

# THE QUARRY

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## Chapter Five, From *Slipstream*

*Slipstream is a Young Adult novel, set in a parallel contemporary society, in which teenagers with 'extra' abilities are being recruited as part of an elite programme. At the d'Orsay Academy in central London, Scarlett, the protagonist, and her peers attend the corporation's 'school.' We follow Scarlett and her three friends as they explore their new-found abilities within an organisation that is rigid about how their talents should be used. This leads to the questioning of what each of them knows about themselves, where their moral boundaries lie, and how far each of them will go to protect what is important to them.*

‘Jeez,’ Scarlett shivered in her jacket as they gathered later that day in the courtyard, ‘this is summer?’

Conor looked a little insulted. ‘Do I look like I’m controlling the weather here? This is *England*, not the Outback. If you want someone to direct your complaints to, I’d suggest you blame global warming.’

He made it sound like global warming was a company with a customer services department, and she was amused by the thought. Mike interrupted them, clearly impatient to get going.

‘Why are we talking about the weather? Let’s go already,’ he said, shoving his hands into his pockets. ‘You’ve got the picture, right?’

Scarlett nodded and pulled out the folded up image of the Manhattan comic store. She’d spent the afternoon studying the picture, ignoring the algebraic equations she was meant to be doing.

‘Okay,’ she said, ignoring the niggling voice that was telling her that this was a *really* bad idea. ‘Take my hand,’ she told them and Conor grabbed Lena’s hand. Scarlett bit back a smile. Mike let out a dramatic sigh and took her hand. His fingers felt a little clammy wrapped around hers and Scarlett tried to ignore the dampness. Other than that, he gave no outward sign of nerves, and for a brief second, she envied him.

‘Don’t let go, no matter what.’ Scarlett took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Letting her mind relax, she recalled Mike’s picture. She saw the store with its canvas awning and battered trim take shape in her head as the sound of cars, pedestrians and faint music drifted in. *So far, so good*, she told herself. No sign of anything out of the ordinary. The ground shifted, and the smells of a city that ran on smoke and gasoline brought the image in her head to life. Cracking one eye open, Scarlett peered out. The other three seemed to be holding their breaths, and Mike’s grip was becoming uncomfortable.

‘Yes!’ she said, more than a little pleased with herself. ‘You guys can open your eyes.’

The other three opened their eyes, and Mike dropped his hands, breaking their circle as soon as he spotted the store. The looks on their faces confirmed they hadn’t really believed that she could pull it off. As she stood there, smug in her achievement, the others broke away, wandering off to check out their surroundings.

‘Stay connected!’ Scarlett said, sounding sharper than she intended. Even to her, her voice sounded like it was coming from somebody else. She softened it a little. ‘At least until we get to the door, okay?’

‘Don’t you think that’s going to look a little weird? I mean, I’m fine with the holding hands thing now,’ Mike said, briefly scowling at Conor as if daring him to contradict him, and then turned back to Scarlett to continue. ‘I mean, we can’t walk in there together holding hands.’

Scarlett bit her lip. ‘We have to stay together. What happens if someone wanders off and gets caught?’

He raised an eyebrow, as if to say something, but changed his mind, and nodded his reluctant consent. He grabbed Lena’s hand and shuffled over to the store’s window. A fleeting look of jealousy crossed Conor’s face. Scarlett saw the stiffness in Lena’s body as she stood there with Mike, which loosened just a smidgeon as she let out a small giggle at something Mike said. Walking over to them, Conor unwound his scarf and handed it to Mike. ‘Here, wear this. If you’ve got something of mine, you should be okay.’ Mike looked at him, surveying him, as if waiting for the sarcastic comment to follow. Lena dropped her hand, a faint blush staining her cheeks.

‘Thanks, man.’ He shrugged and wound the scarf around his neck. The biting wind was finding its way in to the nooks and crannies, and Scarlett envied the warmth he had around his neck.

‘That was nice of you,’ she said to Conor, her voice low.

He shrugged. ‘Nice’ wasn’t why I did it,’ he said, giving her a sly, knowing smile.

‘Um, maybe we could go inside now?’ Mike asked them, his tone plaintive.

‘Yeah, sorry. Let’s go,’ Scarlett said as Mike, finally given permission, almost took the door off its hinges in his haste to get inside. Mike headed over to the ‘new release’ section, and, having found what he was looking for, was making strangled noises of rapturous pleasure that set Lena off in a flood of giggles. Looking around, Scarlett saw that every available space of the shop was crammed with comics, posters and young guys, hanging out, flicking through the vast selection. To her relief, nobody had given

them or their appearances a second glance, and she felt her shoulders sink away from her ears a few millimeters.

‘This is seriously boring,’ Conor announced. ‘What are we meant to do now? Wait for him to finish his private moment? I’m out.’ He looked at Scarlett, as if waiting for her to disagree, given her earlier warning about staying together. She said nothing, and he smiled. ‘Let’s check out next door. Some kind of music shop, I think.’

‘Yeah, but only next door,’ Scarlett warned. They made their way over to Mike, who was poring over each page in a reverential manner that Scarlett found a little uncomfortable.

‘Hey,’ Scarlett said, keeping her voice down. They’d pretty much gotten away with being here, and the last thing she needed was her accent being picked up on. ‘We’re going next door, but we’ll be back in ten minutes, okay?’ He nodded, only half hearing her and she gestured to Lena.

‘Thank you,’ she said to Scarlett as they left. ‘I’m not sure how much longer I would have lasted in there.’

‘Me neither,’ Scarlett replied, ‘*so* not my thing.’

The record shop was next door, and they stood aside to let someone come out, an old-school LP tucked under his arm.

‘Wow, this is totally retro,’ Scarlett said to Conor. This was more like it, she thought.

‘Tell me about it,’ Conor replied. They headed over to the ‘new music’ section and began flicking through the new releases, laughing over the photos on the covers, filled with people in lurid clothing and big hair. The look of the day seemed to be girls working bows in their hair and massive skirts, with the boys rocking gelled hair and knitted cardigans. Scarlett picked up an LP of *Bobby Rydel’s Greatest Hits*, looking like he’d stepped out of the movie, *Grease*.

Dropping it back in to its slot, she picked up a smaller 45 record and scrutinised the label. ‘*Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor (On The Bedpost Overnight)*,’ she read out loud. ‘Oh, come *on*. That can’t be real.’

Conor leaned over her shoulder and sniggered. ‘Where did they come up with these titles?’

Lena leaned in. ‘What do you reckon our kids will think of the stuff we listen to now?’

Scarlett shoved the LP back into the section she’d pulled it out of and pulled another one out. ‘It can’t be any worse than these,’ she told her. ‘*I’m Gonna Knock On Your Door*,’ she read. Conor joined in.

‘*You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby*,’ he told Lena, who blushed.

They traded titles back and forth for a few minutes until they were interrupted by the arrival of Mike, who looked more than a little flustered.

‘We have to go,’ he said. His eyes were glittery and red patches had stained his cheeks. He looked like he’d run five miles, not from next door.

‘Why?’ asked Scarlett, ‘where’s the fire?’ She slid the record she’d been holding back in to its slot, a small frisson of alarm shooting up from her stomach.

He glanced around. ‘We have to go, like, *now*, okay? I’ll explain when we get back.’

Lena and Conor had come over to see what the fuss was about. ‘What’s the deal?’ Conor said. ‘Annoy the crap out of someone else with your comic-book back-stories?’

Mike looked a little annoyed. ‘No, I didn’t, but thanks for asking. It wasn’t *my* fault,’ he began to elaborate but Scarlett cut him off with a wave of her hand.

‘Just stop talking now, okay?’ She saw the scowl cross his face and knew he’d stuffed up — big time. ‘You’re an idiot,’ she stated. ‘No,’ she held up one finger, ‘that’s not up for debate. I guess we need to get out of here pretty quick, then?’

‘Yeah, like now, okay?’ He glanced over to the window and they all turned to see a few of the boys from the comic shop, peering through the glass to see if he was in there.

‘Why did we go with this choice again?’ Scarlett asked nobody in particular. ‘Come on,’ she told the other two, ignoring Mike. She nodded at Conor, and as he pushed open the door, he reached behind him and linked hands with Scarlett, who grabbed Lena. Mike was lurking at the back of them all and seemed hesitant to go back out. Lena grabbed his hand and they walked out, primary-school style, onto the sidewalk. Conor’s scarf, still around Mike’s neck, snagged on the doorframe, and tugged itself free.

The boys looked down, stunned, before picking it up and talking in excited tones that didn’t sound good at all.

‘Leave it,’ Scarlett told him, ‘just keep moving.’

‘But-’ he tried to say.

‘Well, we’re stuffed now,’ Conor said, his voice sounding a little sick. ‘I think we’re going to have to make a quick exit. And we can’t do it stuck together. When I count to three, we’re going to run for that alley, okay?’ He indicated a small opening about a hundred meters ahead of them to the left.

‘Why?’ asked Mike. ‘Why can’t you just get us back from here?’ he said to Scarlett.

‘Because I can’t just stand in the middle of a sidewalk with people walking into me, can I?’ she said. ‘I need some space. And Lena’s not up to lifting all four of us just yet. So we head for the alley.’

‘Yep,’ Lena agreed. ‘Let’s just get out of here.’ She glanced back at the boys. ‘Like *now*.’

‘Agreed,’ Mike said, his voice high with tension. Scarlett was seething. Angry with Mike, she was mostly annoyed with herself. So *stupid*, she thought. Conor broke the link and the four of them became visible again. Not the most discreet exit, Scarlett thought, looking around at the startled looks from the pedestrians who were disconcerted to find human-shaped roadblocks appearing in their paths. The group of boys spotted Mike on the sidewalk and began walking towards him as if he were some kind of Messiah. One of them was holding Conor’s scarf.

‘Jeez,’ Mike said, nervous. ‘This is not what I had in mind.’

‘Yeah?’ said Conor, ‘And what did you have in mind, exactly? Drop a few hints, look like the big man?’ They were moving along the sidewalk, trying not to run but not far from it. The boys were dodging pedestrians, their pace picking up.

‘Shut up, okay?’ Mike said, a little out of breath. ‘Maybe if you’d stayed in the shop with me instead of wanting to spend a little more time with your girlfriend, none of this would’ve happened and we wouldn’t be running along the street like criminals.’

Scarlett reached the alley and pulled Lena in, giving Mike an extra shove for his stupidity as he came past her. He stumbled, but didn’t say anything as he shot her a dirty look. They took a few seconds to get their breath back along a dirty brick wall, the entrance of which was partially concealed by large rubbish bins. It looked like the gods of time travel had come through for them, Scarlett thought. Nobody would think to come down here, surely. The first to recover, Mike ducked back to the entrance and peered around the corner, scanning the sidewalk. ‘I think they’re gone,’ he announced, a confident tone evident.

‘Not so fast,’ Conor said, pointing. The boys were beginning to gather, and they could hear the excited babble of noise and shouting as they tried to get Mike’s attention.

As the group advanced, Scarlett grabbed Conor’s hand. ‘Join hands,’ she instructed them all, ‘and stay quiet. This is going to be hard enough.’ They nodded and she shut her eyes, but couldn’t block out the sound of the strangled sounds of concern from around her. Focusing harder than she ever had before, she pictured her room at d’Orsay, and the world around them began to dissolve. The shouts from the boys began to fade and the ground disappeared and reappeared underneath her feet. She caught the lingering smell of her perfume and the wet towel she’d tossed over her desk chair earlier that morning. She opened her eyes with a sigh of relief.

‘We’re here,’ she told them, as the others opened their eyes, mirroring her relief. Mike looked around.

‘Wow,’ he said. ‘Tidiness is not your strong point, is it?’ as he took in her scattered belongings.

‘How about you keep your mouth shut?’ she countered. ‘You’re not exactly in my good books right now.’

He sat down on the edge of the bed, tossing a few clothes on to the floor as he did so. Lena took the desk chair and Conor sat on the floor, cross-legged. All three of them sat, waiting.

‘Well, that was exciting,’ Conor said, breaking the silence, sarcasm dripping from every word. ‘What’d you do to get them so wound up?’

Mike cleared his throat. ‘*Nothing*. I mean, I got talking to one of the guys in there and I kind of forgot they don’t know what’s going to happen. And *maybe* I got a bit carried away. But it’s not like I did it deliberately,’ he said to Scarlett, indignant.

‘Yeah, that makes it all okay, then,’ she told him. ‘Look, Maggie told me that if I started playing around with *anything* when I went time-travelling, then things here would change. So I don’t know what this means, but it can’t be good.’

‘Weeeelll,’ Mike began, ‘I guess this isn’t good, either.’ He drew out the first edition of *The Fantastic Four* a little crumpled, from inside his jacket. For a minute, nobody spoke. Lena let out a strangled sound, and Scarlett caught her look, as though afraid of an explosion.

But Scarlett felt like someone had zapped every last bit of energy from her. All she wanted to do was throw up. Taking a few deep breaths, the others waited to see what she’d do. Lena eventually got up to sit next to her, clearly concerned at her silence, but Scarlett held up her hand to stop her, and the other girl stopped and sat down again.

‘Did I not tell you to just go and read it and then we’d come back?’ she asked Mike. ‘Why would you do that?’ All of a sudden, she felt incredibly tired. ‘That’s it for me. I’m so out of here.’ *Why am I so surprised at him? He’s only doing what I knew he would.* Tom would be so disappointed in her, she knew.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, sounding a little contrite. ‘I didn’t think it’d make that much of a difference. I thought that you were exaggerating.’ His voice trailed off as he finally grasped the enormity of his error.



Conor shook his head. ‘Man, for a smart guy, you are seriously slow on the uptake. Why couldn’t you just leave it there?’

Mike looked miserable. ‘I couldn’t. It’s a first edition. Does this mean that I’ll have to give it back?’

‘*Give it back?* That’s what you’re worried about? Yeah, you could say that!’ Scarlett leaned over and snatched it out of his hands. ‘Give me that!’ The comic felt like it was pulsing with some kind of energy between her hands.

A knock sounded at the door, startling them.

Scarlett swallowed and opened the door. Gil was standing there, with a look that seemed to go beyond ordinary anger. He scanned over the rest of them before coming back to rest his attention on Scarlett.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, welcome back. Scarlett, I’d like a word, please?’ The formality of his words belied the bristly body language, arms crossed, and a mottled pattern creeping up his neck as he bit back on elaborating.

‘Let’s go,’ he said. ‘There’s no point delaying the inevitable. And you three,’ he said, directing his attention to the others who were now hovering in the hallway, ‘go and wait in the common room. Your Mentors are looking for you as we speak. And I’ll take that, too,’ he said, reaching for the comic. He glanced at the cover. ‘I’d have been disappointed if it’d been a DC one.’ Mike looked surprised, but closed his mouth as he saw the expression on Gil’s face. The older man sighed, as if suppressing some other emotion. ‘You just couldn’t leave it alone, could you?’ he asked them, his voice holding a thread of fear in it. He looked up at her. ‘What have you done, Scarlett?’