



DARK TALES OF WASHINGTON ♦

The Lincoln Conspiracy

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 raw spring dark of April 1865, out of a nation just beginning to breathe again after four years of civil war, when the whole capital was lit up with lanterns and joy because the fighting was all but done. This is a true story, Carol, every word of it documented, and it begins with a famous face that everyone in Washington knew and loved. A handsome young actor, celebrated from New York to Richmond, a man audiences adored. And it ends with the president of the United States dead in a narrow rented bed across the street from a theatre, and a hunt through the fog of southern Maryland that would not stop until the fires burned.



CAROL

April of 1865, right at the very end of the war. Marty, I've heard the name John Wilkes Booth my whole life, but I've never had it told to me as a story, from the beginning. A beloved actor. How does a man like that come to such a terrible thing?



MARTY

Because behind that famous face, Carol, was a heart that burned for the losing side. Booth was a Confederate sympathizer to his very bones, and as the South collapsed that spring, something in him curdled into fury. And here is the thing most people never learn, Carol. This was no lone madman with a single pistol. What Booth planned was nothing less than a decapitation of the government, a coordinated blow to cut off the head of the nation all in one night. He gathered a little band of conspirators around him, and he handed out the killing like parts in one of his plays. He would take the president himself. A great hulking young man named Lewis Powell was sent to murder the Secretary of State, William Seward, in his bed. And a nervous German carriage-maker, George Atzerodt, was given the vice president, Andrew Johnson.



CAROL

All three at once, in a single night. Oh, Marty, I had no idea. That's not a shooting, that's a conspiracy to behead the whole government. So they each went out to do their part on the same evening?



MARTY

The same hour, Carol, near enough. It was Good Friday, the fourteenth of April, and the president had come out for an evening at the theatre, to Ford's Theatre, to laugh at a comedy called *Our American Cousin*. And Booth knew that stage the way you know your own kitchen. He knew every line, every laugh. He slipped up to the presidential box, where Lincoln sat with his wife and their guests, and he waited for the biggest laugh of the night, the moment the whole house would be roaring, to cover the sound. And around a quarter past ten, in that swell of laughter, he stepped in behind the president and fired a single shot into the back of his head.



CAROL

In the middle of the laughter, so no one would even hear. Marty, that is so cold it takes my breath. What happened in that box, in that instant, with the whole theatre full of people?



MARTY

Chaos and horror, Carol. Booth leapt from the box down to the stage, a good twelve feet, and he caught his spur in the flags draped there and came down hard, breaking the bone in his leg. And still, wounded, he pulled himself up before that stunned audience, brandished a knife, and cried out in Latin, *Sic semper tyrannis*, thus always to tyrants, the very motto of Virginia. And then he limped out the back to a waiting horse and was gone into the night. And across the city at that same hour, Carol, the giant Powell had forced his way into Secretary Seward's home, past his son, up to the sickroom where Seward lay bandaged from a carriage accident, and he stabbed him savagely again and again in his own bed.



CAROL

Two attacks at once, all across the city. Marty, did they die? The president, and this poor Secretary Seward in his sickbed, did any of them live?



MARTY

Here the fates divided, Carol. Seward, by a mercy, survived. The very splint and brace holding his broken jaw turned the blade from his throat, and though he was cut horribly, he lived. And Atzerodt, the man sent for the vice president, lost his nerve entirely. He sat in a hotel bar and drank instead, and never went up the stairs. So of the three great blows, only Booth's found its mark. They carried the president out of that theatre, Carol, across the muddy street to a boarding house, the Petersen House, and laid his long frame at an angle across a bed too short for him. And through that whole terrible night the cabinet and the doctors gathered around, watching him breathe, unable to do a single thing.



CAROL

Across the street, in a stranger's little rented room, with the whole cabinet standing helpless. Marty, I can hardly bear to picture it. How long did he last?

MARTY

Until the gray of morning, Carol. At twenty-two minutes past seven on the morning of April the fifteenth, Abraham Lincoln died, never having woken. And his Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, standing at the foot of that bed with tears on his face, spoke the words that have echoed ever since. Now he belongs to the ages. And with that, Carol, the greatest manhunt the country had ever known began. For Booth was out there in the dark, riding south on a broken leg, with his frightened young companion David Herold beside him, running for the old Confederacy.

CAROL

A manhunt, with him already hurt and fleeing into the night. Marty, where do you even run, with a broken leg and the whole nation howling for you? How did they ever track him?

MARTY

Slowly, Carol, through twelve long days. Booth and Herold slipped across into southern Maryland, through the swamps and the pine woods, moving farm to farm among men who still favored the South. They stopped in the night at the home of a country doctor named Samuel Mudd, who set and splinted Booth's shattered leg. They hid days in a cold thicket while soldiers combed the country and rewards mounted into the tens of thousands. At last they crossed the Potomac into Virginia, and there, before dawn on the twenty-sixth of April, the cavalry cornered them at a farm belonging to a family named Garrett, run to ground at last in a tobacco barn.

CAROL

Cornered in a barn, after twelve days of running. Marty, tell me how it ended. Did they take him alive?

MARTY

They meant to, Carol. Herold gave himself up, came stumbling out with his hands raised. But Booth would not come out. So the soldiers set the barn alight to drive him into the open, and by the light of those flames they could see him through the slats, moving with a carbine. And then a single shot rang out. A soldier named Boston Corbett had put his pistol through a crack in the boards and fired, and the ball struck Booth in the neck. They dragged him out onto the Garrett porch, and there, as the sun came up, paralyzed and fading, the great actor died. And it was not finished even then. The conspirators were rounded up and tried before a military tribunal that summer, and in July of 1865 four of them went to the gallows together, among them a boarding-house keeper named Mary Surratt, the first woman ever put to death by the United States government. That is the story, Carol, and every bitter word of it is true. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking of that long man laid across a bed too short for him, and a country that had just learned to hope again losing him in a single night. Hold the ones you love a little closer, be gentle with this fragile peace we're given, and always, always come back to the fire.