Ellie crept closer to the gaping crater. Its edges were jagged and burnt, its ashen slopes plunging down to the magma chamber below. Smelly clouds of gas and steam billowed out, making her cough. She pulled the face mask tighter, and peered nervously over the edge. Mr Forbes had done a whole lesson on volcanic craters, so she knew how dangerous they could be. What if this thing suddenly erupted? Not even the best volcanologists could predict every eruption. What if she slipped, and fell into a boiling lava lake? What if that had already happened to Seb? She began to shake just thinking about it.

“Seb! Where are you?” she shouted. There was no answer. Horrible scenes played out in her mind. Seb had fallen on the path and broken his leg. Worse, Seb had fallen into the crater and was trapped down there. What should she do? Should she try and find him, or go back and tell Mr Forbes? Was there time? Seb might be alone and scared. She would find him first, then raise the alarm.

She carried on calling his name, edging slowly round the crater. She couldn’t help feeling that the great monster mouth might be about to swallow her up. It might have swallowed Seb up already. She was standing less than a metre from the edge when for a brief moment, the clouds of steam parted, and she saw it.
The Sleeping Volcano
It was a ladder, or rather the hooks of a ladder that seemed to lead down into the crater. She inched closer. She kicked one of the hooks with her boot. The sound of metal echoed around the bowl of the crater. Ellie swallowed hard. Had Seb gone down the ladder? It was just the sort of mad thing he might do. He could have been tempted to see what it led to. But was he mad enough to venture inside the crater?

She remembered a video clip Seb had shown her on his computer before this trip. It showed a volcanologist abseiling into a volcano. But he had been wearing a protective heat suit and he was a scientist. He knew what he was doing. Seb was just a boy in search of adventure. She was crouching by the ladder now and tried calling his name again: still no answer.

Ellie’s heart was beating faster and faster but she knew she had to go down the ladder herself, just far enough to see if Seb was down there. Then she could persuade him to come back with her, or if he was hurt and trapped, she could raise the alarm, and lead a rescue party back. What else could she do? She couldn’t just go back and leave Seb down there.

Her legs were shaking as she carefully lowered herself onto the first, then the second rung of the ladder. She had to find her way down by touch rather than sight, because the steam was getting denser as she descended. It was hot, smelly and dark. She didn’t dare look down but she was aware of flaring lights of red, orange and grey and below her, getting darker as she got further down into the crater.

The rungs of the ladder were damp and slippery and once or twice she almost missed her step. She was holding on so tightly that her fingers had turned white.

How far down had she come? She tried to make out the top of the crater but the steam made it impossible to see more than a faint circle of light. How much further did the ladder go, and where would it lead her?

It was getting darker and darker. Holding onto the ladder with her left hand, she fumbled in her bag for her torch. Her hand was shaking as she began to pull it out, and in a moment, it was gone. She had dropped the torch deep into the volcano.
Ellie closed her eyes in horror. When she opened them, she could make out a small but bright speck of light below. It was the light from her torch, and it was just enough to make out a ledge. Standing on it, with a cheeky smile on his face, was Seb.

“Lost something?” he asked, holding up the torch.