Preface

In writing this book, I relied heavily on the investigation files from the crime and augmented my research with supporting interviews. Where possible, I have employed a technique to change the names of individuals to avoid embarrassment to families. The names that have been changed are marked with an asterisk (*) in the list of characters in the back of the book and at their first occurrences in the text. Marshall is a very small and closed Michigan community, and revealing the names, especially those associated with adulterous acts, might prove embarrassing for some families. Names that I could not alter include those of families directly tied to the crime, such as the Puyears and Chisms. This was one of the most celebrated and notorious murders to take place in Calhoun County, and the names of those tied directly to the case are known and are presented here.

Memories often are corrupted over time, weathered and worn. Those associated with the case are bound to see things they might not remember specifically. Any errors are unintentional, and I assume the blame for them as the author.

Finally, I encourage anyone reading this book to go to Marshall for yourself. Walk its streets. Meet its people. See the places I have written about. You won’t be disappointed.
Author’s Note

Every small town has a moment when it changes—when the real world abruptly intrudes on it and shatters its notions of itself and its people. For the citizens of Marshall, Michigan, that moment came on the hot morning of August 18, 1967, at 9:03 a.m. The event that turned people’s view of Marshall was hideously violent and savage, a drama that played out on the main street of the town and behind the closed bedroom doors of its citizens. It was not just a murder but a seemingly random bombing of a well-known and loved local woman. And it led to police prying open the seamy private lives of some of the citizens in search of a deviant killer.

In researching this book, I heard a common theme in my interviews about the change that came about in the Calhoun County community. Until the murder on August 18, there had never been a reason for citizens to lock their doors or look at mailed packages as potential threats. That changed overnight. There was a killer in their town. The citizens instinctively knew that and reacted to that grim realization. They started to look at their neighbors and scrutinized their actions out of fear—fear that one of them was a violent murderer. A normally open and quiet community was forced to open its dirty little secrets and was appalled at what it saw.

Even today, Marshall appears, at first glance, to be the set for a 1950s TV sitcom. If you were to ask me what town it resembled, I’d say the closest would be Andy Griffith’s Mayberry. For visitors, Marshall appears trapped in a time, like an antique sepia image from another era. It is an image that the citizens strive to maintain. The people who live there thrive on small-town life and are deeply protective of the illusion of timelessness.

Marshall’s immaculate main street, Michigan Avenue, is bounded by
a magnificent white pillared Brooks fountain and driving circle to the west. The east end of town is marked by the red-bricked GAR building, with its distinctive Civil War cannon and pile of cannonballs. Between these landmarks is the kind of small city featured on postcards to show off quaint streets and pristine businesses.

Marshall is a small place where homecoming is celebrated by the whole town and where you can tell where you stand on Michigan Avenue by the power of the smell of fresh bread from Louie's Bakery. Magnificent elms, maples, and oaks—some nearly a century old—line the side streets, as if they crept out of a Norman Rockwell painting. The black squirrels flirt with traffic on the shaded streets during the spring and summer. With only five thousand people in the city limits, it is difficult to walk down the street without someone recognizing and calling out to you. Over the years, all that really has seemed to change about the city is the style of cars. Most things don't seem to have changed with the passage of time. Instead, they have become more quaint.

The people of Marshall are warm, friendly, and very protective of the reputation of their small town. Marshallites covet the town’s appearances and the way it still clings to the 1950s imagery. You are often identified by your last name: “Which member of your family are you related to?” Strangers stand out, and that is considered acceptable. Your ability to fit in is often governed by who you know and how you know them. Like many small towns, it is a closed community. Newcomers are welcome... over time... eventually.

The brutal bombing/murder that took place in 1967 shattered some of that idyllic illusion in which the little city wallowed. Marshall was no longer able to cling to its peaceful past but was violently thrown into modern times. Before that autumn, innocence reigned. After it, things would never quite be the same. Marshall's prized innocence was lost, and like the proverbial genie, it couldn't be put back in the bottle.

I was in Marshall, Michigan, on August 18, 1967, when the murder took place. Though I was only four years old at the time, I remember it vaguely, because it was the first time in my life that I saw adults afraid. We lived ten miles away from Marshall, but it was my hometown, and the bloody terror that was unleashed there reached every home in the surrounding communities. My own memories are not entirely clear. I never heard the explosion, but I remember the police coming and trying
to relay information to the concerned mothers in Ketchum Park that day. I remember the sirens and the crowds that were drawn into the heart of town to see the scene of the crime.

I had to do this book if only because it was history—a history that people wanted to forget—and because it subtly altered this small town. When I began to speak to people, I got their jumbled memories of real events. But what I got more often than not were the rumors that circulated both about the victim and the murderer. The rumors had a life of their own but were not as tantalizing as the truth. These inconsistent memories of citizens intrigued me to begin to look into the facts of the case. The collective memory of the community was tainted and remembered events often in a very different light than reality.

The crime itself was hideously violent—a bombing that disemboweled the victim. Anyone wanting to kill someone would be hard pressed to find a more vicious manner than blowing the person up. Such a brutal act seemed to demand it being a crime of passion. The fact that it took place on the main street was blatant and defiant.
The investigation into this murder was incredible, because it was good old-fashioned police work. In an era before the technology-laden CSI Miami, a team of investigators from multiple jurisdictions came together and worked to solve the crime. What they uncovered about pastoral Marshall and its citizens was stunning and embarrassing. The sexual escapades of the mild-mannered citizens of the community were horribly laid bare during the investigation, as the team attempted to find the killer. These tawdry sexcapades were swept under the proverbial rug discreetly, to ensure that they did not come out at trial. Marshall’s dirty side, a side the general public never saw, was carefully protected.

The killer was, in many respects, brilliant but diabolically twisted and violent. As I researched this crime, what dumbfounded me was the motive he had—or, better yet, lacked. The motive was so disproportionate to the staggering viciousness of the murder that it was hard for me to comprehend. Then it hit me: for the first time, I got a clear glimpse into madness and true evil. Pure evil requires no motive, only an opportunity.

While I was raised in the area, I have since moved away, returning to where I was born, in Virginia. Distance, in this case, offers perspective and a certain degree of objectivity in writing about the case. Many of the parties involved still live in the area. Relatives of the victim and the murderer still live in Marshall. If I still lived in Michigan, my interpretation of the events related to the case might have been tainted.

The events of the autumn of 1967 go beyond Marshall, Michigan. They could mirror any small town in America. The events in this book tell the story of what happens when any community goes from being one of open trust to one of fear-filled terror and mutual suspicion. Marshall is the home of my youth, but it could just as easily be your hometown anywhere in America.

To fully understand this crime and its impact on the town, you have to go back in time and onto the main street of Marshall on that fateful day . . .
Prologue

Delivery of Death

My own memory of that day is that the center of town was like a magnet, drawing every person to the scene of the crime. Looking back, I realize that an odd mix of morbid curiosity and terror took hold of the people. The fear in the air was like electricity, but as a four-year-old, I didn’t understand why. I could tell something was wrong. I was in Marshall a great deal as a child, and the sounds of sirens and the gathering crowd told me that something new and unique had happened.

In an era before mobile devices, Facebook updates, and Twitter tweets, the word spread like a brush fire through town. All the people who spread a rumor or passed the word on added their own spins, their own thoughts or suspicions. Most of these would live on and be treated as gospel, since real information was hard to come by.

Marshall postman Donald Damon, who had taken Thursday off, leaving his rounds to another carrier, was back on duty that Friday morning. The day was hot and humid, typical for mid-Michigan summer. As Don walked his rounds from business to business, he was greeted with a chorus of hello’s and salutations. In a town the size of Marshall, the postman was often a fixture, a friendly face that everyone knew by name. Everyone greeted him on his route, with friendly nods, cordial waves, smiles. The morning pavement was already starting to get hot in the sun, and in two hours, he would feel the heat through the soles of his shoes, as if he were walking across a hot grill. The postman did not wear shorts but was decked out in long blue pants and a tieless blue uniform shirt.

Damon was highly patterned in his rounds. He was the kind of postman against whom you could set your watch. Always charming, always friendly, he was proud of the fact that he was in the same place at the same time every day. People relied on such patterns in their life.
The buzz around town was about the fair, which started in a few days. The Calhoun County Fair was the oldest such fair in Michigan and was the focal point for Marshall. The fairgrounds were only a few blocks outside of town, and the Marshall Evening Chronicle covered the repainting of the fair pavilions as front-page news. The fair brought a lot of business into town and was the social event of the year. Kids speculated about what rides would be offered this year—the word was that an eighty-foot Ferris wheel was going to be arriving. The local citizens and surrounding farmers competed in everything ranging from harness racing to quilting to livestock. Fair week was a time for the common men and women to shine in the community. Winning a ribbon at the fair for your prize pig or an apple pie was something that would be talked about (and bragged about) for months. Competition between children, farmers, and blue-haired old ladies was fierce and contentious. But the fair was more than a social event, more than competition. It marked the end of the summer.

Marshall was quiet, stable, pleasant. The new Elvis Presley movie, Double Trouble, was starting that night at the Bogar Theatre. The Bogar was only open on the weekends—there simply weren't the crowds to merit keeping it open during the week. People could either go to the Bogar for air-conditioned entertainment or go to the Battle Creek Drive-in Theatre six miles down the road. Of course, once the fair came into town, no one would be going to the movies.

An entire world away, on the West Coast, it was called the “Summer of Love.” Large numbers of hippies were converging on the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. Other gatherings of long-haired hippies took place in other major cities. The Mamas and the Papas sang songs about the events changing the culture of America. Rolling Stone magazine was about to debut in two months. Those things happened outside of Marshall, seemingly in another world. The most popular haircuts for men in town ranged from the crew cut to the more stylish “Princeton.” Long sideburns and long stringy hair, beads, and other trappings of hippie lifestyles simply were not accepted in town.

As Don made his rounds through the streets of Marshall, he didn't know that he had assumed the role of murderer that day. Marshall had a stalking murderer on the loose, a killer who had carefully and meticu-
lously planned the death of someone on Don’s route. The longtime post-
man did not know that he was carrying the implement of death in his 
bag on his shoulder. He never realized with each bump of the heavy can-
vas bag against his hip that he was tempting fate and risking his own life.

He stepped into the Tasty Cafe at 209 East Michigan Avenue as he 
had hundreds of times before. The little restaurant was one of several on 
Michigan Avenue. It was painted white on the outside. Out front hung a 
bright yellow sign advertising Vernors ginger ale. An L-shaped counter 
extended to the rear of the restaurant. There was a series of tables and 
booths—their vinyl seats buckled from use—along with a jukebox. At 
the rear of the restaurant were a large refrigerator and a small office area. 
The rear door was a double screen door, perfect for hot, humid Michigan 
summers. Air-conditioning outside of a movie theater was an unheard 
of luxury in little Marshall. On the counter was a display case for cold 
food, usually stocked with donuts from Louie’s Bakery down the street. The Tasty was only a block away from the high school and was a favorite 
place to dine for students attempting to dodge the cafeteria meal or the 
one their mothers packed.

The air inside the cafe wafted with the smell of eggs and a hint of 
bacon—someone’s breakfast. In the Tasty were three customers, all 
dressed as workingmen. None seemed to pay attention to the postman, 
and Don gave them little thought that morning; there were always cus-
tomers in the little diner. He was more interested in the warm greeting 
he got from the Puyears, Nola and Paul, who owned the cafe.

Paul was sixty-two years old, wore horn-rimmed glasses, and ap-
peared more like a white-haired church elder than a short-order cook. 
Nola was ten years younger and had dark curly hair. She was known to 
be bright, energetic, and outgoing, whereas Paul was content to serve 
quietly as a cook at the Tasty. Nola was a plump, churchgoing woman 
who was warm and friendly with anyone who crossed her path. She 
and her husband had been raised in Arkansas. Nola brought her southern hospitality to the Tasty Cafe that she and her husband owned. On that Friday, she wore a plain dress, grandmotherly glasses, and an apron 
splattered with the remains of meals past. She had never fully shaken her 
southern drawl, a hint of which was always in her voice.

From the depths of his postal bag, Don pulled out a package for Nola.
It was wrapped in plain brown paper and was roughly the size of a book. He later estimated the dimensions at two and a half inches thick, seven inches long, and five inches wide. The package bore the word “BOOKS” printed in large red block letters. It weighed about two pounds and had two twenty-cent stamps on it. It was addressed to the Puyears’ home at 857 East Michigan Avenue, specifically to Mrs. Paul Puyear. From what Don knew, it was supposed to have been delivered the day before but had been put on the wrong truck, leaving it for him to deliver. The Marshall Post Office allowed postmen to deliver personal packages to the owners of businesses at their place of work. It was the kind of gesture that happened in small towns where people knew each other, a casual convenience that people expected.

The addressing stood out to Damon. It had been addressed in red ink or an indelible pencil. The handwriting was a distinct scrawled jumble of letters and numbers. There was no return address. At the time, he didn’t give it a second thought. He didn’t realize that the murderer had taken the step to make it stand out. At the moment, Don didn’t know that he was being used as an instrument of death and destruction. Only later did he realize just how close he had come to being killed himself—the victim of the same killer who was stalking unsuspecting Nola.

Donald Damon handed the day’s mail, including the package, to Paul Puyear. Paul shook the package and heard a “clunk clunk” noise, like books inside of a pasteboard box. Nola was standing next to him and asked, “What is it?” Paul replied, “I don’t know.” She took the box from him, saying, “Let me take it.” Don heard her say something about the package possibly being from her son, John. John Puyear was in the Air Force, stationed in California. He and Damon knew each other—but then everyone knew each other in Marshall.

Damon left the cafe and started up Madison Avenue to continue his route. He knew that at 9:00 a.m., the church bells tolled the hour for everyone in town to hear. Damon’s role in the murder of Nola Puyear was over. He had beaten fate that morning. Don had done the gruesome work that the murderer had been too cowardly to do personally.

The law firm of Schroeder, DeGraw, and Mathews was next door to the Tasty Cafe. Attorney Ronald DeGraw had two appointments that morning, both concerning divorces. His eight o’clock client finished up,
and DeGraw walked him to the lobby. DeGraw suggested that his client go next door and get a cup of coffee; then they could walk together down Michigan Avenue to the court. The only wrinkle was that his 8:15 a.m. client didn't show. So Ron spent a few minutes in the lobby with his first client, talking and killing time. At the counter of the Tasty Cafe, nineteen-year-old Ed Bowman sat nursing a cup of coffee while waiting for his breakfast, which Paul Puyear was just finishing on the grill. Ed watched Nola take the package and head to the back of the cafe, standing at the counter between the refrigerator and the metal case that held bakery goods. “She picked up the package and walked by me past the counter, and started to open the package on a small table under the counter. It was 9:03 a.m. Nola turned her back to the patrons to open the package at a small workspace next to the refrigerator. ‘This is a big surprise,’ she said.” No one was sure if she was surprised to receive a package from her son or if the package coming at all was a surprise. As she tore the paper, Bowman heard her say, “Oh—” Perhaps in that last moment of her life, she realized something was horribly wrong with the package in her hands. Perhaps Nola realized that her life was about to end.

The package exploded with a fury and force that tore apart the rear of the Tasty Cafe and Nola with it. The explosion instantly destroyed the refrigerator and work area along with Nola. Her body shielded much of the force of the blast from hitting the two patrons nearby. The force of the explosion was so great that it bowed the eating counter outward and flipped it over. A hole was blasted in the drop ceiling, tossing the grease-splattered ceiling tiles about like a deck of cards left to the wind. Apartments above the cafe, on the building’s second and third floors, were rocked hard by the explosion. The large front windows of the cafe were blown out, turned into thousands of pieces of jagged shrapnel, littering the sidewalk and Michigan Avenue. The rear of the cafe was a jumbled wreck from the blast, and the shattered remains of the counter were in the dining area. A bluish gray smoke tinged with the smell of gunpowder or exploded firecrackers filled the restaurant, smothering the smell of eggs that had hung in the air only a few seconds earlier.

The explosion had mercilessly destroyed most of Nola Puyear in a millisecond. Gore, blood, and thousands of bits of shrapnel covered the
interior of the once quaint little diner. From her head down to her navel had been ripped open by the explosion. Her left arm was missing just below the elbow, the right arm just above. Her nose had been torn from her face. Her thighs rested on the upturned shelves of the counter. The right lens from her eyeglasses was found fifteen feet away, lying on the floor between two booths—the only part of her glasses that would ever be found. There were parts of human flesh, blood, and torn shards of clothing everywhere, fanning out from the epicenter of the explosion. Nola Puyear’s remains, savaged by the detonation, draped over the counter. She was on her back, her face turned to one side. On the floor, near one of the booths, lay her rings, spotted with blood, gnarled and twisted by the force of the blast.

Young Ed Bowman was knocked off his counter stool by the concussion of the blast and tossed hard onto the floor of the Tasty. Donald Page, a truck driver with the Michigan Transportation Company of Dearborn who had stopped for a cup of coffee, had been sitting at the front window when the explosion had gone off. The occupants of the diner were temporarily deafened by the blast. To them, the world around them had been a silent, chaotic, and confusing place of death. Bowman was knocked down by the concussive force of the explosion but was otherwise uninjured. As he staggered to his feet, he was surprised to see that somehow his cup of coffee had been eerily undisturbed by the blast. It was on the counter, forever unfinished. The eggs that Paul Puyear had been making on the dingy grill for Bowman were also oddly unaffected by the force of the explosion. The survivors tumbled out to the safety of Michigan Avenue.

Donald Page kept focused on Paul Puyear. As he headed toward the door, Paul cried out to Page, “My God, Nola!” Don said, “Who’s that?” Puyear responded, “My wife’s inside!” Page followed him into the smoking restaurant. Paul made it halfway into the restaurant when he saw Nola’s remains and began to scream. Page tried to comfort him, getting him out of the restaurant and onto the sidewalk. Paul muttered, “My God, she’s dead. She was opening the box she got in the mail and it killed her.” As Page stood with him, Paul looked up at him for answers, asking, “Who would do such a thing? Why? Why?” Don saw someone in uniform—probably a policeman—and guided Paul over to him.
Next door, attorney Ron DeGraw was rocked by the explosion. His early-morning client asked if it was a sonic boom, but DeGraw felt otherwise. The telephone mounted on his wall was knocked down by whatever it was. Rushing out, he saw the glass tinkling from the shattered windows of the Tasty Cafe. He approached Paul, who was in a daze. “Who did it?” he asked. DeGraw noticed something on Paul’s shoulder, gray and fleshlike. “Where’s Nola?” he asked. Paul coughed and pointed back at the restaurant. “Inside,” he said.

The Tasty was filled with smoke. “It smelled like the Fourth of July,” DeGraw recalled later, “the smell of firecrackers after they had been set off.” The air was filled with a dense grayish smoke. DeGraw was worried. If this was a gas leak, he was standing there with his lit pipe in his mouth. He paused for a moment and realized he had to go in. “I wouldn’t have been able to live with my conscience,” he later explained, “if I didn’t go check on Nola.”

What he found was a shambles; the counter had been flipped into the middle of the dining area. The refrigerator had a hole blown into it. What remained of Nola stunned him. She had been blown apart, thrown back over the shambles of the counter. Her flesh was gray, except for a hint of color near her hairline and down at her socks. The rest of her body looked as if the flesh had been scraped off—replaced with a gray visage. DeGraw left quickly. There was nothing that could be done for Nola now.

Postman Don Damon had just reached the Consumers Power building a half block away. He had just handed Cliff Wise a package when he heard the blast. He knew that something was wrong. Leaving Consumers, he retraced his steps back to Michigan Avenue. As he rounded the corner, he saw the carnage at the Tasty Cafe—the patrons spilling onto the street and smoke rolling out of the front of the restaurant. He heard the siren of a fire truck within a minute of the explosion but quickly realized that it was speeding away. The manager from the Citco gas station across the street was rushing over. Don saw Paul Puyear standing outside. He assumed that there had been a gas explosion.

Damon wanted to stay but could not be distracted from his rounds. People counted on him delivering his mail at the same time every day. Turning around, he continued on his rounds. Whatever it was that was
causing all of the commotion, he was sure he would get the details later. After all, the Marshall Post Office was right across the street.¹⁷

Nola’s murderer had succeeded brilliantly. His grisly work had been completed by an innocent, unsuspecting postman. His intended victim was not just dead but savagely disemboweled. Her murderer had managed to kill without dirtying his own hands with the horrific crime. The terror that was going to grip Marshall in that hot autumn of 1967 was just beginning.