

Chapter 2

In America any boy may become president
and I suppose it's just one of the risks he takes.

—*Adlai E. Stevenson Jr.*

The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness, but the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable, especially when the question is disinterested, for they determine whether we use the power or the power uses us.

—*John F. Kennedy*

Air Force One August 1968

...As the president recited the lines of the poem, Patrick was able to get a better measure of the Kennedy he had seen so often from afar. He had no previous personal observations for comparison, but John Kennedy looked like a man who had been to the bottom of things and come back up. He always had a steely firmness under his charming demeanor, but he now emanated a more forceful gravitas. Nothing specific created this impression. It related more to the sum total of his parts: the gestures, facial expressions and timing created a sense of something very firm internally housed in a battered exterior form. For he was battered. He had taken months to recover from the shooting. He was noticeably older and a bit thinner, with a slightly hollow look to his face and eyes. His suit hung loosely when observed up close. But the intelligence and situational command shone through even with his reduced vigor. There was no doubt that he had wholly recovered mentally and significantly improved physically. His sophistication and magnetism were unmistakable, possibly even more magnified given the historical events swirling around him. Patrick felt no lessening of fascination with the man and his destiny.

Patrick couldn't help smiling, since Robert Frost's poem was the source of the title of his book about Joe McCarthy. He was surprised to find the president knew of it and, in fact, knew the poem by heart. He knew Kennedy was well educated in the classics and through his own interest, the current poets, but there was also a history there that lent a wary undercurrent. Patrick realized this recitation of verse might not have been the friendly opener it seemed. McCarthy had been a close family friend and confidant of Joseph Kennedy, Sr. and was rumored to have been the godfather of Robert Kennedy's first child. He had dated JFK's sisters, Eunice and Patricia when he was still a junior congressman. As a fellow Irish Catholic, he had been a surrogate member of the Kennedy household for many years. There had been conjecture and argument at many levels regarding the relationship between JFK and McCarthy. JFK was blamed for not openly censuring McCarthy during the years when both were senators and the freewheeling excesses of the McCarthy hearings were crushing innocent Americans. He refrained from formally censuring McCarthy during the

Senate hearings that effectively destroyed McCarthy's stature and led to his degeneration and death from alcoholism. It was a common refrain from JFK's detractors that if he wanted to live up to the ideals of his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Profiles in Courage*, he should have openly censured McCarthy for his abuses.

Patrick, on the other hand, had done his level best to dismember McCarthy and everything he stooped to, and *Acquainted with the Night* was the tool he used to do it. So at the moment, he didn't know where that left him with the president of the United States, who was looking at him with a serious face while flying thirty-thousand feet above Oregon after reciting a few lines of poetry.

It was said that Harry Truman would ask to be informed when *Air Force One* was flying over Ohio, the state of his arch political enemy, Republican Senator Robert A. Taft. Truman would walk aft, use the toilet and then ask the pilot to jettison the remains overboard. Patrick momentarily wondered if it were possible for him to be jettisoned off this flight for disparaging one of the president's former family intimates. He could imagine himself flushed into the rarefied, frigid air.

The president, however, did not seem angry, just intent.

Kennedy sat back a little, flicking his cigar into the ashtray by the armrest. It was the kind of motion that was so practiced and repetitive, it was nearly unconscious. He looked at Patrick for a quiet moment.

"So you're the Patrick Hennessey who dismantled my Uncle Joe."

Kennedy said this without any noticeable bitterness. It was more a statement than a question, as if he were just putting a face to the name. Patrick had a hard time reading Kennedy, not the least of which was the shock of talking with him at all. He seemed to be a circumspect individual, deliberate and watchful. He didn't indicate, either with movement or words, the position he might hold behind the questions he was asking. Good at poker probably. Probing, without obvious rancor, but unrevealing.

Here it comes though, thought Patrick.

"Well... yes, sir. That was me," he answered cautiously but directly. "I was somewhat personally motivated."

Patrick and his family had lived too close to the bedevilment of Joe McCarthy for him to react coyly about trying to discredit the senator. He only wished he could have done it sooner and better. He could neither make apologies nor hedge his position, even if it brought the disapproval of a president. It wasn't that Patrick was such a brave soul. It was just a passion at his core that he could not mask even under such conditions. In fact, he was a little surprised at how easily firm acknowledgment of authorship came off his tongue. He hadn't had time to prepare a more circumspect answer, and he didn't feel this man across from him wanted anything but a direct response. He was aware of the transgression he might be making and sat waiting for a possible career-altering reprimand from the president of the United States.