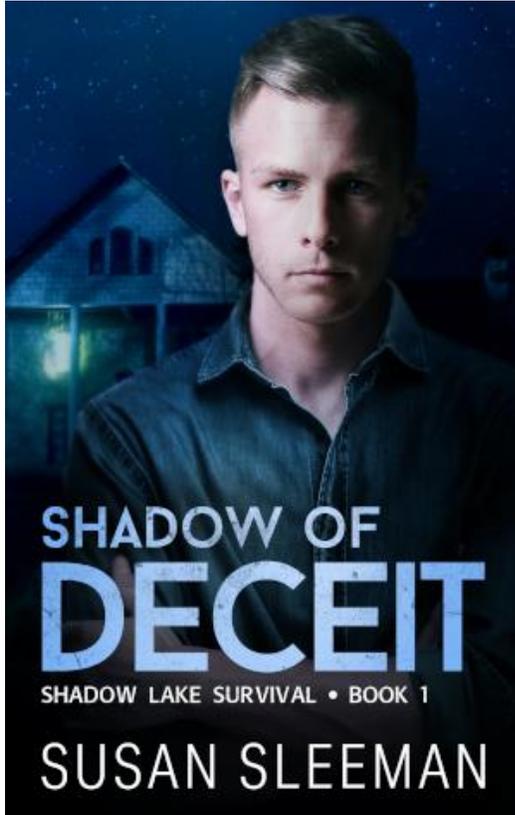


## SHADOW OF DECEIT SNEAK PEEK



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

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

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**When returning to her past threatens her life and a murder occurs...**

When Mia Blackburn returns to Shadow Lake to inherit her uncle's property, she doesn't expect a threatening warning before she even reaches the rustic resort. And when a fire traps her in the burning barn that very day, she fears she won't get out alive. Just in time, Ryan Maddox, her ex-boyfriend and Shadow Lake Survival owner, rescues her from the deadly blaze. She's thankful for his rescue, but after their tumultuous breakup, he's the last person she wants to see.

**Will she be the next victim?**

Despite the threatening warning and her residual feelings for Ryan, Mia won't let anyone scare her from

the rustic resort before she fulfills the terms of her uncle's will and inherits the property. Ryan insists on keeping a close eye on her, and soon Mia feels safer and closer to Ryan than ever before. Yet the threats haven't stopped, and soon Mia's inheritance includes a murder, and she could be the next victim.

### Chapter One

He'd come for her. Full throttle. The proof in Mia Blackburn's hand as he looked on—a threat in neat rows of shiny magazine letters glued to stark white paper.

*Evergreen Resort will never be yours. Leave town now or you will pay.*

She looked up at her father as his continued hatred burned in her hand, exactly like she

feared would happen if she ever returned home.

Her mouth went dry, and her throat tightened. She desperately wanted to fire an accusation his way, but couldn't form any words.

“What is it you want, Mia?” He picked a speck of lint from his navy suit coat and flicked it into the air.

*Wow.* Nothing had changed. He'd flicked her upcoming answer away as easily as the fuzz. Right here in Shadow Lake's small post office with old brass mailboxes and worn tile floors.

Not unusual for him. He'd been acting this way since she'd turned thirteen.

Sure, she hadn't seen him for ten years, but she was used to his behavior—expected it even. Then why did it sting so badly?

Tears dampened her eyes.

*No. Don't you dare.*

No way she would cry. She willed back the tears and located the armor she'd forged over the years. She slipped inside the steel plating and drew a deep breath.

“I never thought you'd want me to leave town bad enough to resort to threats.” She thrust the page out, her hand shaking. “And why bother sending hate mail when you could threaten me in person?”

He grabbed the paper and stared at it. “This isn't something I would do.”

She continued to watch him. “Interesting response. Not a definitive no. Just not something you would do?”

He shoved the paper back into her hand, his expression blank and unreadable. Moments ticked by. Painful. She was ready to squirm out from under his microscopic intensity, but willed herself to remain still.

He heaved a sigh. “As usual, you’ve made it very clear what you think of me. I won’t respond to your accusation.” He spun and exited the building, the small bell above the door tinkling in a cheerful chime, belying the lingering tension.

Through the window, she continued to track his progress as he strode down the street in the morning sunshine to his Mercedes. Why had she even stopped to get the mail first thing on arrival in town? If she hadn’t come here, she wouldn’t have run into her father.

He climbed into his shiny car and drove off. Her anger dissipated a fraction, and a hint of reason returned. She could breathe again, if only to inhale the lingering musky scent of the cologne he’d worn for as long as she could remember.

She let out a long breath. Dragged in another. She didn’t want to be like this. Tense. Anxious. Fearful. Less than an hour in town and she’d returned to the motherless thirteen-year-old girl who cried herself to sleep every night, hoping for comfort from her remaining parent and getting none.

She thought she’d dealt with this pain. Put it behind her. Obviously not. But maybe she was wrong. Maybe he really hadn’t done this. Maybe someone else wanted her to leave Shadow Lake to stop her from fulfilling the terms of her uncle’s unusual will.

She had to live at Evergreen Resort for one full year to inherit the property, sleeping on site every night of that year. The only exemption her Uncle Wally, Evergreen's owner, had given her was that she could leave the property if her life was in danger.

Wally's lawyer said her uncle was concerned about natural disasters or a fire or something like that. But his intent was for her to make every effort to reside on the property unless it was completely uninhabitable. Then and only then could she leave, and the property would immediately revert to her.

An escape and yet not one. Even if the main lodge became uninhabitable there were cabins she could live in. She doubted he ever thought about someone trying to scare her away. But someone was doing just that. She didn't care about owning the land or even the money if she sold it, but she did care about honoring the wishes of the man who'd been more of a father to her for the past ten years than her biological father. She would honor him no matter what came her way.

The clang of the bells over the door sounded. Had her father returned?

She spun.

*Oh no.* Not her father, but equally as stressful. Maybe worse.

"Ryan." She whispered her ex-boyfriend's name like a desperate plea for help as he held the door for several townspeople coming in to collect their mail.

A jolt of awareness shot through her.

*Don't look over here. Please don't!*

He strolled into the space and she couldn't look away.

Gone was the boy, in his place a man dressed in worn jeans, rugged boots, and an army-green T-shirt that revealed his built chest. Sun-streaked blond hair was cut shorter, emphasizing his skin bronzed from the summer sun. His warm expression and greetings offered to the others spoke to his love of this small town and its people.

She needed to stop staring and escape the post office before he spotted her. She grabbed her mail from the counter and inched along the wall.

As if feeling her movements, he turned in her direction. Of course he did. As a wilderness guide and tracker, he had strong situational awareness, and she wouldn't get anything past him.

Recognition widened his piercing blue eyes.

“Mia, wow. Is that really you?” he called with genuine fondness as if they'd parted as best friends.

How could he seem so glad to see her? They'd been in love, but she'd left him to get away from her father. He should be angry with her. Or at the very least not want to talk to her.

He headed her way, taking long, powerful strides over the worn tile floor. He gave her a thorough once over, and the appreciative response sent her heart firing fast. The heated emotion in his expression hadn't changed since they'd dated. Not one bit.

And she hated to admit it—but she liked it.

“I almost didn't recognize you with the new look.” He lifted a strand of her shoulder-length hair she'd straightened and dyed nearly black from her natural obnoxious red.

His touch sent Mia jerking back. She'd known she would see him. It was a given. He directed a wilderness counseling program for teens, and they leased cabins at her uncle's resort. She'd pictured this moment many times. So very many times. Had prepared great dialogue even.

So where was her voice today? Why wouldn't the words she'd imagined come to mind?

"I remember that look." His trademark crooked grin spread slowly across his face. "Got it every time I messed up."

*Come on, Mia. Where are your quick, witty comebacks?*

"You okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine." Fine? She wasn't fine. Not in any way. This was all too much. Way too much. First the threat. Then her father. Now Ryan.

All within the first hour of arriving back home when she'd hoped to fly under the radar.

"I'm sorry to hear about Wally," he said, filling her awkward silence. "I remember as a kid how I would count down the days until he left Atlanta to come up here for the summer. He was the best neighbor ever." His soft smile pulled the corner of his mouth higher. "And all the kids loved his camp. Takes a special person to give so much time and money to help underprivileged kids like he did. I'm gonna miss him."

"Me too," she managed to say.

*Great.* She sounded like a terrified mouse. Maybe it was better that she was tongue-tied or she might bring up their past in front of the others now openly watching them.

Small towns had big ears in public places. The last thing she needed was gossip about her

served as the entrée on dinner tables all around town tonight. She'd had enough of that in high school. Enough to last a lifetime. Her fault. Totally. She'd sparked the local gossip often by rebelling against her father's rigid control, skipping school, and partying the night away.

Her best option was to cut this short. "If you'll excuse me, I really need to get to Evergreen and unpack."

In search of car keys, she used her hip to shift her purse dangling from her shoulder as she transferred the mail and letter to her other hand. She fumbled. The mail slipped, crashing to the floor.

Ryan squatted and reached for the alarming letter.

He didn't need to see the warning.

She lunged toward the page, but his hand whispered softly over hers and snatched up the paper to scan the message.

Exactly what she didn't want to happen. She wouldn't rip it from his hand and make it seem even more important. Instead, she slid the avalanche of envelopes into a stack.

"What's this?" Deep crevices of concern burrowed into his face. "You can't seriously be thinking about going there after receiving this threat?" He shook the paper. "We have to report this to my brother. Russ is the county sheriff now. And you need to stay somewhere safe until he figures out who sent the letter."

She couldn't let anyone know that her father had likely sent such a threatening letter. Not even Russ.

“We don’t need Russ involved in this. Someone is just playing a practical joke.” Not believing her own words, she couldn’t look at Ryan and grabbed the threat from his hand. And she couldn’t handle him being so kind to her after she’d hurt him so badly. She already felt guilty enough and didn’t deserve his kindness and concern.

She bolted past him and into the crisp August morning.

“Mia, wait,” he called after her. “You could be in danger.”

She kept going, picking up her pace. His concern warmed her heart in way she hadn’t felt since last seeing him. But she didn’t need him trying to take care of her or his brother digging into her life. She’d been self-sufficient for years, and she didn’t need *any help*. She’d be fine.

And talking to him? That was more dangerous at the moment than anything. She’d hurt him once. Badly. She wasn’t going to hang around there and do it again. He deserved far better.

\*

Ryan charged out to the sidewalk while Mia raced away from him as if he had a contagious disease. The high heels on her designer boots clicked on the concrete, and her suede coat swished on her hips. Not surprising that she’d bolted like one of the skittish horses they used for long trail rides with troubled teens.

She’d bailed on him once before. Cut him to the core. But he wanted to reconcile with her if she would consider it. Deep down anyway. It was the Christian thing to do for sure.

Then why did he also want to run in the other direction?

Because her eyes had seared into him, that’s why. They weren’t filled with the same

defiance like when she'd taken off on him after high school. Not today. A vulnerability tugged at his need to help a woman in distress. Any woman, but especially her. And now? Now she was running away from him again. Horse galloping speed running away. Headstrong bolt. Not thinking—like she was prone to do.

Act fast. Strike back. Run. But she could be heading into danger.

He couldn't let that happen.

He rushed after the sound of her skyscraper heels echoing down the street and into the sweet, tantalizing fragrance lingering behind.

Had his tomboy taken to wearing perfume?

She'd definitely given up the ratty jeans and slogan T-shirts she used to wear. Today, dark blue jeans emphasized her long legs. Perfect on the current Mia, who'd traded her fiery red curls for sleek black hair gleaming in the brilliant sunlight.

Her hand shook as she pointed the key fob at the door of a sweet red Mustang convertible.

Not at all a practical car for the rural roads in the area. She would know that, so why rent a convertible? Or had she moved back permanently and brought her car from Atlanta?

She glanced at him as she climbed into the vehicle at record speed.

She might not want anything to do with him, but he wouldn't let her get hurt just to spite him. He breathed deep to control rising emotions and stopped next to the driver's door. She ignored him and lowered the roof.

“Mia, please.” He planted his hands on the door frame. “I get that we parted on bad terms, but don’t do something foolish to get away from me.”

She sat, rigid and unresponsive, hand on key, resting on the steering wheel.

He leaned into her space. “Give me a minute. After we talk, if you still want to go, I’ll back off.”

Her head slowly rose, and a gleaming strand of hair blew into her face. It would take some time for him to adjust to her new look. Not that he didn’t like it. Layered hair curved softly around her face, giving her a sophisticated appearance that was all too appealing.

He reached out to tuck the stray strand behind her ear.

She beat him to it and fixed a tired gaze on his face. She tapped her jeweled watch with a nail painted baby blue. “You have exactly one minute.”

The distress in her tone almost stopped his words. Almost. “It’s crazy to go to Evergreen alone. You never know what the person who sent the threat intends to do.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s from my father. He does such over-the-top things. Uncle Wally’s will says I have to live at Evergreen for a year to inherit it. If I leave town the resort goes to my brother, David.”

“David gets Evergreen if you leave?” Ryan took a few moments to process her announcement. “The lakefront location makes the property worth a chunk of change. Seems like David would be the logical person to want you to leave for the money a sale would bring.”

She sighed and closed her eyes for a moment before locking them on him. “I’m not

certain about my father. David *is* a possibility, but I doubt it. Uncle Wally told me David's doing well for himself."

"Yeah, that's what it looks like, but he's older than you and probably thinks Evergreen should be his." *And he didn't run away from here.* "Or at least the two of you should share it."

She blinked her long lashes. "I might've been gone for a long time, and don't know him anymore, but he always took Dad's side. And my father? Well..." She shook her head. "He always believed David was more deserving of everything. Why not this? And why not do his best to be sure David got the place." Her voice trembled.

*Oh, man.* She'd been through so much and had put up a huge wall to fend off any additional hurt when she had a heart of gold underneath. Ryan had gotten through the tough exterior in high school and wanted to hold her. To comfort her the way he'd done after one of her father's many rampages. But she'd ended things with him. Rejected him, and his touch wouldn't likely be welcomed.

He looked over her head and searched for words to keep her from rushing to the resort. But what could he say to make her see the danger she could be in when she didn't care about anything he had to say?

Maybe he could paint a dire picture. "You may be right about the letter coming from your dad, but are you willing to risk your life on it?"

She recoiled as if he'd slapped her. "I appreciate your concern. I really do, but I doubt anyone is waiting to pounce on me at the resort. Now I have to go."

She revved the engine, and he reluctantly stepped back. She flung her arm over the seat to

reverse onto the street. He had no idea why she'd reacted in such a strong way, but he did know he'd failed her. Maybe seriously failed when her life depended on his help.

Back when they'd been a couple, he hadn't lived by his faith. Her either. He didn't know how she stood on it these days, but Ryan had God to turn to. The One who never disappointed anyone and offered the perfect solution to everything.

Ryan focused on the impressive stand of Douglas firs in the distance and lifted his face.

*Please keep Mia safe and let her see my sincere desire to reconcile our past.*

At the screech of tires, he snapped his head back to catch Mia's car shooting down the street. His gut tightened. Sure it did. She'd bolted on him again. How could it not be tight? But despite that, the familiar sight brought a brief smile. Mia might dress all prissy and girly now, but she remembered how to handle a car like a NASCAR driver.

Oh, yeah, she'd always been a little spitfire. Rebelling against her father. Getting into trouble left and right. Calming down some the year they were together. Taking up again the last few days she'd remained in town after they'd split up, maybe as a way to show everyone she didn't need him.

And she *didn't* need him. Not now, anyway.

Instincts and the desire to do the right thing with Mia told him to jump in his truck and follow her. He wouldn't. Not with the threatening message. For that he should go see his brother. Get law enforcement involved.

Ryan could talk with her later—iron out the past. But not if the person behind the letter made good on his threat and ended her life.

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