

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.