New York Times Bestselling Authors of *The Lincoln Conspiracy*

BRAD MELTZER

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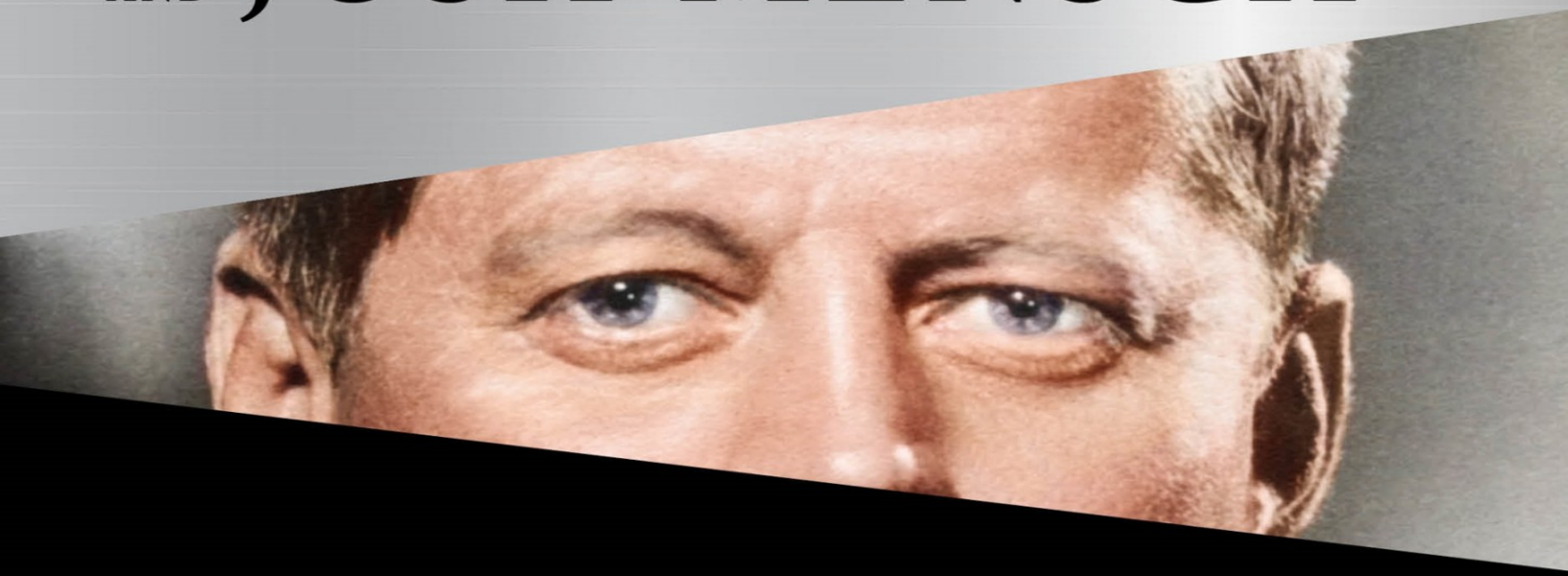

THE JFK CONSPIRACY

The Secret Plot to Kill Kennedy —and Why it Failed

"History is full of fascinating twists and near twists—and Meltzer and Mensch are masters of the tales of such moments." —JON MEACHAM

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For email updates on Brad Meltzer, click here.
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For Josh Mensch, my dear friend and brother in writing. So grateful we got to make history together.

—B.M.

For Brad Meltzer, who may be the greatest mensch of all. Thank you for inviting me on this amazing journey through history.

—J.M.

A Note on the Text

When quoting directly from historical sources, we've occasionally altered the capitalization or punctuation to be consistent with the style and syntax of our text. The language itself has not been altered.

Prologue

Palm Beach, Florida

December 11, 1960

No one notices the car.

It's been there for a while, parked on one side of a quiet residential street. The morning is bright, with the sun shining through the tall, leafy trees that line the roadside.

If anyone were to look in the car's direction, nothing about it would seem unusual. It's a 1950 Buick sedan—not a fancy or noteworthy vehicle. And if anyone happened to glimpse the man sitting behind the wheel, they wouldn't think anything unusual about him either. He's an older man, with short white hair and a wide face. His dress and appearance are typical—he looks like many other motorists in South Florida or, for that matter, anywhere else in the United States.

Across the street from the parked car, a scene is unfolding that isn't so typical. A small group of men stand or pace just outside the entrance gate of a walled-off private estate. They're dressed professionally and wear sunglasses, sometimes whispering to one another. They seem to be waiting for something or someone to appear from inside the grounds.

Soon enough, someone does appear. A tall, trim man in his early forties, wearing a suit, with perfect posture and short, carefully parted reddish-brown hair. He's flanked by a few other men, who greet or nod at those who are waiting outside the property's gates.

The man's face is memorable, with tanned skin and a bright smile. It's not just any face. Unlike the motorist, he's got one of the most recognized faces in the country. Soon, he'll be one of the most recognized in the world.

This is John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who, a month earlier, was elected to be the thirty-fifth President of the United States. Six weeks from now, he'll take the oath of office and occupy the White House.

John F. Kennedy's election was one of the closest and most bitterly fought in American history. He won the popular vote over his opponent, Vice President Richard M. Nixon of California, by the smallest margin in the twentieth century. When it came to the Electoral College, several states had razor-thin margins that could've swung the victory in the other direction. It was the first election in U.S. history to be fully televised, drawing unprecedented scrutiny and a media frenzy greater than any the country had ever experienced.

It was also a divisive election at a divisive time. In the 1960s, the nation was entering a new decade that would be as turbulent and full of social upheaval as any other in the nation's past. The defining domestic issue of the day—the struggle for civil rights for Black Americans—has led to a furious and violent backlash that has put the country at a perilous crossroads.

Kennedy's victory was greeted, especially by younger voters, with unprecedented fervor and devotion. At a time when the nation is bitterly torn, a new generation has placed its hopes and ideals with this young President to move the country forward in a direction they believe in.

Equally fervent, however, are those on the other side of the divide. Many Americans reject the changes and upheaval the younger generation are pushing. For these voters, Kennedy embodies everything they believe is *wrong* with the country and where it's heading. And Kennedy's enemies don't just disagree with his policies—they despise *him*. In their minds, he's a tool of dangerous radicals, or a foreign interloper with motives to undermine the nation.

Before the President-elect gets in the car waiting for him, he stops and turns around to greet someone else—a woman who has emerged from inside the grounds. She's medium-tall with dark hair and, like him, carries herself with perfect posture. Walking near her is a child, barely three years old. The woman's face would be recognizable to most Americans as the President-elect's wife, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy.

Like her husband, since the campaign, she's become the focus of intense public fascination and media scrutiny. The girl walking beside her is their daughter, Caroline Kennedy. Along with Caroline's younger brother, two-week-old John Jr., they're the soon-to-be First Family of the United States.

Across the street, the man in the parked car is still watching, taking in the scene. Most important, while his 1950 Buick may be nondescript on the outside … on the inside, there's a secret.

Hidden in the trunk, tucked under blankets and mixed with assorted junk and tools, are seven sticks of dynamite. Affixed to that dynamite is a wire that runs from the trunk into the body of the vehicle, toward a small trigger mechanism. All the man has to do is activate this small trigger to blow up the vehicle—and everything around it. According to one expert, if detonated, the amount of dynamite is powerful enough to "blow up a mountain." And right now, the man's hand is moving toward the ignition.

Across the street, President-elect John F. Kennedy takes a few steps toward the sleek black sedan parked by the side of the road. A few of the men in dark suits guide him to it. The sedan has been waiting for him, ready to drive him to somewhere most unusual for an American President: Sunday Mass. For Kennedy is, as almost every American knows, the first person of Catholic faith ever elected to the highest office.

For the man behind the wheel of the Buick, this is the moment he's been waiting for. It's why he's here in South Florida: to be on this street, on this day, with seven sticks of dynamite hidden in the trunk of his car.

It's a simple plan. Turn the key in the ignition. Put your foot on the gas. And turn the steering wheel just enough to slam the Buick into that sleek black sedan.

That's all it'll take to turn this quiet, leafy, sunny Florida street into a scene of horrors beyond imagining—and at this dawn of a new decade, to thrust the nation into unspeakable darkness.

PART I

The Candidate

1

SEVENTEEN YEARS EARLIER …

The Solomon Islands

August 2, 1943

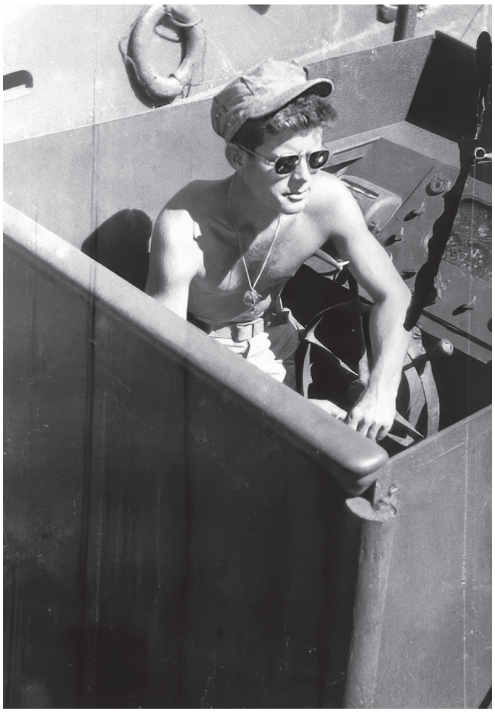
The sky is black. There's no moonlight to illuminate the choppy waves breaking softly against the boat's hull.

The vessel is roughly eighty feet long and twenty feet wide. It's a U.S. Navy motor-torpedo patrol boat, or a PT as they're often called, patrolling the Blackett Strait, a stretch of water in the Pacific Ocean southwest of Kolombangara in the Solomon Islands. On the opposite side of the world, in Southern and Eastern Europe, the United States and its allies Great Britain and the Soviet Union are engaged in a massive land war against Nazi Germany. Here in the South Pacific, the United States is battling the forces of Germany's ally Japan in brutal combat for control of sea, air, and land.

The U.S. has mostly gained control of the waters surrounding this part of the Solomon Islands, east of New Guinea, but the Japanese still send naval convoys through the region and launch air and sea attacks from nearby bases. That's why small American PT boats like this one patrol the area at night, on the lookout for intruding enemy ships.

On this particular PT, four of the thirteen crew members are asleep, the others manning their stations.

At the helm is the ranking officer on board, twenty-six-year-old Lieutenant Junior Grade John F. Kennedy, from Boston, Massachusetts. Like the other members of the crew, he wears a tattered life jacket and beat-up lightweight olive-green combat fatigues.



In the summer of 1943, during World War II, twenty-six-year-old Lieutenant Junior Grade John F. Kennedy is stationed in the South Pacific. He's the pilot and ranking officer aboard PT-109, an armed mobile patrol vessel. (Credit: circa 1943)

At 2:30 a.m., the boat is on the lookout for a Japanese transport thought to be in the vicinity. Only one of the PT's three engines is running so that the vessel will be as quiet as possible. For the PT's crew, these overnight patrols are common; they'll work in small shifts through the night while the others sleep.

That is, until the silence is broken.

"Ship at two o'clock!" one of crewmates, Harold Marney, calls out from the side deck. From behind the wheel, Kennedy turns to look, and, sure enough, the shadow of a ship can be made out against the dark water and sky. For a moment, he thinks it's another PT boat. But then he squints to get a better look.

That's not a PT boat. It's larger. Much larger.

The men on deck grasp it all at once. That ship they're looking at is a Japanese destroyer—a fully outfitted warship—from the Imperial fleet. It's roughly five times the length of the PT, with exponentially more armor and firepower. Still, Kennedy quickly spins the wheel to starboard, facing the

PT's flank toward the larger vessel so the PT can fire off one of its small torpedoes. The problem is there's no time to even load a shell—because the hulking shadow is getting rapidly larger. The destroyer is coming right at them, racing on the water at a speed of roughly forty miles per hour.

To Kennedy, it's unclear whether the Japanese ship is intentionally trying to ram them, or if its captain simply doesn't see the smaller boat in the darkness.

Doesn't matter. There's no time. Frantically spinning the wheel, Kennedy tries to swerve out of the way. But with only one engine engaged, the PT can't move fast enough. Now the destroyer is only seconds away, coming right at them.

So this is how it feels to die, Kennedy thinks to himself, shutting his eyes as the huge vessel SMASHES into their small boat. An explosion sends debris and plumes of flame through the air.

Two of the U.S. crew members are killed instantly in the collision. Others are badly injured as they're thrown around the hull and flung into the water by the force of the crash.

Only one crew member is below deck for the impact, the machinist Patrick McMahon, who is working in the boat's cramped engine room. He's completely unprepared for the shock of the collision. Water immediately gushes in from the smashed walls, and then, only moments after impact, flames from the explosion rip through the vessel, burning his shoulders, back, torso, and legs before he's submerged in water.

At first, the wreckage pulls McMahon straight down, but he somehow frees himself from the sinking debris. He has the surreal sensation of being several yards underwater, looking up to see flames on the water's surface. His body is too damaged to swim, but his life preserver pulls him toward the surface.

On what's left of the deck, Kennedy opens his eyes. He's clearly not dead. Getting his bearings and emerging from a daze, he hears men shouting, some nearby, some from the water. The Japanese destroyer has already disappeared into the darkness as quickly as it appeared, cleaving the smaller boat in two and leaving mostly floating wreckage in its wake.

A searing pain slices through Kennedy's back. He's had chronic back pain for years, ever since a teenage sports injury, but here, the impact has made it worse. Otherwise, he seems to be intact. Quickly gathering his wits, he knows what takes priority.

Wasting no time, he takes off his boots, strips down to his underwear and life jacket, and dives into the dark water strewn with debris and pools of burning oil.

The water is illuminated only by flames, and Kennedy follows the shouts, swimming in the direction of his injured crew. Two men have floated farther away than the rest, Gunner's Mate Charles Harris and the machinist, McMahon. Nearly unconscious and with severe burns all over his body, McMahon can barely move.

"How are you, Mac?" Kennedy asks.

"I'm kind of burnt," MacMahon replies, hardly able to talk.

Grabbing the wounded man and pulling him slowly back toward the debris, Kennedy swims against the current, tugging McMahon the whole way. Harris swims alongside them, struggling with an injured knee and the weight of his life jacket and sweater.

Meanwhile, those sailors who have the strength do their best to aid the rescue mission, pulling those who can't swim themselves up onto the damaged boat. Some of the men have broken bones. Others are nearly passed out from inhaling noxious fumes. In the end, rescuing the injured crew takes over three hours. Eleven crew members are accounted for, with two crewmates still missing. Their bodies will never be found.

As the sun rises over the Solomon Sea, some crew are lying on top of what's left of the boat's sinking hull, while a few simply float in the water. Some have slept an hour or two; others, like Kennedy, not at all.

For nine hours, overnight and then through the morning, they cling to the debris, with the healthy crew aiding the wounded. They have no food or water, and with the morning light comes the blazing hot sun. They can already feel the first waves of dehydration. The remains of the hull are sinking, and some of the men desperately need medical attention.

For a while, they're hopeful that the local command will stage a rescue mission to find them—but there are no ships on the horizon, no signs of

U.S. aircraft above. With each passing hour, their hope of rescue fades.

They also know these waters aren't safe. That destroyer probably wasn't alone, and there are Japanese island bases not far away, just outside the perimeter of Allied control.

Kennedy, although barely a junior officer, has the highest rank in the group, so he's the one who has to decide what to do. If they stay in the water, he knows it'll bring almost certain death, especially with no sign of rescue.

The closest bit of land is a small strip of uninhabited rock and vegetation—Plum Pudding Island—three miles away. Getting there won't be easy. The ocean is choppy, with unpredictable waves and currents. Making things harder, the men are weak and wounded. For some of them, a long swim could be fatal. But right now, Kennedy knows … there's no choice.

From the floating debris, Kennedy and the crew extract a two-by-eight-foot plank of wood and tie a life jacket to it. The weaker men can keep a hand on the floating wood while the healthy take turns pushing the plank in the water, propelling everyone else. The plank also serves another purpose: they can tie their remaining shoes and the ship's lantern to it while they swim.

There's still one problem: the machinist, McMahon. He's nearly incapacitated. His injured arms are too weak to even hold on to a plank in the water. For him, they'll need to find another way.

Five years earlier, Kennedy was on the swim team at Harvard. Even with his injured back, he figures he's the best swimmer in the water. Right there, a plan is made. While everyone else uses the plank, he'll personally pull McMahon in the water, swimming for both of them, for three miles.

Thankfully, since McMahon is wearing a life preserver, the one thing he can do is float. Kennedy will need both arms to swim, so to pull him in the water he stretches a strap from McMahon's life jacket and clasps it in his own teeth. That's the only choice at this point. If he wants to get McMahon to the tiny island, it's three miles with a clear objective: don't drown.

At roughly 2:00 p.m.—that's nearly twelve hours after the collision—the group sets out from the wreckage. Their progress is painfully slow. Even

the uninjured men are dehydrated and weak. Kennedy does a simple breaststroke, trying to keep his head above water as he pulls McMahon with the strap in his teeth.

Every time Kennedy inhales, he gets a mouthful of salt water. Struggling to swim, he has to stop every ten minutes or so, coughing, gagging, and trying to catch his breath.

"How do you feel, Mac?" he keeps asking.

"I'm okay, Mr. Kennedy," McMahon replies.

What starts as an hour-long swim becomes two hours, then three. Kennedy and McMahon get slightly ahead of the others. Pushing the plank while so many hold tight to it makes everyone's movements awkward and slow.

Soon, though, the speck of land known as Plum Pudding Island starts growing bigger in the distance.

Just before dusk, after four straight hours of swimming, Kennedy is so exhausted he's barely conscious. That's when he feels it. Something solid beneath his toes.

It's a bed of coral. He's close. Only a few hundred feet to go.

He shouldn't be surprised that it doesn't get any easier. The coral is full of spikes and sharp edges, quickly lacerating his bare feet and legs as he stumbles toward shore, still pulling McMahon behind him.

As soon as Kennedy reaches solid ground he vomits and collapses, nauseous from the physical exertion and swallowing salt water. Pushing through the pain and the exhaustion, Kennedy and McMahon slowly crawl across the beach until they reach the bushes at the center of the tiny island.

It's not much different for the others, who drag their damaged bodies toward the scraggly brush, using it as cover. For all they know, Japanese soldiers are lying in wait, or there's a Japanese vessel nearby. For that reason, staying out of view is essential. As night falls, the men have all made it to the brush. They pass out in exhaustion, but somehow, they're all still alive.

Looking back, it's a miraculous swim. But their trials are far from over.