



Historical Context and Synopsis

The U.S. Civil War

The Civil War happened because many people felt strongly about whether slavery should be allowed in the United States. Slavery is when people are held against their will and forced to work without being paid. Enslaved people were not allowed to vote and were not considered citizens. At the start of the Civil War, each state determined for itself whether slavery was legal. There were 15 states that allowed slavery (called “slave states”) and 19 states that didn’t allow it (called “free states”). The slave states and the free states disagreed as to whether slavery should be allowed in what was known at that time as the western territories and in new states joining the Union.

When Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1861, a group of states in the south seceded (broke away) from the United States, trying to create their own country called the Confederate States of America (or the Confederacy). They thought Abraham Lincoln was going to abolish (or end) slavery in the United States. The Confederacy’s constitution protected slavery. The United States, sometimes called the Union, fought the war to keep the whole country together. The Civil War lasted for four years, from 1861 to 1865, before the United States finally won. Over 700,000 people were killed or wounded. Washington, D.C., was on the frontlines of the war, with the Confederacy just across the Potomac River in Virginia.

One Destiny Plot Summary:

One Destiny tells us the story of President Abraham Lincoln’s assassination from the perspective of people who were at Ford’s Theatre that day. The story is told by two men: Harry Hawk, who was an actor, and Harry Ford, who owned and ran the theatre. Throughout the play they discuss and act out their interactions with others at the theatre that day to consider if they could have done anything to stop the assassination of President Lincoln.

Two actors portray Hawk, Ford and many different characters as they tell the story. They add or remove costume pieces, change their voices, or change their posture each time they become a different character. This helps the audience understand which character they are pretending to be.

The play starts a few weeks after President Lincoln died. When we first meet Harry Hawk and Harry Ford, Ford’s Theatre is closed because it is being investigated as a crime scene. The police have allowed the actors and other people who worked at Ford’s Theatre to come back to the building to collect their things.

Harry Hawk is an actor who worked at Ford’s Theatre. He was the only actor on stage in the play *Our American Cousin* at the moment when President Lincoln was shot.

Harry Ford is the manager of Ford’s Theatre. The police arrested Harry Ford after the Lincoln assassination because they thought he might have had something to do with it. He was released from prison 39 days later. In the play, Harry Ford finds Harry Hawk on stage when he comes to the theatre. Ford is sad about President Lincoln’s death, he is frustrated that he himself was arrested, and he is afraid that his life and business are ruined.

Ford wonders if there was a way to stop the assassination from happening. Hawk suggests the only way for them to find out is to replay the day that it happened, moment by moment.

Hawk pretends to be a theatre employee named Tom Raybold. Ford instructs Mr. Raybold (Hawk in costume) to have one of the Ford’s Theatre boxes (expensive seats that are set apart from all the others) decorated for a special guest. That night, Ford says, President Lincoln and General Ulysses S. Grant will attend the performance of the play *Our American Cousin*. The play is a popular comedy. The Civil War has just ended, and everyone in Washington is ready to relax and enjoy themselves.



One Destiny Plot Summary (continued):

Ford pretends to be another theatre employee, Ned Spangler. Raybold asks Ned Spangler (Ford in costume), to prepare the Presidential box. Spangler does not like President Lincoln and wanted the Confederacy to win the war, but he does his job at the theatre and prepares the box anyway, with flags and furniture and even a portrait of George Washington.

Ford then pretends to be a man named John Matthews, another actor who works at Ford's Theatre. Hawk and Matthews (Ford in costume) practice for the performance. They imagine they see actor John Wilkes Booth enter the theatre through the lobby, looking out into the "house," where the audience sits. Booth has come to pick up his mail, a regular thing for someone who performed often at a particular theatre. They tease Booth for being at the theatre even though he is not in the performance that night. Hawk then pretends to be a man named Mr. Buckingham, who is the ticket taker at the theatre. Mr. Buckingham (Hawk in costume) lets Ford know that General Grant will not attend the theatre that night after all.

President Lincoln arrives at the theatre so late that the play starts without him. When Lincoln and his party arrive, the play stops and everyone in the theatre claps for the president. A little after 10:00 p.m., while the play continues, Matthews (Ford in costume) sees John Wilkes Booth walking through the audience near the Lincolns' box. As Hawk delivers the funniest line of the play, John Wilkes Booth enters the box and shoots president Lincoln.

Hawk and Ford describe how almost no one heard the shot, and that Booth jumped from the President's box onto the stage, yelled at the audience with a knife raised and then ran across the stage and out into the alley behind the theatre.

Hawk then pretends to be Dr. Charles Taft. Dr. Taft (Hawk in costume) describes the president's injury and how Lincoln was carried out of the theatre and across the street to the Petersen family's boarding house.

At the same time, Matthews (Ford in costume) describes the fear and chaos backstage. Matthews remembers that earlier in the day, Booth gave him a letter to hold. Matthews finds the letter in his pocket and reads it aloud. In the letter, Booth talks about his plan to assassinate President Lincoln. Matthews (Ford in costume) is scared that people might think he helped Booth on purpose because he has Booth's letter. Matthews throws the letter away. Dr. Taft (Hawk in costume) reports that President Lincoln died on April 15, 1865, at 7:22 a.m.

Hawk and Ford stop pretending to be other people. They talk to each other and realize there was nothing they could have done to stop assassin John Wilkes Booth from killing President Lincoln. But they agree that John Wilkes Booth failed in his plans because Lincoln lives on forever in our memory.