

NICHOLE HEYDENBURG

DEADLY VOWS



BOOK 1: THE SHADOW BOUND CHRONICLES

Content warnings

Murder, loss of parents, violence, swearing

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

As of right now, *Deadly Vows* has only been self-edited, so any typos, awkward wording, etc. will be caught by myself or my editor during the final editing stages. This book is still a work in progress, and it will be professionally edited. Thank you for understanding!

-Nichole Heydenburg

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 turned forward again, and in her haste to escape, she tripped. She scrambled to get up, but all too soon, the killer loomed over her. Silver flashed in his clawed hand as 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 as they sat 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 teenage girls back to reality. “Are you 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, letting the scent of freshly baked, greasy pepperoni pizza from their favorite local pizza place invade the small

bedroom. She picked up a massive slice, then handed the box to Taylor. She held the pizza up to her face before taking a bite. “Mmm, this smells good.”

Taylor nodded. “I’m starving.” She took a slice too.

They continued watching the horror movie they had just started 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 I have you as my own personal chauffeur, why do I need to know how to drive?” Taylor teased.

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

Taylor glanced at the time on her phone. She hadn’t realized how late it was. “Should we go to bed soon?”

“Oh, fine. I’ll go brush my teeth and change first,” Krissy said, grabbing her PJs 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 annoyingly in her pocket. Who would be calling

her so late at night? Her parents? She pulled it out, glancing at the number. Her eyes widened. *Incoming call- Maple Grove Police Department* flashed across the screen. She swiped up to answer the call with trepidation.

“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 anything good. “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 the worst news of her life hit her hard. 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.

Taylor ended the phone call without saying goodbye and set her phone on the counter. Her fingers tingled and Taylor swore she saw tiny purple sparks fly off of them as she flexed her fingers. 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 clearly losing it.

The news Officer Wilkes had told her couldn’t be true. How could it be? Terrible things like this didn’t happen to girls like Taylor. She was fairly 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 liked spending time with her parents sometimes. So why was this happening? Why was she being punished?

She pretended like she hadn't gotten the call and instead scoped out the impressive display of snacks on Krissy's kitchen counter. Her mom had left them out, like she did every time Taylor slept over. It was one of the reasons Taylor liked staying the night there. Well, that and the fact that Krissy was a good friend.

Krissy entered the kitchen in her PJs with her hair piled into a messy bun on top of her head. "All right, I'm officially in my comfy clothes! Maybe we can watch another movie." She tilted her head at Taylor when she noticed the sullen expression on her face. "Everything okay?"

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

"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. It was too horrible to fathom the news Officer Wilkes had just imparted.

"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 finally exploded, feeling better for about 0.2 seconds.

"Wh-what? Are you kidding?" Krissy's blue eyes were round and glassy as she stared at her in disbelief.

Taylor shook her head, grabbing another handful of candy, this time M&Ms. She spoke through a mouthful of candy, "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. I don't have anyone else to ask..."

“Oh my God, Taylor!” A horrified expression crossed Krissy’s face, but she appeared to repress it. “Of course I’ll go with you. I’m so sorry. I’m here for you whenever you’re ready to talk about what happened.” Krissy wrapped her arms tightly around Taylor and squeezed her until her midsection ached. “I’ll go wake up my parents. 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 managed to mumble. It was all she could make herself force out in the moment.

Her mind spun as she followed Krissy back to her bedroom so they could change out of their PJs.

Krissy smiled sympathetically. “Ready?”

Chapter 2: Taylor

When they had both changed back into regular clothes, Krissy drove them to the police station. Thankfully, Krissy took charge of the situation when they arrived because 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, and she didn't want to live in a world without her parents.

After they entered the police station, they were greeted by a short, stocky woman with closely cropped dark hair and sharp eyes. 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 you are...?"

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

"Right. Well, I suppose it's fine if you accompany her. It might be easier if she has a friend with her. Come on, then."

Taylor and Krissy silently followed Officer Wilkes 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 and Krissy both shook their heads.

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." Officer Wilkes 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, but she knew 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 everything tomorrow.”

Taylor stared open-mouthed at the photo of her home, the place where she had lived her entire life. Fifteen years of memories, and nothing was left. The house was little more than a pile of charred stone and rubble, unrecognizable as her former beloved home. A sob escaped her mouth, 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 want to. 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 parent’s charred bodies shot through her mind, mouths wide open in horror and pain as they burned alive. For a second, she thought she might vomit picturing what they had gone through in their last moments. 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 teddy bear personality.

Taylor closed her eyes for a moment, as 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 been a horrible accident. Sometimes in older homes, there can be 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 done something as dumb as leaving 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. Things like this happen, unfortunately."

"But what am I supposed to do? Where am I going to stay? I still have three more 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 hysterically and her dad would act all gruff, but 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. In the meantime, Taylor, can you stay at Krissy's house? Is there a family member who could take you in? Someone your parents would have granted custody to?” Officer Wilkes asked.

Taylor bit her lip. “No, 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 does have a younger sister. My Aunt Mel. I've only met her a few times.”

“What's Mel'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 smiled gently. “I'll track her down, and we'll get this sorted out. You two can go home. I'll call you when I have an update.”

Krissy shook Officer Wilkes' 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 drove, she kept glancing over at Taylor like she was nervous about how she was coping with all this. "I'll tell my parents what happened when we get back. I'm sure they'll be understanding. Don't worry. We'll get this figured out. You won't have to leave Minnesota."

Chapter 3: Taylor

Krissy's parents were kind enough to let Taylor stay with them for as long as she needed. Being with her friend's family provided some sense of normalcy in the worst situation, but Taylor missed her parents fiercely. Not to mention, it was difficult to be around her friend and her parents when they were a happy family still together—not torn apart by death. She wished none of this had happened and wondered if she had made a different decision that night, whether she could have saved her parents. She continuously replayed her last day with her parents in her mind. If she had stayed home, would she have noticed the fire and been able to stop it? Or would she be better off if she had died in that fire with her parents? At least then she wouldn't be so miserable, figuring out how to navigate life without them. Being an orphan at fifteen wasn't exactly how she had imagined her life turning out.

The morning after the fire, Taylor went to her house with Krissy and Officer Wilkes to search through the remains and see if any of her possessions or her parents' belongings could be salvaged. She needed clothes, toiletries, basically everything a teenager needed to survive. Her parents' safe was found still intact, so all the Windsor family's important documents were recovered, including her parents' will. Taylor anxiously awaited the will to be examined by a lawyer and to find out what her parents had wanted for her future, in the case of something terrible happening to both of them.

Taylor went back to Krissy's house with the meager belongings she had been able to salvage from the remains of her former home—an old teddy bear from when she was a toddler, a few outfits that somehow had survived in her solid oak dresser, a bottle of her mom's signature

perfume, and a small stack of books from her parents' collection. It was all she had left, and it would have to be enough. But she knew it wasn't enough, and it never would be.

"You okay?" Krissy asked, peering at her with the same concerned, sympathetic expression she had been wearing for the last twelve hours.

"Mhmm," was all Taylor could make herself respond.

Because how could she be okay? She had lost her parents, her home, everything. What did she have left?

"Wanna watch a movie?"

"Sure," Taylor said, shrugging a shoulder.

"Or we can go somewhere if you would rather leave the house. Out to eat or shopping?"

Krissy made eye contact again, her kind blue eyes persistent.

"Okay," Taylor agreed.

"Where do you want to go?"

"It doesn't matter. You pick."

Taylor didn't know when anything would ever matter again.

Once again, Taylor sat across from Officer Wilkes, with her shrewd dark eyes examining her as if she was concerned about Taylor's wellbeing. This time, her parents' lawyer and Krissy's mom, Wanda, sat at the table with her too. They were in the lawyer's office in downtown Minneapolis, a sprawling office on the seventh story of a tall building with a fantastic view of the Saint Anthony Falls Bridge, the one that lit up for special events. Taylor remembered when they turned it purple after Prince died. Taylor had only been six, but her mom was a long-time fan of his music, so she had dragged Taylor along to see the bridge all lit up at night.

The lawyer set the documents on the table and cleared his throat. "I'm Aidan Petersen, Nick and Christa Windsor's lawyer." He turned to Taylor. "It's nice to meet you, Taylor, although I'm sorry about the circumstances. I only met with your parents a few times, but I remember them as kind people."

Taylor remained silent, tears threatening to burst from her eyes if he kept talking. She glared at him, willing him to shut up.

Aidan cleared his throat and continued, "I've looked over the will several times, but it's fairly straightforward. Although it was written and notarized back in 2010, when Taylor was only one, it's the most up to date legal document in their possession."

Taylor's heart hammered uncomfortably in her chest. Her parents' most recent will was written fourteen years ago? She was still a baby then! What did that mean? Who would they have granted custody of their only child to back then? Taylor couldn't think of any close friends they had when she was small. Certainly no one who they trusted enough to leave in charge of raising their daughter.

Wanda patted her shoulder and smiled reassuringly.

Aidan continued, "I believe you have an aunt. Melanie Turner?"

Taylor nodded, her head feeling unnaturally heavy.

"Your parents chose her as your guardian. I'll contact her after this meeting to confirm she wants to take on this responsibility. I'm sure that under the circumstances, she'll be happy to step in. And she's family, so that's good news for you. I've seen too many situations where the parents weren't prepared with an appointed guardian, and their child ended up being passed around to different family members, living in foster homes, or in extreme cases, homeless. Luckily, you won't have to worry about that," Aidan said.

Lucky? Right. Taylor ignored him. She didn't care about any of that right now. All she cared about was what the hell her parents had been thinking when they made the decision for Melanie to be her guardian.

A timid smile crossed Aidan's face. "Only three years left until you turn eighteen, so it isn't a huge commitment for her, if that's what you're worried about."

It wasn't.

Taylor swallowed hard. "C-can I see the will?"

Aidan slid a copy of it over to her. Taylor picked it up tentatively and skimmed for the relevant part.

Last Will and Testament

Nick and Christa Windsor, of the City of Maple Grove, and State of Minnesota, declare this to be our Last Will and Testament and hereby revoke all of our prior wills.

In the case of our untimely deaths, we grant full legal and physical custody of our daughter, Taylor Windsor, to Melanie Turner, Christa's sister. The house, all personal belongings, and assets will go to Taylor. She may not receive full access to our finances until she turns eighteen...

Taylor didn't need to read the rest. She had seen enough. Besides, the words were becoming blurry with tears. She hastily wiped her eyes, but more tears fell in their place. How could her parents do this to her? Melanie was basically a stranger, and she lived halfway across the country. If Melanie agreed to be her guardian, Taylor would have to leave behind her entire life. She didn't want to leave Minnesota, and she certainly didn't want to live in North Carolina.

Aidan excused himself and left. He had another meeting soon. Officer Wilkes and Wanda stood and waited outside the room for Taylor to gather herself. She sighed deeply and brushed the tears from her face. Taylor pushed back her chair, stood, and joined them outside the meeting room.

“Are you okay, honey?” Wanda asked.

Taylor felt like she was underwater. A buzzing sound filled her ears. She saw Wanda’s mouth move again, as if she was speaking, but Taylor couldn’t hear the words. The buzzing noise grew louder. She felt herself falling toward the floor, so she clutched the doorframe, her knuckles turning white as she held on for dear life. Maybe if she didn’t leave the building, she wouldn’t have to go live with her aunt. Krissy’s parents had been so nice to her the past few days. There was a chance she could stay with them. It had to be better than going to live with someone who she hadn’t seen since she was ten.

Taylor turned toward Wanda. “Do you think I could live with you instead? I can get a part-time job to help pay for my expenses. I don’t know how much money my parents left me, but I’m sure it’s—”

Officer Wilkes interrupted Taylor’s pleas, smiling awkwardly. “I better get back to the police station. Give me a shout if you need anything, Taylor.”

“Thank you,” Taylor whispered.

Officer Wilkes waved, and her heavy-footed steps in her black combat boots echoed throughout the building as she descended the stairs. Maybe that was why she was in such good shape—walking seven flights of stairs was no easy feat.

Wanda finally spoke when Officer Wilkes was out of view. “Oh, Taylor, honey, we would love to have you stay with us. But I’m not sure that’s the best—”

Taylor knew where the end of the sentence was headed, but she didn't want to hear it. She shoved past Wanda and headed toward the elevator, storming out the double doors at the front of the building when the elevator opened. She sucked in big gulps of fresh air, savoring the cool wind on her heated cheeks. She hadn't realized how warm it was inside. Or was that because of the horrible news she had just received?

Taylor didn't wait for Wanda to join her outside. Instead, she kept walking down the sidewalk, unsure of where she was headed. She recognized a few landmarks around the city. She could probably take a bus back to Maple Grove. Besides, she didn't want Wanda to give her a ride home—wherever that was. She didn't have a home anymore. And there wasn't a single soul left in her life who truly cared about her the way her parents had.

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