

Chapter One

The hammer weighed heavy in his hand. Aaron Zook hit the nail again and again, securing the iron hat hook. Finally done, he placed the hammer on the windowsill and stepped back. His heart weighed heavy, too. Bruised as if it received similar blows. Aaron removed his straw hat and placed it on the hook, then he turned and scanned the room. For months he'd poured himself into his work, planning for the day he'd complete the cabin, but it meant little now. The windows were bare, like large blank eyes staring into his soul, mocking his pain. He'd done his part, but it needed a woman's touch—white, plain curtains, a rag rug by the door, green plants by the window.

He'd set up a bed in the larger room, but he wouldn't sleep here. Not yet. Another blow struck his heart. He'd always imagined his first night with Marianna by his side, snuggled under the quilt she'd been working on. He swallowed hard and wiped his eyes, telling himself to push those thoughts from his mind.

Aaron cleared his throat and strode, steps determined, into the kitchen. His eyes scanned the simple cupboards and the table and

two chairs he'd made. He took a deep breath and imagined the fragrance of homemade bread wafting from the wood-burning stove he'd picked up at a local auction. From there he moved through the living area to the simple bathroom, and then to the larger bedroom, making sure the last nail had been driven. All looked *gut*. The wooden floor was laid. The trim around the doors finished. Aaron refused into go to the smaller room—the one he'd made for a child. Their child. He crossed his arms over his chest, pulling them tight.

Marianna would love that room best, especially the view of the meadow. The window bench still needed cushions, as did the cradle.

His mother had declared the room “fancy,” giving a toss of her head, but Aaron didn't care. Marianna deserved something special. As he'd worked on the window bench, he'd pictured her watching sparrows dance in the tree limbs, cradling his child in his arms, humming a lullaby.

Who was he kidding? He pictured her in every room. Even though she'd never stepped through the door, her presence haunted this place. If only she'd taken the time to come and see the home he'd built for her.

He approached the bare, queen-sized mattress and sat, placing his elbows on his knees and hiding his face in his hands. Anger course through him, followed by desperation.

Why had she turned back?

His mother had heard from Marianna's best friend Rebecca that she'd packed up her things and boarded the train to Indiana, but at the next station she got off and returned the way she'd come. Why? Did guilt chain her to that place—to her parents? Was it something else? *Someone* else? His stomach clenched and a soft moan escaped his lips.

He'd seen her urgency to live right. Determination to follow every rule often straightened her eyebrows and tightened her

lips into a thin line. Didn't she realize all could see the pain she attempted to hide?

Losing her sisters impacted Marianna in ways he doubted she understood. It also made Aaron love her even more. It made him want to take her away from the haunted memories tucked away within her family home and cherish her as she deserved. To show that he loved her just for *her*. Making this cabin had been his first step, but it did little good if she never saw it.

I need her to return. She has to come back. She has to know . . .

He stood and paced from the bedroom window to the door and back again. If this place were to ever be filled with the life he'd planned on—the woman he'd dreamed of—he'd have to do something about it.

Aaron's heart seemed tangled in a thousand knots. He placed a hand to his chest and forced in a breath. He had to let her know he wasn't giving up.

His only chance was to go to her. Marianna had to know his heart.

As much as it scared him to leave, he had no choice.

Aaron looked at the borrowed suitcase. It was only half full. He'd put in a few changes of

clothes and an extra hat. He'd borrowed a book on cattle from Mr. Stoll. Under it all he'd tucked his sketchbook.

Turning to his dresser, Aaron picked up the last two things. A stack of letters and a paper sack with a lunch Naomi had packed. Tears had filled her eyes as she'd handed it to him. She hadn't wished him a good trip. She hadn't begged him to stay. She'd come to him months in her desperation, hoping to find companionship. For a while he'd tried, for the same reason. But he knew better now. Lying was something he'd been raised to hate. And letting Naomi think he cared about her the way he cared for

Marianna . . . That was a lie. Which was why he was leaving.

To find the truth.

He sighed as he set the lunch inside the suitcase. Many in his parents' generation married for a home and family. His own mother said it was foolish for him to travel so far for love. Marriage did not take love, she insisted.

His younger sister called up the stairs. "Your driver's here!"

"*Ja, ja,*" Aaron yelled back.

He clenched the stack of letters, still unsure if he'd give them to Marianna. There were fifteen letters. Nearly one for every week she'd been gone. He'd shared so much on those pages—his dreams, his hopes. He'd left nothing hidden. Which was why he hadn't mailed them yet. He had to go to Montana. He had to look into Marianna's face, peer into her eyes—her soul. Only then would he know if he'd be willing to hand over his heart.

Lifting his suitcase, he took one last look around the room he'd slept in since a babe. Then, determination straightening his back, Aaron turned and walked out the door.

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