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# Holding the Hand that Holds Me Down

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## Summary

Willa Graham has spent her life searching for what everyone in life is searching for - someone who understands her. While solving crimes for the FBI she meets Dr. Hannibal Lecter who at first isn't all that interesting and then, later, might be too good to be true. It takes her too long to realize it's the opposite.

## Notes

Title taken from a Breaking Benjamin song. Full credit to them.

Credit also given to the Hannibal TV show. At times, lines are lifted from the episodes. Timeline of the show and this story don't match up. In the show the cases were used to mirror and show the story if Will Graham. This story is a bit different so the crimes have been shifted around to fit a new narrative.

Warnings: Violence, Emotional Manipulation, Cannibalism, character death. Anything that happened in the show is fair game here.
Chapter 1

Will.
Willa.

Only one letter difference.

But that letter makes a lot of difference.

Letters do that.

Willa is treated differently than Will would be.

Ms. Graham as opposed to Mr.

Sometimes, Willa thinks she should go back to school for a PhD. Dr. Graham has a nice ring to it. One letter difference between Dr. and Mr. But too much difference from Ms. Besides, names are just an introduction, just a start.

First appearances also contribute to impressions, and no matter how many letters Willa changes, she’s always going to look like a woman.

Heh, that’s another difference. XX and XY.

She digresses.

Whether there’s a Dr. or a Ms. or Mr. or even an Agent in front of Graham, she’s not going to change. Dr. Graham would wear the same glasses that Willa Graham does. Agent Graham would have the same quirks. Mrs. Graham might have a wedding ring but then again, she probably wouldn’t be Mrs. Graham. She’d be Mrs. Something Else.

Not that she thinks of marriage often. She doubts she’ll ever get married. Wilhelmin Graham in her scuffed boots and worn jeans and plaid shirts. She can wear the plaid to lecture, because they button up. Any shirt that buttons up the front is a formal shirt. Her dad taught her that one.

Her dad also taught her to fix boat motors, cuss enough to get scolded by her school teachers, and that being tough was nothing to be ashamed of. Of course, he also taught her that alcoholism - and tempers - run in the family.

She’s just finished her lecture for the day when Jack Crawford strides into the room. She doesn’t need her glasses when she lectures though she sometimes wears them, because there’s no need or expectation that she meet the eyes of her students. She’s not talking to one of them, she’s talking to all of them so she looks at her slides or her notes or lets her gaze flit from ponytail to laptop to tapping pencil.

When Crawford makes his way through the exiting students - he’s going the wrong way, people should be leaving now not entering - Willa fumbles for her glasses. There are no protective shades, no tinted glass to hide behind, but they protect her just the same. She can look at the rims instead of at a person and most people wouldn’t know better.

“I’m Special Agent Jack Crawford,” he says. That’s another title she doesn’t have ‘Special Agent’. She’s special but not an agent. Not special in the right way. She should’ve known she wouldn’t
pass the tests, maybe she did know and was just letting herself hope. She can’t see all the things
she sees with some of it filtering through.

She can step into anyone’s head, can see their motivations and their drives. Can see what they’ve
done and predict what they’re going to do. Nobody ever asks her to look at nice things. She only
sees the worst. Her biggest fear is that one day she’s going to go too deep in someone’s head and
she’s going to bring back a bit of them with her. Not enough to know she’s not herself but enough
to warp her. She can’t be sure that hasn’t happened yet already.

It’s why she got out of the field and into a classroom.

Well, that and getting stabbed.

In a classroom she’s safe from the outside world.

And the outside world is safe from her.

“I lead the Behavioral Science Unit,” Jack tells her.

She knows this. They’ve met before. Willa’s not boasting when she says she’s not easily forgotten.
She wishes she was. But she tends to make an impression on people. Creepy. Weird. Crazy. She’s
had every label in the world lobbed at her. Some of them she even deserves.

She knows Jack Crawford knows her. They met when he opened the new museum. The Evil Minds
Research Museum. Willa thought that was a ridiculous name. She still thinks it’s a ridiculous
name. She told Jack then and she tells him again now even though it’s too late to change it.

It’s not too late for Jack Crawford to decide she’s not worth his time.

He doesn’t turn around and walk out when she gets prickly. Instead, he presses harder. Insults her
choice to teach and then asks her why she isn’t sociable. Maybe, she isn’t sociable because people
aren’t worth being sociable with.

She doesn’t say that.

She’s tempted.

Being ‘unsociable’ lets her get away with a lot, but it’s never good to push someone in power.

A moment later, when Crawford adjusts her glasses, pushing them up her nose so she’s forced to
look at him, she wishes she’d snapped. She wishes she’d cut him off before he got into her
classroom, before he walked into her space and claimed it like he had every right.

Her eyes flit to his and then flit away, and she mumbles about diagnoses and spectrums.

And then, what she’d been waiting for since his entrance, “But you can empathize with narcissists
and sociopaths.”

That’s all anyone cares about. Her ‘party trick’. Her ‘unnaturalness’. She buried herself in the
teaching academy so she wouldn’t get pulled into the world Jack Crawford is no doubt about to
drag her into. It’s much safer to study killers from photographs and reports. Fresh scenes are tough.

She tries to explain to him that she can empathize with anyone. She doesn’t have a special
connection to killers. She doesn’t have a special connection to anyone. She can see what other
people can’t. She can understand what other people can’t. It’s not her fault they only ask her to
understand the sociopaths.

He brushes aside her explanation and gets to his point, “Can I borrow your imagination?” and even though it’s a question, Willa knows she can’t say no.

She’s never allowed to say no.

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Empathy is a feminine trait, one of the few that Willa possesses and maybe that’s why she has an overabundance of it.

Too much empathy to make up for the fact that she prefers flannel to blouses and well-worn jeans to skirts. An ability to get inside other people’s heads to make up for the fact that she can’t understand her own.

For someone who has an overabundance of empathy she struggles connecting with people in real life. It makes sense when she’s in the Nichols’ living room. They’re grieving for their daughter, and their grief is loud, distracting. Grief won’t help Willa concentrate. It won’t help her find their daughter’s killer. Because Elise Nichols is dead. Willa doesn’t care that officially she’s listed as abducted, when they find the girl, if the find the girl, it will be a body.

So Willa asks about the cat, because that’s easier than passing on platitudes, and it’s safer than trying to understand the parents (too much grief, too much sadness, overwhelming). It gets her startled looks from Mr. and Mrs. Nichols and a disapproving one from Jack.

She goes to look at Elise’s room. A dead girl’s empty room is better than a room full of people.

Only...Elise Nichols’s room isn’t empty.

Posed on the bed, blanket tucked around her like she’s just been put to sleep is Elise Nichols.

Dead.

Willa rubs her temples and tries to keep Mr. Nichols from contaminating the crime scene.

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“You’re Wilhelmina Graham,” a woman who isn’t supposed to be in the room says. “Wilhelmina like the modeling agency?”

Willa blinks, her first response, a rebuke, silent on her tongue. “What?” she asks.

The woman’s lips quirk up in a smile. “Not an America’s Next Top Model fan?”

Willa feels like she’s listening to a completely different language. She shakes her head.

“I’m Beverly Katz,” the woman says. “And I’m a fan of your standard monograph on time of death by insect activity.” Another smile.

Willa’s losing track of what she saw. The present is overlaying the past, pushing it away, and as friendly as this woman is (teammember - no, you’re not on the team) she’s a distraction.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” Willa says.

Beverly laughs. “You’re a charmer,” she says.
She’s not any more chastised when Crawford comes in and scolds her.

Willa drives home from the airport turning the case over in her mind. The antler velvet made this an apology. But why? Why was Elise Nichols an apology and none of the others? How did the killer mess up? He’s not sorry for killing her. If it was that then where are the other bodies? Why haven’t they been returned?

Elise Nichols isn’t his Golden Ticket, but there’s something special about her anyways. Maybe not special. Wrong? Why didn’t he want to keep her? Willa rummages through her pocket for a bottle of Aspirin. She comes up with an empty one and tosses it onto the passenger side’s seat.

She searches for another bottle. This is a bad sign. A couple days back in the field and she’s already popping Aspirin like Pez. She’s sure this isn’t good for her stomach lining. It’s probably worse for other parts of her.

But Crawford needs her.

She has a hard time saying no when she’s needed.

She doesn’t even like him very much, and she doesn’t want to disappoint him.

She’s fumbling for a fresh bottle when her headlights catch on something on the road. She squints trying to make out the shape.

It’s a dog.

She slows her car down, putting her hazards on even though she hasn’t seen another car since she left the airport. The dog is unfazed by the lights. She rolls down her window.

“Hello,” she calls out.

She’s slowed her car to a crawl, matching the dog’s pace. It’s got frayed rope around its neck like it had been tied to something before escaping. She doesn’t see a collar, and its fur is dirty and matted like it hasn’t been taken care of.

The dog stops, eyeing her, wary.

She pulls her car to the side of the road and gets out. This is too much for the dog who decides it should head back where it was coming from.

“You don’t have to do that,” Willa says. She takes the hot dogs that were going to be her dinner from the cupholder and holds one out to the stray. “Here,” she says. “We can have a picnic.”

She’d stopped at 7-11 on the way home for two hot dogs and coffee. The coffee’s finished, because she could drink that while she drove. She figured she’d wait on food until she was home. Her stomach’s grateful that she’s eating now.

“See?” she says, taking a bite out of one of them. “Perfectly good.”

She holds the hot dog out, waiting, chewing slowly, willing the dog to come back to her. It hesitates and then trots back to her.

She brings the dog - Winston, she’s named him - back home with her and gives him a shave and then thorough bath before bringing him into the house. She has a whole pack, Winston makes nine
dogs, a family that she’s collecting for herself.

She reminds herself to find something to eat after she’s gotten Winston squared away. She ended up giving him a hot dog and a half - he needed it more than she did, but now she’s hungry. Well, she knows she should eat something before she goes to bed. She’s too...something to be hungry. She’s tired, drained from a crime scene, a bit nauseous from too much Aspirin on an empty stomach.

She gently towels Winston off next to the space heater, and Winston nudges his nose against the underside of her chin.

“Good boy,” she says.

She lives in Wolf Trap, a medium sized house on a big plot of land, away from what most people would label civilization. The people she knows feel better about a single woman living in the middle of nowhere since she has a pack of dogs.

Willa thinks that’s silly. She has a collection of strays. They’re not guard dogs. They’re more likely to roll over for belly rubs than snap their teeth. Besides, she’s the most dangerous being in her house. Just because she hasn’t killed anyone doesn’t mean she can’t keep herself safe.

She’s got a shotgun for emergencies.

She’s got a Rolodex of Killer’s Best Hits in her head. Anyone who tries to show up at her house with an unpleasant surprise will have an unpleasant surprise of their own.

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Willa’s in the restroom, splashing water on her face, trying to wake herself up. There’s only so much coffee a person can drink. Only so many Aspirin they can take.

The water isn’t helping.

Sleeping at night would help, but she knows that’s not going to happen any time soon.

She’d soaked through two two sets of sheets and two sets of pajamas last night. She’d had to put down a towel, because she didn’t have a third set of sheets to put on her bed.

She was right about the field not being a good place for her. But...Eight girls in eight months. There’ll be nine if they can’t catch this guy. Then ten. He won’t stop. Someone has to stop him. And Willa’s the best for that.

She splashes more water on her face, trying to wash the killer away. She doesn’t need him yet. She can’t let him sit in her head all the time or she won’t be able to keep them separate.

What am I apologizing for?

No, what is he apologizing for?

Willa’s eyeing the faucet like maybe she should just stick her head under it when the door to the room slams open.

Her shoulders draw up her ears, because there’s only one person who would burst into the restroom like that. And he doesn’t belong in here. This is for women. It’s supposed to be a safe place. A place where she can take a moment to think, to collect herself.
She pulls a couple paper towels out so she can dry her face.

“What are you doing in here?” Crawford demands. He closes the door behind him, pulls the lock, the sound echoing off the walls.

Trapped.

Willa’s hands shake as she throws the paper towels in the trash.

“We have a better chance of catching this guy if you’re in the saddle,” Crawford tells her, as if she didn’t know that. As if she’s not in the saddle. She is. Crawford came into her classroom and dragged her back into the field. He’s given her a case, shown her a dead body, promised that more will be coming if she can’t stop it.

She’s not going to turn her back on the dead girls. She’s not going to turn her back on the living girls that could easily become dead if they catch the killer’s notice. Crawford acts like Willa has turned her back. She taught a class this afternoon. She’s trying to pull herself together in the bathroom so she can look where Crawford drags her.

She hasn’t dropped her whole life for this case.

She can’t.

If she drops her life and picks up the killer’s then she’s not sure she’ll find her way back to herself. Crawford doesn’t understand that. Doesn’t want to know it. She’d explain it to him, but he doesn’t care.

“I’m in the saddle,” she says, weary.

Crawford raises his voice - shouts in the way that men do, they think louder means they’ll be heard, thinks it makes their words more important - and he crowds her against the sink, white porcelain digging into her back, because she doesn’t have anywhere else to go.

“You think he loves these girls?” Crawford looks disgusted, like Willa the one who is killing teenage girls, like she's the one with inappropriate thoughts.

It’s not her. She can feel him lingering on the edges of her mind. She doesn’t want to know him more. She doesn’t have a choice.

Of course, the killer doesn’t love the girls the way Crawford thinks he does. Love doesn’t mean sex. But of course that’s where Crawford jumps first. Men always equate love with sex. But this isn’t about sex. It’s about need. About want. It’s an all-consuming love, and they’re on the clock now.

The killer has to take a girl to replace Elise, because something had been wrong.

They’re not going to find the killer in the ladies’ room.

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Willa’s gotten another piece of the puzzle - the killer is eating the other girls. That’s why they weren’t found. Why Elise was returned - liver cancer, he couldn’t eat her, couldn’t honor her, so he tried to undo the damage. When Willa said the killer’s love was consuming...this wasn’t what she meant.
But this is what it is.

She has to separate herself from the horrors of the case. She needs to be focused on fact. If she’s not focused than another girl will go missing, another girl will die.

Why is it always girls?

Girls are never safe.

Someone always wants to hurt them.

“Tell me then, how many confessions?”

Willa blinks, returning to Crawford’s office. The speaker is a man she doesn’t know. A man in a nice suit. A man who doesn’t fit in here. Refined. Subtle strength instead of the swagger that FBI agents have. Someone who has confidence in himself, in his strength. He doesn’t flaunt it but it’s more obvious for that.

“Twelve dozen,” Crawford says. He looks tired.

Willa’s more tired.

She looked at Tattlecrime.com. She saw the article the Lounds woman wrote. The one that’s rocketed the Minnesota Shrike to the news channel. The one that’s humiliated Elise Nichols. Her body plastered all over the internet because some officer with a camera phone decided to be an idiot.

That’s not how Elise should be treated. She was supposed to be loved. Honored. She -

Willa squeezes her eyes shut, pushing the killer out of her head. She’s not the one who wanted to honor Elise. Her name is Willa Graham. She’s a teacher, not a cannibal.

Does that mean she wanted Elise humiliated?

No.

She needs another Aspirin.

Or ten.

“Tasteless,” Willa sneers, unable to keep her disdain for Lounds or the damage she’s done out of her voice.

Mistake.

Talking has attracted the attention of both men in the room.

“Do you have trouble with taste?” the unknown man asks.

The man, the psychiatrist - Hannibal Lecter - takes her apart, dissects her neatly, lays out her mind for everyone in the room to see. She thought Crawford brought the man in shore up Willa’s profile of the killer (to question it, to fix it, to second guess it) but it’s worse than that.

Crawford brought the man in to profile her.

Willa storms out of the room. It’s the only power she has - the power to walk away.
Willa gets dragged out to Hibbing, Minnesota for another murder.

Crawford tells her it’s the Shrike making up for Elise Nichols.

Willa knows he’s wrong - the Shrike doesn’t leave bodies, that’s the whole point of the Shrike - but she doesn’t tell him that yet. Crawford’s the kind of man that she can’t give her ideas. She has to back them up with facts and more facts and even more facts. Crawford is a man that demands Willa do something he can’t do and then explain it so he’ll understand.

He wants the impossible from her.

She still tries to give it.

Willa knew the kill wouldn’t belong to the Shrike but getting to the crime scene confirms it.

The body is mounted on a rack of antlers. There are crows hovering nearby. Had they been eating her before they got here? Are they hoping the FBI will leave her behind so they can continue their feast?

This is certainly not the work of the Shrike.

This is...a humiliation.

“Where’d all his love go?” Crawford asks.

Willa laughs, shaking her head. How can he not see? The whole team pauses to look at her. None of them can see. Willa doesn’t understand. It’s so obvious.

“This isn’t the same person who killed Elise Nichols,” Willa says. “Her killer tucked her into bed. An apology because he couldn’t honor her. This -” Willa gestures to the presentation, to the waiting crows - “This is a mocking. Of her. Of us. It’s,” her lips quirk up, “tasteless.”

Willa turns away from the scene. It’s shown her too much. Enough. What she needs.

“Our cannibal loves women,” Willa continues. “He doesn’t want to destroy them. He wants to consume them.” And people wonder why she hates men. They can’t let people live. They have to own them. Control them.

And the original killer, the Shrike, he needs more than that. He needs someone so bad that he has to eat stand-ins of them. Someone he’s afraid is going to leave him. A young girl. A teenage girl. A -

“Daughter,” Willa realizes. “He has a daughter. She’s going to leave him - college - and he can’t handle the thought of it.”

Willa rattles off an entire profile of the Shrike, everything coming together now that she can see what he’s not. Looking at the mounted body is like a negative of Elise Nichols. None of the care. Elise had been put in her nightgown, tucked into bed. This body was displayed. No respect here.

“What about the Copy Cat?” Crawford asks, staring at the mounted body.

Willa laughs. Typical. She gives him what he wants on the Shrike and it isn’t enough. The Shrike is the case she agreed on. She agreed on one killer in her head. Not two. “Call Dr. Lecter,” she says, “You seem impressed with him.”
Once again, she finds herself walking away from Jack Crawford.

It only works because he doesn’t chase after her.

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Willa doesn’t like motel rooms. It’s not home. There are no dogs to keep her company, no well-worn routine to sink into when life becomes too overwhelming. There’s a bed that isn’t hers, sheets that are too scratchy.

There’s a knock at her door - probably Crawford demanding more out of her, but it’s too soft to be him. Besides, he probably has a key to her room.

She takes the time to wrap a robe around her damp shorts and now see-through white t-shirt, and opens the door.

It’s Dr. Lecter.

Willa stands, blocking the doorway, and stares.

She’d challenged Crawford to get Dr. Lecter as a snide comment. She hadn’t thought he’d actually do it. But of course he would. He’s brought Lecter in to show that he doesn’t need Willa. If she doesn’t want to play ball by Crawford’s rule then he’ll bring in new players.

“Good morning, Willa,” Dr. Lecter says. “May I come in?”

His hands are full of food - cups, a thermos, a zippered bag. Willa’s still staring. She doesn’t know why he’s here - at her door, with...an offering? She doesn’t know if she wants to let him in. He, of course, is in another suit. And she’s in a flimsy bathrobe.

She looks around for signs of Crawford. Is this another set-up?

“He’s in court,” Dr. Lecter says, sensing her thoughts. “It’s the two of us. May I come in?”

She steps aside. She can’t quite bring herself to give him vocal permission, but he follows her into her room. She turns on the lights, casting dim light through the room. She leaves the blinds closed. She doesn’t want to invite anyone to look into her room. To look at her.

She narrows her eyes at Dr. Lecter, wondering why he’s here.

She pulls her robe tighter around herself.

Dr. Lecter produces a cup of coffee for each of them and then a Tupperware of breakfast for each of them. It’s a protein scramble, made by Dr. Lecter himself. Willa’s a terrible cook. It’s another one of her feminine failures. She eats a lot of gas station food, a lot of cafeteria food at the Academy. If she’s home she tends not to eat. Too much effort. Gets caught up in other things. No one to remind her.

She cautiously tries a bite of Dr. Lecter’s protein scramble. It’s...surprisingly good. The eggs are fluffy and the sausage is fresh. She eats frozen sausage that’s been reheated in the microwave or that’s been flattened into a patty by a cafeteria worker. This is different. This is -


Dr. Lecter looks pleased with the compliment. “My pleasure.”
They talk about Willa - briefly - and then Willa directs the conversation to the case. It’s why Lecter’s here, and it’s safer than talking about herself. She pushes her breakfast to the side as she leans back in her chair and explains everything that’s been going through her head. How the body in the field was like a gift - a gift to her, allowing her to see the Shrike. She’s a little disturbed at how perfect it was. A little disgusted with herself for being glad. Another girl is dead. But maybe Willa can stop the Shrike. The Copy Cat...well, that’s someone else’s problem.

And then the conversation winds it’s way back to her.

This time, she gives into it. “How do you see me?” she asks Dr. Lecter, challenging. He wants her to find him interesting? Give her something to be interested in, then.

“The mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by,” Dr. Lecter says, too serious for her to laugh.

She eyes him, the muscle he tries to hide under his jacket, the easy power in his hands, and asks, “What snake would dare come to your house?”

Dr. Lecter’s lips quirk up, the barest of smiles before he nods towards her Tupperware. “Finish your breakfast.”

She prickles at being told what to do, but the food is good, and she doubts she’ll get a chance to eat again today. She pulls the Tupperware back to herself and tries not to hunch as she notices Lecter watching her eat. She knows she’s not ladylike - bites are too big, mind wanders while she chews, elbows on the table - but his attention is intense.
Crawford calls her to tell her to chase down leads with Dr. Lecter. He didn’t send a text, because she would’ve ignored it. At least he didn’t call Dr. Lecter and make the man pass on the orders. Though he probably would’ve if she hadn’t picked up her phone.

As it is, she’s been told what she’s doing today and with whom and when she looks over at Dr. Lecter he’s smiling like he heard both sides of the conversation.

“I still don’t find you interesting,” she says, just to be spiteful.

If anything, Dr. Lecter’s smile grows, like her paltry attempt to annoy him only amuses him. “Time will change that,” he says, “And Jack Crawford has given us more time.”

“I’m driving,” she says, snatching the rental keys off the table like she thinks he’s going to fight for her them.

“I anticipate the opportunity to passenger,” he says.

She frowns, because she’s gotten what she wants but the victory feels hollow, false, like the fact that he hasn’t put up a fight means it’s not worth as much. She kicks him out of the room so she can get dressed and wishes she hadn’t told Crawford to bring Dr. Lecter in on this case. He would’ve anyways, probably, but at least she wouldn’t feel like she brought it on herself.

She pulls on a pair of jeans and a sturdy pair of trail shoes - not as sturdy as her boots but easier to run in - and then starts on her top half. Sports bra, tank top, undershirt, and then a long sleeve flannel buttoned up over all it. She grabs a light jacket for good measure.

The more layers she can cover herself with around Dr. Lecter the better.

She tucks her gun out of sight. She knows if they succeed in finding their Shrike then she’s going to need it. She wonders if she’ll do a better job firing than she did when she was a police officer.

She exits her motel room rubbing her shoulder, not even realizing it until Dr. Lecter looks over at her, questioning.

She drops her hand to her side and doesn’t answer.

They get into the car, and Dr. Lecter turns the radio off as soon as the car is running.

“I prefer conversation,” he says.

Of course he does. Stuck in a car with a psychiatrist hunting down a serial cannibal. This is why she was better off in her classroom. And as soon as this case is over that’s where she’s going back to. It’s not. She knows it’s not. Just like Crawford knew that if he could get her on one case he’d have her. Hooked like the fish she casts for in the stream. Dangle the prospect of saving lives and she can’t resist.

She glances at her (temporary) partner. He’s smiling again.

“What about this time?” she asks.

He doesn’t play coy. “I’m intrigued to see how the FBI conducts its business when it’s not kicking in doors.”
"I’m afraid the door kicking is the exciting part of the work,” Willa says. “Most likely you’re going to be terribly bored.”

Unless they find the right construction site. Willa wants to find it. She wants to stop the killer. She doesn’t want Dr. Lecter with her when she does. Civilians are never good partners. They get spooked, they get hurt, they take your attention away from what’s important.

“Doubtful,” Dr. Lecter says. “What clue are we tracking?”

“A little piece of metal. Katz found it.”

“A little piece of metal will bring us to the killer?” Dr. Lecter asks.

Talking about work is easier than talking about herself so she indulges him. Maybe they can talk about the case long enough that she won’t have to talk about anything else. “A little piece of metal will bring us to possible work sites for the killer. If we find the right site then we might find the next clue. We might miss it.” Willa shrugs.

“How do you know if you’ve found a clue?”

“At this stage we’re looking for something peculiar.” It’s Willa’s turn to smile. Everything in the world is peculiar. It’s her job to sift through the peculiar to find the strange. One of these days the sift in her brain is going to break down. It’s going to get too clogged with all the horror and it’s not going to function right. Important things will slip through.

They don’t find anything that jumps out at her at the first site. After the second, Dr. Lecter insists they stop by the motel.

“It’s on the way,” he reasons, tapping the GPS, “and we need to eat lunch.”

“We can get something quick on the way,” Willa says. The grease of a hamburger won’t do anything for her nausea, won’t do anything for the sense of dread that’s building toolaletoolatoolate, but it’ll keep her blood sugar from dropping. And she kind of wants to see Dr. Lecter in his three piece suit in a McDonald's. Better to force him through the drive-thru? She wonders if he’d use his pocket square to dab at his mouth after taking a bite.

“It will be just as expedient to stop by my room,” Dr. Lecter says, “and it will be better for both our bodies to eat something freshly made.”

She doesn’t have any good reason not to agree with him, and breakfast this morning had been good so they stop by the motel, and they go to his room this time. His room is bigger, has a small kitchenette, but it has the same horrid motel carpet and the same suspect sheets as Willa’s. She has a hard time imagining Dr. Lecter sleeping in here.

Not that she’s imagining Dr. Lecter in bed.

Cheeks pink, she casts about for something else for her brain to latch onto.

“Sandwiches,” Dr. Lecter says as he works at the small counter. “Not what I would normally prepare but we have both time constraints and,” he glances at his prep area with a hint is disdain, “other considerations.”

Willa shrugs. “Don’t have to impress me,” she says. “I wasn’t going to eat if you hadn’t made us stop. Not sure I’m going to eat anyways. Nothing against you, but I’ve already eaten more than I would on a normal day.”
Dr. Lecter’s back is to her as he fusses with some kind of fancy looking mustard. Willa uses mustard packets she snatches from Subway or other fast food joints. Same with mayonnaise. No sense in buying things you can get other places. Her dad taught her that one too.

“I find that concerning,” Dr. Lecter tells her. “Neglecting your health won’t help you be your best.”

“Be my best?” Willa laughs. “You sound like my grade school teachers. Be the best Willa you can be. What does that even mean?” Willa holds up a hand. “That wasn’t an invitation, Doctor. Though, my fault for raising questions of self to a psychiatrist.”

Dr. Lecter turns so she can see the quirk of his lips. “You would argue that you don’t need proper nutrition to be your best?”

“I would argue that you don’t know what it feels like to be in my body,” Willa says, “and therefore, you can’t lecture me on what is and is not in my best interests.”

A moment too late Willa’s words play back to her, you don’t know what it feels like to be in my body, and she knows what she meant, but she also knows that anyone she’s ever worked with would take the opportunity to make a lewd comment or smirk at her. She braces herself for Dr. Lecter to be the same.

“A compromise, then,” Dr. Lecter says. He presents her a plate (did he bring half his kitchen with him?) that holds a half sandwich. “Eat this now and allow me to make dinner for you tonight.”

“Fattening me for the slaughter?” Willa asks, taking the plate. “Maybe I should be checking you for a connection to pipe threaders.” Again, Willa’s brain catches up to her words a second too late and she winces. “Sorry,” she says. “That was...rude.”

Dr. Lecter looks far from offended. He looks amused again. “Are you implying that I’m a cannibal, Willa?”

Willa flushes, at her misstep being flaunted and the way her name rolls off his tongue. She retreats to the table with her half-sandwich. Dr. Lecter joins her a moment later with a whole sandwich of his own. She pokes at the creation - bread that she’s betting didn’t come from a bag off the shelf at the grocery store, fresh lettuce, a thick slice of tomato, some kind of meat - again, didn’t come from the local store.

“This is a fancy sandwich,” she says. Much fancier than PB&J slapped on Wonder bread. Grilled cheese with bacon and tomato is about as fancy as her sandwiches get. She wonders if Dr. Lecter would frown at her if she brought that up. Probably. She kind of wants to.

She pauses, sandwich halfway to her mouth. Why does she want to poke Dr. Lecter for a response?

“I assure you,” Dr. Lecter says, spreading a napkin across his lap, “You will not find Elise Nichols in that sandwich.”

“Of course not,” Willa says, “She wasn’t good meat.”

There’s a moment of tight silence, before Willa’s eyes find Dr. Lecter’s to confirm that they’re joking about a serial killer. They’re joking about cannibalism. While sitting down to eat. Dr. Lecter’s eyes crinkle at the corners. Willa throws her head back laughs.

Maybe Dr. Lecter is more interesting than she first gave him credit for.

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They luck out at their first site after lunch. Willa’s going through files, ignoring the secretary who’s gossiping on the phone, and she pauses when she lands on Garret Jacob Hobbs.

“Something peculiar?” Dr. Lecter asks, looking over her shoulder.

She’ll explain the process to him later. Right now, time is important. She can feel the tingle in her brain, like it’s at the starting line waiting for the gun to go off. Once she sees the smoke she’ll be off and running. Everything is poised, everything is ready.

They race to the Hobbs’ residence. Willa knows she’s right, knows she’s found him.

She doesn’t know how he’s going to react to being found.

Dr. Lecter doesn’t try to talk to her on the drive to where Garret Jacob Hobbs lives. She appreciates it. She’s approaching the Shrike’s nest, and she needs to be prepared. His daughter will be there, she knows that, because he wouldn’t let his daughter out of his sight. Not when she’s leaving so soon. Not when he has to kill all these other girls to satisfy his urge to kill her.

Will Willa’s presence accelerate the timeline?

Will he recognize her for what she is - his reckoning - and kill his daughter?

No. Because there won’t be time to honor her.

The consumption, the honoring, is the important part. Without it, it’s like Elise Nichols - something to apologize for.

They pull up to a quiet house, and Willa gets out of the car. She doesn’t look at Dr. Lecter, trusts him to stay put. She leaves the keys in the ignition in case he needs to make a quick getaway. Willa pulls her gun from its holster. She’s not going to allow Hobbs another victim.

She’s going to save his daughter.

Everything happens in a blur after that.

The front door swings open long enough to push a body out and then it slams shut again. Willa rushes forward, catching a middle-aged woman as she falls to the ground, blood pouring out of multiple wounds. Too old to be the daughter.

Wife.

Willa’s brain screeches to a halt.

Wife. Mother. There was another person in the family. Willa hadn’t - no, that will come later.

The woman’s hand spasms, landing on Willa’s wrist. It draws her back to the woman as she dies. The life flickers out of her eyes, extinguished along with pain and something deeper, something harsher. Betrayal?

This was not an honoring, Willa thinks, detaching herself from the body.

She turns her attention to the door. Hobbs has changed his pattern. The daughter is no longer safe. Willa throws herself at the door. There’s a crack - the wooden frame? Willa’s shoulder? She throws herself into it again before kicking it open.

She pulls her gun out with blood slick hands. She’s going to have more blood on her before the
afternoon is over.

“Garret Jacob Hobbs?” she calls. “FBI.”

She moves from room to room, freezing when she reaches the kitchen.

He’s got his daughter in his hold, knife held to her throat. He’s going to kill her. And then Willa will kill him. There will be no honor, no purpose. This is not his design. Willa’s changed things. She’s ruined the design.

The girl is gasping for air, her eyes wild and trained on Willa.

Willa raises her gun. She fires.

Three shots and Hobbs doesn’t go down.

He slashes his daughter’s throat.

Two more shots.

More shots. Actual shots or just the sound ricocheting in her head?

Doesn’t matter.

The only thing that matters is the daughter.

My daughter.

Our daughter.

Willa drops to the girl’s side, pressing her hands against the bleeding wound. Pressure stops bleeding. Stopping bleeding will stop death. Willa’s going to save her. This one isn’t going to die.

“See?” Hobbs hisses and Willa jerks, losing her hold on the girl. “See?” he demands again.

Willa turns and suddenly Dr. Lecter is here, kneeling in the pool of blood, hands expertly around the girl’s neck to stop the bleeding. He doesn’t have to look down to know he’s right. He looks straight at Willa, and Willa can’t look away.

There is blood on her hands, on her face, and splattered across her body. There’s a dead man on the ground and a dying girl in Dr. Lecter’s arms, and Willa can’t tear her eyes away from the man. He’s going to save the girl’s life.

She’s going to outlive the monster.

“Thank you,” Willa whispers. Or maybe just thinks. She’s not sure. There’s still gunfire ringing in her ears. There’s still Hobbs.

See? See?

You’re one of us now, he says. All this time struggling with the monsters in your head, all this time thinking you’re better. And now you’re not.

Blood on her hands.

Bullets in his body.
Willa’s distantly aware of other people coming into the kitchen. People who carry the girl out. Willa follows, helpless to do anything else. She watches as the paramedics take over for Dr. Lecter. She watches as the girl is lifted into the ambulance. As Dr. Lecter goes into the ambulance with her.

He saved the girl’s life.

Willa could kill her would-be killer, but she couldn’t stop the bleeding.

She sags against her rental car and is immediately swarmed by paramedics of her own. She can’t help but wish Dr. Lecter were here to hold her hand the way he held the girl’s.

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Willa has to get checked over and then has to go over what happened in the house. Then she has to go over it again. And again and again.

When she’s finally released she goes straight to the hospital. She doesn’t expect to see Abigail awake, knows in a place she doesn’t want to admit that she may never see Abigail awake. She doesn’t expect to see Dr. Lecter asleep.

But there he is, in the chair next to Abigail’s bed, her hand still clutched in his. Willa wonders if he let go since entering the ambulance. Wonders if Abigail can feel the steady pressure, can feel someone anchoring her, someone calling her home.

Given what just happened in her home, it’s probably best that she’s not called home.

Called to a new home, maybe, Willa thinks taking the couch as her own. She doesn’t lie down. Someone needs to stand watch over these two - the injured and the savior. Willa is the protector, the defender, she doesn’t have her gun on her anymore, but she will kill again for Abigail Hobbs if she has to. And Dr. Lecter will offer comfort.

A new home.

A new family.

Dangerous thoughts but Willa lets herself have them anyways. The specter of Hobbs, still lurking in her mind, grins and turns her towards memories of his daughter, of how he loves her. Willa shakes him out of her head but when she looks at Abigail she still feels a swell of affection.

A girl caught up in something beyond her control. A girl who deserves better than what the world has given her.

Dr. Lecter could cook for her, Willa thinks. She’s sure someone of his culinary skills has an impressive array of vegetarian dishes. She doubts Abigail will want to eat anything with meat in it for some time. It’s only natural that Hobbs would’ve extended his bounty to his family. He hunted and killed, provided, and he would’ve make sure they all partook.

Does Abigail know?

Will she be forced to know?

Willa will shield her from that if she can. She’ll shield Abigail from everything.

An odd, mismatched family, but it could work.
Hobbs cackles in her head.

_See?_ he demands. _See?

_You are one of us._

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Dr. Lecter wakes up in stages, like he doesn’t recognize the danger in the room. Does that mean Willa isn’t dangerous? Or that he doesn’t know her well enough to know she is? Willa’s hands open and close in her lap. She can still feel the gun in one hand, steadied by the second. She can still hear the gunshots, still doesn’t know how many she fired. There will be a report later to tell her. A hearing too, probably. It’s what happens when you shoot someone on duty.

She doesn’t take her eyes off Dr. Lecter.

She should. She knows she’s unsettlingly. Knows it must be especially unsettling to wake up with her gaze on him. There’s nothing pleasant in her head tonight.

His blinks one final time, and then his eyes are open, meeting hers. “Hello, Willa,” he says. His voice is raspy from sleep, but he doesn’t lower it, doesn’t whisper.

Because Abigail isn’t asleep.

Coma.

If Willa shouts can she draw Abigail out of it?

“Hello, Dr. Lecter,” Willa says.

There is silence after that. What is there for them to say to each other? They began the morning with breakfast and they’ve ended it in the hospital. Willa’s killed someone. Dr. Lecter’s saved someone.

Dr. Lecter checks his watch. “It is past dinner,” he says.

Willa blinks.

“We had a deal,” Dr. Lecter says, standing. “I told you I would prepare you dinner.”

Willa claps a hand over her mouth so she doesn’t laugh. If she laughs she’s going to turn hysterical. Why not? What Dr. Lecter’s proposing is worth a bit of hysteria.

“You want to make me dinner?” she asks.

“I told you I would,” he says. “And I always keep my promises.”

Willa shakes her head. “I think you can be excused from this one. Extenuating circumstances.”

“What circumstances are those?” he asks.

Willa looks pointedly at the teenager girl on the hospital bed between them.

“Abigail won’t mind if we eat,” Dr. Lecter says. “It’s doubtful she’ll wake while we’re gone.”

“Doubtful she’ll wake at all?” Willa asks. She’s not a doctor, and none of the nurses would answer
her questions. She doesn’t have blood on her anymore - she changed clothes before coming back to Baltimore - but she’s still frantic. Still twitchy like she was at the scene.

“She will wake,” Dr. Lecter says, “When her mind is ready to face the world.”

Ready to face that her father tried to kill her. Ready to face that he did succeed in killing her mother. Ready to face that Willa killed her father. That her father killed other girls. His legacy of murder is waiting for when she wakes up.

“I wouldn’t,” Willa says, standing as Dr. Lecter stands.

“Wake up?” Dr. Lecter asks. He drapes his coat over his arm and opens the door to the hospital room for her. “You would. The mind is remarkably durable. Yours especially.”

“I’d rather not talk about my mind,” Willa says.

Dr. Lecter acknowledges her with a nod. “Let’s turn our thoughts towards dinner, then. Something light.”

“No meat,” Willa says. “Please.” She can’t believe they were joking about cannibalism at lunch today. She can’t believe she’d laughed at some point today. It seems so far away now, quiet breakfast in the motel room, pleasant lunch in a different motel room. She’s killed someone in the time between lunch and dinner. She’s watched Abigail nearly bleed out on the floor of the kitchen.

It’s amazing how much a person can change in the span of a few short hours.

Sometimes, she wishes her mind wasn’t so durable. Wishes it would snap and give her peace from everything that’s trying to crowd inside.

She follows Dr. Lecter to his house and wonders what she’s doing. She should be in her own home. She should be surrounded by her dogs. She wouldn’t have her dogs. They’re still with her neighbor, and she wouldn’t disturb her at this hour. So she’d be alone in her house.

Well, she glances to her left. Garret Jacob Hobbs smiles at her, eyes dulled in death but body still animated. Not quite alone.

Dr. Lecter’s kitchen is impressive. Large, modern, more space than Willa would ever need in her house. More appliances than she knows what to do with.

“No flashbacks to be found here,” she says, trailing her hand over stainless steel. It looks nothing like the Hobbs’ kitchen. She wonders if she’ll be able to stomach her own.

“Good,” Dr. Lecter says, “I wouldn’t wish to bring you to a place you didn’t feel comfortable.”

“You want me to be comfortable in your kitchen?” she asks.

He holds up a bottle of wine, a question. She shakes her head. He sets it aside and opens his refrigerator.

“I want you to be comfortable,” he says.

Too dangerous a path to follow. “I kicked down the door,” she says. “You wanted to see what the FBI did when we weren’t kicking down doors. Afraid I let you down.”

“On the contrary,” he says. He sets his oven to preheat and then puts a small saucepan on the stove. He puts half a stick of butter in it and then begins mincing garlic and other things to sprinkle
in. “I saw a great deal today. I saw your investigative process, and I saw how you respond to a threat. It was very informative.”

“Of the FBI’s business,” Willa says.

She’s not surprised when he meets her eyes and dips his head in deference. “Of course,” he says. Both of them know he isn’t telling the truth.

He takes a half loaf of bread from a bread basket and begins slicing it with a large knife. Willa twitches at the sight of the serrated blade, but she reminds herself that this is Dr. Lecter’s kitchen, not Hobbs’s. And she’s not Abigail. Dr. Lecter isn’t going to slit her throat.

Her hand reaches for her gun. Her fingers close around nothing.

“If you’re still concerned that I was bored, I can assure you I was not,” Dr. Lecter tells her. He takes his slices of bread and lines them up on a baking tray. A paintbrush - she’s sure that’s not what it is but that’s what it looks like - is pulled from a drawer and used to spread the contents of the saucepan on the slices of bread. Once that’s finished, he puts them in the oven.

“Wishing you’d been bored?” Willa asks.

“Are you?” He locates a couple tomatoes, what looks like fresh basil, and a ball of fresh mozzarella. “Abigail Hobbs is not the only one who survived a traumatic experience today.”

It hits too close to home so Willa does what she does naturally, she hits back. “Is this therapy, Dr. Lecter?” she asks.

He is unfazed as ever by her outbursts. “This is my home,” he says. “Therapy is for my office. This is dinner and conversation between friends.”

“Friends?” Willa asks. She’s starting to wish she’d said yes to the wine. “You move fast.”

“In your case, one must move fast,” Dr. Lecter says, cutting the tomatoes into thin slices. “Or else they would not be able to catch you when you ran.”

“Is that why you’ve brought me to your house?” Willa asks. “Afraid I’m going to run?”

“Afraid you’re not going to eat.” Dr. Lecter smiles, a private little smile, just for her. “Do you have to teach tomorrow morning?”

“Have to, no,” Willa says. “But I’m going to. Whoever they called in to sub for me can have the day off.”

“But you can’t?” Dr. Lecter prompts. Tomatoes done, he moves onto the mozzarella.

“I told Agent Crawford I would find him his killer,” Willa says. She ended up killing the killer. One might even argue that she’s gone above and beyond the call of duty. “My service is done.”

“Is it?” Dr. Lecter asks.

Willa looks at a spot beyond his shoulder. “I want it to be.”

Dr. Lecter doesn’t push, finishing dinner preparations in silence, and Willa’s grateful for the break. Dr. Lecter is engaging, but he’s also exhausting. He uses conversation like she uses eye contact, and she’s afraid that, like her, he sees too much.
Even though dinner is simple, he produces it with a flourish, toasted bread with a butter-garlic glaze topped with a piece of basil, a slice of tomato and sliver of cheese. A glass of ice water accompanies it, and he brings her into a small sitting room for them to eat.

“I’m afraid the dining room would be overwhelming right now,” he says. He produces a set of silverware and cloth napkins for each of them.

Willa lays her napkin over her lap and takes the first bite. Everything is fresh, crisp, and it’s the first thing to really break through the fog she’s been in since shooting Hobbs. Everything is startlingly clear - the bite of garlic followed by the smoothness of the cheese, the heaviness of the napkin on her lap, the deep red of Dr. Lecter’s eyes.

It also leaves her startlingly aware. She’s exhausted. She covers a yawn with the back of her hand.

“Sorry,” she says.

“It has been a long day,” he tells her. “There is nothing to apologize for.”

And she still has to drive home. By the time she gets to Wolf Trap she might be able to catch a few hours of sleep before she has to come back to the city. She should probably just get a hotel room in the city for the night. It’s not like her dogs will be home waiting for her. Might as well sweat through hotel sheets than her own.

“However,” Dr. Lecter says, and Willa glances up at the hesitation in his voice, “I must express my concern over you driving such a long way in your condition. It would be remiss of me not to offer you the use of a guest room tonight.”

Willa knows she’s staring but she can’t make herself stop.

“You have your bags from our trip with you,” Dr. Lecter says. Trip, like they’d gone on vacation and not to track down a killer. “You have a change of clothes and your laptop. There is no need for you to return home before you teach.”

But how many reasons are there for her not to spend the night here? Hannibal Lecter is a man she doesn’t know. This morning, he was a man she didn’t want to know. This afternoon, he was a man she grudgingly accepted. Now, he is a man who saved Abigail Hobbs from bleeding out like her father intended. Now, he is a man who holds Willa’s interest.

“I was thinking of getting a hotel room for the night,” she admits. To show she does occasionally have her best interests in mind. If her dogs were home then she’d go home to them, no question. Maybe even cancel her lecture and spend the whole day in a pile of fur and cold noses.

“An unfamiliar place to rest your head,” he says.

“And here is familiar?” she challenges. “There’s a Days Inn just off the highway. They do complimentary breakfast.”

“So do I,” Dr. Lecter says. He takes a neat bite of his bruschetta and chews and swallows before he speaks again. “If you would feel more comfortable at the,” his lips turn down the barest amounts, “Days Inn then I encourage you to go. If, however, you seek an alternate arrangement, because you don’t wish to impose, know that you aren’t an imposition to me.”

“What am I to you?” Willa challenges. She’s been offered a bed to stay in by strange men before. It never ends well.
Dr. Lecter allows himself to smile. “A friend.”
Chapter 3

Willa spends the night in one of Dr. Lecter’s guest rooms, and he makes her breakfast in the morning. Smoked salmon and scrambled eggs. She doesn’t even have to ask to lay off the sausage. She has the feeling she’s going to only be eating fish for at least a week.

It’ll be a good excuse to get out in the stream next time she’s home.

Which doesn’t turn out to be soon.

She gives her lecture - it starts with applause that’s all kinds of inappropriate - and then Jack Crawford shows up. It’s a bit like deja vu.

“I did what you asked,” she says, putting her lecture materials back in her bag. And now she’s going home. To her dogs. To her life. “I closed the case.”

“You found Hobbs,” Crawford agrees. “But the case isn’t over.”

Willa’s head feels heavy as she raises it to look at Crawford’s nose. “Hobbs is dead. We saved Abigail. What else is there to do?”

“Find the other girls,” Crawford says.

Willa runs a hand through her hair, messing up the French braid she’d done this morning in the elegant mirror in Dr. Lecter’s guest bathroom. His guest suite is bigger and fancier than anything in her house. It made her feel out of place. “He ate them. We won’t find them.”

“We found his hunting cabin,” Crawford says and Willa knows she’s going back to Minnesota.

“You’ll get a free vacation somewhere nice at the end of this,” he says.

If this ever ends.

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The cabin is...horrifying.

Willa knew it was going to be. Anyone who hunts people in addition to animals was guaranteed to have a frightening place where he...dealt with his kills. Willa goes up into the second floor of the cabin, and she’s greeted by walls and walls of antlers. Brambles of antlers, if you will, so thick the actual walls can’t be seen.

She waits for Maleficent to rise up above them and set fire to the whole place.

Instead, her eyes are drawn to the most massive rack of them all, the tines covered in dried blood. She feels like she’s in a cage, feels like the antlers are going to grow and twist until they can puncture her from all sides. Until they can exact revenge for the killer of their killer.

Willa hears footsteps on the ladder. She half-expects it to be Hobbs. She has to turn to confirm that it’s Crawford. He looks as uneasy as she feels.

“Exactly the kind of display you need for your Evil Minds Museum,” Willa says. She walks around
the room, looking at the antlers, at the...trophies. Trophies from deer but not from humans.

Willa glances back at the bloodied antlers and for a moment she can see Abigail pinned on them, the greatest prize of them all.

“This is a big room,” Crawford says.

“The man enjoyed the hunt,” Willa says. She shakes Abigail’s image out of her mind.

“Maybe he wasn’t the only one,” Crawford says.

“Oh?” Willa didn’t realize they were looking for an accomplice.

“It’s a lot of work - disappearing the girls, butchering them. We’ve found no trace of them. They came into this room and then...gone. Lot of work for one person.”

Even for a dedicated person. Willa can acknowledge the point. The person who placed the phone call? Had he, or she, been working with Hobbs? A warning to get out? A warning to kill Abigail before the opportunity was lost to him forever?

“Someone who survived him,” Crawford says. “Someone who might carry on his legacy.”

“Abigail Hobbs is a suspect?” Willa asks, disbelief coloring her tone. It’s knee jerk reaction. She knows what girls are capable of. Knows that they’re fighters. Knows that when they get cornered they survive, they bide their time and wait until they can emerge victorious.

Willa knows what it’s like to be torn apart when all you’re trying to do is live. She knows what it’s like to be forced to see things, do things she’d rather not do. Was Abigail in the same situation? Maybe. Willa doesn’t see it, but that doesn’t mean it’s not there.

She doesn’t want it to be there.

She wants to protect Abigail.

See, Hobbs crows, See why I did what I did?

“We’ve been doing interviews,” Crawford says. It’s barely been a day, Willa thinks. They’ve certainly been busy. “Hobbs and his daughter spent a lot of time together.”

Willa laughs. “Of course they did. Hobbs loved Abigail. Loved her to the point he wanted to eat her. It’s not strange that they spent time together.”

“Time up here,” Crawford continues. “She’d make good bait - similar to the other girls. Wouldn’t be hard to smile, to make friends, to lure them in.”

Now, Willa can see it. Abigail going on college tours, meeting someone in her tour group or maybe the tour guide herself. Acting shy, persuading a new friend to come to lunch. Or maybe taking the train, sitting away from her father so she looks like a girl traveling on her own. Finding another girl traveling alone.

She could’ve -

But she might not’ve.

“Hobbs killed alone,” Willa says, knowing that Crawford will hear what she’s saying. And what she’s not saying.
And then she sees something else, something in the present. She pulls the tweezers out of her pockets and picks up a long strand of red hair.

“Maybe this is his accomplice,” Willa says even though she doubts it. If Hobbs had help, it was from within the family. No one else he could trust the secret to. No one else he could trust his daughter to.

Willa returns to Maryland and to her lecture hall.

Again, a person comes in while the students file out.

This time it’s Alana Bloom. Alana Bloom in a wrap dress that accentuates her body while still being appropriate for work. Alana who glides in heels and finds a way to always look presentable, put together, stable. She’s effortless and beautiful, the kind of person Willa’s envious of but could never resent.

It’s a surprise to see her in Willa’s classroom.

Or, maybe not a surprise given what’s happened in the past few days.

“Hi,” Willa says. Alana gets a smile. Alana isn’t here to demand the impossible of her.

“Hello,” Alana says. She smiles back, but it quickly fades. “I’m here as an early warning,” she says.

An early warning for what, Willa wonders, but then Crawford strides into the room, pausing when he notices Alana but then he barrels forward anyway.

“Review board came to a decision,” he says. “You’re up for a commendation and they okayed active return to the field.”

Commendation for killing someone. Hobbs killed and he got shot. Willa’s got lecture after lecture of men who’ve killed and they got killed or got prison or got studied in an asylum. Willa gets a star and okayed to go out and do it again.

Lucky her.

“That doesn’t mean you have to go,” Alana says. “It’s up to you.”

“I want you to go back,” Crawford says, and Willa bites back her smile. Up to her. Nothing is up to her. “But I’m recommending a psych evaluation.”

Ah, and suddenly Alana’s presence makes more sense. Willa gives Alana a mocking smile. “Going to ask me how I feel, doctor?”

Alana’s wince is barely visible. “It wouldn’t be with me,” she says.

A neutral party then.

“Hannibal Lecter might be better,” Crawford says. “Your relationship’s not as personal.”

Willa manages to stifle her laugh, but she doesn’t quite keep the smile off her face. Her relationship with Hannibal Lecter might be the most personal one she has. She’s eaten four meals with him, more than anyone else certainly within the last year. She slept at his house - in a different
room and different bed but still at his house. She killed someone in front of him. That’s pretty personal.

But Willa knows how this works. Crawford wants her back in the field. He wants someone to play in her head. He wants *Hannibal Lecter* in her head. She’s not going to say no.

(it’s not an option)

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She enters Dr. Lecter’s office and scans the room. One main floor with a ladder leading to a balcony of sorts. It’s full of bookshelves. She has a vision of herself on the ladder like Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*. Does that make Dr. Lecter the book seller or the beast?

There’s a large desk, solid wood, with a comfortable chair behind it. There are two armchairs facing each other. A psychiatrist’s couch in the middle of the room and another two couches along the walls. Lots of seating options. Odd because she can’t imagine Dr. Lecter ever has more than one other person in the room. Two if it’s couple’s counseling.

She tries to imagine him counseling a couple.

Maybe the Hobbs.

Mrs. Hobbs: I feel like we’re growing apart

Mr. Hobbs: I told her if she wanted to be together then I would gladly eat her heart

Mrs. Hobbs: I hates it when he jokes about his feelings. It makes me feel like he’s dismissive of mine

Willa laughs and sits down in one of the armchairs. She keeps her coat wrapped tightly around her. “So,” she says, “We’re in your office. That means therapy.”

Dr. Lecter sits behind his desk. Not what she expected. The desk is now a barrier between them. He doesn’t think she needs therapy? Or he’s pretending to respect her boundaries?

He signs his name, neat and with a little flourish, and then slides the piece of paper to the edge of his desk. Willa gets up to investigate.

“What’s this?” she asks, looking over the paper. She knows what it is, even before Dr. Lecter explains. She just doesn’t understand why. “You rubber stamped me?”

“Jack Crawford may lay his weary head to rest knowing he didn’t break you.”

Willa laughs. “That’s how he pitched this to me, you know. Told me I had to go to therapy so he could sleep. Even when he bullies me into something for my own good he makes it about him.”

Dr. Lecter looks up from his desk, easily catching her gaze. “Does he bully you into things often?”

Willa looks away. “I could put up more of a fight,” she says. She doesn’t want to give Jack Crawford full credit for her decisions. She also doesn’t want to carry the blame for them.

“He could respect you when you give him your answers.”

Willa smiles and it’s not a pleasant one. “Oh, he respects my answers fine. When they’re the ones he wants.” She returns to her chair, paper left on Dr. Lecter’s desk.
“Jack Crawford wants you in therapy so he can sleep,” Dr. Lecter says. “What do you need so you can sleep?”

“To be a better shot.” She laughs even though it’s not funny. It took her ten bullets to put Hobbs down. Too many. One and Abigail wouldn’t be hurt. The next killer she faces might not give her the chance to shoot her gun ten times.

She hasn’t made it to the shooting range yet. It seems like an acknowledgement that she’s going back into the field. You don’t need a gun in the classroom.

“I dreamed about it,” she says. She laughs again. “Really plumbing the depths, here, talking about dreams. Maybe I should be lying down for this.”

“If you like,” Dr. Lecter says, no judgment in his words.

Willa swallows back the humor and the uneasiness. “I dreamed about going to the shooting range. Only I was shooting Hobbs and not a paper target. He came at me no matter how many times I shot. He kept coming and coming and…” Willa trails off. “Put a lot more than ten bullets in him in my dream.”

“Dreaming about a traumatic experience is normal,” Dr. Lecter says. “Sometimes the subconscious is able to work through things the conscious cannot.”

“Like killing someone?” Willa asks. “All my years on the force and I couldn’t do it. First case with Jack Crawford, and I put someone down. Should’ve stayed in New Orleans. Think they’ll take me back now that I’ve proved that I’m not a liability?”

“Not being a killer makes one a liability?”

“In some professions,” she says. She glances at the paper still on the desk. “Sure you want to sign off on that without delving?”

“I would rather our conversations take place unobstructed by paperwork.”

“Conversations?” Willa asks.

“I’m not sure therapy will work on you.”

“That’s what I told Crawford - Jack. Think he’ll listen to a doctor’s second opinion?” She flashes Dr. Lecter a smile.

He returns it. “I’m no longer that kind of doctor. Jack thinks you need therapy. I think you need something different. I think you need a way out of dark places when Jack sends you there.”

Boy does she ever. She sinks back into her seat. “Is that what you’re offering? To be my light in the dark places? A little cliche, don’t you think?”

“I could be your lighthouse,” Dr. Lecter offers, smile in his eyes. “Your anchor. I’m sure there are plenty more cliches I can pull from if you don’t like any of the ones we’ve come up with. But metaphors serve a purpose. I will be your guide.”

“My stability,” Willa says. She tugs at the end of her braid. “I can trust it with you when I delve deep. It’ll be waiting for me when I come back.” Someone to hold her sense of self so she can slip back into it after she’s done being whatever killer Jack has her chasing. Someone who’ll look over her, someone who’ll protect her and preserve her. It’s a comforting thought. Doesn’t mean it’s
realistic.

“Were you able to find your way back from Hobbs?” Dr. Lecter asks, curious.

She laughs and pushes herself out of her chair. “Maybe? I know what it felt like to be him. I know what he felt like. Out of all the horror I brought back with me, you know what’s stuck with me the most? I’m grateful no one’s ever loved me.”

“No all love is destructive,” Dr. Lecter says instead of picking up the easy thread which would be to ask about her parents.

Willa laughs again. “How many patients have you had because love has mangled them?”

“We’re not here to discuss my other patients.”

“No,” Willa agrees. “We’re here to talk about me. And, by association, Hobbs. I brought something back with me from that case.” A lot of somethings. Time will tell how much of it she can shake off.

“A surrogate daughter?” Dr. Lecter asks.

That. The feeling of what it’s like to kill. She felt so out of control, blindly firing her gun, begging he’d go down, hoping she wouldn’t hit Abigail. She wanted him dead and she shot and shot and shot until she got what he wanted. Hobbs was never out of control when he killed. His hands were steady. His reason for killing made him frantic, made him desperate, but when it came to the hunt he was patient. When it came to the butchery it was precise.

Willa was...messy.

Her design.

“You were there,” Willa says. Easier to talk about Dr. Lecter than her. Safer. “You saved her life. I shot her father, but you kept her alive. Do you feel obligated?”

“I feel a staggering amount of obligation,” Dr. Lecter says, staring right at her, and for a moment she thinks he isn’t just talking about Abigail. But then he expands on his answer and they get drawn into a conversation about whether or not Abigail helped in the murders. Willa doesn’t mention that she thinks Abigail could’ve helped, even when Dr. Lecter says that he does. She’s not ready to say it out loud. It feels too much like a betrayal.

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Alana finds her and invites her to a dinner party at Dr. Lecter’s. It catches Willa so off guard all she can do is stare.

“You don’t think it’s a conflict of interest?” she finally manages to ask.

“Conflict of interest?” Alana asks. Her eyes sparkle with mischief. “I thought you and Hannibal were conversation partners. You can’t do that over dinner?”

“Oh my goodness,” Willa says. “I don’t know how to respond to that.”

“You could say yes,” Alana says. “Hannibal’s an excellent cook.”

Willa has personal experience with that, but she feels it’s best to keep that to herself for now. “Excellent enough to make up for the company?”
Alana feigns hurt.

“You, me, and Dr. Lecter aren’t a party,” Willa says. “Will the others be as enjoyable as you and Dr. Lecter?”

“People from Johns Hopkins,” Alana admits. “Some psych. Some medical. You won’t be the star attraction if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“And you’ll protect me if the sharks catch my scent?” Willa’s surprised to find herself teasing. She doesn’t have many friends, doesn’t...tease people. That implies comradery, implies a connection beyond what she usually lets herself have. She thinks Alana Bloom could be a friend.

She wonders if this means her therapy’s working.

“Of course,” Alana says. “You’ll be coming as my plus one. Not,” she hurries to add when Willa looks alarmed, “As a romantic plus one. Hannibal always gives me leave to bring someone with me.”

“Did you tell him you were picking me this time?” Willa asks.

Alana’s eyes twinkle even more, telling Willa everything she needs to know.

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Willa spends a fair amount of time agonizing over what she’s going to wear. What finally snaps her out of it is the knowledge that no matter what she wears could possibly impress Hannibal Lecter. It’s...both somewhat depressing and wonderfully reassuring.

She finally caves and asks Alana for help.

She ends up at Alana’s getting ready, the best way to ensure she won’t show up with dog hair all over her, but she puts her foot down at Alana’s offer of a dress or a skirt.

“I’m not you,” Willa says. “I just don’t want to be me.”

Alana finds her a pair of slacks and a nice blouse. They’re things Alana hasn’t worn in awhile; at least, Willa doesn’t associate them with Alana, not like wrap dresses and scarves.

“Has Dr. Lecter ever been your romantic plus one?” Willa wonders as Alana deliberates over which necklace to pair with her outfit. Willa’s forgone jewelry. Bracelets feel too much like handcuffs to her. Necklaces feel like they’re weighing her down. And rings; well, rings are expectation and promises she’ll never make.

“He hasn’t,” Alana says. She picks a necklace made of interlocking silver rings. “It’s come close a couple times. He’s my mentor, my colleague, and my friend. More would be complicated.”

“But not unwelcome,” Willa says.

Alana smiles at her through the mirror. “He’s quite fit for a man his age.”

His age. Willa guesses that’s somewhere in the high 30s or low 40s. Willa herself is 27. Old enough to have seen too much of the world and too young to hope to die any time soon.

“You interested?” Alana asks. She fastens the necklace without any help.

“He’s my psychiatrist,” Willa says. “More would be complicated.”
Hannibal Lecter is the kind of man who greets each guest that comes to his door which means he’s the first person Willa sees when they reach his house. He opens the door to let them in, polite smile on his face, and it freezes when he sees them, morphing into something more genuine.

“Alana,” he says. “Lovely as ever.” And then he turns to Willa, and she swears his expression softens. “And Willa. You are a surprise.”

“A good one, I hope,” Willa says.

“Most certainly,” he says.

He’s in suit pants and a matching waist coat, but he looks underdressed without the matching jacket. Willa’s cheeks heat up without her permission, the situation not helped by Dr. Lecter helping them out of their jackets.

He takes Alana’s first and hangs it up before he turns to Willa. “May I?” he asks.

She lets him ease the sleeves off and thinks he stands closer to her than he needs to to do it.

His eyes take in her outfit before he looks over at Alana. “You offered more than just an invitation.”

“Figured you didn’t need me tracking dog hair through your house,” Willa says. Inelegant but she’s never pretended to be anything else.

“I will accept you into my home any way that you are,” Dr. Lecter tells her, and she can’t help but remember the only other time she’d been here - exhausted and wrung out after killing Hobbs. She hadn’t been covered in blood then but she still felt like she was. And Dr. Lecter invited her in, invited her to stay. No, she doesn’t think he’ll shirk away from her.

It’s a dangerous thought to have.

Acceptance is something everyone craves. For it to be offered so generously…

“And your other guests?” Willa asks. “Are they as accepting as you are, Doctor?”

“Hannibal,” he tells her. “Please.”

“I’m going to be in a room full of doctors who don’t insist on their titles?” Willa asks. She’s teasing again, flirting but she can’t make herself stop. “That’s a first.”

“I don’t need to flaunt who I am,” Hannibal says.

Willa looks around the foyer, peers past him to get a glimpse of the dining room. “No?” she asks. “Then what’s this? Simple showing off?”

Hannibal ushers them deeper into the house. “A glass of wine? Perhaps you’ll be kinder to me afterwards.”

“Wine will only loosen my tongue,” Willa says. “Make me more truthful.”

She’s aware of Alana following the two of them, aware of her cataloguing every word, every look Willa and Hannibal share. She wonders what conclusions she’s drawing. She wonders if Alana will share them when the night is over.
Hannibal leads them into what Willa would call a parlor, but she could be wrong. She certainly has never had a room that’s sole purpose was to herd guests before dinner. Hannibal produces a glass of wine for each of them and then excuses himself to check on dinner.

“He makes it all,” Alana says.

“Cooking’s a passion of his?” Willa asks.

“One of many.”

Alana sips her wine, and Willa’s debating whether or not it’s a good idea to drink hers when they’re approached by two men in plaid suits. They look like pale imitations of Hannibal - their suits not nearly as nice and not fitting their persons. Not many people can pull off the suit styles Hannibal favors, and these two men fall far short.

“Dr. Hubert Schulz,” the man with greying hair says.

“Dr. Andrew Locke,” the other introduces. He’s going bald.

Both give her polite smiles and wait to give her a real reaction until she tells them who she is.

“Wilhelmina Graham,” she says. She’s tempted to hold out a hand for them to shake, because she knows it would offend them. They don’t shake hands. Not unless they’re in a board room. “No doctor.”

Both smiles dim.

“Ah,” Schulz says. “A friend of Alana’s?”

“I’m a teacher,” Willa says. They’re already looking down their noses at her, might as well have some fun with it.

Locke actually takes a step back.

“Those who can do,” Schulz says with gravitas. “And those who can’t…” he trails off, meaning clear.

She’s tempted to say that what she can do is shoot people dead. She doesn’t. No sense in ruining Hannibal’s evening because she doesn’t fit in here. She’s starting to regret her decision to come.

“I’m currently teaching,” Alana reminds them, rebuke in her tone.

“You do much more than that,” Locke says. He turns to Willa. “Her articles are quite famous in certain circles.”

“So are mine,” Willa says. “I think my most popular is a standard monograph on time of death by insect activity.” She bares her teeth in a smile that’s far from polite. “We could discuss it if you’d like. Apparently some insects like their meat more...raw than others.”

Locke blanches.

Schulz makes up an excuse and scurries away.

Willa takes a vengeful drink from her wine glass.

“It’s meant to be savored,” Hannibal says, appearing out of nowhere.
Willa startles, wine sloshing dangerously near the lip of the glass, but it doesn’t spill over.

“I am savoring,” she promises, eyeing Schulz as he finds a new corner to hide in. He glances her way once and quickly looks away.

“I hope everyone is being courteous,” Hannibal says, following her gaze.

“I think I’m the one you have to worry about on that front,” Willa says. She takes a smaller sip of her wine. “Alana says you’re preparing dinner yourself?”

“Not entirely,” Hannibal says. “With a group this large I require a few extra hands. But my own recipes and my own preparation. Nothing here will be vegetarian. Will that be a problem?”

Beside her, Alana makes a small sound. “I didn’t even think,” she says. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Willa says. In response to both of them. “I must have a good psychiatrist.”

Hannibal laughs, attracting the attention of the whole room. Because she’s the first person to make him laugh? Or because everyone is naturally pulled into his orbit when he enters a room? She wants it to be the first. She suspects it’s the second.

When he turns to go, Alana looks at Willa over her wine glass. “I don’t think you needed me to ward off the sharks,” she says. She adds a pointed look at Hannibal’s back.

“You’re saying he isn’t one of them?” Willa asks. There is the barest of pauses in Hannibal’s step, like he’s listening, like she’s surprised him, but then he’s continuing on to the kitchen like nothing’s happened. “Just because he keeps the others at bay doesn’t mean he isn’t interested.”

“He keeps them at bay because he is?” Alana offers.

Willa shrugs. She doesn’t have a clear read on Hannibal Lecter. There is something lurking beneath the surface, something she can’t quite place her finger on.

See? Hobbs asks.

Willa shakes her head. She doesn’t see.
Willa pulls her target in to inspect how she’d done this round.

Not well.

It would probably take ten bullets to put this target down too.

She needs to be better. Jack got his way, she’s going back into the field, and that means she needs to be ready for another Hobbs. She needs to be ready to defend herself or protect a victim. Ten shots is too many. She needs to get it down to one. Three at the most.

Wrong weapon, she thinks, a voice that isn’t hers.

She’d be lethal with a knife. She knows exactly where to stick it, how to apply enough pressure to yank it up. How to butcher.

She rips the target down to put a fresh one up.

No.

Hobbs knows how to wield a knife.

Willa’s a former cop now an FBI consultant. She uses a gun. She’s had training. She can do this.

There are easier ways, Hobbs taunts.

Beverly shows up to rescue Willa from a voice that only exists now inside her head.

Jack summons her to Elk Neck to look at a garden of mushrooms grown in beds of dead people.

“You take me to the nicest places,” Willa says, breezing by Jack and the other lab techs.

“Welcome back,” he calls after her before pulling everyone back and leaving her alone.

Alone with the bodies, alone with her mind, alone with the killer. Exactly what Jack promised he wouldn’t do. She’d laugh but laughter isn’t proper crime scene etiquette. Besides, she’s not completely alone. She has Hannibal now. He’ll help bring her back to who she is.

She takes a deep breath (through her mouth, the smell here is horrid) and lets the pendulum swing.

Willa returns the Psych Eval to Dr. Lecter. “This may have been premature,” she says.

He looks at the paper on his desk and makes no move to pick it up. He makes no move to speak either, patient, waiting.

“I went to another crime scene today.” She hadn’t wanted to. Hobbs was supposed to be her one and only. Ha, her one and only. She bites back laughter. Wouldn’t want to look unstable in front of her psychiatrist. “It was...difficult.”

“In what ways?”
“The victims were alive for a while,” she says. “Unconscious but alive. They didn’t know they were dying.” She’s going to have nightmares about that. Unless, maybe she’s dreaming right now. Maybe she’s in a bed somewhere being seeded with fungus. Maybe -

“You are unsure of reality,” Dr. Lecter says. “This new killer has made you unsure.”

“I’m not sure I was ever sure to begin with,” she says. “I should be more disturbed by the death than the manner of death and yet,” she shrugs.

“Being uncertain of reality can be disturbing,” Dr. Lecter acknowledges. “If your current existence is a dream, would you act differently? Would it be freeing?”

Willa shakes her head. “I can’t be certain that I’m dreaming. I could be living in reality and if that is the case then I have to act as myself.” Another problem. “Whoever that self is.”

Dr. Lecter nods, acknowledging the point.

“I found it easier to look today,” Willa says, pacing the length of the room. “I knew you would be waiting for me at the end of it.”

“A small comfort,” Dr. Lecter says, “Given the horrors of what you saw.”

“Small comforts are still comforts,” she says. “And it wasn’t horrifying. The concept of not knowing you’re dying is disturbing, and I screamed when one of the bodies turned out to be alive,” she flushes at the memory even though there’s no reason for her to be ashamed, “but I wouldn’t label the killings as horrific. I’ve seen worse.”

See? Hobbs prompts.

Yes, she thinks irritably. I see. And I’ve seen. And I will see.

“I find myself confused,” Dr. Lecter says. “What you have told me is important to work through for your mental health, but it’s no reason to revoke your reinstatement. Something else happened.”

“Astute,” Willa says. Her fingers play with the curtains covering the windows. Curtains to keep the space private. To keep people from...seeing.

“I saw Hobbs,” she confesses. “Lying in someone else’s grave.”

She glances at Dr. Lecter, wonders if this is too strange for him. His posture, his gaze, they give nothing away.

“Did you tell Jack what you saw?”

She shakes her head. He thought she was shaken up by being grabbed by one of the victims. It provided cover to not tell him everything, and she always leans towards not telling people everything.

“Is it harder,” Dr. Lecter asks, moving towards her, “imagining the thrill somebody else feels killing now that you’ve done it yourself?”

Everything she thought Dr. Lecter might ask - that never factored in. She feels like she’s been knocked off balance, feels like she ought to be falling but she’s steady on her feet. She’s never had someone be able to look at her and **understand** the way he does.

“Yes,” she breathes, quiet like a confession before Sunday Mass.
For a moment, she thinks she’s going to cry.

For a moment, she thinks Dr. Lecter is going to hug her.

And then, for the second time in a span of minutes, he surprises her by directing their conversation back to the case.

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“Was it strange?” Alana asks, catching Willa for lunch between lectures. “Seeing Hannibal professionally now that you’ve seen him personally?”

Seen him personally. It sounds dirtier than it is, like Willa has seen him stripped and bare for her eyes.

She can feel her cheeks pinken. “It wasn’t,” she says. “I’m very good at compartmentalizing.”

“I’m sure you are,” Alana says and it doesn’t sound condescending. “Dr. Lecter in the office and Hannibal for more social visits?”

“Exactly,” Willa says. “And I’m glad. Our...conversations are beneficial.” She wrinkles her nose at the thought of their last one. “Even if he did compare me to fungus.”

“Oh?” Alana asks. She laughs as she rummages through her fruit salad for a grape. “I thought he had more charm than that.”

“Apparently, my brain is like fungus,” Willa says. “Able to make connections that normal human brains can’t. I guess, if you look at it from a particular angle then it could be seen as charming. Not that I’m looking for Dr. Lecter to be charming.”

“You prefer the shark?” Alana asks, tone innocent but eyes far from it.

Willa laughs despite herself. This is something she never had growing up - female companionship, having sleepovers where they painted each other’s nails and giggled about the boys in their grade. It’s not quite what she has now, but she still savors it.

“Dr. Lecter,” Willa says, making sure she emphasizes the formal use of his name, “Is helping me cope with what I’m forced to see. I need that more than I might want...other things.”

“Think he’s a big enough shark to chase off Jack Crawford?” Alana wonders.

Willa’s phone rings, Jack Crawford’s name flashing across the caller ID. “Speak of the devil,” she murmurs before answering the call.

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Willa’s brought to the examination room to watch Price, Zeller, and Beverly work and offer any insights she might glean. It’s not what she expected to do after her last lecture of the day, but she supposes she should be lucky she didn’t have to skip her final lecture. She’s going to have a hard time holding onto her job if Jack Crawford keeps pulling her away from it.

She can’t deny that they make a good team.

They figure out how the victims die - diabetic ketoacidosis.

They figure out why - best way to feed the mushrooms.
They figure out the who - someone who works in medical services.

Of course, they also figure out that since they just dug up his garden he’s going to have to grow a new one.

Willa feels the same insistent thrum she felt with Hobbs.

Tick tock, her heart beats.

There will be more victims if they can’t find the killer. Once again, Willa’s messed with the timeline, she’s altered the design. She’s forcing him to kill again before he intended to.

They start searching pharmacies, start using what little information Willa’s been able to pull together. She hopes it’s enough. It needs to be enough.

Gretchen Speck goes missing.

They don’t know until she doesn’t show up to work.

Too late? Willa wonders.

The FBI follows their leads, they find the name Eldon Stammets.

They find his pharmacy.

Willa’s with them when the interrogate the terrified workers.

She’s the one who smashes Eldon Stammet’s window. Her heart is beating too loud in her chest.

Tick tock.

Tick tock.

She jabs at the button, pops the trunk.

She races around to see it filled with soil. She digs through it, frantic, ignoring the stench. She digs and digs and -

“She’s in here!” Willa announces.

She’s found her. Willa’s pushed to the side as the EMTs take her place. They can save her, Willa can only find her. No, Willa thinks, remembering Abigail, remembering Hobbs. There’s one more thing she can do. She can stop Stammets.

See, Hobbs asks as Willa’s heart begins to pound again, energized this time. You enjoy the hunt.

“We know his name,” Jack says, interpreting Willa’s silence as disappointment. “We know where he lives. He have his car. We’ll have him within 24 hours.”

“Jack,” Price says, coming up to them, hesitant. There’s something he doesn’t want to tell them.

Jack and Willa both know it.

They’re brought back inside, brought to Stammets’ work station. There’s an article pulled up, and Willa can tell from a glance that it’s Tattlecrime.com.

Another look and she spots the title Takes One to Know One. There’s a picture of her from the
crime scene. Her, alone, in front of the bodies. Willa begins to shake.

See? Hobbs jeers as Beverly reads the article, cutting off when it starts to get detailed. They see you.

“She shouldn’t have done that,” Jack says, hard set to his mouth. Willa suspects he’s more angry about what the article means for the FBI’s reputation than what it means for Willa’s.

Maybe he’ll decide she’s too much of a liability. Maybe she’ll be allowed to go back to her classroom. Her classroom is safe. No one looks too closely at her. They listen but don’t look.

Willa assures Jack that she’s not going to go cry in a corner about Lounds’s article and then goes to Abigail’s hospital room. Better than going home. Plus, after rescuing a victim it makes sense she’d want to see her original rescue, the original victim.

She thinks about telling Dr. Lecter at their next session.

Too simple.

“Simple things still have meaning,” he would say.

Predictable then. She gets the impression that Dr. Lecter doesn’t like the predictable. He’s a man that’s rarely surprised which makes those few instances all the more precious. She finds herself wanting to surprise him. Like when she arrived at his door with Alana. He had been surprised then, carefully orchestrated face giving way to genuine emotion for a moment.

Masks, Willa thinks. We all wear them.

And hers has been stripped away by Freddie Lounds.

Willa wakes up to the sound of a woman’s voice. For a moment she thinks -

Doesn’t matter what she thinks.

When she wakes up fully she realizes that Alana Bloom is sitting at the foot of Abigail Hobbs’s bed, reading to her. There’s a blanket on Willa’s shoulders that wasn’t there when she went to sleep which means Alana must have draped it over her.

It’s a small gesture but one that makes Willa smile.

“What are you reading?” she asks.

Alana pauses in her book. “Flannery O’Connor.”

Willa nods, a staple of her childhood education. It’s what happens when you grow up in the South. O’Connor and Faulkner. “She wrote an awful lot about fat people.”

“Oh?” Alana looks amused.

Willa shrugs. “That’s all I remember. It was strange. She would describe people that way ‘the fat girl’, ‘the fat woman’. We weren’t allowed to talk that way, of course. Impolite.”
“She was able to state facts without worrying about social graces?” Alana asks. She smiles before Willa can get huffy about being psychoanalyzed. “I personally latched onto the peacocks. Even tried to raise them, but they’re really stupid birds.”

Willa laughs trying to imagine a young Alana Bloom shepherding peacocks around her backyard.

“We can keep talking about peacocks,” Alana says, “Or I can broach the Takes One to Know One article.”

“Mm,” Willa says. She’s glad for the warning, glad for the option. “Freddie Lounds is quite gifted with imagery. ‘Jack Crawford’s crime gimp’.”

“And the truth?” Alana asks. “How does she fare with that?”

Willa shrugs. “Would I consider myself a psychopath? No. But I can see why others might. And I can definitely see how labeling me one would drive up readership which would in turn drive up revenue from ads. It’s...unusual for me to be on the other side. Usually, I’m the one doing the seeing.”

“Are you upset that she’s trying to take your place?”

Willa laughs. “She’s not trying to take my place. Freddie Lounds,” Willa pauses, sorts her words out because she’s talking to Alana and not Dr. Lecter and that means she has to be careful. “Freddie Lounds has a choice whether or not she looks. Jack Crawford has made that choice for me. I have to see the ugliness. She wants to. She profits from it. And, her article allowed Stammets to get away. I try to help, I try to do the right thing. She doesn’t care about that.”

“You’ve given her a lot of thought,” Alana says. She sounds surprised.

Willa pushes the blanket off her shoulders. It isn’t warm anymore. “If thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee.”

“You’re not an abyss,” Alana says. “And you’re not a monster.”

Willa shrugs. “Freddie Lounds would disagree.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

Willa leaves the hospital long enough to give her lectures and then she goes back. The FBI has all relevant information on Stammets. That means Willa isn’t needed anymore. No bodies to look at, no theories to posit. Her time is her own.

And she’s going to sit by Abigail’s bed.

She thought about bringing a book of her own - not O’Connor because that’s Alana’s thing, maybe a book on fish or the novelization of Homeward Bound. Neither of them felt appropriate. A book about fishing when Abigail’s father’s hunting is what led to this? A book about finding your way back home after seemingly being abandoned? Not good choices.

Willa thinks there aren’t any good choices for her.

Alana can sit by Abigail’s bed and read, because that’s the woman she is. Kind, compassionate.

If Willa did it - it would seem like a poor imitation of someone’s mother.

Willa might desperately want to be Abigail’s mother, but she isn’t. She hasn’t been given that
honor. Abigail would have to choose her.

Willa wonders if she would. What if Jack is right and Abigail hunted with her father? Likely, Willa’s mind supplies. Excusable. But it means Abigail would understand. If she could live with her father could she live with Willa? Could Willa and Abigail be a broken family of two? Could Hannibal be the stability they need to hold the family together?

Would Willa want to play house with Hannibal?

No, not play. She doesn’t want it to be an act, doesn’t want an imitation. She wants a family. If Abigail wakes up, if Abigail chooses her, Willa will be her family. And maybe she’ll extend an invitation to Hannibal.

Her phone rings, pulling her out of her thoughts. “Hello?” she answers.

“Stammets is after Abigail,” Jack tells her. “He’s going to plant her. For you.”

Willa ends the call, shoves the phone into her pocket, and takes off running.

It’s a good thing she spends all of her free time in the hospital. A good thing she’s started carrying her gun with her everywhere.

Abigail’s room is empty.

Tick tock.

Willa did not rescue Abigail from her father only to lose her to Eldon Stammets. He won’t honor her. He won’t love her.

The nurse stammers out non-answers.

Willa sprints for the stairs. Stammets will have a car waiting. A car full of soil just like with Speck. He won’t get to put Abigail in the trunk. Willa won’t let him. She’s going to stop him.

Willa bursts through the doors at the end of the staircase.

Stammets is at the far end, and he startles when he sees her.

Willa sees his hand on the gurney, on Abigail’s gurney and she fires her gun. The impact jars him, knocks him away from the gurney, away from Abigail. Willa’s able to breathe easier now that Abigail is safe.

Safe.

Not yet safe.

Stammets clutches his shoulder, his gun on the ground.

Willa kicks it away.

“What were you going to do with her?” Willa demands.

“That journalist said you understood me.”

Willa adds Freddie Lounds to her list of people to protect Abigail from. “I don’t,” she sneers.
“You would have,” Stammets says. “You should have let me plant her. You would have found her in a field where she could finally reach back.”

Willa’s gaze hardens. She lifts her gun. “When Abigail reaches for me, she’ll do it alive.” She fires her gun again.

Stammets twitches and then goes still.

Two shots to put him down. Less than Hobbs. Her training has paid off.

She leaves Stammets’s body and goes to check on Abigail, only distantly aware of a flood of hospital staff coming to make sure everything’s okay.

~*~*~*~*~*~

“Two cases, two kills,” Willa says to start her session with Dr. Lecter.

“You’ve saved the State quite a bit of money in prison fees,” Dr. Lecter says.

Willa laughs. “How many people do I have to kill before they start getting worried instead of giving me commendations?”

Willa worries. She didn’t have to kill Eldon Stammets. He was wounded and no longer a danger. She could’ve waited for Jack to arrive to arrest him after she kicked the gun away. She shot him instead. No one down there to witness except Abigail. No cameras. No one but her.

Abigail won’t tell.

She might not’ve even if she’d been awake. She kept secrets for her father. Why not keep secrets for Willa?

See? Hobbs asks.

Willa nods. She sees. Abigail is worth killing for. She’s worth protecting. But Willa isn’t Abigail’s father. She doesn’t need to kill Abigail. She doesn’t want to kill Abigail. She’s going to stand guard.

“When you shot Eldon Stammets who was it that you saw?” Dr. Lecter asks.

A threat, she thinks. “I didn’t see Hobbs,” is how she answers.

She saw a different man who meant to harm Abigail. A man who wanted to harm her for Willa. Stammets didn’t understand. Willa doesn’t need mushrooms to form connections. She needs Abigail alive for the connection she wants. Hobbs both wanted Abigail alive and wanted her dead. Wanted to connect to her both ways. Stammets wanted her dead. Willa wants her to live.

She should tell Dr. Lecter that she brought more than a surrogate daughter back from the Hobbs case.

She brought Hobbs himself.

She doesn’t say that, though. Instead she says, “I should have stuck to fixing boat motors in Louisiana.”

He counters. “Where was your paddle with Hobbs?”
She doesn’t think he needs her to say, “You’re supposed to be my paddle,” she thinks he just wants to hear her say it. He looks pleased when she does.

“I am,” Dr. Lecter tells her. She doesn’t need him to say that, but she wants him to. She smiles. “It wasn’t the act of killing Hobbs that got you down, was it?” he asks. “Did you really feel so bad because killing him felt so good?”

The smile slips from her face. Once again, Dr. Lecter has managed to see right into her. None of the crassness or conjecture of Freddie Lounds. He sees the truth and he doesn’t judge her for it. He doesn’t lay her out for others to see. He sees the truth and accepts her for who she is.

“I liked killing Hobbs,” she admits. After a moment she adds, “I liked killing Stammets.”

One day, she thinks she’ll like killing Freddie Lounds. She isn’t ready to admit that, isn’t ready to see how far Dr. Lecter’s acceptance goes. But, as he shifts the conversation to God and divine judgement she thinks that his acceptance goes far beyond what she dares to hope for.

Part of her wishes Stammets was still alive so she could bring Dr. Lecter before him, show the man that you don’t need death or mushrooms to form connections. You just need the right brains.

There is a lull in serial killings after Stammets, and Willa is once again free to teach her classes during the day and spend her nights in Abigail Hobbs’s hospital room. The doctors and nurses don’t give her strange looks anymore, not after she caught the man who was abducting her from the hospital.

Several of the nurses actually pick up a coffee for Willa on their runs or bring her something from the cafeteria when they come back from break.

Once, Willa takes a picture of the (admittedly decent) sandwich from the cafeteria and sends it to Hannibal.

She expects him to respond with a long suffering lecture on proper nutrition.

She doesn’t expect him to show up at the hospital with what appears to be a picnic basket. She wouldn’t dare call it that in front of him, though.

“I didn’t send you the sandwich as a suggestion,” she says, amusement giving way to guilt that he felt obligated to show up and feed her. And a bit of shame leftover from a childhood where she often had to accept charity meals.

“You sent it to me because you knew it would pain me,” Hannibal says.

Willa can’t deny that. “I thought your response would be amusing,” she says.

Hannibal looks over at her as he unpacks Tupperware from his container. “Are you amused?”

“No,” she says. “Mostly guilty.”

Hannibal doesn’t actually tut his tongue but she can hear the sound in her head anyways. “You didn’t force me here. Guilt on your part implies lack of control on mine. And I assure you, Willa, I am fully in control of my actions.”

He uncovers two small salads as well as soup that’s still steaming. Willa doesn’t own any
Tupperware that would hold heat like this. Of course, she also doesn’t own ceramic Tupperware.

“I figured you already ate the sandwich,” Hannibal says, looking pained.

“It was there,” she says. “I was hungry.”

“Indeed,” he says. He hands her a fork and then a soup spoon. And then he pulls out two slim baguettes, perfect for dipping in the thick soup he’s made. “Cream of broccoli with wild rice,” he tells her as she inspects it. “Homemade.”

“Isn’t it always with you?” she asks. She eats her first spoonful and her eyes flutter shut. It’s warm and thick and whatever he’s spiced it with makes it taste divine. “Much better than the stuff from a can,” she says, just to watch his eye twitch.

“You could learn,” he says which she takes to mean I could teach you.

“I don’t think I have the time to learn something this complicated,” she says.

Hannibal looks around the room they’re in. “You have the time. It’s a matter of what you choose to do with it. Do you spend much of your time here?”

“Yes,” Willa says, refusing to be ashamed of that fact. “More, lately.”

“Since Stammets,” Hannibal says. “A reminder that she still isn’t safe.”

“She may never be safe,” Willa says. “Once she wakes up, Jack will want to question her. There will be families, angry that Hobbs is dead, that will put the blame for their daughters’ deaths on Abigail.”

“A difficult life,” Hannibal says.

“We all have difficult lives. And Abigail’s strong. She survived her father.”

Hannibal’s gaze is level as it meets hers across their makeshift dining room table. “With help.”

“And that help will end if she wakes up?” Willa asks. She’s skirting close to something she hasn’t vocalized before, testing the waters, testing Hannibal.

“On your end, doubtful.”

“And yours?” Willa prompts. “You said you felt an obligation.”

“And how long should that obligation last?”

Forever, Willa wants to say. She swallows the word back, careful she doesn’t expose herself too much. “I suppose that depends on Abigail.”

She eats a few spoonfuls of soup.

“You want a family,” Hannibal - or is it Dr. Lecter now - says. “Abigail Hobbs is a convenient daughter. No parents, already used to seeing the darker aspects of life.”

“You think I feel an attachment to Abigail, because she’s convenient?” Willa asks her words slow, measured, to keep her from turning the full force of her temper on Dr. Lecter.

“An adopted daughter requires no time off from work in order to carry out a pregnancy,” Dr.
Lecter says, “Requires no partner to acquire the child. Having an older child comes with other benefits as well. Also drawbacks.”

Willa pushes her bowl of soup away and then stands up. “Abigail deserves more than the world’s given her.”

“Her father loved her,” Dr. Lecter says.

“So did her mother,” Willa snaps. Everything is about Garret Jacob Hobbs. Everyone forgets about Louise. Because she couldn’t see. She was the outsider. Hobbs was the hunter, Abigail the unwilling (coerced?) bait. Louise was irrelevant. But that didn’t stop her from feeling. She loved her daughter. And her love wasn’t destructive.

“I have upset you,” Dr. Lecter says. “That was not my intention.”

“I care about Abigail,” Willa says. She’s not ready to forgive him, not ready to return to the table. “And yes, I want a family. It didn’t start with this case, it’s not Hobbs’s influence. I’ve wanted a family for a long time.”

“You thought you couldn’t have one,” Dr. Lecter says, quiet, like he doesn’t want to spook her. “But if Abigail Hobbs could know what her father was and love him, if Garret Jacob Hobbs could be what he was and love his daughter then you think there is hope for you. To love and be loved.”

Willa’s quiet.

She doesn’t deny.

She doesn’t agree either.

Dr. Lecter knows the truth regardless of what she says.

“When we first discussed the Hobbs’s case you told me you were glad no one has loved you after seeing the nature of Hobbs’s love,” Dr. Lecter says.

“Conflicting desires,” Willa says.

He pushes her soup back to her side of the table. “Come and eat,” he says. “We’ll talk of something less weighted. I haven’t heard what you thought of my dinner party, yet. Alana whisked you away before I could ask.”

“The room applauded when you presented the first course,” Willa says but she allows herself to be coaxed back to the table. “That’s not enough praise for you?”

“Would you like me to tell you I value your opinion over that of Baltimore’s finest medical minds?” Hannibal asks.

A smile tugs at Willa’s lips. “Would it be the truth?” She breaks off a piece of her bread. “How about I tell you what I think about this meal?”

“It’s simple,” Hannibal says, like it’s an insult.

“Simple’s not always a bad thing,” Willa says. “And you didn’t have to make something simple. You did because you knew I would like it.”

Hannibal doesn’t deny.
He doesn’t agree either.

Willa knows the truth, regardless. “*That* is what makes it enjoyable,” she says. “I don’t need frills. That’s what makes me a poor dinner party attendee.”

“But excellent company in private?” Hannibal asks.

Willa flushes and stuffs a piece of bread in her mouth to avoid answering.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Character death in this chapter. Someone who died in canon but this isn't how or when they died in canon.

Willa wakes up in her own bed and feeling rested, two things that are abnormal. She’s been sleeping worse and worse since Hobbs. She dreams of Hobbs killing Abigail, dreams of herself killing Abigail, dreams of a large stag. She soaks through her sheets most nights.

But she slept well last night, and she rolls out of bed, content with the world. She tugs the ponytail holder out of her braid and begins undoing the braid she sleeps in every night. It keeps her hair from being hopelessly tangled while she sleeps.

The dogs swarm her as she moves into the kitchen, and she laughs and opens the front door so they can bound outside. She’s not the only one with energy this morning. She’s finger combing her hair when she pauses, realizing she has company.

“Alana,” Willa greets. She’s very aware of the fact that Alana’s in a pair of cute boots and a fashionable trench coat and that Willa herself is in the boxers she slept in and a white t-shirt that does nothing to hide that fact that she isn’t wearing a bra. “I didn’t hear you.”

She’s surprised she didn’t. Even more surprised that the dogs didn’t. She looks over her pack, happily chasing each other around trees, and wonders how anyone thinks they protect her.

“Hybrid,” Alana answers easily. “Good car for stalking.”

Willa laughs and backs up into the house. “I should put clothes on.”

“We’re both women,” Alana says. “And I did show up when most people would be in bed.”

“What makes me wonder why you’re here,” Willa says. “What couldn’t wait until I saw you at the Academy? What’s too important for a phone call?”

“Abigail Hobbs woke up.”

Willa pauses in her doorway. Abigail? Awake. Willa should’ve slept there last night. If she’d been there then she’d be the first to know. She’d be the first with Abigail. Probably best she wasn’t. Abigail needs space. Abigail needs time. Abigail’s needs are more important than Willa’s.

“I’ll make coffee,” Alana says coming up the porch stairs. “Or maybe tea. You put clothes on.”

“Yeah,” Willa says, distracted. She stumbles back to her bedroom changing into a pair of jeans and a clean white t-shirt. She puts a sports bra on first. And then she pulls her biggest comfiest sweater over the whole thing. It hangs down past the fly of her jeans. The sleeves have to be rolled so she can see her hands.

When she gets back to the kitchen, Alana has the kettle going.
“I’m not the traumatized one,” Willa feels obligated to point out as Alana makes chamomile tea.

“You haven’t been able to move past what happened while Abigail was asleep,” Alana says.

“In a coma.” Willa doesn’t believe in softening words.

“In a coma,” Alana amends. “I’m concerned you’re looking for Abigail to pass judgement on you.”

“The FBI gave me a commendation,” Willa says. “Why should Abigail’s opinion matter?”

Alana doesn’t bother dignifying that with an answer. Instead, she brings the tea over to the table.

“Will the dogs be alright outside?” she asks.

Willa nods. “I’ll put out their food in a bit, but they like to run around first thing in the morning. To make up for all the time they spend inside at night.”

Willa’s phone, resting on the table, begins to ring. It’s Jack. Willa looks over at Alana, and the other woman makes no sign that she wants Willa to pick up. She doesn’t signal that she doesn’t want Willa to pick up either.

Willa lets it ring out and then Jack immediately calls again.

If Willa was alone she would’ve picked up on the first ring. Alana being her gives her the strength to let it ring.

“Jack wants you to see Abigail,” Alana says.

Willa knew that. “You don’t.”

“Eventually,” Alana says. “You need to see Abigail for several reasons. Abigail needs to see you. It’s important for you to both move forward. I’m not concerned about what Jack needs.”

Willa can’t help her smile. There are reasons why she likes Alana. One of them is the effortless way she stands up to Jack. He doesn’t yell at Alana, respects her too much to raise his voice to her no matter how badly he wants to sometimes.

He doesn’t show Willa the same respect.

Alana respects her, though. “Abigail will need to see you, will need to see Hannibal, but not right away. She needs to talk to someone about what happened before she talks to people who were there when it happened.”

It makes sense and Willa nods even though she’d love nothing more than to find Abigail right now. “You think we can keep the Stammets’ thing quiet?”

Alana looks surprised at the turn in conversation. “You’ve saved her life. Twice.”

“By killing people,” Willa says. “That’s how her dad saved her life too.”

“It’s not the same,” Alana says.

“No,” Willa agrees. “I didn’t honor the people I killed.”

She takes a sip of her tea as Jack begins calling again.
Willa gives a lecture on Hobbs’ Copy Cat and, in a change of pace, Jack is in her classroom during a lecture and doesn’t throw everyone out. He also brought Hannibal with him which means she’s going to be visiting Abigail after this lecture.

She doesn’t let either of them rattle her and talks until her time slot is up.

“Elevate them to art?” Hannibal asks once the room is empty of eager young FBI trainees.

“Arguably,” Willa says.

“Argued by you?”

“We’re not here to discuss the Copy Cat,” Jack interrupts. “Dr. Bloom has agreed that Abigail Hobbs is ready for a visit from you two.”

Willa notices that she’s only Dr. Bloom when Jack agrees with what she’s said.

“My car or yours?” Willa asks Hannibal.

“Mine has less dog hair,” he says.

“Oh yes,” Willa says. “Would hate to get dog hair on your fancy suit. Might make a bad impression when we meet Abigail. Worse impression than me shooting her father right in front of her?”

“Willa,” Jack says, reprimanding.

Hannibal’s lips turn up, a secret smile behind Jack’s back.

Jack insists on walking them to Hannibal’s car which is unnecessary and then he reminds Willa that this isn’t a pleasure visit and that she should report anything relevant back to him. Willa breathes a deep sigh of relief once they’re out of the Academy parking lot.

“Relevant is subjective,” Hannibal tells her.

“He expects me to interrogate her,” Willa says. “He wants to know if she was an accomplice.”

“Or if she knew the Copy Cat,” Hannibal says. “The Copy Cat might have been the accomplice.”

“Doubtful,” Willa says. It doesn’t feel right. Which, of course, doesn’t hold up with Jack or a court of law, but she’s learned to trust her instincts. “But I’m not going for Jack. I’m going for me. And for Abigail. Alana thinks it’s a good idea.”

“Abigail may be uncomfortable with you,” Hannibal says.

“I know. She’ll probably feel drawn to you more than me. You saved her life. I, arguably, ruined it. I’ll try not to be too jealous if she hugs you and not me.”

It’s supposed to be a joke. It falls flat.

“If Abigail does not return your feelings it doesn’t mean you’re a failure,” Hannibal says. “It simply means she isn’t the right daughter for you.”

Willa chokes on a laugh. “Let’s not discuss me,” she says. “Or my misguided thoughts about
“It’s an important part of who you are,” Hannibal says. “I am simply cautioning against allowing Abigail Hobbs to be in control of that part of your identity.”

“Guess I could always do the family the old-fashioned way,” Willa says. “Get a husband and get knocked up instead of shooting someone.”

Hannibal looks pained. “Must you be so crude?”

“Modest upbringing,” she says, “Part of my identity.”

They’re quiet for the rest of the drive to the Psychiatric Hospital. They’re escorted to Abigail’s room by two orderlies, and Willa’s steps speed up when she sees the door is already open. She can hear voices inside.

“...works for the FBI but isn’t FBI. She catches insane men because she can think like them. Because she’s insane.”

Willa pushes the door to the room all the way open.

Freddie Lounds, sitting on the edge of Abigail’s bed, turns to look over her shoulder. Her mouth twists when she sees Willa. “Speak of the devil.”

Willa’s hands close around a gun she didn’t bring with her. For the best. Shooting Freddie Lounds wouldn’t be seen as self-defense. It would be gratifying, though. Willa wonders what lies she’s told Abigail. Wonders if when she was detailing Willa’s numerous faults if she mentioned that it was Lounds’s own article that got Abigail kidnapped. That almost got her killed again.

Willa’s not allowed to kill Lounds, but she does snatch the business card from her before she can pass it to Abigail. The orderlies escort Lounds out of the room and then it’s just Willa, Hannibal, and Abigail.

The way it should be.

Willa turns her full attention to Abigail. “Abigail, this is Dr. Lecter. Do you remember us?”


Willa doesn’t have a response to that. Silly because obviously it was going to be one of the first things to come up. It’s Hannibal that suggests they take a walk, and they don’t say anything as they head out to the gardens.

Abigail’s in a pair of tight fitting jeans with boots over them and a scarf that suggests Alana picked out her clothes. Willa...struggles with that for a moment. She imagines Alana taking Abigail shopping - picking out clothes for school, maybe even a dress for prom. She imagines Alana sitting at the foot of Abigail’s bed, reading to her when she’s awake. Hannibal cooking dinner for them.

Willa’s the one who doesn’t belong. The one who doesn’t fit.

She desperately wants a family. Desperately wants this family; Willa on one side, Hannibal on the other, helping Abigail walk towards the bench so she can sit. But she knows that this probably won’t be the family for her. She’ll still cling to it as long as she can.
“He was loving right up until the second he wasn’t,” Abigail says. “He kept telling me he was sorry and to just hold still. He was going to make it all go away.” She looks over at Willa, sitting next to her on the bench. “You didn’t let him.”

“No,” Willa agrees.

“Sometimes I wish you had.” Abigail looks away, not meeting anyone’s eyes.

“Your father caused a lot of pain,” Hannibal says, “and his death means the repercussions fall on your shoulders. It is a lot to bear.”

“What he did wasn’t your fault,” Willa is quick to assure her.

Abigail laughs and fidgets with her hair. “They looked like me. All those dead girls. They looked just like me. He said he didn’t want to kill me. He killed them instead, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” Hannibal says when Willa doesn’t answer.

“Kinda my fault then,” Abigail says. “I’m going to be pretty messed up, aren’t I? I already don’t sleep well. I worry about nightmares.”

“Me too,” Willa admits.

Abigail looks over at her, curious. “Do you have nightmares about killing my dad?”

“I do.” And nightmares about killing Abigail. And nightmares about sprinting down the staircase only to throw open the doors and be in the woods instead of the hospital. Seeing Abigail’s body covered in mushrooms. Stammets smiling, like he’s done Willa a favor. Nightmares about Abigail looking at Willa and screaming because her father is reflected in Willa’s eyes.

“Killing somebody, even if you have to do it, it feels that bad?” Abigail asks.

Willa can hear the hesitancy in her voice, can hear the fear and the desperate need for comfort. She knows then that Abigail played a part, how large a part is unknown, in the death of the other girls. At the very least she knew what was happening. She knew they were dying and she knew why. Willa still doesn’t blame her. She had no power, had no control. And society is quick to dismiss the concerns of teenage girls.


“I want to go home,” Abigail says. “If you’re FBI can you take me home?”

“I can ask Jack - Jack Crawford. He’s the head of the unit. He brought me in on the case. Alana, uh, Dr. Bloom, will be part of the decision, but I can ask.”

“Thank you,” Abigail says. She reaches her hand out so the tips of her fingers touch Willa’s knee.

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Freddie Lounds is lounging on the hood of Hannibal’s Bentley when they exit the hospital.

“Rude,” Hannibal says, under his breath, and, like she can hear him, Lounds straightens up as they approach.
“Special Agent Graham,” Freddie Lounds greets.

“Thought I wasn’t an agent?” Willa asks. Lounds is the last person in the world she wants to see right now. And, out here with only Hannibal as a witness, Lounds probably doesn’t want to be seeing Willa. “Thought I was...unstable.”

“I should apologize,” Lounds says.

Willa laughs. “You think?”

Lounds loses her friendly smile. “You don’t want pleasantries?” she asks. “I’ll level with you. I can improve your image - with Abigail, with the general population. I can also make it a lot worse.”

“What? You’re not even surprised? I’m not even surprised that Jack hauls Hannibal and Alana in to witness Willa’s scolding.

She shouldn’t be surprised that he talks as if she isn’t in the room.

She still is.

“You were there with her and you let those words come out of her mouth,” Jack tells Hannibal, looking as angry with Hannibal as he is with Willa.

“Hannibal doesn’t control me,” Willa snaps, because apparently she hasn’t reached her quota for reckless talking back for the day.

Thankfully, Alana interrupts then and the conversation shifts to Abigail and her request to go home.

“I thought it was smart to bait Jack,” Hannibal says as he walks Willa out to her car after the meeting.

“Not smart to bait Lounds either,” Willa agrees. “Sometimes I get angry. Figured snark is better than shooting people.”

“Were you angry when you shot Hobbs?”
“A little,” she says. “Mostly afraid - for Abigail. Annoyed that he realized what was happening. I - I don’t know how much anger was mine and how much was his. He was furious. Desperate, yes, but also furious. That scene in the kitchen - it wasn’t his design. He wasn’t going to get to honor Abigail.”

They stop by Willa’s car. She leans against the driver’s side. “And now we’re bringing her back. Do you think it’s a good idea?”

“I think it’s an opportunity for closure,” Hannibal says. “For both of you.”

“Maybe I can leave Hobbs behind?”

Hannibal regards her, curious. “You still see him?”

“Sometimes. In my dreams mostly. It’s a bit ironic, actually. With Abigail, that’s the one time I don’t see him. It’s like he knows better. I’ve already killed him once for getting too close to her.” Willa scrubs her hands through her hair. “I sound crazy.”

“You sound like you’re haunted,” Hannibal corrects. “I will be accompanying you to Minnesota. You won’t be alone this time.”

“My light in the dark?” she asks, aiming for teasing and missing by a mile.

“If that’s the metaphor you wish to use,” he says. He leans close, and for a single glorious, terrifying moment, she thinks he’s going to kiss her. Instead, he tugs at the collar of her shirt, pulling it up against the wind. “Drive safe, he tells her.

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They take Abigail back to the house. Willa’s aware of the way Alana shadows Abigail’s steps just as she’s aware of the way Hannibal shadows hers. Willa doesn’t tell him he doesn’t need to be so careful. She’s been back to this house in her nightmares. She could probably draw the kitchen from memory.

Being back here isn’t a shock.

Being back here while awake is different, but everything looks the same.

Less blood in real life than in her dreams.

They talk with Abigail until her friend comes and then Willa gets outside in time to see a man fleeing into the woods.

Nicholas Boyle.

Older brother of the Copy Cat victim. Only, he thinks Hobbs killed his sister which means Abigail is the last person he can blame for what happened.

“We should be careful tonight,” Willa tells Hannibal as they head back to the hotel (not motel, because Hannibal refuses to stay in motels unless forced). She’s careful to keep her voice low, she doesn’t want to alarm Abigail more than she already has been.

She needn’t have bothered.

“He might come here,” Abigail says when they’re all in Hannibal’s room, the nicest of the three rooms they rented.
Hannibal is using the kitchenette to prepare tea.

“Doubtful,” Alana says.

“He found me at my house,” Abigail says. “How did he know I was coming back. Did you tell anyone?”

Willa shakes her head. “No one outside the team knew, and they wouldn’t tell.”

“So he found out,” Abigail says. “He might find out I’m here. Have to stay somewhere, right?”

“None of the rooms are under your name,” Hannibal tells her.

“I don’t want to be alone,” she says.

Willa can’t entirely blame her. “Alright,” she says. “Dr. Bloom should stay with you. It would look...improper if it were Hannibal.”

Hannibal nods, conceding the point.


“Me?” Willa looks at Abigail’s outfit, she looks like a mini-Alana again. Willa’s a mess. Willa shot Abigail’s father. She has no idea why Abigail would pick her. She’s desperately glad she did, though.

“You’ve killed to protect me before,” Abigail says. “You’d do it again.”

Has already done it again, Willa thinks. And yes, would do it again. Still, “I have nightmares,” she says. Ones where she is Hobbs. She might accidentally kill Abigail. Might wake up screaming. Might do a lot of things to traumatize an already traumatized girl.

Abigail crosses her arms over her chest.

“Perhaps a compromise,” Hannibal says.

All three women in the room turn their attention towards him.

“The room Alana and Willa were going to share has two beds in it,” he says. “Abigail could sleep in one. Willa and I could share the other.”

“Oh?” Abigail says, like that settles it.

It’s Alana’s turn to cross her arms over her chest. “Oh?”

“You, of course, can have this room,” Hannibal says, gesturing to the room they’re in.

Alana looks at Willa. “Willa -”

“It’s alright,” Willa says, finding her voice. Hannibal knows what the inside of her head is like, knows what her nightmares hold. If he thinks he’s a match for them then she’s not going to tell him he’s wrong.

Abigail, pleased that she’s gotten wants so far, pushes her luck a little more. “Can we play cards? I know Willa brought some for the plane.”
“Sure,” Alana says. “Just a few hands. “We’ve got another long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Tomorrow they visit the cabin.

It’s where the real test is. For Abigail and Willa. How well can they keep their secrets?

~*~*~*~*~*~

After cards, they go to their new rooms, and Willa gets a chance to talk to Hannibal while Abigail goes into the bathroom to brush her teeth.

“I can sleep in the chair,” Willa says, motioning to the other piece of furniture in the room. “Won’t be the first time I slept in a chair near her bed.”

“Is this sacrifice on my account or yours?” Hannibal asks. His suitcase is on the desk, open as he pulls out his pajamas.

“You shouldn’t have to sleep with me,” she says. “It’s not...pleasant. I get restless. Have nightmares. Sweat a lot. Actually, I don’t know why I agreed to sleep in a room with another person. I’m not good company, Hannibal.”

He steps into her space, touches his hands to her shoulders. She’s not sure he’s ever touched her before. “Abigail trusts you to protect her during the night. Can you trust me to protect you?”

“I’m worried about who’s going to protect you,” Willa says but she sighs. She knows when she’s lost a battle.

Abigail comes out of the bathroom, making a lot of noise like she’s afraid she’s going to catch them at something. Willa steps back, out of Hannibal’s reach and looks over at Abigail. She’s in plaid sleep pants and a matching top. Willa looks at Hannibal’s pajamas, the same except a much finer quality.

“Aw, crap,” Willa says.

Hannibal tuts. “Language,” he says.

She rubs her eyes. She sleeps in boxers and a t-shirt, because she overheats, because they’re easy to change, because they’re easy to buy in bulk. She doesn’t usually sleep with other people in the room so she doesn’t have to worry about being decent.

“I have extra pajamas,” Hannibal says. “If that’s what’s bothering you.”

“I’m not wearing your pajamas,” Willa says. She’ll sleep in her clothes. It’ll be fine.

“They’re clean,” Hannibal says.

“I know,” Willa says, because she does. “You wouldn’t give me used pajamas.” Though there’s an image. Willa’s aware of Abigail watching them, fascinated. It makes her uncomfortable.

“Alright,” she says. “I mean, thank you.”

Hannibal, smiling, hands her a set of pajamas. “They may be big on you.”

“Will be,” Willa corrects. “I tend to wear my clothes big anyways.”

She takes the pajamas into the bathroom to change. She pulls the pajama pants on first. She rolls them twice and they still hang over her feet. Next, she turns to the top. After some deliberation she
strips all the way down before putting it on. She’d thought about leaving a sports bra on, but she doesn’t like to feel constricted when she sleeps. There’s something...daring about buttoning Hannibal’s pajama top up over her bare breasts. She wonders if she’ll ever get to do it in a more intimate setting.

She pushes those thoughts out of her head and brushes her teeth before going back out into the main room.

Hannibal takes her place in the bathroom, leaving Willa and Abigail alone.

“This is nice,” Abigail says as she gets into her bed. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me for protecting you,” Willa says. She pulls the blankets on her bed - her and Hannibal’s bed. She’s not sure how she’s going to make it through the night. She climbs into her bed, careful to stay on the far right side of the bed.

“Because it’s your job?” Abigail asks.

Willa looks over at Abigail, looking small and lost, in the large bed. The last person who cared about her killed people to cover for it. Willa wouldn’t put herself on the same level as Hobbs, but there are similarities. She can’t say what she wants, what Abigail probably expects to hear, I care about you, but she still has to answer.

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” Willa says. “And you don’t have to thank me for that.”

Luckily, Hannibal emerges from the bathroom before Abigail can ask any more questions Willa isn’t ready to answer. He looks between the two women. “Am I interrupting?” he asks.

“No,” Abigail says. She burrows under her covers. “Goodnight.”

Hannibal looks over at Willa but she doesn’t have an elaboration for him. And, even if she did, Abigail can surely hear anything thing might have to say.

“Turn out the light before you get into bed?” Willa asks. She flushes at the way it sounds - domestic, familiar - and turns her face away from Hannibal.

“Of course,” Hannibal says.

There’s a click as the light turns off and then the room is dark. Willa can feel the bed dip as Hannibal gets into the other side and she lies as straight as she can so she doesn’t encroach into his space.

“You’re very tense, Willa,” he says, voice pitched low, just for her. “This may be part of your sleeping problems.”

Willa’s not usually this tense. She’s not usually sharing a bed with someone else. She flips onto her stomach and wonders if maybe she can suffocate herself. Not to die, just to pass out. That’s kind of like sleep.

She startles at the touch to her hip, and she might have fallen off the bed if Hannibal hadn’t wrapped his arm around her waist.

“Easy,” he says.

He keeps his arm where it is, and she inches back from the edge of the bed. When his fingers curl
around her waist she continues to move closer to him.

“Unconventional therapy?” she whispers.

“Goodnight, Willa,” he says.

She tucks her head under his chin and closes her eyes. If she kicks him in her sleep then it’s his own fault.

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Willa wakes up in stages, rather than startled out of a nightmare. She’s warm, another pleasant change, as opposed to sweat soaked and shaking. There’s also a strong arm around her waist and the feel of something breathing against her neck.

Hannibal.

She goes completely still as reality crashes back into her. She and Hannibal shared a bed last night. Because Abigail didn’t want to be alone. Because she was afraid someone was going to come after her.

Abigail is still asleep, peaceful, and Willa’s hesitant to wake her. Maybe they can sleep through their scheduled visit to the cabin. Abigail doesn’t need to see it. Jack wants Willa to bring her there and act as a truth barometer.

Willa...doesn’t want to.

Hannibal’s hand is on her hip, thumb the only part of his hand under her pajamas, just a small bit of him touching her bare skin. It’s...distracting. She’s not going back to sleep, that’s for sure.

She closes her eyes anyways, lets herself imagine that she’s not in a hotel room in Minnesota. Lets herself imagine that she’s not going to spend the day thinking about murder. Maybe she’s still in a hotel room. Where would Hannibal take her and Abigail on vacation?

Willa would want to go somewhere with nature, somewhere not near people. Where she and Hannibal and Abigail could go for walks, see some waterfalls maybe or take a long hike. She wouldn’t mind looking at museums. She thinks that might be more Hannibal’s style.

He’d probably want to go to Europe. France maybe. She wouldn’t mind that. A week looking at churches and wandering through museums. And then a week touring vineyards maybe. She would get her walk and he would get his wine. And Abigail would be happy to have them both.

It’s a nice fantasy.

In the present time, Hannibal presses his face into her hair, and she can feel his chest expand as he breathes in.

“Are you smelling my hair?” she asks, quiet so she doesn’t disturb Abigail. She’s pretty sure Hannibal’s awake though. She’s not sure if it would be stranger if he was or wasn’t.

“I don’t like the hotel shampoo,” he says.

She has to clap a hand over her mouth so she doesn’t laugh. “Seriously?” she asks through parted fingers.

“It is low quality,” Hannibal says. He sounds like he’s pouting.
“It was one wash,” Willa says. “Wasn’t worth bringing my own.”

“It’s always worth bringing your own,” Hannibal says.

“Well,” Willa says, trying to wrap her head around the weirdness of the morning. “I can’t imagine this will be an issue again.”

“You using inferior shampoo?”

Willa rolls her eyes. “Us sharing a bed.”

“Ah,” Hannibal says. His tone doesn’t give away how he feels about it.

“But if I do,” Willa says, “I’ll make sure I don’t use hotel shampoo first.”

Hannibal’s quiet for a moment, and Willa’s afraid she’s pushed this too far. And then he says, “You shouldn’t use your own either.”

“Oh?” she asks. “That offend your nose too?”

“I have a strong olfactory sense,” he says.

“No Axe spray for you?” she asks.

She can feel him shudder behind her. “No,” he says.

She’s curious, wants to push this further but then Abigail stirs, and she can feel Hannibal pull back, pull away from her. She’s not surprised that he does, but she is surprised how disappointed she is when she’s left alone in the bed.

She says goodbye to her pleasant morning fantasies and her pleasant morning in general and gets out of bed as well. Time to face the day.

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Willa wishes she’d never gotten out of bed.

She wishes she’d turned to Hannibal and told him that if he had such a big problem with her shampoo then to give her his. Or, even better, shower with her until she smelled a way he liked.

She stares at the mounted body of Marissa Schuur and feels a headache coming on.

It gets worse when she hears Jack stomp up the stairs.

“You bring Abigail Hobbs back to Minnesota to find out if she was involved with her father’s murders and another girl dies.”

Willa shakes out two Aspirin and takes them dry. She listens to Jack rage and tries to counter his arguments even when he raises his voice, even when he accuses her, and Abigail, of a range of things. Through it all, Hannibal stands tall, stands protective at her side.

“I think it’s time Abigail Hobbs left home for good,” Jack says. His attention is on Hannibal now, fed up with Willa. Pack up and get her out of Minnesota. Now.”

Willa turns to leave with Hannibal but Jack’s voice holds her still.
“Not you, Willa. You stay right here.”

With the dead body. With Jack.

Willa wishes Hannibal would stay. She wishes she could go with him. She wishes, like Abigail, she could demand someone stay with her and protect her. It’s silly. She doesn’t need to be protected. But...Jack’s going to ask her to get in the Copy Cat’s head, because this is the Copy Cat, no matter what Jack is blustering about. Jack’s going to ask her to get in a killer’s head, and she won’t have anyone here to anchor her.

Hannibal will be on a plane if she needs him. And then he’ll be in Baltimore.

She rubs her forehead and wills her Aspirin to kick in.

She goes back to the body. She doesn’t know what else she can tell Jack. She’s shown him the evidence she’s found. She knows that whoever killed Cassie Boyle killed Marissa Schuur. She’s not convinced that it was Nicholas Boyle even though that’s what the evidence points to. She doesn’t know why he’d kill Cassie Boyle.

Cassie Boyle was personal. For Willa. Cassie Boyle showed Willa what Hobbs was, showed her what to look for and led her to the man. She doesn’t understand why Schuur is dead. What purpose? It wasn’t to honor her, not like Hobbs. It wasn’t to show Willa something, not like Boyle. She’s just...dead. It’s a humiliation, certainly, but why? What did she do? And who is her killer?

Willa is outside the cabin when she gets the call. She’s leaning against Jack’s car, chatting with Beverly, waiting for Price and Zeller to finish their evidence collection when her phone chimes.

“Sorry,” Willa says, pulling her phone out of her pocket. She can’t imagine who’s calling her - the entire team is here - and she frowns when she sees it’s Hannibal. She hits answer. “Hannibal?” she asks.

He hesitates and she knows something’s wrong. And then he’s speaking, smooth and clinical, only a slight waver in his voice. “Abigail was gathering her things from the house while I escorted Miss Lounds from the premises. Alana was detained by Marissa Schuur’s mother. Nicholas Boyle entered the house.”

Willa’s knees give out, and she hits the ground before Hannibal finishes.

“He found one of Garret Jacob Hobbs’s hunting knives. We were alerted by her screams, and one of the officers on duty made it to the house in time to shoot Nicholas Boyle, but he was too late to save Abigail.”

Willa’s mouth is open but no sounds is coming out. Her scream echoes in her head.

“Willa,” Hannibal’s voice is steady, commanding, “I’m telling you this so you hear it from someone you know. From someone who has your best interests in mind. I am on my way back to the cabin. Alana is remaining behind to answer questions. Do not let Jack remove you from the premises.”

Hannibal’s coming for her.

Abigail’s dead and Hannibal’s coming for her.

“It’s dangerous to talk and drive,” she says. Nonsensical. The only thing she can come up with.
Abigail is dead.

Abigail is dead.

“Willa?” Beverly’s hand is on her shoulder. “Willa, what happened?” The phone is taken out of her hands. “Who the hell are you?” Beverly demands.

Willa covers her ears.

Abigail is dead.

Willa wasn’t there to protect her.

Willa wasn’t there and Abigail is dead.

See? Hobbs taunts.

No! Willa doesn’t see. She doesn’t see.

She doesn’t understand.
Abigail is dead.

The facts don’t change when Hannibal appears at Willa’s side outside the cabin.

They don’t change when Willa lands in Baltimore.

They don’t change when she’s brought to the examination room to look at Abigail’s body, then Nicholas Boyle’s.

There’s no need to keep Abigail’s body for long, cause of death is evident, and they know who killed her so they cremate her and make plans for a small service - private so people can’t come and gawk.

So Freddie Lounds can’t worm her way in.

In the meantime, there’s still Boyle’s body.

“It’s too neat,” Beverly says as she looks at the dead man on the slab. “We wrap up Hobbs and then the Copy Cat?”

It’s not neat. Abigail is dead.

“Sometimes things work out that way,” Jack says. He doesn’t look pleased but he looks satisfied, two cases closed in a relatively short amount of time.

One problem.

“Boyle wasn’t the Copy Cat,” Willa says. She’s been...off since Abigail’s death. She fell apart outside the cabin, and she’s come back together, but it feels like all of her didn’t make it back into her body. She feels distant. Feels like she’s floating.

Dr. Lecter offered to talk to her.

She doesn’t want to talk.

She wants to mourn.

Jack makes her work.

Now, Jack turns to her, and he doesn’t look happy. “What do you mean?”

She’s not sure she can be clearer than she was. “Nicholas Boyle isn’t the Copy Cat. The man who killed Marissa Schuur, who killed Cassie Boyle, is still out there.”

Jack shakes his head. “You told me whoever killed Cassie Boyle killed Marissa Schuur.”

“Yes,” Willa says. That’s true. That’s definite. She can see the underlying strokes, can see the same design in both of them.

“Nicholas Boyle killed Marissa Schuur,” Jack says. “Therefore, he killed Cassie Boyle.”

Willa shakes her head. “Nicholas Boyle did not kill Cassie Boyle. Therefore, he didn’t kill Marissa
Jack takes a step towards her, looming, angry like he thinks she’s mocking him. She’s not. That’s not what she intended. She’s just trying to get him to see.

See? Hobbs says, standing behind Jack. He taps Jack on the shoulder, but Jack doesn’t feel it, doesn’t turn. Doesn’t see.

“His DNA was found on Marissa Schuur. She fought back.”

“Not enough,” Price mutters.

“He didn’t kill her,” Willa says.

“Then how did his DNA get there?” Jack is shouting.

“I don’t know!” Willa shouts back. “He killed Abigail. He didn’t kill anyone else. He was stalking Abigail. He was angry about his sister’s death. He wasn’t her killer. He wanted revenge on her killer. He thought Hobbs killed her. Blame shifted to Abigail. He would never hurt his sister. And he didn’t kill Marissa.”

“You’re not thinking straight,” Jack tells her, and she’s tempted to laugh. “Hobbs had an accomplice, you told me that yourself. Maybe Boyle was an apprentice. He killed his sister to impress Hobbs.”

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

“If he was an apprentice then he would’ve honored his sister,” Willa says. She feels on the verge of hysteria. Her hands shake as she spills two Aspirin into her palm. She feels on the verge of shaking apart. “Cassie and Marissa weren’t honored. They were humiliated. They weren’t connected to Hobbs. They weren’t connected to Nicholas Boyle.”

“Accomplice,” Jack repeats.

“Abigail,” Willa says.

The room falls silent.

“Shit,” Beverly murmurs.

Jack looks so furious Willa’s afraid his eyes are going to pop out of his head.

“What?” he demands. “You told me -”

“*You told me,*” Willa interrupts, “to take her to the cabin and get an impression. I did. But then there was Schuur and then there was Abigail and Boyle and I’ve been preoccupied.”

“Now that she’s dead you believe she had a hand in it,” Jack says.

Now that she’s dead, she’s safe from you and your misplaced anger, Willa thinks. She’s still got enough wits about her not to say it. “I don’t know if she was an accomplice,” Willa says. Her voice is softer now. “She was bait, but I don’t know if it was willing or unwilling. We’ll never know. But you were looking for Hobbs’s help - it was Abigail.”

“And Boyle?”
Willa shrugs. “His sister was butchered, and the indignity was broadcast all over…” Willa trails off, pieces clicking together.

“Willa?” Jack prompts.

“Lounds,” Willa says. “She plastered Cassie Boyle’s murder across the web. We couldn’t figure out how Boyle knew Abigail was back home, but it must’ve been Lounds. She was creeping around the house when Boyle was.” She kept Hannibal from being with Abigail. Made sure Abigail was alone when Boyle came from her. “She’s the reason Abigail is dead.”

“Nicholas Boyle is the reason Abigail Hobbs is dead,” Jack corrects. “Freddie Lounds stretches the limits of her profession, but she didn’t wield the knife.”

“She just made sure all the pieces were in the right places.”

“Willa,” Jack begins.

“I don’t think she meant that to happen,” Willa says. Doesn’t stop the fact that it did happen. “She wanted a story. Sister of victim meeting daughter of murderous cannibal. The kind of fireworks her readers would love. And now Abigail is dead.”

Willa’s aware of five sets of eyes on her; Jack, Beverly, Price, Zeller, and Hobbs.

See? he asks, soft. See what loving her is like? How painful? How desperate?

Willa wants to butcher Freddie Lounds. She wants to find the Copy Cat and present Lounds to him as a sacrifice. She wants to do it herself. She -

“I think you should take some time off,” Jack says.

Two cases and she’s being benched. Should’ve just let her be after Hobbs. She agreed to one case and he pushed for more and now she’s broken. Teacup shattered across the floor.

“Do you want me to call Dr. Lecter?” Jack asks.

She laughs. “He’s not my babysitter.” She unclips the gun from her waist and hands it over. “I’m assuming you’re worried about me walking around armed.”

“Willa -”

She walks out without a look back.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Probably, she should go see Dr. Lecter. She’s not exactly...stable right now. But it rankles her that Jack assumed she needed to see him so she doesn’t. She goes home instead, holes up with her dogs and doesn’t leave for two days.

Abigail is dead.

Willa dreams about it.

She dreams that she was the one to gut Abigail not Boyle.

She dreams that she was there, unable to do anything as Boyle ripped the knife through her body. Dreams that Abigail turned to her as she was dying and said, “You should’ve let my father do it. At
least he loved me”.

She dreams that she’s in the Hobbs’s dining room, sitting across from Garret Jacob Hobbs. He serves dinner. They’re halfway through the meal before Willa looks around and asks, “Where’s Abigail?” Hobbs looks down at his plate. “See?” he asks.

Willa wakes up from that last one and barely makes it to the bathroom in time to throw up.

Abigail is dead and Willa must move on.

She knew that her idea for a family was a long shot. Knew that Abigail would have too many complicated feelings towards Willa as the woman who killed Abigail’s father for it to be the fairytale Willa wanted.

She still wants a family.

There are more...conventional ways to go about it.

The third night into Willa’s self-imposed exile and Jack-imposed vacation, she goes into Baltimore. She goes to a bar and gets druncker than she should and lets a man take her back to a motel room and she lets him fuck her. He looks at her, leering, and asks if his buddies can have a go.

She has sex with four men that night.

In the morning, she wakes up horrified and rushes into the nearest drugstore for Plan-B before going to Dr. Lecter’s house. She shows up on his doorstep in last night’s clothes, the scent of beer and cigarette smoke clinging to her hair and the imprint of other men’s hands on her body.

“I need help,” she says. She’s shaking. She’s not sure she’s stopped since she got the news about Abigail.

“Oh. He has to work. Of course he does. Not everyone gets put on forced vacations.

She shakes her head. “You don’t have to do that. I’m not,” she swallows, “I’m not a danger. To myself or anyone else. I just -” she looks down at her pants. “Can I have a shower?”

“Of course,” Hannibal says again. “I’ll make breakfast and we can discuss what’s troubling you and then I will decide the best course of action.”

Willa nods. It’s best if someone who isn’t her makes the decisions for a bit. She doesn’t exactly make the best ones.

Hannibal leads her to the guest room she stayed in after she killed Garret Jacob Hobbs - it seems so far away now - and he sets out a small pile of clothes for her, “If you want them,” and then leaves her to shower.

She takes her time, wanting to be clean, wanting to get last night off of her, wanting to get the past week, the past month gone. She scrubs until her skin is pink and stinging and then she reluctantly gets out of the shower.

She dries off with one of Hannibal’s towels, soft and thick, and she thinks about just wandering around in that, but then she finds the clothes Hannibal set aside for her and they’re even softer than the towel. A pair of pajama pants and a top and a thick pair of socks. She puts all of it on, leaving
her clothes in a dirty pile on the floor. After a moment, she forces herself to pick them up.

She wanders down into the kitchen where Hannibal’s working at the stove, back to her.

“These fit better than the last time I wore your pajamas,” Willa says. Her hair hangs wet and loose around her face. It’ll probably annoy her enough to pull it back in five to ten minutes. She’s not stepping on the bottom of the pants, and she can actually see her hands at the end of the shirt sleeves. They also pinch in close like they’re tailored for women. She wonders if Hannibal keeps clothes for if he has women over. Has someone else worn these pajamas before? Someone Hannibal had in his bed? Someone Hannibal embraced and kissed and - she cuts that train of thought off before it can get too far.

Suddenly, the clothes don’t feel as nice as they had when she initially put them on.

“These aren’t mine,” Hannibal says. “I thought I should carry a set in case it was necessary for us to share a hotel room again.”

Willa’s glad his back is to her, because she blushes. Hannibal bought these for her. She can’t deal with that thought any more than the thought that they belonged to someone else.

“Oh, I guess that makes my next request easier,” Willa says. “Do you have someplace I can toss my stuff from last night?”

“I can show you the washing machine once I’m finished with breakfast,” Hannibal says.

Willa shakes her head then realizes he can’t see it. “If you’re okay with me hanging onto the pajamas for a day or two I’d rather throw these out than wash them.”

“Oh,” Hannibal says. “Of course. There are bins in the garage. Labeled.”

“I’ll make sure not to put them in the recycling,” Willa says. She goes out to the garage and dumps the small pile of clothes in the trash. She feels better as she goes back into the house. Not quite so brittle.

Hannibal has breakfast set out at the small breakfast table, and he motions for Willa to sit.

“I can help,” she says, hovering by the table.

“I only have the juice left,” he tells her, bringing two glasses of fresh-squeezed orange juice to the table. “Please, sit.”

She sits. She’s wearing Hannibal’s clothes, smelling fresh from his shower, sitting in front of a breakfast he made, and she feels unsettled. “I didn’t mean to be a burden,” she says.

“Nonsense,” Hannibal says, untroubled as he cuts into his crepe, making sure he gets a fresh piece of strawberry with his bite. “Is that why you haven’t come to see me? You were concerned that you would be a burden?”

Willa shrugs and makes a mess of her own crepes. “Jack gave me some time off. I thought it was what I needed.”

“A break from crime scenes might be what you need,” Hannibal says, “but I would argue that solitude is not.”

“I don’t see people when I’m not working,” she says. “I mean, I lecture, but I’ve ensured that my
students won’t try to engage with me.”

“Then we should make sure you find avenues for social contact while you’re not working with Jack and his team.”

Willa, thinking about last night, feels her stomach churn. “Maybe not,” she says.

Hannibal picks up on her distress. “Would you like to talk about what led you here this morning? It’s quite early for you to have driven from Wolf Trap.”

“I didn’t come from home,” she says. She looks away. Now that she’s here, she’s not sure she wants to tell him. She’s ashamed. She scrubs a hand down her face. “I was...upset about Abigail.”

“A natural reaction,” Hannibal says. “You had pinned your hopes of a family on Abigail Hobbes and when she was killed you felt like you lost your chance at that family.”

“There are more ways to get a family than adoption,” Willa says. She glances at Hannibal, wondering if he catches her meaning or if she’s going to have to be more specific.

He looks up from his breakfast, slight frown wrinkling his forehead.

“I had a lot of sex last night,” she says, and she almost misses the flash of emotion across Hannibal’s face before he’s calm once again. “Ill-advised sex,” she adds. “Unsafe. Um,” she pushes her crepes around. “I already took a Plan-B. I’m going to call my doctor as soon as her office opens to get checked out. It was a pretty stupid thing to do.”

“It was impulsive,” Hannibal says, words slow, measured, like he’s thinking them through, like she’s caught him off guard. “But you had a reason. I would have preferred you came to talk to me, and I hope you know that my door is always open to you - my home or my office.”

“You not going to judge me?” Willa asks. Her crepes are pretty mangled at this point but she takes a bite anyways. They still taste good.

“You’re an adult woman capable of making decisions for yourself,” Hannibal says. “You made a decision last night, and you have recognized the dangers in the decision and are taking the necessary precautions.”

“That wasn’t a yes or no,” she says.

“I would be concerned if you made it a habit,” Hannibal says. “And I believe there are better ways to work through what has happened. But no, I am not going to sit here in judgement.”

“Alright.” She doesn’t know why she cares so much about what he thinks. Maybe because she can’t trust herself right now, but she can trust him. She eats a couple more bites of her breakfast. “Am I messing up your morning routine?”

“Hardly,” he says. “I find breakfast more enjoyable when shared. If you are feeling better then I’m going to go to my appointments today, but my house is open to you while I’m gone. I would like to have dinner with you and discuss a few things.”

“Avenues for social contact?” she asks. “Or how to find better romantic partners?”

“It does not sound like you were searching for romance last night,” Hannibal says. Then, before she can get uncomfortable, “I have an extensive library that’s open to your perusal. Or you may rest.”
“Sleep sounds good,” Willa says. “I, uh, didn’t get much last night.”

Again, a flicker of emotion passes across Hannibal’s face, too quick for her to identify it.

“I can do the dishes if you want. Since you made breakfast.”

“Focus on eating,” Hannibal says. “I prepare myself a lunch every day for the office. I will make a second one for you.”

That means she’s going to be eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner with him. Rather, he’s going to make all three meals for her. “You feed me a lot,” she says.

He glances at her mostly-full breakfast plate. “Is that an uncommon experience for you?”

“I did the cooking as a kid,” she says. Her dad didn’t know how which meant when her mom left he struggled. As soon as Willa was old enough, well, earlier than that really, he handed that responsibility over to her. A couple of the neighbors helped out, showed her how to move around a kitchen. No one thought it was strange that as a kid she was in charge of cooking. Her dad did the shopping, did the providing, and she was supposed to make something edible out of it.

They didn’t starve, but she’s never considered herself a good cook. And now that she’s sat at Hannibal’s table; well, she thinks cook might be too generous a word for what she is.

“Guess practice doesn’t always make perfect,” she says and then eats so she doesn’t have to say anything else.

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She sleeps after Hannibal goes to work, and it feels strange to be in Hannibal’s house when he isn’t here, even stranger to be able to nap while the rest of the world is at work. The strangest thing, though, might be how well she sleeps.

She doesn’t have a single nightmare, and she wakes up feeling rested. It’s past lunch time so she wanders downstairs to eat and after doing her dishes and putting them on the drying rack, she goes to investigate the house.

The second floor has three guest rooms but only one guest suite, and she feels a little daring and a little intrusive poking her head into Hannibal’s room but she does it anyways. A massive bed occupies most of the space, four poster with beautiful drappings that are currently open.

Hannibal’s the kind of man who makes his bed every morning.

It’s a very large bed, too large for just one person she can’t help but think. She wonders what kind of women Hannibal invites into his bed. Probably ones that are more put together than she is.

She wanders downstairs and admires the numerous musical instruments he has and wonders if he can play them all. She knows a little piano, but Hannibal seems like the kind of man that has a few very well-developed interests. Willa has a bunch of scattered ones. Fishing’s the only thing she’d say she’s good at. Well, that and understanding killers.

She eventually finds herself in the library, and she spends the rest of the afternoon curled up on the couch in her pajamas reading. It feels a little like she’s getting away with something, tucked inside, relaxing, when normally she wouldn’t be.

She returns the book to its place when she hears a door open, and she gets to the kitchen the same
time Hannibal does. She smiles, happy to see him, and almost asks him how his day was before deciding that’s too domestic so instead she says nothing and wonders if the silence is going to stretch until it’s awkward.

“I hope you had a pleasant day,” Hannibal says. He sets his briefcase down on the breakfast table and then drapes his suit jacket over one of the chairs.

The man looks unfairly good in a waistcoat, Willa thinks.

“I did,” she says. “I never sleep as well as I do when I sleep here.”

Hannibal smiles, looking pleased. “My home is open to you whenever you wish to frequent it.”

“Thanks,” she says. “Um, how was your day?” There goes her resolve.

“I believe several of my patients made progress today,” he answers. “And I was able to secure a second ticket for the opera next week. I admit it was a bit of an impulsive act, but I think it will work out.”

Willa nods. Impulsive for Hannibal is getting an extra ticket to the opera. Impulsive for her is having sex with strangers, because she thought she wanted to get pregnant. And then what Hannibal says really catches up to her and she grows suspicious.

“An avenue for social contact?” she asks.

Hannibal dips his head. “Yes, if you would like to explore it.”

“I’m not sure I would fit in,” she says.

“If you’re with me no one will question it,” Hannibal says and while she doesn’t quite think that’s true, she doesn’t argue.

“If I’m with you people will assume things.”

“Would those assumptions bother you?”

“I would think they’d bother you,” she says. She’s not the one with something to lose if rumors start going around about them dating.

“Hardly,” Hannibal says. “But if it’s something you’re concerned about then I will certainly make sure inquiring minds know the nature of our relationship.”

Willa ignores both the tingle she feels when he says relationship and her knee-jerk reaction to flee as fast and as far as she can. “And what is that?” she asks.

“I like to believe we are friends,” Hannibal says.

“Friends having conversations?” Willa asks.

“And, if you’re willing, friends who go to the opera.”


Hannibal smiles as if he knows that’s as good as a yes.
Chapter 7

Hannibal’s avenues for social contact feel a lot more like he’s arranging playdates for her than dispensing therapeutic advice. The only reason she doesn’t immediately shut down his suggestion is because he leaves it up to her who she sees and what they do instead of actually arranging outings for her.

She’s not a child.

And she’s not incompetent.

She just likes her life as a hermit.

But she recognizes that hiding away in her house with her dogs isn’t good for her right now. Her leave from the FBI doesn’t extend to her teaching so she at least has a bit of a schedule to give shape to her days, but she makes sure to set up times to see both Beverly and Alana.

It’s...weird, being the one to initiate contact, and she’s nervous about going to Beverly’s apartment - what will they even talk about since they’re not working a case together - but she goes because she doesn’t want Beverly to drive all the way out to Wolf Trap to find Willa hiding under a pile of dogs.

It’s extremely tempting to hide, though.

“Everyone’s been worried about you,” Beverly says when she ushers Willa into her apartment.

It’s small, not in the best part of the city, but Willa figures that’s what happens when you’re looking for a one person apartment on a government salary. Willa wonders why Beverly doesn’t have a roommate - she’s not nearly as terrible with people as Willa is - but figures it’s rude to ask.

“I brought beer,” Willa says, because she doesn’t know how to respond to Beverly’s greeting. Is she supposed to be happy that people are thinking about her? She’d rather they didn’t. Because she’s sure they’re talking about how she completely fell apart, about how she had been given mandated time off to get her head back on her shoulders. If it was ever there to begin with.

“Awesome,” Beverly says, rolling with the conversation change. “I was waiting until you got here to order pizza. Unless you want to do Chinese. Beer’ll go with either.”

Willa shrugs. She doesn’t like making decisions. “I eat both.”

“Well, duh,” Beverly says. “You’re human. All humans eat pizza and Chinese. Let’s do pizza. My biology professor told me your first instinct is almost always the right one. He meant when answer multiple choice questions but I’m sure the same applies to dinner. What kind of pizza do you like? I’m getting two so get whatever you want.”

“Veggie special if they have one,” Willa says. “If not, mushrooms and peppers.”

She has a hard time eating meat now that Hannibal’s cooked for her so many times. Everything she orders and especially anything she buys from the store falls flat. Not as much flavor, not as much substance. She’s going to have to make sure he never makes her fish. If he ruins fish for her then she’s going to starve.

Or have to move in with him.
She pushes the last thought out of her head.

“Mushrooms?” Beverly wrinkles her nose. “I can’t even think about eating them after Stammets.”

That hadn’t even crossed her mind. Willa shrugs. “I went vegetarian a few days after Hobbs, but I’ve bounced back from that. Trying not to let the cases get too deep into my head.”

Beverly kindly doesn’t point out that Willa did just that and that’s why she’s been benched.

“Maybe I’ll steal a slice from you,” Beverly says. “Or just a mushroom.” She grins and then turns her attention to the pizza employee on the other end of the phonecall.

Order placed, Beverly puts the beer on the kitchen counter before taking two bottles out. “Couch,” she says, and Willa obediently sits down on the couch and accepts the beer Beverly hands her.

“I find it best to put the beer out of reach,” Beverly says. “That way I have to decide whether it’s worth getting up to get another one.” She turns the TV on. “Does that make me sound like I drink too much?”

“Sounds like you plan ahead,” Willa assures her.

She settles into the couch, waiting until Beverly tucks her feet under her to put her own feet on the couch. Willa’s entire house is covered in a layer of dog hair which means socks, or even shoes, on furniture isn’t a big deal. She’s pretty sure Hannibal has two separate welcome mats and a shoe rack in his house to keep people from tracking dirt inside.

...And she’s thinking about Hannibal again.

Willa watches Beverly expertly navigate the Hulu menu before pulling up, “America’s Next Top Model?” Willa asks, a bit incredulous.

“Watch and learn, duckling,” Beverly says. “One, amazing show. Two, whenever I feel like my life is mess these girls reassure me that it’s absolutely not.”

Willa’s skeptical but she has no idea what they’d do if they didn’t watch TV so she keeps her mouth shut and watches as a voiceover tells them that 33 semi-finalists have been chosen to be shown on TV and narrowed down to the 13 they’ll take into the house.

“They put thirteen girls in one house?” Willa asks, horrified. “Has anyone killed each other on this show?”

Beverly laughs. “They’re not allowed to have physical confrontations. Which means they do some other, wild, stuff. Watch and you’ll see.”

Against her own wishes, Willa gets sucked into the show, to the point that she doesn’t even register that the pizza guy’s buzzed up. Beverly gets up, letting the show run, but Willa doesn’t look over, because there’s drama over taking nude pictures on a roof.

“Didn’t they know that models pose naked sometimes when they signed up?” Willa asks.

Beverly returns with two pizzas and two more beers. “By this point they definitely should, but they always have a nude shoot, and there’s always at least one who freaks out about it. Good for ratings, I think. I don’t think the nude shoots are a big deal. They’re always artistic if not...tasteful. Definitely not pornography.”
She plops back down on the couch and hands a pizza over to Willa.

“It’s refreshing to see people without their clothes and alive,” Willa says. Her brain catches up to her mouth a moment later and she winces, knowing that wasn’t a normal person comment.

Fortunately, Beverly spends as much time at autopsies as she does. “I know what you mean. I’m a little afraid the next time I get naked with a guy I’m going to be surprised when he doesn’t have a Y incision on his chest.”

Willa pushes the thought of naked men out of her head and opens up her pizza box. “Is this show really on its seventh season?”

“Oh, it’s up in the twenties by now,” Beverly says. “But this season is a classic. I thought about showing you Camille or even Tiffany, but this is Monique’s season. It’s a memorable one.”

Willa feels like she’s hearing a foreign language, but she pops open the lid of her pizza and starts eating while they watch.

A couple episodes later, she’s eaten half her pizza and declined a third beer and is staring, with wide eyes, as Monique drags her bathing suit across Melrose’s bed. “That’s going to start a fight,” she says.

“Oh yeah,” Beverly agrees.

“And this show makes you think of me?” Willa asks as Monique prances through the, large and extravagant, model house.

“There’s a modeling agency,” Beverly says, “Not really that important. But don’t you feel better about your life watching this?

Willa watches a couple of the models cry over getting their hair cut and nods. This probably isn’t what Hannibal meant when he told her to spend time with people outside of solving murders. She wonders if she should mention it to him. He would be appalled at all the rude behavior. She amuses herself, imagining his reaction to Monique’s antics.

Though, now that she’s thinking of Hannibal...

“Can you rent dresses the way guys can rent tuxedos?” Willa asks.

Beverly turns away from Mr. Jay’s lecture on proper salon etiquette. “You need a fancy dress?”

Willa shrugs, suddenly uncomfortable. Maybe she shouldn’t have brought it up. She doesn’t want to talk about why she needs a nice dress, doesn’t want to admit that she’s going to the opera with Hannibal. Thinking about going to the opera with Hannibal.

“Allright,” Beverly says, “Be mysterious. But yeah, you can totally rent a dress. There are tons of places you can do it online, but I’m sure there are stores you can do it. You know who I bet knows where you can rent a dress around here?”

Willa really hopes she doesn’t say Hannibal Lecter.

“Alana Bloom,” Beverly says.

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Willa seeks Alana out after Willa’s first lecture of the day. It’s a little early for lunch, but Willa
brings hers anyways, because eating lunch together is an excuse to show up in Alana’s office. And eating means less time talking.

“This is a pleasant surprise,” Alana says when Willa knocks on her door and, because it’s Alana, she actually means it. “Come in. Help me scare away anyone brave enough to show up for office hours.”

Willa laughs quietly as she comes in and sits in the chair across from Alana’s. “I’m not sure anyone’s braved my office hours in months. They don’t even ask questions in class anymore. It’s nice.”

“You like the lecture style,” Alana says, rolling her chair around so they’re sitting on the same side of the desk. “I like a little more audience participation. What brings you by?”

“Lunch,” Willa says, holding up her brown paper bag. She has to give Hannibal credit, planning out social visits is working well for her. She had a good time at Beverly’s and, because she knew in advance she was going to visit Alana at lunch she actually packed herself a lunch.

Alana smiles, warm, indulgent. “And?” she prompts.

“And,” Willa says, fidgeting with her paper bag, “Dress advice.”

Alana’s eyebrows climb up into her forehead. “Dress advice? Where are you going?”


“Ah, Hannibal’s recruited you for the opera?”

The way Alana says it implies that Willa’s not the first person Hannibal’s brought to the opera and probably won’t be the last. Willa doesn’t know if she’s relieved that this appears to be a common thing that Hannibal does or upset that she’s not special. She decides to focus on being relieved. She showed up at Hannibal’s house a mess, both mentally and physically. He invited her the opera to try and help her, not because he wants to date her.

“Yeah,” Willa says. “And given what he wears as casual clothes, I don’t think I have anything to wear to something as nice as the opera. Beverly said you’d probably know a place I could go to rent a dress.”

“Rent one? You don’t want to buy one?”

“I’m going to wear it once,” Willa says. “It doesn’t need to hang useless in my closet.”

“Beverly didn’t want to go with you?” Alana asks.

“She said her tastes are skewed more towards leather than ‘Baltimore Elite’. My tastes don’t run towards that either. I figured you could help keep me from being a complete embarrassment when Hannibal shows up with me in tow.”

“I would love to go dress shopping with you,” Alana says. “Two store maximum?”

“Yes,” Willa says, glad Alana understands her. “Thank you.”

“Of course. Who knows, you might actually enjoy yourself.”

“Shopping or at the opera?” Willa asks.
Alana just smiles.

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“Did you hear that Jack’s got a new case,” Willa says as she meets Alana outside Desdemona’s Bridal. “I heard it’s pretty grotesque.”

Beverly swung by the Academy to show Willa the case file even though she’s not on the case. They’re calling him the Angel Maker because he skins his victims’ backs and pins the skin up behind them like wings. Willa skipped lunch after flipping through those pictures.

“I thought you weren’t working cases right now,” Alana says.

Willa doesn’t want to get Beverly in trouble so she switches topics. “Desdemona’s a strange name for a bridal salon. She went against her father’s wishes by eloping with Othello and was later murdered by her husband, because he was convinced she was cheating on him.”

The sales attendant that had been making her way towards them pauses, expression souring, either because of what Willa’s saying or what she’s wearing. She actually put on a pair of slacks to teach in today, but they’re too loose and are dusted with dog hair. It probably would’ve been better if she hadn’t tried at all.

“Maybe Hannibal should take you to a Shakespeare production next,” Alana says. She guides Willa towards the wall of evening gowns that are labeled rentals.

“This could be our final outing,” Willa says. “Maybe I’m going to embarrass him in front of his friends.”

“Is that what you think is going to happen?” Alana asks, pulling a dress off the rack. It’s...ethereal is probably the nicest thing Willa can say about it. It’s called Blushing Ballerina and Willa’s face makes Alana laugh and put it back.

“I’m not an opera person,” Willa says. “I like my house and my dogs. I fix boat motors in my free time. I don’t do,” she motions to the wall in front of them, “dresses.”

“But you are for Hannibal,” Alana says.

“He invited me,” Willa says.

“I invite you to things all the time,” Alana says. “You never have difficulty saying no.”

Willa examines a dress that’s made up of geometric patterns. She lets it fall back into place. “He said it would beneficial to me. He, uh, thinks I need to be more social.”

“Does he?” Alana asks, a hint of something in her voice that Willa can’t quite place. She’s not sure whether Alana’s annoyed with Hannibal or with her.

Either way, she feels a bit of defensiveness. “He’s not wrong. I spend most of my time with killers or cadavers.”

The sales attendant was making an attempt to approach them again but at this she turns on her heel and walks in the opposite direction. Willa doesn’t blame her. Sometimes Willa wishes she could walk away from herself, but living doesn’t work like that.

“Do you want to go to the opera?” Alana asks.
“I don’t not want to go,” Willa says. But she can see where this is heading. “Hannibal isn’t forcing me to go with him. Or manipulating me to under the guise of therapy.”

Alana doesn’t look convinced.

“How about this?” Willa asks, holding out a black lace dress.

“You’re not going to a funeral,” Alana says.

“I thought black was supposed to be a classic color.”

“I like this one,” Alana says, pulling out a dress for Willa to view.

It’s beige (champagne, the tag declares) with hundreds of sequins sewn into the fabric that make it catch and reflect the light as Alana waves it back and forth.

“Can’t hide in that,” Willa murmurs. There’s a modest neckline which she definitely approves of, and some kind of fabric twist thing to give it shape. She’s betting it pulls the fabric in tight around her waist to make it look like she has curves. Or maybe follow the curves she does have.

“You’re going to the opera with Hannibal,” Alana says, “There’s no hiding when you’re on his arm.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t go,” Willa says.

“Don’t let me talk you out of it,” Alana says. “Unless that’s what you want me to do?”

Willa shakes her head. She doesn’t need Alana’s permission or help to weasel out of something she doesn’t want to. Being a social...failure has its perks. One of them is that people aren’t surprised when she bails on them. But she finds that she doesn’t want to skip out on her...outing with Hannibal. She doesn’t want to disappoint him.

“In that case,” Alana presses the dress into Willa’s hands. “You should go. Even if you’re a little uncomfortable or uneasy, Hannibal will protect you. And he’ll love it. He likes to feel like he’s needed.”

Willa considers this for a moment. “Are you teaching me how to manipulate Hannibal?”

Alana’s mouth lifts into a smile. “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

Willa laughs and goes to try on the dress Alana picked out.

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She leaves the dress at Alana’s to minimize the amount of dog hair it’ll collect and because Alana’s promised to help her get ready. The end result is that Willa doesn’t look like herself, hair done up with a few strands hanging loose to frame her face, make-up done, in a dress she never would’ve picked out for herself.

It’s a relief in some ways to look at herself in the mirror and not recognize the face looking back. She can be a different version of herself tonight. And maybe one that has more grace and poise than her usual self does. Someone that will blend into the crowd at the opera instead of standing out.

“Remember,” Alana says as she walks Willa to her car. “Text me if you need an out. I’ll make up a convincing emergency.”
“Thank you,” Willa says and she means it.

It’s a short drive to Hannibal’s from Alana, and Willa’s surprisingly not nervous as she walks up to Hannibal’s front door. Alana’s dressed her so she knows she looks the part. And Hannibal invited her as a friend. There’s nothing to be nervous about. If she doesn’t like the opera or the people there then she never has to go back.

This isn’t like crime scenes. She’s not going to save lives by going to the opera. If she doesn’t like it then she can walk away without any consequences.

Hannibal comes to the door in slacks and a dress shirt that he’s still buttoning. Without his usual waistcoat or even suit jacket he looks **undressed**.

“You’re not wearing clothes,” Willa says, blushing as soon as the words are out of her mouth. “I mean, you’re wearing less clothes than usual. Um,” she winces, “I should probably just not talk for the rest of the night.”

Hannibal, thankfully, looks amused with her rather than offended. “Come inside,” he says. “I am hesitant to admit that I had a mishap in the kitchen. It led to the delay of my preparations for the evening.”

“Are you okay?” Willa asks, reaching for his hands before she realizes what she’s doing. It’s not until she’s holding Hannibal’s in her own that she realizes what’s she’s done. “Um,” she says, but she doesn’t let his hands go - they’re warm, and a touch dry - until she’s turned them over and made sure they’re unharmed. “Usually, when I have trouble in the kitchen I end up accidentally cutting myself.”

“That’s not the kind of trouble I had,” Hannibal says, “but I appreciate you concern.”

“Right.” Willa drops his hands and drops hers to her sides. “Uh, I can wait out of the way while you finish getting ready. Probably best.” She reaches up to tug on the end of her braid; only, she doesn’t have a braid tonight.

“You may wander the house or you may come with me,” Hannibal says. He glances at her with a slight smile. “I am perfectly decent.”

Willa follows him up to his bedroom, feeling a little daring and a little like this should signify the end of their evening and not the beginning. It’s strange again when they get to his bedroom to watch him put clothes **on**. Not that it should be strange. She and Hannibal are friends.

Friends that...watch each other get dressed?

Hannibal’s fingers are nimble as he does up his waistcoat, and Willa gives up on not staring and gives herself permission to. Hannibal wouldn’t have asked her up if he wanted want to be admired. The waist coat accentuates a trim waist and keeps his white dress shirt from being too much.

“Is that a bow tie?” she asks as Hannibal deftly ties a black bow tie around his neck.

“There are certain expectations when one attends the opera,” Hannibal says.

Willa glances down at her dress. It’s certainly showy. Hannibal looks like he’s in a classic tuxedo and she’s maybe not dressed to match. She resists the urge to tug at the sequins, but Hannibal must notice her discomfort, because it’s his turn to take her hands in his.

“I fear I was caught off-guard by your arrival, and I didn’t pay you the compliments you deserve.”
Willa rolls her eyes and pulls her hands back. “It’s still me, Dr. Lecter. Still Willa. Just Willa in a dress.”

“Am I back to being Dr. Lecter?” Hannibal asks.

“You invited me as a friend,” she says.

“Most of my friends call me Hannibal,” he says.

“That means you don’t need to...fuss over me.”

“Noted,” Hannibal says. “You do look lovely tonight.” He holds up a hand to forestall any of her protests. “I simply wanted to make sure I was the first to tell you that. I will abstain from any further comments. Unless you ask for them.”

“Deal,” she says. “Is this the kind of thing we drive to or do we take a cab?”

“I’ll drive us,” Hannibal says, slipping into his suit jacket. “Those who take cabs generally do because they overindulge during intermission.”

“You don’t seem to be a person who has trouble with overindulgence.”

“I don’t,” Hannibal agrees. “Indulgence is important - we should have things that we like and enjoy, but too much of a good thing causes it to lose its flavor.”

Willa grew up in a home where even indulgence was a dirty word. Toughness was a virtue. So was having simple needs. She can see the mark of indulgence on Hannibal’s life - the nice suits, the gorgeous kitchen, the active social life - but she’s a person of simpler tastes. She grew up knowing that wanting was fruitless because they couldn’t afford what she wanted or her dad would frown, thinking what she wanted was silly.

Hannibal takes pleasure in things he doesn’t need, but with an appreciation for them that comes from a time when he didn’t, or couldn’t, have them. At one point in his life he might not have been much different from her. And now, in her borrowed dress and with a face that doesn't look like her own, she can pass as not that different from him.

They get to the opera during the first call for finding seats. Willa’s worried she’s made Hannibal late. He doesn’t seem like the kind of person to aim for fashionably late. He doesn’t need an entrance to make people pay attention to him. He just needs to exist.

Her suspicions are confirmed when a woman in a dress reminiscent of the 1920s approaches them.

“I was beginning to fear you weren’t going to show up,” the woman says. She has a headband with the same fringe as her dress. “But I can see why the delay. Had a bit of a distraction?”

The woman says this last bit with a smile and a knowing look at Willa.

“I will make all the proper introductions at intermission,” Hannibal promises.

He puts a hand on the small of Willa’s back and guides her through the dispersing crowd. A couple people come up to them, given the same deflection as the first woman, but most just stare before finding their seats.

Willa realizes her first assessment wasn’t quite right - Hannibal’s not late because she made him late but he’s still later than usual because of her. She waits until they’re in his box - because of
course he has a box - to say anything.

“We could’ve been here for introductions before the opera started,” she says, fussing with the skirt of her dress until she doesn’t feel like it’s trapping her. “You wanted them wondering.”

“I did.” Hannibal gestures for her to sit first, in a plush velvet chair.

“They’re going to have the whole first half to think up questions.”

The whole intermission is going to be spent being interrogated.

“They will.” Hannibal looks pleased by this, a small upturn in his lips that Willa would've missed if she hadn’t been looking for it.

Alana was right, Hannibal enjoys the thought of putting her on the spot. Will he put his hand on her back again? Pull her close to him to shield her from all the stares? They’re sitting side by side in the box, and they seem even closer than they are because no one else is in the seats beside them or behind them.

“You have a box,” she says. “You told me you happened to get an extra ticket for the opera. You have your own box.”

“It’s a shared box,” Hannibal says. He doesn't deny misleading her. “But Donald and his wife declined to come tonight. He claims The Marriage of Figaro is overdone.”

“Is it?” Willa asks.

“Some works are popular for a reason.”

Willa covers her smile with her hand and is glad when the lights dim so Hannibal can’t ask her why she’s amused. Of course, when the room darkens it only becomes that much more obvious that it’s just the two of them in the box together. She’s suddenly hyperaware of Hannibal’s shoulder - it brushes hers every time he exhales, and she’s not sure whether to lean into or away from the touch.

She’s relieved when the singers take the stage, because it’ll be something to focus on besides Hannibal except when they begin to sing Willa realizes that it’s not English.

Italian.

She’s at an opera in a language she doesn’t speak. Not that language really matters she thinks as the singer’s voice climbs and climbs. Willa wouldn’t be able to understand even if they were singing in English.

She sneaks a look at Hannibal. He’s leaning slightly forward in his seat, enraptured.

Willa turns her attention back to the stage before Hannibal catches her staring. She lets her mind wander, though. She wonders what the team is doing now. Has there been a new body in the Angel Maker case? Or are they combing through the evidence from the last scene, searching for anything that could help them find him?

Willa should be with them wherever they are.

She shouldn’t be at the opera in a fancy dress while people are dying. This is frivolous. Wasteful.

She doesn't realize she’s fidgeting until Hannibal puts a hand on her knee. She goes absolutely still,
not even breathing until her lungs burn in protest. She doesn't shift side to side anymore, but her body trembles under Hannibal’s touch. There’s no way he can’t feel it, but he doesn't move his hand, doesn’t say anything, just keeps listening to the opera.

His hand is warm and a grounding touch, and she can’t help but wonder what it would feel like against her bare skin. If she started fidgeting again would he squeeze her knee? She blushed just thinking about it. Hannibal is her friend and kind of her therapist. She shouldn’t be thinking this way about him. Now that she’s started though, she finds it hard to stop.

She saw the sure way his fingers did up the buttons on his clothes. Would they be as sure undoing them? What about the zipper on her dress? Would he stand behind her and drag it down slowly, one click at a time until he could push the straps off her shoulders and let the dress fall? Would he step close to her then? Kiss her neck? The bare skin of her shoulders?

Would he be gentle with her? She thinks he would the first time at least. He’d take his time, making sure to touch or kiss every bit of her. He’d probably talk, too. Italian, in a low murmur, saying things that would embarrass her if they were in English.

By the time the curtain comes down for intermission, Willa’s cheeks are flushed, and she can’t look Hannibal in the eye.

“I’m going to get a drink,” she tells him, eyes skittering around the box as the lights come on. “Let the mystery grow some more.”

“Of course,” Hannibal says.

He doesn’t offer to come with her which she’s grateful for. She’s not sure she could think up a plausible reason for him not to.

When she gets to the bar, the man behind it gives her a once over and says, “Champagne?” already reaching for the bottle.

“Scotch,” she says.

He pauses. “What's a girl like you want a drink like that for?”

Willa’s tempted to just take the champagne even though it’ll mean a headache in the morning when someone comes up beside her.

“Doesn’t matter why,” the man says. He’s younger than Hannibal, closer to Willa’s age and in a suit that isn’t quite as nice as Hannibal’s. He’s got a shiny shirt on underneath it and his bowtie is crooked. “She’ll have a scotch. A double.” The man’s voice dares the bartender to argue. He doesn’t. “And I’ll have a gin and tonic.”

The man doesn't look to see if the bartender is listening. He turns to Willa instead. “Matthew Brown.”

“Willa Graham.”

He hands her her scotch. Their fingers brush, a clumsy flirtation. Maybe she shouldn’t have wandered off without Hannibal.

“You wrote the standard monograph on death by insect activity.” Matthew says.

Willa takes a larger sip of her scotch than something this nice deserves. “That’s me,” she says. She
didn’t expect to find someone that knew her at the opera. She thought that here the name Willa Graham would mean nothing.

“My boss - he gave me the ticket for tonight - he thinks you’re brilliant.”

Willa is not drunk enough for this. She takes another large swallow. “Um, thank you. You have an interest in entomology?”

How does she manage to find the strange ones? She must have a beacon or something. She’s at the opera. There should be some rule about no talking about insects or dead people at the opera.

“I do,” Matthew says, but the way he looks at her implies that his real interest is her.

She downs the rest of her drink.

“Another please,” she tells the bartender. She shakes her head when Matthew pulls out his wallet. “I’ve got this one. I should be getting back to my date.”

“Date?” Matthew asks. He frowns.

“Dr. Hannibal Lecter,” she says. “Have you met him?”

“I know of him. He and my boss are acquaintances. Both well-known psychiatrists.”

Willa’s drink appears with much less fuss than the last one, and the bartender waves her off when she pulls out her wallet. “I put it on Dr. Lecter’s tab,” he tells her. He also hands her a glass of wine. “For Dr. Lecter.”

“Thank you,” Willa says. She should name drop Hannibal more often. “Nice to meet you,” she tells Matthew and then leaves before he can suck her into another conversation. She doesn’t want to talk to someone who works for a psychiatrist.

She finds Hannibal with ease and hands his wine glass when he notices her.

“We weren’t sure you were coming back,” the woman from before says, a hint of reproach in her voice. “You seemed to find yourself an admirer.”

“Professional,” Willa says. She steps close to Hannibal, aware that she’s surrounded by strangers and ones that aren’t inclined to be kind.

Hannibal wraps his free arm around her waist, pulling her even closer, and she’s grateful for the acknowledgement and glad he didn’t think she was abandoning him for Matthew.

“And what profession is that?” a balding man in the circle asks with a pointed look at Hannibal’s hand, low on her hip.

There are a few scandalized gasps, but everyone stares at her, waiting for her to confirm that she’s a prostitute or make up some kind of lie. Hannibal’s arm tightens around her waist, the only sign that he’s affected. She can’t help but wonder if he’s more upset with the implication that he’d have to resort to a prostitute to get a date or that the man was being rude to Willa.

Willa knows which one has her more upset, and she snaps her answer before she can think better of it. “FBI. I profile serial killers.”

That gets a reaction. There are even more gasps and a couple of people in their small audience look at each other as if to say can you believe it?
The woman in the flapper dress is the first to recover. “A profiler?” She turns to Hannibal, a sly smile on her face. “Are you also a professional admirer, then?”

Hannibal’s fingers dig into Willa’s hip for a moment, resenting the comparison to Matthew Brown. When he speaks, his voice is calm. “I’m afraid I’m mixing business and pleasure by bringing Willa with me tonight.”

There are titters of laughter at that, and Willa takes a long drink of her scotch and leans into Hannibal’s side. He obliges her, turning her slightly towards him so it feels like she’s shielded from the crowd.

“I’ve been remiss in my introductions,” Hannibal says. “Willa Graham, this is the esteemed Linnea Komeda.”

Mrs. Komeda preens at the compliment. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Willa. One I hope I’ll have again.”

Willa sips at her scotch, slower this time to make it last, and Hannibal takes that as his cue to answer for her.

“Possibly,” he says. “This is her first time at the opera. We’ll have to see if it’s one worth repeating.”

So far, no. She likes the Hannibal part of it but could happily do without all the other people and the opera itself.

“Oh, don’t be coy, Hannibal,” Mrs. Komeda says, lightly hitting his arm. “You know I’m talking about a dinner party. It’s been forever since you’ve had one. You had the little get together with the doctors. Andrew told me about it. A small affair. You need to have a proper dinner party. It’s been long enough that dear Willa hasn’t experienced one.”

*Dear Willa*? Willa sips at her scotch, it’s really quite good now that she’s taking her time with it.

“Would you attend if I had a dinner party?” Hannibal asks her. He turns his head to speak to her and as close as they are, it wouldn’t be difficult to kiss him. She should probably stop drinking before she actually tries to kiss him.

“I think it’s unfair to make me the deciding factor,” she says. “If you want to show off for your friends then you should.” She’s already been to a dinner party at Hannibal’s, well a little get together according to Mrs. Komeda and that had been a bit overwhelming. Not to mention, with an adoring crowd, Hannibal doesn’t need her. She doesn’t have a refined palette. She’s not that hard to impress.

Mrs. Komeda laughs. “She knows you well, Hannibal. But so do we.”

“We all know each other as much as we allow ourselves to be known,” Hannibal says which is possibly the most pretentious psychiatrist line she’s ever heard him use, and she has a therapy session with him every week. She turns her face into his shoulder to muffle her laugh.

Possibly she’s had too much to drink.

She changes the possibly to definitely as the crowd breaks up to return to their seats for the second half of the opera and walking is more difficult than it should be.

Standing still had been fine, had lulled her into a false sense of security. As soon as she took her
first step the world tilted alarmingly. Fortunately, Hannibal still had his arm around his waist, and he steadies her without making it obvious that that’s what he’s doing.

“Huh,” Willa says, relinquishing her empty glass to Hannibal. He gives it to a passing man carrying a tray along with his wine glass, also empty. “Guess I’m the one who overindulged.”

“Is that what you were doing?” Hannibal asks, leading her back to the privacy of his box.

“No,” she admits. “All I wanted was a glass of scotch, but the bartender gave me a hard time about it and then Matthew showed up and was rather insistent on my behalf and got me a double. And then it turned out he was kind of creepy so I drank my first drink too fast and got an ill-advised second drink. And now,” Hannibal helps guide her into her chair, “Now, I think I’m quite more drunk than I wanted to be.”

“Would you like me to get you a glass of water?”

Willa shakes her head. “I’d like you to stay here,” she says and then immediately flushes. Apparently she’s drunk enough to have no filter but not drunk enough to feel no shame about it.

Hannibal looks pleased as he sits next to her. He surprises her by then reaching a hand out, palm up, and she stares at it for a long few seconds, because that’s a gesture that implies he wants to hold her hand.

“Um,” she says and then tentatively places her hand in his. She half-expects him to snatch his hand back like the old playground trick - high five, down low - oops, too slow! - but he doesn’t. He closes his hand around hers and rests their joined hands on her leg.

She’s staring.

She can’t make herself stop.

“I told Matthew you were my date,” she says. She risks a look at his face to see if this pleases him. He doesn’t give her any kind of reaction. She goes back to looking at their hands. She should probably pull away before she does something her sober self will never forgive her for.

Hannibal’s thumb rubs across the back of her hand, oddly hypnotic, and she doesn’t pull away.

The lights dim, signaling that the opera is about to continue. Both she and Hannibal quiet, but he doesn't let go of her hand. She spends the rest of the evening buzzing.
“How was the opera?” Alana asks.

She’s brought her lunch to Willa’s office giving Willa no place to hide. She knows Alana doesn’t meant it to seem like a trap - she’s being friendly, being nice. It’s not her fault that Willa’s a mess.

“Did understand a word of it, but it was fine.”

“Fine? That doesn’t sound like you’ll go back.”

Willa’s returned the dress she borrowed for the evening, returned the jewelry Alana let her borrow. She’s back to being Willa - hair in a messy french braid, in jeans covered in dog hair and a sweater that’s a size too big. She’s herself, she’s comfortable. She doesn’t belong at the opera.

“I got hit on at the bar.”

Alana stops poking through her pasta salad. “Well, this story just got interesting. Was Hannibal with you at the time?”

Willa shakes her head. “I don’t think he would’ve dared if Hannibal had been with me. I needed a drink. Needed a bit of space. That’s not quite what happened.”

“Is the guy still alive?” Alana asks.

Willa stares at her, eyes wide.

“That was supposed to be a joke,” Alana says. “Guess given what we do for a living it wasn’t very funny.”

“Hannibal didn’t meet him,” Willa says. Not that that should matter. Hannibal doesn’t murder people. And if he did he wouldn’t target people who hit on Willa. He’s the one who’s encouraging her to get out and meet people. It would be counterproductive to do that and then kill everyone she spends time with.

Still...if he did target people with a sexual interest in her, how would he do it?

“Willa?” Alana calls, pulling Willa out of that disturbing train of thought. Even for her that’s a bit much. She wonders if she should bring it up during her next therapy session. How would Hannibal react? He’d probably tell her he doesn’t feel such base emotions like jealousy. If he killed people he would do it with poise, grace, with a certain detachment of emotion.

“Sorry,” Willa says. She shakes her head to clear it. “I might go back. I guess it depends on Hannibal.”

“Oh?” Alana asks.

“I’m certainly not going to go on my own,” Willa says.

Alana lips curve up into a smile. “Maybe your new beau will ask you to go with him. What was his name? I didn’t catch it.”

“That’s because I didn’t tell you,” Willa says. “His name’s Matthew Brown. And he’s not my new beau.”
The smile vanishes from Alana’s face. “No, I don’t think he will be. He works at the BSHCI. But he’s an orderly, how would he - oh. Chilton.”

Willa didn’t follow any of that conversation, probably because Alana was having it with herself. All she can gather is that Matthew Brown isn’t the kind of guy she wants to spend more time with, but she’d figured that bit out all on her own.

“Sorry,” Alana says. “That was rude. Dr. Chilton is the general administrator for the BSHCI, and a colleague of both mine and Hannibal’s. Though, uh, he prides himself on collecting psychopaths.”

“Let me guess,” Willa says, suddenly weary, “He wants a go at the inside of my head?”

“He does,” Alana answers. “I don’t know much about Matthew. I can’t imagine that Frederick would’ve known you were going to be there and then sent him, but,” she shrugs as if to say can’t put anything past him.

“Brown knew a lot about me. More than strangers usually do. I told him Hannibal was my date and ran away. Not one of my better moments.”

“I bet Hannibal loved it, though.”

Willa thinks back to Hannibal’s reaction. How he’d gone quiet, how he hadn’t shown any outward feelings, but how he’d held her hand for the rest of the opera. How he didn’t let her out of his sight after that, keeping her close, and keeping others at bay.

“You were right,” is what Willa chooses to say, “He enjoys being in a protector role. It makes me wonder why he gave up being a surgeon.”

“Switched from protecting the body to protecting the mind,” Alana says. “But enough of Hannibal. Let’s talking about something else.”

Willa’s about to ask after Alana’s evening when her phone rings, Jack’s name flashing across the Caller ID. “I think I would’ve preferred to keep talking about Hannibal,” she says before answering the call. “Afternoon, Jack.”

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Willa is restless as she paces Hannibal’s waiting room even though she called ahead to make sure he didn’t have any appointments. He probably wants to do something better with his free time than walk her through the mess of her own mind.

It’s almost funny, she thinks as she looks at the same picture of a sailboat for the tenth time, that Jack send her to Hannibal to deal with the horrors of what she sees on cases, and she’s sent herself to Hannibal because of Jack.

Though, maybe it should be Dr. Lecter if she’s seeming him in an official capacity.

She rubs her temples, a headache building behind her eyes, and she’s caught off guard when the door to Hannibal’s office opens.

“Willa,” he greets, like he’s pleasantly surprised to see her when, again, she’d called ahead. “Come in.”

“Are you sure it’s okay?” she asks. “It isn’t Thursday.”
“And that is a problem?” he asks, ushering her through before closing the door behind them.

“Our appointments are on Thursdays. Today isn’t Thursday.” She walks over to her spot near the curtained window. Hannibal doesn’t like it when she paces on the upper floor. It ‘makes dialogue difficult’. She thinks he just enjoys being taller than her. “When we’re in here do I call you Dr. Lecter or Hannibal?”

“You struggle when there aren’t clear boundaries,” Hannibal says.

“We’re don’t have a lot of those,” Willa says. Her empathy means that she can understand everyone, and she struggles to balance what she’s comfortable with, what she knows are social graces, and what people expect from her by dipping into their heads. It’s too much information, often conflicting. It’s best when things, when people, are straightforward. They rarely are.

One of the reasons Willa likes Beverly is that she’s incredibly straightforward.

Alana makes the effort because she knows Willa appreciates it.

Hannibal is...well, he’s Hannibal. He’s her friend and her therapist. He takes her to the opera and makes her breakfast after a bad night, but he reports back to Jack on her state of mind. He held her hand and just now he held open the door to his office. There are no neat little boxes. She doesn’t know how to act.

“We are friends who have conversations about work,” Hannibal says. “I offer you guidance and assistance when you require it.”

“And what do I offer back?” Willa asks.

“Your company,” Hannibal answers easily.

Willa rolls her eyes and plays with the curtain. “Whining to you about my day isn’t exactly good company.”

“I enjoy when you share your thoughts and insights with me,” Hannibal says. “And if you’re concerned about the nature of the conversation we’re going to have then you can assuage your conscience by joining me for dinner tonight. No work talk allowed.”

It feels like a trap. “I’ll be pretty boring without work to talk about.”

“Hardly,” Hannibal says. “We haven’t talked about how you enjoyed the opera yet.”

Willa quickly turns to the window as a blush creeps up her cheeks. Thinking about the opera isn’t going to help keep their boundaries in their right places. “Fine,” she says. “But that’s at dinner. Right now, work.”

“Of course,” Hannibal says. “Would you like to take a seat?”

“No,” she says. She’s too restless to sit. “Jack called me.” She risks a glance over her shoulder. She’s not sure whether it’s her imagination or not, but Hannibal looks displeased. A second later, his expression is neutral again. Or maybe it always was. Wishful thinking.

“Alana joked that she was surprised you didn’t kill Matthew Brown,” Willa says. She winces. Even worse topic than Jack. Coming here was a mistake. She should’ve stayed away. Should’ve kept her mouth shut.
“Oh?” Hannibal asks, rolling with the conversation change. She wishes he’d direct her back to Jack.

In for a penny, in for a pound, Willa thinks. “I thought about how you’d do it.” She smiles, more of a grimace, really, as if that can offset that horrifying thing she just said. “I do think about murder for a living.”

“You must have some interesting killers in your head,” Hannibal says, unfazed that she’s thought about him as a killer. “Did you imagine it as a crime of passion?”

“No,” Willa says. Hannibal’s easy acceptance makes it easier to talk, makes her elaborate when she should just keep her mouth shut. “You wouldn’t be that kind of killer. You’re not impulsive. It would be careful, well-planned and well thought out.”

Hannibal is sitting in his usual chair, and he looks interested by what she’s saying.

“I don’t know what I’m saying,” Willa says.

“On the contrary. You know exactly what you’re saying. Tell me, Willa, how did I kill him? What images did you see in your head?”

Willa’s flush returns. This is such an intimate conversation even given the topic. It shouldn’t be, but Hannibal’s watching her, interested, and she doesn’t know how to say no. Doesn’t know how she could. Hannibal is the first person who sees her and wants to know more. He doesn’t want to study her, doesn’t want to pick her apart and put her brain in a trophy case. He simply wants to see.

Hobbs crows right in her ear. See? See?

She pushes him aside. This moment is about her and Hannibal. Hobbs doesn’t have a right to intrude.

Willa wets her lips before she speaks. “It depends on why you wanted to kill him.”

Hannibal leans back in his seat, waiting.

“If you were annoyed with him, if you thought he’d interrupted the opera, if you thought he was...discourteous then you would kill him and dispose of the body. There would be no evidence, no investigation. Everyone would assume he disappeared. His death would be as insignificant as his life.”

Hannibal’s eyes glitter as he meets her gaze, and Willa’s on the edge of something. Hannibal is dangerous, she knows this without a doubt in her mind, but there’s something else. Something more.

See? Hobbs demands, frantic, hands reaching out like he’s going to shake her.

“Is that all you saw?” Hannibal asks, calm, like she isn’t casually discussing a murder she imagined him committing.

“No,” Willa admits. She wonders how he knows. “There was another.” More vivid. More real.

Hannibal waits.

Willa abandons the curtain. “I also saw what you’d do to him if you wanted to display him as an
example.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Hannibal asks, but Willa’s certain that he knows. Somehow, that makes it even harder for her to answer.

“He took liberties he shouldn’t have,” Willa says. Her voice is steady but her eyes skip around Hannibal’s face as she says, “He coveted someone he shouldn’t have.”

Hannibal smiles, proud, and Willa should be horrified - by what she’s saying, by his reaction - but she’s not. She feels...free.

“What did I do to him?” Hannibal asks.

“You arranged him on knees - supplication. Instead of having his hands clasped in prayer they were held out in front of him. His eyes were in them, perfectly - no, surgically - removed. He died slowly. You talked to him the whole time. You wanted him to know who brought his end to him, you wanted him to know why. And then you put him on display so everyone else would know. That was your design.”

Hannibal doesn’t stir from his seat, but she can see the rise and fall of his chest, he’s breathing heavier than usual.

“I don’t usually see things that haven’t happened,” Willa says. “Usually my nightmares are of crime scenes. This is new.”

“Does it bother you?” Hannibal asks. There’s a slight rasp to his voice, and he takes a cup of tea off his desk and takes a sip.

“It should,” Willa says. “It will. I’m afraid that the next time I see him I’ll see flashbacks to you killing him. That I’ll be able to feel his body giving way to my - your scalpel as we cut into him.” Willa rubs her eyes. “This is why I’m benched. There’s something very, very wrong with me.”

“You are forced to see horror,” Hannibal says, “and those horrors are reflected inside your mind. You could just as easily see better things, but your career does not lend itself to more pleasant images.”

It’s as good a segue as they’re going to get to why she originally came here. She’s relieved to leave behind murder fantasies or whatever they’d just been talking about, but at the same time she wants to push more. Hannibal had looked enraptured, had watched her like he watched the opera. She knows he has the ability to kill, suspects that he might even have the desire. She wonders if he’s ever actually taken a life.

“Jack interrupted my lunch with Alana,” she says. “There’s been another body. This one was castrated.”

“Angel maker, indeed,” Hannibal says.

Willa smiles. “That’s what I said. Jack didn’t appreciate the mini-lesson on angel physiology. He really didn’t appreciate that I wouldn’t come to the crime scene. He only wants me to have time off if it works for him. And I don’t know what to do. I’m not getting better. Should I just go back out into the field? Be as useful as I can before I can’t anymore?”

“As both your therapist and your friend I don’t recommend any course of action that puts yourself at risk. Jack doesn’t need you on this case. Give yourself time to recover from Abigail’s murder, give yourself time to recover from your first case back in the field and then we’ll evaluate whether
it’s good for you to return.”

Willa laughs. “It’s not good for me. I can tell you that right now. It will never be good for me. But I’m good for it. I’m even better for closure rates.” Willa’s smile feels like it’s splitting her face in two. “Jack’s unit looks better when I’m helping.”

“I don’t think that’s a good reason to return, but I can understand why you might,” Hannibal says. “Still, you’re not needed on this case.”

“That’s the second time you’ve said that,” Willa says. “What do you know that I don’t?”

“Jack’s Angel Maker is suffering from a brain tumor,” Hannibal says. “He’s deteriorating quickly. He will die very soon. You aren’t needed to catch him.”

“But how many people will die before he does?” Willa asks. “How many people could I save?”

“He’s killing those who could arguably deserve to die. Do you wish you had been there to save anyone who’s died?”

Willa stops behind her chair, hands digging into the back of it. “The answer should be yes,” she says. She looks around, hopes Freddie Lounds isn’t recording this conversation. Hopes that Hannibal isn’t going to share this with Jack. “But it’s not. What looking takes out of me, I want that pain to be worth it. And they aren’t.”

Hannibal nods. “Then no more guilt, Willa. There’s no need for it. Should I talk to Jack about what being on leave from cases means?”

Willa shakes her head. She can fight her own battles if they’re worth fighting. “It’s fine. He’s just trying to do his job the best he can. It’s not his fault I’m the way I am.”

“He is at fault for exploiting you.”

Willa shakes her head. “I’m capable of saying no, Hannibal. If it was bad enough I would.”

Hannibal raises his eyebrows.

Willa amends, “If I wasn’t doing enough good to make it worth it, I would stop.”

Hannibal doesn’t look like he believes her, but he doesn’t push it. Instead, he stands up. “If that’s all, I don’t have any more appointments this evening. I can begin making dinner.”

Willa laughs. She can’t help it. Hannibal looks...affronted, like a bird who's gotten its feathers ruffled. “I tell you I’ve graphically imagined you murdering someone, I tell you I’m losing my mind, and you still want to make me dinner?”

“We’re leaving work behind,” Hannibal reminds her. “Boundaries.”

Willa laughs again, but this time, Hannibal smiles along.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Elliot Buddish is found suspended in a barn, an angel of his own making.

“I don’t understand how he did it,” Price says, staring at the pictures from the scene.

Willa’s been allowed to see the evidence of the crimes, but Hannibal’s recommended she doesn’t
attend Buddish’s autopsy or speak with any of his bereaved, and confused, family. Too many emotions, too much to stir inside her brain.

Willa thinks the only reason Jack’s allowed her here is to see all the people that died, because she didn’t help. He’s brought her here to gloat and to guilt her at once. Feeling a headache coming on, she shakes two Aspirin into her hand. She swallows them and looks at the pictures Price is thumbing through.

“This was his becoming,” Willa murmurs, tracing her fingers over the fishing line, almost too thin to be visible in the photograph. “His ascension.”

“Hell of a way to go,” Zeller says. “You think he actually became an angel?”

Both Beverly and Price give him matching incredulous looks.

“You believe in a Supreme Being?” Price asks. “I thought we were supposed to be scientists.”

Zeller shrugs. “He believed,” he says, pointing to the picture.

“He also has a brain tumor that made him believe he could see evil,” Price says. “And then he killed his victims and set them up to watch over him as he slept. He was out of his mind.”

Willa leans closer to the picture. She swears she can see him lowering himself to the ground, skin flaps still posed as wings, tall and proud behind him.

“I see you what you are,” Buddish says, words echoing in the empty barn.

Willa’s not in the barn. She’s in Quantico. Beverly is here. Price and Zeller too. She looks around but all she sees are tall wooden stalls and piles of hay. No, she thinks, desperate, she’s not alone. She’s not here.

Hobbs appears at Buddish’s side, and he hooks his chin over Buddish’s shoulder. “See?” he croons. He raises a hand to point at Willa. “See?”

“I see what you are,” Buddish repeats. “I see inside of you. I can bring it out.”

Willa shakes her head. She fumbles at her side for her gun. She can protect herself. She can get herself out of this.

How?

Both men are dead.

How can they be killed again?

How can they be alive now?

“I will give you the majesty of your Becoming,” Buddish intones.

Hobbs’s face splits into a ghastly smile. “See?” he asks, and Willa doesn’t know who he’s talking to anymore.

She sinks to her knees, hands covering her eyes. She doesn’t see. She won’t see. They can’t make her. Hobbs can’t make her. She won’t see. She won’t become an avenging angel. She won’t butcher anyone. All these killers, they want her. They think she understands, thinks they can make her like them. They can’t. She won’t.
She won’t.

“Willa? Willa!”

Someone’s shouting.

Willa tries to cover her ears, but it means leaving her eyes exposed. She closes them, squeezing as tight as she can.

If I can’t see you then you can’t see me.

She laughs, hysteria threatening to bubble up and overtake her.

How do you hide from a ghost?

How do you protect yourself?

“WILLA!” the voice is sharp, demanding, and Willa looks up.

She blinks against bright, harsh lights. They’re too bright for the barn. She’s on her knees, hands covering her ears, on the floor of the meeting room. Jack is looming over her, frightening in his fear. Price and Zeller are in the corner of the room pretending like they’re not paying attention.

Beverly hovers by her shoulder, like she wants to touch, wants to comfort, but doesn’t know what will happen.

“What?” Willa asks. Her voice sounds far away, like her body is in this room but the rest of her is still in the barn.

In the barn she’s never stepped foot in.

“I think something’s wrong,” Willa says.

“I’m calling Dr. Lecter,” Jack decides. “Don’t try to argue.”

Willa stays there on the floor until Jack strides away, phone in hand. Beverly approaches then, offers Willa a hand and helps her to her feet. Willa’s head is pounding. She fumbles for her bottle of aspirin.

“Oh no,” Beverly says, taking the bottle. “You just had two of those. You’re going to wreck your stomach if you take more.”

“Just?” Willa asks.

“Before you zoned out,” Beverly says. She eyes the aspirin like they’re somehow at fault. “Have you been taking these a lot?”

“Headaches,” Willa answers. She remembers taking the two aspirin, remembers needing to fortify her head against the crime scene photos. It seems like that was hours ago, though. “How long was I...zoned?”

“A couple minutes,” Beverly answers. “You weren’t responding to anything.”

Willa’s shaking. Cold, maybe. Leftover adrenaline. Something. Beverly guides her to a chair and helps her sit down.
“You want a blanket?” Beverly asks.

“I want to be normal,” Willa says. She tips her head back and closes her eyes.

Beverly, miraculously, lets her have her peace until Hannibal shows up.

“Dr. Lecter’s here,” Beverly warns, voice pitched just for Willa to hear, and Willa’s sitting up and alert when Hannibal strides through the door, Jack on his heels.

Willa flushes, embarrassed because there’s all this fuss over her. She doesn’t want to be a burden. Doesn’t want everyone’s attention on her. She tries to shrink into herself, but she doesn’t disappear. Hannibal, face edged with concern, forcibly softens, and Willa’s able to relax.

“How are you feeling?” Hannibal asks her.

She has an answer on the tip of her tongue but then she looks around, sees all the people in the room, remembers where she says and changes her answer. “I don’t want to talk here.”

Jack throws his hands up in the air, like she’s being difficult and maybe she is, but she deserves a right to her privacy. She’s in Quantico. Everything here is probably recorded. And even if it wasn’t, she’s not going to open her mind up to Hannibal when there are other people around.

“Of course,” Hannibal says.

He never treats Willa like she’s being unreasonable, never treats her requests with anything less than respect. When he holds his hand out to her she takes it and lets him help her up.

“Here,” Beverly says, holding the bottle out, to Willa but her words are for Hannibal. “She just took two. Probably five minutes ago.”

Hannibal nods his thanks and Willa tucks the bottle into her pocket.

“Have you been having headaches?” Hannibal asks and then, before Willa can even open her mouth he says, “Apologies. No more questions until we are elsewhere.”

He and Willa leave Quantico slowly, because Willa doesn’t want to lean on him, and her legs are too weak to be walking briskly on her own. It isn’t until they’re outside, and by his car, that she realizes he’s driven all this way because of her.

“Your other appointments,” she begins.

“Rearranged,” he says. “Being a psychiatrist means that sometimes emergencies crop up. My patients knows this. Some of them have even been that emergency.”

And today it’s Willa.

“I don’t know what happened,” she says.

“Is this where you would like to talk?” Hannibal asks, looking at the parking lot around them. There are a few students wandering the sidewalk, a couple harried agents rushing to their cars or into the building.

Willa shakes her head. “It’s too open.”

“Where would you like to go?” Hannibal asks.
She thinks about his office, but what if a patient didn’t get his cancellation call and showed up and saw her? She doesn’t want that. His house would be private, but they’ve had a couple nice memories there, and she doesn’t want to ruin them with whatever this is. That really only leaves one place, but Wolf Trap is a long drive, and she’s already inconvenienced him enough for one day.

“Would you like to go home?” Hannibal asks. “Somewhere familiar might be good. And seeing your dogs could be therapeutic.”

“You don’t like my dogs,” Willa says.

“I’ve never said that,” Hannibal says. “And this isn’t about what I want or like. This is about you.” Things being about her makes her uncomfortable. “You’re always brushing dog hair off your pants,” she says but she gets into his car. “Home sounds good.” She leans her head against the door once it’s closed again. “No talking until we’re at my house?”

“If that’s what you’d like,” Hannibal says.

She doesn’t remember him starting the car. She doesn’t remember falling asleep either. She remembers waking up to a gentle hand on her shoulder and an even gentler, “Willa? Willa, we’re home.”

Home, she thinks, smiling as she comes out of her doze. It sounds nice when Hannibal says it like that. Like it’s their home. It’s a silly thought, one that will never happen. He’s her therapist, and all signs are pointing to her being crazier than she thought she was.

The lingering warmth and happiness from a good nap fade, leaving her chilled as she gets out of the car. She makes sure to go first so it’s her the dogs try to bowl over when the front door is open, but Hannibal is behind her, strong and holding her up when their combined excitement almost knocks her over.

The dogs calm enough for them to get into the house, and Willa sinks down onto the rug in the living room and lets her dogs pile on top of her. She needs to be near them as much as they need to be near her right now.

“Comfortable?” Hannibal asks, smiling as he inspects the chairs for the one least likely to leave dog hair clinging to his pants when he leaves.

He picks the armchair, the one that Willa almost never sits in because it means the dogs can’t climb on next to her. He brushes it off before he sits and then he leans forward, elbows on his thighs like they’re in his office for a session.

Willa supposes this means it’s time to talk.

“Did you have a good rest in the car?” Hannibal asks.

It’s not where Willa expected him to start and it catches her off guard. “Um, yes.”

“Trouble sleeping?” Hannibal guesses.

She nods. “Nothing new. I mean, the dreams have been getting weirder, and I’ve been feeling more rundown, but I never sleep well.”

“And do you lose time often like you did this afternoon?”
“I wouldn’t say I lost time,” Willa says. “I was...transported.”

Hannibal is patient, waits for her to keep talking.

“I looked at the crime scene photo, and it came alive. I was in the barn. Buddish was there. He was talking to me. And then Hobbs showed up.” Willa rubs her forehead, doesn’t dare glance up at Hannibal. She doesn’t want to see what he’s thinking about her. “Something’s wrong with me.”

“Yes,” Hannibal agrees which wouldn’t be reassuring except if something’s wrong then it can be fixed. And with Hannibal on her side then she thinks everything could be alright. It’s stupid, it’s too trusting, but Wiilla can’t help but be comforted anyway.

Willa itches to take her aspirin out. “I’ve been having headaches,” she says. Might as well get it all out there. “Nightsweats. Hot flashes during the day followed by cold flashes. Some days I feel fine. Some…” she glances around the room, “I feel like I’m separating from my body.”

“These are things that should be concerning,” Hannibal says. “Why didn’t you bring them up? Have we blurred the boundaries too much?”

“No,” Willa says, quick, too quick. They might be blurring boundaries, but she knows that if they stop then Hannibal will insist on being her therapist and not her friend. No more opera, no more intimate dinners. Just sessions in his office. “They’re normal. For me. I don’t know. Maybe it wasn’t always this bad. It’s been getting worse. But I didn’t notice.”

Hannibal reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small notebook and a pen. He hands both over. “Would you please draw me a clock?”

“A clock?” Willa asks. “With the right time?”

“If you wish,” Hannibal says.

It seems like a silly request but Willa does it anyways. She draws the circle, draws the numbers around the edge. She even draws the small and long hands to point to the right times. She hands it over, and she sees the slight furrow in Hannibal’s brow as he looks it over.

“I believe we should arrange some tests for you,” Hannibal says.

“Well,” Willa says, swallowing past her fear, “That doesn’t sound ominous at all.”

“If I am correct then what you are afflicted with is perfectly curable,” he tells her. “But I’d like to be sure. I know one of the most prominent neurologists in Baltimore. I could get you an appointment with him.”

Willa nods then remembers what Alana told her before the opera. Hannibal enjoys being needed, he enjoys the opportunity to show off, and she knows exactly how she can repay him for his help.

“Would you do that for me?” she asks. “Please?”

The corners of Hannibal’s lips turn up in a smile. “Of course,” he says.

Hannibal enjoys being needed, but he enjoys it even more when he’s asked for help. Acknowledgement from the other party that Hannibal can offer them something they can’t do for themselves. Willa should probably be uncomfortable with that and its implications, but it’s not like she’s a model citizen either. She killed two people to protect Abigail Hobbs, and she would’ve killed more if she’d been given the chance.
Compared to her, what Hannibal does, his subtle manipulations, they’re barely even worth noticing.
Willa goes to see Dr. Donald Sutcliffe - the same Donald who Hannibal shares an opera box with - and he determines that she has encephalitis, a rare inflammation of the brain. It explains all her symptoms, and they caught it in time that she doesn’t need to be hospitalized, just put on medication.

Unlike when she got worse without noticing, she can immediately recognize that she’s getting better. She begins to sleep more soundly at night. The nightmares are fewer and fewer until she has regular nightmares instead of fever induced ones. She wakes up sweaty but not soaked through. She begins to see clearer and her headaches lessen.

“I would like to have a dinner party in honor of your recovery,” Hannibal tells her during her weekly session.

She’s sitting in the chair across from him, something she doesn’t often do, but there’s a certain restlessness gone from her bones now that she’s feeling better. It’s easier to sit, easier to face Hannibal.

It shouldn’t be.

She doesn’t know how long she was sick for - before Hobbs? Before Stammets? Maybe long enough to justify killing them. Maybe even long enough to justify not feeling the right amount of guilt for it. Only, she still doesn’t feel guilt. She knows she should. Knows what she did was wrong. Necessary in Hobbs’s case, definitely unnecessary in Stammets’s. She’s not upset by what she did. She’s more upset that she isn’t upset.

She’s afraid to tell Hannibal. Afraid of what he’ll tell Jack. Afraid she’ll be locked up in the BSHCI. If she’s cured then she shouldn’t have these thoughts, right? If she’s cured she should be better she should be good.

See? Hobbs taunts, dancing just out of reach.

Maybe...maybe she’s not fully recovered yet.

She should tell Hannibal she’s still seeing Hobbs. Not telling Hannibal everything led to her encephalitis go untreated. Maybe there’s something else wrong. Or, maybe, she’s wrong.

“Jack wants me to start going back on cases,” Willa says, realizing that she can’t pause too long in her answers or Hannibal will catch on that not everything is alright.

“So you suggesting that a dinner party is as painful to you as bearing witness to horrific crimes?” Hannibal asks.

“I’m sure the food would be better,” Willa says, “and the company equally as dreadful.”

Hannibal laughs, surprised by her candor or maybe just surprised, and she flashes him a small smile. It vanishes just as fast as it appeared. The opera hadn’t been enjoyable. Well, the performance had been okay, she could appreciate that it was more than okay even if she couldn’t appreciate the performance itself. The people had been awful. Hannibal had been...charming. Nice. She’d like to spend time with him in social settings more often.

But a dinner party isn’t what she had in mind.
She blushes at the thought of what she did have in mind, and she looks away even though Hannibal’s sure to have caught her blush.

“Mrs. Komeda will be pleased if you would come,” Hannibal says.

“And you?” Willa asks. She doesn’t care about Mrs. Komeda. She doesn’t care about Baltimore High Society. She cares about Hannibal. Maybe she should care what everyone else thinks about her, but she doesn’t. They don’t know her. They don’t see her the way Hannibal does.

“It would be difficult to have a party in your honor if you were not there,” Hannibal says.

It’s a deflection. A smooth, charming deflection, but a deflection nonetheless.

“Alana told me you enjoy being a protector,” Willa says. “Is that why you want me to come to your dinner party? Because you know it’ll make me uncomfortable? Or because you want to show off for me?” She knows it’s not because he wants to ‘honor her’ and boy, do those words give her uncomfortable flashbacks.

“Both,” Hannibal answers, no deflection this time.

Willa considers his answer, considers his honesty then says, “There are a lot of people who could fill both those roles.”

A gentle smile graces Hannibal’s lips. “Would you like me to tell you you’re special to me?”

“Only if it’s the truth.”

“I’m always honest with you, Willa, And I will be honest with you now. I am having a dinner party, because I enjoy cooking for my friends. I enjoy their praise even though I’m confident enough not to need it. You always tell me that your palate isn’t refined enough to be discerning, but that’s not what I’m interested in. I want to know if you enjoy what I cook for you. And yes, I cannot deny that I enjoy when you stand close to me, as if you trust me to act as a buffer between you and the rest of the world.”

“Protector and provider,” she murmurs.

Hannibal’s words sit between them, too much for her to begin to dissect even though she was the one who asked for honesty. She’s usually the one who uses honesty as a weapon, cutting people through with it, making them jump back from her. It isn’t often that someone turns it around on her.

“I’ll go to your dinner party,” she says, because that’s the easiest thing to tackle. Her feelings, his feelings - those will have to wait.

Hannibal’s eyes crinkle at the corners, pleased. “Might I ask another favor of you?”

Willa watches him, wary. People asking for favors...that never ends well. It ends with her staring at mutilated bodies. Ends with her standing over Garret Jacob Hobbs’s body, gun trembling in her grip. It -

“May I pick your outfit this time?”

It’s not what she was expecting, and it catches her off guard. “Alana didn’t do well enough for your tastes?” Willa asks. She should probably be offended. She’s not. Hannibal knows fashion. She doesn’t.
“You seemed uncomfortable,” Hannibal says, diplomatic.

“And I won’t be under your care?” Willa asks.

Hannibal doesn’t try to deny the accusation. He simply smiles and asks, “Do you trust me?”

“I do,” Willa answers.

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Willa’s first case back is a Ripper murder.

Because of course it is.

“It’s him,” Jack says when he calls her, and Willa knows she has no choice but to go in. She rolls out of bed, throws on some wrinkled clothes (after a quick Febreeze) and drives herself down the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

“Welcome back,” Beverly says. She’s leaning against the stairs leading up to the BSHCI like she’s been waiting for Willa. Like Willa needs an escort.

“That bad?” Willa asks, Beverly falling into step with her.

“The crime scene or the administrator?” Beverly jokes.

Willa tries to laugh.

The joke falls flat.

“Chilton seemed too interested in whether you’d be on the case,” Beverly says. “Jack wants one of us with you at all times.”

“In case I find myself into a cage that locks from the outside?” Willa asks. She hesitates at the doors to the hospital. She’s always had a low grade fear of places like this. Always afraid that if she goes in she might not come out.

“Something like that,” Beverly says. She pauses next to Willa. She doesn’t ask questions, doesn’t hurry Willa through.

“Do I have to meet with Chilton before I can look at the scene?” Willa asks.

“You know the administrator?” Beverly asks.

“I know of him,” Willa says. She steels herself and enters the building. Beverly follows her and the doors creak ominously closed behind them. “Would like to keep it that way.”

Beverly laughs. “I know what you mean. If we’re quiet we can probably sneak by him. Jack’s got the scene waiting for you. I know he doesn't like you going in biased, but there’s a reason I didn’t greet you with coffee.”

Gruesome.

Great.

At least if it’s the Ripper then there will be some artistry in there.
It’s not the Ripper.

The room is cleared for her, and there’s no one but her and the impaled body of the the nurse. Nurse Shell, she thinks Jack told her. The privacy curtain frames have been broken and fashioned into spears, used to both prop up the body and push through her. There are shards of wood, bits of glass that suspend her organs above her corpse.

It’s a recreation of the Wound Man.

No, yes, but more than that it’s simply a recreation.

“This isn’t him, Jack,” Willa says once the room isn’t just hers anymore.

She shakes herself out of the killer’s head - Abel Gideon’s head, out of order they know the killer but don’t know the killer. It was a particularly brutal crime. It was violent. It well-planned but also impulsive, frenzied.

“What do you mean, it isn’t him?” Jack asks, anger weighing his words.

He wants Gideon to be the Ripper.

“How can you be certain?” Dr. Chilton asks. A slight frown tugs his lips down.

They both want Gideon to be the Ripper.

Does Gideon want to be the Ripper? She shoves the thought aside.

“This is a recreation,” Willa says. She points to the Wound Man on the wall.

“The Ripper’s last victim,” Chilton begins.

“Exactly,” Willa interrupts. “His last victim was killed in this manner. The Ripper wouldn’t repeat. That’s not in his nature. He’s an artist. Why would he show something he’s already done? This is his work, but it’s not him.”

“Willa.” Jack sounds frustrated. Because she’s not making sense? Or because she’s not giving him the answer he wants?

Chilton puffs himself up. “Maybe his mind has stagnated after being in the BSHCI for so long. Maybe Gideon is returning to the familiar in hopes of finding himself again.”

“No,” Willa says. The longer she stares at the nurse the more certain she becomes. “Jack, this is plagiarism.”

“We never made the wound patterns on any of the Ripper victims public,” Jack says. He looks like he wants to believe Willa but he keeps glancing at the victim like he’s unsure.

Willa can understand. If they had the Ripper behind bars then Jack could get some peace. Everyone could get some peace knowing that they’re safe. Well, relatively. If Gideon is the Ripper then he managed to kill even while being in captivity.

“Jack,” Willa says, voice coaxing, patient. “I don’t think this is the Ripper. And, more importantly, when this gets out and the real Chesapeake Ripper hears that someone’s playing at him then he’s not going to be happy.”
The frown line in Jack’s forehead deepens.

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Willa calls Hannibal while she’s setting food out for the dogs. He picks up on the second ring.

“Willa?” he asks, a slight note of concern in his voice. “Is everything alright?”

Willa hadn’t even realized that calling Hannibal without warning would make him worry. But of course it would. She has a dangerous job, she just got over a brain inflammation. Maybe calling wasn’t a good idea.

“Yeah,” she says. “Fine. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have - I just -” she tucks the phone between her ear and her shoulder so she can rub her face. “I just wanted to talk. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to alarm you.”

“I’m glad you called,” Hannibal assures her. “You are not only my patient, you are my friend. Friends talk.”

“Yeah,” she says. She gets out of the way of the dogs. While normally they love her and crowd her demanding pets and head scratches, when there’s food out then there’s no competition. Food is more important than her.

She goes over to her couch and lies down. “I just wanted to say thank you for picking out a dress for me.” It seems like such a stupid reason to call. Especially since she worried him. She should’ve just sent a text. Only...she wanted to hear his voice.

“Thanking me before you see it?” Hannibal asks. “That is a brave choice.”

“You have good taste,” Willa says. “And I’m not sure when I’d find the time to go out and get something. Not that you’re not busy.” She bites her lip. Definitely should’ve stuck to texting.

“New case keeping you busy?” Hannibal asks.

Willa stretches out until her toes touch the far end of her couch. “Yeah. Everyone thinks it’s the Ripper so it’s chaos.”

“Everyone?” Hannibal asks.

“Not me,” Willa amends. “It doesn’t seem right. It’s too perfect. But they all want it to be the Ripper. Jack. Chilton. I talked with Gideon. I’m not an expert or anything, but I think someone told him he was the Chesapeake Ripper. It’s like he’s two people. I catch glimpses of the Ripper, and I catch glimpses of him. It’s...confusing.”

“Has anyone else spoken to him?”

“Alana. She has her suspicions too, but Jack...he’s going to do something stupid, Hannibal. I can feel it. I just don’t know how to stop it.”

“You’re not responsible for Jack Crawford’s behavior,” Hannibal tells her.

“What’s the dress look like?” Willa asks.

Hannibal, used to her abruptly changing subjects, doesn’t even hesitate before answering, “A surprise.”
“I’m not good with surprises,” Willa says.

“You told me you’d trust me,” Hannibal reminds her.

“Is it pink?”

Hannibal chuckles, low and quiet on the other line. “It is not pink. Do you have specific concerns about what Jack will do?”

Willa tips her head to look up at the ceiling. “Sometimes, I think it best not to encourage my imagination.”

Willa didn’t give much thought to what Jack would do. All she knew would be that it’d be bad. It’s worse than bad.

Jack gets a call from who he thinks is Miriam Lass, the trainee that went missing after Jack put her on the Chesapeake Ripper’s trail, and on the one hand he doesn’t believe Gideon is the Ripper anymore, but he does believe he can **bait** the Ripper.

And he uses Freddie Lounds to do it.

Willa paces Hannibal’s office. She’s pretty sure she’s wearing down the carpet. She can’t stop.

“This is going to end in disaster,” she says. It’s not even hyperbole. “Nothing good can come from trying to draw the Ripper out. I tried to warn him. I - he didn’t listen to me. He never listens to me.” Willa spins to Hannibal. “Did you know he actually had the **gall** to ask me if I was so adamant against his plan, because I didn’t want to work with Freddie Lounds?” Willa almost screamed then. She wants to scream now. There’s so much building up inside her - worry, furry, panic - and it has no outlet.

Hannibal continues to sit in his chair, silent, watching.

“He tried to make it like I’m the one with the agenda. It was Miriam’s phone call that tipped him over the edge. He’s too involved. The Ripper is inside his head the way he isn’t inside mine.”

“Willa,” Hannibal begins.

He sounds too calm, too **together**. “Don’t you get it?” Willa asks. She knows interruption is rude, but she can’t help it. “Jack is daring the Ripper to prove that Gideon isn’t the Ripper. How many bodies are we going to find over the next few days?”


“Sounders,” Willa says. Her anger drains out of her, leaving her tired. Sounders because pigs. Hobbs dances behind Hannibal. **See?** Willa brushes him away. She doesn’t have time for Hobbs. Not when she’s about to need all the available space in her head for the Ripper. “But yeah. Sounders of three.”

She finds her way to her chair and sinks down into it. It seems closer to Hannibal’s than usual. Not close enough.

“It is not your fault if the Ripper responds to Jack’s invitation,” Hannibal says.
“It’ll be my fault if I get a fresh crime scene and can’t catch him,” Willa says.

“You cannot shoulder the blame for the actions of others,” Hannibal tells her.

“I’m going to need a new bottle of aspirin,” Willa says.

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Freddie Lounds’s article is tasteless. Willa looks over the article, frowning at the gimmicky picture of Gideon behind bars, frowning even harder at the words themselves. Jack asked Freddie to...stretch the truth, and she rose admirably to the task.

Willa struggles to sleep that night. Her dreams are full of the Ripper, of what crime scenes she might wake up to.

Her phone pulls her out of a dismal sleep. She’s almost glad for it to pull her out of bed.

Until she sees the Caller ID.

Until she see the crime scene Jack summons her to.

The dead girl isn’t Miriam Lass; though, from a distance or if you squint she could be. Young, blond hair, the same kind of build. She’s sprawled out on the ground, one hand futilely trying to hold her internal organs in from where she’s been slit open. Her other arm is reaching out, fingers inches away from her cell phone. Willa doesn’t need to look to see that Jack’s phone number is the only number in the log.

The cause of death is a bullet to the back of the head.

The bullet is from an FBI issue gun - reported stolen years ago.

Willa doesn’t need to close her eyes to imagine what the Ripper was thinking as he killed this girl. She knows it’s to get to Jack. She knows it’s to get back at him. For the article. For taunting him. For daring him.

Willa closes her eyes anyways.

She sinks into the Ripper’s head.

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Willa spends all day working on the case and collapses into bed, too tired to shoo her dogs off when they all pile on with her. To be honest, she could use the comfort.

She’s pulled out of another fitful sleep at 2:30am.

“There’s another,” Jack says, gruff.

Willa rolls out of bed and finds a pair of jeans and black t-shirt to throw on. She puts a flannel over it and goes downstairs to start coffee.

When she gets to Jack’s house there are police cars, FBI vehicles, and hordes of media already there. She has to fight through the crowd and when she gets to the tape that separates the scene from the public, a familiar hand grabs her arm.

“You might want to rethink that,” Willa says, following the hand until she’s glaring at Freddie.
There’s a hint of remorse in Lounds’s eyes. Willa doesn’t soften her attitude at all.

“Guess Gideon isn’t the Ripper,” Freddie says. She tries to laugh. She doesn’t quite succeed.

Willa shakes Lounds’s hand off of her arm. “Guess not.”

She goes up to look at the scene.

Willa doesn’t sleep at all that night.

She’s awake and waiting for the call that comes at 4:37am.

There’s a body in Frederick Chilton’s yard. The victim’s brain is in Chilton’s mailbox. All the organs have been surgically removed, no sign of where they are. The top of the victim’s head has been removed. An even, precise cut to cut it off so the brain could be removed.

Willa doesn’t want to look.

She doesn’t want to see.

She wonders if she can tell Jack I told you so yet.

She wonders if she’s a bad person, because she feels a measure of relief being at this scene. The Ripper kills in sounders of three. This is the last one. This won’t be the end of the investigation; no, she has weeks of staring at these crime scenes ahead of her but at least there won’t be any more.

Willa doesn’t wake up to her phone ringing. She wakes up slowly, warm and surrounded by dogs. She covers her mouth as she gets out of bed even though there’s no one here to see her yawn. She’d been up late last night, haunting the labs at Quantico on the off chance the Ripper left evidence.

Three murders in three nights is a lot even for him. Maybe he got sloppy.

So far, no.

Willa showers under hot water. She even shaves so she doesn’t have to get out of the shower right away. Today is going to be another long day. She’s going to cling to her small bit of happiness as long as she can.

Her dogs bark at her from the other side of the bathroom door.

“I’ll feed you!” she calls out to them. “It’s not even that late!”

They continue to bark.

She hurries through the rest of her shower and goes to see what’s wrong. She’s in a towel as she comes out of the bathroom and they herd her downstairs. They bark at the front door. A couple of them even jump at it.

Willa clutches her towel tight to her body and opens her front door.
There are four bodies in her lawn. Three are posed like the three previous Ripper murders. The fourth is standing apart from them, standing with her eyes in her palms, hands holding her eyes out so they can look over the death in Willa’s front yard.

See?

Willa runs upstairs. Her dogs are barking and attacking the screen door. She picks up her cellphone. She doesn’t even know who she’s called until she hears Hannibal say, “Good morning, Willa.”

“He was at my house,” Willa says. Hysteria is building in her chest. Her towel is going to slip and fall. She clings tighter to it. “The Ripper came to my house.”


“The Ripper came to my house, and he staged a scene, and I slept through it.”

Jack had gone through his horror earlier. Willa hadn’t cared. She’d been too mad at him to empathize. But now she can. She feels violated. Her safe space, her house. The Ripper’s tainted it. Why didn’t he come after her? Why just taunt? Because he knows she can’t see? That she’ll never see?

“He.” Willa glances out her window, glances at the gruesome set-up, “I have to call Jack. Shit! That should’ve been my first call. I need to call the police. The FBI. I’m not even dressed. I showered. I was happy this morning.”

“Willa,” Hannibal’s voice cuts smoothly through her panic. “You need to alert the FBI to what happened. While you’re waiting for them to arrive, I want you to pack a bag. They’re not going to allow you to stay at your house for several days. It is now a crime scene. I would like you to stay with me. Something traumatic has happened, and you could use a familiar face.”

“Yeah,” Willa says. She sits up, looks around her room, sits down again. “Call Jack. I need to call Jack. Hannibal, the Ripper was here. Why didn’t my dogs wake me up?”

“Maybe he brought treats for them,” Hannibal says. “Willa, we can discuss this tonight at my house. Right now, you need to call Jack. If you’d like, you may call me after you’ve called Jack, and I will talk to you until the FBI arrive.”

“Yeah,” Willa says. Her voice sounds far away. “Call Jack. Then call you. Okay. I can do that.” She takes a deep breath. “I can do this.”

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Willa’s dressed by the time Jack shows up. She dresses while Hannibal is on speaker, while Hannibal directs her. She’ll be embarrassed by it later. She’s not now. She’s not at her best, and she need all the help she can get. The Ripper came into her space. He’s too close. She can’t see.

“He broke his pattern,” Willa tells Jack when Jack finds her on her porch. Willa hasn’t left her porch. She hasn’t even gone on the stairs. She doesn’t want to approach the crime scene. She knows she’ll have to.

“I can see that,” Jack says. He has dark circles around his eyes like he hasn’t been sleeping. She wonders what hotel he and Bella have been staying at since their home is a crime scene as well.

“There are four bodies on my lawn,” Willa says.
“I can see that too.” He sounds defeated.

Willa wonders if the Ripper is watching them right now. She hopes he is. Hopes he can see Jack, broken, head hanging low. Hopes the Ripper can see that he’s won and leave them be.

“More missing organs?” Willa asks.

“And more,” Jack says. He motions to the bodies.

Willa looks for the first time. Two of the bodies are missing legs.


“That’s what I need you to tell me,” Jack says.

Willa wants to get angry, wants to point out that he’s the one who brought death to her home and that he can’t just snap his fingers at her and expect her to clean-up his mess. She’s too tired to get angry.

“Alright,” Willa says and starts down the stairs.

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When Willa comes back to reality, a small crowd has gathered. There are people snapping photographs, people looking concerned, people asking the officers on duty if they have anything to worry about.

“It was the Ripper,” Willa tells Jack.

He gives her a flat look. “I know that.”

Willa glances over the scene. “He was displeased, angry like with the other scenes. But completely in control. I don’t think we’re going to find any evidence here.”

“He copied his own work,” Jack says. “You said he wouldn’t do that.”

“I also said he only killed in sounders of three,” Willa sighs. “The Ripper does what he wants, Jack. He could kill every day for the rest of the year. He could stop now. He could wait until we’re back in our houses and kill us in our sleep. It’s a game to him. One he’s winning. The only reason we’re not dead is because he enjoys watching us fail.”

“You’re cheery today,” Jack says.

Willa points to the victim holding her eyes. “The Ripper killed a look-a-like of me. This is personal, Jack. I just don’t know if he’s angry because he thinks I didn’t see, because he thinks I put Freddie up to the article or angry because I did see and didn’t stop the article.” Willa rubs her eyes. “None of this is the usual Ripper. It’s obvious. It’s not as artistic. Not as elevated. It’s a message. For me. For you. For Freddie fucking Lounds. He’s still active. And he wants respect.”

“We’re going to find him,” Jack says.

Willa’s not as confident but she says, “Okay, Jack,” and goes to find her keys.

The FBI tells her she can have her car once they’ve inspected it to make sure there’re no bombs tied into it. Once they’ve made sure the Ripper hasn’t tampered with it.
“I’m pretty sure he didn’t have time to stage that,” Willa points to the crime scene, “and mess around with my car. The Ripper doesn’t do mechanical work. It’s not his style.”

They take her overnight back but they give her her car keys.

Willa feels like she’s going to cry. Or maybe punch something.

She spots a familiar flash of red hair, and she stops arguing with the officers and strides over to where Freddie Lounds is trying to both get a front row seat to the crime scene and look unobtrusive.

“Lounds,” Willa says. Her smile is anything but friendly. “Would you like an exclusive comment?”

Freddie looks wary, but she’s always put story over self-preservation, and she follows Willa to the side of the house where there’s a bit of privacy.

“I warned you what would happen,” Willa says. She warned everyone in that room that no good would come out of poking the Ripper. And no one listened. “As far as I’m concerned, you brought him to my house.”

“I wrote what I believed to be true,” Freddie says.

“You should’ve believed me,” Willa says.

She takes her car keys and leaves. She needs to be somewhere far away from Freddie Lounds before there’s a fifth victim on her front lawn.
Chapter 10

Willa goes to Quantico.

Her house is off limits, and she doesn’t want to be at Hannibal’s house without him, and that leaves Quantico as the only other place for her. Part of her wonders if it’s a bid to feel safe. She laughs at the thought. Her home isn’t safe. Jack’s home isn’t safe. The Ripper can get anywhere.

Hannibal’s?

She thinks Hannibal’s house is where she’d feel the most safe. She’ll be there soon enough. But first, she has a lecture.

She walks into her class, a bit surprised to see students already there. They look even more surprised to see her. Willa looks down at her clothes. Yeah, faded jeans and one of her softest flannels isn’t the most professional of attire, but she didn’t have access to her house to change.

“Good morning,” she says. She clings to routine. Routine will get her through the day.

Her students looks at each other. Look at her.

Willa goes over to her projector. “I think we were going to talk about the Angel Maker today. How to profile someone who cannot be traditionally profiled. In the Angel Maker’s case it’s because he had a brain tumor.”


“The Angel Maker -”

“Professor Graham,” Becky-Becca interrupts. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t have a brain tumor,” Willa says.

Her students freeze, unsure whether or not to laugh.

“Your house is a crime scene,” another one of her students says. “We got an email saying we’d have a sub today.”

Willa looks around. “I don’t see one. And I’m here. So. The Angel Maker.”

“Professor,” Becky-Becca interrupts again.

Willa interrupts her right back. “As I’m sure you all know, the Chesapeake Ripper left four bodies in my front yard this morning. Since all I have done the past few days is think about the Chesapeake Ripper and all I’m going to do for the next few weeks at the very least is think about the Chesapeake Ripper, I’d like a break right now. Is that a problem for anyone in this room?”

The room is silent. She’s pretty sure Becky-Becca isn’t even breathing.

“Good.” Willa’s smile is a fractured thing. “Now, back to the Angel Maker.”

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At the end of Willa’s lecture, Alana Bloom is leaning against the small hallway leading into the
“Surprised to see you here,” Alana says after all the students have trickled out.

“Oh?” Willa asks. “I had a class today. Three, actually. Figured I’d actually do the job the FBI pays me to do.”

Alana raises her eyebrows at the outburst but doesn’t address it. “Heard there was some excitement at your house this morning.”

“Apparently all the excitement happened last night,” Willa says. She takes her glasses off and puts them in her breast pocket.

“Come eat lunch with me,” Alana says.

“I don’t have a lunch.”

“I know,” Alana says. “I can share.”

Willa follows Alana to Alana’s office and dutifully eats what Alana puts in front of her.

“The FBI offer you a hotel yet?” Alana asks.

Willa shakes her head. “I think the crime scene is their priority right now.”

“Would you like to stay with me?” Alana asks. “I have a guest room. And my house is alarmed.”

“Hannibal’s already offered,” Willa says.

“Oh?” Alana asks.

“He’s my friend,” Willa answers. “And my therapist. I have the feeling I’m going to need both.”

“Well,” Alana says, recovering well. “Can’t fault that logic. You going to give your remaining two lectures today?”

“Unless Jack drags me out of them.” Willa drags a hand down her face. “I woke up thinking today was going to be a good day. I thought that even if I had to look at crime scene photos at least I wouldn’t have to look at anymore crime scenes. The Ripper isn’t predictable anymore. No,” that doesn’t sit right. “He was never predictable. But he played by certain rules. He’s not doing that anymore. He made the rules. He can break them.”

“Willa,” Alana flounders for a moment, struggling with where the line between friend and therapist is.

Willa gives her a tired smile. “I’ll learn the new rules. Jack will get what he wants. He’ll get my head wrapped around the Ripper. But I don’t know if I can solve him, Alana. I can’t - I can’t see enough.”

Alana reaches across her desk to put her hand on Willa’s. “That’s why you have a team. So it’s not just you.”

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When Willa gets to Hannibal’s house he’s already there. He opens the door for her when she knocks and lets her in without a word.
“They didn’t let me bring my duffel,” she says. “Like the Ripper got into my house. He didn’t. Dogs definitely wouldn’t have slept through that.” She’s taking her shoes off when she remembers her manners, remembers Dr. Lecter’s manners. “Sorry. Hi. Thank you. How was your day?”

Hannibal puts a hand on the small of her back and ushers her into the living room. “You’ve had a trying day, Willa. You don’t need to put me at ease. I believe that is my role.”

Willa wants to lean into his touch. She wants to turn into him, bury her face in his shoulder and feel both his arms wrap tight around her. She wants a hug. She wants to feel protected. She wants to feel safe.

“It’s been a bad day,” Willa says. She pulls away from Hannibal and sits down on the couch. She pulls her feet up underneath her. She half-expects him to tell her no socks on the couch.

He doesn’t. He lingers by the armchair, but he doesn’t sit down.

“Freddie Lounds was there,” Willa says. She couldn’t complain to Jack, couldn’t complain to Alana, because they asked Freddie to help. They’re both owed partial blame for the article. Alana might admit it, but then Willa would have to deal with her guilt. Jack would never say what they did was wrong.

“At your house?”

Willa nods. “It’s interesting that the Ripper would visit me. I wasn’t mentioned in the article. I didn’t have any part of it. Jack did and the Ripper visited him. Why didn’t the Ripper go after Freddie?”

“Go after Miss Lounds?” Hannibal asks. “Not visit her?”

Willa makes a face.

“Do you want the Chesapeake Ripper to kill Freddie Lounds?”

Willa wants to be the one to kill Freddie Lounds. She’s been thinking about it since the article that got Abigail kidnapped. After the article that got Abigail killed, Willa started dreaming about it. She can’t tell Hannibal this. She knows that. Not yet. No, not ever.

“I don’t,” Willa says and it’s the truth. She doesn’t want the Ripper to kill Freddie. Freddie is hers. “But why did the Ripper drive me out of my house when this is Freddie’s fault?”

“The Ripper’s actions are his own,” Hannibal says. “I told you this after our last session when you were concerned that Jack had made a misstep. The Chesapeake Ripper’s actions are his own. You cannot be blamed for them. Jack cannot be blamed for them. Miss Lounds cannot be blamed for them. They may have provoked a response, but the Ripper is an autonomous being.”

Willa sighs. “I shaved my legs this morning.” There was a crime scene waiting for her in her front yard, and she took the time to shave her legs.

“I suppose you will not need the razor I purchased for you then.”

Willa’s eyes meet Hannibal’s, startled. “What?”

“When you told me that your house was a crime scene, I assumed they would not let you take your belongings with you. I took the liberty of acquiring a few things for you.”
“Hannibal,” Willa begins. She doesn’t need charity. And she doesn’t need to be taken care of like a child. She has a car. She has her wallet. She could’ve gone to the store.

“You’re my guest,” Hannibal says like this is a sufficient answer. “If anything is not to you liking, let me know.”

Willa can feel a headache coming on. “Hannibal, you can’t just,” Willa waves her hand around.

“My actions are my own,” Hannibal says. “Like the Chesapeake Ripper, I am an autonomous being. I wanted to do what I could for you. As an autonomous being yourself, you can of course, choose not to wear any of the clothing I bought for you. But before you make that decision, what would you have done if you stayed with Alana?”

“What?” Usually Willa can keep up with Hannibal, but she’s exhausted - physically and emotionally. She’s not at her best.

“If you were staying with Alana and were not able to bring an overnight bag, what would you do?”

“Borrow something, probably,” Willa says.

“Would you prefer to wear my clothes rather than the ones I purchased?” Hannibal asks.

Willa flushes. The answer, of course, is yes, but she can’t say that. “I wore your pajamas that one time in the hotel,” she says.

“With Abigail,” Hannibal says.

Willa’s too tired to flinch at her name. Instead, she nods.

“Would you like to wear my pajamas tonight?” Hannibal asks.

“I’d like to sleep in my own pajamas,” she says, “In my own bed, surrounded by my dogs.”

“That’s not in my power to give you,” Hannibal says.

“I know. And I’m coming off incredibly ungrateful. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to keep apologizing,” Hannibal tells her. “Would you like to take a shower? Then perhaps a nap before dinner.”

Tears prickle at the corners of Willa’s eyes. She can’t remember the last time she felt taken care of. “Thank you,” she says. “That sounds really good, actually.”

Hannibal smiles. “Do you remember where the shower is?”

Willa nods and summons enough strength to get herself to her feet. She goes up to the guest shower, the one off the room she stayed in the last time she was here. Now that she thinks about it, she’s slept at Hannibal’s place quite a few times.

It should be strange.

She doesn’t let herself dwell on it.

She takes a quick shower, using Hannibal’s body wash to clean off and then, after a moment of hesitation, she washes her hair with his shampoo. She already washed her hair this morning, but she remembers him saying that he has a sensitive sense of smell and that he prefers certain scents to
others. If he’s being kind enough to let her stay with him, to apparently buy her a whole new wardrobe then she can make sure her hair doesn’t offend his sense of smell.

When she gets out of the shower, towel wrapped tightly around her, there are two small stacks of folded clothes waiting for her outside the door. One is a set of pajamas with the tags still on. Another is clearly a set of Hannibal’s.

Willa looks over at the door to the guest room but it’s closed, no sign that Hannibal had been in here except the pajamas. No one watching her, no one waiting to see which she’s going to pick.

She takes Hannibal’s pajamas. She tells herself it’s because she already knows they’re going to be comfortable. Because there’s no sense in taking the tags off new pajamas when she can just wear Hannibal’s. Maybe Hannibal can return the other ones. Maybe…

Maybe she’s thinking too much about this.

She pulls on a fresh pair of underwear (no, she’s not going to think too hard about how Hannibal bought her underwear or how he knows what size she is) and then pulls on Hannibal’s pajama pants. They’re soft against her skin, and she can’t wait to put the top on too. She buttons it up without putting a bra on. It’s loose enough that you can’t tell.

She hangs her towel up in the bathroom before she goes through what Hannibal has bought her. Socks, the rest of the package of underwear. Sports bras (no real ones, thank goodness). Two pairs of jeans. A 5-pack of white t-shirts. The closet door is cracked open, and she’s afraid to look in there, afraid that he bought more stuff for her. This is...this is too close to charity, the kind of thing Bill Graham would’ve gotten offended at. Charity case.

Willa wonders if she should be offended. Or just stick with grateful.

She goes downstairs to the kitchen, and she knows Hannibal hears her enter, because he lifts his head, but he doesn’t turn away from the stove. She slides onto one of the island stools and settles in to watch him work.

“I trust the shower was pleasant?” Hannibal asks.

“Your water pressure is amazing.” she says. She’s glad his back is to her, because she gets caught up staring at the bow tied at his back with the apron strings. She knows he wears an apron when he cooks, knows all the practical reasons, but it still trips her up whenever she sees it.

Hannibal Lecter in an apron.

And Willa Graham in his pajamas.

She turns her face into her shoulder and breathes in the scent of Hannibal. She’s showered with the shampoo he bought for her, she’s in clothes laundered in his machines. She smells like him, feels surrounded by him. For the first time since the Ripper returned she feels relaxed. Settled. Safe.

“I hope you don’t feel obligated to take care of me,” Willa says. “I can make myself food. Or go out if you’re worried I’m going to wreck your kitchen.”

“I prepare meals for myself every day,” Hannibal tells her. “It’s no trouble to make them for two rather than one. It will be more enjoyable to cook for someone other than myself. The company will be enjoyable as well.”
Like a private dinner party for two, Willa thinks. Thankfully, she doesn’t say it. But thinking about dinner parties reminds her of *the* dinner party. “I hope you didn’t get my dress already.”

Like always, Hannibal keeps up with her changes in subject. “Because you feel like you can’t accept it?”

“It’s not that - wait. What do you mean accept? I’m paying for the dress. I justed wanted help picking it out.”

Hannibal turns away from the stove. He looks amused. “You will do no such thing. I’ve already purchased the dress. To repay you for coming to the party. I know it’s not how you would prefer to spend your time.”

“Can you return it?” Willa asks.

“Is there a reason I should?”

Because asking him to get her a dress was a bad idea from the start. Because she probably can’t afford whatever he’s chosen. “Because I can’t go.”

“Oh?” Hannibal turns back to dinner, but she knows she still has his full attention.

The party is at the end of the week and, “The Ripper is going to be my life for the next month at least. Jack won’t let me take a night off. Especially not for a party.”

“You have to eat,” Hannibal says. “Jack Crawford cannot deny you that.”

“I think it’s the party part he’ll object to. I’m not even sure he’ll let me teach my classes. The Ripper...the Ripper is personal for Jack. It’s going to be all hands on deck this time.”

“You cannot allow Jack’s crusade to consume your life,” Hannibal says. “There must be balance.”

“Boundaries?” Willa asks, smile on her face. “We both know I’m not good with those.”

“I can help you,” Hannibal says. “Don’t let the Ripper take the good things out of your life. Don’t let Jack Crawford, either.”

Willa knows sinking too deep into a killer is bad for her. Look what happened with Hobbs. She definitely doesn’t want to start seeing the Ripper, having him *talk* to her. Hannibal’s right. She needs to carve out places to be herself. No killers, no cases, just Willa.

“I want to keep my classes,” Willa says. Ostensibly, teaching is her job. She was never supposed to be on an FBI team. She didn’t qualify to be FBI. They rejected her. Multiple times. Jack had to pull strings to get her on cases, and she’s grateful, but she also needs to establish boundaries. She can’t continue saving lives if she loses her own in the process.

“Then that’s where we’ll begin,” Hannibal says. “Would you like to set the table for dinner?”

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Willa wakes up to her alarm rather than a nightmare or a new Ripper murder. It’s a good way to wake up. She lingers for a moment, appreciating a bed nicer than she’ll ever own and then she gets in the shower.

She puts on a pair of jeans and a plain white t-shirt when she gets out, and she rolls her shoulders, trying to get used to it. There’s something off, and it’s not that all the clothes are brand new though
that is different. She figures it out when she folds her pajamas. She’s not wearing anything of Hannibal’s anymore.

She wants to be.

It’s a mortifying thought, and she flees downstairs as soon as she’s ripped a brush through her hair a few times. Her thoughts come with her.

“Good morning,” Hannibal greets. He’s putting the finishes touches on an elaborate bowl of fruit, because Hannibal Lecter can’t even do fruit and yogurt without flourish.

“It is,” Willa says. Certainly better than yesterday morning. “I mean - good morning. And, thank you for the shampoo.” She’d been surprised to see curl friendly shampoo in the shower. She’s not sure why - Hannibal is both generous and detail oriented - but it had been a good surprise. She doesn’t get a lot of those.

“It’s the right kind? I wasn’t sure.” Hannibal touches a few strands of his own, straight hair.

“It’s right,” she says. “Hopefully it comes in acceptable scents.”

The words are out of her mouth before she can take them back and she winces because that was rude. Hannibal crooks a finger at her, and she walks towards him, hesitant, expecting a scolding. She doesn’t expect him to draw her close and **inhale**.

“Did you just smell me?” she asks even though that’s obviously what he just did.

“You smell lovely,” he promises her. He puts his hands on her bare elbows, his fingers are a bit sticky from slicing fruit. “You might be chilly, though.”

“Oh.” Willa files the scenting away to freak out about later. Right now she has enough to focus on with his hands on her and a conversation to keep up with. “Yeah, I was going to ask if I could borrow a sweater.”

“You don’t like the ones I picked out for you?”

Well, that answers the question of whether there were more clothes waiting for her in the closet. Hannibal actually got her a full wardrobe? Why? What’s he going to do with it when she leaves? Given his attitude towards the dress for the party he won’t return them.

“They’re nice,” Willa says. Partial lie. She hasn’t seen them but she’s sure they are, in fact, nice. Hannibal wouldn’t settle for less. And, since Hannibal just sniffed her hair she could probably tell him that she wants something of his to wear. Hell, he’d probably be delighted if she told him that.

She’s not ready to admit it, though, at least not to him. They’re on the verge of something, but she’s afraid to explore what that something is when she doesn’t have somewhere to retreat to if it doesn’t go well.

“They also fit,” Willa says. Again, an extrapolation. “And if I’m going to spend most of my day with the Ripper then I want to be comfortable.”

“I can get you a sweater,” Hannibal says. “After breakfast?”

“Afraid I’m going to spill?” Willa asks.

With Hannibal this close there’s a possibility that one of them is going to lean in and kiss the other.
She’s afraid it’s going to be her.

Instead, Hannibal lightly squeezes her elbows then lets go. “You’d be distracting.” He picks up the platter of fruit slices and brings it to the table.

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All Willa’s lectures today are before noon, and she teaches in one of Hannibal’s sweaters. She pulls the sleeves over her hands as she paces in front of her podium and talks about forensic analysis.

She eats with the sleeves of the sweater pushed up so she doesn’t get them dirty.

Alana stops by as Willa’s finishing her sandwich. Hannibal made it for her, packing her a lunch despite her protests. Alana’s mouth is open like she came here to say something but her eyes are drawn to the sandwich then the sweater.

“Well,” Alana says, recovering. “I guess I don’t have to ask if Hannibal is being a gentleman.”

Willa flushes. “I told him I could get something from the cafeteria. I think I did irreparable damage to his soul.”

Alana laughs. “I can see that. How are you doing?”

“Okay,” Willa answers. Alana will know she’s lying if she says she’s fine. “I don’t like that he came to my house. And since he came to Jack’s, since there were more deaths than usual there’s going to be a lot of pressure to solve the case.”

“Does that worry you?”

Willa shrugs. “It won’t change how I work. It’ll just change who’s breathing down my neck and how often.”

“If you need anything, I’m here,” Alana tells her.

“Thank you,” Willa says and means it. “I’m going to keep teaching. Hannibal and I talked about not letting the Ripper consume me.”

Willa pauses.

Consume me.

There’s something her brain is trying to tell her. A connection it’s trying to make.

See, Hobbs asks.

This is not what Willa needs right now. She doesn’t need Hobbs and the Ripper fighting for space in her head. Hobbs has already gotten more of her attention than he deserves.

“Hannibal is good for you,” Alana says.

Willa ducks her head. “It’s not like that. We’re just - he’s my friend.”

“Friends can be good for you,” Alana says.

Willa nods. “As soon as I’m done eating I’m going to find the team. Nothing like crime scene photos on a full stomach.”
Willa submerges herself in the Ripper. When she gets to the meeting room that’s been converted into a war room there are photos and notes of all the known Ripper murders hanging on the walls. The newest ones are on the table.

She pushes her sleeves up to the elbows and delves in.

She doesn't enter the real world again until a familiar voice calls her name. She looks up and has to push her glasses more firmly on her face.

“Hannibal,” she says. She smiles.

Then she looks around. The rest of the team is in the room. Did any of them try to talk to her? Did she talk to any of them? She tugs on the hem of her sweater. Her phone tells her it’s almost eight.

“Oh,” Willa says.

“Oh,” Hannibal agrees.

Beverly is studying the pictures from Willa’s house. Jack is bent over the scene from his. Willa coughs awkwardly to get someone’s attention.

Beverly looks up. “Oh, hey Dr. Lecter. You here to help?”

Jack keeps looking at the table.

“I'm here for Willa,” Hannibal answers.

*That* gets Jack’s attention. “You can’t have her. We’re on a case.”

Willa cuts an angry look at Hannibal, daring him to answer Jack, to talk about her like she’s not here. She can’t yell at Jack, because he’s her boss, but if Hannibal is stupid enough to step in it then she'll gladly use him as an outlet for her anger.

He gestures for her to answer.

“It’s eight,” Willa says. “I need to eat dinner. I need to sleep.”

Price and Zeller look up from their side of the table, alarmed. Probably because no one ever talks back to Jack.

“This is an important case,” Jack says. He straightens, a frown on his face, because he isn’t used to Willa telling him no.

“Which is why I need to be at my best,” Willa says. “I can’t help you if I run myself down.”

“This is the Ripper,” Jack says. “There’s no resting when he’s involved. We can’t let him get away again. He came to your house.”

Willa can feel her temper flaring, and she fights to keep it in check. Shouting isn’t going to help anything.

Instead, she takes a deep breath. “Jack, I got too close to Hobbs and it didn’t end well. I can’t let myself get too close to the Ripper.”
Jack’s shoulders slump and Willa knows she’s won even before he says, “Alright.”

“I’ll be back after my lectures tomorrow,” she says, pressing her luck.

“I want your advanced classes to see crime scene photos. We need to get as many heads working on this as we can.”

“Of course,” Willa says. She gathers her things and leaves with Hannibal before Jack can change his mind. She waits until they’re in the parking lot to sigh. “I’m going to have to adjust my lesson plans when we get back. I was hoping to have a Ripper free night.”

“I can assist you,” Hannibal says, guiding her to her car.

“Thanks,” she says.

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Three days of studying the crime scenes and all Willa has to show for it is that, “He doesn’t like you, Jack.”

Everyone but Zeller looks up at her, but he looks too once Price nudges him.

“He’s taunting you,” Willa says. “That’s what the Miriam phone calls were about. And now these kills. Someone who looks like Miriam. A staged body on your own front lawn. The Ripper wants to humiliate you. I don’t know why.”

“Someone I know?” Jack asks. “Someone out of jail? A relative of someone I put in jail?”

“I don’t know,” Willa says. She pushes her glasses up so she can rub her eyes. “Usually the Ripper humiliates his victims. He’s punishing them for some kind of transgression. But you’re alive. You don’t fit the pattern. Not that he has a pattern anymore.”

“Is he going to come after me?” Jack asks. He sounds calmer than Willa.

“No. It wouldn’t be fun if you were dead. He’s...he’s going to go quiet for a while. Observe as we scramble for clues he knows he didn’t leave behind.”

Willa’s phone beeps, a reminder that she needs to get to Hannibal’s so she can shower and dress for the dinner party. She still can’t believe Hannibal convinced her to go. It’s a bad idea.

Jack slams his hands down on the table, rattling it. Willa wonders if the Ripper is watching them right now, seeing how Jack is unraveling. He’d be pretty smug if he was.

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“Sorry,” Willa says, rushing into Hannibal’s house. There are people in his kitchen helping him prepare for the party. “I think the Ripper’s in Jack’s head more than mine.”

“You have time,” Hannibal assures her.

“Whatever you’re making smells incredible,” Willa says before dashing up the stairs.

She showers, careful not to get her hair wet. She dries off with a large fluffy towel and smiles when she sees that Hannibal’s put her dress out on the bed. He’s been as secretive about the dress as he’s been about the menu.
She loses her smile as she puts the dress on. It’s black which she approves of but it’s *tight*, clinging
to her waist, and the only reason she can walk is because there’s a slit up to mid thigh. And that’s
not even getting started on the back. It’s mesh. *See through.*

She’s still scowling when she goes back downstairs.

“You look beautiful,” Hannibal tells her. He’s at the base of the stairs, waiting for her. He holds
his hand out to her, and she takes it, letting him lead her down the last few steps.

“Uh huh,” Willa says. “I know what you did. Got me a dress with a see through back so I won’t
leave your side all night.”

Hannibal smiles, too pleased with himself to even try to deny it. “Do you like it?”

“It’s a little tight,” she says.

Hannibal’s smile only grows. “It fits. Would you like a glass of wine before the guests begin to
arrive?”

“Sure,” she says. “If I stay out of your way can I watch you work?”

“I would be honored,” Hannibal says and leads her into the kitchen.

He doesn’t let go of her hand until he needs both his hands to pour her wine.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Willa sticks by Hannibal’s side the whole night. A couple of people tell her they’re sorry that her
house is a crime scene. Mrs. Komeda sees Hannibal’s arm around Willa’s waist and winks after
giving her condolences.

Dinner is good.

Having Hannibal’s attention all night is better.

Once everyone’s left and clean-up is done she and Hannibal share a final glass of wine in the living
room. They walk up the stairs together, Hannibal with a hand on her hip like she needs it to steady
her. She doesn’t but she doesn’t want to lose the touch. She can feel Hannibal’s fingers, warm,
through the fabric of her dress.

They part ways at the top of the stairs. This isn’t how it’s supposed to go. The hand is supposed to
stay on her hip, supposed to guide her into the bedroom. Hannibal would help her with the dress,
carefully lifting it over her head. Maybe he’d help her with her hair too, easing the pins out then
running his fingers through it. His hands would feel good in her hair.

“Willa?”

Willa comes back to reality to see that she’s still standing at the top of the stairs. There will be no
going to Hannibal’s bedroom. They’re not like that. She’s his patient, she’s his friend. She’s not
his lover.

“Tonight was nice,” she says to cover her behavior. “Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure,” Hannibal says.

He lingers and she thinks he knows the direction her thoughts had gone in. She knows he wouldn’t
turn her away if she closed the distance between them and kissed him. She’s not ready for it. She knows too that he’ll wait for her to be ready.

“Good night, Hannibal,” she says.

“Good night, Willa.”
Willa wakes up to her phone ringing. It yanks her out of her dreams and she fumbles to answer it, dread filling her.

“Please tell me it’s not the Ripper,” is how she answers.

“It’s not the Ripper,” Jack tells her.

Something in her chest loosens.

“It’s Lounds.”

Freddie Lounds got a hold of a picture from last night and ran an article about the FBI’s pet profiler partying instead of chasing the Ripper. It’s a headache neither Willa nor Jack needs.

She goes downstairs after Jack lets her off the phone. Hannibal is already awake and moving around the kitchen.

“I take it you saw Tattlecrime?” Willa asks.

“It’s a good picture,” Hannibal says.

It is. Willa’s turned toward Hannibal, a smile on her face. His arm is wrapped around her and his face is soft, gentle as he looks down at her. They look...happy. Willa hates that Freddie’s ruined it.

“I’m going into Quantico after breakfast,” Willa says. “I’d be there now if Jack had his way.”

“You’re not coming back here,” Hannibal guesses.

“The FBI decided to release my house. Guess I can thank Freddie Lounds for that.”

Willa will be glad to have her home back. She’ll be less glad to give up Hannibal’s.

“Do you wish the Ripper had visited her after all?” Hannibal asks.

“No,” Willa says, a little too sharp. If anything, her desire to enact her own revenge on Lounds has grown. She still can’t tell Hannibal that. “She’s right. My focus should be on the Ripper. This week has been wonderful, but it’s not me. It’s not my life.”

Hannibal looks disappointed. “You can have everything.”

“You want to give me everything,” Willa corrects. “Maybe when the Ripper mania dies down I can have you to my place for dinner.”

“Not when you catch him?”

“The Ripper won’t be caught until he’s ready to be caught,” Willa says. “And he’s having too much fun to stop now.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Willa sinks herself into the Ripper’s psyche. She spends all her free time in the war room pouring over photos, reports, every bit of evidence they have. All her lectures focus on the Ripper. She
brings files home with her.

She *dreams* about him.

She doesn’t realize how deep into him she’s gotten until someone bumps into her in the parking lot.

*Rude,* is Willa’s first thought.

Then she sees the red hair. The smirk.

*Lounds.*

She wonders what it would be like to skin her. It would take a lot of time but it would be worth it. Skin her, dispose of the body. Use the skin to pose her to be found. Inflate it. A face with no substance behind it. Nothing but hot air.

Willa jerks back, horrified at herself, at her thoughts.

Freddie looks wary, but she doesn’t have enough self-preservation to run. “Willa Graham. Just the woman I was looking for.”

Willa throws up all over Lounds’s boots.

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“I need to go back to the BSHCI,” Willa tells Jack.

The first thing she told him was that Freddie was outside. The second was to expect another unflattering story. The third was that Willa needs to get out of here. She doesn’t frame it that way, though.

She needs a crime scene that isn’t the Ripper’s. Needs to give her mind a break. Gideon’s is the only case she can flee to. It’s not ideal, but it could be worse.

Jack waves her off. It’s better if she’s not here when he starts damage control with Lounds.

When she gets to the hospital, Chilton’s secretary informs Willa that he's in a meeting and she can’t see him.

“Well, can I go to the room where Dr. Gideon killed the nurse?” Willa asks.

“Well, without authorization,” the secretary says.

“And let me guess, I need Chilton for that.” Willa sighs.

The secretary narrows her eyes. “*Dr. Chilton.*”

“You do realize I’m with the FBI, right?” Willa asks.

“The waiting room is over there,” the secretary says, pointing to a single wooden chair with a pregnancy magazine on it.

*Rude,* Willa thinks.

She’s spared from imagining the secretary’s death by Matthew Brown.
“Willa!” he greets with more enthusiasm than she deserves.

She’s in jeans that haven’t been washed in too long and Hannibal’s sweater, also not washed so she can cling to the scent of his detergent for as long as possible. Her hair is limp against her head in the same French braid it’s been in for at least three days.

“Matthew.” She summons a smile and hopes she doesn’t look possessed.

“Are you here for another look at the crime scene?”

“I’m trying.”

“I can take you.” Matthew waves off the secretary’s protests. “You can’t talk to Dr. Gideon without Dr. Chilton’s permission, but I can show you the room he killed the nurse in.”

“Thank you,” Willa says.

Matthew smiles and ushers her out of the office. “I didn’t realized you were still investigating Gideon.”

“Everything’s been the Ripper recently, but we haven’t officially closed Gideon’s case.”

“Because they’re connected? Hard not to see the similarities. Guess no one thinks Gideon’s the Ripper anymore.”

Matthew sounds disappointed.

“They definitely don’t,” Willa says. Her eyes burn but she doesn't want to blink. Doesn’t want to see the bodies in her yard when she closes her eyes.

Matthew leads her into the room where the nurse had been killed. “I have to stay with you.” He doesn’t sound too upset. “Protocol.”

She nods, attention already on the room. She wasn’t quite sure what she was hoping to get out of this except to get away. She at least has to pretend she’s investigating now that she’s got an audience.

She closes her eyes and Gideon’s crime reassembles. Now that she’s seen the Ripper, she can see that Gideon isn’t. Same brushstrokes but wrong technique. It’s like -

It’s like the Copy Cat. She can see what the Ripper isn’t and it helps her see what he is.

Her eyes fly open. “The Copy Cat,” she says. The Ripper is the Copy Cat. What does that mean? How does it help them?

The Copy Cat helped her. Showed her Hobbs. Not out of kindness. Interest? Curiosity? Wanted to see how her mind worked? A test to see if she was good enough to see him? She wasn’t. She still isn’t.

That means - the phone call, the one that warned Hobbs. Also the Ripper?

How did he know Willa was getting close?

He’s been watching her.

“Willa? Willa!”
There’s a voice in her ear. Wrong. There’s an arm around her waist. Wrong.

She wants Hannibal.

She has Matthew Brown instead.

“I need air,” she says.

Did she bring the Ripper out again? Is she a target? The Ripper went after Jack’s last promising young recruit. Five years down the road will Jack get recordings of Willa’s voice?

She’s shaking. Matthew holds her tighter. She wishes he wouldn’t.

“I can take you to the break room,” Matthew says. “Get you a drink.”

“Outside.” Willa feels like the walls are closing in around her. If she doesn’t escape she’s going to be trapped. She doesn’t want to be trapped. Outside, her thoughts can reach out. In here they hit the walls, bounce back at her. It’s too much.

She claps her hands over her ears. It doesn’t help.

The world shifts.

No, she’s moving.

She’s on her knees.

Matthew hovers over her. His lips are moving but she can’t hear what he’s saying.

A shadow looms over him. It focuses into a person.

“Hannibal,” she breathes.

See? Hobbs demands.

She holds her hands out to Hannibal.

Matthew thinks she’s reaching for him, but Hannibal reacts before he can, clasping Willa’s hands and helping her to her feet. She sags into him. He feels real, but Hobbs dances at the edge of her vision. She can’t be sure.

“Are you here?” she asks. It’s a mistake. Chilton is openly watching. What if he tries to keep Willa here? She’s not insane. She doesn’t belong here. She wants Hannibal to take her home.

“I had a meeting with Frederick,” Hannibal tells her. “I didn’t realize you’d be here as well.”

“She wanted to see Gideon’s crime scene,” Matthew says, trying to make himself relevant.

Rude.

Willa closes her eyes and sees Matthew’s murder played out. The Ripper would take his tongue for interrupting. He’d leave Matthew’s eyes and ears, only working when Matthew was conscious. He wants Matthew to see what’s being done to him.

See? Hobbs screeches.

Willa passes out.
Willa wakes up in bed, and she bolts upright, expecting to see white walls and Chilton’s triumphant smirk.

She sees familiar walls instead, and a welcome face in the chair beside her bed. Hannibal. She’s in the guest room in his house.

“I wouldn’t let Frederick keep you,” Hannibal promises. “Though he was quite insistent.”

“Thank you,” Willa says. Her heart pounds. “I don’t know what happened.”

“You haven’t been eating.” Hannibal says. “Or sleeping. The neglect of your body combined with the stress of your job led you to collapse.”

“Thanks, doctor,” Willa says but she’s smiling, teasing. Then she remembers what she figured out at the BSCHI. “I need my phone.”

“You need to rest.”

“I will after I call Jack. Promise.”

She holds her hand out, expectant. Hannibal gives her phone but he doesn’t look pleased about it.

Jack answers on the first ring. “Graham! I heard there was an incident.”

“I blacked out. It’s fine.” She glares when Hannibal coughs, lending his opinion. “Jack, the Ripper and the Copy Cat are the same.”

Jack goes silent. So does Hannibal.

“I went to see Gideon’s crime scene - to see what the Ripper wasn’t. That’s when I made the connection. Cassie Boyle showed me Hobbs. The Ripper showed me Hobbs. This is his mistake, Jack. We weren’t supposed to make this connection. I think he might’ve been the one to warn Hobbs.”

“That means we have a leak in the department,” Jack says.

“Maybe,” Willa says. “He definitely has a source. It’s like we’re telling him case details. It means he’ll know we made the connection. He’s definitely going to lie low now. He’s not ready to be caught.”

“You’re that close to him?” Jack asks.

“I’m just a couple pieces away,” Willa says. “I can feel him. I can see his shadow.”

“Good work,” Jack tells her. “Take a day or two. Recover.”

“Thank you.”

They hang up and she hands her phone back to Hannibal.

“Abigail heard his voice,” Willa says. “She knew what the Ripper sounded like. If I had saved her…”

“Shh,” Hannibal says. “You need rest.”
“I spend a lot of time sleeping here,” Willa says. Her eyelids are heavy. “Are you going to stay?”

“I’ll watch over you,” Hannibal promises.

“You can sit on the bed if you like. It’s probably more comfortable than the chair.”

She falls asleep before she hears Hannibal’s answer.

~*~*~*~*~*~

She wakes up to hands in her hair, gently massaging her scalp.

“That feels really good,” she mumbles. She opens her eyes to see Hannibal looking down at her. He’s in bed with her. Her head’s on his lap. She should probably have thoughts about that. She can’t get past how good his hands feel. “Was I asleep long?”

“Not long enough.”

Willa laughs. “Yes, doctor.”

His hands tug lightly on her hair, not enough to hurt. That feels good too, and she blushes at the thought of asking him to do it again.

“You’re staying for dinner,” he tells her. “You slept through lunch.”

“Okay.” She’d probably agree to anything right now. “Is that soon?”

“We can stay like this a little longer.” His fingers brush her hair out of her face, leaving her vulnerable to his gaze. But she doesn’t feel the need to hide. Not with Hannibal. He makes her feel special, like something worth protecting. And there’s just enough of something lurking beneath the surface of him that she believes he could protect her from anything. Something just a little dangerous about him.

“I should probably be afraid,” Willa says, mind already spinning away. “The Ripper has an interest in me.”

“You’re not?”

“It seems...pointless. The Ripper knows me and the danger I present to him. If he wants me dead then he’ll kill me. I won’t see it coming.”

“You describe him like a god.”

“He does pass judgement.”

“What judgment do you think he’ll pass on you?”

“Depends,” Willa says.

“On what?”

“How I react when I see him.”

Hannibal’s hands pause.

“Everyone wants to be seen, wants to be known. I’m one of the few who can understand the
Ripper. When he’s ready, I think he’ll show himself to me.” That doesn’t sound right. “No, when I’m ready.”

“How do you know when you’re ready?” Hannibal asks.

“That’s his judgement to make.” Willa closes her eyes again. “I just have to wait.”

Alana comes by while Willa’s playing with her dogs. She hasn’t given them enough love and attention lately.

“Jack?” Willa guesses as the dogs bound over to greet the newcomer.

“He said you had a breakthrough.”

Alana’s in slacks and a nice blouse, paired with a fashionable leather jacket. Willa’s bundled up against the chill of fall.

“Of sorts.” Willa tosses a stick and Winston barrels after it.

“You seem happier than he does.”

“Jack wants the Ripper behind bars. I’ll settle for him not killing anyone. The breakthrough means the Ripper’s definitely going to let things cool down again.”

“It’s a good thing Hannibal was at BSHCI,” Alana says.

“Yeah. Do you know why? I forgot to ask.” It had seemed strange that Hannibal happened to be there the same time she was. She’s definitely grateful he was, because she got lost, and she can’t trust Matthew or Chilton to bring her back to safely. She can trust Hannibal.

“Following up on our hunch that someone wanted Gideon to believe he was the Ripper.”

Willa wrestles the stick away from Winston and throws it again. “Chilton?”

Alana shrugs. “We don’t know yet. But that’s my guess. There’s a lucrative book deal to be had if you housed the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Only, he didn’t have the Ripper. Is Gideon going to sue?”

“I would,” Alana says. “Do you think the Ripper will go after Gideon? Eliminate the competition?”

“I,” Willa weighs her thoughts. “I’m done thinking about the Ripper for now. I don’t want to end up thinking like him.” More than she already does.

“Fair,” Alana says. “Going back to your original lesson plans?”

“Yeah. How’re your classes?” Normal, Willa thinks. This is how to be normal. She can do this.

“Good. They’re a bright crop of trainees.”

“Can’t write for shit,” Willa says.

Alana laughs and Willa can feel the semblance of a normal life coming together.
Willa finishes her last lecture for the day and has just assigned her class homework when she sees Jack in her doorway. Her stomach clenches, wondering what’s gone wrong this time. She wonders if she’ll ever be able to see Jack without feeling dread.

“Matthew Brown didn’t show up for work today,” Jack says.

“Okay.” Willa feels bad for being relieved. She feels worse because her next reaction amounts to ‘why should I care’.

“Hannibal suggested that he may have contacted you.”

Willa rolls her eyes. She starts stacking her lecture materials together. “He bought me a drink once. He’s interested in me, but I’ve never reciprocated. Wait, is he a Missing Person?”

“He hasn’t been missing long enough,” Jack says. “But Chilton suggested that he might have had an interest in the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Coming from Chilton that’s rich.” Willa’s putting her work in her bag when she pauses. “Suspect?”

Jack nods. “For prompting Gideon’s murder. We think you might have spooked him by returning to the scene. The secretary said he was very eager to help you.”

Willa thinks that had more to do with the fact that he wants to have sex with her, but she doesn’t say that. “What do you need from me?”

“Right now, nothing. Tomorrow, if there’s been no sign of him then we’re going to his house.”

They go to his house.

It’s a little cabin tucked away in the woods, and they have to drive down a dirt road to get to it. Once you get to the cabin you can’t see the paved road anymore.

“Oh yeah,” Beverly says as they approach, guns drawn. “This is going to end well.”

Matthew’s truck is in the driveway, but he doesn’t answer when Jack calls out to him. Jack tries his name twice more before he directs the team forward.

The living room is clear. So is the kitchen. The bedroom is clear. The bathroom too. The guest room…

There’s no bed, no furniture at all. The walls are covered with clippings from the Ripper murders. There’s an entire wall dedicated to Gideon’s Ripper impression. In some ways, it looks like the war room. The only difference is that Matthew Brown is not an FBI agent trying to catch the Ripper.

“Holy shit,” Beverly says, coming up behind Willa. “Boss! You’re gonna want to see this.”

Jack arrives as Willa walks over to the pictures from her house. They’re printed from Tattlecrime and surprisingly good quality. Freddie had front row access.

“He’s officially a person of interest,” Jack says. “I’ll get the alerts out.”
Willa looks around the room until Beverly shoos her out to take pictures. It’s a shrine to the Ripper. Who wants to be surrounded by him like this? At least there’s no bed in there. As someone who has unwillingly dreamed about the Ripper, Willa can’t imagine inviting those kinds of dreams.

She steps outside to get some fresh air and frowns when she sees Freddie hovering by the police line. How is she already here?

“What are you doing here?” Willa asks, walking over. She shoves her hands into her pockets, both because it’s chilly today and because if her hands are in her pockets then they won’t be strangling Freddie Lounds.

“Looking for a friend. I take it Matthew is indisposed?” Freddie smiles sweetly like that will soften her to Willa.

Willa imagines killing Freddie on a regular basis. A smile isn’t going to change that. She turns to the cop in charge of guarding the line. “This woman doesn’t come through. Make sure you tell your relief. Last time she wormed into a scene she got a cop fired. Then killed.”

Freddie narrows her eyes. “That wasn’t necessary.”

“At least what I say about you is true.”

“Are you still holding a grudge because I called you insane?”

“I’m holding a grudge because your shitty excuse for journalism got Abigail Hobbs killed.”

Freddie doesn’t have a snappy comeback for that so she changes track. “Could you tell Matthew that I’m here?”

“No.”

Freddie huffs. “I’m here because he called me. He told me to come to his house. He had something he wanted to show me.”

Willa slowly looks Freddie over. She hates that Freddie might be useful. “He called you? When?” Freddie smirks. “I’m willing to trade information.”

Willa takes a deep breath and glances back at the house. In a rare bit of luck, Jack’s outside the cabin, and he’s just finished with his latest phone call. She calls out to him. “Jack!”

He spots her with Freddie and walks briskly over. “I hope you two are getting along.”

What he means is that he hopes Freddie won’t print any embarrassing quotes from Willa. Or pictures of Freddie’s boots covered in Willa’s vomit.

“Matthew Brown called Freddie,” Willa says.

Jack immediately goes into business mode. “When?”

“What’s going on?” Freddie asks, because as much as Willa hates her, the woman isn’t stupid. “His truck is still here. Is he dead?”

“I cannot discuss details of an ongoing investigation,” Jack says. “May I have a look at your phone?”
“You may not,” Freddie says.

Jack nods like this is what he expected. “Johnson!” he calls.

A tall, broad shouldered officer jogs over from his spot further down the police line. “Yes, sir?”

“Could you and Officer Daniels please stand in front of Miss Lounds? She has a delicate stomach, and I would hate for her to see anything that might upset her.”

“Of course, sir.”

Both officers step in front of her, blocking her view of the cabin.

“Is this really necessary?” Freddie demands from the other side of the human wall.

“Have a good day, Miss Lounds,” Jack says. “Make sure to keep an eye out for the official press release.”

“Wait!” Freddie says.

At Jack’s gesture the two officers part.

“Matthew Brown called me an hour ago,” Freddie says. “He told me to had something to show me. He sounded...strange.”

“Distressed?” Jack asks.

“Tinny. Like -”

“A recording,” Willa finishes, mind already beginning to spin.

“Yes,” Freddie says. She looks at the truck in the driveway then at jack. “He’s not here, is he?”

“Thank you for your cooperation, Miss Lounds.”

She studies Jack, assessing, before she flounces off. Willa’s sure there will be a story up before she goes to bed tonight, full of wild speculation and quoting anonymous sources from within the FBI.

“Kidnapping?” Jack asks once Freddie’s out of earshot.

“Definitely a possibility. But, also, he might be on vacation - looking for a new Gideon.”

Jack pales. “You think he might be training Ripper imitators?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“Matthew Brown is now a priority case,” Jack tells her.

Too bad Matthew Brown isn’t around to hear it. He’d love knowing he was the focus of her attention.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Willa invites herself to Hannibal’s for dinner. He waits until she gets there to tell her there’s no work talk allowed at the table.

“You just want me to stay longer,” she accuses, hanging her jacket up in the closet.
Hannibal doesn’t deny it.

“Your house, your rules,” she says. “Can I help you with anything?”

He presses a glass of wine into her hands.

“Just this one,” she says. “I have to be able to drive home tonight. My dogs need me.”

“You make it sound like I’m trying to trick you into staying the night.”

Willa takes a sip of her wine and watches him work. “Not trick. You want me to want to stay the night.”

Hannibal’s lips lift up in a smile, confirmation.

“If I could have your house and my yard I think it would be perfect.”

“Do I factor in there somewhere?” Hannibal asks. He sprinkles something into a frying pan and it sizzles and sends a burst of flavor into the air.

Willa inhales deeply before answering. “If you came with the house I wouldn’t say no. I would probably get fat.”

“It would be healthy for you to put on some more weight.”

“Probably,” she agrees. She knows she doesn’t eat well - either in terms of balance or quantity. Certainly not in taste. She never eats as well as she does when she spends time with Hannibal. It’s one of the many draws to spending extended time at his house. “Is this your dream home?”

“I enjoy the house, but the yard leaves something to be desired. I have given thought to retiring in France. Somewhere with a vineyard.”

Willa whistles. “That’s quite a backyard.”

“Plenty of space for dogs, I would think.”

Hannibal says it casually, but with a serious look in his eye. Willa, deciding to be a coward, takes a sip of her wine and doesn’t answer.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Dinner is nice and afterward they wash and dry the dishes side by side. It’s very domestic, something they did every night the week Willa stayed here while waiting for her house to be cleared as a crime scene. It’s something she’s missed.

It’s something you could have, a part of her whispers.

She pushes the thought away.

“You wanted to talk about work,” Hannibal says, leading her into the living room. He pours them each a glass of scotch.

“I also said just one glass of wine,” she points out.

“This isn’t wine.” He holds the glass out to her. “I promise to find something to talk about if work doesn’t take a full hour.”
She accepts the glass of scotch. “Matthew Brown is missing. He has a shrine to the Ripper in his house. Jack thinks he’s the one who influenced Gideon.”

“What do you think?” Hannibal asks. He sits down on the couch. She sits down next to him. It feels less like a therapy session if they’re sitting side by side.

“I think if he was the one to influence Gideon then we could have a lot more Ripper imitations over the next few weeks. But Freddie Lounds got a recorded call from him. So it might have been a kidnapping. His truck was still in the driveway.”

“Who would want to kidnap him?”

“I don’t know,” she says but that’s not entirely true. The Chesapeake Ripper went on a killing spree to punish Jack for running the Gideon story. What would the Ripper do to the person who convinced Gideon he was the Ripper? “Oh shit.” She winces. “Sorry. I think the Ripper might have him.” She gives the scotch to Hannibal and stands so she can dig her phone out of her pocket. “I need to call Jack.”

“Of course,” Hannibal says.

“I always think better around you,” Willa says as Jack’s phone rings.

“Maybe you should come over more often,” Hannibal says.

Willa smiles but before she can say something, Jack picks up.

“I think the Ripper has Brown,” she says before Jack can even say hi.

“Evidence or instinct?”

“Instinct.”

“We’ll look into it,” Jack says. He sounds exhausted.

“Okay. Good night, Jack.”

Willa hangs up.

“More than instinct,” Hannibal says.

She walks back to the couch, to him. “You have good hearing.”

He hands her scotch back to her. “Tell me what you don’t want to tell Jack.”


“You think there’s a connection?”

“I think she’s still alive.”

Hannibal’s quiet.

“I think the Ripper is waiting to reveal that fact. She’s his trump card.” Willa can’t tell Jack that. She can’t drop a bombshell like that without proof. There’s no way for her to brace Jack for what’s coming, and she hates it. Hates that the Ripper is smarter than her. Hates that he’s thought so far
ahead she’s not sure she’ll ever catch up.

She knocks back the rest of her scotch. “I don’t want to talk about work anymore.” She doesn’t want to think about Miriam Lass drugged and confused and imprisoned somewhere.

“Of course,” Hannibal says. “Would you like me to braid your hair?”

“What?”

“You enjoyed my hands in your hair before,” Hannibal says and Willa blushes. “I could braid it for you.”

“You know how?”

“I wouldn’t offer if I didn’t.”

“Yeah. Okay. I mean, thank you.”

Hannibal parts his legs, making space for her at his feet and she sits, still holding her empty scotch glass. He pulls the ponytail holder out of her hair and loosens the braid she already has in.

“I feel like I should do something for you,” she says. “You’re always doing things for me.”

“I like to see you happy.”

She’s glad her back is to him so he can’t see how red she turns.

“I’m going to do something for you,” she promises. Hannibal’s fingers work through her hair and she groans and tilts her head forward. “But not right now. Later.”

“Shh,” Hannibal says.

She shhes.
Chapter 12

After two weeks of dead ends on both the Ripper and Matthew Brown cases, Willa’s almost glad when they get a new one. Maybe this one she’ll actually be able to solve.

“Whole family killed during Thanksgiving dinner,” Jack says. He’s driving Willa to the scene. Willa hates when he picks her up. It means she’s trapped until Jack is done with her.

“Was it the in-laws?” Willa asks.

Jack cuts her a withering look. Beverly would’ve laughed, Willa thinks. Hannibal wouldn’t’ve. He’d approve of her finding coping mechanisms for crime scenes but not the humor. He prefers an elevated level of humor. She wonders what dinner with Hannibal’s family would be like.

They’re probably European royalty.

She tries to imagine herself at a banquet table with them, casting surreptitious looks at Hannibal so she knows which fork to use.

It’s just as well that Jack pulls her out of the fantasy.

“The Turner house,” Jack announces, parking along the curb.

Willa takes a deep breath and goes in.

She sinks into the scene until the bullet holes are closed and the table’s occupants are sitting up, eating, smiling. The dad tells the daughter to eat her broccoli. Minutes later, the girl is dead. It’s... jarring.

Willa’s gaze is drawn to the mother after she comes back to the present. “The mother was saved for last,” Willa says.

“How was first?” Jack asks.

“The rest of them. Father and kids shot at the same time.”

“Seems wrong to shoot a family on Thanksgiving,” Jack says.

Willa doesn’t have any particular attachment to the holiday. She tries not to have attachments to any holiday. Thanksgiving was always a gathering of neighbors growing up. Everyone bringing a dish to the church. Somehow it all added up to enough food for everyone. Mrs. Landingham always said it was a miracle. Willa’s father would roll his eyes as soon as he thought no one was looking.

Willa trials her fingers over the family pictures. “Not the whole family. If that makes it any better.”

“What?” Jack comes to look over her shoulder.


~*~*~*~*~*~
Jesse Turner is missing.

There are no good leads.

~*~*~*~*~*~

“Do you celebrate Thanksgiving?” Willa asks Hannibal.

They’re in his office, but they could just as easily be in his house. Blurring boundaries.

Hannibal’s in his usual chair, left ankle resting on his right knee. Like a figure-4, Willa’s mind helpfully supplies. Willa’s near her window. She finds it easier to ask questions when she’s not looking. Finds it easier to be around Hannibal when she’s not looking. He’s...intense. Some days she wants him to overwhelm her. Some days she wants to build up forts until even he can’t reach her.

“No,” Hannibal answers. “I have lived in America since I attended Johns Hopkins, but I have never felt any attachment to the holiday.”

“Turkey not enough of a challenge for you?” Willa asks. She allows a smile - quick, fleeting. She knows Hannibal will catch it.

“My acquaintances all have family obligations. There is little point in hosting.”

“No family obligations of your own?” Willa asks.

“I have an aunt and uncle who live at the family estate in Lithuania, but they don’t come out for American holidays. Occasionally, I will visit them.”

No parents then, Willa thinks. No siblings, either. She wonders if Hannibal ever gets lonely. It’s too personal a question to ask. She’s not feeling daring enough to voice it.

“Do you celebrate?” Hannibal asks.

“In a way. Becoming an adult is about making your own traditions.” She goes to the store early on Thanksgiving, when it’s still open, and goes to the buffet station and gets a mish-mash of foods. It’s almost like a potluck.

It's a miracle , Mrs. Landingham’s voice echoes.

It’s the wonder of modern America, Willa thinks back.

“I do celebrate Christmas,” Hannibal says. “New Year’s’ as well. There’s a wonderful choir I listen to every Christmas Eve. You should come if you aren’t otherwise engaged.”

“My Christmas plans are trying and failing to come up with reasons not to go to the FBI holiday party.” Willa eyes Hannibal, considering. “Would you like to come? I’ll go to the choir with you.”

“It does not have to be an exchange,” Hannibal says. “I will be glad to attend your party regardless of your interest in the choir performance.”

“You say that now. Generally, I spend the party hiding from mistletoe and drunk coworkers. It’ll be nice to have someone to talk to. Unless I’ve scared you off.”

Hannibal, regal and poised in his chair, gives her a look as if to suggest why would mere humans scare me . “You have not.”
Willa stands during their appointments, because gets restless. She’s restless now and wanders towards the couch. It looks like an antique out of Freud’s office. Knowing Hannibal, it might be. She wonders if anyone ever lies down on it.

“We’ve got a new case.” She returns to her window. Fiddles with the curtains. She wonders if she’d sleep better if she had thicker curtains. “Family killed at Thanksgiving dinner. Well, all but one kid. He’s been missing for a while.”

“Fortuitous for him,” Hannibal says.

“Maybe. We’re not sure if he ran away or was kidnapped. Either way, when we find him we’re going to have to tell him he doesn't have a family anymore.”

Willa had still been on the force in Louisiana when her father died. Heart attack. Too many years of not taking care of himself. It hadn’t been instant. She’d gone to see him at the hospital. He told her to be careful, Grahams apparently had weak hearts.

He died. She went back to work.

A couple months later she got stabbed. With nothing tying her there anymore she moved up here and started teaching.

“Would it have been better for him to die with his family than live without them?” Hannibal asks.

“Plenty of people live without family,” Willa says. She does, though, she wouldn't argue that what she does is living beyond the barest definition of the word. Existing might be better. “Are you close with your aunt and uncle?”

“They took me in after the death of my parents and some time in an orphanage. My uncle had been in Japan, meeting my aunt when my parents died. As soon as he was back in Lithuania and heard the news he searched for me.”

“And found you. Did you resent your aunt?”

It’s a daring question. She’s not sure Hannibal’s going to answer it.

“Hardly. If my uncle had been with us he would be dead as well. My aunt taught me Japanese. It was the only language I would speak for several months.”

His parents didn’t die natural deaths, then. She doesn’t press. Hannibal will tell her as much or as little as he wants.

“Did you resent your aunt?” Hannibal asks.

Willa looks over at him, surprised.

“You had an older female figure in your life,” Hannibal explains. “Your father would’ve ensured it.”

“Briefly,” Willa says. She’s constantly caught off guard by how smart Hannibal is. How observant. Usually she’s the one who sees things, the one who is explaining. It makes her feel exposed, how easily he sees her. It also gives her a bit of a thrill. She might not be alone. “Aunt Constance. My dad’s younger sister. She was impatient with me.”

“Gave up on you,” Hannibal says. He doesn’t mince words.
Willa shrugs. She has hair like her mother’s. It was unruly when she was younger, not helped by Willa’s lack of interest in hygiene. She would cry when Aunt Constance brushed it out. Aunt Constance would hit her with the brush and Willa could cry harder.

“She has kids of her own now,” Willa says. “She sends me cards sometimes.”

They’ve got straight hair. They’re always smiling in their pictures. Posed like the pictures at the Turner household. Pictures that show carefully planned moments - holidays, vacations, milestones. Pictures are still, a flash of time that hide what happens around them. The Turner house showed a happy family and now they’re all dead. What didn’t the pictures show?

“They’re old now,” Willa says, getting back the topic at hand. “College, I think.”

“My aunt writes me letters,” Hannibal says. “In Japanese, of course. To keep me in practice.”

“My dad used to make me write Aunt Constance letters in cursive. They were completely illegible. I think my dad thought I was going to grow up to be Scarlett O’Hara.”

“She didn’t have a very pleasant life,” Hannibal says.

“Then one might argue I’m closer to being her than my father ever thought I would be.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

Jesse Turner continues to be missing.

The rest of his family continues to be dead.

They have nothing but ends, no leads to follow. It’s how investigations go, and Willa feels no guilt getting ready for the FBI holiday party. Dread, yes. Irritation, definitely. But not guilt.

She pulls her sweater over her head - Hannibal’s, but at this point it’s hers - and smiles at the memory of Hannibal asking her what the dress code was for the party. She’d told him sweater and jeans were fine and at first she thought his look of mild horror was for the jeans. Once she found out it was because he thought she meant holiday sweaters she laughed so hard her legs gave out.

Hannibal didn’t help her up, just frowned as she wheezed about the sight of him in a sweater that lit up or maybe even played music.

She drives to Hannibal’s, because he’s going to drive them to the party, because it means neither of them will have to fend for themselves while waiting for the other to show up. And because Willa told him that she usually gets through the party by getting really, really drunk and he doesn’t trust her to drive even after she told him it’ll be different this year.

Hannibal opens the door wearing black slacks and a maroon sweater over a white dress shirt. It’s a v-neck sweater so it shows off the knot of his tie.

“So formal,” she says. Better than telling him how good he looks.

He looks her over, loose jeans and even looser sweater. “You don’t like the sweaters I got for you?”

“This one is my favorite,” she says. Since it’s Hannibal’s it’s a little big on her. The fabric doesn’t cling, allowing her to move freely and, if she wants, she can pull the sleeves over her hands, tuck herself away.
Hannibal is quiet like he’s trying to figure out if it’s more important for her to look presentable or like his.

“Can I get you a green one?” he finally asks.

Willa smiles. “Getting into the holiday spirit?”

He goes upstairs without another word.

He comes back with another one of his sweaters. She’s wearing an undershirt so she doesn’t hesitate to pull off the sweater she’s wearing. Hannibal sighs like he was hoping for more class, but she doesn’t care. He knows her well enough to know what he’s getting with her.

She pulls the new sweater on, pleased because it smells stronger of Hannibal than the one she just took off.

“Mrs. Komeda is having a small get together on New Year’s Eve,” Hannibal says. “I’d like you to come.”

“Alright,” Willa says. It gets easier to say yes to Hannibal every time she does it.

Hannibal adjusts the collar of her sweater so it doesn’t show her undershirt. “I’d like to dress you like I did for my dinner party.”

“Okay.”

Hannibal lifts his eyebrows. “No negotiations?”

“I trust you,” she says. “Does this mean I get to dress myself for caroling?”

Hannibal looks pained. “It’s a choir performance.” Then, “Would you let me dress you?”

She’d let him do a lot of things to her. She blushes and ducks her head before he can read her thoughts off her face. His hands are still on her collar, and his knuckles brush her cheek. “If you want. You know the dress codes for your events better than I do.”

It’s a cop out, the easy answer, but Hannibal lets her get away with is. He drops his hands from her sweater, but he leaves one arm extended, an offering. “Shall we?”

~*~*~*~*~*~

The party is in full swing when they get there. Zeller’s down to his undershirt and there are wet patches like he’s spilled more than one drink on himself. Beverly has a reindeer headband in her hair. The cold case guys are chugging eggnog. Willa can feel Hannibal’s displeasure even though no one comes up to scold them for being late.

“This is still earlier than I get here,” she tells him. “Any other year I’d be hiding away, working on a case until Jack realized I was missing and drag me up here. You want a drink?”

“I’m good,” Hannibal says.

He spots Stevenson, one of Willa’s professor colleagues, running around with mistletoe, and he pulls Willa to a more secluded location.

“That is not a tradition I adhere to,” Hannibal says as two interns get mistletoe-bombed. “When you kiss me, I want it to be because you want to.”
Willa nods along, then, “When?” she asks. “Presumptive, Dr. Lecter.”

He smiles but doesn’t take it back. “We should say hello to your colleagues.”

“My turn to show you off,” Willa says.

They head over to Beverly, Willa’s mind playing *when you kiss me* on a loop. That answers the question of whether Hannibal knows how she feels about him. And how he feels about her. He’s waiting for her to be ready to progress their relationship. There’s something comforting about that. Also, terrifying.

“Woah,” Beverly says, the first to spot them. She smacks Zeller’s arm to get his attention. “Hey guys.”

“Hey,” Willa says. “Uh, you all know Hannibal.”

Beverly looks like she’s trying not to laugh. Price takes a sip of his eggnog and chokes on it.

“Are you two finally dating?” Zeller asks.

Beverly smacks him again.

“Oh,” he says, rubbing his arm. “What was that for? It was a legitimate question.”

“Uh, we’re not,” Willa says. But apparently they could be. Whenever she decides she’s ready.

Beverly looks pointedly at the sweater Willa’s wearing. *Hannibal’s* sweater, obvious both for it’s size and style. “Uh huh,” she says.

Hannibal doesn’t help matters by sliding an arm around Willa’s waist. He doesn’t tuck her into his side, she doesn’t need his protection here, but it’s a gesture that’s difficult to misinterpret.

“Really?” Zeller asks. “Cause there’s some mistletoe floating around. We could get it over here.”

“We’re good,” Willa says. She’s blushing again. “Hannibal doesn’t like mistletoe.”

“As a psychiatrist I am troubled by the consent issues presented by the tradition,” Hannibal says.

“Huh,” Beverly says. “Eggnog?”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Willa doesn’t kiss Hannibal the night of the party.

She doesn’t kiss him after their Christmas Choir date even though she does spend the night. Honestly, she doesn’t know why she’s holding back. It just doesn’t feel right yet. And if Hannibal isn’t going to push then she isn’t either.

She’s glad she’s in the guest bed and not Hannibal’s when a phone call wakes her up Christmas morning.

“We’ve got another dead family,” Jack says. “I’m on my way to get you.”

“Give me an address,” Willa says. “I’m not at my house.”

“Okay.”
For once, Willa is awake before Hannibal. She leaves him a note - *Crime scene. Merry Christmas* - and heads out. She’s in yesterday’s clothes, rumpled from their night on the floor, but no one gives her a second glance when she gets to the crime scene.

The scene is similar to the last one - father and two children killed simultaneously, mother killed second. But the mother took more than one bullet to die. And there’s a third child’s body in the fireplace.

The pieces slot into place.

The missing child returns to kill his mother.

That would explain the forgiveness in the mother’s expression, frozen in death. Everyone else looks surprised. The mothers don’t. They know their killer. *Love* their killer.

Some research shows that the gun that made the kill shot was used in a different murder. Mother of a thirteen year old boy shot to death with her own gun. CJ Lincoln. They think he’s the ringleader even though it doesn’t fit until Alana mentions the significance of the mother. There’s another mother. Or a woman trying to be one.

“They’re throwing away their families,” Willa tells Hannibal. They’re at his house. It’s three days after Christmas and Willa is *livid*. “We can’t give it back to them. They’re not *thinking*!”

“You’re projecting,” Hannibal tells her, calm.

She whirs on him. “No shit,” she says. She doesn’t apologize for swearing. “I’d do anything to protect my family.”

“Anything?” Hannibal asks. He’s leaning against the desk in his study. He watches her, still calm, but curious now.

She was pacing but she pauses to stare him in the eye, “Anything.”

Hannibal doesn’t look like he believes her.

Willa’s temper flares. “I killed to keep Abigail safe. I would’ve killed Boyle if I’d been there. I lied to Jack to protect her. You think I’d do less for my own family?” *For you*, she thinks before she can help it. *For a child we might have.*

Maybe this is why she’s hesitated to take the final step with Hannibal. The man plays for keeps. Once they’re together they’re going to be *together*. Maybe he can’t handle her. Maybe he’s not right for her. Maybe she’s too much. Maybe when he finally sees her he won’t like what he sees.

“Hobbs had a knife to Abigail’s throat when you shot him,” Hannibal says, voice still level, like nothing ever fucking rattles him.

Willa takes a step towards him. Hannibal isn’t cornered and he doesn’t look like prey but she feels like a predator. “Stammets didn’t.”

“He had a gun,” Hannibal says.

“Not when I killed him. I shot him - non-fatal - kicked the gun away. Then I shot him again.”

There’s a beat of silence and Willa realizes what she’s just said, what she *admitted*. Her eyes widen. The anger drains out of her. Panic threatens to fill the empty spaces left behind.
“I’m under no obligation to report your past crimes,” Hannibal tells her. “Only future ones.”

Willa’s mouth opens, then closes.

Hannibal puts more of his weight on his desk, relaxing, opening himself up to her. She doesn’t know how to react to that. How to react to him.

“How did it feel?” Hannibal asks. “When you killed Stammets?”

Willa doesn’t answer right away. Hannibal hasn’t shown any signs of being concerned or repulsed by her, but there’s always time for that to change. “Powerful,” she answers.

“Because you got away with something you knew you should not?”

She shakes her head. “Because I knew I would before I shot him. Because I was protecting what was mine.”

Willa, famous for her avoidance of eye contact, meets Hannibal’s eyes now. She wants to see his reaction, needs to see it - raw, uncensored.

Hannibal doesn’t disappoint.

He watches her with intensity, with understanding. She crosses the space between them and presses her body against his, kisses him, because she can’t do anything else. She doesn’t know how to tell him what his acceptance means, but she can show him. She crowds into his space, gets as close to him as he’ll let her. She wants to be closer. She shudders at the thought of him in her, as close as they can get, his naked body bearing down on hers, blanketing her.

His lips are soft against hers, and he brings his hands to her hips, but he doesn’t pull her closer. He doesn’t push her away either, but she knows it’s only a matter of time. She just confessed to murder. She’s with the FBI and she just admitted to killing someone and liking it.

She breaks the kiss, turning her head away. “Sorry,” she says. She misread the situation.

Hannibal’s hands stay on her hips, keep her from fleeing.

“I thought,” she begins then cuts herself off. He’d told her he was waiting for her to be ready. She’s ready. But maybe he’s not ready. She can’t blame him. She’s...a lot.

“I will not spill your secrets,” Hannibal tells her. “You do not need to kiss me to ensure my silence.”

Willa knocks his hands off her, and he lets her stomp a few steps away.

“You think I kissed you so you wouldn’t talk?” she demands. She’s not sure who she’s more mad at him - him for being a colossal idiot - or herself for thinking this might work.

“It’s a possibility,” Hannibal says. He’s still perfectly put together, like she hasn’t affected him at all. “I want to make sure it’s not the case. As I told you before the holiday party, consent is important to me.”

“You’re an idiot,” Willa tells him, stalking back towards him. She stops just within reach but he doesn’t make a move to touch her. “I want you. I have wanted you, but I’ve held back. I wanted to make sure it was right. Wanted to make sure You could handle me. And you think I’m kissing you to manipulate you.” She shakes her head. “Unbelievable.”
“I want to be sure as well,” Hannibal tells her. “I do not enter into relationships lightly.”

Willa takes a deep breath, lets some of her anger dissipate. “You’re right,” she says. “I’m sorry. I guess given all our...complications clear communication is important.”

“Complications?” Hannibal asks.

“I’m your patient,” she says. “Not technically but I am.” With some distance it’s easier to see all the reasons she shouldn’t be with him. “Jack will tell me my therapy’s too important to give it up for a shot at a relationship.”

“Does Jack make all your decisions for you?”

“He’d like to.” After a moment’s pause. “I often let him.” It’s easier than getting embroiled in fights all the time.

“Are you going to let him make this one?”

Hannibal’s tone doesn’t reveal any of his thoughts, like he doesn’t care what Willa’s choice is. Or, rather, like he doesn’t want to influence her. Even though one of the choices benefits him a lot more than the other does.

“You respect me,” Willa says. It’s a non-sequitur. Or maybe it isn’t.

“I do,” Hannibal agrees. “I think respect is crucial to any relationship - whether it be romantic or another kind.”

Her mind stutters a bit over romantic. She’s imagined a sexual relationship many times - too many probably - but she’s never given much thought to the other stuff. Probably because it wouldn't be that different from what they do already. Dinner, the occasional outing.

It doesn’t seem so intimidating when she thinks of it that way.

“I want you,” she says. “All of you.”

Hannibal smiles. “Then you shall have me.”

It seems easy - too easy - but Willa doesn’t want to look too hard, doesn’t want to see the possibility of being happy fall away before her eyes.

See? Hobbs calls.

Willa brushes him aside. She doesn’t need to sabotage this relationship before it starts. Hannibal is everything she wants. He’s knows her, understands her, and he didn’t push her away. He’s seen her for what she is and he likes it.

No, Willa’s not going to ruin this.

“If I kiss you again will you kiss me back?” she asks.

Hannibal’s eyes glitter in the dim lighting of his study. He beckons her closer.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Willa’s awake before Hannibal, something that’s happened maybe three times in all the time she’s known him. She’s pretty sure he doesn’t sleep as much as normal humans do. It shouldn’t surprise
her - nothing about Hannibal is normal. Still, she’s getting used to falling asleep with a light on so he can read in bed. He’s offered to read elsewhere, but she likes having him near her. Sometimes, she’ll drape an arm over his leg, press her cheek against his thigh and fall asleep that way. Sometimes, he’ll read to her - in French or Lithuanian or Japanese.

The mornings are more difficult to get used to. She’s woken up several times to see him propped up on an elbow watching her.

The first time she asked he told her, “It’s so rare to see you so relaxed. One day, I hope you will achieve this kind of calm while awake.”

She’d asked him if he’d stop watching her while she slept if that happened.

He’d just smiled and asked her what she wanted for breakfast.

So yeah, sharing a bed with Hannibal has been an adjustment. But this morning she’s awake first, and she lingers in her room for a moment, admiring the way the comforter is tucked around Hannibal’s waist, and how his hair is disheveled. Natural, she thinks. He likes hair product. Likes things to be a certain way.

She slips out of the room before he can catch her staring. He’d give her an unending amount of shit for it. She makes herself a cup of coffee and wonders if she should make breakfast or wait for Hannibal to wake up because he’ll make a much better breakfast than she could ever dream of.

She puts thoughts of breakfast on hold and brings the dogs outside, letting them run and play and piss against as many trees as they like. They like the food Hannibal brings for them - homemade sausage even though she tells him he’s going to spoil them - but they don’t like how he takes Willa’s attention away from them.

She kneels on the damp ground and gives as many head pats and belly rubs as are demanded of her. She even lets them lick all over her face.

“Things are changing,” she tells the pack. “It’s a good change, though. It’ll just take some getting used to.”

She brings them in to feed them and sees that she has a missed call on her phone. Two minutes ago. Jack.

She calls him back.

“You didn’t answer,” he says.

“I was letting the dogs out. What do you need?”

She makes sure the dogs have bowls with food and with water before she goes to investigate the fridge for something for herself. A call from Jack at this hour means a case or a development in a case. She grabs a yogurt and some of Hannibal’s pretentious hand-mixed granola.

“We’ve identified the other kid. Chris O’Halloran.”

“We going to warn the parents?” Willa asks.

“Yes. I’m on my way to get you. I’ll be there in half an hour. We’ve got a long drive out there.”

“So bring a book?” Willa asks. She mixes the granola into the yogurt. Looks like she’ll be taking
breakfast on the go.

“Bring a bag,” Jack says. “We don’t know how long we’ll be out there for.”

“You’re hoping we’ll be there when the Lost Boys show up,” Willa realizes. “Alright. I’ll pack a bag. Half an hour. I’ll meet you at the end of the road. It’ll keep the dogs from swarming the car.” And from Jack realizing that Hannibal’s Bentley is in the driveway. That’s not a conversation she’s ready to have.

Jack hangs up with a click and Willa eats a spoonful of yogurt as she heads to her room. She’s quiet as she changes and then packs a small duffel with her toiletries and a couple changes of clothes. She adds the draft of her latest monograph - not insects this time - in case she gets some time to work on it.

Once everything’s packed and her yogurt is gone, she sits down on the edge of the bed, on Hannibal’s side, so she’s just a few inches from him.

He stirs, eyes blinking open and finding her right away.

“Morning,” she says. She keeps her voice quiet. “Jack called. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone.”

Hannibal frowns, more of a reaction than she’d get if it weren’t so early in the morning. She knows he doesn’t like the demands Jack makes of her and that he thinks the work she does is bad for her, but she’s good for the work. And saving lives is too important to quit because Jack gets pushy.

*Taking lives too*, a voice that sounds suspiciously like Hobbs whispers in her ear. Hard to justify shooting someone in a classroom the way you can in the field.

Willa leans over to kiss Hannibal’s cheek. “Sleep as long as you want. I’ll let you know when I’m on my way back. You don’t have to stay.”

Hannibal pulls her in for a proper kiss. It’s still soft, still a morning kiss, but she’s breathing heavy when she pulls back.

“I might be gone for a couple days,” she says. “We don’t know what we’re walking into.”

“New case?”

Willa shakes her head. She makes herself get off the bed, makes herself pick up her bag. “Hopefully we’re going to stop a kid from throwing away his family.”

“Damage might already be done,” Hannibal warns her, because he knows she’s overly invested in this case.

“We’re going to find out,” Willa says.

The O’Halloran’s front door is open when they arrive. There’s a car parked out front that matches reports they have from tracking down the Lost Boys and their criminal mother.

“Shit,” Jack says. His shoulders pull up, his back straightens. “Weapons out. Assume we’re walking into a crime scene. Know that there will be kids but that they can and will kill given the opportunity.”

Willa feels sick to her stomach. She takes her gun out anyways.
The team splits up. She’s with Jack. They go through the house. It’s empty. Quiet. The porch door is open. Willa can smell burgers cooking. Hot dogs too. Something is burning. The Lost Boys have the O’Halloranscornered. CJ Lincoln has a gun pointed at Mr. O’Halloran.

Things blur after that.

A gunshot.

Mr. O’Halloran crumples, shouting, clutching his ear.

People are screaming.

CJ Lincoln goes down, bullet in his head. He faceplants on the grill.

Something’s really burning now.

Chris O’Halloran takes off running.

Willa chases him.

The boy runs faster. Scared. Of Willa? Of himself?

“Chris, stop!” Willa calls out.

Chris skids to a stop. When he turns around he has a gun in his hand. It shakes more than the one Willa has. For a moment, she thinks the kid is going to shoot her. She takes a deep breath.

“I’m not going to shoot you,” she promises Chris. “You can put your gun down.”

Chris eyes her, suspicious. Willa knows why he doesn’t trust anyone. He either ran away from home or got kidnapped. Ended up with Eva and the Lost Boys. They promised to love him. To protect him. Maybe he believed them. Maybe he always had doubts. He definitely had doubts after seeing what happened to Connor Frist. Probably carried those doubts to his home where he was supposed to shoot his mother.

Shoot or be shot.

Willa slowly crouches down, puts her gun on the ground.

“It’s okay,” Willa tells him. “CJ can’t hurt you anymore.”

Chris’s eyes well with tears. Willa thinks she might be getting through to him.

And then another figure emerges from the pool shed. Eva. She also has a gun. She presses it against Chris’s spine. Willa’s fingers twitch towards her own gun.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Eva tells Willa. To Chris she says, “Shoot her, honey.”

“I’m not his mother,” Willa says. “I’m not the one he needs to shoot for your fantasy to come true.”

Eva’s mouth twists. “Fantasy?” she demands. The gun presses harder into Chris’s back. Chris’s tears finally spill over. “I am their mother.”

“Some mother,” Willa says, letting all her scorn be heard. “You had to abduct them. You chose them. They didn’t chose you.”
“They’re choosing me now!” Eva’s near hysterical. Her arm’s shaking. Willa thinks she’ll be able to get her gun up and shoot the woman with just a bit more distraction. “They kill for me. They love me.”

Willa’s eyes dip down to Chris. He doesn’t look like a boy who loves the woman behind him. He looks like a boy terrified. Chris’s eyes widen and his cheeks flush and a moment later Willa can smell the scent of urine. She sees a spot on his pants, sees the little puddle form by his shoe.

“Again?” Eva demands.

Chris flinches away from her.

“It’s okay,” Willa promises him. “Sometimes when we get scared our bodies don’t listen to us.”

Chris nods. He’s still crying.

“Don’t you tell him what to do!” Eva demands. Her gun’s now pointed at Willa. Much better than being pointed at the kid. “I’m his mother. I’m the one who loves him. I -”

Whatever she’s about to say is cut off when Chris turns and shoots her. The bullet rips through her stomach and Eva stumbles back with the impact. She raises her own gun, but Beverly comes out of nowhere and tackles the woman to the ground. The gun gets knocked away. Eva screams.

Willa goes up to Chris and eases the gun from his hands.

“It’s going to be okay,” Willa promises him.

“She wasn’t my mother,” Chris says. He twists so he can see Eva twisting and screaming on the ground as Beverly handcuffs her. “She wanted to be. She said I had to kill my real mom. But that it could be quick. That it didn’t have to hurt. Connor’s mom hurt. He didn’t like that. That’s why CJ shot him.”

Chris continues to watch Eva struggle. Willa should probably get him somewhere out if sight, but he can’t tear his eyes away and Willa can’t bring herself to make him leave.

“She’s not my real mom,” Chris says. “Does that mean it’s okay for her to hurt?”

“Let’s get you some clean pants,” Willa says.

“Okay. Then can I see my real mom?”

“That’s up to Jack,” Willa says. She’s betting the answer is no. Coerced or not, the kid showed up with the intent to watch his family get murdered then shoot his mom.

“Do you have a family?” Chris asks.

“Not yet,” Willa says. She thinks about waking up with Hannibal, thinks about what it might be like to use one of the extra rooms in her house as a bedroom instead of storage room. Hannibal would probably insist on importing an antique European cradle. “One day.”

“Don’t listen if someone tells you to kill them,” Chris says as Willa reaches Jack and the EMTs that have arrived on scene. “Family is better alive.”

Willa squeezes his shoulder. “I’ll keep that in mind, kid.”

She waits until the EMTs have brought him out of earshot to say, “Fuck,” and rub her forehead.
“He’s alive,” Jack tells her. “That’s a start.”

“Yeah,” Willa says. Alive but traumatized. His entire family too. “Guess I didn’t need that overnight bag, after all.”

Jack gives her a look but doesn’t say anything. Maybe he can tell how much the case has rattled her.

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When she gets home, Hannibal’s car is still in her driveway. She’d forgotten to text him, too busy dealing with the aftermath of the case. Which meant he’d stayed in case she got back. Stayed even though she wasn’t even sure if she was going to be home tonight.

It’s too much to think about so she just doesn’t.

She stumbles into her house and drops her bag right inside the door.

Hannibal’s halfway to her, book left on the armchair, before he sees her. She knows what he sees - her hair’s disheveled from running her hands through it so many times. Her glasses are crooked. Her skin is pale and her eyes are unfocused, and there’s a slight tremble in her hands.

Hannibal wraps her up in a strong hug, and she sags into him.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she says. Being held by him is better than faceplanting onto her couch until the dogs started demanding to be fed.

“What happened?” Hannibal asks.

Willa shakes her head. She doesn’t even know where to start.

“Dinner?” Hannibal asks instead.

She missed lunch. Missed dinner too. She knows she should eat, but she doesn’t feel hungry.


“Dead,” Willa says. She stiffens in his embrace. This is probably not the honey, how was your day talk he was expecting. Or maybe he was. He knows what she does for a living. “Not from the grill. Bullet to the head. He tried to kill Mr. O’Halloran. Only got his ear.”

They move into the kitchen, Willa clinging to Hannibal’s side as he pulls a Tupperware out of the fridge.

“I can just eat out of that,” Willa says as Hannibal reaches for a bowl.

He gives her a look and pulls the bowl down.

“We saved the family,” Willa says as Hannibal puts some salad in a bowl for her. “Saved the kid too. A couple others. Saved them for what, I don’t know. They’re going to be pretty messed up.”

“And you?” Hannibal asks. He guides her into one of the chairs at her table. He sits next to her. She tangles their legs together under the table. They’re still not close enough.
“Am I going to be messed up?” Willa asks. She digs into her salad, eats a few bites before she answers. “Had a gun pointed at me today. Twice. Watched a ten year old shoot his kidnapper.”

“Busy day,” Hannibal says. He curls an arm around her shoulders, pulls her against his side.

Willa laughs. “Something like that.”

After dinner they go up to her room. They shower together and Hannibal washes her, gentle but thorough like he’s trying to wipe the case from her skin. Afterwards, they get into bed without putting pajamas on. Willa wraps herself up in him and tucks her head under his chin. She falls asleep to the steady beat of his heart.
“No progress on Brown, no progress on the Ripper,” Jack says barging into Willa’s classroom. At least he waited until Willa’s class had left this time.

“We solved the Turner case,” she reminds him.

Jack nods but he doesn’t look satisfied. His meaning is clear. Some collars are more important than others. Some lives more important to save. Willa wonders if she should tell him that she suspects Miriam is still alive. Would he tear apart the city to find her? Would he sacrifice Willa to save Miriam?

“And we’ll get a new one soon enough,” Jack says. He looks tired.

“We don’t have one yet,” Willa says. “Maybe you should take a couple days off. Spend some time with Bella.”

Jack flinches like she struck him.

“Um,” Willa says. “Sorry?”

“Bella has cancer,” Jack says.

Then Jack should really take a couple days off, Willa thinks. By some miracle she doesn’t actually say it. “I’m sorry,” is what she says instead. It seems equally insufficient.

“There’s nothing that can be done.” Jack leans against Willa’s desk. “Feeling that a lot lately. Nothing I can do.” He stares off into space.

Willa’s hands flutter uselessly at her sides.

Willa, and by extension, Hannibal are woken up when Willa’s cell phone rings at 2am.

“Ugh,” Willa says.

Hannibal reaches across her for her phone. “It’s Jack,” he says, voice still rumbly from sleep.

Willa wants to kiss him. Instead she takes the phone. “Yeah?” she croaks. Not nearly as attractive as Hannibal.

“Got a case,” Jack says. “I’m on my way.”

“I’ll meet you there,” Willa says.

Jack pauses. He doesn’t like it when he doesn’t drive her places. “You not at home?”

“None of your business,” Willa says. It comes out sharper than she intends. She blames it on the rude wake-up. “Have an address for me?”

Jack grudgingly hands it over.

As soon as Willa hangs up, she turns to Hannibal, apologetic. “I’m sorry it woke you up.”
“I don’t mind,” Hannibal says. “As it means that you’re in my bed.”

Willa rolls her eyes. “Romantic even at this unholy hour.” She leans in to kiss him. She tries to make it quick, but Hannibal puts a hand on the back of her neck and pulls her back in.

“There’s a crime scene,” she says, turning her mouth away. The words are said against his cheek. He’s still holding her close.

“The victim is already dead,” Hannibal says.

Willa laughs. “I’m a terrible person for finding that funny,” she says as she pulls back.

Hannibal’s eyes are crinkled at the corners. “Then I am equally terrible for saying it. Can I persuade you to delay long enough to eat something?”

“Go back to sleep,” Willa tells him. “We don’t both need to be awake. I’ll grab something quick on the way out.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrow. If he had his way he’d keep her for a full half-hour and cook her breakfast, but there’s a crime scene waiting for her. She can’t take that long. And she doesn’t want to eat that much anyways.

Willa finds the scene with ease. A hotel that’s surrounded by the flashing lights of police officers and the FBI. She shows her badge to get past the police line. Officer Johnson, one of the officers from Brown’s cabin, lifts the tape for her.

“Seventh floor,” he says. “There’s an elevator.”

“Thanks,” she tells him.

He opens his mouth like he’s going to say more then snaps it shut.

“You’ve seen the room?” she guesses. He shakes his head. “Heard rumors then. And Jack wants me to have it fresh?”

He nods.

Willa sighs. “Lucky me.”

She takes the elevator up to the seventh floor. There are more local police officers clogging the hallway. Jack’s waiting for her outside room 727.

They enter the room together. Price is dusting for fingerprints. Beverly’s inspecting the bed. Zeller’s bent down near a bloodstain. He’s pulling something out with tweezers. Willa’s vision zooms out. The trail of blood leads from the blood-stained bed to the bathroom. There’s overturned furniture following the path. Some kind of struggle than.

“Anyone touch the body?” Jack demands.

Willa hasn’t seen a body yet. She’s guessing it’s waiting for behind the bathroom door.

“Local police didn’t,” Zeller says.

“No need,” Price says. “Pretty obvious the man is dead just by looking at him.”

Jack cuts him a dark look.
Price raises his hands. “No spoilers. Promise.”

“I touched the body,” Beverly says. “A lot going on with that body.”

Jack has a dark look for her.

“Why don’t I see the body,” Willa suggests. Before someone ruins the mystery Jack’s building.

She doesn’t wait for Jack’s permission before she goes back to the bathroom. She pushes the door open and pauses. There’s a man in the bathtub. He’s been opened from neck to pelvis. There’s blood in the tub. Not a lot though. Not enough for the surgery to have happened here. Because those are surgical cuts on him.

“Surgery wasn’t performed here,” Willa says. “Not enough blood.”

“Surgery was performed then unperformed,” Beverly tells him.

“Surgery happened with bare hands,” Zeller volunteers.

Jack growls.

Willa kneels down next to the body. She examines his fingers. Maybe he fought back. But what she sees doesn’t indicate fighting. At least, not against the other person in the room. “He clawed open his own sutures.”

“Anything missing?” Jack asks.

Pieces slot into place. Jack thinks this is the Ripper. No, Jack wants this to be the Ripper. He wanted Willa coming to the scene unbiased. Like that’s possible. Jack’s bias leaks everywhere he goes.

“No but we think the objective was the heart,” Zeller says. “It’s pretty traumatized.”

Willa studies the open chest cavity. I see you, she tells the body, you can’t hide your secrets from me.

She hears the others leaving the room. That’s her cue. She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes as she exhales. The pendulum swings.

She sees the crime played out. If crime is really the right word. She takes another deep breath and goes to get the others. Jack isn’t going to like what she has to say.

“It’s not the Ripper,” she says when she opens the door.

A couple local police officers look her way. Jack pushes her back into the room, scowling.

“Want to say that a little louder?” he demands.

“I’m right,” she says. “And there’s no reason to get everyone in a panic. It isn’t the Ripper.”

Beverly’s the last one to come into the suite. She closes the door behind her.

“There are a lot of similarities,” Zeller says. “The knife work, the anatomical knowledge, mutilation, organ removal. The victim displayed. True, it looks like the recreation of an urban legend but the Ripper’s into that kind of staging, right?”
“There are similarities,” Willa allows. “But this isn’t him.”

“How do you know?” Jack demands.

Willa’s smile, when she turns it on him, isn’t friendly. “Because you’ve made me crawl inside his head. I know what it looks like. This,” she motions to the body. “Isn’t him.”

“There are similarities,” Zeller says. “You can’t deny it.”

“You’re right,” Willa agrees. “But it’s not him.”

“Matthew Brown?” Beverly suggests. “Or another one of his trained puppets?”

Willa shrugs. “I don’t know. Gideon faithfully recreated a murder, like an art forger. This isn’t that.”

“So it could be Brown,” Jack says.


Jack doesn’t look happy with her answer. Willa thinks longingly about the warm bed she left for this. About how she left Hannibal for this.

“We should let the coroner do his job,” Jack says. “Once we’ve got the body back at the lab we’ll look at it again.”

Sometimes Willa thinks she should’ve picked a profession with fewer dead bodies.

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Willa doesn’t leave the scene with Jack and the others. She lingers a few moments, looking around. What she sees only reinforces what she told Jack. This isn’t the Ripper. There’s an artistry to the Ripper. This is messy. Desperate. Something went wrong in this room. Things don’t go wrong for the Ripper. He plans too thoroughly.

When Willa gets back outside, Officer Johnson comes up to her. “Freddie Lounds is here,” he tells her. “After the Brown cabin, I thought I’d give you a heads up.”

“Thanks,” Willa tells him. “She talk to anyone?”

“As soon as I saw her I started warning guys. I don’t know who she got to before that.”

“Thanks,” Willa says again. Despite her better judgement, she goes over to where Freddie’s lurking by the tape. “You’re late. Didn’t have anyone call ahead this time?”

Freddie narrows her eyes. “I don’t see Jack Crawford. Your leash getting longer?”

Willa laughs. It’s not a nice sound. “Hostile today.”

“You told them not to talk to me.” Freddie’s nearly pouting.

“That wasn’t me,” Willa says. “They look out for their own. New concept for you?”

Freddie tucks her hands into her pockets. Probably turning on a recording device. “Rumor has it
this is the Ripper.”

“Careful,” Willa warns. “Remember what happened last time you spread rumors that the Ripper was in town?”

Freddie’s face goes pale in the early morning light.

“Yeah,” Willa says. “Think before you post. He might not be so forgiving next time. Might leave a body on your lawn.”

She walks away, buoyed by the fact that she didn’t let Freddie provoke a soundbite and the fact that she’ll be home with Hannibal soon.

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Freddie runs a pretty tame article given that she’s Freddie Lounds. She still has pictures from the crime scene that Willa has no idea how she got her hands on, but not only does she not make the title RIPPER IS BACK she cautions people about jumping to conclusions, reminding them that the Ripper doesn’t like his work being copied or misattributed.

“Maybe she’s not so bad,” Zeller says looking over the article.

It’s how they’re spending their lunch break, browsing Tattlecrime. It’s a little pathetic.

Willa laughs. “She’s a menace.”

“This is subdued for her,” Beverly says. She glances at Willa.

Willa shrugs. “Might’ve mentioned what happened last time she said the Ripper was back when he wasn’t. Guess she decided to be cautious.”

“You really don’t think it’s the Ripper?” Zeller asks.

Price groans. “Are we really going back to this?”

“I’m eating my sandwich,” Willa says. “And not talking about the Ripper or murder until lunch is over.” To prove her point she takes a giant bite out of her sandwich. It’s turkey, avocado, and bacon with a cranberry spread. She doesn’t know how Hannibal manages to make an amazing sandwich but he does.

If he had a better yard then Willa might just move her and all her dogs into his house and make him cook for her all the time.

“That’s a really good sandwich,” Price says.

Willa holds it closer to her, like he’s going to take it.

“Definitely didn’t come from the cafeteria,” Beverly says. She’s eyeing Willa, suspicious.

The problem with working with an FBI unit is that it’s hard to keep secrets. Willa’s amazed she’s managed to keep this one as long as she has.

“You and Hannibal finally…?” Beverly waggles her eyebrows.

Willa flushes.
Price whistles. “About damn time.”

“Does Jack know?” Beverly asks.

“Not yet. He will soon enough.”

“Guess that explains why you keep driving yourself places. Don’t want Jack picking your up from Hannibal’s?” Beverly grins.

Zeller’s frowning. “Isn’t he your therapist?” To his credit, he doesn’t cower under the looks he gets from Price and Beverly. “Look, I just wanna make sure, you know, everything’s good.”

There’s a moment of silence and then Beverly, with a wicked grin on her face, turns on Zeller. “You making sure Hannibal’s treating her right?”

“Ugh,” Zeller says. “You guys are the worst.”

“It’s good,” Willa says before they can tease him too much, because Zeller’s just looking out for her. Like she’s a part of the team. Like they’re friends. “He’s good to me. And I’m not officially his patient.”

“Have you fucked in his office yet?” Beverly asks.

Price groans. “New rule. No sex talk during lunch either.”

Beverly heaves a mock sigh. “No murder, no sex, what’re we supposed to talk about?”

“Uh...the Caps are playing well?” Zeller offers.

“They always play well leading up to the playoffs,” Beverly says. “And then they crash and burn.”

Willa has no idea what they’re talking about. She looks over at Price and he shrugs, equally confused. Willa goes back to her sandwich. They’ve only got a small break before it’s back to the body.

“I’m not going to make it home for dinner,” Willa says. She’s managed to get out of the autopsy lab long enough to make a phone call. She blushes as soon as she realizes what she’s said. Hannibal’s isn’t home. “Um.”

“Late night?” Hannibal asks, “After such an early morning?”

“Yeah.” Willa’s head is pounding, nothing that caffeine or aspirin can help. She needs to sleep. She knows it won’t come any time soon. And then she remembers - “Crap. We were going to go to the thing tonight.”

“The fundraiser,” Hannibal says.

“With the opera singer.” Willa tugs on the end of her braid. “I’m sorry. I’m not going to be able to go. Jack’s already pissed at me because I told him it’s not the Ripper. He thinks if I keep looking at evidence then I’ll change my mind. Or something. I don’t know. You should still go.”

“It will not be as enjoyable without you,” Hannibal says.

“That’s a lie. You’ll have a much better time without me and my novice ear. You can stay and talk
as long as you want. You’ll have a great time.”

“I could do all those things with you,” Hannibal says. “And I could introduce you.”

“They already know who I am,” Willa says. “And they’ve thought we were dating for months.”

“Will you stay at my place tonight?” Hannibal asks.

“I don’t know when I’m going to be done,” she says. “I already woke you up this morning. I don’t want to wake you up tonight too.”

“I’d like to see you.”

Willa smiles into her phone. “Alright. I’ve already got someone looking after the dogs.”

“And clothes here.” Hannibal sounds pleased.

Willa sees Jack poke his head out the door, looking for her. “I’ve got to go,” she says. “See you later tonight.”

“I’ll have dinner in the fridge for you. You’ll just have to heat it up.”

Willa’s smile softens. “Thank you. Enjoy your night.”

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Jack lets Willa go earlier than she thought he would. It’s still not early enough to go to the opera with Hannibal, but she’s kind of grateful for it. She’s too exhausted to be social, to be nice. She doesn’t want to be surrounded by rich people who’re proud of themselves for donating money to some art foundation.

It takes her twice as long to eat as usual because she keeps dipping her head, eyes closing, almost falling asleep. At least Hannibal made her soup - thick and filling - but something that doesn’t require a lot of chewing or effort.

She manages to stay awake long enough to shower. She emerges from the shower, towel wrapped around her body. She frowns when she’s met by an empty room. She knew Hannibal wasn’t going to be here but she still wishes he was. Even though she’s going to fall asleep as soon as her head hits the pillows. It’s that kind of night.

She changes into her pajamas and hesitates at her side of the bed. The bed seems big. Too big. Empty. She pulls back the covers on Hannibal’s side and climbs in. It’s not the same as sleeping with Hannibal but when she puts her head on his pillow and pulls his comforter up to her shoulders it’s almost like he’s here with her.

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Willa wakes up when she hears the bedroom door open. She blinks against the darkness of the room, tries to get an impression of who’s entering.

Hannibal, she assures herself. She can see his shadow moving.

“You can turn on the light,” she says.

“I was hoping not to wake you,” Hannibal says. He turns on a lightswitch that makes a dim light come on above the bed. By the time it filters through the draping it’s a muted golden color. Mood
lighting, she thinks. She can’t help her smile.

“I’m a light sleeper,” she says. “Besides, only fair you get to wake me up every once in awhile.”

“I’d prefer you to sleep,” Hannibal says. “You don’t sleep as much as you should.”

She rolls her eyes. She feels surprisingly rested. Like she’s just had a good nap. Which is exactly what she just had. She lets her eyes roam over Hannibal. He’s in a full tux, bow tie included. She can’t help her smile.

“Looking good,” she says.

He doesn’t do anything as undignified as blushing, but he does puff up a little, pleased.

He goes into the adjoining bathroom to brush his teeth. She’d never dare brushing her teeth in something that nice, too afraid she’d get toothpaste on it, but Hannibal, of course, has no problem. He comes out of the bathroom loosening his tie. She leans against her pillows and shamelessly watches him undress.

He knows she’s watching, but it doesn’t make him undress and slower, or faster. He places his cufflinks on his dresser.

“Was it a good performance?” Willa asks.

“Yes. The company left something to be desired.”

Willa can’t help her pleased smile. “We’re together now,” she says.

“Indeed we are.”

He isn’t shy once he’s naked.

“You don’t need those,” she says when he reaches for his pajamas.

A smile curves Hannibal’s lips. “Oh?”

She matches his smile and pulls back the blanket.

“You’re on the side of my bed,” he says.

“Then come join me.”

It’s a little daring, a little bold, but she reminds herself that Hannibal likes her. She can be bold. He might even want her to be. She undoes the first button on her pajama top. Hannibal’s gaze is drawn there, and she undoes the next one, exposing the swell of her breasts.

Hannibal joins her on the bed. He sits with a leg on either side of her thighs, pinning her to the bed. Like she’d try to get away from him. She’s sitting up which means his hands brush hers as she undoes the next button. She glances up at him, questioning, wondering.

“You watched me,” Hannibal says. “Now I am watching you.”

Willa undoes the last two buttons and lets her pajamas top fall down her arms. She licks her lips. “Then watch,” she says and moves before he can react, rolling until he’s on his back in the middle of the bed. She’s the one straddling him now, and he looks up at her, pleased as punch.
“Stay,” she tells him, pushing her luck. She climbs off him so she can get rid of her pajama pants and so she can get the condoms and the lube from the bedside table. That has been a bit of a surreal night, the night she first learned that the contents of Hannibal’s bedside table were the same as everyone else’s.

She straddles his thighs again. She strokes his cock a few times, until he’s hard, and then she rolls the condom on.

And then she rises up on her knees, smiling as Hannibal’s gaze dips to her right hand. She slides a finger into herself. She tips her head back, exposing the long line of her throat, and she can feel Hannibal’s gaze there. She knows he likes her throat. He loves to kiss it, to nip at the thin skin with his teeth. If he had his way he’d scatter it with bruises, marks that say I was here .

But Hannibal doesn’t always get his way.

Willa slips another finger in, and her moan isn’t entirely exaggerated as she scissors her fingers, stretching herself. She meets Hannibal’s gaze, as she thrusts her fingers in and out of herself. They feel good. Not as good as Hannibal’s would but still good.

Speaking of Hannibal...she glances down at his cock. It’s still hard, still waiting for her. Still looking at Hannibal’s cock, she tilts her head like she’s assessing, and then slips a third finger in. Hannibal groans.

She doesn’t touch herself all that often. She didn’t have a strong sex drive before Hannibal, and she wouldn’t say she has one now, but it’s definitely more than it was. Her fingers are a little clumsy like she doesn’t quite know what to do with them, but it still feels good. Watching Hannibal’s reaction is even better.

Warm hands slide up her thighs, and Willa startles, fingers hitting a new angle and she groans.

“Thought you were watching,” she manages to say.

Hannibal’s thumbs sweep up and towards the crease of her thighs. “I am.”

She doesn’t know how he’s always in control. She’s not sure she’d want it any other way. She grips his cock with her free hand, holds it still so she can sink down on it. She’s filled faster than she normally would be, Hannibal likes to take his time, and it’s almost too much. When she’s seated on his cock, filled completely by him, she lets out a soft, “Oh.”

Hannibal’s hands tighten on her thighs. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?” he asks.

“If it’s even a fraction of what you do to me then I’m not sorry,” she says.

Hannibal growls and surges up, flips them so she’s on her back on the bed and he’s looming over her. She moans and rocks her hips up into him.

“Are you watching me?” she gasps, arching her chest up towards him. She wants more. Wants him deeper, wants him harder, wants everything . And she knows how to get it. “Watching what you do to me? Watching how much I want it? Want you? ”

Hannibal growls and in an instant his mouth is on her, claiming her mouth as his. Her hands scramble at his back, digging into his skin, drawing him closer to her, taking what she wants even as he does the same.
Neither of them are woken up by Willa’s phone the next morning. It’s pleasant to wake up when they’re ready, for Willa to stretch out and feel Hannibal beside her.

“You stayed in bed,” she murmurs, surprised. He’ll often want breakfast ready when she wakes up, no matter how many times she insists it isn’t necessary.

“You don’t like waking up without me,” he says. “Even if I have left you for a noble pursuit.”

She blushes because she doesn’t like waking up to an empty bed even if waking up to him in bed with her means he’s been watching her sleep. She doesn’t understand how the man can function on a few scattered hours.

“Well, I’m up,” she says.

“So you are,” Hannibal says. He throws the comforter off his legs and turns his back to her as he gets out of bed.

Willa can’t help her small gasp. There are long red scratch marks down his back. Marks that she put there. They’re...deep. Like they might have bled at some point. She looks down at her nails. There are specks of red under them.

“Have you made me into a work of art, then?” Hannibal asks. He’s turned back around, is watching her. “I had hoped when I first felt the sting. But I can’t see.”


“And I hope you will do it again.”

Willa can’t think about this right now. Blood under her fingernails reminds her too much of crime scenes, of murder, for her to be comfortable with it. And yet, she likes Hannibal wearing marks she gave him. Likes that he’s proud of them.

“Can we eat?” she asks.

“Of course,” Hannibal says. He has an uncanny ability to know when to push her and when to back off. “Would you like me to put a shirt on?”

“Do you want to?” she asks.

“I enjoy what you’ve done to me,” Hannibal says, “and I would like to flaunt the marks in my home, but if it makes you uncomfortable then I would not enjoy it.”

“Okay,” Willa says. “You really like them?”

Hannibal pulls on a pair of lounge pants. Willa would call them sweatpants, but she thinks it would offend Hannibal’s whole sense of fashion if she did. He forgoes a shirt.

“I do,” he says. “Would you like to get dressed or would you like a dressing gown?”

“Most people call them bathrobes,” she says. She slides out of bed and takes inventory of the various marks on her body. There’s nothing as big or obvious as the scratch marks she left on Hannibal, but there are smaller bruises from where his fingers pressed into her skin.

Again, she sees flashes of crime scenes, of victims on autopsy tables with bruises and scratch marks
and bite marks. She wants to close her eyes but she knows that will make it worse. She looks at Hannibal instead. Reassures herself that he’s alive. So is she.

“You’re distressed,” Hannibal says.

“There are reasons I’ve never been in a steady relationship,” she says. She grabs clothes at random, yanks on a pair of underwear and then shimmies into a pair of jeans. She wishes for a pair of worn sweatpants and one of her old t-shirts, one of the ones with a hole in the collar. “I look at these,” she holds up her hands, “See the blood under my fingernails and wonder who I killed.”

“I am quite alive,” Hannibal tells her.

“I know,” Willa says. She grinds the heels of her palms into her eyes. “I know. I’m sorry. Maybe I should go home.”

“I would prefer you didn’t,” Hannibal says. “It’s Saturday. Neither of us have to work. I suggest breakfast then, if you’re feeling up to it, we could do errands together.”

Willa drops her hands from her face. “Errands?”

“I’ve been meaning to go to the cheese shop,” Hannibal says.

“You want to go cheese shopping with me?” Willa asks. She feels like she’s on the edge of hysteria.

“Among other places,” Hannibal says.

It’s...domestic but Willa kind of wants to go with him. The closest thing to grocery shopping she’s ever done with a partner is going out for late night mozzarella sticks.

“Alright,” Willa says. “Breakfast then...cheese shopping.”

“Are you mocking me?” Hannibal asks.

Willa shakes her head but can’t help her smile as she pulls a sports bra on. “I’m preparing myself for new experiences.”

“I hope we will have many of them,” Hannibal says.

Willa waits until her back is to him to roll her eyes. Only Hannibal can add gravitas and deeper meaning to cheese.

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They go to a farmer’s market, a local grocer, and a butcher before they go to Jose’s.

“The cheese shop is called Jose’s?” Willa asks. She likes teasing Hannibal, not only because she likes that they’re familiar enough to tease each other but also because she’s knows she’s one of the few people who’s allowed to. She’s special.

The cheese shop itself is bigger than she thought it would be. And has a lot of cheese. She sticks to Hannibal’s side, pretends she knows what she’s doing or even has any right to be here as Hannibal peruses the wares.

“What are you planning to make?” Willa asks. She’s been trying to guess from what they’re buying but she’s got no clue.
“Something - “ Hannibal pauses, lips turning down for the shortest of seconds, and Willa turns to see what’s caught his attention.

Who, not what.

There’s another man in the shop who looks as out of place as Willa. He’s in a suit that fits him in terms of size but feels off like he’s trying to be someone he’s not. He’s glancing around the room and when his gaze falls on them his eyes light up with genuine pleasure if not genuine surprise.

“Apologies in advance,” Hannibal murmurs.

The man hurries towards them like Willa and Hannibal are going to run out of the shop to get away from him. Willa wonders if they should.

“Dr. Lecter!” the man greets, effusive. “And who is this lovely lady?”

Willa’s not sure anyone’s called her lady since she left Louisiana.

“Franklyn, this is my partner Willa Graham. Willa, this is Franklyn.” A patient of mine.

Willa hears the rest of the introduction. She summons a smile and holds a hand out to Franklyn. “Pleasure to meet you,” she says.

Franklyn grips her hand in both of hers and shakes it vigorously. “The pleasure is all mine. I’m surprised I didn’t meet you last night. At the opera.”

“Um,” Willa glances at Hannibal but he doesn’t look inclined to speak. Probably speaks to the man enough during their sessions. “I was working. I was sorry to miss it, but I’m glad Hannibal was still able to go and be among friends. He loves the opera.”

“I know,” Franklyn says. “He shed tears. I almost did. It was beautiful.”

Willa glances over at Hannibal. “You cried?”

“The performance moved me,” Hannibal says.

Which is Hannibal for yes, I cried at the opera. Once again, Willa wonders how the two of them ended up together.

“What do you do for a living?” Franklyn asks. “I mean, if you don’t mind me asking.”

Willa thinks she’s finally met someone who understands social graces less than she does. “I’m a profiler with the FBI.”

Franklyn sucks in a breath, eyes wide. “That’s so cool! I love murder mysteries. Are you on a case right now?”

“I am,” Willa says, “but I’m not allowed to talk about it.”

“Of course not.” Franklyn grins, delighted that he’s been made aware of the secret even if he doesn’t know the secret. “Does Dr. Lecter work with you? He’s quite brilliant. He understands people.”

“He does,” Willa agrees. She touches Hannibal’s arm. “Would you like to pick out the cheese while I talk to Franklyn? I’m not going to be any help anyways.”
To his credit, Hannibal hesitates for a moment before leaving her with Franklyn. Willa would rather not be stuck talking to him, but the faster Hannibal gets their cheese the faster they can be out of here. And it’s not like Franklyn is dangerous. Just awkward.

“Dr. Lecter is amazing,” Franklyn says once Hannibal is out of earshot.

“He is,” Willa agrees. She’s starting to think Franklyn has a crush on Hannibal. She wonders if she should tell Franklyn that she was Hannibal’s patient before becoming his lover. It would be cruel to give him false hope. She also can’t help but wonder if Hannibal has ever viewed her like he views Franklyn. An inconvenience. Beneath him.

“Have you known him long?” Franklyn asks.

“Long enough,” Willa answers. “And, given both of our professions, we have gotten to know each other quite intimately.”

“A psychiatrist and a profiler,” Franklyn says. He nods his head like he’s a bobblehead. Willa’s afraid his head is going to bobble right out. “That must be some dinner conversation. What I wouldn’t be to be a fly on that wall.” He laughs.

“I’m not sure Hannibal would allow a fly anywhere near his cooking,” Willa says. She gives Franklyn a gentle smile to take some of the sting out of her words.

A couple excruciating minutes of smalltalk later, Hannibal returns to her. “Time to leave,” he says. “Dinner tonight will take most of the day to prepare.”

“It was nice to meet you,” Willa tells Franklyn. She hopes she never has to talk to him again.

He shakes her hand again before telling Hannibal, “It was so good to see you again, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal smiles, strained to Willa’s eye, and then escorts Willa out of the shop. They get into the car and Hannibal locks the doors. Willa can’t help her giggle. “That bad?”

“A persistent patient,” Hannibal says. “He was at the opera last night. And now at Jose’s this morning. It’s a troubling pattern.”

“He’s got a crush on you,” Willa says, “but you don’t need to worry. I won’t let him have you.”

“Now you are the protector?” Hannibal asks.

“When I need to be,” she answers.

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It’s Hannibal’s turn to come home with her for the night, and he’s driven himself to Quantico so they can drive together. It doesn’t make sense to bring both their cars all the way out to Wolf Trap, especially when Willa can easily drop him back off to his car in the morning when she comes in to work.

Hannibal comes into her classroom and presses a hand to her hip before leaning in for a kiss. Willa kisses him back, quick, before turning back to her desk.

“I’m just packing up my bag,” Willa says. “And then we can get out of here.”

Now that Hannibal’s here she isn’t interested in taking her time. She shoves her laptop and her classnotes into her bag.
“You’re wrinkling your papers,” he says, amused.

“They’re not important,” she says. Not as important as getting home with Hannibal. As having a cup of coffee or maybe tea on the porch while they watch the dogs run around the front yard. Not as important as a casual dinner then getting into bed together.

Hannibal’s smile grows as he catches her meaning. He looks smug. It’s an unfairly good look on him.

“Yeah, yeah,” she says. “Good day in the office?”

“Interesting,” he says. “I would tell you about it now but then we would have nothing to talk about in the car.”

“We could listen to the CD you made me,” Willa says. Because Hannibal had made her a CD of his favorite classical songs. Made her a mix CD. Like they were teenagers. She couldn’t stop laughing when he gave it to her but she wouldn’t give it back either.

She slings her bag over her shoulder and Hannibal frowns at the jacket in her hands.

“It’s chilly out,” he says.

“It’s a short walk to the car,” she says. “And I’ll overheat once the heater’s on. Taking a jacket off while I’m driving is doable but not ideal.”

They walk out into the hallway together where they see Jack and Beverly hurrying towards them. Willa has a feeling she and Hannibal aren’t going to get to go home.

“Dr. Lecter,” Jack says. He looks pleased. “Want to help us catch the Ripper?”

Willa sighs. “Still not the Ripper, Jack.”

“We’ll see,” Jack says.

They get to the Medi-Now ambulance garage only to find that Devon Silvestri already has the ambulance signed out. Which means they’ve gone from trying to catch the guy at his apartment to trying to catch him in action. Because if the ambulance has been signed out then Silvestri is probably about to do something that’s going to end in another dead body.

Beverly’s the one who figures out how to use the GPS to find the ambulance and Willa lets herself believe that they’ll find Silvestri’s latest victim before he or she dies.

Willa and Hannibal sit in the back of Jack’s SUV, Beverly in the front, as they drive to where the ambulance is parked. When they get there, Willa puts her hand on Hannibal’s arm. “Stay?” she asks as Jack circles around to get an unnecessary shotgun from the back of his car.

“You concerned for my safety?” Hannibal asks.

“Yes,” Willa says.

“I’ll stay,” Hannibal tells her.

She gets out of the car and pulls her gun, ready in case she needs to shoot. She knows it’s not the Ripper in the ambulance but that doesn’t mean Silvestri isn’t dangerous. She, Beverly, and Jack approach the vehicle with their weapons raises. Another agent uses a crowbar to open the ambulance doors.
Silvestri - Willa assumes it’s him at least - is mid-surgery. There’s a body face down on a rigged operating table and Silvestri has his hands inside the guy.

“Show me your hands,” Jack demands.

Even Willa knows that’s dumb.

“I can’t,” Silvestri says.

Jack cocks his shotgun. “Show me your hands.”

“He’ll die,” Silvestri says.

“Dr. Lecter?” Jack calls.

Willa turns to see Hannibal emerge from the car. He jogs forward, jog becoming a run when he takes in the scene. He climbs inside the ambulance without hesitation. His body blocks Willa’s shot of Silvestri. She doesn’t think Silvestri is dangerous anymore, just incompetent, but it still makes her nervous.

Hannibal snaps on a pair of gloves as he observes Silvestri’s work. “He was removing the kidney. Poorly. I can re-attach it.”

“Do it,” Jack says.

Hannibal effortlessly takes over, and Willa’s glad that Jack takes over dealing with Silvestri, because she can’t take her eyes off of Hannibal. She knew he was a surgeon, knew he had plenty of experience with saving people’s lives, but it’s still something to see in person. She can’t help being reminded of Abigail, how he’d knelt on the Hobbs’s kitchen floor alongside her and kept Abigail from bleeding to death.

She has to swallow past a lump in her throat.

Out of the corner of her eye she sees Jack and several agents swarm Silvestri as soon as he’s out of the ambulance.

She continues to watch Hannibal.

He glances up once and makes eye contact with her. She smiles and then looks away. She can’t help but be reminded of their differences. She takes lives. He saves them. He’s better than her. In every way there is.

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She’s quiet as they drive back to Quantico then switch from Jack’s car to hers.

“Guess we don’t need the CD,” she says, forcing a smile on her face as she starts the engine. “Plenty to talk about.”

“Indeed,” Hannibal says.

They don’t say anything as she pulls out of Quantico’s parking lot.

“You are upset,” Hannibal says.

She doesn’t deny it.
“Because I left the car?”

“What?” She remembers asking him to stay. She was afraid of what they were walking into. She didn’t need to be. Silvestri wasn’t a danger to them. Only the people he operated on. “No. You did the right thing. You saved that man’s life.”

“You save lives as well,” Hannibal says.

“By killing people. You do it by actually saving them.” She readjusts her grip on the steering wheel. “Sorry. I don’t mean to sound bitter.”

“Your job is difficult,” Hannibal says. “It’s understandable that it would affect you.”

“Yeah.” She gets them onto the freeway. “How am I different than Franklyn?”

Hannibal hadn’t expected that question if the surprise on his face is anything to go by. She doesn’t often surprise him. She’s not sure if this is an accomplishment or not.

“We’re both your patients,” she says. “Both have an interest in you. He’s desperate for your attention.” She feels desperate for his attention. Feels desperate for him. Is she pathetic? Franklyn certainly is.

“He is quite...dedicated to his pursuit of me,” Hannibal says. “The difference between the two of you is that I pursued you. I have no interest in pursuing him.”

Willa’s lips turn up. “You pursued me? Is that what we’re calling it?”

“I find you interesting,” Hannibal says. “I want to be with you. Be around you. You are nothing like Franklyn.”

“Okay,” Willa says. “I was hoping for a nice night at home.”

“We can still have one,” Hannibal says.

“Yeah,” she says. She turns the cruise control on so she can steer one handed. She holds her free hand out to Hannibal.

He clasps it in his own.
Chapter 14

It’s another Saturday where neither of them have to work. Willa insists on spending it at her place instead of cheese shopping. Hannibal had laughed and said it was unlikely that even Franklyn could find him out here.

“My dogs would protect us if he did,” Willa says.

Magnus takes this opportunity to bound over and roll onto his back demanding belly rubs. Willa laughs and kneels down to oblige.

“I was thinking a walk in the field,” Willa says. “I know there’s still a bit of snow but it’ll be fine in boots. You have boots?” She finds it hard to picture Hannibal in sturdy work boots.

“I do,” he says.

“Here?” she asks. She doesn’t remember him bringing boots over but he has a whole closet full of stuff at her place and she hasn’t gone through and catalogued it. Every once in awhile she’ll open the closet door and smile at all his stuff. She’s in a relationship with someone. The kind of relationship where they keep stuff at each other’s places.

“Yes,” he answers. “I don’t need boots in Baltimore.”

That makes sense. She gives Magnus one last belly rub. “I’m going to change into boots. Maybe put on a light jacket.”

Hannibal frowns.

“We’re going to be exercising,” she says. “I’m going to warm-up quick. Besides, it’s a nice day.”

They change into boots and Willa puts on one of her light jackets, one of the ones with a lot of pockets in case she sees anything she wants to use in her lures. Hannibal’s in jeans, a sweater, and boots when they meet back up in the kitchen.


He pulls her in for a kiss, arm wrapped around her waist and holding her tight.

“Definitely you,” she says when they break the kiss. “No one else has ever kissed me like that.”

“Like what?” Hannibal asks as they head outside.

“Like I’m the most important person in your world.” Willa whistles and the dogs come bounding over to them. “Want to go by the river? Maybe one day when it’s warmer I’ll take you fishing with me.”

“I know some good fish recipes,” Hannibal says.

Willa smiles. “Figured you would.”

Her smile grows when Hannibal’s hand brushes hers, questioning. She laces their fingers together. Sometimes she still can’t believe this is her life. Holding hands with someone she loves, with someone who loves her. Sometimes, she thinks she’s still sick, thinks she’s going wake up in the hospital and all of this will have been a dream.
“I can show you,” Hannibal says. “We can cook together.”

“Or I can have a glass of wine and distract you from cooking,” Willa says. “Both sound appealing.”

Hannibal stops in the middle of the field, a couple hundred feet from her house, and kisses her. They stand there, holding hands, kissing, until the dogs demand they keep walking again.

They take another early morning walk on Sunday, but it’s interrupted by a phone call from Jack. Willa looks down at her buzzing phone. She knows it’s going to be a case. She feels tired all of a sudden.

She leans into Hannibal’s chest. “One day I want to take a vacation,” she says. “I want to leave my phone behind. No work. Just me and you.” She answers the phone before Hannibal can answer. “Hi, Jack.”

Willa drops Hannibal off at his house before going to the concert hall. She’s on the later end of arrivals, and it doesn’t surprise her to see a crowd gathered outside the building. She’s even less surprised to see Freddie Lounds.

“Wanna give me a quote?” Freddie asks as Willa ducks under the tape.

Willa considers flipping Freddie off and then decides it’s not worth the bad press. She goes inside the concert hall. It’s not hard to follow the signs until she’s in the hall proper. She pauses at the back entrance.

The body is up on the stage, the neck of a cello jammed down his throat. His throat is open, cut to look like strings. Willa takes a deep breath and then walks down the aisle towards Jack and the body.

“Good of you to make it,” Jack says.

“I was at home,” she says. “It’s a bit of a drive.”

“Victim is Douglas Wilson. He was a trombone player for the Baltimore Metropolitan Orchestra.”

“Any good?” Willa asks.

Jack ignores the question. “Killed by blunt force trauma to the back of the head.”

Willa looks at the human cello posed before her. “Someone had some fun after that. Wanted to put on a show.”

“Who wants to put on this kind of show?” Jack asks.

“Don’t know yet,” Willa says.

“Figure it out,” he tells her and then everyone leaves the room. Leaves her alone with the body.

Willa takes a deep breath and closes her eyes.
Willa gives her report to Jack then goes to Hannibal’s. They won’t need her again until tomorrow, and she plans on enjoying the rest of her weekend. She lets herself in with the key Hannibal gave her, and she’s quiet as she comes in, and manages to get into the living room without Hannibal noticing.

He’s in his armchair, legs crossed, book balanced on his knee. He looks relaxed, peaceful, happy. She’s not sure she wants to bring murder into the house.

“Hey,” she says quietly.

Hannibal doesn’t startle. He does look up, smiling when he sees her. He puts a bookmark in his book and closes it.

“You don’t have to do that,” she says. “I could go for a quiet afternoon.”

“Do you want to talk about the case?”

“Not really. It was pretty gruesome. Guy made into a cello. I can -” she looks away from Hannibal. “I can hear the killer’s song in my head.”

“I can see how that would be unpleasant,” Hannibal says.

“Unpleasant is one word for it.”

“Lunch?” Hannibal asks.

“Food isn’t the answer to everything,” Willa says but she’s smiling.

They eat and then go back into the living room. There’s a piano and a theremin and a few other instruments in the room. “Will you play something for me?” she asks.

“Want a new song in your head?” Hannibal asks.

“Want you in my head,” she answers.

He smiles, pleased, and sits down at his theremin. “I remember a time when you didn’t.”

She sprawls out on the couch, on her stomach but propped up on her elbows. “Guess I find you interesting, after all.”

Hannibal laughs and starts to play.

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Willa goes to the morgue the next day with Hannibal’s song in her head. It gets softer as she walks through the doors. She hovers as Beverly, Price, and Zeller poke around the body. Her job is to poke around the scene and then take in other people’s observations during the autopsy.

Her fingers itch to take up a bow. It’s not her urge. There’s a new killer in her head.

Beverly and Price and Zeller talk about what they see.

Willa interprets for them. “Vocal chords were hardened to make them easier to play.” Hannibal’s song is drowned out by the killer’s. “I had to open you up to get a decent sound out of you,” she says in a voice that isn’t hers.
She gets alarmed looks from the other three people on her team.

Beverly’s the first to talk. “Apparently he was better at being an instrument than playing an instrument.”

Willa laughs. It’s inappropriate but she can’t help herself. She’s starting to feel unhinged. Too much murder. She wants to go back to Hannibal. Wants to lock them in his house or her house. Shut the door, close the blinds, and fight off the world. Hannibal understands the madness in her head. He’ll help guide her away from it.

“He’s treating the vocal chords the same way you’d treat catgut string,” Beverly realizes. At everyone’s look she rolls her eyes. “Yes, I played the violin.”

“So we’re looking for a musician,” Willa says. “Or someone who makes instruments. Someone who frequents the orchestra. A fan. He, or she, didn’t like the performance Wilson put on. They had to put on their own.”

“New killer?” Zeller asks. He looks down at the body. “This seems like the work of someone practiced, but we would’ve heard about human instruments if it was a thing.”

“This is a confident killer,” Willa agrees. “But this is the first time he’s killed like this.”

Why, she wonders. What’s changed?

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“Is this weird?” Willa asks.

They’re in Hannibal’s office. She’s even more restless than usual. Instead of standing guard over her window she’s pacing. She knows the movement bothers Hannibal, but he doesn’t ask her to stop.

“I feel like this is weird,” she says before Hannibal has time to answer. “But I don’t want to bring cases home. Not anymore than I have to.”

“Boundaries,” Hannibal says.

“I’m trying.” It doesn’t feel like enough, but she is trying. “Jack wants me so wound up in his cases that I don’t have any choice but to solve them. I don’t want to get that close. Not anymore. Not again.”

“Then we will continue to use my office to discuss cases,” Hannibal says. “It doesn’t have to be on Thursdays only.”

“Thank you,” Willa says. “We can use Quantico too. Just not home. If we can help it.”

“Of course,” Hannibal says. “Tell me about this new case.”

Willa tells him. She tells him what it was like to walk into the room and see the body posed up on the stage. She tells him about the handle jutting out of his neck, about the way his body had been cut and cured and arranged in order to be played.

“Was there olive oil?” Hannibal asks.

It seems an oddly specific question to ask. “Yeah, there was. We haven’t figured it out yet.”
“Olive oil hasn’t been used in the production of catgut for over a century,” Hannibal tells her. “It was said to increase the life of the strings and create a sweeter, more melodic sound. Your killer is interested in authenticity.”


Hannibal looks over at her. “Oh?”

“He’s a music enthusiast,” Willa says. “He killed Wilson to punish him for being a bad player. Turned him into an instrument in the hopes that something...pleasent would come from him. The kind of person who is so in love with music he would kill for it is someone who probably runs in your circles. Someone you would probably enjoy talking to actually.”

Hannibal’s lips quirk up. “I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or an insult.”

“I didn’t mean that you’d be friends with him if you knew he was a killer. Just saying, music enthusiasts. Birds of a feather.” She waves her hand. “Forget it.”

“You said the killer was performing. Who was he performing for?”

Willa’s grateful for the change in subject. “I don’t know. Someone else who enjoys music as much as he does. Maybe another musician. Maybe another killer. I don’t know enough yet.”

Hannibal looks intrigued. “Could he have been performing for you?”

Willa laughs. “I’m not important enough to show up on his radar. It wouldn’t be for me. At least, I hope it’s not for me. I don’t think I...appreciate his music as much as he’d want. He’d probably kill me for being a bad audience.”

“You are still hearing his song?” Hannibal asks.

“It’s all I hear,” Willa says. She finally goes over to her chair and sinks down into it. “The killer - he’s taken a risk. He’s an experienced killer, but he doesn’t usually put on a performance. He doesn’t get caught. He’s risking that for whoever he’s putting on this show for.”

“And you don’t believe it is you? You are the FBI’s top profiler. It makes logical sense.”

“Not me.” Willa’s certain in that. “Why the insistence?”

“Not insistence,” Hannibal says. “It simply occurs to me that if I were to commit a murder I would do it with you in mind.”

Willa’s pulled up short by that. “I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or an insult,” she says, echoing Hannibal’s earlier words.

Hannibal smiles, not giving her a clue either way. “Back to the actual killer,” he says. “He wants to show someone how well he plays. What happens if that person doesn’t realize the performance is for them?”

“He’ll make sure they do,” Willa says. “He’s careful, he’s smart, and he’s determined.”

“A most intriguing case,” Hannibal tells her.

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Willa spends the day going through the list of everyone who bought a ticket for the latest orchestra
performance. There’s thousands of people, and they begin to blur together after a while. She’s not
sure what Jack’s hoping to get out of this. Willa’s a person not...whatever he thinks she is. Looking
a names, at pictures, she’s not going to see one and go Eureka! This is it!

A familiar face makes her pause.

Franklyn Froideveaux.

An aficionado of opera, cheese, and the orchestra. Also a fan of Hannibal. Obsessive even,
Desperate for attention. She can’t imagine him a murderer. Shame. It would make him an easy
suspect and then she could go home.

Tonight, she’s going to her home, going to Wolf Trap for a night with just her and her dogs. She
and Hannibal don’t spend every night together but enough that it’ll be weird to sleep alone in her
bed tonight. Maybe she’ll let the dogs up into bed with her.

According to the database, Franklyn had an end seat. He only had one person sitting next to him. A
Tobias Budge. His smile glitters out at her from the computer screen. It looks like a school picture
- someone told him to smile and he’s not quite sure he’s managing it.

Willa clicks through to the next ticket buyer.

By the time she’s done it it’s late and she has a pounding headache. It’s the kind of thing that no
amount as Aspirin will fix, and she doesn’t fancy driving home with it.

The killer’s serenade plays in her mind. She wishes she could turn it off. Wishes she could make it
go away.

“It’s not even that good,” she mutters, just to be petty.

“What was that?” Beverly asks. She looks up from her computer, also assigned to ticket buyer
duties.

“Nothing,” Willa says. “Just talking to myself.” She winces as the pain in her head sparks behind
her eyes.

“You don’t look so hot,” Beverly says.

“Too much staring at a computer screen. I hear it’s bad for your eyes.”

Beverly chuckles but she still looks worried. “Where you headed tonight?”

“Supposed to go to Wolf Trap,” Willa says, “but that seems far away.”

“Good thing you’ve got a boyfriend in Baltimore then,” Beverly says.

“Yeah.” Willa pushes her glasses up so she can rub her eyes. “We don’t have plans though.”

Beverly makes an incredulous noise. “Willa, the man is mad for you. I bet he’d be over the
fucking moon if you showed up.”

“I should probably call just to make sure,” Willa says.

Beverly gets up from her computer. “Do you have a key?”

Willa nods.
“That’s an open invitation. Go see Hannibal. Have a nice glass of wine. Talk about something that
isn’t murder. Have a nice night. You deserve it.”

“What about you?” Willa asks.

“I’m going to the bar after this,” Beverly says. “Where I am going to have a beer and dance to
shitty pop music until my head is clear. You can come with me if that sounds better than wine and
Hannibal.”

“It doesn’t,” Willa says. She smiles so Beverly knows she isn’t trying to insult her.

“Go,” Beverly says. She gives Willa a small push. “Get your man. Get freaky.”

Willa flees out of self-preservation.

She still feels weird just springing a visit on Hannibal. He’s not one for surprises. But he likes her.
Maybe she’ll be a good surprise.

The ‘this wasn’t the right thing to do’ feeling increases when Hannibal meets her in the foyer and
doesn’t immediately smile.

“Bad time?” Willa asks.

Hannibal recovers but the fact that he has to recover at all puts Willa off-balance. “Not at all. I
wasn’t expecting you.”

“Yeah,” Will says. “I won’t bother you or your plans for the night. I just didn’t want to drive all the
way to Wolf Trap. I -” she pauses in the dining room. There are two plates with half-eaten dinner
on them. “You had company.”


“I interrupted,” Willa says.

Hannibal sweeps an arm out to gesture at the fact that he’s no longer here. “He had an urgent call.
You interrupted nothing.”

“I’m sorry,” Willa says. She should’ve just gone home. Or gone out with Beverly. Or gotten a
darn hotel room.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” Hannibal says. “In fact, I’m glad you’re here. I have dessert for
two, and I had no one to share it with.”

Willa follows Hannibal into the kitchen and watches as he whisks a bowl of whipped cream.

“I should’ve called ahead,” Willa says.

“My house is your house,” Hannibal tells her. “There is no need for such formality. You are
welcome whenever you please. That is why I gave you a key.”

“You had someone over,” Willa says.

“A colleague. As I remember, you are not very fond of psychiatrists.” Hannibal smiles as he puts a
dollop of whipped cream on their desserts. “With certain exceptions, of course.”

He’s teasing. Willa can do that. She can relax and let Hannibal tease her. She can even tease him
“Yes,” she agrees, taking her bread pudding. “I am quite fond of Alana.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrow, a fraction of an inch. “I didn’t invite you to dinner with my colleague, because I thought you wouldn’t enjoy it. I would have you with me all the time if I thought you wanted to be there.”

That’s...that’s a pretty loaded statement. Willa knows how Hannibal feels about her, she can see him just as clearly as he can see her, but hearing him say it is - it’s a lot.

“Oh wow,” she breathes which is definitely not the right reaction. She should say something back. Should let him know how she feels about him.

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” Hannibal says. “Let’s eat our dessert then you can tell me what brought you here.”

Willa puts her dessert on the table but she doesn’t sit down. “You,” she says. “You are what brought me here.”

Hannibal goes unnaturally still. “Willa?”

“I’m here because this is where you are. I want to be with you. All the time. I know I can’t - we both have jobs - but whenever we don’t have to be apart I don’t want to be. I -” she takes the bread pudding out of his hands and puts it on the table next to hers. “I think tonight is going to be a night for neglected cooking.”

“Willa -”

She pushes into his arms, pushes into his space until he holds her close. “Take me to bed,” she demands and that’s what it is, a demand, an order. “I want you to pin me beneath you. I want you in me. I want to feel nothing but your skin, hear nothing but your voice, see nothing but you.”

Hannibal’s arms tremble around her. At first she thinks she’s the one shaking. When she realizes it’s him she looks up at him, hopes she hasn’t pushed him too far.

He’s staring down at her like he’s never seen her before. He cups her chin in one hand. “My dearest Willa,” he murmurs. “I will give you everything you want. You only ever have to ask.”

She rises up on her tiptoes so they’re eye to eye. “Take me to bed,” she says again. “Please.”

Hannibal growls and lifts her off her feet.

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Willa has never felt cherished before Hannibal. She never thought that was something she wanted. But sitting at breakfast with Hannibal, both of them in dressing gowns, as they eat food he cooked for her himself she feels cherished. She feels happy too. Especially when stretching the right way reminds her of last night.

She smiles, recalling the way he’d blanketed her with his body just the way she asked, how he’d made it so he was the only thing that mattered in her world. No other voices in her head, no other songs in her ears. Just Hannibal.

He catches her smile and looks smug, correctly guessing what brought it on.
“Yeah, yeah,” she says.

“You didn’t leave me with any marks this time,” he says. “How am I to be reminded of our time together?”

She pushes her plate aside so she can get up. Hannibal pushes his chair back from the table so she can straddle him.

“You want me to mark you?” she asks. She digs her fingers into his shoulders.

“Yes,” he says. He tilts his head back, inviting her to bite at his throat. He probably has shirts high-collared enough to hide any bites she leaves there. It’s tempting. “My little mongoose.”

She can’t help her laugh. She presses her face into his neck but not to bite. “Is that what I am? What does that make you? The snake slithering by?” She grins as she slips a hand between them. She parts his dressing gown and cups her hand over his soft cock. “Snake metaphors during sex? How very Freudian, doctor.”

“You drive me to distraction,” he tells her. It sounds like a compliment. His hands work at the tie of her dressing gown until he gets it undone. She isn’t wearing anything underneath it and he makes an appreciative sound when it falls away, leaving her naked on his lap.

“I like the way it feels on my skin,” she says. “Like wearing yours even better.” She gasps as he presses harsh kisses against her neck. It’s a good thing he’s so meticulous about shaving or she’d be covered in beard burn from head to foot. “Like knowing that your clothes are touching my bare skin and that they’re going to touch yours next.”

Hannibal growls against her throat and she shudders at the vibrations.

“I wear the pajamas you leave at my house when you’re not with me,” she says. “I’ve thought about touching myself in them. I bet -” she sucks in a breath as Hannibal’s mouth moves lower, to her collarbone then her breasts, leaving stinging bites that she can cover up later, “I bet you’d be able to smell it. Could you?”

Hannibal nods against her skin.

“Yeah,” she sighs as his teeth catch on one of her nipples. “I’ve thought about it. Thought about you pulling the pajama pants on and then looking at me and knowing.” The teeth on her nipple grow rougher. She grinds down into his lap but it isn’t enough. She needs something to grind against.

“What did I do next?” Hannibal asks. His voice is rough. It sends a shiver through her.

“You fucked me,” Willa says. She gets her hands in his hair and pulls his head up so they’re eye to eye when she says it. She doesn’t flinch away from the word. “It was rough and desperate. I made you want me as much as I want you and it was -” she gasps as Hannibal’s fingers slip into her wet folds. “It was my design.”

They both groan and Willa presses her sweaty forehead against his. She grinds down on his fingers, but they’re not enough. She needs more. She gets a hand around his cock. It isn’t soft anymore.

“Please,” she says, stroking it. It curves up towards her hand, seeking the attention. “I’m on birth control. I want -”

Hannibal kisses away the rest of her plea. He lifts her up by the hips and she spreads her legs. She
guides him into her and he lowers her onto his cock. It’s exactly what she wants. It’s hot and hard, and she rocks down on it. It’s different without a condom. Better. With anyone else she’d be terrified. But this is Hannibal.

“Do you have what you want, dear Willa?” Hannibal asks.

Dear Willa. She shudders, body tighting around him. “Yes,” she manages to say.

Hannibal tilts her chin up so they’re looking at each other again. “What about what I want?”

Her heart hammers in her chest. Hannibal weaves a hand through her hair and guides her down to his neck. She latches her teeth into his skin and bites. He makes a sound somewhere between triumphant and needy, and his hips piston up and into her.

She runs her tongue over his abused flesh and then bites again, tasting the salt on his skin and the underlying taste of Hannibal.

When she comes, she comes panting against his neck. He thrusts into her a few more times before he comes as well and her first thought is that it’s wet. A lot wetter than with a condom. Her second is that part of Hannibal is inside of her. It stays inside of her even as he pulls out. She reaches between her legs and drags her fingers through the combined mix of their releases.

She can’t tear her eyes away from her fingers.

“Willa?”

She looks up at Hannibal’s voice. Her mouth falls open. His hair is in disarray, tufts in every direction, and his eyes are blown wide. His lips are red from being bitten, and there’s a giant, glaring hickey on his neck.

“I’ve made a mess of you,” she says.

Hannibal smiles. He presses his palm between her legs like he can keep his come inside her. “I believe I returned the favor.”

She stares at his hand. “I wish -” she cuts her off before she says something stupid like I wish I could keep some part of you with me forever. “I guess we should shower.”

“Again,” Hannibal says. He doesn't look unhappy at the thought.

“Again,” Willa says.

“But first,” Hannibal lifts her with ease, puts her on her back on the table. Her legs hang over the edge. She doesn’t realize what Hannibal does until he lifts her legs up and spreads them.

“Hannibal!” she shrieks, a little horrified, but he just dips his head between her legs and presses his mouth where she’s wettest. He licks into her, groaning. He pins her there with his hands and his mouth until she comes again, shaking apart for him.

He pulls back looking undeniably pleased with himself. His lips glisten with - with them - and Willa hauls him forward before she can think too much about it and kisses him. The taste is salty and a little sweet, and she moans into his mouth, wanting more.

Hannibal grips her arms, pulling her closer to him like he wants just as much as she does. It should terrify her, that level of want, but it doesn’t because they’re a matched set. Equals.
Finally, they have to pull back, both needing to breathe. Willa’s sitting up on the table now, Hannibal standing between her legs. The remnants of their breakfast lie ignored on the table.

“I think we just desecrated your table,” Willa says. She’s a little afraid he’s going to kill her for it.

“On the contrary,” Hannibal says, his voice still ragged, “We have christened it.”

“I -” her phone dings, the alarm that reminds her she’ll be late for work if she doesn’t leave. “Shit. I have class. And you have appointments.”

Hannibal doesn’t move from his spot between her legs. He looks reluctant at the thought of leaving.

“Tonight,” Willa says. “My place. We both have late mornings tomorrow. But I need to shower before I go into the classroom.”

“Why?” Hannibal asks. He presses his nose to her shoulder and inhales. “You smell divine.”

“I smell like sex,” she says. “Sex with you.”

He gives her a look as if to say how are we disagreeing.

“If we hurry we can shower together,” Willa says. “I won’t smell like your come, but you can lather me up with your soap.”

Hannibal’s eyes darken. “Keep talking like that, and I won’t let you leave.”

Willa shudders. “I’m not sure I’d protest that,” she says. “We shouldn’t test my self-control.”

“Nor mine.” He steps away. “Separate showers, perhaps. I’ll clean up breakfast then take my turn.”

Willa knows it’s a bad idea for them to get in the shower together. She still wants to. She wants to call in sick and skip work, something she’s never done. She wants to spend all day in bed with Hannibal. She wants - She hurries upstairs before she can act on any of the things she wants.

She does, because she can, finger herself in the shower. It’s a rough, quick job, but thinking about Hannibal’s hands on her, thinking about how he desperately wanted her is enough to get her there. She wipes her fingers on his loofah before she finishes her shower.

She comes downstairs with a skip in her step.

Hannibal’s eyes narrow, suspicious.

He hands her two bags, lunch and, “A morning snack,” he says. “Since breakfast was interrupted.”

“You’re too good to me,” she says. She pulls him in for a kiss. “Have a good shower.”

She feels his eyes on him the whole way out to her car.

When she gets to Quantico she has a text from him.

Vixen.

She laughs and still has a smile on her face when she gets to her lecture, five minutes late. Her students stare at her like they don’t know who she is.
“Let’s talk about murder,” she says.
Hannibal calls her during her lunch break. She’s finished eating, too ravenous to give the meal the time it deserves. Turns out starting the morning with three orgasms takes a lot out of a girl.

“Hey,” Willa answers. She sounds happy, flirtatious. She almost doesn’t recognize herself. “This a follow-up to your text?”

“I wish,” Hannibal says.

He sounds serious. Willa immediately follows suit. “What’s wrong?”

“Something just occured to me,” he says. “Something a patient said yesterday. I should’ve brought it to your attention earlier, but it borders on a violation of doctor-patient confidentiality. And I was distracted.”

A bit of Willa’s smile returns at the thought of what had him distracted. “Tell me only what you think you can. You know I can work out the rest.”

“I do.” There’s a slight pause. “A patient told me something about a friend of his. I believe that means I can speak of it to you. Since it does not directly involve my patient. My patient believes a friend of his may be involved with the murder at the symphony.”

“Franklyn,” Willa says which makes the friend Tobias Budge. “What did he say about his friend?”

“He owns a music store in Baltimore, specializing in string instruments. Perhaps you should interview him.”

“I will,” Willa promises. “Thank you. This could be the difference in the case.”

“My patient,” Hannibal is tentative again, searching for words he’s allowed to say, “Sometimes stretches the truth for attention.”

“I’ll interview the friend,” Willa says. “We’ll find out.”

She goes straight to Jack after she finishes her call with Hannibal. “I’ve got a lead on the Wilson case. I was going to interview a possible suspect after my last lecture.”

Jack looks up from his desk. “Or you could go now.”

“Or it can wait another two hours. He won’t kill anyone.”

Jack doesn’t like being told no. “Where’d you get the lead?”

“Hannibal. A patient of his made mention of something suspicious.”

“I’ll send people with you,” Jack says. He doesn’t ask about doctor-patient confidentiality. Willa
doesn't know why she thought he would.

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Willa’s first hint that Jack’s mad at her for insisting on interviewing Budge after her lectures is that he sends local police with her.

Her second hint is that he doesn’t send Daniels or Johnson. He sends Sorrell and Morphis. Sorrell’s not too bad, but Morphis hate her. Hates that she’s FBI and he’s a police officer. Hates that she’s a she. Hates that she’s ‘a freak worse than Lounds’s’ll dare to print’.

“Hey,” Willa greets when she sees the two. Might as well try to make it a bearable afternoon.

“We’re your hired muscle?” Sorrell asks. She’s not a bad cop, but she’s very by the book. By definition, anything involving Willa isn’t by the book. Willa can understand why Sorrell’s never too happy to see her. Can’t really blame her either.

“Yeah. Potential suspect in the Human Cello case.”

Sorrell crosses herself.

Morphis goes to the driver’s seat of the car and climbs in. Willa gets into the backseat. It’s a small thing she can do to make Sorrell happy. They’re not driving a police cruiser, but it’s still a police car. There’re lights they can use if they need to get through traffic, and Willa knows where the spare gun and spare handcuffs are. She drove cars like this back in Louisiana.

“We’re going to the Chordophone String Shop,” Willa tells Morphis. “If this is our guy then be careful. He knows what he’s doing.”

Morphis scoffs.

Willa keeps quiet for the rest of the ride.

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Tobias Budge is even more unnerving in person than he was in his picture. There’s supposed to be a stillness to a picture, but he carries that same stillness now in front of Willa. It’s unnatural. He’s a person who is either very, very in control of himself or a person who doesn’t quite know how to act like a person.

“We’re here investigating the death of Douglas Wilson,” Willa tells the man after he’s escorted his student out. “He was -”

“The Trombonist,” Budge interrupts. He looks pleased that he knew something. Looks even more pleased that he beat Willa to it.

She has a feeling she’s going to need her police back-up. She subtly makes sure she has a gun of her own on her. She does. “Did you know him?” Willa asks. Best to play clueless for now. He’s superior enough that he won’t suspect she knows unless she gives something away.

“I was aware of him. Baltimore’s a small town.” He adjusts one of the cellos he has on display. “I heard someone cut his throat and tried to play it with a bow.”

“Try?” Willa asks. “You don’t think he succeeded?”

Tobias’s smile is condescending. “Strings have to be treated.”
“They were treated,” Willa says. It’s her turn to smile. “We kept those details out of the press. But they were chemically treated. Similar to the way catgut strings are treated.”

“And now I see why you are here,” Tobias says. He picks up a bundle of catgut strings and offers them to Willa. “Mine come from Italy.”

“That’s a long way to get your string,” Morphis says. He’s at the edge of the room. “There’s a basement here.” He looks over at Budge. “Might be easier to make your string right at home.”

Tobias’s smile grows even more. “Are you asking permission to look around? Of course, you may have it. I will just have to accompany you. My instruments are quite delicate.”

Budge has confidence rolling off him in waves. Because he’s innocent? Or because he’s guilty but knows Willa and her team are incapable of catching him?


“Think something’s off?” she asks, just as quiet.

“If you hear signs of a fight call for back-up,” Willa answers.

Sorrell nods and Willa goes down the stairs.

It’s dark, Budge hasn’t turned the stairway light on. It takes her some time to adjust to the lighting, but she does adjust. She gets to the base of the stairs and what she sees doesn’t surprise her. Intestines. Ropes and ropes of them in various stages of treatment. There’s an eerie green light backlighting them. She feels like she should be in some stupid Halloween Haunted House.

She’s tempted to look around and guess how many victims are here.

Instead, she forces herself to focus. There’s no sign of Morphis or Budge. No signs or sounds of a fight either. Had they disappeared?

A scratching sound draws her towards a curtain. She knows what she’s going to see before she pulls the curtain back. She whips it aside to reveal Morphis. Dead. Wires cutting into his body.

She has time to take a deep breath before Budge is on her. She manages to shout, hopefully loud enough to warn Sorrell before Budge is wrapping razor sharp strings around her. She gets an arm up to protect her throat. The wires cut into the skin of her arm instead. She thinks she can feel the trickle of blood.

She struggles, aware that struggling too much will make the wires cut right through her arm. She manages to get her gun up. She fires, too close to herself, and she and Budge both go down. Her hearing’s muffled, and when she manages to look up Budge is stumbling to his feet. He’s clutching his ear. If she hit him it wasn’t a kill shot.

She tries to shoot him again but her balance is off. She sways to the side and misses. She fires again. Misses. He disappears up the stairs.

Fuck.

She gets to her feet and stumbles after him. She’s just set a killer loose on Baltimore. A killer who doesn’t need to hide anymore.
She gets to the top of the stairs to see Sorrell lying in a pool of blood. Her gun is still in her hand. There’s another gun - Morphis’s - at her side. Budge doesn’t favor guns. He used it because it was there and he’s left it behind.

Sorrell’s phone is in her other hand.

“Hello?” a voice says from the other end. “Officer Sorrell?”

“This is Willa Graham,” Willa says. Her voice sounds far away. “I need ERT at Chordophone Strings downtown Baltimore. Officers down. I’m leaving the scene. In pursuit of suspect.”

She hangs up before the voice on the other line can argue. She needs to figure out where Budge is going. He’s desperate, thwarted, he -

Franklyn. He confessed something to Franklyn and Franklyn betrayed him. He’ll kill Franklyn for the betrayal.

Yes.

No.

Yes but also something else.

Franklyn wasn’t the only betrayal.

Hannibal.

Willa sees it clearly in her head. Budge knew that Franklyn saw Hannibal. Budge wanted to impress Hannibal, wanted his attention. He fed the lines Franklyn told Hannibal. Because he wanted Hannibal to see. And instead Hannibal send the FBI after him.

Willa races downstairs to dig the car keys out of Morphis’s pocket. She’s upstairs and outside, peeling out of parking spot as back-up arrives. She calls Jack on the way.

“Budge is our guy,” she says. She turns her lights on and people get out of her way. “He got away. He’s going after Hannibal.”

“Fuck,” Jack says.

“I’m on my way,” Willa says. “Meet me there. With an ambulance.”

“Willa -”

“He’s dangerous, Jack. He’s not going down without a fight.”

Willa screeches into a spot outside of Hannibal’s office. She yanks the keys out of the car and sprints up the stairs. Her arm is bleeding steadily. Her head is pounding. She can barely think anything except Hannibal better not be dead. She will eviscerate Budge if he’s hurt Hannibal. She’ll -

She bursts into Hannibal’s office, gun raised.

She eyes immediately hone in on Hannibal’s desk. Hannibal’s pinned underneath Budge. Both men have hands around each other’s throats. Budge has some kind of stab wound on his arm but Hannibal’s entire wrist is bleeding. It’s a question of who has the strength to finish off the other.
No, Willa thinks as both men grunt and strain to get the advantage.

It’s a question of who has her on their side.

She trains her gun on Budge. Hannibal turns his head at the sound of the safety coming off. She smiles at him as she pulls the trigger.

Budge crumples to the ground, dead.

One shot.

She’s getting better at this.

She rushes to Hannibal’s side, cataloguing his injuries. Left wrist bleeding - wire probably. Bloody face - kick or punch. Stab wound on his leg. There’s a bloody letter opener on the floor. Also a bloody pen. She thinks the pen was Hannibal’s weapon. He’s good at improvisation.

Hannibal is bloody and bleeding heavy, but he’s alive.

Willa touches his hair, his cheeks. His neck is red from Budge’s hands. Later it’ll be bruised. She feels irrational anger swell up in her at that. He should only have her marks on him. She wants to shoot Budge again. She wants to take apart his body. She -

“I thought he was going to kill you,” she says. “I thought I wasn’t going to be fast enough.”

“He killed Franklyn,” Hannibal says. He looks beyond her. There’s probably a body there.

“I don’t care,” Willa says. She leans in so their foreheads are touching. “I killed him for you. He doesn’t get to hurt you. No one does.”

Hannibal makes a sound at that, longing and needing, and Willa crushes their mouths together. She bites at his lips, hard. She wants him to bleed because of her. Wants him to hurt because of her. She wants -

“Wow,” a voice says interrupting them.

Willa turns her head, aware that there’s blood on her teeth, aware that she looks like a predator trying to chase someone away from her kill.

Beverly’s in the doorway. She looks a mixture of disturbed and impressed. “Jack’s about two seconds behind me,” she says.

Jack appears a moment later. He looks at Franklyn’s body then at Budge’s then looks over at Willa and Hannibal. He frowns. “What happened?”

EMTs push past Jack so they can get to Hannibal. Willa’s also pushed aside. She doesn’t like it. She feels something surge beneath her skin. She wants to rip, to tear, to kill. She hugs herself and backs up to the chair she sometimes sits in during therapy. She sinks down onto it. Hannibal watches her, curious.

Jack clears his throat.

“Mr. Budge came into my office,” Hannibal says. He winces as the EMTs cut away one leg of his suit pants. Probably over the destruction of a good suit and not the pain. “He said he was questioned by the FBI and killed two people. I was afraid he had killed Willa.”
Willa holds up her arm. It’s still bleeding. One of the EMTs makes an exasperated noise and goes over to her.

“He tried,” Willa says. “I didn’t let him.”

“Mr. Budge realized that his friend Franklyn had told me about his possible involvement in the murder,” Hannibal continues. “He came here to kill Franklyn.” Hannibal glances at the body on the floor. “He snapped his neck. And then he came after me.” Hannibal gestures about the disheveled room. There are clearly signs of a fight. “Willa arrived when we were in a bit of a stalemate.”

“They were trying to choke each other,” Willa says. “I shot Budge. Kill shot.”

“And then you arrived,” Hannibal finishes.

The EMT fussing over Hannibal pokes at his mouth. “Mr. Budge bite you?” she asks, sounding amused.

Beverly chokes on a laugh.

“That was Willa,” Hannibal says. He sounds proud.

“What?” Jack demands.

“Hannibal and I are together,” Willa says.

“I’ll deal with that later,” Jack says. He looks around the room as the coroners come in. “I send you after Budge for a routine interview and two police officers are dead, the suspect is dead, and -”

“His friend,” Hannibal supplies.

Jack shoots him a dark look. “His friend is dead.”

“Well,” Willa says, fighting back her irritation. “He definitely is the killer. His basement of human intestines will prove that.” She pauses. “Sorrell’s dead?”

“She got rushed to Johns Hopkins,” Jack says. His expression softens. “We don’t know yet.”

The EMT working on Willa’s arm finishes wrapping it up. “You need to clean it and rebandage it regularly. You don’t want it to get infected.”

“Don’t worry,” Willa says. “I’m dating a doctor. He’ll make sure I don’t make it worse.” She smiles over at Hannibal.

He smiles back.

“I’m too old for this,” Jack mutters before stomping out of the room.

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Willa drives her and Hannibal home to her house despite Jack’s mutterings and Beverly’s concern that it’s a long drive. Willa’s arm hurts but it isn’t broken or anything. And her need to be at home overpowers any discomfort she might feel. She doesn’t want to be in the city. She wants to be with her dogs. Wants to look out and see trees and fields.

She doesn’t want people.
She doesn’t want interruptions.

She heats up soup Hannibal left in her freezer, and they eat in charged silence. Even though it’s Hannibal’s cooking she doesn’t taste it. She eats because she knows she has to, because she knows that as soon as they’re done they’re getting into bed and they won’t leave for a long time.

She lets the dogs out and leaves them food and water and then goes to her bedroom. Hannibal’s already waiting for her.

“Naked,” she says.

He hesitates. “Willa -”

“I’m not saying sex. I’m saying naked. I want to see you.” Wants to make sure he’s okay. Make sure he’s still whole.

“You too,” he says. He understands how she feels.

She strips down completely, nothing but the bandage on her arm covering her. Hannibal has more bandages, and he winces as he gets into bed, but she reassures herself that he’s going to heal. He’s going to be fine.

“I’ve dragged you into my world,” Willa says. She lies down next to him and pulls the heavy comforter up and over them so they won’t get cold. There’s regret in her voice. She knows Hannibal can hear it.

“I got here on my own,” Hannibal says. He brushes her hair out of her face. “With or without you in my life, Franklyn would’ve met Tobias. And Tobias would’ve found an interest in me. You in my world saved my life.”

“You would’ve had him,” Willa says. She remembers seeing Hannibal’s fingers digging into Budge’s neck. Remembers the intensity in Hannibal’s eyes. There’s a killer in him. He might only kill when his back is up against the wall, but he can kill. He will if he needs to.

Willa shouldn’t find that attractive.

“I appreciate your faith in my abilities,” Hannibal says. “I am still glad you were there.”

“Of course,” Willa says. She moves closer to him, careful of his injuries.

They’re quiet for a moment, just the steadiness of their breathing.

“I don’t want to say something that will upset you,” Hannibal says.

Willa goes still, her natural response to an opening like that. “Tell me,” she says.

Hannibal turns his head so they’re looking at one another. “You killed for me,” he says.

Willa nods. “I did.” It had felt good. Better than Hobbs. She’d felt the desire burning through her and then she pulled the trigger and felt just. Powerful. Like she was protecting her own. “I told you I would.”

Hannibal pauses, whatever he was about to say frozen on his tongue.

“During the Turner case,” Willa says. The case that brought them together, that brought them to this point.
“You told me you would kill for your family,” Hannibal says. His voice drops to a whisper.

“I told you I already had,” Willa says. “And I told you I would again.” She meets Hannibal’s gaze squarely. She sees him and lets him see her. “I told you I would do anything to protect my family. You doubted me.” Her mouth pulls up in a half-smile. “Do you still doubt me, Hannibal?”

“Never your conviction,” he tells her. “But am I -” he discards that line of questioning. “Marry me.”

Willa’s eyes widen. She doesn’t ask him to repeat himself. She heard what he said. She just-processing is a bit difficult. Hannibal has asked her to marry him - well, she didn’t hear a question. The sentiment is still there. Hannibal wants her. Wants to put a ring on her finger.

It shouldn’t seem like a big step.

A couple of hours ago she killed for him. She tore through Baltimore afraid she was going to find him dead and when she found he she shot his would-be killer. Hannibal is her lover. Her family. Hers.

“Yes,” she says.

She straddles him, noting the way he winces when she jars his injured thigh. Her eyes narrow. They narrow further when she sees the marks left on his throat from Budge’s hands. “He didn’t have a right to touch you,” she says. She wishes she could erase the marks from his body. She wishes she could cover them with her own.

“He shouldn’t have marked you,” Willa says. Her fingers brush over Hannibal’s throat. He doesn’t shy away even though the last hands on his throat tried to choke the life out of him.

“Is that why you killed him?” Hannibal rasps. His gaze is caught on her.

“It was,” Willa feels words coming to her that aren’t her own, “It was rude.”

Hannibal’s eyes glitter in the dim light of her room. “You can put a ring on my finger. Warn off anyone else who might encroach on your territory.”

Willa shakes her head. She - there’s something rising up in her. Something dangerous, something that should stay hidden. “You shouldn’t encourage me.”

“Dear Willa,” Hannibal says. He closes his hand over hers, encourages her to press down on his neck. “It’s what I want to do for the rest of our lives.”

She applies pressure to his throat, listens as his gasps, watches as his mouth opens wider like that will get him more air. She leans down to kiss what air he’d managed to get right out of his mouth. When she pulls her hand back his mouth is lax beneath hers. She kisses him how she wants. He offers no resistance.

She thinks she could very easily get addicted to Hannibal Lecter.

“I don’t want to get married until his marks are gone,” she says.

Hannibal doesn’t laugh at her. “I want as short an engagement as possible,” he says. “An engagement is for propriety and second thoughts. I know I want you, and I want you as soon as I can have you.”
“Yes,” Willa agrees. She finds the bandage covering the wound on his thigh. She diggs her thumb into it and Hannibal grunts, but he doesn’t try to twist away from her.

“Also enough time,” he sucks in a deep breath, “For my family to come for the wedding. And,” he groans as she slides down his body to get his cock in her mouth. “For me to prepare a menu.”

She pulls off to say, “No more wedding planning right now.” Then, “Tell me now if you don’t want this.”

“To marry you?” he looks offended at the thought.

“No.” She rubs his stab wound. “I want to hurt you while I blow you. I want you to feel pain and pleasure because of me. I can’t erase what he did to you, but I can make it mine.”

Hannibal’s head drops back against the pillows. “I would like that,” he says.

“Good.”

It’s the last thing either of them say for a while.

Willa puts her palms on his thighs, a steady kind of pain, and takes his cock back in her mouth. They’re not using a condom so she can taste him, and she makes sure to pull back every time he pulses so she can sweep the precome up with her tongue. He groans every time she does it.

She takes him deep in her throat and presses harder against his wound. His hips jerk up, and she pulls back coughing. She does it again, prepared this time, and he slides deeper into her throat. This makes him groan too. She does it again and again and again until his breathing is choppy and desperate. Until he’s leaking continuously down her throat.

He’s close.

She wants him over the edge.

She pulls back until just the tip of him is in her mouth and she glances up to see him staring down at her, transfixed. It’s heady, having all of his attention focused on her like this. She’s going to make it a goal of their marriage to get him to look at her like this at least once a day.

Their marriage.

She can hardly believe the thought.

She shelves it for later.

For now she sucks on the head of his cock, long-drawn out suction that she accompanies with a brutal jab at his wound.

He grunts and growls, body tight with tension for a moment before he’s spilling and spilling into her mouth. She stays down there until he goes soft in her mouth and then she rises up above him, feeling powerful, invincible.

He still can’t take his eyes off her.

His hands fall on her hips, tug her forward. “I want you,” he says.

She hesitates. “You’re injured.”
He gives her a look that has her blushing. Since she was just...playing with those injuries she
doesn’t really have any room to stand but still.

“You should rest,” she says.

“After,” he promises. At his nudging she knee walks up until she’s straddling his chest. “I’ll stay
like this if it makes you feel better.”

He pulls her closer, towards his mouth and she realizes what he’s implying. “But,” her fingers trace
his lips, bottom lip still puffy from where she’d bit it. “It’ll hurt.”

“I think we’ve established that I like it when it hurts,” he says. This time when he tugs on her hips
she goes, until she’s over his mouth, until he’s pulling her down so he can lick into her.

She’s wet, embarrassingly so from blowing him, from hurting him. More the latter. She thinks he
knows. He groans at the first taste of her and opens his mouth for more, tongue plunging into her
again and again until she’s rocking on his face, until she’s the one demanding. She brings her
hands up to her nipples, pinches them because he’s not the only one who likes a bit of pain.

She slumps forward when she comes, hand bracing herself on the the wall. She has to take several
deep breaths before she gets off Hannibal’s face.

“Thank you,” he says, his face shiny with her release.

She kisses him. Wonders if he can taste himself in her mouth the way she can taste herself in his.
She wants his cock inside her. She bets she could come again. She’s not sure if he’d be able to. She
wonders if he’d like that, her using him for her own pleasure. She thinks he would. She shudders
and turns her face so she’s mouth at his cheek.

There are so many things she wants to do with him, to him. There’s no need to rush though. They
have...forever.

’Til death does them part, she thinks.

Hannibal’s fingers find their way between her legs. She can’t help clenching down around them
even as she says, “You should sleep.”

“You’re not satisfied,” he says.

His fingers rub at her, hard, and she tugs on his hair. “I am very satisfied. I don’t need to come
again.” If he doesn’t stop, she will need to. She can already feel it building, and her hips are
restless, moving against his hand.

“You’re concerned for my health?” he asks.

Willa nods.

In an instant he has them flipped, Willa on her back on the mattress, staring up at Hannibal as he
looms over her. “Still concerned?” he asks.

She clenches down around his fingers. “You win,” she says.

He grins, pleased with himself. “I always do,” he says. He draws his fingers out of her but before
she can protest he grabs her by the hips and pulls her up until she’s balanced on her shoulders and
her elbows. Until he can dip his head down, until he can get her mouth on her like she’s a feast.
Willa doesn’t last very long this time around.
Hannibal takes some time from his practice to deal with what happened. Willa’s given time off from work as well. Three kills in less than a year. All three were justified (as far as anyone official knows) but it’s still a larger number than anyone wants to see.

“Ironic,” Willa says when Jack tells her the news. “Left the police force because I couldn’t pull the trigger and now I pull it too much.”

“People would be dead if you didn’t,” Jack says.

“People are dead because I did,” she says. She holds up her hand to forestall anything else he’s going to say. “I’m not saying I regret it or feel guilty. I know it was the right choice. Just commenting on the irony.”

Jack isn’t listening to her. He’s staring at her hand.

“Oh,” Willa says, remembering the ring Hannibal had given her yesterday. “Hannibal and I are engaged.”

“That’s quick,” Jack says.

“I love him,” Willa says. She smiles at the surprise on Jack’s face. “I almost died. He almost died. It has a way of putting things in perspective. We’ll make sure you get a wedding invitation when we send them out.”

She walks out before Jack can get his voice back.

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“Jack knows,” Willa says when she gets back home. They’re spending at least the first part of their little vacation at Willa’s. They’re going to have to talk about the two homes thing at some point. She wouldn’t mind moving in with Hannibal if she could bring her dogs.

“Did he congratulate you?” Hannibal asks.

“I think he was too shocked for that.”

Hannibal’s reclining in the couch, open book on his lap. He puts it away when Willa sits on the edge of the couch next to him. He puts a hand on her knee and she leans into him.

“He will want to walk you down the aisle,” Hannibal says.

Willa laughs. “Of course he will. He would love the idea that he’s giving me away. That he’s giving me to you. He’s not. He won’t. I’m giving myself to you.”

Hannibal sits up so he can nuzzle her neck. “My dear, fierce Willa.”
She turns to him, challenge in her eyes. “He introduced us, but I chose you.” She leans in to kiss him. When she pulls back she says. “But I think I have a solution to the aisle problem.”

“Oh?” Hannibal asks. He sounds amused. Probably because Willa hasn’t shown much of an interest in the actual planning on the wedding.

“I want to get married at City Hall.” She can feel Hannibal pull back at that and she twists to face him. “We can have the most elaborate ostentatious reception you want, but for the actual ceremony I don’t want people gawking.”

“Ostentatious?” Hannibal asks. He doesn’t look like he’s about to leave her anymore so there’s that at least.

Willa smiles. “I’ve seen your sketches for what you want. I know what you’re like, remember? You’re going to want something Baltimore will never forget.”

Hannibal doesn’t argue the point. “Married at City Hall and I can make whatever plans I want for the reception? You won’t complain about any of it?”

“I’m sure I’ll complain,” Willa says. “But I’ll do it.”

“Is this all an elaborate plan to get out of wedding dress shopping?” Hannibal asks. “Because I would like you to wear one at the reception.”

“White for the virgin bride?” Willa asks, a bit mocking.

“Alana and Beverly would be quite happy to go shopping with you,” Hannibal says.

“You’re not going to pick it out yourself?” Willa asks. She’s actually a little bit surprised.

“It’s bad luck,” Hannibal says. “I’ll select your outfit for City Hall. You are in charge of the wedding dress.” He kisses her neck. “Have you thought of who you would like to invite?”


Hannibal grins against her skin and then kisses down her neck, paying special attention to her collarbone when he gets there.

“Hannibal,” she says arching at the bite of his teeth. It pushes her hips into his hands and he’s quick to get her pants undone. “Have you noticed that every time we talk about the wedding we end up having sex?”

“Is that why you keep bringing it up?” Hannibal asks.

Willa laughs and lifts her hips up off the couch so he can push her pants off.

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Willa procrastinated the whole wedding dress thing until after wedding invitations had been sent which means it’s her own damn fault that she’s now wedding dress shopping with Alana, Beverly, and Aunt Constance. A psychiatrist, an FBI agent, and family - it’s the worst possible combination.

“It should be a grand dress,” Aunt Constance says. Her hair is the exact same color Willa remembers from decades ago which means she’s either aged very well or has a favorite kind of hair dye. “I’m thinking a ballgown.”
Willa could’ve seen *that* coming. “No,” she says, automatically.

Aunt Constance huffs. “But you’re a good Southern girl, Wilhelmina.”

“I shot a man in the head two months ago,” Willa says.


“He was a murder suspect,” Alana explains. “Willa caught him trying to kill Hannibal.”

“So your man is a damsel, is he?” Aunt Constance asks. She sniffs, disapproving.

Willa tucks her smile away. She and Hannibal will have a good laugh about it later. For now, she’s stuck in this wedding dress store until she finds something for a party that she’d never go to if it wasn’t a celebration of her and Hannibal. Even still, she’s tempted not to go.

Alana holds up a dramatic dress full of pick-ups and a long train and it looks exactly like the kind of thing Hannibal would love.

“If he’d gotten his way and we were getting married in a cathedral, yes,” Willa says. “But I’m getting a dress for our reception. I need to be able to move in it.”

“I still can’t believe you’re getting married at City Hall,” Aunt Constance says. “And not inviting anyone.”

“I can’t believe I’m getting married at all,” Willa says.

Aunt Constance huffs. “Your cousins will be glad to see you. Even if you didn’t go to any of their weddings.”

Willa wanders over to look at a display of dresses that look like a chicken coop exploded on them. There are feathers everywhere. Willa’s not wearing a dress with feathers.

A saleswoman comes over to help them. “Who’s the lucky bride?” she asks. Her eyes sweep through the group and they freeze on Willa. “Oh,” she says. “You’re Willa Graham.”

“You know me?” Willa asks. That’s never a good thing in her experience.

The woman’s smile grows strained. “We’ve all heard of your engagement to Dr. Lecter. And we don’t believe anything that nasty woman has to say. We’ll be honored to help you find a dress.”

‘That nasty woman’ can only be one person. Willa sighs and pulls out her phone to see what Freddie’s done now.

**A Match Made in Therapy** is the current title on Tattlecrime.

“For fuck’s sake,” Willa says.

Her aunt smacks Willa on the back of her head. “Language!”

Willa hands her phone to Alana and then turns to the saleswoman. “What do you have that won’t make me feel like I’m drowning or having the life slowly squeezed from my body?”

“This way,” she says. “I’m Brandi, by the way. Did I hear that you’re looking for a reception dress?”
“Yes,” Willa answers. “But it needs to look somewhat bridal. We’re getting married in City Hall and then having a big reception. Balancing my preference for privacy and his preference for peacocking.”

Brandi giggles. “We’re going to go through some showrooms. Tell me if any of the styles jump out at you.”

The first showroom is for a woman named Pnina Tornai. The dresses are elegant, but they’ve all got see-through bodices or giant crystals on them.

“Pass,” Willa says.

She passes on Lazaro as well. He likes feathers. And tulle. Everything is too poofy.

Willa’s wondering if she’s going to have to ask Aunt Constance to sew her a dress when they pass a room for Enaura. She sees a couple dresses that catch her eye and pauses. Brandi immediately ushers her into the room.

There are several dresses in the corner that look more like evening gowns with a hint of bridal. Like if they were in a different color then Willa would wear them to the opera. But in off-white they definitely can pass as bridal.

“Yes,” Willa says.

“Yes?” Brandi echoes.

“One of those,” Willa says. “I don’t really care which.”

Brandi looks like she’s going to cry.

“We care,” Beverly assures her, arriving with Alana and Aunt Constance. “She’ll try on all five of them.”

“Five?” Willa asks. She wrinkles her nose.

“You’re only going to do this once,” Aunt Constance says, “So you should do it right.”

“Fine,” Willa says. “Five it is.”

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Willa comes home from dress shopping exhausted but successful. Brandi had another minor panic attack when Willa mentioned how soon the wedding is, but Hannibal’s credit card had smoothed things over. Aunt Constance had nodded approvingly when she noticed Willa using Hannibal’s credit card. It’s about the only thing she’s ever approved of in Willa’s life.

“Were you successful?” Hannibal asks. He’s on the couch reading again.

A life of leisure suits him, Willa can’t help but think. “I have a dress. I have to go back in for fittings, though.”

“I’m sure it’s beautiful,” Hannibal says.

“Did you see that Freddie Lounds posted an article about us?” Willa asks.

Hannibal frowns which means he did.
“The sales lady recognized me from it.”

“Miss Lounds is very rude,” Hannibal says.

“She is.” Willa plucks the book out of Hannibal’s hands and straddles his lap. “Maybe we should’ve invited her after all.”

“Oh?” Hannibal asks. “I don’t follow this leap of logic.”

“Is this how fairy tales start?” Willa asks. “A witch spurned and then suddenly she’s cursing your first born to die?”

Hannibal captures Willa’s hands and her attention in one motion. “You have given thought to children?”

“I’ve thought about being a mother since Abigail,” Willa reminds him even though she’s sure he doesn’t need the reminder. “I’ve thought about you being being a father since I told you my vision for how you would kill Matthew Brown.”

It feels wrong to talk about it now, to talk about death when they’re discussing children, to talk about Brown when he’s still missing. Hannibal doesn’t agree because he pulls her forward by her hands until she’s braced on his chest.

“You have killed to protect your family,” Hannibal says. “Do you believe I would do the same?”

“Without a doubt,” Willa says. She breaks her hands free of his grasp. “I wouldn’t have chosen you otherwise.”

Hannibal lunges forward to bite at her neck, sharp little bites that send heat straight down between her legs. “The things you do to me,” Hannibal growls.

“Yeah?” Willa asks. She grinds down on his lap, feels the hard press of his cock. “What about the things you do to me? You going to put a baby in here?” She takes one of his hands and presses it flat against her stomach. “How long do you think it’ll take?” She gasps and groans as Hannibal’s teeth scrape down her neck. “Would it be better for you if I stopped taking my birth control or if you got me pregnant despite it?”

Hannibal lifts her up and throws her down on the floor, descending on her with a frenzy she’s never seen in him.

“Look what you do to me,” Hannibal demands, tearing the clothes from their bodies. There are scratches on their skin, evidence of his impatience. “Look,” he says, stroking his cock when he gets it out. It’s thick, precome dribbling from the tip.

“I see,” Willa tells him as he thrusts into her. She gasps and arches her back, but she doesn’t break eye contact. “I see.”

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Willa only takes a week off from teaching her classes. They move back to Hannibal’s house when her classes start up because the commute is better. She’s in the backyard while he makes dinner. It’s not a very large yard, not like hers, but it’s still a good size.

She’s walking around when she catches Hannibal leaning against the open French doors.
“We should get a shed,” Willa says. She still gets a little thrill whenever she says ‘we’.

“For what?” Hannibal asks.

Willa isn’t often shy with Hannibal. She knows how he feels about her, knows that he would give her the entire world is she asked for it. She’s still hesitant when she says, “My dogs.”

Hannibal doesn’t say anything.

“I know you don’t like them in your house. But a shed with warm dog beds could work. And then .” Willa looks away. “We could live in one place.”

Hannibal’s quiet enough that she risks a look at him.

He’s still watching her. “It’s your boat on the sea,” he says. It’s not a no. It’s a concern for her.

“I told you the only time I felt safe was when I’d look on it from a distance,” she says. She remembers that conversation. “That’s no longer true.”

Hannibal holds a hand out to her. “Come inside, Willa. Dinner’s ready.”

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A lot happens leading up to their wedding. They do in fact build a shed for the dogs complete with electricity so they can have both light and a thermostat. Hannibal’s worried about them getting cold. It’s sweet enough that Willa kisses him when he shows her what he’s done.

Then there’s the matter of moving the dogs in, of sorting through the stuff in her house for what she wants and what she wants to donate and what can be tossed.

It doesn’t take long for the house to be bought once it’s on the market. Willa thinks that’s odd until she finds out Freddie did her own Tattlecrime house showing. The person who buys her house is creepily obsessed with Willa, but she still sells it to him. If he tries to come after her at her new home then she’ll kill him. Or Hannibal will.

Simple.

Willa continues to teach and without cases she’s able to enjoy her evenings. Some nights Hannibal plays the harpsichord or theremin for her. Other nights she does some academic writing, something she hasn’t done in a long time.

“I forgot how much I enjoy this,” she says on one of the nights that sees her lying down on the study floor surrounded by four different books and two notebooks.

Hannibal smiles down at her. He has papers of his own spread out, but she thinks it’s a menu for the wedding reception. She’s seen the guest list. She can only hope he doesn’t try to make it all himself. She won’t see him for weeks if that’s the case.

“Less dangerous than chasing murderers,” Hannibal comments.

“Yes,” Willa agrees. “A lot of things are.”

“You could teach,” Hannibal says, “and write books. You could get out of the field.”

Willa puts her pen down. “After all the effort it took to get into it?”
“You’ve told me it’s bad for you,” Hannibal says.

“It is.”

“It would be bad for any children you carried,” Hannibal adds.

Willa pauses. She hadn’t thought about that. Hadn’t thought about potentially putting their children in danger. Or of putting their children in danger of not having a mother.

“Jack won’t like it,” she says. “But this would be the logical time to stop. I’m on a break already. We’re getting married.”

“Going on a honeymoon,” Hannibal adds. At her surprised look he lifts his eyebrows. “You thought we wouldn’t?”

She shrugs. “I hadn’t thought. Have you planned one?”

“The semester is ending soon,” Hannibal says. “You will have a break from your lectures. It seemed appropriate.”

Willa leaves her work to stand by Hannibal’s side. He wraps an arm around her waist.

“I know you associate hotel rooms with crime scenes so I made sure that we would only stay in apartments or houses.”

“Sweet,” Willa says, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. Then the rest of it registers. “Wait, apartments as in plural? And houses? How long are we going to be gone?”

“A month,” Hannibal says. “I want to take you to Italy.”

Willa sits down on his lap. “A month? Italy?”

“You don’t have to worry about a thing,” Hannibal promises. “I have planned the whole thing.”

“I simply have to follow where you lead?” Willa asks. Her mind is spinning. A month in Italy with Hannibal.

“We’ll leave our phones behind,” Hannibal says, voice low in her ear. “You asked me for that, remember? No work. Just me and you. That’s when I first thought of proposing to you.”


Hannibal stands up and she wraps her legs around his waist. She doesn’t think she’ll ever get tired of how effortlessly he can lift her. “I’m going to take you to bed,” he tells her. “And tell you of all the places I’m going to take you in Italy.”

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It doesn’t take them long to get married at City Hall. A few words, a few witnesses, two rings, and they’re married. Willa likes the simplicity of it. She can tell that Hannibal doesn’t. But that’s what the reception is for. Something for her, something for him. Compromise.

When they leave City Hall she makes sure to hold his hand with the hand that now wears his ring.

“You’re not subtle,” he tells her. He can’t take his eyes off the simple band. She’d insisted on
simple. The look on his face suggested that at some point he’d be unearthing family jewelry for her to wear.

“Not trying to be,” she says. They have to let each other’s hands go to get in the Bentley. “How’s this for subtle? We’ve got three hours before the reception and a bed that’s twenty minutes away.”

“We have all tonight for that,” Hannibal says. “You have to get into your dress. And I have final preparations to make.”

“It isn’t going to take me three hours to get a dress on,” Willa says. She turns the ring in her finger. It feels heavier than a ring should. She likes it. A constant reminder that Hannibal is hers. That against all odds she’s managed to find some happiness in this life.

“I’m dropping you off at Alana’s,” Hannibal tells her. “And then I have to pick my aunt and uncle up from the airport.”

“They’re really just flying in for the reception and flying out?” Willa asks. That seems strange to her.

“No need to adjust to a new time zone that way,” Hannibal says.

Willa shrugs. “Okay.”

When they get to Alana’s she can’t resist leaning in for a kiss. “I’ll see you soon,” she says.

Hannibal squeezes her hand then lets her go.

Alana opens the door with a glass of wine in one hand. Beverly’s behind her with a beer.

“What do you want?” Beverly asks. “We figured since you wouldn’t have a bachelorette party that we’d drink and gossip before the reception and call it square.”

“Beer’s fine,” Willa says. “Bachelorette party would’ve been a bad idea. Hannibal would’ve been able to smell whatever strip club we went to all over me.”

“What makes you think we’d go to a strip club?” Alana asks.

“Because Beverly can’t keep a secret which means Price and Zeller would insist on coming, and they would drag us out to a strip club.”

Beverly nods. “Yeah, sounds right.” She hands Willa a beer. “So, you officially hitched?”

Willa shows them her ring.

“Plainer than I thought Hannibal would go for,” Beverly says.

“He’s learning to compromise,” Willa says. She takes a sip of her beer.

Alana laughs. “Better you than me. How are the dogs settling into the new house?”

“They love it,” Willa says. “I take them out on the weekends so they can run around in big open fields, but we’ve got a nice yard. And Hannibal spoils them. A heated dog shed and homemade sausage.” Willa can’t quite keep the pride out of her voice and from the way Alana and Beverly look at each other, they’ve noticed.

“Anyways.” Willa takes a drink of her beer. “How are you guys?”
“Oh no,” Beverly says laughing. “This is your big day. No trying to deflect attention.”

“It’s Hannibal’s big day. He’s cooking for the entire reception.” Willa shakes her head. “I can’t imagine spending that much time in a kitchen. Even with help.”

“He’s going to get to show off you and his cooking on the same day,” Alana says. “He must be a very happy man.”

Willa flushes and takes another big drink of her beer.

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Eventually they stop drinking and they do Willa’s hair and her make-up and get her into her dress. It’s got thin straps and a sweetheart neckline that show off her shoulders and swell of her breasts. If anyone gets close they’ll be able to see her shoulder scar, but everyone who knows her knows she has that scar.

The dress is fitted tight to her waist and her hips before flowing gently to the floor. It’s easy enough to move in and it’s not so tight that she’s going to have to forgo eating or breathing. She even likes the beaded designs on the dress. It reminds her of a chandelier.

“You’re not nervous,” Beverly says as they drive to the reception.

“No need,” Willa says. “Hannibal’s taken care of everything. I just have to show up. Hang on his arm. Smile until it’s over.”

Beverly laughs. “There’s the Willa I know. You staying somewhere in the city tonight?”

“Our house,” she says. “We leave for Italy in two days. I’m not bringing my phone. Maybe I’ll go real old school and send you postcards.”

“If you’re thinking about us long enough to send postcards then Hannibal is doing something wrong,” Beverly says.

Willa laughs. “We’re going to be there a month. That’s a long time to only think about one other person.”

“I think you’ll find it not long enough by the end,” Alana says.

They pull up in front of the venue for the reception. There’s a large tent with seating and all the food tables. There’s also a big field in deference to Willa’s love of the outdoors.

Willa takes a deep breath.

“Still good?” Alana asks.

“There’s only one person in there who’s opinion I care about,” Willa says, “and he put a ring on my finger this morning. I’m good.”

Alana gives Willa a hug when she gets out of the car. “I’m glad you’re happy. It’s a good look on you.”

“Let’s go find your man,” Beverly says, coming up on Willa’s other side. “See if we did a good job with the dress.”

Willa laughs and lets them lead her into the tent. There are people there already - a lot of people -
and music is playing, but the conductor (because of course Hannibal hired an orchestra) cuts the
music when he spots her. When the music ends, the chatter stops. Everyone looks around.

They all turn towards her.

Alana and Beverly step away.

The crowd parts, revealing Hannibal on the far side of the tent. He’s in a crisp suit, fitted perfectly
to his body. When she gets closer she sees that he has a pocket square with embroidery reminiscent
of her dress. Alana, Willa guesses.

“Dr. Lecter,” Willa says, voice barely above a whisper as she stops in front of him.

He’s openly smiling, the most emotion she’s ever seen him show in front of a crowd. “Mrs.
Lecter,” he says.

Willa’s in heels (Beverly’s insistence) so all she has to do is lean in to kiss him.

Someone wolf whistles - probably Zeller. There’s polite applause from others - Hannibal’s guests.
Mindful of Aunt Constance in the audience, Willa pulls back before she’s kissed Hannibal as long
as she’d like. She doesn’t step away from him, and she reaches out for his hand.

“Food,” she says. “Then you can parade me around.”

“Your dress is beautiful,” he tells her.

“It’s tight,” she tells him, a smile dancing in her eyes.

“It fits,” Hannibal corrects. He smiles back.

Willa kisses him again. Screw what anyone thinks. They’re at their wedding reception. She can
kiss her husband as much as she damn well pleases.

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Willa smiles but doesn’t really pay attention to anyone she meets until Hannibal leads her to an
older European gentleman and his wife who is dressed for the occasion in a formal kimono.

“This is my Uncle Robert,” Hannibal introduces. “And my Aunt Murasaki.”

“Hello,” Willa says. She holds a hand out. “Nice to meet you. I’m sorry you’ll be leaving again
before we can get to know each other.”

They exchange a few pleasantries. Willa excuses herself to get a glass of champagne and so
Hannibal can have a bit of time to catch up with his relatives. They don’t seem inclined to talk to
her but she’s a stranger.

She spots a young woman hovering by the edge of the tent, where Willa would be if she weren’t
the guest of honor. The woman is too young to be any of Hannibal’s society friends, but Willa
doesn’t know who else she would be.

“Hello,” Willa says, approaching the woman.

Her eyes flit up to Willa’s. “Hello,” she says, faint accent coloring her words.

“I’m Willa.”
The woman smiles. “Yes. You married my Lady’s nephew.”

Ah, she’s part of the Lecter contingent. “You must be Chiyoh then. Hannibal told me he wasn’t sure if you were coming.”

“I don’t like to travel,” she says.

Willa can understand that. “Do you want something to eat? Hannibal made everything himself. It’s quite good.”

Chiyoh actually flinches back. “I’m fine,” she says.

She’s clearly not fine, but she doesn’t look inclined to share, and Willa isn’t inclined to push her. “Okay,” Willa says. “Um, nice to meet you.”

“Same.” Chiyoh nods and Willa starts to walk away. She only gets a few steps before a hand touches her arm. “Here,” Chiyoh says. She hands Willa a folded piece of paper. “In case you need anything.”

She disappears while Willa’s opening the paper. It’s a phone number. Willa folds it back up and puts it in her clutch. That was...strange.

She rejoins Hannibal in time to talk to Mrs. Komeda who boasts she’d seen this match coming for months and that she better see Willa at more events after this. Willa tells her maybe and then it’s off to see some of Hannibal’s former coworkers at Johns Hopkins and then Jack and the someone else and by the end of the night Willa’s feet ache and her cheeks hurt from smiling so much.

“That was nice,” Willa says when they’re back at their house. They’re in the bedroom, Willa wrestling with her shoes.

Hannibal looks over at her, a smile on his face. “You hated it.”

She lifts a shoulder in response. “It was nice in a once in a lifetime kind of thing. No more weddings for me after today.”

“I should hope not,” Hannibal says.

Willa, finally free of her shoes, reaches for the zipper on her dress.

“No,” Hannibal says, and Willa thinks he startles them both with his intensity. He ducks his head briefly. “I would like to do that.”

“Of course,” Willa says. “I keep forgetting how traditional you are.”

She turns around so her back is to him. She feels him behind her a moment later, the heat of his body warming hers. His hands are on her zipper but they don’t pull down yet. “As this is going to be a once in a lifetime opportunity, I would like to savor it.”

Willa’s hair is pinned up which means it’s easy for Hannibal to lean in and press a kiss to the back of her neck. He kisses down her spine, unzipping her dress to reveal new places to kiss, and her skin is tingling by the time he presses a final kiss to the small of her back.

She feels him stand up again, and he pushes the straps of her dress off her shoulders and they both watch as it slips to the ground.

“I feel like I’m in a movie,” she says as he helps her step out of it.
“You’re not,” he promises. “This is real.”

He turns her towards him then, kisses her.

She’s the first to pull back. “I’m glad,” she says. “I’m glad this is real.”

He kisses her again.
Italy is beautiful. She knew it was from pictures, knew it had to be if Hannibal was taking her there for any amount of time let alone a month. A month. Just her and Hannibal. They’d both left their phones behind. Computers too. There’s nothing to connect them to the outside world.

They’re going to go places Hannibal knows are worth visiting. They’re going to take suggestions from the locals. There’s no need for the internet to tell them where to go. They’ll go wherever they like.

They start in Florence. Hannibal said he secured an apartment for them. It’s more like an elaborate suite, furnished in a way reminiscent of Hannibal’s study. This is his natural habitat, Willa thinks, as she watches Hannibal move about the space. No, she corrects. It’s where he wants to belong.

“Time to see what you packed for me,” she says, carrying her suitcase into the the bedroom. She’d been surprised when Hannibal only packed one. She’d been less surprised when he told her it was only the essentials. Everything else they could buy wherever they were.

The bed is a masterpiece, large with ornate carvings on the bedposts and the headboard. There are curtains to protect against the morning sun or so that the occupants of the bed can pretend they’re the only ones in the world.

Willa unzips her suitcase. It’s less...Hannibal than she’d expect. Mostly comfort clothes, things she would pick out for herself. She smiles when she pulls a brown sweater out, the first one she’d taken from him. “I would say I'm glad you thought of my comfort, but I suspect this is because you’re going to push me out of my comfort zone with what you purchase here.”

Hannibal simply smiles.

“I don’t need more clothes than I already have,” she says. It’s an old discussion between them. She’s not surprised when he doesn’t pick up his end of it.

“You would like to discuss less clothes?” Hannibal asks. He’s already untying his tie.

From there it’s a race to see who can get undressed first. Hannibal has more clothes but he also has more grace. They make it to the bed at the same time, each reaching for the other. The only thing the two of them are wearing are their wedding bands.

“Are you taking me to the opera while we’re here?” she asks.

“Of course,” Hannibal answers. He lays her out on the bed so he can see all of her and decide where to start first. “You will need a dress.”

“I figured.” She sighs as he latches his mouth to her collarbone. She spreads her legs so he falls into the cradle of them, so she can rub herself against his hardening cock. “I want to go with you.”

“You want to help pick it out?” he asks. He lifts his head from her skin long enough to look at her. She nods. She has an idea growing in the back of her mind. She’s not ready to share it. She tugs him up by the hair so she can kiss him. He kisses her for a moment before pulling back.
“I was busy,” he says.

She tightens her grip on his hair just to listen to him gasp. “I wanted to kiss you,” she says.

“Later,” he promises.

He slips a finger inside her to soothe her as he continues to mark her skin. When she grows impatient again he adds a second. She twists and rocks beneath him and he bites harder into her skin like he’s afraid she’s going to get away. It only makes her writhe more and they get caught in a cycle that turns and turns until she’s coming around his fingers.

His fingers are glistening when he pulls them out of her, and her breath catches in her throat when he wipes them on his cock.

“Hannibal,” she begins but she doesn’t know where to go next.

He slicks himself up with her release before he pushes into her. It’s just on the right side of too much. She wraps her legs around his waist and encourages him to give her more. If she’s sore in the morning then she can make him bring her breakfast and she can laze about until lunch. There’s no rush, no where they need to be.

They’re on vacation.

No, they’re on their honeymoon.

Willa sighs and reels Hannibal in to kiss her.

~*~*~*~*~*

They go to a little cafe for breakfast. Hannibal orders them fresh coffee and fresher pastries. They’re amazing. Even better, they’re seated at a small table, and their knees bump each other under the table. Hannibal holds his coffee in one hand and her hand in his other.

“I was thinking the market after breakfast,” he says. “There are many places to eat here, but I would miss cooking if we ate out for every meal.”

“Of course,” Willa says. “Maybe -” she takes a sip of her coffee. “Maybe you can teach me.”

“Finally have the time?” Hannibal asks.

Willa smiles.

They go to the market and they don’t buy as much as she’d expect.

“I like my ingredients fresh,” Hannibal says. “I go to the store on most days at home. Here, I think I will visit the market every day.”

Willa figures this isn’t the time to mention that her favorite aisle is the bulk aisle. Hannibal’s lips turn down like he’s guessing her thoughts.

“I haven’t eaten anything you haven’t cooked in months,” she reminds him. “You can stop hating whatever processed evil is dancing in your mind.”

“I want you to be in good health,” Hannibal says. His eyes dip down to her stomach before he’s opening the door to their apartment for her.
Willa flushes and stumbles inside. She wonders if she should tell him she’s quit her birth control. She wonders if he can smell it on her. She tries not to follow that line of thought too closely. Then she wonders if he’ll be able to smell her pregnancy. Will he know before she does? That seems...unfair to her.

She pushes it aside. That’s a thought for another time. For now, they have dinner to make.

Hannibal removes his jacket leaving him in a dress shirt and waist coat. No matter how many times Willa’s seen him naked, and the number is growing, he still looks most underdressed to her like this. In his kitchen with most of his clothes on.

She shakes her head at herself and lets him show her how to mince garlic.

She’s a quick learner and while she doesn’t have his enthusiasm for cooking or his level of skill she does well enough. She gets distracted, though. Every time she catches movement out of the corner of the eye she looks and there’s Hannibal. He’s chopping peppers with dedication that a vegetable doesn’t deserve. Or he’s flicking spices into a pan with a gesture that shouldn’t look suggestive but does. She sees his cheeks flushed by the heat of the stove flame. She sees his sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

It’s one thing after another and by the time dinner is served her cheeks are flushed even though she’s been at the counter far away from the stove.

Hannibal notices as he plates their food. “Willa?” he asks, concerned. “Do you need to lie down?”

“Yes,” she answers, “but not in the way you think.”

When he catches her meaning his concern quickly morphs into smugness. She brings their wine to the table.

“The problem with your fancy cooking,” she says, “is there’s no time for a quick break.”

“Quick?” Hannibal asks. He seats them at the large table but puts himself at the head and her just to the left of him so they’re close to one another. “None of the things I want to do to you, dear Willa, are quick.”

Willa wonders if Hannibal would consider it rude or hot if she fingered herself at the dinner table. “You’re going to tease me all throughout dinner, aren’t you?” she asks.

They eat dinner with Hannibal’s hand on her thigh, a steady, maddening touch that she starts squirming under halfway through dinner. She knows he’s smirking, knows she should just sit still but she can’t. She wants. And only the knowledge that Hannibal would be sad if dinner went cold keeps her from taking what she wants.

“Next time we’re making a casserole,” she says. “Something that needs an hour in the oven before we eat it.”

Hannibal laughs, loose, happy. “Are we?” He stands up with their plates. “Dishes.”

She takes their plates from him. “I’m going to do them. When I get to the bedroom you better be naked.”

There’s a bounce in his step as he goes back to their bedroom, and Willa can’t help herself. She finds it cute. She rinses their plates then their wine glasses and puts them on the drying rack before going back to the bedroom.
When she gets there Hannibal is naked and on the bed. He’s still smiling.

“Here I am, Willa,” he tells her. “What do you want first?”

She looks him up and down. Looks at his mouth - still so fucking smug - at his fingers, at his cock, hard and proud between his legs. She strips with speed and gets the slick out of his bag even though she doesn’t think she’ll need it.

“I’m so wet for you,” she says. It’s her turn to smirk as his eyes go wide. She drags a finger through her wetness and raises it to his lips. He leans up towards her finger but she snatches it back before he can get it in his mouth. “Whatever I want,” she reminds him.

There’s a wariness in his eyes as he settles back against the pillows. Curiosity too. And pride. She smiles back at him and straddles him, sinking down onto his cock. It still feels good no matter how many times she does it. And she’s less shy than the first time she did this, rocking on him, chasing her pleasure without any self-consciousness.

She bats his hands away when he tries to touch her and laughs at the expression on his face. He bucks his hips up into her mutinously which really, really does it for her. She groans. “Wanna do that again?” she asks, a bit reckless. She knows she’s playing with fire.

She knows it when she reaches down to grip his balls, tug them down so he won’t come. His body still jerks like it had and that’s what gets her off, knowing that he didn’t, that he couldn’t because she wouldn’t let him.

She carefully lifts herself off his cock, gives it a little pat once she’s off. “Thanks,” she tells him.

He watches her, silent, curious.

“You made me wait,” she tells him. She sees the slick on the end table and gets an idea. “Now I’m going to make you wait.”

Hannibal’s smile is nothing short of delighted. “Willa, I’m not sure you want to start these games. I promise you I will enjoy every moment of them.”

“And I won’t?” she shakes her head. “You wouldn’t do that to me.” She leans in to kiss him. “You love me.”


She holds up the slick. “Is this something you would enjoy?”

She knows he gets her meaning. He’s quiet for a moment, thinking. “I don’t know,” he says after a moment. “I have never had another person do it to me.”

Willa doesn’t expect that to hit her as hard as it does. It takes her a moment to catch her breath. “I would like to,” she says.

Hannibal smiles. “You are interested in the thought of being my first at something.”

“We should make a rule about no psychoanalyzing in bed,” she says. “Yes, that certainly has a draw. But I wanted to before you told me that. I want to be inside you. The way you’ve been inside me.” She shrugs a shoulder. “Not quite the same way.”

“You’re already inside me,” Hannibal tells her. “You are in my mind, you are in my heart.” He
spreads his legs. “You may be here too if you wish.”

“Fuck,” Willa says, word expelled on a jagged breath. “Only you could make anal sex a love confession.” She leans down to kiss him because she can’t do anything else.

When she pulls back she feels more settled. She slicks her fingers and brings them down between his legs. She starts just by dragging them between his cheeks. She’s going to put her fingers in Hannibal’s ass. It seems surreal even though she’s watching herself prepare him for it. She wonders if he’d ever let her -

She blushes and banishes the thought.

“Yes,” Hannibal says. “Whatever produced that reaction, yes.”

“You would give me anything I wanted,” Willa says. Her thumb presses at his entrance, waiting for it to relax around her.

“You are just figuring this out?” Hannibal asks.

“You’re too coherent,” she tells him and slides her first finger inside. He’s impossibly tight around her finger, and she has no idea how she’s going to get this one out let alone more of them in. He’s hot too. It’s a hot, tight pressure, and she wants more. She wants it to feel good for him.

She curves her finger as she pulls it out, and Hannibal sucks in a short breath.

“This as good for you as it is for me?” she teases.

He casts a baleful look in her direction but she doesn’t let him draw the air he needs to answer. She slides her finger out and drizzles more lube on. This time when she slides her finger in it’s easier and Hannibal’s hips rock down to meet her. She smiles, glad that does actually appear to be enjoying this.

She works her way up to two fingers and then slicks up her left hand so she can grip his cock.

“Not as coordinated with this hand,” she tells him. “Apologies in advance.”

It’s not a sincere apology, and they both know it. He bares his teeth at her and then hisses a breath out through him when she scissors her fingers. She stretches him until he’s looser than when she started, until his cock starts leaking, until he really starts to moving into it.

She continues to finger him then, but she takes her hand off his cock.

“Can you come just from this?” she asks. She works a third finger in.

“Probably not,” he says.

“Good.” She slides two fingers into herself. They go in easy. Trying to coordinate fingering both of them at the same time is difficult, but she makes it work. The little glares he’s sending her way do a lot to get her going, and it isn’t long enough she’s clenching down on her fingers and coming.

“Huh,” she says. Her legs are trembling after that last one. “Guess I’m more coordinated than I thought.” She smiles and pulls her fingers out of him as well. She wipes both her hands on his thighs and then leaves her hands there, feeling the tension in his legs.

She’s aware that she’s poking him, aware that there’s something lurking beneath the surface of him and that she’s not entirely sure what it is. The thought of danger makes her heart beat faster.
She touches his cock - angry and red from being denied.

“What do you want?” Hannibal asks.

Her thumb brushes over the head of his cock. “I want you to take me like you’re desperate,” she says. She glances up at him, wondering if she’s pushing for too much, pushing too far. When he meets her gaze evenly, she brings her thumb up to her lips, sucks off the drop of precome. “Are you desperate?” she asks.

Hannibal lunges at her with a growl, grabbing her and throwing her facedown on the bed. If it was anyone else she’d be terrified, she’d be fighting back. Instead she spreads her legs, and says, “I wanted to see you,” she says.

“You wanted the beast,” Hannibal says. Rough hands grab her hips and haul her up to her hands and knees. “So I’m going to fuck you like one.”

She shudders at the vulgarity. “Please,” she says. “Please. Hannibal -”

He thrusts into her, both of them grunting as his hips knock into hers. She wasn’t braced for it but he holds her tight enough that she doesn’t fall.

“I’ve been nice to you,” he tells her. “Been gentle with you.”

“I know,” she says. He knocks the breath out of her with his next thrust. It’s brutal and too much and perfect. She plants her hands on the bed and meets his next thrust. She feels the impact all the way to her shoulders. “And I like it. I want it. But sometimes I want this.”

“You don’t need to goad me,” he tells her. “You can ask.”

“Because you’ll give me anything,” she gasps.

“Yes.” He grabs a handful of her hair and pulls, dragging her head to the side so he can latch his teeth to her neck. He bites, harder than he has before, and tears spring into her eyes. She clutches around his cock.


He bites again, hips pounding into her, and at some point she comes but she doesn’t remember when because he just keeps fucking her through it. Her entire body is humming, and she can feel everything, and it should be too much but it isn’t, because Hannibal holds her tight, holds her together.

He rears back on his knees, pulling her with him so they’re both upright. Her head falls back against his shoulder. His hands are on her hips again, moving her up and down on his cock. She knew he was strong, but this is another reminder. He moves her how he likes, takes her how he likes. She trembles around his cock.

“Going to come for me again?” he asks. “That will be four. Can you come four times in one night, Willa?”

She doesn’t know. She wraps an arm around his neck, pulling him closer to her. She wants him to kiss her. He won’t. He does grind his cock up into her. It feels good. It feels amazing. She doesn’t think she can come though. Her body is wrung out.

“Touch your nipple,” Hannibal tells her. “Pinch it. Twist it. Hurt yourself how you wish I was
“Please,” she says even as she listens. She wishes it was his hand on her instead of her own. Her breast feels too big in her own hand. His hand are a perfect fit. His nails would feel good biting into her nipples. She grinds down on his cock, thinking about it.

“Please,” she says again.

“I can’t do everything,” Hannibal tells her. He chuckles darkly in her ear. “Come for me, Willa. Touch yourself and use my cock and come. You can do it.”

She moans and obeys, pinching her nipple and then chasing the pain, rocking down on his hard length until she’s coming for a fourth time. He eases her down onto the bed, lays her on her back so she’s looking up at him as she tries to catch her breath.

His cock, still hard, juts out from between his legs. It’s glistening with her release.

Hannibal touches it but he doesn’t come. She’s amazed at his self-control.

“Have I waited long enough?” he asks, voice hoarse.

Willa almost forgot what started all this. She licks her lips. “What if I say no?”

“Then I don’t come,” he says. “But tomorrow it will be my turn to make a move.”

She thinks she’s going to be too exhausted for whatever he’ll cook up to get back at her with. “You’re good,” she tells him. “You can - you can come. On me.”

Hannibal draws a sharp breath in through his nose. His hand closes around the base of his cock. Her eyes widen as she realizes she almost made him blow his load without even touching him.

“I want you to,” she says. She meets his eyes so he knows she knows this is a kink for him. “Bet you’ve got a lot in there after waiting so long. Bet you could get it all over me.”

Hannibal strips his cock as she talks, eyes locked on hers as he works his hand faster.

“Come on,” she says. “Mark me. Come on me. You can even rub it in. Bet you’ll be able to smell it.”

He comes with a grunt, cock spurting across her face, her breasts, a bit landing on her thighs. He keeps his hand on his cock as it twitches like he’s afraid it’s going to twitch so hard it’ll come off.

“Wow,” Willa says after a moment.

Hannibal laughs and lies down next to her. “That was intense,” he agrees. His hands trace over his skin, pause when they reach a streak of come.

“You can,” she tells him.

He rubs the come into her skin and then presses his face close and inhales.

“I’m going to shower before we sleep,” she tells him as he continues to do this everywhere his come landed. “But we can do this for a bit.”

“You constantly amaze me,” Hannibal tells her.
“Same,” she says. She pulls him in to kiss her. She can already feel an ache between her legs. She’s excited to wake up on the morning. “I’m going to feel you tomorrow.”

He eyes her like he’s not sure if she thinks that’s a good thing or a bad thing.

“I want to,” she says.

“I will be at your side all honeymoon,” he tells her. “All you have to do is ask and I’ll fill you. You don’t need memories.”


“Then I will give you everything,” he promises.

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She’s got a bit of a limp the next morning when she gets out of bed. She’s not sure which one of them is more smug about it.

They go to a different cafe for lunch and then they go shopping for an evening gown. They pass other shops on the way, and Willa’s gaze catches on one that promises all kinds of lingerie and she wonders if Hannibal wishes she’d wear something besides sports bras and sturdy cotton underwear.

She doesn’t ask but she does make a mental note of the shop. Maybe she’ll visit it later. It is their honeymoon after all.

“Long dress,” Hannibal says leading her into the shop. “Elegant. It is the opera.”

“Long is fine,” Willa says, “but I want a high slit so I’m not tripping over everything all night.”

Hannibal bows his head in agreement. “Do you have color preferences?”

“I don’t think you’ll pick something I hate,” Willa says. “I just wanted to come with you.”

A saleswoman comes bustling over, speaking in rapid Italian and that’s about the end of Willa’s participation in the outing. Hannibal selects a deep midnight blue dress for her, wide straps on the shoulder that narrow to points where they’re sewn to the neckline. It’s floor length but has a slit high enough that she can walk and for...the other stuff she has in mind.

“It’s lovely,” she says when both Hannibal and the saleswoman look to her for her opinion. “Uh, bella?”

Hannibal smiles at her attempt at Italian. The woman speaks again, hesitant, but Hannibal is quick to assure her of something.

After the dress shop they go to the market. Willa’s confused when Hannibal nudges for her to lead.

“You promised me a casserole,” Hannibal says.

Willa looks over at him, blush creeping up her cheeks. “I’m not a very good cook,” she says. “Not compared to you.”

“What kind of casserole?” Hannibal asks, brushing aside her concerns.
Willa shrugs and they hunt together for ingredients. Later, when the casserole is in the oven, she drops to her knees and blows him in the kitchen. It’s the kind of thing she’d never dare to do in his kitchen, but here she feels safe enough to try.

Afterwards he bends her over the counter and fingers her until she begs him to let her come.

Willa doesn’t remember if the casserole was any good.

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They go to dinner with old friends of Hannibal their fourth night in Florence. On their sixth, and final, night in the city they go to the opera.

“I’m excited for Rome,” Hannibal tells her. “I think you will enjoy the Colosseum.”

They’re both dressed up, and Willa’s arm is tucked against Hannibal’s. They seem too fancy to talk about murder, but Willa figures underneath the dress and the jewelry and make-up she’s still Willa. And murder is what she does.

“Want to see if I can get any impressions from it?” she asks.

“I had not considered that,” Hannibal says. He sounds disappointed with himself.

“Would you rather I imagine you battling in the arena?” Willa asks.

Hannibal’s silence is telling.

“I’ve seen you fight,” Willa reminds him. “Briefly but I can extrapolate from that. Once I get over the fact that you didn’t die I think look back on it and...appreciate it.”

Hannibal gets a speculative look in his eye.

“No,” she says. “Do not fight people for me to watch. Once was enough.”

“I would win,” Hannibal says. He sounds offended that she’d think otherwise.

Before they get into what Willa thinks is going to be a frustrating argument they’re in the lobby of the opera house, and they’re surrounded by too many people to talk about fights to the death.

They’re approached by a couple that starts talking to them in rapid Italian. Willa smiles and hangs on Hannibal’s arm and hopes she looks interested while she lets her mind drift. She’s most excited for Verona. She wonders if there will be a production of *Romeo & Juliet* while they’re there.

She’s always liked Juliet. She knew exactly what she didn’t want, what she did want, and how to get it. Her problem was that Romeo was an idiot prone to overreaction. She glances at Hannibal. She wonders what he would do if she faked her death. She thinks he would go the Romeo route.

“Willa, darling?” Hannibal asks.

She realizes she’s been staring. She thinks she can feel tears misting in her eyes. “Sorry,” she says. “Thinking. When we go to Verona, could we see *Romeo & Juliet*?”

Hannibal smiles at her. “Of course. You do enjoy the classics.”

“Then she will love the opera tonight,” the woman with them says in accented English. “It’s *The Marriage of Figaro*.”
“Is it?” Willa asks. She glances at Hannibal, her turn to smile. “Always seems to be *The Marriage of Figaro.***

“It was our first opera,” Hannibal explains to the couple.

They’re smiling now too.

“While I enjoy the classics, Hannibal is quite the romantic,” Willa says. She sounds sickeningly fond.

“Married?” the woman guesses.

Willa nods. Hannibal wraps an arm around her waist.

“We’re on our honeymoon,” Hannibal says. “A tour of Italy.”

“My first visit,” Willa says.

“One of many, I hope,” Hannibal says.

They continue to make small talk with the couple until it’s time to find their seats. She takes her seat next to Hannibal and settles in for a long night. The opera doesn’t make any more sense to her this time around, she still speaks next to no Italian, but she does enjoy herself more. She doesn’t sit tense in her seat, afraid to touch Hannibal yet longing to at the same time.

She reaches for Hannibal’s hand when she wants to hold it, and he lets her fingers curl around his. She keeps her eyes on the performance, but she lets her mind wander. She thinks about how put together Hannibal looks in his suit. How regal. How handsome. She thinks about the high slit in her dress and how it will part to show her legs later tonight.

She makes small talk during intermission and then goes back to her fantasies during the second half of the opera. When Hannibal makes to lead her back to the reception room, she tugs him towards the exit.

“I want to go home,” she says.

“We have a late train tomorrow,” Hannibal tells her.

“Good,” she says. She looks up at him through her lashes, something she’s seen people do on TV but has never tried herself. “I don’t think it’s going to be an early night.”

“Oh,” Hannibal says. He glances back at where the crowd is going to get drinks and chat about the performance they just saw.

Hannibal might be the only person she knows who has to think about the choice between sex and mindless small talk. She’d be offended if she hadn’t know this was what he was like when she chose him. She takes a step closer to him and puts his hand high on her thigh, on bare skin.

His eyes drop down to where they’re touching, to where his hand disappears up her dress.

“I suppose we can make an exception,” he says, “and skip the pleasantries.”

Willa would tease him except she’s afraid he’ll change his mind. “Thank you,” she says instead and he pulls his hand out from underneath her dress and rests it on the small of her back as he leads her out of the building.
They take a cab back to their apartment but as soon as they’re through the door, Willa’s turning and shoving Hannibal up against it. She has shock and determination on her side and his back hits the heavy wooden door with a thud before she’s on him, kissing him with a passion that has been building for hours.

His hands are on her hips and he pulls her flush against his body. She swallows his groan when she rubs against the growing bulge in his pants. She knows he hasn’t been imagining how this would go for days now, but she’s glad he’s getting with the program. She reaches a hand between them to cup him, stroke him, because she needs him harder faster. She needs him in her.

It’s her turn to groan and Hannibal licks at the sound, greedy for it and the others that follow.

“Willa,” he says. He turns his face so he can speak, the words pressed wet against her cheek.

She finds his mouth and claims it again. They’ve talked enough for one night.

His fingers dig into her hips, try to hold her back from him.

“Willa,” he says again.

He tips his head back, baring his throat to her. She bites at the soft underside of his jaw.

“We have a bedroom,” he manages to say.

“Don’t want a bedroom,” she says. Clearly. She wouldn’t have pinned him here if this isn’t what she wanted. She’s desperate but not so desperate she isn’t thinking. She continues her assault on his throat even as her hands work at his pants. It takes some work to get the belt off but then the button on his pants is easy. She drags the zipper down then sinks her teeth into his skin when he tries to push her hands away.

“You told me anything I wanted,” she says.

His hands pause. She feels him swallow, his Adam’s apple bobbing against her lips. She wants to bite him again.

She gets his cock out, grateful for the flap that men’s briefs come with.

“This is what I want,” she tells him. She strokes his cock a few times. It’s definitely on board with her plans, hard and pulsing in her hands.

Hannibal looks at her hands, at the slit of her dress, at the want in her eyes. He swallows again. “I might ruin your dress,” he says.

“You’ll buy me a new one,” she says, knowing it’s true.

Hannibal’s lips part in a smile that’s feral more than friendly. He spins her, slamming her back against the door, and Willa gasps as the air is knocked out of her.

“Is this what you want?” Hannibal demands, hiking her dress up until he can hook his fingers in her underwear. He pulls it down and kneels as he drags it to the floor. She braces her hands on his shoulders as she lifts up one foot then the other so he can take her underwear all the way off.

They stay like that a moment, Hannibal on his knees before her, her hands on his shoulders. He’s staring at the slit in her dress again.

“Up,” she says, tugging on his jacket. She’s leaving wrinkles behind. She wants to leave more.
“You like my mouth,” Hannibal says. He’s smiling, serene, like there’s no rush.

Willa’s throbbing. She needs him. She pulls again. “I do but I want your cock. Please, Hannibal. I’ve been waiting.”

“Have you?” He slips his hands under her dress, pulls it up as he rises to his feet. She shivers as she’s bared to the air of the apartment. “Were you thinking about this during the opera?”

She nods. “Been thinking about it since I saw the dress.”

“Liar,” he says. He bites harshly at the swell of her breast, pushed up by her dress, an offering to him. “You came with me to get the dress. You knew what you wanted. A high slit. Your only requirement.”

His hands travel up her thighs. He finds her wet already. He kisses soothingly at the bite he left on her skin.

“Yes,” Willa says. “You’re right. I - I planned this.” She groans as he easily gets two fingers in her. “Please, Hannibal. I’m ready. You can feel that I’m ready. Want you cock. Want it in me, please. Oh.” She gasps as he gives her what she wants thrusting into her without warning.

She drops her head back against the door. “More,” she says.

He fucks into her in earnest, his hands clutching at her skin, her dress parted to make room for him. He fucks her up against the door until her feet don’t touch the ground, until all that’s holding her up is his hands on her hips and his cock where it’s buried deep inside her.

“Yes,” she says. She wraps her arms around his head, pulls him in. This time, it’s Hannibal who refuses her kisses.

“This what you wanted?” he demands, hips pounding into her, knocking her against the door over and over again. “All our clothes on? Something quick? Something dirty?”

Her fingers scrabble at his hair. “Yes,” she breathes.

“You should’ve told me,” he says. “We could have found a dark corner, done this at the opera house.”

She shakes her head. She almost says you wouldn’t but she bites it back because he would. Especially if she dared him not to. His hips begin to lose some of their rhythm. He’s getting close. So is she.

“Could’ve gone for drinks with my come still leaking out of you,” Hannibal says, growls really, and that’s it.

Willa comes with a loud moan, squeezing down around his cock so he’ll come with her. Hannibal breathes harshly against her chest before he slowly lowers her back to the ground. He keeps his hands on her hips which she’s grateful for because her legs are shaky and he’d insisted on her wearing heels.

She can’t help her whine when he slides out of her. She can still feel his phantom thrusts, can still feel the impression of his cock inside her but that’s all it is - an impression. She’s empty. And still turned on.

“Or maybe I would use my pocket square,” Hannibal says. He lets her dress drop back down to the
floor. Willa presses her thighs together, feels the wetness there. He pulls his pocket square out of his suit pocket, uses it to clean his cock. He tucks his cock back into his pants. Except for a flush in his cheeks he looks like himself. Composed.

Willa can’t take her eyes off the small square of fabric. 

“I’d wipe it through you next,” Hannibal says. “Clean you up and then fold it back up and put it in my pocket. I would carry the scent of you right here.” He pats the small pocket.

Willa’s face burns. She’s sure she looks a mess - sweaty, hair messed up, face on fire. She wouldn’t be able to hide what they’d done. She’s not as good an actor as Hannibal.

“No one would notice,” Hannibal promises. “You’d be weak in the knees but you would just lean on my arm as you do already. All you’d have to do is stand there and smile. I would make sure everyone knows you don’t speak Italian. No one would expect anything of you. You’d just stay at my side thinking about what we’d just done. Thinking about how soon you could get me home to do it again.”

“Hannibal,” Willa’s face grows even redder as she feels a bead of wetness roll down her thigh. She presses her legs together knowing it isn’t enough to stop their come from leaking out of her. “Can I - will you do it now?”

Hannibal cocks his head.

She points to his handkerchief.

“Dear Willa,” he says. He tucks her pocket square back into its place and drops back to his knees. “That’s only if we’re out. Here, I can clean you the way I would prefer.”

Willa’s legs tremble as he eases them apart.

“Mmm,” he says nosing his way between her thighs. “We’ve made quite the mess.”

Willa whimpers as she feels another pulse of slickness spill out of her. “Don’t talk,” she begs. “Please.” She’s afraid her face can’t handle the heat. She feels like her head is going to pop right off her body.

She squirms as Hannibal blows a hot breath over her. “Better things to do with my mouth?” he teases.

“Hannibal,” she pleads and miraculously he stops teasing.

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Willa loves Verona. They go for a walk every day to see some different historic street or house, and they go to three different Shakespeare productions; Romeo & Juliet, Titus Andronicus, and Much Ado About Nothing. Two tragedies, one comedy.

She struggled with Titus Andronicus. She’d read the play in high school but seeing it performed made it come alive in a way it hadn’t on paper. Or maybe, she’s changed since then. Watching Lavinia abused then as her tongue was cut out and her hands chopped off so she couldn’t tell anyone what happened was difficult. Watching Tamora unknowingly eat her children...it reminded her too much of Hobbs, too much of things she wanted to leave in the States.

After Verona they go to Venice, their last stop on their trip. Willa doesn’t want to think about it
being over.

So she doesn’t.

Hannibal gets them a place right on the water and Willa spends her days outside, soaking in the sun while she reads or naps or cuddles with Hannibal. It’s pleasant. Nothing to do except enjoy herself.

“You’re going to spoil me,” Willa says one afternoon. She has a wide brim hat perched on her head, because Hannibal’s worried about sun exposure.

“I haven’t succeeded already?” Hannibal asks. They’re on separate chairs for the moment. Hannibal has an Italian newspaper open on his lap. He’s reading through the Arts section.

She scowls at him. “This has been amazing,” she says. “Relaxing.”

“As a good vacation should be,” Hannibal says.

“I don’t want it to end,” she admits. It’s hard to look across the glimmering water and know that in a few short days she’s going to be back in Baltimore, back at her old life, her job. She’s been happy here. She’s not happy there. And now that she knows what she’d be missing out on…

“You can find joy in everyday life,” Hannibal says. “You don’t have to restrict yourself to vacations or honeymoons.”

Willa scowls again. She hates that he knows what she’s thinking even though she loves that it means she doesn’t have to say it. “I don’t know how.”

Hannibal puts his newspaper down. “I will teach you,” he says.

“I don’t want to work for Jack anymore,” she says. “I enjoy teaching, but I want to be done with killers.”

“Then you will be,” Hannibal says as if it’s that easy.

She lets herself believe him. It’s too nice a day to do anything else.

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Given that Hannibal is the one who packed their bags to begin with, it shouldn’t surprise her that he packs them to leave either. It shouldn’t surprise her either that he finds what she tried to hide in the bottom of her suitcase.

“Willa?” Hannibal calls from the bedroom.

Willa’s in the kitchen, finishing the dishes as Hannibal does another check of their things. He had to buy an extra suitcase to fit everything extra they’d accumulated this trip.

Willa puts the last wine glass on the drying rack and goes into the bedroom. Her pajamas are laid out as well as her travel outfit tomorrow - loose jeans and the sweater of his that she’s long since claimed as her own. But that’s not why Hannibal’s called her in here.

He’s holding up the bustier she’d bought in a moment of weakness. It’s satin because she’d liked the shine and a deep emerald color. She’d considered red at first but thought it looked too much like blood. She doesn’t know why she bought it except it seemed like a good idea at the time. She’s wishing she hadn’t.
Looking at the delicate article of clothing in Hannibal’s hands just reminds her how much it isn’t her. It’s elegant, refined. She’s excited because tomorrow she gets to wear pants that’re a size too big and have the beginnings of a hole forming at the cuffs.

“We can leave it,” Willa says. She wishes she’d stayed in the kitchen. Wishes she’d had another glass of wine with dessert.

“When did you get this?” Hannibal asks. He turns it over in his hands. There are fussy fasteners all the way up the back. She’d never be able to get it on herself, and she’d never ask Hannibal for help. It would be too silly. Too ridiculous.

“Florence.”

“That was at the beginning of our trip,” Hannibal says.

“I thought better of it,” Willa says. She fights the urge to wrap her arms around herself. “Look -”

“Willa darling,” he interrupts. He puts the bustier on the bed and walks over to her. He clasps her hands in his like he’s afraid she’ll run away. “We have done many new things together this trip. Why does this one make you shy away?”

She shakes her head. She doesn’t want to talk about it. Pushing Hannibal to the brink, making him wild and desperate is different than dressing herself up and inviting him to look. To judge. To evaluate. She shakes her head again.

“It’s beautiful,” Hannibal says. “A gorgeous color. Did you choose it yourself?”

She nods.

“You have good taste. It will look wonderful against your skin. Will you let me put it on you?”

Willa tenses in Hannibal’s grasp, a rabbit frozen in the moment before it runs.

“Our last night in Italy,” Hannibal says. He leans in to bury his face in her hair. “The last night of our honeymoon. That’s why you bought it, yes? For our honeymoon?”

She nods again.

“This is our last chance.” Hannibal pulls back to he can look at her. “Will you let me?”

She glances at the piece of fabric. “You want to?” she asks. She doesn’t understand why.

“Yes,” Hannibal says, enough conviction in his voice that she knows he isn’t lying.

The silence in the room is weighted, heavy like an extra hand on her skin as Hannibal pulls her shirt over her head. Her sports bra is next and she glances over at the bustier, a splash of color on their bed. Hannibal’s fingers under her chin turn her back to him.

He kisses her then undoes the button on her pants.

He waits until she’s completely naked to lead her back towards the bed. He undoes the fasteners on the bustier as she watches him, breath caught in her throat. She pulls in shallow breaths, too afraid to disrupt the mood that’s building around them by breathing too hard.

The bustier parts beneath Hannibal’s hands and he holds it up for Willa to step into. She stares at him, the way the green looks against his hands and takes a tentative step forward. She doesn’t
make much progress, maybe a couple inches closer but it’s enough for Hannibal to close the rest of the
distance between them.

“Hold it in place,” he says as he lays the fabric against her skin.

She presses her hands against the front as Hannibal does the fasteners up the back. It’s not tight, not
like a corset would be, but it is fitted, and she can feel it press against her skin as Hannibal fastens
it into place. When she looks down she can see where the bustier defines her waist, making her
look small there, slim.

She runs her fingers down the sides. The satin is smooth to the touch.

“Beautiful,” Hannibal tells her. He brushes her hair out of the way so he can kiss the back of her
neck.

“It came highly recommended at the store,” Willa says.

Hannibal chuckles and kisses her skin again. “I meant you, dear Willa. Will you let me lay you out
on the bed and admire you?”

She doesn’t say no, words trapped in her throat, and Hannibal takes that as permission, guiding her
towards the bed. When they reach it he lifts her up, an arm under her back another under her knees.
He deposits her on the middle of the bed and then, true to his words, leans back to simply watch
her.

She fidgets under the attention. “Hannibal-”

“One day I am going to draw you,” he says.

“The sophisticated way of sending nudes?” she asks.

Hannibal kneels between her legs and ignores her comment. He nudges her legs further apart and
pushes a finger into her, slow, because she’s tight and not very wet yet.

“Relax for me,” he tells her, petting her thigh with his free hand.

“I feel silly,” she says. She tugs at the hem of her bustier. It’s weird to look down and see green, to
see clothes. She should feel more covered because of it but she doesn’t.

He leans in then, kisses her until she relaxes. It’s easier when she knows he isn’t looking at her,
when he’s kissing her and touching her like they’ve done dozens of times already. He doesn’t pull
back until she’s moving beneath him, rocking into his fingers.

When he does pull back she flushes, knowing he’s staring at her - at the way the green looks
against her skin, at the way her breasts strain against their confinement. It’s almost too much to be
on the receiving end of Hannibal’s full attention, but he doesn’t let her shy away. He continues
moving his fingers until there’s no room for self-consciousness inside her. Until she’s meeting his
gaze and begging him to let her come.

He does with a twist of his fingers that leaves her breathless, and he continues to moves his fingers
inside her until she comes down, until she starts trying to twist away from his touch instead of into
it.

“Too much?” he asks.
She nods.

“Let me soothe it away,” he says. That’s her only warning before he replaces his fingers with his mouth.

“Hannibal!” She gets a good grip on his hair and she means to push him away but she pulls him in instead, and he licks the come out of her and then gets to work making her come again. After her third orgasm she does try to push him away but she’s too weak to dislodge him.

He stays between her legs until she begs him to stop and then begs him to keep going. Until tears slip out of the corners of her eyes. Until she comes and it’s just a contraction of muscles nothing left in her to give him.

That’s when he slides his cock into her, and her tears flow more freely down her face - overwhelmed.

“I have emptied you out,” Hannibal says. He presses gentle kisses to her face, licking away her tears. “Now I am going to fill you up.”

Willa’s arms tremble as she wraps them around Hannibal’s neck. She kisses him, sloppy, desperate to distract herself from the keeling of too much.

“I have you,” Hannibal promises, turning his head to whisper against her skin. His hands run up and down her sides, hot through the satin of her bustier. His hips rock slowly into her, not in a rush. “I will take care of you.”

“Please,” she says.

He kisses her again.

She clings to him and wishes this night would never end. Wishes they didn’t have to go back to America.

Chapter End Notes

If you want to pretend that Hannibal and Willa live happily ever after touring Europe then this is the chapter to stop at. From here we begin to get back to a canon-esque feel.
Willa gives Jack her resignation letter her first full day back from her honeymoon. It’s not time for classes to start back up, but she’ll start planning her new lectures tomorrow.

Today is for unpleasant things.

“Did you have a nice vacation?” Jack asks when Willa comes into his office.

She’s got her letter clutched in her hands. She practiced this with Hannibal, practiced it dozens more times with herself. “I did,” she says. “Did some thinking.”

“Good,” Jack says. “We need you thinking.”

Willa shakes her head but Jack’s already thumbing through files. “Jack, I’m not doing any more cases.”

“We’ve got a real weird one right now,” Jack says like she didn’t speak at all. “A girl who sheds her skin. It’s some kind of disease. She’s cutting people’s faces up.”

“Jack,” Willa says, voice a little louder. Her hands are trembling.

He hands her a file.

Willa takes it. She hands him her letter.

“What’s this?” he asks. He flashes her an uncertain smile. “Postcard from Italy?”

Willa shakes her head. “It’s my resignation, Jack.”

All the warmth in Jack’s face vanishes. “No.”

Willa puts his file back on his desk. “You can’t just say no.”

“I can and I am. We need you, Willa. You’re an important part of this team.”

Willa laughs. She can’t help it. “Jack, I failed the test to get into the FBI. Multiple times. You had to bend the rules to get me in. And I was so grateful that you did. But there’s a reason they didn’t let me in the real way. I’m not supposed to be a field agent. It’s not good for me.”

Jack shakes his head. “You’ve been fine. That’s why we brought Dr. Lecter on. To make sure you stay fine.”

“Hannibal’s my husband,” Willa says, “Not my therapist. I’m quitting, Jack. You’re not going to talk me out of it. I just wanted to tell you in person. I didn’t come looking for a fight.”
Jack’s eyes narrow, but he’s smart enough to recognize when he’s not going to win a fight. “Come back if the Ripper resurfaces. You’re the only one who can see him.”

That’s not a good thing, she thinks. She nods anyways. “Alright. That’s the only case I’ll consult on. Ripper and nothing else.”

“You’re going to get bored in the classroom,” Jack says.

She shakes her head. “I don’t think so. But I know where to go if I do.”

Willa gets home from her confrontation with Jack and goes into the dog’s shed and just curls up with her dogs. Alana had watched them while they were gone, and they’d jumped on Willa and took her to the ground last night when they got home. They’re just as enthusiastic today, and Willa saves herself some bruises by getting on the ground right away.

She pets every dog in reach and lets them lick her face and nuzzle up by her side, and she must fall asleep because the next thing she remembers is Hannibal’s amused, “There you are.”

She rubs her eyes. “Hey,” she says.

Winston pushes his nose against her chin as if to tell her that she spent the past month with Hannibal and it’s the dogs’ turn for her attention.

“How did your meeting go?”

Willa extracts herself from her dogs. “Successful. For now. He’ll regroup and come back. And he already got me to cave on the Ripper.”

“Didn’t you speculate that the Ripper would lie low?” Hannibal asks. “It could be years before he resurfaces.”

“I can speculate all I want,” Willa says as Hannibal leads her back to the house. “The Ripper isn’t predictable. He had a pattern then broke it with ease. I don’t want to talk about him.”

“Of course,” Hannibal says. He opens the porch doors and ushers her through.

“If it weren’t for the dogs I might’ve been tempted to stay,” Willa says. “Leave everything behind.”

“Just the dogs?” Hannibal asks. “You wouldn’t miss Alana or Beverly?”

“I could call them,” she says. “And they would understand. The dogs wouldn’t. They’d be sad.” Willa turns back towards the doors. She can hear the dogs whining from the other side. “We should take them somewhere this weekend. Let them run around.”

“I could prepare a picnic,” Hannibal says.

“Yeah?” Willa turns to him with a smile. “Basket and checkered cloth included?”

“You do enjoy the classics,” Hannibal says.

Willa laughs and steps into his space to kiss him. It’s brief kiss and she moves on to go take a quick shower before dinner, because she smells like her dogs. It isn’t until she’s in the shower that she realizes what she did. A casual kiss. Because she wanted to. Because she could. Planning a
picnic. It’s *domestic*. It’s something she never thought she could have.

She likes it more than she wants to admit.

In her experience good things never last.

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Jack tries to tempt Willa with a couple cases, but she holds her ground and he eventually stops coming around. She starts teaching her new classes, two that require talking about serial killers, but two on lab forensics, and she finds herself enjoying teaching more than she had before. There’s something safe about being a classroom. And at the same time she still feels like she’s helping.

She was telling the truth when she told Jack he didn’t need her. There are plenty of brilliant minds at the FBI. And she’s preparing them to look at and dissect a crime scene. She’s preparing them for the scenes she won’t go to. Preparing them to catch killers that they can keep their distance from in a way she can’t.

She starts writing articles again, and she’s even working on a book that’s a study of serial killers.

She has a schedule approaching normal and it means she gets to eat dinner with her husband every night and then spend the evening with him.

Hannibal had told her she didn’t have to be on vacation to be happy, that she could be happy in her daily life and she hadn’t really believed him. She believes him now.

It makes her wish her dad was still alive. She thinks he’d like to see her like this. Married and settled and happy. Hoping for a family of her own.

Willa sets aside one day a month to drive out of the city and buy a pregnancy test. She’s determined to know if she’s pregnant before Hannibal does.

For three months there’s nothing.

Willa teaches her classes and gets a couple articles published and gets the first draft of her book drafted. Hannibal comments that the Ripper is conspicuously absent. She tells him that the Ripper isn’t going to be a part of her life if she can help it.

It’s been a little over four months since their honeymoon when the test is finally positive. Willa holds the plastic stick in her hands, trembling in the pharmacy’s bathroom. She wants to take another one. Wants to take four more.

It could be a false positive.

She knows it isn’t.

She knows it the way she knows a crime scene. She puts her hand over her stomach. There’s the beginnings of a baby there. She smiles. She’s still smiling as she comes out of the bathroom. She doesn’t know how she waits until she gets outside to call Hannibal.

“Willa,” Hannibal greets when he picks up. “I was just about to call you.”

There’s a tension in his voice that dims some of her happiness. “Oh?”

“Jack is coming over for dinner.”
“Oh.” Willa knows her disappointment is audible.

“There’s been a development in the Chesapeake Ripper case,” Hannibal says.

Willa’s stomach sinks. “He wants to talk about the Ripper over dinner?”

“Everything is better if discussed over a hearty meal,” Hannibal says. “He’s requested you stay off the news. He doesn’t want you biased.”

Willa sighs. “Of course he doesn’t. Is it - is it another murder?”

Hannibal’s quiet.

“Right. Unbiased. Okay. I’m on my way home. Do I need to pick anything up for dinner?”

“I have everything I need,” Hannibal says. “It’s best if you come straight home. But first, you called me. Did you have something you wanted to talk about?”

Yeah, Willa thinks looking down at her stomach. She swallows past the lump in her throat. “Later,” she says. She doesn’t want to talk about their baby and the Chesapeake Ripper in the same conversation. She wants their baby to be free from killers, free from the life Willa’s doing her best to get free from.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes,” Willa says. “We can talk about it tomorrow.”

Hannibal makes a humming sort of sound. “Why put off until tomorrow what we could do today?”

Willa can’t help her laugh, some of the tension easing from her shoulders. “I promise, it’ll hold. I’m getting in the car so I’m going to hang up. I’ll see you in forty minutes.”

“Ah, yes,” Hannibal says. “Today is the day of your mysterious monthly appointment.”

“I’ll see you when I get home,” Willa says. She hangs up before Hannibal can lure her into talking longer. They can talk when she gets home.

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When she gets home, Hannibal is working in the kitchen looking like he’s cooking five different dishes.

“It’s just Jack,” Willa says, coming in. She frowns at the meat in one of the pans. “What’s that?”

“Swan,” Hannibal answers. “I thought of roasting the whole bird but decided on steaks instead. Yours will be accompanied by foie gras. Jack will have a special accompaniment for his. And I will have one for myself.”

“Show off,” Willa says. “When you’re not balancing dinner I want a kiss. But I won’t interrupt you.”

“Thank you,” Hannibal says.

“I’m going to go say hi to the dogs.”

Hannibal hands her a paper bag. “I made sausages for them.”
“You spoil them,” she says. She ducks in for a quick kiss. “That doesn’t count as my welcome home kiss, by the way.” She heads to the backyard, the sound of Hannibal’s laughter following her outside.

The dogs bound over for pets and sausages and then she gives them all bellyrubs and tosses a stick for the more restless ones to chase. She’s feeling worn out by the time she hears the doorbell ring. She pushes to her feet and wipes the dog slobber off on her pants and goes to answer the door.

Jack is there in a long trench coat to ward off the autumn chill.

He doesn’t look happy.

Willa feels her own smile dim. “Evening, Jack,” she says. She steps aside to let him in.

He grunts something in response.

Willa almost wishes Hannibal hadn’t gone overboard with dinner. She wants to talk about whatever happened and then usher Jack out.

“Did we have to do this here?” Willa asks. The question is out before she can help it. But she doesn’t retract it and she meets Jack’s surprised look with an angry one of her own. “I told you I wanted out, because I wanted my life. And now you’re bringing the Ripper into my home.”

Something flashes across Jack’s face too quick for her to check.

A cleared throat behind her has her turning. Hannibal’s here now too.

Hannibal holds a hand out to her. “I believe I owe you a kiss,” he says.

Willa feels a smile tug at her lips and she lets Hannibal reel her in and kiss her. It’s not as good a kiss as she would’ve liked, but she’s aware of Jack standing impatiently behind him. She turns to whisper in his ear. “You still owe me.”

When she pulls back Hannibal is smiling but there’s something lurking in his expression too. Something...sad? Hopeful? There’s a mess of emotions whirling around the foyer, and she can’t deal with them.

“Well,” she says. The sooner they get this over with the sooner she can get back to her life. “Is dinner ready?”

“Yes,” Hannibal says. “Hungry?”

Willa thinks about the pregnancy test she took earlier, thinks about how she’s going to have to start being more careful of her diet, how she’s going to have to start eating more. She bets Hannibal will love designing a pregnancy friendly diet.

Hannibal cocks his head, wanting to know what’s making her smile.

“Let’s eat,” Willa says. “Nothing goes with dinner like murder.”

It’s meant to be a joke.

Neither men smile.

They’re staring at each other, a strange tension between them.
“Right,” Willa says.

The table is already set, and it’s a strange meal for Hannibal in that there aren’t multiple courses. Usually he has a soup or salad course before the main course, but tonight that isn’t the case. Maybe he also wants to hurry Jack out of here.

Willa’s plate, as promised, has a swan steak as well as a serving of foie gras as well as pan-seared vegetables and rice. Jack’s plate has a steak and three little roses. Willa wonders what meat Hannibal used for them. It doesn’t look like bacon.

“Pretty,” Jack says, pointing to the roses.

“I take pride in my work,” Hannibal says. He smiles.

Jack’s eyes narrow.

Garret Jacob Hobbs slinks into the dining room. Willa can’t remember the last time she saw him. She doesn’t know what it means that he’s here now.

*See?* he asks her. His eyes are milky, *dead*, but there’s pity in them.

She doesn’t need a dead man’s pity.

“Willa?” Hannibal asks.

Willa turns away from Hobbs in the corner. He’s not actually here. She focuses on the people who are here. They’re both looking at her with various degrees of worry.

“Sorry,” she says. She picks up her silverware. “Dinner first or conversation?”

“Dinner will go cold,” Hannibal says. “The case can wait.”

“I’ll never turn down a meal from you,” Jack says. He smiles as he plucks the first petal from his meat rose.

Hannibal watches him eat it, a smile tugging at his lips. It’s not a friendly smile.

*See?* Hobbs asks.

Willa feels like she’s on the edge of something. She looks down at her plate. Swan, Hannibal had told her.

Swan song.

No.

She shakes her head.

She glances up at Hobbs and then turns her attention back to her plate.

“Not hungry?” Hannibal asks.

Willa cuts a small piece of foie gras and puts it in her mouth. She chews but she doesn’t taste it. “Distracted,” she says.

Something is humming in the room. Hobbs is slouched in the corner like he’s bleeding out again.
There shouldn’t be an again. He should be dead. He shouldn’t be haunting her. She wants to reach for Hannibal, wants him to ground her, but she doesn’t want to look weak in front of Jack. Or maybe she does. Maybe if he sees how the Ripper makes her come undone then he’ll back off.

She pushes her plate away.

“I can’t do this,” Willa says.

Jack’s head jerks up. He looks surprised. His mouth is too full to say anything though.

“Where’s the file?” Willa asks. “What do you want me to look at? Is there a body? Please tell me there isn’t another body.”

“Two bodies,” Jack says after he swallows. “One dead, one alive.”


“Miriam Lass,” Jack says. “He took something from her, though. Her arm.”

“And a couple years of her life,” Willa says. “And probably her sanity and sense of safety.”

Jack gives her a look. “Yes. All of those things.”

“Wait,” Willa says. “If she’s alive - does she remember who took her?”

“She does,” Jack says. He’s looking at Willa like she should remember. Because Miriam and Willa blur in Jack’s mind? Or because he thinks Willa is the Chesapeake Ripper? That’s preposterous. She’s not.

See? Hobbs asks.

No, Willa thinks. She doesn’t see. She’s not the Ripper.

“You didn’t ask about the second victim,” Jack says. “Matthew Brown’s turned up.”

Willa takes her glasses off so she can drag her hand down her face. “How?” she asks.

“Painfully,” Jack says. “He didn’t die easy and he didn’t die quick.”

“You want me to look at a picture?” she asks. Then she remembers. “No. Because you know who the Ripper is. What is this, Jack? What do you want from me?”

Jack pulls a picture from the folder he brought with him. He slides it across the table to Willa. She takes it from him, afraid of what she’s going to see.

See? Hobbs asks.

She puts her glasses back on. Matthew Brown comes into focus. He’s on his knees. In prayer, she thinks. Supplication. His hands are held out in front of him, offering up his eyes to the man he offended. To the Chesapeake Ripper.

Willa’s stomach twists.

She knows this murder.

She’s seen it before.
She’s spoken it.

No.

See? Hobbs says. He rises from the corner.

“No,” Willa says. She doesn’t see. She doesn’t want to see. She looks up at Hannibal. He’s blurry. She thinks there might be tears in her eyes. “Please,” she says. Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me this isn’t true.

Hannibal meets her gaze evenly.

Willa sees.

She sees Cassie Boyle on an altar of antlers. Presented as a gift to Willa, the piece she needed to solve Hobbs.

She sees Hannibal spilling the files outside where Hobbs worked. Sees him slipping into the office to make a phone call. The phone call.

She sees Hannibal sitting with her as she kept watch over Abigail. As he encouraged her maternal instincts. As he complemented them with his paternal instincts.

She sees Hannibal working his way into her life. Making himself interesting. Putting her in positions where he could show off his ability to protect her. Where he could show off how good a partner he would be.

She sees herself telling Hannibal about Jack and Freddie’s plan to lure the Ripper. She sees Hannibal seething after she’s left. She sees him plotting. Sees him going on a murder spree. Sees him opening up his home to her when hers is a crime scene. Sees him encouraging her not to let the Ripper consume her life.

She sees him talking to Franklyn. Sees him sitting down to dinner with Budge. Sees herself interrupting. Sees him sending her after Budge knowing he was dangerous. A test. To see if she was worthy of him. She sees his triumph when she shot Budge for him. When she saved the Chesapeake Ripper’s life.

Willa squeezes her eyes shut. She doesn’t want to see. She doesn’t want to.

She hears the click of a safety.

She opens her eyes to see Jack pointing a gun at Hannibal.

“Don’t do anything rash,” Jack says. “Your house is surrounded.”

Willa’s mind is threatening to spin away. It’s threatening to take her somewhere else. Somewhere that isn’t here. Somewhere safe. She can’t give into it. If she loses it then they’ll take her to a hospital. They’ll find out about the baby. They’ll -

She’s pregnant with the Chesapeake Ripper’s baby.

She -

Willa drags in a harsh breath and then another. She needs to stay focused. Needs to stay grounded. She needs her paddle.
She needs Hannibal.

Too bad he’s a serial killer.

See? Hobbs asks softly, almost gentle.

Willa snarls at him. I killed you, she thinks. I shot you fucking dead. You don’t get to pity me. You tried to kill your daughter. I’m going to protect mine. No one will hurt my baby. Not you. Not Hannibal. Not the fucking Chesapeake Ripper.

“What’d he take?” Willa asks. Her voice sounds far away. She clears her throat. She carefully doesn’t look at Hannibal. “The Ripper always takes something. You said Miriam was missing her arm.”

“Liver,” Jack answers. His voice is gruff but pleased. Triumphant. This is him winning. He and the Ripper have been locked in a battle for years. He doesn’t care that Willa’s been caught in the crossfire. He knew when he came here that Hannibal was the Ripper. He wanted to see if Willa knew. If she was an accomplice.


That’s what threatens to make her sick.

Well...that and the obvious.

She looks at Jack’s place. There’s only one rose left. “You should test that,” she says, pointing to the rose. “I bet it’s Miriam.”

“What?” Jack loses some of his smugness.

Willa looks back at her own plate. She has a piece of Matthew Brown in her. She meets Hannibal’s eyes, lets him see how furious she is that he would do that to her. She makes sure he’s watching when she jams a finger down her throat. Makes sure he’s watching when she vomits his fancy fucking dinner up all over his floor.

The house is stormed while Willa’s throwing up.

Hannibal goes down to his knees, hands laced above his head like he isn’t being arrested for a shitload of murders.

Willa doesn’t understand. Why did he do this? He could’ve kept Miriam and Matthew hidden. He could’ve killed them and done away with the bodies. He chose to reveal himself. Why? An echo of her own words come back to her.

Everyone wants to be seen, wants to be known. I’m one of the few who can understand the Ripper. When he’s ready, I think he’ll show himself to me. No, when I’m ready.

She said that to Hannibal. How many times did she talk about the Ripper to him? Just tonight, she told Jack she didn’t want the Ripper in her house. Joke’s on her because she moved into the Ripper’s house.

Willa meets Hannibal’s eyes as he’s handcuffed and hauled to his feet. No, she thinks, knowing he’ll catch it. I’m not ready for you. I never will be.
He looks unbearably smug as he’s led out of the living room.

Willa’s standing over her pile of vomit when the rest of the team comes into the room.

“Here,” she says. She points to the puddle on the floor. “Sorry but it’s evidence.” Her voice feels like it should echo. It doesn’t. It falls flat. A thud. Like a body hitting the ground. She checks to make sure she’s still standing.

“Willa, I need you to come with me,” Jack says. His voice is soft, soothing.

It grates against her ears. She whirls on him, blocks the hand that was reaching out for her. “You knew,” she spits. “You knew it was him. You invited yourself over for dinner to test me. Did I pass, Jack? Did I pass your *fucking* test?”

“Willa,” he begins.

“How many times have you eaten with him?” Willa asks. Her voice drops. It takes on a nasty edge. “How many victims have you eaten? How much evidence have you *consumed*?”

Jack takes a step towards her. Willa takes one back, stumbling into Zeller. It’s funny, all her time with Hannibal and she never felt afraid like this. Never felt like he might lose control and hurt her. She should stop goading Jack. Because he will hurt her. He doesn’t have Hannibal’s control. He doesn’t love her. He doesn’t want the best for her.

“Jack,” it’s Beverly. She sounds worried.

“You’re coming to the office,” Jack tells Willa.

“Well, I’m assuming my house is now a crime scene,” Willa says, “So I appreciate the generosity.”

“Alright,” Beverly says. She steps between Willa and Jack. “I’m driving Willa to Quantico.”

“You didn’t answer me,” Willa tells Jack. “Did I pass your test? Or am I going in as a suspect?”

“You’re coming in as a witness,” Jack says. “A victim.”

Willa’s laugh is sharp and brittle. “Miriam Lass is a victim. I *married* him.”

“We can fix that,” Jack tells her.

Beverly curses under her breath.

“You can *fix* that?” Willa demands, voice low, measured.

“We’re going,” Beverly says. She hovers near Willa but doesn’t try to touch her or guide her. “We’ve got a new coffee machine. It’s marginally less shitty than the last one.”

“Am I allowed to pack a bag?” Willa asks. Her voice is soft again. Everything’s sinking in. It threatens to overwhelm her. She can’t let it.

“The whole house is a crime scene,” Beverly says.

Willa squeezes her eyes shut. Of course it is. “Last time my house was a crime scene I stayed with Hannibal,” she says. “Of course, last time my house was a crime scene it was his fault.”

“His fault too this time,” Beverly says.
Willa laughs. “Yeah.”

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When Willa gets to Quantico Alana is waiting for her at the doors.

“You’ve heard?” Willa asks.

Alana’s tight, pained smile is answer enough.

“They’ve got questions for me,” Willa says. “Not sure why. They’ve got plenty of evidence.”

“I’ll be with you,” Alana says. “They won’t keep you long. You want to stay at my place tonight?”

Willa’s not sure she can handle someone being nice to her right now. She doesn’t know what other options she has. “I’m probably going to have nightmares.”

“Me too.”

“Okay,” Willa says.

The three of them go into Quantico together, Willa flanked on either side. Last time they did this they were walking into her wedding reception. Willa stumbles. Her wedding reception. Hannibal spending days cooking for it.

“No,” she whispers. He couldn’t have.

She remembers Hannibal’s aunt and uncle’s chilly reception. Remembers Chiyoh declining to eat anything.

“Oh,” she says. She stops and leans against the wall.

“Willa?” Alana asks. She sounds concerned.

“Where’s the guy I’m supposed to be talking to?” she asks.

She hurries down the hall. Beverly jogs to catch up to her and then leads her into a room where there’s a woman with a short, severe blond haircut.

“Kade Prurnell,” the woman says, “I’m from the Office of the Inspector General.”

“Not all his victims were displayed,” Willa says. “Our wedding reception,” Willa trails off.

Beverly gasps somewhere behind her.

“That’s a lot of dead bodies,” Prurnell says. “Do you know what led to him choosing his victims?”

“They were rude,” Willa says.

“What?” Prurnell leans forward.

“They were rude,” Willa repeats, voice stronger. “They offended him in some way.”

Matthew Brown with his eyes in his hands. His crime for looking where he wasn’t invited.

“I’ve been told you’re the FBI’s best profiler,” Prurnell tells her.
“I’m retired,” Willa says.

“I’ve heard that too. You’re known for your mind, for seeing things other people can’t.”

See? Hobbs hovers nearby.

“So tell me,” Prurnell says. “What prompted Hannibal Lecter to turn himself in?”

It’s not the question Willa was expecting. She’s shocked into honesty. “Love.”

“Explain,” Prurnell says.


“Hannibal wanted me to love him. Not just as the person he presented to the world but for who he truly is. Hannibal and the Ripper.”

“Do you?” Prurnell asks.

Rude, Willa thinks.

“I could,” Willa says. “Enough time with him, yes. I would be able to see him. I would be able to understand him. Maybe I could love him. But I won’t.”

“We would like it if you testified at the trial,” Prurnell says.

“You want me to help him get the death penalty,” Willa guesses.

“It’s what he deserves,” Prurnell says.

Willa can’t help her flinch.

“That’s enough,” Alana says. “It’s been an exhausting day.”

“Would you come back tomorrow?” Prurnell asks. “We have more questions.”

Willa knows she doesn’t really have a choice.

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She sleeps fitfully. She wakes up expecting to see Hannibal propped up in bed watching her. Instead, she’s alone. She stumbles into the kitchen, bleary eyed and wearing Alana’s pajamas, in time to see Alana throwing out her bacon and sausage and burger patties. Anything with meat in it.

“Eggs?” Alana asks.

Willa doesn’t feel hungry. She knows she needs to eat. “Sure.”

They eat in silence and Alana drives them back to Quantico. They have a hard time finding a parking spot. The place is crawling with reporters. Willa isn’t surprised when she gets out of the car to see Freddie Lounds standing on the curb.

“Just what I need to make this nightmare worse,” Willa says.

Freddie’s smile is sharp. “Are you a suspect?”

“Ignore her,” Alana says. She ushers Willa to the back entrance.
Jack and Prurnell are in the office when Willa gets there. So is a man she doesn’t know. He’s in a fancy suit. He must be a lawyer.

“Devon Townsend,” he tells her. “I’m one of the Lecter family lawyers. You don’t have to answer any questions you don’t want to.”

“Thank you,” Willa tells him. She almost tells him to go away. She doesn’t. It feels nice to have someone on her side.

“Freddie Lounds is outside,” Willa says.

“Hannibal wants to talk to you,” Prurnell says. “Dr. Chilton is quite put out. Apparently he refuses to speak to anyone but you.”

“I want my clothes,” Willa says. It feels weird wearing Alana’s. It’s like playing dress-up. “Neither of us are going to get what we want.”

“Did you ever go in the basement?” Prurnell asks.

“No,” Willa says. Something else occurs to her. Something that makes her feel like a terrible person. “My dogs. I want my dogs.” If she can’t have her house or her clothes or her husband than she wants her dogs.

Prurnell looks away.

Willa turns to Jack. “What did you do?” she demands. She flashes hot. Cold. Whatever’s coming...it isn’t going to be good.

“They were fed human meat,” Jack says. “They had to be put down.”

Willa goes utterly still in her chair. If she stops breathing will she die? She wants to wake up. Maybe she still has encephalitis. Maybe this is still a fever dream. Maybe...

Willa, when she speaks, is steadier than she feels. “Mr. Townsend, I’m ready to go.”

“That’s it?” Jack demands. “You’re done?”

“You killed my dogs, Jack.” Willa meets his gaze, lets him see all the hatred brewing inside of her. “Put them down because Hannibal fed them people sausage. How many people in Baltimore have eaten at his table? How many people in the FBI? Should we put them down?” Willa holds her arm out. “Got an injection for me, Jack? Afraid I’ve developed a taste for human?”

Jack grinds his teeth so hard she’s surprised he doesn’t spit them out.

“Miss Graham,” Prurnell says.

“It’s Mrs. Lecter,” Willa says. “We’re still married. And I’m not testifying at the trial. For either side.” Willa stands up. “I’m leaving,” she says. “I’m getting away from all this.” They should’ve just stayed in Italy. They were happy. She was happy.

She needs to stop thinking in the past.
She needs to think towards the future.

She has a baby to protect.

Hannibal has exposed himself to her. He thinks she’s going to cave and come to him. Does he want her help getting out of prison or does he already have a plan and is just waiting for her accept him? She won’t. She’s not going to see him ever again if she can help it.

The safest her baby will be is if Hannibal stays in prison. Well, the safest they’ll be is if Hannibal gets the death penalty but she knows better than to think that will happen. He wouldn’t risk that. He’ll plead insanity. And being a psychiatrist he’ll probably do it successfully.

Chilton will have Hannibal for the rest of their lives. She wonders if Hannibal will give him the silent treatment the whole time.


“I am,” she says. “I am finally doing the right thing for myself. You promised me when I agreed to consult that you wouldn’t let me get too close.” She laughs, brittle and broken. “I got too close, Jack. I married the monster.”

She walks about of the small office, Mr. Townsend trailing behind her.

Chapter End Notes

Willa's dogs get put down, because they've been fed human flesh.
Willa leaves Maryland. She leaves her job and her crime scene of a house. She leaves her friends and leaves her enemies.

She takes herself down to Florida. Sugarloaf Key is remote but not as remote as she’d like. They’re currently in the process of building bike paths to connect the island to mainland Florida. Still, she lives in a connected series of islands which means lots of boats and lots of fishing.

She finds a rundown house in the Upper Sugarloaf Key, and she circles it a few times wondering if she could buy it. Wonders if she could fix it up, make it a good place for her and her baby to live.

She’s not surprised when someone comes up to her to investigate what she’s doing and why she’s hovering. Willa’s back in the clothes she wore to dinner with Hannibal, the clothes she was wearing when her world was turned upside down.

The woman that approaches Willa is older than Willa. She’s in shorts and a shirt that flaps in the breeze. She’s cautious but also curious and when she sees Willa’s state of dishevelment there’s also concern there.

“Nice place,” Willa says. She nods towards the shack.

The woman laughs. “Matter of opinion, I guess.”

“Could be nice.”

“You going to make it nice?” the woman asks.

“Maybe,” Willa says. She doesn’t have the money to buy it. Well, she does, but she’s not going to touch any of the money in her joint account with Hannibal. She doesn’t want anything that could be used to track where she is. She knows that even just using cash doesn’t mean there’s no footprint to follow, but it’s a lot more difficult. She also knows that if she really wanted to hide then she’d go somewhere without water. But she needs some kind of comfort to fall back on. And fish is that comfort.

“You know anything about the campground?” Willa asks. She’s got a beat-up car that she drove here. In it are things she’s bought along the drive. A sleeping bag. A tent that may or may not be waterproof. Some secondhand clothes. She managed to get her hands on some stuff from her storage locker in Baltimore. She’s got her old tools. Her fly fishing stuff. Things that didn’t seem like they fit in Hannibal’s fancy house. Things she was saving until they bought a house that was theirs instead of his.

She’s glad some things didn’t get tainted.

“For tourists,” the woman says. There’s derision in her voice. “You a tourist?”

Willa looks down at her shirt, dirty and stretched from being worn the whole drive down. “Not enough palm trees on my shirt for that.”

“I’m Calemonia,” the woman says. “You can call me Cally.”

“Willa.” Willa looks at the woman, braced for the woman to recognize her.
“You want a place to stay that isn’t crawling with spoiled kids and even more spoiled parents?” Cally asks.

Willa hesitates. She does. But…

“I got some things that need fixing,” Cally says. She nods towards the house. “If you think you can fix that then you can handle my problems.”

Not charity, then. Well, charity disguised as something else. Willa will take it.

“Okay,” she says. “I’m really good with boat motors.”

“Lots of boats around here,” Cally says.

Willa smiles and follows the woman down the hard packed dirt that serves as a road.

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Cally was born on Sugarloaf Key, and she tells Willa that she plans on dying here. “Told my kids I want my body tossed into the ocean when I’m dead,” she says over their first dinner together. “Let the fish feed on me. Payback for me eating them all these years.”

“Circle of life,” Willa says.

“Exactly. They think it’s morbid.” Cally sighs. “Inherited their guts from their dad. He was a right bastard.”

Willa smiles. It threatens to disappear when Cally’s eyes dip to the wedding band Willa still hasn’t taken off. But then Cally smoothly segues into Willa’s fishing experience.

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“I’m a pescatarian,” Willa says on the fourth night when Cally checks to make sure eating fish every night isn’t a problem.

Willa insisted on cooking tonight. She wants to make sure she’s pulling her weight. She caught tonight’s bonefish (illegally, she doesn’t have a fishing permit yet) and she split it, seasoned it with pepper sauce and salt and then put it in the oven to bake.

Her hands tremble as she prepares the dish, but she doesn’t drop anything. She’s going to stay away from meat for a while, but she’s going to be in trouble if she can’t cook because it reminds her too much of Hannibal.

“Only some kind of fish,” Cally says. “For now, at least.”

Willa looks over at her, surprised.

Cally rolls her eyes. “You haven’t had a drink since you got here,” she says. “You’re clearly lying low from some low life,” she nods towards the wedding ring. “You’re pregnant.”

Fear washes through her. Someone knows. If someone knows then someone else can find out. If someone else finds out…She shakes her head. She’s safe here. She has to believe she’s safe. She can’t live if she’s constantly afraid. She needs a house. She needs to fortify it. She needs to create a bunker that no one can break through.

“Honey, I’m not gonna judge,” Cally says. “And I got a shotgun if your man comes knocking.”
“Thanks,” Willa says.

“Did he cheat on you?” Cally asks.

Willa laughs, she can’t help it, at the thought of Hannibal doing something as mundane as cheating. “Work was more important than me. Classic tale.”

“His loss,” Cally says. “If you can fix boats as well as you can fish then the boys around here are gonna love you.”

“I’m married,” Willa says. She feels some of her cheer slip away. Hannibal kidnapped, murdered, and displayed Matthew Brown for buying her a drink. She doesn’t want to imagine what he’d do to someone who did more than that.

Cally raises her eyebrows.

“Til death do us part,” Willa says. She wishes she could get drunk. She could really do with a good glass of whiskey right now. Or a shitty glass. She’s not picky.

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Living on an island means a lot of boats and a lot of fishing. Willa gets herself a job doing repair work. It means she can sit in the back of a shop and tinker without anyone trying to make small talk with her. She can work and be left alone.

She’s not welcomed right away - she’s an outsider and a woman - but it only takes a couple jobs for the locals to realize she knows her way around a boat motor. And that she’s not afraid to get her hands dirty. It doesn’t take long before she’s got a steady stream of jobs.

She also gets a fair number of offers to go fishing with her coworkers or go out for a drink after work.

She declines those.

She fishes on her own, wading into the shallows and casting her line, letting her mind drift. She enjoys her time alone. She doesn't have to be on. She can just be herself. Sometimes she can even forget about Hannibal and the FBI and that whole life. Sometimes she imagines that her dad is still alive. That she never went into the police force. That she decided to fix boat motors and live off the sea that way her dad always wanted to. Sometimes she imagines that Abigail is standing next to her. She never got to teach Abigail to fish. She’ll teach her child.

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The offers for drinks decline when she starts being noticeably pregnant. They’re replaced by offers for dinner.

Willa just holds up her hand, showing off her ring whenever she’s asked.

“You see a doctor yet?” Cally asks when Willa comes home with a string a fish.

“Fishing isn’t very strenuous,” Willa says.

“You’re pregnant,” Cally says. “You should see a doctor.”

Hello, Willa.
Hello, Dr. Lecter.

“I don’t like doctors,” Willa says. She takes the fish out back to gut them.

Cally follows her. “Midwife?”

Willa sighs.

“There are a lot of things you can do on your own,” Cally says. “Pushing a baby out of your body isn’t one of them.”

“You know someone?” Willa asks.

Cally smiles. “Of course.”

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There are two schools on Upper Sugarloaf Key which means there’s also a public library. Willa goes once, when she’s starting to waddle more than walk, and she Googles Hannibal Lecter. The first thing that comes up is a picture of him sitting serene in his...suite at the BSHCI. And it is a suite. It’s a large room with a bed, a bookshelf, a drawing table.

Willa would say she can’t believe it but she does. Hannibal has a way of getting exactly what he wants.

He’s not going to get her, Willa thinks. She closes out of the browser.

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Willa gives birth in the shack under the careful watch of Cally and a midwife. It’s painful and she refuses any drugs and she screams and cries and when it’s all over there’s a tiny squalling baby girl handed to her.

“What’s her name?” Cally asks.

Willa, sweat on her forehead, arms trembling around the pink-faced angry child can’t help her smile. “Juliet.”

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Willa doesn’t find out until later that Cally has bought the shack and given it to Willa.

“I don’t want to be woken up by a crying baby,” Cally says. “I’m done with that phase of my life.”

“I can’t,” Willa says. Not a charity case.

“You can pay me back,” Cally says. “If it’s your pride that’s getting in the way. But the place is yours.”

One of Willa’s coworkers gives her a hand carved crib. Willa doesn’t know how long it takes to make something like that. She doesn’t understand why someone would spend that amount of time on her. She hasn’t tried to make friends here.

Maybe she should start trying.

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Willa is exhausted by having a baby.

She’s undeniably happy too.

She’d watched her stomach grow, felt her organs move themselves around, knew that there was a child growing in her. Part of her still didn’t believe she’d give birth. Or that she wouldn’t give birth to a human baby. Everything else has gone wrong. Part of her expected this to go wrong too.

But it hasn’t.

She has a baby.

A baby girl.

Willa hasn’t slept this badly since she had encephalitis, and she has to start doing repair work out of her new house because she refuses to let Juliet out of her sight, but she’s beginning to build a new life for herself.

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Willa’s phone rings for the first time since she left Maryland behind.

She glares at it, willing it to stop ringing.

It doesn’t.

She picks it up before it can wake Juliet up from her nap.

“No,” she says. She doesn’t know who’s calling but no matter what that’s her answer.

“Willa.” It’s Jack.

Willa hangs up.

When he calls back she turns her phone off.

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Willa redoes the kitchen first. She makes it functional. She chases away the spectre of Hobbs, the spectre of Hannibal. She does the barest amount of repair to the kitchen and then moves on to Juliet’s room.

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For Juliet’s first birthday, Willa invites people to her house for a cookout. She tells everyone to bring a side dish or a dessert. A couple people bring fresh caught fish for the grill. Willa makes burgers and sausages. It’s the first time she’s cooked meat since what she thinks of as Hannibal’s Last Supper.

It’s going to be the first time she eats it too.

Cally comes to judge as Willa puts the first burger patties on the grill. “You don’t have to do this. No one faults you for liking fish. Not around here.”

“I need to do it for me,” Willa says. “And Juliet.”
No more living in the shadow of what Hannibal put her through. No more letting the past dictate her future. She’s not going to avoid beef and chicken for the rest of her life. She’s not going to do that to Juliet either.

Juliet, like she knows she’s being talked about, giggles and bangs her fists on the plastic shelf of her exersaucer. It’s one of the few new modern things Willa owns. It’s bright yellow and green plastic, a place to plop Juliet in when Willa needs her hands free or when she needs to make sure Juliet doesn’t crawl away and get into trouble.

For a time, Willa put up fences and gates but that only encouraged Juliet to learn how to climb. She’s a smart girl, determined. Willa just has to make sure Juliet doesn’t end up hurting herself in her quest to learn new things.

Juliet, seeing that she’s got her mom’s attention, giggles again and bounces up and down. Willa’s helpless to do anything but smile back at her.

“You know how many people are here?” Cally asks. About fifteen. There will be upwards of twenty by the end. Willa knows exactly who is here and where they are. She’s grown more vigilant since Hannibal. Forces herself to see everything so she misses nothing.

It’s overwhelming. It’s why she keeps her world narrow, why she limits where she goes and who she sees.

“Any one of them would hold her,” Cally says. “They’re just waiting for permission.”

Willa’s a bit infamous for being incredibly cautious with Juliet. She rarely lets people hold her daughter, and she never lets Juliet out of her sight. She doesn’t know what she’s going to do when Juliet’s school age. She knows she can’t hide Juliet away forever. That’s no kind of life. But she’s afraid of other people seeing her, meeting her, talking about her. She’s afraid of Juliet’s existence getting back to Maryland.

Her family is only safe if it stays hidden.

“Only if they don’t leave my line of sight,” Willa says.

“But of course,” Cally says. “I get to hold her first since I was brave enough to ask you.”

“Are you really that scary?” Willa asks.

“You’re protective,” Cally says. “As most first mothers are.”

“Yeah,” Willa says. She watches with sharp eyes as Cally lifts Juliet out of her exersaucer. “Must be those first mother instincts.”

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Jack calls and tells Willa he needs her in DC. “I won’t ask you to look at pictures,” he says. “I know you don’t want to look at case files. But there is something you can do to help.”

“No,” Willa says. “Whatever it is, no.”

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Willa ends up in DC. She’s never been good at saying no to Jack. Rather, Jack’s never been good at listening to her ‘no’s. She leaves Juliet with Cally who can’t quite believe it.
“You’re going to let her out of your sight?” Cally asks.

“I don’t have a choice,” Willa says. Her shoulders are tight, drawn up near her ears as she throws a bag together. “She can’t come with me. She can’t.” Willa’s hands tremble. “I’m trying to keep her safe.”

“Okay,” Cally says. “You’re going to be gone a couple days? Want to call and check in?”

“No!” Willa’s voice is sharp and rings out through the small house. She winces. “I’m sorry.” She can’t make any phone calls back here. Can’t risk anyone making the connection. Too much risk. She shouldn’t go. She doesn’t have a choice. She -

“Hey,” Cally says. “You don’t look so good. What’re you flying up north for anyway?”

“To see my husband.”

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“This is a bad idea, Jack,” Willa says when she meets him outside the BSHCI. “He wants to see me. Doesn’t that bother you? Because it bothers me.”

“He’s being difficult,” Jack says. “Dr. Chilton thinks seeing you will encourage his cooperation.”


“Must be fragile if you think he’ll shatter it with one visit,” Jack says. He holds the door to the hospital open.

“I know you,” she reminds him, “It won’t just be one visit. And…the groundwork is already there. I am in love with Hannibal Lecter. It’s not a very big step to loving all of him.”

She walks past Jack into the hospital. Dr. Chilton is waiting for her in the lobby. He looks gleeful. She wonders if Hannibal’s spoken a word to him since he began his stay here.

“The conversation will be monitored,” Chilton says. “For your safety, of course.”

“And your book?” Willa asks. “Or have you decided to wait to write it until after the trial? I imagine you haven’t gotten very many direct quotes yet.”

Chilton’s eyes narrow. “There are other safety procedures to go through. Let me explain them to you.”

After Willa has been thoroughly debriefed on the BSHCI security procedures she’s escorted down to Hannibal’s cell. His suite.

Hannibal looks up from his drawing table.

She’s struck by how different he doesn’t look. The same part to his hair. The same serenity to his posture. If it weren’t for the jumpsuit then he might as well be in his study sketching. Willa has to look behind her, to where an orderly stands by the door to remind herself of where she is.

This isn’t the Hannibal she would come home to after a day lecturing followed by an afternoon at the library. He looks like it, but it isn’t him. They’re not home. Hannibal’s awaiting trial for murder. And Willa’s home is now off the coast of Florida.
“Hello, Willa,” Hannibal greets.

She takes a chair from near the doors and drags it over to the glass, making sure the metal screeches against the floor. Hannibal doesn’t wince. He does frown slightly at her.

“You are displeased,” he says.

She bites back her initial sarcastic response. Even if Hannibal’s theoretically imprisoned, he has ways to make her suffer. He values politeness. He kills the rude. Eats them.

Willa regrets the peanuts she ate on the plane.

“Still astute,” she says. She sits down on her chair. She fights the urge to wrap her arms around herself.

“It has been difficult to keep myself sharp in here,” Hannibal says. “But I have made efforts. You have not been to visit me.”

He sounds upset.

“I’ve been out of town,” she says.

“So I’ve heard. A permanent relocation. Or...not so permanent.” He smiles. “You are back.”

“Jack pulled on my leash. And here I am.” Willa’s abruptly reminded of her dogs. The dogs she no longer has.

She can’t keep the anger off her face. Hannibal picks up on it. “I am sorry about your dogs.”

“If you start apologizing then you’re never going to stop. I don’t have time for that.”

“So eager to leave?” Hannibal asks.

“I didn’t want to be here in the first place,” Willa says.

“Jack was desperate,” Hannibal says. “I can’t say I’m upset as it did bring you to me. It was Jack and a case that led us to our first meeting. And now he’s brought us together again.”

Willa didn’t come here to reminisce. “He brought you in the Hobbs case under the guise of evaluating my sanity. That is not what’s happening here. You weren’t talking. Now you are.”

“You weren’t talking,” Hannibal says. “Or did Jack not tell you why he brought you here?”

Hannibal lifts the paper off his desk. It’s not a drawing. It’s a case file.

Willa’s been played. She wouldn’t help Jack with his cases so he turned to Hannibal. And then Hannibal demanded to see Willa in exchange for helping. Everyone gets what they want. Everyone but Willa.

“Very rude of him,” Hannibal comments. “Would you like to talk through the case?”

“Do you need the help?”

Hannibal smiles like her snappiness amuses him. “No but I thought you might appreciate it. Like we used to do.”

“I didn’t come here to walk down memory lane,” she says.
“You didn’t,” Hannibal agrees. He looks her over - the brand new jeans, the new sweater, the new socks, the new sneakers. She wonders if he can smell her from here. She showered this morning until she scrubbed off any hint of where she’s been. And then she put on brand new clothes. No clues for Hannibal where she’s been. No clues except for the deliberate lack of them.

“You’re his second choice,” Willa says. “Jack came to you because he couldn’t have me. How does that make you feel?”

“Is this therapy now?” Hannibal asks. “I am intrigued that Jack could not secure your assistance. He has never failed in the past.”

“Looking at killers isn’t good for me,” she says.

“It never has been. You told me it was worth it to save lives.”

“Who says I’m not?” Willa’s smile is sharp. “I’m saving my own now.”

“Not just your own,” Hannibal says. His words are calculated and Willa knows she can’t hide her reaction. She draws in a breath, tenses. Hannibal looks pleased with his deduction but not with what he’s deduced. “There’s someone else in your life.”

*Someone keeping you together.*

Willa knows it’s pointless and maybe even dangerous to lie. “Yes,” she says. But she won’t tell him who. She knows that as much as he pretends to be caged, the moment there is a reason to escape he will. He’s waiting for her to accept him. But if he knows they have a child...he’ll take Juliet. Willa’s not sure if he’ll take her too.

“I could kill him,” Hannibal says.

How...pedestrian. He assumes that she’s dating someone new. She’s not going to tell him he’s wrong, because she doesn’t want him to land on the right answer.

Instead, she stands up and steps up to the glass. Behind her, the orderly makes a protesting sound. She’s not supposed to get this close. She’d almost laughed when Chilton told her that. She’s had Hannibal inside her. She’s been as close to him as you can get.

“No,” she says, voice low and even. She doesn’t doubt for a second that Hannibal can slip out of here anytime he wants but, “You wouldn’t make it through the front door.” She smiles, teeth glinting like knives.

“My mongoose,” Hannibal says, proud.

“I can see why you’re thriving,” Willa says, stepping away from the glass. Hannibal hasn’t moved from his desk. “This is what you do. Put people in situations where they have to ask you for help. You got Chilton. You got Jack. You won’t get me. I don’t need you, Hannibal.”

“No,” Hannibal agrees. His eyes catch hers and hold them. “But do you want me?”

Willa’s heart pounds, sound filling the room. She can’t look away. Like always, Hannibal knows how to strip her down, how to expose her. Because she does want him. She wants the man who would rub her shoulders after too many hours hunched over books in the library. She wants the man who would hold her tight even though he knew the thoughts in her head. And yes, a part of her wants the monster as well. She wants the man who can kill with expert precision. Who can display those kills with artistry. She knows what horrors lurk in the world, and she knows Hannibal could
guard against them.

She knows she’s not supposed to want him.

And for now, that knowledge is enough.

She also knows that Hannibal is counting on the day where she stops caring about supposed to. When she seizes what’s hers.

“You haven’t taken your ring off,” Hannibal says.

It breaks the spell and she’s able to look away, breathing heavy as she does. “Wore it for you.”

“Trying to distract me from the new man in your life? You’re not very good at deception.”

“I guess not.” She turns to Barney. “I’m finished.”

If he thought the conversation that just transpired was strange, he doesn’t comment on it. He simply opens the doors so she can leave. Willa’s not surprised to see Jack and Chilton waiting on the other side of the door. She’s a little surprised to see Alana.

“You tricked me,” Willa tells Jack as the doors swing shut behind her. “It won’t happen again.”

“Willa,” he starts but she walks past him.

Alana is the only one who dares to catch up to her. “I’m glad to see you,” Alana says, “Even if it’s not under ideal circumstances.”

“Yeah,” Willa says. It is good to see Alana. Good in a way that hurts because Willa’s reminded of the friendships she built and isn’t allowed to have anymore. No contact with anyone from her past life. The only way to survive the future is to leave behind the past.

“I can understand why you left,” Alana says. “And I can understand why you need to start over but be careful.”

Willa slows her steps. Alana’s only ever tried to catch up to her. Only ever tried to be her friend. And Willa hasn’t asked what it’s been like for her. Hannibal was her mentor. Her colleague. Her friend. Selfishly, Willa doesn’t want to know what it’s been like for Alana. She has enough pain of her own without taking on anyone else’s.

“He wanted you broken without him,” Alana says and it cuts even though Willa knows it’s true. “You’re not. You’re happy. You’re moving past him. He’s not going to like that. I don’t know what he can do from in here, but it’s Hannibal. He’s always been resourceful.”

“Thank you,” Willa says. She’ll be on her guard. “I’m hoping never to be back here again, but...I hope things get better for you too.”

Alana smiles. “Working on it. Was what Hannibal said true? You’ve found someone?”

“Don’t,” Willa turns away afraid of what might show on her face. “Don’t ask those questions. If he finds out...” Willa shakes her head. “The less he knows the safer we all are.”

“Okay,” Alana says. “I’ll try to keep Jack from contacting you again. When the trial’s over, maybe we could see each other.”

“The trial won’t ever be over,” Willa says. “He has money and he has good lawyers. The trial’s
“Freddie Lounds is writing a book,” Alana says. “About the two of you. About the veneer of civility and what lurks beneath.”

“Sounds like a bad romance novel,” Willa says.

“I’ll try to keep her away too. Most of it will be speculation. Hannibal isn’t inclined to talk to her. He thinks she’s rude.”

“Rude?” Willa asks. It’s a specific choice of word. “Guess she should be glad Hannibal’s locked up then. He might try to do something about her manners.”

Alana shudders. “As much as I dislike her, I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

Willa has many deaths in mind for Freddie Lounds. None of them involve letting Hannibal kill her. She doesn’t tell Alana that. Instead, she says her goodbyes and changes her plane ticket home. There’s nothing left here for her.
Chapter 20

Willa drives back late at night, and she rolls the windows all the way down so the breeze and the scent of salt air will keep her awake. She’s crossing from the Lower Key into the Upper Key when she hears it. Whimpers carried across the wind.

It’s a good thing there’s no one else on the road because she yanks her car into the breakdown lane and jumps out. She chases the sound until she finds a box by the side of the road. It’s battered and warped from getting wet and drying again. When she rips the box open it’s full of puppies. She counts at least four, maybe five that she can see in the moonlight.

“Hello there,” she says. She lifts the box up. “Did you get left behind?”

The puppies scramble at the sides of the box, trying to get out.

“I’m going to bring you home,” she tells them. “I’ll take care of you.”

She puts the box of puppies on the passenger seat and debates buckling them in before she decides that’s probably not necessary.

“I’m going to find you homes,” Willa promises the puppies. “That home might be with me. We’ll have to see how you get along with Juliet. I hope she’s not allergic.” Is it possible? It would be a cruel twist of fate. Though, given how her life goes, it wouldn’t surprise her if Hannibal passed a dog allergy to Juliet. Hannibal’s not allergic but maybe it’s a recessive gene.

Trust Hannibal to find ways to screw her over even when he’s in jail.

She’s getting ahead of herself. She doesn’t know if Juliet’s allergic to dogs. And if she is, then no dogs.

Willa keeps one eye on the puppies and one eye on the road as she continues on her drive home. She leaves them in the car when she stops outside Cally’s. The house is dark except for a bit of light shining out through the living room.

Willa knocks on the door because she knows Cally isn’t expecting her tonight. “It’s Willa,” she says as she lets herself in.

Cally meets her in the kitchen. “You’re home early.”

“That’s a good thing.”

“Juliet’s asleep,” Cally says. “And after how long it took to get her to sleep you’re not waking her up to bring her back to your place.”


“I have a couch,” Cally says. “And blankets.”

“I’m sleeping in her room.” Willa doesn’t think Hannibal can move quickly enough for them to be in danger tonight, but she’s not taking any risks. “Do you want a puppy?”

“What?”

“I found some on the side of the road,” Willa says. “You want one?”
Cally shakes her head, maybe an answer, maybe just in disbelief.

“I like dogs,” Willa says. “I’m going to put them in my yard. And get my sleeping bag.”

“Alright,” Cally says.

Willa brings the box of puppies back to her house. She uses the pieces from Juliet’s numerous baby gates to make a small fenced in portion of the yard. The puppies will be fine there tonight. Willa sets out bowls of water and some dried food (her boss has a dog he doesn’t always remember to feed). She puts some old towels down too in case they get cold.

“I’ll be back tomorrow morning,” Willa promises. She gets her sleeping bag and returns to Cally’s.

“You want to talk about your visit?” Cally asks.

“No. I want to see my baby, and I want to sleep.”

“Fair enough. If you’re up before me tomorrow you’re making breakfast.”

“Ohkay,” Willa hesitates. “Thanks. For watching her. And not prying.” She clasps Cally on the shoulder and then heads back to the spare room.

She lies down on the floor next to Juliet’s crib and falls asleep to the sound of her daughter breathing.

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Willa starts going to the library every day to check the news and see if there’s any danger coming her way. She adds dog food to her weekly grocery list. Also bananas. Juliet loves them. Well, she loves eating them up until the point that she’s full and then she loves pounding the leftover bananas slices into mush.

She also loves the puppies.

Willa has to be careful because both Juliet and the puppies are prone to overexcitement. Juliet’s gotten better at cruising, and she’s thinking about taking her first steps, and Willa spends a lot of time making sure the puppies don’t knock Juliet over.

She’s down to three puppies now - Huey, Dewey, and Louie. The others were taken in by friends on the island.

Three is a good number.

The house training is coming along nicely. It’s not that difficult to train a dog to piss outside. She’s not looking forward to teaching Juliet how to use a toilet. She doesn't think it’s going to be as easy. She’s going to have to look at some parenting books at some point.

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When Juliet first says ‘da-da’ Willa’s heart stops. It takes a long time to start back up again.

The internet tells her it’s an easy sound to make. To expect to hear a lot of da-da and ba-ba before she hears ma-ma. It doesn’t make it an easier for Willa’s ears to hear her daughter say ‘da-da’ as she explores the world. She says it when she pulls herself up to a standing position, like she’s showing off for her dad. She says it when she fingerpaints with her baby cereal because she decides she doesn’t like the taste anymore. She says it on walks as she points to the dogs and the neighbors
and everything else she sees. Like she’s trying to share her life with someone who isn’t here to see it.

Willa feeds her daughter store bought hot dogs and thinks about taking a picture and sending it to the BSHCI. Wouldn’t that be a headline for Freddie Lounds. Hannibal Lecter breaks out of prison to save his daughter from processed meat.

Juliet loves hot dogs. She likes ketchup even more. It’s particularly good for making messes.

Willa takes pictures but she doesn’t send them to anyone. She hoards them knowing that her daughter gets older every day. Hoards them knowing that good things in her life never last. Hoards them knowing that one day Hannibal will want to see them.

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She’s at the store with Juliet when Carlos, the nephew of one of the guys she works with sprints into the shop. His eyes are wide and his hair is wild and he’s panting like he’s run from one side of the island to the other.

“Mr. Santos!” he says, rushing up to the counter. “Did you hear what happened?”

Willa wanders towards the front of the shop. She hooks her basket on her arm and lets Juliet gnaw on her finger. It hurts. She thinks Juliet might be getting some more teeth.

“No but I expect you’re about to tell me,” Mr. Santos says. Mr. Santos is an elderly man. He inherited the grocer from his father, but he doesn’t have any sons to pass it down to. He claims he’s going to work until the day he dies at the register and then he doesn’t care what happens to the place. Cally thinks he’s an idiot. Willa doesn’t know local politics well enough to weigh in.

“Something killed some crocs! Look!” The boy thrusts a newspaper under Mr. Santos’s nose.

“I need my glasses for this,” Mr. Santos says. He begins the laborious processing of bending down to locate his glasses.

“They think it’s a wolf!” Carlos exclaims.

“They think a red wolf killed a crocodile?” Willa asks.

Carlos holds the newspaper out for her to look at. There are several mutilated crocodile corpses looking back at her. She turns so Juliet can’t see.

“A wolf didn’t do that,” Willa says.

Carlos scoffs, refusing to let her ruin his moment. “A trained wolf did. That’s what they’re saying. I told Mama I wanted to be a wolf tamer and she told me to quit being stupid and sent me down for some mangos.”

“Can I borrow this?” Willa asks, holding her hand out for the paper.

“I guess. You gonna give it back?”

“Come by my place this afternoon,” Willa says. “I’ll give it back and you can play with the puppies for a bit.”

“You think I can train them to fight crocodiles?” Carlos asks.
“No,” Willa says.

She takes the paper and Carlos scurries off, no doubt to tell someone else of his news. She pays for her groceries and then takes Juliet and the newspaper to the library. She gives her groceries to the librarian so she doesn’t get scolded for bringing food to the computers.

She bounces Juliet on her lap as she looks up the crocodile case. A search turns up related cases. Livestock mutilations in Maryland. A trucker killed in Virginia. A couple murdered in South Carolina. And now crocodiles in the Everglades. The professionals can’t agree if the attacks are being done by a wolf or a bear. Some people even speculate that it’s a cave bear despite the fact that they’re extinct.

Everyone agrees that there’s a human behind the animal.

Willa traces the path of the kills. They’re headed her way.

Is it paranoia that she thinks she’s next on the list?

She logs out of the computer and picks up her groceries. She puts them away and builds towers with Juliet until it’s time for her nap.

Once she’s sure Juliet’s asleep she calls Beverly.

“Willa?” Beverly asks when she picks up. “This is a surprise.”

“Are you guys involved with the mutilations?” Willa asks. “The livestock, the crocodiles? And the trucker and the couple?”

Beverly pauses. Willa can hear Price and Zeller chatting in the background, but she can’t make out any words. “You know I can’t talk about ongoing investigations.”

“No animal could make the wounds the victims suffer from,” Willa says.

Beverly sighs. “Alana made it very clear that we weren’t supposed to ask you for help.”

“You’re not,” Willa says. “I’m asking you for help.”

“A cave bear is the only animal that meets the bite radius,” Beverly says. “But, even if you set aside the whole extinct thing, it doesn’t match up. The bite radius fits but it wouldn’t have the strength to make these kinds of wounds.”

Willa leans against her kitchen counter. “What about a mechanical cave bear skull?”

“If someone built one? Ah, shit. We interviewed someone who constructs fossils. He seemed weird but not like he was building a kill suit weird.”

“Has he been missing work recently?” Willa looks out her window at where the puppies are scuffling over a knotted towel that somehow has become their favorite toy. It’s good for tug-of-war and good for catch.

“Give me a sec,” Beverly says. “Why’s this case caught your eye?”

Because Hannibal threatened to have my imaginary boyfriend killed and there’s now a killer making his way from Maryland to where I live in Florida, she thinks. She doesn’t say that. “One of the local kids thinks he can train my puppies to kill crocodiles. I’m trying to persuade him not to.”

Willa hears the phone changing hands then a tentative, “Hello?”

“Hey Price,” Willa says.

“Willa!” He instantly perks up. “Hey, Z, it’s Willa! You giving us a hand with our case? I’m putting you on speaker.”

There’s a crackle and then Zeller says, “Hey, Willa!”

Willa smiles even though they can’t see her. “Hey. You guys been busy, then?”

“Busier than we’d like,” Zeller says. “Did Bev say you’ve got puppies?”

“Yeah. Three of them.”

“You’re busy too then,” Price says.

“Yeah,” Willa says.

“Okay,” Beverly says, her voice far away but getting closer. “I just got off the phone with Randall Tier’s boss. He hasn’t been to work since we interviewed him.”

Randall Tier, Willa thinks. She’s got a name. It’s not going to help her much. But it does confirm what she thought - this isn’t an animal making its way south. It’s a person. And she’s pretty sure she knows the next target.

“We’re setting up an interview with his parents,” Beverly says. “We have to go.”

“Of course,” Willa says. She feels a bit of an ache as she imagines them running around getting themselves ready to pile into the car and head off to investigate a lead. But she put that life behind her. Had to. “Let me know if you find anything.”

Willa gets off the phone and makes a few arrangements of her own.

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“You never want to be social,” Cally says as she lets Willa and Juliet into the house. “So forgive me for being suspicious but what prompted this?”

Juliet’s in her pajamas, ones that cover her feet and has a fish dangling on a line with the words *I’m a catch* underneath it. She stifles a yawn with her hand like maybe no one will see it and put her down for bed.

“The trip home,” Willa says, “Made me realize I needed to make some friends here.”

There’s a long silence.

“Home?” Cally asks.


“Uh huh,” Cally says, not convinced. “You staying here, tonight? That one,” she points at Juliet, “is going to fall asleep and you know she doesn’t like being moved after she’s fallen asleep.”
“If you don’t mind,” Willa says. Even with her back to Cally she can feel the older woman’s suspicion.

“You never give in that easy,” Cally says. “What’s going on?”

“I’m being more social,” Willa says. “You should be encouraging me.”

“I’m letting you and your rascal stay at my house,” Cally says. “Isn’t that encouragement enough?”

“Rascal?” Willa asks. She looks at Juliet. “What do you think, Juliet? Are you a rascal?”

Juliet tries to cram her fist in her mouth.

“I think she’s offended,” Willa says.

“There are beers in the fridge,” Cally says. “You can have one. Juliet can’t.”

“Ha ha,” Willa says.

~*~*~*~*~*~

It’s a night of cards and drinking and local gossip. Willa puts Juliet down at eight, and she falls asleep almost instantly. It’s Willa who can’t settle, unable to sit still as they sit around in the living room, unable to focus enough on her cards to play the game right.

“I thought you were supposed to be sharp,” Alejandro says.

Willa sees car lights through the window and holds her breath until the car drives past the house.

“Why are you complaining?” Kayla asks. “You’re no longer the worst card player here.”

“Shut your mouth,” Alejandro says.

Kayla raises her beer to him and takes a long swallow. “Alright. Done being quiet. Did you enjoy those few seconds?”

Cally laughs. “Best few seconds since the last time he had his dick out.”

More laughter. Even Willa smiles as Alejandro splutters and then sulks.

It’s nearing ten o’clock when Willa’s puppies start barking. She’d left them at home, her early warning signal in case what she feared was going to happen. But just because she didn’t hide them away with Juliet doesn’t mean she doesn’t care about their safety.

“Holy shit,” Alejandro says as the puppies continue to bark, almost hysterical. “You forget to feed them?”

The barking tapers off to a whine. Willa turns to Cally. She feels surprisingly calm. Centered. This won’t be the first time she kills someone. “Where’s your shotgun?” she asks.

Everyone’s staring at her. Willa doesn’t have the time for that. Someone’s here. Randall Tier. He’s come for Willa’s family. That was a mistake on his part.

“Willa,” Cally begins.

“I’m just going to take a look around,” Willa says. “See what’s gotten the dogs bothered. I need
your shotgun. Alejandro, I need your car keys.”

“Woah,” he says. “Is that necessary?”

Willa holds her hand out. He grumbles but hands his keys over. Cally retrieves her shotgun.

“Willa-”

“Get Juliet and get out if you need to,” Willa says. She takes the shotgun and checks to make sure it’s loaded. She has an idea of what’s waiting out there for her, but she’s not sure she’s going to win in a fight against a man who thinks he’s a prehistoric predator.

There’s no doubt, though, that she’s going to fight.

“What do you think is out there?” Cally asks. There’s uncharacteristic fear in her voice.

Willa fishes her phone out of her pocket and tosses it over. “If you’re in trouble, call Chiyoh. Tell her what happened. She’ll come and get Juliet.”

“Willa!” Cally calls but Willa ignores her. She strides towards the front door, pausing when she spies the the knife Cally uses to gut the fish they ate for dinner. Willa swipes it off the counter and puts it in one of her cargo pants pocket.

She goes out to the driveway. The puppies are quiet. Willa actually finds that comforting. They’d be making a lot of noise if they were being attacked. She still has time. She chose Alejandro’s car because it has an open top. It means she can stand on the driver’s seat as she turns it on.

The headlights flare to life, and they catch the creature lurking outside Willa’s house. The thing - person - turns, hideous and horrifying mask on his shoulders. Willa doesn’t hesitate. She lifts the shotgun and fires. The recoil jars her shoulder, but she lands her shot. It hits Tier in the shoulder and he jerks back. He throws his head back and howls before he drops to all fours and charges at her.

The gunshot wound doesn’t appear to be stopping him.

Willa manages to reload and get another shot off before she has to abandon her position on the car. And the shotgun. She tosses it back towards the house and then leaps off the car and leads Tier away from Cally’s house. Away from Juliet.

She gets back to the road. The headlights are in her eyes now, and Tier is a looming shadow as he rises to his feet before her. No more crawling for him. He’s still got the enhanced skull and claws on his hands. Willa wonders if it’s too much to hope that he’ll bleed out before he can reach her.

“Did Hannibal send you?” Willa asks. “Did he send you to kill me?”

Tier growls and launches himself at her. Willa dives out of the way and then leaps on his back. She gets her arm around his neck in a chokehold. He bucks and thrashes beneath her. He’s stronger than he looks. He throws her off of him and she lands on the hard packed dirt and rolls.

He’s on her in a second, knees digging into her thighs, pinning her to the ground. His claws sink into her stomach and she screams as they cut into her. She scrabbles for the knife she got as Tier leans in, snapping his teeth. She can’t let him kill her. If he kills her then there’s nothing standing between him and Juliet.

Hannibal isn’t going to win.
He isn’t going to destroy her family.

She promised him she would kill if her family was threatened.

And right now? Her family is being threatened.

She gets the knife if her hands and brings it up, thrusting it into Tier’s abdomen. She yanks it up, gutting him like she’d gut a deer. See? Hobbs asks as she rips the knife through flesh. See?

Tier gurgles and collapses on top of her.

Willa’s breaths come short and harsh, and her vision swims. She doesn’t let herself pass out. She’s not done yet. Juliet’s still not safe. They’re not safe.

“Holy shit!” Alejandro.

“Willa?” Cally calls.

Willa groans. Tier is bleeding on top of her. She’s pretty sure his intestines are pressed against her stomach. She still has his claws in her.

She hears Cally reload the shotgun.

“He’s dead,” Willa says. Talking hurts. “I need you to call someone.”

“An ambulance?” Cally asks.

“Jack Crawford. Look in my contacts.”

“You need an ambulance.” Cally’s voice is getting closer. And also further away.

Willa clings to consciousness. “Jack.”

“Stubborn,” Cally mutters. She kneels down next to Willa, phone in one hand and shotgun in the other. “There’s a dead freak on you.”


“Fucking hell,” Cally says. She holds Willa’s phone to her ear.

“Jack Crawford,” Jack’s gruff voice greets.

“Hey Jack.”

“Willa. Beverly told me you were getting involved in a case we’re on. I thought you were out.”

The bones and ridges of his cave bear skull are digging into her cheek. Its claws have sunk into her flesh, and she can feel her pulse thudding around the intrusion. Laughter gurgles up in her throat. “Randall Tier appears to have had some...psychological issues. Patient of Dr. Lecter?”

“Yes,” Jack says. Then. “You’ve met him?”

“He came after me,” Willa says. “I need a hospital. Local police are going to be crawling over the scene soon. Thought I’d give you a heads up. Chance to tell them it’s your case.”

“Are you alright?” Jack asks.
“Been better.” She hears sirens. Someone inside must’ve called for help. “Tier’s dead. I’ve got to go. My ride’s almost here.” She takes the phone from Cally and hangs up. She leaves smears of blood on the keypad. “I need someone to get Juliet out of the neighborhood. To clear out my house.” She lets her head loll to the side. She can barely make out Cally’s expression in the dark. “You get what I’m saying?”

“We’ll take care of her,” Cally promises. “Who’s going to take care of you?”

“Some doctor or another,” Willa says. Responsibilities taken care of, she begins to float. “Doctors like me. I married one, you know. He has a...unique take on ‘do no harm’,”

Cally leaves her side, and Willa’s left with Randall Tier. She manages to cling to consciousness until the paramedics show up. They take one look at the scene and one of them says, “Holy fucking shit.” Another throws up. Willa laughs until she passes out.

~*~*~*~*~*~

She wakes up in a hospital bed.

“...It came to a stop just over them and for some minutes, the driver looked down with a steady expressionless gaze to where they were sitting, and didn’t speak. Then he turned his head and muttered something to the other two and they got out. One was a fat boy in black trousers and a red sweat shirt with a silver stallion embossed on the front of it .”

Willa smiles, recognizing the voice and the story. “A fat boy?” she asks, opening her eyes to see Alana sitting by her bed. “Must be Flannery O’Connor.”

Alana smiles as she closes her book, marking the page with her finger. “I’m glad you woke up when you did. I forgot what this one is about.”

“A Good Man is Hard to Find ?” Willa guesses. “It’s about a fat boy. And murder.”

“Yeah.” Alana’s smile is soft but fragile, like it might vanish at any moment.

Willa looks down at herself. There’s a blanket pulled up high but underneath the blanket her torso is wrapped in gauze. She should be hurting. She isn’t. Must be the drugs.

“I killed a man last night,” Willa says.

“You did,” Alana agrees.

“Hannibal’ll be disappointed when he realizes Tier didn’t get the job done. Ironic because Tier was sent after me, because I disappointed Hannibal.”

“I met some of your neighbors,” Alana says. “I’m glad you’re making friends.”

“I shot and gutted a man in front of them last night,” Willa says. “Not sure if they’re still my friends.”

“Randall Tier ransacked your house,” Alana says. “At least, that’s what it looked like. I don’t
know what he did with what he took.”

That must mean someone cleaned her house of baby stuff. Willa lets herself relax, relieved. “I can buy new stuff. I haven’t been using my bank account, because I didn’t want Hannibal to track me, but he knew where I was anyways.”

“He tricked Frederick’s secretary into giving him your address,” Alana says. “She’s been fired.”

“And Hannibal?”

“Had his drawing materials taken away.”

Willa laughs. Her husband tried to have her killed from prison and he lost his charcoal.

“Jack wants to talk to you,” Alana says. “I can stall him if you’d like.”

Willa shakes her head. “Send him in.” She wants this over with as soon as possible.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

I just wanted to issue a quick apology - normally I answer comments the night before I post, but I spent the evening (and early morning) watching election coverage and didn’t get to it. I appreciate everyone who left a comment on the last chapter, and I hope you enjoy this one.

Willa’s anxious during her hospital stay. There’s nothing to do but think. She wants her baby. She wants to cradle Juliet and make sure she’s okay. She wants to get back to her life. She forces herself to stay checked into the hospital until Jack and his team leave. She knows she’d give away her secret if she was out. She chokes down hospital food, rolls her eyes at well-meaning nurses, and heals until the FBI leaves and the island is her own again.

She checks out and goes straight to Cally’s.

“Where is she?” Willa asks, voice rough. She has to lean against the doorway. Getting here took more out of her than she was expecting.

“Kayla has her,” Cally says. “Come on.”

She doesn’t tell Willa to rest, doesn’t suggest another day or two of recovery. Probably doesn’t dare to. Willa doesn’t know how much of the fight her friends saw, but they definitely saw the aftermath.

Alejandro’s on the front porch of the house, and he crosses himself when he sees her.

Willa ignores him and goes inside. Juliet’s in her high chair grinding grapes to a pulp. She looks up at the door opens.

“Mama!” she exclaims, and Willa lifts her out of the high chair and hugs her tight even though Juliet’s knees press against her recent injuries.


Juliet doesn’t answers. She wraps her arms tight around Willa’s neck and doesn’t let go.

“It’s going to be okay,” Willa promises. “We’re going to be fine. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Willa spends a week in her house with her daughter and her dogs, and she doesn’t see anyone and doesn’t leave once. She eats all her emergency stashes of canned food and all the fish she had in the freezer. She eventually emerges because she needs to go shopping and because she knows she can’t spend the rest of her life hidden away.

And because there’s no reason to hide. She fought the beast and emerged victorious. She’s gone up against Hobbs, against Stammets and Budge and now Tier. she feels reckless, invincible. She can handle anyone Hannibal sends her way.
Anyone but Hannibal himself.

A bit of her pride recedes at the thought of Hannibal intruding on her island. Would he kill her for hiding Juliet from him? Or would he be pleased that she defended their family against Tier? Budge had been a test to see if she was worthy of being his wife. Maybe Tier was a test to see if she was worthy of being a mother.

Only, he doesn’t know about Juliet.

If he did then it would’ve been him who showed up not Tier.

Part of her wishes it had been him.

Raising a kid by herself is hard. And beyond that, she misses him. She knows she shouldn’t. Knows he’s a murderer and a cannibal, that he doesn’t kill out of necessity or self-defense. He doesn’t even kill like she does, to protect what she cares about. He kills because he wants to, because he feels that people are beneath him and that gives him the right to take life when he sees fit. She shouldn’t be able to forgive what he does. Shouldn’t be able to accept it.

She wants to.

She wants to go up to Baltimore and bring Juliet to see him. She wants to hold her daughter up to the glass in his cell and ask him how he would’ve felt if Tier had killed their daughter.

She wants to watch him break out, wants to watch him escape so he can be with her.

She wants the vineyard in France - a place Juliet can grow up and they can have as many dogs as they want.

She wants to go back in time. She wants Hannibal to have not turned himself in.

That’s when she knows she’s in trouble.

If she’s dreaming of a world with time travel then why not go back before she met Hannibal? Why not go back to before Hannibal became himself? Because part of her loves the monster. Because she knows she can’t love him without loving all of him and she does. Because she knows what horrors haunt the world and she knows her family stands a better chance if it has two parents standing watch.

No.

She protected herself and Juliet from Tier. Hannibal will be monitored closely to make sure he doesn’t send anyone else her way. Willa doesn’t need him. Juliet doesn’t. They’re going to survive, going to thrive, while Hannibal rots in the BSHCI.

Willa drives to the store because she knows she’s going to buy a lot of things. Partly because she’s emptied her house. And partly because she now has money to spend. Part of it is hers. Most of it is Hannibal’s. She knows it won’t hurt him if she spends his money carelessly. She still feels a thrill at the thought of it.

She fills a cart.

Mr. Santos looks surprised when she pushes it to the counter. “Is your company still here?”

“They’re not my company,” Willa says. She sees Carlos hovering near the door. His hands are
tucked behind his back like he recently got his knuckles rapped. Bothering Mr. Santos again then.
She smiles at the boy. “You busy right now?”

Carlos shakes his head, eyes wide as he stares at her.

“If you help me with my groceries you can get yourself an ice cream,” she says.

Carlos scurries off to pick the ice cream bar he wants.

“You’ll spoil him,” Mr. Santos scolds.

“I could use the help,” Willa says. “I’m not supposed to be doing any heavy lifting.”

“Alejandro says a beast emerged from the shadows and you battled,” Mr. Santos says.

“Something like that.”

Willa pays and leaves. She and Carlos load up the car, and he eats his ice cream on the drive to her house. Unfortunately, he finishes as they set to unpacking and with nothing to keep his mouth busy he talks.

“You killed the crocodile killer,” Carlos says. “Was it a wolf?”

“Nope.” Willa puts Juliet in her exersaucer to make sure she doesn’t run off.

“Was it a bear?”

“Nope.”

“The nice lady said it was a person who built himself a bear suit.”

“Something like that,” Willa says. She puts everything that needs to be stored in the refrigerator or freezer away. She pauses. “Which nice lady? Brown hair or black hair?”

Carlos looks at her funny. “Red hair. She gave me a chocolate bar. I wanted ice cream but she didn’t buy it. So not as nice as you.”

“Red hair?” Willa asks. Her stomach fills with dread. “Curly?”

Carlos nods. “She wanted to talk about you. Said you were a hero. Said she’d give me a picture of the bear-guy to put up on my wall.”

Willa shuts her freezer. She picks Juliet up out of her exersaucer. “When did you talk to her?”

“A couple days ago maybe? I dunno. She’s at the campground. Jorge got a look at her in the showers.”

“Stop peeking at women in the showers,” Willa says. She doesn’t have time for a more detailed lecture. She hurries across the street to Cally. “I need you to watch Juliet.” She thrusts the baby into Cally’s arms. “I’ll be back.”

She ushers Carlos back into her car and drops him off at the grocer before going to the KOA. It’s not hard to find the cabin Freddie’s staying in.

Willa shoves the door open. It swings into the wall, making a loud crack.
Freddie looks up at her computer. She doesn’t startle at the sound. Doesn’t look surprised to see Willa. Her lips curve up into a smug smile.

“House visit? What did I do to deserve this? Wait a moment, let me start my recorder. An exclusive interview with the woman who put down Randall Tier. Is it true that your husband Hannibal Lecter sent him to kill you?”

Willa closes the door. If she kills Freddie she doesn’t want any witnesses.

“What are you doing here?” Willa demands.

“Chasing a story,” Freddie says. “And boy did I find more than I thought I would. Some good exclusives for my book. *Wining and Dining: A Date with the Chesapeake Ripper*. Good, right?”

Willa didn’t bring her knife or her gun with her. She looks around the room for a weapon to use. Her hands will work in a pinch. Or the sheets. She can twist them then wrap them around Freddie’s neck. Pin her to the ground and stare her in the eyes as Willa chokes the life out of her. It has its appeal.

“You want to tell me about your first date? Did he cook for you?”

“I’m not answering your questions,” Willa says.

Freddie shrugs. “Worth a try. Though, maybe you’ll answer this one. Did you know you were pregnant when you ran away to Florida?”

The world goes still around her, everything slowing down until it feels like time isn’t passing. Willa knew when Carlos told her there was a woman with red hair skulking about the island that Freddie knew. Freddie Lounds has a knack for sticking her nose where it doesn’t belong. Willa would cut it off if she could.

She stops herself before she can imagine killing Freddie again. She can’t kill the woman. Juliet can’t grow up without both her parents. Which means damage control.

“Personally, I think no,” Freddie says. “If you knew then you would’ve gone somewhere no one could find you.”

“You think there’s anywhere in the world he wouldn’t find me?” Willa asks.

Freddie’s eyes sharpen. She thinks she’s going to get a story. “He doesn’t know. He wouldn’t have sent Randall Tier after you if he did.”

Willa picks up Freddie’s recorder. “Is your conversation with Carlos on here?”

“Maybe,” Freddie says.

Willa drops it on the floor and grinds it to pieces with her shoe.

“Hey!” Freddie says. “You can’t do that!”

“Do you have pictures of my daughter?” Willa asks.

Freddie, to her credit, does her best not to look afraid. “I wouldn’t tell you if I did.”

“Then I’m going to destroy every piece of electronic equipment in this room,” Willa says. She looks Freddie dead in the eye so Freddie knows how serious she’s being. She once told Freddie it
wasn’t smart to piss off a woman who thinks about killing people for a living. The sentiment is still true.

“Wait!” Freddie says. She clutches her computer to her chest like that will protect it. Like Willa isn’t capable of ripping it from her grasp. “No pictures. I swear. Carlos told me that you have a baby. A daughter. Juliet. That’s all I know. I tried poking around but people here are very protective of you.”

Willa’s smile is sharp. “They are. You can’t tell anyone about Juliet.”

Freddie laughs. “Are you kidding? This is the biggest scoop since - since I don’t even know!”

“Not kidding,” Willa says. “You’re a pain in the ass, but you’re not stupid. Which means you know Hannibal doesn’t know about Juliet. Because if he knew then he wouldn’t be locked up right now. He’d’ve escaped. I’ve done my part to keep him from hurting anyone else. You give him a reason to break out and all those deaths are on you.”

Freddie doesn’t look all that concerned.

Willa sighs. “You want an exclusive?” she asks.

Freddie looks wary but she sits up straight. “You know that’s not even a question.”

“I will tell you everything you want to know,” Willa says. This is reckless. But not as reckless as waiting for Randall Tier to come after her. Or maybe it is. “But it gets published posthumously.”

“Your death or mine?” Freddie asks. She’s smiling like she thinks this is a joke.

Willa’s expression doesn’t change. “Hannibal’s. Or you can be sure your death will be quick to follow.”

Freddie blinks but doesn’t back down. Instead, she smirks and pulls a new recorder out of her bag. “You going to smash this one too?”

Willa turns her back. “I married Hannibal Lecter.”

“Anyone with a newspaper knows that,” Freddie says. “Did you know he was the Chesapeake Ripper when you married him?”

“No. In hindsight, a lot of things now make sense. But I didn’t know when I married him. I didn’t know until the dinner with Jack Crawford when Hannibal turned himself in.”

“Jack Crawford bent the rules for you, because he thought you were the best profiler around. You’re telling me you didn’t suspect anything?”

“Did I suspect that the charming psychiatrist and former surgeon that Jack asked to work the Minnesota Shrike case was the Chesapeake Ripper? No.” Willa thinks back to that day - breakfast in her motel room, lunch in his, going after Hobbs. “I’m pretty sure he fed me a sandwich with Cassie Boyle in it.” She looks over her shoulder. Smiles.

“Times like these makes me glad I’m a vegetarian. You want to give me a quote on what human flesh tastes like?”

“Not something I try to think about too much,” Willa says. “I don’t eat much meat anymore. Only eat fish that I catch and gut myself.”
“You were telling me how Dr. Lecter duped you,” Freddie says.

“Is it any wonder everyone hates you?” Willa asks.

Freddie offers up an angelic smile.

“It never once occurred to me that Hannibal might be the Chesapeake Ripper,” Willa says. “And when your mind - subconsciously or otherwise decides something…” Willa shrugs. “There were clues, hints, things that would have me asking questions if it was anyone else. But it wasn’t. It was Hannibal. Who had box seats to the opera and a standing order at a cheese shop. You pride yourself on your investigative skills. Did you see anything?”

“Not my job,” Freddie says.

“No, I suppose it wasn’t.” Willa wanders over to the window that faces the ocean. Her fingers play with the curtains, and she’s reminded of being in therapy. She laughs. “I knew he was dangerous. Knew that something lurked beneath the three piece suits and his manners and accent. That was part of the appeal. I’ve spent my life profiling and catching killers. I know what horrors lurk in suburban neighborhoods and outside truck stops. I wanted a strong family. One I could protect and that could protect me.”

Willa knows it’s dangerous to tell Freddie everything. She knows she’s going to anyways. It feels...good to tell everything all the thoughts that have been swirling around in her head. And she knows that if Freddie dares to publish any of this then Hannibal will break out of the BSHCI and kill her.

“I protected Abigail Hobbs,” Willa says. “I protected her from her father, from Eldon Stammets.” Willa cuts a sharp glance in Freddie’s direction. “From you. It wasn’t enough. I was detained by Jack. Hannibal was detained by you. And Abigail died. Hannibal would’ve killed for her if you hadn’t been lurking. Abigail never would’ve been in danger if you weren’t so desperate for a story.”

“You’re still holding a grudge?” Freddie asks.

Willa’s smile, when it comes, isn’t friendly. “Revenge is a dish best served cold. And yes, that is a cannibalism joke. But inaccurate. Hannibal would never serve meat cold. Well, in some cases, I supposes. Maybe he’ll make sandwich meat out of you like he did Cassie Boyle.”

“You’re seriously disturbed,” Freddie tells her.

“The man I loved and married turned out to be the serial killer I’d been chasing for over a year. That kind of thing can mess a person up.”

“You were telling me you fell in love over Garret Jacob Hobbs’s cooling body.”

Willa laughs. “I wasn’t. That isn’t when we fell in love. That’s when I considered the possibility of having a family. When I first considered Hannibal being a part of my family. That wasn’t about love. It was about survival. Love came later.” She walks over to Freddie’s desk. “Did you cover the Tobias Budge case? The human cello?”

“I did. Another on duty kill for you. You’ve racked up quite a number of those. I’m surprised no one worried.”

“I worried,” Willa says. “Hannibal set it up. He sent me after Budge knowing that Budge was dangerous. Knowing that Budge would try to kill anyone who suspected him. It was a test. It went
better than even Hannibal could’ve planned. Budge didn’t kill me but he did escaped. Escaped to kill Hannibal. I showed up in the office while they were trying to choke each other to death. One bullet and I put Budge down. I saved Hannibal’s life. That’s probably one of the thoughts keeping him sane while he waits for the trial. I unknowingly saved the life of the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Hannibal Lecter is going for an insanity defense,” Freddie says.

“He’s not insane,” Willa says. “But he’s smart enough to make everyone believe he is. He can’t die. It would ruin the plan. He proposed to me the night I killed Budge. We made out in the midst of a crime scene while we were waiting for EMTs. Then when we were in bed talking about how I killed to protect him he proposed. Very romantic.” She smirks even though the recorder won’t catch it.

“That’s disturbing on so many levels,” Freddie says.

“It gets worse,” Willa says. “But you don’t need all the details.” How Willa dug her fingers in the cuts and bruises Budge left behind. How she made Hannibal hers again. How she wished she’d taken longer to kill Budge. How she wished she’d made him pay for every mark he left on her Hannibal.

“You made out at the crime scene,” Freddie repeats. “That didn’t clue you into something being weird about him?”

“I kissed him first,” Willa says. Another smirk. “I thought his weird matched my weird. You’ve written ad nauseum about how I’m insane, how there’s something wrong with me, how I’m not like normal people. I’m not. And in Hannibal I’d found someone who not only could see me for who I was but loved me anyways. Who loved me because of who I was. It’s an addicting feeling.”

“Again, you didn’t think there was something weird going on?”

“I didn’t care,” Willa says. “I figured he’d killed someone at some point in his life. He would’ve killed Budge if I hadn’t made it there in time. Self-defense. But, after some thought, I think he was the one who killed Franklyn, not Budge. Definitely not self-defense. But I’d killed people. Hobbs, Stammets, Budge. How could I judge him for doing what I’d done?”

“You had a badge,” Freddie says.

“And that makes murder justified?” Willa shakes her head. “I imagine if you ask Hannibal then he’d tell you how each of his murders were justified. Because he wanted to would be enough of a reason for him. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. We got engaged. Then we got married. Had a honeymoon.”

“Played at being normal.”

Willa shrugs. “Maybe. I fell more in love. We talked about having children. He...quite liked the idea.”

Freddie makes a face.

“The day I found out I called him to tell him to make something special for dinner. I wanted to celebrate. He’d already invited Jack over for dinner. I didn’t tell him about the baby. I figured I could tell him after Jack left or the next morning. I didn’t realize what he was planning.”

“The Last Supper,” Freddie says. “You think he still would’ve gone through with it?”
“No,” Willa says. “He’d already revealed himself as the Ripper - already staged Matthew Brown’s body and left Miram Lass as a witness - but he wouldn’t have stayed to get caught. He would’ve found me and we would’ve left.”

“And you would’ve gone with him?”

Willa’s thought about it a lot. About how things could’ve gone differently. If she’d gotten pregnant earlier. If she’d told him over the phone instead of wanting to do it in person. If, if, if. Pointless.

“I wouldn’t have had a choice,” Willa says. “But enough time with him, and I would forgive him. It’s why he turned himself in. I told him once that I didn’t think the Ripper would be caught until I was ready. The Ripper - Hannibal - he’s like anyone else, He wants to be known. Understood. Seen. And I’m...uniquely qualified to do that.” Willa taps her head. “He turned himself in because he thought I was ready. Because he thought I would accept him. That even if it didn’t happen in the first week or even month that eventually I would come to him. He would break out. We’d run off somewhere.”

“That’s not what happened,” Freddie says, stating the obvious.

“I was pregnant. I was pregnant and my husband was a serial killing cannibal. So I ran away.” Willa looks around Freddie’s cabin. “Apparently not far enough. I wanted my daughter to have a chance at being normal. Though, I guess given her parents that probably won’t happen. I knew what Hannibal did was wrong. And I knew that if I stayed nearby then I would begin to see him. And that he would see me. No cell would hold him if he knew he had a child. It’s why I’ve been lying low. Why you can’t tell anyone anything that I’m telling you.”

Freddie rolls her eyes. “Yes, we’ve been over this already. I hope he gets the death penalty. My book will sell much better with these quotes.”

Willa doesn’t dignify that with a response.

“Do you really think you can keep Juliet a secret forever?” Freddie asks.

Willa doesn’t snap at her because it’s not meant to try and go back on their agreement. It’s an honest question.

“No,” Willa says. “And the longer I do keep her a secret the more angry he’ll be with me when he finds out. But I do anyways. I keep hoping common sense with assert itself. Really, I should move again. He knows where I live. You know where I live. It’s not safe anymore.”

“But you’re not going to leave,” Freddie says.

“No, I’m not.”

A beat of silence.

“You want him to find you,” Freddie says.

“I’ve always wanted a family,” Willa says.

“Yes, very touching, but why not anyone else in the world? Someone who doesn’t kill people and then eat them? He’s a killer.”

“So am I,” Willa reminds her. “So is Jack Crawford. So are a lot of people. Once you start making excuses to justify murder then how can you be outraged when people make up their own? If
murmurs. "Advocating for murder, Freddie? You’re just like us. Surgeons, journalists, and law enforcement. 5, 6, and 7."

"A bunch of psychopaths helping each other out," Freddie murmurs.

"Now you’re getting it," Willa says.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who’s been with me during my first foray into the Hannibal fandom. I hope you all enjoyed reading the story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Willa doesn’t worry about spending Hannibal’s money anymore. He clearly knows where she’s living. It doesn’t matter if there’s a credit card trail. She’s careful not to buy anything baby related with her card, but she does buy herself a boat.

A nice boat.

Cally whistles when she sees it in the marina.

“In case I need to run,” Willa says.

“He’s going to get the death penalty,” Cally says.

Willa isn’t surprised that Cally’s figured out who her husband is. She is surprised that Cally’s still talking to her.

“He’ll escape if that’s the case,” Willa says.

Cally hands a copy of Tattlecrime over. The front page is a picture of Hannibal kneeling at Abigail Hobbs’s side, hands wrapped around her throat to keep her from bleeding out. Willa’s kneeling next to him, blood splattered across her face, her glasses, her clothes. She’s staring at Hannibal in awe. There’s a little bit of envy there too. Garret Jacob Hobbs’s is slumped in the corner, bullet wounds obvious.

**Love at First Kill** the headline reads.

Willa doesn’t know where Freddie got this picture. She isn’t surprised by the article, even though she’d told Freddie that isn’t where she first fell in love with Hannibal. Freddie’s not allowed to tell the truth so she’s going with fiction. Willa flips the tabloid open. It’s a timeline of cases, a timeline of her and Hannibal’s relationship. The snippets are brief, the pictures are gruesome. More detail is promised in Freddie’s upcoming book.

“She does know how to turn a profit,” Willa says.

“You should run now,” Cally says.

“He’s chased me out of my life once,” Willa says. “I’m not going to let him do it again.”

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A month later there’s a Tattlecrime article with a picture from the aftermath of Randall Tier’s murder.

**A Dangerous Affair** the headline boasts.
The article is garbage. It’s about Willa’s supposed lover and Hannibal’s jealously. There are pictures from Willa in the hospital room. Freddie says she tried to interview Hannibal to see if he wanted Willa dead or just her lover. Hannibal refused the interview.

Willa gets a copy of the article mailed to her with a sticky note that says you’re welcome in Freddie’s looping letters.

Willa, once again, regrets that she can’t kill the woman. She can’t risk Juliet being left on her own. She’s tempted though.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Juliet’s just had her second birthday when Willa gets a phone call from Jack.

“This is a bad one,” he says. “We need your help. We don’t want to ask for Dr. Lecter’s. We’re calling him the Tooth Fairy. He’s killing families in their homes. Perfect families. We don’t know why. And we don’t know how he’s choosing them.”


“Families!” Jack says. “There are kids being murdered in their beds.”

“A piece of free advice,” she says, “He doesn’t like being called the Tooth Fairy.”

She hangs up.

Jack doesn’t call her back.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Willa’s keeps a gun in her bedside drawer ever since Randall Tier. She keeps the drawer locked, because she and Juliet share a room. Share a bed. She knows the parenting magazines think children should have their own beds, their own rooms, their own space.

The parenting magazines aren’t writing articles for people like Willa. Mothers who have had to fight off threats before and know she’ll have to do it again.

The dogs get sick. All three of them.

Willa brings them to the vet. She’s told they ate something bad, and they’ll need to stay overnight. Willa has no idea what they could’ve eaten that makes them sick. Willa’s the one that feeds them.

She sleeps restlessly without the dogs. Something doesn’t feel right.

She’s awake when she hears the front door open.

She pulls her gun out of the drawer. She looks at Juliet, curled up, blankets clutched to her chin. She puts the gun in her waistband. She walks on quiet feet to her bedroom door. She locks it. She doesn’t know who is here, and she knows a lock won’t hold them long, but it’ll hold long enough.

She scoops Juliet out of bed and goes into the bathroom. She locks this door too and then opens the bathroom window. She climbs out, still clutching Juliet to her chest. She sneaks to the front of the house and then starts down the road. She keeps her steps slow, soft, even though the beat of her heart demands that she runs. She can’t afford to make any noise. Can’t afford to draw the wrath of whatever’s entered her house.
She’s about three hundred feet from the house when she hears a roar. It’s human but not. It echoes through the neighborhood.

Whatever came for her knows she’s not home.

She starts running.

Juliet wakes up when Willa gets closer to town.

“Shh,” Willa says.

She doesn’t look behind her. Doesn’t look to see if she’s being followed.

She has one goal.

Make it to the marina.

She does. She gets onto the boat and gets the engine running. She puts Juliet down below, puts her back in bed and tells her to stay there. Juliet nods sleepily. Her eyes close as soon as she’s on the bed.

Willa goes back up top. She unties the rope tethering the boat to the dock. She sees a shape running up the dock as she puts distance between her and the shore. The figure raises his arm.

Gun, Willa thinks.

She takes her own out, fires.

The shape jerks back. Recovers and fires on her. The bullet hits the water. Willa shoots again. She misses this time. The shape returns fire. The bullet grazes Willa’s arm. She hisses. Takes one final shot then cranks the engine higher.

Her boat travels into the ocean.

The shape doesn’t follow.

Willa stays on deck for a long time to make sure they’re safe. Once she’s done with that, she goes to slap a bandage on her arm. The wound’s not bad. She bites back a cry when she disinfects it.

She sits at Juliet’s side as she pulls out her cell phone, the one she keeps stashed on the boat. It only has one number programmed into it.

She knows who came after her. She knows why. And she knows what she has to do.

She runs her hand through Juliet’s hair as her phone rings.

“It’s Willa,” Willa says as soon as the person on the other line picks up. “I need your help.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

Willa’s second phone call is to Jack.

“Do you know what time it is?” he demands when he picks up.

“You’ve got my help,” Willa says. “Get someone down to the marina near my house. There’ll be blood. That’ll give you the identity of your Tooth Fairy.”
“Shit,” Jack says. “Are you sure?”

“Enough that I’m on the case. It’s going to take me a day or two to reach you. I’m on a boat. Had to make an interesting escape. I’ll call you again when I’m on dry land.”

“You’re okay?” Jack asks.

A little late in the conversation to be asking that. Willa laughs. “Tired of people trying to kill me, Jack. I think after this case I’m going to disappear for good. No cell phone. No credit card. No lingering connections. I’m going to find someplace safe.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

Willa meets Chiyoh off the coast of Maryland.

“The boat is stocked to last for months,” Willa says as she lets the woman on board. “You should - you should head for Europe. See if Hannibal’s aunt and uncle feel like raising a child.”

Chiyoh’s eyebrows lift.

Willa leads her down below to where Juliet is scribbling in her coloring book. They’ve progressed beyond eating crayons (for the most part) but coloring in the lines is something that’ll come later.

“Oh,” Chiyoh says.

“She’ll be safe with you,” Willa says. “Safer than she’ll be with me.”

“You don’t have to,” Chiyoh says. “You could sail yourself.”

“I’m in the Dragon’s sights,” Willa says. Because that’s what he is. Or thinks he is. Not the Tooth Fairy. The Great Red Dragon. “He dies or I die. And I’m going to need help.”

“Hannibal,” Chiyoh says. It isn’t a question.

“Maybe we’ll die,” Willa says. “In that case, I need you to protect Juliet. And if we don’t die...I might still need you to.”

“She will be safe with me,” Chiyoh promises.

~*~*~*~*~*~

The blood on the dock belongs to Francis Dolarhyde. When they break into his home they find eight separate Tattlecrime articles. They’re all about Willa and Hannibal.

“Well,” Willa says looking over the pictures that he’s cut out. “I guess I know why he came after me.”

“I thought he went after perfect families,” Zeller says.

Willa puts her hand over her heart. “That hurts,” she tells him. She turns to Jack before Zeller can respond. “He didn’t want to kill me. Not the night he came to my house. He kills families in their home. I wasn’t home. And I wasn’t with my family.”

Jack shakes his head. “No. I know what you’re thinking. No.”

“You can’t lure him without the right bait,” Willa says. She runs her fingers over a picture of her
and Hannibal from the opera. “I need Hannibal if you want to catch Dolarhyde.”

Jack puts up a few more protests.

Four days later another family is killed.

Jack, Willa, Alana, and Chilton sit in Chilton’s office.

“I’ve gotten permission from the FBI,” Jack says. “We’ll bring Lecter on as a consultant, fake a prison escape, and Willa and Hannibal will go to their home in Baltimore. We’ll have snipers and SWAT teams on location. We’ll put Dolarhyde down and then we’ll get Hannibal.”

“I don’t like it,” Alana says.

Willa doesn’t like it either. She doesn’t know what she thought the plan was going to be but this isn’t a good one. She doesn’t want to play house with Hannibal. She doesn’t want to be his keeper. She’s been given a temporary FBI badge and a gun. During the fake escape she’ll be the agent in charge of Hannibal. She’ll be in charge of him when Dolarhyde goes down while they wait for the FBI to swoop in and rearrest Hannibal.

Jack thinks she’s loyal to the FBI.

Willa...she doesn’t know what she’s going to do.

She knows she’s going to kill Dolarhyde. Eliminate the threat to her family.

Will she shoot Hannibal afterwards? Isn’t he a threat to her family?

He is family.

Willa can’t protect from every threat. It’s tiring. She could use help. Juliet could use a father.

She knows Hannibal belongs in prison.

She’s just not sure if she wants him there.

“Hannibal has agreed,” Chilton says, “On one condition.” He looks at Willa. “He wants Willa to ask him nicely.”

Willa laughs. “Of course he does.”

“You’re going to do it,” Jack says. Like he still has any kind of control over her.

She turns to Chilton. “You’re going to turn off the surveillance to Hannibal’s cell. No visual, no audio. And I’ll get him agree to the plan.”

“Wait a second,” Chilton begins.

“That’s not a good idea,” Alana says.

“Do it,” Jack says.

Willa turns away so they can’t see her smile.

She goes down to Hannibal’s cell. Barney walks her through all the procedures and then she shoos
him to the other side of the doors.

“Privacy?” Hannibal asks. He rises from behind his desk. He makes a prison jumpsuit look regal. “Don’t want anyone to see you beg?”

“I’m not going to beg,” Willa says. “You enjoy making people ask you for help. You’re not going to get that from me. You don’t deserve it.”

Hannibal’s expression hardens. Did he really think she’d come here cowed? Begging?

“Don’t give me that,” Willa says. She feels her anger flaring up. Everything that’s built since he went to his knees for the FBI. Since he put his hands over his head and smiled at her like he wasn’t bringing their whole lives down around him for his own pleasure. “You sent Randall Tier after me.”

“And you triumphed. I saw pictures. I wish I could’ve seen the whole thing.”

Willa steps right up to the glass, no one to tell her not to. “Maybe one day I’ll tell you about it.”

“This is your trade?” Hannibal asks. He looks bored. “Information for my help with the Dragon?”

“No trade,” Willa says. “No begging. You’re going to help. It’s not just my scent he’s caught.”

“Self-preservation,” Hannibal says. “That’s how you’re going to appeal to me?”

Willa doesn’t say anything, patient.

“Does this make me another mongoose?” Hannibal asks. “I thought I was the snake. Perhaps a shark.”

References to previous conversations, to a happier time. Two can play at that game.

“You’re whatever I need you to be,” Willa says, echoing the words he told her after she killed Hobbs. It feels like such a long time ago. She’d been terrified of the capacity for violence that resided in her. Now she embraces it. Partly Hannibal’s influence. Partly her growing into her own.

Hannibal steps towards the glass, interested. “Jack has offered me a night in my home with my wife if I do this for him.”

“How generous of him,” Willa says. “I don’t offer you anything.” She could. She knows that one mention of Juliet, and Hannibal will agree to the plan. She doesn’t tell him though. Part of her still clings to the notion of right and wrong. And releasing Hannibal back into the world is wrong.

“Kill him with me,” Hannibal says. He’s at the glass now as well. “When the Dragon comes for us in our beds, kill with me.”

“This is what you wanted all along,” Willa realizes. To be seen, yes, to be known, yes, but most of all he wanted a partner. An equal.

“Yes,” Hannibal says.

“And you always get what you want,” Willa says. She sounds bitter. She doesn’t like that Hannibal can reduce her to this. She’s better without him. And she’ll be without him soon enough.

She...isn’t as comforted by that as she should be.
“It’s a date then,” Willa says.

Hannibal’s lips curl up in a smile.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Willa watches as they prep Hannibal for transport. The straight jacket. The mask. They strap him to a board so they can wheel him towards the transport van. Willa doesn’t know how he manages to look smug and in control when he’s strapped and pinned and muted. He does.

Superior, she remembers telling Freddie.

He certainly looks it.

Willa and two guards get into the back of the transport with Hannibal. There are two more guards in the front of the truck - one driving and one passengering. Willa can’t help but think there should be more.

Twenty minutes later when there are bullet holes in all the guards she’s glad there weren’t.

Hannibal looks coolly down at her from where he’s been propped against the side. Somehow he manages to look demanding. Willa takes the mask off first.

“This is not the way the plan was supposed to go,” Willa says.

“I don’t think the Great Red Dragon liked Jack’s plan,” Hannibal says. “I wasn’t too fond of it either.”

Will undoes the straps that pin his arms behind his back. “Of course you weren’t. It ends with you back in the BSHCI.”

Hannibal shakes his arms out once they’re free. Then he draws Willa in for a hug. She knows she should resist. She doesn’t.

“I did not want the FBI watching us when we finally had a night to ourselves,” Hannibal says.

Willa stalks out of the transport. If Dolarhyde is still here it puts her in a vulnerable position, but she’s banking on the fact that he wants to kill them in their house the way he’s killed all the others.

“This isn’t a vacation,” she snaps. “We’re catching a killer, and you’re going back to your cage.”

“I didn’t like my cage,” Hannibal says. “I prefer freedom.” He follows her out of the transport.

Their police escort is all dead too.

Hannibal pulls a body out of the driver’s seat of the car. He climbs in. “Are you coming?” Hannibal asks.

“Where are we going?” Willa asks. She doesn’t get in the car.

“To a house not monitored by the FBI,” Hannibal says. “I feel like you would be less willing to kill Dolarhyde if you had an audience.”

“You’re not an audience?” Willa asks.
“Accomplice,” Hannibal says. He gestures to the car. “If you’re ready, we can depart.”

If she’s ready.

If she’s ready to accept Hannibal knowing he’s the Chesapeake Ripper?

If she’s ready to kill with him?

If she’s ready to leave behind Jack and the FBI and embrace the life she wants?

“Plan doesn’t work if we’re not together,” Willa says. She gets into the car.

Hannibal smiles. “Of course.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

They switch cars on the drive out to a small house that sits on the edge of a cliff.

“You didn’t leave an obvious trail, but Jack’s good enough to pick up on it,” Willa says as Hannibal opens the front door for her.

“We won’t be here when Jack arrives,” Hannibal says.

“Right,” Willa says. “Because your plan is that we kill Dolarhyde together and then what? Run off into the sunset together?”

“I was thinking France,” Hannibal says. “A large house with a vineyard.”

“Plenty of space for dogs,” Willa says. She stops in the middle of the foyer. “No. No. That was our future. It’s not anymore. We don’t have a future. Not together. You made sure of that.”

She storms into the kitchen and then, thinking better of it, goes into the living room. There are floor to ceiling windows that overlook the ocean. She should call Jack. She knows where she is. She should make sure they get this house properly surveilled.

She reaches into her pocket for her phone.

It isn’t there.

Hannibal must’ve gotten his hands on it. It’s probably back with the prison transport.

She’s not sure she would’ve called even if she did have it. She should call. She should get in the car and find Jack. But she can’t leave. If she leaves then they don’t get Dolarhyde. If she stays then she’s going to kill Dolarhyde. Going to kill him with Hannibal. She’ll be giving Hannibal everything he ever wanted.

And maybe get everything she wanted in return.

No.

They’re going to eliminate Dolarhyde as a threat. Hannibal’s going to go back to the BSHCI. She’s going to meet up with Chiyoh and take Juliet somewhere they’ll be safe. She thought Chiyoh would tell Hannibal, but apparently whatever Hannibal’s done to the woman has made her no longer loyal to him. Or, at the very least, she’s not giving Willa’s secrets to Hannibal.

“The bluff is eroding,” Hannibal says. He comes up behind her. He smells freshly showered. He’s
in new clothes. Another full three-piece suit. “There was more land when I was here with Miriam Lass.”

Reminding her of Miriam, of everything he’s done, of everything he is - it should be the wake up call she needs. It just pisses her off.

“Now you’re here with me,” Willa says. “Going to cut off my arm and feed it to Jack too?”

“You're angry with me,” Hannibal says. “I suppose I should wait to open the wine.”

“I suppose so,” Willa says. “Are you really surprised that I’m angry? You built a family with me and then destroyed it. I’ve killed people for that.”

“Threats, Willa?”

She turns from the window to meet his gaze. “Facts.” She should let this go. She shouldn’t poke at Hannibal’s mind. She shouldn’t try to understand. Shouldn’t dig out answers that will allow her to forgive. She shouldn’t try to learn anything that will make it hard to put him back in his cage. She’s never been good at letting things go. “You didn’t have to turn yourself in. You didn’t even have to stop killing. How many people did you kill for our wedding reception? There were no bodies found.”

Willa stalks over to the wine rack. “You didn’t have to turn yourself in. And don’t try and tell me you did it for me. You did it for you. Part of your fight with Jack.” She pulls a bottle out at random. “I would’ve understood you. A little more more time. One or two more Ripper displays. I would’ve seen you. And I would’ve still had you. You left me!”

She thrusts the bottle of wine into Hannibal’s hands. She raises the corkscrew like she’s thinking about stabbing him with it. She hands it over. “You left me,” she says again, softer this time.

“I will not do it again,” Hannibal says.

“You will,” Willa says. “You still have a trial.” And Willa still has a daughter to protect.

“I’m not going back,” Hannibal says.

“My job is to make sure you go back,” Willa says.

Hannibal puts the corkscrew in the wine bottle’s cork.

“You’re going to force me to choose,” Willa says. “Them or you. Are you sure you know what choice I’m going to make?”

“I’ve never been able to predict you,” Hannibal says.

“I’ll get the glasses,” Willa says. They can put aside the argument for now. Share a glass of wine. Sit in silence until Dolarhyde shows up.

Willa hears something. A moment later she sees the bottle of wine shatter in Hannibal’s hand. Wine splatters across his suit. More stains the floor. Willa’s mouth falls open as she sees blood on Hannibal’s suit. It seeps out, reaching for the spots of wine.

Willa turns, reaching for her gun. She doesn’t manage to get it. Dolarhyde strides into the house, gun in hand and held up. There’s a black duffel in his other hand. A knife strapped to his belt. His gun is steady despite the fact that Willa shot him in that shoulder. She can’t see the bandage under
his clothes, but she knows she wounded him. She keeps that in mind in case this becomes a close fight.

“Don’t run,” Dolarhyde tells her. “I’ll catch you.”

Willa looks at Hannibal, on the ground now, hands clutching his wound. Willa is forced to consider a third possible ending for the night - Dolarhyde kills Hannibal and she kills Dolarhyde. She could make it through the night alive and without Hannibal. That should be what she wants. She still sees a spark of anger when she looks at Hannibal on the ground.

“Hello, Francis,” Hannibal greets. Like they’re friends. If he sent Dolarhyde after her the way he sent Tier then Willa’s going to kill Hannibal. Let Dolarhyde figure out how to deal with that.

“Hello, Dr. Lecter.”

Dolarhyde takes a tripod out of his bag. He tosses it to Willa. The gun is still trained on her. Willa sets up the tripod. Next, Dolarhyde removes a camera. He hands it over to Willa.

“I’m going to film your death, Dr. Lecter,” Dolarhyde says. “As you die you shall meld with the strength of the Dragon.”

“It’s a glorious and rather discomfiting idea,” Hannibal says.

Willa takes advantage of the lack of attention on her and backs up. She reaches for her gun again. Dolarhyde, sensing the movement, whips his arm out. The knife catches her low, across the stomach. It’s not a deep cut, but she can feel the sting as it tears through her flesh.

A moment later, Dolarhyde lifts her off the ground like she weighs nothing. He throws her through the broken window. She hits the stone patio and rolls until she loses her momentum. She can feel the blood seeping through her shirt. There’s a trail of it on the patio from where she rolled.

Dolarhyde stalks towards her. Willa gets to her hands and knees.

“It’ll be easy to break your back,” Dolarhyde tells her. “Simple break and twist. And then I’ll arrange you to witness Hannibal’s change.”

“Hannibal wouldn’t change for me,” Willa says. She pulls her gun out. “He sure as hell isn’t going to change for you.”

Dolarhyde rips the gun out of her hands and tosses it over the bluff. Willa lunges and she rips the knife from Dolarhyde’s hands. She stabs him in the leg. She’d hoped he’d buckle or maybe stumble back. Instead, he grunts and pulls the knife out and drives it into her collarbone.

She screams and tries to get to her feet as Dolarhyde uses the knife like a handle, yanking her up and back like he’s going to snap her back like this.

Hannibal comes out of nowhere, and he leaps onto Dolarhyde’s back, distracting him. Willa falls back onto the patio, on her back, knife still wedged in her body. She hurts. She’s tired. She wants to give up, but Dolarhyde kills families. If he gets through Willa and Hannibal then there’s no one to protect Juliet.

Hannibal tries to twist Dolarhyde’s neck, but Dolarhyde is too strong or maybe Hannibal’s too weak from his gunshot wound. The two of them stagger around the patio as Willa debates what to do. Take the knife out? Stagger away and hope the two of them finish each other off?
Dolarhyde tosses Hannibal across the patio as easily as he’d tossed Willa. Hannibal hits the patio and rolls into the woodpile. It means Willa’s going to have Dolarhyde’s full attention again. She pulls the knife from her shoulder and charges, stabbing him in the back before he can turn to her.

Dolarhyde roars and turns, backhanding Willa to the ground. She drops down, curling around the pain in her stomach, the pain in her shoulder.

“You are no match for me,” Dolarhyde tells her.

She can see Hannibal dragging himself towards something. A weapon, maybe. Willa needs to keep Dolarhyde’s attention.

“Shot you last time we saw each other,” Willa says. “How’s your shoulder feeling?”

Dolarhyde snarls.

Hannibal crawls along the ground. He has a rusted hatchet in his hands.

“I am the Great Red Dr-”

Hannibal swings the hatchet, slicing through Dolarhyde’s Achilles tendon. Then his other one.

Dolarhyde slams to his knees.

Hannibal yanks the knife out of Dolarhyde’s back. He tosses it over Dolarhyde’s head. Willa catches it by the handle. Dolarhyde tries to muster his energy, tries to get back to his feet. He falls back to his knees.

“You’re not going to walk again,” Willa tells him.

Hannibal meets her gaze over Dolarhyde’s head. He raises the hatchet and brings it down on Dolarhyde’s head. He tips over onto the ground.

“He’s not dead,” Hannibal says. He doesn’t toss the hatchet aside, but he does loosen his grip on it. “Killing him would be a mercy.”

Willa’s gotten a few new scars to add to her collection. Hannibal may or may not survive his gunshot wound. Between them is their quarry, their kill. Their would-be killer.

“Maybe I’m feeling merciful,” she says. She drives the knife into Dolarhyde’s gut. She rips the knife up.

Dolarhyde’s hand whips out to grab her wrist, squeezing it hard enough to hurt. He yanks the knife out and turns it back on Willa. He plunges it into her leg. And then he shoves her shoulder, sending her sprawling backwards.

Hannibal growls and leans in, tearing into Dolarhyde’s throat with his teeth. Dolarhyde falls to the ground, blood bubbling from his throat. His eyes find Willa’s, and she watches the life slip from his eyes. When she’s able to look up, Hannibal’s watching her, blood smeared across his mouth and his teeth.

He is a predator.

He is feral.

And he’s hers.
Willa pulls the knife out of her leg. She drops it to the patio.

“You should’ve left it in,” Hannibal says.

Willa hauls herself to her feet. “I’m going to die or I’m not,” she says. She’s bleeding in more places than she can count. She wonders how long until she’s lost too much.

Hannibal gets to his feet. He finds his way to her side. He wraps his arms around her and looks over at Dolarhyde’s body. “I’ve never killed with someone before. It was better than I imagined.”

“You have weird fantasies,” Willa tells him. She drops her head to his shoulder. It's too much effort to hold it up on her own.

She closes her eyes.

She wonders if they were always destined to end up this way - bloody and clinging to each other.

She wonders how far away Jack and the team is. Hannibal’s in no condition to run away from the FBI now. She shouldn’t have dropped the knife. She could kill Hannibal now. She could leave him to die. How long will she last on her own?

Juliet is safe with Chiyoh.

Could she be safe with Hannibal?

Willa doesn’t know.

She doesn’t want to decide.

She can’t decide.

She and Hannibal are only a few feet from the edge of the cliff.

Heads they live.

Tails they die.

If they live then they live together. A family. With a house in France. With a vineyard. With dogs.

If they die then they die. The world is safe from them.

Willa grips Hannibal’s shirt in her hands. Her wrist throbs from Dolarhyde’s rough treatment.

She tips them over the edge of the cliff.

Epilogue

Excerpts from *Wining and Dining*.

Many people have questions about the relationship between Willa Graham and Hannibal Lecter. They seemed like a classic example of opposites attract. Willa Graham was rumpled. She wore ill-fitting clothes that were covered in dog hair. Her glasses were always on the verge of slipping off her face. She profiled serial killers for a living and fixed boat motors for fun.

Hannibal Lecter was refined. He attended the opera often enough that he had his own box. He
frequented a cheese shop to make sure he had the right cheese to pair with his wine. He was never seen without a three piece suit. He hosted elaborate dinner parties that he cooked personally for. Later, we would learn that there was more to these dinners than it originally seemed.

Later, we would also learn that Hannibal Lecter’s...extracurricular activities were what made Willa Graham and Hannibal Lecter more similar than they appeared at first sight.

It was a mystery to many that Willa Graham didn’t stay to act as a witness in Hannibal Lecter’s trial. Some say she loved her husband too much to testify against him. Some say she hated Jack Crawford too much to testify for him. Maybe both of those things played a factor in her decision. But there was something that loomed even greater over her head.

A baby.

Yes, Willa Graham was pregnant.

And, in a twist that seems too perfect to be made up, she discovered her pregnancy the same day she discovered who her husband truly was. A phone call took place between them. She wanted to share her good news. Before she could, Hannibal told her Jack Crawford was coming over for dinner. She decided to wait to tell Hannibal Lecter about the baby.

She didn’t know what Hannibal Lecter had planned.

Maybe if she did then she would’ve told him about the baby. Maybe Hannibal would have forgone the Last Supper. They would have run off together. Instead, Hannibal Lecter was locked up until the FBI needed his help closing a case. He escaped custody and together he and Willa Graham killed Francis Dolarhyde, also known as the Tooth Fairy.

The married couple met their own end tumbling off the edge of a cliff. With blood from their shared kill covering them and a flush on their cheeks, one thing is known for certain. They died happy.

Willa Graham claims she didn’t know that Hannibal Lecter was the Chesapeake Ripper when she married him. Claims she was as surprised as the rest of us when Lecter admitted it. She told me, “In hindsight, a lot of things now make sense. But I didn’t know when I married him”.

But, even if she knew he wasn’t the Ripper, she knew other things. “I knew he was dangerous,” she said in a KOA cabin in Sugarloaf Key. “Knew that something lurked beneath the three piece suits and his manners and accent. That was part of the appeal. I’ve spent my life catching killers. I know what horrors lurk in suburban neighborhoods and outside truck stops. I wanted a strong family. One I could protect and that could protect me”.

It raises the question, did she still love Hannibal Lecter even though he was the Chesapeake Ripper?

Yes, she did. She might have even loved him because he was the Chesapeake Ripper.

But, she wasn’t completely blinded by love. She knew that Hannibal Lecter was a dangerous man. She knew he belonged in prison. It’s why she didn’t stay for the trial. She knew that if Lecter saw she was pregnant then he would escape. He would escape and they would set up house somewhere, and he would kill again. She left her home to protect the local population, to protect herself, and,
most importantly, to protect her baby.

And it worked.

She kept her secret.

Maybe she told Lecter in the prison transport van. Maybe she told him at the house while they waited for Dolarhyde. Maybe she told him as they were falling to their deaths. Maybe he died not knowing.

I kept her secret too. I promised I would wait to publish excerpts from our conversation until Hannibal Lecter’s death. He wouldn’t learn about Juliet Lecter from me.

I didn’t ask Willa how she chose that name. I should have.

There are some questions as we look back on the legacy of Hannibal Lecter, of Wilhelmina Graham. She was honored as an FBI agent who gave her life in service of the FBI. There’s now a classroom named after her, the classroom she used to give her lectures before Jack Crawford pulled her out of teaching and into a world of killers.

Is Willa Graham the hero everyone wants to paint her as?

The FBI had a plan. They were going to stage an escape for Hannibal. He and Willa were to return to their home in Baltimore and wait for Dolarhyde. The FBI would kill Dolarhyde then cuff Lecter and return him to the BSHCI.

Instead, Dolarhyde killed everyone in the prison escort except for Graham and Lecter. They went to a different house, this one not surveilled by the FBI. Together, they killed Dolarhyde. And then together they died.

There was a conversation between Graham and Lecter at the BSHCI. The recording equipment was turned off at Graham’s request. There were no witnesses to the conversation. No one knows what words were spoken between them.

Did they know Dolarhyde would play rescuer?

Did Graham willingly accompany Lecter to the new house? Did she want to stick to the original plan?

Did they hope to kill Dolarhyde and escape?

What doubts did Graham have throughout that night?

She told me that “Hannibal is like anyone else. He wants to be known. Understood. Seen. And I’m...uniquely qualified to do that”. She added, “He turned himself in because he thought I was ready. Because he thought I would accept him. That even if it didn’t happen in the first week or even month that eventually I would come to him. He would break out. We’d run off somewhere”. Perhaps, more disturbingly, she told me, “I’m not going to give him a reason to break out[of prison]. I’m not going to go to him. But if he comes to me...I won’t say no”.

Did Graham and Lecter tumble from the cliff because they were dizzy with a lack of blood?

Or did Graham remember that she was an FBI agent, sworn to uphold the law and push them off
the edge?

Maybe Lecter was the one who tipped them over.

We’ll never know. Their secrets are lost to the ocean now.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Freddie Lounds’s penthouse apartment is spacious and modern. The decorations are...gaudy. She has money now, her book was wildly successful and there are already plans for a movie. And a sequel. Journalists who snubbed their nose at her are now forced to cover her book signings and interviews. Some people have accused her of making up the exclusive Willa Graham interview that provides so much of the detail in her book.

Residents of Sugarloaf Key reluctantly admit that Willa Graham lived there for a time. And that she lived there with a little girl. They don’t give details. They want to be left alone.

Tonight, the lights are dim in Freddie’s apartment. Candles are on the table, flames flickering and setting a mood.

Freddie Lounds herself is seated at the head of the table. She’s tied to her chair so she doesn’t slip out of it.

There is a typewriter on the table. Lounds’s hands, detached at the wrists from her body, are poised over the keys.

Her mouth has been sewn shut in neat, surgical sutures.

Her rib cage has been opened.

Her organs are removed.

Most of them appear in various dishes, cooked and set out on the table.

The heart is missing. It is implied that she doesn’t have one.

In the typewriter sits a single piece of paper.

All it says is nothing here is vegetarian.

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