

# SHADOW OF NIGHT SNEAK PEEK



**Romantic Suspense** – Print, E-Book, and Audio

**Shadow Lake Survival Series** – October/2023

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### **To protect her loved ones...**

Rookie officer Sydney Tucker can handle threats to her life. After all, she's a law enforcement officer. Even when a killer demands she turn over evidence from a drug bust or he will kill her, she refuses to comply. But things change when he threatens the life of her teenage sister, and Sydney might consider turning over the evidence. *If* she had what he was looking for.

### **Will she pay the ultimate price—her life?**

But even when Sydney tells the killer that she doesn't possess the evidence, he doesn't believe her, and his threats continue. Emerson County Sheriff Russ Maddox steps in, putting Sydney and her sibling under his watchful eye. But will his protection be enough? The killer is closing in, picking off the people and

places that mean the most to Sydney. A list that now not only includes her but Russ as well.

## **Chapter One**

Gunshots echoed through the inky darkness.

One. Two. Three. Sharp. Concussive.

Officer Sydney Tucker hit the cold ground. A jagged rock slashed into her forehead. Blood ran free and dizziness assaulted her. Ignoring it, she reached for her service weapon and came up empty-handed.

*No. No. No.*

She'd made her usual stop after her shift ended at seven to check on the construction of her townhouse and left her gun and phone in the car. The lot was way down a steep hill. Going for her gun would leave her too exposed.

*Dumb, Sydney. Really dumb. Now what're you going to do? Besides panic.*

*Remember your training. Take a breath. Deep air. In. Out.*

Inching her head above knee-high grass, she listened, her pulse thundering in her head.

The keening whistle of the wind died, leaving the air damp and heavy with tension. No sounds. Not a single one.

What was going on?

Had she overreacted to the gunshots? Hunters could be taking nighttime target practice in the woods. They sometimes did crazy things. She'd seen a lot of it on the job in her rookie year.

Footfalls pounded from down the hill toward her. Two people at least. Charging through the brush. Maybe a chase. A loud crash reverberated in the air and branches snapped.

"What're you doing, man?" A panicked male voice traveled up the hill. "No! Don't shoot! We can work this out."

A gunshot rang out. A second one. Then a third. A moan drifted toward her.

Sydney's gut clenched.

*Oh no.* She hadn't overreacted. This wasn't target practice. Not at all. Someone had been hunted down and shot. Possibly murdered.

She wasn't going to be next.

She lurched to her feet, fighting the dizziness. Blood dripped into her eyes. She wiped it away, blinked

hard, and steadied herself on a large rock while peering into the wall of darkness for the best escape route.

Heavy footfalls crunched up the gravel path toward her location.

“I know you’re here, Officer Tucker,” a male voice, disguised with a high, nasal pitch, called out. “We need to talk about this. C’mon out.”

Yeah, right. Come out and die. Not hardly.

*Please protect me. Please!*

She scrambled deeper into the scrub. Over rocks. Through grass tangling her feet. Her heart pounded in her head, drowning the prayers with fear.

“I’m losing patience, Officer,” he called again in that strange voice. “You’re not like Dixon. He had it coming. You don’t.”

Carl Dixon? The man she’d arrested for selling drugs and providing alcohol to her sister, Nikki? Was that what this was about?

She paused to listen.

Rocks skittered down the incline. The shooter was still on the move. Coming for her.

Closer. Closer.

No time to think. She had to go. Now!

Blindly she felt her way past shrubs, over uneven ground. Dried leaves crunched underfoot. Branches slapped her face and clawed at her arms, but she stifled her cries of pain.

“I hear you, Officer.”

She wrenched around to determine the assailant’s location. A protruding rock caught her foot. Her body catapulted forward and somersaulted through the air. She came down fast and hard, her knee slamming

into the packed earth before she crashed down the hill. Wrapping her arms around her head, she tumbled. Free fall. Rolling. Over and over. Smaller rocks biting into her body. Gravel scratching her arms.

She came to a stop, breath knocked out, lying flat on her back in a thick stand of weeds. Thankfully, she still wore her Kevlar vest from work and it helped protect her a bit.

“So you want to play it that way, do you, Officer? Fine. Just remember, you can run, but you can’t hide. I will find you. This will be resolved, one way or another.” His disembodied laugh swirled into the night.

The darkness pressed closer. Blinding. Overwhelming. Terrifying.

She rose to a crouch. Pain knifed into her knee, keeping her anchored to the ground.

*Lord, please don’t let me die like this. Give me the strength to move. I need to live for Nikki. She’s only seventeen. She has no one else.*

Sydney took a long breath. Uncurled and came to a standing position. Taking a few halting steps, she tested the pain. Nearly unbearable. But she *had* to do this for her sister.

Thinking of Nikki, Sydney gritted her teeth and set off, moving slowly, taking care not to make a sound.

Out of the darkness, a hand clamped over her mouth.

Screams tore from her throat, but died behind fingers pressed hard against her lips.

A muscled arm jerked her against a solid chest and dragged her deep into the brush.

*God, please, no.*

She twisted, arched her back, pushing against arms that held her like iron bands.

She dug her heels into the ground. To no avail. Her assailant was too strong. He continued deeper into the brush. He abruptly stopped behind a large boulder and settled them both on the dewy ground.

“Relax, Sydney, it’s Russ Maddox,” her assailant whispered, his lips close to her ear.

Sheriff Maddox? What was he doing here?

“Sorry to grab you.” His tone said she was nothing more than a stranger instead of someone he’d known for years. “I didn’t want you to alert the shooter if I scared you and you screamed. I’m going to remove my hand now. Nod if you understand me.”

She let all of her relief escape in a sharp jerk of her head.

His fingers dropped away.

“Once the shooter rounded that curve, you would’ve been a goner,” he whispered while still holding her in a strong grip. “Good thing a neighbor reported gunshots, and I was in the area.”

Sydney started to shiver and inhaled deeply to steady her galloping pulse. Air rushed into her lungs. She was alive, but barely. No thanks to her own skills.

“You okay?” His breath stirred her hair.

“Yes.” She willed her body to stop shaking and eased out a hiss of disappointment at her job performance. “How long have you been here?”

“Long enough to hear the shooter claim he plugged Dixon, and he’s coming after you.” Though whispering, urgency lit his voice and rekindled her fear. “This have to do with your arrest of Dixon the other day?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered back. “At least not on my part. He works on the townhouse construction site, but I just stopped to check on the progress of the one I’m buying on my way home from work.”

“Off duty, huh? Explains why you don’t have your weapon drawn.”

“I left my duty belt in my backpack in the car.” She waited for his negative reaction to her confession,

but he simply remained still as footfalls grated against gravel.

“Shh, he’s about to pass us.” Russ leaned forward and drew his sidearm with his free hand, but didn’t release his hold on her.

Crunching steps came within a few feet of their location. Halted.

A hot lump lodged in Sydney’s throat. Thick. Suffocating. She could barely swallow.

“Can you feel me breathing down your neck, Officer Tucker? I’m inches from finding you.” He couldn’t know the accuracy of his words.

Russ pulled in a deep breath, upping her concern and washing away the brief blanket of security his arms provided.

Adrenaline urged her to move. Run. Fast. No holds barred.

She concentrated on Russ’s unwavering weapon to stem her panic.

The shooter took a few steps closer. Her heart thumped. Hammering. Threatening to leave her chest.

Russ tightened his hold. Could he tell she wanted to bolt?

The shooter spun, feet digging into the gravel and sending it flying at them, then headed back the way he’d come.

His footsteps receded up the hill, and she tried to relax her taut muscles. The warmth from Russ’s body helped chase out her fear and the chill of the night. Thank God Russ was here. Who knew what would’ve happened if he hadn’t come.

*No. Don’t go there.* God had watched over her. Provided rescue. Just not in the form she would have chosen.

Not only was Russ the head of the Emerson County Sheriff’s Department—a team often in

competition with Shadow Lake Police Department where she worked—but he was a man she'd had a crazy crush on in high school. A man whose rugged good looks still turned women's heads. Hers included.

She let out a long sigh.

"I know this is awkward," he whispered. "But hang tight for a few more minutes. We need to wait for the shooter to head back down the hill when we'll have the advantage."

She wanted to protest and suggest they flee, but Russ thought clearly. The shooter had to come back down to reach the parking lot. Taking off now gave the killer the benefit of higher ground, making them moving targets. They'd have to sit like this until he passed them again.

*If* they made it out of here, which the approaching footfalls told her wasn't at all certain.

The shooter's steps pounded closer. He moved at a quick clip this time, as if he thought she'd gotten away, and he was in hot pursuit. Or maybe he was heading to her car to lie in wait for her.

As the footsteps receded again, Russ's arm slackened.

"Time to roll," he whispered. "Stay here."

"But I—"

"You have a backup?"

With their small-town police force and limited crime, she hadn't felt a need to carry a second weapon, but that would change starting today.

She shook her head.

"Then wait here." He crept toward the path.

She leaned against the boulder. Without his warmth, chills took over her, and she couldn't stop them. The reality of the night froze her inner core. She wrapped her arms around the warm circle on her waist where

Russ had held her. She should listen to him. Lie low. Wait until he apprehended the killer.

That was the safe thing to do.

The easy thing to do.

The wrong thing to do.

As an officer of the law, letting a shooter escape without trying to stop him wasn't an option. Even if that shooter had her in his sights, she would make her way to her car for her weapon and then reassess to see if she could be of help.

She would do anything she needed to do to stop this maniac before he hurt someone else.

\*

“Stop! Police!” Russ called out after the shooter, who'd hopped onto a dirt bike in the parking lot. Of course the shooter didn't stop. Didn't even slow. Taillights of the mud-splattered dirt bike vanished up the trail, spitting gravel and dust.

Russ halted near the ditch and fought to catch his breath. He'd warned the suspect to stop, but short of shooting him in the back, Russ couldn't stop him from fleeing into the dark.

At least he'd accomplished his primary objective—to protect Sydney and keep her alive.

Now he needed to alert his team and the local police department to the suspect's whereabouts.

He lifted his shoulder mic and ordered a unit from his office to stake out the end of the trail for the dirt bike and requested an ambulance in case Dixon survived. Plus Sydney had a nasty gash on her forehead that needed looking after. He also asked dispatch to patch him through to the city police department to make sure they knew he'd taken charge of the scene. No way he wanted the chief or any of his hotshot officers arriving with the hope of usurping control.

Russ turned on his flashlight and headed up the hill toward Sydney. Its beam skipped over gravel and



lush plants lining the winding path. Midway up, rustling brush stopped him cold. He'd left Sydney higher up. Nearer the lake.

Was a second shooter hoping to ambush him?

He flipped off his light and sought protection behind a tree. His breath came in little pulses in the cold air—unusual for October in Oregon. Adrenaline, with little time to ebb away, came roaring back, but even as the noise grew louder, he resisted the urge to take action.

Maybe it was Sydney. The girl he used to know wouldn't have listened to his directive to stay put. She'd trounce down the hill, her chin tilted at the same insolent angle like her freshman year of high school when he told her he didn't return her crazy crush. Not that he'd wanted to send a beautiful, lively girl like her away. He could easily have dated her, but he was four years older—just starting college. With their age difference and long distance between them, it wouldn't have been right. She had four years to date and figure out who she really was.

Bushes at the path edge shook, then parted. Slow as a sleek panther, Sydney slipped out. He watched until she stood tall on those incredibly long legs he'd admired since she was sixteen before lowering his weapon and aiming his flashlight at her.

She jumped and peered up at him, an impudent look on her face. This was the Sydney he'd known as a teen and, heaven help him, in just minutes, she'd sparked his interest again.

"Mind shining that somewhere other than my face?" She shaded her eyes, warding off the glare.

He moved the light, but not before he caught a better look at the gaping wound running from her hairline to her eyebrow, covered in congealed blood. He lifted his hand to check out her injury, but stopped. He wouldn't probe a wound on any of his deputy's faces. As a fellow law enforcement officer, he shouldn't treat Sydney any differently.

"I told you to stay put." He infused his words with authority.

“I wanted to help.” She held out blood-covered hands. “Wish I’d listened. I tripped over the body.” Her eyes watered as if she might cry.

*Man...don't do that. Don't fall apart.* He couldn't remain detached if she started crying. He'd have to empathize, maybe give her a reassuring pat on the arm. Maybe feel her pain and dredge up all the reasons he'd left his homicide job in Portland. Something he preferred to keep buried.

Changing his focus, he nodded at the brush. “Show me the victim.”

As the faint whine of sirens spiraled in the distance, a grimace of pain marred her beautiful face, and she limped into the tall grass. He followed, illuminating the area ahead of her, the light falling on lush ferns and other thick greenery he couldn't name.

About ten feet in, she stopped.

Diffused rays slid over a young male lying on his back. Russ shifted the beam to the man's face, landing on open eyes staring into the blackness above.

Sydney gasped and swung around him. She rushed toward the main path.

Even though Russ knew it was a lost cause, he bent to check for a pulse on the body. Dead. Carl Dixon. A man every officer in the area knew from his frequent blips on law enforcement radar, including his most recent arrest by Sydney for selling drugs and providing alcohol to underage girls.

The flashlight illuminated three close-range gunshot wounds to the chest. Once they thoroughly processed the scene, he'd know more. But first, they needed to vacate the area before further contaminating the scene.

He located Sydney near the path, leaning forward, hands clasped on her hips, exhaling long breaths as if trying to expel what she'd just seen.

Haunted eyes peered at him. “He's dead, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And what about the killer?”

“Couldn’t catch him. He took off on a dirt bike.”

She came to her full height and disappointment crowded out the fear on her face. “Did you at least see him?”

“From the back. He was my height or a little taller, thin build. Wore a black stocking cap. The bike has a plate, so it must be street-legal. It was covered with mud, but I got the first two digits. I think it was red, but it’s dark so can’t swear to that.”

“That’s something then.”

Something, but what? It would do little for them in terms of searching DMV records without additional details, but he didn’t think she could handle more bad news, so he kept quiet. “Let’s head down to the parking lot.”

He put the flashlight in her hand and urged her to take the lead down the steep hill covered with knee-high scrub grass. They reached solid concrete, and she handed the light back to him. Holding it overhead, he watched her closely for dizziness or other impairments from her injury. He saw nothing out of the ordinary, but a head injury could mean a concussion. The EMTs would check her out when they arrived.

He pointed at a rough-hewn bench. “Maybe you should sit down.”

“I’m fine.” Her voice cracked, and she ran a hand over her face. Was she embarrassed about her reaction to the murder? Could be or she could just be tired.

Her distress cut him to the core, and it took everything he was made of not to gather her in his arms and hug away her pain. “It’s okay to be upset, Syd. A horrible thing happened tonight.”

“I’m fine, really.” She lifted her shoulders maybe trying to convince herself of that fact. “I’ll be back

to a hundred percent by morning.”

“Don’t expect too much too fast.”

“Really, I’m fine.” She tightened her jaw as if trying to live up to her statement. “It may be my first year on the job, but I can handle this.”

“You just witnessed a homicide. If you’re like other officers, you’re probably feeling guilty for not preventing it.”

“I deserve the blame.” She averted her gaze and shifted her feet. “His death is all on me. I should’ve been carrying. Now a person is dead and a killer is running free. What if he hurts someone else?”

Russ knew that look. Had worn it himself. Guilt. Plain and simple. He took a step closer and softened his voice. “You can’t think that way. You have a life outside the job. You couldn’t have known something like this would happen when you left your weapon in the car.”

She backed away and studied his face for long moments, her pained expression turning suspicious. “Why are you being so kind and not blasting me for leaving my sidearm in the car? Is it because I’m a woman?”

“What?”

“If I were a male officer, you’d probably be jumping down my throat and railing on me for being dumb enough not to be carrying.” She jutted out her chin.

He held up his hands and took a moment to regroup.

Maybe she was right. Not in the way she meant, discriminating against her because he thought a woman couldn’t do this job. This had more to do with their past. He’d never interacted with Sydney the officer, just Sydney the teenager. Sydney, the woman with captivating blue eyes could leave a man thinking about her into the wee hours of the night. That he could handle.

But Sydney as an officer?

He needed to adjust his mindset and see the fiercely determined officer standing before him. She was trying so hard to overcome her guilt and hold herself together at a time when many rookies fell apart.

He respected that and would get on with it. “Nothing to do with your gender. All I’m trying to say is I’ve been where you are, and I’m here if you want to talk about it. But we can move on.” He paused, waited until her chin lowered and shoulders relaxed a bit. “Tell me what happened from the moment you arrived.”

She shielded her eyes from the light. “There’s really nothing much to add. I was on the hill checking on the construction of my townhouse like I do every day after my shift. I heard gunshots and dove for cover. The killer called out my name, asking me to come out.” She shivered, then clamped a hand on the back of her neck as if she could stop it. “He said he wanted to talk to me, but I think he was trying to lure me out so he could kill me too. Maybe pin Dixon’s murder on me as well.”

“Not sure I agree,” Russ said. “You made so much noise falling down that hill, he had to know your location. If he wanted to take you out, even with your vest on, a few rounds in your direction could’ve done it.”

Her eyebrow arched. “So you think he really *did* want to talk to me about something? But what?”

“We figure that out, we ID our killer.” Russ planted his feet. “The first step is analyzing your connection to Dixon.”

“There’s no real connection. I arrested him a few times, but that’s all. I…” Her voice drifted off, her attention shifting to flashing lights rounding the bend in the road.

His deputies were almost there. He wanted to keep questioning her, but she was distracted. It would be best for both of them if he moved her out of the action and finished interviewing her later.

“I need to get my sergeant to secure the area. You can wait in my car, and I’ll get your formal statement when I’m done.”

She opened her mouth, but then clamped it closed. Through a light, hazy fog, he escorted her to his

patrol car and watched as she gingerly settled into the passenger seat, a soft moan escaping when she bent her knee. Her patrol car was parked in the lot too, even though she was off duty. Not surprising. City provided vehicles for every officer and allowed them to bring them home as a crime deterrent.

“I really need to get to my car for my phone and call this in to my chief.”

*Great. Police Chief Krueger.*

Karl—with a *K*—Krueger, as he liked to call himself, had also run for the sheriff’s job, and when the county elected Russ over him, a fierce rivalry developed. If Krueger showed up and offered to help in the investigation, and Russ turned him away, Krueger would let it slip to the public that the sheriff’s office—and Russ—weren’t doing all they could to catch this killer.

Maybe he could convince Sydney to hold off on making that call. “Do you really want Krueger coming out here right now?”

“He’s out of town until tomorrow, but I still need to call in.”

Yes, finally, something in Russ’s favor tonight.

“I’ll grab your phone for you,” he said, not wanting her to go to her car and dwell over having left her weapon in there. He held out his hand. “Just give me your keys.”

She didn’t argue but gave them to him, and he moved to her vehicle to grab the phone from the holder on the dash.

Making sure the vehicle locked behind him, he returned the keys to her and gave her the phone. “Make your call, and I’ll be right back.” Russ crossed the lot to meet his arriving deputy, Sergeant Bill Garber, Russ’s go-to incident response guy.

The tall and lanky guy, as he climbed from his car, was lit from behind revealing his blond hair so pale it almost looked white. He surveyed the area. The excitement of a murder investigation burned in his eyes. Not that Garber would be happy someone died, but the thrill of utilizing skills he didn’t normally get to

employ in this small county would be intoxicating to most law enforcement officers.

Russ met him at the road. “I want this entrance sealed off. No traffic, foot or vehicle, beyond that bench.” He pointed at the bench near the path. “And call the ME. Tell him to get here double time. With the fog moving in, we need him to move the body before we can’t see anything.”

Garber planted his hands on his waist. “Our portable lights won’t light up this whole area. Should I call City to borrow theirs too?”

That’s what Russ liked about Garber. Always one step ahead. Even if it did mean that Krueger would insert himself when he returned. “Do that.”

Garber gave a sharp nod. “I’ve got our forensic team en route, but what about the state crime lab? Want me to get them here too?”

Did he? “Their availability can often be sketchy, but give them a call. If they can’t arrive tomorrow, I might call in the Veritas team.”

“Veritas?” Garber blinked. “We have the funds for that?”

Russ shook his head. There was no way his department could afford to hire the world-renowned forensic team based in Portland. “I should be able to call in a favor. Let me know what City says about the lights and what they say at the state lab. I’ll be at my vehicle taking Officer Tucker’s statement.”

Garber’s eyes filled with questions, but Russ walked away. He wouldn’t waste time now bringing Garber up to speed. Russ had to plot out the murder investigation, starting with taking Sydney’s statement. Then get the scene processed before impending rain set in and potentially destroyed evidence that could help find the shooter.

Back at Russ’s car, he stood next to the open door. His position allowed him to block her view of the scene and keep an eye on what was going on at the same time.

He focused on Sydney for the moment. “Tell me about Dixon’s arrests.”

She swiveled to face him. “The first time was last month when I busted a party at his house and hauled him in for supplying alcohol to minors.”

“Your sister, Nikki, was involved, right?”

She nodded. “Dixon got her and three of her friends stinking drunk and the judge let him off with a fine. A *fine*. Can you imagine that?” Her voice rose with each word. “He corrupts young girls, pays a few bucks, and is free to do it again.”

“Sometimes our system doesn’t work.”

“Yeah, well, try to act so complacent when it happens to someone you love.”

She had a good point. How would he react if this happened to his five-year-old son, Zach? Not that Russ would find himself in this position. He’d let alcohol control his life for a few years and now only had weekend visits with his son. They spent every waking moment together on their visits, and Zach was way too young to touch alcohol, so this couldn’t happen. But as a father, Russ understood why Sydney reacted this way.

“I’m sure I wouldn’t let it roll off my back real easy.”

“And I couldn’t either. She’s my little sister, Russ. I fed her. Changed her diapers. Loved her when our parents failed us.” She paused. Inhaled the night air. “I couldn’t let Dixon get away with hurting her and walk free. He had to pay.”

“You wanted him dead,” he added to see her reaction.

“What? No! Of course not. I just wanted him in jail. I knew he would screw up again, so I made it a point to follow him in my free time.” She met his eyes, a challenge in her expression. “Last Wednesday afternoon I caught him on his porch selling coke and busted him.”

Russ couldn’t believe it. She’d gone rogue and followed the guy, putting herself in danger. “They call it *off duty* for a reason. Without backup, you could get into serious trouble. Besides, you don’t have the



experience to run a narcotics investigation.”

“Believe me, I’m well aware of my limitations. When I started following him, I didn’t know it would lead to drugs. Or to this.” She held out her bloody hands. “If I’d known my actions might result in someone’s death, I would never have pursued him.” She shivered and wrapped her arms around her waist, sheer misery clouding her face.

He hated to see any officer forced to deal with death, and he hadn’t wanted to make things worse. Still, he had a job to do. That meant they would have discussions like this. But he could try to make it easier.

He went to his trunk, grabbed a blanket, and settled the blue fabric over her shoulders. Raw anguish filled her eyes.

Russ felt her pain.

To the bone.

He had lived it for the past four years, since he’d watched a homicide suspect gun down a six-year-old boy. Watched, helplessly, as if in slow motion.

Russ wanted to go back. Save Willie Babcock’s life. But that wasn’t possible. The price had been paid. Willie with his life. Russ with the loss of his family.

He shook off the pain, dug deep for the calm center he’d worked hard to develop the past few years. He couldn’t change the past, but he could and would stop it from happening again.

No way another person would die on his watch.

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