

For my mom, who supplied me with mountains of library books and let me read them in a tree. For hours.

SEPTEMBER SHADOWS



JUSTICE, MONTANA SERIES
- BOOK ONE -

DEBBI MIGIT



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Published by Scrivenings Press LLC
15 Lucky Lane
Morrilton, Arkansas 72110
<https://ScriveningsPress.com>

Printed in the United States of America

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Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-086-6

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-087-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020949288

Cover by www.bookmarketinggraphics.com.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

1. My husband, Phil, who delivered food to my desk when I was on a deadline and encouraged me in all things writerly.
2. My kids, who snuck in for hugs even when the door was closed.
3. Christine, Aunt Carol, Krista, and Leslie, who opened their homes (and cabin!) to me for personal writing retreats.
4. Jen Miller for her valuable insight and encouragement.
5. Linda Nixon Fulkerson and Shannon Taylor Vannatter at Scrivenings Press and Kathy Cretsinger at Mantle Rock Publishing. Thank you!



Saturday, September 1

1:00 p.m.

“**L**ook out for that car!” Horn blaring, I grip the steering wheel and jerk the truck into the right lane, narrowly avoiding a collision with a white Lucerne. The driver’s face is as pale as her Buick, her mouth forming a tiny *O* as she gapes at me. Great. I almost took out sweet Mrs. Fairfax, the town librarian.

“Jess, stay in your lane. That car was in your blind spot.”

I glare at Cole McBride. It’s the same glare I used when we met on the playground during a four-square scuffle. I’d been the stubborn first-grader, and he was the determined third-grader. Not much has changed over the years. Well, we’re taller.

“First, you told me to keep my eyes on the road. Then you said change lanes. I did that. And quit yelling at me!” I swing Cole’s red Ford 150 pickup into Walmart’s parking lot and turn off the engine.

The Saturday morning traffic rolls by as the residents of Justice, Montana, kick off their weekend errands.

A strand of hair escapes my braid, and I brush it aside,

waiting, as Cole tries to control his temper. I'm pretty sure I hear him counting to ten in Sioux, and the little vein in his neck stands out farther. That's not a good sign. Cole's easygoing, but sometimes I bring out the worst in him.

"I wasn't yelling," he says through gritted teeth. "You asked me to instruct you. I was instructing."

I grin. "You were instructing all right. At the top of your lungs. You can relax, Cole. I won't damage your truck."

When he bought the truck, it needed some work, but Cole fixed it up, and now it's his pride and joy. It shocked me when he offered to use it for my driving lessons.

"It's not the truck I'm worried about—I can fix it. But that car aimed right for you, and I don't think I can find replacement parts as easily."

Cole's tone and the warmth in his eyes make me catch my breath. Lately, our relationship seems to be changing. We're spending more time together as he teaches me to drive.

Something is shifting, which makes me both thrilled and terrified. Cole's my oldest friend, and I would never want that to change. But I can't deny I want more than friendship with him. And I suspect he feels the same way.

"C'mon. Give me the keys."

I wrap my smaller fingers around the set of keys. "No. Let me do it. The traffic confused me for a few minutes, but I'm fine now. Let's drive up Route 278, where it's not so crowded."

Cole raises a dark eyebrow and quirks his lips. "Yeah. Justice is a real metropolis. I'll bet we passed at least ten cars today."

"But I need to practice driving on the mountain roads, too, right?" My voice trails off as Cole shakes his head. I can hear Roxie, Cole's Australian Shepherd, pacing restlessly in the pickup bed. She doesn't enjoy long stops.

"Sorry, Jess. We need to check on Chieftain. Ben said he injured a fetlock yesterday, so I promised I'd keep an eye on him. Plus, I figured you'd be excited to start your new job."

Cole climbs out, his long strides taking him to the tailgate.

He lowers it, and Roxie leaps down, running to nudge me out of the driver's seat. I slide over to ride shotgun while Roxie, then Cole, squeeze into the cab.

"I'll bet Chieftain's not the only thing you'll be watching," I whisper out the window.

Amy Sinclair boards her horse, Damsel, at Hadley's ranch. Amy and Cole are seniors, and lately, she makes it a point to exercise Damsel whenever Cole works. As a member of the wealthiest family in Beaverhead County, Amy gets everything she wants. I just hope the one thing she can't have is Cole. She doesn't deserve him. I take a second to wonder if I feel protective or jealous. Probably both.

"Hey, don't sulk." Cole yanks the end of the braid hanging over my shoulder.

For a minute, I'm afraid I've expressed my opinion of Amy aloud, but then I realize he thinks I'm annoyed because he's taken the keys away from me. Sitting up straighter in the seat, I offer him a grin.

"That's okay. I know you're busy. Mark Crowley offered to take me driving sometime. I can call him." Did I really say that? What's going on with me, anyway?

Cole's dark eyebrows lower, and his grey eyes are nearly black as he scowls. "Mark Crowley is an idiot. He's already wrecked two cars, and he's barely seventeen. The last time Nick arrested him for drunk driving, and the only reason Mark didn't lose his license is because his dad's on the city council. Don't you even think of getting into his car!"

I consider this, then give a bright smile. "Don't worry, Cole. I'll drive."

Cole makes a growly noise, but he doesn't take the bait. Instead, he glances at the bag by my feet.

"You brought old clothes to change into, right?" He eyes my shredded jeans and green hoodie with concern.

"Oh yeah. I came prepared. I've seen you when you've

finished working at Hadley's. I brought the grungiest stuff I own."

"Great." He nods his approval. As we travel the five miles to the Hadley ranch, Cole explains my new duties. "You'll clean out stalls and maintain the equipment. Eventually, you'll help feed the horses."

"When can I exercise them?" I ask. Ben Hadley boards some of the finest horses in the county. I can't wait to ride them.

Cole turns the pickup off Route 278 and onto the dirt road that borders Rattlesnake Creek. Straight ahead is Hadley's Ranch and Stables. He drives under the wooden arch and down the unpaved road, his tires sending swirls of dust behind us.

"Well, Ben is cautious about who rides the horses." He pulls into the circular drive and parks the truck near the stables. "When he gets to know you, he'll see how mature and responsible you are. Exercise will come *much* later."

"Uh, I'm not sure how to take that." I climb down from the cab.

He grins. "C'mon. Grab your bag, and I'll show you where to change." He leads me through the stable yard and into a small equipment building. "There's a bathroom down the hall. When you're ready, come to the main stable next door, and we'll get to work." Then he's gone.

After I change into my old jeans and a T-shirt, I search for Cole. I find him in the paddock, brushing Chieftain. The magnificent black stallion belongs to Amy's uncle, Robert Sinclair, who's also my sister Sly's boss at Sinclair Construction. When Cole sees me, he gives a quick nod.

"You look good in grunge."

"Thanks." Compliments from Cole are rare. I duck my head, pleased.

He studies me for a minute. "Wait. This might help." He removes his baseball cap emblazoned with the Montana Grizzlies emblem and hands it to me.

I gather my long hair, tucking it under the rim, and settle the cap on my head.

Cole grins and tugs the bill down a little more securely. "Perfect."

Leading me to a vacant stall, he lays a tarp near the door. He hands me a pitchfork, showing me how to sift through the straw and toss the soiled part onto the tarp. Later, he'll put the tarp into the wheelbarrow for disposal.

The next hour is spent cleaning horse stalls. I'm deep in a fantasy of a hot bubble bath when a snicker sounds behind me. I turn around to see Amy Sinclair leaning against the side of the stall, watching me.

"Well, well, what have we here?" she sneers. "Hadley's has a new stable hand. Here boy, my mare's stall needs cleaned out next."

I glare at her and pull Cole's cap from my head, tumbling my dark hair around my shoulders.

"Why, if it isn't Jess Thomas!" Amy says in mock surprise. "I thought you were a boy Ben hired."

I figure I was grimy before, but now I feel completely filthy. Amy wears cream-colored jodhpurs, a sky-blue blouse, and shiny black boots, which I'm certain would show my reflection. Her white-blond hair would never think of coming loose from her perfect French braid.

I draw a deep breath and mentally count to ten—in Gaelic. *Aon, dha, tri, ceitmy* ... Cole taught me a few Gaelic words and suggested counting in Gaelic might slow my temper quicker than in English since I have to concentrate harder.

When I reach *deich*, I say brightly, "No, Amy, it's me. Are you riding today?"

Her perfectly arched eyebrows raise a fraction. "No. I'm going dancing." Her tone drips with sarcasm. "I'm waiting for Cole. We're taking Damsel and Chieftain out for a while. We ride together every day, you know." She smirks.

I didn't, but I'd sooner be boiled in hot oil than admit it to Amy. I settle for giving her a slight, bored smile.

"How nice for you." I turn back to my work.

She views the pile of manure I'm shoveling and wrinkles her nose in disgust. "Don't forget to clean Damsel's stall while we're out," she orders. With one more sniff, she leaves.

I jam the pitchfork into the straw with a little more force than necessary. Cole has been busy grooming the horses over in the other stable ever since we started working. He didn't mention his riding date with Amy.

My feelings for Cole confuse me. He dated several girls throughout high school, and it didn't bother me ... much. But when my parents died, he was right there, holding me up—sometimes literally. Over time, our light-hearted and friendly conversations have deepened as we share our individual hopes and dreams for the future.

Now, I feel betrayed. I continue cleaning, my temper simmering over Amy's taunts. I toss a particularly disgusting piece of straw over my shoulder.

"Hey!" Cole's startled voice sounds behind me. "Be careful where you sling that stuff, Jess."

I swing around to see him brushing the sleeve of his denim jacket. His jeans are dusty, and his tousled black hair is messy, but it makes him look even more appealing. The jerk.

"Sorry," I say, insincerely.

Cole studies me through narrowed eyes. "Is something wrong? I warned you it's dirty work."

I turn away. "No. Nothing is wrong," I lie. "It will take me a few days to get used to it, that's all."

"Did you talk to Amy? Ben says she headed this way."

"Yes. She was here a minute ago." I scoop more straw over my shoulder. "She went looking for you." I turn and glare at him through the curtain of my hair.

"Okay. Jess, you can take a break if you're getting tired," he says, studying me with concern.

"I told you, I'm fine," I snap. "You'd better not be late for your date with The Princess."

He opens his mouth.

"Cole, let's go," Amy calls.

"I'll be right there, Amy." He glances over as she appears in the open doorway. "Why don't you lead Damsel around, and we'll leave in a second?"

Her mouth tightens, but after a moment, she moves away. "Hurry, please."

"Maybe you shouldn't have a weapon right now." Cole grins and takes the pitchfork, propping it against the stall.

I fold my arms across my chest. "You'd better go, Cole. You heard Amy. It wouldn't do to keep the Sinclair Princess waiting."

He frowns and reaches over, tipping my chin with his finger. Gazing into his eyes, I almost forget my anger. Who am I kidding—I almost forget my name.

"Jess—"

"I'm waiting," Amy shouts.

He gives an exasperated sigh. "We'll talk later." He turns and strides from the barn.

Frustration floods through me. It seems like Cole was ready to say something significant when Amy derailed him. "Must not have been too important if just a call from The Princess changed his mind," I grumble to myself. "We'll talk later," I mimic as I retrieve the pitchfork. "Who does he think he is? It doesn't matter to me what he does."

My hard work pays off, and by the time they return, the stable is gleaming. As Amy passes, she shoots me a gloating glance over her shoulder, and I regret there's no more disgusting straw in reach.

Five-thirty arrives, and we climb into Cole's truck for the trip home. He pulls onto the highway, then looks at me and sighs.

"Okay, Jess, I can see the steam rising. What did Amy say to you?"

I glare out of the side window and shrug. "I'm not sure what you mean."

He makes a sound of disgust. "Jess, she said something to make you mad. Earlier, when I stopped by, you were in a great mood. Even mucking out the stalls didn't seem to bother you. The next thing I know, Amy arrived, and you were dumping ... straw ... on me. Now, what happened?"

I realize I won't be able to distract him, so I might as well voice the turmoil that's been roiling in me all afternoon.

"Amy told me the two of you have a date every afternoon. Here I've imagined you working hard after school when in reality you've been riding with The Princess." My eyes flash with the accusation.

Cole's mouth tightens as he grips the steering wheel, then pulls off the highway. He parks in a scenic overlook that offers a fantastic view of Bannack State Park. Unfastening his seatbelt, he shifts closer to me. I move away, but he stops me by laying his hand on my arm.

"First, Jess, I don't go riding with Amy every afternoon. She's worried about Damsel's gait and asked me to check her. Chieftain needed exercise, so I told her I'd come along and see if there's a problem. Whatever she told you about any other rides isn't true. This is the first time we've ever ridden together."

"But she was practically all over you."

"I get that you don't care for her, Jess, but she isn't bad once you get to know her."

I roll my eyes.

He laughs. "Or maybe not. But Amy's a valuable customer of Hadley's, and I'm employed by them."

I stare out the window, determined to stay mad. Amy makes me feel like I'm only good for mucking the stables. Like I'm not good enough for Cole, and I worry she's right. It hurts, and for me, hurt sometimes looks like anger.

"Jess." Cole's tone sounds vulnerable.

I face him. His expression mixes frustration and concern

with something else. I wish I could define it. Whatever it is, I'm having trouble catching my breath.

"That's all it is, Jess. Work."

My anger forgotten, I tremble a little as he reaches to pull me closer. He leans down, and I close my eyes. Cole is going to kiss me, and I'm covered in horse yuck and straw.

Whoop, whoop.

We jump apart as if we've been scalded and see Nick McBride, Cole's older brother, drive by in a Sheriff's Department squad car. Deputy Nick laughs, shaking his finger at us. Cole waves back.

"Busted," he says, scooting across the seat and pulling the truck onto the highway.

I brush my hair away from my warm cheeks. "See what happens when you have a brother who's a cop," I grin. "You can't get away with anything."

A few minutes later, I breeze into my house and head for the shower. I replay our almost-kiss. At least, I believe Cole had been ready to kiss me. But what do I know? Lately, I've caught him looking at me like he's seeing me for the first time.

Several girls at school say Cole is hot. But it hasn't affected me, other than when they join us at the Dairy Barn, uninvited. Apparently, it doesn't occur to anyone I might be dating Cole. People are so used to seeing us together, they probably view us as brother and sister.

But I definitely don't think of him as a sibling, and I hope he doesn't see me that way either. My best friend, Grace Compton, recently said she noticed Cole studying me with a curious expression.

'It's like he's trying to memorize your face,' she said.

I'd blushed and laughed it off, but today has convinced me. I'm torn between seeing what develops between us and risking our deep friendship.

The past ten months have been the hardest of my life. On a November afternoon last year, my parents drove to Billings to

get my birthday present. I'd caught them smiling at me and whispering together for days, and I knew this would be a special gift.

It was snowing as they walked to the car that day. I'd laughed when I saw my dad scoop a little snow and touch the back of Mamma's neck. Shrieking in surprise, Mamma laughed and threw a handful of the cold stuff back at Dad. They climbed into the car, still laughing as they drove away. That is my last memory of my parents. An accident took them from me.

Those weeks are still a blur. My older sister, Sly, came home from college and became guardian of me and our younger sister, Maggie. But one thing remained constant. Cole. He held me when I cried, somehow realizing no words would be enough.

Now, thinking our relationship might go to a new level is equally thrilling and terrifying.

After my shower, I enter the empty kitchen, surprised that Sly hasn't started dinner. I walk to the fridge, where I find a note secured by a Montana shaped magnet. Sly's slanted handwriting reads, 'Called into work for a short meeting. Home by noon.'

Glancing at the clock, I see that it's already 6:00 p.m. Where is Sly?

I grab my phone to call our next-door neighbor, Mrs. Mendelsohn. Maggie is probably there, and she'll be eager to come home.

Soon, Maggie bounds in and gives me a hug. "Thanks for rescuing me. Mrs. M wanted me to try her new strudel recipe. You called just in time."

"Strudel doesn't sound too bad. Even Mrs. M. can't mess that up too much." Mrs. Mendelsohn uses us as her guinea pigs to test her latest contest recipes.

Maggie wrinkles her nose. "Spinach strudel?"

I shudder.

"You should have smelled it," she says. "Yuck."

"Mm," I tease, as I set the table with three flowered plates.

"I'm tired from working today, and I don't want to cook tonight. We could offer to test it."

I laugh at the appalled expression on Maggie's face.

"Just kidding, Magpie." I ruffle her dark hair. "We're eating spaghetti tonight. Could you chop the salad for me?"

Maggie races to the sink, obviously relieved she's escaped the strudel.

We work together and soon have dinner on the table. Maggie sets out the salad dressing as Sly's car pulls into the drive.

"Perfect timing," Maggie grins.

We're happy to have such an appealing meal waiting for our sister. Sly works hard at Sinclair Construction, and I want to relieve some of the pressure. Our expectant grins fade, though, when Sly enters the kitchen. Her puffy eyes make it clear she's been crying.

"Sly, what's wrong?" I reach her first, followed by Maggie. "Did you have an accident? Are you okay?"

Sly works to compose herself.

"No, I'm fine. At least physically. I've been driving for hours, not sure what to do."

Sly's voice breaks as Maggie and I hold her.

"I'm sorry, girls, but I was fired!"

Saturday, September 1

6:30 p.m.

THE SPAGHETTI IS a congealed mess in Mamma's big yellow pasta bowl. I move it and the now slimy salad to the counter and rejoin my sisters at the table. It's hard to believe just thirty minutes ago I'd been anticipating a delicious dinner. Now the lingering aroma is nauseating.

Maggie is a little ball of misery on Sly's lap. Her sniffles are the background music for the scene that replays in my mind. Sly

had shocked us with those three simple words: I was fired. But the words that came next were devastating.

“Robert Sinclair accused me of stealing money from the company.” Sly’s voice had trembled with rage. “He said if I make arrangements to repay the money, he might not press charges. Otherwise, I could go to jail.”

Sly and I had been so intent on our conversation we’d forgotten Maggie was in the room. But her deep sob at the word, ‘jail’, had us moving to gather our little sister in our arms. Eventually, Sly had lifted Maggie’s slight weight and sat down to hold her while the emotional storm raged.

“Will Jess and I have to live with strangers?” Maggie’s whispered words draw me out of the memory.

Sly and I exchange startled looks over Maggie’s head.

“No, of course not.” Sly’s words are infused with assurance, but Maggie pushes away.

I watch as Sly gently guides Maggie upstairs, whispering words of comfort.

“But how can you know for sure?” Maggie’s words echo down the stairway and my heart breaks at the bleakness in her tone. She’s only eleven years old and already she’s lost too much.

My fault. I shake my head, trying to dislodge the accusation of my mind. My heart. I can’t think about that right now. I force myself to concentrate on today’s crisis, and as terrifying as it is, I almost welcome the distraction. I can’t change the past, but maybe I can do something to stop the devastation of our future.