



## Into the Dark

By Rick Mofina



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### **And a grieving cop who lures a killer from the shadows...**

Detective Joe Tanner, struggling to overcome his wife's death while raising their little girl alone, heads the task force formed to stop the monster who has resurfaced with a chilling message.

### **Race the clock in a life-and-death struggle to save the next victim...**

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Mofina is one of the best thriller writers in the business, and Jeff's painful journey of trying to reunite his family will resonate with readers. The characters ring true, and the payoff is both emotional and shocking."--  
Library Journal (starred review)

"Rick Mofina's tense, taut writing makes every thriller he writes an adrenaline-packed ride." -Tess Gerritsen,  
New York Times bestselling author

"A blisteringly paced story that cuts to the bone. It left me ripping through pages deep into the night."--James  
Rollins, New York Times bestselling author on *In Desperation*

"Hell hath no fury like a mother wronged. *In Desperation* is a "A superbly written thriller that plumbs the  
depths of every parent's nightmare. Timely, tense, and terrifying, this book is sure to be a big hit!" --Brad  
Thor, #1 New York Times bestselling author

"Taut pacing, rough action and jagged dialogue feed a relentless pace. *The Panic Zone* is written with  
sizzling intent."-Hamilton Spectator on *The Panic Zone*

"*The Panic Zone* is a headlong rush toward Armageddon. Its brisk pace and tight focus remind me of early  
Michael Crichton."-Dean Koontz, New York Times bestselling author

"*Vengeance Road* is a thriller with no speed limit! It's a great read!"  
-Michael Connelly, New York Times bestselling author

"A gripping no-holds-barred mystery...lightning paced...with enough twists to keep you turning pages well  
into the wee hours. *Vengeance Road* is masterful suspense."  
-Allison Brennan, New York Times bestselling author

"*Six Seconds* should be Rick Mofina's breakout thriller. It moves like a tornado." -James Patterson, New  
York Times bestselling author

"*Six Seconds*...grabs your gut-and your heart-in the opening scenes and never lets go." -Jeffery Deaver, New  
York Times bestselling author

#### About the Author

Rick Mofina is a former crime reporter and the award-winning author of several acclaimed thrillers. He's interviewed murderers face-to-face on death row; patrolled with the LAPD and the RCMP. His true crime articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Marie Claire*, *Reader's Digest* and *Penthouse*. He's reported from the U.S., Canada, the Caribbean, Africa, Qatar and Kuwait's border with Iraq. For more information please visit [www.rickmofina.com](http://www.rickmofina.com)

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*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.

### *Commerce, California*

The image on the computer screen resembled a child's crude painting of an outstretched hand.

Ghostly and somewhat grotesque: five misshapen fingerprints stood out from five reddish-brownish rivers that meandered amid smudges down the white page.

It was feathered amid the kid art, the take-out menus, a calendar, notes, business cards, a snapshot of mother, daughter and son beaming at the Santa Monica Pier, all pinned to the family bulletin board in the kitchen.

Typical of a young, happy family, Detective Joe Tanner thought.

It was getting late. He was expecting a call at any moment. While he waited he went back to his work.

The board stood in innocent juxtaposition to the outrage down the hall. Down the hall is where a neighbor had discovered the body of Bonnie Catherine Bradford in the bedroom of her home in Temple City, nearly

six years ago.

Bradford, a thirty-four-year-old divorced mother of two children, had been tied spread-eagled to her bed and—well, the crime scene photos illustrated what the killer had done. Tanner clicked his mouse, opening more photos on his computer monitor.

The walls, the bed, "frenzied overkill," one of the reports said.

It didn't matter how many times he'd looked at the pictures in the past few weeks, Tanner still seethed at the fact that whoever did this in 2007 had gotten away with it.

The Bradford killing had now fallen to Tanner and the detectives with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Cold Case Unit. It was among the hundreds of other cases they oversaw. And in that time a few tips had surfaced: people heard talk on the street, in a bar or a jail cell, but ultimately all of them deadended.

Even as leads turned cold, the Bradford case, like the others, was always there, calling out to be solved. But no matter how frustrating it was for cold case investigators, it was brutal for the survivors who called or wrote, struggling to make sure the death of their loved one would never be forgotten, that one day, justice would be done.

Bonnie Bradford's ex-husband, Ross Corbett, who'd long been cleared as a suspect, called Tanner on anniversary days, the day they were married, the day Bonnie was murdered or Bonnie's birthday.

"We had our troubles, but I always loved her," he'd say as Tanner listened with sincere compassion. "Are you any closer? Is there anything I can do to help?" Corbett always asked the same thing.

But it was Corbett's last call, some three weeks ago, that hit a nerve. He'd told Tanner how the kids at his son's school had said that the cops were never going to find the guy who killed Jimmy's mom.

Tanner knew better than anyone that there were certain types of killers you couldn't stop—*like the one who took my wife*—but the one who murdered Bonnie Bradford was not one of them.

This case was solvable and it was his duty to clear it.

The question was: How?

After Corbett's call, Tanner and his partner, Harvey Zurn, set out once more to take another, "fresh" look at the case by first pulling out the thick accordion files. They also delved into the unit's database for the computerized files of the Bradford case and reviewed all the witness statements given by those who knew or had any dealings with Bonnie in the weeks before her death. They went through files and reports going back in the last year of her life. They consulted file notes about her habits, hobbies, the patterns of her life, who she had contact with. They called up people and re-interviewed them, even challenged the validity of statements that seemed questionable.

Tanner followed the creed of a long-retired detective who'd told him that in most cases, the key you need is right in front of you.

And something surfaced.

Tanner had been examining the crime scene photos, doing his neo-Sherlockian best enlarging them on his computer screen. The victim's hands and fingers were bloodstained owing to defensive wounds, the reports had noted.

Studying a file of photos the scene people had taken of the rest of the home, he'd come across a family bulletin board in the kitchen, plastered with a calendar, business cards, notes and works of kid art. In the Bradford collection he saw a colored pencil drawing of a cat, another one of sunflowers, a single page with a handprint in paint and then a small paint-by-numbers of dolphins.

*The handprint.*

Something about it struck Tanner as odd. Call it instinct, or a gut feeling but it just seemed out of place, even though it was neatly overlapped by the children's work.

*Where did that handprint come from? The inventory sheets indicated that while appointment notes from the calendar were followed up on, nothing from the bulletin board had been processed. Where was that handprint now?*

Tanner called Ross Corbett.

"We need to see the artwork from the bulletin board that was in the kitchen. I hope you didn't throw it out?" Tanner asked him.

"No, we had a moving company collect most things and move them into storage," Corbett said. "We wouldn't have even looked at what was on that board, we were too traumatized."

No one at the time had noticed anything different about the bulletin board.

Corbett volunteered to let Tanner and Zurn accompany him as he retrieved the artwork from the bulletin board. The drawings were stored in a file folder and were in good condition.

Jimmy Bradford, who was now thirteen, shook his head when Tanner and Zurn had asked him if he had made the handprint.

"Nope, I didn't make it. I would've remembered."

Jimmy's eleven-year-old sister, Jessie, hadn't made it.

"I drew the cat and the flowers. Jimmy made the dolphin picture," she said. "I never saw that hand thing before."

Tanner and Zurn had sent the handprint to the crime lab for analysis days ago. Charlene Podden, a forensic technician, alerted Tanner that morning that she'd have a preliminary report to him by five today.

The waiting started gnawing at him because it underscored that this potential evidence should've been analyzed at the time of the murder but wasn't. At 5:41 his landline rang at his desk.

"It's Charlene at the lab. I'm sorry for the delay, Joe."



"You find anything on that handprint?"

"This is just a preliminary, okay? We need to do more work."

"More work? Charlene this case has been cold for six years. Tell me how come this stuff was not processed six years ago."

"Maybe it was overlooked. Maybe somebody made an assumption, or lost a report. Look, I honestly don't know. It was before my time."

"Okay, forget it. Let's get to work. What can you tell me?"

"The drawing was produced with blood, human blood."

"The victim's blood?"

"Some of it."

"Some?"

"And there are latents," Podden added, "but they have to be processed, Joe, so give us time to get to that."

"Are they good?"

"Yes, and there's more."

Tanner pressed his phone harder to his ear.

"There's something under the largest, darkest smudge, something the artist intentionally covered or concealed on purpose—a message in tiny letters, likely scratched using the tip of a pencil."

"What does it say?"

"I'm just getting started."

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Katie Phillips:**

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