



THE ISLAND

Book 1 of The Cliffside Chronicles

by

Larry M. Belmont

© 2024 Pigasus Productions LLC

FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

“We should have a special place nobody else can go/And we should know the things that nobody else should know.”

- *Old 70s pop song*

PROLOGUE

No one over a certain age in these parts knows the story of the Lost Alamo, or how it got its name. Let alone the real reason it eventually had to be sealed shut. Certainly not the reason local parents were given. And how what ended there began on the island.

A few local kids, grown up now but still living in the Landing, know the true story. They're the type of adults who still believe in certain things, mostly because they were the kinds of kids that read scary stories like this one. More than once. In bed, by the glow of a flashlight, with the covers pulled tight over their heads. Kids that built every monster model that Aurora ever made, treated every movie shown on Chiller Theatre as a documentary, and considered Bram Stoker's DRACULA a survival manual. Because the Lost Alamo, everything that happened when it became the center of the universe for me and my friends who almost died on the island back in August 1970, and what we thought at the time was our last stand, and indeed was for some of us, is hard to believe even now, almost 55 years later.

Stories like this one have been whispered to younger kids by older ones on the Cliffside for years. They used to be called campfire stories or tall tales; now they're called urban legends. I was one of those older kids, and I told parts of this story more than a few times to a tent full of little squirts camping out in a backyard during my teenage years. I held back on the really bad parts. A few always acted like they didn't believe it, but those were always the first ones who would get spooked at the slightest sound outside the tent and run inside. It's a story with some good parts that'll always remind me of what was once like to be a kid during those endless summers of my early adolescence. But it also reminds me of what it meant to believe in monsters, before that gets schooled out of you and you let your guard down. Because, make no mistake, in the Summer of 1970 a real monster came to Cornwall Landing.

Before my friend Sam Bennett moved to the Landing and started the club that he christened the Cliffsiders, what became known as the Lost Alamo wasn't called anything. Few kids knew about it and most adults had forgotten it was even there. The most commonly told story was that it was a fallout shelter that old man Lemnitzer built back in 1949, after he'd heard that the Russians finally got the A-bomb. I'd even heard that from Mr. Orlandi, the barber my Dad forced me and Sam to go every June, the day after school got out, for our ritual summer

buzzcuts. Mr. Orlandi knew everything about the Landing. Well, almost. Like most adults, he only knew what he believed.

But that the Lost Alamo was just an old bomb shelter was only partly true. You see, Sam dug up some old documents at the library and found out that the shelter was built on top of something else. Something older and even more forgotten and buried deeper than “Lemnitzer’s Folly,” as one Letter to the Editor published in the local paper in the 1950s called it. Lemnitzer’s plan was to charge \$100 per person for a spot if what he called “those damn dirty Commies” started World War III and dropped an atomic bomb on New York City, which everyone figured was a prime target of the Russians. Considering that the Landing was only 50 miles up the Hudson from the city meant that radioactive fallout, depending on the wind, could reach it. A spot in the shelter guaranteed your survival. After old man Lemnitzer died in the late Fifties, most townspeople forgot all about it. Even the few who knew where it was didn’t consider going down there during the 13 days of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. But the kids didn’t. It was, for all intents and purposes, a “free” fort, and its location was passed on from generation to generation of Landing kids. The real story, though, is why the Cliffsidiers needed the Alamo at all.

The story of the Lost Alamo is where the story of what happened on the island ends, and to know how we got there, I should start here, at the beginning, and tell what happened during that entire second summer of junior high. Sam or I will eventually get around to telling you what else happened every other summer for the next five years. I certainly don’t know why things stopped after that. Sam doesn’t even have a theory. Sometimes we both think they could start up again, but we pray like atheists in foxholes that they don’t.

By the way, my name’s Sean McConnell, but when I was a kid everybody called me Freck. Yep. You guessed it. It’s because I have a lot of freckles. Everywhere. And by everywhere, I mean EVERYWHERE. Not the most creative of nicknames, I know, but Billy Wilson was barely 6 when he gave me the name. Don’t get me confused with Freak. That’s Keith Christopher. Freak was the first Cliffsider allowed to grow his hair past his shirt collar. Dennis Milani started calling him Freak when he overheard his Dad say that “the Christopher kid looks like a goddamned hippie freak.” And from that day on, only his Mom called him Keith. Which reminds me that it was one of her Virginia Slims that I gagged on the day Freak passed the pack he stole from her around when we were hanging out in the Alamo before we had any idea what would happen there.

I’ve lived in this part of the Landing all my life. In Cliffside, to be specific, so I’m what’s known as a Cliffsider, thanks to Sam, who has a way with words and gave us the name. When I was growing up, the group you were in was identified by what part of the Landing you lived in. Maybe it’s the same in all small towns. Along with Cliffsidiers, there were Weber Road kids, Park Streeters, Grand Avenue kids, and River Roaders at our end of town. There were Benson Court kids and Carter Place kids living in the brand new ranches and split-levels in the new development across from the high school. We played entire seasons of

wiffle ball against Ridgetop and Butter Hill kids, and had marathon snowball fights with Avenue A-ers, Bayviewers, and Hudson Streeters behind the elementary school. Each group was as distinct from each other as Jets and Sharks, just as kids from Idlewild Park were distinct from kids from Mill Street, and those that lived in the Upper Landing were distinct from those living in the lower one. There were no turf wars fought with switchblades or anything like that; as far as it went was each neighborhood standing up for their own, and competing like hell in every pickup game from hoop to hockey.

The Landing had its share of other sides of the tracks too, social divisions created by a working trainline and the remnants of a long defunct railroad yard in the old Landing, which had several factories and a massive coal dock jutting out a hundred yards into the river in its heyday.

There were rich kids, poor kids, and kids that were somewhere in the middle. The one Black family, the Wilforks, lived down in the wooded hollow below the Cliffside. The oldest son, Mike Wilfork, was an honorary Cliffsider. Sam had decreed that - and Sam had such an insistent way about him that "decree" is the only word I can think of that applies - because, he said, "Since Mike lives in a no-man's land between the riverside and Taft Terrace, he can be one of us" (Taft Terrace was where the wealthiest Landing families lived). There were also "outsiders," kids that attended Stone Hill School on the mountain or Bradley Military Academy in the Upper Landing, but weren't from here, and so we never said anything more than "Hi" to them in Pasquale's Pizza or Maynard's Variety Store. Like I said, Jets and Sharks. Townies and Toy Soldiers. One Cliffsider - or should I say, former Cliffsider - Rients Vandeven, did transfer to the Stone Hill School in 9th Grade, and while we were thick as thieves in junior high, after transferring he somehow wasn't one of us anymore. Even though he still lived right around the corner, the change in him went beyond wearing Stone Hill Royals blue and gold instead of Landing Dragons green and white.

Our neighborhood, the Cliffside, was special. And it really was on a cliffside. Well, at the top of one anyway, with steep-to-sheer 100-foot drops on two sides. Once the site of a sprawling estate called Dayton Hedges owned by a wealthy man named Palmer, the flat top of the cliff was shaped like an arrowhead or the prow of a ship, with what would be the port side overlooking the Hudson River, and the starboard in the shadow of Storm King Mountain. Below, on the river side, was what remained of the once-bustling old Landing, comprising several derelict buildings, the stone walls and foundations of long-gone riverfront structures, ghost roads that disappeared a few hundred yards into Storm King forest, a massive cement slab of a hotel that burned down in the 1920s, and the hulk of a sunken barge. On the other side was a deep gorge cut into the hillside through which a stream flowed mostly only after it rained, more or less parallel to an incredibly steep road, Station Hill Road, which led down to the waterfront. Between the stream and road, perched on a narrow mound of land, sat the Wilfork house. At the bottom of the hill were railroad tracks that were in heavy use then and still are today. At the top of the road, on the left, was the entrance to the Cliffside, flanked by

two large stone pillars that Sam named Modi and Magni, after the twin sons of Thor, from his favorite comic. The pillars made the secluded neighborhood marked “Cliff Side” - two words - on old maps seem like our private fortress, our Torquilstone from IVANHOE, our Hornburg from THE LORD OF THE RINGS.

On the clifftop, at the tip of the arrow or ship’s prow, set into the very edge of the cliff was a narrow shelf of rock overhung by tall pines that we christened “The Eagle’s Nest.” Impossible to see from the single narrow road that wound around the Cliffside, anyone inside the Eagle’s Nest on foggy mornings felt like they were sitting within the very clouds themselves. Many a Cliffsider had his first cigarette, can of beer, joint, or kiss inside the Nest. Two ropes had been rigged below it, running from tree to tree down the cliff, by the two oldest Cliffsiders, Will Newman and Mark Marciano. The ropes allowed fast access to the bottom or top of the cliff for anyone who was brave enough to use them. The alternative was to take the long way round, via Station Hill Road, on foot or by bike. The ropes are long gone, but you can still spot the rusting iron hoops where Will and Mark attached them to several trees.

On the road that looped around the Cliffside, right where it curved sharply, tracing the sharp point of the cliff, sat a huge rock with the name “Palmer” carved into it. We all just figured it was a marker left over from the old estate, but since the path to the Eagle’s Nest began in a thicket just behind it, we told littler kids that it was a grave, which kept them away from our secret spot and probably saved a few from tumbling over the edge.

Sam had given Lemnitzer’s old bomb shelter the name “The Lost Alamo” back in the Spring of 1970. He’s the one who found it one day when hiking along the banks of Moodna Creek looking for frogs and turtles. Sam also learned that the Moodna’s original name was Murderer’s Creek, one rooted in a story of Dutch settlers being massacred on its banks by local Indians in the 1670s. Little did we know the creek would earn that name several times some 300 years later.

Sam read a lot of spy novels, especially those by Ian Fleming and Alistair MacLean, and he’d say that we never knew when we might need what he called a “safe house.”

Sam also used to say that he’d never actually felt like he had a hometown until he came to the Landing. He said there was something magical and a little scary - “good scary” he called it - about a place with a mountain called Storm King where the early Dutch settlers told tales of imps and goblins conjuring thunder and lightning to sink ships that had not paid proper tribute to the “Heer of the Highlands,” a monstrous and vengeful demon that controlled passage through the river between Peekskill and Newburgh. A place with a river that flowed both ways (the Indian name of the Hudson means exactly that), with an island in it with a castle built by an arms dealer on it. I wouldn’t have known any of this stuff if hadn’t been for Sam, who made it a point to learn the history of wherever he lived.

Sam's dad had been in the Air Force and the Bennett family had moved around a lot before settling in the Landing, mostly because it was only five miles from West Point. They'd lived in France, Virginia, Germany, South Dakota, and Florida before settling in New York after Mr. Bennett retired. Sam almost ended up in California, but I'm glad he didn't. He was and still is the best friend I've ever had.

I first caught sight of Sam from my bedroom window, sitting on the front steps of the Byers' house. We - me, Mom, Dad, and my sister Kathleen - lived on the entire top floor of the Palmer Apartments, which my parents owned, and we could see the whole neighborhood from up there. I'd been wondering since the last days of school who'd bought the Byers place, a small Cape with a tiny front and back yard that we'd all be warned to stay off of for years even as our baseballs, footballs, and frisbees ended up on both from time to time. We figured old lady Byers probably had an entire sporting goods store in her collection by the time the Bennetts moved in. Since we never got them back, we guessed the nasty old biddy had tossed them. Since I'd seen only two older people, a man and a woman, around the place for a few weeks after the Byers moved out, I sadly assumed they didn't have any kids. No one was happier than I was when Sam appeared that day, on crutches with his leg in a cast. I later found out he'd just gotten out of the hospital. And, best of all, he was my age, 12. That meant that we both would be entering 7th Grade in September.

If you knew one thing about Sam Bennett, you knew he loved books. I mean he loved to read AND he loved books. He had so many that one of the first things he did was set up the "Bookhouse" in the McCormick family garage, a real lending library for the Cliffsidiers that even had a card catalog and checkout system. All of Sam's comic books, paperbacks, National Geographics, and other magazines could be checked out. And "new books" arrived weekly, since Sam would go to the Landing Thrift Shop and buy used books for a nickel a piece, six for a quarter.

The Bookhouse shared the garage with Doctor Jekyll's Hydeout, Sam's name for the group's combination secret meeting room, lab, and workshop. Aaron McCormick's older brother Joe even built a false wall with shelves in the garage, basically dividing the space into open and hidden parts. Joe also taught all the Cliffsidiers the seven dirty words, along with a few of his own. Joe passed away a few years after graduating from Landing High, but most of us will never forget some of the things he told us, even the stuff he made up, especially all the lies he told about his sexual escapades. Even lies told about having sex qualify as having sex when you're 12, and beggars can't be choosers.

In the front part of the garage was the Bookhouse and in the back was the Hydeout. No one could get into the Hydeout unless they knew to pull a copy of The Hardy Boys mystery "The House on the Cliff" out from the shelf. Pulling it out tripped a mechanism that opened the back wall of the storage cabinet below the bookcase, allowing a person to crawl through the cabinet and into the Hydeout. Part of the back wall of the garage could be removed from inside to allow escape from the Hydeout in emergencies, though for the longest time we

wondered if we would ever have to use it. All Sam's ideas, all thanks to Joe McCormick's skills honed in wood and metal shop at Landing High.

In his first summer on the Cliffside, 1969, Sam had a cast on his left leg that went from his hip to his toes. He had polio as a small child, and when he turned 12 the doctors said it was time to correct some things. His family lived in Walden Falls, and after finishing 6th grade at Montgomery Middle School a few weeks early, he went right into the hospital at West Point. He was there for 10 days, during which time his parents closed on the Byers place and moved in. When Sam got out two weeks later, he arrived in a new house with a brand new bedroom set (with a bookcase bed, naturally). After living the nomadic life of a military brat for the better part of his 12 years, his parents assured him there would be no more moves and no more new schools to get acclimated to. Landing High would be the last one.

As I mentioned, when I first saw Sam from our apartment window he was sitting on the porch of the old Byers house with that leg sticking straight out, stiff as a board in that long cast. It was actually his second day on the Cliffside since he'd gotten out of the hospital the morning before. Red-haired Patty Harrison, who lived in the basement apartment of our building, was sitting next to him drawing something on his cast with a magic marker. How she beat any of us boys over there, I'll never know. Chalk it up to him being the new boy in the neighborhood. And who wouldn't be curious if the new kid's leg was in a cast? Did he break it playing football? Mountain climbing? Sky diving? Inquiring minds wanted to know. Soon, a gaggle of kids had formed around Sam. Aaron McCormick, Dennis Milani, Pete Rooney, Bill and Chris Wilson, the Gustafson twins, Patty's brother Pat, my sister Kathleen, and Alison and Rose Robbins. I don't remember if Sam ever explained that day just why he was in a cast, beyond saying he'd had an operation. No one really cared. We all took turns signing his cast that day, and almost everyone who signed it would play a part in the strange series of events that were to begin the following summer. In retrospect, it was almost like we'd signed up for something without knowing it.

By the time Sam got that cast off, the Summer of 1969 was history, the school year was in full swing, and Thanksgiving was right around the corner. He had indeed settled into his new school, and had made new friends and, typically, a few enemies.

But Sam had one thing on his mind: to make up for the summer he'd lost. With a vengeance, as it turned out. He vowed that the Summer of 1970 was going to be the best ever.

One of the first things he did was form us into the Cliffsideers. He even came up with an oath, which goes like this: "I will never betray my Cliffside friends; we'll stick together until the whole world ends. Through heaven and hell and nuclear war, we're Cliffsideers forever, to the core."

One thing was and is for sure to this day: Once a Cliffsider, always a Cliffsider. And I think that Sam was one from the day he was born, and was always destined to be. It was if he had work to do here, and only here.

As one of the characters writes at the end of the movie STAND BY ME, “I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?”

I’m almost 70 years old now, and the answer has always been, and still is, “no.” Even if it’s only one, and it’s Sam Bennett.

I guess I’ve spoiled one aspect of the story that follows, since you’ve probably figured out that Sam and I lived through what happened on the island and what drove us into the Lost Alamo that night in August 1970.

Not all of us did.

Sean “Freck” McConnell
Cornwall Landing, NY
Summer 2024

FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER