

THE QUARRY

Soul 3396

Hannah Bell

'On February twelfth the accused was arraigned before me,' Chief Justice Ellins begins, his voice flat and dry, conserving itself for the long judgment to follow.

Astrea's hands are wet. She hides them in her lap, wipes them on her thighs.

'She faces charges of malicious damage to property and using a hoax bomb to cause alarm. In addition to these terrorist offences, the prosecution has sought to confirm that this woman is the eleventh reincarnation of soul number 3396, formerly known as Ezekiel Armstrong, and sentenced to twelve lifetimes in prison for war crimes. To avoid prejudice in considering this very serious accusation, it was agreed that this case should be tried by a judge alone, rather than by jury.'

The rest of the courtroom is stiff with silence. Astrea's breathing is louder and far more laboured than she'd like; each inflation of her lungs is a weightlifting exercise. She crosses her legs at the knee, uncrosses them, crosses them again at the shin. The trial has taken months, the route by which she's found herself here much longer than that—but as Ellins methodically reads through his decision Astrea can't bear to wait even a minute more.

17

Astrea was seventeen—very nearly eighteen—by the time she felt any connection with her past lives. A late bloomer. There were just weeks left until Confession Day. She was putting on lipstick when the blood started welling up under her tongue, staining her teeth, dribbling down over her lips. It painted them so much more vividly than the waxy balm of Revlon's *fuchsia shock*. She coughed, expecting liquid to spew out onto her vanity, but it didn't. The fingers she brought to her mouth came away with pink, not red, tips.

It was only the mirror, then, that was bleeding. Astrea was not relieved.

Reflections were a common unlocking point for transincarnational residue—deposits of history or intuition that stayed tucked away within the soul through death and rebirth. Dreams, hallucinations, feelings of *déjà vu*—all were potential clues about former lives, and would appear with increasing frequency as the brain reached maturity.

Astrea ripped her eyes from the mirror as her reflection's cheeks grew hollow and sickly. The phantom taste of hot iron stuck in her throat.

Residual blood is an indicator of significant violence in a soul's history. That was what the textbooks all said.

She found her aunt Kath out on the porch, lighting a fresh cigarette with the cherry of the one before.

'You saw something that scared you,' Kath observed, face half-obscured by a cloud of smoke.

Astrea nodded.

'Well, babe, you've got two weeks to get really good at acting like everything's fine. Think up some cute stories to tell them about your visions—maybe you've dreamt of your past lives caring for sick animals, and the smell of jasmine flowers reminds you of a long, happy marriage. If they see you're scared shitless at Confession they'll suspect your soul's got a number on the Registry. There are a couple of major ones supposed to be turning eighteen this year, so they'll be watching.'

Astrea felt bad for making her aunt talk about the Registry. Beginning on her own Confession Day, Kath had served the remaining three years on her past life's sentence for a hit and run. Kath herself had never driven. Dad used to say that she never even liked to take the bus to school when they were growing up—residual instincts showing through as phobias, was his theory.

'Don't give them any reason to believe there's a sentence hanging over you.' Kath tilted Astrea's face up, examining it. 'You should wear that lipstick to the ceremony,' she added. 'It's cute. Sweet. All the things you need to show them that you are.'

18

Astrea was just lucky that Confession Ceremonies weren't what they used to be. At school, she'd had to write essay after essay about the legal overhaul that prohibited soul-searching in the physical sense—the culmination of decades-long campaigns by human rights groups, people suffering PTSD after their search procedures, many legal professionals. The UN, which, ever since its inception, had condemned the entire concept of the Soul Registry. Even if she hadn't had anything to hide, Astrea would still have been glad not to be waiting half-naked in a hospital gown outside a sterilised, soundproofed exam room, watching as the other eighteen-year-olds walked in and hobbled back out.

Confession Ceremonies were conducted state-wide each month. None of Astrea's friends shared her February birthday, so she filed into the huge city hall by

herself. The girl she sat down beside was hunched over, apparently scribbling something on her forearm. Maybe, Astrea thought, she was writing notes to prompt her in the interview. If she needed notes, it could well be because she was planning to lie. The idea that there was someone else lying—someone doing it less carefully, someone more likely to be caught than Astrea—was comforting.

The girl shifted her posture, holding her wrist up to the light to observe it, and Astrea saw that instead of writing notes she had been drawing flowers with her blue biro.

The girl turned further and caught Astrea watching. 'I want to get this tattooed one day,' she said. 'Dad's always saying people will find tattoos suspicious, but it's just art. I know I was an artist in a past life. There's already art all through me. Why not on the surface?'

Astrea nodded sympathetically.

'My name's Lita, by the way.'

'Astrea. You're going to be an artist for this lifetime too, then?'

'I'm in beauty school right now, so my art will be makeup and hair. Designing tattoos on the side, hopefully. It's different to oils on canvas, but it's all variations on a theme, you know? We live different lives, but I don't think we ever really change at heart.'

Before Astrea could decide whether it was wise to argue a hush fell over the hall.

'As I'm sure you are aware, we are no longer able to use invasive measures in order to identify individual souls,' Commissioner Francis spoke from up on the stage. He looked damp under the spotlights, his posture as wooden as the podium he stood behind. 'Evidence relating to transincarnational residue is now our greatest weapon when it comes to ensuring the serious criminals in our midst are put behind bars. We are reliant on interviews, and on information provided to us by yourselves. If you see or hear something suspicious, you have an active duty to report that information to police. Failure to do so could result in your being charged with a criminal offence. Today, you become adult members of our society. That means you take on significant responsibilities. I hope that is clear to you all.'

Where they would once have been sent to physical exams, they were called away to interviews.

'I really hope you find the souls you're looking for,' she told the Senior Constable conducting hers. He was fairly young, but had a hard look in his eyes that she thought would probably be considered incriminating if he were in her position.

'You're free to go,' the officer told her.

Astrea smiled at him, smiled at everyone she saw as she walked back out of the hall, smiled until it hurt, smiled with fear because she didn't feel free at all.

24

The coffee had barely even been an afterthought; Astrea's head was whirring with case names and dates for her final-year exams, aching with the friction of them all, and the decision to recaffeinate before the interview for the clerkship was instinctive. She checked her makeup as she waited, bracing herself against the stream of blood that ran from her nose in the little round window of her compact. She heard a scream—a raw, dying sound that cut off too suddenly. No one around her reacted. *Please! I said we surrend—*

Astrea did her breathing exercises and let the memories play themselves out. She smoothed composure on over her face like her Bobbi Brown setting powder. The residue was always most unsettling when she was stressed, but she'd had five years of practice at swallowing her reactions.

This interview had to go well. Justice Ellins had been a driving force behind the amendments that outlawed soul-searching, and Astrea had wanted nothing more than to work for him ever since she'd read his work in first-year Jurisprudence.

She promised herself that once the interview was over she'd squeeze in an extra yoga session at the gym.

'A caramel latte?' Ellins raised an eyebrow as she offered him one of the twin coffees in her hand. 'That's certainly not my regular order.'

'I—' Astrea had blown the interview already. Her resume was not exceptional enough to counterbalance some bizarre, presumptuous slipup. 'I'm *so* sorry—'

'More of a guilty pleasure from my youth,' Ellins took a long sip of the drink, set it down on his desk, and regarded her intently. 'How did you know?'

'Maybe I read it somewhere?' Astrea floundered.

'No, you wouldn't have. It's Astrea, isn't it? How old are you?'

'Twenty-four.'

'That seems right. And how much have you discovered about your past lives?'

'Nothing illuminating,' Astrea's response was automatic.

'I see. Are you familiar with the name Nathaniel Chan, by any chance?'

Astrea went cold. 'He and his family were part of the same Anti-Registry campaigns you were,' she answered. *He knows*, went the rhythm of her pulse, too loud in her ears. *He knows. He knows.*

She remembered the afternoon she'd read about Chan. She had been researching for an assignment, sitting in a cafe and soaking up the coffee and wifi on offer there.

Nathaniel Chan, the tenth incarnation of soul 3396 since the notorious Ezekiel Armstrong, died in prison from several knife wounds. Chan's parents released a statement saying they stood by their son's innocence, as they had done since he was imprisoned upon Confession twenty-three years earlier. Chan, who as a child was a musical prodigy and aspiring astronomer—

'Hey, you alright?' the waiter had interrupted Astrea's reading as he'd cleared away her most recent coffee cup.

Astrea had nodded politely, only just able to hear him over the piano notes that seemed to be resonating from the fibres of her muscles, emptying out pockets of memory buried deeper within her than she'd ever gone before.

'Are you alright, Astrea?' Justice Ellins asked.

'Of course, Your Honour,' she blurted out.

Ellins laughed. 'None of that. In fact, you should call me Arthur. I wonder whether maybe you'd like to take a trip to the observatory sometime? I used to go

there with a friend of mine when we were just boys; he always found it quite relaxing.'

28

It was impulsive, stepping into the unfamiliar hair salon the day before her biggest trial yet was due to begin.

'I was thinking of copper highlights, as well as a touch-up of the blonde,' she told the hairdresser, who reached around to fasten the cape across Astrea's front with arms covered in rose tattoos.

She wasn't sure what identified *her*, but Lita stopped her movement and met Astrea's eyes in the mirror.

'Did we meet at Confession?' she asked. 'Ten years ago. I swear you look like—'

'We did. I see you got your tattoos—the permanent version.'

'As permanent as anything in a single lifetime is. What are you up to now? You're dressed all corporate.'

'I'm working as a defence lawyer, currently,' Astrea explained. Crown Prosecutor was the ultimate goal, but she kept that quiet when Lita leapt at the defence aspect.

'Wow, sounds stressful. That explains why you're so tense, I guess. I'm sure you're helping a lot of people—now that it's harder to, you know, identify souls, lots of average folk are needing good defence lawyers to vouch for them. I reckon there are so many that are wrongly accused.'

Astrea shut her eyes while Lita worked, listening to the steady stream of chatter the hairdresser kept up.

'My boyfriend's the president of Green Souls—you might have heard of us, but if not, we're all about taking radical action to stand up for the environment. We're doing a protest soon, actually. I can't tell you the details yet, but you should keep an eye out for us in the news. Actually, have you got a business card or something I can take?'

Astrea gave Lita her card, but she didn't get a call, and she didn't see anything about Green Souls on the news. Not that year, at least.

36

Astrea was always dazzled by the stars. The wide open space of the sky was a comfort she'd missed for many lifetimes. She had long ago begun to suspect that Arthur was bored of the observatory, but he humoured her.

'There's a case coming up that might be the one,' Arthur told her quietly. 'Eco-terrorism charges, so not an unconvincing match for Armstrong's war crimes. And she's thirty-six.'

'Lita.' Astrea had seen the case in the media, but she'd have known the name regardless. 'It's crazy, Arthur—I sat right next to her on Confession Day.'

Arthur frowned. 'You can do it, though? You will?'

With every new arrest of someone Astrea's age, or even close to it, there were new questions about soul 3396. Among those the media suspected there was even a client Astrea had defended several years ago, before she finally made the transition to prosecution. Joseph Stene, the client, had murdered his wife and young daughter. *This is what people expect from me*, Astrea had thought, flipping through the tabloid pages despite her better judgment. Every word she'd spoken in Stene's defence felt like a confession of her own. *I'm just doing my job*, she'd had to remind herself. *Everyone should know it's just my job*.

There was only one way to make it stop. Once the world finally had its soul 3396, it wouldn't matter what Astrea said anymore. She could even advocate for the abolition of the Registry without feeling like she was exposing herself. She could do good, that way.

'It's the perfect chance,' she gave Arthur a decisive nod. 'I've been on the run for half my life; I'll do whatever I have to.'

37

Arthur takes his time reading out the verdict. Even though Astrea knows what it's going to be, she needs to officially hear the words and be out of this courtroom so that she can breathe, cry, rest, scream. To finally be acquitted of *being* will surely be an unimaginable relief.

She casts her eyes across the room to where Lita sits. Her floral wrists are cuffed in her lap. It's unfortunate. Not what Astrea would want. But it's self-defence. She watches on with a hard look in her eyes that might have been considered incriminating, had she been in Lita's position.