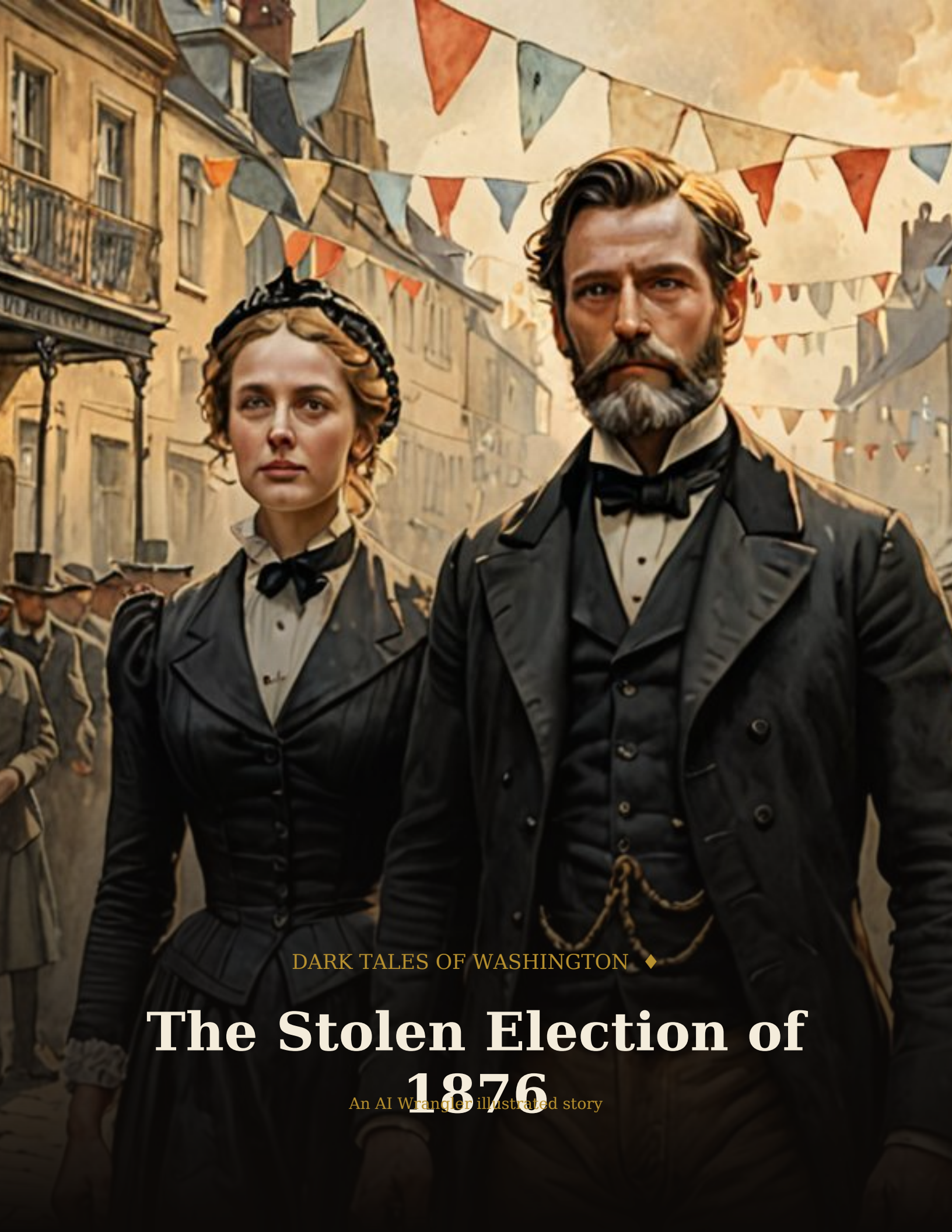




DARK TALES OF WASHINGTON ♦

The Stolen Election of 1876

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 smoke and exhaustion of a young country that had already bled itself half to death. It is the autumn of 1876, the hundredth birthday of the republic, and America is bone-tired. The Civil War is eleven years gone, but the wound of it has never really closed, and down in the South the great experiment they called Reconstruction is guttering out like a candle. And into that weary, angry season, Carol, comes a presidential election so twisted, so disputed, that for a few dark weeks men wondered aloud whether the guns might come out again.

CAROL

Oh, Marty, the hundredth birthday of the country and it nearly tore itself apart again. I've heard the name of that election but never the whole shape of it. Who were the two men standing against each other that fall?



MARTY

Two respectable men, Carol, neither of them a monster. For the Democrats, Samuel J. Tilden of New York, a reforming governor who had broken the corrupt Tweed Ring in the city, a cool and careful lawyer. And for the Republicans, Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio, a Civil War general, sober and decent, a man nobody much disliked. On the surface it looked like an ordinary contest. But underneath, Carol, the whole thing turned on the South, on those last Southern states still held under Reconstruction, where Black men had won the vote only a few years before and white Democrats meant to take it back by any means they could.

CAROL

By any means they could. Marty, that has a chill in it. So election night comes. The people vote. What did the country see when the returns started coming in over the wires?



MARTY

Picture the telegraph offices, Carol, gaslit rooms thick with cigar smoke, clerks tearing paper off the wires while crowds press against the windows in the November dark. And the news that clatters in says one thing plainly: Tilden. Samuel Tilden has won the popular vote, a quarter million more Americans marked their ballots for him than for Hayes. And as the electoral count climbs, he is right there on the doorstep of the presidency, needing just a single vote more to take the White House. Democrats went to bed that night, Carol, believing their man was president. Newspapers half of them said so. It looked finished.

CAROL

It looked finished. Oh, Marty, I can feel the "but" coming. What happened in the night, while half the country was celebrating?



MARTY

A handful of clever men stayed awake, Carol. Republican managers looked at the map and saw that three Southern states had not been fully settled: South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana, the last three states in all the South still under Reconstruction, still with Republican governments propped up by federal soldiers. And they realized something. If Hayes could claim all three, and hold every other state he had, he would win, not by a landslide, but by exactly one electoral vote. So a message went out over the wires to the South that night: hold your states. Don't concede. And suddenly, Carol, the election was not over at all.

CAROL

Just those three states, and one lone vote in the balance. Marty, but who was to say who had really won down there? Surely someone had counted the ballots?



MARTY

That, Carol, is where the darkness closes in. Down in those three states the voting had been a nightmare of fraud and terror on both sides. Black Republican voters driven from the polls by rifle clubs and threats, ballot boxes stuffed, whole counties where the count could not be trusted an inch either way. And so each of those states did a terrible thing: it sent to Washington two different sets of electoral returns. One set signed by Republican officials swearing Hayes had won. Another signed by Democrats swearing it was Tilden. Two envelopes from the same state, each claiming to be the true voice of the people. And then, to cap it, a single contested elector up in Oregon fell into dispute as well.

CAROL

Two sets of returns from the very same state. Marty, that's like two men both swearing they're the rightful king. How many votes were tangled up in that terrible knot?



MARTY

Twenty, Carol. Twenty electoral votes hanging in doubt. And here is the arithmetic that froze the nation's blood: Tilden needed only one of those twenty to become president. One. But Hayes needed every single one of them, all twenty, or he was finished. And the Constitution, Carol, that great document, said not one clear word about who was supposed to decide such a thing. Who opens the envelopes? Who chooses which is real? Nobody knew. There was no rule, no referee, no remedy. Just two furious parties, a contested prize, and a country that had already shown it would go to war over its quarrels.

CAROL

No rule at all. Oh, Marty, that's the most frightening thing you've said yet. With no one to decide it and feelings that raw, what kept it from coming to blows?



MARTY

It very nearly did, Carol. There was open talk that winter of a second civil war. Democrats muttered that they would inaugurate Tilden by force. Old soldiers on both sides wondered if they'd be marching again. And so, backed into a corner, Congress reached for a desperate invention. They built a special tribunal, a thing never seen before or since, to settle it: an Electoral Commission of fifteen men. Five from the House of Representatives, five from the Senate, and five justices of the Supreme Court. Fifteen men, Carol, to decide who would rule a nation of forty million.

CAROL

Fifteen men in a room to choose a president. Marty, that's the whole country balanced on a knife. How were those fifteen split? Because I can't imagine they were friends.



MARTY

They were not, Carol. The design was meant to be balanced, seven Democrats and seven Republicans, and then one final justice, a man named David Davis thought to be independent, to hold the scales even. But at the last moment Davis was elected to the Senate and stepped away, and the seat went instead to another justice, a Republican. And so the commission that gathered in that tense, crowded chamber to weigh the fate of the republic split eight to seven, eight Republicans, seven Democrats. And when the votes came, Carol, every single one of the disputed states, every contested envelope, every last one of those twenty electoral votes, was awarded to Hayes. Every time, eight to seven. Straight down the party line.

CAROL

Every single one, eight to seven, right down the line. Oh, Marty, so Hayes was made president after all. By how much, in the end?



MARTY

By one vote, Carol. One. A hundred and eighty-five electoral votes to a hundred and eighty-four. The man who lost the popular vote by a quarter million was declared the winner by a single elector, handed to him by a commission that split along its party seams. And here is the thing that makes this a dark tale and not just a strange one. Because behind the commission, in the shadows, another deal was being cut. In a hotel in Washington, Carol, in quiet back rooms filled with cigar smoke, Southern Democrats sat down with Hayes's men and struck a bargain. History calls it the Compromise of 1877.

CAROL

A secret bargain in a hotel room. Marty, my heart sinks. What did they trade away in the dark, while the rest of the country slept?



MARTY

They traded the South, Carol. The Democrats agreed to stop fighting, to let Hayes take the office quietly. And in return, Hayes agreed to pull the last federal troops out of the South, out of Louisiana and South Carolina, the soldiers who were the only thing still standing between Black Southerners and the men who meant to crush them. And so it was done. Hayes was inaugurated. And the troops marched away. Reconstruction, that fragile decade when a Black man in the South could vote and hold office and stand equal before the law, was over. It did not end at the ballot box, Carol. It ended in a smoke-filled room.

CAROL

It ended in a room. Oh, Marty. And the people down there, the ones the soldiers had been protecting. What became of them when the last of the blue coats was gone?

MARTY

They were abandoned, Carol, and they paid the price for eighty years. Once the troops were gone, the old order came roaring back. Black Southerners were stripped of the vote by terror and by law, hemmed in by Jim Crow, shut out of the courts and the polls and the schools, and it would be nearly a century before a new generation clawed those rights back in the streets. Millions of people never

saw freedom again in their lifetimes, all of it sealed by a bargain most of them never knew was made. As for Hayes, he served his one term honestly enough, but he never lived down how he got there. They called him, to the end of his days, "His Fraudulency."

CAROL

"His Fraudulency." Marty, that says it all, doesn't it, a nickname for a man who won a chair he was never really elected to. It's such a quiet kind of theft, no gunshots, just papers and handshakes.

MARTY

That is the heart of it, Carol. We tell ourselves that in this country the people decide, that power passes at the ballot box in the clean light of day. But in the winter of 1876 and 1877 the most disputed election in American history was settled another way entirely, not by the millions who voted, but by fifteen men on a commission and a few more in a hotel room trading a whole people's freedom for the keys to the White House. So the next time you hear that every vote is counted and every voice is heard, remember Samuel Tilden, who won and lost, and remember the Southerners who were sold in the dark to make a president. Keep that story by the fire, friends, because a republic only lasts as long as we refuse to let its bargains be struck in the smoke. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking about the quiet rooms where big things get decided, and all the ordinary people who wake up the next morning to find their lives were traded away while they slept. Watch who counts the votes, friends. Guard the light of day. And whatever the cold outside, always, always come back to the fire.