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TEMPEST

◆ CHAPTER 1 ◆

This is the truth he lives with under his skin, how the ocean has left salted thumbprints all up his throat and marked him for drowning.

Jonathan Covey wears it well, this obsession the sea has with him. It's as if he has drowned already, water swollen up against the sharp confines of his ribs, and he is simply waiting for the day when he will let the ocean lick up what's left of him. He will be nothing but bones curled under its salt-strewn tongue, towed down deep where everything is cold and dark and quiet, no fight in him because he never wanted to be that kind of person.

The kind cored by violence.

This is why he's so upset about the blood ribboning between his fingers, staining the crevices of his shaking palms in a spill of cherry red. There's so much of it. His nosebleeds are always bad, but this one seems never-ending, his mouth numb against the rising bruise. His fault, of course. It always is.

He lowers himself onto his stomach on the floating dock nestled between the tall pilings underneath his house, ignoring the stacks of tackle boxes and nets that he's meant to be loading into his father's fishing trawler. His face hovers inches from the water and the ocean laps against his lips in an open-mouthed

kiss, licking away the blood with a tenderness he finds nowhere else. This will cleanse him, will make him forget.

He and the ocean have a history of salt and blood and brine together, and when the tide breathes out, Jonathan feels it in his lungs. It has always been this way between them: a love story, but the wrong kind.

"I need you," he whispers to the sea, "to fix my life."

Not that the ocean has any interest in fixing the lives of boys on forgotten islands of coarse grass and crowberry thirty miles off the Maine coastline, who learn to map out storms and eat superstition with a spoon and have a body riddled with scars from swimming too close to the sharp edges of rocky shorelines. Kelcarrow is all Jonathan has ever known, and sometimes he can't breathe around that fact.

What he needs to do is peel off his skin like a crustacean and turn into something that would survive on the mainland, in college, *anywhere but here*. But the conversation about going to college is over, his bloody face the closing statement, and he is again left swallowing acidic bile. He hasn't told his friends the truth yet. He thought he'd have a solution before summer ended, but a taut urgency is growing up his throat, the pitch tuned higher and higher each day in a soundless scream: *You're running out of time, they'll leave without you, you need more time* ~~time~~ ~~TIME~~ ~~TIME~~—

Tonight. He'll tell them tonight when he sneaks out to meet them at the ruins.

Rae and Ellis, the two halves of his heart.

Also the two people he's been avoiding.

Jonathan finishes scrubbing blood from his hands and pushes stiffly to his feet, his ribs creaking under new bruises. He has fed a little more of himself to the sea and in return he feels slightly calmer, the jittery electricity sparking up his spine dialing down as he lets the soft rocking of the dock center him. This is where he always goes when he's upset, though right now he must pretend he's out here to do chores. Tackle boxes need to be checked. Nets sorted. Lobster traps stacked on the trawler's deck. His duties as a fisherman's son.

This is all he'll ever be: a boy who smells of salt and the sea, his head full of sand, his cuffed grimy jeans and mucky T-shirt so ingrained with the smell of fish guts that it will never come out in the wash.

He wipes his nose, smearing blood up his cheekbone, and starts working on the tackle. Already the cold curl of fall is in the air, the sky folded over with rain clouds and the wind turning the waves choppy as the sun sinks toward the horizon. The sea is an indigo gone black, and he wishes he could swim away from all of this.

Behind him, the rusted back door hinges creak, and Jonathan's shoulders stiffen as boots thump down the ancient, splintery staircase. A shadow falls over where he crouches on the dock. When his father's hand comes up, Jonathan flinches, his head tucked low and his fingers splayed out on the rough boards like he's a swimmer about to launch off the diving block.

escape escape escape—

His father rumples Jonathan's dark, sweaty hair.

Jonathan stays perfectly still.

"You nearly finished up here? I need to head out before I lose the tide. Left some money in the tin for you to get groceries, but you'll need to pick up a few jobs at the dockyards while I'm gone to keep your grandfather stocked up on those expensive toffees he likes."

"Okay," Jonathan says so softly it barely comes out.

Abel Covey gives a fond laugh, scrubs his knuckles harder across his son's skull, and then climbs into his trawler. He's whistling, his faded ball cap pushed back, his flannel shirt taut across broad, muscled shoulders. They look nothing alike, father and son. Jonathan wears all the Covey traits wrong: He's slim with his dark hair curling under his ears, his mouth soft, his eyes a burnt-button black, and there's something supple and liquid about the way he slips into the sea and swims as if he was made for fins and selkie skins. He's just like his mother. But his father is all golden hair with a broad build, his hands chapped from hard labor and eyes in a permanent squint from the horizon, and he always wears heavy boots and an old leather belt threaded through denim loops. He has a loud laugh and a charming smile, and the entire island respects this hardworking family man who is part of the bedrock of Kelcarrow.

Jonathan remains taut where he crouches, his eyes tracking his father as he moves about the trawler and whistles a jaunty sea shanty as he checks the winches. After he sails out, there will be at least a week without him.

Maybe this time the sea will smash the boat to smithereens and he'll never come back.

Please.

"Have you checked the lobster traps yet, kiddo?" his father calls over his shoulder.

"I'll do it now." Jonathan starts to force himself to his feet, but his father waves him off.

"I've got it. You finish up there."

They are in Act III of the play now, the finale curated for the neighbors' viewing pleasure. It never ceases to make Jonathan feel like his brain has been pulped and he's going insane. It's the way his father says *kiddo*. As if his son's fresh blood isn't flecked across the wallpaper upstairs. But out here they can be seen, can be heard, and his father enjoys being liked.

The neighbors are close, this side of the Kelcarrow cliffs lined with cottages all the way up to the peak. They stand on stilts with their back halves propped up on barnacle-crusting pilings while the fronts cling to the cliffs with white-tipped fingers. Most have fishing boats moored under the houses, but not many of his neighbors still work the ocean these days. Kelcarrow is a graveyard of the elderly, retired fishermen and crusty old sea captains, and the cottages are all decrepit to match. The Covey house is the very last in the line, all gray stone and slate, and when storms hit, salt spray crests against the back of the house to lick off another roof tile with a shrieking *crack*.

One day the whole thing will pitch backward into the sea, and Jonathan has so very few feelings about that. Let it fall. It will be prettier sunken among the waves with coral grown through the wallpaper in a shock of unprecedented color.

"What you need to understand," his father says from the

trawler, his voice deep and comfortable, "Is that selfishness is an ugly trait. It disappoints me that I see it in you. Your grandfather needs care. He needs you, and if you refuse and I have to stay home, then how will I provide for this family? I want to give you the best possible life and that means keeping food in the pantry and clothes on your back. But you have to pull your weight, too. That's the meaning of *family*."

Jonathan stands, his numb hands tangled uselessly in nets as his stomach hollows out. *Selfish*. When his days are crammed with a thousand chores to keep the house running and his grandfather calm while Abel Covey is off fishing. He is literally *never home*, though Jonathan doesn't complain, because he prefers it this way.

What he needs to do is keep his mouth shut and just let his father sail away, but there's safety out here where the neighbors can hear. Old Mr. O'Brien is on his own decrepit trawler moored under his house, trudging in and out of the cabin as he tinkers with his engine. He exchanges a friendly wave with Jonathan's father before he descends into the oily bowels of his boat.

Jonathan is just desperate enough to try again.

"Can I just—just retake my exams?" It comes out cracked through the middle.

His father pauses and leans an elbow on the trawler's side, watching his son with neutral interest, much like one would watch a fish speared through the middle but still flopping around the deck.

"There's no point," he says calmly, "since you were too god-damn stupid to get a good grade the first time. You're not smart,

Jonathan. I don't want you to embarrass yourself again, and quite frankly I can't afford more pointless school or tutor fees for you." He gives the rail a pleased clap as if he enjoys delivering reality like this. "You're not leaving Kelcarrow or my house. Try it and you'll end up like your mother. That's a promise, kiddo."

Shame burns all the way to the tips of Jonathan's ears, and it takes a long second to see past the hot red blur. If he punched a fist down his throat right now, all he'd drag up out of his core would be black sludge and deadened rot. He is so full of dead things.

It's true, anyway, how this is all Jonathan's fault. He did so poorly in his exams that he didn't get into college and now he's wasted all summer trying to bring it up, because he knew how this would play out. Questioning his father is disrespectful. Asking for things is selfish.

You'll end up like your mother.

He crushes the heels of his palms into his eyes for a second and tries to breathe.

"You're embarrassing yourself," his father says. "If you're going to cry over this, we're in for a longer talk when I get back home. Really got to toughen you up, don't we? Now loosen my mooring lines so I can get going. And make sure you get up bright and early Monday morning to clean the house. You'll have plenty of time for chores now that those kids you waste your time with are leaving the island." He starts whistling again.

It's cheerful mockery, as if he is enjoying his son's pain, feasting on it. Dread will own Jonathan as he waits for his father's

return, for the promised *talk* that will mean contempt laid out across his skin in an array of vibrant bruises.

Already, he feels sick, his stomach full of glass shards.

Jonathan stares at the dock boards, splinters sticking up to catch on the hard skin of his bare soles, and his eyes lock on a massive iron hook at the end of a chain. It's meant to be attached to one of the nets before being fastened to the winches. The hook is heavy, bigger than his hand, rust flaking off the edges.

He imagines holding it.

He would leap the rail, nimble and light, onto the trawler, and come up behind his father and wait for him to glance over his shoulder with unbothered curiosity.

The skull is softest at the temple.

One hit. One second. That's all it would take and Jonathan would be free. He would no longer hurt. He would be *safe*.

It plays out in such vivid detail in his mind that he's horrified at himself for even thinking it, for the way violence coats his throat and leaves his fingers tingling like they've been shot through with frost. He is the kind of boy who tucks strawberry flowers into his pockets and spends hours folded into rocky nooks on blustery days with binoculars borrowed from Rae in hopes he'll see a leviathan out on the waves. He is not made of cruel things, and he never will be.

A nauseating, heavy pulse oozes up his throat.

He's dizzy.

He blinks hard, suddenly sweaty and sick, and kneels to unfasten the mooring lines. They flop into the water as the boat starts to drift out, though one of the ropes snags against

the underside of the dock. He thrusts his hand into the water to yank it free, and he doesn't know why he's trembling or why he again whispers, "Ocean, I said fix my life. *Please*." Because better to beg the sea than start crying.

No more demands or scathing admonishments follow from his father as the trawler eases away from the dock, and Jonathan escapes back upstairs. His father will fish for a week, maybe two. Until then, Jonathan can breathe.

It's quiet inside, the cottage haunted only by the loud ticking of a clock. He sniffs hard, wiping at his face and inspecting the smudges of fresh blood on his fingertips as he stands in the worn-out kitchen. He needs to wash his hands. Again. Get the blood off.

The entire cottage is small, the rooms pressed firmly together and filled with decades of Covey history, everything layered with the persistent smell of fish from his father's raincoat and boots still hung up in the narrow entrance hall. Old floral couches sag in the living room, and the kitchen linoleum is yellowed and curling at the edges. He knows each notch and divot in the shrunken floorboards personally, knows each creaking step that leads up to the attic. It should be cozy, this old fisherman's cottage perched on the cliffs, but every time he stands in the midst of the crowded rooms, he can't breathe.

In the hallway, blood flecks the ancient floral wallpaper, but at least the dense pattern eats the evidence. No one will notice. Not that anyone but Coveys are allowed inside this house, a rule slotted in place by his father to give his ailing wife *some peace to recover*.

She used to fling open the massive porthole window in the living room and stand on the sill, swaying as she screamed about how much she wanted to leave this godforsaken rock, the wind teasing ribbons from her dress and snatching them away to twist in the gale. She is always sad and Jonathan turned out just like her.

No one outside the family knows this about her. The Coveys are good at minding their own business, and Jonathan doesn't think he'd survive if he let any of their secrets slip.

When he looks at his hands, they're shaking, blood still rimming his nails. He needs to get it together. Focus on this instead: the hours between him and midnight, between him and seeing Rae and Ellis. It's almost dusk. Just a little longer.

The walls shrink around his shoulders and his ribs bend inward under the weight of his suffocation. So. He might be having a panic attack.

"Just figure it out," he hisses to himself, and slams cupboards as he attempts to make a feeble dinner for his grandfather.

When he glances out the window, only the tail end of his father's trawler is visible as it drifts slowly toward the horizon. Good. Freedom is here. With his father gone, Jonathan owns the house, makes the rules, can stretch to his full height instead of whittling himself down as small as possible. Sure, he will need to scrub the salt-crusted windows, mop the floors, fit rags under the doors so the wind will stop screaming through the cracks, but he has plenty of time for all the cleaning before his father gets back.

His real problem has solidified hard and cold in his gut. The

way he needs to tell Rae and Ellis the truth. There are just over two weeks left of summer. Then college starts. His chest already feels blown apart like someone's shot a cannonball through his rib cage.

The cupboards yield nothing dinner-worthy, so he arranges some of the brown butter cookies he made yesterday on two plates, ignoring the way his hands still shake, and hurries to the narrow staircase at the far back of the cottage. He takes the steps two at a time, slowing for the heavy oak door at the top. The brass knob stares at him, key in the lock. The bottom of the door has been modified, a two-inch gap cut like a mail slot at the base, just tall enough to fit a bowl, a tray, a plate of cookies.

Gently, he lays the plate on the floor and hesitates before pushing it halfway in.

"Are you hungry?" he whispers.

Outside the wind howls and hurls itself harder against the walls.

It takes a minute, maybe two, and then the plate begins to drag with a low *scrape, scrape* until it vanishes into the pitch-dark.

Relieved, Jonathan heads back downstairs, feeling lighter as he leaps off the last step. The sound of the sea outside haunts him all the way through the house as he takes the other plate straight to the living room, where his grandfather hunches in his recliner before the ancient box of a TV, the screen shifting to another wave of static. Jonathan smacks the side and the snow clears.

Nothing has been updated since his grandfather was a child,

and sometimes Jonathan feels like they're trapped in a vintage photograph, awash in sepia and the smell of mothballs, dust stuffed down their throats like taxidermy corpses. It doesn't help ground his grandfather in the present. He no longer writes his sea fable encyclopedia, the one he's been working on for decades, and he's starting to forget all his old stories.

Jonathan snaps a plastic tray onto each arm of his grandfather's recliner and arranges the plate of cookies on top with a flourish. The old man wears a tattered cardigan, his hair a wiry bristle brush of white and wrinkles melting down his face like wax. He peers at the plate with disdain, white-capped eyebrows pulled together in glowering judgment. "What is this?"

"Brown butter cookies," Jonathan says.

The effect is immediate. His grandfather's brow smooths and an almost childlike delight crosses his face as he reaches for one. "Oh, I haven't had these in years. My mother baked these for me when I was a child. This is—this is—" But his focus is lost as he bites into one with a happy noise of approval.

The important thing to understand is that his grandfather isn't angry all the time—he's scared. He so often has no idea what's going on, where he is, who he's talking to.

A small, sad smile tugs at Jonathan's mouth, but he won't remind his grandfather that he makes these cookies for him every week. It's better not to correct the fantasies. He read up about dementia while sprawled in Rae's beanbag during one of his usual campouts on her floor, distracted once again from studying for biology. No one else cares for his grandfather these days, so it's up to Jonathan to figure it out.

Everything is up to him, really. His grandfather's care, the cooking, the laundry, scrubbing the floors, upkeeping the ancient cottage. His family is an anchor strapped to his back, his spine splintering under the weight, all his fingers cut off at the knucklebone so he cannot unpick the bindings.

"Be sure to tithe these to the sea," his grandfather says gruffly, crumbs patterning the front of his cardigan. "Didn't I tell you that's the rule? We take and we give back and the sea lets us live a bit longer. You see how careful I am, hmm? Warding it off with sage and salt. You remember all the names of the ocean, don't you? It's important you don't forget."

There are always random herbs or chalk runes scattered about the cottage, but at least it helps with the dank smell of mothballs and mold.

"I remember." Jonathan tries to sound reassuring. "Want me to heat up some water bottles for your bed?"

"It's still early." His grandfather peers up at him with a little too much clarity. "Sneaking off into the night, are we? Meeting up with *that girl*."

Jonathan groans. "No. It's not like that with Rae."

His grandfather makes a *hrmph* noise. "Better a girl built of soil than one from the sea. A selkie is only as pretty as the first kiss. After that everything begins to rot, including you, from the inside out." He settles back to his cookies. "Is the moon full? That's when they come out, you know, to sit on the rocks and flirt with the foolish."

Jonathan loves his grandfather's stories—ghost ships and sirens and finfolk and krakens and unholy gods of the deep—