

# OCTOBER OUTLAW



JUSTICE, MONTANA SERIES  
- Book Two -

## DEBBI MIGIT



**Scrivenings**  
PRESS

Quench your thirst for story.  
[www.ScriveningsPress.com](http://www.ScriveningsPress.com)

©2021 Debbi Migit

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

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy and recording— without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotation in printed reviews.

Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-165-8

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-166-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021948008

Editors: Elena Hill and Linda Fulkerson

Cover by [www.bookmarketinggraphics.com](http://www.bookmarketinggraphics.com).

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

*Dedicated to the Flynn family. We are writers, artists, poets, singers, songwriters, crafters of all kinds, photographers, film-makers. Creatives.*

*A very special thank you to my Flynn cousin, Krista, who helped me thicken the plot.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Keith and Christine, for my peaceful writing retreat. You bless me.

Mom, my best beta reader, who loves everything I write.

Phil, I couldn't do this without your support. Literally.  
#punsrus

Linda Fulkerson, Elena Hill, and everyone at Scrivenings Press.

Thank you!



*Sunday, October 7*

*6:30 p.m.*

If I'd known my evening included being stalked by a cougar, I would've worn different shoes. I picture my red Chucks, the right one nestled near my desk, the left one upside down on my overflowing clothes hamper. Now those are cougar-stalking shoes.

I glance at the pointed toes of my black and white cowboy boots. They were a perfect choice to go with my denim skirt and slouchy black sweater when I dressed for church this morning. Wriggling my pinched toes, I jolt as Grace grabs my arm.

"Shh. Quit squirming, Jess, or he'll hear you." Grace's voice trembles, and I don't blame her. At least I have pointy toes to kick my way out of an attack. Grace is wearing ballet flats.

"I wonder if he tracks us by smell?" I ask, regretting I washed my hair this morning with my favorite shampoo, Eden Spring. Then I smile, remembering how much Cole likes my shampoo.

"Are you smiling?" Grace is incredulous. "This is not a smiling situation." She narrows her eyes. "You're thinking about Cole, aren't you?"

My face heats, and I hope Grace doesn't notice in the darkness. "Yes," I admit. "I think he'd be pretty handy right about now, don't you?"

"Especially if he brought Roxie," Grace agrees.

Roxie, Cole's Australian Shepherd, is gentle, but she can be very protective when necessary. Cougar stalking qualifies.

"You know what else would be useful right now?" I add. "A cellphone." I glance at the phone Grace is gripping. "Specifically, one with some battery left."

"Well, at least I brought my phone."

She's right. I forgot my phone. Again. With a weak grin, I suggest, "I suppose you can throw it at the cougar." I make jokes when I'm nervous.

Grace opens her mouth to tell me what she thinks of that plan. But an unearthly scream slices the night, drowning out Grace's soft, Georgia accent, and we echo with our own shrieks.

"He's getting closer. We have to get out of here," Grace states the obvious through chattering teeth.

I peek around the edge of the small utility shed, hoping it conceals us from the largest cougar I've ever seen. I want to kick myself with my pointy-toed boots for insisting we walk this far. Justice, Montana, sits at the foot of the Pioneer Mountains. Usually, the wildlife stays in the mountains, seldom venturing this close to civilization.

I recognized the eerie wail of a cougar a few days ago when Cole and I were leaving our jobs at the Hadley Ranch. But this meeting is my first in person. Or cougar. Or whatever.

Next to me, Grace snuffles, and I squint at her. "Are you crying?"

"No, I'm trying not to sneeze." She scrunches up her nose. We hold our breaths, then sigh as the urge passes. "The Olson's are having a bonfire, and you know what smoke does to my sinuses."

We press against the shed, senses alert for any sign the cougar has found us.

“Ah-choo!”

Grace’s blue eyes widen in horror. We both know what’s coming next. Grace always sneezes three times. Always.

“Ah-choo, ah-choo.” The baby sneezes shake her body but barely make a sound.

A minute passes, then two. Laughter drifts from the Olson’s back yard, and I suddenly crave a s’more. And safety. Not necessarily in that order.

Grace touches my hand, and I flinch but continue looking toward the field where we last sighted the cougar. Nothing.

“Jess,” Grace murmurs.

“I don’t see him. Let’s make a break for it.” I’m counting on fear and adrenaline to overcome our poor choice of footwear.

Grace squeezes my hand tighter. “Jess.”

I give her hand a return squeeze. “We can do this,” but I’m interrupted by Grace again.

“Jess!”

Startled, I shift to look at her, but Grace’s attention focuses somewhere else. She’s staring in stark terror at the massive cougar standing ten yards away. He’s eyeing us like we’re the main course in an all-you-can-eat buffet. I detect the shimmer of one green eye in the moonlight, and I swear he licks his lips. Knees buckling, I slump against the shed by Grace.

“Grace,” I whisper. “Do you notice anything strange about that cougar?”

She looks at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“You mean other than the fact he wants to devour us?”

“He only has one eye.”

“One is all he needs,” she says, her tone laced with bitterness.

We each hold our breath as the cat tenses his muscles, preparing to pounce. Then he opens his giant mouth, displaying impressively sharp teeth. Yet instead of another spine-chilling howl, I hear the powerful *whoop, whoop* of a police siren. In a split second, the cougar turns and bounds away, retreating into the timbers where he belongs.

My legs give way, and I join Grace, where she's collapsed to the ground.

Around the corner, men are talking, and I recognize the voice of Deputy Sheriff Nick McBride, Cole's older brother. As a flashlight beam sweeps the pasture, I see Levi Cooper, a Deputy Sheriff Cadet, who has been training with Nick. They're facing away from us.

Levi turns toward the squad car, and I panic. What if they leave us here? What if the cougar comes back and brings his friends and family?

I open my mouth to call out but instead give a tiny squeak. I've heard mice make more noise. It's like a dream where you try to scream, but you can't. Grace looks like she's experiencing the same dilemma. As the flashlight beam moves farther away, Grace pounds her fist against the side of the shed. I join her, and a moment later, a flashlight beam is blinding us.

"Ouch." I try to shield my eyes.

Then the silence is so absolute I can hear the crickets over in Miller's pond.

Finally, Nick shakes his head and asks, "Why am I not surprised?"

---

*7:30 p.m.*

GRACE and I huddle together on my living room sofa. My older sister Sly tucks a soft blanket around us, then rushes off to make chamomile tea. Nick is speaking on his police radio to someone named Ranger Hawthorn.

Levi sprawls in the recliner across from us. "Dispatch says the phones are blowing up with calls about the cougar. You're the only ones who saw it, but lots of people recognized the screams." He nods at Nick. "It sounds like the trackers will head out as soon as possible."



Grace and I glance at each other and, in one voice, say, “Don’t hurt it!”

Levi frowns and shakes his head. “They may not have much choice. He’s been killing cattle on the mountain for the last month. He even tried to attack one of Mr. Marlin’s horses last week, but a rifle shot scared him away.

“That he’s come into town, well ...” Levi’s voice trails off as we imagine what could have happened tonight.

Sly hurries into the room, carrying a tray with mugs of tea and peanut butter cookies she baked this afternoon. Nick finishes his conversation and sits beside her on the loveseat. As usual, a smile forms when I see Nick and Sly together. They’ve only been a couple for a few short weeks, but clearly, they’re already in love.

I’m thrilled for Sly. When our parents died last year, she left college and took guardianship of me and our younger sister, Maggie, who recently turned 12. Even as our little family created a new normal, Sly’s employer, Robert Sinclair, accused her of embezzlement. He threatened her with prison while Maggie and I faced the prospect of foster care.

Determined that wouldn’t happen, I investigated on my own. I shiver, thinking of the dangerous situations I faced during that time.

Sly hands me a mug of tea. “I’m so glad God protected you and Grace tonight.”

“Yeah, Jess’s angels are earning their wings this year.” Cole stands in the doorway, his expression a mix of concern and exasperation.

My heart flips at the sight of him, but I defend myself, “Hey, I was taking a walk and minding my own business.”

Cole settles beside me and smooths a strand of hair from my face. “That’s my point,” he smirks. “You seem to find trouble even when you aren’t searching for it. Heaven help us when you are.”

I sip my tea, remembering those occasions when I searched for trouble.

Cole leans over to murmur, "I was teasing. I'm glad the cougar didn't hurt you two."

I smile at him. "I know, but what are the odds? Two girls out for an evening walk, stalked by a cougar."

To Sly, I offer, "You can have our interview for *The Voice of Justice*." Sly recently accepted a job as a photojournalist for our local newspaper, so the least I can do is give her an exclusive.

But, instead of looking excited, Sly bounces up, nearly knocking Nick's tea from his hand. Fortunately, Nick has excellent reflexes. It's probably a cop thing.

"Grace," Sly says. "Call your parents immediately. I don't want them to see this on Facebook. Word will be all over Justice in a few hours."

Grace's parents took her younger brother, Josh, to Missoula, and she's staying with us until they return later tonight.

Grace reassures her. "I used Levi's phone and called them on the way here."

"Oh my." Sly sinks into the love seat. "What did they say?"

"Mom cried a little, Dad said he would contact the wildlife officer tomorrow, and of course, Josh was jealous." Grace gives a slight grin, obviously remembering the excitement in her 10-year-old brother's voice.

"I'll call your mom myself," Sly assures Grace. "I feel terrible this happened while you were staying with us."

"Well, it's not like you drove up the mountain, grabbed the cat, and hauled him down here to terrorize teenage girls." Nick reaches for another peanut butter cookie. "So, why were you girls on the edge of town, anyway?" His matter-of-fact tone contrasts with his unwavering stare.

Grace glances at me, and I shrug.

"Exercise?" I offer.

Nick eyes my pointy-toed boots. "Right," he drawls. However, his tone suggests he doesn't believe that for one

second. He reaches for another cookie and stands. “Levi and I are going to the sheriff’s department and check the progress of the great cougar hunt. Everyone stick close to home until we get the all-clear, got it?”

I try not to be offended that when he says everyone, he stares at me.

Nick and Levi leave just as my younger sister, Maggie, rushes through the door. Her brown eyes are wide as she kneels beside me.

“Jess, are you guys, okay?” Maggie is petite and graceful, which makes her a talented gymnast. But now, shaking makes her clumsy as she reaches for me. I gather her into my lap, and Cole gently tugs at Maggie’s auburn braid.

“She’s okay, Magpie,” he says.

After our parent’s accident, Maggie struggled to accept their deaths. Then, a few weeks ago, she became more fearful as our family faced Sly’s crisis. She’s blossoming again, but we’re very protective of her. I hope tonight’s adventure doesn’t trigger her nightmares.

I hold Maggie tight until I sense the stress leave her. Sly sits beside us and asks, “How did you know about the cougar? I wanted to tell you myself.”

“Kylie Warren posted it on Instagram.” Maggie muffles her words in my black sweater. Grace and I give each other an of-course-she-did look. No event in Justice is too insignificant for Kylie to document. A cougar in town will be a social media Christmas to her.

Sly gives Maggie’s knee two gentle pats. “Jess and Grace are safe now. Go relax with a nice bath before bed.”

I remember the times Mamma gave those two soft pats to show everything was fine. I’m sure Sly isn’t even aware she did it.

Maggie studies me to make sure I’m whole and undevoured. Then she follows Sly upstairs, grabbing a cookie on her way.

Cole moves to the recliner and leans forward, his elbows resting on his knees. At 6 foot 2 inches, Cole fills up my dad’s

chair. He glances at me, Grace, and back to me. Then he nods at my boots and asks, "Exercise?"

Grace gives an unladylike snort, but otherwise leaves me to explain.

"Hey, it's no big deal. I needed to have a private conversation with Grace. Since it was a nice night, we took a walk. End of story."

Grace stares at me in dismay. "There was no *we* in that decision. You announced you had something important to tell me, and you insisted we keep walking. If you remember, I wanted to sit in my dad's warm car and talk. It's a proven cougar-free zone."

I gape at her. "Grace, what part of 'no one else can know' didn't you get?" I look pointedly at Cole, who raises an eyebrow.

"You needed to tell Grace something about me?" He asks. "Or about us?"

I'm distracted for a minute by the knowledge that Cole and I are an 'us.' Then I realize what he's asking. "No," I say, "not about you or ... us ..." I stammer, feeling my cheeks warm. "I just don't want Sly to know. Yet."

"Something dangerous." It's not a question, and Cole's frown is one I haven't seen since I risked my life several times to keep Sly out of prison. I haven't missed that expression at all.

"Doubtful," I say.

"So, yes," Cole says.

Grace turns to me, her blue eyes wide. "Jess, I didn't realize it was anything like that. I thought it upset you when Cole talked to Gwen Torres after church today."

I scowl at Grace, giving her a slight kick with my pointy toes. "Grace," I hiss. She glares back at me as she rubs her shin.

"This is a fascinating conversation, but let's go back to Jess doing something dangerous." Nick stands in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest.

"What are you, a ninja or something?" I mutter. "I thought you left."

“I did. Then I came back.” Nick is a man of few words, but he makes them count.

As Sly descends the stairs, her face brightens when she sees Nick. He glances up, his expression softening. But if I think my sister will be a distraction, I don’t know this sheriff’s deputy.

“Jess is about to tell us some important information.” Nick takes Sly’s hand and tugs her to the loveseat.

“Oh?” Sly sounds puzzled but not alarmed, and my heart squeezes as I consider the grief she’ll soon face. It’s a heartache I’ve been carrying, alone, for a week.

“Jess?” Grace notices my tears and reaches for my hand. “I’m sorry.”

She starts to say more, but I surge up, tired of carrying this knowledge alone. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

Their worried expressions haunt me as I race to my bedroom. I reach the closet and shove aside old backpacks and games until I pull out an ordinary manila file folder. Then, trembling, I return to the living room to break my sister’s heart.