

“Northwoods” - Excerpt #1

Bootsy Anderson kicked off his shoes and waded into the water. The lake muck cushioned his feet as he eased his way in. When he was up to his chest, he rested his plastic travel mug on the water’s surface and let his feet drift upwards until he was floating on his back. He had always been good at floating. He tipped the mug to his mouth and sucked the brandy through his teeth so that it wouldn’t spill into his nose.

He tried to focus on the stars, the weightless sensation of floating, the fruity burn of the liquor on his lips. Meditation, they called it.

Michelle had agreed to meet him after work but she had left when an hour had passed and he hadn’t shown up. It was a sad routine, and there was a part of him that had been relieved when she had asked him for a divorce in July. Now they could both move on, her to something better, and him to a place where he didn’t have to disappoint her all the time.

He thought of Andy.

Across the lake, somebody cranked up the radio. Etta James’ voice slid over the water, a nice change from the usual shit-kickin’ country coming from Dan Simon’s cottage. “Classy with a K” is how Michelle had always described Dan, and Bootsy stopped keeping track of how many noise disturbance calls he got for him. Maybe the vacationers wouldn’t mind Etta James. Maybe tonight he could just get drunk and float.

The scanner crackled from under the heap of clothes he had left on the sand.

“Bootsy, you there?”

He considered ignoring the dispatch. Then, with a twist of his hips, he turned and began to frog-kick back to shore, holding his drink out of the water. Back on dry land, he eased the lid off the mug and tipped the rest of the contents into his mouth. He stood still for a moment, the back of his hand pressed to his lips, and then bent over to grab his clothes.

Bootsy nudged the cruiser into the brush along Lakelawn and turned off the engine. He stepped out of the car onto the gravel and listened more closely to the music that was still blaring. It was the same Etta James song...‘At Last’...and it wasn’t coming from Dan Simons’ cottage after all.

“Phil, which house called in the noise disturbance?” He clicked the speaker button on the scanner and waited for a response.

“Six-six-oh Lakelawn. One of Mike’s places.” The blast of the dispatch officer’s voice seemed deafening in the night air, and Bootsy turned the volume down before replying.

“Roger that.” He tucked the scanner into his waistband and put his hands on his hips. He listened a few minutes longer and, sure enough, it was the same song, on repeat. He kept to the line of shadows where the road met the woods, making his way towards the row of cottages that lined this stretch of Shaky Lake. A puff of lake flies collided with his face and he spit out one that had managed to find its way into his mouth. The brandy had finally arrived in his bloodstream and he stared longingly at the campfire glowing in a backyard a little ways down the lake. But as he came upon the row of cottages, he realized that the music was coming *from* 660 Lakelawn. The cottage was one of about a dozen clustered along the lake, part of a resort owned by Mike and Kim Sukowaty.

The shore on this side of the lake was a zigzag of rocky outcroppings and pine forest, and 660 Lakelawn was partially hidden from the road by trees, and from the water by a tall ledge of red granite. Through the pines, the windows of the cottage shone brightly, and Bootsy braced himself for dealing with a bunch of drunken tourists who were so far gone as to call the cops on themselves. He was not in the mood.

The parking space next to the cottage was empty. Gravel from the parking space was scattered onto the path leading to the front door and two long scars showed where a car had peeled out of the driveway. His heart sank. Drunk driving was a problem in Shaky Lake. In Wisconsin in general, and a noise disturbance call was starting to look nice compared to a DUI arrest, or worse.

Up close, the music was jarringly loud - like a smoke alarm in the middle of the night. It drowned out any other noise from the house and he felt uneasy. *Going in deaf is better than going in blind*, he thought. Suddenly, a black shape came hurtling towards him from the side and he instinctively ducked. One hand shielded his face and the other flew to his service weapon. He scanned his immediate surroundings. Nothing. Nothing but the swoosh of blood pumping through his body, loud enough in his ears to drown out the music. He looked up. In the treetops, he saw small black shapes swooping through the air.

*A bat. It was just a bat.* He growled in frustration and stood up. Hand on his gun, he continued to the cabin and pulled open the screen door. No doorbell and no use knocking with the music blasting. The door opened into the kitchen, with its honey-stained knotty pine cabinets and speckled linoleum floor. A formica table, chrome with a bright orange top, was situated in the middle of the room. All six orange vinyl chairs were pushed in. Nothing on the formica countertops. No evidence of food or drinks. Empty. Tidy.

“Police!” he shouted. “Anyone home?” He waited. When no one came, he stepped in and locked the door. The music was driving him crazy but he resisted the urge to find the source and turn it off. Etta James hid the sound of his movements, and for that he was thankful. It had

always been the sound of his own movement that scared him in Kandahar. He poked his head into the living room, then took a few steps in and looked around. There was a vintage print hanging over the fireplace that said “Show Off Your Rod...Swim Naked” and a cluster of overstuffed chairs and a sofa.

The cottage was small, maybe three bedrooms and a bathroom, with a screen porch facing the lake. He went to the porch first and scanned the length of it, brightly lit with strings of white twinkle lights and rustic-chic lamps. Empty. That done, he stepped back into the living room and locked the porch door. *No one in, no one out.* One of the cardinal rules of a sweep. He made his way systematically through the rooms, all as tidy and empty as the kitchen. High-end speakers were positioned throughout the house, and the source of the music system was a Bose radio in one of the bedrooms. For now he left it playing. If it wasn't for the music and bright lights and wide-open windows, the place looked like no one had set foot in it all summer. He leaned in the doorway of the bedroom and chewed his lip thoughtfully.

“Helloooooo!!” Someone shouted, barely audible over the music. Bootsy crossed the hall to the bedroom with the radio, and pulled the plug. His ears quavered from the shock of sudden silence and he shook his head. He heard the crunch of gravel and realized that the person who had come to the door was now walking away. He quickly opened the door and saw a woman in denim shorts and a Green Bay Packers hoodie walking away. She had nearly disappeared down the unlit path and her footsteps were silent now on the cushion of fallen pine needles.

“Excuse me. Ma'am?” The woman spun around and Bootsy could tell that he had scared the crap out of her. “Sorry, sorry,” he said, holding his hands in front of him. “Do you have a minute, ma'am?”

She looked at him, her eyes widening slightly. *It's the uniform,* he thought. It was tough to have normal conversations with people when he was wearing police gear and carrying a gun.

She shrugged. “Sure.” As she came into the light cast by the lantern sconces on either side of the door, he studied her appearance. *Forty-something, dark hair, about five-foot-five, medium build.* Her expression was calm but puzzled as she squinted at him in the bright light.

“Thank god you came, officer,” she said. “I was about ready to kill those people for blasting their music.” She looked at his badge and laughed. “I mean, you know...not actually kill them.”

He laughed. “Don't worry. We don't arrest people for figurative murder around here.”

At this, she smiled broadly and shoved both hands into the pockets of her shorts. “Ok then, officer. What can I do for you?”

“I'm Officer Anderson. Are you staying at this resort?”

“Yeah, my daughter and I are just down that way. Three cottages down. I thought we had the resort to ourselves until an hour ago.” She took one hand out of her pocket and gestured at the cottage. “Until that started.” She shook her head. “What the hell, people?”

“So you don’t know the people staying here?” he asked.

“I honestly didn’t think anyone was here at all. We’ve been coming here for years, since my kids were babies, and I’ve never seen it this dead here. It’s weird.”

“How long have you and your family been here this summer?” *Clothing simple and clean. Nothing fancy but nothing scruffy. Small earrings, possibly diamonds. Expensive-looking haircut. High-quality leather sandals and toenails with shiny pink nail polish. No wedding ring.*

“A week. We come every August for two weeks before school starts. We usually stay in that one,” she said gesturing past him towards the cottage, “but it was already reserved.” She cocked her head to the side. “I was actually kind of pissed about that. We’ve been coming here forever and I’m always really good about reserving early. In fact, I called in January to reserve this place and it was already taken.”

“What’s so great about this particular cottage? Better view?”

“No, it’s the only one with a private dock. We like to bring our canoe and it’s nice to be able to just tie it up there versus hauling it to the boat launch.” His pulse quickened. *There’s a dock.* He kicked himself for not considering that and immediately looked for a way to wrap up the conversation.

“Can I get your name and contact information, ma’am?” He pulled his notebook and pencil out of his breast pocket.

“‘Ma’am.’ Makes me feel old.” She laughed and shook her head. “I guess I’m middle-aged now.” She noticed the impatient look on his face. “Beth. Elizabeth, actually. Winkley.” She gave him her cell phone number. “The connection here can be a little spotty so if you can’t reach me, try calling Mike and Kim and they can track me down.”

“You’re going to be here for another week?”

A look of anxiety crossed her face, as though she realized that something more than a noise disturbance was going on. “Yes,” she said quickly.

“Thanks for your help. Hope you and your family have a good vacation.”

She gave a polite smile and turned and walked away down the path. Bootsy waited until she had been gone for a few minutes, then went back into the cottage and locked the door. The

night was very dark now. The stars shining over the lake earlier had gone, obscured by clouds. He considered whether to leave the lights on or turn them off, then finally decided to turn them off. He went quickly through the cottage, flipping off lights, then went out onto the patio. He turned off the lamps and unplugged the twinkle lights. It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the dark, and for his ears to grasp the rhythm of night sounds. It was after midnight and, being a Tuesday, the people of Shaky Lake had mostly turned in for the night.

God, he loved silence. Not silence, exactly. Just the absence of human noise. No voices, no radios, no motor boats, no rumble of helicopters or humvees. These were the times when he loved Shaky Lake like it was part of his soul. He clung to these perfect summer nights when he was digging cars out of snow banks or mopping puddles of dirty snow melt off his mudroom floor. He would give anything to just sit there on the porch and take in the silence. The shiver of pine boughs in the warm air. The lapping of the water against the rocks. The chirping and rustles of who-knows-what in the darkness. He *trusted* the darkness in Shaky Lake.

*Not tonight.* He pulled his flashlight off his belt and held it, unlit. The path down to the water was all smooth rock and pine needles, and he moved silently, all the time looking ahead, above, around, behind.

He heard a boat scrape gently against the dock below and he froze. The granite outcropping obscured the shore and the dock, and he ducked into the shadow of the rock. He listened intently, but couldn't hear anything besides the boat and the nighttime noises. Slowly, one foot carefully at a time, he descended the path. Finally, he rounded the corner and saw the dock. It was empty except for a small rowboat that wobbled gently on the ripples of wind and water. The shoreline was dark and still.

The dock was rickety, and the peeled-paint boards creaked under his weight. Bootsy turned on his flashlight. Nothing was visible in the boat from where he stood, just off shore, except the oars, propped neatly in the stern. He moved farther down the dock until he stood directly next to the boat. And there, crumpled in the bottom of a boat, was the lifeless body of a boy.

"Oh God, don't do this to me now," said Bootsy, aloud. He crouched down to see more clearly and swept his flashlight across the boy's body, then laid down on his stomach on the dock so he could reach into the boat. He stretched to feel the boy's pulse. *No pulse, not breathing. Skin cold.* Even with the flashlight, it was hard to see details. *Longish dark hair. No shirt. Hawaiian-print swim trunks. Stocky build.* The body was sprawled unnaturally, the head twisted sharply to the side. Bootsy knew the boy was dead. Even so, he considered doing CPR. Maybe he hadn't been dead long. *Maybe I can...*

But he knew he couldn't. It wasn't the first time he had sat, helpless, beside a fallen body. He started shaking, just a tremor in his hands at first, then a growing spasm as his muscles locked up.

The flashlight slipped out of his hand into the water and the cyclone in his mind began to spin.

*Breathe in, breathe out. Let it wash away.*

Finally, he wasn't sure how long it took, he recovered enough to get his brain back in order. He rolled off of his stomach into a sitting position and grabbed the radio from his belt.

"Dispatch, this is Deputy Anderson, I've got a DOA at 660 Lake lawn. Request immediate backup. Over."

"Roger that, Deputy. Backup en route. Lights and sirens?"

Bootsy paused. Lights and sirens was protocol but he cringed at the thought of waking everyone. An audience was the last thing he needed.

"No lights and sirens," he responded. "I'm at the dock behind the cottage."

"Roger that. Over."

He sat with his head in his hands. With the flashlight gone, he couldn't see much beyond the edge of the dock. It gave him an excuse to avoid looking at the boy again and a chance to collect himself. He got up and walked to the far end of the dock. As he moved, he noticed that the front of his pants were wet. *Must have gotten splashed when the flashlight fell in.* Then he looked more closely. His shoulders sagged in mortification.

It had never been this bad before. He had never so completely lost control. *I pissed myself.*

A car door slammed from up by the cottage and he cursed. He stooped to reach into the water and scooped handfuls of cold lake water onto his pant legs and shirt to make it look like he was wet all over.

"Down here," he called. A minute later, two flashlight beams bobbed around the outcropping.

"You standing there in the dark, Bootsy?" called a voice. It was Jake Howard. New guy. New to Shaky Lake, anyway.

"Yeah. I'm a total dipshit. Knocked my flashlight into the water."

The dock shook as the deputies stepped on. Behind the glare of the flashlights, Bootsy could make out Jake's scarred face. An older woman with short-cropped hair walked just behind him.

“Shit, Nathan.” The woman handed him her flashlight and put her hands on her hips, looking first at Bootsy and then down at the boat.

“Hi, Mom. Didn’t know you were on tonight.”

She just nodded, all the while looking around as far as the flashlights allowed. “You already checked the cottage?”

“Yeah. Noise disturbance call. When I got here, the place was deserted. No sign of anyone except the blasting music.”

She pinched her lips thoughtfully. “Jake, go up and take another look.”

Bootsy’s jaw tightened but he kept quiet.

“And call forensics.”

“Got it, Sheriff,” Jake nodded and headed up the path.

Marge Anderson wasn’t much of a talker, and tonight was no exception. Bootsy waited for her to speak, and when she didn’t, he began to report the facts.

“Phil sent out the call at about 10 pm and I got here around...um...10:20.”

Her brows raised slightly and he knew what she was thinking. *What took you so long?* He remembered the brandy and rolled his tongue around in his mouth to see if there was any chance the smell lingered on his breath.

“All the lights were on and the music was blasting when I got here. I mean blasting. Same song over and over again.”

“What song?” asked Marge.

“Etta James. At Last. You know, ‘At laaaast, my love has come along...my...’”

“I know the song, Nathan. This isn’t karaoke.”

His face reddened and he gripped the flashlight more tightly.

“I’m not taking the bait, Mom,” he said, and shook his head. The counselor at the Veteran’s Affairs hospital had spent hours teaching him to pick his battles. *“Those battles, back then? Over there? You couldn’t choose those, Bootsy. No way to change what’s already been done,*

*but now you choose. You and only you.*” Standing here in the dark, next to a dead child, with piss slowly drying into his pants...he felt anything but in control.

“Anyway,” he continued, “no sign of anybody in the house.” He described the sweep in precise detail. “I spoke with a woman. She’s staying with her kids a few cottages down. She didn’t know anything about the occupants of the cottage. She didn’t think there were any.”

The crease between Marge’s brows was the only sign that she was listening. “We’re gonna need to talk to her again,” she said, finally. Her eyes flicked at him and he had to bite back a “No shit, Sherlock.”

“I can do that,” he said.

Then, Marge looked in the direction of the shore, high up where the outcropping met the path. He could make out the figure of a woman, holding a camp lantern. The light from the lantern swung a bit but the woman was completely still.

Bootsy cursed under his breath, then quickly made his way back to the shore. “Ma’am? Ms. Winkley, I need you to return to your cottage for the night.” She didn’t move or say anything, so he climbed up the path towards her. By the time he was ten feet away, he could tell that something was wrong. The way the lantern light reflected in her large eyes made him nervous.

He hurried to her side. “Ma’am. Beth. You can’t be here. Come on,” he said, and took her gently by the elbow. She didn’t move. Then she looked at him and her expression turned pleading.

“What’s going on? Why are you guys down there?” She gestured at Marge and then looked back at him.

A mosquito whined in his ear and he could feel sweat spring up on the edge of his hairline. The panic in her voice had taken him by surprise and he struggled for a moment to keep his composure. He felt Marge’s eyes on him.

“Beth, I need you to go back to your cottage. I’ll take you.” He tried once again to turn her back up the pathway but she wrenched her hand from his grip and looked at the dock.

“There’s someone in the boat, isn’t there?”

Her question took him by surprise. “I’m sorry, I can’t...”

“Caitlin hasn’t come home yet.” Her voice was low, almost choking. “I haven’t seen her since this morning.”

“Caitlin?”

“My daughter.”

Horror spilled through Bootsy like cold water, down his neck to the ends of his fingers. He grabbed her arm. “Beth, I need you to come up to the cottage with me *now*.”

Her eyes widened. The edge in his voice was unmistakable. She looked back at Marge, standing on the dock in the dark, watching them.

“Hang on a minute, Beth. Don’t move.” He let go of her arm and hurried down the path. Marge met him at the shore.

“Her daughter might be missing,” he whispered as he handed her the flashlight. “I’m going up to talk with her but I have a bad feeling about this.”

Marge nodded. “I’ll be up once forensics gets here. Maybe another twenty minutes.”

He returned to her side and they continued up the path in silence. Behind him, far in the distance, he heard the sound of a boat engine starting.

The cottage was nearly identical to 660 Lakelawn. Same layout. Same vintage northwoods vibe. He scanned the living room as he waited. The place was tidy but lived-in. A beach towel draped over the back of an armchair. Flip-flops sitting by the door to the porch. A lap-top computer halfway open on the coffee table.

Beth was in the kitchen. She hadn’t said anything since telling Bootsy to take a seat on the couch, just hurried off to make coffee. The windows were wide open and the plaid curtains gently puffed and sucked against the screens. In the distance, he could just make out the sounds of more car doors slamming. Voices shouting directions. *Forensics will be out there all night*, he thought.

“Here, officer, um...”

“Anderson.”

Beth handed him a mug of coffee but her hand shook and the coffee sloshed onto his lap.

He sucked his breath in through his teeth and grabbed at his pants leg. As he looked down, he saw the nearly-dry spots on his pants and cringed. *I'm sitting here with piss drying on my pants.*

Beth seemed to mistake his mortified frown for anger, and she backed away a couple of steps. "I'm so sorry, officer." Her face twitched and he knew she was about to cry. He quickly set his mug on the coffee table and jumped up.

"Mrs. Winkley, please, sit down." He held his arms out and led her to the couch, then grabbed the coffee cup and shoved it into her hands. He hesitated for a second, and then sat down beside her.

"I just have some questions for you." He sat quietly while she took a sip of the coffee.

"Please, officer, what's going on?" she said finally. The pleading look returned to her eyes and he realized he had no idea what to say. He looked at his lap for a moment so she couldn't see the uncertainty on his face.

"You mentioned that you haven't seen your daughter since this morning. Can you tell me more about her?"

Her face was pale. "Her name is Caitlin and she's sixteen-years-old. She went boating with her friend Ben this morning and —" she pressed her lips together tightly, as if to prevent a cry from escaping. "—and that's Ben's boat down by the dock."

He looked at her hands, curled around the coffee mug. He could have sworn she wasn't wearing a wedding ring earlier, but now one sparkled on her left hand. A huge rock on a diamond studded band.

"Did you know Ben and his family?"

Her expression turned defensive. "I've met Ben and his mom, Rachel, lots of times. I've only met his dad once, but..."

"It's okay, Mrs. Winkley," he said in what he hoped was a reassuring tone. "Can you give me a description of Caitlin?"

She pressed her lips together and he saw that she was close to tears again. After a moment, she said quietly, "She has blond hair. A body like a string bean. She's tall for her age." She began to cry.

Bootsy thought about the boy in the boat - dark hair, a stocky build.

“Is it Ben?” she asked. “The boy in the boat?”

He frowned. *How long had she been standing there on the shore, watching?*

Just then, there was a knock on the screen door. Bootsy jumped up, relieved, and stood there while Beth went to answer the door. He heard Marge introduce herself and, as she followed Beth back into the living room, she gave him a questioning look.

“Sheriff,” he said, “Mrs. Winkley and I were just finishing up.”

“What about Caitlin?” Beth asked.

“Do you have a way to contact her? Cell phone?”

“I— I could call Rachel and see if she’s there with Ben.”

Bootsy shook his head quickly, glancing up to meet Marge’s eyes. “No, we will be visiting them shortly. Do you know the address?”

Beth scribbled directions and a phone number on a notepad she produced from the kitchen, then handed it to Marge.

“Beth, what I need you to do now is try to get ahold of Caitlin,” he said. “You have my number. We will check back in with you in a few hours.”