

LUKE

Helen was missing.

The first Luke knew that something was wrong was on his way downstairs for breakfast. His mother was on the phone in the hall, her free hand pulling at her hair, and this is what Luke heard as he came down the stairs:

‘Look, she’s bloody sixteen years old, that’s a child in my ... well, you *should* be. Look, for God’s sake, she’s been out all ... I *know*, you already *told* me that, but there’s got to be *something* ... well that’s just *not* good enough-’

She looked at Luke as he walked past her, but kept on talking angrily into the phone.

His grandmother and Anne were sitting at the

kitchen table. Granny turned quickly as the door opened, then sagged a bit as Luke walked in.

He closed the door behind him. 'What's going on?'

'Helen never came home last night.' Her face was twisted with worry. 'She wasn't home when I was going to bed, but I thought she'd be in any minute ... and your mother just assumed she was there when *she* got in ...'

There was a piece of unbuttered toast on her plate. It looked as if it had been there for a while.

'Her bed hasn't been slept in,' Anne told Luke, and then ate a spoonful of Weetabix.

'Wow.' Luke thought of his sister, out all night in the dark. He tried to think of something to say that might take the lines out of his grandmother's forehead. 'Maybe she went to a friend's house, and just forgot to say.'

'Maybe.' His grandmother nodded slowly, still frowning. 'She might have done that, I suppose.'

'Who's Mum on the phone to?'

Before his grandmother had a chance to answer, Luke's mother burst into the kitchen and crossed quickly to the worktop by the sink and leant up against it, folding her arms. 'They're useless, bloody useless.' Her shoulders were hunched.

'What did they say?' Luke's grandmother started to

stand up, and then changed her mind and sat down again.

‘They can’t do anything until she’s been missing for twenty-four hours, can you believe it?’ His mum unfolded her arms and began to pace quickly around the kitchen, biting at one of her nails.

Then she stopped suddenly and glared at Luke’s granny. ‘Why did you let her go out? She’s barely sixteen, Mam – what were you thinking of?’

Granny bit her lip, shaking her head. ‘I’m sorry, Breda, I-’

But Luke’s mother wasn’t listening. She turned to Luke. ‘Do *you* know any of her friends?’

He shook his head. Helen had been a mystery to him for a long time now. Since their father had come home from hospital, Luke had felt Helen pulling herself away from the family, little by little. Coming home later from school, disappearing after tea on the nights Mam worked late, and at the weekends. Spending the rest of the time in her room.

Luke had no idea what kind of life his older sister was leading. She barely spoke to him, to any of them. ‘She’s probably in a friend’s house,’ he said to his mother, but she wasn’t listening to him any more either. Her head was bent over the phone book.

Luke wondered if he and Anne would have to go to

school, with his sister missing. But when Mr Farrell's car horn sounded outside, a few minutes later, nobody said, 'Of course you can't possibly go to school today', so he took the two lunchboxes from the fridge and picked up his bag and walked out into the hall with Anne. He wished he'd had something for breakfast – now he'd have to wait till half twelve to eat the tomato sandwich that was always gone soggy by lunchtime.

The curtains were still pulled in their father's downstairs bedroom. Their father had taken sleeping tablets every night since the accident, and he never got up now till around noon. On bad days he was still in bed when the children got home from school.

'Don't tell about Helen,' Luke said to Anne as they walked towards Mr Farrell's car.

'Why not?'

'Because it's none of their business.' No need to give anyone another reason to talk about the poor Mitchells. 'She'll be back soon anyway.'

Every so often during the day, Luke remembered that Helen was missing. He wondered what the others in his class would say if he told them. Would it get into the newspapers? Would Helen's photo be on 'Crimecall'?

What if she was dead? He couldn't eat his lunch,

thinking about that. He watched a few of his friends playing soccer in a corner of the yard. He hoped Helen would be found quickly, if she was dead. He didn't like to think of her lying in a field somewhere, with rain falling on her.

In the afternoon, Mrs Hutchinson asked them how they were getting on with their penfriends. A few girls said 'brilliant', and Luke guessed that they were writing to boys. None of the boys in the class said brilliant.

'Well, they're delighted with you, according to their teacher,' Mrs Hutchinson told them. 'Keep up the good work.'

Helen came home that evening. She walked into the kitchen as her mother was giving a description of her to a policewoman.

From the sitting room, Luke cocked his head and listened to the shouting. As soon as he made out Helen's voice, he turned up the volume on the TV. His father, sitting in another armchair, kept his eyes on the screen, but began rocking uneasily as soon as the shouting began.

'Helen came home,' Luke told him. His father darted a look at him, and then stared back at the screen, still rocking.

'It's OK,' Luke said. 'She's home now. Everything's

OK.’ When ‘The Simpsons’ was over, he watched the credits as they rolled up the screen. ‘Will I switch to the News?’

‘Yeah, the News,’ said his father, brightening up. ‘Yeah, the News.’

In the hall, Luke stood listening for a minute. There was no shouting coming from the kitchen. The police car was gone from the driveway. He could smell the sausages they always had on Wednesdays, and his mouth watered. He remembered he’d had nothing to eat all day.

Helen didn’t come down for tea. Luke’s grandmother put sausages and pudding and grilled tomato on a plate and brought it upstairs. His mother looked as if she’d been crying.

Afterwards, Luke helped with the dishes while his mother put his father to bed.

‘Where was Helen?’ he asked his grandmother, but she just shook her head.

‘She won’t say. She wouldn’t even tell the guard.’ She finished scrubbing the frying pan and put it on the draining board.

In his room later, Luke reread his penfriend’s last letter. She still sounded so dumb. ‘I think I’ll be a pop star’ indeed. As if you could just decide to be something like a pop star, and that would be it. As if

a pop star was better than a brain surgeon. Not that Luke had any notion of being a brain surgeon, of course.

And how on earth was he going to get out of the whole horse business? Why hadn't he thought more about what stories to make up? His penfriend was being so persistent – it was obvious she didn't believe he had any horses. Well, no way was he going to admit that. He'd just have to think of something.

And what the heck was all that about her mother being a famous chef? How could anyone be famous for making gravy? Wasn't that just powder mixed with hot water? What a load of rubbish – famous for making gravy. At least his horse story sounded like it might be true.

He addressed the envelope and stuck the stamp on while he was thinking about what to write. The picture on the stamp was some kind of modern art painting that looked exactly the same upside down.

He lay on his bed and thought for a while. Then he sat up, pulled the notebook onto his lap and began.

Dear Penfriend,

It's been the worst week of my life. On Tuesday Rocket fell while he was in training and broke his leg,

and had to be put down. The whole family is devastated. Rocket's trainer said he'd never have another horse like him. I'm too upset to even talk about the race now.

You asked about my sister having long hair as a baby. I'm wondering what on earth that would have to do with her being a model now. Anyway I haven't a clue what kind of hair she had when she was small – I just said that I didn't think babies had long hair. No biggie – get over it.

My dad and I had a brilliant mid-term break in the Pyrenees. We had two excellent climbs, and we stayed in a 5-star hotel with a Jacuzzi in the bathroom. I had octopus for dinner on the first night. It was a bit salty but OK. I like to try new food whenever I travel.

Speaking of food, I never heard of someone being famous for making gravy. You learn something new every day – although if I was famous for something I cooked, I'd rather it was something a bit more exciting than gravy.

Sorry, but I'm just not in the mood to write any more.

I keep thinking about Rocket.

Luke

PS I've never heard of a pop star who played the violin. Maybe you should just join a world famous orchestra instead.