

WOLF ISLE

PROLOGUE

THE ISLAND waited.

Formed by titanic lava flows and sculpted by glaciers, it rose above a great Lake left behind by the receding ice. Ten thousand feet of volcanic rock, produced by repeated eruptions of molten lava over millions of years, lay beneath its corrugated surface. More fire and ice converted the stone between the ridges into greenstone, agate and slate, while the massive outcroppings along the coast were barely worn. Sandstone pebble beaches formed. Inland lakes and ponds, puddles left by the glaciers, glittered like sapphires spilled over the gray rock.

Days were typically longer than nights, but even in the dark there was sometimes a dancing crystalline light – yellows and greens, purples and whites – in the northern sky. Meteors rushed across the heavens and plunged into the Lake. The sun rose everywhere, spreading across the horizon like fire, while the moon was a speck loosing its pale gleam over the water, or a globe casting the entire Island in

black and gray. And, but for the disparate sounds of water and the rage of wind and storm, the Island was still.

In a tiny sliver of recent time, it produced soil which, in turn, allowed plants and animals to flourish. Pine, spruce and cedar, limbs interlocked and dripping with moss, reached to the shoreline and dominated the slopes and valleys. Broadleaf trees – aspen, birch, maple – clustered on the higher plateaus. Orchids and wildflowers colored the landscape, and blueberries and thimbleberries – whose white flowers gave way to scarlet fruit – grew everywhere. Swamps, bogs and dense vegetation clogged the low-lying areas while moss and mushrooms – encouraged by cool, wet summers and fog – carpeted the forest floor. Orange lichens attacked the stone.

Birds and animals migrated to the once-barren rock. Some flew, some swam, others crossed bridges of ice when the temperatures fell. Red foxes, scavengers who cleaned up after larger species, lurked. Hares and squirrels multiplied, and beavers and otters claimed the lakes and ponds. Painted turtles and garter snakes, black flies and mosquitos, added to the mix.

Eagles, ospreys and loons built nests near the rocks, and gulls and ducks patrolled the waters. Songbirds, ravens and woodpeckers nestled in the trees. The quiet was replaced by an orchestra of sounds – punctuated by the loon's demented laugh and the wolf's uncanny bark – produced by the new inhabitants.

The dominant species on the Island, apart from man during his intermittent forays, were wolf and moose. Predator and prey, they were locked in an existential struggle. One or the other, or both, verged on extinction. Moose fed on the trees, grasses and ground hemlock, and wolves fed on the moose. When the wolves prospered, the moose declined, and the Island's vegetation grew more robust. When the wolves suffered, the moose thrived, and plant life was decimated.

Unexpectedly, the game was fixed in favor of the moose – substantial numbers of unrelated pairs bred every year, thus maintaining a vigorous gene pool. The wolves were all descended from the same old male and female, creating an incest among mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, corrupt blood that weakened the strain with each succeeding generation.

Mankind journeyed to the Island for hundreds of years but never established a permanent presence. The uncertainty of the Lake, never more than a few degrees above freezing, was a substantial barrier. Winds from north and south clashed eternally, and generated wild storms year round and blizzards, ice and snow during the colder months. Gales blew like hurricanes beneath angry black skies. Fog lay on the surface for weeks at a time.

The water – blue, bluer, black – was itself alive. In contrast to the soft, yielding embrace of the inland lakes and rivers, the Lake had a powerful action that caused trouble for the best-trained boat and crew, however calm it seemed on the surface. A placid mien gave way abruptly to whitecapped waves crashing into the

rocks. Unanticipated swells rose and fell, making troughs that blotted out the shore and horizon.

The first Americans crossed the Lake to dig copper excreted by the rock, leaving hundreds of pits – some thirty feet across and twenty feet deep – as evidence of their industry. Europeans eventually followed, fur traders, fishermen and others seeking to mine copper and gemstones or simply to find respite from the Lake. The rocks and unseen shoreline, extending more than four miles beneath the water, made a graveyard for inattentive vessels.

The most recent visitors came to escape the tedious progress they were creating elsewhere. Having come to the Island for the “nature,” they immediately began to subvert it. “Clubs” and “resorts” – Park Place, the Island House, the Washington Harbor Club – came and went, and the leavings, exposed to the relentless power of time, weather and climate, melted away. Scientists, with their accustomed arrogance, proclaimed the Island a “laboratory,” a place where they could tamper with the existing order, but mankind and its technicians barely registered in the biography of the Island.

Like the soil, the ecology was only skin-deep. The Island and the Lake, not the plants or the animals, or even the human beings, dictated how life was lived. Isolated and timeless, the Island could never be mistaken for somewhere else, even in the warmth of summer. In the winter, with its fierce squalls and icy

temperatures, it seemed plausible that – when the wind stopped and the snow melted – all the nature might be stripped away, leaving only the ancient rock.

And, from the beginning, the Island had preserved a secret, one it might give up one day. When it did, all the turmoil would begin again. But for now, the Island waited.