

A NICK BANCROFT MYSTERY

**AUGUST
IS
MURDER**

BOB LITER

August Is Murder

A Nick Bancroft Mystery

By

Bob Liter

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Introduction by Martie Liter Ogborn

Welcome to *August Is Murder*, the second novel in the series of Nick Bancroft Mysteries. While proof reading this book I realized again how much my Dad, Bob, reminds me of the main character in the book Nick Bancroft. Bob Liter was a reporter and copy editor and was, by some standards, just a good man who falls into the strangest situations.

My Dad, Bob Liter, was a young ambitious man raised in the depression era. He had been to war, gotten an education in journalism, and had seen the world through his military service. He found the love of his life, my Mom Lillian. They married and nine months later I arrived. I am Bob Liter's first daughter Martie Liter Ogborn.

Dad's career made it necessary for our family to move several times, fortunately because of bigger and better job offers. There were a few stops in small towns in the Midwest. I was born in Boone, Iowa. My sister Jeannie was born in Dubuque, Iowa. And our brother Jeff was born in Lincoln, Illinois where Bob Liter was hired for the job of city editor at the Lincoln Courier.

Now a family man, did Bob's ambitions fade and the dull routine of the common and ordinary take its place? Did Bob Liter find a cold beer at an air-conditioned bar during the heat and smothering humidity of August in Central Illinois more attractive than going home to a house full of kids, a wife pregnant again, and a black and white TV in front of a box fan?

I remember Dad taking me to the Flame Restaurant in Lincoln one Saturday afternoon. We went hand-in-hand into the bar area where he picked me up and sat me on a bar stool. I had a fountain soda and he had a beer. The bubbly water and melting ice cream did not impress me and may have been the first and last fountain soda I ever had.

My Dad was a penny pincher. He made a meager attempt at painting the kitchen in our rental house with three different colors of leftover paint. The colors didn't really go together. I remember a pole lamp with crumbling white plastic shades that barely covered three light bulbs. Dad replaced the shades with coffee cans and painted them Chicago Cub Blue. I still have that pole lamp in my bedroom and decorated it with Cub baseball emblems in 2016 when the Cubs won the World Series.

During a summer school break in Lincoln, IL there was uneasiness in the house at 222 Sixth St. Try saying that with missing front teeth. Mom was packing us kids up. Why did she tell me she was taking us to the train station to visit her mom in Des Moines, Iowa? Why wasn't Dad going with us? What could I do to stop this from happening? I hid in the garage.

The next spring we moved to Sunnyland, Illinois across the river and east of Peoria. Bob Liter started a new job at the Peoria Journal Star. We moved into a house that was ours, not one we rented. Mom and Dad planted flowers and started a garden. It was the sixties, a new decade, a new start, and new opportunities. We still did not have an air conditioner; August was murder.

Dear Reader, sit back and enjoy this first chapter of *August Is Murder*. I would love to hear from you. Email me Martie@BancroftMysteries.com or follow the wild and crazy adventures on the website <http://www.BancroftMysteries.com>

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August Is Murder

CHAPTER ONE

The first time they tried to kill me I was asleep. My office and apartment were on the third floor of a nearly abandoned building. My own coughing jarred me awake. I rolled to a sitting position from the sweat-wet bedding and continued choking on hot, acrid air. The sweat was no surprise. My air conditioner had quit. But this was more than August heat in Centrel City, Illinois.

A flip of the light switch near my bed did nothing to alleviate the darkness. I went to hands and knees and felt around until I found my pants and shoes, sat against the bed, squirmed into the jeans, and put on my much-used Reeboks. Heat from the floor threatened to roast my rump.

"Don't panic, Nick," I said aloud. Should I try to save anything or just get the hell out? My files, I had to save my case files. The dented metal filing cabinet in the office contained stuff from the previous owner, but I just wanted my own files in the top drawer. I crawled into the office, stood, and pulled out the top drawer. I felt my way to the office door and opened it. A swish of even hotter air swept against my face. The drawer slipped from my hands, but I kept it from falling to the floor with a knee.

What about Maggie? She might be in the office on the second floor. It was well past midnight. Why would she be there? I assured myself she was not. She was the reason why I now had a stray cat and a cracked heart. What about the cat? But there was no need to worry about it. Any cat that came and went when the office door was locked wouldn't be trapped in that old building.

Flickering light appeared as I neared the stairway. Hungry flames licked at the air below, daring me to try to escape in that direction. Fire noise rose like the vicious growl of a watch dog.

"Don't panic," I repeated.

My lungs felt as though they were melting. Heat pushed me back like an unseen hand. The fire escape! Where was it? On the side of the building at the end of the hall? Beyond my office and all that unoccupied space? I remembered rust, lots of rust. What a choice. Walk down the stairs into an inferno or risk falling three floors from a fire escape that probably hadn't been used in twenty years.

I felt my way to the end of the hallway. The door wouldn't budge. Could I crawl through the door window? I smashed the file drawer against the glass, shattering it. Hot air swished out of the building through the opening.

I placed the drawer on the floor and removed shards of glass until I figured there was enough room to climb out. I felt around outside trying to locate something solid. Nothing. Light from the fire had not yet penetrated the darkness on that side of the building. Was the fire escape really there? I picked up the file drawer and dropped it outside the window, hoping it would hit the fire escape landing, if it was there. The file drawer thudded against something almost immediately.

I used the doorknob to steady myself and raised one leg through the window. Muscles complained as I maneuvered the other leg through. Broken glass ripped my pants and scratched my legs and stomach as I wiggled out into the darkness.

I grasped the base of the window frame and rested my knees against the outside of the door. I lowered my feet an inch at a time. If my legs extended completely and my feet still hadn't touched anything, could I pull myself back up?

My feet made contact with something solid. The platform? I tested it with my weight as I held onto the window ledge in case the thing below me, whatever it was, gave way.

I released one hand from the ledge. It was sticky. I reached down and tried to feel whatever was supporting my feet but I couldn't reach it unless I let go. I took

a deep breath, released my grip on the window ledge, and sank to my knees on metal – crusty metal. The fire escape landing.

The file cabinet drawer sat near steps leading down. Holding the rail with one hand, I carried the drawer in the other arm and made my way down, a step at a time, toward a glow coming from inside the building. Flickering light cast shadows on the second-floor fire escape platform. I put the file drawer on the landing and crept onto the fire escape extension straight out into the night. Would the rust give way and allow my weight to swing the extension down to the ground? About halfway out the damned thing dropped without warning. I squeezed the rusted metal railings until pain in my blood-soaked hands forced a scream from parched lips. The noise evaporated into the smoky night. The extension jolted to an abrupt halt. It was headed downward at an angle that left me about 20 feet above the ground.

I climbed back up, retrieved the file drawer, and climbed down cautiously, a step at a time, fearing the ladder would drop violently at any moment. When I was almost to the end it descended at a slow, comfortable pace and stopped about two feet from the ground. I stepped onto the blessed gravel and expected the ladder to spring back up. It didn't. Firelight made it easy to make my way to the front of the building. I ran awkwardly away from the heat and flames.

The hungry blaze ate at the building and its contents. My stuff was in there. My clothes, a couple of bowling balls I no longer bothered to keep in the rear of my car, a radio, an old wooden chair, my bed, and a refrigerator. And the desk. My good old desk. The fire would consume them all.

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