



DARK TALES OF WASHINGTON ♦

Huey Long, the Kingfish

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 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.