

CHAPTER ONE

Bearly a Beginning

Carrot, Turnip, and Bean are best of friends. Other kids call them the Vegetable Soup Gang. Their real names are Dan, Bill, and Marvin, but Dan's hair is red as a carrot and Bill's body has the shape of a turnip. It tapers down from a fat middle to the skinniest legs you ever saw. Opinions differ on why Marvin is called Bean. Some say it's because he is skinny all over. Others say it's because of an argument he once had with his fourth grade teacher in public school. When she insisted that people have evolved from apelike creatures, Marvin protested, "I'm no monkey. I'm a human bean."

All three boys attend Gracefaith Bible Academy (GBA) in the town of Weedyfields. During the school year they keep busy playing varsity soccer, basketball, and baseball. They're good athletes, but not so good as their pile of varsity letters suggests. After all, since the academy is not very big, the main requirement for making one of the boys' teams is that you can't be a girl.

The school year is followed by vacation, and during the long parade of summer days, the gang often congregates at Carrot's house. He lives outside town at the foot of a hill that is the gateway to miles of wilderness, stretching all the way to the

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town of Valleynook. One Saturday in June, the boys decided to climb the hill and laze around on the big rocks scattered among the blueberry bushes. So they began trudging up the path that zigzagged through the woods on the hillside. Accompanying them were two unofficial, nonhuman members of the gang. Carrot's dog Radish (or Reddish, according to Dan's mom) is a friendly Irish setter. Turnip's dog Peanut is a yapping little mutt, half poodle and half undecided. As the boys walked along through the woods, the dogs scampered ahead, hoping to find some of the mouth-watering critters whose rich scent still lingered by the path. Near the top of the hill, Radish and Peanut suddenly began barking ferociously, and they bolted out of sight. The boys, wondering why the dogs were so excited, trotted after them.

At the moment they rounded the last turn in the path, they saw the reason. There, sprawled among the blueberries, was a bear—a big, cantankerous, old he-bear. He sat there blinking and confused, blueberry juice running down his chin, while the dogs stood off at a distance, barking as if someone had proposed the outlawing of doggie biscuits.

The boys must have set a world's record for stopping. In an instant, three running boys became a heap of three bodies, each with a pair of very big eyes. In about the time it took to fall down, they got up again and began running back down the hill. First went Carrot, who instinctively moved his legs as fast as they would go until he remembered that you can't outrun a bear, but he forgot that you can't outclimb a bear, so he headed for a large oak tree nearby. The other two boys followed him, and soon all three were perched high off the ground like oversized birds.

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As they clung to branches above the undergrowth, they could see the bear, and the bear could see them. And when he realized that he faced more enemies than he could count, he roused himself and lunged for the dogs. Radish skipped away, but a swinging paw caught Peanut and knocked him about ten feet into the bushes.

At this, something snapped inside Turnip. He screamed, "You can't do that to my dog," and with amazing speed for his bulk, he slid down the tree and began running toward the bear. The other boys, not wishing to see their friend swallowed alive, followed him down and ran after him. With rocks in their hands, the gang rushed at the bear with the mad fury of fighter planes. The whole hillside resounded with their angry shouting.

First came Turnip, who was yelling, "You lousy bear. You can't do that to my dog!"

Then came Bean, screaming, "Hey, you fat slob. What do you think you're doing!"

Last came Carrot, the most spiritual of the three. He was shouting, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!"

When the bear had a good look at the oncoming attack by three chattering, multicolored, foul-smelling beasts with the curious ability to hurl part of themselves in his direction, he decided that he could find plenty of blueberries elsewhere, and he lumbered away. Dogs he could handle. They were normal animals. But these must be visitors from another world.

When the boys found Peanut in the bushes, they were greatly relieved to be greeted by his wagging tail. He was lying there stunned and scared but unhurt. His wiry little body apparently had nine lives like a cat. By the time the gang arrived home, he was perky as ever. Turnip was so overjoyed at

his dog's escape from death that Carrot invited him to stay over and celebrate.

Later in the evening, as they sat eating popcorn, Carrot said, "You know, Turnip, today you were a living Bible verse."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you were like the verse that says, 'Perfect love casteth out fear' [1 John 4:18]. You loved your silly little dog so much that to save his life you weren't afraid of anything—not even a vicious old bear that could have knocked your head off."

"No, he couldn't."

"Well, he could if he were a grizzly. Anyway, he was dangerous, but you ran at him like he was just a cow. I wonder why we don't show the same courage when we witness to people. They're in greater danger than Peanut was. They'll go to hell if they never accept Christ. Why are we too bashful and too scared to give them the gospel that can save their lives?"

"I guess we don't love them enough."

"I guess you're right."