

RUSTLERS

HEIST

By Kasey Riley

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Chapter One

"Sheena, are all the riders accounted for? We need to start back to the R-bar-B if we expect to get there before sundown." Bethany's red gelding, Coup, danced a circle as she spoke. He was more than ready to hit the trail again. Thirteen miles back home would be a cakewalk for the retired endurance horse.

Sheena side-stepped out of Coup's path and laughed. "Yep. I got three horses in the trailer and their riders in the truck, and you've got the other twenty-two riders to lead back. I'm surprised they all look energetic at this point of the day. We've had a great fund-raiser for Betty's Animal Rescue. Suzie will bring up the rear on Gypsy so there won't be any stragglers." She waved the group off onto the trail down into the canyon before returning to the guests in the truck.

The scattered white clouds caused the late afternoon sun to play hide-and-seek on the trail into the canyon. The rising breeze felt chilly, as expected for the second Saturday in May at this elevation. The riders, filled with the tasty food from the picnic and relaxed from the music, held random conversations as their horses moseyed down the trail to the crossing of Blue Creek close to the Gunnison River. The horses knew they were heading back, and the pace picked up wherever the track allowed. Bethany chuckled at Coup, who knew this trail, day or night, sun or rain, and seemed to feel the pace was slower than needed. She drew him in more than once when he tried to shift gears.

"How's everyone doing? Anyone need to stop for anything?" Bethany yelled the question to the riders behind her by turning in her saddle. When the query reached the last rider, Suzie waved to show no one had needed to stop. Now came the fun part. It was quite a climb up out of this gorge.

A whinny off to her right made Bethany swing her whole body in that direction. It was doubtful that there would be stray riders in the gorge today. Her skin goose-bumped, remembering the last time she heard a horse but didn't see it. The day they found Gypsy without Suzie. It couldn't be Gypsy today. She and Suzie were at the back of the group. Having stopped Coup, blocking the other riders, Bethany turned to the group.

"Take a minute. There's possibly a horse and rider over that rise. I'll be right back," Bethany warned the group of the approaching rider. She directed her horse up the trail toward the river. This side was the tougher of the two ways down to the Gunnison, and she hoped it was mustangs over the rise. The whinny sounded again, closer. Coup responded and picked up his pace.

At the top of the rise, Bethany saw a saddled but riderless horse limping toward her. She recognized the horse. What in hell was Buster doing out here? More importantly, where was his rider? Oh, crap! Bethany jumped off Coup and started walking down to the injured animal.

Buster's shoulder was bleeding from what looked to be rock scrapings with a deep gash on his right side, and the saddle horn laid over to the left. If Bethany guessed, she would think the horse had fallen off the trail to the right and rolled over on the saddle and possibly his rider. Unless the rider dived off to the left as the horse went down. She said a silent prayer for that to be the case. The fall had been a steep one, from the looks of the lacerations. Blood covered Buster's golden buckskin coat, and more red showed in the black of his lower back right leg. Neither injury was spurting, but both had shed quite a bit of blood. Judging by the dried and fresh blood, Bethany felt the accident had happened hours ago. The animal must have been wandering ever since, too sore to make it back to the ranch.

Hearing an approaching animal, Bethany grabbed the rein hanging from Buster's bit to keep him from moving. The horse behind Coup stopped, and Bethany turned to see Suzie climbing off of Gypsy.

"Holy cow! Poor Buster! What happened, ma'am?"

"Looks like he fell off the trail and rolled at least once down the embankment." After judging the teen, Bethany came to a decision. "I need you to lead the group back to camp. As soon as you reach the top of the ravine, call 911. Tell the operator we have a lost and possibly injured rider on this trail. You're going slow, so you get to lead Buster. He's sore, but it doesn't look like anything is dangerously hurt. Call Roger and have him meet you to get these people back to their rigs. Okay? Think you can do this?" Bethany watched Suzie straighten her shoulders, accepting the weight of this new responsibility.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll make sure everyone gets back to camp, and I'll call as soon as I have a signal. I'll text Roger right now, so he'll get that before I can get to the top of the canyon. Buster has a halter and lead rope tied to his saddle. I think he was supposed to be rented out for this event." Suzie pointed to the items tied to the back of the saddle.

Bethany quickly switched the horse's bridle to his halter. She was glad to see the attached rope was one of the twelve-foot variety. She managed to get Buster past Coup, who mildly pinned his ears at the other gelding because it was close to Bethany. In

Coup's mind, Bethany was in his herd, and other horses were *not* supposed to be close to her.

"Here you go. If it starts getting dark, send the riders up the trail. The worst that would happen is they would make the R-bar-M's gate and not know which direction to take. You've got another hour before the sun sets. You'll be riding in twilight once it goes behind the mountain." Bethany gave directions to Suzie's retreating back before turning back to Coup. "Okay, Bud. It's just you and me. Let's see if we can find the scene of the wreck before dark. The full moon is still several days off, but it should be bright enough for us to retrace our steps—if the clouds stay away."

Stepping up onto a boulder, Bethany swung herself on Coup and moved down the trail toward the river. She'd taken this trail before, but the storms last spring had caused a lot of the river bank to be washed out. She hoped that wasn't what happened to Buster. Obviously, the rider had missed the turn down to the Blue Creek crossing and, as a result, ended up on this nasty trail toward the Gunnison. A blood trail weaved from one side of the path to the other, where the horse had grazed his way back from the accident site.

Twenty minutes down the trail from where they had found Buster, Bethany found the spot of the disaster. At this point, what there was of the path was more of a deer track than a horse trail. She jumped off Coup and threw his reins over a nearby sagebrush. Coup was well trained. He'd wait for her unless something like a bear or cougar jumped out—then, it would be every creature for themselves in horse logic.

On foot, she stepped cautiously along the track's narrow ledge to the spot where a recent slide from erosion had taken out the entire path. She stopped and peered over the edge, whistling at the drop and the scramble marks in the loose soil. Yikes! Buster was lucky nothing had broken. The tracks below showed where the horse had regained his feet. The rider had either stumbled or slid down the long embankment, and it looked like he had possibly ended up in the river. Bethany shivered. That wasn't a good sign. She looked over at Coup, who appeared to be napping. "You wait here, boy. I'll be back." Bethany spoke mostly to hear her own voice.

She walked back to the horse almost as an afterthought and pulled the first aid kit and a rope from her saddle. R-bar-B wranglers tried to be prepared for the unexpected when leading a group. Patting Coup's shoulder, she stuck the kit in her baggy jacket pocket and slung the rope over her shoulder. She began the long descent to the edge of the river. A little way down the bank, she looked back up at the slide. Something didn't look right; the river couldn't have eroded this high up the hill, and there were no drainage grooves above it where water would have rushed to the river. There were too many wide-open spots above and below this location. The river would naturally lower and slow its flow in the broad basins, even in floods.

Bethany found blood where the horse had come to rest. The rider's canteen and cell phone lay nearby. The loose dirt showed an impression of what might be an elbow or knee and about a yard farther, the depression caused by a body. She could envision a rider landing hard and scooting out from under the horse before possibly passing out. That would account for the "dirt angel" impression. Just below this spot, she saw where the likely injured rider had rolled over, possibly trying to stand, and then rolled head over heels down the remainder of the slide. At the river's edge, only one footprint remained inches from the water. *SHIT!* From this angle, it looked like the rider had gone into the river.

Bethany moved to the side of the slide. No sense in messing up the tracks that Search and Rescue would need to track the unfortunate rider. She took photos with her phone in each part of the scene. Where the horse had rolled, and the rider had lain. Bethany followed down one side where the person had tumbled down to the river. There, she examined the footprint, trying to tell if the rider was a man or a woman, and realized the footprint was toe-heavy. The person had been off-balance, and from the proximity to the water, he must have fallen into the river. Even during the dry spells of summer, the Gunnison was never a slow-moving lazy river. A groggy, off-balance, possibly injured rider stood little chance against that current.

Bethany worked her way back up the slide, keeping out of the tracks made by the falling horse and rider until she was at eye level with the trail.

"Sonofabitch." Bethany muttered when she saw what looked to be shovel marks or pickaxe grooves eating into the soil and rocks under the trail. This wasn't a total accident. Someone had worked to destroy the track. Quickly, since the light was fading, she got photos of the bank under the trail. She was careful to get extra pictures of the bank before the wreck site and beyond where the track had broken off and slid down to the river.

With a heavy heart, worried the rider had been washed downriver, Bethany got back to Coup, turned him toward home, and mounted. She hadn't gone a half-mile before meeting riders and a person on a four-wheeler from the R-bar-M. Roger was leading them, and all Bethany wanted to do was fall into his arms and cry. The day had not turned out as she had planned. Not. At. All.

"Hey, babe. I saw Buster. What did you find?" Roger rode up to Bethany before asking.

"It doesn't look good—about a half-mile behind me. Buster got caught up where the trail gave way under him. He rolled. The rider managed to scramble out from under and might have laid there a few minutes or hours. Who knows? When the rider tried to stand, he must have been dizzy and tumbled head over heels down to the river. One clear footprint is on the bank. It's toe-heavy, like the wearer still might have been out

of control. Do you know who was riding Buster?" Bethany's voice cracked despite her resolve not to get emotional.

"Yeah, it was that guy who reserved a horse last week. He's making a place out on the southwest corner of the 3Cs. Bought about fifteen acres and built a cabin. I don't think he's got any stock yet, but I sent one of the hands over to make sure. No sense in letting animals go hungry while we search for their owner." Roger reached for Bethany's hand and squeezed it to comfort her.

"I took photos of everything. This was no accident. Someone worked under the trail with a shovel or something. That trail didn't just get eroded. I can't think of anyone who would want to shut down this trail, can you?"

"No. There were some disagreements about kayakers and canoeists pulling out at Blue Creek to rest. Still, I don't see where destroying this trail would resolve that argument." Roger turned to the men behind him.

"We don't have much daylight left. I want everyone to dismount at the wreck site down to the river. Search the bank for any tracks of a person coming out of the water. Look for anything in the eddies and back-wash areas. Take at most half an hour, and then start back to the ranch. We don't need to have you injured trying to locate the rider. Spread out and good hunting." Roger turned back to Bethany.

"I'm going home. Megan and the Search and Rescue team can't really get started until the morning, and I want her to see these photos before they begin. I'll see you when you get home. I love you. Be careful." Bethany squeezed Roger's hand before pulling hers free and continuing up the trail.

