



The Seeker

Chapter 1

Mercer County, Kentucky

April 1861

"The Shakers! Have you taken leave of your senses, Edwin? You can't seriously be considering joining the Shakers?" The words came out harsher than Charlotte Vance intended and Edwin Gilbey stepped back from her until the budding branches of the lilac bush behind him had to be poking holes in his dinner jacket.

"Please, Charlotte. Calm yourself. You know I can't abide a scene." He sounded alarmed as he shifted his eyes away from her face to look longingly over her shoulder toward the veranda door.

Charlotte's irritation grew as she stared at Edwin in the light of the nearly full moon. He didn't even like social gatherings. Behind her the door opened and laughter mixed with the music of the string ensemble she'd hired from Lexington flowed out into the garden. The party seemed to be proceeding well in spite of the charged emotions in the air.

When her father first sent word from Frankfort that he wanted her to arrange a grand gala for his return home to Grayson Manor after completing his business in the capital city, she'd doubted his sanity. Surely as a senator in the State Legislature he was more than aware the country was teetering on the brink of destruction after Mr. Lincoln had taken the Oath of Office and moved into the White House last month. Half a dozen southern states had already followed South Carolina out of the Union. That's all anybody was talking about. Whether they could do that. Whether the government should allow them to do that. Whether there would be armed conflict to preserve the Union.

How in the world did her father expect them to have a civil party with half the guests waving the Union flag and the other half shouting State's rights and favoring secession? She'd sent a message back to him saying they might as well lay the dueling pistols on the table in the front hall and let the men take turns out on Grayson's front lawn. But he had made light of her worries and on return post had insisted he had news to announce that required the finest party she'd ever arranged. Astounding news.

Charlotte had surmised he was bringing word back to Grayson that the Constitutional Union Party had pegged him as their next candidate for governor. Certainly reason enough to dare entertaining in spite of the political climate. But no, that hadn't been his news. Instead he had

handed a woman dressed to the nines in silk and jewels down out of the carriage and introduced her as his wife.

Not wife to be. Wife. A woman from the North. Selena Harley Black. A widow with a young son somewhere still in the north or so Betty Jamison had whispered in Charlotte's ear while her father escorted his bride from group to group to introduce her. Of course, after the death of Charlotte's mother, Betty had entertained the improbable notion that she might eventually catch Charlotte's father's eye.

When the veranda door closed again and muffled the sound of the party, Charlotte was relieved. She couldn't think about her father and that woman right now. Not with Edwin talking this ridiculous Shaker talk. One problem at a time. She turned her attention back to the man pinned against her mother's favorite lilac bush in front of her. He shifted uneasily on his feet and glanced over his shoulder as though considering an escape under the lilac's branches even if it did mean spoiling the knees of his trousers.

"But Edwin," she said as sweetly as she could under the circumstances. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, the Shakers have a ban on matrimony."

Edwin straightened his shoulders and almost looked at her face again before he let his eyes slide down to the ground at their feet. "You are not mistaken. It is one of their strongest tenets. The avoidance of such unions allows them to live in peace and harmony. Hence the name of their village, Harmony Hill."

"I am well aware of the name of their village." The irritation in her voice sounded a bit strident even to Charlotte's ears. Not the way to win arguments. She attempted to pull in a deep steady breathing, but with the tight lacings of her corset constricting her breathing, she simply ended up feeling light-headed. She fought the feeling. She refused to have the vapors. She could control this. She could control Edwin. Hadn't she done so ever since they were toddlers playing together in the nursery?

He threw up his hand to ward off her anger as he hurried out his words. "Yes, yes, of course you are. At any rate, I have become well acquainted with an Elder Logan in their village. He has found great peace among the Believers there. A peace I envy." Edwin peeked up at her and went on in a tremulous voice. "You know yourself how unsettled I've felt ever since my dear grandmother departed this world last spring."

"I do understand how difficult the loss has been for you. For all of us. She was a fine lady." It took effort, but she managed to sound sympathetic as she spoke the oft repeated words. What she actually wanted to tell Edwin was that Faustine Hastings had been well along in years and that no one could live forever. Or grieve forever. Charlotte had resigned herself to a year of mourning before their marriage even though that would make her nearly twenty when they spoke their vows in May. A mere month from now.

Edwin knew they were to marry in May. He had agreed to the date. Her dressmaker was putting the finishing touches on her wedding dress. The last time she had tried it on it had taken

Mellie almost a half hour just to fasten its many pearl buttons down the back and from the elbows on the sleeves. Of course part of the reason for that was Mellie had something unfavorable to say about Edwin with every button she fastened.

Charlotte's familiar words of sympathy seemed to allay Edwin's apprehension and he eased a bit away from the bush closer to her as he said, "Elder Logan thinks Grandmother would have understood and approved of my search for peace in my life."

"Does he? And how can he know that? Did he get a vision as he was doing his worship dances?"

Edwin frowned at her mocking tone. "You needn't try to disparage Elder Logan. He's a fine man and their worship dances are often very sedate and orderly. At least the ones I have witnessed."

"But isn't it so that they spin and at times fall prostrate on the floor in odd fits? That hardly sounds sedate to me." Charlotte's head was spinning every bit as wildly as she'd heard the Shakers did in their worship dances. How could both of the men in her life lose their senses at the same time? First her father and now Edwin.

She tried to block from her mind the vision of her father's beaming face as he presented that woman as the new mistress of Grayson. He hadn't even glanced toward Charlotte who had been running Grayson with Aunt Tish's help even before her mother's untimely death four years ago. He had without a doubt lost his mind. Proof was surely in how he had sounded almost proud when he said he'd met the woman only six weeks earlier. Charlotte would be surprised if he had even checked into her family lineage. Or given the first thought to why a woman her age would consider marrying a man his. She had to be twenty years younger than him. Perhaps thirty to his fifty.

Charlotte reached up to smooth out the furrows of a frown forming between her eyes. A lady could not chance developing grimace lines to mar her appearance. It was bad enough that she had a too generous sprinkling of freckles across her nose no amount of cream could fade. Her mother had laid the fault of that on Charlotte's red hair and her Grandmother Vance back in Virginia who neither she nor her mother had ever laid eyes on. But her father said his mother's hair was the color of new bricks and while Charlotte's was lighter than that, more like ginger spice, nobody in the Grayson family line had ever been born with such a flamboyant hair color.

"You have to be among them to truly understand," Edwin was saying. "When the Spirit comes down on one of the Believers, it takes control of their bodies and demonstrates its ecstasy in myriad ways. Not always by shaking as is commonly believed by those of the world."

"Those of the world," Charlotte echoed softly. This was more serious than she had thought. He already sounded like one of them.

Of course Charlotte knew Edwin had been visiting the Shaker village. Aunt Tish had heard as much through the servant grapevine that delivered news between their adjoining plantations faster than a crow could fly between the two great houses. But who would have ever thought Edwin would seriously consider joining with them? Even Mellie who held Edwin in considerable disdain had never

suggested that. Just last week while she'd been pinning up Charlotte's hair, Mellie had told her, "That Mr. Edwin, you best stop counting on him comin' courtin' you any time soon, Miss Lottie."

"He doesn't have to court me, Mellie. We've known we were marrying ever since we were six," Charlotte told her.

"You might be knowin' it, Miss Lottie, but that Mr. Edwin ain't a knowin' it. If ever I did see a man afraid of loving, it's him." Mellie had twisted Charlotte's hair in a tight roll and jabbed a pin in it as she added, "And you ain't no way loving him neither."

"What do you know about loving?" Charlotte spoke shortly as she stared at Mellie's face in the mirror.

"Enough to know it's something a slave like me had best avoid like the plague. 'Fore I find myself on the auction block like my mammy and pappy with me goin' one way and whoever I was fool enough to fall in love with goin' the other."

Charlotte turned on the dressing stool to touch Mellie's arm. "You know I'd never let Father put you on the block. Never. You and Aunt Tish are family."

"I know you wouldn't want to. And I know we as close to sisters as a black slave girl and a rich white girl can be seein' as how we took turns suckling at my mammy's breast, but things change. That's something we can count on and if we ain't ready for it we're gonna get knocked down and trampled into the dirt. Mammy warns me about that all the time and she knows about them kind of changes."

Mellie mashed her lips together and shook her head a little as she placed her long slender hand over top Charlotte's and went on. "And I guess as how you know about them too what with your mama dying how she did. Just steppin' out in her garden and fallin' down there by her red rose bush. I can still see her laying there with that rose in her hand like as how she'd pricked her finger and fell asleep like some princess in one of them fairytales."

Charlotte slowly shut her eyes and pulled in a breath. She would never forget the sound of her mother's gasp as she collapsed on the garden path and how she had run to kneel by her mother's side, but it was already too late. Her mother was gone. Charlotte blinked her eyes to keep back her tears as she said, "Except she wasn't asleep."

"Except that," Mellie agreed sadly as she squeezed Charlotte's hand before she pulled it away to start pinning up Charlotte's hair again. "Things changed then and things is sure to change again."

Charlotte had turned back to the mirror and said, "Some things won't." She hadn't looked at Mellie's reflection in the mirror but instead had stared into her own eyes as if making the promise to herself. She would see that no changes upset their lives at Grayson.

Now she studied Edwin's face as he went on and on about what this man, Elder Logan had told him. How a person needed to pick up the cross of purity and bear it no matter how heavy it

might be in order to find that peace he needed. How at the Shaker village, men and women lived as sisters and brothers without the thorn of marital relationships to disturb their peace. How they owned everything in common and how when he joined with them, he would turn his land, the Hastings Plantation, over to the Ministry there at Harmony Hill. With each word his voice got stronger and bolder until he didn't even sound like the Edwin she knew. The Edwin who had always done whatever she said.

"But, Edwin," she interrupted him. "We are to wed next month."

He did have the grace to look uncomfortable, but he didn't back away from her. "That was more your decision than mine, Charlotte. While I regret disappointing you, Elder Logan assures me a man should not allow himself to be pulled into an unwanted and sinful union simply to avoid a bit of embarrassment. Not when his eternal salvation is at stake."

"Marriage is not sinful," Charlotte said. "I fear you have been listening to bad advice from those who simply want to gather your land in with theirs."

Edwin stiffened at her words and in the moonlight, the lines of his face looked chiseled out of stone as he stared down at her. The man in front of her little resembled the Edwin she had grown up with. That Edwin had hidden behind his grandmother's skirts until he was well out of knickers. That Edwin had been afraid of his shadow when she pulled him out into the garden to play hide and seek. That Edwin listened without argument to her plans for their lives.

When he finally spoke, his voice was harsh. "And why have you always said we must wed, Charlotte? Isn't it to join our properties? Hasn't that always been your primary purpose? To do your father's bidding and make his holdings the largest in Mercer County."

"Not his holdings, Edwin. Ours. Grayson and Hastings Plantations together." She pushed the words at him. "We've talked of nothing else for years."

"You've talked of nothing else. Perhaps it is time you listened for a change," he said shortly.

Then without waiting for her to say more, he stepped off the path to go around her as if even the touch of the ruffles on her hooped skirt must be avoided. She stared after him astounded by his rudeness. And by the determined set of his shoulders. That old Shaker elder with his insidious words of peace was the cause of this, but she wouldn't let it be the end. Edwin would marry her. Of course he would. He'd come to his senses and crawl back to her, begging to carry out the plans they had made. She'd find a way to see that he did.

When he opened the veranda door, the noise of the party drifted out. He stepped inside and snapped the door closed behind him, clipping off the sound, but through the glass door and window she could see the guests milling about. Her guests. She was neglecting her hostess duties. Edwin could wait. She touched the pile of hair elaborately styled on top her head to be sure no strand had escaped its pins and started back toward the house.

A man's deep voice stopped her before she had gone a dozen steps. "He must be an extremely foolish man to turn his back and run from such beauty."