

The book cover features a dark, textured background. A diagonal crease or tear runs from the upper left towards the center. A large, dark red blood splatter is visible on the right side, partially overlapping the text 'A NOVEL'. The author's name 'Catherine Coulter' is at the top in a large, bold, black serif font. The title 'Hemlock Bay' is at the bottom in a similar font. The words 'A NOVEL' are in a smaller, white, sans-serif font, positioned within the red splatter area.

Catherine
Coulter

A NOVEL

Hemlock
Bay

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G. P. Putnam's Sons
Publishers Since 1838
a member of
Penguin Putnam Inc.
375 Hudson Street
New York, NY 10014

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Published simultaneously in Canada

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Coulter, Catherine.
Hemlock Bay / Catherine Coulter.
p. cm.

ISBN 0-399-14738-1

1. Government investigators—Fiction. 2. Married people—Fiction. 3. Washington (D.C.)—Fiction. 4. Maryland—Fiction. I. Title.
PS3553.O843 H46 2001 2001019711
813'.54—dc21

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper. ♻

Book design by Deborah Kerner/Dancing Bears Design

I wish to thank the following people at FBI Headquarters and at Quantico for their generosity and enthusiasm.

William Hayden Matens, *Special Agent, retired*

Thomas B. Locke, *DAD, Inspection Division*

David R. Knowlton, *Assistant Director, Inspection Division*

Wade M. Jackson, *Unit Chief, Firearms Training Unit*

Gary J. Hutchison, *Agent Instructor*

Alan H. Marshall, *Special Agent, Indoor Range*

Jeffrey Higginbotham, *Assistant Director, Training Division*

Douglas W. Deedrick, *Unit Chief, Information and Evidence
Management Unit*

Lester “wingtips” Davis, *Officer, National Academy Association*

Ruben Garcia, Jr., *Assistant Director, Criminal Investigative
Division*

Kenneth McCabe, *Section Chief, Laboratory Division*

Michael J. Perry, *Firearms Instructor*

Sheri A. Farrar, *Deputy Assistant Director, Administrative
Services Division*

Royce Curtin, *Special Agent, Hostage Rescue Team*

Stephen R. Band, *Unit Chief, Behavior Sciences Unit*

Lew Elliott, who teaches cops how to fight

I wish to thank my husband, Dr. Anton Pogany, yet again, for his excellent instincts and his eagle eye that never misses a thing—he remains the Editor from Hell.



Near the Plum River, Maryland

It was a chilly day in late October.

A stiff wind whipped the last colorful leaves off the trees. The sun was shining down hard and bright on the dilapidated red barn that hadn't been painted in forty years. Streaks of washed-out red were all that was left of the last paint job. There was no charm left, at all.

FBI Special Agent Dillon Savich eased around the side of the barn, his SIG Sauer in his right hand. It had taken discipline and practice, but he'd learned to move so quietly that he could sneak up on a mouse. Three agents, one of them his wife, were some twenty feet behind him,

covering him, ready to fan out in any direction necessary, all of them wearing Kevlar vests. A dozen more agents were slowly working their way up the other side of the barn, their orders to wait for a signal from Savich. Sheriff Dade of Jedbrough County and three deputies were stationed in the thick stand of maple trees just thirty feet behind them. One of the deputies, a sharpshooter, had his sights trained on the barn.

So far the operation was going smoothly, which, Savich supposed, surprised everyone, although no one spoke of it. He just hoped it would continue the way it had been planned, but chances were things would get screwed up. He'd deal with it; there was no choice.

The barn was bigger than Savich liked—there was a big hayloft, and too many shadowy corners for this sort of operation. Too many nooks and crannies for an ambush, just plain too many places from which to fire a storm of bullets.

A perfect place for Tommy and Timmy Tuttle, dubbed “the Warlocks” by the media, to hole up. They'd hopscotched across the country, but had dropped out of sight here, in Maryland, with their two latest young teenage boys taken right out of the gym where they'd been playing basketball after school, in Stewartville, some forty miles away. Savich had believed that Maryland was their destination, no sound reason really, but in his gut he just felt it. The profilers hadn't said much about that, just that Maryland was, after all, on the Atlantic coast, so they really couldn't go much farther east.

Then MAX, Savich's laptop, had dived into land registry files in Maryland and found that Marilyn Warluski, a first cousin to the Tuttle brothers, and who, MAX had also discovered, had had a baby at the age of seventeen fathered by Tommy Tuttle, just hap-

pened to own a narrow strip of land near a good-sized maple forest that wasn't far from the serpentine Plum River. And on that sliver of property was a barn, a big ancient barn that had been abandoned for years. Savich had nearly clicked his heels together in excitement.

And now, four hours later, here they were. There'd been no sign of a car, but Savich wasn't worried. The old Honda was probably stashed in the barn. He quieted his breathing and listened. The birds had gone still. The silence was heavy, oppressive, as if even the animals were expecting something to happen and knew instinctively that it wouldn't be good.

Savich was afraid the Tuttle brothers were long gone. All they would find, despite the silence, would be their victims: teenage boys—Donny and Rob Arthur—dead, horribly mutilated, their bodies circumscribed by a large, black circle.

Savich didn't want to smell any more blood. He didn't want to see any more death. Not today. Not ever.

He looked down at his Mickey Mouse watch. It was time to see if the bad guys were in the barn. It was time to go into harm's way. It was time to get the show on the road.

MAX had found a crude interior plan of the barn, drawn some fifty years before, documented in a computerized county record as having been physically saved and filed. Kept where? was the question. They'd finally turned up the drawing in an old file cabinet in the basement of the county planning building. But the drawing was clear enough. There was a small, narrow entry, down low, here on the west side. He found it behind a straggly naked bush. It was cracked open, wide enough for him to squeeze through.

He looked back, waved his SIG Sauer at the three agents peering around the corner of the barn, a signal to hold their po-

sitions, and went in on his belly. He pushed the narrow door open an inch at a time. Filth everywhere, some rat carcasses strewn around. He nudged his way in on his elbows, feeling bones crunch beneath him, his SIG Sauer steady in his hand.

There was a strange half-light in the barn. Dust motes filled the narrow spears of light coming through the upper windows, only shards of glass sticking up in some of the frames. He lay there quietly a moment, his eyes adjusting. He saw bales of hay so old they looked petrified, stacked haphazardly, rusted machinery—mainly odd parts—and two ancient wooden troughs.

Then he noticed it. In the far corner was another door not more than twenty feet to the right of the front double barn doors. A tack room, he thought, and it hadn't been shown on the drawing. Then he made out the outline of the Honda, tucked in the shadows at the far end of the barn. The two brothers were in the tack room, no doubt about it. And Donny and Rob Arthur? Please, God, let them still be alive.

He had to know exactly who was where before he called in the other agents. It was still, very still. He got to his feet and ran hunched over toward the tack room door, his gun fanning continuously, his breathing low and steady, his steps silent. He pressed his ear against the rotted wooden door of the tack room.

He heard a male voice, clear and strong, and angry, suddenly louder.

"Listen, you Little Bloods, it's time for you to get in the middle of the circle. The Ghouls want you; they told me to hurry it up. They want to carve you up with their axes and knives—they really like to do that—but this time they want to tuck you away in their carryalls and fly away with you. Hey, maybe you'll end up in Tahiti. Who knows? They haven't wanted to do this before. But

it doesn't make any difference to us. Here come the Ghouls!" And he laughed, a young man's laugh, not all that deep, and it sounded quite happily mad. It made Savich's blood run icy.

Then another man's voice, this one deeper. "Yep, almost ready for the Ghouls. We don't want to disappoint them now, do we? Move it, Little Bloods."

He heard them coming toward the door, heard the scuffling of feet, heard the boys' crying, probably beyond reason now, heard curses and prods from the Tuttle brothers. It was then that he saw the huge, crude circle painted with thick, black paint on a cleared-out part of the rotting wooden barn floor.

Zero hour. No time, simply no time now to bring the others in.

Savich barely made it down behind a rotted hay bale before one of them opened the tack room door and shoved a slight, pale boy in front of him. The boy's filthy pants were nearly falling off his butt. It was Donny Arthur. He'd been beaten, probably starved as well. He was terrified. Then a second terrified youth was shoved out of the small tack room next to him. Rob Arthur, only fourteen years old. Savich had never seen such fear on two such young faces in his life.

If Savich ordered the Tuttles to stop now, they could use the boys for shields. No, better to wait. What was all that crazy talk about ghouls? He watched the two men shove the boys forward until they actually kicked them into the center of the circle.

"Don't either of you move or I'll take my knife and shove it right through your arm into the floor, pin you good. Tammy here will do the other with her knife. You got that, Little Bloods?"

Tammy? Her knife? No, it was two brothers—Tommy and Timmy Tuttle, more than enough alliteration, even for the media. No, he couldn't have heard right. He was looking at two young

men, both in black, long and lean, big, chunky black boots laced up the front to the knees like combat boots. They carried knives and guns.

The boys were huddled together on their knees, crying, clutching each other. Blood caked their faces, but they could move, and that meant no bones were broken.

“Where are the Ghouls?” Tammy Tuttle shouted, and Savich realized in that instant that he hadn’t misheard; it wasn’t the Tuttle brothers, it was one brother and one sister.

What was all this about the ghouls coming to murder the boys?

“Ghouls,” Tammy yelled, her head thrown back, her voice reverberating throughout the ancient barn, “where are you? We’ve got your two treats for you, just what you like—two really sweet boys! Little Bloods, both of them. Bring your knives and axes! Come here, Ghouls.”

It was a chant, growing louder as she repeated herself once, twice, then three times. Each time, her voice was louder, more vicious, the words ridiculous, really, except for the underlying terror they carried.

Tammy Tuttle kicked one of the boys, hard, when he tried to crawl out of the circle. Savich knew he had to act soon. Where were these ghouls?

He heard something, something that was different from the mad human voices, like a high whine, sort of a hissing sound that didn’t belong here, maybe didn’t belong anywhere. He felt goose-flesh rise on his arms. He felt a shock of cold. He was on the point of leaping out when, to his utter astonishment, the huge front barn doors whooshed inward, blinding light flooded in, and in the middle of that light were dust devils that looked like small

tornadoes. The white light faded away, and the dust devils looked more like two whirling, white cones, distinct from each other, spinning and twisting, riding up then dipping down, blending together, then separating—no, no, they were just dust devils, still white because they hadn't sucked up the dirt yet from the barn floor. But what was that sound he heard? Something strange, something he couldn't identify. Laughter? No, that was crazy, but that was what registered in his brain.

The boys saw the dust devils, whirling and spinning far above them, and started screaming. Rob jumped up, grabbed his older brother, and managed to jerk him out of the circle.

Tammy Tuttle, who'd been looking up, turned suddenly, raised her knife, and yelled, "Get back down, Little Bloods! Don't you dare anger the Ghouls. Get back in the circle, now! GET BACK DOWN!"

The boys scrabbled farther away from the circle. Tommy Tuttle was on them in an instant, jerking them back. Tammy Tuttle drew the knife back, aiming toward Donny Arthur, as Savich leaped up from behind the bale of hay and fired. The bullet ripped into her arm at her shoulder. She screamed and fell onto her side, the knife flying out of her hand.

Tommy Tuttle whipped about, no knife in his hand now but a gun, and that gun was aimed not at Savich but at the boys. The boys were screaming as Savich shot Tommy through the center of his forehead.

Tammy Tuttle was moaning on the floor, holding her arm. The boys stood, clutched together, silent now, and all three of them looked up toward those whirling, white cones that danced up and down in the clear light coming through the barn doors. No, not dust devils, two separate things.

One of the boys whispered, "What are they?"

"I don't know, Rob," Savich said and pulled the boys toward him, protecting them as best he could. "Just some sort of weird tornado, that's all."

Tammy was yelling curses at Savich as she tried to pull herself up. She fell back. There was a shriek, loud and hollow. One of the cones seemed to leap forward, directly at them. Savich didn't think, just shot it, clean through. It was like shooting through fog. The cone danced upward, then twisted back toward the other cone. They hovered an instant, spinning madly, and in the next instant, they were gone. Simply gone.

Savich grabbed both boys against him again. "It's all right now, Donny, Rob. You're both all right. I'm very proud of you, and your parents will be, too. Yes, it's okay to be afraid; I know I'm scared out of my mind, too. Just stay nice and safe against me. That's it. You're safe now."

The boys were pressed so tightly against him that Savich could feel their hearts pounding as they sobbed, deep, ragged sobs, and he knew there was blessed relief in their sobs, that they finally believed they were going to survive. They clutched at him and he held them as tightly as he could, whispering, "It will be all right. You're going to be home in no time at all. It's okay, Rob, Donny."

He kept them both shielded from Tammy Tuttle, who was no longer moaning. He made no move to see what shape she was in.

"The Ghouls," one of the boys kept saying over and over, his young voice cracking. "They told us all about what the Ghouls did to all the other boys—ate them up whole or if they were already full, then they just tore them up, chewed on their bones—"

"I know, I know," Savich said, but he had no idea what his eyes

had seen, not really. Whirling dust devils, that was all. There were no hidden axes or knives. Unless they somehow morphed into something more substantial? No, that was crazy. He felt something catch inside him. It was a sense of what was real, what had to be real. It demanded he reject what he'd seen, bury it under a hundred tons of earth, make the Ghouls gone forever, make it so they had never existed. It must have been some kind of natural phenomenon, easily explained, or some kind of an illusion, a waking nightmare, a mad invention of a pair of psychopaths' minds. But whatever they were that the Tuttle had called the Ghouls, he'd seen them, even shot at one of them, and they were embedded in his brain.

Maybe they had been dust devils, playing tricks on his eyes. Maybe.

As he stood holding the two thin bodies to him, talking to them, he was aware that agents, followed by the sheriff and his deputies, were inside the barn now, that one of them was bending over Tammy Tuttle. Soon there were agents everywhere, searching the barn, corner to corner, searching every inch of the tack room.

Everyone was high, excited. They'd gotten the boys back safely. They'd taken down two psychopaths.

Tammy Tuttle was conscious again, screaming, no way to keep the boys from hearing her, though he tried. They held her down on the floor. She was yelling and cursing at Savich as she cradled her arm, yelling that the Ghouls would get him, she would lead them to him, that he was dead meat, and so were those Little Bloods. Savich felt the boys nearly dissolve against him, their terror palpable.

Then one of the agents slammed his fist into her jaw. He looked up, grinning. "Took her out of her pain. Didn't like to see such a fine, upstanding young lady in such misery."

"Thank you," Savich said. "Rob, Donny, she's not going to hurt anyone ever again. I swear it to you." Sherlock came to him, and she looked angry enough to spit nails. She didn't say anything, just put her arms around the two boys.

The paramedics came through with stretchers. Big Bob, the lead, who had a twenty-two-inch neck, looked at the two agents comforting the boys and just held up his hand. He said to the three men behind him, "Let's just wait here a moment. I think these boys are getting the medicine they need right now. See to that woman. The guy is gone."

Three hours later, the old barn was finally empty again, all evidence, mainly food refuse, pizza boxes, some chains and shackles, a good four dozen candy bar wrappers, carted away. Both Tuttle had been removed, Tammy still alive. The boys were taken immediately to their parents, who were waiting at the sheriff's office in Stewartville, Maryland. From there they'd go on to the local hospital to be checked out. The FBI wouldn't need to speak to them again for at least a couple of days, giving them time to calm down before being questioned.

All the agents drove back to FBI headquarters, to the Criminal Apprehension Unit on the fifth floor, to write up their reports.

Everyone was bouncing off the walls. They'd won. High fives, slaps on the back. No screwups, no false leads. They hadn't been too late to save the boys. "Just look at all the testosterone flying around," Sherlock said as she walked into the office. Then she laughed. No one could talk about anything but how Savich had brought them down.

Savich called all the agents who had participated in the raid together.

“When the barn doors swung in, did anyone see anything?”

No one had seen a thing.

“Did anyone see anything strange coming out of the barn, anything at all?”

There wasn’t a word spoken around the big conference table. Then Sherlock said, “We didn’t see anything, Dillon. The barn doors flew inward; there was some thick dust in the air, but that was it.” She looked around at the other agents. No one had seen any more than that. “We didn’t see anything coming out of the barn either.”

“The Tuttles called them Ghouls,” Savich said slowly. “They looked so real I actually shot at one of them. It was then that they seemed to dissipate, to disappear. I’m being as objective as I can. Understand, I didn’t want to see anything out of the ordinary. But I did see something. I want to believe that it was some sort of dust devil that broke into two parts, but I don’t know, I just don’t know. If anyone can come up with an explanation, I’d like to hear it.”

There were more questions, more endless speculation, until everyone sat silent. Savich said to Jimmy Maitland, “The boys saw them. They’re telling everyone about them. You can bet that Rob and Donny won’t call them natural phenomena or dust devils.”

Jimmy Maitland said, “No one will believe them. Now, we’ve got to keep this Ghouls business under wraps. The FBI has enough problems without announcing that we’ve seen two supernatural cones, for God’s sake, in a rampaging partnership with two psychopaths.”

Later, Savich realized while he was typing his report to Jimmy

Maitland that he'd spelled "Ghouls" with a capital G. They weren't just general entities to the Tuttles; they were specific.

Sherlock followed Savich into the men's room some thirty minutes later. Ollie Hamish, Savich's second in command, was at the sink washing his hands when they came in.

"Oh, hi, guys. Congratulations again, Savich. Great work. I just wish I could have been with you."

"I'm glad to see a man washing his hands," Sherlock said, and poked him in the arm. "In a few minutes I'm going to be washing my hands, too. After I've beaten some sense into my husband here, the jerk. Go away, Ollie, I know you'll want to protect him from me, and I don't want to have to hurt both of you."

"Ah, Sherlock, he's a hero. Why do you want to hurt the hero? He saved those little boys from the Warlocks and the Ghouls."

Savich said, "After what I told you about them, do you spell 'Ghouls' with a capital G in your head?"

"Yeah, sure, you said there were two of them. It's one of those strange things that will stay with you. You sure you weren't smoking something, Savich? Inhaling too much stale hay?"

"I wish I could say yes to that."

"Out, Ollie."

Once they were alone, she didn't take a strip off him, just stepped against him and wrapped her arms around his back. "I can't say that I've never been more frightened in my life, since you and I have managed to get into some bad situations." She kissed his neck and squeezed him even tighter. "But today, at that damned barn, you were a hot dog, and I was scared spitless, as were your friends."

"There was no time," he said against her curly hair. "No time

to bring you in. Jesus, I scared myself, but I had no choice. And then those howling wind things were there. I honestly can't say which scared me more—Tammy Tuttle or whatever it was she called the Ghouls.”

She pulled back a bit. “I really don't understand any of that. You described it all so clearly I could almost see them whirling through those barn doors. But Ghouls?”

“That's what the Tuttles called them. It was like they were acolytes to these things. I'd really like to say it was some sort of hallucination, that I was the only one who freaked out, but the boys saw them, too. I know it sounds off the wall, Sherlock, particularly since none of you guys saw a thing.”

Because he needed to speak of it more, she just held him while he again described what had burst through the barn doors. Then he said, “I don't think there's anything more to do about this, but it was scary, Sherlock, really.”

Jimmy Maitland walked into the men's room.

“Hey, where's a man to piddle?”

“Oh, sir, I just wanted to check Dillon out, make sure he was okay.”

“And is he?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Ollie caught me in the hall on my way to the unit, Savich, said you were getting the bejesus whaled out of you in the men's room. We've got a media frenzy cranking up.” Jimmy Maitland gave them a big grin. “Guess what? No one's going to pound on us this time—only good news, thank the Lord. Great news. Since you were the one in the middle of it, Savich, we want you front and center. Of course, Louis Freeh will be there and do all the talking. They just want you to stand there and look like a hero.”

“No mention of what we saw?”

“No, not a word about the Ghouls, not even speculation about whirling dust. The last thing we need is to have the media go after us because we claim we were attacked by some weird balls of dust called into the barn by a couple of psychopaths. As for the boys, it doesn’t matter what they say. If the media asks us about it, we’ll just shake our heads, look distressed and sympathetic. It will be a twenty-four-hour wonder, then it’ll be over. And the FBI will be heroes. That sure feels good.”

Savich said as he rubbed his hands up and down his wife’s back, “But there was something very strange in there, sir, something that made the hair stand up on my head.”

“Get a grip, Savich. We’ve got the Tuttle brothers, or rather we’ve got one brother dead and one sister whose arm was just amputated at the shoulder. The last thing we need is a dose of the supernatural.”

“You could maybe call me Mulder?”

“Yeah, right. Hey, I just realized that Sherlock here has red hair, just like Scully.”

Savich and Sherlock rolled their eyes and followed their boss from the men’s room.

The boys claimed they’d seen the Ghouls, could speak of nothing else but how Agent Savich had put a bullet right in the middle of one and made them whirl out of the barn. But the boys were so tattered and pathetic, very nearly incoherent, that indeed, they weren’t believed, even by their parents.

One reporter asked Savich if he’d seen any ghouls and Savich just said, “Excuse me, what did you say?”

Jimmy Maitland was right. That was the end of it.

Savich and Sherlock played with Sean for so long that evening