On March 27, 2013, I left my college office to head to Starbucks for a meeting that filled me with dread. I had prepared to sit down with the family of a high school friend, Michelle Jackson, who had been brutally raped and murdered on her way to school almost thirty years ago. I had often wondered what became of Michelle’s devastated mother, Carlotta, whom I had not seen since Michelle’s funeral in 1984. What caused me such anxiety was the fact that even though twenty-nine years had passed since my friend’s murder, the pain was still raw and real to her family, and this was evident in the phone call I shared with Carlotta two nights before we met. Several weeks before our meeting at Starbucks, I discussed with students in my criminology course that I was in the process of writing a book about the role of race in media coverage of female homicide victims. During this discussion, I mentioned the murder of Michelle Jackson. One of my female students looked perplexed and abruptly left the room as I described some of the details of the homicide.

On the cold and snowy morning of January 24, 1984, my friend Michelle Kimberly Jackson, a sixteen-year-old student at Murray-Wright High School in Detroit, rose from her bed and began to get ready for school. Packing her book bag with texts and homework completed the night before, she said good-bye to her cousin Jodie Kenney and made her way to the bus.
stop near the corner of Fenkell and Wildemere on the city’s west side. It was approximately 6:45 A.M. during final exams week. Michelle, an honor student, wanted to be on time. She was an attractive and popular student who had recently moved in with her aunt to be closer to our high school and avoid the inconvenience of multiple bus rides to get to school. A neighbor on her way to work observed Michelle, a lone would-be passenger, in the dark and frigid dawn waiting at the bus stop at 7:05 A.M. Other than the killer, she was the last person to see Michelle alive.

A cloud of terror and anxiety hung in the air in Detroit that winter as a number of female students had been sexually assaulted en route to and from school. Approximately forty-seven girls had been raped between September 1983 and February 1984. When the otherwise prompt and astute junior was not seen in class that day by her teachers and friends, and subsequently did not return home from school, Michelle’s mother and cousin began to panic. Carlotta was quoted in the press as saying, “She just never did that . . . she always came home. When she didn’t (come home) . . . I just knew something was wrong.” Family members made phone calls to Michelle’s closest friends; we also became worried as each of us responded that we had not seen her that day either. By 9 P.M., the family filed a missing person’s report with the Detroit police department. Early the next day, family members formed a search party and set out to find her. Retracing Michelle’s steps in going from her home to the bus stop, Jodie Kenney and a male cousin separated from the group and walked in another direction, a short distance from the bus stop. They noticed a dilapidated garage located behind a row of abandoned buildings (and ironically only one block from Kenney’s home), and instinctively decided to enter the structure. Lying in a corner of the garbage-strewn garage floor was Michelle’s abused and lifeless body. The killer had strangled her with a pair of long johns she was wearing that morning and left her body nude from the waist down. She had been sexually assaulted, and as a final act of brutality, a dirty green soda bottle had been viciously shoved into her rectum.

The violent and horrific nature of Michelle’s death was not lost on me. She was one of my sister’s closest friends at Murray-Wright High School, and my sisters and I rode the bus home with her almost daily after school. Even after
so many years, I can still recall a shy and easily smiling girl with an enviable slender yet curvy figure and a mischievous giggle when something amused her. Her death struck a chord of fear and deep sadness within all of us who knew and loved her. It was my first realization that the capacity for human beings to inflict savagery on other human beings knows no bottom.

At the conclusion of my telling the class Michelle’s story, the student returned to the classroom and sat silently for the duration of my lecture, and then tentatively approached me at the end of class to inform me that she knew Michelle’s family. A tremendous feeling of incredulity washed over me as I thought about the many times I longed to find out how her mother had fared over the years. I told the student that I had wanted to speak with Michelle’s mother to let her know that I was writing a book that would feature her daughter in the prologue; I did not want her blindsided by the information. I gave the student my contact information and was pleased when several weeks later, Carlotta agreed to speak with me and gave my student her number.

Nevertheless, I waited several days before I phoned Carlotta; I was at a loss as to how I would begin the conversation. I didn’t want to compound her grief by revisiting the horror of Michelle’s death. But there was also a deeply personal reason why I was less than sanguine to sit down with Michelle’s mom. Guilt. Guilt that I wasn’t the one snatched from a cold wintry bus stop that early January morning. Guilt that I wasn’t the one who was viciously sexually violated and left in a lifeless heap on the filthy floor of a rotting and abandoned building. That guilt plagued all of Michelle’s friends in the winter of 1984, and as this feeling came and went, guilt could not be avoided as our graduating class crossed the stage to receive our diplomas in June of that year. I was relieved that Carlotta was gracious and more than willing to speak with me. She notified me that she would come with Jodie and a few other relatives since they had been her support system over the years and that it would be difficult to discuss Michelle—despite all the years that had passed. A short time after we ended our conversation, my phone rang again, and it was Jodie Kenney. She told me that she would be accompanying Carlotta to our meeting and requested that I communicate directly with her (Jodie) if I needed additional information. “Carlotta does
not do well after talking about Michelle. She wants to talk to you, but she will be in bed for three days afterwards. . . . The grief can get unbearable,” Jodie explained. My heart sank at that revelation. I could only imagine the number of nights she would lie awake thinking about the suffering and terror her only daughter experienced that fateful morning.

When I arrived early at the coffeehouse that cold and gray afternoon, a smiling man who appeared to be in his late thirties greeted me. He asked if I was there to meet with Carlotta Jackson. He then took me to a table where she sat with another relative, nervously awaiting my arrival. Though she smiled at me warmly, her face wore the familiar mask of grief. My mother wore the same expression after my sister Suane (a year younger than I and one of Michelle’s closest friends at Murray-Wright) suddenly died from a pulmonary embolism following a surgical procedure in 2007. “Nothing worse than losing a child,” my mother said through tears almost daily since my sister’s death.

Carlotta and I greeted each other with a hug, and she informed me that Jodie Kenney (Michelle’s cousin and the unfortunate discoverer of her body) was running late to the meeting. She arrived minutes later and took a seat beside me, greeting me also with a warm embrace. As I began to tell them about the book I was in the process of writing, Jodie interrupted me and began to weep openly. She apologized and said, “I’m sorry . . . but when I look at you I can’t help but wonder what Michelle would be like . . . would look like at your age.” I was forty-seven years old at the time, and I, too, wondered about the very the same thing. It was painfully obvious that no matter how many years had transpired between now and Michelle’s death nearly thirty years ago, there was no closure for this family. How many times had Jodie and Carlotta looked at women in their forties and wondered the same thing Jodie confessed to me? Who would Michelle be today? Would she have become a lawyer? A doctor? Or perhaps chosen academia as I had? Would she be married? How many children would she have borne? The inquiry was tragic.

There were a number of profoundly disturbing details that emerged from our discussion that were unknown to me, and I was deeply disturbed by them. Carlotta and Jodie told me that the police were reluctant to file a
missing person’s report on Michelle, suggesting that she was a runaway. The family strongly protested this assertion and angrily stressed that Michelle was an honor student. They insisted that her disappearance was completely contrary to her character. At one point, in frustration, one officer snapped at Carlotta that if she wasn’t satisfied with their response, she and her family could “look for her yourself!” Horrifically, they did just that and found her raped and strangled body in an abandoned garage. That same officer, with an ashamed and contrite expression, had to drive an emotionally shattered Carlotta Jackson home from the crime scene.

Unfortunately, to date, Michelle’s murder remains unsolved. Police arrested and a jury convicted a suspect named Eddie Joe Lloyd for Michelle’s rape and murder. However, seventeen years later, the Innocence Project, through DNA testing, exonerated Lloyd of the charges, and he was freed from prison. It was determined the Detroit police homicide investigators coerced a confession from Lloyd, a man suffering from schizophrenia who developed an interest in the case from reading newspaper articles on the homicide.4

Despite the sadness of the occasion, our conversation that day renewed hope in Michelle’s family that this book could possibly reopen the investigation into her death and possibly lead to finding her killer. To say that that Michelle’s family was desperate for any help they could get solving her murder would be a gross understatement. The release of Eddie Joe Lloyd from prison seemed to revictimize the family as it completely destroyed their trust in law enforcement. Worse, it made them feel as though Michelle’s life had no value and that her death was of no consequence. In short, Michelle was one of many invisible victims—African American women who have been slain and are ignored by both the media and law enforcement. These cases often go unsolved, leaving the victims’ loved ones in a perpetual state of shock, grief, and anguish.

Without question, my friend’s brutal rape and murder is one of many tragic stories of violence perpetrated against women every day in this country. Crimes of this nature evoke fear, outrage, disgust, and, oftentimes, a demand for swift and severe punishment for the perpetrator. However, the public’s reaction to violent crimes against women is contingent upon media
coverage, and without it, societal pressure on law enforcement to solve these crimes is minimal at most or nonexistent at worst. Most disturbingly, the public’s reaction to violent crimes against women is also predicated upon society’s view of the victim, or specifically whether the victim is seen as deserving of sympathy and outrage or not.

Even at eighteen years of age, I was taken aback at the lack of outcry from the community, press, and law enforcement for justice in Michelle’s brutal murder. The press documented that at that time the citizens of Detroit were up in arms about the continual rapes of teens en route to school and that one of these rapes eventually culminated in a vicious homicide, yet they provided little attention to Michelle as a victim. It was as though she was simply an appendage to an increasing number of schoolgirl rape victims who served as an unfortunate indication that these unspeakable crimes had now escalated to murder. The scant coverage of her death failed miserably at portraying a sweet and academically ambitious young woman who is forever lost to her family and friends.

The purpose of this book is to examine the bias in the mainstream media’s reporting of homicides of female victims of color, and law enforcement’s culpability in its own failure at times to thoroughly and aggressively investigate these deaths. A further goal for this book is to ignite a discussion of one of the most insidious ways that this form of discrimination harms African Americans—by obscuring the stories of victims whose voices have been forever silenced by murder. In doing so, the media devalues these victims (like Michelle), ignores their humanity, and minimizes how they (as much as white female victims) are irreplaceable in the lives of the people who loved them. This book will attempt to speak for them.