

An excerpt from
Happy Little Family
by Rebecca Caudill

1. Crack-the-Whip

It was January, and the morning was very cold. Icicles hung from the porch roof in a stiff ruffle. Sparrows sat hunched in the bare branches of the cherry tree, saying nothing. Only the wind made a noise. It howled down the mountain and whistled through the valley. It moaned in the pine trees and roared at the kitchen door. And everywhere it blew, it swept snowflakes before it and left them in deep white drifts.

That was outdoors. Indoors the morning was warm and cheery. A big fire burned in the fireplace of the log house and made a roaring noise up the chimney to scare the wind away.

Bonnie stood in front of the fire. First she stood facing the fire and held out her hands to warm them. Then she turned herself around and stood with her back to the fire, and held her hands behind her. Around and around she turned, warming herself.

At one side of the hearth stretched Rover, a yellow and white collie, fast asleep. He snored softly as he slept. The snoring made a cozy sound.

Curled up in Mother's hickory rocking chair lay Whiskers, a big black cat. As Bonnie turned herself the ninth time, Whiskers opened his eyes a slit and looked at her. Then he shut them again and went on sleeping. He purred gently as he slept. The purring made a cozy sound.

Whenever her back was turned to the fire, Bonnie looked out the window. Beyond the road, along the edge of the mountains, wound the river. It was frozen solid, as it was always frozen in January, and people were sliding on the ice. Debby was there, and Emmy. Chris and Althy were there, and Father. Four of the Sawyers were there, three of the Huffs, and all five of the Watterson boys and girls. They made deep scars in the ice with their heavy hobnailed shoes as they slid back and forth, back and forth.

Bonnie blinked her eyes as she watched them. She could have been sliding on the ice too, instead of warming herself by the fire if only Debby and Emmy, Chris and Althy hadn't given her grown-up advice as they buttoned their coats and pulled on their warm mittens.

"Oh, Bonnie, sugar, you can't go," said Debby when she saw Bonnie going for her coat. Debby was six. She was pulling her bright red toboggan cap low over her ears all the while she was talking. "You're too little, Bonnie," said Debby. "You were four only the day before yesterday."

"You'd freeze your toes right off, honey," Emmy told her.

Emmy was Bonnie's favorite sister. Emmy was eight, and twice as big as Bonnie. She could climb to the top of the sycamore tree in the barn lot. She could catch a ball with one hand as easily as Chris, who was ten, and she wasn't afraid of the dark, like Debby. Sometimes Emmy shared her treasures with Bonnie, half and half -- the chestnuts she found on her way home from school, her snail shells, the rag dolls she made. But sliding on the ice was a thing Emmy wouldn't share.

"Shucks, Bonnie, you've got no idea how cold it is out there!" warned Chris.

"You'd just get in the way," said Althy. Althy was twelve.

Even Father, who always walked hand in hand with Bonnie when they went to the mountains looking for wintergreen or sweet wild strawberries, seemed to understand no better than the others that she was now four, and big enough to go sliding on the ice.

Father, pulling on big brown mittens, smiled down at Bonnie and said nothing at all.

So Bonnie stayed home by the fire, warming herself. All the while she listened wistfully to the merry shouting that came from the river and did not once notice how softly Rover snored as he slept, nor how gently Whiskers purred as he lay curled up in Mother's rocking chair.

As Bonnie turned herself the tenth time, Mother came in from the kitchen.

"Br-r-r-r-r!" said Mother, making a noise like the wind. She held her hands out to the fire to warm them. "It must be cold out there on the river," she said.

"Emmy won't freeze her toes off, will she?" asked Bonnie.

"Oh, no," said Mother. "Emmy runs too fast."

"Will Debby?" asked Bonnie.

"Oh, no," said Mother. "Debby runs faster than Emmy."

"I wouldn't freeze my toes if I went skating on the ice, either," said Bonnie. "Would I?"

"I don't believe you would," said Mother.

"May I go skating then, Mother?" begged Bonnie. "I'm big enough. I'm four now."

Mother put her hand under Bonnie's chin. She tilted Bonnie's round face up and looked at it.

"Why, bless me, Bonnie!" she said. "You are four. I hadn't realized what a big girl you are. Run and get your coat."

Bonnie trotted to the kitchen, her coppertoed shoes thudding softly across the bright rag carpet of the living room, clicking across the bare floor of the kitchen.

Hammered into the wall behind the kitchen stove, in a pattern like stair steps, were five nails. The farthest one belonged to Althy, because she was the oldest and could reach the highest. The next one belonged to Chris. The one in the middle belonged to Emmy. The next to the lowest nail belonged to Debby. The lowest of all was Bonnie's.

All the nails were empty except Bonnie's. On her nail hung a blue worsted coat made from an old coat of Father's, and a pair of new mittens, as red as ripe cherries. After Mother had knitted the mittens, she made a special loop on them to hang them by.

Bonnie stood looking at the nails. She might as well try to reach the kitchen ceiling, or the stove pipe, as Althy's nail, she thought. Althy's nail was very high. Chris's nail was high too, and Emmy's. She moved a step farther behind the stove and stood in front of Debby's nail. Being four the day before yesterday, and going on five, she thought she might be able to reach Debby's nail.

She raised herself on the copper toes of her shoes. She stretched as far as her finger tips could reach on the wall. She grunted, and that helped her stretch farther still. But she could not quite reach Debby's nail.

"I'm getting bigger now, and soon I can reach it," she said to herself.

"I'll tie my fascinator around your head to keep your ears warm," Mother told her when she brought her coat and mittens from the kitchen.

"When may I have a toboggan cap, Mother?" asked Bonnie. "A red toboggan, like Debby's, with a white tassel?"

"When you're bigger I'll knit you one," promised Mother.

Crossing the ends of the big blue fascinator under Bonnie's chin, Mother tied them in a bow in the back. "Run along, now," she said.

At the edge of the river Bonnie stopped to watch the others sliding. They were running races on the ice and playing tag. They were whizzing along as fast as the wind. They were laughing and shouting to one another--Althy and Chris, Emmy and Debby, the four Sawyers, the three Huffs, the five Wattersons and Father.

Far up the river Bonnie saw Debby in her red coat. Debby took a long run on the ice, planted her feet firmly, one a little in front of the other, spread her arms wide and skimmed along like a red autumn leaf flying in the wind.

Out on the ice walked Bonnie. Being four, and going on five, she was sure she could skate as well as Debby. She took one step. Two steps. Half a dozen steps. Then she planted her feet just as she had seen Debby do, one a little in front of the other. Nothing happened at all.

Once more she watched as Debby came skimming along on the ice. Once more she tried. Three steps. Four steps. Five steps. Not quite running steps like Debby's, but hurrying steps, in between running and walking. Six steps. Seven steps. Then a push to set herself going.

Plop! Both feet flew from under her. Both copper toes shot into the air.

Bonnie lay very still a moment, wanting to cry; but four was too big for crying, she decided. So she got to her feet again on the slippery ice, and looked once more for Debby.

Down, down the river came Debby, her arms spread wide.

"Debby!" called Bonnie.

"Hi there, Bonnie!" shouted Debby, waving to her. "Watch me skate, Bonnie! Did Mother say you could come?"

Without waiting for an answer, Debby took another run-and-go, and slid away, down the river.

Bonnie blinked her eyes after Debby. Father had said Debby was such a good skater he thought he ought to buy a pair of metal skates for her like a pair he had once seen in the town across the mountains. Then Debby could whiz by so fast she wouldn't look like a girl. She would look like a bright red bird flying down the river. Father was proud of Debby's skating.

Remembering the skates Father was going to bring to Debby, Bonnie felt almost as small as three, which, when one is four, is very small.

"Never mind," she said to herself. "I'll find Emmy. Emmy will help me."

Down the river came Emmy. Emmy was sliding even faster than Debby, but she fell down twice.

"Emmy!" called Bonnie.

At the sound of Bonnie's voice, Emmy swung about. She ran over to Bonnie, her eyes shining.

"Oh, Bonnie!" she laughed. "Don't you look sweet, all tied up in Mother's fascinator! Did Mother say you could come, honey? Watch me skate!"

And Emmy was off down the river after Debby.

Bonnie looked for Althy. Althy was doing fancy stunts on the ice. She glided along with her hands behind her. Then, with her hands over her head, she slid along first on one foot, then on the other. Althy was proud of her skating.

"Oh, Althy!" Bonnie called.

Althy put both feet on the ice and came to a stop.

"Bonnie!" she said. Her voice sounded grown up and scolding. "You'd better run back to the house before you freeze. Did Mother say you could come?"

Without another word, Althy lifted one foot and slid away on the other.

A lump that felt like a cry lump stuck in Bonnie's throat. Maybe Chris would hold her hand, she thought, until she could get her feet going on the ice. Chris was racing with Andy Watterson. They were running on the ice, whizzing around curves, cutting sharp corners.

"Chris, will you help me?" Bonnie called, when he came close enough to hear.

Chris, flying along with Andy at his coattail, shouted, "Look out there, Bonnie! Better get out of the way! Hey, did Mother say you could come?"

At last Father spied Bonnie. He slid across the river straight to her.

"How did you get here, Bonnie?" he asked, smiling down at her. But he didn't stop for an answer. "Wait a minute," he said, "until I come back."

Before Andy Watterson could catch Chris, or Althy could twirl on her toes twelve times, Father came back. On one arm he carried Mother's three-legged kitchen chair. On the other arm was a warm red blanket.

"That for me?" called Bonnie.

"It's for you," said Father. "You're going skating."

Father unfolded the blanket. He spread it on the chair and lifted Bonnie into it. Then he wrapped her up snugly until all that showed of her were her blue eyes and her small red nose.

"Ready?" asked Father. "Here we go!"

Pushing the chair in front of him, Father slid out to the middle of the river.

"Look at Bonnie!" shouted Debby, who whizzed by just then. Quickly she wheeled about, caught one of Father's hands, and skated along with him.

"Look at Bonnie!" cried Emmy. She caught Debby's hand.

Althy glided to them on one foot, and took Emmy's hand.

"Hey! Let's play crack-the-whip!" shouted Chris. He took Althy's hand. "Come on, Andy! Come on, everybody! Let's play crack-the-whip!"

Down the river they glided--Father and Debby and Emmy, Althy and Chris, the four Sawyers, the three Huffs and the five Wattersons. Flying over the ice, at the head of line, sat Bonnie in Mother's kitchen chair, her eyes dancing, her small nose growing redder and redder every minute in the wind.

Up the river and down they went. Up the river and down.

At every turn Father pulled hard on Debby's hand, and the long line went flying wide like the lashing of a whip. Every time Father cracked the whip, Chris and Althy, one of the Huffs, half of the Sawyers and all five of the Wattersons fell sprawling on the ice.

"Like it, Bonnie?" asked Father.

Bonnie was too muffled up to make a sound, but she nodded her head and wiggled the blanket with her feet to tell Father it was the most fun she had had since the day before yesterday, when she was four.

Then, suddenly, she didn't like it any more. Only little girls, girls of two and three, were pushed about in kitchen chairs over the ice, she remembered. Big girls like Debby skimmed away on their own feet. She decided she wouldn't ride in a chair again. Riding in a chair, she would never grow as big as Debby.

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