

Arlo and the Vortex Voyage

Juliet Blair



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Chapter 1

So there I was, at ten past midnight, sitting like a seagull on a rock. A very wet rock.

I was wondering whether Kate would show up, and whether it would be better if she did or she didn't, and feeling like a complete nigel.

My name isn't Nigel, by the way. It's Arlo, which is just as bad. I'm called after a folk singer from the distant past, like the seventies or something. Get used to it. I had to.

She was ten minutes late. Maybe I should go home, I thought. A deserted beach at night – there's no place lonelier. And it was freezing cold, too. I tied the string of my hoodie tighter. It didn't help much. And what was I there for? To do some midnight rock-climbing. I hate rock-climbing, even in the daytime.

Kate loves it. What we had planned for tonight was nothing to her. "It's a cinch," she'd told me. "Even for a beginner. And the rock shelf is only half-way up. Perfect viewing platform." Perfect for her, maybe.

I wanted to do the climb in the afternoon, but there's a 'danger, falling rocks' sign there, and Kate said that someone would be sure to stop us. "No, it has to be midnight," she said. "It's nearly as bright as day, with the floodlights, and there aren't so many people around."

I moved further into the shadows. Kids hanging around the beach at night attract attention. Not that I thought I was a kid – I was thirteen, after all – but that’s what a guy in a car had just yelled at me: “Watch where you’re going, kid!”

The more I thought about this climb, the less I liked it. But Kate was set on it. She said she had something to show me.

“It’s hard to explain. It’s a sort of spiral of tiny lights. You can hardly see it at all in daylight, but in the dark you can’t miss it.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“Neither have I. Or I hadn’t till last Saturday. I call it the Vortex.”

It sounded dangerous to me, like something that would suck you in if you weren’t careful. I stepped back and looked up, but of course I couldn’t see anything. Only the tower of the castle, with the moon rising above its tooth-edged stone battlements.

Is it a real castle? As if. This is New South Wales, not Transylvania. No, it’s a community centre, built by a mad mayor from Scotland with a passion for all things mediaeval. Or rather, it’s one half of a community centre. It was split in two, fourteen years ago, one night when there was a terrible storm and an earthquake. The other half of the castle disappeared, along with a headland, a small bay and the land behind them. The newspapers called it the Cataclysm, and the name stuck.

The sign over the door of the building, which once read ‘SCHOOL OF ARTS’, now reads ‘SCHOOL O’. I think it would have been better if

we'd kept the other half. Then it would have read 'F ARTS'.

The castle may be phoney, but the sinister atmosphere is real all right. Some people say that the ghosts of the people who died in the Cataclysm still haunt the place where they were last seen. Seventy people, waiting out the storm in their houses, thinking they were safe. One of them was Kate's great-aunt Norma.

You'd have expected something to be found - debris, bodies, washed up later perhaps - but no. All the houses, animals and people were lost without trace. All the people but one.

His name was Warren Mills. He was found on a beach in Tasmania, barely alive, battered and broken, amid the wreckage of his boat. Strangest of all, it was four years after his disappearance. Where, and how, had he been living for those four years? No-one knew. And Warren couldn't tell his story. Brain damage, memory loss, speech defects - he held his story locked inside his mind, and no-one could discover it.

He was still living in Southcliff, in a shack, looking after himself in a basic way, a scruffy old loner to be greeted and then left to himself, as he preferred.

"Oy, Arlo! What're you standing there for? You're getting all wet!"

Uh-oh. Kate. Rock-climbing was on.

"Just being haunted by the ghosts of the Cataclysm."

"Why would they bother haunting you? Forget it. Just a sec, I've got to put my rock-climbing

shoes on." She took off her sneakers and tied them to her belt.

Kate had brought a pile of equipment with her: ropes and webbing and clips, and two shiny helmets.

"Helmets?" I said. It made the climb seem more dangerous.

"Have to. I promised Dad I'd never climb without one."

She was stuck on obeying her dad, but she hadn't told him a thing about the climb we'd planned for tonight. I hadn't told mine, either. For obvious reasons.

I tried on the blue helmet for size. Not bad. Kate's helmet was red. The rock-climbing shoes she was putting on were thin and delicate, like athletic ballet slippers. I looked at my clumsy sneakers and felt more doubtful than ever.

"Kate, is this a good idea? If anyone sees us, we've had it."

"Who's going to see us?" Kate stood up. "There's nobody here. Not a soul."

"Euarrgh." The sound came from the other side of the rocks. We both jumped. Then we heard the clanking of a bucket.

"Warren," we said together.

Warren it was. Shuffling and grimacing as always, carrying a bucket and a fishing rod, he came into view round the cliff.

It didn't matter if Warren saw us. He couldn't tell anyone.

"Doing a bit of midnight fishing, Warren?" said Kate.

Warren put down his bucket and waved his hand. He pointed at us, then at the rocks, making agitated gurgling noises. It looked as if he was warning us of danger, as he pointed at one particular place on the rock face.

"That's exactly where we're headed for," whispered Kate. "You didn't tell anyone, did you?"

"As if."

Now Warren was making gestures, shooing us back towards the esplanade.

"Better do what he wants, just for now," I whispered to Kate.

"Thanks, Warren. Bye!" Kate called out, and we walked in the direction of town. Warren watched us for a minute, then, obviously satisfied, headed for home. As soon as he was gone, Kate said, "Come on, let's go back." She set off, calling over her shoulder, "Wait till you see this. You'll freak out!"

"See what? You didn't tell me much. The Vortex, that's all you said."

A vortex. I'd googled it before coming here. It's like a whirlpool, except it doesn't have to be in water. In air, it's called a dust devil if it's small, and a tornado if it's big. This one seemed to be a vortex in rock. Solid rock. How was that possible?

Kate grimaced as she tried to explain. "It's on the cliff wall. Not the path. There are these little sparkly dots, and they seem to be going round and round in a sort of helix, or spiral."

"What does the wall feel like?"

“Feel? I wouldn’t touch it for anything. I’d be afraid of what would happen to my hand.”

I could have said no at this point, and believe me I was tempted, but I didn’t. Not wanting to look a wuss in front of Kate was only part of it. I know Kate – I should, she’s been my best friend for nearly a year – and if she says something is strange and unheard-of, it really is.

An unknown phenomenon. How many scientists have had the chance to see one? Michael Faraday? Maybe. Marie Curie? Certainly. Arlo Singleton? Perhaps. If I didn’t chicken out now.

Kate stood up. “You’ll need a harness,” she said, handing me what looked like a pair of skeleton pants made of webbing. “And a couple of biners.” These were metal clips. A mini-lesson on safety and equipment came next.

She told me she was going to go up first, and then I would follow on a rope she’d fix so that I couldn’t fall. She’d be holding the rope all the time. Belaying, she called it.

“Hey, wait a minute. If you’re going up without a rope, why do I have to have one?”

Kate ticked the reasons off on her fingers. “No climbing experience. Never done this climb before. Sneakers instead of proper shoes. Oh, it’s not risky, really,” she said. “Not with me belaying you.”

It looked none too safe to me, whatever she said. “Couldn’t you have brought me some gloves?”

“You don’t need them. And I would have had to go into Mum and Dad’s bedroom to get them.

Then I'd never have got away. Did you have to field any awkward questions?"

"No. Dad was out." As always these days.

"You're lucky."

Oh, yes, so lucky, Kate, not to have anyone who knows or cares whether I'm home or not.

"My mum and dad were asleep when I left," she went on, "but they might wake and check, so I don't want to be too long."

"Righteo. Let's get going."

The first part involved scrambling over big boulders. Easy. But then the boulders ended and the cliff began. I stopped, and waited for Kate to climb up first. She tackled the cliff, her limbs working independently but clearly under perfect control. Would I be able to do that? I looked away for a moment, and she was gone when I looked back. She must have reached the rock shelf.

Now I had to wait in the wind and sea spray for the rope. After what seemed a long time it came snaking down, ready for me to attach to my harness. I fitted it to the clip on my belt, hoping I'd done it right. I tugged the rope twice. Our signal. I had to go for it now.

Though much slower than Kate, I found I was getting the hang of it. Finding suitable spots to step or grip was like a maths problem. When I finally heaved myself over the edge I was proud, relieved and exhausted in equal parts.

Looking at my fingertips, I discovered that three of them were blistered. I hadn't felt it while it was happening. I showed them to her.

"Good. You've got your climber's stripes." No use expecting sympathy from Kate.

The ledge ran along the cliff for some distance. Almost a metre wide. Not as bad as I'd feared. This was an exhilarating place to be, high above the ocean. I stopped for a moment to enjoy the feeling.

"Wake up, veghead. We didn't climb up here for our health, you know."

Of course. The Vortex. "Where is it?" Now I was here, I wasn't sure I wanted to go any further. Some of those 'vortex' images on the net looked scary.

Too late. Kate was leading the way. "Just along here a bit. Face the rock. Move sideways. That's right." I unclipped the rope and edged along beside her.

About halfway along the cliff, she stopped and said, "Well, there it is. How about that, eh?"

I couldn't see anything for a moment. Then I noticed the tiny gleams of light in the rock, winking on and off, catching the light, like grains of mica, but brighter, livelier. "I can't see them circling," I said. "Oh, wait a minute, yes, I can." And I could. It was like one of those 3-D cards you hold in front of your nose and pull back; one moment you can't see a thing, next, there it is, the whole picture. At first I thought they were flowing in concentric circles, then I saw that the sparks were converging towards the centre like a whirlpool.

"Far out," I breathed.

"Told you," said Kate with quiet pride.

I watched the dots move till my eyeballs felt like spinning tops. Then, with an effort, I looked

away. "Kate," I said, "we have to tell someone. Ring the geology department at the uni?"

"Maybe. How would you describe it?"

I looked back at the rock face to think about this, and found I'd lost the picture again. I turned my head to one side; then, suddenly off-balance, I took a step back.

"Arlo." Kate's voice sounded deliberately quiet. "Keep your weight off that back foot. Lean forwards, but not too quickly."

I looked down, and oh my God! My heel was over the edge of the precipice. I almost pitched backwards in sickness and whirling panic. But then Kate's words registered, and I managed to balance myself again.

"Thanks, Kate," I said. "I'm okay now. I can't understand how I did that."

"It's easy to do," Kate said. "Next time--"

"What next time? I'm outa here!"

The rope was on the ledge nearby. I picked it up and started looping it round my waist.

"What are you doing that for?"

"I need something to keep me safe till I get down."

"Not that rope," said Kate. "It's not fastened to anything."

"It makes me feel better."

"It doesn't, it doesn't! It shouldn't, anyway. Give me that rope!" She grabbed it and began to coil it up.

"No way." I ripped it out of her hands.

That was my first mistake. The end of the rope flew into the air and touched the sparkling helix.

Immediately, it began to be swallowed. It went straight into the rock, which started slurping it in like spaghetti. I just stood there watching with my mouth open for a moment; then the loop of rope round my waist started to squeeze me like a vice. The pain, the pain! It burst and throbbed from my head to my feet.

“Kate, quick!” I managed to yell. “Help me! Loosen the rope! It’s killing me!”

She whipped the end out of its twisted knot, and the pressure eased. The relief was wonderful. I felt boneless, about to collapse.

“Watch out! Don’t fall!”

Hell! I’d nearly reached the cliff edge again. I started back, and my hand hit the rock wall.

My hand! It was being pulled, sucked, drawn in. It was buried in something smooth, sickening, not grainy like rock.

I looked down. My arm was gone, up to the elbow. And the rock was eating further, even as I watched.

“Aaaah! Pull me out!” I yelled to Kate. She grabbed me round the waist and pulled. “No, stop it, stop it! It’s hurting too much. Get help. Don’t come near, or it’ll get you too.”

“Too late. It’s got me already.”

We both screamed then. I didn’t know whether I was screaming for Kate or for myself. Then my head was engulfed by the rock, and in the sudden darkness and silence my head felt as though it was vibrating like a tuning-fork. The Vortex had me, and there was nothing I could do but submit.

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