



AUGUSTINE MEIJER

North's End

A Brick North Mystery

Chapter 1

Suzette looked over North's cottage on the south end of Hi-Land Lake outside Hell, Michigan. The small white house with faded green trim was partially obscured by overgrowth. She looked at the hand-painted sign at the end of the drive, "North's End?"

"My father always said that this is where he wanted to end up after he retired. So my mother painted the sign." North lit a cigarette and leaned against the fender of Suzette's red-over-white Plymouth Savoy, "It looks rough now, but not nearly as bad as when I got here last October. It took me weeks to clear the brush."

"So, we going to stand out here reminiscing, or are you going to open the door?"

North dug in his pocket and pulled out a worn leather key fob that held the cottage key. He turned the lock and pushed the door open. Dust shimmered in the late afternoon sun the open door admitted.

Suzette entered ahead of Brick. Looking at the dusty, mismatched furniture, she shook her head, "Cozy."

"It needs a little work." He pointed to the back wall of the living area, "Bedroom is on the left, bath is on the right, but you need to wait until I get the pump running before you use it." He dropped the suitcases on the sofa. "I'll get to work on that."

"I can help," Suzette offered cheerily.

North opened the faucet at the kitchen sink. In the bathroom, he turned on the taps on the tub and sink. Back in the living area, he flipped a breaker in the small electrical box on the wall, “Done.”

“That’s it?” Suzette asked with a hint of incredulity. “You said it took days to get it going last fall.”

“It did because the filter and pump were full of silt. It shouldn’t be a problem now.” The words were hardly out of his mouth before brown-tinged water spluttered through the taps. “It’ll take a few minutes to clear.”

“Do you have enough energy left to help me bring in the groceries, or should I let you rest after exerting yourself?”

North grabbed her around the waist and pulled her close, “I have plenty of energy left.”

The sun had been down an hour as Officer Gerald Davis patrolled the area around the Deer Forest amusement park. Opened in nineteen forty-nine, the park occupied thirty-two acres of woodland. Two hundred tame white-tail deer and dozens of other animals attracted schoolchildren and their parents year after year. Davis recalled his first trip to the park, mainly because one of the mules had bitten the back of his arm after he had teased it with withdrawn food. He instinctively rubbed his arm as a flicker of light deep in the park caught his eye.

The trim young officer stared into the blackness momentarily, wondering if his mind was playing tricks on him. He was about to continue his patrol when he saw a light flare up again. Davis climbed over the split-rail fence and shouted, “Police!” The light died, and he heard what sounded like running on one of the many gravel paths that crisscrossed the park.

Using his flashlight, Davis searched the park. A high-pitched, sustained yell from behind sent a shiver up his spine. “Crap,” he said under his breath. Spinning around, his light showed on a peacock, puffed up and tail spread, which yelled again in search of a receptive peahen.

He slowly recovered from the adrenaline that had rushed through his bloodstream and turned back toward the radio car. He had gone only twenty paces when he stumbled over something that protruded into the path and fell face-first into the brush next to the trail. Rolling onto his side, he found himself staring into the dead eyes of what had once been an attractive blonde.

On his feet, he used his flashlight to examine the scene. The body was of a woman that he guessed was in her early thirties, a green head scarf tied tightly around her neck. The scarf was saturated with blood from what looked like multiple slashes to the front of her throat.

Within thirty minutes, the Douglas County Coroner, the on-call detective, and half a dozen uniformed officers had joined Davis. "Tell me exactly what you saw," Detective Barry Tiffin asked the young officer.

"I had gotten out of the car and checked to make sure the main gate was secure when I saw a glimmer of light. It's like a match was lit and quickly burned out. I was almost convinced I was mistaken when I saw it happen again. It was then I climbed over the fence and announced myself."

Tiffin scratched a note, "Okay, go on."

"I heard someone running and gave chase. It's pretty dark back there, and I lost him. When I turned back, I tripped over the leg of our victim."

"You say him. You sure it was a man you were chasing?"

Shaking his head, Davis responded, "I guess I figured it must be a man. I really don't know."

"Tiff," Doctor Melvin Howard, the local surgeon who served as the coroner, shouted. "Send me a couple of your guys with flashlights to help me see what I've got here."

"You okay with helping Doc Howard?" Tiffin asked Davis.

"I'm good," Davis said as he took off at a trot.

Tiffin directed Officers Lambert and Maxwell to assist, “While you’re back there, keep an eye out for anything that looks like it doesn’t belong.”

“Yes, sir!” Maxwell called back as they walked toward the body. For his part, Tiffin gave the coroner plenty of room to work. He chuckled to himself as he thought about how North would be giving him grief about steering clear of the dead.

It was after the ambulance attendants from the local funeral home had removed the body that the officers found their first clue: a bone-handled pocketknife with a three-inch blade that the body had partially concealed. Tiffin carefully picked up the knife with his handkerchief and dropped it into a paper evidence bag.

“Any identification on the body? A purse or pocketbook?” Tiffin asked as he looked around the area where the body had been.

“Nothing,” Davis answered.

“Work the parameter with Lambert and Maxwell. Our victim didn’t just spontaneously appear here. Look for a car.”

“Show me where you found the body,” Suzette said as she and North walked up the lane from North’s cabin. He quickly spotted the fence post where he’d sat an empty bean can for target practice. “Right over there,” he pointed with his head.

“She was a co-ed?”

“Yes. She was a nursing student at the University of Michigan.”

“How sad,” Suzette looked at the overgrowth between the road and the lake. “What was her name?” she finally asked.

“Monica. Monica Baker.”

“Did she have family?”

“She had friends.”

“She must have had family or friends,” Chief Cummings spoke with his briar pipe clenched between his teeth. “Someone must know she’s missing.”

Tiffin nodded his agreement, “As of this morning, no one has reported a thirty-something blonde missing.”

“Maybe they don’t know she’s missing yet. Perhaps she worked the night shift somewhere, and her family assumes she’s been held over.”

“Or she lives alone, and there’s no one to report her missing.”

Cummings used his thumb to tap the burning tobacco deeper into the pipe’s bowl, “Get with Doc Howard and see if he’s found anything that will help us identify her.”

“And connect someone to her murder,” Tiffin added as he stepped out of the chief’s office into the squad room. He picked up the receiver on his phone, which was answered immediately, “How may I help you, detective?”

“Make a note that I’ll be at the County Morgue. I’ll check in before I leave there.” He placed the receiver onto the phone cradle and headed for the stairs with fedora in hand. Ten minutes later, Tiffin parked the black Chevy 150 the detective unit shared behind Memorial Hospital. The morgue was just down the corridor from the loading dock. He never failed to have an involuntary shiver as he entered the white-tiled-lined room.

Doc Howard looked up from the Dictaphone he used to record his notes, “Good morning, Tiff. Where’s Brick?”

“Our buddy Brick is vacationing in Hell.”

“I’m guessing that’s the Hell near Ann Arbor and not the abode of the damned,” Howard chuckled.

“That’s the one. His parents left him their cottage on some lake there. What can you tell me about the woman you brought in last night?”

“I can tell you that someone strangled her. The cuts to her neck were perimortem.”

“Perimortem?” Tiffin questioned.

“At or near the time of death,” the coroner explained. “Jane Doe also had coitus prior to being killed.”

“Consensual?”

“There is no bruising or tearing to her external genitalia or vaginal walls, so yes, I would consider it consensual.”

“Anything to tell us who she might have been?” Tiffin asked, glad the body wasn’t still on the metal table in the middle of the room.

“She had no ID or jewelry on her. The indentation on her third finger tells us she recently had a ring there. Short fingernails and calloused hands tell me she worked hard. A look at her *pubic symphysis* indicates that she hasn’t had children.”

Tiffin furrowed his brow, “Come again?”

“The pubic symphysis is a bit of cartilage that connects the left and right portions of the pelvis right at the front. As you can imagine, it comes under immense tension during childbirth. One would expect to find that cartilage showing signs of damage on a woman who’s given birth.”

Swallowing the bile that had invaded the back of his throat, Tiffin responded, “You can keep the medical stuff in your report.”

“Which you won’t read,” Howard chuckled.

“You’re right,” Tiffin conceded. “I don’t normally read anything beyond the cause of death.”

“I guess, from your perspective, that’s everything you need to know.”

The cottage at North's End was on a narrow peninsula that extended into Hi-Land Lake. The lake was only some fifty feet from the back of the small house. Suzette sat with her feet in the water as North cleared overgrowth from the property. "Enjoying yourself?" North said sarcastically.

"It could be better," Suzette called over her shoulder.

"How's that?"

"You could bring me a cocktail."

North turned and looked toward the brunette. Her pink halter top was untied at the neck, and the white shorts were pulled high on her legs as she soaked up the sun. "What are you smiling about?" Suzette asked.

"I'm thinking you're going to regret the tan lines."

Suzette giggled, a sound that North always found captivating, "I suppose you wouldn't mind if I sunbathed in the nude."

North put his hand to his chin and pretended to think, "No, I don't suppose I would."

"You're incorrigible."

Back at the Safety Building, Tiffin looked over the missing person file to see if anyone had added to it since the previous evening. He wasn't surprised that the file contained nothing new.

"Did Mel come up with anything that might help us identify our victim?" Chief Cummings asked as Tiffin neatly hung his suit jacket.

"Jane Doe had short, broken fingernails and callouses on her hands, so she probably worked in a factory or warehouse. Doc says there's an indent where she had been wearing a wedding ring, and she hadn't had children. Oh, and she had sex shortly before she died."

“Whoever she had sex with is our prime suspect. And, if she worked in a factory, someone is going to miss her when she doesn’t show up for her shift,” Cummings mused. “Get a photo from the morgue and start showing it around.”

Tiffin reached over to his jacket and pulled a Polaroid from the pocket, “One step ahead of you.”

“Then why are you sitting here?” the chief asked before returning to his office.