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Silver Midnight

By

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Chapter One

The house wasn't quite big enough to call it a mansion, but it looked like it was trying. Somebody had added about as much to it as you could without completely eating the lawn, and it was quite a pile of yellow bricks. That wasn't good security thinking, you wanted some open space between the perimeter barrier and the structure, and some exterior lighting that would up the risk of crossing the yard. This place not only didn't have that, some of the trees had been allowed to grow limbs out over the stone wall. That was twice as bad, you wanted something you could see through, like a fence, and you didn't leave the equivalent of a ladder next to it. Oh well, if they wanted to make it easy...the small, darkly clad figure tossed a weighted line over a limb and climbed up effortlessly.

The top of the wall had two rows of nasty looking barbed spikes, but that was a waste of metal when an intruder could just bypass the whole thing. The intruder pulled the line up and concealed it in a small knapsack. An alert observer might figure out that she was a woman from her shape, but little else since she was covered completely in light absorbing black fabric. She walked along the limb as easily as most people would a sidewalk until reaching the trunk. She stopped and listened. No normal human would hear it, but there was a large dog coming around the house and it wasn't barking. This wasn't a guard dog to scare people away, it was an attack dog to take them down. Maybe that's why they'd left the rest of the security so loose. If they were betting their lives on a dog, they hadn't picked good odds.

Deciding not to make extra work by waiting until the thing had position under her, she dropped three meters to the grass, crouched, and waited. The Doberman came at her in full sprint, jaws wide. It went for the throat, which was conveniently down near its level. A little too conveniently perhaps, but dogs just weren't that smart, nor did they expect their targets to be so much faster and stronger. Slipping sideways at the last instant, she grabbed the animal by its

neck, swung it over onto the ground, and crushed its throat and spine. She held it until it was no longer capable of making any obvious noise.

She made her way through the shadows across the narrow strip of lush, late spring lawn towards the house. These people were making it too easy, the curtains were open all over the place, and she could see them walking around instead of having to pick occupied rooms by thermal and guess. There was only one of them targeted for elimination, the woman, but they were all fair game if they got in the way. Somebody had dropped the bomb. That wasn't something a darkling would do without a damn good reason.

She used the sturdy copper downspout to climb quietly to the second floor, then it was a short hop over to the limestone window ledge. This room was dark, but it was next to the one where the woman had been less than a minute before. The intruder knew the alarms would trigger the instant she breached the glass or opened the sash, but she really didn't care. Nobody was fast enough to intervene, and too bad for anybody that wanted to try. A closer inspection of the window revealed that somebody had replaced the glass with three centimeter thick polycarbonate, probably to stop bullets. Too bad they had just kludged it into the old wooden sash with some kind of resin epoxy. She slipped the short end of a flat steel prybar in between the sashes, braced one hand on the wall, and pulled until one of the rails cracked enough to release the lock screws. No alarms yet. Using one foot and the opposite shoulder to stay on the narrow ledge, she put the long end of the bar under the lower sash and readied the other hand to lift as soon as there was room. The thing was skewed slightly and resisted going upward until she got both hands under it. There was the alarm. Keeping the bar, she rolled through the window, across the bed, and onto her feet by the room's doorway.

The woman had just come into the hall to see what the noise was about when the dark clad figure jammed the flat steel bar into her throat with a single strike that was faster than any cobra. The woman thudded to the floor, a mass of flailing limbs and flying blood. The intruder wasn't leaving anything to chance, and threw

the flat bar into the massive hallway mirror making sure someone would hear. She crouched down by the Elizabethan table at the top of the stair and waited. It took an eternity -ninety seven seconds- for the lone body guard to instruct the rest of the family and come upstairs.

She lashed out, hitting him in the groin. His momentary hesitation was all she needed to sweep one of his legs and toss him over the railing. She followed him over the rail as he landed badly, breaking several bones. He was trying to pull his gun with his off hand -the unbroken one- when she landed on his chest with one foot and crushed his throat with the other. After borrowing his pistol and putting one of his own bullets in his head, just to make sure, she had to restrain herself from going into the basement to finish the witnesses because she knew there wasn't time. She could hear sirens in the distance, and the chatter of the Chicago PD on the police band in her head said the cops would be rolling up shortly. Their response time was usually pretty good in these better neighborhoods. There might even be some security company pukes too. It would be fun to stick around and mess with them, but there were other houses on the list tonight. Somebody had made the wrong enemies and the wrong moves. People would have to pay.

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She sat up and rubbed lightly at her eyes. Her tear ducts had never quite made the adjustment to her artificial, enhanced ocular replacements. They were comfortable while she was awake, and while she was asleep, but there was that transitional time when they just itched in a way and in a place you could never quite scratch. At least she had made peace with sleeping while her amped hearing picked up every noise for blocks. The white noise generator she had tried a few times hadn't been worth the nightmares it caused.

She slid out from under the military surplus sleeping bag and padded silently across the low pile carpet to the bathroom. Her fingers scratched idly at the newest scar on her shoulder while she sat on one of the toilets deciding not to take another shower. It had taken a while when she'd gotten in last night to wash off the dried blood that had soaked through the seams of her work clothes. Well,

actually, it had been this morning, but it wasn't like she had to punch a time-clock. She had tossed the clothing into her 'vat' of evidence destroying chemicals and would fish them out and wash them later, when she felt like it.

Right now, it was just getting to be dusk and she wanted to have some fun. Last night had actually been work, hitting almost a third of the addresses and disposing of the people on the list. Somebody had already gotten to the sixth address when she drove by, somebody with Torch's delicate touch. It looked like maybe a rocket or a drum fed grenade launcher had been used. It was messy and it was overkill. Some people just lacked a sense of style.

It was unusual to do that many jobs in a night, but somebody had dropped the bomb. That meant another darkling had called down the thunder on somebody who was a danger to them all. It wasn't something that was done often or lightly. It was meant to eradicate the threat completely and to send a message to anyone who might be trouble in the future. Besides, Silver was sure she'd gotten as many of the targets as anybody else. She was as lean and efficient as any of them. Now she felt like recreating. If she wasn't getting paid for those targets, the least she could do was throw herself a party.

She stood and reached back to straighten out her hair, even braided it still reached her waist. Walking back out to the bunk room, she passed the big mirror without even glancing at it. She never used it anymore. After kicking through the pile where most of her clothes seemed to end up, she pulled on a pair of red leather pants, unable to remember how many she had. They were all tight but supple so she'd look good without giving up the ability to fight. She added a short vest that was the same material and color even if it wasn't a complete match, not really caring as long as it left her arms and most of her torso bare so people could see her scars of triumph. Each one represented a time when she had cheated death. There wasn't any real pattern to them, it was just something she did in the heat of the moment. The first few had been given to her by opponents, and she had just continued from there.

She pulled on a shoe, put her foot against the other thigh, and

laced it standing. There had been a time when it would have been necessary to sit or put her foot up on something but she hardly even remembered those days as she put the other on the same way. They were soft boots a lot like freestyle wrestlers wore but with soles more like the kind rock climbers used, and they didn't last like regular boots, but who cared. They gave her the traction on unusual surfaces and the feel for her footing that had saved her life more than once. They were, of course, red.

Her hands slid into a pair of fingerless black fighting gloves with carbon fiber plates in the backs. She'd lost count of how many pairs of those she had gone through. A pair of tough looking, black on black, shades that completely covered her red irised, almond shaped eyes completed her look. She shrugged her shoulders and flexed her hands. She felt good, she felt ready.

She slid down the brass pole, letting go and dropping the last meter, landing with a casual delicate grace any cat would have been proud of. Scanning quickly over her collection of vehicles, there wasn't really any doubt about which one she'd take tonight. She strolled to the sleek red and black car on the end. It was wide and low, sitting there like a sleeping demon with wheels almost half the height of the composite body. She slid behind the wheel, shut the door, and put her thumb on the reader pad. When the lights went green, she put her finger on the start button and ran it in a slow circle once around it before she pushed it firmly in. The engine came to life hungrily.

She thought about how busy this place would have been when it housed firetrucks and firemen while waiting for the overhead door to roll all the way to the top. It wasn't about the room, it was about the statement. She coaxed the car gently forward onto the apron. There wasn't any trick to getting power out of it, the challenge was in driving it at slow speed with finesse. After the door had closed, she waited for a break in traffic and let the giant contact patches do their job. She loved the way this beast felt rolling on pavement. The speed limit would do for now, there would be time for some fun when she hit the highway.

She was waiting at the last light before her ramp when two

young guys pulled up next to her in a two-door they had probably modified themselves. They made appreciative faces and revved their engine(s) at her. She ignored them until she saw the cross-light cycling with peripheral vision as wide as any other human on the planet and then turned her head calmly to the side and hooked her finger in a come hither gesture just as the light changed. Her foot barely had to stroke the pedal to roll calmly across the intersection. The boys stayed hungrily along side until the on-ramp where they dropped in right behind her. After they had merged onto the four-lane, she waited for them to pull along side her again. She turned their way, kissed the air, and put her foot down. The car had a top speed almost four times the legal limit and a power-to-weight ratio that let it get there in a third of a minute. It also had a computer controlled drive train that let it stay on the road while dodging other traffic at that speed. She made sure the boys were just a dot on the horizon before she let it back down to a speed that wouldn't get every cop in the region on her tail.

She turned on the sound system and punched up a track that always got her blood pumping by a group that really *understood* the power of the solid body electric guitar. She drove down the road feeling like she owned it. Hey, anybody who thought they could convince her otherwise was welcome to die trying.

It was well after dark by the time she drove between the warehouses somewhere on the west side of St. Louis, slowing as she neared the one with the flame colored sign that simply read "Asylum". She had earned the right to go around and use the back door, bringing in any weapons she wanted, but she didn't need them, not any external ones anyway. Besides, what was the point of having juice like that if you couldn't abuse it once in a while. She parked in front of a sign that said specifically not to. There was already a line waiting to get in and some of them looked at her as she got out of the car. They weren't impressed by rude parking or cheap stunts, everybody tried that now and then, before they learned better. Some of them were interested in anyone who could afford a car like that and came down here.

She walked up to the door, outside the rope. The bouncer on her

side put his fingertips on the chest of the guy he had been screening and focused his attention on the slightly muscular, scarred Asian woman. Her red outfit was a little plain compared to some of the people in line. Stopping a meter short of him, she put her palms together in front of her face with her elbows out high, and turned her skin completely metal-flake silver. She stepped back to a fighting stance and fifteen centimeter long, slim metal spikes slid out of the inside of her wrists from their internal sheaths along the ulna, locking in place with a faint click.

The bouncer knew exactly who she was and exactly what was going on, but he also knew better than to mess with the moment. The people in line got quiet in anticipation. The bouncer finally cracked a smile. "Quit showing off and get in here." He pushed the guy back to make room. Silver put the spikes away, slid around the end of the rope, patted the bouncer on the cheek, ducked under his other arm, and went inside. The crowd was even more eager to get inside and see who else might be here.

Silver made her entrance unobtrusively, but there were regulars here who'd seen which people she spent her time with. They made room for her to cross the floor without a word, not that words could be heard by most people over the music. Only two of her team were here and in their usual places in the conversation pit at the back. She angled over a bit so she could approach the u-shaped leather sectional from one end. The man blocking access there was immense and muscular with geometric tattoos covering his dusk colored arms. He knew she was coming, but made no move.

Silver took a few long strides as she neared and leaped into a completely aerial, no hands, forward flip that left her seated in the big Hispanic man's lap. He hadn't even flinched. "You never get tired of that, do you?"

She tossed her braid back into place and patted his cheek. "Why would I?" She turned an evil glare on the black man in the workout suit who was sharing the seating. "You're a pig, Torch. Sloppy, very sloppy."

Torch shrugged. "Nobody said it had to be pretty, just done."

She turned back to the big man she was sitting on and pulled her shades partway down her nose. "Choo."

"Yeah, what?" He turned his head so their noses almost touched.

"Where's everybody else?"

"Skitch is upstairs." He tipped his head slightly, indicating the offices and DJ's booth. "Vertical will be here later. I think she has work tonight."

Silver waited for six seconds, then gently bit the tip of his nose. "And where's Shatter?"

"Don't know. I think she might have been the one who pushed the big red button. Nobody's seen her since."

Silver rolled off Choo into the corner seat, stretching out so she could put her feet on the low, steel table. "What ever happened to the regular guy she drug down here that night?"

Both men shrugged. They all spotted Skitch coming around the edge of the crowd along the wall. She never made any sort of scene, it was in her nature and to her advantage to be unnoticed. The others waited for her to come over and get comfortable between Choo and Silver before she answered the question she shouldn't have been able to hear. "He's in the hospital. The cops want to talk to him when he's able. Somebody made hamburger out of the guy. And *somebody* made hamburger out of half a dozen cops at the scene. They'd really like to talk to her, too. Anybody placing bets on that happening?"

No normal person would have noticed any response from the others, but they all sensed the lowered heart rates and skin temps that signaled the relief they were feeling. Their kind was rare enough that it was always good not to lose anybody, especially not to cops. It was so much work to find a replacement that you could trust. No one spoke for several minutes.

A young kid detached himself from the rest of the herd and made his way across the three meter no-man's-land that the crowd observed out of fear and respect. The darklings ignored him until he was standing right in front of their territory. The kid made eye

contact with Silver's sunglasses. "I'm calling you out."

She leaned her head slightly towards Choo. "He's not even hyped up on chems. Is he suicidal?" Choo shrugged.

Skitch put her hands into her jacket pockets. "Yeah he is. It's some beta test version of some new bio-crap that's supposed to be undetectable. It's also pretty unreliable when you're nervous. Is anybody nervous around here?"

Choo leaned forward as if to get up out of the way. In the last instant, he grasped the table and backhanded it into the kid. The kid was fast enough to block with his hands, which earned him two broken thumbs. Choo hit him just under the ribs, he didn't really want to hurt the kid badly. As the kid was hitting the floor, Silver flipped up and stepped on the back of the sofa behind Skitch. The kid had fallen with his injured hands close to his body and Silver landed on him with her knees wide, pinning his arms. She put her hands on the sides of his head and pressed her open mouth on his, using her thumbs to pinch his nose shut. While he thrashed about for a moment or two, she could hear Choo put the table back where it belonged. After she felt the boy pass out from lack of oxygen, she let go, stood effortlessly, and addressed the crowd.

"Now it feels like a party."

Chapter Two

Detective Dunn had only been on nights for a few weeks. He was already starting to hate it. The crime scenes were dark, the patrol pukes had usually let the newsies walk through everything, the witnesses were either wanted criminals or sleepy civilians, and most of the cases were either domestic or drug related. What fun. He was already on his eighth murder of the night though, and morning couldn't get here soon enough. Something was in the air tonight, there weren't usually this many cases in one night, and especially not this many high rent ones.

His phone buzzed. He fished it out of his coat pocket and put it to his head. "What?" He listened as the Patrol Sergeant stood waiting for him. He put the phone away. "Fuckin' great. They got another one."

"What the hell happened last night? Did these people's stock fall off a cliff or something?" The sergeant seemed eager to be involved.

"What's that supposed to mean? You know something useful?"

"Well, I guess so. So far the word is that there are seventeen of these upper class hits and at every one there's at least one person that worked for the same company, a place called NexTech. That makes them all related and you caught the first one. So, that means you ride herd on the whole mess."

"Oh, that's just great. You guys always have the good news first, don't you." Dunn put a piece of gum in his mouth and stuffed the wrapper into his coat pocket with the others. "What can you tell me about this crime scene?"

"Well, our perp is clever and creative. The doors and windows on this place are pretty secure." He pointed to the metal bars. "So the killer climbs this tree over here and drops onto the back roof there. Then it's a short but steep run up the slate roof to the top, go to the end, hang over, and forcibly remove that vent there that goes into the attic. Not a very big hole, but a medium sized person could squeeze through. Seems nobody bothered to go up in the attic and

add that to the alarm grid. It's always the details that get you. Then the killer goes through the house disposing of anybody who gets in the way. At some point, somebody must have made some noise, 'cause the guy who worked for NexTech made a run for it. He hit the panic button and went out the front door. He bought it on the front walk there." He gestured with his datapad. "These people were all cut, stabbed, or killed with a well placed blow to the throat. All real quiet and quick."

"Okay, so that rules out the blow-shit-up character. And the entry and attacks rule out the gate-crasher guy. The only other repeated M.O. we have fits this pretty well. So this was ninja-woman." They stood and looked down at the body on the sidewalk while the forensic people did their thing. "What the fuck? Was this some kind of homicidal scavenger hunt? See how many people from the same business you can whack in one night? I wonder what the prize is."

"Nothing good I'd imagine. Have you had a chance to talk to Detective Rand, yet?"

"Didn't he take early retirement? Bailed when it got tough? What can he offer?"

"He used to catch most of these kind of cases. He might have some leads or theories that could help. I can get his number for you if you want."

"Yeah. What the hell, it can't get any worse, right?"

Chapter Three

There were only a few hours left before dawn as she prowled through a former Chicago warehouse district that had been turned into club central. It didn't take her long to find the kind of place she was looking for. It was a trendy, dance club that still had a line at the door even at this hour. She parked a few blocks away and walked to the back of the place. It only took her minutes to gain access through a window and make her way to the main dance floor. She watched the crowd for a few minutes until she spotted the kind of guy she wanted. He moved just right and had a heat signature that fit the parameters she had established over time, mostly through trial and error.

As she crossed the dance floor she put on a pair of green tinted sunglasses she kept in the car, not because they were cool, but because they made her red eyes look brownish and closer to normal. They didn't hamper her vision at all. As she passed the targeted man she captured his wrist and dragged him away from the girl he had been dancing with. He followed without much resistance. The girl started to make a move in objection, but that ended when she found Silver's foot a centimeter from her nose.

Silver led the guy into the men's room and straight into the handicapped stall at the end, chasing out the three guys who'd been sharing a little chemical recreation. She put herself between him and the door, slid all eight fingers down the front of his pants, grasped with her thumbs, and pulled. There was a tearing and the guy looked a little frightened and a lot excited. She slid the useless fabric out of the way before pushing him down onto the seat. It only took seconds for her to slide her pants down to her ankles, and no time at all to climb on top of the guy. She wrapped her hands around the brushed stainless steel grab rails and worked at creating some serious friction. The guy couldn't figure out what to do with his hands, so they just hovered in the air above her thighs.

After she was finished with him she slid off, pulled her pants up, and closed them. He looked at her like he was going to say

something, so she put her finger on his lips and shook her head. He waited until she was halfway across the restroom before he leaned out of the stall holding his torn pants up. "Hey! I didn't even get your name."

Silver didn't look back as she lifted one hand above her shoulder, gave him the finger, and kept walking. The other guys in the room jeered and applauded as she left. She made her way out of the club and back to her car. She made sure she wasn't followed on the way home, it wasn't a conscious effort, just something she did, like breathing.

She checked her encrypted messages before she went to sleep. There was a job waiting for her. She decided it could wait a few more hours, threw off her clothes, and crawled into bed.

Chapter Four

Detective Dunn sat at a table in a mall food court, waiting. He had called former Detective Rand, even though he doubted whether the guy could offer anything useful. The guy had provided the open slot that let others move up, including Dunn. So he put his scorn aside and asked for any information he could get. All Rand had said was a time and a place before he hung up. Dunn didn't mind waiting someplace warm and dry, especially if there were pretty girls.

He wasn't too busy watching girls to notice Rand buy a coffee and come over to the table. He was dressed pretty richly for a retired cop. Working for a big company evidently paid a lot better than civil service. Rand took a chair without being asked. "You know much about land mines?"

"Why, that the business you're in now?"

"No. You're standing in a minefield and you haven't got a fucking clue. One wrong step and BANG!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I heard about your murders. Everybody heard. You have no idea what it means do you?"

"Why don't you enlighten me?"

"Look. These people don't play kids' games, they play for life and death. Trouble is, they play with a marked deck and you only get one chip. I followed them around for a decade. They're your worst nightmare come to life. Most of the time they just kill one or two when the price is high enough and then they fade back into the night. What you had the other night was about more than business, it was personal."

He sipped his coffee while trying to see if he was getting through to Dunn. "This is all off the record. Here's what the score is so far. Victor Santra, one of the dead bodies in the warehouse on the south side was the CEO of NexTech. Victor made business personal, bad

move. He was trying to target one of the darklings who'd done work for a rival corp against him. You try to finger one of them and you get dead. So does everyone around you. It's a miracle that they stopped with the VPs and the board members that live in the area. I wouldn't have been surprised if the corporate headquarters had gone down in flames. They're that serious."

"So, what, you're telling me that these supposed darklings really exist and they can pretty much kill anyone they want and skate?"

Rand looked into his cup. "You might want to update your will."

"You trying to scare me? What's your stake in this?"

Rand sat back and sighed faintly. "I'm trying to save your life. You aren't going to close these cases, but they might close yours. Wait until another one happens and try to figure out which company was behind it. You might be able to build a conspiracy case against them. Chasing the darklings is a waste of time at best. At worst, you might as well eat your gun, it'd be less painful."

"You ever meet one of these people?"

Rand looked right into his eyes with an expression Dunn had only seen in pictures of combat weary soldiers. "Yeah. I did, once. It was enough."

"What happened?"

"Screw you. Keep doing what you're doing, you may get to find out." He downed the rest of his coffee. "Don't mess around with these people. Did you actually *look* at the crime scenes from the other night? Do you have any idea what they're capable of? If they want you, there's no place you can hide and no place they can't get to you. They don't flinch and they don't hesitate." He got up from the table, taking the empty cup with him. "Don't call me again."

Dunn sat for a few minutes thinking. Maybe working nights wouldn't be so dull after all.