

The book cover features a woman with long red hair, seen from behind, wearing a red dress and holding a large knife. She is walking away from the viewer down a dark, tiled hallway that leads to a bright light at the end. The title 'Murder Unreported' is written in a white, typewriter-style font across a red horizontal band. The author's name 'AUGUSTINE MEIJER' is at the top in white, and 'A Brick North Mystery' is at the bottom in white.

AUGUSTINE MEIJER

Murder
Unreported

A Brick North Mystery

Chapter 1

Weather in Southwest Michigan was known for its extremes. From heatwaves to bitter cold and drifting snow, ice storms to tornados, floods to high winds. What was unusual, especially in April, was the kind of still that had descended upon LaSalle Harbor. No air was moving, which was regrettable as there was no breeze to blow the stench away from the rotting corpse that lay on the cold white beach.

North knelt in the damp sand next to Doc Howard, Douglas Counties Coroner, “How long’s he been dead, doc?”

Howard, middle-aged, greying, and with a perpetual five o’clock shadow, grunted as he stood, “Looking at the damage to his skin and extremities, I’d guess months. Maybe he walked out onto the ice this winter and died. The cold preserved him, but you can see that the waves that washed him across the sandy bottom have erased most of his features and shredded his clothing.”

“The clothing looks like what, laborer?” North asked as he lit another of the dozens of cigarettes he would smoke today.

“That one is going to be hard to identify.” David MacDonald, the self-described photojournalist for the LaSalle Palladium, walked up, his Busch Pressman camera at the ready.

“Mac,” North turned to look at the newly arrived photographer, “this isn’t going to look very good on the front page.”

“There’s no way my editor would ever publish a photo like this, but I’ll print it and put it into the archives anyway.” North automatically turned his back as Mac focused the camera and took a picture. Swinging the large camera around behind his back, Mac grabbed his notepad, “So, what can you tell me?”

“What have you overheard?” North asked as he lit a cigarette.

“That maybe he’s been dead for months.”

North shrugged, “Well, you know everything we know.”

“Any wallet or anything on him?”

Doc Howard brushed the sand from the knees of his slacks, “No wallet, no ID. Mr. Doe here isn’t going to give up his secrets easily.”

Nodding, Mac wrote in his book as he complained, “‘Body of unknown male washed up on Lion’s Park Beach. Perhaps in water for months.’ Thanks for a headline, guys. Now, I need a story to put under it.”

North turned back to the corpse; its blue skin color mirrored the blue-grey sky, “Doc, what’s this discoloration on the jacket look like to you?”

Howard leaned over the body and looked at the area on the left breast pocket of the tattered Carhartt jacket, “Could be a logo of some kind, but it’s so worn that I can’t make anything out.”

“Hey, Mac,” North called as the reporter walked away.

“What’dya need, Brick?”

“Grab me a good close picture of this logo on the jacket and get me a copy of it.”

“You know I work for the Palladium and not the PD, right?” Mac joked as he leaned in for a photo.

North took a pull on the Pall Mall, “I’ll buy you a beer to make it worth your while. And besides, I’m helping to write your story.”

“Yeah, how’s that?”

“Unusual design on the jacket of corpse could be a clue to identity,” North quipped.

Mac laughed, “You know, that ain’t bad.” He quickly wrote it on his notepad.

“I’ve been reading the Palladium since I got here in forty-six; kind of picked up on the way you boys write.”

MacDonald pushed the lens bellows of the Pressman into the aluminum frame and closed the cover, “So, when do I get this beer?”

“When do I get the picture?”

“I’ll have it to you at lunchtime,” Mac said as he walked up the beach to his car.

North field stripped the cigarette and pushed the paper into his pant pocket, “Let me know what you come up with, doc. I think I’ll head back to the office and see if I can pull anything from missing persons that might help ID this guy.” He nodded toward the uniformed officer who had first responded to the call, “Davis, stay with Doc Howard until the ambulance arrives to take the body to the morgue. Oh, get me your report as soon as you can.”

The young officer squared his shoulders, “Yes, sir!”

North was just about to leave when he heard the coroner say to Davis, “The guys from the mortuary are going to hate this pickup.”

Davis cocked his head, “Why’s that doctor?”

“John Doe’s apt to lose his feet when they pick him up.” Pointing to the corpse’s ankle, Howard continued. “See, the Lateral and Medial Malleolus are connected to the Talus by ligaments and tendons that rapidly deteriorate when exposed to even cold water. So it’s not uncommon for a foot just to drop off.” The coroner pretended to move the foot, “Oops!”

The customarily composed Davis jumped back two feet. The officer’s chocolate-hued skin was visibly green as Doc Howard laughed.

“You know, doc,” North said as he walked away, “If you’d done that to Tiff, he’d have passed out.” Detective Barry Tiffin had been North’s partner for over three years.

“Where is Tiff this morning, anyway?”

“Kaye’s close to hatching those twins she’s been carrying. I guess he went to the doctor with her.”

Howard pulled a package of Chesterfields from his jacket pocket, “He went to the Obstetrician with his wife?” He shook his head, “Why would he do that?”

North shrugged, “Beats me.” After parking the Onyx black Chevy four-door sedan the detective unit shared behind the Safety Building, he climbed the terrazzo stairs to the detective squad room. The limestone-fronted, two-story red brick building housed both the police and fire departments.

A distinctive odor wafted from the Fire Department’s side of the building. “Klopp’s making his Armenian rice dish for the hose guys again,” Chief Cummings said as he saw North sniffing the air. Lieutenant Clarence Klopp, one of the longest-serving firefighters in the history of LaSalle Harbor, was known for dishes that were so spicy even the firemen couldn’t put out the blazes. “So, tell me about the floater.”

“Not much to tell. The doc figures he’s been dead for months, maybe walked out on the ice this winter and got trapped. His face and fingertips

are gone, so getting a quick ID is going to be impossible. I'm going to start combing through missing person reports and see what I can find."

Cummings began packing moist tobacco into his pipe, "Any signs of foul play?"

"Not any doc could find after a quick look over. The only thing that might help is that the coat our floater was wearing had some image silk screened or printed on it," North put his Stetson onto the coat rack and draped his suit jacket over the back of his chair.

"An image of what?" Cummings asked as he coaxed his pipe to life.

"Really hard to make out after having been dragged over the bottom of Lake Michigan. I had Mac from the Palladium take a picture. Maybe it'll be easier to make out in black and white."

Cummings nodded before adding, "Lake currents bring water from Milwaukee, past Chicago, around the Southern end up the lake, and up the coast on our side. So our floater might be a dock worker in Chicago for all we know."

"Or a beer maker in Milwaukee, or an ironworker in Gary. I'm beginning to think that figuring out who this is might be a needle in a haystack."

"Well, that's why we pay you the medium bucks," Cummings chuckled as he walked to his office.

North was still searching through missing person reports for Douglas County when Tiffin arrived. "What're you working on?" he asked as he hung his hat and jacket.

Looking up from the stack of manilla folders he was going through, North shook his head, "We've got ourselves a floater. Washed up on Lion's Park beach this morning."

"Brrr. That water had to have been cold. What was someone doing on the lake at this time of year?"

“Well, according to Doc Howard, he’s probably been in the water for months.”

Tiffin walked over to the coffee urn in the corner, “You suppose he’s been floating since last summer?”

“Doubtful, he was wearing a winter coat and heavy work boots.”

Tiffin took a whiff of the dark liquid that came from the urn, “This coffee reminds me of being back in the Navy.”

“I wouldn’t know. We got instant coffee in the Army. Nothing like waking to a lukewarm cup on a cold winter morning.”

“Any leads in missing persons?”

“Not so far. I’m through what we’ve got for the city and county.” North closed the last of the folders, “Considering the currents push Chicago’s garbage onto our shores. This guy could have dropped in the water from almost anywhere.”

“Where’d you learn about lake currents?”

“From the chief,” North lit a cigarette and picked a piece of loose tobacco off his lip.”

“That’s a huge area to cover. Guessing you didn’t find anything in our files, where to next?”

“I had Mac from the Palladium take a picture of something silk-screened on his jacket. That might help us put a name to him.”

Tiffin nodded, “When’s Mac supposed to get you that picture?”

“Right now!” a voice came from the elevator.

“Hey Mac, let’s see what you’ve got,” North said as he turned toward the voice.

The detectives bent over the eight-by-ten photo Mac tossed on Brick’s desk.

“Looks like a diamond with three ‘C’s” in it,” Tiffin observed.

Mac lit a cigarette and tossed the spent match into North’s overflowing ashtray, “It looks like the logo for Cleveland-Cliffs.”

North took a closer look at the photo, “The freighter company?”

“Hell,” Mac said as tobacco smoke erupted from his nose. “They own the mines, the ships, and the mills. They practically developed the manufacturing process for taconite pellets. They’re one of the largest companies in the country.”

“What’s this line under the logo?” Tiffin asked.

North pulled the magnifying glass from his desk, “Looks like an M, and maybe a T, H, and an E.”

“It’s got to be Mather,” Mac said. “One of their ships is the William G. Mather.”

North looked at Mac, “You know a lot about this company.”

“It’s the ships. As a kid, I watched the freighters on the lake and learned everything I could about them and who owned them.”

Tiffin took a sip of his coffee, “You think maybe someone went overboard and washed up here?”

“That’s a place to start.” North looked at the photographer, “So, where does this company call home?”

“Cleveland. Guess that’s why they call themselves ‘Cleveland’ Cliffs,” he emphasized the first word of the company name.

“Smartass,” North said as he picked up the receiver of his desk phone, which was answered almost immediately.

“How may I help you, detective?” asked the operator in the first-floor telephone exchange.

“I need you to place a long-distance call to Cleveland for me. The company name is Cleveland-Cliffs.”

“I’ll call you back as soon as I’ve got them,” the operator disconnected.

North put the receiver back onto the cradle. “I should have waited until after lunch to place that call. We might be waiting for a while.”

Tiffin looked at the Simplex clock that hung on the wall. It was nearly noon. “Guess Mac, and I can go to lunch.”

“Since you haven’t been here long enough today to warm your chair, you wait for the call while Mac and I grab a beer.” North countered.

Tiffin laughed, “And who’s the detective of record for this case?”

North ran his hand through his dark, wavy hair, “Well, you’ve got me there.”

Mac looked at Tiffin and then North, “I don’t care who I go with. But, Brick’s buying.”

“Oh, good,” Tiffin smiled, “I don’t have much cash on me anyway. So we’ll just have Roxy put it on your tab.” Roxy and her husband Charlie were the owners of the Trophy Room Bar, a working-class joint that served cold beer, stiff drinks, and greasy burgers.

North waved them off before he began the task of refiling the missing person reports.