There's a new girl at school today. I spot her the second she walks through the front gates. She's alone and seems to be headed in my direction. I take another look. The girl has pale skin and dark hair to her shoulders. She sees me and for a second our eyes collide. Hers are amazing – so light, they could pass as grey, with just the slightest hint of green. They remind me of a fox. I can't look away.

She comes right up to where I'm sitting on a bench. 'You're a psychic, aren't you?'

Her words are so direct they stun me. I get defensive quickly. 'Maybe. Who wants to know?'

'My name's Erin. But I don't have time for small talk. I need your services.'

I can't believe her abruptness. Most people wouldn't dream of mentioning my paranormal ability. In fact, they tend to stay well away, just in case I perform some sort of hocus-pocus on them. That's why I sit alone most of the time. They're scared. But not this girl. 'My services are not for sale.'

'I don't have money anyway. I just need your help.'
For some reason I find myself intrigued. It could be her strange eyes. I'm not sure. It could be the sadness I see inside them. Deep inside. 'Tell me why I should help you?'

'Because there's nobody else.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Find my brother. He's the only one left that's still missing.'

This is getting weird. 'What are you talking about?'

'My brother is lost in the forest that spreads west of Glenhaven.'

'Glenhaven? Isn't that ...?'

'Over the border, but there's a train that will get us there in four hours.'

I vaguely recall hearing something on the news this past week. Not that I listen to the news very often lately. Since my psychic power grew stronger, my mind never seems to rest any more. But I do remember hearing about a family that went hiking at Glenhaven. There was a flash flood and the three children became separated from their parents. One of the children was found on the first day. But apparently one is still missing. 'How old is he?'

She frowns. 'Only six. He doesn't know how to fend for himself. He doesn't know how to find food or water. He won't last another night.'

'How do you know this?'

'I know my brother!' she yells. 'And you have the power to find him!'

Her anger makes me suspicious. I get up quickly. My backpack, and everything inside, spills out. 'Is this a joke? Who sent you? It's not funny, you know. Do you think I like being like this? Ignored as if I'm invisible, or being made fun of?'

'I wasn't making fun of you,' she says in a much softer tone, a tone bordering on pleading. 'I really need your help. My brother is in trouble.' She puts a hand to her throat, resting her open palm on her chest. 'I feel him, in here. I know he's still alive.'

I peer at her, trying to work out if she's for real. 'Just because he's the last one of you to be found, doesn't mean the rescue teams are going to give up looking for him. They found you, didn't they?'

For the first time she breaks eye contact. Her head rolls around the base of her throat as if she is completely worn out. Well, I guess she would be. She must have suffered quite an ordeal herself. And now she's here, hours away, trying to get me to help her. I glance into her eyes. From this close they look like silver. She trembles and turns an even paler shade of pale. I think she's going to pass out. Finally she says, 'They're looking in the wrong direction!'

'So why don't you tell them?'

'Do you think I haven't tried? They won't listen to me! They just think I'm some stupid little girl who doesn't know anything.' She quickly adds, 'Please, just say you'll do it. You've helped others. I know about you helping the police find that kidnapped little girl.'

Yeah, I remember too. It had drained me for days afterwards. The publicity surrounding the event catapulted my loner status.

'Will you help me, Luke?'

She knows my name even though it wasn't printed in the papers. The thought makes me laugh. Obviously, she knows a lot more about me than just my name! 'When is this train?'

'Huh?'

'The train that will take us to Glenhaven?'

'It leaves in fifteen minutes.'

I grab my bag and look about. No one is watching. 'We'd better hurry then.'

The train is already sitting at the station. I glance up and down the platform. A porter is loading luggage into the baggage compartment at one end. 'We don't have a ticket.'

'I told you I don't have any money.' She runs straight into a carriage.

Well, neither do I. I glance around and follow quickly. She gets me to hide in the toilet when the conductor makes an appearance. When he's gone we find seats in a half-empty carriage. Suddenly I wish I hadn't agreed to help her. What are the chances that her brother is still alive? He's only six and has been missing for seven days! An hour ago we hadn't even met. Yet strangely there's an unexplained
rightness to her sitting beside me, a comfortable feeling, as if I've known her all my life.

I must have fallen asleep. I wake with a jolt and Erin shouting in my face, 'Come on, Luke! We're here!'

I grab my backpack and follow her out of the carriage and all the way to the end of the rapidly emptying platform. There, she jumps down onto the tracks.

'Hey, what are you doing?'

'Come on!'

A helicopter overhead flies in a northerly direction. I stare at it for a minute. That's where the rescue teams are searching, but Erin is adamant on going west. I jump down behind her. I haven't come all this way to back out now.

She crosses the track without even looking. More carefully, I follow. From there we hike down a path that leads us right into the base of the valley. We come to a creek with a bridge over the top. We cross it and find ourselves immersed in dense forest. I follow Erin off the path.

We keep walking into thicker forest, and the time passes quickly. My stomach growls. 'Hey!' I call out. 'Wait a minute.'

She spins round.

'We've been walking for ages. Let me get an apple out of my lunch box.'

She groans and rolls her eyes. 'But it's going to get dark soon!' Her voice sounds panicked. She stares off into the thick forest surrounding us. Just as I find my apple I hear her say softly, 'Tyler is scared of the dark.'

I think she's going to cry. Not quite sure what to do, I thrust my hand out, offering her the apple. 'I don't know how you can think of food!' she snaps, taking off.

We keep going, wading through miles of thick forest growth, and with each step it becomes darker. Spiders start weaving webs between branches. A possum gives a squeal as it clammers up a tree to my right. I glance round with a sinking feeling kicking into my stomach, as I realise exactly where I am— in the middle of thick forest as night is starting to descend. 'Hey!'

She turns. 'What's wrong now?'

I cross my arms over my chest. 'OK. Firstly, I'm not in the habit of taking a compass to school, so I'm assuming you know the way out of here? And secondly, I didn't bring a torch. And well, you didn't bring anything. Not even water! Didn't you learn a thing from your recent experience?'

Tears spring to her eyes. Oh no! This is all I need. But there's one more point I want to bring up. 'My mother's got to be worried like hell by now.'

'I'm sorry,' she mumbles, glancing at her feet. 'I swear we're nearly there.' She looks up and stares straight into my eyes. 'Don't bail on me now, Luke.'

As if I could with those sad eyes looking at me! 'OK. But when I searched for that little girl I had her clothing in my hand. I even had a recently lost tooth that her mother had kept for the tooth fairy.'

From around her neck, Erin unhooks a chain. She holds it out to me and I open my hand to take it. On the end of the chain is a gold cross with a sparkling stone in its centre.

'It's mine,' she says. 'But, well, we're brother and sister, so that means we're linked, right?'

I nod, and she adds, 'When Tyler was little he used to reach up and play with it. He loved the glistening crystal. He called it a star.'

My fingers fold around the chain and cross and I consciously think of Tyler. In seconds my head fills with a sense of him. He's in pain and keeps drifting in and out of consciousness. He's also afraid. Very afraid. I open my eyes. Erin was right all along. He's in this area somewhere. 'He's not far.'

She smiles and her eyes practically glow. 'I'll find him now,' I reassure her,
I take the lead, firmly holding on to the cross and chain. Erin follows. We leap over a shallow creek, winding our way up a rising embankment. The ground rapidly becomes moist and we have to be careful not to slip. It takes ages, but finally I get an overwhelming sense that Tyler is very close. His fear is seeping through every nerve in my body. My head starts to throb and ache.

‘What is it?’ Erin calls out. ‘Is something wrong with Tyler?’

I take the chain and cross and thread my hand through it, wrapping the chain twice around my wrist. The cross dangles into my palm, it’s my link to Tyler and I don’t want to lose it. I start searching again, positive the boy is nearby. I clasp my right palm over the cross and press my two hands together and think of Tyler. Sensations of his nearness fill my head, so strong I have to close my eyes and force myself to breathe slowly.

‘Luke, what’s wrong?’

I open my eyes and see him leaning up against the base of a large tree. His eyes are closed and his chest is hardly moving, but I know he’s still alive.

I run over and the first thing that hits me is his size. He’s so small, huddled up against the tree, one leg curled up, the other straight. It’s then I notice the twisted angle of his bones. Straight away I throw my backpack down, digging inside for my ruler and anything else that could make a splint.

Erin squats beside me. Tears are pouring down her face, obviously tears of relief. She knows her brother is going to be safe. I can’t help a quick look around. It’s so dark now, how on earth are we going to find our way out of here?

‘I’ll show you the way,’ Erin says softly.

I look up and she swallows deeply in her throat. ‘Water,’ she mumbles.

I dig my bottle out and offer it to her. She shakes her head. ‘For him.’

I take the bottle to Tyler’s mouth and trickle some water across his lips. He stirs and sips. ‘Slowly,’ I warn. His eyes flutter open briefly and he sips again, before drifting off into unconsciousness. I look across at Erin. ‘He’s going to be all right.’

She nods but appears unable to speak. I finish the makeshift splint and carefully lift the boy into my arms. A fragment of the moon breaks through the canopy above, enough to see the boy more clearly. He has scratches and bite marks all over his exposed skin. He’s been through a nasty ordeal, but soon he’ll be back with his parents. The whole family will be together again. I should be happy at the thought, but I can’t shrug this eerie feeling of gloom. I put the sensations down to being tired and hungry.


I nod and she starts to lead the way out. She seems to know where she’s going and, well, I don’t. So I follow, trusting her. She hasn’t been wrong so far.

After a while my arms grow weary and numb. I make her stop three or four times to give them a rest and get rid of the pins and needles that keep plaguing me. After a couple of hours I move Tyler’s body to my right shoulder. He’s still out cold, but I can feel his little heart beating, while the skin of his face warms my neck.

The forest starts to thin out and I realise we’re back in the valley. Light from a full moon makes the way much clearer. The bridge looms into sight, welcoming us like a doorway to paradise.

On the other side lights come into focus and I hear noises unlike anything I’ve been listening to these last few hours in the forest. I soon realise the noises are human sounds. People, talking or bustling about.

The lights become stronger. I get a second wind at the sight of them. It must be the railway station. But as we draw nearer I start wondering why the station is so vividly lit. Spotlights are everywhere. Some lights are even moving through the bushes towards us.

Someone calls out and soon the sounds of thumping footsteps draw close. A man in bright yellow overalls runs over. ‘Are you Luke Stanton?’

I nod, my mouth too dry to form words.

He takes Tyler from my arms carefully. ‘You found the boy.’
looking for her. A strange sense of unreality settles in my stomach. What's going on here?

'Erin?' I call out.

The man who hasn't shaved in three days puts his hands on my shoulders from behind. 'I think you'd better come with me, son.'

I shrug him off. 'No! I have to find Erin. She must have fallen away. I remember crossing the bridge together. The moon was out. I saw her clearly.'

The ambulance officer tries to put the blanket back over my shoulders, but I shrug it off. 'She's out there. You have to go and find her. She can't be far!'

The ambulance officer puts her hands on my face, one on either side. I have nowhere to look except straight into her eyes. 'Listen to me, Luke. We found Erin.'

Relief hits me and I smile.

Then she says, 'In the early hours of this morning. On the northern side of the railway bridge.'

I can't believe what this woman is trying to tell me.

She looks at me intensely. 'Luke, Erin had been dead for at least six hours before the rescue team found her.'

Moisture hits the back of my eyes as I try to take this in. My head shakes and I find I have to lunge for breath. I break out of the ambulance officer's hold, spinning away. Someone in the background mutters to the others to leave me alone. I'm grateful for the quiet moment to figure this out. It's a hard concept to follow, even for me! When Erin came to see me this morning she was already dead. She wasn't real. So what was she? Did I imagine her presence? Were my senses working on some strange level that I'm not even aware of?

My eyes catch sight of something shimmering near my hand. I look down and stare, unblinking. There, wrapped around my wrist, is Erin's gold cross and chain.
The Star

STRATEGIC READING/LISTENING
- Read aloud / in silence
- Read alone
- Read with a friend / in a group
- Look up words / Guess their meaning
- Listen only
- Listen first, read afterwards
- Listen while you read
- Get all the details
- Get the big picture

What happened?
Find the answers in the story.
1. Why is Luke surprised when Erin asks whether he is a psychic?
2. What happened to Erin's family?
3. How long has her brother been missing?
4. Erin and Luke have no money to buy train tickets. How do they manage to travel?
5. After walking for hours Luke senses that Tyler is close by. How is he able to do this?
6. How does the unshaven man know immediately who Luke is?
7. What happened to Erin? Where did she go?

Reading between the lines
Analyse the story and make interpretations. Be prepared to motivate your answers.
1. Luke says that his services are not for sale. So why do you think he agrees to help Erin?
2. "The whole family will be together again. I should be happy at the thought, but I can't shrug this eerie feeling of gloom." Why might Luke feel this way?
3. "Moisture hits the back of my eyes as I try to take this in." What is happening to Luke, do you think?
4. Make a list suggesting that Erin might in fact not be a real living person.

What do they mean?
Explain, translate or find a synonym for the highlighted words and phrases. Use these strategies to help you:
- Does the word remind you of a word in Swedish or any other language?
- Are there any clues in the text that can help you?
- What sort of a word is it (e.g. noun, verb, adjective, adverb)?

WORDS
1. She sees me and for a second our eyes collide.
2. I can't believe her abruptness.
3. I vaguely recall hearing something on the news this past week.
4. She must have suffered quite an ordeal herself.
5. When he's gone we find seats in a half-empty carriage.
6. That's where the rescue teams are searching, but Erin is adamant on going west.
7. We cross it and find ourselves immersed in dense forest.
8. A possum gives a squeal as it clammers up a tree to my right.
9. He loved the glistening crystal.
10. My fingers fold around the chain and cross and I consciously think of Tyler.
11. He's in pain and keeps drifting in and out of consciousness.
12. ... I get an overwhelming sense that Tyler is very close.
13. I finish the malevolent splint and carefully lift the boy ...
14. After a while my arms grow weary and numb.
15. ... I start wondering why the station is so vividly lit.

PHRASES
1. But I do remember hearing about a family that went hiking at Glenhaven.
2. She frowns, 'Only six. He doesn't know how to fend for himself.'
3. Her head rolls around the base of her throat as if she is completely worn out.
4. She gets me to hide in the toilet when the conductor makes an appearance.
5. I must have fallen asleep. I wake with a jolt ...
6. 'Don't bail on me now, Luke.'
7. We leap over a shallow creek, winding our way up a rising embankment.
8. His fear is seeping through every nerve in my body.
9. I soon realise the noises are human sounds. People, talking or bustling about.
10. The lights become stronger. I get a second wind at the sight of them.