

THE QUARRY

Kylie Nealon

Chapter One, from *Slipstream*

The two men stared at the screen in front of them, disbelieving.

'It worked,' the older of the two whispered.

His companion's eyes glittered under the lab's eerie artificial lights. 'This changes everything,' he said. 'Everything.'

The older man shook his head. 'It makes no difference at all. We still can't guarantee the subject's safety, or the reliability of the transfer. I don't want to take this to the committee yet.'

The younger man stood up, his athletic frame rigid with fury. 'Your overcautious mentality is absurd, Richard. We've tested and retested, and we get the same result. Every. Single. Time.' His voice rose to a half-shout on the last word.

Richard fixed his stare on his colleague of more than a decade. 'Harry, do you understand the implications in saying something if we're wrong?'

His voice was flat; he was weary of having the same argument they'd had dozens of times before. In the past, they'd always managed to resolve it, at least for the sake of appearances in front of the lab staff. Not this time, Richard thought. Something seemed to have shifted irrevocably in Harry.

The latter strode to the security door as if unable to speak, clearly unwilling to

break the impasse.

'Don't don't do this, Harry!' Richard attempted to appeal to the only thing he knew would reach him – a slim shard of morality that remained within an otherwise corrupted conscience. 'You can't inflict this on them. They aren't ready. You'll regret it, I promise!'

The younger man turned, his face hard. 'The only thing I'll regret, Richard, is that I wasted so many years listening to you.'

Harry slammed the 'exit' button, leaving Richard alone. His exhalation echoed around the room, save only for the beeping coming from the panel in front of him. He knew there was no longer any point in delaying. Touching the console in front of him, he waited. A woman's face appeared in front of him, her concern evident. 'Cerys? We have a problem.'

'Miss Hambleton?'

The assertive query came amidst the shrieks of joy and garbled announcements over the loudspeakers. Even at 7:00am, Heathrow was mental. Sixteen-year-old Scarlett pushed her overloaded trolley towards a small man holding a 'D'Orsay Academy' sign with her name on it.

'Hi, that's me,' she managed, holding her wayward trolley with one hand.

He smiled, and took hold of the trolley as it threatened to mow down a group of old aged pensioners who'd also come off her flight.

'Welcome to London, Miss. Come with me – you're the last one to come through.' He began weaving through the throngs of waiting relatives and friends with an ease that spoke of many such previous trips.

Scarlett followed, tripping over feet and earning a few scowling looks in the process. As she drew closer to the exit door, the air shimmered and she felt a familiar wave of nausea rooting her to the spot.

Multi-hued auras began appearing around people who were eyeballing her with wary expressions. Please, not here, she pleaded with the universe. She closed her eyes and took a few breaths, hoping it might disappear. These weird episodes, which appeared out of nowhere, had become more frequent over the last six months. Scarlett had no idea what was causing them, but she was pretty sure that the last thing she wanted was another one in the middle of the world's busiest airport. The deep

breathing was making her hyperventilate, and a cold sweat broke out between her shoulder blades, sticking her already grubby t-shirt to her back. Behind her, someone let out a harsh string of curses under his breath.

‘What is it with you tourists? Want to take a few pictures? Move, already!’ The sarcasm was unmistakable, made more prominent with an American twang. A tall, lean boy of about her own age, sidestepped Scarlett, his bright blue eyes glaring down at her. His movie star looks were spoiled by a scowl that tore up his face.

‘Geez, okay,’ Scarlett said. She wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans and straightened up.

The boy huffed. ‘Spare me your redundant apologies.’ His eyes flicked over her. Scarlett pushed her slightly damp hair back and looked up at him, nausea forgotten.

‘I don’t think I did apologise,’ she replied, stung by his rudeness. ‘I’m *so* sorry that I stopped you getting your,’ she glanced at the solitary bag slung over his shoulder, ‘*duffel bag* out of here. I can imagine how inconvenient it must be for you having to get all of that luggage out of here.’

The duffel bag was definitely a step down, for someone who looked like he wasn’t short of a bob or two, as her granny would say. She noticed that the boy’s knuckles were turning white as she spoke, an unexpected anxiety that was at odds with the arrogant attitude.

‘Whatever.’ He hoisted the bag closer to his body and brushed past her, leaving a whiff of leather and something metallic hanging in the air. Scarlett watched him climb into a car that must have cost more than her parents made in a year.

‘Uh, Miss?’ her driver’s voice called out to her from the kerb. ‘Gotta go, love, the traffic’ll be a nightmare if we wait any longer.’

Scarlett nodded and walked over. The boy’s car melted into the traffic and she realised that her ‘episode’ had been cut short by his unexpected intervention. Cheered by the thought, she boarded her bus and put him completely out of mind.

On the D’Orsay bus, Scarlett met three other new students who’d arrived around the same time she had. They seemed nice, though she couldn’t imagine that she’d find a friend like Sass, who’d been her best friend since they were five. Determined to soak in as much detail for her first missive home, Scarlett studied the landscape, fascinated by how different everything looked here. It was so green and tidy, compared to the desiccated wild dryness of home.

‘First time away from home?’ Mike, a student from the States, leaned over as if able to read her thoughts.

‘Yep,’ she said. ‘You?’

‘Nah.’ He scooted closer. ‘Parents are diplomats, so I’m used to it.’

‘Wow. I’m from Melbourne. The closest I’ve gotten to diplomacy in action was a school trip to the capital in Year 8.’

He laughed. ‘Yeah, I’ve done a few of those.’ Mike had an assured sense of himself and his place in the world, with the kind of skills that suggested that diplomacy as a career might extend into a second generation. He had an unlimited supply of humorous travel stories to tell, and the trip into central London passed in a blur. He was in the middle of a particularly entertaining one, involving insects dipped in chocolate as a snack in a café in Central America, when the bus took a sharp corner, pulling up at what looked like the entrance to a medieval castle planted right in the middle of London’s urban metropolis.

‘Hey, check it out.’ Mike craned his head over the top of the seat as they pulled to a stop. ‘We’re here.’

Passing through D’Orsay’s ancient doors, the building looked like a something from a film set: all weathered stone and stained-glass windows, with an enormous, modern glass tower that shot skyward from the inside of the building. There was a particular kind of energy that seemed to reverberate from its stones, but as Scarlett looked around at her travel companions, none of them seemed to be affected by it. It almost felt, she thought, that if she reached out and touched the weathered grey stone, she could feel the pulse of the building underneath her fingers. Mike grinned as he made his way past her off the bus, mistaking Scarlett’s interest in D’Orsay’s surroundings for something touristy.

As she stood in front of the bus, she couldn’t help but wonder how on earth D’Orsay had managed to build such a huge building behind what appeared to be a church, especially in central London. Her musings were interrupted by a gentle Irish accent.

‘Welcome, all of you, to D’Orsay. My name is Maggie.’

A tiny woman with jet-black hair and bright green eyes introduced herself to them, as they craned their necks to see her. Scarlett found that she was thinking of leprechauns, and blushed when Maggie fixed her with a glance that suggested she’d been able to tell what she was thinking about.

Flicking her eyes back to the rest of the group, Maggie continued. ‘Some of you have had quite a long trip, so let’s get you settled in right away. Please, follow me and try not to fall behind.’

Scarlett stepped forward to follow the group inside, but felt herself being held back as if by some weird magnetic pull. Glancing over her shoulder, she came to an abrupt halt in front of Mike, who stumbled into her. Muttering a good-natured complaint under his breath, he stopped when he saw the look on Scarlett’s face, and he followed the direction of her glance.

You have *got* to be kidding, she thought. The boy from the airport unfolded himself from the back of his expensive car, and stood up. Scarlett felt his gaze fix on her from behind his dark Wayfarers.

Escorted by his driver, the boy walked past, turning his head with the barest of movements, one eyebrow raised over the top of his sunglasses. He still had a pretty tight grip on that duffel bag, Scarlett noted.

‘Friend of yours?’ Mike asked her from behind. They watched the boy disappear inside, and Scarlett felt the pull begin to dissipate.

‘Uh, no. I mean, not really.’

She explained what had happened at the airport. Mike chuckled.

‘Well, whoever he is, he must be someone pretty important. Us plebs are stuck doing the group tour. Which we’re about to lose if we don’t get a move on,’ he said, grabbing her arm.

They were led on a tour that was both swift and confusing. Corridors snaked off into a vast research laboratory section, as well as to other buildings that were used for the day-to-day running of the company. Scarlett wondered how anyone found his or her way to the right place. The term ‘rabbit-warren’ didn’t even begin to cover it.

‘The student wing is through here,’ Maggie said.

Going through the massive doors, Scarlett caught her breath.

No expense had been spared in furnishing the academic wing. A large circular living area with plush furniture was arranged around a vast array of high-end technological equipment, some recognisable, some she’d never seen before. Even Mike looked impressed.

‘Your personal rooms, dining hall, and classrooms are located off this central area,’ Maggie said. ‘Please, have a seat.’ Forty or so other students were already seated in the middle of the meeting area. A relaxed conversation was coming from the

young staff gathered around the edges of the room. They were all dressed in identical blue uniforms, and appeared to have an alternative career option as high fashion models.

Scarlett slipped in near the back of the room, near a girl with platinum-blond hair and a boy who was more interested in his cuticles than making eye contact with anyone. The girl smiled over at Scarlett as she sat down.

‘Welcome.’

Scarlett’s attention was drawn to the front of the room before she could strike up a conversation with either of them.

‘It’s lovely to have you all here, finally.’ This time, Maggie was standing on some kind of platform, so they could all see her, but instead of making her more imposing, it served to emphasise her diminutive stature even further.

‘As Head Mentor at D’Orsay, I’ll be overseeing your academic progress and psychological wellbeing during your time here with us. The mentors,’ she gestured over to the blue-clad staff, ‘are also here to provide support. Each of you has been matched to a suitable mentor, based on the psychological profile carried out prior to your departure.’ Maggie’s gaze swept the room. ‘We’ll have more time to chat later, but for now, we’ll get the initiation process underway and meet back here later this afternoon. If you’ll all make your way over to the Dispensarium, please follow the instructions once you’re inside.’ She indicated a large doorway set into the wall with misted glass doors.

One by one, the students lined up, with Scarlett, the blonde girl and Cuticle Boy bringing up the rear.

When her turn came, Scarlett stepped through the sliding doors into a booth, from which a large cylinder dropped down over the top half of her body.

‘Please look straight ahead,’ a voice said. It was a dry, hollow-sounding voice of indeterminate gender that pulsed inside the capsule as it spoke. Scarlett waited, a little unsure. Was this like those eye tests you got at the optometrist, when you weren’t supposed to blink? She wondered.

A blue strand of light streamed into her eyes, not hurting her, but not comfortable either. It felt like a tickle deep inside her brain that she couldn’t itch. The light disappeared, and she was left standing in a blue glow.

‘Please place your hand on the scanner,’ the voice prompted. Scarlett was rewarded with a stinging sensation in her forefinger as she did so.

‘Ow,’ she hissed, nursing the finger. Peering at it closely, she could see that something tiny had been embedded under the skin. What *was* that? And how did they do that without drawing any blood?

‘Thank you,’ the voice told her. ‘Data collection is complete. Your assigned mentor is Gil.’ A picture of a young man, no more than twenty years old, flashed on the cylinder’s surface in front of her. ‘Please leave to the left, where you will find him waiting.’

Scarlett stepped out of the room, eyes a little tender under the bright, overhead lights. She walked up to Gil, her fingertip curled up in her palm.

‘Uh, hi,’ she said.

‘Scarlett, it’s very nice to meet you.’

Gil’s upper class BBC accent was gentle. Note to self, Scarlett mentally added to her list of things to tell Sass. Those accents actually existed in real life. Gil smiled as though he knew what she’d been thinking. Damn, that was twice today already! What was going on?

‘Let’s get you organised, shall we?’ He nodded to the other mentor he’d been chatting to, and he and Scarlett set off through one of the exits. ‘I hope your trip was uneventful? You’ll notice quite quickly that we aren’t like other schools here. There are lessons here, shall we say, that your normal school won’t have offered,’ he said as they made their way out of the meeting hall. ‘But I promise, you’ll find them quite interesting.’ He was moving quite fast, and Scarlett was struggling to keep up, trying not to miss anything he was saying. ‘How’s your finger?’ he asked.

Scarlett looked at her finger, which was bright pink and a little swollen. ‘Kind of sore,’ she admitted.

Gil picked up her hand and examined the fingertip. His hands were calloused, an unexpected contrast in someone who looked like he’d never done a hard day’s work in his life.

‘It looks fine. It’s D’Orsay’s way of ID-ing you.’ He let go of her hand. ‘We don’t carry cards or tags here. It might seem a bit extreme, but actually it’s a great idea. We’ve got your DNA profile, with some other odds and ends.’

‘Odds and ends?’ she asked. ‘Like what?’

‘You know, family history, genetic predispositions, other abilities.’

Other abilities? Scarlett opened her mouth to ask, but he cut her off.

‘Naturally, all of that is encoded, so if anything should happen to you, the

information won't fall into the wrong hands. If you'll pardon the pun.' He smiled at her, and gestured to a doorway that looked identical to the other dozen or so lined up in the corridor. 'You just need to wave your finger over the sensor at the entrance to each room you're in,' he said. 'It's a bit retro, but we rather like keeping the past alive here at D'Orsay.' Gil smiled to himself, as if enjoying a private joke. 'If you have any questions, let me know. There's a console in your room that you can contact me through. You're in Room B5, which means that you're the second tier out from the main meeting area. I'll leave you to settle in. We'll be meeting back in the main area in an hour. Your bags will already be inside. If you have any problems, use the console.'

'Thanks. I guess I'll see you in a little while.' Scarlett hesitated before waving her finger over the sensor set into the wall next to her dorm room door. The panel lit up with her photo and DNA sequence. She looked at Gil, who smiled, and left.

That was pretty impressive, if a little freaky, she thought; a bit like D'Orsay.