

Chapter 1

Clackamas County, Oregon, Saturday, 10:11 a.m.

Present day

The cow was in bad shape.

Hanson wasn't surprised. It was why he had been summoned here.

The animal was lying on its side in the dry grass, its head bent toward its back, the legs unnaturally askew. Entrails were spilled out in a wet mass from a long slit in its underbelly. Hanson circled the black-and-white Holstein and found its eyes gouged out. On the backside, its udder and genitalia were intact. Large black flies hovered lazily over the carcass warming up under the September morning sun.

"A real cattle mutilation, and so close by—" Hanson began, unable to contain his excitement. He looked over at the dairy farmer standing near him. Ben Tully looked like he didn't share his enthusiasm.

"I mean, I'm sorry for your loss," Hanson added. That didn't sound right either. "Your financial loss, that is," he finished lamely.

"Going to be a hassle to replace," Tully replied as he nudged one of the cow's back legs with the toe of his boot. The broken limb fell into a more normal-looking position. The dairyman looked up, his gaze studying Hanson as if he were appraising him one more time.

Both men were in their late early fifties stood a little less than six feet tall. The similarities ended there. The stocky dairy farmer's face looked like creased leather, while white hair peeked out from underneath a worn baseball cap with a cattle feed supplier's logo.

Hanson had a slimmer physique. His dark hair was still thick and full, though it had a touch of gray. Bright green eyes, a clean-cut face, and a boyish grin made Hanson look ten years younger than Tully.

"Have you seen anything like this before?" Gary asked.

Hanson glanced at Tully's son, who had accompanied them on the quarter-mile hike up the hill rising above the dairy farm. Blond, tall, and lanky, the teen looked like a younger version of his father. Gary had his cell phone out, and he was taking selfies with the cow in the background.

"Only in photographs and television specials," Hanson answered as he circled the cow again. He snapped off his own pictures with his phone's camera, and he knelt to get some close-ups.

"You do this for a living?" the teen asked.

"It's a hobby," Hanson replied as he looked up from the cow's pile of organs. "I follow unusual events for my blog, *The Unexplained, Explained*. It's how your dad found me."

"I looked up cattle mutilations right after I called the sheriff. Your website had an article detailing the recent increase in mutilations in eastern Oregon. Your bio said you lived in the Portland area," Tully senior said.

Hanson grunted in acknowledgment as he stood back up. An alert had chimed on his phone when Tully had reached out through his blog's email earlier that morning.

"I looked up mutilations too. Some people think aliens do this. Do you believe that?" Gary asked.

The kid hadn't read his blog though. "No, I'm more of a skeptic. I try to look for a more rational reason when something unusual happens."

"So, what's the deal with cattle mutilations?"

"Back in the seventies, ranchers in the Midwest began reporting a spike in cattle dying unnaturally."

"The seventies? That's like ancient history."

Both men frowned at the teenager as Hanson continued. "It was the long slit in the underbelly that had everyone excited."

Gary had his camera pointed at the wet mass of entrails. "It looks like it was done with a scalpel," he observed.

"That's what most people thought," Hanson replied. "Surgical precision. No marauding animal could make a wound like that. Only organ-hunting aliens, satanic cults, or government agents in black suits and riding black helicopters could be responsible."

"If it wasn't them doing it, then how?"

"Have you ever ripped a sheet in half?"

"Yeah."

"Sheets tear in a straight line when you apply an opposing force on it. It's the same here, only it's the stress of bloating that causes the tear. Ranchers back in the seventies thought their livestock were being dissected. They didn't realize the cows were just bursting open because of natural forces."

"Other websites also talk about the cows missing their eyes, organs, and even the anus." Gary challenged, though he was smiling when he said the last part.

"Scavengers don't tear through a cow's tough hide for the filet mignon. They go for areas of easier access," Hanson replied.

Gary was looking at the cow's back end. "No way, that's too gross."

"Don't believe me? Look up the 'hyena eating elephant' video."

Gary's thumbs flew on his phone. The kid exclaimed in dismay as he watched the video.

"That hyena stuck his whole head in there, up to his shoulders! That's not right."

"The unexplained, explained," Hanson said with a grin.

Ben Tully was at the cow's head, rocking it back and forth. The neck had been broken.

Hanson's amused smile disappeared when he saw that. He knelt by one of the cow's legs and shifted it around also. It moved easily back and forth. It, too, had been broken at the joint.

"Ever seen anything like that on television?" Tully asked.

"A few times in the more unusual cases," Hanson answered. "And the bloating thing happens when the animal is found after a few days. You told me this happened last night."

Tully was silent, his face grim.

"Someone attacked your cow," Hanson finished, and he could guess what was on the rancher's mind.

A man with a knife was on the property last night.

"I thought so too. I just wanted a second opinion from someone who's studied this shit before," Tully replied.

Both men stood up from the animal. Hanson looked around. They were on top of a hill of dry pasture. The ranch itself was a quarter-mile north. A paved highway could be seen winding below a few hundred yards to the south.

"Do you mind if I walk down to the road?" Hanson asked.

Tully, on the phone with his vet, nodded absently. Hanson started down the hill and kept an eye out for signs of the cow killer. In some spots, where the earth was softer, human footprints going in both directions could be seen.

The sun was higher in the sky now, and Hanson unzipped his gray hoodie. As he walked, he kept the tracks to his left. The last thing he wanted was a sheriff's deputy in his face acting upset about ruined evidence.

A gully was forming on his right. It developed into a deep cut that ended at a culvert passing beneath the highway. The fence angled a bit up the gully, its wires crossing the ditch where it wasn't as pronounced.

The V shape in the fence caught Hanson's attention. It created a space where a car could drive off the highway and tuck in amongst some trees.

He glanced at the highway shoulder. Someone had pulled off the road. The vehicle's tires had left parallel lines that led into a gap between the tree trunks.

Hanson aimed his phone's camera lens, feeling a bit let down as he took photos of the car tracks. He had told the Tullys that he was a skeptic, but the truth was, a part of him still wanted to believe. Hanson had come out here hoping for cows with missing hearts and scorched circles where alien spacecraft had landed. Instead, he had the tire tracks of some crazy dude who didn't like cattle. *Had a beef with cows*. Hanson spent a few moments updating his blog from his phone.

With his photos uploaded, Hanson turned to leave but stopped when something on the other side of the fence caught his eye. There was a splash of blue amongst the dried brush in the gully. He couldn't tell what the source was from his side of the fence, though it felt out of place. Curious, he spread the strands of barbed wire and carefully squeezed through the gap. Closer, and at a better angle, he could see that it was a pair of blue denim pants.

That had the shirtless body of a man still in them.

Hanson reeled back in horror.

The man was in worse shape than the cow.