



# I

## SOUTH DAKOTA

*June 1989*

Cooper Sullivan's life, as he'd known it, was over. Judge and jury—in the form of his parents—had not been swayed by pleas, reason, temper, threats, but instead had sentenced him and shipped him off, away from everything he knew and cared about to a world without video parlors or Big Macs.

The only thing that kept him from *completely* dying of boredom, or just going wacko, was his prized Game Boy.

As far as he could see, it would be him and Tetris for the duration of his prison term—two horrible, stupid months—in the Wild freaking West. He knew damn well the game, which his father had gotten pretty much right off the assembly line in Tokyo, was a kind of bribe.

Coop was eleven, and nobody's fool.

Practically nobody in the whole U.S. of A. had the game, and that was definitely cool. But what was the point in having something everybody else wanted if you couldn't show it off to your friends?

This way, you were just Clark Kent or Bruce Wayne, the lame alter egos of the cool guys.

All of his friends were back, a zillion miles back, in New York. They'd



be hanging out for the summer, taking trips to the beaches of Long Island or down to the Jersey Shore. He'd been promised two weeks at baseball camp in July.

But that was before.

Now his parents were off to Italy and France and other stupid places on a second honeymoon. Which was code for last-ditch effort to save the marriage.

No, Coop was nobody's fool.

Having their eleven-year-old son around wasn't romantic or whatever, so they'd shipped him off to his grandparents and the boondockies of South holy crap Dakota.

Godforsaken South Dakota. He'd heard his mother call it that plenty of times—except when she'd smiled and smiled telling him he was going to have an *adventure*, get to know his *roots*. Godforsaken turned into pristine and pure and exciting. Like he didn't know she'd run off from her parents and their crappy little farm the minute she'd turned eighteen?

So he was stuck back where she'd run from, and he hadn't done anything to deserve it. It wasn't his fault his father couldn't keep his dick in his pants, or his mother compensated by buying up Madison Avenue. Information Coop had learned from expert and regular eavesdropping. They screwed things up and he was sentenced to a summer on a horseshit farm with grandparents he barely knew.

And they were really *old*.

He was supposed to help with the horses, who smelled and looked like they wanted to bite you. With the chickens who smelled and did bite.

They didn't have a housekeeper who cooked egg white omelets and picked up his action figures. And they drove trucks instead of cars. Even his ancient grandmother.

He hadn't seen a cab in days.

He had chores, and had to eat home-cooked meals with food he'd never seen in his *life*. And maybe the food was pretty good, but that wasn't the point.

The *one* TV in the whole house barely got anything, and there was no

McDonald's. No Chinese or pizza place that delivered. No friends. No park, no movie theaters, no video arcades.

He might as well be in Russia or someplace.

He glanced up from the Game Boy to look out the car window at what he considered a lot of nothing. Stupid mountains, stupid prairie, stupid trees. The same view, as far as he could tell, that had been outside the window since they'd left the farm. At least his grandparents had stopped interrupting his game to tell him stuff about what was outside the window.

Like he cared about a lot of stupid settlers and Indians and soldiers who hung around out here before he was even born. Hell, before his prehistoric grandparents had been born.

Who gave a shit about Crazy Horse and Sitting Bullshit. He cared about the X-Men and the box scores.

The way Coop looked at it, the fact that the closest town to the farm was called Deadwood said it all.

He didn't care about cowboys and horses and buffalo. He cared about baseball and video games. He wasn't going to see a *single* game in Yankee Stadium all summer.

He might as well be dead, too.

He spotted a bunch of what looked like mutant deer clomping across the high grass, and a lot of trees and stupid hills that were really green. Why did they call them black when they were green? Because he was in South crappy Dakota where they didn't know dick about squat.

What he didn't see were buildings, people, streets, sidewalk vendors. What he didn't see was home.

His grandmother shifted in her seat to look back at him. "Do you see the elk, Cooper?"

"I guess."

"We'll be getting to the Chance spread soon," she told him. "It was nice of them to have us all over for supper. You're going to like Lil. She's nearly your age."

He knew the rules. "Yes, ma'am." As if he'd pal around with some

*girl*. Some dumb farm girl who probably smelled like horse. And looked like one.

He bent his head and went back to Tetris so his grandmother would leave him alone. She looked sort of like his mother. If his mother was old and didn't get her hair done blond and wavy, and didn't wear makeup. But he could see his mother in this strange old woman with the lines around her blue eyes.

It was a little spooky.

Her name was Lucy, and he was supposed to call her Grandma.

She cooked and baked. A lot. And hung sheets and stuff out on a line in back of the farmhouse. She sewed and scrubbed, and sang when she did. Her voice was pretty, if you liked that sort of thing.

She helped with the horses, and Coop could admit, he'd been surprised and impressed when he'd seen her jump right on one without a saddle or anything.

She *was* old—probably at least fifty, for God's sake. But she wasn't creaky.

Mostly she wore boots and jeans and plaid shirts. Except for today she'd put a dress on and left the brown hair she usually braided loose.

He didn't notice when they turned off the endless stretch of road, not until the ride turned bumpier. When he glanced out he saw more trees, less flat land, and the mountains roughed up behind them. Mostly, it looked like a lot of bumpy green hills topped over with bare rock.

He knew his grandparents raised horses and rented them at trail-heads to tourists who wanted to ride them. He didn't get it. He just didn't get why anybody would want to sit on a horse and ride around rocks and trees.

His grandfather drove along the more-dirt-than-gravel road, and Coop saw cattle grazing on either side. He hoped it meant the drive was nearly over. He didn't care about having dinner at the Chance farm or meeting dumb Lil.

But he had to pee.

His grandfather had to stop so his grandmother could hop out to open a cattle gate, then close it again when they'd gone through. As they bumped along his bladder began to protest.

He saw sheds and barns and stables, whatever they were didn't matter. It was, as far as it went out here, a sign of civilization.

Something was growing in some fields, and horses were running around in others like they didn't have anything better to do.

The house, when it came into view, didn't look that different from the one his grandparents lived in. Two floors, windows, a big porch. Except the house was blue and his grandparents' was white.

There were a lot of flowers around the house, which somebody who hadn't had to learn to weed the ones around his grandparents' house might think were okay to look at.

A woman came out on the porch and waved. She wore a dress, too. A long one that made him think of the pictures of hippies he'd seen. Her hair was really dark and pulled back in a ponytail. Outside the house sat two trucks and an old car.

His grandfather, who hardly said anything, stepped out of the car. "Lo, Jenna."

"It's good to see you, Sam." The woman gave his grandfather a kiss on the cheek, then turned to give his grandmother a big hug. "Lucy! Didn't I say don't bring a thing but yourselves?" she added when Lucy turned and took a basket from the car.

"I couldn't help it. It's cherry pie."

"We sure won't turn that down. And this is Cooper." Jenna held out a hand as she would to an adult. "Welcome."

"Thank you."

She dropped a hand on his shoulder. "Let's go on in. Lil's been looking forward to meeting you, Cooper. She's finishing up some chores with her dad, but they'll be right along. How about some lemonade? I bet you're thirsty after the drive."

"Um. I guess. May I use the bathroom?"

“Sure. We have one right in the house.” She laughed when she said it, with a teasing look in her dark eyes that made the back of his neck hot.

It was like she knew he’d been thinking how old and dumpy everything looked.

She led him through, past a big living room, then a smaller one, and into a kitchen that smelled a lot like his grandmother’s.

Home cooking.

“There’s a washroom right through there.” She gave his shoulder a careless pat, which added to the heat on the back of his neck. “Why don’t we have that lemonade out on the back porch and visit awhile?” she said to his grandparents.

His mother would have called it a powder room. He relieved himself with some gratitude, then washed his hands at the tiny sink fixed in the corner. Beside it pale blue towels with a little pink rose hung on a rod.

At home, he mused, the powder room was twice as big, and fancy soaps sat in a crystal dish from Tiffany. The towels were a lot softer, too, and monogrammed.

Stalling, he poked a finger at the petals of some white daisies standing in a skinny wood pot thing on the sink. At home there would’ve been roses probably. He hadn’t really noticed that kind of thing until now.

He was thirsty. He wished he could take a gallon of lemonade, maybe a bag of Cheetos, and stretch out in the back of the car with his Game Boy. Anything would be better than being forced to sit with a bunch of strange people on the porch of some old farmhouse for probably *hours*.

He could still hear them talking and fooling around in the kitchen, and wondered how long he could stall before going back out.

He peeked out the little window, decided it was the same shit. Paddocks and corrals, barns and silos, dumb farm animals, weird-looking equipment.

It wasn’t as if he’d wanted to go to Italy and walk around looking at old stuff, but at least if his parents had taken him, there might be pizza.

The girl came out of the barn. She had dark hair like the hippie woman, so he figured it had to be Lil. She wore jeans rolled up at the

cuffs, and high-top sneakers, and a red baseball cap over the hair done in two long braids.

She looked scruffy and stupid, and he immediately disliked her.

A moment later a man came out behind her. His hair was yellow, and worn in a long tail that enforced the hippie conclusion. He, too, wore a ball cap. He said something to the girl that made her laugh and shake her head. Whatever it was had her starting to run, but the man caught her.

Coop heard her squeal with laughter as the man tossed her in the air.

Had his father ever chased him? Coop wondered. Ever tossed him in the air, then swung him in giddy circles?

Not that he could remember. He and his father had *discussions*—when there was time. And time, Cooper knew, was always in short supply.

Country bumpkins had nothing but time, Cooper thought. They weren't under the demands of business like a corporate lawyer of his father's repute. They weren't third-generation Sullivans like his father, with the responsibilities that came with the name.

So they could toss their kids around all day.

Because it made something hurt in his stomach to watch, he turned away from the window. With no other choice, he went out to be tortured for the rest of the day.

LIL GIGGLED as her father gave her another dizzying swing. When she could breathe again, she tried to give him a stern look. "He is *not* going to be my boyfriend."

"That's what you say now." Josiah Chance gave his girl a quick tickle along the ribs. "But I'm going to keep my eye on that city slicker."

"I don't want any boyfriend." Lil gave a lofty wave of her hand with her expertise as an almost-ten-year-old. "They're too much trouble."

Joe pulled her close, rubbed cheeks. "I'm going to remind you of that in a few years. Looks like they're here. We'd better go say hello, and get cleaned up."

She didn't have anything *against* boys, Lil mused. And she knew how

to mind her manners with company. But still . . . “If I don’t like him, do I have to play with him?”

“He’s a guest. And he’s a stranger in a strange land. Wouldn’t you want somebody your own age to be nice to you and show you around if you dropped down in New York City?”

She wrinkled her narrow nose. “I don’t want to go to New York City.”

“I bet he didn’t want to come here.”

She couldn’t understand why. Everything was there. Horses, dogs, cats, the mountains, the trees. But her parents had taught her that people were as different as they were the same.

“I’ll be nice to him.” At first, anyway.

“But you won’t run off and marry him.”

“Dad!”

She rolled her eyes just as the boy came out on the porch. Lil studied him as she might any new specimen.

He was taller than she’d expected, and his hair was the color of pine bark. He looked . . . mad or sad, she couldn’t decide which. But neither was promising. His clothes said city to her, dark jeans that hadn’t been worn or washed enough and a stiff white shirt. He took the glass of lemonade her mother offered and watched Lil as warily as she watched him.

He jolted at the cry of a hawk, and Lil caught herself before she sneered. Her mother wouldn’t like it if she sneered at company.

“Sam.” Grinning broadly, Joe stuck out a hand. “How are things?”

“Can’t complain.”

“And Lucy, don’t you look pretty?”

“We do what we can with what we’ve got. This is our grandson, Cooper.”

“Glad to meet you, Cooper. Welcome to the Black Hills. This is my Lil.”

“Hello.” She cocked her head. He had blue eyes—ice-on-the-mountain blue. He didn’t smile, nor did his eyes.

“Joe, you and Lil go clean up. We’re going to eat outside,” Jenna

added. "We've got a fine day for it. Cooper, sit down here by me, and tell me what you like to do in New York. I've never been there."

In Lil's experience, her mother could get anybody to talk, make anybody smile. But Cooper Sullivan from New York City seemed to be the exception. He spoke when spoken to, minded his manners, but little more. They sat out at the picnic table, one of Lil's favorite things, and feasted on fried chicken and biscuits, on potato salad and snap beans her mother had put up last harvest.

Conversation ranged from horses and cattle and crops, to weather and books and the status of other neighbors. All the things, in Lil's world, that mattered.

Though Cooper struck Lil as stiff as his shirt, he managed to eat two helpings of everything, though he barely opened his mouth otherwise.

Until her father brought up baseball.

"Boston's going to break the curse this year."

Cooper snorted, then immediately hunched his shoulders.

In his easy way, Joe picked up the basket of biscuits, offered it to the boy. "Oh, yeah, Mr. New York. Yankees or Mets?"

"Yankees."

"Not a prayer." As if in sympathy, Joe shook his head. "Not this year, kid."

"We've got a strong infield, good bats. Sir," he added as if he'd just remembered to.

"Baltimore's already killing you."

"It's a fluke. They died last year, and they'll fade this year."

"When they do, the Red Sox will pounce."

"Crawl maybe."

"Oh, a smart-ass."

Cooper paled a little, but Joe continued as if he hadn't noticed the reaction. "Let me just say, Wade Boggs, and toss in Nick Esasky. Then—"

"Don Mattingly, Steve Sax."

"George Steinbrenner."

For the first time, Coop grinned. "Well, you can't have everything."

"Let me consult my expert. Sox or Yankees, Lil?"

"Neither. It's Baltimore. They've got the youth, the momentum. They've got Frank Robinson. Boston's got a play, but they won't pull it off. The Yankees? Not a chance, not this year."

"My only child, and she wounds me." Joe put a hand on his heart. "Do you play back home, Cooper?"

"Yes, sir. Second base."

"Lil, take Cooper on around back of the barn. You can work off the meal with a little batting practice."

"Okay."

Coop slid off the bench. "Thank you for dinner, Mrs. Chance. It was very good."

"You're welcome."

As the children walked away, Jenna looked over at Lucy. "Poor little boy," she murmured.

The dogs raced ahead, and across the field. "I play third base," Lil told Coop.

"Where? There's nothing around here."

"Right outside Deadwood. We have a field, and a league. I'm going to be the first woman to play major-league ball."

Coop snorted again. "Women can't play the bigs. That's just the way it is."

"The way it is isn't the way it has to be. That's what my mother says. And when I'm finished playing, I'm going to manage."

He sneered, and though it brought her hackles up, she liked him better for it. At least he didn't seem as stiff as his shirt anymore. "You don't know dick."

"Dick who?"

He laughed, and even though she knew he was laughing at her, she decided to give him one more chance before she clobbered him.

He was company. A stranger in a strange land.

"How do you play in New York? I thought there were buildings everywhere."

“We play in Central Park, and sometimes in Queens.”

“What’s Queens?”

“It’s one of the boroughs.”

“It’s a mule?”

“No. Jesus. It’s a city, a place. Not a donkey.”

She stopped, set her fists on her hips, and fired at him out of dark, dark eyes. “When you try to make somebody feel stupid when they ask a question, you’re the stupid one.”

He shrugged, and rounded the side of the big red barn with her.

It smelled like animal, dusty and poopy at the same time. Coop couldn’t figure out why anybody would want to live with that smell, or the sounds of clucking, snuffling, and mooing all the damn time. He started to make a sneering remark about just that—she was only a kid, after all, and a girl at that—but then he saw the batting cage.

It wasn’t what he was used to, but it looked pretty sweet to him. Somebody, he supposed Lil’s father, had built the three-sided cage out of fencing. It stood with its back to a jumbled line of brush and bramble that gave way to a field where cattle stood around doing nothing. Beside the barn, under the shelter of one of the eaves, sat a weatherworn box. Lil opened it, pulled out gloves, bats, balls.

“My dad and I practice most nights after dinner. Mom pitches to me sometimes, but she’s got a rag arm. You can bat first if you want, ’cause you’re company, but you have to wear a batting helmet. It’s the rule.”

Coop put on the helmet she offered, then checked the weight of a couple of bats. Holding one was almost as good as the Game Boy. “Your dad practices with you?”

“Sure. He played minor-league for a couple seasons back east, so he’s pretty good.”

“Really?” All derision fled. “He played professional ball?”

“For a couple seasons. He did something to his rotator cuff, and that was that. He decided to see the country, and he ended up out here. He worked for my grandparents—this used to be their farm—and met my mother. That was that, too. You wanna bat?”

“Yeah.” Coop walked back to the cage, took a couple of practice swings. Set. She pitched one straight and slow, so he got the meat on it and slapped it into the field.

“Nice one. We’ve got six balls. So we’ll field them after you hit.” She gripped the next ball, took her position, pitched another easy one.

Coop felt the little lift inside as the ball sailed into the field. He smacked a third, then wiggled his hips and waited for the pitch.

She winged it, and blew it by him. “Nice cut,” was all she said as he narrowed his eyes at her.

He choked up on the bat a bit, scuffed his heels. She fooled him with one that curved low and inside. He caught a piece of the next pitch, fouling it off so it rang as it hit the cage.

“You can toss those three back if you want,” she told him. “I’ll pitch you some more.”

“That’s okay. You take a turn.” And he’d show her.

They switched places. Rather than soften her up, he burned one in. She caught enough of it to have it shooting foul. She caught the next, popped it up. But she got the fat of the bat on the third pitch. If there’d been a park, Coop was forced to admit, she’d have hit it out.

“You’re pretty good.”

“I like them high and inside.” After cocking the bat against the cage, Lil started toward the field. “We’ve got a game next Saturday. You could come.”

Some dumbass boondockie ball game. Would be, he thought, a lot better than nothing. “Maybe.”

“Do you get to go to real games? Like at Yankee Stadium?”

“Sure. My father’s got season tickets, box seats, right behind the third-base line.”

“No way!”

It felt good—a little—to impress her. And it didn’t suck to have somebody, even a farm girl, to talk ball with. Plus she could handle the ball and the bat, and that was a serious plus.

Still, Coop only shrugged, then watched Lil slip through the lines of barbed wire without mishap. He didn't complain when she turned and held the lines wider for him.

"We watch on TV, or listen on the radio. And once we went all the way down to Omaha to watch a game. But I've never been to a major-league ballpark."

And that reminded him just where he was. "You're a million miles from one. From anything."

"Dad says one day we'll take a vacation and go back east. Maybe to Fenway Park because he's a Red Sox fan." She found a ball, stuck it in her back pocket. "He likes to root for the underdog."

"My father says it's smarter to root for a winner."

"Everybody else does, mostly, so somebody has to root for the underdog." She beamed a smile at him, fluttered long lashes over dark brown eyes. "That's going to be New York this year."

He grinned before he realized it. "So you say."

He picked up a ball, tossed it hand to hand as they worked their way toward the trees. "What do you do with all these cows, anyway?"

"Beef cattle. We raise them, then sell them. People eat them. I bet even people in New York like steak."

He thought that was gross, just the idea that the cow staring at him now would be on somebody's plate—maybe even his—one day.

"Do you have any pets?" she asked him.

"No."

She couldn't imagine not having animals around, everywhere, all the time. And the idea of not having any brought a lump of genuine sympathy to her throat.

"I guess it's harder in the city. Our dogs . . ." She paused to look around, then spotted them. "They've been out running, see, and now they're back at the table, hoping for scraps. They're good dogs. You can come over and play with them sometimes if you want, and use the batting cage."

"Maybe." He sneaked another glance at her. "Thanks."

"Not many of the girls I know like baseball all that much. Or hiking and fishing. I do. Dad's teaching me to track. My grandfather, my mom's father, taught him. He's really good."

"Track?"

"Animals and people. For fun. There's lots of trails, and lots to do."

"If you say so."

She cocked her head at the dismissive tone. "Have you ever been camping?"

"Why would I want to?"

She only smiled. "It's going to be dark pretty soon. We'd better get the last ball and head back. If you come over again, maybe Dad will play or we can go riding. You like to ride?"

"You mean horses? I don't know how. It looks stupid."

She fired up at that, the way she'd fired up to hit the ball high and long. "It's not stupid, and it's stupid to say it is just because you don't know how. Besides, it's fun. When we—"

She stopped dead in her tracks. As she sucked in her breath, she grabbed Coop's arm. "Don't move."

"What?" Because the hand on his arm shook, his heart slammed into his throat. "Is it a snake?"

Panicked, he scanned the grass.

"Cougar." She barely breathed the word. She stood like a statue with that one trembling hand on his arm, and stared into the tangled brush.

"What? Where?" Suspicious, sure she was just screwing around and trying to scare him, he tried to pry her hand away. At first he saw nothing but that brush, the trees, the rise of rock and hill.

Then he saw the shadow. "Holy shit. Holy freaking shit!"

"Don't run." She stared as if mesmerized. "If you run, he'll chase you, and he's faster. No!" She yanked on his arm as Coop edged up, getting a firmer grip on the ball. "Don't throw anything, not yet. Mom says . . ." She couldn't remember everything her mother had told her. She'd never

seen a cat before, not in real life, not near the farm. "You have to make noise, and, and make yourself look big."

Quivering, Lil rose to her toes, lifted her arms over her head, and began to shout. "Get away! Get away from here.

"Yell!" she shouted to Cooper. "Look big and mean!"

Her eyes, keen and dark, measured the cougar from tip to tail. Even as her heart pounded with fear, something else moved through her.

Awe.

She could see his eyes glint in the oncoming dusk, glint as they seemed to look right into hers. Though her throat went dry, she thought: He's beautiful. He's so beautiful.

He paced, powerful grace, watching them as if deciding whether to attack or retreat.

Beside her Coop shouted, his voice raw with fear. She watched the big cat slink toward deeper shadow. And then it leaped away, a blur of dull gold that dazzled her eyes.

"It ran away. It ran away."

"It didn't," Lil murmured. "It flew."

Through the roaring in her ears, she heard her father shouting for her, and turned. He charged across the field, scattering surprised cattle. Yards behind him Coop's grandfather ran, carrying a rifle she realized he'd gotten from the house. The dogs raced with them, as did her mother, with a shotgun, and Coop's grandmother.

"Cougar." She managed to get the word out just before Joe swept her off her feet and into his arms. "There. Over there. It's gone now."

"Get in the house. Coop." With his free arm, Joe pulled Coop against him. "Both of you, get inside. Now."

"It's gone, Dad. We scared it away."

"Go! Cougar," he said as Jenna sprinted past Sam and reached them.

"Oh, God. You're all right." She took Lil, giving Joe the shotgun. "You're all right." She kissed Lil's face, her hair, then bent down to do the same to Coop.

“Get them in the house, Jenna. Take the kids and Lucy, and get inside.”

“Come on. Come on.” Jenna draped her arms around both children, looked up at Sam’s grim face as he reached them. “Be careful.”

“Don’t kill it, Dad!” Lil called out as her mother pulled her away. “It was so beautiful.” She searched the brush, the trees, hoping for just one more glimpse. “Don’t kill it.”