

McKenna's Challenge

Met with grit and determination.

Kasey Riley

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McKenna's Challenge is dedicated to all who ride the backcountry for sport and pleasure. A special thanks to Kathy Tugwell, who took the photo used for the cover. Also, thanks to my friends who lived through the drawn-out process of creating this novel. Thanks for your support and forbearance. It's much appreciated.

Parts of this work started as a Kindle Vella. Still, there have been so many changes and additions that the story no longer follows much of Radar's Run or Radar's Race.

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Chapter One

“Thanks for letting me ride with you guys today,” Suzie McKenna exclaimed as she settled her helmet more securely on her shoulder-length blonde curls and mounted her bay Mustang mare, Gypsy. “I’ve found some tracks beyond the Skeleton Trail but haven’t been brave enough to follow them. Dad keeps telling me to stay on the marked, known trails. Guess he’s worried that I’ll get lost. I really messed up last summer when I tried to get to his place in Wyoming,” Suzie admitted.

“You did scare the crap out of him and your mother,” endurance rider and campground owner Bethany agreed. Bethany turned her chestnut Arab gelding, Coup, out of the field toward the Skeleton Trail. That route would take them up the hill the quickest, providing a good climb for their horses. Sheriff Megan moved her palomino Missouri Foxtrotter, Radar, to follow. The rocky trail led through some woods out of the R-bar-B campground.

“Have they set the wedding date yet?” Megan asked Suzie. She cued her palomino Missouri Foxtrotter gelding, Radar, to give Coup some room. Radar would tailgate if not held back off Coup’s hind end.

“Yeah, they chose the fifteenth of December, the date they were married for the first time. Dad says no sense in messing up his mind with a different anniversary date. Mom’s just happy. I don’t think she gives a crap what day they marry,” Suzie replied, reining Gypsy to fall in behind the other two riders. She admired the view while they climbed up the ridge to the woods.

“What do they think about you conditioning Gypsy for endurance? I’ll bet they’re worried,” Bethany commented.

“Dad’s all for it. He thinks endurance will be good for both Gypsy and me. Mom is worried I’m biting off more than I can chew, more than Gypsy can handle,” Suzie confessed. She patted the Mustang’s neck. “You’ll show them, won’t you, girl,” she softly said.

“So long as you start slow, Gypsy will be able to handle the workload. It’s going to get hot today, so we’re only going to ride a fifteen-mile loop. We should be back here by one,” Bethany called over her shoulder as she put Coup into an extended trot.

“Well, Mom doesn’t think I learned anything from that disaster last summer, and she’s afraid that I don’t have the sense to be responsible for my horse in the wilds at my age. I did fine until that water knocked me off Gypsy last year. Dad’s a really good teacher of wilderness survival,” Suzie explained her situation as the trio climbed the steep, rocky hill up to the connection of the Skeleton Trail.

“Is that why you were an hour away from death’s door when we found you?” Bethany reminded the teen of her dire situation when she’d been located.

“Yeah, I know. But I had survived two nights alone and made it within a mile of where I needed to be to get to Dad’s,” Suzie argued. She knew she had almost died and still had bad dreams about that last day on the trail.

“Keep telling yourself that. You wouldn’t have made it off that mountain if your parents, Roger, and I hadn’t found you. And you know it,” Bethany’s tone was low with an implied warning not to continue arguing.

Suzie wisely dropped the subject. “Are we going to take the trail that loops up by the abandoned cabin?” she asked. She’d been to the cabin once with her dad and a group from the campground. It was a cool trail, and the cabin was spooky old.

“No, I want to inspect the trail that Amanda and I found. It runs across in front of that rock face. It’s got some amazing overhangs and will make a wonderful pack trip for the R-bar-B pack guests,” Bethany clarified.

“Cool. Amanda showed me a photo of the place where you two turned around. She said it was obvious the track led across the base of the overhangs. She thought she could see where the trail descended back to the valley floor in the distance,” Megan stated, urging Radar to keep up behind Coup. Radar’s glistening coat began to darken with the sweat of the challenging climb.

Bethany turned left at the top of the slope instead of taking the Skeleton Trail Loop to the right. Coup walked out at a good clip, huffing from the long ascent. Ahead, the trail narrowed, and several spots became mucky from the past week’s rains. The group rode into a thicket of trees, some quite close together. The pace slowed, and time passed in companionable silence while they picked their way around and between pines and aspens. There was an obvious trail, but it was only a single track, not wide enough to ride side-by-side.

Soon, the woods broke, and a massive rock face jutted into the sky just yards off the trail on the right. On the left was a steep downhill littered with boulders and debris from decades of erosion. The path was hardly more than one horse wide between the rock face and the drop, about four feet. Suzie thought she could see the R-bar-M ranchhouse in the valley below with the Gunnison Gorge and the mountains in the distance. The view took her breath away, and she nudged Gypsy closer to the rock face, away from the drop-off. She was thankful that heights didn’t often bother her. Otherwise, this trail would be terrifying.

Bethany and Coup led the way, with Megan giving Coup room but following close to his hindquarters. Gypsy dropped back, cautiously watching her footing through the rocky debris on the narrow path. Suzie admired how fast her mentors could traverse this trail, but she knew better than to push the Mustang when the mare was picking her way. Gypsy came from a long line of animals who survived by being careful.

“Would you wait up for us when the trail gets wider?” Suzie called to Bethany and Megan. Neither rider seemed to hear. The distance between Gypsy and Radar slowly widened. While Suzie worried, Gypsy kept her pace slow and wary.

Above her, Suzie heard a deeply terrifying rumbling. Gypsy slid to a halt, looking up at the cliff. Suzie grabbed mane when Gypsy spun on her haunches and leapt forward. The mare sprinted back up the trail. A large boulder barely skimmed past the mare’s tail. Three more lunging strides, and Gypsy was safely back in the woods. The ground shook while boulders continued to rain across the trail where Gypsy had just been. Suzie hopped off her mare to check for possible injuries.

Meanwhile, huge rocks continued plummeting down the hill into the valley below. Many rolled to a stop on the trail, blocking the path. Bethany and Megan had disappeared. The track they had been riding was gone. A massive pile of rocks sat where a single-track trail had been. Suzie’s knees gave way, and she sat unceremoniously at her mare’s feet, shaking in reaction to the close call they had just experienced. Where were Bethany and Megan? *Were they even still alive?*

The silence after the roar of the falling rocks felt deafening. Even the birds had fallen silent. Suzie sat on the ground, shaken and terrified. Gypsy brought her blazed nose down to nudge her rider, bringing Suzie out of her momentary stupor. All she wanted to do was hug Gypsy and cry. The urge felt overwhelming until the mare blew against Suzie’s chest and pulled her head away to look over the valley below.

In a daze, Suzie brought out her cell to check for service. Of course, there was none. She hoped Bethany had the Spot II Locator on her saddle. She looked at the rubble and prayed, “Lord, please let them be okay, please, please, please...”

“Rock slide on trail. Bethany, Megan, other side.” Suzie’s fingers shook as she sent the text, praying she was telling the truth. That Bethany and Megan *were* safely beyond the disaster. She hoped the text would get through.

“BETHANY! MEGAN! WHERE ARE YOU?” Suzie screamed as loudly as she could. Her throat hurt with the effort.

No response, only the eerie silence that had settled after the rock fall.

Suzie finally noticed the sound of distant birds calling. They were returning to the woods. Crap, nothing else. She strained her ears, hoping against hope that she would hear Bethany or Megan yelling. No such luck.

Praying again, sniffing back the tears rolling down her cheeks, Suzie used Gypsy’s neck to pull herself upright. Thank God her horse was okay. The sound of a rolling boulder drove both horse and rider farther into the woods.

“Easy, Girl. Whoa.” Suzie murmured to Gypsy before climbing up the trail’s edge and mounting. She would get back to the R-bar-B more quickly by riding. Gypsy seemed to sense Suzie’s urgency, picking up an extended trot through the woods and back to the top of the long grade. Suzie hated going faster than a walk on a downhill, but they didn’t have any time to waste. Bethany and Megan could be in trouble.

Halfway down the grade, Suzie felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. Reception. At last. “Whoa, baby.” She pulled Gypsy to a stop, turning her to face the open vista.

“Hello?”

“Suzie, this is Roger. Are you okay?” Roger’s voice broke with the question. “We’ve had a text from Bethany. She and Megan are caught on the trail. Megan is injured. Bethany thinks her leg is broken. Where are you?” Roger’s voice shook.

“I’m okay. Gypsy and I were on this side of the slide when it started and got back up the trail into the woods. We’re coming down the hill that leads out of the R-bar-B up to the Skeleton Trail. I’m hurrying as fast as Gypsy can on this ground. How can I help? Can you get a helicopter to Megan?” Suzie asked.

“No. There’s no place for a chopper on that hill, and the wind wash could bring down more rocks. The Search and Rescue team and I are mounting up and heading your way. Wait for us. We need you to show us the slide. Can you do that?”

“Okay. Hurry. Gypsy and I can get you to the slide, but I don’t know if you can get across it.” Suzie’s voice broke, but she felt a weight lifting from her shoulders at Roger’s instructions. Reaction set in, and she barely could get her phone into her pocket from the shaking of her hands. She guided Gypsy to the grass along the trail to graze. Hanging the reins over the saddle, Suzie put her trembling hands to her face and cried. She understood it was a reaction to the adrenaline, but that didn’t stop the tears or shaking. She was thankful that Gypsy was such a mellow horse and happy to graze.

Suzie wept until the need evaporated as quickly as it had hit her. Putting her hands on the saddle, she surveyed her location. She wasn’t far from the R-bar-B. Roger and the crew shouldn’t be long. Roger would push his horses to get up the hill to his wife. Someday, she wanted to find a love like theirs. Suzie realized Roger had said Megan was injured, so Bethany must be okay. Thank God.

The sound of hoofbeats coming up the trail behind her brought Suzie out of her reverie. The others were approaching. She turned Gypsy to face the riders who rounded the bend into sight. She waved at them, turned Gypsy, and began leading the group to the top of the hill.

“How far from here is the slide?” Roger asked when the group gathered to let the horses blow at the top of the grade.

“I don’t know the distance, about twenty minutes at the rate we rode out or ten minutes at the rate I came back,” Suzie explained.

“Lead on at the rate you returned unless you think it could hurt the horses,” Roger dictated.

“We can handle it until we clear the trees, then I’m slowing down. There are some slippery spots, so watch out.” Suzie turned Gypsy and asked the mare to move out. Gypsy picked up her extended trot along the forest trail, weaving through the trees. When the path opened up, and the cliffs began to tower over it, Suzie pulled Gypsy down to a walk. Roger came up beside her.

“Want me to take the lead? Is it far?” he asked.

“Just around the next bend, I think. Please, I don’t think I really want to see it again. I’d rather follow you and the others.” Suzie allowed Roger and the two medics to pass her, holding Gypsy with her butt turned to the cliff face. The other horses stepped around them, giving the mare lots of space.

When Suzie rounded the bend, the medics were off their horses and had the folding stretcher unpacked. They were strapping it to the shoulders of the lead climber. Roger had put on a climbing helmet but held the horses of the medics.

“Suzie. I need you to hold the horses while we get through the slide. We’ll have to haul Megan back and carry her down the mountain.” Roger wiggled the lead ropes at Suzie. She dismounted. She unclipped Gypsy’s snap-on reins to create a lead rope for the mare before taking the other horses’ lead ropes from Roger.

The geldings were wary of Gypsy, with good reason, but all stood quietly enough. When Roger passed Suzie his mare’s lead rope, he gave her a sat-phone. “We’ll call you if there’s any problem,” he assured her.

Suzie stood there, holding four horses, watching the three men begin to feel their way across the rock slide. A line tied each man to the next, with one end secured to a huge pine tree above the rubble. “*Lord, speed and protect these men in this rescue. Let them return safely with Megan and Bethany. Amen,*” Suzie prayed for the group.

Suzie paced with the horses, mares’ lead ropes in one hand, geldings’ in the other. There was no grass to graze at this spot, and the trail was restricted, so she decided to walk up and down the track to the bend and back. On her third turn at the bend, she heard voices behind her. They were coming back! Yay! Suzie turned the horses and jogged to the rubble pile across the trail. Two men carrying a stretcher were scrambling around the bend.

The two medics balanced Megan’s stretcher between them. Roger wasn’t with them. Suzie’s heart stopped until she realized Bethany wasn’t in the group either. They must have stayed behind with the horses.

“Are Roger and Bethany coming?” Suzie called to the medics before they climbed down through the rocks.

“Wait a minute, and we’ll explain once we can set down the stretcher,” the taller man yelled. Suzie could hardly contain her impatience, waiting for them to settle the stretcher on the open path before they turned to explain.

“Roger and Bethany are going on to see if the trail goes down to the valley. They’ve got enough supplies for the night if it doesn’t.” The man cast a concerned look at Suzie’s trembling hands while his partner cared for Megan. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I am. I can pony a horse from this mare. Shoot, she’s even trained to take a travois or a stretcher. We spent a week at a ‘catastrophe camp’ this spring.” Suzie bragged about her mare.

“That’s good to know. Roger thinks his mare will take a stretcher, but the weight is entirely different than hauling a rider. I’m Rick. I caught your name as Suzie, right?” The taller medic reached over and patted Suzie’s shoulder.

“Yes, I’m the daughter of the wrangler at the R-bar-B. Suzie McKenna at your service,” Suzie said, sticking her mildly trembling hand out to the man. Rick shook it and nodded over at his partner.

“That’s Shane. We’re the medical team assigned to the Riverview Search and Rescue. Our ambulance is down at the R-bar-B. We must get Megan down the hill as quickly and smoothly as possible. Are you positive your mare will take the stretcher?” he asked. “I’d rather bind the stretcher to a horse I *know* is trained than to one that might be trained,” he explained, looking from one mare to the other.

“Yes. They taught us survival skills at camp, and we all trained our horses to take stretchers and travois. It wasn’t easy. On the last day, we each played patient on every horse there. *That* was terrifying,” Suzie admitted.

“You hear that, Shane? We’ve got a stretcher-trained horse here.” Rick called to his partner.

“Thank God. This wasn’t exactly the trail I wanted to experiment on,” Shane’s relief was tangible when he yelled back. “Let me get our patient a little more secured, and we can lift her onto the horse,” Shane suggested.

“You hold the other horses.” Suzie handed the lead ropes to Rick and moved around Roger’s mare, taking down the saddle bag Roger had packed with the straps they needed to secure the stretcher. Within minutes, she laid the straps out on the ground by length. Suzie’s hornless trail saddle would be perfect for accepting a patient. The swells and cantle were almost identical in height, so the stretcher could lie flat.

“Okay, Sweetie. Do me proud. I know you can do this. Megan needs you.” Susie patted Gypsy’s neck before walking her mare to the stretcher on the ground.

“You can ride Roger’s mare,” Rick suggested as the team lowered the stretcher onto Gypsy. The men used all the straps of the stretcher and added most of the ones Roger had brought. They soon had Megan anchored to Gypsy’s back. Gypsy stood quietly, looking over her shoulder a few times but not moving while the men worked.

Suzie mounted Roger’s mare and waited. The medics each took a spot on the side of Gypsy. They led their mounts instead of riding.

Suzie dismounted. “If you’re walking, we’re all walking. It’s not more than a few miles. I’ll tie these horses together, and they can follow Gypsy back to the

R-bar-B. I'd rather have them behind us." She pulled bridles from the horses and used lead ropes to connect each horse to the flank ring of the horse ahead of it. The geldings gave Roger's mare almost as much room as they gave Gypsy. Suzie thought about where to be in this equine convoy back to the ranch. She would feel most secure at Gypsy's head.

"If one of you can take this lead rope, I'll walk at Gypsy's head. If anything starts to go wrong—drop the lead rope. The horses will make their way back without any problems," Suzie explained.

"I'll take the lead rope. I've never been on this trail before, but I've packed in with mules on leads. This can't be much different," Shane said. On the other side of Gypsy, Rick nodded his agreement. The small group began the trek down to the ranch. Under the covers, on the stretcher, Megan moaned.