

A CROWN



SALT AND STARS

*The tide remembers
every promise*

ISLA VOSS

CHAPTER ONE

The tidekeeper's debt

The sea returned a crown on the morning of Mara's twenty-first birthday. It lay among the nets, tangled with silver weed, as ordinary as a broken trap. Every fisherman on the quay pretended not to see it.

Mara knew the law. What the water returned belonged to the tidekeeper. She also knew the older law, the one her grandmother had whispered with all the shutters closed: never accept a gift that remembers your name.

She wrapped the crown in sailcloth. Beneath the fabric, its points shifted like something breathing. The harbor bells began to ring, although the watchtower had stood empty since winter.

'Leave it,' said a voice behind her. A young man stood barefoot on the quay. His coat was fine, ruined by salt. Around his wrist was a pale mark where a chain had been.

'I would,' Mara said, 'if it hadn't started calling me.'

CHAPTER ONE / CONTINUED

The exiled heir

He called himself Ren. It was not a royal name, which was how Mara knew he had chosen it. The people fleeing the drowned court always chose names small enough to hide inside.

'That crown belongs below,' he said. 'Then the sea can come and fetch it.' For the first time, his careful expression broke. 'That is exactly what it will do.'

Mara looked past him. Beyond the harbor wall, the water had gone flat. Boats sat in their reflections. A gull hung motionless over the fish market, wings open, as though the morning had forgotten how to continue.

She carried the bundle into her grandmother's workshop. Ren followed without asking. On the wall, all thirteen tide clocks pointed to midnight.

Her grandmother's ledger lay open on the bench. A fresh line had appeared beneath the last entry: One promise outstanding. Payment due at moonrise.

CHAPTER ONE / CONTINUED

What a promise costs

'She never told you,' Ren said. Mara closed the ledger before he could read more. 'People keep saying that about her. I'm beginning to find it unhelpful.'

He held out his wrist. The pale mark was not a scar but writing, fine as a thread. Mara recognized her grandmother's hand. She had spent ten years copying it into the harbor accounts.

Outside, the first boat bell rang underwater. Ren flinched. 'Your grandmother promised to bring me home. The crown is the sea's reminder.'

Mara unwrapped the sailcloth. Between the gold points, small constellations burned in a darkness that had no business fitting inside a crown.

She had inherited a house, thirteen clocks and three unpaid invoices. Apparently she had also inherited a prince. 'Start at the beginning,' she said. 'And this time, tell me what happens if I refuse.'