

McKenna's Path

By Kasey Riley

CHAPTER ONE

Saturday—in the Teton Mountains

The wind whistled up the canyon, tugging the riders' sleeves and riffling their horses' forelocks. A group of ten riders followed the trail down from the wilderness camp, their home for the past week. The pines moaned, swaying in the growing wind, encouraging them to sink deeper into their saddles while pulling up the collars of their jackets. Although the group was quiet as they rode, assorted smiles decorated their faces. It was Saturday, and their eight-day, seven-night Wilderness Experience was ending. The vacation had provided an appreciation of the mountains' astounding beauty. Only now, the third week of August, the wind had a bite to it. All the riders could smell the approaching rain.

Wrangler Joe Bennett knew he needed to keep the group moving if they were to reach the trailers before the storm hit. His much-abused joints warned him it would soon get wet around here. With only ten miles to the trailhead, it would take them about three hours to make it. If the rain held off. If the storm hit, the ride could take closer to four hours, slogging through rain and mud. Joe knew none of his customers would enjoy it. At least one might be in danger

without help. He frowned, urging his gelding to walk faster. Behind him, the other horses followed their lead while the riders seemed to enjoy the woodland scenery.

The wrangler's mind wandered until he heard slow hoofbeats and a distant, plaintive, whinny. He pushed down his collar, exposing his ears, listening. Maybe he could tell where the noise came if the whinny sounded again. It did. Joe's horse stopped, tensing up as it listened. Spinning to the right, Joe's gelding responded with a loud, challenging trumpet.

Joe looked in the same direction as his horse looked but saw nothing. He heard distant irregular hoofbeats. Ahead was a junction where this high meadow pack trail met another, less-used track before both turned downhill. The old Elk Track pack trail headed west. He knew his group shouldn't stop but decided it was a good point to allow the riders a ten-minute break. They would ride faster if they rested.

"Watch your horses; they may get distracted or spooked by the approaching horse. You can stay mounted or dismount, your choice, but keep your horse on a short lead, or keep contact with its mouth if you stay mounted," Joe instructed the group. Most of them were complete greenhorns, but his horses were used to just about anything.

The two riders with their own horses had logged many trail miles, but their horses were unknown to him. Those horses might spook, startling all the others. This narrow trail didn't have room for any shenanigans. He hoped the approaching rider would talk to the group as he neared; it helped horses to recognize another rider coming into view.

"Yo, Rider! We're waiting at the junction where your trail meets the canyon. Can you hear me?" Joe called. The sound of the stumbling horse grew louder as it approached. It whinnied to the herd of saddle horses, but the rider still

didn't respond to Joe's call. That *wasn't* a good sign. Joe's horse called again. The responding whinny seemed louder, stronger, and the hoofbeats moved more quickly, if unevenly. It sounded like the approaching horse was lame. Something was definitely wrong. When the animal finally came into view; he knew what it was. The horse was riderless. It was also dead lame on the right front.

Throwing his horse's reins to his drag rider, Joe crept up the trail. The more he saw, the more his heart sank. It was a pinto mare. When she stumbled past a large boulder, he could see her right side. Dried mud covered the right side of her saddle, with caked blood marking her shoulder. Another nasty-looking gash oozed blood down her cannon bone. The wound didn't look fresh, but it hadn't yet sealed.

"Easy, Lady. Whoa, Girl." Joe spoke softly, letting the mare reach for his extended hand rather than walking up to her. Remnants of broken reins hung from her bit. He touched her nose before moving in to rub her left shoulder, skillfully catching the cheek of her halter-bridle.

Once he had it, he turned to his drag rider. "Bill, bring me a lead rope. I'll need the first aid kit too, but you can get it once we have a lead on this girl."

He continued to stroke the mare, talking to her in a quiet and soothing voice. "What happened, Lady? Did you fall? Where's your rider? It's okay now; we've got you, and we'll take care of you. That's it, easy, Girl." Joe continued, taking the lead from Bill, snapping it to the halter under her clip-on headstall. He disconnected the two, easing the headstall off the mare. He didn't think she would try to run but, after a wreck, horses could be unpredictable. When his rope had rubbed her neck, he had seen the distinct markings of a BLM freeze-brand, marking this mare as a mustang, caught on public lands. "You're okay, you pretty mustang. You've got people to care for you now."

"How can we help?" Roger, one of the two campers who brought their own horses, asked from behind him. Roger's wife, Bethany, held their horses a little farther back. "I can hold her while you look her over for any clues to what might have happened."

Bill approached with the first aid kit. Once he saw Joe had the mare under control, he moved more quickly up to the two men.

Joe handed Roger the lead rope, freeing himself to walk with Bill around the mare. They were extra cautious to keep a safe distance from her hind feet.

"Wow, that's ugly. Look at the saddle horn; it's broken over to the left. This horse took a nasty spill, falling over onto her right before rolling over the saddle," Bill pointed out.

"The saddle even rolled a bit." Joe shook his head and grimaced. "I hope the rider was off before that fall, or we could be looking for a body instead of a horseless rider." Both men had seen riders from rollovers in this rocky terrain. The injuries were often severe, even fatal. A broken leg was typical for an equestrian who had a horse land on them in a simple fall. However, having a thousand pounds of horse press your body into the rocks as it rolled—often meant internal injuries or even a broken back.

"Boss, most of this stuff has dried. I think this wreck likely happened yesterday or even the day before. I wonder how far this mare has wandered looking for the way home?" Bill gently touched the caked blood on the mare's shoulder.

"Damn. You're right. If this wreck is two days old, the rider could be anywhere out here." Joe swore under his breath, wishing he could contact the home base. They needed a search party up here. His satellite phone would work from the ridge a few miles behind them or once they got the open parking lot; but not here. The phone's provider

had satellites only at the equator so, in these mountains, obstructions were not only possible but predictable. He knew he couldn't spare his drag rider to go off looking for the distressed rider but, with the approaching storm, someone needed to find the victim before the tracks washed out.

Joe's first responsibility was to get his group down the mountain to the trailers. The safety of eight guests trumped the safety of one rider. He wasn't even sure there was a rider out there. The horse could have busted loose from a picket line, or galloped off after a spook, injuring itself without a rider. It was also possible; the owner could have been with a group which continued without locating the lost horse. He couldn't risk his group. He poured water over the oozing wound, binding it lightly with vet wrap. Hopefully, this would make the mare more comfortable.

"Listen, Joe. Bethany and I have tracking and trail experience." Roger handed the lead rope over to Bill, putting his hand on Joe's shoulder. "We can backtrack this horse, at least until the rain washes out the hoof prints."

Roger could see the wrangler was about to refuse and quickly continued. "Just give us your rifle, one packhorse with supplies including a good tarp and all the extra rope, and we'll be able to do this without endangering ourselves," he argued. "You know I'm a rancher. I've spent lots of time in the wilds of Colorado. Bethany and I ride endurance races over trails like these for hours at a time."

"I know you two can ride, but what kind of survival skills do you have? These mountains aren't forgiving; you could put yourselves into danger." Joe didn't seem convinced. "Just this past June, we came across an old man wandering down the trail close to here. He was delirious. Kept telling us he'd won the Lotto. Said he was up here to show his wife the ticket and secure his boy's future. We found his car over

three miles away on this side of the staging parking lot. He'd broke an axel when he tried to drive it over a wash. Old man Lee had to bring his mule hitch in to pull the car out to where a tow truck could snag it. I don't think his son ever found a Lotto ticket." Joe stopped, scratching his head under the brim of his well-worn hat. "Lord only knows where the old man was heading. Wherever it was, he almost didn't make it out of these mountains. I don't want that for you or your wife."

"Understood. But we know where we're going, and we won't be delirious. I was an Army Ranger, spent two tours in the Middle East. Bethany has thousands of trail miles. Our horses are fit enough to race over fifty miles of mountains in one day and still look for more. I haven't updated my skills, but I have some EMT training from my Ranger days. If you have a GPS locator, we can take it so you'll be able to find us when you're able to come back up here." Roger detailed his and his wife's qualifications.

"If we find the rider, we'll make camp, set the locator, and wait for the storm to clear. We're not dumb enough to camp in a wash or gully or to cross one in a cloudburst; if that's what's got you worried." He paused before continuing. "If the storm hits before we find the rider, we'll make camp, continuing when it's over. We can look for signs of the wreck or even signs of a camp along this trail maybe showing the rider wasn't alone. Do you have a USGS map with you?" Roger hoped he did but didn't expect him to carry one on his home range.

"No, I don't carry a map unless I plan on pushing cross-country. Hunting season I do, but not camping season. I've got a locator though. It can't send over the mountains, but if we have to put a chopper in the air, it could pick up your signal even if you're in a canyon."

Leaving them behind, worried Joe, but Roger seemed

confident he and Bethany had enough sense and survival skills to make it work. It could give the possibly injured rider a chance at survival.

Making his decision, Joe walked to one of the two packhorses. He began sorting through the food and gear to secure the items Roger requested, plus a few extras onto this one animal. Joe loaded tarps over the grub, ropes, and first aid kit, tying the cargo to the packsaddle.

"You can take this horse. Smokey can carry a rider along with his load if you need to use him for that. If you have doubts, leave the extra supplies along the trail; we'll send a rider up for them later." Joe turned to the guests who were resting; "Listen up, people! I need each of you to take your bag. You need to attach it to your saddle. Bill will help you if you can't figure it out. These folks are going to search for the rider of this injured horse. They need to take the packhorse hauling your gear. Sorry for the inconvenience, but if you can't haul it yourself, we'll send a rider up tomorrow to collect whatever the storm leaves behind." Joe watched riders walk over to the pile, taking bags of clothes back to their horses. No one was muttering, but two greenhorns who couldn't figure out how to secure their gear to the saddle waited for Bill's help.

Roger grabbed the stuff bag holding his and Bethany's clothes. Harley could carry it along with the bedroll already attached. Joe showed Roger how to activate the locator. The wrangler handed Roger the remaining feed along with an extra blanket from his own bedroll.

"I hope this will be enough. If you run short on food, start back down—no matter if you've found the victim or not. Don't put your lives on the line; losing two people trying to find one isn't good math. Watch the gullies. We've had a wet summer. A lot of the banks aren't as stable as they used to be. The mare likely fell because she didn't know the

ground was loose. I'll bet she got too close to an edge and it crumbled under her weight." He didn't say, but both men knew, a rider would likely have been directing the horse in that case. Most horses would sense the loose ground, stepping around it—10,000 mustangs proved that point.

"Okay, I understand. Remember, I have my wife with me. I will not risk her life for anyone. If I didn't think this was doable and not life-threatening for us, we would stay with the group," Roger assured the wrangler.

It took less than ten minutes for Joe, Bill, and Roger to secure the packs, allowing the group to split up. Roger and Bethany sat on their horses, watching the larger group move off down the trail before turning to follow the mare's tracks up the trail. Sensing their riders' anxiety, Coup and Harley were ready to move out. The packhorse pulled on Roger's shoulder for a few steps then moved into a jog-trot to keep up with the faster walk of the endurance horses.

"You know we'll be camping out in a storm and be miserable later, don't you?" Roger asked his wife.

Bethany laughed at the look of disgust on his face. "You haven't ridden a fifty-mile race in the rain with a temperature of forty degrees yet; have you?" She smiled serenely. "This will be a piece of cake compared to that. At least this time, we can stop whenever we decide and put a tarp over our heads." She watched the ground, catching sight occasionally bloody hoof prints. Using her legs, she urged Coup forward.

"I can see the trail easily; we need to keep this pace for as long as we can. It's likely there's a rider ahead who has already spent one night out in the weather and might not survive a second in bad weather." Bethany mentioned over the sound of Coup's hoofbeats.

Roger agreed with her increased speed. He pulled again at the packhorse, urging it once more to pick up its pace.

The couple rode in silence until a distant rumble of

thunder penetrated their concentration. At about the same time, the trail opened from woods to the edge of a deep gully. Stopping, they both dismounted. Together, they walked to the edge, looking up the other side until they saw where the horse had rolled into it. The wreck had chewed up the ground with rubble following the animal in its fall. At the edge of the runnel of water was a muddy clearing with deep holes where the mare had sunk, pulled free, and sank again. A small waterfall above the trampled ground most likely kept the area saturated, especially after heavy rains. The tracks left the bog, following the trail up the side of the gully.

"I think we can get down the way she came up, but getting up the other side might not be easy. Let me walk down; you wait here. I'll call you if I want you to lead the horses down," Roger told Bethany. He didn't want her near the edge of the gully until he found a way out of it. He heard another rumble. They needed to move if they expected to get across this creek before the storm caused the water to rise to an impassable level. It could already be raining higher on the mountain above them.

"Well, get going," Bethany said. "I'll give you five minutes. After that, we're following unless you yell otherwise." The concerned look on her face reflected her worry for his safety.

Roger climbed down the trail in the tracks of the mare. He trailed her to the base of the small falls where she came out of the water. The knee-deep holes in the mud would force Bethany to find another way around with the horses. Feeling his boots sinking, Roger jumped for the far side of the water.

To his left, a deer track ascended the ten-yard climb up to a larger spot in the trail. The horses might have problems using the narrow path but, by leading them, the geldings should get to the top. Once Roger made the top of the falls,

he turned to signal his wife but saw she was already leading the horses into the gully. Damn fool woman. He wondered why he'd thought she would wait. He continued walking, shaking his head at her obstinacy.

Bethany followed the mare's trail until she saw the extra-deep mud where the horse had floundered out of the water. She found a firmer spot to cross the creek away from the falls. Once she had the horses across, she saw where Roger had followed the deer track. The climb didn't look too bad. She took her ten-foot single rein, hooked it to Coup's halter, and sent him ahead of her up the trail. Bethany grabbed Coup's tail, using it for leverage and balance during the climb. Smiling to herself, she knew there was a reason she had taught him to allow her to "tail" him all those years ago. With Coup pulling her, she could lead Harley who led the packhorse tied to his flank ring. Coup followed Roger's scent as much as the trail up the narrow deer track. He continued to move forward until Bethany, Harley and the packhorse were in the clearing. Bethany stopped him with a tug on the long rein in her hand.

She turned, watching Roger inspect the ground where the mare had fallen before she fell into the gully. "Are there any signs of a rider?"

"Yeah. From what I can see, it looks like the mare went down to her knees, scrambled back to her feet, and then the ground gave way completely. That's where the rider came off in the boulders. I think the mare fell into the mud pit." He pointed to footprints, then hoof prints before a spot where the ground gave way. Poorly defined marks on the ground indicated where a body coming down hard might have landed. And there, on a rock, was a bloody handprint.

"Roger, look at that handprint. We're looking for a large child or a small adult. That rider's hand is smaller than mine." She laid her own small palm over the bloody print on the

rock. "Look." She bent, pulling a watch from the base of the boulder. "She must have taken this off. The band is scratched but not broken. I wonder why?"

"Could be her arm was swelling. Shit. I thought the saddle looked small. I would guess a teenager or a petite woman. *Damn*, what brought her out here by herself?" Roger demanded. His irritation matched Bethany's. Why would a rider risk so much? To ride alone in the National Forest so far from civilization?

"Don't tell me you used to ride alone in the middle of nowhere like this without letting people know how to find you if you had a wreck." He glared at her. He knew she spent many a mile conditioning alone before they met.

"No, I tried to use loop trails, which kept me within five miles of a road or trailhead," she assured him, her fingers crossed behind her back. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him—those days in her past.

"But, for now; we have to find where she's gone." Bethany maneuvered around him; her eyes searching the ground for signs of passage. The day was quickly getting darker, making the tracks challenging to spot. "Look, over there. I see blood on a branch and a footprint heading away from the water." She pointed toward a small trail heading to the left.

"Looks like another deer trail. If a deer can make it, the horses can too," Roger assured her. He took Harley's lead, following the tracks along the deer trail up the side of the gully in a zigzag route. Coup, with Bethany tailing him, followed steadfastly behind them.

Roger and Bethany were halfway out of the gully when the rain began to fall in a soft mist. They moved faster, feeling the trail becoming slippery with leaves and mud. The couple nervously watched the water in the small creek swell. They heard the small waterfall increase to a roar with the

influx of water running off the mountain. Below them, just past the waterfall, the creek level rose enough to overflow into the surrounding land.

Over the rim of the gully, the track opened into a wooded clearing with well-spaced trees. Two trees had grown together in a V with boulders behind them. It looked like a spot a lone hiker could nest for the night.

"Well, now we have to guess which way she would go. I say we turn left because the main trail comes from the right. I don't see her wanting to go back the way she came. She had to know the junction with the High Meadow pack trail wasn't more than a few miles away. Who knows how far she'd traveled to get here?" Bethany looked to Roger for his agreement of her evaluation.

"I think you're right. The rider would turn to the left. I think she spent the night along this trail last night. In her situation, I would have used that V over there to get off the ground, away from predators." Roger tried to imagine a rider, horseless and alone, possibly hurt. What would she do to survive in the wilderness? He walked over to the trees in question. They leaned against two high boulders. The rider could have climbed into the V from the rocks. Walking around, Roger saw footprints in the sand. Yep. She'd slept here. Good thing the rain was only starting. In another hour, they would lose those tracks. "She spent a night here," Roger called.

The rain was still only a mist, but the thunder was closer. Roger looked around. He knew they needed a spot to ride out the storm. Somewhere they could string the tarps to make a shelter for themselves and a windbreak for the horses.

"There's a stand of willows over there. It might work for our tent." Bethany pointed.

"Good eye. I'll get the shelter started, and you make the

picket line." Walking back from the boulders, Roger tied Harley to a handy branch. He grabbed a rope and the first tarp off the packhorse. Pulling two young trees together, Roger tied them off, throwing the tarp over them to create a shelter of sorts for him and his wife. He anchored the tarp with stakes to make it a tent. Or at least enough of a tent for the night. It would be a cold camp, but they would be more comfortable than the missing rider. He went back to the horses, snagged their bedrolls off the saddles, spreading them out on the ground. The waterproof under-layer had kept the sleeping bags dry. He zipped them together so he and Bethany could warm each other during the night.

When he finished, Roger moved over to help her complete the windbreak for the picket line. The horses would stay saddled with the cinches loosened. Along with the windbreak, this would help them keep warm. He was glad Joe had remembered to put hay cubes in the pack with the human food. There would be no chance for the horses to graze tonight. He removed the bridles from Coup and Harley, put feedbags on all three horses, verified the loosened cinches before pulling the clothing bag off Harley's saddle. Taking it, he walked back into the makeshift shelter.

"Wow, listen to the wind. I think the front is here!" Bethany raised her voice over the pounding rain. Roger was less than three feet away, but he shook his head, pointing to his ears, showing he hadn't understood her comment. Bethany jumped when lightning flashed, followed immediately by a horrendous crack of thunder.

Bethany sat on a fallen log inside of the shelter, a light shiver racing over her skin. The wind swirled, blowing toward the back of the tarp, keeping the interior safe from the now driving rain. "I hope the trees are wet enough to keep lightning strikes from starting a forest fire!"

"I don't think we have to worry about fire. Falling limbs

or trees maybe but not fire," Roger called across the shelter. He reached into their bag of food, hauling out a container of biscuits, a package of jerky, and two bottles of water. He crossed the open space, handing her some of each, then sat next to her.

"So long as the wind doesn't get too high, we should be safe enough." He put his arm around her when he felt her shiver.

"Eat up, strip and get into that dry bed," Roger ordered. He began eating his dinner of jerky and biscuits. The failing light gave up its battle against the storm, and darkness settled over them.

"I sincerely hope the rider has found some shelter against this weather. I hate to think of her without it," Bethany said around a mouthful of biscuit. She shivered again, continuing to eat as quickly as she could. Eating generated body heat, but it used calories too. Her wet clothes were the main problem. As she finished eating, she thought about stripping them off.

Roger hugged her again, giving her some of his warmth. It bothered him that the chilly rain had made her shiver. He felt her tremors and draped himself around her. Bethany snuggled against him while she ate.

Bethany's lips turned up into a smile around her chattering teeth. She looked up at her husband through her lashes, judging his concern. Love shone in her eyes, and he smiled when he caught her looking at him. She blushed.

"I love you too, honey," Roger said, pulling her tightly against his body to shield her from what cold he could. "How is it, looking at you warms me enough to keep the shivers away? Now, get out of those clothes. We have dry ones, but no sense dragging them out in the rain. Just climb into the nice, dry sleeping bag. Hurry."

Roger encouraged Bethany with a gentle nudge. He let

her get into the bag before shedding his clothes and joining her there. He lay down and pulled her next to his body, sharing his heat. "Daggumit, woman. You're like an ice cube."

Bethany's shivers slowly began to recede. "You make a great electric blanket;" she murmured against his chest.

Roger felt her falling asleep, even as she snuggled into his warmth. With a smile on her lips, she began a soft snore.

Roger lay, enjoying the warm feel of Bethany's skin next to his. It seemed like sleep would be hours away. He laughed silently about the differences between being married or being single. A single man would never allow a naked woman to fall asleep without at least a kiss. A married man knew there would be better and more comfortable times for loving his wife than on the hard ground in a cold rain. Her head rested on his shoulder, he spooned around her body to keep her cozy and warm. His eyes grew heavy, his thoughts drifting as he fell into a dreamless sleep with the sounds of the storm raging around them.