

A JASON HAMMOND NOVEL

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Frame 232

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Author's Note

THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION, but the raw materials have been mined from the quarry of reality. Most of us know that President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was gunned down on November 22, 1963, in Dallas's Dealey Plaza and that former Marine and U.S. expatriate Lee Harvey Oswald would have been tried for the crime if not for his own shooting death at the hand of nightclub owner Jack Ruby two days later. We know that a group of seven civil servants, acting on behalf of succeeding president Lyndon Johnson and bearing the colloquial name of the Warren Commission, investigated the assassination and concluded that Oswald was the sole individual responsible for the president's death. And we know that literally hundreds of conspiracy theories have been put forth in the decades since, attempting to contradict the commission's findings.

But there are other truths that have escaped the notice of the general public, and the most pertinent to this book is that the Babushka Lady is a real person and not a figment of anyone's imagination. She is one of only a handful of spectators within close proximity to the president's limousine who

has yet to be identified. If you take the time to search the Internet, you will see her there, as plain as day. And in some images she appears to be holding a camera. Many assassination researchers believe it was the type that took motion pictures rather than stills and that she might have captured something no one else did. This could explain why she has made the choice to remain in the shadows. If that is indeed the case, then we can only speculate on what she witnessed that tragic day and, in all probability, has witnessed again, in private, in the years since.

PROLOGUE

DALLAS, TEXAS

22 November 1963

12:20 p.m.

MARGARET BAKER FELT more than a little foolish in her makeshift disguise—an overcoat she'd found in a box of her late mother's things, the prescription glasses she never wore, and a pink headscarf she'd borrowed from a friend. The coat and scarf were far too heavy for such a warm day. They made it *look* like she was in disguise. Everyone else in Dealey Plaza was dressed appropriately—most of the men in shirtsleeves, the women in skirts of varying modesty. True, this was November. But this was also Dallas, where temperatures could easily reach into the seventies this time of year. The morning report said it would be in the high sixties at least, with a fair amount of humidity. Her heart sank when she heard this. But she had little choice in the matter. If someone recognized her . . .

It wasn't her husband she was worried about. She hadn't informed him of this little detour, but he wouldn't mind one way or the other. He wasn't particularly political, and he was about as even-tempered as a man could be. But Dr. Lomax was a different story. Being one of his receptionists had its perks, to be sure. The pay was decent, the hours comfortable, the office clean and neat, and the other girls were nice

enough. But Lomax could be a monster, demanding and unreasonable. And as a proud member of the John Birch Society, he loathed the Kennedys. Whenever the president came on the radio, Lomax would stop whatever he was doing and listen intently, his face reddening, then launch into a venomous rebuttal that often ended with him stomping off in a rage. When he heard JFK was coming to town, he muttered something about how nice it would be if Air Force One went down in a fiery blaze.

Margaret wasn't sure what Lomax would do if he found out she had come here just to see the president, but it certainly wouldn't be pleasant. She had lied to facilitate the opportunity, coming in for a few hours in the morning before claiming she didn't feel well. Lomax didn't like his employees taking time off regardless of the reason, and he was already in a foul mood, griping about the increased traffic and security in the area. She took this as a bad omen and shuddered. Nevertheless, she went into the ladies' room of a department store a few doors down to put on the scarf and glasses. Ten minutes later she found a suitable position in the plaza, about thirty feet from Elm Street, and whispered a prayer that no one had recognized her along the way. The crowd wasn't as thick as it had been along Main, but she was still within walking distance of the office. Too close for comfort, in her opinion.

These worries evaporated, at least temporarily, when the cheering on Main Street became noticeably louder. *He's coming!* she thought, and excitement swirled in her belly. She had liked Kennedy from the moment she first saw him, with his Ivy League good looks and boyish magnetism. The latter had been obvious even when she and her husband, Ron, watched the first-ever televised presidential debates on their grainy

Philco Admiral. Kennedy had the air of one who'd already been in the office for years, whereas challenger and former Eisenhower VP Richard Nixon bore the haggard mannerisms of a prisoner in an interrogation chamber. Beyond all that, however, Margaret believed Kennedy's dedication to America was sincere and absolute and that in spite of his youthfulness—which so many of his detractors considered a handicap—he possessed the innate wisdom to handle the job. The way he had stared down that corpulent thug Nikita Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis had proved her right on that score, and Lomax's begrudging silence on the matter provided a delightful bonus layer of confirmation.

As the crowd's roar continued to rise, Margaret reached into the pocket of her overcoat and took out an 8mm Paillard Bolex. She hadn't used it since she and Ron went to Galveston for his sister's wedding. She'd bought a virgin reel earlier in the week and loaded it just before she left the house this morning.

The cheering reached a near-deafening pitch, and she switched the unit on. Looking right, she saw the motorcycle-flanked procession ease off Main and onto Houston. The lead vehicle was an ordinary white Ford with four occupants. She recognized the driver as Dallas Police Chief Jesse Curry, a familiar figure in the area who'd been on the force since the midthirties. She did not know the other three men, and they were instantly forgotten when Kennedy's 1961 Lincoln Continental appeared a moment later, its two fender-mounted flags—Stars and Stripes on the left, the presidential seal on the right—flapping madly. There were three rows of seats, and she briefly registered Governor John Connally and his wife, Nellie, in the middle. As soon as the president came into view, however, her eyes locked onto him. It was surreal to see the flesh-and-blood man in such close proximity. He

was smiling and waving in the afternoon sunshine. *The handsome young king among his subjects*, she thought. When he used his left hand to sweep his chestnut hair off his forehead in that familiar way, her heart jumped.

The limo turned left off Houston and started down Elm, rolling ever closer. She was aware of a near-hypnotic feeling of fulfillment, to the point where she was no longer conscious of the Bolex camera in her hand. She might not have remembered it until the president was long gone if not for a woman close to her shrieking, “Oh, oh, look at Jackie! Look how bea-u-tiful she is!”

Snapping out of the trance, Margaret brought the Bolex up and activated it. As she did, she noticed a man—who would eventually be identified to the world as Abraham Zapruder—standing on the pergola on the opposite side of Elm. He was holding a video camera, a Bell & Howell Zoomatic, and was aiming it at the approaching motorcade. Margaret kept the president and his wife in the center of the frame, remembering a tip she had learned from a photographer friend. She’d always had a steady hand and had been pleased with her film work in the past. *Between the sunlight and the unobstructed view*, she thought, *this should come out really well.*

The president faced her direction briefly, then turned to the crowd on the other side of the street. Margaret hoped more than anything he would turn back again. If he did, she decided, she would sacrifice a little camera stability and try to get his attention. He was known for making direct eye contact with people, often accompanied by a smile and a wave. If she got either from him . . . how incredible would that be? She’d be willing to blow her cover and tell Ron if that happened. He’d probably just laugh and shake his head, but it’d be worth it.

She continued to follow her subject through the lens, waiting for him to turn back, urging him to do so through sheer willpower. Then—

POP!

A sharp, firecracker-type sound echoed through the plaza. The thought that it might be a gunshot did enter Margaret Baker's mind, but the president didn't seem to respond to it. Then came the second one, and this time his reaction was unmistakable—through the tiny viewfinder she saw him raise his hands to his throat, his elbows sticking out like spearheads. At the same time, Governor Connally began sinking, jellylike, into his seat. Margaret froze, uncertain of what was happening, and the camera kept rolling. When the third shot arrived and the right side of the president's head blew out in a gruesome cascade of bone and tissue, she gasped audibly.

She finally looked up, the camera still held in place, and witnessed something that would replay in her nightmares for weeks to come—Jackie Kennedy, resplendent in her pink Chanel suit and matching pillbox hat, crawling on all fours across the trunk. Noticing the bloodstains on the First Lady's midsection and the fact that the president was now a motionless figure slumped down in his seat, Margaret intuited through her horror what the rest of the world would soon come to know as truth—that Jackie, in her shocked hysteria, was trying to retrieve parts of her husband's brain and skull.

No . . . dear Lord, please. . . .

Margaret watched in wordless astonishment as one of the Secret Service agents forced Jackie back into the seat

with her dead husband. Then the limo's engine roared as it picked up speed and zoomed off. In the remaining chaos, sirens blared and terrified people took off in every direction. Some dropped to the ground in case the gunman decided to expand the assassination into a random turkey shoot. Several adults were lying atop small children.

This can't be happening, a voice in Margaret's mind insisted. *It just can't be*. She wasn't even aware that she had stopped filming and was now holding the camera slack against her thigh.

More police officers and Secret Service agents materialized. Some people came up alongside them and pointed to a spot high on the facade of the Texas School Book Depository, where the son of one of Margaret's friends worked as a night custodian. She looked up and saw several open windows but nothing more.

"Come on! Don't just stand there!" a man barked as he sped past. The crowd around her was migrating to the other side of Elm. Margaret began moving forward, barely aware her legs were in motion. Everything had become dreamy and muted, like being underwater.

What snapped her back to reality was the scatter of red spots on the macadam. The sight of John Kennedy's blood, like paint flicked off a too-soaked brush, brought her to a halt. It glistened in the same afternoon sunshine that had projected an angelic light onto the president's face just moments earlier.

She moved to avoid stepping in it and kept going.

• • •

Margaret's home, a modest Victorian, was located in the quiet suburb of Addison. The house sat well back from the sidewalk and was partially obscured by a pair of massive oak trees.

She pattered up the front steps and worked the key into the door with hands that were still trembling. Once inside, she had no less trouble twisting the lock back into place—an action she had performed thousands of times without difficulty. She tossed the keys onto a nearby table and continued up the carpeted steps to the second floor. One hand still clutched the wad of tissues she'd found in the glove compartment. They had dampened into a warm, solid mass. Her eyes were delicately swollen and thoroughly bloodshot, her makeup a disaster.

She strode past the second bedroom, currently reserved for guests but which would one day be transformed into a nursery, and went into the master bedroom. She removed the headscarf and glasses and set them down on the dresser, then shed the overcoat and laid it on the bed. She crossed the room and turned on the tiny portable television that was set on a rolling hard-wire stand. They only received five channels in this area, and two of them were snowy on the best of days. They were all broadcasting coverage of the shooting, which wasn't surprising, and she twisted the knob to CBS because that's where Cronkite would be. Like so many other members of Middle America, the Bakers never questioned the gospel according to Walter.

There was still part of her that harbored hope for a miracle. She knew what she had seen, but there was always that chance. She had analyzed the shooting in her mind and figured that such a young man could likely survive the first strike, the one that pierced his throat. Maybe it would permanently affect his speech; maybe he'd need some kind of medical equipment to assist with his breathing. *But that second strike, the one where his head . . . where it . . .*

She erased these thoughts and trained her attention on

the little screen. Cronkite was there, sitting at his anchor's desk in a white shirt and black tie, addressing the nation.

“. . . policemen called in on their day off because there were some fears and concerns in Dallas that, uh . . . that there might be demonstrations, at least, that could embarrass the president. Because it was only on October 24 that our ambassador of the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, was assaulted in Dallas leaving a dinner meeting there—”

He was interrupted, presumably by a news editor who had just pulled an Associated Press bulletin from one of the wire machines. Cronkite put on the horn-rimmed glasses that gave him the academic bearing of a nuclear physicist. He read through the bulletin once while America waited, then turned back to the camera.

“From Dallas, Texas, the flash, apparently official. President Kennedy died—”

At this point he removed the glasses again, and Margaret Baker let out a warbling, uneven cry.

“—at 1 p.m. Central Standard Time, two o'clock Eastern Standard Time . . . some thirty-eight minutes ago.”

The glasses went back on again, and a clearly affected Cronkite took a moment to compose himself. “Vice President Johnson has left the hospital in Dallas, but we do not know to where he has proceeded; presumably—”

Margaret switched it off. She then covered her face and wept. Kennedy had offered so much hope, so much promise. He had fresh and exciting ideas that represented the dawn of a new age. *And it's all gone now.*

When the tears dried up, she went to the mirror and wiped her face with the hardened tissue mass. Then she found some busywork, putting the glasses in their case and back into the forgotten reaches of her top drawer and setting the scarf by

her jewelry box so she wouldn't forget to bring it back to the neighbor who'd loaned it to her.

She took hold of the overcoat, planning to put it back up in the attic, where it had been stored. Then she felt the weight of it, of something semi-heavy that was—

The camera.

She stopped. Every function in the universe, in fact, seemed to pause while she digested the magnitude of the discovery. She reached into the pocket, found the hard metal shape, and brought it out. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she stared at it as if it were a living, breathing thing. Then the unavoidable question came. *The film—what should I do with it?*

A litany of possibilities marched through her mind, none of them palatable. From a financial standpoint, it would likely be worth a small fortune. She had been about thirty feet from the car when the president was struck, and she was certain the quality was above average. But . . . *No*, she decided. *I will not profit from this. Absolutely not.*

Should the film be turned over as evidence? *Maybe. . . .* Surely there would be a massive investigation. But what about the people pointing to the high window in the book depository? *If that really was where the assassin fired from, I never turned the camera in that direction. And even if I had, what good would it do now? Would it bring the president back?*

Realistically, then, there was only one option—keep quiet about it. That was almost certainly the safest choice. *Or is it?* Had anyone recognized her while she was there? She had friends all over town. She went out for lunch at least twice a week, and she did a fair share of shopping in the area. Some of the people she saw on a regular basis had to be Kennedy supporters. It followed, then, that at least a few of them had also come out to see him. *Did they see me, too?*

Of one thing she was absolutely certain—she would never watch the film. There was no reason to relive the experience. Besides, the film had to be developed, which presented an assortment of new problems. Sometimes the people who worked in those labs looked at the things they were developing. They weren't supposed to, of course, but they did. If some technician saw those images, what were the odds he'd keep his mouth shut? A person in that position might even feel it was his responsibility to say something to the authorities. If that happened, Margaret might be criminally liable for withholding—

Or . . . what if the film didn't come out right? What if it got "accidentally" ruined before I even had the chance to develop it? The story came together easily in her mind—*I was running with the rest of the crowd immediately after the shooting. I fell down. . . . The camera tumbled out of my hand. . . . It popped open, and the film was exposed.* Then she would show the police (or FBI or CIA or whomever) the exposed and ruined roll as proof, and that would be that. They wouldn't suspect her of anything dubious. Why would they?

She ran her hand over the camera and found the little ring that opened the protective panel. She sat staring at it for a long time, taking slow, measured breaths. Then she slipped her forefinger into it.

There was a metallic *clunk* downstairs—the lock on the front door being opened—followed by the familiar rattle of Ronnie's keys. The door squealed, and he called out, "Honey? Honey! Where are you?"

She took a deep breath and slid her finger back out.

"Margaret? Are you—?"

"I'm up here, Ronnie."

"In the bedroom?"

“Yes. I’ll be down in a minute.”

“All right.”

She gave the Bolex one last look, hoping a decision would come. It did not, and she didn’t want to marinate in the uncertainty for another dreadful minute. Ron would want to talk about the events of the day. That would be followed by hours in front of the television and dozens of phone calls from friends and family. The film could be dealt with later. When, exactly, she didn’t know. Just . . . *later*.

She opened her bedroom closet and knelt down to retrieve the Bolex box. She laid the camera carefully inside, set the lid on, then stored the box in a far corner next to a shoe-shine kit.

• • •

The two people responsible for what she did next were her husband and a local blowhard named Ellis Clayton.

The capture of Lee Harvey Oswald did not sway her one way or another. She never had any doubt the authorities would make an arrest. The fact that the shooter turned out to be some defiant little pip-squeak didn’t shock her as much as it did some people. *It’s always a nameless face from the crowd*, she thought as she watched him whine to journalists about police brutality and being someone’s patsy. *Another nobody with delusions of grandeur*. She found his own murder two days later at the hands of nightclub owner Jack Ruby as shocking as the rest of the nation, but more due to the fact that it occurred on live television than anything else.

The following week, Ron said he wanted to take a break from the media madness in the area and drive out to Granbury, a town southwest of Fort Worth where he’d spent his childhood. Then he added, “Let’s bring the camera, too.

I'd like to take some movies that I can watch when I'm feeling homesick."

Margaret decided at that moment that the film would be disposed of. *Stuffed in the trash—and out of my life forever. The president's gone; his killer is gone. . . . Why hold on to it?*

What changed her mind was a routine trip to the supermarket the following afternoon. Standing in one of the checkout lanes, yammering to one of the clerks and slowing everyone else down as usual, was Ellis Clayton. Clayton was a retired municipal utilities worker who padded about town in shorts and a tank top. He had a harsh, growling voice that he used as if certain every syllable that fell from his lips was sacred.

When Margaret first spotted him, she deviated to the only other lane that was open and tried to tune him out. As she unloaded the carriage, however, her attention was drawn by something he was saying about a possible conspiracy in the assassination—that Oswald might not have acted alone, might in fact have been part of a larger organization—and that new president Lyndon Johnson was ordering a group headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren to look into the matter. Margaret was trembling by the time she reached the car.

She knew she could still destroy the film if she wished . . . but that option no longer seemed realistic. *What if it's true? What if there really were more people behind the killing?* From there her imagination sailed. *The Russians? The Cubans? Fidel Castro? Or maybe President Johnson himself?* Anyone who paid attention to politics knew Johnson had loathed being vice president. *That would make sense*, she thought, unaware that she was among the first to dabble in the kind of wild speculation that would occupy much of society for a generation. *The fact that he launched the investigation would give him good cover. . . .*

Regardless of who was responsible, of this much she was certain—these kinds of things occurred on a level of society so far removed from her own that it might as well have been part of a different universe. And if the president's murder had, in fact, been a carefully coordinated effort among multiple parties, then those involved were likely well connected, well funded, and frighteningly powerful. In other words, very, very dangerous.

The following Monday—the office was closed on Mondays so Lomax could play golf at his country club—she drove all the way to Plano because she'd found a developing lab listed in the yellow pages and, more importantly, because she didn't know anyone out there. She used a false name and paid in cash, including an extra fee to have the processing done within two hours. She was so nervous when she walked back into the shop that the technician, still wearing his rubber apron, asked if she was feeling all right. She lied, saying she was in the early stages of her first pregnancy and still experiencing the effects of morning sickness. He congratulated her as he handed her the change, the receipt, and the finished film in a brown paper bag. There was nothing in his manner that gave her the slightest impression he had looked at it. Nevertheless, she couldn't help asking, "Did it come out all right?"

The tech appeared to be horrified at the suggestion of such unprofessionalism—precisely the reaction Margaret was hoping for. "I wouldn't look at a customer's film, ma'am," he explained, with patience colored ever so slightly by prideful irritation.

Back home, Margaret made a point of securing the front door not just with the dead bolt but also with the chain. She didn't expect Ronnie to arrive home from work for a few

hours, but if he came early for any reason, she'd be alerted when he had to ring the bell. She would explain that a salesman had come earlier in the day, so she had decided to put the chain on before opening the door and had neglected to remove it.

She went into the basement pantry, unfolded the step-ladder, and slid one of the ceiling tiles aside. She had chosen the pantry because it was dark and cool—ideal for film storage. She never removed the reel from its flat yellow box, nor the box from its brown paper bag. She simply set the whole package up there, then moved the tile back into place. At no point did she feel the need to put the film on the projector they kept in the hall closet upstairs. Seeing John Kennedy murdered once was more than enough.

After refolding the ladder and wiping the dust from her hands, she whispered a little prayer that she would not have to take the film out of its hiding place for any reason.

And the Lord would grant this request . . . for a time.

• • •

April 1976

Margaret opened the basement door and felt around for the light switch. This simple action was not as easy as it had once been, as her diminishing vision made depth perception difficult. Also, abrupt shifts from light to dark gave her instant headaches, often compounding the chronic migraines that already arrived, unannounced, several days a week. Bright sunlight, which she had loved as a child, was the worst. One look into a clear sky at high noon sent knife blades into her eyes.

She found the switch and flicked it, shielding her face like a frightened animal. Compromised vision and paralyzing

migraines weren't the only manifestations of the hypertension that had become a relentless presence in her life. In spite of being only forty-one, she had acquired obvious streaks of gray in the thick wave of brown hair that had once shimmered with such radiance it earned the envy of many of her girlfriends. And her face, which had retained much of its youthful clarity well into adulthood, now bore the first lines, blemishes, and discolorations that commonly flow in the wake of unyielding anxiety.

She took the steps cautiously. There was a faintly electric uncertainty to all her movements these days, resulting in a clumsiness previously unknown to her. She had already slipped and gone down this staircase three times, once resulting in a badly sprained ankle and a chipped bone in her right elbow.

When she reached the bottom, she crossed through the laundry area and went into the pantry. She did not turn on the bulb in here; there was enough light slanting through the ground-level window set high in the corner. Summoning all her willpower, she took the stepladder from its hooks and unfolded it, setting it beneath the ceiling tile in question.

She sat down on the ladder and took a pack of Parliaments from the breast pocket of her blouse, which was fashionable for the times but fairly wrinkled. Ron didn't care much for the smoking habit she'd acquired a few years back. She told him she had smoked in college—therefore it wasn't really a *new* habit—and that she only indulged occasionally. She was pretty sure he knew she was lying on all counts, even if he didn't say as much.

She fumbled with the lighter, eventually got the cigarette going, and reveled in the curling threads of bluish gray. Her thoughts inevitably followed those threads upward, settling

on that accursed tile and the even more accursed package that waited behind it.

She was struck again by the fact that there was actually a point along the timeline when she could go days without the film even entering her mind, when it had become all but forgotten. She had even determined an exact date when this “era” began—September 27, 1964. That was when the Warren Commission released their report to the public stating that Lee Harvey Oswald had been the president’s sole assassin and had not been part of a broader conspiracy. Those who believed otherwise scrutinized the evidence to the subatomic level and volubly protested the commission’s findings. But the eight-man team that produced it—which included future president Gerald Ford—stood their ground, and the lone-gunman theory became a matter of official record.

Margaret had been so overwhelmed with relief that she broke down in tears and thanked God for his infinite mercy. *It’s over—at last. The verdict has been handed down and written into the ledger of history. That’s that.* And thus, there was no longer any need to worry about the accursed film. It would never be needed as evidence and could be recategorized as nothing more than a personal curio. A remarkable record of a remarkable moment in history, but nothing that would send shock waves through humanity.

She had thought again about simply throwing it away but decided instead to keep it as a family heirloom. At some point she’d tell Ron about it—she didn’t know when because it just wasn’t that important—then label the box and put it with all the other reels: the road trip to New Mexico, camping in Arizona, and that wild weekend in New Orleans, where they recaptured the spirited times of their premarital courtship. It was no longer radioactive, and that’s what mattered most.

Drawing in another lungful of smoke, she moved to the next significant point on that timeline—1969. It was a turn-about year in so many ways, with the needle swinging in a wide arc across the emotional spectrum. On the joyful side, there was Sheila Marie, born on January 15, shortly after midnight. She was pink and plump and perfect in every way, and Margaret could not have been more delighted. Thoughts of the assassination were so distant on that day that it seemed amazing to her, even a little ridiculous, that she had been worried in the first place. The conspiracy crazies still stuck their heads up from time to time, and Margaret would occasionally invest a moment or two to listen. But they never came up with anything convincing, so she dismissed them and went on with her happy life.

Her blissful contentment was shattered just two weeks after Sheila's birth when New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison hauled local businessman Clay Shaw into court in what would prove to be the only prosecution relating to the president's murder. Garrison accused Shaw of working with both right-wing activists and the CIA to facilitate the killing, but he could not prove his case, and Shaw walked. While conspiracy theorists were disappointed, one aspect of the trial had such a powerful impact that it went all the way to Addison, Texas, and landed in the center of Margaret's life—for the first time in any public forum, the Zapruder film was shown in its entirety. This "new" evidence reignited the conspiracy frenzy, and Margaret found herself powerless to do anything except tend to the benign hope that the furor would once again die down.

Instead, Americans began to reconsider their stance on the assassination. To Margaret's astonishment, the people who had railed for years about the Warren Report being

the product of a crooked government trying to cover up a brutally implemented coup now found an eager audience in the general public. New theories were being explored and new technologies utilized in private but well-funded investigations. Reenactments of the shooting were carried out, documentaries produced, and dozens of books and articles published. Some ideas were downright idiotic, but a few others seemed entirely plausible—and from there public interest grew even further.

It was around this time that Margaret began to think of the assassination not as a historical event but a cancer that had awoken in her life on November 22, 1963. It had gone into remission for a while but was now active again. She also began to realize it had been one of the central governing factors in almost every major decision she had made since that sun-soaked Friday.

With the cigarette now half-gone, she glanced up briefly at the ceiling and shook her head. In her memory, she reached the most recent segment of this interminable nightmare. It also had a specific launch date—March 6, 1975, just over a year ago—and coincided seamlessly with the decline of her health. That evening, millions watched as two conspiracy theorists, along with host Geraldo Rivera, played the Zapruder film on ABC's *Good Night America*. The public's reaction was immediate and decisive, with renewed demands on the government to finally resolve the question of who really killed John Kennedy. This horrified outrage eventually led to the formation of the United States House Select Committee on Assassinations as well as a small army of neo-conspiratorialists, all of whom dedicated an abundance of time, energy, and money to the examination of virtually every piece of evidence that could be found. No

stone went unturned, no theory unstudied, and no witness unquestioned.

This was also when a small group of curious persons began to ponder the identity of the woman, previously overlooked, whom they provisionally named “the Babushka Lady.”

She was there in a few photographs, grainy and unfocused. One was taken a good distance behind her but clearly established her proximity to the president’s limousine. Another had the woman in midstride across Elm along with several others exiting the scene. And she was there, albeit briefly, in Abraham Zapruder’s grisly record of the killing.

Most researchers believed the Babushka Lady—so dubbed because of her distinctive headscarf—was holding a motion camera of her own and had witnessed the assassination from a unique angle. If this was the case, then perhaps her film had caught something equally unique. In particular, they wondered if there was clear evidence to support the growing theory that a second shooter was positioned behind the stockade fence that stood atop a tiny hill just a few yards away from the Bryan pergola, a region of Dealey Plaza that would eventually become known as the “grassy knoll.” If so—if the Babushka Lady did, in fact, have such evidence—why hadn’t she come forward with it? Had she been tracked down by the conspirators and killed, as many believed others had been? Or was she still out there now, waiting for just the right time to come forward? Perhaps she had already sold the film to some powerful media presence, like *Time* or *Life*, for an astronomical sum, and they were the ones sitting on it. There was also the suggestion that the woman in question wasn’t even aware of what she had and that the film had been innocently relegated to a forgotten box in her home somewhere.

Whatever the case, two points were now very clear to

Margaret Baker. One was that *she* was the person known as the Babushka Lady. The other was that many people associated with the assassination wanted to find her.

• • •

She took a final puff and dropped the cigarette onto the cement floor, crushing it out with her shoe. A part of her had always suspected this day would come. In the end, it wasn't the film's potential implications or the quest for justice or even the thought of shadowy figures searching for her that brought about this moment—it was the blood she saw in the toilet three days ago following her morning routine. The hypertension that was gradually obliterating her strength had begun with the usual symptoms—fatigue, occasional dizziness—then moved to the more severe—blinding headaches, irregular heartbeat, labored breathing. They made life difficult, no doubt, but she had tolerated them. There was something about the sight of that blood, however—something about the thought of her insides *coming apart*—that pushed her past her limits. The time had come, she decided, to rid herself of this burden, to take the steps necessary to put the matter to rest once and for all. And the first step, she knew—against every instinct and desire—was to watch that film.

She let out a final, defeated sigh and placed her foot onto the ladder. With each step she felt increasingly sensitive to the sickness that was consuming her. It was as if the film still possessed a kind of emotional radioactivity after all and moving closer to it magnified the symptoms. Sliding the tile aside had a ghastly familiarity to it, like she'd stored the package up there only a day or so before. The actual interval between then and now shrank to zero, and she was reminded of the dim awareness she'd felt on that day—and which had never

fully left her waking thoughts since—that she would one day have to do this.

She felt around on the gritty surface, and at first there was nothing. What followed was an almost-relieved kind of confusion. *Is this the right tile? Did I forget where it was?* Then, slightly more alarming—*Did Ronnie find it and do something with it?* And finally, almost inevitably, the paranoia—*The men in the shadows . . . They found me and searched the house one day. . . . They know everything, and they know that I know.* This got her heart pounding like a parade drum.

It was only after she moved to the stepladder's top rung that her fingers found the wrinkled paper bag. It had been there all along, right where it was supposed to be. She supposed she had subconsciously lingered on the lower step as a kind of passive self-sabotage.

Like everything else up there, the bag had been dusted by time. She gave it a shake before bringing it down. She could feel the hardness of the box inside, and it filled her with revulsion.

Stepping to the floor, she unrolled the bag and took the box out. A part of her fantasized that it had been damaged somehow, perhaps from a pipe leak. The box would be corroded, the film warped and water-stained. . . .

No such luck. The box was firm and solid, its corners sharp. When she lifted the lid, the reel was so healthy it still bore malodorous traces of the chemical processing that had been performed twelve years earlier. The first few inches of dark celluloid hung out like the tail of some sleeping beast. *Waiting for me*, she realized angrily. *It has always been up there waiting for me.* Once again, she entertained thoughts of destroying it, more aggressively than ever before. *Douse it with gasoline and throw a match on it, then pour the ashes*

down the drain. If anyone asks, deny it all. There won't be any evidence, so what can they do? But it was too late for that now, and she knew it.

In another eerie reenactment of 1963, she went upstairs to lock the front door and secure the sliding chain. Ron had moved into a management position in 1971 and was rarely home early . . . but still. Their daughter was down the street with a retired schoolteacher who supplemented her income as a neighborhood babysitter.

Margaret went back to the basement with the projector in hand and set it up on a folding snack tray, aiming it at one of the bare walls. Her shaking hands made it difficult to feed the film through the spools. When it was finally in place, she took a deep breath and summoned all the nerve she had left. Then she turned the switch.

For a moment there was nothing but the purr of the projector's gears and a run of scrambled letters on the wall. Then came the first images of the president's motorcade as it flowed onto Houston.

Margaret was overwhelmed by sensory recall—the warmth of the sun on her cheeks, the scent of grass in the plaza and a nice perfume that the afternoon breeze had carried from one of the other women nearby, and the uncomfortable sliminess of perspiration mounting under her too-heavy outfit. She also remembered, for the first time, what she had planned to do with the rest of her day once Kennedy had passed—put the camera and her disguise back in the car, then return to the office and say she felt a little better and wanted to carry on. Lomax would've liked that. And if Kennedy had waved to her, she would've confessed everything to Ron over dinner that evening and laughed when he shook his head.

The motorcade eased onto Elm, and the president came

into view. It occurred to Margaret then that the film's quality was, as many researchers had theorized, outstanding. The images were sharp, the colors vivid, and her hand had been remarkably steady. *A hundred times better than the Zapruder film*, she thought. *And closer . . . much closer. . . .*

As the president and First Lady drew nearer, she could see Abraham Zapruder clearly on the Bryan pergola with his receptionist, Marilyn Sitzman, behind him. As Margaret had suspected all along, there was no view of the sixth-floor window in the book depository building in her film. And the assassination was mere seconds away.

She could not bring herself to look at Kennedy as he was struck. She had been unable to pull her eyes away twelve years earlier, but she would not witness it now. *That's not why you're watching anyway, is it?* Of all the conspiracy theories that had been put forth over the years, one that had really gained traction concerned a supposed second shooter behind the fence atop the grassy knoll. When that area of the plaza came into view, Margaret fixed on it. When the president was hit—she was aware of it even though she wasn't looking there—she searched for any signs of that elusive second shooter. A rifle barrel being leveled between the pickets, perhaps, or the head of a man in sunglasses. Even a puff of smoke as a shot was fired. . . . But there was nothing, nothing at all. Just the trees and the shade and the few bystanders who had long since been identified. There was no one there.

She smiled with an unpolluted elation she had not felt in ages.

Nobody. All those nuts who've been poring over blurry photographs with their magnifying glasses have been—

Then she saw something else, something well away from the stockade fence and the grassy knoll and Abraham

Zapruder and the book depository building. Something unbelievable.

She rewound the film and played it again. Once again the motorcade turned onto Elm. . . . The president and First Lady waved cheerfully to the adoring crowd. . . . Zapruder lifted his Bell & Howell and began filming.

And again she saw it.

“No,” she said in a tone soaked with dread. “No . . .”

She watched it again, just to be sure, then a fourth time.

When she went into the upstairs bathroom a short time later, there was more blood.

• • •

Margaret had never been to Texas First National before. She and Ron did all their banking at Dallas Fidelity, on the other side of town. That was exactly why she had come here.

She went to a teller window and asked to see the manager. The woman, with a turtleneck sweater and a beaded eyeglass chain, gave her a once-over. It was highly unusual for a female customer to make such a request. In fact, it was unusual for any married woman to come in without her husband. What was this lady up to?

“I’m not sure he’s available right now.”

“He’s expecting me.”

The teller’s carefully drawn eyebrows rose. “Oh?”

“Yes.”

The appraisal continued. Then, in a tone that suggested she wasn’t ready to admit defeat just yet, the woman said, “I’ll see if I can find him.”

“Thank you.”

Margaret retreated to a quiet corner so as to not attract further attention. The teller returned a moment later,

followed by a tall, well-built man in a pin-striped suit. His black hair was combed like that of a child on school-picture day. The rest of his all-female team stopped what they were doing when he appeared, their faces drawn with concern. He was the rooster of this particular henhouse.

“Can I help you?” There was no attempt at friendliness. His precious time was being wasted.

The teller hung around until Margaret shot her a look, then stalked off.

“I believe you spoke to Mr. Moore earlier this morning?”

The manager, whose name tag read *Kelso*, said, “Moore?”

“Henry Moore. The attorney?”

Kelso stiffened; he clearly did not like being contacted by attorneys.

“He’s a friend of my husband’s,” Margaret said, her stomach tightening, “and handles all of our legal matters. I think he told you I would be coming here to put some things in our new box.”

“Box? You mean—”

“A safe-deposit box.”

“Oh, uh-huh. And you are . . . ?”

“Margaret Baker.”

“Margaret Baker, right.”

“It was opened for us yesterday.”

“I believe I remember that.”

He paused to study her, the faintest trace of a smile on his otherwise-dour face. Margaret felt fear begin to crawl through her. The struggle to maintain a casual air was beginning to slip out of its leash. *He’s seen women do this before. He’s going to call Ronnie. . . .*

“Do you have the items with you?”

“Yes, right here.”

She drew a small cloth bag from her pocketbook and held it open for Kelso to inspect. Inside was an impressive cache of gold coins, dull-shiny and in various denominations that Ronnie had collected over the years. He kept them in a small lockbox under their bed.

Kelso's face brightened, revealing the actual—and unabashedly greedy—soul underneath. “Well, look at those.”

“They belonged to my grandparents, and I don't feel comfortable leaving them around the house.”

He reached in, removed one, and admired it. “I wouldn't want these lying around either.”

“So is it all right if I . . . ?”

“Hmm? Oh yes.” He tossed the coin back in the bag resentfully. “Follow me.”

He led her to the bank's spacious vault. The safe-deposit boxes were in a separate, smaller room on the right.

“I believe Mr. Moore reserved number 423 for us.”

“Number 423.”

“I have the key right here.”

Moving to the far right corner, Kelso opened the little door and then pulled the box out by its loop handle. It was auto-primer gray and about the size of two shoe boxes set end to end. He carried it to the small table in the middle of the room. The lid opened like an alligator's mouth.

“Here it is.”

“Thank you.”

Kelso lingered until it became obvious that his guest was not going to do anything while he was there, then left.

• • •

Margaret put the cloth bag back into her pocketbook and took out the film. Just having the box in her hand again

made her feel nauseous. She also took out a standard-size envelope with the words *For Ronnie or Sheila* written across the front. The flap had been sealed.

She wondered for the millionth time if this was the right thing to do. It could be that this was just one of those situations where there *was* no perfect solution and you simply had to go with your best guess. *If that's true, then please, God, please let this guess be the right one.*

She felt tears coming on again, so without further hesitation she placed both items into the receptacle. It slid back into its cavity easily, and she locked the swinging outer door. Then she returned to the lobby, where Kelso was making time with his harem.

"You're finished?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Will there be anything else today?"

"No, that's it."

When she stepped onto the sidewalk, she paused to scan her surroundings. This had become a habit now, born from the fear of being watched or followed. Every stranger had become a threat, every glance in her direction a cause for concern. Were they really out there, searching for her? Were there really men in dark shadows, monitoring her every move, listening to her every conversation? Were they waiting for an opportunity? Did they plan to eliminate her, as they had apparently done to so many others associated with the assassination?

It was a beautiful clear day, cheerful under ordinary circumstances. But then November 22, 1963, had started out the same way. Margaret couldn't remember the last time she'd felt anything even close to cheer. It seemed like a part of someone else's life, a long time ago. She didn't want to think

about it anymore. She had done what had to be done; whatever happened now was out of her control.

She took one last look around, then hailed a cab and disappeared into the afternoon traffic.



PARKLAND HOSPITAL
PRESENT DAY

IT WAS NOTHING but a waiting game now, a cruel and macabre waiting game.

Sheila Baker watched her mother's face, framed within the hospital pillow. The eyes, reduced to sunken orbs covered by parchment skin, had been closed for a while now. Her nose and mouth were trapped inside the oxygen mask, clear plastic with pale-green straps. Her breathing was erratic, as it had been for the last two days. A drip bag hung nearby, filled with fluid that streamed into her ravaged body, and a mile of gauze ran around her wrist to hold the needle in place. The room was kept immaculately clean by the hospital staff, the sheets changed daily. Yet the reek of death hung heavy in the air. The clinical-looking clock on the wall held no relevance; time was measured in here by the rhythmic hiss of the respirator. For Margaret Baker, who had turned seventy-eight nine weeks earlier, this room was her universe now, her gateway from this world into the next.

She had smoked for years, a habit she'd first picked up in the 1950s, when smoking was considered safe and fashionable and people puffed away in airplanes, offices, restaurants, and

elevators. The idea that you could die from it was as distant as the notion of committing gradual suicide from the sustained consumption of fried foods, the use of dirty needles, or living down the street from certain types of power plants. By the time academics started publishing their studies proving otherwise, she was hooked. When she finally mustered the willpower to break free of its grip, the cancer had already set up shop. Doctors were summoned, friends rallied round, and a spirit of cautious hopefulness arose. But lung cancer was almost always a nonrefundable ticket to the grave, and the light of optimism first dimmed and then flickered out. Margaret had accepted the truth and, with characteristic courage, focused not on fighting a losing battle but rather on making the final stage of her journey as uncomplicated as possible.

She'd been a patient at Parkland twenty-six times over the last three years. The first few visits were overnight stays for observation and an endless litany of tests. Then they became longer—two days, four, six . . . Names and faces of the hospital staff became familiar. The need to stop at the information desk faded. One of the nurses in the oncology section, it turned out, had been a year behind Sheila in high school. People from the past came to visit in a depressing revival of *This Is Your Life*—the owner of the pharmacy in downtown Addison, several church friends, a former coworker, a few others. But no relatives. Sheila was Margaret's only child, and her husband had passed away in '98.

Sheila was pleased they finally moved her mother to a private room. She'd had roommates in the last three, all in worse shape. Each one was an elderly woman, and they were all deceased now. The first had been clearheaded for a few weeks, the other two in various states of delirium. Sheila was haunted by one in particular, who stared maniacally at

the ceiling and produced an endless stream of glossolalia. It wasn't her deteriorated mental state that affected Sheila so deeply but rather the fact that no one came to see her. There were no balloons, no flowers, no cards. A forgotten soul in a world of billions. Someone from the local church had left a prayer card—but then her mom received one too. So did every other patient, most likely. Then one day Sheila came in and found the bed empty, made up with fresh sheets. One of the nurses said the woman had died the night before. *With no one there to hold her hand, no doubt*, Sheila thought with a touch of anger.

She stroked her mother's white hair, kissed her on the cheek, then sat in one of the ridiculously uncomfortable guest chairs and opened a cooking magazine she'd spotted in the lobby. No sooner had she found a recipe for sesame apricot chicken than her cell phone vibrated. Removing it from the holster, she found the following text message on the screen:

Sheila,

The guys are here with the new arc trainer and they're setting it up. Is there anything else I need to do?

Vi7cki

Sheila rose from the chair and walked into the hallway before dialing. The call was answered on the second ring.

"That was quick," Vicki said.

"I'm here at the hospital and it's pretty quiet right now."

"Oh, I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"No, that's fine. I asked you to let me know when they got there."

“Do I need to tell them anything?”

“Are they actually working? Sometimes Eric’s guys need the whip cracked over their heads.”

“No, they’re doing it.” Vicki laughed. “I think they’re afraid of you.”

“That can be useful sometimes.”

“I don’t know. . . . You’re the best boss *I’ve* ever had; that’s for sure.”

“Vying for a raise again?”

“No, really. I—”

“I’m just kidding. How are things going otherwise?”

“Okay.”

“Busy?”

“No more than usual, but no less, either.”

“Any new recruits?”

“Yes!” she said. “I signed up four new people this morning. *Four.*”

“That’s excellent, Vick. Terrific work.”

“And I re-upped two others.”

“Re-upping is just as good. As long as they come to *my* gyms, I don’t care how or why.”

“We’re the best.”

“Better believe it.”

“Oh, and that guy stopped in again, too. . . .”

“What guy?”

“That Doug guy.”

Sheila rolled her eyes. “Did you tell him I was out of town?”

“Yeah. I don’t know if he believed me, but he said he’d be back.”

“Lucky me.”

“He’s creepy.”

Sheila agreed, but she was also at a point in her life where she wasn't interested in a relationship with any man.

"Okay, let me get back to Mama."

"How's she doing?"

"Not that great. It's just a matter of time."

"How are *you* holding up?"

Sheila wasn't sure how to reply to this. She'd been through every emotion on the spectrum since the cancer had quietly entered their lives three years ago. Truth be told, she felt like a towel wrung of all moisture. It was torture to watch her mother suffer like this and to know the end of her life was mere days or even hours away. But there was still that hope, like a little flame that never burns out, for a miracle. Of course it was ridiculous now, but that wouldn't stop her from tending it.

"I'm doing okay," she said, more to keep the silence from winding out than anything else. "As well as can be expected under the circumstances." A tear rolled down her cheek, and she wiped it away before anyone else in the hallway noticed.

"I wish there was something I could do."

"I know. I appreciate it."

"Is there anything you need? Anything I can send you?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Really? Honestly?"

"Honestly. Hey, she was the greatest mom I could've asked for. She and my dad were always there for me, gave me everything I needed, and let me find my own way when the time came. I couldn't have asked for much more. And they really loved each other, so she had a good life too."

"You were all very lucky."

"We certainly were. But let me go, okay? I want to stay by her side."

“Sure. And don’t worry about anything here. I’ve got it all under control.”

“Thanks, Vick.”

Sheila ended the call and put the phone away. As she crept back into the room, she thought about how lucky she’d been to find Vicki, too. She had more than two dozen employees, and Victoria Miller was the best of them. No formal education beyond high school, yet she had more natural business sense than any of the arrogant MBA geniuses Sheila had interviewed. Vicki was hardworking, tough, and—best of all—trustworthy beyond all doubt. That was something they didn’t stress much in postgrad courses, Sheila noticed.

She was just about to return to the magazine when her mother groaned and rolled her head back and forth. The oxygen mask didn’t follow—the tube got caught under her arm. This caused the edge of the mask to press her nose down crookedly. Sheila hastened to fix it, and Margaret’s eyes opened. They were red-rimmed and watery, like those of a child who’d been crying.

“Sweetheart,” she said, her voice muted behind the clear plastic.

Sheila was stunned by the lucidity of her tone. They were medicating her heavily to chase off the pain. She slept most of the time, talked nonsense the rest. She usually confused the past with the present, referring to long-dead friends and family as if they were standing in the hallway. Every now and then she produced a coherent thought, but they were growing scarce.

Sheila leaned down and smiled. “Yes, Mama?”

Margaret lifted the arm with the gauzy wristband and, with surprising strength, took her hand. “I’m sorry,” she said.

This came out shaky and labored, but the eyes were suddenly bright again. The abruptness of the change was unsettling.

“For what?” There was still a faint trace of the Texas accent in Sheila’s voice, in spite of not having lived here for almost twenty years.

Margaret’s eyes closed again, and she sank back onto the pillow. This simple exchange had drained her, it seemed. Sheila thought she might fall back to sleep.

Then her mother took a deep breath and swallowed to clear her throat. Her eyes reopened. “For the burden. The burden of it.”

Puzzled, Sheila studied her for a long moment. “What are you talking about?”

“This burden that I’m leaving you. I’m sorry, Sheila. I’m so sorry.”

“Mama? What burden? What do you mean?”

“Just get rid of it. Get rid of it.”

“What? Mama, I don’t underst—”

“I’m sorry. . . .”

The eyes closed slowly this time. Her breathing became deep and heavy.

Margaret Baker had just two more rational moments—one the next day in which she said that she loved her daughter more than anything in the world, and a second on her final day, when she asked Sheila what she thought God might have in store for her. When Sheila said she didn’t know but was sure it would be wonderful, her mother managed a weak nod before slipping into unconsciousness. Her suffering came to an end less than two hours later.