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TROUBLE

ISLAND

A Novel

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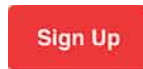
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In memory of Great Aunt Ruth.

And to all the women who've survived their versions of Pony.

PROLOGUE

LOONS AND GULLS arc in the vast, blue-gray sky over the island below.

Yet even wheeling far above it, the birds are tethered to Trouble Island. No matter how high they soar, how far south they fly later in winter, or how far north come spring, they will never be able to truly break free.

Instinct draws them to this stretch of forty-six limestone acres flatly topping the lake's surface, one of many islands in the archipelago dotting the waters of Lake Erie.

On this morning, the birds dive into the lake, seeking whitefish that resurface in November's cooler water. Intent on their prey, they seem not to notice the purple sandpipers—here on a stopover in their migration from the Arctic Ocean to the Atlantic—running in and out to the rhythm of the waves' slow reach and retreat.

Away from the shore, platoons of waterfowl bob up and down on the frigid waves.

Inland, owls nest in forests of hackberry, chinquapin oak, blue ash, sugar maple—trees that thrive in shallow soil. Woodland birds rustle around in swatches of poison ivy for the vine's winter crop of red berries, just now coming on, or glean insects from tree bark.

Of course, none of these birds know about the small blue-and-yellow macaw that lives in a cage in the mansion on the southern shore of the island,

though if the macaw were to be set free, some among them might note it as easy prey. Perhaps the northern goshawk, now swooping among the airborne birds whose ancient warbling cries turn frantically warning, but too late. Midair, the goshawk snatches a gull.

The wheeling birds barely notice as I emerge from the woods, running past the old lighthouse and the hulking remains of an iceboat, abandoned alongside it.

Though bundled up in my coat, hat, and boots, I'm shivering.

Not just from spotting the goshawk kill its prey.

Or from the cold.

Or from the anticipation of what I'm about to do.

But from the fear that's lived in the pit of my stomach ever since I landed on Trouble Island, a fear that claws through my heart, making it pound, and into my throat, making it hard to breathe. The fear that I, like the birds, will remain tethered to the island.

As I let myself into the unlocked, abandoned lighthouse keeper's cottage, I tell myself *no*.

I am not like the birds.

This morning, I am finally breaking free.

I set aside my glasses and disrobe down to my homemade full-body swimsuit, swimming cap, and the goggles I keep stowed away in the cottage.

I pick up a fishing knife.

I go back out into the cold. At the edge of the dock, I stare down at the frigid, rollicking waters of Lake Erie. I hesitate just a moment.

Free.

With that promise thrumming in my mind, I plunge into the lake.

The shock is brutal.

I've swum in this lake before. I have about two minutes before I'll need to come up for air, about ten—maybe twelve—before cold will numb my limbs and hypothermia will begin setting in. I also know that here, on this island, especially in the lake, two minutes is an eternity—and so is even one second. Here, eternity can fit into any sliver of measured time.

Though frigid, the water feels good sluicing over my face. I revel in the feeling of strength as my arms stroke to pull me downward, my legs kick to propel me on. I need just a minute to locate what I'm searching for ...

But instead what comes into view is a figure.

Face bloated. Arms floating out as if grasping for fish, for water snakes, for *me*.

Reflexively, I gasp.

Swallow water.

Flail.

Swim back, back, back ...

CHAPTER 1

I'LL ALWAYS REMEMBER my first sighting of Trouble Island.

I believe it shall appear in my dreams and nightmares for the rest of my life, emerge before me in odd moments, just as it first materialized through the fog as I stood on the prow of the McGees' small yacht nearly two years ago.

I'd only just distinguished the shore when Rosita McGee's mansion emerged, as if it floated there on its own, created of mist and water and sky.

Rosita's descriptions drifted across my mind.

From the veranda I can see for miles across Lake Erie!

The library—so many books! Not that anyone besides me uses it. But you would.

The roses out front are so lush that I can smell them from the tennis courts.

Such were the wistful descriptions that once spurred visions of what my first trip to the island would be like: swirling images of lightness and laughter and joy and ease.

But as it turned out, my first—my only—trip was no such visit.

It was for my imprisonment.



AFTER MY FIRST few days on the island I discovered that there was no angle from which to see the full façade of the mansion. Trouble Island is too small and flat and forested, the mansion too big. No matter how I approached—emerging out of the woods on the singular gravel path that semicircles the southern edge of the island, returning from serving guests at the pool or on the tennis courts, coming back from the small cemetery—I could only glimpse Rosita’s mansion in small bits, like puzzle pieces.

Fitting, as although I once thought I knew her, Rosita herself had become a puzzle.

After that, every time I glimpsed a fragment of the mansion, my first view from the yacht’s prow would flash before my eyes. The only time I had seen the façade of the mansion whole.

Until an early morning last November 1931, when everything changed.



AT FIRST, I thought I’d finally found my means to escape the island.

I was taking my last swim of the year in the early morning around the island, which normally took me an hour, but a half hour in, I was too cold, even in my flippers, goggles, and the full swimsuit I’d made. I came out on a patch of grassy beach along the northern edge of the island, just before the shoreline became challengingly rocky. I knew if I kept going, I’d have to swim

past the rock-ridden stretch to the north dock, and there was no path from that dock—used for private business—back to the mansion.

As I staggered out of the lake, something glinted under the morning sun in the shore grass, catching my attention even with my poor eyesight. Curious, I went to it, and found a rectangular lockbox.

I picked up the box, too heavy to easily swim with, so I made my way to the semicircular path, which traced from the southwest dock—where guests launched fishing boats or visited the old lighthouse—to the main dock in front of the mansion.

I hurried as quickly as I could along the path to the lightkeeper's old cottage. Inside the dark, dank abode, I rushed to the derelict rolltop desk, rolled back the broken cover where I stowed my glasses and clothes while I was swimming to protect them from mice and other critters. I was so curious that, though I shivered, I didn't peel out of my suit, but quickly took off my goggles and put on my glasses.

I studied the box; it was in good shape, not corroded or rusted. So it had not been in the lake, at least not for long. Was it a box that belonged to a recent visitor? A box from one of the many shipwrecks on Trouble Island's shore thirty, forty, even fifty years before? Maybe the box had fallen into the tangled roots reaching from the trees and shrubs that grew on the very edge of the shoreline. Maybe a ferocious Lake Erie storm had stirred up the box, and in a great crashing wave, deposited it in the tall grass, where it had remained, waiting, a gift from the lake to me. A reward for all my months of swimming. Of coming to appreciate the lake and island's natural life, as our visitors never seemed to. They, instead, focused on the delights of the island's mansion, the headiness of being a guest of the island's notorious owner.

The story I wove for the box pleased me, and so, after I spotted a hammer carelessly left on a side table—the cottage was used as a storage and toolshed—I was careful as I used the tool’s claw end to pry open the box.

I stared in shock at the contents: three bars of gold bullion. Jewels—a diamond necklace, cuff links, earrings.

I considered taking the box back to my room at the mansion, but I didn’t want to face my workmates’ curiosity and questions. I thought about stashing it in the rolltop desk, but the top didn’t lock.

I spotted an old fishing net and had what I thought, at the time, was a brilliant idea: I’d bind the box in the net and tie up the box under the southwest dock. I took a moment to consider how the fitful lake and its creatures might affect the box. It should be fine for a week, even two, and by then I hoped—prayed—I’d have concocted a plan for leaving the island before icy winter weather locked us all down. I closed it, bound it with twine, and tied it up securely in the net. I carried my odd package of loot out to the southwest dock.

Before I could have second thoughts, I donned my goggles, grabbed the net-bound lockbox, and jumped back into the frigid, rollicking water. Under the dock, I held my breath so long that my chest was on the verge of convulsing, but eventually I tied up the net.

And then I surfaced, gasping for air, yet giddy. I laughed aloud with joy. The contents of that box were worth at least five hundred dollars, enough for me to start my life over—once again.

But my delight and hope were short-lived. For I spotted a boat coming from the south toward Trouble Island.