

Hugh Centerville

Chapter 1

At the bottoms of the signs along the roads leading into Baker's Fort, beneath the warnings to solicitors and vendors and on a removable panel so it could, presumably, be changed, was the population of the town – 7900. The number on the signs never changed. The population changed, big time.

It jumped by more than a thousand every summer.

That was because of the summer neighborhoods on Baker Lake, just south of town. There were roads along both sides of the lake, the roads each about eight miles long and coming to dead ends where the mountains came down to pinch the shores, and from both roads, smaller roads led through the piney woods and to the summer neighborhoods.

One of those secondary roads, on the west side of the lake, slanted east at about a thirty-degree angle from the main road. A quarter mile farther along, another road went in a direct line to the lake. The two roads met at the top of a declivity overlooking the lake and were called, respectively, Diagonal and Orthogonal Highways. Neither road was paved and where they met, they became a single road, Point Road, the even narrower road that was a spine along the southern claw of Indian Lookout Bay. The camp houses on both sides of Point Road were small and low and were right up close to the road on one side and to the declivity on the other side. There was a five-mile posted speed limit along Point Road and a berm at the end, dirt and rocks packed down hard and with a flashing yellow light. Behind the berm was a twenty-foot plunge into the lake.

North of the point was the wide swath of the bay.

It was August 1964 and there weren't too many men around. It was all mostly moms and kids. The men weren't off to war, although most of them had fought or had at least been in uniform for The Big One. The men were back home, working. It was the middle of the week and the husbands-dads would arrive Friday night.

The summer neighborhood of Indian Lookout Bay consisted of fourteen camp houses in a half-circle around the inland curve of the bay and bookended by groves of tall cottonwoods. Everyone called them camp houses, not bungalows or cabins, and lake houses? Never! If anyone had used any of those terms, and sometimes the newbies did, the more savvy Baysiders, Baysiders is what they called themselves, they would've made it clear – they were camp houses, thank you. The Baysiders called them camp houses because when Carol, the oldest Slater child, was a little girl and the family would arrive at the bay for the summer, little Carol would jump up and down and clap for the camp house. Everyone thought it was so cute. Everything Carol did was cute, even now, especially now. Carol was eighteen and had just graduated high school and for the first time, she only came to the bay on weekends. She was working in her dad's office for the summer, to make money for college, and she arrived with her dad on Friday nights and left with him on Sundays after supper.

8:30 A.M. and Vince, the second of the four Slater kids, was in a chair at the wicker table in front of the picture window that looked out over the bay. Vince was eating the breakfast he'd prepared himself, a couple of sloppy eggs, bacon, toast, grapefruit juice.

The roar of an outboard motor came into the bay and without even looking up, Vince knew it was Patty. That's how it was with the boats. If you were waiting for a particular boat, you didn't have to look for it. You only had to listen. They were all loud, of course, outboards with all those horses, some louder than others, some purposely loud, still there was something about the one you wanted.

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Vince assessed what remained of his breakfast. Plenty of time to finish and get the dishes into the sink and grab up his army surplus backpack and get down to the dock. The bay was shallow and the boaters had to cut their throttles as they came to shore.

Mrs. Slater came out of the back bedrooms where she'd been cleaning. She'd heard the boat too and recognizing its roar, had come out pretending to be just passing by the big window on her way to the kitchen, and really she'd come out to glare over her son's shoulder and out the window at the boat.

Vince understood what his mom was about and ignored her. He continued eating, and Mrs. Slater, feeling suddenly foolish and wanting to continue her charade of having come out of the back for some reason other than to vent her displeasure at her son's girlfriend, a broom or a mop, went through the kitchen and into the screen porch. Her younger son, Bobby, thirteen, and Cousin Joe, soon to turn thirteen and who spent summers with the family, were there, sleeping on cots.

"Rise and shine!" Mrs. Slater said harshly.

The boys didn't stir and that made Mrs. Slater even more angry. She didn't appreciate being ignored. The boys weren't ignoring her. They were sleeping.

"Rise and shine!" she said again, really angry now, and the boys, suddenly and rudely awakened, scrambled off their cots. Mrs. Slater's voice said no fooling here. It said I'm mad about something that, yeh, maybe doesn't have anything to do with you boys but you're here and I'm here and I'm going to give you the business. I'm going to chase you out of bed and out of the camp house and don't tell me it isn't fair. Life isn't fair. Just ask me.

The boys slept in their underpants and off their cots now, they grabbed their shorts and T-shirts from where they'd tossed them the night before and put them on quickly. Joe grabbed his glasses off the nightstand and they went out the door. Years later, when the Slater kids had kids of their own and needed to get them up, they'd do it gently, never, ever harshly, and when Mrs. Slater died, Joe and his Slater cousins, adults in their forties, would stand for a long time in silence before the casket. When it was time and the man came and closed up the box, Joe would rap his knuckles against the lid.

"Rise and shine," he'd say.

Patty was alone in the boat. She was sitting up high, perched on the back of the driver's seat. She was up there so she could navigate the shallow waters of the bay, to see over the bow, on the lookout for the rocks and sandbars that could twist a propeller or rip the bottom out of a boat, and she had to lean forward to work the wheel. Some teenagers sat up there when it wasn't necessary and when Officer Krauss of the Lake Patrol wasn't around, when, say, they were going really fast and needed to be firmly planted in their seats. They did it because they thought it was cool. Patty did it to see better. Patty was Vince's girlfriend of about two months, since the Baker's Fort Victory Commemoration Day parade and carnival, that magic night when they'd found one another and talked excitedly and held hands and kissed in the darkness behind the freak tent and with fireworks, real fireworks, in the sky.

Patty was fifteen.

She had long tanned legs and brown hair lightened by the sun and in a ponytail. She had brown eyes and that cute way of crinkling her nose when she grinned. She was wearing a pink sweat-shirt and pink shorts over the two-piece bathing suit, skimpier than what most girls dared wear around the lake.

"A frisky colt," Mr. Slater said the first time he saw her, playing badminton on the camp house lawn. The compliment, with its unabashed admiration, infuriated Mrs. Slater. Her own husband a

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Brutus. Didn't he know the girl had an older sister who was a tramp? There was stuff about the mom too.

In front of Patty as she was coming in was the arc of the bay camp houses, all pretty much alike except for the colors and whatever slight changes the owners had made over the years. The camp houses were one-story clapboards, bigger than the camp houses on the point and not clustered so close together, and with picture windows facing the bay, and patios.

Patios were popular, all the camp houses had them. Most were on the bayside, some were on the short side, not sure why, and one was in the back, facing the road. The patios were simple, anyone could build one. They were wooden decks on two-foot pylons, no railings, and the camp houses had fireplaces too, out along the crest of the declivity and for toasting marshmallows and for sitting around on those cool August nights.

To Patty's right now and behind her as she approached the shore was the northern curl of the bay, a claw of land too narrow and rocky for camp houses. There was a single house out there, a tumbled down, four-story Victorian mansion built up instead of out and with gables and turrets, a stone and wood castle abandoned for longer than anyone could remember. A thick tree grew right up through the front porch. The older kids went out there sometimes to drink their beer.

To Patty's left and nearly invisible behind the tall reeds of a patch of swamp were two little girls. They were on Indian Lookout Rock, a flat rock just a few feet above the waterline. The Slater pump house had used to be on the declivity behind the rock and when Mr. Slater moved his water pump to the other side of the dock, he and two men had picked up the empty housing and carried it down to the rock and presented it to his younger daughter, Penny, for a clubhouse. Penny and her best summer friend, Julie Burdette, had immediately formed a club. They called themselves the Red Roses and had rules and dues and Julie's mom painted two delicate roses, stems crossed, on the clubhouse door.

Penny and Julie were twelve and it was their first full summer with their clubhouse and probably their last. They'd outgrow it but for this one summer, they took their breakfast down there, English muffins with jelly, juice in cups. It wasn't easy going from camp house to clubhouse without spilling the juice, there were no stairs to the rock, just a steep and twisty path down the declivity, and with tripwire roots and half-buried rocks, and Julie's mom had suggested cups with tops. The girls balked. Sippie cups were for Julie's little baby sisters, and still there was the problem of the declivity, and Julie's mom had suggested a compromise. The girls could go across the lawn with the tops in their hands or in their pockets, and when they descended, they could put the tops on the cups and take them off again at the bottom, and that was fine until the first time they tried it.

They arrived at the rock and there were two boys, same age as the girls. The boys were frogging. They carried a bucket and homemade spears, broomsticks with nails at the ends. The boys were after bullfrogs and had stopped on the rock to rest. The girls were outraged. Boys weren't allowed on Indian Lookout Rock and here were two boys as bold as you please and with a bucketful of bloody frogs and snooping around inside the clubhouse. The girls yelled at the boys. One of the boys saw the tops on the cups and retaliated:

"Baby!"

"Baby!"

"Baby!"

The girls were mortified.

They chased off the boys and took off the tops.

The girls, whenever they arrived on the rock, opened the club-house door and looked inside, although they didn't go in much. Too many spiders. Big hairy spiders that jumped.

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"Damn spiders," Penny said once and it felt good, her first time swearing. Now and when they looked, it wasn't just for spiders but for boys too.

Crossing in front of the girls from their right to their left, Patty smiled and gave them one of her exaggerated moon-waves, palm out, fingers up, her hand moving counterclockwise like she was wiping a window with a rag. The girls returned the wave shyly, no moon-wave.

Penny and Julie watched for Patty every morning. Patty was one of the reasons the girls ate breakfast on the rock. They were enamored and intimidated by Patty's good looks and easy demeanor, the same things about her that so infuriated Mrs. Slater, the offhand confidence and that bathing suit! The girls hoped to wear one when their own time came. Patty looked so fine in her bikini, and Little Peaks, the title character of one of the children's books the girls refused any longer to read, became their secret name for Patty.

For Penny and Julie, it was supposed to be their summer of change. It hadn't happened yet but it was imminent, the girls had heard the talk from their moms, well, Julie heard the talk, Penny got a pamphlet. The girls were excited and a little bit afraid and they had a pact. If it didn't happen before the summer ended and they went home, to homes seven hundred miles apart, the one who got it first would call, not write. It was worth a phone call.

For now, the girls sat on overturned buckets and ripped chunks from slices of stale bread. They balled up the bread and threw it down hard against the water. The water off the rock was only about two feet deep and clear, and the pieces of bread attracted a myriad of fish - sunnies, bluegill, pumpkinseed, perch absconded from their schools, and to the side, wary with its red eyes and pouty lips, the shy rock bass.

Once, when Penny's dad arrived too late on a Friday night to see his little girl, he'd come down to the rock first thing next morning to say hello, dads were welcome, and he watched as the girls fed the fish. He had a cup of coffee in one hand, cigarette in the other, and not paying attention to the cigarette, it grew a long and crooked ash. Noticing it finally, he tapped the top of the cigarette with his finger and the ash broke off and fell and hit the water and without breaking. It sat on the surface and a little sunfish swam up to investigate. The fish looked at the ash for a long time and from a couple of different angles, and lunging suddenly, the fish swallowed the ash whole, which struck the girls and Mr. Slater as very funny, the fish thinking it was getting some new kind of tasty bread and getting instead exactly...nothing. The fish was baffled. It knew it had swallowed something and there was no substance to the morsel. The fish coughed, regurgitating the ash, all busted up now in a perfect cloud of soot, and the confused little fish darted away. The Morning Food Gods were having a joke on him and he didn't appreciate it. The girls and Mr. Slater laughed and laughed. Penny even slapped her knee.

It was on Indian Lookout Rock that Penny would suffer one of the most distressing moments of her golden years.

Penny would have a beautiful marriage, a husband who'd fall hopelessly, adoringly in love with her the first time he saw her, an ultra-serious college coed, sipping tea and immersed in a book of romantic poetry, and he'd go on adoring her until the day she died. They'd have a son and a daughter, both would turn out OK, and down through the years, Penny wouldn't think much about her summers on the bay, too busy for that, but as she got older and life slowed, those summers would become more precious and she'd bring them up more and more to her husband, Bill.

For Penny's fifty-fifth birthday, Bill presented her with a week at the bay.

Penny was thrilled.

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“Going home,” she called it, and all the way north in the car, she regaled Bill and the two granddaughters, ages ten and eleven, with stories of summers long ago, things she and Julie had done and vignettes of Great Uncles Vince and Bobby and Great Aunt Carol. The girls weren’t impressed. It was all ancient history but it was Grandma’s history and they loved her dearly.

It was August 2007, Julie was three thousand miles away and with grandkids of her own, and the rusticity that was the charm of Indian Lookout Bay had been eradicated. Indian Lookout Bay, 2007, was suburbia perched on a hill overlooking a bay, and the water in the bay? Ugh! It was a fetid glop of water chestnut fed by the runoff of the nitrogen fertilizer that made perfect lawns and a lousy bay.

Posted signs listed the things forbidden.

No swimming or boating.

OK, who’d want to swim or boat in there?

No bare feet.

Penny shook her head.

No bare feet?

“We never wore shoes,” she said, “except for going to church on Sundays.”

“It’s because of the water chestnuts,” Bill said, and picking one up, he showed Penny the sharp corners of the chestnut.

It didn’t matter. Penny loved it. To be back was enough and anyway, water snakes and spiders were more fun to recall than to revisit, and no swimming in the bay? There was a big swimming pool back where the boys had used to play ball.

“Girls! Girls!” Penny said and before they’d even unpacked the car. “I’ve got to show you the rock!”

She took the girls into the house, couldn’t call them camp houses anymore, and into the kitchen. Penny scrounged for stale bread. She felt it had to be stale, like in the old days, so she could show the girls how to soak and squeeze the hardness out of it. They found half a loaf, hard, left behind by the previous week’s family.

“Come on, girls!” Penny said.

They went across the lawn.

Penny couldn’t wait to stand on the rock again.

That old slab had been there since before Indian times. It had outlasted the chiefs and scouts who’d stood on it, had outlasted the farmers who’d driven off the chiefs and scouts and who’d been driven off themselves by the economics of big farm - little farm. The rock was constant, immutable, a trusty friend.

Wooden stairs with a pipe railing had replaced the twisty path, Penny hardly noticed.

“Indian Lookout Rock,” she said, going down. “You’ll see the entire bay from the rock. Indians used to stand where we’ll be standing, to see if the enemy was approaching.”

“They could’ve seen better,” one of the girls said, “from the top of the hill.”

At the bottom of the stairs, Penny stopped, appalled.

There was a life-sized statue on the rock, the valiant scout scanning the bay, and around the Indian, and this is what appalled Penny, around the perimeter of the rock was a black metal fence with spear-point tops, a fence like what was around obelisks and mausoleums in spooky old cemeteries.

A sign was posted on the fence.

Stay off the rock.

Penny stared at the sign, the girls stared at Grandma.

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"It doesn't matter," Penny said, and she herded the girls to one side, to what had been the swamp and was now a beach no one ever used.

Penny dunked the bread into the water and rolled it into balls and smacked it down hard against the surface, into the narrow strip of water between the shore and the mat of vegetation. The bread-balls floated, crumbs broke off.

Penny watched eagerly for fish.

There weren't any.

Penny kept putting out bread and the girls did too and when it was all out there and floating and still with no fish, Penny squeezed one of the girl's arms.

"More bread, quickly!"

It was scary for the girls, Grandma's sudden frantic eyes, the rising pitch of her voice, the way she kept glaring, glaring, not staring, at the statue and the fence, and the strength in the fingers pinching the granddaughter's arms, and both girls went, one because she'd been told to go, the other because she didn't want to be alone with Grandma. The girls returned with a loaf of bread from one of the bags of groceries and with Grandpa, a look of consternation on his face, the girls clinging, one to each arm, pulling. Penny was on her knees and shaking the fence like she was a prisoner in a cell or an aggrieved lover at a freshly covered grave. The fence was bolted to the rock, Penny wasn't going to move it.

"It's my rock!" Penny said. "My rock!"

The girls looked up at Grandpa.

Penny, always so perfect, her clothes, demeanor, and the sight of her now, disheveled, hag-like, her hair down in her face, was unsettling for Bill. He hurried down the stairs and lifted Grandma to her feet, his hands firm under her arms. She was limp and morose and pointed to the water. There was bread and no fish.

There actually was a fish, although no one saw it, a little sunny in the shadows along the edge of the vegetation. The fish was interested in the bread and nervous about Penny, like everyone else.

"What happened to the fish?" Penny said.

"Too gunky for fish," one of the girls said.

The little sunfish decided a feast of bread wasn't worth risking the crazy woman on shore and it scooted back into the glop.

"Can we go to the mall?" one of the girls said.

"You promised," the other said.

"The mall," Penny said, standing on her own now and pinning back her hair and feeling foolish. "Of course."

The screen door slammed. Those screen doors were always slamming, even when the person going in or out wasn't mad. It was that big spring that attached from the inside of the door to the top of the doorframe. Penny's bigger brother and least favorite sibling, Vince, came out and across the lawn and down the stairs to the dock, to meet the arriving boat. Vince was average height, years later he'd be short. He was shirtless and barefoot and in light blue clam-diggers with dark blue stripes down the outside of the legs. Vince was on the high school wrestling team back home and was a weightlifter, proud of all those muscles and his taut stomach too, his shirt in his pack with his lunch and shades and suntan oil. It was maybe too early in the morning to go shirtless but Vince had all those muscles to flaunt.

Vince was mean, not like Penny's other brother, Bobby, three years younger than Vince and a

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little more than a year older than Penny. Bobby was especially nice lately, sickeningly nice, and Penny knew why – it was Penny’s fellow club member, Julie, with her short red hair, green eyes, and freckles around her nose. Julie had a crush on Bobby, and Bobby had figured it out finally and now he liked her too.

Vince got into the boat, kissed Patty.

They would spend the day at the beach, Patty helping her aunt with the concession stand, Vince as lifeguard. The boat moved away from the dock and with Vince driving now and he shouted over to his sister:

“Hey, Penny! Going to be hot! Better get into your bathing suit!”

Patty knew Penny’s secret and punched Vince on the arm.

“Don’t tease your sister,” Patty said.

Penny’s hands were on her hips, her mouth open real wide and not saying anything. Julie knew the secret too and stuck her tongue out at Vince.

Just before the Slaters headed to the camp house for the summer, Penny and her mom had gone shopping for bathing suits, and Penny had begged and wheedled for adult-looking suits, no more kid stuff, please. What she got were three suits – one was lime green with exuberant, leaping frogs, another was stupid neon yellow bumblebees servicing stupid smiling sunflowers, and the third suit? Adult gorgeous and all was forgiven. The suit was black with a ruffled chest and little pink bows on the outside of each thigh. Penny was ecstatic, until her mom decided she liked it too and finding it in her own size, bought it. Penny and her mom had a big fight in the store and in the car and at home too. They didn’t speak for three days.

“Bad move,” Vince said.

He’d heard the home piece of the argument, the explosive prelude to the long silence.

“What was I supposed to do?” Penny said.

“Should’ve waited for the right time and asked her to take hers back.”

“You think that’d work?”

“Too late now.”

Penny wasn’t swimming much and when she did, it was with one of her goofy suits beneath shorts and a T-shirt. The black swimsuit stayed in the bureau drawer. Penny looked at it a lot.

Bobby and Joe came across the lawn and toward the rock.

The girls saw the boys.

“It’s your brother,” Julie said.

“Yeh,” Penny said.

“He’s cute,” Julie said.

Penny looked at Julie.

“You promised not to like him,” Penny said.

“I don’t.”

“I think you do.”

“Penny!”

“You said he was cute.”

“He is...sort of.”

The boys arrived on the rock. They were allowed, grudgingly. Bobby’s hair was moppish, he’d get a clipping before returning to school. He was skinny and had his dad’s lankiness and his dad’s blue eyes too.

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"What's doing?" Bobby said.

He'd heard the teenagers using the what's doing line and thought it was cool.

"Lots," Penny said.

"Yeh?" Bobby said, casual. "What?"

"Julie's mom is taking us to the beach and leaving us there."

Not leaving them like a litter of unwanted kittens but like teenagers.

"Mom said OK?" Bobby said.

"She gave me two dollars for lunch," Penny said.

"We might go to the beach too," Bobby said and he glanced at Julie. Did she care? No indication she did or didn't.

"How're you going to get there?" Penny said.

"Ride our bikes," Bobby said.

"It's too far, isn't it?" Julie said.

"Maybe I'll call Patty," Bobby said. "Have her come over and get us."

"Mom finds out," Penny said, "she'll kill you."

Bobby shrugged.

Penny didn't believe Bobby would dare ask Patty for a ride to the beach but what a way to go. Penny had fantasized about it herself – in Patty's hot boat with its pointed bow smacking other boats' wakes, the wind whipping her long blonde hair, never mind long and blonde was short and curly. Penny's boat fantasy always ended like all her other fantasies – with the image of her mom, hands on her hips, the epitome of seething wrath.

"We did it once," Bobby said.

"Went to the beach in Patty's boat?" Penny said.

"Yeh."

"No way!"

"Didn't we?" Bobby said to Joe.

Joe mumbled, an indication Bobby was maybe lying.

"The time Dad got sick," Bobby said to Penny, "and you and Mom had to go home."

Now Penny wasn't so sure.

"Oh, really?" she said.

"Over and back in Patty's boat," Bobby said.

"Mrs. Wolfe would've told Mom," Penny said.

"Mrs. Wolfe was passed out," Bobby said, impressed with his own very adult cynicism, and it was true about Mrs. Wolfe. She lived in the camp house next door to the Slaters and was passed out a lot.

"Liar, anyway," Penny said.

"Not lying," Bobby said.

"Liar, liar," Penny said.

"Pants on fire," Julie said.

"My pants aren't on fire," Bobby said.

"Good thing," Julie said and she laughed, a bold, throaty laugh.

Bobby was chagrined, Penny too.

"How come you didn't go with Patty just now?" Penny said to Bobby.

"Too early," he said. "Mornings it's all little kids, swimming lessons and stuff."

There was a silence and Bobby was suddenly confronted with what he'd come to the rock to do. Joe looked at Bobby. Joe was in on it and understood it was time. Everything else was just

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chatter.

“We’re going over to the store,” Bobby said and it was to Julie, not to Penny. “You want to go? Buy you something.”

There. He’d done it.

“What about me?” Penny said.

“Buy you something too,” Bobby said grudgingly.

“We could get stuff for the beach,” Penny said to Julie.

“Sure!” Julie said, and surprised by her own enthusiasm, she clamped her hand over her mouth, like it was her mouth’s fault.

Penny glared at Julie, spoke to Bobby:

“Promise you’ll buy us stuff?”

“Promise.”

“Alright,” Penny said.

It made Bobby feel nervous and good. It was a date, not a real date like the teenagers, not with Joe and Penny along. That would come next and soon, if things went OK at Deckers’ store.