

Chapter Five

The Bunkhouse

The sun burst through the back door of the lodge sending orange rays of light between the angry red and grey clouds in the east. It had just barely climbed over the tip of the mountain throwing eerie pink and grey shadows across the brilliant snow covered landscape and the dead flat, frozen lake. The atmosphere was supernatural and apprehensive. The ‘red sky in morning, sailors take warning thing’ came to mind. The temperature was a balmy 20C below freezing with very little wind and about three feet of snow; light and fluffy. The air was crisp and surreal, like before an earthquake or a violent storm. No sound. No squirrels chattering. No Flickers tapping on the trees. Even the ever-present, noisy curious ravens were missing.

The four of us were sitting around the table in the lodge dining area having coffee and breakfast and shooting the breeze and trying to get to know each other. There was Mike and Corry from 100 Mile House who were building a couple log cabins on site, an old local cowboy named Bill who was the appointed handyman/helper and myself. I am a carpenter and a sub-contractor hired by the owner of the resort.

This bullshit session went on and on. I was getting antsy. I wanted to get started but the boys had other ideas. We talked about everything except the job. Lies about the women we’ve had, fish we caught, moose we shot, tall buildings we jumped over and the bullets we stopped. *Typical load of Bullshit!* It was nine o’clock and we were still sitting there! My leg was bouncing up and down. I had a contract and I wanted to get going. These guys didn’t seem to have the same urgency.

That’s when Cliff, the resort manager and supervisor showed up and ruined a perfectly good morning. He came walking into the kitchen with his chest puffed out, rudely barking orders, pointing, bullying us around and using a fair amount of expletives doing it. *What a prick you are, Cliff, was my immediate thought.* He was short, flabby and smelled like unwashed bed sheets. Around thirty five, a thick red bushy head of hair, big blood veined nose and a square jaw that he held out and up, inviting anyone to take a swing at both. Arrogance and bullying

was his management style and I was not the only one who glanced at the shotgun hanging over the fireplace.

Cliff was a creepy, antagonistic SOB that people generally despise. Bosses like him make life hell for their employees. When they come on to a jobsite they create chaos, screw things up royally and then leave, which is exactly what Cliff did, but thank God he did leave. We just stared out the rear door of the lodge throwing imaginary knives while watching him tramp through the snow.

At least that tongue lashing finally got us going. The party was breaking up.

I walked over to the front windows and looked around at the resort. It was a great view of the property. I hadn't seen it in the daytime. I had arrived the night before feeling miserable, cold, hungry and totally on edge from the ride up the mountain on the un-cleared goat trail they call a road. Now that it was serene and peaceful, I couldn't help but marvel how life changes from day to day.

It had been a wild trip up the interior of BC to the Chilcotin starting in the lower Fraser Valley where traffic was hell. It was backed up from Aldergrove to Abbotsford and I cursed the stupid drivers that caused the delay. Once past Sumas it was clear sailing all the way to Hope. Just outside of Spuzzum I almost sideswiped a Semi which made me remember all the prayers I had learned in Sunday school when I was a kid. I'm sure it was his fault for taking a wide corner. At Spence's Bridge I had to stop suddenly for a herd of mountain sheep who decided to cross the highway in front of me. In Cache Creek I picked up a drunk on his way to Williams Lake who puked all over the inside of my truck. Just west of Williams Lake on Highway 20, I had to contend with the mini-blizzards from logging trucks that blinded me temporarily. There was swirling snow, white-out conditions, huge snow drifts and vengeful logging truck drivers who thought they owned the road.

When I reached the road between Vedan Lake and Elkin Lake the snow was so deep I had to chain up the truck. The horrifying drive on the goat path leading to the resort climbed approximately eight hundred meters within a distance of six or seven kilometers. It was an old narrow forest service road with steep uphill switch-backs, frightening cliffs, two single path tracks in the road, treacherous ice underneath two feet of snow, huge snow banks and drifts and steep drop offs. The two icy ruts in the snow were barely wide enough for my truck. It does not work well for a long wheel-based truck like mine to follow in the tracks of a shorter truck. For the hundredth time since I left home, I wondered whether this was such a good idea but I was

going nuts with all the traffic, trying to run a business and dealing with people. I figured this would be kinda like a holiday. So far, it didn't feel like a holiday.

The lodge was built on the north end of Chaunagan Lake and is situated on the Chilcotin plateau, which forms the eastern foothills of the coastal mountain range in central BC. It was constructed out of logs which the sun had burnt to a vivid black, brown and gray; the exact colour of the surrounding trees. There was a large woodshed with very little wood inside about thirty feet from the back door of the lodge and a trail to a dilapidated old outhouse with a door that hung by one hinge. I could see that fixing the outhouse would be one of my first jobs.

Apparently, a plumber had come up a couple weeks earlier to get the water system going in the lodge, "Which means we now have a regular bathroom and don't need the outhouse as much. There's even a bathtub," joked Bill. "This here lodge is a real 'shang-gra-la now'". *I'll still fix that outhouse door 'cause you never know.*

Bill was tall, in his early fifties, about 6'1", 185 lbs., bald on top, black sidewalls with a little grey/white edging sprinkled around the ears. His nose had seen a few fists and a piece of the left ear was missing. He was clean shaven with an immaculately trimmed walrus style mustache under his crooked hook nose. He was skinnier than the pecker-pole Spruce trees that they grow up there and just about as strong, with legs so bowed you could drive a snowmobile between them. He reminded me of the Marlborough Man with the ever present cigarette hanging from his mouth except he didn't have a cowboy hat on. He had a deep southern states Sam Elliot drawl and held his head at a slight angle so the cigarette smoke wouldn't get into his eyes.

In the summer Bill doubled as the wrangler and trail guide. He was the 'go to' guy. According to Mike and Cory, Cliff didn't know shit about anything so if you wanted something done you had to ask Bill. He was the one who knew what was going on, where things were buried in the snow and what to do when you needed something. I guess he was to the resort what a secretary is to an office.

The new log cabins that Mike and Corry were building were about three hundred yards east of the resort. A poorly plowed road connected these buildings and made a circuit approximately two hundred and fifty meters diameter from the lodge. It curved around past the bunkhouse to the north, crossed the main road, over to some old run-down cabins that belonged to the resort at the head of the lake, then back south past the lodge and on down the lake to join up with some private properties on the south part of the lake. Another road branched off

towards the north at the junction of the main road and continued over to the snowed-in airfield. That road wasn't plowed at all. It was Cliff's job to keep all the roads and the material stockpiles cleared of snow but not much of that was done. Bill said that the back-hoe was frozen so Cliff couldn't do the plowing. It was also his job to keep the backhoe running. I guess it was our job to dig out the lumber.

"Enough lollygagging around," I announced to everyone. I stretched my arms, giving the guys a view of my tonsils. "Time to get to work," I mumbled as I grabbed my coffee mug and put it in the sink on my way to the back porch and the cool air outside the lodge,

I waited outside for Bill to come through the back door. I could tell he didn't feel quite the same as I did about going to work. When he finally showed up we wandered towards the woodshed. Then he let out one of his own gaping yawns and a touch-the-sky stretch. Then he leaned up against a supporting post in the woodshed and pulled out his cigarette gear and starting the process of building a cigarette.

Was he doing the la-de-da thing for my benefit? I had been warned about the 'Chilcotin time' attitude up here. I suspected that this particular ritual of Bill's would take some time, and he didn't disappoint me. He knew he had a captive audience and made every movement as dramatic as possible. I wanted to get to work. I felt like a squirming dog trying to get out of the house ahead of his master. Bill stretched out his smoke break as long as he could, while I stood there looking at the morning, stomping my feet and kicking the snow bank.

"Ya gotta slow down and smell the roses, boy," he said. That confirmed it. I was in for an education in dog-fucking. Then he announced to me and to the trees, that he was going on his 'morning constitution' and would meet me at the bunkhouse 'presently'. He tramped off to the outhouse.

I slapped my thighs in frustration. "Really, Bill?!" is all I could say to him and those trees.

"Ya, I don't feel like shak'n off my boots and gear just to use the inside toilet." *Made sense I suppose.* I kicked the snow bank some more and huffed off to my truck. I figured that I might as well get it started and bring it over to the Bunkhouse and unload it.

It took a long while to get that old diesel started. I was afraid that the continuous cranking of the starter would kill the battery but luckily it fired a couple of times. I waited for a while before I tried it again and finally the motor started with a great puff of black smoke and a rattle that sounded like rocks in a concrete mixer. It sounded, looked and felt like it was missing

a couple of cylinders. Oh, oh. *Broken truck. Might be stranded up here.* I wondered if Bill was a mechanic.

I let the truck idle for a while and pretty soon the motor quieted down and warmed up enough to drive it over to the lean-to beside the bunkhouse. It was slow going because the transmission hadn't moved all night. When the truck finally started to move the tires felt like they were square, but I made it.

The only electricity that we had at the resort was a thirty-five hundred watt generator and the story on that is, according to the guys, that Cliff uses it to power his mobile home and some of the power tools on the job site. Nothing else could be powered by that generator, under threat of death and dismemberment, unless, of course if Cliff wanted to use the two-way radio. So, consequently, all the vehicles were left at the mercy of the elements. That's why the backhoe froze.

My job was to rebuild the Bunkhouse. I was told I'd be putting up walls, paneling, install doors, casings and baseboards and other finishing. The doors were in the back of my truck. I could see that the outside walls were built out of pine logs, the same as every other building on the property. They were burnt black and water stained. The building was about thirty feet by forty and had a steep pitched roof with new galvanized steel roofing. There was also a roof over the front porch and a lean-to that probably once upon a time held firewood but there wasn't a stick in it. *Cliff's job was to have firewood cut and stacked for each building, the lazy bastard.* Some building supplies and other stuff now occupied the space. Three windows and a crooked chimney pipe is all I could see from my side. I wondered what shape the inside was.

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It was quite a while later and still, no Bill. I wondered what **was** keeping him. He must have been saving up his constitution for a week. He was supposed to be helping me unload my truck. Finally, after I had just about finished unloading all the material he shows up and grabs the last stick of wood and offers to help, as if it's a great favour.

“Sure Bill thanks a lot. You didn’t strain yourself or anything, did ya?” I said somewhat seriously. I could see that we were going to have a little chat, real soon. He had to realize that I was under contract with a deadline for returning home.

“Awe it’s no problem at all,” he replied ignoring my attitude.

Right about then the sky started to cloud up and I could feel a slight breeze. The trees started to squeak and rustle. I didn’t think anything about it but Bill looked at the sky and shook his head and grimaced, as if the inevitable would happen.

“Well let’s have a look at what we’re up against,” I said as I went up the rickety steps to the front door of the bunkhouse.

“Best be warned ‘bout dat first step after ya open the door,” Bill replied and I knew something was up because he had a funny grin on his face. So I opened the door slowly and carefully looked in. I couldn’t believe my eyes. *Oh for fuck sakes*. My jaw hit my work boots.

“Shit,” was all I could say. I hadn’t planned on this. Then, just as slowly and carefully I closed the door and looked at Bill. I could be dramatic as well. He burst out laughing. I let out a smile myself. The scene inside the building was so unbelievable I peaked in again and quickly closed the door, just for show. The butt of Bill’s cigarette fell as he burst out laughing.

“Okay Bill, looks like you got a story to tell.”

“Well,” he said with a chuckle and pulled out his smoke kit to replace the cigarette that had fallen. He sat down on an old rickety chair on the porch and I leaned up against the porch post and crossed my arms to keep warm. *OK, here comes another long winded story*.

“I guess I should start at the begin’n, just so’s ya know a bit a history around here,” he said in his slow southern drawl while building his cigarette. “This used ta be the vacation spot for George McMillan, his family, his ranch employees and whoever else he brought up here. They used the resort as their own private playground as well as for ranch business and summer grazing. George owned that big ranch out by Chico Lake. *As if I should know about it*. The boys brought the cattle up here to graze in the summer and also ta get away from all the bugs. Well, old McMillan died of cancer about fifteen years ago and nobody looked after the resort after he was gone. The cattle got sold off so nobody come up here no more. Thar’s a few private cabins on the south side but the owners rarely show up. This mountain top was deserted until Bob bought it a couple of years ago. This here building fell into some disrepair along with everything else around here.”

“Bob’s bin try’en ta rebuild the place every since. He wants ta turn it into an exclusive fly-in fishing and hunting resort while keeping the cowboy flavour. He said somethin’ about a tax haven when he hired me to take care’a the place. It’s a slow process.”

Bill had arranged his cigarette paper in his right glove and had placed the tobacco pouch on his knee. He had to grab his other glove with his teeth and remove it in order to put the tobacco onto the cigarette paper. This process was unbelievably frustrating for me to watch.

“I think he’s got big dreams but don’t know how ta get’em,” he continued. “The lodge is a work in progress but livable. A couple of guys came up from the coast last summer and put the metal roof on the lodge and the bunkhouse. Unfortunately, the inside’a this builden’ was rotten from all those years of have’n a leaky roof.” Bill took a break from telling this story while building his smoke and looking at the sky. It was a beautiful clear morning earlier but now it was completely clouded over. *What? You know something about the weather I don’t? This story is taking too long, Bill.*

I started thinking about Bob. Robert (Bob) Van Derwhal lived in Coquitlam in the lower Fraser Valley and owned a growing Greenhouse operation combination garden and plant supply outlet, a working farm and this resort. I did a job for him on his greenhouse complex and we got along and worked well together. He asked me if I would go up to the Chilcotin and to help fix up the resort. He was kind of an odd duck. Nice enough guy, in his late fifties, intelligent and quick and he would look you straight in the eyes when talking.

Finally Bill was ready to continue with his story even though his cigarette was only half built. *Yes! As I mentally fist pumped the sky.*

“One day Cliff showed up and took over the resort renovations. The first time he made an inspection of the bunkhouse he fell through the rotten floor and scraped the inside of his leg. He got so mad he took his chain saw and cut the plywood floor and floor joists on the inside of the walls and just let the whole thing fall. The center beam in the crawl space was left holding up the middle. The outside logs remained intact. As you can see, he left a heap of a mess for us to clean up. He didn’t even bother ta take the furniture or lamps or the papers and books out. That wood stove over there, lay’n on its side, well he didn’t even check to see if there was a fire burning before it fell. That man’s a real prize piece a work sometimes,” he finished with a shake of his head and a quick glance at the sky. He looked back at what he was doing, licked the glue on the paper and stuck the finished cigarette in his mouth and had a bit of a panic attack while feeling his pockets for his matches. That was probably the end of the story, anyway.

I had to agree with Bill on one point. It was real dumb to destroy that perfectly good floor. Except for a few rotten areas that weren't really that bad, from what I could see. I could have fixed those spots and saved having to replace the whole floor. Cutting around the perimeter of the floor like that would have been dangerous too. The crawl space was at least four feet deep and he would have had to stand somewhere while he was cutting with the chain saw. It was a real mess and I figured that it would probably take two days just to clean out everything before we could even start rebuilding. Probably adds four days to my time here just to bring it back to where it was before Cliff cut the floor down, I thought.

Of course that's when Cliff came by. He gave us specific instructions on how to do this job. I could tell, right away, that he didn't know what he was talking about. He yelled at us for standing around, rudely pointed at various aspects of the Bunkhouse, gave us some ultimatums and then pompously walked off. Well, I saw red! Nobody speaks to me or anyone else like that.

"Fuck you, Cliff," I mumbled to his back. Of course he turned around and we were in the middle of our second confrontation of the day.

"What did you say to me?" He walked back.

"I told you to fuck off. What kind of idiot would do this to a perfectly good floor," I came right back at him.

"It was rotten."

"I could've fixed it, Cliff. You're an asshole and you don't know shit about construction or about supervising or how to handle men." He got red in the face but he did show a bit of courage when he got right up into my face. His breath was not pleasant. I was clenching and unclenching my fists.

"You can't talk to me like that; I'm the boss around here. You're fired. Now get your stuff together and get off this mountain." I just laughed at him. Of course, what else could he say; he was so mad at me.

"Listen Cliff, you can't fire me. I have a contract with Bob to do this work and if I go home you will have some explaining to do. This stupid ass move that you made by cutting out the floor will come out in the open plus a lot of other things, too. On top of that, Bob will still have to pay out my contract. Think he'll like that? So...Cliff...fuck off and let me do my job and stay out of my face."

"Ya, well...you just stay outta my face, too," he whinnied after thinking about it for a few seconds. "We'll see what Bob has to say about your attitude. I'm also going to tell him



about your long smoke breaks and not getting any work done,” replied Cliff as he hurried away a second time, oblivious to the fact that I don’t smoke. *What a dork.* I held my tongue this time and I suppose I should have held it the first time too, but God-damn that little rant felt good. I’m a bit of an excitable guy and sometimes my mouth kinda gets ahead of my brain. That was not the last time Cliff and I would have a run-in on this job.

I glanced over at Bill who looked thoroughly entertained. He was sitting cross-legged, elbow on his knee, cigarette between his fingers and grinning at me through the smoke. I smiled and said, “Well, that was fun.” He laughed as he stubbed out the cigarette on the bottom of his boots.

“Yep, sure was. Wished I could’a done that myself a while ago but I just work here by the hour.” He looked at me and gave me a knowing smile.

“So you got a game plan here?” he asked.

“Well, no I don’t so why don’t you just sit and have another smoke while I think about it,” I replied. So that’s what he did.

I sat down on the doorsill with my feet dangling over the edge of the remaining floor and tried to devise some sort of action plan. It was obvious that we had to remove all the waste materials through the crawl space access door at the far end. Of course the access was blocked with snow so we had some digging to do. Then I started looking at the wood stove and a light bulb went off inside my head. The stove was lying on its side on a bare spot on the ground inside the crawl space. I wondered. *Maybe.*

“Wouldn’t take much to prop it up,” I said, looking at Bill. We were both blowing on our hands to keep them warm. Outside, through the window I could see some white flakes fluttering around.

“Yep, sure is cold in here and I think I know what yer thinking.”

“Ya Bill, all we need is a step ladder, some lengths of stove pipe and a tin snips and we’ll get that stove working,” I explained. “We’ll have it warm in here by lunch and we’ll burn a lot of this scrap wood, too.”

“Hot damn,” Bill replied with an excited slap on his thigh, “Good idea’r, sunny boy. I’ll git the ladder and I do believe there is some pipe in the lean-to, ya just have to dig it outta the snow.” *Bill! Wait!* He was off before I could object. It was his job to get the materials and the tools! Plus someone had to clean out a spot for the stove and make kindling and get paper,

which actually was lying all over, but I thought we might divide the work a little more evenly. This I would learn was typical of Bill's work ethics.

It was now snowing harder. I couldn't believe that the weather could turn so quickly. It was tough to see the lodge or even the road from the bunkhouse porch. I went over to the lean-to and got the pipe, dug out a saw, hammer, pry bar and some other hand tools from the back of my truck and proceeded to clean out a larger area for the stove under the chimney that was still hanging from the ceiling. I lifted the stove upright, stabilized it, and then stood on top of it and attached a four-foot length of stovepipe to the existing chimney. Then I raised the stove with some blocks of wood as shims and connected the pipe to the flange on the stove. *Bingo, bango, bongo. Done! This is way too easy.* I found some paper and matches and a bit of wood and had a fire started, all before Bill got back. All this time I was wondering where he was with the ladder. He probably went to Williams Lake to get it.

He finally he showed up and stuck his head into the building and said he couldn't find the ladder. I told him I didn't need it after all, but I did need a sledge hammer, chainsaw and bigger pry-bar and I also told him that I was not going to get them. He said, "OK, I'll be right back." *Bill! Wait!* And off he goes before I can tell him to bring coffee. He sure is quick when he wants to be.

I grabbed a chair that had fallen into the crawlspace when the floor collapsed, set it by the stove, picked up a magazine that was lying around, propped my feet up on a hunk of wood and decided that's enough work for now. I was learning about Chilcotin time.

Bill was back sooner than I expected this time, of course that's because he didn't bring any of the stuff that I requested, but he did bring the coffee pot, mugs and the rest of the Danish left over from breakfast. *Good man.* Bill and I were starting to think alike.

"No sense a'leavin' two lonely Danish in the cupboard to dry out," he says. I couldn't really fault his thinking on that point and it was obvious that Bill had a sweet tooth too.

After coffee, work progressed fairly steady. Bill got the tools I needed and we actually got a fair amount accomplished and had a good time doing it. The only damper to our mood was when Cliff came by. His obstinate attitude hadn't changed. In fact he seemed a little more pissed when he saw how comfortable we were with the stove going plus I think he was a bit put-off that we got so much work done. He left pretty quickly, probably to go kick his dog.

Soon after that Mike and Corey came in for coffee. We cleared a spot in the crawl space around the stove, found some more chairs, some mugs that we washed with snow and had a nice little bull-shit session.

“We had a hard time finding this place because of the white-out conditions,” said Mike. “We’re probably done for the day.”

“We’re done too,” replied Bill. *What?* I gave him an exasperated look.

“C’aint find any wood in this storm so what’s the use,” he answered, waving his hands at the weather and conditions outside. I guess he felt he needed to justify quitting. I secretly agreed with him.

“Cliff’ll shit bricks,” I replied.

“Cliff won’t come outta his trailer,” he said. I sighed. Obviously production wasn’t a big thing up here.

“A productive day if I do say so myself,” declared Bill on the way to the lodge, as if he did all the work. *What? Gimme a break.* Bill and I had two different ideas on production.

“Well...” I said as we were stumbled through the snow and wind back to the lodge. To tell the truth, I was kind of happy to be quitting. With all that was going on, I was tired.

It was around six thirty and I was hungrier than a mother Grizzly bear in the spring. Nothing good would come of that. So there was only one thing that we could do and that was to sit down on the easy chairs in the lodge, grab a bag of chips and crack open a beer, or two or three and hope that Cliff doesn’t show up.