

CHAPTER 1

John Wilkes Booth glared at Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was calling for "national thanksgiving." He spoke of reconstructing the South. Booth's left eye twitched as he fought to keep from shouting, "Tyrant!"

He looked about him. Thousands of people stood around him on the Executive Mansion's lawn. Lincoln spoke from an east wing window.

"How can they listen to him and not shout him down?" Booth asked.

Lewis Paine, dark hair hidden beneath a top hat, turned to Booth. "At least they're not applauding him, John Wilkes."

David Herold, on Booth's right, grumbled, "They should stone him, is what they should do."

Booth grinned at young Herold. Every now and then, the boy had a good thought. He turned back to Lincoln.

The President was talking about the voting situation in Louisiana and to Booth's astonishment, he was advocating Negro Suffrage. "That means Nigger citizenship," Booth hissed. "By God, I'll put him through. That is the last speech he will ever make."

Paine gave him a sidelong glance. "John Wilkes, keep your voice down."

Ignoring the warning, Booth grabbed Paine's arm. "Do you have your pistol with you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Shoot him, Lewis. Do it now." Both Paine and Herold stared at him. "What's the matter with the both of you!" Booth exclaimed. People around them looked at him. He smiled and tipped his hat to the elderly couple in front of him. "The excitement of the moment."

He stood quiet then, hands in the pockets of his overcoat, fuming at Lincoln, and at Paine and Herold. Didn't they understand? This had gone past kidnapping Lincoln. The President had to die. He whispered in Paine's ear, "This is the time, Lewis. Shoot him."

Without looking at him, Paine flatly refused. "There are too many people here, John Wilkes. We'd never get away with it. We'd only get ourselves in trouble."

"Trouble," Booth mumbled. He gazed at Lincoln again, but he did not see Lincoln. He saw himself at age fourteen. The carnival had come to town. He and his sister, Asia, had gone. A gypsy read his palm in the confines of a weathered, gloomy tent. She was old, white hair curling out from beneath a dark, multicolored cloth. A smelly black

wart sat on the end of her nose. "I have never seen a worse hand, boy," she said. "Never. There is only trouble ahead for you. You will die young." Asia tugged on his arm and begged, "Let's go, Johnnie. I don't like this."

Now, years later, Booth was ready to cause trouble. And he would do so by killing Abraham Lincoln.

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"Come on, Peter!" Roger shouted. "Paine wouldn't speak that way and you know it."

Peter stared at him, anger in his eyes. "This is how I've always said these lines."

Roger glared at him.

A small, thin man with wire-rimmed glasses cleared his throat. "Ah, Roger, have you forgotten who the director is here.?"

"No, Rich, it's just that..." He trailed off.

Rich brushed his two-day-old beard. "Just what, Rog.?"

"Lincoln's giving a speech that speaks of everything John Wilkes Booth detests. It angers him. No, it infuriates him. He's pushing Paine to pull out a gun and kill Lincoln in front of a mob of people, that's how upset he is. Peter isn't responding to that. He has Paine sounding almost monotone. Like this is no big deal."

"What!" Peter exclaimed. "Paine sounded pretty forceful with Booth to me."

Rich held up his hands. "Both of you, fighting four days before opening night is not helpful here. So let's break for lunch and give ourselves a chance to cool off. We'll pick up this scene again later."

"I second the idea," Peter said, turning to go.

"Right behind you, mate," Chet Manfield, a.k.a. David Herold said, following Peter.

Rich laid a firm hand on Roger's shoulder. "Come on."

"I'll catch up."

"Okay. Coffee shop around the corner."

Roger watched Rich go then turned his attention to the theatre box where Abraham Lincoln had received the fatal bullet. The box was decorated as it had been that night; bunting, American Flag, and portrait of George Washington. Booth had given his ultimate performance in that box. "Will I even come close to you, John Wilkes.?" he asked, aloud.

"Come close to what?"

Roger turned. Camille stood beside him. "I was just wondering if this season will be as good as last season was, baby, that's all."

Camille slipped her arms around him and laid her cheek on his chest. He was a good three inches taller than her. "With you as Booth, it will top last season," she said. "That is, if you don't alienate Peter."

He pulled away from her. "What's that mean?"

"I saw your tantrum. It wasn't very becoming, sweetheart."

"Isn't this play important to you, Camille?"

"Of course it is, Roger. This play has been really good to us. Playing Laura Keene has been very rewarding, especially showing that she helped tend to Lincoln's comfort the night he died. But..." She pushed her black hair back over her shoulder. "I guess I just don't have your urgency about the whole thing. It's a play. There will always be plays."

"**Murder Through the Eyes of the Murderer** is not just a play, Camille. I wrote it. I molded it. I enticed the best director in theater to direct it. My entire life savings went into this project."

She took his left hand. "I know. And you've made that life savings back tenfold. You conquered Broadway. We got Tonys. We just signed a deal with the publisher yesterday to put it out in book form this fall. We've done it all. And to be perfectly frank, I was really surprised that you wanted to do another season."

"Surprised? Would you want me to quit on a winning thing?"

"No. But you've earned a name for yourself now. You could write other plays. You'd have no trouble getting the backing."

He pulled his hand free. "I don't want to do other plays. Besides, now we're doing this at Ford's. We're recreating an event that actually happened here. Doesn't that thrill you?"

She folded her arms beneath her breasts. "Actually, Roger, it kind of gives me the creeps..." She looked up at Lincoln's theatre box. "Sometimes, I think that it's commercializing his death. Degrading a great man."

Roger shook his head. "We're not degrading Lincoln. We're getting rid of the historical bullshit surrounding the assassination. We're presenting Booth's point of view. That's all. What happened back then happened. I'm not saying Booth was right. I just want to show an accurate picture."

Camille sighed. "Roger, Booth was obsessed and he committed an insane act."

"John Wilkes was not insane!" he shouted.

Camille jumped. "God, Rog."

For a minute, just a minute, Roger Eberth wanted to hit his fiancée. The realization stunned him and all he could do was stare at her.

"I'm going to meet the guys at the coffee shop," she said, backing away from him. She headed backstage, taking a wide berth around him.

"Camille, wait."

She turned, but held her distance.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell."

"Did you ever stop to think, Roger, that maybe you're as obsessed with Booth as he was with Lincoln?"

She left before he could reply.

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She was quiet on the ride to their apartment on K Street. In fact, she'd shied away from him during the afternoon rehearsals. He hadn't gone to the coffee shop, and he knew that she was mad about that as well as him blowing up at her. He would have to smooth things over.

He stopped the Jaguar at a red light and looked over at her. She was staring out the windshield, her mouth a grim straight line. He sighed.

The signal changed and he returned his attention to his driving. Reaching their building, he pulled the car into the narrow drive, drove its length then parked in the alley beneath their kitchen window. Camille jumped out before he shut down the engine.

He let her go. He sat there a few minutes, wondering what he could do to please her. He ran a hand through his dark hair. It never used to be like this with her. It used to be easy. It used to be natural. And if he was to be honest with himself, he was getting damn sick and tired of trying to please her.

Camille ran around the old brick building to the front doors, slipped in her access card then entered the lobby, a circular room with maroon chairs and a wall of brass mailboxes. She bypassed them. Let Roger deal with the mail. She forsook the elevator for the stairs, taking them two at a time until she reached the third floor. She hurried down the hall to the last door on the left, apartment 3E. Unlocking the door, she entered and tossed her keys on the mahogany coffee table. She shed her suede coat and laid it on the couch. She ran to the kitchen window. He still sat in the Jag. Turning away from the window, she stamped her foot and said, "Damn you, John Wilkes Booth." Releasing a long burst of air, she returned to the living room, her attention turning immediately to the small alcove which housed the John Wilkes Booth shrine. Pictures of Booth hung on the walls, sat on the desk and on top of the computer monitor. The shelves to the left of the desk held books on Booth, Lincoln, and the Civil War. She gazed at Booth. "How can you, a dead man, steal him from me.?" she

asked the photographs. "Tell me, Mr. Booth." She was still standing there, staring at Booth, when Roger entered.

"Camille?"

She turned to face him.

"Can we talk about this?"

She leaned against the wall and folded her arms across her chest. "The way you treated Pete was awful, Roger. I didn't appreciate the tone you took with me either."

"I'm sorry. And I'll apologize to Pete too. Promise. It's just, well, I got carried away."

"Something you seem to do all the time these days."

"Look, this is an important opening."

"Why is it more important than the other openings, Rog? You weren't this freaky when we opened on Broadway for God's sake."

He threw up his hands. "This is Washington, D.C., baby. This is where it happened."

She pushed her hair back over her shoulder. "And maybe it shouldn't happen here again."

"What?"

"It's just that.... I can't explain it but.... Well, the closer we get to Friday, the less doing this play here, at Ford's, seems right."

He came to her, reaching for her hands. She gave them to him and he led her to the couch. They sat together, legs touching. "Why doesn't it feel right to you, baby?"

The question surprised her. For the first time in weeks, he cared what she was thinking. "Roger, I said it earlier. I feel like we're exploiting a very tragic event."

He sighed. "You just don't get it, do you? "

"And neither do you, Rog." She looked away. "This is a mistake. Doing it at Ford's is a mistake."

"How do you know that?"

"I don't know. It's just how I feel. Why are you so hell bent on perfection for this opening? More so than ever before."

"Cam, I know a lot of people think what Booth did was horrible. Especially in this town. But—"

"Roger, he murdered a man. That is horrible."

He shook his head. "You're missing the point. Yes, it was horrible. But history has never portrayed John Wilkes for what he really was. He wasn't insane. He was a man with convictions and principles who acted on them."

"In a horrible way."

His eyes narrowed and Camille shivered. "I'll give you what he did was horrible," Roger said through clenched teeth. "But do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"No, I don't. What, Rog? What are you saying?"

"Camille, how can you not understand?"

Camille shook her head. "Maybe because I've never liked this man you find so fascinating."

He gripped her hands tighter as he said, "I never asked you to like Booth. I've only asked you to love me."

The wild look in his eyes frightened her, and she tried to pull her hands free. He held fast, crushing her fingers. She looked down at their hands. "Let me go, Roger!"

He squeezed harder, pains shooting up her arms. She cried out, and her cry seemed to jolt him. Abruptly, he released her.

She jumped to her feet and he did too. "I'm sorry, Camille. Baby. He reached for her, and she pushed his arms away. She turned to go, but he grabbed her. "Where do you think you're going? You stay right here, Camille." His voice was harsh, commanding. He raised his free hand to strike her. On the inside of his wrist was a tattoo, Booth's initials, J.W.B.

Camille gasped. She pulled away, terrified. "Get away from me. Leave me alone!" He looked at his raised right hand, seemingly mystified. She snatched her coat from the couch and scampered past him, running for the door.

"Camille," he said, turning. "Baby, wait."

"I gotta get away from you. I don't know you anymore. God, you are Booth."

"Camille!" he called after her.

She ignored him, closing the door on his words. She ran down the hall to the stairwell. Her legs gave out after three steps and she fell down the stairs, crashing into the wall at the bottom, pain shooting through her left arm. She cried out, cradling it to her body. Breathing hard, she looked down at it. Her forearm was crooked. She grabbed the doorknob with her good arm and pulled herself up. She had to get out of here. She had to get away from him.

She ran down the back hall and burst out the back door. Reaching the Jag, she leaned against it, dizzy from the pain in her arm. She realized she had left her keys on the coffee table.

She looked behind her. He wasn't chasing her. Not yet anyway. She couldn't go past the front of the building. He could cut her off at the front door. No, she would go down the alley. She would go to Paul. She was halfway to Paul's when tears started streaming down her face.

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By the time Roger got the apartment door open, Camille was gone. He slammed it closed. "Shit!"

He paced around the living room. He'd nearly hit her. Twice today, he'd nearly hit her. Stress, he told himself. With the opening so close, he was stressed out.

He stopped pacing and sat on the couch. But hit Camille. He'd never hurt her. Never. He stared at his right hand. He had certainly wanted to hit her. Booth would have hit her. He had stopped himself, and yet, Camille had said he was Booth. In a way, he was. At least for a few hours a night. He grinned. It was fun being Booth. His eyes fell on the initials on his right wrist, J.W.B. He'd gotten the tattoo at lunch time. It would be his memento of these years when he had been John Wilkes. It would be a tribute to the man who had helped young Roger Eberth carve his niche in the stage world. Camille would understand about the initials once he'd explained.

He stood up and smoothed the wrinkles from his slacks. He had to talk with Camille because as much as she frustrated him these days, he loved her. They could work out some kind of arrangement until the play opened. Maybe she could live with a little less attention. This tour only lasted six months. When it was over, they could take a vacation somewhere romantic.

Right now, however, he had to find her. There were two places he could check first—Paul's office and Paul's townhouse. He'd try the office first. Paul always worked late.

He snatched his jacket from the coat rack and left the apartment. He was unlocking the Jaguar when it hit him. If he was unlocking the Jag, then she was on foot. This was Washington, D.C. It was night. Heart racing, he hurried into the car. The engine was barely started when he threw the car into gear and took off. He had to find her. This city was not kind to beautiful women on foot, and alone.