

EDGE OF DUSK by Colleen Coble

EXCERPT

PROLOGUE

“WAS THAT THE WINDIGO?” NINE-YEAR-OLD ANNIE

Vitanen yanked her little sister’s hand to pull her to a stop in the deep shadows of the pines. Chills trickled down her spine, and she stared into the darkness. “Did you hear that?”

“It was just the loons,” Sarah said. “Daddy said there’s no such thing as the Windigo.”

Annie shuddered. “You’re only five—you don’t know that.” While at school she’d heard the story about the fifteen-foot-tall monster who ate humans. Annie peered into the shadows, searching for sunken red eyes in a stag skull staring back at her. The Windigo particularly liked little girls to fill its hungry belly. Sarah tugged her hand free. “Daddy said it was just an old Ojibwa legend. I want to see the loons.”

She took off down the needle-strewn path toward the water.

Annie’s heart seized in her throat. “Sarah, wait!”

Daddy had always told Annie she was responsible for her little sister, and she didn’t want to get in trouble when their parents found out they were out here in the dark. Sarah had begged to come out to see the loons, and Annie found it hard to say no to her. This was the first time they’d been to their little camp on Tremolo Island since the summer started, and it might be a long time before they had time to visit again. Daddy only brought them to get away when he had a lull at the marina. Annie loved it here, even if there wasn’t any power.

Her legs pumped and her breath *whooshed* in and out of her mouth. She emerged into the moonlight glimmering over Lake Superior. Her frantic gaze whipped around, first to make sure the Windigo hadn’t followed them, then to find her sister.

Sarah sat on the wooden dock with her legs dangling over the waves. Lightning flickered in the distance, and Annie smelled rain as it began to sprinkle. Clouds hung low over the water, and the darkness got thicker.

“We need to go back, Sarah.” While they could still find their way in the storm.

“I want to throw bread to the loons.” Sarah gave her a piece of the bread they’d gotten from the kitchen.

Annie jumped when the loon’s eerie yodel sounded. The *oo-AH-ho* sound was like no other waterfowl or bird. Normally she loved trying to determine whether the loon was yodeling, wailing, or calling, but right now she wanted to get her sister back into bed before they got in big trouble. They both knew better than to come down here by themselves. Mommy had warned them about the dangers more times than Annie could count.

She touched her sister’s shoulder. “Come on, Sarah.”

Sarah shrugged off her hand. “Just a minute. Look, the loon has a baby on its back.”

Annie had to see that. She threw in a couple of bread pieces and peered at the loons. “I’ve never seen that.”

“Me neither.”

The loons didn’t eat the bread, but she giggled when a big fish gulped down a piece right under their feet.

When she first heard the splashing, she thought it signaled more loons. But wait. Wasn’t that the sound of oars slapping the water? A figure in a dark hoodie sat in the canoe. Did the Windigo ride in a canoe?

The canoe bumped the dock, and a voice said, “Two to choose from. It doesn’t get much better than that.”

The voice was so cheerful, Annie wasn’t afraid. Before she could try to identify who it was, a hard hand grabbed her and dragged her into the canoe. “I think the younger one would be better.”

The sudden, sharp pain in Annie’s neck made her cry out, and she slapped her hand against her skin. Something wet and sticky clung to her fingers. In the next instant, she was in the icy water. The shock of the lake’s grip made her head go under.

She came up thrashing in panic and spitting water. Her legs wouldn’t kick very well, and she felt dizzy and disoriented. She tried to scream for Daddy, but her mouth wouldn’t work. Her neck hurt something awful, and she’d never felt so afraid.

She’d been right—it was the Windigo, and he meant to eat her sister.

“Sarah!” Annie’s voice sounded weak in her ears, and the storm was here with bigger waves churning around her. “Run!”

Her sister shrieked out her name, and Annie tried to move toward the sound, but a wave picked her up and tossed her against a piling supporting the dock. Her vision went dark, and she sank into the cold arms of the lake.

The next thing she knew, she was on her back, staring up into the rain pouring into her face. Her dad's hand was on the awful pain in her neck, and her mother was screaming for Sarah.

She never saw her sister again.

ONE

Twenty-four years later

LAW ENFORCEMENT RANGER ANNIE PEDERSON RUBBED

her eyes after staring at the computer screen for the past two hours. She'd closed the lid on an investigation into a hit-and-run in the Kitchigami Wilderness Preserve, and she'd spent the past few hours finishing paperwork. It had been a grueling case, and she was glad it was over.

"I'll be right back," she told her eight-year-old daughter, Kylie, sitting on the floor of her office playing Pokémon Go on her iPad.

Kylie's blonde head, so like Annie's own, bobbed, too intent to respond verbally.

Kade Matthews looked up when Annie entered his office. Over the past few years he'd moved up and become head ranger. Kade's six-foot-tall stocky frame and solid muscles exuded competence, and his blue eyes conveyed caring. Annie thanked the Lord every day for such a good boss. He was understanding when she needed time off with Kylie, and he let her know he valued her work and expertise. "Ready for a few days off?"

"Really? With all this work on your shoulders?"

He nodded. "I can handle it. I know this is a busy time for you."

"I do have a lot of work to do out at the marina."

Since her parents and husband died two years ago, she'd been tasked with running the Tremolo Marina and Cabin Resort. She managed with seasonal help and lots of her free time, but summer was always grueling. It was only June 3, and the season was off to a good start.

He cleared his throat, and his eyes softened. "I'm glad you stopped in. I didn't want to send this report without talking to you first."

"What report?" Her tongue felt thick in her mouth because she knew the likely topic.

"A child's remains were found down around St. Ignace."

It didn't matter that it was so far. That route could have easily been chosen by the kidnapper. It was a common way to travel from lower Michigan to the U.P. "How old?"

"Five or six, according to the forensic anthropologist. I assume you want your DNA sent over for comparison?"

"Yes, of course."

They'd been through this scenario two other times since she'd begun searching for answers, and each time she'd teetered between hope and despair. While she wanted closure on what had happened to her sister, she wasn't sure she was ready to let go of hope. Though logically she knew her sister had to be dead. People didn't take children except for nefarious purposes. Annie didn't know how she'd react when word finally came that Sarah had been found.

Relief? Depression? Maybe a combination of the two. Maybe even a tailspin that would unhinge her. All these years later, and she still couldn't think about that night without breaking into a cold sweat. Avoidance had been her modus operandi. Not many even knew about the incident. Kade did, of course. And Bree. Jon too. Probably some of the townspeople remembered and talked about it, too, but it had been long ago. Twenty-four years ago.

Nearly a quarter of a century and yet just yesterday. "How long before results are back on DNA?"

"Probably just a few days. With children they try to move quickly. I'll get it sent over. You doing okay?"

She gave a vigorous nod. "Sure, I'm fine. I'll file this report and get these pictures sent to you."

"Bree told me to ask if you wanted a puppy, one of Samson's.

There's a male that looks just like him."

She smiled just thinking of her daughter's delight. "Kylie has been begging for a puppy since we lost Belle. How much are they going for?"

The little terrier had died in her sleep a month ago at age sixteen, and they both missed her. Samson was a world-renowned search-and-rescue dog, and his pups wouldn't come cheap. She ran through how much she had in savings. Maybe not enough.

"We get two free pups, and Bree told me she would give you one." "You don't want to do that," she protested. "You'd be giving up a lot of money."

He shrugged. "We have everything we need. Head over there in the next few days, and you can take him home with you before our kids get too attached and bar the front door."

She laughed. "Hunter says he's marrying Kylie, so I think he will stick up for her."

Kade and Bree's little boy was four and adored Kylie. She was good with kids, and she loved spending time with the Matthews twins.

"You're right about that. I'll let Bree know you want him. He's a cute little pup."

"What are you doing with the other one?" "Lauri has claimed her."

Kade's younger sister was gaining a reputation for search-and-rescue herself, and she already had a dog. "What about Zorro?"

“He’s developed diabetes, and Lauri knows he needs to slow down some. She wants a new puppy to train so Zorro can help work with him.”

“She might want the one that looks like Samson.” “She wants a female this time.”

She glanced at her watch and rose. “I’ll get out of here. Thanks again for the puppy. Kylie will be ecstatic.”

She went back to her office. “Time for your doctor appointment, Bug.”

Kylie made a face. “I don’t want to go.”

At eight, Kylie knew her own mind better than Annie knew hers most days. She was the spitting image of Annie at the same age: corn silk-colored hair and big blue eyes set in a heart-shaped face. But Annie had never been that sure of herself. Her dad’s constant criticism had knocked that out of her.

She steered her daughter out the brick office building to the red Volkswagen crew-cab truck in the parking lot, then set out for town.

The old truck banged and jolted its way across the potholes left by this year’s massive snowfall until Annie reached the paved road into town. She couldn’t imagine living anywhere other than where the Snow King ruled nine months of the year. There was no other place on earth like Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. With the Keweenaw Peninsula to the north and Ottawa National Forest to the south, there could be no more beautiful spot in the world. Her devotion to this place had cost her dearly nine years ago, but every time she saw the cold, crystal-clear waters of the northernmost Great Lakes stretching to the horizon, she managed to convince herself it was worth it.

Part of the town’s special flavor came from the setting. Surrounded by forests on three sides, it had all the natural beauty anyone could want. Old-growth forests, sparkling lakes where fish thronged, and the brilliant blue of that Big Sea Water along the east side.

They drove through town, down Negaunee to Houghton Street to the businesses that comprised Rock Harbor’s downtown. The small, quaint village had been built in the 1850s when copper was king, and its Victorian-style buildings had been carefully preserved by the residents.

Dr. Ben Eckright’s office was a remodeled Victorian boardinghouse on the corner of Houghton and Pepin Streets. She parked in his side lot and let Kylie out of the back.

She glanced across the street to the law office, and her breath caught at the man getting out of the car. It couldn’t be. She stared at the sight of a familiar set of shoulders and closed her eyes a moment. Opening them didn’t reassure her. It really was him.

Jon Dunstan stood beside a shiny red Jaguar. Luckily, he hadn't seen her yet, and she grabbed Kylie's hand and ran with her for the side door, praying he wouldn't look this way. She was still trembling when the door shut behind her.

* * *

Excerpt from *Edge of Dusk* by Colleen Coble. Copyright 2022 by Colleen Coble. Reproduced with permission from Thomas Nelson. All rights reserved.