

THE OUTLAW AND THE SHERIFF

Outlaw Brides, Book One

~ EXCERPT ~

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Chapter One

San Juan Mountains, Colorado, 1887

"Pops, hurry!" Jerrellyn yelled as her gray-haired father peeked out the bank's door. "The marshal's coming."

He waved and disappeared inside.

Speckles, her pinto mare, picking up on Jerrellyn's tension, danced beneath her. She held onto the reins of the men's horses with one hand and patted her mount's neck with the other to calm her. All the while, she searched the street to see where the marshal had gone. She'd never been in Pine Bluff before. It mirrored her hometown, Coleville. She supposed all small frontier towns were much the same.

Her younger brother, Brodie, waved from the tree where he kept watch, pointing desperately toward the lawman, and she signaled that she'd seen him.

Beside Speckles, her sheepdog, Jingles, growled. The marshal had seen something and begun running.

"Pops!" she shouted. She hated this. Why did they have to rob banks, anyway?

Pops burst out the door, followed by Trap, Wilder, and Hunter. Wild-eyed, they, too, scanned the town for trouble.

Someone called to the lawman from somewhere behind Jerrellyn. She swiveled in the saddle to see who, but her brothers mounting beside her blocked the view.

Suddenly, shots rang out. After that, everything escalated at a rapid rate.

Pops rode up under Brodie's tree, and the boy jumped down as trained, but his landing on the rump of Pops' horse fell slightly short, and he slid off onto the ground. The men took off at a gallop, unaware they'd left the ten-year-old behind. Terrified, Jerrellyn turned Speckles and rode back to help him. He saw her coming and leaped up behind her. Turning, she kicked the mare into action.

More shots came from both sides, townspeople and robbers. Trap fired over his shoulder without looking back. A burning pain pierced Jerrellyn's shoulder, and blood splattered. Crying out at the agony, she slapped her quirt against the horse's side, and they bolted down the street, Jingles

racing alongside.

"Jerrellyn," Brodie shouted in her ear. "You've been hit."

"I know. Hurts like hell."

Jerrellyn groaned. Until now, they'd never fired a gun during a robbery. After today, they'd be labeled bandits and have their faces on wanted posters—an unbearable thought that would cause her poor mother to turn over in her grave. Somehow, Jerrellyn had to convince them to stop stealing. She prayed the shop owner wasn't hurt badly and if he died—God forbid—he didn't leave behind a widow and kids.

Pops and the others continued to fire over their shoulders, and Jerrellyn kept her head down, telling Brodie to do likewise. One bullet wound was enough.

The pounding of hooves sounded like an entire herd stampeding as the family fled. No one slowed or spoke until they'd left the town miles behind.

The pain in Jerrellyn's shoulder burned a hole through her entire being. She felt weak and feared she would faint, which she didn't dare do. Her beloved little brother's arms around her wouldn't hold her in the saddle.

The harder they rode, the worse her pain became. But slowing meant danger. If the law caught any of them because of her, she'd never forgive herself.

At last, Pops signaled a stop near a stream. Each searched their backtrail, seeking a dust plume or other sign of pursuit, while the horses drank.

A heavy weariness took hold of Jerrellyn, an unfamiliar sensation. She wanted to rest her head against Speckles' soft mane but feared slipping off like jelly on a hot knife. Brodie tightened his grip on her. Jingles whined.

Her father rode up, his eyes taking in the blood dripping from her hand. "How bad are you hurt, Jerrellyn?"

"Not bad. I'll make it. Don't fret over me." She doubted her ability to go another mile but kept it to herself.

Pops turned to her brothers. "Come on, boys. Your sister's hurt. Let's take her home."

And they were off again.

The thud of twenty-four hooves striking earth seemed like blows to Jerrellyn's shoulder, to her whole body. Gritting her teeth, she clung tighter to the reins and prayed to make it home. Their path wound upward through forests and rocky bluffs. Instead of following the road along Wildcat Creek, which sprang out of the mountain and twined its way past the house to join the Boulder River in the valley below, they took a less accessible and more roundabout route a posse would find impossible to track. Strangers would call it a game trail and believe themselves lost, but the Ables clan knew it by heart and called it their secret way home.

When they arrived, a late sunbeam shining through the trees lit up the house like a beacon welcoming them back. Despite its sagging porch and broken shutters, Jerrellyn thanked God she'd made it. If only she had the energy to climb from the saddle. One by one, her brothers bypassed her and went into the house, along with their father. She thought herself abandoned. Then Brodie slid off Speckles' rump and stood beside her.

"Come on, Sis." He held up his arms, offering to catch her if she fell. "Let me help you down."

"Thanks, Brodie." She likely would flatten him if she fell, but with him supporting her, they made it up the steps, through the living area, and into her bedroom, where she collapsed onto the mattress. It felt like heaven.

"I saw what happened," Brodie said. "Trap shot you and then a man from town with a long apron. A store owner, I guess."

"Trap shot me?"

"Accidentally." Brodie sounded defensive. "He didn't see where he was shooting."

"Well, he'd better start," she muttered.

Even with her door closed, the men's voices as they counted the stolen loot and joked about how to spend it filtered through the wood. Jerrellyn considered it a useless discussion since she knew it would have to go toward food, animal grain, and other necessities. Brodie sat with her for a few minutes before fetching her a glass of water from the kitchen. Telling her to rest, he joined the others, not wanting to be left out. Jingles jumped onto the bed, lying as close to Jerrellyn as he dared.

She took a long swallow, set the glass on the crude, homemade side table, and closed her eyes. Only a second, she told herself, then she'd doctor her wound. Oh, but her body felt so heavy and begged for sleep. *A few seconds. No more.*

"Come on, girl." Her father's voice woke Jerrellyn. "Wake up. We have to remove that bullet."

She groaned and sat up; it took great effort. He gave her laudanum to sip. She grimaced as she swallowed the bitter reddish-brown liquid.

The knife Pops held terrified her, knowing how it would hurt. "I'm going to put a cloth under you. You're losing blood."

Jingles growled from the bedside.

Trap came in and held a stick in front of her mouth. "Here. Bite on this. It'll help you bear the pain."

"Take the dog out," Pops told him. "He thinks I'm going to hurt her."

"You are, Pops." Trap took hold of the dog's collar and dragged him out. Jingles whined and scratched at the closed door after Trap returned to help.

Lying on her back, with the stick between her teeth, Jerrellyn tried to relax and prepare herself for what would come. Even so, when Pops eased the blade into her flesh, she'd have bucked clear off the bed without Trap holding her down. It seemed like Pops probed her shoulder for hours, but she knew it was more like seconds.

"Got it," he declared and dropped the slug into a basin. "Bandage her up, boy."

Trap wrapped her shoulder in cloth ripped from an old sheet.

"Did you know you shot a man in the town back there?" she asked her brother.

He stopped tying the bandage. "What?"

"She said you shot someone," Pops said. "Blast it. How'd that happen?"

"Brodie saw it." Jerrellyn relaxed as her brother finished and stepped back. "He said Trap shot over his shoulder without turning, hitting me and then a shopkeeper."

"What was I supposed to do, risk falling off my horse?" Trap growled. "The guy's probably okay. Nothing I can do about it now. And you should have been in front of us, not behind."

"I was until I saw Brodie fall from Pops' horse. I couldn't leave him behind."

"This is going to change things." Pops sounded angry. He didn't seem to hear what she'd said about Brodie falling, as if it had nothing to do with him. "The law will be more deadset than ever on stopping us now."

"Is that all that matters?" Jerrellyn asked. "What about that poor man in Pine Bluff? What if he died?"

Trap shrugged and left the room. Glaring at his son's back, Pops followed. Neither answered her question.

Jerrellyn closed her eyes and succumbed to exhaustion, waking hours later to a dead-silent house, a strange metallic odor, and a wet bed.

Rolling carefully onto her uninjured right side, she saw that she lay in a pool of blood.

"My heavens," she breathed, shocked by the puddle beneath her that spilled onto the bare floor. Weak as a raw noodle, she forced herself from the bed and staggered into the living area. Bloody footprints from her arrival home marked her path from the front door, except where the dirty tracks of heavy masculine boots obliterated them.

The house stood empty.

Going to the front door, she peeked through the oval window. Her mare stood alone in the corral. Someone had unsaddled her, likely Brodie, which she appreciated. Her little brother always had her back, and she tried to have his. Turning back into the room, she found a note in her father's handwriting on the table, saying they'd gone to Coleville for supper and would bring her something back.

"I bet they've forgotten all about me," she told Jingles, who'd followed her from her bedroom. She knew them too well. They'd have a few beers or rounds of whiskey and then go upstairs with the saloon girls, as they always did, forgetting their sister existed, let alone with a bullet wound. Not once had they remembered leaving her with Aunt Henrietta. She'd always had to spend the night there and wait for them to fetch her the next day. They'd never be back by tonight.

Had they forgotten about the poor man in Pine Bluff, too? She tried to think how they to learn how he was doing and how to make amends. Pops and Trap likely wouldn't do anything even if they could. They were so selfish and thought only of themselves.

Back in her room, she stared at the stained bed and floor. They must be dealt with before she can rest. Gritting her teeth, she stripped off the wet sheet and piled it by the door. A peek in her mirror assured her the wound had stopped bleeding. She decided not to mess with the damp bandage. It would take more energy than she owned to change it. Nor did she have the strength to clean the stained floor or remake the bed.

As she stood there staring at the mess, the room began to spin. Fearing she might faint, she lay down. The world rolled away like a snowball on an icy slope, and darkness descended.

The next time she opened her eyes, a strange man was bending over her. With a startled shriek, she jerked, then groaned at the pain. The world threatened to flee again.

"Easy, honey." A gentle hand caressed her uninjured arm. "You've lost a lot of blood. Found you unconscious. I stopped the bleeding. You're not out of danger but have a fighting chance if the fever doesn't set in. Where's your family? I can see that more than one man lives here. Why isn't anyone tending to you?"

Anger colored his tone, and she wondered why. What did it matter to him? "Who are you?"

"Blade McKendrick. I work at a ranch west of here. I'd hoped to water my horse at your well. Never expected to find a beautiful girl in such bad shape. Couldn't just go off and leave you like that."

She frowned. He made no sense. "You had to have ridden along Wildcat Creek to come here. Why didn't you let him drink there?"

He smiled, his generous mouth stretching across his face, a handsome one with a straight nose and prominent cheekbones, lending it structure and strength. Chestnut hair curled slightly over his collar and swooped across his forehead. Medium blue eyes full of concern regarded her. Specks of various blues in the irises reminded her of a field of bluebells she'd seen once on the mountain and thought the most beautiful sight ever. He resembled an angel. *Her angel.*

Have I died and gone to heaven?

A tall man, he had broad shoulders and a muscular build. He smelled of fresh air, horse, coffee, and leather.

"Good question," he said. "Of course, Red—my gelding—drank from the stream. I'll be honest. I just wanted to find out who lived here. Will you tell me your name?"

"If you didn't know who lived here, why'd you come, and how'd you get in?" His hovering over her made her feel vulnerable and helpless. A scary thought interrupted. "Are you a lawman?"

"No. Remember I said I worked at a ranch? I'm a cowhand." He reached out to touch her shoulder, but she jerked away, and pain lanced through her like a knife.

"I knocked," he said, "but no one answered. Bloody footprints on the porch concerned me, so I tried the door and found it open. You have a mighty fine dog. Took me a while, but we're friends now. When I came in, I followed the blood trail to you. So, what's your name? I told you mine."

Jerrellyn tried to swallow, her throat too dry. Had she met this man before? Blade McKendrick. She didn't recognize the name. How was it possible to forget someone who resembled an angel? "I'm sure I've never met you. Do you know one of my brothers?"

"Maybe. What are their names?"

Why wouldn't he cooperate? "I'm Jerrellyn." Habit prevented her from revealing the names of her family. "I live here with my father and four brothers. My mother is dead."

"You're quite a distance off the beaten track. The stream and all the trees camouflage the house. I've lived in Coleville for ten years now and never knew anyone resided up here. I always figured fishermen created the trail, and it would die out in a mile or so."

"We like it that way. Water your horse and...go." She almost got the words out before the world tried to vanish on her once more. She hated being so weak, particularly in front of a strange man. Fighting to stay awake, she opened her eyes as far as possible. "Jingles. Where's...my dog?"

Had he said something about being friends with Jingles? How could that be?

"He's in the front room gnawing on a bone from your ice box." Blade smiled and gave a guilty shrug. "You're wondering how I got him to let me in. I have a way with mutts. Haven't met one yet that didn't become a friend. Truth is, I think he was worried about you. He almost dragged me in here to care for you. Where do you find ice clear up here, anyway? Do you cut it in winter and store it somewhere?"

"Yes." How would she protect herself if this man already had Jingles taking bones from him? Her head spun as she struggled to comprehend. "In an old mine."

Tarnation! She shouldn't have said that. She was giving away too much information. She needed to be more cautious. If he handled Jingles that effortlessly, what intentions did he have toward her? Her brain wasn't working right. She tried to sit up. "What do you want? Don't think you can take advantage of me because I'm hurt."

"Calm down. You're appearing more peaked than you did when you woke up. I don't want you passing—"

The room spun, turned gray...then black. When Jerrellyn next opened her eyes, she found the stranger mopping her brow with a damp neckerchief. Jingles lay next to her. She pushed up onto her elbows. "Wh-what happened?"

"Stay put." He eased her back down. It didn't take much. "You almost ripped out the stitching someone put in, jerking your body around like that, but I stopped the bleeding. Again. When will your family return? I'd like to meet them. As for your dog, he's smarter than you are. He knew you needed help, and I could give it."

"The men will be back in the morning." She ought to kick herself for saying that. It placed her in a vulnerable state. She should have said they were due home any minute. Perhaps he would have left. *Wait. He wanted to meet them. Why? Did he know who they were?*

"I figured as much." He frowned and scratched his neck. "I'll have to stay."

"Stay?" She pursed her lips. "How long? I can tend to myself, you know. Are you sure you aren't a lawman? Would you tell me if you were?"

"Of course, I would. Do I appear dishonest?" His offended tone roused guilt inside her. "And forgive me if I don't trust you to care for yourself, considering the condition I found you in. You'd have died without me."

"Well, I thank you. Now go."

He stalked from the bed to the door and back. "That's the thing. I don't dare."

"Why not?"

"Because if you start bleeding again, you *will* die." Frustration showed on his face. He spoke in a slow, soft voice, showing grand patience as if she were a child. "I'm afraid to trust you to tend to yourself, and your family won't; that's plain."

"Pops took out the bullet, and my brother bandaged it." What more did he expect? Yes, her men left her alone, but they must have thought she'd be okay. How did she know if she should rely on this man? A stranger?

She couldn't deny that he'd saved her life by stopping the bleeding. And he'd stayed to watch over her after her father and brothers abandoned her. She hated thinking such an awful thing, yet

she doubted they'd even checked on her before leaving. For a long time now, she'd been unhappy here. Her family expected so much from her and didn't seem to appreciate all she did.

"Who shot you, anyway?" Blade asked. "And why?"

How should she answer? Not honestly, for sure. "It was an accident." That was sort of true. She drew in a long breath, seeking calm. Time for a little lie. He wouldn't know her family's habits. "Listen, my menfolk will be back any minute. You should leave."

He shook his head. "Huh-uh. You already said they won't be home until morning, and I read your Pops' note. If they were returning today, they'd be here. I'll go when I think best. If they come before I leave, all the better. I can talk to them."

About what? How they treated her? Pops would be livid. Her attention darted to the window. The dim light indicated an imminent sunset. "I can't let you stay here. If my family finds you, Pops will have the shotgun out and the preacher waiting before we can explain."

Blade ran his finger over his short beard and shook his head. "I'll clear out at dawn, and they'll never guess I was here. Confound it, Jerrellyn. You're a beautiful young woman with her whole life in front of her. I don't want your death on my conscience."

Beautiful? She'd never heard that before.

"It doesn't need to be." She tried to push herself higher to see his flowery blue eyes better. She liked those eyes. "I resolve you of all responsibility. Now, you can go with a clear mind."

Except she didn't want him to go. "May I have some water first, please." That would delay him.

He helped her sit up straighter before fetching her a drink. "No matter what you say, whenever I go, I'll worry about you."

A lump filled her throat. No one had ever done as much for her as this stranger. No wonder she yearned to keep him there. Her angel. "You can make yourself a pallet on the floor if you want."

"No need." He sat in the granny rocker in the corner. "I can sleep in this. Now, close your eyes. You need a lot of rest. 'Night." He leaned back, pulling his hat over his eyes.

She watched him for a while before exhaustion claimed her.