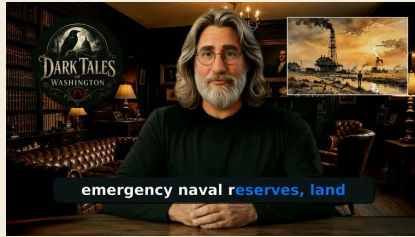




DARK TALES OF WASHINGTON ♦

Teapot Dome

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

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.