

Facing the Cliffs

‘Daddy, this seaweed’s a funny colour,’ said Lily, throwing it down in disgust. ‘And it’s got all bubbly things on it. I don’t like it.’

Alex hugged his coat closer round him and gazed out across the sands, to where a dark line separated the land from the sky. The wind stretched his skin taut. Without turning round, he said, ‘Did you know you can pop those bubbles? Like that bubbly plastic I bring home for you?’

‘Hmm,’ she said, retrieving a piece for experiment. ‘It’s not proper mermaid’s hair, though. Do *you* like it?’

He pushed his thoughts away for the moment, and took her hand. ‘Come on, let’s look in those rock pools over there, and see if we can find some crabs. Don’t forget your bucket,’ he added, handing her the bright red plastic pail. As they walked, he turned and glanced behind him. The tide could come in very quickly here.

The search for crabs took second place: there were seven or eight likely-looking pools at the foot of the cliffs, and Lily insisted on trying out her new wellingtons in each of them. Alex tried to look up at the black rock as often as he could; after all, this was one of the things he’d come for. To his left was Old Stagger, the great arch which stood out towards the sea like the stride of some dark giant; above and before him rose the cliff face, striped white here and there with birds’ excrement but otherwise barren and bare. Fissured and cracked, from here it looked like a jumbled heap of shards and rubble: flattened and worn faces punctuated by outcrops, sharp and jagged like broken glass, hard and unyielding; like the lump in his throat.

They had left Lily in the crèche that day. He and Rachel had come to play tennis on the beach with Graham and Mel, and even though he knew her so very well, Alex had felt Rachel’s grace and poise take his breath away. She was like a dancer, like a young sapling swaying to and fro, and the sun shone like a spotlight on her. After their friends had left, they’d stayed to walk barefoot on the wet sand, arm in arm.

‘Don’t stay too long,’ Graham had said. ‘The tide comes in quickly around here.’

‘Daddy, Daddy! Here’s one!’ Lily was pointing excitedly into one of the hollows, and sure enough Alex could see a tiny white crab, no bigger than a thumbnail, drifting industriously to and fro in the chilly water. In the surface he could see the dark reflection of the cliff.

‘Please, Mr. Crab,’ said Alex, picking up Lily’s spade. ‘Mistress Lily requests your company in her royal bucket, the better to make your acquaintance. Will you join us?’

‘Yes!’ said Lily, clapping her hands. ‘Come and make my ‘quaintance!’

Alex adopted a crab-like voice. ‘Well, Mistress Lily, thank you very much for your kind invitation. Will you bring me home afterwards?’

‘Will we, Daddy?’ said Lily.

‘Of course,’ said Alex. ‘We must always be kind and courteous to our guests.’

Then, as he bent toward the pool, he stiffened. It was a faint sound, an innocent sound: a soft plop and a gurgle, carried like a whisper on the wind; but he knew it. He knew it with every bone in his body, every corner of his mind, every fibre of his being. The tide was coming in.

Now he could see it clearly, clearer than reality. They had looked at the waves sloshing about their toes, and played at jumping over them. As the water got higher, he’d pulled Rachel to him, and they’d kissed, long and passionately, not caring that their clothes were soaking. The sea held them, and they’d swayed together.

Then they’d realised their danger. They waded towards the rough concrete steps which led to safety, as the water rose chest-high and splashed salt down their throats. Then they had swum, struggling, fighting as the water flung them up and down. He’d reached the steps and grabbed the railing, when she was taken from him.

He’d gone in after her, but the very current which drew her away seemed to hurl him back against the steps. He climbed out and tried to edge across the rocks towards her. The waves had risen, and risen; he’d watched as she was flung against the cliff like a rag doll, drawn back and flung again, and again...

He grabbed Lily’s wrist and pulled her with him. ‘Come on!’ he barked. It was about a quarter of a mile to the steps; the same steps. He cast an eye at the distant grey line. It was on the move.

‘Daddy, my bucket!’ she cried, slipping free and running back to fetch it.

‘Never mind your bloody bucket! The tide’s coming in!’

She had it in her hand: glistening, sanded, precious. Her eyes were big and round. 'Are we going to get caught like Mummy?' she said in a small voice.

'No! No we're not!' he yelled. He wanted the cliffs and the sea to hear him. No, he thought, *not this time*.

They were half way when the first washes came over their boots. Their feet sank into the wet sand. Lily was dragging behind. 'Daddy!' she said, panting, 'Not so fast!'

Alex turned and threw her unceremoniously over his shoulder, and jogged on, his feet now plunging deeply into the sand at every stride. They were nearly there. Nearly there...

He dropped Lily onto the steps, and half pushed, half cajoled her up and up, until they had covered half the flight, and he judged they were safe. Clinging to the handrail, he sank down and sat gasping for breath in long, labouring spasms. He could feel his ribcage vibrate as his heart beat violently inside, and a dark mist swam before his eyes.

After an age, he heard a voice coming to him from above.

'Daddy, have you had enough rest now? I'm cold,' said Lily.

There was a bark, and Alex sat open-mouthed as a sprightly couple in wellingtons came striding up the steps, followed by a sopping wet dog.

'Hello,' said the woman. 'Hello there,' said the man. 'Thought we'd better get up here sharpish. Tide comes in quickly around here, doesn't it? Come on, Lady!' And with a bound, and a shower of doggy rain, they were gone.

Alex looked down the steps. The tide had almost reached the cliff, but it only seemed a couple of feet at its deepest. He gave a long, shuddering sigh.

'Daddy?'

Alex turned and tried to smile. 'Goodness! That was silly of me,' he said, his voice still shaking. 'Fancy being frightened of a bit of water!'

'I don't like the sea,' she said, looking out across the white breakers.

'Lots of people do like it,' he answered, hauling himself to his feet. 'You mustn't be frightened of it.'

She looked doubtful.

'Hey, look!' he went on. 'You've got your spade, and I've got your bucket. Haven't we been clever not to leave them behind?'

'You *were* holding very tight.'

He held out his hand, and she took it. 'Come on,' he said, 'let's get back up to the top.'

They went slowly. His legs still felt shaky, and his socks squelched unpleasantly inside his shoes. From here they could see the wide expanse of the sea, and Lily wanted to stop and look for ships. A couple of gulls screeched above them, sailing confidently in the wind. Alex felt his heart returning to its regular rhythm.

They toiled the last few feet to the top of the steps, where the rough gravelled ground served as a tourists' car park. A few other cars were parked there, and the doughnut seller was doing a brief trade.

'Hello Mummy!' called Lily, and went scampering off to join Rachel, where she sat in her wheelchair, stately and assured.

'Hello Tinker!' her mother replied, hugging her. 'I thought you'd be back soon. Yes I did!'

'We had to *run*!' said Lily.

Rachel looked at Alex. 'We didn't need to,' he said, quickly. 'I – I was being a bit silly, wasn't I Lily?'

'Where's Auntie Mel?' demanded Lily.

'Ah, now. She's gone to get some coffee and doughnuts. Do you think she'd like some help carrying them? There she is, waving. Off you go. You can tell her what sort you like.'

They watched her run. Alex sat down on the bench by her chair and looked out over the grey swell below them.

'I panicked,' he said. 'I saw the tide was coming, and I couldn't stand it. I grabbed Lily and practically dragged her up the steps. She was very good.'

Rachel reached out and took his hand.

'I thought I was doing okay,' he went on. 'I was talking about seaweed, and crabs. But all the time I was really thinking of – of what happened...'

He looked away, fumbling in his pocket for a tissue.

'I don't like to think about it either, you know...'

'I'm sorry. I'm nothing but a selfish pig.'

'No you're not. Come on,' she said, peering into his face, 'give me a smile? That's better.'

'You – you're amazing. There you are, with all you've got to put up with, and you're the one who's comforting me. And you're always happy, and cheerful.'

‘Not *always*, please. But, Alex, I’ve got so much to be happy about. I can still get about, I’m healthy, and I’ve got a loving husband, and a beautiful daughter. Not many people can say that, can they?’

He leaned over, and they kissed. They kissed for a long time, and the wheelchair rocked ever so slightly.