

Copycat

by Jeffery Deaver, 1950-

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He'd never revived a cold case in quite this way.

Detective Quentin Altman rocked back, his chair squealing I with the telltale caw of ageing government furniture, and I eyed the narrow, jittery man sitting across from him. "Go on," the cop said.

"So I check out this book from the library. Just for the fun of it. I never do that, just read a book for the fun of it. I mean, never. I don't get much time off, you know."

Altman hadn't known this, but he could certainly have deduced it. Gordon Wallace was the *Greenville Tribune's* sole crime reporter and must've spent sixty, seventy hours a week banging out copy, to judge by the number of stories appearing under his byline every day.

"And I'm reading along and—"

"What is it you're reading?"

"A murder mystery. I'll get to that... I'm reading along and I'm irritated," the reporter continued, "because somebody'd circled some passages. In a library book."

Altman grunted distractedly. He was head of Homicide in a burg with a small-town name but big-city crime statistics. The fifty-something detective was

busy and he didn't have much time for reporters with crackpot theories. There were twenty-two folders of current cases on his desk and here Wallace was delivering some elliptical message about defaced books.

"I don't pay much attention at first, but I go back and reread one of the circled paragraphs. It jogs my memory. Anyway, I checked the morgue—"

"Morgue?" Altman frowned, rubbing his wiry red hair, which showed not a strand of gray.

"Our morgue, not yours. In the newspaper office. All the old stories."

"Got it. How 'bout getting to the point?"

"I found the articles about the Kimberly Banning murder."

Altman grew more attentive. Twenty-eight-year-old Kimberly had been strangled to death a year ago. The murder occurred two weeks after a similar killing-of a young female grad student. The two deaths appeared to be the work of the same person, but there were few forensic leads and no motive that anyone could determine. The cases prompted a task-force investigation but eventually the suspects dried up and blew away like maple leaves in October, and soon the case grew cold.

Tall and gaunt, with tendons and veins rising from his pale skin, Wallace tried to tone down his intimidating physique and face with brown tweed jackets, corduroy slacks, and pastel shirts, an attempt that was, as today, completely unsuccessful. He asked the cop, "Tfouremember how the whole town was paranoid after the first girl was killed? And how everybody was double-locking their doors and never letting strangers into their houses?"

Altman nodded.

"Well, look at this." The reporter pulled latex gloves out of his pocket and put them on.

"Why the gloves, Wallace?"

The man ignored the question and dug a book out of his battered briefcase. Altman got a look at the title. *Two Deaths in a Small Town*. He'd never heard of it.

"This was published six months before the first killing." He opened the book to a yellow Post-It tab and pushed it forward. "Read those paragraphs." The detective pulled on his CVS drugstore glasses and leaned forward.

The hunter knew that now that he'd killed once, the town would be more alert than ever. Its soul would beedgier, its collective nerves would be as tense as an animal trap's blue-steel spring. Women would notstroll the streets alone, and those who did would be looking around themselves constantly, alert for any risk. Only a fool would let a stranger into her house and the hunter did not enjoy killing fools.

So on Tuesday night he waited until nearly bedtime—eleven P.M.—and then slipped onto Maple Street. There, he doused a parked convertible's roof with gasoline and ignited the pungent, amber liquid. A huge whoosh... He hid in the bushes and, hypnotized by the tornado of flames and ebony smoke swirling into the night sky above the dying car, he waited. In ten minutes behemoths of fire trucks roared up the street, their wailing sirens drawing people from their homes to find out what the excitement might be.

Among those on the sidewalk was a young, demure blonde with a heart-shaped face, Clara Steading. This was the woman the hunter knew he had to possess—possess completely. She was love incarnate, amore herself, she was beauty, she was passion... and she was also completely ignorant of her role

as the object of his demented desire. Clara shivered in her bathrobe, standing on the sidewalk along with a clutch of chattering neighbors as they watched the firemen extinguish the blaze and offered words of sympathy to the dismayed owner of the car, who lived a few doors away.

Finally the onlookers grew bored, or repulsed by the bitter smell of the burnt rubber and plastic, and they returned to their beds or their late-night snacks or their mind-numbing TV. But their vigilance didn't flag; the moment they stepped inside, every one of them locked their doors and windows carefully—to make certain that the strangler would not wreak his carnage in their homes.

Though in Clara Steading's case, her diligence in securing the deadbolt and chains had a somewhat different effect: locking the hunter inside with her.

"Jesus," Altman muttered. "That's just what happened in the Banning case, how the perp got inside. He set fire to a car."

"A convertible," Wallace added. "And then I went back and found another passage that'd been circled. When I'd read it at first I didn't pay any attention. But you know what it said? It was how the killer had stalked the first victim by pretending to work for the city and trimming the plants in a park across from her apartment."

This was just how the first victim of the Greenville Strangler, the pretty grad student, had been stalked. "So the killer's a copycat," Altman murmured. "He used the novel for research."

Which meant that there could be evidence in the book that might lead to the perp: fingerprints, ink, handwriting.

Altman stared at the brooding cover—a drawing of a man's silhouette peering into the window of a house. The detective pulled on his own pair of latex gloves and slipped the book into an evidence envelope. He nodded at the reporter and said a heartfelt, "Thanks. We haven't had a lead on this one in over eight months."

Walking into the office next to his—that of his assistant, a young crew-cut detective named Josh Randall—he instructed the man to take the book to the county lab for analysis. When he returned, Wallace was still sitting expectantly in the hard chair across from Altman's desk.

Altman wasn't surprised he hadn't left. "And the quid pro quo?" the detective asked. "For your good deed?"

"I want an exclusive. What else?"

"I figured."

Altman didn't mind this in theory; cold cases were bad for the department's image and solving cold cases was good for a cop's career. Not to mention that there was still a killer out there. He'd never liked Wallace, though, who always seemed a little out of control in a spooky way and was as irritating as most crusaders usually are.

"Okay, you've got an exclusive," Altman said. "I'll keep you posted." He rose and shook the reporter's hand. Waited for him to leave.

"Oh, I'm not going anywhere, my friend."

"This's an official investigation—"

"And it wouldn't've been one without me. I want to write this one from the inside out. Tell my readers how a homicide investigation works from your point of view."

Altman argued some more, but in the end he gave in; he felt he had no choice. He said, "Just don't get in my way. If you get in the way, you're out of here."

"Wouldn't think of it." He frowned an eerie look into his long, toothy face. "I might even be helpful." Maybe it was a joke, but there was nothing humorous about the delivery. He then looked up expectantly at the detective. "So, whadda we do next?"

"Well, you're going to cool your heels. I'm going to review the case file."

"But—"

"Relax, Wallace. Investigations take time. Sit back, take your jacket off. Enjoy our wonderful coffee."

Wallace glanced at the closet that served as the police station's canteen. He rolled his eyes and the ominous tone of earlier was replaced with a laugh. "Funny. I didn't know they still made instant."

The detective winked and ambled down the hall on his aching bones.

Quentin Altman hadn't run the Greenville Strangler case himself. He'd worked on it some-the whole department had had a piece of the case-but the officer in charge had been Bob Fletcher, a sergeant who'd been on the force for years. Fletcher, who'd never remarried after his wife left him some years before and was childless, had devoted his life to his job after the divorce and seemed to take his inability to solve the strangler case hard; the soft-spoken man had actually given up a senior spot in Homicide and transferred to Robbery. Altman was now glad, for the sergeant's sake, that there was a chance to nail the killer who'd eluded him.

Altman wandered down to Robbery with the news about the book and to see if Fletcher knew anything about it. The sergeant, though, was out in the field at the moment and so Altman left him a message and then dove into the cluttered and oppressively hot records room. He found the strangler files easily; the folders sported red stripes on the side, a harsh reminder that, while this might've been a cold case, it was still very much open.

Returning to his office, he sat back, sipping the, yes, disgusting instant coffee, and read the file, trying to ignore Wallace's incessant scribbling on his steno pad, the scratchy noise irritatingly audible across the office. The events of the murders were well documented. The perp had broken into two women's apartments and strangled them. There'd been no rape, sexual molestation, or postmortem mutilation. Neither woman had ever been stalked or threatened by former boyfriends, and though Kimberly had recently purchased some condoms, none of her friends knew that she'd been dating. The other victim, Becky Winthrop, her family said, hadn't dated for over a year.

Sergeant Fletcher had carried out a by-the-book investigation, but most killings of this sort, without witnesses, motive, or significant trace found at the scene, are not solved without the help of an informant-often a friend or acquaintance of the perp. But, despite extensive press coverage of the investigation and pleas on TV by the mayor and Fletcher, no one had come forward with any information about possible suspects.

An hour later, just as he closed the useless file, Altman's phone rang. A forensic lab tech at the county police told him that they had been through the book page by page and found three passages underlined and starred with large asterisks. In addition to the two that Wallace had found, there was a passage about how the killer had put plastic bags around his shoes to prevent leaving footprints and to keep trace evidence from sloughing off at the crime scene.

Altman gave a short laugh. The report that he'd just read contained a note that the crime-scene searchers hadn't been able to figure out why the perp had left no footprints.

Because the goddamn killer had used a goddamn how-to book, the detective thought bitterly.

The tech continued: Next to two of the underscored passages were several handwritten notations. One said, "Check this one out. Important." And the other: "Used distraction—brilliant."

The documents department had blown up images of the handwriting and was prepared to compare these to any samples found elsewhere, though until such samples were found they could do nothing more.

The techs had also checked for any impression evidence—to see if the killer had written something on, say, a Post-It note on top of one of the pages—but found nothing.

Aninhydrin analysis revealed a total of nearly two hundred latent fingerprints on the three pages on which the paragraphs had been underlined. Unfortunately, many of them were old and were only fragments. Technicians had located a few that were clear enough to be identified and had run them through the FBI's automatic fingerprint identification system in West Virginia. But all the results had come back negative.

The cover of the book, wrapped in print-friendly cellophane, yielded close to four hundred prints, but they, too, were mostly smudges and fragments. AFIS had provided no positive IDs for these, either.

Frustrated, Altman thanked the technician as cordially as he could and hung up.

"So what was that about?" Wallace asked, looking eagerly at the sheet of paper in front of Altman, which contained both notes on the conversation he'd just had and a series of compulsive doodles.

He explained to the reporter about the forensic results.

"So, no leads," Wallace summarized dramatically and jotted a note, the irritated detective wondering why the reporter had actually found it necessary to write this observation down.

As he gazed at the reporter an idea occurred to Altman and he stood up abruptly. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Your crime scene."

"Mine?" Wallace asked, scrambling to follow the detective as he strode out the door.

The library near Gordon Wallace's apartment, where he'd checked out the novel, was a small branch in the Three Pines neighborhood of Greenville, so named because legend had it that three trees in a park here had miraculously survived the fire of 1829, which had destroyed the rest of the town. It was a nice place, populated mostly by businessmen, professionals, and educators; the college was nearby (the same school where the first strangler victim had been a student).

Altman followed Wallace inside and the reporter found the head of the branch and introduced her to the detective. Mrs. McGiver was a trim woman dressed in stylish gray; she looked more like a senior executive with a high-tech company than a librarian.

The detective explained the connection between the person who'd checked out the book and the murders, shock registering on the woman's face as she

realized that the killer was somebody who'd been to her library. Perhaps even someone she knew.

"I'd like a list of everybody who checked out that book." Altman had considered the possibility that the killer might not have checked it out but had looked through it here, in the library itself. But that meant he'd have to underline the passages in public and risk drawing the attention of librarians or patrons. He concluded that the only safe way for the strangler to do his homework was at home.

"I'll see what I can find," she said.

Altman had thought that it might take days to pull together this information, but Mrs. McGiver was back in minutes. Altman felt his gut churning with excitement as he gazed at the sheets of paper in her hand, relishing the sensations of the thrill of the hunt and pleasure at finding a fruitful lead.

But as he flipped through the sheets, he frowned. Every one of the thirty or so people checking out *Two Deaths* had done so recently—within the last six months. They needed the names of those who'd checked it out before the killings a year ago.

"Actually, I need to see the list before July tenth of last year," he explained.

"Oh, but we don't have records that far back. Normally we would, but about six months ago our computer was vandalized."

"Vandalized?"

She nodded, frowning. "Somebody poured battery acid or something into the hard drive. Ruined it and destroyed all our records. Backup, too. Somebody from your department handled the case. I don't remember who."

Wallace said, "I didn't hear about it."

"They never found who did it. It was very troubling, but more of an inconvenience than anything. Imagine if he'd decided to destroy the books themselves."

Altman caught Wallace's eye. "Dead end," he muttered angrily. Then he asked the librarian, "How about the names of everybody who had a library card then? Were their names in the computer, too?"

"Prior to six months ago, they're gone, too. I'm sorry."

Forcing a smile onto his face, he thanked the librarian and walked to the doorway. But he stopped so suddenly that Wallace nearly slammed into his back.

"What?" the reporter asked.

Altman ignored him and returned to the desk, calling as he did, "Mrs. McGiver! Hold up there!" Drawing stares and a couple of harshshhhh's from readers.

"I need to find out where somebody lives."

"I'll try, but you're the policeman—don't you have ways of doing that?"

"In this case, I have a feeling you'd be a better cop than me."

The author of *Two Deaths in a Small Town*, Andrew M. Carter, lived in Hampton Station, near Albany, about two hours away from Greenville.

Mrs. McGiver's copy of *Who's Who in Contemporary Mystery Writing* didn't include addresses or phone numbers, but Altman called the felonies division of the Albany police department and they tracked down Carter's address and number.

Altman's theory was that Carter might've gotten a fan letter from the killer. Since one notation called a passage "brilliant" and the other appeared to be a reminder to do more research on the topic, it was possible that the killer had

written to Carter to praise him or to ask for more information. If there was such a letter, the county forensic handwriting expert could easily link the notation with the fan, who- if they were lucky-might have signed his real name and included his address.

Mentally crossing his fingers, he placed a call to the author. A woman answered. "Hello?"

"I'm Detective Altman with the Greenville police department," he said. "I'd like to speak to Andrew Carter."

"I'm his wife," she said. "He's not available." The matter-of-fact tone in her voice suggested that this was her knee-jerk response to all such calls.

"When will he be available?"

"This is about the murders, isn't it?"

"That's right, ma'am."

"Do you have a suspect?"

"I can't really go into that. But I would like to talk to your husband."

A hesitation. "The thing is..." Her voice lowered and Altman suspected that her "unavailable" husband was in a nearby room. "He hasn't been well."

"I'm sorry," Altman said. "Is it serious?"

"You bet it's serious," she said angrily. "When Andy heard that the killer might've used his book as a model for the crimes, he got very depressed. He cut himself off from everybody. He stopped writing." She hesitated. "He stopped everything. He just gave up." "Must've been real difficult, Mrs. Carter," Altman said sympathetically.

"I told him it was just a coincidence—those women getting killed like he wrote in the book. Just a weird coincidence. But the reporters and, well, everybody, friends, neighbors... they kept yammering on and on about how Andy was to blame."

Altman supposed she wasn't going to like the fact that he'd found proof that her husband's book had indeed been the model for the killings.

She continued, "He's been getting better lately. Anything about the case could set him back."

"I do understand that, ma'am, but you have to see my situation. We've got a possibility of catching the killer and your husband could be real helpful..."

The sound on the other end of the line grew muffled and Altman could hear her talking to someone else.

Altman wasn't surprised when she said, "My husband just got back. I'll put him on."

"Hello?" came a soft, uneasy voice. "This's Andy Carter."

Altman identified himself.

"Are you the policeman I talked to last year?"

"Me? No. That might've been the case detective. Sergeant Bob Fletcher."

"Right. That was the name."

So Fletcher had talked to the author last year. There was no reference in the case file to it and he supposed that Carter hadn't provided any helpful information. Maybe now, after this much time had passed, he'd be more cooperative. Though Altman soon found that wasn't the case. He reiterated to Carter what he'd told his wife and the man said immediately, "I can't help you. And frankly, I don't want to... This's been the worst year of my life."

"I appreciate that, sir. But that killer's still free. And—"

"But I don't know anything. I mean, what could I possibly tell you that—"

"We have a sample of the killer's handwriting—we found some of his notes in a copy of your book. And we'd like to compare it to any letters from fans you might've received."

There was a long pause. Finally the author whispered, "So he did use my book as a model."

"I'm afraid he did, Mr. Carter."

Altman heard nothing for a moment, then a cryptic noise—maybe a sigh. Or maybe the man was crying softly.

"Sir, are you all right?"

The author cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. I can't help you. I just... it'd be too much for me."

Altman often told young officers under him that a detective's most important trait is persistence. He said in an even voice, "You're the only one who can help us trace the book back to him. He destroyed the library computer so we don't have the names of who checked your book out. There's no match on the fingerprints, either... I want to catch this man real bad. And I suspect you do, too, Mr. Carter. Don't you, now?"

There was no response. Finally the faint voice continued, "Do you know that strangers sent me clippings about the killings? Perfect strangers. Hundreds of them. They blamed me. They called my book a *blueprint for murder*. I had to go into the hospital for a month afterwards, I was so depressed... I caused those murders! Don't you understand that?"

Altman looked up at Wallace and shook his head.

The reporter gestured for the phone. Altman figured, why not?

"Mr. Carter, there's a person here I'm going to put on the line. I'd like him to have a word with you."

"Who?"

He handed the receiver over and sat back, listening to the one-sided conversation.

"Hello, Mr. Carter." The reporter's gaunt frame hunched over the phone and he gripped the receiver in astonishingly long, strong fingers. "You don't know me. My name is Gordon Wallace. I'm a fan of your book—I loved it. I'm the one who found the circled passages... No, I'm not with them; I'm a reporter for the *Tribune* here in Greenville... I got that. I understand that. My colleagues step over a lot of lines. But I don't operate that way. And I know you're reluctant to get involved here. I'm sure you've been through a tough time.

"But I just want to say one thing: I'm no great novelist like you—I'm just a hack journalist—but I am a writer and if I have any important belief in my life it's in the freedom to write whatever moves us. Now... No, please, Mr. Carter, let me finish. I heard that you basically stopped writing after the murders... Well, you and your talent were as much a victim of those crimes as those women were. You exercised your God-given right to express yourself and a terrible accident happened. That's how I'd look at this madman: an act of God. A couple of people got killed and you were injured because of that. You can't do anything about those women. But you can help yourself and your family to move on. And there's something else to consider: You're in a position to make sure nobody else ever gets hurt by this guy again."

Altman lifted an impressed eyebrow at the moving sales pitch. Wallace fell silent and, glancing at the detective, shrugged. He held the receiver to his ear for a moment, listening. Finally he nodded and glanced at Altman. "He wants to talk to you." Altman took the phone. "Yessir?"

"What exactly would you want me to do?" came the tentative voice through the phone.

"All I need is for you to look through your fan mail. See if you can find anything suspicious. Any fans who might've written something about these passages in the book." He told Carter which ones had been circled and then added, "And look for any letters from people who asked about how you researched the murders. Particularly from people within, say, a hundred miles or so of Greenville."

Carter protested, "I've got thousands of letters. It'd take a couple of days to go through them all."

"That's fine. We'll follow up on other leads as best we can... But I have one more request, sir."

"What's that?"

"Can we get those letters in person?" "You want me to come to Greenville?"

"Yessir, I do." Silence.

The detective persisted. "Depending on what we find, it could be real helpful to have you here. The city'll pay for the mileage and a room if you stay overnight."

"Sir," Carter said slowly, "there's not enough money in the universe to get me to come to Greenville." Altman took a breath to set out his argument, though before he could speak the man continued, "but I'll come anyway."

Altman started to tell the author how much he appreciated the help, but after a moment he realized that the man had hung up and he was listening to dead air.

Andy Clark turned out not to resemble either a sinister artist or a glitzy celebrity but rather any one of the hundreds of white, middle-aged businessmen that populated this region of the Northeast. Thick, graying hair, neatly trimmed. A slight paunch (much slighter than Altman's own, thanks to the cop's fondness for his wife's casseroles). His outfit wasn't an arm-patch sports jacket or any other authorial garb, but an L.L. Bean windbreaker, polo shirt, and corduroy slacks.

It had been two days since Altman had spoken to Carter. The man now stood uneasily in the detective's office, taking the coffee that Josh Randall offered and nodding greetings to the cops and to Gordon Wallace. He slipped off his windbreaker, tossing it on an unoccupied chair. The man's only moment of consternation in this initial meeting was when he glanced at the top of Altman's desk and blinked as he saw the case file that was headed, Banning, Kimberly—Homicide #13-01. A brief look of dismay filled his face. Altman was grateful that he'd had the foresight to slip the crime-scene photos of the victim's body to the bottom of the folder.

They made small talk for a minute or two and then Altman nodded at a large white envelope in the author's hand. "You find something helpful?"

"Helpful?" Carter asked, rubbing his red eyes. "I don't know. You'll have to decide that." He handed the envelope to the detective. "Oh, I wore gloves when I handled them. Not fancy ones like yours. Playtex. My wife's from the kitchen."

"Good thinking." Altman opened the envelope and, donning his own gloves, pulled out what must've been about fifty or so sheets.

"I looked through the e-mails from fans, too," Carter said. "But I didn't find anything that seemed suspicious."

E-mails wouldn't help them anyway; Altman was after a handwriting comparison.

"The ones on top," Carter continued, nodding at the correspondence, "seemed to be from the most... how do I put it?... the most intense fans."

The detective led the men into the department conference room and spread the letters out on the table. Randall joined them.

Some of them were typed or printed out from a computer, some were written in cursive, some in block letters. They were on many different types and sizes of paper and in many colors of ink or pencil. Crayons, too.

For half an hour they looked over the letters. Altman finally divided them into two piles. One, he explained, was of letters from fans who were, as Carter had said, "intense." These notes were eerie, nonsensical, angry, or disturbingly personal ("Come to see us in Sioux City if your in town and the wife and me will treat you to our special full body massage out side on the deck behind our trailer.")

"Ick," said Josh Randall.

Yep, definitely icky, Altman thought, but he set that pile aside and explained that they were the discards. "Those're your typical wackos and I don't think they're half dangerous. It's the other ones I'm worried about." He nodded at the second pile. "They're reasonable and calm and cautious... just like the strangler. See, he's an organized offender. Calculating and smart. He's not going to give anything away by ranting. If he has any questions, he's going to ask them politely and carefully—he'll want some detail but not too much; that'd arouse suspicion."

Altman gathered up this stack—about ten letters—placed them in an evidence envelope, and handed them to the young detective. "Over to the county lab, stat."

A man stuck his head in the door. Bob Fletcher. The even-keeled sergeant introduced himself to Carter. "We never met, but I spoke to you on the phone last year about the case."

"I remember." They shook hands.

Fletcher nodded at Altman, smiling ruefully. "He's a better cop than me. I never thought that the killer might've tried to write you."

The sergeant, it turned out, had contacted Carter not about fan mail but to ask if the author had based the story on any previous true crimes, thinking there might be a connection between them and the strangler murders. It had been a good thought, but Carter had explained that the plot for *Two Deaths* was a product of his imagination.

The sergeant's eyes took in the stack of letters. "Any luck?" he asked.

"We'll have to see what the lab finds." Altman then nodded toward the author. "But I have to say that Mr. Carter here's been a huge help. We'd be stymied for sure, it wasn't for him."

Appraising Carter carefully, Fletcher said, "I have to admit I never got a chance to read your book, but I always wanted to meet you. An honest-to-God famous author. Don't think I've ever shook one's hand before."

Carter gave an embarrassed laugh. "Not very famous, to look at my sales figures."

"Well, all I know is my girlfriend read your book and she said it was the best thriller she'd read in years."

Carter said, "I appreciate that. Is she around town? I could autograph her copy."

"Oh," Fletcher said. "Well, we're not going out anymore. She left the area. But thanks for the offer." He headed back to Robbery.

There was now nothing to do but wait for the lab results to come back, so Wallace suggested coffee at Starbucks. The men wandered down the street, ordered, and sat sipping the drinks as Wallace pumped Carter for information about breaking into fiction writing, and Altman simply enjoyed the feel of the hot sun on his face.

The men's recess ended abruptly, though, fifteen minutes later when Altman's phone rang.

"Detective," came the enthusiastic voice of his youthful assistant, "we've got a match! The handwriting in one of Mr. Carter's fan letters matches the notes in the book. The ink's the same, too; there were markers in it."

The detective said, "Please tell me there's a name and address on the letter."

"You bet there is. Howard Desmond's his name. And his place is over in Warwick. "A small town fifteen minutes from the sites of both of the Greenville Strangler's attacks.

The detective told his assistant to pull together as much information on Desmond as he could. He snapped the phone shut and, grinning, announced, "We've found him. We've got our copycat."

But, as it turned out, they didn't have him at all.

Single, forty-two-year-old Howard Desmond, a veterinary technician, had skipped town six months before, leaving in a huge hurry. One day in April he'd called his landlord and announced that he was moving. He'd left virtually overnight, abandoning everything in the apartment but his valuables. There was no forwarding address. Altman had hoped to go through whatever he'd left behind, but the landlord explained that he'd sold everything to make up for the lost rent. What didn't sell, he'd thrown out.

Altman spoke to the vet in whose clinic Desmond had worked, and the doctor's report was similar to the landlord's. In April, Desmond had called and quit his job, effective immediately, saying only that he was moving to Oregon to take care of his elderly grandmother. He never called back with a forwarding address for his last check, as he said he would.

The vet described Desmond as quiet, and affectionate to the animals in his care, but with little patience for people.

Altman contacted the authorities in Oregon and found no record of any Howard Desmond in the DMV files or on the property or income-tax rolls. A bit more digging revealed that all of Desmond's grandparents—his parents, too—had died years before; the story about the move to Oregon was apparently a complete lie.

The few relatives the detective could track down confirmed that he'd just disappeared, and they didn't know where he might be. They echoed his boss's assessment, describing the man as intelligent but a recluse, one who—significantly—loved to read and often lost himself in novels, appropriately for a killer who took his homicidal inspiration from a book.

"What'd his letter to Andy say?" Wallace asked.

With an okaying nod from Altman, Randall handed it to the reporter, who then summarized out loud. "He asks how Mr. Carter did the research for his book. What were the sources he used? How did he learn about the most efficient way a murderer would kill someone? And he's curious about the mental makeup of a killer. Why did some people find it easy to kill while others couldn't possibly hurt anyone?"

Altman shook his head. "No clue as to where he might've gone. We'll get his name into NCIC and ViCAP but, hell, he could be anywhere. South America, Europe, Singapore..."

Since Bob Fletcher's Robbery division would've handled the vandalism at the Greenville library's Three Pines branch, which they now knew Desmond was responsible for, Altman sent Randall to ask the sergeant if he'd found any leads that would be helpful.

The other men found themselves staring at Desmond's fan letter as if it were a corpse at a wake, silence surrounding them, trying to guess where the killer might've gone.

Altman glanced up and noticed that Andy Carter was frowning as he gazed at a large map of Greenville County up on the wall. The author nodded to himself slowly and then said, "Had a thought"

"Go on."

"Desmond rented his place, right?"

"Yep."

"Well, he had a decent job, he wasn't a youngster, and he was single. He had to've had some money. Why would he rent? Houses aren't that expensive in Greenville."

Altman shrugged. "I don't know. What do you make of that?"

"My wife and I used to go up to the Adirondacks in the summer. We looked into buying a place awhile ago but we couldn't afford to own two houses. So we ended up renting."

The detective nodded. "So you're thinking that one reason a man would rent his main residence was if he owned a house somewhere else. A summer house or something."

"Just a thought."

"But you checked the county registrar; he didn't own any property," Wallace pointed out to Altman.

"But we didn't check other counties," the detective replied. "A vacation place might not be nearby." He grabbed his phone.

And in less than five minutes they had their answer.

Howard Desmond did indeed own a house elsewhere—on the shore of Lake Muskegon, sixty miles from Greenville, tucked away into the backwater, piney wilderness.

"Good thought," the detective said to Carter. "Thanks."

"You think he's hiding out there?" Wallace asked.

"Doubt it," Altman said. "He's not stupid. I were him, I'd vanish for a couple of years, till everybody'd forgotten about the case and I thought it was safe to come back to the area. But there could be some leads there to where he did go. Maybe airline receipts or something."

Josh Randall returned to report that Sergeant Bob Fletcher had no helpful information in the library vandalism case.

But Altman said, "Doesn't matter. We've got a better lead. Suit up, Josh."

"What're we doing?"

"We're going for a ride in the country. What else on a nice fall day like this?"

Lake Muskegon is a large but shallow body of water bordered by willow, tall grass, and ugly pine. Altman didn't know the place well. He'd brought his family here for a couple of picnics over the years, and he and Bob Fletcher had come to the lake once on a halfhearted fishing expedition, of which Altman had only

vague memories: gray, drizzly weather and a nearly empty creel at the end of the day.

As he and Randall drove north through the increasingly deserted landscape he briefed the young man. "Now, I'm ninety-nine percent sure Desmond's not here. But what we're going to do first is clear the house—I mean closet by closet—and then I want you stationed in the front to keep an eye out while I look for evidence. Okay?"

"Sure, boss."

They passed Desmond's overgrown driveway and pulled off the road, then eased into a stand of thick forsythia.

Together, the men cautiously made their way down the weedy drive toward the "vacation house," a dignified term for the tiny, shabby cottage sitting in a three-foot-high sea of grass and brush. A path had been beaten through the foliage—somebody had been here recently—but it might not have been Desmond; Altman had been a teenager once himself and knew that nothing attracts adolescent attention like a deserted house.

They drew their weapons and Altman pounded on the door, calling, "Police. Open up."

Silence.

He hesitated a moment, adjusted the grip on his gun, and kicked the door in.

Filled with cheap, dust-covered furniture, buzzing with stuporous fall flies, the place appeared completely deserted. They checked the four small rooms carefully and found no sign of Desmond. Outside, they glanced in the window of the garage and saw that it was empty. Then Altman sent Randall to the front of the driveway to hide in the bushes and report anybody's approach.

He then returned to the house and began to search, wondering just how hot the cold case was about to become.

Two hundred yards before the driveway that led to Howard Desmond's cottage, a battered, ten-year-old Toyota pulled onto the shoulder of Route 207 and then into the woods, out of sight of any drivers along the road.

A man got out and, satisfied that his car was well hidden, squinted into the forest, getting his bearings. He noticed the line of the brown lake to his left and figured the vacation house was in the ten-o'clock position ahead of him. Through dense underbrush like this, it would take him about fifteen minutes to get to the place, he estimated.

That'd make the time pretty tight. He'd have to move as quickly as he could and still keep the noise to a minimum.

The man started forward, but then stopped suddenly and patted his pocket. He'd been in such a hurry to get to the house he couldn't remember if he'd taken what he wanted from the glove compartment. But yes, he had it with him.

Hunched over and picking his way carefully to avoid stepping on noisy branches, Gordon Wallace continued on toward the cabin where, he hoped, Detective Altman was lost in police work and would be utterly oblivious to his furtive approach.

The search of the house revealed virtually nothing that would indicate that Desmond had been here recently—or where the man might now be. Altman found some bills and canceled checks, but the address on them was Desmond's apartment in Warwick.

He decided to check the garage, thinking he might come across something helpful that the killer had tossed out of the car and forgotten about—directions or a map, maybe.

He found something far more interesting in the decrepit building, though. Howard Desmond himself.

That is to say, his corpse.

The moment Altman opened the old-fashioned double doors of the garage he detected the smell of decaying flesh. He knew where it had to be coming from: a large coal bin in the back. Steeling himself, he flipped up the lid.

Inside were the mostly skeletal remains of a man about six feet tall, lying on his back, fully clothed. He'd been dead about six months—just around the time Desmond disappeared, Altman recalled.

DNA would tell for certain if this was the killer, but Altman discovered the man's wallet in his hip pocket and, sure enough, the driver's license inside was Desmond's. There wasn't enough face left to be sure, but the thatch of hair on the corpse's skull and the man's height were the same as indicated on the license.

He looked briefly through the bin again and found nothing else that would identify the body or who'd killed him, though he did find the apparent murder weapon—a stained, old-fashioned military bayonet. Lifting it out with a Kleenex, he set the weapon on a workbench.

So what the hell was going on?

Somebody had murdered the strangler. Who? And why?

But then Altman did one of the things he did best—let his mind run free. Too many detectives get an idea into their heads and can't see past their initial conclusions. Altman, though, always fought against this tendency and he now asked himself: But what if Desmond wasn't the strangler?

They knew for certain that he was the one who'd underlined the passages in the library's copy of *Two Deaths in a Small Town*. But what if he'd done so after the killings? The letter Desmond had written to Carter was undated. Maybe—like Gordon Wallace—he'd read the book after the murders and been struck by the similarity. He'd started to investigate the crime himself and the strangler had found out and murdered him.

But then who was the killer?

Like Gordon Wallace...

Altman felt another little tap in his far-ranging mind, as fragments of facts lined up for him to consider—facts that all had to do with the reporter. For instance, Wallace was physically imposing, abrasive, temperamental. At times he could be threatening, scary. He was obsessed with crime, and he knew police and forensic procedures better than most cops, which also meant that he knew how to anticipate investigators' moves. (He'd sure blustered his way right into the middle of the reopened case just the other day, Altman reflected.) Wallace owned a Motorola police scanner and would've been able to listen in on calls about the victims. His apartment was a few blocks from the college where the first victim was killed.

The detective considered: Let's say that Desmond had read the passages, become suspicious, and circled them, then made a few phone calls to find out more about the case. He might've called Wallace, who, as the Tribune's crime reporter, would be a logical source for more information.

Desmond had met with the reporter, who'd then killed him and hid the body here.

Impossible...

Why would he have brought the book to the police's attention, then? And why would he have killed the two women in the first place? What was his motive?

But Altman refused to dismiss the notion of Wallace's involvement so quickly. He bent down into the shabby, impromptu crypt again to search it more carefully, trying to unearth answers to those difficult questions.

Gordon Wallace caught a glimpse of Altman in the garage.

The reporter had crept up to a spot only thirty feet away and was hiding behind a bush. The detective wasn't paying any attention to who might be outside, apparently relying on Josh Randall to alert him to intruders. The young detective was at the head of the driveway, a good two hundred feet away, his back to the garage.

Breathing heavily in the heat, the reporter started through the grass in a crouch. He stopped beside the building and glanced quickly into the side window, noting that Altman was standing over a coal bin in the rear of the garage, squinting at something in his hand.

Perfect, Wallace thought, and, reaching into his pocket, eased to the open doorway, where his aim would be completely unobstructed.

The detective had found some papers in Desmond's pocket and was staring at one in particular, a business card, trying to figure it out, when he heard the snap of a twig behind him and, alarmed, turned.

A silhouette of a figure was standing in the doorway. He seemed to be holding his hands at chest level.

Blinded by the glare, Altman gasped, "Who're—?"

A huge flash filled the room.

The detective stumbled backward, groping for his pistol.

"Damn," came a voice he recognized.

Altman squinted against the backlighting. "Wallace! You goddamn son of a bitch. What the hell're you doing here?"

The reporter scowled and held up the camera in his hand, looking just as unhappy as Altman. "I was trying to get a candid of you on the job, but you turned around. You ruined it."

"I ruined it? You've got no business being here. I told you not to get in the way. You can't—"

"I'm not in the way," the man snapped. "I'm nowhere near you. How can I be in the way?"

"This's a crime scene."

"Well, that's why I want the pictures," he said petulantly. Then he frowned. "What's that smell?" The camera sagged and the reporter started to breathe in shallow gasps. He looked queasy.

"It's Desmond. Somebody murdered him. He's in the coal bin."

"Murdered him? So he's not the killer?"

Altman lifted his radio and barked to Randall, "We've got visitors back here."

"What?"

"We're in the garage."

The young officer showed up a moment later, trotting fast. A disdainful look at Wallace. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"How'd you let him get past?" Altman snapped.

"Not his fault," the reporter said, shivering at the smell. "I parked up the road. How 'bout we get some fresh air?"

Angry, Altman took perverse pleasure in the reporter's discomfort. "I oughta throw you in jail."

Wallace held his breath and started for the coal bin, raising the camera.

"Don't even think about it," Altman growled, and pulled the reporter away.

"Who did it?" Randall asked, nodding at the body.

Altman didn't share that for a moment he'd actually suspected Wallace himself. Just before the photo-op incident he'd found a stunning clue as to who Desmond's—and the two women's—killer actually was. He held up a business card. "I found this on the body."

On the card was written, "Detective Sergeant Robert Fletcher, Greenville Police Department."

"Bob?" Randall whispered in shock.

"I don't want to believe it," Altman muttered slowly, "but back at the office he didn't let on he even knew about Desmond, let alone that they'd met at some point."

"True, he didn't say a word."

"And," he continued, nodding at the bayonet, "doesn't that look like one of his?"

"Does, yeah," Randall said.

Bob Fletcher collected World War II memorabilia and weapons. The wicked-looking blade was similar to several in his collection.

Altman's heart pounded furiously at the betrayal. He now understood what had happened. Fletcher bobbed the case intentionally—because he was the killer—probably destroying any evidence that led to him. A loner, a history of short, difficult relationships, obsessed with the military and hunting... He'd lied to them about not reading *Two Deaths* and had used it as a model to kill those women. Then—after the killings—Desmond happened to read the book, too, underlined the passages, and, being a good citizen, contacted case officer Fletcher, who was none other than the killer himself. The sergeant murdered him, dumped the body here, and then destroyed the library's computer and never made any effort to pursue the vandalism investigation.

Altman then had another thought. He turned suddenly to the reporter. "Where was Fletcher when you left the office? Did you see him at the station?" The detective's hand strayed to his pistol as he looked around the tall grass, wondering if the sergeant now intended to kill them as well.

"He was in the conference room with Andy Carter."

No! Altman realized that they weren't the only ones at risk; the author was a witness, too—and a potential victim of Fletcher's. Altman grabbed his cell phone and called the central dispatcher. He asked for Carter.

"He's not here, sir," the woman said.

"What?"

"It was getting late so he decided to get a hotel room for the night."

"Which one's he staying at?"

"I think it's the Sutton Inn."

"You have the number?"

"I do, sure. But he's not there right now."

"Where is he?"

"He went out to dinner. I don't know where, but if you need to get in touch with him you can call Bob Fletcher's phone. They were going together."

Twenty minutes from town, driving at ninety.

Altman tried again to call Fletcher but the sergeant wasn't answering. There wasn't much Altman could do except try to reason with the sergeant, have him give himself up, plead with him not to kill Carter, too. He prayed that the cop hadn't already done so.

Another try. Still no answer.

He skidded the squad car through the intersection at Route 202, nearly sideswiping one of the ubiquitous dairy tankers in these parts.

"Okay, that was exciting," Randall whispered, removing his sweaty palm from the dashboard as the truck's horn brayed in angry protest behind them.

Altman was about to call Fletcher's phone again when a voice clattered over the car's radio. "All units. Reports of shots fired on Route One-twenty-eight just west of Ralph's Grocery. Repeat, shots fired. All units respond."

"You think that's them?"

"We're three minutes away. We're about to find out." Altman pushed the accelerator to the floor and they broke into three-digit speed.

After a brief, harrowing ride, the squad car crested a hill. Randall called breathlessly, "Look!"

Altman could see Bob Fletcher's police interceptor half on, half off the road. He skidded to a stop nearby and the two officers jumped out. Wallace's car—which had been hitching an illegal ride on their light bar and siren—braked to a stop fifty feet behind them and the reporter, too, jumped out, ignoring the detective's shout to stay down.

Altman felt Randall grip his arm. The young officer was pointing at the shoulder about fifty feet away. In the dim light, they could just make out the form of Andrew Carter lying facedown in the dust.

Oh no! They weren't in time; the sergeant had added the author to the list of his victims.

"Look out for Fletcher," he whispered to a spooked Josh Randall. "He's around here someplace and we know he's armed."

Altman ran toward the author's body. As he did, he happened to glance to his left and gasped. There was Bob Fletcher on the ground, holding a shotgun.

He shouted to Randall, "Look out!" and dropped flat. But as he swung the gun toward Fletcher he noted that the sergeant wasn't moving. The detective hit the man with his flashlight beam. Fletcher's eyes were glazed over and there were two bullet holes in his chest.

Wallace was crouching over Carter. The reporter called, "He's alive!"

The detective rose, pulled the scattergun out of Fletcher's lifeless hands, and trotted over to the author. The man's face was bloody and streaked with dirt, his clothes torn. Lying on the ground nearby was a black revolver, the sort that Fletcher had carried.

"Are you shot?"

Carter winced and blinked.

"Andy? Are you shot?"

In response, the author shook his head. "No. But I think I broke my arm. I can't feel anything in my fingers."

"There's an ambulance on its way. Just stay where you are. Don't try to get up."

"My leg... man, it hurts."

"Just stay still, Andy. Don't move. Tell me what happened."

Gasping, Carter said, "Fletcher said let's go to dinner. We took his car. He said if I didn't mind he had to make a stop on the way to the restaurant and he

turned down this road. Then he was talking and he said it was funny, this road reminded him of that scene in my book where the hunter's waiting for one of the victims."

"Ah."

"Right," Carter continued. "He said he hadn't read it. He lied to us. That meant he had to be the strangler. And he was taking me someplace to kill me." Carter coughed and laid his head back on the ground. A moment later he continued, "When he slowed down to turn into that side road I grabbed his pistol and jumped out of the car. I thought I could run into the forest and hide. But I hurt myself landing and couldn't get up. Fletcher stopped and got the shotgun out of the trunk. He came after me and I fired a couple of times and then passed out." He looked at the body up the road.

He whispered, "I didn't want to kill him. I didn't have any choice."

Over a crest in the road Altman could see flashing lights and hear sirens, growing steadily louder. As Randall ran toward them, gesturing wildly, Altman collected the weapons. He glanced at Bob Fletcher's body. Murdering Howard Desmond and trying to murder Andy Carter—well, those had been to cover up his original crimes. But what had been the sergeant's motive for killing the two women in Greenville last year? Maybe the anger at being left by his wife had boiled over. Maybe he'd had a secret affair with one of the victims, which had turned sour, and he'd decided to stage her death as a random act of violence.

And maybe, Altman reflected, unlike in a mystery novel, they'd never know what had driven the man to step over the edge into the dark world of the killers he'd once hunted.

The doctors kept Andrew Carter in the hospital overnight, though it seemed that the flying leap from the car—as dramatic and frightening as it probably seemed to him—hadn't caused any serious damage.

The next morning he checked out of Greenville Memorial and stopped by the police department to say goodbye to Altman and Randall and to sign a formal statement about the events of the previous night.

"Got the latest from Forensics," Altman said, and explained that Fletcher's prints were all over the bayonet and that a search of the sergeant's house revealed several items—stockings and lingerie—that had been taken from the homes of the victims, leaving no doubt that Fletcher was the Greenville Strangler. Most people in town, certainly everyone in the police department, were shocked at this news. But Quentin Altman had to admit that one of the things he'd learned in his twenty-plus years of being a cop was that you never really knew what was in anybody's heart but your own.

He chatted with the author for a few moments but their conversation quickly became merely the superficial exchange between two men whose sole reason for contact no longer existed, and Carter finally looked at his watch, saying that he'd better be going. Altman walked him outside.

They were leaving the police station when Gordon Wallace loped up to them. "Hot off the presses." He handed a copy of the *Tribune* to Carter. On the front page was Wallace's story about the solving of the Greenville Strangler case. "Keep that," Wallace said. "A souvenir."

Thanking him, Carter folded the paper up, slipped it under his arm, and walked to his car.

Altman observed that the author seemed in somewhat better spirits than when he'd arrived. The melancholy remained in his eyes, but the detective sensed that he'd found a bit of inner peace by coming to Greenville, to the site

of the terrible killings that he felt responsible for. And perhaps making this difficult trip and risking his own life to help bring the killer to justice would ultimately prove to be a godsend; unlike many people touched by tragedy, Carter had had the rare chance to revisit the past and personally confront the demons of guilt that threatened to destroy his life.

Just before the man climbed into his Toyota, Altman called out, "Oh, one thing, Andy—how's that book of yours end? Do the police ever find the hunter?"

Carter caught himself as he was about to answer. He gave a grin. "You know, Detective, if you want to find that out, I'm afraid you're just going to have to buy yourself a copy." He dropped into the front seat, fired the car up, and pulled into the street, offering a brief wave goodbye.

At two a.m. the next morning Andrew Carter slipped out of bed, where he'd lain wide-awake for the past three hours.

He glanced at the quiescent form of his sleeping wife and went to his closet, where he found and pulled on an old pair of faded jeans, sneakers, and a Boston University sweatshirt—his good-luck writing clothes, which he hadn't donned in well over a year.

He walked down the hall to his office and went inside, turning on the light. Sitting at his desk, he clicked on his computer and stared at the screen for a long moment.

Then suddenly he began to write. His keyboarding was clumsy at first, his fingers jabbing two keys at once or missing the intended one altogether. Still, as the hours passed, his skill as a typist returned and soon the words were pouring from his mind onto the screen flawlessly and fast.

By the time the sky began to glow with pink-gray light and a bird's cell-phone trill sounded from the crisp holly bush outside his window, he'd finished the story completely—thirty-nine double-spaced pages.

He moved the cursor to the top of the document, thought about an appropriate title, and typed: *Copycat*.

Then Andy Carter sat back in his comfortable chair and carefully read his work from start to finish.

The story opened with a reporter finding a suspense novel that contained several underlined passages, which were strikingly similar to two real-life murders that had occurred a year earlier. The reporter takes the book to a detective, who concludes that the man who circled the paragraphs is the perpetrator, a copycat inspired by the novel to kill.

Reviving the case, the detective enlists the aid of the novel's author, who reluctantly agrees to help and brings the police some fan letters, one of which leads to the suspected killer.

But when the police track the suspect to his summer home, they find that he's been murdered. He wasn't the killer at all, and had presumably circled the passages only because he, too, like the reporter, was struck by the similarity between the novel and the real-life crimes.

Then the detective gets a big shock: on the fan's body he finds clues that prove that a sergeant on the town police force is the real killer. The author, who happens to be with this very officer at that moment, manages to wrestle the sergeant's gun away and shoot him in self-defense.

Case closed.

Or so it seems...

But Andy Carter hadn't ended the story there. He added yet another twist. Readers learn at the very end that the sergeant was innocent. The real Strangler had set him up as a fall guy.

And who was the strangler?

None other than the author himself.

Racked by writer's block after his first novel was published, unable to follow it up with another, the man had descended into madness. Desperate and demented, he came to believe that he might jump-start his writing by actually reenacting scenes from his novel, so he stalked and strangled two women, just as his fictional villain had done.

The murders hadn't revived his ability to write, however, and he slumped further into depression. And then, even more troubling, he heard from the fan who'd grown suspicious about the similarities between certain passages in the novel and the real crimes. The author had no choice: He met with the fan and killed him, too, hiding the body in the man's lakeside summer cottage. He covered up the disappearance by pretending to be the fan and phoning the man's boss and landlord to say that he was leaving town unexpectedly.

The author now believed he was safe. But his contentment didn't last. Enter the reporter who'd found the underlined passages, and the investigation started anew. When he was asked to help the police, the author knew he had to give them a scapegoat. So he agreed to meet with the police, but in fact he'd arrived in town a day early. He broke into the police sergeant's house, planted some incriminating evidence from the first murders, and stole one of the cop's bayonets and his business card. These he planted on the body of the fan at the lake house. The next day he showed up at the police station with the fan letter that led ultimately to the cottage, where the detective found the leads to the sergeant. Meanwhile, the author, alone with the unsuspecting cop, grabbed his gun and shot him, later claiming self-defense.

In the final scene, the author returned home to try to resume his writing, having literally gotten away with murder.

Carter now finished reading the story, his heart thumping hard with pride and excitement. True, it needed polishing, but considering that he hadn't written a word for more than a year, it was a glorious accomplishment. He was a writer once again.

The only problem was that he couldn't publish the story. He couldn't show it to a living soul, not even his wife. For the simple reason that it wasn't fiction; every word was true. Andy Carter himself was the homicidal author.

Still, he thought, as he erased the entire story from his computer, publishing it didn't matter one bit. The important thing was that by writing it he'd managed to kill his writer's block as ruthlessly and efficiently as he'd murdered Bob Fletcher and Howard Desmond and the two women in Greenville. And he knew, too, how to make sure that the block never rose from the dead. From now on he'd give up fiction and pursue what he'd realized he was destined to write: true crime.

What a perfect solution this was! He'd never want for ideas again; TV news, magazines, and the papers would provide dozens of story leads he could choose from.

And, he reflected, walking downstairs to make a pot of coffee, if it turned out that there were no crimes that particularly interested him... well, Andy Carter knew that he was fully capable of taking matters into his own hands and whipping up a bit of inspiration all by himself.

