

BACK CREEK

A Novel

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For my Family

Chapter One



I'd stayed up late drinking beer with Cal. As I lay in my grandmother's old pine-spool bed, my head full of cobwebs, I alternately dozed and half-listened to the early morning sounds of Back Creek.

The Creek knew a deep peace that last Sunday morning of May 1975. I could feel it even in my little room on the third floor. Everybody said my great-grandfather had been crazy to build a three-story brick house on low land with a history of flooding, but we Barnetts have never been known for willingly following the advice of others. Personally, I was glad he hadn't listened to the naysayers, because I loved my little room, with its outcropping of small windows facing the Creek. I had the best view in the house—maybe the best view on our side of the Creek. And I loved the Creek.

As I struggled up from the sheets and summer quilt, I heard a gas-powered whine.

I wasn't sure where I'd placed my glasses. It's not like I'm blind without them, but I can see far-away things much better with them on, and I wear them most of the time.

The whine outside grew louder as I leaned over the side of the bed, feeling for my glasses along the edge of the braided rug, just below the ancient dust ruffle. My mess of brown hair fell over my face. Just as my fingertips reached the stiff metal of my wire-rims, my legs kicked up and I landed butt-first on the floor. Sitting up,

I flipped my hair back and pulled the frames over my ears. Somewhere in my fog, I realized that the whine had become a roar.

I bolted to the windows and peered out. The window glass seemed even wavier than usual, and the sun's glare more intense. I turned my head and glimpsed only dead calm directly below. Yet, the sound grew louder.

Jerking the frame open with a paint-ripping pop, I stuck my head out one of the windows to get a better look. Way up, almost to the boat ramp near Dandy Park, I could discern a white outboard boat racing down the Creek. My stomach lurched as I recognized the sleek square bow of a Boston Whaler.

The Creek's mouth faces to the east, catty-cornered to where the York River meets the Chesapeake Bay. I watched the boat head toward that opening, churning plenty of white water behind it. Straining my eyes, I could see only a lone figure, standing up at the steering wheel—tallish, with long hair streaming behind him. I brought my head back in from the window, removed my glasses, and rubbed my sun-dotted eyes, trying to imagine what kind of crazy fool would be boating this early, this loud, and this fast on a Sunday morning.

I leaned back out the window to shout a righteous "Slow Down!" So as not to wake my father two stories below, I positioned my hands like a megaphone around my mouth, but I didn't have a chance to get the first word out.

Everything froze in me as I watched the boat veer toward a long-abandoned pier still standing at the mouth of the Creek. When the boat met the pier, it sounded like a bomb exploding. I saw the wood fly—the creosoted planks of the pier, and the white plexiglass of the hull. The boom echoed up and down the Creek.

Within a few minutes, the water's churning white peaks had settled to the silver calm of the morning.

It was as if nothing had happened.