

THE VERITY: PART ONE

Free Chapter I

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A rare and welcomed gust of wind sweeps my long, auburn hair across my face. I scrape it up into a ponytail, gathering the thick mass of curls and tying it with string to keep it out of my eyes.

Crouching behind this brick barricade and keeping well out of sight is torture. Hiding, it goes against every instinct I have. My muscles twitch with the need to move and the more I think about what's coming, the harder my heart continues to beat and the more I struggle to keep from fidgeting.

I risk a sneaky peek over the barricade and have yet another scout of the area. There's not a single living tree in sight. Just their grey, brittle husks remain. The buildings are pretty much gone now. Only their bare metal frames and crumbling brickwork have been left behind. I can't remember the last time I saw a bird fly in the sky or a wild animal of any kind. I saw a dog once. I think. It ran off before I could get a proper look. Back home, we have livestock. Cows, chickens and sheep. But everything out in the wild is just... gone.

Well, almost everything.

'When are they gonna give the starting signal?' I whisper eagerly, glancing into the distance to a hill about a mile away. There, on its peak, is a large canopy with a dozen people sheltered beneath its shade. They're all watching me and the five others by my side as we remain crouching low, taking shelter behind this wall. 'I'm desperate to get out there,' I add. 'I don't know about you guys, but I can't wait!'

'Scarlett. This isn't supposed to be fun!' Tee hisses at me, jabbing her elbow into my ribs. With an enormous smirk, I murmur a less than genuine apology. 'And will you stop grinning like a lunatic!' she snaps. 'This is serious stuff. It's not a game.'

'Yeah, yeah,' I reply, rolling my eyes and wiping the beads of sweat from my brow. 'I know. I'm taking this perfectly seriously, as I always do. Keep your knickers on, Tee.'

'Never mind my knickers. Guide your concern to the mission.'

Q-Tee, my best friend. My sister, really. She swishes her long, brunette ponytail in annoyance and glares at me. She definitely has some Japanese heritage in her family tree. Of which I'm very jealous. Such a great culture.

Well, it was.

Tee usually has a smile that can make the coldest of hearts melt. Her eyes sparkle with kindness and her spirit just wraps you in love. She's a tall, slender and very elegant girl who always holds herself with grace. Even now, crouched behind a wall in this blistering heat and wearing all her leather battle gear, she does all those things. But today, her usual smile is nowhere to be seen.

Her hazel eyes are wide and dry. She hasn't blinked for far too long. She never does when she's in hostile territory. Even though I know that her heart is beating like crazy and that she's fighting the urge to throw up, she's ready to fight. Ready to kill.

The bow on her back makes her lethal. Her skills and accuracy with that thing are unreal. I once saw her use an arrow to put out the flame on a candle at one-hundred feet. Didn't even graze the wax.

Awesome.

Well, she has been using it since she was five.

I was the same age when I held my first sword.

I shot my first crossbow at six and learned to ride a horse while wielding both weapons at seven.

Our job is to kill.

We're very good at our job.

But unlike Tee, I love my work.

'It will be fine, Tee. Please. Blink,' I encourage with a squeeze of her shoulder. 'The way you're staring at me is making me nervous.'

'You're nervous?' she says in an uncomfortably high-pitched whine. 'You can't be nervous! You never get nervous!' She slams her hand over her eyes. 'We're all gonna die.'

'No one's gonna die. Right guys?' I look to the other four for some support in calming her down.

Flash nods far too eagerly. His eyebrows are so high, they're almost lost in his hairline and his body shakes as if he's freezing. Despite the dozens of beads of sweat trickling down his face. He's a skinny guy with extremely blonde hair who has the dullest blue eyes I've ever seen. Even duller today. Probably the result of a sleepless night. Even with no sleep behind him, he still moves faster than anyone I've ever known. Guy runs like the Devil is chasing him.

Most of the time, that's precisely what *is* chasing him.

Titan nods too, but much more confidently. He's a big guy with dark skin and short black hair. He's built like a tank and could probably crush your skull with his bare hands. But he's so gentle and sweet, he never would. He glances at Flash, careful not to show the slightest bit of the worry I know is boiling away underneath that calm exterior.

Worry. Not fear.

Because Titan's out here with the man he loves and losing Flash? Well, for Titan that would be worse than death.

He grips Flash's hand so hard, his fingers lack any colour. And Flash holds him back just as tightly.

Tee sees and gives a fretful little whimper.

Not getting any support from those two, clearly.

I look to Cass instead. A jittery archer is the last thing we need and he's always been a strong sense of reason for us all. No matter how much shit hits the fan, he never loses his cool.

'It'll be fine,' Cass agrees, as I knew he would. He places his hand on Tee's other shoulder and she relaxes ever so slightly knowing she's protected by us both. Cass's dark brown, permanently tousled hair, hangs over his grey eyes. He emanates calm. Control. Competence. But his strong jaw fails to make it into the reassuring smile I know he's trying his best to give her. She doesn't notice his disingenuous grin.

But I notice.

I also notice how his lean and muscled frame is tensed.

He's a good foot taller than me. Strong, athletic, quick and extremely lethal.

The perfect person to have by your side out here.

The perfect person full stop really.

'As long as we all do what we're supposed to do, everything will be fine,' he assures her. 'Scarlett isn't nervous. She never gets nervous. She's excited. Because she's an idiot and enjoys this madness.'

'An idiot that could kick your arse,' I remind him.

'In your dreams,' he replies, with the slightest hitch in the corner of his mouth.

'Alright. Fancy a bet?'

'What do you have in mind?'

'Whoever gets a lower kill count has to give the other a back rub.'

'Your back rubs are like slow punches along my spine,' he complains, eyebrows raised.

'Yeah,' I shrug. 'But yours are really good. And since I'll be winning anyhow, my crap back rubs are completely irrelevant.'

Cass gives a low, amused chuckle as Tee continues to glare at us both.

'We are about to face death. And you two are joking like it's any other day!' she scornfully hisses. 'Winder, will you tell th-'

'Is the sun falling to earth?' Winder groans, interrupting us and wiping the sweat from his face with the back of his hand. 'Because it really feels like the sun's getting closer. Did we miss the memo of yet another disaster trying to wipe us out, or what? I'm sweating like a pig.' His brow furrows and his eyes glaze slightly. 'Do pigs sweat? I mean, I've personally never seen a pig sweat, but people say they sweat.'

'I don't think pigs actually sweat, Winder,' I reply with a shrug and checking my dagger is secure in my leg holster. 'It's an expression. Like... raining cats and dogs.'

'Don't even get me started on that expression,' he laughs. 'What the fu-'

'Guys!' Tee pleads. 'Do you have any idea what we're about to face out there? Can you at least try and take this seriously?'

'Oh, Tee,' Winder sighs, slinging his arm over her shoulder and almost pulling her over under its weight. 'You worry about stuff way too much. Everything's gonna be fine. For sure. We've got this. We've *always* got this.' He starts scratching at his neck, picking off strands of his hair that are stuck to his skin. 'I shouldn't have cut my hair today. It's itching the hell outta me.'

'I still can't believe you shaved it all off.' I lean over and help pull out the long stray strands of ginger hair from beneath his collar. 'I can't get used to it.'

'Long hair's too much in this heatwave. Why they're insisting on doing this today is beyond me,' he complains, looking up at the spectators on top of the hill. 'Pretty damn sure it's the hottest day of the year. When are they gonna to give the signal? We're gonna melt if they leave us out here for much longer. I say we just go over, clear the area and go home. It's my turn in the shower first, and I'm hungry as hell.'

'We go over when they signal. Not a second sooner,' Cass says clearly. 'And no one is having a shower until you clear up the mess you made in the bathroom. Your hair was all over the floor when we left. And the only reason you're hungry is that you lost a bet with Scarlett and had to give her your breakfast this morning. You know you can't beat her in hand to hand combat. She's too fast. You can never catch her.'

I laugh mockingly at Winder, who decides the best response is to shove his finger up my nose.

'Gross!' I hiss, slapping his hand away.

'Guys! Seriously!' Tee pleads. 'Can we focus?'

'I'm too hungry to focus.'

'You had a whole apple this morning,' I remind him.

'An apple isn't filling. It's-'

'Guys!' Tee snaps again with much more severity. 'I mean it. You focus... or... or...'

'Or?' I ask.

She narrows her eyes and crosses her arms. 'Or I'll tell the boys about the book you have stashed under your mattress.'

'Book?' I scoff. 'What book?'

'You know precisely which book I mean.'

'I have no idea-'

'Ya know... The one with all the steamy se-'

'Tee!'

'I think it's called, "*Secret diary of a call-*"'

'Alright!' I snap, feeling my cheeks redden. 'I get the point. I'm focused, okay? Totally focused. C'mon.' I smack Cass on the arm. 'Let's take another quick look. See if anything's changed.'

Together, we peer over the barricade, careful to be quiet and unseen. The top of our heads barely pokes above our cover as we scan the area.

Ahead of us is an old three-story building made of red brick. It was once an old factory of some kind. The door is boarded up with a thick piece of wood and the two windows either side of it are sealed with metal sheeting. The panelled windows above are all shattered and missing their glass, leaving behind rusty metal window frames. Unlike the rest of what surrounds us, this structure's still standing, which is precisely why this location has been chosen. There are rusted, burnt-out shells of five old lorries precisely where they were abandoned just over half a century ago.

'So...' Cass whispers in my ear, and I know he has a grin from ear to ear. 'About this book...'

'Mention it again, I'll kick you so hard between the legs, you won't be able to sit for a week.'

He's chuckling to himself as we turn back to the others.

'What does it look like out there?' Tee asks nervously.

'Well, it's still an old factory,' I reply. 'Just as it was ten minutes ago. It's still three stories high. Just as it was ten minutes ago. And it still looks completely sealed. Just as it was ten minutes ago,' I tell her, for the third time.

'I meant are there still six targets?' she asks exasperatedly, pinching the bridge of her nose and closing her eyes. 'You are such a sarcastic cow, Scarlett.'

'Yes. There are six Class Threes visible,' I laugh, nudging her with my elbow. 'Probably not part of the original assignment. More than likely, they just wandered over. The factory is our mission. We need to kill the six Class Threes first before we attack it.'

'And then?' Titan asks. 'You and Cass are up for the Red Coat positions so we're following your lead, right?' There's a pleading tone to his words. I understand why. Out here, you follow orders, or you make them. And it has to be perfectly clear who does what. Can't have people bickering about what we should or shouldn't do. Which is the purpose of this whole exercise. Deciding who will do the leading. But for the last seventeen years, Cass and I have always taken the lead. In everything. Where we go. The games we played as children. Battle formations.

And no one ever complains because without sounding big-headed, Cass and I are the best. It's life and death out here. And a wrong call or a bad choice can end someone's life. That's a burden not many people want to bear.

But like I said, Cass and me? We're the best. And the others trust us completely. As they should.

No one's died on our watch.

Yet.

'So...' Tee says, as each one of them shuffles a little closer to Cass and me. 'What is the plan?'

'We stick to our usual formation. You two,' I point to Titan and Flash. 'You're scouts and second wave. Tee, you're our eyes and our bow. Stay up high. Me, Cass and Winder on the ground up front. Three-point formation. This is our final assignment, guys. We get one shot. We mess this up... it's over. In every sense of the word.'

'That's a crap pep talk,' Winder scoffs.

'We've been training for this since we were five. That's twelve years of experience. Twelve years of solid training. Twelve years of blood, sweat and tears. All leading us here. There's nothing else to say. Today is the day. Today will define the rest of our lives. So, we play by their rules. Show them what we can do. Earn our ranks, survive, and go home. Got it?'

'Got it,' they all agree.

'Good. How's that for a pep talk?'

'Much better,' Winder nods approvingly.

I peer over the top of the wall again. 'Titan, Tee and Flash... when Cass, Winder and I make our move, you go around the outside of those lorries. Use the vehicles as a barrier between you and the six targets. Tee, that third lorry there?' I make sure she knows exactly where I'm pointing. 'You climb up on its roof. It will give you a good vantage point. Titan and Flash, do your scout of the building and get back to us as soon as you can with what you see inside. We need to know how many targets we will be facing, and their Class. Steer clear of the six targets outside. We'll deal with those.'

'Sure thing.' Titan nods.

'Tee, how many arrows you got?' I ask.

'Twenty,' she replies. Her hand pats the quiver full of arrows at her hip. Her other rests firmly on the string of her bow across her chest.

'How many targets did you think we'd be facing?' Winder laughs.

'Well, I might miss,' she says, not taking her unblinking eyes off me as she talks to him.

'You never miss, Tee,' I remind her.

'Well, she did once,' Winder teases, jabbing my shoulder where I have a scar from one of her arrows. Tee makes a high-pitched kind of whine and chews on her lip.

'Ignore him,' I insist. 'Everything will be alright. Just stay up on that lorry. Your assignment is with your bow. That's it. Under no circumstances are you to fight with anything other than your bow.'

'I don't have anything *but* my bow,' she whispers, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. 'Should I?'

I shake my head, but internally I'm groaning.

Why the hell didn't she bring her sword?!

I pull out the dagger from my holster and give it to her instead. 'Take this. Just in case. We all agreed, you're going for a Green Coat so they need to see your skill with a bow. That's all. They see that, you'll be put up on the wall for sure.'

'You sure you guys aren't mad?' she asks. 'Me being on the wall means I won't join your unit.'

'For the hundredth time. Of course not,' Cass insists. 'The wall needs you more than we do. You're the best archer in the army and your place is up on that wall keeping us all safe.'

As she nods and takes a deep breath, Cass settles his eyes on me.

'Thank you,' I mouth, before he flashes me a wink. Putting her up on the wall was his idea. That way, she doesn't have to be out here fighting. She can stay home and protect everyone there instead. She's capable of being on the ground. Sufficient with a blade. And brave. Stupidly so. But being out here terrifies her. And fear leads to mistakes. And mistakes can get you, and others, killed. We all care about her too damn much to let that happen.

'If you start running low on arrows, signal. I'll get more to you,' I tell her. 'We won't know what - or how many - are in that factory until Flash and Titan do their scout. Keep your eyes open and watch our backs. We have one straightforward objective. Clear the specified area quickly and efficiently of any and all targets.'

'And don't get eaten alive by them.'

'Yes... Thank you, Winder. When the six targets are down, and when we know what we're dealing with inside that factory, we head to the door and open it up just enough so a couple of them can fit through at a time,' I tell them while they all nod. 'They'll funnel out towards the light. Now remember guys, because two of us are gunning for the Red Coats, this mission will be harder. I imagine we'll be facing a few more targets than the other units have had to face. They're gonna wanna see our skills. See us prove ourselves. So please, no loud noises. No yelling. The targets will be slow as long as they're not stimulated.'

A high-pitched whistle travels through the air. We look up to the hill and see the spectators all standing in a line watching us.

'That's the signal. It's go time,' I whisper, giving Cass another whack on his arm in excitement before turning to the others. 'Tee...'

'Get to the lorry and stay there. Blink. And don't miss. Got it.' She nods.

'Flash, Titan...'

'Go peek in the windows and see what's inside the factory while you, Cass and Winder kill the six targets outside,' Titan replies. 'Understood.'

Tee gives me a kiss on the cheek. 'Love you. Be safe out there and kick arse. C'mon fellas.' She heads out, Titan and Flash following close behind.

'Six Class Threes,' Cass says as they head off. 'Piece of cake.'

'Boring.' I roll my eyes. 'I'm looking forward to seeing what's inside that factory.'

Not that I don't love the Class Threes. I mean, a target is a target, and no target should be taken lightly. But Class Threes are slow. Cumbersome. A little dull.

The group of spectators watching over us are scoring our skills with a weapon and our ability to adapt to the ever-changing environment that a post-apocalyptic world inhabited by millions of these creatures create. Today determines our rank for when we join the army in a few days' time. It's the final of sixteen tests we've had to endure this past year. Our last year of a training programme that started the day we were born and ends when the youngest member of the unit turns seventeen.

That's me. The group's baby. And today is my birthday.

'Hands in.' I hold out my hand. Cass lands his palm on top of mine. Winders lands on top of his. 'Just like any other day. No holding back. No showing off. We go in, and we all come out.'

Cass wraps his fingers around my hand and grips it tightly.

'Don't do anything stupid, Scarlett,' he tells me.

'You know me.' I grin excitedly.

'Yes. I do. So, I'll say it again. Don't do anything stupid.' His slight smile doesn't match the seriousness of his eyes. 'Killing you would really suck.'

'Please,' Winder scoffs. 'If Scar gets bitten and turns into a target... we're all screwed.'

But despite the joking, there's a heavy tension between us. People have died in these tests. And worse. Been bitten and become one of... *Them*.

'Remember our promise. We get bitten, we get put down. No hesitating. We don't wait for anyone to turn. We just do it. None of us wants to be left like that.' I nod to the creatures behind us and the boys nod in agreement. 'Death or glory.' I repeat the motto drilled into us for as long as we can remember.

Death or glory, Cadets.

Death or glory.

'Their death,' Winder adds.

Cass nods his head. 'Our glory. Let's do this.'

Thank you for reading

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