

Witness

Book 2 of the Search for Truth Series

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ISBN-13: 978 1 910513 62 0

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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

Prologue

“How dare you defy me?” the voice snarled venomously. “I will find you and you will pay, both you and that no-good Bible-bashing brat! Just you wait...”

Seb Mitchelson’s eyes widened and he looked across at Mum. Her hand trembled as she ended the hateful flow of words spewing from the voice message. She didn’t need to ask Seb if he had heard.

“That’s not the first one,” she told him, her face white. “I’ve blocked his number, but he keeps calling from different phones and leaving voicemails.”

Seb shuddered and glanced out the window of the train at sheep grazing in green fields. The very sound of that voice caused unpleasant sensations to reawaken deep inside – a mixture of fear, worthlessness and weakness. He took a deep breath.

Mum gave him a shaky smile and slipped the phone back into her handbag resting on the grey plastic table between them. “It’s okay,” she said. “He won’t find us. I don’t think he’ll even try. He’s all noise.” She bit her lip, looking unsure. “Still, it would do no harm to change my number. And, Seb, please be careful. Keep your eyes open.”

Seb nodded. They both knew, no matter how much they wanted to believe otherwise, that the growling wasn't a harmless show of strength. Instead, it was a sign he was primed for attack – provoked, incensed and ready to strike.

They were familiar with this beast. They had been his victims before.

But never before had the anger been so intense. Never before had his authority been toppled so completely and his opinions disregarded so soundly as when Mum packed up her belongings and left him and when Seb threw his influence aside and became a Christian.

They needed to be on their guard, for this time his rage would know no bounds.

Chapter One

The deceleration of the train, coupled with the ever-widening tangle of railway lines outside and the sight of large, grey, metal sheds, caused a flurry of movement inside the train. People sprang to their feet, retrieved their bags from under seats and from the overhead storage racks, then jammed the aisles in the race to be first out the door. The train's brakes hissed and metal screeched against metal as the train finally slid to a stop. Doors beeped and glided open to disgorge the passengers onto Platform 2.

The red-bearded man opposite stood up, nodding in time to the beat pumping into his head from his earphones. He stuffed his arms into his navy duffle coat and shoved his iPhone into the pocket, earphones still embedded in his ears.

Mum smiled at Seb, a look of guarded excitement in her blue eyes. "Almost home," she said. Seb glanced over his shoulder to make sure the aisle was clear before standing and pulling his bag from the overhead storage rack. Mum dragged a large shopping bag from under the seat and pulled it into the aisle.

"Whew," she exclaimed. "It was so good of Karen to give me all this stuff, but now we've got to walk home with it."

“How far do we have to go?” asked Seb, as he stepped off the train and turned to wait for Mum.

“About twenty minutes’ walk,” she replied. “Not too far.”

Seb took the bag from Mum. His arm dropped with the unexpected weight. “What’s in here?” he asked.

“Oh, just some clothes, a pair of curtains Karen didn’t need, and a few books.”

Seb opened the bag and peered in. A round cake tin lay on top. “And this?” He pointed at the box.

“That’s a fruitcake Karen made. She found Granny’s old recipe for Christmas cake earlier this year and wanted me to taste it to see if she’s got it right. She remembered that I always loved Christmas cake when I was a child.” She smiled wistfully.

“Really?” he asked. “I’ve never seen Christmas cake in our house.”

Mum shook her head sadly. “I stopped buying Christmas cake years ago. Your dad hates dried fruit, so there wasn’t much point in buying one just for me.”

His mum loved Christmas cake? Why had he never known that before? Seb had a sudden suspicion that there was a lot more about her and her childhood that he didn’t know. *Things will be different now*, he thought. Now that his mum had a new house, and it would just be the two of them, there would be lots of time for Seb to find out things about her that he’d never been interested in prior to his trip to Cherryhill Farm. Before he left Belfast at the beginning of the

summer, he'd never thought about Mum's childhood. Aunt Karen, who was Mum's sister, her husband, Matt, and daughters, Lavinia and Martha, were only names to him. But they had become very special to Seb, closer family than even his own dad, who Seb now realised didn't act much like a father at all. He especially wanted to know why Mum felt that it was too late for her to be saved. What had she done that she felt was so unforgiveable?

Mum lifted the heavy bag from Seb and hoisted it onto her arm. "This way," she said, pointing towards the exit.

They had barely left the front doors of the train station when Mum started to slow. Grimacing, she lifted the bag to her other arm.

"Here, Mum," said Seb. "Why don't you take my bag instead? It's not much lighter, but you can carry it over your shoulder."

Mum smiled gratefully at him as she handed over the bag and turned left onto a road, busy with Tuesday evening rush hour traffic. "You likely can manage to carry it better than I can anyway. All that fresh air and hard work on the farm. You've grown at least a couple of inches too, I think."

"That's likely because of Aunt Karen's—" Seb quickly stopped.

"Good cooking?" finished Mum.

Seb nodded sheepishly. "I don't mean that your cooking is bad, but Aunt Karen always had really big meals and she made everything from scratch..." He trailed off, aware that the more he said, the worse it sounded.

Mum laughed. “It’s okay, Seb,” she said. “I know you didn’t get great meals at home before, but things are going to be different now. There won’t be much money left over after I pay the rent, but we’ll have enough to eat healthily. At least I know that it won’t have disappeared when I go to look for it.”

Seb knew what she meant. Dad’s drinking habit had wreaked havoc on the family’s finances; and not only the finances, but on the atmosphere in their home. Dad was a violent drunk and Mum bore more than a few scars as a result of his drunken rages.



The new house was located halfway down a quiet street lined with two identical rows of small, red-brick houses. The doors opened directly onto the street. Mum stopped outside a brown door and pulled a key from her black handbag. Turning the key in the lock, she pushed the door open and stood back.

“Welcome home, Seb,” she said, smiling, as she gestured for him to step in first.

Seb took a step into the little house. The stairs were directly ahead and there was a frosted glass door to the right. He opened it and stepped into a living room. The walls were painted cream and the sofa and armchair were covered with bright pink throw blankets. A small table and two chairs sat against the opposite wall,

beside a door leading to what Seb presumed must be the kitchen.

“Come upstairs and I’ll show you your bedroom,” said Mum, biting her lip a little nervously.

Seb followed her upstairs.

“Bathroom is here,” Mum said, pushing open the door at the head of the stairs. She opened the door to the room beside the bathroom. “This is your room.”

Seb stepped into a small, dark room. He dumped his bag on the single bed which was pushed against the wall. A wardrobe stood against the wall to his right, almost behind the door.

“I haven’t decorated it yet,” Mum said. “I thought I would ask you first what colour scheme you’d like.”

Seb shrugged. He didn’t really mind. He moved to the window and looked out. The houses of another street backed up to the houses of his street. If it hadn’t been for the net curtains hanging at the windows of the other house, he could have almost seen right into the house. Directly under his window was a small, empty back yard with a washing line. The back yard next door caught his eye. Crammed full of pots and plants of every description, it was a bright spot of colour in an otherwise drab scene.

“Who lives there?” he asked Mum.

“Oh, that’s Mrs Thompson,” she said. “Aren’t her flowers beautiful? She’s offered to give me a few to brighten up our yard too.”

Seb turned away from the window and followed Mum out the door as she showed him her bedroom at the front of the house. The house was small. Even smaller than the last house they'd lived in, and tiny compared to the farmhouse at Cherryhill. But this was now home. There were no bad memories here. Mum had gone to a great deal of effort and it was clean and tidy. It smelled good too, no lingering tobacco or alcohol smells. And, best of all, it was peaceful.

"Seb, dinner!" called Mum, a short while later. Seb got off the bed and went downstairs to find two plates of pasta in a tomato sauce on the table.

"I'm sorry it isn't very much," she said, "and certainly not as good as the food Karen would have given you."

"It smells good." Seb pulled out his chair and sat down.

Mum went to lift her fork, then paused.

Seb looked at her inquisitively. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing," she said. "I just wondered if you'd want to give thanks for the food."

Seb swallowed. He prayed plenty on his own, but he'd never yet prayed audibly in front of anyone. He'd planned on saying a silent prayer of thanks. And yet, his mum wasn't a believer. If she expected him to pray...

"Okay," he said, closing his eyes. "God, we want to give thanks for this food, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen." He opened his eyes and glanced at his mum. She lifted her fork and smiled at him.

“Short and sweet. No point in big long prayers when the food’s on the table. We don’t want it getting cold.” She ate a forkful of pasta. “We have lots to do tomorrow. There’s no way last year’s school uniform will fit you, so we’ll need to go and buy you new clothes, and I’d like to get paint for your room.”

“Can we afford all that?” Seb asked.

“Well, just about,” replied Mum. “The curtains Karen gave me will save me having to buy any for my bedroom.”

“I don’t mind if I don’t get my bedroom decorated yet.”

Mum’s eyes filled with tears and she gave Seb a watery smile. “Are you sure?” she asked.

Seb nodded. “It’s fine the way it is.”

Mum reached across and squeezed his arm. “Thank you, Seb.” She looked quite relieved, but Seb could still detect a troubled look in her blue eyes. No wonder, she had plenty of worries these days. He’d have to pray a lot more earnestly for her salvation. While it wouldn’t remove her problems, having the Lord Jesus Christ as her Saviour and Friend would certainly help her to cope much better.



Seb yawned and stretched. *Thump*. His elbow banged against something solid. He rubbed it and opened his eyes a crack. A wall? Sunlight was streaming through the thin curtains. He gazed around

the room, confused. Gradually his memory awakened. Belfast. Mum's house. He'd left Cherryhill yesterday and was now back in the city. School was starting tomorrow and today they were going to get his uniform. He could hear running water and the hum of the fan in the bathroom next door.

Swinging his legs out of bed, he pulled back the edge of the curtain and looked out. Houses and yards, stretching in neat lines. He sighed. He missed the green fields and tall trees, the lowing of the cows and the singing of the birds, the fresh air... *and farm smells*, he thought, smiling wryly. They beat traffic fumes any day.

"How did you sleep?" asked Mum at breakfast time.

"It took me a while to drop over," he said, buttering his toast. "I'd forgotten how noisy it is in Belfast."

Mum nodded, her eyes glazing over with the memory of a long-ago scene. "I remember when I first came to live in Belfast," she said. "I couldn't sleep with the streetlight outside my window. I ended up taping a sheet of cardboard to the window every night." She laughed drily. "After a while, I got used to it..." She drifted off, a look of sadness in her eyes.

Seb watched his mum. He guessed she wasn't just talking about the streetlights. What was her story?

Mum shook her head and blinked, then pasted a smile on her face. "Well," she said brightly, "a bus passes the end of the street just after ten. I hope I brought everything you need for school from

the last house. I cleared out all I could, but I'm sure I've forgotten something. The house was in such a mess.”

Seb nodded. He was sure it would be in an even bigger mess now with just his dad living there and no one to clean up after him. Or was he still there? Could Dad even afford the rent?

“I put your things in the wardrobe, and there are some more bags in the cupboard under the stairs. Sort through everything and see what you need. We'll leave as soon as you're ready.”



The bus pulled to a halt and Seb stepped down onto the street, arms laden with bags. Mum followed, her arms full as well. They'd had a successful trip – Seb had got his uniform and new school supplies. Mum had even found some half-price bedlinen for Seb's room, and a reduced-price damaged tin of paint.

“The next day I'm off work I'll try to paint your room,” Mum said later as she stored the tin of paint under the stairs. “I'm sorry it's not the shade of blue you wanted, though.”

“It's okay,” he replied. “I don't really mind.”

Mum gave her head a little shake and looked at him in amazement. “You've changed so much, Seb,” she said, putting an arm around his shoulders.

Seb smiled. He really had. But – his smile faded – school started

in the morning and the new Seb wasn't going to be very popular there anymore. It wasn't just because he had discovered an interest in agriculture; he knew that becoming a Christian was going to lead to a lot of problems. It was so much easier at Cherryhill, where there were lots of other Christians around, but now he'd have to take a stand for Christ in an opposing and unsympathetic world. What would Tyler say? His other friends? He bit his lip. Mr Symons, his biology teacher, who made no pretence of the fact that he believed that God was a myth. His stomach clenched and he suddenly felt very alone. He didn't know one other Christian in the city. No doubt there were others, but he didn't know where they might be.

I am with you always...

Seb took a deep breath as the words he'd read in his Bible, spoken by the Lord Jesus Christ after His resurrection, filled his soul with peace. No matter what happened, whether he was ostracised, ridiculed or scorned, he was never alone. Not when Christ was with him as He had promised. He grasped the promise tightly. He would need it.

Chapter Two

The corridors buzzed with a nervous first day of school energy as Seb walked towards his allocated form room on Thursday morning. It was all so familiar, and yet he felt as if he had stepped into another world. Almost as if he had ceased to belong here, among these people and in this environment.

“Hey, Seb!” Tyler called from the area of the lockers.

Seb turned around. “Hi, Tyler! Hi, Corey!” He walked over to join the boys. Tyler and Corey had been his closest friends before the summer. In fact, Seb had complained bitterly to them when he’d found out he was going to be packed off to Cherryhill Farm.

“We haven’t seen you all summer. Were you really on a farm the whole time?” Corey asked.

Seb smiled. “Pretty much. It was good, though.”

Tyler and Corey looked at each other incredulously.

“Did you drive tractors and milk cows?” Tyler scoffed.

“Yes,” Seb replied.

Tyler looked at him for an instant before bursting into laughter. “Ha-ha! Good one, Seb! You really had me convinced for a minute.”

Seb shrugged. “It’s true. I helped out. And I helped stop cattle rustlers–”

“Hold on a minute, Seb,” interrupted Corey. “You don’t need to make stuff up. What crazy story will you tell us next?”

Seb bit his lip. There actually was something else that his friends would find even less believable than the thought of Seb milking cows. “Um...”

The bell rang loud and shrill, drowning out what Seb had been about to say.

“Right, people, get to your form rooms,” Mr Harding shouted. “You can’t hang around here all day.”

Seb hefted his school bag on to his shoulder and followed the boys to registration. He felt sick. He had missed an opportunity to tell them that he was now a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. And yet he felt oddly relieved that he could hide a little longer. He could only imagine what they might say.

On arrival at the classroom, the boys grabbed their usual seats at the back. The noise was deafening, with shouts and calls. Tyler began to blow tiny wads of soggy paper through an empty pen at Madison, which got caught in her long blonde hair. “Yuck, Tyler, that’s disgusting,” she exclaimed as she picked them out and flung them on the floor.

“Yuck, Tyler, *that’s disgusting*,” he mocked in a shrill voice. “Hey, look.” He pointed at the front of the classroom. “A new boy!” He

pulled an elastic band from his pocket and aimed a folded paper missile at the back of the black-haired head.

Ping! The paper bullet hit its target and ricocheted. The boy jumped and lifted a hand to rub his head before turning around to determine the source of the attack.

“Oh, look!” Tyler nudged Seb, eyes widening as he took in the straight black hair and Asian features. He shouted a derogatory name at the boy. The rest of the class looked to see who Tyler was yelling at, and began to laugh. The boy turned back around and stared intently at the whiteboard, shoulders squared.

“Tyler, stop that,” said Seb intently, in a quiet voice.

Tyler stopped shouting and gave Seb a puzzled look. “What’s got into you?” he asked. “Has living on a farm turned you into a goody-goody?”

Seb shook his head and took a deep breath. “No, but over the summer I became—”

“Right, class!” boomed a voice from the doorway. “Far too much noise on the first day. Settle down or you’ll all be in detention.” Mr Symons, his form teacher, strode into the room.

Everyone sat up a little straighter and the yelling subsided. Seb sighed. He would have to wait until another time.

Seb glanced around the crowded canteen, then lifted his tray and

weaved his way to their favourite table in the far corner of the room. Madison and her friend Zoe were already there. As Seb set down his tray, he heard a crash of a plate and cutlery hitting the floor. The room erupted in a cheer. Tyler was standing, bent over in laughter, beside a boy sprawled on the floor, rice and curry strewn around him. Seb's face tightened in anger as he recognised the new boy. He could hear Madison and Zoe giggle behind him as Tyler swaggered over, a silly smile on his face. Seb spun around to look at the girls.

“What are you laughing at?” he demanded. They blinked at him, confused, their giggles momentarily stilled. Seb didn't wait for an answer. He turned to Tyler. “What did you do that for?”

Tyler sniggered. “Do what?”

“You know what you did! You tripped him up!”

Tyler laughed. “He wasn't looking where he was going.” He looked quizzically at Seb. “But why are you getting so annoyed about it? He's only a foreigner; he deserves it!”

Seb took a step closer. “He does not deserve it,” he hissed. “He's done nothing wrong and I don't know why you're picking on him.”

Tyler's mouth fell open. “I didn't think you had a problem with having a bit of fun. Don't you remember the way you use to wind up Pawel?”

Seb sank into his seat. Tyler was right. He had done a lot worse to the Polish boy in his class last year. Pawel had finally changed schools. “Sit down, Tyler, I want to tell you something.”

Tyler looked suspiciously at him and sat down. “What is it?” he asked. Madison and Zoe had lost interest in their lunches and were staring intently, waiting to hear what Seb had to say.

Corey chose that moment to join them with his tray. “Hey, mate, what happened over there?” He slid into the seat and pointed in the direction of the new boy, where the cleaners were busy cleaning up the spilled rice.

“Shush,” said Tyler. “Seb has something *very important* to tell us.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

Seb took a deep breath. It was now or never. He sent up a silent plea for help. He could feel his legs trembling. *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*, flooded through his soul. He cleared his throat. “You know the way I was at the farm this summer?”

“Oh, yes, milking cows and driving tractors,” laughed Corey. “Have you decided to be a farmer when you leave this dump?”

“Maybe,” Seb began, “but...”

“Oh, he *is* going to be a farmer. Farmer Seb! Ha-ha!” laughed Tyler.

“Oo ar!” mocked Corey.

“Tyler! Corey!” Seb was getting exasperated. He was determined to tell them this time. “That’s not what I was going to tell you. I wanted to tell you that when I was at the farm I got saved.”

Tyler scrunched up his nose and looked at Seb. “You what? Got

saved? What's that?"

"It means I became a Christian," replied Seb.

Tyler and Corey erupted in laughter. He didn't look round but he could hear the girls' giggles. "Oh, that's brilliant, Seb! The best joke I've ever heard," chortled Tyler.

Seb shook his head. "But, Tyler, it's true! Honestly!"

Tyler's laughter fizzled out. "True? You're a Christian?"

Seb nodded.

"But you were an atheist before the summer."

"Yes."

Corey leaned back in his seat. "You've been brainwashed, mate. Those stupid farmers that you lived with, they've no brains and don't know any better. Sure everybody knows there's no God."

"But there *is* a God," replied Seb. "How do you think everything came into existence?"

"Uh, the Big Bang! Duh!"

"So if there was a big bang, what made it happen? And how did something come from nothing?"

Corey shrugged. "It just did. Why don't you ask Miss Carruthers?"

Seb glanced at Madison and Zoe. Madison looked puzzled and Zoe was focussed on picking at her bright pink nail polish.

"And anyway," he continued, "a Christian isn't just someone who believes that there is a God. A Christian is someone who has trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ. He died on the cross to take away our sins—"

“Ugh, shut up, Seb,” said Tyler. “I can’t believe you’ve gone all religious. That explains why you’re no fun anymore. Why can’t you just forget about the whole religion business and be yourself again?”

“But I’m not the same person,” Seb explained. “ ‘If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation,’ the Bible says.”

Corey groaned. “Aw, no! He’s rhyming the Bible at us now!”

Seb shook his head and ate a forkful of his pasta bake. There was no point in saying anything more right now: they obviously didn’t want to hear it.

Seb stayed in the canteen after the others had left, and pulled his Bible from his bag. He opened it at Paul’s letter to the Colossians where he’d left off reading that morning. A verse caught his eye. *That you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God...* He paused. That was quite a challenge in this environment, surrounded by foul language, obscene conversations and everything else that went on in his school.

Suddenly, the bell rang, signalling the end of lunchtime and making him jump. He placed the Bible back in his bag, exited the canteen and walked down the corridor. As Seb was putting a book into his locker, he caught the end of a conversation around the corner.

“I can’t believe Seb is a Christian.” It was Madison.

“He has changed so *much* since last year,” came Zoe’s reply. “I

mean, he's got taller and he's so tanned..." She giggled.

"I think you fancy him!" replied Madison.

"Hey!"

"I wouldn't blame you."

The two girls laughed. Seb inwardly groaned and slammed the locker shut.

"But he's a Christian. Did you understand all this *saved* stuff he was talking about?" Madison asked.

"Uh, sort of," replied Zoe.

"Well, I haven't a clue," Madison declared. "Tyler and Corey weren't too impressed either!"

The voices grew closer and Seb quickly left the locker bay. He was glad he'd had an opportunity to tell his friends that he was now a believer and, despite their scoffing, he hoped that they could see the change in him.



Seb turned the key in the lock and pushed open the door. Mum was at work and the house was quiet. He dumped his school bag beside the table and went in search of some food. A plastic box lay on the bench. He shook it, then lifted the lid. The smell of fresh scones wafted towards him. He reached in and helped himself to a couple. Beside the kettle sat a pot of jam bearing a label which

read *Raspberry Jam* in old-fashioned handwriting. Likely from Mrs Thompson – Mum had said she spent a lot of time in her kitchen and liked to give away most of what she made. He smiled as he found a plate and a knife and then liberally slathered butter and jam over each scone half. After grabbing a mug, he filled it with milk and carried his snack through to the table in the living room. Seb lifted his maths homework out of his bag and spread it out on the table. As he lifted his hand to reach for the scone, his phone rang. Pulling it out of his pocket, he glanced at the screen. He didn't recognise the number. Maybe someone he had met over the summer...?

The slurred voice was instantly recognisable. “Where a-a-are youuuuu, s-s-son?”

Dad! Seb grimaced. He wished he hadn't answered it.

“I'm at home,” he said.

“Wh-wh-where's home?”

“I can't tell you that,” Seb replied, after a pause.

“Wh-wh-why n-n-not?”

“Dad, you've been drinking,” said Seb. “I'm busy. I have maths homework to do.”

“W-w-wait! C-c-come back. Live here. Plenty of m-m-money now.”

Seb frowned. Plenty of money? His dad never had money. Anything he earned, he spent on alcohol.

“Dad, you're drunk. And I really need to go. Bye!” Seb ended the call and turned the phone off before Dad could call back. Leaning

back in his seat, he turned the phone over in his hands. What on earth had Dad been talking about? Maybe he thought that Mum had plenty of money now and he wanted to get his hands on it. Seb nodded. Yes, that was probably what he meant. He was likely struggling now that Mum wasn't around to fund him anymore. Seb set down the phone and lifted the scone.

By the time Mum came home from work, the box of scones was almost depleted, and the homework was done.

"I don't remember you doing homework since you were at primary school," she said in surprise.

Seb smiled. "I never did any."

Mum shook her head. "I know! The teachers kept telling me, but what could I do? You wouldn't listen to me. I just can't get over the difference in you."

"God's salvation, Mum," he called, as he ran upstairs to change out of his uniform. "It could change you too!"