

The Quaker and the Rebel

by
Mary Ellis

CHAPTER ONE

Bennington Island, in the Ohio River, Summer 1861

"Miss Harrison?" the soft voice queried. "Please come in and take a seat."

Emily, startled from her open-mouth perusal of the painted ceiling, stared in the direction of the voice. She thought she'd been shown to an empty room to wait, but a wren-sized woman sat near the windows in a wicker chair with wheels. She hurried to the woman's side, bobbed her head and then bent her knee in a small curtsy. "Mrs. Bennington," she said. Never in her life had Emily done such a thing. She'd only seen a curtsy in theater presentations, but the astounding elegance of the house seemed to warrant one.

"Oh, my, what lovely manners you have," the woman said, patting a chair beside her.

"Thank you, ma'am," she said, perching on the edge. Emily judged her to be around thirty-five, younger than her mother had been, with an unlined forehead, green eyes and dusky blond hair. Delicate, that's what Mama would have called her.

"Your letters of reference from Mrs. Ames and Miss Turner glowed with praise of your accomplishments. We're glad you've come to our backwater island to polish the rough edges off our girls. They both attended grammar school in Parkersburg for six months of the year and we've had tutors here, but now they require refinement. They still run wild through the garden like savages. Annie, especially, needs to learn deportment." She inhaled a deep breath and sighed. "I am aware of your loss, Miss Harrison. And in time I hope you will come to regard us as your family."

Annoyed by the statement, Emily drew back from the lavender-scented aristocrat. "I'm afraid the situation will be temporary, Mrs. Bennington, since I'm engaged to be married. When my fiancé returns from Washington, I shall return to Marietta."

Her voice sounded haughty, but she couldn't help herself. From the moment the flatboat rounded the turn and she viewed Bennington Plantation, she'd been on unfamiliar ground. A carriage had been waiting at the dock to drive her to the mansion. Then an elderly black gentleman in finer clothes than any owned by her father opened the door, bowed, and ushered her into a foyer larger than her entire house. Pink and cream marble lay beneath her feet while the crystal chandelier overhead cast harlequin patterns on the polished steps to the second floor. The butler had to wrestle her portmanteau away as she stood gaping at her surroundings. The butler spoke perfectly-

inflected Queen's English without a trace of the slang she'd expected from a slave. *He was a slave, wasn't he?* She'd followed him to this salon, and here she was—behaving rudely to her new employer without other options for her future.

"Of course, Miss Harrison. We're happy to have you for as long as possible. I only meant I hope you'll relax and find comfort with us." Mrs. Bennington's smile filled her face and didn't fade when she addressed a servant carrying in tea. "Thank you, Lily. This is Miss Harrison. She will be our new governess."

The reed-slim black woman bobbed her head and murmured, "Pleased to meet you, Miss." Lily retreated before Emily could reply, so she addressed Mrs. Bennington instead.

"That is another matter, Mrs. Bennington. My family does not condone slavery. Although I respect your authority here, I won't be waited on by anyone. I shall do my own laundry and prepare my own meals." Her defiant tone clashed with the rarefied atmosphere in the room. "My family is Quaker." Emily lifted her chin.

If her well-bred employer was shocked by the outburst, her face revealed nothing. "Of course, as you wish. We're willing to accommodate you in any way." Her voice sounded like a trilling flute, musical and soothing. "Let's discuss your curriculum. I thought perhaps literature, poetry, penmanship and French in the morning. My favorites are Lord Byron, Tennyson, and Emily Dickinson. Mathematics and whatever science lessons you think necessary for young ladies after luncheon. The girls rest in the late afternoon and their dinner is served in the kitchen at six. You may eat with them or you're welcome to join us at seven in the dining room." Then with a dismissive air, Mrs. Bennington settled back against the chair.

"The curriculum sounds fine—well within my knowledge and abilities." Feeling foolish, Emily searched her mind for something reconciliatory to say. Drawing a blank, she retreated sheep-like from the room.

"Oh, Miss Harrison, we have something in common."

Emily halted in the doorway and turned.

"I also come from Quaker stock, from Massachusetts originally. Since my marriage, I worship in my husband's Presbyterian church when in town, but my sister in Front Royal still is Quaker. That is how she raised her son, Alexander, although she hasn't had much luck converting my brother-in-law. Alexander takes the Quaker precepts very seriously and for that reason, hasn't joined the Confederate Army." She studied Emily as though waiting for a reaction.

Emily shuffled her feet, unsure of the expected response. "Yes, ma'am."

"You would like Alexander, I think. He's about your age, quiet and studious. He always has his nose in a book and loves classical literature that leaves me weary. You'll meet him tonight if you chose to dine with us. He's visiting for a few days." Augusta Bennington smiled warmly.

Sounds like a crushing bore, Emily thought. "It would be my pleasure," she replied, hot and uncomfortable in her traveling dress. She was eager for the interview to conclude.

"I'm sure you're tired," she murmured. "Joshua will show you to your room. You'll meet the girls tomorrow after breakfast. Good afternoon."

Emily cleared her throat and stopped fussing with the ribbons on her dress. "I will do my best with your daughters, Mrs. Bennington. I apologize if I offended you earlier.

I'm very glad to have this job." She bobbed her head and fled, almost knocking the butler over as she rounded a corner in the hall.

He looked down his aquiline nose as though gauging potential madness. Apparently satisfied she posed no immediate threat, he said, "If you follow me, Miss. I'll take you to your room as *quickly* as possible."

Emily's face burned with embarrassment until she closed the bedroom door. Her battered trunk and reticule had been left at the foot of the bed. She was blissfully alone. Pulling off her scratchy bonnet and unbuttoning the top of the high-necked dress, she opened the French doors to her balcony and stepped out. She breathed deeply, both from the luxury of privacy and from the clean, tangy scent of the river. With a clear view of the water and of the far bank, Ohio and freedom lay only yards away.

Didn't it make the slaves yearn to swim across? To be so close, yet still so far?

"No matter how nice you are, Mrs. Bennington, you are still a slaver," muttered Emily under her breath.

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In the fading light of the sunroom, Augusta Bennington pondered the young woman she had just hired. She felt compassion and a touch of pity for the strong-minded, tenderhearted idealist. Emily reminded her of another outspoken woman who had wanted to change everything wrong with society—herself. But now she was old, complacent and weak, due to infirmities and simple ennui. *A fiery abolitionist living on a slave-holding plantation?* This was exactly the influence Augusta sought for her sheltered, insulated daughters. But convincing Porter Bennington of the wisdom of her decision would be another matter altogether.

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"What in the world are you doing in my kitchen?"

The loud voice caught Emily by surprise. She dropped the towel she had been using to fan smoke from the room. The towel landed near the stove burner and burst into flames. Emily jumped back in fright. "I was trying to fry eggs and potatoes, but the grease got too hot." She peered at her blackened meal stuck to the skillet.

"Land sakes." The woman elbowed Emily out of her way. She picked up the flaming towel with the tip of a poker, flung it down on the brick floor, and doused it with a shovel of sand from a nearby bucket. Next, she wrapped another towel around the handle of the pan, pulled it from the burner and covered it with a heavy lid. Then with hands on hips, she turned toward Emily. "Who are you?"

Emily cleared her throat and straightened her spine. "I am Miss Emily Harrison, the new governess, ma'am. I'm very pleased to meet you, Mrs..." She offered her hand to the middle-aged black woman.

The woman ignored her outstretched hand, while her forehead furrowed with confusion. "All right, you're Miss Harrison, but what are you doing in my kitchen? You could have burned the place to the ground."

Another person I've gotten off on the wrong foot with, Emily thought. "I was preparing myself dinner."

The woman arched an eyebrow. "Dinner is served in the dining room at seven if you're eating with Dr. and Mrs. Bennington and at six in the kitchen if you're eating with the girls. I don't know why no one told you that." Shaking her head, she began to clean up the mess on the stove as though Emily was no longer there.

“No, ma’am, I won’t eat food prepared by slave hands. I will do for myself while I’m here. I believe that—” Her voice faltered. The cook had stopped wiping and turned to her. From the expression on the woman’s face, Emily backed up a step.

“My name is Matilde Amite. You met my husband, Joshua, this afternoon. You’ll meet my daughter tomorrow. Lila is the young misses’ maid. We’re not slaves; we are free people of color. I’m paid a salary to cook here and this is *my* kitchen; make no mistake about that. Should you wish to peel your own potatoes or shuck your own peas, that don’t make no-never-mind to me. But you’ll do it out there, not making this kind of mess in my kitchen.” A flourish of her hand indicated the yard beyond the windows.

“Oh, I thought, I mean... I am sorry, Mrs. Amite,” Emily mumbled.

“Never mind, no harm done.” Matilde returned to cleaning her stove while Emily slunk from the room. She headed toward the house but did not get far.

“Good afternoon, Miss. You look like you’re running from the scene of a crime.” A tall man appeared out of nowhere, directly in her path.

Emily gazed into pewter gray eyes set in an angular face. He had the longest hair she’d ever seen on a man. Due to his hair length, she scanned the person from head to toe. Definitely male. He wore tall boots, tight breeches and nothing else. His tautly-muscled chest was bare—no shirt, no jacket. She gasped at his near nakedness, yet couldn’t seem to avert her eyes.

“Excuse my appearance. I’m on my way back from bathing in the river. I do enjoy it on a hot afternoon, don’t you?” As though that explained his effrontery, he continued. “What happened? Did I overhear correctly that you tried to burn down Matilde’s kitchen? I’ve never seen her so vexed.” His smile etched deep wrinkles around his eyes as though he was enjoying this.

“Not at all, sir. It was only a misunderstanding.” Emily’s focus flitted between his face and the pectoral muscles of his chest. “If thou would be so kind as to cover thyself, I would be grateful.” She motioned to the lump of clothes tucked beneath his arm. “I am a betrothed woman. It’s highly improper for me to see thee in such state of undress,” she stated primly, allowing her gaze to wander again.

He was taller and thinner than her fiancé, but his sinewy limbs made him appear strong and powerful. Emily felt a pang of shame for having compared him to Matthew and finding Matthew even slightly lacking.

“Great Scot. Do you mean I’m too late? We have only met, but you’re already betrothed to another? I’m having the worst string of luck. What kind of misunderstanding with Matilde?” He obliged by putting on his frock coat, but neglected to button it. Tiny drops of water clung to his chest and sparkled in the reflected light.

Speechless from his sarcasm, Emily soon recovered. “I was preparing myself something to eat for supper.”

“Are you saying Matilde refused to cook for you? What could you have done to offend her this quickly?” His tone sounded aghast, but his gray eyes twinkled with amusement as though enjoying her discomfort.

“No, sir, I will cook for myself and not partake of food prepared by slave labor. I am a Quaker.” Her statement resonated with pride and dignity. “We abhor the practice of keeping our fellow man in bondage.” Emily lifted her chin.

"I assumed you were Quaker from your thee's and thy's, but Matilde is not a slave. Where did you get that idea? I'm certain she set you straight on that fact." He crossed his muscular arms over his chest as Emily watched.

"Yes, Mrs. Amite corrected my incorrect assumption. I'm pledged to speak like the Benningtons, but occasionally I lapse whenever nervous." She flushed, uncertain where to cast her gaze.

"I apologize for making you nervous. I had mistaken you for the governess my aunt hired to tame my two wild cousins." He slicked a hand through his damp hair. "You must be a newly hired cook. Perhaps trained in Paris? I'm sure the Benningtons look forward to your cuisine." He ran his eyes over her from head to toe. "Judging by your initial performance and thin frame, they should have no fear about growing plump in middle age."

It took Emily a moment to recognize his ridicule. But when she did, she responded with her usual poise. With flaming cheeks she clenched her fists and spoke through gritted teeth. "My culinary abilities are none of thy concern. I assure thee. Good day!" Picking up her skirt, she flounced past him...or at least so she tried. Precisely at the same moment, he stepped into her path. She bumped soundly into his bare chest. Emily hissed like a feral cat and maneuvered to the left.

But the horrid man moved in her way again. "I do beg your pardon, Miss Harrison."

When she lifted her gaze, they were mere inches apart. Her skirt blew against the leg of his trousers. She staggered and lost her balance on the flagstones.

He reached out to steady her, his fingers spanning her waist. With an exaggerated inhalation, he breathed in her soap's lingering scent. "My, you do *smell* good. Not like any cook we've ever had. They always stink like onions and garlic." He sniffed her hair in a noisy fashion. "You smell like honey and lemon balm," he declared with obvious satisfaction.

This was too much. Emily jumped back from him. "Sir, I must insist you stop sniffing me like a dog. It is most inappropriate!" She smoothed the wrinkles from her skirt with both hands. "I'm not a cook. I *am* the governess your...aunt...sent for. I'm Miss Emily Harrison from Marietta." She wiped her palm on her skirt before extending her hand.

He stared for a moment. Then he grasped her hand tightly, drew it to his mouth, and placed a kiss on the freckled skin of her knuckles. "What a pleasant surprise. I am charmed to meet you, Miss Harrison."

Aghast, Emily yanked her hand back. "Most inappropriate, sir, without my gloves on!"

"I was just *wondering* where your afternoon gloves were," he said with mock derision.

"I doubt that's what you were wondering. If you would please excuse me." Emily stepped to his left while he mirrored her action.

"I beg your pardon. We seem to be at cross purposes." He retreated an inch.

Folding her arms over her chest, Emily stared him squarely in the eye. She had practiced this look in the mirror to use on unruly pupils. "I must insist that you stand still so I may pass." She enunciated each word, leaving no question as to her displeasure.

He remained ramrod straight with his arms tightly at his sides. "Certainly, but I

wish to properly introduce myself so that our first, memorable encounter won't leave you with the sole impression of impropriety." He bowed deeply, his long hair falling across his brow. "I am Alexander Wesley Hunt, of Hunt Farms."

"Nice to meet you." Bobbing her head, Emily sprinted by while she had the chance.

"Of Warren County. It's outside of Front Royal." His voice rose with intensity. "We live east of the Shenandoah Mountains. Perhaps you've heard of our farm?" he called.

Emily hurried up the path, not pausing until she reached the safety of the portico. Then she glanced over her shoulder.

He stood where she'd left him, rocking on his heels, in a fit of uncontrolled laughter. He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Please don't rush into an impetuous marriage until I've had an opportunity to redeem myself."

Seething with fury, Emily marched into the house and climbed the servants' staircase. This cocky man was the bookworm nephew Mrs. Bennington had spoken about? He certainly didn't look serious and studious. He was the most obnoxious person in the world. Now she could add him to her growing list of people she offended. Why the impertinent, half-dressed man had managed to rile her, she couldn't say. But she paced her room long into the evening, repeating his taunts and the retorts she *wished* she'd uttered. Why would a nephew bathe in the river, yet act as though he owned the place? And why was she unable to get him out of her head?

That night she stood for a long while on her balcony and watched the calm flat water of the Ohio. Occasionally by a laden flatboat riding low in the current broke the smooth surface on its way south. Nightjars and whippoorwills called to her from swamp willows on the riverbank. Their sorrowful cries deepened her near-consuming melancholia. Exhausted, she crawled under the covers without any supper, either with the Benningtons or their daughters. After the day's events, she found she had little appetite. "I'll make you proud, Mama," she whispered in the darkness and fell asleep as soon as her head hit the goose down pillow.

I'll make you proud.

* * *

She awoke to sunlight streaming into the bedroom, a fragrant breeze stirring the lace curtains, and a thump at the door. Throwing her wrapper over her dressing gown, Emily padded across the thick carpet. A growl in her stomach reminded her she'd skipped dinner. Smelling food through the closed door, she answered the knock with gratitude.

Alexander Hunt held a steaming breakfast tray in outstretched hands. "Good morning, Miss Harrison. I trust you slept well." He moved the tray closer for her inspection. "Here is your breakfast. You must be famished this morning. Miss Matilde said she cooked this food herself, and that you should eat every bite of it."

"Good morning." Emily didn't move, only looked from the tray to him and then back to the tray.

"May I come in?" He nudged the door open with his foot. "Perhaps I can set this on your balcony and share a cup of coffee with you? We have another gorgeous morning in the Ohio River valley."

"You may certainly not, sir," Emily recovered her wits. "I am not dressed." She folded her wrapper across her gown and knotted the belt. Foolishly, she had answered

the door as though she still lived on a farm with her parents. His furtive glances from her neck to her toes reminded her otherwise.

“Express my appreciation to Miss Matilde. And thank you, Mr. Hunt, for delivering my breakfast.” She took the tray and tried shutting the door with her knee, but his boot was too quick.

“I remembered your Quaker convictions. Since I knew you wouldn’t eat food unless carried by free hands, I volunteered for the task.” Folding his arms across his waistcoat, he rested against the doorjamb. “And I can assure you, I am no man’s slave...or any woman’s either. At least, not yet.”

Emily stared at him in disbelief. “Were you sent by the devil specifically to needle me, Mr. Hunt?” She glanced down the hallway, not wishing the Benningtons to overhear the question.

Straightening, he leaned toward her without a shred of decorum. A lock of hair fell across his temple. “No. The devil sent me initially...to buy horses.” He winked and ambled down the passage with his thumbs hooked in his pockets.

She glared at his back until the smell of food roused her senses. Inhaling the aroma of coffee and fried ham, she almost inhaled everything on the plate: hotcakes, thinly sliced ham, a poached egg, strawberries in cream, and a pot of strong coffee. She devoured every morsel at her balcony table. Thank goodness the cook turned out to be a paid employee since Emily didn’t know when she had eaten a meal so delicious. The way her dress hung from her shoulders she was slowly starving to death from her own cuisine.

Once revitalized, Emily slipped down the staircase and out the front door, thankfully unobserved by anyone. Tulip poplars and giant black walnut trees shaded the expansive lawn. Standing on the flagstone terrace, she surveyed the mansion that would be her home for several months. The main building was a three-storied Georgian with painted wood shingles and brick chimneys at both ends. A large Palladian window crowned the front door and an open Belvedere topped the third floor like a huge cupola. A covered portico connected two separate wings to the house—the right housing the kitchen and pantries, but the left was locked and shuttered. Everything was balanced, symmetrical and tidy, from the matching pillars to the identical chimneys in each wing. She stepped back to crane her neck skyward.

“Miss Harrison?” A voice startled Emily almost out of her shoes.

She turned to see a copper-skinned woman of about sixteen, fashionably and expensively dressed, approaching from the flower garden. “Yes?”

“I am Lila, Miss Margaret and Miss Anne’s maid. We were introduced briefly and you met my parents yesterday, Matilde and Joshua.” Her expression betrayed nothing. “If you’ll follow me, the girls are eager to make your acquaintance.” Her speech was clear, articulate and cultured. Her accent contained a southern inflection, perhaps New Orleans, not at all what Emily expected in colonial Virginia.

“Pleased to meet you,” she said. Hurrying to keep up, Emily followed the young maid to the location of her initial interview. Two tow-headed young ladies stood as she entered the sunny room. The taller of the two extended her hand.

“Miss Harrison? I am Margaret. This is Anne. And I see you’ve met Lila,” she said politely. She dipped the tiniest of curtseys. “We’re so glad you’ve come to be our teacher.” Her smile seemed genuine, and Emily warmed to her immediately.

"Yes, we hated that sour old Mr. Tate," the younger sister piped.

"We had outgrown his curriculum, I believe is what my sister is trying to say," said Margaret.

"Yes, that and he smelled badly." Anne clasped her hands behind her back.

"Smelled bad," Emily corrected.

"Oh, did you know him, too?" she asked.

"No, I've never met him, but smelled badly indicates something was amiss with his nose," said Emily as Margaret attempted to stifle a smile.

"Something was amiss with his nose, Miss Harrison," Anne agreed. "It was red and bulbous. Once I heard Mama say to Papa it's because he's too fond of bourbon." At this, Margaret erupted into laughter. Emily heard Lila snicker, too.

"Yes, well. Let's forget about Mr. Tate for the moment. Please show me the books he'd been using with you two in your lessons," Emily regained her composure.

"With us three," Margaret corrected. "Lila also studies with us."

"Will you mind if I sit in?" Lila asked, meeting the governess' eye.

"Mind? Goodness no. I'm pleased, as a matter of fact." Emily stopped rambling before she said something regrettable as she had with the girl's mother. "All right, let's be seated and take a look at your books."

The morning passed pleasantly as Emily gauged their proficiencies. The girls had solid foundations in English grammar, diction and penmanship. Margaret and Lila were fluent in spoken French, but couldn't read or write it very well. Anne had progressed little beyond *merci* and *sil vous plait*. She would also require a remedial level of mathematics, whereas the other two were ready for algebra and geometry. All three needed a broader base in literature, and science seemed to have been completely neglected by the imbibing Mr. Tate.

After two hours, Emily stood and announced, "Tomorrow afternoon we'll start a science unit on the edible versus poisonous plants indigenous to this area."

They had been reading from a stack of *Goody Books* and looked up with quizzical expressions. "I beg your pardon?" said Margaret.

"You should know which plants are safe to pick while in the forest and which things you should never put in your mouth," explained Emily, attempting to stimulate interest in her topic.

"But Matilde usually packs a hamper of refreshments whenever we spend an afternoon on the levee or by the lake." Margaret's tone indicated bafflement in studying such matters.

"Yes, but what if you got lost or stranded in the mountains?" Her question hung in the air as three sets of eyes grew round as saucers. Lila giggled behind an upraised palm. "Never mind," Emily said, holding up her hands in dismissal. "We'll stop for the day. I'll take the rest of the afternoon to plan my curriculum and course of study."

"Good afternoon." Anne bobbed her head and flew out the door.

Margaret approached the oak writing table where Emily worked. "Good afternoon, Miss Harrison." With a demure tentativeness, she placed her hand atop Emily's. "I'm so glad you've come to our island. I do hope you'll be happy here." After a flash of brilliant white teeth, she too was gone, taking several periodicals with her.

Only Lila remained, silently appraising her. "I'll bring you a lunch tray, Miss. If you like, I can show you around the island later."

“Thank you, Lila. I’d like a sandwich and would very much enjoy a tour.” Emily wondered more about her impression on the maid than on the Bennington sisters. Lila had watched her all morning, as though waiting for something dangerous to happen. Her mother probably repeated the story of Emily’s cooking attempt that almost burned down the kitchen. “I do hope we can be friends,” she added.

“Yes, ma’am.” Lila vanished through the door without a backward glance.

Hours later, the promised tour revealed much to Emily. Bennington Plantation wasn’t really a plantation at all, more of an elegant subsistence farm. There were apple and peach orchards, fields sown in corn and oats, and a substantial garden behind the kitchen. But no crop appeared large enough to supply more than necessary for man and beast in residence. Sleek, beautiful horses grazed and frolicked in grassy paddocks.

Lila stopped the open carriage near the gate to a grassy paddock. Sleek, beautiful horses grazed and frolicked with several new colts. As soon as Lila set the brake, Emily jumped down and ran with her skirt and petticoats clutched in her fist. She loved to run, despite her mother’s insistence on ladylike behavior at all times. After all, only Lila would witness and she quickly caught up and beat her to the fence. Breathlessly Emily climbed up to the top rail for a better view.

“Those are some beautiful horses, Lila. Are they Thoroughbreds?”

“Yes, ma’am, they are Dr. Bennington’s pride and joy.”

“Does he race them? I bet they’re very fast. I do wish Matthew—he’s my intended—could see them. He’s particularly fond of horseflesh.” Emily couldn’t contain her giddiness.

“No, ma’am, there’s no place on the island to race. Dr. Bennington breeds horses and shows them off to his friends. But he grows so attached, he seldom sells a foal.” Lila whispered almost conspiratorially.

“I would get attached, too. And don’t call me ma’am when it’s just you and me. Please call me Emily.”

Lila shook her head. “That would not be right, Miss Harrison. I won’t do it.”

“Fine, as long as you address me as ‘Miss Harrison’, I shall address you as ‘Miss Amite.’”

Lila looked both confused and suspicious as they walked back to the carriage. “Call me whatever you prefer.”

Emily inhaled deeply. “Ah, the smell of timothy grass. We grew it in our best pasture. Only honeysuckle is sweeter.” Emily climbed into the buggy and took up the reins. After a cluck of her tongue, the horse broke into a brisk trot down the shady lane.

“You can drive a carriage?” Lila gripped the seat with both hands.

“Of course I can. I didn’t grow up on a plantation like this. I lived on a small hardscrabble farm where I learned to do most everything.” Which wasn’t exactly true considering her cooking abilities. Emily pointed at a low, whitewashed building that bustled with activity. “What goes on in there?”

“That’s our dairy,” Lila said proudly. “We have four hundred head of jersey cows on the island. We make our own butter and cheese to sell in town, along with any milk we don’t need.”

“Dr. Bennington has time to run a dairy besides his medical practice?”

“No, the workers run it and take the cheese to Parkersburg on market day. They split the profits down the middle with Dr. Bennington.”

Emily's mouth dropped open. "Are those men slaves?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am." Lila reached up to pluck low-hanging leaves overhead.

"He lets them keep the money they earn from *his* milk?"

"Yes, ma'am." Lila looked at her from the corner of her eye.

"What do they do with it?" Emily's questions were starting to sound inane even to her.

"They buy their freedom once they've saved enough. That's what my two brothers did last year." Lila looked at Emily with pride.

"Do they still work here?" Emily pulled on the reins to slow the carriage.

"No'm. They both moved to Cleveland to work on the ore boats. They don't much like being sailors, from what we could figure out from their letters. My brothers don't read or write well, like I do," she explained. "There's another business on the island, too. Dr. Bennington, Nathan and Micah make whiskey from the five hundred acres of corn grown here. He takes the whiskey down to Cincinnati to sell twice a year. Dr. Bennington keeps all that money though. He says it's for the lean times when people can't afford to pay their doctor bills. Mama says Mrs. Bennington doesn't know anything about the whiskey, she being a former Quaker and all. Quakers don't look kindly on spirits."

"I'm well aware of that, being a Quaker myself." Emily brought the carriage to a halt. "Hard liquor is produced on this island?"

Lila drew in a sharp breath and pursed her lips. "Have I erred in telling you this, Miss Harrison? Mamma will skin me if the secret gets back to Mrs. Bennington." She looked uneasy. "You did say you wanted to be friends and all," added Lila for good measure.

Emily swallowed down her revulsion over a distillery in close proximity. "Your confidences are safe, Miss Amite, have no fear. How the Benningtons run their personal lives is of no concern to me. I'm an employee here, nothing more, the same as you."

"Yes, ma'am." Lila relaxed against the seat.

"Did you purchase your freedom, Miss Amite?"

"My father did, a long time ago. I don't much remember." Lila released the brake and picked up the reins. "We'd best get back to the house. You might want to rest before dinner."

"Very well. You've answered enough questions for one day." Truth was the island wasn't what Emily had expected, or the residents quite the demons her mother had described slaveholders to be. But appearances can be deceiving, she reminded herself.

"Will you be eating in the kitchen with the young ladies or dining with the Benningtons?" Lila's bright eyes revealed an unspoken third possibility.

"If you're checking to see if I would attempt to cook for myself, the answer is no. But I don't see why they don't all eat together. My family did. Every family I've ever known always eats together at mealtime."

Lila thought before replying. "Miss Margaret is fourteen. Soon she'll be asked to join the dinner table on a regular basis, but Miss Anne is only eleven. She's much too young to be expected to comport herself that long. She only dines on Sundays with the family and on special occasions."

Emily's inaugural dinner that evening explained much as to why an eleven-year-old wouldn't be welcomed. No one could expect someone that young to sit still for a

three-hour meal. Having decided to eat in the kitchen with the girls, she changed her mind after discovering a heavy vellum card had been slipped beneath her door.

In a spidery script, Mrs. Bennington had written: "Please join us for dinner. Dr. Bennington is looking forward to making your acquaintance."

How could she refuse such a summons from her employer?