

DARK OF NIGHT by Colleen Coble

EXCERPT

One

Should she even be out here alone? Michigan's U.P. was a whole lotta wilderness. Michelle Fraser's shoulder blades gave a tingle and made her glance back to see if anyone was following her. No one there. But in spite of seeing no movement in the trees and bushes, she couldn't discount her gut instinct. She'd been spooked ever since she left the safety of the women's shelter.

Maybe it was just knowing she was out here with no backup that had her on edge.

The heavy scent of rain hung in the twilight air as she set the last of her wildlife cameras in the crook of a large sugar maple tree. A northern flying squirrel chattered a warning from its nest. The *glaucomys sabrinus*'s agitation made Michelle pull away in time to avoid being nipped.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and a spooky mist blew through the forest. The sooner she was out of here, the better. Her last set of cameras hadn't turned up the elusive mountain lions she'd been searching for, but a hunter in neighboring Ontonagon County had snapped a picture of a large male reclining on a rock. If she could acquire more data, it would aid her research for the magazine article proving mountain lions inhabited the area. And she had to have pictures.

She'd been obsessed with big cats for as long as she could remember. Even the various names held a fascinating mystique: catamount, puma, cougar, mountain lion, panther.

A mosquito landed on her arm, and she swatted it. Her hands came away with a drop of blood on her fingers. Yuck. She wiped the residue on her khaki shorts and turned to go back to her ATV. A sound erupted to her right, and it sounded like either a puma or a woman's scream. The hair on her neck prickled, and she moved that way.

The scream peeled again, and she removed the lens cap on the camera slung around her neck. Her palms dampened, and her breath came fast. Walking toward danger might not be the smartest thing, but Michelle couldn't help herself. She yearned to see a puma in the wild in all its power and beauty. Her knees shook as she pulled out a bullhorn from her backpack to frighten away the cat if it sensed her as prey.

Queen pumas would be protecting their litters in June, so she needed to be careful. Her lungs labored as she rushed in that direction. Her black belt in jujitsu wouldn't do much against the speed and power of a puma. She seized a large branch to make herself seem bigger as she advanced through the forest. Evergreen needles clawed at her arms as she forced her way through a thick stand of white pine.

She paused on the other side and caught the glimmer of water. Lake Superior's waves lapped at the rocky shore, and she spotted a yellow kayak riding the swells in the shallow surf. A discarded backpack bobbed beside it.

Her sense of unease grew as she observed the scene. Glancing around, she approached the water and snagged the backpack from the lake, then pulled the kayak onto the rocks. Her gut told her someone was in trouble.

Should she call out? If it was wildlife threatening the woman she thought she'd heard, Michelle could scare it off with a flare. But if the attacker was human, she didn't want to give away her presence and put the woman in greater danger. She scanned the area for bear or cougar scat but found nothing.

The sound of oars slapping the water came from her left, and she ducked back into the shadow of the pines until she could tell the intent of the boaters. Two figures partially shrouded in mist paddled a large canoe around a rocky finger of the shore. The glimpse of broad shoulders through the fog indicated they were probably men. She strained to listen through the sound of the wind and water but couldn't hear much.

She couldn't put her finger on why she didn't want them to see her. Maybe because they were men, and Brandon might have sent them after her.

"I know she ran this way. Trying to get to her kayak, eh." The man's heavy Yooper accent carried well over the water.

"Can't see her through this mist," the other man said. "I don't know why I let you talk me into this. Your love life isn't my business."

"You owe me. Let's try on down the shore. There's a deer trail toward the road she might have tried to take."

Their voices faded as their canoe moved past. She didn't get a good look at their faces. Was a woman out there trying to escape an abusive ex? Michelle had seen plenty of that kind of trauma this past year and had experienced abuse personally.

Once they were out of sight, she stepped back into the clearing. "Hello," she called softly. "Is anyone here? I can help you."

She walked across the green mossy clearing, searching for a sign of an injured woman. The bushes to her left shivered and rustled, and she stepped closer. "Hello? Do you need help?"

The leaves parted as the mist swirled along the ground, and the pale oval of a woman's face emerged. Long blonde hair hung in strings along her cheeks, and her eyelids fluttered as though she might faint. Michelle rushed forward and helped the young woman to her feet. She was in her early twenties with a slight build. Mud smeared her khaki shorts and red top, and she was barefoot.

She seemed familiar, and Michelle reached down to touch her forehead. She nearly recoiled at the heat radiating from the young woman. "Wait, aren't you Grace Mitchell?"

They'd met when Grace first arrived at the shelter, but Michelle hadn't immediately recognized her with the mud and dirt on her face and hair. The woman's fever alarmed Michelle. "You're burning up. We need to get you to a doctor."

"I-I'll be fine. Do you have some way out of here?"

"My ATV is this way." Michelle put her right arm around the woman's waist and helped her stumble toward the trail. "What are you doing out here?"

Grace paused and wiped the beads of perspiration from her forehead. "I spotted my ex driving past the shelter, and I knew he'd found me. That day we met, you mentioned a remote area you liked with a great camping spot, and I decided to try to find it. You know, hide out until I figured out where to go to get away from Roy. But I stopped by to get camping gear from my parents, and he must have followed me here. He's out there somewhere. He and a buddy." Her blue eyes flashed with fear. "I can't let him find me."

They reached the ATV, and Michelle got Grace situated, but it was a tight squeeze on the vehicle meant for one person. Michelle got water out of her backpack and helped Grace drink some. She grabbed her phone, too, and took a quick photo of the traumatized girl before she dropped it back into the pack.

Michelle started the machine and pulled out onto the trail back to the cabin where she'd been hiding out. She should have gotten out of here earlier since the weather had caused darkness to fall sooner than expected. It would be slow going on the rough trail with only the headlamps pushing the darkness back a short distance.

After only a few minutes, Michelle realized she'd gotten off the trail. She stopped the machine and looked around. Which way should she go? She consulted her compass and decided to push due west. They'd only gone a few feet when the ground gave out under the machine, and they went flying

into the air. When Michelle hit the ground, something in her right leg snapped, and the excruciating pain was instantaneous.

She bit back a scream but couldn't stop the moan as she pulled her knee to her chest. The swelling was already starting four inches above her ankle, but at least it didn't appear to be a compound fracture. "I-I've broken my leg. Are you all right, Grace?"

When Grace didn't answer, Michelle felt along the ground until she touched her thigh. "Grace?" She felt up the young woman's body to her face.

Grace wasn't breathing. "Oh no," Michelle whispered. She checked her out in the dark as best as she could. No pulse.

Michelle dragged herself to the machine but it was on its side, and she couldn't right it with her broken leg. No one would be searching for her out here, so she had to find shelter. But how?

The pain made it hard to think. She froze at the sound of movement in the vegetation. Something big was crashing toward her. A deer? A mountain lion or bear?

A man's shoulders moved into sight, and his expression sent shivers up her spine. When he reached down to lift her up, the pain intensified in her leg, and her vision went black.

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Law enforcement ranger Annie Pederson sat at a table by herself in the small interrogation room at the Rock Harbor jail and waited for Taylor Moore to be brought in for questioning. Maybe it was Annie's imagination, but it seemed as if the beige paint on the walls reeked with the guilt and despair of countless years of interrogations. Even the clean scent of the disinfectant used in the area didn't dissipate the unpleasantness. She didn't like this space and wished she could have talked to Taylor at the coffee shop or somewhere more pleasant.

But this meeting might be the end of her lifelong search, so she would have faced even tigers in this place.

The door opened and Taylor entered. Several weeks ago Annie had hired her to help out around the Tremolo Marina and Cabin Resort and with Annie's eight-year-old daughter, but the woman had been picked up for questioning about the necklace found belonging to a murdered girl. Her claim to be Annie's sister, Sarah—kidnapped from Tremolo Island twenty-four years ago—had turned Annie's every thought on its head. According to Taylor's ID, she was twenty-nine, three years younger than Annie, so that detail matched Sarah.

Annie's heart squeezed at Taylor's ducked head and stringy locks. The bright-red hair dye was fading, and glints of her natural blonde color showed through. Her jeans and tee looked like she'd slept in them for days, and the scent of stale perspiration wafted from her.

Taylor glanced up, and Annie bit back a gasp at the defiance gleaming in those vivid blue eyes that matched Annie's eye color instead of the muddy brown Annie was used to. Jon Dunstan had claimed Taylor was wearing contacts to change her eye color, and it seemed he was right.

Annie had prided herself on her ability to read people in her line of work. She'd always thought she could detect a liar with no problem. Taylor had completely snowed her. After Taylor's impeccable references, Annie had trusted the woman with her child.

Sheriff Mason Kaleva ambled in behind Taylor. He gestured to the chair across the table from Annie. "Have a seat, Ms. Moore."

In his forties, his husky form brought solace to Annie. He'd always been there for her and his town, and his kind brown eyes swept over her in a questioning gaze. She gave him a little nod to let him know she was okay.

Taylor's eyes narrowed. "It's Ms. Vitanen. Sarah Vitanen."

A wave of dizziness washed over Annie, and she bit her lip and eyed Taylor closely. "You claim to be my sister, but do you have any proof?"

The chair screeched on the tile floor as Taylor pulled it out before she plopped onto it. "I should have expected you wouldn't welcome me with open arms. After all, you did nothing to stop my abduction."

Heat swept up Annie's neck and lodged in her cheeks. "What could an eight-year-old do to stop an adult? If you're really Sarah, what was the name of your favorite stuffed animal?"

“Cocoa,” Taylor said without hesitation. “It was a brown kitten. I couldn’t have a real one because Mom was allergic.”

Annie’s eyes widened. She caught her breath as she studied the other woman across the table. “Let me see your left knee.”

Rebellion flashed in Taylor’s blue eyes, and she leaned down to yank up her baggy jeans, then stood with her tanned knee exposed. A faded two-inch scar just below her kneecap matched the one in Annie’s memory. Sarah had gotten snagged on a large metal hook under the dock at the marina. It had taken fifteen stitches to close the wound, and Annie had helped her sister hobble around for several weeks.

But was that proof? Kids had scars from all sorts of things. She wanted to believe her sister was still alive, but was Taylor really Sarah?

Her breath eased from her lips, and Annie couldn’t speak for a long moment. “You really believe you’re Sarah? Did you research all that and make sure the details matched?”

Taylor just stared back at her with that same defiance. In Annie’s dreams, finding Sarah meant a tight embrace and happy tears, but Taylor’s stance with her arms folded across her chest and her jutting chin warned Annie off any displays of affection. Not that she was feeling any warmth toward the other woman in this moment.

When the other woman plopped back in her chair and didn’t answer, Annie licked her lips. “Why didn’t you tell me when you first showed up looking for work? Why the fake name? I’ve been searching for my sister for years.”

“Have you? Have you really?”

Annie glanced at Mason. “Ask him if you don’t believe me.”

Mason shifted his bulky form and nodded. “I’ve been helping Annie search. We’ve sent DNA samples numerous times over the past ten years. Her parents searched for Sarah, and even hired investigators, until their deaths.”

Annie hadn’t known that. Her parents’ business, the Tremolo Marina and Cabin Resort, operated on a shoestring, so they must have taken much needed money to try to find Sarah.

Annie shifted her gaze back to the woman across the table. Taylor twisted a strand of hair around her finger in a coil. Sarah used to do that too. If this was a scam, it was an elaborate one. With all her

heart Annie wanted to believe it, but she couldn't quite accept it. It was so sudden, and the circumstances were bizarre.

Mason cleared his throat. "We'll need a little more proof. We can get the DNA back in a week or so."

"I have nothing to hide," the other woman said.

Annie had spent twenty-four years agonizing over her failure to save Sarah. The guilt had nearly swallowed her alive, though everyone told her she couldn't have done anything. Until a few days ago, she hadn't been able to recall much about that awful night. Maybe she hadn't wanted to remember how she froze in fear when the kidnapper grabbed Sarah.

Annie fingered the scar on her neck where the attacker had wounded her with a knife. She'd been left for dead in the cold waters of Lake Superior, and while logically she knew she was no match for the gruff woman who'd snatched her sister, Annie had struggled to believe it.

"Were any of the things you told me about your life true? Those things you said about your mother?"

"I had a rotten life, if that's what you're asking. All those things I said about my mother were true. And it was all your fault."

There was nothing Annie could say to counter that when her own conscience condemned her too. She was only too glad when her boss, Kade Matthews, texted her with a new case. Mason could continue the questioning about the necklace.