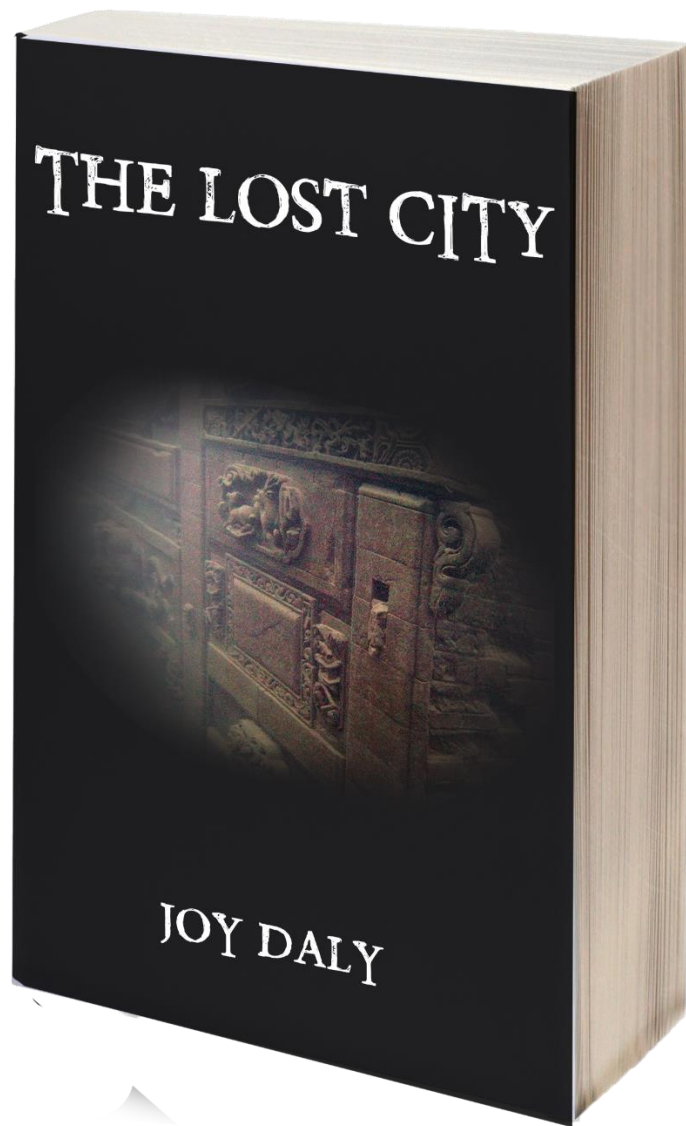


Middle Grade Fantasy Adventure
The third book in The Vortex series

THE LOST CITY



CHAPTER ONE



Of the four kids, only David looked relaxed.

Liam, his dark hair sticking up in spikes, was jumping up and down like a frog.

Josh wobbled on his right foot, his left foot in the air.

And Rebecca, clasped her hands almost like she was praying, as she stared at the blazing hole in Josh's left heel.

They were huddled in the far corner of the school library, away from the other kids and the librarian. Josh checked the library clock. A big round one with a white face. There was only a couple of minutes until the bell for class sounded and they needed to come up with a plan.

"So, what now?" David's vowels were nicely rounded. He sounded like the doctor he'd probably one day become.

"Now we go get some orichalcum." Liam threw a celebratory arm around David's shoulder.

Josh looked from his brother to David, reading David's face, reading the scorn. When Liam had first told David about the disc, David hadn't believed him. And Josh had known how much that had hurt Liam because Liam had told him with tears in his eyes. And Liam never cried.

"Oh yeah," and David smirked. "This amazing alternative world energy source, in this parallel universe that you visited, because a disc produced a vortex that dropped you there"

"It's true, David," said Rebecca. Her voice was too loud, and the librarian glanced over.

“Killer animals, other worlds, orichalcum? This is the type of sick joke I’d expect from Liam and Josh. Not you, Rebecca.”

Josh dug Liam in the ribs and gave him a questioning look. He’d often wondered about David; about how good a friend he really was, with his perfect white smile that never quite made it to his eyes.

“It’s okay Josh, don’t worry,” Liam muttered out of the corner of his mouth. “He’ll come around.”

But Josh was worried. Being dumped in a dangerous place where the sun never set and animals banded together to destroy you, meant you had to trust your friends with your life – and he didn’t trust David. But Liam did, and Liam was his big brother and usually right about everything. He gave Liam a weak smile and lowered his foot to the floor, hoping Liam was right about David.

“Okay, so we all meet at our place after school. I’ve got everything ready to go,” said Liam

Josh glanced at their faces. Rebecca looked unhappy, David disbelieving, and Liam excited. He wondered how David could doubt the light coming from his heel. It was really intense now. The bell sounded and he pulled on his sock and shoe. “I’ll see you guys,” he said, half-hoping David wouldn’t turn up.

They sat on Liam’s blue bedroom carpet, in front of the four packs lying open in front of them.

Liam had sealed the snare wire, hand lens, water purification tablets, notepad and pencil in plastic containers and stacked them in his front pouch. He got up and rummaged in his jocks drawer and pulled out the sapphire from the jungle, and the turquoise from the desert. “We’ll take these too,” he said as he placed them on the carpet next to the food and water, a collapsible shovel, torch, pocketknife, bug spray, sun block, solar blanket, rolls of rope, compass, fishing kit, machete and two lighters.

For the first time David’s eyes showed something other than disbelief. “Let me see,” he said as he reached for them.

“No,” said Josh as he swiped them from David’s stretching fingers to shove them deep into his pack. He didn’t know why, but his feelings were telling him to keep David well away from the artefacts they’d found in the pyramid and the Great Kiva.

Liam was busy dividing the gear, and after slipping a huge water bottle into his pack he zipped it up and heaved it onto his back. "Wow, it's heavy with the water. Do you think you'll be okay with yours?" And he looked at Rebecca.

Straightening her shoulders Rebecca took a deep breath. "Of course."

"Grab yours Josh." Liam pointed to the pack on the left and Josh slipped Big Head into the pocket that held the bulging first aid kit. There was no question of him going anywhere without Big Head, his lucky stuffed dog, or the first aid kit, and he gave a secret shudder as he thought about how much he'd used the kit the last two times they'd jumped into the vortex.

"David, the one with the machete is yours. Sling it on and get ready," said Liam.

David rolled his eyes and hoisted on the pack. "I can't believe you're going through with this Liam. I admit, I don't know how you're doing the light-thing with Josh's heel. And that." He pointed to the disc lying on Liam's desk with a light shooting from its centre that matched Josh's heel. It was changing colour to bush-fire red as he watched. "Some sort of electronic signal I suspect. But you're not getting me again."

Josh looked at David and cut him a little slack. They'd got him last month when Liam had concocted a disgusting gel that stunk worse than rotten eggs. Josh had smeared it on the back of his school shirt, and the home room teacher, who David had a secret crush on, had told him gently that a shower would be a good idea. And just before Christmas, they'd all entered a competition on the Weetbix packet to win a family trip to Disneyland. Two weeks later they'd sent David an official letter and an SMS congratulating him on his win. David had called them, telling them to come over, hardly able to speak, he was so excited. They'd got there in time to watch him ring the number on the letter to confirm acceptance. Even now Josh could recall David's face turning scarlet as the Beerwah Retirement Home answered, and he realized they'd struck again. Maybe it was fair enough that he didn't believe this.

David gave them a look. "Okay, what now? Do you rub a magic lantern, wave a wand?"

"You'll see," said Liam. "Everybody's dressed, packs on, let's go. Shut the bedroom door Rebecca and don't forget your hat."

“Okay David, now you’re going to see this is all real. Liam pushed the disc, now the colour of fire, into the waiting metal bin. It clanged into the bottom. He waved the tuning fork into the air. “Is everybody ready?”

Josh and Rebecca exchanged glances. “As ready as we’ll ever be,” he said.

David nodded. “Gunna love to see this. Go for it Liam,”

Liam leaned towards the bin, the blue flames shooting from the side of the disc lighting his face. Holding the tuning fork between pinched white fingers, he struck the top of the disc once, and a deafening whistle sounded.

David jammed his hands over his ears as a harmonic ripped through the air, and he stumbled backwards as a Vortex shot from the bin, pulsing, and expanding as it changed from pure white to blood red, to rainbow. The swirling rainbow touched Josh and he disappeared. “Josh,” he called. Then, before he could say anything else, Liam, grinning an ‘I told you so’ grin, vanished into the maelstrom of colour as well.

He glanced across at Rebecca who looked petrified. “Rebecca,” he managed before a warmth enveloped him, and Liam’s bedroom became no more.

Rebecca stood alone in the room. The three boys were gone, and she stumbled back towards the door, towards safety. With her hand on the knob, she began to turn it. Then she stopped, took a shuddering breath, and stepped into the mad whirl.