

## Prologue

There's a sound to breaking waves when they're close, a sound like nothing else. The background roar is unmistakable, overlaid by the swash of the landing wave and then the sucking noise of the backwash as it retreats. It was dark, barely a speck of light, but even without seeing it I recognized the strength of the swash and knew it must be close. I tried to be logical. We'd camped well above the high-tide line; the beach shelved away below us and beyond that was the water level: it couldn't reach us; we were fine. I put my head back on the rolled-up jumper and thought about sleep. No, we weren't fine, we were far from fine. The swash and suck wasn't coming from below, it was right outside.

Scrambling through the green-black light in the tent, I tore open the flaps. Moonlight cut across the cliff tops leaving the beach in complete darkness, but lit the waves as they broke into a mess of foam, the swash already running over the sand shelf ending only a metre from the tent. I shook the sleeping bag next to me.

'Moth, Moth, the water, it's coming.'

Throwing everything that was heavy into our rucksacks, shoving feet into boots, we pulled out the steel pegs and picked the tent up whole, still erected with our sleeping bags and clothes inside, the groundsheet sagging down to the sand. We scuttled across the beach like a giant green crab, to what had the night before been a small trickle of fresh water running towards the sea, but was now a metre-deep channel of sea water running towards the cliff.

'I can't hold it high enough. It's going to soak the sleeping bags.'

‘Well, do something, or it won’t be just the slee . . .’

We raced back to where we started from. As the backwash headed out I could see the channel flattened to a wide stretch of water only a foot deep. We ran back down the beach, the swash landing far above the shelf and rushing over the sand towards us.

‘Wait for the backwash then run to the other side of the channel and up the beach.’

I was in awe. This man, who only two months earlier had struggled to put on his coat without help, was standing on a beach in his underpants holding an erected tent above his head with a rucksack on his back saying, run.

‘Run, run, run!’

We splashed through the water with the tent held high and climbed desperately up the beach as the swash pushed at our heels and the backwash tried to draw us out to sea. Stumbling through the soft sand, our boots brimming with salt water, we dropped the tent down at the foot of the cliff.

‘You know, I don’t think these cliffs are stable. We should move further along the beach.’

What? How could he be so careful at three in the morning?

‘No.’

We’d walked 243 miles, slept wild for thirty-six nights, eating dried rations for most of that time. The South West Coast Path guidebook stated that we would reach this point in eighteen days, and directed us towards delicious food and places to stay with soft beds and hot water. The timescale and comforts were all out of our reach, but I didn’t care. Moth ran up the beach in the moonlight in a ripped pair of underpants that he’d been wearing for five days straight, holding a fully erected tent above his head. It was a miracle. It was as good as it gets.

The light started to break over Portheras Cove as we packed our rucksacks and made tea. Another day ahead. Just another day walking. Only 387 miles to go.