



## CHAPTER 1

**I**n 1848, a farmer in Ireland named Patrick knelt on the ground and dug up a handful of potatoes that barely looked like potatoes. They were rotten—black and slimy—and they smelled terrible. A wave of fear shook the young man. A fungus had been spreading from farm to farm throughout Ireland for a few years, and now it had reached Patrick’s land. Without his potato crop, he would die of starvation or sickness. Nearly one million Irish people had already died.

Knowing that staying in Ireland would be a dead end, Patrick decided to join the many thousands of people who were fleeing the country and boarding ships bound for the United States. Patrick had heard that America was a land of opportunity. Certainly, life would be better there than in Ireland. So Patrick spent his last bit of money to pursue this new dream.

However, the voyage to the United States was worse than Patrick’s worst nightmare. The ships that carried the Irish emigrants were always terribly

overcrowded, with hundreds of people crammed into the small, filthy, windowless areas beneath the deck. People who were already starving died quickly, as very little food was available for the passengers. Others died more slowly from disease during the month-long ocean journey. So many people passed away that the ships became known as “coffin ships”; it was said that sharks followed the coffin ships, waiting for the corpses that were tossed overboard daily.

Patrick made it to the harbor island near Boston, Massachusetts, alive. However, he didn't have even the two pennies needed to take the ferry to the city, so he remained on Noddle's Island (known today as East Boston) along with many of the other poor Irish emigrants. Home became one of the many dingy tenements that lined the muddy streets where garbage was piled high. Everywhere Patrick looked, Irish people suffered with sickness and poverty. This was not the dream Patrick had in mind when he had left his home far away across the Atlantic Ocean. Still, he moved forward, determined, against all odds, to one day become a successful man.

Finding even the lowest-paying work, however, was not easy. Although there were many jobs available in the shipyards, signs reading NO IRISH NEED APPLY were often posted right alongside the HELP WANTED signs. Patrick quickly found out that many Americans treated

Irish people unfairly, even cruelly, because of their religion. Most Irish were Roman Catholics, while most Americans were Protestants. Many Protestants did not agree with Catholicism and even believed that Catholics were evil and up to no good. Additionally, so many thousands of very poor, sick, and ragged Irish people had been pouring into Boston that some people unfairly stereotyped all Irish people as dirty and lazy.

In time, however, Patrick found a low-paying job making whiskey barrels on one of the docks. The job never paid enough for him to escape the slums of Noddle's Island, but he found happiness with a young woman named Bridget, who had also moved to the United States from Ireland. Patrick and Bridget married and had four children: three girls and then a boy. However, Patrick's happiness was short-lived. When the boy was ten months old, Patrick, barely 35, died of cholera. Patrick's young wife and their four children were left nearly penniless, and his dreams of success were left unfulfilled.

More than seventy years after Patrick had died in the slums of East Boston, a young boy listened to the story of Patrick and his difficult journey. The young boy also lived in Boston, but he was surrounded by wealth and opportunity. It was hard for him to imagine a grown man having to nail whiskey barrels together to make a living,

and even harder to imagine not having even two pennies for a short boat ride. But perhaps most difficult of all for this boy to imagine was the fact that Patrick had been his great-grandfather.

Although Patrick Kennedy's dream had not come true, his widow, Bridget, had worked hard to keep that dream alive. To support herself and her four children, she had worked cleaning houses for some of Boston's wealthy families. Through that job, she glimpsed a better life—a life she wanted for her own family, especially for her only son. In time, Bridget began working in a shop that sold paper and sewing supplies. Amazingly, after a few years, she was able to buy that thriving business—and she began selling groceries in the store as well. All of the children helped out in the store, and Patrick Joseph, or “P.J.,” as Bridget's son was called, worked other odd jobs, too.

Knowing that education would be necessary for P.J.'s success, Bridget managed to find the money to send him to a Catholic school. By the time he was 14, however, P.J. felt he had learned enough. He then quit school and took a job loading heavy cargo onto ships for up to eighteen hours a day. It was tough work for a fourteen-year-old, but, several years later, it paid off—literally.

P.J. invested his money in a rundown saloon by the docks. He fixed up the saloon, treated his customers with fairness and friendliness, and,

in time, had enough money to open two more bars, one in the fanciest neighborhood in Boston. P.J. invested his money wisely and started more businesses. Before he was the age his father had been when he had died, P.J. was a rich and well-respected man. That respect then led P.J. to success in politics. He was elected to five one-year terms in the Massachusetts House of Representatives and then to three two-year terms in the Massachusetts Senate. In one generation, the Kennedy men had gone from making whiskey barrels to making laws.

P.J.'s only son, Joseph, was no less ambitious. Often fueling Joseph Kennedy's ambition was his anger at being treated rudely because of his Irish heritage. At Harvard University, he was not allowed to join certain clubs, and more than once he caught classmates talking behind his back about how he didn't belong at such a good school. He was told to his face by one particularly snobbish classmate that he'd never amount to much.

Joseph did his best to ignore the taunting. Instead of focusing on his anger, he focused on the future. He was determined to become a millionaire and prove everyone wrong—and he did just that. Only a year out of college, he became the youngest bank president in the United States. Like his father, he knew well how to both save and invest money, and his fortune grew quickly.

Soon after his appointment as a bank president, Joseph was ready to start a family. He married Rose Fitzgerald, a young woman he had known since childhood. Rose's family history was similar to Joseph's. Her great-grandparents had also migrated to the United States from Ireland during the potato famine, and her father, John, nicknamed "Honey Fitz" because of his sweet nature, had, like Joseph's father, worked his way into politics. Honey Fitz served as the mayor of Boston for several years and also served in the U.S. House of Representatives.

In time, Rose and Joseph had nine children, one of them being the young boy who now sat and listened with amazement to the story of his ancestors. Born in 1917, he was their second child, and he had inherited his Grandfather Fitzgerald's name: John Fitzgerald Kennedy. John, or "Jack," as he was always called, had been born into a life of luxury and riches. There were fun trips to the family vacation homes in Florida and on Cape Cod. There were servants and maids who brought Jack whatever he needed. There was the promise of a secure future, the best education, the best clothes—the best of everything.

"But remember," Rose concluded, looking at her young son's freckled face and bright eyes, "of those to whom much is given, much will be required."

Jack had heard his mother say that many times; it was from the Bible. And though he wasn't completely certain what the sentence meant, Jack knew that he was expected to appreciate what he had, and he was expected to be the best he could be.

Sometimes, however, Jack did not exactly feel like he was living up to expectations.

From a very young age, Jack Kennedy had been a sickly boy. Rose Kennedy kept a file of index cards on which she kept track of her children's illnesses. But Jack was sick so often that his card was nearly full even before he started school. While most children had a few typical childhood diseases, Jack had them all: whooping cough, measles, chicken pox, bronchitis, German measles, ear infections, and the most dreaded disease of all—scarlet fever.

Many people, particularly children, died of scarlet fever, and when Jack came down with it, his parents feared the worst. In addition, so many people were sick with scarlet fever that there was no room for Jack at any of the hospitals. However, Jack's father, an important and well-known man, was able to make a few promises and ask a few favors, and eventually get his son a room in a good Boston hospital. Joseph Kennedy promised to donate half of his money to charity if Jack survived the illness.

Jack's parents, along with a Catholic priest, gathered at Jack's bedside. The priest performed last rites, feeling that Jack was certainly close to death, but Jack struggled and fought against the illness. Joseph visited his young son in the hospital every day, praying and trying to keep Jack's spirits up. Against all odds, Jack recovered. And, keeping his promise, Joseph gave half his money to a charity that provided free dental care to children in Catholic schools.

In the years that followed, Jack would continue to be sick with all sorts of ailments. He was ill so often that his younger brother, Bobby, would joke that any mosquito that bit Jack was taking a big risk since Jack's body always seemed to have one sickness or another floating around in it. Jack often sat in his bed when he was ill, watching his brothers and sisters play games and race around the yard. It was difficult for a young boy to be cooped up inside so much of the time, but Jack soon discovered an excellent way to escape the boredom: reading.

In particular, Jack liked books about adventures in faraway and mythical places. *Treasure Island*, *Peter Pan*, *Kidnapped*, and *The Jungle Book* were among his favorites. But perhaps his favorite of all was King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table. This was the tale of a brave and noble king who wanted more than anything else to establish a kingdom

where peace reigned and where good deeds and creative thought were encouraged and rewarded. Surrounding King Arthur were his loyal knights, the beautiful Queen Guinevere, and even an old magician named Merlin. For a time, life was good in the kingdom known as Camelot. But then the queen and one of King Arthur's knights fell in love, and along with that came Camelot's downfall.

Jack was particularly intrigued by the story of King Arthur, because no one had ever been entirely certain whether King Arthur was a real man or a mythical character. That mystery provided hours of thoughtful entertainment for Jack, and even today, the question is left up to the reader to decide. More often than not, friends and family visiting Jack when he was sick found him propped up in bed covered in books, his brow wrinkled with concentration as he read. This love of reading stayed with Jack even when he was well, and on more than a few occasions, he hid in the big house so that he could finish a book instead of doing what he was supposed to be doing.

"I often had a feeling his mind was only half occupied with the subject at hand, such as doing his arithmetic homework or picking his clothes up off the floor, and the rest of his thoughts were far away weaving daydreams," Rose Kennedy recalled of her young son.

When Jack was 10, his family moved from Boston to Riverdale, New York, to be closer to their father's work in New York City. The family also needed a bigger house. There were now five children: Jack; his older brother, Joe Jr.; and three younger sisters, Rosemary, Kathleen, and Eunice.

Growing up a Kennedy may have been considered a life of luxury, but it was not necessarily a life of ease. Around the dinner table, there could be no small talk or idle chitchat. Politics and current events dominated typical dinnertime conversation, and when the children were old enough to read, they were instructed to read *The New York Times* every morning so that they could participate in these nightly conversations. Joseph Kennedy was a strict and demanding father who, as Rose Kennedy explained, "liked the boys to win at sports and everything they tried. . . . he did not have much patience with the loser."

However, in spite of all of these serious expectations, at a young age Jack developed a sense of humor and a streak of mischievousness. Along with his older brother, Jack made up ridiculous songs about bugs, and he bellowed them out to the neighborhood. The two boys changed signs on restaurant doors from NO DOGS ALLOWED to NO HOTDOGS ALLOWED, and they stole desserts from their siblings' plates when no one was watching. Once, when his father was scolding everyone at the dinner table for spending money

irresponsibly, twelve-year-old Jack looked around the table and told everyone to cheer up. Then, with great authority, he explained, “The only solution is to have Dad work harder.” Even Joseph Kennedy had to laugh at that.

Jack quickly learned that the ability to make people laugh could come in handy—particularly when his father was involved. When Jack decided that he needed a raise in his allowance, he presented “Chapter 1” of a book he had titled *A Plea for a Raise*. Although Jack had written only the first chapter (all 150 words of it), he had already honored his father by including “Dedicated to my [father,] Mr. J.P. Kennedy” at the beginning. Following a semi-serious description of why he needed a bigger allowance (“I put in my plea for a raise of thirty cents for me to buy scout things and pay my own way more around”), Jack signed his masterpiece, “John Fitzgerald Francis Kennedy.” “Francis” was a comic flourish to make his name look more important—it wasn’t really part of Jack’s name. Joseph laughed out loud.

And Jack got his raise.