



Suckering the tobacco seemed more bearable this year, for we knew that within a month school would be starting. As we worked, we chatted away, full of anticipation about starting high school, our excitement growing with each passing day.

“Mrs. Bender hasn’t mentioned anything about school or about getting us new clothes,” I noted. “And school starts soon.”

“Oh, she’ll probably leave it until the last minute,” Joan said. “And besides, we’ll probably have to finish the harvest before we start high school. I doubt if we’ll be able to start on time.” We grimaced at that thought.

“I sure hope she buys us some new coats. My arms stick out of my sleeves by a foot,” Jean complained. “I look like a scarecrow, and there’s only one button left on it.”

Joan was right. We were in the midst of harvesting the tobacco crops and still nothing had been said about starting school. As we gathered in our rooms one evening wondering what was in store for us, the stairway door opened and Mr. Bender shouted up to us: "Bonnie, come down here for a minute. Your mom wants a few words with you."

My stomach tightened as I slid off the bed and straightened my clothes. "What could she possibly want me for now?"

"Did you do or say something wrong?" Betty asked.

"I don't think so," I said, shaking my head and chewing my nails. "But we don't have to do anything wrong to get in trouble with them. They'll blame us for something anyway."

"If you need help, just holler," Jean said, trying to cheer me. "I'll come and take a round out of them."

"We're gonna eavesdrop down the stovepipe just in case," Joan said.

Leaning over the rail, they watched as I walked haltingly down the steps.

I was scheming to leave the door open a bit, but as I stepped out into the kitchen, Mrs. Bender said, "And you can close that door."

Everything looked like a setup, and I felt as if I were walking into a trap. Mr. Bender was sitting in his chair, a bottle of beer at his elbow and his belt coiled on top of the green plastic radio as if he wanted me to see it. What caught my attention next was the white pad of lined paper on the table with a pen lying across it and Mrs. Bender standing stiffly beside an empty chair, holding what looked like a letter in her hand. I checked their faces, looking for a clue of what they had planned for me. They looked somber, almost guilty. For a brief moment we faced each other, no one speaking.

"Get over here and sit down," Mrs. Bender commanded, her voice a bit strained as she adjusted the chair in front of the pad of paper.

“Did I do something wrong?” I asked, easing reluctantly into the chair.

“No,” Mr. Bender said. “Your mom wants you to write a letter to the Children’s Aid. She’s already prepared it for you.”

“Me?” I questioned, putting my hand on my chest and becoming more bewildered and frightened by the moment. “W . . . what about?”