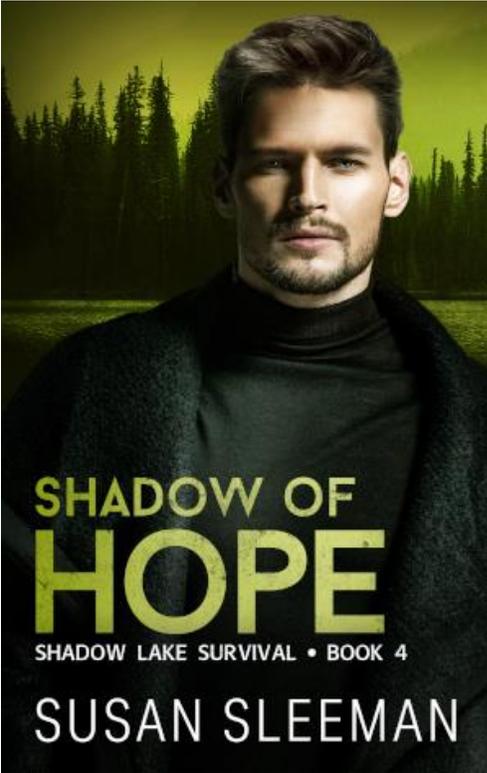


SHADOW OF HOPE SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Paperback, E-Book, and Audio

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An impossible position...

The moment Ava Weston checked into Shadow Lake Survival's immersive survival training camp, Shadow Lake Survival's weapons expert, Micha Nichols, knew something haunted her. He was sure of it. And that something had brought her to Shadow Lake Survival to heal or forget. He'd lived through a similar struggle in his life and knew he wanted to help Ava move on and maybe pursue a mutual attraction that was impossible to ignore.

That only disappearing can solve.

But getting involved was the last thing Ava needed. Her days at Shadow Lake Survival were filled with survival challenges, but her nights were plagued by fear and nightmares. Not even learning the skills she needed to

protect herself could chase them away. Nothing could, until she faced up to the fears and the criminal charges awaiting her back home. She wanted to confide in Micha, but how did she tell the man she was falling in love with that she was wanted for murder and running from the law?

Chapter One

He was at her front door, and he was going to kill her.

Ava had ignored his demands. Waited too long. She had to act fast. Move. Quickly.

Run!

Her foster care days taught her how to bolt at a moment's notice, and she could disappear in a flash.

She grabbed her backpack and raced to the back of her house. Down the stairs. Into the old-fashioned root cellar. Up the concrete steps. She flung open the doors to her backyard and dashed into the darkness.

She glanced around the yard. Into the inky night. Moon behind clouds. Drizzle spitting.

Good for cover. Not so good for the risk of falling.

Now where?

Her car? No! She couldn't risk approaching the garage and revving her engine. Alerting her would-be killer.

She would have to hoof it. Simple as that. Yeah, right, simple.

Heart galloping, palms sweating, she charged over her yard, spongy from months of Oregon spring rain.

She reached the fence where pickets had recently fallen, revealing her neighbor's yard. Swing set. Slide. She slipped past their patio door. Light glowed from the dining table where the family of three was gathered for dinner. Heads bowed in prayer, they didn't notice her.

Perfect. She wouldn't have to get them involved and potentially put them in danger, too.

Thank You!

She slipped along the far side of the fence to the squeaking of Timmy's guinea pigs.

Thank goodness he hadn't wanted his parents to get him a dog, or it would reveal her location.

She reached the street. Kept going. Pummeling her sneakers over the sidewalk. She risked a glance back at her house. At the car out front. Black. Sports car. Dented and rusty.

Yeah, it was Layne Boyle's vehicle all right, but no sign of Layne. At six foot tall, the thirty-something buff guy with blond hair and striking blue eyes would be impossible to miss.

She kicked it into gear. Rounded a corner. Then another. And another, then ducked into bushes near the neighborhood playground.

She gulped the humid air, sucking it in as if it were from an oxygen tank she would use for one of her patients. Patients. Not anymore. Her nursing career was over. Layne would see to that, and the police would be after her. Bringing her up on murder charges.

Her! Murder charges. How had her life come to that?

She didn't kill Layne's mother, Holly Boyle, last month. The police had no reason to suspect foul play, but Layne told them she had changed her will at the last minute and could've made the killer mad. The police agreed to look into it, but they did nothing, claiming high caseloads, and with the autopsy not showing any sign of foul play, they blew him off.

So he decided to investigate on his own and located circumstantial evidence that made Ava look guilty. He'd threatened to kill her unless she turned herself in within three days. She couldn't do that when she wasn't guilty—wouldn't—and she'd made plans to flee. To move to a secluded Oregon town. To learn to live off-grid. Alone.

But he'd come hunting her before the time was up.

She couldn't change that, but would still go through with her plans. Head to Shadow Lake Survival's compound and complete the deep immersion course to learn necessary skills needed to live off-grid in the small cabin her cousin had left to her.

Become Kari Curtis. She'd paid big bucks for a fake ID. She liked that name and started using it right away. Gone was Ava Weston, her real identity. She'd bought a car with cash from a private individual and filled it with personal possessions, including her bassoon, which she still played in a local community orchestra. Then she parked a second car in a storage facility, paying cash again.

So yeah, if she could get to a bus, she could get to her future. Run from Layne. From the law. Live a life of solitude. Not what she wanted. She'd always imagined a life with a husband and family. That was out of the question now. A lonely life in a cabin was better than a life behind bars.

She peeked out of the shrubs. Down the treelined street. Past the cars parked in front of houses with lights glowing, alluring warmth and safety. Misleading, and she couldn't let down her guard. Her house was emitting the same vibe, and there was no safety inside. Not with someone wanting to kill her.

She spotted nothing unusual.

Move. Now!

She eased out. Pulled up the hood on her jacket against the misty rain. Walked at a rapid pace when she wanted to bolt. But better not to draw attention to herself.

Head down, she moved on. Step after step. Her shoulders braced for an attack.

She reached the bus stop. Turned away from the street. Studied both directions.

Alone. Alone on the quiet Portland neighborhood street. Cars passing. None with a loud muffler like Layne's.

Please keep him at bay. Please.

Her future stood before her.

If she made it onto the next bus when it arrived.

If she survived the night.

*

Micha Nichols rarely liked the first day of their weeklong intensive survival skills training. But today? Today was different.

Thanks to the petite blonde doing her best to start the fire they needed for tonight's dinner.

Kari Curtis appeared nothing like the pictures he'd located when doing her background check. She'd had coal-black hair in those photos, but was now blonde. And thinner.

Which coloring was natural? He couldn't be sure, but her fair skin said blonde to him.

What none of it explained was this zing he got in his belly every time he looked at her. But it was there. Like now. He wanted to wrap his arms around her, take her petite hands into his, and help her start the fire she was struggling with so badly.

Totally unprofessional behavior. He shoved his hands into his pockets instead.

She was nibbling on her lower lip as she rubbed her hands on the spindle to create a hand drill fire. Basically a slim branch they'd scavenged from the woods and processed after creating a sharp edge by striking two rocks together. The Shadow Lake Survival team believed their clients needed to be prepared all the way. Not to have a single item in their possession to use in most situations. Scavenging in the place they found themselves was the only sure way to survive every situation they faced in the wilderness or off-grid living.

Her spindle jumped out of the divot on her hearth board.

"Argh!" She tossed it down to sit back, brushing her hand over the perspiration on her face from the hard work.

"You won't want that to hit the ground," he said.

She frowned and grabbed up the spindle. "Sorry. I forgot it can't get wet. Is it ruined?"

"Could be, but it wasn't on the ground long. You could be okay." He smiled, but it did nothing to change her frustration. "Only one way to find out. Try again once you're rested."

She scowled at him. "I have tried. How many times? Five? Six? Everyone else did it in three or less. Why can't I get this?"

"Because it's not as simple as it seems. Sure the concept of rubbing wood against wood to cause dust and friction is simple, but in reality?" He shrugged. "Not so much."

She glanced at her fellow participants. Five men, ages twenty-five to seventy-three. "Everyone else has gotten it. Even Ernie."

"Hey, now." Ernie scratched his silvery gray goatee. "Is that an old age joke?"

“Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it. You look to be in great shape, but this is surprisingly physically taxing.”

“I get it, hon.” Ernie smiled, the wrinkles around his eyes narrowing. “My wife, who’s only a year younger than me, loves to say I’m a vintage model, and I’m proud of it.”

The others laughed, and Kari joined in, but she didn’t look up from her work.

“Maybe you could try using your foot to hold the hearth board.” Micha dropped down beside her and took off his boot and sock, then placed the side of his foot on her hearth board.

“Like this. Holds it tighter. Keeps the spindle from jumping as much.”

She removed her boot and sock to reveal a delicate foot with nails painted an equally delicate pink. Okay, not the style of their typical preppers or survivalists, but utterly captivating.

He scooted back and put on his sock and boot before he did something more to help. She seemed so fragile. Not only physically, but he caught worried—maybe fearful—expressions on her face when she didn’t know he was watching. Problem for her was he was always watching.

Not only watching her, but the guys, too. As a former military intelligence officer, he didn’t relax around strangers. Especially ones who might lean toward the far side of society’s norms, like many of the people who came to their off-grid survival training camp.

She spit on her hands to better grip the spindle, another act he couldn’t imagine this very feminine, pink-toenailed woman willingly doing. Yeah, he was putting her in a box. Maybe one he wanted her in. It’d been a long time since he’d had any real interest in a woman like this. And if she fit his criteria, maybe he could consider pursuing something once she graduated this week.

If she graduated. Today didn’t bode well for her.

Her hands traveled down the spindle, and she started back at the top, holding on to the spindle with one hand as he'd taught her. She'd remembered all the directions to this point except dropping the spindle.

Come on, God. How about cutting her a break? Let this work.

Micha asked, but God didn't always make things easy in life. His sister Tristin and her freak accident were a perfect example, one that he had yet to reconcile. Why did she have to lose the use of her legs—be wheelchair-bound, maybe for life? Sure, he knew God grew people under pressure. Shaped them. Molded them. Micha should know. He'd been molded under pressure for far too long. Since childhood in foster care, trying to keep his sister safe. Time she caught a break, wasn't it?

The hearth board smoked.

“There you go.” He put as much enthusiasm as he could muster into his tone to cheer her on. “You got it. Now put down the spindle. Use the tiny stick you cut to transfer the coal to your tinder bundle.”

She shot a hand out for the large leaf holding the spark, or what they called the coal.

“Careful. Slow down. Make sure to keep it in one piece.” He held his breath as she moved the very fragile object.

She slid the tiny coal onto the top of the bundle of shredded cedar bark.

“Now hold the bottom and blow gently. Very gently.”

She pursed her lips that had started the day with a pale pink lipstick, and a flame

emerged. Her large blue eyes widened. “I did it.”

“Not quite yet. You have a flame, but you still don’t have a fire. Set it down and start with your smallest sticks to form a teepee over it.” He’d had the clients gather dry sticks and break them into small pieces, then lay them out in size order. That allowed them to begin with the smallest size and work their way to the larger ones.

She gradually added the larger sticks until she had a nice teepee formed and a strong fire going.

She shot up a fist to bump with him.

“Finally. I was about to die of old age waiting.” Ernie chuckled.

She laughed, a sweet sound that wound through Micha like the warble of the songbirds they encountered in their wilderness hikes, freeing him from his past and making him hope for a future he didn’t think he would have while his sister was paralyzed.

Why did it even have to happen? She’d already suffered so much in foster care. But then she’d finally had it all. Was happily married. Lived in a big house. Had a beautiful daughter. The ideal life. Which, after foster care, didn’t often happen. And now? Now it was all gone. Poof, vanished in a flash of time that changed her life forever. Just like when their parents died.

Enough. He had work to do. No time to consider his own potential happiness at the expense of the other participants. “Now, as the last one to master fire-starting, you get to cook dinner.”

“Hey, wait.” Jamal Thomason uncrossed his legs and sat forward. “The website said the meals were catered.”

“Some are.”

“But not ours?” He cast a suspicious look at Micha through dark eyes, a look the twenty-five-year-old mechanic had worn since he’d arrived. “I paid good money to be here and not to have to cook my own food.”

“You paid to be trained in survival skills in a one-week immersive course, and that includes procuring and prepping your own meals. We’ll start out by providing the food, but you’ll soon be hunting for your own.”

His eyes brightened. “Yeah, the hunting I understood. Not so much the cooking it for our meals.”

Micha took a breath to maintain his patience over this guy’s erroneous take on the week. “Some of the longer courses do start with catered meals, and we take longer to get to the nitty gritty, but not this one.”

Jamal crossed his arms. “Not what the website says.”

“I’m not that familiar with the website, but I can mention it to one of the owners, and he’ll get back with you.”

“Yeah, well.” He stuck out his chin. “I’d show you where I read it, but you confiscated my phone.”

“We all had to turn them in,” Kari said. “Something they told us to be prepared to do.”

“I get it.” Jamal tightened his arms. “Just don’t like it.”

“Why don’t we move on to that dinner?” Ernie asked. “I’m getting hungry.”

“Sounds good,” Micha said. “But before we do, I want to mention food storage again. We do get black bears on the property. Not often, but occasionally. Means we have to prepare for them. FYI, don’t let the name fool you. Their coloring can be black, sure, but they can also be blond, brown, and cinnamon.”

That worry he’d found in Kari’s expression intensified.

“We’ll be fine as long as we practice good bear hygiene,” he said. “Our KP tent will never have food left in it. We’ll store all food on platforms ten feet high, and we have bear-proof garbage cans.”

Kari shuddered.

Micha had to ignore her worry and go on. “When we hit the trail, we’ll sleep at least a hundred yards from cooking and eating areas. Then please leave all soap, suntan lotion, candles, and any other scented items back at your cabin.”

“No soap!” Kari’s voice squeaked high, and she gaped at him as if he’d said they wouldn’t eat for a week. “Just how are we supposed to stay clean?”

Wow. A strong reaction to a little bar of soap.

“We’ll provide the soap and store it on the platforms,” he said.

She swiped a hand over her brow. “Phew, because I could use a shower right now, and all I did was spin a little stick.” She laughed.

Micha laughed with her, but it was all for show. She sure didn’t seem like a survivalist, so why was she here? His gut said she was hiding something, but what? Something illegal?

She'd passed their usual background check, but the review had turned up little online information for her. Maybe the secret she was concealing made her keep a low online presence.

His path was clear. Crystal. Even if his radar hadn't gone off due to his attraction to her, he would be paying her special attention to ferret out the answer to that question.

Mark his words. He would find out what she was hiding. No matter what it took.

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