

# VERACITY by Laura Bynum

## Chapter One

August 2045.

The deeper I get into the prairie, the more I realize what I've been told about the wastelands is false. The trees here are green. The crops, tall and heavy with corn. There are no black clouds threatening to drip acid onto my car, no checkpoints full of frothing police ready to execute every onerous code they see fit. I haven't seen a Blue Coat since Wernthal. God willing, it will stay that way.

An old farmer is hitch-walking down a line of corn. I see him in my rearview mirror as a blotch of spoilt yellow. This is how our world considers the inhabitants of this land. Spoilt and decrepit, not useful. But neither are they considered clever enough to pose a threat. So they enjoy the otherwise restricted bounty of nature. A wide open sky. Grass. Neon-free, unfettered space. I envy them this, but only so much. We live in different prisons, but in prisons nonetheless. Theirs is made up of memories of the beforetime. Mine, of concrete walls and security checkpoints, of no birdsong and no breeze.

Fewer line boards are posted alongside the roads out here. Just one every few dozen miles instead of the standard one per block. Posters of non-sexually attractive housewives blink as I drive by. *Stay happy*, at mile marker 1. *Stay healthy*, at mile 32. *Remember the Pandemic*. Mile marker 78.

Used to be something different. *Honor Those Who've Fallen*, to communicate the whole of it. But the word *Honor* got too many people thinking. The concept sparked a small fire in those of us not quite doused out and for a blip on the file of our lives, we began to discuss the *dishonorable* things required of all citizens living here, things that didn't get printed on line boards. In small quiet ceremony, in the ripping down of a hundred-thousand posters, *Honor* had the honor of being our first Red List word. We woke the next morning to *Safety First* and *We Don't Want to Go Back to the Way Things Were, Do We?*

The countryside is more beautiful than I remember, even like this. Bales of trash instead of baled up hay. Abandoned farmhouses dotting the land like weeping sores. I can't stand to see their burnt or age-worn structures, or their insides seeping out onto the un-mowed lawns. I was born in the country, as were my best memories. I won't desecrate them by noticing these shells of civilization zipping past my car windows. In fact I'll go faster. It's unlikely Blue Coats will pick me up on the way to my break site anyway. They won't be out patrolling in the heat, in the wastelands where nothing happens. They'll come later when the Fatherboard sees I've gone rogue. It will be the most excitement they've had in months.

*Maybe they won't be carrying guns.* Not all Blue Coats get them. Most guns are reserved for the brigade lined up outside the National House like dominoes. Tin soldiers in tidy rows, they flash weaponry used to guard President and his cabinet of Ministers. Keep people from considering assassination, keep those who try anyway from achieving their goal. Also for police assigned to specific jobs. For hunting down runners and the quick dispatch of terrorists.

Aside from this ignoble guard, the largely gun-free system has flourished. Fists, elbows, knees, mouths, teeth, the fleshy weapons carried by men, the ones used to inflict more intimate

punishments, these broadcast an absolute and terrifying power the business end of a pistol doesn't match. When a Blue Coat exacts a punishment, scars are left and people see them.

I try not to think about the Blue Coats and what may happen to me if I'm caught. At least I will have finally stood up.

I've run in what I wore to the office. A white, long-sleeved linen blouse over a white camisole. A pair of gray tweed pants. Soft leather, low-heeled shoes. This would have been so much easier in a t-shirt or a tank top. A pair of jeans, sneakers. From my understanding, the clothes I run in, I stay in for the better part of my training. It might prove stupid, not to have changed, but I'm a Monitor who's just gotten off Red Watch. They would have noticed the clothes gone from my closet or sitting in a sloppy pile in the trunk of my car. They can break into anything they want in the name of security. My home, my vehicle, my computer, my neck. It's how they protect us. From whom, I've long since stopped asking.

The sun is in full bloom above the cracked country road. Sweat beads on my brow, drops onto my cheek, runs down past my collar. It stings my slate, the silver identification module imbedded in our necks almost as soon as we're out of the womb. It's barely visible above the skin with just a line of silvery gray to collect Confederation downloads and provide access to where I am, where I've been, what I've said.

The slate is made of a material I don't understand. The first prototypes were re-fitted as an individual grew, like for me. Now they grow with us, like for my daughter. Hers was implanted in her eighteenth month. Most children have theirs put in closer to age two, but she started talking early.

My slate has always itched and when I sweat like this, it feels like an infection. For years I've considered cutting it out but it's wrapped around the carotid in such a way it's impossible to remove without bleeding to death. Removing one's slate is the number one method of suicide in the Confederation of the Willing. People who are completely sane in the morning are found at their kitchen tables at night, a cup of coffee in their left hand, a paring knife in their right. I can understand this madness. Especially if you're older and have memories of the beforetime, like the old farmers.

Most of us are younger than the event that divides our population. A quarter of us, probably less, are well into their fifties or sixties, the survivors of a bacterial holocaust the likes of which mankind has never before seen. It took out whole continents. Almost half our nation's population. I'm one of a very small percentage of children who made it through the Pandemic. I was alive and aware thirty-three years ago, have small memories of freedom.

I roll down the window and adjust the rearview mirror so I can see my face. My cheeks are flush with blood and my gray eyes look older than the rest of me. I have light brown hair that's too long to be loose. It whips around my face and catches on my eyelashes.

"Goddamnit!" I shout into the wind. We can swear. A small privilege to keep us sane.

I tuck my hair beneath my collar and watch for the green road sign that will tell me I'm almost there. It comes up quick. I almost miss it, just like the note warned.

*2050 North Province Rd., three miles southeast of Bond, East Bodland. Look for an old farmhouse, fire took out the barn. One white wall of siding is gone. Looks like your*

*grandparents' place used to with a long rocked drive and a big oak tree bending the road.  
Don't miss the turn. Sign comes up quick on the backside of a hill.*

I memorized each word.

My grandparents' house was thirty-three years ago and a world away. Their front drive was a white river of rock hewn between mounds of wild prairie grass and the entrance to my favorite place in the world. Dim memories show me a dark-haired father who missed the entrance more than he found it and a blonde-headed mother awkwardly smiling back at me from the passenger seat. According to the government, I was four-years-old when the Pandemic came wheeling down our drive in a big Confederation truck and took us all away. It was the last time I saw the farm, or my family.

I hit a patch of cobbled earth and bounce in my seat. I'm topping a hundred and twenty miles an hour and can no longer see the ugly residue of crops as a set of rows. They're now a haze of brown sludge sliding past my windows. The oak tree is ahead. I hit the brakes and turn the wheel toward the rocked drive, holding tight as the car fishtails on the loose gravel. I'm to the house before the dust trail can catch up. My legs are shaking when they hit the ground.

*I'm Off Map now. They'll be sending out a car.*

I don't remember making my way through the uneven earth to the screen door. But then I'm there, my hand on the knob, reading a bright yellow piece of paper that's been posted to a broken pane of glass.

*No trespassing as posted by the Confederation of the Willing and its representative Province of Bodland. This property has been devalued as a residence or place of business and is Off Map for any citizen. Entrance will be noted via your slate and penalties may include 102A, 102B, 217A, and/or 550.*

A 550. I think about the punishment hiding behind that name and number. *Jesus*. I'd think about getting in my car and lighting out for somewhere less patently dangerous but this was my assigned place. This is where my recruiter said I'm to meet my trainer afterward. I tear the yellow warning off the door and let it fall out of my hand on the way in. *Fuck 'em*. The false bravado doesn't make me feel better. I feel the *false* part more than the *bravado*.

The screen door leads to another that opens easily into a kitchen. There's a round table inside with a couple of chairs, its laminate top barely visible beneath an inch of dust. A gray linoleum counter runs the length of the far wall, separating wooden cabinet doors below and above. Their pine panels have warped and most of them stand ajar, revealing empty interiors. There are no implements. No refrigerator. No glasses to run under the sink that's sitting beneath a window. I can see other farm buildings through the thick panes. An abandoned corncrib made of cement with a rusting ladder running up one side. An old gasoline tank sitting atop a wooden crèche.

Deeper into the house, the air is so thick with the scent of decaying wood and carpet, I can hardly breathe. I pull my shirt over my nose and push aside cobwebs until I find a room with a bed.

"Oh, God."

The comforter looks just like the one I slept under at my grandparents' home with pink flowers on a striped yellow backing. Except this one is duller, the material browned in large patches by years of unchecked damp. Maybe my recruiter put this here to soften my break. I've met him only once. He held me upright in an alley as I cried. I never saw his face. We didn't speak. I don't know the man's name and he knows what comforter I slept under as a child. This is the way it is between the recruiter and the recruited. They study us for years, review the whole of our lives. By the time we meet, they either love us or hate us and we know nothing about them other than what we permit ourselves to imagine. And I have imagined my recruiter irrationally.

Despite my pragmatic nature, I've allotted him only the best qualities. Kindness. Humor. Honor. A desire to get to know me from the inside out, the same way I want to learn him. It's a spiritual ache Pastor would call pornographic. The State would rather us focus on each other's bodies and forget about the contents of our hearts and minds, but I don't care. If I am a whore for fantasizing about this man's character and desiring a more intimate, less desultory connection, I am a whore. The rest is available on any street corner, anytime, for very few credits per act.

I know, in the long run, such fantasies about my recruiter won't serve me. But, until I meet him and have to deal with the reality of who and what he actually is, they give me something to hope for.

I dump the contents of my pockets onto the bed, taking stock of the room's small closet. I've brought a picture, a roll of tape, and a handkerchief I tie around the knuckles of one hand. It's completely without function, this red swatch of cotton, save for what it represents and the way it feels. The note suggested bringing something, anything, to help with the pain.

I pull off short segments of the tape and paste the picture to the underside of the closet's door frame, a good eighteen inches lower than the ceiling. I lay down beneath it but there's not enough light to see the girl's eyes so I get up again. Cross the room and yank open the window's shade. A cloud of dust appears, floating for a few seconds in the bedroom air. Through it comes the first sun this room has seen for over thirty years.

I lie back down, face up, eyes steady on the girl above me, my feet sticking out into the room. Try and calm myself with memories of my daughter. I think of her at age four. A fair-skinned child with wild, honey-colored hair that became a helmet of springs during bath time. I can see her perfectly then. Pink-cheeked, chubby hands batting at the bubbles I'd make by pouring in a capful of dishwashing soap. Then, suddenly, she was nine, then ten, then no longer possessed a round belly or light-colored hair. Bath time was spent with me sitting on the floor talking to her through a pulled curtain as there were now things to hide. Blushes of womanhood to be kept private.

The fear comes back and thoughts of Veracity are replaced with questions. *Will it burn? Will I feel the metal breaking? Will I smell my flesh melting around it?* I work my legs to dislodge these thoughts. Almost begin to scream and feel something cool pressing against my forehead.

*Oh, Christ.*

A wire hanger. I toss it across the room and feel around the closet for any others. Anything metal grounds the current. Pressed against my body, it would have ended this run here and now. I shake it off. Shut my eyes and pray.

*God. Make your truth mine.* Even my inner voice wavers. It doesn't sound like the prayer I repeat silently everyday. It sounds like something you say when you know you're going to die. And I might. It's a possibility.

Two syllables is all the Confederation needs in order to know if I'm trying to say something on the Red List. Then they stop it from coming, wiping away any other words that start with this sound. Either way, I'll stay physically bound to my slate forever. It will stay put in my neck, working or no. A purposeless organ, like an appendix that shows. If this break works, it will be my daily reminder to be *profound* - a quality of speech considered sinful. These days, the less said, the better.

*All regress begins as address*, Pastor says. Meaning there is nothing more dangerous than the spoken word. When we try to articulate words that have been Red-Listed, a noise cancellation device disintegrates the product of our voices as the slate shocks us into submission. If warranted, Blue Coats are then sent out to make sure the message was clear. This is what the slate does, it regulates our vocabulary. Contains us. Keeps us from harm. That's what Pastor says.

This is what I have to do. Make a Red Word audible. Repeat it over and over until one of us short circuits. Just one word that, to me, means everything.

I look into the eyes above me, young and brown, a doe's eyes in a girl's face. "I love you."

A premature tear slips down my cheek. I open my mouth and begin to scream.

"Vera . ." Two syllables escape then nothing. Nothing but neural fire shooting through my jaws, boiling the fluid in my ears. I keep my eyes on the girl above me. It is my daughter, age ten.

“ .” The shock is greater, matched by my effort.

My hands have started twitching. I squeeze the one holding the handkerchief. Try again.

“ .”

My head is splitting in two. My face, already awash in tears.

“ .”

The feedback splices through my skin and whips down the length of my arms.

“ .”

*God help me.* I’m getting nowhere. The scent of burning hair is in my nostrils.

“ .”

My eyes blur. My hands have begun to clench and unclench as if I’m convulsing. I may be.

“ ....” It’s something. A tapping sound.

“.....ssssssssssssssssssssstttttt...” The staccato of consonance. Like at the grocery store, when they’re about to announce someone’s lost child has been found.

“Ssssssss.....ciiiiiittttt.....yyyyyy!” The sounds slip through the air and fill the closet. I ignore the blistering heat in my throat and scream louder.

“Ffff.....ccccccc.....ttttt.....yyyyyy!”

“Fffvvvv.....cccccciiittttt.....yyyyyy!”

“Vvvvvv.....ccc.....tttyyyyyy!” My voice sounds inhuman, like an android short-circuiting.

“Vrrreeeee...rrrrr.....cccccciiitttyy!”

She’s smiling at me now from her perch on the ceiling. *Do this, mommy. Finish this.*

I swallow the last of my fear and scream, “VVEERRAAACCHITTTY!” It is my voice in full. Raw and ripped - but mine, a voice combined with a cracking, snapping spark. A flash of orange appears beneath my chin. It buckles beneath my jaw.

“VERACITY!” There is no more pain. I whisper, making sure, “Veracity.” It was my daughter’s name. My daughter, called by the name they took from her.

The corners of my closet world fold inward. Veracity reaches down and runs her hands over my face. I fall away. She goes with me. I can smell her, tell how much she’s grown and in not so long a time. She’s over five feet tall now, I’ve seen her like this in my dreams. Her hair is long and thick, her body’s beginning to curve.

God help her, she’s no longer a little girl.