

Chapter 1 ~ A Longford Mystery

“What are you showing me that for” asked Liam, staring at Peter in surprise. What is so special about that dirty old blocked up window”?

Liam had only been in Longford a few weeks. He had moved here from New York, with mom, dad, and his sister Lola at the end of August. Now he was just getting used to a new school. He wasn't sure how he felt about the move but he'd made new friends, especially Peter.

If you had asked Liam about Longford, he would have said “It's a bit small, and quiet, there's not much traffic and the shops shut early but it's very friendly”.

Peter thought that was a bit odd. Everyone complained about the traffic in Longford and at least one shop was open all night. He agreed that Longford was a very friendly place with plenty to do and interesting places to go. He wanted to show them all to his new friend.

It was true, he couldn't find anything like that statue they had in New York. He had seen pictures of that lady with the torch and the spiky hat, but he had quite a long list of places that were just as good. There was 'Mad-stones', 'Crazy Clowns', 'Mega Bowl', the cinema, and the Backstage Theatre for a start. The trouble was they had started school as soon as Liam had arrived and he'd been busy with his family most weekends, so far.

They had got to the Mall, to play football, once or twice, and been to the library a few times. But most of the places he wanted to show Liam would have to wait until half term.

In the mean time they were on their way home from school and he had stopped to show Liam one of his favourite places in all of Longford. Seeing the look on Liam's face as he stared at the old window, he had to admit he could see Liam's point. It didn't look much. The window had been boarded up so long ago that moss and weeds covered the crumbling sill. The rusty bars that fronted the long gone opening still showed flecks of dirty yellow paint. Next to the old window were signs of what had once been a door. There wasn't much more to see. The little building was hardly more than a derelict. He could see why Peter was not impressed.



“I don't get it”, went on Liam who was still staring at the bars.” I've seen loads of old buildings in Longford. There's the courthouse, with all its funny shaped windows, and the old brick post office, or was it a museum? There are interesting old houses here in Great Water street. But this is just a ruin ready to be bulldozed”.

“I think it's interesting”, muttered Peter, turning a bit red.

“What's interesting about it?”

“I don't really know, but I always thought it looked like an old jail. I used to tell myself stories about it. I wondered who got shut up in there and what they did wrong. I asked Dad and he told me that there used to be a little shop there a long time ago but it can't be. A shop wouldn't have bars.”

"It might".

"Why?"

"To stop people breaking in".

"Why would anyone want to break in to a shop?"

"What if it was a sweet shop?"

The two boys stared curiously at the barred window for a long time. Finally Liam spoke.

"You could be right, Peter. If you look at the boarded window long enough it seems to go all misty and blurred".

"If you stare at anything long enough it goes all misty and blurred", answered Peter, laughing. "Just leave it."

The two boys decided to stop in at the library before they went home. Maybe there was someone who could solve the mystery of the barred window. The librarian was very helpful but she couldn't give Peter the answer he was wanting.

"Great Water Street is one of the oldest streets in Longford", she said doubtfully, "but I never heard that there was ever a jail there... There was once a jail up above the barracks, around Battery Road but that's been gone for hundreds of years. There is nothing left to see. You could always ask about the old jail in the Local Studies Room, above Tesco. The librarian or the archivist there might be able to tell you more".

"Oh you mean the "Time Machine Room" where all the old newspapers, photos, maps and stories are kept", replied Peter, excitedly. "We found out about that place in school".

"But what's that barred window in Great Water Street then", asked Liam, not prepared to give up now that Peter had got him interested.

"I think that two ladies had a small shop there".

"Oh!" said the boys.

It was a bit disappointing and they went home.

The next day, in school, Peter began to wish he had never shown Liam his favourite Longford mystery. He didn't mind Liam getting interested in the window. The trouble was that he kept telling the other boys about what Peter had shown him.

Peter saw him talking excitedly with Bartek and Connor at break.

"There's this old jail round the corner in Great Water Street. You must go past it loads of times. The librarian said it was an old shop and so did Peter's dad. But Peter and I think it's haunted."

"I never said that", protested Peter joining the group.

"But you said you'd heard stories", argued Liam who was starting to enjoy the idea of a mystery here in Longford.

"No", replied Peter. "What I said was that I used to tell myself stories about the blocked up window. I was just making them up".

"Didn't you say it went all misty and blurry yesterday?"

No I did NOT", answered Peter a bit more loudly than he meant to. "I never said anything like that." He was beginning to feel a bit embarrassed about all this.

He needn't have worried. Bartek and Connor were getting interested as well. This was just the sort of thing to liven up a boring Thursday morning.

"Why don't we go and have a look at it after school?" persuaded Connor.

"Nothing will happen".

"Go on. It won't take long".

"Oh alright".

Peter stopped and looked around. Something was making him feel uncomfortable. Ryan was walking towards the little group.

“What are you going to look at after school? The taller boy asked aggressively. “Nothing”, replied Peter quickly. “Just something in the bike shop”.

He hoped that Ryan would accept this. It wasn't that Ryan was a bad lad. Well, he pushed the younger boys around a bit but he never actually hurt anyone. It was just that if you hung around with Ryan you usually ended up in the middle of an argument, often with your best friend. Ryan sniffed but he walked away.

The day passed quickly and soon Peter, Liam, Connor and Bartek were approaching the barred window. Peter was feeling silly and was wishing that he had kept his imagination to himself. Liam did not seem at all bothered. He just hitched his schoolbag over his shoulders more securely, reached out and shook the bars. To his surprise, they shifted, crumbs of cement scattering to the ground.

“Leave it out, Liam”, muttered Peter, but it was too late. The bars came away in Liam's hands. Peter jumped forward to help his friend lower the heavy bars to the ground. Bartek and Connor stepped well back looking around to see if anyone had noticed what had happened. They weren't sure they wanted to be involved. Nobody seemed to be passing but they were still ready to run.

“I wasn't expecting that”, Liam said confidently. “Those bars didn't feel loose yesterday”. “You shouldn't have pulled at them so hard”, answered Peter. We'll get into trouble if anyone finds out it was us”, Liam ignored him. He climbed up onto the crumbling window sill and placed one hand firmly on the old window board as if to push it back.

It was then it happened. The board seemed to go soft and misty. Bartek said later that it had begun to glow. Peter didn't remember that. What he noticed, with horror, was that he couldn't see Liam's hand at all. It seemed to stop at the wrist. The whole hand had gone right through the board. Liam didn't seem to have noticed anything but it looked very strange.

“Liam, your hand”, yelled Peter, his eyes wide in shock. Liam looked down and saw what was happening. He jerked his hand back but he had underestimated the weight of his school bag and, instead of leaning backwards, he fell forwards. His shoulder touched the board and it didn't stop. It went on until half his surprised face was gone as well... He looked as if he had been sliced in two. Then Liam seemed to tip forward, as his body travelled through the solid wood, leaving just his legs to view. Peter did not stop to think. He grabbed at Liam's kicking feet and pulled.

Bartek and Connor just couldn't believe what they were seeing. They stared open mouthed as Liam and Peter were dragged through the wooden board just as if they had been caught by a giant vacuum cleaner. There wasn't even any noise although Connor said he thought he heard a whooshing sound. Of course it could have just been blood rushing to his head with the shock”.

And the two boys turned and ran. They didn't even look back. They just kept running until they were nearly home.

It was a trick” gasped Connor. “It had to be a trick!”
“Maybe his Dad's one of those American magicians”.
What are we going to do?
“Should we tell someone?”

“Who’s gonna believe us?”

They argued for a while in a half hearted sort of way. It had been too much to take in. Finally they decided they would say nothing until the next day. If they had told this impossible story to their parents and then Peter and Liam turned up at school laughing at them, they would feel very silly. It would be better to say nothing until the morning. After all, no-one else had seen what had happened.

But someone else had seen the strange disappearance of Liam and Peter. Ryan had overheard more of the break time conversation than the four friends had realised. So, after school, he collected his bike and followed the boys, keeping some distance between them to make sure he wouldn’t be seen. He watched, amazed, as Liam and Peter were sucked through a solid wall and, after Bartek and Connor had run away, he wheeled his bike closer. The grid of metal bars still stood by the wall, but the board covering the old window, seemed strong and solid.

“If they can get through so can I”, thought Ryan to himself.

He carefully stood his bike by the wall and, making sure there were no cars coming, he took a few steps into the road. Then, still wearing his bike helmet, he lowered his head and charged like a bull straight at the boarded window. His head hit the wood with a whoomph that knocked him back so hard that he fell over, almost tumbling into the road. He got to his feet very glad that he had been wearing his bike helmet and feeling very embarrassed. Stiffly, he collected his bike and rode home desperately hoping that he hadn’t been seen.

Chapter 2 ~ Walk or Die

Liam sat up. For a moment he thought he must be sitting on a beach on a sunny summer's day. It was hot. He stretched.

"This is the life", he thought, happily. "An ice-cream would be perfect".

His second thoughts told a different story.

"What beach? There's no beach in Longford and it wasn't a hot day. It's never this hot in Longford".

But he could feel the warm sand between his fingers. Then he remembered. He had been on his way home from school. There was the window. He had pulled the bars away and then ... and then... Peter. Where was Peter?

Liam struggled to his feet, leaving his school bag lying on the red sand. He turned and with a sigh of relief, saw Peter just getting to his feet as well. He looked dazed.

"Where are we?" muttered Peter, almost to himself.

"Not in Longford, that's for certain", replied Liam, going over to help his friend who still seemed very confused. "I thought we were on a beach but I can't see any water. This is more like a desert.

"Where are we?" repeated Peter.

"I don't know" Liam answered, "but it is very hot. The sun is right overhead and we will get burnt if we just stand here. We need to get into the shade."

Liam looked around at a red desert landscape. To one side were ragged red mountains and to the other red sand and rock stretched as far as he could see. There was no water and little shade other than a few low scruffy bushes with hard grey green leaves. He chose the thickest of them and encouraged Peter towards what shade there was. Peter seemed to recover a bit once out of the blazing sun.



Liam stared around him in disbelief. "You were right all the time Peter", he said at last... "That window was a portal to another place. How did you know?"

"I didn't know. I was just making it up".

"But you should have warned me, went on Liam. This could be a dangerous place. There might be snakes or scorpions or anything. It's good though. So how do we get back?"

"I don't know. I was just making it up".

"Stop kidding and tell us how we get back".

Peter was almost in tears. "I don't

know".

Slowly it dawned on Peter that his friend didn't know any more than he did. This was real. Liam's dad had taken him on a couple of wilderness camping trips. It was fun trying to use the things they found around them to survive but that was different. Then it had been a holiday. Then he had been safe. Then he had been with his dad.

Liam tried to sound confident.

"Let's turn out our school bags", he said, "and see what we've got".

Besides their books they had pencils, rulers and a compass. There was some glue, scissors and a roll of sellotape. Between them they had two bottles almost full of water, one and a half sandwiches, an apple and a rather squashy banana. It wasn't much. It was

too hot for their coats and jumpers. They tried to make hats out of jumpers but they were a bit sweaty.

“We can’t stay here”, insisted Liam. “We need to find water. Let’s get ready to move”.

Peter found his Earthquest book and started looking through it. “

“I wish I had an atlas”, he said, wistfully, “I might find out where we are. Do you think this is the Sahara, or maybe the Gobi desert?”

“I once saw a picture of the Australian desert”, replied Liam looking around. “It had red sand like this”.

“That’s a long way from Longford”.

At last the boys were ready to move. Peter had made a hat out of his geography book. He opened it over his head and fixed it on with sellotape. Liam did the same with his Action Maths. They drank some of their water but saved the food for later. They weren’t sure where they would find any more. Now all they had to decide was which way to go.

“I think we should go towards the higher ground”, said Peter. “It might be cooler there and we might find more shade”.

“We should go over the scrubland away from the hills”, argued Liam. “Look there are a few trees in that direction. Where there are trees we could find water”.

They couldn’t decide so they flipped a twenty cent coin. Liam won.

They seemed to have been walking for hours. Neither boy had a watch or a phone with them so they couldn’t be sure. They had gone through the window soon after three but that didn’t mean it was the same time here. They were worried about what creatures there might be. There might be poisonous snakes or deadly scorpions but they hadn’t seen anything dangerous yet. There were plenty of lizards and geckoes. Some of them were quite big. They boys even saw one that could run very fast. It wasn’t going to hurt them though. It was running away.

One of the lizard creatures was more scary. It wasn’t very big but it had a spiny triangular devil’s face and there were pointed thorny spines all over. The most frightening bit was the tail that curved up over its body like a scorpion but it had no sting so that was o.k.



It was still very hot but the landscape was beginning to change. The ground was still red but it wasn’t so sandy and that made it easier to walk. There were more spiky dry grass clumps now, Peter thought they looked like giant hedgehogs. There were even some small trees with shiny brittle leaves..

They were almost beginning to enjoy themselves when things got very scary. Peter was just about to step forward onto a patch of sand when Liam noticed movement. It was hard to see, coiled up like that, almost the same colour as the sand, but it was there. He recognised it and he yelled.

“Liam,, whatever you do, don’t put your foot down”.

Liam stopped, his foot in mid air.

“Move away, very, very gently”.

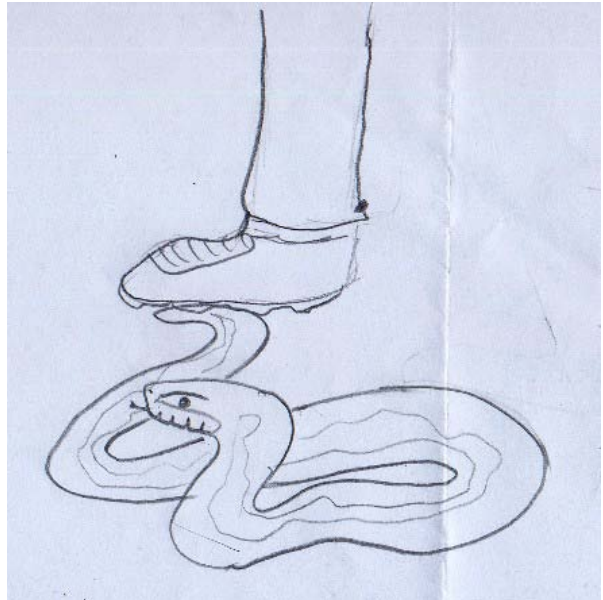
Liam, slowly and carefully, stepped sideways. When he was safe he turned and looked at Liam.

“What was that?”

Liam was shaking. “It was a Death Adder”, he answered, “one of the most poisonous and aggressive snakes in the whole world. It’s found in Australia.

After that, the boys watched every step very carefully indeed..

The boys were glad that it was getting cooler until they realised what it meant. It now late in the day and they hadn’t found water. The bottles were empty, and before long, it would be dark. But they were feeling happier about the choice of direction now. There were a lot more trees and more soil over the red sand. They stopped to rest by a rocky bank. There were small dry plants growing around the sticks of trees. Liam sat on the bank poking his fingers into little cracks and holes in the rock. One hole, about the size of his finger, looked particularly deep. It seemed to be covered by some grey stuff. You couldn’t see through it. Liam reached into his bag and brought out his tin whistle. Without thinking, he pushed it into the hole. As he pulled it out something came behind He looked on, in horror, as hairy black legs waved into the air followed by black pincers and a solid black body.



“Run”, yelled Liam and the two boys legged it.

They stopped, out of breath, a good distance away from the bank.

“What was that?” whispered Peter who hadn’t really seen the spider.

“It was a Funnel Web”, breathed Liam, still shaking. They are deadly”.

The boys walked on. Both of them could now see that the sky was changing colour. Already the blue sky was stained with pink which was rapidly turning red, almost as red as the sand. Dusk was getting close. The boys walked on. They didn’t know what else to do. Then ahead of them the boys saw a patch of darker red,

“More sand”, thought Peter. But it wasn’t sand. It was a pool of water reflecting the evening colours of the sky. Both boys rushed to fill their water bottles. As they got close something moved in the gathering shadows. It looked a bit like a deer lying on the rough grass but as it got up, startled, they could see the strong back legs and the heavy tail. It was a large red kangaroo.

“So we are in Australia”, exclaimed Peter.

And so the boys made camp as best they could. They cut long sticks from the bushy trees and stacked them up into a cone. They covered it, as best they could, with the scrubby grass clumps. Once it was ready, they crawled inside trying not to think about snakes and spiders.

It was a terrifying night for both boys, the most frightening either had ever known. It was pitch dark, absolutely dark. They could see nothing. They were hungry. There was nothing left to eat, and after the heat of the day, they even felt cold and were glad of their coats. They both felt homesick but they didn’t want to talk about it. They didn’t sleep much although, once the moon rose, it wasn’t quite as bad, but they were very glad when it

finally began to get light. The boys were ready to move before dawn. They had water to drink, although in daylight it looked a bit muddy. Peter found a bush with bright red berries but they didn't dare touch them.

After they had been walking for a while they came to another water hole. It looked greener here and they stopped to rest and drink some fresher water..

"Do you think there will be crocodiles?" asked Peter nervously.

Liam thought about this."I don't think so, he answered at last. I think crocodiles live in bigger rivers".

So now they were watching out for snakes, spiders and crocodiles. They saw none although they did see a few more kangaroos, Feeling happier, they sat down to wash their tired dusty feet in the water. Suddenly there was a slight noise behind them and they turned quickly, hoping it wasn't a crocodile after all. What they saw amazed them. There was a man standing grinning at them. His glossy black skin shone in the sunshine under a tousled shock of black spiky hair. He was wearing a pair of dusty trousers and old cloth shoes but not much more. The sun didn't seem to bother him at all. In one hand he held an animal, rather like a rabbit but with a longer face. It looked as though the man had just caught it and it was certainly quite dead. As they stared open mouthed at the strange figure he did something quite unexpected. Smiling widely he said "Hello, my name is Jimmy. Would you like some breakfast?"

Not long after the boys found themselves with Jimmy, sitting around little camp fire. The man had quickly heated them up a drink in a clay bowl over the fire. Now they were eating handfuls of nuts and berries while a couple of the rabbit like animals were roasting on a spit over the fire. He hadn't asked them a single question about why they were there.

They were feeling much better now they had eaten. The food had tasted better than it had looked. It was almost like a barbeque.

"What are you doing here?" they asked Jimmy at last.

"Just talking with the land" he answered grinning. "Just listening to the stories the hills and the desert have to tell."

This didn't help much.

"And have you got a story to tell?"

The boys looked at Jimmy. Somehow they didn't feel afraid of him. They almost thought he might believe their strange tale. Nervously they told him about the strange window and how they had been pulled through it. They told him how they needed to find a way back to Longford. Jimmy listened without comment. He didn't laugh at them.



Instead he reached for something that lay back behind his campfire. It was a long hollow tube, thick as a tree branch and as tall as either of the two boys. The cylinder was a yellow colour but decorated in bands and patterns of bright colours. The boys watched in surprise as Jimmy hunkered down and put the tube to his mouth. The strangest sounds began to emerge from the other end. At first Liam thought it sounded like a bee

trapped in a drainpipe while Liam would have described it more like an elephant with indigestion. But after a while, they seemed to hear rhythms and patterns in the music that

seemed to tell the story of the red land around them. Liam and Peter stopped feeling anxious and frightened. They just listened.

The rhythmic rumbling sounds died away and Jimmy put down the cylinder. "Now I will tell you a story of this land", he said. "Maybe it will take you home. Stories can do that". The boys didn't argue. They just listened.

"In the old days, the dream time, there were only people and they roamed a flat world. But one day the Rainbow Serpent, Goorilla, woke up and went in search of his tribe. On his way there he created the landscape of mountains and hills. The other people followed Goorilla. and very soon he found his tribe. He danced and then went to sleep. Two boys came looking for a place to sleep and he invited them into his mouth. Then Goorilla snuck away afraid he would be caught. When the tribe awoke next morning, they were angry and went in search of Goorilla and the boys. They found the Serpent asleep and cut the boys out of his stomach. The boys turned into parakeets and flew away... When Goorilla woke up he was angry to find his stomach had been cut. He began shaking the mountain and rocks started to fly towards the people. As the people tried to escape, they turned into birds and trees and animals. Eventually Goorilla tired of this and escaped into the sea, leaving us with our brothers, the plants and the animals, to look after.

Peter looked at Jimmy. "How does that help us", he asked, "Are we supposed to get ourselves eaten by a giant snake?"

"Maybe",

"That's crazy".

"Not as crazy as being dragged through a window".

"But the Rainbow Serpent is just a story about how the hills came to be."

"And the hills are still there".

"So, we have to go to the hills".

"Could be".

Peter gave Liam a hard stare. "It's all your fault Liam", he said. "I told you we should have gone towards the higher ground".

"Yea, and if we had gone that way we wouldn't have met Jimmy".

The two boys looked at Jimmy.

"But it's a long way back".

Jimmy stood up. "Let's follow the story then", he said, "Come with me. It is starting to get hot". The boys followed Jimmy away from the water hole and into the bush. It was then they got the shock of their lives. There, standing in the shadow of a bushy tree, was a battered green four- four. The boys couldn't believe their eyes.

"Hop in", said Jimmy opening the door. "I'll take you back to your hills". The boys hesitated, not sure what they should do. "You are quite right to be sure", smiled Jimmy, "but since you have landed inside a story, I seem to be the only one around to help you to follow the Rainbow Serpent safely". Jimmy put on an old checked shirt a dusty hat, and, to their astonishment, sun glasses. He climbed into the driving seat and, once the two boys were settled in the back, he drove off along the dusty path.

It was much cooler in the car and much less hard work than walking. As he drove, Jimmy told them more about himself.

"I am one of the people who have always lived on this land. Now we share the country with others but they cannot listen to the stories of the land like we do. Mostly I work on a farm but sometimes I like to come out here alone. On one of my walkabouts I followed the Rainbow Serpent to a cave in the hills. I found some unusual carvings that seem to belong to your story. That is why I am taking you there".

“Oh “, Said Liam, suddenly understanding. “Going into a cave is a bit like getting swallowed up by the Rainbow Serpent. But I still don’t understand”.

“We don’t have to understand. We just have to follow the story” replied Jimmy.

There was no road, just a rough track through the red sandy bush. They saw lizards and more kangaroos. Jimmy told them that they had been lucky to escape from the snake and the spider. He agreed that the bush could be a very dangerous place. They went on thinking about their lucky escapes as the track began to climb into the hills. The view through the dusty windows was changing and the boys’ noticed that the long curving valley that flowed between the dusty bare hills began to look as though it had been made by a giant serpent.

Jimmy didn’t mention the story again until he had parked the Land Rover. They climbed down and looked around. Ahead was a deep hollow in the red hills, and a narrow cave. It was dark inside. The boys looked at Jimmy nervously.

“Do we have to go into the cave?”

“Are you coming in with us?”.

Jimmy grinned.

“I’ll stay with you for a bit”, he answered reassuringly. “Now bring all your stuff”.

They stepped into the cave together leaving their footsteps outside in the sunshine.

After the bright white sunshine it was hard to see. They felt as if they had gone blind. Liam and Peter reached out their hands in front of them looking for the comfort of the wall. Jimmy felt their hesitation and rummaged for something in his pocket. There was a click and the darkness was shattered in the beam of a small bright torch in Jimmy’s hand.

Peter stared.

“I didn’t think you’d have a torch”, he said.

“Did you think I’d rub two sticks together?” laughed Jimmy.

“Err, yes”,

“And I didn’t think that you’d have a car either”, added Liam

“Then how did you think we’d get to the hills?”

“I thought we’d got to walk”.

Jimmy’s grin got wider.

“So I’m not what you expected then”

“Na, we thought you were a lunatic, nice, but a lunatic”.

Jimmy laughed out loud.

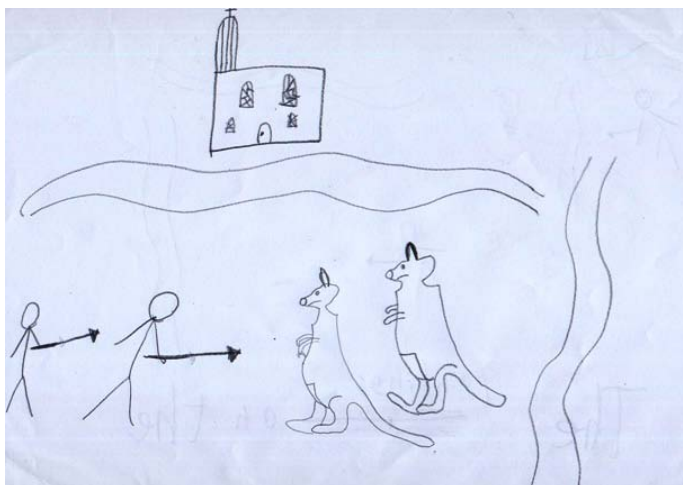
“And, you’re not lunatics, jumping into Australia through a window?”

“You could be right”, agreed Liam.

The cave wasn’t deep and they soon found themselves facing a sandy wall decorated with scratchy pictures. Peter could see stick men who seemed to be chasing some kangaroos. There were wavy lines that might be some sort of snake. And there was something else, Liam and Peter gasped in astonishment. There was a building with high windows and a round topped spire.

“But that’s....”

“But that’s ... but that’s Longford Cathedral!



"It can't be!"

"Longford Cathedral". Repeated Jimmy with an even bigger grin. Now, that would be worth seeing".

He reached forward and touched the carving. Then he vanished. He just wasn't there and neither was the light from his torch.

"Quick!" yelled Liam, "Follow him!"

With one hand Liam reached back to grab Peter and with his other, he stretched forward and touched the unexpected carving. There was a whooshing noise in his ears and he closed his eyes to stop the dizziness. When he opened them again he was sitting on the pavement staring up at Jimmy who was looking up at the grey sky behind Longford Cathedral. Jimmy turned to smile at the two boys who were just picking themselves up off the pavement.

"It's a magnificent building", he said to them happily. I always wanted to see Longford, but it's a bit cold, so I won't stay".

He handed Liam a small reddish stone. It was decorated with the same patterns that the boys had seen in the cave.

He turned and took a last look at the church with its temporary roof.

"What a pity about the fire", he said to them, took a step backwards and then just disappeared. There wasn't even a puff of smoke.

Liam and Peter went on staring at the space where Jimmy had been

"Were we dreaming?"

"I don't think so".

"What time is it?"

"What DAY is it?"

They were able to find out the time from the clock on the pharmacy wall but they had to go into the shop to ask what day it was. They felt very silly asking.

When they discovered that it was still Thursday and that they had only been gone from Longford for about an hour and a half, they weren't sure what to do. In the end they decided that it would be best to go home quickly. They agreed to try and say as little as possible until they had had time to think about the adventure some more. Nobody was going to believe them anyway. Liam put the decorated rock into his pocket and then the friends set off for home, in different directions, trailing red dust and sand.

This was going to be very hard.

Chapter 3 ~ A Step into the Unknown

There was a rumour going around St Michael's sixth class the next day. No-one knew if it was true, but Luke, Peter's neighbour,, was the only one who seemed to know what had happened. Mark and Joseph, his best friends in sixth class, grabbed him at break and started firing questions at him. Luke answered as best as he could. But it was a strange story.

"Yes, well, you know, I live right beside Peter. He got home almost two hours late last night. His mam was in with mine. She was mad with Peter but I think she was just scared because he was late. I saw him when he came in. You should have seen the state of him. His shoes! They were all cut up and worn out. His clothes were dirty and he was covered in bumps and bruises.

"Maybe he'd got in a fight".

"Na. It doesn't explain the dust, the red dust. There's nothing like that in Longford. His face and arms were all red, like he'd been in the sun too long".

"Maybe he'd been sunbathing!"

"Stupid! It was grey and drizzly in Longford all day."

Then there was his school bag. It was scuffed like it had been dragged across rocks and some of his books were torn up. One had sellotape all over it".

"How d'you know that?"

"Der, I saw it, of course, when his mam turned the bag out. "Funny, it was full of red sand".

"What did his mam say?"

"Well, she kept on asking where he had been and why his clothes were ruined"..

"What did Peter say? Did he explain?"

"He wouldn't say anything except that he had been with his new friend Liam".

"What, the fifth class boy who came here from America?"

"Yes, but he's not in school today so I can't ask him."

"Is Peter in school?"

"Yes, but he's gone quiet. He doesn't want to talk to anyone."

The boys were still discussing the mystery at lunch break. In the end, the only thing they could think of was that Liam and Peter must have been in a fight. When they saw Ryan they felt sure they were correct because of the huge purple bruise darkening his forehead.. If he had been in a fight with Peter and Liam then he had been the loser.

The boys sauntered up to Ryan who was, as usual, hanging about in the yard by himself.

"We know what happened to you yesterday", teased Joseph..

Ryan turned bright red. "Oh No!" he thought "I was seen throwing myself at that window"..

Luke, Mark and Joseph looked at each other convinced that they were right. Ryan had been fighting.

Ryan looked petulant. "You saw nothing", he said." It wasn't me".

"Go on", added Mark. "Tell us what happened with Peter and Liam".

Ryan looked for some way of escape. They had seen him make a idiot of himself. He shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably.

"Didn't do nothing", he muttered.

"Where d'you get that bruise on your head then? Fighting with someone?"

"Fell off my bike last night", mumbled Ryan "Wasn't fighting"..

The boys almost felt sorry for him. After all it had been two against one.

"You don't have to feel bad about losing a fight", Mark said soothingly, "It happens"..

Ryan realised he had been holding his breath. He let it out in one big puff. So the boys didn't know about him head butting the window. They thought he had been fighting. That

wasn't half so bad. He relaxed and almost smiled. The boys smiled back and walked away together certain they had been correct about the fight.

It was just before the end of lunch break that Luke thought of something.

"It still doesn't make sense", he told Joseph and Mark. "Winning a fight doesn't fill a school bag full of bright red sand".

"No", agreed Mark. "And fighting doesn't give you a sun tan".

"There's Connor and Bartek", suggested Joseph. "They left school yesterday with Liam and Peter, I saw them".

The three friends ran off to find the two fifth class boys.

.They found Connor and grabbed him before he could run away.

"S'alright Connor, we only want to ask you something"

Connor sighed deeply. He had been afraid of this.

"Did anything strange happen after school yesterday?" asked Luke. "You know, with Peter and Liam?"

Conor sighed again. He really didn't want to talk about it.

"It was only a trick", he stammered

"What trick"

"Oh nothing"

"Look it's important. Liam's not in school today"

Conor thought hard and then said quickly "He fell off his bike and broke his leg. He's in hospital".

"If that was true, we'd have heard about it", persisted Joseph "Tell us what really happened".

You won't believe it".

"Try us".

And that was how they got to hear the whole story. They thought he was making it up it but they had to let Conor go. It was time to go back to class.

After school they decided to walk home past the barred window. They still couldn't believe that Connor's crazy story was true but they couldn't be sure. Joseph was worried

"What if it is true? He asked. "If Peter got dragged through trying to pull Liam back then what we need is rope".

"How's that going to help?"

"You see", added Joseph, "If we tie ourselves together, then if one of us gets pulled through,, we can pull him back with the rope".

This seemed a good idea so the three boys went to the pound shop for a rope before going back to Great Water Street. The window was just the same as usual. However the bars were propped up against the wall, just as Conor had described...

The three boys stood around for a while feeling a foolish waiting until the street was empty. They didn't want anyone to see them tying themselves together on a length of rope. Finally they linked themselves together as they had planned. Now it was time for one of them to try to walk through solid wood. It had felt exciting when they had talked about it earlier. Now it just felt silly. They stood there looking at each other waiting to see who would be the first to speak. Eventually it was Mark who broke the silence.

"I'll do it", he said. "Nothing will happen, but just in case, be ready with the rope so you can pull me back"...

The other two just nodded, now too nervous to speak..

Luke and Joseph tied themselves to the ends of the rope with Mark in the middle. Then they took up their positions on the pavement to each side of the window leaving just enough slack to allow Mark the chance to climb through the window, if that was possible, which it wasn't. The three boys glanced around. There was no-one passing. Quickly Mark took a deep breath and ran forward. He jumped up raising his hands to hit against the window, fully expecting to hit the wood and be pushed back.

He ran and he jumped. For Mark it was if the world had gone into slow motion. He could feel himself jumping ... and jumping ... and jumping. Then he was stretching. He thought he must be long and thin like a piece of cooked spaghetti. He was stretching through warm mist. It was strange but not unpleasant. It seemed to go on forever. And then his feet suddenly caught up with his chin and he landed in a tumbled bump.

Joseph and Luke saw Mark run and reach up to the window. Then it was odd. His feet lifted off the ground. He was floating but not for long. He was pulled rapidly through the solid wood, his head, body, legs and finally feet just suddenly cut off by the boarded window. Joseph and Luke stared in fascinated horror as their friend vanished. Then it was their turn. The rope tied to them, twitched and the boys were pulled up and relentlessly through the board of the window in a struggling tangle of arms and legs. They never could work out how they had both been pulled through the small opening at the same time. It should have been impossible. But then none of this should have been possible.

Joseph and Luke landed on something soft and squirmy. It was a while before they realised that they had landed on Mark.

Chapter 4 ~ The Roof of Africa

The first thing that Mark Naguma knew about was the pain in his leg. He was breathless and stunned as if he had fallen out of the sky. He couldn't move. He opened his eyes.

"Get off".

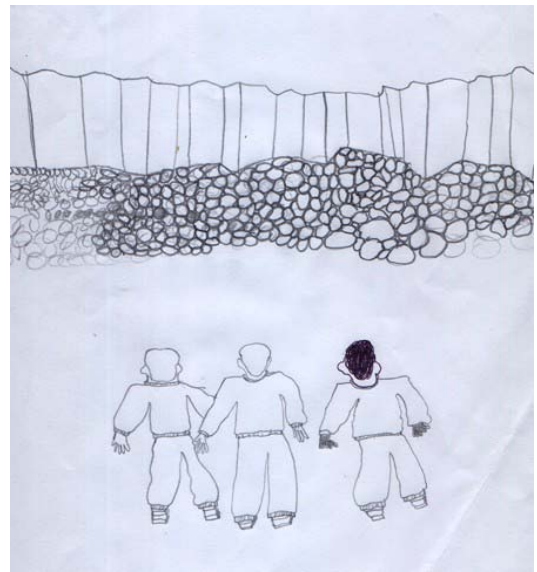
Joseph and Luke weren't sure what had happened or where they were. When they opened their eyes, all they could see was blue sky above them.

"Get off".

It was Mark's voice they could hear. He sounded annoyed. Joseph and Luke tried to sit up and then discovered what was wrong. They were lying sprawled on top of Mark. Quickly, they struggled to their feet, shading their eyes from the brilliant sunshine. They untied themselves from the rope, It hadn't helped much. Mark sat up.

"Where are we?" he asked.

Luke and Joseph looked around them wide eyed. This was certainly not Longford. The air was very fresh and cold, even though the sun was strong. They were standing on gravel, grey and rough. There was almost nothing growing here other than a few scrubby bushes and spiky grass stalks all the way to the slope ahead of them. It was when they turned to look behind them that they had the greatest shock. There was a shining cliff of silver white ice. It looked like a great city, with towers and turrets formed from glittering glaciers. It was very beautiful and very cold.



Mark got to his feet at last, rubbing his sore leg. He looked around him and whistled, "It worked", he gasped. "The window IS a portal. I wonder where it has taken us."

"Not where it took Liam and Peter then. There's no red sand here".

"This can't be real". Joseph turned and pinched Luke.

"Ouch" complained Luke. That won't help.

Mark examined the landscape carefully. "I think we are up a mountain" he said. "We must be very high up if there are glaciers".

"Do you think this is Everest?"

"I don't think so", answered Mark slowly. "It is very cold here but I think Everest would be colder and icier".

Luke stamped his feet trying to keep warm. His coat wasn't thick enough for this environment.

"It feels cold enough to me. Is there any way we can get back through the window?" he asked hopefully.

The boys examined every centimetre of their surroundings but there was no sign of any portal. For now they were stuck here.

"Liam and Peter got back".

"But we don't know how long they were away. Perhaps time runs differently through the window".

"We can't stay here. We would need cold weather clothes".

"We need to get further down the mountain".

The boys picked up their bags and began to run around in panic looking for a way down. This was very scary.

“Be careful”, warned Mark. “Mountains can be very dangerous”. Come over here. This is the way. The boys began to walk together down the scree slope.

They were a long way up the mountain. There were even clouds below them. It made it hard to see, but through the mist they could glimpse a vast landscape of forests and distant golden plains far below. The first part of the journey down was difficult and very risky. There was no path so all they could do was to follow a small, icy stream that poured itself on to the rough slope. The stones were loose and easily kicked. Every so often a false step would send pieces of rock bouncing and spinning down the steep slope. At least, if they kept close to the rapid stream, meant the rocks were less likely to fall but their feet,, wearing only trainers, became very wet. It was very slow going. The boys were happy they had set out on a Friday and weren't carrying so many school books.

When they entered the thick patches of cloud mist, it got much worse. Now they couldn't even see where they were going, The journey became even more treacherous.

“We've got the rope”, Joseph pointed out. “Do you think we should tie ourselves together?”

“No way”, replied Mark, taking the lead again. “If one of us falls he'll pull the others over”.

They struggled on,

They were never sure how long they had walked. It felt like hours and it probably was. But, finally, they got down to a point where the cloud mist patches were above them. It was still cold but not so icy fresh. .They stopped for a break beside the rushing stream that was threatening to become a waterfall in places.

“We need a rest”, Joseph looked out of breath.

Mark looked around. “This is as good a place as any“, he replied. “And we need time to answer some questions. We must try to find out where we are and what we've got to help us.”

Gratefully, Mark and Joseph sat on flat rocks. They weren't used to walking this far..

“We need to look for clues to help us decide where we are”, went on Mark.

“We are on Earth for a start”, commented Joseph

“How do you make that out then?” asked Luke,

“Well we're breathing aren't we?”

“I've been looking at the sun” said Mark, taking no notice of Luke and Joseph.. “It's very high. My watch says that it is now three thirty pm but I wouldn't trust it. That's about the time we went through the window. It hasn't stopped but I don't think that it is telling the time here. We might be close to the Equator”.

“What, glaciers at the equator? Impossible”.

“Not impossible”.

Mark went on looking up into the sky. Then he stopped and pointed. The boys noticed that he was indicating a colourful bird wheeling above. .

”I recognise that bird from when I lived in Africa”, he said excitedly. It's a Zu Zu. They come up to nest in the mountains. They have red on the chest, blue on the wings on the back, and green on the head. Yes, there it goes”. He turned to the others very pleased with himself. “Do you know what that means? It means we are in Africa. There is only one mountain high enough to have glaciers on the top. We are in Tanzania, on Mount Kilimanjaro, the roof of Africa”.

“It's a long way from Longford”, muttered Joseph gloomily

Mark was too excited to take any notice. He was looking all around him, his eyes shining. "Did you know", he went on, "this mountain is really one big inactive volcano. There are three peaks, Shira, Kibo and Mawenzi, the highest is nearly 6000metres above sea level, but I don't know for sure which is which.

"How come you know so much about the mountain?"

"Because I always planned to climb the mountain as as I was old enough. I tried to learn as much as I could to prepare, but then we moved to Longford."

"And do you know if there is any way we can get down it?"

"Well it's not too difficult a mountain to climb", answered Mark doubtfully". There are five different walking routes but I don't know which one we are following".

"I hope it's the easiest".

The boys were feeling a bit better now they had taken a chance to rest. Mark was still feeling excited. He couldn't believe he was really here.

"Come and sit down, Mark", said Luke. "Aren't you feeling hungry? We need to see what we have to eat between us".

Mark sat down and they began to turn out their school bags. There wasn't much to eat. They shared out the couple of sandwiches, the bag of crisps, the yoghurt and the two apples. Luke even ate up the crusts of his sandwiches that he had discarded at lunchtime. Now he was glad he hadn't put them in the bin. Water wasn't a problem. They could all fill their empty water bottles from the rapid stream. The water was ice cold and deliciously refreshing.

Mark licked the last sandwich crumbs of his fingers and looked at the sky. "It's getting late in the day", he commented. "We might be safe up here but we are still high up on the mountain. It will be very cold here when it gets dark. We ought to go down further".

"Are we going to spend the night on the mountain?" asked Luke "We haven't even got a tent?"

"What do you think?" answered Mark. "We have no choice, unless you can find the window again".

Luke and Joseph said nothing but they suddenly felt very afraid. They hadn't thought about being here at night. Slowly they packed up their bags and followed Mark down the slope.

They followed the little stream down as far as they could. Then it began to rush away over rocks and tumbled down over a sheer cliff. The only path they could find took a different direction, curving through scrubby grass and ferns. Now the land was a mixture of rock and soil and it was easier to walk. Mark was keeping an eye on the sky. He could see the first sunset colours painting the horizon. He also knew that, because they were so near the equator, it would get dark very rapidly. There would be no long slow twilight like there always was in Ireland. He encouraged the boys to keep up a good pace.

Luke was feeling very anxious. "We haven't even got a torch", he moaned. "What are we going to do?"

Mark looked at the boys. He knew they were used to living in a town, even if it wasn't a very big town. They had never even been camping. Before he had come to live in Longford he had slept out in the wild lots of times. This place wasn't as strange to him as it was to them. Perhaps, for now, he shouldn't mention the leopards that came up the mountain to hunt. He didn't want to think about that himself.

Then Mark noticed a sort of gully between two large rocks. There was an almost a rectangular space between them. Maybe they could cut branches to lay over the top to create a roof. It wouldn't be very comfortable but it would give them some shelter.

When he explained his plan to Luke and Joseph, they were not at all happy.

“We can’t sleep on the ground. It’s too hard”.

“We haven’t any blankets”.



Once Mark had laid bundles of dried grass on the stony ground between the rocks, and used broken branches to make a roof, it didn’t seem quite as bad. The space had become a protected, almost cosy, tent. It was nearly dark now so the boys didn’t argue. They huddled together inside their makeshift shelter using their coats as covers. At first the darkness was terrifying. It was so hard to accept that you couldn’t just reach out and switch on the light. Then the moon rose and it wasn’t so bad. It was cold and uncomfortable, but they did manage to sleep for a while.

The three boys woke up with a terrible shock. There was a sniffing grunting sound as something, some animal, was ripping away the roof branches. They saw two dark eyes and a long brown muzzle with an open grinning mouth full of teeth. A long hairy arm, with human like fingers, reached towards them.

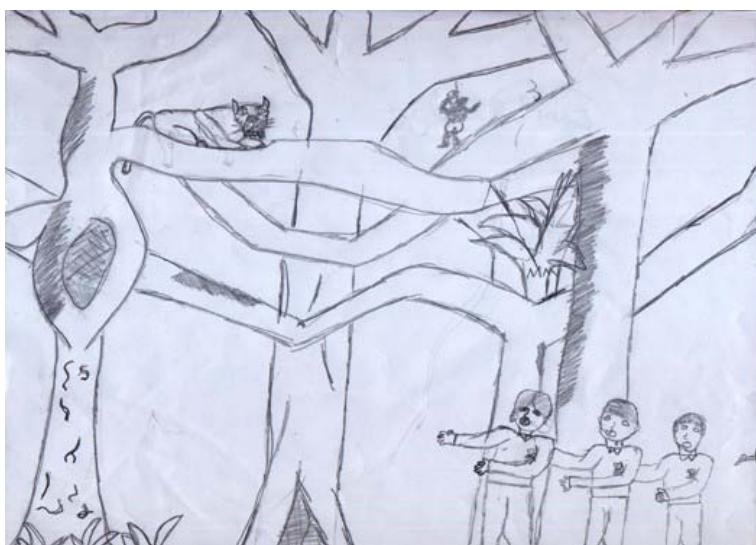
“It’s only a monkey”, gasped Luke in relief.

“It’s a baboon and they are more dangerous than they look. Listen both of you, carefully, and without any sudden movements, reach underneath you and feel for a couple of stones. When you have got them start clashing them together above you”.

The boys did exactly as they had been asked and the sudden loud noise made the baboon leap away chattering in fear. As they sat up they could see the animal bounding off among the trees.

“Baboons come up the mountain at night to find somewhere safe to sleep, away from leopards”, explained Mark.

The sun was just rising and they were happy to get up. They stretched and stamped trying to get the life back into their stiff arms and legs. They drank some water from their full water bottles but there was nothing to eat. Mark hoped that he would find something for them as they travelled further down the mountain. Joseph and Luke set off grumbling and moaning but Mark couldn’t help but be happy. This was all such a marvellous adventure. The trees were still sparse but there were more of them in the rocky landscape. It was cold, and the boys were glad of their coats but Mark could feel that, today,, it would get much warmer.



Then he heard the rustling sound behind them. Some instinct told him that it wasn’t the wind. He turned and there, smoothly and silently walking towards them on a low tree branch, was a sleek black shape with glowing yellow eyes. It was a black leopard, a panther. The boys froze, staring in horror.

“Do we keep still?” whispered Joseph to Mark.

“Yes, no, Yes, I don’t know” muttered Mark. The leopard was staring straight at him. He was certain that once a leopard saw you, there was no way to escape. He was sure they were going to be eaten. Suddenly there was an angry chattering sound and a hairy brown shape flung itself over a rock and into a tree. It was the baboon. It must have been following them until it saw the panther and tried to get away. The panther turned and growled as the agitated baboon fled. The panther pounced, missed the baboon and followed it. Both animals disappeared leaving all three boys very relieved. They moved on as quickly as possible.

They were leaving the rocky landscape behind. Tall grasses and ferny plants covered the ground. Now there were some strange trees. They looked like short stubby palm trees topped with house-plant ferns. Growing around their roots were thick fleshy plants. Mark smiled.. He had seen these before.



“Are you thirsty”, he asked stopping. See those plants that look like thick cabbages. If you pull one up and poke a stick into it you’ll get water”.

The boys tried it. They even managed to drink some of the liquid that trickled out.. It was a bit bitter but quite drinkable.

“Can you find us some breakfast as well?” asked Luke.

“I think I can”, smiled Mark. He bent down to the soil where he had pulled up the fleshy plant and

scooped up a red handful of something.

“Try these”, he said opening his fist. Joseph and Luke were horrified to see that he was clutching a palm full of insects.

“These bugs are very tasty, sort of crunchy and then soft. You can eat them raw but be careful to pinch off the stingers first. They won’t kill you but they can give you a nasty nip” He demonstrated how it should be done, munching away at the insects with obvious enjoyment, Joseph and Luke were disgusted.

“I’d rather die”, groaned Luke. “That’s not breakfast. I would rather have a zeppelin like I used to eat in Lithuania”.

“If there is nothing else”, I’ll give it a try”, said Joseph, tentatively, and he reached out for one of the red bugs. He dropped several on the ground before he managed to twist off one of the stingers. Closing his eyes, he put the bug in his mouth and chewed. He screwed up his face but managed to swallow the mouthful but he couldn’t bring himself to try another.

Mark had found a rock that had a hollow in it a bit like a bowl. Then he had taken some of the insects and mashed them up with a stone.

“They taste better like this”.

Luke turned away. “I’m not hungry”. He said defiantly.

Mark shrugged. His friends weren’t very adventurous about what they would eat. He led them on through the trees. Maybe further on he might find some fruit that it was safe.

Mid morning, they were still walking and it was getting warmer. There were more trees and Mark was keeping an eye out for fruit that he recognised. He hadn’t seen anything yet but he was certain that he would find something before long. Maybe, this was why he was not looking where he was going, and he tripped, catching his foot between two rocks. He

yelped and fell heavily to the ground. Joseph and Luke ran over to help him. Between them, they freed his foot. Mark sat and rubbed it. It was very sore and he hoped he would still be able to walk.



Meanwhile, Joseph was examining the rocky hole that had caused Mark's accident. There seemed to be something odd buried in it. He thought it was made of wood but it wasn't a tree root. Bit by bit he cleared the soil and stones away until he could free the buried object and rub the dust off. He carried his find over to show Luke and Mark. It was a polished black box, big enough to need both hands to carry it, inlaid with patterns of red, yellow and shiny white stone. It was beautiful. Carefully, he opened the box while Luke and Mark watched. There inside was a mask, decorated in gold with more of the red, and yellow stone. He lifted it out of the box and they all examined it carefully.

"It's a panther mask" said Mark

"How's it a panther", asked Luke.

"Can you see the jaws and the teeth"?

Now Mark had pointed it out they could clearly see it was a black cat of some kind.

"This could be part of the legend", said Mike excitedly.

"What legend?"

"My Grandfather told me the legend of the Black Leopard King of Kilimanjaro".

"Tell us".

"Well, there was once a proud and powerful king. He thought that he was as strong and brave as a panther, so he called himself the "Black Leopard" King. He was already king of all the lands around but he wanted the glittering white crown of Kilimanjaro as well. He sent his soldiers to take the mountain in his name but they never returned. Nothing came back to him except the rumour of a terrible spirit beast, a glittering white ice leopard that guarded the mountain peak. At last, the king went up the mountain himself, taking with him his magic black leopard mask. No-one ever saw him, or the mask again".

"And you think this is the king's mask", breathed Luke.

"But it's just a story", argued Joseph.

Mark wasn't listening any more. He was fascinated by the object he held in his hands.. Slowly, carefully, he lifted up and placed it over his face. When he released his hands, the mask remained, covering his face. Mark lifted his head and became rigid with shock.

"I can see! I can see!", he cried out. "There is a shining silver trail running up the mountain. We have to follow it".

Joseph and Luke stared in dismay.

"You're mad. There's nothing there".

"Take the mask off".

Joseph reached out and tried to pull the mask away from Mark's face but it wouldn't budge. It was as if it had become part of Mark's face. Joseph leapt back. It was scary.

"We must follow the track up the mountain", repeated Mark in a strange low voice, and he began to run, showing no sign of his injured foot.

"Oh, bananas! groaned Joseph. We have only just got down. I was hoping to see elephants and giraffes!"



They had to decide quickly if they wanted to follow Mark or not. There wasn't much choice. He knew more about this environment than they did. But Mark had gone crazy!

It was hard to keep up with him. He moved like a cat as he picked his way upward through the stony landscape with delicate agility. Joseph and Luke scrambled up the slope after Mark. It wasn't as hard as they feared. Mark was following an unseen trail that avoided all the loose rocks and stumbling places that had made their route down so slow. If they got too far behind, Mark would turn and wait, silent and still, watching and waiting with no sign of tiredness. Luke and Joseph were very weary and very hungry but somehow they had to keep going,.

And so the day went on with the exhausted boys following Mark back up a mountain path that they could not even see. At last Mark reached a cliff wall. The glittering ice city was now close above them again. As far as Joseph and Luke could see, their path was blocked but Mark took no notice. He stepped forward and was gone. Joseph and Luke gasped but when they examined the area carefully they found a steeply sloping pit going down into ground at the foot of the rocky cliff. Nervously, they scrambled and tumbled into the pit after their friend.

The floor of the pit was bumpy almost crunchy. As their eyes became accustomed to the dim lit that strayed in through the entrance hole, Joseph and Luke glanced down. They screamed, and almost fled. They were treading on bones, human bones. They could see long leg and arm bones, tiny finger and toe bones, and even a few grinning skulls. Around the walls of the cave leaned spears, tipped in silver and hung with ancient feathers. From the floor, in the dim light, came the flash, the gleam of gold.

"Do you think these were the soldiers the Black Leopard King sent to win the mountain for him?" whispered Joseph.

"How should I know", replied Luke, terrified of all these bones. "Just let's find Mark and get out of here".

But when they saw Mark they forgot all about the bones beneath their feet. He was poised and still, his catlike face close to another mask carved into the end wall of the sloping pit. This mask was almost a match for the one Mark wore except that it glittered with patterns of silver and white stone, a contrast to the black, yellow and gold of Mark's mask.



It was then that something happened that Joseph and Luke could never forget, although, when they talked about it later, they still could not quite believe what they had seen. In front of their startled eyes, both Mark and the mask of the white leopard began to transform. The shapes flowed and billowed like misty smoke but what the boys clearly saw was a sleek black leopard, dark as shadow, face to face with a glistening white beast, sharp as a frosty dawn. The two beasts opened their jaws as if to growl at each other but what happened was, if anything, more frightening. As the two terrible cats leapt, they seemed to flow into each other like, mirror images, from teeth to tail tip, and then they were gone.

Joseph and Luke started breathing again. They had hardly noticed that they had been holding their breath for so long. All that was left was a large ragged hole in the wall where the white mask had been. But there was something odd about the hole. Although it still glittered with melting frost, a watery light shone through it onto the pit floor. Shadowy shapes moved behind it in the distance. Then they realised what it was that they were seeing. They were looking into Great Water Street and the moving shapes were cars.

“Quickly”, yelled Joseph. “It’s our window. We can get back to Longford”.

“What about Mark?”

“I don’t know, what happened to him but I’m not waiting to find out”.

He scrambled up and pushed himself, head first through the hole. Luke took one last desperate look back, just in case Mark should be suddenly there. He followed Joseph’s fast disappearing feet.

Joseph had his eyes tight shut. He wasn’t sure where he was. He could feel hot breath on his face and a strange panting sound in his ear.. He was sure he was about to be eaten by a leopard, at the very least. Joseph did the bravest thing he had ever done. He opened his eyes. A small black spaniel was sniffing at him as he sprawled on the pavement in Great Water Street. A tall man pulled on the lead attached to the inquisitive dog and yanked it away, tut-tutting disapprovingly as he walked off down the street.

Joseph sighed in relief and stood up. A little further down the road Luke was doing the same thing. And there was Mark, leaning against the rough wall turning the leopard mask over in his hands as if he had never seen it before.

“Mark, It’s you, You’re alright, You’re not crazy.”

“Me, crazy? Why? What happened? How did we get back here?”

“You don’t remember? You turned into a leopard”.

But It didn’t matter what they said to him. Mark could remember nothing from the moment he first picked up the mask.

“You don’t remember getting the mask stuck to your face?”

“You don’t remember leaping up the mountain like a cat?”

“You don’t remember meeting the ice leopard?”

“No”.

Joseph and Luke were too exhausted to argue. They were ravenously hungry as well. As far as they were concerned they had eaten almost nothing and hardly slept in twenty four hours .It was strange that Mark was neither tired nor hungry.

How long were we gone then?” asked Joseph wondering how much trouble they would be in. He checked his phone. It hadn’t been working earlier but it was fine now. He was very relieved to find they had been gone only around an hour and a half, although his stomach insisted that was a big lie.

In the end, they decided just to go home. It was Saturday tomorrow and the start of the half term holiday. It would give them time to think about the adventure. Mark sighed, looking up at the drizzly grey Longford sky. He wished he could have stayed on Kilimanjaro..

Chapter 5 ~ Following Adventure

Josie knew that there had to be something going on at St Michael's. Something had happened to her friend Lola's brother Liam. Lola had talked about little else in school all day. She had even got Josie into trouble for whispering to her in class.

None of it really made sense but Lola thought it was very exciting and told her all about how Liam came home late on Thursday with torn clothes and covered in red dust and sand.

"Mom thought he had been fighting and she was real mad. She was all for going up to the school to complain only Liam wouldn't let her. He promised her that no-one had been bullying him, and what with Dad being away, working in New York, she didn't know what to do."

"What did Liam say", Josie whispered back, forgetting about her maths.

"Not much", He looked done in, exhausted and all red as if he'd been in the sun too much. He was really hungry. Mom put him straight to bed and I think she wanted to get the doctor. She kept him home today". I didn't really get time to talk to him this morning. He was still asleep.

"Maybe he had been messing on a building site it doesn't explain the sunburn. It rains all the time here".

"I don't know".

"But didn't he say anything at all?"

"Well he just kept talking about a multi coloured snake or something."

"P'raps he's gone mad?"

"He's always been mad".

They had to stop talking then.

On Friday evening it was Josie who rang Lola.

"My brother's Luke's hiding something now", she rushed excitedly. "He came back late from school today. He looked as if he had been living rough for days.

"And would he tell you anything?"

"Just a load of rubbish about climbing through a window and ending up in Africa".

Why can't he just tell you the truth?"

"What do you expect? He's my brother".

The girls talked about what to do. Finally they decided to call Nadia, Josie's other best friend in sixth class. Lola knew Liam and his friends would be hanging out in the Mall with their football in the morning, if it wasn't raining. Maybe, if the girls just happened to be going the same way, about the same time, they might just, well, not follow the boys, but just keep an eye on where they went, just in case. They weren't sure if there was any point but it was all they could think of.

On Saturday morning Nadia and Josie met Lola near her house in Battery Road. The girls had planned their "surveillance", as Lola called it, very carefully. It was a bit like something out of a detective story. Lola had kept in touch with the other girls by mobile so that they *just happened* to meet each other, *by accident* just behind the boys who were on their way to the mall. They were almost sure that the boys hadn't even noticed them and even if they had, why shouldn't the girls be on their way to the shops or something. It was very exciting. They tried not to be seen. If one of the boys looked back then the girls quickly hid themselves behind bushes or cars or whatever was handy.

They got close to the turn off to the Mall Walk, the alleyway that they were sure that the boys would take. Sure enough, all four boys turned left as they expected. They saw Connor turn back but he didn't seem to have noticed them.

"We've done it", said Lola, pleased with herself. You'll all make the FBI yet".

But as the girls quickly reached the Mall walk there was no sign of the boys. They had disappeared, into thin air. The girls stood still and stared. They had lost their quarry.

"They must have an invisibility cloak like Harry Potter", said Nadia, looking bewildered. "It is the only thing that makes sense".

Josie stared at her, tossing her short brown hair. "Nadia, you read too much", she countered, scathingly. There is no such thing.

Nadia seemed a little upset until Lola replied. "And I suppose our brothers coming back from who knows where covered in dust and dirt and sunburn does make sense. Leave Nadia alone. She might even be right!"

There was no point standing there arguing. They had lost the boys. What should they do next? It was Nadia who noticed that someone was following them. She pointed out the tall boy with his bike to the other girls. The boy had come up from the town but now he was just standing staring at them. His fair hair flopped over his eyes but even from this distance they could see how pale he was. He looked as if he was in shock.

"I know who that is", said Josie, "its Ryan. He lives near Luke and me. He's in fifth class Luke doesn't like him much. He pushes the younger boys around, Luke says but we have to talk to him sometimes because he's in our street"...

"He doesn't look very scary to me, "replied Nadia. He looks upset".

But Josie wasn't listening. She had marched straight up to Ryan.

"Who d'you think you're staring at?" she said rudely. "Were you following us?"

Ryan backed away from the girl.

"No! Yes! No!" he stammered.

"Make up your mind", went on Josie. "What were you doing then?"

Ryan was too taken aback to argue with her.

"I wasn't following you", he muttered after a pause. "I was following Liam, Peter, Connor and Bartek. At least, I was trying to. Then I saw you. You were already following the boys so I stopped to watch what happened".

"What makes you think we were following the boys", queried Lola

"It was kinda obvious", sneered Ryan, getting his confidence back now he wasn't facing Josie alone. He had seen her with Peter often enough. Her red hot temper could be a bit scary.

"We were being very discreet", answered Lola, a little offended.

"Dis ,what?" Ryan stared at her. "All I know is that you were jumping around behind bushes and cars. You looked like you were all playing some mad game of hide and go seek. Couldn't help see you. Neither could Liam and his friends.

Nadia ignored Ryan's scoffing tone. "So what happened then", she asked. "How did the boys disappear like that?"

Ryan laughed loudly. "They had you", he grinned. They never disappeared. They hid round the church and never went down the Mall Walk at all.

Josie was getting angry.

"Oh, shut up, Ryan", she said. "You still haven't explained why you were following the boys in the first place or, she added pointedly, "why you looked so scared"...

Ryan stopped grinning immediately. He did look scared.

"Tell us Ryan", begged Nadia.

“You wouldn’t believe me”

“You wouldn’t believe what we can believe”, said Lola encouragingly. “I can believe pigs might fly or ... or that doors have ears”.

“And Nadia believes in invisibility cloaks”, added Josie, Nadia gave her a look.

Ryan stared at the girls. They really did want to know and he really did need to tell someone. He just didn’t know where to start. He thought about it some more and made up his mind.

“I won’t tell you”, he said slowly, “but I will try to show you. Just follow me”.

The girls didn’t know what to make of all this but Ryan seemed quite serious so they followed him. He led them down past the church and then around the bend into the high street. Past the cinema, on the other side of the road they stopped at Great Water Street. Without hesitation, Ryan turned left and the girls followed him.

“It was funny”, thought Josie. She passed this road so often but she didn’t usually come down here. It wasn’t so close to her school and, if she was going to the shopping centre. She usually went under the arch by Super Mac’s.

Ryan stopped suddenly and the girls looked around them with interest. What did he want to show them? There were a few old closed-up buildings and some new ones, but nothing unusual. Ryan pointed to a ruined wall with a boarded up window... Standing nearby was a grid of rusty yellow bars. They looked like they had once fitted over the boarded window. The girls stood there amazed. Was this what all the fuss was about? It was ridiculous!

“Now what?” asked Josie, suspiciously?

“I’ve had a good look around, went on Ryan, ignoring her question. “I even managed to get round the back but it’s just waste ground. There’s nothing there.

“What ARE you going on about?”

“Just keep back and I’ll show you”.

Ryan carefully leaned his bike against the wall, well away from the boarded window. He kept his bike helmet on. Then, to the girl’s amazement he walked up to the grubby window, took a few steps into the road, put his head down and threw himself at the window. There was a loud clunk as his helmet hit the wood and Ryan was flung down, landing on his back on the pavement. He picked himself up and, giving the three girls a desperate look, grabbed his bike and fled, peddling furiously away down the road.

“It worked for the others”, he shouted over his shoulder as he went.

Josie turned and stared at Lola.

“Now WHAT was THAT all about?” she asked astonished. Lola turned.

“It seemed to be something to do with that boarded up window”,

Nadia moved closer to the window and raised her hand curiously to touch the board.

“Wait”, shouted Lola. “I don’t have a clue what’s happening here but I think we should experiment”.

She walked up to where Nadia was standing and peered at the board.

“It looks OK”, she said.

Josie picked up a stone.

“Move away, she called. She threw the stone. It hit the board and bounced back.

“Told you”, she laughed.

Lola didn’t give up. She bent close to the window and sniffed.

“It is odd”, she commented. “It doesn’t smell like damp board. I can smell flowers and green plants. It has a sort of jungle smell. It’s warm here as well.

Josie laughed.

“Next you’ll be telling me you believe in Nadia’s Harry Potter magic”.

Lola looked at her slowly

“You said your brother told you he went through a window to Africa”, she said. And she touched the board with a careful finger. Her finger disappeared, followed by her hand, cut off by the board. Nadia screamed and grabbed Lola. The two girls fell backwards, landing on the pavement. They picked themselves up, white and shaking.

“It’s true”, gasped Lola

“It’s a magic door, you know, like Narnia” replied Nadia.

“Just like Narnia”, whispered Josie. “Let’s go through it”.

“Wait a moment”, Lola grabbed Josie’s arm. “We need to plan. The boys got back but they looked bad. I guess they didn’t have time to prepare. Let’s go back to my house and get a few things, No one will notice what we take. There is still stuff in boxes in my house. We haven’t finished unpacking yet.

An hour or so later the girls were back, in front of the window, with stuffed backpacks. It wasn’t far to Lola’s house in Battery Road and her mother had been too busy to notice the girls rummaging in the unpacked boxes. Lola had found a small, very lightweight, tent although she wasn’t sure if it would be big enough for three. They had found a couple of light sleeping bags as well. They had borrowed a change of clothes and Nadia reminded them to take spare underwear as well.

“Remember”, she told them, “If this is a Narnia-ish door we might be gone for a very long time, even if only an hour or two passes here”.

The girls had quickly hunted for spare batteries to go with their torches. They also had rope, sun cream, insect spray, toothpaste and soap in their packs. They felt that they were now well prepared. Of course they had some food and water with them although they weren’t sure what to take...At the last moment, Lola picked up her camera.

“We are going to feel very silly if the window doesn’t let us through”, said Josie. It didn’t let Ryan through”.

“My hand went through”, argued Lola.

“It doesn’t mean it will again”.

They couldn’t decide who would try to go through first. Finally they agreed to hold hands. Feeling very nervous, Lola looked around her. The street was quiet. Lola took a deep breath then she moved forward and lifted her free hand to the boarded window and laid it flat on the wood. There was a sensation of warmth around her wrist which quickly turned to heat. She was vaguely aware of yelps behind her and realised that her own voice had joined in. She felt very dizzy and realised that she wasn’t standing but lying on the pavement. No, it wasn’t pavement. Her face was lying on moss and leaves. She could hear cars? No, not cars. She could hear strange metallic bell like sounds. She had heard it before somewhere, Parrots! It was parrots”. This wasn’t Longford. They had gone through the window into another place.

Chapter 6: The Land of the Monkeys

Lola sat up. She had been lying on a bed of trailing plants with glossy green leaves. The air smelt stuffy and flowery. Lola breathed deeply and then remembered.. Nadia, Josie, where were they? She jumped up quickly and looked around. She found herself standing among huge trees, draped in long leafy vines, but she was alone. For a moment she panicked, her heart beating wildly, until she saw them, lying together,. They were not moving.

Lola ran over to them nearly catching her foot in a creeper. As she bent down the two girls began to stir. Josie opened her eyes.

"Where am I?" she said.

"I can't believe you really said that", grinned Lola. "The window worked. We're in a jungle".

Nadia opened her eyes and sat up as well.

"But there aren't any jungles in Longford".

"That's because we're not in Longford. I wonder where we are"

"Is the window still there so we can get back when we want?"

The three girls looked around but there was nothing to see. Suddenly they did not feel quite as excited.

"How do we get back then?"

"I don't know".

"Just as well we came prepared then".



They found their back packs.

"Have you ever seen such a huge tree", asked Lola looking up. "Even the roots are taller than us".

It was massive. They couldn't even see the top of it and the roots seemed to fan out like a set of giant slides.

"What sort of tree is it, do you think?" asked Nadia.

"It should be called the Slidiolocious tree", laughed Lola.

The girls explored the clearing. There were green climbing plants with odd shaped red flowers. Above them

shaking the branches of the great tree were brilliant parrots flashing wings of red, green and blue. Huge iridescent butterflies filled the air like floating flowers. It was beautiful.

"Do you think we should stay here?" asked Josie. "It's pretty and besides, the window might come back later and we can get home".

"Don't you think we should look around?" asked Lola.

"But we don't know where we are."

"Ok. What clues do we have?"

"It might be Pakistan", suggested Nadia but wouldn't remember. I was hardly more than a baby when I left".

"It looks more like the pictures I've see of the rainforest£.

"There's rainforest in lots of places in the world, Australia, Africa, Malaysia".

"Don't forget the Amazon".

"We might see some animals that will give us a clue".

"Are there any dangerous animals in the Amazon".

Yes, loads”.

“Oh”

In the end, the girls decided that they would go and explore. If the window didn't come back, they would need to find another way home. They opened their packs and took out sun cream, insect spray and their sunhats. Then they set off down a path between some of the tallest trees where there was more space to walk. The trees were amazing. Some seemed to have other trees wrapped around them so they looked as if they had been created with mad knitting patterns. Others had huge ferny plants growing out of the trunks. They walked on staring at everything in delight. What an adventure this was.

After a while, they weren't sure which way to go. There were three paths, or none, they might be imagining the paths. Should they go left, or right, or straight on.

“Left”, suggested Josie.

“Right”, argued Nadia.

“Straight on”, insisted Lola. “It looks more interesting”.

They decided to sit down and have a snack before they made up their minds. Josie opened a packet of crisps. Suddenly, from above her head, something stretched down and grabbed the bag out of her hands. She looked up in surprise and saw a small brown monkey happily dipping into the bag and fetching out a crisp. The little monkey crunched up a couple of crisps and then emptied out the rest of the bag all over Josie's head.

“Hey! Stop that”, yelled Josie, brushing away the crisp crumbs.

The monkey screeched and jumped away into the tree tops.

Josie screwed up her face and stamped her foot. Lola and Nadia thought it was very funny.



In the end, Lola got her way and they went straight on. She thought that, because the path went up hill they might get a better view of the landscape. The monkey followed them for a while. Lola opened another packet of crisps and held them up but the monkey wouldn't come down for them again.

“It must be your face frightened it off”, teased Lola.

Josie pushed her.

They had been walking a while when Nadia noticed a very strange animal in a tree. It had a grey brown furry flat face and long arms. It was quite still and it didn't move even when the girls got quite close.

“I know what that is”, said Lola excitedly. “It's a sloth”. They live in the “Amazon.”

“Then keep a look out for huge anacondas, boa constrictors, bird eating spiders, and alligators for a start”, added Josie shuddering.

They didn't meet any of those scary terrors but they did see a little red brown Kinkajou with its huge eyes and, best of all, a long snouted pig-like tapir. It wasn't a threat. It ran away as soon as it saw them. It was a beautiful afternoon and the girls were enjoying the walk. Everything was so new, so unusual, that they almost forgot what a strange adventure this was.



After a while they heard something else beside the wind in the leaves and the strange chinking calls of the colourful birds. It was water and it sounded like a fast running stream. They came out of the trees and there was the little river. It was foaming over mossy rocks and fallen tree branches and sparkling under a bright sun in a cloudless sky. They found a path that wound along the bank and followed it for a while. The water looked cool and refreshing and soon the girls stopped to refill their water bottles.

"I'm going in", laughed Lola, stripping off her trainers and socks. "My feet are hot". She stepped carefully into the water bracing herself against the flow.

"Aren't there piranhas in Amazon rivers?" asked Nadia "I thought they could strip the flesh off an animal in minutes".

Lola squealed and splashed her way out of the river.

"But I don't think they live in fast flowing rivers like that", continued Nadia. "You should still have all your toes".

Lola looked down at her feet. She couldn't help it. However, she didn't try to go back in the water.

Once they were rested they continued to walk along the river bank. The river was getting wider, and faster.

"Have you noticed how much noisy the river is getting?" asked Nadia

"Yes it's like a roaring sound", added Josie. "It's very loud".

"It's a waterfall", shouted Lola, pointing ahead. It's a big one.

By the time the three friends reached the edge of the cliff the noise was deafening. It wasn't very wide but it was dramatic with the water disappearing over bare rocks into a pool far below in a rainbow spray of light. They stood and watched it for a while, as close to the edge as they dared. It was an amazing site.

"Didn't you pack your camera, Lola?" asked Nadia. "This would make a very good photo".

Lola put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, I had completely forgotten. I could have been taking pictures all the way, the parrots, the butterflies, the tapir, the sloth".

"Well you can begin now", she laughed. I think there will be lots of things to take yet".

As Lola took pictures, she noticed how the water seemed to be changing colour, taking on shades of rose and soft yellow. It was Nadia who realised why the water was changing like that.

"It's getting to be sunset", she said. It won't be long now before it gets dark. Are we going to stay here? It is warm now but it might get cold and there is no shelter here".

"We should try to find a way down the waterfall before dark said Lola. This would be a bad place to camp".

It was hard to find but there was a path. They couldn't think who or what had made it but it was there and the path was quite firm. They kept going but it was taking too long. It was beginning to get dark. Were they going to have to spend the night on this narrow path with the wind blowing the spray in their direction? The idea wasn't much fun.

Then Nadia noticed another path. The water must have changed course once upon a time. It had formed a path with a cave going back behind the fall. If they could get into that little cave they would have all the shelter they needed. Very carefully they followed the little path. It was damp and slippery, but once they got inside the cave, it was surprisingly dry. They managed to put up the little igloo tent without too many arguments. They couldn't put the pegs into rock, of course but it didn't matter. Inside the cave it was cosy. The ground was hard but they shared out the sleeping bags and covers as best they could so it wasn't too bad. They left one torch on as they had spare batteries and their other torches were

wind up ones and then settled down to get some sleep. Josie thought she would never get comfortable but the sound of the water was so soothing she was soon fast asleep, just like Lola and Nadia.



In the light of dawn, Josie woke feeling stiff. Nadia's elbow had been sticking in her back. That was what had woken her. The tiny tent was very cramped. Josie turned on her back trying to get more space. Above her, on the outside roof of the tent she could see a shape about the size of her hand but with eight waving fingers. Suddenly Josie realised what she was looking at. It was a huge spider. She screamed.

They never did find the spider. When they managed to sort out what was them and what was the tent, the spider was long gone. The tent wasn't damaged although one of the poles got bent the wrong way. Nadia had sat on the crisps but, apart from that, everything was ok. They packed all their equipment and crawled out through the water spray and back onto the path down the fall.

"Did you get a picture of the spider Josie?" giggled Lola
Josie pushed Lola again. They hadn't been far from the bottom of the waterfall but they all agreed that their waterfall cave camping site had been the best.

The pool at the bottom of the pool was secret and mysterious. It was a good place for a morning wash. Once they were ready, they set out again, following the path of the little river. Now the river was flowing more slowly and was becoming wide and sluggish.

"Now this might be a good place for piranhas", noted Nadia.
Josie shuddered. "Let's take another break", she sighed. I'm getting tired and it is so hot.. Are there any of those biscuits left".

They sat down for a break. Josie kept an eye on the water, just in case. She was still watching the water when Nadia and Lola were packing up. They had just picked up the bags when Josie saw the alligator. It wasn't very big but it had huge teeth. "Alligator", she screamed and pointed.

They all ran away from the river



They nearly ran into the boy. He was standing smiling at them. He wasn't much taller than them but he looked quite different. He wasn't wearing much but it didn't seem to worry him. On his shoulder, sitting quite comfortably was a small brown monkey.

"There's the monkey that took my crisps, complained Josie".
She waved her arms at it. The monkey took this as some kind of invitation and leapt onto her shoulder. Josie screamed.

"Get it off, get it off"
The monkey jumped back to the safety of the boy's shoulder chattering angrily. The boy continued to smile at them but it was clear that he was trying to tell them something. First he beckoned to them, turning away as if to ask them to follow him. Then he pointed to his mouth and rubbed his stomach.
"What is he trying to say", asked Nadia.

"I think he is telling us that he's hungry and that he wants us to come with him."

"Do you think he wants to eat us?"

"He's a cannibal?" squeaked Josie in horror.

"I don't think so", answered Lola. "I think he is asking if we are hungry."

She tried pointing to her own mouth, rubbing her stomach and nodding. This seemed to please the boy.

"There you are", she said. "He wants to feed us, not eat us".

The boy turned again and beckoned them to follow him.

"Let's see where he's going", suggested Lola. "We can always run away if we get scared".

Reluctantly, Josie agreed.

They hadn't gone far before they came to the village. It was a group of rectangular wooden huts with grass thatched roofs on stilts. Lola wondered if they had been built like that to keep snakes out. If they were in the Amazon then there might be some pretty big snakes. The boy led them through the little houses. There were groups of people, mostly women and children, around open cooking fires. They stopped still and watched the girls pass but they didn't come closer.

The boy led them to far end of the little village. There was an old woman, in a black skirt and a red shawl, stirring an iron pot. She didn't look very scary. She gestured them to sit while she ladled some sort of stew out of the pot into four wooden bowls and passed one of the steaming bowls to each of the girls in turn. Nadia sniffed it suspiciously.

"I wonder what's in it?" she whispered to Josie.

"Fish, good fish".

All three girls looked up in surprise, wondering who had spoken.

"Fish. Eat fish", repeated the old woman, holding up her own bowl.

"You speak English", gasped Lola.

"I have English words", answered the old woman proudly.

"Where did you learn English?"

"I learn TV", answered the woman.

This surprised them even more but it wasn't much use. She really only understood a few words. They managed to find out that they were in the Amazon rain forest but they couldn't discover where. They tried to find out more about the woman but she couldn't understand the questions. They didn't think that there could be television in a tiny village like this. Perhaps she had lived in a town at some time in her life. She didn't seem interested in why the girls were here but she did keep asking them their names.

The fish stew was tastier than it looked and all three girls ate it hungrily. When the bowls were empty she stood up and pointed away from the village.

"Boy show you".

They didn't know what she was talking about but she was very insistent.

"Boy show you. You go now".

The boy got up and immediately, the little monkey back on his shoulder "Boy show".

He copied the words the old woman had spoken but it was hard to understand him. The woman turned her back to the girls. They had little choice but to follow the strange boy.

He led them through paths in the jungle that they were certain they would not find again. The tall trees were draped in vines and it was hard to see where they were going. It was hot and very sticky. The three friends were starting to feel nervous when, at last, they broke out into a clearing. And there, rising up before them, were the ruins of an ancient city. The three friends couldn't believe what they were seeing. They were wide eyed with excitement. Great stone blocks, arches and walls, rose up, tier upon tier like a building brick tower piled up by a giant child.

“Are we going up there?” breathed Lola

“Boy show” was all their companion answered. He began to walk up the hill towards the ruins with the girls following as fast as they could.

It was hot work climbing the levels of the ruins. The girls wanted to stop and explore every broken wall and carved archway. Lola wanted to stop and play with all the little brown monkeys that lived on this hill. They were very friendly and there were so many of them. Lola and Nadia thought they were sweet and encouraged them to jump up onto their shoulders. The boy was impatient. He wouldn't wait, but kept calling out “Boy show”, and moving on up the next flight of ragged steps. Josie was secretly glad that they were not stopping. She had decided that she didn't like monkeys. She didn't want one climbing on her.

At last they reached the highest level of the ruin and the boy stopped at last. The girls were able to get their breath back and take a look at the view. It was magnificent. In the far distance they could make out the broad grey green ribbon of the river.

“Look”. pointed out Nadia, “There's our waterfall river. It would have joined the big river if we had kept on following it”.

The monkeys had followed them up the hill as well. There seemed to be a huge number of them chattering wildly in a ring around the top of the hill. Josie wasn't too happy about this but Josie was delighted and kept on snapping photo after photo.

Now the boy was trying to get their attention again.

“Boy show”.

“Yes, we've seen the hill now. It's a great view”.

The boy tried to pull Lola towards a low wall.

“Boy show”.

Lola bent down to see what the boy was pointing at and gasped with surprise.

“Nadia, Josie, look at this!”

There were lots of carved stones on the hill with the strange square letters and ugly masks but nothing like these. Each of the little square blocks contained a single letter like a curly sausage. Lola found an A, then two Ls and an O. Nadia found two letter A's an N, a D and an I. Josie quickly found a J, an E, an I an O and an S. That was all. There could be no doubt. The carved letters spelt out the names of the three girls. It was frightening but what was more scary was that when they looked up. The boy was gone. The monkeys were much closer but they no longer looked friendly. Now they were silent and menacing.

“What do we do?”

I don't know”, said Lola “but I think it is time for us to leave”.

She bent down and touched the stone L. She vanished. Nadia and Josie screamed. It had happened so quickly..

“I'm following Lola”, gasped Nadia and touched the N. She vanished as well.

Josie was scared. What if Nadia and Lola weren't back in Longford? What if they were lost? At least she was safe here. Several monkeys leapt straight at her. Josie made a dive for the letter J.

Chapter 7: The Writing On The Wall

Patrycja, Saorise and Adana were standing outside the cinema checking the starting time of "Despicable Me" when they saw three girls from sixth class wandering up the street. They were all wearing backpacks and looked like they had just got back from a camping holiday.

"You going on somewhere?" called Patrycja.

"You wouldn't believe us if we told you".

"We'd believe anything".

Lola gave her an odd look. "We've just got back from the Amazon a few minutes ago".

Patrycja, Saorise and Adana burst out laughing.

"And we've just been to the moon".

"You said you'd believe us, liars!"

"You three have a great imagination".

"Wait, we can prove it", said Lola reaching into her bag. She took out her camera, set it on playback, and passed it to Patrycja. The three girls crowded around the viewer.

"There's a great one of me with a monkey on my shoulder".

"And there's the huge waterfall where we camped".

"Don't forget the ruined city with all the carved doorways".

Patrycja, Saorise and Adana viewed picture after picture. Each one was blank, or just showed one of the sixth class girls against a white background. There wasn't a monkey's tail or a jungle leaf in sight.

"There's nothing there".

"Are you blind?"

It was very confusing..

"Look, we'll tell you what happened if you'll listen."

Lola, Nadia and Josie explained about the dilapidated window and what had happened.

The others listened in astonishment until they had finished.

"So we haven't been home for two days",

Patrycja snorted. "Don't exaggerate. You were in school yesterday".

"But it's true".

"So all we have to do to get to the Amazon is jump through solid wood?"

"I know it sounds crazy".

"I don't believe you. I'm going to find out for myself", said Patrycja finally, walking off down the road.

"Wait", called Lola, rummaging in her bag again. "If you are going, take food and take this", She threw Patrycja a torch. Patrycja caught it and turned away again. Saorise and Adana shrugged, waved goodbye to the 6th class girls and followed Patrycja.

Once they reached the window, they all agreed on the description "dilapidated". It was the last object you might imagine would turn out to be a "magic" portal.

Patrycja marched straight up to the window and laid her hand on the wood.

"I don't believe a", and she vanished.

Saorise and Adana stared. The look on Patrycja's face as she fell through the window was surprising

"Get her back, get her back", squealed Adanah

Saorise looked at her friend imploringly and, swallowing hard, pushed her own hand right through the wood.

"I can't feel" and she was gone too.

Adana grabbed at the other girl, and yelled loudly as she was dragged off her feet.

Water Street was empty.

“They were telling the truth then”.

Adana heard Patrycja’s excited voice before she even dared to open her eyes. She was in the Amazon. She was in the Amazon. There were dangerous snakes and spiders there. Her new white rock top would get filthy and her sparkly black ballet shoes would get ruined. She was dressed to go to the cinema, not trekking.

When she finally did open her eyes she shrieked. She couldn’t see anything. It was dark, stuffy and echo-y.

Patrycja switched on Lola’s torch and cast the beam all around the room.

“I don’t think we are in the Amazon”, Saorise commented calmly. She took out her phone and turned on the torch setting.

“It’s some sort of cave”.

“More like a tomb”.

Adana squealed again.

By the time Adana had tried to brush the dirt off her new jeans with hands that were so dusty that it made them worse, Patrycja and Saorise were already exploring the walls of the chamber. They could see it wasn’t a cave. The walls were smooth with plaster and covered with strange rows of figures. They all seemed to be walking sideways but with bodies that faced forward. The men in the pictures were wearing short white skirts and everybody had thick black long hair. All around the figures was funny picture writing. There were lions, snakes, feathers, birds and strange symbols that the girls couldn’t identify,

“I know where we are”, squeaked Saorise in excitement. This isn’t the Amazon. We are in Egypt. We must be inside a pyramid!”

“A pyramid?”

The girls stared as Patrycja swept the torch beam around the chamber. Now their eyes were more used to the gloom, they could see more detail. There was a clay statue, taller than them, in a long dress painted to look like thin pleated fabric. In her hand was something, kind of like, a stripy ice cream. She had too much black hair held by a painted band. There was another statue nearby. It was a man sitting on a sort of box but he had a donkey’s head with goats’ ears.

“It could be one of their gods”, explained Saoirse.

“How come you know so much about Egypt?” asked Adana.

“I’ve always been interested in history, especially ancient Egypt”, answered Saorise, enjoying an audience. “Patrycja, can you shine the torch on this wall?”

Patrycja turned the torch so that all three girls could examine the wall painting.

“Look”, explained Saorise, “This painting tells a story. Can you see the Pharaoh, the king. He’s the one with the tall bumpy hat? He’s dead and he’s being led to the Egyptian Otherworld by Anubis, that figure, with a sort of dog’s head. But first his soul must be judged”.

“Who’s that green face guy?”

“That’s Osiris. He’s the judge. Can you see the big weighing scales? The king’s heart is being weighed against the “Feather of Truth”. Thoth, the one who looks like a baboon, is writing down the result with a feather. You can see the monster, half hippo and half crocodile, waiting nearby eager to gobble up the king’s heart if it is too heavy”.

The girls stared at the painting noticing all the details, especially the monster. Suddenly the shadows were much darker. Suddenly they were thinking about where they were.

“When Pharaohs died they turned them into mummies that come to life and chase people”.

“We might be locked in”.

“There will be no food and water”.

“Will we die in here and turn into mummies?”

“If we die in here will we go to the Egyptian underworld?”

“Will our hearts get weighed?”

“Oh no, I stole my brothers chewing gum”.

“I cheated in my maths test”.

Saorise shook her head. She didn't know the answers. They were stuck in a sealed stone chamber with no light, no food, other than the crisps and sweets they had bought to take to the cinema. She was scared too. She could see that Patrycja and Adana were starting to panic.

“Stop rushing around. You'll run out of air quicker”.

She really wished she hadn't said that. The panic got much worse.

It was Patrycja who found the loose bricks, but she had the best torch. She examined the wall carefully and could soon see that it was an entrance that had been closed up.

“Come and help me”, she called.

The old mortar was loose and the girls had soon broken through. They were shocked to find out that it led to another chamber as dark and dusty as the first.

“We have to go on”, said Saorise, “We will find a way out”.

As they searched around, they discovered that they had found something amazing. This room was full of treasure

There was a golden statue of a man, in a skirt, with a bird's head. There was a statue of kneeling man, also in a skirt, carrying a jar in each hand. It looked like gold but it had gone a bit green.

“All the men here wear skirts”, said Adanana. “They must be Scots”.

“Egypt is a very hot place”, explained Saorise.

“Scotland's not hot but they still wear skirts”.



There were too many things to see to waste time arguing. They saw a large model boat made of wood. It had a table with a mummy and with two birds with wings around the mummy. There were rows of animal mummies, mostly cats. Patrycja thought they looked horrible.

On a table, which had legs like a lion, Adana found a yellow metal mirror and a bone comb. She wanted to try it out but Saorise stopped her.

“We shouldn't touch anything”, she protested. “These things are all thousands of years old. They should only be touched by archaeologists”.

The whole room full of beautiful golden treasures. It was hard not to touch anything. Patrycja couldn't help it. She bent down and picked up what looked like a large golden coin. There was something odd about it and she wanted a chance to examine it later.

Saorise was looking for something. There in the middle of the chamber was a huge stone chest. It was covered in carved and painted figures and more of the picture writing, hieroglyphics, as she knew they were called. It was a stretch, but she could just see over the top. She was hoping that there wouldn't be a stone

lid. It didn't look like there was but it was very dark.

"Patrycja", bring the torch over here please".

The taller girl shone her torch inside the sarcophagus and they both gasped in wonder. Saoise had seen pictures of the painted golden coffin in the rock tomb of Tutankhamen, discovered by Howard Carter in 1922, but she had never dreamed she would discover an untouched, treasure filled tomb herself. She stared at the golden coffin painted with the dead pharaoh's face. She stared in wonder.

"Do you realise that if we could lift the golden coffin lid we would see the mummy of the dead pharaoh", she breathed.

"But I don't want to see dead people", moaned Adana and she shuddered.

"You don't understand what we have found. This is a find that will make us famous".

"There's just one problem", muttered Patrycja. "We have to get out of here first".



Suddenly all three girls heard something, It was a quiet shuffling, like someone walking in very old slippers with their shoelaces tied together. They stood quite still listening. It was getting louder, a dragging, rubbing sound. Were they imagining it? Then, looming towards them, was a shadow like a man although maybe it was the flicker of light on the torch. They didn't wait to find out.

They stumbled backwards and crashed into the wall behind them. There was a strange sound like metal on stone and a statue of a man with a spear swung round to face them. The girls screamed in terror and fell backwards into another chamber.

As they picked themselves up off the dusty floor, the secret door rumbled shut. There was no sign of where it had been! All that could be seen was yet another painted tomb wall. They were so horrified that they hardly noticed that this chamber was lit with modern lanterns.

Saoirse let out a cry of horror.

"The tomb. The golden king. We've got to find a way back".

The three girls began to scabble frantically at the plaster wall.

"What do you think you are doing?"

The girls whirled around in shock. A young woman in an grubby tee shirt and dusty jeans was standing frowning at them. She held a small notebook in her hand and had a furious look on her face.

"This part of the tomb is closed to the public. You are trespassing. Go back and join your tour".

The girls did not know what to do. They had to explain somehow.

"But there's gold on the other side".

"There's a mummy in a golden case"

It's better than the one Howard Carter found".

"There's statues".

"There's treasure".

"

The young archaeologist sighed.

“There’s nothing on the other side of the wall”.

“There is. You only have to go and look”.

“Look, we’ve x rayed that wall. We’ve scanned it. It is just solid rock. There is nothing behind that wall.

“Well if there is nothing there, why are you here?”

The young woman almost smiled as she explained that this rock tomb had been robbed long ago and that no treasure had ever been found here.

I am here because this tomb has super rare hieroglyphics that I want to study. I am an archaeologist, not a treasure hunter.

The three friends just couldn’t believe what they were hearing.

She turned and began to thump her fists on the wall.

“Stop that at once. You’ll damage the paintings”.

Saorise hardly heard her.

“Get out of here now. I’ll call security. Your parents will be furious when they find out what you are doing”.

She reached for her walkie-talkie

“It’s alright, we’re going”, said Patrycja quickly, pulling her friend away from the wall,

“Which way do we go?”

“Down the corridor, turn right into chamber”. The archaeologist dismissed them and went back to her work.

The girls felt, humiliated and embarrassed but they had no choice. As they followed the low corridor towards the entrance of the rock cut tomb, they wondered what would happen next. Could they pretend to be part of a tour? They knew they must be a long way from any town. What would their parents think if they got a call from an Egyptian police station when they thought their daughters were at the cinema in Longford?

There was one more chamber. A little of the bright sunlight from outside managed to find its way into the room making it easier to see the writing on the wall. There were no pictures here. There was just the hieroglyph picture writing from floor to ceiling.

“Can you read any of this stuff?” asked Adana.

“I’ve got a book about hieroglyphs”, replied Saorise.

“Have you got it with you?”

“No.”

“Not much use then”.

Patrycja sighed deeply. “What we need is a big red lit up exit sign.”

“But we can see sunlight. The way out of this filthy place is straight ahead. At least, I can get a shower and find a way to clean my clothes” complained Adana.

Saoirise was taking no notice. She was staring intently at one spot on the wall. There was a cartouche that was larger than any other. She knew that a cartouche was an oval shape that outlined the name of an important person



like a pharaoh but she couldn't tell what this one said. Then something very strange happened. The cartouche and the symbols inside began to glow red.

"I can read them, I can read the symbols", gasped Saorise.

"You're joking".

"No"

"Alright then, what does it say?"

E.X.I.T. T.O. L.O.N.G.F.O.R.D.

"Don't be stupid".

Patrycja laughed. "Saorise has found the very thing I was looking for she laughed, "a big red lit up exit sign".

She stepped forward in front of Saorise, her hands outstretched in front of her. Then she just walked through the wall, like a ghost.

Adana squealed. "I'm not going through a solid wall. It was bad enough getting dragged through a window".

"Then don't go", said Saorise wistfully. "I wouldn't mind staying".

"No way!" groaned Adana.

She shut her eyes and ran at the wall as hard as she could and vanished. Saorise sighed again. She took one last longing look backwards, towards her lost prize, and stepped through the wall. Back down the silent corridor the archaeologist continued to study the writing on the wall.

Chapter 8 ~ A Meeting of Explorers

The explorers all met together on Tuesday afternoon. Brothers and sisters talked to each other, Friends were phoned, and by the half term Tuesday morning, the explorers thought that everyone who had been through the mysterious window had been contacted. They included Bartek, Connor and even Ryan. They hadn't been through the portal but they had watched it happen. The hardest part was deciding where to meet. Mark, Luke and Joseph suggested meeting on the seats outside Tesco but the others thought it might be easier to meet in the leisure centre at The Mall.

So on Tuesday afternoon, fourteen explorers and adventurers met outside the swimming pool, Some of them bought drinks and crisps from the vending machines and gathered around an empty table.

"You begin", said Lola to her brother. "You and Peter started all this".

"We didn't start anything", complained Peter. "It just happened".

"Don't argue", replied Lola. "Just tell us your story".

The boys began to recount what happened to them in the Australian desert.

"We think Jimmy made it all happen because he wanted to visit Longford", finished Peter.

"But Jimmy had nothing to do with our adventure", pointed out Mark.

"Not ours either", added Josie

"Or ours", concluded Saorise.

One by one each group told their story. Everyone had lots of questions although they were very disappointed that the photos from the Amazon had not come out.

"We have no proof that any of the adventures really happened then", said Saorise sadly. She still could not quite believe that she had been inside an un-plundered Egyptian tomb. The only other explorer who seemed to understand how she felt was Mark.

"I didn't want to come back from Mount Kilimanjaro either", he told her sympathetically. "I have always wanted to go there and now I will have to wait until I am much older to go back and explore properly.

"Do you think you will ever meet the ice leopard again?"

"I don't know", answered Mark, shaking his head. "But one day I will become an explorer and get to stand on the Roof of Africa among the glittering walls of ice again. I might even see the ice leopard there. Do you think you will ever find the lost Egyptian tomb again?"

"I want to grow up to be a famous archaeologist", said Saorise firmly. "Then I will search until I find it".

I think I'll leave the exploring to you two, said Adana with a grimace, "It's too hard to get a shower and clean clothes on an adventure"

"We have forgotten", said Lola. "We do have some proof". She took the South American stone cube carved with the first letter of her name and held it out. Nadia and Josie added their letter blocks.

"I've got the rock carving with the stick men hunting kangaroos and the picture of Longford Cathedral", added Liam.

"And here is the Black Leopard King's mask", said Mark, showing it to the group.

Patrycja, gave Saorise an odd look at took something shiny out of her pocket.

"I know Saorise told me that I shouldn't touch anything in the treasure tomb" she said apologetically, "but this was different".

She held out the golden disc. Saorise took it with a frown of disapproval and examined it carefully. Her eyes widened as she realised what she was seeing. There, on one side of the disc was the Eye of Horus but behind it was a rectangular shape that she recognised immediately. It was clearly their Great Water Street window.

"I see what you mean", replied Saorise quietly, handing it back.

"Has anyone come up with a reason that this all happened?" asked Lola. "I mean, why did some people get through and not others?" She looked meaningfully at Ryan.

"Yes", it's not fair", he said. "I would have made a great explorer".

"You might get a chance yet".

"I have an idea", said Luke. I think there was this scientist somewhere in the world who was trying to make a wormhole, a kind of tunnel that can get you anywhere you want. It might have gone wrong and started opening in Longford".

Don't know", said Josie. "Great Water Street is a very old street, one of the oldest in Longford. Maybe, long ago, someone got lost there or something bad happened there so, now, it's haunted.

"Why should a haunted street take you to Australia or the Amazon", asked Liam. "Surely a haunted street would take you somewhere spooky. None of your adventures were spooky. Adana shuddered.

"You didn't get locked in a dusty old tomb full of mummies. It was very spooky".

"I've got a better idea", went on Liam, ignoring her. "You see there's loads of old stories in Ireland where wizards do all sorts of magic spells. There's a story where someone was turned into a deer and another where a girl gets turned into a fly and is blown across the world in a terrible magic storm".

"It's not the same thing".

"Is so. Well it's better than the wormhole idea".

"I still think that Jimmy arranged the whole thing".

"Or the Ice leopard"

"Or the old lady from the Amazon village".

They argued together for a while but they couldn't agree on anything. .

"I still think it's not fair", said Ryan. "I want to go to Antarctica like in the book we are reading, "The Ice Man", Thomas Crean. was a real, brave explorer".

"We want to do that too", added Bartak and Connor. It was scary for us when you got dragged through the window, but now it's our turn".

"It was scary for us too", agreed Liam. We thought we might die in the desert".

"Spending the night on the mountain was very bad", remembered Joseph. "I wouldn't like to do that again in a hurry".

"Yes, but you got back ok."

The fairest thing, they decided was to go back to the strange window with Bartek, Connor and Ryan. They might get to go through the it after all.

It did not take them long to get back to Great Water Street. They walked together from the Mall still talking excitedly about their marvellous adventures. But as they approached the window they were in for a shock. The old bars had been replaced and were fixed as firmly as ever. Ryan went right up and shook the bars but it was useless. They wouldn't budge. Behind the bars the wooden board was just that, wood. It looked as though no-one else was going to go exploring this way again for a while.

The fourteen adventurers stood about looking dejected. It was likely that their adventures were over for now and they weren't sure quite what to do.

"We might as well go home".

"No, let's go back to the library. We might be able to find out more about Great Water Street. There might be old stories or legends. Your ghost story idea could be right".

"The library might be able to tell us something about the objects we brought back as well".

The librarian could not tell them much more about Great Water Street.

"There were warehouses and a brewery there", she told them, "but I have never heard any ghost stories. Children like you collected stories from their grandparents and neighbours more than seventy years ago. Perhaps they told some ghost stories".

She was very interested in mask, the coin and the other objects that they had brought back, although they didn't try to tell her how they got them.

"Such beautiful things here in Longford", she said brightly. "You should have an exhibition. You could ask your friends in school to add unusual objects from other counties as well. It would be interesting for everybody to see them, especially if you could research information about their places of origin".

"What here in the library?" asked Josie

"Why not?" answered the librarian

"We could make up a story about some of the exhibits", commented Peter, innocently. He was thinking it would give him an excuse to tell his story about the adventure in the desert.

"That is an excellent idea", the librarian told him.

The exhibition was a great success. The adventurers had spent the rest of the week researching the countries they had visited and presenting the objects they had brought back. They didn't mention the window of course, no-one would have believed them, but writing stories based on their adventures made them feel much better. Ryan, Conner and Bartek decided to make up stories about adventures in the frozen lands, like Thomas Crean, and soon they didn't feel left out. Ryan even decided that, he wanted to be a scientist and, one day, go to the Antarctic himself.

Some of their friends joined in and soon there were exhibits from China, Croatia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and many other countries. However, the best exhibits, agreed everyone, at the launch, were the "made up" stories written about the visits to the Amazon, the Australian desert, Tanzania, Egypt and Antarctica.

"We have some exceptional young writers in Longford", one visitor was heard to comment "The stories are so imaginative. You might believe that they really happened".

The adventurers smiled to each other. Only they knew the truth.

But perhaps the most surprising thing that happened at the launch went un-noticed by nearly everyone. Parents and friends came to see their work but only Peter and Liam recognised the short thickset man with glossy black skin and a shock of spiky black hair. He was wearing jeans and a cosy brown jacket but Liam and Peter recognised him immediately. It was Jimmy. He was reading their stories and nodding delightedly.

"It is Jimmy", whispered Liam to Peter. "We must tell the others".

They found Josie, Mark and Saorise nearby but when they went to look, he had gone.

A few days later, after school, the fourteen explorers came to clear up the exhibition and to take back their special finds.

"It was Jimmy we saw, It was", Liam insisted.

"Then our window on the world might not be closed forever. We might still get to go on more adventures".

"Who knows", answered Mark, holding his leopard mask in his hands". But until we can go out exploring again it looks like the world will still come and explore Longford. We won't run out of adventures, not yet."

A deep laugh made them look up. There was no-one there but Liam and Peter always insisted that it was Jimmy.

