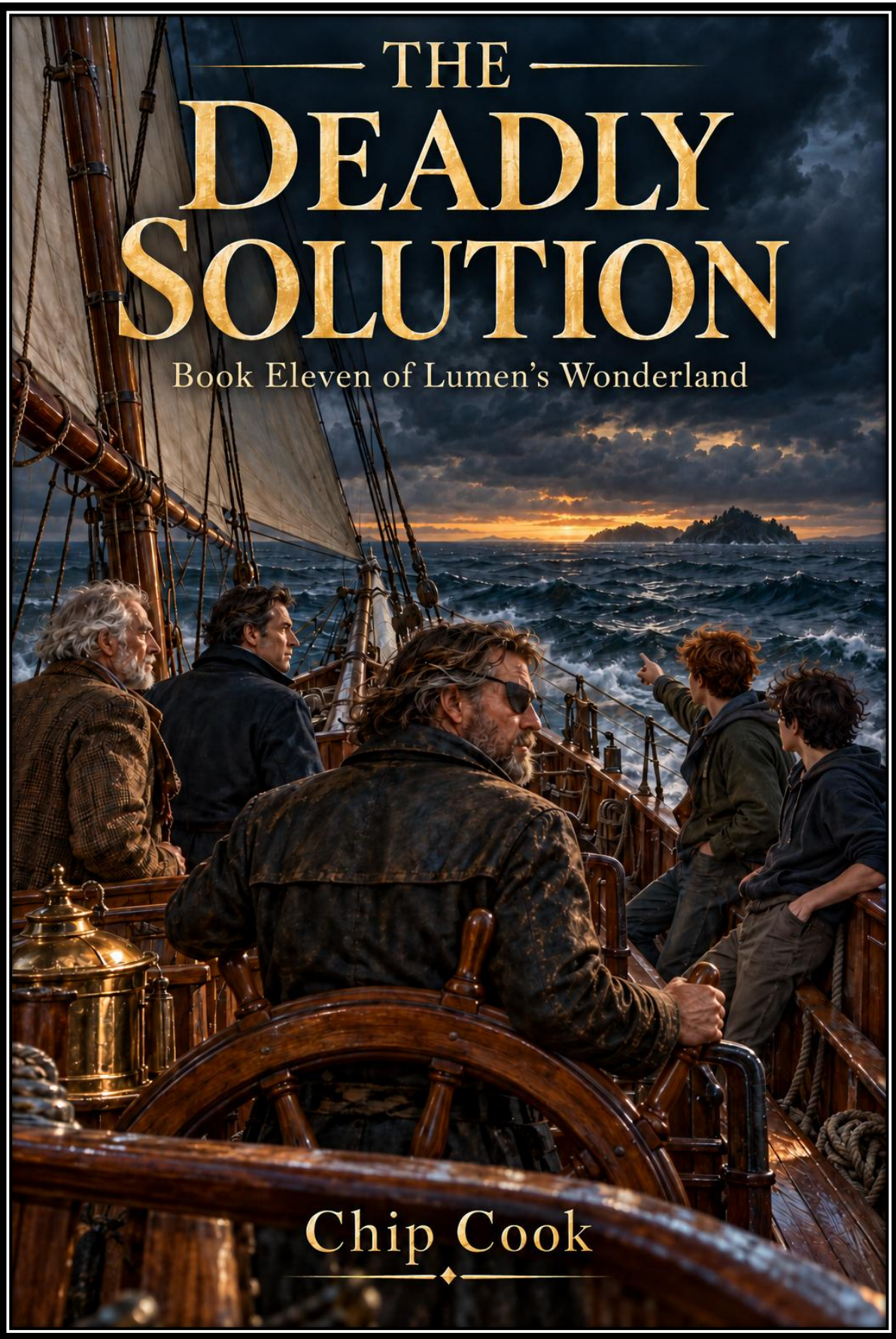




# THE DEADLY SOLUTION

Book Eleven of Lumen's Wonderland

Chip Cook

# The Deadly Solution

A family sea adventure with mystery and a touch of Wonderland

Chip Cook

Created with Lumen

A work of fiction. The laboratory, organizations, criminal events, and their connection to Oak Island are invented for this story.

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## The Chartered Cure

The Professor had rented eighty feet of schooner because six feet of dining table had proved insufficient.

At the table, his son could refuse to speak, refuse to listen, and refuse to carry his plate to the sink. Aboard a vessel, the Professor reasoned, refusal would have consequences that even sixteen could understand.

Lumen read the charter agreement over his shoulder.

“Does Jax know this is a floating improvement scheme?”

“It is an expedition to Oak Island.”

“That wasn't my question.”

Across Rockport harbor, the schooner lay black-hulled and handsome beneath two tall masts. Her name curved across the stern in gold:

THE DEADLY SOLUTION.

“An unfortunate name,” said the Professor.

“Perhaps they were out of Gentle Encouragement.”

Jax arrived wearing headphones. Beside him walked another sixteen-year-old, dark-haired and apparently composed. His father, Martin

Reed, had brought matching waterproof bags and an expression suggesting that the weather had already disappointed him.

“This is Theo,” Martin said. “He knows how to behave when he chooses.”

Theo smiled without showing any pleasure.

Jax dropped his bag by the gangplank. A weathered sailor with an eye patch looked at it.

“Yours?”

“Obviously.”

“Good. Then we've settled who carries it.”

The Professor almost applauded. Lumen touched his sleeve.

“Don't enjoy that too openly.”

Dr. Adrian Ash, part owner and outward captain, welcomed them aboard. He had a narrow, scholarly face and hands that trembled slightly when he checked their documents. The unusually low charter fee had helped persuade the Professor to book.

“The authorities' clearance is in order,” he told the mate. “We sail on the tide.”

The mate, Jonas Vale, nodded. Beyond him, a young deckhand named Nell was securing the gangway. Mrs. Pike, who cooked and stood watches, counted the passengers twice.

“Two weeks,” Ash told the fathers. “A voyage can change a young man's life.”

Ash tapped the return date on the agreement: September 14. “The vessel goes into a sale survey immediately afterward,” he said. “We must be back on time.” The Professor signed beside the date.

Jax glanced at Theo.

“Can we change it back if we don't like it?”

Theo laughed before he could stop himself. His father looked at him, and the laugh disappeared.

As Rockport fell behind, Lumen stood beside the Professor at the rail.

“Have you made a list of what he must learn?” she asked.

“Several.”

“Leave some paper for your own.”

## The Eye of the Observer



By the second morning, Jax had discovered that the boat was unfair. It expected him to be awake when he was tired, useful when he was bored, and considerate when he was neither. Wet clothing did not dry faster because he swore at it.

Jonas assigned both boys to Nell. They learned where to stand, which lines to leave alone, and why a life jacket was not a matter of opinion.

Theo listened politely. Jax asked why after almost every instruction.

“Because I said so,” Martin supplied from the companionway.

Nell shook her head.

“Because that rope moves under load. It's a sensible question.”

Jax looked briefly astonished.

Later, Martin praised Theo for accepting instructions. Jax called his father an idiot when the Professor reminded him about his jacket.

The Professor went very still.

“Try that sentence again,” Lumen said.

“I know where my jacket is.”

“Better. Now answer what he actually asked.”

Jax fetched it. Nobody declared a victory.

Their first shared interest arose after breakfast. Jonas stood at the wheel with the patch over his right eye.

“Wasn't that on the other side yesterday?” Jax asked.

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

Theo waited until they were alone before producing a notebook.

“It was on the left.”

“His left or ours?”

They looked at one another.

Their investigation began again with diagrams.

By supper they had a chart headed SUSPICIOUS MARITIME ACTIVITY. Beneath three entries about the patch, Theo recorded that Captain Ash had declined a second helping of pie.

“That's not suspicious,” Jax said.

“You haven't tasted the pie.”

They agreed to keep it.

Ash spent most of the next day in the chart cabin. Jonas navigated the schooner under his standing instructions, while Nell pointed out clouds that meant more than their appearance suggested.

When Nell fetched a coastal chart, Ash opened the shallow drawer for her. It caught on something behind it. He pushed a canvas strap out of sight, and the drawer closed. “Old trial books,” he said. “Leave those where they are.” Nell remembered the instruction because this was supposed to be a pleasure charter.

At dusk, the Professor saw a blue folder through the captain's open door. On its cover was a white circle interrupted by three black bars.

He stopped walking.

Ash shut the folder.

“Something you need, Professor?”

“No. An old design. It reminded me of somewhere.”

“Many things do, at our age.”

Ash closed the door gently. That troubled the Professor more than if he had slammed it.

## The Wrong Kind of Treasure

The boys had watched enough television to know that Oak Island contained both treasure and reasons why nobody could reach it yet.

Theo favored a hidden archive. Jax preferred something they could carry.

“Books can be valuable,” Theo said.

“So can a hernia. Doesn't mean I want one.”

Their theories grew over meals. The Professor corrected them until Jax stopped contributing. Lumen asked Theo what would make him abandon his favorite explanation.

“Finding nothing?”

“For how long?”

He considered this while Jax drew a chest with wheels.

Lumen had been unusually quiet whenever the island appeared in conversation. At last the Professor asked whether she knew it.

“I once saw a picture of a little shore building there,” she said. “A blue door. A swallow under the eaves.”

“Every coastal building has a bird under its eaves.”

“This one had been painted out. It kept showing through.”

He waited for an explanation.

“So did I,” she added.

That evening, he asked Ash about the emblem.

“An organization I encountered years ago, near Boston. You weren't associated with the Merewick laboratory?”

Ash held his cup carefully.

“For a time.”

“I checked figures for an outside contractor. Marine materials, I think. There was an accident.”

“There was a death.”

The correction settled between them.

The Professor remembered a technician's name: Samuel Venn. He remembered being told that the man had ignored a procedure. He remembered accepting that explanation because everyone who knew more appeared certain.

“Did you know him?”

“Yes,” Ash said.

Before the Professor could ask anything else, the captain rose to inspect a sound that no one else had noticed.

At the wheel, Jonas watched him go.

“Old acquaintance?”

“Hardly.”

“Those can be the awkward ones.”

His patch was now on the left. The Professor was too preoccupied to notice. Behind the foremast, two observers made an entry.

## **A Small Unreported Mistake**

On the fourth day, Theo mislaid a handheld radio.

Nell had entrusted it to him during a supervised deck exercise. When Mrs. Pike called them to lunch, he put it beneath a folded towel, intending to return immediately.

Then rain arrived. He carried the towels below. The radio vanished among them.

“Tell Nell,” Jax said.

“I’ll find it.”

“You’ve looked everywhere.”

“Then I haven’t looked everywhere.”

Martin was already telling the Professor how responsibility flourished when adults refused to tolerate excuses.

Theo sat through lunch without eating. Jax watched his father point approvingly toward him.

Afterward, Nell asked for the radio. Theo said he had returned it.

Jax looked at him.

The search spread. Ten minutes later, Jax found it in the laundry basket.

Theo reached for it. Jax held it back.

“You can't just put it away now.”

“Please.”

The word had almost no sound.

Jax took him to Nell. Theo admitted what had happened. She checked the radio, assigned him the work of drying and inventorying the equipment, and explained why she needed accurate answers.

Martin arrived halfway through.

“You lied?”

“Yes.”

“I cannot believe—”

“I can,” Nell said. “He was frightened. We've still got work to do. You can discuss it later.”

That night, Theo confronted Jax beside the furled headsail.

“You enjoyed that.”

“No.”

“You think because you shout everything you're honest.”

Jax opened his mouth, then closed it.

For a while they listened to the water.

“My dad thinks I'm a project,” Jax said eventually.

“Mine thinks I'm an examination.”

Below them, Martin and the Professor were discussing the boys' progress. Neither had thought to ask them.

## The Blue Door



Their visit near Oak Island had been arranged through a small local heritage group, whose waterfront storehouse served as a meeting place. It was not one of the celebrated excavations. Jax expressed disappointment at the absence of cameras.

Their guide, Ruth Mercer, pointed toward the shore.

“If something interests you without being filmed, you're allowed to look at it.”

Lumen had stopped beside the storehouse's blue door.

Above it, beneath several layers of peeling paint, a swallow spread its wings.

“Hello again,” she said softly.

“Do you know Ruth?” the Professor asked.

“No.”

“The building?”

“Not from this side.”

Ruth had offered visitors a table of old photographs. In one, a young Samuel Venn stood beside a woman holding an infant. The Professor recognized the name on the handwritten caption before he recognized the face from a laboratory noticeboard.

“He was my uncle,” Ruth said. “He worked away. We used to say he'd come home when he'd finished saving the world.”

She smiled without amusement.

Jax had found something else in the photograph: a brass swallow fixed to the strap of a canvas case.

“The same bird,” he said.

“A family mark. My grandfather carved boats. Sam put it on things he didn't want his brothers borrowing.”

Captain Ash appeared at the doorway. He looked from the photograph to the Professor, then to Ruth.

“May we speak privately?” he asked her.

They went inside. When Ash emerged, he was no longer carrying his blue folder.

The boys noted that. They also noted the patch over Jonas's right eye.

They did not find buried gold. They explored the permitted shore, argued over a stone that resembled an arrow only from one direction, and returned it when Ruth explained that interesting was not the same as theirs.

Before they left, she called Lumen back.

“Dr. Ash asked me to give you this. He said you were the least likely to dismiss it.”

It was a sealed envelope addressed to the Professor.

Lumen put it inside her coat. On the path outside, a swallow darted past her head and disappeared toward the sea.

## A Change of Captain

Dr. Bernard Bell arrived with a leather case, a broad smile, and none of Ash's hesitation.

He was the schooner's other owner and, like Ash, qualified to command her. The crew knew him. Mrs. Pike did not greet him warmly.

“You won’t find a newer boat with as much history,” Bell told Martin. Mrs. Pike kept polishing the same cup. “Nor an older one with so much of it still bolted in,” she said. Bell changed the subject.

“Captain Ash has business ashore,” he announced. “I’ll take you home.”

Jax whispered to Theo, “Do they take turns being suspicious?”

Bell heard him and laughed.

“You’ve been watching too much treasure television.”

Ash departed before supper. From the shore he looked back once, but whether at the schooner or someone aboard her the Professor could not tell.

Nell checked the fixed radio with the harbor station before departure and heard a clear reply. Both pumps passed her routine check.

That evening Lumen handed over the envelope. Inside was a copy of a page bearing two signatures and a short note.

I have given Ruth my signed account and the laboratory approval sheet. The trial log is still aboard, behind the shallow chart drawer.

Together they prove Samuel was sent below after we knew the ventilation was unsafe. C means closure. Bell means to destroy the schooner after this charter. I helped him arrange it. I am afraid to face him. A. Ash.

The Professor read it twice. Then he fetched Martin, and together they showed it to Jonas.

“We should speak to someone ashore,” Martin said.

“We will,” Jonas answered. “We need to establish what Ash has actually handed over, then get everyone ashore.”

He used the satellite handset to call Ruth, who confirmed the delivery and put him in touch with the officer to whom she had reported Ash’s statement. Jonas described the note. They agreed that he would take

the schooner into the nearest suitable port on the return coast and bring the documents ashore. He told Nell to keep the emergency equipment ready. Ash's note was photographed and transmitted before he put it away.

Jonas informed Bell that the private research stop was cancelled. Bell agreed readily. He said he knew nothing about a criminal plan and would cooperate ashore. At supper he was almost cheerful. Later, from the dark companionway, the Professor heard him say into a phone, "Bring the launch forward. The charter has become a problem. I'll confirm the position." When questioned, Bell said he was arranging transport for an inspection team. Jonas asked Nell to keep Bell's movements in sight while he stood the night watch.

Martin asked whether they should tell the boys.

"Enough that they come to us if anything worries them," Lumen said. The Professor hesitated. He had wanted to teach Jax not to question every adult instruction. Now he would have to make a distinction he should have made at the beginning.

On the tenth morning, Bell reported an intermittent pump fault and asked Nell to fetch a spare switch from the deck store. She left him in the machinery space for only a few minutes. When she returned, he said he had corrected it. Later she found the communications locker open. “Routine inspection,” Bell told her. She asked Jonas to check both jobs before the next watch change.

## **The Bottom of the Drawer**

On the tenth morning of the voyage, while Jonas was coming off watch, Bell ordered a change of course.

He called it a brief equipment check before they entered port. Jonas came straight back to the wheel, checked the position, and refused.

They were within reach of coastal rescue services, but the forecast was deteriorating. He would not take passengers farther offshore for an owner's convenience.

Bell held up an old expedition supplement. Jonas laid Ash's written cancellation beside it.

"We are going ashore," Jonas said. "That is the only change of plan."

Mrs. Pike began securing the galley anyway.

Nell took the boys into the chart cabin to retrieve the trial log named in Ash's note. Bell, who had offered to check the pump fault, was already below. Nell knew that the shallow drawer had stuck twice during the outward passage; now they had a reason to examine it.

Jax pushed it. Nell stopped him.

“Find out what's stopping it.”

They lifted out the drawer without forcing it. Behind its false back lay a slim canvas packet with a brass swallow sewn to the strap. A folded letter had been tucked inside it.

Theo looked toward the door.

“Get the Professor,” he said.

Inside lay the original trial log, with the schooner's name and equipment numbers on every sheet. The last page bore Samuel Venn's handwriting: Ventilation failed in test. No occupied trial authorized. Below it were Ash's and Bell's signatures approving the next day's work. Ash's separate approval sheet, now with Ruth, recorded the same equipment as safe.

The newer letter was a disposal agreement signed by both owners a month before the charter. Its dates were explicit: passengers ashore in Rockport on September 14; the vessel taken offshore on September 16; a support launch to remove the delivery crew before the hull was deliberately sunk. The owners called the operation CLOSURE.

The schooner had been the laboratory's trial platform before the owners turned her into a charter boat. Altered ventilation ducts and sealed instrument housings remained under her restored woodwork. The log identified them by number. An independent sale survey, booked for September 17, would open those spaces and expose the connection between the ship and Samuel's last trial. Bell and Ash had planned to avoid that inspection by losing the vessel first.

Nell photographed the pages. She passed the phone to Theo and asked him to take it straight to Jonas. Jax stayed with her to keep the papers dry. Neither boy argued about who had the more interesting job.

The Professor remembered his own figures. Weeks before Venn's death, he had queried a date. A field trial appeared to precede its safety clearance. His supervisor had called it a transcription error. He had accepted the corrected table.

Lumen read beside him.

"Your name isn't on the approval," she said.

"No. But I stopped asking."

From the doorway came Bell's voice.

“You were never in a position to understand the work.”

Jonas appeared behind him with the copied note in his hand.

“Then you can explain it ashore. We're turning for port.”

Bell looked first at the photographs on Nell's phone, then at the open drawer.

For the first time, he did not smile.

## What C Meant

There was no great speech. Bell demanded the papers. Jonas refused. Nell stayed beside the boys while Mrs. Pike called Martin onto the deck.

The Professor asked one question.

“What happened to Samuel Venn?”

Bell glanced at the approaching dark on the horizon.

“He should not have gone into that compartment.”

“Why did he?”

“To stop a trial he had no authority to stop.”

The Professor saw the laboratory corridor again: a notice pinned straight, a dead man's judgment neatly summarized for people who hadn't been there.

“Ash says you knew the equipment was unsafe.”

“Ash will say anything now.”

“And the schooner?” Jonas asked. “The launch? The records?”

Bell's expression hardened.

“No one was supposed to be aboard,” Bell said. “Ash changed the charter schedule.”

The Professor opened his agreement. “September first to fourteenth. The same dates you both signed.”

Jonas placed the disposal letter beside it. “And the sixteenth for your launch. There was no overlap.” Bell looked away from the two pages.

“Then Ash changed something else.”

“You told your launch to come today,” the Professor said. “I heard you. The change was yours.” Bell did not repeat the accusation.

Bell checked his watch. “Ash should never have given her those papers. I had to get the hull clear before anyone ordered an inspection. My launch was to take you off. All of you. You would be landed safely, believing an equipment failure had forced us to abandon her. That was the story.” He stopped. The Professor looked down at the disposal agreement. Bell had brought September 16’s operation forward to this morning. The supposed research stop was

the rendezvous. His assurance that the radios needed only routine attention now sounded very different.

“Your launch is not here,” Jonas said. Beyond Bell, the weather was swallowing the horizon. “And the water is.”

Ash’s letter explained the discount: he wanted the Professor to corroborate the altered figures. But he had hidden in his cabin, then confessed ashore and left the crew to face Bell. His warning did not excuse that abandonment.

“A for Ash,” Jax said quietly. “B for Bell.”

“And C?” Theo asked.

“Closure,” said the Professor. “They meant to call the sinking an accident. The trial log would disappear with the vessel.”

Jonas told Martin to stay near Bell in the saloon while he called the authorities again. The fixed radio would not transmit, despite having worked the previous evening. The satellite handset was gone from its cradle. Nell opened the communications locker and found a damaged feed cable. Its protective cover lay neatly beside it. This was no weather fault.

Mrs. Pike called from below.

“There is water where there shouldn't be.”

Bell pushed past Martin. He did not head for the pumps. He headed for the chart cabin.

## The Statement

Jax moved to block him.

“Don't,” Nell said. “Stay with me.”

Bell disappeared into the chart cabin, seized an oilskin packet from his own locker, and ran below by the forward companionway. Nell held Jax back. “We need you here. He is not your job.”

Nell fetched the independently powered emergency handheld from the grab bag she had checked after Ash's warning. Jonas sent a distress call and activated the emergency beacon. A coastal station answered, confirmed their position, and relayed the call to a rescue vessel. “Approximately forty minutes,” Jonas repeated. Mrs. Pike marked the time on the galley clock.

Water was rising in the lower passage. Nell found a disabled automatic pump and evidence of deliberate damage at a hull fitting Bell had inspected that morning. The second pump was working, but could not keep pace. She made no attempt to dismantle anything while the vessel rolled. Mrs. Pike helped her put the portable

emergency pump into service. “It buys time,” Nell told Jonas. “It does not fix this.”

Then Theo spoke.

“I saw him.”

Martin turned.

“Who?”

“Bell. Early this morning. Nell was fetching the spare pump switch he asked for. He came out of the machinery space carrying a bag. Then he went into the communications locker.”

“Why didn't you—”

Martin stopped. Theo's face had closed in the familiar way.

His father tried again.

“Tell Jonas. All of it. We can talk about the delay later.”

Theo described Bell's route from the machinery space to the communications locker. Bell had called it an inspection. Both boys had been watching Jonas change his patch. Jonas relayed the account to the coastal station.

Jax looked at his friend.

“Did you write it down?”

“No. I was drawing his eye patch.”

Jax looked at the pages of careful diagrams. They had spent days recording the harmless thing they did not understand and scarcely noticed the man who wanted to be believed.

Theo shut the notebook. “Tell me what needs doing now,” he said to Nell.

The Professor started to give Jax another instruction, then stopped. He asked Nell what she needed.

“Keep this light on my hands,” she said, passing him a torch.

He did.

A roll threw a case against a lower storage door, trapping Bell inside with the maintenance records. Water spread across the floor. Mrs. Pike checked the clock: twenty-six minutes until the rescue vessel’s estimated arrival.

Jax heard the calls and looked at his father.

“He’s still a person,” he said.

“Yes,” the Professor answered. “He is.”

## Below the Surface



Jonas kept the schooner moving slowly under reduced sail, with the worst of the sea off her side. Nell worked at the jammed door while the fathers passed tools. The boys remained on the upper landing, secured and clear of the rising water. Each roll pressed the case against the other side of the door again. Nell waited for the pressure to

ease before trying another movement. “Together, when I say,” she told them. This time nobody supplied advice.

Martin reached too far when the schooner rolled. His foot slipped off the step. Theo caught the back of his jacket and shouted to Nell, who took his weight before both could fall.

For a moment father and son stared at each other.

“Thank you,” Martin said.

“Hold the rail.”

Martin held it.

They freed Bell on the third attempt. He stumbled into Nell’s arms, coughing, still clutching his oilskin packet. Mrs. Pike took it and checked him for injuries. At the foot of the stairs, water covered the lowest step. The Professor kept the torch steady while Jax helped pass a blanket forward.

At last a rescue vessel appeared through the rain. Its crew circled once to judge the schooner’s motion, then called Jonas with a plan for approaching her sheltered side. A heavy line trailing from the damaged stern was sweeping through the water beside the boarding

area. They could not risk a propeller catching it. Nell could haul neither the snag nor its loose end aboard. The rescue vessel held clear while her crew prepared another approach. Mrs. Pike looked at the clock. The first forty minutes had gone.

Nell moved the passengers forward, away from the swinging line, to prepare them for transfer. Mrs. Pike checked every life jacket and kept Bell with her. Jonas watched the rescue vessel from the wheel. Behind the high cabin, only the Professor and Lumen remained by the stern steps. The others could not see that corner of the schooner.

Lumen put her coat into the Professor's arms.

“Watch the steps,” she whispered. “And keep my secret.”

He nodded. He alone saw her slip down into the water. Beneath the swell, a pale curve swept past the stern, then vanished into deeper blue.

Underwater, Lumen found the line pinched beneath a split edge of timber. Each surge drew it tight, then let it slacken for a breath. She waited through two pulls, keeping her hair clear, before working the trapped loop toward the broken edge. She could not make the

schooner whole. She could not make the sea still. On the next slackening she freed the loop and carried the loose line clear of the boarding area, then slipped back beneath the stern. From the sheltered quarter, Nell recovered the rope without seeing what had released it.

“Line aboard!” Nell shouted. Jonas relayed the message. The rescue vessel came in again, holding its position beside the sheltered boarding point. Its crew took hold of Nell’s transfer line. Now the two boats could begin working together.

Lumen surfaced in the shelter of the stern. The Professor lowered a hand. She waited until her legs had returned before climbing the steps, then pulled her coat over her wet clothes. Only he had seen what moved beneath the water.

“Cold?” he whispered.

“Ask me somewhere warm.”

They joined the others forward. Jax glanced at her dripping hair, but Nell was calling him to the transfer point. He went where he was needed.

Nell sent Mrs. Pike across first to receive the boys. Theo waited for the rescuers' signal, stepped when told, and turned to make room for Jax. Martin followed. Bell went next, without his packet. Lumen and the Professor crossed together; Jonas and Nell left last, carrying the logbook, grab bag, and records. Before anyone moved away, both crews counted the people again. All nine were safe.

Behind them, the schooner rode low. The emergency pump was still running, and a salvage tug had been called. Whether the hull could be saved was now work for another crew. In the rescue vessel's warm cabin, Jax heard his father give their names for the list. It was a relief to hear something so ordinary.

## The Witnesses

At the refuge harbor, Jax expected somebody to tell him he had finally learned his lesson.

Nobody did. There were blankets, questions, and a room where the kettle never quite stopped boiling.

Nell gave investigators the photographs and original trial log. Ruth supplied Ash's statement and the approval sheet. Bell's oilskin packet contained the missing satellite handset, his launch messages, and the maintenance records he had tried to recover. A message sent that morning supplied the words he had avoided on deck: Ash has handed papers over. Must lose the hull before inspection. It ordered the launch to collect everyone during a staged equipment emergency, then leave Bell to sink the schooner and be taken off last. Bell had refused to leave the destruction of the trial compartments to anyone else: if the hull survived, the cover-up failed. The launch operator had refused to sail into the worsening weather. Bell had continued anyway. Investigators took both owners into custody for questioning.

When the schooner was towed in, the damaged radio cable, pump fault, and hull fitting could be examined alongside Theo's account. Responsibility for each act would have to be proved, but the evidence had survived.

The boys gave their accounts separately. Theo said where he was certain and where he was not. They brought their notebook, too, and admitted how much of it concerned the wrong mystery. The crew's watch records helped establish the times; the boys did not invent precision their memories could not supply.

Jonas read the heading over their diagrams.

"SUSPICIOUS MARITIME ACTIVITY?"

"You kept moving it," Jax said.

Jonas lifted the patch onto his forehead. Both eyes looked at them.

Theo sat down.

"You can see?"

"Both eyes work. I wear it over whichever one is bothering me."

"That's all?" Jax asked.

"That's all," said Jonas.

Jax considered the notebook.

“We did get some things wrong.”

Jonas looked toward the dry trial log on the investigator’s table. “You looked again when it mattered.”

Later, the Professor sat beside his son where they could see the harbor lights.

“I told myself this voyage was for you,” he said. “I wanted somebody else to make you easier for me.”

Jax watched a workboat cross the reflected lights.

“I am pretty difficult.”

“Yes.”

“You could have hesitated.”

The Professor smiled, then became serious again.

“You saw someone in danger and wanted to help him. I would like to know more about that person you've been becoming. I've spent too much time arguing with the one I expected to find.”

“I still don't want lectures.”

“I'll need practice.”

“So will I.”

Jax's cup stood empty between them. When he rose, he took his father's too. Halfway to the kitchen, he turned.

“This doesn't mean I'm cured.”

“I hadn't dared hope for anything so alarming.”

Ruth arrived with a photograph of Samuel in working clothes, smiling beside the schooner before her name had been repainted. “This is the one we want people to remember,” she said. Jax studied it. Until then, Samuel had been a name beneath some figures. Now he could see a young man who had expected to come home. He passed the photograph carefully to Theo.

## A Drawer That Would Open



The schooner was brought safely into harbor two days later. She needed repairs, and her owners had more urgent appointments elsewhere. The charter ended without its planned triumphant return to Rockport. The weather delays and the investigation had used almost all of their fortnight.

Before the passengers went home, Nell obtained permission for the boys to mend the chart drawer that had begun their discovery. She supervised from within earshot, sorting tools.

“I can do it,” Jax said when the Professor approached.

“I know.”

After a minute, Jax glanced up.

“You could hold that end.”

Martin took the other end when Theo asked. Neither father offered a better method. The drawer gradually became something that would open without a struggle.

Lumen watched from the dock, warm inside her cream coat. Jonas stood by the wheel, patch above both eyes.

The Professor joined her after the drawer slid home.

“Do you think the voyage improved their characters?”

“They're working. Ask them later.”

“And Oak Island? You knew where the swallow would be.”

“I remembered a door. I didn't know what was behind it.”

“That's an extremely inconvenient kind of knowledge.”

“I thought you'd recognize it.”

Samuel Venn's family received copies of the paired records. His sister, the woman in Ruth's photograph, had lived long enough to see the trial approval placed beside his warning. Ruth brought her written reply to the dock: Thank you for bringing Sam's words home. The Professor read it twice. He wrote his own statement about the altered table without asking anyone to make it kinder to him.

Jax and Theo came down the gangplank carrying their own bags. They were arguing about who had first suspected the envelope.

"You said it was a receipt," Theo reminded him.

"It could have been a very important receipt."

Martin started to intervene, then waited. The boys reached the dock without assistance.

Lumen looked back at the schooner's name.

"Will they change it?"

"I hope so," said the Professor. "Have you a suggestion?"

Before she could answer, a small metallic voice came from inside her bag.

"THE INCOMPLETE SOLUTION."

The Professor stared.

“You brought the toaster?”

“Someone had to keep the voyage from becoming educational.”

Out in the harbor, a buoy bell rang. Jonas lowered his patch over his left eye.

Both boys noticed. Theo opened his mouth, then looked back at Jax.

They finished their conversation about when they would meet again.

Lumen watched them go with a small, satisfied smile.

The boys laughed and carried on toward home.

