

Six

Palmer Memorial Institute

Charlotte scraped her shoes on an old wooden board, trying to remove the red clay “glued” to the soles. How in the world do they get anything to grow in this, she wondered. It was the first sunny day they had seen all week, and red mud was everywhere, including all over Charlotte’s shoes and the bottom of her dress.

“Having a little trouble there, Miss Hawkins?” Reverend Baldwin said, carrying a newly-sawed board across the field toward the building being worked on.

“It’s this red clay, Reverend Baldwin. I just don’t see how it serves any purpose.”

The reverend smiled as he lay down the board. “Well, the good Lord put it here for some reason.”

“Maybe to teach me patience,” Charlotte said before she laughed.

Charlotte, Reverend Baldwin, and some of the students and parents had worked all morning, trying to fix up an old building. Charlotte had persuaded Reverend Baldwin, who owned it, to let the school use it for a dorm. The girls and teachers could sleep in the loft upstairs, and the boys could sleep downstairs. Transforming the building had become a community project, with everyone wanting to help. Charlotte smiled with satisfaction.

Until she looked around her at all the work that needed to be done. She sat down on a rock and sighed. The hot, muggy air clung to her, and she thought once more of the fresh ocean breeze off the New

England coast. Even though she stayed busy, she had never lost her homesickness. She missed having someone to talk with about books and music. Charlotte spent most of what little spare time she had writing letters home to her family and friends, and then waiting anxiously for a reply. Whenever the mail came, she always tore through it, looking for letters. She had read the few books around the community, and had even started in the evenings reading a dictionary.

"Miss Hawkins. Miss Hawkins!"

Charlotte jerked around, startled to see Mattie standing over her. "I'm sorry, Mattie. I didn't realize you were speaking to me."

A big grin spread over Mattie's face, then she laughed out loud. "Miss Hawkins, where do you go?"

Charlotte shielded her eyes from the sun. "What do you mean, where do I go?"

"When you start staring off like that. Where do you go? Back home up North, or off to someplace in those books you're always talking about?"

Charlotte pointed at her shoes. "I was just thinking how nice it would be if I could wash my feet off in the ocean water."

"That would be nice," Mattie said, "nice and cool, but all I have to offer you is some pork chop, a piece of corn bread, and some water."

Feeling the pangs in her stomach, Charlotte said, "That sounds wonderful."

Mattie brought her a plate and a cup with the food and water. While Charlotte began eating, Mattie asked, "Do you think we'll get this building finished by the end of the week?"

Charlotte knew why Mattie asked; it was time for the crops to be harvested, and she wanted the building done so her family could get back to work on their farm. "I think so, Mattie." She could tell by the way Mattie's eyes narrowed that she wasn't convinced.

"There is still a lot to do before anyone can live there," Mattie said.