

# *The Summer of My Discontent*

Monday August 10, 1981

Dane

I squinted in the bright light, trying to make out the lettering of the road sign in the distance. Stinging sweat ran into my eyes, making them water. I pushed my bangs off my forehead and my hand came away dripping, as if I'd just plunged it into a pot of hot water. I wiped my fingers on my already sweat soaked t-shirt.

"Damn it!" I said out loud, then stripped off my shirt and wrung it. Droplets of perspiration fell onto the sticky, liquid asphalt. I could almost hear them steam.

My head swam from the pounding sunlight. I covered it with my shirt, now stinking of sweat and underarm odor. I needed to get out of the blistering sun before I started hallucinating or somethin'. I screwed my eyes half shut, looking toward the sign. It was closer now and I could make out some of the letters – V-E-R...damn it. I kept my feet going, one in front of the other, hot tar sticking to my heels, threatening to suck my shoes off. Closer. Closer. V-E-R...O-N-A. Verona. Civilization at last!

Several paces later I came to the sign itself. Just beyond it was nothing—absolutely nothing. Perhaps I was a bit hasty in proclaiming this civilization. There were only trees and bushes and plowed fields of pathetic corn withering in the sun. I forced my feet forward. They felt as if they'd spontaneously combust in my shoes. The heat of the sun reflecting off the asphalt seared my bare legs. Heat, heat, and more heat assailed me from both above and below. My throat was parched. I needed water—ice cold water and air conditioning. Yeah.

A few houses gradually came into view and then the spaces between each one and its neighbor lessened until the country became a town. Giant oaks sheltered me, but I still felt as if I were standing on the surface of the sun. Soon, my tired feet were treading on a sidewalk, passing block after block of decades-old homes surrounded by huge trees and delicious shade. Just when I thought my aching legs couldn't hold me up any longer, the business district came into view. Up ahead I could see a large park off to the left and a few businesses across the street. I saw what must have been an old movie theatre, judging from the marquee. Closer still were a couple of restaurants—one that looked a bit fancy, called *The Park's Edge* and one that was obviously some kind of burger joint, *Ofarim's*. I squeezed into my shirt and quickened my pace.

I pulled open the glass door of *Ofarim's* and was inundated by cool air and the scent of French fries and sizzling burgers. I walked up to the counter and ordered a double-cheeseburger, fries, and the biggest drink they had. While I waited on my food I took my cup over to the soda dispenser, filled it with ice and then water. I'd have some Coke with my burger, but for the moment I needed water. I could almost feel my body soaking it in, as if I were a dried out sponge. I gulped down two full extra-large cups before my lunch was ready.

I sat down at a booth that would've been at home in a 1950's diner. In fact, the whole place kind of had that look, with red checked tablecloths and matching curtains. There was a jukebox along one wall and a lot of old rock & roll and Marilyn Monroe photos and posters. But I was far more interested in my food and the cool air. I felt as if I'd narrowly escaped a nasty death in a desert and was now resting comfortably in an oasis.

When my burger arrived at last, I realized I was starving. I didn't rush my meal, however, as I was in no hurry to go back out into the blistering heat. Now that I'd arrived in a real town I had no place to go. This was my destination. Now I had only to find a place to sleep and then...and then I'd see what happened next.

I smiled. I was glad to get away from home. It was without doubt the most boring place in the entire world—no, make that the entire universe. I only wished I'd left sooner. I was a moron for not leaving at the beginning of the summer, instead of the very end. Each monotonous day had been filled with nothing except longing and unfulfilled need. It was a wonder I hadn't been driven mad. No matter, I was outta there at last.

After the last French fry had disappeared, I refilled my cup with Coke and ordered a large ice cream cone. I resisted the temptation to take it across the street to the park because I knew it was still sweltering outside. I was all comfortable and cool in *Ofarim's* and it gave me the illusion that deadly heat wasn't ready to pounce on me as soon as I stepped out the door. I sat back down in the booth, feeling the fizz in my mouth as I alternated between bites of ice cream and sips of Coke.

After I'd munched up the last of the cone, I just sat back and listened to the jukebox playing some old song I didn't recognize. I didn't stir until I got too bored to sit there any longer. I refilled my cup, making sure I loaded up on ice, and walked outside.

The heat was waiting on me like a fierce, sinewy dragon that blasted me with its flames as soon as I left the safety of *Ofarim's*, leaving my flesh scorched and stinging. I stepped quickly across the street to reach the shade under the trees. I gazed around at the park, sipping now and then on my Coke, sticking my nose nearly into the cup to feel the coolness of the ice. It was a large park, with plenty of benches upon which to sit and think, or watch passersby. The grass was even somewhat green under the trees, but it was dry and brown wherever the sun touched it. The flowers in the flowerbeds were puny and wilted. The drought that had lasted all summer was taking its toll.

"Mind if I have a sip?"

I jumped. I was lost enough in thought that I didn't know anyone was near. My attention was held by the sickly flowers and a group of shirtless boys on the distant basketball courts playing hoops. I jerked my head around and my eyes fell on an older boy of about nineteen. He was taking a drag on a cigarette and peering at me intently as if studying me. I felt almost naked under his gaze.

"Uh—yeah, sure," I said.

I looked him over as he drank much more than a sip. The first thing I noticed was his chest, which was bare, revealing hard muscle and smooth skin that made me breathe a little faster. He had a strong stomach, with abs that I could easily see. His shirt hung at his side and he was wearing worn jeans with a big hole ripped about mid-thigh on the right. His shoes were old Nikes, scuffed and worn.

"Ahh, that's what I needed," he said, handing me back my much lighter cup.

"You're welcome," I said.

He touched his upper lip with his tongue and gazed at me without smiling. "Well, I have places to be," he said and left without so much as waiting for a response. I watched his broad, sweaty back as he departed; realizing that I'd sprung a boner talking to him. I rearranged it and

hoped he hadn't noticed. I doubted it. He seemed much more interested in my Coke than in me.

I hadn't asked his name. There hadn't been time. I wished I'd asked. His body and features were burned into my mind. He had a nice bod—that was for sure—all those muscles. Yum. He was all nice and bulging and tight, without being all gross like some guys who got too built. His face haunted me. He wasn't cute or even particularly good looking, but there was something about him... Those probing brown eyes—they made me feel like he knew things about me that even I didn't know. They were kind of scary, too—searching, as if looking for some sign of weakness to exploit. He had a hungry look to him, not like he was hungry for food, or even sex, but hungry for something life wasn't giving him. There was a violence in him, just under the surface. I'd only been near him for a few moments, but I was quite certain he was not someone to mess with. For some reason, that made him even more attractive.

I couldn't pry him out of my mind. Maybe it was because I was bored senseless with absolutely nothing to do, but most likely it was because he fed the hunger in me—the hunger I got when I looked at boys. Usually I went for the pretty-boy type or the jocks. This scruffy, frightening guy drew me to him, however. Maybe it was the danger I sensed, or maybe I was just plain horny and he walked along at the right time. I could just about get turned on by a tree if I was in the right mood.

The sun fell toward the western horizon and the shadows lengthened in the park. I considered exploring the town, but that could wait. Instead, I sat and watched boys playing basketball. I thought about joining in, but I wasn't here to make friends. I had something quite different on my mind.

Later, I walked along the well-tended paths and found myself a secluded bench surrounded almost entirely by shrubs. The park turned a bit eerie as the darkness deepened, but I wasn't afraid. I enjoyed the novelty of it. Anything was better than my exceedingly boring room back home.

As night fell, I lay down. Weariness from a long day's march in the sun put me out, even though the hour was early. I dreamed that night of deserts and shirtless boys in the sun.

## Ethan

Uncle Jack was worried—I could tell. He didn't say anything to me or anyone else, but he was quieter than usual. I caught him more than once looking out over the dying fields—just staring. That wasn't like Jack. He was *always* working.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead with my shirt, then stuffed it back into my belt-loop and took up the hoe once more. Chopping weeds out of the soybeans seemed like a waste of time. I'd never seen such pathetic crops. The beans were puny, almost nonexistent, when they should've been lush and beautiful. The corn stalks were stunted in their growth and the ears were only miniature versions of what they should've been. The wheat was suffering, too. There'd been virtually no rain for far too long, and I feared the Selby Farm was looking at its worst harvest ever.

I needed a break and a few minutes out of the searing sun. I loved working shirtless in the sun, but even I had my limits. I turned my mind from the withering crops and headed for the barn. There was work to do there, too. There was always another task waiting on the farm.

Sure enough, the horses were nearly out of water. I uncoiled the hose and turned on the hydrant. Cool water spilled out of the hose, filling the horse trough. I turned it on myself for a few moments, shivering slightly in the sudden coolness as I doused my torso, and then returned

to the task at hand.

Despite the drought, there was plenty to be happy about. I was surrounded by family and friends. Dave was busy feeding the chickens nearby and Nathan, Brendan, and Casper were elsewhere on the farm, performing their own chores. Uncle Jack was on the tractor, of course. Ardelene, Casper's grandma, was tending the garden that had quickly become her own, no doubt watering it furiously to keep the flowers and vegetables alive. I felt a sense of serenity, knowing that all was well and everyone was where they were meant to be.

It was hard to believe how much things had changed in just a few short months. A little more than a year ago, it was just Uncle Jack and me working the farm. Then, he'd hired Nathan and we slowly became friends and then, all of a sudden, boyfriends. Nathan and his little brother came to live with Jack and me not long after that and our family had doubled in size overnight. In the late spring, Brendan and Casper showed up answering an ad we'd placed in the *Verona Citizen* for farmhands. Uncle Jack hired them and we soon became friends, and then family. The latest addition was Ardelene, who ended up marrying Jack, much to the surprise of all. So here we were, a family of seven where we'd once been two.

After I watered the horses, I headed out of the barn to take a look at the combine. I figured the hoeing could wait. It was early August and it wouldn't be all that long before the harvest would begin—if there was a harvest. Most of it was a few weeks off yet, but I knew how time could slip away. Jack said the combine was starting with difficulty. It was probably just the battery or plugs, but even if it was something simple, it needed to be taken care of. If the problem were more serious, then it was even more important that I get it fixed before it was time to harvest the vast fields of corn, soybeans, and wheat. We couldn't afford to lose a minute when harvest time was upon us.

The problem with the combine turned out to be simple: the plugs were fouled. It took only a few minutes to clean them with gasoline. I gave the rest of the combine the once over, just in case. I reminded myself that I needed to check out the baler soon, too. It'd been acting up a bit and it wouldn't be long at all before we were baling straw and hay once more.

As I worked, I thought about the upcoming wrestling season. It would be the first time since I'd come out that I'd be wrestling on the team. All the guys had known about me for months, but what would it be like in the locker room and showers now that my secret was out? Attending classes with those guys was one thing, but being naked with them was another.

Zac would probably be back on the team. That was too bad. I couldn't look at him without wanting to pound him for all the shit he'd pulled. It was bad enough that he'd left anonymous, threatening notes in my locker for weeks, but trying to blackmail me into throwing the championship match was too much. Of course, things hadn't ended there with Zac, but the less said about that the better. If I thought too much about what he'd done, and what he'd tried to do, I'd have to hunt him down and kick his ass. If it hadn't been for Brandon and Jon... Well, enough of that.

I'd long feared being outed, but my fears hadn't been realized. When I came out to the team, all of them, except for Zac, were supportive. I thought they'd all turn on me, but they didn't. A few guys outside the team gave me some crap, but they knocked it off when I threatened to kick their asses. Being a wrestler had its advantages. I had friends and teammates who would back me up, too. One cool thing about coming out was that I found out who my real friends were.

I still got strange looks sometimes, especially when Nathan and I were together. Public displays of affection aren't allowed at our school, whether gay or straight, but I still gave Nathan a peck on the cheek now and then and sometimes kissed him full on the lips. That usually got a few looks, but no one said anything.

While some of the guys treated me differently, almost all of the girls did. That wasn't a bad thing, though. Girls used to hang around because they were interested in me, but now I had a lot more girls as friends. I think they liked the idea of a friendship with a guy without any sexual overtones. They knew I wasn't interested in their bodies or anything like that. I bet a lot of the straight boys wished they had girls around them like I did, but that wouldn't happen because the girls knew what the straight boys wanted.

I wasn't romantically interested in the girls, but I found that I'd enjoyed my new friendships with them. I still preferred the company of guys, but I enjoyed the best of both worlds. What was really funny is that guys would ask me to set them up with girls. I'd become a sort of go-between. My life was definitely interesting.

My thoughts floated back to Zac. I'd had serious second thoughts about the decision I made the night he jumped Nathan and me. After Brandon, Jon, and I kicked Zac, Devon, and their crew's asses, I let 'em go. I should've called the cops on them and had them locked up. At the time, I just didn't want to deal with it anymore. I'd had weeks of Zac's notes and too many things had happened. I wondered if maybe I'd sent the wrong message to those guys. Even though we threatened to beat them senseless if there was any more trouble, I think we let them off way too easy.

Brandon sure thought we should've done more. Brandon didn't like Zac, because of what he'd pulled, and he *hated* Devon with a vengeance. Brandon had just about killed him for all the crap he'd pulled and the way he had acted after Mark and Taylor's deaths, and he had threatened to kill him if he ever did anything like it again. Devon had kept his distance since then.

The baler checked out okay. There was still plenty of sunlight left, so I walked to the farmhouse, filled up a water-bottle, and then headed back to the fields. Sweat ran off my body in streams. I felt as if I had to drink constantly to keep dehydration at bay. I had cooling thoughts about skinny-dipping in the lake after work. I could almost feel the refreshing water engulf my body. Maybe Nathan would be able to join me.

## Casper

I was exhausted as Brendan led me to our bedroom. I barely had the energy to pull off my clothes. Something about working in the intense heat just sucked the energy right out of me. I was too tired to even make love, and that's saying something!

Brendan lay on his back on top of the sheets. It was too hot for any covers. He slept naked and he was one beautiful sight. I still couldn't believe he loved me. I felt like I was in a Cinderella story. I'd definitely ended up with the prince, or, in my case, with the hunky football player with a heart of gold.

I hugged Brendan. He pulled me to him and cradled my head on his bare chest. He wrapped his arms around me, holding me tight and petting my hair. He made me feel safe. I could feel the powerful muscles of his chest against my cheek. Brendan was my boyfriend and my protector. When he held me, I felt secure—and loved.

"I wish I wasn't so tired," I said, sleepily.

"And why's that?" asked Brendan, as if he didn't know.

I giggled. "I'm sure you can figure it out."

"There's always tomorrow."

"Promise."

“First thing.”

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The next morning I awakened beside Brendan. He was awake and just laying there with his arm around me. I crawled up on him and kissed him. Touching his hard body made my heart race. I wondered if he could feel my stiffness against his leg.

“Go take a quick shower,” he said, “and then get back here.”

I had my answer. I looked down at Brendan’s waist as I slipped off the bed. His manhood was standing straight up. I grasped it for a moment and Brendan moaned.

“No fair—now hurry, I’ve already showered.” I noticed then that his hair was damp.

My weariness of the night before was gone. I rushed through a quick shower, feeling like I might explode at any second. I didn’t even bother to dress after I’d dried off. I just hurried down the hall nude and joined Brendan in our bed. He lay there naked. He was beautiful. I jumped on top of him and covered his face with kisses, then lay full length on top of him, feeling his hardness against my own. We started rubbing against each other and it was almost more pleasure than I could bear.

Sometimes, we made slow, unhurried love, but not that morning. We frantically went after each other, our hands and lips seemed to be everywhere at once. We writhed on the bed and I lost myself in Brendan’s embrace. In less than ten minutes, we were both done.

I lay back in Brendan’s arms panting, feeling his chest quickly rise and fall. He held me close. I smiled. I knew I was lucky to have such a kind, strong boyfriend that I loved so deeply. The fact that he was gorgeous and awesome in bed didn’t hurt matters either.

We pulled on boxers and shorts and went downstairs. Jack, Ethan, and Nathan were gone, but Dave sat at the table munching on hot buttered toast and Grandma was bustling about the kitchen.

“Where are the guys?” asked Brendan.

“Working,” answered Dave, with a mouthful of toast, “and Jack’s gone into town for somethin’.” It figured that Ethan and Nathan were already working. Brendan and I were running a little late because of our love-making, quick as it had been.

“Want me to fix you boys some breakfast?” asked Grandma.

“No thanks,” I said. “We’ll do our own. I’m sure you have more than enough to do.”

“That’s for certain,” said Grandma, as she filled the sink with water and prepared to do the dishes. I sure liked having Grandmother around. I didn’t feel like I’d had any real family since my Mom died.

I cut us thick slices of homemade bread, buttered them, and then stuck them in the toaster-oven while Brendan made some hot tea.

“So what are you up to today, Davy?” asked Brendan.

“Dunno. I’m gonna feed the chickens, then... whatever.”

“Maybe we can all go fishing this evening after we’re done with work,” said Brendan. “I’m gonna catch one bigger than you this time!”

“Yeah, right!” said Dave. “Last time all you caught was that little bluegill—looked like a guppy.” He giggled.

“Yeah, well, we’ll see who gets the biggest this time.”

Dave smiled. Brendan was good with him. I guess Dave was kinda like the little brother he

never had. We all tried to take care of Dave. Jack was like a father to him, and Dave had taken up with my grandma like she was his own—almost as if she were his mother. I didn't mind. I knew Grandma loved me—I could share.

I smeared blackberry jam on my toast while I talked with Brendan and Dave. It was nice to have a family. Living with the Selbys wasn't anything like it'd been living back home in Kentucky. After my mom died, it was like I didn't have a dad anymore. He just kind of ignored me. And then there was Jason, my older brother. I wish he had ignored me. I thought of him for a moment, sitting in the *Cloverdale Center*—a “hospital” where they tried to turn gays straight. It was kind of ironic that my brother had ended up there. He was probably the biggest homophobe alive. But, after the horrible things he'd done to me...I didn't want to even think about it. All I knew was that I felt a lot safer with him locked up.

After we'd eaten, Brendan headed off to join Ethan, and Dave went to care for his chickens. I grabbed a hoe from the tool shed and walked to the garden. The neat rows of flowers and vegetables were almost free of weeds—partly because it was so dry even the weeds had trouble growing, but mostly because Grandma liked to keep the garden...she had a word for it that I couldn't quite remember. Imac... I'd looked it up in the dictionary. It was...immaculate. Yeah, that was it. I liked to help Grandma with the garden whenever I could. It was so peaceful. Whenever I had troubles, I spent some time in the garden, tending the peppers and sweet peas, and after a while my problems started to melt away.

I found a few small weeds that had dared to pop up from the tilled earth, but not many. I hoed them under, then went for the watering can. Watering the garden had become a full time job. The green beans, peas, tomatoes, peppers, and other vegetables were coming along nicely, but only because Grandma and I watered them daily. The flowers were beautiful, too—Zinnias, Marigolds, and a whole bunch of other kinds that I couldn't name. It was Grandma who'd added most of the flowers when she'd come to live on the farm. She said a garden should not only be productive; it should be beautiful, too.

I filled the old galvanized watering can at the hydrant by the tool shed and carried it to the closest row of peas. Even though it was morning, the weather was fine and hot with not a cloud in the sky. It must've been 80 already and the temperature would likely climb close to 100. The thirsty peas soaked up the water greedily. If only there was a way to let the good plants have the water and keep it from the weeds. I couldn't figure that one out, however.

I stopped and dug my hands into the earth. The dirt was dry on top and fell through my fingers like coarse sand. Farther down, it was darker, cooler, and retained a bit of moisture. I loved the aroma of the earth and plants that surrounded me. The scent of a tomato plant in the hot sun meant summer to me. Tomato plants might not smell as good as flowers, but when that scent came to me it brought with it images of sunshine and living, growing, green life. Grandma said it was a sign that I was a true gardener. I didn't doubt it one bit.

On my third trip to the peas, I thought of something—Grandma always did the watering in the late evening. I remember she said she did it then so the water wouldn't just evaporate in the sun. I smacked my head with my open palm. What was I thinking? Duh! I'd been so content working with the plants that what I was doing didn't cross my mind. After I emptied the watering can, I put it back up, having decided that I'd better follow Grandma's advice. She knew best.

Brendan

I'd little more than found Ethan and Nathan when Dave came running up to us. "Jack says to come to the house. We're having a family meeting."

Ethan and I looked at each other. I didn't know if I liked the sound of this—a family meeting in the morning? That kind of thing was usually after the day had ended. Ethan and Nathan dropped the axes they'd been using to clear some of the new land and we followed Dave back to the farmhouse.

When we arrived, Jack, Ardelene, and Casper were all sitting at the kitchen table. For some reason, I felt a knot of fear in my chest as I took my seat beside my boyfriend.

"We have a money problem," said Jack. "There are some debts and not enough money in the bank to pay them."

We all looked at each other.

"What happened?" asked Ethan. "I thought we were doing well."

"We were, but it's this drought...the loan officer doesn't want to extend our loan. He doesn't seem to think we can pull out any kind of harvest and I can't say I disagree with him. We're looking at a year's worth of expenses and no crops to show for it."

"Is it that bad?" asked Nathan.

"Even if we got a good rain right now, we'd be lucky to get 20% of the yield we did last year, even figuring in all the new acreage we put in production. I knew I shouldn't have tried to expand, but the price was just too good and it isn't often that land comes up for sale right next to the farm."

Jack looked angry. He was angry at himself.

"So we could lose all the new acreage?" asked Ethan.

"Worse than that. We could lose everything. The loan for the new land was secured by a mortgage on the farm."

Ethan looked ill. "But surely we can keep up the payments?"

"With what?" asked Jack, a little more angrily than he probably meant. "Our only income comes from the farm and it looks like there'll be no harvest this year. I've just used practically everything that's in the bank to keep our heads above water, but that'll only keep the bank off our backs for a few days."

"Could we sell some cattle?" asked Nathan.

"I've already sold as many as I dare. If I sell anymore, we'll be out of the cattle business. It may come to that. We may have to sell the cattle, the goats, the sheep, and the horses." Ethan looked like he was about ready to cry.

I'd noticed that quite a lot of cattle were being sold off, but I hadn't thought there was anything unusual in it.

"You won't sell the chickens, will you?" asked Dave, almost in a panic. I knew he was thinking of his little hen, Henrietta.

"No, Dave, we won't sell the chickens." Jack very nearly smiled at Dave, despite the gravity of the situation.

"You have some money, don't you, Grandma?" asked Casper.

"Not enough, Clint. Social Security is about all I've got." I knew things were serious. Casper was rarely called by his real name.

I wished I could get to my money, but my father had managed to tie most of it up in a trust fund that I couldn't touch until I was twenty-one. I wasn't sure how he'd managed it, since it was my money, but he was a powerful man. My guess was that he'd done it somehow before I turned eighteen. I was willing to bet he'd tried to steal it from me, but couldn't manage it, so he'd tied it

up for as long as he could. I did have some money, though. There was one savings account he either hadn't found out about, or hadn't been able to touch. I hadn't dared touch it before I turned eighteen either. My father would've known exactly where I was if I did and I'd have been sent back to the *Cloverdale Center*.

"How much do we need to keep the bank from foreclosing for now?" I asked.

"Ten thousand dollars," said Jack.

"Ten thousand!" said Ethan.

"I've got it—or nearly," I said. "My parents have cut me off from most of my money, but I had a lot put away. I have just about what we'll need—maybe not quite enough, but I know I had more than \$9,000 in my savings and with the interest, it'll be close to \$10,000."

"I can't let you do that," said Jack. "It's your money. I appreciate the offer, but..."

"Jack, Casper and I are living here. We're not paying rent. We're not paying for food. I've got the money and we need it right now. The way I see it, it's as simple as that."

"You don't pay rent and don't pay for food because you work here. What's more, you're family. I can't take your money. It's not right."

If the situation hadn't been so frightening I would've smiled. Jack called Casper and me family. I knew Jack was legally adopting Casper, but he'd never referred to us as family before.

"Okay, we're family—all the more reason for you to take the money."

"No," said Jack, "with that money, you could go somewhere else and make a new start. You'll need it for college. You'll..."

"I don't want to go somewhere else!" I said, far too loudly. "I want to stay right here! This is my home and if I can help to save it with a few dollars then I'm damn well gonna do it!"

I swallowed hard. I'd gotten outta control. No one talked to Jack like that. I looked at him fearfully. "Listen," I said more calmly, "you're the boss, but I'll be damned if I let some bank take the farm away when I can save it. You're taking the money and that's that."

Ethan smiled and looked at Jack, who remained silent. Jack rubbed his chin.

"We'll call it a loan," he said, finally. "I'll have my lawyer draw up legal papers. That way if we do go under, you'll be one of the farm's creditors and have a chance of getting it back."

I nodded. I knew there was little use in arguing with Jack. I'll already pressed my luck about as far as it could go.

"That still leaves us with day to day expenses," said Jack. "I've racked my brains, but I don't know how we'll keep this place going. Any ideas on how we handle that?"

Everyone sat and thought for several moments. There was no easy answer. "I'll get a job," said Ethan.

"I will, too," I added.

"There's a problem with that," said Jack. "We still have a farm to run."

"How about me?" said Casper. Everyone looked at him. "I'm not that much help on the farm. I'm not strong enough to handle a lot of it. I could get a job and bring in some money and still have time to tend the garden and help out some."

"Casper," said Ethan, "you're a lot of help. Don't sell yourself short."

"Well, maybe I do help, but I'm just sayin' I can't do a lot of the stuff that you guys do. You've gotta admit I'm small, and I'm kinda puny. I'm not puttin' myself down. I've even been getting stronger from farm work, but I'm the one we can do without most easily, so it just makes sense that I go out and bring in some money. I want to contribute and this way I can."

"I could get a job, too," said Nathan. "What you said goes for me, Casper. I'm not putting

myself down either, but Ethan and Brendan are by far the strongest and most capable for the farm work. And Jack, well, this place can't run without you. Casper and I can bring in the bacon and the rest of you can grow the corn."

We talked it out for a very, very long time, but everyone agreed in the end. Casper and Nathan would each find a job and bring in cash to pay the bills and expenses, while the rest of us kept the farm running. I was so proud of Casper.

"Can we take the truck into town and start looking?" asked Casper.

"I can drive," said Nathan.

"Okay," said Jack. "And the rest of us can get to work."

Before we each went our separate ways, Jack pulled me to the side and shook my hand. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this, son."

"It's no more than I owe you for taking us in," I said. I left before he had a chance to argue.