



DARK TALES OF WASHINGTON ♦

The Whiskey Ring

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Draw up close to the fire, friends, and breathe in that woodsmoke, because tonight I carry you back to the spring of 1875, into a country still healing from its great war, into the reeking warmth of the copper stills where whiskey ran day and night. This is a true story, Carol, every word of it in the record, and it begins not with a gunshot but with a barrel of liquor and a little stamp of tax that somehow never got paid. And it ends, Carol, at the very door of the President's own study, with an honest, wounded man trying to shield a friend. That is the strange road we'll walk tonight.

CAROL

The Whiskey Ring. Marty, I've heard the name whispered, but never had it laid out for me from the start. A little tax stamp that never got paid. How does a thing that small climb all the way up to a President?



MARTY

Ah, Carol, that is the wonder of it, and the horror of it too. You see, in those years the government laid a heavy tax on every gallon of whiskey distilled, and that tax filled the nation's coffers. But out in St. Louis, and reaching up into Chicago and Milwaukee and beyond, a secret brotherhood had formed. Distillers, the men who bottled and shipped the stuff, and worst of all the very Treasury officials sworn to collect the tax, all of them clasping hands in the dark. And the scheme, Carol, was simplicity itself. For every gallon that left the still, the taxman would look the other way, and stamp only a fraction of what was truly made.

CAROL

So the men paid to guard the henhouse were passing the fox his supper. Marty, how much could a trick like that truly be worth, one gallon at a time?



MARTY

Millions, Carol. Not thousands, millions of dollars, poured away year after year into private pockets. And here is the part that gives the tale its dark shimmer. Not all of that stolen money went to fine houses and fat cigars. A great river of it flowed back into politics, into the machinery of the party in power, greasing campaigns and buying loyalty. So the crime fed on itself, Carol. The stolen taxes bought the influence, and the influence protected the men who stole the taxes. Round and round it spun, and for years no honest hand could reach inside to stop it.

CAROL

Money stolen from the people, then spent to keep the thieves in their chairs. Marty, that is a wheel that could turn forever. Who on earth was brave enough, or foolish enough, to try to jam a stick in its spokes?



MARTY

His name, Carol, was Benjamin Bristow, and he was the new Secretary of the Treasury, a man of real conscience in a capital grown soft with easy money. Bristow began to hear whispers, to sense that the whiskey revenue coming in was far too thin for a thirsty nation. But he knew, Carol, that he could trust almost no one around him, for the rot ran through his own department. So he did a quiet and cunning thing. Rather than send the usual inspectors, whose faces the ring would know, he gathered his own secret agents, private men, outsiders, and slipped them into St. Louis and the other cities to watch, and to count, and to gather proof in silence.

CAROL

Secret agents, slipped in like shadows. Marty, I can just see them, strangers loitering by the distilleries, counting the barrels rolling out. But surely such careful men would only strike once they were certain?



MARTY

Once, and all at once, Carol. That was the beauty of it. Bristow held his hand until he had the whole picture, and then, in May of 1875, he brought it down like a hammer. On a single coordinated day, his men swept in with surprise raids across the cities, seizing the distilleries, seizing the crooked books, seizing the ledgers that told the whole rotten story in ink. The ring, so confident, so long untouched, was caught flat-footed. And when the counting was done, Carol, more than three hundred and fifty men stood indicted, and in the end over a hundred of them were convicted. A whole conspiracy, dragged blinking into the daylight.

CAROL

Three hundred and fifty men. Marty, that is not a gang, that is an army of thieves. The whole country must have reeled. And through all of this, where was the President? Where was General Grant?



MARTY

Ah, Carol, now we come to the heart of the sorrow, for this touches Ulysses S. Grant, the great soldier who had saved the Union, a man honest to his bones but trusting, far too trusting, of the men he loved. When word reached him of the corruption, Grant spoke words that ring down the years. Let no guilty man escape, he said, if it can be avoided. Let no guilty man escape. And oh, Carol, he meant it with his whole heart. But then the investigation turned a corner that Grant could not bear, for the trail led into the White House itself, to a man who sat at the President's own right hand.

CAROL

Into the White House itself. Marty, you don't mean someone close to Grant? Someone he saw every single day?



MARTY

The closest of all, Carol. His name was Orville Babcock, General Babcock, the President's private secretary, a man who had ridden with Grant through the war, who guarded his door and handled his most private affairs. And the evidence, Carol, suggested that telegrams had passed, cryptic little messages, hinting that Babcock had been warning the ring, tipping them, shielding them from the very government he served. Imagine it. The President thunders let no guilty man escape, and the arrow of the law swings round and points straight at the friend who stands just outside his study door.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. To speak those brave words and then watch them turn against your own dear friend. What did Grant do? What can a man even do, caught between his honor and his heart?



MARTY

And there, Carol, is the tragedy of the whole tale, for the honest man faltered. Grant could not, would not, believe it of Babcock. When the case came to trial in 1876, and the friend stood accused before a court in St. Louis, the President of the United States did a thing no President had done. He gave a sworn deposition, a written statement under oath, testifying to his secretary's good character and loyalty. The great soldier, who had told the world let no guilty man escape, now lent his own name and honor to the defense of the man in the dock.

CAROL

The President himself, a witness for the defense. Marty, with the weight of that name behind him, how could any jury dare to convict?



MARTY

They could not, Carol, and they did not. Babcock was acquitted, set free, saved by the shadow of the President's stubborn loyalty. And though Grant, chastened, at last eased his friend out of the White House, the damage was done and the lesson was plain. A President's honest words had been undone by his own hand. The Whiskey Ring was broken, Bristow had won a great victory for the honest taxpayer, and yet the scandal clung to Grant's name like woodsmoke in wool. It became the very symbol, Carol, of how a good and brave man, too loyal for his own good, can let corruption nest in the rooms closest to his heart. 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 brave Benjamin Bristow and his silent agents counting barrels in the dark, and about a great general who could win a war but could not bear to doubt a friend. Guard the trust that's given you, speak the truth even about those you love, and always, always come back to the fire.

