Angels

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Even from the street he knew it would be good. And yet, he was surprised – he walked past this building every day and never had he felt such a presence before.

The sun had just begun to turn the sky gray and the narrow sidewalk outside the apartments was still empty. He knew that in a few hours school children would flood the path as water, running down the cracks to the bus stop a few blocks away. He despised that hour – their shrieking filling the air, the squeal of the bus puling to a stop, and the disgusting *smell* of it all.

This hour between dark and dawn was his and his alone. No children, no stressed parents driving to work, and in this building, not even a waitress to wake up earlier than the rest of the working world. No, here he knew everyone functioned on a solid nine-to-five schedule like clockwork, and he would not be interrupted.

Standing on the sidewalk, staring up at the third floor balcony, he was gripped with an uncanny knowledge that the door was unlocked. Subconsciously, his hand slid to the rope hanging inside his coat, and he considered the premonition that had caused him to stop outside this building. Yes, he knew there would be no one to disturb him for another hour or more, but that wasn't why he stopped – he passed this building every day at this exact time. No, something more had told him to stop – had told him he could get inside – had told him to bring the rope today instead of the crowbar – had told him *she* was waiting inside.

The air was slowly growing warmer as he stood and considered it, and he became increasingly aware of the heat building inside his gloves. It was beginning to annoy him. Driven at length to move again he withdrew the coil of rope and began unwinding it with practiced ease, pitching the end up to just over the edge of the third-floor railing. The plastic-coated metal hook attached to the end was small enough to make just a soft rustling noise against the wood of the railing.

He was up in a moment, pulling the remainder of the rope up with him, carefully replacing it to the spot inside his jacket. His heart was beginning to accelerate with anticipation and he slid one finger slowly, reverently down the edge of the door. Even through his glove he could feel cool air seeping out, and again he was gripped with the feeling that he was *meant* to be here.

Finally he gripped the doorknob and gently pressed it into compliance. *It was unlocked.* His sense of things had never been wrong before and he was filled with reassurance that she had in fact left the door open just for him, anticipating this moment.

The opening door hit him with a breeze of cold air, nearly crystallizing on his face as he stepped inside. The carpet muffled the step of his feet and he closed the door unhurriedly, letting his eyes adjust to the new light source – a fluorescent kitchen light had been left on. It was a small apartment but spotlessly clean. He walked across the silencing carpet to the front door and bolted it from the inside, feeling a thrill at the metallic *slice* of steel on steel, disturbing the silence at last.

As he walked away from the front door, deeper into the apartment, he forced himself to focus on every step, silencing it with practiced ease, deliberately not allowing himself to look up. The hall he came to held three closed doors but he knew without hesitation which one he wanted.

Another door which gave silently to his pressing fingers. The long window on the far wall was beginning to show cracks of impending dawn around the curtained edges, but he felt unhurried. There was always exactly enough time.

Only when he had stepped into the bedroom in the back did he raise his eyes from the ground. Upon seeing the girl he completely understood his premonition – he had seen her last week at the store, and it had been clear to him when she met his gaze that this was exactly what she wanted. He approached her bedside, staring at her face for a moment, until he saw permission cross her features. He glanced once more at the window, asking the impending sunrise for permission, before moving in one fluid motion to cover her mouth with one gloved hand and pin her on the bed by sitting on her hips. Even as she came awake and began to struggle, he felt momentarily sorry for getting his boots on her bedspread, before the look of sheer terror froze onto her face – he enjoyed it for a mere second that lasted an eternity, wide eyes fixed on his – before she began to struggle a moment later.

He moved unhurriedly, easily gripping her jaw and keeping her mouth closed with one hand while the other fetched the knife from his coat. This was the true test to see if he had truly anticipated her desire as well as he thought he had – he was painfully aware of each of his own breaths as he drew the blade out into the dim light of the bedroom.

She fell still immediately and made a little sound against his glove. Relief washed over him. It was clear to him in that moment that this is what she wanted. He stared at her for another second, the angelic face begging him to finish it, and bit back a tight breath of sorrow. His work was never complete, always he was driven to take these angels and send them home – no one else could do it, and without him, they were trapped on this mortal plane, *forever*. He lightened his grip on her face and felt her lips part against the smooth leather on his palm.

The silver tip brushed her throat and as the sheets around her grew hot and heavy, he watched her eyes flutter and finally drift closed, peacefully. He shut his eyes for a moment and when he looked again her wings had spread out from her back, covering the bloody sheets with soft white feathers. She leaned up and kissed his cheek before taking flight, slipping out from his reaching fingers.

He stared at her body for a moment before standing, pausing only to slice a lock of her hair for his collection. Most men could never dream of an angel so beautiful as the ones he had seen. He carefully positioned her fingers around the hilt of the knife, leaving it as a going-away present as he always did, before returning to her balcony.

The fingers of dawn reached up and brushed the tears from his eyes. With sunrise, the angels he had freed from their prisons of flesh could finally thank him. He smiled at the sun.