

"THE TROOP SCARED THE HELL OUT OF ME,
AND I COULDN'T PUT IT DOWN. THIS IS OLD-SCHOOL
HORROR AT ITS BEST." —STEPHEN KING

THE

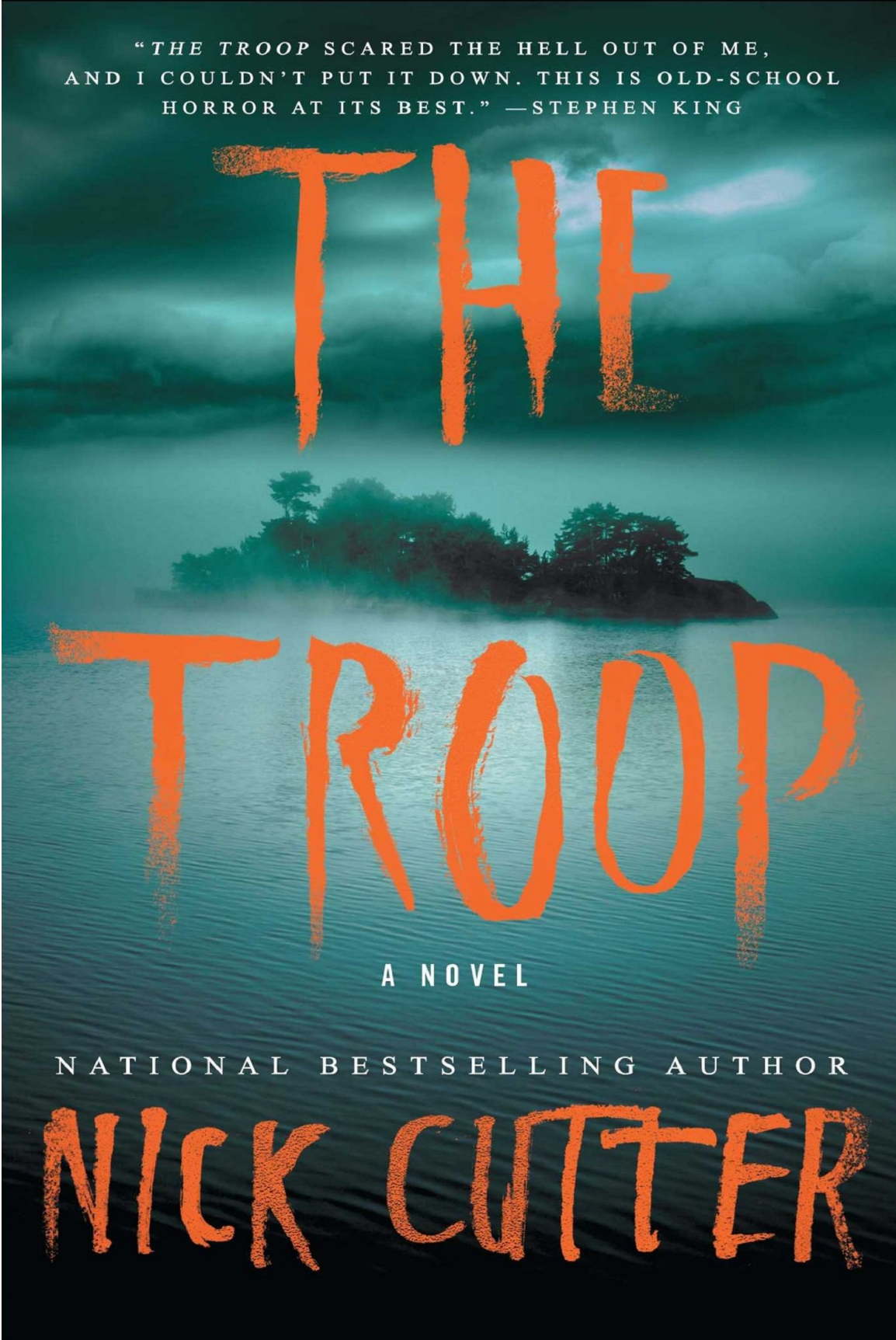
TROOP

A NOVEL

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NICK CUTTER

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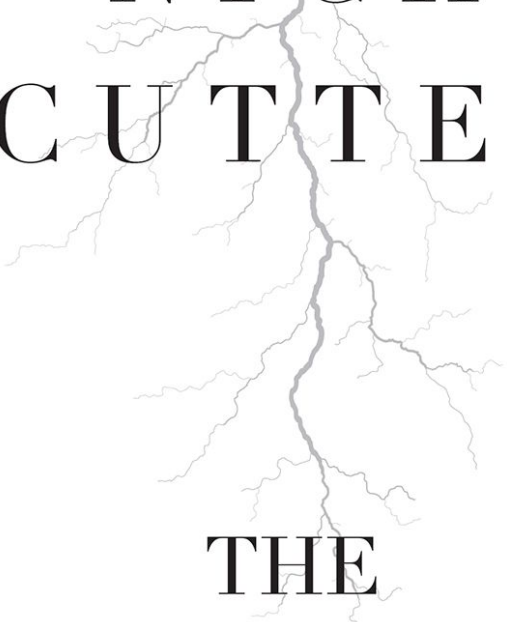
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NICK
CUTTER
THE
TROOP

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*For my brother,
Graham*

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“Adults are obsolete children.”

—DR. SEUSS

“This head is for the beast. It’s a gift.”

—WILLIAM GOLDING,
Lord of the Flies

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PART 1

THE
HUNGRY MAN

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Headline from The Weird News Network, online edition, October 19:

THE HUNGRY MAN OF PRINCE COUNTY!

By Huntington Mulvaney

Fearsome news, dear readers, from one of our loneliest outposts—the tiny fishing community of Lower Montague, Prince Edward Island. A forlorn, foreboding spike of rock projecting into the Atlantic Ocean.

The perfect location for devilry, methinks? Thankfully for you, we have eyes and ears everywhere. We see all, we hear all.

Sadie Adkins, waitress at the Diplomat Diner in Lower Montague, had her late-model Chevrolet truck stolen from the restaurant's lot last night by an unnaturally emaciated thief. Adkins placed a call to our toll-free tip line after her entreaties to local deputy dawgs were cruelly and maliciously rebuffed, deemed—and we quote—“ludicrous” and “insane.”

“I know who stole my damn truck,” Adkins told us. “Starvin’ Marvin.”

An unidentified male, with close-cropped hair and baggy clothing, entered the Diplomat at 9 p.m. According to Adkins, the man was in a severe state of malnourishment.

“Skinny! You wouldn’t believe,” Adkins told our intrepid truth-gatherers. “Never in my life have I seen a man so wasted away. But *hungry*.”

Adkins reports that the unidentified male consumed five Hungry Man Breakfast platters—each consisting of four eggs, three buttermilk pancakes, five rashers of bacon, sausage links, and toast.

“He ate us out of eggs,” Adkins said. “Just kept shoveling it in and asking for more. His belly must have swelled up tight as a drum. He . . . well, he . . . when I came back with his third platter, or maybe it was his fourth, I caught him eating the napkins. Ripping them out of the dispenser, chewing and swallowing them.”

The unidentified man paid his bill and left. Shortly thereafter Adkins went outside to find her truck stolen—yet another malicious indignity!

“I can’t say I was too surprised,” she said. “The man seemed desperate in every way a man can possibly be desperate.”

She fell silent again before adding one final grisly detail:

“I could hear something coming from inside him—I’m saying, under his skin. I know that sounds silly.”

The unidentified man remains at large. Who is he? Where did he come from? The people who *know*—and longtime readers know who we’re talking about: the government, the Secret Service, the Templars, the Illuminati, the usual shady suspects—aren’t forthcoming with info . . . but we’re beating the bushes and scouring secret files, investigating every legitimate tip that arrives at our tipline.