

Chapter One

Eli Plank sipped a cup of strong coffee as he sat down to write his *Budget* report, which had to be mailed today in order to make the next printing of the paper. One of his earliest memories included watching his *dat* reading *The Budget* each night after dinner. It was a staple in Amish homes. A way for men and women from all around the country to connect, telling of joys and hardships of their local Amish communities.

For as long as he could read *The Budget* himself, Eli had always sought out the news from the West Kootenai community first. The local scribe's column often read like an adventure novel, with elk taking down clotheslines and wild turkeys showing up in buggy sheds. The Amish families who'd traveled to West Kootenai were the adventurers among them—like modern-day Lewises and Clarks. Now he was one of them. Eli wondered if the area would live up to the expectations he'd set in his mind. And he also wondered how many days his mother could go before writing him of his need to return to Indiana, settle down, and find himself a wife.

He sat at the small handmade wooden table. Next to him the large window was open. The cool wind carried in the scent of pine and a stirring of dust from the four-wheel-drive truck that had just rumbled down the road. Yesterday his first visitors had shown up at the cabin. A trio of Amish kids who lived just down the road. They'd brought over cinnamon rolls from their *mem* as a welcome to the area, and a note to let him know that church would be at their house this week. They'd pointed to a small yet tidy ranch house down the road.

"That's where we live, not far at all yet," the youngest one—a girl—had proclaimed. "And on the other side of that is the Carashes' house. They're *Englisch*. Sally is my best friend."

Eli had only been in the small West Kootenai community two days, but it was long enough to discover this was an Amish community unlike any other he'd been in. Three things stood out: the way the Amish and *Englisch* mingled as friends, the snow still on the mountains though it was May, and the pretty blonde Amish woman who barely glanced his way as he offered a hello in the general store. She was lovelier than most of the young women back home—yet he wouldn't tell *Mem* that. The last thing he needed

was *Mem* writing to give him courting advice. She seemed overly worried that he was already twenty-four years old and had yet to find a suitable woman to pursue.

Instead of glancing his way, the young woman had been focused on bags of planting soil, asking the store clerk, Edgar, a slew of questions about hard freezes and soil content. Growing up with his family's seed business, Eli knew gardening. He now kicked himself for not stepping forward and offering her some advice. Then again, he'd only be guessing. It wasn't as if he'd ever gardened in these parts. He was certain that planting in the high mountains had to be quite different from Indiana. And it wasn't until the woman walked out the door with her purchases that he saw the same trio of kids who had stopped by his cabin waiting for her.

"That's Sadie. She's been through quite a loss," Edgar had informed him. "Yet those kids keep her connected to real life. Otherwise I think she'd spend most of her thoughts on her garden." Edgar sighed. "Though I'm not sure if it's the one she's planting or the one of her childhood that she thinks 'bout the most."

Edgar hadn't said any more about the woman, and Eli hadn't asked. Yet he'd been pleasantly surprised to know she lived right down the road. He'd have a chance to see the woman again this morning. After all, being neighborly as he was, Eli had offered to walk the woman's younger siblings to school . . . seeing that there was a bear in these parts and all. It was the kids themselves who'd stopped by last night to tell him the news. A bear . . . now that was something to write home about!

THE BUDGET—West Kootenai, Montana

May—Unseasonably warm weather (or so the locals tell me) with clear skies reflecting off the mountain snow. Schoolchildren were running around barefoot during morning recess, even though the frost had barely melted. Seems to me that in Montana, if the sun is shining, that's good enough reason not to wear a coat and shoes, or so they think.

Montana is everything I imagined it to be. Arrived two days ago with three other bachelors and found the West Kootenai area to be just as lovely as everyone describes. Mountain peaks surround the high-mountain valley. Green pastures and the songs of birds hidden in tall pine trees. Everything smells like pine . . . and dust. Very few roads around these parts are paved. If I walk fifty feet in any direction there's always something to explore—rivers, ponds, mountain trails—and words cannot describe the expansive Lake Koocanusa.

Now I know why so many bachelors come to these parts every year. I, like the rest of them, used the excuse that we must live in this area for six months in

order to receive our resident hunting license in the fall. I am looking forward to hunting season, no doubt, but I'm also thankful to live here too. There are numerous bachelor cabins all over the area. I have the smallest one and don't have a roommate yet. Maybe this means that local families will take pity on me and invite me to dinner and good conversation often. One can only hope.

Spent a few days giving the bachelor's cabin a good cleaning before unpacking my things. As I washed a film of dirt off the cabin windows with a hose, I thought of the ladies back home who'd often come to help *Mem* clean before Sunday church. Wishing they could show up here for even one hour. Tomorrow I start my job at Montana Log Works. My hands are more used to tilling weeds than shaping logs, but I suppose I can just look at these pines as the big brothers of the plants *Mem* tends back home.

I just came from Pinecraft, Florida, for the season, and I haven't adjusted to the weather yet. The balmy days filled with ocean breezes are gone. Even though it's late spring, Montana's still clinging to winter. The nights get downright cold, and the cold seeps deep here. You're not going to find me without my shoes and jacket.

It's good to see some familiar faces in the area. I'd met the Sommers family (Abe) when they still lived in Indiana. Linda Tillman (Rudy) is a cousin of my mother's too. She brought a fresh loaf of bread to my cabin and got the whole place smelling *gut*. Of course, I'm most excited to meet the bear cub that the neighborhood kids are talking about. Yet we all know that when a cub is around, the mother isn't far. I'm heading out in a few minutes to walk the neighbor kids to school. The kids and I have high hopes we can spot it. One doesn't have to look far to find adventure.

This reminds me of God's Word, which says, "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe."

Trust is a good word to cling to today for all of us. Trust that being neighborly and introducing oneself to a new friend can warm your heart even more than the Montana sun on a crisp spring day.

—Eli Plank, the bachelor scribe