

PICKING COTTON

OUR MEMOIR OF INJUSTICE AND REDEMPTION

JENNIFER THOMPSON-
CANNINO AND RONALD
COTTON WITH ERIN TORNEO



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Note to the Reader

The names and identifying details of some individuals in this book have been changed. For information regarding sources, please see the notes at the end of the book.

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*For all those whose voices may never be heard—
the victims—on both sides of wrongful convictions*

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September 200

RONALD COTTON stands a few rows behind Jennifer Thompson-Cannino, watching as she cranes her head through the crowd, looking for him among the faces of the parents who have come out to watch their children play soccer. All of the fields at Northeast Park in Gibsonville, North Carolina, are occupied on this bright autumn afternoon: It's tournament day, with a parking lot crammed full of yellow school buses, SUVs, and station wagons to prove it.

"Where are you?" she says into her cell phone, unable to find him.

"I'm right here," Ron says, enjoying the joke. Then he reaches out and touches Jennifer's arm, causing her to turn and jump.

"It's so good to see you," she says, laughing and moving close to embrace him. "You'd think I would've spotted you!" Wearing a blue baseball hat, Ron at six foot four towers over her. He's got to lean *way* down to hug Jennifer, a tiny blonde with bobbed hair. The sun catches the sterling medallion he always wears around his neck: an eagle in flight.

Ron immediately gets into the game. "C'mon! Don't let 'em take that ball!" he shouts, clapping his hands.

Beside him, Raven, his nine-year-old daughter in neat braids he helped do that morning, shoots him a look. "Daddy!"

"What? Am I embarrassing you?" She nods, which only makes Ron yell louder. "Let's go!"

He is cheering on Jennifer's sixteen-year-old daughter, Brittany, who plays center-midfield, the link between offense and defense. Her brown ponytail bopping behind her, she keeps her cleats close to the ball, switch-backing across the field to try to keep it away from the other side until she's got a clear path to pass it to her fellow players. When she sees her opening, Brittany makes a strong, sure kick and sends the ball to her teammate, who takes off for the goal. The crowd yells for the black and white ball to make it into the net as if nothing could matter more.

The Reds, Brittany's team, win the first game of the tournament, and then they break for lunch. Brittany, spotting Ron and Raven with her mom, jogs over and hugs them both, happy they are there. The four of them head over with the other parents to the park's pavilion. With his Burger King bags picked up from the drive-in, Ron isn't part of the usual soccer parent crowd: moms like Jennifer who unpack neatly prepared sandwiches and snacks from Tupperware and coolers. After the kids eat, Brittany heads off to the grass to show Raven how to kick straight and dribble, while Jennifer and Ron catch up. One nosy mom can't resist and comes over to say hello.

"Jennifer, Brittany was just great today!" she says. "Too bad your husband missed it. Where is he?"

"He's with my son, doing 'guy stuff,' but they should be here any minute," says Jennifer.

The mother's eyes dart over to Ron and back to Jennifer. She can't figure it out. "So how do y' know each other?" the mom says, motioning to Ron.

Jennifer and Ron look at each other, smiling. They let the moment settle between them, hanging in the air like the sweet green smell of freshly cut grass, ready for hordes of high school girls to trample it.

"We go way back," Ron says, in his characteristic way of understating things.

What they don't say is that twenty-two years ago, Jennifer sat in a jailhouse just five miles down the interstate, looked at seven black men standing in front of her, and picked Ronald Cotton as the man who had brutally raped her eleven days before.

Conquered they can never be
whose spirits and whose souls are free.

—*Inscription on the Confederate Soldier statue
outside the Alamance County Courthouse
where Ronald Cotton was convicted*

Jennifer

CHAPTER 1

I USED TO WALK three miles to campus and back every day from my apartment in Burlington. There weren't any sidewalks on West Front Street, so during the summer I hugged the edge of the road, trying to stay in the patches of shade when the magnolia trees provided them. I didn't know many people in my neighborhood, although I passed their houses and proud lawns every day. I don't know if I ever even noticed the brick home with white trim just beyond my apartment complex, but on the night that I ran through the damp grass, wearing only a blanket, it was that door I pounded on.

On my way to school, my head was always buried in index cards. I had stacks and stacks of them—careful notes all hole punched and ring bound—a different ring for every class. Just across from campus was a Hardee's, where I'd stop and get a coffee, then sit outside and keep studying. I didn't look over my shoulder or pay too much attention. My focus was on what lay ahead: I was going to graduate in the fall with a perfect 4.0, and my boyfriend, Paul, and I were talking about getting married. He was in his first year of business school at UNC–Chapel Hill. That's all my life was really about: college and my boyfriend. I was twenty-two years old and those were the kind of crystal-clear pictures I carried in my mind.

One night coming home in the dark—it must have been the beginning of July—I noticed a small orange glow as I was walking up to my door. It was just a pinprick of light cutting through the branches. The dry burn caught in the back of my throat. In the tree across from my bedroom window, someone was smoking a cigarette. I couldn't see who it was, but someone was there. I told myself it must be a kid—someone who had climbed up the tree to sneak a smoke. I gave it no further thought.

But that's the picture that flashed in my mind afterward, a snapshot uncovered by my brain as it was reeling for answers to what happened later that month—July 1984.

Burlington, North Carolina, is like most college towns: It swells during the school year with kids from Elon College, and contracts during the summer, when many of them return to their hometowns, to their parents, to the summer jobs they've had since they were in high school. I'd decided to stay that summer because I was taking classes, and because Paul was from Burlington, and would be home for

the summer break from his classes in Chapel Hill. His parents ran a barbecue place in downtown, or what was left of it. Already the little mom-and-pop stores were emptying out or moving closer to the newly built mall near Huffman Mill Road, right off of I-40. But people still came to J.J.'s BBQ no matter what. They came for the vinegared pork and sweet tea that were as much a part of the Burlington summer as the humidity.

Most days I taught aerobics at Spa Lady, and on Saturdays, when I finished teaching, I would stop to lift some weights and put in a few hours at the sales desk. That Saturday was no different. When I got off, Paul and I spent the afternoon together, browsing at a shopping mall and eating lunch nearby until the heat finally got to us. We ended up back at my apartment, napping in the comfort of the air conditioning. In the early evening, it cooled off enough for us to play tennis at the Alamance County Country Club, where he and his family were members. We were famished when we finished our showers, so we headed over to China Inn Restaurant—a favorite of ours. It was one of those all-you-can-eat deals, and I loaded up on fried rice, spring rolls, and refill after refill of sweet iced tea. I'm sure all the MSG had something to do with it—by the time we got to his friend's party, a fierce headache was blooming behind my eyes. We didn't stay very long.

Back at my apartment we turned up the A/C unit in the den full blast. Paul came into my room, carrying a glass of water and some aspirin. I fell asleep to his rubbing my back. The police report would later indicate that he slipped out around 11:00 P.M., taking care not to wake me.

Around 3:00 A.M., something pulled me from sleep, the sound of feet shuffling. At the twilight edge of consciousness, I searched the dim borders between sleep and wakefulness. Was it a noise from my dream? A nightmare? Or something outside my head? All I heard was the thrum and rattle of the air conditioner against the metal frame of the window. My weighted eyelids closed and sank me right back into sleep.

Something grazed my arm. I opened my eyes and felt my heart hammering through my chest. Everything was still and quiet, save for the percussion of blood in my ears, the rush of my breath. My body was terrified although my mind hadn't caught up yet. I struggled to focus my eyes in the fuzzy dark of my room. Instinctively, I pulled the sheets up around my neck. I began to make out the contours of my white dresser, my Smurfette doll, the pale blue and peach knickknacks my mom and I had cheerily decorated the apartment with when I'd moved in the previous fall. By the side of my bed as I made out an unfamiliar roundness, a stab of pure panic hit my gut. It was the top of someone's head. Somebody was crouching by my right side.

"Who is that? Who's there?" I said, allowing myself to think it must be Paul, or someone playing a stupid joke.

A man sprang up and was on me in seconds. I heard myself scream. Something cold, flat, and metallic pressed into my neck. My mind snapped awake.

"Shut up or I'll cut you!" he hissed, clamping a gloved hand down over my mouth. His breath was inches from my own, and it reeked like an old ashtray someone had spilled beer all over.

Can't breathe, I tried to say, my words muffled by the rough material of his glove. He moved his hand away from my mouth and used it to pin my arms back over my head. "Scream and I'll kill you," he said, pushing the point of the blade harder into my neck with his other hand. My first thought was that he was robbing me and that, when I woke up, I'd startled him. I told him he didn't have to hurt me. I would give him my credit cards, my car keys. I would not call the police.

"My wallet is in the den," I offered, my voice strangled and small from the lack of air in my constricted chest. "Take all my money." I squirmed under him but he was too heavy, the lamp on my

night table too far out of my reach. Without anything to use as a weapon, I had little to help me fight back. I was certain that even if I freed my hands, the best I could do was slap him before he stabbed me. I couldn't kick him because he was sitting on my legs. At five foot two, I knew I wouldn't win a physical struggle.

There in my memory, at the knife-edge of fear, time distorted: Some moments hurtled by; others seeped by slowly, as if they were becoming one with everything I was ever going to be. In this particular moment, he sneered at me.

"I got your ten dollars," he said, "but I don't want your fucking money." He reached down, yanked the sheet away from me, and pulled off my purple underwear.

The definitiveness of that knowledge—that I was going to be raped—settled on me like his weight, crushing me. *Was this how I was going to die? Was this the last thing I would see?* My head ran its own track of protest while my body lay there, unable to move. *I don't want to die! I want to live! I want to see my mom and dad again! Paul!*

"Just relax. It's been a long time for you, hasn't it, baby?" He put his head down between my legs. The intimacy of this gesture revolted me. My body went rigid, an unconscious resistance all the way down to the muscle: *Don't touch me.* The Chinese food I'd eaten with Paul churned in my stomach. Was it only a few hours ago that we'd sat at China Inn? My disbelief was a kind of vertigo, and I clutched dumbly for anything to prove that this wasn't really happening. But those hours were already part of something else that seemed to drift further and further out of reach: before—a perpetual yesterday before this night ripped a hole in my life that I tumbled into, bottomless and dark. I swallowed back my nausea, grateful that all I had drunk at dinner was iced tea. It seemed vital that my mind was clear because I was imploring it to figure out what to do. *Think. Think!* My mind wanted to leave, to dull the sensate horror of his hands and mouth on me, but I knew I must stay present if I was going to have any chance of staying alive.

"Your man's overseas in Germany, ain't he?" He was wrong. It was my brother Joe who was backpacking over there, but I didn't bother to correct him. He took my stunned silence for what it was and interpreted it. "I know all about you, Jennifer. You from Winston-Salem. They burned witches there, ain't that right?" he said. "Yeah, you a witch. We gonna have a good time tonight."

Again I didn't correct him, but I registered that he wasn't as smart as he thought. In school, we had studied the Salem witch trials in Massachusetts, and I never forgot Giles Corey, the only man in American history ever pressed to death. To force him to talk, the court had placed a board upon his chest and piled on stone after stone. His last words were, "More weight," before his lungs collapsed and his rib cage snapped all around him.

My bones didn't give way. I was alive and breathing, alert to the sounds of his unzipping and kicking off his shoes and my silent dread of anticipating what was next. I smelled the scent of cigarette smoke all over him and then he was inside me, his face just above mine. He told me he knew I wore glasses, so he thought I couldn't see him. He was wrong again. My glasses were for distance; everything right in front of me, I could see. Light from the parking lot lamppost filtered through the blinds—it wasn't a lot but it was enough. In blinks, I willed myself to note the details. I studied his face for features to identify. The hairline, his awful mouth. Did he have scars? Tattoos? He had close-cropped hair. Although I didn't want to look at him, I had to. How much could I bear?

I tried to look in his eyes. They were distinctly almond shaped, small, and set deep into his face. I searched for something human to connect to, some kind of appeal I could make through eye contact. But he kept shifting his dark gaze from my eyes. He had high, broad cheekbones, and his mouth was not overly large. A faint shadow of hair framed his upper lip; it looked more like dirt than a mustache.

He kept talking to me, telling me I probably never had a man like him. It was sick what he did, and if we were lovers meeting surreptitiously in the middle of the night, as if this was some kind of

fantasy. I was never so enraged and frightened at the same time. My hands balled up into fists—I couldn't stop the fight in them, useless as they were under him. I thought if I could just keep him talking, if I could win his trust, maybe I could get him to put his weapon down. Maybe I could figure out a way to run. I was trying to learn anything about where he lived, or went to school, how old he was, any clue to who this monster in the dark was. The only way I could fight him was to outsmart him.

"I'm afraid of knives," I told him. "I can't relax until you put it down. Can you put it outside? On my car?" I lied. But it was all a twisted lie anyway: his kissing me, talking to me. Like it was a game we were playing together.

I could sense his giving in. He stopped and looked at me. "You ain't gonna call the police?" Here it was: my will staking a claim, this first tiny victory giving way to a hope that maybe I would survive the night.

"No. Just drop it outside on my car. Please, I can't relax." I used his words. He didn't get angry. If he did this, I thought, I could shut the door behind him fast. It'll give me enough time to call 911. I had no way of knowing that the phone lines had already been cut.

He began to get off me. He reached for his shoes on the floor, the ones he'd removed as he got on me, punctuating the moment with a thud. They were black canvas shoes. He moved slowly, testing me, unsure. I didn't feel powerful, but we were at least negotiating now. His uncertainty about what I was going to do reminded me that he hadn't taken everything from me.

"I have to pee," I announced. I wasn't asking for his permission. I headed out to the hallway, toward the bathroom. "First, I have to watch you go outside so I know you really went. While you're out there, I'll go to the bathroom." I grabbed the soft stadium blanket and wrapped it around me—Hennie, our housekeeper, my second mother, gave this to me—the red, yellow, and blue plaid that I was hoping, wishing, and praying would keep him from touching me again. I trembled with fear and he accepted it was because I was cold. But the blanket was a deliberate choice. I wasn't wearing any clothes, but that wasn't going to stop me from running if I got a chance. Once in the bathroom, I turned on the light, getting another glimpse of his face.

"Turn it off!" he yelled, retreating like a wounded animal into the shadows. I closed the door and ran the water. The bathroom window was too small for me to climb out; if he came after me in here, I'd be trapped. I rushed out into the hallway.

There was a night-light in the den, breaking up the inky corners of the hallway. My eyes continued to adjust to the dark, giving me more detail on him. Standing next to him for a few minutes I tried to record information about how tall he was, if he walked pigeon toed or duck footed. Based on my height, I figured he must be about six feet tall. As he inched his way toward the front door, he didn't take his eyes off me. "You gonna let me back in, right?"

I reassured him, did my best to sound natural. But I frantically wondered if I could be fast enough to get to the front door before he came back in. It was a chance I'd have to take. I heard the knife hit the table on the porch, his frame still in the doorway. He never even stepped outside; in an instant, he shut and locked the front door. I remained in the hallway, moving toward the den—anything to keep from going back into the bedroom with him. I needed a new plan.

"Turn on the stereo," he commanded. I walked into the living room, and I saw my postcards and pictures scattered all over the coffee table. I hit the power button on the radio, the DJ's voice on KISS coming through the speakers. I needed to get to the back door. Maybe it was open.

"I'm thirsty. I'm gonna get a drink. You want something?" Another stalling tactic I hoped would buy me some time.

He fiddled with the dial, and the blue LCD light illuminated his profile as he trolled for a station. He didn't have a wide nose. "Yeah, fix me something with Seagram's and let's make it a party." The

he held up something.

“Can I have this?” he said. It was a picture of me, standing in a bathing suit at Apex Lake. Why he asked me this still baffles me, since permission was so beside the point. I nodded and he put it in his back pocket.

I headed into the kitchen. If I survived, I told myself, I would tell the police he was a light-skinned black man, wearing dark khakis, a blue shirt with white stripes on the sleeve, and canvas boat shoes. He wore white knit gloves on his hands. I still had the fibrous taste of them in my mouth.

I flipped on the light switch, because I knew it would protect me. It was a small buffer zone: he wouldn't come too close to me with the light on. On the table I saw a pack of Vantage cigarettes from my purse, empty Coors cans, my wallet with my license out. *How long was he here while I slept?*

Maybe only fifteen feet were between us, but he was behind a corner, just out of sight. I turned on the faucet. The water hitting the basin made a loud, tinny sound. I opened the cupboards, clanked glasses together, threw ice cubes in the sink. I zeroed in on the door in my kitchen. His way in was my only way out. I heard his voice coming toward the kitchen. “Is that door locked?” he yelled. *Run!*

I set out in my backyard. It was misting rain, and the grass was wet and cool under my feet. I headed immediately to the right—the next unit. I banged on my neighbor's back door, screaming. But there was no time to waste. No time for someone sleeping to hear me, get out of bed, and open the door. He was already coming out my door. I ran across the yard to the next building. I didn't have any plan other than to run. He was somewhere behind me in pursuit, but the soft, damp ground absorbed the sound of his and my footsteps. A tree branch whipped me in the face, and I staggered into a corner between two buildings that connected in a L-shape, a place that had no escape if he found me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a light on—in a brick house with a carport. I hopped the low dog fence that separated that property from the apartment complex, and slammed my hands on the screen door, frantically hitting the doorbell. I knew my stalker could see me in the light. *Please open. Please open.*

A man inside the house saw me through the window of the door. “Help me, please! I've been raped by a black man! He's after me!” I yelled. The man screamed. Behind him, his wife appeared. “She's a student at the college. I recognize her. Let her in.” As their door locked behind me, I fainted. Everything went black as I saw the terror in this man's eyes of what the night had brought him. This hysterical girl, naked except for a blanket. When I came to, I heard them calling 911. All the lights were off, but we could see my rapist circling the house. The man who let me in stood by the door with a baseball bat.

Here is where there are moments lost forever down in that black hole, gaps of time I must have lived through but have no recollection of. The moments that remain are fragments: hard, sharp fragments. Somehow I was then in the back of an ambulance. I heard the sirens and the bloodhounds. The drag on the windshield wipers back and forth across the glass, clearing the fine coating of rain.

At Memorial Hospital, when I was told to undress, I realized that I was not wearing my own clothes. The plaid blanket was gone. I now wore green athletic shorts, someone else's underwear, and a T-shirt. The people who had let me in must have given me some of their teenaged daughter's clothing. I was aware of the material touching my body, only it no longer felt like my body. I was no longer me. The girl in my mind, the picture-perfect student who would be getting married soon to Paul, was sucked down by that black hole, too.

The doctor was called in, sleep still in his eyes. He didn't look too happy about being awakened in the middle of the night. And it was clearly my fault. He was sloppy and unsympathetic. I didn't want him to touch me. I felt like a dead girl, watching another strange man plumb my body, humiliat

it. Saliva swabs, vaginal swabs, pubic hair combings. My body as evidence, as the crime scene. I wished I could take off my skin and have them seal it away in a plastic bag.

In only a medical gown, I lay on a bed with privacy curtains in the ER. Uniformed police officers were nearby; I heard their radios. The curtains slid on their metal track and a plainclothes police officer walked in.

“Ms. Thompson,” he said. “I’m Detective Mike Gauldin.” His was the first compassionate face I saw, despite the fact that he didn’t look like he could be much older than I was.

Detective Gauldin explained procedure to me: going to the station to make a statement, the rape crisis counselor who would be available to me. He wanted to know what family he should call, and I told him Paul and my sister Janet. As he talked, I heard another woman crying somewhere in the ER.

“What happened to her?” I asked, nodding in the direction of the sound. He paused for a minute before saying, “She was raped. We think it’s the same guy.” I began to cry again for her, for both of us. This must have been the first moment I felt the hate. I hated him for what he had done to us. *He’s not going to get away with this.*

“Ms. Thompson, did you get a good look at your assailant?” Detective Gauldin asked. “Do you think you’d recognize him if you saw him again?”

In an instant, it was all there: *Shut up or I’ll cut you!* His narrow eyes, the pencil-thin mustache, the repulsive lips, the nose so close to my own. His laughter after he asked me if I wanted my ten dollars back and I said, “You stole my money?”

“Yes,” I told the detective. “I would.”

Paul drove me to the police station, following the detective. I collapsed in his arms when I saw him, feeling like I never wanted to leave that space. We didn’t really talk. He was ruffled and quiet. It was a lot for a twenty-five-year-old guy to take in, especially one like Paul, who had his whole life mapped out.

The last bit of night was leaving the sky, and as the sunrise began to bleach it, I felt filthy and exhausted. The smell of my rapist lingered in my nostrils; it was all over me and I wondered if Paul could smell him, too. Already the gulf between us was so much more than this too-early morning silence. It was a fault line.

I walked into the building; it was the first time I had ever been in a police station. My younger sister, Janet, and her boyfriend, Andrew, were already there. Janet was blond and brown eyed like me but she was taller and thinner, with a longer face and a wide, easy smile. Andrew was somewhat stocky; his dark Irish looks always reminded me of a young Al Pacino. I clung to Janet for a long time. The police called my parents. They must have reached my father at home in Winston-Salem. My mother was staying at our vacation place, a condo at Grandfather Mountain, because it was near Appalachian State University, where she was taking classes. I remember Janet’s speaking to them on the phone, looking at me and telling them, “Yes, *physically*, she’s OK.” My hand went to the side of my neck where he’d pressed the knife in.

I took the phone, “...raped...last night...police...” I heard my voice saying these words, those exacting words cutting through the surreal fog coating everything. “Oh Jennifer,” my mother said, sadly. Then, “Do you think it was someone who saw you in your leotard at Spa Lady?” I withdrew deeper into the numb composure that kept me functioning. I told her I had to go, and that I would call soon.

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