

# NOVEMBER 22, 1963



There are many conflicting theories about what exactly happened in Dallas on the day of President Kennedy's assassination. What is presented in this chapter is the most plausible version of events based on known facts, eyewitness accounts, investigative findings, and reasonable assumptions.

## A NEW DAY BEGINS

It was still dark in the Texas suburb of Irving when Lee Harvey Oswald was woken by his wife, Marina. They had been married less than two years, yet the relationship was already fraught with difficulty. They had two beautiful young daughters, Rachel and June, but they now lived apart most of the time. Marina and the children had moved in with a friend, and Lee had rented a room about 13 miles (21 kilometers) away so he could be closer to his job in Dallas. The family still saw each other frequently, however, and Lee had asked Marina many times over the previous few months if they could get back together for good. Weary of his unpredictable moods and



Lee Harvey Oswald left his family's home in Irving, Texas, early on November 22, 1963.

occasional outbursts of violence, she was hesitant. When they saw each other, they still argued and fought. Nothing had changed.

Through her sleepiness, Marina heard Lee say that he was leaving some money behind. "Take it and buy everything you and Junie and Rachel need," he told her.<sup>1</sup> This was very odd, as he was usually tight with the little money he managed to earn. He was often unemployed, and when he found a job, he didn't usually keep it for long. In spite of this uncharacteristic flash of generosity, Marina did not reply. Stranger still was the fact that Lee took off his wedding ring and placed it in a teacup just before heading out. Marina would not notice this until much later in the day.



About an hour later, in a Fort Worth hotel room about 30 miles (48.2 km) from Irving, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, was just waking up. Fort Worth was one stop among many on Kennedy's current campaign tour. He did not love the process of campaigning, but 1964 would be an election year, and he needed to increase his popularity in Texas. Texas was a mostly Republican state, and Kennedy was a Democrat. He was wildly popular in other parts of the nation, though. He was tall, slender, and handsome, and he possessed a likable, easygoing manner. There was also his age. In 1960, at 43 years old, he had become the youngest man ever elected president. This delighted many voters after a generation of "old-man presidents" ending with



Kennedy shakes a young man's hand during his first presidential campaign in 1960.

## NOT A WELL MAN

Kennedy's youthful aura was something of a myth, as he was frequently ill throughout his life. As a child, he spent more than two months in a hospital with scarlet fever. He also had an abnormally severe case of chicken pox and numerous inner-ear infections. He suffered appendicitis at the age of 13, and the resulting surgery kept him bedridden for a long period. During his first year of high school, he had numerous flulike colds, made worse by the fact that he never seemed to put on much weight. In his early twenties, he began having trouble with both his back and his digestive system. He eventually had a back operation that once again required a great deal of bed rest. He would experience excruciating back pain throughout his life. Long after his death, when many of his medical records were revealed to the public, it was learned that he had Addison's disease, which occurs when the adrenal glands fail to produce certain hormones. In spite of all this, he managed to conceal his suffering from the public and maintain an image of healthy energy.





Kennedy (center) visited Fort Worth, Texas, before moving on to Dallas.

Kennedy's predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was in his early seventies when he left office. As Kennedy got out of bed that morning, he was reminded that he had to give a speech in Fort Worth, then make a short flight to Dallas to give another.

## **A PACKAGE OF CURTAIN RODS**

Around the time the president was getting ready for his busy day, Lee Harvey Oswald was sitting in the passenger seat of a friend's car, on his way to work. Both men worked at the Texas School Book Depository in downtown Dallas. During the drive, the friend noticed a package Oswald had put in the back seat—long and thin,

slightly wider at one end, and wrapped in brown paper. Oswald told him it contained curtain rods. When they arrived at the book depository, Oswald grabbed the package and hurried off.

The president's plane landed at Dallas's Love Field at approximately 11:40 a.m., and a huge crowd was waiting to welcome him. His wife, whose name was Jacqueline but was usually referred to as "Jackie," appeared first and received enthusiastic applause. Like her husband, she was young and attractive, and she had many fans of her own. To the crowd's delight, the Kennedys came over to say hello and shake hands. The tarmac was still wet from the rain that had fallen earlier, but the skies had since cleared. It was turning out to be a wonderful day.



A crowd of people greet John and Jackie Kennedy at Love Field in Dallas.

Around this time, Oswald was standing by the open shaft of a freight elevator on the fifth floor of the book depository. As the elevator car came by on its way down, Oswald saw that a few of his co-workers were on it. He asked them to close the gate after they got off at the bottom. If the gate wasn't closed, a safety feature on the car would prevent it from going up again. These co-workers did not have a very favorable opinion of Oswald. He rarely spoke to anyone, and when he did he came across as moody and arrogant. When they reached the bottom, none of them bothered to close the gate for him.

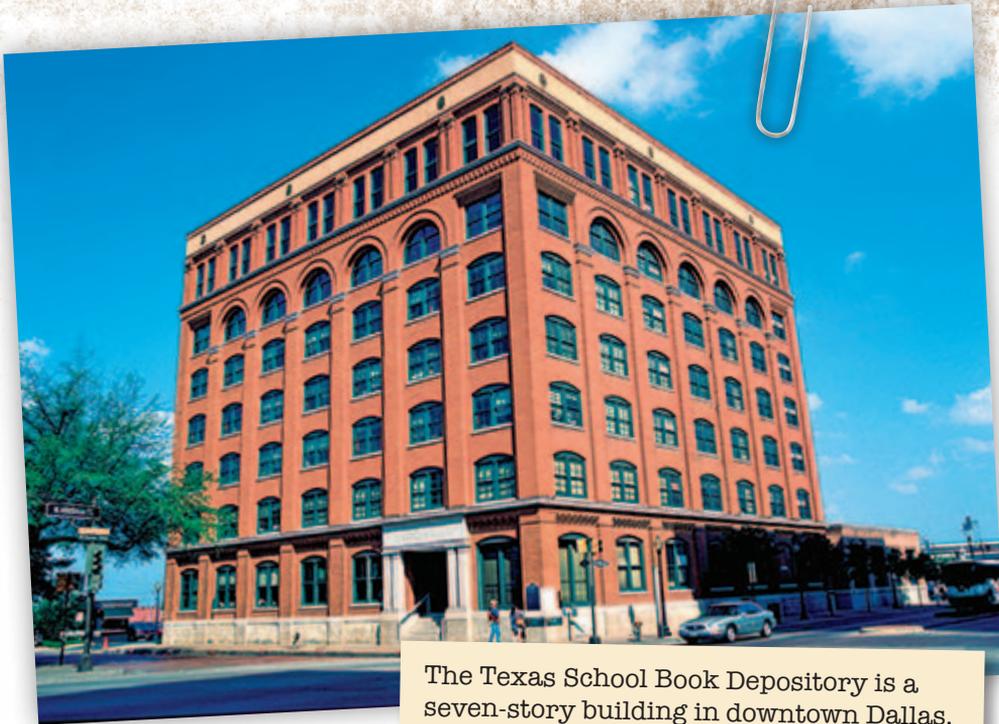
The Kennedys got into their limousine a few minutes before noon. The limo was part of a long line of vehicles that made up the president's motorcade. Other notable people riding in the motorcade included Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson and Texas senator Ralph Yarborough. There were Secret Service agents everywhere, as well as dozens of Dallas police officers. Protection was of prime importance on this trip, as Kennedy had received numerous threats from radical organizations and unstable individuals in the weeks beforehand. Kennedy had even said earlier in the day, "It would not be a very difficult job to shoot the president of the United States. All you'd have to do is get up in a high building with a high-powered rifle with a telescopic sight, and there's nothing anybody could do."<sup>2</sup>

The motorcade pulled out of Love Field at noon and headed for downtown Dallas. Riding with the president and first lady was



The Kennedys sit in the back of the open convertible in Dallas. Texas Governor John Connally (bottom right) is in front of them.

Governor John Connally and his wife, Nellie. The custom-built limousine had three rows of seats—front, middle, and back. A Secret Service agent was in the front with the driver, the Connallys were in the middle, and the Kennedys were in the back. The limo could also be fitted with a clear-plastic “bubble” instead of its normal hardtop roof. But because the weather was nice, Kennedy had requested that the bubble be left off the vehicle. There were also running boards on either side of the car where Secret Service agents could stand while it rolled along. Kennedy did not like this and asked that the agents stay clear. He did not want to feel too isolated from ordinary citizens.



The Texas School Book Depository is a seven-story building in downtown Dallas.

## THE SIXTH FLOOR

Around the time the presidential motorcade left Love Field, one of Oswald's co-workers went up to the sixth floor of the book depository to get a pack of cigarettes. While there, he noticed Oswald walking around with a clipboard. It seemed strange that Oswald would be working during lunch. When he asked Oswald if he'd be going down to the lunchroom, Oswald said no. The man thought nothing more of it and took the elevator back down. A few minutes later, another co-worker came to the sixth floor. He had heard that President Kennedy would be passing by, and he wanted to have a good view. He did not see Oswald during this time. He sat down by one of the windows and ate his lunch, hoping some of his friends would join him. When none did, he finished eating and



Crowds lined the streets of Dallas to see the president drive by.

went to the fifth floor instead. There he found two other co-workers. They went together to the southeastern corner of the building and waited for the president to pass below them.

The motorcade turned onto Main Street in downtown Dallas around 12:20 p.m. All along the journey from Love Field, there had been thousands of people waving and cheering. Now the crowds were thicker than ever, spilling into the streets and slowing the motorcade's progress. The Kennedys did not mind. They were delighted by the warm welcome. As the motorcade crawled through the hallway of tall buildings, Kennedy and his wife smiled and waved back to their admirers.

The motorcade finally reached the end of Main Street at 12:29 and entered Dealey Plaza. From a bird's-eye view, the plaza formed



The motorcade entered Dealey Plaza and turned right onto Houston Street, then a quick left onto Elm—where three shots rang out just seconds later.

a triangular shape as three main roads in downtown Dallas came together at a point, then ran under a long railroad bridge before continuing onto the Stemmons Freeway. The motorcade made a right turn from Main onto Houston, then a left onto Elm. The crowd was much thinner here, but the mood was just as frenzied. People were still calling for the president and first lady to wave to them or to turn in their direction so they could take photos.

One man looked up toward the book depository and saw the workers who were watching the president from the windows. He took particular note of a figure visible through a sixth-floor window on the far east side of the building. But no one else in Dealey Plaza took any notice of the man on the sixth floor. All eyes were on

the president and his wife. Many people were clicking pictures or recording films—creating images that, in light of what happened next, would be analyzed exhaustively in the years ahead. In another moment of irony, Nellie Connally turned to Kennedy and said, “Mr. President, they can’t make you believe now that there are not some in Dallas who love you and appreciate you, can they?” The president, in the last utterance of his life, smiled and replied, “No, they sure can’t.”<sup>3</sup> The limo began down Elm Street around 12:30 with the president and first lady still waving and smiling.

Then it began.



Employees at the Texas School Book Depository watch out the window as Kennedy’s motorcade drives into Dealey Plaza.

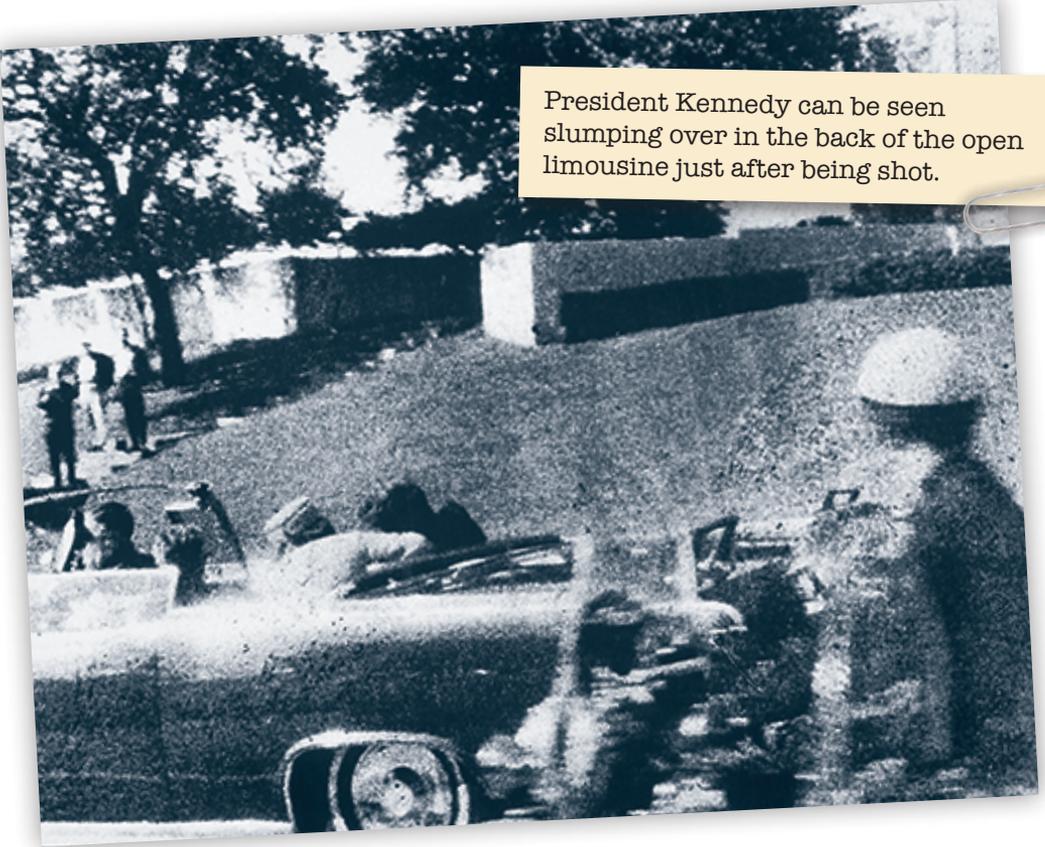
## EIGHT SECONDS THAT CHANGED AMERICA

The first shot cut through the din like a firecracker. Many thought it was just that—a prank pulled by some kid to taunt the security team or by some lunatic looking to scare the president. Others said they initially thought the sound was a car or motorcycle backfiring. Still others thought it was a gun firing a military salute in the president's honor. A few people, however, knew exactly what it was—and Governor Connally, sitting directly in front of the president, was one of them. An experienced hunter, he was very familiar with the sound of a rifle shot. Fearing that this was the beginning of an



Police officers keep an eye on the crowd as the Connallys (left) and Kennedys (right) enter Dealey Plaza.

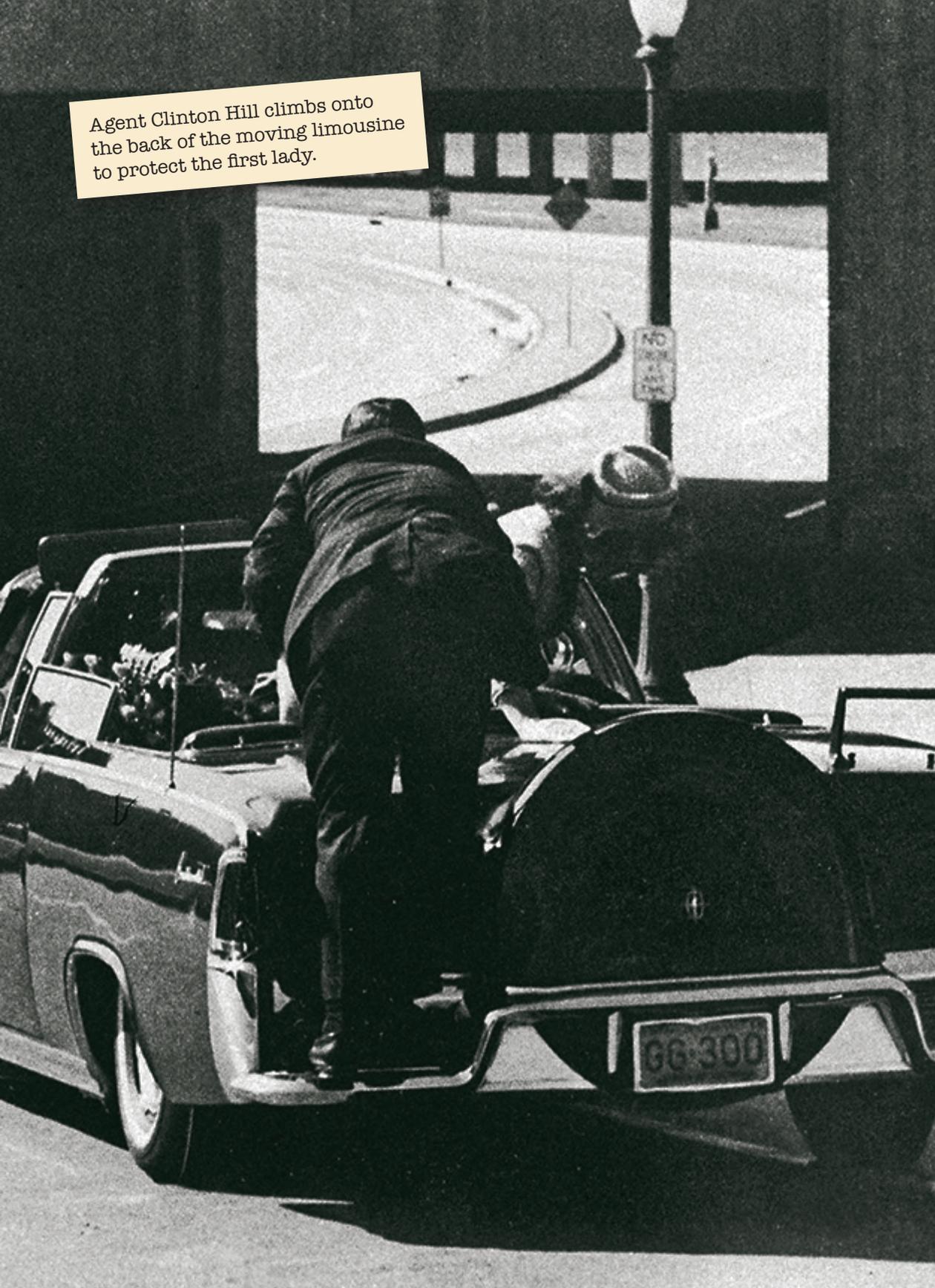
President Kennedy can be seen slumping over in the back of the open limousine just after being shot.



assault, he said, “Oh no, no, no ...”<sup>4</sup> He looked back to see if the president or first lady had been hit, but the first bullet had missed its mark and instead struck a nearby curb.

The second shot came less than four seconds later, and it erased all remaining doubts. President Kennedy’s hands went to his neck, his elbows up, as the bullet entered high on his back and exited at the base of his throat. It continued through the seat in front of him and struck Governor Connally in the back, driving him downward. Connally cried out, “My God, they’re going to kill us all!”<sup>5</sup> Then his wife pulled him down for protection and covered his head with her own.

Agent Clinton Hill climbs onto the back of the moving limousine to protect the first lady.



Jackie Kennedy turned to her husband, who had a pained expression on his face and was unable to speak. Doctors would later theorize that he likely would have survived the attack if this first wound had been the only one. Elsewhere in Dealey Plaza, as people began to realize what was happening, they fled or dropped to the ground. Meanwhile, a few Secret Service agents were running toward the president to protect him from further harm. Tragically, they would not reach him in time.

The third, final, and fatal shot arrived eight seconds after the first. It entered the president's head on the top right side, fragmenting large pieces of his scalp, skull, and brain tissue. For all practical purposes, he was killed at this moment. Even if he had received immediate medical attention, he would not have survived. His body went limp and slumped toward his wife, who cried out, "Oh no, no, no. Oh my God, they have shot my husband. I love you, Jack."<sup>6</sup> Then, in an act she would later claim to not remember, Jackie climbed onto the trunk of the limousine, possibly to retrieve some part of her husband's skull that had been blown away by the fatal bullet. A Secret Service agent who had reached the car by this point forced Jackie back into the seat in case more shots came. The driver was then ordered to head for the nearest hospital, Parkland Memorial. As the limousine sped off, Jackie cradled the president in her lap. It was like a scene out of a horror movie, with blood everywhere. The first lady would later say, "I kept holding the top of his head down ... but I knew he was dead."<sup>7</sup>