



DARK TALES OF THE BRUCE ♦

The Great Storm of 1913

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Pull your chair in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this tale comes to us off the cold grey water of Lake Huron, off the long shore of the Bruce Peninsula where the waves come marching in out of the north. This is the story of the Great Lakes Storm of nineteen thirteen, the one the old sailors called the White Hurricane, the deadliest storm this country's inland seas have ever known. It fell hardest right here on Huron, Carol, on the shipping lanes off Goderich and Kincardine and Tobermory, and in one terrible weekend that November it took a whole fleet of great ships and better than two hundred and fifty men down into the dark.

CAROL

The White Hurricane. Marty, I have felt the wind come off Huron on a bad autumn day and it is a fearsome thing even from the beach. But a storm that could sink a fleet, that I can scarcely imagine. When did it come, and where did it come from?



MARTY

It came in the first week of November, Carol, nineteen thirteen, and it was born of two great weather systems colliding right over the Great Lakes. One roared down cold and dry out of the northwest, the other came up warm and wet off the lower lakes, and where they met they bred a monster. The storm raged for four full days, from the seventh of November clear through the tenth, but the worst of it, the killing night, fell on Sunday the ninth on Lake Huron. And by then it was no ordinary gale. The weathermen barely had a warning out before it was on them, and the ships were already out on the water with nowhere to go.

CAROL

November on the lakes. Marty, I always think of the water as calming down by then, the summer boats put away. Why were these great ships still out so late in the season?



MARTY

Because that was the busy time, Carol, the very end of the shipping year. These were the long steel freighters, the ore boats and the grain carriers, some of them five and six hundred feet of iron, hurrying to make their last runs before the ice closed the lakes for winter. Coal down, grain and iron ore up, the captains pushing hard to squeeze in one more cargo. They were the biggest, strongest vessels that had ever sailed those waters, and their masters had crossed Huron a hundred times. When the barometer began to fall that Sunday, most of them figured it for another autumn blow, the kind they had ridden out before. Not one of them had ever seen anything like what was coming.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. That is the part that catches at me, that they thought they knew the lake. Tell me what it turned into out there.



MARTY

It turned into something out of a nightmare, Carol. On Lake Huron that Sunday night the wind came screaming down out of the north at near ninety miles an hour, hurricane force, hour after hour without a lull. And on the open lake it built the seas up into grey mountains, waves better than thirty five feet high, coming three and four close together the way they never do at sea, so a ship had no time to rise between them. And through all of it, blinding snow, a full blizzard howling sideways so a man on deck could not see the bow of his own ship. The temperature crashed, and the spray froze where it struck. Every rope, every rail, every deckhouse was sheathed in inches of ice, until the boats grew top-heavy and slow, staggering under the weight of it.

CAROL

Sheathed in ice, in the middle of the storm. Marty, I hadn't thought of the cold on top of the wind and the water. Those poor men out on those decks. What could a captain even do, caught in the open like that?



MARTY

There was precious little he could do, Carol, and that is the terror of it. On the ocean a ship can run before a storm, put her stern to it and ride it out over open water for days if she must. But Huron is a lake, a narrow trough of water with a hard shore on every side, and a captain running before that north wind was being driven straight down onto the rocks of the Ontario shore. Turn to face the seas and they'd bury your bow. Turn broadside and they'd roll you over. So the masters fought the wheel through the black and the snow, half blind, the ice building, the great waves smashing the length of the deck, and they held on and they prayed. And one after another, out there in the dark where no one could see, the great ships lost the fight.

CAROL

One after another. Marty, my heart. How many were lost out there that night?



MARTY

On Lake Huron alone, Carol, in that single terrible night, some eight great ships went down with every soul aboard. Not a survivor from any of them to say how she died. The Charles S. Price, a brand new giant of a freighter. The Regina. The Wexford, an old salt-water ship that had crossed the Atlantic and met her end here on fresh water. The James Carruthers, the largest ship on the Canadian lakes, launched only that same year, gone on her maiden season. Whole crews, Carol, twenty and twenty five men to a ship, fathers and sons and young deckhands on their first voyage, all of them taken together in the space of a few hours. Across all the lakes that storm killed better than two hundred and fifty sailors and sank a dozen ships outright, and drove a dozen more onto the rocks.

CAROL

Better than two hundred and fifty. Oh, Marty. And their families ashore, waiting. When did the towns along the Bruce know what had happened?



MARTY

They knew when the lake gave up its dead, Carol. For days after the wind died, the storm handed its sorrows back onto the Ontario shore. Along the beaches by Goderich and Kincardine and up the Huron coast, the people came down to the water's edge and found it strewn with wreckage, splintered planking and hatch covers and cabin doors, life-rings with the names of the lost ships painted on them, and the sailors themselves, come home at last, frozen in their lifejackets in the sand. Some were carried up to the town halls and laid in rows, and folk walked between them trying to put names to faces, and grieving for the ones they could not name. Every harbour town on that shore had its funerals that November.

CAROL

Come home at last. Marty, you tell it so gently and still it breaks my heart. Is there truly no stranger part than that? You said at the start there was a mystery.



MARTY

There was the strangest thing of all, Carol, and it kept the whole country holding its breath. In the days after the storm, sailors passing over the middle of Lake Huron came upon a great ship floating out there, a huge steel freighter riding the swells, upside down. She had capsized and turned turtle whole, her hull rolled to the sky and her decks and her crew hidden beneath the water, and she drifted there like that, floating bottom-up, for days. No one could say what ship she was, or how many men were sealed inside her. The papers called her the mystery ship, and boats came out to circle her, and still no one knew her name. It was not until a diver went down at last, down under that overturned hull into the cold green dark, and felt his way along the steel, that he found the letters and read her name. She was the Charles S. Price, and the mystery of the lake was a mystery no longer, only a grief.

CAROL

A diver in the dark, reading a name with his hands. Marty, I don't think I'll forget that as long as I live. So many ships, so many men, all in a single night.



MARTY

All in a single night, Carol. The White Hurricane of nineteen thirteen still stands as the worst disaster in the history of the Great Lakes, and the Bruce and the Huron shore have never quite forgotten it. If you walk those beaches on a cold November day, when the wind swings around into the north and the grey water starts to march in off the lake, the old folks there will tell you to think of the men still out under it, the fleet that never came home. So the next time you stand on the shore of Huron and feel that north wind on your face, friends, say a quiet word for the sailors of the great storm. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking of all those men on the cold water, and the shore towns that waited for them, and the ones who never stopped watching the lake. Hold the ones you love a little closer when the north wind blows, remember the sailors who gave everything to the storm, and always, always come back to the fire.

