

# Wild Dog Summer

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## Chapter 1

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It all happened so fast, I hardly realized what was going on. One minute I was standing beside my mother at Reiser's while she ordered the week's supply of meat and the next thing I knew she was telling Mr. Reiser, in this very cold high-pitched voice, to hold her order, she'd be back for it later. She grabbed me by the arm and jerked it so hard it hurt. Then we were out on the sidewalk in the hot sun.

I blinked. Mom was already ahead of me, marching up the sidewalk towards the crossroads, her back hard and straight, as if she'd just won a war or something.

"Come on, Betty Jane," she called over her shoulder in that voice I had come to hate.

I took a step, then glanced back into Reiser's shop. Mr. Reiser was still standing behind the counter where we had left him. In fact, he still had about a pound of hamburger in his hand. He was staring out the door with a funny expression on his

face, as if he'd just witnessed something he'd never seen before.

Craig was still standing there, too. His eyes met mine for a split second, before I turned and hurried up the street after my mother. I thought I saw tears in his eyes. Of course, I couldn't be sure, not with the glaring June sun bouncing off the sidewalk and reflecting off the windows. It might have been just my imagination.

Back at home, Mom was silent. However, with cupboard doors banging all over the place, I decided to go out for some peace and quiet. I called to her that I was taking the dog for a walk but didn't get any answer.

In the old days, before the accident, she would have told me to be careful, or have fun, or something. Now, she didn't say anything. Dad said she was grieving, and we had to be patient with her, because it would take a while.

"Are you grieving too, Dad?" I had asked him when he told me that. I had looked into his face and tried to find signs of his grief, a clue that would tell me he felt as badly as Mom and I did.

"Yes, Squirt, I'm grieving, too," he had said, and turned away. But not without giving my shoulder a squeeze.

I walked across the backyard with my dog Butch jumping around at my feet. He gets all excited when he knows we're going off into the bush. Joe used to say Butch was our little brother. That was a pretty good description because Butch does jump around and look at you with a big dopey smile on his face,

just like some slobbering little kid.

As I walked along the creek toward the bush at the back of Martins' farm, I thought about what had happened at Reiser's.

Mom and I were standing there while Mr. Reiser measured out the hamburger. He'd already packed some pork chops, ribs and a roast beef. Mom and he were talking about the weather, as usual.

Then Mr. Reiser asked me about my job with the newspaper. "So what are you getting to write about this week, BJ?" he asked with a grin. "Graduation dance, maybe?"

"No way," I said scornfully. "That wasn't news! "It's the water ban this week."

"Oh, of course," Mr. Reiser said, and he winked at my mother.

There had been no rain for two weeks and the hot sunny weather had dried up most of the community wells. The grass was all brown and the gardens wilting, so people kept turning on their lawn sprinklers. The Township had issued an order that we couldn't use our sprinklers until further notice, but some people, especially in the new subdivision that used to be old Mr. Conrad's cornfield, weren't cooperating. So *that* was my big news for the week.

I was explaining all this to Mr. Reiser when we heard the bell over the door. Somebody came in and stood behind us.

"How're you today, Craig?" Mr. Reiser asked.

"Fine, thanks," said Craig Hannaford. "Hello, Mrs. Kelsey. Hi, BJ."

There was a silence. I looked at my mother. She

had turned to look when the door opened, then immediately snapped forward again and stared straight ahead. She was frozen as still as an ice statue and just as white, too. I looked over my shoulder at Craig. He was watching her, sort of frozen, too. You could tell he really wanted her to say something.

All she said was, "I'll be round for that later, Dan. Come along, Betty Jane."

She grabbed my arm as if I were a little kid in kindergarten. Just as we went past Craig, I tried to jerk free and accidentally hit him in the arm. But as I looked up at him to say something – and I really wanted to say something to him, because he looked so miserable – she yanked me again. The bell on the door rang crazily, the door slammed, and I was standing out on the sidewalk watching her walk quickly up the street ahead of me.

She wouldn't stand next to Craig Hannaford. She wouldn't stay in the same room. She hated him because of what he did to Joe.

I guess I should have hated him too, but I didn't. Before the accident, I used to think Craig was the nicest of Joe's friends, and the cutest one. When he wasn't home helping his Dad with the chores, he hung around our house a lot. He and Joe were always up to something – playing ball, working on Craig's car, shooting baskets down at the schoolyard. He was usually nice to me, not ignoring me the way the rest of those guys did. Joe's little sister. They were all jerks anyway. Craig, well, he could be a jerk too, especially with snowballs! I liked him, though, and he and Joe were best friends.

But Craig was driving the car, you see.

And Joe died.

Joe wasn't wearing a seatbelt and went through the windshield. He died instantly, the police said. The boys had been drinking.

The other boy, Peter, from a farm up near Elmira, was badly hurt but came out of it all right. Craig hardly had a scratch. He was the only one wearing a seatbelt.

So my mother hated him. She called him "that murdering kid," that is, whenever she talked about it. In a way I could understand why she hated him. I felt funny when I saw him walking down the street towards me, because I really didn't want to talk to him anymore. But I didn't think he was a murderer, like the people you read about in the paper. He had gone to jail, or something like jail, for a while. Not for long, though, because people stood up for him in court and said what a good boy he was most of the time.

My mother had insisted on going to court, too. I remember when it was all over, and they came home, my mother sat at the kitchen table all slumped over.

"They should put that murderer away forever," she said very quietly.

"Go to your room, BJ." My father spoke softly and gave me a little push. "I'll look after Mom now and be up to see you later."

I remembered that night as I walked into the quiet shade of Martins' woods. Butch ran ahead sniffing, sticking his nose up into the air, and diving into the ferns and stuff along the path. He was smiling his

head off.

“Find a squirrel, Butch!” I told him. He barked, sort of like a laugh, and went diving off into the underbrush again.

It was shady in the woods and quiet except for Butch. Peaceful. It’s one of the places I go when I want to think. The other place, my favourite place, is Martins’ old barn, but I didn’t think I should take Butch there. He’d start digging things up and scaring the birds.

I walked along slowly and thought about Joe. It was almost a year. June 29th. The end of school. They had gone out to celebrate the end of school.

Monday would be the last Monday of the school year for me. The long summer months stretched out ahead. This summer would have to be better than last summer. Everything had been so crazy after the accident. The funeral, Mom going off the deep end.

*The summer without Joe*, I thought, as I whistled to Butch and started back towards home. *I miss him so much.*