



AUGUSTINE MEIJER

Murder In Hell
A Brick North Mystery



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Chapter 1

Brick North’s first few weeks in Hell were a blur. He had arrived in the fifty-four Dodge pickup he bought at auction from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. After unloading his few belongings and supplies, he began working on the cottage his parents had left him. Truth-be-told, as an only child, his parents had left him everything.

Hell, Michigan was barely a wide spot in the road in southern Livingston County. While only seventeen miles from Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan and sixty miles from Detroit, the contrast was so great that Hell might as well have been in the primeval forests of Europe. Lush with both conifers and deciduous trees, and with gently rolling hills, it was easy to see why the original German settlers had stopped and stayed.

The first order of business had been to begin the massive chore of dusting, sweeping, mopping, and cleaning. North had no idea when his father had last used the cottage. His mother had died while he was fighting Nazis in France back in forty-four. His father died five years ago in fifty-two, and the tiny house hadn’t been used since then. The most

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recent magazine in the living room was a July forty-seven copy of “Life.” North speculated that it could well have been a decade since anyone had visited the cottage. If the overgrowth around the property was any indication, it was a long time since anyone had been there.

North was pleasantly surprised that the two-bedroom cottage now featured only a single bedroom, his youthful room having been turned into a bathroom. It was not important when the house had been remodeled; all that mattered was there was no more outhouse. With winter approaching, Brick was agreeable with whoever’s decision it was to plumb the house. All he had to do was get the water out of the well and into the plumbing.

The evening of the ninth day in Hell, he finally got the pump working, its filter having been filled with silt. With running water, a full bath, a comfortable bedroom, and a living room – kitchen combination, the cottage, though small, was considerably larger and better appointed than his room had been back at the Swanson Hotel in LaSalle Harbor. He lit a fire in the woodstove, dumped a can of beans into a pan, and placed it on the stove to heat. A glass of Old Quaker bourbon sat on the table along with the Colt .38 he’d purchased.

He switched on the old Crosley radio on the kitchen counter, tuned it into WLQV out of Detroit, and waited for the tubes to warm up to catch the final game of the World Series. To everyone’s surprise, the Milwaukee Braves had tied the Yankees, leading to a seventh game.

While North ate the beans out of the old enamelware pot with a spoon and sipped at the bourbon, he contemplated the events that had led him here. He ran his fingers through his thick wavy hair as he recalled the young rapist who had fallen down the terrazzo steps of the Safety Building while being taken to a holding cell. How the Grand Jury had recommended that he be indicted for deliberately harming that rapist who was the son of an up-and-coming politician, and how he had been placed on leave awaiting his trial.

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North was a realist. He understood that things often blow up, and there is nothing one can do but to continue to pull oneself up. He was reminded of what a philosophy professor turned soldier had told him during the war, “As Confucius said, ‘We are all like water seeking the easiest path downhill.’” Life is either slipping downhill or deciding to pull oneself up. North chose the latter.

Meanwhile, fifteen miles to the east of where he sat, someone closed their fingers around the windpipe of a University of Michigan coed. The rough hands increased their pressure until they felt the crunching of cartilage, and the coed stopped struggling. The newly created murderer felt both a rush of nausea as well as a strange euphoria as he looked at the body of the brunette that lay beneath him. He climbed off her still form, pulled on his clothes, and used a sheet to wrap her body.

North washed his cookware and looked out the kitchen window as the first snowflakes of the season drifted to the ground. Many of those flakes would still be in shaded areas, compressed under more layers of snow when spring came. He went outside and brought in more firewood, noting that he would need a lot more wood should he end up spending the winter in Hell.

He listened to the World Series game, bottom of the eighth, and Milwaukee was ahead five to nothing. Much to his consternation, the Braves won the game in New York, taking the series. He turned off the radio and sat in the dark, sipping bourbon until he eventually fell asleep.

He was awakened by a vehicle driving slowly past the house. He rolled out of the chair and sought cover behind the old sofa. His mind had flashed back and showed him a convoy of Nazi vehicles and infantry. North searched but could not find his carbine. He lay in the cold mud along the side of the road as platoon after platoon of German soldiers marched by. Weaponless and away from his unit, his heart pounded inside his chest. As the last platoon marched past, he heard one of the soldiers cry out, “*Leutnant, da ist etwas im Gebüsch.*” “There’s something in the bushes.” North cringed as multiple Mauser M712

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submachine guns cut through the foliage on the opposite side of the road. Confident they had destroyed their target, the Germans moved on.

North lay sweating on the hooked rug in the living room. He was still there when the morning light streamed through the window. His Bulova showed that it was a quarter of seven. Shaking off the fog, he pushed his lean frame off the floor and into the bathroom before getting the stove hot enough to perc a pot of coffee.

After downing the coffee and a bowl of Wheaties, North pulled on a pair of boots and slipped into the old red and black plaid Mackinaw his dad had left in the closet. He took a walk carrying the bean can from the previous night's supper. The early snow was already melting in the sun when he found a fence post well away from any buildings. He put the can on the post, walked about twenty-five feet away, and removed the new Colt Detective Special from its holster under his right arm. He flipped the cylinder open and spun it, making sure all six rounds were there before snapping it back into the frame. The knurled trigger felt familiar under his finger as he pulled it. The can jumped from the post and into a pile of brush about twelve feet back from the dirt road.

As North bent to retrieve the can, he saw off-white fabric under the brush. He gingerly lifted one of several pine boughs that had been carefully laid over the material; a human foot protruded from what appeared to be a bedsheet. Looking around, he could see in the muddy ground where the body had been dragged from the edge of the road. North lowered the bough and gave a cursory look at the scene. Fresh tire tracks were evident. From the width of the tracks and their distance from one another, they appeared to be from a small truck and not a car.

He quickly walked back to his cottage, trying to burn the images into his head. If the weather warmed or there were additional rain or snow, the drag marks and tire tracks could disappear. He retrieved the keys to the truck at the cottage and drove the mile and a half into Hell. “If I end up here for long, I’m going to need to get a phone,” he thought aloud. “Then again, I wonder if there’s even a phone line out here they can connect to?”

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In town, he found a payphone outside the small general store. He picked up the receiver and dialed "0." A moment later, a well-trained female voice answered, "Operator."

"I need the Sheriff's office," North spoke in a clear voice.

"One moment, while I connect your call." There were a series of clicks before the phone was answered by a gruff-sounding female, "Livingston County Sheriff's Department."

"My name is Richard North; I just found a body near my cottage on Hickman Court off of Weiman Road on the south side of Hi-Land Lake."

There was a pause before the Sheriff's office responded, "You say you found a body?"

"Yes. I didn't want to disturb the scene, but it appears to be a Caucasian female."

"How is it you happened to find the body?"

"Tell you what, send someone out, and we can play show-and-tell. My cottage has a sign out front, reads 'North's End,' I'll be there." Brick hung up the phone, stepped into the store to buy some cigarettes, and drove back to the cottage. It was nearly forty-five minutes before a brown and white Sheriff's vehicle pulled onto Hickman Court. An older deputy stepped out of the car and squared his brown wool, flat-rimmed trooper hat on his head. North stepped out to meet him.

"You Richard North?" the gravel-voiced deputy asked.

"I am," North took a pull on his cigarette. "People usually call me Rick."

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“I’ll be damned; you’re Ricky North, Brian and Nora’s boy? Heck, it has got to be twenty years since I’ve seen you,” he stuck out his hand, “Dennis Deweiss.”

North thought for a few moments before taking the offered hand, “Dennis, sure I remember you.”

The deputy looked around through the bare trees, “I understand you found a body out here somewhere?”

“Yeah, I was plinking at a tin can down the lane when I came across it.” North used his head to point down the road.

“Climb in,” Deweiss offered, “let’s go check it out.”

North shook his head, “No, let’s walk, so we don’t drive over any evidence.”

Deweiss gave him a quizzical look, “You sound like a cop.”

“I’m on leave from the LaSalle Harbor PD.”

North and Deputy Deweiss walked down the narrow dirt road, the moist soil compacting under their feet. In places, mud squirted up and over the top of their shoes with each step. He pointed as they walked, “The body is just past those trees.” The scene was just as he’d left it. Twelve feet off the road, there was a pile of brush. North pointed out the tire tracks and drag marks, “Looks like someone stopped here and pulled the body out using the sheet as a litter.”

Deweiss bent down and examined both the tire tracks and the drag marks, which he followed to a mound of pine branches and debris. North pointed to a dented pork and bean can, “That’s the can that I was plinking at,” he said, adding, “when I bent down to retrieve it, I saw that fabric poking out.” The deputy moved just enough of the fauna covering the sheet to see the foot that North had seen an hour before.

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“You have a phone I can use?”

Brick shook his head, “Nope, I had to drive into town to use one.”

“Okay, you stay here and make certain no one disturbs this. I’ve got to call the Sheriff and the coroner. You good with that?”

A corner of North’s mouth turned up in a smile, “It’s just like being back at work, but without the pay.” He pulled a cigarette out of the pocket of the Mackinaw and lit it, “Think you could grab a thermos of coffee on your way back?”

Deweiss laughed. “You want a doughnut with that?” he asked sarcastically.

The deputy’s retort reminded him of conversations he’d had with his partner Barry Tiffin back in LaSalle Harbor, “Nah, I’m good.”

Deweiss walked back to his car, leaving North alone with his thoughts. In under three weeks, he’d gone from a detective with a solid track record to indicted on felony charges and on leave without pay. While the felony charges were an issue, money was not. His parents had left him both the cottage and a large house in Grosse Pointe Shores. He had sold the house following his father’s death. The proceeds of the sale, the equivalent of seven years’ pay, had gone into the bank; this would be the first time he’d have to take advantage of those funds.

A formation of Canada Geese, probably the last of the season, kept North’s attention, as did a stray marmalade-colored cat that kept just at the periphery of his vision. Pickings got scarce once the summer occupants of the cottages around Hi-Land Lake went home for the winter. “It’s probably why our victim was placed here.” North mused, “Normally, no one would be back here again for six months.” He considered that thought for a moment, “So our murderer must have some connection to this area.” He was on his fourth cigarette when Deweiss returned, followed by two other cars.

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“North!” Deweiss called out as he approached, “Let me introduce you to Sheriff Drake, and that’s our Coroner, Doctor Von Boren.” The Sheriff, two decades younger than Deweiss, walked up with his hand extended, “Is it Richard, Rich, or Rick?” he asked as they shook hands.

“Most everyone calls me Brick,” North responded.

“Call me Tom. Now tell me what you were doing out here and what you found.”

“My cottage is down the lane. It’s the one with the green Dodge pickup and the sign that reads ‘North’s End’ out front. I wandered down here this morning around nine to get a feel for a new pistol I bought. Fired one shot, the tin can flew off to the left, followed it to that pile of brush, found what Deweiss has probably told you, and called your office. End of story.”

Concern crossed Drake’s face, “Where’s the pistol now?”

“Secured in my cottage.”

“Good, let’s leave it there right now. If we find this person was shot, I’ll want to take a look at that gun of yours.”

“If I shot the victim, I sure wouldn’t have come down here to do some target practice,” North bristled.

“Unless you were trying to make us look the other way.”

North thought about Drake’s response. If the roles were reversed, he’d probably have the same answer.

“Now, stand back and let us do our jobs. Denny, make sure Mr. North keeps his distance.” The Sheriff, deputy, and doctor walked over to the pile of brush. Deweiss and Drake pulled the branches off, uncovering an off-white bed sheet. Drake gave a nod in the direction of Von Boren, “Steve, let’s see what we’ve got.”

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The coroner gently pulled at a corner of the sheet revealing the bare legs of what appeared to be a woman. He then walked to the other side, where he again gave the sheet another pull. The partially nude body of a young brunette was fully exposed to the midday light. Von Boren reminded North of Doc Howard back in LaSalle Harbor. He carefully lowered himself to one knee and began to call out his observations, "Female, fully developed, approximately twenty to twenty-five years old." He gently moved a leg, "Bruising to the external genitalia and inner thighs would suggest non-consensual coitus. There is also bruising along the torso and," he paused as he moved up her body, "yes, here it is, it would seem that she was strangled. I will speculate that her trachea was crushed. You can clearly see the antemortem bruising in a shape suggesting a pair of hands." The doctor held his hands out and imitated how she was strangled. "I'll know more after an autopsy, but that's what I've got so far."

Drake flicked the ashes off the cigarette he was smoking, "So, some bastard raped and strangled our victim. Any idea how long she's been dead?"

The doctor stood up and wiped his hands on his handkerchief, "Twelve to twenty-four hours; rigor has fully set in."

Drake looked at North, "Why don't we wander over to your cottage and have a chat." Brick nodded; five minutes later, they were walking in the front door. "Dennis tells me that he knew your folks," the Sheriff said as he lit a cigarette.

"And I vaguely remember him. He patrolled the area years ago and would stop and talk." North kept an eye on Drake; if the Sheriff noticed the empty bourbon bottle along with one yet-to-be-opened, he didn't mention it. "Are any of these other cottages occupied?"

North, who had just started putting a fresh pot of coffee together, shook his head, "I've been here almost three weeks; I spoke to one

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family as they were packing up for the winter; that was the first weekend I was here. Otherwise, it’s been the squirrels and me.”

“If Von Boren is right, our victim was dropped here last night. You notice any cars back here last night?”

North hoped the involuntary shiver at the thought of last night's nightmare wasn't noticeable, “I may have heard a car drive by, but I don't know what time it was.”

“Drinking pretty heavily, were you?” the Sheriff's tone was nonaccusatory.

“Yankees lost the series, so I probably had a few.”

The Sheriff nodded his understanding, “If I were smart, I would've put money on the Braves. No one expected them to win.” Drake paused to crush out his cigarette, “So, tell me, who did you piss off to be put on leave?”

North gave the Sheriff an honest and complete answer to his question. “That's crap.” the Sheriff blurted out. North bristled at Drake's response. “No, don't get me wrong, I believe you; I just hate politicians.”

North checked the percolator, “Aren't sheriffs elected?”

Drake nodded his head, “I'm a lawman first and a politician second. I ran for Sheriff because the man I was working under was a politician first and used the office as a springboard for better things. He didn't give a shit about the office or the men who worked under him.”

There was a knock on the door; North walked over and opened the door for Deputy Deweiss, “Sheriff, thought you'd want to know that I made a plaster cast of a tire track that has a distinctive cut across the tread.”

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“Good work, Dennis. Keep me updated on how the investigation is going.”

The older deputy nodded, “Yes, sir.”

North looked up from the cup of coffee he was pouring, “You know, I can help you with this investigation. I’ve got some pretty decent detective skills.”

Drake took the offered cup, “You’re currently not a sworn officer.”

Grinning, North answered, “No, but I know a county sheriff who could swear me in.”