

Chapter One

March, 1841

Pinewood Village, New York

Callie Conner propped the full basket on her hip, closed the door of the buttery and started toward the hotel, then stopped and stared at the man limping up the path toward her. A logger by the looks of him. She sighed, looked down at the ground and waited. She hated meeting new people—especially men. There was always the staring, and then the profuse compliments about her beauty, and then—

“That basket looks heavy for you, miss. May I carry it for you?”

She lifted her head and it happened—just as it always did. The man’s eyes widened. He stared, blinked, and stared again. He gazed into her eyes, and she heard his breath catch. She frowned, but held back the refusal that rose to her lips. If he was Aunt Sophia’s friend she would have to accept his offer of help.

The man made a visible effort to collect himself and cleared his throat. “Truthfully, miss, I was wondering if there is work I could do in exchange for something to eat?”

So he was not known to her aunt. She opened her mouth to refuse, but his stomach rumbled, and she bit back her words. She hadn’t the heart to turn away a hungry man. At least he hadn’t complimented her to win his way, as the wealthy, elite men in Buffalo were wont to do. She ignored her unease and handed him the basket. “Follow me.” Not a very gracious response perhaps, but she was heartily sick of men.

The hems of her long skirts whispered against the wood as she climbed the steps, crossed the wide porch and entered the back door. The smell of the beef stew she had simmering over the fire filled the kitchen. The man’s stomach rumbled again. “Set the basket there on the work table, then hang your jacket on one of those pegs and have a seat.” She swept her hand toward the smaller dining table against the wall. “I’ll bring you some food.”

“You’re most kind.”

The man removed his knit hat, winced and shoved it into his pocket, shrugged out of his plaid wool jacket and lowered himself into a chair. There was something careful about his movements. Was he injured? Is that why he was not working? Spring was such a busy time of the year for loggers.

She pushed aside her contemplations, took a knife, fork and dish from the hutch, crossed to the fireplace, ladled a large serving of stew onto the dish from the iron pot hanging from the crane and walked to the table.

The man glanced up at her, raised his hand and rubbed the stubble on his chin. He looked uncomfortable about it. But most loggers let their beards grow until they came to town. She placed the dish in front of him.

“Thank you.”

Her nod set the wisps of black curls around her face aflutter. She brushed them back off her forehead. “There is more stew should you wish it. I’ll get you some bread and butter.”

The logger offered quiet thanks for the food, and then there was the click of the fork against the dish. His prayer took away some of her unease, but still there was something odd about the situation. The man was begging food, yet the blue wool shirt he wore looked new, as did his jacket, pants and boots. Well, no matter. He would soon be gone.

She uncovered a loaf of bread and cut off two thick slices, grabbed the crock of butter from the basket he’d carried in for her, returned to the table and gasped.

The man jerked his head up, winced.

“You’ve a nasty wound on your head, Mr....”

“Ryder.” He lowered his fork to his plate and stood. “My apologies, miss. I thought there was only a lump, not a visible wound or I would not have subjected you to—”

She banged the bread plate down on the table and looked straight into his astonished gaze. “I am *not* a delicate flower that must be pampered and coddled, Mr. Ryder! I have seen wounds worse than yours. I was merely surprised by it. Now please sit down and eat your meal. That wound needs care. I will tend to it when you are finished.”

"You're very kind, miss, but I can't permit—"

She jutted her chin up a notch and stared at him.

A puzzled look flickered in his blue eyes. He gave a small nod. "Very well." He sat, took a bite of the stew, then lifted a piece of the bread from the plate and dipped his knife in the butter.

Heat spread across her cheeks. Perhaps she had reacted too strongly, but she was so *tired* of men seeing only her beauty and none of her worth. She'd come back to Pinewood to escape that—at least for a little while.

Her long skirts flared out at her pivot, swished over the tops of her shoes as she strode to the stove. She poured warm water from the iron teakettle into a large bowl, moved to the dry sink and draped a few clean cloths from the bottom shelf over her arm, snatched a small, covered crock from a shelf and walked back to the table.

The man crossed his knife and fork on his empty dish. "My compliments, miss. That stew is the best I have ever eaten."

"There's nothing like hunger to refine the palate." He had praised her *cooking*. She smiled, set the crock and bowl on the table and glanced at him. He was staring at her with that *look* she so hated. Her hands tightened on the bowl of water. If he told her she was beautiful, she would—

"Callie dear, I've been thinking about—" Her Aunt Sophia swept into the room, stopped and stared. "And who are you, sir?"

The logger rose and made her a polite bow. "Mr. Ezra Ryder, at your service, madam."

Her aunt's delicately arched brows rose, her gaze shifted to her. She gave a small shrug. "Mr. Ryder asked if there was work he could do in exchange for a meal, Aunt Sophia." She dropped one of the cloths into the bowl of warm water. "Is there something you needed? I was about to tend a wound on Mr. Ryder's head."

"Nothing that can't wait, dear. Please be seated, Mr. Ryder." Sophia came to the table, glanced at the man's wound then took the chair opposite him.

She recognized the expression in Sophia's eyes from her days of youthful escapades with her friends. A smile tugged at her lips. Her aunt would soon know all about the logger. She squeezed the excess water out of the cloth and held it on the lump at the crown of Ezra Ryder's head to loosen the dried blood.

"How did you injure yourself, Mr. Ryder?"

Her smile grew. Sophia's inquisition had begun.

"I was ambushed by two men intent upon relieving me of my...wages."

Why had he hesitated? She frowned and moved the position of the wet cloth.

"Here in *Pinewood*?"

"No. I was attacked in Dunkirk on my way here."

"Greed makes men do evil things." The words left a bitter taste in her mouth. Her father was numbered among the greedy. Why else would he plan to sell her hand in marriage to the highest bidder? Her stomach knotted. She looked down, rinsed out the cloth then applied it to the wound again.

"Sadly, that's true, Callie. And what brings you to Pinewood, Mr. Ryder? Are you seeking employment as a logger? Or a sawyer or teamster?"

"I came to visit a distant cousin...Johnny Taylor. But I was told by the clerk in the mercantile that Johnny and a man by the name of Arnold Dixon quit their jobs and headed west a few days ago."

Johnny Taylor and Arnold Dixon. Thomas Hunter's friends. The men who had so frightened Willa. Was Ezra Ryder of the same ilk? She frowned, turned the cloth over and again held it on Ezra Ryder's bowed head. "What a shame your cousin didn't know to expect you, and you made your journey in vain."

"Yes, indeed." The sympathy in Sophia's voice belied the sharpened look in her eyes. "Were you close with your cousin, Mr. Ryder?"

"No, not at all. I know him only from when we were young boys, and my uncle brought his family to visit us on the farm. My visit here was to renew our acquaintance."

There was something underlying the ring of truth in Ezra Ryder's deep voice—something he wasn't telling. Her shoulders tensed. She detested lies and subterfuge. And disdained the men that indulged in them. In her experience, they were many. She dabbed the softened blood from his hair, dropped the cloth in the water, dried her hands on the long white apron that covered her blue wool dress

and opened the small crock.

"So you are without funds, and without a place to stay?"

"Thanks to those thieves, and my cousin's leaving town, yes. That is why I inquired if there is work I can do in exchange for my meal...and perhaps a place to sleep?"

"I see." Sophia glanced around. "I'm sure there is something..."

"The stables need a thorough cleaning." A cheeky suggestion. It was not her place to interfere in her aunt's business, but she didn't want the man given work around the kitchen. It was her sanctuary. She clamped her jaw to keep from saying more, and smoothed the salve over the exposed gash.

"An excellent suggestion, Callie." Sophia gave her a warm smile, then lowered her gaze to Ezra Ryder. "My groom suffers from rheumatism and can no longer care for the stables as he once did. You may clean them as payment. But you must do so as Joseph directs."

"I understand, madam."

There was politeness and acquiescence in Ezra Ryder's voice, but not a hint of subservience. She ran her gaze over his neatly trimmed hair. The man had recently been to an excellent barber. She frowned, held back the questions crowding into her mind and put the cover back on the crock and placed it on the table.

"Very well. There is a cot you may sleep on in the equipment room. You'll find a mattress tick you can stuff with fresh hay in the tin cupboard, and— Yes, Mary?"

The maid in the doorway gave an apologetic smile. "Begging your pardon, Mrs. Sheffield, but there's a gentleman out front that wants a room."

"Thank you, Mary. I'll come right along." Her aunt rose.

Ezra Ryder stood and made her a small bow. "Thank you for your kindness, Mrs. Sheffield."

Sophia nodded and stepped toward the doorway, paused and looked over her shoulder. "Callie, Ezra will need blankets. You'll find some in the chest in my bedroom."

Something akin to shock flashed in Ezra Ryder's eyes at the subtle message of his servile position contained in her aunt's use of his given name. It was followed by a flicker of amusement. A strange reaction for a man come begging. He glanced her way, caught her studying him.

"I'll get the blankets." She hurried through the door that led to her aunt's private quarters, snatched three blankets from the chest at the foot of the bed and returned to the kitchen. He had donned his jacket.

"Here are the blankets—" She glanced up at him and his first name stuck in her throat. There was something about the man that commanded respect. "The Allegheny has flooded the fields out back and is only a few feet from the stables, but these should be sufficient to ward off the damp and the cold." She handed him the wool blankets and stepped back.

He nodded, fastened his gaze on hers and smiled. "Thank you for your suggestion to your aunt that I might help in the stables. I'm grateful for the opportunity to earn bed and board. And thank you for tending my wound. It already feels better."

She turned from the look of admiration in his eyes and began clearing the table. "The salve is made by the Senecas. It's very effective. I'll apply more in the morning."

"I don't want to trouble you, Miss... I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"It's Conner. And it's no trouble to dab salve on a wound." She glanced up and again found that look of admiration in his eyes. "Try not to roll onto your back while you're sleeping, or you'll irritate that wound."

A smile curved his lips and crinkled the corners of his blue eyes. "I shall do my best, Miss Conner."

She stared at his smile, then leaned down and picked up the dishes she'd stacked. There was definitely something amiss. The man was too self-assured, too confident for someone in his situation. "Breakfast is at daybreak. Come along with Joseph. It would be well to eat before you go on your way." The reminder of his temporary stay helped. There was something unsettling about Ezra Ryder.

He nodded, opened the door and stepped outside.

She listened to his uneven footfalls cross the porch and thump down the steps then shook her head and carried the dishes to the sink cupboard. Mr. Ryder was a handsome man with impeccable manners and a very charming smile. He was, also, a man with a secret. She had no idea what he was

hiding or why, but she was certain he had not been completely honest. How she hated deceit! The social circle in Buffalo was rife with it.

She turned to the work table, unloaded the basket and began the pudding she had planned for the hotel guests' dessert tomorrow. She should never have mentioned the deteriorating condition of the stables. The sooner Mr. Ryder left the better.