

The Darkness in His Mind (Darkness Within Book 3)

Sneak Peek

Chapter One - Vega

Detective Melissa Vega didn't let her head slump forward. She refused to hold it in her hands, defeated. Because she wasn't defeated. Just...momentarily at a loss for leads.

Before her, a map of the Midwest took up most of her desk, small red dots indicating every city she knew, or suspected, Adrian Riley, aka Randy Riaile, had lived, learned, worked, lectured, consulted, vacationed, or killed. The standing whiteboard beside her desk still pictured each of his victims, unchanged from the way it had looked four months ago when she and Marks, along with Archer and Adrian, had first started investigating the case of a prolific, and until then, unknown serial killer murdering his way around Illinois.

With three notable exceptions. Upon learning Adrian, or Randy rather, himself was the killer they hunted, and his subsequent escape, Vega erased all the contributions he'd made to the case board. She put his real name and the least flattering photo she could find of him – an annoyingly tall order – front and center at the top of the board under *Suspects*. And she reluctantly added Lana Vega, her little sister, to the board under *Victims*. She steadfastly refused to add herself, though Randy had manipulated and attempted to kill her as surely as he'd kidnapped and beaten Lana.

"Vega!" a gruff voice snapped from across the room. Hastily Vega folded up the map, attempting to stuff it in into a drawer of her desk while simultaneously flipping the whiteboard to their current case on the other side before her partner, Head Detective Jonah Marks, saw what she'd been working on. Obsessing over.

She was unsuccessful. For one thing, by spinning the whiteboard to the back side instead of turning it around on its wheels, the information for their current case was upside-down.

"Vega," Marks said again as he walked up beside her desk, a few decibels softer now. "The Chief is gonna have your ass if she catches you still at this. You're off the Revealer case, remember?"

Vega grimaced at the *nom de guerre* the press had given Adrian/Randy. *The Revealer*, referring to his need to debase the woman he killed, 'revealing' them for the powerless objects he viewed them as. A cringe-inducing nickname that had Vega jumping on Marks' reporter-hating bandwagon.

"She won't catch me if you keep your mouth shut," Vega pointed out, knowing it was pointless to deny his accusations. Marks knew her too well.

"And what am I supposed to tell her when she asks for an update on our arsonist?" Marks pressed. Though Vega had a feeling he wouldn't narc on her, guilt bloomed in her chest at her partner's mention of their new case, which she'd been neglecting.

"Right." Vega sighed and pulled another, thinner folder in front of her. "So far, it looks like he's only targeted abandoned warehouses, at least according to the arson investigator." She checked the notes in the file. "Lola Rodriguez."

Marks nodded. "I've worked with her before. Good head on her shoulders, for a firefighter."

"She was a firefighter?"

"Yeah. Made those hotshots over at station 119 look good for a couple years before she moved into arson investigation."

Vega raised an eyebrow, curious but not quite willing to ask her question aloud. It was rare for Marks to speak so complementary about... well, anyone really, but especially someone whose career positioned her as a stereotypical rival with cops.

He rolled his eyes. "Honestly, you meet one girlfriend and suddenly I'm Casanova? No. Rodriguez and I were, and remain, professional colleagues, so you'll have to look elsewhere for fodder to feed your romantic little heart."

Vega couldn't suppress a snort. "Romantic? Please. I've seen that end badly too many times on this job." She didn't feel the need to mention how close she'd come to being one of those statistics. Marks didn't respond but Vega could see his doubt. "Anyway, so, abandoned buildings, but with this last one, not quite as empty as the unsub thought, which is why we caught the case?"

Marks grunted in agreement. "One body found in the aftermath of the latest fire. No ID yet, we're waiting on dental records. Same MO, same accelerant as the other warehouse fires. The question is: did the perp overlook the victim in the building, or intentionally start the fire to kill them?"

"The difference is an accidental versus intentional escalation. Either way, it changes the pattern of behavior moving forward," Vega added. Because it was a pattern. Their serial arsonist had already burnt down two other buildings before this. And now, one person as well.

"If it was a mistake, maybe that's enough to jar him into stopping, or at least cooling off, so to speak," Marks suggested. "Lay low for a while."

"Or," Vega countered, "it's given him a taste for killing. We should ask-"

"Let me guess, Archer?" Marks' tone made it clear what he thought of that plan. "This is the third time you've tried to angle bringing him in on a case in the last few months. You know what they say – three's a pattern."

"His insights would be useful this time." Vega wanted to ignore Marks' accusation. Sure, maybe those other cases Marks was referring to weren't exactly in Archer's wheelhouse, which was why he hadn't ended up consulting on them, but this was different. A serial offender, and now a murderer. That was Archer's expertise. And if they happened to have some downtime to brainstorm next steps in the Revealer case, then that was simply a bonus.

She and Marks stared each other down for a few more moments. "We'll see what the Chief thinks," Marks finally said. "I

swear, you get more and more stubborn," he muttered as he walked toward Chief Leeds' office.

"Learned from the best," Vega shot back. She followed him.

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"I don't see a reason to bring Mr. Archer onto this case quite yet," Leeds said after listening to Vega's proposal. She nodded along with the serial aspect of the case, and the clear shift that the discovery of a body at the latest crime scene presented. Despite his feelings about Archer, Marks kept silent when Leeds asked his opinion, letting Vega make her argument. "It is too early to determine if his skills will offer new insights. Homicide has only had the case for a day. Keep digging into it, gather more info. Then we can reevaluate, if you still believe Mr. Archer's consultation would be of value."

Vega wanted to press Leeds' decision but stopped herself. Neither Marks nor the Chief was stupid. If she was too insistent, they'd see through her pretenses. Not that she didn't truly believe they could use Archer to catch their firebug. But she'd been in enough mandated counseling to also recognize how close to the line between determination and obsession she got with each day Adrain remained free. She'd already been kicked off the case. She risked desk duty if she wasn't careful. Marks and Leeds would always have her back. But sometimes that meant doing what they thought was best for her, even if it wasn't what she wanted. So, although she didn't like it, for now she acquiesced. To an extent.

As Marks and Vega walked back into the bullpen, Vega stopped.

"I think I'll touch base with the Doc," referring to Dr. Arther Jackson – the medical examiner. "See if dental records have come in yet. If they have, Dante and I can start digging into the victim's background."

Marks stared at her for a moment. "Okay," he eventually said. "Just remember, Jackson doesn't like to be rushed. I guess I'll see what I can find about the building before it was torched,

compare notes with Rodriguez. I'll set up a meeting with her to come in tomorrow."

Vega hurried away. She wanted to head straight to the tech lab to see Dante but forced herself to walk over to the medical examiner's office first.

"Afternoon, Doc," Vega called, knocking on the door to Jackson's office. She spared a glance at the darkened shape under a white sheet on the slab. Though she'd been a detective for over a year now, Vega hadn't seen many burned bodies up close. It was more gruesome than in the movies. Not to mention the lingering smell.

Jackson looked up from his computer. "Hello, Detective. I assume you were hoping for dental records, am I right?"

"Got it in one, Doc. Any luck yet?"

Jackson shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not. Although, given what I've gleaned from my initial examination, I'm not sure our victim has visited a dentist any time recently."

"What do you know so far?"

Jackson stood and walked to the slab, picking up the victim's file. "Adult male, five-foot-nine. Traces of denim and cotton on the skin, as well as polyester and nylon. Possibly from a jacket or sleeping bag. A handful of healed fractures spotted on the X-rays. Several cavities and decay in the remaining teeth. No signs of perimortem trauma, other than the burns of course."

"Was he homeless?" Vega wondered, taking into consideration the location of the victim, as well as the state of his teeth and possible traces of a sleeping bag.

"Certainly a supportable hypothesis," Jackson agreed. "Though that may make identifying him more challenging, particularly if he'd been sleeping rough for an extended period of time."

"You said no recent trauma," Vega continued. "So, he probably didn't fight back before he was killed. Was the fire the cause of death?"

"I'll need to do the full autopsy to confirm, but my suspicion is yes. There is soot inside the mouth, indicating he inhaled smoke and ash. He was alive when the fire got to him."

"Right, okay." Vega lingered, feeling like she should ask more, but about what she wasn't sure. She tried not to think about their victim burning alive.

"I'll be sure to call you and Detective Marks once I finish the autopsy. And if I get any hits on dental records or his toxicology," Jackson assured her.

Vega took the hint. Hanging around the morgue wouldn't get her leads any faster. She'd done all she could for the moment. "Thanks, Doc. I'll see you later. Tell Genine I said 'Hey!' if you see her before I do." Jackson smiled and waved as she left the office.

Chapter Two - Vega

Though Marks would want Jackson's meager initial findings, nothing the doctor reported was immediately pressing. Which meant Vega could swing by the tech lab before heading back to her desk.

"Dante! I need a favor."

The young computer tech spun in his chair away from his multi-screen display. He smiled, as always, when he saw her.

"Anything. Although these days, I feel like you only come down here when you need something," he accused teasingly.

Vega shrugged, looking away. "That's not true. I... I stopped by last week for lunch, when we were on that robbery-homicide downtown."

"You ate two bites of *my* sandwich, and then grilled me for your suspect's financial history," Dante corrected.

"We had dinner like a few weeks ago."

"That was last month. And I was having dinner with Lana. You came over to check up on us under the guise of returning the left-over gauze and stuff she gave you for changing your dressing." Still, Dante said this with a grin. Like he could spar with her all day. "She was just too nice to tell you to get lost. Or point out that your leg had been fine for weeks before that."

"What can I say, I got busy," Vega half-heartedly countered.

It had been more than a little awkward since Dante and Vega's little sister Lana started seeing each other. Lana insisted they were still casual, but one look at Dante's face told Vega the boy had fallen hard. Harder than he'd previously fallen for Vega herself, even. Hence, the awkward. But, since he'd started spending more time with Lana, Dante and Vega's friendship only got stronger despite the occasional cringy moments, finally moving past their own disastrous romantic venture.

"So, what can I do for you?" Dante asked, relenting.

Vega hesitated. She knew Dante wouldn't judge her for her request, but it still took her a moment to make herself ask. She wasn't sure why she hadn't thought to do so sooner.

"You were in contact with Archer, at Garfield Park, when I was... out, right?" she asked, referring to the days she'd gone incommunicado trying to save her sister from a sadistic serial killer who'd made it his life's mission to torture Vega. Who also happened to be her boyfriend at the time. She didn't like to dwell on those days. "After he was suspended from the case?" After she'd slapped him across the face for suggesting Adrian was the killer.

"Yeah, why?"

Vega tried not to let Dante's sudden look of concern bother her. It wasn't as if they'd never discussed Adrian or the case before. The many favors Dante accused her of coming to him for largely pertained to hunting his ass down.

"Well, I have some things I want to get his perspective on. For our arson case," she told him. "And I have his number for his work phone – the one he gets when he's out on cases – but I have no idea how to get in touch when he's at the hospital. I don't really have time to make a visit right now." She'd considered visiting Archer several times since Adrian's escape but always talked herself out of it. They weren't friends. Consequently, it had been a while since they'd spoken.

"Sure. I still have the number he called us from. I think the line is monitored though, or something like that. When we spoke, he sounded like he was being listened to." Dante pulled out his phone and scrolled through the call history until he found what he was looking for. "I'll send it to you."

A moment later, Vega's phone buzzed. "Thanks, Dante. I'll make it up to you. I promise." And she meant it. Dante was a good guy. Good for Lana and a good person to have in her corner. Sometimes Vega just had to take off the blinders and remember to be a better friend. She gave him a quick hug before departing.

Vega didn't want to call Archer at her desk. She didn't think Marks would approve, not only because they weren't bringing him in to consult on the arson case, but because that wasn't really what Vega planned to talk to him about. It wasn't that she was doing anything wrong. But best to avoid unwanted attention. So, she ducked into an empty conference room.

The phone rang a few times before someone picked up. It was a woman. "Hello, Garfield Park Behavioral Institute."

"Oh, hi. I was wondering if I could speak to a patient, Jack Archer? My name is Melissa Vega. I'm a detective with the Chicago Police Department, Twelfth Precinct."

The woman was silent for a second. "One moment. May I ask how you got this number. It's just, this is the phone in our community room. Typically, only patients use it when they have phone privileges. Most people call the main line."

Vega too could have called the Institute's front desk, but she had to admit to herself she'd hoped to avoid reaching out in

an official capacity. Going to Dante seemed easier. "Right. I don't have the main number. I'm sure I could have looked it up now that I think about it, but I already had this one. Er, Archer gave it to me the last time we spoke." Close enough to the truth.

"Well, alright. I'll see if he is available, though this is unusual, Detective Vega."

"I understand. Thank you so much for your help." The line went quiet, as if the woman on the other end, perhaps a nurse or orderly, had simply set the phone down. Vega could pick up muffled voices in the background.

Maybe five minutes later, someone picked up the phone. "Detective Vega?" Vega immediately knew Archer's cool voice, colored with a hint of well-disguised surprise.

"Archer. Hello. Can I talk to you real quick?"

"I should say so," he answered sardonically. "They brought me all the way from my room, after all. Though I should inform you, I'm only permitted a strict amount of phone time."

"Great. Um, how are you?" Vega felt a little weird going to all the trouble of calling just to dive right into work.

"Growing curiouser by the minute. I'll admit I didn't expect your call. To the community room's ancient landline, no less. Usually when the Department seeks my insights on a case, they arrange it through the administration."

"Well, I'm not really calling to bring you onto a case, per se," Vega said.

"A social call. Be still my heart, have I finally won you over, Detective?"

Vega snorted, some of the tension broken. "Please. You know better than that. It's about Adrian, er Randy Riaile. I assume you've kept up with the case?"

"As much as I've been able to. The detectives who took it over, Duncan and Kerr, are not nearly as welcoming as you, or

even Detective Marks." Archer's disdain was evident, even over the phone.

"Someone who hates you more than Marks? That is saying something."

"It isn't hate so much as dismissal. Apparently, Detectives Duncan and Kerr don't place as much value on my contributions as you and your partner. Even Detective Marks is usually able to compartmentalize his distrust and contempt long enough to make use of my profile. These gentlemen simply took my notes on the case and sent me back here the moment Riaile's trail went cold." Vega could practically envision Archer's frozen expression as he ranted his woes.

"So, it is cold, then? No new leads? No sign of him?" Vega pressed hopefully.

"No. My frustration is tantamount to your own, I imagine."

"Don't bet on it."

"Detective Vega," Archer explained, his tone annoyingly patronizing, "keep in mind that solving cases such as this is one of the few strategies which successfully stays my hand from taking the nearest blade to an unsuspecting orderly or wrapping my fingers around the neck of some poor, innocent nurse. Leaving this one unsolved is like having an itch inside my skull, impossible to scratch."

Vega knew Archer's drive to outmatch the suspects they pursued, to flaunt his own superiority, was as pathological as whatever it was that compelled him to kill, or at least, to want to kill.

Still, "You didn't date him," she countered darkly.

"Touché. Therefore, I do apologize that I can offer nothing you won't already find in the case file, which I'm sure you've attained a recent copy of, despite no longer working Riaile's manhunt."

Vega snorted. "Hardly a manhunt." She didn't deny having kept herself apprised of the case's progress, little that there was,

since her removal. "It's been four months and no trace of him. No traffic cam slips. No bodies, thank God. Nothing."

"At least if he produced another victim, we'd have a lead," Archer pointed out. Vega believed that Archer saw that as an acceptable trade-off if it meant apprehending Adrian. She did not.

"He'll come back," Vega said firmly. Just as an unsolved problem left Archer unsettled, Vega suspected Adrian couldn't simply walk away from what he started with her. Not forever. She hated waiting though.

"Perhaps," Archer said. "Logic would dictate he stay as far away as possible, so you might be onto something there, Detective." Out of habit, Vega almost made a comment about Archer's familiarly constant belittling of Adrian's intellect before she remembered she no longer had any reason to defend him. Would Adrian let reason override his compulsions?

"You wouldn't," Vega told Archer softly.

Archer didn't respond immediately. "No. I don't think I would," he eventually conceded. Vega couldn't get a read on his tone, so carefully controlled even when he was almost vulnerable, or at least honest. Both were acutely aware of the similarities between Archer and Adrian's psychology, each for different reasons, though they rarely discussed it.

Vega cleared her throat. "Well, I'd better get going. But before I do, can I pick your brain about escalation in serial arson? This actually is for a case."

"Hmm. That would be two favors owed to me, I believe," Archer answered, referring to the debt she'd incurred a few months prior when she asked for the near impossible from Archer: an apology. Personally, Vega thought it shouldn't count against her any longer, as the apology was to Adrian. But Archer seemed less likely to relent.

"Come on. If I'm right, it might be your case soon enough anyway." She wasn't going to offer up any more vague, open-ended favors.

"Very well. You've piqued my interest," he said.

"Our arsonist has, up to this point, only targeted abandoned buildings," Vega explained. "That all changed with the most recent fire. Someone died. Whether accidental or intentional, taking a life has to have an effect on the unsub's actions moving forward, right?"

"Most likely, yes. If intentional, then the arsonist is escalating, which means you can expect more deaths in future fires."

"Any chance that if it was accidental, the killing will jar the unsub into a break? Or at least a longer cooling off period, while they figure things out?" Vega asked.

"It's possible. Unless they derived pleasure, even unexpected pleasure, from the act of killing your victim. A pleasure greater than setting the fire itself."

"How will we know?"

"More bodies."

As with Adrian, this was an uncomfortable truth to pursuing serial offenders. More information made for a better profile. And more victims provided that information.

Vega sighed. "Thanks, Archer. I'll talk to you soon. Probably." She had a feeling their firebug wasn't done yet.

"I shall wait with baited breath, Detective Vega."

* * *

[later]

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"Vega!," Marks called from his desk, phone still in hand. "Call just came in from an old construction site less than two miles from here. Fire spotted. Looks like it could be our guy. Abandoned site, rapidly moving fire. Right on schedule too."

Vega was immediately out of her seat. "How far out is CFD?"

"Closest available station is ten minutes away. We'll beat them there."

Not that they'd do much good in putting out the fire. But if there was a victim, which was likely, and they were still alive, maybe Vega and Marks could get to them. Plus, according to Archer, arsonists liked to watch. The perp could still be there.

"Let's go."

"I'll get Rodriguez" Marks said, heading for the consultant's office.

Vega moved to follow him, but hesitated and turned to look at Archer, still seated beside her desk. "You coming?"

"You're inviting me?"

Vega sighed. "You usually want to come along, delivering some lengthy lecture insisting that your skills as a profiler are relevant to a crime scene. I'm saving time."

Archer shrugged and stood, pulling on his jacket. "Tell me, Detective. What would I have argued to justify my presence in this instance? I'm no firefighter, after all."

"Something about profiling the room? No, actually, you'd want to see the bystanders. We haven't gotten to a scene until after the fire was out. By that point, the arsonist would have hightailed it out of there. At least, I'm assuming so since we've yet to connect any of the witnesses to the last two fires to any other crimes. So, you'll watch them."

"Interesting." He didn't indicate if she was right or wrong in surmising his line of thinking. He simply followed her out to Marks' car.

When Marks saw Archer climbing into the back seat, he groaned. Lola sat beside Archer, while Vega took shotgun.

"Hands to yourself," Marks muttered over his shoulder. Archer rolled his eyes, but Vega noticed Lola stiffen slightly, leaning away from Archer. Great, another colleague on Marks' side of the battle lines that only he and Archer seemed able to see.

"Rules," Vega coughed, glaring at Marks, referring to the long standing and somehow always short-lived "truce" between Marks and Archer on cases. Neither really paid her much attention.

Marks said nothing more, peeling out of the parking lot and pushing his car to the limits of the congested road outside the precinct.

"Smoke," Vega said a few minutes later, pointing over the buildings to their right.

As Marks turned, the construction site came into view. As they'd left in a hurry, they hadn't had time to get a download on the site from Dante. Vega didn't love going in blind. From the looks of the site, it had once been a storage facility, now partially demolished. Maybe a renovation project that had been abandoned when the funding dried up. Only a small portion of the structure still stood. For now. Flames were clearly visible through the half-blackened windows.

"Looks like only the north side of the building is engulfed," Lola commented, studying the fire. "South side is intact."

Marks got out of the car. "Rodriguez and I will go around to the south side and see if there's a safe way into the building to check for survivors. Vega, manage the scene and keep your eyes peeled for any sign of our perp." He neglected to give Archer a job. "Stay clear of the building until we give you the heads up, got it?"

Vega nodded. "Be careful."

Marks and Lola hustled around the building, maintaining a cautious perimeter until they reached the south side, where the fire hadn't reached yet.

"Come on," Vega said to Archer. "Make yourself useful."

She walked back toward the street, looking around for anyone out of place. Very few people were near the construction site. A couple in athletic wear, probably jogging by when they saw smoke and sirens. A young girl with a shaggy German Shephard tugging against its leash. A couple men in work clothes walking

past. They hadn't stopped to watch. Vega knew as more first responders showed up, they'd draw a larger crowd. But for now, everyone was staying back out of the way.

Vega felt more than saw Archer shadowing her, likely also assessing the few gathered spectators, scanning the area for any potential hiding places for a firebug who likes to watch. Then, she couldn't catch him in her peripheral vision anymore.

"Archer?" She turned to see him heading toward the building. "Archer, what the hell are you doing? Get back here." He didn't acknowledge if he'd heard her. As the building continued to burn, the flames grew larger and louder. Vega expected Marks and Lola to reappear any minute.

For an insane moment, Vega thought Archer might attempt to get inside the building. What the hell? But then he turned sharply, moving toward a pile of debris and tarps off to the side.

"Archer, you're too close." She started after him to drag his ass back to the car. Before she could get close, a thunderous crack split the air. Followed by a high-pitched whoosh. And then the side of the building exploded outward, shaking the ground. Vega stumbled, falling to her knees. Billowing clouds of black smoke and orange flames obscured the north side of the building. And Archer.