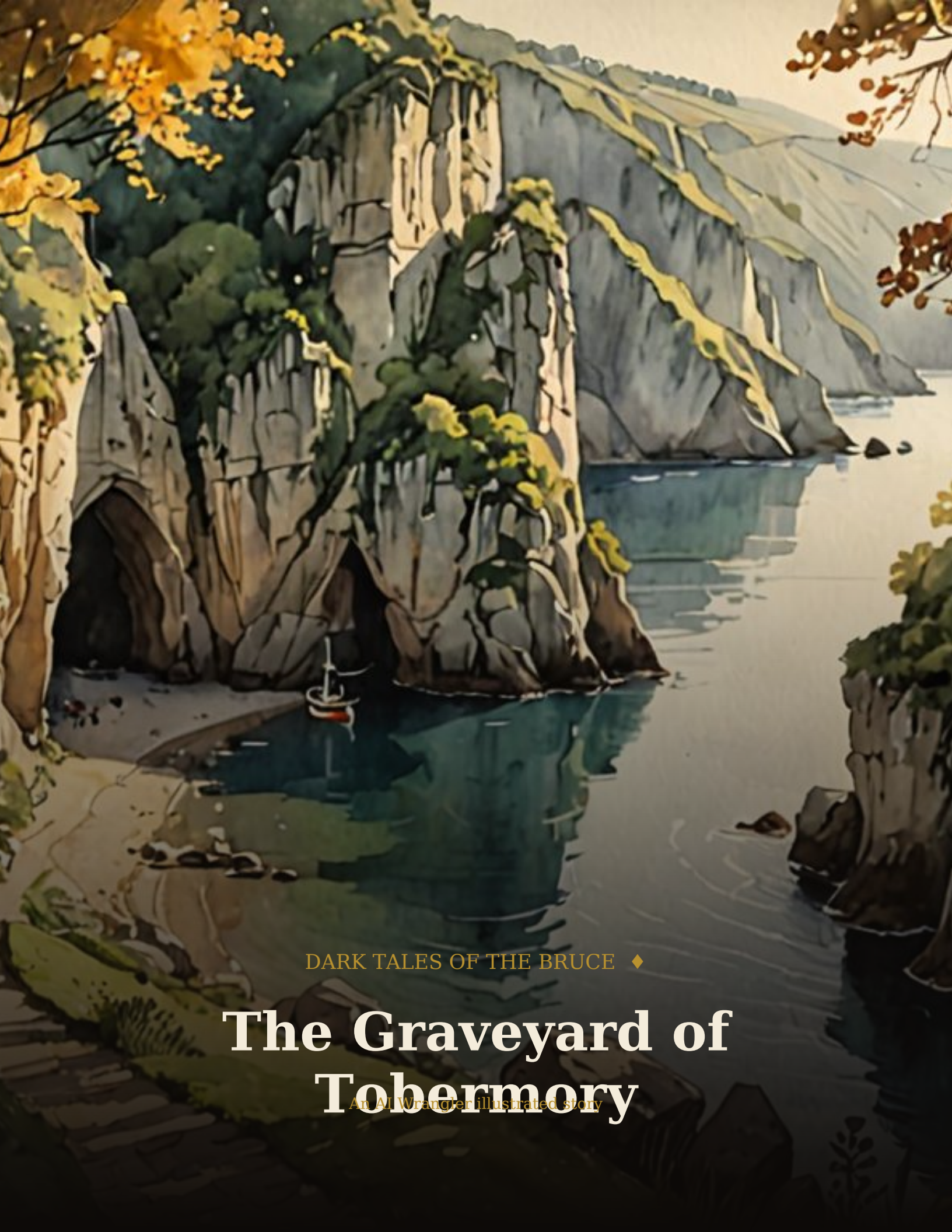




DARK TALES OF THE BRUCE ♦

The Graveyard of Tobermory

An Al Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this one comes to us from the very tip of the Bruce Peninsula, from a little harbour town at the end of the road called Tobermory. It is a place where the deep cold water of Lake Huron meets the green water of Georgian Bay, and where, if you lean over the side of a boat on a still day, you can look straight down through water so clear it stops your heart, and see the dead ships waiting. There are more than twenty of them down there, Carol. Whole ships, resting on the bottom, and this is the story of how they came to rest in the graveyard of the Great Lakes.



CAROL

Twenty ships, Marty. And you can see them through the water. I have heard sailors call Tobermory a beautiful place, but you make it sound like a drowned graveyard with the lid left off. Why there? Why did so many ships die at that one little town?



MARTY

Because of where God set the land, Carol. Picture the Bruce Peninsula as a long stone finger reaching north into the lake, and at its very tip the finger breaks apart into islands and shoals and hidden reefs. Cove Island lies out there, and Flowerpot Island, and between them and the mainland runs the only passage a ship can take from Lake Huron into Georgian Bay. It is a narrow gate, Carol, and it is lined with teeth. Ledges of limestone rock reach up from the deep, some of them just under the surface where no man can see them, waiting in the dark green water. In the great age of sail and steam, every schooner and every steamer hauling grain and lumber and iron had to thread that needle.



CAROL

A narrow gate lined with teeth. Oh, Marty, I can feel how tight that passage must have been. But surely a good captain in daylight, in fair weather, could pick his way through. What turned it deadly?



MARTY

The weather, Carol. Lake Huron is one of the great inland seas of the world, and she can turn on a ship in the space of an afternoon. A morning could dawn calm and blue, the water like glass, and by dusk a gale would come howling down out of the northwest with no warning at all, driving the seas into grey mountains. And a sailing ship caught out on that open water had nowhere to run but down toward the Bruce, toward those very islands, toward those very rocks. The wind that should have carried her to safety would instead pin her against the shoals off Cove Island and pound her to pieces on the limestone. That is how the graveyard filled, Carol, one storm at a time, one ship at a time, until the bottom of those harbours was paved with wrecks.



CAROL

One storm at a time. Marty, that is a terrible slow way to fill a graveyard. And these ships, they are still down there, all these years later? The cold must keep them.



MARTY

The cold keeps them like a museum, Carol. Lake Huron water at the tip of the Bruce is bitter cold the year round, cold enough that the worms and the rot that would eat a wreck in warmer seas cannot live. So the ships do not fall apart. They sit down there whole, timbers and ribs and planking, exactly as they sank, in water so clear the sunlight reaches all the way down. And in time men came to understand what a wonder it was, and in nineteen seventy-two the government made all of it Canada's very first national marine park. They call it Fathom Five, Carol, and it exists to guard a fleet of the dead.



CAROL

Fathom Five. A park made to guard drowned ships. Marty, of all those wrecks, is there one you would take me down to see? One that tells the story best?



MARTY

There is one, Carol, and every soul who visits Tobermory comes to look at her. Her name was the Sweepstakes. She was a two-masted cargo schooner, built in the year eighteen sixty-seven, a hard-working ship that hauled coal and grain and stone up and down these lakes for near twenty years. And in the late summer of eighteen eighty-five, the Sweepstakes was out near Cove Island when she was badly holed, torn open below the waterline on those same treacherous rocks. She was taking on water fast, Carol, and she should have died right there in the deep.



CAROL

But she didn't die there. Marty, you said her name like she got a little further than the others. What happened to the Sweepstakes after the rocks tore her open?

MARTY

They fought for her, Carol. A tug got a line to the wounded schooner and towed her, low and heavy and half-drowned, all the way into the shelter of a little cove at Tobermory called Big Tub Harbour. It is a narrow, quiet finger of water, calm as a pond, and they meant to save her there, to pump her out and patch her hull. But the Sweepstakes was hurt past saving, Carol. The water won. And so she settled down gently to the bottom of Big Tub Harbour in the shallow clear water, and there she has stayed for near a hundred and forty years. Her whole hull is still down there, ribs and deck and bow, resting in perhaps twenty feet of water so clear you can drift over her in a boat and see every timber, green and ghostly in the light below, a whole ship you could almost reach down and touch.

CAROL

A whole ship you can look right down into. Oh, Marty, that gives me the strangest feeling, a ship just resting there under the glass of the water, waiting. And is she alone down in that little harbour, or does she have company?

MARTY

She has a neighbour, Carol, and a stranger one still. Just a little way off in the same harbour lie the bones of a steamer called the City of Grand Rapids. She did not die on the rocks like the Sweepstakes. She died by fire. In the autumn of nineteen hundred and seven, that steamer caught alight right there at Tobermory, and there was no saving a wooden ship once the flames took her. She burned down to the waterline, blazing in the night with the black water all around reflecting the fire, and what was left of her hissed and sank close by the drowned schooner. So now they rest together, Carol, the one the storm killed and the one the fire killed, side by side in the cold clear dark.

CAROL

The one the storm killed and the one the fire killed, lying together. Marty, that is the loneliest picture. And out beyond that little harbour, all the rest of them, the whole fleet. What is it like down there, do you think, in that green light?

MARTY

It is another world, Carol, a drowned one. Down there in the shafts of green sunlight lie masts still reaching up toward the surface, and hulls settled in the sand, and hatches open onto holds that still hold their lost cargoes. Anchors and chains and the great wooden wheels ships were steered by. And somewhere in the cold dark of that graveyard lie the sailors themselves, the ones who never came up, their bones scattered among the timbers of the ships they died on. The water is so clear and so still that it is like looking down through a window into the country of the dead, where the ships wait, exactly as they were, for a voyage that will never come. So if you ever stand on the dock at Tobermory on a quiet evening, Carol, and you look down and see something pale and long resting in the green below, tip your hat to it. Because you are looking at a ghost that never learned it drowned. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking of that clear cold water at the end of the Bruce, and all those beautiful lost ships resting in the green light with their sailors, waiting so patient for a wind that will never blow them home. Be gentle on the deep water, keep a weather eye on the northwest sky, and always, always come back to the fire.