

THE VERITY: PART TWO

Free Chapter I

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As welcome homes go, this sucks!

Standing in the lobby of the Guardhouse - a building I've only seen from outside and never, not once, had the inclination to enter - has me so anxious and so furious, I could scream. This is where every soldier convicted of a crime severe enough to warrant a death sentence or a Canary Coat is brought. Around the back of this cold, authoritarian building is The Courtyard.

Where they execute people.

Where *I* am to be executed.

This is where every soldier convicted of a crime severe enough to warrant a death sentence or a Canary Coat is brought.

Chilli was brought here when he was sentenced to the Canaries. It's exactly as he described it, too. He even got the smell down. Sad desperation. I never thought that was actually a smell.

But it is.

And it stinks.

The Guardhouse's lobby is a large space with high ceilings and no windows whatsoever. The floors are made of cracked and uneven grey stone-slabs. Cast-iron chairs have been bolted into them and they line every wall. Ahead of me is a bare concrete staircase that twist upwards and out of sight.

The Grey Coat Commander disappeared up there several minutes ago and ordered me to stay here.

On the walls, portraits of the Sand's family hang side by side. Noah's face is watching me from a golden frame with that self-righteous grin he loves to wear, leering right at me. I fight the urge to spit at it. The hole in my gum is still bleeding and throbbing. Sodding Commander, taking my tooth. I keep swallowing mouthfuls of blood, which in turn is making me want to hurl.

I've spent months out in the wild. Fighting Class Threes and Class Twos. I've gone days without sleep. Without food. I've defeated foes I had no right in defeating. Survived impossible odds.

And where has it got me?

Stuck in the lobby of the dankest and most depressing building I've ever had the displeasure of seeing, in handcuffs no less, waiting to be executed.

That's where.

I've seen more welcoming sites in the derelict buildings left to rot out beyond the wall.

I'm not allowed to sit and two Grey Coats continue to hold my upper arms so tight, I'm bruising. Two others are positioned by the thick wooden door behind me, marking the only exit. I watch it closely, hoping to see Elder One emerge.

We wait.

I can't believe I had to leave the body of my dead father in the hands of my devastated best friend who just told me that Cass hates me so much, he was glad that I might be dead.

Bastard.

Suppose he's about to get his wish. He can sit upfront when they tie the noose around my neck.

It's been years since they've executed anyone and not once has it ever been mandatory to attend.

Usually, they just sentence criminals to the Canaries and let the un-dead do their dirty work for them.

A door creaks as it opens upstairs and the voice of the Commander carries down from above.

Shortly after, he appears and gestures for the brutes holding onto me to bring me up.

I glance back longingly at the one and only way out of here.

Still no sign of Elder One.

The Grey Coats push and shove me unnecessarily. If I stumble, they tighten their already impossibly tight grip and watch, keen to hear me complain. But they won't hear me utter a single word.

My lips are sealed.

Up the stairs we go, onto a long landing that looks just as cold, grey, unwelcoming and harsh, as the lobby below. At the end of the hallway is a slightly ajar white door with a silver handle.

We stop this side of the threshold and I smell a burning fire inside. Hypocritical sods. It's not cold enough to light a fire yet. Not for us.

But it would be... for *him*.

Heaven forbid he gets chilly.

The Grey Coat commander raps his knuckles on the door and the heavy footsteps inside get closer.

I put on a smile for the man who opens it fully.

'Fancy seeing you here,' I greet.

'Well... hello, Cadet. Long time, no see.'

I look past Noah to the little setup behind him. It's a plain, square room with the same grey walls as the rest of this place. There's a large wooden table to the back, two chairs on opposite sides, a pot of tea in the very middle and two mugs, all set in front of a roaring fire in the fireplace.

'I have been worried sick,' he sighs in apparent relief. His hand reaches out and he tucks my hair behind my ear, just as he always did when he would see me. 'Every day that you have been

gone has been torture. Utter torture.' His palm settles on my cheek. His features ease into a disingenuous sadness as he steps closer, pressing his body into mine.

I remain silent as he surveys me. His eyes flick back and forth as he tries to read my raging thoughts. I'm not exactly hiding the hatred I have for him in my sneer but that doesn't stop him staring deep into my eyes and soul.

His other hand holds my hip firmly and he steps even closer. I feel his heart through his chest as it hammers hard, not that you would ever tell by the serenity on his face. My heart races just as hard, hating his closeness and wishing more than anything I had my katanas to hand to force through his neck.

He leans in. His forehead rests on mine as he lets out a long breath, closing his eyes as he does.

'Oh, Cadet. I thought I was never going to see you again. How could you leave like that? Without a word? Without any warning?' His eyes open. The corners of his mouth twitch before he utters his next words. 'It's a miracle that it was only your Elder that perished. Thank the lord that you survived. Praise God that he chose to spare you.'

I snatch my face from his grasp and step back, causing the two Grey Coats still holding onto me to harden their grip.

'God had nothing to do with any of this.'

'God has everything-'

'Fuck God,' I hiss hatefully, leaning towards him slightly. The Grey Coats hands tighten. 'And fuck you. If you're gonna kill me, get on with it. I'd rather the noose around my neck than have to listen to your sanctimonious bullshit, or have to suffer having your hands on me ever again.'

His entire face goes rigid. Pure rage burns behind his eyes as his teeth grind together. But still, he attempts to remain calm.

With a small side-step, he clears the doorway for me to enter. 'You are clearly upset. Come inside. Let's talk.'

'Talk?' I ask. 'About what? Something you want to get off your chest, Noah?'

'Lord Sands to you, Cadet,' he says, his fists balled up by his sides. 'Now, like I said, inside.' He gives a small nod of his head, gesturing me to join him.

'Nah.' I laugh at the mere idea of stepping inside that room alone with him, with no weapons and my hands still cuffed behind my back. 'I don't think so.' I bump into a Grey Coat as I step away.

'I said... inside.' Noah snarls, narrowing his eyes. 'Now!'

'I'm good out here. Thanks.'

'You think there's nothing I won't do to you in here alone that I won't do to you in front of my men?' he laughs angrily. 'Get inside.'

'I'm allowed an Elder representative with me for all hearings. I'll wait.'

He steps forward, not stopping until he's towering over me. His chest is crushed up against mine and I feel him shaking with rage.

'I said get the fuck inside, Cadet. Or I will drag you in here myself.' He's pinned me between his body and the chest of the Grey coat at my back.

'You'll have to drag me in then,' I hiss in reply. 'I am not going in there willingly.'

'As you wish.' He reaches out and wraps his fingers around my throat. He flings me inside and tosses me on the floor, slamming the door shut behind him.

I hit the ground harder than I'd have liked and with my hands still cuffed behind my back, my face takes quite a hit. He remains by the door for a few moments, his back to me as he takes numerous deep breaths in and out. Slowly, his shoulders relax. His fists unclench and when he turns to face

me, he seems calmer. He walks slowly and at his leisure around me as I roll myself over onto my back. As I go to sit up, he slams his boot on my chest, keeping me down.

'Despite your hostility towards me, it is good to see you again, Cadet 5-3-6. I have truly missed you.'

'I wish I could say the same. And it's Canary, actually. I graduated. Remember?' I correct him, making his eye twitch. 'So, you want to sentence me to death because I turned you down? Rejected you? Bit pathetic, don't you think? Even for you.'

His fingers flex slightly and he's forcing himself to breathe slow and steady.

'I know that the way we left things wasn't ideal-'

'You threatened to kill my family unless I agreed to be your wife!'

'And I planned to say sorry for that but you left before you gave me the chance.'

'Sorry?' I scoff. 'You're sorry? I glance at his boot which is currently pressing down hard on my chest. 'Yeah... I'm feeling the apology.'

'I'm trying to make this right!' he barks at me, his foot becoming heavier. 'Just... accept my apology and agree to give me another chance.'

'Another chance?'

'Yes. All I have ever done is love you. Train you. Try to protect you! I wanted you to be my wife rather than die bloody in a war that we will never win! Why is that so bad?!'

'Is that all you have done, hmm? Love me? Protect me?' I laugh and shake my head. 'You have destroyed my whole life, Noah. You have done far worse to me than try to make me your wife and you know it.'

'What is that supposed to mean?'

I know there's blood between my teeth and that a steady stream of it is dribbling down my chin, but I still put on a smile for him.

'It means that you're going to pay. And I promise it's going to hurt.'

He lunges down, grabbing my hair. I give an angry yell as he drags me across the room towards the desk before slamming my face down into it so hard, the teacups fall with a crash to the floor. He holds me there with his hand at the base of my neck.

'GET THE HELL OFF ME!'

'No,' he says, taking a fist full of hair and lifting my head before smacking it into the table. The hit knocks me senseless. 'That was for blaspheming.'

'I'll do more than blaspheme if you hit me again.'

'Stop struggling, or I'll give you another hit, Cadet.'

'THAT'S CANARY! YOU HOLIER THAN THOU PIECE OF SHI-'

Bang.

'Language!' he warns as I blink the room back into focus. 'You will not take the Lord's name in vain! You hear me?' He leans down into my face, a nasty smirk on his smug face. 'Now, tell me what you meant by that? What else have I done to you exactly?' He asks, daring me to accuse him of something.

I keep my mouth shut. If I come right out and say that I believe he orchestrated my father's death, he might just cut his losses and kill me here and now. And more than likely my Canaries just in case they suspect him too. The mission my Canaries and I have now is too important to jeopardise this early on. We need proof if I'm to get my revenge without putting the people I care about in danger.

'Well?' he pushes.

'I know you hurt Cass,' I tell him instead. 'You've made him hate me and turned him against me.'

'You did that yourself when you chose him over me and then left us both.'

He leans down and softly runs his nose along my jaw. His free hand runs down my spine before resting on my backside. He moans in pleasure which makes me turn cold from the inside out.

'Get off me, Noah.'

'That's Lord Sands to you. But I will accept husband. Or beloved, if you prefer. But I'll leave that up to you of course. Wife.'

As I laugh in his face, he gives me another hard bang. The pain makes me silent and I struggle to fight the urge to throw up. Knowing I'm far from my normal capabilities after three hard knocks, he loosens his grip and spins me around so I'm on my back across the desk. He rests his forearm across my collar bone and maintains a fair amount of pressure as I blink up at him.

'You're looking a little dazed there, Cadet,' he smirks, brushing my hair from my face. 'Oh, and look...' He wipes my eyebrow with the cuff of his sleeve and shows me the red that stains it. 'I made you bleed.'

'I'll make sure to return the favour one day soon.'

He simply laughs.

'What do you want from me, Noah?'

He presses his arm down a little, making it difficult to get a good breath.

'I'm pretty sure I've made that perfectly clear.' He takes hold of my chin and directs my attention to something in the corner. It's a dress, draped on a hanger. A long, white, lace dress. Complete with a floor-length veil.

'You'll look very pretty in it,' I tell him. 'It'll definitely bring out the psycho in your eyes.'

Whack.

I groan and see spots before I lose the ability to hold my own weight. He has to keep me from sliding off the table. 'Keep hitting me if that makes you feel better,' I slur, shaking the fog away. 'You can do it till my skull breaks and my brain leaks through my ears. But I ain't marrying you. I mean it.'

'As do I,' he replies. 'Every single word I'm about to say. So listen closely. You entered your name into my lottery. You were chosen.'

'And then I left,' I snipe. 'Take a hint. You're coming across as desperate.'

Whack.

'I'm gonna be sick if you do that again,' I warn. 'And I'm a good aim.'

'As I was saying. You were chosen. You still are. So, you're going to take off these trashy clothes you have on, put on that dress, and in ten minutes an Elder will be here to wed us.'

'Not gonna happen.'

His arm slides up and he presses harder on my windpipe.

'Kill me,' I wheeze. 'Better dead... than your ... wife.' He keeps pressing harder, but he won't shut me up.

'You do not have a choice, Cadet.'

'Canary...' I gasp.

'You will marry me. I need you to. Not only because I love you, because I do love you, Cadet. Against my better judgment and common sense, I love you. But also because I need you to help me.'

'Need me to... help... you?'

'I need you to stand by my side. The army's "*darling*". The one all the others look up to and admire. The one they trust, even above their Elders in some cases.'

'I think you're overestimating... Noah... I can barely breathe!' I wriggle beneath his hold but he refuses to let up.

'I have big plans, Cadet. Huge! Drastic! The survival of humanity is within our grasp and with you by my side, supporting me and loving me, we can start building our new world order.'

'What the hell are you talking about?' I ask breathlessly. 'You sound insane!'

'Just... say yes. Just love me!'

'I came here to be executed. Not to marry you. And certainly not to love you.'

He presses harder. I feel the pressure in my lungs as my body starts to scream for oxygen. My eyes begin to bulge.

'Really?' he asks, eyebrows raised and an expectant look on his amused face.

'Re-a-ll-y.'

'Fine. Then we'll do this with you unconscious. Once the Elder gets here, he'll sign the paper that will legally make you mine. I don't need your permission. Just his signature and his word that you agreed. Which he has guaranteed to give. Even if you prove... resistant. I'll give the announcement in the morning and declare to one and all that you returned from your brave and daring adventures beyond the wall more determined than ever to lead us all to victory, with me by your side as your loving husband. But due to your grief at losing your Elder and the injuries you suffered, you will be resting in private for a while. And then, when you have become more... compliant... you will return. With you by my side and with the Sainted Army looking to us both as their leaders, the real work can begin.'

'You can't - do - this.'

'Yes, I can. I would rather have you willingly wed me, but I know that in time, you will come around to my way of thinking. One way or another. Everyone has a breaking point, Cadet, and I am very excited about finding yours. And when I have stripped all your defiance and disobedience away, you will be mine in totality. So sleep, my love. For when you wake up, you'll be my wife.'

'And I'll slit your throat.'

He holds me down tighter. I'm not getting any air. It's starting to go black. My legs weakly kick out. I try to wriggle free but my hands are still in cuffs and I can't. I'm less than useless. My eyes start to close. This can't be happening! I joined the Canaries to stop exactly this from happening. I lost Elder Eight in the process. And Cass.

'LORD SANDS!' bellows a familiar and most welcomed voice. 'I suggest you release your grip on that Canary and step away, *Sir*.'

'This is of no concern to you, Elder One,' the distant echo of Noah's voice replies. I'm on the very edge of unconsciousness. The very, very edge. 'I suggest you leave. You have no authority over me whatsoever.'

'Perhaps not you, my Lord. But I do have authority over her.'

'Not more than I do, I'm sure.'

'I'm afraid I do,' Elder One insists. 'I have something you need to see.'

There's a moment of agonising silence before thankfully, Noah releases his grip on me and lets me fall to a heap on the floor, gasping and coughing as I greedily take in as much air as possible. Before I get a chance to move, however, he presses his boot down on my neck, applying just enough pressure to keep me down and for barely enough air to get into my lungs I look to the open door where Elder One stands accompanied by Elder Ten - The Elder who still works on the wall and would reward me with apples every time I guessed the correct answers to his riddles - As well as three Black Coats. Elder One has a hand resting on the chest of the man beside him, stopping him

from going any further into the room which is clearly all he wants to do. A simple hand gesture and the Black Coat is very begrudgingly obeying him.

It's Titan.

One of the members of my unit before I left home. The gentle giant I grew up with and one of my closest friends.

Boy... am I glad to see him! Even if I am under Noah's boot.

Titan's eyes are on me completely and he looks livid at what's happening. His chest is rising and falling from anger and his fists are clenched as he looks at Noah.

But he stays.

Funny thing is, Titan could easily flatten Noah with a single punch. But no one would ever lay a hand on him. It would mean death. Simple as that. Hundreds of Grey Coats would tear any attacker apart. I couldn't have made any real attempt to fight Noah off even if I wasn't cuffed and bashed about first. One strike, I'd be killed then and there.

'There is no reason for you to be here, Elder One,' Noah says, applying a little more pressure to my neck. 'I have dropped the charges against her. Seems she has returned home to fulfil her duties as my wife, and Elder Two is due any moment to officiate our wedding.'

'I'm afraid you must hand over the girl to me,' Elder One says with a polite smile as Elder Ten openly scoffs at Noah's obvious lies.

'I have the ultimate authority. Over you and over my bride to be. She is my property. Always has been. Always will be. What I do with her is of no concern to you.'

'I intervene with your best interests at heart, my Lord. I personally don't care what goes on between you and the girl.' Elder One shrugs, sounding beyond disinterested. Even bored. 'I am simply following the laws which you and your family put in place.'

Elder One holds out a piece of paper for Noah to take. Everyone stays put. Noah doesn't move an inch and neither do the Elders. This standoff is getting more unbearable with every second. I can barely breathe and his boot isn't getting any lighter.

'Can someone bloody move?' I wheeze. 'A little uncomfortable down here.'

'Language!' Noah warns, before holding out his hand. 'Bring the letter to me, Elder One.'

Elder One bows and heads over. They stand by my head, neither one acknowledging me as Noah takes his sweet time reading. Titan's looking between me and the wedding dress behind me. Elder Ten has his hand wrapped around his wrist, just in case he does decide to charge in and hurl Noah off me. Titan's eyes settle on me.

"*You alright?*" he mouths silently.

I give the slightest of nods, as much as I can in my current position. Elder Ten gives me a worried wink as he watches us all anxiously.

Noah's eyes dart from the paper to me and there's such hatred in them, I worry he'll just snap my neck and be done with it.

'Did you know about this?' he demands. Instead of giving me the ability to speak, he nudges his foot down a little harder, making my legs kick out. If I could catch a breath, the language I'd be hurling about would probably earn me a thousand lashes.

'She does not,' Elder One replies. 'Which is why I came as soon as I heard she had returned with Elder Eight's body. Now, I must insist you let her up, Lord Sands.' There is slightly more agitation to his voice. But only slight. Noah either doesn't notice or he simply doesn't care. He scrunches up the paper and tosses it into the fire.

'What you have shown me makes no difference. The facts remain the same. This cadet-'

'*Canary.*'

'Shut up,' he spits at me without even lowering his gaze. 'She put her number into the lottery. She was chosen. And now she has chosen to fulfil her obligations to me.' Someone clears their throat by the door. Everyone turns to see a thin, paled-complexioned man standing in the entrance. 'Ahh. Just in time. Elder Two, come on in. My bride will be ready shortly.'

The newcomer looks down at me pinned beneath Noah's boot and then to Elder Ten and One nervously.

'Now,' Noah sighs with a great amount of agitation. 'Leave us and take your Black Coats with you. It's our special day. One I've waited far too long to enjoy.'

'Don't,' I gasp, looking up at Elder One pleadingly. 'Don't leave me here. I don't consent.' I start to thrash. Is this really going to happen? It can't! I've been through too much to *stop* this from happening. 'I don't consent! I don't con-'

'SHUT UP!' Noah roars.

'NO!' I yell from beneath his hold. The more effort I put into forcing my voice past the force of his boot the more my throat burns, but I will scream until I lose my voice for all eternity before I let this happen to me. 'I DO NOT CONSENT TO THIS AT ALL!'

As I struggle beneath him, he gets angrier. His foot becomes heavier.

And Elder One laughs.

He sodding well laughs at me!

'She's feisty,' he chortles, lowering his gaze to meet mine. 'It's amusing that you think what you do or don't consent to actually matters, Canary.'

'Her feisty nature is nothing a good bit of physical discipline won't resolve,' Noah replies. 'Like I said, if you'll excuse us-'

'I am sorry, my Lord.' Elder One interrupts, resting his hand over his own heart. 'But I simply can't do that. As you read, she is now in my charge. She must come with me. I am sorry, sir, but a wedding between you and this Canary is simply not possible by law. *Your* law, might I add. Even if she has changed her mind and returned home to become your wife.'

'She was eligible when she put her number in!'

'And now she is not eligible. You cannot break your own law to fit your desire.'

'Well, I burnt that letter. So-'

'That was merely a copy. The original is back at Elder HQ with six other Elders who have all seen it.'

'And word has gotten out to the rest of the Army of its contents,' Elder Ten adds. 'More will know than not know by now.'

Noah's getting angrier. His foot, heavier. Both Elders simply remain passive.

'She returned less than an hour ago. How has word gotten out?' he snarls.

'Loose lips. I will ensure that whoever owns them will not get the chance to be so careless in the future. I am sorry but the girl cannot legally marry. Not until she reaches the age of retirement at any rate. Not unless you want the whole Sainted Army to revolt. We must follow the law. If we do not, why should *they*?' Elder One asks plainly. Noah says nothing. 'And now, I really must insist you remove your boot from her throat and let her up. I have the entire Elder Council waiting for us to return with her and if I don't, the other Elders will simply come in my place. And they will be accompanied by far more than three Black Coats.'

I'm confused as hell and have no idea what was on that paper. Or why I suddenly have the full force of the Elders behind me. But I'll take whatever's going on as a win.

'Are you threatening me?' Noah asks furiously. 'You and your fellow Elders are living on borrowed time, I assure you. So I would be wary of your welfare if you dare threaten me again.'

Borrowed time?

'No, Sir. I am not threatening you. Not at all. I am just stating the facts.' He nods to Noah's foot on my throat. His eyes never leaving Noah's fury-filled face. Begrudgingly, Noah lets go and steps away. 'On your feet!' Elder One orders.

No one helps as I struggle to get myself up. I stumble and sway. I'm definitely a little out of it and I have a trickle of blood making its way down the side of my face.

'Come along, girl.' Elder One steps aside, still not looking at me in the slightest. 'Hurry up. I don't have all day and people are waiting for us.'

As I pass, Noah grabs my arm and stops me. 'She's still under arrest.'

'Any charges brought up against her are to be dealt with by the Elder Council now. But, my Lord, you know that there is no law against joining the Canaries. And there is no law against a betrothed getting cold feet and calling off a wedding.'

He's beat. He knows it. I don't know why exactly, but I'll accept it. With his face in mine, Noah issues me one final threat.

'This isn't over.'

'You're not wrong,' I warn. 'This is far from over. Now, excuse me, *my Lord*.'

I try to leave, but he blocks my path and descends on me, making me back up a few steps. Behind him, Titan shrugs off Elder Ten and attempts to come to my aid, but Elder One holds up his hand and he stops.

I hit the table.

'I will get what I want from you,' Noah says quietly. 'One way or another.'

'Doubtful.' I lean in a little closer and lower my voice. 'And know this, Noah. If I did marry, if I did choose to be with anyone, it would always, always, be Cass.' I snarl every word in his horrid little face. 'He's a million times the man you could ever be.'

'If I find out that you have broken the law in any way, you will both be executed. And anyone who protects you, anyone who defends you, anyone who tries to save you... will be executed right alongside you both.' He's filled with such venom and hatred, it's scary.

'Until that day, perhaps you should contain your wrath, my Lord,' Elder One says, picking a stray piece of lint from the elbow of his jacket. 'If anything were to happen to this young woman or her acquaintances after such a careless and public threat...' He gestures to the others he brought with him still by the door. 'Your position and your motives may be called into question. And I would hate for you to lose the loyalty of the army because you could not hold yourself to the laws and standards you demand we live by. And, may I also say, purely out of concern for you, the soldiers adore this girl as well as those she calls family. They respect her and hold her in very high regard. Mistreatment of her or her kin may lead to somewhat of a disturbance. It is not worth losing the respect and loyalty of the Sainted Army over such a petulant and disobedient girl.' Elder One lifts his slightly smug gaze to meet Noah's. 'Don't you agree?'

Noah looks into my eyes. If looks alone could kill...

'I will still end up getting what I want from you, Cadet.'

'Canary.' I correct him.

'Actually,' Elder One says, finally looking at me. 'She's to be addressed as Elder. Elder Eight. And it's time I escorted her to Elder HQ.'

'I-I'm sorry...' I stammer. 'What did you just call me?'

Thank you for reading

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