

AUGUSTINE MEIJER

Murder Unholy
A Brick North Mystery



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CHAPTER 1

Brick North walked across a vacant lot at Lakeshore Drive and Howard Avenue just as the first hint of sunrise tickled the horizon; his tall thin frame in contrast to the young uniformed police officer who met him.

"Brodeur!" North called out as he got within earshot, "Why do you need a detective to come out for a torched car at a quarter of six in the morning? Get the license plate number and find out who owns it! No detective work needed."

Officer Brodeur called back, "Sorry, sir, maybe you should see what's in the trunk."

North, who on his best days got just a few hours of sleep, and not what one would ever call a morning person, picked up his pace. He followed the officer to what was left of a Studebaker; as he got closer, he could almost taste the nauseating and sweet, putrid and steaky aroma of burned human flesh. In the trunk was all that remained of a human being.

Brodeur held a handkerchief to his nose, "Fire department found him when they got the flames out. They figure the heat caused the trunk to pop open."

North took a look at the body which, although seriously charred, appeared to be of an adult male, "Has dispatch called Doc Howard?" he asked, referring to the local surgeon who served as the county coroner. The question was barely out of his mouth before the lights of Howard's black Buick swept over the lot; he parked near a stand of Tree of Heaven that had also gotten scorched in the fire.

Mel Howard had just gotten out of the car when he lifted his nose to the air, "*Obtulerunt Carnes*, eh?" Howard was a compactly built middle-aged man with dark hair graying at the temples, a high forehead, and a perpetual five o'clock shadow.

"What's that, Doc?"

"Burned flesh, so I can stop guessing why you called me out."

Howard walked over to the offending odor; North took the fedora off his head and leaned in so he could watch as the coroner look at the body, "Can you tell how he died?"

"Not a clue, but I can tell you that he was probably dead before he was placed in the trunk."

"Because..."

"Because," Howard stood up, "the body doesn't display signs that he tried to move around to get out. This trunk is big enough that he could have moved around quite a bit, but there he is, on his side, knees together and pulled up."

"Let me know what you come up with," North said as he crushed his Bradmore over his thick crop of dark wavy hair and turned to walk back to Brodeur.

Howard looked North's way, "Always do. I just need to wait for the ambulance. Those boys are not going to be happy about trying to get our gentleman out of this car."

North smiled, "I think you're right, Doc." Then to the officer, "Hey Will, get the plate number; let's see who this car is registered to."

Brodeur handed him a piece of paper torn from his notepad, "Already on it."

"Good, I'll run this; once they've got the body outta the car, get it towed to the city yard."

"Yes, sir!"

North eased the Ford Mainline the detective squad shared into the parking lot behind the Safety Building, which housed both the police and fire departments. He stopped for a moment and watched the firefighters cleaning off the pumper that had recently been at the same vacant lot as he had. As he reached for the door pull, he caught sight of his watch, "Six-thirty," he thought to himself as he let go of the door and started to walk around the front of the building toward Main Street.

Five minutes later, he was pushing the door open at the Fifth Wheel Café on Main Street, home to a decent plate of breakfast, and as the sign in the window said, 'The World's Best Cup o' Coffee.' He grabbed a copy of the LaSalle Palladium off the stand near the door and dropped a dime into the metal box attached to it. Sitting at the counter, his hat on the stool next to him, he spread the paper out in front of himself.

A middle-aged waitress in a pink uniform with white trim on the short-sleeved cuffs and collar, along with a clean white lace apron tied around her ample waist, approached with a carafe of coffee in her hand, "Anything other than coffee this morning, detective?"

"Yeah, how about some hash, a couple of eggs over hard and toast no butter," he said as he took a swallow of the steaming coffee that sat in front of him.

"You got it," the waitress said to him as she turned and shouted through the service window into the kitchen, "Sweep the floor, flop a couple hard, dough well done no cow!"

He absently leafed through the paper while he waited for his breakfast. An article on page six caught his attention, 'Excursion Train Crashes

Killing 175." "Where?" he thought to himself; a quick scan of the article revealed the train was in Jamaica, "Not my worry," he said aloud.

"What's that, sugar?" asked the waitress as she put his breakfast in front of him.

Setting the paper to the side, he looked up at the waitress, "Nothing doll, just talking to myself." In his customary fashion, he inhaled the plate of food, wiped it clean with a piece of toast, and washed it down with a refill of his coffee. He left the paper for the next patron, dropped three half-dollar coins on the counter, and walked to the office.

Passing the first-floor office that housed the switchboard, he heard a couple of operators quietly talking to themselves; there weren't many calls for assistance at seven in the morning. He caught himself just before he looked in, recalling that Sylvia was probably still asleep where he had left her two hours before.

His partner of three years, Barry Tiffin, walked into the detective squad room precisely at eight and gave a surprised look to North who was already working at his desk, "Wrinkled suit, unshaven. Let me take a guess; you slept here all night."

A corner of North's lip turned up in amusement, "Guess again."

"Let me think; I got it! Maybe some bastard woke you up to do some detective work."

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have a winner!"

Tiffin hung his hat and suit coat on the stand and rolled up his sleeves against the early September heat, "What'd you get?"

"We," North replied with emphasis, "we have a body in a burned-out car."

Tiffin grimaced, "I'm glad you're taking primary this week," referring to the rotation of which detective was called first to a scene. "What do you have so far?"

"Burned out late-model Studebaker Champion found in a vacant lot near Resurrection Cemetery; body in the trunk. Doc Howard has the body, and I have the license plate number, just waiting for Vehicle Registration to open to see who this belongs to."

"Good start for eight in the morning." Tiffin turned to the stainless coffee urn in the corner, "Any coffee?"

"Haven't looked."

Tiffin looked at him in surprise, "You haven't checked to see if there's any coffee?"

"I had coffee with my breakfast."

"You had time for breakfast, what time did you get called?"

"I don't know, maybe five-fifteen."

"Ouch."

North worked on the preliminary report while Tiffin fielded a stack of message slips he found in the squad's inbox. At nine North called Vehicle Registration, "This is Detective North from the LaSalle Harbor Police Department. I've got a Studebaker with plate number DL 6516; can you tell me who it's registered to?"

As the minutes passed, North lit a cigarette and picked at loose tobacco, which stuck to his lip. Finally, the clerk returned to the phone, "Yeah, I'm here," North replied, smoke following his words. He grabbed a pencil and made a few notes, "Got it, thanks," he said as he put the receiver down.

Tiffin tried to read North's chicken scratch upside down, "What've you got?"

"Got a '53 Studebaker registered to a Eugene Miller out in Coloma."

Coloma was about nine miles northeast of LaSalle Harbor, and Tiffin grabbed the Coloma phone directory from among a stack of telephone directories atop a file cabinet, "What was that street address?" he asked his partner.

"248 East Logan."

"Nope," Tiffin said as he flipped the directory closed, "No listing for any Miller on East Logan."

North stood up and grabbed his coat and hat, "I guess we're going for a ride."

Tiffin called dispatch and let them know where he and North were heading.

Within twenty minutes, the two detectives were at the Coloma address. The single-story house was clean and neat, as was the yard. An older woman with a laundry basket resting on her hip was heading toward the clothesline as they stepped out of the car, "May I help you?"

North moved his coat back to display his badge, "Ma'am, I'm Detective North, this is Detective Tiffin, is this the home of Eugene Miller?"

The woman looked on the verge of passing out, "Oh my! Is Gene okay? What happened?"

"Is Mr. Miller home, ma'am?" Tiffin asked quietly.

"No, he works graves at the Auto Specialties plant in town. He normally gets off at six, but they had some overtime available this week..." her voice trailed off as Mr. Miller and the family's Studebaker pulled up the dirt drive, "Well, here he is now. You two should be ashamed of yourselves; you gave me such a fright."

Augustine Meijer "Murder Unholy"

North looked at Tiffin with some surprise as Mr. Miller, lunchbox in hand, stepped out of the car. "You Eugene Miller," Tiffin called out.

"Yup, that's me," the jovial man of about sixty answered, "What can I do for you boys?"

"A burned-out Studebaker with your license plate on it was found this morning."

"Well, you can see there's nothing wrong with my car except for a little rust here and there."

North walked behind the car, "Nothing wrong except your plate's missing."

Miller and Tiffin walked to where North was, "Well, isn't that the darndest thing?" Miller offered as he looked at the space on the trunk lid where the plate should be attached.

Tiffin, notepad in hand, asked, "When's the last time you saw the plate?"

"Don't rightly know. Been a week since I washed the car; I think it was there then."

North picked up the questioning, "Where do you park when you're at work?"

"Lot B, near the State Street entrance. I don't mind the walk to the plant cause it saves time getting out of the lot."

North gave the man a nod, "Thank you, Mr. Miller. You're going to have to file a report with the Coloma Police noting your plate has been stolen and then apply for a new one."

"Don't that just beat all?" Miller exclaimed as North and Tiffin got back into their car.

"So, Brick, where's that leave us?" Tiffin asked. Brick was a nickname that North had earned as a rookie. It was a contraction of his first name,

Brian and middle name, Richard. His family had always called him "Rick," his father having also been named Brian, and a sergeant with a sense of humor had called him Brick at rollcall one morning; it had stuck.

"Let's head to the city yard and see if they can get the engine number off that Studebaker. We'll have to research the owner from that."

The city yard was a hodge-podge of buildings surrounded by chain-link fencing. It was here that the garage and city gas pumps were located as well as storage for snowplows, salt trucks, and other equipment when they weren't in use. The burned-out Studebaker sat on the side of the Quonset hut that housed the repair shop. North got a mechanic's attention, "We're going to look around the Studebaker."

"Be my guest," the mechanic said, "The smell is so bad that I can't stand to get within twenty feet of it."

North tossed his coat and hat into the Mainline, rolled up his sleeves, and looked at Tiffin, "Let's see what we can find, partner."

Tiffin gave an involuntary retch, "I'll look for the number on the engine block if it's all the same to you."

The two worked on opposite ends of the car for a while. Tiffin walked back to the rear of the car and wiped his hands on his handkerchief, "Nope, too much soot on the engine; I can't find a number anywhere."

North backed out of the trunk he was leaning into, "Then it's a good thing I found this," he said as he held up a charred license plate.

Tiffin looked at the piece of stamped metal, which had been warped by the heat, "What have you got?"

North looked at the plate and then at his partner, "If I had to guess, I'd say this is the plate that was on this car originally. The person who took the car, found Miller's Studebaker, glommed the plate and screwed it here," he said as he pointed to the trunk lid.

"Why would someone do that and burn up the car anyway?"

"Try to hide their identity," North answered.

Tiffin shook his head, "Doesn't make sense."

Tossing the plate into the backseat of their car, North climbed behind the wheel, "Murder never does, Tiff. It never does."

Back in their office at the Safety Building, Tiffin made the call to Vehicle Registration. "Okay, thank you very much."

North looked at Tiffin, who was busy scribbling notes, "And?"

"And..." Tiffin looked up, "the Studebaker belongs to St. Julian Catholic Church here in town."

"St. Julian? That's what Columbus and Catalpa?"

Tiffin nodded, "Yup, five hundred block of Columbus."

"Grab your hat; let's go pay the priest a visit," North said as he was halfway down the stairs.

St. Julian was an imposing red brick building; its thin spire reached high above every other building in the neighborhood. North read the inscription on the cornerstone as they walked to the entrance, '*S. Juliano Hospitaller, In Anno Autem Dominus MDCCCXCI, Leonis Papae XIII*' "It's Greek to me," he said to Tiffin.

"Actually, it's Latin," Tiffin smiled back.

"Okay, if you're so smart, what does it say?"

"Yeah, like I read Latin."