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Opening Extract from...

Crosstalk

Written by Connie Willis

Published by Gollancz

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CROSSTALK

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GOLLANCZ
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To the inimitable—and irreplaceable—Mary Stewart

"In Ireland the inevitable never happens,
and the unexpected constantly occurs."
—John Pentland Mahaffy

*

"In every crowd are certain persons who seem just like the rest,
yet they bear amazing messages."
—Antoine de St. Exupéry, *Night Flight*

*

"Listen up."
—*Ghost Town*

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crosstalk ('krostok) *noun*

1. a disturbance in a communication device's (radio, telephone, etc.) transmission caused by a second device's transmission, resulting in crossover, intermingling, and confusion; the presence of unwanted signals and/or interference due to accidental coupling

2. incidental, off-topic conversation during a meeting

3. witty, fast-paced repartee; banter

One

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments."
—William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 116"

By the time Briddey pulled into the parking garage at Commspan, there were forty-two text messages on her phone. The first one was from Suki Parker—of course—and the next four were from Jill Quincy, all saying some variant of "Dying to hear what happened." Suki's said, "Heard rumor Trent Worth took you to Iridium!???"

Of course you did, Briddey thought. Suki was Commspan's very own Gossip Girl. And that meant by now the whole company knew it. It was a good thing Commspan didn't have a no-fraternization policy—she and Trent could never have kept their romance secret. But she'd hoped to keep them from finding out about last night at least until she could tell her family. *If they don't know already.*

She scanned through her other texts. There were five from her sister Kathleen, eight from her sister Mary Clare, and nine from Aunt Oona reminding her of the Daughters of Ireland Gaelic poetry reading Saturday night.

I should never have given her a smartphone, Briddey thought. It had never occurred to her that her great-aunt would figure out how to use it—she couldn't even set her DVR. Or her clocks. But Briddey had

reckoned without Aunt Oona's desire to pester her constantly about the Daughters of Ireland. She'd gotten Maeve to teach her, and she now sent Briddey texts about it twenty times a day.

Briddey quickly read through the rest of their messages, but none of them began, "OMG! You can't be seriously thinking of doing this!"

Good. That meant she still had time to decide what she was going to say to them—though not much, given the speed of communication these days.

She scrolled quickly through the rest of her messages to see if there was one from Trent. There was. It said simply, "Love you. Call me ASAP." She very much wanted to, but the longer she was out here in the garage, the more likely Jill—or worse, Suki—was to drive in and begin interrogating her, and she'd come to work early precisely to avoid that. Talking to Trent would just have to wait till she got safely to her office.

She got out of her car and walked quickly toward the main door, checking the other cars to see who else was here. She didn't see Trent's Porsche. She didn't see Suki's car either, or her assistant, Charla's, which was good, but Jill's Prius was there, parked next to C.B. Schwartz's ancient Honda.

His car was always here—Briddey suspected he lived in his lab, sleeping on the sagging couch that looked like he'd retrieved it from a curb somewhere. But Jill usually arrived late, and Briddey wouldn't put it past her to come early expressly to pump Briddey. She was probably lying in wait for her in the lobby. *I'll have to go in the side entrance,* Briddey thought, changing course, *and hope nobody sees me on the way there.*

Nobody did, and there was no one in the elevator or up on four. *Good,* Briddey thought, hurrying down the hall. With Charla not in yet, she could go straight into her office, barricade the door, and come up with some way to break this to her family before they began bombarding her with calls saying, "Why didn't you answer any of my texts? What's wrong?"

Especially Aunt Oona, who always immediately leaped to the conclusion that something terrible had happened to her and began calling around to all the hospitals. *And this time she'll be convinced she was justified in her premonition,* Briddey thought as she turned down the hall to her office.

"Briddey!" Jill Quincy called from the end of the hall.

So close, Briddey thought, trying to decide whether she could make it to her office before Jill reached her, but Jill was already running toward her, calling, "*There* you are! I've been texting you all morning! I didn't see you come in."

She skidded to a stop next to Briddey. "I was down in the lobby," she said breathlessly, "but I must have missed you. I heard you and Trent Worth went to dinner at Iridium last night. So what happened?"

I can't tell you, Briddey thought. *Not till I've told my family.* But she couldn't refuse to talk either, or *that* would be all over the building within seconds. "Come here," she said, and pulled Jill into the copy room so passersby wouldn't hear them.

"Well?" Jill said the moment Briddey'd shut the door. "He proposed, didn't he? Oh, my God, I knew it! You are *so* lucky! Do you know how many women would *kill* to be engaged to Trent Worth? And you managed to snag him! After only six weeks!"

"I didn't 'snag' him," Briddey said, "and he didn't propose." But Jill wasn't listening.

"Let me see your ring!" she cried. "I'll bet it's gorgeous!" She grabbed for Briddey's hand and then, as its ringlessness registered, asked, "Where is it?"

"We're not engaged," Briddey said.

"What do you mean, you're not engaged? Then why did he take you to a place like Iridium? On a Thursday? Oh, my God! He asked you to get an EED, didn't he? That's even *better* than getting engaged!" She hugged Briddey. "I am *so* happy for you! I can't wait to tell everybody!" She started for the door.

"No, don't!" Briddey said, grabbing her arm. "Please!"

"Why not?" Jill asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Don't tell me you turned him down!"

"No, of course not," Briddey said. "It's just—"

"Just *what*? He's the most eligible guy at Commspan! *And* he must love you or he wouldn't have asked you to get an EED! And you obviously love him or you wouldn't have said yes. So what's the problem?"

She gave Briddey a searching look. "I know what it is. You're disappointed he didn't ask you to have it *and* propose, aren't you?"

And now that would be all over Commspan, too. "No, not at all,"

Briddey said. "He said he wants to wait to get engaged till after we have the EED, so I'll be able to sense how much he loves me when he asks me."

"Oh, my God, that's the most romantic thing I've ever heard! I can't believe it! He's gorgeous, he's willing to commit, *and* he's romantic! Do you *know* how rare that is? All the guys I date are either commitment-phobes or liars—or both. You are so lucky! It's that hair of yours. Guys go wild for red hair. Maybe I should dye mine red." She frowned. "You still haven't told me why you don't want me to tell anyone."

"It's my family. I'm not sure how to break this to them."

"You don't think they'll be happy? But he's so perfect! He's got a great job and a great car, and the losers your sister Kathleen dates . . . Or is it the EED? Everyone says it's totally safe."

"It is," Briddey said. "But they're kind of—"

"Overprotective?"

No, meddlesome and interfering. "Yes, so don't say anything till I've told them, okay?"

"Only if you tell me all the gory details! I want to know when you're having it done and—"

Briddey's phone rang. It was Trent's ring tone, but that didn't mean it was him. The last time she'd been with the family, Maeve had done something to her phone so that half the time it said it was him when it wasn't, and Briddey hadn't been able to fix it.

But at least it was a way out of the conversation. "Sorry," Briddey said to Jill. "I just need to see who this is." She glanced at the screen. "Look, I need to take this." She opened the copy room door and started out into the hall. "Promise me—"

"My lips are sealed," Jill said. "But you have to promise to tell me *everything.*"

"I will." Briddey turned away so Jill couldn't see her declining the call, then put the phone up to her ear, said, "Hello?" and walked briskly down the hall till she was out of sight.

She stuck the phone back in her pocket. And was instantly sorry when she saw Phillip from Logistics bearing down on her. "I heard via the grapevine that you and Trent Worth are going to get an EED," he said.

How is that possible? Briddey thought. *I only left Jill ten seconds ago.*

"Wow! Just like Tom Brady!" Phillip was saying. "Congratulations! That's great! But I hope you're not going to do it till after your boy Trent comes up with a better idea for the new phone than just more memory and an unbreakable screen. The rumor is Apple's coming out with something that'll blow every other smartphone out of the water, and Trent can't afford to be laid up in the hospital—"

"The EED's not major surgery," Briddey began, but Phillip wasn't listening either.

"If we don't watch out, Commspan could be the next Nokia," he said, and launched into a history of smartphone-company failures. "A small company like us can't compete unless we come up with something revolutionary, a whole new concept, and we need to come up with it fast, or—"

Come on, Aunt Oona, Briddey thought. *You usually call me every five minutes. Where are you when I need you?*

Briddey's phone rang. *Thank you,* she breathed. "I have to take this in my office," she said. "I'll see you at the meeting at eleven," and walked off.

But it wasn't Aunt Oona who'd saved her. It was Mary Clare, and the instant after Briddey sent the call to her voicemail, she got a text from Maeve. "I'm fine," it read. "Pay no attention to my mother."

Which meant they still didn't know, thank goodness, though she felt sorry for Maeve. What was it this time? Videogames? Bulimia? Cyberbullying? Mary Clare was constantly in hysterics over her, even though Maeve was a perfectly normal nine-year-old girl.

In fact, she's the only *normal member of my family,* Briddey thought.

Mary Clare certainly wasn't normal. She obsessed constantly about Maeve's homework, her grades, whether she'd get into an Ivy League college, her friends, her eating habits (Mary Clare was convinced she was anorexic), and the fact that she didn't read enough, even though (or possibly because) Mary Clare was constantly forcing *Little Women* and *Alice in Wonderland* on her.

Last week Mary Clare had been convinced Maeve was sending too many texts, and the week before that that she was eating too much sugared cereal (which didn't exactly square with the anorexia). Today it was probably nude selfies. Or the hantavirus.

For Maeve's sake, Briddey should really call Mary Clare and try to calm her down, but *not* till she'd worked out what she was going to say about the EED. And she didn't have much time. Half of Commspan probably knew by now, and one of them would be bound to mention it to Aunt Oona the next time she "popped in" with Maeve to show her how Maeve looked in her new step-dancing costume and try to convince her to go to some boring Daughters of Ireland thing . . .

Oh, my God, and there was Suki, Grapevine Girl herself, emerging from the Human Resources office. Briddey cast decorum to the winds and sprinted for the safety of her office. She yanked the door open and flung herself inside—and practically into her assistant's arms.

"I thought you'd never get here," Charla said, steadying her. "You've got a million messages, and I want to hear all about last night! You are *so* lucky to be getting an EED!"

Faster than a speeding bullet, Briddey thought. *If Commspan wants a revolutionary form of communication, they should design a phone based on our grapevine.*

"I didn't see your car in the garage," Briddey said.

"Nate gave me a ride to work. I wish I could talk him into having an EED done. It would be great to *know* whether he loves me or not. You are so lucky you won't have to worry about that anymore. I mean, I spend all my time trying to figure out when he tells me he does, is that for real or does he just want to hook up? I mean, last night, he—"

"You said I had messages. Who are they from?"

"Your sister Mary Clare mostly, and your aunt and your other sister. I put them all on your computer. I thought you told them not to phone you at work."

"I did," Briddey said. *But they didn't listen. As usual.*

"Did you talk to them?" she asked aloud, dreading Charla's answer, but Charla shook her head.

Thank goodness for that. "If they call again," Briddey said, "do not, repeat, do *not* say anything to them about the EED. I haven't had the chance to tell them yet, and I want to be the one to break the news."

"They'll be so excited!"

Wanna bet? "Who are the other messages from?" she asked.

"Trent Worth called and said to call him as soon as you got in, and so did Trish Mendez and Rahul Deshnev's assistant. And Art Sampson

needs you to look over his memo on improving interdepartmental communication right away and tell him if you have any suggestions to add. It's on your computer. So when he asked you, were you thrilled?"

"Yes," Briddey said. "If anyone else comes in or calls, tell them I can't talk to them till after the meeting." She went into her office, shut the door, and called Trent. He didn't answer.

She texted and messaged him telling him to call her, tried Rahul Deshnev's assistant with the same result, then called Trish Mendez. "Is it true that you and Trent Worth are going to have an EED?" Trish said.

"Yes," Briddey said, thinking, *I don't think interdepartmental communication needs any improving.*

"That's wonderful!" Trish said. "When are you having it done?"

"I don't know. Trent wants to have Dr. Verrick do it, and—"

"Dr. Verrick? Oh, my God! He did Brad and Angelina's, didn't he?"

"Yes, so he has a really long waiting list, and I don't know when we'll even be able to get in to see him, let alone schedule the EED."

"He did Caitlyn Jenner's, too, didn't he?" Trish said. "And Kim Kardashian's, though that one didn't work because she fell in love with somebody else, I can't remember his name. He was in the last Avengers movie."

This was going to take all day. Briddey held her phone close to the desk and rapped twice on the desktop with her fist. "Come in," she called, and put the phone up to her ear. "Listen, my appointment's here. Can I call you back?"

She hung up and, with a feeling of "out of the frying pan, into the fire," checked the twenty-two messages from her family—correction, thirty-one—to make sure they still didn't know, starting with Mary Clare's in case she'd decided Maeve was possessed by demons and had scheduled an exorcism or something.

She hadn't. She'd read an article online about the negative influence that gender roles in movies had on girls, and wanted to know whether Briddey thought she should block Maeve from watching them online.

Good luck with that, Briddey thought, and checked Kathleen's, which were all, "Need to talk to you about Chad," her latest in a long line of odious boyfriends. Aunt Oona's messages—except for three

"Where are you, mavourneen?" inquiries—were all reminders that Sean O'Reilly was planning to read "The Passing of the Gael" at the Daughters of Ireland meeting, and the whole family was going.

That is, if they're not at my apartment trying to talk me out of having the EED, which she was sure they'd do as soon as they found out. They didn't like Trent, as they'd all made perfectly clear when she'd gone to dinner at Aunt Oona's last Saturday.

Mary Clare thought he spent too much time on his smartphone (and not enough listening to her fret about Maeve), Kathleen thought he was too rich and good-looking to still be single and therefore had to be hiding something, and even Maeve, who usually sided with Briddey in family debates, had made a face and said, "His hair's too combed. I like guys with messy hair."

Aunt Oona had, of course, rejected him on the grounds that he wasn't from Ireland, even though she herself had never set foot on "the Auld Sod" in her life. Not that you'd know it to look at her. Or hear her. She talked in a brogue straight out of *Angela's Ashes*—or an old Bing Crosby movie—and twisted her graying red hair into a straggling bun, wore baggy tweed skirts and Aran Isles sweaters summer and winter, and put a shawl over her head when she went to her incessant Daughters of Ireland meetings. "No one in Ireland has dressed like that in the last hundred years," Briddey wanted to shout at her. "And you're not *Irish*! The closest you've ever been to a peat fire was watching *The Quiet American* on TCM!"

But it wouldn't have done any good. Aunt Oona would simply have clutched her rosary beads to her ample chest, called upon Saint Patrick and Briddey's sainted mother to forgive Briddey's blasphemous words, and redoubled her efforts to fix her up with a "foine Irish lad." Like Sean O'Reilly, who was forty, balding, and still lived with his mother—also a Daughter of Ireland.

I don't want Sean O'Reilly or any of Aunt Oona's other aging "lads," Briddey thought. *Or any of Kathleen's ne'er-do-wells. That's why I'm dating Trent. And why I'm going to have the EED with him, no matter what you say.*

She tried to call him again, but he was apparently still on his phone. And now his message box was full. She emailed him.

Mistake. When she clicked SEND, nineteen new emails popped up on her screen, all but three of them headed, "OMG EED! Congrats!"

The three that weren't were from Aunt Oona: "It's checking your phone you need to be. There's something wrong with it" and, "Is it an accident you've had?" And from Maeve: "You have to talk to Mom. She won't let me watch *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* or any of the *Frozen* movies. Or *Tangled,* which is like my favorite movie next to *Zombie Hordes*!"

Thank goodness Mary Clare doesn't know Maeve's watching zombie movies, or she'd really have apoplexy, Briddey thought, and her phone rang.

"Where are you?" Trent said. "I've been trying to—"

"Hello!" she said eagerly. "You have no idea how glad I am to hear the sound of your voice. Last night was so wonderful."

"I know," he said. "You have no idea how happy you've made me."

"And how happy we're going to be when we—"

"Yeah, about that. I'm afraid I've got some bad news. I talked to Dr. Verrick's office, and his nurse said they're not going to be able to get us in till late summer."

"Well, we knew he had a waiting list—"

"His nurse said we were lucky to get in *that* soon, that some patients have to wait up to a year."

"It's all right," she said. "I can wait—"

"Well, *I* can't! This screws up *everything*!" he exploded. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to shout at you, sweetheart. It's just that I want us to be connected *now* so I can—so you can know what I'm feeling—"

"Which I'm guessing is frustration," Briddey said.

"*Yes!* I'm trying to see if there isn't some way to get us in by May, and in the meantime, we need to fill out the preliminary paperwork—sorry, I've got to take this," he said. "Hold on." His voice cut off for a minute and then came back. "Where was I?"

"Filling out the preliminary paperwork."

"Right. His nurse will be sending a medical history and some questionnaires, and you need to fill them out and get them back as soon as possible so that if he *can* get us in earlier, we're ready. And meanwhile, I've got to figure out what I'm going to do if Schwartz doesn't come through."

"C.B. Schwartz?"

"Yes. He's supposed to have some ideas for the new phone that I can present at today's meeting, but I've been emailing him for the last

two days with no response, and he isn't answering his phone either. I don't know what's wrong with him. Half the time when you're talking to him, he doesn't even hear you. It's like he's off in another world. Hamilton thinks he's a genius, the next Steve Jobs or something, but *I* think he's mentally unstable."

"He's not unstable," Briddey said. "He's just a little eccentric. And he *is* really smart."

"The Unabomber was smart, too," Trent said. "Let's hope he's not homicidal, and that he's enough of a genius to come up with some ideas to tide us over till the one I'm working on is ready, or we're dead. We've got to have something ready by the time Apple rolls out the new iPhone, and now that—"

His voice cut off, and Briddey thought he must have another call, but a few seconds later he said, "Sorry, I didn't mean to unload on you like that."

"That's okay. I understand. You've got a lot riding on this."

He laughed harshly. "You have no idea just how—" His voice cut off again.

"Trent?" Briddey said. "Are you there? What happened?"

"Bad connection," he said. "What I was trying to say is, I want everything—the phone, the EED, everything—to be perfect for us, and I can't stand the idea of having to wait to be together, really together. I love you so much."

"I love y—"

"Look, I've got another call coming in. I'll see you at the meeting. And till then, check your email. I sent you something."

He had, a virtual bouquet of golden rosebuds, which opened into lush yellow roses and then morphed into butterflies.

How sweet! Briddey thought, watching them flutter around the screen to the tune of "I Will Always Love You."

The butterflies morphed again, into letters forming the words "Now that you've said yes, our troubles are over!"

Except for me telling my family, Briddey thought. *Which I have got to figure out how to do* now*, before they come over to see why I haven't answered their messages*.

There was a knock on the door. *Oh, my God, it's them,* Briddey thought, but it couldn't be. They never knocked. They just walked in.

Which meant this must be Charla. "Come in," Briddey said, and Charla opened the door and leaned in, looking bemused.

"Art Sampson and Suki Parker want you to call them as soon as possible," she said, "and you got a message from C.B. Schwartz."

Let's hope it's his ideas for the new phone. "Did you put it on my computer?" Briddey asked.

"No, I mean a *message.*" Charla held out a folded piece of paper as if it were a poisonous snake. "He wrote it by hand and everything. I mean, who does that anymore?"

"He's a genius," Briddey said absently, reading the note.

"Really? Are you sure? He never answers his emails."

The note read, "I need to talk to you. C.B. Schwartz." If this was something about his ideas for the phone not being ready, she'd better talk to him before the meeting, so she could warn Trent.

She asked Charla for the number of his lab and called him, but there was no answer, and it didn't let her leave a message. "Get me his cellphone number," she said to Charla.

"It won't do any good," Charla said. "There's no coverage down in that sub-basement where he has his lab."

"What about our voice-texting function?"

"It doesn't work down there."

That was ridiculous; it was designed specifically for areas with poor reception. "Give me the number anyway, in case he's not in his lab."

"He's *always* in his lab."

"Well, then I'll text him," Briddey said, and Charla reluctantly gave her the number.

"I doubt if it'll do any good," Charla said. "He refuses to carry his phone with him. Suki says he never even turns it on." She frowned. "You're not going to make me take a message down there, are you? The sub-basement's *freezing,* and there's nobody down there but him. And he creeps me out, the way he lurks down there and never talks to anybody. Like that guy who lives in the dungeon in that movie, the Hunchback of Notre Dame."

"You mean the Phantom of the Opera," Briddey said. "The Hunchback of Notre Dame lived in a bell tower, not a dungeon. And C.B. doesn't have a hump."

"No, but he still creeps me out. *I* think he's crazy."

"He's not crazy."

Charla didn't look convinced. "He wears a *wristwatch,*" she said. "Nobody does that anymore either. And he dresses like a homeless person."

Briddey didn't have an answer for that. He did. Even by Commspan's casual, Silicon Valley–style dress code of flannel shirts, jeans, and running shoes, C.B. looked terrible, as if he'd grabbed his clothes randomly off a thrift-store rack, and they always looked like they'd been slept in. Which they probably had.

"Suki says he doesn't believe in answering emails or going to interdepartmental meetings," Charla said, "and those earbuds he wears aren't connected to anything. I've even seen him talking to himself. What if he's a serial killer and he's storing the bodies in his lab? Nobody would ever know, it's so cold down there."

Don't be ridiculous, Briddey thought. *This is Commspan. They'd know within nanoseconds.* "Well, serial killer or not, I need to talk to him, and I don't want to go all the way down to his lab. Keep trying to get in touch with him," she said, and went back into her office to text C.B.

In the five minutes she'd been gone, she'd accumulated nine more "Congrats!" emails and twelve more voice messages, including one from Darrell in IT telling her he thought having an EED was "Totally phenomenal!" and one from Rahul Deshnev's assistant wanting her to call ASAP. Briddey did, hoping it meant the meeting had been postponed, but when she got on the line, Rahul Deshnev's assistant said, "I'm so glad you're getting an EED! Greg and I just had one, and it's even better than they advertise. Now our relationship is totally open and honest. We don't have any secrets from each other, and we *never* fight. And the sex is amazing! Greg—"

"Sorry, but my nine forty-five just got here," Briddey said, and hung up, thinking, *Maybe going down to see C.B. would be a good idea.* Staying here, she wasn't going to get a moment's peace, and the fact that there was no reception in the sub-basement meant she wouldn't be able to get calls *or* texts there. And since Charla thought C.B. was some sort of horror-movie monster, she was unlikely to venture down there after her to deliver a message.

Best of all, since C.B. didn't carry a phone and never checked his

email, he wouldn't know anything about the EED, and she wouldn't have to engage in another time-consuming conversation about it. She could find out what he wanted and then go into one of the storerooms and figure out exactly what to tell her family without fear of being interrupted.

She started out the door, nearly colliding with Charla, who said, "Suki Parker called again. And your Aunt Oona. She said she needs to talk to you about the poetry reading. And your sister Mary Clare is on line one."

"Tell them all I'm in a meeting," Briddey said. "I'm going down to C.B. Schwartz's lab."

"But how will I get in touch with you?"

You won't, Briddey thought. "I'll be back by ten thirty," she said.

"Okay," Charla said doubtfully. "Do you really think you should go down there by yourself?"

"If he tries to kill me, I'll hit him with an icicle," Briddey said, and to make sure Charla didn't follow her, she added, "I've been thinking about what you said, and you're right. He does look a little like the Hunchback of Notre Dame. Or the guy in those *Saw* movies."

"I *know*. You're sure you'll be all right?"

Absolutely. If I can just get down there without being waylaid by anyone else. She opened the office door and looked cautiously out, convinced Suki would be lying in wait, but for once the "luck of the Irish" Aunt Oona constantly invoked was with her. There was no one in the corridor *or* the elevators, and she made it safely down to the sub-basement without any more encounters.

The elevator opened onto cement emptiness and the sharp, cold smell of a walk-in freezer. No wonder no one came down here. It was absolutely glacial. Ice crystals had formed on the metal door of C.B.'s lab, which had a printed sign on it saying DANGER—NO ADMITTANCE—EXPERIMENT IN PROGRESS and a handwritten one that said, KEEP OUT—THIS MEANS YOU. And when she looked through the door's glass-and-wire mesh window into the lab, C.B. was wearing a pea coat, a wool muffler, and fingerless gloves. And cargo shorts and flip-flops. He was hunched over a lab table, doing something with a circuit board and a soldering iron.

Briddey was glad Charla wasn't here because he looked appalling even for him. He had a two-day stubble, and his hair was even messier than usual. *Maeve would probably like* him, Briddey thought.

He looked like he'd spent all night here again. *Which is good,* she thought, knocking on the metal door. *He won't have overheard anyone talking about the EED on his way down here this morning.* Though he wouldn't necessarily have heard it even so, since he was wearing the earbuds Charla had mentioned.

He didn't look up. She knocked again, and when that didn't have any effect, she opened the door, went in, walked over to where he was working, and waved both hands in front of him. "C.B.? Hello? Are you in there?"

He looked up, saw her, and yanked the earbuds out. "What did you say?"

"I'm sorry to bother you when you're working," she said, smiling. "But you said you wanted to talk to me?"

"Yeah," he said. "You're not seriously thinking of getting an EED, are you?"