be 'Daddy'?"

At that Hannibal launched them both out of the chair. Will stumbled on his feet, grinning, then darted ahead as they started up the path. If a dog had done the same he'd have called it frisking. He felt reckless and weightless, carried on the high crest of a wave. Hannibal followed after him, mock-stalking. They nearly collided among the sea grapes when Will dawdled to let himself be caught. Together they climbed the outside stairs.

The sky had darkened to indigo. Lamplight shone from inside the house, but the lanai off the master bedroom was unlit. The daybed with its pale cushions floated among the shadows like a cloud.

They shed their shoes before going in. As the screen door swung shut behind them, Hannibal smacked Will on the ass with the flat of his palm. Will let out a yelp, more from amazement than anything else.

"That's for your cheek," Hannibal said.
Will pivoted, half laughing. "Did I say you could spank me?" He flopped onto the daybed and crab-walked backward into the cushions, reaching for a handful of Hannibal's shirt to tug him along. "We haven't talked about corporal punishment."

Hannibal came after him on all fours, then eased to one side to lean on a cushion, leaving one leg hooked between Will's. "Perhaps we should."

"In relation to me or our hypothetical offspring?"

"Let's start with you."

"Well," drawled Will, "my dad spanked me when I was a kid. Never used anything but his hand. No belts, no switches. No riding crops."

"What did he spank you for?"

"One time I remember, I'd gotten into his toolbox and messed with his tools. I was pretty little. He lit into me good after that."

"His tools," repeated Hannibal.

"Uh-huh."

"Inappropriate for a small boy to play with. Unsafe."

"Exactly."

Hannibal flattened his lips. "Is this a factual narrative or a fiction comprised of shameless innuendo?"

Throwing his head back, Will flashed his teeth. "Oh, it happened. As described."

"And what are your thoughts on spanking now?"

"I don't mind if you want to do it. I don't know if I want to think of it as 'punishment.'"

"What would you like to think of it as?"

Will wriggled his shoulders against the pillows. It was as much a gleeful squirm as a shrug. "Hot?"

Hannibal looked almost rueful. "I see."

"How would you think of it?" asked Will. "You think I need to be punished?" He paused. "Have I been that bad?"

"You have been, if anything, too concerned with being good. At times I feel a desire to correct that."

"You want me to mess with your toolbox?" Eyebrows cocked, Will splayed his hand over Hannibal's crotch and squeezed.

Hannibal closed his eyes. He drew a fortifying breath through his nose. "I revise my statement. You are naughty, Will Graham. Naughty and crass."

"You wish you only found it crass when I talk like that." Will stilled his hand. "Is that something you're into? Punishment. You think it'd be fun to hit me? Tie me up?" He did his best to maintain a neutral tone. It was probably good they were having this conversation, he thought, before he got knocked up rather than after.
"I'm not wedded to any particular form of activity," said Hannibal. "It would be more accurate to say there's very little I wouldn't like to do with you. So." He raised himself up on one arm and looked down at Will. "What shall we do with you now?"

"What happened to starting on project baby?"

"It's unlikely anything we do tonight will achieve that aim. Fortunately for you, I have others."

"I don't care about statistical probability." Will fingered the top button of Hannibal's shirt, then undid it. He kept undoing until the shirt gaped open, baring Hannibal's chest. He put his palm to warm skin and slid his fingers through the fuzz of hair. "I want you to fuck me," he said. "Like I'm still in heat. Like you can't help it."

Their eyes met and caught. Without breaking the line of his gaze, Hannibal sat up to strip off his shirt. The roll of his shoulders, their muscles outlined in a faint sheen of light, made Will's mouth go slack.

"If you want me to do that, I'll need you to be wet for me. Nice and slick." Before Will could speak, Hannibal forestalled him. "And don't say 'There's such a thing as lube,' because that would neither taste nor smell of you. I want you wet with your slick, not a substitute. Can you do that for me? I think you can."

Licking his lips, Will nodded. "Are we--doing this out here?"

Hannibal glanced around the dark lanai. "Al fresco. Why not?" He reached for the drawstring of Will's shorts and plucked. "These should come off, I think."

Will hiked up his hips to let Hannibal drag the shorts down. Hannibal tilted his head, as if considering options, then resettled to sit with his back to the cushions, legs outstretched.

"Why don't you lie down across Daddy's lap?"

Will groaned, but peeled off his shirt and crawled across him as directed. "About that. I was mostly teasing. Maybe eighty percent."

"I know you were." Hannibal laid a hand over Will's bare ass, squarely in the middle, then slid one finger along the cleft. He began to stroke lightly, up and down, over and over. "Two can play at that, don't you think? Or don't you want Daddy to make you feel good?"

The bottom dropped out of Will's stomach. The delicacy of the touch sent frissons up his spine. He shut his eyes. He could feel Hannibal's cock through the fabric of Hannibal's trousers, half-hard and getting harder against his hip. He stiffened, holding himself taut so as not to writhe.

"Does that feel nice? Do you want to rub against Daddy while he helps you get wet? It's all right to move if you need to."

Squinching his eyes tight, Will swore. A finger flicked hard against his perineum. It stung briefly, and the sting made Will bite his lip.

"Language," Hannibal said. He licked his finger, then pressed the tip of it in to tease at Will's hole, delicate still, but insistent.

Will's jaw came unclenched. He hung his head and let himself start to rock against Hannibal's thighs. He could feel his slick beginning to well, feel the head of his cock blotting stains onto Hannibal's pants. Hannibal leaned over him and took a deep, relishing sniff.
"That's it. That's my good boy." He traced the rim of Will's hole once more, then spread his palm flat over Will's cheeks and let it rest there, barely in contact with skin. Will buried his face in the crook of his own arm, breathing hard through his nose. "If you want me to spank you, Will, I think you'd better say so."

"Okay, do it. Not too hard, just--"

Before he could finish, Hannibal delivered a swift smack. It was the noise--sharp as gunshot--that shocked Will as much as the feel of being struck. The sting melted almost at once to a tingling heat, and then Hannibal was soothing him, fingeriing his hole again. Will moaned and ground down into his lap.

"All right?" Hannibal sounded amused, like a grown-up watching a child have a very tame adventure. Will flushed harder and narrowed his eyes.

"You like this," he said. "Having to work for it. Heat sex is too easy for you. You'd be bored out of your skull by it if the hormones didn't shut down your higher brain functions."

Hannibal denied nothing, only said: "Do you imagine this amounts to work?"

Another smack. Will yipped and lurched up onto his hands and knees. Hannibal laid a hand on the small of his back, steadying. Enough slick had welled for him to push a finger in, smooth and easy. In, and out, and in again, until Will was panting and gulping for air.

"Wait, wait." He grabbed at the leg of Hannibal's trousers. "Why do you still have these on?"

Eyebrows raised, as if to cede the point, Hannibal let go of him and knelt up, unbuttoning. Before he'd drawn the pants even halfway down, Will swung around toward him and groped for his freed cock.

Hannibal went still. Will leaned in, breathing open-mouthed. He might not be an olfactory genius, but the smell of Hannibal's arousal still made need twist in his belly, made his mind fizzle with static and go blank.

In that blankness he heard himself say, "You need to be wet, too, Daddy. Is it okay if I help get you wet?"

Hannibal sat back on his haunches, hard. He made no effort to guide Will or constrain him. Will put his lips over the head of Hannibal's cock and mouthed it softly, slathering as much spit as he could. He tasted pre-come. He knew without looking up that Hannibal would be watching him, staring down--with lips parted, maybe, eyes dark and bright at once.

At last Hannibal's hand came to rest on his head. For a few heartbeats it only rested, lightly. Then Hannibal seized a fistful of Will's curls and gripped. Will pulled off, chin dripping. The grip in his hair was hard enough to hurt.

"As if I can't help it, you said."

Hannibal's voice had gone rough. At Will's nod, Hannibal let go of his hair in favor of grabbing his nape and pushing him down over the nearest pillow. He climbed behind Will, grasping his hip with one hand, and Will felt two fingers at his hole, testing its slickness once more with a cursory breach. Will bit the pillow beneath him. The fingers withdrew. Hannibal positioned his cock and pressed in.

Unclouded by heat-haze, Will's mind felt keen, awake to each burst of sensation. It was their first
time with no condom, with nothing between them, and they'd done this little enough when he wasn't in heat. Even with plenty of slick, he felt every inch going in. Hannibal bent over him, face smothered into his shoulder, then reared up and started to thrust.

His aim was always true. Every inward push grazed the sweet spot inside Will, until Will groaned and stuttered and flinched. Hannibal made a guttural sound in his throat.

"Will," he crooned, "so good, so slick for me. I should've fucked you like this from the start. You'd have our child in your belly now if I had. But you don't need to worry. If this doesn't take, we'll do it again. As many times as we need to." He raked at Will's sides with bent fingers, as if his nails had grown into claws, and jacked up his pace. "Daddy's going to come now, sweet boy. Do you want Daddy's come inside?"

The noise Will made broke apart in his throat. Hannibal took it for the yes that it was. He reached to fist Will's cock blindly through the last jerks of his hips. Then he stilled, shuddering, and bit down on the line of Will's scapula, almost hard enough to draw blood.

The grip on Will's cock suddenly eased. Hannibal's thumb smeared softly over the slit. The abrupt gentleness of the touch sent shocks through Will. He went stiff, insides clenching, and in fitful bucks spilled on Hannibal's hand.

Hannibal's weight over him seemed to condense. He nosed at Will's ear, slipped his tongue into its little hole as if there were no opening to Will's body he could bear to leave unfilled. He let go of Will's cock and lifted his hand to their faces, within reach of his mouth and Will's. He licked his own fingertips clean while Will lapped the drips from his wrist.

When Hannibal slid out of him, Will slumped. Bereft, he turned his face to be properly kissed. Hannibal licked into his mouth, then crawled backward and bent to his hole, where come was trickling out, mingled with slick.

Will stirred. "Hannibal--"

"Hush. Let me."

Subsiding, Will did. He shivered as Hannibal licked him clean—it was almost more than he could stand—but Hannibal was careful. When most of the mess was gone Hannibal rose and went into the master suite. He returned with a warm washcloth to finish the rest, and a loose-knit blanket for Will.

The air had cooled with the descent of full dark; Will felt it now. He tugged the blanket over him and said to Hannibal, "Come here."

Hannibal obeyed, lying down on his side so Will could curl against his chest. He draped his arm around Will and fitted his face to Will's hair. Neither of them spoke.

Will's mind was purely vacant. The sex and the gin acted on him like a tranquilizer dart. For a while he drowsed, listening to Hannibal's heart and the breeze through the palm fronds outside.

"Think we got it in one?" he mumbled at last.

"I doubt it." Hannibal put a hand to Will's belly. His thumb brushed Will's navel, tracing around it in idle whorls. "Even if we had, where's the fun in that? I'd much prefer to keep trying."

Will shook his head, but it wasn't in denial. "I think you'd better be 'Papa,'" he said.

"'Papa' to the little one," said Hannibal, warm against his ear. "And 'Daddy' for you."
"God. Don't start again."

"It wasn't me who started it." As if they were on the playground, pointing fingers after a fight. "If you dislike it, then that's an end to it, of course."

"I didn't say that." Will shut his eyes. He focused on the feeling of Hannibal's hand on his belly: the care of his touch, the light, steady strokes of his thumb. "Will you...will you do the surgery, if...when it's time?"

He heard Hannibal's indrawn breath: that had surprised him. But when Hannibal spoke he sounded cautiously pleased.

"Most clinics discourage doctors from performing surgery on their mates. But I wouldn't like to entrust you to anyone else. We'll find a way, if that's what you want." He touched Will's lips with his fingers. "Now you're smiling."

"You used the m-word," Will said.

"Did I?"

"Did I?" mimicked Will. He opened his eyes. "As if you'd slip up."

"It's been for some time now that I've thought of you as mine," said Hannibal. It sounded like an admission, almost an apology. "I assumed if you didn't feel likewise, you'd have run me off long ago, not continued to invite me in. Let alone invited me to father a child."

It was difficult for Will to talk around the burgeoning in his chest, the feeling of a membrane about to rupture and gush brightness everywhere. He tried anyway.

"I've...been thinking you might be mine, too." He'd told Hannibal he wasn't shy--why then was it so hard to say it? Maybe he was shy in this, in happiness, unsure of his footing on still unfamiliar ground. He squinted. "Most people would've had this talk before the baby one, I guess."

"Are you and I most people?"

"Not even close."

Eventually Hannibal roused them both to go into the house. They hadn't eaten dinner yet, Will realized. His stomach was silent on the subject, but if Hannibal set food in front of him, he'd probably bite.

Hannibal collected their abandoned clothes. When he picked up Will's shorts, a business card fell from one pocket to the floor. Hannibal bent to retrieve it and carried it into the bedroom to read in the light.

"Jeremy Blyle, financial advisor?"

"That noisy alpha from the beach," said Will.

"He gave you his card?"

"Part of his apology." Will yawned. "You can pitch it, as far as I'm concerned. Unless you're in the market for financial advice."

Hannibal held the card in his hand for a moment, seeming to weigh its worth.
"Perhaps I'd better keep it," he said. "Just in case."

*
"We never finished our conversation," said Hannibal.

He stood at the kitchen counter, juicing blood oranges for blood orange mimosas. Will suspected there might be an actual juicer stowed in one of the cupboards—the kind where you stuck fruit in and got juice out, no elbow grease required. If there was such a thing, Hannibal wasn't using it. He stood over an old-fashioned glass reamer with sleeves rolled up, compressing halved oranges into it with his palms. Juice streamed out, fragrant and pinkish red. The entire kitchen smelled of citrus.

Will sat at the breakfast bar, tasked with peeling and dicing mangoes for chutney. He wasn't making much progress on the dicing. The temperature had cooled overnight, but not by much. It wasn't cold in the house. There was no discernible reason for Hannibal to be wearing long sleeves. If anything the kitchen was warm. Something about the way the rolled folds of white fabric hugged and clung to the shifting muscles of Hannibal's arms--

Will blinked down at the fruit in his hand. He was getting mango goo all over.

"Which conversation?" he said.

"About spanking."

It took him a minute to remember the hypothetical offspring portion of the question. But probably they ought to talk about parenting philosophies. Hash out discrepancies, lay the groundwork in advance.

"You go first," he said.

Hannibal kneaded another orange into the reamer. "To strike a child is, at best, an act of fear and frustration on the part of the guardian," he said. "A loss of control, not only of the child but of oneself. I can't condone it."

"Me neither." Will set to work on the second mango. "I don't hold it against my dad that he did it. But I wouldn't want to do it. No self-respecting dog trainer would hit a dog."

He watched Hannibal visibly withhold comment on the equivalence of dogs and children--of dogs and their child. Princess Goldilocks Graham-Lecter. Nobody was going to be whapping her with a rolled-up newspaper, even if she did make a mess on the floor.

"It's ineffective, besides," added Hannibal. "What a child learns from such punishment is not to avoid the proscribed behavior, only to take better care not to be caught."

Will's mouth quirked. "Did you? Take care not to get caught?"

"Assiduous care. Though I can't recall an occasion when either of my parents struck me. The orphanage later was another matter."

Before Will could do more than stop dicing and gaze at him, arrested with protective dismay, Hannibal gathered up the spent oranges and carried them to the sink.

"We're of the same mind, then," he said. He switched on the disposal unit and fed rinds to it one by one. Just like that, the door to the past swung shut again. But Will hadn't expected otherwise. He let Hannibal retreat to the present.
"No spanking for Junior," Will said.

"Only for you."

Setting down the paring knife, Will thumbed cubes of mango into the waiting bowl. "I'm not convinced that's only for me," he said. "Wasn't me who started it. Makes me wonder what other proclivities you've been hiding."

Hannibal leaned over the sink, rinsing red pulp from his hands. He tilted his hint of a smile catty-corner at Will, as if to say, *moi?*

It gave Will pause. He wondered, as he never had before, about the typical fantasies endemic to alphas. Commonplace stuff. Vagaries he wouldn't have guessed Hannibal might be susceptible to, not before the other night.

"Let me guess. Pissing on your territory? Or are you one of those kinky alphas who likes to take it from behind?"

Hannibal went blithely poker-faced. "Are you offering to give it?"

Will stared, then blew out an explosive breath. "Wait--seriously?"

"As I said, there's very little I wouldn't like--"

"--to do with me. Right." Only the mango goo on Will's fingers kept him from covering his eyes and scrubbing at his face. He slid from the bar stool and went to the sink to wash up. "God. What've I let myself in for."

He'd been with alphas and beta women in his life, if not many of either. His sex with alphas had been heat sex, in the throes of his body's demands, basic and urgent. Perfunctory. Jack had never offered to do more than the necessary--would never have offered, or even germinated the idea. The thought of it made Will's brain lag, not out of titillation but a failure to compute.

Hannibal was looking at him far too brightly.

"I'll think about it," said Will, if only to get him to quit. He shut off the faucet, furrowing his brow. "Would you feel deprived if we didn't?"

Hannibal stepped into his space, caging Will against the kitchen sink with his body. "No. Far from it. And I wouldn't deprive either of us of what you need. But perhaps as a chance of pace, if you find you'd like to try it." He bent to nose at Will's ear. "Daddy promises to make it nice for you if you do."

A bloom of hot disbelief spread through Will. His imagination unspooled. He let himself try to conceive of it: Hannibal around instead of in him. Other than that, maybe it would be no different. There might still be the gentling, the coaxing, the low encouragement. The praise that unlatched and dismantled him, piece after piece.

He swayed backward. Hannibal was tracing the curl of his ear with parted lips, slipping fingers along the waistband of his shorts. Will grasped the edge of the sink with both hands, as if it were the safety bar on a carnival ride. His chin tipped upward. His eyelids drooped and fluttered shut.

The house phone rang.

They both froze and turned to look at it, startled by the reminder of its existence. On the second ring
Hannibal unhanded Will and crossed the kitchen to pick up.

"Hello?" He cocked his head. "Ah, good morning, Mrs. Pullman."

One of the neighbors--the retired music teacher. Will let out a breath and turned to clean up the sink.

"Not at all. It was our pleasure." A pause. "That sounds lovely. May I speak with Will and call you back? I'm not sure whether he'd planned an excursion." Another pause. "Has it? Yes, I'll tell him. He'll be delighted to hear. Until later, then."

Hannibal hung up the phone. "We've been invited for drinks," he said, "and there's breaking news. One of the eggs has hatched."

Will's head perked up. "Really?" He twisted the dishtowel in his hands, worrying it. "Only one?"

"She did say one. Shall we go and see?"

* * *

Hannibal had found an old pair of field glasses somewhere in the house. The glasses made it possible to observe the plover nest and its occupants from a respectable distance. Will adjusted the focus. He scanned until he caught sight of the parent bird--the male with his neat dark epaulettes and dark blaze on his brow--sitting on the nest. Peeking out from the fluff of his breast was a small ball of separate fluff, specked as its egg had been. The other egg remained hidden.

Will handed the glasses to Hannibal. The unhatched egg niggled at him. That kid with the goddamned stick, he thought--but it could've been anything. The storm, or some other assault he hadn't witnessed. It could've been his own encroachment, scaring off the parents one too many times.

Hannibal lowered the field glasses and turned to Will. "You're not pleased?"

"I am. I just wish both of them had hatched."

"The other may still. A late bloomer."

"Could be, yeah."

They started back toward the house, facing windward. Will went barefoot in the wet sand, walking between Hannibal and the water. The field glasses hung around Hannibal's neck.

"Now that your sentinel duty is discharged," Hannibal said, "what would you say to venturing a bit further afield? We might go down to the Keys for a day or two. Take the high-speed ferry. Unless you'd prefer to sail."

"I don't have a boat down here," said Will, and then shut his mouth. Too late.

"Easily remedied. Take the ferry down, find you a boat, and sail back."

He'd waltzed right into that one. "I have a boat. At home."

Hannibal had seen the contents of his shed in Wolf Trap. "You have an assortment of parts that aspire to one day become seaworthy."

"It's work in progress," Will said. He glanced sideways. "I'm not letting you buy me a boat, Hannibal."
"No?" Hannibal pursed his lips. "I thought you might prefer a boat to a ring, but if you insist on refusing the one, I'll have to insist on the other."

Will stopped in his tracks. The wind picked up, catching at his hair. A wave lapped at the back of his heels.

"Did you just--"

The wave swept out, then in again with greater eagerness, dousing his Achilles tendons. Will crossed his arms over his chest, covered his mouth with one curled fist. A laugh like a hiccup escaped him. If he didn't laugh he was going to do something else.

"I take back what I said about you being smooth," he said. His vision began to blur. He wished he could put it down to the bursting in his chest. "Really?"

Hannibal was watching him, squinting against the light. He hadn't brought his sunglasses. "Is it so unlikely?"

"Your lapse in suaveness? No."

"Not that. The thought that I would wish my mate and the bearer of our child to also be my husband."

There it was, thought Will. The h-word. For some reason it seemed starker than the others. A steeper, more precipitous drop. He stood in place, feet sinking into what felt like quicksand. The water sluiced and frothed around him.

"What if I said I wasn't sure?"

"Then I would need to work harder to persuade you." Hannibal reached to cradle him by the elbows, gently. He was standing in the water, now, too. "Would you like me to?"

Will looked down to see the cuffs of Hannibal's trousers getting soaked by the surf. Why he hadn't bothered to roll them like his sleeves--Will shook his head.

"I like watching you work," he said. "But you don't have to. I'm pretty hooked."

"Good," said Hannibal, reaching to take his hand. "Now, as for a boat."

Swaying, Will shouldered into him. He felt his face might split from the stretch of his grin. "Like I said--"

They went back to the house. Hannibal changed out of his wet trousers, then poured mimosas and started on breakfast. The eggs were local, from a farmer's market. The ham had been shipped down from Baltimore, some fancy free-range cuts from Hannibal's own freezer, because God forbid he order from the Publix deli.

Will leaned against the breakfast bar, flute in hand. His mimosa was mostly juice. After the gin binge he'd have to re-wean himself, but at least being treated for brain fever had braced him for a nine-month drought of booze. He knew Hannibal would have no trouble handling the extra Prosecco.

His other hand rested on the counter, on the spot where Hannibal had perched him, that first morning, to lap him up and drink him down. Maybe after breakfast he'd ask for another helping of that. Maybe he'd return the favor.
Over eggs Benedict he said yes to the Keys, yes to looking at boats. Only looking. If nothing else, he could pretend to find fault with all of them. That might delay the inevitable, right up until Hannibal dialed up Morris Yachts and ordered a custom Grande Touring. Will tried to imagine confessing—to Beverly, to Alana, to the deadpan memory of his dad—not just that he'd gotten engaged, but that he hadn't been able to keep Hannibal from buying him an engagement yacht.

He firmed his resolve to resist. Or failing that, to tell no one.

* 

After lunch Hannibal had a single appointment. Will started in the direction of the beach, but got no further than the hammock on the patio below deck. The day had warmed with afternoon. It was comfortable in the shade, sheltered by house and palms and sea grapes. Will stretched out in the hammock, suspended in its web of netting, hands draped over his belly. The hammock swung. He closed his eyes.

Maybe it would be better to let Hannibal spring for something, he thought, rather than try to stave him off completely. A little bay boat for fishing, like the one from Will's dream. He drifted to the purr of an imagined motor, the glint of a white prow tilling the waves. In the haze between waking and sleeping he saw a dark shape in the water, horned and hooved and fish-tailed, surging to ride the wave of the bow.

* 

End Notes

I've taken some liberties with the actual geography of southwest Florida barrier islands, but the gist is there.

Thank you to Hannipenguin/byk23 for the beautiful cover art!

You can find me on tumblr: http://unicornmagic.tumblr.com/

Works inspired by this one: Captiva & Ananta by Nonexistenz

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