



with TIM RUTTEN

Johnnie L. Cochran Jr.

JOURNEY TO JUSTICE

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JOHNNIE L. COCHRAN, JR.

WITH TIM RUTTEN



ONE WORLD

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**JOURNEY TO  
JUSTICE**

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**M**y story is first of all the story of an American family. I dedicate this book to my beloved, late mother, Hattie B. Cochran; to my wise and supportive father, Johnnie L. Cochran, Sr.; to my dear wife, Dale Mason Cochran; and to my wonderful children, Melodie, Tiffany, and Jonathan, who are our family's hope and treasure.

I dedicate this book as well to all those clients who have paid me the compliment of trusting me with the defense of their constitutional rights. As my parents gave me life, so those clients have given me purpose. I have done what I can to keep faith with them all.

The differences between black folk and white folk are not blood or color, and the ties that bind us are deeper than those that separate us. The common road of hope which we all have traveled has brought us into a stronger kinship than any words, laws, or legal claims.

—*12 Million Black Voices*, Richard Wright

We all came here on different ships but we are all in the same boat together now.

—Jesse Jackson

Let's not run and hide, let's acknowledge the divide. Let's work together to make things better.

—*Bridging the Divide*, Johnnie L. Cochran, Jr., 1995

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## INTRODUCTION

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**I**T WAS A SWELTERING DAY IN EARLY SEPTEMBER 1972. I was thirty-four years old; I had tried and won ten murder cases in a row; I had my confidence: I was on a roll.

Then I agreed to defend Geronimo Pratt. Geronimo was innocent. We were friends. I never had cared about a client as deeply as I did him. And now I was on my way to visit Pratt in the prison where the state of California intended to keep him for the rest of his life.

What happened? What went wrong?

As I was driving north out of San Francisco on that sweltering day, Pratt's trial was still fresh in my mind. As I headed for San Quentin, I replayed it over and over in my head. Most of all, I recalled the moment less than two months before when Judge Kathleen Parker's bailiff had intoned the familiar "All rise" and we stood to hear the jury's verdict.

Pratt's trial on charges of murder, robbery, and aggravated assault had been hard fought but no more difficult than many others I had won over the years. Still, I was inordinately tense as

Judge Parker scanned the verdicts, then handed them to her clerk to be read. From the start, an indescribable undercurrent had surged beneath the surface of the Pratt case. Like an underground river, dark and hidden, it had silently eaten away at the very foundations of my confidence in the integrity of the criminal justice system.

My client, the leader of the Black Panther Party's Los Angeles office, had insisted from the start that his case "was about something else. They're out to get me, Cochran," he said over and over, "and they're going to do whatever they have to do." But I was an experienced attorney. I dealt in facts, not conspiratorial fantasies. With all they had on their minds in those turbulent years, it seemed somehow improbable to me that federal, state, and local authorities would plot secretly together to persecute a single Vietnam veteran whose worst fault was a taste for hyperbolic revolutionary jargon.

But as Geronimo and I stood shoulder to shoulder to hear his fate pronounced, why was my stomach heaving?

"The defendant will face the jury," Judge Parker instructed, and Geronimo and I turned as if in harness. I scanned the jurors' faces. They did not return my gaze.

"We the jury in the above action find the defendant . . ."

I had done my best. But suddenly—for perhaps the first time—I wondered if it really had been enough.

". . . guilty, as charged, of the crime of murder."

A few weeks later, on August 29, Judge Parker denied without comment my motion for a new trial and sentenced Geronimo Pratt to life in prison. In the days that followed, there were rumors and whispers, glimmers of dark secrets. I had begun to learn things, though not nearly as much as I intended to know. One of us, indeed, had been living in a fantasy world. But it wasn't my client.

I had come to San Quentin, in part, to tell Geronimo that. The guard who escorted me to the three-by-five-foot cubicle set aside for visiting lawyers and their clients smiled chillingly as he opened the door. This, he informed me, was the very room in which George Jackson had been handed a gun by his lawyer shortly before his fatal escape attempt. Pratt was in solitary confinement, where he would remain for the next eight years, and they brought him to me chained hand and foot. He wore a white jumpsuit with a huge black X stenciled on its back.

"Cochran," he said matter-of-factly, "this thing on my back is a target. When I walk back across that yard, if I fall down they will shoot and kill me."

We sat across from each other at a wooden table, a metal screen between us. We talked for hours without ceasing. Then the walls of that tiny room began to close in on me. I felt suddenly desperate, as if I might be going mad. It was time to go. We rose and put our hands together against the screen.

"Don't forget me, Cochran," he said.

"I won't," I promised.

And I never have. Driving back toward San Francisco, I approached the Golden Gate Bridge, and, all at once, its storied beauty seemed somehow forbidding and tragic, part of another world in which people lived happily and unburdened. If I was to keep my promise to Geronimo Pratt, if I was to complete this journey to justice on which I had embarked, I would need more strength than I ever had imagined.

I knew just where to find it. As I have so many times in my life, I recalled the words of the Prophet Isaiah: "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

That's the thing about roots. They nourish you, and a man who

has them always knows where he stands. My own roots run through the rich, black earth of my family's love, across the continent and back nearly sixty years to a clapboard house on a red dirt hill in Shreveport, Louisiana, and to the Little Union Baptist Church where I first heard the voices that have been with me ever since. . . .

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## Gifts of the Spirit

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**O**N OCTOBER 2, 1937, IN SHREVEPORT'S CHARITY HOSPITAL, my mother—Hattie B. Cochran—delivered me into a world where your food was always fried and everyone you knew was black and a Baptist. I was named for my father, Johnnie L. Cochran, Sr., and, over the next three years, my mother bore him two daughters, Pearl and Martha Jean, whom we've always called "Jean."

We children didn't know it, but we were poor. The Great Depression still had its hands around the throats of Louisiana's working folk, and Jim Crow's iron heel remained firmly planted on the necks of black men and women throughout the South. But the particular world my earnest and enterprising parents built for us was as secure as any palace, so filled with warmth and affection that, looking back through the years, what I recall is its bounty.

But most of all I remember the Sundays. Now, some will insist that after nearly six decades, a man's memory grows selective; I prefer to think that it retains essential truths. So I can say with some confidence that during my childhood in Shreveport, the sun always shone on Sunday and that, whatever the season, it was hot.

When my sisters and I were small, we played in the yard but were careful not to disturb the vegetable garden my mother tended in a vacant lot beside our single-story, white clapboard house. The three-bedroom dwelling, with its covered front porch, was located in Shreveport's Lakeside section, a bit more than a block from the Little Union Baptist Church.

Our Sunday started early. It was a day of rest from work, but not from activity—at least not in the Cochran house, which Jesus may have had in mind when he told his disciples that “the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.”

My parents, my sisters, and I shared our rented home with my father's mother, Hannah Cochran—whom we all called “Big Auntie”—and my father's cousin, Arthur Lee, along with his widowed mother, Aunt Easter, whose nourishing hugs, kisses, and words of encouragement were nearly as sustaining as my mother's marvelous cooking.

We always arrived early for church, which began at 11 A.M. Between rising and then, there were eight baths to get and your Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes to don—suits and ties for the men, dresses, hats, and heels for the women, short pants and a white shirt and dark tie for me. No less important, there was one of my mother's unforgettable breakfasts to enjoy.

Even though there were two other women in the house, my mother did most of the cooking. By the time the rest of us sat down to breakfast, she had already started the greens and other slow-cooked dishes destined for Sunday dinner. In the meantime, the breakfast table was groaning with grits, eggs, and



bacon, sausage, or ham. Best of all were the biscuits she made each day from scratch. I can still taste them, swimming in real butter and crowned with fresh fruit preserves, which had been put up by my maternal grandmother, who lived in the country not far away. All of it was washed down with tall glasses of milk—whole milk. Like so many women educated in an era when malnutrition was still widespread in the South, my mother had a respect for calcium that bordered on reverence. She also had a country girl's shrewd appreciation for traditional remedies and periodically would serve my sisters and me small helpings of dirt from her garden. Multivitamins were unheard of in my mother's world, but generations of experience had taught rural Southern women who'd never heard of the periodic table of the elements that the red earth nourishing their crops was rich in trace minerals, which would help their children flourish. Our mother was proud of the fact that her family ate a balanced diet, and if the meals she fed us were partly responsible for my later struggle with high cholesterol, they also get the credit for the strong teeth my sisters and I still enjoy.

But man, as the Scriptures tell us, does not live by bread—nor even biscuits—alone. And the bright center of our Sundays was down the block in the sanctuary of the Little Union Baptist Church, where my grandmother, Big Auntie, who was also known as “Sugar,” sang in the choir and my father, despite his youth, was already a deacon. We always walked to services as a family, and on the way we would meet friends and exchange hellos. Like our house, the church was a clapboard building, white and set back from the street. Inside were a double row of pews and, at the front, the pulpit behind which the white-robed choir stood on risers. There were uniformed ushers, and you always waited for them to seat you. It was hot inside, but the air was always in motion, propelled this way and that by dozens of ladies vainly attempting to cool themselves with the paper fans