

AUGUSTINE MEIJER

MURDER

ON AIR



A Brick North Mystery

## Chapter 1

**T**he chipper voice of Catherine Cassidy filled the air to anyone who might be awake and listening at two in the morning, “That was the Everly Brothers and their hit, ‘All I have to do is dream.’ You’re listening to WLSH, the voice of LaSalle Harbor, and this is Cat Casey. I’ll be with you until six when Stan Michaels starts spinning the disks for those who have to wakie wakie and get ready for work.

“Speaking of starting your day, there’s no better way than a hot and tasty breakfast at the Fifth Wheel Café on Main. Check out their daily specials and enjoy the best cup of coffee in the world. Tell them that Cat Casey sent you. If you have a request, call me at 5-1460. Now, get ready to flip your lid for Elvis and his hit, ‘Wear my ring around your neck.’

The red lamp on the phone began to blink just as the song started to play, “WLSH, what can I play for you?”

The voice was neither weak nor strong, young or old. Just male. “You sound pretty.”

“I have the perfect face for radio, but thanks for saying. What can I play for you?”

“Do you get lonely?”

Casey paused; the hair on her arms stood up. “Is that the name of a song?” she asked, trying to keep her voice from wavering.

“No, I want to know if you get lonely working all night.”

“How can I get lonely? I’ve got my bruiser of an engineer in here with me,” she lied.

“I feel like you’re not being honest with me.”

Catherine felt like she would throw up as she looked at the empty engineers’ station, “Why do you say that?”

“You sound lonely to me. I’ve been listening to you for a long time. I’m lonely, too. When I hear you in my room at night, I know you’re talking to me.”

“Okay. I’ve got to go now.” Catherine hung up and tried to get her tone steady. The song was almost finished. She put a 45 on the second turntable and started it the moment the first ended. “Creep,” she thought as she composed herself.

The red lamp on the phone began blinking again. She reached for it instinctively before pulling her hand away. “I don’t think so.”

She grabbed one of the pre-recorded *Fidelipac* cartridges and pushed it into the cart player. The carts usually contained commercials and promotional recordings. However, each DJ had a few with songs and patter should they need to take a break from the microphone. Catherine had recorded one from a live show a few weeks before. It had a little over half an hour of audio. When the song that was playing finished, she pressed the button and began playing the recording.

She sat in the restroom and smoked a cigarette. It was going to be a long night.

Thirty-one minutes later, she was back behind the microphone. Besides reading the promotions at the requested intervals, she spoke very little.

Two hours passed. Catherine began to relax. When the red lamp on the phone lit up at half-past three, she picked up, “WLSH, what can I play for you?”

“It was rude to hang up on me.” She slammed the receiver down.

Catherine was startled by the door behind her rattling. She spun around in her chair, which caused the headphones she was wearing to fly off her head.

“What the hell is going on?” Stan asked as he walked into the studio. “I’ve been trying to reach you for an hour, checking to see if you would want anything from the Dubois Bakery. So, why aren’t you answering the phone.”

“Holy shit, Stan. You scared two years off my life just now.”

He dropped the bakery bag onto the desk, “Is the phone not working?”

“I had some creep call last night, and it really flipped me out.” Catherine held one finger up to Stan to quiet him as she keyed the microphone button, “Well, kiddies, it’s time for this Cat to curl up for a well-deserved nap. The one and only Stan Michaels is here to spin some wax to start your day.”

Pulling on a pair of headphones, Stan took over and imitated Walter Winchell, “Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. LaSalle Harbor and all the boats on the Lake. This is Stan Michaels. Let’s wake you up to Mr. Jerry Lee Lewis and a ‘Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On.’ He released the microphone button and turned to Catherine, “You’re a pretty tough cookie. What’s got you shakin’ in your boots?”

“This guy just sounded fixated on me. He asked if I was lonely. A couple of hours later, he called back and was upset that I hung up on him. I spent most of the night worried he would show up at the door.”

“He wouldn’t be fixated on you if he’d ever met you,” Stan joked.

“Oh, thanks. That’s helpful.”

Stan smiled, “Just trying to make you feel better. I wouldn’t worry about it. Probably just some bored guy who was yanking your chain for sport.”

She gave a weak grin, “You’re probably right. Have a good morning.”

He nodded, "You too, Cat."

"What'll it be?" the pink-clad waitress asked as she filled the mug with coffee.

"A couple of eggs over hard, fried potatoes and dry toast," North said as he took a sip of the coffee. "You're a new face around here," he added as he opened the morning edition of the LaSalle Palladium.

The young blonde blushed, "I just started Saturday."

"What do I call you?"

"Darlène."

While they were talking, a tall, stunningly attractive brunette moved North's hat off the stool next to him and sat down, "So, you're two-timing me, are you?"

North smiled, "So, Suzette. You're checking up on me, are you?"

She leaned over, kissed his cheek, and laughed, "I figured you'd be here."

"I'm that predictable, am I?"

"You'd be surprised at how predictable you just might be." Suzette raised her hand to get the waitress's attention, "Can I get a cup of coffee?"

"Sure, hun," the waitress replied. "Anything else?"

Suzette turned to North, "What do you recommend?"

"Bromo-Seltzer," he teased.

"Can I get a poached egg and a piece of toast?" she asked the waitress.

"Do you want butter on your toast?"

With an odd look, Suzette replied, “Of course, why wouldn’t I?”

Nodding in North’s direction, “Your friend likes his dry.”

“Just like his sense of humor.”

North looked at Suzette, “I have a sense of humor?”

She smiled at him, “Call it the truth in advance. I’m hoping I can help you find one.”

Over breakfast, Suzette worked at talking Brick into taking her to his cottage in Hell for the weekend. North’s father had left him the place when he had died. Brick had used it for almost two months the previous Fall when he’d been suspended from his job. Hell, Michigan was hardly a wide spot on the road in southwest Livingston County. Just fifteen miles from Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan, the old-growth forests and rolling hills resembled the German countryside.

Suzette continued, “We leave here tomorrow after work and come back Sunday night. Two nights in the middle of nowhere. It sounds wonderful to me.”

“It’s only the beginning of May, so I doubt there’d be anyone else around,” he mused. “It might be a good idea to check on the place. I haven’t been there for six months.”

“Okay,” Suzette beamed. “We’ve made up our minds.”

“Well, you seem to be working at helping me to make up mine.”

Suzette leaned over and kissed him, “This is going to be fun.”

“We’re taking your car.”

“Absolutely. I can’t imagine riding across the state in that pickup of yours. Now, I gotta get to work.” Suzette managed the local airport.

North pushed his mop of wavy dark hair back with one hand as he pushed his Stetson Stratoliner onto his head with the other. After paying

the bill and leaving a generous tip for Darlene, he made his way down the street to the Safety Building that housed both the Police and Fire Departments. His partner, Barry Tiffin, was already at his desk.

After carefully placing the Stetson onto the coat rack and draping his suit jacket over the back of his chair, North looked through the blotter from the previous night. “You look at this yet, Tiff?”

“Yeah, the only thing that looked of interest was the Ford dealer being broken into.”

North examined the notes, “We’re looking for a kid. Who would break into a Ford dealership with new car keys hanging on a pegboard and steal a pair of fender skirts for a fifty-four Crestline and a chrome spotlight?”

“Not exactly the crime of the century,” Tiffin took a swallow of coffee.

“Someone had to know the layout of the parts department. They knew where to find what they wanted.”

Tiffin sat forward, “An inside job.”

“Or a former employee. One way or the other, he owns a fifty-four Crestline.”

At nine, North called the switchboard, “How may I help you, detective?”

“I need to speak with Karsen Ford on Niles Avenue.”

“Hold while I place your call.” A series of clicks indicated his call was being connected.

“Karsen Ford. How may I direct your call.”

“This is Detective North of the LHPD. I need to speak with someone in charge.”

“One moment, please.”

North lit a Pall Mall. He had just shut the lid to his Zippo when someone answered, "This is Mr. Hess. How may I help you?"

"Mr. Hess, this is Detective North. Quick question as I look into your break-in. Do you have an employee who drives a fifty-four Crestline?"

"Not currently."

"You had one in the past?"

"Randy Prentiss worked for us. He had a two-door hardtop that he'd purchased used. It came in as a trade-in last year, and he snapped it up."

North jotted notes while he spoke, "When did you and Mr. Prentiss part company?"

"A couple of months ago."

"Your decision or his choice?"

Hess paused, "Let's say that it was a mutual agreement."

"So, you fired him. Is that correct?"

"We gave him the opportunity to look for work elsewhere."

North shook his head, "You always this diplomatic, Mr. Hess?"

"Comes from a lifetime in sales. So you think Randy is the one that broke in?"

"What do you think?" North brushed a piece of loose tobacco off his lip.

"I think it's a possibility," Hess admitted.

"You have an address for Mr. Prentiss?"

"Give me a minute. I'm just going to put the phone down." Hess returned about the time North finished his cigarette. "You ready for that address?"



“I am.”

“Five forty-seven Catalpa.”

North jotted the address on his notepad, “Thank you. We’ll be in touch.” He replaced the receiver on the cradle. “Grab your jacket, partner. Let’s see if we can locate one Randy Prentiss. He’s a former dealership employee who owns a Crestline and got himself fired a few months ago.”

While Tiffin called dispatch, North left a note on the chief’s desk, “Where’s the old man this morning?”

“Heck if I know,” Tiffin said as they took the stairs to the main floor and checked out the black Chevy 150 the detective squad shared from the motor pool.

Five forty-seven Catalpa was less than a mile from the Safety Building. The wooden steps leading up to the screened porch were worn, but the house was tidy and the lawn well-kept. Tiffin reached to ring the bell. “I’ve got the feeling that I’ve been here before.”

“We have been here before. This is the Shoemaker house.”

“Constance Williams,” Tiffin said under his breath as the front door opened. Constance Williams had helped establish a route to bring heroin in from Chicago through Lakeland Airport, which serviced LaSalle Harbor.

“North removed his hat, “Good morning, Mrs. Shoemaker.”

“Detectives? Has something happened to Connie?” Janice Shoemaker was Constance’s aunt.

“No, ma’am. As far as I know, she’s still safe and sound in the Western Wayne prison for women.”

“Then why are you here?” Mrs. Shoemaker wasn’t agitated but concerned.

Tiffin spoke, “We might have the wrong address. But we’re looking for a Randy Prentiss.”

“Randall? He rents a room from us. Since my Bert was hurt at work, we’ve rented a room to help make ends meet.”

“Sorry to hear about your husband,” Tiffin offered. “Is Mr. Prentiss in?”

“Not at the moment. He’s at work.”

North, not in the mood for small talk, butted in, “Where’s he working?”

“Barlow’s Cleaners.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Shoemaker,” Tiffin said as he replaced the fedora on his head. North was already in the car.

Five minutes later, they pulled into the parking lot behind the cleaners and took a look at the cars. Parked near the rear of the lot was a fifty-four Crestline. Tiffin laughed when he saw it was sporting a pair of fender skirts that were a different color than the car itself, “Randy should have waited to paint those skirts before he put them on his car.”

North turned the Chevy off and stepped on the parking brake, “Let’s go introduce ourselves.”

“Poor Mrs. Shoemaker,” Tiffin lamented.

“How’s that?”

“She’s going to have to find herself another boarder.”

As they were walking their suspect through the backdoor of the Safety Building, one of the operators caught North’s attention. She handed him a message slip. North gave it a quick read before pushing the paper into his pocket. “Let’s get Mr. Prentiss to a holding cell.”

Tiffin turned and looked at him, “What’ve you got?”