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Chapter Two

The late August sun broiled every trace of moisture from the thin air, leaving nothing but dust and the taste of sagebrush drifting in the afternoon heat, a sharp contrast to the coolness of the previous night. Sean Burton stopped to catch his breath, winded by the trudge up the steep hillside. At fourteen he was big for his age, stocky, not tall, the muscles in his arms and shoulders solid from cleaning ditches and throwing hay bales. Sweat dripped down his forehead. He pulled off his grimy red baseball cap and let the wind ruffle his hair. Squinting in the glare, he studied the ground. Spindly tufts of grass, so dry they snapped

when you stepped on them, marched upwards to the treeline.

Two men stood at the top of the ridge, framed against the washed-out sky. In front of them, legs thrust stiffly out, lay a dead heifer. The wind shifted and Sean caught the sick-sweet odour of soured meat. The animal had been dead less than a day and already was so bloated it looked as if its hide might split open.

"Find any tracks?" a voice called to his left. Sean turned and saw his brother sidling towards him.

"No," Sean replied. "You find anything?"

"Nope. Nothing but cow tracks and a couple of deer." Patrick Burton shrugged. "If anybody was up here last night they didn't drive, that's for sure. Not unless they were in a helicopter."

Something in his brother's voice startled Sean, as if he knew more than he wanted to say. Patrick, known to everyone as Trick, was everything Sean wanted to be and wasn't. Tall, good looking, with an easy smile that opened more doors than a pocketful of keys, Trick was one of those lucky few who always seemed to land on his feet no matter how many times he tripped. He caught Sean watching him and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"Nothing," Sean said. "You just sounded a little weird, that's all."

"Yeah?" Trick shot a quick glance uphill, then turned back to his brother. "Can you keep a secret?"

Sean nodded.

"I don't want this getting around, but last night me and Drew and Chris were down there on the road—"

"What were you doing down there?"

"I don't know," Trick said, annoyed at being interrupted. "Just driving around. Are you going to let me finish?"

Again, Sean nodded.

"Anyhow, we were just driving around and we saw this light."

"Yeah?" The tiny hairs along the back of Sean's neck stiffened. "What kind of light?"

"Well… It was kind of weird, like a spotlight or something; only it covered the whole top of the ridge." Trick paused. "I'm pretty sure this is the hill it was hovering over."

"It?" Sean suddenly found it hard to breathe. "You mean like a helicopter or something?"

"Maybe. But if it was a helicopter, it wasn't like any I've ever seen before."

"Did you tell Dad about it?" Sean asked.

"Are you kidding?" Trick rolled his eyes, then glanced uphill. As if sensing he was being talked about, Aaron Burton looked in their direction before returning to his inspection of the dead animal. "You want to tell him, go right ahead. Maybe he'll listen to you, because he sure isn't going to listen to me."

They worked their way uphill. Sean thought about his brother's story, more disturbed by it than he wanted to admit. If it was true. Trick loved practical jokes,

especially when they were played on Sean. Still, something in Trick's eyes said he was frightened by what he had seen. And that didn't happen often. Sean's brother might have his faults, but cowardice wasn't among them. Time and again he had seen Trick rush into situations saner people would have avoided. For all his good nature, Trick gathered trouble like the floorboard of their old pickup gathered dirt.

Their father turned as they broke over the top of the ridge, a questioning expression on his face. Like Trick he was tall, with thinning blond hair hidden beneath a black Stetson so battered the brim fluttered with every gust of wind. But, unlike his son, Aaron Burton seldom smiled, and when he did it was with a weary, cynical twist of the lip, as if the universe was playing a joke on him. Beside him stood a shorter man wearing a tan uniform and a black cap with a patch that read *Beaverhead County Sheriffs Department*. A pistol in a shiny black holster hung at his hip, his belly threatening to spill over his leather belt.

"You guys find any tyre tracks?" the man in the uniform asked. Frank Munez said it as if he didn't expect anything helpful. Both Sean and Trick shook their heads. Munez tipped his hat back. His face was dark and round and prone to easy grins. Although he was technically only a part-time deputy, he was the closest thing the nearby town of Antler had to a lawman. His son, Drew, was Trick's age, the Munez ranch just south of their own place.

"Well, I'm not surprised," Munez said. "I don't think this animal was shot. From the way she's lying, maybe she was hit by lightning."

"I doubt it," Aaron Burton said. "There weren't any storms last night."

"True enough." Munez scratched his nose. "Could have been dry lightning." He kneeled in front of the dead heifer, took a pencil out of his breast pocket and poked the animal in the stomach with the eraser. It barely made a dent in the drum-tight skin.

Flies buzzed around the animal's face and tail, a frustrated black cloud. Sean took a closer look at the heifer. Other than a neatly sliced cut beneath the animal's tail, and her lips, which were also gone, the heifer seemed untouched. A trickle of watery fluid seeped from her nostrils, but there was no blood, no obvious wounds. Even her exposed eye, which was usually the first thing ravens went after, remained intact, staring up into the cloudless sky with an expression of surprise.

"How come nothing's gone after her?" Sean asked softly.

"Good question." Munez rose back to his feet. "Sometimes, scavengers will leave a lightning kill alone."

"If she was hit by lightning," Aaron Burton said doubtfully. "Besides, looks like coyotes have been working her over." He pointed at the cut beneath her tail.

"Too clean for coyotes," Trick said. "And there aren't

any tracks around here. Never heard of a flying coyote before."

His father shot Trick a sour glance. Sean stiffened, waiting for an argument to erupt. Trick and his father never seemed to get along, strong words lurking beneath the surface of every conversation. Maybe it was the strain of raising two boys alone, or maybe his father and brother were simply too much alike. But, no matter what the reason, the fights had grown more serious since Trick started high school two years earlier. Inwardly, Sean sighed. As far as he was concerned, everything had gotten worse since his older brother had started school. Frank Munez must have sensed the same storm brewing, because he moved around the dead animal, conveniently placing himself between them.

"Trick's right," Munez said. He pointed at the incision in the heifer's pelvis. "If coyotes or wolves had done this the cut would be ragged. This looks like it was done with a knife." He pushed the pencil into the wound, then drew it back and studied the tip. Though the eraser was damp, it showed no trace of blood.

"Weird." He tucked the pencil back in his pocket. "You know, there was another one of these up in Cascade last month."

"Another what?" Aaron said.

"Mutilation." Munez said the word darkly, as if it carried some foul but potent magic. Aaron stared at him sceptically. The deputy shrugged. "Happened on a little

place about fifteen kilometres out of town. Peterson, or Pierson. Something like that. Doesn't matter. Anyhow, they found a heifer cut up just like this one. Healthy young animal, no reason to have died. And according to the guys that saw it, the coyotes and ravens never did touch her."

"Sounds like redwater," Aaron said, defensively naming the disease. "That will drop 'em like this."

"Nope." Munez shook his head. "The vet did a post-mortem. No disease. No poison. He said it looked like she just fell out of the sky."

"Cattle mutilation?" Aaron cocked an eyebrow, his expression pure disbelief. "That's what you think this is? Little green men?"

"I never said anything about UFOs," Munez said, his wry grin once more in place. It was well known around Antler that the deputy was interested in anything that touched on the strange, especially if it might include the subject of Unidentified Flying Objects. "But, I hear tell there was a crop circle not too far from where they found the carcass. I'm not saying the two were connected, but…"

Munez let his words trail off. Again, Sean felt the hair on his neck stiffen as old half-formed memories swirled in his mind. Suddenly, he desperately wanted to go home. From the corner of his eye he saw Trick push his grease-stained straw hat back from his forehead.

"You know, now that you mention it," Trick said,

obviously nervous, “I saw some strange lights up here last night.”

“Headlights?” Munez asked.

“No. They were above the ridge-line. I’m sure whatever it was, it was in the air, not on the ground.”

“What time was that?”

“I don’t know,” Trick said. “Midnight. Maybe twelve-thirty.”

Aaron’s eyes narrowed, the lines above his nose drawing together. “What were you doing out here at midnight?”

“Just driving around.” Trick’s sunburned face grew a little redder.

“I thought I told you to stay home last night. How much did you have to drink?”

Sean drew in a deep breath and readied himself for an explosion. The storm he had been expecting had arrived. He looked at his brother. Trick was flushed, but now it was with anger, not embarrassment.

“We weren’t drinking.”

“Is that so?” Frank Munez cut into the conversation. Although he tried to look stern, an amused glint showed in his eye. He knew all too well wherever Trick and Chris Sorrenson had been the night before, his own son Drew would have been with them. “You’re sure about that?”

“We *weren’t* drunk.”

A gust of wind blasted across the ridge, throwing a wall of fine grit against their faces. Sean turned away

from it, but if Trick and his father noticed, they showed no sign. Finally, Aaron pulled his hat down further on his forehead and turned in the opposite direction.

"Let's go," was all he said.

He stomped off, angling towards the pair of pickups waiting two hundred metres away. Frank Munez breathed a loud sigh, no doubt relieved to see the argument over, at least for the moment. He took a digital camera from his breast pocket, shot a couple more pictures, then hurried to catch up to Aaron Burton. Trick watched the two men walk away, the expression on his face a mixture of anger and hurt, like a dog who had been kicked but didn't understand why.

"What is it with him?" he said. Sean wasn't certain if he was talking to him, or just thinking out loud. Trick started towards the trucks. Sean fell in beside him and was glad to see his father climb into the passenger side of Munez's truck, a beige Dodge Ram with government plates and a light-bar bolted to the top of the cab. Their own pickup, a dark-green Chevrolet flatbed, sat parked beside it. A shaggy black-and-white dog pranced nervously back and forth across the wooden deck.

By the time they reached the Chevy, Munez and his father were already driving away, the truck lurching along the rutted set of tracks. Seeing the boys, the dog barked. Trick petted the animal, but pushed him away when he tried to lick the side of his face.

"Cut it out, Stupe." Trick tipped his face down to avoid the dog's frantic tongue, then gave him another

shove. Undeterred, the shaggy creature bolted to the other side and gave Sean's face an equally thorough washing.

"Quit," Sean said. If the dog understood, it paid no attention, but only increased its efforts to greet the boys with the canine version of welcome home. Although Stupe, who had originally started life under the name of Shep, was in theory a carefully bred mixture of Border collie, McNab and Australian shepherd, in practice it seemed more reasonable that his background included porcupine, ground squirrel and demented coyote.

"That has to be the dumbest dog that was ever born," Trick said. He started for the driver's side, while Sean went for the passenger door. Trick pointed the pickup down the mountain road, towards home.