

Counted Worthy

Chapter One

I sat back on my heels, picking at my black nail polish and waiting for the single, bare light bulb to flicker. A normal teenage girl would never work her full shift if she could help it. Especially a full shift at this job. Most teens thought processing books at the government sorting center marked the apex of dullness.

I glanced towards the camera that blocked most of the tiny basement window. I preferred to keep working, but I wanted to look normal in case someone was watching the security screen.

The red pleather Bible in my peripheral vision tempted me to give it my full attention. What kind of idiot made a Bible red? Anyone who saw it would pay attention for sure. Not a desirable quality for a Bible. If I didn't nab it now, it would end up in an incinerator for sure.

I gave up my effort to look bored and snatched a romance novel with an embarrassing front cover off the pile of paperbacks. I saw worse at school every day, but the cover still bothered me. The art of wearing enough clothing and keeping it on had died sometime before the Great War. These days even our teachers encouraged the stupidity.

I flicked dust off the barcode and swiped the book across the in-wall scanner. "Acceptable." Go figure. One more disgusting book would re-enter the world while the quality ones burned. If only there was a way to get Christian literature into the hands of ordinary people. It would change the country.

I sighed and gave the rest of the novel a slap-dash wipe with my rag. It would never happen. I tossed the romance novel into the sales bin.

The light flickered just as the book thumped against the other acceptables. Sunset. A few seconds of darkness before the batteries kicked in. My window of opportunity. I slipped the Bible off the pile. The binding threatened to crumble as I slid the little book into a secret pocket sewn into the lining of my leather jacket.

The light came back on, steady this time. Dust and flakes of red pleather stuck to my hands. I wiped them on my rag and dumped the cloth down the trash chute. Time to go home.

I jogged up the stairs and flipped the light switch off when I reached the top. The smell of book mold stayed with me. I hoped the manager wouldn't notice.

"I finished stack C." I scanned my student card to clock out. "I'm going home."

The manager straightened from behind the front desk and peered over her glasses. "Find any banned books?"

The edge of the little Bible poked into my ribs. "No, ma'am. Not today."

"Good." She lifted her eyebrows in what passed for a smile. "I think after all these years we've finally burned most of them."

"Maybe." I slouched, waiting for her to let me go.

Her head dipped forward. She ended every conversation the same way.

"Have a good evening." I forced myself to walk slowly and give a casual, over-the-shoulder wave.

The arrival beeper chimed as I pushed through the front door. I let the door swing behind me.

Dead streetlights lined the road like sentinels and offered no light against the gathering dusk. I walked close to the buildings, my black clothing concealed by the shadows.

The crisp spring air nipped at my face. April should be warmer, I told myself. I zipped my jacket to my chin and shoved my hands into my pockets. Conscious of the other people on the street, I maintained a careless swagger. Anyone who noticed me would see a Goth teenager. I prayed they wouldn't suspect anything more.

Storefronts gave way to private houses and yards as I distanced myself from the cluster of businesses and government outposts. My work took me too close to the border of the main city. I preferred my outdated but less claustrophobic neighborhood.

The overgrown shrubbery covering the windows of my house looked spookiest at this time of day. Neighborhood kids dared each other to venture onto our property on All Hallows Eve. The rest of the year, they steered clear. It worked well for our purposes, but I wished we could keep people away without making our house look like the set of a horror movie.

I poked my head into the garage. Dad's bike was missing, which meant he was working late again. My bike leaned against the far wall. Even from a distance I could see a layer of dust on it and the way the tires flattened out on the bottom.

I turned away from the bike and made sure the garage door clicked behind me. Someday I would live in a house without so many ghosts.

As I stepped onto the lawn, a cool breeze off the lake behind the house blew my hair into my face and made me shiver. I circled the house, ticking off a mental checklist as I

went. No broken windows, no forced locks, no torn up grass, nothing out of the ordinary.

Reassured, I took a deep breath and allowed myself to relax. The smell of damp earth and flowers made me smile. Maybe tomorrow I'd cut some daffodils for the kitchen table. Dad would like that.

I fished my house key out of my pocket and let myself in the side door. The familiar scent of Dad's aftershave and our government-issue, all-purpose cleanser greeted me. I relocked the door and slipped my shoes off.

Two steps forward, a shuffle to the right. I groped for the battery powered lantern hanging on its peg, and found it easily. The routine was as natural as tying my shoes.

I flicked the lantern on and headed for the kitchen. On the table, the salt shaker held down a yellow scrap of paper. Dad's big, almost illegible cursive scrawled across it.

Heather,

You must still be at the Sorting Center. They need me back at work. Don't worry, I ate. Hope you had a good day.

Love, Dad.

I slipped the paper into my jeans pocket. Just like Dad to waste a precious piece of paper when he could message my screen. Nothing could train him out of his old habits. At least no one in his office seemed to mind.

The blue-tinted glow from the lantern reflected off the window. I pulled the shades down. No point letting strangers look in and see me home alone.

The Bible bumped against my ribs like a little kid making sure it hadn't been forgotten. I patted it and headed for the windowless hall. One forbidden Bible—or even the suspicion of a forbidden Bible—could cost me my life. I knew

that truth better than anyone, but I couldn't stop going back for more.

I settled cross-legged on the floor and set the lantern next to me. The Bible stuck to my sweaty hand as I removed it from my pocket. Dust from the cover swirled in the soft light.

Red. Vibrant, brick red. So strange. Things that broke the norm meant trouble more often than not. We'd have to rebind this Bible before we gave it to Ansley.

I rubbed my finger over the faded gold lettering on the spine of the book. *Holy Bible: Red Letter Edition*. My heart fluttered. No matter how scared I got, no matter how hard I tried to repress it, the excitement over finding a Bible never lessened.

Ansley, one of my friends in our underground church, had given her Bible to a new family just last week. This one would replace hers.

I started flipping through the pages, and frowned as some stuck together. Sometimes that happened when we bound or rebound a Bible. Could this one be brand new? A Bible from before the war that had never been used?

The fake leather kept flaking onto my hands as if protesting the very thought of being new. I slapped my palms together and stood up.

As much as I loved Bibles, I never felt safe with one in my hands. Still, I didn't envy normal people. The way they lived made them miserable from the inside out. I only longed for one aspect of their existence. Their lack of fear. I wanted to experience that feeling.

I went to my room and slid the Bible beneath my mattress. It nestled between two other old books, the titles

almost unreadable. *Do Hard Things* and my own Bible. My babies.

After mom died, my books kept me grounded. I had distanced myself from the people and activities that had once filled every free moment. I cut as many ties to the underground network as I could. I attended church because conscience compelled me. I continued to smuggle Bible because I couldn't help myself. Everything else, I shoved into the past. I filled my free hours and aching heart with books. They still felt like real friends.

I lowered my mattress. For now, these precious volumes would remain safe.

As I readjusted the blankets on my bed, a key rattled in the front door. I listened as the door creaked open.

"Is that you, Daddy?" I headed for the kitchen.

"It's me." He sounded tired. I could hear him hanging his coat before coming into the kitchen. He dropped a stack of papers onto the table.

"Still working?"

"Still working." His brown hair spiked in odd places, a sure sign of stress.

"You need anything?"

"A hug and a kiss would be good." He opened his arms to me.

I hurried to hug him, smiling as his strong arms squeezed the air out of my lungs. If books were my friends, Dad's arms were my place of safety. His hugs warmed my heart.

"You're squishing me," I mumbled into his shirt.

He let go and kissed my forehead. "How was your day?"

“Good.” I looked up at him, waiting for his next question. He always knew how to read me.

“Your expression gives it away, sweetheart.” The tiredness in his eyes faded a little as he smiled.

“Do you want to see it?”

“Of course.”

When I came out of my room, Dad stood in the hall holding the light. We swapped. He ran his fingers over the Bible, read the spine, then opened to Proverbs and tilted it towards the light.

“You did a good job.” He smiled, but his eyes didn’t light the way they normally did when I found a Bible. “You’re a brave girl, Heather. Your mother would be so pleased with what you’re doing.”

“Dad, don’t.” My breath caught in my throat. Why did he have to travel this path over and over?

He looked at the Bible and stayed quiet for a long time. The loneliness for someone we couldn’t have thickened the air between us.

Dad looked up. “Would you do it if I weren’t here?”

“Are you going away?” I skirted his question. Leaving meant either arrest or going into hiding. I didn’t want to face either possibility. I hugged my arms to my chest and stepped back.

“I didn’t say that.” Dad’s voice stayed steady. His job as a screen entertainer on live cast forced him to stay calm, cool, and collected in front of an audience. He applied the talent with equal skill in his private life.

“I don’t know,” I said. It was a neutral but honest response. A response that avoided the snake’s nest of emotions

threatening to bubble up. Dad couldn't leave. I needed him. *God, do you hear me? I've lost enough.*

Dad sighed. "Police came snooping around the office today. It's not the first time. They keep singling me out and asking questions."

I looked at the floor to avoid Dad's searching gaze. Fear wrapped its icy claw around my chest. Why would they single Dad out for questioning if they didn't suspect him? What had we done wrong? Was it my fault?

I will trust, and not be afraid. The verse surfaced as an automatic response to stress. Those words linked my thoughts to all the hard times in my life. It had been my support, my verse of refuge. Now it carried a mix of comfort and pain. *God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation.*

A tear escaped and started down my cheek. I scowled and ducked my head.

"Sweetheart." Dad slid a finger under my chin and tipped it up.

I forced a smile.

"We don't know what they're looking for," he said. "They might not know anything."

"Maybe."

Dad set the Bible next to the lantern and reached for me. I leaned my head against his chest. The tears pooled until I couldn't hold them back. They slid down my face, leaving wet circles on Dad's shirt.

I clung to him, not wanting to let go. What would I do? How could I live without him? Maybe I was blowing the

situation out of proportion, but I couldn't stop my mind from scrambling to aching painful possibilities.

When Dad stepped back, I hurried to dry my face. Black mascara smudged onto my fingers. Pathetic.

"I won't run away if they come for me." He squeezed my shoulders. "What will you do if that happens?"

"If you're taken?" I stared at the floor. "I don't know."

I looked up and found an expectant look on his face. He wanted me to sound spiritual, but I only felt scared.

"Think, sweetheart. What will you do?"

I closed my eyes and drew a deep breath. What would I do? My eyes still closed, I let the air out in a rush and settled on an answer to satisfy both of us.

"I will fight the good fight," I said. "I will finish my course. I will keep the faith." I opened my eyes. "I don't know beyond that."

Dad smiled and, for the first time that night, his eyes sparked. I loved that expression. It transported me back to carefree childhood days when his smile could set my world to right.

"That's all you need." He held the Bible out to me. "Our lives are but a vapor."

I took the Bible from him and nodded. "But the word of the Lord endures forever."

I clenched the Bible until my hands ached. These pages held the words of life, but how many would have to die to preserve them?

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I jolted awake and sat up in bed. Someone pounded on the front door, demanding that all occupants of the house present themselves. The police. Or, more likely, The Agency.

The special division of the police force often pounced on its victims by cover of night. They preferred to attract as little attention as possible.

The door to my room flung open.

“Up,” Dad hissed. “Hurry.”

I scrambled out of bed and lifted the mattress, groping for the two Bibles and *Do Hard Things*. I found them and pulled them from their hiding place.

“You know what to do,” Dad said. I couldn’t see him, but I sensed his presence near the foot of the bed.

I snatched a hoarded plastic bag out of my nightstand. The plastic crinkled in my shaking hand. No number of drills could fully prepare me for a moment like this. The rush of adrenaline made me dizzy.

I clutched the books to my chest.

“Dad, come with me.” My voice wobbled and cracked. I knew it was a useless plea. He wouldn’t run. If he came with me, the police would continue their search. Dad would never endanger me that way. Why did he have to be so stubborn?

Dad crossed to me and pulled me against him. He kissed the top of my head. “Go, sweetheart.”

The pounding on the front door turned into a rhythmic smashing.

“Dad, I can’t.”

His hand lingered on my face for a moment. I felt a flicker of hope. Maybe, just maybe...

He shoved his Bible into my hands, and the moment passed. “He hath said, I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.”

“Daddy.” I wanted to cling to him. My heart pounded.

“Go!” He pushed me away, his voice tight.

I had to obey. I had to leave. To stay with the Bibles would seal our fates. I grabbed my jacket and hurried to the window.

I could hear voices nearby, the speakers invisible in the dark.

I put my hand out, feeling for the ornamental tree growing in front of my window. I found it and swung my legs over the windowsill.

Dew dampened my feet as I landed in the overgrown grass. I crouched between the house and tree, straining for a glimpse of movement in the back yard. I couldn't see anyone, but the crackle of radios alerted me to police presence.

Staying close to the house, I crept towards the edge of the yard. I prayed the shrubbery would be enough to hide me.

When I reached the woods bordering our yard, I stood up. They wouldn't see me in the shadows of the trees, and their brisk chatter hid any sound I might make.

A great crack shattered the night air. They'd broken the door. I didn't look back. Couldn't look back.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I forced myself to concentrate on following my memorized path to the lake.

The ripples on the water glinted in the faint moonlight. I stopped at the bank and squeezed the books in my hands. It felt like holding red-hot coals, yet I dreaded destroying them.

The breeze shifted. It carried the sound of shouting.

I dropped to my knees and scooped dirt and rocks into the plastic bag. When it felt heavy, I added *Do Hard Things*, my Bible, and the new red Bible.

I saved Dad's Bible till last. It weighed heavy in my hands. Almost as heavy as my heart. So many nights I had watched Dad pour over this book. So many mornings I listened

to him read it. So many times in my childhood both my parents and I had gathered around its pages seeking comfort and wisdom. I couldn't do it.

Another shout reached me. Dad crying out in pain. I pressed the back of my wrist into my mouth, stifling the sob threatening to break loose.

Shadows separated from the house, heading toward the lake. I tied a loose knot in the bag, tight enough to hold the books in, but not tight enough to keep the water out.

The cops stopped halfway between the house and lake. Definitely Agency. The silhouette of their slouched hats confirmed my suspicion.

If they stayed still a moment longer, I could get rid of the Bibles before they came close enough to hear.

Mud squished between my toes as I edged close to the lake. I glanced over my shoulder. The men still stood near the house. I leaned over the water and tossed the bag. It plunked into the water, sending ripples shimmering across the surface.

Clutching Dad's Bible against my chest, I hunkered behind a tree and watched the police. They were walking again, approaching the lake. Had they heard the splash?

I squeezed the Bible harder. If they caught me, they'd probably kill me anyway. What difference did it make whether I held a Bible or was accused of owning one? Perhaps proof of my guilt would earn me a swift death instead of a drawn out trial I could never win.

If they caught me, a fast death would be a mercy. I shivered at the potential of being dragged to prison. Some Christians were executed with no more thought than euthanizing a stray dog. Other times they tried to force the

Christian to recant. Only a handful of people who clung to their faith survived to tell. I knew all the stories.

Please, God. Not me. Not now.

I didn't think I would recant. Even in my times of despair, I never questioned the truth of my faith. But no one could be sure of their reaction under such pressure until they faced it. I didn't want to find out.

As the men drew closer I realized they were staring intently at handheld screens. The monitors cast a glow across their faces.

A radio crackled to life on one man's belt. A voice came through in bursts of static. "What do you see?"

"The signal is strong, sir, when it comes at all. It keeps cutting out. The battery in the tracker is dying."

"Impossible."

"Yes, sir, I know. It seems the tracker has been thrown into the lake."

The man on the other end cursed. "Don't waste time, then. I want to get out of here before the neighbors show up to find out what's going on. We've secured the prisoner."

Oh, God, You can't let this happen. Please. Tears dripped off my chin.

The moon silhouetted more men coming out the side door of the house. Two of them marched a third man between them. I watched as they forced Dad into the driveway.

My verse wouldn't come to me. I could think of nothing but the torrent of grief.

Please, God, don't take him too.