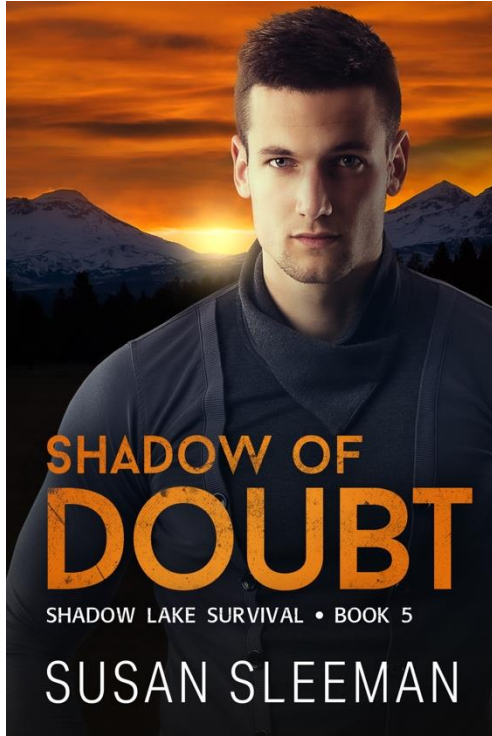


SHADOW OF DOUBT SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Paperback, E-Book, and Audio

Shadow Lake Survival Series Book 4– August/2024

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A cyber-stalker and a murder threaten her life...

When IT specialist, Brooklyn Hurst's cyber stalker grows bolder and the police refuse to do anything about it, she has to take drastic measures. Like fleeing the only home she's known to a place so off the map that the stalker would never think to look. When she discovers, Colin Graham, a former FBI agent and now

Shadow Lake Survival cyber expert, is looking for a live-in caregiver for his mother, she applies for the position and is hired via an online interview. She quietly packs up everything she can fit into her car and disappears in the middle of the night, ensuring that her stalker doesn't follow her.

Will the danger draw the couple closer together or push them apart?

She fits in perfectly with Colin and his mother, but he'd never met a more jumpy and fearful woman in his life and is sure something is wrong. As they grow closer, he gains her trust, and she shares about her stalker. As if talking about her stalker conjures him up, he makes his appearance in Shadow Lake. Had Colin betrayed her? Done something stupid to bring danger to her doorstep again? Should she run again or could she trust Colin? Colin knows running isn't the

answer and promises to keep her safe. But can he do so while also protecting his heart from pain again?

Chapter One

Her gun was out of reach when she needed it most.

Brooklyn kept an eye on the security camera feed for her front door, the pounding of her heart sounding in her ears and overpowering her earbuds.

A man in a black cap fumbled with her lock.

Kane? Could it be Kane?

Oh, God, no. Not this. Not again.

Had he found her? Come to exact his revenge and end her life?

No! She wouldn't let that happen. She'd planned for this. Drilled it. Experienced it before. She could do it again.

She tossed her earbuds to the desk and rolled her chair to the side drawer. She slid it open. Reached inside. Picked up the Glock. The cool grip icing her palm. She flicked off the safety.

Yes. Good. This is good.

She could protect herself. Couldn't she?

She studied the video, her heart racing. The tall guy's head was down, his face out of sight. The warm weather didn't warrant a stocking cap, but he wore a black one pulled low. A disguise or fashionable? Either way the guy's build fit Kane.

Kane Tarver—the man who'd become the unethical hacker he'd set out to be and bilked honest, hardworking people out of their money. But worse? She'd been in love with him when they'd worked together

as white-hat hackers. At least she'd thought she loved him until he turned to the dark side of hacking for money. She discovered the real Kane then and doubted he'd ever had any genuine feelings for her.

The door flew open and slammed against the wall, reverberating as it bounced back.

Hands trembling, she lifted her weapon and sighted it on the dark figure looming in the opening.

"I have a gun, and I'm not afraid to use it." Bravado in her words, but her voice trembled, giving away her anxiety.

Please don't let him hear my fear and rush me. Please. I don't want to shoot him.

"You're not going to use that thing on me, are you?" Her buddy Nick Thorn stepped inside and marched toward her. His usual dark eyes were a deeper brown and filled with an intensity Brooklyn hadn't seen since he'd married Piper and mellowed a bit. "Power down your computer. We're leaving now!"

Releasing a long breath, Brooklyn flicked on the safety and returned her weapon to the drawer, giving her heart rate time to start settling down. "You scared me. I could've killed you."

Nick peered at her as if she were a virus he'd discovered in a coding review. "Sorry, but it's not half of what Typhon will do if he arrives before we get out of here."

"Typhon." The mention of Kane's online nickname sent her heart plummeting. He'd chosen the handle for the father of monsters—a Greek mythological giant with a hundred snake-heads. Based on his actions from that day forward, he'd picked the perfect nickname.

She blinked up at Nick, her mind racing. "He found me again?"

"Yes. Lucky for you I was at a nearby work thing when it happened, and I can get you out of here before he shows up."

This wasn't happening, was it? Typhon? Here? Tonight? She'd settled into her cute studio apartment in the Portland burbs just two months ago. He couldn't be coming for her this soon. Could he?

Sure he could, if he'd indeed located her online. But had he? "I didn't see any evidence that he found me."

"Then you're losing your touch." Nick frowned. "My alert kicked off fifteen minutes ago. Been trying to call you to warn you."

She pointed at her earbuds laying on the desktop. "I was listening to music. Didn't hear the phone."

"But you have online alarms set too," he said. "So why are you just sitting here?"

"Clearly they failed to activate and warn me." Failed big time. The warning system she'd created should've sent an alert of Typhon's handle appearing online in relationship to her, like Nick's had done.

So why did it fail? Were her skills not current enough or her equipment not robust enough to run her algorithms on a speedy basis?

"I'll show you. Scoot over." Nick shoved her chair out of the way with his hip, and his fingers flew over her keyboard, entering lines of code as fast as one of the latest computer processors could work.

"There." He pointed at the monitor and leaned back.

She squinted at the screen as if seeing the details might make it untrue that the world's most unethical hacker, who held a grudge against her and threatened to kill her, had found her.

She blinked at her screen glowing green in her dark, one-room apartment. Blinked again.

Yeah, there he was. His handle, Typhon, in plain sight. The day he chose the handle was the day she'd fled from him with Nick's help.

Even if the code wasn't on the screen in front of her, Nick was a world-renowned cyber expert working at the equally renowned Veritas Center here in Portland. If he said Typhon found her online, then it was inevitable that Typhon would locate her physical address too.

Question was, how much time did she have before she had to leave? Or had he already found her

address and was on his way?

Nick eyed her. “Either he doesn’t bother to hide his nickname anymore because he’s desperate to get to you, or he figures he’s untouchable.”

She shook her head. “It’s hard to believe he was once one of the good guys and we all used to work together.”

“Well, he’s not a good guy anymore, and we have to leave now.”

He was right. No waiting. Better to flee.

She powered down her computer and mentally ran through her checklist of To-Do items that she’d followed too many times already. She would complete the essential items now, then go with Nick. When they were safely away, she would implement the plan she’d made for disappearing. She always had an escape plan at the ready. Always would as long as Typhon lived or continued to escape incarceration.

Her computer monitor went dark.

Nick started jerking out the plugs. “I’ll take this to my car and come back for you and your personal belongings.”

“Thanks,” she said and meant it. She appreciated his friendship all these years and his legit concern for her wellbeing.

She got up to pack the few items she didn’t keep at the ready, allowing her to take off with her important items at a moment’s notice. How many times these past three years had she run from Kane and had to leave things behind?

Four? No five. She was starting to lose count.

She emptied her desk drawer containing her valuable papers into her backpack and went to the closet at the far end of the room. In her safe, she removed her backup gun and ammo, shoving it all inside her pack

along with her laptop and tablet computers.

A quick shrug of the pack onto her back, and she grabbed the handles on two suitcases she kept filled at all times and rolled them to the front door.

Nick stepped inside. “Just need to get the printer and network devices.”

“Take the printer, but don’t bother with the network. I don’t want to risk Kane tracking them again.”

“Resetting them would work, but yeah, not using them again is ultimately the safest plan.” Grabbing the printer, he glanced at her. “Ready?”

“As I can be.” She retrieved her everyday carry from the drawer and followed him out the door. With a trembling hand, she twisted the deadbolt. She would drop the key in an envelope she kept in her suitcase, already set to mail to the leasing company, and send it from some obscure place that Kane couldn’t trace back to her.

Nick jogged up the stairs through a blustery June breeze.

He took control of the suitcases. “Move it, Stick.”

She wrinkled her nose at his use of her nickname. She possessed an usually high-functioning memory and recall, and he’d given her the nickname as a nod to a memory stick the first week they’d met.

He raced down the stairs at top speed. Her gut tightened more as she charged after him, fighting the wind with each step. She dove into the front seat of his SUV and settled her backpack at her feet. He slammed the hatch and got behind the wheel, not speaking but cranking the engine and roaring out of the parking lot.

She batted her windswept hair from her face and clicked her seatbelt in place. “You think Kane still lives in Portland and is nearby?”

“I think no matter where he lives full time, he’s nearby right now.” His dire tone raised her concern even higher.

“Why?” she asked as she searched out the windows for any sign of the creep but caught only the half-moon beaming down on the road and lighting their way.

“Because he’s missed catching up with you, what? Four times now, and this will be the fifth. And he’s got to be freakin’ angry about it. He knows we have the skills to run algorithms that pick up his name, so I don’t think he would release his name again unless he was close by to scoop you up.”

“He would just let the information be out there long enough to scare me before he comes to my door.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, it does. Scare me, that is.” She circled her arms around her stomach and felt the car rock under the windy night. “I have no idea what he’ll do to me for turning him in to law enforcement.”

“He had a thing for you, big time. I mean, I could say he loved you, but can a sociopath actually love? More like he thought you belonged to him, and he couldn’t abide you choosing to leave him. So predicting his behavior is nearly impossible.”

Sociopath. Described Kane to the letter. How had she not seen it when they were dating?

Memories of their time together played like a newsreel in her brain. Good times. At least she’d once thought they were, but now she could see beneath it all, and his duplicitous behavior came rising up and taking over the images.

She shuddered.

“Sorry.” Nick took a sharp left turn, the car rocking before it righted itself, and he made another left. “I don’t mean to scare you more. But I need to make sure he doesn’t find you.”

“Where are you taking me?” she asked. “I mean after you finish your defensive left turns to be sure we’re not followed.”

“Not sure. I’d let you stay with me and Piper, but now’s not a good time. You’d be safe there with our

top-notch security at the condos, but I have to think of my family. Carter's almost two now, and Piper's expecting again. I don't want to bring danger to any of them."

"Congratulations!" The word burst out, and she grabbed his arm. This was the first she was hearing of a second child on the way. "Boy or girl? Due when?"

A grin spread across his face. "We don't know the gender yet, and Piper's three months now, so do the math."

Ah, good news in the midst of all the mess in her life. Really helped her hope for a good future for herself too. "You really are living the dream, my friend. I'm so happy for you."

"You deserve to have the same thing." He looked her way, his expression gloomy.

His gaze held his sorrow. Not new. He hated the way she was forced to live on the run from Kane and that a dream of a family was out of her reach as long as Kane was alive and free. "I've got some friends in Cold Harbor that you might be able to bunk with for a short time."

She shook off her sudden sadness to focus on her safety. "Cold Harbor? Never heard of it."

"A small town down the coast, a few hours from here. Gage Blackwell runs Blackwell Tactical, and they have a secured compound. You'd be safe there, for sure."

"Sounds interesting." Her phone dinged, and she jumped. "It's my front door camera."

He flashed her a look. "It's likely Kane."

"This fast?" She refused to acknowledge Kane might be standing on the stoop. "I ordered a pizza. Maybe it arrived."

"You should ditch your phone. Kane will likely track the feed."

"I'll power it down now and remove the sim card, then trash it as soon as we're somewhere no one will find it. I have a new one in my backpack." She opened the app, and her heart fell.

“It’s Kane.” She stared at Nick. “He’s at my…”

Door. Her door. Her breath left her body, and she couldn’t finish the sentence.

A close call. Too close. She gulped air, but her lungs felt like bricks and didn’t seem to fill.

Still, things were clear.

If not for Nick’s quick thinking and rescue, she might already have been dead.

*

Colin Graham stared at his mother, fast asleep on the sofa in their cabin on Shadow Lake. Correction. Not really their cabin. The large, three-bedroom place belonged to the Maddox brothers and their business, Shadow Lake Survival, where Colin and his brother, Devan, taught wilderness survival skills. Russ, the middle Maddox brother, had moved out of the cabin after he’d gotten married and into a place his wife owned. He was kind enough to let Colin and Dev move in from the smaller cabin they’d each been occupying on the compound so their mom could join them and they could take care of her.

Take care of their mother. Made Colin’s brain hurt just to think about. She had lupus, which the doctors had struggled to control over the years, and they’d always figured it was a possibility that she would require care with her day-to-day needs. But they’d all prayed it wouldn’t come to that.

Not so. Her painful joints and extreme fatigue made doing most everything a challenge. She also experienced mild cognitive issues and forgot important things. Things like taking her meds on time. Or eating.

Dev walked up behind Colin and dropped into the chair at the table where his Glock and cleaning supplies sat. “Didn’t think it would come to this.”

Colin took a better look at his mother’s face. Her body. She’d aged well on the surface, still a fit, beautiful woman with the same dark hair color shared with Colin and Dev. By looking at her, you would never know she’d suffered from lupus for so many years. But she *had* suffered. Majorly.

Still, she was a big-time believer in not letting her disease define her, and she refused to give in to it. Sure, she had a lot of days when the choice wasn't hers to make, but for the most part, she'd found workarounds.

Until now. Now her suffering had taken over. Colin hated to see her suffer. Would do anything to take it away. Scared him to see it. And her willingness to give in and come live with them scared him even more. She was far too self-sufficient to accept losing her independence unless she absolutely had no choice. Which meant she was even worse off than she was letting on.

Colin looked at Dev. "She looks just fine sleeping there. If only..." He let his voice fall off. "I don't know what I was going to say. There's no *if only*. With no cure for lupus, that's not changing."

"We can fix this," Dev said. "For now anyway. Keep working with her doctor and insurance company to get her back on the meds that work."

"Stupid insurance company, suddenly denying coverage." Colin gritted his teeth. "Hopefully her doctor's latest appeal will work, and they'll approve the right drug no matter the cost."

Dev slammed his fist into his other palm. "Give me five minutes with them, and I'd change their mind."

Colin rolled his eyes. "All that would result in is you going to jail, and then who would take care of Mom?"

"Too bad Jada just re-upped, or she could be here too." Their little sister had gone straight into the Navy from high school and, at the age of twenty-five, already had seven years in.

Colin nodded. "She was one of the last people I thought would make a career in the Navy."

Dev raised an eyebrow. "You don't give your younger siblings credit for growing up. You just see us as kids who always wanted to hang out with their big brother."

Colin winced. "There could be some truth there, but all I'm certain of now is that it's taking both of us

to care for Mom, and we're failing on all counts."

"Not all counts. She's looked after."

"But what about all the hours we're missing at work? At this rate, the Maddox brothers can only keep us employed for so long."

"But they've been great about it."

"Yeah, while having to pick up our slack, and that's not fair to them."

Dev picked up the cleaning rod. "Too bad one of us can't afford to quit and take care of her full time. Or even pay for the meds ourselves."

"That wouldn't help Shadow Lake Survival. At least not right now We're in peak season, and classes are fully booked through August. The guys can't lose our expertise without losing revenue."

"You got a better idea?" Dev worked the rod through the barrel of his Glock. "We still can't afford to hire a nurse, and her insurance won't cover that either. And ditto on the home health care worker."

They'd looked into paying the cost themselves and were shocked at what a nurse was paid. Not that they should be surprised. Nurses were highly trained and worth the care they provided.

"Mom doesn't need a nurse," Colin said. "We can just keep trying to hire a caregiver with less training."

Dev blinked. "You losing your memory too, bro? We've tried that for weeks. Failed to get anyone to apply that we would even consider."

"Then we try again. Keep at it. I'll place an ad in the paper as soon as I can. I'm heading out now to do a joint class with Eryn Sawyer at Blackwell Tactical. I'll be spending the night in Cold Harbor at their compound, so you have Mom duty."

Dev increased the speed of his rod going in and out of the gun barrel. "I don't get it. Why do you need

Eryn's help to teach a basic class on eliminating an online presence? Not when you were once a big-time cyber expert at the FBI and all."

"I don't need her help to do the training, but you know class participants can now choose to have us delete their online footprints, right?"

"Right. But it'll cost them."

"Money they appear willing to pay, so most of the participants sign up for the service. Means it takes two people to complete the work in the week we have them in our training program."

"Why can't Eryn come here?"

"She has more powerful equipment. Besides, she has little kids, and I hate to take her away from them."

"Even if Mom needs you?" Dev set down the gun and looked up.

Colin couldn't let Dev guilt trip him. He needed to make a living because he needed to support their mother too. Always had. Their dad tragically passed away when Colin was nine, and Mom's money had run out during his junior year of college.

Dev didn't know Colin was currently footing her bills. He thought their father had left plenty of money for her, but the medical bills ate it up at a record pace, so once Colin was out of college and employed, he'd stepped in. As an agent, he'd been able to afford it and didn't want to saddle his little brother with the costs, but with the survival business in startup mode, their salaries weren't high enough, and things were tight now. Financially, it was a blessing to have his mom under the same roof.

"I've already arranged with Barbie Maddox to take my day shifts with Mom while I'm gone," he said.

Dev tilted his head as he took in the information. Maybe looking for something to complain about since it was clear he felt like Colin was shirking his duties. But becoming members of Shadow Lake Survival meant they'd become members of the Maddox family, and that included being unofficially adopted by Barbie,

the brothers' mother, and their father, Hank. So they had a support system, and Colin wasn't afraid to use it right now.

"Barbie works for me," Dev finally said. "Mom will like spending time with her better than being with you anyway. She feels guilty about taking us from work, and Barbie is retired."

"Plus, Barbie's stories of living the flower-child life in the sixties are guaranteed to entertain her."

"Not to mention, going to the Blackwell compound won't be a hardship for you." Dev shoved his hands into his pockets. "I discover something new about the place every time I visit. Especially new weapons."

Dev was seriously into firearms, as was the Blackwell Tactical team.

Colin didn't have a collection of guns like Dev did. Still, he could appreciate how a firearm could be used to save lives. "They do have all the cool toys."

"I figure we will here someday, too, but Reid is just building the business."

"I'm glad we got in on the ground floor. It's rewarding to help build the business." Colin resisted frowning. "At least when we manage to get to work these days."

Their mom shifted on the sofa and guilt took hold of Colin. He shouldn't ever put his work first. Their mother had always been there for him and Dev, and he needed to be there for her as much as he could. Plus, as the oldest, she was his responsibility.

But that didn't preclude finding someone with the proper skills to stay with her so he and Dev could earn a living. Still, he wouldn't just settle for someone qualified. The caregiver had to be someone she liked and respected too.

I know You haven't given us anyone yet, but I wouldn't be opposed to You letting the perfect candidate fall into our laps and making it happen soon.

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