

In the Stone House
by
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11/22/63 Joe Kennedy, Jr. wipes the stock of the rifle again, his hands shaking, then, dissatisfied, breaks it open for the third time, making sure that the shells are still there, that the trigger is properly positioned. He reassembles the gear slowly, cursing the damned M-1, cursing his own stupidity in putting so much dependency upon a weapon which was no damned good. He should have had better equipment, not relied on the old Army supply service. But then getting better equipment would have brought some attention and he didn't want that. You had to carry this on in secrecy. Joe Kennedy, Jr. knows all about secrecy now, has counted upon it, has made it his mistral and the source of all his splendor. Too late, Jack. Too late for all of this, Joe Kennedy mumbles. He positions the cartons on the floor, peers out the window. A scattering of crowd, good, the street cleared, better, no sign of the motorcade yet in the distance. A little behind schedule but nothing ominous. Jack and the powder puff would be along soon enough.

Joe Kennedy, once President of the United States, now reduced (in his own mind if not quite in the estimation of the press) to sniveling bum, sniveling potential assassin, perches on the sixth floor of the Dallas School Book Depository, waiting for the presidential motorcade. He will sight his rifle on his brother's tousled head, hope for the best, pull the trigger. It is a difficult business, assassinating your younger brother, crazier yet if you are an ex-President of the United States, 1952-1956, which raises fratricide to the level of lunacy but there you are. It is the last great service, Joe knows, which he can perform, not only for patrimony but for the country. Jack is out of control, the arrogant little bastard had never been trustworthy in the first place but to a certain point he had been manipulable, now he was no longer.

You had to save the plan, that was all: the plan was all that mattered and Jack had broken the plan, shattered everything, the bastard. Joe thought of this, thought of that, considered all of the dreadful but necessary implications of his position, watching the sun drop little pools of uneven light on the dusty surfaces of the cartons of books, feeling the old clarity coming back. It had been a long time since he had felt this level of control but here it was, at last he knew what he was after, what had to be done. In the distance, he thought he could hear the sound of shouting, the thin tremor of drums and then as he arched his body, peered awkwardly out the window, he could see the thin movement of the crowd which could only indicate, yes, that the motorcade was coming. His breath was high in his throat, perched there like some enormous bird. Joe felt alive, felt more in possession of himself than he had in this long, dreadful exiled time. Well, he would wait it out, that was all. This was a serious business. There was nothing frivolous about it. The time for frivolity was gone.

11/22/46 I don't want it, Joe Jr. said to Jack, the big strapping jock. I was never cut out for politics. This is ridiculous. Jack laughed at him, winked riotously, hit him on the back. You may not be cut out for it, Jack said, but you got it. Mr. Smith goes to Washington. Shake 'em up good, Joe. You're a fucking war hero.

Going to be a lot of war heroes down there, Bobby said. War heroes are going to be a dime a dozen right through the decade. Sure going to be a shake-up time there, right, Dad?

Oh sure, Joe Sr. said, beaming at the three of them. Joe hadn't seen the old man in this kind of mood on land since before the war. This was what they called a family, the four of them getting together after the election to figure out what the right move would be. But that was all a bunch of crap, Joe knew, all the old man wanted to do was to look at them and gloat. His three

sons, the Congressman ready for his first term, everything lining up after the war just as the old man had promised. Feels good, doesn't it? the old man said. Well, it's a way to welcome the boys home, right? I promised you a homecoming.

I didn't want this, Joe Jr. said. Going up against the old man was a losing cause but he had to go on the record, if he had taken bombers out over Germany then he could go up against the Ambassador to the Court of St. James's. Couldn't he? But it was all crap, he couldn't stand up to it. No one could, the old man rode you down one way or the other and you just had to take it. I could get used to it though, he said.

Oh, you can get used to it, the old man said. Power is fun, even if a freshman Congressman hasn't got any. And the living is easy.

Lots of women, Jack said. Don't forget the women. You never forgot anything, Bobby said. In your whole life you let nothing go by. I think I'll bail out of this, Dad, Bobby said. I have business downtown.

We have business to settle, the old man said. You'll go in a few minutes, when I say you can. Joe, I want a staff put together. You know the names, but I'd like to hear what you have to say if you have any ideas.

Oh, I have ideas, Joe said. I have lots of ideas. You'll never listen to any of them. Hyannisport, Joe thought. It always comes back to Hyannisport.

Wherever you go, however hard you fly, whatever risks you take, you wind up in a room in a house on the beach where the old man tells you what to do. Why don't you just go ahead and fix it? he said to the Ambassador. I'm sure anything you want is okay with me.

I'll tell you this right now, Jack said. I don't want any part of it. I don't want to go to Washington and I don't want to be anyone's aide-in-waiting. I'm going to go back to school.

You think so, the Ambassador said. You think that's really the plan?

I'll get a graduate degree, Jack said. I always wanted to teach history. Maybe I'll go to law school. He yawned. No Congress for me, he said, no agenda, no roll calls, no quorums. I had enough of that on the high seas, thank you very much.

I'm too young, Bobby said. Don't look at me, Dad. It may be a young man's country again, but Joe can't have a twenty-two-year-old assistant. Besides, they'll just say that I got put on the payroll to keep me off the streets. You see? Joe said to the Ambassador, it's a family revolt. Your sons are standing up and being counted. No aide-de-camp in the room, no assistant either. So just go ahead and get the Honey Fitz delegation, because I don't give a shit. It's all the same to me.

You're a defiant prick the old man said. You know that? I give you everything and you shit on me. You think a few stripes, a couple of bombs, and you're hot shit. Well, you're the same little bum you were before the war, you know? Who do you think pulled you those assignments?

Joe felt the old anger. Hyannisport, Hyannisport, throwing sand at the beach, they could get you every time. That seemed to be part of the deal, you thought you could get away from it but the old man could always get you back.

Leave me alone, Joe said. Just leave me alone. You wanted me to run for Congress, I ran. You wanted me to make speeches, I made war hero speeches. You want a staff, appoint a staff. Just leave me out of it, you know? You don't give a damn anyway, so just have it your way. Bobby said, Joe, calm down. It's okay.

He's just ragging you, Jack said. That's his way. You know that he means well. He's just kidding you, trying to get you to pay attention, right, Dad? But I think we should ease off, go for a swim or something.

You'll go when I say, the Ambassador said. Jack you're going to Washington with him. There's no time to waste and there's no time to screw around either. Bobby, you can go to law school, we won't need you for a few years but you're going to check in and stay close.

I don't want any part of this, Jack said. I want to study history, be a professor at Wellesley. Maybe Duke. Show the girls the way through the New

Deal or maybe the Middle Ages. I've had all the goddamned politics I'll ever want. Jack paused, looked at the Ambassador, then took out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead slowly. I really am going to Washington, he said. You really mean it, don't you? The academy is just a dream, isn't it?

Just about, the Ambassador said. I told you, we have no time for that. We have to get down to cases. There's a country out there.

Oh, there's a country out there, Joe Jr. thought, it's been out there for a hundred and seventy years now, waiting for us. And now the Ambassador figures it's about time that he took it. The sprawl of the land, the heat of the old man's need, the sense of injustice tilted within him, and for a moment it was as if the walls had come down and he could see everything, could see what was in store for all of them, the poor, foolish damned Ambassador too, but then mercifully the walls went up again and he could see only the bare surfaces of the conference room in Hyannisport. You really do mean it, don't you, he said, you meant it all.

From the start, the Ambassador said. Before you were ever born. Before I was ever born, I meant it. And you too, Joe. You mean it. Because you'd better.

11/22/63 It wasn't easy, Joe Kennedy, Jr. thinks, to progress from President to one-term President to ex-President to sniveling bum to assassin all in a seven-year period, it was an arc of history which refracted by opposites the old man's journey and might have been thought impossible if he, Joe Kennedy, Jr., hadn't proven that it was possible. But you had to work at it, you really did have to put your best attention to it because the country loved the few ex-Presidents it had so very much and paid such kind attention to them. But it helped if your younger brother had succeeded you as President and had found his own distinction and style in such a way as to absorb your own traces, and it also helped if you really needed to escape, if you needed somehow to sink back into the morass that his life had become since the Ambassador had looked at him in 1956 and had pulled the plug. You're through, laddie, the Ambassador had said, you've gone as far with this as you're going to go. You are not going to run in November, you are going to announce your withdrawal in Jack's favor right now, or things will get very hot for all of us. Do you understand that? Joe had understood it very well.

He had always understood the Ambassador. Maybe that was the problem, his father had been refractory of Joe Jr. from the start; Joe had felt not exactly like an extension of the Ambassador but simply a spare part, something extra that could be screwed in, unstuck, manipulated, it didn't matter, he was always around. Sometimes he had wanted to stand up to the Ambassador, he had given him a mild push in 1946 when he hadn't wanted to run for Congress, but that had collapsed pretty soon and then he had fought a little harder in '48 when the Ambassador had said that now was the time to go for the Governor's chair, a really shitty job then and now. In '51 Governor Joe Kennedy, Jr. had really struggled when the Ambassador had said, okay, now is the time, Truman is out of the way and we are going to stick it to this ignorant old general and take the presidency. For a few wild moments Joe had thought that he would beat down the Ambassador through simple expediency, make a speech in the Capitol like Silent Cal had in 1919 and simply pull down the temple, but he hadn't been able to do it then either. There was something very persuasive about the Ambassador, very tough, very unyielding. Ask Rose, ask Kathleen. Well, ask Rose now anyway. Ask Bobby if you could find him. That had been the worst of it, going out for the presidency, going through the worst imaginable campaign and the terrible events of the convention when he had had to break Adlai open right there in front of everyone, but since then it had gotten a little easier. It always got easier when you simply gave up, Jack had warned him and it was true, nothing had been as bad as that struggle in '52 and the convention, even '56 when Joe had had the plug pulled on him was easy in comparison. But once he had broken, once he had come down all the way to sniveling bum territory, it had been as if he had an entirely new perspective on things.

The perspective was new every day. Now Joe Jr. had a real grasp of the situation. More and more he was seeing it the Ambassador's way. Once you gave it up and gave the Ambassador his points, admitted what he was and that he had probably been right all along, everything else fell into line. Still, Joe Jr. knew that he was fucked up in his own mind. He couldn't figure out if he was doing this for the Ambassador or against him, whether it was his last great service for his father or a terrible act of defiance. It didn't matter, he supposed. This introspection, this wondering, this internalization, it just got you nowhere in the first place, you had to go on like the Ambassador himself and simply do things. The motorcade was in sight now, he thought he could see it, the lead cars of the agents. The crowd was straggling into separate ragged lines on either side of the street, the first advance patrol car came down the empty street between the barricades. It wouldn't be much longer now. Joe Kennedy, Jr. fondled the rifle and thought about this and that, thought about the nature of conditions and the question of his own sacrifice. He wanted one clear shot, that was all. One plug, one bolt of revenge, one pure thunderbolt, as Emily Dickinson said, to scalp his living soul. After that he would take his chances just like the rest of the world; he would come into a cause-and-effect world where things simply happened or failed to happen as a result of consequence. Oh Jack, he thought, it could have been different, but even as he murmured this he knew it was bullshit, it could have been no different at all. The old man had worked it out in his head long before any of them were born, had lain on a thousand pillows of resentment running the pictures through his head over and again, and by the time the four sons came along, they were nothing other than aspects of the plan like angels in the mind of God. The whole thing was determinism, that was all. One pure thunderbolt. To scalp his living soul.

10/22/63 I called you in, JFK said, because whatever has happened to us, whatever you've become, you're still a President and you're my brother. So I want you to know that I'm pulling the plug on all of this. Bobby is not going to get my endorsement. Bobby will never be President. Joe looked at him. Past security, past the guards, past Salinger and O'Donnell into the Oval Office. Nobody had even looked at him. It had been as if he were dead. Only Caroline had waved at him when she saw her uncle go by. Caroline was probably the last friend Joe Jr. had in the family, now that he thought about it. What are you saying? he said. What does this mean to me? It means that the dynasty is coming to a roaring halt, JFK said. He smiled at Joe. It means that Bobby is being dismissed from the Cabinet this afternoon. A press release has already been prepared. He is not being allowed to resign, he has been fired as Attorney General, comprende? And I will do everything within my power to make sure that he never runs for office again. The line is running out, Joe. There will be no more. I don't understand, Joe said. I truly do not understand. His mind was as clear, as vacant as it had been the day he had been elected in 1952 and had come to understand that he had no agenda, not the shred of an agenda for the eight years of the presidency which stretched before him, and that the Ambassador had no real agenda either, they had been dumped by the wave of history but they were on the beach. Why are you doing this? he said to JFK. And why did you call me here to tell me that? What did you think I could do? Well, nothing at all, JFK said. Call it a family courtesy. You can tell it to the Ambassador, that's what you can do for me. Tell it to Old Joe, break the word before he gets it from the radio. No Bobby in his future. The old man will shit a brick, but frankly, that's his problem. I have no concern for that now. But why? Joe said. He seemed to be fixed on this point. He somehow couldn't get beyond it. That was what came from being your old man's first son, you had to take all of the mistakes, make them so that the others could have a smoother deal. Some deal they had. The deal was me, then you, then Bobby, Joe said. Now you're breaking the deal. There seemed to be a whining tone to his

voice. In just a few moments he would cry. Then what? What did that mean? The crying Mr. President. I can't tell the Ambassador, Joe Jr. said. He'll go wild. He'll kill me.

You're fifty years old, JFK said. You've been the President of the United States. You're afraid some ancient fart with a cane is going to kill you? Is that what he's done to us? For what? For what purpose?

But why? Joe said again. Bobby was a good Attorney General. He never gave you any trouble. He got rid of Hoffa. He's got Hoover held down, the first guy in thirty years to do that. I couldn't do that. He's the next in line.

Because the country isn't our playpen, JFK said, because there has to be something else but the Ambassador's craziness and our own knee reflexes twitching away. Because it has to be broken sometime. I'm going to go for Lyndon. He's taken the shit admirably, he's kept out of the way, he's even been as polite as an ignorant Texan can be. Let him run the place for a while, I just want to go out and get laid which constitutionally I have to do now anyway. Maybe Lyndon will tame his sex life a little. Whatever he wants, it's okay with me.

It's crazy, Joe Jr. said, I've never heard such craziness. I can't believe that you're telling me this, that I'm here to listen. I wasn't a very good President. I fucked up, I admit it. The old man was right to tell me that I had to go. I admit it now, I never wanted to be there and the country was done a disservice. You did all right, Jack, in your way, up to a point. You kept Nixon out anyway, and that's a fact. But now you're betraying everything. I just don't get it. I don't--

Caroline, the President said. Caroline, honey. He extended his arms and the lithe girl bolted from the right doorway, ran toward him giggling. JFK leaned over, scooped up the six-year-old, bounced her in the air. Daddy, Caroline said. Joe could see the glint in their eyes, the same eyes really, the communion between the two. But it's best, still, he thought, it's best I didn't get married, didn't have children. It wouldn't have worked out. And I have spared a wife and children the disgrace of my life. I have at least kept the sadness to myself. Say hello to Uncle Joe, JFK said. Your uncle misses you.

I said hello when he came in, Caroline said. She squinted. Uncle Joe is tired, she said. He looks so tired.

We get tired earlier and earlier, honey, JFK said. He put the little girl on his lap, kissed the top of her head, spilled her off. That's enough, he said. We have to talk now. You can come back and play later.

I'll play later, Caroline agreed. She came over and kissed Joe on the cheek. I want to play with you later, she said and ran out. Joe stared at JFK, feeling the imprint of the little girl's lips on him.

It's enormous, he said, I don't believe it. This cannot be. This cannot be happening to us.

It was always meant to happen, JFK said. Now I told you. We can sneak you out the back way so that no one knows you were here.

How is Bobby taking it, Joe said, does he know?

JFK grinned. I guess he would know, the President said. I mean, I fired him face to face. It would be difficult to do that and for him not to know, right? Oh, he's in a ruddy gloom, Bobby is. But he'll get over it. We all get over it sooner or later. I've had my heart broken more times than you were up over Germany, Joe, and I've lived to tell the tale. You've lived pretty good yourself, and they could have shot you down anytime. Life goes on as long as you have it, that's all, you know? I'll get you down the back stairs. Anyway, that's the deal. How's your love life? I'll tell you, it's never been the same for me since the blonde did herself in. But that's another story.

Don't talk to me about the blonde, Joe said. How can you talk about the blonde? This is vile, do you hear me? It is enormous. It is impossible, it is the end of all of us, don't you see? You have destroyed us.

No, JFK said. He patted Joe's hand. That's why you're still trapped and I'm

free now. Because you don't see it, you never got away, even when he made you quit you were still his property. But I see it and I tell you that this is the making of us. This is the beginning. It is the true beginning of the story. It is the beginning of the Kennedy story and someday you will see that. And now it is time for you to go, brother, but you may take a paperweight from the Oval Office as a reminder of why you no longer miss the place.

10/26/63 He hadn't been able to reach the old man first, of course. That was impossible. He had put in the call to the compound right after the conversation with Jack but no luck, the word was that the old man was getting physical therapy and couldn't be bothered. Not even by his son, the ex-President of the United States. Which meant that the old man was fucking or trying to fuck the nurse again. Half of his brain had been shut down, but the old man was still in there fighting and for all Joe Jr. knew he was having a kind of success. You had to give the old man credit, he was in there fighting until the end. In the second place, no one was really returning his calls or picking him up now, it was amazing how far an ex-President could fail if he had been out of office for almost seven years and if he had a brother-successor who was a real bastard. A real maneuverer, that was JFK. Thinking about it could get Joe sick so he tried not to consider what had happened to him, how quickly it had all unraveled. Throttlebottom, wasn't that the name? the little Vice President in Of Thee I Sing who gave guided tours around the White House wearing a uniform and who had lunch with his mother every day. Joe hadn't turned into a Throttlebottom, not quite, he could probably seek paying employment and get it if he wanted (he didn't want it) and probably half the adult population could name his previous occupation, but it was still a hell of a thing.

So he had settled for trying to get through to Bobby. Bobby at least would take his calls, would listen to him, and this time maybe Joe could say a few words to the Attorney General that might be of some comfort. It was a hell of a situation, that was for sure. But Bobby wasn't available, he was locked up incommunicado somewhere in the Justice Department, maybe with Hoover for all Joe knew, and there was no word on whether he would return the call if ever. So Joe had been absolutely at loose ends, the first time it had been that way for him in years. He literally did not know where to go. Surfacing, showing up in public would be suicide now, the press would be all over him, would want quotes, would want to know what Jack had in mind. The city was exploding, absolutely on fire with this, with the unbelievable news that JFK had ditched his younger brother, the Attorney General, and had announced that he was going to back the Vice President for the nomination. The end of the dynasty, it seemed, the planned succession of Kennedys. Ted had been smart, he was hiding out in the Senate well, holding the gavel for the absent LBJ and denying comment of all kind. Besides, what the hell could a freshman Senator have to say about any of this? Teddy was thirty-one years old, he was in the Senate on a family pass, everybody knew that they had used up every bit of credit this time to sneak him in and if there was a next stop for the dynasty it wouldn't be at his house for a long time, maybe never. So Joe stayed away from Teddy too. He hung out in the secret apartment on K Street, just him and his one Secret Service guy, sharing a bottle and telling stories about the war yet again, they had both been pilots over Dresden and Secret Service had had worse luck than Joe, had had to make an emergency landing and evade capture over land. It was kind of an interesting story, but Joe was sick of it. He was sick of the whole damned thing, that was the truth, the war and the hero stories and the dynasty and the old man's plans, all of it, the whole business. There was enough of it now, and with JFK pulling this rotten move there would be nothing but a recycling of all that stuff over and again.

There had been a time, just a few moments it seemed, after his discharge, when Joe thought that he might be free of it. Just as JFK had planned to go on and teach history at Harvard or Tufts or Haverford, hang out some place and be an academic, avoid the whole thing, Joe had thought that he might go to law

school and then into pro bono work of some kind, maybe go into the down-and-out district around Scully Square and try to pay back some of Honey Fitz's debts. It wouldn't have been a bad life and somewhere along the way there might even have been a woman, one of the succession who would have stock. He could have gotten a subscription to Friday Symphony, gone to Symphony Hall in the early afternoons and sat in the slant light of that cathedral and listened to Brahms, just Brahms and pro bono and one woman who would listen to him but that shimmering little moment had passed when the old man had sat them down early in the year and had laid out the situation. You and you and you. Joe would have tried to balk, but what was the point? No one got anywhere with the old man, Gloria Swanson had been the strongest-willed actress in the world, stronger than Marion Davies had been with the Ambassador's friend Hearst, and where had it gotten her? She was a slut on a boat, just gash for the old man and that's how she stayed. If Gloria Swanson couldn't beat this guy, then Joe who bore his name with the diminishing Jr. below didn't have a chance. JFK didn't have a chance, Bobby with his verve and his big eyes was down on the list but he was locked in too. Only Ted among them might have gotten through, he was fourteen years old then and the old man hadn't noticed him yet.

So Joe had capitulated. Run for Congress? All right he would run for Congress. Spring for the Senate because you had to keep on moving or get shot out of the water? That would be okay too. The presidency? Well, that had been a big leap, the biggest, but the Ambassador had put it to him bluntly. No one is going to beat the general unless we do it, the Ambassador had said, Truman is finished and the Democrats are done for unless they get a complete overhaul. And then what? Do you want that bastard Nixon just a heartbeat away, waiting for the old general to keel over? You know that the general is a figurehead, it will be Nixon and McCarthy running the show and we don't want that, do we? Joe Jr. had fallen for that, not Nixon so much, a thirty-nine-year-old shit who Joe had gotten to know in the Senate as too much of a nut case to ever be dangerous--but McCarthy in control... that was another story. (He hadn't known the Ambassador's full cunning, hadn't measured the Ambassador's plans.) So okay, he had run. He shrugged. What the hell? It was the presidency, there were people who had been forced to do far worse, like march to their deaths in gas chambers or take rickety planes high in the air to be open targets for every ground gunner in Dresden. You couldn't complain that being forced to run for the presidency was perdition. All right, Joe had said, all right then. We'll try it. There was the good possibility they would lose, the general had his points, and if he didn't lose, how bad could it be? He already knew that he was just keeping the seat warm for Jack, who the Ambassador was beginning to suspect was the real political guy here, the real son-in-waiting. Joe Jr. didn't care about that either. If they would just leave him alone, he could put it together. Sure he could. That was the plan.

Oddly, it was LBJ who took him out of this recursive brooding, this spiteful hammering at his history, the infinite and repeated measure of the betrayals which had become his post-presidential lot and now seemed in the wake of the Ambassador's unavailability, JFK's implacability, Bobby's invisibility, to be his complete fate. LBJ had turned him up at the secret apartment and had invited him over to Blair House for a confidential talk, just a courtesy he hoped he would get from the ex-President in hope of his continued support. That was LBJ for you, still maneuvering around, even when the maneuvering was unnecessary and made him look silly. But he couldn't get off the can. All right with me, Joe Jr. said. He told his Secret Service to take the afternoon off and went over on his own. No one seemed to care. Security had really been so lax with the ex-President for years that it was almost as if they had wanted him to get taken down, just end the whole problem. LBJ was full of courtesies, of winks and nods, of little pats on the hand and flourishes with the bottle of Jack Daniel's which he insisted Joe Jr. partake. I hope, LBJ said, that I can persuade you to put my name in nomination. It would be a great honor.

I don't know, Joe said, I haven't thought about it. A serious honor, LBJ said. Or you can be a second if that's all you want. Anything you say. It would be a great unifying gesture. I haven't thought about it, Joe said. I'm still in shock. I just haven't worked this out.

Yes, LBJ said, it is sure a shock. That is a boy of many surprises, our Jack, isn't he? He is one surprising boy in good times and bad. But certainly a good-looking boy and a great President. I hope that I can honor him in succession.

That was LBJ. Blair House, the sitting room, no one there, Claudia knocking around somewhere upstairs, the staff dismissed or in hiding for the afternoon, an audience of one, then, and LBJ was still making speeches. You had to give him all kinds of credit, he never stopped. But wasn't that the Ambassador's lesson? You couldn't let go, you couldn't let down, not even once, because then you got led into bad habits and soon it would all unravel. So LBJ was still working the territory, audience of one, audience of a thousand, it was all the same. Still, Joe was the ex-President, that should count for something. So maybe he was an audience of a thousand.

Tell me, LBJ said. His cunning features, those of a hound, became even more shrewd, he leaned toward Joe. Fifty-five years old, he had the sudden, frightening ingenuousness of the thirteen-year-old kid in the schoolyard saying to the first grader, I sure could use your lunch money now, so why don't you pass it over? Why did he do it? LBJ said. What does he have up his sleeve?

I don't know, Joe said. I really don't know.

You talked to him. He had you in there the day after he did it, the day after he told me and Bobby what he was going to do. He must have told you something. What is the plan? Is he straight on this?

As far as I know.

Why would he ditch Bobby? Did Bobby do something bad? LBJ said, nudging Joe's elbow. Was that it, was it some kind of get-even, or to protect him? Because I've got to know that. If something comes out when I'm running, in mid-campaign, I ought to know that now. Why would he ditch his own brother? I can't answer that, Joe said. I don't think there's anything bad, though. I just think maybe that he's had enough.

Who's had enough? The President?

JFK, Joe said. He's had enough of this. Maybe he wants to break the line, you know? My father--

Oh, that Ambassador is something, LBJ said, he is really something. Fighting back from a stroke and all that. Still as stubborn as they come, a real guy. One of my favorite people. He paused. You say Jack has had enough of him? Maybe, Joe said. Maybe that's it. I can't be sure. You have to draw a line somewhere. Maybe Jack has drawn that line.

I don't know, LBJ said. It's too deep for me, I'm just a simple son of the South, a man's man, a drinking derby of one. He lifted the glass. I sure would appreciate your support though, he said. And that's a fact. Your support would be very important to me. The Kennedys are this country, you know that, don't you?

Oh, I hope not, Joe said. I hope that's not the case. But it's true. Sure you boys are. You put it together. You're in the movie magazines and the newspapers, you're on television and you're a soap opera too. You are America. A poor Southern boy like me, he hardly has a chance to get his name in nomination these days. Which is why Jack astounds me, why I can't figure this out.

Don't ask me, Joe said, I am the ex-President. If I could figure things out I would be in a different condition.

LBJ put a hand on his wrist. He wouldn't double-cross me, would he? he said. That's what I want to know. This isn't some slick maneuver, is it, and at the convention Bobby storms it and looks like an opposition candidate when it's really you all the same? That would be a bad business.

Joe shrugged. I don't know, he said, I'm out of all this. It's just headlines and memories to me now.

That stuff with Cuba, LBJ said, that was a pisser. I thought that Bobby was going to shit, I swear. I thought he was going to have a fit right in that office. But the guy went along with the plan in the end, didn't he? He fell into line. You boys, you all fall into line with each other, no matter how it seems. That's family, right?

Joe put down the glass, shook it, watched the ice revolve. Maybe, he said. I tell you, I don't know. You have me up here for a special reason, to pump me for information, and I tell you I can't give you what you want. I'm going to go now, I'm going to pack it in. Maybe you'll hear from me later.

A nomination would be a good thing, LBJ said. And there would be something in it for you. How would you like to be Secretary of State? How about that? Or UN ambassador? I've had enough of Adlai, I think, we all have. Or how would you like to be your old man and go to the Court of St. James's? You'd be the first ex-President to do some real government service. Why don't you think about it? You're a young man, younger than I, you still got it all ahead of you. We can work out something.

That was it. That was LBJ. He could always work out something, that was the way he saw life, everyone was stumbling around, looking to have an angle or to enact one, and Joe was just part of the party. Any man could be bought, any man could be sold. By all rights of experience, LBJ was on the bail, that was the way it happened. I don't know, Joe said, I'll think about it. We can talk about it next year. It's a long way to the convention.

It's going to be Atlantic City, LBJ said. That's where I want it. Jack said it was my choice and that's it.

Sure, Joe said, sure. There had to be a way out of Blair House. He had been over when he was in office a few times, Sparkman had shown him the corridors and hallways, he ought to remember. Sparkman was good at getting out of Blair House and so was he. He walked. LBJ sat on the chair at attention, his hands folded, peering at him brightly, letting him go unescorted. That was LBJ. Ferally alert, right through to the very end. It got you a reputation and you had to eat a lot of shit along the way, but at the end you were around all right, and there to pick up the pieces. All of the pieces. So much for the succession. Joe snapped back, came away from the parapet, looked no more at the imponderable, unspeakable future, felt himself hurled again and again into the hard wail of the past.

Somewhere back there were the conditions which if only understood could have changed all of this, even yet. Or so he thought. But you never knew. You never knew.

8/28/46 In the stone house at Hyannisport, Joe Jr. had sat with the girl, Rhoda, through the early afternoon and talked, talked through the soft dwindling light cuffing in the windows and into the early dark. They had made love through the morning, past stupor and into that high, fine, dense place which Joe had known only a few times in his life, most of them at high altitude and in dread of imminent death, but this was different. They had only known each other for three days but the connection was there, even a sense of possibility. The campaign was going all right, it was more than a safe seat, it was so easy that even the old man had slacked off on him and had allowed him to take a few days off for what the old man called with a smile, rejuvenation. The big push would begin right after Labor Day, but now there was some time for Rhoda. She was pretty in an unconventional, Wellesley-girl kind of way, the body wasn't much but she knew how to use it, and beyond that there was something else, something which touched Joe and showed him parts of himself which he had never been convinced were quite there. Knowing that they were there would have been too risky, dangerous maybe, but in this late August the Congressman-to-be didn't care. Rhoda was a secretary at the Worcester office, detailed to be on the road, just filling in the summer after college while she made decisions about her life, she said, but Joe suspected that she

didn't much care either. Not caring was precious, there was so little of it in life and even then Joe must have known that it would never be happening for him again, that this was a weekend knocked out of eternity.

I don't understand, she said to him, I don't understand what it is with you boys. Young men. The three of you. I mean I haven't met Eddie yet, but it's probably the four of you. What is it with you and your father?

I don't know, Joe said. I don't know what you're asking. I've seen how you talk about him. I've seen how you act when he comes to headquarters or gets up on that rostrum with you, I've watched Jack's face, and Bobby's too. You're afraid of him, aren't you? He really scares you, all of you, very badly.

This is not the way to make points with the Congressman, Joe said. You are not playing your cards right if you are looking for my heart.

I'm not looking for your heart, Rhoda said. She held his hand, looked at him with much intensity. I'm looking for you, don't you know that? I'm trying to find you, Joe, I'm trying to help us both see who you are. You were in the war, you flew planes, dropped bombs, you were a hero. Jack did Navy duty. Bobby didn't do much of anything but that wasn't his fault, the two of you boys though were out there making the world free for democracy. What does he have over you?

It's not fear, exactly, Joe said. It's not that. The Ambassador-- He paused. The Ambassador is a very strong man. He is very insistent. He has big plans and has had them for a long time. Sometimes it is just easier to get out of the way and let him have his plans, you know? It is not worth opposing him. This makes no sense at all, she said. You know that you're not a coward. So why are you acting like one? You saved the world for him, Joe. So why do you want to please him so? What is there about him that he holds over you?

Plans, Joe said. He has large plans. It's hard to explain. It's hard for anyone outside of the family to understand--

That's bullshit, she said and smiled at him when she saw him twitch. Bullshit, she said again. You don't have to be in the family to figure out what he has in mind. He wants you to be President. The first Catholic President.

Primogenitor, because you're the oldest. Then Jack. Then Bobby. Then for all I know, Edward. One, two, three, four. Those are his plans. He's always had them, from the time his sons were born. He would have drowned his daughters if Rose hadn't taken on the responsibility for them. Am I shocking you, Joe? You know it's the truth. Anyone can see it. You talk of his big plans as if it's some kind of sacred secret, but the fact is that everyone knows it. So why don't you admit it and decide if you want to play or not? You don't have to play, you know. You can go off and have a nice life. She squeezed his hand. You're good-looking. You've got lots of money, even if he cuts you off you can make your way. You're not dumb. You can go and be a professor of history. That's Jack's ambition, Joe said. Not mine. But Jack's not going to make that either.

So what's yours? Rhoda said. What do you want, Joe?

Congress, he said, I want to go to Congress.

No you don't.

Sure I do. It will keep me off the streets.

Then the Senate? The Governor's chair? The presidency? You want that, Joe? Is the whole package set with Jack behind you?

He shrugged. I don't want to talk about it any more, he said. You're supposed to be helping with the campaign, not asking questions. You're very pretty, he said. When the light catches you in a certain way--

Blarney will get you everywhere, she said. But you've already been into the sacred trust. I think you have something to think about, she said. I think that you've got some very serious thoughts ahead of you. Because this isn't what you want, Joe, and it's not too late to pull out. How do you know what I want?

I don't. But I know what you don't want and that's it. Let Jack have it, she said. He'd have taken your place anyway if something had gone wrong. If you had been killed overseas, Jack would have been doing what you are right now.

He will anyway. So you can get out of this.

You're persuasive, Joe said, pretty and persuasive. But I don't think you understand. There are centuries of family history here, generations of ignorance and slight, the Ambassador and all his forebears working--

I'm not interested in that, she said, I'm interested in you. I haven't been fucking the Ambassador or Jack all night and all morning, it's been you.

You're the one I care about and I want you to see, want you to know--

He put a hand on her lips. All right, he said. I understand you. It's enough. I understand what you're trying to say. You don't have to say any more.

But you won't change, she said, will you? One pretty girl in one afternoon isn't going to make any difference at all. All those centuries of family history, generations of ignorance and slight, the Ambassador and his forebears working--

You got me, he said, let's go to bed. Let's make love. I want to see you. I want to enter you, I want to know--

She stared at him, her eyes round and full. In the stone house at Hyannis in that moment, he felt that he could have touched all the deepest parts of her. Maybe, he said. I don't know. I'll think about it. It's too much to think about. Maybe we have a chance, he said. You don't know where you're heading, what this has been, what has become of us. I can only tell you that there's more here than you can know. But we could try--

She put her arms around him. All right, she said, we won't talk any more. We won't say anything more now. I could love you. I don't love you. Maybe I do love you. I just don't know, can you see? We don't know what we are, we have to dig for it. You have to go inside, you have to understand.

Yes, he said, yes, we'll try, we'll try to go inside, and in the light and shadow they had come together in that room, not even leaving for the bedroom, and there had been that night and part of the next day too, and then Rhoda had left because her parents would want to know where she had been all these days and she had still been living at home. Then came Worcester and Boston and the tumult of the campaign resumed; it was not as if they simply fell apart, it was not that simple. They saw each other again and they almost came that close again several times, but as October went into November and then past the election and into the plans which had to be made for Washington it became clear to both of them, maybe Rhoda before Joe, that nothing was going to change, that he wasn't going to get out, not then or ever, that he was going to have to follow it through to the end and there was no room for her because she would have been part of the furniture. I think I'll always love you, she said. I don't think I'll ever marry. Me too, he said, me too, Rhoda, but that had all been what she would have called bullshit; Joe was the sincere one, Joe was the one who had never married (he sure had fucked around, though) but Rhoda was hooked up with a professor of economics in less than six months from their parting, went to UCLA with him, had four sons, a nice bit of collusion there, and had died at forty in San Bernardino in a crazy flood that had washed out a campground and drowned her and the oldest boy. So much for that.

The stone house at Hyannis, the pinwheels of light, the soft sounds of her against him and the rising too, and then the end of it as they fell and fell and it was not Rhoda but his condition which embraced Joe as he lay there gasping by the cold fireplace, staring at the crazed and absolute configurations of his life. You kept on going, that was all, followed it through, and then on the beach at Hyannis or in the campgrounds at San Bernardino the waters came, the waters always came and they would take you. Take you up, take you down, take you to the castle of your life. Portraits of the Ambassador hung at every angle in every room, glinting, glinting with their spectral knowledge and absolute pity.

11/22/63 Joe checks the stock again of the M-1, feeling it cold and solid in his hands, the trigger a little rigid but it will yield in the clutch, he is sure. The trigger feels a little bit like a clitoris against his index finger, he will jiggle it a little, then take a firm grip and make the rifle come. The

thought of this, the analogy, makes Joe giggle a little and there is a strange, whirring moment of descent in which he wonders if he is really losing control, if this act is truly as crazy as it might seem from the outside. All of his life, he now sees, he has been surrounded by ordnance, by gleaming machinery of one description or another, the planes carrying him like an embryo in their thin, shaking, gusty surfaces, then later in the open cars and closed offices of politics, the experiments with hunting and high-caliber bullets which he had carried on at Hyannisport over the weekends, just as a means of getting away, then the years after the Presidency running around the country in high-speed machines, sometimes with the Secret Service in tow, more often not, tracking the highways of his doom, watching America stream by him. In Las Vegas for a while in the late fifties there had been some real peace, hurling himself against the distant totalizers, the green felt of the craps table, the roulette wheel, feeling himself dispersed in these arenas of chance, and in that machinery he had found for the first time since Rhoda the beginnings of a frail if illusory sense of himself... but that too had ended, Bobby had passed the word, Las Vegas was just too touchy, mob-infested, in the hands of the racketeers and it wouldn't look good if the oldest son and the ex-President were seen at the gaming tables, even if he was surrounded by Federal protection.

Worse if he were surrounded by Federal protection, Bobby had said, because that made the government look like collaborators, made it look as if they were granting special prerogatives to the gangsters. Joe had made something of an issue of it, had even humiliatingly pleaded, but Bobby had been firm, it wouldn't work out. He had to quit. At last the Ambassador himself had brought the word to Joe in a late-night phone call. They weren't talking much in those years, reconciliation had come later if at all, but the Ambassador made the call a special issue. You're entitled to some pleasure, maybe, the Ambassador had said, but you're fucking up things for everybody, Junior. So bury it. Come back East and play the horses at Bowie and Laurel with Hoover, but stay the fuck out of that Mafia trap. And that had been the end for him, he had never gone back since.

But the machinery had persisted, even to this moment when he cradled the M-1 and looked at its dull surfaces, feeling the power humming in the stock, feeling in his wrists the arc of the bullet which would tear off his brother's head. Reconciliation had come later if at all, that was true, but in a way this was reconciliation right now, he would be performing the one last great service for the Ambassador that no one else could have conceived, and that service would change everything.

See, you old bastard, I loved you all the time. I gave up everything for you because it was in you that I would find myself and that is what I have, Father, don't you see?

He didn't have to peer into the distance now, the motorcade was visible, clearly within the arc of his vision, it would be only a little while now. In the meantime, Joe Jr. thought, there was absolutely nothing to do but to stay calm, stay crouched amidst the cartons, let it happen. The worst thing would be to lose control now, to become emotional, to begin to think about it. The thinking had all been done. He had blamed the Ambassador for everything back then, had really fixated upon the Ambassador as being--how foolish, how stupid!--the force which destroyed his life, but then he had learned better, had come to understand that he who bore his name was if anything the Ambassador's greatest creation and now he would have to break the President to prove this to all of them. In the end it all came simple, it was far less complex than anyone thought, one fine line carried through it all, and you simply had to follow that arc. The best part of being Throttlebottom was that you could put on a uniform and lead a guided tour and no one would notice, no one at all. Joe Jr. began to hum, hummed a little marche militaire in a cracked and insouciant tenor, waiting, waiting now for the cars to come. Getting out quickly, out the back way, that was going to be a tricky business. But he would work on it in due time.

11/22/55 Joe had gone ahead with everything up to that point. The Ambassador wanted to stock the cabinet with Massachusetts polls, that was okay with him; he wanted JFK in at HEW even with the nepotism angle, and that was okay too. He had a certain agenda, the Ambassador, and the best thing to do was to go along with it, otherwise he would take to reminding you of exactly who you were and how you had gotten there and what could be next.

So even putting McCarthy in at State, Joe had gone along with it. That had been the real shocker and he had taken plenty for that; it had looked in the beginning as if it would tear the party apart. But the Ambassador had been insistent. I want this and that's the way it's going to be, he said to Joe. Handle it any way you want, take it to the press, make any goddamned liberal excuse you want, but Tail-Gunner Joe is in there and that's the way it's going to be. What about the eighty-seven Communists he can't produce? Joe had asked mildly. What about that faked Tydings photograph? What about the loyalty oaths and that joke committee? The Ambassador had shrugged. That's all politics, he said, that's for show. The real thing is that I want him in there. He's an old friend and a good guy and we can keep an eye on him better there than in the Senate. Listen here, the Ambassador had said and maybe he was telling the truth, that was the thing about the old man, he could lie and lie and lie and then he'd pull something on you which was absolutely the truth and if you ignored it you could really get in trouble, would you rather have that guy over at State where we can keep an eye on him and control him all the time? Or do you want him in the Senate, skulking around with Nixon, making plans and working against us every minute? You'll see how much sense this makes.

Joe had seen it all right, had known what was going to come on him when he made the announcement, the best thing to do was to announce the Cabinet in a bunch in mid-December right around the tree-lighting ceremonies and kind of sneak McCarthy into the back of the pictures and hope that they could get away with it, but that of course wasn't the way it really worked out. The press had been too scared of Tail-Gunner Joe to really make a big issue of it, that had been left for Truman, who went half-crazy back in Independence, and to Alger Hiss, but they had certainly made it the story of the day, then the week.

Handle it any way you want, the Ambassador had said, so Joe did just that, went on the radio the day after Christmas to talk about the New Unity Coalition which would come out of Tail-Gunner Joe being brought to State, even let the Tail-Gunner join him in the last ten minutes to make his own unity statement, and it seemed for a while as if it actually was going to work out. McCarthy liked his drinks and his boyfriends in secret and his prerogatives and really wasn't as much of a danger as everyone thought, the Ambassador had been quite right there, but then the situation had started to get really nasty when McCarthy all on his own decided to reconvene un-American Activities and go after a whole flock of homosexuals and Communists who he said had been part of the old China group for years. A hundred were pitched out in October of 1955 in the first wave, and then Tail Gunner Joe had taken some advice from Nixon and had gone on television, shaking his fists and crying and saying that he was standing up for an administration which was too cowed, just too scared to really face up to the degree of corruption, but the penalties had to be paid. Then McCarthy had spoken about how the H-bomb plans had been shipped out to China and maybe the Soviet satellites by some of these hundred people and it might be too goddamned late to save security, they might have to deal with the possibility of a preventive strike against Peking, and looking at the shouting figure on television, looking at the grays and blues of the Secretary of State who was clearly drunker than he had ever been and absolutely out of control, Joe Jr., the President, had seen that he was going to take whatever risks were entailed, wherever they led, and he had fired the Secretary. Had simply called in Sorenson and told him to get the announcement out immediately and then had phoned the UPI himself at midnight to break the word. This is intolerable, the President had said. McCarthy does not speak for this administration, he speaks for no one. He was an attempt at a coalition which

simply went wrong and he is out. Then he had gone to bed, alone as always, with the first solidity of conviction he had felt in more than a decade and had waited for all of it to sweep over him.

It had been even worse than he had thought it might be because McCarthy did not make a frontal attack, he sent up Cohn first and then Harriman (how he got Harriman to front for him was something that Joe could not figure out) and then amazingly Adlai had made a call and said that this was simply too extreme, that perhaps some compromise could be worked out. McCarthy might say that he had overstated the preventive strike issue and felt that the warning alone was sufficient. No, Joe said to the old trimmer, the Governor of Illinois who he had beaten back like a crutch at that rigged 1952 convention, there's no compromise. He's out. He is out as of thirty-six hours ago. He is crazy, Adlai, and I am crazy if I keep him. You don't understand the stakes, Adlai had said, and Joe understood then and only at that moment that Adlai was bought too, that Adlai was bent over and Tail-Gunner Joe had him cold. Adlai was a liberal who had spent his whole life waiting to be buggered and Tail-Gunner Joe had seen it and somehow done the job. It was the first insight the President had ever had which he thought might be worthy of his old man, the Ambassador, which he thought the old man might really have liked and respected, but of course it was too late for gaining respect that way. At last McCarthy himself had come up alone, his eyes bloodshot, his head tilted, the scent of alcohol and frenzy coming off him, and something else, some deeper odor which Joe could not identify but which he knew was profound. Tail-Gunner Joe had already known that it was over, though. I'm not finished yet, he said. I'm not finished with you yet, Boston. There's plenty more to be said here. You aren't going to fuck with me like this. I came over to your side, gave you the advantage for years because I am a great American, but I see you for what you are now. You're part of them.

A Communist too, Joe said, is that what you're saying? Never mind what I'm saying, McCarthy had said, you just remember that you're going to go down on this one.

If anyone crosses you he's a Communist, Joe said mildly. It played for a long time and it's probably going to still play, but I can't tolerate it at this level, Senator. The Chinese don't understand our politics, you understand, they don't know that it's all a game you're playing. They and the Russians are likely to do something which might go out of control and that's why you have to go. So you're gone. Except that you won't go easy. So go hard, but go away before I call the Secret Service and have you thrown out by all the powers of the office I have been given. I don't know how deep you're into all of this but I don't think you can compromise the Secret Service, at least not yet. Get out, he had said. Get out, you stinking, evil son of a bitch, go back to your boys and your press conferences and your glory holes but get the hell out of this White House right now and never come back.

So McCarthy had gone away then, something in Joe's face, certainly not the tone of his voice which was quiet, even choked, must have gotten through to him, but that wasn't the end of it, the Ambassador was up there in two hours, coming right in past Sorenson, past JFK, who was sitting with him, trying to calm Joe down. Get out of here, the Ambassador said to Jack and Jack got up and went, no argument, no response, just cleared out. That was the way it was done. The Ambassador closed the door and turned to the President. Just what the fuck do you think you're doing, he said, what is going on here? I want that man back, you understand. I want him back in office. I don't care how you handle it, a full retraction, a press conference, an arms-around-each-other bit, that's up to you. But you are not going to get this one by me. I have given you a lot of latitude, Junior, but I am not going to give you this one. The Tail-Gunner comes back.

No, Joe said. He's not coming back.

Must I--

No, Joe said. I have given in to you all the way. I have let you have one thing and the other thing, I have gone along with you from the first, I have

given you primogeniture and the Presidency and I have not fucked with you, but you are not getting this one. McCarthy is out. He is not coming back. I will stand in the door of State before he ever comes back. I will go to the well of the Senate, I will make a joint session of Congress to hear an address, but he is out. I will get Hoover to release everything from every file on this guy if I have to, but he is out and he is not coming back. He will have us all in flames, don't you understand that? He will have a bomb put in Times Square and another in the Rose Garden here. Joe looked at the Ambassador, felt the tears hopelessly come to him. Dad, he said, he's crazy, don't you see that? He had not called the Ambassador Dad in twenty years, it shocked both of them. He wants us all dead for his own advantage, Joe said. That's the truth and you know it. It has to stop.

But it can't, the Ambassador said, it can't because I won't have it. Because I said so--

What you say goes almost all the time, Joe said, but it doesn't go this time and that's all. I will be impeached for it if necessary, but it ends here.

McCarthy is out. Please, Dad, leave now. I won't throw you out, I can't do this to you, you're my father so I'm begging, but I want you to leave.

All right, the Ambassador said. He sat convulsively, took off his glasses, wiped them, stared at Joe. All right, he said, you'll make it stick. I can see that. You are that serious, you fool. You will stake everything on getting him out.

Yes I will. I must.

Then you're finished, the Ambassador said. Don't you understand that? You're all done for. I'll close the books on you. You're a one-term President.

I can't be concerned about that, Dad, Joe said. That's not the issue. The issue is--

The issue is that you can't give me this one. All right then, but it cuts the other way too. I can't give you this one either. You're finished, Joe. Jack is the next President. You're getting out. Ill health, inability to govern.

You're going to pass it on to your brother, the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. You've got enough clout in the party to do it, you're the President. That's what is going to happen.

And if I don't? Joe said, what's going to happen then?

You will, the Ambassador said. He put on his glasses, stared precisely at Joe, rubbed his hands. You can make it hard or you can make it easy, it's up to you. I'll destroy you, Joe. If I have to I'll finish you off. So just get out.

Make your announcement tomorrow. Otherwise--

Otherwise what?

Otherwise people are going to start to die, the Ambassador said. Maybe a housewife and college professor in San Bernardino for starters, maybe some other people. I'm not playing around, Joe.

Joe stared at him, swallowed, said nothing at all for a while. He tried to keep his mind blank. That was a trick his father had taught him long, long ago, if they hurt you, if you find yourself really bleeding, just shut up, keep your mind blank as a screen, allow them absolutely nothing. That was the only way to handle it until you got control again.

All right, Joe said, say I do it. Then what? Jack becomes President if he wins the election--

He wins the election, the Ambassador said. Don't you worry about that. He wins the election just like you won the election. We'll make sure of that. That's my department as of right now because you, Joe, you are finished. The election will be taken care of.

And so McCarthy gets back in at State, Joe said, so you'll reverse everything I've done here. I can't go along with that. You can take me down but I'll take you down too. Jack as well. You'll all go down, but McCarthy is never going to make a speech about preventive war again.

Okay, the Ambassador said. His glasses glinted, flashed in the light. No McCarthy. That's the deal. He won't be coming back. We'll keep him out.

And you say--

That's my word, the Ambassador said. You'll have to trust me just like I trusted you and got betrayed. Except that I won't betray you. McCarthy won't be Secretary of State.

Or Jenner, Joe said. Or Capehart. Or those swine McCarthy runs around with, I want them out too. That's the deal then. You make that pledge and I'll go quietly. Otherwise-

Otherwise you'll take us all down, the Ambassador said. Except you won't, you won't do that. Because you're a Kennedy, Joe, and that's part of the deal, the family first. He limped toward the door. I want an announcement within forty-eight hours, he said. You can go on television live or call the press or sneak it out to the UPI the way you did the firing. That's up to you. But I want that forty-eight-hour business and that's all there is to it, you hear me? That is very definite.

And if not--?

We've been through that, Joe, the Ambassador said. We don't have to go through it again, do we? He opened the door, nodded at the Secret Service.

I'm your son! Joe wanted to shout, I'm your first-born son, how can you do this to me? If the door had been closed, if the Ambassador had still been there, he might have done that. But of course the Ambassador was too clever, he was gone already and he knew that the President wasn't going to make that kind of a scene in front of the security. So Joe just sat there, the way the Ambassador had known he must and after a while Jack drifted back in again from the side room where he had heard everything and they just stared at each other. There was absolutely nothing to say. This was another of those times, and there had been plenty in their lives where there was just not one brotherly word that could be passed.

Oh, the Ambassador had been angry at him! Joe had thought that it was irreparable. But of course as the years passed things cooled off. McCarthy died of drink not much later, meaning that he wouldn't have been around much longer anyway, and JFK had turned out in the long run to be an even bigger betrayer in office than Joe had been, in the estimation of the old man. And Joe had come to see after this one great confrontation that the old man had probably been right after all, McCarthy was just red meat for the troops, and backed off China and the Soviet Union with terror so that deals could have been made. Joe in any case never took issue with the Ambassador again; one way or the other that confrontation had been the end for him.

And here in Dallas at last and at least he could come back all the way, perform this one great service for the stricken, nurse-fucking, raunchy, devoted old Ambassador who had in the end proven in this circumstance as in so many others to have been absolutely right.

Son of a bitch, JFK had said in the Oval Office that afternoon, son of a bitch, I'm going to be President. Not even a thought of protest or uncertainty, that was how thoroughly the Ambassador had controlled them all. The fucking President, oh my God, I'm the next President.

Well, you'll love it, Joe said, you'll love the perks anyway. There are lots of interesting possibilities in this job.

I wonder if I should get married after all, Jack said, maybe this isn't the time to do it with the campaign coming up and all. Maybe I should wait.

Jackie won't let you wait, Joe had said, she's going to be First Lady now and no one is going to give that up. Except Rhoda, he thought, but that was another wench in another time and so dead, so dead to me. You might as well go ahead and have a big wedding, Joe had said. The voters will love that.

They had, they did, and Jack stormed in over Nixon with 472 electoral votes and Kefauver clinging onto him on the inaugural stand, holding him even tighter than Jackie. Joe Jr.'s instincts had always been good, even if his luck hadn't. One way or the other, the Ambassador had made him a first-class political animal.

A humble one too, and eager to get back under the umbrella. The real betrayal then had been JFK. JFK had broken the line.

11/22/63 The sounds of the motorcade drifting to his high seat in the depository, the sound of the crowd seeming to envelop him, Joe lifts the stock, sets the sight, puts the scope to the curly, tousled head of his brother, seeing the faint pink of Jacqueline's suit refracting an aura, takes off the safety then. With a precision he had never known to be within him, Joe sets the sight, aims the rifle and fires. The first shot is in the throat, Jack falls back, Joe can imagine the look of terror and surprise on his face. Second shot ... he cocks it again. Jackie is starting to scramble, casting wistful, hopeless glances over the back of the limousine. Joe puts the killing shot in, the shot that will come through the Governor's knee, enter Jack's head at a high angle and windage and blow off the skull. Bobby will storm the citadel in a wave of national horror and sympathy which will utterly repudiate the crude, the untalented JFK. For every plan there is another plan. Joe knows this. The Ambassador after all was absolutely right, there was always that alternative.

Giggling, Joe Kennedy, Jr. puts down the rifle, lurches for the door, yanks open the door and speeds down the steps toward the open air, leaving the concerns of the motorcade to the Secret Service and to Parkland Hospital. Later that afternoon the ex-President will be found cowering in a movie theater and later yet he will be taken away in what must be the most sensational story in all of American politics, but he will never tell. He will never tell. He will never tell. Only the Ambassador, should the Ambassador come to see him, he will tell the Ambassador everything. Everything. But that is a part of the saga, Joe Jr., assassin of the thirty-fifth President knows, which will have to be told by other than him. His time is done.

He wonders what Rhoda might have known.

The policeman, curious, sees him running and comes toward him. The rifle is back on the sixth floor but Joe still has the .38-caliber Smith & Wesson.

Would Rhoda have made any difference?

Flatly, the policeman comes toward him, then shouting.

Joe reaches for the gun.