

# AUGUSTINE MEIJER



## Murder at Lakeland

### A Brick North Mystery



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## Chapter 1

Monday morning found Rick North arriving late and liquored to his desk, not that there was anything unusual about either. He was tall and lean, not so much handsome as rugged; the lines on his face read like a map of the roads he'd traveled. His hair was thick, dark, and wavy enough that it took more than the "*little dab'll do ya*," that Brylcreem advertised to keep it from falling onto his forehead. But his most striking feature was his eyes, steel blue and intense as if he were able to take in more than the average person could see.

"North!" Shouted Pete Cummings, Chief of Police for LaSalle Harbor, a manufacturing city on Lake Michigan's shores with plenty of tourists and the problems they brought. In addition to those industries, LaSalle Harbor sat in the middle of the nation's largest fruit-producing county and boasted the largest grower-to-customer wholesale market in the world. Trucks came from dozens of states in

the spring and summer months to load millions of bushels of fruit; the drivers of those trucks often sought out prostitution, gambling, and drugs while they were in town.

North turned toward Cummings, whose voice still vibrating in his ears.

"Are you okay? Well, doesn't matter. Grab Tiffin when he drags his ass in here and get out to the airport. A maintenance worker just found a body in a hanger."

"Shit," North rubbed the nape of his neck, "what a way to start the week."

"It'd start better if you weren't still drunk or hungover or whatever you are."

"I'm okay."

"Then you better call the coroner before you go and let him know that he should examine you as well as whoever that is at the airport."

North followed the smell of burned coffee to the urn in the corner of the squad room. A bit of acidic liquid trickled out of the urn, "Dammit! Can't anyone ever make coffee around here?" He slammed the cup onto the table, thought about it for a second, and downed the ounce or so that had ended up in the bottom.

He looked through the dusty Venetian blinds out onto the street below. Shopkeepers were beginning to open their awnings, and folks made their way into Dubois' bakery for pastry and bread for the day. The sun was already burning hot at eight o'clock in the morning, and the dawn freshness was evaporating into what looked like it was going to be another scorching July day. Only a hint of a breeze entered the open window.

"Morning, Brick. You aren't thinking about getting doughnuts for me, are you?" Barry Tiffin asked as he walked up behind him. Brick was a nickname that he'd earned as a rookie when he asked to be called Rick, and a sergeant added the B from his seldom-used first name, Brian. And Brick had stuck.

"Nope, just waiting for you. Don't take your hat off; we're going to the airport. Boss says they found a body out there this morning."

"Who the hell would go and get themselves killed at Lakeland?"

"I suppose that's what they're sending us out there to find out," North said as he crushed his worn fedora over his mop of brown hair. He stopped just long enough to pick up the phone and call dispatch to let them know where he and Tiffin were going.

Tiffin was a couple of years younger than North's thirty-four, three inches shorter and a little rounder about the midsection. It was apparent to all who took the time to notice that marriage agreed with him. They had been partners for almost three years, an arrangement that worked for both of them.

Lakeland Airport was what had become of a small Army air field installed during the Second World War for training. Twelve years later, the military feel of the airport had nearly been erased with some paint and commercial signage. A cluster of buildings, including the terminal, stood on the south side of the runway, and half-dozen hangers sat on the other side. A Gulf Gas sign and pump occupied a lonely island about fifty feet from the hangers. Several small private planes were tethered to the ground outside the two eastern-most hangers, most with canvas covers over their windows. A Northwest Orient DC-7 was being fueled near the terminal.

They spotted the black Buick Roadmaster North recognized as belonging to Doc Howard, the local surgeon who served as the Coroner for Douglas County, near one of the hangers. Alongside the Buick was the ambulance, which belonged to the local mortuary. He and his partner stepped out of the blue Ford Mainline the detective squad shared.

"Let's find out what we've got," North said as he held his hat against the winds which blew in off of Lake Michigan. He and Tiffin stepped inside the hanger, their eyes struggling to adjust to the sudden darkness.

They found the coroner kneeling down in a corner to their right. Partially hidden by his round body was the form of a woman. As they approached, North made a note of the victim. She appeared to be in her mid-twenties, her blonde hair splayed on the dirty concrete floor. She was dressed in a white blouse, which was torn at the left shoulder, blue skirt, and black heels; her nylons were torn at the knees. Her body was twisted in an unnatural position as if she had crumpled to the ground more than fallen. She had applied makeup sometime before she was killed and was missing one of her false eyelashes.

"What we got here, doc?" North said to the back of the sweating coroner.

Wiping his brow with his handkerchief, the coroner grunted his way to his feet. "Unknown victim, no obvious sign of trauma or coitus; been dead at least twenty-four hours; rigor's beginning to subside."

"Any idea what killed her?" the detective asked, although he already knew the answer.

"Too soon to tell."

"When will you know?"

"I'll let you know when I know, is that okay?"

"No worries, doc. Was there a purse or any other belongings here?"

"Not that I've seen."

As they finished their exchange Tiffin approached with a lanky man dressed in blue coveralls; the name BUTCH embroidered in red letters on a white oval over his right breast. LAKELAND AIRPORT embroidered in yellow over the left.

"Brick, this is the guy that found her."

"Butch, is it?" North said as he looked first from the name patch and then down to his small black notepad.

The maintenance worker swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing as he did, "Well, that's what everyone calls me, but my name's Bill er William, Henry."

"Well Bill, when did you find her?"

"When I came in this morning."



With a sigh, North changed his question, "What time did you come in and find the body?"

"Oh, about half-past seven. That's when I called you guys."

"The doc here says that she's probably been dead for a day. Could she have been here since yesterday?"

"Nope, no way," the maintenance worker stood a little taller, "I'da seen her when I was in here yesterday."

"When were you in here?"

"About three was in here replacing a fuse in that fuse box right behind where she is, and I know that I didn't step over her or anything."

"Can you explain how she got in her? Are the doors locked overnight?"

"They'd be locked if someone was using the hanger, but this one's for rent, and there's nothing inside to lock up."

"Okay, thanks. I may have more questions for you later."

The maintenance man walked away and out of the hanger. Tiffin looked down at North's notepad and then his own. "Been dead a day, huh?"

North nodded. "Yep, and it doesn't look like she dropped dead here. Let's find a phone and let the chief know what we've got so far and then let's start asking if anyone saw anything."

The two detectives drove over the terminal and used a phone on the Northwest Orient Counter. North spoke loudly over an Eastern Airlines plane that made a noisy taxi over to the gate. When he'd finished reporting what they had and hadn't found, an attractive brunette showed them to the administrator's office. She was the kind of woman that North found most appealing; tall, buxom, confident. "What's your name, should I need to call you?"

"I suppose I should give you my number too?" She said with a demure smile.

"That would be helpful, yes."

"Suzette, Yukon 5-2215." North made a note in his book.

"And your name?" her voice came out breathy.

"Rick North, but everyone calls me Brick," he replied.

"Brick? You're going to have to tell me more about that."

"Sure, doll, if you're interested, I'll tell you."

She gave him a look that told him there wouldn't be a lot of small talk the next time they met, "Here you are," and with a pause, "Brick," the word sounded suddenly dirty as she spoke it. "This is Mr. Jaeger's office." North thanked her and watched her walk away. She seemed to emphasize the heel-to-toe gate that accentuated the movement of her hips.

"You ever not on the prowl?" Tiffin whispered as they entered the office.

"Don't be jealous, Tiff."

"I just don't know what women see in you."

"And that, my friend, is because you're not a woman." At that, they turned their attention to the gentleman behind the desk. Short, balding, and pockmarked, Jaeger faced away from the door, his face directly in front of an oscillating fan that sat atop the credenza. A cigarette burned in the ashtray, its smoke making a zig-zag pattern as the fan swept back and forth.