

## • CHAPTER 16 •

That afternoon, when Merrybelle slipped out the back door, her friend Rachel had already started walking up the street. Merrybelle skipped a few steps to catch up with her.

“Rachel! Hold up!”

“What’s going on, Merry? You sure look like the cat that swallowed the canary!”

“Rachel, it’s strange, that’s what it is!”

“What’s strange?”

“Mrs. Carlson sat me down and, I swear, she opened her heart right up, and poor me, trying to not spill the cup of coffee she poured for me!”

“Uh huh. It’ll be a cold day in hell before Mrs. Blakeley pours a cup of coffee for *me*!”

“You’re not going to believe it, Rachel. First, she won’t even let me put my apron on, and she sits me down at the kitchen table and serves cookies! Says she has to talk to someone...”

“Now, *I* got some talking-to. I could hardly get my cleaning done with all her gab! You’d think the neighborhood was disappearing into a sinkhole, and it’s all because of colored people.” Rachel shook her head in frustration. “Practically ‘moving in’ she says, and with the Carlsons’ invitation, too! If we could afford it, I’d quit working for that woman!”

“Mrs. Carlson’s aware of the talk, and I tried to comfort her—told her that time will heal and they’ll come up with something

else to jabber about at their canasta parties, but she didn't seem to care what Mrs. Blakeley thought about her."

"Don't say! So what she want to talk about?"

"Says she's miserable, there in her perfect house with her perfect yard and her perfect husband! Don't that take the cake? Now it's true Mr. Carlson has spells of depression, and that's hard on any woman, but he seems to have recovered. Matter of fact, she said working with Jacob and that Mr. Acree on the deck repair had him whistling, again."

"There! You hit on it! Mrs. Blakeley pins the blame on those Northern relatives of the Olsens!"

"I guess something about Jessamine and the relatives is what started it, all right. But all of a sudden, she wants to cozy up to me and open up her heart—stuff she's never even told her husband."

"Like what?"

"Well, like this. She's got to remembering this little colored girl she used to play with when she was very young. They were real close friends. Then her family moved, and she started school, and somewhere along that time, this colored girl died of the measles."

"Hu-huh. That kind of friendship white parents got to break up. I'm surprised she had a chance to play with a colored child..."

"Said the girl was the daughter of their maid. Seems this woman nursed Mrs. Carlson along with her own daughter while the woman lived with them."

"Ah! So they were titty sisters! That's not so unusual."

"The point is, now Mrs. Carlson wants to change. She's all sorry for forgetting her friend and for what she calls her role in society. She's got dreams of being friends with all the colored women she knows, especially Margaret because she went to college. You should have heard her running her mouth with these big plans."

“So how’s she think she’s goin’ to do that? Teach us colored women to play canasta and have us out there tending the flower beds by the courthouse like the white ladies do, instead of growing food for the table and earning a living?”

“Don’t know about that, but she’s going to sew me a dress for the choir performance.”

Rachel stopped in her tracks and faced Merrybelle. “Now, girl, you’re getting in too deep!”

“It’s beautiful green cloth—you should have seen it—and you know she has time on her hands. Why shouldn’t she sew it for me if she wants to? The fact is, and this is the truth, it’s me who’s doing her a favor. I figured that out. She’s buying off her regrets over the little girl she forgot. When she sews this dress for me, she’s paying back her guilty conscience. But she says she can do it by Wednesday, and it’s so pretty!” Merrybelle giggled.

“No! Next thing and she’ll be cleaning your house!” exclaimed Rachel.

“Well, she wanted to send me home with a bouquet of roses, but I begged her to put them on the dining table instead—said they’d never get home without wilting!”

Rachel shook her head in disbelief. They crossed the street and headed for their homes across the tracks.