

SILENT NIGHT

By: Emma Couette

Chapter One

Haven City, 05/2110

The stupidity of humanity never ceases to amaze me. They all must have a death wish. Well, I'll consider myself a genie, but they'll have to get in line. I already have my target for today—Lincoln McColl—and these morons have been giving me his information all morning.

Nobody suspects a thing when a young woman comes up to them in tattered clothes, crying her eyes out, saying she's from out of town, her parents just died, and she's looking for her Uncle Lincoln.

Do you know Lincoln McColl? Where does he live? Does he have a job? What time will he be home?

It works like a charm, and before I know it, I have all the information I need. People are suckers for a crying girl, even in a city like this. One day, it'll get them killed, but today is not that day. I can't say the same for Lincoln. If luck is on my side, he'll be dead by midnight and if not... Let's just say I won't be pleased. Things might get messy. You never know what the day will bring you.

I don't mind messy; it's more fun than clean. Don't get me wrong—I'm not a violent person, but I never said I was honest either. I lie to get by. I do whatever it takes, and if that means killing for a living, I'll take it over dying any day.

I continue down the street, keeping my head down and hood up. I've found the information I need, enough with catching people's attention. It's time to blend into the shadows again. I love the shadows. They're dark and mysterious, full of danger, just like me. Some people say assassins are demons from hell, spawns of Satan. I disagree.

I am a child of darkness, one with the night.

I take a right at the next street corner, following the directions given to me by a middle-aged man.

What did he say his name was again?

Bernard or something like that. His briefcase had read "Whitman."

Well, Mr. Whitman, you better hope these directions are right or you'll be next.

I walk five blocks down William Street, heading away from the heart of Haven City. The bustle of downtown shops and office buildings gives way to homes and gardens cloaked in despair. The sidewalks are cracked, the gardens full of weeds. Sometimes, I wonder what the city looked like in its glory, before the Assassin's Guild tainted its streets with malice. The rest of the time, I revel in the horror of what we've done.

I hang a left at Richard Avenue, the road sign bent and faded. According to Whitman's directions, this is the right street and Lincoln's house is the only two-story red brick, number 358.

I count the house numbers as I go, keeping an eye out for the red brick, as well as any Resistance agents I could have fun with. Sadly, I reach the house a few minutes later with nobody in sight.

This is it: a dilapidated brick building with a front porch and dying window box flowers.

Quaint.

Beside the door, the numbers 3, 5, and 8 hang in gold-painted metal.

Satisfied, I turn around and head back down the street. I'll enter the house through the backyard.

At the corner of Richard, I turn right and head toward George Street, which runs parallel. I count the houses in my head as I walk down George, until I reach a brick bungalow that should back onto Lincoln's property.

I don't check to see if anyone is looking before I make my way across the front lawn. It's better to act like you belong and get seen, than to look like you shouldn't be there. I should know. I've learned from experience and have bluffed my way through situations on more than one occasion, though not in recent months. I've never been caught. That's why I'm one of the best, though it's not the only reason.

When I reach the back gate, I hop it with ease and stroll to the back fence. I climb over it, landing like a cat in Lincoln's flower bed.

Tulips. How nice.

I straighten and head towards the back porch.

The back door is locked, but no matter. I reach into my hair and pull out two bobby pins. I shove both into the lock and, after a couple of expert twists, the bolt slides over with a click. Smiling, I replace the pins in my hair and turn the knob. The door swings open without a sound and I slip inside, shutting it behind me with a soft thud.

The interior of the house is unimpressive with its fake wooden floors, dull paint choices, and minimal decoration. The kitchen is cluttered with dishes, though there isn't much food in the cupboards or fridge.

There are a few pictures on the mantelpiece in the living room. One is of a brown-haired, blue-eyed man of average height, presumably Lincoln. The other is of the same man with a blonde woman at his side. She must be his wife, though by the look of the kitchen, I guess she's been gone for a while.

There's nothing else of interest on the main floor, so after checking for a basement and finding no sign of one, I head upstairs. The fifth stair creaks. I make a note of that for later. The landing leads to a hallway and I creep down it, counting my steps and checking for any more loose floorboards. I'm disappointed when I find none.

Squeaky floorboards always make for an interesting story, always point the finger in my direction after a murder. A house full of creaks and groans makes it impossible for an assassin to go undetected, unless of course, that assassin is me.

There are four doors in the upstairs hall. One leads to a nasty-looking bathroom. I linger long enough to catch a glimpse of myself in the cracked and grungy mirror. My

hair is growing too long for my liking and the black is showing through the blue in my bangs again.

I sigh and then scold myself.

Now is not the time.

I leave the bathroom behind. The other three rooms upstairs must be bedrooms and I have to inspect each one before I go.

I open the first door on my right. Boxes and old furniture fill the small space. In the corner sits an old metal box I recognize only from stories I've been told. Nobody in Haven has watched television since before the war. It strikes me as odd that Lincoln would have one.

I poke my nose into a few of the cardboard boxes. There isn't anything of value in them. One is full of miscellaneous items: markers, cutlery, and keys. It's strange. Two others are crammed full of newspapers, dating back 40 years. Then, four more boxes overflowing with women's clothes, shoes, and jewelry. They must be his wife's belongings. I pick up a necklace with a name engraved in it: *Margaret*. That would make them Lincoln and Margaret McColl.

How lovely.

I drop the necklace into the box and leave the room. I won't find anything here.

The next room is a guest room. It's sparsely furnished with only a nightstand and a bed. It's painted a dark grey.

Very depressing.

I suppose this is the room Lincoln would've offered to his "niece."

Too bad she isn't real.

I move on.

The last room at the end of the hall is Lincoln's, but for a master bedroom, it's rather disappointing. The single bed is pushed up against one wall, opposite the two windows. There is no closet, only a chest of drawers, and clothes litter the floor, enough that I can't tell whether it's hardwood or carpet.

In the far corner is a desk and I navigate around the piles of clothes to reach it, careful not to disturb them, though I doubt Lincoln would be able to tell the difference. I bet his wife wouldn't approve of this mess. Again, I wonder how long she's been gone, but I'm not paid to wonder. I'm paid to get results. I turn my mind back to the task at hand.

The desk is a paper war zone. Sheets are torn in half, scribbled over, and a whole pile lies shredded. A lot of the papers bear his name.

What are you trying to hide, Lincoln? Don't you know nothing gets past us?

I guess I won't be collecting much evidence tonight, though I check the desk drawers for anything he might have left intact. The first three are empty, but the last one is locked.

Bingo.

I pull out my bobby pins again and have the drawer open in seconds. Inside is a white envelope. It lies unmarked save for the plain red seal.

Interesting.

I know without a doubt that this is what I need.

Satisfied, I replace the envelope and lock the drawer again. I'll retrieve the envelope tonight after I'm done. I walk out of the room without leaving a single trace of my presence behind.

I return to the storage room and go unlock the window, making sure it opens. This will be my entry point tonight. There is no way Lincoln will notice it's unlocked and he has no reason to check it. If he does lock it again for some reason, I know I can pick the lock on the back door. No matter how hard he tries to keep me out, I'm getting in tonight.

I go back downstairs and lock the back door before heading out the front. I walk down the front steps like I own the place, ready to spout my niece story if need be, but the street is empty.

Too bad.

With a resigned sigh, I flip up my hood and start down the street. It's time to head home and give my report. The Charger will be eager to learn what I have found.

Chapter Two

The streets in the south end of Haven City are quiet; some would say dead. I say silence is sometimes louder than noise, but no one else understands. I hear the silence like a slow beating drum when I advance on my victims, drowning out their heartbeat until it stops.

Silence presses in on people in their weakest moments, its sound rendering them deaf to what they want to hear, but I've long since learned how to push back, to mould that silence into something I can use. I've made silence my own, so now when I walk down these streets, the quiet cacophony of them does not deter me. I saunter towards the lion's den.

People stay clear of this side of Haven. Some remember the rebels who once owned these streets, but all fear the assassins the rebels left behind. The war was not kind to this city and neither are we. People can sense our presence. They see it in the abandoned bungalows with ripped curtains and unkempt lawns. They see it in the buildings turned to rubble, red staining the dusty remains. They feel it in the silence, in the emptiness. Nothing thrives here except for the destruction we create. No one has confirmed the suspicion that the dreaded Assassin's Guild calls these streets home, but they aren't willing to take that chance.

The truth is, the assassins don't live *on* the streets but *beneath* them, in a warren of passageways, caves, and caverns. The houses of the south end are only used as access points to our lair, though some hold no connection at all. The Charger is the only assassin who knows the location of every entrance and exit. Most assassins are given one or two. I know of twenty, but that's one of the perks of being in the higher ranks.

I go several streets out of my way, down dead-end alleyways, through overgrown backyards, and under bridges to shake off any possible pursuers. Even an assassin can't be too careful, especially in a city crawling with Resistance agents, despite our efforts to pare them down.

Eventually, I come to the abandoned house that is my usual entrance, a small brick bungalow on a corner lot.

As it should be, the door is unlocked, and I push it open. I listen for the sounds of any trespassers: scavengers, city outsiders, or other assassins. I hear no one and head down to the basement.

The basement is finished, but neglected, and I walk through it to the back bedroom. I cross the room and step into the closet. In the corner, under a pile of clothes, lies a trapdoor. I crouch down and pull it open with one hand; it's lighter than it looks. Nothing but darkness lies beyond it. I listen once again for company and hear nothing.

It's safe.

Holding onto the trapdoor with one hand, I step into the hole, my foot landing on a ladder rung. I drop the other foot down and descend into the gloom, pulling the door behind me. When the door shuts, it cuts off all light, but I am not afraid. Only weak people fear the dark.

The shaft I climb down is about five meters deep and I land on the ground a few moments later. Though it is dark, I know I'm in a tunnel. I brought a lantern with me the first time and memorized every feature. I haven't brought a light since.

I head down the tunnel a hundred paces before light spills into the space. A single light bulb hangs from the dirt ceiling, illuminating a door and a buttoned panel beside it. I type in the code and enter the elevator. Darkness once again reigns as I descend.

The elevator journey is only two and a half minutes, but it seems like forever before the box slows down and hits the ground with a muffled bang. The doors open automatically and I step out. Another lonely bulb illuminates a second tunnel. I continue down it without a backward glance.

This is where the journey becomes dangerous, not for me, but for any non-assassin who is lucky enough to make it this far. I count my steps as I go. After ten, the tunnel widens and in twenty more, it opens up into a huge cavern, though you can't tell in the dark. Anybody who shouldn't be here would continue straight and walk right off of a cliff, free falling into an underground lake full of jagged rocks. I keep to the left, following a ledge hugging the cavern wall. The tunnel continues fifty paces later.

Five minutes after that, the tunnel turns sharply to the right and I can see again. Every few feet along the ceiling is a light bulb, all the way to the end of the tunnel where a ladder carved into the wall ascends upward into a dark shaft. I start climbing and, five rungs later, I reach up and push open the trapdoor, just enough to see through.

I peer into the hallway above. No one is in sight. I listen for footsteps heading my way but hear nothing.

Satisfied, I push the heavy door up the rest of the way and slide it over gently so the tile doesn't scrape against the floor and announce my presence. I climb out of the shaft into the bright hall and slide the trapdoor back into place. Nobody would ever guess the tile is an entrance to our lair; even I can't find it once it's been replaced, which is why it's only an entry point, not an exit.

I dust myself off and look around. I'm back into the Guild proper, though there's no one to be seen. I don't let that bother me as I continue on my way.

I navigate the hallways and dark corridors of the Assassin's Guild with the ease of someone who's memorized every inch of the place. I could get anywhere in my sleep. Soon, I hear the familiar noises of the Guild: yelling, small conversations, and the satisfying clack of weapons meeting as I pass by one of the countless training rooms.

I allow myself a small sigh. This is home, but now is not the time to lose myself in the charms of the place. I have a mission to complete.

I go a little out of my way in order to bypass the Grand Cavern, our wide open gathering place where we can do anything and everything we want. It's at the centre of the underground compound and you can see all the training rooms from its floor, as all of them have glass walls facing the cavern. I usually spend time there after missions, but I'm not done yet. The Charger is waiting for my report.

I walk faster, eager to get it over with. Like many of the assassins, I don't enjoy spending time with the Charger. He is King of us all and has murdered more people than we could ever dream of. His soul is as dark as they come and he's the only common thing we all fear. None of us would ever dare cross him, which is why I don't want to be late.

Ten minutes later, after a route that sends me doubling back several times, I head down a hall cloaked in darkness. Only thirty assassins, out of the hundreds living here, actually know where the Charger's office is. I'm included in the few who receive missions from him personally and am required to report back to him face to face. The others receive envelopes shoved under the doors of their quarters, depicting the details of their missions, and they send back written reports.

I dreaded the written reports in the past, but now I often wish I could go back to them. The Charger gives me chills and after being in his presence, I can't shake off the feeling of dread for hours, but I fare better than others. Agent Ten wouldn't speak or leave his room for a whole week after he met the Charger. Three years later, and now Agent Six, he still shuts himself in his room for five hours after he gives his report.

Some people are so weak.

I reach the end of the hall then. Two assassins in black stand on either side of the Charger's door. Their job is such a joke; as if the King of Assassins needs bodyguards. He could probably kill any intruder with his eyes closed and both hands tied behind his back. Yet, the guards still stop me and ask me my name and business. I suppress the urge to pull a knife and gut them.

I keep my expression neutral as I say, "Don't be a fool. You know who I am, and you also know how quickly I can make you disappear. So, I suggest you drop the act and let me in. The Charger doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Threats in the Assassin's Guild aren't usually alarming, as we are all skilled killers. However, I'm more known among the citizens of Haven City and every assassin is aware I'm almost as lethal as the Charger. The guards don't test me further and let me through.

I knock on the door and a dark voice says, "Come in."

I push the door open and step into the Charger's office. A single lamp illuminates the space and the Charger sits behind a tall oak desk opposite the door, almost blending into the shadows with his black fatigues and dark skin.

The room around him seems to breathe and I try not to think about the stack of skulls shelved on the left wall where the light can't reach. I try not to think about the eyes watching me from the darkness or about the blood-red carpet beneath my boots. It used to be white, once upon a time.

The Charger smiles as I enter, all teeth and no eyes, like neither are aware of the other's agenda. There is warmth in that smile, but it's an inferno, a pyre, something to keep an eye on, lest it swallow you whole. Every time I see that smile, I understand why the people named him Black Death.

He smiles his evil smile and says, "Hello, Silent Night. I've been expecting you."

Unfortunately, to read more, you'll have to buy the book, though I may share another snippet before release day :). Pre-orders open this coming Saturday for e-book and the paperback will be available on October 23rd. I hope you enjoyed this excerpt and that you'll continue to follow Silent Night on this journey!

- Emma C.