Sleep Like Dead Men, Wake Up Like Dead Men

by rosenritter

Summary

Will knows he sleepwalks, that his body does things without the presence of his conscious mind. He dreads that he will snuff the life from someone while his body drifts on autopilot.

He never expected that he would do the exact opposite of taking a life.

From this prompt on the Hannibal Kink Meme: So there's a kind of sleepwalking called "sleep sex" wherein the sleepwalker has sex with people while asleep and doesn't remember it in the morning. Will is one such sleepwalker, and of course he doesn't know it. He starts staying with Hannibal at some point (house fire? Renovations? Hannibal's just that persuasive?) and starts having sleep sex with Hannibal almost every night. Hannibal either knows or doesn't that Will's asleep. This continues for some time until either Hannibal tries to have sex with him awake or something happens to make Will realize he's been having sex without knowing it (maybe a pregnancy? *hint hint*). Ending up to writer!

08/08/16 - Added the final epilogue!
See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

He is standing in a clearing in the snowy woods, dressed only in his meager undershirt and boxers. Countless thin, barren trees surround him, encircling him like a pack of starving hyenas closing in on easy prey. As the wind rustles through the sparse and skeletal branches, it sounds like whispering voices. Will cannot make out the words.

There is a crackling sound and the whiff of something burning. Will squints and brings a hand up to guard his eyes as a light draws near. With heavy, purposeful steps, the stag which has haunted his dreams and hallucinations emerges through the trees. Its antlers are wreathed in bright and raging flames, though the beast does not seem perturbed by it. It makes its way to Will with a powerful, controlled grace. Its black and empty eyes bore into him all the while. Will is immobilized, stuck in place by those eyes like a weakly fluttering moth on an entomologist’s pin. He is not only unable to move, but incapable of even thinking about moving. All he can do is stare into those eyes.

The beast stops about three feet from Will. No heat emanates from its flaming antlers, which makes the warm puff of air it expels in a huff all the more confounding. The warm vapor curls up into the frigid night sky and somehow, despite the distance, Will feels the warm exhalation against his neck. There is something eerily intimate in that small pocket of impossible warmth, and it sends a cold chill of dread racing down Will’s frozen spine.

Without warning, the stag rears up on its hind legs and the trees surrounding Will erupt into a fiery cataclysm.

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Will awakes to insistent whimpering and yelping and the cold press of several wet noses against his bare arm. His eyes open blearily, which just riles the dogs up even more in their desperate attempt to rouse him. “What—what is it?” he mutters, his voice still thick with sleep. He jolts to full awareness and his body stiffens when he realizes that he is not lying in his bed but rather sitting in a chair in his living room. Even worse, there is a thick haze of smoke in the unnaturally warm air.

For some reason, his phone lies on his lap. He grabs it and staggers to his feet. Stumbling and coughing, he heads to the door leading to the kitchen. The moment he sets his hand on the metal doorknob, he gasps in pain and recoils. It is painfully, scalding hot. He glances down at his shaking hand and the angry red welt that has already begun to swell on his palm even after such brief contact. His gaze sinks even lower, and he can see thick, black smoke pouring out from the crack beneath the door. The puny fire extinguisher he keeps in the hallway closet would be no match for the inferno that has already consumed his kitchen and seems eager to extend its dominion.

“Shit,” he hisses, ending the curse in a cough. As his lungs rebel against the choking smoke filling the air, he lifts his nightshirt over his nose and mouth in an attempt to buy himself more time. The dogs crowd around him, yelping and barking in their panicked state.

“C’mon, hurry,” Will says as he ushers the dogs down the hall toward the back exit. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

There is a glorious rush of fresh, cool air when Will opens the door, and his oxygen-starved lungs gasp at it hungrily. He counts the dogs as they run out of the burning house, and at least one small layer of his dread fades when he notes that all are present and accounted for. Still coughing in an
attempt to clear the smoke from his lungs, he stumbles until he stops against a tree. He leans his back against it just in time for his knees to turn to jelly as the surge of adrenaline that had gotten him out of the house drains out of him as if he were a sieve. Trembling, he sits against the tree as the dogs huddle around him, licking his face and arms in gratitude and concern.

Will stares at his house in the darkness. He can see the smoke pouring up from the other side, tinted an ethereal orange in the moonlight. It’s a far cry from when he’d leave the lights on and observe his home from a distance. There is light, yes, but it is a mere byproduct of the fire consuming his house. Without intervention, his little boat on the sea will surely sink.

In a numb and distant way, he remembers the phone in his left hand. Somewhere in the back of his hazy mind, he realizes he must call the police, the fire department, Jack, Alana… but the numbers his fingers press do not belong to any of them. With his eyes still locked on the thick and ominous smoke, he raises his phone to his ear and listens to the tinny mechanical ringing.

Once.

Twice.

“Will?” Hannibal asks. His voice is as controlled as ever with not even a hint of being muddled by sleep, and for a fleeting second Will wonders if it’s completely impossible to catch Hannibal off guard. “It’s just after 3 AM. Has something happened?”

“My house – on fire –“

“Are you hurt? Are you out of danger?”

Even though his mouth is dry as a desert, Will swallows. “The… the dogs woke me up before I could… roast.”

“Have you called the local fire department and police yet?”

Will hesitates and blinks a few times in rapid succession, as if trying to clear his head. It doesn’t work. It’s insane to call his psychiatrist before the fire department, isn’t it? The fire is growing ever stronger, but here he is on the phone with someone who can’t put out the flames. He swallows heavily again and shakes his head. “No,” he croaks. “You were the… the first person I called.”

For a moment, there is only silence at the other end of the line. Though only a few seconds long, the quiet seeps down deep into Will’s core and something peculiar happens. He begins to laugh. It’s a quiet, gasping laughter that bubbles up from his throat, and he can’t begin to understand it. He clamps his free hand over his mouth in a desperate attempt to stifle it, leaving him shaking even more.

“Will, listen closely to my voice,” Hannibal says. Will obeys, mentally grasping at the smooth stability in the older man’s voice like a parched wanderer in a desert clawing to drag himself closer to an oasis. “Let my voice be a tether for you; embrace it as the peaceful center of the emotional hurricane you are experiencing. You may be having a bout of hysteria. It is not uncommon when unstable individuals are exposed to certain traumas.”

Will’s shaking hand slides from where it had clamped over his mouth. Goosebumps prickle and make the skin on his arms and the back of his neck tickle in an uneasy, sickly way. He swallows nervously and mutters, “Don’t you mean a ‘conversion disorder’, doctor? Nobody’s called it ‘hysteria’ in decades. The word’s got certain connotations. From the Greek for uterus. The root of the word. Once believed to be the root of the problem. And I think we can all agree that the root of
my problems extend far beyond my reproductive organs.”

“I apologize. My terminology can, at times, be a little antiquated. I have been referred to as a rather old-fashioned Alpha,” Hannibal says. “But we shall talk more about the matter when I arrive at your home. I am leaving my house as we speak. Your next task is to inform the police and fire department as soon as this conversation ends. Do not trouble yourself with contacting Agent Crawford and Dr. Bloom. I will bear the burden of informing them, and I can only hope that I arrive at your side before they do. You are, quite frankly, in no state to be put under pressure by Agent Crawford without psychiatric assistance. Unfortunately, he lives considerably closer to you than I do, and I apologize in advance for not being there to cool the coals he will be sure to rake you over.”

“What do you-”

The rest of Will’s question dies on his tongue as the sound of sirens approaching begins to cut through the trees. Two distinctive sets: one a fire engine and the other at least one cop car. He pulls himself up to stand on trembling legs and watches in a daze as the flickering glow of reflected blue and red lights draw nearer and nearer.

“Will?” Hannibal prompts.

“The police and the fire department are here. Someone called them. But it’s just me out here. No neighbors, no…” he whispers. He takes a few shaky steps forward and falls to his knees again, raking his free hand through his curly hair. “I’m… hanging up. They’ll want to talk. Just please…” His voice hitches. “Please get here fast.”

“I hope there are not any patrolling police officers on the way,” Hannibal says. “For I am prepared to break a great many laws to ensure I get to you as quickly as possible, Will.” Will can hear the tone of smooth assurance in Hannibal’s low voice; the man means every word.

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Time blurs once the police and fire department arrive. Will does not black out or lose time, but as fire fighters pump water into the inferno that had once been his home, Will feels as if he is equally submerged. The officers’ and fire fighters’ voices are muffled and garbled when they ask him questions, and his own voice sounds as if it were coming from a mouth a thousand miles away when he tries to reply. They check him for burns, smoke inhalation, and other injuries, but it doesn’t take long for them to clear him of any physical damage. Even in his hazy state, though, Will can see the shifty, pitying glances they exchange with each other after they try to speak with him. He can’t read lips, but he doesn’t need to in order to know what they’re whispering about. They suspect him.

Eventually they let him be, leaving him to sit at the back of an ambulance with its doors open. Someone drapes an orange shock blanket around his shoulders, though Will takes no notice of it as it hangs limply from his frame. He stares once more at his smoking home with glassy eyes, thinking.

He imagines water shooting back into the fire hoses as the flames roar back to life. He imagines the police and fire fighters running backwards, packing their tools away, and driving off away from the home in reverse. He sees the fire recede until it is a tiny, flickering light on a match head. He holds it up to his face, his eyes obscured by the dancing flame reflecting against his glasses. It goes out, leaving the match unstruck.

“If I wanted Will Graham to die, there are more certain ways to accomplish it,” he mutters. “I do
not want him to die. Or at least not yet, and not in this way. An ignoble death in a fire, easily ruled accidental?” He sneers. “Not my design. Low art.”

He moves around the kitchen, squeezing a bottle of lighter fluid. “I have disabled the fire alarms. The only fingerprints that will be found on them will be Graham’s. I have been paying close attention to him. This is not the only time I’ve been in his home. I know it like the back of my hand.”

He glances at the door and the definite lack of any scratching or yelping from confused dogs. “The dogs do not react. They have grown used to my presence and will not go on the alert unless something out of the ordinary happens. I am about to make things very, very extraordinary.”

He holds the match up and strikes it. Once again, the light glares against his glasses. “Now the question is: do I light this fire, wander into the living room, call the police, and fall asleep in my chair… or do I leave? Am I Will Graham? Or am I someone else?”

“Will- WILL!”

Will gasps and shudders, coming back to reality abruptly as someone lays a heavy hand on his shoulder. His eyes flicker from face to face, and slowly his rapid breathing and heart rate begin to settle. The worried faces Alana Bloom, Jack Crawford, and Beverly Katz eye him warily, the same way animal control eyes a questionably-rabid creature. It’s Jack’s hand on Will’s shoulder; his aggressive supervisor gives what he probably considers a comforting squeeze, but it just makes Will wince and his muscles ache.

“How long have you been here?” Will croaks.

“Five minutes,” Bev answers. Her body language begins to relax, and she gives a tentative smile. “But we’ve only been shaking you and trying to get you out of Will Land for about two.”

“Dr. Lecter called Alana and I, and we busted ass to get here,” Jack says. He finally lets his hand slip from Will’s shoulder. “I called Katz, Price, and Zeller on the way. Speaking of which: Katz, go lend those two a hand. See if you can get a read on what the fire marshal’s thinking about all this. Plus, Dr. Lecter should be here sometime soon, and I want you to bring him here when he arrives.” Bev nods and trots off.

Alana takes a deep breath, holds it. She lets it go slowly, a long and steady exhalation that sends a stray strand of her hair fluttering slightly. “Will, I really don’t want to ask what I’m about to ask you, but-“

“Then I’ll save you the trouble,” Will grumbles. “No, I have no idea if I set my own house on fire.”

Alana furrows her brows in worry. “What’s the last thing you remember before you woke up?”

“I’m not sure that would actually mean anything, given my sleepwalking and blackouts. My last memory could’ve been climbing Mount Everest and I still would’ve woken up in my burning house with no clue how the snowy peaks of point A became the smoky rude awakening of B.” He sees Alana cross her arms in his peripheral vision and a stab of guilt spikes in his gut for being sarcastic toward a concerned friend. “But for the sake of argument, the last thing I remember before I woke up in the living room is brushing my teeth and going to bed.”

“Then we won’t know for sure until the place gets checked out thoroughly,” Jack says. “But we can’t just assume you did it while sleepwalking. It could’ve been bad wiring. Or… well, you have had a lot of exposure thanks to our good friend Freddie Lounds.”
Alana snaps her worried gaze from Will to Jack. “Jack, are you saying you think the Ripper could have done this?”

“Or any other psycho with an internet connection. I’m saying that there are a lot of possibilities we can’t write off until we know what started the fire.”

“If it’s the Ripper, his goal wasn’t to kill me,” Will murmurs. “He wouldn’t let me die in something that could be seen as an accident. If he wanted me dead tonight, there’d be no question he did it.” He meets Jack’s eyes for a few seconds before they dart away. “He’d have left my corpse for you as a big, special present. Maybe wrapped up with a bow of Miriam Lass’ hair.”

He turns his head toward the woods, and he can see it all too easily. His own pale and waxy body on the cold ground, his torso sliced and butterflied open. All organs missing, with the exception of the ones he personally resented. A ribbon woven from blonde hair around his neck, tied off in a bow right over his Adam’s apple. His eyes open wide, left that way intentionally by the Ripper. Unblinking, unflinching eye contact at long last.

“Will,” Alana chastises, looking back and forth between Will’s haggard form and the perturbed twitch developing in Jack’s jaw.

“Sorry.” Will rubs his fingers over his tired eyes and trails his hands down the stubble on his cheeks. “It looked – seemed like something he’d do.”

Jack heaves a sigh, and Will can almost hear him counting to ten mentally in an attempt to keep his temper in check. “So you don’t think the Ripper is involved?”

“All I know is that he wouldn’t want the fire to kill me,” Will says. “If he was involved, it would be to smoke me out.”

“Aside from your dogs, you already live alone, so it’s not like he’d want you isolated even more. Would he want you to stay with someone?” Alana ponders. “But why and who?”

Jack slams his fist into the door of the ambulance and the whole vehicle quakes. Will shudders and his trembling hands dart up and twitch around his temples, as if undecided between covering his ears and his eyes. “That son of a bitch,” Jack growls. “Does he want you under my care, Will?”

“I don’t- I don’t know,” Will mutters. “If it is the Ripper, my impression of him has always been… different… from what I get off other killers. No, no, no… not what I get from him. What he lets me have. With a lot of the other killers, especially the ones with poor or inconsistent designs, I just slip easily into their thinking like they’re oversized coats. Obvious and easily worn. But the Ripper… he holds the door open to his boutique. He smiles wide, all teeth, and ushers me in. Makes it tailor made. Fits like a glove. Real artisan work. Whatever I see in his killings, I see because he wants me to. The fact that I have no idea if the fire is him tying a noose around my neck or my subconscious unleashing hellfire on one of my few little corners of peace is… troubling.”

Alana bites her lip. “As troubling as you using flattering terminology like calling his gruesome murders as artistry? You’re on thin ice, Will. You need to be aware of the cracks.”

“That son of a bitch!” Jack growls. “It’s his goddamn mind games. I bet he wanted me to take you in over this. If he does want to give me your dead body with a ribbon on it, he wants it to happen in the sanctity of my own home. Like when he left Miriam’s hair in my bedroom. Maybe take me or, God forbid, Bella out while he’s at it.”

Will stared down at his feet. “You don’t have to worry about that. I sure as hell won’t be playing
slumber party with you or anyone else, Jack. I’ll find a dog-friendly hotel and stay there until my house gets repaired.”

“I’m afraid I really must disagree.”

Will jolts a little in surprise at Hannibal’s voice, looking up to see Bev leading his distinguished psychiatrist up to the tense little group. Will glances furtively at Jack’s watch. Only about forty minutes had passed since he first called Hannibal, and given that the doctor lives at least an hour away in Baltimore, he really must have broken the speed limit to get there so quickly.

“There is reason to believe you may have started the fire without realizing it, Will?” Hannibal asks.

Will looks back toward the final, faint curls of smoke drifting from his home. “It’s one possibility.”

“The other being that some freak might’ve been trying to make Kentucky Fried Will,” Bev says to Hannibal, whose lips purse in distaste at the joke. Her grin widens at the obvious disdain on the Alpha psychiatrist’s face. “Will, do you feel like you’ve been rubbed down in the Colonel’s secret herbs and spices?”

“No more than usual.” Before Bev can continue her teasing or Jack can develop an aneurism yelling at her about it, Will continues, “Find out who made the 911 call and you find out if I set the fire or not. I don’t have neighbors, and my house isn’t visible from any public streets. Whoever made the call had to have been here. If it’s my sleep-garbled voice on the other end of the line, my subconscious has a lot of explaining to do. But if it’s someone else, I really doubt they happened to be out on an innocent jog.”

“Now that sounds like something with actual answers behind it. It’s sure as hell better than us just standing around and throwing out guesses,” Jack says. “Come on, Katz. We’re looking into it.” He turns to Hannibal and Alana. “I’m leaving it to you psychiatrists to hash this out. But whatever you decide, Will is not to be left alone.”

Hannibal gives the irate Agent a small, dignified smile and a gracious nod. “For once, Agent Crawford, you and I agree about what would be best for Will.”

Will grips the shock blanket around his shoulders and slouches a bit, as if willing himself to disappear beneath the fabric. “I’m beginning to suspect that I don’t have much say in this,” he says, his lips twisting into a wry and mirthless smile.

“You suspect right, but it’s for your own good,” Jack declares. With that, he and Beverly leave Will to the devices of Hannibal and Alana.

“‘My own good,’” Will mumbles beneath his breath. He flicks his gaze to Alana and Hannibal, where it lingers on his unconventional psychiatrist for a moment before wincing away. “And what would you suggest that is?”

“I would suggest you stay with a trusted colleague,” Hannibal states.

“Let me guess. You?”

“Of course. As your unofficial psychiatrist, I am the one most familiar with the dark corners and esoteric workings of your mind. I am a light sleeper and pride myself on being aware of my surroundings. I am capable of protecting myself and others if the need is present. And, naturally, I would be more than willing to help a friend who needs a place to stay.”
“I agree with Hannibal, Will,” Alana says. She presses her lips into a thin line for a moment. “Right now, you really shouldn’t be alone, and he is far and away the best fit. Jack is too pushy and confrontational and… I’m sorry, I don’t trust myself to provide what you need right now.”

Will sits in silence, trying not to think too hard about her words. He looks over to where a few police officers are corralling and placating his dogs. “What about my dogs?”

“I have a frequent dinner party guest who is utterly enamored of dogs and who happens to own a sizeable plot of land,” Hannibal says. “Given the situation, I’m certain she’d be happy to help. The dogs would be able to get plenty of fresh air and exercise, as well as socialize with the other animals she fosters. I’m sure she would be very agreeable in regards to scheduling times for you to visit them.”

“See? It sounds ideal. You stay with Hannibal while your house is repaired and we get to the bottom of this, and you don’t even have to worry about kenneling your dogs.” Alana beams, giving her best reassuring smile.

“I still don’t think it’s a good idea,” Will grumbles.

Alana sighs. “Will, Hannibal is easily the most well-mannered and cultured Alpha I’ve ever met, myself included. Less refined Alphas can get aggressive and territorial over what they consider their property, sure, but you have absolutely nothing to worry about from someone as respectful as him. Even if you weren’t on suppressants and birth control, I’m sure he’d be a perfect gentleman.”

Will squirms slightly. “I wasn’t referring to my… to that,” he says. His lips twitch into a small smile. It’s bitter and unconvincing to the core. “He’s just got a much nicer house than me. It’d be a shame if anything were to happen to it.”

“Well, then I shall have to protect what’s mine,” Hannibal says, stepping toward Will. He extends a hand, offering to help him stand. “Now, come. Let’s see if the fire marshal will allow you into your home to collect any of your clothing or personal articles. If not, you are only somewhat thinner and shorter than me. The difference is even less pronounced when you manage to keep proper posture. I’m sure we could find something in my wardrobe to fit you well.”

Will stares at the hand for a moment before tentatively reaching up and accepting.

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By the time Will sits in the passenger seat of Hannibal’s car and gazes out the window at the passing scenery, the sky is turning the deep purplish pink of approaching dawn. There’s a red tint to it as well which only grows deeper as sun begins to peek over the horizon; the little part of Will that forever floats on the rivers of Louisiana and casts his fishing line into its waters recognizes it as a portent of an approaching storm. The part of him that stares at dead bodies and imagines he is the one who snuffed the life from them sees the purple hue of internal bleeding and the bright red of freshly spilled blood.

“You did not correct Dr. Bloom when she said that you take heat suppressants,” Hannibal says. It’s the first thing either of them has said since getting into the car about twenty minutes before.

“So you know,” Will mumbles. “Of course you do. Knowing is what you do.”

“I have an especially strong sense of smell, even for an Alpha,” Hannibal explains. “Others may be tricked by the fact that you cover your naturally mild scent in overbearing aftershaves and deodorants, but not me.”
“They mess with me too much. Never found suppressant or birth control that didn’t leave me even more of a wreck than I already am,” Will says. “When I tried, I got every bad side effect in the book, from awful mood swings to suicidal ideation to cramps so bad I felt like someone put my organs in a vice and squeezed until it was just a matter of time until something ruptured. Even acne.”

“Yet I find it curious that you have never missed work for the three or four days in a row which would indicate a heat, at least as far as I’m aware.”

Will sighs and rubs at the bridge of his nose. He squints at the rising sun and begins the explanation which has weighed him down for nearly two decades, rarely if ever discussed. “I had my first heat when I was fifteen. It only lasted about six hours. My dad thought it was a fluke, but the same thing happened again three months later. We went to one of those Omega free clinics, since free was all we could afford, and I got checked out. Turns out I was born with one sad, warped little ovary that couldn’t produce the right levels of hormone and pheromone on its own. They said that my heats would always be short and pathetic. That my scent would never be enough to bring an Alpha into rut. That the odds of me ever conceiving without fertility treatment were about 25%. I always took it as a not-so-subtle hint from Mother Nature that my genes ought to crash and burn at a dead end.”

“So you press your luck by refusing to take the suppressants and birth control which vex your system so,” Hannibal muses. Will glances at him out of the corner of his eye and sees a thoughtful expression on the older man’s face. “You should be aware that Mother Nature has a tendency to inflict dramatic irony upon those who jump to conclusions about her intent. You should not assume yourself immune to her meddling. When was your last heat?”

“A month ago. I slept through it. I usually do, and just wake up feeling like I ought to take a shower beneath Niagara Falls.”

“Then I have two months to come up with a solution to the problem,” Hannibal says. “Fortunately, I am nothing if not resourceful.”

Will scowls. “Did you miss the part about how I don’t produce enough pheromone to send an Alpha into rut?”

Hannibal smirks and he raises an eyebrow in amusement. “Did you miss the part about how my sense of smell is uncommonly strong?”

He smells Will succumb to his somnambulism before the man even enters the kitchen. Hannibal closes his eyes and breathes in deeply, allowing himself to fully indulge in the luxurious smell. It’s clean, delicate, and ethereal. It brings to mind small, iridescent soap bubbles on a gentle breeze, in danger of popping at any time. It’s a pleasant compliment to Will’s natural Omega scent, blessedly spared from awful aftershave.

He has been visiting Will’s home at night with some regularity now. He finds it particularly easy and rewarding to consider his plans for Will Graham as he walks through the Omega’s home. Home is where the heart is, or so they say, and there is nothing Hannibal wants more than to observe Will’s heart. He imagines holding it in his hands delicately, the way one would cradle a small and injured bird. He would feel the organ flutter and pump as it continues to push lifeblood through Will’s still-living body. And he would carefully put it back in its little nest within Will’s ribcage.
Normally Hannibal kills to arrange his works of art. But Will… Will is a living tableau.

The dogs are now used to Hannibal’s presence and have considered him a dear and trusted friend ever since he fed them homemade sausage while their master was out of town. They are perceptive dogs and realize that merely watching him with their tails wagging pleases him more than crowding around him and impeding his progress. They sit in the living room and watch with curious affection as the man who brings good food disables the fire alarms and begins dousing the kitchen in lighter fluid.

Hannibal looks up when he hears unsteady footsteps. He can still smell the scent of sleepwalking beneath the lighter fluid, and he smiles when Will wanders into the living room from his bedroom. He stands there for a moment, swaying slightly, before walking into the kitchen and up to Hannibal.

The sleeping man stands in front of Hannibal for a moment and watches him with glassy eyes untainted by consciousness.

“Good evening, Will,” Hannibal practically purrs.

At the sound of that rich and heady voice, Will presses forward, wrapping his arms around Hannibal’s chest. He murmurs something purely incoherent as he lifts his chin up to rub against Hannibal’s jawline just below his ear. He pushes his groin against Hannibal’s thigh and tilts his head back far, exposing the long, pale expanse of his neck. A textbook Omega mating display.

Something rumbles deep in Hannibal’s chest, a low growl of interest. It just makes Will go even more boneless and pliant against him. Hannibal pushes his nose against Will’s neck and breathes in deeply against his pulse point beneath his jaw. He lets the breath out slowly against Will’s warm skin.

“Later,” Hannibal murmurs. “I promise.” He disentangles himself from Will’s arms and presses his hand against the small of Will’s back, guiding him toward the living room. Will lets out a vague moan of protest that makes Hannibal smile.

He ushers Will to a chair in the living room and gently pushes him down to sit. Will relaxes into the chair and his eyes flutter closed; he is drifting out of his sleepwalking state, leaving him in a deeper, less ambulatory sleep. Hannibal reaches into his trouser pocket and pulls out Will’s cell phone, which he had removed from Will’s bedside table when he had disabled the smoke detector in Will’s bedroom. He places it gently on Will’s thigh and can’t resist the urge to slowly run his hand up the inside of that thigh. He can feel the warmth through the gloves he’s wearing.

He walks back to the kitchen, shutting the door behind him as he goes. Once at the door leading outside, he reaches into his other pocket for the matchbox he brought. He strikes the first match and tosses it to a puddle of lighter fluid by Will’s wooden cabinets. With a burst of blue flame, it catches fire. He lights another match and flicks it to the pantry door, which also soon flares alight. The fire hungrily spreads throughout the kitchen, and when Hannibal is certain he won’t need to help it along, he casually walks from Will’s home.

He drives for around ten minutes, stopping in an empty parking lot by a rest stop surrounded by woods. There is a muffled, desperate sobbing coming from inside the dense trees, along with a frantic rustling. Hannibal approaches and finds the grocery clerk who had charged him twice for several items and pocketed the difference. The young man’s ankles are twisted and broken, and his wrists are tied tightly together behind the tree he has been tethered to. His mouth is gagged.

“Ah, I see you’re finally awake,” Hannibal says.
The clerk’s eyes go wide and his attempts to scream escalate. Hannibal shakes his head and makes a tsk. “Now, that’s no way to behave for someone who comes to you looking for a favor.”

The clerk goes quiet, though he continues to tremble and breathe shakily.

“I have a phone call for you to make,” Hannibal explains. “If you’re very helpful and do exactly as I say, I may be willing to entertain other notions about your fate. On the other hand, any deviation from what I say will make me very disagreeable. Now, what do you say? Will you be cooperative?”

The grocer mumbles and nods desperately.

“Good.” There is a bag near the man. Hannibal strolls over to it and pulls a prepaid cell phone from it. He tells the man that he is going to report a fire at Will’s address and if he does anything else, like scream when Hannibal removes the gag or yell to the emergency services operator about being held captive by the Chesapeake Ripper, things will end badly and – more importantly – very, very slowly.

Hannibal dials 911. Two minutes later, he ends the call. He places the cell phone back in his bag. He will destroy it later at his leisure. No one will ever find a trace of it.

“There, I-I did what you said,” the grocer whimpers. Hannibal, his back to the man, rolls his eyes. He should have gagged him again immediately after the phone call. He pulls a flawlessly sharp butcher knife from the bag. The man cranes his neck, trying to see everything Hannibal is doing as he walks behind the tree the man is tied to and pretends to regard his tied wrists. “Y-you’ll let me go now, right? I promise, I won’t say anything. I’ll take it to my grave, I swear.”

“Oh,” Hannibal murmurs. “I’m sure you will.”

With one swift movement, he swings the knife. The very beginning of a startled yelp transforms into a choked gurgle as his throat is cut cleanly. The man thrashes and seizes as blood pours down his neck and out of his mouth. His teeth stain red. His kicking eventually dies down to a few pathetic twitches and, finally, nothing at all.

Hannibal knows he doesn’t have much time to work. He expects he shall receive a phone call soon. Still, given that everyone expects him to be at his home an hour away, there should be enough time for him to pick a few choice cuts and place them in the cooler in his trunk.

As he slices into the grocer’s flesh, he ponders the menu. Some sort of flambé would be ideal.
Chapter 2

It’s mid-afternoon when Will wakes up in an unfamiliar bed. His heart hammers as a surge of panic washes over him, and he thrashes and kicks at the smooth satin sheets clinging to his legs. The terrified fit does not last long, however. As his wild, nervous eyes dart about and take in the luxurious décor, recognition begins to seep into him.

The room is a picture perfect display of regal elegance. The color scheme is heavily weighted in favor of dark scarlet trimmed with gold. The walls are painted a red so dark and rich that it is nearly brown and the hard wood flooring is made of an impeccably polished dark cherry wood. The reds in the room are dark enough that if left to their own devices the room would feel uncomfortably moody and oppressive, and that is where the gold comes in. The ceiling is a light, serene gold in stark but complimentary contrast to the bold and aggressive reds, and the bed’s sheets and pillow cases are a similar though deeper and richer color. There is a large window with sheer, breezy curtains and trimming which would normally add some pleasant natural light, but the sky outside is dark and ominous with driving rain.

Will glances at the antique bedside table to his right. A table clock that’s probably worth more than every cent in Will’s bank account ticks the seconds away with the graceful sway of its pendulum. It’s 2:47 PM. His name is Will Graham. He’s in his psychiatrist’s guest bedroom.

He leans back against the pillows and sighs. He remembers Hannibal guiding him to this room at about half-past seven in the morning and leaving him to collapse onto the bed with a graceless, bone-aching exhaustion. No lost time, no sleepwalking, no dreams - just the peaceful oblivion of sleep for once in far too long.

He heaves himself out of bed and onto his unsteady feet. There’s a neat stack of folded clothing on a bergère chair. He ambles nearer and gets a better look. The collection includes several pairs of trousers, a selection of button-down shirts, a few vests and two belts. There’s a note perched atop them.

Will –

_Hopefully this will suffice until the fire marshal allows you to retrieve your own clothing. I believe they will suit you._

_The guest bathroom is directly across the hall._

- Hannibal

Will sets the note down and picks up a few articles of clothing without bothering to worry if they’ll match or not. He feels oily and gritty, and as he opens the door to the hallway, all he can think about is the fact that he’s never wanted anything more than he wants a shower right now.

That thought is quickly proven wrong. The moment he’s in the hallway, the scent of something
wonderful wafts from the kitchen. It’s a powerful punch of countless spices, savory meat, salty seafood, okra and tomato simmered to the point of disintegration. The familiarity hits him with the impact of a speeding truck, and his stomach, deprived of a real meal since lunchtime the day before, growls voraciously. Hannibal is cooking Creole-style gumbo of all things.

Still, Will forces himself to take the shower before he will allow himself to head to the kitchen. The scent of the food follows him into the bathroom and lingers. As he stands beneath the spray of water from the shower head, he shuts his eyes and he’s up to his knees in the muddy water of the bayou. There is a distant rumble of thunder as a downpour of rain soaks his bare skin. Bullfrogs bellow and crickets chirp and mosquitoes buzz at his ears and curious minnows nibble at his toes.

His eyes don’t need to be open to know there’s an alligator lurking in the water. He just wishes he knew its exact location.

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Hannibal is checking the tenderness of the rice when he hears Will come and stand awkwardly at the entrance to the kitchen.

“Shouldn’t you be at your office with a patient?” Will asks.

“I’m on vacation,” Hannibal explains, lowering the pot lid back over the steaming rice and turning off the heat. “I planned to attend a wine festival in Martha’s Vineyard, but obviously something much more important has come up. I have the next three days off.”

“I’m sorry you had to miss something like that on my account.”

"As I stated, I consider few things more important than 'your account'."

Hannibal glances up to look at Will. He prides himself as a man of profound self-control and composure, but he finds those qualities tested when he sees a freshly showered Will wearing some of the clothes he set out for him. His clothes.

It says a great deal about Will’s typical style of dress when clothes which are tailored for a man who is slightly taller and broader in the shoulders and chest fit better than his usual garb. Hannibal realizes it’s only a matter of time before Will gains access to the cheap, frumpy clothing again, and he briefly wishes he had started the fire in Will’s closet. All too soon, he will hide himself away beneath the uninspired plaids, dull browns, and weather-beaten jackets which have earned him the secret nickname of Goodwill Graham amongst some of the snarkier underlings in the Behavioral Sciences department.

For now, though, Will is a treat to behold. He is dressed in a pair of dark, well-ironed trousers with subtle gray pinstripes and a matching vest. Beneath the vest is a long-sleeved powder blue dress shirt which brings out the color of his eyes. The ensemble is missing a tie and suit jacket to really round out the look, but the fact that Will is wearing anything so presentable is a small miracle in and of itself.

“It’s a good look for you. I should have had you play dress-up much earlier,” Hannibal says. “Come, no need to sulk in the door frame.”

“I feel like a pall-bearer,” Will mutters as he walks into the kitchen.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow as he stirs the gumbo. “Does this mean you typically feel like a homeless fisherman?”
I certainly do now,” Will says, picking at the vest and keeping his eyes low and away from Hannibal. “Considering that’s what I am.”

“You are not homeless, Will. Your house is merely damaged and in need of repair. And besides,” he pauses, allowing the silence to linger long enough that Will’s eyes are forced to meet his out of curiosity. Hannibal smiles. “It is my sincere hope that you will come to think of this place as home as long as you are here. And the best way I can think of to illustrate this point is to offer you a taste of home. Chicken, pork sausage, and shrimp gumbo in a shellfish stock base.”

“Louisiana hasn’t been my home in years,” Will says, even as he breathes in a deep whiff of the familiar aroma of gumbo.

“But it was your first, and that is always significant.”

Will blinks and quickly averts his eyes again. “Thanks,” he says. Quick to change the topic, he continues, “I just thought gumbo would be… I don’t know… beneath you. It’s not exactly haute cuisine. Next you’ll be telling me you’re making fried frog legs.”

Hannibal begins carefully ladling the gumbo out of the large pot it has simmered in all day into an elegant tureen. “The cuisine of Louisiana reflects a rich and varied cultural heritage, and it is one of the most unique culinary traditions in America as a result. From the peppers and tomatoes introduced via Spanish and Italian influence to the spices of Africa and the West Indies, all held together by a backbone of French cooking techniques. There is no shame in any of this.”

He finishes transferring the gumbo and starts scooping the fluffy white rice into a serving bowl. With that task complete, he gestures for Will to lift the tureen. “If you would be so kind as to carry that into the dining room, we may begin our meal,” he says. “And as for the matter of frog legs: would you like me to add that to a future menu?”

They carry the food to the table where Hannibal pulls out a chair for Will before setting to the task of serving them. “No,” Will says. “I never saw the appeal. When I was about four, my dad took me to a county fair that was serving frog legs in one of the food tents. I started screaming at the top of my lungs that they’d killed Kermit the Frog.”

Hannibal smiles and ladles a generous serving of gumbo over a bowl of rice and passes the food to Will. “Your empathy extends even to food?”

“It does when it can sing The Rainbow Connection.”

Hannibal laughs as he finishes serving himself. “Well, rest assured: this chicken had a terrible singing voice.” Never before had he heard an opera singer do such a severe disservice to Nessun Dorma, amateur or not. Will gives a small, breathy laugh at the joke, and Hannibal savors the feeling of knowing the true punch line.

Will lifts a spoonful of the gumbo to his mouth and Hannibal watches with keen interest as he bites into a large morsel of the ‘chicken’. “This is delicious, Dr. Lecter. I don’t think even the proudest Cajun could tell this came from a non-Louisianan.”

“Please, I’d prefer it if you’d call me Hannibal. And thank you. I do try. I think being extremely particular about the quality of the ingredients makes a big difference.”

They eat in companionable silence for a time. Will is ravenous, and when he’s on his second bowl, he restarts the conversation. “Another thing that always bothered me about frog legs is how they look,” he says. “When skinned and raw, they resemble chubby human legs in miniature. Like
someone chopped the legs off a fetus. Whenever I’d see them in local markets, I found them… unnerving.”

Hannibal nods. Now that the suggestion is there, he can see the resemblance. What the rows and rows of them on ice must have looked like to young Will and his intense imagination. Hannibal can’t begin to visualize the carnage himself, and he wishes he could peer through Will’s eyes and see. “Did you always see them in this way, or did it only come about once you discovered your condition?”

Will pushes a shrimp around in his bowl. “You’re going to have to be more specific than that,” he says. “I’m essentially little more than a bundle of conditions given a coat of skin.”

“Such is true for everyone, though the conditions vary. In this case, I refer to your incomplete reproductive system, diminished Omega qualities, and limited fertility.” He can see Will tense and open his mouth, likely ready to snap about not wanting to be psychoanalyzed at the dining table. He continues before the rant can erupt. “Please bear with my curiosity, Will. I’ve always suspected you of possessing some tendencies which imply a minor case of body dysmorphia or gender dysphoria, but now I have confirmation and a root cause. I can’t help you if I don’t have a complete knowledge of you. Now, please answer my question.”

Will’s lips press into a hard, thin line for a moment before they relax again. “I only saw them that way after,” he whispers.

“I see,” Hannibal says. “Do you feel like your mind and body are not in alignment?”

“I don’t think I was born in the wrong body, if that’s what you mean,” Will says. He pushes the remains of his second bowl of gumbo away, no longer hungry. “I think I’ve got a broken brain tucked away in a broken body. If that’s not complete mind-body alignment, I don’t know what is.”

“Then do you resent being an Omega? Even with all the advancements that have been made in dynamic equality over the past few decades, society’s scales are still weighted heavily in favor of Alphas and, to a lesser degree, Betas. Then there is the inherent alienation in being part of an extreme minority in law enforcement in general, let alone a field as taxing as the tireless pursuit of serial killers.”

Will laughs mirthlessly. “Yes, thank you, it’s so easy to forget that I’m a weird, unsettling freak to everyone I work with. It’s not like I’m reminded of it constantly.” He stands and paces, his nervous energy getting the better of him. He cups his hand by his mouth and his voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper. “’There goes Will Graham. Not only does he have vivid visions of being any number of sick serial killers, but he’s an Omega, too! Shouldn’t he be mated and driving around a minivan full of screaming kids by now?’ ‘Wait, he’s an Omega? He doesn’t even smell right.’”

“I apologize. It was not my intent to set you off,” Hannibal says. He folds his hands and rests his chin on his laced fingers. “And for the record, I do not think you’re unsettling in any way. I think you are very interesting.”

“An interesting viral mutation under a microscope,” Will mutters. “Could be an irritating but ultimately harmless variation on the common cold or a potentially fatal pandemic.”

“A fascinating human being whose company I enjoy enough to invite into my home. Trust me when I say that people of that caliber do not come along often,” Hannibal corrects, though he does wish that Will were as contagious as his metaphor implies. The world would be a more interesting place as a result. “But you really do feel that your associates think such things about you due to
“I think it’s a factor. Maybe not quite on par with the whole ‘vivid serial killer hallucinations’ thing,” Will says. He collapses back into his seat with a tired sigh. “I believe you were the one who said Jack thinks of me as a ‘fragile little teacup’.”

“And Alana Bloom?” Hannibal asks. “You harbor romantic intentions toward her. Surely you don’t believe she thinks of you so dismissively?”

Will’s lips twitch with a whisper so low Hannibal cannot hear it.

“You’ll have to speak up.”

“Harbored,” Will murmurs, staring down at his hands. “Past tense. I’m giving up the intent.”

It takes every ounce of Hannibal’s willpower to school the sudden predatory gleam in his eyes back to professional and personal concern. “Would you care to elaborate on that?”

“I really wouldn’t,” Will says. “But considering you’ll just get me to anyway, fine. We had another conversation about the whole mess about a week ago. My lack of stability is a major stumbling block but maybe not an insurmountable one. She brought up one that is. She wants kids one day.”

“And you do not?”

Will sighs and leans forward, propping his elbows on his thighs and burying his face in his hands. “What I want has had little to no bearing on my life. The thing that matters is I, personally, can’t give her that.”

“You are not completely infertile. It would require a great deal of work or a tremendous quantity of luck, most likely both, but you are entirely capable of having children. And even if you were fully sterile, there is always the option of adoption.”

“It’s more like it’s a ‘shouldn’t’ so huge and daunting and covered in jagged thorns that it becomes a ‘can’t’ by default,” Will says. “I’d be a terrible parent. Alana said as much as gently as she possibly could before she said we should just focus on our friendship. Can’t say I disagree.”

“You have been doing well with Abigail Hobbs.”

“I’m aloof and awkward and constantly thinking about the warmth of her blood on my fingers,” Will replies. “There isn’t a single healthy thing in that. Besides, Abigail is basically an adult. A baby would be completely dependent on me and therefore have no way to defend itself from me screwing it up.”

Hannibal watches him with an appraising eye. “You speak as if it’s a given that, if you did have a child, you would end up as a single parent. Are you afraid that your Alpha would abandon you and your child the way your mother abandoned you and your father?”

Will sits up straight. “I didn’t tell you that.”

“I presumed as much when you were so evasive about discussing your mother. You said that you never knew her. If she were dead, there would be no need to mince words. But if she abandoned you when you were still a baby, there is the weight and shame of being rejected by someone who is supposed to offer unconditional love. It could also explain the strange dichotomy you have around Alphas. In most cases you are crippling shy and wary, but every so often you meet one who renders you desperate for their approval and affection,” Hannibal says. “Platonically in the
case of Jack Crawford and romantically in the case of Alana Bloom.”

"And where do you fall in that dichotomy, Dr. Lecter?" Will asks sarcastically.

"Which one? Wariness-vs-desperation or platonic-vs-romantic?" Hannibal retorts.

A brief moment of heavy silence settles over them like the dark storm clouds churning outside. Hannibal is about to press his line of inquiry further when Will’s phone rings from his pocket. Tension visibly drains out of Will’s muscles as he scrambles for the distraction of the phone call. “It’s Jack,” he says and accepts the call.

Will gets very few words in edgewise during the conversation, saying little more than grunts of assent and a few murmurs of understanding. When the call finally ends, he sighs heavily. “Good news is they got their hands on the recording of the 911 call reporting the fire and it definitely isn’t my voice. The fire marshal’s also cleared it so I can get my car and some of my stuff. The considerably worse news is that arson was definitely involved in the fire and the cops found a body about ten minutes away from my place. They think it might be the Ripper claiming responsibility. Jack wants me out there so I can look ASAP.”

“Well then,” Hannibal says. “Let’s not keep them waiting.”

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“Looking good, Will,” Bev says as Will steps out of Hannibal’s car. She gives the psychiatrist a friendly wave, and Hannibal gives a polite nod before he drives off. As Bev, Price, and Zeller escort Will to the crime scene, she continues, “You never struck me as the type to be such a fancypants, but I gotta admit, it really works for you.”

“Probably because the pants, though fancy beyond reproach, belong to Dr. Lecter,” Price says.

“You know that’s not what normal people mean when we say we got into someone’s pants, right, Graham?” Zeller sneers. Will picks up his pace a little and keeps his eyes on the ground.

“Don’t be such a dick, Z,” Bev hisses. “There’s friendly teasing and then there’s being a douche. You know what he’s going through, so have a little sympathy. Didn’t anybody ever teach you about chivalry?”

“What? It was just a joke. No need to get bent out of shape about it. This is why it’s a bad idea to let Omegas do work like this. They’re just not cut out for rough stuff like this the way Alphas or Betas are, and we end up walking on eggshells because of it.”

Price clears his throat loudly in an attempt to cut off the argument as they approach Jack, the rest of the forensics crew, and the corpse.

“Meet Christian Andrew Nelson, Alpha, age 24,” Jack says as Will comes to stand behind him, his eyes glued on the body. “Worked the checkout at an upscale organic grocery store in Baltimore. He didn’t show up for his shift this morning, and here’s our reason why. Likely cause of death is blood loss from his slit throat. His kidneys and liver are gone. And, as you can see, that’s not all that got moved around.”

The young man’s arms have been removed at the elbow and tied to a neighboring tree. A small amount of twine is wrapped around the fingers and thumb so all digits except for the index finger are tied down, leaving the arms pointing in two different directions.

“It’s a signpost,” Will murmurs.
“There are numbers carved into the arms with a scalpel,” Bev says. “They look like GPS coordinates. I can run them and see what results we get.”

Will walks over to the arm-signpost and hones in on the left arm. He stares at the index finger for a moment before turning around and facing the direction the finger points. Living so nearby, he knows the area well, and he tries to visualize everything in that direction.

He begins mumbling to himself, “Fields, fields, rundown 7/11, more fields, trees, turning road, my…” He stops, a bit of color draining from his face. Louder, he continues, “I think I already know this one. Run it anyway.”

Jack moves over to Will and tries to follow his line of sight. “What do you think it’s pointing to?”

“I know it’s pointing to my house,” Will says. “This is the Ripper’s work. He set the fire and made the 911 call.”

Jack turns abruptly, his mouth slightly open. “Then that means we’ve got a recording of the Ripper’s voice,” Jack says, a tentative note of triumph in his voice.

Will shakes his head, his shoulders shaking with a barely-restrained laugh. “Of course you don’t, Jack. You think the Ripper wouldn’t think of that? I’ll bet you anything it’s Nelson’s voice in the recording. The Ripper dialed the number and held the phone up so Nelson could report the fire,” Will says. “Then he killed the messenger.”

“Jack?” Bev calls out as she approaches. “You’re really not going to like this.”

“Since when do I like anything?!” Jack bellows. “Spit it out!”

“The numbers are definitely GPS coordinates,” Bev says. “We converted them to addresses. The one Will’s standing by is… it’s his home address.”

“He already figured that out,” Jack growls. “What’s the other one?”

Bev swallows. “Your house.”

“God damn it, I hate being right about shit like this!” Jack yells. “So that was the Ripper’s game after all. Get you out of your house and staying with me so he could do God knows what while we’re both under one roof. This is him taunting us, letting us know it’s already too late. I’m just glad you saw through him and spoiled that particular plan.”

Will narrows his eyes. There’s something wrong with the scene. He can’t quite put his finger on it, but something doesn’t fit. He feels as if he’s gazing at an optical illusion, like the famous drawing of a young woman that transforms into a crone when viewed from a different angle. There are two ways to look at this crime scene, but for now he can only see Jack’s interpretation. The feeling that he’s missing something huge and obvious makes his skin crawl.

He jolts when Jack claps an arm on his shoulder. “Will,” the older man says in a low voice. “As of now, you are staying at an undisclosed location. You are not to inform anyone that you are living with Dr. Lecter unless they come to you with a seal of approval from me, got it?”

“Who would I tell?” Will croaks. “I’m not exactly spoiled for choice when it comes to confidants.”

Jack ignores the remark. “I’m going to need to beef up security at my home due to this. And I’m sorry, Will, but you probably won’t be able to return home immediately even after your house is repaired. It’d be easier for you to consider moving entirely, but if you’re dead-set on staying there,
you’ll need a complete security overhaul and that might take a while.”

Will doesn’t immediately respond. He takes in a long, stuttering breath which Jack interprets as a displeased hiss. Maybe it is; he can no longer tell. Jack’s hand on his shoulder rises and falls in the form of a few friendly pats.

“Come on,” Jack says. “Like I said on the phone, you’re clear to get whatever you like from your home now. Let’s get some of your stuff packed up in your car and you can head back to Dr. Lecter’s.”

Will can feel Christian Andrew Nelson’s finger pointing at his back as Jack guides him away from the crime scene. Even later on, as he moves in a daze through his home and shoves his clothes and a few of his more important knick-knacks into boxes, he thinks he sees it pointing at him in the periphery of his vision.

----- 5 Minutes to Midnight -----  

The storm in Baltimore is still going strong even as the clock on Hannibal’s bedside table clicks closer and closer to midnight. The patter of rain against his window and the occasional distant rumble of thunder add to the relaxing atmosphere as Hannibal sits in bed reading a book on Cajun cuisine. With how well the gumbo was received, he thinks it wise to consider other options as well.

He looks up from his book when he hears an unusual sound mixed in with the familiar sounds of the storm. It’s the low, slow scratch of fingernails against wood. Hannibal sets his book aside and waits. There is another scratch, and it is definitely coming from his door. He pulls his sheets aside, stands, and goes to answer.

He opens the door slowly and sees Will’s bitten and ill-kept nails scratching the wood as his hand fails to grasp the doorknob. Once again the delicate scent of sleepwalking hits Hannibal’s nostrils and he smiles. He opens the door a bit wider and reaches out, placing a strong hand at the small of Will’s back. He pulls Will close, and he tilts his head until his lips are pressed against the sleepwalking man’s right ear.

“It’s later, isn’t it?” Hannibal murmurs. “I always keep my promises.”

Hannibal pulls back slowly but keeps his hand on Will’s back. He maneuvers them to the bed, though Will is unsteady on his own feet. He stagers and leans against Hannibal for support, and when they finally make it to the bed, he collapses onto it with the grace of a sack of potatoes. Hannibal sits on the bed and watches the inelegant display with a trace of amusement curling at the corner of his lips.

It doesn’t take long for the amusement to turn to something more carnal. As soon as Will is on the bed, he seems to get a better grasp on what he came to do. Perhaps it is the fact that he is surrounded by Hannibal’s scent, but regardless of the reason, Will’s movements become less awkward and more sensuous. He writhes, swiveling his hips and clawing his hands into Hannibal’s bed sheets. His breaths come in short, ragged gasps through his open mouth.

Hannibal reaches over and takes both of Will’s hands in his right hand. He lifts, pinning Will’s arms above his head. Slow and deliberately, he moves until he is straddling Will’s narrow hips, using his own legs to pin Will’s together. Leaning on his left arm as leverage, he keeps a gap between their chests as he presses his forehead against Will’s.

“Look at me, Will,” he rasps. “Into my eyes.”
Will’s eyes meet his and hold Hannibal’s half-lidded, dark gaze steadily. There is no spark of human awareness in those light blue eyes; they are as glassy and vacant as a doll’s.

“Good boy,” Hannibal purrs. “Can you speak?”

Will gives a sleepy murmur, but nothing in the sound could ever be considered real speech by any stretch of the imagination.

“Do you understand me? Blink once for yes, twice for no.”

Will’s eyelids flutter and he arches his back, trying in vain to press himself closer to Hannibal. He gives a low moan of disappointment when he fails to achieve more contact.

Hannibal smiles. “If you do not wish to consent,” he breathes. “Tell me to stop.”

With that, he crushes his lips to Will’s. He yearns to be rough, to bite and bruise to the point that Will would have to walk around for days with lips that make him look like he lost a brawl with a prizefighter. But it is still far too early for any of that. It would be foolish to give everything away for something which would fade and heal in a matter of days. When the time comes for revelations, it should be over something much more permanent. When he breaks the kiss, Will gasps for air.

Still keeping Will’s arms pinned above his head, Hannibal’s free hand reaches over and grabs the silk bed sheet. He wraps it around Will’s wrists and through a loop in the intricate wrought iron headboard. When he is finished, Will is bound firmly enough to impede movement of his arms but not nearly strong enough for any incriminating marks to be left behind.

Hannibal licks a long line on the inside of Will’s right arm, starting at the wrist and ending at the soft tissue on the inside of the elbow. He nips the throbbing blue vein there as his thumbnail traces numbers against Will’s forearm; it is the GPS coordinates of Hannibal’s home.

Hannibal thinks that Will’s upper body has had plenty of attention, so he places his hands on Will’s chest over the fabric of his night shirt and begins to trail down. Hannibal’s fingers slide down the muscles of Will’s stomach and dip under the waistband of his boxers. He eases them down, revealing the straining erection nestled in his dark thatch of pubic hair.

Hannibal stares at Will’s face as his hand ghosts over the penis, getting close enough to feel its warmth without actually touching it. Will’s head lolls from side to side and his eyelids twitch and flutter.

The bed shifts as Hannibal changes his position, moving so his knee nudges at Will’s legs. Will catches on and complies immediately, spreading his legs and giving Hannibal room to settle between them. Hannibal smirks and lowers his hand onto Will’s erection, giving in a soft rub as a reward. Positive reinforcement. Will groans at the contact, tilting his head back and exposing his neck.

“Good, Will,” Hannibal praises. “Good.”

Hannibal’s hand drifts lower, gently scraping his fingernail down the perineum. Will gasps and buck’s his hips off the bed when Hannibal’s probing fingers finally enter him. Even fully-functional Omega males only produce small amounts of lubrication outside of heats, so it’s no surprise that Will has produced even less than that. The fact that there’s any at all makes pride swell in Hannibal’s chest and his as-yet untouched erection throb. Will must be profoundly aroused.

“Hmm,” Hannibal murmurs as his fingers continue to rub and press. Will trembles with every little movement and keens when Hannibal removes his fingers. “It seems we’ll need a little assistance
Will tugs at his restraints and kicks when Hannibal moves away. The Alpha stands at the side of the bed and finally removes his pajama bottoms and underwear, revealing toned thighs and his impressive erection. He drapes himself over Will, who pushes up into the full-body contact and mumbles something unintelligible.

Hannibal moves against Will and reaches down to take both their erections in hand. Between the stroking of his hand and the thrusting of his hips, it does not take long to establish a pleasurable rhythm. Will grunts and murmurs, bucking his own hips up to match Hannibal’s pace.

“Sss-“ Will hisses through his teeth. “Ssstaaaaahhh…” His eyes open wide and Hannibal watches, intrigued, as a moment of panic flashes there. Though he can still smell the scent of somnambulance all over Will, he wonders if this is a sign that his consciousness is returning.

It isn’t. The brief glimmer of potential awareness is gone as quickly as it appeared. Will shudders and climaxes, coating Hannibal’s fingers with the evidence. Hannibal growls and follows, allowing his teeth to graze Will’s neck.

Will’s eyes roll back in his head and his body goes completely limp. He has sunk back into the oblivion of deep sleep. Hannibal unties his arms and goes about cleaning and dressing him. When he has finished, there is absolutely no sign that the intercourse had even happened.

Hannibal tucks an arm under Will’s knees and the other beneath his shoulders. He lifts Will with ease and carries him down the hall toward the guest bedroom as if he is no burden at all. Hannibal is very particular about maintaining his exercise routine, and he has built up an impressive amount of strength and endurance as a result. And, of course, there’s his extensive experience in moving dead weight.

Will sinks into the guest bed with a tired murmur when Hannibal sets him down. Hannibal sits on the bed, running his hand down the side of Will’s face. It’s a possessive gesture, if not an affectionate one. He leans down and presses a kiss to the sweaty curls covering Will’s forehead and moves his lips to the sleeping man’s ear.

“I’m glad you didn’t tell me to stop,” he hums. He nibbles at the earlobe. "Though it wouldn't have made a difference."

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Will stands against a tree, staring down a long path that cuts through the woods in a straight line. In the distance, he can see his house engulfed in flames. It is little more than a burning speck on the horizon, but he knows deep in his core that it is his home. It collapses as if in slow motion, and the flames burn impossibly higher.

He blinks slowly, and when his eyes open again, the stag is standing before him.

“Tell me to stop.” The voice is deep, warped, and guttural, sounding more like a rumble of thunder given speech than anything that could come from a throat. It echoes in a strange, muffled way, and Will can’t tell if it originally came from the stag or elsewhere.

It is then that Will realizes it is not an echo at all, but many different voices. The beast stamps a hoof on the hard ground and the voices become louder, more distinct. Something grabs Will’s wrists and pulls his arms up over his head. He looks up to see Christian Andrew Nelson’s disembodied arms strapped to the tree. The hands grip him like a vice.
“Tell me to stop.”
“Tell me to stop.”
“Tell me to stop.”

The voices hiss and moan louder and louder, some sounding like desperate pleas and others like cruel taunts. More arms writhe up out of the ground or begin emerging from the tree, grabbing Will in different spots. They claw at him. Their touch burns.

“Tell me to stop.”
“Tell me to stop.”
“Tell me to stop.”

Will’s tongue is heavy and immobile in his mouth like a lump of meat. His mouth hangs open, trying desperately to form words, to scream, to do anything to try to stop what is happening. The burning is becoming unbearable, and he feels welts rising all over his body where the terrible hands rip and scrape at him. He takes in a deep breath and tries one last, desperate time.

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“STOP!” Will yells hoarsely as he darts up in bed. He thrashes wildly at the covers, his skin still stinging from the nightmare. “Stop, stop, stop, stop!”

He gasps for air desperately as his panic recedes. He sits there a few long moments, straining his ears in an attempt to hear if his violent awakening has woken up Hannibal. When he hears no footsteps approaching, he sighs in relief and collapses back against the pillows. He glances over at the clock on the bedside table.

“It’s 2:47 AM,” he whispers. “My name is Will Graham. I’m in Hannibal Lecter’s guest bedroom. It was only a nightmare. None of that happened. I didn’t even sleepwalk. I’m safe.”

He curls up on his side and stares at the wall, wondering how long it will take him to fall back asleep and if he will ever actually believe those last two words he said to himself.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Once again, there's not a lot of informed consent happening in this chapter. And by 'not a lot', I mean Will consents to precisely none of this. We also have non-consensual drug use now too because apparently I am the worst person. Please be advised over these and other triggery matters. Also, there's heat sex in this chapter with all the strange kinks that entails. So... choo-choo, here comes the weird porn train.

There's a reference to the song "Mad World" in this chapter, and if you'd like to listen to it as a little background sound, make it the original Tears For Fears version. Gary Jules' famous cover is lovely but ultimately kind of toothless, in my opinion.

One last thing: I want to apologize for how long this chapter took and how long future chapters may take. An enormous family tragedy and many other stresses slowed me down, and I'm frequently very busy. I wish I could update faster, but sometimes it just doesn't work out that way.

There is a new clock in Hannibal’s office and it is driving Will to distraction.

Perhaps ‘new’ is not the right term for it. It has been there for nearly two months now. Will first noticed it when his appointments with Hannibal resumed about a week after the fire. They’d ultimately decided that, as long as they were sharing a home, it would be wise to keep the psychoanalyzing and the domestic affairs as separate as possible. Keeping the sessions confined to Hannibal’s office would reinforce that boundary.

According to Hannibal, the clock is a gift from a colleague. He says he is not fond of the thing and would never allow it to clash with his home décor, but inflicting it on some other unsuspecting recipient would be rude. It’s a no-win scenario in black wrought iron.

The clock is roughly Will’s height, and he can’t decide if it’s cutting-edge modern or a throwback to the torture devices of the dark ages. Despite how heavy the clock must be, the claw foot base has a deceptively nimble look to it, as if it could easily unfurl its quasi-reptilian toes and begin skittering across the floor. The thing is composed entirely of intertwining metal ‘vines’ of various thicknesses, staring with a confounding knot of metal just above the clawed base. There is something uncanny in the shape the vines take as they loop and twirl upwards out of the chaotic mass; it almost resembles a humanoid torso and head emerging from – or perhaps forming itself out of - a pit of snakes. The clock’s dark, reflective face is situated in the abdomen of the emerging figure. The vines grow thinner and smaller as they writhe and wrap together to form a spiraling labyrinth where the figure’s head would be.

As amazing as it is as a work of craftsmanship, it’s indisputably eerie. But its strange appearance alone isn’t what keeps Will’s eyes pinned to the thing, his hands balled into white-knuckled fists on his lap.

It’s the ticking that really does it.
What hadn’t bothered him before has steadily grown into something inescapable. It seems like such a steady, easily-overlooked progression. Will hadn’t even noticed the ticking the first two weeks after the clock first appeared, but it was noticeably louder after that. And louder. And louder. Growing less and less tolerable with each new session to the point that it now booms like war drums in his ears when lulls of silence fall between him and Hannibal. Will thinks he feels something throbbing deep within him to the ticking beat. Perhaps the noise has synched up with his irritating biological metronome.

Tick, tick, tick.

Will stares at the clock.

He sees himself. He is nude, though his genitalia and everything below are completely obscured by a constantly writhing mass of animate black iron. Will can’t tell if the movement is one long serpentine slither or the subtle throbbing of a vein. Vines of the unnatural stuff wrap up around him, holding him in place and pinning his arms behind his back. His eyes are closed, his face placid. His skin is pale and there is no sign of breathing.

There is a clock low on his abdomen. The hour hand points straight up and the minute hand is closing in with every noisy, maddening tick. A pink flush begins to seep into the ashen skin around the clock, slowly crawling down his legs and up his chest. A hint of purple creeps into the bluish tint to his nipples and lips, and soon they too are becoming rosy. With one last, loud tick, the minute hand joins the hour hand.

His back arches and his eyes begin to flutter open.

“Will, what do you see?”

The vision is gone. Will shakes his head and rubs at his eyes, trying to clear the afterimage from his mind. “An ugly reminder,” he mutters. “But it’s not the seeing that has it crawling under my skin like botfly larvae.”

Hannibal leans forward in his seat. “What is?”

Will sighs. “You didn’t hear it last week, or the week before, or any time I’ve brought it up after that first tentative, ‘Hey, does that clock seem kind of loud to you?’”


“More like an auditory Chinese water torture at this point,” Will says. “How can you not notice it? It’s so loud that I can practically feel it thrumming through me. Like it’s trying to dig into me and take over, force my heart to march to its rhythm.”

“Fortunately, you will not need to put up with it for much longer. I’ve found a buyer who appreciates its… let’s call it ‘unconventional’ design.”

“Oh thank God,” Will sighs. “But can they put up with its noise?”

“It is no louder today than it was the first time you brought it up,” Hannibal says. “It is your perception which has changed. I suspect your approaching heat is making you increasingly sensitive to certain stimuli.”

Will’s hands slide from his face and he stares at Hannibal. He can’t meet the man’s eyes, so he focuses on his lips. He waits, looking intently for any subtle lie indicator. There is none. Hannibal’s lips do not twitch subconsciously in time with the ticking. As always, there is only that
look of perfect control, of rock-steady confidence and stability.

Tick, tick, tick.

_Those lips against his neck, sharp canine teeth sinking down on the inflamed point just above his clavicle as Hannibal slams him against the wall—-

Will groans and shudders, sinking lower into his seat. He closes his eyes and mutters, “Every three months, like horrible clockwork. I hate it. It’s never been this strong, though. This vivid. I’ve slept through most of my heats – feverish and restless sleep, but still. But right now I’m practically crawling out of my skin and it hasn’t even started yet.”

“Have you ever lived in close quarters with an Alpha for an extended period of time, Will?” Hannibal asks as he stands and makes his way over to a small cabinet. “Family excluded.”

Will shakes his head heavily. “Never. Family included.”

Hannibal opens the cabinet, revealing some glasses and a few small bottles of wine. As he inspects the wine, he continues, “The symptoms you’re currently suffering are extremely mild compared to what a fully-functional Omega undergoes when they are so close to their heat. But to you, this particular cycle feels uncommonly strong, and I suspect it’s due to the fact that you are unused to such prolonged exposure to Alpha pheromones. As meticulous as one may be about the punctuality of their schedule, the way they keep their home, the quality of the food they eat, and everything else that can influence a body, it is only that: influence. The natural processes of the body march ever onward regardless of what we intend or desire. Matters such as these shatter our illusion of control. Wine?”

“Probably shouldn’t,” Will murmurs. He’s silent for a beat. “As much as you can fit in the glass without it spilling over.”

He watches as Hannibal smirks and pours two glasses of red wine. He clears his throat and continues, “So, that’s it? We’re slaves to our biology.”

“Perhaps indentured servitude is a more apt comparison. A repayment for the debt incurred by living.” Hannibal says as he approaches and hands Will one of the glasses. Their fingers brush on the stem as it changes hands.

Will brings the glass to his lips almost immediately, but Hannibal raises his free hand and gently tugs the rim away with his index finger. “It may be light-bodied, but it is still a red,” the Alpha chastises. “Let it breathe.”

“Sorry,” Will mumbles. “Wine always makes me sleep heavier. I think I could’ve used some help in that department for several days now.”

“I’ve noticed the bags under your eyes every morning at breakfast,” Hannibal agrees as he returns to his seat. “You have been having nightmares.”

“When am I not having nightmares? I could be having one right now,” Will says. He holds his glass up and squints at Hannibal through the red tint of the liquid. “I suppose I’ll find out if I drink this and it turns out to be blood.”

Hannibal imagines Will sipping fresh, warm blood from a wine glass. The viscous blood clings to the inside of the glass, and Will gives him a scarlet-tinted smile. It’s a compelling image, and he files it away for later use. Once the fantasy is safely tucked away, Hannibal says, “But there is something new about your nightmares. An element which was not present before and which
troubles you deeply. I can see it on your face. Tell me about this new development.”

Will squirms in his seat. “It’s unsettling. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Will, the mind and the body have similar healing processes. They pour resources into healing the issue on their own, but sometimes the wound is so deep, the poison so toxic, that it is impossible to recover under their own power. Refusing to seek help can make the problem become infected or even septic.”

“And you think I slap flimsy knock-off Band-Aids on my gaping wounds,” Will grumbles.

“I think you are a soldier who is ordered by his captain to drag himself out of the field hospital and into the trenches despite two gangrenous legs,” Hannibal says. “If you allow someone to tend to your wounds, you will live to fight more battles and won’t merely be another casualty of Jack Crawford’s war of attrition.”

“Fine, Florence Nightingale,” Will snaps, still fidgeting. No longer caring about wine etiquette and propriety, he drains his glass in a few desperate gulps. “You want to know what’s making my dreams even more screwed up than usual? For the past few weeks, I’ve been in mortal danger or dying in all of them. And in such inventive ways! I’ve… I’ve been stuck in place on railroad tracks as a train speeds towards me…”

*Will pinned against the ladder as Hannibal thrusts into him roughly.*

Will shudders and continues, “The dry, bony branches of the signpost tree scratching against my scalp as one of Christian Andrew Nelson’s arms tries to crawl down my throat and strangle me from the inside…”

*Hannibal’s fingers comb through Will’s hair as the younger man swallows his cock. Will’s head bobs up and down like someone trying to fight against sleep. Hannibal smiles at the irony.*

“And countless other things, almost every night, for the past two months,” Will finishes, fiddling with his empty wine glass.

“Your empathy and the nature of your profession make it so you typically identify with predators,” Hannibal says. “Are you troubled because your dreams have cast you as prey?”

“No. Well, yes, but that’s not the big issue. That part is… I’m less bothered by that,” Will murmurs. He gives a small huff of frustration. “In fact, that part’s almost a relief. ’And I find it kind of funny. I find it kind of sad. The dreams in which I’m dying are the best I’ve ever had.’”

*Mad World,* Hannibal says as he swirls his wine.

Will smiles sarcastically. “It really is, isn’t it?”

Hannibal breathes in the scent of the wine and allows the bouquet to rest on his palate for a moment before he takes the first sip. There is a slight hint of strawberry, but it soon gives way to a complex spiciness and acidity which sits well on his tongue. “Do you really believe that, Will?”

“When the alternatives are dreams about being the killer instead of the killer or sleepwalking and waking up in some godforsaken place with no knowledge of what I’ve done?” Will shrugs. “I admit that there’s some comparative appeal. Having it happen every night is kind of overkill, though. Pun unintended.”

“Then what is ‘the big issue’, as you put it?”
“At first it was just fear. Wake up gasping for breath after feeling the life draining out of you thanks to some godawful thing? Completely rational. But a couple of weeks ago, I started waking up with…” Will swallows nervously. “Other, less appropriate reactions.”

Hannibal goes still for a moment, the glass of wine still at his lips. The admission sends a carnal tingle through him, and his memories add the taste of salt on Will’s sweaty skin to the arrangement of flavors in the wine. They complement each other beautifully. He clears his throat. “You have been waking up aroused after nightmares featuring your own death,” he states.

“Very.” Will whispers. He shakes his head. “Death and sex. A bad mix. I see it too often when I look. Acts of passion where things went horribly wrong and calmly calculated designs where things went horribly right. I haven’t had to crawl into the head of someone like that in ages. If it’s not an invasion from another diseased mind, it’s a home-grown perversion.”

“The French have a euphemism for the orgasm, la petite mort,” Hannibal says. “‘The little death’.”

“I know,” Will grumbles. “From Louisiana, remember? Dad’s side was Cajun with all the linguistic slurry that entails.”

Hannibal ignores his sass. “Through sex, all lives are created. Through death, all lives end. Billions of human lives have come and gone in our little species’ brief time on this planet, and the fact that each life begins and ends with the same physical processes is ultimately the only similarity we all share. These concepts speak to us on an innate level as a result, and we alternately fear, fantasize about, and pine for them as we attempt to make sense of the time we have between the two bookends.”

He finishes his wine and glances at Will, who seems to be mulling over his words. “In other words, Will, I would not fret excessively about the content of your dreams. You are only two months out from a severe blow to your personal privacy and safety. Victimhood. You see and think about murder scenes for a living. Death. Your body is preparing itself for a heat. Sex. All of the troubling neuroses you see in your nightmares have exact, easily-traceable sources. I suspect the severity will wane after your heat crests and passes, especially if you talk about your troubles frankly and honestly in our discussions.”

“It still feels wrong,” Will mutters, mostly to himself. “Something is wrong.”

“If the problem persists, I’ll do all I can to alleviate it,” Hannibal says. He stands, coming over to Will to collect his glass. He sets their empty glasses aside on his desk and offers a hand to help Will stand.

All Hannibal has to do is a give small shuffle of the feet and a pivot of the wrist and Will is ‘accidentally’ stumbling and holding onto him for support. Hannibal embraces him, easily affecting the pose of someone surprised but helpful.

“Damn it. S-sorry,” Will gasps. “It can’t be the wine. I don’t even feel tips… Dr. Lecter?”

Up close, Will’s scent is divine. It’s been getting steadily stronger over the past week, and Hannibal has taken great pleasure in cataloging the subtle escalation. The heady, earthy scent is leagues beyond what it was even the night before, but for an Omega it is still quite understated. He briefly considers pitying the inferior Alphas who can’t detect such gratifying subtlety, but the notion is very brief indeed.

“Dr. Lecter?” Will tries again, a hint of panic in his voice.
Hannibal tightens his grip and breathes low and hard against Will’s neck. He’s curious, and with Will’s heat so close, he has a ready-made biological alibi. He lets his lips graze the spot on Will’s neck where the scent is most concentrated.

He hears Will give a small, strangled sound and the Omega begins to struggle, trying to push Hannibal away. “Dr. L- H-Hannibal, stop!”

Ah, the time-out. No matter. He rears back from Will, allowing his breath to come raggedly. He rubs a hand over his forehead and the fringe of his hair. He shakes his head. “Mere words cannot begin to express my apologies, Will,” he says, his voice husky. He clears his throat and shakes his head again, as if still trying to clear his mind. “Your scent got the better of me. Your heat is likely only a few hours away, but that is absolutely no excuse for my appalling behavior. It was deeply inappropriate.”

Will stares at him, hunched slightly like a small, cornered animal that can’t decide which direction it wants to run in to get away from a hungry cat. “Maybe I shouldn’t stay at your house tonight,” he says.

“No,” Hannibal says. “At this point, it would be dangerous and foolhardy to try to come up with a different place for you to withstand the heat. I have faith in the plan I’ve come up with, even if I’ve just now lost some of my faith in myself. I know not to take any risks now that I know what I’m capable of.”

Hannibal adjusts his cuffs, pointedly keeping his face turned away. It’s a game of charades now, and the goal is for Will’s empathy to guess ‘shock and shame over loss of self-control’. He knows it’s working when he spots Will’s shoulders sagging very slightly out of the corner of his eye. The fight-or-flight adrenaline is draining from him now that he perceives that the threat has passed. Hannibal turns his head further away from Will and smiles; his only audience is the hideous clock.

“It’s not your fault,” Will mutters. “At least not completely. I set you off.”

“And, as we previously established, I very likely set you off,” Hannibal says. “You may return home. I’ll follow shortly. We will likely need to skip dinner, as it’s much more important for us to go over how we shall survive the night without… complicating matters.”

Will stares at Hannibal’s back for a moment before he heads for the door. “Y-yeah,” he says. There is still a note of confusion and wariness in his tone. “Good idea. Um, see you later, I guess.”

Hannibal nods once, polite but curt. The false contrition in his posture evaporates like a lone drop of rain in a desert the moment he is certain Will has gone. He strides over to the strange clock and pushes it forward slightly, switching off the sound amplifier he has attached to the escapement. The clock has served its purpose.

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Less than an hour has passed since the incident in the office, and Will can’t get it out of his head. He lies on the guest bed with his face against the pillow. The horrible, bizarre combination of emotions is relentless in its attack on him. Confusion, surprise, anxiety, guilt, arousal (with a little extra helping of guilt on top of that), and – strangest of all – a small, peculiar sense of déjà vu that he knows is completely irrational.

His clothes are just starting to feel itchy and uncomfortable against his flushed, sensitive skin, and he knows what that means. He’ll be a heat-riddled wreck within the next few hours. All he can do is hope that he finds a way to sleep through it and that whatever Hannibal has in mind is good.
enough to keep nature from taking its course.

He flips over and sits up when he hears a knock at the door. “Come in,” he calls. “But, uh, it’s starting to get… it’s getting there.”

To his surprise, he hears the sound of the door unlocking. Will’s brows furrow in puzzlement as Hannibal enters, leaving the door open with the help of a doorstop. His right hand effortlessly balances a tray which supports a tiny metal safe and two steaming mugs. The handles of a heavy cloth bag are looped over his left arm. Hannibal sets the tray down on the bedside table and Will gets a good look at the mugs’ contents. The beverage inside is light brown but strangely murky, and the smell is unlike anything Will has ever experienced.

“That door doesn’t have a lock,” Will says as he continues to frown at the strange liquid.

Hannibal smiles. “It didn’t have a lock,” he corrects. “I took a long lunch break and installed it this afternoon. I meant to inform you about the change, but other things came up during our session.”

Will glances at him. “Is it safe for you to be here right now?”

“For now? Yes. But only for now,” Hannibal says. He points to a barely noticeable sheen on his upper lip. “Menthol rub. An old but relatively effective trick. It will block out your scent for the time being, but just to be safe, I really shouldn’t linger.”

Will nods. “So… the lock is part of your plan?”

“Yes. When the door closes, the lock clicks into place automatically. The only way to open it is with this key,” he says as he pulls the item from his pocket. He opens the tiny safe, sets the key inside, and closes the door. With a twirl of the tumbler, the safe is locked.

Will’s eyes widen with realization. “You know the combination, but the safe will be in here with me. Neither of us can get to the key. You can’t get in, and I can’t get out.”

“Precisely,” Hannibal says. “Once the heat has passed, we can cooperate and get the door open.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Will says. He scratches at his neck, which is beginning to itch and chafe ridiculously beneath his collar. He glimpses at Hannibal and notices the intent look the Alpha is giving that same spot. Will stops scratching immediately and folds his arms around himself. He focuses on the mugs once more. “What’s with the gutter water? I’ve seen cleaner-looking stuff in the tub after bathing my dogs, and that includes the time they found bear crap in the woods. Otherwise known as Dog Christmas.”

“It’s tea, actually. A special blend which encourages relaxation and mild sedation. If you have ever had chamomile tea, the effect should be similar albeit stronger. I thought after today’s events, we could both use a little help calming down.” Hannibal hands Will one of the mugs and picks up the other. He sits down on the bed, close enough to be friendly but far enough away to be non-threatening. He takes a long sip and continues, “I prepared some for Abigail quite some time ago, and it did wonders for her.”

Will eyes the tea warily but brings it to his lips and drinks. He winces, fighting back a gag and swallowing with difficulty. “It’s vile,” he rasps.

“I’d call it an acquired taste. Unfortunately, you’ve done no favors to your palate by insisting on cheap and artless instant coffees,” Hannibal says. He takes another sip.

“At least instant coffee doesn’t taste like a moldy bath mat. I’ll just get it out of the way,” Will
mumbles. He takes a breath, holds his nose with his free hand, and downs all the tea in a few gulps. He shudders and gives a disgusted sigh. Still wincing, he nods to the bag Hannibal is opening. “Please tell me there’s not more of that in there.”

Hannibal shakes his head. He removes several large bottles of water and a Tupperware container filled with dried meat. He stands and places the items by the safe on the bedside table. “Some provisions for you if you get hungry or thirsty during the heat,” he explains. “Water and homemade beef jerky.”

Will shuts his eyes and flops back to lie on the bed. “Don’t even talk to me about food right now,” he groans. “That tea’s already sitting badly.”

“In time, the aftertaste will fade,” Hannibal says. “Just as your heat will. By morning, you’ll be less burdened by biology.”

“I better be,” Will murmurs as he curls up on his side, turning his back to Hannibal. A haze is settling over him, making his thoughts slow and heavy, and he can’t tell if it’s the heat creeping ever closer or if the tea is just that impossibly fast-acting. He hears Hannibal collect the mugs and make little adjustments to the placement of the safe and provisions.

Hannibal’s footsteps are quiet, but Will can tell when he approaches the door. “Thank you,” Will says. His voice sounds distant to his own ears. “For doing so much for me.”

There are a few seconds of silence before Hannibal replies. “It’s my pleasure, Will,” he says. The door shuts behind him and the lock slides into place with a loud click.

On the opposite side of the door, Hannibal checks his watch. Two hours from now will be the ideal time to strike. That’s when the effect of the tea and the throes of Will’s heat will really begin to set in in earnest. It gives him enough time to have another cup of the perfectly ordinary tea he drank while an infusion of psychotropic mushrooms slid down Will’s throat.

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Hannibal slides the window of the guest bedroom open and climbs in with little difficulty. The scent of Will’s heat barrel into him the moment he’s in the room. Given the countless variations in individual perception, it’s difficult to put the scent of an Omega’s heat to words, though God knows every Alpha poet has tried. It’s been the subject of everything from the basest limericks to the most florid love poems. If Hannibal were to contribute to their ranks, he would compare Will’s scent to that of the freshly-tilled fields of his native Lithuania in the very first days of spring: earthy and faintly coppery with what could either be blood meal or the remains of someone who has “vanished” after intense Soviet scrutiny. Assuming those two things aren’t one in the same.

But Hannibal sees no need to focus on scent when Will is currently a feast for all senses. He is nude and the low moonlight glistens off his flushed, sweat-covered skin. His curly hair is plastered to his forehead as he pushes his face against the pillow. His hips rock unsteadily against the bed as he works three fingers in and out of himself. He is making breathy, frustrated little keening sounds as he tries and fails to satiate the burning itch within.

Hannibal is more than willing to assist. He loosens his tie as he watches Will writhe, apparently too caught up in his fruitless endeavors to notice an Alpha has joined him in the room. That changes when a gust of wind blows in through the window behind Hannibal as he undresses. Will’s next panting breath catches in his throat, and he freezes. The moon provides just enough light that Hannibal can see Will’s eyes snap open and stare at him, the expression on his face uncomprehending.
It takes a great amount of willpower for Hannibal to keep himself from leaving his finely-tailored clothes in a rumpled heap on the floor, but he manages. There’s a bit of pleasure to be had in fighting the primal instincts clawing at his insides, telling him to drop everything he’s doing and sink into that desperate body. But he fights it, keeping his hungry gaze on Will as he neatly folds every article of clothing and sets them aside. Finally, he is as naked as Will.

They say that clothes make the man. Hannibal supposes that makes Will and himself wild animals. Time to act the part.

With the same purposeful speed he used to sneak up on Miriam Lass, Hannibal strides over to the bed. Will continues to stare at Hannibal as if he’s seeing something not of this earth, and Hannibal can only begin to imagine what he sees.

Will is pliant and obliging as Hannibal joins him on the bed, grabbing the hand Will had been using to finger himself and pulling it away. Hannibal flips Will over onto his back and spreads his legs wide with little effort. Will’s pupils are almost impossibly wide, with just the tiniest hint of a blue ring around them. They’re lovely, and Hannibal makes his decision as he settles himself over Will. He grips Will’s chin tightly and looks deeply into those eyes as he thrusts into Will. No words are wasted nor is there any pretense of foreplay; the past two months have been build-up enough.

Will tries to throw his head back at the sudden penetration, but Hannibal’s grip prevents it. He gasps and pushes his hips up to meet Hannibal’s hard thrusts. Hannibal feels something prod against his back. It doesn’t take long for him to realize that Will has wrapped his legs around him and is digging one of his heels into the small of his back as he fucks Will into the mattress. It’s difficult to tell if it’s meant to urge Hannibal on or if it’s a confused attempt at kicking him away. A low growl resonates through Hannibal’s chest as he feels his knot begin to thicken, causing his pace to quicken instinctively. Will’s breathing becomes even more ragged as his body reacts to the changes in pressure and speed. It doesn’t take long for him to come with a choked moan. His body seizes up, and Hannibal finally lets go of Will’s chin. He buries his face in the crook of Will’s neck as his internal muscles clamp down even harder. Hannibal wants to bite, to let everyone know Will is his, but he manages to corral the instinct. No, not yet. With one final, powerful thrust of his hips, Hannibal pushes in to the hilt and comes. His knot inflates to its full size within Will, who cries out and arches his back with the combination of pleasure and discomfort of being filled so fully.

They will be tied together for up to thirty minutes. As the knot only appears when an Omega’s heat triggers rut in an Alpha, such an intense afterglow can only happen every few months. For mated pairs, this time would most likely be spent reaffirming the bond through long, lazy caresses, lavishing attention upon any bond marks, and rubbing together to fully mix their scents. But Hannibal has kept his teeth to himself. He will use this close proximity as an opportunity to have a front-row seat for observing the effects of psychotropic drugs and heat upon Will’s mind.

He pulls his face away from its spot against Will’s neck, and he looks deeply at Will’s expression. The Omega’s head lolls from side to side, but his wide, terrified eyes remain set on Hannibal.

“What do you see, Will?” Hannibal murmurs.

“… see…” Will’s voice is thick and hoarse yet also tremulous.


Will trembles. His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows nervously. “Beast.”
Hannibal tilts his head in curiosity. “You see a beast?”

“… saw a beast rise up… horns… crowns…” Will slurs. Hannibal recognizes the words even though Will’s heat-fevered and hallucinating brain is providing an incomplete recitation of the verse. Will raises his shaking hand and lays it upon Hannibal’s forehead, where his thumb tries to scratch and gouge some senseless pattern. The nail is too short and blunt to break the skin. He growls, “And upon his heads the name of blasphemy…”

Hannibal gently takes Will’s hand from where it’s painting nonsense against his forehead. He brings the palm to his lips and kisses it reverently.

“‘Who is like unto the beast? Who is able to make war with him?’” Hannibal quotes. “You, my good Will. You alone. The only lingering question is how one defines that pesky ‘with’. But that’s a matter for another time. For now, the war can wait.”

He laces their fingers together.

Soon, the knot will deflate and another wave of heat will sweep over Will, setting off another round of sex. This pattern will repeat for another four hours. After that, Will’s heat and the effects of the psilocybin will pass, leaving him in a state of exhaustion so severe that he will pass into a sleep so deep that it borders on a coma. Hannibal will clean and dress them until there’s no outward physical evidence that anything happened.

He will then lift Will up into his arms and carry him out the window. In the middle of the night, the streets will be empty and there will be no witnesses. There is a scene he must stage. When the scene is complete, he will caress Will’s jaw before he runs his hand down to Will’s stomach. 25%. He’s worked with worse odds.

He will then watch Will sleep from a distance, ready to strike in the extremely unlikely event that any other Alphas pick up the lingering scent of heat.

He will wait.

----- Later, At Dawn -----”

Will awakes to the sour odor of dog breath as something furry licks his face.

“Winston, no,” he grumbles, shoving the animal away. The dog goes in for another round of licking, and Will opens his mouth to chastise again before a sickening thought hits him. It can’t be Winston. His eyes fly open.

He’s lying beneath a bush instead of in Hannibal’s comfortable guest bed. The dog is a dopey-looking Golden Retriever whose tail wags jovially behind it while its tongue hangs out its mouth. It doesn’t seem to register that its new friend is deeply distressed, even when a surge of panic sears through Will and gives him the energy to sit up despite heavy exhaustion and throbbing aches all over his body.

“Oh my God, you’re alive,” a woman says. “Pepper ran too fast and yanked his leash out of my hand and he found you and I just saw your legs sticking out a-a-and I thought, ‘Holy shit, it’s a dead body just like on Law and Order’, and God, I’m sorry for rambling.”

His heart still hammering in his chest, Will turns toward the voice. The woman is an Omega in her late 20’s and is dressed in a pink jogging suit. Her dark blonde hair is tied back in a ponytail and her green eyes are wide with surprise. She’s holding an iPhone the way someone dangling over a hundred-foot cliff holds the rope suspending them. She takes in a breath and frowns.
again, and some of the wariness in her stance and body language is replaced with concern. “You… you’re an Omega. There’s a bit of a… did you just come off a heat? Did someone hurt you?”

Will’s breaths are shallow and coming quicker and quicker. “Where am I?” he groans.

“Patterson Park,” the woman says. Her demeanor is changing rapidly; a trained and practiced assurance is superseding her nervousness. “Try to take long, slow breaths. You’re on the verge of hyperventilation. I’m a social worker. My name is Julie Osterberg, and I help abused Omegas. I want to see if you’re okay, but I need to get a bit closer to you to do that. Is that okay?”

Will tries to slow his breathing, but he still feels as if the world is spinning out of control. The dog, Pepper, head-butts his arm and Will instinctively embraces him. He nods faintly.

“Good,” Julie says soothingly. She slowly walks closer to Will. “What’s your name?”

“W-Will Graham.”

“Do you like dogs, Will?” He nods. “Well, Pepper likes you too. He likes to make new friends. When I first met my girlfriend, she and Pepper became best buddies in seconds. If holding him makes you feel better, keep doing it. Now, do you think you can answer some questions for me?”

Will swallows heavily. “I can… I can try.”

“Good. Did you just have your heat, Will?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any idea how you ended up here?”

“I… I sleepwalk. A lot. Nightmares too. That’s not new. But it’s never happened during a heat, at least not as bad as it got this time. But I was in a locked room. There’s no way I could have gotten out,” he says. He shakes his head. None of this adds up. Maybe this is just the aftershocks of the horrible nightmare he knows he had last night. He can feel the memory of the dream trying to invade, like a robber coming in through a window.

Will goes still. The window. “The window was unlocked,” he whispers. “That’s how I got out. I sleepwalked while I was in heat.”

“What else do you remember?” Julie asks.

He remembers how real everything felt, even as reality bent in impossible ways around him and his senses went completely haywire in a way that was not typical of his heats. He remembers a monster and fear and sex. His throat goes dry. How much of that actually happened? Any of it? All of it? Did his fevered mind transform some random Alpha he stumbled across into that terrifying horned creature? He shudders as he recalls that thing touching him. It can’t have been real. He refuses to believe it.

He hugs Pepper closer. He’s never felt more lost, and he’s spent his entire life with no map and a broken compass. “I don’t know,” he whispers.

Julie sighs. “Okay, Will. I’m going to call the police, and then they can help –“

“No!” Will exclaims, immediately dreading what would happen if word of this managed to trickle from the Baltimore police to Jack, Alana, or God forbid Freddie Lounds. “Um, no, I’d rather… could I borrow your phone? Please. I’d like to call my therapist.”
He hates how Julie’s face lights up with understanding and pity; her expression makes it all too apparent that that bit of information has answered a lot of her questions. She hands Will the phone, and he taps in Hannibal’s number as fast as he can. As it rings, he internally begs for Hannibal to pick up.

Click. “Hannibal Lecter speaking.” His voice is professional but clearly displeased with a call from an unfamiliar number so early in the morning. “Who may I ask is calling?”

“It’s me,” Will mutters.

There is a beat of silence. “Will?” Hannibal asks. “This isn’t your number.”

“A woman who was walking her dog found me. I sleepwalked. Th-the window.”

Will hears a small, sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line. “Where are you?”

“Patter… uh, Patterson Park,” Will replies.

“That’s only a few blocks away. I will be there within ten minutes. Please try to remain calm in the interim.”

“Might be too late for that,” Will says. He ends the call and hands the phone back to Julie. He can hear her begin to talk about how she’ll speak with his therapist about “what’s best” for him in “this situation”. He tunes it out, simply holding the dog a bit tighter and stroking his fur in long, soothing motions. He’s never missed his dogs more in his life.

True to his word, Hannibal arrives in almost no time at all. The only time Will can remember Hannibal looking more disheveled than he does now is when he was bleeding and bruised in the aftermath of Tobias Budge’s attempt on his life. His hair is uncombed and he is wearing the same suit he wore the day before. As he approaches, Julie leaves Will’s side and goes ahead to intercept him. Will suspects she wants to confirm that Hannibal isn’t some strange Alpha coming to take advantage. Hannibal hands her what looks like a business card, and whatever he says after seems to assuage her.

Will finds himself subconsciously holding his breath as Hannibal approaches him.

“Will,” he says quietly. “Are you hurt?”

“I ache all over and my head feels like it wants to split apart,” Will answers. “It’s not too far off from what I’ve felt after other heats. Just worse. Much worse.”

Hannibal takes a deep breath. “What I am about to ask you is unpleasant. But it must be asked: do you remember if any Alpha took advantage of you while you were heat-compromised?”

Will is silent. He remembers the beast breathing against his neck. He remembers being forced to stare into its soulless, predatory eyes. He remembers gazing into the abyss, and the abyss gazing back. It has to be a dream. It has to be. That’s all. “If something happened, I don’t think I would have woken up with clothes on,” he says.

“That is not what I asked you.”

“That’s my answer,” Will hisses.

“I think he’s trying to dissociate,” Julie says quietly. Even though it’s intended for Hannibal alone, Will can still hear it. He grinds his teeth. “He needs to go to the police and have a rape kit done.”
“Don’t talk about me like I’m not here,” Will mutters. “And no I don’t, because nothing happened.”

“I’m afraid I can’t force Will to endure an invasive procedure he does not wish to have. Compelling him to oblige could be a potential trauma in itself,” Hannibal says. “Will, whatever you decide to do will be of your own volition. That said I do see the logic in Miss Osterberg’s recommendation.”

“I want to go home,” Will says.

“Your house in Wolf Trap is still undergoing repair, and –“

Will shakes his head. “I want to go home,” he insists.

Hannibal is silent for a few long seconds before his lips quirk in a small, bittersweet smile. “I see,” he says. He reaches down and helps Will stand, looping one arm around his shoulders to help support him. He takes Pepper’s leash in his other hand. “We’ll go home, Will.”

Julie looks conflicted as she watches Hannibal help Will up. The fact that the psychiatrist isn’t urging Will harder to go to the police or the hospital clearly isn’t sitting well with her. She is shaken from her thoughts when Hannibal offers her Pepper’s leash.

“One last thing, Miss Osterberg,” he says. “May I have your business card? If Will changes his mind on the subject, it would be a valuable resource. And, of course, I would like to thank you properly for your assistance this morning.”

Julie flushes, shaking her head. “I’d be glad to give you my card if it means helping Will, but thanking me really isn’t necessary…”

“I really must insist.” Hannibal smiles. “Perhaps you could join Will and I for dinner.”
WARNING: Content warnings for this chapter include needles, blood-letting, and violence against a pregnant person [all the above relate to a case], and of course the already established problems of lack of informed consent, power imbalances, and manipulation. Also for the record, I am very strongly pro-choice. The implications toward abortion in this chapter do NOT reflect my real opinions. Just keep in mind that the discussion here is between a confused and distraught person in a very dark place and the world's most manipulative asshole.

This chapter was originally going to have more events in it and resolve the case plot, but this bit is already 7k and long as hell. Getting to everything else would easily push it well over 10k and I believe "fuck that noise" is the appropriate phrase there. So buckle-up for a lot of build-up but not as much resolution yet.

If you want to listen to music during this chapter, go for "Kokuhaku Shoukoushitsu ~ Kuusou no Warui Mushi" from the Revolutionary Girl Utena soundtrack since I lost track of the number of times I listened to it while writing. You can listen to it here.

I'd like to thank everyone who wished my family well in a time of great distress, as well as once again thank people for having patience with me. I'm a slow writer.

Hannibal knows long before Will does, but that’s because he’s looking closely for the signs. One week after the heat, he gets his answer.

In the wake of his nightmarish heat and traumatic awakening in the park, Will has taken the week off from work due to “illness”. This is only at Hannibal’s behest. Hannibal has no doubt that if left to his own devices, Will would have blindly wandered out into the field at Jack Crawford’s request within hours of waking up in Patterson Park. As much as it troubles Will’s psyche, perhaps putting himself in the minds of killers and other predators is preferable to his existence as a victim.

That’s how it seems when Hannibal tries to broach the subject. Will is quiet and evasive at these times, and Hannibal soon stops pressing the matter. Will’s denial suits his purposes just fine for now.

Hannibal first notices the change when he is carrying Will back to the guest bedroom after another sleepwalking incident. They are both tousled from sex, and Will’s curly hair tickles on Hannibal’s shoulder. They are partway down the hall to the guest bedroom when Hannibal smells it. He stops abruptly in front of a painting in the hallway in order to better investigate the scent. Progesterone. Extremely faint and only detectable to Hannibal’s uncannily precise nose, but it is there. A clump of rapidly-dividing cells has successfully implanted itself within Will and begun the long and arduous process of making a person from scratch.

The painting on the wall is a beautiful late autumn landscape. He quickly does a few calculations, and Hannibal realizes their child will be born around the same time as the scene depicted in the painting. He smiles and resumes walking.
When he sets Will down on the guest bed, he presses a kiss against his forehead. “I knew you could beat the odds,” he says. “Well done, Will.”

He will spend the next few hours replacing the painkillers Will overuses when he has headaches – in other words, almost daily – with placebos. He will secure his liquor cabinet in light of Will’s potential if not already growing alcoholism and briefly regrets that their shared conversations over wine will have to take a break over the next few months. He will drive to a distant all-night drugstore and pick up prenatal vitamins, which he will grind up into Will’s servings of food.

He will prepare.

-----

Will knows far later than he should, but that’s because he’s denying all the obvious signs. Three months after the heat, he can’t avoid it anymore.

He stands at the door to his lecture room, distributing hand-outs to the trainees as they enter and take their seats. As the line begins to dwindle, the scent of something foul hits him and Will’s stomach lurches. The final two trainees look exhausted and chatter to each other about their late night as they draw closer to Will. They reek of stale coffee and countless cheap cigarettes, and Will can’t comprehend how the other trainees don’t seem to notice or care about the unbearable odor. Will’s stomach gives another nauseous flip. He barely manages to tell the trainees to read the handout before he’s dashing to the nearest restroom with his hand over his mouth.

The fact that he actually makes it to the toilet instead of just vomiting on the floor is a small miracle. He doesn’t bother shutting the stall behind him as he retches miserably.

When his stomach is finished staging its unpleasant coup, he staggers over to the sink. He grips the white porcelain as the basin fills with cold water. His mouth is sour and acrid, and the taste of it is almost enough to set him off again. Thankfully, it passes.

He sighs heavily and turns the water off. He shuts his eyes and splashes the cold water over his face. His right hand drifts down to his stomach, but he quickly scowls and slams his hands back down on the sink. The water slowly drips from his face and back into the sink. When he opens his eyes, a few drops of blood are dissolving in the water. He wonders if it’s another hallucination when he feels another drop of water run down his nose. The droplet is not water at all, but blood. It swirls in the full basin, steadily fading from red to pink.

“Shit,” Will grumbles as he holds his head back and pinches at the bridge of his nose. He briefly tastes a hint of salt as his own blood slides down his nasal passage and down his throat. He blindly grabs for some paper towels and presses them against his nostrils.

“Only 9 AM and already your day’s off to a bad start.”

Will turns to the bathroom door, which Jack Crawford leans against with his arms crossed over his chest. He watches Will tend to his nosebleed with a look of mixed wariness and concern.

“When isn’t it?” Will grumbles.

“You been to a doctor?” Jack asks.

“It’s just a persistent stomach bug.” Will can feel his fingers becoming sticky with his blood. “And the repair crew say I can move back into my house in about a week. So packing. Lots of cardboard boxes. Dries out the sinuses. June allergies too.”
“I really would’ve preferred a simple ‘No, Jack, I haven’t’ over all that bullshit.” Jack purses his lips. “A stomach bug and stress, huh? And Bella only had a cough she couldn’t quite shake off,” he says, his tone low.

“It’s not like that, Jack. It’s fine. I’m fine,” Will says. The nosebleed has finally stopped, and he proceeds to clean the drying blood from his face and hands. “It’s nothing.”

“If it keeps up, you need to promise me that you’ll get checked,” Jack says. He walks over to Will and places his hand on his shoulder. “I want your word, Will.”

“Fine,” Will says, using the hand dryer machine as an opportunity to shy away from Jack’s touch. He raises his voice to speak over the loud hum of the machine’s fan. “Now if you’re done speculating about my health, I’ve got a class to teach.”

“No, you don’t. I dismissed them. You’re not lecturing today.”

The dryer’s noise fades away as it finishes his task. Will’s hands still feel clammy, though he can’t tell if it’s lingering moisture or him just being generally ill at ease. “And that would be because…?” he asks.

“We got a call about half an hour ago. Vincent Van Gore struck again. That makes six victims now,” Jack says. He sighs heavily. “If you don’t count the --”

“I know about Van Gore’s preferences,” Will snaps. He can feel Jack glaring at the back of his head, so he plows on before he can get a lecture. “So you’re shipping me off to New York to look.”

“No,” Jack says. There’s a grim edge to his voice that makes Will turn to look at him again. “Only to DC.”

Will frowns in confusion. “But Van Gore’s never struck outside the New York metro area. The furthest he’s gone is Jersey City.”

“And that’s one of the reasons why I want you to look,” Jack says. “If Van Gore’s on the move, maybe we can catch him while he’s out of his Big Apple comfort zone. Plus, we want to make absolutely sure we don’t have a copycat on our hands. We don’t need another incident like the copycat Shrike.”

Will is silent as he looks down and fidgets with the cuffs of his sleeves. He hears Jack approach him again, his shoes clicking against the tiled floor. “We need you on this case, Will,” he says quietly. “You said you know the type of victims Van Gore prefers. That means you know whose lives are on the line. Look for their sake.”

Will releases the lungful of air he didn’t realize he’d been holding. He nods.

Jack opens the bathroom door for him. “Good.”

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Less than an hour later, Will longs to be anywhere else on the planet than where he is. He stands by the window, staring out at the small planter box outside as Jack and the forensics team bustle about the small but opulent townhouse. It’s a rainbow display of brightly colored pansies, and the flowers seem to tilt their little painted faces up at him curiously. There are several strange petals nestled on the soil. They don’t appear to have come from any of the flowers in the box.

“Got some big evidence this time. There were some sheets of paper on the coffee table. One’s an
info pamphlet for a local art gallery and the other’s some kind of permission slip. We think the
gallery had an educators’ open house last night. We’re gonna call the gallery and try to confirm the
victim was there, but if so, that’s probably how he ran into Van Gore. There’s also a cup on the
coffee table with a little bit of tea residue left in it,” he hears Price say. “We think there’s probably
enough to test it. What little blood could be wrung from Van Gore’s prior victims tested positive
for heavy-duty sleeping meds, after all.”

“Good work,” Jack replies. “Katz, give me the background info.”

“Sure thing, boss,” Bev says. Will keeps his eyes on the flowers as she speaks. Something rustles
among them, but it blends in too well amongst the green for him to tell what it is. “The victim is
Elliot Gardner-Flores, age 29. Taught chemistry and sponsored the art club at a local high school.
Estimated time of death is about 8 PM last night, so around 14 hours ago. When Elliot failed to
show up at school and wasn’t answering any phone calls, the principal started looking up people
who could check on him. The body was found by a neighbor and close friend who is part of the
PTA at that school.”

“What do you know about his Alpha?” Jack asks. “If this ends up being a copycat, the perp is
almost always the Alpha when it comes to… this kind of crime.”

“Not in this case,” Bev says. “Carmen Flores, a young up-and-comer at an environmental lobbying
firm. She was confirmed to have been in Philadelphia on business at the time of death, and she’s
practically catatonic with grief right now. Everything about this scene screams Vincent Van Gore.”

“She’s right,” Price says. “The victim’s almost completely drained of blood, and a few locks of his
hair are missing. The body is staged reverently. Most telling of all, there’s the little painting made
in the victim’s own blood, but no sign of what he did with the rest of it.”

“And he painted a butterfly this time,” Zeller says, followed by the sound of a camera clicking.
“You know, many cultures consider it a symbol of rebirth or the transformation of the soul. I bet
this is some kind of spiritual thing for this freak.”

“It’s a moth,” Will finally says. He can feel all the eyes in the room turn to stare at his back, but he
keeps his attention on the window.

A small yellow butterfly comes to flutter around the pansies. “The art Van Gore leaves at his crime
scenes is meaningless. He just wanted to test the paint, like someone scribbling on their hand
before they buy a pen. He looked out the window for inspiration. It was night. He saw a moth.
That’s all,” Will continues as he watches the butterfly alight on a dark red pansy. As soon as it rests
and begins to drink the flower’s nectar, the rustling among the leaves and stems increases. A
praying mantis strikes from where it was hiding amongst the flowers and seizes the butterfly with
its pincers. The delicate insect tries to struggle and fly away, but the mantis is already devouring it.
Will can’t look away as the mantis feasts on everything but the butterfly’s wings before it sinks
back to its hiding spot. It’s then that Will realizes the strange, mismatched petals aren’t petals at all
but the fragile, discarded wings of long-dead moths and butterflies.

Will hears Jack and the forensics team whisper behind him followed by several sets of footsteps
and the sound of a door closing behind them. There is a long moment of silence after that.

“Turn around, Will,” Jack says. “It’s time for you to look closer.”

“I don’t want to be here,” Will whispers.

“None of us do,” Jack says grimly. “And that’s exactly why you’re here. So we can catch this guy.
So we won’t have to see this again.”

Will sighs and nods. He turns around to face the room he’s been trying to avoid. The walls are pale yellow, but the paint job is splotchy and portions of an eggshell white undercoat peek through. It’s only the first coat of paint, though Will suspects all progress on the renovation will be forever abandoned. There are only two pieces of furniture in the room, both clearly antique family heirlooms: a rocking chair and a cradle. It’s an unfinished nursery for an unfinished child.

Elliot’s body sits in the rocking chair, his hands folded gently over the five month swell of his belly. He looks like he could merely be sleeping, but the unnaturally pale and waxy look to his skin says otherwise. Even his lips are nearly white from the extent of his blood loss. There is a small painting of a butterfly on the wall a few inches away from his head. The dark red blood may still be sticky to the touch in the thickest part of the wing.

Jack leaves, closing the door behind him. Will shuts his eyes.

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When he opens them, he’s peering through the crack of a slightly ajar door. Across the room, Elliot sits on the sofa, sipping herbal tea from a light blue cup. His dark brown hair is damp and his skin is flushed a pleasant pink from a hot shower.

“Tough the tea you were steeping while you were in the shower,” Will says. “It is odorless and tasteless, and you will begin to feel the effects in three... two... one...”

Elliot frowns and brings a hand up to touch his temple. He tries to stand, but he sways and stumbles, falling back onto the couch.

“I open the closet door slowly,” Will says as he reaches forward and pushes the door open. It creaks on its hinge. Elliot’s eyes are wide and fearful as Will walks over to the sofa. “You see me coming. And recognition clicks. Recognition and terror and... the crumbling of the pedestal you have placed me on.”

Elliot’s movements are sluggish and imprecise as he tries to reach for his cell phone on the table. Will’s black-gloved hands reach out and move the phone out of reach. Elliot’s mouth quivers in an attempt to speak, but his tongue and lips are already going numb. He fights to keep his eyes open, but soon they flutter shut. His body goes limp.

Will, his eyes still on Elliot, sets his hand on the coffee table, millimeters away from an informational pamphlet for a local art gallery and a draft for a field trip permissions form. He pauses in his reenactment. “Why don’t I take this evidence?” Will murmurs to himself. “It’s practically an invitation to come looking for me. Is that what I want? Am I becoming sloppy and cocky? So why don’t I see it?”

His eyes widen in realization. “Because I literally can’t see it.”

His peripheral vision turns hazy and blackens until he has tunnel vision with Elliot at its center. “I have a degenerative sensory condition and my vision is failing. While other artists wallow in general existential ennui and the worry that they’ll suffer a creative block, I know for a fact that I am careening toward complete darkness. I can see the void creeping up on me. I’m desperate. I want to make as much art as I can before it all ends. I want to make my masterwork.”

He runs a hand down Elliot’s cheek. “And I chose you to be part of my art’s tragically short legacy.” He leans down to lift Elliot’s sleeping body and shuts his eyes.
When he opens them again, they are in the unfinished nursery. Elliot’s body is laid out on the floor and a large black bag rests at Will’s side. One compartment contains ice packs and the other an assortment of medical tools.

“I work quickly and efficiently,” Will says as he effortlessly arranges the tools around him despite his tunnel vision. He inserts a needle into the blue vein on the underside of Elliot’s right wrist, and blood begins quickly spilling into the attached plastic donation bag. He does the same to Elliot’s other wrist and both legs. He knows precisely when to switch out the bags, never spilling a drop of the blood.

“Too quickly and efficiently to be an amateur,” Will clarifies. “My day job, if I have not quit it entirely to pursue my art, involves this type of work. A nurse or blood donation technician, perhaps. That is how I can drain Elliot Gardner-Flores of his blood so masterfully. That is how I know that the blood volume of an average Omega increases up to 50% during pregnancy. This makes my art supplies not only top-tier but cost-effective as well.”

Elliot’s breathing becomes weak and raspy as his unconscious body enters late stage hypovolemic shock. His skin is pale and clammy. Will places his fingers at Elliot’s neck, feeling the soft, sad fluttering of his fading pulse. “Going… going… gone,” he murmurs.

The puncture holes in Elliot’s skin don’t ooze a thing when Will removes the needles. He cleans his instruments and puts them away in his storage bag. As he puts the needles back in place, he feels around in the bag and removes a pair of shears, a plastic zip bag, and a paintbrush. He tucks most of the blood away in the cooler portion, leaving behind the final, least full bag of blood. He sets it aside, along with the other supplies he will shortly need.

He drags Elliot’s body over to the rocking chair, where he puts the corpse in its peaceful pose. He stands, retrieving the items he put aside, and returns to the body. He carefully cuts away several locks of Elliot’s dark curly hair and places them in the zip bag. “I will weave your hair into my paintbrushes,” Will murmurs.

He takes the brush and dips it into the bag of fresh blood. “I will mix your blood into my paint. There will be a trace of it in every color, but it will make the reds especially striking,” he says. He watches the blood soak into the paintbrush. He dips it again. “That is, if your blood is up to the task. I need to test it.”

He glances out the window. His night-blindness is already severe, but he can just barely make out the shape of a moth fluttering around the pansies. “Beautiful,” he whispers, turning back and beginning to paint. “This is my design.”

The mantis strikes behind him.

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Will opens his eyes with a gasp. He is on his knees by the rocking chair, hand up and arm propped against the wall as if he is painting with an invisible brush. He sighs and leans back, pressing the palms of his hands against his eyes until strange lights and colors swirl in the darkness behind his lids. It takes a moment for the world to swim back into clarity, but he freezes when his eyes begin to focus again.

In his peripheral vision, the body in the rocking chair is wearing a pair of worn old jeans and a plaid shirt. Elliot Gardner-Flores had been wearing a pair of black pajama bottoms and an old Washington Redskins shirt.
A heavy ball of dread sinks in his uneasy stomach. Slowly, Will looks up. The body in the chair is his own, and it’s not the bloodless skin or choppy cut to his hair that terrifies him. It’s the fact that he is visibly pregnant and the thing painted in blood on the wall seems to have antlers.

He lets out a sharp shout of terror and doesn’t hear the door slam open behind him. His breath comes fast and ragged as he scrambles to get away from the sight. He collides against a pair of legs. Jack Crawford kneels down, grabbing Will tightly by the shoulders and shaking him out of the fit. “Hey. Hey! Will, c’mon, snap out of it,” he growls. “What did you see? Did you lose yourself in Van Gore?”

Still breathing heavily from the hallucination and ensuing panic attack, Will risks a glance at the body. It’s just Elliot. The painting is just a moth. “No, I… ah, it’s nothing.”

Jack frowns at the body. “What did you get from looking?”

Will stands, brushing himself off and distancing himself from Jack. “He’s an artist, and it’s not just what he leaves at the scene. He’s collecting the blood of his victims so he can mix it with his paint later. He takes the hair so he can weave them into paintbrushes. He’s got no personal vendetta against pregnant Omegas. He sees nothing hateful in what he does. Part of him thinks his victims are beautiful and that their remains contribute to his work, but he’s more practical than the typical mad artist. Probably has a background in medicine, especially with blood work.”

“Good,” Jack says encouragingly. “What else?”

“He’s got some kind of degenerative sight disorder,” he says. “His peripheral vision is already gone and it’ll be a few years at most before he loses it all. He didn’t even see the papers on the table; if he had, he probably wouldn’t have left such big clues behind. He’s part of that exhibition of New York artists. He’s in there. Hiding in the flowers, waiting for butterflies.”

“Now that’s the kind of lead I like to hear,” Jack says, grinning triumphantly despite it all. He schools his expression back a notch, but the strength and determination remains.

He puts a hand around Will’s shoulder and ushers him out of the room and back downstairs. Will ducks his head, avoiding the gaze of the forensics team as they re-enter the nursery with a body bag. “We’re going to that exhibition undercover. You’re going to talk to every artist there and see if any of them feel like Van Gore to you. Let Dr. Lecter know about this too; he’s got his finger on the pulse of the arts and culture scene in this area more than anyone I know. He might be able to provide some insight.”

“If that pulse thing was an intentional pun, it was in bad taste,” Will says, scowling.

Jack ignores the remark as he leads them over to the coffee table. He picks up the information pamphlet, looking hard at its promotional drawing of a barrel filled with various apples. From a Surrealist Sturmer Pippin to a pointillist Pink Lady, every apple is rendered in a unique style. “Panoply Gallery proudly presents the first installment in our Summer Exchange Program. Come meet and mingle with a bumper crop of some of the Big Apple’s finest,” Jack reads. “Opens to the public in two days.”

He hands Will the pamphlet. “Now we just have to find out which one’s got the worm in it.”

The next few hours are a blur. Jack must have taken them to Panoply Gallery and procured tickets for the operation because he hands Will an envelope with them inside when he opens the car at Hannibal’s house. Will tries to remember that happening, but all he can recall is seeing blood in all the red paint about town and the way his vision would occasionally collapse into a disconcerting
tunnel. That, and the sickening squirm of parasitic worms against his gums with the sour taste of rotten apple on his tongue.

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Later, and at first he is not sure how much later, Will awakes on the comfortable leather sofa in Hannibal’s living room. A blanket that he doesn’t remember getting sloughs off his shoulders as he sits up, his head swimming with confusion.

His stomach growls when he catches the rich scent of roasting meat and onion wafting from the kitchen. He’d only eaten breakfast that day, and he hadn’t been able to keep that down for very long. His persistent nausea is long gone for now, though, leaving behind a profound hunger. Picking up the blanket and clutching it around his shoulders, he shuffles into the kitchen as if led by a siren’s call composed of the clicking and clinking of cooking utensils.

Hannibal looks up from the pot of braising meat. “I see you are finally awake,” he says.

“What time is it?” Will mumbles. He rubs sleep from his eyes. “What day is it?”

“Still Wednesday, I’m afraid,” Hannibal replies. “Almost 8 PM.”

Will groans. “I slept for over five hours.”

“I contemplated waking you when I first arrived home nearly an hour ago, but you’ve been so fatigued lately. I thought you could use some additional rest.”

Will shrugs the blanket higher on his shoulders as he gets closer to peer at the meat. “So the blanket,” he states.

“So the blanket,” Hannibal confirms. He leans around Will to grab an onion and his mouth turns down in a concerned frown. “You were sick again this morning and haven’t eaten anything since.”

“How’d you know?” Will asks grimly.

“You still smell faintly sour from the nausea,” Hannibal says. “You can’t keep that up, Will. It isn’t healthy.”

He wants to say more, but he is holding himself back. Will can see it in the set of his jaw and way his lips press together. Will turns away, trying to keep a calm appearance even as panicked goosebumps tingle on the back of his neck. His mind races for a distraction, and he finds it when he feels the envelope with his ticket crinkle in his pocket. He pulls it out and tosses it onto the counter. “Jack wanted me to talk to you about this,” he blurts, interrupting. “Thought you might know something.”

Hannibal wipes his hands on his apron and picks up the envelope. He opens it, raising an eyebrow when he sees the tickets. “Panoply Gallery,” he hums. “Yes, I’m familiar. I’ve attended many of their exhibitions in the past and have been looking forward to this upcoming presentation. I own an original painting by one of the featured artists.”

Will’s mind toggles through the paintings he’s seen in Hannibal’s home and office. “Which one?” he asks.

“In the downstairs hall by the guest bathroom. I know you’ve seen it,” Hannibal says. He puts the tickets aside and resumes the preparations for dinner. “At Autumn’s End by Stephan Waldorf.”
The painting blooms into focus in Will’s memory. Will doesn’t know much about art, but even he can safely say that that painting is beautifully rendered. It’s a serene landscape of a forest and river in late autumn. As such, the color palette is weighted heavily in favor of oranges, deep yellows, browns, and – most significantly – reds. The foreground is vibrant with fiery leaves, but the dark red sun on the horizon is being swallowed up by the first truly ominous cloud of winter. The trees in the background are already sparse and frigid, shivering in the encroaching cold and dark.

Will wonders if any of the colors in that stunning palette are enriched with blood.

“And why were you tasked with asking me about the gallery?” Hannibal asks. “I very much doubt Agent Crawford has assigned you to attend for cultural enrichment alone.”

“It’s for a case.”

Hannibal glances at Will out of the corner of his eye as he reaches around him for another onion. He skins it effortlessly and begins to chop. “Oh?”

The burn of the onion’s acid makes Will’s eyes start to water. “Vincent Van Gore.”

To Will’s astonishment, Hannibal’s hand slips. The onion skids off the cutting board and tumbles onto the kitchen counter as the knife embeds in the wood. “The one who murders pregnant Omegas.”

“That’s him in a particularly cracked and rotten nutshell, yes,” Will says, eyes locked on the knife.

“You cannot work that case,” Hannibal states. His voice is stern and leaves no room for argument.

The commanding tone strikes a sour note in Will. He crosses his arm and frowns. “I don’t think you’re in any position to dictate whether or not I can do my job,” he says. “Jack’s my boss, not you.”

“Jack is either a fool who can’t see what’s directly in front of him or he is so reliant upon using you as a tool that he is choosing to ignore the danger he is putting you in,” Hannibal argues. “At the moment, I’m inclined to believe that it’s a mixture of these things.”

“I’m always in danger,” Will retorts moodily.

“But you do not always fit all the criteria in a murderer’s victim profile,” Hannibal says. The words are so stern and sharp that Will wonders for a moment if this is as close as Hannibal gets to raising his voice. But then the implications of his words sink in. He opens his mouth to protest, but Hannibal cuts him off. “Yes, Will. All the criteria.”

“Th-that’s not…” Will croaks.

Hannibal sighs. He turns from Will and slides the chopped onions into the boiling water. “I’ve let you wallow in denial for too long. I thought allowing you to distance yourself from your trauma for a little while might do you some good. That, when you did choose to address your situation, it would be on your own terms and of your own agency. Clearly that has backfired and your unwillingness to face the issue has forced my hand.”

He leans down and opens a small cabinet beneath the sink. When he stands straight once more, he sets a box on the counter and slides it toward Will. It’s a pregnancy test kit.

Will says nothing as he stares at the damned thing. He simply shakes his head.
The stern concern in Hannibal’s expression fades into something less harsh. It’s replaced with something faintly pitying, however, and that stings Will more than the strict frustration ever could. “I can already smell it on you, Will,” Hannibal says quietly.

“No,” Will moans quietly as his knees begin to quiver beneath him. He grabs onto the kitchen counter for balance as he sinks to the ground. “No, no, no. The probability of… th-the odds are…”

Hannibal is at his side, running his hand up and down Will’s back in broad, soothing strokes. “You have always defied the odds, Will Graham,” he says. “For all the good and ill that entails. Take the test. Perhaps seeing that proof will convince you in a way that your symptoms somehow have not. But every moment you spend in denial of the unfair hand fate has dealt you, you lose time which could be spent more productively.”

Will sits, hugging his knees on the kitchen floor, staring into the middle distance. Hannibal wonders what terrified chaos is swirling through that head as he takes the pregnancy test and presses it into Will’s left hand. Hannibal rises from his kneeling position and offers Will his hand. “Please,” he murmurs.

Hannibal can’t help but notice how clammy the skin of Will’s hand is. How deceptively vice-like the grip is for something so wan and trembling. He holds on to Hannibal’s hand like a lifeline as they walk toward the guest bathroom in silence. This is a man lost at sea, Hannibal thinks. His ship has wrecked and, blown about by the driving wind and stinging rain of the storm, he clings desperately to a rock in the churning waters. It is his only constant. The only possible source of safety and salvation. He also doesn’t see how it is part of a much larger formation with jagged rocks beneath the waves. This is what tore the ship’s hull to oblivion, not the storm.

He shuts the bathroom door behind Will, giving him privacy. He admires At Autumn’s End as he waits. Ten minutes go by, and he thinks that should be more than enough time. Hannibal knocks quietly on the door and enters when he hears no response.

Will sits hunched over on the edge of the porcelain tub, his elbows on his thighs and his face buried in his hands. Hannibal approaches, spotting the test on the sink. Two pink lines. Positive. Despite already knowing this fact for three months, Hannibal finds himself appreciating the look and promise of those two little lines. Sometimes it’s nice to have visual confirmation of already-known facts. He sighs and moves to sit beside Will. He is prepared to begin the conversation, to pull the strings and offer Will the illusion of choice, but Will speaks up first.

“You said you could smell it on me,” he says. His voice is hollow and dull. “How long?”

“Not long,” Hannibal lies smoothly. “Two days at most. Though I began to have suspicions approximately four days ago when I realized I detected no hint of approaching heat in your scent. And I wondered about your other symptoms, particularly the vomiting and fatigue.”

“I had a nosebleed at Quantico today. The blood should’ve made my scent obvious, but Jack didn’t say anything.”

“It’s very likely he can’t smell the pregnancy on you yet,” Hannibal says. “The same goes for your other associates. My senses are very acute, after all.”

“How long until they know?”

“At this point, it could be any time. Certainly no longer than a week. At any moment, your chemical balance could tip the scales and broadcast your condition clearly via your scent.”
Will groans and curls in on himself more. “I don’t…”

Hannibal waits for him to say anything more, but the sentence trails off into obscurity. “Whatever you choose to do, Will, I will support your decision,” he says.

“What choice?” Will croaks, not looking up. “I don’t see any choices here.”

“Your options are as open as anyone else in your condition.”

“Not true,” Will hisses. “Adoption? I’ve got a list of neuroses a mile long and my sanity feels like it’s attached to a ticking time bomb half the time. What if whatever’s wrong with me is genetic? I can’t in good conscience let some unwitting family step into a mine field of hallucinations, night terrors, and God knows what else and just stroll away because it’s not my problem anymore. Not when I’m the one that buried the mines. And that’s not even considering the fact that I’ve got no idea where the other half of the thing’s genes came from! Keep it? We’ve already discussed how I’d ruin a kid’s life if left to raise it alone. So that leaves… termination. It’s the merciful thing to do.”

A jolt rocks through him.

"Your lives are so difficult. It’s the merciful thing to do,” he says as he is the Ferryman, who puts his silenced gun to the temple of another slumbering homeless youth.

“He’s gone already. It’s the merciful thing to do,” he says as is the Angel of Mercy, who lowers a pillow over an elderly man’s face.

“The world is ending soon. It’s the merciful thing to do,” he says as he is the Prophetess, who slips cyanide into the apple juice for her preschool Sunday School class.

He scratches so hard at his scalp as he nervously runs his fingers through his hair that it’s a surprise that he doesn’t draw blood. He feels Hannibal wrap a comforting arm around his shoulders, but it’s a vague and distant feeling in contrast to all the grief and guilt and confusion.

“Whatever you choose, Will, it must be a course of action that you can truly believe in,” Hannibal says quietly. “You must not forget that this is a matter of your mental and physical wellbeing first and foremost. If any option leaves you as distraught as you look now, it’s not one your psyche will allow you to live down in the long term.”

“All of my alleged options are like that,” Will insists. “If all my options leave me even more messed up than I already am, then the ‘best’ one is to prevent others from sharing that misery. Genetically or environmentally. Keep the suffering as localized as possible.”

“Normally, that is very sound logic. I know it well, personally and professionally. It’s similar to the ideas aspiring doctors are first taught in medical school. Primum non nocere,” he recites. “But a human life cannot entirely be defined by one emotion or state of being, no matter how powerful it may be. By denying the child life, it is true that you are denying it the opportunity to experience physical and mental suffering. But you are also denying it the opportunity to experience happiness and love. Even your life, as much as it is a scarred by the harsher aspects of your nature and nurture, is not wholly deprived of moments of joy.”

“It’s hard to remember them right now,” Will mutters darkly. “And you’re not making this decision any easier.”

Hannibal is silent for a moment. He lets out a long, quiet sigh and says, “With our current living situation, people will assume the child is mine.”
Will’s breath hitches. He feels as if he has been shoved out the door of a plane soaring miles above the earth with no warning and no preparation. He tumbles in the free-fall. “Oh God. You’ll get dragged into it too. That’s—”

“So why not let them?” Hannibal continues before Will can finish.

Will’s hands disentangle from his hair and fall limply to his lap. His red-rimmed eyes look at Hannibal with complete bafflement. “What?”

“I’m willing to claim responsibility for your child,” Hannibal says. He frowns. “In a way, I do feel responsible for the fact that you’re in this unpleasant and unenviable position. If I had remembered to lock your window, you wouldn’t have been able to sleepwalk while in such a vulnerable state.”

“You can’t blame yourself for that,” Will rasps.

“Just as you can’t blame yourself for someone taking advantage of you,” Hannibal replies.

“Your reputation. Couldn’t you get disbarred?”

“I am not officially your psychiatrist,” Hannibal says. “At most, I would receive some very stern lectures from your compatriots, possibly some very disapproving whispers and aspersions cast behind my back, and definitely the look on Agent Crawford’s face as he struggles to keep from punching me in the jaw.”

Will goes quiet again, looking down at his shoes in thought. “You shouldn’t go through that for my sake.”

“I mean my offer, Will, and it extends beyond merely allowing people to believe in a juicy scandal. When I said I was willing to take responsibility for the child, I mean that completely. You mentioned that you couldn’t justify giving the child up for adoption to a family that may be unaware of your troubles and unprepared for a child which may share them due to heredity. How would you feel about entrusting the child’s care to someone who is aware?”

“You’d… you’d be willing to adopt it?”

“More than willing. I would want to,” Hannibal says. “Of course, only if that is what you choose. If you decided to terminate, I would respect and support your decision. But I must admit that I worry how your mind would cope with the burden of that choice. And, above all, I think you are an extraordinary person with traits which ought to be preserved.”

Will stares at Hannibal in disbelief for a moment before his gaze drifts down to his own shoes. He still feels like he’s in free-fall, but maybe he has a parachute after all. “It’s only half me,” he whispers. “The other half’s a completely unknown rapist.”

“A child cannot be held accountable for the actions of its parents. We are all more than the sum of our parts,” Hannibal says. He finally moves his arm from Will’s shoulder as he stands. “You still have time to weigh your options, Will. Think about them deeply and, though the situation is terrible, try not to let it consume you. You will not have to go through this alone, no matter what you decide.”

“Thank you. Really,” Will murmurs. His brows furrow slightly and he swallows nervously despite a scratchy dryness in his throat.

Hannibal regards him carefully for a moment, an appraising look on his face. Finally, the look turns grim and faintly resigned. “You don’t intend to step away from your current case, do you?”
“I can’t,” Will says. “I might be… I might be Van Gore’s preferred victim type right now, but so are others. And I need to catch him for their sake. I can’t just sit by and let him turn people who are actually happy and hopeful about their condition into art supplies.”

“Then let us hope you have a guardian angel watching over you,” Hannibal says wryly.

To Will’s surprise, he finds himself actually laughing. It’s a dry, sarcastic laugh, but it is laughter all the same. The sensation is strange in his throat and the sound foreign in his ears after today’s events. “Pretty sure I haven’t got one of those. Patron demon, maybe. One that really likes to screw things up for me.”

Hannibal smiles. “In that case, let us hope that he doesn’t like to share you with the likes of Vincent Van Gore.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** I just realized that an HTML tag I didn't close properly cut out several paragraphs of the story in this chapter. It's been fixed.

**WARNINGS for this chapter:** Shockingly, nothing that hasn't already been addressed. That doesn't mean that there's not some rough stuff that sensitive readers should keep in mind, but it's not *new* rough stuff to keep in mind. If that makes sense.

Remember when I implied last chapter that this one would wrap up the Van Gore case plot? I lied! Once again the chapter just got long enough with even more planned that I felt I needed a stopping point. I can't believe this Van Gore stuff will span over 3 chapters when I originally meant it to be 1. It's not even the climax of this damn story.

And once again, I apologize for it taking so long. I blame it on all the summer matsuri and Comiket, because when in doubt always blame Comiket.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#).

Jack Crawford is waiting on the gallery steps when Hannibal and Will arrive. The night air is sweltering and humid despite how early it is in June and it makes Will especially uncomfortable in the suit Hannibal has provided for him for the evening. It’s the same suit he wore when he stood beneath the signpost tree almost half a year ago, and he can almost feel the tree bark against his skin as the fabric moves against him.

There’s something else that adds to the anxiety clawing at the inside of Will’s chest and throat. Hannibal is more solidly built than he is, so the suit has always been a little loose on him. Due to all the stress and morning sickness of the past few weeks, he has actually lost a small amount of weight. It’s most noticeable in his face, which seems slightly hollow and gaunt when he looks in the mirror. Despite all this, he wears the belt one notch looser than he did all those months before and the pants feel a bit tighter around his hips.

Maybe it’s in his head. Maybe there’s no difference at all, and he only feels this way because he expects there to be changes. Maybe the knowledge that there is something growing in him, uninvited and diverting resources and rerouting physical priorities, weighs on him.

Will swallows as he and Hannibal approach Jack.

“Will, Dr. Lecter,” Jack greets, nodding at them. He turns his attention fully to Hannibal. “I take it Will filled you in on why we’re here?”

“He did, yes, though I planned to attend this event regardless,” Hannibal replies. He presses his lips tightly together for a moment. “You suspect Vincent Van Gore is among the painters.”

“There’s a lot pointing to it,” Jack confirms, gesturing for them to follow as he heads for the entrance. “We confirmed with the managers of the exhibit that the latest victim was present during the educator’s open house they held a few days ago, which supports evidence we found at the crime scene.”
He lowers his voice as they begin to mingle with other patrons, speaking in a whisper just loud enough for Will to hear. “We ran background checks based on some of the information you gave us after the profiling. Three of the artists are either currently or formerly employed in medicine. We need to pay the most attention to them and then branch out if it proves fruitless.”

Will frowns. “What about the degenerative vision? I really doubt there’s more than one artist at this exhibit who worked in medicine and is slowly going blind.”

“Nothing like it came up in any public records. Van Gore’s keeping quiet about it.” Jack scowls. “If he’d made it some big, attention-grabbing sob story everyone knows about, it sure as hell would’ve made our job easier.”

“It will broadcast loud and clear in his art,” Hannibal remarks. “If not yet in form and function, then certainly in theme and subtext. A true artist always puts some of himself into his work.”

“The problem is that this guy’s putting other people in his work too,” Will mutters.

Once inside, Jack pulls them aside and out of the traffic flow of eager art enthusiasts. He pulls a slip of paper from his suit pocket and unfolds it, revealing a map of the exhibition floor with three areas circled on it. “We start here,” he says, tapping on a circle with the name Celia Clarke beside it. “And work our way in this direction.” He moves his finger along a path to hit the other two circles.

Will notices that one of the names is Stephan Waldorf. The name is familiar when his eyes first alight on it, and the memory clicks in place when he hears Hannibal give a curious hum. It’s the artist Hannibal was looking forward to seeing, the man who painted the piece near the guest bedroom. Will files the fact away to mull over later.

Jack pins Will and Hannibal with a look that allows no room for debate or compromise. He keeps his voice so low that Will nearly has a hard time hearing the whisper over the murmurs of the other visitors and the click-clack of their fancy dress shoes. “And as of this moment, we keep our objective quiet. The last thing we need Is to spook our quarry.”

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Will rules Celia Clarke out as a suspect the moment he lays eyes on her work. She is an abstract expressionist, and though Will perceives a lot of anger and frustration in the bold splashes of chaotic color strewn across her canvases, it isn’t the right strain. Explaining the difference to Jack is easier said than done, especially given Jack’s decree that they must tip-toe around the subject of Van Gore in a place where their target could easily eavesdrop on them.

“She’s transgressive,” Will explains as he squints at one of Clarke’s pieces. The work is titled Eye of the Storm, and Will is fairly sure he can only make heads or tails of it due to his empathy. It’s a whirling miasma of furious, clashing colors and splattered paint with a tiny pure white circle at the center. The spot is no bigger than a thumbtack. “She sees society as ugly and cruel with rules that need to be shattered, and her art is a reaction to that. Every session is a means to get out some of her aggression, and she paints in a frenzy of righteous anger.”

He points out a stuttering line of yellow on the canvass that ends abruptly at the bottom, as if cut off. “She throws the paint, often from a distance. A lot of it would spill on the floors or the walls of her studio. The paint is nothing special to her and is not worth any care or preservation,” he says. He turns to Jack and gives him a meaningful look, keeping his voice quiet. “And we’re looking for someone who wouldn’t spill a drop.”
Jack nods, checking Celia Clarke’s name off his mental suspect list. A server who is handing out complimentary champagne walks by, and Jack flags her down. He takes a glass for himself and watches as Hannibal takes one as well. Curiosity sparks in his eyes when he sees Will begin to reach for a glass before his hand jolts and he nervously pulls away as if he has been burned. His shoulders hunch and he fidgets with his glasses, shaking his head when the confused server asks if he wants a glass of the champagne.

“You’re not normally the type to turn down free alcohol,” Jack remarks as soon as the server leaves.

Will shrugs weakly. “Gotta focus,” he mumbles.

Jack glances over to Hannibal, seeking any kind of twitch or tell which could shed light on Will’s strange behavior. The psychiatrist has pinned Will with an intense but inscrutable look, and an odd suspicion settles hard in Jack’s gut. He feels left out of the loop, and that is something that cannot be allowed to stand. Casting one more look between Will and Hannibal, he sets his jaw.

“Dr. Lecter, have you been to this gallery before?” Jack asks.

Hannibal sips his champagne. “Yes, many times.”

“Then I’m sure you’d be willing to show me where the restroom is?”

“Of course. The facilities aren’t far from our next stop,” Hannibal says.

“Fantastic,” Jack says tersely.

The atmosphere is tense as they make their way to the next target. Will lags a bit behind the two Alphas, internally castigating himself for such an awkward blunder. He stares nervously at the back of Jack’s neck, feeling the terror that Jack may well know bubbling and churning in his chest like the viscous contents of a foul-smelling cauldron. He feels a few beads of anxious sweat break out on his brow despite the powerful air conditioning keeping the gallery almost as cold as a meat freezer.

“The restrooms are down that hall,” Hannibal states, gesturing to his right. “Will and I can wait for you here.”

Jack shakes his head. “Actually, I’d rather you come with me. Don’t want to make a wrong turn and end up in the room for Omegas.”

Hannibal’s expression is smooth and cold as he and Jack exchange tense looks. “I am not sure if it’s advisable for any of us to be left alone, given who we are looking for.”

“It will be fine,” Jack replies, punctuating each word with matching intensity. He turns his domineering expression to Will, who instantly stares down at his own shoes. “You’d know best. Is it in his ‘design’ – as you call it – to try anything in public?”

“No,” Will mutters, still feeling the anxiety roiling at his core. “I don't know what he'd do if cornered, but he likes to work in privacy. Almost intimate, in a way.”

“Exactly,” Jack says. “And you can probably work better without us breathing down your neck for a couple of minutes, anyway. Come on, Dr. Lecter.”

Will doesn’t look up. He hears the sound of Jack’s shoes against the floor as he walks away and, after a moment’s hesitation, the sound of Hannibal following. When his nerves finally settle
enough for him to look up, his eyes land on the nearby paintings of Stephan Waldorf. His brow
wrinkles in concentration and he curls his hands into fists so tight that he can feel his nails biting
into the flesh of his palm. If he focuses on his work instead of whether or not Jack knows about his
condition and whether or not he’s giving Hannibal the lecture of a lifetime in the bathroom, maybe
some of the horrible anxiety will pass.

He strides closer to Waldorf’s work and hones in on one in particular. His pace slows down as he
stares at it, each tentative step bringing him closer to the painting which has consumed his
attention. It’s a rendering of a grove of cherry trees in the full bloom of spring. They are beautiful,
but there’s something more to the painting. There is a mighty wind whirling through the branches,
separating many of the delicate pink petals from their trees and scattering them wildly. At the base
of one of the trees is a small well in the early stages of disrepair. The stones are ancient and
weathered with green moss clinging to them, and a few are in the process of coming loose and
 crumbling away. The darkness inside that well is the blackest, most consuming void Will has ever
seen in a painting. A placard on the wall reveals the title of the work: Mono no Aware.

It is then that Will knows. He knows that the petals are dyed pink with carefully measured blood.
He knows that brushes woven with human hair gently slid across that canvass and left puffy white
clouds in their wake. He knows what horror lurks in the darkest part of that cavernous and
decaying well.

“You seem quite taken with my art,” a quiet voice says near his ear.

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“I am curious what you want to say to me that can’t be said in front of Will, Agent Crawford,”
Hannibal says the moment the bathroom door closes behind them.

Jack strides ahead, checking the stalls and confirming they are alone. He storms back to the door
and leans against it, crossing his arms and glowering at Hannibal. “You’re going to tell me what’s
going on with him,” he states.

“That would be a breach of patient-doctor confidentiality,” Hannibal says drily.

“You’re not his official therapist,” Jack retorts. “I need to know what’s gotten into him. I need to
know if it will affect this or any other case he’s put on. And if I ask you about that, I expect you to
tell me.”

Hannibal squares his shoulders and does not blink in the face of Jack’s command. “Then I’m afraid
I will have to disappoint you. You are aware that Will’s confidence is hard won and easily lost, and
I will not throw that trust to the wolves just to satisfy your curiosity. Whatever you want to know
about him, you will have to ask him yourself.”

“You think I haven’t already tried that?” Jack barks. He gives a loud bitter laugh. “He’s clammed
up even more than usual. I wouldn’t have thought that possible, but here we are. He’s keeping
something from me.”

“And what do you think he is keeping from you, Agent Crawford?” Hannibal asks. “Use your
deductive skills.”

Silence hangs heavy between them for a few seconds. Jacks lips twitch and pull down in the
corners slightly, forming into a small and tight frown. His fingers fidget with the gold band on ring
finger of his left hand.
Hannibal’s eyes linger on the subconscious display for a moment. “I may not be willing to divulge the particulars of Will’s condition, but at the very least I can tell you that this is not a repeat of the situation you face with your wife. He is not keeping cancer from you.”

“That’s more or less what he told me a few days ago when he was sick at Quantico,” Jack says. He shakes his head. “He said it was nothing. Just stress. I wanted to believe him at the time, but…”

“But you carry your own baggage where your wife is concerned. You have been burned by the knowledge that someone so important to you tried to keep you in the dark. Now every symptom you see in others is an echo of her condition,” Hannibal says. “With a burden so heavy weighing on your mind, it’s easy to understand how it has clouded your perception and judgement.”

Tension slowly drains out of Jack’s frame as Hannibal’s words sink in. “When I first figured it all out… about Bella, I mean… Will sat by me and said he wasn’t going to leave until I felt comfortable talking about it.”

“And how long did the two of you sit there in silence?”

“A damn long time. At least an hour, maybe two.”

“Then perhaps you should extend Will the same courtesy,” Hannibal says. “Instead of cornering his psychiatrist and pressing for details behind his back like a gossiping teenager.”

Jack has the decency to look shame-faced as the calm chastisement knocks the last of the galvanizing anger out of him. He nods and mumbles something that might be an apology. He clears his throat awkwardly and continues, “I’ll keep it in mind. Thank you for giving me some perspective, Dr. Lecter. I still don’t like not knowing what’s up with Will, but what I did was out of line.”

Hannibal holds up a hand to silence him. “Your apologies are appreciated but unnecessary. I’d rather us return to Will’s side as quickly as possible. Between his stress and other circumstances, I’m concerned about what toll this case may have on him.”

Jack frowns in confusion as Hannibal steps past him and out the door. He follows, trying to fit the puzzle pieces together.

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At first glance, Stephan Waldorf defies every Alpha stereotype Will knows. He isn’t physically imposing or brash like Jack, nor does he appear to have an easy confidence like Bev or Alana, and he is certainly without the powerful charisma and natural authority that Hannibal possesses.

He is young, perhaps no older than 25, but everything about him is far from youthful. His clothing looks like it was pilfered from the long-forgotten and dustiest corner an elderly clockmaker’s closet. Normally Will would think someone so young dressed in such an overwhelmingly antiquated way is simply a slave to artistic affectation, but Waldorf exudes earnestness. At least his fashion sense is in harmony with the artistic aesthetic he displays in his paintings; there is not a scrap of post-modern sarcasm or avant-garde aggression in his work.

Waldorf’s premature agedness extends beyond the superficial. There is a strange fragility in the way he carries his slender frame. Will is surprised that those thin limbs are capable of carrying the dead weight of his victims. His sharp chin and angular cheekbones are off-set by a pair of horn-rimmed glasses with the thickest lenses Will has ever seen. Probably an attempt to preserve his failing vision.
“You’re the artist?” Will asks, trying to keep his tone as level as possible.

“I am. Stephan Waldorf,” Waldorf replies. He holds out his right hand for Will to shake and gives him a pleasant smile. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone give any of my paintings such an intense look before. I had to know what was going through your head.”

“I was just wondering about the composition of your paint,” Will says. Waldorf’s skin is dry against his as their hands shake. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

“I make the paints myself,” Waldorf states. “Saying anything more than that would reveal trade secrets.”

Will’s stomach gives a sickening lurch. He thinks about all the stolen blood from Elliot Gardner-Flores, from Waldorf’s five other victims, from all their unborn children. Thick and clotted trade secrets. “Of course,” he croaks. “I just thought I’d ask, since whatever technique you use is so evocative. Almost as if you managed to imbue everything you paint with life itself. Except…”

One of Waldorf’s pale blond eyebrows rises in interest. “Except?”

Will turns his attention back to Mono no Aware. “There are many beautiful things to focus on in this picture. The cherry blossoms. The bright and inviting colors of spring. The clouds drifting lazily overhead. But what draws my attention more than any of that is that well. The blackness is deep and inescapable. You almost expect the void to bubble up and consume all the beautiful things surrounding it. Why is that?”

He steels himself and looks back at Waldorf. “Because for you, that’s already happening, in a very real and literal sense.”

“Usher syndrome III,” Waldorf states, observing Will with open fascination. “I’ll be completely blind and deaf well before I turn 30. Nobody knows about my diagnosis outside of my doctors and immediate family. Your ability to pick up on an artist’s neuroses so easily is incredible. You must be one hell of an art critic.”

Will thinks back on all the designs he’s viewed over the years, all the twisted bodies and mutilated remains and carefully constructed horrors. Many would not be out of place in a museum of contemporary art, minus their canvases of flesh and bone. “That’s one way of describing it,” he mutters.

“Well, I’m afraid you have me at an advantage,” Waldorf says. “You can pick up on so many private things about me just from my work, and I don’t even know your name.”

Will hesitates. “Graham Williams,” he responds. A strange look crosses Waldorf’s face, and Will prays that it’s only due to his awkward and halting response.

“You know, I’ve always had a strong sense of smell. It’s only gotten stronger the past couple of years, probably to compensate for my weakening senses of sight and hearing,” Waldorf says breezily. “And since you deduced something so private about me, fair’s fair, right?”

Will’s brows knit together in an expression of confused wariness, but he does not reply otherwise. A large group of people led by a gallery guide moves in around them. Will hardly notices the sound of their chattering and shuffling over the beating of his own heart in his ears.

Waldorf continues, his voice low and smooth, “When are you due, Will Graham?”

For a moment, Will wonders if his heart has stopped. But a second later, the beat is back and
thudding violently in his chest. Terrified chills run down his spine as he stands stock still, rooted to the spot by the knowing look in the murderer’s light green eyes. Vincent Van Gore smiles at him.

“There you are!”

Will snaps his head in the direction of Jack’s voice, seeing Jack and Hannibal approaching. He turns back to Waldorf, but the killer is gone. His breath comes in sharp pants as he scans the crowd, trying to spot that pale blond hair or that old-fashioned suit.

“Will? What’s wrong?” Hannibal asks, frowning in concern. “You’re pale and shaking like a leaf.”


“You’re sure?” Jack asks.

Will nods emphatically and gives a growl of frustration when he finds no sign of Waldorf anywhere. “I talked to him. He’s Van Gore.” He swallows, turning his attention back to his boss and psychiatrist. “And…” His voice catches.

“And?” Jack goads.

“And he knows about me,” Will says, glancing between Jack and Hannibal and seeing how those five little words mean such different things to the two Alphas.

“Shit,” Jack growls. “Where is he? You said you were talking to him.”

“I got distracted for a second and he was gone,” Will says. Jack shoots him a disbelieving grimace, and he finds himself holding back a biting comment about that being Jack’s fault. “Blended into the crowd and out of sight.”

“He’s gonna be loose in the DC area,” Jack says, already pulling out his phone and dialing numbers. “But we need search and arrest warrants before we can bring him down. It’s gonna be a pain in the ass to shut this place down and haul the paintings in for evidence testing, but at least it’s an option.”

“Wait,” Will says, holding up a hand. He turns to Hannibal, a gleam of inspiration in his eyes. “You own a painting by Waldorf. When did you buy it?”

“About a year and a half ago,” Hannibal replies. “Though now I think I have buyer’s remorse.”

“That’s right around when Van Gore’s second kill was reported,” Will states. “We need that painting.”

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At Autumn's End tests positive for the presence of human blood. It’s enough that within an hour of the result there are warrants out for Stephan Waldorf’s arrest and the seizure of his property. The gallery exhibition is shut down so police can collect Waldorf’s works, and the media already begins buzzing with pleas for any private owners to turn their Stephan Waldorf paintings over to the authorities.

A cynical corner of Will’s mind knows that surely not everyone will comply and the prices for Waldorf’s work must be skyrocketing in illicit art trade circles. There are far too many people out there who would knowingly pay top dollar for idyllic landscapes painted with the stolen blood of murder victims, all for the sake of having a morbid little chunk of history all for themselves.
The murderer is not in his hotel suite near the art gallery when the FBI breaks down the door, but his supplies certainly are. Jars and jars of paint pigment and blood and not-yet-perfected mixtures of the two sit in the suite’s generously-sized refrigerator. A large canvas that’s half-rudimentary sketch, half-base color of a swarm of migrating monarch butterflies reveals that he has already begun to put his latest kill to use. Tests reveal that all the blood in the suite belonged to Elliot Gardner-Flores.

But the revelation of Vincent Van Gore’s identity is not nearly as important as the question of where he could be and what he could be planning, especially since his kill kit is nowhere to be found.

The situation only escalates when, roughly an hour into a late-night emergency brainstorming and profiling session with Jack and Alana, Will’s biology sabotages him at the worst possible time.

“He talked to me around 9 PM, so he’s known we’re onto him for about six hours now,” Will mumbles. He feels heavy with exhaustion. He rubs at his eyes, where he suspects dark bags must be forming. “All he cares about is leaving one last masterpiece before we catch him. I think he knows that’s a matter of when, not if. And for the swan song of his artistic career, he’ll want only the finest paint he can get.”

“The question is if he’s already found a target or if he’s still on the hunt,” Jack says, his arms crossed over his chest as he peers down at the pictures of all of Van Gore’s victims. “Who is he looking for?”

Will shrugs awkwardly and slouches under the intense glare of imaginary spotlights and the accusations of pointing fingers attached to disembodied arms.

He feels a gentle, friendly hand on his shoulder. He startles, looking up to see Alana smiling at him. She hands him a Styrofoam cup filled with cheap instant coffee, which he gratefully accepts. The little scabbed-over wound that is his fading crush on Alana throbs slightly over the fact that she can look so stable and put-together even during a 3 AM crisis.

The little bubble of warmth pops when her smile begins to fade. Alana’s brows knit together in deep confusion bordering on alarm. “Will,” she begins cautiously. “Why do you smell like that?”

Will swallows heavily. Out of the corner of his eye he can see Jack’s arms uncross and hang limp at his sides. They aren’t limp for long, however; his hands curl into fists and seem to vibrate with tension. Deflect, he thinks, his mind scrambling against the inevitable. “Not exactly a good time for a shower with a killer like Van Gore on the loose,” he desperately attempts to joke.

There is only silence for a few lingering seconds.

“When the hell were you going to tell me about this?!” Jack bellows. Will winces. “Hell, were you going to tell me at all? Or was I just gonna get an invitation to a goddamned baby shower? How long?”

“I don’t-“

“How LONG?!” Jack roars.

“Three months,” Will croaks.

“You’ve known about this for three months?!“

“No!” Will exclaims. “No, no. I’ve only known since Wednesday night. Three months is… how
old it is. How far along, I mean.”

“That’s still two days I let you chase after a killer who targets people in your condition! You let me serve you up to Vincent Van Gore like a tempting buffet to a starving man! You should have come to me about this the minute you found out.”

“I wasn’t ready to deal with it yet,” Will says, looking anywhere besides the shocked and furious faces of his colleagues.

“Not ready to-“ Jack cuts himself off. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, which he holds for a few seconds and releases through his teeth in a long, low hiss. When he opens his eyes again, there’s a sliver of regret beneath a thick sheet of professional ice. “You’re off this case. You’re out of the field. Indefinitely.”

Will’s blood runs cold and he looks to Alana, hoping for any sign of a second opinion. Her hand trembles with barely-restrained fury as she fumbles with her phone. “What are you doing?” Will asks.

“I’m calling Hannibal to let him know how appalled, disappointed, and disgusted I am to find out he’s done something so unforgivable,” she hisses.

Despite the fact that all the exhaustion and stress makes his legs wobble uneasily beneath him, Will stands and places his hand over the phone before Alana can finish dialing the numbers. “Don’t,” he says. “This isn’t his fault and-“

“Not his fault!” Alana crows in disbelief. “Will, that’s poisonous thinking. As your psychiatrist, he’s in a position of power over you. As an unstable Omega who was in heat, you couldn’t give informed, balanced consent. What he did to you is an absolutely unacceptable abuse of power. It’s rape, Will!”

The word slams into him like a haymaker punch, and Will forces down the surge of sick, confusing feelings that bubble up in the back of his brain. He remembers what Hannibal said about being willing to accept blame and responsibility for Will’s child if it will keep him from having to answer the inevitable uncomfortable questions or from reliving the mostly-unremembered horrors of that night. But his conscience gnaws at him, insisting that it isn’t right to make Hannibal bear the brunt of Jack and Alana’s righteous fury.

“It’s not his fault because he didn’t do this to me!” he shouts. His knees finally do begin to give out on him, and he grabs blindly for his chair. He only just reaches it in time. He slumps into the seat, propping his elbows on his thighs and burying his face in his hands.

Alana’s eyes go wide, her red lips parting slightly in surprise. Jack takes a few steps closer to them. “Who did, Will?” he asks quietly.

Will does not respond.

“Please. We want to help you,” Alana says quietly.

“I don’t know.” Will shakes his head. “I don’t know. I sleepwalked. I only remember a few vague things, and they might just be nightmares.”

“Oh my God, Will.” Alana breathes, her voice on the verge of tears. She kneels beside him and embraces him loosely around the shoulders.

The anger is gone from the room, but it has left a thick and cloying cloud of pity in its wake. Will
can almost feel it clogging his lungs and stinging his eyes like a haze of pollution. But he sits, motionless, appreciating and resenting the mournful concern in equal measure.

“Why didn’t you report this to the police?” Jack asks, though the true meaning behind those words is blatantly obvious. *Why didn’t you tell us?*

“I didn’t want to think about it. And I didn’t want to think about the signs once they started to turn up,” Will says.

Alana releases him from her comforting hug. She takes a moment to wipe at her eyes. “Will, whatever you decide, I’ll support you. You’re my friend, and I want to help you whenever I can. But what are you going to do about this?” Like Jack, a hint of her true meaning bleeds through. *Remember, you’d be a terrible parent.*

Will shrugs. “I don’t know,” he replies. His hands fidget with the fabric of his now-untucked shirt. “I haven’t decided yet. But… Hannibal offered to adopt it if I decide I can’t go through with the only rational choice. He was very sincere.”

“And I almost called him at half-past 3 in the morning to scream at him,” Alana says, hanging her head. “And he probably wouldn’t even blame me for it.”

“There’ll be time to yammer on about Dr. Lecter’s saintly qualities later,” Jack says. Over the course of Alana and Will’s conversation, he has drifted back to the evidence table and is squinting at the crime scene photos in thought. “What matters now is the fact that Van Gore’s still out there and Will can’t be on his trail.”

“I understand why you want me to take a backseat on this, Jack, but I can’t just leave this unfinished,” Will argues.

“Too bad, because that’s exactly what’s happening,” Jack says brusquely. He rubs his chin in thought, keeping his eyes on the evidence. “You said a couple of days ago that your house was almost through with its repairs, right?”

Confused, Will glances to Alana for an opinion on the seemingly out-of-the-blue statement. She only shrugs. “Yeah,” he says. “The repairmen even went to the trouble of moving my furniture out of storage and back into the house. It’d just be a matter of moving the rest of my stuff back in.”

“And you feel safe there?”

“It was one of the few places I’ve ever felt safe. At peace,” Will says. He is silent for a moment before he continues quietly, “I’d like it to be that way again.”

Jack nods. “Right,” he says. He turns to Will. “Until we catch Van Gore, you need to stay safe and keep a low profile. Your house out in Wolf Trap is secluded and it’s comfortable, familiar territory for you. We’ll enlist some local police to guard you while you’re there.”

“But-“ Will began, but the expression on Jack’s face leaves absolutely no room for argument. Will frowns slightly and nods. “Understood.”

“Glad you agree,” Jack says. “Come on. We’re wasting no time on this. I’ll have your first round of bodyguards bring some of your clothes and other necessities from Dr. Lecter’s.”

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By the time Jack delivers him into the hands of the two police officers waiting outside his long-
disused home, Will is exhausted to the point of collapse. He barely registers his bodyguards’ introductions on his bleary trek to his bedroom.

He falls onto his bed, bare of all sheets and even pillows, and sighs heavily. In less than a minute, he is nearly asleep. He is tempted to ignore his phone when it begins to buzz faintly with an incoming call. It is only a ring or two away from hitting his voicemail as he blearily looks at the call I.D. It’s Hannibal.

“Hello?” Will murmurs.

“Will, what is happening? Two police officers came to collect some of your things about an hour ago. I tried calling you, but you didn’t pick up.”

Will groans. “Ah, sorry. Guess I was too worked up to notice the call. Jack’s put me under police protection out here in Wolf Trap to try to keep me safe from Van Gore.” He hesitates for a moment. “My scent got stronger. Jack and Alana know.”

“I see,” Hannibal says. “In that case, I’m surprised my 5 AM visitors were merely police officers and not Agent Crawford with fury and vengeance burning in his eyes.”

“I think Alana was the one who really wanted to let you have it,” Will says. He can’t bring himself to laugh about it yet. Maybe one day, but it’s such a distant and alien notion that it’s practically abstract. “But I told them the truth. I couldn’t let them think you took advantage of me when you’ve been nothing but hospitable.”

For a few seconds, Hannibal is silent. “Thank you, Will,” he finally says. “If there’s anything I can do for you, do not hesitate to call. Now, you sound as if you are barely clinging to consciousness. Please rest up.”

Will sighs gratefully. “Going to sleep with the rising of the sun like a goddamned vampire. Still, you don’t have to tell me twice. Bye.”

“Sleep well.”

Will hangs up and sets his phone on the small table by his bed. He’s deeply asleep within seconds, too tired to dream.

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He is groggy and disoriented when he wakes. The sun is full and blaring at him as he squints and fumbles for his phone. Its clock reads 3:45 PM, along with flashing warnings telling him BATTERY LOW - 1% and PLEASE RECHARGE. He sighs and slips it into his pocket anyway.

There is a cardboard box by his bed which he completely failed to notice in his earlier exhaustion. It’s filled with a decent selection of his clothes and towels. He drapes a navy blue towel over his shoulders and selects a pair of underwear, a dark green flannel button-down shirt, and a pair of khaki slacks at random. He tucks the rumpled clothing under his arm.

He wanders into the kitchen, rubbing at his tired eyes. The newly remodeled room is spotless and well-designed, but these very qualities leave him feeling strange and hollow. It’s too sterile, unsullied by fishing supplies and rogue strands of dog fur. Though the kitchen is hit the hardest, he realizes that the entire house has that same feeling. With only his largest furniture here, the house isn’t lived-in or homey anymore.

Another box sits on the kitchen counter and he tries to put the unsettling thoughts aside as he goes
to investigate. There are some necessities like plastic utensils, paper plates, and napkins along with his old coffee pot, a few mugs, a pack of filters, and the cheap coffee Hannibal always quietly judged him for buying. On top of that, there’s a few days’ worth of easy canned food likely procured from a CVS or Walgreens. He peels back the tab on a small can of halved peaches and eats them with his fingers, caring not one whit about propriety.

As he chews on his syrupy peaches, he looks out the window to the front of his house. One of the officers sits on a chair there, his back to Will. The officer is slouched slightly, and Will wouldn’t be surprised if he’s bored out of his mind and wasting time on his phone.

He sets the empty can aside on the counter and sets up the coffee pot, pouring the grinds into a filter and letting the machine get to work. He can think of nothing more appealing than a cup of coffee after a long shower. Once he’s in the bathroom, he’s pleased to see the officers have left him some shampoo, soap, and washcloths, but there’s no sign of a shower curtain. A bath it is.

The bath rejuvenates him somewhat and thanks to the sugar from the peaches, he finally starts to feel a bit more awake. He can smell the coffee as he enters the kitchen and for the first time in a couple of weeks the scent doesn’t make his stomach turn. He doesn’t know if that’s because his morning sickness is finally fading or if 4:30 in the afternoon can’t really be considered a morning by any stretch of the imagination.

Will reaches for the handle on the coffee pot. He freezes two inches from contact.

The handle isn’t where he left it.

He distinctly remembers turning the handle to the left when he set the pot beneath the percolator. It’s a habit he cultivated after snagging the handle on things one too many times whenever it was turned to the right. He never leaves it like that anymore, yet there it is. To make matters worse, the pot is completely full. There’s no chance either of the officers came into the kitchen and helped themselves.

Despite the chill in his blood, he forces himself to act as if nothing is wrong. He takes hold of the pot and fills one of the mugs up halfway. He walks into his living room as casually as he can, keeping his head steady while his eyes covertly dart around for clues.

There. The storage closet near the entrance to the hallway is cracked open.

Will’s heart pounds. He is not alone in this room.

He sits on his old and beaten-up sofa as his mind races. If he shouts for the officers, Van Gore might be able to try something in the confused scramble. If he turns his back on the closet, Van Gore might suspect that Will knows he’s there. Maybe if he acts like he’s idly checking his phone, he can send a text message for help. It’s worth a shot.

Keeping his face as bored and neutral as possible, he pulls his phone from his pocket. He feels his throat tighten with panic and frustration when he sees that the battery is completely dead. He slides it back into his pocket.

Fight or flight kicks in. Fight. But do it wisely.

He brings the mug up to his lips and tilts it, pretending to drink deeply. He keeps this charade up for a few minutes, slowly forcing himself to sink into the couch in an imitation of relaxation. He sets the mug on the floor, clutching his head as if stricken by an unexpected bout of vertigo. He slumps back against the sofa bonelessly, keeping his eyes slightly open and locked on the closet.
door.

It slowly creaks open.

Stephan Waldorf steps out of the darkness, his kill kit in hand. The killer has deep bags under his eyes and a thin smile full of cruel promise tugs at his lips. He approaches Will slowly.

With adrenaline pumping through his system, Will is keenly aware of the distance between Waldorf and himself with every step he makes. Five feet away. Four. Three. Two. Waldorf leans over him; Will can smell mint on his breath.

Now.

Will kicks wildly, clipping Waldorf in the shoulder with his heel. He swears as he rolls away from where Waldorf is hunched and hissing in pain. He’d wanted to hit him in the lungs and knock the air out of him at least and break a rib or two at best. Scrambling to his feet, he dashes to the kitchen. He can hear Waldorf begin to recover behind him.

“Waldorf’s here!” Will shouts as he slams open the door leading outside. “Give me your gun and call for-“

The words die out with a choked gasp. The officer is not slumped over in boredom but rather in death. His eyes are bulging and bloodshot. His throat is cut from ear to ear, the blood dark and congealed on the front of his uniform.

Will is only able to observe the corpse in horrified shock for a few seconds before he’s seized from behind. He struggles in the grip, trying to kick back against Waldorf’s shins or punch with his trapped arms. He hisses in pain when he feels something thin and sharp jab into his side. At first he worries that he’s been stabbed with a small knife or some kind of ice pick, but his vision begins to blur and contort. His muscles stop obeying him as a powerful numbness begins to seep into his bones.

The last thing he hears before the world goes dark is Waldorf’s whispering voice in his ear. “Let’s make art.”

Chapter End Notes

"Mono no Aware" is a Japanese term which can be translated in a billion subtly different ways but which ultimately conveys the notion of wistfully/slightly mournfully acknowledging the transience of things, experiences, and even people.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Loads of blood in the final bit of this chapter, along with needles other forms of violence. Lots of medical stuff too, including discussion of cancer and the world's most disgusting tumors.

There's a lot of medical jargon and crap in this chapter, and I did do a lot of research and tried very hard to keep it as realistic and plausible as possible (for something set in the goddamned Omegaverse anyway). BUT I'm not perfect and am definitely not a medical professional, so don't be surprised if there's major goof-ups despite my best intentions.

Anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis (Will's diagnosis in canon) really is associated with the form of tumor I discuss in this chapter, and considering this is an Omegaverse fic, I had the perfect opportunity to put that fact to terrible use. That said, if you're squeamish, you really, really, REALLY do not to look up pictures of the thing. It's... pretty freaking gross.

So with no further ado, here's a chapter with a word count which is... wait for it... wait for it... over 9000.

I'm sorry.

Will comes awake slowly to the well-known pinging sound of a heart monitor and a rapid, watery wuh-wuh-wuh noise that he does not recognize. Though the sounds get clearer as consciousness returns to him, he still can't quite determine what the unusual sound is.

His eyes flutter open and he immediately scowls. The world is blurry, white, and far too bright to handle with the dull headache throbbing in his temples. He tries to bring a hand up to blot out the light, but the heart monitor shrieks when the movement jostles the sensor.

The alarm screeches for a few frustrating seconds before a middle-aged nurse enters the room, looking prepared to perform resuscitative measures. She visibly relaxes when she sees Will fumbling with the equipment attached to his hand in an attempt to get the awful noise to stop. With practiced patience, she sorts out Will’s monitor troubles while explaining that he’s in Johns Hopkins Hospital and that she’ll alert his team of doctors that he’s finally woken up.

Will has a thousand questions, but his head is still too murky and his tongue too sluggish to sort them out properly. How long has he been out? What was he injected with? Why does he need a team of doctors? Why is he alive in a hospital bed instead of completely exsanguinated on his living room floor?

All of the big, incredibly important questions lump together into one big traffic jam in his head. The question that does make it out is so small and silly in comparison that he already feels slightly embarrassed as the words leave his lips.

“What’s with the watery noise?” he slurs as the nurse prepares to leave.
She smiles at him. “That’s your baby’s heartbeat,” she says. “Nice and strong and regular.”

He doesn’t really listen to the rest of what little she says after that, even as he continues to stare at her. He can guess what she says from the movement of her lips. ‘Sit tight’ and ‘doctors will be with you shortly’ are probably somewhere in there. What has completely consumed his attention is the sound of that heartbeat. He wonders how an organ which must not be any bigger than a very small pea can produce such a sound. For a few minutes, there is only him and the beat.

Finally, the door to his room opens again and three doctors enter. The first doctor, a tall, slim Beta with dark hair and olive skin, introduces herself as Dr. Angela Mueller, a toxicology specialist. The second is a cheery and pleasantly plump Omega obstetrician named Dr. Josephine Cheung. Dr. Cheung introduces the final doctor, a balding Beta in his mid-forties, as Dr. Everett Preston of the neurology department. Mueller checks Will’s vitals while Cheung checks the fetal monitor. Satisfied that all is well, they switch off the monitors. Will is surprised how quiet the room is without the presence of the watery heartbeat.

Taking turns, Cheung and Mueller explain Will’s physical situation. They tell him that it is now 7 AM and that he was brought to the hospital by the FBI and local police a little after 8 PM the evening before. With that little revelation, Will realizes he's spent most of the past 24 hours asleep or unconscious. Maybe that's part of the reason why he feels like warmed-over garbage. They reassure him that he was heavily monitored while unconscious, and neither he nor the fetus show any lasting damage from the drug cocktail of anesthetics and anticoagulants Waldorf had forced into his veins.

All through the lengthy explanation, Preston remains quiet. He merely lurks behind his talkative associates, looking vaguely uncomfortable. It’s exactly the sort of thing Will notices above and beyond Cheung and Mueller’s pleasant reassurances.

“You haven’t said anything. Go ahead and spit it out,” Will states after Cheung and Mueller have made their case that the drugging will likely leave no adverse effects on him. He gestures vaguely to Cheung and Mueller. “These two are obviously the good news. Not too hard to deduce what that makes you.”

Preston looks briefly surprised, and Will suspects that most of the man’s shy discomfort is a result of him trying to come up with a way to broach a sensitive and troubling topic. The middle-aged doctor exchanges a look with Cheung and Mueller, who part and let him approach Will’s bedside.

“Maybe not bad news,” Preston says, though his wary tone says otherwise. “Just something that ought to be checked.”

Will braces himself. “Go on.”

“You were acting strangely when you were first brought in,” the doctor explains. “You seemed to wake up briefly, but you displayed no awareness and your muscle movements were jerky and highly irregular. Do you remember that, Mr. Graham?”

Will frowns and shakes his head. “I don’t remember anything between Waldorf sticking me and waking up in this room.”

“We think you had a mild to moderate seizure,” Dr. Preston says. “It’s extremely unlikely that the drugs caused it. Have you had any other unusual symptoms?”

“Like what?”
Preston shrugs and tilts his head. “Well, anything you might’ve found unusual or disconcerting. There’s already the suspected seizure. But anything besides that, like strong headaches, changes in sleeping habits, maybe even hallucinations…”

Will’s blood goes cold. “All of that,” he whispers.

Preston bites his lower lip, and Will can practically see the long, long list of potential terrible diagnoses pop up behind his hazel eyes. “I’d like to perform an MRI and see if we can find a cause. There are a lot of things those symptoms fit, and those conditions range from easily surmountable to… challenging. The sooner we have an idea what’s going on, the better.”

“Is it safe?” Will asks. Given how dry his mouth suddenly feels, he’s surprised he’s capable of speech at all. He glances down at his abdomen. “Y’know. Considering.”

Cheung raises her hand. “I’ve suggested MRIs to many of my patients for all sorts of ailments,” she says. “The procedure itself is completely harmless, but I recommend going without the contrast dye that helps clarify the images. It’s capable of crossing the placental barrier, and there haven’t been enough studies to prove whether or not it can be dangerous. Going without the contrast will make reading the images a little more difficult on our end, but we’ve got loads of eager residents who are up to the challenge.”

“Still, it’s important that you give completely informed consent,” Preston says. “If you’d feel more comfortable discussing the matter with your mate, we can –”

“Not applicable,” Will says brusquely, turning his head from the doctors so he can’t see their reactions. The more apparent it is that that subject is closed, the better. “Go ahead with the MRI.”

The doctors are silent for a moment before Preston speaks up again. “It’ll be about half an hour before we can have a machine free for you,” he says. “In the meantime, there’s an agent from the FBI who’s been pacing a hole in the floor in one of our waiting rooms. Out of all of your potential visitors, he’s been the most impatient. We can send him in if you think you’re up to being grilled for information.”

Will nods, still looking away from the doctors as they give another brief round of reassurances on their way out the door. His mind is awhirl with grim possibilities, but he isn’t given much time to dwell on them. A loud knock sounds at his door and he turns to look. Jack enters before Will can respond to the knock.

There are dark bags beneath Jack’s eyes and his skin is slightly ashen. His clothing is rumpled and there are a few coffee stains around the right cuff of his shirt. He holds a black leather padfolio in his left hand, his fingers clutching the object tightly. His expression is haggard, underscored with a plethora of mixed emotions, primarily relief and frustration. “Will,” he greets. “Thank God you’re alive. When we got there and saw you and all the blood, I thought for sure-”

“All the blood?” Will interrupts, frowning.

Jack runs one of his broad hands over the back of his head and rubs at his neck. He sighs heavily, slouching into the visitor’s chair by Will’s hospital bed. “Yeah,” he says, grimacing. “All the blood.”

“You’re going to need to paint a clearer picture for me, Jack, if you’ll excuse the completely unintentional and tasteless pun,” Will says. “Waldorf had me right where he wanted me. Stuck me with a needle and knocked me out. And yet here I am, alive in defiance of all logic, with my blood still in my veins instead of smeared across a canvass. What happened?”
“Now that is the million dollar question.” Jack presses his lips into a thin line for a moment, drumming his fingers on the padfolio in thought. “I’ve got pictures of the scene, but I don’t know if it’s something you need to see right now.”

Will extends his hand, saying nothing. Jack looks at Will’s outstretched hand, then down at the padfolio, and back again. He sighs, unzipping and opening the padfolio. He hands Will a photograph.

It’s one of the few walls in Will’s home that isn’t dominated by a window. Blood is smeared all over it, and it is sloppier than Waldorf’s typical work by virtue of being rendered via finger painting instead of via paintbrush. It’s a vaguely humanoid shape looming over something, extending its long, bony arms and spindly fingers down toward the ground. The gesture simultaneously exudes deadly menace and fierce protectiveness. Wings stretch out from gnarled roots in the thing’s back, and Will can’t tell if they're meant to be feathery or leathery. About a foot away from the wing is a handprint which smears down the wall as if the artist had been reaching up to add some final touches of texture to the wings but couldn’t quite make it.

Jack reaches over and runs his thick index finger along part of the photo, an area just beneath the reach of the creature’s fingers. “You were staged right here,” he says. “With your eyes shut and your arms crossed over your body like a corpse. We thought for sure you were dead.”

Will stares at the picture intently, imagining his body prone and vulnerable beneath the painting.

_The bloody image begins to move slowly and jerkily, like a figure out of an early silent movie projection. Its fingers peel off the wall and become solid, running down the unconscious Will’s cheek. It leaves streaks of blood where it touches, and its wings spread, triumphant and proud._

He drops the picture as if it has burned him. He shakes his head and scowls, rubbing at the bridge of his nose in an attempt to clear the hallucination. Words can’t express how grateful he is that he’s been detached from the heart monitor; his pulse is hammering in his chest, and he’s sure it would make the machine howl loud enough to wake the dead.

“If it’s not mine, whose is it? How’d you capture Waldorf?” he asks.

Jack eyes him warily for a moment, and Will wonders what his momentary hallucination must have looked like from the outside. Jack seems to make up his mind quickly, however, and he returns to rifling through the padfolio. “We didn’t capture Waldorf,” he says as he settles on a picture. He passes it to Will. “He’s dead. Apparent suicide. He painted that with his own blood.”

The first picture is Waldorf’s corpse, apparently a few feet away from where Will and the painting had been discovered. His flesh is unnaturally pale from extreme blood loss. His clothing is covered in drops of blood of various sizes, and his hands are absolutely coated in the stuff. There are needles in the veins at the inside juncture of both arms, connected to tubes which drain into a tray for paint rollers. There is still some blood in the white tray, but it’s apparent that most of it wound up elsewhere.

“This makes no sense,” Will whispers as his eyes scan the picture wildly. “Why would he kill himself when he had me at his mercy?”

Jack sighs, crossing his legs and folding his hands. “I was hoping you could shed some light on that,” he says. “I need your side of this, Will.”

Confused, Will recounts the events between the last time he saw Jack and the sharp sting of the syringe stabbing into his side. Jack’s expression remains grim and stoic the entire time. His only
reaction is the downward twitching of his lips when Will mentions the murdered police officer.

“Both of the officers were found dead at the scene. The one you saw by the kitchen door had his throat slit, and the one posted at the back entrance had her neck snapped,” Jack says. He frowns, deep in thought. “You said you woke up around 4 and were attacked by Waldorf about half an hour later, right?”

Will nods. “Yeah.”

“According to the autopsy report, the estimated time of death for both officers is around 1 PM, about one hour after they came to switch shifts with the officers you met that morning,” Jack says. “If that’s right, Waldorf was in your house without any police interference for over three hours. Why didn’t he attack you while you were asleep? Why waste that opportunity?”

Will is stunned by the revelation. He’d assumed that Waldorf had attacked the officers while he was in the bath. His hand trembles as he rubs his chin in thought, his stubble prickling against his palm. “I’d say it’s because he had a design he had perfected, but that doesn’t explain why he would commit suicide out of the blue. Or why he’d paint that thing when he’s traditionally only painted nature.”

Another thought hits him with the force of a truck. “Or…” he says, reaching for the pictures. He holds them side by side, his hands shaking slightly. “Why there’s missing blood.”

Jack frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Look at it, Jack,” Will demands. “The size of the painting. The amount of blood still in the tray. The spots on Waldorf’s clothing and hands. The pools of it on the floor. It’s definitely enough to kill a man, but that’s not even close to what the human body contains. All of Waldorf’s victims were almost completely exsanguinated, and if he used a similar process on himself, he’d end up the same.”

“The cleaners haven’t gone in yet,” Jack says. “The blood could have seeped into the cracks in the floor or under the baseboards and into the wall. We scoured your house top to bottom, and there’s no sign that there was anyone there besides you, Waldorf, and the deceased officers. Blood doesn’t just get up and walk away on its own.”

Will glares at the pictures, still perturbed by the eccentricities of the scene.

Jack sighs. “Do you see something that says otherwise?”

Will’s shoulders slump. All he can see are him, Waldorf, and the creature painted on the wall, which seems to have an odd life unto itself. “No,” he concedes, despite the fact that his stomach is still churning and his brain is still whirling over how the puzzle pieces won’t quite fit into place.

Jack leans over and takes the photos. “You’ll be the first to know if we find anything – any hair or flake of skin or odd fiber – that doesn’t fit. But for now, what matters is that Waldorf can’t hurt any more innocents. You should focus on relaxing until you’re discharged.”

Will slouches back against his pillows, shutting his eyes in frustration. “If I get discharged,” he grumbles.

“What? Explain.”

“I’m going to have an MRI soon. One of the neurologists said I might’ve had a seizure and the symptoms I took for being stressed and paranoid might be something else,” Will says. He scoffs.
“You’ll be the first to know if they find anything – any tumor or aneurism or odd degenerative condition – that renders me unfit.”

With that, he turns on his side, his back to Jack. The room is eerily silent, and Will expects Jack is processing before the inevitable blow-up and further questions. He doesn’t want to continue the conversation. He doesn’t want to think about what may or may not be eating his brain from the inside out. He doesn’t want to think how Jack’s experience with Bella must make him automatically assume he is riddled with inoperable cancer.

Fortunately, that conversation doesn’t come. Before Jack can say anything, there is a knock at the door. A young nurse enters, explaining that he’s there to take Will to the MRI suite. Jack departs, his goodbye curt but concerned. Will steels himself for the worst and follows the nurse.

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The MRI suite is spotless and smells faintly of disinfectant. There’s the machine itself, which is huge and peculiar. With its tubular shape and intricate machinery, it looks more like a trans-dimensional device plucked from a sci-fi movie than it does actual medical equipment. There is a window on the opposite wall and Will can see various screens and mechanisms inside. The technicians help him lie down on the hulking machine’s bed. He tries to find a comfortable position, but between the shape of the bed and how cold it feels through his thin hospital gown, he soon gives it up as a lost cause. He glances around again, and he can just barely see Dr. Preston and several young residents enter the room behind the window.

“Okay, Mr. Graham,” Preston’s voice says, crackling over an intercom. “Everything is all set up. This is completely non-invasive, so you won’t feel a thing. Just try to stay as still as possible.”

Will tries to relax as the machinery starts to move. Once inside, he hears strange, loud sounds. He tries to ignore it to the best of his ability, but the noise soon warps into a quick, buzzing beats that have him feeling disoriented. As he waits, keeping motionless save for the pounding of his heart and the ragged flow of air through his lungs, he sees something begin to move out of the corner of his eye. A line of blood creeps up the walls of the chamber, curving up onto the ceiling in defiance of gravity and rationality.

Where is the blood coming from? His eyes dart, straining to see the source of it while remaining still. Finally, he sees. The blood is flowing from needles stuck into his wrists. The blood begins to pour out of him faster and heavier, a far cry from the initial trickle which first caught Will’s attention. It spreads and smears into a distinct shape on the chamber’s ceiling.

As if painted by an invisible brush, a picture emerges out of the blood. The creature is eerily angular and gaunt as a skeleton, and a pair of long, jagged antlers juts out of its bald head. Its lips, if the thin things lining its mouth deserve that name, are neither twisted into an evil smirk nor snarling with menace. They’re actually quite neutral. But the eyes are another matter. They are lurid and possessive, despite their utter emptiness. They are the void, in its purest and hungriest form.

He recognizes the beast instantly. It has appeared frequently in his nightmares over the past few months, often little more than a fleeting glance or a shadow lurking in a dark corner. It’s the one image he remembers clearly from the night of his heat.

He manages to remain still, even as droplets of blood fall from the painting and land on his cheek. Even as the monster stares down at him as it did three months before. Even as the noise from the MRI reaches a terrible crescendo.
And then, suddenly, he’s moving. The loud buzzing and beating is gone, replaced by the simple whirring mechanics as the bed moves out of the chamber. There is no blood, of course. No needles in his skin, no painting of that terrible, impossible entity. The MRI machine and its suite are perfectly normal.

“Mr. Graham, we’ve been able to pinpoint the cause of your symptoms,” Preston says. “We’re going to proceed with a pelvic scan. One of the residents has a hunch about your condition. If she’s right, we’ll have an excellent idea on how to proceed. Is that acceptable?”

“Can I close my eyes for this one?” Will croaks. “And do you have any earplugs?”

“Of course,” Preston responds, sounding slightly baffled. “You could have closed your eyes for the first one.”

One of the attending MRI techs fetches a set of earplugs and hands them to Will. He nods his thanks, slips them in, and shuts his eyes tight. The bed begins to move once more, taking him deeper into the machine for the second scan. Closing his eyes and muffling the sound does not help in the slightest. His eyes and ears may be shut tight, but he feels warm breath waft down his neck and against his ear. It smells like blood.

Somehow, he forces himself to endure it. He feels especially disoriented and hazy by the time the scan is over, and he drifts behind the technician who gave him the earplugs as she guides him to a nearby consultation room. Noticing his slightly vacant demeanor, she helps him sit on the examination table and leaves with the promise that the doctors will be with him shortly.

The room is quiet, small, and relatively sparse. Aside from the examination table, there is only a flat, white screen that Will presumes is for displaying x-ray, MRI, or PET scan images. The room’s lighting is also a bit different from the bright glare he’s used to seeing in hospitals and clinics. It’s slightly softer and dimmer, probably an attempt to soothe patients who are braced to receive bad news. Now that he fits that profile, he finds that he appreciates the sentiment. He should be nervous, yet he only feels a vague numbness.

He isn’t left waiting for long. There is a knock, and he turns to look at the door as it opens. Dr. Preston and one of the residents enter. The young blonde Alpha carries a large manila envelope and has the look of someone who was just chatting excitedly. That’s what really snaps Will out of his haze; whatever the young woman has to say, she’s eager.

“Mr. Graham, this is Dr. Emily Schwarz. She’s one of our oncology residents, and she’s the one who was ultimately able to make the diagnosis,” Preston says.

Will takes in a deep breath and holds it for a long, uneasy moment. “And what would that diagnosis be?”

Schwarz flips on the viewing screen and removes an image from her folder. She sets the picture of the brain into the lit screen and gestures to the right side of Will’s brain. “Severe Anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis,” she says. She goes on to describe the ailment to Will, and even though it explains most of the increasingly worrisome symptoms he’s been living with, there’s still one thing that really troubles him. That dread only solidifies when she begins describing its nature as an autoimmune ailment.

“Autoimmune,” he repeats during a lull in her explanations. “The body attacking itself over a perceived invasion. But you’re an oncologist, and the fact that you’re the one who spotted this says a whole lot. So tell me, doctor: what kind of cancer has invaded me?”
For a moment, Schwarz looks taken aback, but soon that strange, excited gleam is back and twinkling in her gray eyes. “A blunt one, aren’t you? Well then, I’ll cut to the chase,” she says, pulling out a second image and setting it by the first. It’s the pelvic scan. Though the brain image had been rather daunting to look at, with all its intricate wrinkles like the meat of a walnut, the pelvic image is on another level. It’s a mosaic of shadows and shapes, and Will can only begin to guess what some of the structures are.

His eyes focus on one spot in particular. It’s small and the image is somewhat unclear, but he supposes that’s because the fetus didn’t get the message not to fidget during the scan. Hearing its heartbeat and seeing it in this blurry image all in one day has made the reality of his situation sink in far more than anything else. He has absolutely no idea what to think about it all.

“What were you told about your reproductive health, Mr. Graham?” Schwarz asks. Her tone is almost conversational.

Will shakes his head, forcing himself to look away from the picture. He clears his throat. “Uh, I was told that my weak, irregular heats and reduced fertility were due to only having one malformed ovary.”

“That’s not quite true. You have two ovaries, just like any other Omega. Look, the one on the left is healthy, but just a little on the small side. Kinda shy, in a way. If the clinic you went to was stuck with old, worn-out equipment and overworked, undertrained staff, it’s likely they could have missed it completely. Especially when compared to this one,” Schwarz says, pointing to a larger mass on Will’s right side. “This is probably what they saw. The ovary isn’t merely malformed; it’s tumorous.”

Will frowns in disbelief. “I’ve had cancer since I was a teenager? If the encephalitis is part of that, why do I only have it now?”

“That’s the interesting part: it’s not quite that simple. As soon as we saw your particular type of encephalitis, I knew it could be a symptom of something else entirely. Anti-NMDAR has been linked to a type of slow-growing tumor called a teratoma, and it’s very likely been with you much longer than you’d think. It probably started to develop before you were even born. It was able to hide away in you until you developed the autoimmune response.”

A small portion of anxiety drains out of Will. If he’s had the tumor that long, it can’t be malignant, can it? Surely it would have eaten away at him and killed him years before if it were capable of spreading and wreaking further havoc on his body. “What do you have to do to treat it?”

“We’ll have to remove the ovary surgically and have it biopsied, after which it will be classified as ‘mature’ or ‘immature’. There’s a lot that goes into those classifications, but generally speaking mature teratomas are benign and immature ones can be malignant. If it’s mature, we start you on immunotherapy until the encephalitis clears up. If it’s malignant, we’ll seek further options from there. But to be completely honest with you, I’d bet good money on it being benign,” Schwarz says, looking once more at the tumor as if she were a child and it a present left by Santa under the Christmas tree.

At first, Will had wondered if Schwarz’s strange exuberance was merely her way of being relieved over the likelihood of a good prognosis, but now he sees that it extends beyond that. She’s excited over the presence of the tumor itself. Will isn’t sure if he should be confused or insulted, so he settles on easy medium of frustration. “You seem awfully happy about the fact that I have a tumor,” he mutters.

Preston frowns, leaning in and whispering chastisements into the medical resident’s ear. Schwarz’s
shoulders twitch slightly and she turns her wide gray eyes back to Will. There’s genuine contrition and guilt there. “I’m sorry, Mr. Graham. That was very unprofessional of me,” she says. “It’s just that I find teratomas so interesting. The thing about teratomas is that the tissues they’re made of make them capable of growing things you really wouldn’t expect to find in a cyst. For instance, it’s very common to find hair growing in them, and in very rare instances you can find partially or fully formed body parts like eyes, organs, or hands.”

She points at the picture, indicating a set of three white spots inside the shadowy growth. “Do you see these?” she asks. When Will nods slowly, her grin widens. “I think those are teeth. These tumors are hideous little balls of potential and surprise, and I think they’re fascinating. I really don’t intend any insult, Mr. Graham. It’s just extreme job satisfaction. According to your file, you work for the FBI and used to be a police officer. Maybe it’s the same thing you feel when you help bring a criminal to justice.”

Will feels the weight of the gun in his hand. His muscles tighten and vibrate with energy from the force of the recoil. Bullet after bullet pierces Garret Jacob Hobbs’ flesh. Warm blood splashes on him. His heart pounds. His ears ring from the blasts. It’s terrible. The light goes out in the Minnesota Shrike’s eyes. It’s wonderful.

“I doubt that very much,” Will says flatly.

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Hours later, Will lies on the bed in his hospital room. He waits for the nurse to arrive with the last meal he will be allowed to eat before he begins his fast for the surgery tomorrow. He hadn’t been able to finish the lunch he ate shortly after his MRI consultation. Between the thought of the hideous tumor in him and the completely unremarkable food, his appetite was compromised to the point of vague nausea. He’s not exactly eager to see how dinner fares in comparison.

There is a knock at the door. He sits up and starts to prepare the built-in meal tray attached to the bed, but his brows furrow in confusion when he realizes the person at the door has not entered. They knock again.

“Come in,” he calls, though it comes off as more of a question than a request.

To his surprise, Hannibal enters instead of the expected nurse. He is carrying a paper bag, and Will can hear the faint sound of silverware clinking together within it. As always, his expression is somewhat guarded due to his disciplined and professional nature, but Will can see a hint of relief in the stoic man’s demeanor. “Good evening, Will,” he says, approaching. “I’m glad to see you are well after enduring such a horrible event.”

“Well is relative,” Will says, watching as Hannibal sets the bag on the visitor’s chair.

Hannibal begins removing containers of food, utensils, and two plates from the bag. “I wanted to visit you sooner,” he states. “I came here as soon as I was informed that you were attacked by Stephan Waldorf. Unfortunately, your doctors told me you could not receive visitors until you had a few tests.”

“Jack visited me,” Will states, breathing in deeply to take in the delectable scent of the sausages and side dishes being put on the plates.

“He needed your account of the attack and some insight on the crime scene,” Hannibal corrects. “Can that really be called a friendly visit? In any case, I decided that if I could not visit you immediately, I could at least cook you a fine meal.”
He sets a plate on the tray in front of Will. “Himmel und Erde. The English translation is ‘heaven and earth’. A traditional German meal featuring blutwurst, pan-fried onion, mashed potato, and applesauce. Hearty and nutritious, precisely what you need.”

“How did you manage to pull this off? I thought for sure I’d be eating boring hospital food tonight.”

Hannibal gives a small smile. “You forget I worked in this hospital before I retired from surgery. I still have some very close acquaintances here, many of them very high up the chain of command. I was able to pull a few strings.”

Will cuts into one of the dark reddish-brown sausages and drags the morsel through the buttery mashed potatoes before bringing the fork to his mouth. He closes his eyes as he chews, relishing the flavor. His appetite is back with a vengeance thanks to the delicious food. “Well, thank God for that,” he says. “Thanks for making this. It’s amazing. Even though I knew I should be hungry, I couldn’t really make it through lunch. I don’t know why. It’s no worse than the stuff I usually make for myself when I cook.”

Hannibal laughs softly. “Perhaps the baby has a refined palate.”

They eat in quiet for a few minutes. Hannibal does not press for conversation, perhaps sensing that Will is a little lost in thought. Will keeps his eyes on the food when he finally speaks up. “I heard its heartbeat today,” he says. “And kind of saw it in an MRI picture.”

“Oh?”

“They say it’s healthy.”

Will glances out of the corner of his eye and sees Hannibal set his plate aside and lean forward slightly. The psychiatrist says nothing; instead, he makes it apparent in his body language that he is there for Will should he choose to open up further on the subject.

Will sighs. “I don’t think I can do... what I really should do,” he whispers.

It’s a vague statement, but Hannibal picks up on the meaning easily. “In this situation, Will, there is no such thing. The only thing you ‘should’ do is listen to what you feel is best, no matter what that may be.”

Will skewers the last piece of sausage and swirls it around the plate “When you offered to adopt the baby, you really meant it, didn’t you?”

“Of course. Every word.”

Will chews his lip so hard he tastes blood, but when he runs his tongue along it, he doesn’t feel a wound. He must be imagining it. “If I agreed to that... would you... I mean, if I gave you notice in advance, would you let me see it sometimes?”

Hannibal blinks at him, slightly taken aback. “If you wish to be involved in the life of your own child, I would never deprive you of that right. Nor would I deprive him or her the pleasure of knowing you.”

The subtle praise surprises Will, and his chest feels as if it’s being squeezed be a warm, not-unpleasant vice. As a distraction, he takes the final bite of sausage into his mouth and savors it. He must appreciate the small, calm bubbles of comfort such as these before they burst. They always burst.
They are quiet for a few long seconds. Then, Hannibal sighs and says, “Will, I feel as if I have not been completely honest with you. I believed I could delay or perhaps even entirely avoid what I am about to confess to you, but your recent brush with death has convinced me otherwise. To keep it secret would be to set myself down the path of regret. And above all else, I feel I owe you the courtesy of the truth.”

Will looks at him, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Hannibal pushes forward to sit on the edge of his chair, resting his elbows on his thighs and folding his hands together. Will wonders if it’s a subconscious move, for he almost looks like a man in a priest’s confession booth. “Not long after you began sharing my home, I started noticing changes in how I thought about you. Changes which extended beyond the realms of professionalism and friendliness.”

Will’s eyes widen and for a moment his mouth is open, his lips parted slightly in disbelief. “Are you saying you have… feelings for me?”

“Yes,” Hannibal says. “Ones which have only gotten stronger over time. Three months ago, I was at war with myself over whether I should inform you and recommend you to another psychiatrist or simply attempt to will my feelings for you away. After what happened to you during your heat, I decided I could not in good conscience burden you with my attraction, so I kept my silence. So you see, when I said I would adopt your child if you had no desire or ability to raise it, I did mean it. But in the back of my mind, all I could think about was how much I would prefer to have you at my side for that. I realize it’s a very selfish thought.”

For a few long seconds, Will tries to process the new information, but his mind seems to have gone completely blank. He finally manages to wrench his shocked gaze away from Hannibal’s face. He stares down at his lap, grasping the sheet nervously with his right hand. He glimpses back at Hannibal, but soon returns his attention to his lap. Slowly, his left hand reaches out toward Hannibal’s clasped hands. He hesitates for a moment, almost as if he is thinking of pulling back, but he settles his own hand over Hannibal’s.

“I’ll need a lot of time;” Will murmurs, still keeping his eyes averted.

He does not see the satisfied smile that lights up Hannibal’s face. Hannibal's hands unlace, and he clasps Will's hand with his own, gently stroking the Omega’s fingers with his thumb. “Fortunately, I am as patient as I am selfish.”

----- Before Heaven and Earth -----
mark the way. Most people would have easily gotten lost amongst all the similar-looking trees and shrubs. Hannibal is not ‘most people’. His stride is confident and quick, but he manages to make very little noise as he moves through the underbrush.

He stops when Will’s home comes into sight. There are two police cars parked in front of it. From his hiding space in the thick underbrush, Hannibal watches as two officers talk on Will’s front porch. They shake hands and one of them walks away toward one of the cars. Another officer comes walking along the side of the house, giving the new one stationed on the porch a friendly nod. The two departing officers get into their patrol car and drive off.

Hannibal chooses to wait. The new guards will be particularly alert just after the changeover. If he gives them some time to get used to their position, dispatching them will be much easier. An hour should do the trick. In the meantime, he will stalk around the house, deciding who to eliminate first and how to go about it.

Time passes quickly and soon he sees the time to strike. The officer at the back entrance has gone from patrolling the back and sides of the building every five minutes to sitting on the chair provided for her. She’s been there for fifteen minutes now, and judging by the slump of her shoulders and the casual way she’s kicked her legs up to lean on the railing, the young Alpha has already grown bored and complacent with her assignment.

Hannibal silently emerges from the woods behind the officer. He moves slowly, holding a large, smooth rock he picked up in the woods in his right hand. He creeps nearer and nearer, keeping himself close to the side of the house and stopping whenever the officer makes an idle movement. When he knows he is close enough and the officer has her head turned, he hurls the stone into a bush.

The noise alerts the officer, who bolts up and readies her gun. As she cautiously approaches the bush, Hannibal charges behind her. He seizes her, one hand automatically covering her mouth before she can utter a shout of surprise and the other resting on the base of her skull. With a quick twist and a sickening crack, the officer slouches to the ground. Hannibal carries her corpse to the chair and arranges it so that from a distance she merely appears to be sitting. Only those who come up close can see the hideous bulge of broken bone in her neck and her glassy, lifeless eyes.

He must move quickly. If the other officer decides he wants to come and chat with his companion, Hannibal will be at a distinct disadvantage. He returns to the woods and retrieves his bag, then enters Will’s house through the back entrance.

He makes his way through the house, being sure to keep particularly quiet when he moves past the bedroom where Will is sleeping deeply. When he gets to the front door, he sets his bag against the wall and retrieves one of his finest knives from it. He then grasps the knob and slowly eases the door open, keeping himself behind it.

“You awake, Mr. Graham?” the middle-aged officer asks. Hannibal hears him stand and approach the door. “Mr. Graham?”

As soon as the officer steps through the door and into the kitchen, Hannibal lunges. He kicks the officer’s shins, causing the Beta to stumble. Hannibal takes full advantage of that, grabbing the officer’s left wrist and twisting it back almost to the point of dislocation. The officer starts to gasp in pain, but Hannibal reaches around to slice the knife deeply across his trachea. The gasp quickly turns into horrified gurgling.

Hannibal lugs the dying man back out onto the porch. He watches as the life drains out of the officer’s bulging, terrified eyes. Just as he did with the younger officer, he props the body up to
appear alive from a distance. The thick blood running down the officer’s front doesn’t exactly help the illusion, but it will have to do.

After cleaning his knife and all the blood that landed on the kitchen floor, Hannibal closes the door. He now has free reign of Will’s home. If Waldorf is smart and resourceful enough to make it here, Hannibal will be ready to intercept him. If he never arrives, Hannibal can set fire to the house again while easily ensuring Will gets out alive. He isn’t above an encore performance.

Though he must remain vigilant, Hannibal can’t resist indulging in a bit of temptation. He returns to Will’s bedroom, opening the door quietly and stepping inside. He approaches the unadorned mattress where Will is curled up on his side. Though still deeply asleep, Will mumbles something soft and incoherent, shifting slightly as Hannibal sits on the side of the bed. He reaches down, running his hand down the side of Will’s face and sweeping his thumb over his lips. Will reacts subconsciously, moving into the touch and giving another faint murmur. Hannibal smiles, leaning in to leave a lingering kiss upon those lips. Fortunately, Will is no Sleeping Beauty; the kiss will not wake him.

Hannibal pulls back and stands. Will makes a small sound of protest, but soon drifts back into silent slumber.

He looks down at his watch; it’s almost 2 PM. The first shift of officers picked up some of Will’s things from his home in Baltimore at 5 AM and presumably arrived in Wolf Trap around an hour later. Given that he witnessed the shift change at noon, that means that teams of officers are taking six or seven hour shifts. In that case, he’s got about five hours until the next officers arrive and who knows how long until Will wakes.

The next hour and a half moves slowly. With nothing to plan and no police officers to monitor, there’s nothing to do but wait. He moves about Will’s home, checking the many windows and being careful to keep from leaving any trace of his presence behind.

Finally, just before 3:30 PM, something happens. Hannibal is in the living room and just as he is about to move on to the next window in his patrol, he spots something moving in the brush outside. He moves to the side, ensuring that he can peer out the window without being seen.

Waldorf, looking tired and worn but fiercely determined, slowly emerges from the wood. He checks around vigilantly as he moves toward the side of the house. As he moves closer to the window, Hannibal backs off. He heads for the kitchen, keeping the door between it and the living room open just enough to watch through the crack.

Once at the window, Waldorf checks again for any interference. He then pulls out a glass cutter and uses it to cut a circle just wide enough to put his arm through. His movements are careful and deliberate as he reaches through the hole and unlocks the window from the inside. He lifts the window open and climbs through, bringing his kill kit with him.

Hannibal thinks it’s a moderately successful break-in at best. Though Waldorf was quiet and definitely skillful, Hannibal can’t help but suspect that he would have been caught had the police officers been alive. But then Waldorf would have been captured and carted off and Hannibal wouldn’t have the satisfaction of what he is about to do.

He watches as Waldorf creeps over to the storage closet and hides himself away within. If he listens very closely, he thinks he can hear Will begin to stir awake in his bedroom. That’s the sign for him to hide away as well. He strolls to the front door, retrieves his bag by the wall, and exits. He walks down the porch and waits along its side; he’ll be well hidden and out of sight if the door opens. And once more, he waits.
Hannibal stands vigil with only the dead and bloodied corpse for company for just over forty minutes. He is put on the alert by a loud thump from inside the house and the sound of panicked running. The door flies open, and Will shouts “Waldorf’s here!” He sees the Omega take a single step onto the porch. “Give me your gun and call for –”

Will doesn’t get a chance to finish his sentence. He has noticed the murdered police officer, and Waldorf takes advantage of the moment of shock, grabbing Will from behind.

As refined and controlled as Hannibal prides himself to be, there is still a part of him which is as instinctive and territorial as any other Alpha. He does not resent this aspect of his identity the way many other modern gentlemen do. Far from it. The primal animal which lurks in everyone, buried deep beneath layers of pretense and denial, often has very handy advice. It has aided him while out hunting many, many times. The key is to know when to put it to use. So he clamps down on the ancient and wild part of him which bristles and scratches under his skin when Waldorf – an inferior Alpha in all ways - dares to lay his hands on Will.

Will, for his part, puts up a good fight. For a moment, Hannibal wonders if Will will triumph in the confrontation, but Waldorf sticks him with the needle. Will goes limp and his eyes flutter shut as the drugs race through his system.

Hannibal still manages to keep the part of him roaring for vengeance and blood in check. It will be sated soon, and it will be worth all the waiting.

Waldorf drags Will back inside, and Hannibal gives him a moment’s head-start before grabbing his bag and following. Waldorf has pulled Will back into the living room and laid him by one of the walls for the bloodletting. Hannibal waits until Waldorf’s back is turned to him. As soon as the moment is perfect, he rushes the smaller, weaker Alpha and grabs his neck in a flawless chokehold. Though Waldorf struggles and gasps futilely, he is rendered unconscious within seconds.

While Waldorf is out cold, Hannibal works deftly and quickly. He pulls a white paint tray, a syringe, and needles with draining tubes attached from his bag. He taps the syringe, clearing out any air pockets, and injects the contents into Waldorf’s upper arm. With sharp jabs, he inserts the needles into the soft inner flesh of Waldorf’s arms. Blood begins to flow into the tubes instantly, and Hannibal adjusts them so they drain into the tray.

Without any anesthesia to keep him unconscious, Waldorf soon groans and begins to wake. His breathing hitches when he sees his blood pouring out of him.

“You must listen to me very carefully, Mr. Waldorf,” Hannibal says calmly. Waldorf jerks his head to look at him. “I am about to give you an ultimatum and I am not in the mood to repeat myself. Understood?”

Waldorf stares at him, unblinking, his breath ragged in shock. Finally, he nods.

“Good. I have injected you with a strong dose of anticoagulants, but if you remain calm and move slowly, you will likely live long enough to paint something with your own blood. You will leave this world engaging in the act you love most,” Hannibal says. “But if you rush at me or make a frenzied attempt on Will’s life, your blood pressure will plummet and you will likely suffer a bout of syncope. I will then rip your veins open wide, causing you to quickly bleed out. That will be the ignoble and artless end of Vincent Van Gore. Your death is guaranteed in either scenario, but surely one is preferable to the other.”

Strangely, the panic seems to drain out of Waldorf entirely. His shoulders relax and his expression goes mild, as if he has come to accept his fate. “I accept your terms,” he says. “I’ll make my
masterpiece”

“I hope finger-painting is acceptable.”

“I don’t really have much of a choice,” Waldorf says as he dips his fingers into his own warm blood and begins dabbing it against the wall.

“Very true,” Hannibal concedes.

Waldorf paints slowly and methodically, as if pacing himself to ensure he finishes his work. “You know,” he says. “I never liked the name ‘Vincent Van Gore’. I’m much more informed by Thomas Cole and Caspar David Friedrich. There’s nothing of Van Gogh in my technique at all.”

“I understand,” Hannibal states. “I am not especially fond of the name ‘the Chesapeake Ripper’ myself. It’s very plain.”

Waldorf stumbles for a moment. He looks back at Hannibal, eyes wide with surprise. However, he doesn’t share whatever goes through his head at the revelation. He merely turns back and continues to paint.

As Waldorf paints, Hannibal returns to his bag and removes a glass mason jar from it. He crouches by the paint try, lifting one of the tubes and allowing the blood to pour into the jar.

“What are you doing?” Waldorf asks, his tone flat.

“Don’t worry. You will have more than enough to complete your masterpiece,” Hannibal says. “But you are not the only one who appreciates the finest, freshest material for their art.”

Waldorf scoffs. “You're the Ripper. I thought murder was your medium.”

As soon as the jar is full, Hannibal returns the tube to the tray. He screws the lid on tightly. “An accurate observation,” he states. “But my passions extend to cooking as well. It’s been so long since I made proper blood sausage.”

Waldorf gives a slightly hysterical giggle as Hannibal packs the jar of blood away. Perhaps he is beginning to feel the effects of his blood loss. His already light skin tone is certainly getting paler by the moment.

“If you wouldn’t mind sharing, I would love to hear about your process and motivations, Mr. Waldorf. I am very curious, and I would hate for it to be lost to time upon your impending death.”

“Everything withers. Everything fades. Everything ends. That’s why art is so important, you know. It’s a means to record those all-too-brief moments of beauty before the dark waves crash in and wash them away for good,” Waldorf says as he carefully reaches up to continue painting the humanoid figure looming over Will. “And when I use their blood, not only is the color more vivid, but I capture their beauty as well. I make a part of them immortal.”

Hannibal gives an interested hum. “A noble objective. It certainly did add an ineffable and enjoyable richness to your art, and I would have very gladly allowed you to continue your work without interference. However, you made a very grave mistake by choosing to ignore my warning.” He shakes his head, almost regretfully. “That is very rude indeed.”

“So you’re the one who slipped that note under my hotel suite door on Thursday night. How did it go again?” Waldorf muses. He begins to paint a wing structure growing out of the figure’s back. “Ah, yes. ’I am a fan of your work. Your use of color and medium is exquisite. But you are not the
The name was familiar from TattleCrime, but that note is how I knew it was him when he gave me a desperate pseudonym at the art gallery.”

Hannibal shrugs. “I did warn you, and you chose not to listen.”

“The temptation was too great. But then, I’m probably speaking to the choir on that,” Waldorf says. He giggles again. “It’s your child, isn’t it?”

“A very astute guess.”

Waldorf’s giggles dissolve into laughter which would be full and manic if he still had enough energy. His skin has gone from eerily pale to a chalky, deathly white, and even his lips have begun to take on a bluish tint. His shoulders shake from the laughter as he fills in the wings. “My God! The spawn of the FBI’s own freak-on-a-leash and the Chesapeake Ripper! What on earth will a child of that pedigree be like?”

“The word you’re looking for, Mr. Waldorf,” Hannibal says as he settles back in Will’s chair to comfortably watch Waldorf paint himself to death. “Is ‘perfect’.”
WARNINGS for this chapter: This is where the dubious consent warnings actually come into play. I consider everything that's happened sexually between Hannibal and Will prior to this to be 100% non consensual. Will's body might be into it, but he isn't consciously aware that most of the sex has happened. And when it comes to the one that he does know about, he's been gaslighted into thinking he was raped by a stranger. As much as he thinks he consents in this chapter, he isn't privy to VERY important, game-changing information. This renders the consent dubious at best.

A few readers have left comments about wanting to know whether or not the ending will be happy or not. Because of that, I've made a poll [here](https://example.com/poll). If a majority of people want to know the nature (NOT specific spoilery content) of the ending, I'll say it in the notes prior to the next chapter. Likewise, if most want it to be a secret, I'll be quiet about it. If you want to elaborate on why you voted the way you did, feel free to leave it in a comment. The voting will be open until the next chapter is ready, so uh... let's say a while. Sorry.

Including this chapter, I estimate there are probably three or four chapters left. Though uh, you really shouldn't quote me on that since the Van Gore arc was meant to be one chapter but I couldn't feasibly fit all the things I wanted to cover with it in one go.

As always, thank you for your patience! I'm in Kyoto right now and am flying back to my rural speck of Japan tomorrow, so I may be slow in responding to comments or questions.

The removal of the teratoma goes off without a hitch, but that’s just the first step on the long and winding road that is Will’s path of recovery. The after effects of the surgery are minimal, leaving Will’s abdomen sore for only a few days. A mere three days after the removal of the teratoma, the biopsy is complete and it is classified as completely benign. Dr. Schwarz asks him if he wants to see a picture of the contents of the tumor: four teeth, a lock of long brown hair, and various fatty tissues. Will declines the offer.

With the tumor situation resolved, there is no longer anything tricking Will’s body into sending confused antibodies to attack his own brain and start new fires there. Unfortunately, the removal of the teratoma does nothing to eliminate the antibodies already in his system. Without long-term, extensive immunotherapy, they will just continue their assault like the dogged little soldiers they are.

As his treatment enters the post-surgical stage, Will starts to get an idea of what he’s in for. Though Dr. Preston and other members of the neurology team assure him that most Anti-NMDAR patients start to show signs of improvement within a month after starting treatment, they stress that he is in for a long ordeal. It may take over a year for him to make a complete recovery. Will sees an addendum to that statement bleeding through the shadows in their eyes and the small, hidden frowns twitching in the corner of their lips: if he can make a complete recovery.
Given the severity of the encephalitis and the close monitoring and careful handling that comes with the pregnancy, Will is told that he will likely be spending months in the hospital. If his initial treatment goes well, there’s the option of moving him to a rehabilitation wing once he begins to stabilize. It would still be a hospital stay, but at least it would grant him a bit more privacy and comfort. The thought of being cooped up in a hospital for such a long stay is one of the least appealing things Will has ever heard, outside of the dark and creeping things that croak and screech in his head when he sees certain designs. A little part of his mind hisses that this is it; this is institutionalization given a pretty coat of paint and a perky, deceptive smile. He manages to brush it off, but it isn’t easy.

Although he does not have many visitors, the ones that he does have come often. Sometimes this helps chase away those darker thoughts.

For the first month of Will’s hospital stay, Bev manages to see him twice. Her first visit comes shortly after his surgery, where he feels even worse than usual by virtue of having had someone rifling through his innards and removing a disgusting tumor only a few hours prior. His side of that conversation is mostly monosyllabic thanks to the painkillers numbing him. But the second visit is far enough into his treatment that she greets him with a wide, slightly disbelieving grin and a happy remark on how much healthier he looks. This is immediately followed by a comment about how the “bun in the oven” is getting big enough to notice even without the use of scent, and that means she can finally give him her list of suggested baby names. There are over thirty of them, most transparently ripped off from superhero comics. She gives him a toothy grin when he reaches “The Incredible Hulk Graham” and nearly chokes on a sip of water.

Will’s second-most prolific visitor is Alana, who always comes to see him at least once a week and calls him very regularly. She is as warm and friendly a presence as ever, and her encouragement helps him unwind on days when he finds the hospital’s atmosphere particularly oppressive or frustrating. He once worried that he’d be saddled with awkward or even slightly resentful feelings for her after she gently put an end to the lingering question of a potential romance, and perhaps some of those unfortunate feelings clouded his heart longer than they should have. But as his mind slowly begins to heal, he finds that the crush is well and truly gone. It leaves behind only the warm feeling of a strong and supportive friendship in its wake. He no longer feels like he needs to clutch for her in a bid for stability when his world tilts on its axis.

He wonders how much of that comfortable transition is thanks to the slow, quiet, and secret courtship blooming between Hannibal and himself.

Hannibal is far and away his most prolific visitor. The psychiatrist makes a point to visit him daily, usually bringing dinner for them to share. When Will is moved to a room in one of the rehab wings a month into his recovery, he’s granted permission to spend time in the spacious, beautiful courtyard nearby as long as he respects the hospital’s regulations and schedules. He spends many warm summer evenings with Hannibal in that courtyard, sitting by the ornate fountain or strolling on the walkways.

It’s one such evening when Will decides to broach the topic of one conspicuously absent visitor.

The sun has just set and the sky is a thick and hazy burnt orange giving way to shades of blue. The sound of cicadas buzzing fills the warm and humid mid-July air. The days are sweltering when the sun is at its peak, but at this time of evening the heat gives way to a full but pleasant mugginess. Will sits on a wooden bench with Hannibal by his side. The Alpha’s left hand covers Will’s right in a subtle but distinct display of affection. Though it’s been over a month since Hannibal admitted his attraction to Will, their physical interaction has been limited to hand-holding and other chaste but intent forms of touch. Will asked that they approach the situation slowly, and he’s beyond
relieved that Hannibal has been so obliging of his skittishness and neuroses.

But every day the touches linger longer. Every day Will feels a little bolder, even if it’s just the equivalent of one small grain of sand tumbling through an hourglass. A grain on its own may be unimpressive, but together they form vast dunes and endless deserts.

While discussing the day’s events, Will mentions that he got a call from Bev about coming in for another visit.

“You know, now that I think about it, it’s strange,” he says. “You’ve come to see me every day I’ve been here, minus only one or two occasions. I see Alana all the time and Bev comes around often enough. Hell, she even asked if Jimmy Price could tag along with her next time. But the only time I’ve seen Jack was when I was first admitted and he came to get my account of the Waldorf incident.”

Hannibal gives a thoughtful hum. “I suspect Jack has his reasons. First and foremost would be how shaken he must be by the fact that you had a tumor.”

“It’s not the same thing, though. What I had wasn’t cancer. Or at least not what most people mean when they talk about cancer.”

“It doesn’t matter. Grief and trauma are powerful things. Even situations with only a glancing similarity can result in extreme discomfort or distress.” Hannibal furrows his brow and frowns slightly, and Will catches the expression out of the corner of his eye. “At least, that is what I hope is the reason behind Agent Crawford’s apparent abandonment of you.”

Will squints in confusion. “What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Merely some less than savory speculation which I’m sure is entirely inaccurate. Think nothing of it.”

“No,” Will says intently. “Tell me.”

Hannibal sighs. “I merely wonder why Agent Crawford sent you to hide in your home in Wolf Trap.”

He holds up his hand when Will opens his mouth to interject. He continues, “I realize that his justification was that you would feel comfortable in a familiar place. But you are also familiar with the FBI training facility in Quantico. If he truly wanted you safe, he could have hidden you away in trainee quarters until Waldorf was caught. Van Gore couldn’t have sliced and strangled his way through countless FBI agents and trainees like he could two local police officers, after all. He already knew that your home was compromised due to the meddling Miss Lounds’ articles. How else would the Ripper have targeted your home for arson back in winter? And he knew that Waldorf knew your identity. Procuring your address would have been simple with that knowledge. I do not like suspecting that Agent Crawford intentionally jeopardized your safety in an attempt to use you as bait for Waldorf, but I admit it can be difficult to think otherwise when it looks like he’s ignoring you now that you are currently unable to serve his purposes.”

Will’s mind reels with the speculation. It’s the kind of interpretation that’s hideously obvious once he knows how to see it. Though Hannibal’s logic is very sound, it can't be possible. Jack couldn’t have willingly put him in danger just to get quicker results.

_Tell that to Miriam Lass_, a cynical part of him thinks.

Will snaps out of the distressing thought when he feels Hannibal’s grip on his hand tighten. “Stay
with me, Will. Do not get lost in that labyrinth of doubt. I regret telling you that suspicion. Although Agent Crawford and I might not see eye to eye on everything, I’m sure he is keeping his distance from you for reasons which are not nearly so insidious.”

Will nods slowly, but says nothing. The doubt still sits heavy in his chest like a lead weight.

“Agent Crawford will approach you when he is ready. Trying to contact him yourself might just cause the gap between you two to become deeper and more ruinous. Let him cope with his misplaced concern about the tumor on his own terms, just as you must focus on many other things before you can return to work. We must walk before we can run, after all.”

“You’re right,” Will says quietly. “I’ll give him space.”

Hannibal caresses his hand comfortingly. “Good. I think that’s the healthiest option for both of you right now.”

They sit in silence for a time as the night grows deeper and darker. Will feels Hannibal’s hand leave his own, and he turns to see what the Alpha is doing. Hannibal is leaning down over a bag he brought with him. He reaches in and pulls out a jar filled with the soft green glow of two fireflies. Hannibal unscrews the lid and gently taps at the base of the jar. The insects stir and lazily fly out into the humid night air, their lights flickering in sync.

“There were a great many of them in the park near my home. I felt they would fit in well in this courtyard. A little charming light to compliment some wonderful scenery,” Hannibal explains. He turns to Will, a small smile on his lips. “And wonderful company.”

Will stares at him, a breath caught in his lungs. The heavy ball of doubt born of Jack’s potential deceit is still in his chest, but its weight is mitigated by a surge of something pleasant and warm. He’s glad it’s dark enough to obscure the flush he feels creeping across his cheeks and down his neck. Tentatively, he moves in closer to Hannibal and tilts his head. Hannibal takes the hint, reaching up to cup Will’s jaw and eliminating the distance between them with the soft press of his lips.

Will relaxes into what he thinks is his first kiss with Hannibal.

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One hour later, Hannibal exits the hospital after escorting Will back to his room for the night. He walks toward the visitor parking lot, which is empty save for his car and another vehicle parked directly beside it. As he approaches, he sees the shape of a person behind the wheel of the other car. They notice him, opening their door and stepping out. Even from a distance, he can tell from the size and build of the shadowy figure that it is Jack Crawford.

“Good evening, Agent Crawford,” he greets as he comes to stop beside his car. “May I ask why you seem to have been waiting for me?”

Jack purses his lips. “How is he?”

“Physically, Will is recovering very well. The steps he has made on the road to recovery are very promising indeed,” Hannibal says. “But I’m sorry to tell you not much progress has been made in other aspects of his condition.”

Jack’s shoulders slump. “So he still blames me for Waldorf nearly killing him.”

“I wouldn’t say ‘blame’ is the right word,” Hannibal muses. “It’s much more subconscious than
that. Unfortunately, he still associates you with the loss of safety and the sanctity of his home, which led to a very narrow brush with death for himself and his child. Until he heals completely from his encephalitis and other complications of his tumor, until he has stabilized and readjusted into healthy living, I would advise that you continue to keep your distance. Will shall approach you when he is ready. If you press him before he has prepared himself, you may lose him completely.”

Jack nods, casting his heavy, tired eyes down at his feet.

“And there is one thing you must understand above all else, Agent Crawford,” Hannibal says. “Becoming a parent may have a profound effect on Will’s priorities. He may decide that whatever good he does in the field is not worth the danger. If so, you will have to respect that choice.”

“I know,” Jack rasps after a long, heavy pause. “There’s just one more thing, and then I’ll… I’ll be on my way.”

Hannibal tilts his head with cold curiosity when Jack turns around and opens his driver side door. He reaches over and grabs a paper bag sitting on his passenger seat. With the crinkle and rustle of thick paper, Jack opens the bag and removes an item which Hannibal never expected to see in the gruff Special Agent’s possession.

It’s a teddy bear. Though clearly an antique, it has survived the years well and is imbued with that certain aura some items possess after years and years of intense love and care. Though the fur was once likely dark and coarse, it is now pale brown and soft with age and frequent washes. Its shiny, black button eyes stare, and Hannibal wonders how many times those eyes have been stitched back into place by a loving parent while a child sniffs at their side.

“This is Bosco,” Jack says. “He was my dad’s in the early 30’s and mine in the early 60’s. He’s been in storage for decades, and I always thought I was going to pass him on to my kids one day, but… I guess that wasn’t in the cards for Bella and me. It’d mean a lot to me if you’d give him to Will for his kid. You don’t have to tell him it’s from me. Just knowing he’ll be in good hands is enough.”

Hannibal smiles and reaches out. Jack puts the bear back in the bag and hands it over.

“Of course, Agent Crawford,” Hannibal says. “I will see to it that this bear gets the warm and heartfelt home he deserves.”

With a hint of relief and happiness in his eyes, Jack Crawford bids Hannibal a good night.

Later, Hannibal rips the bear’s seams apart with a kitchen knife. He removes every bit of stuffing, setting the fluff aside. He tosses the fur onto a fire and watches disinterestedly as every fiber of the nearly century old toy is consumed. The careworn material burns quickly, and the bright orange glow of the flame glints accusingly off of the black button eyes.

One week later, the FBI will find the latest Chesapeake Ripper victim. The middle aged man will have his legs severed below the knees and his heart cut out, but this will not be what has the forensics and profiling teams utterly stumped. That dubious honor goes to the bloody wads of cotton clogging the space where the organ should be.

As Bev leans down to photograph the mess, she will ask Jack if they should ask the hospital to grant Will a furlough to come see.

Jack will scowl in confusion at the scene but shake his head.

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Two weeks after Will’s coworkers receive the Ripper’s gift of a cotton-hearted corpse, Will has a very eventful day. Not only is he finally getting discharged from the hospital after nearly a three month stay, but he is poised to learn something very important.

It’s the end of August and Will is in the twenty-fourth week of pregnancy. He’s officially well beyond the halfway mark, which means he’s past the point of no return where termination is concerned. His emotions on the subject are still mixed and can vacillate wildly from day to day. Sometimes allowing the pregnancy to progress is the best and most selfless choice he’s ever made and other times it’s the cruelest and least responsible. Part of him suspects that he will always carry some trace of those dark and insecure feelings, even if things have improved markedly thanks to the treatment of his illness and Hannibal’s support.

Today he’s going to one of the ultrasound suites for a routine scan which, in Will’s opinion, really isn’t all that routine at all. When a nurse came to his room to schedule the scan one week prior, she casually mentioned that they’d probably be able to identify the child’s sex if they got the positioning right. Hannibal expressed a keen interest in being there for the scan when Will told him about it during their evening rendezvous, promising to reschedule appointments with his patients so he could attend. Given that this is Will’s final day in the hospital, the plan is that Hannibal will spend the day with him, observing the scan and helping him settle back in to his home.

Will didn’t ask if he’d still be sleeping in the guest bedroom or if he’d find himself sharing Hannibal’s bed. But he’s certainly thinking hard about it now as he sits on the edge of his hospital bed, fidgeting with the hem of his largest button-down shirt. It won’t fit well for much longer. The rest of the clothing and other small items he has accumulated over his months-long stay in the hospital are stuffed into a duffel bag at his feet.

The sound of a knock at the door jolts Will from his thoughts. He turns to see a nurse hold the door open for Hannibal, who greets him with a smile. The nurse asks them to follow him. Will grabs the duffel bag, but Hannibal offers to shoulder the burden and won’t hear any protests otherwise.

The walk to the ultrasound suite is quiet and uneventful. Once there, the technician waiting for them ushers them inside. She prompts Will to lie back on the examination table and unbutton his shirt. He complies, but a combination of sudden embarrassment and nervous energy has his eyes darting from one wall to another, each covered in various medical charts and posters. They’re mostly anatomical diagrams of the effects various stages of pregnancy have on the bodies of male and female Omegas. The posters are mostly health advisory warnings, but the information is all well-known common sense like avoiding cigarettes and alcohol while pregnant.

Will winces when he feels something cold and slimy hit his abdomen. The technician gives a small smile of apology as she spreads the ultrasound gel around with the sensor. “You never quite get used to it, huh? Kind of like getting into a Jell-O fight as a kid,” she says cheerfully.

“It’s more like getting covered in partially refrigerated hagfish slime,” Will mutters. He thinks he hears a small huff of laughter from Hannibal.

The technician falters slightly. “Well, that’s certainly… an interesting metaphor.” Her smile is a little bit forced now, but fortunately she’s got a prime distraction to keep things from becoming any more awkward.

She reaches over to switch on the equipment and the screen lights up with a hum. As soon as she presses the sensor back against the swell of Will’s stomach, grey shadows appear on the monitor. As always, the image is difficult to discern at first. The technician presses firmly but not uncomfortably as she searches for the right angle. It doesn’t take long for the odd shadows to twist into something recognizably human.
Although Will has seen the child in many scans at this point, mostly to confirm that the medications and treatments are having no ill side effects, he is always surprised to see the little thing on the screen. He stares at it.

“The heart and other structures still look as good as ever. Looks like they’re taking a nap right now,” the technician reports. She presses a little firmer to get a better look and the fetus jolts in response. Will feels the lurch of the rude awakening. The technician laughs. “Oops. Sorry. I think someone’s going to be grouchy now.”

The movement of the temper tantrum inside of him is strange. The first tentative taps and wriggles shocked Will tremendously the first time he felt them around a month prior, and he feels like he hasn’t adjusted in the slightest. His morbid tendencies don’t really help the situation much at all. All his life, the world has told him that Omegas should blush and coo and feel delighted when they feel their babies move. That they cherish every little tap and find it adorable. But the things that always rush to the forefront of his mind are jumbled images gleaned from disgusting nature documentaries about parasitism and alien horror movies. He knows it’s irrational, but he still hasn’t been able to get a handle on it.

Seeing the movement on the screen helps a little, he supposes. It helps to see that it’s a little human making all the commotion inside him instead of some awful, inscrutable alien or monster. He glances over at Hannibal to see if he has any kind of reaction to the images on the screen. The psychiatrist is staring at the monitor, his head tilted slightly in thought. Though others might find the expression intense and stoic, Will can see the awe in his dark eyes.

“Now let’s see if I can get a good look at who I just irritated,” the technician says, still chuckling. She slides the sensor across Will’s abdomen and stops on a spot just below his navel. “Ah, there we go. Clear as day. Would you like to know the sex or dynamic? Sometimes we get parents who want to know one or the other, both, or neither.”

“Both,” Will replies without any hesitation. “I’ve had more than enough surprises.”

The technician nods but doesn’t pry. “In that case, you can look forward to welcoming a little Alpha girl into your life in about three months. Congratulations.”

Will’s breath hitches. Just as it had when he heard the heartbeat and saw a blurred image of the child for the first time, he feels the weight and tangibility of the situation settle on his shoulders. Now he knows exactly what kind of tiny person has been assaulting his innards.

Hannibal’s right hand brushes across his fingers.

The room is silent for a few moments as the technician finishes up the scan, saving a few particularly clear images for later. “You work for the FBI, right?” she asks as she wipes the gel from Will’s abdomen.

“I assume it counts if I’m on indefinite medical leave,” Will says. “So for the sake of argument, yes.”

“That kind of career field is like Alpha Town, USA, and here you are with another one on your hands. I hope you aren’t disappointed if you were hoping for a little Omega solidarity.”

“It’s fine,” Will says as he buttons up his shirt. “I rarely know what to do with myself when I’m around other Omegas.” He sighs and shrugs, raising his eyebrows with tired, self-deprecating humor. “Or, you know, almost every other type of person.”
The next half hour is a whirlwind of doctor giving him advice about his medicine regiment, scheduling frequent check-ups to ensure the immunotherapy stays on course as he transitions from inpatient to outpatient recovery, and wishing him luck. A lot of it blurs together for him, but as long as he has his meds in order and his appointments circled on a leather-bound day planner Hannibal provided for him, he supposes a little disorientation doesn’t really matter. He’s too eager to leave the hospital to think of almost anything else.

The car ride from Johns Hopkins to Hannibal’s home is a mere thirty minutes with traffic included. With Will staring out the window and cataloging the city he hasn’t properly seen in months, the trip flies by. He clutches the duffel bag on his lap a little tighter as he wonders if his dogs will still recognize him when he finally gets a chance to visit them. If he can manage to make a call today to Hannibal’s colleague who’s fostering them, he might be able to see them as early as tomorrow. He wonders if he’d need to bring a big bag of treats for them to help smooth over the apology.

Hannibal parks the car and places his hand on Will’s knee. “Welcome home.”

Will snaps from a daydream of being very literally dog-piled by his pets after their long separation. “I guess it is at this point,” he muses quietly. “All the good memories of my old house have been burnt away and drowned in blood. Can’t put up with it anymore. God knows if anyone will be willing to buy it with that background, though.”

“Unfortunately, I suspect we live in a world where certain people would leap at the chance to own the house where a notorious serial killer met his end,” Hannibal says. “Such a grisly history may drive away your average consumer, but it will certainly raise its estimated worth for a very particular type of clientele.”

He exits the car and Will follows suit. “But there are far more pressing things to think about right now,” Hannibal continues, gesturing to the duffel bag. “If you could put that away in your room and meet me in the kitchen, we can discuss matters while I prepare a late lunch for us.”

Will is torn between relief and a strange, unexpected little pang of disappointment that he still has his own bed. It’s one of the strangest, most confused combinations of emotions he’s ever had, an impressive feat given its competition. He manages to shake it off. “Sure. No problem.”

By the time he makes it to the kitchen after dropping off the duffel bag in the guest bedroom, Hannibal has rolled up the sleeves of his emerald green shirt up to his elbows. The bottom half of his dark pinstripe vest is obscured behind the white apron tied around his waist. He is massaging a cut of meat, tenderizing it and rubbing herbs spices into the scored flesh.

“What’s on the menu?” Will asks.

“Mutton,” Hannibal replies. “My butcher informs me that the sheep in question had particularly fluffy, cottony wool. But alas, I’m merely a cook. I can only work with what’s on the inside of an animal, not the outside.”

“Can’t say I can easily see you knitting a sweater, no.”

Hannibal smirks. “The meat will be complimented by a spinach salad with light balsamic dressing. Would you prefer wild rice pilaf or roast potatoes with herbs as a side?”

“The potatoes, but only if you use that herb I’ve had you put in damn near everything lately,” Will says. He scoffs. “I might as well name the kid after it since she’s made me want it all the time. Punishment befitting the crime.”
“You joke, but that would give her a very respectable name,” Hannibal says as he ties the meat up with string for roasting, setting it aside. He washes and dries his hands on his apron. Will watches him as he peruses a row of old, well-kept books on various cooking techniques. Hannibal removes a brown book with thick, yellowed pages; the tome looks as if it could have been made years before Will’s great-grandparents were even born. Thumbing through the pages carefully, Hannibal gives a hum of interest when he finds what he was looking for. He hands the book to Will.

The words are written in a language Will does not recognize on sight, but he assumes it’s Lithuanian based on the few pieces of information he knows about Hannibal’s early life. There are hand-drawn pictures of an herbal plant on the right page. Everything about the plant is rendered in incredible detail, from the texture on the needle-like leaves to the patterns of its flowers.

“Rosemary,” Hannibal says. “A very remarkable herb indeed. It has a long, noble history in both medicine and cuisine. It adds the very unique flavor you have grown so fond of as of late, and traditional medicine believed it to be such a powerful memory aid that it came to symbolize the remembrance of times and loved ones long passed on.”

“What color are these flowers?” Will asks, pointing to the illustration.

“It varies. White and pink are common, but it’s best known for a very charming blue,” Hannibal says. “Do you know the etymology of the name?”

“I can guess,” Will says. “Rose for the flower and Mary for… Mary.”

“Believe it or not, that is a coincidence,” Hannibal says as he returns his focus to his cooking. He begins peeling and chopping potatoes. “It comes from the plant’s Latin name, Rosmarinus officinalis. The first part translates to ‘dew of the sea’, so named because it was said that meager sea mist is all the plant needs to survive in harsh soil or unforgiving conditions. A variety of practical uses and associations: versatility. Lovely flowers in appealing colors: beauty. And the determination and hardy nature to thrive even in difficult or adverse conditions: strength. All traits to be admired.”

“Rosemary,” Will murmurs, feeling the shape and weight of the sound on his tongue.

“There are far worse culinary things to name a child after,” Hannibal remarks. He pushes the potato peels into a bin for composting later. “Such as star anise.”

“Stripper name,” Will mutters, his attention still on the rosemary drawings.

Hannibal laughs. “Something to that effect,” he concedes. They are silent for a moment, and Will can feel an air of seriousness settle on the room like a heavy cloud. “There is another name I would like to ask you to consider. Perhaps as a middle name.”

Will blinks, lowering the book. “What is it?”

It takes a few seconds for Hannibal to respond. “Mischa,” he says.

“She must be someone very important to you,” Will says.

“She was my younger sister.”

Will’s shoulders slump under the weight of that remark. He does not know much about Hannibal’s early life. He can sense that it must not have been very pleasant, and so he never pries. He’s not thrilled when people try to get him to open up about his own childhood, after all. If Hannibal doesn’t want to shed light on his past, Will won’t ask him to. “‘Was’,” he repeats, his voice hoarse.
“Yes. Was.” Hannibal offers no other information as he puts the cut of meat and potatoes in a roasting pan, which he slides into his oven. Once the meal is cooking, he continues, “That name means far more to me than my surname. If you chose to use it as part of the child’s name, it would be the highest honor.”

“It doesn’t bother you?” Will blurts. “At all?”

Hannibal turns to him, one pale eyebrow raised in confusion. “I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

“This whole… this whole situation,” Will says, crossing his arms over his chest. He averts his eyes from Hannibal. “Most Alphas wouldn’t be able to stand the notion that their Ome-“ He pauses, hating how the common terminology makes his entire dynamic sound like something to be owned. It doesn’t even apply to Hannibal and himself, as they’re merely courting. They aren’t bonded.

“Do you mean to say most Alphas would summarily reject a child that isn’t biologically theirs?”

Will somehow manages to shrug and nod awkwardly at the same time.

“I admit this situation is not ideal, but that’s entirely because you have been put in an uncomfortable and unenviable position without your consent. But if every single Alpha refused a child that wasn’t theirs, adoption would be a complete impossibility. Blood may be a factor in family, but it is not the only one.”

Hannibal moves away from the oven, approaching Will. He places a hand on Will’s shoulder, simultaneously pulling him closer and stepping closer himself. Will moves his gaze up from the floor, meeting Hannibal’s eyes. “I consider the child mine, Will, in every way that truly matters.”

As Will brings their lips together hastily and clumsily, he knows he’s never felt love like this before.

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Hours later, Will has retired to the guest bedroom for the night. Besides dusting and other forms of general upkeep, it doesn’t look like Hannibal has touched any of his things. All of the shirts and pants he is rapidly outgrowing are exactly where he left them in the old oak wardrobe. He’ll have to add new clothes to their numbers soon.

Will pulls on one of his night shirts. It’s tight around his abdomen now, and he rubs at the firm bump distractedly. He’s never been a vain person, quite the opposite, but he really doesn’t understand where all those stories about pregnancy making people ‘glow’ or look more attractive come from. His changing shape is strange and conflicting most of the time.

He feels a strong kick. “You’d better not be thinking that you can do that all night, young lady,” he grumbles as he continues to prepare for bed.

Another kick distracts him, and it’s even stronger than before. He gasps at a small, brief flare of pain. The baby must be kicking at a sensitive spot. He tries to write it off as nothing serious, but another horrible pain hits him. He staggers and reels, groaning at the sharp, tearing misery in his abdomen. Something is terribly wrong.

He brings a trembling hand up to the bump and gasps as hot, sticky liquid coats his fingers. Blood.

With his breath reduced to ragged, panicked panting, he looks down at his stomach. His shirt is rapidly staining with an ever-expanding pool of blood emanating from a spot where the sharp tip of an antler has stabbed through his belly. He is not impaled like Marissa Schurr or Cassie Boyle. It is
Will’s eyes fly open and he gasps for breath. The room is dark, but he can feel the awkward weight of the duvet at his feet, kicked around and disheveled by his fitful sleep.

Still struggling to calm his pounding heart and panicked lungs, Will sits up in bed. His hand flies to his stomach, which is neither covered in his own blood nor pierced in any way. He brings the same hand up to cover his eyes and run his fingers through the sweaty fringe plastered against his forehead.

He contemplates collapsing back against his pillows and hoping another nightmare doesn’t come for him. With a quick glance to the clock on the bedside table, he sees that it’s only 11:30. It’s very likely that Hannibal is still awake.

Will chews on his bottom lip, grappling with himself over what to do next. Finally, he moves to the edge of the bed and plants his feet on the cool hardwood floor.

Hannibal sits in the soft, pale yellow glow of his antique bedside lamp. He leans back against the headboard of the bed, idly sketching in a notebook with a charcoal pencil. With a few strokes, he adds more cross-hatching shadow beneath Will’s chin and a few more stray strands of curls to his hair. The sketch is exquisitely rendered, and Will stares off at something unseen with grim intensity in his eyes. A crown of rosemary adorns his head.

There is a knock at the door. Hannibal looks up from his handiwork. He closes the notebook and shuts it away in the top drawer of the bedside table. He scents the air, but there is no trace of fevered sleepwalking in Will’s scent. There hasn’t been since he began his treatment. A pity.

Hannibal had allowed the encephalitis to flourish due to the fascinating and satisfying impact it had on Will’s erratic sleep patterns and memory, and he feels nostalgia for it now that it’s been washed away by immunotherapy and medication. Still, if the disease had been allowed to continue much longer, their daughter’s life could have been at risk. Her safety is an acceptable trade-off for the loss of Will’s sexsomnia.

“Come in,” he calls.

Slowly, Will opens the door. He stands in the doorway awkwardly, as if suddenly unsure if he’s making the right decision despite making it so far. “Um. Hey,” he mutters. He doesn’t say anything else.

Instead of a vocal response, Hannibal reaches over to the other side of the bed. He untucks the duvet and pulls the sheets back. An invitation.

Will’s shoulders visibly sag with relief over the fact that he won’t have to ask to share a bed like a frightened child. With the whisper of fine sheets moving across one another, he slides under the covers on the unoccupied side of Hannibal’s bed. “Thanks.”

“Nightmare or hallucination?” Hannibal asks, frowning with concern.

“Just a nightmare,” Will replies. “I had them for years and years before I came down with encephalitis, and I expect I’ll have them for years and years after, assuming I live that long.”

Hannibal switches off the bedside lamp. He moves over to Will until they lay as close as they can
get to chest-to-chest with the curve of Will’s stomach in the way. He reaches around, slowly running his thumb up and down Will’s spine. He feels the tension slowly start to drain out of the Omega's muscles. “You will,” he says. “If I have anything to say about it.”

A quiet chuckle escapes from Will’s throat and Hannibal smiles against his forehead. They lay there in the quiet dark for so long that time begins to blur. Hannibal focuses on stroking Will’s back soothingly. He pretends that he is drifting off, making his movements slower and heavier. In reality, he is still very much awake.

He can smell arousal building within Will and it is becoming overpowering. It would be so easy. He could just grab Will’s wrists, pin him, and take. Given the scent coming off of Will, the advance wouldn’t be unwelcome, either. But as appealing as that is, it isn’t feasible in the long term. If he pulls a move like that, Will may react poorly out of surprise and become skittish again. Hannibal has made a tremendous amount of progress with Will lately, and he isn’t about to lose all of that in one poorly calculated blunder.

Right now, the move must be Will’s and Will’s alone.

Finally, after what may be hours, he gets what he has been waiting for. Will squirms, placing his hand on Hannibal’s shoulder and pushing gently. As soon as Hannibal is on his back, Will moves his leg over and pushes himself up to straddle the psychiatrist’s hips.

Hannibal blinks several times, squinting like a confused man awoken by something unexpected. “Will?” He makes sure to add an extra huskiness to his voice and thicken his natural accent. He feels Will’s thighs clench slightly against his hipbones in response. So far, so good. “What are you doing?”

“What do you think?” Will whispers.

“What I think is that this is the sort of thing which you must undertake after a great deal of time and thought, especially given your circumstances,” Hannibal says.

“We’ve been seeing each other for three months,” Will says. “I’ve known people who would hop into bed with someone after half a date. And not even a good date. Like, KFC-Taco Bell combo location date.”

“But you are not that kind of person.”

“I’m obviously not a virgin,” Will grumbles seemingly out of the blue. “Wasn’t even before… everything happened. Got it out of the way in college.”

“I don’t believe I ever insinuated that you were.”

“I’m just saying that sexual experiences aren’t a completely foreign idea to me. I’ve had them. Not as many as most people and no really good ones, admittedly,” Will says. Quietly, he adds, “I’d really like at least one.”

There is still a hint of uncertainty in Hannibal’s expression. He knows Will can see it and will be dwelling on it. Just a little bit further and things will be perfect.

“Please,” Will whispers. “I’m really thankful that you’ve been willing to work with my neuroses and go along with how slow I am with all this. But right now, I want this. In some way, I-I think I need it.”

There.
“Then take what you need, Will,” Hannibal says, running his calloused fingers and palms up Will’s thighs. “I am more than willing to provide if you know you are ready.”

With a relieved groan, Will practically crashes down on Hannibal in a rush to press their lips together. The kiss is desperate and insistent, soon leaving Will’s lips swollen and sensitive. Hannibal nips at Will’s lower lip as he allows his hands to wander over the younger man’s body. They trail up and under Will’s night shirt. Blunt fingernails lightly brush against warm skin, and Will heaves a long, heavy breath of contentment.

The kiss ends with Will rising back up to sit straddled over Hannibal’s hip, grinding down as he pulls his own night shirt off. The Alpha gives a quiet growl of interest, bucking up slightly with Will’s movements. He reaches up, grabbing Will’s hips on each side. Slowly, he begins to ease down Will’s boxers. Will hums quietly, shifting his position to help expedite the process. His erection springs free once the boxers are removed, rosy red and nestled in a thatch of dark pubic hair.

With his own clothes off, Will begins unbuttoning Hannibal’s navy blue silk pajama top. Once the shirt is open, he shifts his weight to his knees and leans forward for another kiss. Hannibal’s hips are free from Will’s weight, and he takes the hint. Soon, he is as nude as Will.

The kiss ends and they gasp for breath. “Will you need any… assistance?” Hannibal asks huskily.

Will shakes his head slightly, and even with the moon providing the only light, Hannibal can see the flush on his cheeks go darker. “No, I… I was thinking about this for hours. So, I’m… I mean, I should be…” He sighs in frustration and moves his lips to Hannibal’s ear. “Feel.”

Hannibal complies. He slides his hand lower and lower down Will’s back. The Omega arches with Hannibal’s touch, making pleased little sounds in the back of his throat. The little noises turn into a sharp gasp as Hannibal’s fingers press against wet, sensitive flesh.

“I see you were not exaggerating,” Hannibal says as he slowly pushes his index and middle fingers in, kneading and stretching methodically as Will moans. It’s a very interesting contrast from the last time he had Will. He had needed to use lubrication with Will during every one of their intimate encounters, minus when Will had been in heat. Perhaps the removal of the troublesome teratoma has helped balance out his system, or at least as much as it can be balanced while sustaining a pregnancy.

They move together for several minutes, rubbing up against each other while Hannibal prepares Will. They break from another bruising kiss, and Will leans back to kneel over Hannibal’s hips once more. “Ready,” he pants. “Ready.”

“Good, Will,” Hannibal says, reaching up to cradle the Omega’s jaw.

Will’s trembling hand wraps around the base of Hannibal’s erection, holding it in place as he eases himself down onto the shaft. His breath hitches at the pleasant burn of his muscles as they stretch to accommodate it. He moves his hand away and with one final movement, they are fully joined together.

Hannibal admires Will as the younger man adjusts to the feel of the Alpha being inside him. Will’s eyes are closed and his head is tilted back slightly, his mouth parted just enough for him to pant shallowly. As always, the sight of Will taken over by pleasure is truly stunning to behold. There is a corridor in Hannibal’s mind filled with nothing but portraits of Will’s face contorted in the throes of sex, and he files this new one away with its brethren.
Will begins to move. He is breathtakingly slow at first, pulling himself up off of Hannibal by only an inch or two before bringing himself down fully once more. It doesn’t take long for him to find a rhythm which has him moaning with every movement. Hannibal follows Will’s lead, thrusting up in time with the pattern and responding to Will’s sounds with short, husky words of encouragement. He slips into his native tongue once or twice, and given how Will clenches tightly and shudders at the sound of the words, it’s something Hannibal will have to remember for later.

In contrast to their earlier heated kisses, Will keeps their pace slow and deliberate. There is something almost ritualistic in the way he moves: precise and purposeful movement instead of a wild and desperate collision of flesh. As they move together, Hannibal’s hands continue to wander over Will’s body. A caress against the thigh, a massage against the small of the back, a kneading of the buttocks.

As soon as Hannibal’s hands move and begin to rub tenderly against the Omega’s swollen belly, Will’s hands dart up to cover his own. He briefly wonders if Will will swat his hands away, but instead Will’s fingers tighten over his own and he lets out a shuddering gasp. He is not brushing Hannibal’s hands away; he is making certain that they stay put.

And that is when Hannibal understands why Will’s pace is so laborious. It really is ritualistic for him, albeit subconsciously. It’s a symbolic conception of the child he’s already been carrying for six months. A way for a primal part of Will’s brain to insist, This child is yours. Fruit of love, not of a stranger’s assault.

He can play along.

“Mine,” Hannibal growls, bucking up and caressing Will’s belly protectively.

Will arches his back, keening as he climaxes.

Hannibal follows suit, awash in the thrill of truthful deceit.
WARNINGS for this chapter: Pregnancy complications and difficult delivery

First and foremost, thank you to everyone who contributed to the poll! Almost immediately after I posted it, though, I realized there was a way to let the people who want to know spoilers see while allowing those who DON’T want any spoilers to avoid them. Kind of a 'duh' moment there. Anyway, if you DO NOT want spoilers, then DO NOT click the following link! If you DO want to be spoiled for the tone of the ending, take a glimpse at this entry on my infrequently updated tumblr. How infrequently updated? Try like nothing in over a year. Yeesh. I should maybe try to be better at that.

If you chose to look at the spoiler and am not fond of that direction, maybe don't be disappointed just yet. I've had an idea for a brief alternate take on the ending. The ending I've always had in mind will be, for lack of a better term, 'canon' for this story. But if I do write the other version as a side piece, it'd be best to think of that as the AU ending. Yes an AU for an AU. A slow, pitying shake of the head at me is rational.

Secondly, you might have noticed that the number of total chapters has gone from ? to 10. I feel reasonably certain that I'll be wrapping this thing up by the 10th chapter. I may need to chop up the next chapter into 2, but I strongly doubt it given how long these fucking chapters have turned out to be.

Also, this chapter brings in a character who has been sorely absent thus far. I feel very shaky on writing them, partially because the nature of this AU has sent them down a somewhat different path than their route in the canon TV series. I apologize if it comes across as clunky in any way.

Finally, it might be a good idea to go re-read the final part of chapter 3 before digging in to this chapter. You can skip down to the part labeled "Later, At Dawn" and go from there.

We're starting to get into the home stretch. As always, thank you so much for your kudos/comments/everything. They really keep me motivated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Summer turns to fall. Oranges and reds creep into the green of the leaves, and for a few weeks the trees in the parks and down the more gentrified boulevards are vibrant in color. Shockingly, the imagery doesn’t turn dark and festering in Will’s mind. He isn't singed by the flames of the inferno which smoked him out of his former home when he looks at the fiery reds in the treetops. He doesn’t think of the forest in At Autumn’s End and how he passed that painting for months without knowing of the literal blood, sweat, and tears soaked into its canvas.

It’s like there’s a warm, protective buffer between him and the terrors which his mind is all too eager to dredge up. Even as the nights grow longer, colder, and darker, he feels increasingly bright and safe. It’s not that the world’s suddenly become one big, beautiful fairytale and now he’s
magically healed thanks to the power of love and wishes. He still has regular nightmares and moments where his lifelong burden of fear and doubt hisses aspersions in his ear. But he can’t recall a time when it’s been so easy to chase the dark away.

It’s the gift of no longer being alone, he thinks. The boon of waking up when the nights are long and dark and having someone there. Now when he wakes abruptly, gasping from some half-remembered terror slinking in the shadows of his brain, he is not left to fend for himself. Instead, he feels the weight of a strong arm curled around his stomach and the warmth of his lover’s body pressed against his back. Sometimes Will will jolt awake and the movement will wake Hannibal as well, and when that happens, his lover will tighten his grip. He’ll press closer, rubbing his chin against the junction where Will’s neck meets his shoulder, and murmur something comforting against the shell of Will’s ear.

“I’m here. You are not alone.”

And Will will go boneless and pliant in response to the comfort of the embrace and the husky, wonderful promise of those words. Sometimes the warmth surges through him, pooling and distilling into need in his chest and the pit of his abdomen. At these times, he bares his neck and languidly presses back, fitting his body against Hannibal’s in a silent, insist ent invitation. Hannibal always knows how to respond. Other times, the comfort Hannibal offers is the greatest anti-insomnia drug he’s ever known, and Will slides back to sleep quickly. His rest will be peaceful, deep, and uninterrupted until the sun shines through their window. Sometimes love is made; sometimes it is nurtured.

As much as the relationship has been a major factor in keeping the dark away, there’s also the fact that there has been considerably less darkness to be kept away recently. A few days before Halloween, he goes in for one of his regular check-ups. His recovery from the encephalitis is going so smoothly that he is given the option to return to teaching at Quantico. He considers it for half a moment, but at nearly eight months pregnant, it’s not feasible. Standing and lecturing to FBI trainees was simple before his center of gravity went haywire and when being on his feet for extended periods didn’t lead to swollen ankles.

He goes to Quantico a few days later to explain the situation to the higher-ups. They tell him that "despite his quirks" he’s one of the best trainee lecturers they’ve ever had on the payroll and as such, his spot is as good as assured whenever he chooses to come back. It’s one less thing for him to stress over, anyway, and he is grateful for all the consideration he’s been granted.

On his way out, he passes Jack’s office. He sees the older man frowning hard at some file spread out all over his desk and for a moment he contemplates knocking on the door. But he remembers Hannibal’s advice, that Jack needs space and will come to him when he’s ready. He stands there for a moment longer before turning and leaving.

“How did the mysterious powers-that-be in the FBI take the news of your leave of absence?” Hannibal asks when Will opens the passenger side door and settles into the seat with a sigh.

“Really understanding, thankfully,” Will says. “They said they’ll gladly take me back whenever I decide to return.”

Hannibal turns on the ignition. “Will you miss the work?”

“‘Miss’ is a troublesome word.” Will buckles up and adjusts the straps over his swollen stomach and sensitive chest. “It implies that you like whatever it is you’re deprived of. The day I like getting dragged out to some godforsaken place and tasked with hopping into a serial killer’s head is a day that’s worthy of concern.”
“Well, then it’s good that you won’t have that burden weighing you down for the time being,” Hannibal says. “You can continue to allow your recovering mind to rest, and together we can focus much of our energy on preparing for Rosemary’s arrival.”

And over the next few weeks, they do exactly that. Together they strip the guest bedroom where Will used to sleep of all of its furniture and objects, placing them in storage. Although the baby will likely spend her first month or so of life in a bassinet in their bedroom, they begin to transform that old guest room into her nursery. They pick out a crib, changing table, a child-friendly chest of drawers, and an antique rocking chair to replace the old furniture. Slowly, they start to accumulate toys and clothes as well.

But when Will looks at the new furnishings in the room against the current color of the walls, he finds he can’t stomach it. Hannibal seems to have taken a laissez-faire approach to the nursery, but Will isn’t sure if that’s only because they’ve been in easy agreement on the design so far. Still, the walls have to change, so he seeks permission to repaint them. They select a new color at a home renovation store later that very day.

Will tackles the new project with gusto. Over the next few days, Hannibal often comes home from his appointments to see Will hard at work on the nursery walls. Today is one such day, and when Hannibal comes to stand in the doorway he sees that the room is already over halfway completed. He smiles, watching his lover as he refills the rolling tray with more pale yellow paint.

“Although you did not pick a traditional color, I’d say the room is coming together rather nicely.”

Will looks over his shoulder and gestures for Hannibal to come in. “Non-traditional?” he asks.

“Conventional wisdom would call for a dark, bold red to fit the fiery spirit of an Alpha girl,” Hannibal states. “The walls were already scarlet, a perfect color by that standard.”

“Conventional wisdom can get bent. Gender essentialist bullshit. Not all Alphas are bold aggressors, just as not all Omegas are simpering nurturers. The fact that a ludicrous culture of arbitrary expectation and indoctrination begins here – in a newborn baby’s room – is disgusting,” Will grumbles. He pushes the roller over the tray and spreads more paint over the walls. “And I’ve seen enough red on walls to last me this lifetime.”

Hannibal smiles as he reaches down to run his hand through the curls over Will’s forehead. “I take it the walls of your nursery weren’t the traditional soft powder blue for Omega boys, then.”

“First off, I don’t think I ever had a nursery in my dad’s rickety trailer,” Will huffs as he continues to paint. “But regardless, you should be thankful that I haven’t succumbed to the ways of my people and am going for the yellow instead of covering the walls in cheap wood paneling and mounted catfish.”

Hannibal removes his suit jacket and vest, folding the articles of clothing and setting them aside on the seat of the rocking chair. He unbuttons the cuffs of his shirt and pushes the sleeves up to his elbows. Kneeling down beside Will, he holds his hand open for the roller.

“Take a rest,” he says. “You’ve obviously been working hard on this, so allow me to carry the burden a while.”

Will glances skeptically at Hannibal’s expensive burgundy-colored dress shirt and dark trousers. “You know, there’s a reason I’m wearing this,” Will says, gesturing to his outfit. The t-shirt is ancient and formerly comically-oversized, though now it’s baggy everywhere except for where it stretches over the swell of his stomach. The plaid shirt he has on over the t-shirt is unbuttoned by
necessity; maybe it was red at some point in the distant past, but age has rendered it a threadbare pink. His glasses case peeks out from the breast pocket of the button-down. His jeans are pale with torn holes at the knees and a few other bare spots. The zipper and button are undone and splayed out wide to accommodate the changes in his stomach and hips. All the clothes have various paint splatters on them, some far older than their new yellow compatriots. “And not something as nice as the stuff you always wear.”

Hannibal takes the roller, chuckling as he gets to work. “I thought it was merely a series of ill-advised fashion choices.”

“I know I’m bad at being stylish, but I’m not that bad,” Will says. “I just wear this if anything needs to be painted or a fish needs to be gutted. Hopefully not both at the same time. But seriously, how do you plan on keeping the paint off of those clothes?”

“I have very precise, steady hands,” Hannibal says. He looks over his shoulder at Will, raising a brow suggestively. “You of all people should be intimately familiar with that fact.”

The blush that spreads across Will’s cheeks is instant and burning hot. He looks away and focuses on finding a relatively comfortable position to sit in until he can feel the embarrassing flush drain from his face. As he tries to find a way to sit that isn’t hideously uncomfortable, it sinks in how much his lower back was starting to ache from nearly two hours of constant painting.

“I guess I didn’t notice until now that I was kinda pushing it,” Will says, rubbing at the sore muscles at the small of his back. “Thanks for taking over.”

“No trouble at all. And on the subject of thanks, next week is Thanksgiving.” Hannibal remarks. “Do you have any particular traditions for us to uphold?”

“Oh, uh, not really. Growing up, it was just Dad and me. When you’re as poor as we were, you don’t really have the time or money for a big holiday dinner or anything like that. We still managed to have turkey, though.” Will’s shoulders shake with a short, sarcastic laugh. “A couple of turkey sandwiches from the 7/11 for me and a bottle of Wild Turkey for him. You?”

“I was a young adult when I came to this country. Even after living here for over twenty years and occasionally putting my culinary skills to use for others on the day in question, it isn’t really part of my cultural landscape,” Hannibal says. “Nor am I particularly fond of roast turkey. Its traditional display allows for very little mystique in its presentation.”

“Well, we don’t have to do anything special for it.”

“On the contrary. Apparently the guests who will be joining us next Thursday have precious memories of Thanksgivings past, and we must be gracious hosts.”

Will gives a hum in thought. “And who will we be hosting?”

“Alana Bloom, for one. I consulted with her on the subject of one of my patients two days ago, and afterward she mentioned that her brothers will be spending the holiday with their mates’ families and that their parents will be on a cruise in the Bahamas.”

“Given the storm that’s due to hit us like a frozen truck next week, I think they’ve probably got the right idea there,” Will says. “But you said guests. Who else?”

With one long, steady push of the roller, Hannibal finishes the coat of paint. Three walls down, one to go. He sets the roller in the tray and turns to give Will his full attention. “Why, Abigail, of course.”
Will’s eyes widen, hit by a minor bolt of shame for not immediately thinking of her. “Abigail,” he breathes. He casts his eyes to the floor and his shoulders slump slightly. “God, it’s been ages since I’ve talked to her. The last time has to have been… a couple of weeks before my hospitalization. So, what, almost five months?”

He is silent for a few heavy seconds before he continues, his voice disgusted. “Almost half a year. Pathetic.”

Hannibal stands and moves closer to Will with two easy strides. He settles back down beside him, wrapping an arm around the younger man’s back and settling his hand on his shoulder. “Not pathetic in the slightest,” he murmurs softly into Will’s ear. “Are you afraid Abigail will resent you for your distance?”

Will shrugs, but he leans in closer to Hannibal’s body. His eyes sting, and he fumbles for his glasses case in his pocket. He hasn’t worn his glasses around Hannibal for a few months now, but the compulsion to raise his little glass shields is too great. “Wouldn’t blame her. I kill her real dad, promise to be a parental figure in any way I can, and then drop off the face of the earth as far as she’s concerned. A real success story there.”

Hannibal’s hand drifts down from Will’s shoulder, slowly running up and down the Omega’s forearm. “Do you know why Abigail hasn’t confronted you about it?”

“The sudden, wholly rational and justified realization that seeking to keep in touch with me is incredibly unhealthy?”

“No.” Hannibal presses a long, slow kiss to Will’s forehead. “I’ve kept in contact with her over via phone and email since she moved away to university, and I’ve given her updates on your welfare. She knows you’ve had a very challenging year, and she doesn’t want to be another worry on your already overfull plate.”

Will sighs. A crumb of relief settles over him, taking a bit of the edge off his anxiety. It helps, but it’s not nearly enough to truly give him peace of mind. “Did you tell her about…” he trails off, running his hand over the top of his stomach.

Hannibal’s hand joins his. “She knows about your condition in general, but I’ve been evasive with some of her questions. She’s a smart girl, and I suspect she knows that reams and reams of information can be contained in conspicuous silences. But you alone have the right to decide when and if someone learns about what you have gone through.”

Will’s fingers lace together with Hannibal’s and they sit in silence for a while. “And what should I tell Rosemary when she gets old enough to wonder why other children resemble their fathers in one way or another, but she doesn’t look like you?”

“We will cross that bridge when we come to it. Or perhaps I should say ‘if’. It may not be something she ever wonders about. For now, I think you are worrying yourself by thinking too far ahead. She won’t even be born for another three weeks, after all,” Hannibal says. He gently rubs around Will’s stomach, which has dropped a little lower than usual over the past few days. “Give or take.”

He stands, brushing himself off. He glances over his clothing and when he is satisfied that he sees no drops of paint, he gives a sweeping gesture with his hands with the flair of a classy magician. Smirking, he says, “As you can see, spotless.”

Will grins, shaking his head and reaching up for assistance now that he has trouble getting up on
his own. Hannibal obliges. Once Will is standing, he finds a dollop of still-wet paint on his plaid shirt. The sudden rush of amusement at Hannibal’s showmanship after several minutes of wallowing in misery makes him giddy, and before he can second-guess himself, he spreads the paint on his fingers and reaches up to smear a small, pale yellow line across Hannibal’s left cheekbone. “There,” he says, sniggering. “Like pastel war paint.”

Hannibal quirks an eyebrow. “Clearly the only thing that can rectify this is a bath,” he says. He reaches down to another spot of damp paint on Will’s jeans. With one smooth movement, he brings his fingers up to slowly drag the paint down Will’s jawline. He stops at Will’s chin, tilting it up as he moves down to initiate a kiss. When he pulls back, he murmurs, “And it seems you’ll need one as well.”

Will smiles. “Lead the way.”

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The rest of the week passes in a blur of Thanksgiving and nursery preparation. The walls are completely painted by Monday. On Tuesday, Will puts the finishing touches on the nursery and cleans while Hannibal ventures out to gather the groceries for Thanksgiving dinner. Though he must bow to tradition and prepare a turkey, Hannibal decides that some homemade sausage would act as an excellent complement or alternative. Will thinks nothing of the container of ground meat thawing in the sink as he polishes the table.

On Wednesday morning, Alana calls and volunteers to pick up Abigail from the airport later that evening. It’s a boon for everyone; not only does it give Hannibal and Will more time to prepare, but it allows Alana and Abigail to catch up a bit in person on the drive.

Shortly after the phone call, at around 10 AM, the icy wind picks up, causing the dark grey clouds outside to swirl like the murky contents of a witch’s cauldron. The snow starts to fall heavily and with that the “Winter Storm of the Century” that local weather forecasters have been going on about for over a week begins.

Will doesn’t think much of the daunting weather from the warmth and safety of the indoors. At first it’s because he’s too busy helping Hannibal prepare ingredients to cook the following day. He peels and chops potatoes, washes vegetables, and holds the sausage casing as Hannibal pipes the meat into the tubing. Even though it’s close to noon and he’s surrounded by so much food, he has no appetite. He even feels a little nauseous as the clammy weight of the raw meat fills his hands. Hannibal pan fries a couple of the sausages as soon as they’re finished, and Will can barely finish his sandwich despite the amazing flavor.

He writes his odd behavior off as a combination of being overly tired and lingering anxiety about seeing Abigail after so long. But as the day wears on, his fatigue gets worse. Starting around 7 PM, his muscles start to ache and burn, especially around his lower back. He winces, rubbing his back as he leans away from where he’s been washing vegetables. With his eyes screwed shut tightly in pain, he doesn’t see Hannibal move closer to his side, though he does feel his warmth as he embraces Will from behind.

“You’ve pushed yourself too hard again,” Hannibal murmurs into his ear. “I should break you of that habit.”

Will’s arms slump to his side. “I wanted to be useful. Not just some lazy pregnant lump who sits around while there’s work to do.”

“And you have been exceptionally helpful,” Hannibal says. “But I think even all the nervous
energy you built up has been depleted. Abigail will be here around 9; why don’t you go up to bed and have a rest before she arrives? You should be refreshed and rested for your reunion, not sore and run ragged.”

Will pinches at the bridge of his nose and nods after a moment of thought. “Yeah, okay.”

“Good,” Hannibal says, moving down to scent along the length of Will’s neck and dropping a kiss on his pulse point. “Would you like me to assist you?”

Will waves him off. “Thanks, but I can still do some things on my own,” he grumbles. He rubs his stomach. “At least there’s a good chance I’ll actually get some rest. She’s been surprisingly quiet today.” He frowns, glancing back at Hannibal. “Should I be concerned about that?”

Hannibal shakes his head. “At this stage, it’s perfectly natural,” he says as he chops a long stalk of celery. “Would you like me to join you?”

“No, there’s still stuff to do to get ready. And this might sound a little weird, but I kind of want to be alone for a bit.”

“Again, perfectly natural.”

With a relieved murmur, Will heads toward the master bedroom with the slow, uneven gait that has afflicted him since the baby began to hit her final growth spurts. As soon as he knows his pregnant Omega is safely in their bedroom, Hannibal sets the knife down on the cutting board. He walks to a storage closet in the hall. Pushing aside some neatly folded linens, he removes a large white metal box. It’s a first aid kit. That’s its intended purpose, anyway; he’s used some of its contents for other inclinations. But can only be said of the scalpels and needles.

He opens the lid and surveys the materials inside, taking inventory. Ten scalpels of various shape and purpose are strapped to the lid. Needles – both thick hypodermic types and thin stitching types – are packed away neatly to one side. Surgical sutures, cotton swabs, and rolls of gauze and bandages are next to the needles. The fingertips of a pair of folded green latex gloves peek out from underneath the cotton swabs. Hannibal lifts a bottle of antiseptic, then nods and puts it back, satisfied with its fullness. Finally, there are the jars of injectable anesthetics and antibiotics. Everything is in order.

Hannibal closes the lid and returns the box to its rightful place. He returns to the kitchen and resumes chopping the celery, but his mind is elsewhere as he works. He is going over his knowledge of labor and delivery, reacquainting himself with the procedures. With Will’s symptoms – the fatigue, the aches, the loss of appetite, the need for quiet and solitude, and most telling of all, the fact that his scent is tinged with the milky richness of impending birth – there is no question that their daughter will be born within the next 24 hours. She’ll be a little under two weeks early, but that’s still well within the time frame for a healthy birth. Right now, there is no need for Will to concern himself further.

At this point, all he can do is wait until Will’s discomfort transitions from minor, easily-overlooked inconveniences to active labor. He’ll be ready when it does.

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For the first five minutes after he lies down on the bed, Will finds it impossible to relax. He tosses and turns, and no matter what position he takes or how he arranges the sheets he can’t relax. With his frustration and discomfort reaching an irrational peak, an urge hits him. He can’t explain why, but he needs the lights to be as dim as possible without being completely off and, more
importantly, to be surrounded with things that smell like himself and Hannibal. He sets the lamp to its lowest setting and fetches their pajamas, Hannibal's dressing robe, and a few articles of worn clothing from the hamper. The sheets and comforter have picked up their scents as well, and he piles them around him in a lopsided circle. With the lights dim and the bedding and clothes pulled close to him, an odd calm finally settles over him. It’s like finally being able to scratch an elusive itch.

His eyes flutters shut and he finally manages to doze despite his lingering discomfort. It only feels like he’s been asleep for a few seconds when he’s awoken by a soft tapping on the door. He stirs, blinking awake as the door carefully creaks open.

“Hello?” a soft female voice calls.

Will is awake instantly. “Abigail?” he asks, his voice slightly thick from sleep. He tries to sit up, but Abigail enters the room, her hands raised up.

“You don’t have to get up,” she says. “Dr. Lecter told me you aren’t feeling very well, and with everything the way it is, I mean… you should relax.”

“Thanks.” Will moves to get a better look at her, hissing slightly through his teeth as a sore muscle throbs in his lower back. She looks healthy and is dressed well in comfortable winter clothes. Even in the warmth of the indoors, she wears a dark blue scarf over the scar on her neck. Maybe it’s the odd mood he’s in, but Will feels cognitive dissonance just looking at her. She’s just as he remembers her, but there’s something different about her that is somehow simultaneously profound and easily overlooked.

It’s her eyes, he decides. They’re stronger and a little more self-reliant; the ingénue desperate to survive has begun to smooth out into a savvy young woman.


Abigail scoffs slightly. “Try 12:30. The weather is insane out there. I got lucky. My flight was the last one before they started cancelling everything left and right. Dr. Bloom and I drove through near white-out conditions, so it took us forever to get here.”

Will gestures for her to sit. Abigail approaches the bed. She gets close to where Will is lying bundled up in his pocket of instinctive comfort, but she stops abruptly. Her nostrils flare for a moment and a thoughtful look crosses her face. She takes a step back, sitting on the corner of the bed a bit further away. “Um, let me know if I should give you more space,” she says quietly. “My mom’s best friend had a baby when I was ten, and I remember she didn’t want any other Omegas near her nest when she was getting close to the end. Irrational instincts, I guess.”

“You’re fine,” Will says, silently grateful that he wouldn’t have to be the one to tell her to step back. A rush of something primal and territorial had bubbled up in him when she had first stepped close, but it has settled down. “The weather’s that bad out there?”

Abigail nods. “And getting worse every second,” she says. “You’d think I just arrived in Alaska, not that I just left it.”

“Do you like it all the way up there?”

A small smile tugs at the corners of Abigail’s lips. “It’s nice. Everybody in Fairbanks has been really kind to me, especially the friends I’ve made on campus. I guess either they don’t know who I am or they’re too polite to bring it up.” She points to her scarf. “And even in summer it gets cool
enough that I can wear stuff like this and not get any weird looks.”

She’s quiet for a few seconds, but Will can see that she hasn’t finished speaking. She looks a little uncertain in that brief moment, but she soon finds her resilience and she smiles again. “You should visit sometime. I think you’d like it there. It’s quiet and there are all kinds of beautiful forests and rivers around, so it’s great for hunting and fishing.”

“That’d be nice. It’s, uh, probably not something I’d be able to do for a while, though.”

“Because of the baby,” Abigail says. When Will nods, she chews her bottom lip for a second. “Can I ask you a question about that? It’s kind of personal, I guess.”

Here it comes, Will thinks. Here’s where the pleasantries end and the awkward, difficult, hideously inevitable sludge starts to leak out like a hole in an oil drum. He clears his throat. “Go ahead.”

“It’s not Dr. Lecter’s, is it,” she says quietly, her voice barely above a whisper.


“That’s what I thought.” Abigail fidgets with her hands on her lap. Softly, she asks, “Why weren’t you on suppressants or at least birth control?”

“I was an idiot with a reproductive system that I thought was dysfunctional enough for it not to be an issue,” Will says regretfully. “Don’t make that kind of mistake.”

“I’ve been on strong suppressants since I was sixteen,” Abigail says. “My mom always said that even we don’t want our heats to be an issue, Alphas will make it one.” She goes silent, looking down at the oversized buttons on her jacket and fidgeting with them nervously. “That’s what happened to you, isn’t it?”

Will just nods. Abigail’s big blue eyes turn mournful, but Will is relieved to see that there is no condescending pity there when she looks back at him. There is only sympathy. “It’s been a difficult year for you,” she whispers.

“You and I have both had more than our fair share of hardships,” Will says. “But in a life overrun by low points, this trench has been especially deep and dark. At this point, all I can do is look for a light to follow and hope it’s not an anglerfish.”

“Do you think you’ve found a good light?”

Will burrows deeper beneath the duvet, nestling close to Hannibal’s robe and inhaling the comforting scent. “For maybe the first time in my life, yeah.” He sighs. “But even though I’ve been through a lot this year, that’s no excuse for me losing contact with you for so long. You deserved more attention than what I wound up giving you. I’m so sorry, Abigail.”

Abigail shakes her head. “Don’t apologize. I’ll admit, it was tough at first, but… in the end, I think it might’ve been good for me. I always relied on others to get by. I did some selfish things I’m not proud of. But I was able to finish my high school credits while I was recovering in therapy, and now I’m going to university. And, you know, I was never alone. Dr. Bloom really helped me find my independence, and Dr. Lecter helped whenever he could too. My dad carved codependence into me deep, and if I’d been allowed to keep that up, things could’ve really spiraled out of control. It could’ve ended badly.”

Will smiles. It’s like the sun’s come out in his chest, and layers of guilt begin to melt off of him like thawing ice. “You’re taking psychology in school, aren’t you?”
Abigail returns the warm expression. “I can see the appeal now,” she says. She tilts her head slightly, causing her long black hair to cascade over her shoulder. “But if you still feel guilty, there is one thing you could do…”

“What’s that?”

“I always wanted a younger sibling, especially a younger sister. I think my mom wanted another kid too, but my dad always refused. He said that I was already perfect, and there was no way another child could measure up to me. I kinda thought it was sweet at the time, but maybe that was the first sign that something was wrong.” Her expression turns pensive for a moment, but some of the darkness has been chased away by the time she turns back to look at Will. “You could let the baby think of me as a big sister.”

“I thought that was a given.”

Abigail gives a small laugh. “When is she due, anyway?”

“Around December 10th.”

“That’s right around when I’ll be having finals,” Abigail says. She smirks. “She is going to hate that when she’s my age.”

Will laughs, but the happy sound ends in an abrupt, startled gasp as one of the dull aches he’s been experiencing all day suddenly escalates. He curls in on himself as the pain rips through him. His hands fly to his stomach on instinct, and his muscles there are cramping hard. When the pain begins to ease off, he is shocked to feel a sudden wetness rush out of him.

Abigail jolts and stands gracelessly, her hands darting up in surprise and her fingers trembling. “Are you okay?”

“Get Hannibal,” Will grits out as another pain starts to hit him. The young Omega nods and runs from the room, leaving the door open in her wake. The pain subsides, but he knows it will return soon. The light from the hallway feels unnaturally bright and wrong to his eyes; he screws them shut in an attempt to blot it out. He opens them again when he hears urgent footsteps approaching. Hannibal strides up to where he lies on the bed and Will can see the shapes of Alana and Abigail hovering behind.

“Tell me what is happening, Will,” Hannibal says. His movements are quick and confident as his strong hands rove over Will’s body, checking his pulse, feeling for tiny signs and symptoms. Hannibal the psychiatrist is gone for now, replaced entirely by Hannibal the former emergency surgeon.


“What kind of pain?”

Will gasps, trying to catch his breath once the awful sensation has crested. “Contractions. I think it wasn’t just a backache, what I had all day.” He shakes his head, some of his curls sticking to his forehead as the sweat of anxiety and exertion starts to set in. “Too soon, too soon.”

“Listen to me, Will,” Hannibal commands, cupping Will’s jaw. “I am going to help you through this. It isn’t too early. Rosemary will be fine. Now, I’m going to feel for her position first, and then I’ll undress you and see how far you’ve already progressed.”
Will nods as he breathes hard, not knowing what else to do.

Hannibal’s hands press into his belly, firm but not harsh. It hurts, but Will grits his teeth and forces himself to put up with it. The strong hands go still and there is tiny, split-second crack in Hannibal’s stoic expression. The slip raises immediate alarms in Will’s head, and he nearly sobs out his next words, “Something’s wrong.”

“The baby is breech,” Hannibal says, a grim note to his words. “I can’t get her to change position; she’s too low. A natural birth carries too many risks for the both of you.”

The words seem to suck all the air out of the room. An ominous, heavy silence settles in for a few seconds, and it’s only broken when another painful contraction wracks Will’s body. “What do we do?” Abigail asks softly.

“There is a supply closet near the kitchen. You’ll find a first aid kit and a lot of linens there. Bring them all to the kitchen,” Hannibal orders. Abigail nods nervously and takes off. Once she is on her task, Hannibal turns to Alana. “Fetch a phone and call 911. Meet us in the kitchen.”

Alana furrows her brow. “Hannibal, if you’re thinking what I think you are…”

“At this point, it is the only option,” Hannibal says, turning his attention to Will and giving the Omega his hand to squeeze through the pain.

“You didn’t let me finish,” Alana says. “I’ll help in whatever way I can.” With that, she leaves.

“Come, Will, I need you to stand,” Hannibal says quietly, helping Will move to the side of the bed.

Will shakes his head. “Needs to happen here. Moving feels wrong. The nest-“

“I know, and as difficult as it may be, I will need you to fight that instinct just as I am fighting similar ones. Normally that instinct would serve you well, but this is an exceptional circumstance,” Hannibal says as he loops his arm around Will’s back, placing his hand in Will’s underarm to support him. “Lean on me.”

They move slowly with Hannibal supporting much of Will’s weight. It’s a small blessing that Will doesn’t have a contraction as they walk to the kitchen, but he’s already so sore and wrecked that there’s little difference. “You told Alana that there’s only one option,” Will whispers. “What is that option?”

“Like I said, the baby is breech. In some very rare cases and with truly exceptional supervision, a natural birth can occur even with that hardship. But your hips are too narrow to ever allow that,” Hannibal says. Will feels his lover’s arm tighten around him. “You would suffer hours and hours of fruitless labor before one or, more likely, both of you succumb. The only option is a Caesarian section.”

Will’s heart hammers in his chest and his skin crawls as he remembers what Abigail told him earlier. “The snow’s coming too hard. There’s no way to drive to a hospital.”

“No,” Hannibal says. “There isn’t.”

“Then…?” Will whispers.

“I’ll have to do it,” Hannibal answers. He stops them just before the entrance to the kitchen, and Will can hear Abigail clattering around with something and Alana trying to explain the situation on the phone. His lover closes his eyes and presses his forehead against Will’s, a small gesture of
intimacy. Hannibal’s voice is low and steady when he speaks again. “Do you trust me?”

Will takes a moment to calm his fluttering heart and lungs. He gulps, saying nothing but nodding against Hannibal. The Alpha presses a quick kiss against his lips before guiding them the small distance into the kitchen.

Alana is pacing, the phone pressed to her right ear as her left hand gesticulates to punctuate her frustrated words. “- yes, yes, I understand that, but...”

“Allana,” Hannibal says. She stops and turns to face him. “Give me the phone. I’ll explain what I have to do; you help Abigail get Will as comfortable as possible.”

“Hold on, I’m going to hand the phone over to him,” Alana says into the phone. As she hands it to Hannibal, she continues. “There have been a lot of car accidents due to the weather, and with the streets as bad as they are, emergency services are spread thin.”

Will groans as Alana helps him lay down on the linens spread on the kitchen floor. The pain is intensifying and coming more and more frequently now. His mind is a whirl as Abigail places two pillows beneath him, one to support his head and the other his lower back.

He can hear Hannibal talking with the 911 operator as Alana and Abigail help him, but the surges of pain interfere with his senses. His vision whites out briefly and his hearing goes muffled as a particularly aggressive contraction hits, so a lot of what Hannibal says is lost to him. He has said that he trusts Hannibal, so he will hold himself to that. He focuses on riding out the pain, though it’s becoming more and more apparent that something must be done and soon.

When that harsh contraction passes, he returns to his senses to find Hannibal by him, gently attempting to turn him onto his side. “They are working hard to send an ambulance our way, but we can’t delay the procedure any longer. Abigail, dress warmly and work hard to clear a path in the snow for when the ambulance arrives. We will need to get Will and the baby to a hospital as soon as possible. Alana, stay here and assist. Will, I am about to administer an anesthetic to numb the pain. The drugs aren’t the best choice for this situation, but this is an emergency. I need you to be strong for me.”

Will nods, gritting his teeth together when he feels a thick needle puncture the skin on his lower back. Only a few seconds go by before he starts to feel numbness spread across the lower half of his body. As sensation leaves him, so does the pain; he heaves a harsh sigh as the terrible agony begins to die down.

Hannibal coaxes him to lie on his back once more. Out of the corner of his eye, Will can see Hannibal’s gloved hands sterilizing a scalpel. The Alpha works quickly and efficiently, his unusual dark reddish-brown eyes focused on his task with laser precision. Will’s vision begins to blur a bit around the edges as the anesthesia creeps up on him. His head is swimming from a combination of the drugs, exhaustion, and dread.

There is a brief ringing in Will’s ears before his sense of hearing begins to go as hazy as his vision. Hannibal says something brief, but the sound is indistinct. He repeats himself and only then does Will realize that Hannibal is calling his name. He focuses all of what little energy he has on listening. “Yeah?” he slurs, his tongue feeling heavy and sluggish in his mouth.

“I am touching your abdomen. Can you feel it, Will?” Hannibal’s muffled voice says.

He can, but only barely. It’s a strange, distant sensation. “Just vague pressure,” Will says.
“Then let us begin,” Hannibal says. Will’s hearing blurs out again, and Hannibal mumbles something to Alana, who nods. Will isn’t sure what his lover said, but he guesses it has something to do with Alana holding up a sheet so Will won’t experience the excess stress of watching Hannibal perform the procedure. He can see the Alpha’s head and shoulders above the sheet, but that is all. Alana mutters something in a warm, encouraging tone, but the meaning is lost on him.

He can feel it as Hannibal works to save him and the baby. There is no pain, of course, but the sensation of feeling-without-feeling is confusing and disconcerting. His hazy mind has also lost all track of time; any given moment could be milliseconds or long, slow stretches of minutes. They feel the same to him. It’s horribly reminiscent of some of his episodes during the height of his encephalitis, and that connection reignites pockets of fear in his memory. He shuts his eyes, almost as if that will help shut out the shadows creeping across his mind.

When Will opens his eyes, it has done more harm than good. Hannibal is gone, replaced by the spindly, antlered monstrosity which has haunted his hallucinations and nightmares. The rest of his vision is still blurred and foggy, but the beast is clear and well-defined. Although he can’t feel it, the monster is clawing at his middle, trying to eviscerate him or…

Will’s heart skips a beat before it resumes its tempo at a fever pitch. He tries to thrash to get away from the awful creature, but his body is sluggish and unresponsive under the anesthesia. All he can do is loll his head from side to side in a desperate shake. “No,” he moans. “No, no, you can’t have her. No, don’t take her.”

The thing looks up from where it is working at ripping Will apart. When it speaks, it is clear despite all the other muffled sounds, just as it sits in stark clarity despite the surrounding haze. Its voice is strangely familiar, but cold and hard as an old jagged tombstone. “Will, you are having a negative reaction to the anesthesia. It will be over soon. Alana, try to keep him calm.”

Something feminine mutters from somewhere in the haze. Will pays little mind to the litany of soothing murmurs as he continues to shake his head, groaning and pleading for the beast to spare his child. He endures this hell for what seems like an eternity before the monster’s thin, hideous lips twist into a wide smile.

There is a tiny, watery cough followed by the first squeals and cries of a newborn baby. Will’s eyes go wide and he holds his breath like letting the air out of his lungs will blow it all away and take him back to the world of terror he had just been in. Everything sounds a little clearer; his vision is not nearly so blurred and terrifying, and most importantly the beast is gone. He can see Alana and Hannibal again, but his eyes are drawn to what is in Hannibal’s arms.

“She’s perfect, Will,” Hannibal says as he gently cleans the newborn’s face and wraps one of the towels Abigail had fetched around her still bloody body. He places the baby on Will’s chest. “Perfect.”

Will can barely control his arms, but he manages to bring his shaking limbs up to hold the crying child. Then and only then does he release his breath. He is mesmerized by this new, tiny life, so much so that he completely tunes out everything that isn’t his daughter. He barely notices Hannibal stitching him up, nor does Alana’s praise really register. Even when the ambulance finally arrives and he and Rosemary are carefully bundled up and wheeled out, he is fixated on her.

At some point during the ambulance ride, exhaustion finally starts to catch up to him. Given the ordeal he’s just gone through and the fact that it’s nearly 4 AM, his body sags with a weariness he’s never felt before. He drifts off to sleep, Rosemary still in his arms, with Hannibal at their side.
Will’s first few hours in the hospital are a whirlwind. Due to her unorthodox entry into the world, Rosemary is whisked away for tests and close monitoring. Being born via emergency C-section in a place with none of the resources a hospital can provide means she’s at greater risk for an infection, illness, or some other terrible complication. The same goes for Will. He’s put under more comprehensive anesthesia and is thoroughly checked for any surgical damages. When that turns up clear, he is placed on an IV of preventative antibiotics just in case. Despite working alone and in profoundly difficult conditions, Hannibal performed the operation admirably.

Fortunately, in spite of everything working against her favor, Rosemary is declared completely healthy. There will be no long, stressful days spent in the NICU. A nurse wheels the baby’s bassinet into Will’s hospital room so they can be together, and even though they’ve only been separated for a few hours, Will embraces Rosemary as if she had been gone for days.

Shortly thereafter, Will is cleared for visitors and Hannibal and Alana enter. “Where’s Abigail?” Will asks.

“She fell asleep in the waiting room and I couldn’t bring myself to wake her,” Hannibal explains, pulling visitors chairs up beside Will’s bedside for Alana and himself. “I expect she’ll visit you later.”

Rosemary is awake in Will’s arms, and the baby is calmly receptive to all the attention the adults in the room immediately begin to shower on her. “Look at those blue eyes!” Alana says, smiling at the baby. She looks up at Will. “Do you think they’ll stay that color or do you think they’ll change?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I’ve got blue eyes, but…” Will shrugs awkwardly, looking away.

“With that color, it’s very likely they will turn darker as she gets older,” Hannibal says as he reaches up to caress Rosemary’s light brown hair. “But she will have baby blues for a while yet.”

“Would you like to hold her?” Will asks. “The last time you got to touch her, she was still covered in my blood and gunk. Not the best first impression.”

“Nonsense, she was charming from the start,” Hannibal says as he leans in to gently take the newborn into his arms. A proud, possessive thrill runs through him as he feels the warm weight of his daughter’s tiny body. He runs a thumb over her soft cheek, and he brings her up to whisper to her in his native tongue. “Su Gimtadieni, Rosemary.”

“You know, you’re already all over the news,” Alana says to Will. When he frowns in confusion, she continues. “Instead of the usual Thanksgiving filler stuff, the local news has been reporting about the storm non-stop. A baby born at home via emergency C-section during the worst blizzard Baltimore’s seen in over a century is apparently a pretty big scoop.”

“Yes, a news crew came to interview me about it hours ago,” Hannibal says. “Apparently, an anonymous worker at the hospital sent them the story. I wish I knew who it was because I have a bone to pick with them for such a rude disregard for privacy.”

Alana shakes her head. “Hannibal, what you did was extraordinary. Certainly news-worthy.”

“It was a desperate move which could have ended badly if it not for a little skill and a great deal of luck. Regardless, I suspect the news presence contributed to Abigail’s exhaustion.” He looks at Will with his lips set in a small, disapproving grimace. “She hid from the media and was quite shaken up afterwards, poor girl.”
“They aren’t going to barge in here and bother me, are they?” Will asks, scowling.

“They wanted to, of that there can be no doubt. But fortunately you were not allowed visitors at the time,” Hannibal says. “And I believe I managed to convince them that you are a deeply private person and that you would react poorly to the intrusion. They agreed to refrain from using your name or providing any details about Rosemary besides the fact that she is a healthy girl.”

Alana checks her watch. “It probably already aired over an hour ago, anyway. Unless people decide to pry, you’re in the clear.”

Will relaxes slightly, but it doesn’t last long. Hannibal’s phone buzzes from his pants pocket and the unexpected noise startles Rosemary, who had drifted off into a light doze. The baby shakes her tiny fists and she begins to whimper and fuss. Will reaches out for her instinctively.

Hannibal chuckles as he hands the baby over. “I’m sorry for the rude awakening.” As Will quiets Rosemary, Hannibal looks at his phone. The amusement drains from his face, leaving a stony expression.

“What’s wrong?” Alana asks.

“I’m sorry, but I’ll have to leave to attend to something urgent. I’ve just received an email from one of my patients, and it seems I’ll need to make an emergency call,” Hannibal says as he slips his phone back into his pocket. “Suicidal ideation skyrockets on family holidays.”

Will’s eyes go wide and he nods. “I understand.”

“Thank you. I promise I’ll return as quickly as I can,” Hannibal says as he stands. A hint of a smile tugs at the corners of his lips. “In fact, if all goes well, I’ll bring dinner. Perhaps not the turkey, but we are due a Thanksgiving meal.” With that, he leans down to press a kiss to Rosemary’s forehead and then moves up to kiss Will goodbye.

As soon as Hannibal is gone, Will looks to Alana. “Well?”

“Well what?”

Will looks down at Rosemary, fussing with the once-again slumbering baby’s blanket as an excuse to avoid eye contact. “After that little display, there should be no question what Hannibal and I are in a relationship.” He clears his throat quietly. “And I seem to recall you being rather… let’s say *vehement* when you thought he had fathered Rosemary.”

“And considering I thought he had taken advantage of your heat and exploited your trust in him as a psychiatrist, I’d say that anger was justified,” Alana retorts. She sighs. “Will, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have some reservations about the fact that the two of you have decided to pursue a romantic relationship. It’s morally shaky ground at best, and more often than not such things end horrifically.”

Will does not reply. His shoulders tense up as her words wash over him.

The Alpha woman’s eyes go soft and sympathetic. “But…” When Will looks up at her over that unexpected word, she gives him a small smile. “I’ve never seen you so happy and stable, even after all the terrible things you’ve gone through this year. He’s obviously an extremely positive influence on your life. And as long as he’s not acting as your psychiatrist anymore and there’s no unhealthy power imbalance, I’m willing to be a little open-minded.”

Will exhales a shaky breath. There is a pleasant, relieved warm sensation in his chest. “Thank you,”
he whispers. “Thank you so much, Alana. And… I’d like to ask you something.”

“What is it, Will?”

He clears his throat. “If something ever happens to Hannibal and me that renders us incapable of looking after Rosemary, it would mean a lot to me if you’d be willing to take her in. Like a godmother.”

Alana’s mouth opens with surprise and her hand flies up to cover it. After a moment, she lowers her hand, revealing her flattered smile. “I’d be honored,” she says quietly. She laughs, sniffing slightly and reaching up to brush away a happy tear. “Now, I think we should seal that promise with letting me hold her for the first time.”

Will happily complies.

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Given that he rode in an ambulance to Johns Hopkins, Hannibal takes a cab back to his home. After hours of respite from the snow and multiple street-clearing vehicles out in full force, many of the streets are slowly becoming drivable again. As the world covered in white zips by his window, Hannibal looks at the email message on his phone again.

* Saw you on the news. Finally remembered your name. I need to talk to you about Julie Osterberg ASAP.

* Call (410) 555-0166 at absolute earliest possible convenience.

  -Kell Münz

He dials the number as soon as he steps into his home. It rings twice before a hoarse female voice responds. “Hello?”

“Am I speaking with Ms. Münz?”

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“This is Dr. Hannibal Lecter. I received your email about forty-five minutes ago but was preoccupied at the time. I apologize for the delay.”

The woman is silent for a moment. Something rustles softly on the other end of the line before she continues, her voice more alert. “No, thank you for being so prompt,” she says.

“May I presume that the Julie Osterberg you mentioned in your email is the unfortunate young Omega who went missing earlier this year?” Hannibal asks as he opens the refrigerator and removes the container of uncooked sausages.

“Yes. She’s my girlfriend,” the woman says. Hannibal raises an eyebrow and smirks at the present tense.

“Your campaign to keep her name in the public eye has been truly admirable, Ms. Münz,” Hannibal says. “The billboard with her picture, name, and statistics; the awareness rallies for missing persons of Baltimore; the frequent notices in local newspapers urging the populace to not forget her or allow her to be eternally lost… I respect your devotion. But I’m afraid I’m not sure why you’ve contacted me. I only met Ms. Osterberg once when she assisted a patient of mine, and unfortunately she vanished before I could schedule a follow-up with her.”
“That’s why I want to meet with you, Dr. Lecter,” Münz says. “I’ve been trying to talk with everyone who might have met with Julie before she disappeared. So far, you’re one of the few who’s managed to slip through the cracks.”

Hannibal walks into the garage as she speaks, flicking on the light and reaching for a box high on a storage shelf. He pulls it down. “When would you like to meet?”

“The sooner the better.”

“I agree,” Hannibal says as he pulls a length of rope from the box. “I can meet with you in about two hours’ time. I don’t think I have any information that can help you, but I’m more than willing to try. What’s your address?”

Münz provides her address and the phone call ends. while Hannibal finishes gathering a few other supplies. He’ll definitely need the gloves, but he’d rather not have to resort to using the knives. They’ll be there as a last resort, just in case he can’t execute the current plan for whatever reason.

He packs everything he’ll need into his car’s trunk, but he won’t be leaving for a while yet. He has to prepare dinner first, after all. Kell Münz’s residence is on the way to Johns Hopkins, and it would be a shame to waste time doubling back.

Chapter End Notes

"Su Gimtadieniu" is 'Happy Birthday' in Lithuanian. Or so the internet says. If you're a native Lithuanian speaker, please correct me so I can fix it!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Lots and lots and lots of graphic violence in this chapter. Murder and suicide imagery within, so if you're a survivor who has triggers, be forewarned.

Well, this certainly was a long time coming.

I want to thank everyone for their patience in the long wait. If you checked on this fic between 1/12 or so and 2/14, you would've seen a hiatus warning. My mother died unexpectedly at the start of January. I had to fly from Japan to the USA in very little time while suffering from grief and distress. I wasn't in a good place to write for several weeks. Another thank you to everyone who gave me kind, thoughtful words in their reviews. I'm truly, deeply appreciative, and I can begin responding to comments as of this chapter.

Hopefully the long wait was worth it. This chapter is over 11,000 words long, so it's not like it's starved for content I suppose. I thought about splitting it into two but wasn't happy with any of the potential pause points I tried.

If you have time, I recommend re-reading all prior chapters before you go into this one. It's designed to tie everything up so the final chapter can put a big bow on it. If you want to plunge right in, by all means, but I think going in refreshed would be a benefit.

As always, please, please let me know what you think in the form of reviews/kudos/etc. I'm always looking to improve or just hear what worked/what didn't. And so, with no further ado...

The gravel path crunches beneath the wheels of Will’s car as he slows and parks the vehicle. Will pulls the key from the ignition, slipping the ring into his jacket pocket with a loud metallic jingling. There is a soft coo from the backseat, and Will grins at the little sound. “No you don’t, young lady,” he says, turning his head to look. “The last time I let you see my keys they went right into your mouth. And I’m about to get covered in slobber anyway, so I don’t need your help in that department.”

Rosemary stares at him from her car seat, her fingers flexing awkwardly as she tries to cram as many of them into her mouth as possible. Her eyes are wide, innocent, and dark blue, though very recently a new, strange dark color has begun to creep in around the rim of her pupils. It’s not enough to be certain one way or another, so Will will just have to wait and see if the new hue is the beginning of Rosemary’s destined eye color.

At three months old, the baby girl has been growing like a weed and hitting all of her developmental marks right on time. She can now hold her head up on her own, and that newfound crumb of autonomy seems to have helped her mood tremendously. She had fits of fussiness the first two months of her life, and Will now wonders if a lot of that was due to frustration. With slowly sharpening vision and a better ability to turn her head toward points of interest, she’s calmed down tremendously. Will suspects she will be an unstoppable hurricane of curiosity when she becomes a
toddler.

Another perk of her ability to hold her head up is that it’s allowed more of her hair to come in. She’s still very young, so it’s not long yet, but Will can see telltale signs that the dark honey blonde hair is starting to curl. At least he knows where she got the texture from, if not the color.

Will opens the driver side door, stepping out into the slight chill of mid-morning in early spring. He opens the backseat and begins unfastening the baby from her seat. “Ready to meet Daddy’s friends, Rosie?” he asks as he puts her in the baby carrier strapped to his chest. She gives another little gurgling coo as she kicks her dangling legs, fascinated by the freedom of the movement.

At the end of the gravel parking path sits a large, elegantly-constructed cabin-style house with an enormous fence reaching back behind it. The enclosed space is about half the size of a college football field, but the land extends even further out beyond that. At the far end of the fence is a gate with another gravel path attached. Will knows that if you follow the path, you eventually hit several generously-sized and equipped barns, stables, pens, and nesting houses.

Over a year ago, back when he was first faced with the grim necessity of finding a new place for his many dogs to live, he had been unsure if the acquaintance Hannibal suggested would be a proper fit. Will’s dogs are all stray rescues, and he suspects that many of them had either been abandoned or had run away from abusive homes. Though they’d flourished in his make-shift pack of castaways and lonely wanderers, Will knew that winning the dogs over to his side really didn’t count as getting them fully socialized and rehabilitated with humans. Introducing his potentially traumatized dogs to a stranger who looked after so many other animals seemed like a recipe for disaster.

But then Hannibal took him out to this property and introduced him to Matilda.

“Will!” a big, booming female voice crows, immediately grabbing his attention. Standing in the doorway is an Alpha woman in her early 60’s with her grey hair pinned up in a wild, sloppy bun.

Standing at 6 feet tall and sporting exactly the kind of build one needs to wrestle ornery goats and pigs into submission every day, Matilda Valsar is an imposing presence. Were it not for the 30 year opera career under her belt, Will would have no idea how she and Hannibal came to be associates. But even following her passion for fostering and raising animals in her retirement, she seems to live her life as if she’s still wearing a Valkyrie helmet and belting out Wagner.

The large woman laughs boisterously as she strides over to Will. “And this must be little Rosemary. Let me get a good look,” she says, leaning down to get a good look at the baby. She lets out a long whistle. “I can already tell this one’s gonna be a heart-breaker. All the Omegas in school will be batting their eyelashes at her.”

Will chuckles and shrugs while Rosemary awkwardly reaches out, grabbing for the unfamiliar face in front of her.

Matilda places her dark olive index finger in the center of the baby’s right hand; Rosemary grabs on instinctively. Shaking the little fist up and down with her finger, Matilda says, “Pleasure to meet you, Rosemary.” Looking back up at Will, she continues. “She’s got a lot of your facial structure, but she’s such a spitting image of Hannibal otherwise.”

Will’s smile turns weak. As much as he likes Matilda, he’s not prepared to share the truth with her. If she thinks Hannibal is Rosemary’s father, of course her brain will invent similarities to notice. Will gives a vague, appreciative mutter.
“Well, I can fawn all over this little one later,” Matilda says. She turns, waving for Will to follow. “C’mon, I’ll take you out back and you can introduce her to the swarm.”

"Dogs run in packs, not swarms," Will mumbles. Matilda just laughs and claps him on the back with enough force to make him jump.

As Will follows, his eyes sweep over the now familiar décor of Matilda’s home. Like the exterior, it strikes a delicate but decidedly odd balance between elegance and rusticity. For every gleaming trophy or intricate ribbon honoring Matilda’s opera career, there is a quaint wooden or ceramic knick-knack of some farm animal in a silly pose. A photograph with European royalty here, a goat in a straw hat there. Though the walls are lined with photographs of Matilda’s younger days, when she wore intricate costumes and gowns to gala events and had a gorgeous Omega on each arm, there are also pictures of her in muddy overalls posing dramatically with gap-toothed elementary schoolers on their field trips to ‘a real farm’.

“Are they still being well-behaved for you?” Will asks as he spots a more recent photo. He recognizes two of his dogs among a throng of other dogs delighting the residents of a retirement home.

“Oh, they’re darling as ever,” Matilda says as they make it to the back door. “I tried to arrange it so only your dogs would be out here in the house gate today, but a couple of the others slipped in regardless. Hope that’s okay.”

Will walks out into the fenced-in space and he can see a pack of dogs lazing around in a wide beam of late morning sun at the far end. Sure enough, most are his, but he can distantly see a few unfamiliar faces among the crowd. He gives a whistle and every dog immediately become alert. His dogs leap to their feet and charge for him, tails wagging deliriously behind them.

He laughs as the dogs slow down as they approach, noticing the baby strapped to his chest. They crowd around him, sniffing and snuffling at Rosemary in curiosity. The baby girl squeals and squeaks her amusement as wet noses press against her hands and furry bodies tickle her legs. The little gurgling sounds turn into full laughter as Winston reaches to lick at her fingers.

“How? I told you guys I wasn’t just fat the last time I was here,” Will says as he pets the dogs. He begins introducing Rosemary to the animals one by one, and the baby is so enthralled and the dogs so pleased to meet her that he regrets not bringing a camera.

Towards the end of the introductions, he feels a nudge against his right arm. At first he doesn’t think much of it, given that he is the epicenter of a canine cuddle-pile. But it happens again, and this time he can see that all his dogs are to his front and left side. Curious, he turns to see an unfamiliar Golden Retriever staring at him. The dog’s tail waves behind it somewhat listlessly and it head-butts his arm again.

No, not so unfamiliar after all. The movement strikes a chord in Will’s memory, and he frowns in confusion as he works to put two and two together. The dog tries it once more and recollection slams into Will hard.

“Pepper?” he whispers.

Hearing his name makes the dog’s tail begin to wag stronger. His tongue lolls out, making the animal look a bit more hopeful. He nudges up against Will again, and this time Will lets the dog snuggle close.

“What are you doing here, boy?” Will asks, scratching at the golden scruff of the animal’s neck.
He tries to ignore the icy chill that threatens to climb up his spine and force him to remember the circumstances of the last time he hugged this particular dog. “Why aren’t you with… what was her name…”

He swallows, allowing the memory to creep in closer. The confusion of waking in the park. The little scrapes and bruises on his body, not all of them from waking up in an unexpected place. The fear of knowing without knowing what unwanted actions had been forced upon him. A helping hand and concerned voice.

“Julie,” he breathes. He strokes down the dog’s neck, patting the fur over Pepper’s ribcage. “Julie Osterberg. That’s her name.”

Pepper strains his neck, bringing his muzzle close to Rosemary. He gives her foot a curious sniff and his demeanor changes completely. His floppy ears tense slightly before they swivel back and lay down flat against his skull. Beneath his palm, Will feels the dog’s heart begin to hammer wildly. With a yelping whine, Pepper wrenches away from Will’s embrace and charges off with his tail tucked between his legs. At the far end of the field, Pepper paces, his posture anxious and his eyes never leaving Will.

Will stares at the dog. He’s never seen such a profound change in an animal. There’s no doubt in his mind that this is the same Golden Retriever that had comforted him. But that Pepper had been a simple dog whose dopiness was overshadowed by enormous kindness. Something turned that Pepper into the creature suffering from canine post-traumatic stress at the far end of the field.

“What happened to you?” Will murmurs, frowning. “What did you see?”

His thoughts are interrupted by a whimper from Rosemary. He looks down, and though the baby still looks interested by the dogs, she’s sucking on her fist like she always does when she’s starting to get hungry. Realizing said fist had just been covered in dog spit and hair, Will scowls and gently tugs it away from her mouth. He stands, lifting the baby slightly to press a quick kiss to her head. “C’mon, let’s go inside. We can see the puppies again soon.”

As he walks back to the house, his dogs gleefully trot beside him. He can’t help looking back over his shoulder one last time. Pepper sits, anxious and despondent, far in the back.

He retreats to Matilda’s bedroom to feed Rosemary in privacy. Once she’s had her fill, Will returns to the kitchen. Full from her feeding and tired from the excitement with the dogs, the baby drifts off to sleep in her harness before Will even sits down at the little kitchen table.

Matilda stands at the counter stirring something in a bowl. “Sorry I can’t make anything more complicated than tuna salad,” she says. She gives a little shrug, accidentally lifting the spatula from the bowl and causing a blob of mayonnaise to plop on the marble countertop. She raises a dark eyebrow at it. “Case in point. We can’t all be master chefs like Hannibal.”

Will shakes his head. “You really don’t have to…”

“I insist,” Matilda says as she begins to spread the tuna salad on slices of bread. “You deserve it. Especially since I saw that you were able to make a bit of a breakthrough with Chili, at least for a little while.”


Matilda sighs, nodding. “The poor thing. It’s obvious he’s a big sweetie, but he’s had it rough.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how did you get… ah, Chili?”
“Hannibal brought him to me.”

Will blinks in surprise and he leans forward slightly. Rosemary makes a sleepy snuffling sound from her carrier, and Will’s arms subconsciously come up to support her. “Hannibal?”

“Mm-hmm.” Matilda passes him an aqua-colored plate with two rye bread tuna sandwiches on it. She sits opposite him at the table, placing her own plate down in front of herself. “Brought him here about… oh, three months ago. The night of Thanksgiving. I tell you, that man’s got a flawless memory. Most people would probably assume someone is out of town on that holiday, but I told him way back in September I’d be here slinging brews and bullshitting with some old opera friends and he was welcome to stop by. And he-”

“Did he say where he got him?” Will blurts. “The dog.”

Matilda shakes her head. “Just that he had a patient who wouldn’t be able to look after the poor thing anymore.”

“Why didn’t he tell me?” Will murmurs to himself, his eyes darting anxiously.

“Doctor-patient confidentiality, I suspect,” Matilda says. “Probably with a heaping side order of not wanting to worry you, considering you were recovering in the hospital with a brand new baby and all. He knows you’re a dog-lover.”

Will frowns at the information buzzing around his head. He can’t think of anything else as he takes a bite from his sandwich and chews slowly and distractedly, as if he can’t taste anything at all. He responds to Matilda’s questions and comments as she breezily keeps her side of the conversation going, but it’s such an automatic, almost robotic thing. He’s too busy turning the information in his head over and over. No matter how he looks at it, none of it fits together. Like the stray pieces of multiple clashing jigsaw puzzles, he can’t make the disparate curves and corners fall neatly into place.

He needs to contact Julie Osterberg.

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The oddities, inconsistencies, and Pepper’s sad loneliness are all he can think about as he packs up and makes the drive back home. Thankfully, Rosemary is still deeply asleep when he unbuckles her from her seat. He puts the baby down in her crib for her afternoon nap, kissing her soft temple as she sleeps.

He checks the clock on his phone. It’s just after 2 PM. He could wait another five hours and ask Hannibal about the confused jumble of events taking up all the space in his head. He can already hear his lover’s voice go deep and soothing, assuaging all of his confusion with an easy rational explanation, effortlessly filling in all the gaps and holes that make the whole situation so difficult to comprehend.

But with a sigh, he sits down at the computer anyway. Opening up the browser, he inputs “Julie Osterberg”+Baltimore into the search engine.

What he finds makes his breath hitch.

Stretching before him is an endless parade of alarming links with titles like ‘Young Omega Goes Missing’ and ‘Victim or Runaway? Social Worker Vanishes into Thin Air’. As he clicks through, he’s shocked by what he’s missed over the past year with so much of his attention focused on all the things that burnt his life to the ground and the little glimmers of hope and happiness that
emerged from the ashes.

The woman who had helped him during one of his lowest points went missing a mere week after her act of kindness. He frowns, scanning the description of the event. Her apartment had been in a state of disarray, but there was no indication that a robbery had taken place. A large piece of Samsonite luggage was missing, along with Osterberg’s purse, several articles of clothing, and a few other personal items. According to the missing persons’ file, the scene looked as if she had packed in a hurry and fled, though it was impossible to tell if she had done so on her own volition or under duress.

Will’s eyes narrow on a few lines from one of the earliest articles on the subject.

Osterberg’s girlfriend, Kell Münz, disagrees with the theory that Osterberg has chosen to run away. “That makes absolutely no sense,” said Münz, 33, in an interview. “Julie is passionate about her family, community, and clients. She would never choose to abandon all of that.”

Münz, a software analyst and website designer, has been eliminated as a suspect. She has taken in Osterberg’s dog and has sworn to devote herself to finding the truth.

“If Pepper moved from Osterberg to Münz, what happened to Münz...” Will mutters, continuing to scan the links. One headline from three months ago catches his eye: ‘Tragic Turn in Missing Omega's Case’.

Expecting the article to be about the discovery of Osterberg’s body or a similar dark revelation, Will sits back in shock as he reads the article.

After nearly nine months of toiling to solve the mystery of her girlfriend’s disappearance, Kell Münz’s work has come to an end. The body of Münz, 34, was discovered by neighbors early Friday afternoon. Although no note has been found, police have ruled her death a suicide after an investigation of the home.

“It’s a tragedy, but you see this kind of thing a lot this time of year, especially when things have been rough for the person in question,” said Detective Barry O’Hare of the Baltimore Police Department.

The article continues on with reminders of the Osterberg disappearance case, but Will’s eyes glaze over it. Things make even less sense now than they did before. Something in him makes him delete the recent activity from the browser. He stands, wobbling on his feet slightly as if the burden of knowledge clinging to him has an actual physical weight. He walks as if nearly in a trance, and he comes to a stop at the leather sofa in the living room. He sits on it heavily, tilting his head back as he goes over what he knows.

It’s as if all the information has fused together to create a blurry image in his mind. If he concentrates, he might be able to bring the whole picture into focus. But an icy cold dread claws at his throat, and he isn’t sure he has the strength to face that anxiety head on. He closes his eyes and takes a long, stuttering breath. Slowly, his eyes open. It’s a misunderstanding. He just doesn’t have all the information. If he digs deeper, he’ll find something to shed the light on everything and reveal that he’s just been paranoid. He must.

Will pulls his phone from his pocket and stares at the few options on his speed dial. His finger hovers over Hannibal’s name for a moment, unsure, before he reaches up and clicks on ‘Beverly Katz’.

“You’re lucky you caught me on my pretend-to-smoke-but-actually-just-play-Candy-Crush break,
Will,” Bev says. “How’s your cute little squirt?”

“She’s, uh, fine. N-napping,” Will says. His voice sounds tired and thick to his own ears, and he clears his throat. “Listen, Bev, this is important. I need a really big favor.”

Picking up on the unsteadiness in his tone, Bev’s voice grows more serious. “What can I do for you?”

“They’ll be kind of old at this point, but I need the scene photos for the Julie Osterberg disappearance case. That’s O-S-T-E-R-B-E-R-G. I’ll also need the scene photos relating to Kell Münz’s suicide. M-U with an umlaut-N-Z.”

There is a scratching sound of pen against crinkled paper as Bev murmurs the names. “Osterberg and Münz, got it.”

“When do you think you can get them to me?”

“If I start the process ASAP, I might have them by tomorrow. It’s not the kind of thing I can just drop off on your doorstep, though.”

“I know. And I know you haven’t gotten used to my part-time schedule yet, or you’d know that I’m scheduled to lecture tomorrow. If you get lucky, could you bring the files to me after my lecture?”

“Sure thing,” Bev says. “Are you on to something, Will?”

Will pauses for a moment and he bites his bottom lip. “I really, really hope not.”

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The rest of the day passes in a blur. He goes over his lesson plan for the next day while Rosemary naps and plays with her once she wakes. His body forces itself to move from room to room and participate in the happy routine it had established for itself, but all the while part of him feels as if it is lost in a fog.

At just before eight, Rosemary is starting to succumb to nighttime drowsiness, so Will carries her to her nursery. He lays the baby in her crib and turns off the light switch. For a moment the room is lit only by the light from the hallway. Will leans over the crib, fiddling with a bedtime toy attached to the bars. It’s a little box that plays gentle music and glimmers with soft, glowing color in time with the melody. Its edges are softened with plush material, and once Will finishes winding it up, the lilting tones of Brahms’s Lullaby fill the air.

Will watches for a few seconds as Rosemary wonders at the colors and music even though it’s a spectacle she sees in every night. As the baby is bathed in red light and sleepily reaches for the soft contours of her toy, Will gets the feeling that he, too, is being watched. He doesn’t even hear feet against the floor before a warm body settles behind him and strong arms wrap around him.

Hannibal gives a quiet hum as he rests his chin on Will’s shoulder and looks down at the drowsy baby. “Was she a good girl today?”

“Very,” Will replies. He swallows, forcing himself to behave as if he isn’t caught in a miasma of uncertainty. “Soon, ah… soon her indoctrination as a dog person will be complete.”

Hannibal chuckles and presses a kiss against Will’s jaw. As soon as Rosemary has finally drifted
off to sleep, Hannibal grips Will by the shoulders and gently turns him around. “You seem tense,” he says. “Is something wrong?”

_Don’t lie. He’ll smell the lie on you._ Blood in the water, Will immediately thinks. The unbidden darkness of the thought startles him and his mind whirs again. _It’s all a misunderstanding. You’ll figure it out tomorrow. If you lie, you’ll ruin this. This one good thing. The one good thing you’ve ever had. Don’t ruin it._

He sighs and shrugs. “Just… something I saw with one of the dogs today.”

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Yeah…” He remembers Pepper’s skittishness and the forlorn body language. _Don’t lie._ “One of the dogs was acting kind of odd. I think maybe something upset him. I guess it’s been bugging me.”

Will feels Hannibal’s rough hands - uncharacteristically rough for someone so refined, he notes - trail up his neck and cup his jaw. “Don’t worry. Did Matilda notice the unusual behavior?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I’m sure she will know how to resolve the situation.” He leans in and kisses Will gently. “I know your empathy extends to your dogs and this makes you worry about their well-being. It’s why you attract and are in turn attracted by strays.”

Will nods, but his heart won’t stop hammering in his chest. It keeps its fluttering, uneasy rhythm even as Hannibal leads him out of the nursery. It prevents him from enjoying the fantastic meal his lover prepares for their dinner, makes him constantly feel on edge as they converse before bed, and chases sleep away for much of the night. A single day before, he found such solace in Hannibal’s arms. Now, as he stares at the shadows on the wall, he forces himself to stop irrationally imagining that the strong arms embracing him are the coils of a great serpent.

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Will is haggard and restless the next day. His shoulders are slumped and there are dark bags under his eyes as he shuffles down the hallway. He fumbles on the buttons of his dark green shirt; the little plastic discs seem intent on slipping from his fingers. He can smell breakfast cooking as he heads toward the kitchen. As he gets closer to the kitchen doorway, he can hear Hannibal murmuring in Lithuanian with occasional squawks or coos from Rosemary.

Subconsciously picking up his pace, Will enters. Hannibal is tending to a skillet of omelets on the stovetop with Rosemary supported by his left arm. The baby girl has a wooden spoon grasped with both hands, and the size of the utensil in comparison highlights the tininess of her fists and fingers.

Sensing Will’s presence, Hannibal turns to look at him. “Good morning, Will,” he says. “I was just teaching Rosemary how to cook.”

“She might be a little young for that, considering all she can eat is milk,” Will says as Hannibal passes the baby to him.

“Nonsense. One is never too young to learn the fundamentals.” Hannibal cuts the heat and begins to plate the omelets. “Such as what cuts of meat best compliment organic eggs and artisan cheese. She’ll know the secrets of haute cuisine in no time.”

Will sits at the counter, holding Rosemary close. She sucks on the broad end of the spoon, and Will
smiles fondly as she stares up at him with her ever-darkening eyes. He looks up when Hannibal sets a plate before him. His lover tilts his head, frowning slightly as he takes in Will’s restless appearance. “I know you barely slept last night. I’m not sure if you should go in to Quantico today. It’s such a long drive, and you look like you could fall asleep at the wheel. Besides, I have no patients today and will be doing some minor remodeling of the guest bathroom. I wouldn’t be averse to company.”

Will shakes his head. “I might be tired, but I can still drive and I can still lecture.” He bounces Rosemary slightly, and the baby gives a big smile as she gums her spoon. “And Rosie likes seeing the other babies at the day care.”

Hannibal sits beside him. “Surely your concerns for your dog were not what kept you from having a sound sleep.”

“No. There’s something I need to confront at work today,” Will admits. He adjusts Rosemary until he has a hand free. He cuts into his omelet with his fork.

“And what would that be?”

Will shrugs as he chews on his first mouthful of breakfast. “I’m finally starting the seminar series on Van Gore today,” he says. Hannibal does not need to know that it is a subject change. “This’ll be the first time I’ve spoken about it in public. Difficult headspace.”

Hannibal sighs. “In that case, if you find yourself overwhelmed and needing to leave Quantico early, I will be here. There’s no need for you to close yourself off, fret on your own, and lose sleep.” He reaches out, taking Will’s free hand in his. His skin is warm and dry. “You are not, and never need be, alone.”

“I know,” Will whispers. Don’t lie, he thinks. So, this time, he doesn’t. He clenches Hannibal’s hand so his own won’t start trembling, and his next words are barely audible. They are wrenched from somewhere deep down in him. “I love you.”

Hannibal smiles and leans forward to kiss Will.

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Will’s nerves are alight as he watches the lecture suite fill up with an eager audience. Anxious energy tingles in his fingertips and across the soles of his feet, and the only way to resolve it is to pace around the desk and fidget with his files and equipment for the lecture. When he’s finished checking his materials three times and people are still entering, he removes his glasses and neurotically wipes them with the sleeve of his shirt.

He presses a button on a control panel and the lights around the seats dim. He clears his throat and the attendees quiet down.

“When many people think of serial killers, they think of destruction alone. These are people who rip flesh, who spill blood, who tear families asunder, who end lives. By engaging in such activities, they must not value creation. This is a grave mistake to make. Indeed, many killers lead very elaborate creative lives, and some are compelled to their dark deeds by an overwhelming artistic impulse. Some see art in the way they stage the bodies of their victims. Some see the human body as little more than a cupboard full of ingredients for their purposes.”

Will presses a button and a collage of paintings and posed corpses fills the screen behind him.

“Some, like Stephan Waldorf - or ‘Vincent Van Gore’ as TattleCrime would have us call him - do
both. And he had a type: Omegas who were between three and eight months pregnant. He killed six, for a total of twelve victims. He harvested their blood and created paintings from it. Unfortunately, due to a combination of factors – the highly-publicized nature of Waldorf’s killings, his victim profile, and artistic leanings – I feel he is highly likely to inspire others with similar inclinations. Therefore, we must study him thoroughly. We must know him better than any of his inspired fans, that we may be one step ahead of them at all times. Over the next few weeks, we will uncover the factors which led him to become a killer, study his methods of murder, and analyze the content and construction of his designs. I hope some of you studied art theory in school.”

There is a small murmur of laughter from the crowd. Will frowns; it wasn’t a joke. He clears his throat a bit awkwardly. “Let’s begin.”

Over the next hour and a half, he lays out Stephan Waldorf’s precocious but neglected childhood, his work as a technician at a blood bank, his medical problems and early artistic frustrations, his first kill and the subsequent creation of *At Autumn’s End*, and the evolution of his design as a killer. A lot of his anxiety drains out of him once he is able to pretend he is alone in the room, theorizing on his own about Waldorf. Towards the end of his lecture, he glances at the doorway. He sees Bev leaning against the door frame. Their eyes meet, and she nods a greeting. Behind her, Will catches the sight of a large silhouette. The figure is masculine and heavy-set; his broad shoulders are slumped slightly by the psychological pull of some internal weight. He walks away before Will can get a good look at his face, but then he doesn’t need a face to know the shape of Jack Crawford.

“That’s all for today,” Will says as he watches the shadow leave. “Next week we’ll be getting into Waldorf’s final three kills: Crystal Stevens, Kazuo Kitamura, and Elliot Gardner-Flores. Think about the elements you saw in his earlier kills and write up some potential thematic threads to follow in his work. And there is another question I want you to mull over every week. We may still be a ways from covering it, but I want you to be constantly brainstorming why Waldorf deviated from his design in his seventh attempted kill.”

He presses another button on the panel and the lights turn bright once more. He stares blankly at all the curious faces. “What made him use his own blood instead of mine?”

Papers shuffle and voices mumble quietly as the trainees and curious listeners from other departments file out of the room. Bev remains standing in her spot as they move past her. Now that the lights are on, Will can see that she holds a large manila folder.

Once everyone else has left, Bev looks over her shoulder to confirm that they are alone. She shuts the doors and walks to where Will stands with the Waldorf file still spread out before him. “Nice lecture,” she says. “But I get the feeling some of them were a bit disappointed that you stopped before you could get into your own brush with Van Gore. Pun unintended.”

Will shrugs. “Hard for me to feel too bad for them when I’m pretty sure some of them will just turn around and funnel that information to Freddie Lounds,” he mutters. His eyes linger on her folder. “Is that what I think it is?”

“It is.” Bev stands beside him, placing the folder on the desk and opening it up. “Plenty of shots to work with when it comes to the Osterberg disappearance, but there’s even more when it comes to Münz. The scene photographer for that was a zealous rookie, so he took plenty of shots.”

“Not as good as actually being present at the scene, but it will do,” Will says as he takes the folder in hand.

Bev watches him as he spreads out the photographs, piecing them together into two separate
“There’s just one thing I’m wondering about, Will.”

“What’s that?”

“The Osterberg case is ambiguous, but signs generally point to it being a voluntary runaway job. And Münz was an open and shut suicide case. You work by putting yourself in the shoes of murderers, so what’s your plan here?”

“Preferably: nothing. Less preferably: find the shoes that everyone else has missed.”

Bev purses her lips. “You need some privacy?”

Will takes in a deep breath as he finishes arranging the photographs. “Please.”

The Alpha woman nods and gives him a friendly pat on the shoulder. “I’ll leave you to it,” she says. “I know you tend to lose your appetite after these things, but if you want, Price, Zeller, and I pooled our resources to order a body bag’s worth of pretty great burritos. Give me a text if you want in and I’ll personally take on the nasty, thankless work that is keeping Price from hogging all the pico de gallo.”


Once the door shuts behind her, Will takes a deep breath. He holds it in his lungs for a few long seconds before slowly exhaling. He peers down at the pictures before him. A few beads of sweat gather on his forehead. He shuts his eyes.

He stands in the living room of Julie Osterberg’s small, inexpensive apartment. There are cardboard boxes strewn about, some half-full and others knocked over, their contents spilled across the floor. The room tidies itself before his eyes as he attempts to reconstruct the area: boxes tip upright, stacks of papers organize themselves neatly on the coffee table, and the bedroom door closes neatly.

Finally, Julie appears beside him as if teleported there. Her eyes are shut and her posture is slumped. She twitches slightly and her eyes open. She blinks. Suddenly, she begins to move in an awkward, lurching manner, not unlike a wind-up doll.

Will follows Julie into her bedroom, where she slams open the closet and hauls out a large piece of rolling luggage. He watches as she grabs articles of clothing from the hangers in her closet and dumps them into the luggage. She does the same with some jewelry on her dresser, but only things that are obviously old sentimental heirlooms than anything with monetary worth.

She returns to the living room, knocking over boxes and papers as she hurries to the door. She grabs her purse from where it lies on the sofa. Once her hand is on the knob, she freezes and her body goes slack again.

“This is what I want people to see,” Will says. “This is what many people have seen. Julie Osterberg, mere days from completing the process of moving in with her girlfriend, decides to flee under unknown circumstances. She is so far into the move that her dog already resides with Kell Münz on a full-time basis. There is no sign of a robbery or a struggle. But this is not what happened.”

He blinks and the room has righted itself again. The luggage is gone, though Julie’s slack body is still by the door. Will stands in the door frame.

Julie begins to move again, but it’s more natural than the previous fake, jerking motions. She
blinks and looks at Will, smiling politely. Her mouth moves, but there is no sound.

“She invites me in,” Will says. “But I am no friend. I am going to kill her. Why?”

He remembers being in the park and seeing Hannibal hand something to Julie Osterberg. His stomach sinks and his throat is dry. “She has my card,” he croaks. “And has called me to check up on Will Graham. She is kind, considerate, professional, and harmless. She is all of this as much as she is a loose thread. And those must be mended.”

“I almost regret what I am about to do,” he says, pulling a pair of gloves out of his pocket as Julie turns to head toward the kitchen. He slips them on. “Almost.”

Will rushes up behind the unsuspecting social worker and grabs her in a headlock. Before she can cry out, he jerks his hands and there is a sickening snap. Julie goes limp as he slowly lowers her body to the floor.

He moves over to the couch and picks up the woman’s purse. He rifles through it, eventually finding a collection of business cards in her wallet. He doesn’t even need to look through them; his target is at the top of the stack. He places the cards back into the purse.

“I will take the luggage, some of her clothing, and the purse. I will painstakingly stage the apartment to make it seem like she has run away despite a complete absence of motive to do so. Some people will buy it; others won’t. They will see the marionette dance and twirl across the stage without seeing the strings or the hands of the puppeteer.”

He looks down at Julie’s corpse, his eyes lingering on the twisted bulges in her neck and her wide-open eyes. “This is a necessary murder. I am not proud of it, so I do not claim it as my own. This is not my design.”

Will gasps, breaking himself out of his projected recreation of the scene. He moans, pressing the heels of his palms hard against his temples and fighting down the urge to be sick. “No, no, no,” he pleads, his voice little more than a ragged whisper. “Please, no.”

It takes more strength than he knows he has to force himself to stand and face the next set of photographs. His breaths are shaky as he looks over the pictures of Kell Münz and her house. It’s tidier than Julie’s apartment had been in the wake of her disappearance, but it’s far from warm and welcoming. Looking at its bare and lonely walls and general lack of decoration, Will surmises that any desires Münz had to make the house into a home withered when Julie vanished.

Münz’s body lies slumped against the bedroom door, her neck caught in a noose. Her dark skin is ashen and slightly blue from death and the stinging cold. Strangely, both the glass sliding door to the back yard and the front door are open with small trails of snow leading into the house on both sides. Will looks at the suicide report for the Baltimore PD’s take on the matter.

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The deceased was found by neighbors when they returned home Friday morning and noticed the front door open. Estimated time of death is 11/28/13, approximately 17:00. No sign of lock tampering or forced entry. Glass sliding door to backyard open as well. The only fingerprints on either door belonged to the deceased. The deceased’s dog, a 4 year old male Golden Retriever, is missing. No footprints, canine or otherwise, were found at the scene. It is highly likely that the dog ran out through the open doors and the prints were covered up by the weather conditions. No signs of intruders or potential evidence of foul play aside from scratches around the neck. Tissue found under the deceased’s nails. Awaiting DNA results with autopsy report.
ADDITIONAL 12/5/13: Autopsy lists cause of death as strangulation consistent with the state of the body at the scene. Tissue beneath the nails belongs to the deceased. Scratches around neck have been ruled self-inflicted. Case is officially closed.

CAUSE OF DEATH: Suicide by hanging.

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Will frowns, putting the report aside. He takes another long look at the pieced-together scene and shuts his eyes.

_He stands in the exact middle ground between the open doors. The wind is cold and snow is creeping in towards him on both sides. Pepper, his thick winter coat covered in snow, trots into the house through the open yard door. He stops just in front of Will and shakes the loose snow from his body. The dog’s tail wags happily as he looks around the living room. He ignores Will, for in this scenario, he does not exist._

_Kell Münz stands by her bedroom door, a length of rope in hand. Like Julie, at first she is as still and slumped like an unwound clockwork toy. Then, in slow, creaking motions, she begins to move. Her movements are robotic as she ties the rope around one of the knobs. Once the knot is tied, she throws the remaining rope over the top of the door. She tugs, putting all of her weight into testing the integrity of the rope. It holds. She then fashions a noose at the other end._

_She slowly brings the noose down over her short, tightly-curled hair. She tightens the loop around her neck. Kell stands still for a moment, her eyes closed, reflective. Then she lets herself drop._

_It isn’t a quick or easy death. Her body thrashes as her throat tries and fails to gasp for air. As she begins to lose consciousness, she claws at the tightened rope around her neck for a few long, harrowing seconds before she finally goes slack._

_Pepper barks in confusion and agitation, trotting in anxious semi-circles around his dying master. He sniffs at her foot and whines pathetically. The dog sits there for a few long moments before he stands, whines again, and runs out the open front door._

_“This is what I want people to see,” Will repeats. “This is what many people have seen. But this is not what happened.”_

_He blinks and the door to the yard is closed. He blinks again and Kell’s hanging corpse and the rope is gone from the door. He blinks once more and he stands at the door, the haggard but much more realistic form of Kell Münz standing before him. Behind the closed glass door, Pepper trots around in a shoveled snow clearing in the backyard, gleefully snapping at drifting snowflakes._

_Kell’s dark skin is slightly loose in places in a hallmark display of stress-related weight loss, and there are lines around the corners of her mouth and across her forehead which belie her true age. There is an odd expression in those line-accentuated eyes, a thick and murky combination of desperation, skepticism, suspicion, and hope._

_“I am not an uninvited guest,” Will remarks. “She asked me to come here. She…”_

_A sharp sting of recollection shoots through him. “Yes, a news crew came to interview me about it hours ago,” Hannibal says._

_Will’s hands tremble as his grasp on the scene falters. Kell Münz and her apartment begin to flicker, alternating rapidly between him feeling as if he is really standing there in the full force of
her complicated stare and merely looking at pictures of her frozen corpse splayed across his desk in his lecture room.

Another sting. **Hannibal looks at his phone. The amusement drains from his face, leaving a stony expression.**

A pair of warm, wet tears stream down Will’s as he screws his eyes shut. His hands have gone beyond trembling and into the realm of frenzied shaking. Despite this, he clamps them down against both of his temples in an attempt to drown out the stinging and focus on the scene. “Saw,” he whispers. “She saw... and contacted me. We speak for a short time in her home. She is desperate to discover something – anything – about the disappearance of Julie Osterberg. She wonders if I have answers.”

His pulse throbs beneath his fingers as he presses tighter against the sides of his head. It takes a few deep breaths for him to bolt down his mental doors to keep the panic at bay. Still, the horror slams and rattles against his ramshackle defenses. But it’s enough to let him continue.

**Will’s eyes open, and the cold, disinterested sheet of ice solidifies across his features. “I do,” he says, reaching into the lining of his jacket to remove a length of rope from a hidden pocket. “And I do not hesitate in providing her with her answers.”**

Just as Kell recoils with shock at the sight of the rope, he hits her with a low, sweeping kick. It knocks her off-balance, sending her stumbling. Will’s movements, on the other hand, are as graceful as they are swift and powerful. While the Alpha woman is still trying to scramble away, he loops the rope around her neck and pulls. Kell gags as he forces her to stand, tightening the rope. She tries to kick back at him or jab him with her elbows, but he sees and reacts to every one of her attempts at self-defense.

As Kell’s gasps turn croakier and weaker, she claws at the rope around her neck. She tries to force her fingernails beneath the rope for leverage, but she only succeeds in creating dark red scratches along her throat.

With a few more groans, her eyes flutter shut and her body goes limp. She is not dead yet. The trauma and lack of oxygen has rendered her unconscious, but he will now see to it that she has no chance to recover. His hands are nimble as he ties the noose around her neck. In no time at all, he has arranged the diorama of Kell Münz’s suicide. He tidies the area, removing any and all signs that a struggle had ever occurred.

“**The police will not find a single stray hair, flake of skin, or misplaced thread,”** Will says. “**I will leave nothing behind to tie me to this scene...**”

**There is a desperate scratching sound along with muffled, plaintive whines. He turns toward the sound. Pepper is on his hind legs, clawing frantically at the glass with his snowy, muddy paws. Between the clawing and the dog’s heavy breathing, the glass is quickly becoming scratched and filthy. Will observes the animal’s frenzied panic for a few long seconds before he walks over.**

“**There is a witness to my crime, albeit a voiceless one.”** Will says as he stops in front of the glass. “**If I leave him, he will freeze to death well before anyone discovers Münz’s body.”**

**The traumatized dog cowers, shivering in fear and cold. It’s not in the simple animal’s character to attack humans, even ones which have killed his master before his very eyes. He gazes up at Will through the glass, a shattered world in his dark brown eyes.**

**Will tilts his head slightly, observing the dog with aloof curiosity. He slides the glass open. The**
dog tries to scramble away, but Will manages to grab his collar. “But in a moment of… truly unusual sentiment… I choose another option. I decide to take something which could tie me to this scene. I am confident that I can engineer this in such a way that no one will be able to make the connection.”

He leaves the doors behind him as he departs, taking the dog with him. “My mistake is this one, tiny bit of comparative kindness. A single drop of uncharacteristic light against such stygian darkness is enough to reveal the depths of my depravity.”

Will’s eyes fly open and he is once more himself, once more standing in his empty room in Quantico. For a few moments, he is motionless save for a slight subconscious quiver in his shoulders. He stares unblinking at the pictures in front of him and barely seems to notice when his vision begins to blur and swim with unshed tears. His mouth opens, but he finds himself incapable of sound as the shake in his shoulders gets stronger. His hands come up and his fingers tangle in his hair. He stands there as the horror in him grows stronger and stronger.

He erupts. The hot tears fall just as his fists slam down against the desk. He sobs, pounding against the wood and sending the pictures scattering across the ground. His knees give out on him and he sinks to the floor, still slamming his hands against the sides of the desk.

The pictures of the Osterberg and Münz scenes have become jumbled up with some of the pictures he brought to illustrate the Waldorf murders. His eyes land upon two familiar pictures. The first: the picture of Waldorf’s final work of art, the possessive winged monster reaching down toward the chalk outline where Will’s unconscious body had been. The second: a photo of *At Autumn’s End*, relinquished by Hannibal when the work’s true gruesome nature had come to life. The connection is now too strong to have ever been a coincidence.

“It’s definitely enough to kill a man, but that’s not even close to what the human body contains,” he remembers saying at the sight of the inconsistent amount of blood.

“Blood doesn’t just get up and walk away on its own,” Will croaks as he stares at the picture, echoing the sarcastic words Jack had spoken months ago.

And once again, Will sees the hands of the puppeteer. Waldorf’s unfathomable suicide makes perfect sense when it isn’t a suicide. He has seen this type of drama, this perfect staging, this thievery of remains.


Memories of recreating the arson in his home come blazing into his mind unbidden. His mental voice rings in his head, bringing back his observations with blinding, blistering clarity. “I have been paying close attention to him. This is not the only time I’ve been in his home. I know it like the back of my hand,” he had said. “The dogs do not react. They have grown used to my presence and will not go on the alert unless something out of the ordinary happens.” His dogs have loved Hannibal ever since he fed them while Will was chasing down the Lost Boys.

The fire. The signpost tree. Julie Osterberg. Waldorf’s suicide. Kell Münz. And more, so much more death and destruction and lies clogging up his head, pumping raw horror through his veins. And all of it has the same face. The same face with eyes he has gazed into, with lips he has kissed.

He disconnects. His emotions suddenly feel distant, as if locked away in a box and buried in the earth. Somehow, he knows that it’s a temporary self-defense measure and that all the toxic horrors will gnaw through the locks and come bubbling up to consume him. But for now, the numbness is
delaying the inevitable collapse. And he can act in the limited time he has.

Dazed, he reaches into his pocket for his cell phone. He dials the numbers blindly as he shudders beneath his desk, curling in on himself as the undercurrent of terror carries him out to sea. No anchor, no paddle.

One ring. Two. Three. Click. “Alana Bloom speaking.”

“Alana,” he mutters.

“Will?”

“Are you at Georgetown?”

“No, I don’t have any classes or office hours today, so I’m writing my next psychiatric journal paper at home. Why?”

He clears his throat. “I need you to watch Rosemary. For… for a while. It’s an emergency.”

“Of course, but —“

“Thank you,” he says. “I’ll be there in a little over an hour and a half.”

“Will, what’s this about?”

“I’ll tell you in person. Just… please, Alana.”

She is quiet for a moment before she answers. “Okay.”

He hangs up, refusing to let the conversation continue. He stands on wobbly, unsure legs. He cleans the pictures off the ground. When the desk looks vaguely presentable, he pulls out his phone again and makes another call.

One ring. Two. Three. Four. Click.

“Sorry, Will. If this is about the burritos, I couldn’t save the pico. I underestimated the depths of depravity Jimmy is willing to go to for-“

“I’m on to something, Bev. Something deep and dark as the Mariana Trench. I need another favor,” Will says as he shuts the door on the lecture room. “Do you think you can sign off on something for me?”

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The first half of the drive from Rosemary’s day care center to Alana’s home goes by in a blur. To keep the dark thoughts from leaking into his skull, Will engages in inanity. He counts the white lines dividing the lanes, memorizes license plates, obsessively turns from radio station to radio station – anything to distract. Near the end of the trip, Rosemary’s coos begin to turn into more insistent whimpers. He makes it to Alana’s house, but instead of immediately heading to her door, he moves to the backseat to feed Rosemary.

As the baby lies in his arms, making little contented noises as she eats, a sliver of emotion breaks out of the containment unit Will has been working so hard to avoid. He sobs openly as he holds his daughter closer. “I love you so much,” he whispers. “More than I’ve loved anything. More than I ever thought I’d love you considering… considering. And you’ll never remember this. And God, how unfair is that? That you’ll never remember a time before your life fell apart. I never wanted
you to know that feeling.”

He caresses the hints of dark blonde hair beginning to grow in over her scalp. He leans down and whispers into her ear, “I really thought you’d get a better childhood… a better life… than what I’d had. I’m so sorry.”

There is a tapping at the window and Will jolts, his heart hammering in his chest as his mind conjures up images of the now all-too-familiar Chesapeake Ripper. Eyes stern, mouth set in a grim line, blood of countless victims staining his once impeccable dress shirt. But when he finally chances a look, it’s only Alana standing on the other side of the glass, frowning in concern.

He tidies up Rosemary as Alana opens the door. “What’s this all about, Will?” Alana asks, her voice low and soothing.

Will can’t meet her eyes, so he keeps his focus on his baby. “I’ve identified the Ripper,” he murmurs. “I can see his face. Practically burnt into my retinas.”

Alana gasps. “My God, that’s the breakthrough of the decade! Have you notified Jack? The police?”

“Things will be a little crazy for a while. Not a good place for a baby. Media, flashing lights, unsavory questions, even less savory answers,” Will says, ignoring Alana’s words as he buckles Rosemary back in her car seat and begins the grueling task of removing it from the backseat of his car.

“Will, you didn’t answer my question.”

“Got a plan.”

“You’re being evasive,” Alana says, crossing her arms. “And that only makes me think that you’re going after him on your own. If I need to defy the laws of physics and gouge holes in your tires with my bare hands to keep you from becoming the next Miriam Lass, don’t think for a moment that I won’t do it. Maybe if you let me in on this ‘plan’ of yours, I could help you better.”

“Alana, lying low with my daughter near a police station and shielding her from the danger and stress that’s going to come crashing down is the epitome of helping me. It is the single most important thing I could ask of anyone, ever,” Will snaps as he finally musters the courage to look her in the eye. She must see the red-rimmed devastation there because she holds her breath, staring at him with utmost concern.

She nods faintly. They say nothing as Will prepares to hand Rosemary over. He hesitates for a moment, drawing his face close to Rosemary’s. He shuts his eyes tight in an attempt to keep his composure as he presses his nose against the baby’s curls. He breathes in her fresh, contented scent slowly while the sickening thought that this may be his last time doing so churns in his gut. Finally, he hands the baby and her seat over to Alana. It feels like letting go of a safety rope as he dangles over a precipice.

“Will,” Alana says as he gets back into the driver’s seat. “Be careful. Not just now, but after. Whatever you saw while connecting the dots with the Ripper is carved into you. The Ripper’s in your head. Deep. You’ll need help getting him out.”

Will stares at her. He can’t bring himself to say how much worse it is than that. The Ripper’s carved into him, all right. He can see the mark gouged into his very foundation: a heart with the initials H.L. and W.G. No amount of intense therapy could ever remove that graffiti.
“Thank you, Alana,” he whispers as he turns the key in the ignition. He begins to drive, his knuckles white and trembling as they squeeze the wheel. He can’t bear to look into the rear view mirror even after it’s been miles and miles; despite all the distance, he suspects he’d only see Alana standing anxiously in her driveway, Rosemary in her arms.

He reaches for his phone where it lies in the passenger side seat. The number he looks for is no longer among the recently dialed, but it is still in his contact list.

One ring. Click.

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The new linoleum splits evenly as the sharpened blade slices through it. Hannibal holds the sheet up, admiring his handiwork. He lays it back down against a long straight-edge ruler, checking to make sure it falls within his exact specifications. Satisfied, he sets it aside just as he hears the front door open. He recognizes the sound of Will’s signature shuffling tread as he comes down the hallway.

“Welcome home,” Hannibal calls, turning to look at Will as the younger man comes to stand in the door frame. The Omega is pale and shaken, and his muscles are drawn tight like those of a gazelle prepared to bolt. “What’s wrong?”

Will does not respond. He stares down at Hannibal, his lips trembling almost imperceptibly.

“Will,” Hannibal says, his voice low and commanding. “Where is Rosemary?”

“She’s safe,” Will whispers.

“You,” Will hisses. He reaches into his coat and pulls out a handgun. Though his fingers are trembling, he aims it at Hannibal. “I know why Pepper is with Matilda’s other rescue animals. I know what happened to Julie Osterberg and Kell Münz. I know what drove Stephan Waldorf to ‘commit suicide’. I know the trick to the numbers carved in Christian Andrew Nelson’s arms. I know what fueled the fire. I know what you are.”

Slowly, Hannibal turns his head to look at the strips of linoleum he has been cutting. Keeping his back as still as possible, he slips the knife up the sleeve of his shirt. He turns around and stands with the same precise, calculated flow of movement.

“I see the strings you’ve been pulling. Your victims’. The FBI’s,” Will says. His shaking finger tightens slightly on the trigger, though not enough to shoot. “Mine.”

Hannibal raises his free hand palm-outward, a calming gesture. As Will looks at the proffered hand, Hannibal slowly draws his other arm behind his back. The knife handle slides into his palm. He takes a tentative step forward.

“Don’t!” Will exclaims, holding the gun tighter.

Hannibal takes a step closer regardless. “Put the gun down, Will. Let us discuss this calmly.”

“‘Discuss’?” Will says. “What is there to discuss? You’re not even denying it!”

“No, I’m not,” Hannibal says. He stares into Will’s eyes, intense and unblinking. He takes another slow step forward. A few more and he’ll be toeing the line between point-blank and a contact shot
if Will chooses to fire. “I can see the conviction in your eyes. There is no arguing with fire.”

“Did you think…” Will gasps and blinks, clearing the tears from his eyes. He snarls and Hannibal can hear his teeth grind. “Did you plan on just killing and lying and manipulating and then coming home and kissing me and my baby with your bloodstained lips indefinitely?”

“Not indefinitely, no,” Hannibal says as he takes another step. The gun is an inch from his sternum. “I was hoping that, with enough time, you could become amenable to my lifestyle. I wanted to introduce you to the idea gradually—”

“Like a frog in a pot,” Will spits. “Raise the temperature slowly and it won’t even know it’s being boiled alive.”

“Not the metaphor I would go with,” Hannibal says. The gun muzzle rests against his chest directly over his heart. “Like a gardener carefully tending to the growth of a rare and beautiful orchid. He slaves over it daily, waiting for the day it blooms into something magnificent.”


Hannibal frowns. “Have you told anyone your suspicions about me, Will?” Will does not respond immediately, and though that’s more than enough for Hannibal to know the answer, he presses again anyway. “Answer me.”

“No,” Will whispers.

There is nothing but truth in that one short word. Hannibal shakes his head slowly, a hint of disappointment in his expression. “Oh, Will,” he sighs. “You’re better than such a rookie mistake.”

His free hand slams against Will’s arm just as the Omega fires the gun. The shot rings in Hannibal’s ears, but the bullet misses, imbedding itself in the bathroom walls instead of Hannibal’s aorta. Before Will can shoot again, Hannibal swings his other arm and shoves the blade deep into Will’s abdomen. Hot blood gushes from the wound, coating Hannibal’s hand and pouring out onto the floor.

Will shudders from the pain, and the gun drops from his seizing hand. Twisting the knife, Hannibal coaxes Will to lie on the bathroom floor. He pins Wills arms over his head with his free hand while the other begins to slice. “Oh sweet Will,” Hannibal murmurs. “This needn’t have happened at all.”

“What will you tell them?” Will mutters. “When they look for my body.”

“Intense late-onset postpartum psychosis,” Hannibal says as he continues to slice. Will groans, pain shooting through him as the blade tears his flesh. “In my library, they will find my books on Japanese bushido. The chapters on ritual seppuku will be marked, and there will be notes scribbled in the margins in what will resemble your handwriting. Your fingerprints will be all over it. Even with all that evidence, I expect I will be under intense scrutiny until they grudgingly accept your suicide. I will be grief personified.”

With his free hand, Hannibal caresses Will’s cheek. His thumb brushes Will’s bottom lip. Will can barely keep his eyes open through the searing pain in his belly, but through the crack in his eyelids and the tears collecting on his lashes, he can see the frown on Hannibal’s lips. “I will not need to act,” he murmurs.

“Smart,” Will croaks. “There’s just one problem.”
Hannibal hums, but it’s a slightly patronizing sound. He is unbuttoning Will’s shirt for better access and easier staging. “And what would that…” He goes still as he sees what is on Will’s chest.

“You asked if I told anyone that I suspected you were the Ripper. I said no. I told the truth,” Will says. His throat throbs and produces strange, warped little noises, and not even he can tell if it’s laughter or just his diaphragm convulsing from the trauma.

There is a covert listening device strapped to Will’s chest. The highly advanced equipment sits just above the bloody wound Hannibal has carved into Will’s belly. Hannibal can tell by the design and mechanisms that it is not merely a recorder, but also a transmitter. For the first time in as long as he can remember, he is well and truly shocked to have been out-maneuvered.

“Borrowed this equipment from Quantico,” Will mutters. “Called Jack. Gave him the frequency. You told him yourself. In your own words. You could run, but you probably won’t get far. Jack and every cop in Baltimore are probably breaking land speed records to get here.”

“Oh, Will.” Hannibal’s voice is equal parts an exhalation and supplication. “Remarkable boy. If only you could see your own potential. How well we fit together.”

Will’s fingers tremble as he raises his hand. Blood is gushing from him quickly, and his extremities are already becoming heavy and sluggish. He fumbles at the device, hitting a concealed button which shuts the equipment off. “That’s the terrifying part. The hideous part. The sad part,” he whispers. He can’t even hear his own voice anymore. “Of course I can.”

Though Will can no longer hear his quiet, cracking voice, he does hear the faint sound of pounding. It must be incredibly loud outside of his dying head, but Hannibal neither turns toward the sound nor flees. Instead, he holds Will’s jaw and brushes his thumb over his cheek. He leaves a bloody line behind.

Will hears a muffled crash, followed by frantic mumbling voices. They must be screaming and shouting. One voice shouts the same phrase over and over, and Hannibal drops the knife and places his hands behind his head in defeat. His right hand is soaked red up to the wrist. As soon as he does so, two men in dark clothing rush him. Though Will’s vision is even hazier than his sense of hearing, he suspects that they are SWAT team members. They each grab Hannibal by one arm and pull him away.

More bodies surround him. At least two people are applying pressure to his abdomen and muttering to each other. He can’t make heads or tails of what they’re saying, so if they expect any answers from him they’ll be sorely mistaken. He feels as if he’s being jostled, but he’s not sure if he’s being moved or if his dying body is simply seizing up. It’s an alarming thought, but all he feels is a sense of increasing detachment, as if his body is an exoskeleton being discarded in a molt.

There’s a familiar-sounding voice near his ear. From the angry rumble in its tone, there’s no question that it’s Jack. He tries to concentrate on the deep, commanding voice, and this time he can actually make out some of the words. “Don’t you do this, Will. Stay with me, goddammit. You caught him. You caught the Ripper, so don’t you… don’t you dare be his last victim-“

Concentrating is exhausting, and soon he no longer has the energy to sustain it. His eyelids flutter closed and all he sees is the red, hazy blur of light through his eyelids. His lips, chalky and cracked, form one word; he uses the last gasp of air clinging to his lungs to produce the necessary sound.

“Rosemary.”
Chapter 10

No major warnings for this chapter, I think.

AT LONG LAST, IT'S DONE. And finished on the same day as the season 2 premiere, at that! Hard to believe I started writing this before the first season finished airing, and now I've wrapped it up just as the next one begins.

But yes, this story has finally come to an end. Although this could be read as a set-up for an alternate take on Red Dragon, I will not be continuing this story with a sequel. As I've mentioned in a few other places, I am, however, strongly considering writing an alternate take on the ending. It would only be one chapter and relatively brief, but if I write it, I'll include it here instead of creating a stand-alone work for it. So this story will stand as 10 chapters of 10 until I get around to doing that.

As for other stories, I've had an idea for another Hannigram story which I'm currently brainstorming. I haven't decided if I'll make it Omegaverse or not since it could go either way but who am I kidding, I have such a weakness for it. I'm also considering the possibility of accepting prompts via tumblr (since that might be a way for me to stop forgetting about the poor thing for so long), but that would depend on if anyone was interested in submitting among other things.

Anyway, I'll stop rambling and let this thing wrap up. Thank you for reading and please consider commenting to let me know what you thought!

Over the course of three hours, Will dies twice.

The first death happens while the ambulance speeds his pale, torn, and unconscious body to the emergency department in Johns Hopkins. Too much of him has spilled out over Hannibal's floor, and despite how hard the advanced paramedic on the team works to pump blood back into his veins, he begins to go into acute hypovolemic shock. His heart stops and his chest goes still. It takes twenty seconds, but he finally jolts back to life under the defibrillator.

The second death happens on the operating table as nurses and surgeons struggle to put him back together. This time he goes without a pulse for just over forty seconds. His pulse is thready when it returns, and given his severely weakened state, the surgeons grudgingly agree that resuscitation would be unlikely to succeed if he crashes again. If it happens again, they'll have to let him go.

Will’s heart beats on.

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Will thinks that his first visitor is a hallucination.

His eyes crack open, lashes fluttering weakly against the brightness of the light fixture in the ceiling. The drugs are doing a very good job of keeping him from feeling the pain of a man who’s been ripped open. He is intubated as a precaution, and the sensation of air rushing into his lungs
without his volition is odd. He has little sense of time, identity, or reality, and though that would normally send him careening head-long into a full-fledged panic attack, he’s too doped up to find his disorientation and the many, many tubes in his throat and arms and elsewhere particularly alarming.

Something moves in the distance. An indistinct figure creeps closer to his bed. It’s definitely humanoid, but his vision is so blurry that he sees little more than blobs of green over the body and the top of the head and a smear of white across the face. He tries to open his eyes a little more in the hopes of improving his focus. It’s only a minor improvement, but at least he can now see that the figure is wearing seafoam green hospital scrubs and a surgical mask.

The figure removes its mask and surgical cap. Will sees red, and his drugged brain struggles for context. When he blinks, the figure has transformed. It’s still wearing the hospital scrubs, but its head is an inferno of curling red and orange flames. The fire swirls over a facial structure which is indistinct but somehow strangely familiar. A bubble of memory rises up through the anesthetized haze in Will’s brain; the thing before him is similar to the demons which plagued the Angel-Maker.

The demon looks around, making strange clicking noises as it moves. It looks over to Will and freezes when it catches sight of his eyes cracked open. It stands still for a moment but seems to relax when it takes in how glossy and uncomprehending his eyes are. It moves closer to the hospital bed, still emitting the clicking sounds. Will is too numb to feel it as the demon moves his blankets and lifts his hospital gown. It clicks some more before putting everything back in place.

It slips on the surgical mask and cap and the curling flame is promptly extinguished. Exhaustion begins to weigh Will down again and his eyelids droop. Just before they shut, he sees the disguised demon hold its index finger up over the mask.

“Shhh.”

Once more, Will loses consciousness and plunges into the void.

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The next time Will wakes up, his ventilation tube is gone and there’s a lingering soreness in his throat. His limbs and muscles are significantly achier, and the memory of the demon is distant and dreamy. His head aches along with the rest of his body, and he briefly wonders if he can just fall back into painless oblivion for a while. But before he thinks about that any further, he hears a soft, familiar voice.

“And Max the king of all wild things was lonely and wanted to be where someone loved him best of all.”

Will’s lashes are crusty as he forces his eyelids open. He turns his head to look at the source of the sound. Alana sits beside his bed, Rosemary tucked in the crook of her right arm and a picture book in her left hand. For the first time in his memory, she looks a mess. Her hair is bushy with none of her usual effort to tame it into its usual style. Her eyes are red-rimmed, and it’s clear that she hasn’t been sleeping as much as she needs.

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“Then all around from far away across the world he smelled good things to eat so he gave up being king of where the wild things are,” she continues quietly.

“But the wild things cried, ‘Oh please don’t go – we’ll eat you up – we love you so!’” Will croaks, his voice rough from disuse and bitter from the poisoned well deep inside him.
Alana looks up instantly. Now that her eyes are on him, he sees that they are not tired but full of guilt and horror and unshed tears. “Will,” she whispers.

His eyes turn to Rosemary, who is whimpering and trying to reach for him with both awkward little hands. “Rosie,” he murmurs, trying to move and wincing when dull throbs of pain sting his nerves.

“Here,” Alana says, standing up. “Do you think it wouldn’t hurt if I lay her on your chest?”

“Even if it does, it’d be worth it.”

Alana nods, leaning over the hospital bed to place the baby on Will’s chest so her little head rests just beneath his chin. He breathes in her clean scent and feels tears pricking at the corner of his eyes as he listens to her snuffle and coo.

“She missed you so much,” Alana says quietly. “She may recognize me as a caregiver, but she knows I’m not her parent. She’d cry for hours, and there was nothing I could do to settle her down.”

Rosie gives a sad little whine against Will’s chin. Though his empathy may be a burden at most times, it’s allowed him to be more in-tune with his baby’s wants and needs where other first-time parents may struggle. Of course he recognizes that sound; it’s what she would use when she wanted attention from Hannibal.

“I’m not the only one she misses,” he says. He shuts his eyes tight, releasing a heavy sigh. “How long?”

“Just over a week. Today’s the first day I’ve brought her to see you. Your condition was too critical before.” She is silent for a moment as she considers elaborating. “You were in surgery for nearly 20 hours. They managed to save everything but your gallbladder and a portion of your liver. You almost didn’t make it.”

Will tries to swallow, but there’s not enough saliva in his throat. “What’s it… what’s it like out there?”

Alana takes in a long steadying breath. “A nightmare. Hobbs times a hundred, at least. Honestly, combine all the cases you’ve ever worked and then multiply that by a hundred. My phone’s been ringing off the hook with news vultures wanting to know about you, about your condition, about Lecter’s time as my mentor, about…” She pulls a sour face and swallows back bile. When she continues, her voice is low and hoarse. “About his dinner parties.”

It only takes a moment for the meaning to sink in. Will feels his stomach flip, and if he had anything in it, he’s sure he would have struggled to keep its contents down. He takes in a big lungful of air, holds it, and releases it in a long, stuttering breath. The memory of every meal Hannibal ever prepared for him lingers on his taste buds, bloody and accusatory.

They sit in heavy silence for a few moments. For Alana, there will be a time for speaking later. A time for therapy, for long, difficult visits with doctors who are not herself, for unexpected chills down her spine when she passes the meat section of grocery stores. For Will, the future is one dark, unknowable cloud. It’s been that way before, but the thunder has never been so loud.

The grim atmosphere is punctured by a sharp electronic chirp from Alana’s purse. She gives Will an apologetic glance as she reaches for it. She looks at her phone. “Looks like it’s from Jack,” she murmurs.

First she frowns in confusion, but soon what little color remains in her haggard face drains away.
Her free hand comes up to cover her mouth. “Oh, God.”

“What now?” Will croaks.

Alana’s shoulders begin to shake and her lips press into a firm, angry line. She glares at whatever she’s seeing on her phone. With a sinking feeling, Will realizes he has never seen Alana Bloom this furious before, and there’s been plenty of competition where her righteous anger is concerned.

“I thought she couldn’t possibly reach any lower,” Alana growls. “But she dug the hole even deeper.”

“Alana, what are you talking about?”

Alana takes in a long, ragged breath and closes her eyes. She repeats this a few times before she’s reigned in her anger enough to continue. “Freddie Lounds.”

Will tenses up. He slowly moves his heavy, tired arms up; his left arm settles around Rosemary in a protective gesture and the right reaches out to Alana. “Show me the article.”

“I don’t think-“

“Show me,” Will hisses through gritted teeth. With a heavy sigh, Alana acquiesces.

Whatever Will was expecting to see, it certainly wasn’t a picture of his pale and intubated body on the very same hospital bed he’s currently lying in. There are four photos in a square formation at the top of the article. The top left is a distant shot from the other side of the room, and the top right is a close-up of his face. His eyes are open slightly but unseeing. It’s the bottom two pictures that really knock the air out of his lungs, though. He hasn’t even been awake long enough to get a look at the damage inflicted to his body in private. Thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people online may be seeing the long, angry red lines and surgical stitches across his abdomen before he’s even had the chance to look in the mirror.

There’s so much to be upset over, but God help him, the first thing that he feels is a sting of regret at how the new, hideous wounds cross over his healed C-section scar. He isn’t new to scars. He has ancient callouses from boat motor repairs; cuts and scrapes from stray fish hooks; the stab wound from his time on the beat in New Orleans; and dozens of minor, barely visible things from the banal wounds of everyday life. But the C-section scar, though painful and terrifying when it was still fresh, had grown to mean something more pleasant to him. It was the mark of an incident which by all accounts should have ended messily, but miraculously he and Rosie had come out unscathed.

He can’t even see it anymore beneath all the surgical stitching. He may never see it again when the new scars form.

His thumb trembles over the actual words of the article, but before he can even dare to read any of it, the pictures jump down the screen. Freddie Lounds has just updated again. He pushes his thumb down the touchscreen and his heart stops.

At the top of the newest article is a picture of Alana and Rosemary in the hospital parking lot. Blessedly, Rosie is bundled up enough against the lingering chill of early March that only a bit of her cheek and upper lip are visible. His heart resumes beating as he furiously scans the text, and if he were still connected to any monitoring equipment, it would be shrieking with the mad thundering of his pulse.

The article is short but no less brutal.
Delivered by the Ripper himself and conceived while Will Graham was playing house with the most prolific serial killer to have ever struck the mid-Atlantic, it’s easy to draw certain worrying conclusions about Graham’s fourteen-week-old daughter, whose name has never been released to the public. I’ve put all my journalistic skills to use, but trying to get more information is like trying to squeeze blood from a stone.

I’m just saying that the timing’s pretty conspicuous, dear readers. Anybody with a brain in their head can do simple math, after all, and in this case 1+1=3. When two psychopaths love each other very much… What would you even call such a thing? Obviously “the birds and the bees” is too tame. The vultures and the hornets, perhaps?

But who knows. Maybe love was never a part of it. Maybe Hannibal the Cannibal just wanted some easy access to baby back ribs.

Will drops the phone, bringing his hand up to embrace Rosemary tighter. He shuts his eyes, focusing on shielding his daughter and feeling her soft warmth against his chest. He doesn’t respond when Alana calls his name, but he hears her distraught gasp when she sees the article herself.

Hundreds of thousands of people have seen his wounds. Hundreds of thousands of people know he has a daughter. Hundreds of thousands of people will now think the Chesapeake Ripper is her father.

Deep down - deeper than he’s comfortable digging, where no light hits, where the tunnels connecting his own darkness and the darkness of the monsters he profiles lie - he knows hundreds of thousands of people are right.

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Will remains in the hospital as the weeks drag on. The first three are mostly spent healing and being strong-armed into physical therapy that he isn’t sure he actually needs. After that, the focus shifts more on covert psychiatric monitoring. It has to be covert given how the direct approach went. When the doctors came in and asked him directly how he was coping, he just laughed and laughed and laughed until he nearly pulled one of his stitches loose.

He thinks that’s the sanest reaction someone could have to such an obviously ridiculous question, but apparently some of the doctors disagree.

He tries to shape up after that, if only because he knows he’s perilously close to losing custody of Rosie. If he doesn’t neatly fit into all the little boxes under the ‘Sane’ column on their checklists, he’ll lose her for sure. So he frowns when they need him to frown, cries when they need him to cry, smiles when they need him to smile. He knows when they’re watching and what they need to see, so he puts on an Oscar-caliber performance.

It’s disingenuous at best and manipulative at worst. But if it will allow him to keep the one little bright spot he’s got left, he can’t bring himself to feel bad about it. And it works. In the fourth week of his hospital stay, two nurses bring in a simple crib and tell him that he’s well enough for Rosie to stay with him from now on. He almost feels something vaguely similar to hope.

One week later. Will sits on the floor of his room next to a mat he’s spread out for Rosie to play
on. He holds her new favorite toy, a little red panda Bev sent as a gift, moving it as if it is scurrying around her as she lies on her belly. She laughs as she watches it move about, hitting her little palms on the mat as she tries to catch it.

There’s a knock at the door. Will glances up, prepared to give whatever doctor he’ll be facing exactly what they expect. But when the door opens, his eyes widen in surprise. “Jack.”

Jack Crawford looks about fifteen pounds lighter and fifteen years older than Will remembers. There are bags beneath his eyes and his short hair has gone from salt-and-pepper to fully grey. “Been a long time,” he says.

“Very. If you’re here to catch up, that’s a long, long talk,” Will says, nodding vaguely toward a chair near the window. “Might as well sit down for it.”

Jack practically collapses into the chair, sighing as he stretches his legs out before him. He rubs at his temples with his large hand. “Too much ground to cover. But I guess it doesn’t hurt to start with an apology. For not seeing. For taking his word at face value. For-”

“I believe you, Jack,” Will says quietly. He fumbles in his shirt pocket. He removes his glasses and puts them on. “But that’s not the only reason you’re here.”

“I believe you, Jack,” Will says quietly. He fumbles in his shirt pocket. He removes his glasses and puts them on. “But that’s not the only reason you’re here.”

“Guess I’ll cut to the chase. I’ve got neutral news and bad news.”

“I expected bad news and worse news,” Will grumbles. “Neutral first.”

“You’re being discharged next week. We have a safe house prepared for you and the baby.”

“How long of a stay?”

Jack shrugs, his shoulders as heavy and slumped as if they’re burdened by the weight of the world. “Long as you need.”

Will nods. They lapse into silence. Rosie is staring at Jack as her little fingers squeeze the soft tail of her toy. Out of the corner of his eye, Will sees Jack returning the stare. The Alpha’s expression is stoic and difficult to read, but Will doesn’t need to guess what’s going on in his head. Jack must have seen Freddie Lounds’ article. And even if he somehow hasn’t, he can see Rosie’s eyes. Their color has changed and fully settled. They’re a reddish-brown that Will has only ever seen on one other face.

“I’ll need suppressants. Once Rosie’s about six months old my cycle will start up again. And I want a name change petition sheet. I want to change her middle name to Michelle. She’s already used to Rosemary, and the name hasn’t gotten out to scavengers like Lounds yet. She deserves one stable thing,” Will says. “Her surname goes without saying.”

“Those things can be arranged.”

“What’s the worse news?” Will asks. “Just, you know, for the record: if this is a request or even a demand that I appear in court as a witness, it’s not going to happen. The last thing I need is to sit in front of all those eyes, all those hungry, judging, gawking faces starving for gossip like ravenous hyenas, and have the defense attorney ask if I was in a relationship with him. If we were intimate. And I’d have to sit there and say yes. And watch all those greedy eyes light up like Christmas in Vegas. You’ve got the recording of him ripping me open. That should be more than enough.”

“It’s not about court,” Jack says. “That process is still far off on the horizon. We’re still working on figuring out how many counts of murder we’re looking at here. That’s why I’m here.”
Will glances up at him but says nothing.

“We found a rolodex of business cards in his house near where he kept recipe books and collections. But he says that’s not everyone, not by a long shot. According to Lecter’s lawyer, he’s willing to tell us the names and – if applicable – where any remains are hidden.”

“What does he want?”

Jack’s hands curl into fists against his thighs. “To see you in person.”

Will feels that unstoppable, incredulous laugh boiling deep down inside him, but he’s able to clamp it down and keep it from erupting out of him in another hysterical burst. He clears his throat and reaches out for Rosemary, picking her up and holding her in his lap. She clings to him, still eying Jack. “And what did you say to that?” he asks, his voice shakier than he’d like.

“That I’d ask you.”

A small specter of that disbelieving laugh escapes Will’s lips. “Really, Jack? Not even one flat ‘No’? You went straight for what might as well be ‘Graham will be there in his Sunday best’?”

Jack’s jaw tightens and twitches. “I wanted it to be your decision. Yours alone.”

“But we both know that you’d really, really prefer one of those responses over the other.”

“Fine. You know what? You’re damn right,” Jack growls. He stands, and there’s just enough frustration in him to power his tired and guilty body into a domineering pose. “Because all day – every day – I’ve been flooded with calls from the families of missing persons from here to goddamn Honolulu! They all think their relatives have been gnawed on and dumped somewhere by the Chesapeake Ripper! And God only knows how many of them are ACTUALLY RIGHT!”

Rosemary whimpers and starts to cry as Jack’s raised voice startles her. Will holds her close, instinctively turning her away from Jack. The baby’s cries seem to take some of the furious wind out of Jack’s sails because Will hears him sigh miserably.

“I’m sorry, Will. I really am,” Jack mutters. “You have to believe that I’m not happy about this either. But it’s for the greater good. So many families can finally know what happened to their loved ones.”

Will manages to hush the baby, but he keeps his back turned to Jack. “If I do this for you, Jack, it is the last thing I will ever do for you,” he mumbles tonelessly.

Jack opens his mouth to reply, but he closes it again a few seconds later. The sun is setting in the window behind him, and the bright rays of light cast his shadow long over the huddled Omega and baby. “The Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane wants the appointment at least three weeks in advance so they can make the proper safety and media-suppression procedures,” he mutters.

“Fine,” Will says. “Go.”

After some hesitation, Jack complies.

The sun sets.

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Will has discovered the two most pointless, hideously stupid words in English, if not human language altogether: “at least”.

“At least you didn’t lose anything too vital,” a trainee nurse says as she looks at an x-ray of Will’s abdomen, gallbladder gone and liver in the process of re-growing the chunk of it which had been torn to shreds.

“At least you get to kind of feel like a movie star hounded by paparazzi,” one of the police officers escorting him out of the hospital says as Will can see camera flashes and hear shouted questions even though he huddles beneath a jacket thrown over his head.

“At least you survived,” the other officer says as Will realizes that this hell is what his life will be like indefinitely unless he comes up with something drastic.

“At least this means you’ve got a lot of well-wishers out there,” an FBI agent at the safe house says as he brings in another armful of toys and presents sent to the FBI. Everything Will has ever owned is still locked up tight in evidence lockers, but at least he’s got a closet full of stuffed animals that overwhelm his daughter to the point of tears.

“At least you hadn’t actually bonded with him officially yet,” a guard at the Baltimore Hospital for the Criminally Insane says as he not-so-subtly looks at the pale flesh of Will’s mark-free neck. He’s escorting Will down the long corridor to where Hannibal Lecter is being held prior to the trial.

“At least I’m not hurling empty platitudes at everyone who has done the same to me,” Will hisses as his grip tightens on the folder he’s carrying.

“Jeez, I was just being polite. No need to get snippy,” the guard grumbles. Will doesn’t know if he wants to laugh or scream, but it’s probably a combination of the two.

At the end of the corridor is a dark metal door. Jack and a few people Will does not recognize stand by it, speaking to each other in hushed voices. Given their clothing and posture, Will assumes they’re lawyers or other court officials. They go quiet as he approaches. A dark-skinned Alpha woman in an expensive suit looks sharply at the folder Will carries. “He’s not allowed to receive any correspondence,” she says.

“IT’s not for him,” Will says. He shoves the folder at Jack. “It’s for you. My resignation from the FBI, effective immediately.”

Jack takes the folder, his fingers stiff. He gives a small, grim frown. “And what do you plan to do?”

Will shrugs. “Go back to fixing boat motors. Raise my daughter. Try to get through each day without screaming until my throat gives out,” he says.

“Will, you’ve done so much good for the FBI—”

“Save it, Jack. I meant what I said when you asked me to do this,” Will says. “Besides, I’m of no use to you anymore. Every useful bit of me bled out on Lecter’s floor. I’ve got nothing left to give because I am empty. End of discussion.”

Jack’s frown deepens, but he says nothing else.

“You’ll be alone in there, but we’ve negotiated it so you’ll only need to spend twenty minutes with him,” says one of the other suits, a short bald Beta. He hands Will a timer. “Time’s up when that
goes off.”

“Oh, only twenty minutes. What a walk through the park,” Will sneers. “Let me get this over with.”

The bald man nods at the guard, who opens the door. Will enters

Standing behind a great glass wall is the man who single-handedly managed to be the best and worst thing to have ever happened to Will. His fancy suits have been replaced by a drab grey jumpsuit. As he is not allowed any luxuries beyond basic hygiene supplies, his greying-blond hair hangs across his forehead in a fringe. It’s the type of look Will only saw on the Alpha while they laid in bed together early in the morning, and that memory imbeds in his heart like a shard of glass. Despite being stripped of all the things that maintained his glamour of perfection, Hannibal looks no less dignified. His posture is flawless and confident, and if anything having his mask of respectability torn away reveals the powerful beast in his eyes.

“Good afternoon, Will,” he says. “I’m glad to see you’ve recovered well.”

Will scoffs. “Says the monster that nearly spilled my guts on the floor.”

“If I wanted you dead, you would be.”

“That doesn’t really fly when you were telling me how you planned to stage my corpse once you finished tearing it apart.”

“A necessary lie. Better to tell it than risk ruining the surprise,” Hannibal says. He takes in a deep breath and winces. “You’ve started suppressants. It renders your natural scent sterile and cheap, like dumping out a bottle of the finest perfume in favor of that miserable aftershave of yours. We’ll need to correct that when the time comes.”

“‘We’? You’re locked up in an asylum for the criminally insane, in case you thought the straightjackets on some of your housemates were just tight-fitting sweaters.”

“My current housing situation may be less than ideal, yes,” Hannibal smirks. “But this may not always be the case.”

Will shakes his head. “Maybe you really will end up back here after the trial,” he says. “Talk like that certainly makes you sound crazy, even though you and I both know that isn’t the case. Insane people aren’t fully aware of what they’re doing. You revel in it, savoring it more than fine wine.”

“Few things are as pleasurable,” Hannibal admits. “It comes with my highest recommendation. You would find it to your liking if you allowed yourself the luxury of indulgence.”

Will begins to pace, the first thing that springs to mind in order to burn off the furious energy that’s building up in him. “I hope the court thinks this is worth it. You trying to burrow under my skin and bore into my brain in exchange for half-remembered if not wholly fabricated dumping grounds for bodies.”

“You do not need to worry about the exchange. I value this time enough to hold up my end of the bargain. I also have a photographic memory,” Hannibal says. “I am as aware of the locations of the remains as I am aware of every freckle, every hair, every faded scar, every fresh wound on your body. I’ll possess all those images for the rest of my life, and they are mine to explore at my leisure.”

Will screws his eyes shut tight and his lips scowl as the words wash over him like an acid spill,
leaving him raw and burning. He does not respond.

“Clearly you aren’t thrilled to be here,” Hannibal muses. “Yet you came regardless. For the sake of families you don’t even know - faceless, theoretical strangers - you subject yourself to me. Always the martyr. It truly is a pity they don’t allow me pencils and paper, for I’d draw you as St. Sebastian. Tied to a thirsty, desert-beaten tree, riddled with arrows and battered by your own heavenly burden. Your suffering is as beautiful as it is wholly unnecessary.”

Will’s eyes open slowly. They are half-lidded and dark when he pins Hannibal with an unblinking stare. Hannibal smiles at Will’s grim expression as if it were a confession of undying love. “Your words won’t break me.”

Hannibal quirks an eyebrow. “Can’t break what’s already broken?”

Will’s lips twist upwards at the ends, but it isn’t a smile. It’s a mirthless curl, tiny and spiteful. “That’s the trick,” he whispers. “My edges are all jagged. You’ll cut yourself.”

“Jagged edges can be shattered further. The hairline fractures make the process all the easier,” Hannibal says. He leans forward, closer to the glass separating them. “And I have always had an affinity for sharp objects.”

Will glares at him, but Hannibal breezily changes the subject. “Tell me, Will, how is Rosemary?”

“Don’t you dare,” Will hisses. “You don’t deserve to say her name.”

“It’s only natural for a man to be concerned about the welfare of his daughter.”

“She’s not your daughter.”

“Will,” Hannibal says, his voice disappointed and patronizing. “Lying is unbecoming. You must have connected the dots by now.”

“Of course I have. I think I knew all along, but I didn’t know how to interpret the desperate, horrified hints that slipped through my subconscious.” He swallows, his throat suddenly feeling dry. “I didn’t want to see.”

“Then your protests that she is not my daughter are absurd.”

“She’s not your daughter because she will grow up with no memory of you,” Will growls. His shoulders shake and his fingernails cut so deeply into the palms of his fists that he suspects blood may start to trickle at any moment. “I’ve changed her middle and last names. I’ll lie with a smile on my face and a song in my heart if she ever asks about her sire.”

Will almost cherishes the slight frown that appears on Hannibal’s face at the mention of removing the ‘Mischa’ from Rosemary’s name. “You can strike my surname and my sister’s name from her records,” he says. “But you can’t strike my blood from her veins. We are inexorably connected, you and I, and she is the living embodiment of that unbreakable link.”

Will glances at the timer. Only thirty seconds left, but he knows that time is going to drag out so each millisecond feels like an hour.

“One last thing, for the time being,” Hannibal says. “It’s something I should have said the morning of the day our house of cards came tumbling down.”

Will sighs. His memory is highly accurate as well, and that morning is carved into him bone-deep
anyway. He’s fairly sure he knows what’s coming. “Say it.”

“I love you too.”

The timer rings in Will’s pocket. “Goodbye, Dr. Lecter,” he mutters. “I’m going to send in the people who are actually interested in your corpse treasure hunt now.”

“Adieu, Will. Until we meet again,” Hannibal says. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Will says as he turns his back on Hannibal and reaches for the handle on the door. “I’m prone to nightmares, after all.”

The door slams behind him.

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Breaking News! Hannibal’s Cannibal Clan on the Run

Will Graham, the Omega lover and (in my own personal opinion) likely co-conspirator of the infamous Dr. Hannibal Lecter, has resigned from his position of instructor, profiler, and occasional rabid bloodhound for the FBI. For those just now hearing about the sick and twisted tale (have you been under a rock on Mars for the past couple of months?!), please click the hashtags at the end of the article for the full scoop.

Not only has Graham quit, but it’s been reported that he’s severing ties with anyone and everyone and has set off for parts unknown with his dubiously-fathered baby. I’ve been trying to track him down because his whereabouts ought to be public knowledge for the benefit of society at large, but no luck so far. Even though he’s quit, the FBI must be covering his tracks. Rest assured that I will keep at it, readers, and you’ll be the first to know when I’ve found him.

Well, wherever he is, Graham should be careful. His little monster should be teething by now, after all.

#Chesapeake Ripper #Hannibal the Cannibal #Will Graham #FBI – Federal Bureau of Insanity

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Sitting in front of her computer, Bev fumbles for her phone. She finds the number in her contact list and waits.

The phone doesn’t even ring once. Instead, Bev hears three escalating tones in quick succession. “We’re sorry,” a stilted, overly enunciated male voice says. “You have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please check the number and try the call again.”

She sits there, silent and still, with the phone still pressed to her ear. Numb, she stares ahead. The other line is so quiet she only hears the rushing of her own blood. Then, there is a soft click and the tones sound again. “We’re sorry,” the voice repeats.

Bev taps “End Call” on her phone before the recording can say another word.

She buries her face in her hands and sighs.

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Sitting at a picnic table in a park, Abigail Hobbs highlights a sentence in her abnormal psychology
textbook. The park has become a safe haven for her studies. There are quite a few students from the psychology department in her dorm, and the lounge TV is constantly turned to whichever channel is discussing the ongoing Lecter trial. The TV might be easy enough to avoid, but it’s so sensationalized that it’s all she ever seems to hear about. Apparently there was even chatter amongst the school’s chess club to rename their group the Chess-apeake Rippers to strike fear in the hearts of their competition.

She’s spent a lot of time alone over the past few weeks as a result. Luckily, she has her studies as an excuse for her reclusive behavior. It’s that or explain that she knows everyone at ground zero of that bombshell and she feels the shrapnel burnt and smoking in her own skin. Not again.

“Raaaar, I’m Hannibal the Cannibal and I’m gonna gobble up your brains!”

She looks up abruptly, startled. There’s a group of five young boys, all around seven years old, roughhousing around the playground equipment.

“No fair, Cody!” one of the other boys yells. “You’re never just a normal cop or something when we play this game!”

“That’s ‘cuz I’m the smartest and fastest, duh,” gloats Cody. “I came in like third place in the whole school during the field day race.”

“Ha, I came in second place. Then I’m Will Graham and I’m gonna catch you!” cries a blond boy, who tackles Cody.

“Will Graham sucks!” yells Cody as he tries to shove the other boy away. “He ran off and hid. If you do something as cool as catch the biggest bad guy in history, you don’t just run away!”

Abigail’s hands tremble as she shoves her books into her backpack. She storms away as the boys grow tired of that game and move on to playing Avengers. The horror of her life, juxtaposed with comic book superheroes.

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The ferry rocks slightly though a choppy patch of water as Will stands in the boat’s bathroom. He has just changed Rosemary’s diaper, and now that he’s sanitized his hands, he reaches for her baby bag. He helps Rosie sit up on the counter and hands her the little red panda. She coos in interest and clasps it in her hands, but she becomes transfixed as soon as she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She stares at her reflection.

“What’s that baby, huh?” Will asks softly as he pulls out a brush from the bag. He heaves a heavy yawn as he carefully begins to brush through the baby’s curly hair. “Is that you?”

He blinks heavily, and when he opens his eyes, he catches a bit of red out of the corner of his eye. His stomach turns. Sitting in Rosemary’s lap is a human heart, and her little fingers are stained red with fresh blood as they tear into the muscle.

”You can’t strike my blood from her veins,” Hannibal murmurs into his ear.

Will gasps, his hand jerking abruptly in shock. The shocked movement tears at Rosemary’s hair, and the baby shrieks and begins to cry at the unexpected pain. Wide-eyed, Will looks down at his sobbing daughter. There is no heart, only the soft red fur of her stuffed animal. Her hands are clean.

“Oh God, I’m sorry,” Will whispers, picking Rosemary up and holding her close. He pats her back.
as tears begin to cloud his vision. “I’m sorry, baby, I’m sorry.”

As he’s whispering softly to encourage Rosemary to calm down, Will feels the ferry slow and come to a stop. It takes a few minutes, but eventually the baby’s cries begin to trail off into whimpers and finally silence. Still holding her close and securely, Will swings the baby bag over his shoulder and exits the bathroom.

The ship has already docked, so he makes his way down the steps to the wooden pier. The dozen or so other passengers are all milling about around him, most dressed in garish touristy outfits and snapping pictures of everything. Will feels awkward and out of place, a miserable and exhausted killjoy in the midst of such middle-aged vacationer excitement. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the ferryman carry the last of the few meager boxes Will has out of the hold. There’s another man standing by the small pile of boxes and Will warily makes his way over.

The waiting man looks to be in his late forties and has the particular build of a football player who’s retired and has not-so-reluctantly let the physique go. He’s tall and stocky with a deep tropical tan. He’s hiding his thinning brown hair beneath an old weather-beaten baseball cap. He notices as Will approaches and gives him a wide smile. “You, uh-” The man pulls a sheet of paper from his cargo shorts. “William Graham?”

“That’s me,” Will says.

“Cap Calhoun,” the man says, extending his hand. Will adjusts Rosemary, who peeks at the man but quickly buries her face in Will’s shirt, and shakes the offered hand. “Welcome to Sugarloaf. I own the property you’re gonna be renting, so I guess that makes me your landlord. And who’s this little lady?”

“Uh, Rosemary. Sorry, she’s started to be a little shy around strangers.”

Cap grins. “My youngest went through that stage. She’ll grow out of it.” His smile fades slightly. “So, uh, is it just the two of you?”

“Yes,” Will says, focusing his attention on Rosemary to avoid eye contact with Cap. “I hope that isn’t an issue.”

“Oh, no. No. Not at all. We’re a lot more open-minded here than you get in some parts of the mainland, that’s for sure,” Cap says. “Let me pull my boat around and I’ll get you loaded up. It’s faster to get to the place by water than it is by car.”

A few minutes later, Will sits in Cap’s motorboat with Rosemary on his lap. “Didn’t bring much with you, huh?” Cap asks as he places the last box in the storage compartment. “Guess you don’t need much when the place comes pre-furnished.”

“That’s one major reason why I was interested,” Will says as he puts a little sunhat on Rosemary’s head and begins smearing sunblock on her legs. She reaches up for the hat, more intrigued than perturbed by it.

“Just to clarify, I really didn’t mean anything when I asked… well, y’know, about you and the baby being alone and all,” Cap says as he steers the boat away from the pier. “It’s just that the house is pretty remote. My family and I will be your closest neighbors, and we’re a good two miles away.”

“That’s the other reason I was interested. Remote’s good,” Will says. “I work well with remote.”

Cap shrugs. “Well, if you need anything from us once you get settled in, just give a holler. In fact,
my mate was planning on making some of his world-class burgers for dinner. You can join in, if you'd like."

"No, thank you," Will says. "I don't really eat meat anymore. Had some bad reactions. I think I'll only eat what I catch myself from now on."

"Self-sustaining fisher type, huh? You're in the right place. We’ll be there in about fifteen minutes. You look exhausted, so why don’t you take a rest?"

Will nods. Rosemary gives a quiet, sleepy babble as the rhythm of the boat cutting through the clear blue water lulls her to sleep. Will looks out over the ocean. Blue and stretching as far as he can see, there has to be a good hundred miles of water between his new home and the Florida mainland. From there, it’s another thousand miles to wade through the swamps of the Everglades, to pass through all those southern coastal states, and finally to reach one man in one glass room.

He doubts that the distance will ever feel far enough.

END
Alternate Ending: Hand in Unlovable Hand

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNINGS: Graphic, disturbing death of children (NOT Rosemary, for the record. Case related.)

As promised, here's the alternate ending! Written mostly because there were a few lines I really wanted to write. Just to be clear, I personally consider the ending found in chapters 9+10 to be canonical to this story, making this little excursion an AU. So this isn't meant to be the ~true~ ending or anything. Nor do I think this is a "happy" ending where the other ending is "unhappy". "Happy" isn't really a word I'd ever associate with Hannibal; only various degrees of bloody complication. That being said, if you prefer this ending for whatever reason or think it's a super happy end, it's fine for you to consider this your personal canon end for the story. I'm very laid-back about this kind of thing.

A good way to think about this alternate take is through a video game metaphor. This is the ending you unlock on the second play-through after finding all the hidden collectables. It might not tie together with the main story as much as the ending you got on the first play-through, but it's not meant to be. :) 

The title for this alternate chapter comes from another song by the Mountain Goats. As mentioned in earlier notes, the line "sleep like dead men, wake up like dead men" comes from their song "Damn These Vampires". This time, the title comes from the song "No Children".

And with this done, it's onwards to working on a new, entirely unrelated Hannigram fic. As always, comments/kudos are greatly appreciated!

Sunlight filters through the canopy above, leaving little speckles of light against the grass. Will squints up at the mostly-concealed sun. Not yet midday, but getting close. It’ll be time for lunch soon. He leans back against the rough bark of the tree, sighing as the slight movement makes his back ache slightly. He looks down the small hill, preparing to call out for Rosemary, but he sees the little girl already scurrying up towards him.

Her dark blonde hair shines gold in the sunlight as her curls bounce around her shoulders. Despite the fact that she’s been playing in the sandbox, jumping off swings, and crawling around in tall grass for over an hour, somehow her clothing remains pristine. Everything from her purple sundress down to her white socks and black Mary Janes are spotless. Genetics, Will thinks sarcastically.

She slows down as she approaches Will. She grabs her little red backpack resting near Will’s left side and rummages through its contents, eventually pulling out a pack of crayons and her slightly wrinkled drawing pad. She won't be starting Kindergarten for a few months yet, but she's so eager that she insists on carrying her new supplies just about everywhere Will will let her.

“Is it almost lunchtime?” Rosemary asks as she settles down next to Will on the picnic blanket.
“Almost. You through having fun on the playground?”

“The sun’s too burny now,” the little girl says. “And I wanna draw something before lunch.”

Will raises an eyebrow and leans closer, peering at the pad of paper. “Oh? What’s that?”

Even though she hasn’t yet begun to draw, Rosemary yanks the pad beneath her chest and splays her fingers over it. There’s an impish look in her reddish-brown eyes. “Secret! Don’t look ‘til it’s done!”

Will laughs, shaking his head. “Fine, I won’t look,” he says, shutting his eyes. “See? But you have to promise to stay by my side. No running off while I can’t see you.”

Will hears his daughter laugh, followed by the scribbling of crayon on paper. “Okay. Promise!”

In the humid warmth of midday, Will’s mind wanders.

-----Five Years Before-----

He sits beneath his desk in his lecture room with the pieces of the miserable jigsaw puzzle strewn about him. Now that the emotional tempest has crested and the numbness has set in, he gazes at the pictures with glassy eyes. He settles on an unfamiliar paper lying next to the pictures of the corpse of Stephan Waldorf. He leans forward slowly and tugs the sheet closer.

It’s a page from an unrelated case file. Bev must have accidentally mixed it in when she was preparing the files for him. There are three pictures: one of a middle-aged man in handcuffs at the conclusion of a trial and two school pictures of smiling little girls. The girls’ vital statistics are listed below their photographs. PRESUMED DEAD is stamped beneath each girl’s information. The phrase “Copycat Dollmaker?” is scrawled at the top of the page in Jack’s heavy handwriting.

It’s something to distract from his situation, so without even really thinking, Will plunges in deep.

Will remembers the Dollmaker. Justin Fairbairn of Laurel, Maryland, had been caught about half a year before Jack approached him about the Minnesota Shrike case. As a result, Will had never been out in the field for the Dollmaker’s case. He ultimately didn’t need to, considering the sloppy way Fairbairn had been caught. But the pictures of the man’s gruesome work had certainly made its way across Will’s desk.

The Dollmaker’s four victims had all been blonde Beta or Omega girls between the ages of 6 and 8. Fairbairn abducted each of them on their solitary walks home from school; two came from Laurel proper, while the other two had come from neighboring towns. One day after each set of parents reported their child missing, a beautifully wrapped box would appear on the family doorstep. Each box contained the girl’s eyes and all her hair.

Fairbairn had gotten sloppy in his ‘work’, though. Though he never left a single fingerprint, he neglected to notice that one of his own stray hairs had become stuck in the tape which attached the big pink bow to the fourth package. His DNA wasn’t in any system, but at least it let the police and FBI know they were looking for a Beta Caucasian male.

One week after that discovery, the police caught Fairbairn. Laurel and its surrounding towns had gone on the alert in an attempt to protect any more of their girls from being taken. With no child allowed to walk to or from school and police presence through the roof, his opportunities waned. In an apparent moment of desperation, he was caught by a police officer as he very loudly attempted to snatch a girl from a crowded mall in broad daylight. When the police took a DNA sample from the cripplingly shy, stuttering, middle-aged bank teller, it had matched the stray hair on the fourth
When the police broke down the door of the house Fairbairn shared with his twin brother on a spacious plot of land on the outskirts of Laurel, they did not find any bodies or anything else incriminating. Dustin Fairbairn, the twin, said that his brother had a shed he spent most of his time in. He had never been in it himself because the usually quiet and unassuming Justin would fly into an apoplectic rage at the thought.

Inside the shed were the bodies of the four little girls lined up in a display on a large shelf. They were dressed in beautiful, colorful dresses with plenty of petticoats. Big, glittering glass eyes peered out from their sockets, and carefully brushed and styled golden wigs covered each shaved head. Their skin was painted porcelain white, particularly over their necks, where the coroner would later find the hand-shaped bruises that had ended each girl’s life.

And so Justin Fairbairn, age 37, went down as the Dollmaker in Jack’s Evil Minds Research Museum.

The information blazes through Will’s head as he looks at the pictures of the two new girls and Fairbairn. He sees the tears running down the man’s cheeks, the tiny smile on his cracked lips, and the slump of shoulders which sag with the loss of a terrible burden. “Human enough to feel remorse and shame for the dark deeds he had been compelled to do; relieved he will not be able to kill again”: the universally agreed-upon conclusion in the profiling community.

And just like that, Will knows the trick.

He looks back down at the picture of Waldorf’s corpse. There’s a terrible, gaping void where Will Graham’s heart used to be, and from the blackest corner comes a whisper. He is frozen in place as it whispers again, more insistently. Today is not the first day he has heard it, but before there was just enough light – even if it was only the faintest glimmer most of the time – to chase it away. But now, God help him, he listens.

He stands, scooping up the pictures all around him. He puts his own files in his case and reorganizes the Osterberg and Münz files for Bev. He holds the stray Dollmaker sheet atop the manila folder as he leaves the room.

Will keeps his eyes on the floor as he walks through the halls. This is nothing new, so no passersby suspect that there is a tempest brewing and churning behind his glasses. One trainee attempts to flag him down with effusive praise about the first Waldorf lecture, but he just walks right past her. Again, not unusual.

His mask is in place by the time he finishes the short walk to the research lab where Bev, Price, and Zeller spend most of their time. When he enters, Will can hear Price and Zeller arguing in a side room over something Will can’t quite make out. Bev sits on a stool, leaning one elbow against the steel table she’s sitting at and chewing on a foil-wrapped burrito. She is facing the source of the argument, so Will taps on the door as he enters.

Bev turns, giving him a friendly nod.

“So, uh, what are they yelling about this time?”

“You probably wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Bev says. “But it involves the pico de gallo from the burritos we ordered and a game of chicken that escalated to the point of involving a donated, dehydrated hand we were doing some tests on.”
Will frowns. “Well, that’s… unexpected.”

“Yeah, it really got out of hand,” Bev says. She grins at the scowl that puts on Will’s face. “So, did you find those invisible shoes?”

Will’s mask doesn’t even twitch. “Can’t say I did,” he says as he approaches. He sets the folder down on the table beside her with the Dollmaker sheet on top. “Though it looks like something else accidentally slipped in with the things I asked for. Assuming it was an accident.”

Bev sets her lunch down and holds her hands up in defeat. “Accident, I swear,” she says. She glances back down at the paper, all traces of humor gone. “But…”

“But?”

“Jack really wants to ask you to look. It’s like he’s about to explode from all the willpower it’s taking him to keep from asking,” she says.

“Why hasn’t he?”

Bev shrugs. “Guilt, I bet. He really took it hard when Waldorf almost got you. That, and he’s probably not too keen on throwing someone with a new baby daughter at a copycat who’s killing little girls, even if she’s an Alpha and the victims haven’t been. Too personal.”

Will says nothing for a moment as his eyes linger on the words PRESUMED DEAD.

“Did you glean anything from it, even if it’s just a page?” Bev asks.

“Not much to glean from this alone,” Will lies. “Unless we’re looking at a precise replication of the Dollmaker’s work. Presumed dead… they already found the boxes.”

Bev sighs and nods. “The original Dollmaker only did the mutilations and dress-up post-mortem. But you can never know for sure with copycats.”

“Not with copycats, no,” Will says. He rubs his neck. “Since I’m part-time right now, I’m not scheduled to give the next of the Waldorf lectures for another three days. But I’ll come in tomorrow. Talk to Jack, volunteer to look at the new files, see if I can see something missing.”

“Really?” Bev bites her lip for a moment, and when she continues her voice is quiet and personal, just above a whisper. “This is the widest berth Jack’s given you in a long time. You do good work, Will. Work that saves lives. But if you wanted to get out of field work for good, taking advantage of this distance is probably your best shot. And nobody would blame you, what with having a family now.”

“And I plan on telling Jack precisely that tomorrow,” Will says as he heads back toward the door. “Now that I have a daughter, I can’t push myself for him like I did before Waldorf. But earlier, you said this case could get too personal for me. You’re right. But personal can be just as motivating as it can be distracting.”

As he puts his hand on the door handle, he turns back to look at Bev. “See you tomorrow.”

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Will lets the mask crumble away as he enters the front door to his and Hannibal’s house. His lips are set in a faint, grim frown and his eyes turn piercing. He moves slowly down the hall, listening to the sound of slicing linoleum. He stops in the guest bathroom doorway, looking down at
Hannibal as the older man performs minor renovations on the floor.

“You’re back early. Welcome home,” Hannibal says as he turns to look at Will, a smile on his lips. The smile fades slightly as he notices the hard expression on Will’s face and one very important absence. “Where’s Rosemary?”

“Like you said, I got back early. She’s not due to be picked up from daycare for another three hours. We’ll pick her up then,” Will says. “There’s something we need to discuss before that. Let’s go for a drive.”

Hannibal’s expression is stoic and inscrutable as he observes Will for a few long seconds. His fingers twitch on the hilt of the linoleum knife as he processes the meaning behind every line on Will’s face. Finally, he seems to reach his conclusion, and he makes a very deliberate show of setting the knife aside.

Will shakes his head slowly, his eyes never breaking contact with Hannibal’s. “No. Bring it. Along with whatever else you might need.”

Hannibal stands, the knife in hand. His reddish-brown eyes are narrowed at Will, and his intense expression has gone beyond scrutinizing Will’s face well into the territory of scrutinizing him on a molecular level. “I suppose the proverbial cat is out of the bag,” he suggests.

“The cat is so far out of the bag that it’s in another time zone, if not on another planet altogether,” Will says tonelessly. He turns, heading back toward the door. “But we’re not talking about that here. Let’s go.”

The journey feels enormously long in the thick, heavy silence as Will drives them out of Baltimore, past the suburbs, and into more rural territory. He turns off the half-decent paved road and onto a long, winding dirt path. Every once in a while, they hit a particularly bad divot, and there is a sound that resembles a distant, vague moan.

Finally, Will stops at a small clearing in a wooded area. He still says nothing as he glances at the backseat and its unusual contents: a clear plastic suit, a large black trash bag, a spool of heavy-duty twine, a cooler, and Rosemary’s car seat. His eyes drift to Hannibal in the passenger seat and linger over the linoleum knife still in the Alpha’s hand. When he exits the car, Hannibal follows.

Will takes a few steps away from the vehicle and stops. “I know.”

“What do you know, Will? I’d like to hear you say it,” Hannibal says. Although Will has stopped, Hannibal continues to move. His steps are slow, quiet, and methodical as he begins to circle around the Omega. His knife glints in the sunlight.

“You’re a killer,” Will says, staring straight ahead into the scraggly trees. “One with quite the resume. The Copycat Shrike. The Chesapeake Ripper. You probably have other names. And that’s not even counting disappearances or the ones the police didn’t classify as homicides.”

“And yet here we are in rural seclusion with many of the tools of my trade and no gun or handcuffs on your person. If your objective is to capture me, your method is extremely obtuse.”

Will lets out a small, sharp laugh. “Capture someone like you? You won’t be stopped. Can’t be, more like, if I’m being honest. Let’s say you get thrown in prison. How long will that little vacation last? Because you will get out. You know it; I know it. Just one tiny chink in the armor for you to locate and exploit, and just like that, you’ll be out again with a chip on your shoulder. What you are cannot be caged permanently. The only thing that will ever stop you is death itself.”
Hannibal stops circling around Will. He tilts his head, a faintly amused quirk on his lips. “So you’re threatening me with a fight to the death?”

“No,” Will says, still staring straight forward. “There’s no question that you’d beat me there. I’ll freely admit I’m no match for you physically. But if you’re the unstoppable force, then I must become the immovable object.”

Will takes a few steps toward the car, and he doesn’t need to guess that Hannibal is following like a panther that’s looking for the right time to strike. “I don’t have a threat for you, Hannibal; I have a proposition.”

He stands beside the trunk of his car and clicks a button on his key. The trunk pops open, revealing a bound-and-gagged man curled up in the limited space. His hair is a mousey brown with patches of grey on his temples and flecked throughout his short, well-trimmed beard. The man’s eyes are shut, and for a few long moments, his breathing is so shallow that he appears to be dead. Once the fresh air makes it into the trunk, however, he gives a great, desperate gasp through his nose. His eyes fly open wide, green and darting and panicked.

“Meet Dustin Fairbairn,” Will says.

Fairbairn’s eyes settle on Hannibal, and he begins to make desperate pleading sounds through the gag. Hannibal regards the Beta with cold demi-interest. “The Dollmaker’s twin brother,” he says.

“No. The real Dollmaker.”

Fairbairn’s muffled pleading goes silent as his terrified eyes bore into Will.

“Identical twins. Nature’s identity crisis. Normally the worst you get with twins like that is either a hyperactive need to differentiate themselves or a compulsion to remain as similar as possible. But in this case, things went wrong early. Your brother was always more submissive than you, wasn’t he, Mr. Fairbairn? You the bold, secretly sociopathic leader, he the quiet, dedicated follower. ‘Your brother’s so shy!’ your parents and teachers and neighbors would cry to the two of you. ‘He’s lucky to have you.’ And he took that to heart, took it in until he knew that he was hopeless without you. A perfect garden to cultivate codependency,” Will says. “And he tried to turn a blind eye while you turned little girls into dolls. He resigned himself to that existence. He shut his eyes and covered his ears in an attempt to blot out their screams.”

He reaches into the trunk, and Fairbairn tries to squirm away despite his limited range of motion. Will grabs the man around the shoulders and, with a great amount of difficulty and muffled protests, manages to pull him from the trunk. Fairbairn lands in a heap on the ground, still straining against his restraints.

“But you slipped up.” Will continues as he glares down at the Beta. “You were so careful. You snatched the girls at just the right time, in just the right way, so it seemed like they vanished into thin air. You always wore gloves when you perfected their little bodies.”

He reaches down and yanks a hair from Fairbairn’s head. He twirls the thin strand between his fingers. “But you’re balding and just once, a tiny hair slipped under your radar and got caught in your giftwrap. Now that the police had your DNA on file, if you slipped up again, they’d be that much closer to catching you. And that’s when your hopeless, brainwashed brother saw his chance to repay you. He never intended to actually kidnap that girl from the mall. He meant to get caught, so the police would take his DNA – his perfectly identical DNA. That look of relief on his face at his trial wasn’t the relief of a shame-afflicted madman who knows he won’t kill again.”
Will kneels down and hisses, “It’s the relief of a man who thinks he’s finally done something right by his precious brother. One twin who loves too much, and one who can’t comprehend love at all. The ‘evil twin’ trope is pure fiction, but sometimes life is just sick and bored enough to imitate art.”

Will stands again. He turns to face Hannibal, whose expression is unreadable save for a profoundly fascinated glimmer in his eyes. “And that brings me to you,” Will says. “I figured out your secret by digging deep for Kell Münz and Julie Osterberg once I noticed the slight inconsistencies in their files. But I could have figured you out much sooner, if I’d applied the same effort earlier.”

“And when would that be?”

“Stephan Waldorf. Even in my hospital bed, I noticed there was no reason for him to commit suicide. And I saw the discrepancy in blood quantity at the scene. Suicide was not part of Waldorf’s design, but Jack didn’t press me on it and I had other worries ready and willing to clog up my mind, so I didn’t press myself. I saw the same sort of discrepancies with Münz and Osterberg, but willed myself forward because they were innocent. Harmless. They deserved to have at least one person know the truth. But when a monster dies and there are loose ends, people are not nearly so compelled to trace the strands.”

Will’s eyes lock with Hannibal’s, neither blinking. “In other words, no more Münzes or Osterbergs. Hunting season’s over, but there’s always a need for pest control.”

For a moment, the only sounds in the clearing are Fairbairn’s terrified moans.

Hannibal’s lips purse slightly, as if he has tasted something faintly unsavory. “You forget that I was a fan of Waldorf’s works. I owned an original, after all. He sadly revealed that he was incapable of listening to kindly suggestions when it came to victim selection, and it was with great regret that I had to correct that mistake. What you’re suggesting is vigilantism, and there is simply nothing more tedious in the world. I will not be used as a tool.”

“Vigilantes care. In one way or another, they think they’re making the world a better place,” Will says. “I don’t expect that from you.”

He steps over Fairbairn as he moves closer to Hannibal. “Nor is it an attempt to use you. It is, however, the first step towards something vaguely equal,” he says. “Speaking as someone who was the most blunt and worn hammer in Jack Crawford’s toolbox, I won’t have you continuing to use me either.”

“And if I refuse?” Hannibal asks.

Will shrugs. “Then I expect you’ll kill me here. And him, since he’s heard all this,” he says, gesturing to Fairbairn as an afterthought. “Kind of goes without saying that that’s the one non-variable here.”

“Yet you do not think I’ll refuse,” Hannibal murmurs. “You said we’re due to pick up Rosemary later this afternoon, and if you thought there was any chance of me striking you down, you would have secured her from me. Your certainty is as curious as it is fascinating.”

“You want to know why? Okay,” Will says. He closes the small distance between them, and his voice is a low whisper when he continues. “Because as much satisfaction can be gleaned from manipulation, exploitation, poison-hearted secrecy, destruction for destruction’s sake… there is nothing more appealing than someone who knows all of that, knows how unfathomably deep the darkness goes, knows that there is no glimmer of light or goodness there… and stays.”
Hannibal smiles, cold and cruel and smitten.

-----Now-----

“Daddy! Daddy! Wake up! Papa’s here with lunch!”

Will’s eyes snap open as Rosemary continues to push on his shoulder. “Wake up!” she calls.

“I wasn’t asleep.” Will mutters as he rubs his eyes. He blinks against the light, and the shape of Hannibal pulling plates and small plastic tubs out of a basket comes into focus. “I was just recollecting with my eyes closed.”

“You were snoring a little,” Rosie chirps.

Hannibal chuckles. “Now, now, Rosemary. Your Daddy needs naps as much as you do right now.”

“I don’t need naps. Naps are for babies,” Rosie grumbles. Her grumpiness evaporates immediately as her words spark a thought in her. She brightens, grinning widely. “Oh yeah! Daddy, you should see my picture! Papa said it was good.”

“As always, she displays immense talent,” Hannibal says as he begins constructing sandwiches on their plates.

Rosemary scurries over to where she had set her pad of paper and brings it over to Will. He accepts the paper as his daughter grins with excitement. It’s a set of four figures in descending order of height, and though they’re still childishly rendered, they’re quite good for a five-year-old.

“This one’s Papa,” Rosemary says as he points to the first figure, resplendent with grey-blond hair and a suit and tie.

“And you,” she says, pointing to the next figure. With its curly brown hair and glasses, the resemblance is strong.

“Me,” she continues. Her own self-portrait is wearing a bright red dress, and she has used the same color for her and Hannibal’s eyes.

“And the baby, when he gets born,” she concludes. The final figure is the smallest by far and appears to be wearing a light blue onesie. He has straight, dark brown hair and blue eyes which match Will’s own.

“That’s great, Rosie,” Will says, ruffling her hair with one hand while the other comes up to rest on the swell of his nearly-term belly.

“I gave him your hair and eyes ‘cause I already have Papa’s, and it should be fair,” she explains.

Will laughs. “That’s very kind of you, but it doesn’t really work on fairness. Still, we’ll find out in a few weeks, huh?”

“Lunch is served,” Hannibal announces as he sets plates in front of Rosemary and Will. “Chicken dijon with lettuce, tomato, and black olive tapenade for yourself and Rosemary. Roast beef with sprouts, caramelized onions, and a light horseradish dressing for myself.”

He gives Will a knowing look as his lips quirk upwards with a small, conspiratorial smile. ”You would be quite fond of the latter, I think. It’s a pity you’ve lost your taste for certain meats this pregnancy. Hopefully it returns to you soon after the delivery.”
“I’m sure it will. I’ve never been able to turn down your cooking for long,” Will says, returning the wry expression with one of his own. Rosemary happily bites into her own sandwich, unaware of the secrets hidden in her parents’ conversation.

They eat their lunch in easy comfort. Rosemary finishes first. Energized from the meal and pleased to see some cloud cover rolling in to blot out the hot midday sun, she’s eager to return to play and gets permission to spend another half-hour on the equipment. As Will watches her sprint down the hill, he turns to Hannibal.

“I’ve got an idea for the baby’s name,” he says.

“Oh?”

“Fabian.”

Hannibal hums thoughtfully as he clears their plates away. “From the Latin Fabius, the root meaning being ‘bean’.”

Will laughs. “Glad to see it comes ready-made with such a cheesy nickname for me to exploit.”

“But that’s not why you’ve selected it, is it?” Hannibal says. Now that he’s tidied everything from the picnic blanket, he comes to sit by Will. “Allow me to guess. Fabius Maximus?”

“Got it in one,” Will says. “It’s almost as if you’ve heard a lot of jokes about the Punic Wars.”

“Possibly more than anyone else on the planet, excluding Latin history scholars. It comes with the name,” Hannibal says. “I admit, I see the wry humor in having a son named for the general who opposed Hannibal Barca with innovative delaying tactics. Still, Rome needed Publius Cornelius Scipio to truly put an end to my namesake’s tireless campaign.”

“And what can be done,” Hannibal muses slowly as he presses his forehead against Will’s own and cups the Omega’s jaw with his strong hand. Will leans into the touch. “When Scipio and the bane of Rome are in collusion?”

Will smiles against Hannibal’s lips, dark and secret and smitten.

END
Two Sprigs of Rosemary: They're All Blood, You See

Chapter Notes

I'm back.

It's been a long year. I've gone into it a little bit at my tumblr (rosen-ritter dot tumblr dot com) if you'd like to see all the (pretty objectively) unpleasant reasons I haven't written for so long. Long story short: more family death, expensive eye surgery to keep me from going legally blind, and being in awful funks where there was no chance of being productive.

But the good news is, I'm getting better. I wanted to start writing again (I do plan on finishing Dies Irae, and I've got other story ideas), but I needed a way to get into the swing of things. Episode 2 of season 3 gave me this inspiration. Will and Abigail's informal multiverse theory, where there must be worlds where their actions were different and therefore so were the consequences, was particularly relevant to the ending of this story. I realized there would be two different Rosemarys (Rosemaries?) with very different lives and, as a result, hugely divergent personalities. And I realized I wanted to explore that.

But since I also wanted to stick to my guns about not writing a sequel to Sleep Like Dead Men, I've decided to explore those ideas via 2 new epilogue chapters! Not a sequel work! HAHA, technicalities!

Anyway, I want to thank everyone who has left kudos/reviews/kind words for me here and elsewhere. It's helped me pull through the darkest chapter of my life so far. Every last one of them means a lot to me. Oh - and one last thing. I apologize that Molly here is likely to be very different from her book/TV version. I haven't seen the TV version yet, and it's been way, way too long since I've read Red Dragon. And with all that settled, let's go.

WARNINGs FOR THIS CHAPTER: referenced miscarriage (Rosie portion), domestic and child abuse within an OC family (Rosemary portion)

“Well, we can do you blood and love without the rhetoric, and we can do you blood and rhetoric without the love, and we can do you all three concurrent or consecutive. But we can’t give you love and rhetoric without the blood. Blood is compulsory. They’re all blood, you see.” - Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Tom Stoppard

Rosie

--- 5 - December ---

“O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, how lovely are your...” Rosie hums as she wraps tinsel around the trunk of one of the palm trees outside her house. She squints up at the tree, tilting her head in contemplation as she realizes it doesn’t really have much in the way of branches. “Bark?”
Winston barks beside her, wagging his tail.

“Not you,” Rosie giggles, falling to her knees so she can scratch at the dog’s greying muzzle. His tongue lolls out happily, and he very diplomatically accepts the tinsel that Rosie begins wrapping around his neck. “O Winston-dog, O Winston-dog…”

“Rosie!” Molly calls from the front door. “Could you come in for a minute? Daddy and I have big news for you!”

The little girl clambers to her feet, brushing sand off her knees and wiping her hands off on her lavender shorts. She trots up to the house, Winston at her shoeless feet.

Molly is beaming when Rosie enters, and she laughs and shakes her head fondly at the sight of Winston’s festive decoration. “You know it’s only December 1st, right? Guess I can’t blame you for being eager. But come on, Santa’s little helper. Let’s all go have a little chat on the couch.”

The first hint Rosie gets that perhaps not everything is as happy and exciting as Molly is making it out to be is the way her daddy looks sitting on the couch. There’s a smile on his face, but it’s big and tight and weird – not the tiny but warm little half-grin he gives her when they’re out on the water with a fish pulling at the end of her line. But she doesn’t have time to examine why his body language is so strange; Molly plops down on the other end of the couch and pats the center cushion for Rosie to sit.

“So… uh, hm…” Will mumbles. Molly laughs giddily, and after a second, he does too. He clears his throat and tries again. “Rosie, do you remember… what you wanted for Christmas last year? The big thing that we said was just – um – too much to ask for that year?”

“A real, live mermaid?” Rosie asks in an awed voice.

Will laughs again, and this time it sounds more natural to Rosie’s ears. “No. The other big thing.” Rosie thinks for a moment before recollection washes over her. “A little brother or sister?”

“That’s right!” Molly exclaims, pulling both Will and Rosie into a big hug. Winston, feeling neglected, whines and tries to squeeze into the hug as well. “We’re going to have a baby!”

Rosie grins widely once her stepmother releases them from her vicelike hug. “Is it already here?” she asks, looking around the room and even standing on the cushion to peer behind the sofa. “Or is it coming on Christmas?”

Will folds his hands and settles them low over his stomach. ’You wanted to tell her right away, ’he mouths to Molly while Rosie’s back is to them. ’You explain it.’

“Ah, no, the baby won’t be here on Christmas,” Molly says once Rosie settles back to sit on the couch. “Actually… the baby is really, really far away from us right now! It has to travel a long way, and it probably won’t get here until July.”

“Oh,” Rosie mumbles, her shoulders slumping with disappointment. She swings her legs, biting her lip and furrowing her brow. “But where is the baby right now? Is it where all babies come from? Did I come from there? Why-“

“If we answer all those questions now, then you’ll have nothing to ask between now and when the baby gets here!” Molly chides. “And that sounds pretty boring if you ask me. Now, how about you go get cleaned up and change into some nice clothes. Let’s go have dinner in Key West to celebrate.”
Grinning with excitement, Rosie hops off the couch and runs for her room. Winston follows as fast as his aging bones can carry him.

Will gives Molly an incredulous look. “‘The baby is really, really far away from us and has to travel a long way to get here’?”

“I panicked! I didn’t know what else to say, so that’s what I went with.”

“If we waited to tell her, we wouldn’t be the parents-to-be of some… some baby who apparently has to swim across the Gulf of Mexico just to get here.”

“She’s too little to hear the real deal,” Molly explains. “I am not ready to explain the birds and the bees to a kid who just turned five.”

“You’re going to have to someday, and now not just to her,” Will says. He smirks. “Actually, you’re kind of the perfect candidate. You’re an Alpha woman, she’s an Alpha girl…”

Molly shudders. “That’s going to be a terrifying conversation. I’ll have to own up to all the outrageous urges and hormonally-charged, half-baked schemes I had as a teenager,” she says. “But, hopefully it’s a talk I can put off for a good ten years. Tonight, let’s just have fun.”

She scoots from her end of the couch and cuddles up against Will, wrapping one of her arms around his shoulders. “And,” she drawls. “I was thinking of asking the Calhouns if she can stay the night over there tomorrow. Let the grown-ups have a little celebration of their own.”

“Oh?” Will asks, his tone practically oozing with faux innocence. “Like what?”

“Well, like the obvious,” Molly chuckles. “But it’s also been so long since we saw a movie that wasn’t Disney, Pixar, or Dreamworks. There’s that one thriller out right now that I’d like to see. It’s got that hot actor who looks kind of like you in it. I think it’s called Blood is Compulsory or something like th-“

Will’s breath catches in his throat and all of his muscles tense at once. “I don’t want to see that,” he mutters, looking down at his lap.

Molly looks confused for a moment before she laughs. “You never struck me as the type to get worked up over a scary movie,” she says, a teasing lilt to her words. “You can snuggle up to me if you get scared by the big, bad cannibal.”

“I’m serious, Molly. We can see a movie, but not that one,” Will says. He stands up abruptly from the couch, keeping his eyes on the ground. “I-It’s just… I’m going to go take a shower before we head out for dinner.”

Molly watches him as he heads for the bathroom. Once she hears the door close behind him, she sighs heavily and leans back into the couch. “Smooth move, Mols,” she grumbles. “Note for future reference: apparently hormones kick in way earlier than anticipated.”

As she heaves herself up to go get ready, she suddenly realizes that the last time she’d seen such a grim, haunted expression on Will’s face was very early on in their relationship. But the thought is an idle, ephemeral one, and it’s gone before she even leaves the room.

Standing under the hot stream of the shower with his palms pressed over his eyes and his shoulders shaking, Will recalls the exact same moment with crystal clarity.
Molly answers the door on the second ring of the bell. The man standing on the porch is middle-aged and thickset, with the tired, weathered expression of someone who has gone through the nastiest setting of life’s wringer more than once. He apparently wasn’t expecting to see her, as he visibly takes a couple of seconds to regroup and revise whatever he had initially planned to say.

“Is Will Graham here?” he finally asks.

“Yeah, uh… I’ll get him,” Molly says, frowning at the stranger in confusion. “And you are…?”

“An old friend.”

Molly’s frown deepens, but she nods and shuts the door lightly.

When the door opens again, Will has replaced Molly, who is no longer present in the foyer at all. Rosie is in his arms, and the toddler stares at the stranger on the porch with open skepticism.

“Jack?” Will whispers, shock evident on his face. The surprise hardens to steel as he decides why his former boss must be standing in front of him. He covers that steel with a thin layer of cotton and baby powder when he sets Rosie down and kneels so he’s closer to her height. “Why don’t you go play with Molly for a little bit, huh? Daddy’s about to talk about some really boring stuff.”

Rosie peers up at Jack for a few seconds. With a great seriousness that belies her age and the actual content of her question, she asks, “Will Molly play Ehpane?”

“I’m sure she’ll play Airplane with you if you ask her. Go on.”

The little girl toddles off, and the softness on Will’s face goes with her. He stands up, glaring at Jack Crawford.

“She’s really getting big,” Jack says. Given the strange pinched expression that lingers on his lips the moment the words are out, it’s clear he thinks they’re as lame as Will does.

“Almost three years will do that, Jack,” Will mutters. “Cut the small talk. Why are you here, after what I told you the last time we saw each other?”

Jack sighs. “So you plan on sticking to that.”

“Of course I do. Whatever you really came here to get me to do, the answer is now and ever shall be no.”

“You don’t understand what we’re dealing with when it comes to this guy, Will. He’s killing whole families. Destroying them,” Jack says. “I want you to know that I respect what you told me years ago. I do. I wouldn’t be here if all the other profilers we have didn’t already hit dead ends. We need you on this.”

“And I need to not be on this,” Will says. “If I help you with this guy, what then? There’s always another guy. Seems like it’s just serial killers all the way down. Time for someone else to do the spelunking to see how deep that cave goes.”

“So you’re just going to sit here, content with your family while others are being torn to shreds?”

Will shrugs. “That’s the idea.”

Jack rubs at the bridge of his nose and heaves a tired sigh. “Then one last thing and I’ll leave you
to that existence. Have you been talking to Freddie Lounds?"

Will actually has a laugh at that, even if it’s a harsh and disbelieving one. “I haven’t changed that much.”

“Guess that’s why she’s calling her most recent book ‘inspired by’ instead of ‘the authorized account’. She’s titled it *Blood is Compulsory: The Love and Rhetoric of the Chesapeake Ripper*, and let’s just say you feature heavily.”

“That’s a much more literary and pretentious title than I’d expect from the luminary that brought us ‘Tattle Crime’.”

“And that would be because it’s a collaboration with Frederick Chilton. Alana Bloom and I turned her down, Abigail’s changed her name and is lying low in grad school somewhere, and here you are. He’s the only willing participant she could get. Which, given that he trademarked the term ‘Hannibal the Cannibal’, was probably easier than just paying royalties.”

“What strange yet wholly unsurprising bedfellows,” Will mutters. “I shudder to imagine the meeting where they decided who gets top-billing and the biggest author picture on the back cover. With that much hot air in one place, it’s a wonder they didn’t float away.”

“If you came back, you could probably convince a judge to put a gag order on it. Stay here and just let it happen, and I’m sure you’ve got a lot of uncomfortable questions coming your way.”

“Nice try, Jack, but after all the doses I got, I’m immune to manipulation the same way a snake-charmer is immune to cobra venom. Especially when it’s that obvious,” Will says. “‘Will’ and ‘Graham’ are both common names. People here buy it when I laugh off the coincidence. Nobody knows who I am, and I plan on keeping it that way. Lounds and Chilton can skip off into the sunset hand-in-hand for all I care.”

“You haven’t told anyone?” Jack frowns. “Even, uh-“

“Molly. We’ve only been dating for a month. Not exactly the best conversation for the honeymoon period.”

Jack gives him a good, hard stare. As Will returns it, unflinching and uncompromising, he realizes how far he’s come since his first meeting with Jack. Or perhaps how far he’s fallen; from his point of view, the direction is much more nebulous than the very real sense of distance.

“Being on the wrong end of deceit got you where you are, Will,” Jack says as he takes a step back. “A lie of omission is still a lie.”

Will slams the door without another word.

Still, the content of his brief, strained conversation buzzes about his head incessantly for the next few hours. Whoever this new killer was and how long he could go before capture, lies of omission, *Blood is Compulsory*. Hours turn to days and days to weeks and weeks to months, and these things fade until they’re just a few more Sieverts in the background radiation of the Chernobyl of his mind.

Exactly two years after this conversation with Jack, the little castle of family and anonymity Will has tried to build on the beach meets a sudden, all-consuming tsunami.

--- 5 – January ---
Rosie knows something is wrong when she sees that her daddy isn’t waiting for her outside when her preschool ends for the day.

It’s not unusual for some of the other children to stay later than the usual pick-up time, but Rosie has never been among their number. Every day at 3 PM, without fail, her daddy waits for her at the gates with a smile on his face and an eager ear for what she learned and did that day. Then they usually go back to his store and Rosie has a snack, works on reading library books, draws, or simply plays with the feathers and plastic baubles he uses to make his lures.

But he is not among the waiting parents today. Nobody Rosie knows is.

While the children with late pick-up times play, Rosie stands by the window as the minutes tick by. Fifteen. Twenty. Twenty-five. Several anxious eternities for a five-year-old.

Finally, almost thirty minutes after her usual pick-up time, Rosie recognizes someone as they approach the preschool gate. But it isn’t her daddy – it’s Molly, and she isn’t smiling. Her teachers tell her to gather up her things. She obeys and heads out to meet Molly, but she notes her stepmother’s puffy, reddened eyes and the little fake smile she puts on as she approaches.

“Hey, Rosie-posie,” Molly says. Her voice is slightly thick and hoarse. “How was school?”

“It was okay,” Rosie says uneasily. “Where’s Daddy?”

“Daddy… uh, Daddy got sick at work today,” Molly whispers. “He had to go to the hospital in Key West. He’s going to be okay and he can come home tomorrow, but he has to stay the night there. Do you understand?”

There is a terrible feeling in Rosie’s chest, like someone dropped a heavy weight right over her heart. It’s a strange and unfamiliar feeling, and the only way her body knows how to process this confusing information is to have tears of fear begin forming in the corners of her eyes. She sniffs and wipes them away with the back of her hand. “W-what k-kind of sick?” she whimpers.

Molly takes in a long, deep breath and lets it out slowly. “His tummy hurt very, very much,” she says. She kneels down and puts her hands on both sides of Rosie’s face. “I want to be with him tonight while he’s in the hospital. Can you be a strong, brave girl and stay the night with the Calhouns so I can try to help him feel better?”

“Can Winston c-come with me?”

“Of course.”

Rosie sniffs but nods.

“Good girl,” Molly says, standing up and taking Rosie’s hand in her own. “Let’s go home and get everything ready.”

As they walk to the car, all Rosie can think about is how Molly’s grip isn’t as tight and warm as it usually is.

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They are silent as they leave the hospital the following evening. They are silent in the car, as the light of the rising moon bounces off the ocean on the long drive up the thin strip of the Overseas Highway. They are silent as they enter the house, which is lifeless with Rosie and Winston away. They are silent as they sit on the couch, both staring blankly ahead for a few long moments.
“We could try again,” Will says, breaking the tense silence at last. His voice is flat. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Molly’s hand on the armrest curl into a fist.

“One of the nurses told me something while you were asleep,” Molly mutters. “This happens sometimes. Your body thinks it’s still mated to your ex. As long as we try, this will just happen again. And again. And again. You’ll bleed, and my heart will too.”

Will turns and stare at her in disbelief. “That’s pseudo-science. Coincidence and magical thinking. The same people who believe that sort of thing think that vaccines cause autism or that Alphas are inherently superior because of ‘bio-truths’.”

Molly doesn’t say anything, and that just turns the sinking feeling in Will’s stomach to a plummeting one. “You don’t really think that stuff is true, do you?” he asks, equal parts incredulous and desperate.

“How many heats did it take you and your ex to have Rosie?” she asks.

Will blinks in surprise at the sudden change of topic. He looks away when the weight of the question sinks into his chest like a ball of lead. “One,” he murmurs.

Molly scoffs, but the poison in the sound is immediately complicated by the sounds of a jagged breath and the soft swipe of skin-on-skin as she wipes her cheeks with her hand.

“Sounds like you fit together just right,” she croaks. “You never told me what happened there, and I understand why. Sometimes there’s wounds you just don’t need to open on a day-to-day basis. But we were going to have a kid together, Will. I think I’m owed the truth.”

Will holds his breath until he feels his lungs start to burn. This is it. There is no escaping from it this time. He lets his breath out slowly. “Do you… you remember last month, when you brought up that movie and I… reacted badly?”

Molly turns her red-rimmed eyes to look at him in confusion. “Blood is Compulsory?”

“Yeah,” Will whispers, nodding. “I… I didn’t want to see it… because I lived it.”

Molly’s brows knit together for a second before they raise in shock. Her mouth goes slack, and though she looks as if she has a litany of words ready to spill from her, she is speechless.

“I said that the man who came to the house a couple of years ago was my old boss. That part was true. That was Jack Crawford, head of the Behavioral Sciences Unit at the FBI. He wanted me to work on a new case, and I turned him down because I thought if I tried hard enough, if I shut all of my old life out and barricaded the door, I could leave it all behind me,” Will continues in a rush, like festering pus erupting from an old wound. “For all that I’ve laughed and shook my head when people joked if I was ‘that’ Will Graham, I never actually denied it. Because that’s what I am. All I’ve ever been. All I’ll ever be, for all I’ve tried to hide it. I’m that Will Graham.”

“Then… Rosie’s father is…”

“He is,” Will murmurs. His heart is hammering in his chest and he feels sick from the simultaneous anxiety and relief of confession. “But even though he’s half of her, she is all Rosie. That’s all she is. Just a little girl. Now that you know… can you look at her and just see her and her alone? Can you keep your doubt at bay and treat her the same way you have these past two years? Can we fix this?”

A full minute goes by without an answer from Molly. She just looks at him with her devastated,
horrified eyes. He doesn’t press for a response; she can take however long she needs to come to a truthful conclusion. Finally, she looks away from him and Will has her answer embedded in his heart like a shard of glass before she can even articulate it. “I don’t know.”

Will leans back against the couch and looks up at the ceiling. “Would your answer be different if her father was just some deadbeat who abandoned us instead of a monster who wants nothing more than to be with us?”


“Then it’s not really an ‘I don’t know’, is it?” he whispers. “You know. So do what you know you would do eventually now. Chop the limb off before the gangrene sets in.”

What hurts the most is that, aside from a roughly thirty second silence between them, Molly doesn’t really hesitate. She doesn’t argue the point. She doesn’t delude herself and make promises she will slowly but surely fail to live up to. She doesn’t hopelessly try to convince him that everything is fine, that she didn’t mean it. If it wasn’t so painful, he could almost respect how efficiently and expertly they are falling apart. It’s certainly less messy than his last breakup.

It takes her about two hours to pack her essentials into her luggage. Will wonders if she plans on leaving without another word, but eventually she speaks to him again.

“I’m going to stay with my mom,” she says. “I’ll send for my stuff once I get a new place and transfer to another office.”

He could send her off with a bitter riposte. He could backtrack and attempt to guilt her. He could say just the right words to fill her with poison, so every time she thinks of him a little more of it gets pushed through her veins and eats at her insides. If he is to be avoided all the same, he could be a hated villain instead of a pitied leper.

He settles on something simple with no room for any of that. “Bye.”

“Bye,” she repeats.

And she’s gone.

Will sits for another thirty minutes, feeling nothing. The only thing that gets him up is the knowledge that he hasn’t seen Rosie in over 24 hours. He calls the Calhouns and gives them a truncated version of events, explaining that with the painkillers he’s on, he shouldn’t be driving for at least another day. As always, they’re kind and obliging, and Cap offers to drive Rosie and Winston home.

Rosie is deeply asleep when Cap arrives. Will thanks him again and carries the sleeping girl to her bed. He tucks her in and kisses her forehead.

He manages to sleep that night but it’s only thanks to the painkillers and the fact that he doesn’t have to abstain from alcohol anymore. He does make sure to check the label on the pills to see if there’s any warning about mixing them with alcohol. When there’s nothing specific, he feels like he’s won the fuck-up lottery and swallows them down with more whiskey than he’s had in years. He wonders if he would have bothered checking if it weren’t for the sleeping girl in the other room.

He wants dreamless oblivion, but that isn’t what he gets. He dreams of a loving embrace. He dreams of a warm presence in his bed fitted adoringly against him. He dreams of soft, soothing
words whispered into his ear.

When he wakes up, hungover and aching, he can’t decide if he wants to laugh or cry at the fact that his dream companion certainly wasn’t Molly.

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Rosie’s thoughts are a confused jumble when she first wakes up. The last thing she remembers is falling asleep in Mr. Calhoun’s backseat with her fingers gently combing through Winston’s rust-colored fur. Winston is still there, but he’s a warm, furry lump over her feet instead of in her lap.

She sits up, rubbing her eyes. From the familiar scents and the feel of the covers, her sleep-hazy brain determines she must be in her own bed. That thought wakes her up completely. If she’s in her room, her daddy must be home from the hospital.

Leaping out of bed, she apologizes for rudely waking Winston. She scurries out of her room and into the hall. The smell of maple and butter wafts from the kitchen, so she makes a bee-line for it. She slows down as she approaches the doorframe.

Rosie’s heart sinks when she sees the shape of one of the pancakes on the kitchen table.

“Who died?” she asks.

Will jolts, turning from where he is tending to the next pancake as it sizzles in a beaten-up cast iron pan on the stove top. “What do you mean?” he murmurs.

Rosie points to the pancake on the table. “You only make pancakes shaped like Mickey Mouse when somebody’s died,” she says, her voice quivering slightly. “Last time it was Buster, and before that Mr. Goldfish.”

“N-nobody is dead, Rosie,” Will says, trying to force a convincing, reassuring smile on his face. He suspects it must be pretty ghoulish, given that Rosie’s anguish only seems to deepen. He drops it. “I didn’t realize I had go-to bad news pancakes.”

“So there is bad news,” Rosie says. Winston finally wanders into the kitchen, and she hugs him in an attempt to settle some of her anxiety.

Will sighs. “There is,” he says. “There’s going to be a lot of changes happening soon. Molly isn’t going to be living here with us anymore.”

Rosie sniffs, and Will’s glad she chooses to rub her nose against her sleeve instead of against the dog. “Why?”

“Sometimes… people decide they can’t live together anymore,” Will explains, moving over to his daughter and kneeling to embrace her. “Sometimes they fight a lot, or they just can’t make each other fit together.”

“Are you going go away too?” Rosie asks, her voice meek as she presses her face into Will’s shirt.

“Never,” Will says. He strokes her curly blonde hair gently over and over. “You’re stuck with me.”

The feel of his hand in her hair and the gentle rocking motion of their embrace help settle Rosie’s nerves slightly. She still has a thousand questions. She wants to ask if he’s sure that nobody is dead, because the confusing face he had when she asked made something deep down in her chest ache. She wants to ask if her Alpha mom or dad went away like Molly did. But she holds these and
the other questions back. Even as young as she is, she has enough empathy to know they would make him even sadder than he already is.

So she settles on a statement instead of a question. “Your pancake is on fire.”

Will jumps up and dashes to the stove, where he tries to wave away the black smoke as the fire detector in the kitchen starts wailing. It’s a welcome change of topic, and once the windows in the whole house are open to clear out the smoke, they share a laugh about it over breakfast.

The days turn to weeks and the weeks to months, and slowly Rosie adjusts to the new normal of Molly being gone. But then, on a day in late May, she sees something while she stands on the lawn outside her preschool during the graduation that gives her pause. A few of the parents in the audience are holding babies, and she remembers being told that her little brother or sister would be arriving sometime in summer.

Her daddy hasn’t mentioned the baby once since Molly went away. Maybe it will choose to go live with Molly instead, or maybe it decided to go somewhere else entirely. Like the questions she had the day after Molly left, something in her tells her not to ask.

She decides that the important thing is to wish the best for the baby, whether it’s chosen to live with Molly or elsewhere. Wherever it is, she hopes it’s happy.

--- 6 – December---

“Cats and rabbits,” Rosemary hums as she shines the tops of her black Mary Janes. “Would reside in fancy little houses. And be dressed in shoes and hats and trousers, in a world of my own.”

“Rosemary!” Hannibal calls from downstairs. “Are you ready to go?”

Rosemary looks up at the wall over her bed, eyes landing on the little cuckoo clock she got as a souvenir during her family’s trip to Germany the year before. She gives a shocked little squeak when she sees the big hand pointing to 8 and the little hand getting close to 5.

“Yes, Papa!” she replies as she scurries out of her room.

She hurries down the hall until she reaches the stairs. A thousand safety lectures hit her all at once, and she takes each step carefully and purposefully. Hannibal smiles up at her from the first floor.

“You’re late, you’re late for a very important date, Alice,” he teases, offering Rosemary her winter coat.

Rosemary giggles as she shrugs on the coat and begins to button it up. “I’m sorry,” she says. “Where’s Daddy and Fabian?”

“Waiting for us in the car,” Hannibal states. “Would you care to enlighten me on why you lost track of the time?”

“I wanted my shoes as shiny and my prettycoats as fluffy as possible.”

“Petticoats,” Hannibal corrects as he locks the front door behind them.

“Petticoats,” Rosemary repeats, nodding.
“Well, you did quite a good job on that front, even if the punctuality leaves something to be desired. I started to learn how to balance timeliness with my perfectionist tendencies when I was about your age,” Hannibal says. He helps Rosemary up into her booster seat. “Looks like I’ll have to start teaching you my tricks soon.”

Will turns from his place in the front passenger seat and peers at them as Hannibal finishes buckling Rosemary into her seat. “What’s this about tricks?”

As soon as Hannibal sits down in the driver’s seat, he leans over to give Will a quick peck on the cheek. “Just time management.”

“Okay, good,” Will says. “Because I won’t have a repeat of last week, when I was changing Fabian’s diaper and someone loosened the lid on the baby powder.”

“I had nothing to do with that,” Hannibal says. “I’d changed him with no trouble that morning and I was at the butcher’s at the time of the incident. My alibi is bulletproof.”

“Beanie looked like a ghost,” Rosemary giggles, reaching over to tickle the baby’s chin. Fabian gurgles and kicks in response.

“Well, don’t come running to me once he can retaliate,” Will chastises. “I’ll be Switzerland in whatever wars you decide to wage with each other.”

“Retaliate?”

“To fight back or get even,” Will clarifies. “Now, how about we practice your lines on the way so you don’t have the time to cook up something else?”

“Okay!”

“First, all the kids will line up on the stage to sing the opening song…”

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The moment they enter the school’s theater, a chorus of beckoning Kindergartener voices cry out Rosemary’s name and she runs over to greet them. Will smiles, watching his daughter’s friends poke and prod at all the petticoats in her powder blue dress. Nearly all of her classmates are dressed as playing cards, though a set of identical twin boys have been conscripted to be Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum.

Once he sees Rosemary’s teacher greet her and begin to settle the class into their places, Will allows himself to look around the theater. The stage is large and well-lit, especially for something meant specifically for school plays.

A large banner hangs above the curtained stage. It reads “Our Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd Grades Proudly Present ‘Alice in Wonderland’. The banner’s border is made up of imprints of the children’s hands in various colors of paint. Will can spot Rosemary’s immediately; she had come home with a few flecks of bright red paint in her hair the day it was made.

As they make their way to the seats reserved for the Kindergarten families, Will gives an impressed hum. “I know we saw this on the tour when we were scouting for schools, but it never fails to impress,” he says. “I wonder if it’s because this school is K-12 and they need the space for advanced drama classes.”

“That may well be the case. Regardless, it’s a strong selling point. It is never too early for one to
cultivate an appreciation for the arts,” Hannibal says. There are four seats between the aisle and the next audience member. He checks to make sure they are free and stands aside, gesturing for Will to go ahead and take a seat.

“It’s so extravagant when compared to what I grew up with,” Will says with a sigh as he settles into his seat. “In all the elementary schools I attended, the stage was an unwieldy and unwelcome growth taking up space in dusty, underfunded cafeterias or gyms. When there was a stage at all.”

“Were you in any school plays?”

“That depends on your definition,” Will answers, setting Fabian’s diaper bag on the floor and arranging the baby to comfortably lie in his arms. He tries to smooth down a particularly wild curl on his son's head, but it refuses to comply. “Usually I missed them thanks to all the moving. But due to some very bad timing when I was in second grade, I moved schools in such a way that I was in four separate school plays more or less back-to-back. But I always arrived late enough that the teachers had to give me back-up parts without any lines. Between two states, I was the moon, two trees, and a sheep.”

“Your empathy makes you quite a convincing actor when you need to be,” Hannibal muses, smiling gently. “I’m sure even covered in construction paper and cotton balls, you made quite the convincing sheep.”

Will laughs, but he cuts it short as he notices someone approaching their row. “Why, look who it is,” he says. “Mrs. Komeda?”

The older woman turns at the sound of her name, surprise lighting up her features. “Hannibal! Will! Goodness, what are the odds? Don’t tell me your little Rosemary has already started Kindergarten here?”

“I’m afraid that for all we can control, even Will and I are subject to the inexorable march of time,” Hannibal says. He turns to Will and waggles his finger over Fabian’s eyes. Intrigued, the baby grabs onto it and immediately attempts to suck on it. “It seems like only yesterday she was even smaller than Fabian.”

Mrs. Komeda coos as she moves in for a closer look at the baby. “Oh, he is just precious. Much more handsome than the pink little newborn I first saw at your dinner party back in July. He’s really starting to take after you, Will,” she says. “And how is Rosemary adapting to life as a big sister?”

“She loves him, but we’ve discovered that she has an unexpected mischievous streak,” Hannibal says. “Hopefully it doesn’t become competitive and contentious once they approach puberty, given that they’re both Alphas. I’ve been trying to convince Will that we should keep going until we have a little Omega to balance out the mix.”

Will rolls his eyes but smiles good-naturedly. “And my hesitation is for the sake of all those young Alphas who would cast our child an appreciative eye in adolescence,” Will says. He tilts his head toward Hannibal, his half-lidded eyes and a secret smile speaking of a private joke. “You’d eat them alive.”

“Guilty as charged,” Hannibal says, holding his hands up like a thief caught red-handed.

Once they’ve all had a laugh, Will continues, “And what brings you here, Mrs. Komeda? Are elementary school plays now the craze of Baltimore’s high society?”
“Given the frankly abysmal debuts of some of the so-called professional work this season, this may very well be a step up,” Mrs. Komeda says flippantly. “But all joking aside, my niece actually teaches the second grade here. I’ve attended every one of the plays her class has participated in since she began her teaching career. Speaking of which - and I really am sorry to beat such a hasty retreat - I really would like to speak with her before the play begins.”

“No trouble at all,” Hannibal says. “We likely won’t be able to chat after the play, since we’re now beholden to bedtimes. But I am planning another dinner party soon. You’ll be the first to get an invitation.”

Once Mrs. Komeda is well out of ear-shot, Hannibal leans closer to Will and presses a kiss to his temple. He trails his lips down the side of Will’s head until he is at his ear. “I’d eat them alive?” he murmurs. “So brazen.”

Will chuckles. “Learned from the best.”

They are interrupted by a few soft grunts from Fabian. When Will looks down at the baby, he sees his little face scrunched up in what appears to be intense concentration. “Uh-oh. Now that is a look I know all too well,” he says. He leans forward to kiss Fabian’s forehead, and his nose wrinkles when his suspicions are confirmed with a few ill-fated sniffs. “Though I guess I’d rather you do this now than in the middle of the play, stinky.”

He moves Fabian to the crook of his left arm and reaches down for the diaper bag. He is just beginning to stand when he feels Hannibal’s hand on his shoulder pressing him back to his seat.

“I’ll take care of it,” Hannibal says as he takes the bag and loops its strap over his shoulder. Will passes the fussing baby to him and watches Hannibal carry their son towards the restrooms at the back of the theater.

Once they’re out of sight, Will allows his eyes to take in his fellow audience members and the children preparing for the play. He soon settles on watching the entrance just as the Mad Hatter, March Hare, and Dormouse make their grand appearance all at once. Fitting enough. They leave their parents behind to join the other second graders.

The next two people who enter give him pause, and it’s enough to force him to have a closer look. The adult is likely an Omega given his body language, and the little girl is dressed as a playing card like the majority of the other Kindergarteners. However, she already has makeup on while the other children are having their faces painted by a couple of the art teachers and a few volunteers. The other children have very sparing face paint – simply a heart, club, spade, or diamond on each cheek depending on their costume. But this girl’s entire face is coated in a thick, white basecoat. There is no symbol on her cheeks, but rather one very large, black club painted directly over her right eye.

It’s a jarring difference, and Will finds himself frowning and his mind whirring with possible explanations.

*The black club begins to dribble down the girl’s face, first becoming streaks of black before dripping off her chin completely. The white base goes next just the same, and Will is left with his terrible answer. The girl’s right eye is dark and swollen with a painful bruise.*

Will blinks and the girl’s abuse is once again hidden. His stomach roils with disgust.

She sticks to her father’s side, meek and seemingly unwilling to join the other children. The father says a few words and brushes a gentle hand over her mousy brown hair – the same color as his
own. Though still hesitant, the girl detaches from him and goes to lurk on the periphery of the Kindergarten group. The father lingers awkwardly at the entrance for a moment, looking as unwilling to join the audience as his daughter is to join her class. He scans the seats and cautiously begins to approach when he sees that the only empty seats reserved for the Kindergarten families are next to Will.

The closer he gets, the more precise Will’s assessment of him becomes. He’s very young, possibly no older than 25, which means he likely had his daughter when he was only 19 or 20. Almost definitely a trophy, then. An inexperienced, helpless prize thrown from his childhood home to the feet of an older Alpha who – by performance or pedigree – has acquired the income necessary to match this school’s high tuition and reputation.

“Um, are any of these seats taken?” the young Omega asks once he has made it over to where Will is sitting. He keeps his dark brown eyes downcast, too nervous to meet Will’s own.

“Only this one,” Will replies, indicating Hannibal’s seat to his left. “But the two to my right are free.”

The young man looks nervously two seats down at the Alpha mother who is chattering happily with her Omega while tinkering with a camcorder in preparation of filming the performance. As he deliberates, Will notices him rubbing his wrist subconsciously. He settles on the empty chair next to Will instead of the one next to her.

They sit in silence for nearly a minute. Will’s new neighbor hasn’t removed his thick winter coat even though beads of sweat are collecting around his hairline.

The bruises stop at his wrists. How far up do they go? Aside from his face and his hands, do they stop at all?

Will makes his decision then and there.

“I’m Will,” he says. “I’ve met most of the other Kindergarten parents, but I can’t say I remember meeting you. My daughter is Rosemary.”

The young man looks briefly startled and panicked, as if it never occurred to him that Will would bother to speak to him. “Oh, um, I-I don’t really get out all that much. I’m Rowan,” he mutters. “And my daughter’s name is Violet. You said your daughter’s name is Rosemary? Sh-she’s playing Alice, right?”

Will nods, slightly embarrassed that – if he hadn’t seen her moments ago – he would have no idea that there was a girl named Violet in Rosemary’s class. He thought all the children had come to Rosemary’s birthday party back in November; she’d certainly invited them all, given the esoteric etiquette of Kindergarten parties. Apparently not.

"My Alpha wanted Violet to be Alice, but she has stage-fright," Rowan says, his voice trailing off awkwardly. He rubs at a spot on his arm.

Before Will can attempt to continue the conversation, Rowan sees something behind Will and tenses up. He plaster a large, anxious smile on his face even as he fidgets nervously with his coat sleeves. “H-hi, honey. I saved you a seat, like you asked.”

Will turns to see a tall, broad-shouldered Alpha looming over him. He’s early middle-aged with salt-and-pepper hair and cold grey eyes. Will has to suppress a shudder of revulsion when those eyes sweep up and down his body.
The Alpha turns to Rowan and gives a sharp nod of his head, the way Will would shame a misbehaving dog to its kennel. Rowan obediently moves over a seat, leaving space for his mate to sit between himself and Will.

“Dr. Vincent Seward,” the man says. He gives Will a grin that he no doubt thinks is charming and debonair, but which only raises Will’s hackles further.

Will risks a glance at Rowan, noting the carefully blank look on the young man’s face as he stares down at the floor.

“Will Graham-Lecter,” he says, putting much more emphasis on the second half of his surname than he normally would.

“Lecter? As in Hannibal Lecter?”

“My mate,” Will explains. “He’ll be back soon.”

“I was a surgery resident when Dr. Lecter was still at Johns Hopkins, and I’m sure I must have come up dozens of times in his surgeon stories,” Seward says with a chuckle. “It’ll be nice to catch up.”

“Funny,” Will drawls. “He’s never mentioned you before.”

Given the slightly sour expression that creeps into Seward’s dashing façade, Will knows that was the perfect low blow. He can also see Rowan’s face twist from his careful neutral expression to one of horror, as if he has just watched Will brazenly kick a hornet’s nest. Before anything can come of it, though, he hears a welcome voice.

“It seems we’ve gotten neighbors while I was preoccupied,” Hannibal says.

Will is up and out of his seat in an instant. “There’s my little Bean. Did Papa make you nice and clean?” he coos to the baby. He looks to Hannibal. “Thank you for volunteering.”

As he moves to take Fabian into the crook of his right arm, he places his left hand on Hannibal’s back. He knows that from Seward and Rowan’s position, it will merely look like a side-hug. But he quickly presses his fingertip against Hannibal’s shoulder blade in a few short and long bursts of Morse. A L P H A, he taps, followed by his fingernail scratching a deep, unambiguous X.

Hannibal gives him a lovestruck look, and that’s how Will knows the message has been received loud and clear. He settles back in his seat with Fabian in his arms and waits.

Seward stands and extends his right hand to Hannibal. “It’s been a long time, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal accepts the handshake but gives Seward a quizzical look. “Have we met?”

It’s another hard blow to Seward’s ego, and Will has to suppress a laugh. In his periphery, he sees Rowan’s distressed expression intensify. It then occurs to him that Seward may very well take their bad behavior out on Rowan and Violet, and his merriment at Seward’s expense evaporates instantly.

“He was that resident you mentioned in a lot of the stories from your ER days, remember?” Will interjects. “The name was unfamiliar to me for a minute, too, but now I remember.”

“Ah, yes. You’ll have to forgive me. You became a resident when I was giving a lot of thought to leaving the profession; that sort of doubt can leave the memory hazy,” Hannibal lies easily as he
and Seward take their seats.

Seward tilts his chin up slightly, some of his bravado restored. It doesn’t seem to improve Rowan’s anxiety in the slightest, however.

“I knew you’d remember me,” Seward says. He briefly looks at Will again before turning his eyes back to Hannibal. “And I see you mated after all. There was quite a betting pool going on amongst the surgical team on if you’d ever meet someone who could live up to your high standards.”

“And luckily Will exceeds them,” Hannibal says, draping his arm around Will’s shoulders. “I knew from the very first day I met him, when his boss at the FBI introduced us.”

Incredulity warps Seward’s face at that. He gives a small, sharp bark of laughter. “You let him work?”

“I let me work,” Will says coolly.

Seward shakes his head and whispers to Hannibal as if Will, who is sitting between them, can’t hear his words at all. “They get all sorts of outrageous ideas if you don’t keep them firmly in place, you know. Every day the media tries to find some new thing for Omegas to get offended over, tries to confuse them about their natural role to play in life. Give them an inch, and they’ll take a mile.”

“Heaven forbid,” Hannibal says, feeling the muscles in Will’s shoulders nearly vibrate with tension and fury.

“How about Rowan, the children, and I have a nice little evening together?” Will asks abruptly, taking great pains to keep his teeth from gritting together as he speaks.

Seward looks at him skeptically.

“I think we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot,” Will says. “I assure you – I respect your beliefs and you don’t have to worry about me being a bad influence. After all, we’ll be watching our children play while we trade recipes over a hot stove. What could be more wholesome and traditional?”

As with most things about his mate, Hannibal appreciates the wide, toothy smile Will gives Mr. Seward; it’s sharper than most of the knives in their kitchen, and the rude Alpha is too blind to see that it’s pressed against his jugular.

“That’s right. Will can provide your Omega with some of my recipes, and in turn be taught some of the tricks of being a more successful homemaker. And if it helps settle your concerns, it will truly be an Omega’s night in as I’ll be out of town. An acquaintance of mine in Virginia has been complaining that a very pernicious wild hog has been destroying his property. He’s become a bit feeble as his old age approaches, so I think I’ll take up his offer to stay in his guest cabin that weekend and see if I can resolve the problem.”

Surprise shows clearly on Seward’s face. “You hunt?” he asks.

“Oh yes. I’ve been a hunter my entire adult life, as well as the vast majority of my adolescence.”

“You don’t seem the type. When I think of hunters, I think of… hillbillies in the woods, drunk almost to the point of collapse, shooting at what they think is an 8-point buck but which is really a 0-point raccoon.”

“An unfortunate mischaracterization,” Hannibal says. “In medieval Europe, it was considered exclusively the realm of the wealthy upper-class. That is the sport as I engage with it – the nobility
of asserting one’s dominance over unruly animals.”

“You certainly make it sound appealing when you put it that way,” Seward says. “I’d be more than happy to join you, if you’d like company while our Omegas are being nice little homebodies.”

“I’m afraid I only hunt alone,” Hannibal states. “But do we have an arrangement for next Saturday?”

Seward puts on a show of deliberation. He turns to give a hard look at Rowan, who freezes in his gaze like a deer in headlights. Finally, Seward turns back. “We do. I’ll drop Rowan and Violet off at about 5 o’clock and will pick them up again at 9.”

Hannibal smiles. “Then it’s set.”

The house lights dim and the scarlet curtains in front of the stage begin to open as the play begins.

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The drive home after the play has two distinct halves. The first is filled with praise for the performance in general and Rosemary’s excellent portrayal of Alice in particular. The little girl regales them with amusing backstage anecdotes, like how the first grade girl who played the Cheshire Cat kept tripping over her own tail every time she left the stage.

The second half drifts to Violet and Rowan.

“There’s a girl named Violet in your class. What do you know about her?” Will asks.

Rosemary hums in thought and kicks her feet. “Um… well, she doesn’t have any friends and she talks funny so a lot of the kids make fun of her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sh-sh-she t-t-talks like th-th-this.”

“Ah. She stutters,” Hannibal states.

“Do you make fun of her too?” Will asks. “Be honest.”

“No,” Rosemary says, wrinkling her nose in distaste. “That’s rude.”

“And do you defend her when the others make fun of her? Do you stand up for her?”

“Sometimes,” Rosemary says. “When they’re really viscous.”

Hannibal chuckles. “Vicious.”

“Vicious,” Rosemary repeats, nodding.

“If you don’t always defend her, what do you usually do when you see the other kids making fun of Violet?”

Rosemary bites her lower lip and furrows her brow, clearly working as hard as a six-year-old can to choose her words carefully. “Usually I just watch.”

“Why?”
Rosemary is quiet for a few long seconds.

“It’s hard to explain. A lot of the time Violet just looks sad. But sometimes… sometimes when she thinks nobody else is seeing her, she looks so mad. She looks like a pot of water on the stove with the little bubbles dancing on the bottom,” she says.

She holds her hands up and twitches her fingers in time as she makes bubbling noises. Fabian squeals and gurgles as if his sister is doing this specifically for his own amusement. “Like that. And I wonder what she’d do if those little bubbles boiled into big, hot bubbles. Splash!”

The look Will gives Hannibal is so sarcastic and droll that it would make even the likes of Frederick Chilton blush. “Apples and trees,” he mutters. Hannibal merely smiles, his eyes still on the road.

“Well,” Will continues, looking into the rear-view mirror to catch Rosemary’s eyes. “Violet’s going to come over to play next Saturday. Doesn’t that sound fun?”

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It is not, as Rosemary finds out a week later, fun.

She works down the list of the most fun things they can do at home, and every time Violet is quiet and dour regardless of the activity. When Rosemary spreads out watercolors across the table so they can paint, Violet morosely swirls colors in her brush cup until the water turns murky and brown. When Rosemary lifts up the fall-board on her Papa’s harpsichord and starts teaching Violet the notes and showing her simple chords, the Beta girl’s hands stumble awkwardly over the keys. When she strikes a sour note, she jolts her hands away as if the keys have burned her. She cowers at the other end of the bench, wringing her hands.

Finally, Rosemary resorts to the nuclear option of fun activities. It has never failed to impress good friends and new acquaintances alike.

“Want to help me dress Fabian up in my dolls’ clothes? He’s too little to retaliate,” she suggests. Violet doesn’t move from her huddle at the end of the harpsichord bench. Rosemary will just have to sweeten the pot. “We can tie ribbons in his hair, too. Until he’s more ribbon than baby.”

Violet shrugs. Even the nuclear option lands as a dusty dud at her feet. But at least she follows Rosemary’s directions to stand guard and watch the grown-ups so she can snatch her baby brother from his playpen.

About ten minutes later, Rosemary hears the three most dreaded words a child can hear from their parent: her first, middle, and last name. The full name is always red-alert for being in trouble.

“Where is your brother-“ Will calls as he stomps into the room. Rosemary gives him an innocent smile even as she’s caught red-handed tying the seventh bow in the baby’s hair. Violet scoots away, an attempt to show that none of this was her idea.

Fabian, who is dressed in the pinkest and frilliest doll dress that still fits him, whines and lifts his arms once he sees Will.

“Oh, poor Bean,” Will coos as he kneels down to rescue the baby. “Is your big, bad sister trying to give you a complex? Let’s get you out of that. Violet, why don’t you go help your father set the table so we can have dinner?”

Violet stands up and scurries out of the room without a word. Rosemary begins to follow her, but
Will grabs hold of her skirt. “Oh no, not you, young lady. You dressed him up like this, so you’re helping me get him out of it.”

Rosemary leans back, looking around conspiratorially to see if the coast is truly clear. “Daddy?” she whispers as she unties one of the ribbons in Fabian’s hair.

“Hm?” Will murmurs as he sets that ribbon in the ever-growing pile. Fabian grabs an awkward little handful of them and immediately tries to bring them to his mouth.

“Is Violet’s daddy as boring as she is?”

“That’s not a very polite thing to say, Rosemary,” Will chides as he pries the ribbons from Fabian’s hand.

“Sorry,” Rosemary says, briefly looking down in contrition. It only lasts about three seconds before she’s looking up at Will again, eyes curious. “But is he?”

Will finishes rescuing the ribbons from Fabian’s iron grip and pushes them far out of his reach, much to the baby’s displeasure. “Sometimes people who are very scared or very sad seem boring, because boring is a safe thing to seem. Mr. Seward isn’t boring, and I doubt Violet is either.”

Rosemary frowns. “What does that mean?”

“Do you remember when we visited Miss Valsar’s farm last month?” Will asks as he unzips the doll dress and finally frees Fabian from its frilly grasp.

Rosemary hands Will the onesie she’d taken off of Fabian before she’d stuck him in the dress. “Uh-huh.”

“And how – out in the fields, in the long, brown autumn grass – there was that family of bunnies that was really hard to see because they blended in so well?”

“Camouflage!” Rosemary chirps, grinning with pride at a well-placed vocabulary word. “Tigers use it too, to sneak up on animals they want to eat. Raar!”

“That’s right. The bunnies use it to hide and stay safe, and the tigers use it so their prey won’t see them coming. People use it too. Making yourself as small and quiet as possible is the only camouflage some people know.”

Will scoops Fabian into his arms and blows a raspberry against the wiggling baby’s cheek. As the baby’s fussing fades into happy squeals, Will looks down to watch the concentration on his daughter’s face as she makes her own connections.

Finally, Rosemary peers up at him. “If Violet and Mr. Seward are like bunnies, are there people out there who are like tigers?”

Will smiles. He leans down and ruffles Rosemary’s hair before pressing a tender kiss to her forehead. “Let’s go set the table.”

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By the time dinner is over and the dishes washed and put away, the already subdued evening is even quieter. Swaddled and comfortable in a sling across Will’s chest, Fabian is already out like a light. The girls aren’t faring much better. Rosemary leans heavily against Will’s legs, blinking blearily and occasionally rubbing her eyes. Violet’s clumsy fingers stymie her attempts to button
Rowan, already dressed in his winter coat, lowers his cell phone from his ear. He frowns at the screen, and Will notes that the expression is all resignation and no concern.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think he’d let us stay this long,” Rowan mutters. “He must be out doing some-… thing. Doing something. Again.”

Will shakes his head. “No, you’ve got nothing to apologize for. I could drive you back home if you want. We’ve also got plenty of space here if you and Violet would rather stay the night.”

For a moment, Rowan’s expression is pale and stricken. He laughs awkwardly, and he can’t meet Will’s eyes as the strained sound leaves his lips. Will finds himself jolted from where he is moored in time and space, seeing himself from so many years ago in the younger Omega’s skittish and flinching avoidance of any friendly gestures.

“Th-thank you, but I think we’d better go home. I wouldn’t want him to come home late and we aren’t there,” Rowan says. He subconsciously rubs at the wrists. “I wouldn’t want to upset him.”

He jolts in surprise when Will lays a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I’ll get my little monsters ready, and we can drive you home.”

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The drive feels longer than it actually is with the children asleep in the back and Rowan silent and thoughtful in the passenger seat. A light snow falls from the dark winter sky; the flakes that don’t get swept to either side of the windshield by the wiper resemble passing stars in deep space. It would be tranquil if dread wasn’t emanating from Rowan in waves so thick that Will can almost feel the weight of the atmosphere.

“Why did you do all this for us?” Rowan whispers.

At first, Will isn’t sure if those words are just part of his active imagination or not. He glances into the rear-view mirror and sees that the children are all still sound asleep. Keeping his voice low as to not wake them, he replies, “What do you mean?”

“Why did you go so far out of your way tonight? Why invite Violet and me over? Why listen … the few, pointless times I spoke?”

“Because I think you deserve it. I think you and your daughter are owed at least one night away from the harsh sting of his words and the even harsher sting of his fists against your skin,” Will says. “Don’t you?”

“You know?” Rowan croaks. “H-how long?”

“School play. I knew when I saw the paint covering Violet’s bruise. I knew when you refused to take off your coat to hide your welts. I knew when I looked into your Alpha’s eyes and saw the petty monster pacing and snarling behind the glass window of his corneas.”

Rowan draws in a quick, shaking breath. He wipes tears from his eyes before settling his shaking fingers over his lips. “I’m sorry,” he whispers, the sound so soft that it is nearly drowned out by the rhythmic swishing of the wipers and ambient noise of the drive. “It’s… it’s overwhelming for someone to know.”

“You don’t have to live like this,” Will says. “There are services for situations like yours. I can put
“And then what?” Rowan asks in disbelief, allowing his hands to drop to his lap and squeeze the fabric of his coat until his knuckles go white. “He’d find us. And even if he didn’t get us, what would I do? I barely finished high school when Vincent asked my parents to bond with me. No education, so no skills. No skills, so no job. No job, so no money. No money, so no way to provide for Violet.”

“If something doesn’t change, that monster will shatter the glass and escape. The bruises and welts are just the cracks starting to show.”

“I know,” Rowan says. A tear lands on his clenched left hand. “Usually I’m better at getting him to focus on me instead of Violet. He was just so mad that she was only going to be a playing card and not Alice or-or another big role. He’s furious that she’s so shy and scared. But I’ll try harder next time.”

Will frowns as he parks the car in front of the Seward’s large, impressive house. ”If you change your mind…”

“Thank you. Really.”

Rowan squeezes the handle on his door and opens it a fraction before he sees something out in the cold that gives him pause. He frowns, confusion replacing the morose expression on his face. “The front door.”

The Seward’s front door is open. It’s only a crack, but light from the foyer spills out onto the cold, snowy ground. It sheds just enough light to make the line of blood leading from the door and around the side of the house visible from the car.

Will reaches around Rowan and shuts the car door as quietly as he can. He opens the glovebox in front of his alarmed passenger and takes out a locked metal box. Removing the keys from the ignition, Will selects a small key and inserts it in to the lock. With a soft click, the box opens, revealing a handgun, a magazine of ammo, and a taser.

Rowan stares at the gun in shock as Will loads it with the ammunition. When his wide, terrified eyes finally land on Will’s face again, his expression is utterly uncomprehending, as if he has never seen Will before in his life.

“It’s not much, but I need you to use this if it comes to it,” Will says as he places the taser in Rowan’s left hand. “The most important thing is that you stay here and keep all the doors locked. Only open up if it’s me. No one else. If anyone tries to get in, don’t hesitate to use it.”

“But-“

“You can. Turn it on. Undo the safety lock. Try to shove it right here,” Will says, indicating the side of his neck. “Right in the carotid artery, right over the pulse. If you can’t reach that, then aim for the chest, just above the heart.”

“But-“

“Look behind us,” Will hisses, indicating the backseat with a tilt of his head. He watches as Rowan turns to look at the sleeping children. “They need you to keep them safe. You can do that.”

With a heavy swallow, Rowan’s fingers tighten on the taser. He nods. “I can do that,” he says. "H-here, let me get you the key to the gate."
“Good,” Will says, accepting the key and exiting the car. “Never forget it.”

Snow crunches beneath his feet and his breath curls into the air like white smoke as Will moves around the house toward the backyard. He fits the key into the lock on the wrought iron gate. It swings open with a low, rusty moan under the force of his palm.

He follows the trail of blood through the gate and into the Seward’s expansive yard. The blood spatter gets heavier as he goes until Will is looking down at an enormous pool of it. Will casts his eyes up from the ground, and standing a yard or two from the bloody puddle is Vincent Seward.

‘Standing’ is likely too charitable a word for the position Seward is in, as he clearly isn’t doing it of his own volition. He is propped up by three metal support rods which extend from the cold ground and pierce his flesh in different spots. Each bent knee has a rod jammed into its soft cartilage, and the largest one of the three impales him at his sternum. His hands are tied together around the handle of a croquet mallet which has its head resting against the ground.

The end result is that Seward is staged to appear in the middle of a croquet game, readying himself for a tricky play. Only the object that Seward is preparing to strike in this tableau is his own severed head, eyes wide and mouth frozen in a horrified grimace. A single red rose is pinned to his lapel, and as Will inspects it closer, he notes that the rose was white before it was dipped in blood.

“Oh with his head,” Will murmurs as he slowly walks around what has become of Seward. “Couldn’t find a flamingo for a mallet?”

“I looked into it, but a little cost-benefit analysis ruled it untenable,” Hannibal says from a heavy shadow by what Will surmises is a pool supply shed. He steps forward into the moonlight. “And I take too much pride in my work to substitute a plastic yard flamingo.”

Will tries to stifle a laugh, but doesn’t succeed. “Well, if you had, nobody would peg this as a Ripper kill with that level of kitsch, that’s for sure. So, how goes the grocery shopping?”

“I found quite a remarkable sale on kidneys and tongue. Practically giving it away,” Hannibal says. “The latter in particular excites me, as I think a nice dish of gyūtan will be the first positive thing this one’s ever accomplished.”

Will scowls. “Hm. I may have to have whatever you prepare for Rosemary that night. He turned my stomach before and I don’t need to find out if that’s also literal.”

“Fair enough.”

“How much longer do you need?”

“Oh, I’ve been finished for ten minutes. But I admit, I’ve lingered because I wanted to see the look on your face when you first saw it. That’s been my rarest delicacy ever since Uncle Jack put an end to our professional partnership in light of our romantic one.”

“Egotist,” Will says fondly. “Jealous I can put Rosemary’s art on the fridge but I can’t do the same for yours.”

Hannibal smiles. “Go put on a show for the bereaved. I’ll cover my tracks and be on my way.”

“I hope you’ll actually listen to me when I tell you to stay put in the cabin when I call you in front of Jack a few hours from now,” Will says. “I’ll sound really shaken up, but I won’t want you to speed on those icy rural roads in the middle of the night.”
“You’ll eventually convince me to wait until morning,” Hannibal promises. “But I’ll be very concerned.”

“Good,” Will says. He takes a few steps forward and gives Hannibal a quick kiss. “See you tomorrow. And put a scarf over your face; that was like kissing a snowman.”

With that, Will turns and begins to walk back toward the gate. Hannibal watches as that confident stride collapses into a terrified, desperate run the moment Will knows he’s back in eyesight of the car.

Hannibal smiles, tugs his scarf higher over his nose and mouth, and steps back into the shadows.

--- January ---

Violet doesn’t immediately return to school once the winter holidays end. Rosemary doesn’t really notice at first. Even when she’s actually there she goes out of her way to be as unnoticeable as possible, so it makes sense that her absence doesn’t really attract any attention.

Rosemary only begins to wonder once another student brings it up. Four days into the disappearance, the boy whose desk is next to Violet’s asks about it. A look of anguish flits across the teacher’s face before she covers it up with explanations that Violet needed some extra time away from school but that she would be back eventually.

None of the other students seem to notice that brief flicker on their teacher’s face. But Rosemary does.

Two weeks after the start of the new term, Violet finally returns. Recess seems to be especially slow to arrive that day, as it takes every ounce of Rosemary’s patience to keep her questions contained until she can confront the Beta girl. When the bell finally rings for recess, Rosemary’s friends try to convince her to join their big game of hide-and-seek. She agrees but tells them that she will join in the second round. She’s got something she needs to do first.

As always, Violet is playing alone when Rosemary confronts her. The recently-reappeared girl is sitting on the ground, trying to make what looks like an igloo out of the thin layer of snow on the ground.

“Hey. You were gone from school for a long time,” Rosemary says as she approaches. “Were you sick?”

“My d-d-dad died,” Violet mutters, not looking up as she gathers more snow. “Th-that’s why the policemen came when we were in the car.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“No,” Violet growls. “Don’t be.”

She looks up, scanning the surroundings. When she sees that they are suitably alone, she continues in a whisper, “C-can you k-keep a secret?”

Rosemary blinks in surprise. There is a strange little look in Violet’s eyes, and Rosemary wonders if it means that Violet has boiled over already. Part of her hopes not; she was really looking forward to seeing it happen live. She kneels down and nods slowly.

Violet checks for unwanted ears again. “At f-first, I was scared,” she says. Her eyes are practically
shining with that strange intensity. “B-but now I’m… I’m so happy. Does that make me weird, that I’m glad he’s dead?”

Rosemary tilts her head and regards Violet keenly. “Your dad was a bad man, wasn’t he?”

The other girl takes in a deep breath and holds it for such a long time that Rosemary wonders if she’s forgotten how to breathe at all. Finally, she lets it out in a long hiss. “Yes.”

“Then no,” Rosemary says, as if it’s as simple a fact as the sky being blue. “People don’t judge someone if they’re glad a rat in their house died in a trap, so they also shouldn’t when the rat is a person.”

Revelation gleams in Violet’s eyes. She smiles – small at first, but it grows stronger and wider.

Rosemary sighs inwardly. Violet definitely boiled over during winter break, and she missed it. She’ll have to keep her eyes open for someone else who’s just beginning to bubble. Until then, there’s hide-and-seek.
WHOOPS, AND THEN ANOTHER YEAR PASSED.

I sincerely did not intend for this to take as long as it did, especially since this means it's officially been Too Damn Long since I updated Dies Irae (more on that in a bit). If it's any consolation, this is about 12,000 words of final, complete, for-really reals it's over everybody go home epilogue. No more of this particular world from me after this. I PROMISE.

... because I really, really can't wait to throw myself back into Dies Irae. It's been clawing at the inside of my head for about two years, and I'm so excited to get all of those ideas down (in Google Docs this time! No more losing entire chapters of work!). Criminy. Time to fix that.

Fortunately, this delay was not for reasons as grim as last year's. Honestly, the biggest delay was that I planned to have yet another segment in this thing devoted to the Hand in Unlovable Hand ending Rosemary's life. I spent months writing, deleting, writing, deleting, writing and deleting that thing before calling it a wash. It was too fluffy in contrast to the segments you will see below. To summarize it, it was mostly Hannibal having an in-house scavenger hunt arranged by Rosemary (and Fabian, kind of, as much as a two year old can) with the goal of revealing that Will is pregnant with their third child. It was a cute idea, but it just did not work when attached with everything else in this chapter. To be frank, fluff and adorbs aside, there wasn't much else to it.

I also kind of made the mistake of 'punishing' myself for writing so slowly by refusing to let myself read reviews on my work. That was a terrible mistake, since denying myself that - seeing what all you've written, be it praise or suggestions - might have caused a huge drain on my inspiration. No more of that shitty experiment.

And finally, once again: thank you. Thank you for taking the time out of your day to read this. Thank you for engaging with or at the very least indulging in a hell of a fandom for one hell of a show. I suppose my timing has this accidentally coinciding with #ItsStillBeautiful, though this isn't set post-WotL, and what a fun little quirk of fate. Even if it takes me ages to write fic for this amazing show and its amazing fans, I'm not going anywhere.

Let's close the curtain for good on this one.

"Tadaima"/"Okaeri" are linked Japanese terms meaning "I'm home" and "Welcome home", respectively. "Hannibal ad portas" is a Latin term meaning "Hannibal at the gates", a phrase often used by Roman families to keep their kids in line. Be good, or Hannibal (Barca) will get you.

**WARNINGS FOR THIS CHAPTER:** Pet death, situational depression in a child, brief drug use (original character only, pot), implied alcohol abuse
Rosie

There is a tiny island just off the beach on Will’s property. He has always felt exceptionally generous calling it an island, since even at high tide the water only rises ankle high. At low tide, a wide strip of brown, soggy sand riddled sand dollars and baby hermit crabs connects it directly with the rest of the beach. But Rosie likes to call it her island, so Will obliges.

The thing is little more than a patch of grass and a single lonely palm tree, barely large enough for more than three or four adults to stand around without either getting a little too cozy or getting their toes wet. With how often she liked to relax there while playing on the beach, Will had thought about building Rosie her own little playhouse out there. But then he’d always see some new report about rising sea-levels thanks to global warming or unexpected tsunamis or some new sighting of a poisonous, invasive jellyfish and he’d have second thoughts.

He supposes it doesn’t matter anymore. There’s no way in hell Rosie will want to play out there now. It will probably mean too much and be too raw for years.

He doesn’t have the heart to tell his daughter to hurry up as he waits for her by the car. On her little island, Rosie kneels over a large, smooth black stone at the base of the palm tree. She opens up her little blue backpack and pulls out a few of the China Rose hibiscus flowers she had plucked from the many shrubs growing around the perimeter of the house. One by one, she lays them reverently on the stone.

It breaks Will’s heart to watch, but he can’t find it in him to look away of his own accord. The only thing that succeeds in breaking his observation of the sad little ritual is the distracting buzzing of his phone in his pocket. He pulls it out and gives a puzzled frown at the unfamiliar number on the screen. He swipes to accept the call.

“Hello?” he answers warily.

“Will-“

Disgust flares to life deep in Will’s gut, and he can’t hear the voice’s rambling over the sudden furious rush of blood in his ears. “I told you never to talk to me again, Jack,“ he growls. He ends the call before Jack Crawford can get another word in.

Not even ten seconds go by before the phone is buzzing in his hand again. Will sighs, pressing his thumb harder into the power button than necessary. Once it’s off, he shoves it back into his pocket and grimaces at the ground.

“Are you mad?”

Will jerks up, surprised. Rosie stands before him, staring up at him with tears threatening to spill out over her long eyelashes.

He smiles awkwardly and kneels down to kiss her on the forehead. “Not at you, Rosie,” he says quietly. “I just got a really annoying phone call. That’s all.”

He runs his fingers through the wavy dark blonde hair on the crown of her head. “Ready for school?”

Rosie opens her backpack and pulls out a headband with a pair of felt orange feline ears and a tiger
Will gives her an approving smile as he stands, hoping if he tries to keep sunny it'll rub off on her. Most of him realizes it's an absolutely terrible idea, given his general disposition, but it's worth a shot. He ushers her toward the car and opens the back passenger-side door. Rosie scrambles up into her booster seat.

“Watch your tail, little beast,” Will chuckles. Rosie looks down and gives a squeak of surprise when she sees the orange-and-black striped felt tail dangling over the threshold of the door. She yanks it in.

A few silent, oppressive minutes into the drive, Will glances into the rear-view mirror. Rosie is staring out the window as the scenery passes by, wringing the tail pinned to her jeans.

“Are you excited for your first big report at school?” Will asks, trying and failing to mask his concern.

Rosie looks away from the window to meet his eyes in the rear view mirror. “I wish I could’ve done it on dogs,” she says. “But dogs aren’t endangered.”

“You like tigers, though.”

“Yeah. But I like dogs more,” Rosie says. She casts a heavy look to the empty seat beside her, and Will sees the exact moment she spots one of the rust-colored hairs still clinging to the fabric. Her face scrunches up as she whips her head around to peer out the window again.

“Oh, Rosie,” Will sighs. “I know it’s hard, and it hurts, but you’re not alone. I miss Winston too. But he was really old, and -”

“Not right now, Daddy,” she murmurs, softly rubbing at her eyes with the heels of her palms. “Please.”

Will has a lump in his throat for the remainder of the drive. It only starts to clear when they pull up into the drop-off line at the front of the school.

He puts the car in park and helps Rosie out of her booster seat. With a kiss to her forehead and the gentle swipe of his thumb across her cheek to remove the last lingering tear there, he sends his daughter off to join the little menagerie of costumed first graders that are already clustered around her teacher.

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On his way to the shop, Will stops at the car wash he uses whenever he starts to worry that months of accumulated sand and salty sea water will rust the whole damn thing out instead of just the bumpers. The car wash is self-service with a credit-only payment system, but it does have one employee. That employee is Dave, a late middle-age Beta transplant from the deep south who mostly exists to wear a stupid banana costume to attract business when it’s slow, hand out the key to the unisex toilet when it’s needed, or kick the aging machinery when it decides to malfunction. Today, however, Dave is performing none of his regular duties. The ever-present banana costume is gone, and Will briefly wonders if the salmon pink swimming trunks and olive green Hawaiian shirt covered in cackling scarlet macaws are what Dave always wears beneath its shabby yellow exterior. Instead, he lounges in a sickly yellow beach chair near the toilet while smoking the
biggest joint Will has ever seen in his entire life - including the few months he spent in narcotics before being transferred to homicide in his early police career.

Will has maybe exchanged a total of fifty words with Dave since moving to the Keys with Rosie, mostly because Dave is the only person in the area who knows who he really is. Dave had brought the subject up bluntly years ago, right around the time Will first started dating Molly. All Dave had done was ask Will if he had ever heard of an interesting website called TattleCrime, and Will saw the implication his eyes. But that had been the last of it. It had never come up again.

Even if Dave was an anomaly in the TattleCrime readership in that he appeared to possess an ounce of discretion, Will had never brought Rosie around. Just in case.

For now, however, Will’s curiosity is piqued, so he leaves his car and wanders over. Dave grins and gives a lazy wave with his free hand.

“Is this performance art or an attempt at getting fired?” Will asks.

Dave’s grin widens. “An’ lose this sweet gig? Naw. This is, uh… whatchacallit,” he mutters, scratching at the stubble on his chin. “Some world-class mouse parade. Floats made outta cheese ‘n all.”

“‘When the cat’s away, the mice will play?’”

Dave cackles. “Bingo!” He cocks his eyebrow and extends his hand holding the joint to Will in a clear offer.

Will shakes his head and stuffs his hands in his pockets. “What the hell are you talking about, Dave?”

“Shit. Dint’cha hear?” Dave asks. “All those sirens this mornin’?”

“It’s faster to get to my house by boat than by car from the main streets, so no.”

“Bout two hours ago, an 18-wheeler lost control an’ flipped between Big Pine and Marathon. Rammed into another truck comin’ from the other direction. Boom! Well, both of ‘em caught fire and ripped up the road like you damn well wouldn’t believe. We’re talkin’ some Mad Max shit. Nobody’s comin’ in or out by the Overseas Highway for at least the next few hours. Damn near all the cops in the keys are up there sortin’ it out, ‘cept for maybe a handful of ‘em to keep Key West’s nose clean.”


“Not for me it ain’t,” Dave says. He takes a long drag from his joint, holds the smoke, then slowly exhales. “I’m peachy. If ya got any vices, now’s a pretty good time to indulge. Carpe diem.”

Will shrugs. “I’ll consider it.”

With that, he heads back to his car, pays the machine, and begins to vacuum the backseat for the fifth time that week. Maybe this time he’ll get all of the heartbreaking mementos left behind. The physical ones, anyway. As he works, Will can vaguely hear the sound of insistent voices buzzing from the wash’s overhead radio. It typically blasts aggressively tropical tourist fare even though Will has only ever seen permanent residents using this particular car wash. It’s strange to hear insistent-sounding voices from the speakers instead of the tones of The Beach Boys’ “Kokomo” for the seventy-thousandth time since he moved here.
Will can’t make out any specifics over the vacuum’s cacophonous rattle, but he supposes it’s more information about the wreck. He hears exactly none of it, as he buckles up and drives off while the vacuum is still rumbling to a stop.

He doesn’t look in his rear view mirror. If he had, he would have seen Dave stumble off of the beach chair and stare in shock at the radio before turning and gaping at Will’s departing vehicle.

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The muffled sound of a phone ringing greets Will when he enters the shop, and he immediately knows it’s going to be a long, awful chore of a day. The thought that some of the locals who were cut off from jobs in the Upper Keys might take the highway disaster as an opportunity to shirk their duties with some fishing had crossed his mind, but he hadn’t anticipated a call this early. He rolls his eyes, turning the lock on the door behind him.

“The sign flips from CLOSED to OPEN at nine sharp,” he mutters, as if the phone will hear him and apologize for its rudeness. “You really don’t want me answering your stupid call before I have some coffee in me.”

There’s not much to the public portion of Will’s shop, and that’s entirely by design. He has to walk a very fine line between getting his customers to leave him the hell alone and fostering enough good word-of-mouth to ensure he gets a steady stream of repair jobs and custom tackle orders. He seems to have hit the sweet spot given the amount of work he’s hired to do, even when the tourists taper off once the summer hits.

His customers have the choice between an ancient, battered old couch that is the exact same color and smell as low tide and a small, pink bean bag chair with multicolored butterflies on it. The only reason the latter is an option at all is because Will suspects that extended exposure to the couch might cause mild fungal rashes. While that’s a major asset when it comes to the endless battle against loitering customers, it’s not worth compromising the health of his daughter’s skin.

For entertainment, the west wall of the shop boasts an ancient flat-screen TV Will picked up second-hand. Its satellite reception is iffy on clear days and totally non-existent when the weather turns even remotely stormy, which Will finds particularly amusing given that his customers usually only want to look at the old thing for Weather Channel updates. The only other entertainment option is the finely curated collection of out-of-date fishing and outdoor sporting magazines spread out on a wooden coffee table in front of the couch. Between a set of crayons and curious, ripping fingers, Rosie defaced most of them to the point of pure incoherence in her toddlerhood. Will has no intention of ever updating the selection.

The ringing continues while Will gets a big pot of bargain brand coffee brewing at the rickety old kitchen cart he keeps out for himself and his customers. Hidden at the back, behind the extra sugar and powdered creamer, is Will’s personal mug.

The mug is cheap in quality but priceless in its emotional worth. It’s an art project Rosie made in Kindergarten for the school’s parent appreciation night. The students had been tasked with decorating a white mug with their parents in mind, resulting in most of the designs being cluttered and confused in their attempts to cater to both parents. But Rosie only had him, so her vision was clear. She had first painted the whole thing light blue before decorating it with an assortment of smiling sea creatures - a purple octopus, a yellow sea turtle, and even a friendly-looking pink shark with a wide, innocent grin of sharp teeth. The crown jewel was Rosie’s own handprint; she had dipped her palm in red paint, pressed it against the mug, and had then made minor alterations to make it look like a betta fish.
During the appreciation night activities, Rosie’s teacher had pulled Will aside and gushed that his daughter’s dexterity and spatial-awareness were well beyond her years. She had beamed and, in an attempt at making conversation, had asked if there were any artists in the family that Rosie took after.

Will’s mind had reeled. He saw the countless perfectly-rendered sketches of himself. Casual, candid poses from his daily life. His body nude and in repose, a curve to his belly. His face contorted with pleasure. And then all the other art pieces created by the same hands that had drawn Will’s form so many times. The art of flesh and bone, each sculpted with its own purpose and message, all that remained when lesser material had their imperfections ripped away.

He had plastered on a fake smile and told the teacher that, unless custom flies and lures counted as art, he had no idea.

As he holds the mug now, his wistful smile is considerably more genuine, even if the damn phone still won’t stop ringing. He pours the steaming coffee into the mug and leaves it black. He takes a few scalding sips on his way to the door in the back, which he unlocks and enters.

Will passes his oil-stained work bench and the rows of shelves and boxes where he keeps his various tools and materials. With a heavy sigh, he sits at his desk, which is little more than a repository for the phone and the decade old computer he uses for scheduling and bookkeeping. He slams open the bottom drawer, revealing a metal flask. He takes a quick swig from it before reaching for the phone, grimly certain that anyone who hasn’t hung up by now will be an absolute delight to work for.

“Winston’s Tackle and Boat Repairs,” he sighs into the receiver. “If you’ve got sub-par lures, we’ve got the cure.”

There is a heavy silence on the other end for a few long seconds. Something about it hits Will in just the wrong way, and he feels the hairs at the base of his neck begin to bristle with realization and fury. “If this is you again, Jack-”

He hears a small, sharp intake of breath. “Will…”

The acidic remark with Jack Crawford’s name on it shrivels on his tongue. “Molly?”

“It’s… oh my God, Will,” she says, her voice thick with tears and nasal congestion. “Thank God you picked up. Your cell phone is off and I thought… I hoped you’d be here. Are you okay? Is Rosie?”

“I… what?”

“I’m sorry. I am so, so sorry. I didn’t know she’d do this. You have to believe me. Sh-she just kept asking and asking for two years and I just couldn’t take her nagging anymore a-and so I told her and I made her swear – fucking swear to me - that she wouldn’t tell another soul. Oh no, oh God.”

“Oh, okay, Molly, you need to slow down. I don’t understand what you’re talking about. Breathe,” Will says, shocked at the confidence in his words despite the dread that is creeping across his scalp. “Who did you tell? And what?”

Molly takes a few deep breaths, but it sounds more like the preamble to a fit of hyperventilation than anything remotely calming. Still, she manages to slow her babble into something more intelligible. “My mom. Last month, she was being nosy again and we had another screaming match. And I gave in. I told her why we broke up. Who you’d been before. Who you’d been with…
before. I made her swear she’d keep it to herself. And she turned around and sold it. Sold you. Sold Rosie.”

Will’s heart skips a beat and goes into overtime. He doesn’t need Molly to tell him the rest – he can fit the miserable jigsaw pieces together to form an all-too-familiar ginger picture – but she continues anyway. He grabs the mug with his shaking hand and tries to take a drink to settle his nerves.

“She called me a few days ago and said she just bought a new fucking car with a fraction of the money she got from some woman called… I don’t know… Frankie Lounds? My own mother gave her an interview all about being the mother-in-law of… of ‘Hannibal the Cannibal’s Leftovers’. Oh, I was pissed. And I thought about calling you, telling you. But I put it off. I-I didn't want to hurt… no. You know what? I was a fucking coward. I didn't want to face what she did and tell you about it. And now… now it’s too late. The news. Look at the news and run. He knows. He knows you’re in Sugarloaf. You have to take Rosie and–”

Will slams the phone back onto the hook. His hand shakes violently, causing some of the hot coffee to slosh over the edge and burn his hand. He grunts in surprise, jerking his painful hand in reflex. The mug drops to the ground, shattering into a spray of hot coffee and porcelain shards. He looks down at it, horrified at its loss but too panicked for remorse to completely sink in. His reddened hand trembles as he yanks open the top drawer of his desk. He tears through piles of stray papers and other clutter, allowing the junk to spill out onto the floor and into the coffee mess. He finally finds the remote control to the TV in the front of the shop.

His heart nearly bursts out of his chest in shock when the phone starts ringing again. Breathing heavily, he reaches for the cord connecting it to the wall, loops it twice around his wrist, and yanks with all of his might. The cord snaps out of the wall, taking part of the drywall with it. The ringing stops.

Will’s legs feel like they might collapse under him at any moment as he dashes to the TV. He switches it on and fumbles through the channels until he hits the first 24-hour news channel.

There is a picture of himself and his daughter on national TV being broadcast to millions. His head swims and his stomach sinks as he recognizes the context of the photo immediately. The memory crashes down over him like a great, consuming wave.

He smiles lovingly as Rosie – proudly wearing her rainbow polka-dotted “I Am 4!” birthday shirt and her cheeks smeared with the remains of chocolate icing – holds up her newest toy, a stuffed lion that’s half as long as she is. She hugs it and inadvertently smears a bit of the stray chocolate into its fluffy mane.

There is a flash of light in Will’s peripheral vision. He knows Molly’s mother has been taking pictures throughout Rosie’s birthday party, but he turns to look regardless. She is not who he sees.

Freddie Lounds leers at him and his daughter, her camera raised to her right eye. Her lips move, and though Will cannot hear her, he knows her words.

“Smile.”

Flash.

He squints and blinks, trying to recover from the blinding light. Dozens of new figures loom around him and Rosie. They are vague and faceless, more shadow than anything else. They have no lips, but unlike Freddie, Will hears their whispers clear as day.
“Her father’s hair.”

“Her father’s eyes.”

“Her father’s lips.”

Flash.

When the light recedes, there are hundreds of the shadows clustering around them in a writhing mass of conjoined, incomprehensible bodies. Though each voice is still a whisper, the sheer combination of them all is deafening.

“Her father’s ego.”

“Her father’s cruelty.”

“Her father’s hunger.”

Will grabs Rosie and tries to shield her with his back as the dark audience crashes down upon them.

With a gasp, Will is back in his shop, trembling with sweat sticking to his skin. He tries to catch his breath, but he sees something on the screen that makes him stumble back. He hits the coffee cart. For a terrifying moment he thinks that the wild hammering of his pulse is the preamble to a heart attack.

At the bottom of the screen in big, bold letters are four words Will has seen more times in his heated dreams and feverish nightmares than he could ever begin to count: HANNIBAL THE CANNIBAL ESCAPES!

Above those words, the screen is split into three segments. The middle is taken up by a news presenter Will has never seen before, which is no surprise given how aggressively he has avoided national news for the past seven years. The other two faces Will knows very well, for all the good and ill that entails.

Alana Bloom has changed a lot in the seven years since the last time Will saw her, but he’s sure she’d be thinking the same of him if she could see him as he sees her. Her hair, makeup, and fashion choices are a little colder and bolder than Will remembers, and her body language is more rigid and authoritarian – more Alpha. Her gentler, less dynamic-conforming nature had been one of the things about her that Will thought had attracted him to her, though he’s had years to stare hard and unblinkingly at that idea. He had wanted to want that about her. About anyone. It’s not gentleness and kindness that has haunted his lonely, guilty nights over the years, after all.

Frederick Chilton, on the other hand, has not changed in the slightest since the last miserable time Will had to put up with him. He wears the smug smirk of someone who thinks he is magnificent and Machiavellian in his control of the situation, but the nervous twitching of his lip reveals the pathetic show for what it is. His brow is covered in a fine sheen of flop sweat. It makes Chilton look absolutely radiant, but definitely not in the way he’d prefer.

“-and it’s appalling beyond belief. Absolutely unacceptable,” Alana says. “What Dr. Chilton has done here-”

“Excuse me,” Chilton interrupts. He and Alana squabble over each other for a few seconds before the presenter settles them down.
“Yes, Dr. Chilton?” the presenter asks, her voice dripping with not-at-all disguised irritation.

“Dr. Bloom is being wholly disingenuous,” Chilton says. He draws a handkerchief delicately embroidered with the letters FC from a pocket within the lining of his suit jacket. He mops his brow with it before tucking it away. “I have done nothing wrong here.”

“Incredible,” Alana hisses under her breath.

“These allegations make it sound as if I personally held the door open for Lecter and let him waltz right out,” Chilton protests. “Allegations which are still under investigation, may I add. It’s also absolutely no secret in our industry that Dr. Bloom has had a hungry eye on my position for years, and now you’re here stirring things up. Sly as a fox, Dr. Bloom.”

“Foxes on the brain, Chilton?” Alana scoffs. She tilts her head, sneering slightly. “Are you stuck on how Freddie Lounds described your hiring practices in TattleCrime a few hours ago? I believe the rather labored phrase she used to describe Matthew Brown was that he was ‘the fox guarding the fox-house’. If you had done even the tiniest portion of the due diligence required of your position instead of filling your schedule with book signings and speaking engagements, you would have seen Brown for what he is.”

Chilton gives a scandalized little gasp. Before he can counter-attack, the presenter holds up a hand to cut him off and says, “Dr. Chilton, Mr. Brown has claimed that he was able to assist Lecter’s escape by convincing other orderlies to give him sole oversight over Lecter. He also said that he was able to disable the surveillance systems at the hospital for days at a time. What do you have to say to these allegations?”

Chilton blinks directly at the camera incredulously for a second before he fumbles in his pocket to retrieve the handkerchief again. Dabbing his sweaty forehead, Chilton says, “As I said before Dr. Bloom so rudely cast aspersions: those claims are being investigated by the Baltimore City Police Department and the FBI. That being said, I am personally shocked and dismayed at the sight of so many people taking the word of a clearly unstable man over the word of a well-respected pillar of his field and community.”

“So would you say the same thing about Brown’s claim that Lecter escaped three days ago instead of last night?”

“Absolutely,” Chilton says, desperate triumph in his tone. “That is very obviously a remark thrown out there to impede the manhunt by forcing the authorities to cover more ground. It should not be taken seriously, and the search should be focused solely in the greater Baltimore area.”

“Your response, Dr. Bloom?”

“My response is that Dr. Chilton is being dangerously ludicrous. Here is my problem with everything he has just said,” Alana states, squaring her shoulders and glaring straight ahead. “This was no bloodbath. It’s not like Hannibal Lecter killed his guards and wore one of their faces to escape. This was not the hurried exploitation of a brief window of opportunity. This was downright leisurely. All signs which point to Brown telling the word of a clearly unstable man over the word of a well-respected pillar of his field and community.”

“In that case, would you like to leave protective custody?” Alana says snidely. “I’d be more than
happy to make the argument for your freedom, though you might want to consider what it would mean to go about in the world without the security detailing the FBI is so generously providing you. *Hannibal ad portas*, after all."

Chilton’s hand stills at his temple. His eyes go slightly wide and wild before darting to the side to look at something off camera. He hisses something urgent, and his feed goes black.

“We seem to have lost the conne-” the presenter says. She goes silent as she looks off camera. “It appears Dr. Chilton has decided to leave the discussion panel.”

Alana gives an unimpressed hum. “I’m still willing to participate. If you still have questions, maybe I can actually answer them without the distraction.”

“What do you think Lecter’s next move is?”

Alana sighs. “Hannibal Lecter is hard to predict because of his inherently contradictory nature,” she explains. “He’s fastidious and cultured, but is also one of the most prolific serial killers in modern history. He’s intensely patient and a long-term manipulator, but he engages in improvisation and fits of whimsy because he delights in the knowledge that he can spin it to his advantage. His…” she hesitates, wincing in distaste at the phrase on her tongue. “*shopping list* must be very long after so many years without a chance to whittle it down. Chilton and Freddie Lounds are certainly on it. Hell, I’m probably on it. But I think he can put his culinary urges off for now if it means he can focus on something utterly irresistible. I think we need only look at what Matthew Brown said when he was arrested to know Hannibal’s most pressing goal.”

“Are you referring to-” the reporter begins, lifting a page from her desk to read the words exactly. “‘At first, I wanted what he’ - referring to Lecter - ‘had. I thought of taking it by force if I knew where they were. But after talking with the Chesapeake Ripper, really talking, I knew my passion was only a few smoldering coals compared to the inferno of his devotion. So I decided to play the merry match-maker. The perfect family will be whole again.’”

Alana nods grimly. “He’ll be after Will Graham.”

Will’s legs finally give out beneath him. As he sinks to the floor, his fingers tighten around the remote. He can’t look away from the screen.

“Finally, before we let you go, do you have any words for Will Graham if he happens to be watching this?” the reporter asks.

Alana’s eyes soften, and she once again looks like the impossibly kind Alpha will knew all those years ago. Will knows she’s just looking into a camera, that she’s thousands of miles away, but he feels as if she is in the room with him. “Will,” she says. “We have people reaching out to you. Answer the calls and go to the nearest police department. They will keep you and your daughter safe. Please don’t do anything reckless.”

There is no satisfying spray of sparks when Will hurls the remote at the TV screen. The remote itself shatters, sending the batteries clattering and spinning across the floor. The screen sputters, glitches into static, and finally goes black. Sitting on the floor with his hands over his ears, Will can relate.

He stands slowly and pulls his phone out of his pocket. He stares at it, contemplating it with a look of hollow exhaustion. He risks turning it on – 40 missed calls, 30 voicemails – and dials Rosie’s school.
“Sugarloaf School,” a peppy female voice chirps.

“This is Will Graham,” he says. He holds his breath, waiting for a gasp of revelation or a cry of surprise.

All he gets is a slightly confused murmur. “Yes?”

Will sighs in relief. “My daughter Rosemary is in the first grade class. There’s been a… a family emergency, and I need to pick her up as soon as possible.”

He listens to the receptionist’s condolences and easily answers her security questions: the last four digits of his social security number and his driver’s license number. He’s surprised at the steadiness in his voice even as his heart jackhammers in his chest. He can pick up his daughter in fifteen minutes.

As soon as he hangs up, the phone begins to ring in his hand. He resists the urge to immediately throw it like he did with the remote. Instead, he thinks about how the activity has bounced off local cell towers, how the location of the phone can be triangulated.

It rings as he stuffs it back in his pocket. It rings as he storms out of the shop and around the back, to the little dock where the ships stay when he has a repair job. It rings as he rears his arm back and flings the thing out as far as he can into the ocean. He watches a few stray air bubbles pop up in its wake for a handful of seconds before turning and running to his car.

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Will can feel Rosie trying to catch his eye from her booster seat. She stares into the rear view mirror, reddish-brown eyes perplexed. Will’s trembling, clammy palms tighten on the steering wheel in an effort to remain focused. He feels her gaze move from the mirror to his tell-tale hands, can practically feel her gaze lingering on the small burn welt on his right hand.

“The school office lady said I was leaving early because of a family emergency,” she says quietly. “But you’re my only family. Are you sick?”

“I’m fine, Rosie.”

“You’re all white and shaky,” the little girl says. Her breathing quickens and she continues, a note of panic in her voice, “Are you going to go to the doctor and come back dead like Winston?”

“I’m fine,” Will repeats with enough heat that remorse immediately claws down his throat and hollows out a burrow in his chest. He glances into the rear view mirror and finally looks his daughter in the eye. Her eyes shimmer with shallow tears, disbelief, and concern, and he can’t sustain the eye contact. “I’ll explain later, okay? I know it might be scary and confusing, but you need to trust me on this. I’m not sick.”

He doesn’t need to look in her eyes to feel that she isn’t truly buying it, probably because he doesn’t buy it himself. Her response is a tiny, heartbreaking, “Okay.” Will knows she won’t press the issue, but maybe that would have been preferable to the silence and the shrieking white noise in his head.

When they finally pull up to the house, Will doesn’t see anything immediately out of order. His eyes dart around as he parks and helps Rosie out of her booster seat, taking her hand.

“Daddy,” Rosie says, staring intently out toward the water.
No vehicles, no footprints in the sand-

“Daddy,” Rosie says, trying to tug at his pant leg to get his attention as he ushers her toward the house.

- no broken windows, no signs of tampering with the lock -

“Who put the other flowers on Winston’s grave?” Rosie asks quietly.

Will’s blood runs cold. His head turns, wide eyes looking out toward the beach and the little memorial spot. He has to strain to see, and he can’t make out any particular details, but there are definitely more flowers than there had been in the morning.

He turns back to the door just as it opens.

“Welcome home.”

Three hours later, Jack Crawford barks orders as his agents and more than a quarter of the entire Keys’ police force scours Will Graham’s property. With ‘Hannibal the Cannibal’ loose and likely nearby, almost all of the other Monroe County police officers have been diverted from the bridge emergency and are scouring the streets and waters for anything that could assist the case.

With everyone in his command given at least five tasks to do, Jack makes his way back to Will’s house. He walks through the open door, which hangs on one last resilient hinge thanks to the battering ram they had used on it when they first arrived half an hour ago. More police officers and FBI agents bustle around him, taking pictures and brushing for fingerprints.

Despite the chaos, Jack homes in on a small picture frame atop the end table by the living room’s well-worn sofa. The photo inside must not be very old, as Rosie doesn’t look any different than she does in the first grade school picture that’s currently being transmitted nation-wide as part of an AMBER Alert. The little girl beams up at him from inside the frame, her arms wrapped around the neck of an elderly dog. Will sits just behind her with a hand on her shoulder and the sagging smile of an exhausted but happy single parent tugging gently at his lips. The background is a blue-and-purple laser show of a backdrop that Jack had thought went out of style in the late 80s. It’s corny and tacky and blisteringly sincere and it breaks Jack’s heart.

“Have you tested this?” Jack asks a passing crime scene tech, gesturing to the picture.

“Yes, sir. It’s clean. Nothing useful or important.”

Jack disagrees, but not for any case-related reasons. ”Will it go into evidence?”

The tech shrugs. ”Probably bulk storage. If we can’t use it for anything, and if this whole thing ends badly, I doubt it’ll ever see the light of day again.”

Jack nods to the agent, who goes back to work. He then takes a look around, picks up the picture, and slips it into the inner pocket of his coat.

Moments later, Jimmy Price and Beverly Katz enter the living room from the kitchen. Jack waves them over. “What have you found?”

“If we’re looking for greasy, grubby little kid fingerprints, then we have hit the motherlode,” Price says. “The only adult match we’ve gotten is Will. Maybe one other partial, probably the ex-Alpha.
Everything else is the little girl. No sign of Hannibal’s prints, but that’s not exactly a surprise. He’s always been stingy about them at his other crime scenes.”

“If this even is a crime scene,” Beverly cuts in. “No signs of struggle. Will refused to answer your calls and we know from the school report that he picked Rosie up in a hurry a few hours ago. He was running, Jack.”

“I agree,” Price says as an anxious look settles over his features. “And I hate to be ‘that guy’ since that’s usually Zeller’s job, but we still need to think about if all that running is ‘from’... or ‘to’.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Jack growls. “Until we get some bullet-proof evidence proving otherwise, we are treating this as either a kidnapping or, if he did run, self-preservation on his part. I don’t blame Will for getting spooked, but we need to find him and Rosie and make sure they stay safe.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Price stammers, raising his hands up in defense. “I’m not trying to suggest Will skipped off arm-in-arm with Hannibal. But…”

“He has a point, Jack,” Bev says, frowning. “If he ran, his boat and car wouldn’t still be here. Will would do anything to protect his daughter, even if it means the unthinkable. Lecter’s out and he’ll be doing everything in his power to keep himself that way. ‘Don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.’”

“Better beside the monster than in his way?” Jack asks rhetorically. He considers it a moment before slowly shaking his head. “I just don’t see that from the same man who caught the monster to begin with.”

“He’s not the same man. None of us are who we were then. It’d be pretty appalling if we were,” Bev says. She sighs heavily. “I don’t know the answer, Jack. Maybe he ran with Rosie to get away from Hannibal. Maybe he fought and lost. Maybe he didn’t. Maybe he and the girl are both tied up and are being dragged away. Maybe he decided ‘if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em’. I just hope they aren’t hurt and that we can find them before they are.”

Jack gives her a hard look, which she returns with a tired one of her own. His eyes soften, but his jaw remains firm and set.

The moment is broken when Zeller’s voice calls to them from the door. He’s panting slightly and dread shines bright in his eyes. “We found something.”

The horror in Zeller’s expression makes a wave of goosebumps rise down the back of Jack’s neck. “What?” he demands, striding over to where Zeller stands grasping the door frame like a lifeline. Price and Beverly follow behind him, caught in his wake. “What did you find?”

Zeller looks his teammates in the eyes briefly before turning his attention back to Jack. “We, uh… we think it might be a grave.”

Jack draws in a quick, shaking breath. “Dig it up,” he hisses through his clenched teeth.

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Jack glares daggers out at the pristine blue ocean while Beverly and Zeller dig and Price examines the stone and flowers from atop the grave. They’ve been digging for about twenty minutes, and the mounds of wet sand left behind clutter the already cramped island.

“Jack?” Beverly calls.
He turns his attention to the hole. Zeller and Katz have uncovered something wrapped in a threadbare old quilt. It isn’t large enough to be an adult body, and that only makes Jack’s already heavy heart tighten up more and sink like lead right to the soles of his feet.

Zeller places his hand on the quilt and looks up to his boss for confirmation. Jack gives a single terse nod. With a nervous hand, Zeller pulls the quilt back, revealing the corpse of an elderly dog. Although there are no audible sighs of relief, the tension that drains out of the atmosphere is palpable.

“How long has it been dead?” Jack asks. “Natural causes or a fresh kill from Hannibal to show Will he means business?”

“At least a week judging by the smell,” Zeller says, covering his mouth and nose with the back of his hand. “I don’t see anything to suggest it was anything but natural causes or that it was put down. It looks like it was pretty old.”

“Winston,” Bev says quietly. “That was his name, wasn’t it? I’m pretty sure it was. Yeah. Will got him right around the time he started working with us.”

“What do we do, Jack?” Zeller asks. “Take the body in for evidence?”

Jack shakes his head. “Let him rest.”

Silence settles over them as Zeller and Bev begin filling in the grave. The solemn atmosphere is broken by two short muttered words that Jack really didn’t need to hear: “Oh no.”

Jack turns to Price sharply. “‘Oh no’ what?”

Price is staring at his phone with the other hand covering his mouth in concern. He shakes his head and allows his hand to fall back down to his side. “I was wondering about the flowers. A single hibiscus and a bouquet of red spider lilies and spider flowers. I don’t think the hibiscus means anything, since there are identical flowers near the house. Probably just something they picked for the grave. But the other flowers…”

“What about them?”

“Are you familiar with the Language of Flowers? Or maybe languages, in this case.”

“Just that Bella shot down my suggestion of orange lilies for our wedding because they apparently symbolize hatred. I just thought they were elegant.”

“These are cleome hassleriana, often called spider flowers,” Price says, indicating clusters of light purple flowers. He then points to the delicate red flowers surrounding the cleome. “And these are lycoris radiata – spider lilies. So it could be a coincidence, given the spidery names. They might have been right next to each other in a flower shop. But… it’d be in Hannibal’s character to leave a message through flowers, right?”

Bev scoffs as she shovels more sand into the grave.

“Then we should be even more worried than we already are,” Price says. “In the Victorian language of flowers, spider flowers symbolize a request for elopement… and in Asian cultures, spider lilies are associated with loss and funerals. Death.”

Jack frowns. “An ultimatum?”
Price shrugs helplessly.


Jack is surprised by the bitter laugh that claws out of his anxiety-dry throat. “Hannibal, commit suicide? Never. He’s ravenous for life, for his preferred lifestyle. We would be so lucky if he saw suicide as viable.”

"Without our love, we are as good as dead," Bev muses. "Maybe."

Jack shakes his head. “Whatever the damn flowers mean, all it does is make me even more concerned for Will and Rosie. Hannibal has tried to kill Will before. God only knows what he’d do with the girl.”

“Agent Crawford!” calls one of the Monroe County police officers as he runs toward the little island, splashing in the shallow water. He gasps a little as he slows to a stop before them, clearly more used to having a desk job than doing legwork. “We’ve – we’ve got something. News from the mainland.”

“What?” Jack asks. His fists clench at his sides, steeling himself for bad news. It’s the only type of news he can visualize.

“There was a… a report of a body. A murder. Wealthy retiree,” the officer pants, still trying to catch his breath. “His, uh… his heart was cut out and his luxury yacht was stolen.”

Beverly, Price, and Zeller exchange horrified looks. Jack takes in a deep breath, holds it, and sighs it out along with every ounce of optimism in his body.

“What?” he asks. His fists clench at his sides, steeling himself for bad news. It’s the only type of news he can visualize.

“Get it out to everyone. And when I say everyone – I mean everyone. Every man and woman in the Coast Guard. Every local fishing vessel looking for their daily haul. Every sunburnt vacationer drunkenly parasailing with a rental boat or scuba-diving in a tour group. I want that boat found ASAP. If he gets them to Havana, they are gone. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir!”

Hours pass, and the hotline rings endlessly with half-remembered, half-glimpsed unsubstantiated tips. Weeks pass, and the reports and rumors dwindle. Months pass, nothing. Years pass.

Decades.

ROSA

Twenty years after the escape of Hannibal Lecter and the disappearance of Will and Rosemary Graham, Jack Crawford reminisces.

He is old now – older than he ever thought he’d be in the stinging wake of Bella’s death twenty-five years prior. Back then, he’d given himself maybe five years tops before he’d join her in death. A stopped heart or a popped vein in the head, he’d thought. Something sudden and born of stress, probably right in the middle of screaming at someone. And yet he lives on.

He trails a rough, wrinkled hand across his mantle, stopping in front of the dark, sleek little urn that
contains some of her ashes. His will states that when he goes, part of his ashes are to be mixed with hers and together they'll dance on the Italian wind. A quarter of a century without the light of his life. And he has felt the darkness left behind in the absence of her flame. It whispers in his ears at times, accusatory and hissing.

Like now.

He runs his hand further down the mantle until it settles on an old picture frame. His fingers trace the grain of the cheap wood for a moment before they lift the picture from its spot. It's hard for him to avoid blaming himself for the fact that this picture is all he has left of Will Graham and his little daughter. Two smiles frozen in time, never to grow or change again.

Officially, they are dead, and everyday Jack prays that that is true. He knows all too well what the alternative might entail. If the discovery of Miriam Lass’s dehydrated corpse two weeks into Hannibal’s incarceration has taught him anything, it’s to never underestimate the patience and depravity of Dr. Hannibal Lecter. Lecter had waited just long enough to tell Jack the location of the “special surprise” just for him. Had the FBI arrived even hours earlier, Miriam might have had a distant but still tangible chance at survival.

Just like Will might have had a chance, if Jack had tried harder to mend the rift between them so Will would accept his protection and help. If Jack hadn’t introduced Will to the monster. If Jack had stepped into Lecter’s office that very first day and had seen.

These are far from new thoughts. He’s had them longer than he’s had most of the few friends he still has to his name thanks to distance and death. He suspects that he’ll feel them weighing down his shoulders until he either dies or is too senile to remember what the crushing weight means.

But at least today he has something to distract him, and he’ll be late for it if he lets the regrets keep him from getting ready and stepping out the door.

An old friend has asked for his presence at an important occasion.

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Jack does not attend all four of the FBI graduation ceremonies that happen every year, though he used to before his retirement. Back then, he felt it was wise to get a cursory look at the new agents even if he’d never see the vast majority of them ever again. Now he only makes it to graduation once or twice a year, and even then, usually only on days like today, when a colleague is attending and sees the ceremony as a good excuse to catch up.

Once he passes through the security detailing and credentials check outside the auditorium, he scans the countless faces within. Every year, the faces of the teachers and agents he sees here look younger and younger and are less and less familiar.

Of the core group of associates he had under his wing in his Behavioral Sciences Unit days, only Brian Zeller regularly attends these graduations. He retired from field work fifteen years ago and took up a teaching position within Quantico, so he's usually here to wish his students well. Jack knows that Zeller won't be here today, however, as he's currently at a graduation of a different sort. He’s up in Canada with his mate, watching their daughter receive her diploma from McGill.

Price had retired from field work shortly before Zeller had. He had also taken a teaching position, but he had landed a cushy, tenured professorship in the forensic science department at George Washington University. Price never attended this kind of thing even when he was still working with the FBI. “They’re starting to look so young. Their bright-eyed and bushy-tailed little faces
make me think about the cold inevitability of aging and death,” Price had said flippantly a year or two before he retired. “Plus I barely attended my own graduation. I almost convinced my twin brother to go and claim to be me, just like when I took half his science tests in middle school.”

And then there was Beverly Katz.

Beverly had quit the FBI almost two years to the day after the disappearance of Will and Rosie Graham. Although the FBI had claimed that the combined missing persons case and manhunt for the most notorious killer to have ever escaped custody was still a top priority, she knew that it was a hollow promise. The bureau couldn’t continue devoting so much time and so many resources to a case that had gone ice cold. Beverly tendered her resignation an hour after the BSU got the word that the FBI was “temporarily” disbanding the special case unit pending the discovery of new evidence.

She had taken up with a nonprofit group dedicated to the search for missing and exploited Omegas and their children. On paper, Katz’s new job listed her as ‘Chief Consultant and Advocate’, with responsibilities that amounted to keeping certain cases from slipping through the cracks in the media and lighting a fire under the asses of local law enforcement. While he was still in the FBI, a few individuals in the highest echelon of the bureau had asked Jack to “keep an eye on” his former colleague in a manner that was “strictly off-the-record”. There were rumors that some of the successful recoveries linked to the association were thanks to Beverly Katz dabbling in questionably-legal vigilantism tactics on behalf of her cause. Jack never saw anything untoward, but he didn’t look hard. After Sugarloaf, he didn’t know if he had it in him anymore to uphold the letter of the law above the spirit of the law.

There is only one member of his close inner circle from the Behavioral Sciences Unit who is still working in that division, and he has finally spotted her in the crowd. She’s sitting in the front row, dead center stage. With the new cane his doctor demanded he start using, it takes him a little while to shuffle down to the front row. Jack’s knees aren’t what they used to be, after all.

She has an open manilla folder on her lap. Just text, so Jack can’t tell if it’s the gory particulars of an ongoing case or personnel files of some of the graduates. Either way, she is engrossed, her dark, calculating eyes pouring over each line. Jack smiles. “Starling.”

Clarice Starling looks up at the sound of her name. “Agent Crawford!” she says, springing to her feet. “Why didn’t you send me a message when you arrived? I would’ve helped you from your car to your seat.”

Jack raises a skeptical brow. “I may be old, Starling, but I’m not infirm. I can still get around on my own.”

“Sorry, sir. I hope I haven’t offended you.”

With a small laugh, Jack waves off her concern with his free hand. “No offense taken,” he says. “And still calling me ‘sir’, I see. Now that you have the same job I had before I called it quits, we’re peers. Hell, this might not even be your last promotion. Maybe one day I’ll be the one jumping to attention and calling you ‘ma’am’.”

Clarice squares her shoulders and smiles slightly, flattered and proud. “Even if I become the head of the FBI itself, I’ll always show you the respect you deserve,” she says. She gestures to the empty spot next to her. “I saved you a seat, if you’re interested.”

Jack shakes his head fondly. “Only if you call me ‘Jack’ and actually stick to it. I’m getting sick of repeating this song and dance every time I see you,” he says. “None of this ‘sir’ and ‘Agent
Concern flashes across Clarice’s features briefly before settling into a smirk. “I’d call your bluff, but I know you really are that much of a stubborn old mule,” she says, a tiny hint of her Appalachian accent creeping into her voice. “Sit the hell down, Jack.”

Jack beams, satisfied. Once he’s settled into his seat, he takes in the woman beside him. So many of her features remind him of Bella; it’s easy for him to slip into thinking of Clarice as the daughter they never had the chance to have. He had to keep that tendency in check when he was her mentor, during the twilight of his career and the dawn of hers. Now, he lets the idea warm him. It’s tempting when so many other thoughts leave him cold.

She’s getting into her late forties now, and a light dusting of grey is starting to creep in around the temples in her close-cropped natural hair. Seeing it makes him feel so damn old, possibly even more than his creaking joints and rebellious back do. But it also makes her look distinguished. Ten years ago, when Jack retired and recommended Clarice for his position, he had encountered some hesitation from the higher-ups. Though Omegas had achieved leadership positions at Jack’s level, none of them had been in the Behavioral Sciences Unit - the curator for his so-called Evil Minds Research Museum. One of the board members had tried to dissuade Jack from his pick by suggesting that, as most of the criminals that the BSU pursued are Alphas, it was “tempting fate” to allow Omegas to work closely in their capture. When Jack pressed him on that logic, the bastard had dared to call it “a recipe for another Will Graham”.

Maybe he had imagined it, but Jack could have sworn he heard the windows in the conference room rattle with the volume and intensity of the yelling he had done in response to that argument.

But Jack’s persistence won out in the end, and Clarice Starling had been promoted to the previously Alpha-only job. Jack couldn’t be prouder of her accomplishments in the role.

“So,” he says. “Any stand-outs in this batch?”

“It’s unprofessional to play favorites,” Clarice answers coolly.

Jack grins knowingly. “But.”

“But,” Clarice agrees, a small, conspiratorial smile tugging at her lips. “I may have already recruited one of them for the BSU weeks ago.”

“I know that feeling.”

Clarice cocks one of her eyebrows. “I haven’t expressed my favoritism in the form of sending her out after someone making an Omega-skin coat,” she says. “She has consulted on several cases, though. Her instincts and insight for this work are unlike anything I’ve ever seen. She’s a true natural.”

“What’s her name?”

Just as Clarice takes a breath to answer, the lights above the stage flare to life. The audience applauds as the Director of the FBI walks toward the podium from off-stage. Clarice mouths, “You’ll see.”

Jack turns his attention to the stage. Thanks to years of graduations, Jack nearly has the core ceremony memorized. Though the speeches may change on a word-by-word basis, the content remains largely the same. This particular graduation is no different. After a general speech about the hard work and dedication it takes to not only graduate from the Academy but also last in the
profession, the Director of the FBI hands the ceremony over to several faculty members for more heartfelt and proud speeches about the quality of these specific new agents. It’s so familiar that he finds his mind drifting.

Will had hated these things.

As far as Jack knows, Will had only ever attended two of them, both during his first year of teaching. Apparently his grim demeanor had unnerved enough of the graduates’ families at the reception that not even the insistent, spirited defense of his students could dissuade the higher-ups from politely requesting that Will keep his distance and refrain from attending future graduations. The one time Jack asked him about it, Will had treated the ban like it was one of his proudest accomplishments.

Even if Will found it personally relieving to be excluded, Jack found the whole thing distasteful. Just like the push-back he received when he nominated Clarice for his position, there was probably some latent bigotry involved in the decision. An unsociable, aloof Alpha or Beta working for the FBI would be lauded for possessing an appropriate temperament given the severity of the work. Meanwhile, an Omega with the same traits was looked upon as eerie and unnerving. Omegas like Will and Clarice had to fight twice as hard to be taken half as seriously, and what little respect they won could be easily lost.

Jack sighs slightly. Not even two hours ago, he had been trying to put Will out of his mind. Now here he is dwelling again. It’s the story of the last twenty years of his life distilled into one early afternoon.

The speeches continue on and on until finally the time comes for each new graduate to receive their credentials. Jack has finally managed to put some distance between himself and his melancholy thoughts, and it’s just in time to see each freshly-minted Special Agent stride across stage, pride evident in the set of their shoulders and the smiles on their faces. As each new Agent shakes the hand of the Head of the FBI and accepts their credentials, Jack wonders where they will all end up.

“Rosa Boudica Fell.”

Just as he’s about to whisper *Who the hell names their kid Boudica?* to Clarice, Jack feels her nudge his side with her elbow. So this must be the new agent. An Alpha woman in her late twenties walks from off-stage toward the podium. Jack's eyes are too old and tired to make out many of her features clearly from his seat, but he can see that her hair is dark blonde and styled in a bob of curls. Although she is roughly average height for an Alpha woman, she moves with enough poise, pride, and purpose to make her seem more commanding than she physically is.

There’s something strangely familiar about the way she moves. It tickles at the back of Jack’s mind like an elusive itch.

He turns his head, intending to tell Clarice that he’s intrigued and interested in meeting her new protege, but his eye catches something that stops him short. Behind Clarice, standing far back near the side of the auditorium, is Will Graham.

But it can’t be. Not only has this Will Graham not aged a day since Jack last saw him, but he is somehow even younger than Jack had ever seen him. His face is clean-shaven and his dark curls are tamed enough to have them accentuate his features instead of overshadow them. He looks
cherubic, smiling warmly up at the stage with a small camera in his hand.

Perhaps feeling Jack’s incredulous stare burning into him, the impossible Will turns his head slightly and locks eyes with the stunned old man. His placid smile widens just a little more.

“-ack? Jack?”

Jack’s heart nearly stops when Clarice lays her hand on his upper arm. His eyes dart to hers, and they must be panicked and wild, because the concern in her face only deepens. “Are you alright?” she whispers. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

The audience applauds as the next new agent’s name is read. Jack will never know the name thanks to the horrible buzzing in his head.

“I’m fine,” Jack murmurs.

He casts his eyes back to where the impossible Will stood, but the figure is gone. Nothing. He turns back to Clarice, offering her a shaky smile. “Just a trick of the light. My eyes aren’t what they used to be, after all.”

Clarice pins him with the same piercing, skeptical look that he so often saw her fix on crime scenes or suspects. Before she can decide to press the issue or let it go, the crowd applauds again as the names continue to be called. She brings her hands together, rejoining the clapping lest the two of them start to make a scene. Jack does the same, but he keeps looking out the corners of his eyes towards the walls for the rest of the ceremony.

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After all the graduates have had their moment in the spotlight in their walk across the stage, after the flashes of countless cameras have faded, after the final round of applause has finished echoing off the walls of the auditorium, the crowd finally disperses into smaller groups to chat and enjoy the refreshments. Clarice and Jack accept flutes of champagne from a passing caterer. While Clarice scans the clusters of people, Jack takes a sip of his drink. It’s light and refreshing, but he finds himself wishing for something stronger. Light and refreshing won’t brace him like whiskey might.

“Looking for me?”

Jack turns at the sound of the unfamiliar accented voice, and there she is. Rosa Fell stands before them, having silently approached them without Clarice noticing. Now that Jack can see her up close, the vague, wordless feeling that writhed at the back of his mind when she walked across the stage grows into an insistent whisper that he cannot ignore.

She is slim, long-limbed, and angular above all else. Her jaw and cheekbones are sharp, with the latter also being high and prominent on her face. Her dark blonde hair curls and frames her face, somehow managing to make her features even bolder. But it’s her eyes that really give Jack pause. They are narrow and piercing in shape and the exact shade between brown and red in color. Jack has only seen those eyes studying him from one other face.

For the first time in years, Jack dares to hope for - and fear - the answers to the questions that have tormented him for decades.

“Just who I wanted to see.” Clarice says brightly, shocking Jack from his thoughts. “Let me formally introduce you. Jack, this is Rosa Fell, the newest member of the Behavioral Sciences Unit. Rosa, this is Jack Crawford, my former boss and a personal inspiration to me.”
“Welcome to the FBI, Agent Fell,” Jack says, keeping his voice steady and reaching out to shake the young Alpha’s hand. “Clarice gave you very high praise while we were watching the ceremony.”

“And I’ve heard countless stories about you, Agent Crawford,” Rosa says. “It’s an honor.”

“You have a very unusual accent, Ms. - ah, sorry - Special Agent Fell. I’d consider myself a well-traveled man thanks to my time in the service, but I’m afraid even I can’t place it.”

“I’d be shocked if you could,” she says, a small smile tugging at her thin lips. “It’s cobbled together from all sorts of stray parts. My parents stitched together a Frankenstein’s Monster of an accent for me.”

“How so?”

“I was born to an American Omega and a European Alpha here in the US - only a few hours’ drive from this spot, in fact. We spent my early childhood in this country, so from my perspective, I’m home. But then my father was offered a dream job at the University of Buenos Aires, and when I was seven, we uprooted ourselves so he could escape a position that was more like a prison to him. I grew up speaking English and Argentinian Spanish in equal measure, with a smattering of other languages in our very cosmopolitan household.”

“Rosa, you’re being too modest. ‘A smattering of other languages’,” Clarice says, scoffing at the understatement. She turns to Jack. “On top of the near-native Spanish fluency, she speaks proficient French, Italian, and Lithuanian.”

“Lithuanian,” Jack remarks, raising his brows in interest. “Now, you don’t see that one taught so frequently in schools. Kind of an unusual choice.”

Rosa shrugs airily. “I have an unusual family.”

“Yes, I suppose you’d have to with a middle name like the one you’re saddled with. I’ve never met anyone named Boudica before. She was… an ancient queen, right? Viking?”

“Celtic,” Rosa corrects. “Iceni, specifically. She led an inspiring but ultimately ill-fated uprising against the Roman occupation forces.”

“Your parents must have been bracing themselves for a terrible teenage rebellion phase,” Clarice says, chuckling.

“I plead the fifth on how I spent my teenage years, but I never burned down London. Certainly not all of it, at least,” Rosa replies, joining her new boss in laughter. They clink their glasses together.

As their laughter dies down, Rosa catches the minor confusion in Jack’s expression. She clears her throat, getting the final snickers out of her system. “My parents’ names are Roman and Troy. They have exceptionally dry senses of humor, Papa especially. I suppose that’s a given for a man named Roman who bonded with a man named Troy, and together produced one child named for someone who waged war on Rome and another for a hero produced by the culture that laid Troy to waste.”

“Quite the historical family,” Jack notes before taking a long sip of his drink.

“I should go make the rounds,” Clarice says before the conversation can continue or move on to a separate track. She takes a step back from Jack and Rosa. “Don’t want the new agents whispering that I’m playing favorites. Jack, are you free for dinner tomorrow? I’d love to keep catching up in a more relaxed setting.”
“Any time,” Jack responds. “Just give me a call.”

Clarice smiles. Turning her attention back to Rosa, she tilts her chin up and the smile turns proudly authoritative. “And as for you, Agent Fell, I’ll see you at orientation next week.”

“Yes, ma’am,”

And with that, Clarice walks off, leaving Jack and Rosa alone. Perhaps it’s just his long out-of-use mindset for sussing out information in the face of suspicion uncoiling and stretching out in his brain, but Jack thinks he feels the atmosphere noticeably change between them. Rosa’s expression is still friendly, but there’s a glimmer of calculation in her eyes, like a chess master calculating plays well in advance.

Now Jack just needs to determine if his gut is wrong, if he’s reading too much into this. If it’s just old age and incredible coincidence and guilt making him addled. The only way to know is to play along.

“On the subject of your family, I hope this conversation isn’t keeping you from them,” Jack says. “I’m sure they’d prefer you celebrate with them than humor an old man’s curiosity.”

“Unfortunately, my parents’ flight was delayed. My brother filmed the ceremony for them and then left to meet them at the airport. I’m sure we’ll all watch it together at the hotel later tonight. All the friends I made in the academy are busy with their own families, so I’m quite happy continuing this conversation. Who knows when or even if we’ll ever have the opportunity again.”

“Well, thank goodness for your brother. I suppose that’s the sibling you mentioned earlier. You insinuated his name, but my old brain doesn’t make connections as fast as it used to,” Jack lies mercilessly and pleasantly, tapping the coarse grey hair over his temple for emphasis.

“My brother’s name is Alexander, and he’s significantly younger than me. It’s hard to believe the baby of the family will be turning twenty in February next year,” Rosa says. She gives a small, wistful smile. “Time flies.”

"It certainly does,” Jack says as he does some calculations with this new data point, fitting it as one certain spot in a hazy timeline. He tries to keep it from showing on his face. “Nineteen. That’s a dangerous age.”

Rosa gives a small hum of agreement. “Especially for Omegas. When little Alexander started to grow up, I was quite the overzealous big sister. But I needn’t have worried. He’s very savvy about how to handle suitors. Some less charitable types might even call him an Alpha-eater.”

“You said your family moved to Argentina when you were seven, right? He must have been born after that.”

“He was,” Rosa confirms. “Despite everything.”

“Despite everything?”

“My parents’ relationship was strained at the time. A fairly abrupt international move will do that, I suppose. Especially since Daddy and I were very insistent that we did not want to leave the US,” Rosa says. She casts her eyes down to her drink and slowly twirls the stem of the glass between her thumb and forefinger. “I remember some of that time, that strange, nebulous period between the move and the news of the new baby, in the way one remembers mostly lost moments of their childhood. Hazy and dreamlike for the most part, like seeing through a fogged window to another person’s life. In my case, into another Rosa’s life. But then you’ll tilt your head just so and that
fogged glass becomes a magnifier, bringing certain elements of the memory into incredibly sharp focus.”

She takes a sip of her drink and looks off to the side into the distance, as if her past is physically present at the other end of the building. She sighs and continues, “I remember lying on a tiny cot in our hotel room our first night in Buenos Aires, as our home still had some traces of the former tenants left in it. There was a little bedside table with a clear glass candle lamp on top of it. An enormous moth - the biggest insect my seven year old self had ever seen - was obsessed with the fire inside. It pelted its fat little body against the glass over and over, trying desperately to get to the flame. I knew that if it did, it would burn. But that didn’t seem to matter to it. Getting to the fire was a higher calling for the moth, higher than life itself. Or so it would have seemed to me even a day earlier. I empathized strongly with animals at the time. Saw human motives and emotion and logic in them. But lying there on the cot, staring at the desperate moth and hearing my parents trying to argue without having their voices penetrate the thin wall separating us, I realized something important. It was just a stupid moth that didn’t know what was best for it. Didn’t know that if it got what it wanted, it would die burning.”

The more Jack looks at her, the more her words roll over him, the more certain he becomes. The shape of her cheekbones. The curl of her hair. The cadence and content of her words. He can’t be wrong on this. It takes all his concentration to keep his hands from trembling, to keep himself from grabbing her shoulder with that trembling hand, to keep that hand from shaking her, to keep himself from begging her to tell him that Will Graham is alive and uncorrupted and an unwilling participant in the life they’ve lived for twenty years. He succeeds, not because of willpower or self-control, but because he knows whatever the answer is it will open a terrible, gaping pit in his stomach.

“What did you do about the moth?” he asks. He’s impressed by how steady he manages to sound.

Rosa’s lips quirk into a wry smile. “Nothing,” she says. “I thought about catching it in my hands and opening the window for it. I’d keep it from what it wanted, but it would live. I thought about lifting the glass. I’d let it get what it wanted so desperately, but at the cost of its own life. I couldn’t decide which was the merciful thing, and eventually I fell asleep. When I woke up, its body was crumpled on the table. It had bashed itself to death against the lamp overnight, never giving up and never getting what it wanted. The worst of both options I’d weighed that night, and an unsatisfying way to die. That was the second important lesson from that time: always do a merciful thing.”

“Which would you choose, if you had been in my position, Agent Crawford?” she asks, lowly and slowly, as she turns her head to look at him face-on again. “The window or the flame?”

“The window,” Jack answers without hesitation. “But if I were the moth, the flame.”

“Interesting,” Rosa says, reaching up to tuck a stray curl back behind her left ear. “That’s what Daddy said when I asked him the same question, but that was a very long time ago. He might not think the same way anymore. Papa always chooses the flame, regardless. And Alexander takes after Papa.”

“I’d love to meet your family sometime. It sounds like we’d have a lot to talk about.”

“They would be honored,” she says. “My father in particular has wanted to pick your brain from the moment I joined the Academy.”

“Good, good,” Jack murmurs, nodding in approval. He tilts his chin up and rolls his shoulders, straightening his posture despite his aching old back. “I’d give you my card so we could arrange things, but I’m sure your father was planning on paying me a visit regardless, Rosemary.”
Rosa smiles.

Jack’s intuition is as sharp as ever.

So are the Lecters’ knives.

END

End Notes

The title comes from the song "Damn These Vampires" by The Mountain Goats. You can listen to it here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRTqDG9Mo18 I personally consider it one of the most perfect Will Graham songs I've ever heard.

Crit and comments welcome with open arms!

Works inspired by this one
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