

NICHOLE HEYDENBURG

DEADLY VOWS



BOOK 1: THE SHADOW BOUND CHRONICLES

Deadly Vows

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This book is a work of fiction. All characters, incidents, names, and places are utilized fictitiously or are the product of the author's imagination. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, events, or businesses is completely coincidental.

To the friends who were always there...

Until one day, they weren't.

I hope you know I only wish you well.

ALSO BY

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CONTENT WARNINGS

Murder, loss of parents, violence, and swearing

CHAPTER 1: TAYLOR

A blonde-haired woman ran down the street, her black peacoat flying behind her. The killer was in pursuit. The woman turned and glanced over her shoulder to see if he was still there.

He was.

He smiled, exposing fangs with a sadistic smile that let her know exactly what he would do to her when he caught her.

The woman panicked, fear vibrating through her veins as she surged forward again. In her haste to escape, she tripped. She scrambled to get up. All too soon, the killer loomed over her. Silver flashed in his clawed hand. The knife plunged—

The bedroom doorknob turned, and a blonde woman appeared holding a pizza box and paper plates. “Who’s hungry?”

Taylor and Krissy both screamed, clutching each other on Krissy’s bed, surrounded by a pile of pillows and blankets.

Krissy’s mom chuckled and flipped the light switch on, startling the two teenaged girls back to reality. “Are you two watching a scary movie?”

Krissy quickly recovered and paused the movie. She rolled her eyes. “Yes, Mother. Thanks for the pizza.”

“Yeah, thank you for dinner!” Taylor chimed in.

Krissy's mom smiled and set the pizza on Krissy's dresser. "You're welcome, girls." She gave them both a pointed look. "Don't stay up too late." She left the room and shut the door behind her.

Krissy bounced off her bed to snag the pizza and flipped the box open, the smell of the freshly baked, greasy pepperoni pizza from their favorite local pizza place invading the small bedroom. She picked up a massive slice, then handed the box to Taylor. Before taking a bite, she held the pizza up to her face. "Mmm, this smells good."

Taylor nodded and took a slice. "I'm starving."

They continued watching the horror movie while they munched on pizza and drank too much soda.

Two hours later, the movie ended, and they went back to the conversation they kept circling back to recently.

"Are your parents ever going to take you driving so you can get your license?" Krissy asked with a raised eyebrow.

Taylor shrugged. "I'm not sixteen yet, so it's not a big deal. I'm sure they'll teach me how to drive soon."

"My dad has taken me tons of times. Maybe he can help you too," Krissy offered.

"Yeah, maybe. I'm not that worried about it. I have all summer to learn."

"True, and since I got my driver's license before you, I can drive us everywhere!" Krissy grinned.

"Exactly. If you'll be my personal chauffeur, why do I need to know how to drive?" Taylor teased.

Krissy responded by shoving Taylor into the mountain of pillows on her bed.

Taylor pulled herself out of the pillow mountain and glanced at the time on her phone. "Should we go to bed soon?"

"Oh, fine. I'll go brush my teeth and change first," Krissy said, grabbing her pajamas from her dresser as she went into the bathroom.

Taylor headed down the hall to the kitchen to get a glass of water. As she held the glass under the sink to fill it, Taylor's phone buzzed in her pocket. Who would call her so late at night? Her parents? She pulled it out, checking the number. Her eyes widened. *Incoming call - Maple Grove Police Department* flashed across the screen. She swiped up to answer the call with shaking hands.

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is Officer Kayla Wilkes with the Maple Grove Police Department. Is this Taylor Windsor?"

Taylor swallowed hard. What was this about? It couldn't be good news this late at night. "Um, yes . . ."

"How soon can you come down to the police station?"

"Why?"

There was a slight pause before Officer Wilkes explained the situation. Taylor's heart plummeted into her stomach as she received the worst news of her life. She felt as if her heart was made of glass and had just shattered into hundreds of tiny pieces, too many pieces to ever be put back together.

After ending the phone call, she set her phone on the counter. Her fingers tingled, and Taylor swore she saw tiny purple sparks fly off of them as she flexed them. She blinked rapidly, sure she was imagining it. When she checked again, the sparks were gone and her fingers didn't have that strange tingling sensation anymore. She was losing it.

The news Officer Wilkes had told her couldn't be true. Tragedies like this didn't happen to girls like Taylor. She was smart, she had a few close friends, she never got into serious trouble. She listened to her parents' rules . . . most of the time. She even enjoyed spending time with her parents sometimes. So why was this happening? Why was she being punished?

She couldn't come to terms with what had happened. She didn't want to tell Krissy and ruin the night. Instead, she pretended like she hadn't

gotten the call and scoped out the impressive display of snacks on Krissy's kitchen counter. Her mom had gone all out with the perfect sleepover snacks, like she did every time Taylor slept over. It was one reason Taylor liked staying the night there. Well, that and Krissy was a good friend.

Krissy entered the kitchen in her pajamas with her curly blonde hair piled into a messy bun on top of her head. "All right, I'm in my comfy clothes! Wanna watch another movie?" When Taylor didn't respond, Krissy tilted her head. "You okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Taylor snapped, picking up multiple Red Vines and shoveling all of them into her mouth.

"I thought you didn't like Red Vines," Krissy said with a bemused expression on her face.

"I don't," Taylor replied. She rubbed her nose.

"Did I hear you talking to someone? Did your parents call?" Krissy pressed.

"Uh . . . no. No, it wasn't my parents. They're—" Taylor couldn't finish the sentence. The news Officer Wilkes had just imparted was too horrible to fathom.

"Taylor, what is it? I can tell something's wrong. I can drive you home if you need to go or—"

"I can't go home. I don't have a home anymore. My parents are dead!" Taylor exploded, feeling better for about 0.2 seconds. She raised her arms in anger, and the glass canisters of candy exploded, sending candy spraying across the room.

"Oh my God, what just happened?" Krissy screeched, stepping back in alarm. "Did your hand hit one of the containers?"

"Obviously, because nothing that's happening is going my way. My parents are dead!" Taylor yelled, carefully stepping around the broken shards of glass. She went to the kitchen table and sat in a chair.

"Wh—what? Are you kidding?" Krissy's blue eyes became round and glassy as she stared at Taylor.

Taylor shook her head. “The police station just called me. They need me to come in to identify their bodies. Can you go with me? I think I’m still in shock. I can’t believe this is happening. I don’t know what to do. There isn’t anyone else I can ask . . .”

“Oh my God, Taylor!” Krissy stepped closer to Taylor, tiptoeing around the mess and reaching out for her. “Of course I’ll go with you. I’m so sorry. Whenever you’re ready to talk about what happened, I’m here for you.” Krissy wrapped her arms tightly around Taylor and squeezed her. “I’ll go wake up my parents and ask them to clean up the mess while we’re gone. I’m sure they’ll let you stay with us for a while. Whatever you need, I’m here for you, no matter what.”

“Thanks,” Taylor mumbled. It was all she could force out in the moment.

Her mind spun as she followed Krissy back to her bedroom so they could change out of their pajamas. Taylor felt numb, unable to process the news. It didn’t feel real, and she wished it wasn’t.

Taylor jumped when Krissy returned from her parents’ bedroom with her dad behind her.

Krissy spoke in a soft tone, “Ready?”

CHAPTER 2: TAYLOR

When they had both changed back into regular clothes, Krissy's dad drove them to the police station. Thankfully, her dad took charge of the situation when they arrived. Taylor felt like she was floating in a bubble, cut off from the rest of the world. If only that were true. She still hadn't grasped what had happened. She didn't want to live in a world without her parents.

After they entered the police station, a short, stocky woman with closely cropped dark hair and sharp eyes greeted them. She stuck out her hand for Taylor to shake. "Hi, you must be Taylor. I'm Officer Wilkes."

Taylor shook her hand. "Nice to meet you," she replied automatically.

Officer Wilkes nodded toward the back of the police station. "Shall we head to one of the interrogation rooms? You aren't being interrogated, but we'll have more privacy if we go back there." Officer Wilkes eyed Krissy and then her dad. "And you are . . . ?"

"I'm Krissy, Taylor's friend. We were having a sleepover at my house when she found out."

"Hi, I'm Krissy's dad, Mike Watson." He stuck out his hand.

Officer Wilkes shook his hand. "Right. That's a good idea for you to accompany her. Taylor is still a minor, after all. Come on, then."

Krissy's dad went first, with Taylor and Krissy following behind as Officer Wilkes led them into one of the interrogation rooms. Officer Wilkes held the door open for them and gestured for them to take a seat.

"Do you want anything? Coffee or water?" Officer Wilkes offered, hovering by the door.

Taylor shook her head.

Officer Wilkes closed the door and sat across from them at the long table. "All right. I have a few photos here that I want to show you." She pulled a folder toward herself and opened it. Her fingers curled around the photo. She hesitated for a moment before sliding it closer to Taylor and pointing to the house in the photo. "This is your house, correct?"

Taylor glanced at the single-story, gray and white stone structure, immediately recognizing her home. She didn't know what it looked like now. This was a 'before' photo. They must have gotten it online.

"Yes," she whispered, fear flitting through her as she thought about the next image.

Officer Wilkes took the photo back and slid another one toward Taylor. She cleared her throat. "This is what it looks like after the fire, just so you have some idea of what to expect when we go there to sort through the damage when it's safe to do so."

Taylor stared open-mouthed at the photo of her home, the place where she had lived her entire life. Fifteen years of memories, and all of it was gone. The house was little more than a pile of charred stone and rubble, unrecognizable as her former beloved home. A sob escaped her, and she clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the cries threatening to come out. She didn't want to fall apart in this grimy police station in front of a stranger.

Krissy reached for her hand and squeezed, offering silent comfort.

"Do you want to see your parents?" Officer Wilkes asked, her eyes shining with sympathy. "It's okay if you don't. These images are gruesome, so I wouldn't blame you if you said no."

“No, I don’t want to see them.” Taylor shook her head, clutching Krissy’s hand even tighter.

An image of her parents’ charred bodies shot through her mind, mouths wide open in horror and pain as they burned alive. For a second, her stomach churned, and she thought she might vomit. She didn’t want to see them like that. She needed to remember them as they were. Her mom’s kind, brown eyes and beautiful, light brown hair. Her dad’s mischievous grin and his loveable, teddy-bear personality.

Closing her eyes for a moment, several tears crawled out of her eyes and down her cheeks. She sniffled and wiped her eyes.

“Well, is that it?” Krissy asked. “What do we do next?”

Officer Wilkes shut the folder and pulled it closer to her body. “There was no evidence of arson, so this may have just been a horrible accident. Sometimes, in older homes, there’s an issue with the wiring that causes a fire. Your house was over thirty years old, so there may have been faulty wiring or an electrical fire . . . Or something as simple as someone leaving the stove on or a candle burning. We aren’t sure of the cause yet, but we will launch an investigation and find some answers.”

Taylor butted in, “No, my parents aren’t careless. They wouldn’t have left the stove on. It had to be something else.”

Krissy wrinkled her nose. “So someone might have set their house on fire? Who would do that?” She turned to Taylor, and her eyebrows drew closer together. “Everyone loves Taylor and her parents. This isn’t fair!”

“Please don’t jump to any conclusions. Like I said, at this point, we have no reason to believe it was started on purpose or that the fire was intended to kill Christa and Nicholas Windsor. Rest assured that we will investigate this case to the best of our abilities. It very well could have all been a horrible accident. It happens, unfortunately.”

“But what am I supposed to do? Where am I going to stay? I still have over two years until I turn eighteen and can live on my own. I don’t even have my driver’s license yet,” Taylor said, her voice cracking.

The future Taylor had always pictured flashed before her eyes. Her parents teaching her how to drive this summer and congratulating her when she received her driver's license in four months. Her dad taking cheesy photos of her before prom and teasing her date. Her parents smiling with pride at her high school graduation. Moving away to college, where her parents would visit her dorm and meet all her new friends. Her wedding day, where her mom would cry and her dad would act all gruff, but then melt like a teddy bear when he saw her in her wedding dress.

But now she wouldn't get any of that. Her parents wouldn't see her do any of those things.

Because they were—

“We have to find a copy of your parent's will if they had one. Is there a family member who could take you in? Someone your parents would have granted custody to in an emergency?” Officer Wilkes asked.

Taylor bit her lip. “No one I can think of. My dad's parents both passed away, and my mom hasn't seen hers in years. I don't think they would have wanted me to live with my grandparents.” Taylor squinted, thinking about any other possibilities. “Although my mom has a younger sister. My Aunt Mel. I've only met her a few times.”

Mike interjected, “Taylor can stay with us for now. Wanda and I would be happy to have her.” He smiled gently at Taylor.

“That's a nice offer, Mike. Having a stable home environment and being around people she knows will be good for Taylor.” Officer Wilkes turned to Taylor. “What's your aunt's full name?” Officer Wilkes asked, her pen poised over a notebook.

“Melanie Turner. She lives in North Carolina, though, so that wouldn't work,” Taylor explained. “I would have to move.”

Officer Wilkes patted Taylor's shoulder. “I'll track her down, and we'll get this sorted out. You can go now. I'll call you when I have an update.”

Mike shook Officer Wilkes's hand. “Thank you for everything,

Officer. Have a good night.”

“Th—thanks,” Taylor stuttered, following Krissy out of the police station and to her car.

As Krissy’s dad drove, Krissy kept glancing over at Taylor like she was nervous about how she was coping. “Don’t worry. We’ll get this figured out. You won’t have to leave Minnesota.”

A dull ache filled Taylor’s stomach. Turning away from Krissy, she gazed out the window. It was nearly 2:00 a.m., so there wasn’t much to see. Taylor didn’t care. She searched the sky for stars, spotting a few that offered tiny pinpricks of light, guiding their way home.

CHAPTER 3: MEL

Mel opened the fridge, staring at the contents. A half-empty carton of orange juice, several cheese slices, a tomato that looked questionable, and a Tupperware container with an unidentifiable meal inside. She shut the fridge.

“Takeout it is!” she said to herself, going over to the middle kitchen drawer to browse her collection of takeout menus. “Hmm, maybe pizza tonight . . .”

Mel’s phone buzzed from the counter, and she reached over to grab it.

“Maple Grove Police Department . . . Weird. Why would they be calling me?” Mel’s eyebrows drew closer together. Her phone continued ringing as a vague inkling hit her. The city name sounded familiar. *That’s where Christa moved.*

Swiftly, she swiped “Answer” on her phone and held it up to her ear.

“Hello?” Mel said, her hands feeling clammy. She wiped them on her shorts.

“Is this Melanie Turner?” a female voice asked.

“Yes. Who is this?”

“My name is Officer Kayla Wilkes. I work for the Maple Grove Police Department. I’m so sorry to call you with this news, but . . .” Officer

Wilkes paused. "I'm afraid that your sister Christa and her husband, Nick Windsor, are dead. There was a fire at their house. It seems to have been an accident. Of course, we're investigating the cause of the fire—"

"WHAT?" she exploded, pacing the kitchen. "What about my niece, Taylor? Is she okay? Please tell me she wasn't home." Her legs shook, and she made her way over to one of the kitchen chairs. She settled into the chair, although her legs didn't stop shaking.

"Yes, Taylor was at a friend's home, and she's . . . well, she's hanging in there," Officer Wilkes said.

"Oh, thank God she's okay." Mel's bottom lip trembled as she held back sobs.

She was glad Taylor was alive, but her sister and brother-in-law were gone. She hadn't seen them in four, maybe five years. Now she could never fix things with her sister. She had always thought they had time, that they would make amends eventually. But now . . . It was too late.

Mel's heart beat picked up as she contemplated the news. She barely registered the rest of what Officer Wilkes told her. Until she hit Mel with another bomb.

"I'm sure Christa and Nick's lawyer will contact you soon because Taylor doesn't appear to have any other living relatives. We're going to the house later today to search for the will, but I wanted to warn you, so you aren't caught off-guard. Most likely, you'll be asked to be her guardian. You have the choice to decline, but it's usually better in these cases for the kid to go to family. Taylor is fifteen, so it would only be a few years."

"Th—thank you for letting me know," Mel stuttered, wrapping her mind around the situation.

I'm going to be Taylor's guardian? A teenager? Her stomach turned queasy.

"All right. Well, please contact me if you have any questions. I can follow up with you later today or tomorrow after we go through the

remains of the house,” Officer Wilkes offered.

“Ye—yes. That would be great,” Mel said, blotting at her cheeks with a napkin she grabbed from the table.

She hung up the phone and slouched down in the chair, putting her face in her hands and breaking down. There was no question about it. Mel had to be Taylor’s guardian. The guilt was already threatening to consume her alive. After all, it was her fault that Christa and Nick were dead.