



DARK TALES OF WASHINGTON ♦

The Wilmington Coup of 1898

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 Carolina lowcountry, from a warm port city on the Cape Fear River, and it is a true story, every word of it documented, though for a hundred years men did their best to bury it. This is the tale of Wilmington, North Carolina, in the autumn of 1898, and it is the only time in all of American history that an elected government in this country was overthrown by force of arms. It is a grave story, Carol, a tragedy, and we tell it gently, with respect for the people who lived it and the many who died. It begins not in violence but in a moment of real promise.

CAROL

A moment of promise. Marty, I confess I never learned this one in any schoolroom, and that itself tells me something. Take me back there. What was Wilmington like before that autumn?



MARTY

It was a city on the rise, Carol. In the 1890s Wilmington was the largest city in North Carolina, a bustling deepwater port, and it was a majority-Black city with a thriving, prosperous Black middle class the likes of which the South had rarely seen. There were Black carpenters and brick masons, barbers and tailors, restaurant owners and merchants. There were Black lawyers and doctors, a Black-owned newspaper, Black aldermen and magistrates and policemen. The city was governed by what they called the Fusion coalition, Republicans and Populists, Black and white citizens together, all of them fairly and legally elected by the people of that place. For a brief shining while, Carol, Wilmington was a picture of what the South might have become.

CAROL

Black and white citizens governing together, fairly elected. Marty, that sounds like exactly the future the whole country had been fighting toward. Who could look at a thriving city like that and wish it harm?



MARTY

There were men who looked at it and saw a threat, Carol, and that is the hard turn in our story. In 1898 the leaders of the state Democratic Party set out on a deliberate campaign, an openly declared campaign of white supremacy, to take back power by any means. Newspapermen like Josephus Daniels filled their pages with cruel propaganda and manufactured fear, day after day. Politicians like Alfred Waddell gave thundering speeches. And out in the countryside rode bands of armed men in red shirts, the Red Shirts they were called, a paramilitary force that paraded and threatened and intimidated Black citizens away from the ballot box. It was a machine built to inflame, Carol, and it was aimed straight at that fragile peace.

CAROL

Red Shirts riding the roads to frighten people from voting. Oh, Marty, that is a chilling thing, an organized effort to poison a whole community's trust. Did the people of Wilmington see what was coming for them?



MARTY

Some surely did, Carol, and one man in particular became the lightning rod. His name was Alexander Manly, and he was the editor of Wilmington's Black-owned newspaper, the Daily Record, one of the very few daily Black newspapers in the entire country. Manly wrote an editorial that year answering the ugly rhetoric of the day, and the white supremacy campaign seized upon it, twisted it, and paraded it through their own papers as a pretext, an excuse, to fan the flames hotter still. They did not need the truth of what he wrote, Carol. They needed a spark, and they had decided to have one whether the people gave them cause or not.

CAROL

So they took one man's honest words and made a weapon of them. Marty, I can feel the danger closing in on that city like weather. And still, the people had voted. The Fusion men still held their offices, didn't they?



MARTY

They did, Carol, and that is the very thing the campaign could not abide. The election came in November of 1898, and even amid all the intimidation the Fusion government still held office in Wilmington, for the city offices were not up that year. The people's choice had held. And so the men behind the campaign decided that what the ballot had not given them, they would simply take. On the morning of November the tenth, 1898, an armed mob of some two thousand white men gathered in the streets of Wilmington. This was no accident and no sudden riot, Carol. It was planned. And their first act was to march upon the office of Alexander Manly's Daily Record and burn it to the ground.

CAROL

Two thousand armed men, and they began by burning the newspaper. Marty, my heart sinks. They meant to silence the very voice of that community first of all. And then, God help them, what did that mob do?



MARTY

They turned upon the people of the city, Carol, and here we must tread softly, for this is the sorrow at the center of it all. The mob moved through the streets and gunned down Black residents where they stood. We do not know, to this day, how many were killed. The honest histories say somewhere between sixty souls and as many as three hundred. The true number was never counted, never recorded, because the men who did it had no wish to count them, and the families who lost them were soon scattered to the winds. Fathers, sons, neighbors, ordinary working people who had built good lives in that city, cut down on a November morning. We say their number is unknown, Carol, but we do not let them be nameless in our hearts.

CAROL

We do not, Marty. We hold them close by this fire tonight. Between sixty and three hundred people, and no one even permitted to count the dead. And the government, the mayor and the men the people had elected. What became of them?



MARTY

This is the part, Carol, that makes Wilmington unlike anything else in our nation's story. With the city terrorized and the streets in the mob's hands, the armed men marched upon the city hall. They forced the elected mayor, and the aldermen, and the chief of police, to resign their offices at gunpoint, one after another. And into the mayor's chair, that very same day, they installed Alfred Waddell, the man who had roused the crowds. A legally elected government, chosen by the people, overthrown and replaced by force in a single afternoon. It has a name, Carol. It is called a coup, and it is the only successful violent overthrow of a government in the history of the United States.

CAROL

The only one in all our history. Marty, to hear it plainly said like that takes my breath away. And the thousands of Black families who had made Wilmington their home, the tradesmen and the doctors and the neighbors. What happened to all of them?



MARTY

They were driven out, Carol. In the days that followed, thousands of Black residents fled Wilmington, some marched to the rail depot and put out of the city, many more escaping on foot into the swamps and the pine woods around the Cape Fear, hiding in the cold with their children, leaving everything behind. Businesses that families had built over a lifetime, homes, churches, a whole flourishing community, shattered in a matter of days. Wilmington had been a majority-Black city, and within a few years it was not, and it never would be again. The people who fled into those woods, for the most part, never came home.

CAROL

A whole community scattered into the swamps at nightfall, never to return. Marty, that is a grief almost too large to hold. And I fear this wasn't the end of it, was it? A thing like that, left standing, doesn't simply stop.



MARTY

No, Carol, it did not stop, and that is the last dark truth of it. The men who seized Wilmington had shown the whole South a template, a method, and it spread. In the years that followed came the disenfranchisement laws that stripped Black citizens of the vote across the region, and the long night of Jim Crow segregation settled over the South and held for generations. And Wilmington itself was quietly relabeled a race riot, as though the people who were murdered had somehow brought it on themselves, and that lie was printed in the histories and taught for the better part of a century. Only in our own time has the state gone back, studied it honestly, and named it for what it truly was, a coup and a massacre.

CAROL

A century of calling it the wrong name so the truth could stay buried. Marty, it makes the remembering feel like the least we owe them. Why do we carry this one to the fire tonight?



MARTY

Because a thriving community and a government fairly chosen by its people were destroyed in the span of a single day, Carol, and because a wound kept hidden can never begin to heal. We do not tell this to frighten anyone. We tell it because the people of Wilmington were real, their lives were good and hard-won, and what was taken from them was real. We tell it so that it is seen at last, honestly, in the plain light, and remembered, so that it is never, ever repeated. That is the whole of our purpose by this fire. Keep the truth close, friends, even the truth that hurts. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking of the people of old Wilmington, the ones who built something beautiful and the ones who fled into the dark woods and never came home, and of the many whose names we were never even allowed to learn. May they rest easy now that we are finally telling it true. Hold onto the truth, be gentle with one another, and always, always come back to the fire.