

AUGUSTINE MEIJER

All Men Are  
Cremated Equal



A Brick North Mystery

## Chapter 1

**T**ourist brochures described Michigan summers as having comfortable temperatures. In truth, summers along the Lake Michigan coast were hot, humid, and could be downright unpleasant. The temperature at noon was eighty-five degrees, and North could feel the sweat trickling down between his shoulder blades.

Crystal Springs was one of two city-owned cemeteries. With buildings created of fieldstone by the Works Progress Administration during Roosevelt's New Deal, and manicured lawns, it was a beautiful place of rest for many.

Brick North and his partner, Detective Barry Tiffin, walked one of the gravel lanes toward the bell tower in the cemetery's center. "I thought you were joking when you said there was a body in the cemetery," Tiffin said as he wiped his brow with a handkerchief. "Then I remembered you don't have a sense of humor."

North looked at Tiffin, "I have a great sense of humor."

"Oh, yeah? When's the last time you told a joke?"

Ignoring his partner, North's pace picked up when he spotted the coroner's black Buick.

"What have we got, Doc?" North asked Melvin Howard, the local surgeon that served as Douglas County's coroner.

“Hey, Brick, Tiff,” Howard said as he knelt next to the body of a young man in greaser-style clothing. His white T-shirt stained reddish brown in the chest where he had been stabbed.

“Cause of death looks obvious,” North said as he examined the wound.

Howard shook his head, “Don’t make a rash judgment. The obvious is often secondary to what a victim has died from.”

“Any idea how long ago he died?” Tiffin asked.

“The body is in full rigor, so at least eight hours. I’d guess our victim was killed at least twelve hours ago.”

North looked around. Several family mausoleums and large hedgerows blocked the area from any prying eyes. “So, he was killed around midnight?”

Howard groaned as he pushed himself up to his feet, “I can’t officially say, but that’s probably about right.”

Tiffin shook his head, “What the hell would anyone be doing in a cemetery at midnight?”

“You’re not superstitious, are you, Tiff?” Howard asked.

“Superstitious? No. Easily spooked? Absolutely.”

North looked at his partner momentarily before returning his attention to the coroner, “Can you say if he was killed here?”

“Look at the lividity on the back of his arms,” Howard said, pointing to the bluish-purple discoloration on the otherwise pale corpse. “*Certus sum*, I’m certain.”

“You find any identification on the body?” North asked.

Doc Howard shook his head, “No wallet, no ID. Two bucks and a token are all I found in his pockets.” He handed North the brass token.

“What’s this from?” North asked as he held it up.

“Some of the game rooms use tokens instead of coins,” Tiffin observed.

“You know much about arcades, do you?” North asked.

Tiffin smiled, “Saw it in ports of call when I was in the Navy.”

Turning his attention back to the crime, North called out to two uniformed officers who had been the first on scene, “Tell me what you found when you arrived.”

A big kid entering his third year on the job, Officer Will Brodeur answered, “We got here at a quarter past eleven after the groundskeeper called. There was nothing unusual except, of course, the body.”

“You and Slater,” North used his head to point toward the other officer, “sweep this area. Look for drag marks, tire tracks, the knife that made this wound, anything that looks out of place.”

Brodeur’s back straightened as he clamped his arms tight to his side, “Right away, Chief.”

“When is Cummings supposed to get back to work?” Tiffin asked, referring to the Chief of Police, who had been out on sick leave.

North shook his head, “Not soon enough.” North had been acting chief for over two months, a role he neither wanted nor enjoyed.

Breaking the silence of the cemetery, Brodeur shouted, “Detectives! You need to see this.” North and Tiffin took off at a trot toward the officer.

“What’ve you got?” Tiffin asked as they approached.

“This mausoleum has been broken into,” the young officer said. “See, here’s the padlock that’s been cut off.” Brodeur pointed in the grass just outside the mausoleum’s double doors.

Using his handkerchief, North pushed the door further open. The family mausoleum was built of marble. The walls were rough-hewn stone; the roof was steeply pitched, also made of marble, and half-round

arches surrounded the door and stained glass window at the far end. Francini was debossed into the stone over the entrance arch. The entire interior was polished marble. On either side of the entrance were three crypts stacked atop one another. Five were occupied.

Under the stained glass was a small altar tight against the wall. Large stone flower urns stood on either side of the altar, each over three feet high. There were no flowers in either.

“This place gives me the creeps,” Tiffin said as he peeked in.

North read the inscriptions, “Four of these were Francinis. The other is for a Giulia Costa. She died just two years ago. Judging from the date of her death, she might have been a daughter. One crypt is unmarked, so is probably still empty.”

As North exited, Tiffin stepped back from the doors, “Why would someone break into a mausoleum?”

“Nothing seems to be missing. Best guess is it was kids looking for valuables.” North paused to light a cigarette, “Let’s check with the cemetery office and see what they can tell us about the Francini family.”

The small office at the front of the cemetery was also made of local field stone. While larger than his home, the building reminded North of his bungalow on the lakefront. They were greeted inside by a middle-aged man who was pulling on a suit jacket when they entered. “Good morning, gentlemen. How may I assist you?”

North pulled back his jacket to reveal his badge, “I’m Detective North; this is Detective Tiffin. I’m guessing you work here.”

“I’m the business manager for the cemetery, Preston Wells,” he held out a hand which North ignored.

“What can you tell me?”

“About the body?” Wells asked.

At least five different sarcastic responses popped into North's mind. Instead, he said, "Yes, about the body."

"Harland, that's our groundskeeper, Harland Miller, came in around half past ten saying that he'd found a body out near the mausoleums," Wells answered.

"Did you go out and see the body yourself?" Tiffin asked, his pencil hovering over his notepad.

Wells shook his head, "No. I asked Harland to call the police and went about my business."

North looked hard at the man, "What was so important that you couldn't call the police?"

"Tell you what," Wells said. "I won't tell you how to do your job, and you don't tell me how to do mine."

"Who's job is it to see the mausoleums aren't broken into?" North asked bluntly.

Wells looked at North disapprovingly, "Family mausoleums are secured by the families that own them. We don't take any particular responsibility for them."

"So, you wouldn't notice if a lock had been cut off one of them and the door left ajar?"

"Harland or one of his crew would no doubt notice it when they walk the property. They look for things that are out of place," Wells replied defensively. "Is there a mausoleum that has been entered?"

North lit a cigarette before answering, "The name over the door is Francini."

Wells was genuinely concerned, "Oh! Was anything disturbed?"

"Not that I could tell," North blew smoke out of the corner of his mouth. "I'm not familiar with the name. What can you tell me about this family?"

“The family is from Chicago. They have a summer place on the coast around Shoreham. From what I’ve heard, the family likes this area so well that they wanted the family crypt here.”

“They must really like LaSalle Harbor to have their loved ones buried a hundred miles from home,” Tiffin mused.

“You’ve got a phone number for the family?” North asked.

“Sure. I’ll get that for you,” Wells said.

North changed the direction of his questions, “You often have people wander the cemetery at night?”

Wells didn’t hesitate with an answer, “We have signs that indicate that the cemetery closes at sundown, but there’s no way to keep people out.”

“Is that a yes or a no?” North pressed.

“No, we don’t have many people here at night. Of course, we occasionally get kids, especially around Halloween. But we never have a problem with vandalism or anything like breaking into a mausoleum.”

North looked around the office, “Does someone live on site?”

Wells shrugged, “Yes, in exchange for keeping an eye on the cemetery, I live here.”

“You didn’t do a very good job last night, did you?” North asked sarcastically.

“I’ll get that number for you,” Wells said as a way to get out of an uncomfortable conversation. After he had stepped out of the room, Tiffin turned to North, “He seem a little squirrely to you?”

“You’d probably be the same if you lived in the cemetery,” North chuckled.

“The only way you’ll find me in a cemetery at night is when I’m in a box six feet under,” Tiffin said.

Wells returned to the office's public area, "Here you go. Alphonse Francini is the contact. Here's his local number and his number in Chicago."

"We'll be in touch," North said as he slipped the paper into his pocket. He handed the cemetery manager his card, "Call me if you think of anything that might help us identify the kid whose body was found this morning."

"Certainly," Wells said as he pocketed the card.

Back in the Chevy sedan the detective unit shared, North pushed the gear lever into first and let the clutch out fast enough that gravel flew from under the rear wheels. "When we get back to the office, find out where that token's from. And get a Polaroid from the doc of our dead kid. We need to find out who he is."

"What are you going to be doing while I'm working?" Tiffin asked, half joking.

"The same thing I've been working on the past two months," North answered. "Paperwork."