

PROLOGUE

From the Bay of Biscay to  
the English Channel  
from Weymouth to the Wash

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*So, it begins.*

As a solid mass of cold air to the west of the British Isles drifted south towards a zone of high pressure over the European mainland moving north, the sultry remains of Hurricane Floyd high in the jet stream were chasing east across the Atlantic, 30,000 feet up. Polar air to the north, humid sub-tropical air to the south, an intensification from west to east, and the atmosphere was primed: a storm was inevitable.

In the Atlantic Ocean, waves had been like walls of water for days. Off the coast of Spain, west of Finisterre, the *Markusturm*, an ocean-going tug, too far out and moving too slowly to change course, dropped heavily into every shadowed trough, rose vertically to every vertiginous peak. Wire hawsers lay frayed and redundant on deck, the crew sick and exhausted on their bunks. From his wheelhouse, the captain watched as two ships, his unbridled charges, disappeared into the dark, foaming distance, carried north before the gale like splinters on the gigantic swell. They were lost to the sea, their snapped towropes trailing, the engine-less shells rolling, pitching and falling sideways into the wind.

Humid air rose and turned to rain, leaving a vacuum close

to the surface of the earth so deep that cold air immediately rushed to fill it. The earth turned, the winds turned with it, the depression deepened. The winds grew stronger and the storm moved north.

Across the Breton peninsula, from Quimper to Mont St Michel, power lines fell and crops were crushed; woodlands, enchanted forests, trees in their hundreds of thousands were systematically razed to the ground. At the seaport of Lorient and in the great marina at Cherbourg, 100 m.p.h. winds lifted sailboats and yachts from their moorings and threw them against harbour walls as the warrior wind twisted sharply into the English Channel.

But, like a necklace around the ragged English coast line, streaks of light cut through the clouds as Trinity House maintained its five-hundred-year promise to shipping and seafarers to keep the nation's aids to navigation ablaze. From whitewashed buildings, the lanterns shone: from headlands and islands, from crags, creeks and coves, and from formidable columns of granite that launch like space-bound rockets from wave-washed reefs surrounded by sea.

From the lighthouses on Bishop Rock, four miles to the west of the Isles of Scilly and Longships on the tiny islet of Carn Bras in the Atlantic, a mile and a half off Land's End. From Wolf Rock, the howling plug of phonolithic lava, nine miles off the south-westerly tip of Cornwall, and from the Needles, the jagged chalk stacks on the western tip of the Isle of Wight.

On the seafront at Hastings, where for generations fishermen have launched from the beach to drift, trammel and trap for herring, cod and cuttlefish, the sea threw the shingle at the drifting shoreline, and fishing families stood in anxious solidarity by their flat-bottomed boats, watching the rising tide ram the foreshore and batter the fractured harbour arm.

Heavy rain fell on All Saints Church in the village of Ulcombe,

near Maidstone, where a group of bell-ringers, sallies in hand, practised in the draughty twelfth-century tower, the hallowed chime of their bells at sour odds with the jangle of the wind, the uneven peal echoing across sodden orchards of squat-stemmed apple trees, staked and fully loaded with unpicked fruit.

At Kew, the botanical haven on the banks of the River Thames, with its landscaped grounds and wide walkways, its orangery, glasshouses, temples and lakes, its historic collections of flora and fungi, the sodden earth could barely hold the roots of a thousand exotic trees and tender shrubs, imported from far-flung continents a century ago, shipped halfway around the world in glass cases or grown from precious seed and planted in careful clusters.

In a London park, men emerged from drooping cardboard shelters, wrapped in blankets, to stand beneath a desolate, band-less bandstand, nursing polystyrene cups of soup and cans of strong lager, shouting, laughing over the wind, as lofty plane trees arched, bowed and twisted above them.

And at the old rail ferry terminal in the eastern coastal town of Harwich, the *Earl William* – a disused car ferry and floating detention centre, her engines stripped down, her echoing car deck a dimly lit football pitch, one of her lounges a makeshift mosque – rolled and dipped violently at her moorings, snatching ominously at the thirteen ropes and two anchor chains that tied her to port. In the dank interior of the ship, asylum-seekers from boiling sub-Saharan Africa, from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and the tropical island of Sri Lanka had already been locked into their cabin cells, portholes sealed against escape, fresh air and the bluster of a not-so-British gale.

Off the coast of Dorset, in the early hours of Friday morning, the storm turned and spun capriciously inland, raking the

southern half of England in a cruel slant from Weymouth to the Wash. Behind closed doors and drawn curtains in houses across the country and in the capital, people lay awake in their beds listening to the scream of the wind and the pummelling rain as the storm came closer. Shop and car alarms wailed, drains overflowed, streetlamps flickered and went out.