

ENIGMATIC

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

JOSHUA RANDLE FIRTH

CHAPTER ONE

Albert

I pressed my hands against the heating vents in my car, trying to warm my frosted finger tips whilst keeping focus on my speed. The small city ahead, pillowed by a dense fog that made the morning seem much colder than it was for this time of year. My car slowly crept down Kannon Lane, an opulent and quiet street, a few stone-throws away from the heart of town. Oversized houses, gardens perfectly sculpted. I was never a man interested in cars, but the cars parked in these driveways caught my eye. They were perfectly cleaned and detailed, reflecting the bright green trees that lined the street.

My father was what the people outside of the biz would call a ‘grease monkey’, a real *manly* man. He spent his days in his auto-shop – a small dirty shed – where he would rip apart cars and rebuild them. When he’d finally arrive home after working his long hours in the shop, Mother would find him in the garage under one of his new projects, repeating his day all over again. My father bought vintage Chryslers and Cadillacs and would fix them, detail them, then sell them to rich outside-of-towners who were willing to pay big bucks for his overpriced sculpted metal for their car shows.

My mother was the type who’d slaved away in the kitchen like a woman should do – this was a quality my father firmly believed, and

a quality I still to this day have trouble moving past. I didn't want to think of woman as 'housewives' but as much as I hate to admit it, from my father's influence, I still had to remind myself now and then that was not the case. This discomforting problem became easier to deal with over the years, especially after having a female superior. Every meal at the dinner table would start with the same bickering.

'Wash your hands – your fingernails are covered in oil,' my mother would insist.

His reply would always be the same. 'Just going to get dirty again tomorrow,' he'd claim as he scraped the blackened oil from under his untrimmed fingernails.

The houses I grew up in were not like any of these homes. I refer to 'houses' in comparison to 'homes' because that's all they were: houses they could scarcely afford. Kannon Lane was lined with homes, not houses. They were clean, proudly owned homes. Up ahead, the small, quiet and peaceful court was cornered off with police tape. I took a swig of my lukewarm coffee – just how I liked it – and I stepped out into the crisp morning air of almost winter. For November, it wasn't too cold; a month off winter and yet it still felt like we were only mid through spring. I wished I was a hot coffee drinker – something to keep my hands warm, something to help me seem less like a child. I had childish facial features: baby-fat still coated my cheeks, and I had oddly oversized eyes – puppylike, as some would describe. I was, to say the least, not very intimidating at all for a detective.

There was a chrome sign pinned to the fencing of the manor. It read 'The Caulfield Estate'. I stood below the mansion, the walls blocking out the sunlight, leaving me thinking, *I would never choose to ever live in a place like this – not that I would ever be able to afford it.* It was large for the sake of being large, a mass of unused space. It had gardens that

required professional landscapers to keep maintained.

I guess I just wanted the simple life: a nice little two-bedroom, a backyard, perhaps a backyard for the limited summertime we do get in this cruddy city. Suddenly, I was pulled back into work mode.

'I've got to tell you. It's pretty grim,' a forensic investigator whispered to me in her slight southern accent. I tucked my police badge into my belt and continued up to the double-doored entrance.

She led me past the police tape. A crime scene – a sight my eyes were very used to. Yet this strangely felt personal. My mouth went dry. I gathered enough saliva to wet my dehydrated lips, and then we entered.

It was quiet. The walls blocked the noise from outside, I only heard the footsteps of the forensic investigator to which I followed upstairs. I followed the forensic investigator upstairs. We passed photo frames of a family, but I didn't look too closely, in fact, I purposely looked away down to my perfectly polished shoes. I couldn't help but always think of my father when I was confronted with my cleanliness. His dirty fingernails always made me appreciate how unlike we were; or perhaps I was so clean because I didn't want to be like him.

We entered a hefty room at the top of the stairs. It was an open-spaced living area. It seemed useless to me: couches in one corner, and at the other end sat a lonely bar. I just stared at the useless space – another reason I just wanted a small home. I was a clean person: cleanly shaved, clean fingernails, and of course, a clean home would be at the top of my list. I couldn't imagine having to clean such a space, and I certainly didn't make enough money to pay for a cleaner. You'd think a detective would make a decent amount of dough, or enough to afford their own home. Well, not in Mansfield, Ohio.

Smack bang in the middle of Columbus and Cleveland, with a population of fewer than fifty thousand souls. We were not a poor city – well, not the poorest in the country – but we certainly didn't make a lot of money. Our duties as detectives would sometimes stretch

an hour's drive out of town to Lake Erie – a place where me and my colleague, Lori Fishburn, would often be met with a 'body in a lake' scenario. Lake Erie – a place where the setting really suited the name. My colleague and teacher, Lori Fishburn was a real detective – like you would see in the movies. Lori always had her hair in a ponytail, a large steaming coffee cup with her, her plain black and charcoal suit, with a pair of rubber gloves always in her pocket. Lori, on very rare occasions, wore make-up. She was married – happily, for thirty years – and I always assumed that she wore the pants in the household. This didn't surprise me – Lori wore the pants at work, she took control. Lori knows what she wants, and she makes it happen. She is the biggest teacher I've had in my life, for all reasons – good and bad. I learned most of my detective work from her, and a few life lessons along the way like don't make relationships at work.

According to Detective Fishburn, it would 'only get complicated. Friendship or lover, it never ends well.' I can always hear her voice telling me that in her obvious not-from-Ohio accent. Lori has a deep-southern Texas accent. She always described herself as '100 per cent Texan, and proudly'. She lived in Texas until she was offered a considerably big pay rise to move to Mansfield when the city started to go under. So, she packed up the car and, from what I understand, forced her husband to leave, and he found himself smack bang in the middle of boring Mansfield.

Mansfield used to be one of America's safest cities. Not too long ago our crime rate was down so low that only one homicide was reported in a single year. Home invasions and drug use were at an all-time low. Now, if you ask an out-of-towner what Mansfield was best known for, you will gather three answers: a) the winter snow and skiing (when winter hit, we would be drowned in snow, our mountains flourished with people who would take up the rich sport of skiing); b) the town near the building they filmed *The Shawshank Redemption* in; or c) the biggest drug- and crime-rate spike within a twenty-four-month period.

Mansfield changed from the friendly city it was drastically. Drugs took over the streets, and with the drug trade and abuse comes petty crime – and often petty crime turned into death. It was a robust fact that Lori and I had to come to terms with; a fact we had no idea how to truly deal with. We, of course, asked for more staff and a higher budget; however, our requests were never met. So now our once proud, clean, low-crime county is full of addicts, homeless, and drug dealers. And Lori and I were well in over our heads.

‘Guess is about two, maybe three hours,’ the CSI woman said, snapping me back to reality. She guided me into the master bedroom.

The white carpet was stained with blood splatter and on the floor. A woman laid with wounds in her freshly deceased body. One deep slash just above her ankle, cutting her Achilles’ heel, and obviously cut to make sure the woman couldn’t run away. There were two other slashes down her arms, and another in her shoulder – the entry point from the back, all the way through her shoulder – just below the collar bone.

I gasped and then closed my eyes. Trying to take myself to a calm place, I imagined a lake, the water still – freezing – but the air warm.

I opened my eyes.

In the corner, a man, face down in a pool of his own blood.

‘Were they shot?’ I asked, trying to keep my voice unshaken. I’d seen many sights like this before, but this rocked me. I felt the shakiness in my voice as I continued, ‘Well, was he shot?’ I couldn’t see his wounds, just the pool of blood his body rested in.

‘I don’t think so. We’ll have an autopsy report done, that’ll confirm, but he has multiple wounds,’ the forensic investigator responded.

I just stared, like an amateur at my first crime scene, a detective who didn’t know what he was doing. ‘Okay,’ was all I could say; okay was the *best* I could say. I wanted to be out of there. I backed out like a rookie. The woman looked at me like a boy, a boy at his first crime scene.

Truth be told, I’m neither experienced nor old enough to be handling this on my own anyway. I’m thirty-four years old, single, devoted to

work because it's almost the only human interaction I have. If I'm not at work, I'm at home, watching old superhero films or – not that I would ever admit it – Disney films. And not your new, high-thrilled Disney films; I mean the old school cartoon musicals.

As I exited the mansion, I avoided eye contact with the fellow officers patrolling the streets. A media scrum was developing out the front quickly – a circus of camera flashes, and interviews with neighbours. I always wondered how it happened so quickly. It was under three hours ago since we were told of the gunfire. Two patrol cars were sent over immediately because, to be honest, in a court like this, there is never gunfire. So how did the media know already? *It's crazy how un-secure our radios are*, I thought to myself as I avoided the media and their redundant questions—

'Do you have any leads?'

'Have you made any arrests?'

...*Jesus*, I thought. *A family had just been murdered, in a neighbourhood like this, and you think we have found the culprit already?* It's far beyond naive to believe we knew their answers. But they always asked.

There are four parts of Mansfield. The city – well greened, with buildings no more than thirty stories or so, buildings that were classics, heritage. The Ontario side of town, where the streets are empty, littered with trash and useless furniture – a sight that would resemble Detroit in the early 2000s. Ontario is where most of the crime started and spread from. Then we have the Mifflin side of Mansfield. This is where I live, it's nothing special, hidden on the other side of Charles Mill Lake, about a fifteen-minute drive to the heart of our expiring city.

And lastly: the Little Washington side of Mansfield. This is where the rich lived. The land is notably greater than other properties and the houses are boastfully bigger.

I slid back into my car, grabbing my lukewarm coffee and taking another gulp before driving off. I would often drive from A to B and arrive without having any reminiscence of how I arrived there, like my brain was on autopilot, and this morning was no different. A few gulps of my coffee, a left, a right, a memory or two, and I was at the police station.

With a sudden inkling I sprang up like a meerkat or some rodent under threat, and I put my car in reverse. I knew exactly where I was going. I pulled my car out in an uncommon rush and I drove, this time paying attention to every turn, left, right, left, left, right, right. I radioed on the way for another police car to meet me at my destination. I didn't feel like I was in harm, but after this morning's sightings, I admit now, I wasn't sure what situation I would be met with at the other end. I stared at a photo hanging from my rear vision mirror: a photo of a boy at age sixteen. He has shaggy blonde hair and looks completely different to me; though, when I look at his eyes, I can see myself in them. I glance at this photo often while driving. A reminder of why I got into this field of work. Motivation for the tough days. And today was the worst I'd had on the job thus far.

I pulled up out of the front a nice double-story cottage-type home – a renovated classic. It was leased to her and. From the information we could obtain, she had not lived there long. I walked up to her paved pathway, two officers behind me for precautionary measures. I wasn't sure whether she was dangerous – I had come across many strange and dangerous situations before but this was different, this was a perplexing and sizable case that I could not solve. I could hear the television from inside – a news broadcast. So, I knocked. A woman with dark brown hair and pale skin opened the door and stared at me, her coffee-coloured eyes bloodshot with black bags underneath.

‘Mrs Mitchell?’ I asked.

‘Miss,’ she corrected me, a mistake she’d become sick of amending. ‘Why are you calling me by my last name? It’s Megan.’

I didn’t know what to say. I was trying on a professional attitude. This wasn’t an arrest, but I wanted Megan to be sure of the horrendous case she was now highly involved in.

‘You know my name. Why are you calling me by my last name, Albert?’ Megan teased.

I loathed it when suspects used my first name. ‘Would you mind accompanying us to the police station?’

‘For?’ She questioned timidly.

‘We...’ I paused. *Be more friendly, like you were the other day.* ‘I would like to ask you a few questions.’

‘Is this about Erin?’

I shook my head.

‘Okay. Just let me turn off the kettle.’

The other officers and I followed Megan inside. We had caught her in the middle of her morning ritual. A brewed coffee in a stove-top kettle, an antique she must not have wanted to part ways with. A strange thing I, as she didn’t seem to be the hoarder type, the type to just keep things for the sake of memory. Her home didn’t even have photos with family or friends. It looked like a clean display-home.

On her hallway counter, a stack of white pages towered together. I could still feel the warmth from the fresh print. ‘What’s that?’ I asked.

‘Just a book I’ve been working on.’

‘It finished?’ I asked, acting cool, like a throw-away comment, a conversation starter.

She looked back to the tower of her writings. ‘Yes.’

‘Bring it with you. Give us something to read while we wait.’ I manipulatively thought.

She hesitantly picked up the piling of white papers, handing them to me.

Enigmatic
Written by
Megan Mitchell

‘What’s this about?’ I asked.

‘Read it and find out,’ she muttered in playful temptation, her eyes securing to mine.

I couldn’t figure out why she was seducing me to this manuscript, but it felt somewhat intentional, so, I played along and took the manuscript.

CHAPTER TWO

Enigmatic Manuscript

My name is Megan Mitchell. I am a writer. Well, I want to be a writer. I want that moment – a book launch, flashing lights from the press; I want to stand there and read the words I spent many years writing. Then I want to look up from my novel, still reading my articulate words, because I obviously know them from my heart and I look at everyone, their reactions, their faces. I want the compliments.

‘Miss Mitchell, Enigmatic was so stealthy, so captivating,’ the media would yell. I want them to take my photo, and I want to be proud of my body, my face. All in time – hard work pays off, they say... Bullshit.

I am divorced. The marriage lasted only seventy-four days. Jason Jones sounds made up, I know. A stage name, some would assume, but no. Jason isn’t famous, nor artistic. I married Jason after knowing him for just seven tiny months. I met him on a dating site – the lonely, discreet girl I am signed up to a dating site, that’s how desperate I was. Jason is powerful in every aspect of his life. A life insurance manager, it’s sometimes as if he thinks of himself as god. He decides who lives and who dies.

He was powerful in presence; he’d walk into a room and people would stare. Not in a ‘this man doesn’t belong’ type of way; more like ‘this man is captivating’. Our first date was at an expensive Japanese

restaurant – I’ll never forget it. As we hadn’t spoken much, I hadn’t yet told him I was a vegetarian. I bit into that raw fish and swallowed it with a look of pure disgust on my face.

Being the smart man he is, the next words out of his mouth were, ‘Why didn’t you tell me you didn’t eat meat?’

I, of course, lied, like I do a lot in my life, and said I wasn’t a vegetarian. Within the next minute this man – the man I hardly knew – had the truth seeping from my lips.

That night I realised just how powerful he was, his lips pressed against mine when he invited me back to his apartment for one more drink. The penthouse – and I mean like what you would imagine a penthouse to be in films: the top floor, in the middle of the city, almost wall-to-wall windows, a charming kitchen, oversized lounge area, and then I saw the master bedroom. The king-size bed facing the skyline of Mansfield, which from the ground was nothing special, but from the top of the world, out of the windows, the mountains lit up from the moon, a glorious sight you could spend a whole night observing.

His powerful lips kissed my trembling lips and with that, he threw me against the wall, passionately taking off my delicate dress, which I had planned to return and refund. His head immediately went down to my thighs, and he took off my underwear. I probably don’t need to tell you what happened next. But it was strong, Jason Jones was the power I had been looking for in my powerless life.

I was never this powerless woman. I once was fun, or at least I thought so. My friends from high school would have described me as carefree, intelligent, and spontaneous. But things change. My life changed. When I first decided I wanted to be an author, I began writing my first manuscript, *Untitled*. Now I sit here in a dingy twenty-four-hour-a-day café. I sit here all hours of the night, writing, a murder mystery novel. Something different, but since the divorce, I had nothing but rage through me.

It’s strange how quickly time can pass. You move in, you get

comfortable, you get married. I envisioned being a mother long before I envisioned being a wife. I'm not one for the whole husband-and-wife thing; I never played mother and father as a child, nor did I fantasise about marriage. Yet there I was, married to the most powerful man I knew. I just didn't know how powerful he was. But he made me realise quicker than you could say the word 'divorce'.

Jason wanted to be a father. I had an accident that left me with melted scars on my belly and thighs and everything in-between. Internally, the damage from the accident left me infertile. So, the man with the power to have everything wanted to leave me, and with that power, he took everything with him. Now I live in a small, leased home in Mifflin, Ohio. Alone.

Six years ago – a year or so after we divorced – Jason died. Or at least that's what I heard. I thought, *how ironic, just when he got everything he wanted, he lost it all*. Well, he didn't lose it; they lost him. By 'they' I mean his new, younger, fertile girl and their newborn. It wasn't until Jason died that I felt the actual loss. When he was alive, although not with me, I still held on to the fantasy that one day I could become the woman he wanted, and our love would reawaken, and we would live happily ever after. I convinced myself some days that I would find a good-paying job, I would work hard, I would be able to afford IVF and I would have a child with him. Or perhaps he would see how hard I was working and we would spark up our relationship again and adopt a child together. How fucked up is that? Even when this man had left me for another woman, I still wanted him back in my life. I still thought about him daily. I wanted to change my life for that self-obsessed prick. When he passed away, I was broken-hearted; I felt the pain because then and only then did I accept the fact that we were never ever going to have a family together.

I don't know what's more fucked up: the fact that I wanted to change my life for a man who couldn't love me as I was, or that it took him dying for me to realise I was better off without him. I'll let you decide.

So where does this particular story actually start for me? I guess, rather than tell you every bit of my life, I should start when things changed dramatically.

I had recently finished my manuscript, *Untitled*. My best and only friend, Erin, had arranged a meeting with one of the biggest publishing companies in the country – a meeting that typically would only be offered to renowned authors. Erin worked for this publishing company I had done some work experience for almost five years ago. She had no problems reminding me she was putting her job on the line for me for creating this interview.

It was the day of our meeting. I tied my hair back into a ponytail. I dripped a few eyedrops in my eyes, sunken from a sleepless night before, the sting iterating them further. I headed downstairs to make my morning coffee – my usual morning routine. Erin arrived with an all too common honk of the horn in the driveway and I rushed out, finishing getting ready as I entered her cluttered car. Her two sons, Cole and Dean, were in the back seats, menacing each other, and her youngest child – a daughter, Michelle – was in the middle of the two. A full car, a family car, the same life I was destined to have until my accident. Well, almost the same life. Erin was also divorced, whereas I had imagined, if I did have the chance to make a family, I would still have a man in my life – I would have a father for them.

We dropped the boys off at school and continued on our way.

Like I was one of her children, Erin lectured me about how these editors work. ‘Sometimes there are certain narratives they want to change.’

I thought of course they’d want to change the narrative – they would modify it to a point where my story would not be *my* story anymore. I tried not to take offense, but to have someone tell me my book may not be as perfect as I envisioned was deeply hurtful. But I couldn’t express my true emotion to Erin – after all, I wouldn’t have this interview if it wasn’t for her. She was putting her job on the line for me.

An hour drive and we had arrived in Columbus. The city was vastly different from Mansfield. The buildings looked like they belonged to a collective city, the streets busy. It reminded me of stock footage – something a movie would use with an upbeat song played over the top of it; slap a bright-coloured title card on as the camera swept across the city, it would be the perfect opening. But then again, what movies are based in Columbus? The answer to that is none you've ever seen. I'd make a bet with you that could not name a film without searching the internet.

The skyline was more optimistic and picturesquely vivid than Mansfield really was. I looked up and suddenly everything felt like it was slow motion; my legs felt like they weren't moving, but I was getting closer and closer to the building. The lift up made me dizzy, to the point where I asked for water before introducing myself. Here I am, Mrs Megan Nobody, talking with one of the most famous publishers in the country and instead of introducing myself, I say, 'I need a glass of water'. Lucky for me, this man was a gentleman. He showed me to the board room and had a glass of cold water waiting for me. It soon became a painful reality why he was being so polite.

'We're sorry, Mrs Mitchell. This just isn't the genre we publish here.' The generic answer everyone tells me. My first thought: why have me come all the way down to Columbus to tell me that? My second thought: just send me a fucking email. My third thought: calm the down, Megan, calm, the hell down.

One of the Chief Publishers of the publishing firm sat across from me with slick hair and a stone cold look on his face. The other Chief Publisher Harry moved his chair closer to me. He looked at me and I felt drawn to him immediately. I took a deep breath through my nose and calmed down, my muscles loosened whilst I was staring into his bright blue eyes. He had salt and pepper hair – a look that suited him well. However, he didn't seem old enough to have grey hair; one would be surprised to learn he was in his fifties. Harry was dressed in a custom-made suit that was fitted firmly around his in-shape body.

Harry is what the young kids would call a ‘DILF’. For all you baby boomers who missed this phrase from the 90s, ‘DILF’ stands for ‘Daddy I’d Love to Fuck’.

I wasn’t attracted to him, though, just his eyes.

‘It’s villainous and—’ Harry said before he was rudely interrupted by his skeleton-looking colleague.

‘—Rancorous,’ the greasy-haired, prudent partner incautiously said. My mouth dropped; I lost my temper.

‘Why bring me down here, then? Why are we even having this interview? Send an email next time!’ I made my way out of the office in a contained rage. Erin followed after me, trying to calm my wrath, explaining that they would like *her* to read it. They’d like *her* to find a narrative to change. The words she stressed in the car on the trip to Columbus were a reality like Erin knew what the outcome would be all along. I worked for five years, writing the *Untitled* manuscript, and because it has an abrupt ending it was rancorous? Damn, right it was. Some of the best novels are; Steven King relies on the shock factor – not that I would compare my writing to horror like Steven King, but I loved the shock factor. Plus, it was personal – I’d spent a huge chunk of my life writing this, and for what?

I couldn’t tell if I was disappointed in myself or my manuscript. Every word meant so much to me. Will anyone ever get to read this story? Will anyone ever feel the emotion I poured into it? And then I thought, *now I have to go to yoga*. Fuck my life, I believe the youngsters say.

Erin is seven months pregnant. A baby boy. She is a health freak, and I mean *freak!* Exclamation mark and all. Whenever you enter her home, she’ll blend a smoothie on arrival – a thick green drink that looks like the Kermit the Frog’s blood. She’ll question me about my diet and tell me off for drinking too much caffeine and too little water. So, I decided to tag along to her weekly yoga class, to keep her happy and also to keep a watchful eye on her. She was pregnant, and if there were to be an accident, I’d want to be there to help. Her husband

couldn't give two shits, I was willing to sacrifice torturing my body with yoga, just to bring some support to her life. She was my best friend – my only friend – after all. As angry as I was at the time, it wasn't completely directed at her.

A friend once told me that the true measure of friendship is not the way you feel about someone, it's the way they make you feel about yourself. Erin was admirably good at that. I could hear her chatter about how we will get the *Untitled* manuscript published, and how exactly we would achieve it, but the context of how we would accomplish that was a mystery to me. I was only thinking about one thing: the failure.

At yoga, my inexperience was noticeable in front of the entire class. I looked ridiculous, but Erin helped me with the poses, and I huffed and puffed my unfit body through the session. Erin helped a lot of people; it was halfway through the session that I realised she was in fact the trainer. I was a little shocked because she'd never mentioned it to me.

When the time was up, a few of the women walked up and thanked her. Then someone obviously familiar with her approached her.

'Erin, hi,' the woman said to Erin, who looked shocked to see.

'Hi. I didn't even know you were here.' Erin was stunned.

'I've been coming here for years; I just had a few weeks off because work has been overbearing.'

An awkward silence followed when Erin didn't know what to say.

The woman broke the silence. 'But we'd had this present for you and Daniel sitting in the car for months. When I saw you come in, I ran out and grabbed the present.' The woman lifted up a bright and glittery gift bag for Erin to take.

Erin pulled out a beautiful expensive blanket.

'That's for you and the bub.'

Then she pulled out a clear bottle filled with a clear liquid.

'That's for Daniel.' An awkward silence followed when Erin didn't know what to say. Finally, the two women broke their quiet.

'What is it?'

‘It’s gin. We made our own! It’s not the best, but it has a very big kick!’ she gloated.

This woman obviously had no idea about Erin and Daniel’s separation. I’d never seen her – not in the years I’ve been friends with Erin. Erin thanked her politely for her gift and then ended the conversation “Well, I need to get my friend Megan home” Erin said taking me by the arm, using me as a good excuse to get out of their awkward conversation.

Erin put her blanket and bottle of booze in her handbag and then started to walk around, picking up the weights and left-over mats, putting them away in the correct spot. All the while, I just wanted to leave.

Walking to the car I noticed how quiet the streets were. I could see my breath in the cold mid-spring night air. I guess, being that cold, everyone was home early. It got dark so early, so it felt like nine at night, but it was only seven thirteen. I remember the exact time because I had to tell the police. Yes, the police – so I guess you know where this is headed.

We arrived at my car, and I unlocked it. Erin opened her door, chucking in the gift from her old friend. Just as I opened my door it slammed shut. Standing next to me was a man – a skinny, unwell man, half-clothed, a thick beanie on his pale head.

‘Your purse – give it to me,’ he demanded.

Erin was in shock, she kneeled and hid behind the passenger car door. I gave the sickly man my bag and he searched through it, taking my phone, opening my wallet. To his surprise it was empty. He grabbed the credit cards and headed to Erin. I screamed for him to leave her alone, I forced out a high-pitch scream, hoping someone would hear – someone from inside the gym, someone from a nearby house. I looked

around at the still-empty streets. I went to yell again, but before the words came out of my mouth, he had her against the car. A rusted, dried-blood-covered knife pointed at her throat. His grimy hands around her throat, his arm twitching, shaking, pulsating for a hit of his preferred drug.

‘Your purse,’ he ordered. ‘Now.’

Erin passed him her bag. He scrummaged through it, pulling out a few dollar bills and her gym clothes, a towel, and a water bottle.

‘I need some fucking money!’ the twitcher screamed whilst scratching his face.

Erin, being a quick thinker, opened her mouth for the first time since seeing him, ‘I have some in the car. Let me get it.’ She opened the door, looking at me strangely. Have you ever had a close friend where you look at each other and know exactly what one another is thinking? Well, this was that look. I knew Erin wanted to slip into the car and lock the doors. So, I opened my door, but the twitcher grabbed Erin out right away. He held her at the open door. I opened my door and the twitcher grabbed Erin out. He held her at the open door.

‘We don’t have any money,’ I pleaded. ‘Go use my cards. I’m sorry, I have nothing else.’ My warm tears streamed down my cold face – tears not just of fear but of confusion. Once again in my life, I was not in control. Like Jason Jones had the power, but this time it was a threatening junkie. From a white, unkempt car stumbled a girl, her legs bare and weak, her body covered in a small skimpy dress.

‘Let’s just go, we’ll get the cash somewhere else,’ the pale blonde beckoned.

But the twitcher wanted the money now. I call him the twitcher because that’s what he did, his most noticeable trait. Besides his white albino-like skin. He scratched his face obsessively, contemplating what to do next. I could see the confusion in his face, he was desperate.

The heroin-hazed girl tumbled her way back towards the car. She forced the words, ‘Let’s go,’ through her gaunt and youthful face

‘Get back in the car,’ he ordered the girl.

Then, the last words I heard come out of his opioid-affected mouth. ‘You’re both fucking useless.’ And he stabbed the rusty, dry-blood-stained knife into Erin, right into her pregnant belly.

I didn’t know what to do.

The twitcher pulled out the knife, shocking himself at the trauma he had just done. He closed the car door, and he picked up Erin’s bag, then hurried around and picked up mine. Throwing the bags to the blonde drugged girl, he hurried over, got into the car and fled the scene. Leaving me, on my knees, holding Erin, her blood warming my hands. A grotesque calm. I had Erin supported in my arms in pain. Cradled like I always wished I could cradle my own baby. I sat on the wet ground, stroking her head, trying to convince her everything will be okay, but looking down at the trickles of blood from her thighs, I knew it wouldn’t be fine, it wouldn’t be okay.

What was only a minimal amount of time felt like an eternity. And then they arrived. Blue and red lights hollowed my vision. From out of the light in a majestic and mesmerising way walked in the police and paramedics as they helped Erin to the Ambulance.

Stepping out of a police car was a woman who would soon be trusted into my life. She looked over to Erin, and that’s when I got a clear picture of the woman. She was pretty, for an older woman with minimal make-up. She was thin – I noticed because she had her sleeves rolled up, a large takeaway coffee cup in her hand, the steam pouring off it. The scent of it almost relaxed me.

The woman who would become a vital part of my life, put her hand out to introduce herself.

‘Hi, I’m Detective Lori Fishburn. Do you mind if I ask a few questions?’