

Pinewood Village, 1840

"Here we are. This is the schoolhouse." Matthew Calvert looked from the small, white, frame building to his deceased brother's children. Joshua had on his "brave" face, which meant he was really afraid, and Sally looked about to cry. *Please, Lord, don't let her cry. You know my heart turns to mush when she tears up.* "Everything is going to be fine. You'll make nice friends and have a good time learning."

He placed his hands on the children's backs and urged them up the steps to the small porch before they could resume their pleading to stay at home with him this first day in the new town. Their small bodies tensed, moved with reluctance.

He leaned forward and glanced in the open door. A slender woman was writing on a large slate at the far end of the room. The sunlight coming in a side window played upon the thick roll of chestnut-colored hair that coiled from one small ear across the nape of her neck to the other, and warmed the pale skin of a narrow wrist that was exposed by the movement of her sleeve cuff as she printed out a list of words. She looked neat and efficient. *Please God, let her also be kind-hearted.* He nudged his niece and nephew forward and stepped inside. "Excuse me."

The teacher turned. Her gaze met his over the top of the double rows of bench desks and his heart jolted. He stared into blue-green eyes rimmed with long, black lashes, rendered speechless by an attraction so immediate, so strong, every sensible thought in his head disappeared.

The teacher's gaze dropped to the children then rose back to meet his. "Good morning, Reverend Calvert. Welcome to Pinewood."

The formal tone of the teacher's voice brought him to his senses. He broke off his stare and cleared his throat. "Thank you. I—" He focused his attention, gave her a questioning look. "How did you know who I am?"

Her mouth curved into a smile that made his pulse trip all over itself. She placed the book she held on her desk. "You are

from the city, Reverend Calvert. You will soon learn in a village as small as Pinewood one knows all the residents and everything that happens." She brushed her fingertips together and minuscule bits of chalk dust danced in the stream of sunlight. "I dare say I knew within ten minutes of the time you descended from your carriage and carried your bags into the parsonage that you had arrived." She gave him a wry look. "But, I confess, I did not know you were coming here this morning."

"I see." He lifted the left side of his mouth in the crooked grin his mother had called his mischief escape. "So I have managed a 'coup' of sorts by bringing the children to school?"

She stared at him a moment, then looked away. "So it would seem. Have these children names?"

Her reversion to the formal, polite tone called him back to his purpose in coming. "Yes, of course. This is Joshua—he's six years old." He smiled down at his nephew. "And this is Sally." His niece pressed back against his legs. He placed his hands on her small, narrow shoulders and gave a reassuring squeeze. "She's five years old, and feeling a little overwhelmed at the moment."

The hem of the teacher's gown whispered over the wide plank floor as she came to stand in front of them. She looked down and gave the children a warm, welcoming smile he wished were aimed at him. "Hello, Joshua and Sally. I'm your teacher, Miss Wright. Welcome to Oak Street School."

*Miss Wright. She was indeed.* Matthew frowned at his burst of whimsy. Miss Wright, with her narrow, aristocratic nose and small, square chin, was wreaking havoc with his normally sensible behavior. He was acting like a smitten schoolboy.

Children's voices floated in the door. Their light, quick footfalls sounded on the steps. The voices quieted as five children entered and bunched at the doorway to stare at them.

"Come in and take your seats, children. We have a lovely surprise this morning. You are going to have some new classmates." The teacher gave a graceful little gesture and the

clustered children separated, cast surreptitious glances their way as they moved toward the bench desks.

Matthew drew in a breath, hid the pang of sympathy he felt for Joshua and Sally. "I'd best be going, Miss Wright." She looked up at him and that same odd jolt in his heart happened. He hurried on. "The children have slates and chalk. And, also, some bread and butter for dinner. I wasn't sure—"

She smiled. "That is fine."

His pulse thudded. He jerked his gaze from Miss Wright's captivating eyes and looked down at Joshua and Sally. "Be good, now—do as Miss Wright says. Joshua, you take Sally's hand and help her across the street when you come home. I'll be waiting for you." He tore his gaze from Sally's small, trembling mouth and, circling around three more children filing into the schoolroom, escaped out the open door. The children needed to adjust to their new situation. And so did he. What had happened to him in there?

"Miss Wright!"

Willa halted as Danny Brody skidded to a stop in front of her. "Miss Hall wants you." He pointed behind her, then raced off.

Willa turned, saw Ellen promenading toward her, and fought to hold back a frown. She loved her lifelong friend, but sometimes the pretentious ways she had developed irritated. Still, one couldn't blame Ellen for parading about. She was the prettiest girl in town now that Callie Conner had moved away—and one of the biggest gossips. If this was about Thomas—

"Gracious, Willa, why were you walking at such an unseemly pace? If Danny weren't handy I never would have caught you."

"I have to fix supper, then help mother with the ironing." She shifted the paper-wrapped package of meat she held to her other hand for emphasis. "Was there something you wanted, Ellen?"

Excitement glinted in her friend's big, blue eyes. "I wanted to tell you the latest news. Father told me that the new

pastor is a *young* man. And nice looking."

"He is." Willa gave an inward sigh and relaxed. She should have guessed Ellen had stopped her to talk about Reverend Calvert. The new church and pastor were all anyone in the village talked about these days. *Thank goodness*. She disliked discussing anything pertaining to God, but at least the church topic had replaced the gossip about her abruptly cancelled wedding.

"You've seen him?" Ellen leaned close, gripped her arm. "What does he look like? I didn't dare ask father for details."

She thought back to that morning. "Well, Reverend Calvert is quite tall...with blond hair and brown eyes." She cast back for her impression of the pastor and tempered her words so Ellen would not guess she had felt a momentary attraction to the man. *That* would elicit a hundred questions from her friend. "He has a strong appearance, with a square jaw. But his smile is charming." *And his lopsided grin disarming*. She ignored the image of that grin that snapped into her head and forged on. "As is his son's. His daughter's smile is more shy in nature."

Ellen jerked back. "He has *children*?"

"Yes. Joshua and Sally. He brought them to school this morning." She tilted her head to one side and grinned up at her friend. "How did that important detail escape you?"

"I've been helping Mother with my new gown all day." Ellen's lovely face darkened. "Father didn't mention that the reverend was *married*."

"Oh." Willa gaped at her perturbed friend. "*Ellen Hall!* Surely you weren't thinking of— Why, you haven't even seen the man!"

"Well, gracious, a girl can hope, Willa. When I heard the pastor was young and handsome I thought, perhaps at last, there was a man of distinction I could marry in this *place*. I should have known it was hopeless." Ellen sighed with a little shrug. "I must go home. Mother is waiting to hem my new dress for Sunday. I'll have to tell her there's no hurry now. I certainly don't care to impress a bunch of *loggers*. Bye, Willa."

"Bye, Ellen." Willa shook her head and cut across Main Street away from the block of huddled stores before anyone else could stop her to chat. Imagine Ellen being so eager to marry a "man of distinction" she would make plans toward that end before she even saw Pastor Calvert.

She frowned, hurried across the Stony Creek bridge and turned onto the beaten path along Brook Street. Perhaps she should have told Ellen the truth about Thomas and why their wedding had been cancelled. Perhaps she should have cautioned her about trusting a man. Any man. Not that it mattered. Her friend was in no danger from the attractive Reverend Calvert, and neither was she. The man was married. And that was perfect as far as she was concerned. She'd had enough of handsome men with charming smiles.