Over drinks with his fellow actors in the saloon next to the McVicker Theater in Chicago one afternoon in 1862, John Wilkes Booth announced that a "glorious opportunity" for immortality awaited a man with the courage to kill President Abraham Lincoln. No one paid much attention.

The stunningly handsome son of Junius Brutus Booth and the brother of Edwin Booth, two legends of the stage, John had a mind "haunted by strange ideas," a friend recalled. But he "had a way about him which could not be resisted, the way which permits a man to overstep the boundaries ... and do things for which other people would be punished."

On April 14, 1865, Booth surprised everyone by assassinating Lincoln at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. He did it, freelance writer Nora Titone demonstrates, not only to satiate his secessionist sympathies but to establish his primacy in his family's team of rivals. Although Titone relies a bit too heavily on self-serving memoirs, "My Thoughts Be Bloody" is a splendid narrative, by turns amusing, surprising, and suspenseful, which illuminates the theatrical world of the 19th century and provides the context for the most memorable murder in American history.

Although he was not a talented actor, Booth remained convinced that he had inherited his father's divine spark. He never forgave Edwin for being chosen, at age 12, to go on tour with Junius Brutus Booth, to make sure that the alcoholic genius showed up - and sent his salary home. John seethed five years later when the torch was passed to his brother.

Too ill to perform as Richard III, Junius Brutus ordered Edwin to take his place. Stunned when the young man appeared on stage, the audience signaled its approval when the curtain fell. By the 1850s, Edwin was earning about a half million dollars a year in 2010 dollars.

The last straw, Titone suggests, was Edwin's decision to split the map of the United States in two, consigning John to practice his profession south of the Mason-Dixon Line, where box-office receipts were meager, and retaining for himself the lucrative venues of the Northeast.

When the Civil War began, John defied the edict: While Edwin was on tour in London, he made his debut on Broadway, taking on his father's favorite role in "Richard III" and Edwin's signature characters, Shylock in "The Merchant of Venice" and "Hamlet."

Edwin and John, Titone reveals, began arguing about politics. In one long and violent exchange, John "wished for the success of the Rebellion," opined that Lincoln was using "robbery, rapine, slaughter and bought armies" to crush slavery, and predicted that the president was conspiring to make himself king. John should "go elsewhere to make his sentiments known," Edwin retorted; "he was not at liberty to express them in the house of a Union man." He would have been even angrier had he known that his brother was meeting with high-ranking Confederate spies to hatch a plot to abduct - and assassinate - the president.

Julia Ward Howe, author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," thought the crime would ruin the Booth family. It didn't. After a brief hiatus, Titone indicates, Edwin Booth returned to the stage, finding audiences hungry for the thrill of witnessing his virtuosity - and experiencing "the connection he gave to the martyred Lincoln." In an irony of ironies, popular interest in John Wilkes Booth continued to grow, along with a myth of his great acting ability. As Edwin's accomplishments faded, Titone concludes, he stood "alone on the stage of national memory, as he no doubt would have wished."

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MY THOUGHTS BE BLOODY
The Bitter Rivalry Between Edwin and John Wilkes Booth That Led To An American Tragedy
By Nora Titone
Free Press, $30

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