

## *Chapter One*

When I first met Sam, she was named Carol, she had a young son and her life was difficult.

We found each other because one day in 1974, after his work was done, my father drove into our farmyard and parked behind the big green farmhouse. He had a blue and orange dump truck that he had cobbled together out of various parts of other vehicles, using a welding torch and lots of swearing. He always swore at vehicles. I tried to avoid him when he was working on a broken piece of farm equipment, which, because we owned a small farm, was much of the time.

Every morning, my father hitched his backhoe to the truck and trundled off down the road to dig people's water lines and septic fields. Then in the late afternoon, he came home, climbed down out of his truck and sat for a minute, feeding the scraps from his lunch to the dog. He did a round of chores, split wood, milked the cows, fed the chickens and then went in the basement of the farmhouse, took off his boots, went upstairs and waited for my mother to serve him dinner.

But this day, he climbed down out of the truck and walked across the yard to my sagging trailer. My father usually never came near my place.

I looked up from making dinner for my four kids. My father was a huge man, broad shoulders and long legs, dressed in grey overalls and workboots. He loomed in the doorway and said, "You should do something about that little woman."

I stared at him. What was he talking about? Little woman?

I was twenty-five, living at the farm in a ramshackle trailer

across the yard from the main farmhouse. My trailer was the picture of hillbilly dilapidation, with a half-finished addition on one side and four usually half-dressed kids running around outside. After I ran away from my terrible marriage, my father had bought the trailer for us from a resort owner up the road; it was an old holiday trailer, pink and white, twenty-seven feet long. He hauled it home and parked it, as much as possible out of sight behind a rock. He dug a hole for a septic tank and drainage field, put in a rudimentary water line that froze every winter, and there we were. Settled, on welfare: according to society's values then, I was the picture of a loser.

My youngest son was a baby, a little over a year old, and my other son was two and a half. My twin daughters were in Grade 2 at Wynndel School. We had arrived back at the farm in the spring of 1974, and that year I put in a garden and started growing food.

I had escaped an abusive marriage to an alcoholic, psychopathic liar of a man, a man everyone had warned me against. We were a dirty, bedraggled bunch when we straggled into the social worker's office in Creston after a three-day journey by bus and car from the southern US to this small town in southern British Columbia.

"What did you do with your husband?" the suit-dressed woman asked, as if he were a piece of luggage I had forgotten somewhere or lost on the journey. She had short black hair and squinty eyes behind big glasses. I bit back all the smart-ass answers that leapt to mind.

After all, to escape him, we had fled to a neighbour's house at night, been driven to the bus station in Little Rock, Arkansas, caught a bus to Albuquerque where my aunt lived, who didn't take us in but put us in a motel. The next morning,

we caught a plane to Denver and then to Spokane. We almost missed the plane in Albuquerque because I slept in, and we almost missed the plane in Denver because one son, who was two, ran away and got lost—but we made it. My parents picked us up and drove us across the border and back to our farm on the shore of Kootenay Lake, in southeastern British Columbia. I had grown up here, learned to work, learned to run away to the forest, learned to ride and fish and swim and climb trees. But I hadn't learned much about men or marriage.

Begrudgingly, the social worker signed me up and I got a welfare cheque of my very own, my first "salary," as I decided to consider it. I had no idea how small it was in relationship to what I would need, or how little it would actually buy, but it was money and it was mine, and for the first time in my life, I was proud of it. I decided to think about it as my paycheque for being a parent. I was going to do a good job at parenting at least, since my attempt at marriage had been so disastrous.

The year 1974 was an interesting time in history, a time still roiling from the turmoil of the sixties, from the Vietnam War, from drugs, from protests, and in particular, a time when the countryside all over North America was erupting with people also escaping, but escaping the city and going "back to the land." There were suddenly all kinds of new people in our very rural remote neighbourhood, and my twin daughters told me about a new kid on the school bus named Adrian, who lived just down the road. He caught the school bus seven miles from our house; he was shy and had long brown hair that fell over his eyes, and he was a grade ahead of them.

My father had been down at these new people's place, Carol and Carl's place, all day, putting in their water line, and had

been unusually horrified at the conditions under which they were living: no running water, a tiny dwelling, a rudimentary outhouse and an almost vertical driveway.

It took a lot to shock my father. He and my mother had been living in an unfinished basement when I was five and my sister was born. Then they had moved to our farm, into a drafty farmhouse with no insulation. My father worked intermittently at improvement projects in the house, usually because my mother made him.

“You should do something,” he said again. I was puzzled. What did he want me to do? Why was it my job? What did this unknown “little woman” need rescuing from? I had no idea. But they were new neighbours, which in those days meant something. New people were rare on the lakeside. Our community was a big one, stretched thin on the toes of the Purcell Mountains, along sixty kilometres of highway beside the shining water of Kootenay Lake. The small mining community of Riondel perched at one end of the road and the railway depot of Sirdar at the other. People lived miles apart. The area was generally known as the East Shore. When I was a kid, our nearest neighbour to the south was five kilometres away and our nearest neighbours to the north were two kilometres away. But we were all neighbours and friends, regardless of physical distance. And my father knew everyone. Almost every week, he delivered meat, milk, butter, apples or other produce to people along the lake.

There was always a distinction between summer people (who weren't really neighbours) and full-time people. Summer people had cottages at the lake and houses in town where they actually lived. When we were kids, summer on our farm was an insanely busy time, but the summer people were having

vacations. Summer people's kids went to the beach all day, while we picked fruit and sold it to tourists, or pitchforked hay into the barn in the middle of clouds of mosquitoes, or weeded the garden and hilled up long rows of corn and potatoes. We played with some of the summer kids and made fun of them behind their backs. We laughed at their parents making them wait an hour after lunch to go swimming. We laughed at their ignorance about animals and guns and tractors. We were jealous of their leisure but would never admit it.

So now, with the flood of new people into our area who were apparently going to be actual neighbours, I was curious, and nosy. Were these people actually serious about living here? Really?

I finally met Carol and Adrian a few days later at another neighbour's house. Carol seemed nice but was very quiet and responded to questions in monosyllables. Her face was hidden away behind big glasses and a headscarf, and she barely looked at me. I invited Adrian to come over to my place to play with my daughters. He arrived the next day on the school bus, serious and shy. A lock of brown hair drooped over his eyes, and he looked thin in his buttoned blue shirt and blue jeans. He came off the bus with a chessboard, determined to play chess. But I made popcorn and my kids began a popcorn fight. He sat there, bewildered, holding onto his chessboard.

"You might as well join in," I said. After a while, he did. Then I drove him home. I bumped up an impossibly vertical driveway in my ancient Chevy station wagon. Adrian and I got out. I looked around.

A tiny brown-shingled geodesic dome was perched on the side of a clearing beside two new, huge geodesic domes. Carol came out to invite me in for tea. She wore a red kerchief over

her braided long brown hair. It came right down to her eyes, which were still hidden behind thick glasses. We said hello and I introduced myself. She walked me into the small dome, made tea on a hot plate and apologized for the mess. All their belongings were crammed into cardboard boxes. The place reeked of mould.

“Sorry, the roof leaks; it’s a bit mouldy in here,” she said, clearly embarrassed. I felt loud and intrusive. We drank tea and she explained that she and her partner had a business, building full-size geodesic domes. The two large domes, joined together by a foyer, would be the demonstration home and an example of how great a geodesic dome could be. The domes would come in kits that people could build, or Carl and Carol would build for them.

“Carl says we can’t move in until they are completely finished,” she said.

We went to look at the new domes. The domes were built with triangular panels fitted into frames. They had windows and doors, board floors. The walls had pink insulation covered with plastic. The outside was covered with grey asphalt shingles. I looked at her incredulously. She peered back at me through wide blue eyes under her scarf, which, as I would discover, was perennially tied over her hair and covering her forehead.

“Are you crazy?” I said. “You can’t live in that mouldy little dump. Move in here.”

She shook her. “No, we can’t do that,” she said.

I changed the conversation and invited her to come to tea at my place. Adrian was welcome to get off the bus at my house anytime, I said. She gave me a tiny smile.

“We don’t know many people,” she said. “That would be nice.”

Adrian got off the bus with my kids the next day and Carol

came for tea, which turned into some kind of supper. Adrian would soon become a regular at our house. My twin daughters liked him a lot, and eventually he overcame his initial shyness and joined in with my kids on their treks to the beach or over to my mother's house for cake and apple juice.

Carol and I sat beside the littered wooden table in my trailer while kid chaos raged around us. We talked cautiously about the neighbourhood, my family, how Carol and Carl had found their land high up on the mountain. Then we found out we were both reading about environmental issues.

"A few of us are starting an environmental group in Creston. Do you want to go?"

She thought this over. "Will there be a lot of people there?"

"No," I said. "Just a few of us. It's just getting going."

The group that was being formed in Creston was called the Survival Group, part peace group, part environmental group, part politics, part whatever someone currently had on their mind. Politics was in the air, nuclear weapons were menacing the world, the Vietnam War was still going in a monstrous welter of cost and pain and bloodshed, and the economy was a wreck.

In our area, jobs were scarce. Loggers, dope growers and tree planters made good seasonal money. That was about it. In fact, jobs were scarce everywhere. Apocalypse was in the air. Hence the name, the Survival Group.

The founder of the group was my retired high school French teacher, Sigurd Askevold, a man for whom I had great respect. He was very active in the peace movement, about which I knew little, but it seemed like a good idea. I also knew from the stories he had told us in French class that he had been a saboteur from within the Nazi army in World War II. He had

survived battles, starvation and imprisonment. I admired his intellect, and his wife was our family doctor. They kept goats and grew most of their own food.

One night about a month later, Carol picked me up in their huge blue four-wheel-drive truck, nicknamed Nazgul (in those days, all our vehicles had names...and characters) and we set off for the meeting. When I had first arrived back at the farm, my mother had announced that she would never babysit. She never had to. The kids lived more or less between her house and mine, more at my mother's than mine. She considered this visiting, not babysitting. So this night they were at her house, along with Adrian.

About halfway to Creston, Carol announced, in a thin voice I could barely hear over the roar of the truck motor, that she had a secret to tell me. "My partner is having an affair," she said, "with a woman in Creston."

We had only met about three or four times at this point, but still I said, "Oh hell, everyone knows that" (which everyone did, ours being a tiny and gossipy community), "and people think he is a shit."

And then I sat back and realized I had probably just ruined a possible friendship by poking my nose in where it didn't belong. Carol would think I had been gossiping about her, would decide I was a bigmouth. Instead, she laughed. As she told me later, she was relieved. She wasn't on her own. She suddenly realized that she was living in a community where people actually cared about her, had been watching out for her, had reached out and sent help.

I don't remember much about the meeting. Sigurd Askevold was there, and John Grigoruk, the retired art teacher from the high school, and Rae Masse, a man in his eighties who



was devoted to skiing and mountain climbing and was almost completely deaf, so we all had to repeat everything for him by shouting in his ear. It was a great evening, the first of many such meetings.

I discovered I really liked talking to Carol. She read a lot. She liked science fiction and fantasy. We started to exchange books and magazines. We both liked to talk, we liked to read and we liked to argue. Our minds met and engaged. I realized that like me, she was a very smart woman in a community where being smart had no value.

And we were both in deep trouble and knew it and had no idea what to do about it.

Her situation at the domes was bitter. Not only was her man having an affair, their dome business was failing. They had been successful in Vancouver, successful enough to buy land and make their move to the Kootenays.

But their timing was wrong. Our part of the Kootenays was very suddenly full of people who were inventing new and sometimes bizarre ways to build houses. They didn't necessarily want, or have the money, to buy a kit for a building. It was easier to build a house a little bit at a time, as money or materials or help from friends became available.

And apparently domes weren't that great to live in, or at least, people weren't that interested in buying them. They were round, for one thing, with no straight walls to place furniture against. It also appeared there was sometimes a problem with the skylights leaking.

An odd migratory impulse that begun as a trickle in the late sixties, during the waves of drug taking, flower power and rebellion, had, by the early seventies, erupted into a flood all over North

America. Younger urban people decided, often on an impulse and without much planning, to move to the deserts or the mountains, or a farm in Tennessee, or the backwoods of BC. All sorts and sizes of and ages of people, but mostly in their twenties, loaded themselves, their children, dogs, cats, sometimes goats and whatever else they thought they needed into Volkswagen vans, or old school buses, or milk vans or other odd vehicles, and headed for the hills. For many, especially young men fleeing the draft in the US, many of these hills were in the Kootenays.

As such people arrived in large numbers in parts of the Kootenays in the sixties and seventies, they changed the culture and the countryside. They came with dreams, manifestoes, immense innocence, naivety and unshakeable faith in the power of youth and energy to do anything.

The Kootenays were originally settled by miners, loggers, farmers, adventurers and opportunists of all stripes. They displaced the First Nations people and then proceeded to change and disrupt the ecology. Miners shot herds of caribou for food; loggers stripped the mountainsides of trees, and then fires cleared what was left. The closing of the Grand Coulee Dam in 1942 emptied the Columbia and Kootenay rivers and their tributaries of a bountiful salmon population, and that winter, the grizzlies and the First Nations people starved. The flat swampland below Creston was diked, opening the area to farming projects but displacing almost completely what had been a vast and productive wetland, full of wild rice, ducks, fish and other wildlife.

Carol and Carl were part of this wave of back-to-the-land people. They had left Vancouver with a truck, a Volkswagen bus, a dog, Carol's son Adrian and their business. They found some

cheap land on a mountainside. They bought two goats and settled into their new life. Driving up their hill was always an adventure. In the winter, it was a solid sheet of ice, down which Adrian slipped and slid on his way to catch the school bus. They would have to put chains on their four-wheel-drive truck to get up it. In spring it became a churned morass of mud, and in summer a column of dust. Only in the fall was it actually driveable.

But their land was beautiful, a small, flat clearing beneath a pine-treed granite cliff, on the side of the Purcell Mountains, high above the swampy wildlife area at the south end of the hundred-and-twenty-kilometre-long, deep, clear Kootenay Lake. Unfortunately, they got hellish mosquitoes in July, just as we did at our farm.

I found the back-to-the-land movement exciting and hopeful. Farming and gardening I knew how to do; our family had always grown almost all our own food. I had lived at our farm for most of my life, and I deeply identified with it. I loved our land, farming and animals. I wanted to meet these new people. I wanted to invite them all over to my house and talk to them about farming.

It was as if people were suddenly discovering a farming language I had been speaking my whole life. But of course, these people didn't actually want to learn my language; they thought they were going to reinvent country life. They brought floods of new ideas: solar greenhouses, keeping goats, ploughing with horses and building houses in wildly inventive new ways. They used a lot of new words: organic, sustainable, environmental. They ate strange food: brown rice, homemade yoghurt, whole-wheat flour, carob, honey. Magazines and cookbooks sprang up to serve this market. My children have never forgiven me for buying them carob and telling them it was "like chocolate."