

The Darkness in a Ghost Story

- A Darkness Within Spooky Short -

By Katelynn Laird

"You know, for an officer of the law, you are growing dangerously close to committing a criminal misdemeanor," Archer commented tonelessly, eyeing the speedometer.

Vega didn't look over at him. "I hate being late. And you were supposed to be tucked in for the night an hour ago." Her eyes remained trained on the yellow beams of road cutting through the darkness.

"I'm not a child," Archer responded, allowing himself a trace of indignance.

She ignored him. "You wouldn't think a middle of nowhere town would have so much traffic."

"Except perhaps, during their annual harvest festival?" Archer pointed out.

Vega sighed. They shouldn't have even been all the way out in Utica in the first place. Vega blamed Adrian, or rather, Randy Riaile. Then again, these days she blamed him for most things.

Three months of searching for her wayward ex-boyfriend and would-be murderer had yielded frustratingly little. Any day now, she expected Captain Leeds to bench her from the case. Her union mandated trauma counselor tended to agree.

Yet, when she'd fielded a tip that a young Latina woman's body had been found beaten with eye trauma (Riaile's MO) in the small town about two hours outside Chicago, Vega insisted on going herself to check it out. She coordinated with the local sheriff and had one foot out the door waiting for the Chief to sign off.

So, why had Archer tagged along instead of Vega's partner Detective Marks? Well, despite Marks' shared eagerness to nab Randy (he'd actually have preferred bringing in the bastard solo, keeping Vega far from potential harm – physical or emotional), Marks was caught up in court testifying for another case.

Archer conveniently overheard Vega practically begging the Chief and offered his services. He'd just finished updating Leah, the consultant coordinator, with his latest reports for on-going cases he'd been involved with. Both Vega and Leeds were hesitant to accept, but Archer tended to make himself such a nuisance when he didn't get what he wanted. Plus, he could prove useful. He tended to do that too.

So, Vega and Archer piled into her car for a little road trip. Her stomach sank as she left Marks a voicemail sure to catch her an earful later, pointedly ignoring the smugness she could almost feel radiating off of Archer.

"Could you not, I don't know, read a book or something?" She asked him to break the growing silence as she left the city.

"I do have an intriguing set of case studies from the FBI's BAU to finish. But no. I can't."

"Why not?"

Archer hesitated. "When I was a child, I found I get carsick on long journeys. Reading worsens the nausea."

Vega tried not to smirk. It wasn't that Archer potentially vomiting amused her. Just his reluctance to mention the most basic of weaknesses.

"No Halloween candy for you then. I just cleaned this car." Archer didn't reply.

In the end, it was all for nothing. They hadn't been in Utica fifteen minutes before both Vega and Archer knew this wasn't their man. The woman, Cara Marquez's, injuries were consistent with blunt force trauma, but the marks were those of fists, while Riaile had always used a weapon to keep his pretty hands unblemished. And while she had been raped, there was no note behind her eye. She didn't even fit Riaile's victim profile beyond outward appearances, working as an elementary school teacher who got along well with everyone. Except for her townie ex-boyfriend.

Twenty minutes after they'd arrived at the Sheriff's station, a deputy dragged Kyle Majors in, his knuckles bloody and his pupils the size of dinner plates. Apparently, Kyle had a reputation for getting high and getting violent. Cara had a protection order against him, but that didn't stop him from breaking into her house while she volunteered setting up for the harvest festival. Talk about a nightmare.

Vega put on a smile and thanked the Sheriff for his call, grasping Archer's sleeve before he could deliver a scathing complaint about wasting their time. Only to join a slow-moving line of cars crawling down the town's main road headed for the festival.

The singular upside to inadvertently spending so long in Utica was that, by the time they hit the highway back to the city, the lonely road was all but deserted, nothing but cornfields and the occasional pair of headlights in sight.

"Was that...?" Archer's head jerked toward the passenger window. "Curious," he muttered to himself.

"What?" Vega asked.

"Nothing, evidently," he answered, still studying the road behind them.

Vega slowed down. "Archer, what?"

"I thought I saw a woman on the side of the road, but when I looked back, there was nothing. I must have imagined it."

Vega glanced in the rearview mirror and saw nothing in the encroaching gloom of dusk. "Imagine random women often, do you?" she commented off-handedly.

Archer faced her once more. "You don't want me to answer that."

It was true, though she already knew the answer anyway.

Moving past another classic awkward Archer moment, Vega started to pull over. "What did she look like? Someone out here could need help."

Archer rolled his eyes. "I only saw her for a moment. It looked as though she wore a white dress or nightgown."

Vega stopped the car with a lurch. "Really, Archer? A ghost story? I didn't think you'd pull something so juvenile."

"What are you talking about?"

Vega shook her head, putting the car back into gear. "The old 'Woman in White' stories? Ghostly women who haunt roads near graveyards. Sometimes they hitch a ride with you. Sometimes they lure people, usually men, off the road. To their deaths," she added, lowering her voice to a theatrical rasp.

"I've never heard of such a thing," Archer insisted. "Why would I pretend to see an apparition of an urban legend?"

"I don't know," Vega shrugged as she pulled back onto the road, looking up and down the dark stretch a few times. She tried not to feel paranoid now that Archer had put the idea of a ghost in her head. "To mess with me or scare me, which you seem to enjoy doing. To get me to stop for some reason..." She trailed off, consciously registering the fact that she was alone in the middle of nowhere with a psychopath. A killer.

Not that this hadn't been the case all day. Nor for the first time. But she sometimes forgot to be on guard around Archer, much to Marks' continued dismay.

Archer slowly raised his hands and placed them on the dashboard. "I had no intention of manipulating you into stopping the car. Even if the woman had been real."

Vega took a deep breath and shook away the drop of fear in her stomach. "Of course you'd say that," she quipped, forcing some levity into her voice. She refused to be at all rattled by Archer. It was just the stupid ghost story. And her spectacular trust issues, thank you Adrian/Randy. She inhaled again and cleared her throat. "So, you're sure it was your eyes playing tricks on you or something?"

"I cannot be certain, but as I said, when I looked back, there was no woman," Archer answered, his voice its usual monotone, but maybe a little more artificial than it typically sounded.

"I hope you're right." She bit her lip, peering into the night nonetheless.

"Your compassion causes you more harm than good," Archer observed. "Look at you, in distress over a non-existent woman whom you thought to be a fictitious spirit not moments ago. Your worry even crowded out your own sense of self-preservation. Truly, I don't understand it."

"Just one of the many differences between us, I suppose," Vega said. "You see a random woman on the side of the road at night and think 'huh, that's weird'. I feel obligated to make sure said woman is safe. It's kind of my job. We see enough victims whose stories might have turned out differently had someone cared enough to stop, to do something."

Archer was quiet, leaving Vega's words feeling almost loud. They often got into these moralistic debates that seemed to go in circles. Each was who they were, unlikely to change now.

"Detective," he eventually said.

"What, going to explain exactly how idiotic I sound? Can't save them all?"

"Vega." This time more urgently.

"What?" She looked over at him, but his eyes were on the rearview mirror.

"She's back."

Vega looked in the mirror and again saw nothing but the red glow from her taillights. "I don't see anything. Archer, I swear, if you are screwing with me now-"

"I caught a glimpse of white, either her clothing or skin, out of the corner of my eye. But I am sure I saw something."

Vega's heart pounded as she once again pulled over to the shoulder. She flicked on her hazards then turned to study Archer's face. She saw no obvious signs of dishonesty, but then again, she rarely saw signs of any emotion from him. He sat back, as if relaxed, though tension remained in his shoulders.

"We can always keep going," he suggested casually, knowing that Vega couldn't in good conscience just drive away.

"Stay here," she ordered, grabbing her flashlight from her belt. And her gun. Wincing only slightly as she climbed from the driver's seat, she forced herself to ignore her limp as she walked toward the back of the car. Another thing to thank Randy for, healing as slowly as the rest of the damage he caused.

She slowly waved her flashlight back and forth across the road. "Hello?" she called out.

No response. Nothing appeared in the flashlight's beam. Then, a vague shimmer. If it had been a warm day, Vega would have thought it simple heat haze. But on a cool autumn night, she was left with few other explanations.

"Anyone out here?" she yelled a little louder.

Surely, it was her imagination, but she caught a glimpse of something out in the distance, far off the side of the road. There was nothing but open fields for miles. When Vega swiped the flashlight across the field again, a shape appeared closer. Was that a face? Sweat broke out across her forehead, though the air seemed to grow colder. Who was coming out of the darkness to get her? In her mind, images of spectral women blended into a singular visage: Riaile's. Even when she blinked her watering eyes, he lingered behind them.

Stop! she scolded herself. Letting her fears run wild wouldn't help anything. She rubbed her eyes and stared out into the fields again, this time seeing nothing. It was time to go back. No one else was out here. She wanted to move, but her legs weren't cooperating. Her breath still came too quickly.

The back of her neck prickled and Vega spun, gun coming up in front of her. To his credit, Archer didn't jump back.

"Detective," he said sharply, hands half-raised. "Are you well?" He stopped short a little more than an arm's length away.

Vega lowered her weapon. "Dammit, Archer! What the hell are you doing? I told you to stay put."

"You stood out here for several minutes. With no further signs of the woman, ghostly or otherwise, I hoped to be on our way."

Something in his explanation rang incomplete, but Vega couldn't put her finger on what. As it was, she could scarcely catch her breath between her apprehension, anger, and the fact she'd almost shot her colleague. Hands shaking, she holstered her gun.

"Let's go," she snapped. She waited for him to return to the car before following suit.

Neither spoke for several minutes as they resumed their drive. Only when the pinpricks of the city's lights came into view on the horizon did Vega feel she could exhale. She forced herself to stop checking the rearview mirror.

"I'm surprised at you, Detective," Archer eventually commented. "I didn't expect a scary story to rattle you as it has."

"Shut up, Archer."

"Have you always been prone to an overactive imagination?"

Vega gripped the steering wheel tighter. "I mean it."

He didn't get to pry into her head whenever he wanted. She didn't owe him that. Well, she owed him more than she liked to admit. But still.

"Pushing your fears into your subconscious will not make them go away," Archer continued, adopting an almost sage-like tone. Vega guessed he was mimicking one of his many therapists. "They'll simply continue to fester down there, unresolved, until you either face them or they render you debilitated in a moment of stress. And as someone who often finds himself beside you in such moments, I'd prefer to avoid that outcome."

"Will you knock it off," Vega griped, rolling her eyes. Like she wasn't aware of all this. She heard enough of it from her own therapists over the years. She really needed to stop getting herself into situations that ended with trauma counselling. "I get it, okay? And I'm fine." She held up her hand and made a fist until she could relax it and it didn't tremor. "See?"

"Very convincing," Archer replied. "You saying that you are fine is like me saying it."

"You aren't? I didn't think you got scared. Not by a ghost you don't believe in. Or even me pointing a gun at you. You knew I wasn't going to shoot you." Vega wasn't sure she'd ever registered true fear in Archer, despite their misadventures.

"I did know. Your finger wasn't even on the trigger. And no, I do not scare easily when facts and logic give me little reason to be concerned. But, as your partner often points out, I am rarely fine. My baseline is regularly at war with my impulses. I have bad days, remember?"

"Right." Vega's memory flashed back to a different night with Archer in her car – staking out an art gallery waiting for the Faced Stealer. Archer admitted to having a difficult time sitting still, resisting his compulsions that night. Vega was sure discussing methods of murder hadn't helped. "Is it bad now?" She asked softly, echoing that earlier conversation?

Archer shook his head. "No. Back at the Sheriff's station, my frustration was getting the better of me. But not now."

"Why?" Vega asked, genuinely curious. Archer so often got her talking, even now, but rarely did she get glimpses into his head.

He didn't answer. "I'm more interested in why someone generally as level-headed as you let yourself buy into an urban legend. You were clearly on edge, standing on the side of the road back there. Your body language was tense, you were sweating, practically hyperventilating by the time I got to you."

Vega groaned internally, knowing he wouldn't drop it until he got his answers. "Fine, seventh grade, Gabbie Larkin's sleepover."

"Color me intrigued," Archer said, motioning for her to continue.

Could they make it back to Garfield Park before she had to spill the whole embarrassing tale? She doubted it.

"It was my first middle school sleepover, with anyone other than my cousins. The week before Halloween. Gabbie invited a bunch of girls over for pizza, truth or dare, the usual stuff. What she didn't advertise was the horror movie marathon. She'd swiped a bunch of DVDs from her older brother. And then, right before we fell asleep, she had the bright idea to pile all our flashlights together and sit around them like a campfire so we could tell scary stories. The "Woman in White" was one, but not even the scariest. Wendigos, Bloody Mary, killer clowns, demons, the usual. Some of the other girls, they had twisted imaginations or some questionable influences at home. Anyway, I told some lame story about a lake monster based on an old b-movie my parents had watched. And then we turned out the lights.

"I just laid in my sleeping bag for hours, straining to hear the slightest sound – the other girls breathing, Gabbie's mom blowing her nose – staring into the darkness. Gabbie was too old for a night light, and I wasn't about to tell anyone my dad still left on the hall light at home for me. It must have been two in the morning when I psyched myself out so much that I made myself sick. Gabbie's mom found me crying in the bathroom and called home. My dad came to pick me up early. It was the worst night of my life. Well, until recently."

Vega let the story drift into silence, gritting her teeth against the mortification. Why the hell was she telling Archer this at all? At least she hadn't let slip the story that had scared her the most back then: a cold, ruthless slasher type who kidnapped and killed young girls. Too close to home, as it would turn out.

"Was your father angry or upset with you?" Archer asked.

Vega blinked. "Of course not. He wasn't thrilled to be woken up in the middle of the night, but he wasn't mad at me. He gave me some ginger ale and sat in my room with me until I fell asleep. Even now, when I get stressed out or just feel sick, sometimes I think of him to help me calm down."

"Your parents are safe to you?" Archer asked, as if he was unfamiliar with the concept.

"Most of the time," Vega said. She didn't ask if he didn't feel the same way. She knew from his file that Archer didn't have a happy childhood.

Archer frowned and Vega knew that look. He was thinking through a profile. Hers.

They were well into the city now and despite herself, Vega relaxed further under the bright lights. She hoped Archer's silence would last the rest of the car ride, reluctant to further delve into her embarrassment.

"The worst night of your life," Archer eventually said thoughtfully, dashing Vega's hope. "Until Riaile abducted your sister, correct? That is the recent series of events which prompted you to amend your statement?"

"Nothing gets past you," Vega muttered.

"Your recent trauma compounded with a fearful childhood memory. And likely emphasized the absence of your father, while Riaile remains alive, much to our collective annoyance. That is why you froze."

He said succinctly, easily, cracking another layer of her psyche without a second thought.

"Thanks, Professor. I feel all better now."

"You realize that better understanding you helps our professional relationship. We become a more effective team, save more of your precious victims," Archer pointed out in the face of her irritation.

"It hardly seems fair when it doesn't go both ways," Vega countered.

"Were you not furnished with a detailed psychiatric profile on me before we even met?" Archer's tone drifted toward sardonic.

"Not the same."

"And you become more adept at behavior and pattern analysis in your own right with each case," he added, ignoring her.

Vega's eyes widened. "That sounds suspiciously like a complement."

Archer's expression remained unchanged. "I'm simply pointing out that if you wanted to, I'm sure you could turn the tables."

Vega wanted to argue that with most people, sure, she could get a decent read on them. But Archer was different. He'd spent years encouraging his already dulled emotions, and his

manipulations often further obscured what he was really thinking or feeling. Aside from moments when he wasn't acting, when his darker impulses shined through, he was a tough nut to crack.

Before she could formulate a response, the hospital came into sight.

"Asylum, sweet asylum," Archer sighed.

You're dramatic," Vega told him. Garfield Park was hardly Arkham.

She walked him to the front desk to sign him in. Naomi, the woman who usually worked reception, was absent in favor of an older man, likely her night replacement. Vega eyed the man, thinking of Ben, the receptionist whose involvement with Riaile they still hadn't fully sorted out.

"Bale," Archer greeted the man, confirming he knew him. Archer stood beside the desk, arms held out.

"You're late," Bale said, looking curiously at Vega as he waved an orderly over. "Naomi said you were supposed to be at the police station giving a report. And she isn't one of the usual uniforms that brings you back."

"My fault," Vega told him. "I'm Detective Melissa Vega. Archer and I work together, and I had what I thought was a lead on an ongoing case of ours. I borrowed Archer to check it out, but it was a dead end." Vega's throat was tight, likely from her scare earlier. But somehow, Bale made her feel like he didn't believe her. She pulled out her badge while she signed Archer back into the hospital's custody, as if to prove herself.

The orderly came over while she filled out the paperwork and patted Archer down. Archer had an odd look on his face, a more natural neutrality than his cold mask. Then he whispered something to the orderly, who raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"Everything seems in order," Bale concluded, stuffing the papers into a drawer.

Vega nodded and turned to leave. "Good night, Archer."

"A moment, Detective." Vega stopped and the orderly returned, handing an object to Archer, which he in turn presented Vega. It was a can of ginger ale. "For your stomach. You did just clean your car, after all."

Vega knew Archer was teasing her, already manipulating the latest scrap of herself she'd divulged. But somehow, without him beside her, she hadn't been looking forward to the drive home. It was sad that his presence had become even a momentary comfort. She wouldn't tell Marks.

"Thanks." She took the soda.

"Sleep well, Detective," Archer said as the orderly walked him to his room.

Vega doubted she would, too many horrors haunting the corners of her imagination. But as she gripped the can, she knew that despite her childhood fears, Archer wouldn't be one of them. This time.