

# INTO THE DARK

## Chapter 1

*Temple City, California*  
*2007*

It started with the neighbors' dog.

Tucker, the Bradfords' cocker spaniel, was barking, but Ruth Peterson, who lived next door, paid no attention to him as she got ready to run errands. Her thoughts were on the new shoes she needed for her son's graduation from Berkeley in two weeks. Then, moving through her home, she glimpsed Tucker in the Bradfords' yard.

*That's odd. Why doesn't Bonnie see to him?*

Ruth dismissed it, but as she collected her purse and keys, the barking made her wonder for a few seconds. Tucker was a good dog, friendly, and Bonnie Bradford's kids, Jimmy and Jessie, adored him. Ruth never heard a peep out of him, certainly not at night.

In her driveway, Ruth reached for her car door but hesitated.

Tucker's barking was stronger now as it rose from the backyard.

Ruth took stock of the Bradfords' neat ranch-style house and bit her bottom lip. She hated to disturb Bonnie, not when she was trying to meet a deadline for her latest screenplay. Bonnie's ex, the building contractor, had the kids with him in Thousand Oaks for a week and she was using the time to finish her script. At least that's what she'd told Ruth when they'd chatted over the fence the other night.

Still, Ruth grew concerned at Tucker's continual barking.

After giving it a moment, she walked over to Bonnie's front door and rang the bell. Nothing happened. Not a hint of movement inside. Bonnie's car was in the driveway.

She had to be home.

Ruth went around to the back, where Tucker greeted her on the patio with more barking before entering the house through his little dog door. It squeaked a few times, swinging in his wake.

Ruth knocked.

Nothing happened, other than Tucker resuming his barking, now with an eerie echo as if the house were vacant. Ruth knocked again harder, but this time when she struck the door, it opened, startling her.

*Strange.*

Catching her breath, she gripped the handle firmly and poked her head inside the entrance to the kitchen.

“Bonnie! It’s Ruth Peterson, is everything okay?”

Tucker emerged, barking in the silence.

Unease swirled in Ruth’s mind.

*Maybe Bonnie’s slept in, or left her house with a friend, or forgot to lock the door, or she’s listening to music with headphones...*

“Bonnie!”

Ruth stepped into the kitchen and took quick inventory.

She saw nothing on the table or counter, no dishes in the sink. The stove was switched off. Nothing was on. Nothing seemed awry, except for the dog.

She lowered herself, and Tucker rushed into her arms.

“Goodness, you’re trembling.”

His barking evolved into a mournful yelping, then he squirmed until she set him down and watched him trot down the hallway still barking.

Ruth followed him.

She was familiar with the house. Bonnie had invited her over for tea several times and they got along well. Scanning the family room and living room, she saw nothing that looked out of place.

The air was still.

Ruth called out for Bonnie again as she walked along the hall.

The children's rooms with their movie and pop-star posters were empty, their beds were made and all toys were in place. A wide-eyed teddy bear, its mouth a permanent *O*, stared at her from Jessie's bed.

Ruth moved down the hall and stood at the entrance to Bonnie's small office. Sunlight flooded the room. Pages of script were spread over her desk and credenza. Next to her computer keyboard: a ceramic mug, half-filled with tea, with World's Greatest Mom emblazoned on it.

The desk lamp was still on.

*Looks like Bonnie stepped away briefly from her work.*

As Ruth moved toward Bonnie's bedroom, she detected an unusual smell. The light, pleasant citrus fragrance of Bonnie's house now contended with a coppery metallic odor.

Tucker stood at the entrance to Bonnie's bedroom, barking as if alarmed by—or *terrified of*—what was inside.

When Ruth looked, her immediate thought was a question: Who made this awful mess in Bonnie's bed? She could not believe her eyes.

Ruth didn't remember screaming or racing from the house to the front yard. She never recalled Len Blake, the retired firefighter two doors down, dropping his garden hose and leaving it running as he rushed to her aid. Ruth had no memory of telling him over and over that she needed to get to the mall to buy shoes.

All Ruth remembered was that if he'd stopped holding her, she would surely have fallen off the face of the earth.

In the whirlwind that followed there were police, TV crews, the yellow tape sealing the house as stunned neighbors watched the moon-suited investigators come and go.

Then the detectives came with their questions.

For nearly two weeks the gruesome murder of a single mother in her middle-class suburban home remained one of L.A.'s top news stories. Pictures of the pretty screenwriter accompanied every report.

Ross Corbett, Bonnie's ex-husband, seemed devastated at her funeral.

Detectives traced her final movements in an intense effort to find a lead in the case. But they had no solid physical evidence and no suspects. Bonnie Bradford had no enemies, no debts and no unusual lifestyle networks. She lived an ordinary life and was loved by everyone who knew her.

Detectives compared her murder with other cases, looking for links, a pattern, anything. Nothing emerged. They set up a tip line, appealed to the public for help, but as weeks became months, Bonnie's death remained enveloped in mystery.

Her children never returned to their home in Temple City. Eventually the Bradford property was sold and Jessie and Jimmy moved in with their father. Ruth Peterson and her husband sold their home and moved to the Bay Area to be closer to their son.

After the first year passed, the *Los Angeles Times* published an anniversary feature on the unsolved murder.

Investigators, hopeful that it might jar someone's memory and yield a tip, were disappointed.

In the years that followed, the primary detective on the case retired. Eight months later, his partner died of a heart attack.

The case grew colder.

It looked like Bonnie Bradford's killer had gone free.

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