

Ruff Cut

By Kasey Riley

A Riverview Mystery

Chapter One

A blinding flash, a deafening roar, a blast of air pushing her under the desk as she reached for her fallen pen; pain, burning pain, just before darkness overcame her. Voices, guttural voices, Afghanis close by. Coming to her senses long enough to stifle the pain-induced groan caused by her broken and bleeding shoulder, Megan opened her eyes. Darkness surrounded her as memory rushed in of the deafening blast which threw her under this desk. Megan realized the squad must have tripped a booby trap as they cleared the building. But, what were the Afghanis doing here? How long had she been unconscious? Where was her squad? Lack of light under the desk gave the time as night. The explosion had happened shortly after lunch.

Cautiously, Megan fished around in the dark until she found her com unit. Listening to the Afghanis, she translated what the enemy forces were discussing. She heard them pumping each other up with stories of driving the American troops away. Using her workable hand, she managed to send out short bursts of text, praying someone was receiving them. The Afghanis were making plans to attack a nearby village, they planned to kill everyone for helping the Americans. Creaking, debris falling, hitting her injured shoulder, nauseous pain and then blessed

unconsciousness. Awakening with the darkness still surrounding her, the aridity in her throat brought on convulsive swallowing, but even that didn't ease the dryness. Her stomach cramping, Megan wondered how much time had passed since the explosion. Touching her wounded shoulder, the blood felt thick and sticky; obviously hours or perhaps even days had passed. Silence reigned around her, the building felt empty and abandoned. Her awareness fading, Megan dozed—then gunfire, grenades, screams...shouting in English, and the sound of a distant chopper.

"Oh, my God, noooo!" Her own scream roused Megan to tears, trembling, and gut-wrenching pain in her long-healed shoulder. Looking down at her cold-sweat-saturated tank top, panting, she sat and looked around the dimly-lit bedroom; her eyes still bleary and her ears still hearing the long-ago battle. The nightlight she could never sleep without gave the room depth, proving she wasn't trapped again in the rubble. Hanging her head and rubbing her face with shaking hands, the sweat on her palms mingled with the tears on her cheeks. Her shoulder ached with the movement, the scar pulling as her muscles flexed. Moving increased the blood flow, easing the burning pain, but the twinge reminded her of the episode, which changed the course of her life forever.

Years of training as a Forensic Computer Specialist and Cryptologist were useless if she couldn't sit at a computer and work with both hands. Her Middle Eastern language skills were unneeded if she couldn't carry a weapon and follow her squad-mates to the villages where they needed her to interrogate the villagers. It wasn't only the loss of her military career which changed her life; but would these nightmares ever end?

After she got back from Afghanistan, while her shoulder healed, she spent time with others in group therapy sessions trying to talk through the emotions and trauma. For the most part, she was better by far than she had been in the beginning...but, every so often, her subconscious would bring back the incident in horrifying detail. Megan understood some of her fellow soldiers relived the war every night and she was thankful to be beyond that situation. However, she felt it wasn't right that her brain couldn't let the incident go and let her move forward without looking back.

This had to stop! It had been months since the last episode but, even so, every night she tossed and turned before sleep claimed her; worried the dream would visit again. That might be part of the problem. If she could simply fall asleep thinking only of positive things, perhaps she would cease having the dream. For a moment, she debated about taking some of the medication the shrink had given her to help her fall into a dreamless sleep. Determined not to become dependent on the medication, Megan decided against taking the pills. Too many of her friends and fellow soldiers had earned drug habits because of combat; she vowed not be one of them.

A Purple Heart and a Silver Star would never replace the Army life she had planned. The citations looked great in her records, but they couldn't help her sleep without nightmares or move without pain. As a sheriff, her medals helped her win the election, she knew that. The Army skills and discipline she had gained helped her to ace all the classes she had taken since her election but, given a choice, she would trade them to keep from having the nightmare.

Still shaking, she wondered whether Aaron was awake. She wanted—almost needed—to hear his voice. He would

understand her need for comfort or simple communication with another soldier, another veteran. She hated leaning on him as much as she did. It wasn't fair to use his shoulder and accept his comfort without being able to offer him anything emotional in return. He said he didn't care. He wanted her to feel she could call anytime but she couldn't help knowing how much he wanted her, and how much he cared about her. Compared to the man who couldn't even bother to visit her in the hospital, the one who told her to "keep the ring," Aaron was a prince who deserved so much more than she was brave enough, at this time, to give him.

The difference between her service and Aaron's was that he had planned on leaving the Army Rangers by the time he was thirty. The wound in his leg didn't do much more to change his life's plan than force him to adjust back to civilian life at twenty-five. Roger Meadows had already offered him a job at the R-M so, as soon as Aaron was able to walk or, more accurately limp away from the Army, he moved into a job he loved. Aaron's limp didn't interfere with managing the R-M. That was five years ago. Now days, his limp only appeared after an especially physical day of riding or working on his feet. Aaron coached the little girls' soccer team in his spare time and Riverview had accepted him as one of their own.

Megan felt a part of the community from her summers spent with her Aunt Marge. Aunt Marge was head of the Methodist Ladies Auxiliary and had helped Megan win the office of Sheriff of Riverview with as much energy as she put into the yearly Bazaar. As a teen, Megan spent several weeks each summer helping her aunt ready the town for the annual fund-raiser. She fell in love with the area. When her life fell apart, Riverview was the *only* place where she felt at home. The moment she left the hospital and returned home to Texas, she

knew she had to move away from her over-protective family. Marge set her up with a job working for Roger Meadows taking care of his uncle's ranch while the man was in prison. The arrangement suited Megan to a "T". A house, a barn, pasture for her horse and a job she could do at her own speed. Lots of quiet time to lick her wounds and come to grips with the forced changes in her life.

Soon, her shoulder healed and she gained strength and mobility. Living by herself in the old house helped her find peace of mind, and become secure in her own talents. Six months she held that job before the position of sheriff opened. With Roger Meadow's support, she applied to the Riverview Town Council to let her fill the position until the next election. A year later, she was officially Sheriff of Riverview and she'd taken every course available to help her learn what she needed to know to protect her friends and the community. Now, six months into her four-year term, she felt confident in all aspects of the position.

Everyone in town knew how Aaron felt about Megan; he didn't try to hide it. Megan knew that many wondered why they seemed to be only friends, when it was obvious how much he cared. Few could understand how she battled daily for her sanity, or the embarrassment she felt about the scarring of her shoulder. A few who had seen active duty could; those were the ones who understood how far she had come in the past year. They even sympathized with how much further she needed to go before she could lead a reasonably normal life and be able to give Aaron the love he so richly deserved. Perhaps she did love him, maybe she was ready to admit it, but the thought frightened her. She simply wasn't prepared to commit yet.

"Damn it," Megan muttered, reaching for her phone to text Aaron. It seemed to jump into her hand as she touched it, both ringing and vibrating under her palm. Hitting the button, she said, "Sheriff Megan Holloway here. This better be important; it's way too early on my day off."

"Sorry, Boss. We've got a missing child. One of the campers at the R-B has a six-year-old boy and he wandered off during the night," Deputy Joseph Kaleo explained. Calmly he continued. "We're mounting search parties and I thought you might want to either be part of one, or at least know what's happening."

"Thanks, Joe. Sorry I snapped at you. I need my coffee. I'll meet you at the R-B in half an hour, but don't hold any group for me. Send them out as quick as they come in to volunteer, groups of at least two. Section the area, let locals choose ground they know. Make certain the entire camp's been thoroughly scoured. Search inside every trailer, outhouse, pavilion storage, anything with a door needs to be opened—got it?" Her brain whirling, Megan pictured the area and all the different spots that might draw a child.

"Check the hay barn—look for any bales that aren't level, in case he got up in there and the hay shifted." She began moving toward her bathroom, barking directions and taking charge of the search.

"Did you call Marcia and Matt at the Gunnison Valley Ranch? They've been raising two dogs for that rescue group. I don't know if the dogs are trained yet, but it might be good for the animals to be part of this. Also, both Marcia and Matt are backcountry certified. I'm hanging up. I'll be there as soon as I can find my clothes and gear."

Even knowing Joe could handle things until she got there, Megan had a bad feeling about this. The R-B had been

open less than a year. The surrounding woods still had deadfalls, treacherous not only because of possible shifting, but because of snakes and other hazardous creatures they might hide. If something drew the child into one of those piles, he could in danger from them; lost was the least of the risky situations a child might encounter in this region.

Walking out of her bathroom five minutes later, she began pulling what she considered her "backcountry" clothing out of her closet. She dressed in layers, lightweight fabrics next to her skin, and durable, tightly-woven nylon and cotton for the top layer. Wool socks, tall western hiking boots, a multi-pocket vest and her badge completed the outfit.

Heading to the kitchen, she quickly put her favorite flavored coffee on to brew. While the coffee brewed, filling the room with a rich caramel and caffeine scent, she grabbed a fanny pack and began stuffing it with apples, canned oranges, granola bars, a bottle of electrolytes on one side and a bottle of plain water on the other. If she were going to be out in the woods, she needed to be ready to keep herself—and possibly the child—fed and hydrated until she could get back. Satisfied with her pack, she poured coffee into a lidded mug and snagged two additional granola bars for her to eat on the way.

Driving the Dodge Durango assigned to her as Sheriff of Riverview over to the R-B, she reviewed what she knew about the campground. The facility belonged to Bethany and Roger Meadows who also owned the R-M cattle and horse ranch. Bethany's brainchild, Roger had created the equestrian campground and pack station to her exacting specifications. With twenty full-service pull-through sites for campers with horses, or for horseless campers in RVs; it was state-of-the-art. Each site had two covered pens in the shed row and there

was space behind the rigs for those who wanted to set up portable corrals. The outer ring surrounding the full-service sites was open ground for rough camping or portable pens, if needed. Six family cabins ringed the lodge at the north end of the facility, amid the trees.

In the center of the camp, there was an open field, flattened and cultivated to provide excellent footing for horse and rider. Bethany insisted this ground be maintained and kept open for horses to be hand-grazed, and also for group events. Riding groups could gather there to head out on trail together, and it was also a perfect space to set up vet checks or trail obstacles for competitions. A couple of shaded picnic tables and a two-sided covered pavilion sat at one end of the field, giving an open view of the field.

The north end of the property housed the lodge, showers, public restrooms, and restaurant. The large barn at the south end housed the pack-string and dude horses as well as featuring a large hay storage section and another section for shaving storage. Behind the lodge the cook had a private cabin, while the pack-station wrangler's cabin sat behind the barn, to be close to the horses. Each position was a "live-in" and included free rent, horse stall, and meals along with their monthly salary. It was great work during the summer, but the R-B could prove lonely in the winter. The wrangler worked year around, caring for and training the horses. The current plan for the cook was to move her over to the R-M to help at the main house in the winter. With this being the first year of operation, both jobs were floating until need was known. If the work proved not to be required in the off season, next year the jobs would change to seasonal positions.

Megan figured it was close to a quarter mile from one end of the R-B to the other, might actually be over. A small

child could find lots of hiding spots, or get into any number of situations in the dark. Nearing the property, she slowed and began searching for any signs of movement along the last mile of dirt road back into the camp. Even knowing she had little to no chance of seeing anything from her Durango, she still found her eyes straining at the brush along the road.

Pulling up close to the pavilion at the head of the open field, she observed the scene for a moment. In the center of the field, six volunteers with horses were preparing to mount up. Two had dogs, one a hound of some type and the other a shepherd, from the looks of it. The dogs sat obediently next to the horses, waiting for the signal to head out on the trail.

Standing in the middle of the semi-circle of horses, riders and dogs, Deputy Joseph Kaleo looked out of place but clearly in charge of the situation. His size dwarfed most of the riders and at least one of the horses. Megan watched him hesitantly pass the map he held to Matt Ward of the Gunnison Valley Guest Ranch, while Matt's dog bared a tooth at him. Casually, Matt reached over and lightly swatted the dog's nose. At 6'4", Joe should've been unconcerned about the dog, but big dogs worried him. His fear was more that he would hurt the animal than the other way around; at least that's the way he explained it, but Megan had her doubts.

With a heavy sigh, Megan took a final sip of her cooling coffee and climbed out of her Dodge, shaking her head as she walked toward the group.

"Hi, Joe." She called to him and the riders behind him. "What area is this group covering?"

"Hi, Sheriff. This group will follow the Skeleton Loop with the dogs searching above and below the trail." Joe seemed happy to see her. Megan understood why when a

distraught woman in a thick fleece robe with tied sash and fleece slippers came up and grabbed her arm.

"Wait a minute, Ma'am. Let me get these volunteers going and I'll be right with you. Why don't you sit at the pavilion where I can find you?" Megan shook the hand off her arm, turned the woman toward the tables, and gave her a nudge in that direction.

"You have your rifle, Matt?" Megan asked.

Matt patted the butt of the rifle snugged in its scabbard on the off side of his stout gelding. "Yep. If we find anything, I'll fire one shot. If we hear one shot, we can return to camp."

"Right. Good hunting, and ride safe. Be back well before dark, whether you find anything or not. I don't want searchers lost in the mountains, too," Megan warned the group.

She stepped back to stand beside Joe while the riders mounted and filed out of the field toward the trailhead. Megan wondered what could draw a small child out of camp in the wee hours; but kids were curious, and some would always have less sense than others.

Turning to her deputy, she smiled at his worried expression. "Come on, it's early yet. Weather's looking fine and more volunteers are arriving. We'll round up this child before noon—I hope. He's got to be getting hungry by now and he'll start making noise. The dogs will find him."

The pep talk was designed to lessen the big man's concern, it seemed effective when he smiled at her. The talk did little to lessen her own fears. A child lost in the wilderness was in danger from wildlife, plants, cliffs, and rivers in the wet season. Luckily, at the end of October, there was little water in the creeks and ravines. The longer he stayed lost, the higher the risk. Everyone was aware of that and a sense of urgency

hung over the field as riders saddled up and horses whinnied and stomped away flies.

Turning, Megan eyed the woman sitting at the table in the pavilion with her head resting on the table, sobbing into her arms. She could only be the mother.

"That's the boy's mother. I think her name is Rebecca Stroud." Joe offered, following her gaze and confirming Megan's unspoken thought.

Patting Joe on the shoulder, Megan turned to her next task. Climbing the mild incline to the weather-protected enclosure, Megan noted the coffee urns set up by the Ladies' Auxiliary, who were bustling around in the background. One, her Aunt Marge, had come forward to offer comfort to the distraught young mother. She was rubbing the woman's shoulders and talking to her as Megan arrived.

"Now, Sweetie. It's going to be okay. Your boy'll be found safe and sound. All these volunteers know this country so well, there won't be any spot a youngster can get into without them finding him. Mostly because they ran in this forest when *they* were young." Marge assured, still rubbing Rebecca's back. "Let me find you something to drink. Coffee, tea, chocolate?"

"No, I don't want anything except my Jamie back!" snarled the woman. She raised her head and looked around, sniffing, but no longer sobbing. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. I'm so worried about my baby." She touched the hand still rubbing her shoulder.

"Sweetie, I understand. I'd likely be snippy myself. I'll bring you a cup of hot chocolate; it'll help you focus." Marge moved away, heading for the urn of hot water.

"Ma'am. I'm Megan Holloway, Sheriff of Riverview. Joe called me in to help." Megan moved to sit across from the

woman and take her hands. "I know this is a trying time but I need to know as much as you can remember or can figure out about why Jamie might go off and what he's wearing. How old is your boy?"

"Hello, Sheriff. I'm Rebecca Stroud, Jamie's mother. I would say nice to meet you, but this moment has nothing nice about it." She sighed and gazed vacantly around the pavilion and field. "Jamie's six. Well, six-and-a-half by the calendar. He went to bed in his Spider-Man pajamas, as far as I can tell he didn't change out of them. But, his cowboy boots and a jacket are missing from by the door. He's very good about not going out without shoes and jacket," she boasted.

"Does he wander out at night often? Would he go out to look at the stars? Most kids are scared of the dark. Do you know why would he leave the cabin? Did he see something yesterday, which might lure him out?" Megan watched Rebecca take a deep breath and rub her hands together, possibly to relieve their shaking.

"We went to the zoo last week and took a tour. The guide led us into the darkened area where nocturnal animals and birds shelter during the day and explained about how the sun hurts their eyes so they only come out at night. Jamie was fascinated because he's timid about the dark and the thought that some creatures only come out at night amazed him." Her face softened at the memory.

"What color are the pajamas and the jacket he's wearing? Are his boots simple flat-soled cowboy boots?" Megan prompted the mother for a more detailed description of the child.

"His jammies are blue, with red from the knee down. The top is red with blue arms. The jacket that's missing is his favorite. Bright orange body with black arms. It has a tiger on

the back. He got it from Santa last Christmas." Her eyes misted, thinking of her child. "The boots are almost worn out; he seldom wears anything else. Black, with pointed toes and stitching up the calf. I yell at him for wearing them when it gets icy because they have flat soles."

"Do you recall anything yesterday that caught his fancy or that he wanted to explore and you held him back? Sometimes kids will return to something they didn't finish examining." Megan looked into the face of the woman, pressing and prompting her to remember.

"We got here after lunch and I made him take a nap before we went exploring the camp." Her gaze wandered around the camp as if trying to place her location in relation to her cabin. "We left the cabin and walked through the lodge. I showed him the showers and pointed out the kitchen and told him he could only go there with me. We came out the front door and walked toward the stables. It's quite amazing, with the stalls and barns in amongst all the trees. We live in the city in an old brownstone so this is incredibly different from home." Rebecca sniffed, wiping a gathering tear from her eye before she continued. "We kept to the right and circled the entire camp. He got to pet a couple of horses down at the stables and the wrangler showed him the pony he could ride today. Then we worked our way back up to the lodge, had a snack and returned for his afternoon nap. Rain moved in and we spent the evening playing checkers in the lodge. He doesn't actually know how, but he enjoys stacking the pieces."

"Thanks. That was very descriptive. Was he excited about riding? Did you see the trails heading into the woods?" Megan asked. Her mind seemed to be zipping from spot to spot, trying to come up with something that would pull a child from his bed in the dark.

"Oh my, yes. He petted the pony for almost twenty minutes, giving it hay and picking grass for it before he would move on with our hike. I remember the trails into the woods but I don't think they excited him much. He did see a few squirrels on a log pile and a deer took off up the hill as we approached. Jamie loves all animals and has no fear of anything--wild or tame."

"I'm going to suggest you go back up to your cabin and dress for the day. I'm going to mount a small search party close to camp. Once you're dressed, why don't you retrace your steps from yesterday, looking for anything we might miss. But, *do not leave camp*. We don't want to search for you, too. If you see anything, come find me and I'll check it out with you," Megan ordered.

Mrs. Stroud glanced down at her robe, finally noticing she had yet to dress for the day. "Oh, oh my. I didn't realize I was still in my nightgown." Her hand went to her throat, pinching closed the overlapping fleece fabric. "What must everyone think of me?" Her eyes filled with tears as she looked up at Megan.

"Everyone realizes you've been too busy helping us find your boy to change. That long robe looks comfy. I wish I had one like it to sit and watch TV. I'll bet those slippers are warm, too. My feet are always getting cold." Megan helped the smaller woman to her feet, turning her toward the cabins. She watched the woman head toward her cabin and nodded to her aunt, Marge, to follow and assist the distraught mother.

"Boss, I'm so glad you came in time to do that interview. I really lose it when a woman cries in front of me. My brain just freezes." Joe shrugged at Megan, admitting a typical male attitude.

"I feel for her, but I wish I knew what could have drawn the child out into the dark or early dawn. I don't suppose she mentioned if his bed was still warm when she realized he was gone?" Megan glanced at her deputy in question.

"No, and I didn't think to ask. Sorry."

"I didn't ask either; should have. It wouldn't have told us much but it might have made me feel better to know he only had a half hour's start on us." Megan gave the man a wry smile. "You had the compound checked and all doors opened. What about the lodge? Especially the kitchen?"

"We checked all the closets and the shower stalls in the bath facility. I even had Sheena, the cook, check all the downstairs rooms. No luck there."

"Did she search the kitchen? The boy could have gone looking for food. I need to talk to Sheena, so I'll check the cupboards." Megan turned and headed for the lodge, keeping a fair distance behind Marge and Mrs. Stroud. At this point the mother was better off in her own cabin, not out here hindering the search with questions and tears.

She found the cook, black-haired and curvaceous Sheena McDonald, cleaning up the kitchen after offering coffee and breakfast to any waiting volunteers. Sheena had made simple sausage biscuits, something the volunteers could handle as they tacked up their horses. As early as it was, she knew many of those volunteering had awakened to a telephone call and gone straight out to load horses and head over here to search. Food would help keep them going on the trail.

"Hi Sheena, how are things going? Thanks for feeding the volunteers. You might want to make up a bunch of sandwiches too—bill the office for them. Volunteers need energy and if we treat them well, they'll be back for the next

lost hiker." Megan smiled at the short, cute woman in front of her. Megan envied her fair skin and deep-blue eyes. Only the Scots seemed to be able to carry that genetic trait for black hair and deep blue eyes. Her own dirty-blond hair matched her sun-bronzed skin, but her eyes were light sky-blue compared to the periwinkle color of the eyes regarding her.

"Not a problem, Sheriff. Boss Lady said to see that anybody who showed up was treated better than family." Her voice had a lilt instead of a pronounced Scottish burr. Her phrasing and syntax plainly showed her heritage and time spent with her Scottish kin. "I'd rather stay busy than sit about worrying over the poor lad."

"I remember you have a walk-in cooler and a walk-in pantry. You searched them for him, didn't you?" Megan asked, watching Sheena's economical movements as she moved from sink to cutting boards to range. Sheena must be about her age; she didn't appear any older. Megan couldn't help but wonder what brought her to this area.

"Yes, when I found out the boy had been running around before daybreak, I sent his mother to search the rooms upstairs and I opened each and every cupboard as well as walking into the pantry and the cooler. I even opened the freezer, in case he tried to get himself ice cream. Boys are always hungry. Nothing is safe from them." Sheena nodded toward the stainless-steel upright freezer.

"Good job. Are you certain his mother checked everything upstairs?"

"The way the woman was screeching and wailing, the boy would've had to be either deaf or unconscious not to hear. But, you know, if the scamp was feeling guilty, he might have hidden. Let's take a look around in the guest rooms." Sheena suggested. "They're all unlocked since there're no guests and

we need to freshen them before the weekend. Who knows, if we're quiet we might be lucky and find the boy. I truly hope so."

"Okay. I'll start on the second floor and you on the third. Open every door and look under the beds. Don't call him, just look. That way, if he's scared, he won't run or hide from us," Megan suggested with a grim smile at the cook.

"I'm on my way." Sheena turned on her heel and headed for the stairs with Megan not far behind.

Megan turned to the right at the second floor landing and looked out over the reception area, eyeballing the front desk. If she found nothing upstairs, she would check under it when she returned to the first floor. Walking to the first room past the balcony overlook, her boots rapped hollowly on the wooden floor. Megan paused at the door to listen. Other than the sounds of Sheena moving on the floor above her, the lodge was quiet. Everyone was outside searching for Jamie.

Opening the door, she softly walked into the room, crossed to the bathroom, opened the door, the cupboard under the sink, and pulled back the shower curtain. Then she turned back to the room and checked the closet before dropping to her knees to search under the bed. Using the bed, she pushed herself back to her feet and left the room. She searched the four rooms on this side of the hall in the same fashion. Silently, she listened for any sounds outside of each door before she opened it. At the end of hall, she crossed to the other side and began working her way back toward the balcony.

Megan heard Sheena still searching the rooms above. She sighed. She hoped the boy wasn't out in the woods somewhere and this was a futile effort, but it had to be done. With her hand on the knob of the final room on the second

floor, she paused for a second to listen. Was that a quiet sob from inside the room?