Chasing Lincoln's Killer

Prologue - Chapter 1
CHASING LINCOLN'S KILLER

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THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF MANHUNT
This story is true. All the characters are real and were alive during the great manhunt of April 1865. Their words are authentic. In fact, all text appearing within quotation marks comes from original sources: letters, manuscripts, trial transcripts, newspapers, government reports, pamphlets, books, and other documents. What happened in Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1865, and in the swamps and rivers, forests and fields of Maryland and Virginia during the following twelve days, is far too incredible to have been made up.

I was born on February 12, Abraham Lincoln’s birthday, and my fascination
with our sixteenth president began when I was a young boy. On my tenth birthday, my grandmother gave me an unusual present: an engraving of the Derringer pistol John Wilkes Booth used to assassinate Abraham Lincoln, framed by a newspaper article (on page 17) published on the day after the assassination. The newspaper article described some aspects of the assassination, but was cut off before the end of the story. I knew I had to find the rest of the story. This book is my way of doing that.

The author as a boy

LIST OF MAJOR PARTICIPANTS

THE PRESIDENT AND HIS FAMILY
Abraham Lincoln
Mary Todd Lincoln
Robert Todd Lincoln
Thomas “Tad” Lincoln

GUESTS OF THE LINCOLNS AT FORD’S THEATRE
Major Henry Rathbone
Clara Harris

PRINCIPAL CABINET MEMBERS
Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton
Secretary of State William H. Seward
Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles

PRINCIPAL DOCTORS
Dr. Charles A. Leale
Surgeon General Joseph K. Barnes

CONFEDERATE LEADERS
President Jefferson Davis
General Robert E. Lee

CONSPIRATORS
John Wilkes Booth
David Herold
Lewis Powell
George Atzerodt
Mary Surratt
John Harrison Surratt
Dr. Samuel A. Mudd

PRINCIPAL ACCOMPlices
Thomas Jones
Captain Samuel Cox

PRINCIPAL MANHUNTERS
disagreed with that right, Southern states had the right to secede.

Lincoln, elected president of the United States in 1860 just before the outbreak of the Civil War, held two strong beliefs: that slavery was morally wrong, and that the North and South must remain united as one country.

Southern soldiers, dressed in gray uniforms, were called rebels and Confederates. Northern soldiers, dressed in navy blue uniforms, were referred to as Union soldiers or Yankees.

The war lasted four years and resulted in more than 600,000 casualties, half of them lost to disease. After several bloody battles and costly, prolonged campaigns, Confederate General Robert E. Lee
surrendered the Army of Northern Virginiato Union General Ulysses S. Grant in the Virginia town of Appomattox Court House. But other rebel armies continued fighting in the field. Lee’s surrender did not mean the end of the war or of danger. Some Confederate sympathizers mourned the outcome of the war — the “lost cause” — would forever change the Southern way of life, including slavery. Many Southerners were unwilling to give up the lost cause, believing they could continue to fight and eventually win, or die trying. It was a dangerous place and time. With Lee’s surrender, soldiers shed their uniforms, turned in their weapons, and rode or walked home to resume their lives. Spies and Confederate sympathizers as well as soldiers filled the Union capital, Washington, D.C. People could not tell based on clothing, geography, or appearance which side of the conflict people supported.
It looked like a bad day for photographers. Terrible winds and thunderstorms had swept through Washington early that morning, dissolving the dirt streets into a sticky muck of soil and garbage. The ugly gray sky of the morning of March 4, 1865, threatened to spoil the great day. Photographer William M. Smith was to take a historic photograph of the presidential inauguration in front of the recently completed Capitol dome. Smith framed the view from the marble statue of George Washington on the lawn to the top of the dome, crowned by a statue of Freedom. Abraham Lincoln had ordered work on building the Capitol dome to continue during the war as a sign that the Union would go on.

Closer to the Capitol, Alexander Gardner set up his camera to photograph the inauguration. Gardner captured not only images of the president, vice president, chief justice, and other honored guests occupying the stands, but also the anonymous faces of hundreds of spectators who crowded the east front of the Capitol. In one photograph, on a balcony above the stands, a young man with a black mustache and wearing a top hat gazes down on the president. It is the famous actor John Wilkes Booth.
Perhaps the finest portrait of John Wilkes Booth ever made, this magnificent large-format photograph remains vivid evidence of Booth’s appeal.

Abraham Lincoln rose from his chair and walked toward the podium. He was now at the height of his power, with the Civil War nearly won. Clouds threatened another rainstorm. Then the strangest thing happened: The clouds parted and the sun burst out, flooding the spectacle. The president’s speech was brief — just 701 words.

“Fondly do we hope — fervently do we pray — that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away . . . With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God
gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan — to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."
On April 3, 1865, Richmond, Virginia, capital city of the Confederate States of America, fell to Union forces. Now it was only a matter of time before the war would finally be over. In the Union capital, emotions were high. The rebellion was almost over, and the victorious North held a celebration. Children ran through the streets waving little paper flags that read WE CELEBRATE THE FALL OF RICHMOND. Across the country, people built bonfires, organized parades, fired guns, shot cannons, and sang patriotic songs.

The North rejoiced when the capital of the Confederacy, Richmond, fell on April 3, 1865. This rare broadside celebrated the news but became obsoleteless than two weeks later when Lincoln was assassinated.

Four days later, John Wilkes Booth was drinking with a friend at a saloon on Houston Street in New York City. Booth
struck the bar table with his fist and regretted a lost opportunity. “What an excellent chance I had, if I wished, to kill the president on Inauguration Day! I was on the stand, as close to him nearly as I am to you.”

Crushed by the fall of Richmond, the former rebel capital, John Wilkes Booth left New York City on April 8 and returned to Washington. The news there was terrible for him. On April 9, Confederate General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia surrendered to Union General Grant at Appomattox. Booth wandered the streets in despair.

On April 10, Abraham Lincoln appeared at a second-floor window of the Executive Mansion, as the White House was known then, to greet a crowd of citizens celebrating General Lee’s surrender. Lincoln did not have a prepared speech. He used humor to entertain the audience.

“I see that you have a band of music with you. . . . I have always thought ‘Dixie’ one of the best tunes I have ever heard. Our adversaries . . . attempted to appropriate it, but I insisted yesterday we fairly captured it. . . . I now request the band to favor me with its performance.”

On the night of April 11, a torchlight parade of a few thousand people, with bands and banners, assembled on the semicircular driveway in front of the Executive Mansion. This time, Lincoln delivered a long speech, without gloating over the Union victory. He intended to
prepare the people for the long task of rebuilding the South. When someone in the crowd shouted that he couldn’t see the president, Lincoln’s son Tad volunteered to illuminate his father. When Lincoln dropped each page of his speech to the floor, it was Tad who scooped them up.

Wilkes Booth.

Lincoln continued: “We meet this evening, not in sorrow, but in gladness of heart.” He described recent events and gave credit to Union General Grant and his officers for the successful end to the war. He also discussed his desire that black people, especially those who had served in the Union army, be granted the right to vote.

As Lincoln spoke, one observer, Mrs. Lincoln’s dressmaker, Elizabeth Keckley, a free black woman, standing a few steps from the president, remarked that the lamplight made him “stand out boldly in the darkness.” The perfect target. “What an easy matter would it be to kill the president as he stands there! He could be shot down from the crowd,” she whispered, “and no one would be able to
By the time Booth arrived at the theater, the president’s messenger had come and gone. Some time between noon and 12:30 P.M., as he sat on the top step in front of the entrance to Ford’s reading his letter, Booth heard the big news: In just eight hours, the man who was the subject of all his hating and plotting would stand on the very stone steps where he now sat. Here. Of all places, Lincoln was coming here.

Booth knew the layout of Ford’s intimately: the exact spot on Tenth Street where Lincoln would step out of his carriage, the box inside the theater where the president sat when he came to a performance, the route Lincoln could walk and the staircase he would climb to the box, the dark underground passageway beneath the stage. He knew the narrow hallway behind the stage where a back door opened to the alley and he knew how the president’s box hung directly above the stage.

Though Booth had never acted in *Our American Cousin*, he knew it well — its length, its scenes, its players and, most important, the number of actors onstage at any given moment during the performance. It was perfect. He would not have to hunt Lincoln. The president was coming to him.
Chapter I

John Wilkes Booth awoke depressed. It was Good Friday morning, April 14, 1865. The Confederacy was dead. His cause was lost and his dreams of glory over. He did not know that this day, after enduring more than a week of bad news, he would enjoy a stunning reversal of fortune. No, all he knew this morning when he crawled out of bed was that he could not stand another day of Union victory celebrations.

Booth assumed that the day would unfold as the latest in a blur of days that had begun on April 3 when the Confederate capital, Richmond, fell to the Union. The very next day, the tyrant Abraham Lincoln had visited his captive prize and had the nerve to sit behind the desk occupied by the first and last president of the Confederate States of America, Jefferson Davis. Then, on April 9, at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, General Robert E. Lee and his beloved Army of Northern Virginia surrendered. Two days later, Lincoln had made a speech proposing to give blacks the right to vote, and last night, April 13, all of Washington had celebrated with a grand illumination of the city. These days had been the worst of Booth’s young life.

Twenty-six years old, impossibly vain, an extremely talented actor, and a star member of a celebrated theatrical family, John Wilkes Booth was willing to throw away fame, wealth, and a promising
future for the cause of the Confederacy. He was the son of the legendary actor Junius Brutus Booth and brother to Edwin Booth, one of the finest actors of his generation. Handsome and appealing, he was instantly recognizable to thousands of fans in both the North and South. His physical beauty astonished all who saw him. A fellow actor described his eyes as being “like living jewels.” Booth’s passions included fine clothing, Southern honor, good manners, beautiful women, and the romance of lost causes.

On April 14, Booth’s day began in the dining room of the National Hotel, where he ate breakfast. Around noon, he walked over to nearby Ford’s Theatre, a block from Pennsylvania Avenue, to pick up his mail: Ford’s customarily accepted personal mail as a courtesy to actors.

There was a letter for Booth.

That same morning a letter arrived at the theater for someone else. There had been no time to mail it, so its sender, First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln, had used the president’s messenger to hand-deliver it to the owners of Ford’s Theatre. The mere arrival of the White House messenger told them that the president was coming to the theater tonight! Yes, the president and Mrs. Lincoln would attend this evening’s performance of the popular if silly comedy Our American Cousin. But the big news was that General Ulysses S. Grant was coming with them.

The Lincolns had given the Fords enough advance notice for the proprietors to decorate and join together the two theater boxes — seven and eight — that, by removal of a partition, formed the
president’s box at the theater.

By the time Booth arrived at the theater, the president’s messenger had come and gone. Some time between noon and 12:30 P.M., as he sat on the top step in front of the entrance to Ford’s reading his letter, Booth heard the big news: In just eight hours, the man who was the subject of all his hating and plotting would stand on the very stone steps where he now sat. Here. Of all places, Lincoln was coming here.

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He had only eight hours to prepare. If luck was on his side, there was just enough time to carry out his plan. Whoever told Booth about the president’s plan to attend the play that night had unknowingly activated in his mind an imaginary clock that began ticking down, minute by minute. He would have a busy afternoon.

Abraham Lincoln ate breakfast with his family and planned his day. The Lincolns’ eldest son, Robert, a junior officer of General Grant’s staff, was home from the war. Robert had been at the surrender at Appomattox, and his father was eager to hear the details. General Grant joined Lincoln’s cabinet meeting
later that day where everyone in attendance, including Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, noticed Lincoln’s good mood. Secretary Welles, who kept a diary, wrote that Lincoln “had last night the usual dream which he had preceding nearly every great and important event of the War. . . . [Lincoln] said [the dream] related to . . . the water; that he seemed to be in some . . . indescribable vessel, and that was moving with great [speed] towards an indefinite shore. . . . [H]e had this dream preceding [the great battles of the Civil War].”

Lincoln had always believed in, and sometimes feared, the power of dreams. In 1863, while visiting Philadelphia, he sent an urgent telegram to Mary Todd Lincoln at the White House, warning of danger to their younger son: “Think you better put Tad’s pistol away. I had an ugly dream about him.”

After the cabinet meeting ended, the president followed his usual routine: receiving visits from friends and job seekers, reading his mail, and catching up on paperwork. He was eager to wind up business by 3:00 P.M. for an appointment he had with his wife, Mary. There was something he wanted to tell her.

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At the theater, Henry Clay Ford wrote out the advertisement that appeared that afternoon in the *Evening Star*:

“LIEUT. GENERAL GRANT, PRESIDENT and Mrs. Lincoln have secured the State Box at Ford’s
Theatre TO NIGHT, to witness Miss Laura Keene’s *American Cousin*.”

James Ford walked to the Treasury Department a few blocks away to borrow several flags to decorate the president’s box. On his way back, his arms wrapped around a bundle of brightly colored cotton and silk fabric, he bumped into Booth. They spoke briefly. Booth saw the red, white, and blue flags, further confirmation of the president’s visit that night.

Dr. Charles A. Leale, a twenty-three-year-old U.S. Army surgeon, was on duty at the Armory Square Hospital in Washington when he heard that President Lincoln and General Grant would be at the performance that night. He decided to attend. Leale wanted, most of all, to catch a glimpse of the famous general who had won the Civil War.

Booth rode over to the Kirkwood House, where he accomplished his strangest errand of the day. The Kirkwood was the residence of the new vice president, Andrew Johnson, who was from Tennessee. The job did not include official quarters, so he lived at a hotel. Johnson’s room was unguarded and, if Booth had wanted to, he could have walked upstairs and knocked on the door, or worse. But he did not want to see or harm the vice president. He just wanted to leave him a note. Booth approached the front desk, wrote a brief note, and handed it to the desk clerk, who placed it in Johnson’s mail slot. The message read: “Don’t wish to disturb you. Are you at home? J. Wilkes Booth.”
Next, Booth visited a boardinghouse on H Street, a few blocks from Ford’s Theatre, to pay what looked like an innocent social call on the owner. Mary Surratt was a forty-two-year-old Maryland widow and mother of John Harrison Surratt, a Confederate secret agent and friend of Booth’s. Over the last several months, Booth had become a frequent caller at Mrs. Surratt’s Washington townhouse. Tonight her son, John, was not home — he was out of the city on rebel business. Mary told Booth that she was riding out that afternoon to her country tavern in Surrattsville, Maryland, several miles south of Washington. Booth asked if she would mind delivering a small package wrapped in newspaper to her tavern. Conveniently, Booth had the package with him.

There was one more thing. Booth told Mary that he would be riding out of Washington this evening. Sometime that night, he said, he would stop at her tavern to pick up not only this package, but also the guns, ammunition, and other supplies that her son, John, had already hidden there for him. He asked Mary to tell the tavern keeper, John Lloyd, to get everything ready for the actor’s visit this evening. She agreed, and soon she and Lewis Weichmann, one of her boarders, drove down to Surrattsville by carriage.

At some point that afternoon, Booth made the final arrangements. There were two types of preparation: practical and mental. First, the weapons. Booth chose as his primary weapon a .44 caliber, single-shot, muzzle-loading pistol manufactured by Henry Deringer of
Philadelphia. It was a small, short-barreled, pocket-size handgun designed for concealment, not combat. Its big .44 caliber ball, weighing in at nearly an ounce, was a solid, deadly round.

Unlike military pistols that could fire up to six rounds before reloading, the Derringer could be fired just once. Reloading was a time-consuming process that called for two hands and more than twenty seconds. Booth knew that his first shot would be his last. If he missed, he wouldn’t have time to reload.

Booth left behind no explanation for why he chose the Derringer over a revolver. Pistols misfire occasionally. Either the copper percussion cap might fail to spark, or the black powder in the barrel might fail to ignite because of dampness. Booth was a thrill seeker, so perhaps he wanted to increase his excitement by risking the use of a one-shot pistol. Or did he believe it more heroic, more honorable — even more gentlemanly — to take his prey with a single bullet? Perhaps he preferred a stylish single-shot to blazing away with a six-shooter.

The print of Booth’s Derringer pistol
A confident Booth, well known for his good looks and fine clothes, in all his splendor, much like he was dressed the night he shot the president.

Then, if he missed, or failed to kill the president, he would turn to his backup weapon, a Rio Grande camp knife, a handsome and extremely sharp type of bowie knife.

Before leaving the National Hotel, Booth slid the knife and pistol into his pockets and gathered the rest of his belongings. He planned to travel light that night. In addition to the weapons and his clothing — a black felt slouch hat, black wool coat, black pants, big knee-high black leather riding boots with spurs — he took only a velvet-cased compass, keys, a whistle, a date book, a pencil, some
money, a small knife, and a few other small items, including small photographs of five of his favorite girlfriends.

When Mary Surratt and her boarder arrived in Surrattsville, the tavern keeper, John Lloyd, wasn’t there. He had left on an errand. Mary waited for him. When Lloyd returned, he parked his wagon, climbed down, and began unloading his cargo of fish and oysters.

Mary delivered the message to the tavern keeper John Lloyd: “I want you to have those shooting irons ready; there will be parties here tonight who will call for them.”
Mary Surratt’s Washington, D.C., boardinghouse, where the conspirators met, and where Lewis Powell and Mrs. Surratt were arrested

She handed him Booth’s package wrapped in newspaper. The evening callers will want this, too, she explained. And, she added, give them a couple of bottles of whiskey. Her mission accomplished, Mary and Lewis drove back to Washington.

Lloyd followed Mary’s instructions. He carried the package upstairs, unwrapped it, and discovered Booth’s binoculars. He went to a room where, several weeks ago, John Surratt had shown him how to hide two Spencer carbines between the walls. Lloyd retrieved them and placed them
with the binoculars in his bedchamber.

At the Herndon House Hotel, around the corner from Ford’s, at around 8:00 P.M., Booth presided over a meeting of some of the conspirators he had recruited over the previous months to strike against President Lincoln. This was not the first time they had assembled to move against the president. They had failed at least once before.

Beginning in 1864, Booth, the young stage star, had pledged his cash, his celebrity, and his connections in hatching a bold plan. He put together a harebrained scheme to kidnap President Lincoln, take him to Richmond, and hold him as a hostage for the Confederacy, in an effort to help win the war for the South.

From the time of Lincoln’s election in 1860, there arose several conspiracies to kidnap or murder him. Pro-secession, pro-Southern rebels began mailing death threats to Lincoln before he took office in 1861. Some even sent him jars of poisoned fruit! In one notorious plot of 1861, local rebels schemed to assassinate the president-elect when his railroad train passed through Baltimore on the way to Washington for his first inauguration. But Detective Allan Pinkerton ruined the scheme by persuading Lincoln to pass through the city in disguise, several hours ahead of schedule. Other Lincoln haters threatened to assassinate him on the east front of the Capitol the moment he began to read his inaugural address. During the Civil War, several Southern military officers, as well as a handful of officials in the Confederate Secret Service,
considered plots against Lincoln. But big talk was cheap in wartime Washington. As late as January 1865, with the Confederacy in danger of collapse at any moment, not one of the conspiracies resulted in serious action against Abraham Lincoln. At some point, John Wilkes Booth came into contact with sympathetic secret agents in Canada, New York City, Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia.

In late 1864 and early 1865, Booth organized his own little band of conspirators, loyal to him and not the Confederacy. He recruited a gang who, after he clothed and fed them, paid for their food and drink, and allowed them to enjoy the benefits of his fame and favor, would, he hoped, follow him anywhere — even into a plot to kidnap the president of the United States. Booth and his gang of conspirators — Lewis Powell, David Herold, John Harrison Surratt, and George Atzerodt, as well as Samuel Arnold, Michael O’Laughlen, and others who drifted in and out of his circle — would change cheap talk to big action by kidnapping the president.
An 1865 photomontage of John Wilkes Booth and his alleged conspirators

On March 17, 1865, Booth and his henchmen planned, like highway robbers, to ambush Lincoln’s carriage at gunpoint on a deserted road as he rode home to the Executive Mansion. They would make Lincoln their hostage. Booth’s information was incorrect, however, and Lincoln did not arrive as expected. Instead, unbelievably, while Booth and his gang lay in wait on the road on the outskirts of the city, Lincoln was giving a speech at Booth’s own hotel, the National!

If only the kidnapping plot had worked! There would have been no torchlight parades, no crowds serenading Lincoln at the Executive Mansion, no little children scampering through the
streets with little paper flags with red, white, and blue stars and stripes.

Although his panicked gang scattered after that ridiculous failure, Booth hoped to try again. But events unfolded quickly when, eighteen days later, Richmond fell, and then General Lee surrendered.

Lincoln’s April 11 speech provoked more violent talk. The president’s proposal for a limited black citizenship and voting rights enraged the racist actor. But Booth did nothing. If he was serious about assassinating Lincoln, all he had to do was stroll over to the Executive Mansion, announce that the famous actor John Wilkes Booth wished to see the president, await his turn — which nearly always resulted in a private talk with Lincoln — and then shoot Lincoln at his desk. But that would have been a suicide mission. It would have been difficult to escape the White House.

Incredibly, presidential security was very weak in that era, even during wartime; almost anyone could walk into the Executive Mansion without being searched and request a brief meeting with the president. It was a miracle that no one had yet tried to murder Lincoln in his own office.

Booth would soon turn his anger and violent talk into action.

Now, April 14, 1865, Booth assembled enough men to accomplish another mission. “Booth proposed,” aspiring kidnapper George Atzerodt recalled, “that we should kill the president.” It would, said Booth, “be the greatest thing in the world.” Tonight, at exactly 10:00 P.M., Booth and his henchmen would throw
into chaos the Union government by killing its top leaders. That would, they hoped, incite the Confederacy to continue the war against the Union. George Atzerodt, Lewis Powell, and John Wilkes Booth would strike simultaneously and murder Vice President Johnson, Secretary of State Seward, and President Lincoln.

Atzerodt’s assignment was to assassinate the vice president in his room at the Kirkwood House. “You must kill Johnson,” Booth told him. Lewis Powell would murder Secretary of State Seward. Seward was certain to be in his bed this night recovering from a serious carriage accident.

David Herold, an experienced outdoorsman, hunter, and tracker, would accompany Lewis Powell, take him to Seward’s home, and guide the assassin, unfamiliar with the capital’s streets, out of the city where he would meet up with Booth.

Booth claimed the most notorious part in the plot for himself. He would slip into Ford’s Theatre and assassinate the president during the play. Powell and Herold, Booth’s two most loyal pals, agreed to the plan. Atzerodt had doubts about his assignment. He would not do it, he said. Booth then threatened Atzerodt, implying that he might as well kill Johnson, because if he didn’t, Booth would accuse him anyway and get him hanged.

None of Booth’s conspirators knew it, but Booth had already implicated all of them! He had entrusted a sealed envelope to a friend and fellow actor, who was to see that the letter it contained was
published tomorrow in the newspaper. In the letter, not only did Booth justify the triple assassination, but he signed his henchmen’s names to the document as well, sealing their fates.

Atzerodt’s reluctance to kill Johnson put the whole plot at risk. Atzerodt knew the details of the assassination plan that was unfolding. If he left that meeting and went to the police, Booth, Powell, and Herold would be finished. Guards would rush to protect those threatened in the plot, and the conspirators would be hunted down. Booth would fail in his mission.

At the Executive Mansion, the Lincolns were behind schedule. It was past 8:00 P.M., and they still had not gotten into their carriage. As the curtain rose at Ford’s, the coachman and Lincoln’s servant Charles Forbes were on top of the carriage. The Lincolns’ private afternoon carriage ride and absence from the mansion had left business unfinished, with several politicians still waiting for an audience with the president.

Earlier that afternoon, Lincoln was happy to be free of the politicians and the burdens of his office. It had been one of the happiest days of his life. At breakfast, son Robert told tales of Lee’s surrender. For once, the cabinet meeting was free of crises, battle news, and problems requiring the president’s immediate attention. Since Lee’s surrender, Lincoln had been more cheerful than at any other time during his presidency. He expected more good news about the surrender of additional Confederate armies.

He wanted to ride alone with Mary on
this day. She had been emotionally upset since the death of their eleven-year-old son, Willie, in 1862.

They both took the loss hard. But Abraham Lincoln recovered, and Mary did not. “It was hard to lose the boy,” he said. He organized Willie’s funeral. Then he threw himself into his work.

Mary was at heart a kind woman, but some critics preferred to criticize her personal quirks — her expensive shopping habits, her jealous temper — rather than praise her good works for soldiers or her absolute loyalty to husband, liberty, and the Union cause.

The demands of the war had been so great that the president spent less and less time with Mary. Lincoln knew that he had to change that now that the war was ending. He wanted to talk to Mary about their future. He walked her to the open carriage, his good mood impossible to miss. Mary Todd Lincoln had noticed his recent optimism and now, during their afternoon carriage ride, she spoke to him about it. “Dear husband, you almost startle me by your great cheerfulness.”

Lincoln replied, “We must both be more cheerful in the future — between the war and the loss of our darling Willie — we have both been very miserable.”

During their leisurely ride, the president told his wife that they must try to be happy again. That he would like to see the Pacific Ocean. That perhaps at the end of his second term in office, they would move to Chicago and he would practice law again. Freed from the troubles of war and death — he would send no more armies of young men to die
Lincoln dreamed of the future. Mary later remembered, “I never saw him so supremely cheerful — his manner was even playful.”

That evening, when the Lincolns finally left the White House for Ford’s, they picked up their guests. General Grant and his wife had declined Lincoln’s invitation and boarded a train headed home instead. Several other couples had also declined the invitation, but Major Rathbone, an army officer, and his fiancée, Clara Harris, accepted.

At 8:00 p.m., the management at Ford’s decided not to hold the curtain for the presidential party, and the play began without them. Soon, an employee acting as lookout at Ford’s spotted the big black carriage turning down Tenth Street. It slowed to a stop beside the wood platform in front of the theater, constructed especially to assist carriage riders in getting out of their vehicles and avoiding the muddy street. The Lincolns, Henry Rathbone, and Clara Harris exited the carriage. The chief usher escorted them through the lobby, up the winding staircase, and across the first balcony to their theater box. Abraham Lincoln’s entry to Ford’s Theatre at 8:30 p.m. on April 14, 1865, was majestic and simple. He arrived with no crowd of guards or staff, and no announcement to the audience.

Before the presidential party reached the box, the actors, musicians, and theatergoers became aware of the Lincolns’ arrival. The actors onstage stopped performing. To the delight of the crowd, the conductor led his orchestra in
“Hail to the Chief,” the traditional musical accompaniment to the entrance of the president.

Dr. Charles Leale, seated in the front of the first balcony, about forty feet from the president’s box, had arrived in time to witness it all. He watched the audience rise to its feet in enthusiasm and cheer. He looked around, too, and watched as Lincoln “looked upon the people he loved and acknowledged [them] . . . with a solemn bow.”

At this supreme moment, the people cheered the man who, after a shaky start in office, learned how to command armies, brought down slavery, and become a most eloquent and moving speaker. And as he promised he would, he had saved the Union. Lincoln stood in the box and bowed to the audience.

The outpouring of emotion from the audience and orchestra, the hissing gaslights, the packed house, the fresh, moist scent of spring in the air, the recent and happy news from the army — all combined to make a magical moment.