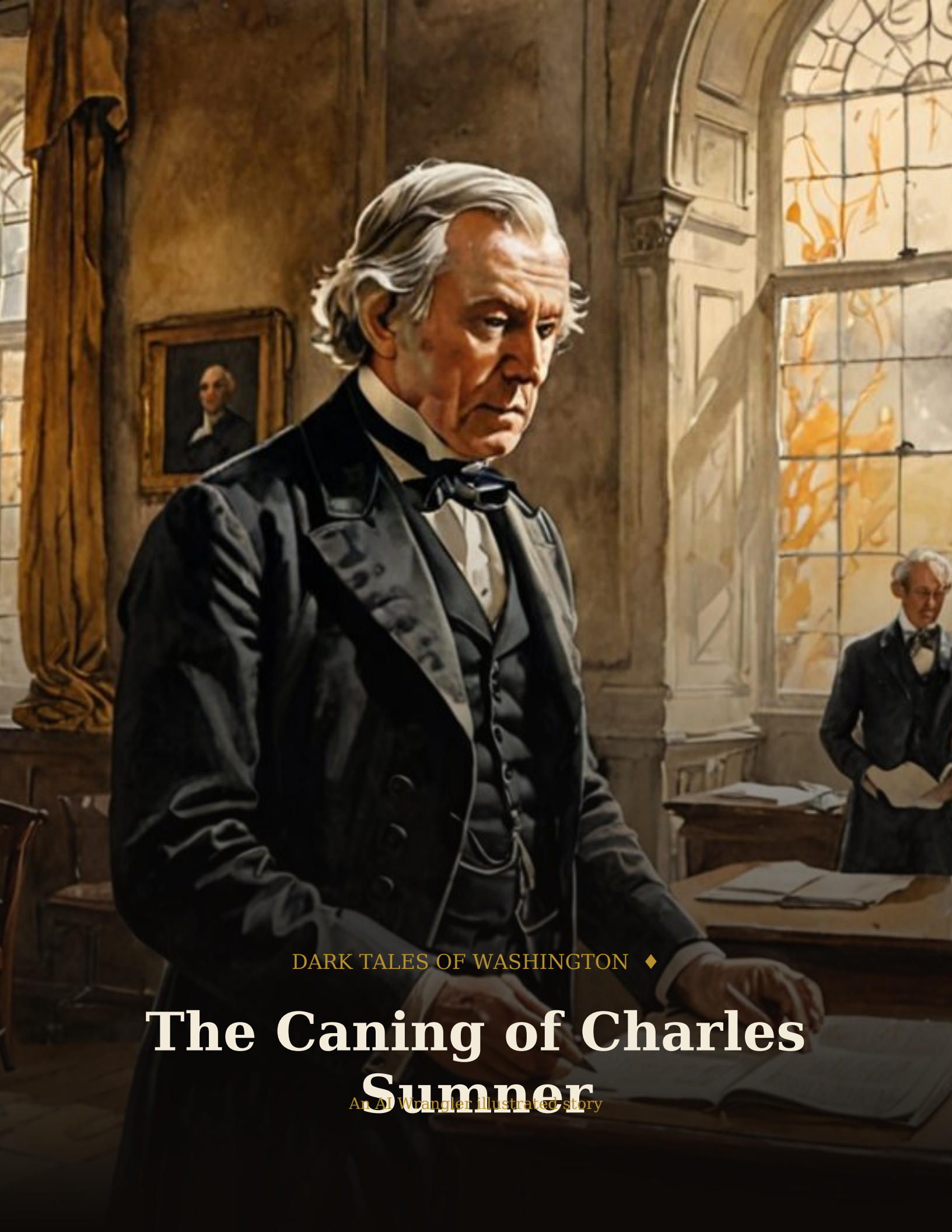




DARK TALES OF WASHINGTON ♦

The Caning of Charles Sumner

An All Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

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?



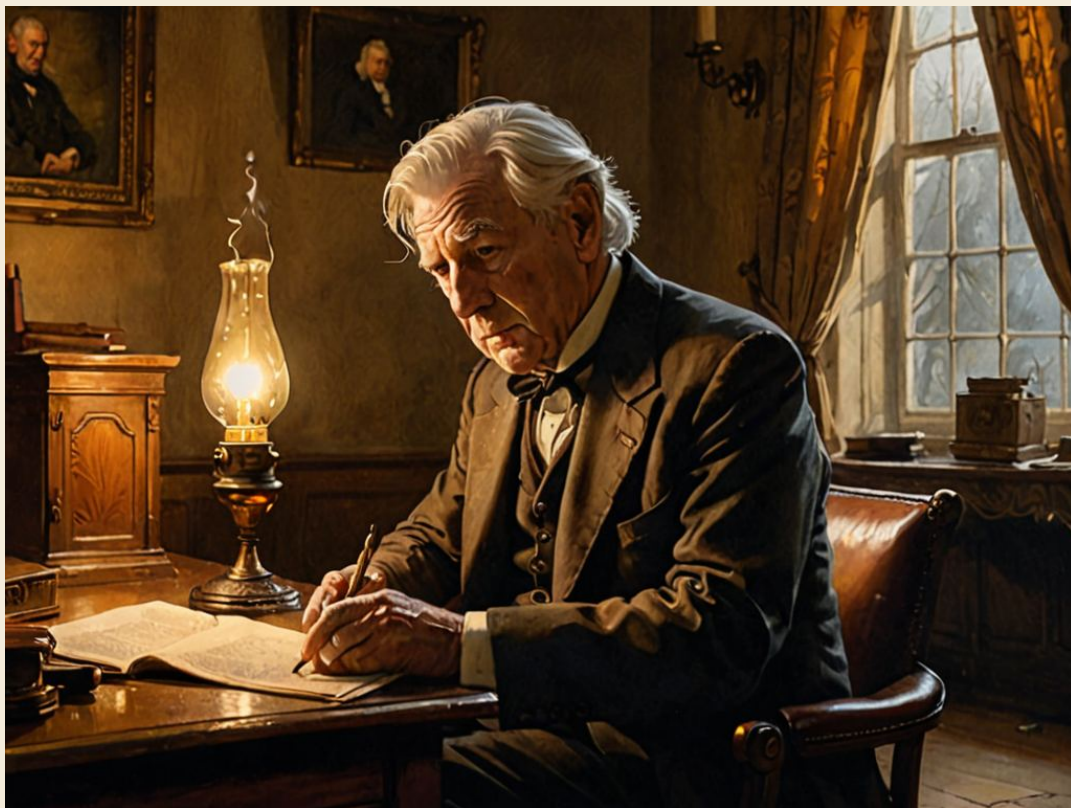
MARTY

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.