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Prologue

Crouched in the closet, he waited for the sounds of her arrival. Sweat pooled beneath the black gloves but his face and neck were cool. The red light on the bedside clock read eleven forty-seven. She was never earlier than 11:36 and never later than 12:04. She would arrive momentarily. Anticipation ran like a blade across his skin, arousing each part of his anatomy.

From his pocket, he found the patch of pink satin he had cut from the first one's panties, and rubbed it across his lips. Nearly three months had passed since that first time. Almost five years had passed since his mother and sister, but he didn't count them with the others.

For almost five years after ridding himself of his sister and mother, he'd been content, working in the morgue. Late at night, when he was there alone, he would do a bit of dissection, practice his skills. He was always sure to work on a victim who was headed out to a closed-casket funeral or to the crematorium so no one would wonder about his handiwork. It had been a satisfying experience.

And then the idiot manager had caught him with one of the cadavers, a young woman, and had fired him. He'd felt himself explode at that moment, the trigger firing. He'd gotten into his car and driven it so fast, he'd gone right off the road. It had been a momentary release, to be free and flying.

The doctors had told him that he was fortunate to be alive, but he knew it was more than that. He was chosen. Once he had healed, with a new face thanks to the accident, he'd found himself hunting for another patient.

That was three months ago. He could still see the first one's body writhing for him, with him, against him. The satin caressed his neck, then his chest. He felt himself grow harder at the thought of her.

Lucy, she had called herself. Lucy was a whore just like his mother. "Lucy," he whispered, pressing the cloth against himself.

He smelled the satin, the scent of his own sweat and her blood and tears. The small triangle was the only thing he had allowed himself to keep. Soon, he would need to be rid of it too. He gathered himself and returned the satin to his pocket.

He let his body cool, using his mind to control its fierce desire, concentrating on his next work. For the one he'd just finished, he had fixated on the face, the center of pain. She had been a model. The face had seemed appropriate for her.

As long as he could remember, he had dreamt of pulling the body apart, of cutting the skin from the organs, of seeing it in pieces. Originally, he had also dreamt of putting it back together.

But fixing was his sister Karen's job. You're not good enough--not smart enough, not motivated, not clever. He'd heard that often from their mother--the man-hating bitch. Not clever--he had shown them who was the most clever.

Being a doctor was just like being an artist, and he had shown he was a wonderful artist. It took skill, and practice. And each time, he got better. Soon, he would make the perfect doctor. They wouldn't deny him again.

The metal tink of the key in the lock renewed his arousal. His fingers tingled with the closeness of her. FBI Agent Casey McKinley. No victim would be more enticing than she.

Cincinnati rarely captured such high profile visitors. She had come because of him. His art had drawn her. How he had longed to share the next work with her. Now he would. McKinley would be the next piece, perhaps his first masterpiece.

The light shifted in the front hall as the rented apartment door swung open. The muscles in his stomach tightened, adrenaline rushing like hot oil in his veins. His ears alert, he waited for the sounds of voices. None came. She was alone. It couldn't be more perfect.

Rising slowly, he watched through the small crack as she staggered inside. Her shoulders slightly hunched, her step heavier than usual, he could tell she was tired. He would change that. Within moments, she would quicken with energy.

He watched her drop her bag to the floor, knowing that her gun was secured in a holster under her left arm. He would have to wait until she put it down. The gun would ruin his plans. Pressing his back to the wall of the closet, he hid himself behind the clothes. He trained his ear to the door. She might pick up the phone or turn on the TV. He could wait. Eventually, she would come to bed.

Within minutes, he saw her shadow cast against the bedroom wall. The overhead light went on and Casey took her jacket off and dropped it on a chair. He was so close. He held himself from leaning forward to watch her. It was too risky. Any movement at all was too risky. He needed to catch her completely by surprise.

Still wearing her gun, Casey passed by the closet and went into the bathroom. With slow even breaths, he made no sound. He could hear the water running as he imagined what she was doing. Washing her face, trying to rinse the

dirt of a serial killer from under her nails? He was anxious to see her expression when she found out the serial killer she had been out chasing was here, in her own closet. The thought held him silent. He could wait.

It didn't take long. Casey came out of the bathroom. She wore an FBI T-shirt and plaid boxer shorts. Her thin, muscular legs strode across the room. Perhaps he would start with her legs. She was a good runner, strong and fast. He'd watched her many times. Setting her gun on the bedside table, she reached over and started to turn the light off. Halting, she turned toward where he was crouched.

His heart pounded as she approached him without her gun. The gun still sat on the bedside table. Her hands were bunched in fists. She liked to box in her spare time. He had seen her a few times in the local gym. She was quite good. She opened and closed her fists as he had seen her do when she was thinking. No, not her legs. He would have to sculpt her hands.

Within a foot of him, Casey stopped and turned back as though she was looking for something. He felt himself tighten as she moved toward the gun. He couldn't risk letting her reach it. Without pausing, he attacked, pushing through the pant suits hanging in her closet. With a swift arc, he landed the cattle prod on her shoulder.

She screamed, but the shock dropped her easily, giving him a chance to gag her. He took the first handkerchief and balled it, stuffing it in her mouth.

Her fight returning, she landed an elbow to his midriff. He had prepared for that. His muscles were tight and strong. He took her hand and twisted it back, pushing her to the floor. She tried to look up at him, but he held her face to the ground. Never let them see your face. It made them too powerful. He drew the needle from the holster on his leg and jammed it into her arm.

She fought against him, but he held her down. Within minutes, she would be silent, complacent. It would give him time to prepare his work. He wouldn't let her go unconscious.

"Hello, Mac," he said, as her fight started to weaken. He drew a blindfold from his pocket and tied it across her eyes.

She tried to make a noise but couldn't.

He would give the drug another minute and then he would remove the gag.

Pulling her to her feet, he pushed her toward the chair.

With a quick turn, she swung her leg, connecting with a hard blow to his chin. She reached for the blindfold but he caught her arm and hit her hard with the cattle prod until he almost felt the burning flesh.

She let out a piercing scream and fell over, collapsing from the shock. From his medical studies, he knew that the stun gun drove the muscles to work at a pace that outstripped the metabolism, forcing the body to convert sugars to lactic acid and making the muscles non-functional. Basically, it caused a transient yet polarizing acidosis. It had worked perfectly.

Rubbing his face, he could feel the tenderness in his jaw. Her kick would leave a mark, he knew.

At the small desk chair, he pushed her down. He drew a roll of duct tape from his pocket and taped her body against the chair, leaving her arms free. Next, he taped each wrist to an arm of the chair.

As he finished, she started to talk again. Pulling down the handkerchief he had made into a gag, he leaned down and whispered in her ear. "I'll let you talk, Agent McKinley, but only if you behave."

"The Cincinnati Butcher."

He cackled. "I'm disappointed in you, Mac. I thought we understood each other. This isn't butchering--this is art."

"Art?" she scoffed, trying to sound strong and brave. But he could hear the vibration of fear in her voice. "You're a basic killer--abused as a child. There's nothing special about you," she added, her voice steadier.

He tightened his jaw, forcing himself to control his anger. She wanted him to react. He was in control here, not her. "Oh, but there is. I'm going to show you how special. The great masters didn't do the kind of work I do. Leonardo Da Vinci wasn't as good."

"You're going to compare yourself to Da Vinci? And here I hoped you might be one of the brighter ones. But it sounds like you're just crazy."

He tensed his jaw. "I am not crazy."

"Your mother told you that, didn't she? Called you crazy? And stupid too, I bet. That wasn't very nice of her, was it? Did you become a killer to get back at your mother, Mr. Butcher? That would certainly make sense. Sometimes even parents do hurtful things. Do you feel like talking about it? I'd like to hear what she did. I'd like to know how she hurt you.

"I'm guessing your father wasn't around much. He left when you were little, didn't he? Did your mother blame you? Let me guess, you've never had a normal relationship with a woman, have you? Women scare you a little, don't they? Your mother certainly did. She was tough, wasn't she? You thought she didn't love you. So, now you can't relate to anyone, am I right? Pretty much a loner?"

He shook his head, fighting to keep her words from penetrating. "No," he whispered to himself, his hands pressed against his ears. She was trying to fuck with him, just like they were always trying to fuck with him. He wasn't listening.

"Did you light fires to get back at her? How many things did you light on fire? Lots of things? Did you ever burn down anything big?"

He felt his arms shake against his head. "No," he said, more strongly. Keep the words out. "No fire."

"How about animals? How many animals did you kill? Did you chop them up too? Did you wet your bed, Mr. Butcher?"

"I told you, I am not a butcher," he spat.

"Right, you're Da Vinci," she said, her voice skeptical. He noticed her response came more slowly and he could sense the drug taking control. "Did you wet your bed, Mr. Da Vinci?"

"You've said enough. Shut up." He moved the point of his knife to her neck.

Her jaw shook and he saw her fear in the motion of her lip. The pendulum of his emotion swung from anger to anticipation as he roped in his control, pulling the brimming fury back inside. He would have plenty of time to be angry later, but he couldn't let it affect his work.

"Oh, Mac, it isn't about killing. It's so much more. But, let's not argue. I'm going to show you."

He watched the panic in her brow and lips as she fought against the constraints. Smiling to himself, he opened his bag and pulled out surgical gloves. With his black gloves off, he put on the surgical gloves and drew his scalpel.

He ran his fingers across the warmth of her skin.

She shivered and squirmed, but there was nowhere to go.

"Did you know the tendons in your hands are like a musical instrument?" He drew the scalpel across the back of her right hand, splitting the skin.

She screamed and he grabbed her shoulder hard. "I would prefer not to be violent with you, Mac. I'd like to do this with finesse. It's art--not violence. But if you make another sound, I'm going to have to put the gag back and be rough," he warned.

Tears soaked the blindfold as sobs choked her. Still, she remained silent.

He watched for a moment before continuing. Removing the thin skin layer from her hand, he ran his gloved fingers across the structure that lay beneath. "I really wish I could let you see this, Mac. It's quite fascinating."

Casey didn't move.

"Did you know that as the tendons pass under the transverse carpal ligament, they are enclosed in two specialized synovial sacs?" he continued. "The larger of the two holds the tendons for the Flexores digitorum sublimis and profundus--it's called the ulnar bursa. Those are your flexor tendons--the ones that allow you to you extend your fingers out, say to shoot a gun perhaps."

Finding the outer edge of the ulnar bursa, he held it between his fingers then slipped his scalpel beneath it. The sound of her screaming and pain was heaven to him.