

Chapter 3

A pearly layer of fog lay still and silent above the Glen Park district, a comforting shroud that muffled city noises and made the world feel small. Jack staggered under his loaded newspaper bag. Weekend sales inserts made Friday papers heavier than usual. He roamed his eyes over the faces of the rowhouses on Chenery Street. Living room windows above formed the eyes, the garage below the mouth. Shutters next to the windows made a house look angry.

He thought ahead to his daily meetup with Samuel. Today would be the tenth. Or was it eleven? During their first few conversations, he had wondered to himself: “Am I really having this conversation with a colored man?” Now it felt like he’d known Samuel his entire life. The depth of the fast-growing friendship made him feel warm.

He lumbered around one of the street’s gentle curves and spotted the old man waiting for him, his dark-blue watch cap resting on his lap. Tight-curly, salt and pepper hair fringed his mahogany-colored scalp.

“How’s it going, Samuel?” Mild anxiety niggled at Jack over what he was about to ask.

Samuel’s happy smile slackened a bit when he caught Jack’s anxious expression. “Looks like you got a question.”

“Yeah, I guess I do, but I worry it might be too nosy.”

Samuel waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t worry about askin’ me awkward questions, Jack. I’m pretty tough. Sometimes questions like that gets a real good conversation started.”

Jack shrugged out of his newspaper bag and laid it on the sidewalk. He put his hands in his pockets. “OK, why are you in a wheelchair? Did you have a bad accident or something?”

Samuel laughed. “That’s your nosy question? Well, I think I can handle that one.” He settled back in his wheelchair.

“It was a work accident. Right after the war began, I heard about a lotta jobs out here in San Francisco. The government needed thousands of workers to build ships for the U.S. Navy. So, I come out here from Alabama hopin’ to get hired. Had just enough money for the train trip. Three days later, the shipyards hired me. I didn’t have no ship construction skills, but they hired me as a welder’s helper.”

“The Korean War?”

“No, no, further back—1942. The start of World War Two. That was when the colored population exploded here in San Francisco. Lots of workers from the South.”

“What’s a welder’s helper?”

Samuel laughed without a smile. "Mostly, I did whatever they told me to do. Just a labor job, haulin' stuff around. Didn't take no brains at all. The kind of job they gave to most of the colored workers." A pleased expression crept onto his face. "After a couple of months, they needed more welders, so my boss sent me to welding school. After I passed the first test, they put me to work in the assembly shop attachin' beams to the plates they used for buildin' those huge navy ships." Samuel put his hands together like he was praying. "I was doin' skilled labor."

"Is welding hard?"

"Like a lot of things, it's hard until you know how to do it. After a few months, I got to be good at it. Welded for most of two years. Until my accident."

A strained expression overtook his face and he squeezed his eyes shut. "Overhead, the bridge cranes hauled heavy steel through the shop. They tried to keep the workers out from under, but the war caused everyone to be in a big hurry.

"One day, a heavy beam busted loose from a crane hook and crashed into my hip. The rigger lost control of the guide rope that kept it steady, and it bumped against one of the support columns of the shop. I coulda been killed. Funny thing was, I didn't feel no pain. That came later in the hospital. Spent ten days in there tryin' to get better but couldn't heal right. Too much nerve damage."

"Can you walk?"

"Just a bit. I can get up from this wheelchair to use the bathroom or climb into bed, and I can stand a little to start food on the stove." He patted the armrest of his wheelchair. "Been ridin' this baby for about twelve years now."

Jack squatted down until his eyes were level with Samuel's. "Does your hip hurt?"

"Not when I'm sat down, but it hurts when I have to walk."

Gloom settled over Jack. What would it be like to live like that? "Does anyone ever come by to help out? I could do some shopping for you."

Samuel put his hands to his chest, looked up toward the sky, and laughed. "Thank you, Lord!" He turned to Jack. "I'm needin' to go to the market for some food, but my elbow's hurtin' me. Would you mind pushin' me over there after you finish your route?"

Jack grinned and used both hands to give a light squeeze to Samuel's forearm. "You bet! I'll be back in a flash." He hurried off to make the rest of his deliveries.

Thirty minutes later, he returned, berating himself over an undelivered newspaper in his bag. He couldn't remember who he had missed.

Boss is gonna get so ticked off.

Unaware of Jack's distress, Samuel directed him. "Grab the handles at the back and push. I ain't that heavy."

Jack guided him past the parade of houses that lined the boundaries of Chenery Steet—stucco fronts on the newer homes, painted wood for the older. His worry over the missed delivery faded.

Maybe this is a good time to tell Samuel about my dream.

"What do you think about engineers, Samuel? I think they have totally cool jobs. I want to design tall buildings or bridges when I grow up. Do you know Montgomery Street?"

"Sure do. Lots of tall buildings over there."

"Think about the engineers who designed them. Those skyscrapers have to be strong enough to survive earthquakes."

Samuel gave Jack a broad smile over his shoulder. "Yep, those guys got to be sm-smart." The wheelchair bumped as Jack pushed it over an uneven portion of the sidewalk.

"You better believe it. Hey Samuel, you ever go across the Golden Gate Bridge?"

Samuel chuckled with delight. "Sure, I have. Several times."

"One time, my parents walked across the bridge with me to the Marin County side. It felt like gravity wanted to pull me down when I looked over the rail. There's a word for it."

"Vertigo?"

"That's it. I had to force myself to look down to where the two bridge towers shoot into the water. They planted those things on the bottom of the sea, Samuel. Imagine how hard that would be. The water there's deep enough for huge ships to sail through. And, think about the gigantic suspension system. One design mistake would cause all of it to crash into the ocean."

Samuel beamed like a proud uncle. "Yeah, those engineers are like magicians. And don't forget all those guys who actually built the bridge with hands and tools. Lots of danger there."

Jack grimaced. "Yeah, eleven men died, ten of them all at once."

"Someone told me that hittin' the water from that height ain't much different from landin' on solid ground. Not sure I believe that, but pretty much everyone who falls is killed."

Jack's grimace turned into an excited smile. "How cool would it be to finish building some huge project like that, then just stand there and admire it—I mean for the whole world to go holy cow over it."

Samuel craned his neck around again. "I hear engineers got to study a lot of math."

“That’s what made me interested. I’m good at math, so I checked out an algebra book from the library and work on it at home. I want to learn about it now before I take an algebra class.”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

When they reached Diamond Street, Jack rocked the wheelchair back and lowered the rear wheels over the curb, then tilted it again to raise it onto the sidewalk on the other side. “How do you do this when you’re by yourself?”

“Sometimes a pedestrian helps me. Mostly, I use driveways.”

“The city could make cement ramps at the intersections.”

“That’s the engineer in you, Jack.”

They entered Diamond Street Market where Mrs. Flanigan, the owner’s wife, stepped from behind a display counter. “Hi, Jack.” She walked toward him with a smile that evaporated when she saw Samuel. “Oh, I didn’t know you had company.”

“This is Samuel—”

Mrs. Flanigan scurried back behind the display counter, her hand to her mouth, glancing at them once before she disappeared.

Jack stared after her, then said to Samuel, “What was that all about?”

A resigned tone stole into Samuel’s voice. “Nothin’, really. She’s just scared of me.”

“But you’re just . . .”

“Don’t worry about it. The people work in this market are easily frightened. That’s why I only been here once before.”

“Yeah, but . . . Is it like that for you everywhere?”

“No, there’s a market further down on Chenery Street where the people are friendly.”

Jack looked back to where Mrs. Flanigan disappeared. “Why’d we come here then?”

“It’s closer. And I thought if I was with you, I wouldn’t get no hard looks.”

Jack tightened his grip on the wheelchair handles. “That’s messed up.”

“Don’t dwell on it. Take me to where they got beans.”

Two aisles over, Samuel pointed to the topmost shelf. “Grab me two cans of pinto beans.”

“Sure.” Jack handed the cans to Samuel, who placed them onto a small platform beneath his seat. “How would you do this if you were by yourself?”

"Sometimes I stand up. Sometimes I ask a customer. It gets done. C'mon, let's get some canned tomatoes."

Jack spotted Mr. Flanigan staring at them from the shadows at the far end of the pasta aisle, his usual smile missing. Jack whispered, "You see the owner down there at the end of the aisle, Samuel?"

"Of course, I do. He's afraid I'm stealin' stuff. Don't let it bother you." He pointed to the bottom shelf. "Grab me one of those cans of pureed tomatoes. Then we'll go get some bread."

Mrs. Flanigan rang up the sale at the checkout counter without looking at either Jack or Samuel. Mr. Flanigan approached and leaned over to peer at the platform under the wheelchair seat.

Samuel aimed a pained laugh toward the ceiling. "I ain't stole nothin' from you, sir."

Mr. Flanigan's face flushed. "We're just thorough in this store."

Jack felt incensed. "How come you never check me out when I shop in here?"

"We know you, Jack, and value your business."

Jack exploded. "Not anymore." He put his hands on his hips. "I'll never shop in here again. You're not the only store around here." He bade an angry goodbye and pushed Samuel toward the doorway. Both Flanigans stared at the two of them with anxious expressions.

Outside, Jack steered Samuel toward home. "He's just thorough? Racist is more like it."

"They're afraid, Jack. I'm too different for them."

Jack paused. "Actually, I was a little scared of you the first time we talked,"

"I know. Your eyes gave you away."

"The kid I took the route from warned me about you."

Resignation tinged Samuel's voice. "Let me guess. Told you to shove the paper in my hand and walk away—same like he did."

"You've gotten a lot of that in your life, haven't you?"

"Goes with the color of my skin."

When they reached the sidewalk in front of Samuel's home, Jack said, "You know, Samuel? I'm glad we've become friends. I'm learning a lot of stuff about life from you."

Samuel tried but couldn't quite hide the tears that welled up. "Thank you for sayin' that, Jack. The feelin's mutual." He rubbed the heels of his hands over his eyes. "You go on home now, OK? I'll see you tomorrow." He pivoted his wheelchair and headed toward his cottage, his arms like skinny sticks beneath his shirtsleeves, pointed elbows reaching back before each thrust.

Why aren't his arms more muscular from all that exercise?

Jack headed home thinking about the human soul. When his teachers talked about it, the idea seemed vague and distant. Now, he felt its presence every day. Each time he spoke with Samuel, he could feel their souls touching.

Maybe the Buddhists are right to say the soul is an aura.

His worry about the leftover newspaper resurfaced. Who had he missed? No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't figure it out. At the bottom of Congo Street, it hit him. Mrs. Garibaldi! How could he forget her? She was one of the nicest ladies around.

He hurried uphill to the house with pink and red hydrangeas next to the stairway and stole a guilty look up and down the street. No one visible anywhere. He tossed his final newspaper upward to the right corner of her small porch, away from the empty milk bottles she'd placed to the left of her door.