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Opening extract from

The Book of Storms

Written by

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The house is falling in.

The house is falling and Danny is falling, knees and elbows crumpling onto the floor, and an ear-splitting crash is tearing through the air – that's surely the roof, breaking in two, about to come pelting down on top of him.

His bedroom is flashing with the screams of rain and thunderbolts poured out by a storm in full, raging flow. Outside, the wind is flinging itself against buildings, howling into chimney pots, twisting trees round benches and leaping in spiteful glee as bicycles crash into cars and tiles fly through windows. The sky is singing with thunder and an iron avalanche of hail is pounding onto the glistening roads.

Danny listens for a moment. As his bedroom curtains blaze with lightning, he curls his fingers tightly around the duvet, wanting to pull it over his head and hide in the soft darkness. But even that won't save him when the house breaks apart. He'll be crushed inside it. Trapped under fallen roof beams, he'll struggle for air. Once the last breath has been squeezed out of him, he'll die.

He shivers, watching flash after flash through the crack in the curtains. More than anything, he wants to creep into his parents' bedroom, even though he knows he's too old, now, for that sort of nonsense. And anyway, his parents aren't there. Always, at the first sign of a storm, they run outside, pile into the car and drive away to the nearest high point. They go to watch how storms behave, they say.

And he has to stay in his bed. But they've told him what to do.

Don't go to the window. Don't look outside. Hide under the duvet, cover your face, and everything will be fine. It's only a storm: only rain and wind, thunder and lightning. Close your eyes and go back to sleep. Just tell yourself: it's only a storm.

The skin of his scalp prickles, as if a horde of ants is burrowing into his hair. He clambers back up into bed and tries to force himself to sleep.

The night around him begins to burn with lightning; he closes his eyes and buries his face in the crook of his arm. Everything will be all right in the morning. Everything is always all right in the morning. His parents come back, and he eats breakfast with them and laughs about how silly it is to be so scared by a thunderstorm. However long the night and thick the darkness, however loud the roaring storm, the morning always comes.

Chapter One

The Sycamore

Danny O'Neill rubbed his eyes against the sunlight and wandered into his parents' bedroom to find some clean socks from the washing pile. The double bed was empty, the crumpled bedclothes thrown back. Normally they made their bed as soon as they were up.

Danny put his hand on his short brown hair and tried to press it down to his scalp.

'Mum?' he called. 'Mum? Dad?'

The house echoed with silence.

'Dad?' he tried again.

Again there was no answer.

Perhaps they were outside doing something in the garden. It was a bit early, but parents did strange things sometimes, for odd reasons of their own.

Downstairs in the hallway he found the front door ajar and the carpet soaked with rainwater. The phone table had blown against the bookcase and overturned, spreading scraps

of wet paper all over the walls. Two framed pictures had fallen off their hooks and smashed against the skirting board. They were both of baby Emma, who'd died before Danny was born, and they'd hung there his whole life, fading a little more every time the sun broke through into the hall. Now that the glass was broken, raindrops had splashed over Emma's cheeks, giving her a red rash that looked like chicken pox.

Where were his parents? They always came home. They were always there in the morning, no matter what happened at night.

He picked up the phone and tried to call their mobiles, but both numbers put him through to a recorded voice. Dead.

A thin breeze pierced his cotton pyjamas, puckering his skin into goosebumps. As the prickling sensation crawled up over his neck, he wasn't sure that it was all due to the cold.

The house was entirely still.

He padded through the kitchen to the back door, his feet leaving wet prints on the tiles, and pressed his nose against the glass panel. Twigs, leaves and pieces of broken fence littered the lawn, but it wasn't until Danny stepped outside that he saw what had woken him in the middle of the night. The old sycamore tree had been struck by a huge bolt of lightning and had split, right down its trunk, almost to the smoking earth.

It stood blackened and dead. A swing once tied to a low branch hung melted on its chains and a few wisps of mist clung around the ground where the trunk was whole.

The lightning had struck only metres from his house. Only metres from the bedroom where he'd lain, trembling, under his covers.

For a second Danny forgot his parents and gazed at the twisted wood. He wanted to reach out and touch the charcoal branches. Would they feel solid, or somehow light? Would they crumble away into dust under his fingers? A patch of ashy debris lay around the trunk: grey-black lumps of sycamore and charred stems of undergrowth. He stooped down, wondering if it was still warm, and his eye stopped, noticing something brown against the black cinders. A stick, the colour of the old, living tree.

He picked it up. Although the stick was as thin as a pencil, it didn't crumble but stayed hard, refusing to break under the pressure of his fingers. For a second he frowned, wondering at its strange heaviness.

A low moaning sound crept into his ear.

'The last . . . the most precious piece of me . . . Oh . . .'

Danny instantly knew that it was the tree who had spoken, although he had no idea how he'd known. It hadn't moved a single twig.

'Hello?' he said, unsure of how to address a dying tree.

'Oh . . . don't bother . . . with the niceties . . .' The tree was gasping a little now. 'No time . . . it had to be . . . step into the light, I can hardly see you . . .'

Danny was standing in bright sunlight. 'I'm in the light,' he said.

'Oh . . . oh . . . there's light . . . then this must be the darkness . . . and there's no time . . . not for anything . . . no time left . . .'

The tree fell silent. Danny cast his eyes around for something to make it talk again. What had it said? The most precious piece of it? The last? He looked down at the stick in his hand. Maybe if he returned the last good piece to the tree it would have some energy left to speak.

He stepped forwards and wedged the stick into the cleft trunk. As soon as his hand let go the world seemed to fall silent. Birds sang and traffic rumbled along in the distance, but a frozen hush hung about the air.

The tree shook. Danny thought it looked more like a shiver of anger than one of death, but then what did he know about the body language of trees? Either way, returning the stick didn't seem to have helped.

With a last spasm, the stick fell to the ground and Danny bent to pick it up again. As soon as his fingers touched it he heard the tree's voice, much fainter this time.

'Idiot boy . . . I can't . . . you'll have to . . . work it out . . . but . . . why is . . . where is it? Why not . . . come . . . back . . .'

'Work out what?' asked Danny. 'What d'you want to get back?'

The tree was losing the last breath of its speech and the words that followed were said carefully, as if it knew it had no time to think of more impressive ones.

'It's . . . Sammael . . . He wants . . . he'll use sand . . . put dreams . . . in your mind . . . Be careful . . . who you ask . . . Most important . . . most . . .'

The last sigh drained from the sycamore tree and the earth under Danny's feet seemed to swell in one final clench before

settling back down into scorched lawn. He looked at the stick in his hand, then put it down and picked it up again. Each time his fingers let go of it the same hush seemed to fall.

He tried clutching it tightly and saying 'Hello!' in as clear a voice as he could muster. To which he could have sworn he heard a faint, echoing gasp that rippled for a moment around his feet like the wind swaying through a cornfield. But nothing more.

Danny decided that he'd better tell his dad, who knew about trees. Swinging around, he stopped with one foot half in the air as he remembered. His parents weren't there. And they weren't here, either.

What could have happened? Maybe when they'd gone to look at the storm, they'd been trapped somewhere and couldn't get out.

Maybe they were dead.

No. He shook his head to clear it of the thought. They couldn't be dead. Someone must know where they were.

Perhaps if he told someone else – but he didn't quite like the idea of that, either. Last Christmas, he'd said something about being outside in a storm up at Aunt Kathleen's farm, and there'd been a furious row – Mum going off her head ballistic and Aunt Kathleen yelling about obsession, and Dad screaming about how she'd get social services sniffing round them again, as if last time wasn't bad enough.

Even though Danny's parents sometimes ignored him for so long that he reckoned he could walk halfway to France before they noticed he'd gone, there was something about

the idea of social services that made him nervous. Sure, Mum was always on the computer, and Dad mostly hung around outside staring at the clouds, and sometimes dinner didn't happen until he was so sleepy that he nearly fell asleep face down in his mashed potato, but at least the things around him were his own. And his parents might be scatty, but they did make sure he had a nice home and clean clothes, so even when dinner *was* late, at least he didn't have to go to school the next day in the same potato-crusted shirt.

Social services would look at his family and see what they didn't do, not what they did, and he had a pretty good idea that they wouldn't like what they saw.

What else could he do? Monday mornings meant going to school. Danny always quite enjoyed them, because they had double art and there wasn't a proper art teacher any more, so he got to keep his head down and draw whatever he liked while the rest of the class made their phones bark like dogs and tried to climb out of the window then come back in through the door without the cover teacher noticing. Art was the only class where nobody looked at the clock.

He felt a strong urge to be there, sitting at the quiet table by the window, trying to draw something complicated. He never thought about anything when he was drawing, apart from lines and shadows.

Well, why not? Maybe his parents were just delayed somewhere. They'd probably driven further than they'd meant to, that was all. They would definitely be back when he came home.

* * *

Danny stepped back inside, put the stick on the table and got himself a bowl of cornflakes. He sat down, but he couldn't manage more than a couple of mouthfuls of cereal before he started to feel sick.

What was that stick? Sitting next to his bowl on the table, it just looked like an ordinary piece of stick. His fingers wanted to reach out and pick it up again, but he was suddenly scared of what else might happen. Would he hear other strange voices, breaking through the silence of the house?

No, of course not. His mind was playing tricks on him. Or someone else was. Yeah, that must be it – his parents liked trying to catch each other out with silly tricks, and they'd just played one on him. That's all it was. A silly trick.

He got dressed and picked up his schoolbag. Some trick. Whatever his parents were doing, it wasn't very funny.

'Bye!' he shouted backwards as he left the house, so that if they were around, they'd know he hadn't been fooled. And as he walked down the path to the garden gate, he listened hard for sounds in the house behind him.

But when he turned his head around for a last look, there was still nobody there.

Chapter Two

Kalia

The grey lurcher put her head between her front paws and waited. Sometimes there was nothing else to do. The room was dark, her coat did little to protect her from the biting cold, and the air stank of ripe decay.

She'd have watched the clock but her master didn't hold with clocks. What was the point of time, to someone like him?

The crackling of breaking twigs stirred the dog into raising her head. A heavy tread – he had brought someone back with him, then. These days he normally did. And even though he could have kept his journey short and neat, could have spun back into this bitter room with a flick of his wrist, he still preferred walking as much as possible. He said it gave him time to see what life was up to.

The lurcher was ready and standing by the time he ducked through the doorway.

'Another one gone, Kalia,' he said, and slung the corpse onto the floor in front of her.

Kalia sniffed at it and wrinkled her muzzle. She was well used to corpses by now, but this one was a young girl, smooth-skinned and frail with a stretched face as though she'd struggled in the last minutes of her life.

'Don't turn your nose up, mutt,' said Sammael, taking off his long coat.

As he turned to hang it on a peg, the lurcher glanced up at him. When he wore the coat, he could get away with walking among humans – he almost looked like one, if a little too tall and thin, with eyes a fraction too black. But now that he'd taken it off, she could see that his arms were narrow as broomsticks, his shoulders as sharp as wings, and his skin paler than ice.

'And don't stare at me,' said Sammael, turning back to the corpse.

'I'm not staring,' said the dog. 'It's what my eyes look like when they're looking. Oh, but you've been gone so long, I missed you. Why wouldn't you let me come?'

'Some things aren't for dogs,' said Sammael. 'I had a bit of business to sort out. Your presence wasn't necessary.'

'What sort of business?'

Sammael didn't reply. Instead, he rolled up his shirtsleeves and bent over the young girl's corpse, placing his bony palm against her shoulder. For a moment nothing happened, then the girl began silently to disintegrate. Her skin puckered and shrivelled, twisting into knotty lumps. The features on her face crawled towards each other and screwed themselves up into twists. Her eyes shrank into raisins, her lips into a tiny walnut.

After a few seconds she seemed to be weeping through the pores of her skin, but it wasn't water that oozed out. Grains of sand were pushing themselves between the stitches of her clothes and forming little mounds, spreading in a mass over the smooth stone floor.

It took less time than usual. She must have been very small.

Sammael picked up the pile of clothes, shook them out carefully so that each clinging grain was returned to the floor, then chucked them into a corner. He surveyed the sand. A pathetic amount. Hardly worth the effort.

'I should have given her more time,' he muttered. 'But she didn't think to ask for any. All this one wanted was to be able to slide down a rainbow. Can you believe it?'

'Only that?' asked Kalia. 'She didn't ask for anything else at all?'

'Only that,' said Sammael. 'She could have demanded hundreds of years in exchange for her soul – she'd no idea what it was worth. But she sold it to me in exchange for the power to slide down a rainbow. And then she got to the bottom of the rainbow and fell straight into the middle of the sea. Drowned in minutes.'

He looked at the lurcher. Her tail wagged.

'You didn't sell yourself so short, did you?' he said. 'You've got all you wanted out of me. You could have all the rainbows you liked, without giving up a second of your life for them. Here you go.'

He stooped down, picked up a couple of grains of the sand and cast them into the air. A rainbow blazed up along their

path, filling the room with light of every colour. It hung for a few seconds, caressing the faces of dog and master, then swooped into a corner and exploded into a shrieking fire of emerald green. Sammael watched the fire as it gradually died.

The dog pattered forward and pressed herself against his leg. Fingers like icicles brushed her head.

'Old mutt,' he said. 'Come on, let's get this lot stored away with the rest. There's enough sand there now to put dreams into the heads of a million creatures.'

As Kalia gazed up at his shuttered face she saw a flicker of muscles across his cheeks, pulling his mouth into something that could possibly have passed for a human smile.

'What things they could have done,' he said softly. 'What dreams I could have given them.'

Then the smile vanished completely. 'But it's too late now. They should have thanked me while they had the chance. It's too late for them all, now.'

And he turned away to fetch his brush.

The strange brush was made of some kind of hair, although the strands were so fine that Kalia's own hairs seemed like fat dreadlocks beside them. It swept up every single grain of sand, so that nothing escaped or was wasted, but she'd never dared ask whose hairs it was made from. Instead, she watched as he methodically cleared the floor until the stone slabs were spotless again.

When he'd swept the last of the girl's sand into a box and balanced it on top of a neat stack, he put his coat back on. The coat smelled of earth, rain and age.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Let’s go and see what that storm left behind.’

Kalia trotted after him. She had to press herself to his legs while they stepped through the doorway, so that he remembered to reach down a hand and take hold of her wiry hair. Sometimes he went too fast and she didn’t get to him in time, then she had to travel alone through places that no mortal creature should ever have seen, between the solid world of the earth and the high, thin air. They did odd things to a dog, those places. The last time she’d been separated from her master, she’d ended up with purple paws and ivy growing out of her toes, curling up around her legs.

Sammael had laughed and cut off the ivy, but he’d left the purple hair growing on her feet.

‘Teach you to meddle, mutt,’ he’d said. ‘Teach you to sell yourself into things you’ve no idea about. Although I suppose the purple does add a certain point of interest to your otherwise dull legs.’

She’d tried licking her feet, but the purple hadn’t budged. Sometimes she looked down at it and thought it might be spreading up her legs, but it was hard to be sure.

No more mistakes, though. She leaned close up to his legs this time. Stretching tall out of scuffed old boots, they were as hard as lamp posts.

By the time they’d walked the entire path of the storm, all the way from the hills where it had gathered to the island where the last raindrops had been squeezed from its clouds, Kalia’s purple feet were sore and stuck with thorns. She

flopped down in the shade of a bush and began gnawing at her pads.

The bright June sunshine shone above them. They had stopped on a shingle beach, which fell, flat and grey, back towards the sea. A couple of terns sat dozing over their nests, but nothing else stirred along the beach apart from the dry wind.

Sammael frowned. He fished out a notebook from his trouser pocket and flicked through it. Its pages were thinner than spider's web silk.

'The storm should have left another taro behind,' he said.

'A taro?' asked the lurcher. 'Haven't you picked it up yet? There's been loads of sticks and acorns and things, I thought it was always one of them . . .' Her voice trailed off for a moment and then before she could sigh, she said very faintly, 'Does that mean we have to go back again and look for it, all that way?'

'Of course not, you fool!' snapped Sammael. 'I would have found it, if it'd been there!' He ran a finger down the page of writing. 'But I suppose one can't always be sure with storms. What a waste of time. Except I did sort out those idiots.'

'Idiots? Oh . . . you mean those two humans in the cold-smelling house. What did they do?'

'They were dabbling in storms, trying to find out how to "control" them. Control them! Hah! I thought I'd show them a little bit of what they were up against.'

His mouth twisted into a scornful smile. Kalia was about to ask what he'd done with the humans, when an urgent

twinge across her well-kicked ribs reminded her that he disliked too many questions.

Then Sammael's head went up and his jaw clenched. Kalia hadn't heard anything, although that wasn't unusual. Sammael's ears were sharper than those of any earthly creature. He listened for a while, the sunlight prodding at his thick black hair. When finally he relaxed again, Kalia stole another long gaze at him.

'It's that flying ant,' he said. 'I knew something was wrong.'

The flying ant had come a long way from home to deliver its news. Although its tiny wings were exhausted, it shifted anxiously and tried to give over its message as quickly as possible.

'. . . the boy picked up a stick and spoke, right out loud, spoke so's I could hear . . . and the grass went very still and the tree shook, so something must've gone on with them, too. Humans talking! How would that happen? It's never happened before, not that I know of . . .'

'A human talking? Indeed? And you heard him?' Sammael watched the ant on the back of his hand, treading at his pale skin.

The ant was too worried about leaving to give more than a glance back at him.

'I did. He said "hello". Just "hello", and a couple of other things that didn't really make sense. But it must be because of something *you've* done, mustn't it? I thought that, when I was halfway here, I thought, I don't know why I'm going

off to tell Sammael – it must be something he's done anyway, given this human the power to talk in exchange for his soul. You're the only creature who could do something like that. You made me able to fly further than any other ant in the world – no one else could have done that, could they?'

'Hmm,' said Sammael. 'A stick, you said. You're sure he picked up a stick?'

'Just before he spoke, yes. A stick from the tree that had been struck by lightning.'

Sammael thought, for longer than the ant could bear. Visions of being grabbed by sentry ants and dragged before the queen began to scroll through its mind – of being accused of that most heinous of ant crimes: Desertion of Duty. Its feet twitched. 'But if it's a problem you can just take his powers off him again, can't you?' it twittered. 'I mean, like I said, I don't know why I thought I should come and tell you about it, only I suppose it did seem so strange at the time . . . look, I really have to go . . .'

'Scared of your little ant friends, are you?' Sammael raised an eyebrow. 'But you can fly forever. Why don't you just fly away from them?'

'I'm an ant,' said the ant. 'I can't live without other ants. Please . . . please, I have to . . .'

'Go.' Sammael waved his hand and the ant flew through the air. As soon as it landed, it spun on its hind legs and scrabbled at the ground, then hurtled away.

Sammael didn't bother to watch it go; it was just an ant. Instead, he stared at his hands and faced a couple of unpleasant facts. There *had* been a taro. And somehow,

although it was the kind of thing that ought never to have happened, it had been found by a human. Was it as the ant had said? Was the human beginning to uncover the taro's power?

There was really only one thing for him to do. And it had to be done quickly, before mere uncovering turned into full understanding.

Sammael clicked his fingers to Kalia. 'Get up,' he said. 'We've work to do.'

Kalia wasn't sure she'd followed all the stuff about the stick and the talking and the lightning, but she'd managed to remove the final thorns from her paws. Her pads still stung. Standing up would be painful, especially on the sharp stones of the beach.

'My feet do hurt an awful lot . . .' she whimpered.

'Fine,' snapped Sammael, turning his back on her. 'Find your own way home.'

Kalia scrambled up and leapt after him. He'd already taken three giant strides towards the sea's edge by the time she caught up. 'Wait! I can't go back without you! You know what happened last time!'

'Bah! You can turn into an entire forest full of purple ivy for all the difference it makes to me.'

Sammael's face was motionless, his eyes tight and hard. As he strode over the shingle towards the sea, Kalia raced to stay with him. Once he started walking, unless he was kind to her, she could never keep up – he could walk faster than the wind, if he chose. Or he could just go back through the strange lands into the room and come out again wherever

he pleased. Mostly he avoided doing that when she was with him, but Kalia hadn't seen him this angry since he'd used the sand to put an idea for making a telephone into the head of a man called Bell. And then Bell had taken all the credit, of course, and Sammael had been driven even wilder than usual; the lurcher suspected it might have been an idea he was particularly proud of.

There was nothing proud about him now. He reached a hand out to grab the back of Kalia's neck so she could stay with him, but he didn't look at her and he didn't speak any more.

As they swept together into the whispering sea, her bruised pads and bony knuckles scraped over the pebbles and knocked against sharp rocks hidden just under the surface of the water. Sammael didn't swim. When he crossed the sea, each foot touched the top of a wave and stayed firm against its crest. But Kalia had been born a dog, just like any other, and the waves wanted to swallow her up. Especially now, when Sammael was paying no attention to her.

She gasped for breath as the waves smashed over her nose. Sammael's hand tightened on the hair at the scruff of her neck.

'How can some numbskull blundering human have got his hands on *that*?' He yanked at Kalia's neck as a large wave rose up, curling in front of them. She choked, but was saved from the stinging spray.

'Does it – urgh! – does it matter?' She struggled for more air as his grip tightened so much that her own neck skin nearly throttled her.

'Of course it does!'

She should have saved her breath. He never got angry without good reason.

'But what could a *human* do with it?'

With relief she spotted the mainland thickening the horizon ahead. They'd be there in seconds. Kalia didn't suppose for a moment that Sammael would answer her last question, but talking at least stopped her from thinking about the leagues of sea below.

However, once he'd dragged her up onto the next beach and begun walking over firm ground again, he let his pace slacken a little, and after a long silence began to speak.

'A human could do all sorts of things with that stick,' he said.

The sand dunes whizzing by beneath them turned into scrubby seaside fields. Sammael vaulted over hedges and gates, as weightless as a paper bag on the wind. But Kalia wasn't sure about the way his chin had sunk down into the collar of his coat. This was usually a sign of evil rage, the lasting kind.

She glanced nervously up at his face. A dark flame had begun to dance in the pupils of his eyes and his skin flickered with shadow.

A cloud rolled over the sun. Kalia shivered as the breeze cut through her shaggy coat. She longed to sit on his feet and prevent him from going back to wherever this lightning was supposed to have fallen. Nothing could go well when Sammael gave himself up to white-hot fury.

'I'll kill him,' said Sammael. 'That brat is a walking barbecue already.'

‘Couldn’t you just take the taro off him?’ Kalia ventured, shuffling a little closer to his boots.

He landed a kick on her ribs, sending her flying sideways. She scrabbled to stand upright, shaking earth out of her ear.

‘You forget yourself, Kalia,’ said Sammael. ‘Do you think I need a dog to suggest ideas to me? The taro’s his, now. If I yanked it from his dead fingers, it’d still be his. But at least if he were dead, he couldn’t use it.’

‘I was only asking,’ Kalia whimpered, licking her bedraggled fur where his boot had stuck wet mud to it.

Sammael continued walking towards some distant hills, leaving the lurcher no time to explore her bruises. She raced to keep up with him, ignoring the pain in her ribs. He was muttering to himself; it wasn’t until she’d sprinted right up close again that she heard what he was saying.

‘Merry Old England.’ The words, full of scorn and venom, barely reached Kalia’s ears before they were swept away on the breeze from the distant sea. ‘I’ll turn those grey clouds of yours jet black, as soon as I’ve dealt with him. That’s a promise.’

And Kalia the lurcher, who had been born in Shropshire and learnt to love the wide open green of the hills that she’d raced over as a young dog, had to close her eyes for the briefest of seconds against a sharp stab at her heart.

‘I’m his dog,’ she told herself. ‘His dog. And I’ll always stand by him, no matter what.’

‘Good,’ said Sammael, looking down at her with a nasty grin on his thin lips. ‘You know your place, dog. And now I’ll teach this human exactly where he belongs, too.’