

Chapter 1

When you are unhappy with where you are and what you are doing, your mind can provide a great escape. While I worked at a job that I hated in a plywood mill, my day-dreams took me far away as I thought about the pioneers and how simple their lives had been. They did not have an easy life and their work was hard, but those who did the work reaped the rewards. When I compared my life to theirs, I found that I also worked hard but, unlike them, I reaped no rewards.

My hard-earned wage disappeared as quickly as I got it: on rent, utilities, food and the other basics of my mere existence. By the time those were looked after there was little left over. I felt like I was on a giant treadmill along with millions of people just like myself, and I wanted desperately to step off that treadmill.

It was 1968. I was twenty-eight years old, doing a man-sized job for a female wage, with nothing to look forward to but more of the same for years to come. Many of my co-workers were also women,

most of them older than me. It scared me to think that I would some day boast that I had been working in the mill for thirty years, as so many of them had done.

That same summer my dreams began to spill over into reality. I could not stop talking about how easy it would be to leave my present lifestyle behind, sell everything and go off into the wilderness to start a new life. I wanted to take my boredom and stress and exchange it for a simple way of life, something like what the pioneers had known. The more I thought and talked about it, the more my dream consumed me.

The person who listened to me go on and on about it all was Betty. Besides being my working companion, she was also my best friend. After months of listening to the same story time and again from me, she finally got fed up one day and in an angry voice said, "Look Sunny, if you are never really going to do this thing, then shut up about it." The whole time I had talked about the dream I had been careful to add that it would not be possible to achieve. I had responsibility for the support of my five-year-old daughter, Lisa. With her to look after, I could not very well go off to live in the wilderness, could I?

When Betty told me to stop talking about my fantasy, I felt my heart sink in despair at the thought that my dream was dead forever. Yet once she saw the hurt look on my face at what she had said, she gently added, "It is just that you have made it sound so good that I want to do it too. So if you are never going, please stop talking about it." My heart went quickly from despair to exhilaration, and I asked in a shaky voice, "Are you serious?" The two of us looked at each other for a long moment before she smiled at me and said, "Yes, I am serious. Let's do it."

Finding someone with whom to share my dream was like stepping out into the warm sunshine after being in a dark place for a long time. We were both caught up in the excitement. There were now two of us directing our energies into making the dream come true. We talked and talked for hours and hours as we made plans to escape.

Neither of us had ever even been camping, let alone thought

about the practicalities of wilderness living until then. I guess the only thing we had going for us was our enthusiasm.

Our personalities were total opposites, with Betty shy and quiet, and me outgoing and outspoken. As different as we were in our ways, we were so much alike in appearance that we were often mistaken for sisters. Both of us were dark haired, with brown eyes and the same height at five foot seven inches tall. We had slim, trim muscular bodies from the work in the mill. Our age difference was seven years, with Betty being the younger. She had led a sheltered life, living with her parents, one sister and two brothers, while I came from the other end of the spectrum. I had been raised in an orphanage until I ran away at the age of seventeen. The one thing we had between us was the strong desire to be free.

In the late sixties, there was no such thing as a garage sale, but we had one anyway. We posted a sale notice on the bulletin board at the mill where there were twelve hundred people working. On the day of the sale, three or four hundred of them showed up with cash in their hands. We sold everything we thought we would not need in the new life we planned. It was scary to see people walk away with items we had cherished. Betty was near tears as she sold her extensive wardrobe piece by piece and as she watched fur coats and evening gowns drift out of sight. My record collection dwindled down to nothing, with each item reminding me of how over the years I had scrimped and saved to buy it. We consoled each other by reminding ourselves that the money was going towards a good cause.

Our plan included starting over from scratch with wardrobes and everything else. Dresses were replaced by blue jeans, high-heeled shoes by boots, and fur coats with jackets. We had no room in the plan for furniture or anything else that did not directly contribute to our basic survival needs. With the money we raised from the sale, we bought rifles, axes, saws, lanterns, hammers, canned goods and sleeping bags. Shopping for all these things was an adventure all of its own.

Sales clerks queried us because we made most of our purchases in bulk. When we told them that we were going to be living a long

way from stores, often they would say that they wished they were going with us. Their remarks gave us an added boost to our already high spirits. We asked many questions, and we learned a lot as we shopped. It all added to the enjoyment of the adventure.

Lisa, only five years old, did not seem to be impressed with the whole show, until the day I came home with Arctic, a warm, fuzzy puppy with creamy white fur, the colour of coffee with a lot of cream in it and a heart full of sugar. He would grow to be a big dog, having parents that were Labrador retriever and Samoyed. We justified his addition to our expedition by the fact that he would, we hoped, grow up to protect us.

From the moment we agreed to jump into our experience until we actually got going, we were on a continual roller-coaster ride of emotions. We had an ongoing up and down mood swing that we brought on ourselves as we discussed what lay ahead of us. We talked about things like: How will Lisa go to school? Do bears attack people? What will happen if one of us becomes sick or is injured? After we had scared ourselves with such negative thoughts, we cheered ourselves up with positive ones. We talked about being free to make our own work hours, learning new things, living in the wilderness, building a log cabin and just getting out of the rat race. The picture we drew for ourselves was the same as seen on most Christmas cards, complete with us living in a cozy log cabin that we would build ourselves. For me, that log cabin was the best part of the whole dream.

One of the last things we did was to quit our jobs. Wearing big smiles, we both walked into the mill office to give notice that we would be leaving in two weeks. Just by chance the general manager of the mill heard us talking to the office clerk. Word of mouth had spread our story through the entire mill, and even he knew what we were about to do. He told the clerk not to terminate our files permanently but to put us on extended leave. He then turned to the both of us and said, "When you two get over this nonsense, you can come back to work here." When he said that, I thought, "Oh God, I hope that never happens."

On the ninth of March 1969, we were ready to go. Betty had just obtained her driver's license three weeks before. We had our two small import pickup trucks bursting at the seams with supplies and we had slightly under six thousand dollars in the bank. For months we had tried to pinpoint our destination but had never succeeded. With neither of us having travelled much before, we agreed to drive north until we found a place we both liked. In our minds, we thought that this would probably be somewhere in the Yukon, more than fifteen hundred miles away from our home on the south coast of British Columbia.

When we left the coast, there were signs of spring everywhere. Lawns were green, tulips and daffodils were in full bloom, and the skies were sunny and bright. As our journey took us north, spring deteriorated into winter, and less than three hundred miles from home, we drove into a snow storm. We both had to struggle to keep our overloaded trucks on the road, and as luck would have it, the storm caught us on a stretch of highway where there was absolutely no place to pull over and stop safely. It seemed that the only other vehicles on the highway were all giant semi-trailer trucks. Those big trucks created havoc with us every time one of them passed us in either direction. The wind force from the big trucks made it seem as though we were going to be blown off the road, and the snow they sprayed over our small trucks made it impossible, for a long moment, to see. The combination of the falling snow and passing trucks created a scary driving situation even for me, and I had several years of experience behind the wheel. Betty had never driven on snow and had only been driving a mere three weeks.

When I spotted the dark outline of a building in the distance, I signalled and pulled off the highway toward it on an unplowed road, with Betty bravely following along behind. When we stopped and clambered out of the trucks, it was immediately apparent how scared she had been. She stood leaning against the door of her little truck shaking like a leaf — even though she was dressed warmly. She told me that her hands were sore from tightly grip-

ping the steering wheel. She said that at one point she thought that she might break it.

From where we stood, we saw a large A-frame building with a big sign over the entrance, reading "Pine Pass Ski Lodge." Betty, Lisa and Arctic stayed with the trucks as I plowed my way through the deep snow to the front steps of the A-frame. When I reached the steps and looked at the front door, I found a sign, "Closed for the summer." After reading the sign and looking at all the snow around me, I had to laugh. I stood there for a moment while I thought about what to do next. As I stood thinking, I smelled the faint odour of wood smoke in the air.

Following my nose, I walked to the side of the building and then to the rear where I saw smoke slowly rising from the chimney of one in a long row of small cabins. All were snuggled under a heavy blanket of snow. When I reached the cabin with the rising smoke, my knock on the door was quickly answered by a tall, thin man dressed in a red-checkered flannel shirt and blue jeans. Before I had a chance to speak, he told me that the lodge was closed for the season. I apologized for disturbing him and told him that I was not a skier, but a traveller with another woman and that we had a small child with us. He listened to me while I poured out my story. His response was a slow shake of his head; he said that he was only the summer caretaker with no authority to let anyone use the place for refuge. Since I was not willing to take a chance back out on the highway with the snow still falling, I used all the friendly persuasion I could think of and even included a bribe before he finally agreed to let us stay in one of the cabins.

I am not sure if it was me that he liked or the bottle of whiskey I gave him, but he accepted the bottle, told me to go and get the rest of my group, and then opened one of the cabins and busied himself building a fire in the fireplace for us. As he left, he told us that he had a large pot of stew on the stove in his cabin, and we were all invited to join him for dinner. His invitation even included the dog. The next morning the storm had passed, and the sun was shining. Once again we were on our way.

As we drove, Betty and I alternated our passengers. First, one of