

MARLOW

Rochester, New York. June 2019. The Eisley girl went missing. (*She extracts a photograph from the book.*) 18 and indistinct, eyes like frightened clouds. It hadn't been 24 hours. It hadn't even been two, but the parents were unusually protective, and rich as sheiks. Those first few months at college had them in a quake of dread. I'd been part of a team working on Pop's last little business difficulty, so when Princess didn't show up for "Check-in" dinner, they called me before any sane person would have a reason to. "We know it's a little early," said Mum, her nails sinking in to her handbag, "but she hasn't answered her phone for a week." "And try to get any solid answers from the school," gruffed Pops, "people who are supposed to be looking after our daughter."

I thought I'd sidle up and have a word with Princess's roommate, a nice little city mouse name of Perez, but she was in another castle. Point of fact, city mouse was just as off the radar as princess. A couple of lumps by the lounge TV told me Perez got so drunk last night that Eisley's boyfriend had to carry her across campus. The Eisleys hadn't mentioned a boyfriend. I poked around their messy room. A pillow shaped like a soccer ball. A blinking house phone with 28 messages. There was a snapshot tacked to the closet door- Princess with a tall, dead-eyed number who was certainly too old. The number had his arm around Princess, but his hand wasn't on her shoulder. It was on her neck. I began to get something of a hunch about him, so I slipped into the girl's computer. Have you ever noticed that young ladies are not encouraged to learn as much about electronics as perhaps is wise?

Bad things happen, Felix. Such bad things as can happen will drive you mad.