

## **Part One**

Evolution loves death more than it loves you or me ... we are moral creatures, then, in an amoral world. The universe that suckled us is a monster that does not care if we live or die—does not care if it itself grinds to a halt

-Annie Dillard

# One

KEYSTONE, SOUTH DAKOTA

**MARSHALL AND SYLVIA** Hotele, who liked to list their places of residence as Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Quartzite, Arizona, and “the open road” were preparing dinner when they saw the dark SUV with Illinois plates drive by on the access road for the third time in less than an hour.

“There they are again,” Sylvia said, narrowing her eyes. She was setting two places on the picnic table. Pork cutlets, green beans, dinner rolls, iceberg lettuce salad and plenty of weak coffee, just like Marshall liked it.

“Gawkers,” Marshall said, with a hint of a smile. “I’m getting used to it.”

The evening was warm and still and perfumed with the smell of dust and pine pollen particular to the Black Hills

of South Dakota. Within the next hour, the smell of hot dogs and hamburgers being cooked on dozens of campground grills would waft through the trees as well. By then the Hote's would be done eating. They liked to eat early. It was a habit they developed on their farm.

The Hote's had parked their massive motor home for the night in a remote campsite within the Mt. Rushmore KOA complex near Palmer Gulch, only five miles away from the monument itself. Because it was late August and the roads teemed with tourists, they'd thought ahead and secured this choice site – one they'd occupied before on their semi-annual cross-country trips – by calling and reserving it weeks before. Although there were scores of RV's and tents setting up within the complex below, this particular site was tucked high in the trees and seemed almost remote.

Marshall often said he preferred the Black Hills to the Rocky Mountains further west. The Black Hills were green, rounded, gentle, with plenty of lots big enough to park The Unit. The highest mountain – Harney Peak – was 5,400 feet. The Black Hills, Marshall said, were *reasonable*. The Rockies were a different matter. As they

ventured from South Dakota into Wyoming both the people and the landscape changed. Good solid midwestern stock gave way to mountain people were ragged on the edges, he thought. Farms gave way to ranches. The mountains became severe, twice the elevation of Harney Peak which was just big enough. The weather became volatile. While the mountains could be seductive they were also amoral. Little of use could be grown. There were creatures – grizzly bears, black bears, mountain lions -- capable and willing to eat him. "Give me the Black Hills any old day," Marshall said as he drove, as the rounded dark humps appeared in his windshield as he drove west, "The Black Hills are plenty."

Sylvia was short, compact, and solid. She wore a sweatshirt covered with balloons and clouds she'd appliquéd on herself. Her iron-gray hair was molded into tight curls that looked spring-loaded. She had eight grandchildren with the ninth due any day now. She'd spent the day knitting baby booties and a little stocking cap. She didn't have strong opinions on the Black Hills versus the Rocky Mountains, but...

"I don't like to be gawked at," she said, barely moving her mouth.

"I hate to tell you this, but it's not you they're looking at," Marshall said, sipping coffee. "They're admiring The Unit." Marshall's belly strained at the snap buttons of his Iowa Hawkeyes windbreaker. His face was round and his cheeks were always red. He'd worn the same steel-framed glasses so long they were back in style, as was his John Deere cap. He chinned toward the motor home. "They probably want to come up here and take a look. Don't worry, though, we can have supper first."

"That's charitable of you," Sylvia said, shaking her head. "Don't you ever get tired of giving tours?"

"No."

"It's not just a motor home, you know. It's where we live. But with you giving tours all the time I feel like I've always got to keep it spotless."

"Ah," he said, sliding a cutlet from the platter onto his plate, "you'd do that anyway."

"Still," she said. "You never gave tours of the farmhouse."

He shrugged. "Nobody ever wanted to look at it. It's just a house, sweetie. Nothing special about a house."

Said Sylvia heatedly, "A house where we raised eight children."

"You know what I mean," he said. "Hey, good pork."

"Oh dear," she said, "here they come again."

The dark SUV with the Illinois plates didn't proceed all the way up the drive to the campsite, but braked to a stop just off the access road. Sylvia could see two people in the vehicle, two men, it looked like. And maybe someone smaller in the back. A girl? She glared her most unwelcoming glare, she thought. It usually worked. This time, though, the motor shut off and the driver's door opened.

"At least they didn't drive in on top of us," she said.

"Good campground etiquette," Marshall said.

"But they could have waited until after our supper."

"You want me to tell them to come back later?"

"What," she said with sarcasm, "and not give them a tour?"

Marshall chuckled and reached out and patted Sylvia's hand. She shook her head.

Only the driver got out. He was older, about their age or maybe a few years younger, wearing a casual jacket and chinos. He was dark and barrel-chested, with a large head, slicked-back hair and warm dark eyes. He had a thick mustache and heavy jowls and he walked up the drive rocking side-to-side a little like a B-movie monster.

"He looks like somebody," Sylvia said. "Who am I thinking of?"

Marshall whispered, "How would I know who you're thinking of?"

"Like that dead writer. You know."

"Lots of dead writers," Marshall said. "That's the best kind, you ask me."

"Sorry to bother you," the man said affably, "I'm Dave Stenson. My friends in Chicago call me Stenko."

"*Hemingway*," Sylvia hissed without moving her lips, "*That's* who I mean."

“Sorry to bother you at dinner time. Would it be better if I came back?” Stenson/Stenko said, pausing before getting too close.

Before Sylvia could say yes Marshall said, “I’m Marshall and this is Sylvia. What can we do for you?”

“That’s the biggest darned motor home I’ve ever seen,” Stenko said, stepping back so he could see it all from stem to stern, “I just wanted to look at it.”

Marshall smiled and his eyes twinkled behind thick lenses. Sylvia sighed. All those years in the cab of a combine, all those years of corn, corn, corn. The last few years of ethanol mandates had been great! This was Marshall’s reward.

“I’d be happy to give you a quick tour,” her husband said.

“Please,” Stenko said, holding up his hand palm out, “Finish your dinner first.”

Said Marshall, “I’m done,” and pushed away from the picnic table leaving the salad and green beans untouched.

Sylvia thought, *A life spent as a farmer but the man won’t eat vegetables.*

Turning to her, Stenko asked, "I was hoping I could borrow a potato or two I'd sure appreciate it."

She smiled, despite herself, and felt her cheeks get warm. He had good manners, this man, and those dark eyes...

**SHE WAS** cleaning up the dishes on the picnic table when Marshall and Stenko finally came out of the motor home. Marshall had done the tour of The Unit so many times, for so many people, that his speech was becoming smooth and well rehearsed. Fellow retired RV enthusiasts as well as people still moored to their jobs wanted to see what it looked like inside the behemoth vehicle: their 2009 45-foot diesel-powered Fleetwood American Heritage which Marshall simply called "The Unit." She heard phrases she'd heard dozens of times, "Forty-six thousand, six hundred pounds gross vehicle weight... five hundred hoses with a ten-point-eight liter diesel engine... satellite radio...three integrated cameras for backing up... GPS... bedroom with queen bed, satellite television... washer/dryer... wine rack and wet bar even though neither one of us drinks..."

Now Marshall was getting to the point in his tour where, he said, "We traded a life of farming for life in The Unit. We do the circuit now."

"What's the circuit?" Stenko asked. She thought he sounded genuinely interested. Which meant he might not leave for a while.

Sylvia shot a glance toward the SUV. She wondered why the people inside didn't get out, didn't join Stenko for the tour or at least say hello. They weren't very friendly, she thought. Her sister in Wisconsin said people from Chicago were like that, as if they owned all the Midwestern states and thought of Wisconsin as their own personal recreation playground and Iowa as a cornfield populated by hopeless rubes.

"It's *our* circuit," Marshall explained, "visiting our kids and grandkids in six different states, staying ahead of the snow, making sure we hit the big flea markets in Quartzite, going to a few Fleetwood rallies where we can look at the newest models and talk to our fellow owners. We're kind of a like a club, us Fleetwood people."

Stenko said, "It's the biggest and most luxurious thing I've ever been in. It's amazing. You must really get some looks on the road."

"Thank you," Marshall said. "We spent a lifetime farming just so we..."

"I've heard a vehicle like this can cost more than six-hundred K. Now, I'm not asking you what you paid, but am I in the ballpark?"

Marshall nodded, grinned.

"What kind of gas mileage does it get?" Stenko asked.

"Runs on diesel," Marshall said.

"Whatever," Stenko said, withdrawing a small spiral notebook from his jacket pocket and flipping it open.

*What's he doing?* Sylvia thought.

"We're getting eight-to-ten miles a gallon," Marshall said. "Depends on the conditions, though. The Black Hills are the first mountains we hit going west from Iowa, and the air's getting thinner. So the mileage gets worse. When we go through Wyoming and Montana – sheesh."

"Not good, eh?" Stenko said, scribbling.

Sylvia knew Marshall disliked talking about miles per gallon because it made him defensive.

"You can't look at it that way," Marshall said, "you can't look at it like it's a car or a truck. You've got to look at it as your house on wheels. You're moving your own house from place to place. Eight miles per gallon is a small price to pay for living in your own house. You save on motels and such like that."

Stenko licked his pencil and scribbled. He seemed excited. "So how many miles do you put on your ... house ... in a year?"

Marshall looked at Sylvia. She could tell he was ready for Stenko to leave.

"Sixty thousand on average," Marshall said. "Last year we did eighty."

Stenko whistled. "How many years have you been doing this circuit as you call it?"

"Five," Marshall said. "But this is the first year in The Unit."

Stenko ignored Sylvia's stony glare. "How many more years do you figure you'll be doing this?"

"That's a crazy question," she said. "It's like you're asking us when we're going to die?"

Stenko chuckled, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that."

She crossed her arms and gave Marshall a *Get Rid Of Him* look.

"You're what, sixty-five, sixty-six?" Stenko asked.

"Sixty-five," Marshall said. "Sylvia's..."

"*Marshall!*"

"... Approximately the same age," Stenko said, finishing Marshall's thought and making another note. "So it's not crazy to say you two might be able to keep this up for another ten or so years. Maybe even more."

"More," Marshall said, "I hope."

"I've got to clean up," Sylvia said, "if you'll excuse me." She was furious at Stenko for his personal questions and at Marshall for answering them.

"Oh," Stenko said, "about those potatoes."

She paused on the step into the motor home and didn't look at Stenko when she said, "I have a couple of bakers. Will they do?"

“Perfect,” Stenko said.

She turned. “Why do you need *two* potatoes? Aren’t there three of you? I see two more heads out there in your car.”

“Sylvia,” Marshall said, “Would you please just get the man a couple of spuds?”

She stomped inside and returned with two and held them out like a ritual offering. Stenko chuckled as he took them.

“I really do thank you,” he said, reaching inside his jacket, “I appreciate your time and information. Ten years on the road is a long time. I envy you in ways you’ll never understand.”

She was puzzled now. His voice was warm and something about his tone – so sad – touched her. And was that a tear in his eye?

**INSIDE THE SUV**, the fourteen year-old girl asked the man in the passenger seat, “Like *what* is he doing up there?”

The man – she knew him as Robert – was in his mid-thirties. He was handsome and he knew it with his blonde

hair with the expensive highlights and his ice-cold green eyes and his small, sharp little nose. But he was shrill for a man his age, she thought, and had yet to be very friendly to her. Not that he'd been cruel. It was obvious, though, that he'd rather have Stenko's undivided attention. Robert said, "He told you not to watch."

"But why is he taking, like, big potatoes from them?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

Robert turned and pierced her with those eyes. "They'll act as silencers and muffle the shots."

"The shots?" She shifted in the backseat so she could see through the windshield better between the front seats. Up the hill, Stenko had turned his back to the old couple and was jamming a big potato on the end of a long-barreled pistol. Before she could speak Stenko wheeled and swung the weapon up and there were two coughs and the old man fell down. The potato had burst and the pieces had fallen so Stenko jammed the second one on. There were two more coughs and the woman dropped out of sight behind the picnic table.

The girl screamed and balled her fists in her mouth.

"SHUT UP!" Robert said, "For God's Sake shut up." To himself, "I knew bringing a girl along was a bad idea. I swear to God I can't figure out what goes on in that brain of his."

She'd seen killing but she couldn't believe what had happened. Stenko was so *nice*. Did he know the old couple? Did they say or do something that he felt he had to defend himself? A choking sob broke through.

Robert said, "He should have left you in Chicago."

**SHE COULDN'T** stop crying and peeking even though Robert kept telling her to shut up and not to watch as Stenko dragged the two bodies up into the motor home. When the bodies were inside Stenko closed the door. He was in there a long time before tongues of flame licked the inside of the motor home windows and Stenko jogged down the path toward the SUV.

She smelled smoke and gasoline on his clothes when he climbed into the cab and started the motor.

"Man," he said, "I hated doing that."

Robert said, "Move out quick before the fire gets out of control and somebody notices us. Keep cool, drive the speed limit all the way out of here..."

She noticed how panicked Robert's tone was, how high his voice was. For the first time she saw that his scalp through his hair was glistening with sweat. She'd never noticed how thin his hair was and how skillfully he'd disguised it.

Stenko said, "That old couple – they were kind of sweet."

"It had to be done," Robert said quickly.

"I wish I could believe you."

Robert leaned across the console, his eyes white and wild. "Trust me, Dad. Just trust me. Did they give you the numbers?"

Stenko reached into his breast pocket and flipped the spiral notebook toward Robert. "It's all there," he said. The girl thought Stenko was angry.

Robert flipped through the pad, then drew his laptop out of the computer case near his feet. He talked as he tapped the keys. "Sixty to eighty thousand miles a year at

eight-to-ten miles per gallon. Wow. They've been at it for five years and planned to keep it up until they couldn't. They're both sixty-five, so we could expect them to keep driving that thing for at least ten to fifteen years, maybe more." *Tap-tap-tap.*

"They were farmers from Iowa," Stenko said sadly.  
"Salt of the earth."

"*Salt of the earth?*" Robert said, "you mean plagues on the earth! Christ, Dad, did you see that thing they were driving?"

"They called it The Unit," Stenko said.

"Wait until I get this all calculated," Robert said,  
"You just took a sizeable chunk out of the balance."

"I hope so," Stenko said.

"Any cash?"

"Of course. All farmers have cash on hand."

"How much?"

"Thirty-seven hundred I found in the cupboard. I have a feeling there was more, but I couldn't take the time. I could have used your help in there."

"That's not what I do."

Stenko snorted. "I *know*."

"Thirty-seven hundred isn't very much."

"It'll keep us on the road."

"There's that," Robert said, but he didn't sound very impressed.

As they cleared the campground, the girl turned around in her seat. She could see the wink of orange flames in the alcove of pines now. Soon, the fire would engulf the motor home and one of the people in the campground would see it and call the fire department. But it would be too late to save the motor home, just as it was too late to save that poor old couple. As she stared at the motor home on fire things from deep in her memory came rushing back and her mouth dropped open.

"I said," Stenko pressed, looking at her in the rearview mirror, "You didn't watch, did you? You promised me you wouldn't watch."

"She lied," Robert said. "You should have left her in Chicago."

"Damn, honey," Stenko said, "I didn't want you to watch."

But she barely heard him through the roaring in her ears. Back it came, from where it had been hiding and crouching like a night monster in a dark corner of her memory.

The burning trailer. Screams. Shots. Snow.

And a telephone number she'd memorized but that had remained buried in her mind just like all of those people were buried in the ground all these years...

She thought: I need to find a phone.

## Two

### SADDLESTRING, WYOMING

**FIVE DAYS** later, on a sun-fused but melancholy Sunday afternoon before the school year began again the next day, seventeen-year-old Sheridan Pickett and her twelve-year-old sister Lucy rode double bareback in a grassy pasture near the home they used to live in. Their summer-blond hair shined in the melting sun and their bare sunburned legs dangled down the sides of their old paint horse Toby as he slowly followed an old but well-trammeled path around the inside of the sagging three-rail fence. The ankle-high grass buzzed with insects, and grasshoppers anticipated the oncoming hooves by shooting into the air like sparks. He was a slow horse because he chose to be; he'd never agreed with the concept that he should be ridden, even if his burden was light, and considered riding to be an interruption of his real pursuits which consisted of eating

and sleeping. As he walked he held his head low and sad and his heavy sighs were epic. When he revealed his true nature by snatching a big mouthful of grass when Sheridan's mind wandered, she pulled up on the reins and said, "Damn you, Toby!"

"He always does that," Lucy said behind her sister. "All he cares about is eating. He hasn't changed."

"He's always been a big lunkhead," Sheridan said, keeping the reins tight so he would know she was watching him this time, "but I've always kind of liked him. I missed him."

Lucy leaned forward so her cheek was against Sheridan's back. Her head was turned toward the house they used to live in before they'd moved eight miles into the Town of Saddlestring a year before.

Sheridan looked around. The place hadn't changed much. The gravel road paralleled the fence. Further, beyond the road, the landscape dipped into a willow-choked saddle where the Twelve Sleep River branched out into six fingers clogged with beaver ponds and brackish mosquito-heaven eddies and paused for a breath before it's muscular

rush through and past the Town of Saddlestring. Beyond were the folds of the valley as it arched and suddenly climbed to form a precipitous mountain-face known as Wolf Mountain in the Twelve Sleep Range.

"I never thought I'd say I missed this place," Lucy said.

"But you do," Sheridan finished.

"No, not really," Lucy giggled.

"You drive me crazy."

"What can I say," Lucy said, "I like people around. I like being able to ride my bike to school and not take that horrible bus."

"You're a *townie*."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Townie's are ... common. Everybody's a townie. There's nothing special about it."

Lucy affected a snooty, Valley Girl inflection: "Yeah, I'm like, *common*. I should want to still live out here so I can curse at horses, like you. You're the weird one, Sheridan. I keep telling you that but you don't believe

me.” She flicked a grasshopper off her wrist. “And I don’t constantly have *bugs* landing on me.”

“Stop talking, Lucy.”

Lucy sighed, mimicking Toby. “How long do you think Mom is going to be in there?”

“A long time, I hope,” Sheridan said.

Marybeth Pickett, Sheridan and Lucy’s mother, had brought them both out to the house they used to live in on the Bighorn Road. Their mom owned a business-consulting firm and she was meeting with Mrs. Kiner, who was starting a bath and body products company using honey or wax or something. Phil Kiner was the game warden of the Saddlestring District, the district their dad used to manage. Because of that, the Kiners took over the state-owned home that was once occupied by the Picketts when the family moved to their Grandmother Missy’s ranch for a year, and then to town to a home of their own. Toby had been one of their horses growing up, and when Sheridan saw him standing lazily in the corral she’d asked if she could ride him around until their mother was done. Lucy tagged along

simply because she didn't want to wait inside and listen to business talk.

"I'm getting hungry," Lucy said.

"You're always hungry," Sheridan said. "You're like Toby. You're like his lazy spawn."

"Now you shut up," Lucy said.

"*Lucy Pickett*," Sheridan said in an arena announcer's cadence, "*Lazy Hungry Spawn of Toby!* I like the sound of that."

In response, Lucy leaned forward and locked her hands together under Sheridan's breasts and squeezed her sister's ribs as hard as she could. "I'll crush you," Lucy said.

"You wish," Sheridan laughed.

They rode in silence for a moment after Lucy gave up trying to crush Sheridan.

Said Lucy, "I miss Dad. I miss his pancakes on Sunday morning."

Sheridan said, "Me, too."

"What's going to happen? Is he ever moving back? Are we moving where he is now?"

Sheridan glanced at the house where her mother was and shrugged, "Who knows? He says he's in exile."

"It sucks."

"Yeah."

"It sucks big-time."

"Mmmm."

"It sucks the big one."

"Okay, Lucy, I got it."

"Ooooh," Lucy said, "I see your boyfriend. I knew he was going to come out and stare at you."

"Stop it."

Jason Kiner, also, like Sheridan, set to be a Junior at Saddlestring High School, had come home from football practice a half-hour before in his ancient pickup. He was tall, dull-eyed, and wide-shouldered with shaved temples and a shock of black hair on top, something all the players had done to show their solidarity to ... whatever. He had seen Sheridan and Lucy when he drove up in his old pickup but pretended he hadn't. Playing it cool, Sheridan thought, a trait in boys her age she found particularly

annoying. He'd parked near the detached garage and slung his gym bag over his shoulder gone into the house.

He emerged now wearing a *Saddlestring Wranglers* gray hoodie, clean jeans and white Nikes. He'd spiked his hair. Jason ambled toward the fence in a self-conscious half-comatose saunter. Waved at them, nonchalant, and leaned forward on the fence with his forearms on the top rail and a Nike on the bottom rail. Trying to make an entrance of sorts, Sheridan thought. They were riding the horse toward the corner of the corral where Jason was waiting. It would be a minute before they'd be upon him.

"There he is," Lucy whispered.

"I see him. So what?"

"Jason Kiner *looooves* you."

"Shut up, he does not."

"I've looked at his MySpace page and his FaceBook page," she whispered. "He *looooves* you."

"Stop it."

"Look at him," Lucy whispered, giggling, "there's *loooove* in his eyes."

With the arm Jason couldn't see, Sheridan elbowed her sister in the ribs and Lucy laughed, "You've gotta do better than that."

When Toby sleepwalked to Jason, Sheridan said, "Hi there."

"How are you guys doing?" Jason said. "I didn't see you when I drove up."

"You didn't?" Lucy asked, mock serious.

Sheridan gritted her teeth and shot a look over her shoulder at her sister, who looked back with her best innocent and charming face.

"It's been a long time since I rode," Sheridan said, "we asked your mom."

Jason shrugged. "Nobody ever rides him anymore, so you might as well. I've been thinking about saddling him up, but with football practice and all..."

And the conversation went completely and unexpectedly dead. Sheridan could hear the insects buzz in the grass. She could feel Lucy prodding her to say something.

Finally, Jason's face lit up with purpose. "Hey – did that chick call you?"

"What chick?"

"She called here a few days ago for you. She still had this number from when you lived here, I guess. I gave her your cell phone number."

Lucy purred into Sheridan's ear, "*He has your cell phone number?*"

Sheridan ignored her. "Nobody called. Who was it?"

"I didn't know her," Jason said, "She said she used to live here and still had the number for the house."

"What was her name?"

Jason screwed up his mouth and frowned. "She said it, but I can't remember for sure. It was a few days ago. Oh – I remember now. She said something like, 'April.'"

Sheridan dropped the reins in to the grass. "*What?*"

Jason shrugged. "She said something like, 'I wonder if she remembers a girl named April.' Anyway, I gave her your number and..."

Lucy said to Sheridan, "Did he say what I thought he said?"

Sheridan leaned forward and felt Lucy grip her hard to keep her balance. "Jason, this isn't very funny."

“Who’s trying to be funny?”

“If you are,” Sheridan said, “I’ll kill you.”

Jason stepped back and dropped his arms to his sides as if preparing to be rushed by the two girls. “What’s going on? What’s wrong with you two? You act like you see a ghost or something?”

Sheridan pointed toward the yard in front of the house but had trouble speaking. Jason turned to where she gestured.

The three Austrian pine trees their dad had planted so long ago in the front yard had all now grown until the tops were level with the gutter of the house. At the time they’d been planted he’d joked that they were Sheridan’s Tree, April’s Tree, and Lucy’s Tree.

“April was our sister,” Sheridan said, pointing at the middle one, “She was killed six years ago.”

The door of the house opened and their mother came out. Sheridan noted how Jason looked over his shoulder at her in a way that in other circumstances would have made her proud and angry at the same time. But now her mother looked stricken. There was no doubt in Sheridan’s mind

that Jason's mom had just mentioned the call they'd received.