

Like all Americans who lived through that day, Robert F. Kennedy never forgot how he heard his brother had been shot. The attorney general, who had just turned thirty-eight, was eating lunch—clam chowder and tuna sandwiches—with United States Attorney Robert Morgenthau and his assistant by the pool at Hickory Hill, his Civil War-era mansion in McLean, Virginia, outside the capital. It was a perfect fall day—the kind of bright, crisp Friday afternoon that makes a weekend seem full of promise—and the grounds of the rolling green estate were aflame with gold and red leaves from the shedding hickories, maples, and oaks that stood sentry over the property. Kennedy had just emerged from a mid-day swim, and as he talked and ate with the visiting lawmen, his trunks were still dripping.

Around 1:45 p.m., the phone extension at the other end of the pool rang. Kennedy's wife, Ethel, picked it up—she held the receiver out to him. J. Edgar Hoover was calling. Bobby knew immediately something unusual had happened. The FBI director never phoned him at home. The two men regarded each other with a taut wariness that they both knew would only be broken when one of them left office. Each represented to the other what was wrong about America. "I have news for you," Hoover said. "The president's been shot." Hoover's voice was blunt and matter of fact. Kennedy would always remember not just the FBI chief's words, but his chilling tone.

"History cracked open" for America on November 22, 1963, as playwright Tony Kushner observed years later. But the abyss that opened for Bobby Kennedy at that moment was the deepest of all. And it was Hoover, of all people, who brought him news of the apocalypse. "I think he told me with pleasure," Kennedy would recall.

Twenty minutes later, Hoover phoned again to deliver the final blow: "The president's dead," he said and promptly hung up. Again, Kennedy would remember, his voice was oddly flat—"not quite as excited as if he were reporting the fact that he had found a Communist on the faculty of Howard University."

Hoover's curt phone calls confirmed that the "perfect communion" between the two brothers, as the *New York Times*' Anthony Lewis described the bond between President John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy—a fraternal relationship unprecedented in presidential history—was over. But they also clearly conveyed that Bobby had suffered a death of a different kind. His own power as attorney general instantly started to fade, already to a point where the director of the FBI no longer felt compelled to show deference, or even common human grace, to his superior in the Justice Department. For the rest of the day and night, Bobby Kennedy would wrestle with his howling grief—crying, or fighting against crying since that was the Kennedy way—while using whatever power was still left him, before the new administration settled firmly into place, to figure out what had really happened in Dallas. He worked the phones at Hickory Hill; he met with a succession of people while waiting for Air Force One to return with the body of his brother, his brother's widow, and the new president; he accompanied his brother's remains to the autopsy at Bethesda Naval Hospital; and he stayed coiled and awake in the White House until early the next morning. Lit up with the clarity of shock, the electricity of adrenaline, he constructed the outlines of the crime.

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