

## Chapter One

Two years later

With one motion, Sarah Shelter pulled her apron over her head. The garment smelled of fresh-baked bread, ham, and onions from the French onion soup she'd put on to simmer before leaving the West Kootenai Kraft and Grocery. Her *Englisch* friend told her once that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach. If that were the case, Sarah should have been married off years ago. She'd cooked for plenty of Amish bachelors, every year befriending the thirty or so men who came to Montana for a season. Problem was, their eyes were more on the wild game that filled the hills than on finding a wife. Typically, girls waiting back home had already captured their hearts. The bachelors appreciated Sarah all right—to fill their stomachs until their western adventure came to an end and they returned to their farms, their families, and their waiting brides.

Tossing the apron into a wicker basket filled with tomorrow's wash, Sarah moved to her bedroom window and opened it. Warm, afternoon air that smelled of sunshine and pine wafted in. She paused, staring up at the trees and the green pasture beyond, but mostly at the large mountain that rose in the distance. Eve Peachy had come into the store earlier to tell Sarah they'd been invited to hike Robinson Mountain. Sarah had laughed, thinking it was a joke, until Eve announced it was a bachelor who'd planning the outing.

"Amos is planning it yet," Eve had mentioned with a twinkle of her eye. Though not the most handsome bachelor, Amos had an outgoing, playful side. Eve knew if anyone could get Sarah to put on hiking boots to climb a mountain, it would be Amos.

Sarah placed a hand over her heart—which danced a double beat at the mere mention of Amos's name—and smiled. She supposed it was time to hike the mountain. Her older brothers had both hiked it, even her father and mother had. Spring had brought plenty of sunshine and had already cleared the snow from the mountain trails. She had no excuse really. And maybe . . . maybe she'd even get a chance to get to know Amos a bit better.

She removed her *kapp*, placing it on her bed. She'd bathe early and spend the evening quilting on the porch. She never liked the sticky feeling that spending all morning baking at the

store brought about. More than that, if one of the bachelors happened to stop for a visit, she'd look proper.

Sarah moved to her dresser and stopped short. Two large jars—previously used for pickles—sat there, filled with all types of curious things. Pretty rocks, old pennies, a rusty nail, a hand-carved whistle, each with a memory attached. But the third jar . . . she rested a hand on her hip. Its contents had been spilled out and the jar itself was gone. She picked up the white rock that had been dumped with the other items and fingered it. Then she set it back down.

She balled her fist. A rush of anger tightened her shoulders. How could someone treat her things so carelessly?

Stomping out her bedroom door through the living room, Sarah let out a shout. “Andy!”

Hearing his name, her twelve-year-old brother rose from where he'd been sitting on the front porch and darted into the woods. Through the open front door, Sarah spotted what she'd been looking for. Her jar. It sat there covered with what looked like tin foil and . . .

Sarah stepped forward. A snake was inside! Her brother had dumped out her things to keep an ugly ole brown garter snake?

She picked up the jar, crumpled the foil, and slipped her hand inside the jar.

“Well, I'll be.” The man's voice caused Sarah to start, and she nearly dropped the jar.

There, striding up the wooded path leading from the road, was Amos Byler with another of the bachelors by his side.

Sarah looked at the jar in her hand and, with a quick grip of her fingers and a flip of her wrist, tossed the snake into the yard. It bounced slightly and then slithered away into the tall grass.

The two men stood staring. Amos ran a hand down his smooth face.

Then she remembered. *My kapp*. Sarah placed a hand on top of her head. The silkiness of her blonde hair felt foreign. Since a small girl, she'd worn a *kapp* by day and a sleeping kerchief at night.

“I was 'bout to change,” she explained. “And then I noticed my memory jar was missing.”

Amos cocked an eyebrow as he nodded. A hint of a smile spread on the other man's face.

“My *dat's* not here, if that's who yer looking for, and I best get inside.” She clutched the glass jar to her chest and hurried to the front door. The wooden planks of the porch squeaked

under her feet, and a blue jay twittered from the top of the porch railing, as if chiding Sarah for her improper presentation.

“Before you go!” Amos called.

She paused and turned, heat rising to her cheeks.

“We didn’t come fer yer *dat*. We came to see you, Sarah. We’re hiking up Robinson Mountain next Saturday—all the way to the top. Care to come?”

“*Ja*, sounds fun,” she called over her shoulder, and hurried inside, her knees trembling. She rushed to her room. Good thing no one else was around to witness that. She hoped no one would find out, especially *Mem*. Sarah’s mother spoke quietly, but her words had impact. Sarah grabbed up her clean clothes and hurried into the indoor bathroom.

*Would Amos tell?*

She had a feeling he wouldn’t. He seemed too kindly for that. But that other man. What was his name? Jathan. Yes, that was it. He stood at least six inches taller than Amos and his shoulders appeared twice as wide. He’d been smiling, and his eyes twinkled as if he enjoyed seeing her embarrassment.

As she unpinned her sleeve, Sarah decided right then she didn’t like Jathan one bit . . .

\*\*\*

The cabin wasn’t much more than four bunks, but it had enough room in one corner for a small kitchen with a wood-burning cookstove and a handmade table with two chairs. Jathan Schrock had straightened it up some when he first arrived. His guess was that the guys who’d most recently stayed there hadn’t tidied up much. Nor the group of guys before that.

He supposed the accommodations weren’t what beckoned most bachelors to the West Kootenai. It was the promise of high mountains, endless forests, and abundant game that called to the outdoorsmen.

“A haven for single Amish men.” *Mem* had read about the bachelors’ cabins in *The Budget*. Sawmill and carpenter jobs were aplenty in the West Kootenai. Wouldn’t Jathan like to go to try his hand at hunting too?

Jathan was excited to come face to face with elk, mule deer, and moose. But he also wanted time to get away and think about his future. He’d snuck two books on running a small business into his suitcase and had been reading them late into the night. Someday, he wanted his

own retail shop—he liked that idea much more than working at a mill or factory. He liked people too—finding out about their lives, meeting their needs. Jathan had worked one summer in his uncle’s cheese factory as a salesman, and he’d been hooked. The idea of offering people something they valued while also providing for a family appealed to him. He could see himself doing that rather than working in the garage-door factory like most of his friends did.

Being in Montana wasn’t just about what he came for—but what he ran from. He’d be in the door factory this very moment if he hadn’t spent his savings on a suitcase and a train ticket out west. And although finding a wife wasn’t one of his motives, he’d thought more about having one here than he ever had elsewhere.

Thought more about her—Sarah Shelter.

Yet she hadn’t paid him any mind, except to offer another cup of coffee at the West Kootenai store. She’d also scowled his direction when she’d been caught this afternoon without a *kapp*. But that didn’t count as romance, right?

Jathan got the cookstove going. After being here two months and missing some of his favorite dishes, he’d decided to cook his own dinner tonight and had stopped by the store for supplies.

The food at the West Kootenai Kraft and Grocery was good, but his favorite part was watching Sarah work. He liked the open kitchen that was visible from the dining room. Liked her broad smile as she kneaded bread dough or whipped up batter for cakes. He especially liked the way she chatted with the customers as they entered.

He’d learned a lot about Sarah by her conversations with others. She had a married brother and three married sisters; one older brother, Jonathan, who wasn’t married yet; and younger siblings too. She like baking more than cooking and liked cakes and cupcakes best of all.

What Jathan didn’t know was why there was always a hint of sadness in her eyes. Something pained her, and he wished he knew her well enough to ask what it was.

*Sarah.*

The memory of her blonde hair glimmering in the sunlight as she stood on her front porch today caused his neck to grow warm. He chuckled under his breath, remembering how she’d picked up that snake and flicked it into the yard as if it were a twig. He couldn’t think of one woman he knew back in Ohio who’d do that.

Jathan opened the front door, letting in a cool breeze, and glanced down the walking path that led to the main road, and beyond that, Sarah's place. Maybe he'd get a chance to talk to her before another two months passed.

His stomach growled, and he grabbed the paper sack he'd brought home from the store. First out was a cooking pot. Jathan hadn't been surprised that there wasn't one to be found in the cupboards of the cabin. Instead of cooking pots, he'd found coils of rope, a knife sharpener, and bullets.

He wiped down the countertop, and then chopped up an onion, carrots, and potatoes. With that done, Jathan melted shortening in the pot on the stove and added boneless beef cubes. When they were browned, he tossed the vegetables into the pot and added water, salt, and a tablespoon of sugar. Then he pulled a few more items from his grocery bag: Worcestershire sauce, paprika, allspice, clove. A dash here, a splash there, and within a few minutes, the room smelled like his mother's kitchen back home rather than sweaty socks and gun oil as it had before.

He pulled out one of his books on small business ownership, writing notes in the margins as the stew simmered.

An hour later, just as he'd tested to see if the stew was done, a pounding of footsteps sounded on the front porch—Amos stomping mud off his boots. Jathan's eyes widened. Would Amos think any less of him for his ability to cook? Tension tightened Jathan's gut.

Amos entered through the front door and stopped in his tracks. He looked over at a bunk and then crouched down and peered under it. "Okay, where is she?"

"Who?"

"The woman. Someone's been cookin' in here. It smells amazing." Amos chuckled.

Jathan shrugged. "Nothing' special. Jest something I cooked up." He took out two clean bowls and ladled up the stew.

Amos grabbed a spoon, sank onto a lower bunk, and dug in. "*Ja*, this is really *gut*," he said between bites. "You should give the recipe to Sarah at the West Kootenai Kraft and Grocery."

"No." The word shot from Jathan's mouth. He took a bite from the stew but was suddenly no longer as hungry. He wanted to talk to Sarah—get to know her better—but not in that way. Wait until he brought in the prize elk. Then he'd make a proper introduction.

“Don’t go jabbering about things unknown to you,” Jathan said. “Have another bowl, but don’t eat yerself full. I’d like to head over to the store later fer some cake.”

“A piece of Sarah’s cake no doubt?” Amos cocked an eyebrow. “It wonders me why you haven’t asked her to go on a walk.” He combed his fingers through his dark hair and straight bangs. “From the way you keep glancing her direction while she works, well, yer interest is clear. Why don’t you ask her to walk down to the lake or something? Jest to be friendly.”

“*Wonnernaus*. There’s no reason really.” Jathan narrowed his gaze as if trying to convince Amos it really was none of his business.

The fact was, he did want to get to know Sarah, but what did he have to offer if she showed her affection back—talk of a door factory job waiting for him? No, he had to figure out some business plans first.

Most people thought he’d come to Montana for the hunting, and while he enjoyed that, Jathan had another reason. He was running—running from being the youngest son who, no matter how hard he tried, couldn’t live up to his brothers, who lived the perfect Amish lives and always obeyed *Dat*, always made *Dat* proud.

Amos served himself another bowl. “This really is *gut* stew.”

Jathan finished his stew and stood. He placed his bowl on the counter and then stuffed his hands into his pockets.

“Are you sure you made it?” Amos asked.

“No, yer guess was right the first time. There’s an Amish woman here. I stuffed her into my pillow.”

Amos laughed and then placed his dirty bowl on the counter. “Hit the spot.”

Amos eyed the pot. “But it looks like there will be enough for breakfast afore we go out shooting in the morning.”

“*Ja*, leftovers are always better.” Jathan tried to hide his disappointment. As much as he looked forward to target practice, doing so would mean he’d miss sitting in the restaurant and saying hello to Sarah Shelter.