

Desperate Endurance

By Kasey Riley

Chapter 1

Bethany had never been afraid of being alone, not on the trail and not when hauling her horses around the nation. Hours spent riding and handling thousand pound animals gave her the confidence needed to handle most situations. Her small frame, blonde hair and large hazel eyes hid her self-defense and survival skills from the casual observer.

Driving into the sunset on I-40 was blinding. Her arms and hands ached from the long hours on the road, the tight muscles in her shoulders and neck screamed. When the radio played the old dark rock song D.O.A., that did it, she decided it was time for a break. Seeing a “Rest Area – No Facilities” sign she followed it off the highway. She stopped in a vacant parking lot next to a thickly wooded field, sheltered by a hill from the sounds and headlights of the nearby interstate.

Unlocking her fingers from the steering wheel, she turned off the GMC ¾-ton pickup, and climbed out of the 4x4. Walking around the horse trailer, opening the feed windows, gave the horses some fresh air. If she spent half an hour eating and resting, the sun would be down and driving would be easier. Bethany grabbed her cell phone,

frowning at the lack of reception bars. She needed to contact the campground where she held reservations.

Entering her kitchen, she grabbed a chicken leg and a bottle of water. The fridge and indoor plumbing of her living quarter's horse trailer made her smile. Munching chicken, she reminisced at how well she adjusted to all the life changes of the past fourteen months.

Bethany realized that she'd been daydreaming while her horses stood in the trailer getting cold. Grabbing their blankets, turning off the overhead light, she let her eyes adjust, and moved through the connecting door into the horse compartment. She blanketed Coup, slipped next to Harley and fastened his blanket when she heard another vehicle come into the rest area.

Following the sound of a car door, she heard arguing male voices. One of them said, "Did you get the plate number of that truck? I'll check out the trailer. Don't look like anyone's home, but we don't need any witnesses." At the same moment, an older voice asked, "Could you please untie my hands so I can take a leak?"

Bethany froze. The overheard conversation terrified her and her pistol was under the mattress on the bed. Moving back next to Coup, she leaned against the door into the living quarters. She heard a knock on the outside door, before the trailer rocked with the sudden weight of an intruder. She held her breath listening to him move around the space, searching for the owner. Her heart beat loudly in her ears. The door handle to the horse compartment moved and she felt him push it. Her foot slipped, startling Coup, who stomped, rocking the trailer.

The pressure against the door stopped, the man paused, possibly listening for human sounds within the horse compartment.

Outside his partner shouted, “Hey! Get back here or I’ll shoot you! I mean it!”

There was a gunshot, followed by the sounds of someone scrambling through the brush. She felt the trailer rock at the slamming of the outer door. There was a second gunshot just outside, next to Coup’s head, followed by quick footsteps in the gravel when the stranger took off chasing whoever was scrambling in the brush.

A third shot, loud cussing, and more sounds of running. The action froze when another set of headlights arrived. Bethany peeked out next to Coup’s head. She could see a dark SUV with a man holding a gun outlined by the headlights of the arriving sedan. She got a good look at the gunman when he turned to look at the new arrival. Halfway out of his car, the driver spotted the gun in the killer’s hand. He didn’t even get his door closed before putting it into reverse and speeding backwards out to the interstate. There were sounds of the vehicle crunching against rock or concrete as he missed part of the ramp, then the sound of squealing tires when his tires found the tarmac.

“Get your ass in the car; we can’t let that guy get away! We’ll come back and take care of the old man after we eliminate that witness.” The man with the gun motioned the other into the car. His partner dove into the open car door as it turned.

Tires spinning, the kidnappers left the rest area. The flying gravel pattered against Bethany's truck before all was eerily silent. She had to check on the old man, she couldn't just leave him there alone, he might still be alive. Grabbing her flashlight, she slipped out of the trailer.

A trail of blood and bent brush led to the victim who was leaning against a large oak holding his gut. Blood poured around his fingers. With a sinking heart, she realized that he was too large for her to carry back to her truck.

He was conscious. She bent over him grabbing her gloves from her pocket to use as a pressure bandage, but there was so much blood, the gloves didn't even cover the entire wound. For once, she felt helpless. "I don't know what I can do for you. There's no cell service and you need help. I can't just leave you." Her tears of frustration evident in her voice.

"Get out of here; they'll be back and they won't let anyone live that's seen me with 'em." The old man tried to push her away. "Take this; it's got my PO Box on it." He pushed a letter into her hand. "There's a large envelope there. Don't let Cole get his hands on it and don't trust anyone. Cole owns everything." He coughed and blood splattered her jacket sleeve. "Give the envelope to my son unless you find he's part of this." He took a shallow, rattling breath. "Take this dog tag; it's got the combination. Now, get out of here! Go! Tell my boy I'm sorry." As he got the last word out, his eyes lost all sight.

Bethany reached over to check his jugular pulse and murmured a prayer for his lost life. Turning to run

back to her truck, she stuck the items into her coat pocket.

In shock, her brain a fog she knew she knew she had to move fast. Mentally she reviewed all the television shows she had ever seen for ways to sneak out of the rest area. In the dark, her running lights lit up her rig like a Christmas tree. She moved around the trailer and disconnected the electrical cord between them. Next, she turned the “auto” headlights and interior lights off. She could drive blind until she felt that she was safely away from the killers.

The half moon shone brightly in the clear air, so she wouldn't be completely blind. Her night vision, honed by years of competing in events that began or ended in the dark, was excellent. Without the running lights, she hoped her rig looked like a camper to vehicles approaching from either direction.

Had the sedan turned off the highway at the first exit? In his place, she would floor it and then stop at the first truck stop to seek shelter and call the cops. She couldn't do that, she had promised the old man to find his son and give him the contents of the PO Box.

She heard sirens far ahead as she turned north on Hwy 362, toward Ute State Park and Logan, New Mexico. She said a prayer for the safety of the other witness. While she was heading north sooner than she wanted, she'd told the Ride Manager of the Coyote, New Mexico ride that she would be there early. She would regroup there. Following Highway 462 to Highway 39, she continued north looking for a safe spot to camp. She'd already been on the road over ten hours, she hated to

keep going another two, but stopping terrified her. Once she put about sixty miles between her and I-40, she should be safe for the night, so long as she wasn't in view of the highway.

At the small town of Roy, New Mexico She parked in a vacant lot. Sitting at her table she dug out her laptop and hot spot. She Googled the town searching for any possible campground in the area. Nothing came up within a hundred miles. She sat there, near tears, when there was a light knock on trailer door. Her heart started racing, she grabbed her pistol with shaking hands. The knock got more persistent, followed by a man's voice. "Hey, you okay in there? Anything we can do to help? You having truck problems?"

She took a steadying breath and replied, "Who are you? I'm fine, but I'm having a hard time finding a campground for us." She tried to keep her voice from quivering, but failed. "Can you direct us to some place within a few miles that would allow me to camp?" she asked. "Anything would work, even just an open field away from the highway." She hated the pleading note in her voice. "I just don't think I could drive another half hour." To her embarrassment, she felt tears falling and sniffled quietly, rubbing her eyes on her sleeve.

"I'm Joshua Blackwell. My wife Mary's in the truck. We own the Blackwell Ranch about five miles south of here. It's not a campground, but you can park your rig and there's a pen for the horses," he offered. "Why don't you follow us out to the ranch?"

Bethany worried about following a stranger to his place but felt that the killers wouldn't have the brains to

come up with a ranch and pen offer. She put her gun away and opened the door to meet an older cowboy dressed in worn boots, snagged denim jeans, and a faded blue denim fleece lined jacket so popular in the region. He wore his Stetson hat tilted back off his weathered brow and automatically put his calloused hand out to help her step down from the trailer. That sealed it for Bethany; kidnappers and murderers wouldn't be so polite. She looked over at his truck and saw the defined outline of a woman. Not too many murderers traveled with their wives, either.

"My name is Bethany Wilcox, Mr. Blackwell. Thank you so much. You've no idea how much I would appreciate following you and your wife back to your ranch for the night." She gave him what she hoped was her best smile and shook his outstretched hand.

"It's just Joshua, ma'am, and you're welcome. Just follow us down the highway, I'll show you where to turn. About a mile up from the highway is the house and barns." He used a vague "over there" gesture. "You can park any place you want between the house and the pen, and there's a water spigot for your horses." He offered.

He walked back to his pickup, climbed in, and waited for her to climb into her truck. He drove past the front of her rig, turning south on Highway 39. He drove slowly until he was certain that she followed. After he turned off the highway, he waited until she made the turn before proceeding up the gravel drive. She parked next to a round training pen.

"Here, let me get the horses untied for you," Joshua said, reaching up and unsnapping them.

Bethany moved to the back of the trailer, opened the door to let out Harley, a pinto Mustang/Arab cross. Without his blanket, his bay coat would show large white spots. Clearing the trailer, he waited for Bethany to clip a lead rope onto his halter while he surveyed his surroundings.

“I’ll take this one while you get the other.” Joshua reached for the lead. He moved Harley to the side.

Her other horse, Coup, turned around in the trailer to look out while Bethany clipped the lead rope to his halter. Carefully surveying the area, he regally stepped out, owning any ground where he set his hooves. As the alpha horse, Coup kept watch for monsters and led the way to safety when needed.

Joshua led Harley into the pen while Bethany followed with Coup. “Do you want to leave on the blankets?” Joshua asked. “There’s supposed to be a frost in the morning.”

“Let’s leave them covered, but we’ll take off the halters,” Bethany replied, removing Coup’s halter. He trotted around the pen, snorting and checking for imagined demons. Finding no demons, Coup pawed the ground and dropped to roll in the hard-packed sand.

Joshua removed Harley’s halter, and Harley followed Coup’s lead while Joshua and Bethany walked out of the pen.

They worked smoothly together, setting up the horses for the night. While tubs filled with water, each of them threw hay over the fence. Bethany added grain in flat feeders for each horse.

“Looks like that should take care of them for the night. Why don’t you come in for a cup of coffee and dinner?” Joshua looked over at Bethany with a warm smile.

“Thank you, but no. I’ve imposed enough,” she said. “I want to thank you and your wife for letting us stay here for the night.” She smiled tiredly. “I know I’ll sleep more soundly knowing the horses are safe and comfortable. Thank you.” Bethany shook his hand. “Have a good night.” She stepped into the trailer. Once inside, she lit her propane heater, cracked a window, stripped off her jacket and climbed up into bed. She was asleep almost before the sleeping bag settled over her shoulder.