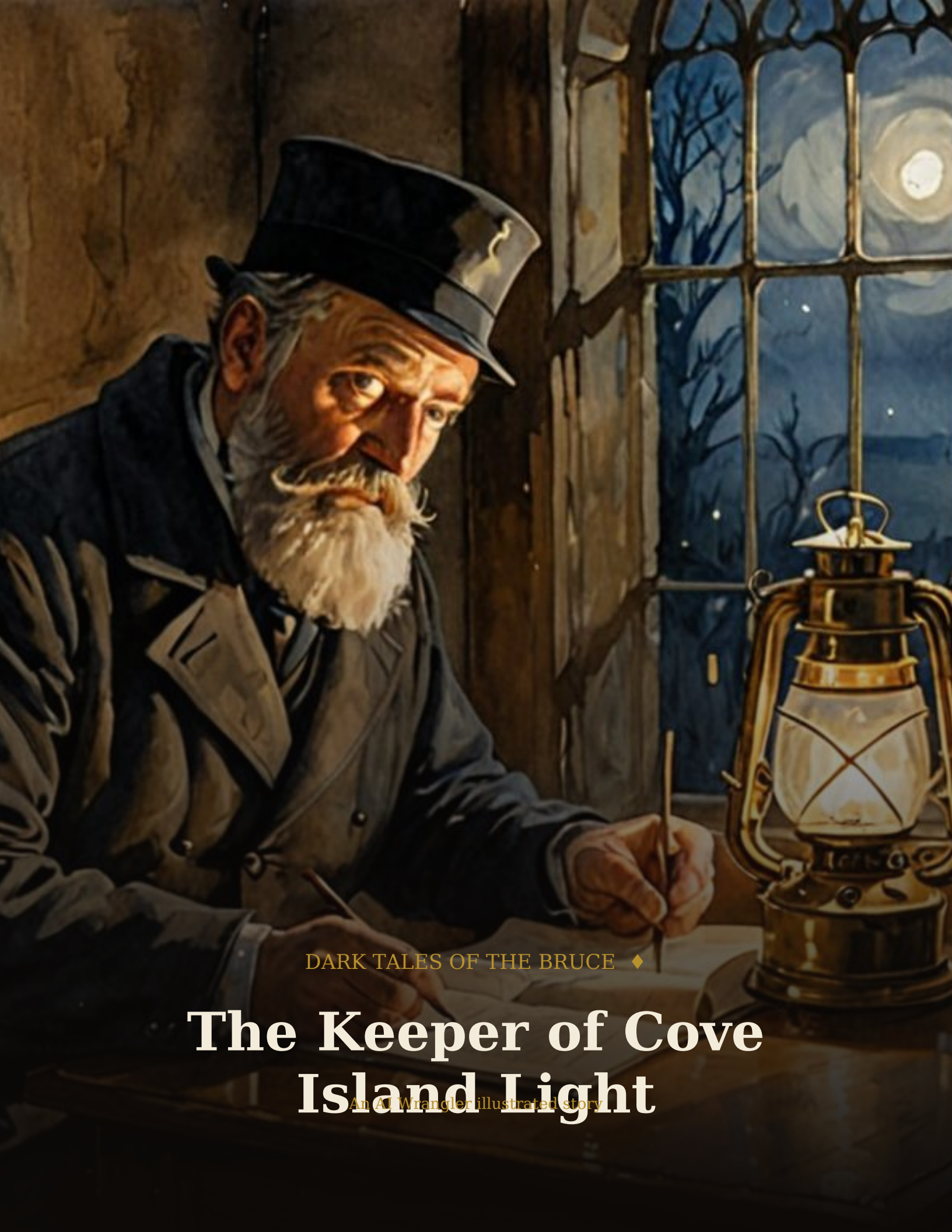




DARK TALES OF THE BRUCE ♦

The Keeper of Cove Island Light

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

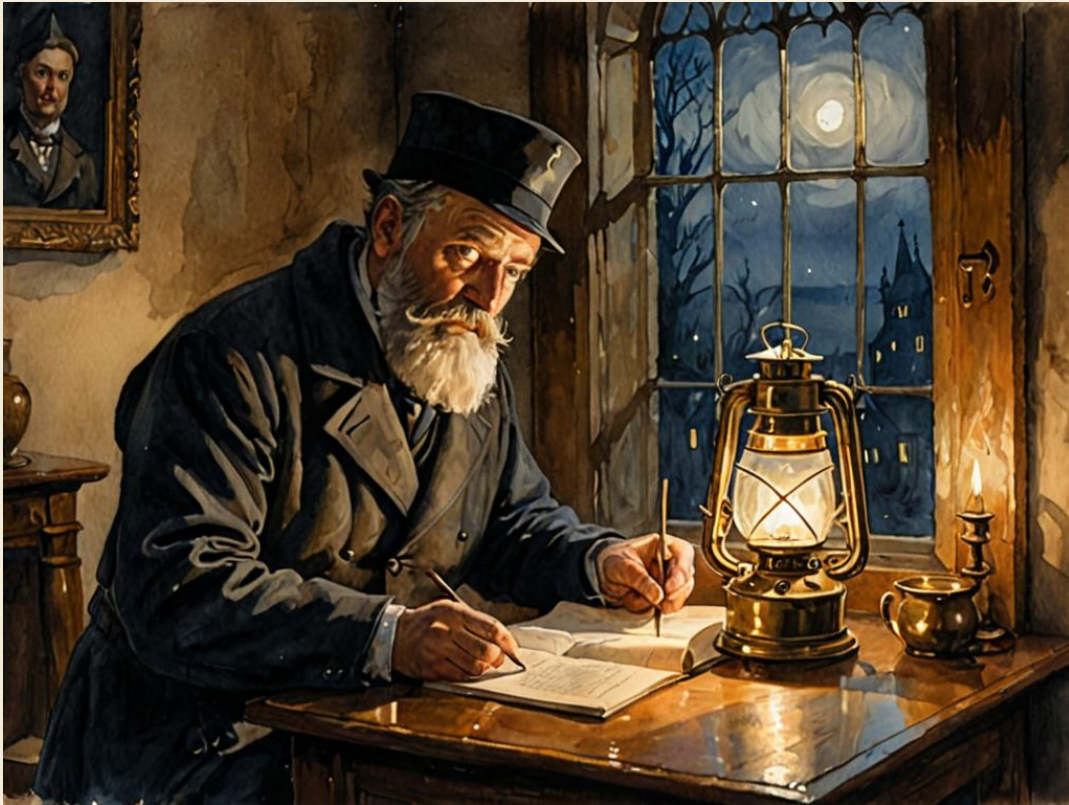
MARTY

Pull your chair in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this tale comes off the very tip of the Bruce Peninsula, out past Tobermory where Lake Huron and Georgian Bay come together in one wild, cold body of water. There is a bare rock island out there called Cove Island, and on it stands a tall stone lighthouse, first lit in the year 1858, and it has been guarding the deadliest passage on all the Great Lakes ever since. This is the story of a keeper who tended that light, Carol, and who, some say, tends it still. It begins with a storm, and it ends with a lantern that no living hand carries.



CAROL

Oh, Cove Island. Marty, I have looked at that lighthouse across the water on a calm summer day and thought it the loneliest thing I ever saw, standing out there on the bare stone with nothing around it but the lake. Tell me, why is that passage so deadly? Why did they need a light out there at all?



MARTY

Because that is the doorway, Carol, the narrow gate where every ship bound between Lake Huron and Georgian Bay has to thread the needle. And the bottom out there is cruel, all reefs and shoals and shelving rock hiding just under the surface, waiting. When the wind comes up out of the northwest and drives the water into a fury, that passage turns into a graveyard. Ships have died out there by the dozen, Carol, timber schooners and steamers, their crews with them, ground to pieces on rock they never saw coming in the dark. So in 1858 they raised that great imperial tower, a hundred feet of cut limestone, and they set a keeper on that lonely island to keep a light burning in the top of it, so that the sailors would know where the rocks were, and steer clear, and live.



CAROL

A hundred feet of stone raised up in 1858, out on a rock in the middle of that water. Marty, I cannot even imagine the men who built it. And the keeper, the one who lived there to tend it, what was his life like out on that island all alone?



MARTY

Hard, Carol. Hard beyond anything most of us will ever know. The keeper I want to tell you about, we will call him Thomas Vail, though the island keeps its own names close. Thomas came out in the spring when the ice broke up, and he did not leave again until the shipping season closed in the late fall, when the lake froze and the last ship was safe in harbour. All those months he lived on that bare rock with his wife and his young son, cut off from the whole world, the nearest help hours away by open boat across water that could turn on you in a heartbeat. Every single night of the season, Carol, dusk to dawn, that light had to burn. Thomas would climb the winding stone stairs to the lantern room at the top, and he would trim the wicks and pour the oil and polish the great glass lenses until they threw a beam twenty miles out to sea. That light was his whole life. He used to tell his boy that every sailor on the lake was a soul in his keeping, and that a keeper who let his light go dark had blood on his hands.



CAROL

A soul in his keeping. Oh, Marty, that is a heavy thing to carry alone on a rock in the dark. And I can hear in your voice that a night came when the lake tested him. Tell me about that night.



MARTY

It came in the last week of November, Carol, the meanest week of the whole season, when the great storms come howling down the lake. It had been blowing hard all day, and by nightfall it was a full gale, the worst Thomas had seen. The waves were breaking clear over the lower rocks of the island, the wind screaming around the tower so the whole hundred feet of stone seemed to tremble, and the spray freezing to ice on the glass as fast as he could keep it clear. And out in the black of it, Carol, past the reef, Thomas saw a light that should not have been there. A ship. A timber schooner, blown off her course, and she was being driven straight down onto the shoals.



CAROL

Straight down onto the shoals in that gale. Oh, Marty, and Thomas alone in his tower watching it happen. What could one man on a rock even do against a storm like that?



MARTY

That is the terrible heart of it, Carol. He could keep his light burning, and pray they saw it in time to claw off. He stayed at that lamp and he fed it and trimmed it and kept that beam swinging out into the dark, calling to them, telling them where the death was. But the wind had them, and the current had them, and there was no clawing off. Thomas heard it even over the gale, Carol, the awful grinding crash as she struck the reef and her back broke, and he heard, thin and far off across the water, the voices of men in the sea. And Thomas Vail was not a man who could stand in a warm tower and listen to men drown. He went down those stairs, and he ran out into that storm, and he dragged his little rowboat down the icy rock into the surf.



CAROL

He rowed out into that. Marty, in the dark, in a gale, one man in a little boat, out to a ship breaking up on the rocks. My heart is in my throat. Did he reach them? Did he save even one?

MARTY

He saved three, Carol. Three men. He found them clinging to the wreckage in the black water, and one by one he hauled them over the gunwale, near frozen, half drowned, and he pulled for the island against waves that stood up like walls. Three times he went back out into it, and three times he came in with men in the bottom of his boat. But on the fourth time, Carol, when he went out for the last of them, the storm had built past all bearing, and a great sea came out of the dark and turned the little boat over, and took Thomas Vail down into the cold with the sailor he was reaching for. They never found him. The lake kept him. And here is the thing that the island has never let go of, Carol. Up in the tower all that while, alone, his wife had climbed the stairs, and through that whole black night, with her husband drowning below her, she kept the great light burning. She never let it go dark. Not for one minute.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. She kept the light because he would have kept the light. Even as she lost him. I don't think I have ever heard anything so sorrowful and so brave in the same breath. And so he was gone. But this is a ghost story, Marty. What did the island keep?

MARTY

It kept him faithful, Carol. That is the legend they tell up on the Bruce to this day. They say that Thomas Vail never truly left Cove Island, that a keeper who gave his life for the light does not just stop keeping it. On wild nights, Carol, when the northwest gale comes down and the passage turns to that same fury, folk out on the water swear they have seen the lamp up in that tower glowing warm and bright when they know for a fact there is no keeper living on the island at all. They have seen a lantern, a single small light, moving slow along the black shore, down by the rocks where he launched his boat, as if a man were walking out once more to see who needs saving. And on the calmest, saddest nights, they say you can see him up on the gallery that runs around the top of the tower, a lone figure at the rail, looking out over the water, keeping his watch over the souls he could not bring home. He tends his light still, Carol, faithful past death, sorry past death, for the ones the lake took from his hands. So if you are ever out past Tobermory on a wild night, and you see the Cove Island light glowing when the papers say that tower stands empty, do not be afraid. It is only old Thomas, still at his post, still keeping you off the rocks. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I will be thinking of that lonely light out on the black water, and the keeper who loved his sailors so much he could not stop watching over them even after the lake had taken him. Say a kind word for the ones who stand watch in the dark so the rest of us come home safe, hold the people you love a little closer against the cold, and always, always come back to the fire.