

Chapter One

June 1841

Pinewood Village, New York

Pinewood. Sadie crowded back into the corner and tugged her bonnet forward as her hired carriage rolled through the village. The news of her return would spread like a brush fire if she was recognized. *Sadie Spencer is back. Sadie Spencer is home.*

Her stomach quivered. In two weeks it would be four years since the incident. Memories surged. She closed her mind to the bad ones—or tried to. Perhaps returning to Pinewood would exorcize them—and the fear. How she wished she could live without that fear! *Please, Almighty God, grant that it might be so.* She took a breath to calm her stomach and pulled the small purse dangling from her wrist into her trembling hands.

The driver's polite touch of his hat brim sent her pushing into the corner where she would not be seen by two women standing at the edge of the road waiting to cross. A wagon passed by loaded with baled shingles and traveling in the other direction. She released her pent breath and lifted her head.

The horse's hoofs clattered against planks and the carriage lurched as the wheels climbed onto the wood. Stony Creek bridge. A smile trembled onto her lips. How many hours had she, Callie, Willa and Ellen spent in the cool shadow beneath its span trying to best Daniel at skipping stones on the water?

The carriage rocked off the bridge, swaying left onto Brook Street. A Snap of the reins urged the horse to greater speed, and her smile died. It wouldn't be long now.

Her chest tightened with longing to be back behind the brick walls of the young ladies' seminary in Rochester. She'd not been outside those walls since she'd fled there four years before, and if not for her grandparents' need she would be in that safe haven still. She would never have willingly returned to Pinewood. *Never.*

The carriage tilted, slowed as the horse started up the incline outside of the village. She slipped back to the center of the seat and caught her breath at the sight of the forested hills on either side of the dirt road. Only one more turn to make when they reached the top of the hill.

She dug her fingernails into her palms, struggled against a surge of dread. When she'd received Callie's letter, she'd told herself it would be all right, that she would care for Nanna and Poppa in the safety of the Sheffield House, but that was not to be. Her grandparents had left Sophia's hotel and returned home to Butternut Hill.

She had to go back there.

Oh, Lord, give me strength.

"Your grandfolks are in the garden. I'll take these up to your room." The housekeeper picked up her bags and looked at her. "It's good you're home, Miss Sadie."

The underlying sadness in Gertrude's voice constricted her throat, making speech impossible. She nodded, removed her bonnet and walked down the entrance hall and into the dining room. The window framed her grandparents seated on the wooden garden bench, the stockade fence and wooded path beyond. Love swelled her heart, blocking out the fear. She pushed open the door, ran across the porch and rushed down the steps. "Nanna! Poppa!" Their gray heads turned her direction. They stared. Her feet took wings.

"*Sadie!*"

She leaned down and hugged her grandmother, reveling in the feel of the soft arms holding her close, the small pudgy hands patting her, offering comfort as she sobbed out the long years of loneliness against the shoulder that had so often been washed by her tears as a child.

"Oh, Sadie... Sadie... Sadie..." Her grandmother patted her back, her shoulder, touched her cheek, smoothed her hair. "Hush, sweeting, hush. It's all right. Everything is all right."

Tears and laughter bubbled into her throat at the old-fashioned, familiar endearment. It *was* all right. Her grandmother knew her. After reading Callie's and Willa's letters she'd been so afraid... She straightened and wiped the tears from her face. "Oh, Nanna, I have missed you so."

She kissed her grandmother's soft, moist cheek and turned toward the silent man staring at her from the bench. "And you, Poppa." She kissed his cheek at the edge of his gray beard, felt his arm slip around her in a hard hug. One arm.

"Wel...come...home, Sa...die."

The words were hesitant, slightly slurred. Tears clogged her throat again. She sank to her knees in front of her grandfather and took hold of his hands. His left hand gripped back, the right moved slightly, stilled. Her chest tightened. "I made arrangements to come home as soon as I heard of your illness, Poppa." Remorse flowed on a torrent of tears. She laid her cheek against their clasped hands. "I'm so sorry I was not with you when you needed me."

"Daniel should have brought you home."

Daniel? She jerked up her head.

Her grandmother huffed and patted her shoulder. "What's more, he shouldn't have taken you off prowling through the woods in the first place. I worry when you go off with your friends, Sadie."

Her heart twisted at the absent look in her grandmother's eyes. Her grandfather's hand squeezed hers. She glanced at him, read the message of protective concern in his eyes and gave a slight nod. "I'm sorry, Nanna." She rose and brushed the dust from her skirt to gain a moment to control the sorrow flooding her heart. Callie and Willa were right—her grandmother was ill in her mind. "I won't go off again."

Boots thudded on the hard-beaten path behind her—the path that trailed through the woods to her grandfather's sawmill. Her heart stopped, her lungs seized at the

remembered sound. She whirled, stared at the tall, broad-shouldered man dressed in logger garb that stepped from the shadows under the trees and strode toward her, just like before. The early evening light receded; the earth swayed.

The man rushed forward, reached for her.

“Put her there on the settee! I’ll fetch water.”

Cole frowned and watched Rachel Townsend hurrying toward the kitchen. Would she return, or forget what she was doing? He looked down at the slender, young woman draped across his arms, and his breath shortened. He’d no doubt things would change now that she’d returned. And not for the better. Not for him.

He leaned down, laid Sadie Spencer on the settee, lifted her limp arm and placed it across her body.

A small, breathy moan escaped her. Her eyelids fluttered then stilled, the long lashes forming dark smudges against her pale skin. He glanced at the small, pearl buttons fastening the high collar of her brown dress and his fingers twitched to undo them to make it easier for her to breathe, but, given the past, that action could be misconstrued. He stood frozen staring at the fine-boned, patrician features of the woman his brother had attacked. She looked so...fragile. And the terror in her eyes when she’d turned and seen him...

The brutal savagery of Payne’s deed struck him anew. He sucked in air, clenched his hands at his sides. He’d spent the last four years working to live down the shame of Payne’s act, to prove that he, himself, was decent and honorable, and the people of Pinewood were finally beginning to trust and befriend him. And now Sadie Spencer had come home.

He gazed down at Manning Townsend’s granddaughter lying so still and pale against the blue silk of the settee. Odd that such a beautiful, young woman would be dangerous for him, but Sadie Spencer could undo all of his hard work simply by her return. Her presence in Pinewood was bound to stir people’s memories, to bring back the anger and distrust that had faced him when he’d come to Pinewood to find Payne and tell him of their parents’ deaths.

He stiffened, breathed hard against the pressure in his chest and rubbed the tense muscles in the back of his neck. He hadn’t suspected the violence and depravity that ran in his brother’s veins until that day—had been sickened when he’d learned what Payne had done. Now, his brother’s actions seemed more real. And if seeing Sadie Spencer made *him* feel that way...

He huffed out a breath and pushed away the memory of the terror in her eyes when she saw him. Sorry as he was for her, he couldn’t let her destroy all the goodwill he had so painstakingly cultivated and ruin the new life and business he’d built here. He’d have to convince her—

“What are you doing? Get away from my granddaughter!”

He jerked his head around. Rachel Townsend stood in the doorway, a scowl in the place of her normal pleasant expression, her hands gripping a wet cloth.

"I said get away from my granddaughter!" She rushed toward him, her lips pressed into a tight line, her small, free hand waving through the air.

Was her anger because of the confusion that was occurring more often? Or was her reaction to his being there beside her granddaughter nothing to do with her slipping grasp on the present? Was the condemnation toward him for Payne's heinous act already returning?

He clenched his jaw, stepped away from the settee and headed outside to get Manning.

The trembling woke her. Bile pushed at her throat. She'd had the nightmare again. Sadie drew in a slow, deep breath to control the nausea and opened her eyes.

"Feeling better, sweeting?" Her grandmother frowned down at her. "What happened, Sadie? Why did you swoon like that? Are you ill?"

She blinked, took another breath. Her head cleared. She was home. "No, Nanna, I'm not ill. It must have been the...excitement of coming home." Something cold slid across her temple. She lifted her hand, removed the wet cloth and pushed to a sitting position, still quivering. The nightmare had never before come while she was awake. It must have been returning to Butternut Hill that—

Boot heels thudding against the wood floor jolted her upright. She turned toward the doorway, stared at her nightmare in the flesh.

"It's...all right, Sa...die."

She glanced at her grandfather being carried in the man's arms, looked back up at that bearded face, shuddered.

"I'm Cole Aylward, not...my brother." He strode across the room toward them.

Payne Aylward's brother? She backed up, bumped against the settee and grasped the high, curved arm.

"Give me the cloth, Sadie. You're getting everything wet."

She looked down at the dripping cloth, eased her clutch on it and handed it to her grandmother—bit down on her lower lip to keep from calling her back as she started from the room.

"Thank...you."

She darted her gaze back to the man lowering her grandfather into his favored chair, brushed a wet tendril of hair back off her forehead and tried to make some sort of sense of everything. "May I ask what you are doing here, Mr. Aylward?" *I should think this home the last place you would want to be.* She pressed her lips together to keep from turning the thought into speech.

"Manning's not yet able to get around by himself. I drop by throughout the day to see if he needs anything."

She stared at his broad shoulders, his powerful arms and hands. "You come every day?" Her voice quavered and she took a breath to steady it, squared her shoulders at his answering nod.

"Then I'm certain you'll be pleased that will no longer be necessary. As I'm here to care for my grandfather now, there'll be no need for us to impinge on your...kindness further."

Her courage failed when he straightened and turned to face her. She hid her shaking hands in the folds of her long skirt and stiffened her spine.

"And are you going to carry Manning in to his bed when it's time for him to retire? And carry him to the table in the morning when he rises? Or out to the garden so he can enjoy the sun and fresh air?"

His tone was conversational, but there was an underlying steeliness in Cole Aylward's voice that caught at her throat and stole her breath. She stared at him, stunned by the questions he so calmly presented—questions that emphasized how ill-prepared she was for the changed situation in her home. She clenched her hidden hands and lifted her chin. "I shall hire someone."

"No! Want...Cole..."

"Thank you, Manning." Cole Aylward rested his large hand on her grandfather's shoulder, then fixed his gaze on her. "I appreciate your thoughtfulness of my time, Miss Spencer, but there's no need for you to go to that trouble or expense. Neighbors look out for one another, and—"

"Neighbors?"

"Yes." A frown creased his forehead. "I thought your grandmother or...someone...would have written to tell you I took over Pay— my brother's cabin and have built a shingle mill on the property."

He lived in Payton's cabin? So near... A chill skittered down her spine. Her pulse fluttered. She slipped her hand up to cover the base of her throat.

"Are you all right?" He started toward her

She jerked back and he froze.

Her grandmother bustled into the room her long skirts swishing back and forth with the sway of her ample hips, and beamed a smile at them. "Gertrude is ready to serve supper. Please bring Manning to the table, Cole." Her smile widened, deepening the wrinkles in her aged face. "You'll be joining us, of course. I had Gertrude set a place for you. We're having roasted beef and potatoes."

No! Don't invite him! She stared at her grandmother in stunned silence. Had she forgotten what had happened? Her stomach roiled. She pressed her hand against it, drew air into her lungs to protest.

"Not tonight, Mrs. Townsend. Thank you kindly for the invitation, but I don't wish to intrude upon your granddaughter's homecoming. Next time, perhaps."

Next time? So he was going to ignore her wishes.

"I'll just carry Manning in, and then come back a bit later to take him in to his

bed.”

At least he was leaving for now. Good. She would have time to convince her grandfather it would be better to hire someone to help him. Her pulse steadied.

“Nonsense! I’ll not hear of it.” Her grandmother gave a small, dismissive wave with her pudgy hand. “You’re so kind to Father, the least we can do is offer our hospitality in return.”

Oh, Nanna, don’t— Father? Tears stung her eyes. She bowed her head and stared down at the leaf pattern woven into the blue silk of the settee as her grandmother chatted on about their daughter and her husband also joining them for supper. The tears overflowed. She drew a slow breath and exhaled softly. Her mother and father had died when she was three years old, and her mother was her grandparents’ only child.

“Are you coming, Sadie?”

She lifted her head and curved her lips in the best smile she could summon. “Yes, Nanna, I’m coming. It’s been a long time since I’ve had any of Gertrude’s roast beef.” She released her grip on the settee and started for the dining room trying to ignore the despair that gripped her at her grandmother’s illness, and to smother the unease that filled her at the thought of Cole Alyward sitting at their table sharing their meal.