SUZANNE CRAIG
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HE CALLED ME SISTER

A TRUE STORY OF FINDING HUMANITY ON DEATH ROW

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Events and details described in this story are noted with original source material where available. Information about Cecil Johnson's life is taken from and attributed to his own writing, given to the author in 2005. Names and identifying characteristics of some individuals have been changed. Conversations and scenes have been recreated using the best recollection of interview subjects, and supported, where possible, with media accounts, public information, and other research.

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DEDICATION

To Cecil, who made me promise to tell his story.
We did it, my friend.

And to Alan, Anne Grace, and Allie, you are my heart.
This is our story together.

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PROLOGUE

A Long Way from Home for All of Us

One by one my family members stopped coming to see me; a few of them said that I embarrassed them, and I haven't seen them anymore. As for my father, I had him removed [from my visitation list] because I couldn't stand to see him anymore. Nevertheless, I knew that I had to forgive my father for all that he had done to my life.

—Cecil Johnson, 2005[1]

EXCEPT FOR THE EXTRA GUARDS DOWN BY THE ROAD, ALL APPEARS normal as I drive up to the prison, winding through serene flowerbeds and carefully manicured edges, which do their part to hide the tension of the extra high security. The place is on lock-down as it prepares for the execution of a friend of mine.

At the top of the grand entrance of Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville, Tennessee, landscaping no longer can conceal its purpose as razor wire and featureless rectangle buildings rise in my view planted like guards themselves. I see a huge red and white tent dominating the otherwise

empty visitor's parking lot. *That's new*, I think. The blank faces of remote satellite dishes extend skyward from boxy news vans like claws searching for prey.

I am at the prison for the first time without my husband, Alan. In fifteen years of visiting Cecil C. Johnson II, this is the first time I have come alone. But today is November 30, 2009, and Cecil is scheduled to be killed by lethal injection in the early morning of December 2—if no court or the governor intervenes. Alan, who works in state government, has an urgent but unrelated meeting with the governor's wife about a building project, and will visit Cecil later today. Time is short, and I had decided I better not wait for him.

When I first walk up to the processing desk, the guard assumes I am a lawyer. He starts to check me in, but when he realizes his mistake and that I am also "not family," he tells me I can't go in. I don't mean to cry. It just happens as I tell him about how I am more like family than most of the people related to him by blood. The commotion catches the attention of another guard, whom I'd seen many times out here at Riverbend. She knows my face and vouches for me, but the first guard is unmoved. The friendly guard says, "Wait here," and goes to make my case to the warden.

I study the cold government-colored block walls, the plastic bucket seats connected into rows and the oversized, dog-eared ledger where visitors sign in, and I wonder how I will get word to Cecil if they don't let me see him. After some time, the friendly guard appears around the corner from the warden's office. She's smiling, so I know that she was able to get me approved for the visit.

"You can go in until his wife gets here, in about thirty minutes," she says. I am so relieved and grateful that I leap toward her for a hug, forgetting momentarily that she's a prison guard packing heat.

She stiffens her back and barks, "*Don't do that*!"

"Oh! I'm s-s-s-sorry," I say, standing up straighter as if to show I will do whatever she says.

"I switched shifts, so I could be here today," she says in a low whisper that I can barely make out. As we walk toward the processing desk, she adds that she has always liked Cecil.

She leads me to the metal detector, stamps my hand, and frisks me as I stand without my shoes, in a private room. For the first time I am less focused on her hands sliding all over my body and more on getting inside the gates. After I put my shoes on, we head out the back door. We walk through a series of now-familiar loud, slow-opening and closing gates, surrounded by fourteen-foot double fences topped by loops of jagged and sharp concertina wire. It's a beautiful day, cold and clear, the heavens a watery blue, an irony against the bleak reason for my visit. I lift my face toward the sky and wonder if Cecil will get to see such a sight again. At the next building, we are buzzed in through a heavy door, and I hold up my hand under a black light for that guard to see my purple glowing hand stamp, which is even more important on the way out.

I take the turn inside the first building as I always have, but my guard catches my elbow and leads me a different way than toward Unit 2, death row. I don't understand at first—she is pointing me toward the vending machines of the main building's visiting room, where over the years we'd spent lots of dollars getting Chili Cheese Fritos, pecan pie, popcorn, and microwave bar-b-cue sandwiches to take into Unit 2. As we get closer, she veers to the right, and I feel the first of many waves of nausea as I realize there is a door next to the drink machine that I'd never noticed.

The death chamber is behind the snacks.

We continue past to another series of buzzing doors. I sign my name in what seems more like a guest book at a bed and breakfast rather than a log on death row. I suppress the urge to write a comment there, like, "Had a great stay!" or "Best killing facility this side of the Mississippi—good job!" Then, I am led to a tiny room that has a waist-high glass window embedded with a crisscross of wires on one wall. Through the window is another, similar room, about the size of a wide closet.

Cecil is not there yet. The guard has left me, and I try sitting in one of the plastic chairs—like you might have on your patio for a picnic—but that leaves me nose-high to the glass, so I stand. Shifting from one foot to the other, I suddenly feel awkward to be here and wonder what we're going to talk about.

I hear him before I see him.

All these years, because of his good behavior, we have visited Cecil in an open room, where we could play cards, eat together, laugh, and forget where we all were for a while. Today, I can't see his feet, but I can *hear* them. The chains, so thick you might use them to pull a car out of a ditch with a tractor, are clamped on his ankles and drag on the hard floor. He is wearing an awkward white cotton tunic and is barefoot. He tells me later they had taken his clothes and shoes, and that his feet are cold.

He backs into the little room through the glass, not looking at me, while the guard closes and locks the door. Cecil puts his shackled wrists through a narrow opening in the door, like a mail slot, while the guard unlocks the chains and pulls them off. Each link clanks on the metal door as it slithers through. He turns slowly toward me, and I catch my breath. He looks like a preacher in a baptistery, in that white tunic. Cecil spreads his arms wide and places his hands on the lower frame of the window, outstretched. My mind flies back to the many baptisms I have witnessed where the pastor stands waist-high in water,

looking down onto the congregation with reassurance. There, the water laps happily onto the glass-fronted pool, and it goes something like this:

"What is your profession of faith?"
"Jesus is my lord and savior."
"I baptize you, my brother in Christ, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

When Cecil speaks, I'm jolted from that safe space of resurrection waters, back to this death chamber reception room.

"I don't know what they think I'm going to do," he says, nodding toward that door with the slot. He puts his hands up on the glass toward me. I put mine up to his on my side of the glass. I'm sobbing now and I can't breathe.

For years now, Cecil has referred to me as his little sister. Although he has many biological siblings, he told us that he felt that God had sent our family because he didn't hear from most of his own family much anymore. For the record, that's a little bit of pressure—to be *enough* to fill that role.

"I can take my daughter crying, and my wife crying," he whispers just loud enough so I can still hear him through the glass. "That just makes me stronger for them. But. Not. You. Not you." He's crying now too. It's the first time I have ever seen him cry in fifteen years. Rivulets of tears make shiny streaks on his dark cheeks.

He tells me how the guards are recording everything he says and does. He's hopeful that a stay of execution will come from the Supreme Court, Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, or even the governor. He recounts the football game from the day before when it looked as if our hometown Tennessee Titans were going to lose, but they pull it out, beating the Arizona Cardinals with

six seconds to go. Commentators called it a "legendary comeback." Cecil describes that last play in detail with a hopeful smile, comparing his situation to that one. Only the fanatical faithful believed the Titans would come out on top, down at the wire, and he's got that same against-all-odds faith today for himself.

I am not as hopeful as he is, and I don't understand football anyway. I keep both of those thoughts to myself.

He tells me how much he loves his daughter, his grandkids, his wife, Sarah, our family, and Jesus. How he isn't worried because of the promise of heaven. How either way he'll be okay.

I had thought these thirty minutes would never end, but the moments flew by.

When our time is up, we both say, "See you tomorrow." The guard escorts me out. As I pass by the snack machines, I see Sarah being escorted in. We stop for a tight hug, but because time is short and she is anxious to see Cecil, she rushes toward the door.

The guard walks me back into the bright sunshine, where I am free to go where I please. I skirt past that massive media encampment in the parking lot. *Circus tent*, I think absently, as I rush to the safety of my car, pushing down the nausea where I sit, stunned.

How did it come to this? I never even meant to get involved.