

The Darkness Beneath the Mistletoe

- A Darkness Within Holiday Short -

By Katelynn Laird

Negative twenty was too cold. Detective Melissa Vega had lived in Illinois her entire life. She could weather the winter as well as the next native Chicagoan. But when her coffee began freezing on the walk from her car to the precinct, she'd had enough of this cold snap. All she wanted for Christmas was a week above zero degrees. Maybe warm enough to snow. She could only hope it was too cold for murder too, she thought as she moodily tapped the thermometer in the breakroom while reheating – defrosting really – her coffee.

"Oh good, you're here," Head Detective Marks said by way of greeting as he dumped the dregs from his mug in the sink, giving it a cursory rinse before stacking it alongside its fellows in the drying rack.

"Morning to you too," Vega responded. It came out grumpier than she'd meant it and she usually reserved that side of the emotional spectrum for her older partner, so she shook off her surely cold-induced mood and added more brightly, "What's up?"

Marks studied her for a moment, concerned. He'd had a habit of doing that ever since Vega's abduction by the Fuller Park Face stealer a few months prior. While Vega appreciated that he cared, his overprotective streak began to put her further on edge. She just wanted to forget it ever happened and move on. Which wasn't the healthiest way to cope, her therapist often reminded her. But now that her department mandated counseling was up, perhaps she didn't really have to listen anymore.

Either unaware of, or more likely ignoring, Vega's internal tangent, Marks answered her. "Got a body in the park."

Vega peered out the window at the nearly deserted, wind-blown streets. "Great."

The body of the young man looked almost peaceful resting beneath a tall pine tree, if not for the chalky pallor and the blue extremities.

"No obvious signs of trauma," Vega remarked, examining the corpse. "Maybe cause of death was exposure?" She pulled the collar of her winter jacket tighter around her neck.

Marks pursed his lips but didn't respond immediately. He knelt beside the body, presumably to get a closer look. The dead man appeared to be in his mid-twenties. Dark brown hair, clean shaven face. He wore black slacks and a blue button-down shirt beneath a grey overcoat. Nothing jumped out at Vega as remarkable or unusual. Marks rifled through the vic's pockets, pulling free a wallet.

"Hmm, money and credit cards are still here. Not a mugging, then. His name was Malcolm Everett." Marks tossed the wallet to a nearby officer to bag.

"What's this?" Vega asked, pointing above Mr. Everett's head. It was a plant, but not naturally occurring, if the bright red ribbon affixing to the branch overhead was any indication. "It looks like-

"Mistletoe," Marks finished grimly. "Because nothing puts one in the holiday spirit quite like a spot of murder."

Vega could think of one person who probably found death more festive than the holiday itself, but she knew better than to mention Archer, lest she inadvertently foreshadow his consultation on the case. "What makes you so sure it was murder?"

"Needle mark." The older detective pointed a gloved finger indicating the small, bruised pinprick on Everett's neck. "Not the most likely spot for a junkie to shoot up and this guy doesn't exactly fit the mold for an accidental overdose anyway. No, someone helped him inject... whatever the hell killed him."

Vega fidgeted at the mention of needles. She'd never been a needle-phobe before. That is, until a serial killer who drugged his victims into fear-induced heart attacks had taken her. She could still see the syringe sticking out of Wallace's neck where Archer had jabbed it to facilitate their escape...and Wallace's murder. Needless to say, the thought of them made her twinge a bit now.

"The ME's van should be here in five," one of the unies, Officer Leon, reported.

Vega nodded. "Great. Doc will run a tox screen. Hopefully we'll know what poison the killer used by lunchtime."

"Bag this too," Marks instructed Leon, tugging down the mistletoe. It obviously hadn't been left there by accident. Vega only wondered what it could have to do with Malcolm Everett's death. "Unless you wanted a kiss first, tradition and all." Marks' face was completely straight, but Vega could sense a hidden smirk. She rolled her eyes.

"We should throw a Christmas party!"

"What?" Vega stared at her phone in disbelief. Had her younger sister lost it?

"Come on, Mel. It could be fun," Lena insisted.

"I thought you were spending Christmas at Mom's." Lena had recently moved into the city, supposedly for a better job as a pediatric nurse, though Vega suspected her worry-prone mother had something to do with the change in scenery.

"Well, I was... unless you want to spend Christmas together down here?" Her voice sounded so hopeful, so reminiscent of when they were kids and Lena begged to hang out with her. Of course, back then Vega had no interest in spending time with her annoying little sister. She sometimes had to remind herself that while Lena could still be a bit vapid and clueless, she had grown a lot in the intervening years.

"I - I might have to work. We just caught a case..." Vega began, and she could practically hear Lena deflate. "But I should be able to wrap up by Christmas Eve. We can do something together? And then maybe carpool up to Mom's place for Christmas dinner?" They'd grown up in a small town about an hour and half north of the city. Vega hadn't been back in a long time.

"Perfect!" Lena sang. "Okay, talk later. Bye!"

"This cold snap made a precise time of death challenging, so the best I can give you is sometime within the last twenty-four hours," Doctor Arthur Jackson explained apologetically.

Vega and Marks stood across from the medical examiner, the body of Malcolm Everett on the slab between them. Vega crossed her arms tightly, refusing to shiver despite the cool temperature in the morgue. It was barely a respite after canvassing the park, to no avail.

"That tracks, since no one has reported Everett missing yet," Marks replied.

"What I can tell you with a greater degree of surety is cause of death. As you suspected at the scene, Mr. Everett was poisoned. And the culprit was curious: mistletoe." Jackson handed over the file containing his findings from the autopsy.

"Mistletoe is poisonous?" Vega asked.

Jackson nodded. "Indeed. It can make both animals and humans quite sick. In high enough concentrations, such as this, it is easily lethal."

"We found a mistletoe plant at the scene too. That can't be a coincidence, right?" Vega mused. "Maybe a message? Or some twisted, festive ritual?"

Marks groaned. When killers started going the extra mile, it often meant they weren't done. "Thanks, Doc. Let us know if anything else comes up." He then led the way back over to the precinct.

"Alright, do you want to write up the reports from this morning or swing by the tech lab to see what you can dig up about Malcolm Everett and who might have had him dead on their Christmas list?"

Vega raised her eyebrows, leaning against Marks' desk. "I get a choice?" She was always on paperwork duty. And Marks avoided the techies like any self-respecting luddite would.

Marks shrugged. "Well, I know you and Anderson have...had... well, that things might be awkward right now." He looked away. "And you know, it's the holidays. Maybe I'm feeling generous."

Vega felt a swell of gratitude, mingled with embarrassment, for her partner. It was true that she'd recently gone on a disastrous date with Dante Anderson, the computer tech who'd long had a crush on her. She'd explained to him as gently as she could that she'd prefer they

remained good friends, but ever since, there was an unwelcome tension between them. And coward that she was, she'd been avoiding him as a result.

"Reports please," she answered quickly. She squeezed Marks arm appreciatively before scooping up their case files and retreating to her desk.

"I guess I'll be in the computer lab if you need me." Marks shuddered. Vega smiled at him over her shoulder, and he almost looked...disappointed? But before she could study him further, he'd gone.

Paperwork was about as fun as it sounded. Basically, she had to write up reports on everything they'd done on the case thus far, documenting any evidence or findings from the ME's office as she went. Sadly, no insights into their latest case presented themselves while she worked.

Once she'd finished filing for the moment, Marks still hadn't returned, so she decided to run a search of her own. Perhaps she could find other cases where mistletoe was the murder weapon. And better yet, where the perp had gotten ahold of it.

"Mistletoe? In a festive mood Detective Vega?" a cold, yet familiar voice asked from behind her maybe ten minutes into her search, which thus far had yielded few promising results. Vega startled and spun around.

"Archer?" she said, half annoyed, half confused. "What are you doing here?"

Jack Archer raised a condescending eyebrow. "Surely you don't believe that you and Detective Marks are the only members of the Twelfth Precinct with whom I consult."

Vega made a face. Of course, she didn't think that. The Department had called on his services several times before she'd joined homicide. But she hadn't seen him around since the Face Stealer case. When he'd almost killed her.

"Right. Whose problem were you this time?"

"Ah, sounding more like your sainted partner every day," Archer remarked. "Although, I must admit that Detectives Espinoza and Meyers have requested this be our final collaboration. Makes one miss the 'good old days', no? At least you appreciated my contributions."

"With a few notable exceptions," Vega shot back. Archer looked perhaps a touch less haughty at the reminder, but his expression remained otherwise unchanged.

"Tell me your latest victim wasn't poisoned with mistletoe," he said, changing the subject. He once more scanned her computer screen over her shoulder. "How unimaginative."

"You think so?"

"The profile practically writes itself," Archer told her, sounding bored. But he didn't walk away. "And a week before Christmas?" He shook his head, as if disappointed in the killer's tendency toward the obvious.

"It is a bit on the nose," Vega agreed. She registered Archer's mild disgust. "Let me guess, not a big fan of the holidays?"

"Well, I can't say that they were especially memorable in the psych ward," Archer answered dryly.

"You were one of those kids who stopped believing in Santa Claus young, weren't you?"

"Santa never visited my house, I'm afraid. Perhaps I was on the naughty list." He remained monotone, but Vega smiled.

"Aw, you made a joke."

Archer ignored her comment. "A man dressed as the jolly old elf did make an appearance at Garfield Park once. I accused him of pedophilia."

"You didn't."

"I was twelve. He was arrested. And for my trouble? A week of solitary confinement and double therapy sessions."

Vega stared at him. "What, for profiling him?"

"For kneeing him in the groin. He irked me," Archer said simply.

"Definitely a Grinch," Vega decided.

"On the contrary," Archer disagreed. "While Christmas itself, or any holiday really, holds no special meaning for me, it does present a fascinating opportunity to observe human behavior. When one believes their actions are observed by an omniscient gift-bearing trespasser, for example. Or under the influence of the "Christmas spirit". Not to mention the dynamics of a large family gathering."

"Whatever you say."

"I take it you feel the typical rise of good will combined with nostalgia, and a fun dose of seasonal depression that holidays often evoke?" Archer guessed.

"If you mean that I like Christmas, then yes, I do."

Archer observed her closely for a moment. "Hmm, you claim to enjoy this time of year, but something in your face says otherwise. Idealizing happier childhood memories can't last, you must know."

"I've told you not to psychoanalyze me," Vega reprimanded. She thought back to her conversation with Lena. Since leaving home for college, and then the police academy, the holidays were more strained than they'd once been. If she were honest with herself, it started a few months prior to her departure with the sudden death of her father. He'd been the glue of their family, until one day he reached his 'end of watch', as cops called it. He died in the line of duty. So, while she did still love Christmas, it also reminded her of more joyful times – and where that joy stemmed from. Sometimes keeping in the holiday spirit felt more performative than she liked.

"You said you had an easy profile here?" Vega said, pulling herself from her reverie. "Want to share?"

Archer glanced toward the consultant's office. Leah, the consultation manager, was likely waiting to ship him back to the Behavioral Institute. Not that inconveniencing her would deter him.

"I suppose. Call it your Christmas gift."

"Whatever will I get you in return?" Vega asked sarcastically.

"You'll think of something," Archer responded confidently. "The use of mistletoe gives away everything. It is not a common poison, even for this time of year. When people think of its toxicity at all, most worry about pets and accidental ingestion. But mistletoe does have two distinct connotations: Jealousy and love."

"Love, I get, I guess," Vega interrupted. "Kissing under mistletoe and all that. But jealousy?"

"The two go hand in hand actually, but not for the usual reason. While love is often a cause for jealousy, in this case it is the other way around." Vega heard the quickening in Archer's speech, a tell-tale sign of one of his lectures. She sat back. "One of the origins of the tradition of kissing beneath mistletoe comes from ancient Norse mythology. The story goes that the god Baldur, son of Odin and Frigg, was beloved by all. So much so that his mother extracted vows from everything on Earth not to harm Baldur. With one exception: a small, unassuming plant called mistletoe. Well, Loki, who was jealous of Baldur's universal popularity, discovered this oversight. He then tricked Baldur's blind brother into murdering Baldur with a spear made from the poisonous plant and took further steps to ensure Baldur stayed dead."

"Frigg was so distraught by the death of her son that she declared mistletoe would never again be used as a weapon but would instead serve as a symbol of peace and love. Thus began the tradition of embracing beneath it during festivals, such as the Yuletide. I suppose Frigg would be none too pleased your perpetrator has once again employed mistletoe for murder."

They were quiet for a few moments as Vega digested this impromptu mythology lesson. "You're kind of a huge nerd, you know that?" she eventually said.

"Did the multiple PhDs give it away?" Archer remained unmoved. "I've had a lot of time to read in my life."

"So, what does the death of Baldur have to do with our homicide?"

"I would have thought it obvious. Your killer was either jealous or a spurned lover. My extremely educated guess is both. Perhaps your victim chose the wrong holiday on which to dump them."

"That's a start, I suppose. Marks is putting together a background on Malcolm Everett, the victim. Looks like our first stop will be his girlfriend or wife."

"How narrowminded. What if he's gay?" Archer pointed out. But he sounded as though he already knew the answer.

"Women are more likely as poisoners," Vega answered anyway. "But we'll check over everyone in his life, not to worry. Maybe he has a blind brother."

"Did Everett have a girlfriend?" Vega asked as soon as Marks returned from the tech lab, rubbing his eyes and stretching.

"Usually I'm the one to jump on the 'it's always the partner' bandwagon," he commented. He doublechecked the file in his hands. "But yeah, one Hillary Swanson."

"Any idea when they got together?" Vega pressed.

"Uhh," Marks once again consulted the file, at greater length this time. "They both updated their relationships status on Facebook – if that means anything – well, damn, on Christmas Eve three years ago."

"Any recent changes?"

Marks sighed and handed her the file before slumping into his chair. "Just take it. You're clearly looking for something specific."

Vega dug into the folder. "Did you have Dante print out copies of the web pages?" she asked. He was worse than she'd thought. Marks deigned not to answer. After a few minutes of skimming, "Ah ha!" Vega exclaimed. "He broke up with her less than a week ago. Wrote about how things were 'complicated' and that he felt bad about doing it right before their anniversary, but apparently there were some 'red flags'. And then he shared pictures with new girl, right before he died. Jesus, he *posted* all this?"

"You kids overshare way too much online," Marks griped. Sometimes she wondered if he purposely overplayed being such an old man when it came to technology. Then she looked back at the printed-out Facebook posts.

"It might not be hard evidence, but this combined with Archer's profile is enough to warrant chatting with Ms. Swanson, don't you think?"

Marks sat up straighter. "Archer? When did we bring him in on this? It isn't even a serial crime."

"Relax. He was in the bullpen, working on a case with Espinoza and Meyers. He happened to see what I was working on and offered an opinion. And his expertise isn't only in serial killers."

"He just happened to walk up behind you when Espinoza and Meyers don't even work on this floor? Their part of organized crime. Their hunting some mob hitman, which is why they needed an expert psycho."

"An expert in psychos," Vega corrected, though Marks wasn't technically wrong given Archer's diagnosis. She didn't really want to think about that seeing how Archer apparently

sought her out. "And he was probably just on his way to Leah's office," she rationalized aloud. Before Marks could get any more bent out of shape, she continued, "Come on. Let's pay Hillary Swanson a visit."

"Hillary Swanson? CPD, Ms. Swanson. Please open the door," Marks called from the hall outside a third-floor apartment.

The door opened a crack, stopped by a chain lock. "Yes?" a petite, curly-haired blonde answered. From what Vega could tell, she wore exercise clothes. Perhaps that's why she was sweating.

"We have a few questions about the death of Malcolm Everett. We understand you recently broke up?"

"Um, would you give me just one second. I left my kettle on the stove. I can hear it boiling," Hillary said before slamming the door shut.

"Kettles usually whistle when they boil," Marks grunted. "You hear anything?"

Vega shook her head. "Hillary!" she called. "Open the door!" A loud thud came from inside, then the sound of rushing feet. "Heard that," Vega said.

Marks took a step back and kicked open the door, snapping the chain. Across the room they saw Hillary scrambling through her window onto the fire escape.

"Really?" Marks complained. He ran to the window, but Hillary had already started down the ladder. Vega pulled her gun, but kept it lowered. Not only was Marks between her and the suspect, but Hillary didn't seem to be armed. And her pace down the icy fire escape was precarious at best.

"Hillary, running is just making you look guilty," Vega yelled. She had to know that, right? It was in every cop show. She was beginning to agree with Archer's disdainful assessment of their perp.

"And it's pissing me off," Marks added, carefully on her heels. "If I break my neck, I'm haunting you," he shouted back up to Vega.

"Ooh, the ghost of Christmas middle age," she teased. "I didn't tell you to rush after her." She remained at the top of the fire escape, watching to see if her partner needed backup.

Determined, Hillary finally made it to the ground. And was promptly tackled by an incongruously sweating and shivering Detective Marks.

"Meet you at the car," Vega yelled down while Marks mirandized her.

"You had motive, and opportunity," Vega told a very pale Hillary Swanson in the interrogation room. She'd been silent since her arrest. "And then you evaded the police before we could even accuse you of anything. Face it, Hillary. You were not cut out for a life of crime."

"I get why you did it," Marks added. "It was practically your anniversary. He probably invited you over and you thought, this is it. He's gonna pop the question. We found a stack of bridal magazines around your place. And you had last Friday circled on your calendar. Is that when he dropped the bomb?" Hillary didn't answer. "But it wasn't what you expected. No, instead he started talking about how it's you, not him. And that's not all, he had to post it all over his social media too. Not just the breakup, but also his new woman. Pretty quick turnaround if you ask me. He rubbed it in your face, and the faces of everyone you know. That had to hurt."

By this point, Hillary's eyes shone with tears. But she still refused to speak.

"Where did you get the mistletoe?" Vega pressed. "Not exactly a drug of choice, you know?"

"But wait, Detective Vega," Marks interrupted. "Ms. Swanson here is a botany minor. Took a bit of digging to find your plant blog, but you have quite the green thumb it seems. She probably grew the stuff, all excited for the holidays. And of course, she'd also know how toxic the plant is. Maybe how to distill it down into something you could inject."

"You do work at a veterinary clinic a few blocks from the park where we found Malcolm's body," Vega said. "Can't have been difficult to get your hands on a needle and syringe. What did you do then, Hillary? Invite him to the park, maybe over lunch? Just to talk things out. And that's when you killed him."

Hillary was shaking, tears streaming down her face. It was upsetting to watch. Vega would have felt bad if she weren't so sure that Hillary was a murderer. A pathetic one, but a killer, nonetheless.

"Just tell us what happened," Marks said softly. He slid a pad and pen across the table. "Can you write it down?"

Hillary stared at the paper. "It's not fair," she finally whispered. "Christmas is supposed to be this wonderful time of year. Good things are supposed to happen. Why couldn't he get that?" She appeared to talk more to herself than the detectives.

"Let it out," Marks told her.

"One day – that has to be a record," Vega announced once officers had taken Hillary Swanson down to holding. "We cleared the case in one day." A very long day, albeit. But she felt energized by the win.

"Don't get cocky," Marks warned. But then he shot her a rare grin. "Any plans for this unexpected free time?"

"Apparently, I am doing Christmas with my sister," Vega shared. "I should probably make sure I have food at my place."

"You still have a few days."

"You don't know Lena. She likes to go all out." She paused. "You should come." She wasn't sure what made her extend the invite. He wouldn't accept.

And true to form, "Thanks, Vega. But I have plans."

"Staying up to catch Santa? Maybe book him for B and E?" She chuckled.

"Wouldn't you like to know." Marks had a reputation for being private that she suspected he prided himself on. The enigmatic old man of the precinct, despite not really being that old.

Vega watched the clock, rushing to finish the last of the paperwork Marks had dumped on her with a cheerful 'Merry Christmas'." If she was late for the Christmas Eve festivities, Lena would kill her. And that would mean more paperwork.

Finally, it was end of shift. She looked around for Marks, hoping he hadn't packed up already. It would be out of character, considering he always stayed later than anyone else. Sure enough, he still sat at his desk.

"Case reports, all finished." She slapped down the folders. "We can close the page on the Mistletoe Murder."

"Do not give the case a nickname," Marks warned. The press' little monikers for criminals, along with pretty much everything else reporters did, irritated Marks to no end. A fact Vega took full advantage of whenever she wanted to wind her partner up.

"Well, I'm out of here. Have a merry Christmas, Jonah." She placed a small box on his desk.

"Oof, first name. You're so sappy." Vega started walking away, waving over her shoulder. "Wait, Vega. Don't you want your gift?"

Vega spun around, curious. Marks took a glittery bag from a desk drawer and handed it to her. Then he tore the paper off his own present. Inside was an engraved keychain.

*Det. Jonah Marks,
There's no one I'd rather have my back. Thank you.
Love Det. Melissa Vega*

"Like I said, sappy," Marks muttered. Then he pulled her into a hug. When he released her, she turned to the bag in her hands.

Inside, she found a small stuffed bear wearing a police uniform. It was fuzzy and cute. And around its neck rested a silver charm bracelet. A single charm dangled from it, in the shape of a detective's shield. It read *6 months*.

"If I remember correctly, Hillary Swanson and Malcom Everett's wasn't the only anniversary coming up." He was right. It had been six months last week since Vega joined homicide. She'd almost forgotten. It somehow felt much longer, and at the same time, like she was still a fresh-faced recruit.

"Thank you." She clasped the bracelet around her wrist before leaning in to kiss Marks on the cheek. He flushed a faint pink.

Marks cleared his throat. "Have a good holiday. Tell your sister I say hi." Vega smiled. But she had one more stop before she met Lena.

Many of the officers had gone home already, but the light in the consultant's office still shone. If Archer was surprised by her presence, he concealed it well.

"Detective Vega. To what do I owe the pleasure?" He wore his usual tight-fitting pants and button-down. Not a hint of festive attire, despite the rest of the precincts' mild decoration.

"I came to deliver your Christmas present, of course." She knew that his profile for Hillary Swanson was a simple one, and that given her instability and amateur criminal skills, they'd have caught her easily without it. Yet, she was curious how he'd react to being given a gift in return. "Still working the mob hitman case?"

"Not for much longer, ideally. Assassins are difficult to track, because they often lack any connection to their victims. On the upside, most have a distinct signature that can be traced. Why? Did you get me a suspect for Christmas?" he asked wryly.

"I didn't think one would fit," Vega said, holding up the small bag. She passed it to Archer. He retrieved a leafy green plant with small white berries.

"Mistletoe. How appropriate."

"Just don't poison anyone with it." She meant it as a joke but couldn't deny the note of truth in her warning.

"I believe the orderlies at Garfield Park will confiscate it for that exact reason. I suppose I'll have to work fast." He held up the mistletoe as if examining it.

The plant hung in Archer's hand just above their heads, and for one frightening moment, she thought he was going to kiss her. Then the moment passed. Archer set the mistletoe down, eyes still on her. She couldn't read his expression, little that was visible.

"Time to go, Mr. Archer," a uniformed officer said from the doorway to the office. He didn't insist on cuffing Archer the way Marks would have, instead standing at a respectful, and possibly wary, distance.

"My sleigh awaits, it would seem. I think I'll leave this with you." He handed her back the mistletoe. "I wouldn't want to risk another Christmas in solitary confinement for trying to sneak a toxic substance past hospital security." He joined the officer escorting him back to the Institute.

"Probably full of nargles anyway," Vega muttered to herself. Archer tilted his head, looking back at her, but said nothing.

Outside, Vega braced herself to the frigid afternoon air and was met with a pleasant surprise. The wind had at last subsided. And fluffy white snowflakes drifted merrily around.

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays from Detective Vega, Archer, Detective Marks, and the Twelfth Precinct.

The Darkness Behind the Eyes (Book 2 in the Darkness Within series) coming in 2024!