

An excerpt from  
**Schoolhouse in the Woods**  
by Rebecca Caudill

Chapter 1

It was Saturday morning, the last day of July. It seemed like an everyday sort of day. Whiskers the cat stretched lazily in the shade of the rose of Sharon bushes. Rover the dog barked at squirrels. The hens cackled, bees buzzed in the blossoms, and heat waves shimmered and danced as they had done every day for a month. But Bonnie knew from the feeling inside her that this was a special day.

Everybody was busy. Mother was making Emmy a dress. She treadled so fast that the little wheel on the sewing machine looked like a silver saucer as it whirled.

Althy was in the back yard washing her long brown hair. Chris was in the woodlot making a bat out of a hickory stick. He whistled as he whittled. Emmy was hunting a hen's nest in the stable loft. Debby was spreading her doll clothes on the rosebush to dry.

Bonnie didn't look busy. She was sitting on the front doorstep, not moving a toe. But she was as busy as busy could be. She was watching for Father. And she was waiting for Monday.

Debby caught sight of Bonnie.

"Are you looking for Father already, Bonnie?" she asked. "Why don't you wash your doll clothes, like me? Then they'll be clean before you start to school Monday. The clock just struck eleven. Father may not be home till sundown."

"I washed my doll clothes yesterday while you were playing at Janie Sawyer's house," said Bonnie. "And ironed them too." And she sat on the doorstep, watching and waiting.

Althy came around the house rubbing her wet hair with a towel. She caught sight of Bonnie sitting on the doorstep.

"You're not watching for Father already, are you, Bonnie?" she asked. "How would you like me to wash your hair? Then it will be clean when you start to school Monday. Father may not be home till supper time."

"Emmy washed my hair yesterday while you were at Aunt Cassie's," said Bonnie. "And curled it too." And she sat on the doorstep, watching and waiting.

Chris came into the kitchen for water to wet the grindstone while he whetted his knife. He caught sight of Bonnie sitting quietly on the doorstep. He stopped whistling.

"Why, Bonnie!" he called. "You're not watching for Father already, are you? Father may not be home till dark. Why don't you get ready to start to school Monday?"

"I got ready yesterday," said Bonnie. And she sat on the doorstep, watching and waiting. Emmy came from the stable, carrying seven eggs in her apron. She caught sight of Bonnie sitting on the doorstep.

"If you're watching for Father, Bonnie," she said, "he may not be home till you're sound asleep tonight. I'm going to try on my new dress. Want to come?"

Bonnie looked down the road once more. Seeing nobody, she got up from the doorstep and followed Emmy into the house.

Mother looked up from her sewing and smiled. "You're not watching for Father already, are you, Bonnie?" she asked. She finished stitching a seam. "July days are long days, and Father may not be home till midnight. Why don't you run and play?"

Bonnie didn't feel like playing. She didn't wait to see Emmy try on her new dress, either. Instead, she went upstairs quietly, on her tiptoes.

Upstairs, on a long rod, hung all the new clothes Mother had been making for school. There were two new dresses for Althy, size thirteen; two new shirts for Chris, size eleven; one new dress for Emmy, size nine; and two new dresses for Debby, size seven.

At the end of the rod hung two new dresses for Bonnie, size five. One was dark blue, sprinkled with white stars. The other was pink. It had a little ruffle around the neck, a middle-sized ruffle around the sleeves, and a big ruffle at the bottom of the skirt.

On the waist of the pink dress Mother had embroidered a B. Little white flowers were twined about it. It stood for Bonnie. The B was special, because Bonnie was going to wear the dress to school the first day.

Bonnie slipped off her faded, everyday dress, took the pink dress from the rod, and put it on. By trying very hard, she could button all the buttons in the back.

Then she went to look at the schoolbooks which lay on a bench, beside the wall, waiting for Monday.

On the far end of the bench lay two books belonging to Althy. One was a songbook. Althy didn't need the songbook because she knew all the songs by heart. But she liked to carry the book to school anyway.

The other book was a Christmas play. Althy had found it the day before when she was rummaging around in Aunt Cassie's attic. She hoped the teacher, Miss Cora, would let the boys and girls give the play for Christmas, on the last day of school. When Father came home, Althy would have many books, all new, and big and hard to read.

Chris had a tall stack of books. He had a geography, and a history, an arithmetic and a reader, and a spelling book. They had once belonged to Althy. On the flyleaf of each book she had

written, "This book belongs to Althy." Chris had erased that. Now the flyleaf read, "This book belongs to Chris."

Emmy's books had belonged to Althy when they were new. Then they had belonged to Chris. Emmy had erased both their names, and had written on the flyleaf of each book, "This book belongs to Emmy."

Debby had four books. They had first belonged to Althy, then to Chris, then to Emmy. The corners were ragged from having been thumbed so often, and the flyleaves had been erased so many times that Debby herself could hardly read what she had written: "This book belongs to Debby." But the words and the pictures inside the books were almost as good as if Father had brought them home yesterday.

At the end of the bench lay an empty blue knapsack. It was Bonnie's, and it was new. Mother had made it for her.

In the knapsack there was a big space for a first reader and a slate. Stitched in one end was a little space for a slate pencil so that it wouldn't break. The knapsack had a long shoulder strap. It was waterproof, so that in a shower, her first reader wouldn't get wet. And it had a plain big B stitched in red in the corner.

Bonnie lifted the knapsack from the bench, slipped the long strap over her shoulder, and went to the window to see if by any chance Father was coming home. Father was bringing her a new first reader, a new slate and a slate pencil, Father said, because starting to school was special.

Just then Mother called up the stairs. "Hurry down, Bonnie, and wash your face and hands. It's twelve o'clock. Dinner is almost ready."

Bonnie left the window, lifted the knapsack from her shoulder, laid it on the bench, and smoothed all the wrinkles out of it. She unbuttoned the pink dress, pulled it over her head, hung it back carefully on the rod, and smoothed all the wrinkles out of it.

"Bon-nee!" came Mother's voice from downstairs.

"Coming!" called Bonnie as she jumped into her faded everyday dress, and ran down the stairs.

At the dinner table everyone talked about school.

"I'm going to finish my bat after dinner," said Chris. "Andy Watterson is making a ball. If we go to school early enough Monday morning, we can play a game of ball before the bell rings."

"I'm going to sit with Janie Sawyer," said Debby. "We planned it yesterday."

"Ellen Watterson and I are going to ask Miss Cora to let us erase the blackboards," said Emmy.

"I'm going to ask Miss Cora to let me ring the bell," said Chris.

"I'm going to ask Miss Cora to let me teach a class some day when she's busy," said Althy.

"What are you going to ask Miss Cora to let you do, Bonnie?" asked Mother.

"Everything," said Bonnie.

"You can't do everything the first day, Bonnie," laughed Debby. "It takes till Christmas to do everything."

"It takes a long time to do some things for Miss Cora," Althy said. "You can't teach a class for her until you're thirteen, like me."

"I wish we went to school every day," said Emmy. "I wish school didn't stop at Christmas."

"How would you get to school after Christmas?" asked Chris. "In January and February the snow would be up to your neck, and any day in March and April the rains might wash away the footbridge while you're at school, and how would you get home that night?"

"During the summer Father needs your help in the fields, and I need your help in the house, getting ready for winter," Mother reminded Emmy.

"Well, anyway," sighed Emmy, "I'm glad school starts in August."

To Bonnie, the afternoon seemed to drag more slowly than the morning. She dried the dishes for Althy. She waded in the river with Debby, and tried to catch minnows in her cupped hands, and watched crawfishes scuttling backwards among the pebbles. She sat in the kitchen and watched as Emmy pressed the new dress Mother had just finished for her. And she went fishing with Chris. But the time passed very slowly.

When the hands of the clock said four, Bonnie went again to the doorstep to watch for Father.

The afternoon was sultry and still. Away off over the meadow a hawk circled and swooped. A yellow jacket flew past, and darted into his gray paperlike house glued to a branch of an apple tree. Down in the orchard an apple fell with a dull thud. And along the river road came the sound of a horse trotting.

Bonnie sat upright. It couldn't possibly be Father coming home, she thought. It was three long hours till sundown.

The sound of the trotting drew nearer.

Bonnie stood up. She gazed down the road as far as she could see. She ran to the gate, and climbed on it so that she could see farther still. As she watched, around the bend trotted Mag. On her back rode Father. Across the saddle lay a bundle.

"Here comes Father! Father's coming!" shouted Bonnie, like an alarm clock waking everybody up.

The Fairchilds came hurrying--Althy and Chris, Emmy and Debby. Mother came too. They crowded around as Father opened the bundle on the porch.

To Althy, Father handed big new books, an armful of them. To Chris and Emmy and Debby he handed new, long, brown pencils exactly alike, and new tablets, each with a different picture on the front.

"You'd better cut your initials on those pencils right away," said Father, "so you won't get them mixed up."

Last of all he handed Bonnie a new first reader, a new slate, and a new slate pencil. The book was crisp and clean, the slate hadn't a mark on it, and the pencil was long and gray and rounded at the end.

Bonnie stood holding them a minute. She wanted to thank Father, but she was so pleased she couldn't say a word. She could only swallow.

"I'll write your name in your book, Bonnie," offered Althy.

"I want Father to write my name," said Bonnie. And Father wrote, "This book belongs to Bonnie."

"I'll cut a B on your slate for you," offered Chris.

"Mother can make the best B," said Bonnie. "I want her to cut it." And Mother borrowed Father's knife and cut a B on the frame of Bonnie's slate.

"I'll carry your book upstairs when I take my tablet and pencil," offered Emmy.

"I can take it myself, thank you," said Bonnie.

She tucked the first reader under her arm and held it tightly.

Chris watched her. "You'd think nobody ever had a book before," he said.

"I never had a book before," Bonnie told him.

Debby opened the book a crack and peeped inside. "Oh, look!" she cried. "There's Chicken Licken! I'll read it to you, Bonnie. Want me to?"

Bonnie thumbed through the book. True enough, there was Chicken Licken running for his life in fear that the sky might fall on him. Farther on Bonnie caught sight of the wolf huffing and

puffing at the little pig's house. Farther still, Goldilocks was falling sound asleep in Baby Bear's bed.

Bonnie closed the book tightly. "I can read it myself," she said.

She carried the book, the slate, and the pencil upstairs and put them in her knapsack. Then she slung the knapsack across her shoulder. Wherever she went for the rest of the day, the knapsack with the book, the slate and the pencil inside, went with her.

At sundown, when she went with Althy to the mountain pasture to bring home the cows, the knapsack went too. When she carried in stovewood for Mother, she slung the knapsack on her back so that it would not get dirty. She ate supper with the knapsack in her lap.

When Bonnie was getting ready for bed, she took the book, the slate and the pencil out of the knapsack, and looked at them. With the pencil she made one long white mark on the slate. She thumbed through the book until she found Chicken Licken running for his life in fear that the sky might fall on him.

Then she put everything back in the knapsack, laid the knapsack beside her pillow, and got into bed.

She went to sleep singing softly in the dark a song she made for herself: "Just one more day till Monday morning, one more day till Monday."

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