

# PROLOGUE

*Pirates Bay, Tasmania*

The boy gasped for breath, hair in his mouth, before the next wave slammed him back against the bottom. He tumbled, the fizz of bubbles around him.

Back to the surface. Another desperate breath. Stinging eyes searching for land. In the pre-dawn light the ocean was a roiling grey, the dark gumtrees so close . . .

Knocked under by another wave, bull kelp tangling around his limbs. He clung to it as the current sucked him away from shore. His hands were so cold he couldn't grip the kelp, but he wrapped slick loops of it around his wrists, adrenaline and fear giving him strength.

The water receded in a rush of whitewash and for a moment his head and torso were above the water.

'Help!' he called, voice raw.

A crash and he was under again. He held his breath, wrists locked in the kelp, until the rushing water had passed.

Above the sound of the wind and the waves, a dog barked.

The boy pulled himself forward. He could feel sand beneath his feet.

When the next wave came he let it carry him forward in the swirl of sand and silt. He spun, over and over. Arms tangled in kelp. Forehead scraping rock.

The water pulled away, but he rolled until he found a crevice in the coarse rocks on the shore. He gasped for salty air, the sound of breaking waves close by. He wasn't out of danger yet. He dragged himself forward, grazing skin, all strength gone from his legs, the wind cold against his bare back.

A German shepherd splashed into the rockpool beside him, barked, nudged its nose under his arm.

The boy dug bleeding fingers into the rock as the waves surged over him again, the dog yelping.

Rough hands seized him under his armpits and picked him up.

'I've got him!' the man shouted. 'Here, he's still breathing!'

The dog shook its fur and licked the boy's bleeding shins, its barks mixing with human voices. They were crowding him now, carrying him off the rocks, onto the sandy beach. The man laid him on his back, putting an ear to his chest.

The boy opened his eyes, crusted with silt and sand.

'He's alive,' said a woman. 'Thank God, he's alive.'

She was right in his face and he pulled away, coughing, scrabbling on hands and knees, backing himself against the panting dog. The stink of wet fur and seaweed.

Still these people crowded around him. 'Easy, mate, easy,' said the man.

The boy's grazes stung, his body ached. He shivered from the cold, his heart pounded. He needed to *run* . . .

The sight of the woman holding out a towel broke through his panic, and a new thought reached the surface of his mind.

*These people have come to rescue you.*

*You need their help.*

He forced his struggling breaths to slow.

‘Thank you,’ he croaked. His throat and nose burned raw from the salt water.

Then he turned and buried his face in the dog’s fur. ‘Thanks, Zeus,’ he whispered to his dog. ‘You did it.’

‘Bloody hell. Look at his tattoos,’ said the man.

The boy knew he was a desperate sight. Short, thin, shaggy blond hair. Covered in kelp and sand. He wore only a pair of boardshorts, the cuts and puckered scars all over his skin rising from goosebumped flesh.

‘No, it can’t be . . .’ gasped the woman. ‘After *seven years*?’

Tattooed across his scrawny shoulder blade, which dripped icy sea water, jagged words read:

*THIS IS FOREST DEMPSEY  
BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR*



# CHAPTER 1

## AHAB

Ahab Stark burst out of the bay with a gulping breath, speargun in his hand, an underwater torch dangling from his wrist. He pulled his diving mask down to his neck, coughing. Cold water matted his grizzled beard, the salt water stinging ice-blue eyes long since used to its bite. He bared his teeth in a grin; he'd pushed that dive a little too far.

The sky still had a dusting of dawn stars – no clouds in sight – but under the surface of the water he had heard the vibration of the drone and felt the cross-current. It was easy to feel it here, around the isolated reefs that spired out of the bay, and he had seen a school of Australian salmon flee to deeper water.

The Black Wind was on its way.

He floated in the dangerous silence that preceded it. Of course, the ocean is never quiet, but to Ahab this was true silence. Natural sounds, constant movement around him, waiting with bated breath. He looked up at the lightening sky, content.

'I'll take my time,' he told it.

Eventually, when the cold and the wind had seeped deeper into

his blood, he kicked his matte-black fins, swimming over to his anchored rigid inflatable boat. He climbed up the ladder, naked skin dripping water. His fishing haul was in the catch bag attached to his waist – enough king flathead to offer a fish-of-the-day special at his pub. He dropped his mask and snorkel, speargun and torch, slid off his fins.

His diving partner, Ned, was floating on the other side of the boat. Ned wore a ripple-patterned wetsuit – even in the middle of summer, the younger man found the water too cold. ‘Fish have disappeared, Ahab,’ he called. ‘Reckon it’s coming? Black Wind?’

‘On its way,’ Ahab called back.

Ned hurriedly climbed into the boat himself, shivering as he peeled his wetsuit off his lanky frame. A boat was like a footy change room – no one cared if you were naked. Ned dried his mullet and checked it in his phone camera before he towelled the rest of himself dry.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ said Ahab, once they were both dressed.

‘Look,’ said Ned, zipping up his thick coat. ‘Another boat.’

It was visible – just – through the peaking waves.

‘They’ll be right,’ said Ahab. ‘They’ll see the signs.’

He glanced at the sky – still clear of clouds save for some high horsetail wisps, which caught the first blush of the sunrise. The truth was, there weren’t any signs, yet. Sometimes the Black Wind came with little warning. And there were always out-of-towners on these waters.

Ahab let out a sigh. ‘Better have a look.’

He fired up the engine and they headed towards the other boat, slicing through a sea of dark interlocking waves, tinges of the pink sunrise now catching in the liquid peaks.

As they drew closer, Ahab identified the other boat, and he backed off the throttle. It was the abalone motherboat, the *Absconder*, a 60-foot Westcoaster, with a flybridge and live abalone

tanks, and a crane on the rear deck. It belonged to the head of Dempsey Abalone – Davey Dempsey, his cousin.

Ahab tied his RIB to the side of the *Absconder*.

‘I’ll stay here?’ said Ned.

‘Get ready to leave in a hurry,’ Ahab said softly, as he pulled himself up through the dive door and planted his feet on the deck.

Davey stood at the stern with his second-in-charge, Chips, and spun at the sound of someone coming aboard his vessel. He cut an impressive figure – a dark-haired, muscular man, in a business shirt but with his sleeves rolled back to show his distinctive tribal tattoo sleeves. He had a rugged face that was, as Ahab had heard Ned sulkily describe it, ‘unfairly good-looking’.

He smiled wryly at Ahab’s entrance. ‘Alright, cuz. Come right aboard.’

Chips wore warm hi-vis, for comfort not style, her sandy hair in a long ponytail under a blue baseball cap. She gave Ahab a deferential nod. A long time ago, when she’d dropped out of high school, Ahab had been the one who’d given her work, then put her name forward for the Business.

*She* had never forgotten it. Ahab wished he could take it back.

‘To what do we owe the pleasure?’ said Davey, leaning back on the rail. He was wary of Ahab, with good reason, but tried to hide it.

‘Black Wind is on the way,’ said Ahab.

Davey grimaced. ‘How long ’til it hits?’

‘An hour. Maybe two.’

Davey sucked his teeth, then turned and looked out over the water from the bow. Ahab followed his eyes. The aluminium tiller-steer boats were just in view. ‘An hour . . .’

Abalone fishing was a strange business. It required divers, who were down there under the water now, to hunt for what were technically sea snails. The thick inner layer of their spiral shells was

a source of iridescent, colourful mother-of-pearl, but it was their flesh that was the prize – delicious raw or cooked, it sold like gold in Asia. Tasmania supplied about 25 per cent of the world's yearly abalone harvest.

On those smaller boats all around the *Absconder* were deckhands, staying above wherever the diver was fishing below. The divers prised abalone from the rocks and sent them to the surface in catch bags, on shot lines with underwater parachutes filled with air from the divers' regulators.

Catch bags full of abalone, but other things too, as Ahab well knew . . . things that were left out here, for Davey to pick up, bring back to shore, and sell on, right under the nose of the law.

'It'll still be there later,' said Ahab.

'Always plenty in the sea,' agreed Davey. 'But we've got a quota. Business stops for no one. I'll signal the divers later.'

'You really want to risk it?' said Ahab.

Davey straightened. 'Don't forget who you're talking to.'

'I know exactly who I'm talking to.'

Chips shuffled her feet. She glanced between the two men, uneasy.

Davey laughed, breaking the tension. 'Don't worry, Chips. We respect the elders that have gone before.'

He might really have intended to be respectful, but all it did was wrench Ahab's chest. There was no way to change the past . . .

Ahab gave a wordless salute as farewell and climbed back down to his boat. Ned turned the wheel, pushed down the throttle, and set them towards Shacktown.

One of these days, he would have to tell the police about the Business. But could he really do it? Ruin Davey's life, Chips's life, the lives of countless others . . .?

But what about the lives *they* ruined?

Angrily, he pushed the thought aside. As he'd done so many times before.

He couldn't do anything – not yet. As much as it goaded him, sometimes to the edge of insanity, Ahab was a man of his word.

But his self-control had its limits. One day he would find a reason to break his promise.

As they neared the sea cliffs, mist from Devils Kitchen caught the pink dawn like smoke. Devils Kitchen: a huge, deep trench in the cliffs of Pirates Bay, where the water and wind had eroded a chasm, forming a dangerous swirl of waves and fury, turning the swells of the Great Southern Ocean into a boiling cauldron. It was gigantic, magnificent, and dangerous as hell. But that wasn't where it got its name – early European settlers in the area had seen this mist rising and claimed it was the Devil, boiling his meat pot.

Now the buildings of Shacktown came into view, spreading across the wooded hills to the stark cliffs, spilling right down to the beaches. Ahab surveyed it all from his boat, the beach mansions and the holiday shacks and all those in between, waiting in the she-oaks and banksias and sands.

As they rounded the point, heading towards the huge maze of wooden piers that made up the marina, they saw red-and-blue pinpricks of ambulance lights and police cars, far in the distance, down on the northern beach.

'What's gone on there?' called Ned over the sound of the engine.

'We'll find out soon enough,' said Ahab.

Shacktown residents were notorious gossips, and even this early the marina was stirring.

Ned eased them into their berth, and Ahab left him to moor the boat, jumping onto the slick timber pier, catch bag in hand.

He approached a huddle of fishermen who were talking among themselves, dressed in thick waterproof gear.

‘Ho!’ called Ahab. ‘A no-go today, boys! Black Wind’s on its way . . .’

‘Ahab!’ said one of the men, as the others broke apart. ‘Have you heard?’

‘What’s happened?’

‘They found Forest. *Forest Dempsey!*’

Ahab dropped the catch bag.

The fishermen edged away from the look in his eyes.