

**THE
LAST
WITNESS**

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For Harry.
You saved me from the monsters.

First published in the United States in 2020 by Sourcebooks
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Published by Sourcebooks Fire, an imprint of Sourcebooks
P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410
(630) 961-3900
sourcebooks.com

Originally published as *Black Cairn Point* in 2015 in the United Kingdom by Hot Key Books, an imprint of Bonnier Books UK.

[Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data]

Printed and bound in [Country of Origin—confirm when printer is selected].

XX 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ONE

NOW

Waiting. My fingers drum out an uneven rhythm on the hard plastic armrest of my chair. The noise jars against the light, methodical patter of the receptionist on her ergonomic keyboard. I see her wince and know I'm rubbing her the wrong way, like nails down a chalkboard.

Good.

My nonverbal protest is the only complaint I can make because waiting is a privilege. It means I've moved up one rung on Dr. Petersen's "ladder of trust." One rung on a ladder that stretches all the way up to the cloud-covered sky. I'm at the bottom. And I have no intention of climbing to the top. Still, my small ascent has its advantages. I'm wearing my own clothes, for a start. My hands are free, and I can continue my discreet torture of the snooty-faced secretary. Smiling serenely at her, I increase the volume of my tapping.

The door opens. Both the receptionist and I look toward the rectangle of space, but no one appears. Through the doorway I can just make out the cream-colored wall, covered with certificates, and the plush shag of the crimson-red carpet. At no sign that I can see, the receptionist takes her cue.

“Dr. Petersen will see you now.”

She’s perfected that sickly sweet voice. Professional, polite, and dripping with disdain. I avoid looking at her as I rise out of my seat. The rubber soles of my slippers—real shoes are at least another six rungs—make no sound on the cheap laminate. Instead, slightly out of step with me, the heavy tread of my escort announces my presence loud enough for Dr. Petersen to know I’m coming. Loud enough for him to look up and greet me.

He doesn’t.

“How are you today, Heather?” he asks the piece of paper in front of him.

It doesn’t answer. There are at least eight seconds of silence before he deigns to lift his eyes to me.

“Hmmm?” He raises his eyebrows, his expression open, pleasant. As if we’re friends. Confidants.

We’re not.

I hold his gaze as I ease myself into the plush leather chair facing his desk. No ugly molded plastic in this room. He drops his eyes first, and I allow myself a small smirk of victory as I watch him go through the rigmarole of shuffling the papers on his desk, clicking his engraved silver pen several times, and adjusting his tie, his shirt. Then he clears his throat and fixes me with a piercing look.

Now we're really playing.

"Are you ready to talk today, Heather?"

To you? No.

He reads it in my face and sighs. Leaning forward over the desk, he drops the pen and presses the fingers of both hands together into a steeple. The soft yellow spotlights on the ceiling make the signet ring on his right little finger sparkle. I can't see what's imprinted on the circular face, just the hint of etchings rubbed worn with age. Like the lines around his eyes, the repugnant folds of his jowls surrounding a mouth puckered by dislike—the expression he wears every time he looks at me. The feeling is mutual.

"I have a report to make to the court, you know."

I lift one eyebrow disdainfully. *Do you?*

"The judge wants an update on your progress, your state of mind. Heather, I can't do that if you won't engage with me."

Written down, these words seem considerate, the rhetoric of a doctor who cares about his patient, about her welfare. When this is transcribed by the receptionist outside—and I know I'm being recorded, even if I can't see the equipment—I'm sure that is how it will read. Only I can hear the razor edge of threat.

I have the power to send you somewhere where there will be bars on your window instead of straps on your bed. That's what he's really saying. Play nice, open up to me, let me inside your mind, and you can climb up the ladder until one day, blue sky and blazing sun will be the only things hanging over your head.

What Dr. Petersen doesn't understand is that I'm not safe.

Whether I'm here or in prison, not even if I'm free. It doesn't matter where I am. I'm not safe. A darkness infinitely more potent than his bureaucratic intimidation hovers. Makes this puppetry a ludicrous sideshow.

And he just wouldn't understand. So why the hell should I play his game?

He sees the thought shining clear as day from my eyes and grimaces. Momentarily defeated, he flicks through the sheaves of paper about me—reports, medical notes, facts and figures—and scans for something, anything, to fill the minutes. He's not quite as comfortable with silence as I am. Suddenly, his eyes light up. In response, mine narrow to slits. What has he found?

"I have a release form here," he says, waving a single piece of blue paper in the air for a brief moment. Before I can focus on it, he returns it to the pile. Release form? He has my interest now. There's no hiding it. Victory number two goes to him, and he is not above preening. "I have to sign to say that you are stable enough to be allowed out of this establishment temporarily for the surgery on your right hand to be performed..."

My hand. I look down at where it's folded in my lap, unconsciously shielded from view by my unblemished left. I can't see it, but I can still feel it: the puckered rivets, the rough unevenness of the scars. Slowly I shift position and lightly place a hand on each knee. Stare at the difference.

Left: pale white skin, fingers long and thin, nails bare and unvarnished but as long as they'll let me keep them. They could be a weapon, after all. They have been, when I've had the chance.

Right: ravaged red, misshapen, nails missing or twisted. More a claw than a hand. Ugly. Monstrous.

I feel my eyes tear up, and I'm helpless to stop it. My hand.

Petersen's still talking, but I can't hear him. "Heather? Heather, are you listening?"

No.

"For me to sign this, you need to show that you can communicate. That you're rational enough to be allowed out of this establishment for the procedure. You have to talk to me today. It's important." He lifts another document. This one is thick, its multiple pages straining the staple that holds it together. "We're going to go over your statement to the police. What you told them." He pauses as if he's waiting for me to say something, give him permission to go right ahead. "Your own words, Heather. Exactly as you said them. Let's start at the beginning."

The beginning?

I think about it as I cradle my hand. Close my eyes and imagine I'm not here, that I'm flying down the highway, surrounded by my friends. I can almost hear the song blaring from the radio.

TWO

THEN

The music erupted out of the speakers, but the smashing drums and high-pitched screech of the lead singer were lost under the cacophony of our five voices, all trying to outcompete one another. The band took over again as the melody twisted and turned its way across the bridge. Then there was a collective intake of breath followed by laughter: none of us knew the words to the verse.

“I love that song!” Emma, flip-flopped feet propped up on the dash, turned around and grinned at Martin, Dougie, and me squashed into the back seat.

“Yeah? Who’s it by?” Her boyfriend—Darren—took his eyes off the road to raise an amused eyebrow at her, lips twitching into a smirk.

There was a moment’s pause, punctuated by a quiet snort of laughter from the boys on either side of me. I kept quiet. I didn’t have any idea either.

“I don’t know,” Emma huffed, put out. “It’s ancient!”

“It’s by Faces,” Martin said quietly. “They were Rod Stewart’s band before he became famous.”

Ah. I’d heard of him.

“Whatever,” Emma replied airily. She tossed her long, blond hair. I wasn’t fooled—the gesture was something she did when she wanted attention rather than when she was genuinely upset—but it was enough to get Darren to take his right hand off the steering wheel to rub her thigh in apology.

“I’m just joking,” he assured her.

His hand continued to run up and down the length of tanned skin from her knee to the hem of her skirt. Since I was stuck in the tiny middle seat, his fondling fingers were directly in my field of vision. I counted to ten in my head while I waited for him to cut it out, but he didn’t, so I twisted to my right and contented myself with staring past Dougie’s profile, becoming hypnotized by the dazzling sunlight and green of the countryside. Feeling me shift in his direction, Dougie turned to look at me. The corners of his lips quirked up, putting a matching pair of dimples in his cheeks. I loved those dimples, just as I loved his eyes—blue and warm, and looking right at me. I lasted three seconds under his scrutiny before I had to turn my head and fix my stare out the other window to hide my burning cheeks. This time Martin eyed me quizzically, registering the heat in my face, but him I could ignore.

The view wasn’t as good from this side: the rolling hills and farm fields were interrupted by two lanes of traffic charging in

the other direction. Safer, though. It'd do until my pulse stopped pounding.

"Pit stop," Darren announced from the driver's seat, and I felt the car swerve as he peeled off onto the exit ramp at the last second. Emma squealed dramatically and gripped the seat as he floored it up the hill. I did likewise, although much more quietly, my nails digging into Martin's leg to stop myself from being pushed over into Dougie's lap.

"Sorry," I muttered as Martin massaged the bruised skin.

He smiled briefly at me, telling me I was forgiven, then shot Darren a look. I smothered my own grin. Since we'd set out that morning, I didn't think Martin had exchanged more than ten words with Darren. He'd referred to him (outside of Emma's presence) as a meathead—"that muscle-bound moron." But it was Dougie's birthday, and that meant making nice.

Initially it had been just the three of us going camping, but my parents had gotten all funny about me going off with two boys. Dougie had been the one to suggest we invite Emma and Darren along (because Emma would never have come without him). I'd been disappointed at first, worried their presence would ruin things, but Dougie convinced me we'd still have fun, we could still do everything we had planned. And Darren had a car, so we were able to head further afield, out to the middle of nowhere rather than just the outskirts of the city.

"What are we stopping for?" Dougie asked over my shoulder.

"Supplies." Darren swiveled around to wink in the direction of the back seat.

I raised my eyebrows. The car was already chock-full of stuff for the trip. We had enough to stock a bunker and survive a nuclear winter, never mind four nights in a tent.

“Right.” Darren cruised into a supermarket parking lot far too fast, causing a woman in a Kia to steer herself hurriedly into the curb. “You guys stay here. Dougie and I will get stuff for everyone.”

“What?” Emma complained. She stared beseechingly at her boyfriend. “Why can’t we come?”

Darren squealed into a space, then turned off the ignition as he shot her a grin that revealed two rows of dazzling white teeth. No dimples, though.

“Because I’m the only one with a good fake ID, and if I go loading up a cart with you all trotting along behind me, they won’t serve me. Then we’ll have to drink seawater all weekend.”

Or cola, or orange juice, or any of the eight types of soft drinks squashed into the trunk. But Darren had something a little harder in mind. Beside me, Martin shifted on the seat, clearly disapproving but not wanting to say anything. I kept my mouth shut, too. I wasn’t a big drinker—mostly because I wasn’t allowed—but I was curious and not so pure that I’d turn down the opportunity.

Fresh air tickled my side as Darren and Dougie threw their doors open in tandem.

“How much do you want us to spend?” Dougie asked as he slid across the vinyl.

“Twenty each?” Darren suggested. Twenty each? My eyebrows slithered up my forehead. “It’s for four nights,

remember,” he continued, reading my expression, which I knew would be echoed and then some on Martin’s face.

“Twenty’s fine,” Emma replied, shooting me a warning look. I made a face at her, unimpressed. My best friend Emma didn’t drink, said it turned people into mindless idiots. Darren’s girlfriend Emma, however, apparently thought differently. Resigned, I reached for my purse.

There was a definite air of annoyance in the back seat as Dougie and Darren shut their doors on the three of us. Emma didn’t seem to notice; she was too busy staring at Darren’s broad shoulders as they disappeared into the warehouse-style supermarket.

“Isn’t Darren gorgeous?” she sighed.

Martin huffed a laugh that he managed to turn into a half-convincing cough. Emma slanted her eyes at him before turning her attention to me.

“Isn’t he?” she prompted.

“Um...” I shrugged.

He was good-looking, I supposed, in a tough kind of way. He was a big guy, one of those compulsive gym-goers, and his clothes came from the sorts of stores that blared out dance tunes and sold shirts with brand names emblazoned in huge letters across the front. Two years older than us, he had a job in the construction company Emma’s dad managed—that was how she’d met him. He was confident, too, walking with a pronounced swagger. But it was all very deliberate, very affected. A paper-thin facade. To be honest, I thought he looked a little like an idiot. Dougie, on the other hand...

Dougie was as laid-back as Darren was pumped up. He was just as tall as Darren but nowhere near as bulky. Nicely normal-sized. He had similar blue eyes, but they were usually smiling rather than eyeing the world with barely veiled aggression, and his thick brown hair stuck up everywhere, nothing like Darren's gelled masterpiece.

"Heather?" Emma waved a hand in front of my face, pulling my attention back to her and her question.

"Sure." I smiled at her, putting just the right amount of enthusiasm in my voice.

I'd had quite a lot of practice at that recently. For the last six months, Emma and Darren had been inseparable. If I wanted to spend time with her, I had to put up with him, too. Which didn't make me happy because the Emma I knew—the one I'd been friends with since we were shy five-year-olds together on the playground—turned into someone completely different as soon as she was within swooning distance of Darren.

"He is!" she asserted, smiling dreamily. "And he's such a good kisser."

Given that I knew for a fact Emma hadn't kissed a single boy before she'd caught Darren's eye, I wasn't sure how she was in a position to judge, but I kept my mouth shut.

Martin gave a cough—a real one this time—and squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. Emma didn't notice.

"And he knows what he's doing, if you know what I mean." She gave me a smug look. "I mean—"

"Emma!" I interrupted before she could expand on that. "Enough details."

“What?” She looked at us, wide-eyed, the picture of innocence.

I was saved from answering by the reappearance of Dougie and Darren.

“Here they come,” I said, relieved. Then my eyes widened. “Did they buy the whole store? Where the hell are we supposed to fit all of that?”

The answer: at our feet, on our knees, in the fraction of an inch of space between the seats. Basically, anywhere Darren could find a gap. If I had been uncomfortable before, now I had less space than a sardine in a can. To make matters worse, Darren forced a case of beer between Martin and me so I was pushed up tight against Dougie’s side, so much so that he had to sling his arm along the back of the seat and press against me just so Darren could shut the door. I was burning up under the heat of it resting lightly across my shoulders. How many times had I daydreamed about sitting close beside him, his arm casually flung around me? In none of those dreams were we quite so closely surrounded by boxes of booze—or people.

“How long do we have to go?” I asked. The sun streaming in was turning the car into a greenhouse, and sweat was already gathering at the base of my back.

“An hour, maybe a little more,” Darren replied, twisting the key in the ignition. The car spluttered and heaved before dying completely. There was a long, drawn-out moment of silence. Darren tried again, pumping the accelerator with his foot.

The car vibrated, clanking noisily, but refused to catch. “Darren, what’s wrong?” Emma simpered.

The look he gave her was priceless.

“The car won’t start,” he hissed between gritted teeth. Aggravated, he tried again, turning the key and holding, letting the choking, grating noises go on and on and on. People in nearby cars began to turn and look. I tried to avoid their stares, wishing there was room for me to slink down and hide. “Do you have Roadside Assistance?” Martin asked, leaning forward.

“No.” Darren turned the key back, waited several seconds, then twisted hard. After just a moment of protest, the engine roared to life. “Yes!”

Throwing the car into gear, Darren backed out of the space and navigated his way out of the parking lot. With the extra weight we were carrying, the car was riding low on its axles, and I felt every bump and rut in the pavement.

“Darren, is this thing likely to die on us when we’re in the middle of nowhere with no cell phone reception?” Martin asked quietly as we accelerated back onto the highway.

“Have a little faith,” Darren replied. “She’s never let me down before.” He patted the Volvo symbol nestled in the heart of the steering wheel.

“Yes, it has,” Emma piped up. “Didn’t you have to call your dad last month to give you a tow back from the gym?”

“Apart from that one tiny incident, she’s never let me down before,” Darren corrected. “Shut up!” he snapped good-naturedly at the snickering of amusement that rumbled across the back seat. He gave us a one-fingered salute before fiddling with the settings on his top-of-the-line stereo, its shiny buttons

and flashing digital display incongruous in the ugly plastic dash of the ancient car.

“Yo, Martin,” Darren called suddenly. I felt Martin stiffen beside me before fumbling to react to the small missile being hurled toward him over Darren’s shoulder. He caught it—barely—and I realized it was an iPod. “Your turn to choose the music,” Darren told him.

Martin shot him a surprised look before offering half a smile. “Thanks,” he said, and a minute later, the strains of John Mayer filled the car.

“Good choice,” Darren muttered before spinning the volume up high.

We drove along without talking, listening to the music and watching the scenery race by. Under the noise from the stereo, the car engine screamed as Darren pushed it faster and faster, showing off to Emma who was giggling and shrieking in the passenger seat. I was relieved that I couldn’t see the dials on the dashboard, didn’t know exactly how fast we were going. Darren was passing other cars as if they were standing still. I wasn’t about to complain, though. I was desperate to get there and stretch my legs, to rub at the bruises from where the sharp edges of the boxes of booze were digging into me.

I shut my eyes and leaned my head back. Both boys had opened their windows, allowing a cooling breeze to whip across the tight space, pulling strands of my hair free from the braid I’d constructed and making them dance around my face. It was nice, relaxing. I smiled to myself, letting my shoulders slump,

forgetting momentarily that I was leaning back on Dougie's arm. My life over the past few months had been madness. If my eyes were open, they'd been stuck in a book, going over notes, watching my hand scrawl out answer after answer. But now the exams were done and it was the first week of July. Six weeks of summer vacation stretched out before me. In theory, I still had another year of school, but I had a tenuous agreement with my mom that if I did well enough on my exams, I could skip that final year and go to college at the end of the summer. I wouldn't be seventeen until September, so she told me I'd have to stay at home for the first year at least, but I'd still be a college student.

Better yet, Dougie had a conditional offer from the same university with the same major in archaeology. That hadn't been why I'd chosen it—digging into the past, seeing the way people lived, the things they believed in, had fascinated me since I was a child—but it was a definite plus. Dougie. Unconsciously, my smile edged a little wider. I'd had a thing for him for a while now. We'd always known each other, had been in the same class ever since grade school. But Dougie and I had never really been friends. Not until the last few months, since Emma had taken an interest in Darren and disappeared, leaving a gaping hole in my life that Dougie had stepped in to fill. I owed her for that. Now he and I saw each other almost every day. More, even, than Dougie saw Martin, his best friend. We had so much in common. Kindred souls, he said.

But friends, only friends. Unfortunately.

“Heather.” His voice whispered in my ear, taking me by surprise. I jumped a little, but I didn't open my eyes.

“Mmm?”

“You’re kind of making my arm go to sleep.” *Oh God.*

Embarrassed, I yanked my head forward so fast I almost gave myself whiplash.

“I’m so sorry,” I muttered as he tried to rub life back into his limb.

“Don’t worry about it.” He grinned at me, but the blush refused to fade from my cheeks.

“You should have said...”

He shrugged.

“You looked comfortable. Well,”—he glanced down at the collection of stuff packed around me—“as comfortable as you’re going to get.”

“Right.” I gave him a timid smile. He was still grinning at me. My face flushed flame-red again as I tried to think of something to say. Something intelligent. Nothing came. “So... where are we going again?”

He wiggled his eyebrows. “Black Cairn Point.” He spat the words at me, low and menacing. Despite the humor in his eyes, I felt a little thrill roll down my spine.

“Sounds creepy!” Emma purred from the front. “Like the kind of place serial killers go to dispose of the bodies!”

Dougie ripped his gaze from mine, releasing me. “Well, it’s named after a graveyard, sort of,” he told her.

“What?” Emma blinked at him, looking horrified.

“A cairn’s a burial monument,” Martin explained from over my other shoulder.

“Darren, you’re not taking us all out there to do away with

us, are you?" I asked, addressing the eyes that were watching our exchange via the rearview mirror. Dougie snorted quietly beside me, and I grinned. "Because—"

But at that moment the music cut off, silencing me. "Hey!" Emma complained, reaching for the buttons. She pressed several randomly, but nothing came out of the speakers, not even static.

"The light's gone out," said Dougie. "Has the fuse blown?"

"Better not have," Darren replied, knocking Emma's hand away and taking over the fiddling, but with no more success. "The damned thing's new."

"Darren, watch the road!" Martin yelled. Darren turned his attention back to the highway just in time to swerve out from behind the truck he'd been about to climb over the back of.

"Christ, sorry!" he huffed.

He pressed down on the accelerator to take him past the truck, and I watched as we cruised along beside an ad, a child's face covered in yogurt laughing happily at me. The truck drifted out of sight as Darren sped on, but then started to coast back into view until it was overtaking us.

"What the hell?" Darren cried.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Dougie leaned forward, peering around me.

"I don't know... The dials have all died. I've got no power." Darren was still kicking at the accelerator, but nothing was happening.

"Darren, we're in the fast lane," Martin reminded him, urgency in his voice.

"I know!" Darren snapped.

“Get into the slow lane,” Dougie ordered. “Look, there’s an exit ramp coming up. See if you can coast down it. That’ll get us off the highway at any rate.”

Darren did as he suggested, and the Volvo rolled slowly down the exit ramp until we reached a junction for a much quieter road where the gradient started to tilt up. Eventually, gravity called a halt to our progress. Darren forced the car onto the shoulder, out of the way of any passing traffic. We sat for a minute, no one speaking, before Darren elbowed open the door and stomped around to the front. A moment later he’d thrown up the hood, hiding his glowering face from us.

“Shit.” Dougie sighed and got out. I watched him jog around to join Darren.

“You’re not in Roadside Assistance, are you, Martin?” I asked quietly. He laughed.

“Not much point when I don’t have a car, is there? Come on, no sense baking in here.”

He stepped out onto the hard, compacted mud on the roadside, offering me his hand so that I could slide along, navigating the obstacle course that was the back seat. Though it wasn’t any cooler outside, standing in the direct path of the sun, the air felt fresher, kept moving by a gentle breeze, and I was able to stretch out the kinks in my muscles.

“How’s it going?” We moseyed around to join Darren and Dougie, who were standing motionless, staring into the inner workings of the machine. Neither of them answered me, which I took to be a bad sign.

As we gathered around the engine, I followed the boys' gaze, not quite sure what I was looking at. Under the hood was a mass of pipes and oddly shaped boxes. The whole thing was covered in grime, metallic surfaces glittering with coppery rust.

"Try starting it," Dougie offered.

Darren gave him a sidelong look, as if that was clearly pointless, but he got behind the wheel again and obligingly turned the key. Nothing happened. No coughing, no spluttering, no clicking.

The engine stayed inert.

"Battery," said Martin. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and scuffed at the loose stones around his feet.

"What?" Darren asked, curling his body back out of the car.

"The battery's dead," Martin repeated.

"How can it be? If the battery was dead, the car would never have started in Kilmarnock."

"It still had a charge then. Your alternator's not working. It hasn't been charging. Happens all the time with this type of car." He kicked at the ancient Volvo's dented bumper. "The brushes get clogged, and they don't spin right."

We all gaped at him. Martin, with his wiry frame and glasses, was more pocket protector and calculator than wrench and cars.

"What?" he said defensively, seeing the way we were all looking at him. "I can't know about cars?"

"So what do we do, then?" Darren asked, staring at Martin with newfound respect. Martin smiled wryly at the change.

"Give the alternator"—catching our confused expressions, he

pointed at a silvery cylinder near the front of the machinery—
“give *that* a bang to clear the brushes. Then we just need a jump
start. After that, we should be good.”

“And do you have a hammer?” Darren asked dryly. Martin
nodded.

“Got a rubber one in the trunk for pounding in tent pegs.
Give me the keys, and I’ll grab it.”

I followed Martin to the rear of the car.

“How the hell did you know all that?” I whispered.

He winked at me conspiratorially. “My cousin’s a mechanic. He
used to babysit me. Spent most of my time in his garage handing
him screwdrivers. Don’t ask me to actually do anything, though...”

I laughed.

A minute later, Martin had unearthed his rubber mallet, and
Darren had given the alternator a couple of good whacks, after
fixing Martin with a searching look to make sure he was serious.

“Now we just need someone to give us a jump,” Dougie said,
rubbing his hands together.

The four of us looked both ways up the road. Nothing was
coming. We waited in silence as a minute trickled past. Then
another.

“Come on!” exploded Darren. “This road’s five feet from the
highway! How can there be no traffic?”

“Guess no one lives out this way,” I offered as I looked around.
I could only see a few houses dotting the rugged landscape.

“What’s that?” Dougie asked, pointing to a faded-green build-
ing down the road in the distance.

“Workshop or something,” Martin replied.

“Well, there’re cars parked there. Maybe someone will help us.”

We all looked at each other. “Who’s asking?” Darren said finally.

Martin responded at once. “It’s your car.”

I thought he had a good point, but Darren’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah, and if it wasn’t for me, we wouldn’t be going farther than the backyard,” he shot back. “And we wouldn’t have anything to drink, either.”

“What do you think they do in there?” Dougie asked, shading his eyes so he could peer at the building. I followed his gaze. I couldn’t see a sign or anything written on the side to give it away.

“Probably welding or something,” Martin offered. “Something industrial.”

“So it’ll be almost all men. . .” Darren said slowly.

“Yeah.”

His face brightened.

“Well, that settles it,” he said, slamming down the hood. “We send the girls. They can charm them for us.” He winked at me, ignoring the curdled expression on my face.

The worst thing was that the other two boys seemed to be in complete agreement with him, although Martin was somewhat sheepish about it, refusing to look me in the eye. Outnumbered and outvoted, I huffed and puffed as I dragged Emma out of the passenger seat, and we traipsed off toward the small warehouse.

“Remember—be alluring!” Darren called to our departing backs.