

Evidence

Book 1 of the Search for Truth Series

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**JOHN RITCHIE LTD**
CHRISTIAN PUBLICATIONS

40 Beansburn, Kilmarnock, Scotland

ISBN-13: 978 1 910513 36 1

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40 Beansburn, Kilmarnock, Scotland

www.ritchiechristianmedia.co.uk

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Typeset by John Ritchie Ltd., Kilmarnock
Printed by Bell & Bain, Glasgow

Chapter One

“Seb! Seb! SEEEEBBB!” A shrill shriek pierced the air. “Come downstairs *this instant*, you wicked boy!”

The boy in question groaned and buried his head under his pillow. It smelled comforting, his refuge in the domestic storms that often rocked the small, grimy house he called home.

Footsteps sounded on the creaky stairs, accompanied by huffs and puffs.

“SEB! I’m going to drag you out by your ugly lug and give you what for if you don’t make a move *right now!*”

Wheezing and sweating, the large form of his gran lumbered into the room on puffy, swollen ankles. Seb pulled his head from under the pillow and darted to the window, narrowly missing a swipe from her pudgy hand.

“Right, you ungrateful wretch,” she growled. “Where did you put them?” She fixed him with a dark-eyed glare. *The Witch*, his friends called her. Stick-straight, black-dyed hair, which usually stuck out in all directions, a beak of a nose and even a hairy wart on her chin.

All that was missing was the broomstick.

The black cat slunk into the room behind her.

“Where did I put what?” he asked cheekily.

The dark eyes ignited with rage. “You insolent *brat!*” She shook a fist and advanced around the end of the bed. Seb saw his opportunity for escape as he leapt over the bed towards the door. Kicking the cat out of the way, he fled down the stairs and out of the house into the dull, drizzly June evening, slamming the door behind him.

Down behind the houses ran the railway. Seb slipped through a hole in the dilapidated fence and sat with his back pressed against the faded artistic graffiti left by a previous generation of youths. He often came here to escape. Gran would never find him here and even if she did, she would never be able to climb through the fence. He pulled up the hood of his grey sweatshirt and tugged the cuffs over his hands.

After a while, he pulled Gran’s cigarettes out of his pocket and looked at them – ‘Smoking Kills’, the packaging proclaimed. He shrugged. Gran was ancient and she hadn’t died yet, he thought, although she coughed so hard sometimes he wondered if she might not drop down dead there and then.

He fished around in his other pocket for the lighter he had grabbed from the hall table on his way out the door. After a few downward swipes of his thumb on the metal disc he managed to produce a steady flame.

A train sounded in the distance. Seb stuck the lighter back in his pocket and pressed himself against the fence. He could see the train lights approaching. As it whooshed past he caught glimpses of people inside – men in suits reading large, boring newspapers, women on their smartphones, and, in the last carriage, a fleeting snapshot of a family who appeared to be having some sort of picnic, their faces wreathed in smiles. The image lingered, the lights faded into the distance and the cold draught enveloped him.

He pulled the lighter out of his pocket once more, this time tearing the clear plastic from the cigarette packet. He'd never tried smoking before, but this was his opportunity. Copying what he'd seen Gran and Dad do countless times, he lifted one out, popped the end in his mouth and went to light it. *Smoking kills*. His hand trembled. He didn't particularly want to die.

"Seb, there's nothing after death. We die; that's it," his dad's voice echoed in his head.

He put his thumb on the lighter.

"Death is not the end!" This time, the voice of a radio preacher. A day which was etched in his memory. His mother had burst into tears and his father had mocked her and shouted at her, before finally grabbing her by the hair and shoving her against the wall. It was one of a number of ugly scenes he tried to suppress.

Stuffing the image in the darkest recesses of his mind, he succeeded in lighting the cigarette. Taking a long draw, he waited

for the satisfying feeling he always saw on Gran's and Dad's faces. No satisfying feeling came - only a horrible, nauseating, choking sensation. He coughed and spat. Trying again, he breathed a little less deeply, but still the nausea persisted and strengthened. Staggering to his feet, he threw up in the bushes.

Grinding the cigarette out with the heel of his trainer, he made for home. It was getting cold and he just wanted to go to bed after the experience he'd had. Smoking wasn't all it was made out to be. And smoking kills.

As he put his hand on the door handle, he could hear the blare of a football match coming from the TV inside. If he was quiet he could make his way upstairs to his room without being seen. Pushing gently, he opened the door. His mum was standing at the foot of the stairs, her pale blue care assistant's uniform hanging loosely on her slight frame.

"Where on earth have you been?!" she exclaimed. "Gran said you'd stolen something from her and ran off. You've been away for ages!"

"Nowhere much," Seb grunted, as he tried to push past.

Mum caught him by his shoulder. "Seb..." She stopped. Leaning across, she sniffed his pale blond hair. "Seb! Please don't tell me you've been smoking!"

Seb grunted again.

“Have you?” she persisted.

“NO!” Seb lied, as he tried to wriggle free from her surprisingly firm grasp.

“What’s going on out there?” Dad’s voice bellowed from the living room.

“Seb was smoking!” Mum hauled him into the room.

Dad was sprawled on the sofa, stained blue t-shirt taut over his large belly. He laughed. “And how did you manage?” he asked. “Bet you were sick. A weakling like you wouldn’t be able to smoke like a man.”

Seb glared at him.

Dad threw back his head and roared. “Poor wee Mummy’s boy,” he jeered. “Can’t even manage one measly cigarette!”

“That is *enough!*” Mum choked out through gritted teeth. “Do you really want Seb to turn out like you?”

Dad launched to his feet, raising a large fist. “And just what’s wrong with me, you-”

“Mind your language!” Mum spat, interrupting him before he could utter whatever foul word he’d been about to say.

Seb slipped out of the room and upstairs. Throwing himself on the bed, he could hear the argument continuing in the room below.

“Who are you to tell me to mind my language?” roared Dad. “I don’t know what your problem is anyway. You were good fun until he came along, and then you went all goody-goody on me.”

“I *told* you! I don’t want to bring Seb up like this. I want him to go to church and hear how he can be saved...”

“SHUT UP!” Dad bellowed. “If you mention *saved* to me once more I’ll kill you!” The front door slammed, and in the sudden calm a soft weeping came from below.

Seb could hardly remember a time when his parents didn’t fight. Lately the fights had become more frequent. And Dad was drinking more. Sometimes he was out all night and slept all day, especially when there wasn’t any work on the building sites, which was nearly all the time now. Mum worked long hours to make ends meet, and Gran came to stay with him when he came home from school until Mum came back each evening.

Shoving back the covers, he kicked off his shoes and got into bed. He hadn’t done his homework, but it was no big deal. Much to his teachers’ frustration, homework was treated as optional by the pupils at his school; he’d only be one among a number. And with just one week of school to go before the summer holidays, even the teachers had given up by now.

The phone’s shrill tone pierced the morning air. Seb stirred. 5:45am, his bedside clock read. The ringing stopped, and he dozed off again. A few minutes later Mum burst into his room, running a brush through her tangled yellow hair, the dark roots a stark contrast.

“Gran has collapsed,” she said. “I’ve phoned the ambulance and I’m going with her to the hospital. You’ll have to get your own breakfast this morning. Make sure you’re at school on time.”

With that, she was gone.

Seb didn’t bother going to school. He awoke again at 10am and found an opened box of soft cornflakes. There was no milk in the fridge, but he found a carton of orange yoghurt past its use by date. Grabbing a bowl from the draining rack, he filled it with the cornflakes and yoghurt. Not his favourite combination, but he was hungry, so it was better than nothing. He took the heaped bowl into the living room and turned on the TV. Nothing but home improvement programmes and chat shows. He searched for the recorded items. Finding a film his dad had recorded, he settled down to watch.

An hour into the film, he heard the key turn in the lock. Grabbing the remote, he turned the TV off and looked around to see where to hide, but it was too late.

Mum looked into the room. “Seb!” she exclaimed. “Why aren’t you at school?”

Seb shrugged.

Mum sighed. “What am I going to do with you?”

“How’s The Witch?” he asked.

“Seb! That’s not nice. You shouldn’t call your grandmother

names.” Mum sighed again. “Gran isn’t well,” she continued. “They haven’t ruled out lung cancer. She’s to have tests. Whatever it is, it isn’t going to work out for her to stay with you over the summer holidays.” Mum sank onto the sofa and rubbed her forehead.

“But I don’t need looked after! I’m not a baby!” Seb protested. “And sure I’m on my own today and I’ve managed fine.”

“And just what were you watching when I came in?” Mum asked, raising her eyebrows suspiciously at him.

Seb looked away.

“I hope it wasn’t something your dad recorded!”

Seb bit his lip and kicked at the leg of the coffee table.

Mum briefly closed her eyes and sighed. She almost looked as if she was in pain. “Anyway,” she continued, “you can’t spend all day in front of the TV. I was wondering if Matt and Karen would take you for the summer.”

“What?!” Seb sat bolt upright. “Uncle Matt and Aunt Karen? But I don’t even know them! And don’t they live on a farm? Farms *smell!*”

“You get used to the smell,” replied Mum, unearthing the portable phone from a pile of newspapers, magazines and biscuit wrappers on the coffee table. She began to punch in a number she found in a small diary in her handbag.

Seb could hear the faint ringing tone from the phone, and he held his breath. Then a distant male voice. “Hello?”

“Matt?” Seb’s mum said. “It’s Julie...I know, it’s been a long

time...yes, we're fine...Seb's okay...actually, that's what I'm phoning about..."

Mum got up, phone still to her ear, and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Seb fell back against the seat. If Uncle Matt agreed, this would be his very worst summer ever. A farm. Miles from town. And with Uncle Matt and Aunt Karen. Christians! Then he remembered - Dad loathed Christians...! Seb smiled. Dad would never agree to him going there for the summer.

"Matt and Karen's? No way!" Dad declared later that day. "They'll fill his head full of religious nonsense and it'll be the ruination of him."

Mum bit her lip. She looked like she very much wanted to say something.

"And why can't he stay by himself? He's old enough," Dad continued.

"Alan, he isn't an adult. He can't be trusted. He skipped school today and was watching one of your films when I came home."

Dad smirked. "Ha! Maybe we'll make a man out of him yet! No, Julie, he's not going there. He'll be fine on his own. Not another word about it."

Chapter Two

Seb threw down his black school sports bag, slumped onto the fuzzy blue seat of the early morning, country-bound train, and stared moodily out the window at the hustle and bustle of the platform. His mother lifted the bag and stowed it into the overhead storage. She slipped into the seat across the grey plastic table from Seb.

“You’ll enjoy it,” she said to him.

Seb said nothing in reply. He was still angry at having been made to go to Uncle Matt and Aunt Karen’s after all. If only he hadn’t played with the lighter in the house. If only the sofa hadn’t caught fire. If only he’d had the presence of mind to put it out instead of running away in a panic. If only...

Unfortunately, once Dad saw the ruined living room, and, more specifically, the ruined 42-inch screen TV, all hope of Seb staying at home over the summer vanished quicker than the old, ugly, green sofa when the flames caught hold. He was fortunate the postman had noticed the smoke through the window and the house hadn’t burned down. Spending the summer with ‘religious bigots’ was appropriate punishment, as far as Dad was concerned.

The train moved off, slowly at first. He could see a suited young man running towards the train, then slowing and shaking his head as he realised the train was leaving. *Too late*, thought Seb, wishing he could swap places. He'd hardly ever been out of Belfast in his life, and 'Matt, Karen, Lavinia and Martha' were only names on a Christmas card, which was propped up until Dad came home, and then was torn into tiny pieces and flung into the bin. Seb supposed it didn't help that there was always some sort of Bible verse on the card. Something like, 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners'. He'd always wondered if there really had been such a person as Christ Jesus, and if He really came into the world, or if He was someone just like Santa Claus, someone who the adults always pretended was real, but was totally made up.

Dad always scoffed. "There's no such person," he often told Seb. "God doesn't exist. Everything started with a big bang." He'd told Seb so many times that he believed him now. He didn't see much to convince him otherwise anyway. "No intelligent person believes in God anymore," his biology teacher at school told the class. "Scientific evidence shows that we are products of evolution and the universe began with the Big Bang."

The train passed through a tunnel and the view of metal fences and overgrown shrubbery was replaced for an instant by his scowling reflection. Seb was actually going to stay with a family who didn't care about scientific evidence. He was dreading it. He tried to

imagine what they would be like. Long, sad faces with droopy eyes. Like those religious pictures he'd seen hanging in Mrs Maguire's house when Mum used to go every week to clean it back when he was seven or eight. This was going to be the longest summer of his life.

Blinking, he looked out the window again. He could see the back of the terraced houses of his street. Some yards tidy, others overgrown and strewn with junk and children's toys. He recognised the stretch of graffiti where he'd taken his first fateful puff of a cigarette. He could have got used to it if they hadn't banned him from having a lighter and sent him away. He might have made his father proud, for once.

The houses soon gave way to industrial buildings, to larger houses with gardens, and then green fields. The farther they travelled from the city, the more Mum seemed to unwind. Seb sneaked a glance at her. She was actually smiling! He couldn't remember the last time Mum had smiled. She caught his gaze and reached across to squeeze his arm. He shrugged away from her touch.

"You'll enjoy it," she said again.

"Don't know what makes you think that," Seb muttered.

"Matt and Karen are decent people," she went on, "and Lavinia, your cousin, is around your age."

"What kind of a name is that?" Seb scoffed.

“She’s called after her grandmother, Matt’s mother,” replied Mum. “You know Karen and I are sisters. We didn’t grow up on a farm, but we did live in the country. I had a great childhood. Matt’s uncle left him Cherryhill Farm and he moved back from Scotland after university to take it over. He’s done well with it. It’s a good opportunity for you to experience another way of life. But Seb, please be good, do what you’re told and be polite, for goodness’ sake. Don’t let me down.”

“Like you never let me down,” Seb muttered sarcastically.

The smile disappeared and Mum’s face crumpled. She pulled a wrinkled tissue from the pocket of her hooded sweatshirt.

Seb rolled his eyes and turned to look out the window again.

As the train slowed to a stop Mum stood up.

“Come on,” she smiled, all evidence of her earlier tears gone, “we’re almost there!”

Seb dragged himself to his feet, pulled the bag from the storage rack and followed her down the short aisle to the nearest door. His stomach was starting to churn. He was being sent to stay for two whole months with people he didn’t know, miles from anywhere. Would they like him? Would he have to go to church? What would he do all day? Surely he wouldn’t be expected to help! Would he be able to stand the smell? He looked at his feet. What about his new trainers? Would they get ruined with mud? What had Mum told

Uncle Matt and Aunt Karen about him? They likely thought he was a spoiled city brat. A no-good waster, like his dad. A...

Mum suddenly grabbed his arm. Seb jumped. He hadn't been concentrating where they were walking and he looked up to see a tall, dark haired man striding towards them, his face wreathed in smiles. He wore blue jeans and a navy body warmer over a checked shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbows to reveal strong, muscular arms.

"Julie," he said, as he reached forward to give Seb's mum a brief hug. "Good to see you. It's been too long."

Mum looked away, biting her lip. For an instant the familiar lines returned to her forehead, then she smiled. "I know, Matt, and I'm sorry."

"We were so glad you got in touch," he replied. "You know we meant it when we said we'd always be here." He turned to Seb. "And you must be Seb!" His huge, rough hand engulfed Seb's in a hearty handshake. "We're delighted you're coming to stay with us. And Vinnie is ecstatic! She's so excited about having company over the summer."

Seb nodded. He felt in awe of this giant-like man.

"Now, let's get going." Matt led the way out to the car park. Seb looked around for their means of transportation, expecting maybe a tractor, or a dirty, straw-covered vehicle of some description. He was pleasantly surprised when Matt stopped beside a huge, black, shiny, chrome-embellished pickup truck.

“Cool!” Seb exclaimed, his excitement momentarily sweeping away his belligerent attitude. He ran his hand across the chrome bar at the front. “I thought we’d be going in a tractor.”

Matt threw back his head and laughed. “You’ll see plenty of tractors,” he said, “but they’re only used for farm work, not for picking up special guests from the station! Come on, hop in!”

The journey to Cherryhill Farm seemed to last forever. Much as Seb loved the ride in the amazing truck, they seemed to make so many turns on narrow roads that he couldn’t have found his way back if he’d tried. He’d never seen so many fields and so few houses. And no shops at all! Where did they get their groceries? Surely they couldn’t grow *everything*, could they?

Finally, Uncle Matt indicated left and slowed. “We’re nearly home, Seb,” he called over his shoulder.

Seb could see a tree-lined lane leading up a slight incline towards a symmetrical ivy-covered house. The door in the centre was flanked by two windows on either side, with upstairs windows directly above those downstairs, and another window in the centre above the door. There was a small garden at the front, neatly fenced, with a few trees and bushes, bright with coloured blooms. Beyond the house lay a collection of grey outbuildings, and he could see a bright blue tractor parked beside one.

Uncle Matt swung the truck around to the back of the house,

and Seb heard the sound of a dog barking. He looked around and saw a large black and white collie running from the direction of the outbuildings. Uncle Matt pulled up beside a small red car, and stepped out. The collie ran up and pressed her head against his leg. He reached down to rub her ears. “Well, Jess-girl,” he said, “we’ve visitors today.”

Seb climbed out of the truck, and Jess sniffed his toes, then gazed up at him inquisitively.

“You can stroke her,” said Matt, “she’s good with people. Not much of a guard dog, is our Jess!”

Seb reached out and patted her soft black head. She shuffled closer.

“She likes you,” smiled Uncle Matt. “Come on, time for spoiling Jess later. She’d have you standing there all day if it was up to her!”

He opened the back door. “Karen! Girls! We’re here!”

As Seb stepped into a small porch, the door to the left was suddenly flung open. A petite lady, brown hair pulled back in a ponytail and wearing a red apron and a warm smile appeared, with two girls - one a teenager and the other a lot younger - close behind.

“Come in! You’re so welcome!” the lady, who he assumed must be Aunt Karen, exclaimed. “And Julie...” she broke off to give her sister a tight hug. “I’m so glad to see you again. I’ve missed you so much.” Seb glanced at his mum, who was crying yet again.

“I’m Lavinia,” the older girl spoke, turning his attention from

the tearful reunion going on behind him, “but most people call me Vinnie. You must be Seb. You’re going to love it here. A farm is totally the best place ever to live. I’m going to show you my heifer, we’re taking her to the show this year and I’m sure she’ll come first in her class, and you’ll have to learn how to do the milking and help with the silage and... *Oh!*” Her dark eyes danced and she leaned forward, hands outstretched. “Jess is having pups soon! I can’t *wait!* Summer is my favourite time!”

Aunt Karen chuckled at her daughter. She had one arm around Mum, who was frantically rubbing her eyes and nose with the now-mutilated tissue. “Lavinia! You can educate Seb on the virtues of summertime on a farm later! This is Martha,” she went on, putting her other hand on the little girl’s blonde curls. “She’s four. Say ‘hi’, Martha.”

Martha gave a shy smile. “Hi,” she whispered.

“Now, come through to the kitchen and we’ll have a cuppa. Julie doesn’t have long before she has to get the train back.”

They all entered a large kitchen which stretched the whole width of the house. The room had two distinct sections – the far end, the one towards the front of the house, had a selection of cosy sofas and armchairs angled towards an open fire, while the part in which Seb was now standing had a large pale blue painted wooden table in the centre, and a large black Aga stove directly opposite.

Aunt Julie directed Seb towards one of the sofas, and he sank into the plush leather. A coffee table in front had a neat pile of magazines, topped by a large black leather-bound Bible. Seb looked away. He couldn't understand how such welcoming, friendly people could be deceived so badly. They certainly weren't how he imagined them to be anyway. Why did they seem so happy? Mum and Dad rarely smiled and the lines around Mum's eyes were worry lines, not laughter ones like Aunt Karen's.

Lavinia sprawled onto the armchair beside the sofa.

“Have you ever been on a farm before?” she asked.

Seb shook his head. “No,” he muttered.

“Seriously?!” Lavinia exclaimed. “You don't know what you've been missing.”

Seb was starting to get a bit fed up with his cousin's obsession about her farm, so he pulled out his phone and scrolled through the latest photos and updates of his friends' lives. He'd already seen everything new on the train on the way here, but acting as if he were preoccupied gave him a welcomed reprieve. Just as he felt he had seen enough pictures of what he was missing back in Belfast, Aunt Karen called them over to the table.

“Have this seat, Seb,” she smiled, patting the wooden back of one of the chairs. He sat down and surveyed the table. It was laden with different types of bread, some butter and two pots of jam, a plate with some cake, and a three-tiered stand crammed with buns

and biscuits. It all looked delicious, and Seb was starting to feel ravenous.

It didn't take long for everyone to find a seat. Seb looked around. Why was no one reaching for something to eat? He lifted a hand to help himself to a particularly tempting piece of cake.

“Seb, in this house we give God thanks for our food before we eat, so we'll just pray and then you can tuck into whatever you'd like.”

Seb snatched his hand back and looked around to see all eyes on him.

“I don't believe in God,” he blurted out.

“Seb!” Mum scolded, her face burning with embarrassment.

“Well, I don't,” he shrugged. “Dad says religion is a crutch for the weak.” He narrowed his eyes and looked defiantly at Uncle Matt.

To his surprise, Uncle Matt smiled at him. “Seb, we'll talk about this again. For now, we're giving thanks for this food. We're grateful for it, and we want to thank God, regardless of your beliefs, or lack of!” With that, he bowed his head and closed his eyes, and the rest followed suit.

Seb defiantly lifted his chin and opened his eyes wide, but he couldn't help hearing what Uncle Matt was supposedly telling God – thanking Him for bringing Seb and Julie to Cherryhill safely and asking God to ‘bless Seb’ and to give Julie a safe journey back, as well as thanking Him for the ‘delicious food’ from God's ‘gracious hand’.

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Finally he said, “Amen,” and everyone lifted their heads and started to chat. Aunt Karen held out the plate of cake to Seb and he chose a piece, but strangely he didn’t feel just quite so hungry now. Uncle Matt’s short prayer echoed in his mind – bless Seb... bless Seb...bless Seb. Whatever did he mean?