

The Bishops'
Sacrifice Book 1

The
Demon
Shadow

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Mad Dog Press

The Demon Shadow
Book One of The Bishops' Sacrifice Series
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I dedicate this book to my loving wife, Janice, and our new additions to the family, Spencer and Avery Means. You have willingly come into our lives with hearts full of love and devotion to teach us the need for patience.

Chapter 1

Barbara Bishop Harding finished dressing and closed her armoire. Staring at herself in the mirrored door, she could see the punishing effects of stress that left her looking haggard and old before her time. Disgusted with her appearance, she went into the bathroom and grabbed the hairbrush, noticing the bristles of the comb were collecting long strands of hair at an alarming rate. Nothing could prevent the anxiety, nor the fear, she had felt since her daughter had gone missing—and as a result, her body was paying the price for her stressful existence.

As she began her morning chores by stripping their bed, she accidentally knocked off the small picture from the nightstand. Picking it up off the floor and staring at the happy faces, profound sorrow pierced her soul. The photo had been taken while the family was on vacation: Her two daughters were playing tag with their father, Mark, in a field of colorful daisies on a summer day not long ago.

The portrait had been on her nightstand since before Melissa had gone missing, but today it somehow left her feeling empty—her world could no longer be ordinary again.

It ripped at her heart; her grief so heavy she thought it might destroy her. She couldn't stare at the photo any longer so she slipped it inside her nightstand drawer and closed it tightly.

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As she looked out her bedroom window at the cold, slate-gray sky, she felt alone in the world. The weight of Melissa's disappearance was more than she could bear, and unstoppable tears slowly trickled down her cheeks.

The more she thought about Melissa, the more a mournful knife twisted in her soul. At long last her tears were spent; she felt more tired than she had at any time in her life. She knew this feeling would only end when her sixteen-year-old daughter was back home, alive and well.

Emotionally drained, she returned to the bathroom. Pulling out several facial tissues from the decorative box, she dabbed the sobbing tears from her blue eyes. She glanced in the mirror, disgusted at her reflection. There, looking back, was someone exhausted and worn out.

Thankfully, she didn't have to go anywhere that day. She had been given a few weeks off from work, but instead of helping her cope with the loss, it caused her to reflect more on her missing daughter, especially in the still quiet morning hours when Mark was away at work and her twelve-year-old daughter, Rachel, was at school.

Noticing the time on the alarm clock, she decided to eat breakfast, even if she wasn't hungry. She felt no joy in anything she did. Life was just a series of events she had to work at achieving. Images of Melissa constantly played in her mind, leaving little room for anything else. Nothing could heal the deep hurt. Each dark day felt like a lifetime, with no end in sight.

Heading back to the bathroom after her quick breakfast, she spent a short time applying her makeup. Content with her appearance, she walked back to the kitchen. Dumping her cold coffee in the sink, she rinsed out the cup and set it on the counter to be washed.

She heard the screech of tires out front and, glancing out her kitchen window, saw a familiar car pull into their

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driveway. Before the vehicle came to a complete stop, Susan Bernstein shot out of the passenger seat, calling her name. Barbara ran to the front door where Susan was already waiting impatiently. The look on her face said it all.

Barbara collapsed in Susan's arms and began to cry.

Holding the inconsolable mother tightly, Susan whispered, "We rushed home as soon as we got the ship-to-shore telegram telling of Melissa's disappearance. Tell us what happened!"

"Please, I want you both to know I hesitated to contact you. I knew that telling you about Melissa's disappearance would cause you both to cancel your vacation plans and rush home. But I had no one else to turn to; you're her godparents so I knew you would hate me if I didn't tell you."

"You were right in sending that telegram; now we're home. Please tell us everything."

Susan put an arm around Barbara's shoulders as they walked inside, her husband, John hurriedly, following behind, silently giving his support.

Barbara held onto her friend tightly as she tried to explain the essential details of Melissa's disappearance. Susan was nearly twenty years her senior, a motherly figure, and a close friend.

Barbara had lost her mother at an early age, and in a family with two brothers and her father, she had often felt the lack of a woman's presence. When she met her, Susan had filled in the gaps in her emotional life, her longing for a mother's understanding.

She had met Susan as an intern at an investment brokerage firm. Instantly, they became close friends. Susan's husband, John, was retired from the U.S. Marshal's Service. Barbara's father had passed away from cancer a few years before, her elder brother, Spencer, had been killed in a motorcycle accident, and Butch, the younger brother, was in

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prison for armed robbery. Now the Bernsteins were the closest thing to a family she had. To see them now eased some of the heavy burdens from her shoulders.

“We caught the very next flight available as soon as our cruise ship docked in port. It wasn’t easy, but we managed to get home as quickly as we could,” Susan announced.

John stood by listening, without making any remarks. As a display of stability, he wrapped his large frame around Barbara and hugged her warmly.

“Tell us what you know so far,” he asked.

Taking the tissue that Susan offered, she wiped away the tears and described the events of the previous Tuesday afternoon.

“It was just a few days after you and Susan left on your cruise when Melissa disappeared.”

Regaining her composure, she recalled events of that fateful day, leaving out none of the details.

“That afternoon Rachel called me at work; it was a little past four, and Melissa hadn’t gotten home from school. You know that’s not like her. Rachel went to our neighbor Mrs. Andersen to use the phone to tell me where she was. She was upset because she couldn’t get into the house.”

Barbara paused, lost in thought as she stared into space, reliving the events of that day in her mind. It was as if the nightmare had returned.

“Barbara,” Susan called out, “are you still with us?”

“Forgive me,” she whispered. “It all seems like yesterday. Where was I? Oh yes, Rachel called me from the neighbor’s house to ask if it was all right if she stayed there until her sister got home. It was cold that day, and I quickly agreed. I was furious at Melissa because of it, but what could I do?”

Susan reassuringly answered, “In that situation, not much.”

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“Of course, I realized what an inconvenience it might be for my neighbor. I was grateful that Mrs. Anderson was kind enough to allow Rachel to stay at all.

“When I got home, I was sure Melissa would be there. But the lights weren’t on. As soon as I opened the car door, Rachel came running frantically from the neighbor’s house, shouting that her sister still hadn’t gotten home from school.”

Barbara dabbed the tears from her eyes and continued. “I felt like my heart had stopped. The first thing I did was call the school to ask if the bus had broken down. But all the buses had already returned to the station, with no children left behind. I called Melissa’s friends—none of them had seen her. It was around six o’clock when Mark got home from work. As soon as he stepped into the house, he could tell something was wrong.

“I explained that Melissa still wasn’t home from school, and Mark began asking what I had done to find her. I told him I’d called the school and checked with her friends. Mark got in his car and frantically drove throughout the neighborhood. He stopped by her best friend Stacy’s house. She told him she hadn’t seen Melissa since the fifth period.

“When Mark got back home, we went to the school grounds and searched for any sign of her, but we found nothing. That evening we explored the entire city.

“Finally, we called the police to report Melissa’s disappearance. A police sergeant named Hargrove monitored the search. He told us a runaway child—a teenager—leaves home voluntarily, but we knew in our hearts Melissa would never run away; she had no reason.

“Mark was desperate. He got into his car again and drove around the city, searching for places Melissa could be, but he returned with no results. The following day he began making phone calls and enlisted some of his friends to help in the search. They explored the streets and neighborhoods for days

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afterward and came up empty.

The result was the same: Melissa was gone, except now the police started asking us all kinds of personal questions about our family and marriage.”

“Barbara, it’s just routine questioning,” John put in.

“Asking if our marriage was a happy one and if we beat our children or if we did drugs, and if we had ever molested our daughters,” Barbara snapped.

Grabbing Barbara’s arm, Susan tried to comfort her but to no avail.

“Mark was upset,” Barbara continued, “and began shouting at the police investigator, a Lieutenant Reed. I felt miserable. Soon afterward the police set up surveillance at our home and waited for a phone call from a kidnapper—it never came. They did find one thing—a piece of Melissa’s torn sweater, with some grease and small amounts of blood, near an abandoned house not far from the school grounds.

“A suspicious dark-colored utility van was spotted driving in the neighborhood, but none was ever found matching that description. It’s been a week now. The police say the case has grown cold, and they assigned us a case number and abandoned us. Mark is withdrawn. He doesn’t talk about Melissa’s disappearance. He just works.”

“Is he doing any better?” Susan asked.

“Mark...” Barbara paused, thinking how to explain. “...well, let’s put it this way, he has his good days and bad days,” she finished, wiping away the last remnant of tears from her eyes.

Susan looked at Barbara with concern; she had never seen her in such a fragile state. She hoped things would be different now they were home from their three-week cruise.

Gripping Barbara’s shoulders tightly, she sternly announced, “I want all of you to come over for dinner tonight. Don’t argue; it’s Friday, and no one is working tomorrow,

right?”

Knowing she wouldn't win no matter how much she resisted, Barbara nodded her head.

Susan smiled and said, “Surely, you remember John has to eat before six o'clock, or else he turns into a grizzly bear.”

“What, little old me?” John interjected. Taking Barbara's hand, he proclaimed, “I still know some of the fellows down at White Plains Police Department. When I get home, the first thing I'm going to do is call an old friend who's a detective at the station to see if they found any new evidence in the case. Don't worry; we're home now.”

Susan grabbed hold of the destitute mother, hugging her tightly while saying, “Barbara, you promise me you're coming to the house for dinner.”

“Yes, of course, we'll be there. Tell me what we can bring,”

“Just your appetites. Unless you want to bring some dessert?”

“It's the least we can do—tell me, have you heard of that bakery on Smith Street called Godfreys? They make the most delicious cheesecakes.”

“Yes, I've heard of them but, you know, since John has diabetes and all, we tend to avoid such places. The truth is I would love some cheesecake; I'll have to make John some sugar-free Jell-O, instead,” Susan laughed.

“All right, we'll see you tonight. Love you.”

“Please listen, we're home now, and things are going to be different—I promise,” John announced.

After a final goodbye the Bernsteins got into their car and drove home. Susan kept her eyes on Barbara until they rounded the corner, then disappeared from sight. Barbara's expression matched her own; they both were feeling the loss of Melissa.

Chapter 2

Entering the house after her friends had gone, Barbara felt a new energy, as if she had had three cups of coffee. She felt a new resolve and purpose. She called Mark at work to tell him the good news. The phone rang a few times and then the sound of someone saying, “Quality Inspection Department.”

“Is Mark available? Please tell him his wife is on the phone,”

“Hey Barb, this is Chris. Give me a minute, and I’ll see if I can find him. Has anything happened? Do you have news?”

“It’s not that important, just tell him to call me when he has time, okay?”

“Speaking of Mark, he just walked in. Here he is.”

“Thank you, Chris,”

“This is Mark. Can I help you?”

“Hey honey, it’s me.”

“What’s up, babe?”

“I have some great news: The Bernsteins got back today.”

“Great! I suppose that means they received the telegram we sent them. Maybe now, with John’s help, we’ll be able to get somewhere with Melissa’s disappearance.”

“Well, you can have that conversation with John tonight over dinner.”

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“Tonight? Sorry, I already promised Lou that I would come by his house and help him adjust the timing on his pickup. Could we make it another night, perhaps tomorrow?”

“Mark, you know Susan. She insisted we come over tonight. But if you can’t make it, then, by all means, give her a call and cancel. I wish you a lot of luck, though.” Barbara laughed, trying to sound cheerful.

How could Mark just go help someone with their car? Her life had stopped when Melissa disappeared. Mark’s hadn’t, and she resented that.

“Hey, forget it. I’d rather tell Lou something’s come up so I can’t make it. I refuse to be the one who calls Susan. Not me; I’m chicken,” Mark chuckled.

“All right, I have to go. I’ll see you when you get home from work—I love you.”

“Love you, too. Bye.”

The rest of the day consisted of laundry and cleaning the house. Before she knew it, it was time to pick Rachel up from school—she hadn’t let her come home on the bus since Melissa had disappeared. Quickly gathering her purse and coat, Barbara left home and drove to Jefferson Middle School, where a line of cars waited. As she sat in the car, she had time to ponder the events of the past weeks and felt fortunate her work allowed her to take a leave of absence. Otherwise, missing too many days could result in her losing her job with Bachman and Burns Investment Brokerage Firm.

Devastated by Melissa’s disappearance, Barbara could never maintain a friendly, upbeat attitude dealing with clients without breaking down into a weepy mess. Nonetheless, with only a week of her leave remaining, she considered the Bernsteins’ return home as an opportunity to ask them if they wouldn’t mind picking up Rachel from school.

The loud school bell went off, announcing all the

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children were free to leave. Slowly, the classroom doors opened, and groups of children appeared, raced to the waiting cars, and jumped inside. Cars quickly began pulling away, and soon the dash to get out of the confined parking lot began in earnest.

Moments later she spotted a familiar crowd of children. Amid the group she caught a glimpse of Rachel, wearing her bright pink sweater, burdened down with a large backpack. She looked Native American, with features she inherited from Mark's mother—long, dark hair, a dark complexion, and the tallest girl in her class. Melissa resembled Barbara's side of the family, with the Bishops' blonde hair and blue eyes. When Melissa realized her little sister would soon be taller than her, she was upset and constantly measured her height against her sister.

While the crowd of kids hurried along, Rachel looked up and saw her mother sitting in the car so ran to get inside. Opening the door, she threw her backpack on the floor and jumped in. Reaching over and locking the seatbelt into place, she sat still, ready to leave.

"So, how was your day?" Barbara asked, driving away from the crowded school parking lot.

"Boring."

"Boring—what do you mean boring?"

"Nothing exciting ever happens. Oh, I mean mostly nothing. Every day it's the same old stuff. However, Mrs. Krupp sure seemed excited to tell the class that the Berlin Wall fell last night. The Cold War between Berlin's Communist Party and the West is healthier than in times past. I guess that means citizens are now free to cross the country's borders and see their families, becoming united again, no longer apart."

"Yes, I heard that on the radio; they're saying President Reagan was a key player in breaking down the wall.

Anything else?" Barbara asked.

Suddenly, there was an awkward pause, then without any warning Rachel broke out in tears and cried bitterly.

"Mom, will we ever be a family again? Why has Melissa disappeared? Please tell me—what happened to my sister?"

Pulling the car next to the curb, Barbara parked and grabbed her daughter. As she held her warmly, the flood of emotions burst out. This entire time since the kidnapping Rachel had remained silent, never showing any outward response to Melissa's disappearance.

Now, no longer able to hold in her emotions, her desperate child continued to bawl. Barbara was grateful her daughter could finally free herself of this burden. She knew keeping everything inside wasn't right, and soon the effects would surface in ways that weren't healthy.

Barbara made a solemn oath never to give up the fight to find Melissa, no matter how difficult things became.

Staring into her daughter's swollen eyes, she pledged that Melissa would return to them—unharméd.

Rachel looked back and said, "Mom, I hope you're right, but I cannot help but miss my sister."

"I understand, honey. I miss Melissa, too. Hey, listen, you'll never guess who stopped by today."

A moment of silence, then Rachel only shrugged her shoulders.

"John and Susan are back home from their cruise!"

"The Bernsteins are back home!" Rachel shouted excitedly.

"Yes, they arrived just a few hours ago."

"Awesome news—that makes me very happy. Do you have a tissue, Mom? My nose is running."

"Sure, there should be one in the glove box. If not, I'll check my purse,"

"Here's one. Oh—do you need one, too? Your mascara

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is running.”

“Yes, please check and see if there’s enough for both of us.”

“I got them; here is one for you.”

“Thanks.”

Taking the tissue from her daughter, Barbara dabbed the tears from her eyes. A moment later she announced, “Oh, I almost forgot. we need to stop by Godfrey’s Bakery to pick up a cheesecake for tonight.”

“Yummy, cheesecake.”

“Now listen, that’s for dessert; I know how you love cheesecake.”

“Sure, whatever you say. I love you, Mother.”

“I love you, too. Now listen to me. Whoever has taken Melissa will regret the day they were born, I promise you.”

“I feel the same way. Whatever it takes to get Melissa back, I’ll do it!”

“Well, we don’t have much time to get ourselves ready for dinner. Tell me, do you have any homework this weekend?”

“I always have homework, both math and English,” Rachel explained sourly.

“Well, you’ll have to bring it with you.”

“I already started some of it during my study period.”

“Good, I have a feeling tonight is going to be a whirlwind.”

“Please never leave me, okay? I love you, Mom, but you already know that.”

“Regardless, I never grow tired of hearing it, and neither does your father. We never try to forget to express our love to one another because you never know if something horrible could happen to us. That day when Melissa left for school, she and I said, ‘I love you.’ I’m so glad, and even now, I feel her spirit alive within my heart.”

“Mom, I know we used to say bad things to each other, but I still love her and always will.”

“I don’t doubt it. Now, will you look at the time? We have to get going. I’m not sure how bad traffic will be downtown.”

Quickly slipping the car into drive, she drove away with Rachel. Although still emotionally distraught, Rachel’s attitude seemed optimistic.

Looking at the time, Barbara realized they would be late getting to the Bernsteins’ house for dinner, but for a good reason. Things in life come at you unexpectedly, and when they do, you have no choice but to deal with them.

When they arrived at Godfrey’s Bakery, they bailed out of the car and ran inside. A small line had formed in front of the glass display case. A baker was helping an older woman. Next in line was a man and his wife. As they waited, Barbara had time to eye her selection. There behind the glass was a cheesecake decorated with strawberries on top.

That one will do nicely, she thought, unless someone buys it.

Soon came their turn; Barbara pointed to her choice, and a moment later they were back in the car, headed for home. When they arrived, Barbara saw Mark’s truck parked in front of the garage. She hoped he was ready to go but, knowing her husband, she doubted it. Walking into the house, she saw he was sitting on the couch, watching a boxing match on television and only made aware of their arrival when he saw Rachel running to her bedroom.

Barbara appeared in front of the television, blocking Mark’s view.

“I thought you would be ready to go to the Bernsteins’?” she said.

“Hey, I already showered and got dressed. Let’s go; I’m just waiting for you.”

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“You’re not going to wear that old stained sweatshirt, are you?”

“I suppose not.”

“All right, I just need to freshen up a little, and we’ll be on our way,” Barbara announced.

Staring intently at his wife and noticing her red eyes, he said, “I see you’ve been crying. Is there something I need to know?”

“Please, I’m running late. Can we talk about it in the car? I’ll be happy to tell you about it then.”

“Sure, at least give me a hint of the subject matter?”

“It’s about Rachel. Today when I picked her up from school, she had an emotional breakdown.”

“What? Tough as nails Rachel, no! I have a real hard time believing that! Now I’m afraid I’ll be the one calling the Bernsteins to tell them we’re running late. Sit down. I want to hear all about it.”

“Nothing much to tell, really. From the expression on Rachel’s face, I could see something was troubling her. All I did was ask her about her day, and she talked about the Berlin Wall coming down and the families reunited. Then bam, she lost it. You know the truth is, ever since Melissa has disappeared, Rachel’s been forgotten and pushed aside.”

“Yes, I know. I was afraid of this happening, but what could we do? All of our resources have been spent on finding Melissa and nothing else. Hell, we hardly communicate ourselves, notwithstanding Rachel and her needs.”

“I’m as guilty as you, but from now on we need to pay close attention to our daughter, or else some creep out there will. I don’t need to say anything else, do I?”

“No, you’re coming through, loud and clear. Now get your butt ready while I call Susan.”

“Look, I’m already gone.”

“Didn’t the Bernsteins just get home today from their

trip, and now they want us to come over for dinner?”

“Yes, but you know Susan. There’s just no arguing with her. Shoot, look at the time. We’re supposed to be there in less than an hour.”

Without argument Mark quickly turned off the TV, went into their bedroom, and put on a clean shirt. He left, promising to call Susan as Barbara remained behind to freshen up. Taking a small amount of cologne and spraying her neck, she scrutinized her image in the mirror.

Unexpectedly, something flashed behind her reflection. Was something dark moving behind her? She spun around to see what it was—nothing was there, just the darkness of the walk-in closet a few feet away. Moving carefully toward the door to leave, she passed through a frigid air pocket directly in front of her, which sent a shiver up her spine.

Instinctively, Barbara moved backward, away from the invisible phenomenon that blocked her exit. She stood near the door, breathing heavily, and stared forward. She saw nothing out of the ordinary. Strange, the rest of the room seemed pleasant—all except for that pocket of coldness.

Without evidence of something being there, she shook her head and quickly dismissed the strange sensation as a problem with a heater duct. Taking another look at herself in the mirror, she thought, *This is ridiculous. We have to get to the Bernsteins’ house. I have no time to waste on my imagination getting the better of me.*

Determined to escape, she walked out of the bathroom and shut off the light behind her. Safely inside her bedroom, she momentarily hesitated and stood perfectly still, not moving.

Bravely, turning back around, she reached inside the dark bathroom. There was nothing out of the ordinary; the space seemed as warm as the rest of the house.

What on earth am I doing. This is silly.

To some degree, it was strange, though, for as soon as

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she pulled away. Something—yes—something invisible from within reached out and tapped the top of her hand, sending shivers down her spine. As quickly as she could, she withdrew her hand and screamed.

From the living room, Mark yelled out, “Are you okay? You didn’t burn yourself with your curling iron again, did you?”

“No, I’m fine,”

Racing out of the bedroom, she appeared next to Mark, gripping her purse tightly, and said, “I’m ready, let’s go—now!”

“Sure thing, whatever you say,” Mark responded, surprised by his wife’s need to make a hasty departure.