



THE COMPLETE ILLUSTRATED COLLECTION

Dark Tales of Washington

8 Stories · An AI Wrangler Collection

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EPISODE 1

Watergate

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this one comes to us out of the warm Washington dark of a June night in 1972, out of a great riverside building of curved concrete balconies on the banks of the Potomac, a place called the Watergate. This is a true story, Carol, every word of it documented, and it begins with something so small the newspapers first called it a third-rate burglary. Five men in business suits and surgical gloves, breaking into an office in the dead of night. And it ends, two years later, with a president of the United States climbing aboard a helicopter and flying away in disgrace. That is the whole arc of it, Carol, and I still can hardly believe the distance between those two points.

CAROL

The Watergate. Marty, I know the name is famous, but I've never had it told to me from the beginning, as a story. Five men in the dark with surgical gloves. What on earth were they after in there?



MARTY

They were after secrets, Carol. That sixth floor of the Watergate held the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee, the opposition party's nerve center in a presidential election year. And these men had come to photograph documents and fix a wiretap they'd planted on the telephones weeks before. It was the small hours of June the seventeenth, and it should have gone off clean and quiet. But there was a night watchman, Carol, a young security guard named Frank Wills, making his rounds, and he noticed something. A door latch, down in the stairwell, taped over so it wouldn't lock. He tore the tape off and moved on. And when he came back around and found the latch taped again, he knew someone was inside. He picked up a telephone and called the police.

CAROL

A piece of tape on a door latch. Marty, that gives me chills already, the whole thing turning on one watchful young man. So the police came. Did they catch them right there?



MARTY

Right there, Carol, crouched in the darkened offices. Five burglars, arrested on the spot. And here is where the small thing begins to grow teeth, because these were no ordinary thieves. They carried thousands of dollars in crisp hundred-dollar bills with serial numbers running in sequence. One of them had

an address book, and in that book was the name of a man who worked inside the White House. The threads ran, Carol, from those five men in that office, straight back toward the president's own re-election committee, an outfit so aptly named that its initials spelled CREEP. And the great question of the next two years was born in that instant: how high did it go?

CAROL

How high did it go. Marty, I can feel the story opening up like a dark hallway. But surely powerful men know how to make a small thing disappear. Why didn't it just fade away?



MARTY

Ah, Carol, that was exactly the plan. Not to answer the break-in, but to bury it. This is the part historians call the cover-up, and it is the true heart of the tragedy. Money was quietly raised and passed to the burglars to buy their silence, hush money, to keep them from talking. Investigators were steered away. And it very nearly worked. But two things would not let it die. The first was a pair of young reporters at the Washington Post, Carol, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, working the phones and the doorsteps night after night, following that trail of money. And the second was a secret. Woodward had a source, a man so high inside the government and so frightened that he would only meet in the dead of

night, in the shadows of an underground parking garage.

CAROL

An underground parking garage in the middle of the night. Oh, Marty, that is straight out of a thriller. Who was he? How did they even signal each other to meet in such a place?



MARTY

They had signals worked out like spies, Carol. If Woodward needed a meeting, he'd move a flowerpot with a little red flag on his apartment balcony. And the source, in turn, would leave marks in the young reporter's morning newspaper. Then down they'd go, into the concrete and the exhaust fumes, and this shadowy man would confirm what Woodward had, nudge him one way, warn him off another. He told him a phrase that became legend: follow the money. The Post editors, needing to protect him, gave him a code name off a movie marquee of the day. They called him Deep Throat. And here is the wonder of it, Carol, his true identity stayed secret for more than thirty years. It was not until 2005 that the world learned Deep Throat was Mark Felt, the second-highest official in the FBI itself.

CAROL

The number two man at the FBI, hiding in a parking garage. Marty, imagine carrying that secret for thirty years. So the reporters kept pulling the thread. But it takes more than newspaper stories to bring down a president, doesn't it?



MARTY

It does, Carol, and this is where the whole nation gets pulled in. By the summer of 1973, the United States Senate had opened hearings, and they were carried live on television, day after day, ordinary Americans watching witness after witness raise a hand and swear the oath. It was a senator from Tennessee, Howard Baker, who framed the question that the whole country was holding its breath over. He leaned into his microphone and asked, what did the President know, and when did he know it? And then, Carol, into those hearings walked a rather nervous White House aide, and almost in passing he revealed a secret that changed everything. President Nixon, he said, had a hidden taping system in the Oval Office. Nearly every conversation the president had held, for years, had been secretly recorded.

CAROL

Tapes. Marty, you mean the answer to Baker's whole question might be sitting there on reels, in the president's own voice? Everyone must have wanted those tapes at once.



MARTY

Everyone, Carol. The Senate wanted them, and a special prosecutor named Archibald Cox, appointed to get to the bottom of it all, demanded them in court. And the president refused. He fought it, he claimed the tapes were his by the privilege of his office. And then came the night that shocked the country, a Saturday in October of 1973, the night they call the Saturday Night Massacre. Nixon ordered his Attorney General, Elliot Richardson, to fire the special prosecutor. And Richardson would not do it, Carol. He resigned instead. So the order passed down to his deputy, William Ruckelshaus, and he refused too, and resigned. Two of the highest law officers in the land, quitting in a single night rather than carry out the president's command. It was only the third man down the line who finally fired Cox. And the country recoiled in horror.

CAROL

Two men resigning in one night rather than obey. Marty, that tells you everything about how far it had gone. But they got the tapes in the end, didn't they? Please tell me they got the tapes.



MARTY

They got them, Carol, but not without one last riddle that has never been fully explained. When the tapes finally began to come out, one of them, a crucial conversation from just days after the break-in, had a gap in it. Eighteen and a half minutes of silence, an erasure, a buzzing hole right where the talk turned to Watergate. The White House offered explanations that satisfied no one. And still Nixon held the rest back, until the Supreme Court of the United States ruled, unanimously, that he had to hand them over. No man is above the law, they said, not even the president. And on one of those tapes, Carol, from just six days after the burglary, the world finally heard the president's own voice arranging to have the FBI investigation shut down. They called it the smoking gun.

CAROL

The smoking gun, in his own voice. Marty, after two years, there it finally was, the thing they couldn't explain away. What could he possibly do after that?



MARTY

There was nothing left to do, Carol. The evidence was plain, the last of his support fell away, and rather than be removed from office, Richard Nixon chose to go. On the evening of August the eighth, 1974, he sat before the television cameras and told the nation he would resign, the first president in American history ever to do so. And the next morning he stood in the East Room of the White House, said his farewells, and walked out to a waiting helicopter on the lawn. He turned at the top of the steps, Carol, and raised both arms in that famous V, and then he flew away, and it was over. A third-rate burglary, five men and a roll of tape on a door latch, had brought down the most powerful man in the world. That is the story, and it is all true. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking about that young watchman on his rounds and those two reporters chasing the money in the dark, and how the smallest acts of paying attention can matter more than all the power in the world. Keep your eyes open, tell the truth even when it costs you, and always, always come back to the fire.



EPISODE 2

Teapot Dome

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this one comes to us out of the roaring 1920s, out of the dust and the oil derricks of the American West, and out of the marble corridors of Washington in the days of President Warren G. Harding. This is the tale of Teapot Dome, the greatest bribery scandal that had ever touched the government of the United States, and it is a story of oil, and of greed, and of one cabinet secretary who quietly sold the nation's reserves right out from under it. It begins, Carol, with a strange rock in the Wyoming badlands, a great sandstone boulder that weather had carved into the shape of a teapot, spout and handle and all.



CAROL

A teapot made of stone, out in the empty Wyoming range. Marty, I love that already. But tell me, why would the whole country come to know the name of one lonely rock in the badlands? What was underneath it?



MARTY

Oil, Carol. An ocean of it, black and thick, sleeping in the rock far below. And here is the thing you must understand. In those years the United States Navy had just changed its great warships over from coal to oil, and a fleet without fuel is only a row of iron ghosts. So a wise president years before had set aside certain oilfields as emergency naval reserves, land held back from the drillers, the Navy's own buried treasure for the day a war might come. There were three of them, and two matter to our story: Teapot Dome in Wyoming, under that very rock, and Elk Hills, out in the golden hills of California. That oil was meant to stay in the ground, Carol, safe, until the nation had desperate need of it.



CAROL

So this was the country's rainy-day fund, buried in the earth for wartime. Marty, that sounds like exactly the sort of thing a greedy man would look at and start to scheme over. Who was minding it?



MARTY

Ah, now we come to our villain, Carol, and what a character he was. His name was Albert Bacon Fall, a former senator from New Mexico, a rancher with a great sweeping mustache and a wide black hat, a man who looked more like a frontier gambler than a Washington official. And in 1921 President Harding made him Secretary of the Interior, put him in charge of the nation's public lands. Now Harding, God rest him, was a genial, trusting soul who filled his cabinet with poker friends and cronies, and history remembers his administration as one of the most corrupt in the whole story of the republic. And Albert Fall, Carol, had a problem that would light the fuse on all of it. He was broke. His New Mexico ranch was mortgaged and failing, his taxes eight years unpaid, and he had a hungry, expensive dream of being a great cattle baron.



CAROL

A broke man with a baron's dream, sitting right on top of the nation's oil. Oh, Marty, I can feel where this is going and I don't like it. What did Fall do with all that power in his hands?



MARTY

His first move was quiet and clever, Carol. He persuaded his friend Harding to sign an order handing control of those naval oil reserves over from the Navy Department to Fall's own Interior Department. A stroke of the pen, and the henhouse was given to the fox. And then, in secret, with no public notice and no competitive bidding, no honest auction where any company might bid, Fall leased the reserves away. He gave Teapot Dome, all that Wyoming oil, to an oilman named Harry Sinclair and his Mammoth Oil Company. And he gave the Elk Hills field in California to another oil baron, an old prospector turned multimillionaire named Edward Doheny. Handshakes in private rooms, Carol, and the people's oil signed over to two of the richest men in America.



CAROL

No auction, no bidding, just done in the dark. Marty, surely a man doesn't hand over treasure like that out of pure friendship. What did Fall get back? What did they put in his hand?



MARTY

Money, Carol. Roughly four hundred thousand dollars of it, which in the 1920s was a staggering fortune, in cash and in government bonds and in cattle for that ranch he loved. And here is the detail that the whole nation would gasp at, the little black bag. Edward Doheny sent his own son, a young man, carrying a satchel, a small black leather bag, stuffed with one hundred thousand dollars in cash, straight to Albert Fall as what they later called a loan, on no note, at no interest, with nothing signed. Doheny's son carried that bag himself. And Fall took the money, and Sinclair's bonds besides, and he thought no one would ever be the wiser.



CAROL

A boy carrying a hundred thousand dollars in a little black bag, and not one paper to show for it. Marty, that is the kind of picture nobody forgets. But how does a secret like that ever come out? Who noticed?

MARTY

Vanity, Carol. It was Fall's own vanity that betrayed him. Because a man who has been broke for years cannot suddenly become rich and stay quiet about it. Out on that struggling New Mexico ranch, the change was plain for every neighbor to see. Fall paid off all those back taxes at once. He bought up the neighboring ranch to double his land. He strung new fences, brought in blooded stock, piped in water, built and improved until the shabby spread became the showplace of the county. And folks began to talk, Carol. Where, they asked, does a bankrupt cabinet secretary on a government salary find the money for all of that? The question traveled all the way to Washington, and it reached the ears of a senator from Montana, a quiet, dogged, incorruptible man named Thomas J. Walsh.

CAROL

Thomas Walsh. Oh, I do love it when the honest, stubborn one finally walks into the story. Tell me about him, Marty. Was he the kind of man who wouldn't let go?

MARTY

He was a bulldog, Carol, a lawyer with a spade-shaped beard and endless patience, and he opened a Senate investigation that dragged on for two long years. At first he found almost nothing, for the deals were buried deep and the powerful men lied smoothly. But Walsh kept digging, kept pulling threads, and slowly it all unraveled. That mysterious hundred thousand came to light. The bonds were traced. Fall's sudden fortune was laid bare before the whole country in the hearing room, the newspapers screaming the word Teapot Dome from coast to coast. It became the symbol of an entire rotten age, of oil money buying the government itself. And when it was all dragged into the daylight, the courts came for Albert Fall.

CAROL

And here comes the reckoning at last. But Marty, there were two rich oilmen who handed him that money. Surely they went down with him? Tell me the ending, because something in your voice says it was a strange one.

MARTY

Strange it was, Carol, and it is the bitter paradox at the very heart of this tale. There were trials that went on for years, all through the 1920s. And when the dust settled, here is what the juries decided. Edward Doheny, the man who sent his own son with that black bag of cash, was put on trial for bribing Albert Fall, and he was acquitted. Found not guilty. Harry Sinclair wriggled free of the bribery charge as well, serving only a little time for contempt and for hiring detectives to shadow the jurors. But Albert Fall, Carol, tried separately, was convicted of taking that very same bribe that Doheny was cleared of giving. Think on that. The law said the money was a bribe when Fall's hand closed around it, but not a bribe when Doheny's hand let it go. And so in 1929 Albert Bacon Fall was fined and sentenced to a year in prison, a broken and disgraced old man, and he walked into that cell and made history, for he became the first member of a United States presidential cabinet ever sent to prison for crimes committed in his high office. He had sold the nation's oil, and in the end it cost him everything. So the next time you hear a kettle whistling on a cold night, friends, remember the teapot of stone out in the Wyoming badlands, and the men who tried to pour the country's treasure into their own cup. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking of that lonely teapot rock standing out in the Wyoming dark, keeping watch over all that oil, and of one proud man in a wide black hat who forgot that the earth keeps no secrets forever. Guard the things that are given to your keeping, don't take the bag that comes with no

receipt, and always, always come back to the fire.

EPISODE 3

The Burr-Hamilton Duel

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this one comes to us out of the raw dawn light of the young American republic, out of the year 1804, from a lonely wooded ledge above the Hudson River called the heights of Weehawken. This is the tale of two of the most brilliant men that new nation ever produced, Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton, and how a lifetime of bitterness between them ended at ten paces with a pair of pistols. It is a true tale, Carol, every word of it in the record, and it is a tale of pride, and of honor, and of how honor can kill a man.

CAROL

Oh, Marty, I have heard those two names my whole life but never the whole of what passed between them. Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton. Tell me first, who were they to each other, before it ever came to pistols?



MARTY

They were rivals, Carol, of the deepest and oldest kind. Picture the new nation, barely a generation old, the ink hardly dry on the Constitution, and here are

these two men climbing to the very top of it. Hamilton, the orphan boy from the Caribbean who rose to be General Washington's right hand and the first Secretary of the Treasury, the man who built the nation's banks and its credit out of nothing. And Burr, the polished New York lawyer and senator, grandson of a great preacher, charming, brilliant, ambitious as the day is long. They circled each other for years in the courtrooms and the politics of New York, and Hamilton came to distrust Burr to the very marrow of his bones. He thought Burr a man of no fixed principle, a man who wanted power for its own sake, and he said so, Carol, again and again, in letters and in parlors all over the country.

CAROL

So it was not one insult but a slow poison, built up over years. And Hamilton did not keep these opinions quiet. Did Burr know what was being said of him behind his back?



MARTY

He knew, Carol, and worse than that, twice it cost him everything. In the election of 1800, Burr and Thomas Jefferson tied in the electoral vote, and the whole thing was thrown into the House of Representatives to decide, ballot after ballot, day after day. And who threw his weight against Burr? Hamilton. He could not abide Jefferson's politics, but he trusted Burr even less, and he worked every lever he

had to see Jefferson made president and Burr shut out. So Burr became merely the Vice President, a man in the shadows. And then in 1804, Burr reached for the governorship of New York, hoping to rebuild himself, and once again Hamilton was there in the background, whispering, writing, campaigning against him. Burr lost that too. And now, Carol, a proud man had been ruined twice by the same hand.

CAROL

Twice by the same man. I can feel the pressure of it building, Marty, like a storm that has to break somewhere. What finally lit the fuse?



MARTY

A newspaper, Carol, and a single dreadful word. After that governor's race, a letter turned up printed in the Albany papers, written by a Dr. Charles Cooper, and in it Cooper reported that at a dinner party Hamilton had called Burr a dangerous man, one who ought not be trusted with the reins of government. That alone Burr might have swallowed. But then came the sentence that finished it. Cooper wrote that he could describe a still more despicable opinion which Hamilton had expressed of Mr. Burr. Despicable, Carol. In that age, among men of that class, that word was a loaded gun all by itself. It meant a stain on a man's honor that only blood could wash clean.

CAROL

Despicable. Just one word in a newspaper, and yet you say it was as good as a challenge. So Burr read that, and what did he do? Did he go straight to Hamilton?



MARTY

He did it the way gentlemen did it then, Carol, through letters, cold and formal and deadly. Burr wrote to Hamilton and demanded a prompt and unqualified acknowledgment or denial of that despicable word. And Hamilton, being a lawyer to his fingertips, tried to split hairs. He wrote back that he could not answer for another man's word, that Burr must say what specific charge he meant, that despicable was too vague a thing to disavow. Back and forth the letters went, each one stiffer and colder than the last, the seconds carrying them between the two men. This was the code duello, Carol, the elaborate rules of honor, and once those wheels began to turn, neither man could step off the road without being branded a coward before the whole nation. And for men like these, Carol, that was a fate worse than the pistol.

CAROL

So they were both trapped by it, in a way. Neither one truly free to say, this is madness, let us stop. Marty, did Hamilton want this? Did he truly want to stand and shoot at another man?



MARTY

No, Carol, and this is the part that breaks the heart. Hamilton did not want it at all. The night before, he sat up and wrote out his private thoughts, and he wrote that he had religious and moral scruples against dueling, that he had resolved to reserve and throw away his first fire, and even his second, to give Mr. Burr a chance to reflect and come to his senses. And there was a wound in him deeper than politics, Carol. Three years before, on that very same dueling ground at Weehawken, Hamilton's own beloved son Philip, just nineteen years old, had been shot and killed in a duel defending his father's name. That ground had already drunk the blood of his boy. And now the father was rowing across the same river to the same lonely ledge, to face the same fate.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. His own son, on that same spot. I can hardly bear it. How does a father even set foot in that boat? Take me to that morning. What did the dawn look like?



MARTY

It was the morning of July the eleventh, 1804, Carol, and it was already warm. Dueling was a crime in New York, so both men had to cross the Hudson into New Jersey, to that narrow wooded shelf below the Palisades where the ground was flat enough to fight. Hamilton was rowed across the still gray water in the early light, his second beside him, the pistols in their polished wooden case. Burr had crossed before him and was already there, waiting in his shirtsleeves, clearing the brush from the ledge. The seconds measured off the ground, ten full paces between the marks, and they loaded the pistols in plain sight of one another, as the rules required. The river lay silver below, the birds were waking in the trees, and two of the finest minds in America stood facing each other in the new day's light with death loaded in their hands.

CAROL

Ten paces. In the quiet of the morning with the birds singing. And then, Marty. Then the word was given. Tell me what happened.



MARTY

The second gave the word, Carol, and two shots cracked out over the water, so close together that men argued forever after which came first. But this much the record tells us. Hamilton's ball went high and wide, snapping through the leaves of a cedar tree far above Burr's head, well off to the side, just as he had told his friends he meant to throw his shot away. Burr's ball did not go wide. It struck Hamilton low in the right side, tore through his body, and lodged against his spine. Hamilton rose up on his toes, twisted, and fell to the ground, and he knew at once it was mortal. This is a mortal wound, doctor, he said. They carried him down to the boat and rowed him back across the Hudson, back to New York, and there in a friend's house, with his wife Eliza and their children around him, Alexander Hamilton died the following afternoon, the fourteenth of July, in terrible pain, forty-nine years old.

CAROL

The very river he had crossed at dawn, carrying him home to die. And Burr, Marty? A sitting Vice President of the United States had just shot a man dead. What in the world became of him?



MARTY

It destroyed him, Carol, as surely as his ball destroyed Hamilton. The nation recoiled in horror. Here was Hamilton mourned as a fallen founder, and here was Burr, the Vice President, indicted for murder in two states at once, in New York and New Jersey both, forced to flee south while the charges hung over him. He served out the last of his term as Vice President almost as a ghost, presiding over the Senate while wanted for murder, and when it was done his career in respectable public life was finished forever. He drifted west into strange schemes, and a few years later he was hauled before a court and tried for treason, for a wild plot they said aimed to carve an empire out of the western lands. He was acquitted, Carol, but it hardly mattered. Aaron Burr lived on for decades, but he lived as a broken and ruined man, the most gifted outcast in America, remembered for one thing only, the morning he killed Alexander Hamilton.

CAROL

Two brilliant men, Marty, and one dawn undid them both. It is such a waste of everything they were. When you sit here by the fire and turn it over, what do you make of it all?



MARTY

I make of it this, Carol. Here were two men who had helped to build a nation out of nothing, men of dazzling gifts, who had every reason to grow old and honored, and instead they let a lifetime of pride and grievance and a single ugly word in a newspaper carry them to a lonely ledge at dawn. One of them lost his life, and the other lost everything that made life worth having, and all of it for a thing they called honor. It reminds us how young and how raw that republic was, Carol, a world where a difference of opinion could still be settled with powder and ball, and how thin the line has always been between greatness and ruin. So when you feel your own pride rising, friends, and some old grievance whispering that only satisfaction will do, remember Weehawken, and the cedar tree, and the boat rowing a dying man home across the river. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking of Eliza Hamilton at that bedside, and of two clever, prideful men who could forgive the world everything but each other. Let the small insults go, hold your loved ones closer than your grudges, and always, always come back to the fire.

EPISODE 4

Huey Long, the Kingfish

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this one comes to us out of the red-clay hills of Louisiana, out of the hungry years of the Great Depression, when a poor boy from Winn Parish rose up to become the most powerful and the most feared man his state had ever seen. They called him the Kingfish. His name was Huey Pierce Long, and he promised to make every man a king. He built roads and hospitals and schools with one hand, Carol, and he ran his whole state like a private kingdom with the other. And in the end he was gunned down in the marble halls of the very capitol he had raised up out of the dust. It is a true story, and a dark one.

CAROL

Oh, Marty, the Kingfish. I've heard that name my whole life and never known the man behind it. A poor boy from the back country who became a king in all but name. Tell me, where does a story like that begin?



MARTY

It begins in the piney woods of Winn Parish, Carol, up in the north of Louisiana, poor country, hardscrabble country, where the soil was thin and the people were thinner. Huey Long was born there in 1893, one of nine children in a farming family, and he grew up watching hard-working people stay poor no matter how they toiled, while a handful of rich planters and oil men held all the money and all the power. He was a bright boy, quick as a whip, with a tongue that could talk the birds out of the trees. He couldn't afford much schooling, so he sold books and lard and patent medicines door to door across the countryside, and everywhere he went, Carol, he listened to the grievances of poor folk. And he never forgot a one of them.

CAROL

A traveling salesman soaking up every hard-luck story in the parish. I can just see it, Marty, that young man on a dusty road, learning exactly what the poor people were aching to hear. So how did a peddler with a gift for talk ever climb into politics?



MARTY

By sheer nerve and a great roaring voice, Carol. He studied law, passed the bar, and hung out his shingle, and he made his name suing the big companies on behalf of the little man. Then he got himself elected to the state railroad

commission, and he made war on Standard Oil, the mightiest corporation in Louisiana, thundering that they were bleeding the working people dry. And oh, how the people loved to hear it. He'd stand up on a courthouse-square stump in his shirtsleeves, sweating in the heat, and he'd roar until the crowd roared back. In 1928 he ran for governor with a slogan borrowed from an old populist cry: Every Man a King. And he won, Carol. The poor of Louisiana carried him into office on their shoulders.

CAROL

Every Man a King. There's something in those words that just catches the heart, Marty, especially in hard times when a family had nothing. And once he had that power, did he keep his promises to them? Did he actually help the poor folk who put their faith in him?



MARTY

He did, Carol, and that is the part that makes this story so hard to weigh. Because Huey Long delivered. When he took office, Louisiana was one of the most backward states in the whole country. Poor children walked barefoot to schools with no books. Farmers were sunk in mud because there were almost no paved roads. And Long changed it. He built thousands of miles of roads and hundreds of bridges. He put up new hospitals and gave free care to people who'd

never seen a doctor. He built schools, and he handed out free textbooks to every child in the state, black and white alike, which took real courage in that time and place. He taught grown men and women to read in night schools. To the poor of Louisiana, Carol, he was nothing less than a savior.

CAROL

Free books in the hands of children who'd never owned one. Marty, I can feel why they loved him so. A man who actually made their lives better. But you said at the start there was a darkness in this. If he was doing such good, where does the shadow fall?



MARTY

The shadow falls, Carol, on how he held his power. Because Huey Long did not govern like other men. He seized control of very nearly everything in Louisiana and ran it as a one-man machine. He bent the legislature to his will until they passed whatever he wanted, sometimes shoving bills through in a matter of minutes without the members even reading them. He controlled the courts, the police, the tax collectors. He handed out every state job to loyal men and took a cut of their pay for his political war chest. He muscled the newspapers that dared oppose him and tried to tax them into silence. Even after he moved up to the United States Senate in 1932, he kept his iron grip on Louisiana, ruling it from

Washington through a hand-picked stand-in governor. They didn't call him the Kingfish for nothing, Carol. He was, in all but the name, a dictator.

CAROL

A dictator who built schools for the poor. Marty, my mind can hardly hold both of those things at once. And yet the country was sunk in the Depression then, wasn't it? People were desperate everywhere, not just in Louisiana. Did the rest of America start looking to this Kingfish too?



MARTY

They surely did, Carol, and that is what made him so dangerous to the powerful. In 1934, in the depths of the Depression, with a quarter of the country out of work and hungry, Huey Long launched a national crusade he called Share Our Wealth. His idea was plain enough for any struggling family to grasp. He said the fortunes of the very richest men should be capped and taxed, and the money spread so that every family in America would be guaranteed a decent home, a car, a radio, and a basic yearly income, and no one would go hungry while a few men hoarded millions. Whether it could truly have worked, Carol, the experts argued then and argue still. But to millions of desperate people it sounded like deliverance. Share Our Wealth clubs sprang up all across the nation, with millions of members. And Huey Long began to talk about running for President.

CAROL

For President. Oh, Marty. So he wasn't just a Louisiana story anymore, he was reaching for the whole country. I imagine that put a chill into some very powerful men in Washington. Even the President himself?



MARTY

Even the President himself, Carol. Franklin Roosevelt sat in the White House then, and he privately called Huey Long one of the two most dangerous men in America. Roosevelt feared that Long might split the vote in the coming election, or worse, that this spellbinding orator with his roaring promises and his army of followers might one day seize the presidency itself. Long had the ambition for it, no question. He had a national following, a war chest, and a voice that could move millions. He was riding higher than any poor boy from Winn Parish had any right to dream. But he had also made a great many enemies at home, Carol, and it was one of those, from his own Louisiana, who would bring the whole towering thing crashing down.

CAROL

From his own state. So after all the enemies in Washington, after Standard Oil and the President, it was someone from home. Marty, tell me how it ended. Tell me about that night in the capitol.



MARTY

I'll tell you, Carol. Long had built himself a monument, a brand-new state capitol in Baton Rouge, a soaring tower of limestone thirty-four stories high, the tallest capitol in all America, an art-deco skyscraper rising straight up out of the flat Louisiana ground. He'd raised it in a little over a year, and he loved to stride its gleaming marble corridors like a king in his palace. On the night of September the eighth, 1935, he was there pushing through another batch of bills, one of them a scheme to redraw a judge's district and force an old political enemy off the bench. And in the shadows of one of those marble hallways stood a young man in a white suit. His name was Doctor Carl Weiss, a quiet, well-liked physician, and he was the son-in-law of that very judge Long was trying to destroy.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. A young doctor waiting in the marble hall for the man who was ruining his family. I can hardly bear to hear what comes next. What did he do?



MARTY

He stepped out, Carol, as Long swept past surrounded by his bodyguards, and by the accounts that have come down to us he drew a small pistol and fired a single shot into the Kingfish's body. And in that instant the corridor exploded. Long's bodyguards drew their guns and fired in a fury, cutting young Doctor Weiss down where he stood, riddling him with dozens upon dozens of bullets until he lay dead on that polished marble floor. Huey Long, clutching his side, staggered down the hall and out of the building, wounded and bleeding. They rushed him to the hospital, and the surgeons operated, but the bullet had torn through something they could not save. For two days the Kingfish lingered, the whole state holding its breath. And then, on September the tenth, 1935, he died. He was only forty-two years old.

CAROL

Only forty-two. All that fire and ambition, gone in a hospital bed two days later. Marty, is it true, what they say about his last words? I've heard them, but I don't know if they're real.



MARTY

They are what those at his bedside reported, Carol, and whether he truly spoke them or not, they have become part of the legend, because they fit the man so terribly well. As he lay dying, they say Huey Long murmured, God, don't let me die. I have so much left to do. So much left to do. And there it is, Carol, the whole tangled heart of him in a single breath. A poor boy who clawed his way up out of the red clay to feed and school and heal his people, and who trampled every law and liberty in his path to do it. A champion of the downtrodden and a would-be tyrant, both at once, cut down in the cold marble halls of the very tower he had built to his own glory. They buried him on the grounds of that capitol, and his statue stands over the grave to this day, gazing up at his skyscraper. The Kingfish of Louisiana. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking a long while about that man and everything he was, the good he did and the darkness he carried, and how the two can live in the very same heart. Remember the ones who lift up the poor, but never hand any one man all the power, no matter how sweetly he promises. Keep your eyes open, keep your neighbors close, and always, always come back to the fire.

EPISODE 5

The Caning of Charles Sumner

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this one comes to us out of the spring of 1856, out of the marble halls of the United States Capitol, in the years when this whole country was pulling itself apart over the question of slavery. This is the true story of the day the violence tearing the nation to pieces walked straight through the doors of the Senate and beat a man half to death at his own desk. It is the tale of Senator Charles Sumner and the cane of Preston Brooks, Carol, and it happened five long years before the first shot of the Civil War.

CAROL

Oh, Marty, right there on the Senate floor. I have heard that it happened but never the whole of it. Set the scene for me. What was tearing the country apart so badly in that spring of 1856?



MARTY

It was a place called Kansas, Carol. The Kansas Territory. Congress had thrown open that vast prairie and said the settlers themselves would vote whether it came into the Union slave or free, and so both sides came pouring in,

abolitionists from the North and slaveholders from Missouri, and they did not come to argue. They came with rifles. Men were burned out of their homes, a town was sacked, blood was spilled in the streets, and the newspapers gave it a name that stuck forever: Bleeding Kansas. And in Washington, in the Senate chamber, the men who spoke for those two Americas hated each other with a heat you could feel in the room.

CAROL

Bleeding Kansas. So the fighting on the prairie was already real and deadly. And into all that fury steps this Senator Sumner. Tell me about him, Marty. What kind of man was he?



MARTY

Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, Carol, was a giant of a man, near six foot four, learned, proud, and absolutely on fire against slavery. He was one of the fiercest abolitionists ever to sit in that chamber, and he did not soften a word for anybody. And in the middle of May, 1856, he rose on the Senate floor and delivered a speech that took him two whole days to give. He called it The Crime Against Kansas. For two days he thundered against the slave power, and he did not stop at the politics of it. He turned personal, Carol. He aimed his scorn at an old senator from South Carolina named Andrew Butler, a white-haired man who

was not even in the chamber that day.

CAROL

Not even there to defend himself. Oh, that is a hard thing. What did Sumner say about him, Marty, that cut so deep?



MARTY

He mocked him, Carol, mercilessly. He said old Senator Butler had taken a mistress, and that mistress, ugly to everyone else in the world, was the institution of slavery, and Butler served her like a devoted knight. He mocked the man's devotion as a kind of foolish infatuation. And worse than that, Carol, Senator Butler had suffered a stroke that left his speech slurred and thick, and Sumner mocked even that, made cruel sport of the way the old man talked. It was brilliant and it was savage, and every man in that chamber knew it had crossed out of politics and into insult of the most personal kind.

CAROL

Oh, Marty, mocking a man's stroke, the way he could no longer speak clearly. That is a wound to a man's honor, and in those days honor was everything. I can feel the trouble coming. Who was it that took up Butler's cause?



MARTY

A kinsman of his, Carol, a young congressman from South Carolina named Preston Brooks. Butler was his relative, and in the code of the Southern gentleman, an insult to your kinsman's honor was an insult to your own, and it demanded satisfaction. Now the usual satisfaction between gentlemen was the duel, pistols at dawn. But Brooks brooded on it, and he made a cold decision. He decided Sumner was no gentleman at all, not worthy of the honor of a duel. A gentleman you challenge. A social inferior, Carol, you simply thrash, the way a planter would horsewhip a man he judged beneath him. And so Brooks chose a cane.

CAROL

A cane instead of a duel, and he meant it as the deeper insult, treating Sumner as beneath contempt. Marty, my heart is starting to pound. What kind of cane, and when did he come?



MARTY

It was a thick walking cane, Carol, made of gutta-percha, a hard dense rubber, heavy in the hand, with a gold head. Brooks waited two days. And on the afternoon of May 22, 1856, after the Senate had adjourned, he walked into that grand chamber and found it nearly empty. And there at his desk sat Charles Sumner, bent over, writing, calmly franking copies of his own speech to send out to his supporters. The desks in that chamber, Carol, were bolted to the floor, screwed down fast so they could not move. Remember that. That bolted desk is the whole of the horror in a moment.

CAROL

Bolted to the floor. Oh, Marty, and Sumner sitting there writing, with no idea at all what was walking up behind him. Tell me what happened. I can hardly breathe.



MARTY

Brooks stepped up to him, Carol, and said a few short words, that he had read the speech, that it was a libel on South Carolina and on his kinsman. And Sumner began to rise, and before he was even to his feet, Brooks brought that heavy cane down on his bare head with all his strength. And then again. And again. Sumner threw up his arms, blinded at once by his own blood streaming into his eyes, and he could not stand, Carol, because his long legs were pinned fast under that bolted desk. He was trapped. He heaved upward in a blind panic, and with the raw strength of a big man fighting for his life, he tore that iron-bolted desk clean out of the floor.

CAROL

He ripped the desk out of the floor. Oh, Marty. And Brooks, was there no one to pull him off, no one to stop those blows coming down?



MARTY

The blows never stopped, Carol, not till the cane itself gave out. Brooks beat him the length of the aisle, staggering, blind, bleeding, until the man finally collapsed unconscious on the Senate floor in a spreading pool of his own blood. And still Brooks struck him, over and over, until that thick gutta-percha cane shattered into pieces in his hand. Only then did he stop. And here is the coldest part of all, Carol. Preston Brooks did not run. He simply turned, gathered up the broken gold head of his cane, and walked calmly out of the chamber, out of the Capitol, and into the street, as though he had done nothing more than tip his hat to a lady.

CAROL

Walked out calm as anything, and left that broken man on the floor. Marty, that is a picture I will not soon forget. How badly was Sumner hurt? Did he live?



MARTY

He lived, Carol, but he was a broken man. The wounds to his head and the shock to his whole body were so severe that Charles Sumner could not return to his seat in the Senate for three long years. And here is the strange power of it. The people of Massachusetts refused to fill his seat. They left that chair empty, session after session, and that empty chair, Carol, became a symbol across all the North, a silent accusation, proof to every free-state man of just how far the slave power would go. And in the South? Preston Brooks was a hero. He resigned his seat, and his district turned right around and re-elected him in a landslide.

CAROL

Re-elected him, after that. So the two halves of the country did not even see the same event. One saw a martyr and one saw a champion. Is it true, Marty, what I have heard about the canes?



MARTY

It is true, Carol, and it tells you everything. Admirers all across the South, delighted at what Brooks had done, mailed him brand-new canes by the dozen, some inscribed with words of praise, one reportedly urging him to hit Sumner again. They sent him canes the way you would send a hero a medal. And that, friends, is the heart of why we tell this one by the fire. This was the moment the fever broke through the skin. For years the North and the South had fought with speeches and votes and angry newspaper columns, and here, on the floor of the United States Senate, the very place built for men to reason together, one man beat another senseless with a stick, and half the country cheered. The talking was over. Five years later, Carol, the guns would open at Fort Sumter, and this bloody afternoon was the whole coming war in miniature. So the next time you walk the quiet marble halls of that Capitol, remember there was a day the anger in this country could not be held in words, and it picked up a cane. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking of that empty chair standing silent in the Senate for three long years, and of how quickly reasoned words can turn to blows when we stop truly listening to one another. Hold onto the talking, friends,

even when it is hard, keep your anger from ever picking up the cane, and always, always come back to the fire.

EPISODE 6

Boss Tweed and Tammany Hall

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this one comes to us out of the great roaring city of New York, in the years just after the Civil War, when the streets were gaslit and cobbled and thick with people from every corner of the earth. This is the true tale of William Magear Tweed, the man they simply called the Boss, and how he stole an entire city blind. He was the ruler of a machine called Tammany Hall, Carol, and for a few short years he owned New York the way a man owns a pocket watch. And it took a fellow with a pen and a drawing pad to finally bring him down.

CAROL

Oh, Marty, I have heard that name, Boss Tweed, but I never knew the whole of it. A man who owned a whole city. Tell me first, what was this Tammany Hall? Was it a place, or a thing, or a person?



MARTY

It was all three in a way, Carol. Tammany Hall was the great Democratic political machine of New York, and picture the city then. After the war, the ships came in

day after day, packed to the rails with immigrants, Irish and German mostly, poor and frightened and knowing not a soul. They stepped off onto those crowded wards with nothing. And there stood Tammany, ready with a helping hand. A basket of coal in the winter. A turkey at Christmas. A job digging the streets. Even your citizenship papers, rushed through a friendly judge so you could vote. And what did Tammany ask in return, Carol? Only that vote. Only that, given faithfully, election after election. It was charity and it was bondage, all tangled up together.

CAROL

Oh, that is a clever kind of trap, isn't it, Marty. Kindness with a hook in it. And this William Tweed, how does a man come to sit on top of a thing like that? Where did he begin?



MARTY

He began humble, Carol, a chairmaker's son, a big good-natured boy from the Lower East Side who ran with a volunteer fire company. And that is a thing to remember, because the firehouses in those days were little brotherhoods, and a genial giant who could rally the men had the makings of a politician. And Tweed was a giant, Carol, near three hundred pounds, with a great booming laugh and a diamond stickpin blazing on his shirt front, and a memory for names and faces

that never failed him. Men loved him. He climbed, rung by rung, alderman and congressman and boss of the Tammany machine, until by the late eighteen-sixties he sat at the very center of the web. He controlled the mayor. He leaned on the governor. He had picked the judges who sat in his courts, and he held the keys to the city treasury. There was no honest wall left standing between William Tweed and the money of New York.

CAROL

The keys to the treasury. Marty, that is the sentence that makes my stomach turn. When one man holds all of that and no one can say no to him, what on earth does he do with it? How did the stealing actually work?



MARTY

It was beautifully simple, Carol, and that is the wicked genius of it. The Tweed Ring stole through the bills. The city needed things built, needed chairs and carpets and plaster and stone, and every contractor who did that work was told, quietly, to pad his bill. Charge the city ten times, a hundred times what the thing was worth, and hand the difference back to the Ring. And the crown jewel of it, Carol, the monument to their greed, was the new County Courthouse just behind City Hall, a grand marble building that was supposed to cost a few hundred thousand dollars. By the time the Ring was finished with it, the city had been

billed something like thirteen million.

CAROL

Thirteen million. Marty, for one building? In those days that must have been a fortune beyond imagining. What could possibly cost that much? Surely somebody added it up and saw.



MARTY

You would think so, Carol, but they controlled who did the adding. Let me give you the particulars, because they are almost too absurd to believe. There was a plasterer paid millions of dollars for his work, so much that they nicknamed him the Prince of Plasterers. There were thermometers billed at thousands. There was a carpenter paid for a year of labor a sum that no honest carpenter could earn in a lifetime, in a building that was half of it still bare. Furniture and carpets billed in figures that would have furnished a palace ten times over. And all across the city, in all the contracts, the same trick, over and over. When the reckoning finally came, Carol, the honest men who tried to total up the theft of the Tweed Ring landed on tens of millions of dollars, and some who studied it said it ran far higher than that. They robbed the city the way the tide robs a beach, a little from every wave, until the whole shore was gone.

CAROL

It takes my breath away, Marty. And the ordinary people, the very immigrants Tammany fed with those Christmas turkeys, they were the ones being robbed all the while. But how do you catch a man who owns the mayor and the judges and the newspapers? Who was left to even try?



MARTY

That is where our hero comes in, Carol, and he is not a policeman or a prosecutor. He was a cartoonist, an artist named Thomas Nast, who drew for a magazine called Harper's Weekly. And week after week, Nast drew Tweed, drew him savage and true, a bloated vulture in a diamond stickpin feeding on the carcass of the city, the Boss and his Ring standing in a circle each pointing at the next man saying, it was him, not me. And here is the thing, Carol, the thing that terrified Tweed more than any editorial ever could. Half the men whose votes he owned could not read a word. But they could look. Tweed said it himself, and it is one of the famous lines in all our history. He said, I don't care what the papers write about me, my constituents can't read. But they can see those damned pictures.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. He wasn't afraid of the words, he was afraid of the drawings. There is something almost beautiful in that, that a man's own picture could damn him.

And did it? Did Nast's pictures finally do it?



MARTY

They lit the fuse, Carol, and then the New York Times lit the powder. For someone inside the Ring, someone who had quarreled with them, slipped the secret account books to the Times, the real ledgers, and the paper printed them for all the world to see, the padded bills laid out in cold black figures. Now the honest men had their proof, and the city rose up. Reformers came at Tweed from every side. He was arrested, Carol, the great Boss himself, hauled into the very courts he used to own. And he tried everything. Money couldn't save him now, and his friends melted away. He was convicted and sent to prison. But the story is not done, because Tweed was not a man to sit still.

CAROL

Not done? Marty, don't tell me he got away. After all of that, after the pictures and the ledgers and the trial, don't tell me the Boss slipped the net.



MARTY

For a while, Carol, he did just that. Allowed out for a visit under guard, Tweed simply walked away, and he ran. He ran in disguise, a fugitive, out of the country and across the ocean, all the way to Spain, thinking he had vanished from the earth. And now comes the piece of this tale that no storyteller could improve upon, the justice so perfect you would call it invented if it were not true. The Spanish officials who took hold of him did not have a photograph. What they had, Carol, was one of Thomas Nast's cartoons, a drawing of Tweed the artist had made to mock him. They looked at the drawing, and they looked at the great heavy man in front of them, and they knew. He was identified and captured off the strength of a cartoon, in a country where he did not even speak the language. The very pictures he had cursed reached across an ocean and closed their hand on him.

CAROL

Off a cartoon. Marty, my heart. The one thing he feared, the drawings his people could see, and it followed him clear to Spain and caught him. So they brought him back. What became of the Boss in the end?



MARTY

They brought him home, Carol, back to New York, back behind bars, and this time there was no walking away. He was a broken man by then, his machine shattered, his friends scattered or turned against him, his fortune clawed back by the city he had robbed. And in eighteen seventy-eight, in the Ludlow Street Jail, in a cell in the very city he had once held in his fist, William Magear Tweed died. And that is the whole shape of it, Carol, the reason we still tell it around the fire. One man, genial and enormous and utterly without shame, took an entire city for himself, fed the poor with one hand and picked their pockets with the other, and bought every judge and every lawmaker he needed. And in the end it was not an army that brought him down, nor even the great newspapers alone. It was a man with a drawing pad, who understood that a picture can say what a whole city is thinking, and who chased a thief clear across the sea with nothing but a pen. So the next time someone tells you that art is a small and harmless thing, Carol, you remember the Boss, who could not read his way out of a cartoon. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking about that little magazine drawing that toppled a giant, and about all the ordinary people who saw the truth in a picture

when the powerful hoped they never would. Watch who feeds you and asks only for your vote, keep your eyes open even when you can't read the fine print, and always, always come back to the fire.



EPISODE 7

The Stolen Election of 1876

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this one comes to us out of the smoke and exhaustion of a young country that had already bled itself half to death. It is the autumn of 1876, the hundredth birthday of the republic, and America is bone-tired. The Civil War is eleven years gone, but the wound of it has never really closed, and down in the South the great experiment they called Reconstruction is guttering out like a candle. And into that weary, angry season, Carol, comes a presidential election so twisted, so disputed, that for a few dark weeks men wondered aloud whether the guns might come out again.

CAROL

Oh, Marty, the hundredth birthday of the country and it nearly tore itself apart again. I've heard the name of that election but never the whole shape of it. Who were the two men standing against each other that fall?



MARTY

Two respectable men, Carol, neither of them a monster. For the Democrats, Samuel J. Tilden of New York, a reforming governor who had broken the corrupt

Tweed Ring in the city, a cool and careful lawyer. And for the Republicans, Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio, a Civil War general, sober and decent, a man nobody much disliked. On the surface it looked like an ordinary contest. But underneath, Carol, the whole thing turned on the South, on those last Southern states still held under Reconstruction, where Black men had won the vote only a few years before and white Democrats meant to take it back by any means they could.

CAROL

By any means they could. Marty, that has a chill in it. So election night comes. The people vote. What did the country see when the returns started coming in over the wires?



MARTY

Picture the telegraph offices, Carol, gaslit rooms thick with cigar smoke, clerks tearing paper off the wires while crowds press against the windows in the November dark. And the news that clatters in says one thing plainly: Tilden. Samuel Tilden has won the popular vote, a quarter million more Americans marked their ballots for him than for Hayes. And as the electoral count climbs, he is right there on the doorstep of the presidency, needing just a single vote more to take the White House. Democrats went to bed that night, Carol, believing their

man was president. Newspapers half of them said so. It looked finished.

CAROL

It looked finished. Oh, Marty, I can feel the "but" coming. What happened in the night, while half the country was celebrating?



MARTY

A handful of clever men stayed awake, Carol. Republican managers looked at the map and saw that three Southern states had not been fully settled: South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana, the last three states in all the South still under Reconstruction, still with Republican governments propped up by federal soldiers. And they realized something. If Hayes could claim all three, and hold every other state he had, he would win, not by a landslide, but by exactly one electoral vote. So a message went out over the wires to the South that night: hold your states. Don't concede. And suddenly, Carol, the election was not over at all.

CAROL

Just those three states, and one lone vote in the balance. Marty, but who was to say who had really won down there? Surely someone had counted the ballots?



MARTY

That, Carol, is where the darkness closes in. Down in those three states the voting had been a nightmare of fraud and terror on both sides. Black Republican voters driven from the polls by rifle clubs and threats, ballot boxes stuffed, whole counties where the count could not be trusted an inch either way. And so each of those states did a terrible thing: it sent to Washington two different sets of electoral returns. One set signed by Republican officials swearing Hayes had won. Another signed by Democrats swearing it was Tilden. Two envelopes from the same state, each claiming to be the true voice of the people. And then, to cap it, a single contested elector up in Oregon fell into dispute as well.

CAROL

Two sets of returns from the very same state. Marty, that's like two men both swearing they're the rightful king. How many votes were tangled up in that terrible knot?



MARTY

Twenty, Carol. Twenty electoral votes hanging in doubt. And here is the arithmetic that froze the nation's blood: Tilden needed only one of those twenty to become president. One. But Hayes needed every single one of them, all twenty, or he was finished. And the Constitution, Carol, that great document, said not one clear word about who was supposed to decide such a thing. Who opens the envelopes? Who chooses which is real? Nobody knew. There was no rule, no referee, no remedy. Just two furious parties, a contested prize, and a country that had already shown it would go to war over its quarrels.

CAROL

No rule at all. Oh, Marty, that's the most frightening thing you've said yet. With no one to decide it and feelings that raw, what kept it from coming to blows?



MARTY

It very nearly did, Carol. There was open talk that winter of a second civil war. Democrats muttered that they would inaugurate Tilden by force. Old soldiers on both sides wondered if they'd be marching again. And so, backed into a corner, Congress reached for a desperate invention. They built a special tribunal, a thing never seen before or since, to settle it: an Electoral Commission of fifteen men. Five from the House of Representatives, five from the Senate, and five justices of the Supreme Court. Fifteen men, Carol, to decide who would rule a nation of forty million.

CAROL

Fifteen men in a room to choose a president. Marty, that's the whole country balanced on a knife. How were those fifteen split? Because I can't imagine they were friends.



MARTY

They were not, Carol. The design was meant to be balanced, seven Democrats and seven Republicans, and then one final justice, a man named David Davis thought to be independent, to hold the scales even. But at the last moment Davis was elected to the Senate and stepped away, and the seat went instead to another justice, a Republican. And so the commission that gathered in that tense, crowded chamber to weigh the fate of the republic split eight to seven, eight Republicans, seven Democrats. And when the votes came, Carol, every single one of the disputed states, every contested envelope, every last one of those twenty electoral votes, was awarded to Hayes. Every time, eight to seven. Straight down the party line.

CAROL

Every single one, eight to seven, right down the line. Oh, Marty, so Hayes was made president after all. By how much, in the end?



MARTY

By one vote, Carol. One. A hundred and eighty-five electoral votes to a hundred and eighty-four. The man who lost the popular vote by a quarter million was declared the winner by a single elector, handed to him by a commission that split along its party seams. And here is the thing that makes this a dark tale and not just a strange one. Because behind the commission, in the shadows, another deal was being cut. In a hotel in Washington, Carol, in quiet back rooms filled with cigar smoke, Southern Democrats sat down with Hayes's men and struck a bargain. History calls it the Compromise of 1877.

CAROL

A secret bargain in a hotel room. Marty, my heart sinks. What did they trade away in the dark, while the rest of the country slept?



MARTY

They traded the South, Carol. The Democrats agreed to stop fighting, to let Hayes take the office quietly. And in return, Hayes agreed to pull the last federal troops out of the South, out of Louisiana and South Carolina, the soldiers who were the only thing still standing between Black Southerners and the men who meant to crush them. And so it was done. Hayes was inaugurated. And the troops marched away. Reconstruction, that fragile decade when a Black man in the South could vote and hold office and stand equal before the law, was over. It did not end at the ballot box, Carol. It ended in a smoke-filled room.

CAROL

It ended in a room. Oh, Marty. And the people down there, the ones the soldiers had been protecting. What became of them when the last of the blue coats was gone?

MARTY

They were abandoned, Carol, and they paid the price for eighty years. Once the troops were gone, the old order came roaring back. Black Southerners were stripped of the vote by terror and by law, hemmed in by Jim Crow, shut out of the courts and the polls and the schools, and it would be nearly a century before a new generation clawed those rights back in the streets. Millions of people never

saw freedom again in their lifetimes, all of it sealed by a bargain most of them never knew was made. As for Hayes, he served his one term honestly enough, but he never lived down how he got there. They called him, to the end of his days, "His Fraudulency."

CAROL

"His Fraudulency." Marty, that says it all, doesn't it, a nickname for a man who won a chair he was never really elected to. It's such a quiet kind of theft, no gunshots, just papers and handshakes.

MARTY

That is the heart of it, Carol. We tell ourselves that in this country the people decide, that power passes at the ballot box in the clean light of day. But in the winter of 1876 and 1877 the most disputed election in American history was settled another way entirely, not by the millions who voted, but by fifteen men on a commission and a few more in a hotel room trading a whole people's freedom for the keys to the White House. So the next time you hear that every vote is counted and every voice is heard, remember Samuel Tilden, who won and lost, and remember the Southerners who were sold in the dark to make a president. Keep that story by the fire, friends, because a republic only lasts as long as we refuse to let its bargains be struck in the smoke. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking about the quiet rooms where big things get decided, and all the ordinary people who wake up the next morning to find their lives were traded away while they slept. Watch who counts the votes, friends. Guard the light of day. And whatever the cold outside, always, always come back to the fire.

EPISODE 8

The Wilmington Coup of 1898

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this one comes to us out of the Carolina lowcountry, from a warm port city on the Cape Fear River, and it is a true story, every word of it documented, though for a hundred years men did their best to bury it. This is the tale of Wilmington, North Carolina, in the autumn of 1898, and it is the only time in all of American history that an elected government in this country was overthrown by force of arms. It is a grave story, Carol, a tragedy, and we tell it gently, with respect for the people who lived it and the many who died. It begins not in violence but in a moment of real promise.

CAROL

A moment of promise. Marty, I confess I never learned this one in any schoolroom, and that itself tells me something. Take me back there. What was Wilmington like before that autumn?



MARTY

It was a city on the rise, Carol. In the 1890s Wilmington was the largest city in North Carolina, a bustling deepwater port, and it was a majority-Black city with a

thriving, prosperous Black middle class the likes of which the South had rarely seen. There were Black carpenters and brick masons, barbers and tailors, restaurant owners and merchants. There were Black lawyers and doctors, a Black-owned newspaper, Black aldermen and magistrates and policemen. The city was governed by what they called the Fusion coalition, Republicans and Populists, Black and white citizens together, all of them fairly and legally elected by the people of that place. For a brief shining while, Carol, Wilmington was a picture of what the South might have become.

CAROL

Black and white citizens governing together, fairly elected. Marty, that sounds like exactly the future the whole country had been fighting toward. Who could look at a thriving city like that and wish it harm?



MARTY

There were men who looked at it and saw a threat, Carol, and that is the hard turn in our story. In 1898 the leaders of the state Democratic Party set out on a deliberate campaign, an openly declared campaign of white supremacy, to take back power by any means. Newspapermen like Josephus Daniels filled their pages with cruel propaganda and manufactured fear, day after day. Politicians like Alfred Waddell gave thundering speeches. And out in the countryside rode

bands of armed men in red shirts, the Red Shirts they were called, a paramilitary force that paraded and threatened and intimidated Black citizens away from the ballot box. It was a machine built to inflame, Carol, and it was aimed straight at that fragile peace.

CAROL

Red Shirts riding the roads to frighten people from voting. Oh, Marty, that is a chilling thing, an organized effort to poison a whole community's trust. Did the people of Wilmington see what was coming for them?



MARTY

Some surely did, Carol, and one man in particular became the lightning rod. His name was Alexander Manly, and he was the editor of Wilmington's Black-owned newspaper, the Daily Record, one of the very few daily Black newspapers in the entire country. Manly wrote an editorial that year answering the ugly rhetoric of the day, and the white supremacy campaign seized upon it, twisted it, and paraded it through their own papers as a pretext, an excuse, to fan the flames hotter still. They did not need the truth of what he wrote, Carol. They needed a spark, and they had decided to have one whether the people gave them cause or not.

CAROL

So they took one man's honest words and made a weapon of them. Marty, I can feel the danger closing in on that city like weather. And still, the people had voted. The Fusion men still held their offices, didn't they?



MARTY

They did, Carol, and that is the very thing the campaign could not abide. The election came in November of 1898, and even amid all the intimidation the Fusion government still held office in Wilmington, for the city offices were not up that year. The people's choice had held. And so the men behind the campaign decided that what the ballot had not given them, they would simply take. On the morning of November the tenth, 1898, an armed mob of some two thousand white men gathered in the streets of Wilmington. This was no accident and no sudden riot, Carol. It was planned. And their first act was to march upon the office of Alexander Manly's Daily Record and burn it to the ground.

CAROL

Two thousand armed men, and they began by burning the newspaper. Marty, my heart sinks. They meant to silence the very voice of that community first of all. And then, God help them, what did that mob do?



MARTY

They turned upon the people of the city, Carol, and here we must tread softly, for this is the sorrow at the center of it all. The mob moved through the streets and gunned down Black residents where they stood. We do not know, to this day, how many were killed. The honest histories say somewhere between sixty souls and as many as three hundred. The true number was never counted, never recorded, because the men who did it had no wish to count them, and the families who lost them were soon scattered to the winds. Fathers, sons, neighbors, ordinary working people who had built good lives in that city, cut down on a November morning. We say their number is unknown, Carol, but we do not let them be nameless in our hearts.

CAROL

We do not, Marty. We hold them close by this fire tonight. Between sixty and three hundred people, and no one even permitted to count the dead. And the government, the mayor and the men the people had elected. What became of them?



MARTY

This is the part, Carol, that makes Wilmington unlike anything else in our nation's story. With the city terrorized and the streets in the mob's hands, the armed men marched upon the city hall. They forced the elected mayor, and the aldermen, and the chief of police, to resign their offices at gunpoint, one after another. And into the mayor's chair, that very same day, they installed Alfred Waddell, the man who had roused the crowds. A legally elected government, chosen by the people, overthrown and replaced by force in a single afternoon. It has a name, Carol. It is called a coup, and it is the only successful violent overthrow of a government in the history of the United States.

CAROL

The only one in all our history. Marty, to hear it plainly said like that takes my breath away. And the thousands of Black families who had made Wilmington their home, the tradesmen and the doctors and the neighbors. What happened to all of them?



MARTY

They were driven out, Carol. In the days that followed, thousands of Black residents fled Wilmington, some marched to the rail depot and put out of the city, many more escaping on foot into the swamps and the pine woods around the Cape Fear, hiding in the cold with their children, leaving everything behind. Businesses that families had built over a lifetime, homes, churches, a whole flourishing community, shattered in a matter of days. Wilmington had been a majority-Black city, and within a few years it was not, and it never would be again. The people who fled into those woods, for the most part, never came home.

CAROL

A whole community scattered into the swamps at nightfall, never to return. Marty, that is a grief almost too large to hold. And I fear this wasn't the end of it, was it? A thing like that, left standing, doesn't simply stop.



MARTY

No, Carol, it did not stop, and that is the last dark truth of it. The men who seized Wilmington had shown the whole South a template, a method, and it spread. In the years that followed came the disenfranchisement laws that stripped Black citizens of the vote across the region, and the long night of Jim Crow segregation settled over the South and held for generations. And Wilmington itself was quietly relabeled a race riot, as though the people who were murdered had somehow brought it on themselves, and that lie was printed in the histories and taught for the better part of a century. Only in our own time has the state gone back, studied it honestly, and named it for what it truly was, a coup and a massacre.

CAROL

A century of calling it the wrong name so the truth could stay buried. Marty, it makes the remembering feel like the least we owe them. Why do we carry this one to the fire tonight?



MARTY

Because a thriving community and a government fairly chosen by its people were destroyed in the span of a single day, Carol, and because a wound kept hidden can never begin to heal. We do not tell this to frighten anyone. We tell it because the people of Wilmington were real, their lives were good and hard-won, and what was taken from them was real. We tell it so that it is seen at last, honestly, in the plain light, and remembered, so that it is never, ever repeated. That is the whole of our purpose by this fire. Keep the truth close, friends, even the truth that hurts. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking of the people of old Wilmington, the ones who built something beautiful and the ones who fled into the dark woods and never came home, and of the many whose names we were never even allowed to learn. May they rest easy now that we are finally telling it true. Hold onto the truth, be gentle with one another, and always, always come back to the fire.