

Chapter Six

Kathy

“I suggest that if we are to go to Williams Lake that now would be a good time to start,” I commented, seeing Cliff as he stomped down the path in our direction. He would come in through the back door and into the kitchen that had all those knives on the counter.

“Good idea,” said Bill taking a quick look out the window.

“I’m ready for him,” said Kathy reaching for one of those knives. “All I want is Cliff’s balls hanging from the post in the wood shed.” Thankfully, Bill grabbed the knife first. I was really starting to wonder about these Chilcotin girls. They can be so sweet, cuddly and vulnerable one minute and the next they act like serial killers.

I had met Kathy a couple of days ago, on the way to the outhouse. We introduced ourselves and she said with a heavy sigh and a shrug of her shoulders, “the plumbing in the trailer was frozen again.”

“Ya, same with the lodge,” I replied. Her mysterious dark eyes held me in a trance. Her face was a soft tan colour with high cheek bones, gently sloped nose and her lips were full and ripe. There was a wisp of long luxurious straight black hair fluttering in the breeze outside of the hood of her parka. I couldn’t breathe. I was tongue-tied. All I could do was point my arm towards the outhouse and let her go first. As a reward she gave me a shy smile and we made electric eye contact as she brushed past me down the trail to the biffy. She passed so close I could smell her perfume. I was jolted as I watched her sway down the path. If I was a poet I probably would have used the word ‘smitten’ and if I had walked away I might have saved a lot of trouble.

But I waited. She smiled again as she came back down the path. I told her that I was working on the Bunkhouse and she said that she knows. *‘Stupid,’ I thought!*

“Staying in the lodge,” I stated feeling embarrassed and thinking that I should cut my tongue out for all the good it was doing me.

“I know that too,” she said with a giggle. *Duh? Where else would I stay but the lodge, ya idiot? Why do I act so stupid in front of a beautiful woman? Of course she would know; she is Cliff’s wife. He must have told her about me and the amazing thing was that she stood there looking at me as if she wanted to empty her heart and give it to me.*

It felt like an eternity of uncomfortable stammering, shuffling my feet and making obvious observations concerning the weather but after a while I managed to overcome my shyness and exchange some semi-intelligent conversation. She was up here to keep Cliff company but she hated it here. Too cold and nothing to do, she claimed. I asked her if she would like to go snowshoeing with me sometime. *Intelligent? What was I thinking? She is the boss’s wife, for Christ sake.*

“There are a couple of sets of shoes in the lodge,” I told her. *I felt like slapping my head. Don’t invite the boss’s wife on a date,* I kept thinking to myself but I couldn’t help it. I wondered where my brain had gone.

“Sure,” she said, “later after the snow stops,” and then she headed back to her trailer, leaving me watching as if she was a dream. I took a confused look at the sky. It was clear; no clouds in sight. *What is she talking about? It’s not going to snow.* I shook my head at her peculiar weather forecast and then went to the can.

Later that morning she showed up at the bunkhouse with a pot of coffee and some cookies. That’s reason enough to fall in love right there. Of course, we couldn’t do anything but gaze into each other’s eyes. *What’s happening to me now, I remember thinking?* We didn’t say anything; we just stood there; both of us mute and dumb acting like a couple a teenagers in love. Her Mona Lisa smile hypnotized me and before I could say anything I heard some boot stomping and a loud ‘achem’! I tore my gaze away and there stood Bill with his arms crossed, nodding his head with a sad look on his face. *Awkward.* More foot shuffling. She snapped out of it first and said ‘see ya’ and like the wind was gone.

Bill reached for a cookie and took a bite and closed his eyes enjoying the taste as if it was the most wonderful cookie he ever tasted. Then he gave me a knowing grin and a wink as if I was such a sly fellow.

“Cliff and Kathy bin fighting ya know,” he said while picking up some scrap wood and tossing it through the open access door to the Bunkhouse. “I hope it aint cuz a you two?”

“No...no...naw, no not us, no, we just met,” I replied innocently.

“Well, there’s bound ta be a ruckus if Cliff sees you two moon’n all over each other.” A fair warning, I had to agree but one I would probably would ignore.

“I suppose we should get back to work, don’t you think?”

“Well then, ‘pitter patter, let’s get att’r,” said Bill showing some unexpected drive. “It’s gonna snow on all the lumber we dug out so I’ll go out and cover it.” *Huh? Snow? Him too? Everyone’s a weatherman.* I looked outside and shook my head. All I saw was sun and clear blue skies. There must be some sort of trick to forecasting the weather up here.

I put down my mug of coffee, picked up the pry bar and started ripping the plywood off the destroyed floor and Bill went for a tarp. I knew he was right and, surprisingly, as the afternoon wore on the weather and Cliff’s attitude soon got a whole lot worse. It started snowing and Cliff’s face developed a mean scowl when he saw me.

The next morning Cliff and I had a fire breathing, eyeball glaring, shirt ripping, macho pushing fight. He accused me of paying more attention to his wife than rebuilding the bunkhouse, which I denied. He was probably right but his attitude got on my nerves.

The rest of the day and into the next I did some deep soul searching, I convinced myself that I needed to get on better terms with Cliff and clear the air but that was a lie too ‘cause I couldn’t stop thinking about Kathy and all I wanted was to see her again. I don’t know what got over me. I realized I was totally infatuated with her. On the other hand, I knew that Cliff and I had some unfinished business so I faced the horrifying possibility of going over there and apologizing to him.

As I approached Cliff’s mobile home I heard a God-awful commotion coming from the inside. Bill yelled, “Kathy, put that down!” Kathy was screaming. I heard dishes crashing. Cliff yelled something incoherent at Kathy. There was furniture hitting the

walls and glass breaking and I heard a mad scramble for the door. Kathy burst out of the trailer carrying a backpack and her purse with Bill running after her. As he passed me he told me to meet them in the lodge.

When I got there Bill was trying to calm Kathy down. She was spitting mad and crying. Her face was red and there was a bruise forming on her cheek. Her eye would be black tomorrow. I guess Cliff and Kathy had another fight but this time Bill and I were caught in the middle. Bill had warned me to stay clear and that this would happen. When Kathy saw me she rushed into my arms, sobbing on my shoulder. I looked at Bill with wide eyes and realized that maybe I should've stayed clear.

The next few minutes consisted of Bill developing a plan for the three of us to run for our lives. It involved a torturous drive down the mountain and a labourous two hours wandering through the central Chilcotin until we reached William's Lake. Cliff had told Bill that morning that he was to go to town and pick up some supplies and groceries and the three of us decided that under the circumstances it would be best if Kathy and I went with. We all agreed that it would probably be a good idea, considering the look on Cliff's face as he made his way to the lodge.

So, to avoid him, we rushed out the front door of the lodge and scrambled into Bill's old beat-up Ford F-250. Just as we were about to make our get-a-way, Cliff shows up at the driver's window and demands Bill roll it down.

"Where the hell do you think you're going, Kathy? You can't go anywhere. I want you to stay here. Now get outta the truck and get back to the trailer."

"You can go fuck yourself, you bastard. You hit me for the last time and I aint staying with you anymore. I'm going to Williams' Lake and visit with my sister for a while and then I'm going to Arizona. Fuck this cold and your miserable trailer and the horse you rode in on!" Cliff had been getting a lot of suggestions like that lately. He pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes. I thought he might do something violent but then he notices me sitting next to his wife.

"And you," he points at me. "You...you son-of-a-bitch. Get away from my wife! You better not be leaving. You gotta stay here an' finish your job. You've been fucking around for two days now. I want you to get over to the Bunkhouse and finish your contract."

“Nope, I ain’t going to do that Cliff. I’m heading into town with Bill and Kathy and I’m going to buy a decent sleeping bag so I don’t freeze my nuts off every night and I’m going to get some parts for my truck so I can get down from this bloody mountain.”

“Does that mean you’re quitting?”

“No, I’m not quitting. I won’t quit because I gave my word to Bob that I’d stay till the job was finished.” Bob was the owner of the resort.

“You and Bob have some sort of agreement, don’t you?”

“Ya and I just told you what it was.”

“Naw, I mean, like you’re suppose to report to him on what goes on up here. You’re his God dammed spy aren’t ya?” *What?* I was incredulous. Cliff was scared and he had good reason to be scared. The roads weren’t plowed, lumber and building supplies were getting ruined under the snow, the Bunkhouse fiasco, not a stick of firewood on site and him watching movies all day in his RV plus punching Kathy like that. His marriage is none of my business but it might be pretty soon.

“Look Cliff, I have a good mind to report to the cops what goes on here,” I said with a knowing glance at Kathy’s crimson cheek.

“Aw look Kathy,” he said, “I didn’t mean to hit ya, sweetheart. I’m sorry and I won’t do it again, I promise.” His effort at conciliation was pitiful.

“You promised the last time, you bastard,” she screamed as she leapt across Bill’s lap, reaching through the open window towards Cliff with her claws stretched out. Cliff wisely stepped back as I grabbed her by the hips and pulled her back. If more women would act like that towards their abusive husbands there would be far less abusive husbands around. God, she was a hellion.

Bill took that opportunity to close the window and start to drive away but I couldn’t resist getting one last word in.

“Sorry about leaving all those dirty dishes in the kitchen and I think the water’s frozen under the lodge again,” I yelled out the rapidly closing window and giving him ‘the bird’ with my middle finger. I know that guy hates me now because he tried to throw a snowball but the dry snow just blew back into his face and then he began to kick the shit out of the snow bank. I’m glad he doesn’t have a dog.

Ecstatic! That's what we felt. We were elated at having made our get-a-way. Kathy gave us a loud 'whoop' and a fist pump and Bill let out a chuckle. This little altercation put us in a good mood for the drive down the mountain.

It wasn't any better going down that hill than it had been coming up. Bill maneuvered like the experienced driver that he was, but it was still a hair-raising affair just the same. *Slow the fuck down, Bill.* His old truck started skidding and slipping; the back end whipping around, the front end hanging over precipices, snow and ice crunching, trees whacking the truck and our lives flashing before our eyes. Kathy also managed a little scream while clutching my arm the whole way. Bill stopped the truck when we reached the bottom of the road. He closed his eyes, took a big breath of relief but didn't say a word. I think he was talking to God. We all were.

We crossed the bridge over Elkin Creek between Elkin Lake and Vedan Lake and then stopped again where I helped Bill take the chains off the truck. When we got out of the truck, all he said to me was, "Well that was interesting." but I didn't know if he meant the drive down the hill or the way Kathy was still holding onto my arm.

As we proceeded south on the Elkin-Taseko forest service road I tried to sort things out. I was confused. I loved my wife and children but what was this new feeling that suddenly appeared? I was light of heart, invigorated and even a little excited. Is that how it happens? Was the old adage about love at first sight really true? My head was spinning.

The cause of this confusion was the package of dynamite that was sitting beside me on the seat. She made me feel warm and tender and protective and I must admit to a certain airy and tingling feeling in spite of all the small talk between Kathy and Bill. I know that he was trying to distract the two of us from each other and keep us focused on the countryside.

While traveling south and seeing Mount Tatlow, shaped like a volcano cone with snow about a third of the way up, Bill was reminded of a story and proceeded to tell us about it. Apparently, Bill and his old friend Angus McVie took a couple of American hunters into Ts'yl-Os Provincial Park while tracking a wounded moose. Highly illegal

but anyway, it took a few hours for that moose to tire and eventually they found it dead at the bottom of a ravine but so did a big grizzly. Unfortunately the bear heard the racket made by the hunters from a long ways away, circled around and surprised them from the rear. Well, those hunters must have shit their pants because they commenced shooting like it was the Gulf war. According to Bill, they let off a couple hundred rounds before Angus and him finally managed to stop the fire-fight and inform the hunters that the Grizzly had headed off up the ravine unscathed, but they had bagged about fourteen pine trees.

The countryside was beautiful I had to agree. It was another cool, crisp day with the temperature around ten below and the late morning sun shining brightly in our eyes. The glare off the snow seared my eyes and bore into my brain. The trees had shed the last snowfall a couple of days ago and now seemed alive and anxious to continue their never-ending cycle of regeneration. Even in the middle of winter the country had a character all its own and it was breath taking. I have seen larger mountains but the panoramic view of Mount Tatlow to the south, as we came down into Nemiah Valley was simply indescribable. I was so enthralled with the sight that I even forgot about who was beside me for a moment.

After some excellent bannock burgers at the general store on the Tankut Indian Reserve we headed northeast, up the Nemiah Valley Rd. to the Taseko Lake Rd., then due north for the long ride to Hanesville. That part of the country was unique in itself. There were pine forests as far as the eye could see with a mix of wood lots, pastures and mysterious dirt roads leading to nowhere that I could see. Civilization was evident here but that was a long time ago. Tucked into the bush were ancient trapper's cabins with caved in roofs, deserted ranches with weathered and dilapidated barns and miles of old, rotten split-rail fences. At one time I suppose there was quite a history in this area.

We drove on in silence. Each of us was in our own little world. Bill told us of the ranch he hoped to buy in the near future where he wanted to start a guiding operation around Chilco Lake as soon as this job was over. Kathy had dreams about going to Las Vegas and seeing some shows, drinks by the pool and spending all of Cliff's money gambling. I dreamt of going home. It was cold here and I didn't get along with the boss.

Soon all conversation trailed off to the odd comment. At one point my left arm fell asleep so I tried to put it up on the back of the seat and around Kathy's shoulders but I caught a glance from Bill and decided that wasn't a good idea. My conscience seems to latch on to all sorts of different people. First it was my mother while I was growing up, then my wife took over that job and my sister-in-law helped her for a while until she passed away and now Bill seems to have assumed that particular responsibility. I can't go anywhere without guilt dogging my footsteps. Of course when Kathy fell asleep on my shoulder Bill's expression was one of resignation.

After Hanceville we turned onto Highway 20 and made an uneventful trip through Riske Creek and on to Williams Lake. There was more grassland here and the ranches were newer and occupied. The closer we got to town the more population there seemed to be. We turned east on Oliver St. and parked in front of The Hamilton Hotel. Bill and I decided to go in and book a couple of rooms for the night. We left Kathy in the truck. As I followed Bill I took a questioning glance back at Kathy and all I got was her Mona Lisa smile. Oh well, might figure that out later I thought to myself.

It was late afternoon and we still had some chores to do. I had to go to Surplus Herbies discount store for a winter sleeping bag and then to the Ford dealership to get the parts we needed for my truck. Yesterday, Cliff who claimed to be a mechanic among other things had taken a look at my truck. He said I'd blown some injectors in the fuel system on the way up the mountain and that is why the motor belches black smoke out the exhaust and runs rough. It was one of the few times he seemed to be in a good mood. It surprised me that he would actually help me with the repairs until he mumbled that the truck wouldn't make it off the mountain and he wanted me gone. He might have talent at some things I'll give him that and it was nice that he looked at my truck but...ya know...he was still a prick.

Kathy needed to get some cash and then offered to do the grocery shopping if I mailed some letters for Cliff and pick up some envelopes and stamps for the resort office. I told Kathy I'd come back to the grocery store after I got the sleeping bag. So with all that settled the three of us arranged to meet at the hotel restaurant for dinner. Bill figured, and I quote: 'that a good meal, a decent night's sleep and a hearty breakfast would put a whole new different complexion on things'. He added that if we left for Chaunagan Lake

early the next morning we might get back around one – one thirty and maybe put in half a days work and not piss-off Cliff too much.

Bill dropped us off at the grocery store; I went about my errands, made an unscheduled stop at the liquor store and then hiked over to Surplus Herbies. The walk helped me to think. Kathy was definitely getting to me. It would be so easy just to say the hell with everything and go to Arizona with her.

She was so pissed off at Cliff that I was willing to bet that she was in the bank, this very minute, cleaning out his account. She might have been serious about going to Las Vegas and, more than likely would say 'sure' if I offered to come with. But what was I thinking? I have a life back in the lower mainland. How could I chuck all that away on a whim? What about my family? My responsibilities? My business and the clients I have built up over the years? I felt guilty for leading her on but it was hard not to respond to her attentions because I was a little vulnerable myself.

All these things were going through my mind while I was supposed to be shopping. I must have looked like a complete idiot standing in the surplus army-clothing aisle asking a manikin dressed in army fatigues and a gas mask, to come with me to Arizona.

The store intercom woke me up from my daydreaming and my eyes focused on what I was looking at and the embarrassment hit. Behind me I heard a sweet adolescent voice, "May I help you sir?"

"No, just browsing," I said, sheepishly wondering if this sales clerk had heard me talking to the manikin.

"No, no wait, don't disappear. I am looking for a warm winter sleeping bag," I called to him in desperation deciding I didn't want to give up what little help that was offered to me this day.

"Right this way, sir." I didn't like the way he said 'sir'. He took me over to the correct aisle and showed me the selection of sleeping bags.

"Will that be a single or double, sir," he said smiling sweetly and innocently pointing to some shelves. By the look on his face he didn't seem all that innocent. I'm sure he heard me talking to that manikin. I could feel my face getting red so I had a quick

look at the selection, grabbed one that I thought would do, said thanks and quickly headed for the cashier. I made my purchase and got out of there.

I can't believe what just happened! This is the kind of thing that's been plaguing me this whole trip. It's like I'm on a Disneyland ride and around every corner of the track, the ride I'm on, is careening on two wheels and there is another calamity up ahead. Why are these things happening to me? May-be it was safer with Kathy in the grocery store.

I found her in the frozen meat section and she was crying. I was wrong. I'm not safe anywhere. I went over to her, took the butterball turkey out of her hands and put it in the buggy, gave her a hug and tried to console her. *Oh, she felt so good.* Luckily there was no one around to witness this little drama and what a tender drama it was. She seemed so relieved that I was there. She stammered something about missing the turkey dinner and she continued to cry on my shoulder. Slowly she got herself together.

"Cliff is making a turkey diner at the lodge in a couple of weeks and I'm going to miss it," she said wiping the tears that were running down her cheek. "He's a really good cook, I'll say that about him," she offered when she saw that I was confused. I wondered about how she really felt about that guy. Well, apparently he did have some other redeeming qualities after all, I thought, as we went to the checkout counter.

She paid for the groceries and we went outside. We strolled in silence while pushing the grocery cart. I could tell she had things to say to me and I could guess what they were but I hadn't figured out an answer to them yet. We found Bill's truck and packed the groceries in the back and went into the hotel restaurant for dinner.

Dinner was good. Bill had steak, I had the veal schnitzel and Kathy had a Caesar salad with shrimp. We each had a couple drinks and talked about everything except what was really on our minds. Nothing was said about anything personal which was fine by me.

After the main course we got on to the topic of the Williams Lake Stampede & Rodeo and Bill told us the story about the horse races they used to have at the rodeo grounds. The riders would circle their horses around a cattle corral then race up a steep hill, follow a trail and around a few other obstacles on top of the hill and then back down, around the coral again and finish up in front of the bleachers inside the grounds.

Apparently the hill was so steep that few of the horses or riders made it down in one piece and usually did a somersault or two on the way.

The race killed quite a few horses and injured some riders real bad before they finally put a stop to it. This “brainchild” race was proposed by one of the inebriated Stampede executives and agreed to at a board meeting and was intended as an additional competition at the rodeo. But after a few years the race soured the enthusiasm of the board members when there were so many injuries plus the fact that a certain native fellow won the competition time and time again. Not many others even finished the race much less come close to beating him. I wondered if I’d met that particular fellow before. The guy I gave a ride from Cache Creek to Williams Lake last week mumbled something about being a rodeo star.

After diner Bill announced that he was going to see a friend this evening and would hook up with me in the morning. To Kathy he gallantly removed his cowboy hat, which he had procured from somewhere, and said, “Well Kat, if’n I don’t see ya agin, it’s been a pleasure.”

“Oh Bill,” she exclaimed, as she collapsed into his arms and burst into another round of tears. May-be this girl isn’t as tough as I thought.

“I suspect we’ll see each other again,” was all she could say. He lingered a while in her arms; it’s clear he enjoyed her embraces as much as I did, then said good-bye and walked away. All Kathy could manage was a sad, choked “Bye Bill, take care.”

She looked at me and I looked at her. *Awkwardness again.* We didn’t say anything for quite a while. We were both thinking about the same thing I suppose but we had come to a crossroads. Does she go with her newly found prince charming on his whimsical white steed and ride with him into the sunset to live happily ever after in Las Vegas? Or does she take a short breather from Cliff and try again?

What was so hard for me to figure out? The whole object of this working holiday was to get my mind straightened away but instead I’d become more confused. It’s been just one thing after another. I thought about all the people that I met this last month; a work-a-hollic business man and resort owner, a drunken ex-rodeo star and his family, a bow-legged cowboy that talked like Sam Elliot and rode a snowmobile, a couple of log building carpenters from the Cariboo who were probably the most sensible and level-

headed of us all, a tyrannical construction supervisor and his lovely wife and I still haven't wrapped my head around what I'm looking for.

"Can you call your sister to pick you up?" I heard myself say. *Hmmm! That came out of nowhere. Done. Maybe I knew the answer all along. Whew!* She looked at me for a long while. More sadness in her eyes than I've seen in all my years and I thought there might be another round of tears about to explode. That was it. The decision made. Our paths are now clear and a great weight has lifted from my shoulders. She didn't cry. She just looked at me a while longer. Finally she sadly nods her head and says, "I'm so sorry, your right. This is so wrong. I'm so sorry to have put you through all this. We've only known each other for a few days; I'm so sorry,"

"I guess I just wanted us to run away together," she continued babbling and waving her hands nervously. "I've hinted and led you to believe, and wanted to believe myself, that we could go off together and I really wanted that to help me through my split with Cliff but I was selfish and I didn't think about what it would do to your life and I'm so sorry." Her voice was cracking and the tears were just about there; just about to burst through, again. *Sheesh, so emotional.*

"Kathy, please stop saying you're sorry. It's as much my fault as it is yours and to be honest, I am very tempted to go away with you too but I started thinking of my own life and I can't do it."

"It's alright, I know you can't but I still had no right to infringe on you the way I have. You know, underneath that rough carpenter there is a very sweet man. Your wife is very lucky."

She kissed me on the cheek and went to the ladies room with a stop at the phone booth. I saw her once more; at Cliff's dinner at the lodge but we didn't talk. We just threw each other smiles and some warm and secretive glances but I made sure I stayed clear that time.

I paid the bill and went up to my room, had a shower and shave and fell onto the bed. I was still buzzed and wide-awake but exhausted at the same time. I stared at the cracks in the ceiling and the bugs flying around the light fixture and I looked at the stained and peeling wallpaper and the picture of a cowboy roping a yearling in a corral and realized that I missed my wife.

