

Freedom's Children

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Chapter One Night Rider

“It could be dangerous...” Emily was scared. She couldn't help it. Johnnie's words kept ringing in her ears. “...it could be very dangerous!”

Trying to forget her brother's words, Emily concentrated on where she was going. It was a dark night. A thin pale moon cast eerie shadows along the deserted country road. Even though she knew the road like the back of her hand, it seemed different somehow—tonight it seemed almost sinister. Rows of trees lined the road on either side. Emily thought they looked like silent soldiers standing at attention, guarding the woods behind them. From somewhere in the darkness came an unearthly sound. Even though she knew it was just a screech owl, Emily couldn't help but shiver a little.

Even her horse, Jasper, seemed tense tonight. “Yah!” Emily whispered in Jasper's ear.

The teenaged girl leaned forward and spurred her horse on. Immediately the bay obeyed. Its hooves kicked up dirt as the fleet horse picked up speed. Even though Emily rode sidesaddle, she had no trouble handling the swift horse. The girl raced down the dark road knowing exactly where she was going.

Emily tried not to think about Johnnie's warning. He had practically ordered her not to go tonight. He had made her promise that she wouldn't. Even though she had crossed her fingers behind her back when she promised, her face flushed a bright pink. Her brother knew right away that Emily didn't mean to keep her word. Emily always blushed when she told a lie!



“Just be careful, Emmy!” Johnnie had said to her before he left.

Emily knew that Johnnie was just trying to protect her because she was a girl. So she was a girl... what difference did that make? She knew the countryside as well as most anyone around. She was used to riding alone—even at night. Besides, she could ride just as well as any boy her age!

Emily decided to ignore the potential danger of getting caught. Besides, she wasn't going to get caught—so there! Stubborn was her middle name her father always said. Emily didn't mind being called stubborn, even though her mother constantly reminded her that it was a decidedly unladylike trait.

“Whoa, boy,” Emily said to her horse. Jasper slowed down and Emily abruptly turned off the road. It looked like she was heading straight into a bunch of thick trees and bushes, but Emily knew what she was doing. The girl's keen eyes picked out the secret shortcut—a little-used path that few knew about.

The path was overgrown. A low-lying branch almost pulled the girl's mobcap off her head. Emily decided to get off her horse and walk. She grabbed Jasper's reins and led him

down the narrow path. The woods were very dark. Only a feeble shaft of moonlight lit the way.

For almost half a mile, Emily carefully picked her way along the shortcut. Even though she had been this way before, she was nervous. It wouldn't do to lose her way in the dark! Emily was determined not to let fear get the best of her. She was almost there. She wasn't about to turn back now!

Emily stopped next to a clump of trees and tied Jasper to a gnarled pine. The clean scent of pine filled her nose. The smell helped calm her.

"Stay here, boy," Emily whispered to the horse. "I'll be back directly." The girl tenderly stroked Jasper's soft muzzle. "You be quiet now. Hear?" The horse whinnied softly as if he understood.

Emily left Jasper and traveled alone on foot. Presently, she came to a large house at the edge of a clearing. Despite the late hour, the back windows of the house were ablaze with

light. In the flickering candlelight, the girl could see people inside.

Holding her petticoats up, Emily ran closer to the house. She hid behind a tree just a few yards from the window. From this vantage point, she could make out four men seated at a table, but she couldn't see their faces clearly. A Negro boy with a tray in his hand was serving refreshments. The boy placed a pewter cup filled with cider in front of each man. Impatiently, the men waved the boy away.

Emily decided to get a better look. She moved from behind the tree and ran right up to the house. Quickly she ducked under the window. Flattening herself against the house, Emily crouched down low. Cautiously, she raised her head and peeped over the edge of the sill. Just then, one of the men leaned back in his chair. Emily saw his face clearly through the window. Involuntarily, she opened her mouth to let out a cry.

But before she could make a sound, a hand clamped tightly over her mouth!