

PROLOGUE

Everyone yearned for spring to blossom early that year but Virginians rooted deep in the mountains knew that winter would never succumb without a fight and feared a powerful assault. It came. An onslaught of storms battered the area with blizzards heaving drifts four to six feet high. The deep snow left the roads impassible, and a weary man cursed the force of that assault as the wind clawed at him and his tiny, fragile bundle. The horse under him plodded endlessly while he kept his head lowered and tugged at his collar. Nevertheless the cold wet flakes were persistent.

The night was pitch-black, as black as the dark thoughts which filled the man's heart and mind. The day's last hours unfolded in his head like the rehearsals of a macabre play. Even now it seemed to him a performance, a drama one watched and pitied and then went home.

Swirling winds ripped through the night, stealing the man's hat and carrying it into the darkness. The man muttered a virulent oath when the cold penetrated his graying hair. The gusts came in waves in the same cruel manner the pains, just hours before, had savaged his daughter's unyielding body while she tried to deliver her bastard child. A widower and deprived of the aid of a doctor or midwife, the distraught man had tried his best but it hadn't been enough to save his daughter's life. Even now his daughter's screams rifled his brain.

The product of a brutal rape, the newborn was sorrow and pain incarnate. The man had kept the pregnancy hidden in order to spare his daughter further humiliation but now she was gone forever, and the child he'd pulled from her body was huddled against him. He had expected the baby to be born dead but when it uttered a cry, a strange resentment suffused him and he suddenly hated this intruder who'd stolen his daughter from him, the only remaining part of his beloved wife. In a moment of crazed madness, he'd imagined smothering the tiny creature but instead he had left the babe in the messy bedclothes and gone to saddle his horse. He had no family left, few friends and no hope and he didn't want to remain in that place with its painful reminders. Returning to the small white house, he had splashed lamp oil over everything and rolled a burning log from the fireplace into the center of the room. The fire had spread quickly as he hauled the tiny, bloody burden to his shoulder and ran out the door. The horse shied when the inferno suddenly engulfed the structure but calmed when they turned and slowly walked away. With his shoulders hunched against the howling winds the man had taken up his burden and ridden into the darkness.

The distraught man wanted the child gone from him but wondered if he possessed the cruelty to carry out the deed. Mile after mile he journeyed, fraught with indecision. The babe lay silently in his giant grasp as if somehow knowing its fate hung in the balance.

A faint speck of light appeared in the distance and the man turned his horse to veer away from the light; he had no need of the others now, he had to finish what he started—or did he? He pulled the horse to a halt. Opening his bundle he somehow hoped the child had died for want of mothering. A flailing arm nudged his palm, and he realized the determined creature still lived. His conscience nagged at him. Despite his hatred he conceded that the child had not asked to be conceived and forced into the

world. The man wheeled his horse around and headed toward the light. He spurred the animal, driving it onward through the whipping wind before he changed his mind. When he reached the house, he placed the wrapped child on the doorstep and galloped away, never once looking back.

Deprived of the man's warmth, the babe uttered a piteous wail and, in time, awoke the matrons of the house.

"Lord, have mercy; Hazel wake up and see what's making that racket."

Hazel belted her wrap and shuffled to the door. "It's a baby!" she uttered as she squatted next to the bundle. She unfolded the blanket. "Flora, she's a newborn; the whole cord's still attached."

"Best put her by the fire because she's probably cold as ice."

"Who is she?" asked Hazel. She removed the bloody swaddling blanket and wrapped the baby in a towel she grabbed from the table. "Where did she come from?" She clipped the cord and bound it. "What'll we call her?"

Flora grunted while she blew at the cup of milk she'd poured from a pot near the fire. "Will you stop your jabbering? It's obvious she's a nobody; that's why she was left here. It doesn't much matter what we call her. Call her Grayson."

Hazel put her hands on her hips. "You can't put that name on a child."

"Why not? She probably won't last more than a few days at best." Flora sipped her milk.

"Then she'll need a decent name to put on her headstone."

Flora threw up her hands. "What for? If she came from decent folks she wouldn't have ended up on our doorstep. Mark my words, she's the doing of sinners." She opened wide one of the baby's eyes with her thumb and forefinger. "Look at her eyes—they're black like sin."

The baby wailed at the intrusion, and Hazel snatched the child away. "Flora, you keep your superstitious ways to yourself. This is an innocent child and whether she lives or dies is up to the Almighty, not you or me. Now get her something to eat while I clean her."

Flora dragged her feet into the next room, muttering to herself.

Hazel picked up the wailing child. "Have to admit, child, with those eyes the name Grayson does seem to fit you." She sighed as she hurried with her chore.

Sometime later—loosely wrapped and poorly fed—the baby girl fell asleep. An entry of her arrival was scrawled as no more than a footnote in the December page of their record book; a smudged scrap of newspaper noting "Old Kinderhook's" lost fight marked the page. Ignored as a scrap of life and left in a crate by the side of the hearth Grayson Ridge strove to live, named after the orphanage on whose doorstep she was found.