

TERRI *New York Times* bestselling author  
BLACKSTOCK

SHADOW IN  
SERENITY



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*Shadow in Serenity*

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# one

Logan Brisco had the people of Serenity, Texas, eating out of his hand, and that was just where he wanted them.

He worked hard to cultivate the smile of a traveling evangelist, the confidence of a busy capitalist, the secrecy of a government spy, and the charisma of a pied piper. No one in town knew where he'd come from or why he was there, and he wasn't talking. But he made sure they knew he was on a mission, and that it was something big.

From the moment he drove his Navigator in, wearing his thousand-dollar suit and Italian shoes, tongues began wagging. Rumor had it that Logan Brisco was a movie producer scouting talent for his latest picture. But the weekly patrons of the Clippetty Doo Dah Salon were sure he was a billionaire-in-hiding, looking for a wife. And the men at Slade Hampton's Barbershop buzzed about the money he was likely to invest in the community.

Two days after he arrived, the UPS man delivered two large boxes marked "Fragile" and addressed to "Brisco, c/o The Welcome Inn." One of the boxes had the return address of a prominent bank in Dallas. The other was marked "Hollywood, California." The gossip grew more frenzied.

For two weeks, he chatted with the people of the town, ate in its restaurants, shopped in its stores, bonded with its

men, flirted with its women. As soon as speculation peaked, Logan would be ready to go in for the kill.

This one might be his biggest score yet.

The next step would be to hold one of his seminars, the kind where people came in with bundles of cash and left with empty pockets and heads full of dreams. That was what he was best at. Building dreams and taking money.

On his second Saturday in town—which consisted mostly of four streets of shops, offices, and restaurants—the sun shone brightly after a week of rain. It was the day Serenity’s citizens filled the streets, catching up on errands and chores. Perfect.

His first stop that morning was at Peabody’s Print Shop, where yesterday he had talked Julia Peabody into printing a thousand fliers for him on credit. “I’m not authorized to spend money on this project without the signatures of my major investors,” he’d told her in a conspiratorial voice. “Can you just bill me at the Welcome Inn?”

Julia, the pretty daughter of the print shop owner, glanced over her shoulder to see if her father was near. “Well, we’re not supposed to give credit, Mr. Brisco.”

He leaned on the counter. “Logan, please.”

“Logan,” she said, blushing. “I mean ... couldn’t you just write a check or use a credit card and let your investors pay you back?”

“I’m in the process of opening a bank account here,” he said with the hint of a grin sparkling in his eyes. “Thing is, I opened it yesterday, but they told me not to write any checks on it until my money is transferred from my Dallas bank. Now, if I were to write you a check and ask you to hold it, that would be exactly the same thing as your giving me credit, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, yes, I guess it would,” she said.

He smiled and paused for a moment, as though he'd lost his train of thought. "You know, they sure do grow the women pretty in Serenity."

Julia breathed a laugh and rolled her eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Logan said. "I changed the subject, didn't I?"

"That's okay."

"So ... would you prefer a postdated check or credit?" While she was thinking it over, he dropped the timbre of his voice and said, "By the way, are you planning to be at the bingo hall tomorrow night?"

"I think so."

"Good," he said. "I was hoping you would."

Flustered, she had taken his order. "All right, Logan, I'll give you credit. You don't look like the type who would make me sorry."

"Just look into these eyes, Julia. Tell me you don't see pure, grade-A honesty."

Today, when he went back in to pick up the fliers, he turned the charm up a notch. "Not only are you the prettiest girl in Serenity, but you're the most talented too. These are excellent fliers."

Julia giggled and touched her hair. "Uh, Logan ... I meant to ask you ... what project is it that you're working on? I looked all over it, but the flier didn't say."

He shot her a you-devil grin and brought his index finger to his lips. "I can't tell you before I tell the rest of the townfolk, now can I? It wouldn't be fair to cut you in before anybody else has had a chance."

"Oh, I wouldn't tell anyone," she promised. "Discretion is my middle name. Secrets come through this shop all the time, and I never say a word. Politicians, clergymen, what-not. Everybody in town knows they can trust me."

Chuckling, he handed her back one of the fliers. “Come to the bingo hall early tonight, and you’ll hear everything you want to know. Now don’t forget to send me that bill.”

With a wink he was out the door, leaving her staring after him with a wistful look.

Stepping out into the cool sunlight of the May day, he looked down at the box of fliers. It shouldn’t be hard to pass all of them out by tonight. And having the seminar at the bingo hall in the town’s community center was a stroke of genius. That place drew hundreds of people on Saturday nights, and tonight they would just come an hour earlier to hear him. By tomorrow, he’d be riding high.

He would hit the hardware store next, since it seemed inordinately busy today. Easy marks there—he’d hook every one of them.

He stopped, waited for a car to pass, then started to dart across the street. The sound of a Harley hog stopped him. It growled its warning as it tore its way up the street, breaking the relative quiet that he had come to associate with the town. He stepped back when it passed, but when its wheel cut through a puddle, it splashed mud onto the shins of his pants.

“Hey!” he yelled. The driver apparently didn’t hear. Logan stared after the bike, which carried a woman and a little boy. The petite biker’s shoulder-length blonde hair stuck out from under her tangerine helmet, softening the impression created by the powerful bike. As she went up the street, people looked her way and waved, apparently pleased to see her rather than annoyed at the disruption.

Logan tried to rein in his temper as she pulled into a parking space and cut off the loud engine. It wouldn’t pay to ruin the image he’d so carefully cultivated here by throttling the first woman who had the gall to ruffle his feathers.

It was an accident, he told himself. An accident she would probably be glad to apologize for.

As she got off the bike, he approached her. “Excuse me, ma’am. I’m not one to hold grudges, but you just splashed mud all over my pants.”

The woman pulled off her helmet, revealing a head full of baby-blond hair. She looked like that little actress Kristin Chenoweth, with a flash of fire in her eyes.

First, she eyed him with curiosity, then glanced down at his muddy legs. “Sorry. Why were you standing next to a puddle?”

He shifted the fliers from one arm to the other and gaped at the woman as her boy got off the bike. She didn’t seem to have the stature to hold up a Harley, much less ride one, but she stepped on the kickstand with little effort.

“I wasn’t standing next to a puddle—I was crossing the street,” he said. “I paid a fortune for these pants!”

“You know, I bet it would come off with a little water, if you don’t stand here and let them dry. A little mud never hurt anyone, though. Did it, Jason?”

“Nope. It washes right off. I get into it all the time.” The child, who looked no more than seven, held up his own feet and showed Logan the splashed mud on the bottoms of his jeans. “Hey, are you the movie producer guy?”

Still frowning, Logan nodded. “Yeah. I mean, no. Where’d you get that idea?”

“Everybody’s talking,” Jason said. “I’ve had the flu, so we haven’t been to town, but we heard all about you.”

With effort, Logan swallowed his ire and flashed the boy that political grin. “Well, I guess they are. Maybe I’ve been a little too secretive. My name’s Logan Brisco.” He reached out to shake the woman’s hand, but she seemed not to notice. He settled for shaking the boy’s.

"I'm Jason Sullivan," the kid said. "And this is my mom."

"Mrs. Sullivan," he said, nodding and searching those eyes for some sign of admiration. When he addressed them formally, women usually corrected him and told him their first names. But not this one. She couldn't have been less interested. "You know, if everybody's so curious, they'll be able to find out tonight what I'm doing in town. Six o'clock, at the bingo hall. Hope you'll both be there. And here ... I'll give you a few of these fliers to pass out, if you wouldn't mind."

The woman didn't take the fliers, but the boy grabbed the stack he offered.

"Me too? Do I get to come?" the kid asked.

"Sure. This affects everybody in town."

"What does?" The woman took one of the fliers out of her son's hand and scanned it. "It doesn't say here what your seminar is about."

Dipping his head to her ear, he said in his most confidential voice, "It's about making all your dreams come true."

She wasn't moved. "My dreams have already come true."

That was a new one, he thought, stepping back. No one had ever told him that. "Then let me show you how to make the most of them," he said in the mesmerizing tone that had made him such a success. "Let me show you how to maximize your potential and minimize your risk, how to build your fortune the way everybody else in this town is going to, how to make your mark in the world."

A smile transformed her face, and she met his eyes. "Really? You could do that? I could get rich?"

Now he had her. "It's practically a guarantee."

"Wow," she said, pulling her purse out of a compartment on her bike. "How much will it cost me? I can write you a check right now. Two hundred? Two *thousand*? Maybe my life's savings? Do you take debit cards?"

He chuckled, not certain how to take her.

Suddenly, that ditzy smile vanished, and she stood a little taller. "Let me give you a warning, Mr. Brisco, if that's your real name. Not everyone in this town is fooled by that act. It only takes one person to blow your cover, and I'm the one who's going to do it."

His smile crashed. "What makes you think there's a cover to blow?"

Her cool smile told him there was no doubt in her mind. "I know your kind," she said. "I knew it the first time one of my neighbors waxed poetic about the new man in town. You're a two-bit con artist, and you think you can ride into Serenity and milk these people for everything they're worth. This town has enough problems. I won't let you do it."

She turned to walk away. Following her, he said, "You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"What if you're wrong, and you miss out on your chance to get richer than you ever imagined?"

"I'm never wrong," she said. "Ask anybody." Holding her helmet by the chin strap, she headed up the sidewalk.

Logan watched her stroll away from him, her son at her heels. Clearly, she didn't need or want Logan's attention. He would have staked everything on the probability that she drew men's gazes wherever she went. When she reached the hardware store, she grabbed Jason's fliers and glanced back, as if to make sure Logan was watching as she dropped them into the trash.

Logan grinned. This would be even more fun than he'd thought. He might have to stay longer than he'd planned, just to meet the challenge of the little lady whose first name he didn't know.

The ladies of the Clippety Doo Dah Salon cackled and

fluttered as Logan stepped inside, breathing in the scent of hair spray and peroxide and trying not to cough. "Hello, ladies," he said with his best grin.

A dozen gals crooned back their hellos and preened with their rollers, their rods, and their teased tresses, as if he could see past them to the beauty that lay just moments away. Across the room, he saw Julia Peabody sitting in front of the hair dryers, where she had the attention of at least five women. *Perfect*, Logan thought. She had to be talking about him.

"Mr. Brisco!" Lahoma Kirtland called from the sink where she was dyeing the head of Mildred Smith. Abandoning her client, she held her gloved, red-dyed hands up like a surgeon and made a beeline across the shop.

"Please, darlin'. My daddy was Mr. Brisco. I'm just Logan." He looked around the room. "I was just strolling through town, wondering where all the prettiest ladies were. And lo and behold, I think I've found them all right here."

The women giggled and exchanged delighted looks. "It's so nice to see you," Lahoma said. "We were just talking about you, weren't we, girls?"

"Were you now? Nothing bad, I hope." He glanced through the arch that separated the main part of the salon from the room with the dryers. Julia Peabody had a deer-in-the-headlights look. He chuckled. "Julia, honey. You aren't giving away all my secrets now, are you?"

Julia popped to her feet. "I was just spreading word about your seminar. Everyone's so excited."

"Well, good," he said, reaching into his box and pulling out a handful of fliers. "I hope you'll tell your friends, and your friends' friends, and your enemies, and your sweethearts, and ..."

A titter of giggles made its way around the shop as he put a flier into each lady's hand.

"Tell them all that this could be the most important meeting of their lives. Years from now, you'll all look back and remember how your lives were changed when Logan Brisco blew into town."

The door clanged open behind him and closed with a tinkling bell. He turned around and saw the biker chick bouncing her son on her back as she cut across the salon toward Lahoma's station, zigzagging and swaying, pretending she might drop the boy. Holding on for dear life, he giggled and shouted for her to stop.

Spotting Lahoma across the shop, she spun around, inciting a scream from the child. "Lahoma," she shouted over his giggles, "have you got time to give Jason a haircut? Slade's too busy down at the barbershop."

"We can work him in, honey, as soon as one of the girls is finished," Lahoma said. "Come on over here and get one of Logan's fliers."

The blonde's eyes met his, and contempt hardened her features again. Letting her son slide down her back, she blew her wispy bangs out of her eyes and came toward the beautician, who held his flier with her rubber gloves still wet with red dye.

"I already got one," she said. "I put it in an appropriate place."

Grinning, Logan turned back to the patrons. "Now if you ladies wouldn't mind passing some out," he said, "I'll give you a few extra fliers."

"I'll take some," a woman beneath a dryer called.

Mildred sat up, the red dye forgotten in her hair. "I'll take some too."

“Anybody else?” Logan asked. “You won’t regret it. Anybody you talk into coming will owe you a lifelong debt.”

“Sold,” his nemesis said, her eyes dancing. “Give me the whole stack. I’ll be rid of them in five minutes.”

He chuckled and withheld them from her. “I don’t think so. Besides, you’ve got that haircut to wait for. And this place is chock-full of lovely young ladies who’d be more than willing to come to the aid of a newcomer in town.”

“Oh, brother.” She grabbed her son’s hand and headed back to the door. “Come on, Jason, let’s go.”

“Aren’t you going to get him his haircut?” Lahoma called after her.

“I think I’ll go wait for Slade,” she said. “The air’s a little hot in here. And Lahoma, you should really finish Mildred’s hair before that peroxide eats through her scalp.”

The door clanged shut behind her, and Lahoma slapped her red hands on her face. “Oh, my word, I forgot!” She ran to where Mildred sat with dye dripping down her forehead, hastily pushed the red head back into the sink, and turned the water on.

Logan grinned and watched out the window as the blonde woman ambled up the sidewalk. “I don’t think she likes me.”

“Sure she does,” Lahoma said. “Carny gets along with everybody. You just have to get used to her. She’s been a breath of fresh air to this town.”

“Carny?” he asked. “What kind of name is that?”

“She was brought up in a carnival,” Lahoma replied.

So that was it. She had street smarts. That might get in his way.

Mildred’s eyes rolled back in her head as Lahoma scrubbed her scalp, and in a voice just short of a groan, she

said, “Carny Sullivan. She moved here when she married Bev’s boy, Abe.”

“Then she isn’t a native of Serenity?”

“Carny?” Lahoma chuckled. “Heavens, no. But she’s sure brought life to it. Abe was no good, though. He lit out a year after he brought her here. Wound up dead in Amarillo. Barroom brawl, they said.”

“And she stayed?”

“Of course she did. She’s one of us now. We love her, even if she does do her own hair.”

Laughing, Logan offered his goodbyes to the ladies and went back outside. Carny and her son sat on the bench outside the barbershop, a block down. He strolled toward them as if in no particular hurry.

She was probably in her late twenties. That savvy edge she had, that mature expression on her face, that lack of innocence only made her more attractive to him.

*Stay away, Logan*, he warned himself. That had been Montague’s first rule. Never let a woman get under your skin—especially one who had the goods on you. It could be the kiss of death. Yet he liked a challenge, and he couldn’t resist confronting her again . . . just one more time.

She gave him a smug look as he approached. “Bet you didn’t pay for those fliers.”

“Of course I did,” he said, surprised.

She laughed and pulled her foot up to the edge of the bench. “No, you didn’t. You conned her into giving you credit, didn’t you? And you probably haven’t let go of a cent at the Welcome Inn yet.”

He set the box on the end of the bench, trying to look unruffled. “How did you know where I’m staying?”

She smiled. “I’m a genius. That, and the fact that it’s the only motel in town. So how are you planning to hoodwink

the men in the barbershop? Can't flirt with them like you did the ladies. But you can still flatter them, can't you? Touch on their misfortune. Plant ideas in their minds. You've probably learned enough about the people here in two weeks to know all their Achilles' heels."

His smile faded. Setting his mud-splattered foot on the edge of the bench, he leaned toward her. "I don't know yours."

She met his eyes boldly. "That's because I don't have one."

Why did her comeback delight him so? Was it that she stared back at him, undaunted and unflattered by his close scrutiny? Or that she had his number, or thought she did, and wasn't going to let him get away with a thing?

She glanced away when she heard Jason's name being called from inside, and nodded for the boy to go in. "Tell him to cut it shorter around the ears. And I want to be able to see your eyebrows."

"Aw, Mom!"

"Go," she said, shooing him away.

When he was gone, she brought her gaze back to Logan and stared at him as if waiting for him to explain why he was standing there with his foot on her bench.

"Look, I don't know why you're out to get me," he said. "I haven't done anything to you. I'm just here trying to do these people a favor."

"A favor?" She laughed. "That's rich. You came here because you heard there was money here. That the local oil boom a few decades ago left these people sitting pretty. Then the wells played out, the factories closed, the hardest hit lost their farms—and everybody who still has money is waiting for a hero to show them how to grow it."

"Is that why *you* came here, Carny?"

She didn't ask how he knew her name. "It's none of your business why I came."

"Maybe it is," he said. "Maybe you're feeling threatened. Maybe you're the one with the scam, and you're afraid I'll horn in on it. You know what they say. You can't con a con."

"They're right, whoever they are," she said, standing and starting toward the barbershop door. Just before she went in, she looked over her shoulder and added, "And you can't con the *daughter* of a con, either. You've got your work cut out for you here, Brisco."

Logan didn't know whether that was meant as a threat or a challenge, but something about it delighted him more than anything had in years.

Grinning, he picked up his fliers and started up the street. He wasn't just going to get rich in Serenity. He was also going to have the time of his life, with this little fireball who called herself Carny.