

AUGUSTINE MEIJER

Murder en Pointe



A Brick North Mystery

Chapter 1

The barrel of North's .38 Colt Detective Special dug into the green leather chair and pushed the leather shoulder holster in which it rode into his ribs. He adjusted the holster and his position in the chair. Chief Cummings shook his head, "Why don't you wear a holster on your belt like the other guys?"

North took a drag on the Pall Mall cigarette that hung from his lip, "I like this better. So, why did you want to see me?"

Pete Cummings smiled, which seemed counter to the Marine bearing he usually kept, "I've got a special assignment for you."

"Why don't I like the sound of that?" Brick questioned as he picked a piece of loose tobacco off his lip. Brick was a nickname he'd earned years before and was a contraction of his first name, Brian, and his middle name, Richard.

"This'll be a walk in the park," Cummings relit his pipe, "You're going to be working with the State Department as the local liaison

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between them, us, and a Soviet ballet company that will be performing here next week."

"Ballet company? What the hell do I know about ballet?" North retorted.

"I'm guessing nothing. But I'm not asking you to dance. I'm asking you to help keep these people safe while they're in our jurisdiction. You up to that, or should I find someone else?"

"I don't get it. Why do a bunch of dancers need protection?"

"Everywhere they've visited so far, they've been met with 'Better Dead Than Red' activists."

"Isn't it the State Department's job to provide protection?"

"They are, by asking us to do it for them."

"Okay, so what do I need to do?" North crushed the cigarette butt into the ashtray on Cumming's desk.

"You'll need to put a team together, check out the theater and hotel rooms before they arrive to make certain everything is good. And, while they're here, you and your team will provide security."

"And what will the State Department be doing?"

"Probably watching you watch the ballet company."

North, resigning himself to the inevitable, nodded, "Sure, I'm all over it. So who will I be working with from the State Department?"

Cumming slid a card across the desk, "Davis Evans; you may want to call him."

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"I've always found people with last names for first names tend to be pretentious."

"That's okay, North. I've always found you to be a pain in the ass." Cumming took a deep pull on his pipe, allowing fragrant smoke to escape his mouth, "Now, get to work."

Back in the squad room, North's partner, Barry Tiffin, looked up from the report he was working on, "So, what did the chief want?"

North leaned back in his chair, "He wants me to babysit some ballet dancers."

Tiffin sat up straight in his chair, "The Soviet Ballet Company? Kaye and I have tickets to see them."

"What the hell are a bunch of Soviet dancers doing in LaSalle Harbor anyway?"

Tiffin was excited to share his knowledge, "It's part of a cultural exchange. They're touring small and medium-sized towns in the United States. Their first performance was in Springfield, Massachusetts; we're the seventh stop on their tour. They'll end in Salem, Oregon, three months from now. Then in a year, an American troupe will tour the Soviet Union."

North lit a cigarette and took a deep pull. "You know a lot about this, Comrade Tiffinski," he said with a laugh.

"I read the brochure. It's my anniversary present to Kaye. She has always wanted to see a professional ballet company." Tiffin thought for a second before he added, "Maybe Suzette would like to go."

"You can ask her, but I doubt that Kaye will want her tagging along on your wedding anniversary."

Tiffin did a double-take, "Not with me and Kaye! I meant that you should take her."

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North laughed aloud, "You meant what I know! I'm going to liaison with some guy from the State Department. I suppose I should call him and start getting this put together."

He picked up the receiver to the black phone on his desk. Ruth at the switchboard answered, "How may I help you, detective?"

"I need to speak with a Davis Evans. Washington DC number." He read from the business card, "Niagara 7-4000."

"I'll ring you back when I have him."

North put the receiver back onto the cradle, "So, where is the Ballet going to be?"

"All three performances will be at the High School auditorium."

North grabbed his Stetson, "I want to check out that auditorium. You coming?"

"I need to finish this report on the warehouse robbery," Tiffin said almost apologetically.

"Too bad. I was going to stop by the Trophy Room for lunch after I visit the school." The Trophy Room was a local bar that offered cold beer, stiff drinks, and greasy burgers.

Tiffin jumped up and grabbed his hat, "The report will be here when I get back."

"Exactly!" North picked up the phone and let dispatch know where he and Tiffin were going. On their way out of the Safety Building, which housed both the Police and Fire Departments for LaSalle Harbor, they grabbed the keys for the blue Ford Mainline the detective squad shared. It was a quick drive to the High School.

"I had three years at this school," Tiffin said as they drove into the parking lot. "Good memories."

North set the emergency brake and turned the big car off. He grabbed his hat as he stepped out of the vehicle, "Liked high school, did you?"

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"Yeah. I had fun. I was in some clubs and took part in as many activities as I could," Tiffin smiled as he pulled the door open and stepped into the building. The locker-lined corridor was empty except for a lone girl wearing a pleated plaid skirt and pink sweater set; she gave North a big smile, "Good morning, sir."

Tiffin turned to watch her go by, "Ha!"

"What's so funny, Tiff?"

"I'm as invisible to the girls now as I was when I went to school here!"

Tiffin led the way into the school office. The chunky post-menopausal secretary with greying hair in a tight bun and thick glasses looked up from her desk, "Barry Tiffin! It's good to see you. Tell me you're not back to talk with Mary DeWitt again."

"No, Mrs. Wroblewski, we're just here to ask to see the auditorium. The police department is handling the security for the Soviet Ballet."

She stood and walked over to the key cabinet, "Isn't it exciting? Think about these dancers from the other side of the world! I can't wait to see them." She handed Tiffin a ring of keys, "You know where the auditorium is. I'll let you figure out what key is what."

"Thank you. We shouldn't be too long."

"Barry?" Mrs. Wroblewski called after them, "Don't forget to return the keys."

"Thank you, Mrs. Wroblewski!" he called over his shoulder in a sing-song voice.

The high school's auditorium was the largest performance venue in LaSalle Harbor. Between the main floor and balcony, over seven hundred patrons could be seated. The detectives entered from the school's main corridor and looked down the slanted floor toward the

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stage. Tiffin took a deep breath, "I always thought this place smelled of mildew and stale air. Still does."

North began to look around the cavernous space, "Other than the two entrances I see behind us, how many ways in and out of here?"

Tiffin looked around in an attempt to remember, "There are two more on the balcony from the second floor, and as I recall, two off the stage; one to the right of the stage which leads back into the building and the other in the corridor behind where the dressing rooms are located that goes outside."

"Six, that's it?" North drew a quick sketch of the auditorium, noting the exits.

"As far as I can remember." Tiffin sniffed the air again, "So, the State Department is worried that someone might try to harm the dancers?"

"No doubt, they want to make certain nothing happens. I would imagine it wouldn't go over well between the White House and Premier Bulganin if something happened." North looked around, "How do we get backstage?"

Tiffin pointed to a door on the left of the proscenium arch, "Through there."

The detectives walked through the door and up six steps until they were on stage level. North pulled a penlight from his jacket pocket and looked around until he found a switch to turn on the work lights. To stage left was the fly gallery comprised of a couple dozen weighted hemp ropes used to raise and lower the pipes from which hung lighting, curtains, and scenery pieces. The flies were weighted precisely so if one released the brake, the pipe remained stationary until a member of the stage crew guided it up or down.

On the opposite side of the stage were prop storage and a massive electrical panel. Four hundred and forty volts of electricity went through the board to the various house and performance lights.

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North looked up into the fly tower where the pipes hung. Some of them were weighted with sandbags held in place by rope. A double door led from behind the stage near the fly gallery to a corridor and two dressing rooms. Each room was identical, with a makeup counter that ran the length of the room, racks for costumes, and restrooms. An exit door at the end of the corridor was barred from inside.

North walked out and stood on the stage's apron. He found himself looking into the orchestra pit, the floor of which was a good eight feet from the level of the stage, "This place poses one danger after another."

"How's that?" Tiffin responded as he looked around.

"Heavy pipes loaded with hundreds of pounds of lamps and sandbags hanging from thin ropes overhead. Enough electricity to power a small town running into that board over there. Electrical cable snaking everywhere. This drop into the orchestra pit. Add to that multiple entrances where a gunman could get in. This isn't going to be the piece of cake I was thinking it was going to be."

Tiffin smiled as they walked out of the auditorium, "Come on, Brick. It's a group of dancers. What could go wrong?"