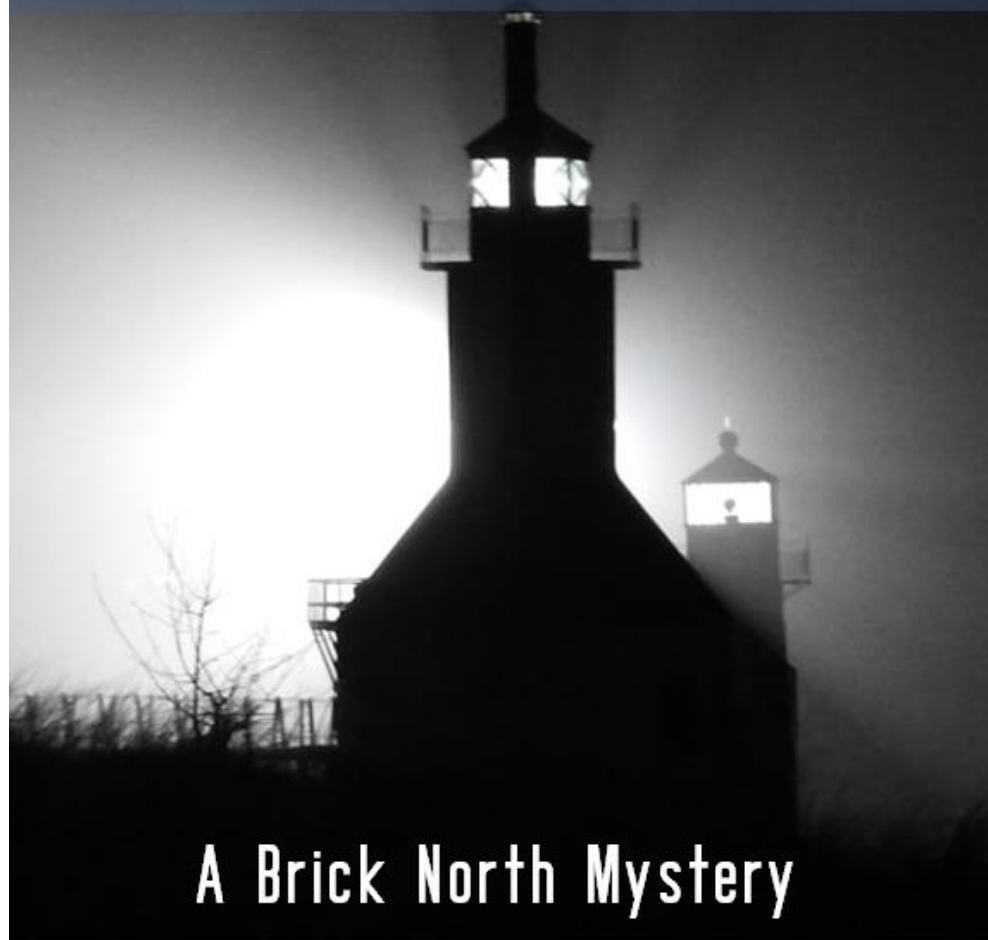


AUGUSTINE MEIJER

Sand Rabbit
Murders



A Brick North Mystery

Chapter 1

North handed the forty-five hundred dollar check to the agent. It was the largest check he had ever written. He had also just broken the promise he'd made to himself that he would never buy a house. But, here he was, being handed the keys to a two-bedroom bungalow on the lakefront.

After his discharge from the army, North had spent years living in boarding houses. After tiring of boarding houses, he lived in the Swanson Hotel for two years, which offered only slightly more privacy. Months of living in his parent's cottage in Hell changed his mind about homeownership. Having a private bathroom and a kitchen was better than he'd imagined.

Vine Street was below the bluff that overlooked Lake Michigan. The houses were predominately occupied by factory and shop workers. Like most the other homes in the area, his place was built on a shallow foundation situated upon the white sands for which Lake Michigan was famous. His property backed up to the tracks; freight and passenger trains rumbled past throughout the day and night.

With some used furniture in place, North set up residence. The cat that had adopted him while in Hell made himself at home. Having investigated every room and closet, Gatto called dibs on the overstuffed chair in the living room. From his perch on the back of the chair, he could sun himself and keep an eye on the comings and goings through the neighborhood. He seemed most interested in the children who made their way to the stairs that led up the bluff and to their school.

A few blocks from North's new home was the Silver Beach Amusement Park, closed now for the winter. The most imposing feature of the area was the empty factory that had been the Cooper Wells Hosiery Company. The three- and four-story Cooper Wells buildings had been vacant since fifty-two when the factory closed. Pigeons and vagrants occupied spaces where knitting machines once churned out socks and stockings. During the Second World War, production was devoted to the war effort when parachutes and green wool socks were churned out in quantities no one could have imagined.

North had been back in LaSalle Harbor for nearly four weeks before he knocked on the Chief of Police's door. Pete Cummings looked up from a stack of reports he was authorizing, "North! I was beginning to wonder if you were planning on coming back." The chief stuck out a hand which Brick shook. "Damn sorry to hear about Miss Kingston. I didn't know you two were close until Tiffin told me."

North nodded, "Thanks. I didn't know how close we were until she..." he paused for a moment, "until she was gone."

"You doing okay?" Cummings was genuinely concerned.

North reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a pack of Pall Malls, and lit a cigarette, "If I've learned anything in life, it's that people die."

"That doesn't make a loss any less difficult."

"No," North took a pull on the cigarette and blew smoke toward the ceiling lamp before he continued, "it just means that I've got to get used to the world the way it is and not the way I want it to be." He looked over his shoulder and into the squad room. "Where is Tiff anyway?"

"He and Uher took a call. Workers found remains down at the old Cooper Wells building. It looks like the body has been there a while." Cumming drew flame into the moist tobacco in his pipe, "So," he sucked on the stem of the pipe, "you coming back to work, or just stopping by for a social?"

"It's about time that I get back to work," there was neither joy nor disdain in his voice. "What do you have for me?"

"First, you'll want these," Cummings reached into his desk and pulled out the badge and revolver that North had handed over when he'd been placed on leave several months prior. "Grab a desk and spend some time going over the blotter. Get yourself caught up; it's been a busy winter so far."

"Grab a desk? What's wrong with my old desk?"

"Uher has been using it since I teamed him up with Tiffin. You can use Uher's old desk."

North pursed his lips and nodded, "Okay, Chief." He walked into the squad room and looked at the desk in which Dan Uher used to sit. It was identical to the one North had previously occupied. He walked across the room, grabbed a metal coat rack, and placed it next to the desk. On this, he

hung both his suit jacket and the new grey fedora he had purchased to replace the brown Bradmore that he'd worn for years. There was much he was going to have to get used to.

He had just finished going through files of the open cases when Tiffin and Uher came up the stairs. It was a full minute before either of them noticed the occupant of the desk in the corner, "Brick?!" Tiffin said as he crossed the twenty-five-foot distance in just a couple of strides. "When did you get here?" North stood as his former partner approached. Instead of the expected handshake, Tiffin grabbed his right hand and pulled himself in for an awkward hug.

Looking over his shoulder at Uher, Tiffin said, "You don't know how good it is to have you back."

"I'll try not to take that personally," Uher glared.

"Kaye's been worried about you," Tiffin continued. "I know she's going to want to see you."

North sat down and resumed his study of the blotter, "Tell her maybe soon."

"Where are you staying?" Tiffin asked as he lit a cigarette.

"Bought a house down on Vine Street."

"You bought a house. Thought you didn't want to be tied down with a mortgage?"

"I didn't."

"Wait. You didn't buy a house, or you didn't get a mortgage?"

"Long story. What are you and Dan working on?" North motioned for Tiffin to sit.

"Whirlpool has purchased the Cooper Wells factory. They're remodeling one of the buildings for some research center."

"And...?"

"And, a construction crew found the remains of a girl behind one of the boilers they were removing."

North looked up, "Girl? How old?"

"Doc Howard," Tiffin referred to the county coroner, "says the girl was probably in her mid-teens."

"Any idea of how long she was there?"

"According to the doc, she could have been there four or more years."

"So maybe right after the factory shut down?"

Tiffin nodded, "That'd be my guess. A body stuffed behind a boiler would undoubtedly get some attention if the boiler operators were still around."

North lit a cigarette, "So after the plant closed. That's still a lot of water over the dam."

"She had dark hair and was wearing a white blouse and a yellow and white striped dress. Not much to go on."

North agreed, "You guys check missing persons yet?"

Tiffin looked at Uher, who was listening to their conversation, "We're all over that, right Dan?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm on it." Uher said as he stood and walked to a file cabinet.

"So, Brick, how are you doing?" Tiffin's tone was sincere.

"I'm okay. I'd rather not talk about it." North lit another cigarette. The one he had just lighted moments before smoldered in the ashtray.

Tiffin made a note of the two cigarettes burning, "Yeah, I can see you're okay." He changed the subject, "So, does the chief have you working on anything?"

"Not yet. He suggested I read the blotter and get a feel for what's been going on."

"Typical holiday season. Caught a ring of thieves that were breaking into houses stealing Christmas gifts. They were gypsies. They're spending the holidays in the county jail; the judge thinks they're a flight risk."

"Anything more exciting than that?"

"Two bank robberies, a few stolen cars, and a prostitution ring that we shut down." Tiffin paused to think, "Oh, and the Sheriff, District Attorney, and several Councilmen were all indicted for corruption."

North smiled, "Yeah, I heard about that."

Chief Cummings walked into the squad room, "North, grab a uni and head down to the Tin City migrant camp. The manager just found the body of a man in the pump house."

"On it, Chief," North grabbed his coat and hat. On standing, Tiffin took note of the scar on the back of Brick's head.

"Holy shit, what happened to you?"

"Used my head to stop an ax," North said as he pushed the grey Stetson over the scar.

"How's the ax?" Tiffin joked.

North used his head to point between Tiffin and Uher, "You two using the car?"

"Not at the moment," Tiffin responded.

"Uher," North teased, "you let Tiff here answer all the questions?"

"Well, he is my nanny."

"Okay, someone will explain that to me later." North grabbed the phone and was immediately connected to the switchboard, "This is Detective North. I'll be going to the Tin City camp."

"Thank you, detective, and we're all so sorry about what happened to Sylvia."

Not knowing what to say, North put the receiver down onto the phone's cradle. On the first floor, he stopped at the Sergeant's desk, "Hey, Higdon. Who you got that can take a ride with me down to Tin City?"

"Well, hello to you, too, Brick." The duty sergeant looked at his roster. "Davis is here. You can take him."

North had worked with Officer Gerald Davis a few times before. He was someone that North knew would move up in the ranks. Higdon picked up the phone, "Connect me with the locker room." A moment passed, "Is Davis back there? Okay, tell him I need to see him pronto." Two minutes later, Davis appeared, adjusting his Sam Browne as he walked.

"Detective North. It's good to see you, sir!" Officer Gerald Davis was in his early twenties, tall, thin, and impeccably groomed.

"Davis. How's Sergeant Higdon been treating you?"

"Oh, very well, sir. The Sergeant is a good leader." North was sure he saw a blush under Davis's dark brown skin.

They checked the Ford Mainline the detective squad shared out from the motor pool and turned toward the river and the migrant camp the locals called 'Tin City' because of the tin-roofed shacks that housed migrant fruit pickers from May until October. Some of the shacks were set up as bunkhouses for single men. Others accommodated families. Few of them had running water, and even fewer had electricity. But, they were cheap to rent, which allowed the laborers to keep more of their hard-earned, but measly income.

The elderly labor camp manager met them as they arrived, "Glad you could be troubled to come out. It's been almost an hour since I called."

North didn't take the bait, "Where's the body, mister...?"

"Fuchs, Harry Fuchs."

"Okay, Mister Fuchs, where's the body?"

The man pointed a shaky finger toward a small brick building near the back of the camp, "There in the pump house."

North continued to ask questions as they walked, "Do you know the victim?"

"Hell yes, I know who it is. It's Mack Cudlip."

The detective added to the notes he was taking, "Cudlip his name, or just what people call him?"

"How the Hell would I know that. It's what he said his name was."

"Mack his first name or a nickname?"

The old man stopped, "Son, I'm gonna be eighty-one come May. I never met no fool ask so many questions as you."

As they approached the pump house, North could make out a pair of well-worn leather boots sticking out from the door. A few yards further on, he saw the entire body stretched out face first on the building's concrete floor.

North lit a cigarette. "I know how much you like a good question," he said sarcastically. "Is this how you found him?"

Fuchs stared between North and the officer for a moment, "No, I found him sipping tea and eating cake. Of course, this is how I found him."

North stooped down and examined the body. The left side of its skull was crushed. Dried blood mixed with the dust beneath the corpse. "Davis, wait out at the road for Doc Howard."

"Yes, sir," the officer took off at a trot.

"Anyone have a problem with Cudlip?" North took a drag on the Pall Mall.

"Everybody has a problem with somebody. I doubt that it was any different for him."

North's tone revealed his frustration, "Let me change that question. Do you know of anyone, in particular, that had a problem with the deceased?"

"Well, you may as well know; I had a problem with him," Fuchs was matter-in-fact in his response.

"What kind of problem did you have?"

"Cudlip was always behind on his rent. I kicked him out of the shanty he was set up in."

North's pencil hovered above his notepad, "When did you do that?"

"Last night. Probably about half-past eight. I told him that he couldn't keep staying here without paying up."

"Did he leave?"

"Yeah, he wandered up Britain Avenue. I watched him for a few minutes, then went back to my place."

"So, you might have been the last person to see Cudlip alive. Is that what you're telling me?"

Fuchs became defensive, "How the heck should I know who saw him after I did?"

"Tell you what," North picked a piece of tobacco off his lip, "I may have more questions for you. Don't think about going anywhere."

"Where would I go? I'm eighty years old and work here to keep a roof over my head," Fuchs wandered toward the building that served as the camp's kitchen during the peak season.

Davis led the coroner up to the pump house. "Brick!" Doctor Howard shouted when he was about thirty feet away, "I'm glad you're back!"

North shouted back, "Good to see you too, Mel. How has the world been treating you?"

"The world?" Howard paused to think, "The world treats me like the idiot cousin at a family reunion. I get invited to the party, but no one wants to talk to me."

North chuckled, "The problem of working with the dead, huh?"

The doctor rubbed his thumbs against his fingers, "I guess they don't know that death doesn't rub off. So, what have you got?"

North pointed to the body, "Meet my new friend. Someone decided to bash his skull in."

Howard lowered himself down onto a knee next to the corpse, "I'll know more when I get him back to the morgue, but it definitely looks like blunt-force trauma. Do you know who this was?"

"I'm told that his name was Mack Cudlip. I'll run the name when I get back to the office and see what we can learn about him."