

# The Darkness in the Eyes

(Book 2 in the *Darkness Within* Series)

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**[SAMPLE]**

## **Chapter One**

“The Hot Sauce Slayer? Honestly, where do they come up with these names?” Head Detective Marks griped, ruffling the pages of the newspaper in his hands. He leaned against his desk in the bullpen.

“A little on the nose, isn’t it?” Detective Melissa Vega, his partner, agreed. Her junior status had been removed after a successful year working in homicide. Even the traumatic near-death experience only a few months into her time there couldn’t derail her advancement. She still sometimes shuddered at the touch of cold metal and the scars on her wrists from the chains hadn’t yet faded. But for the most part, that case was well and truly behind her. At least, to the point where she could joke about the latest psycho that rolled through town.

“They don’t care about news or facts,” Marks said, displaying his usual disdain for reporters. “They only want to catch people’s attention, shock them into buying papers.” He didn’t mention that he stopped at the news stand outside the precinct every day. Vega and her friend Dante Anderson, one of the techies for the department, already gave him enough grief for sticking with the physical thing when they read news, along with most everything else, online.

“Still, they aren’t wrong, I suppose. He was killing his victims by drowning them in vats of hot sauce,” Vega pointed out. She leaned over Marks’ shoulder to see the full article.

“Just what this city needed: a sadistic psychopath combined with a bible-thumping, hell-fire evangelist,” Marks commented, referring to their latest case.

They’d been tracking down a preacher who’d just moved to Chicago from a small, northern town. ‘Moved’ was maybe too nice a word. He was on the run for the murders of three of his congregation. They’d been involved in a sordid affair, both a husband and a wife cheating on each other with the same tractor mechanic. Father Michael, or as the press had dubbed him, the Hot Sauce Slayer, abducted each of them and drowned them in buckets of extra spicy hot sauce stolen from the local diner’s bulk storage.

The town’s sheriff caught onto his crimes pretty quickly and the preacher rabbited. Why he chose Chicago, Vega was still unsure. But if he’d been driven to serial killing by the indiscretions of one small town, he must have found the big city beyond overwhelming, at least if his ensuing murder spree was any indication. Chicago’s crime rate was high enough as it was.

The FBI technically had the case after the perp crossed state lines, but the CPD employed their chosen expert consultant. So, Vega and Marks also lent their support. When they ultimately brought the man in, four more bodies later, he spewed righteous indignation. Apparently, he had to burn the sin out of those he killed. He was willing to take sin unto himself to cleanse those he witnessed going astray from his own warped sense of virtue, believing that God would forgive him in the end as he acted in His name.

“What a crackpot,” Marks said dismissively before shoving the paper away from him.

“Archer said he was raised severely religiously. He also fell through thin ice as a child. While his parents treated his survival as a miracle that put even more pressure on him, Archer believes it might have caused brain damage as well, which lead to his psychosis.” Jack Archer, the expert consultant in question, who they worked with increasingly frequently, was no stranger to psychopathy, holding a couple PhDs and a diagnosis himself. He and Vega sometimes debated the effects of a perp's upbringing versus their brain chemistry when dealing with serial offenders.

Marks didn't respond and Vega instantly wished she could take back her words after glancing up to see his glare. She was usually very careful to not mention Archer unless absolutely necessary. Her partner had never forgiven the consultant for nearly killing her the year before, and they hadn't exactly been friendly to begin with. He all but pretended Archer didn't exist, even when they worked together.

Vega could see the conflict in his eyes when Archer was on a case. He preferred to let Vega act as a go-between so he could limit contact with the man himself, but also hated every moment Vega spent alone with Archer, fearing for her safety and sanity as their working relationship grew stronger.

“Um, anyway, I'll get started on the last of paperwork now that he's been processed,” she said, hoping that volunteering for the more boring side of their job would redeem some of Marks' mood. Not that he wasn't about to order her to do it anyway. From day one, paperwork had largely fallen under her purview and Marks liked to have it done in a timely manner. Despite no longer being a junior detective, Marks was still her mentor and wasted no opportunity to hand her certain responsibilities.

“Alright. Leeds told me about a hit and run that might get tossed our way. She wasn't sure if we'd have the preacher wrapped up yet, but I'll let her know

we'll be on scene in twenty." Some of his anger faded as he walked toward the chief's office.

The write-up for their most recent serial killer case was fairly straight forward. Marks and Vega had literally caught the guy while he attempted to drown his eighth victim in a vat of Tabasco. ...

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While the mangled young man's body once would have forced Vega to steel her nerves, it was now far from the worst she'd seen. Faceless corpses still ranked high on that list, but road rash and exposed broken bones were further down. The crash site was at an intersection outside the city that saw little traffic at the time of day of the incident, pointing the officers first on the scene to consider foul play and call in homicide.

"There aren't any skid marks," Vega commented, noting it in her pad. "It doesn't look like the driver tried to slow down when they saw the victim in the road."

Marks nodded. "Signs of high-speed impact along his right side." He stood over the body beside the Assistant Medical Examiner.

"Detective Marks is correct," Dr. Gene Richards agreed. "Several ribs broken, right femur fractured, right tibia looks like it has multiple breaks. Shoulder is dislocated. The bruising suggests he laid here for a while before dying." She adjusted her glasses as she straightened up from her examination, making her own notes.

"Another point in the intentional hit column," Marks said. "The driver hits him straight on, no attempts to avoid, at speeds well above the limit for this road if the damage is any indication, then doesn't stop to help in any way."

“Look at that.” Vega pointed to a traffic camera mounted to the stoplight above their heads. “I’ll see if Dante can pull the footage. Maybe it will give us a definitive answer here, plus an ID on the driver if we’re lucky.”

“Provided the thing isn’t broken,” Marks muttered. “Half the damn cameras in this city are.”

“You’re looking for a large vehicle, possibly a truck or SUV,” Genevieve told them. “The victim’s injuries go pretty high on his body, indicating a point of impact further off the ground.” She pointed along the young man’s various bruises and lacerations, the unnatural angle of his limbs.

Vega moved closer to Marks and Genevieve to study the victim’s body. Much of his right side was covered in blood. Jagged white bone poked through a dark red gash in his thigh. “Is the leg break the likely cause of death?”

The doctor nodded. “From the location of the wound and the amount of blood here, I’d say the femoral artery was nicked. Between that and probable internal bleeding,” she indicated the large shadow spreading beneath his ribs on the right side, “he suffered severe hemorrhaging, though I’ll need a full autopsy to be sure.”

Marks bent down and shoved a gloved hand into the vic’s pocket. “Excellent, a wallet. Let’s see who this poor sap was.” He pulled free an Illinois state driver’s license identifying the young man as Joseph Lorenz. In the photo unblemished by his injuries, they could see he had olive skin and dark brown hair. “Bag it,” Marks instructed a nearby CSI. “We’ll run the name when we get back to the precinct. He turned to face Genevieve. “How are you going to rule it?”

She considered her answer. “I’m calling this a suspicious death pending further investigation.”

“Great. And guess who gets to investigate?” Marks grumped.

Vega shoved his shoulder. “What, too boring for you? Would you rather another serial killer blow in?”

Marks wrinkled his nose. Serial killers meant three things. Multiple casualties, sleepless nights, and working with Archer. He wasn't a fan, to say the least. “Let's get back to the station.”

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While Marks signed the body over to the ME's office to perform the full autopsy, Vega made her way to the tech lab to find Dante. Her stomach sank a little, as it tended to do whenever she was around her friend.

Last year, Dante had made it abundantly clear he had a thing for her. Finally, she relented and went on one horribly awkward date with him. They'd gone to dinner and it would have been like any other night they hung out, except Vega found she couldn't say a word. Dante easily did all the talking, going on about one topic to the next. It wasn't that he was boring, they usually had fun together. But with the added pressure being on an official date guaranteed, Vega couldn't relax. She knew from the beginning she was humoring Dante and all she could think of throughout the night was how to let him down gently.

At the end of the night, Dante leaned in for a kiss. Vega let his lips brush hers before pushing him away and sitting him down right there in her building's stairwell for a long conversation. He said he understood that she just wanted to be friends, but things weren't fun and easy between them for a long time after that. Friendly chats in the break room, or blowing off steam at a bar after work were replaced by heavy silences and overly formal conversations when they worked on the same case. As months passed, she hoped they were getting

back to their normal dynamic, but she still felt a little tingle of awkwardness whenever she saw him.

“Hey, Vega. What can I do for you?” Dante asked brightly, waving when she entered the room. It was always warm in the tech lab thanks to the dozen machines running in the small space. A few other techs worked hunched over their own desks. They were in general a quiet breed, Dante's bubbly enthusiasm the exception.

“Hi, Dante. Marks and I were out on a call, a hit and run, and I was wondering if you could pull up the footage for the traffic camera at the intersection of Jefferson and Fifth.”

“No problem.” He smiled and started typing. “Did you get that hot sauce guy wrapped up already?” he asked while he worked.

“Yeah, brought him in a few days ago. Full confession. Feds got him on lock down now. They'll transfer him after he undergoes a psych eval.”

Dante chuckled. “I'm guessing the dude has at least one screw loose if he's drowning people in Tabasco. What a way to go.” His fingers switched from the keyboard to the mouse beside it, clicking through number of windows. “Badge number?” he asked without missing a beat.

Vega chuckled, pulling up the chair beside him. “You haven't memorized it yet? This is at least the millionth tech favor I've needed. I thought you were supposed to be good with numbers.”

Dante shrugged. “I am but remembering a random sequence of them that I don't see on a routine basis is a different story. Tell me, if it wasn't written on your shield, would you know it off the top of your head?”

"I guess not," she admitted and read out the number. Dante plugged it into the request system, navigated to the intersection in question, and pulled up the video feed.

"You're in luck," he said. "It was just repaired a couple of weeks ago. How far back do you need?"

Vega checked her watch. "Genene put the time of death at about twenty minutes before we arrived on scene. He was still warm. But she said he'd been laying there for a while. So, give me everything from the last two hours or so." Dante nodded and together they scanned through the footage.

The intersection wasn't busy, making it easier to speed up the video, only pausing when they saw a large car and pedestrian in the same shot. Vega kept an eye out for a man matching their victim's description while she instructed Dante to watch for trucks and SUVs approaching from the direction Joseph Lorenz was hit.

It turned out to be pretty obvious when they found the right time. A large, dark green SUV came speeding down Jefferson just as a man with dark hair and the same blue jacket as Lorenz stepped into the crosswalk. Lorenz jumped back but the car swerved toward him. The impact knocked him several feet into the intersection and the SUV just kept driving, gradually slowing to the prescribed speed limit as it passed out of frame.

Vega and Dante watched in silence. Lorenz didn't move again. About ten minutes later, another car drove through the intersection, saw the body, and stopped. It was an older man. He hesitantly walked toward the victim, then pulled out his phone.



"This must have been the guy to call it in," Dante said softly. His usual easy-going smile was gone, leaving him looking a little like a lost puppy. Vega figured he'd never actually watched someone die before.

"I'm sorry, Dante. I should have warned you it wouldn't be pretty."

He shrugged. "It's okay. Well, really it isn't. But I've seen some nasty stuff in this job. The internet is a dark place. I've just never actually seen, you know..." Some of the color started returning to his darkly tanned skin.

"It's kind of terrible to say, but part of you gets used to it, the death," Vega told him. "Not comfortable with it per say, but desensitized, I guess." She sort of hoped that it wouldn't happen to her sunny, innocent friend all the same, even if it would eventually save him pain. After a quiet moment, they both shook themselves and turned back to the screen. "Can you make out a plate number, or maybe the guy's face?"

Dante zoomed in on the windshield of the car, but the driver was wearing a deep hood and dark sunglasses. "He was prepared for the cameras. I can't get any defining features from him."

"What about the license plate?"

He redirected the footage to focus on the SUV's back bumper. "Yeah, it's clear. But I'm guessing if he's hiding his face, this plate won't be registered to him."

Vega frowned, then shrugged. "It has to lead somewhere." She noted down the number. "I'll take this to Marks. See if you can pick up our driver on any of the other cameras in the area. Maybe he takes off the disguise or else you can find an angle that gives us any more details about him or the car. Also,

try to get an idea of where he was coming from, or more importantly, where he went.”

Dante nodded, undaunted by the large task Vega had set him. “Will do.”

She smiled. “Thanks. You're the best.”

“Tell me something I don't know,” he called over his shoulder as she turned to leave.

**[End of Sample]**