

J. RANDY TARABORRELLI

New York Times Bestselling Author of

JACKIE

Private, Public, Secret

JFK

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This book is for anyone searching for and ready for second chances.

*To step into the light of who we really are, we sometimes
need to confront the darkness in who we've been.*

*If only we're willing to see it and weep, after that dark night
The sun rises.*

Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an action and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

What makes biography so interesting is the struggle to answer that single question: “What’s he like?”

—PRESIDENT JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY

INTRODUCTION

CHARACTER IS DESTINY

Three thousand years ago, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus wrote, “Character is destiny.” In other words, our character, that inner quality of our true selves that not only drives and motivates us but mandates the way we treat others, is the thing that shapes our fate. We’re all a mix of good and bad, imperfect people trying, hopefully, to do the right thing. In that respect, as we grow and as we change in character, so does our destiny.

As you will read in these pages, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was evolving, his character in flux at the time of his death in 1963. Given as much, while writing this book it sometimes felt unfair to commit such a complex and many-sided person to a history that often showed him not at his best as he struggled to find his way. “If I had to live my life over again, I’d have a different father, a different wife, and a different religion,” he was said to have told John Sharon, one of his foreign affairs advisers. When I read that quote at the start of writing this book, it sounded to me like a man unwilling to accept responsibility for his own life. However, as his story unfolded for me, I discovered a man who, at the end of his life, had made a decision to come face-to-face with and confront his demons. He’d begun to ask himself hard questions, the answers to which most certainly would’ve

changed him, both as a president in his second term and, more importantly, as a man in his later years.

So, how are we to remember a man who died in the midst of such personal evolution, a work in progress, if you will? We've been grappling with this question ever since the assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963. Do we revere him as the idealistic president who believed that the strength of our democracy lay in hope and activism, as demonstrated by the aspirational words of his inauguration speech on January 20, 1961: "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country"? Or, do we denounce him as the husband we now know had been chronically unfaithful to his long-suffering wife? How do we square the public servant with the flawed individual?

My previous five books about the Kennedys weren't about JFK, its most famous standard bearer. For the most part, those books centered on the life and times of his wife, Jacqueline Kennedy. While I always touched on Jack's life in those books, many questions about him arose for me during the research and writing, particularly in my most recent biography, *Jackie: Public, Private, Secret*, in 2023. When I finished writing that book, I felt a strong impulse to try to figure out what had made her husband act the way he had toward her in those pages. I wanted to make some sense of this extraordinarily complex figure and consider him not as an icon but, rather, as just a man. That's why I've now added this work, *JFK: Public, Private, Secret*, to my atheneum of Kennedy studies.

The subtitle of the previous book and of this one, *Public, Private, Secret*, was actually inspired by Jackie herself a few weeks before her sixtieth birthday in 1989. She was having a conversation with her former lover and lifelong friend, the acclaimed architect John Carl Warnecke, also known as "Jack," who'd designed President Kennedy's memorial at Arlington National Cemetery. Warnecke told me that while she reflected back on her life years later, he asked her about her relationship with Aristotle Onassis. In her characteristically oblique way, she said, "Oh, Jack, you know me. I have three lives: public, private, and secret."

I think we can all relate to Jackie's aphorism. We all have the same three lives of which she spoke: the one lived publicly for the world, the one lived privately for our friends and family, and then, of course, the one lived secretly. That third one is known only to us. It's the one we keep from even our most loved ones as we grapple with whatever it is inside us that makes us who we are. The person who says he has no secrets is a person lying to himself and to the world.

This book has the same subtitle, *Public, Private, Secret*, because I consider it an extension of the one I wrote about Jackie. You might say this is JFK's side of the story. You should know, though, that this isn't a presidential biography in the conventional sense. Not every move in politics or in governance ever made by John Kennedy as a congressman, senator, and then president is presented and analyzed in these pages. Other books have undertaken that task—literally, more than a hundred have done just that over the last sixty years. I was also not interested in addressing in depth the many conspiracy theories relating to his assassination.

This book is about John Kennedy's life, not his death. It's an exploration of the pivotal moments and touchstones that can make a person who he is—the impact of a son's relentless desire to avoid remaking himself in his father's image, for instance, or of a son who goes on to become a father himself and how that can change him in unexpected ways. The story of a person's life is replete with such moments, each with its own richness, complexity, and depth, each a whole story to be told on its own. These fragments of time don't always link up in a linear way. That's why I've chosen to present some of them here without chronological order, as fragments of a larger picture that, once assembled, reveal the dark truth and the bright light of the man who came to be known simply as "JFK."

In writing this book, I reviewed almost thirty years of my own research in search of stories about John Kennedy and his family that weren't quite right for my other Kennedy histories, and there were many. I spent many hours listening to the haunting tape-recorded voices of people long gone from this world who once shared memories with me I never published and

that I've now, at long last, memorialized in this book. Along with my trusted researcher, Cathy Griffin, who's been at my side on every book for the last thirty-five years, I also interviewed new people for my research. Some are in their nineties, such as Marilyn Monroe's publicist and intimate, Pat Newcomb. A few are even in their hundreds, like Joe Kennedy's personal secretary, Janet DesRosiers Fontaine. Also, the sons and daughters of pivotal people in JFK's life remember here for the first time their parents' fond association with him. Plus, I had access to several unpublished manuscripts of individuals who played key roles in his life, such as one written by his father, Joseph P. Kennedy. His book, if published, would've been called *Diplomatic Memoir*. Also invaluable to me were two unpublished transcripts of interviews Jackie's mother, Janet Auchincloss, gave in 1972 and 1973 intended for stories in a women's magazine. She and Jackie asked for both to be withdrawn because they felt they were too revealing. Indeed, they're quite telling. If they'd been published back then, a good many points of opaque history might've been clarified. I'm happy to bring Mrs. Auchincloss's words to life now, almost sixty years later. Of course, the hundreds of oral histories and other historical documentation provided to me by the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston also proved, as with all my books about the Kennedys, to be invaluable.

In terms of Kennedy's presidency, which lasted only 1,036 days, I chose to focus primarily on consequential decisions he made against a background of family concerns, including historical moments such as his handling of the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, and the Vietnam coup d'état in 1963. I wanted to tell these stories and others like them through the lens of his relationships with family, his and Jackie's—the Kennedys and the Auchinclosses. You'll learn as much about them here as you will about him because, like all of us, he didn't live in a vacuum. In order to better understand him, I think one has to also understand those close to him and how they dealt with the utterly extraordinary experience of watching such an imperfect loved one become the president of the United States.

As a politician, Jack always reminded people of American exceptionalism, a strong America that exercised global leadership while at the same time encouraged its people to be of service to their country. It's a paradox, then, that he wasn't always able to be of service to those he treasured, in particular, Jackie. In one book after another, the question of why she was never enough for him has been considered with a wide brushstroke: he was his father's son and his father was a cheater. But I believe that is too simple, too easy. On a deeper level, I knew there had to be more, and I did discover some larger truths. As you will read, Rose agreed to a long-term relationship between her husband and a woman in the Kennedys' employ. While that decision gave her the freedom to travel and live a life of her own, it also contributed to the shaping of Jack's own view of love and marriage and, specifically, of how much a wife should tolerate in it.

If the public knew of JFK's marital infidelities in the 1960s, would he have been elected? I reveal in this book for what I'm fairly certain is the first time that, shortly before he won his second term in the Senate in 1958, he learned that a woman he'd had an affair with had become pregnant. If that had become known at the time, would he still have been able to later campaign for the presidency? In addition to his infidelity, if his many illnesses and addictions had become known, one has to wonder if he could've been elected at all, and if so, how long he might've remained in the Oval Office.

Can we accept that a fundamentally decent person sometimes does bad things? Maybe a bigger question, at least where the presidency is concerned, is this: Does the character of which Heraclitus spoke matter? In 1965, Arthur Schlesinger addressed his good friend's character in his book *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. In it, he said that JFK defined character as "that combination of toughness of fiber and courage." Maybe politically that's true, but personally it's more than that, and Kennedy knew it, as you'll read in these pages.

I have one regret about this work. I'm sorry it's not the story of a more complete life. If it feels unfinished, that's because it *is* unfinished. John

Kennedy was just forty-six years old and in the prime of his life when he was murdered. If he had lived another thirty years or more, like his wife did, he likely would've experienced the full evolution of character that had begun in 1963, the year of his death.

If we accept Heraclitus's proposition that the inner life, our character, influences the outer, we can also accept that whatever was stirring within Jack in his final months likely would've shaped his true destiny. He'd realized he'd made terrible decisions and, in the process, had hurt people he loved, his wife in particular. He was finally being honest with himself and, in doing so, was deeply regretful. "I haven't been the best husband," he told his sister-in-law Joan Kennedy as they grieved the death of his infant son Patrick, a loss he couldn't help but feel was divine retribution. "It's very painful," he admitted to her, "and by painful, I mean shameful." Perhaps, with the passage of more time, he would've figured out certain things about himself and worked to square things with those he loved. People are usually not in old age who they were in their careless youth. He was already on his way to being a better president. Who knows what JFK the elderly statesman might've been like?

My hope is that as you read this book, you'll have a fuller, more well-rounded impression of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, our nation's thirty-fifth president. Perhaps by the time you finish his story, you'll have opened your imagination of Jack in a new and different way and you'll wonder, as I often did while writing it, just what might have been.

J. Randy Taraborrelli

January 2025

PROLOGUE

THE SECRET PLACE

THURSDAY, JULY 3, 1952. HYANNIS PORT, MASSACHUSETTS.

While gazing out at an endless stretch of sea and sand, Jack Kennedy set himself down on a small bench and placed his crutches next to it. He hated those things. He was only thirty-five. What healthy, able-bodied man of his age, he often asked himself, had to use crutches to get around? One might've thought he'd be used to them by now, considering he'd been on and off them for years. However, hailing from an athletic family like his own, he could never accept being the only one hobbling about as if he were disabled. His bad back, however, made it impossible for him to get around when it flared up, which was more often than not, especially in the years since the war.

Jack had awakened early to go outside and fill his lungs with ocean air, his way of starting the day off with the kind of limitless peace he could only find in these parts. He'd been all over the world and nothing could compare to good ol' Cape Cod, his childhood stomping grounds. These serene few moments alone were the only ones he knew he could count on, given that the Big House—that's what the Kennedys always called the family's beachside homestead—would soon be filled to capacity. His many siblings as well as

other relatives and friends were set to gather for the annual Fourth of July celebration. Soon would begin the daily ritual of holiday sports, meaning sailing and fishing out on the Sound, or tennis, softball, and football on the beach, all activities Jack had loved ever since he was a boy but that, these days, filled him with as much pain as joy.

Turning back to the house, Jack spotted a small woman walking briskly from the front entrance, down a graveled pathway, and out onto the blue-green lawn. She squinted as she gazed out at the sea, its shimmering clarity seeming to hurt her eyes. She then started to walk toward what appeared to be some sort of shed or utility structure, the kind in which one might store garden tools. After taking a single key from the pocket of her summery silk dress, she unlocked its door. Swiftly, she slipped inside and closed the door behind her. Jack smiled to himself. Strange, yes, but that was Mother, so it wasn't necessarily surprising, not if you knew Rose Kennedy.

About an hour passed.

Now, Jack sat at the large table in the kitchen of the Big House and, as he did every morning, perused the stack of newspapers carefully arranged for him by the help. Every day, he'd absorb anything he could find relating to American politics given that he was presently a congressman, elected a little over five years ago. He had bigger ambitions, though, than the House of Representatives. He had his eye on the Senate and then, after that? The presidency, of course. He wasn't shy about it, either. He knew that's where he was headed, and so did everyone else. If you found it hard to fathom, you were probably on the outside looking in, because everyone on the inside looking out knew exactly what he intended to do with his life.

Jack was competitive, taught by his father, Joseph P. Kennedy, that failure was not an option. However, unlike Joe, a man always motivated by naked ambition and a thirst for power, Jack was of genuinely good heart and purpose. He was idealistic, truly wanting to serve and make a difference. He could also be shrewd, as he'd already proven, a fearsome political adversary when necessary. Stumping for the Senate, as he was doing these days, was hard work, but he was up to the task. He was proud of the campaign he'd

thus far waged and of the machinery his greatest benefactor—namely, his wealthy father—had put into place to get him to the finish line. Looking ahead, though, was always his way, and the White House definitely beckoned. But, as they say, first things first, and the election for that Senate seat was coming up in November.

With his political career on track, Jack was also attempting to carve out a personal life with a new love interest, a young woman named Jacqueline Bouvier, “Jackie” for short, of course. He’d been seeing her for about six months. She was twenty-two and a real beauty, a brunette with big, luminous eyes set far apart on a classic-looking face with its full mouth and dazzling smile. He had invited her to the compound for the Fourth of July celebration, her first time in Hyannis Port, to meet his mother; the rest of the family had already made her acquaintance.

In cold, hard political terms, Jackie was the perfect asset. Well-bred, -educated, and -traveled, she looked great on Jack’s arm and was usually personable even if somewhat removed when in the company of strangers. “I’m actually not that fond of the public,” she’d told him. He figured he could work with her, though. There was just something so fresh and beguiling about her; he knew people would take to her. He definitely needed a wife if he was going to be president, or so his father had warned him. It’s just the way it was and, in fact, everyone in the family was a little surprised Jack was still single. The time had come; they all knew it.

While Jack was captivated by Jackie, he definitely wasn’t in love with her. They hadn’t even slept together yet, and success in the bedroom was a pre-qualifier for him in terms of how he’d feel about any woman. She was presently up in one of the guest rooms. She liked to sleep late, she’d told him, which was fine with him. She wanted his attention and required a lot of it. He wanted to impress her if he could, but, he had to admit, it was work.

As Jack became engrossed in a news item, a pretty young woman in a colorful print dress strode into the kitchen. This was Janet DesRosiers, secretary to Jack’s father. Janet was, at twenty-nine, pretty with a pink-and-white complexion, flaxen hair, and dancing green eyes. She was smart and

personable, efficient at her job of running not just Joe's businesses but his entire household. "Have you seen your mother?" she asked Jack. Without looking up from his paper, he said he'd spotted her out on the beach earlier but wasn't sure if she'd returned. When Janet supposed Rose might still be in what she called her "cottage," Jack glanced at his watch and agreed. Taking a final sip of coffee, he said they should probably check on her.

Wincing, Jack rose on his crutches and made his way from the kitchen, through the living room, and out the front door, with Janet following. If she were being honest, she was more than a little dazzled by this man. His angular face really drew a person in—that tanned, olive complexion, those sturdy cheekbones, the lively blue-green eyes, and all those great teeth. He was tall, about six feet, and very wiry at maybe 140 pounds. Truth be told, he looked as if he'd recently been ill, he was just that thin. In fact, he usually *was* sick with one thing or another, and not just this business with his back but all sorts of other maladies. It had been so ever since he was a boy.

The congressman stood on the porch and hugged himself against the unseasonably crisp breeze. With Janet still following, he then hobbled a few hundred feet down the graveled pathway. Finally, they came to that small structure, the one he'd seen his mother enter earlier. It was just four rickety plywood walls, a shingled roof, and no windows. He walked up to the door and knocked. "Mother?" There was no answer. He looked at Janet and knocked again. "Mother, are you in there?"

Then, the familiar, always trembling voice: "Yes, Jack, I'm in here."

"That girl I told you about," he said. "Jackie? She arrived late last night, Mother. She'll be down for breakfast."

"Won't you join us, Mrs. Kennedy," Janet asked, "and meet her?"

The door cracked open. Rose Kennedy peeked out. She screwed up her eyes and pursed her lips. "Breakfast isn't served until nine," she said before slamming the door closed.



“Rose’s Cottage” is what they called it. Joe built it for his wife in 1950. Since that time, every day would find Rose Kennedy in there, usually in the mornings. She’d remain for an hour or two, sometimes even more. “How to describe it?” asked Janet DesRosiers in a 2024 interview, by then a still-energetic hundred years old with an excellent memory of her life with the Kennedys. “It was a small building,” she continued. “No electricity. No plumbing. We had no idea what Rose kept in there. The door was always locked. I felt such sadness at the sight of this small, lonely woman walking across the sand in the morning to her little shed.”

“That’s where Mother makes moonshine,” Jack joked to Jackie when she asked about it at breakfast. She’d seen the shed during an earlier stroll on the beach. Jack, Joe, and Janet along with Jack’s younger brother Bobby and his wife, Ethel, were at the breakfast table, as were siblings Eunice, Jean, Pat, and Teddy.

“If I know Mother, she’s in there counting my money,” Joe quipped.

Jack tried to clarify things by explaining that this place was where his mother went in search of peace and tranquility. Jackie was surprised. The house was so enormous, she remarked, couldn’t Rose find a room somewhere in it to be alone? Jack said no, it was always too noisy. She needed a quiet, private sanctuary, he explained, where she could commune with her maker, which is precisely why his father had the shed built for her. “She prays, says the rosary, that sort of thing,” he explained. He added that his mother had attended a convent school in her youth, so maybe that explained things. What he didn’t say was that Rose’s Cottage was also where she went to put some distance between herself and her husband. Any time she didn’t have to be around Joe was, as far as she was concerned, time well spent. With a wry smile at his father, Jack noted that even though they called it Rose’s Cottage, it really wasn’t much of a cottage at all, was it?

Jackie wondered why Joe hadn’t put electricity and plumbing in the shed. “She didn’t ask for it,” he answered bluntly.

After a moment’s thought, it suddenly became more clear to her. “It’s about humility, isn’t it?” Jackie whispered, almost to herself. She said Rose

probably kept it humble on purpose. For her, opulence wasn't necessary in that space, and neither was the idea of privilege. All that mattered in that space was her relationship to her God. "It's her ... secret place," Jackie concluded, wistfully.

Now Jackie couldn't help but spin a little fantasy. She imagined lit candles on tables with pictures of old saints on walls and stacks of ancient prayer books on shelves. "I'll bet it's just lovely in there," she said.

She was so whimsical and imaginative, Jack couldn't help but chuckle. He doubted it, though. "A chair, a card table, a Bible, and a rosary," he said. Knowing his mother, that was probably the extent of it. Janet then mentioned that Rose had asked for a battery-operated record player. She suspected she was using it to play language records so she could practice her French.

"*Oooh, French,*" Jackie cooed. She thought that was "just marvelous."

When Jackie said she wanted to see it for herself, Jack told her it was impossible. None of them had ever been inside Rose's Cottage. She was surprised. If it were her mother, she said, she wouldn't rest until she knew exactly what was going on in there.

"But we all have a secret life," Jack said, matter-of-factly, "and that's Mother's."

Eunice tried to change the subject by asking Jack a question about his work in Congress. He was about to answer when the back door opened and slammed shut. Moments later, Rose appeared. Instantly, each person bolted to their feet, all except for Jackie. When she realized the breach in protocol, she, too, stood but did so slowly and sheepishly.

Rose took her place next to her husband and his secretary. Looking alertly at the newcomer, she said, "Jackie, I presume?"

Jackie nodded and smiled as she noted the pearls on Rose's neck, the diamond pin at her shoulder, both such dressy choices for the early hour. Though sixty-two, Rose's face was barely lined or scored by the years. "She was like a little doll," Jackie said later. "Porcelain, fragile, and ... breakable."

Rose made a quick assessment of her as well, this intruder sitting in her chair straight as a rod in her perfect little dress with her perfect little hairdo and her perfect little smile. “You do make a rather nice addition to the table, dear,” Rose finally decided.

“Lovely morning, isn’t it, Mrs. Kennedy?” Janet asked as everyone else chimed in with their good mornings to the matriarch. Rose nodded at her and smiled. She then told Janet it was chilly outside, so she should be sure to put on a sweater when she went for her morning walk. After a purposeful beat, she looked at Janet and added, “*With my husband.*” The table fell silent. Jackie’s eyes darted from one person to the next until finally settling on Jack, but he quickly looked away.

Following a very tense breakfast, a full morning of activities commenced before everyone came together again for a barbecue lunch on the patio. Later that night, a veritable feast of a dinner was served, and then they all adjourned to the parlor to chat over coffee. After about an hour, Jackie noticed Jack get up, walk to a chest of drawers, open one, and take from it a flashlight. He went to a corner where his crutches were propped and took them both under his arms. He then made his way to the foyer and out of the house, softly closing the door behind him. It was pitch-black out there. Jackie wondered where he could possibly be going.

Moments later, Rose stood, walked to the same bureau, opened the same drawer, and took out a flashlight of her own. She put on her coat and walked out the door.

After about fifteen minutes, Jackie couldn’t help herself. She had to see. She, too, got up and left the house. Once she was standing on the porch, she peered out into the darkness, searching the dusky shadows for her boyfriend and his mother. The air was hushed, the silence broken only by the sound of gently crashing waves. The air smelled like brine. The breeze was brisk, but Jackie didn’t care as she continued to stare steadily into the night. When the door opened behind her, Janet DesRosiers appeared with a light coat. She told her to wear it, “or you’ll catch your death of cold out here.”

After Jackie put on the coat, she and Janet stood squinting out at the stark and lonely reaches of the shoreline. Finally, in the deep blackness, they spotted two luminous spheres in the sand. Straining to see more, they finally found them, Rose and Jack. They weren't speaking to each other. They were just standing in place like two sentinels keeping watch, both looking out at the shadowy sea, their lit flashlights at their sides. Jackie huddled further into her coat as she watched them in fascination, mother and son alone, together.