

Trial

Book 3 of the Search for Truth Series

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Chapter One

“Seb! Move!” Uncle Matt yelled as five hundred kilos of Holstein bull charged across the yard. Seb grabbed the upper bar of the gate and vaulted over, his wobbly legs barely supporting him as he landed. He pressed against the wall, the ground vibrating beneath his feet. He was no longer able to see where the bull was, but knew that any second now the animal would launch himself at the gate. Seb only hoped the gate would hold and not be torn from its hinges. The bellowing and snorting came closer. Seb winced and braced himself, holding his length of blue alkathene pipe aloft, like a medieval knight in a sword fight.

The thundering hooves drew near, then abruptly stopped. The bull bellowed again. Seb frowned. If the sound was anything to go by, the animal seemed to have changed direction. Gingerly, Seb peered around the wall, and froze in horror. The bull had a new target in his sights. Head lowered, he pawed the ground once, then catapulted himself towards Uncle Matt. Matt turned and dashed for the gate on the other side of the yard, but the bull was too fast. He lifted and flung him against the pillar like a ragdoll, pinning him there and grinding his head against Matt’s leg.

“No!” screamed Seb. He looked desperately around for help, but no one was in sight. He leaped back over the gate. If he didn’t do something, Uncle Matt was going to die. The bull was in a frenzy. Wild. Angry. Seb approached, trembling, driven by desperation. Suddenly the animal backed away and Uncle Matt dropped to the ground in a crumpled heap. Was the bull moving away to renew his attack? Or was he now going to turn on Seb?

Seb breathed a silent prayer. He could hear his heart thudding in his chest and he took a deep breath. Surely the same God who could calm the wind and waves in ancient Israel could calm a raging bull in modern-day Northern Ireland!

The bull strolled into the middle of the yard, his anger spent like dandelion fluff on a windy day. Seb glanced at Uncle Matt. He wasn’t moving and, more than anything, Seb wanted to go straight to him. But he needed to get the bull out of the way. He took another deep breath and walked towards him, suppressing the urge to rush. The last thing he needed was to startle the animal.

The bull headed towards the cowshed, paused to sniff one of the heifers in the adjoining enclosure, then sauntered into his pen. A prayer of thanksgiving on his lips, Seb quickly rammed the bar of the gate into the socket before dashing out of the shed and across the yard. He dreaded to think what he would find.

“Uncle Matt? Can you hear me?” Seb reached down to touch his uncle’s shoulder. He cringed at the cuts and grazes on his face.

His uncle groaned.

“You’re alive!” Seb exclaimed.

“Barely,” Matt ground out between gritted teeth. “My leg...”

Seb glanced down at his uncle’s leg. Was it lying at a strange angle?

“Stay there. I’ll go for Aunt Karen.”

“Not moving anywhere anytime soon,” he moaned.

Seb shook his head in self-rebuke. “Of course not.”

As Seb burst through the back door, Karen jumped. “Goodness, Seb! Is something wrong?”

“It’s Uncle Matt... The new bull... His leg...”

Karen turned pale and the vegetable peeler clattered into the sink. She dashed through the door, wiping her hands on her apron as she sprinted across the yard.

“What’s wrong with Daddy?” Martha, Seb’s little cousin, asked as he prepared to follow his aunt.

“He’s—he fell,” Seb said.

“I want to see him,” she said, worry clouding her big blue eyes.

Seb shook his head. The last thing Martha needed was to see her daddy in extreme pain. “I think you should stay here for now. You can see him later.”

A fat bottom lip protruded and wobbled.

“I need you to look after Glen,” Seb said hurriedly.

The lip stopped trembling and Martha’s shoulders lifted. “I’ll go and get him.”

Seb put a hand on her shoulder. “Stay there. I’ll get him.”

He dashed across the yard and unclipped the chain from the little dog’s collar. The dog bounced excitedly around Seb. He hadn’t appreciated being tied up, but Uncle Matt hadn’t wanted an excitable pup around when he was cleaning out the bull’s pen. When Seb reached the house, Martha was on the step, pulling on her pink wellies. “It’s okay, Martha. You can look after Glen in the kitchen today.”

Her eyes widened. “In the kitchen?” she repeated. “But Mummy doesn’t let Glen into the kitchen!”

Seb tried for what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “It’ll be fine for once,” he said. “Your mummy won’t mind.”

Martha looked unsure. “Well, if I get into trouble, I’m blaming you!”

Seb winked at her. “That’s okay. I’ll explain.” He opened the door and pushed the black and white collie inside. Martha followed and he closed the door behind them both. He raced back across the yard to where Uncle Matt was still lying, Aunt Karen kneeling beside him.

She looked up as Seb approached, a worried look on her face. “We need an ambulance,” she said. “There’s no way we can lift him, and I don’t think I want to. His leg doesn’t look good.”

Seb nodded. He hoped there wasn’t internal damage as well. That bull had been trying to kill him. He pulled his phone from his pocket, unlocked it and handed it to Aunt Karen. She straightened, took the phone and dialled 999.

The ambulance seemed to take forever to arrive. Matt lay still, barely speaking, his face drawn. Aunt Karen sent Seb back to the house with instructions to phone Mrs Harvey to ask her to bring home Lavinia, their eldest daughter, and take Martha back with her. She'd likely need to keep her overnight. Lavinia had been spending the first day of the autumn half-term holidays with her friend, Rebekah Harvey, and had planned to stay for dinner. Now she would be needed to help Seb with the milking instead.

Finally, the ambulance pulled into the yard. Aunt Karen must have waved to the driver, as the yellow and green vehicle turned and reversed to where Uncle Matt was lying.

Martha joined Seb at the back door. "Is Daddy going in an ambulance?" she asked. The worried look was back on her face. Glen barked and pulled at one of her socks with his teeth.

How much should he tell Martha? "Yes, your daddy needs to go to hospital to make sure he's okay." Seb hoped he wasn't stretching the truth. He ushered Martha and Glen back into the kitchen. Seb desperately wanted to be outside with Uncle Matt. He needed to know that his uncle *was* going to be okay.

He heard another vehicle drive into the yard and glanced out the kitchen window. It was Mrs Harvey with Lavinia. As the car pulled to a stop, Lavinia's door opened and she leaped out and ran down the yard. Then a light tap sounded at the back door and Mrs Harvey entered, followed by Rebekah.

As Martha looked up, they smiled. “Martha!” Mrs Harvey exclaimed. “So you’re coming to stay with us.”

Martha frowned and shook her blonde curls. “I think I prefer to stay at home, if you don’t mind, Mrs Harvey.”

Rebekah hid a smile beneath her hand and glanced at Seb. Sometimes Martha was more like an old lady than a four-year-old girl.

Mrs Harvey crouched down to speak to the little girl. “I know that, Martha, but I think you’ll have good fun at our house. Remember, we have Glen’s sister, Moss, and you can play with the dolls’ house.”

Martha’s eyes lit up. “The big dolls’ house? The one with a swimming pool?”

Mrs Harvey smiled. “That’s the one. Now, will we go and find your pyjamas?” She took her by the hand and led her upstairs.

Seb turned to Rebekah. “Must be some dolls’ house.”

“It is.” Glen batted her leg with his paw and she bent down to rub his ears. “It was mine first, then my sisters played with it.” She looked up at Seb, sympathy showing in her blue eyes. “How’s your uncle?”

Seb sighed. “It doesn’t look good. He’s alive, but there’s definitely something up with his leg and I don’t know what all else. That bull...” He shuddered, the vision of Uncle Matt being attacked still too fresh in his mind.

The door opened and Lavinia burst in. He could see traces of tears on her face. “The ambulance people want to talk to you, Seb. You saw what happened.”

Seb headed back across the yard. The paramedics had lifted Uncle Matt into the ambulance, and Seb could see him lying on a trolley. Apart from the cuts and grazes, he looked even paler than before. Aunt Karen didn't look much better.

After he'd told the paramedics about the attack, he climbed into the ambulance to speak to his uncle.

"Thank you," Uncle Matt murmured.

Seb looked down at his strong uncle. "I'll be praying for you," Seb told him. "And don't worry about the milking – Vinnie and I will be fine."

An anxious look fleetingly passed across Uncle Matt's face, then he blinked.

"Right, we're ready to go," the grey-haired paramedic called. Seb stepped back out of the ambulance and waved. The doors shut and the vehicle moved off.

Aunt Karen sighed. She looked close to tears. Seb put an arm around her and she leaned into his embrace. "Oh, Seb," she breathed. "I don't know how we're going to cope."

Seb looked at her in alarm. Was Uncle Matt so ill that he was actually going to die?

Aunt Karen saw his concerned look and gave him a slight smile. "The Lord knows all about it. Keep praying, Seb." She straightened and walked briskly towards the house. "Now, I must see if Martha's ready and then hurry to the hospital. I'm sorry I haven't managed to

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get the dinner ready, but hopefully you can find something when the milking is done.”

The milking was carried out in silence that evening. Every so often, Lavinia paused to dash away tears from her cheeks. Seb felt sick. He hated to think of Uncle Matt in pain, and it felt like torture, not knowing if he was going to be all right. What if Uncle Matt died? How would they ever manage? Seb suddenly felt close to tears himself and he took a deep breath. The cow nearest to him kicked the clusters off and Seb grabbed them, rinsed them off and replaced them. Even the cows were uneasy. They too seemed to sense that something terrible had happened.

The last cow left the parlour and Seb turned the parlour over to the wash-up setting. Lavinia grabbed the scraper and began to furiously scrape down where the cows had been standing.

“It’s so unfair,” she muttered. “Why should this happen to Dad, of all people?”

Seb frowned. He’d been the only other person in the yard when the bull had gone mad. Surely Vinnie wasn’t thinking it would have been better if *he* had been attacked?

“I *hate* bulls,” she went on. “Mean,” she shoved the scraper across the concrete, “wicked... evil... hateful... *beasts!*” she finished, lifting the scraper and pounding it on the wall. She began to scream, beating the wall with all her might.

Seb watched, alarmed. Vinnie was going crazy! How on earth was

he supposed to calm her down? “Vinnie...” he began hesitantly.

“Don’t talk to me,” she yelled. “Couldn’t you have warned him that the bull was there? Why didn’t you go and help him? You probably ran away and left him to deal with that bull on his own! It nearly killed him! In fact...” Her anger melted into a puddle. “Maybe he is going to die,” she finished, tears gathering in her eyes as she sank to the ground, the scraper falling with a clatter beside her. Unmindful of the cow dung, she sat with her head in her hands, shaking. Every so often she gave a loud sniff and wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

“Vinnie,” Seb said softly, “why don’t you go inside. I’ll finish off out here.” He was surprised when, after a moment, she staggered to her feet and left, still wiping her eyes.

Seb picked up the scraper and began where Lavinia had left off, but he struggled to take a deep breath due to the crushing weight in his chest. Finally, he set the scraper down and sat down on the steps, head in his hands. Unlike Lavinia, he had Someone to turn to when things got tough. He had a caring heavenly Father, One to whom he could pour out his heart. This was a very difficult day. No one knew what was ahead. To lose Uncle Matt was unthinkable. What could Seb do, but pray?

He bowed his head and closed his eyes.

Chapter Two

“I know it’s not what we’d planned for the first week in our new house, Mum, but they need me here.”

Mum’s sympathetic sigh came clearly through the phone. “Seb, I know that. Of course you can stay at Cherryhill. I’m working every day this week anyway.” She paused. “I do hope Matt’s okay,” she said, worry in her voice.

“So do I,” replied Seb.

Aunt Karen hadn’t been in touch since she’d left for the hospital. The tension in the air was palpable. Lavinia had grabbed the farming paper and was rapidly flicking through it. When she reached the last page, she held it upright and tapped it on the table in an attempt to straighten the edges, then began again. Half-eaten slices of toast lay on their plates. Seb took a sip of tea and grimaced. Stone cold. He stood up and began to clear the table. As he was carrying the pile of plates and cups to the sink, Lavinia’s mobile rang. Seb startled, but managed to land the crockery onto the work surface before everything slid to the floor.

Lavinia snatched up the phone and swiped the screen to answer

the call. “How’s Dad?” she asked hurriedly.

“Put it on loud speak,” hissed Seb. It could only be Aunt Karen.

Lavinia rolled her eyes at Seb. “One minute, Mum.” She tapped the screen and set the phone on the table. “Go ahead. How is he?”

“He’s stable.” Aunt Karen sounded weary, but relieved. “Thanks be to God.”

“So he’s not going to... to...” Lavinia swallowed.

“He’s going to be fine.”

Lavinia and Seb looked at each other and grinned. Seb released a breath he didn’t even realise he’d been holding. Uncle Matt was going to live!

“However,” went on Aunt Karen, “he’s got a long, long way to go. His femur is badly broken and he needs surgery. They might insert a metal rod.”

“In his leg?” asked Seb. He couldn’t remember which bone was the femur.

“Yes, his upper leg. He’ll be in hospital for most of the week. He’s feeling pretty sore all over and he’s got lots of cuts and bruises, but thankfully there were no internal injuries. That’s quite a miracle, the doctors said.”

“So his broken leg is the worst injury?” Lavinia asked.

“That’s right,” replied Aunt Karen. “They have him on pain relief, so he’s fairly comfortable for now. His surgery is scheduled for tomorrow morning.”

Seb winced. He didn't even want to consider how they would go about inserting a metal rod into someone's leg.

"I'll be home later," Aunt Karen went on, "but I think you'd better head for bed. You need all the sleep you can get, and milking time comes early."

They said their goodbyes and Seb finished clearing up the dishes. He took the remnants of toast outside and gave them to Jess and Glen. Jess ate the toast, then pressed herself against his leg. She seemed to detect his sombre mood. Seb sank onto the step and put an arm around the sedate and wise older dog. Glen circled them, batting at Seb's shoulder with a big paw, before finally settling down and curling up at his feet.

Jess leaned closer and licked his cheek. Seb grinned wryly and rubbed the dog saliva away with his sleeve. Doggy kisses were all right, but he'd seen Jess's secret liking for cow dung.

The night was still and peaceful. The cows lowed softly in the shed, and the stars twinkled overhead. It was only this morning that Uncle Matt had collected him from the new house in town that Seb and Mum had moved to at the weekend, and taken him to Cherryhill Farm to help out. Who would have thought that, by the end of the day, Uncle Matt would be lying in hospital, facing surgery tomorrow? A verse from the Bible flitted into Seb's mind. *Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.* How true!

His mind replayed the events of the day. The bull, rushing towards

him and then turning to Uncle Matt. Could Seb have done anything differently? Was Lavinia right? Was he a coward, turning and running? He'd only done what he'd thought best at the time. He sighed and rubbed Jess's soft fur. At least he'd managed to get the bull back in the pen without further mishap.

"Why are you sitting out here in the dark?" Lavinia's voice came from the door.

Seb struggled to his feet. "Just... thinking. It's getting cold though. I'll be in soon."

He could see Lavinia shrug, the light from the hallway casting her as a silhouette. "I'm going to bed. See you in the morning."



Seb yawned as he pressed the button to start up the milking machine. He'd tossed and turned a lot and it seemed that when he finally fell asleep, it was time to get up. Lavinia looked about as well slept as he did.

"I wonder how Dad is this morning," she remarked as she let the first batch of cows into the milking parlour. "He's likely lying fretting about not doing any work. He isn't very good at being a patient, not that he's often sick."

"Do you think we'll be allowed to go and see him?" Seb asked, pulling on a pair of disposable gloves.

Lavinia shrugged. “I don’t know what time his surgery is. It probably depends on that.” She bit her lip. “I hope he won’t have a long recovery period. We still have loads of cows to calve, and the TB test is coming up next week.”

“TB test?” This was something new that Seb hadn’t come across before.

“Tuberculosis. Every herd needs tested each year. The vet comes out and gives them a couple of wee injections in their necks and then comes back three days later to check if they’ve reacted or not.”

“Reacted to the injections?”

“Yes, if they react to the bovine TB one, they have to be culled.”

“Culled. You mean, like...” Seb paused. Surely not!

“Yep, slaughtered,” Lavinia replied matter-of-factly. “It hasn’t ever happened here, so hopefully we’re okay this year too.” She began to attach the clusters to the cows. “The only problem is that we have loads of dairy cows, not to mention the heifers and older calves. We need all the help we can get.”

“What about the bull?” asked Seb.

Lavinia groaned. “I’d forgotten about him. He needs tested too, unless, of course, we get rid of him first.”

“Your dad would hardly want to keep him.”

Lavinia shook her head. “He’s a good bull.” She rolled her eyes and gave a mirthless laugh. “What I mean is, he’s from a good bloodline,

but Dad always says that if something is dangerous, it has to go, no matter what.”

“Is there anyone who can help out while Uncle Matt’s recovering?” he asked.

“Caleb can still help with morning milking,” she said, turning slightly pink.

Seb let the row of cows out and hid a grin. His cousin had more than a passing interest in Rebekah’s older brother, Caleb. Their attempts to be discreet weren’t too successful and everyone knew the feeling was mutual.

“But he still has his job, and his own cattle to look after,” she continued. Seb sobered. She was right. There was only so much time Caleb could spare. Tommy, the old neighbour down the road, would likely pitch in all he could, but he also had his farm, and wasn’t as fit and active as he used to be.

“It’s such a pity Joe isn’t around,” Seb sighed. Joe, Uncle Matt’s previous farmhand, had got caught up with a gang of cattle rustlers earlier in the year. Seb had uncovered the identities of the men, but Joe had turned against his companions to help the young people when they ended up in danger. Joe had moved to Scotland for his own safety and wouldn’t be back in Northern Ireland for a long time.

“Could we put an ad in the paper?” Seb began to clean the udders of the next batch of cows.

“Dad has tried that before. No one responded. People don’t seem to want this sort of work, with irregular hours.”

Seb bit his lip. This was Tuesday. School would be starting again on Monday. They had just under a week to find someone to help out. He would pray about it. Surely they would find someone by then.



“Matt’s through his surgery.” Aunt Karen set the portable phone on the kitchen table. She sounded weary and looked even worse. Her face was pale and dark circles stood out in sharp contrast under her eyes. She brushed a hand through her long brown hair and gave a small smile. “Everything went well.”

“That’s good, Aunt Karen,” Seb responded. “How long will he be in hospital for?”

“About a week. Maybe a wee bit less.”

“And how long until he’s back to normal?” asked Lavinia.

Aunt Karen looked down, but not before Seb caught a troubled look in her eyes. “I don’t know, Lavinia. I’m to meet the doctor tomorrow. We’ll know then what his recovery is going to look like.”

Seb didn’t like the way his aunt was acting. Surely Uncle Matt would be okay. Did Aunt Karen think that he might never be the same again? If Uncle Matt couldn’t work, what would become of Cherryhill Farm?

Aunt Karen lifted her head and tried to smile. “We’ll go and see him

later. He'll likely be pretty woozy with the anaesthetic, but I think it might do him good."

As they walked through the revolving doors of the hospital and down the corridor, the smells of antiseptic, toast and something unpleasant that Seb didn't want to think about too much assaulted his nostrils and awakened memories. He shuddered as the scenes from the evening he'd found Mum unconscious and beaten up in their living room passed through his mind. That night was still all too vivid in his memory and he tried to push it away. They were here to see Uncle Matt. Mum was safely at work in the nursing home and Dad was in prison on drug trafficking charges, where he couldn't hurt her now.

Aunt Karen pulled open a door that led to a stairwell and motioned Lavinia and Seb forward.

"Why don't we take the lift?" asked Lavinia.

An incredulous look was Aunt Karen's only response.

Lavinia gave Seb a quick grin. "Lifts are too slow for Mum," she whispered. "She only ever goes in one if it's over ten flights of stairs."

Seb hid a smile as Aunt Karen looked around. "Can't you two walk a little faster? You'd think you were twice my age."

They hustled after Aunt Karen as she made her way down a long corridor and hit a button on the wall to open a set of doors to their

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left. They'd barely opened before she squeezed through and began to walk down another corridor. Through the open doors lining the corridor, Seb caught glimpses of little rooms. Some sort of waiting room, with green chairs and a TV in the corner. A burst of laughter came from another room, and as Seb passed he caught sight of three nurses leaning against a bench with steaming mugs in their hands. Another room with a bed, an old, pale-faced man in paisley-print pyjamas reclining against the pillows, and a grey-haired lady pouring water from the blue-lidded water jug.

Aunt Karen stopped abruptly at the next door. Her hands smoothed her hair and she momentarily closed her eyes, then entered. Uncle Matt's room.

Seb's stomach fluttered. He wasn't sure what he expected to find. Would Uncle Matt look really sick? What would Seb say to him? Would Uncle Matt be mad at him for not preventing the bull from attacking him?

Lavinia followed her mum.

There was no time for further contemplation. Seb took a deep breath and stepped into the room.