

# THE QUARRY

## Porcelain Dolls

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They looked like shiny porcelain dolls. They walked on stiff porcelain legs down city streets, hair always perfectly coiffed and shining. They were always smiling, even when they were unhappy.

For years Willa had watched them on TV and thought about how fragile they looked, how breakable. How easy it would be to smash them to pieces.

Willa had checked the scoreboard that morning, while her roommate Lys disappeared into the modification chamber for hours. She was sitting comfortably at number two, the highest Willa had been in the months since filming began. They could use their viewscreens once every day to check, but were then locked out until tomorrow.

Lys had spent so long away from their room that Willa had been sure she wasn't coming back. She'd tried to convince herself that she was happy to be rid of one more competitor, but dread and fear had eaten away at her stomach until Lys returned. Her familiar brown eyes were now blue. Apparently, James preferred blue eyes.

Even though Lys' body had been chiselled and whittled down to perfection, the voice that came from her mouth was the same.

'I swear, if someone tells me to smile even *once* tonight, I'm going to neck myself,' she said, crashing about their room. Willa watched as she glanced in their full-length mirror and touched her cheek with hesitant fingers, as though trying to make sure it was still really her.

Lys was the only one in the compound who still sounded like a real woman instead of a child. But James had said to Lucia last week that he liked sweet girls, pretty girls, girls who only opened their mouths to giggle and say, 'Stop that, you're so funny.'

'Stop that,' Lys said.

'What?'

'Stop touching it.'

Willa's hands had been pressing at the bandages under her shirt without her realising it. She dug in a little more to feel the emptiness there, a spike of pain jabbing upwards through her body. Another rib gone. Willa wondered how many they would be able to take out before she broke in two.

She'd been keeping them in her bedside table drawer, nestled in a crushed velvet graveyard. Three white ribs neatly lined up next to one another. Sometimes at night when she was sure Lys was asleep, Willa slid open the drawer and ran her fingers over the smooth bone.

'Stop it,' Lys said again.

This time, Willa stopped.

The location for filming that night was beautiful, just as every other night had been beautiful. Willa and Lys stood in line beside ten other women that had entered the competition at the

same time. The room was high-ceilinged and extravagant, with a deep navy carpet and a chandelier glittering overhead.

Each night was spent in a different room inside the compound, the walls outfitted with a million tiny holo-projectors creating exotic locations for the cameras. Last night they were lying on a beach somewhere warm, the room filled with the sound of crashing waves. Lys had sworn she tasted salt on the air.

‘Two, over here.’

*That’s me*, Willa remembered.

A blonde production assistant waved her over to one of the green velvet couches near the entrance, and watched impatiently as she lowered herself onto it. The smile she’d plastered on never once wavered.

The rest of the production team set to work draping Willa’s arm along the back of the couch, placing a wine glass in her hand to dangle elegantly from her fingers and tilting her head just *so*.

Willa wasn’t going to drink the wine. She had spent years watching previous contestants on TV with her family, taking notes on the many ways they had ruined their chances at love. She was prepared.

*Not like some of these idiots*. Valerie St Cloud sauntered past, her round doll’s eyes vacant. An assistant with freshly-bleached teeth fawned over her, arranging her cascade of golden curls down the back of the chair next to Willa. Girls like Val didn’t want love, not truly, not like Willa did. Just a silly breakable doll, hoping to end up high on a shelf, to be admired for the rest of her days.

Willa would have given anything to be sitting with Lys instead. Lys wasn’t one of the dolls; in fact, she wasn’t a volunteer at all. Though she hadn’t told Willa much, she had let slip a few times about how her family struggled, and how when she’d been born a girl they’d had no choice but to Nominate her for the competition. The rations they’d received in return were probably what saved them from complete destitution.

Willa suppressed a groan when the seat opposite her was filled by Maddie Pontier. Her sweet smile and guileless expression made Willa want to be sick. Of all the people she could have ended up with, it was fake Maddie and vacant Val.

‘I’m so glad they’ve put us three together,’ Maddie said, fluttering her unnaturally long eyelashes. ‘These things can go on for such a long time, can’t they?’

The producers left them waiting around for ages sometimes just to see if anyone would snap. And plenty of girls did. After all, fifty walked into the compound; only one walked out.

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ Willa looked over her cherry red manicure. ‘I could have laid on the beach forever.’

Maddie had been a celebrity in her own right long before the competition began. It was a huge advantage, being well-known before entering, and she had used her little sob story as ammunition in her fight to win the public’s heart. An orphan who rescued puppies from shelters, a kind heart in a cruel world, a friend to all. It was the reason she shot up to number one straight away and had maintained her position throughout the competition.

Longing burst to life in Willa’s stomach. To be number one was to be special, to be chosen. Not only by everyone outside, but by James.

She would kill for that.

The fight broke out after four hours.

It had been a while since they’d had a real fight, although Lucy had been pushed off a cliff last week and Julia’s parachute had ‘accidentally’ failed to open the week before that. Excursions outside the compound could be so dangerous.

It started with a soft sigh. Willa became aware of the way Val was shifting in her seat, fidgeting impatiently. It must have been the longest she’d gone in her life without a hit of someone’s attention.

After a moment, Val sighed even louder.

‘This is boring,’ she whined, pouting her already swollen lips.

Maddie, always looking for ways to suck up to the people around her, leaned in to brush her fingers over Val’s golden curls.

‘Gosh, you just have the prettiest hair, Val. I wish I was a blonde.’

A small smile spread over Val's face.

'It's natural.'

'It can't be—it's too beautiful to be natural!'

Willa nearly snorted at the heavy dose of fake amazement in Maddie's voice. She was still combing her fingers through Val's hair, her long, slender fingers tangling in the strands.

'I wish I was a blonde,' she said again.

'Why don't you?' Willa cut in despite herself, losing her patience. 'You could easily get it done.'

Maddie laughed, flashing white teeth.

'It just wouldn't be the same. I'm sure James loves blonde hair, but it wouldn't suit me at all.'

'Really? I heard he prefers dark hair.' It was a part of Willa that revelled in the drama that said it. Lys wouldn't have approved, but she needed something to break the monotony.

Val, who had been busy preening up until that point, looked confused.

'Are you... lying?' she asked Maddie. Her child's voice wavered with the promise of a tantrum, and Willa sat back to enjoy the show.

'Of course not.' Maddie laughed again, but she was beginning to look uncomfortable. Her hand found its way back to her lap.

'Why would you lie? Were you trying to sabotage me?'

Willa almost wanted to laugh too. Of course Maddie was trying to sabotage her. She was a liar, it was just what she did.

Storm clouds drifted over Val's expression. Her mouth contorted, baring her teeth—each sharpened to a point. One moment, she was pouting like someone had taken away her favourite toy, and the next she was feral. Without any warning or hesitation, she pounced.

Maddie barely had time to let out a surprised gasp before she was being dragged to the floor by the ends of her pretty, dark hair.

A flurry went through the room as people started to take notice of the two girls rolling around on the carpet. Willa half-rose from her chair, planning on moving out of the way to

watch the proceedings, when Val dug her nails into Maddie's neck and slashed four long cuts into her bare skin.

The next moments came to Willa only in snapshots: Val's wild eyes, the other girls gathering to watch, blood splattered across the carpet, the crunch of bone and finally Maddie, pleading for help. It went on for so long that Willa lost focus on her surroundings completely.

The rest was blissful white noise.

After some time, hands grabbed her tightly by the shoulders and Lys' frantic expression swam into view.

'Are you okay?' She gave Willa a little shake. 'Are you hurt?'

'I'm fine,' Willa managed.

There were flecks of something red and viscous all up the front of her dress, but that was nothing compared to the mess on the floor. Val sat in it with her head ducked and her eyes darting around, daring someone to approach her. The production team was buzzing, making frantic phone calls and trying to herd the girls back to their places.

'I'm fine,' Willa said again. What she meant was *this is my fault*.

Lys couldn't seem to drag her gaze away from Maddie's body now that she had made sure Willa was okay. She was shifting her weight from foot to foot and murmuring something under her breath.

'Fuck, what are we doing?'

Willa looked closely at her friend, and saw a wildness in her eyes that hadn't been there before. It was the look of an animal when it sensed a predator, all coiled tension and fear.

'Why are we here? What's the point?' Her hands began to claw at her cheeks, her temples, as though she might be able to rip away her perfect mask to reveal her true face.

One by one, heads turned to watch Lys as the din of conversation died. Willa tried to touch her shoulder but she spun away.

The blonde production assistant from earlier was watching them from his spot by the door with a phone to his ear. Willa reached for Lys again but she slipped through her fingers. 'You need to stop, you need to be quiet—'

'I can't, not anymore, I can't. Look at her!' Lys gestured at the floor.

Willa looked.

She had never liked Maddie Pontier. And there was only one winner. They all had to go if Willa was going to find happiness here. But then why did the guilt feel so heavy on her shoulders?

Light glinted off the cameras in the room, watching their every move. Watching her.

Lys grabbed her hand. 'We have to leave.'

'What?'

'Right now, come on. We need to leave.'

Willa shook her head, her words drying up in her throat.

Security guards appeared either side of Lys, both bigger than the two of them put together. There was no point in fighting, Willa told herself as they took Lys by the shoulders. They pulled her away and their hands disconnected. Lys called out for her before she was dragged from the room, her eyes desperate and betrayed.

An assistant appeared in front of Willa, obscuring her view of the door. 'One, you've got time with James.'

*That's me*, Willa realised.

He was waiting for her in another room.

James sat amongst a nest of pillows and blankets under a canopy of twinkling stars, the sound of cicadas echoing all around them. The air smelled fresh and Willa drank it in greedily, to wash her lungs free of metallic blood.

When James smiled at her as she settled down next to him, it was almost possible to forget everything that happened earlier.

'How are you finding things?'

He never said hello. He told her the first time they met that any social niceties would just be edited out later.

Willa wanted to giggle and flirt, and turn it on for the cameras. But instead what came out was a fractured, shaking, ‘Where is Lys?’

James opened his mouth to reply and promptly shut it. He smiled at her again, a disarming grin that had never failed to provoke butterflies every time he used it on her.

She felt nothing.

‘I want to see her.’

James gazed into the middle distance and touched a hand to his earpiece. He really wasn’t as handsome up close, Willa realised.

Panic poured into her cavernous chest like a swelling wave. It crested, roared and overwhelmed her.

‘Answer me.’

‘What am I supposed to say?’ The question wasn’t directed at her. James listened intently to whoever was instructing him for another moment before his expression cleared.

He took her hand and ran his thumb over her skin. Willa could remember when he held her hand just last week, how she had felt full to bursting with joy and hope. She tried to conjure up that same feeling, but her mind was busy replaying the look Lys had given her before she left.

‘You’ll see her when you head back to your room,’ James said. His voice was warm like melting honey even as he lied. ‘Why don’t we talk about something else for now? I want to get to know you better.’

It felt like a confirmation and Willa’s stomach dropped.

What would they do with her? Lys was strong, far stronger than Willa, and they had to know they couldn’t subdue her with bribes or manipulation. There would be only one way to keep her quiet.

And if it could happen to Lys, why couldn’t it happen to Willa?

Grief filled her empty spaces. Grief, and the longer James watched her with that frozen, vapid smile, anger.

They weren’t allowed weapons in the compound, only nails and teeth and spiteful words. But there was one thing they let Willa keep, the last part of herself—her bones.



Willa closed her eyes and lived the moment in perfect detail. The expression on James' face when she brought the rib down, the whistle it made as it flew through the air, the sickening crack as it made contact with his skull. And then the blood that flowed down his rugged face.

When she opened her eyes, she still ached.

James was smiling, but his eyes were confused. Last week, Willa had been falling all over herself every time he so much as glanced her way, and now she couldn't even muster up a smile in return.

'Willa?'

Willa felt a dull, distant surprise that he even knew her name. Everything had become clear, like a fog had been lifted from her brain. There would be only one way out of this mess.

She giggled and laid a hand on James' tanned forearm. His confusion cleared.

'James, you're so funny. I don't want to talk about me, tell me more about you.'

Willa was going to be better, smarter, than the rest of them. She was going to win.