

Chapter One

*December, 1841
Pinewood Village, New York*

“Daniel Braynard, what brings you to town in this snowstorm?”

Daniel looped the reins over the hitching post, squinted up through the thick fall of snow and smiled. “Your husband’s skills, Mrs. Dibble.” He stepped forward and offered his hand to the older woman descending the steps from the wood walkway that ran in front of the block of stores. “He’s doing some repair work on one of the stoves from camp. How have you been keeping?”

“I’m well. And busy helping Willa with Christmas preparations. Though I tend to hold the baby more than work. She’s such a sweet little mite.”

“She’s little, all right. Not much bigger than my hand.” He gave the proud grandmother a sheepish grin. “Truth is...she’s sort of scary to hold.”

“She won’t break, Daniel.”

“That’s what Willa said when she handed her to me.” His grin widened. “Trouble was, my big, clumsy hands didn’t believe it.”

Helen Dibble laughed, gripped the hood of her green wool cape against a sudden gust of wind and stepped toward the road. “That tiny baby takes a lot of time and care, and with all Willa has taken upon herself as the pastor’s wife—Christmas decorations for the church and all—I’m afraid it will be too much for her strength. And Matthew is too busy making calls on his sick parishioners to give her a hand. The gripe is bad this year.” She pinned him with a glance. “Mayhap Willa could put your strong back and those big, clumsy hands of yours to good use.”

That was not a suggestion. He grinned at the woman who had been like a second mother to him all his life, grabbed the empty burlap bag off the seat of the pung and tossed it over his shoulder. “I’ll be glad to help any way I can. I’ve no time to go there today, but I’ll stop by the parsonage next time I’m in town. Mind that slick spot.” The brown paper package in her hand crackled as he took her elbow and guided her around the patch of ice in the frozen rut. He helped her across Main Street, then hurried back toward Cargrave’s Mercantile.

The young boy shoveling the snow from in front of the stores stepped aside to let him pass.

“Looks like you’re fighting a losing battle there, Jasper.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Braynard.” The boy blinked flakes from his eyelashes and gave him a gap-toothed grin. “It’s fallin’ faster than I can scoop it for sure. I get down to the end of the walkway, turn around and come back and start all over again.”

“Well, all that shoveling will make you good and strong.” He thumped the youngster’s shoulder, then slanted a look up at the large flakes streaming from the sky and frowned. If it started blowing and drifting, it would be hard going on the way back to camp.

He hurried to Cargrave’s Mercantile, stomped his boots in the store’s recessed entrance and shoved open the door. The bell overhead jangled a welcome. The elderly men hunched over a checkerboard in front of the woodstove at the back of the store looked his way.

“Hey, Daniel. Game’s almost over. You got time to play the winner?”

“You know you and Mr. Grant are too good for me, Mr. Fabrizio. I’d only lose.” He grinned at the men, yanked off the burlap bag he’d slung over his shoulder and tossed it onto the counter. The heat from the stove stung his cold hands and made his cheeks prickle.

“Must be some dire needs at camp to bring you to town in this weather.” Allan Cargrave pulled the bag toward him.”

“*Dire* is right. One of the woodstoves needed repaired—” he pulled a list from his pocket and handed the paper to the proprietor “—the molasses is running low, the men’s chew is about gone and I’ll find the cook hanging by his toes from the ceiling if I don’t get back with some coffee before suppertime—among other things.”

He joined in the general chuckle, grabbed two shovels and an ax from the tools leaning against the back wall and carried them over to the long counter.

Allan Cargrave shoved four five-pound sacks of Old Java coffee beans into the bag and reached for the boxes of cut plug tobacco. “Looks like this cold snap has been hard on your tools.”

“It’s not the weather. We need more tools for the hicks.”

“Townsend’s lumber camps are still hiring?”

He nodded at Emil Grant and rubbed his cold hands together. “We’re having a hard time downing enough timber to hold against the spring rafting *and* keep the sawmill satisfied since Manning bought that clapboard machine and Cole—”

The bell jangled. He blew on his hands, glanced toward the door and eyed the woman who entered. The fur that traced the brim of her snow-covered blue wool bonnet hid her face. More fur formed a collar and edged the elbow-length shoulder cape of the blue wool cloak that fell to within a few inches of the hem of her dress. A fur muff enfolded her hands. *Fancy*. The hunter in him took a closer look at the fur. *Rabbit*.

He turned his attention to the basket of leather gloves on the counter. His had split into useless pieces yesterday. He pulled out a couple pair that looked as if they might fit, tried one pair on and flexed his fingers, then stole another look at the woman. Must be one of the guests at the Sheffield House. No Pinewood woman wore anything as fancy as that gear. Not even Callie, though she surely could now that she’d married Ezra Ryder in spite of all his money. His lips slanted into a grin. Callie had sure led Ezra a merry chase, refusing—

“Good morning, madam. How may I help you?”

Allan Cargrave’s voice drew him back to his task. He grabbed the top keg of molasses from the stack on the floor at the end of the counter.

“Good morning, Mr. Cargrave. I’ve come to see if there’s any mail for Mother. And I’m not a madam—yet.”

Ellen. The unexpected sound of her soft voice froze him with the keg hoisted halfway to his shoulder.

“My apologies, Miss Ellen. I didn’t recognize you.”

“Nor did I.” He settled the keg in place and turned. “Hey, Musquash. When did you come back to town?”

“Daniel!”

Ellen Hall spun to face him, her blue eyes brilliant with azure sparks. His gut clenched. The memory of her beauty always dimmed between her rare visits home to Pinewood. He held his place as she walked toward him, the fabric of her long skirts swishing, small bits of the clinging snow falling off her swaying cloak to dot the plank floor.

“I’ve *told* you not to call me that, Daniel.” Her eyes flashed; high spots of color crept into her cheeks. “We’re no longer children, lest you’ve forgotten.”

As if that were possible. He adjusted the position of the keg and looked away from her. “I remember. Though why you’d prefer to be called Muskrat makes no sense to me.”

“Don’t be boorish!” She sniffed and slanted a look up at him from beneath the fur-trimmed brim of her bonnet. “Would it destroy you to call me Ellen?”

Likely so, the way his heart jolted at that look—phony as it was. Well, what of it? He was a man now, not a twelve-year-old boy with a first crush. He covered his agitation with a grin. “Is that what you have all your rich beaux in Buffalo call you?”

“Of course not!”

He reached down to the counter and grasped the neck of the filled burlap bag. “I must say, all those society doings in the big city agree with you.” He lifted his gaze back to her face and strengthened the teasing note in his voice. “You’re looking well...lots of color in your cheeks and all.”

The spots of red spread across her cheekbones. The delicate nostrils on her narrow nose flared. “I don’t know why I bother to talk to you, Daniel Braynard!” She tossed her head and turned toward the wall of glass mailboxes.

“For old time’s sake, I guess.” He kept his tone light, pasted a grin on his face. “It’s for sure not because I compare favorable with your rich new society beaux.”

“True indeed. My society friends have *manners*.” She gave a huff, glanced over her shoulder at him. “They would never think of calling me by such names.”

He chuckled, shoved the end of the burlap bag into his hand balancing the keg, then gathered the handles of the tools into his free hand. He’d had enough of this conversation. The words stung like salt rubbed into an old wound.

She whirled and glared up at him. “And they would *not* laugh at me. They are gentlemen. And they are devoted to me.”

The leather of the new gloves strained across his tightened knuckles. He relaxed his grip on the bag and the tools and lifted his lips into another slow grin. “Now, Musquash, don’t go all niminy-piminy on me. We go back too far for that. As for manners...” He leaned over and put his mouth close to the blue wool covering her ear so she alone would hear him. “I’ve never told anyone *why* I call you Musquash. How devoted would your fine gentlemen friends be if they’d seen you looking like a drowned muskrat?”

A sound, somewhere between a gasp and a growl, escaped her. He jerked his head up and barely missed getting his jaw clipped by the top of her head as she spun about and stormed to the waist-high shelf in the mailbox wall.

“Mother’s mail please, Mr. Hubble.”

“There’s nothing today, Miss Ellen. That new *Godey’s Lady’s Magazine* your mama’s waiting on didn’t come in yet.”

“Very well. I’ll come back tomorrow. Good day.” She gave a stiff little nod in the direction of the counter, turned and swept to the door. The bells jangled, then fell silent.

“Miss Ellen, so beautiful she is. Ahh, to be young again...” Ilari Fabrizio’s deep, heavily accented voice sighed through the store.

There was a loud snort. A checker brushed across the wood game board. “Forget the dreaming and take your turn, Romeo.”

Good advice, Mr. Grant. There’s no one in this town good enough for Ellen. Not anymore. Daniel ducked his head and stole a look through the window. Ellen’s fur-adorned blue cloak and bonnet blurred and disappeared into the rapidly falling snow. Another image to join the others he’d stored up through the years. A fitting one—Ellen walking away. He took a firmer grip on the tools and headed for the door.

Allan Cargrave came from behind the counter and reached to open the door. “You two scrap with each other the same as when you were growing up, Daniel. I guess some things don’t change.”

“I guess.” He braced the keg on his shoulder and stepped outside. “Put the gloves on my account.”

He ducked his head against a rising wind and headed for the pung. The new snow was already higher than his ankles. He frowned, stashed his burden in the back of the long box, freed the reins and turned the horse to face the road. Allan Cargrave was wrong. Everything changed with time. Ellen certainly had. And so had their old friendship and the childhood crush he’d once had for her. He didn’t even *like* the woman she’d become.