

OUTER DARKNESS

Bart Brevik

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Bart Brevik

PROLOGUE

In the war of good against evil, there are casualties. Some never recognize the enemy until it is too late.

She feels the darkness penetrating her bones as deeply as the cold, and she shivers.

The room is frigid, and dark as the grave. Not even a dim night light to shed a faint glow on the slender teenage girl, who stands bound and naked in the center of the room. Her arms are securely restrained above her head by handcuffs that are fastened around a rusty pipe, hanging low from the ceiling of the bare concrete basement. Her delicate wrists bear red witness marks from the cuffs, which dig into her supple flesh each time she struggles against her bonds. A piece of gray duct tape is sealed rudely across her mouth, making it more of an effort for her to breathe. Her fair skin tightens up into gooseflesh, shivering against the cold.

How did I get here? she wonders. *That lady, Bobbi, that I met outside the homeless shelter seemed cool; she let me stay at her place with her a few days. Her house was stocked with lots of food.*

I can't ...remember anything; one minute I'm at a bangin' party at her house with a bunch of her friends, then ...what happened? Did somebody spike my drink with something? This place is so dark. How did I end up here, and what happened to my clothes? These handcuffs are killing my wrists. Why would they handcuff me to this pipe up above my head?

Whoa – I'm so dizzy ...I can barely stand up straight. My head - it's killin' me! Oh man, I never should've run away from home ...I wanna go back.

Tears begin to flow down her pale cheeks and hit the hard concrete floor, her pretty face contorted with fear and anxiety. Her head slung downward, she sobs plaintively.

Footfalls approach - several people coming, by the sound of it. She lifts her chin up apprehensively. The door opens abruptly, and a column of bright light pierces the darkness of the room.

Through her squinting eyes, the girl sees a group of several people coming down the steps into the basement slowly and quietly, each one silhouetted by the light as they glide in. Their faces are obscured by the deep hoods of their dark purple robes.

Although bound with her hands above her head, the girl pulls her bare thighs together tight and twists her hips to the side, in a vain attempt at modesty.

Who are these people coming in now? The people from the party, maybe? And now they're all seeing me naked. But why are they wearing those robes? Must be some kind of kinky perverts. Oh, God, they're probably going to rape me. Maybe they already did while I was out of it. I told that lady Bobbi that I'm a virgin, but they probably don't even care. I haven't done anything to them, why are they doing this to me?

Her shivering abruptly gives way to a cold sweat as she realizes all at once the gravity of the situation. The hooded figures walk in single file around the outer perimeter of the empty basement room, until the last member of the group passes through the door. In his left hand, the enrobed man carries a dark, medium-sized suitcase. He closes the door behind him, and flicks a light switch on the wall. The room becomes illuminated in a gloomy amber glow.

Each member of the hooded group assumes a position along the wall, facing her. Not a word is spoken among them; everyone methodically follows this ritual in silence. The girl's increasing sense of dread is evident, her eyes darting frantically from one hooded figure to the next. She can't see their faces, which are obscured by the deep hoods. Muffled, unintelligible sounds of protest and pleading leak out from her taped mouth. She feels the tingle of sweat oozing from her scalp, further soiling her matted blonde hair.

A sense of deadly anticipation permeates the air, as the man carrying the suitcase sets it down on a small table near the door. He bends over to open the case.

Bart Brevik

Snap! Snap! The latches on the case spring open noisily, startling the girl, and cause her to jerk back like a spring suddenly released. Losing her balance, the unforgiving handcuffs lacerate her skin, but won't let her fall to the cold, hard cement floor. As the lid of the suitcase opens, the glint of stainless steel is unmistakable, even in the dim light.

Hey, w- what's that thing he's pulling out? Looks like some kind of machine. Oh, my God, look at the size of that needle. No, no, I don't want to be here. What are you going to do? Don't come near me with that thing! I ... can't move ...I can't even scream. Please don't hurt me. Somebody help me! ...Mommy!

CHAPTER 1

Chatsworth, California

He thought he'd already seen everything that the perverse underbelly of Los Angeles had to offer. But on this morning, his queasy stomach told him that he hadn't.

As a top reporter for KNLA TV in Los Angeles, George Tanaka had seen more than his share of crime scenes over the years. He had covered the gamut; drive-by gang shootings, domestic violence incidents that culminated in murder, a teenage girl found bleeding to death in a cheap motel after a botched abortion - you name it. But none of the previous atrocities could have prepared him for what he saw today.

The police usually tried to keep him at arm's length, with varying degrees of success. Today he had managed to find a way to snake through the police lines surrounding the warehouse, by using one of his scams.

The crime scene was in one of the newer industrial parks in the San Fernando Valley; one of a dozen or so cloned tilt-up buildings painted in neutral earth tones. The kind of generic-looking light industrial floorspace that looked like it could be planted anywhere in America - and probably had, for that matter. A very nondescript place, and empty as well. The sparse stick-like trees and small shrubs that dotted the industrial park landscape seemed to be the only living things in the area, besides the police.

George had donned his gray blazer and a necktie after parking his car down the street, out of sight. Brazenly walking into the taped-off crime scene like the cock-of-the-walk, his well rehearsed swagger and look of arrogance marked him as a police detective in the eyes of the cops on the scene, who were busily going about their business.

After all, he thought to himself, you don't get the big story by hanging back with the crowd.

In this case, though, he found himself wondering if he would have been better off if the officers standing around the perimeter had been a bit more diligent about keeping him at bay. With his tie loosely knotted and his travel coffee mug in hand, George was trying hard to look like the kind of hardened detective who saw murder scenes like this every day, and twice on Sunday. Once inside the warehouse, he noticed a couple of men in suits looking intently at the area where the roll-up shipping and receiving door was located.

Gotta be Feds, he thought. The local cops don't dress like that.

Casually walking up to the forensic tech who was examining the corpse with latex-gloved hands, he grunted "Watcha got?"

She looked young - probably not more than fifteen, although it was hard to tell with her color gone and the ghostly pallor of her face looking like a grotesquely distorted mask. George took a quick glance, not allowing his eyes to dwell too long on the macabre scene before him. According to the forensics tech, she had been dead for at least six hours or more. George had seen dead bodies

Bart Brevik

before; the worst ones were the car crashes. But this one was different – and worse than any he had seen.

She was nude, yet according to Forensics, there were no indications of rape. It was worse yet, if that were even possible. The dead girl lying on the cold floor of this empty warehouse had two large incisions on her torso: One vertical down the center of her chest, another about three inches above the navel and to one side. There was also what appeared to be a large puncture mark at the base of one carotid artery in the neck.

The forensics tech who was thoroughly examining the body said that her heart and liver had been surgically removed, and there was very little blood left in her body. Strangely, there was little blood on the floor either. There were no signs of struggle, other than the scraped black and blue marks around both of her wrists.

Another oddity that the crime scene investigators on the scene were busy photographing and examining was a marking on the lower torso, separate from the two incisions. It appeared to be some kind of emblem that was burned into the skin of the victim, about two inches in diameter. The CSI's were buzzing about what it meant, and speculating as to whether a branding iron or similar tool had been used to make the marking.

As he tried to take in the scene with a dispassionate scan, George made the mistake of staring directly at the victim's face. Her eyes were stuck open by rigor mortis, but even in their lifeless state they had a look of horror in them. Her blue lips looked to him as though they had been plaintively screaming for help, but in utter futility. Disgusted, George tried to look away, but couldn't. He suddenly felt something well up deep within his stomach, and he quickly averted his eyes from hers. Too late.

He lunged for the warehouse roll-up door, and burst into the harsh morning sunlight. He hit his knees, just in time to hurl his breakfast into the sparse shrubs.

