

Chapter Thirty-Five



SEPTEMBER 15, 1963

NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

1:00 P.M.

President John F. Kennedy is in pain.

The presidential yacht *Honey Fitz* glides through Narragansett Bay. She is ninety-two-feet long with a wooden hull painted white. JFK, as he is known, wears a leather jacket with the blue presidential seal on the left chest. Ray-Ban sunglasses. There are gray skies and a stiff wind. President Kennedy's reelection campaign starts in just a few weeks, but for now, he is relaxing with his wife, Jackie, and good friends. Everyone on board is wealthy, young, and at ease in opulence. Kennedy likes to be around people such as these.

The media has taken to calling the Kennedy White House "Camelot"—JFK as King Arthur, surrounded by his gracious court. The press does not know about the president's chronic pain and the narcotics he takes to manage it or the intrigues that Kennedy brings upon himself.

Also on board today are *Newsweek* magazine's Washington correspondent Ben Bradlee and his socialite wife, Tony. Kennedy generally does not like the press, but Bradlee is a fellow Harvard graduate and World War II veteran of the United States Navy. The two men are both in their mid-forties and get along.

Bradlee has to know about Kennedy's appetite for female liaisons. Yet that is *never* written about. The national press has heard the rumors for

ten years, beginning when JFK was single and a senator. But no reporter dares investigate.

The ethics of *Newsweek's* top Washington correspondent openly socializing with the president at government expense are also questionable. JFK's top advisers have long used the media to promote their boss, and major names like syndicated columnist Joseph Alsop and Charles Bartlett of the *Chicago Sun Times* are more than happy to do Kennedy's bidding.

It seems "Camelot" is well protected by the press.

However, Ben Bradlee is a special case. The powerful Graham family owns *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post* and shapes political coverage nationwide. But even as he sails the New England waters, Bradlee is holding a secret.

Six months ago, the president made a failed pass at his wife, friendship with her husband notwithstanding. Tony Bradlee rejected the overture.*

But Kennedy has been much more successful with her married sister, Mary Meyer, a Washington artist. Despite those intrusions, Ben Bradlee remains solidly in the Kennedy camp.

The president is a handsome man with a full head of red-brown hair and an easy smile. Jackie Kennedy sits alongside smoking a cigarette, wearing sunglasses, a white sweater, and slacks. She smiles for the camera, despite the recent death of her newborn son, Patrick, from infant respiratory distress. She and President Kennedy celebrated their tenth wedding anniversary on September 12, just three days ago.†

Like his wife, JFK has a great deal on his mind. A new war in Vietnam is pulling him into political trouble as sixteen thousand US "military advisors" have been sent to quell the growing conflict in Southeast Asia. In Cuba, the Fidel Castro situation first confronted by President Eisenhower has developed into an adjunct of the Cold War. Even as the president is yachting, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 is still a fresh memory, the Soviet Union having sought to install missiles aimed at the United States, just ninety miles away.

The ship's phone rings.

* That allegation comes from her *Washington Post* obituary, November 14, 2011: "Mrs. Bradlee told Kennedy biographer Sally Bedell Smith that on a particularly festive 46th birthday party for then-President Kennedy in 1963, he made a pass, which she rebuffed."

† Baby Patrick lived thirty-nine hours, dying in a Boston hospital on August 9, 1963.

Kennedy answers. The news is grim. Civil rights is another hard issue facing America. JFK needs white southern votes to win reelection but cannot afford to ignore black voters. This morning in Birmingham, Alabama, four members of the Ku Klux Klan placed nineteen sticks of dynamite under steps leading into the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

Four young girls died in the blast.

As the president digests that information, the *Honey Fitz* continues its weekend cruise. Gloomy weather approaches. There are still a few more hours on the water to be enjoyed. Fall is coming, and with it the end of sailing season.

Soon enough, the presidential yacht docks at the Quonset Point National Guard Air Station in Quonset Point, Rhode Island. The president and his guests step off, one by one, not knowing the voyage will be Kennedy's last.



JFK is raised in the Bronx.

He was born in 1917 outside Boston, in the master bedroom of the family home on Brookline's Beals Street. His parents are wealthy financier Joseph P. Kennedy and his wife, Rose. "Jack," as he will be nicknamed, is the second of eight children. His brother Joseph, two years older, is his father's favorite. At the time of his birth, Boston mayor John Fitzgerald predicts that Joe Jr. is "the future president of this nation."*

No such claims are made about the weaker Jack, who becomes so ill from scarlet fever at the age of two he almost dies.

The family moves to New York City when the future president is ten, their Irish Catholic father angered by what he perceives as discrimination in Boston, where signs read, "Irish Need Not Apply."

Growing up, Jack lives in his big brother's shadow, an athlete never as good as Joe. He is a member of Boy Scout Troop 2 in Bronxville, New York. Jack also attends boarding school at Choate, in Connecticut, where he is almost expelled for blowing up a toilet seat with firecrackers.

Health issues are a lifelong plague for the future president, beginning with an appendectomy, then colitis, and, finally, a cancer scare in his youth. JFK's left leg is a quarter inch shorter than his right, leading to

* Fitzgerald is Rose Kennedy's father and the source of JFK's middle name.

chronic back pain. He wears a lift in his shoe to compensate, but the imbalance leads to a disintegration of his spinal discs. All his ailments affect John academically as he finishes 64th in his class of 112 at Choate. However, Kennedy's fellow students vote him "Most Likely to Succeed." One instructor speaks of Jack's "flashes of brilliance."

Yet, even when he begins college at Princeton, then transfers to Harvard, the comparisons with big brother Joe never end.

Joe Kennedy plays rugby and football and rows crew for the Crimson.

Jack Kennedy likes to read and write. He pens stories for the student newspaper after a lower back injury ends his football career for good.

In 1938, Jack's father, Joseph Kennedy, is named ambassador to the Court of Saint James's in London. Jack and the family follow along. He travels widely in prewar Europe, spending a great deal of time in Nazi Germany. Like his father and older brother, Jack initially admires Adolf Hitler and believes the German army is unstoppable.

He writes these thoughts in his senior thesis, which is later turned into a book. *Why England Slept* will be published in 1940, selling eighty thousand copies. Ambassador Kennedy's personal and private relationship with British prime minister Winston Churchill has faltered as the elder Kennedy supports Germany. He is accused of being an appeaser—openly against fighting Hitler. His son's book describes the rise of the Third Reich and the apathy of the British government in the face of it.



Now in his twenties, Jack Kennedy suffers from worsening back pain. He self-medicates, taking steroids that will lead to a potentially fatal hormone imbalance. These problems prevent him from securing an army commission as war breaks out in Europe. He tries again, this time with the United States Navy Reserve. His father calls in favors, ensuring that his second son is not just commissioned as an ensign but is assigned to a combat zone.

JFK is sent to the Pacific, assigned to a patrol torpedo (PT) boat, an eighty-foot-long vessel capable of traveling a brisk forty-one knots. JFK plays bridge in his spare time and rarely wears a shirt in the tropical heat. The warm ocean water is good for his back.

On the night of August 1, 1943, having already survived thirty mis-

sions in the Solomon Islands, Kennedy's boat encounters the Japanese destroyer *Amagiri* in the dark of night. At more than three hundred feet long, the warship runs right over PT-109, splitting Kennedy's boat in two.

Twelve Americans are scattered into the dark waters. Kennedy re-injures his back but manages to swim five hours to a nearby island, dragging one burned sailor with him. After hiding for seven days, the Americans are rescued. The story is chronicled in *The New Yorker* magazine.

Summer, 1944. John F. Kennedy is now a decorated, well-known war hero. But his brother Joe is *still* the Kennedy destined for the presidency. JFK, it is thought by his father, will go into journalism.



Joe Kennedy Jr. also serves in the navy. The war will be over soon. According to the plan laid out by his father, Joe will return home a hero and run for Congress in 1946.

His oldest brother is stationed in England, piloting highly sensitive bombing missions over occupied France. On August 12, 1944, he and copilot Wilford John Willy take off in a plane packed with explosives. The top-secret plan is for them to get the aircraft off the ground and then bail out. A controller will take over, using radio signals to guide the now pilotless plane on a crash course to a German target.

But the unstable Torpex high explosive detonates prematurely. Joe and Willy die instantly. Nothing is left of them or their bomber.

A devastated Ambassador Kennedy grieves for a short time. Then he decrees it will be Jack who will run for Congress. The family moves back to Massachusetts so JFK can contest the Eleventh District, which comprises Boston, Somerville, and Cambridge. The congressman holding that seat, James Michael Curley, conveniently vacates it to run for mayor of Boston.

The campaign is funded by Ambassador Kennedy himself. "With the money I spent, I could have elected my chauffeur," he jokes when Jack wins, capturing 73 percent of the vote.

The next year, 1947, JFK visits London during a break in congressional proceedings. Suddenly, JFK becomes violently ill from a hormone imbalance known as Addison's disease. The situation is so intense that

he is given the last rites of the Catholic Church. It seems a second Kennedy son may soon depart the world.*

Despite the chronic back issues, recurring malaria, Addison's disease, and pain so bad he secretly uses crutches, Jack Kennedy forges ahead in the political world. He travels back and forth across Massachusetts to meet the electorate, pushing himself from morning to midnight. His advisor Dave Powers speaks of the thirty-one-year-old JFK "gritting his teeth when he walked . . . but then when he came into the room where the crowd was gathered, he was erect and smiling, looking as fit and healthy as the light-heavyweight champion of the world."



After six years in the House of Representatives, JFK wins a Senate seat. Taking that office in 1953, he serves at the height of Senator Joseph McCarthy's communist attacks. JFK never speaks out against McCarthy's abuse of power. He goes so far as to check himself into a hospital for spinal surgery so he will be unavailable to vote against the Wisconsin zealot in the crucial Senate censure.†

There is a reason for this: patriarch Joseph Kennedy repeatedly invites McCarthy to socialize at the family home in Hyannis Port. The pudgy senator even dates JFK's sisters—first Patricia, Eunice, and then Jean. When Robert "Bobby" Kennedy, Jack's younger brother, needs a job, it is McCarthy who arranges it. McCarthy hires RFK to be a counsel on his committee investigating alleged communists. The bond is so tight the controversial senator even becomes godfather to Bobby's oldest daughter, Kathleen.



By 1953, Jack Kennedy is a married man. He and his wife, Jacqueline "Jackie" Bouvier, are wed at St. Mary's Church in Newport. Boston Archbishop Richard Cushing, soon to be a cardinal, officiates. The pope

* JFK will be given the last rites five times. A priest was summoned to give the Last Rites when JFK was two-years-old and suffering from scarlet fever. The episode in 1947 is number two. Then he suffers a high fever during a trip to Asia in 1951. Three years later, he falls into a coma after a 1954 back surgery. The last time is after his murder in Dallas.

† On December 2, 1954, Senator Joseph McCarthy was censured by a vote of 67–22. Nothing really happened to him other than a public scolding.

sends a marital message from the Vatican to be read to the congregation of eight hundred guests.

However, JFK's new marital status does not change his lifestyle. It is widely known in Washington and Boston that the senator is "available." Senator Lyndon Johnson of Texas refers to him as a playboy.



In 1956, Jack Kennedy publishes another book, *Profiles in Courage*. He tells the story of senators who have changed the course of American history by making tough decisions. The book earns Kennedy a Pulitzer Prize. However, Eleanor Roosevelt is not impressed. Referring to JFK's rumored philandering and friendship with Joe McCarthy, she says of the senator, "I wish that Kennedy had a little less profile and a little more courage."