



DARK TALES OF QUEBEC ♦

La Chasse-galerie

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this one comes to us out of the deep Quebec winter, from the great pine forests where the voyageurs and the lumberjacks worked the cutting camps far up the Gatineau and the Ottawa rivers. This is the tale of La Chasse-galerie, the flying canoe, and it is a tale of lonely men, and a bargain with the Devil himself, on the coldest night of the year. It was New Year's Eve, Carol, and that is where all the danger begins.

CAROL

Oh, the flying canoe. Marty, I have heard the name whispered but never the whole of it. New Year's Eve, and men alone in the deep woods. Tell me, why is that night the dangerous one?



MARTY

Because New Year's Eve, Carol, was the one night in all the world a man wanted to be home. Picture it. These lumberjacks are a hundred leagues from anywhere, snowed into a timber camp deep in the bush, no road out, the nearest village days away by snowshoe. And back home in the settlements along the river, their sweethearts and their mothers are dancing the *réveillon*, the great midnight feast, warm houses and fiddles and rum. And here sit the men, in a smoky log shanty, with the wolves howling and the snow to the eaves, aching for the girls they left behind. On this particular night, Carol, the rum had gone round, and one old voyageur got a terrible gleam in his eye.

CAROL

A terrible gleam. Marty, I can see the firelight in that shanty and I already don't trust that old man. What did he propose to them?



MARTY

He gathered the youngest and boldest of them close, Carol, and he spoke low. He said, boys, do you want to go and kiss your sweethearts at midnight, three hundred miles away, and be back before the priest says his first Mass? There is a way. But it is a fearful way. We take the birchbark canoe, and we run *la chasse-galerie*. We make the pact. We give ourselves to the Devil for one night,

and he will carry the canoe through the sky like a bird, faster than any wind, and set us down in the village square. But there are conditions, Carol. There are rules. And if a single man breaks one, the Devil takes every soul in the boat.

CAROL

Every soul in the boat. Oh, Marty, my heart. What did they have to promise? Tell me the rules, so I know exactly what there was to break.



MARTY

Three things, Carol, and mark them, because everything turns on them. First, no man in the canoe may speak the name of God, not once, not in prayer, not in curse, not even by accident. Second, as they fly, the canoe must never touch the cross of a church steeple, and Quebec, Carol, is a land absolutely thick with steeples, a cross on every hill. And third, they must be home and set down before the stroke of six, before dawn, before the first bell of morning. Break any one, and the Devil claims you, body and soul, and drags you down to burn. So they crossed themselves, God forgive them, and they knelt in the canoe, and the leader called out the dreadful words: Acabris, Acabras, Acabram, carry us over the mountains!

CAROL

Acabris, Acabras, Acabram. Marty, it gives me a chill just to hear you say it. And then, did it truly rise? Did that little bark canoe leave the snow?



MARTY

Up it went, Carol, like a leaf on a gale. One heave, and the canoe tore off the ground and shot into the black sky, and the paddlers dug at the empty air as if it were water, and the air obeyed. And oh, what a sight below them. The whole frozen world laid out silver in the moonlight, the pine forest rolling away white under the stars, the great river a ribbon of ice, and the little villages passing beneath them, each one with its church, and every steeple with its cross reaching up as if to snatch them out of the sky. The cold air screamed past their ears, and the Devil's own laughter, Carol, was in the wind. They flew a hundred miles in the time it takes to say a rosary.

CAROL

The steeples reaching up to snatch them. Marty, I don't know how they steered past every one of those crosses in the dark. And the men themselves, were they sober enough for such a thing? I'm frightened for them already.



MARTY

You are right to be frightened, Carol, because that was the whole of the peril. They reached the village, and they swooped down into the square, and they hid the canoe in a snowbank, and they danced. Oh, they danced till two in the morning, kissed their girls, drank the réveillon rum, and never told a soul how they came. But the man steering in the stern, Carol, the pilot, the one man who most needed a clear head, he drank the deepest of all. And when they piled back into the canoe in the dead of night and cried Acabris, Acabras, Acabram, and rose again into the freezing sky for the long flight home, that pilot was reeling drunk, swinging the bow wild across the stars.

CAROL

Oh no. Oh, Marty. A drunk man at the helm with all their souls in his hands, and a cross on every hill. I can hardly look. What happened to them up there?



MARTY

He steered like a madman, Carol. The canoe pitched and yawed through the night, missing the steeples by a hand's breadth, the men screaming at him under their breath, not daring to shout the holy words that would damn them all. And then a great church rose up in the dark straight ahead, its cross dead in their path, and the pilot hauled the canoe over so hard that it nearly stood on end, and in his terror one of the young men opened his mouth and very nearly cried out the name of God. The others threw themselves on him, Carol, clapped their hands over his mouth, wrestled him down into the bottom of the boat, gagged him with a scarf, all of them tumbling through the sky at a hundred miles an hour with the Devil waiting for one wrong word.

CAROL

They gagged their own friend to save him. Marty, my heart is pounding. Did they make it? Did they clear the cross and get home before that terrible bell of six?



MARTY

They cleared it, Carol, by a whisker, the cross passing so close beneath the hull they felt the chill of it. And with the drunken pilot bound and another good man's hands on the steering, they drove that canoe down through the last of the dark and came crashing into a snowbank behind the timber camp, tumbling out into the drifts just as the first grey of dawn touched the pines. They had done it. They were home, and their souls were still their own, by the width of a scarf and the grace they had no right to ask for. They crawled into the shanty and fell into their bunks, and in the morning they told each other it had all been the rum and a dream. But their moccasins, Carol, were still wet with the snow of a village three hundred miles away.

CAROL

Their moccasins still wet. Oh, Marty, that is the detail that undoes me, that little wet proof lying by the fire. So they lived, but they knew. They always knew what they had done.



MARTY

They always knew, Carol. And that is the heart of it, why Quebec has told this story around a thousand winter fires. It is a tale of terrible longing, of men so lonely for love and home that they would gamble their very souls to hold a sweetheart at midnight. It is the old faith, too, the church and the Devil so close in that world you could touch either one from a canoe. Some tellers say those men ran the chasse-galerie again, and pushed their luck once too often, and that on a wild winter night you can still hear them up there, paddling across the stars, the Devil's canoe that never quite made it home. So if you are ever deep in the Quebec woods on New Year's Eve, and you hear paddles in the empty sky, Carol, do not, whatever you do, call out to God. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be listening at the window for paddles in the dark and hoping those lonely, foolish, lovesick men made it home every single time. Keep the ones you love close on the cold nights, don't go making bargains you can't unmake, and always, always come back to the fire.

