

## Chapter 4

It was the first full day of summer vacation in 1964. The village had grown by seventeen families over the past three years and yet we were still the two oldest boys living there. As such, we ruled the hill, the fort and could only wish we could rule Miss March, the newest addition to the wall coverings inside the fort. Billy's dad never missed the centerfolds and after a few months never looked at the old issues. In fact Billy's mom started throwing out the old issues. We figured by the end of summer we'd be up to Miss June 1964.

The houses on June Drive were inhabited by five families with more due to move in. New houses were springing up on March Drive and over towards April Drive. We figured by the time they decided to develop our hill,

Billy and me would be too old to be horsing around there and other interests would consume our time. But even at the age of thirteen, and three months shy of fourteen, we still enjoyed the comfort the old hill gave us and yes we still got off rolling down the hill in those barrels.

Over the past couple of days we'd been using my dad's binoculars to keep tabs on a family over at the old farm that was about five hundred yards or so from the hill. We figured they must have recently moved in because up until the end of April we never noticed anyone over there.

We could see a couple of kids now and then and an old Chrysler Dodge station wagon parked by the barn. The Dodge looked to be about a 1957 or 1958 model. Now that school was out for the summer and we could spend all day at the hill, Billy and I decided to meander over to the farm and see who these people were.

We climbed over the top of the hill and down into the remains of the old building foundation that set below. We figured it must have been an old house or something that had long since been torn down.

We walked through the weeds over to a narrow path that led part way to the farm. The path ended about one hundred

yards from the farm so we walked the rest of the way with the tall, dry weeds brushing against our jean legs.

We brushed away gnats from our faces as we stirred up more bugs walking to the farm. It was a warm June morning and promised to be a hot one as the day wore on. If this kept up, shorts would be the order of the day tomorrow.

We reached a wooden fence made from weathered planks slid into grooves in the fence posts. We crossed our arms on the fence and surveyed the area. The old Dodge sat parked in a weed-covered driveway behind the house. It didn't look as if the family had the time or wanted to bother cutting the grass. We could hear some activity in the kitchen.

Three years earlier Billy and I chased those two girls all through that house hoping for a little more action than just a run through the house and the ultimate kick in the crotch. I thought maybe we could find out what was down in that hole in the floor. Coming from out of the barn we saw a boy with a fishing pole and a bucket. We called out to him.

"Hey kid." I yelled.

No answer. He must have been engrossed in what he was doing or hard of hearing. I called out again a little louder.

"Hey kid."

This time the boy heard me, stopped and turned toward us. He was dressed in a light red button down shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows and tucked into a worn pair of blue jeans, or dungarees as my mother called them. He had high top sneakers on his feet and wore a ball cap on his head. I couldn't make out the emblem.

"What d'ya want?" he hollered back.

"Come here once." I replied.

"I can't. I gotta go catch some fish."

The boy didn't sound like he was from around here. He sounded like he might be from the South or something. He turned to walk toward the pond when I yelled out "Wait a minute."

Billy and I crawled between the planks in the fence and ran towards the boy.

"Who are you boys and what do you want?" He asked curtly as we finished our short sprint. Up close we could see that he had short, dark hair and a few freckles

scattered mostly around his nose. His eyes were light brown and he looked to be pretty close to our age.

"Geez, kid we just want to see if you want to play or something." I replied.

"I can't. I gotta go and catch some fish." The boy said as he turned and continued walking towards the large pond.

"Can we come along?" Billy asked as we followed in behind him.

"Mama don't like us kids talking to strangers. You'd best be getting along." The boy replied as he continued walking.

"Strangers" I said. "We're kids. Grownups are strangers."

The boy stopped and turned with a bewildered look on his face as he wrinkled his nose.

"Huh?" he said.

"Sure. When parents tell their kids not to talk to strangers they're talking about grownups, not kids." I explained.

"My name is Max and this is my good friend Billy." I continued.

The boy just stared at us then gave us a little smile.

I sensed that although his "mama" said one thing he didn't totally agree with her and would just as well be hanging out with us as anything else.

"I suppose you're right. But I still don't know if mama will like it. But my name is Sammie."

I extended my hand to Sammie and said "Glad to meet you Sammie."

He wiped his right hand on his pants and extended it to me and we shook hands. Then he shook hands with Billy.

"Are you from the South or something, Sammie?" I asked.

"We're from Virginia; moved up here in April."

"You got any brothers or sisters?" I asked.

"I got a twin sister, Alex and my little sister, Sue Ellen is 8. Alex and I are thirteen. Look, I gotta get to the pond and get some fish."

"Can we tag along?" Billy asked.

"I don't rightly know if Mama would like that."

Then Sammie thought for a moment, looked back at the house, shrugged his shoulders and said, "Oh what the heck, I suppose it'll be OK."

"Why would your mom get upset for talking to us?" I asked as we started walking towards the pond.

"Mama has her funny ways. She just don't like northern folk. Plain and simple. She didn't even want to move up here."

"Then why did she?" I asked.

"This old farm belonged to her daddy. That be my pappy Franklin. When he died, he left all this to mama. She didn't want it and just wanted to sell the place. Kinfolk told her it would be good for her and us. They thought it would help wash the demons from her that caused her to hate northern folk so much. Plus, they didn't want it falling into my Uncle Ezra's hands. That's mama's younger brother. He's kind of the black sheep of the family. He was right ticked when mama decided to move up here so he decided to come with us and help out around here. Mama didn't like it none. But he's never around anyhow so I guess its ok."

We reached the pond and Sammie set the bucket and fishing pole down on the ground and pulled a can of worms from the bucket.

"Hey Sammie, can I put the worm on the hook?" Billy asked.

"I guess so, if'n you want to."

Billy took a worm from the can and went to put it on the hook. In the process he poked his finger on the hook.

"Son-of-a-bitch" Billy said shaking his hand.

"You shouldn't talk like that, Billy" Sammie scolded

"Talk like what?" Billy asked.

"You know, like what you just said. Mama says that folks who cuss will be shut out of heaven and end up in Hell."

Billy gave me a look and sort of snickered. Then he turned back to Sammie.

"Humph. Well then I guess we're both going to Hell coz you just said Hell."

"Hell don't count. Hell's in the Bible and it's not a cuss word, it's a place. Mama preaches the Bible to us most every Sunday. She says living by the good book is a sure fire way of going to heaven. Y'all ever read the Bible?"

Billy and I looked at each other not quite sure how to answer that question.

"Well, we kind of don't go to church, if that's what you mean." I replied.

"Man oh man. If'n you meet my Mama and she asks you that, you'd best tell her you do or she'll high tail both of you on out of here, so she will. Folks that don't practice the word of God are evil, so she says."

"Geez, Sammie. We ain't evil."

Sammie smiled. "I know that. But then my ways ain't as funny as Mama's."

We sat down on the shore of the pond and Sammie threw the line in the water.

"So what kind of fish do you pull out of there?" Billy asked trying to make conversation.

"Oh I get some nice striped bass, trout and some catties. There's blue gills in there too but I just throw 'em back. They're too boney."

"This is a big pond. Any idea how deep it is?" I asked.

"Mama figures it to be about twenty or thirty feet deep. That's why she won't let us swim in it."

I thought about asking Sammie what was in the hole in the kitchen but then I didn't really want him to know that we'd been through their house three years earlier. Not that he'd probably care, but it just didn't feel right. I guess I have my funny ways, too.

"How come we never seen you at our school?" Billy asked Sammie.

"Mama teaches us all we need to know right here."

"You mean you don't have to go to school?" I asked surprised.

"Nope. Mama teaches us the Bible, readin', writin', cipherin', history and any thing else we need to survive when we get older."

"What the heck is ciphering?" I asked.

"That be numbers. You know, adding, subtracting, that sort of thing. In fact Sue Ellen is real good at ciphering. She can make change real good up yonder at our fruit and vegetable stand."

Sammie pointed up to the top of bank at the front of the house. I could see part of an old wooden stand. I wasn't sure what kind of English Sammie's "mama" taught them but if he ever wrote like he talked in our school, he'd fail sure as the sun shines in June. But then maybe folks down south have a different way about the language.

"By the way, where are your sisters?" I asked.

Sammie pointed down a dirt road past the barn, "Down yonder picking tomatoes and cherries from the big old cherry tree."

I stood up and looked down the dirt road. It seemed to go on forever into a large wooded area. I wondered why if their Mama was so protective of these kids why she'd let the two girls go down there by themselves.

"Sammie, ain't your Mama afraid some harm might come to your sisters down there by themselves?"

Sammie smiled. "If'n you saw Alex shoot a .22, you wouldn't be askin' that question."

"You mean she has a gun with her?"

"Sure does. Fact is, she'll probably bring a possum or rabbit back with her. She usually does. Alex was the best shot in Fairfax County back home. Mama don't worry too much about her."

I thought it odd that the girl had the gun and the boy didn't. I guess folks did things differently in the South. And don't tell me they actually ate possum. I thought only the TV Clampett's ate possum. The whole idea made me nauseous.

We sat down on the bank again and watched Sammie pull in a half dozen, nice sized fish. I figured Sammie was to fishing what Alex must be to shooting. Maybe their Mama wasn't afraid so much that her kids would talk to strangers but rather what her kids might do to strangers. After a few minutes, we heard a gun shot.

"Bet you a nickel, Alex got a nice big ole' possum."

Sammie said

"I wouldn't bet against that." I said.

As we were getting up so Sammie could take his catch back to the house, we could hear the voices of his sisters coming up the dirt road. We stood and saw coming up the road Alex and Sue Ellen pulling a wagon with fresh tomatoes and cherries for the stand. Alex had her .22 slung over her shoulder. As the girls got within talking distance, Alex said, "Who are those boys you got there with you, Sammie?"

Sammie walked toward the wagon, visually inspected its contents, then looked up at Alex.

"You didn't get nothin'?" Sammie asked his sister.

"I almost got me a possum. But he scurried away before I could get a good shot at him." Alex replied.

"Now, Sammie, who are these boys?"

"This here is Billie and Max. They helped me fish today. They're nice boys." Sammie replied with a smile.

Alex looked at us. She seemed to be looking us over but mostly her eyes were fixed on me. She kind of smiled at me. She had a mischievous twinkle in her eyes that seemed to smile as much as her mouth

"Mama know you talking with strangers?" Alex asked slowly shifting her gaze from me back to her brother. Before she could say another word, I walked toward her with my hand extended.

"Hi Alex. I'm Max. Now we're not strangers."

Alex looked at me, perplexed. Sammie told her what I had said about strangers being grown-ups and not kids. She looked back at me and smiled again. She had a pretty smile and I found it to be most captivating.

"Well then, it's right nice to meet you Max. I guess you must be Billy?" she said glancing quickly at Billy then turned her eyes back towards me.

Billy nodded but didn't offer his hand. I whispered to Alex that Billy didn't really like girls. In fact I wasn't so sure I did either at least not until today.

Alex stood about 5 foot 2, slender, with dirty blonde, shoulder length hair and piercing green eyes. She was dressed much like her brother with worn jeans except she wore a tee shirt and sandals. I think I was turning a page in my life. Alex looked fine, real fine indeed.

Sue Ellen was skinny as a rail with short, wavy dark hair and dark brown eyes. In fact she looked more like Sammie's twin than Alex. I figured Alex and Sammie weren't identical twins. Sue Ellen's light complexion made the darkness of her hair stand out more than normal. Like her brother and sister, she wore faded jeans with a Donald Duck tee-shirt and black high top U.S. Keds. In contrast to

Sammie and Alex, it seemed as she took after one parent and the twins after the other.

"So what kind of name is Alex for a girl?" I asked.

"Well it's actually Alexandria. Mama named me for where we used to live in Alexandria, Virginia. Ain't that the dumbest thing you ever heard, naming your kid after some old city? I hate that name so I just tell everyone to call me Alex. Anyone that uses my real name, 'cept of course for Mama, she always calls me Alexandria when I'm in some kind of trouble, will be looking for some real trouble. Besides, what kind of name is Max - for a northern boy?" She asked with a sly look.

"It's really Maxwell. I hate it as well so you best be calling me Max."

Alex threw her head back and laughed. Then she looked at me and smiled.

"You gonna whoop my butt if'n I do call you Maxwell?" she asked.

Her green eyes seemed to pierce right through me. I didn't know what to say as I stared into her eyes. I started getting a strange feeling in me. Up until this moment I had never looked at a girl quite like I did Alex. I wasn't sure what it was - her eyes, her accent - I just

didn't know but it felt both good and frightful at the same time. But never the less I felt that I was definitely turning a page in my life.

"You boys best be getting along now. I don't think Mama will like us talking to y'all." Alex said.

"Dang it Alex, Sammie." I said. "Just take us up to the house and let us meet your Mama. Billy and I want to be your friends."

"I don't know, Max." Sammie said.

Alex pursed her lips and looked at me and said, "Why not. I've got the .22 so the worse she can do is chase y'all off the grounds with a hickory switch."

"Huh?" I said.

"Come on. You'll see." Alex laughed.