

BIG SAM

CHAPTER 1

Samuel Washington gazed at the clear blue summer sky through the iron bars of his prison cell window. Today was the day. *Freedom at last!*

Sam would never forget the frightening day he entered these stone walls a lifetime ago, a bitter man hating every living creature on God's earth. Because of his size and strength, Sam had appreciated the fact that he had intimidated just about everyone. Everyone, that is, except Beanpole.

Beanpole was a lean white man, not much more than skin and bones. Thick glasses magnified his already bulging eyes. Beanpole had a Book, and he claimed he had discovered a Man who had completely changed his life.

Over time Beanpole befriended the African American. As Sam got to know the quiet little man, Sam came to learn what Beanpole found in this Book, the Holy Bible, and was introduced to the Man named Jesus.

There was a time when Sam thought he could never get used to life behind bars. Today Sam wondered if he could adapt to any other

way of life. The thought of freedom now frightened him more than the thought of prison ever had.

From where he lay on his bunk, Sam's cell mate watched Sam stuff his meager possessions into a small box. The items scarcely filled the canvas container. "I can do without anything 'cept this," Sam told his cell mate as he reverently placed his Bible next to the box.

"Big Sam, I know we never seen eye-to-eye, but I'm gonna miss you, brother," Sam's cell mate confessed.

Sam grinned at the skinny misty-eyed African American. "Aw heck, J.D., there ain't a body alive that sees eye to eye . . . unless he be cross-eyed."

J.D. laughed, glad that Sam could inject a touch of humor on this bittersweet day. What he would miss more than anything was the peace that surrounded Sam within these walls.

"I'm gonna miss you, too, J.D. Look here." Sam retrieved a small flowering potted plant growing on the window ledge. The little flowers had lifted their delicate faces to the sun as they basked in the sunlight. His rough fingers tenderly traced the plant's healthy leaves. Sam turned to his cell mate. With mock ceremony, Sam presented the plant to his friend. "In honor

of our friendship, I want you to have my most treasured possession.”

J.D. rose from his bunk, but refused the plant. “That there’s your plant. I can’t be accepting it. I know how much ‘dis here little plant means to you.”

“Look here, J.D., I’m gonna be on the outside now,” Sam reminded the man. “This here little plant is happy on the inside.” He gazed at the colorful flowers and smiled. “Now, tell the truth. Ain’t it beautiful? Nobody can make a flower this pretty, ‘cept God. Now, if I was to take this here plant to the outside world, why she’d never make it. All that pollution, . . . why she’d be on death row out there.”

Sam could see J.D. was still undecided. “Look here, I can always get me another plant. It’d make me real happy, J.D., to know ‘dis here plant is safe in your hands.”

J.D. knew the living plant had given Sam something to love, something to care for, something to call his own. He had seen for himself how the little plant had helped to transform Sam’s outlook on life.

Countless times J.D. had covered his ears, trying to drown out Sam’s tender conversations with the plant. To J.D. it seemed as though the little plant had sensed how much it was loved, and responded to that love by

blossoming into a show of beautiful blooms. Even the prison guards would stop by to see how Sam's little plant was progressing. The men in prison had fondly come to nickname Sam "The black man with the green thumb."

As proof, there was the drawing on the wall of a black man's hand sporting a green thumb. The work of art had been sketched on a sheet torn from the notebook of a gang member serving a life sentence.

J.D. had marveled how even the hardest of men had respect for his cell mate. The hardened men responded to Sam, just as the little plant had, all because of Sam's love for this Man called Christ.

J.D. realized how much it would mean to Sam to share his plant with someone left behind. "You sure you wanna part with it?" J.D. asked.

Sam picked up his leather Bible. The pages seemed to spring alive as the Book fell open. Here and there were highlighted verses which had served as inspirations to Sam on dark days. "I don't mind parting with my plant as long as I got my Bible."

"I'm gonna take 'dis here plant, Big Sam, just cause you wanna give it to me. And I want you to know that 'dis here plant's gonna remind me of you." J.D. took possession of the little

plant and returned it to the windowsill.

The two men exchanged a quick embrace as a guard unlocked the cell door.

“Okay, Big Sam,” stated the guard, “you’re only a few minutes away from being a free man.”

The guard lingered at the door, allowing Sam a moment to bid his cell mate farewell. Sam grasped his friend’s hand. “You take good care of yourself, here?” said Sam.

J.D. nodded and wiped a tear from his eye.

Sam picked up his Bible and tiny box and stepped into the hall. He hesitated as the cell door clanged shut behind him, realizing he was hearing this sound for the last time.

As Sam and the guard walked down the hall, calls from fellow prison mates echoed from within cells. “Big Sam, you take it easy out there, man!” “Pray for us, Big Sam!” “Don’t forget us when you’re on the outside!” “If you get bored out there, you can always come back!”

The guard detected the tone of sadness in some of the men’s voices. “Sounds like you’re leaving some friends behind.”

“Yah, suh. Some of them guys are like family,” Sam admitted.

“You’re always welcome to stay with us,”

joked the guard.

Sam grinned and shook his head. “Naw, suh! As the mother bird tells her ‘yung’uns, the nest is made for flying. And this bird done sprouted wings!”

As Sam entered the warden’s office, the prison chaplain stood waiting for him. “There he is,” said the preacher with a warm smile. Shaking Sam’s hand, the chaplain added, “The man of the day.”

Sam beamed. “Reverend, I feel just like I been resurrected.”

“You have been,” the pastor reminded him.

“Samuel, the preacher brought you a little going away present,” stated the warden.

The chaplain removed a small object from his pocket and placed it in Sam’s hand. “This is something another minister gave me a long time ago when I was new to the Lord’s Kingdom. I vowed I’d keep it till I could find someone worthy to give it to.” The pastor winked and added, “I think the Lord wants you to have it.”

Sam gazed at a small cross suspended from a sparkling gold chain. “Reverend, I can’t take - -”

“You take it, son. You’ve come a long way since you’ve walked through these doors. You should be as proud of yourself as I am.”

“I am! I am proud of me!” Sam added, “I’m gonna keep this with me always. Thank you, Reverend,” Sam said as he draped the cross and chain around his neck.

The pastor shook Sam’s hand once more. Sam felt something crumple in his palm. He recognized the distinct feel of paper bills. The pastor whispered, “For when the bus stops. You get yourself a hot meal.”

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Sam had no desire to count the money. He knew the pastor’s gift was more than generous. “Reverend, you sure been good to me while I was here.”

The chaplain smiled and placed a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “Now, you go out there and be good to someone else.”

Sam gazed at the men. The room was silent until the warden spoke. “Alright, Samuel, before you get us all to bawling, you’d better get a move on . . . unless you want to stay with us a little longer.”

“Naw, suh. Thanks just the same, but I done overstayed my visit already.”

The warden extended his hand. “Good luck to you, Samuel,” he said with deep sincerity. “And the next time we meet, let’s

make it on the outside of these walls, shall we?"

"Yah, suh," agreed Sam.

Sam nodded a farewell greeting to the men and departed. The pastor stepped to the doorway and watched after Sam. "Lord, look after our Big Sam," he whispered with a smile.

After Sam's paperwork had been completed and his personal items returned to him, Sam was led to the exit. As Sam stepped into the warm sunshine and began his walk down the path which had brought him here, he heard a guard call out. "Samuel Washington, I'm gonna miss those tomatoes you used to grow."

Sam glanced back at the man and waved. As Sam relished the feel of the warming heat on his shoulders, he paused to watch his ex-fellow inmates working the crops in an expansive field under the ever-present scrutinizing eyes of armed guards. It was those fields that had taught him about God's goodness through the tiny seeds which he had planted . . . seeds which sprouted forth nourishment for body and soul.

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The bus shifted gears as it jostled down an open highway. Most of its passengers had

already been deposited at stops along the way. Sam gazed out of the window, drinking in the scenery of open farmland as far as his eye could see. Sam reached up and gently touched the reassuring cross hanging from his neck.

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The bus station was nearly empty. Not many people were leaving or coming to the small, unpretentious town. Ellen and William Washington, Sam's parents, humbly dressed in their Sunday best, stood on the platform waiting patiently. Both had dreamed and prayed that this day would come, and now their prayers had been answered.

The aging man and woman focused on the bus as it slowly approached the station. The couple shuffled closer to the massive vehicle as their eyes anxiously searched the windows.

The brakes squealed as the bus rolled to a gentle stop. A moment later, the doors flung open and several passengers dismounted. Suddenly Ellen's face lit up at the sight of her brawny son. William stood silently behind his wife, beaming.

Sam grinned at the sight of his parents standing there. Embracing his teary-eyed mother, Sam managed to hold his own tears at

bay. His eyes traveled to his father. William smiled and offered his hand in a greeting. “Good to have you home, son.”

Ellen took hold of Sam’s shoulders and stepped back. “Let me see you, son.” Her eyes scanned the big man. “My, my, just look how he’s grown! Just look, William!”

“I see, Ellen,” William said, amused.

“Ma, don’t get hysterical here,” Sam whispered to her. “Wait till we get home, then you can bawl all you want to.”

Ellen laughed and clutched Sam’s arm. “Son, it’s good to see you.” Ellen dabbed at her eyes with a delicate lace cloth.

“Ma, you just saw me last week,” Sam reminded her.

“But that was different. You were in that awful place.”

Sam wrapped an arm around Ellen’s shoulder. “Don’t you be crying, ma. I’m home now. The time for tears is past.”

“Your ma’s just happy to see you, son,” explained William, patting Sam on the back. William reached for Sam’s little box.

“Pa, I’ll take that,” Sam told his father. “You carried enough of a burden.”

William nodded with understanding. “Come on, son. Let’s get your mother home before she catches one of them crying spells

again. I never seen a woman who could cry at the drop of a hat like your ma. Why, the last time we went to a wedding, she made the river overflow. And the head-line news had the gall to blame it on the storm!”

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Sam surveyed the familiar scenery as William drove toward the family’s humble home. The pine trees at the rear of the house were a welcoming sight, as though they had been waiting for his return. The rose bushes Ellen had planted were in need of tender loving care.

How good it was to smell the scent of the magnolia trees with their large heavy-leafed blossoms. Sam hadn’t realized how much he’d missed this place. A passing thought asked him if he would have difficulty readjusting to life, but Sam quickly tossed any doubt from his mind. He would depend on the Lord for that, Sam told himself, just as he had depended on the Lord to see him through his long days in prison.

The faces of the men he had left behind were suddenly before him. For one instant Sam felt a tinge of guilt. He was free, while his friends were still incarcerated, some for the duration of their earthly lives. “Lord,” he whispered, “take care of each and every one of

those men. Help them to know You like I do.”

As they neared the front door, Ellen glanced at William and winked.

“Ma, what was that look you just gave pa?” asked Sam trailing behind them.

Ellen threw open the door. “Surprise!” The chorus of voices startled Sam. This was the last thing he had anticipated. Sam scanned the faces of those crowded in the small living room. Aunts, uncles, cousins, and school friends were there. Even Reverend Brown, the pastor of the small community church Sam had refused to attend a lifetime ago, was amongst those who had come to welcome Sam home.

The small crowd converged on the guest of honor, slapping Sam’s back and shaking his hand. Faces buzzed around him. Everyone seemed to be speaking at once. “Sam, it sure is good to see you, old boy.” “You looking good, son.” “Hey, dude! Remember me?” Sam felt himself growing dizzy as the crowd pressed in about him.

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After everyone had bid Sam welcome, the guests focused their attention on the tables weighted down with food. One of Sam’s friends from the past, a young man nicknamed *Rush*,

sauntered up to Sam. “Man, I bet you glad to be back home,” he said as he helped himself to a chicken salad sandwich.

“You kidding? They had to pry my hands loose from them bars to kick me out of there,” Sam joked. “By the way, thanks for all them letters you wrote.”

Rush hung his head. “Man, I meant to write you, but you know how things are.”

“Yeah. I know how things are. Ain’t you learned how to write your A, B, C’s yet?” Sam teased.

“You think life’s been easy?” Rush glanced about the room and leaned in close. “Look, Sam, I got me some new weapons. Bought ‘um cheap. We can go after Clem and all them white folks that got up there on the stand and lied about you, just so they could send you to prison.”

“Hold it,” Sam said firmly. “I ain’t going after nobody.”

Rush stared at Sam in disbelief. “Man, you is kidding, ain’t you?”

Sam shook his head. “Nope.”

“You mean to stand there on those big trunks of yours and tell me you chickening out?”

“I ain’t chickening out of nothin’. I just ain’t gonna do it. I spent enough time away. Besides, I found the Lord,” confessed Sam.

Rush gazed at his friend, confused. “You *found* Him?” he asked, mystified. “What? Was He lost or something?”

“He wasn’t the one that was lost . . . I was,” explained Sam. “And now that I found Him, I ain’t about to lose Him.”

Rush rolled his eyes in frustration. “Aw, man! Don’t tell me . . . you ain’t gone and turned into one of them Christians, did you?” he asked, exasperated.

“Call it what you want,” said Sam. “All I know is I’m following Jesus now.”

Rush shook his head. “Aw man, what that prison done gone and done to you? You used to be the meanest brother around. I mean you worked hard to get that reputation. Don’t tell me you going soft on me, brother.”

Sam smiled. He offered a cup of punch to his friend. “Have some?”

“No thanks. Religion is too strong for me.”

That night Sam sat down for supper with his parents at the kitchen table. Ellen had cooked all of Sam’s favorite dishes. Sam grinned as he helped himself to generous portions. “Ma, you don’t know how often I dreamed of your cooking.”

“Eat up, boy,” Ellen said happily.

“You got any plans, son?” asked William.

“Now, Will, don’t be rushing the boy,”

scolded Ellen.

“It’s okay, ma,” Sam said. “I’m gonna get me a job someplace. Something where I can get on my feet. Maybe the syrup mill is hiring.”

“Just don’t get discouraged if you don’t get a job right away,” William advised his son. “Some folks shy away from hiring ex-cons.”

“William!” Ellen snapped at her husband.

“He’s gotta know the truth, Ellen.”

“He’s right, ma,” Sam agreed. “But I know the Lord’s got something special for me down the road.”