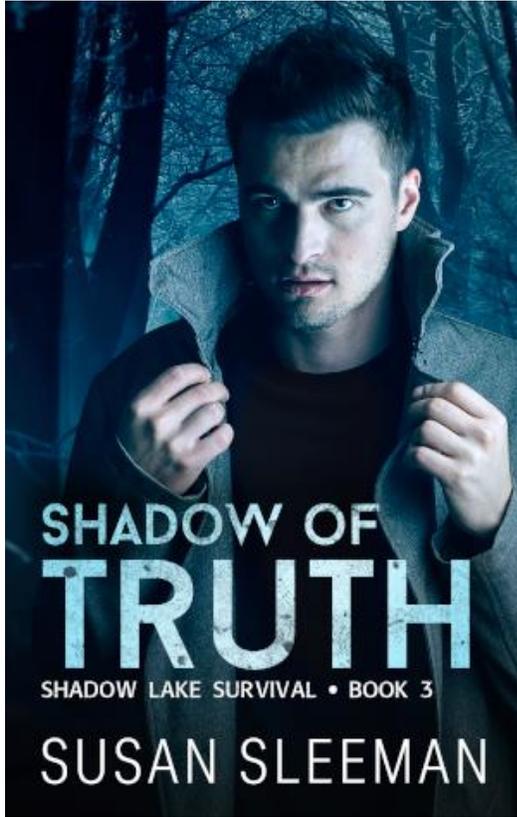


SHADOW OF TRUTH SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print, E-Book, and Audio

Shadow Lake Survival Series – December/2023

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A killer is hunting, seeking her...

When a criminal threatened to kill Megan Cash if she testified against him, she didn't back down and made sure her testimony put this killer behind bars. Years later, he's out of prison and ready for revenge against Megan *and* her critically ill daughter. Megan does the only thing she can do with a child too ill to move. Stand her ground at the hospital to protect her daughter.

Will he succeed in making this a Christmas she won't live long enough to enjoy?

Soon, Reid Maddox, former FBI agent and Shadow Lake Survival owner arrives to help, and Megan doesn't have to go it alone. *If* she chooses the help of the man she once dated. Their relationship ended badly

and she isn't eager to get involved with him again even in a platonic way. But Reid isn't the same man she once knew—he's now a widowed father with a harrowing past and a heart more guarded than ever. Still, he's the only one who believes Megan when she says she's in danger, and he'll do whatever it takes to keep her and her daughter out of this killer's clutches. With her daughter's life on the line, she has no choice but to turn to him for help.

Chapter One

Norman Fowler was free to terrorize her again.

Icy-cold fear slid over Megan Cash. She'd imagined this day. How she'd imagined it.

Terrifying, breath-stopping, the man who'd threatened her with a gun during a bank robbery coming back into her life. Now here he was, striding across the gas station lot, heading toward her car.

Had he seen her? Worse yet, followed her to make good on his threat?

Averting her face, she considered flooring the gas pedal and fleeing, but where could she go?

Two cars in front. One behind. Three at the island to the side. All with nozzles feeding gas tanks like umbilical cords. She was trapped unless she wanted to jump from the car and take off running, making herself even more of a target.

C'mon, Megan. Deep breaths. Maybe it's not him.

She'd seen him hundreds of times in the thirteen years since she'd testified against him. The pockmarked face with the long jaw now covered with a thick beard, jutted out in anger, a tattered Tacoma Rainiers baseball cap snug on his head and hiding long dishwater blond hair.

Hundreds of times she'd been wrong. Had to be wrong. He occupied a federal prison cell for robbing the bank where she'd worked. But today was different. He could have completed his prison sentence and could be free.

A hard knocking sounded on the window. Her heart dropped to her stomach.

"You want gas or what, lady?" the attendant's voice shot through the cracked-open window, letting the caustic smell of gasoline waft in.

Right. Gas. She had to do something or even the lack of action could make Fowler look her way.

Make a small purchase. That's what she would do so she didn't draw attention to herself. When the cars in front of her moved, she would race away. She fished through her wallet and withdrew her credit card.

"Twenty dollars. Regular." Keeping her face averted, she slid her card through the gap and shrank back to watch in the mirror as he went to pump her gas.

Thankfully, she was hiding in the car and not standing by the pump when Fowler advanced her way. She'd never imagined Oregon's restrictions on consumers pumping gas might save her life.

“Hey, dude,” her attendant called out. “Didn’t know you got sprung.”

Was he talking to Fowler? If so, maybe this meeting was a coincidence.

She risked a quick peek—spotted the sharp profile of the lunatic who’d threatened her in the bank, chatting with the attendant on the far side of the pumps.

A shudder of revulsion swept through her, but she couldn’t take her eyes off Fowler. Not yet. Not until she was certain he was the man she’d stared at while he threatened to draw a gun and shoot her if she didn’t put money from her drawer into a bag.

Why he and his partner had chosen their bank and singled her out, she had no idea—none—and he never explained. As his partner slid a bank robbery note across her counter, Fowler’s angry eyes declared he wouldn’t hesitate to kill her if she didn’t comply. Of course, then she hadn’t known Fowler was a suspected killer. He was never charged with killing his best friend due to lack of evidence, but law enforcement believed him guilty.

So in her ignorance, she pressed the silent alarm, grabbed a letter opener from where she’d been opening the branch mail, and plunged it into his arm. He jerked back, slipping on the old marble floor, falling, and breaking his ankle.

The police arrived. His partner fled. Fowler could only crawl. Was arrested on the spot.

He blamed her for his injury and threatened to get even once he was free again.

Now here he was, and she couldn’t let that happen. Not with her daughter, Ella, depending on her.

“You move back down here now?” the attendant asked.

“Nah, just staying at the Creek Water Motel for a while.” Fowler’s gruff voice grated on Megan.

“Wanna get a drink to celebrate my freedom?”

Fowler’s raspy voice was seared into her memory, but this guy’s tone was less grating. Maybe age had

changed the timbre. Or her mind could be playing tricks on her.

Was this even Fowler? Physical appearance changed a lot in the passing years and the beard didn't help.

Her gas pump clicked off, and the attendant walked to the rear of her car. Fowler followed. She jerked her head away and held her hand to the side of her face.

"I dunno, man," the attendant said as she heard him latching the nozzle into the pump. "I'm not supposed to associate with you."

"Don't be a sissy," Fowler answered, the voice similar to the one he'd used at the bank. "I'll be at our usual spot, PJ's, at eight. Be a man for once and show up."

Fowler laughed, and the memories of him standing before her, the threat of drawing a gun, cut through her. The baseball cap pulled low over his hard eyes. Sadistic grin on his face.

Her hands turned moist and clammy, and she swiped them over her jeans. Too bad God didn't hear her prayers anymore or she would pray. But He didn't listen. Even when the prayers were for Ella.

Ella. Precious Ella. Lying helpless in a hospital bed. Chemotherapy weakening her immune system. Making her susceptible to every bug going around.

Hot tears filled Megan's eyes.

No. Stop. Don't let this man make you cry. Don't let him make you do anything. Not anymore.

She took a cleansing breath, inhaling the gasoline fumes and irritating her airway. She let it out slowly. No way she would cough and draw attention to herself. She'd survived the terror inflicted by Fowler once. She could do it again. This time for Ella.

Megan's daughter had no one else to protect her. No one.

Footsteps approached her window. *Please let it be the gas attendant.*

“Here you go, lady. Merry Christmas.” The holiday greeting was as lackluster as the sagging garland on the pumps.

She reached for her card.

He released it, and scratching his bearded chin, he walked away. “I’ll be there, man, but only one drink.”

“I knew I could talk you into it.” Fowler laughed again, but the taunting sound drifted away as if he was heading toward his pickup.

C’mon, hurry up. Drive away.

The cars in front of her slowly pulled forward, but she sat, watching until Fowler roared to the exit in a rusty white pickup truck.

He was leaving. She was safe. She exhaled and panted for another breath.

He turned right on the road leading to the hospital, exhaust trailing behind and tainting the air. *Wait.* Toward the hospital? Did he know about Ella, or was Megan being paranoid?

Maybe he pretended not to see Megan to make her think he didn’t care about her anymore. Let her relax. Put her guard down. Become an easier target.

That seemed logical. The city of Medford was too big for such a chance meeting. They were near her home and the hospital. He could’ve followed her when she’d left Ella at the hospital to go home to get Ella’s well-loved Boo-Boo bear.

Or had his truck been at the station when she’d driven in? Was it really Fowler?

Now she wasn’t sure. Memories could do funny things.

Maybe she really *had* mistaken his identity. After all, the Department of Justice’s Victim Notification Service should have contacted her about his release, and she hadn’t heard from them. But she’d given them her

home number and hadn't been home to take the call. She needed to call their hotline. Later. After she was certain Ella was okay.

Megan fumbled with the key in the ignition, her hand shaking and slowing her down. She finally revved the car and peeled out of the lot in hot pursuit of the truck. She raced down the streets decorated with Christmas lights coming to life in the dusky skies. She pushed her older car. Raced above the speed limit and the engine groaned with the effort.

Still, it took only minutes before she careened to a stop next to a white pickup parked in the visitor lot.

She climbed from her car and gave the truck a quick once-over. Looked like the same vehicle from the gas station, but she couldn't be positive. Pulse ratcheting up, she jumped out and pressed her hand on the hood.

Warm. Hot, actually. As if the engine had recently been turned off.

Fowler.

Oh, no. No. She bolted through the lot and into the lobby as the sun sank to the horizon. She charged across the open space and around a brightly decorated Christmas tree with colorful packages stacked below, heart pounding wildly.

She glanced at the elevators. All on floors above five. No time to wait for the car. Ella's room was only on the second floor.

Megan took the stairs two at a time, her mind flooding with terrible possibilities. What would she do if she found Fowler in Ella's room? Attack him? Yell at him? Scream?

She didn't know. Didn't matter. Ella needed her.

Megan pulled open the heavy fire door. Rushed into the antiseptic-smelling hallway. She raced ahead and made a hard right turn into the corridor leading to Ella's room.

She slammed into a nurse, and they both tumbled to the hard tile. She rolled and peered down the hall.

Fowler stood outside Ella's room, his back to her, his hand resting against an open door.

Megan's heart lodged in her throat, and she let her voice spiral into an ear-piercing scream.

Fowler spun. His hot, ugly eyes met hers. A knowing smirk slid across his face. The same one he'd worn when he'd threatened her at the bank. He let it linger on Megan for a long moment. Then his sneer disappeared into the hard expression that said he wouldn't hesitate to kill someone—had killed someone—and he turned and walked away.

*

The woman's scream pierced Reid Maddox's ears. He knew this cry well.

Please help this woman in whatever distress she's facing.

Even as the wail drifted into nothingness, the earsplitting shriek remained in his head. As a former FBI agent working on the Child Abduction Rapid Deployment team, he'd heard the keening cry of a mother whose child would never come home again more than he heard the happy laughter of a reunion.

"Oh dear, what do you think happened?" Nurse Mary Waldron asked from behind the nurse's station.

"I don't know, but I have to check it out." Reid glanced at his old family friend. "Can Jessie and Bandit hang with you until I come back?"

"Of course." Mary stepped around the desk and rested a hand on his eight-year-old daughter Jessie's shoulder.

Reid looked at her. "I'll check this out and be right back. Okay?"

Eyes wide and fearful, she tightened her hold on their therapy dog's leash and nodded.

He hated leaving her, but he couldn't ignore a woman's distress cry. Ever. He charged the other way and rounded the corner. A petite woman raced toward him, a nurse hot on her heels.

"Stop him," the woman called out, gesturing to the corridor behind him. "Please, don't let him get

away.”

Reid turned back. Searched the hallway. Didn't see a man, much less one trying to get away.

“There's no one there.” He moved toward the woman.

For a moment, their gazes connected, and he caught the sheer terror claiming her eyes. A spark of recognition flashed in his brain. He knew her. That he was sure of. But from where? Before he could determine her identity, she jerked her eyes away.

She pointed at the corridor behind him. “That way. He's heading for his truck. A white one. In the main lot. Please stop him. I have to—” Her words drifted off as she darted into a patient's room.

Should he follow her or go after this elusive man? From the look of determination on the nurse's face as she caught up to the woman, maybe she was the problem, not the supposed fleeing man.

“I called security,” the nurse got out between deep breaths. “She'll be fine.”

Should Reid stay anyway? No. He knew better. He might not have worked a case in over three years, and his skills might be rusty, but he knew abject terror when he witnessed it and couldn't ignore this woman's request.

He spun and went down the hallway, his eyes alert and cautious. No telling what the guy had done to bring out such fear in this woman. The supposed man could be armed and dangerous, and Reid wasn't carrying.

He worked his way down the hall and into the stairwell, racing down the steps to the lobby. A quick sweep of the open area produced nothing but visitors, patients, and medical staff wandering through the lobby. He stepped into the gloomy late afternoon, made bright only by the tall Christmas tree at the end of the walkway with thousands of twinkling white lights.

Keeping his back to the entrance, he scanned the lot for a white pickup.

Howling winds picked up from the west, whipping hard rain into his eyes and clouding his vision. He lifted a hand to ward it off and searched the lot shadowed by ominous clouds.

Unease skated down his body. He would feel a lot more secure in stepping out into the open like this if he had his Glock in hand. He wanted to carry. All the time. But since his wife died and he left the FBI to be more available to Jessie, he didn't carry whenever he was with his daughter. She really freaked out at the sight of weapons. She was only now recovering from losing her mother to cancer three years ago, and guns made her think she'd lose him too. He couldn't add fear to a young child who was already dealing with so much. Not simply to soothe his ingrained need to feel safe.

He completed his search of the lot. *Odd.* No trucks. None. Either parked or exiting the lot.

Maybe the woman's fear caused her to confuse the truck's exact location. He jogged around the hospital perimeter and checked all three parking lots. Rain penetrated his clothing and hair, but nothing unusual caught his interest or made him the least bit suspicious.

Back in the main lot, he found a police car parked in the patient-loading area.

Good. The city police were likely here because of the woman. They'd get to the bottom of this, and he could return to Jessie and their therapy visits.

Entering the lobby, he slicked the moisture from his hair and shook it from his jacket. To the sweet sound of children caroling in the distance, he took the stairs two at a time.

In the hallway, he spotted the woman outside a patient's open door. Her hands were curled tight, voice surprisingly loud for such a small person and standing next to a police officer.

"But you can't just leave, Officer York." She looked at him with feverish eyes. "What about my daughter? He could come back."

York lifted his narrow shoulders under his uniform shirt. "I'm sorry, ma'am. But this guy hasn't made contact with you or your daughter or threatened you today. As much as I would like to help, there's not much I

can do other than file a report.”

“A report?” Her emotion-choked voice cut into Reid. “What good will a report do when he comes after Ella again? How will a report keep him from killing her?”

Officer York looked away, helplessness written all over his face.

Reid recognized that expression. The man wanted to do more for this woman, but budget constraints didn’t allow police officers to pursue every problem presented, and they often had to prioritize resources.

She searched the area, and her eyes lighted on Reid. “There. That’s the guy who went after him. Maybe he saw him or at least saw his truck.”

The officer summoned Reid with a crook of his finger.

“Reid Maddox,” he said as he glanced at the woman, still trying to place her, and flashed a look of apology before he told her he hadn’t seen the supposed offender.

“Reid,” she whispered his name like an involuntary breath.

Oh, man. Megan. Megan Singleton.

He knew her. Knew her well, but he couldn’t acknowledge it. He was frozen in place, and he couldn’t manage to move his mouth, let alone drop it open as she was doing.

He hadn’t seen her since she’d testified at a bank robbery case he’d headed up for the FBI when he was a young agent. As a federal crime, bank robbery fell under the FBI’s jurisdiction, and the case had been assigned to him. A big break. His first chance to prove himself in a leadership role.

He first met her at the bank. He’d never forget the moment. She was wide-eyed and shivering with fear, and he could do nothing about it. He had to see beyond the cowering woman to convince her to let go of her fear and testify against Norman Fowler. That was the beginning of months spent together preparing for and sitting through the trial.

Now here she was after all this time. *Wow*. Here in front of him. Peering at him with the same terrified expression. The same urge to hold her until it all went away was nearly stronger than he could resist. He shoved his hands into his pockets and looked away.

York glanced between them. “I take it you two know each other.”

“Unfortunately, we do.” Megan’s shoulders stiffened. “Figures the FBI would send the perfect company man to tell me Norman Fowler was out of prison.”

Reid blinked at her. “What? Fowler?”

“C’mon, Reid. Don’t play dumb with me. I know why you’re here.”

At her unusual display of temper, heaviness settled into Reid. He’d done that to her—him—and he wished he could change it. “The Bureau didn’t send me. I was just down the hall with my daughter and our therapy dog when I heard you scream.”

She arched an eyebrow. “So you’re not here to tell me about Fowler?”

He met her gaze. “I’m not an agent anymore. Haven’t been one for three years.”

Her eyes, a soft blue and rimmed with thick lashes, widened, and he could see her working to process the information.

York took a step closer. “Mind filling me in on what’s going on here?”

“I was the special agent in charge of Norman Fowler’s bank robbery case. Ms. Singleton—”

“Cash,” Megan said. “My name is Cash now.”

Right. She’d married and divorced, but surprise at seeing her had made him forget that piece of info. “Sorry, Ms. Cash was the teller at the bank Fowler attempted to rob, and she testified at the trial.”

York turned to Megan. “Why are you so angry with Mr. Maddox?”

“That’s personal and between us.”

York planted his hands on his waist. “Not if it has a bearing on this situation, it’s not.”

Megan fixed her jaw in a hard line and eyed Reid as if expecting him to explain their past and why she would be upset with him. No way Reid would mention his failed romance with Megan. York didn’t need those details.

“What exactly *is the situation?*” Reid asked hoping to redirect York.

“Ms. Cash claims she saw Norman Fowler.” York paused and checked his notes.

“So Fowler’s out then?” Reid quickly did the math. Fowler had threatened Megan with a hidden gun, but neither him or his partner were armed. In exchange for thirteen years prison stay plus three years of supervisory release out of a twenty year max sentence, Fowler had ratted out his partner, who was the brains behind the robbery.

The prison portion of his sentence had passed, and now the guy was free to exact his revenge. He wasn’t free and clear, though. He still had to comply with the supervisory release criteria, which was much like parole criteria, plus he had to report to a federal probation officer on a regular basis.

York shifted on his feet. “First time she claimed to have seen him was a half hour ago at Speedy Fill gas station just down the road. Then again here, outside her daughter’s door.”

“It’s not a claim,” Megan said. “I *did* see him.”

“Maybe the station has security cameras, and he was caught on video,” Reid suggested.

York shook his head. “Small mom-and-pop station, and they never put cameras in. I know as we’ve suggested it countless times, but they’re old school, close to retirement, and don’t see the reason to spend the money.”

“You could believe me,” Megan said. “Fowler was here to make good on his threat to me by hurting

Ella.” With a shaking hand, she slipped a lock of curly hair behind her ear and glanced into the open door at her daughter.

“About that.” York faced Reid. “Can you confirm Fowler issued a threat against Ms. Cash at the trial?”

Reid nodded. “After the trial, when deputies carted him off. He also blamed her for his arrest and threatened her then too. If incarceration didn’t change him, I’m sure he’ll make good on the threat.”

York jotted a note on his pad. “So you consider him a violent man?”

“The Fowler I knew wouldn’t hesitate to hurt Megan.” Reid glanced at her.

She curled her shoulders in as she’d done often enough in the past when she was uneasy.

Too bad he had to say Fowler was dangerous, but this officer had to see what they were facing here, if indeed Fowler had made an appearance. Not that he doubted Megan. Not at all. If she said she saw Fowler, Reid believed her. “I hope you’ll take this situation seriously and provide protection for her.”

“I wish we could.” York flipped his notepad closed. “But it’s not a crime to go to a gas station or be in a hospital hallway. And no offense, Ms. Cash, but we don’t have any proof that this Fowler guy was even here.”

“So you’ve said,” Megan mumbled under her breath.

“I’m here with my daughter and our therapy dog, and I heard Ms. Cash’s scream when she saw him. It wasn’t faked. She was terrified. That I can assure you.” Reid scanned the long hallway floor to ceiling. “I don’t see any cameras, but the ones in the lobby could have caught him entering the building.”

“Not today,” York said. “The hospital’s updating their system, and it’s offline for a few hours.”

“He said he was staying at the Creek Water Motel if that helps,” Megan said.

York nodded. “I can stop by there and see if a Norman Fowler’s registered, but they might require a

warrant to provide that information, and I have no probable cause for such a warrant.”

Reid knew he spoke the truth. “But you’ll let Ms. Cash know what you learn either way?”

“Will do.” York pulled out business cards. He handed one to each of them. “We’ll make sure our other officers are aware of Fowler’s release, and I’ll talk to security on the way out to make sure they know what’s going on here. They can make a point of checking in on you now and then.”

Reid took the card and swallowed his anger at York’s action. But York didn’t deserve it. He’d behaved much like Reid would’ve done in the past as an agent when he couldn’t really help a traumatized victim.

With the police not taking action, the question was, what was going to happen to Megan and her sick daughter?

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