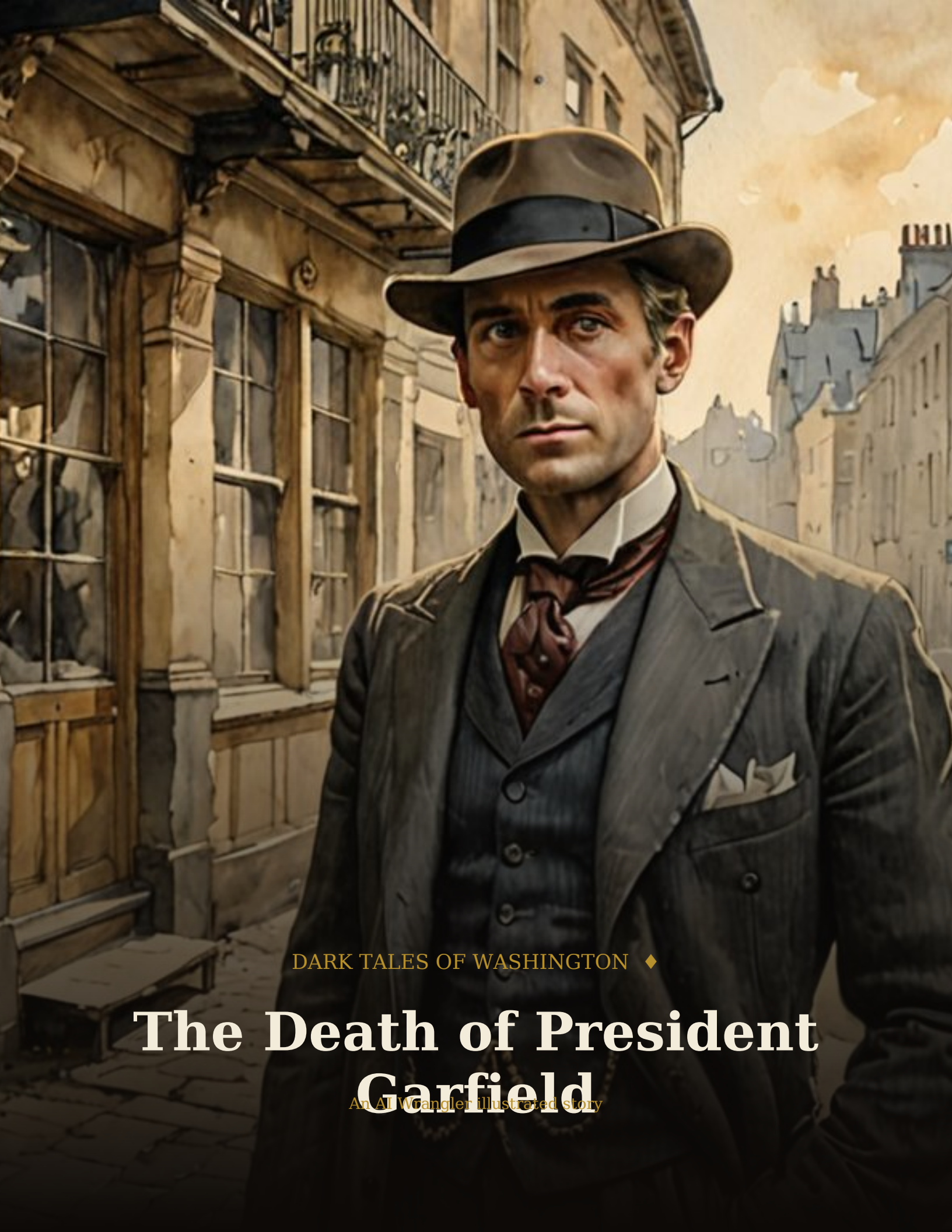




DARK TALES OF WASHINGTON ♦

The Death of President Garfield

An All Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Pull your chair a little closer to the flames tonight, Carol, because this is a story about how a man can survive the bullet meant to kill him and be killed instead by the hands that tried to save him. It is a true tale, every word of it set down in the record, and it opens on a bright Saturday morning in Washington, the second of July, 1881. A tall, robust president, not four months in office, walks into a grand railroad depot to catch a train for a summer holiday. He is in fine spirits, arm in arm with a friend. And waiting for him in that crowd, with a pistol in his pocket and a madness in his mind, is a small, failed man who believes that God Himself has ordered him to do murder.

CAROL

Oh, Marty, four months in office. The poor man had hardly begun. Who was he, this president walking so happily into the depot with no idea what was coming?



MARTY

His name was James A. Garfield, Carol, and he was a remarkable soul. Born in a log cabin, the last of the great log-cabin presidents, he had worked as a boy driving mules along a canal towpath, and he had climbed all the way to the White House by the strength of his own mind. A scholar, a general in the war, a man who could write Latin with one hand and Greek with the other, so they said. He was kindly and unguarded, and on that morning in the Baltimore and Potomac depot he walked without a single bodyguard beside him. Presidents did in those days, Carol. They walked among the people like anyone else.

CAROL

No guard at all. It makes my heart ache to hear it. And the man in the crowd, Marty, the one with the pistol. What had turned him toward such a terrible act?



MARTY

His name was Charles Guiteau, and he was one of those poor, ruined creatures who drift through the world convinced that greatness is owed to them. He had failed at everything, Carol, at law, at religion, at marriage, at business. But he had given a few rambling speeches for Garfield's party during the campaign, and he had convinced himself that he alone had won the presidency, and that he was therefore owed a grand reward, an ambassador's post in Paris, no less. He wrote letter after letter demanding it. He haunted the government offices until they threw him out. And when the door was finally shut in his face, his mind curdled, and he decided that God had commanded him to remove the president, to save the party from ruin. He bought a fine ivory-handled revolver, because he thought it would look handsome one day in a museum.

CAROL

A museum. Marty, the coldness of that, planning for his own fame while planning a murder. So he followed the president into that station. What happened when Garfield came through the door?



MARTY

Guiteau had stalked him for weeks, Carol, even to his church, waiting for the moment. And that morning he found it. As Garfield crossed the waiting room, Guiteau stepped up close behind him and fired twice. One bullet only grazed the president's arm. But the second, Carol, struck him in the back and drove deep, deep into his body, and lodged somewhere no one could find. Garfield collapsed to the floor. And Guiteau turned to walk calmly away, saying to the men who seized him a thing so strange it chills the blood. He said the president would go to heaven, and that he, Guiteau, was an agent of God. He had even arranged a carriage in advance to carry him to jail.

CAROL

He wanted to be caught. Marty, that is the most frightening kind of madness, so sure of itself. But the president was still alive, you said. Still breathing there on the floor. So there was hope, wasn't there? Surely there was hope.



MARTY

There was every hope, Carol, and here is the heartbreak of the whole tale, for the wound need not have killed him. Even in that day, a man could survive a bullet in the body if it were only left clean and let alone. But this is 1881, and across the ocean an Englishman named Joseph Lister had shown the world that unseen germs cause infection, that a doctor must wash his hands and his instruments, must keep a wound clean. And the American doctors, Carol, the proud men who now crowded around their fallen president, scorned Lister's teaching. They thought it foreign nonsense. And so the lead physician, a man named Doctor Willard Bliss, and others besides, began to probe that wound with unwashed fingers and unsterilized instruments, digging, searching for the bullet, again and again, day after day.

CAROL

With their bare hands, Marty. Oh, I can hardly bear it. Digging in the wound of a living man, and every touch, every unclean touch. They were poisoning him without even knowing.

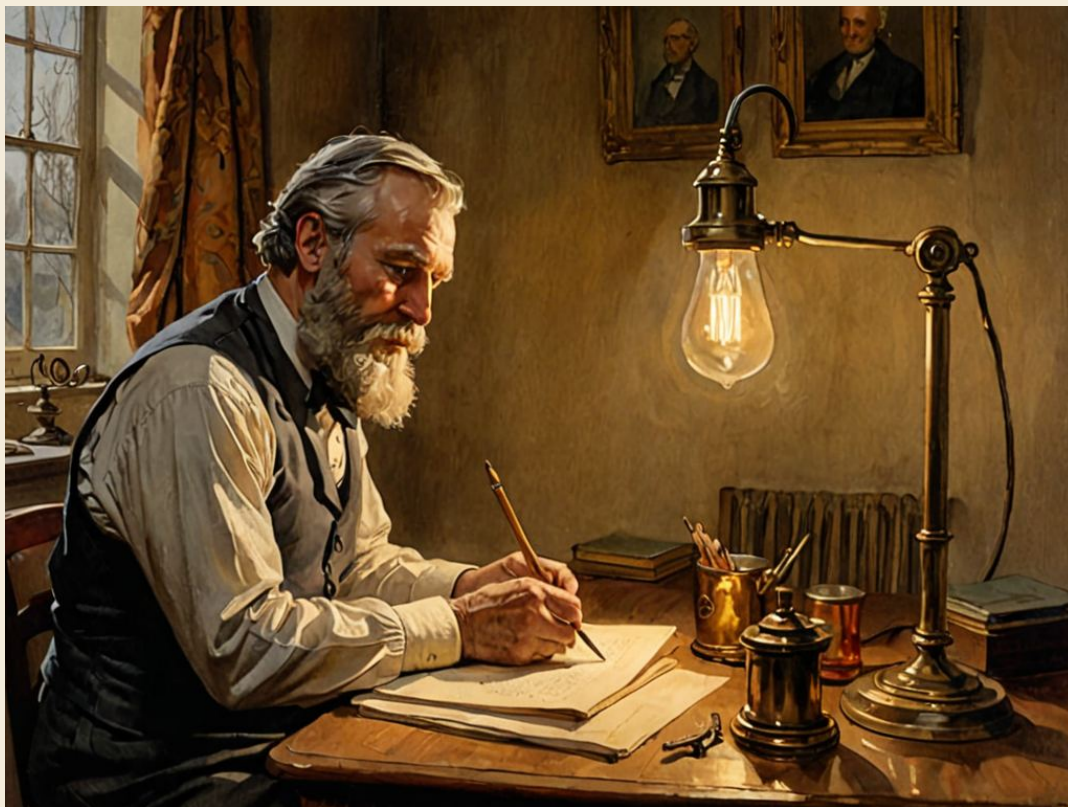


MARTY

Without knowing, Carol, and with the greatest confidence in the world. Doctor Bliss took full charge and would let no one contradict him, and he probed that track through the president's body until a small clean hole became a long festering channel of infection. And through all of it, through the whole terrible summer, Garfield did not die at once. That is the cruelty of the thing. He lingered, Carol. Eighty days he lingered, through the sweltering Washington heat, in a sickroom so hot the air itself seemed to bake. They tried to cool him with an early kind of air machine, ice and blown air, one of the first ever built. And the whole nation held its breath and prayed, reading the bulletins each morning, watching their president slowly waste away.

CAROL

Eighty days. Marty, the courage that must have taken, and the suffering. And all the while that bullet still hidden inside him. Did no one ever find where it had gone?



MARTY

Ah, Carol, now comes one of the strangest chapters of all. For there was a man in America then whose name you know well, Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone. And Bell, desperate to help, worked night and day to build a new device, an induction balance, an electrical detector that would hum and signal when it passed over hidden metal. A metal detector, Carol, one of the very first, invented in a rush to save a president's life. They brought it to the bedside and passed it over Garfield's body. But it buzzed and murmured everywhere at once, giving no clear answer. And do you know why? The president was lying upon a bed with new metal coil springs, a modern mattress, and the metal in the very bed beneath him confounded the machine. The one place it might have found the bullet, it could not see for the bed.

CAROL

Defeated by the bed itself. Marty, that is almost too sad to be true, the invention that might have saved him beaten by a mattress. So the bullet was never found, and the poor man just kept sinking.



MARTY

He kept sinking, Carol. The infection spread through him, blood poisoning, what we would call sepsis, and it devoured him. He had been a big, strong man of two hundred and ten pounds, and by the end he weighed scarcely a hundred and thirty, wasted to a shadow. They moved him at last to the New Jersey seashore, hoping the cool ocean air might revive him, and there, on the nineteenth of September, 1881, James Garfield died, eighty days after the shot was fired. And here, Carol, is the bitter truth at the center of it all. When they tried Guiteau for murder, he stood up in that crowded courtroom and offered a defense with a dreadful splinter of truth in it. He said, the doctors killed Garfield. I just shot him.

CAROL

The doctors killed Garfield. Marty, and the awful thing is he was half right, wasn't he? He fired the shot, but their filthy hands finished the work. And yet the law could hardly let him go for that.



MARTY

No, Carol, the law would not, and it should not, for the hand that fires the pistol answers for what follows. Guiteau was found guilty, and in the summer of 1882 he was hanged, unrepentant to the last, reciting a poem he had written on the scaffold. But the story leaves one more mark upon the world, and this one for the good. The nation had watched its gentle president destroyed because a deranged office-seeker felt he was owed a government job, because the whole rotten system handed out posts as political favors, the spoils system, they called it. And in the wake of Garfield's death the country resolved to end the worst of it, and passed the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act, so that government jobs would be won by merit and examination, not by begging and patronage. Out of that long, hot, needless death came a lasting reform. That is the tale of President Garfield, Carol, true from first to last. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight by the fire I'll be thinking of that big kind man from the log cabin, lingering through eighty days of a cruel summer, and of how the smallest things, a washed hand, a clean instrument, can hold a life or lose it. Be gentle with one another, honor the ones who came before, and always, always come back to the fire.

