

# CHAPTER ONE

The cars in front had slowed down to a crawl, a sea of red lights stretching as far as the next rise on the road. Martin's hands slowly twisted around the steering wheel. *Some idiot who can't drive...an old geezer probably.* The rain was now a steady drizzle. He turned the knob to speed up the wipers, but that was only more annoying. Again he looked at his watch. Twenty till. *Damn! A wasted trip home. Where could she be?* So much for trying to patch things up.

He got off at the University Avenue exit and headed along the frontage road paralleling the freeway. Then he saw the jackknifed trailer truck on the freeway, smoke coming from the big rig, and realized it was the cause of the slowdown. Past the truck the place seemed deserted, so Martin got back on at the next on-ramp. In his rearview mirror he could see the accident not quite a city block behind. The front right tire of the big truck was resting on top of a red Honda Accord, completely smashing it. *That's Jenny's car.* A sickening feeling took over his stomach. *Oh God, please let them be alive, I'll do whatever you want.* With his heart racing, Martin pulled over and stopped. He got out and ran towards the wreck, his eyes riveted on the Honda and the patrolman talking on his shoulder mike and occasionally peeking inside the smashed car. When Martin was about two hundred feet away, the cop saw him and turned in his direction. Martin glanced desperately at the license plate: the first three letters were DLC. He stopped. That wasn't his wife's car. He surveyed the scene, the cop looking at him intently.

"There's nothing you can do. Stay away," the patrolman shouted.

Martin assented with his head. He felt his insides release the tension. He stood to catch his breath. *Poor people, poor people, whoever you are.* His relief was someone else's pain. Someone related to whoever had died in that car was perhaps expecting her or him home in a few hours. Then the news would come...and the horrible grief would start.

He tried to regain composure as he drove, but the palms of his hands felt cold and clammy, his brow was covered with sweat, and his heart was still racing. For a moment he had been sure, so sure it was Jenny and Adam in that car. He knew that some days she picked up their son at school, especially when the weather was bad. *In the blink of an eye our lives can be destroyed.*

Martin looked at his watch as he parked the car in the bank's lot. Two fifty-four. Six minutes until closing time. Still shaken by the accident, he rushed across the street to the bank.

He noticed an old, slim black man leaning against one of the columns by the bank's door. As he approached, the man raised a trembling hand to catch his attention. In his other hand he clutched a plastic bag.

"Sir," he heard the man say in a tentative voice, "Can you help me? ...please?"

Martin looked at the man. Gentle eyes on a leathery face. He knew he had to stop and listen. As the man started to speak, Martin thought how his wife always accused him of being a pushover. He looked at the bank door. *I still have a few minutes.*

"Look sir," the man said, "I don't mean to trouble you or anything, but could you call me a cab?" The voice sounded weak. He was thin, in his late seventies and appeared to be leaning against the column for support. "A lady in the bank called me one a while back." Then he noticed Martin looking him over, studying his clothes. "I need to get to the hospital...I got money, I just need a cab."

"Are you all right? Maybe you need an ambulance."

The old man held up a hand. "No, It's not that bad. I just need to check in, that's all."

"I'll see what I Can do. I've got to go in the bank first. Afterwards I'll take care of you."

The watery eyes smiled at him. "I'll be here."

Once inside the bank, Martin wondered why no one else had helped the old guy. As he approached the teller, he recognized Martha, who often waited on him. When he inquired about the man, she told him she had noticed him out there for at least the past half hour or so. She had no idea whom "the elderly gentleman" was waiting for. Martin had always tried to be nice to the plump, rather homely and apparently lonely teller, and he decided to not press her about it.

His business done, Martin looked for the branch manager. He would help the old man, but first things first. He found the assistant manager instead.

"Yes," the young man said, "I've noticed the old gentleman standing out there."

"Has anyone called him a cab?" Martin asked, knowing what the answer was going to be.

"Oh, is that what he's waiting for?"

Martin felt blood surge to his face. The anger came out in his voice. "The old guy walked into this bank, and someone agreed to call him a cab. That's what he's waiting for. Who the hell was supposed to call him a cab?"

“Mister Devon, I assure you that if we knew he needed a cab we would’ve called him one. Please, sir, calm down.”

*Calm down...calm down...my ass.*

Standing with his face close to the young man’s, Martin was now shouting. “I’m going to find out who the old man talked to, who promised him a cab...and then I’ll make sure that jerk gets fired. Understand? The old man is sick, and is waiting for a cab to go to the damn hospital!” The entire bank was now silent, all eyes turned in his direction, but he didn’t care. With this he walked out. He knew the old guy had been dismissed from someone’s mind as unimportant. *Next time they’ll know better, stupid bastards.* His anger spent, now he simply felt bad for the old man.

The man was still there, leaning against the column, clutching his plastic bag.

Martin decided to make things right for him. “Come with me sir. I’ll take you to the hospital.” *So it will take half an hour out of my life, what the hell.*

Smiling and appearing surprised, the man thanked him. Martin guessed that at that point his primary need was to sit down somewhere.

As they walked slowly across the street, Martin became aware that he was still feeling the jolt from the accident in the form of a knot in his stomach. *Now the old guy. Wonder why he has to go to the hospital?* The man carried his grocery bag with care. In it he seemed to have some cans of food and what looked like two apples.

Once in the car, Martin’s mind started reviewing the things he had to do that afternoon. He had already wasted enough time. *There’s the quarterly report for the Labor contract, two calls to make, the United invoice.* The knot had become a gnawing tension in the pit of his stomach. *First, prepare the draft, then call...*

The old man interrupted him. He was saying that his name was Percy and he had taken the bus to the supermarket to buy groceries. “On my way back, I started feeling poorly and knew it was time for the hospital. I got off the bus to look for a cab, but couldn’t see none...and no public phone, neither. So I went to the bank.”

Percy continued to talk, and Martin figured it was going to be that way for the rest of the trip. He wondered what he himself would be like when he got to be that age.

The old guy was now saying he had been in the Merchant Marines for most of his life, until they told him to retire. Then he worked for a grocery store, “because a man is no good sitting alone in a room.” Then had come the cancer, but at the same time he had met Mojo, and he helped him get better.

But now Mojo had told him the time to die was coming to him. “Get ready to go, Percy, is what he told me the other day.” The old man let out a weak chuckle, “I’m not just lying in bed waiting to die, no sir. Mojo is helping me get around, keeps pumping me up.” Martin turned to look at him, and noticed a big smile on Percy’s face as he stared straight ahead.

*Poor old guy is making things up. Guess he has a right. Why not? He’s probably lonely.*

It was surprising that Percy knew exactly how to get to the hospital. He had directed Martin all the while. Martin drove up to the emergency door, but Percy told him to take him to the main entrance.

“No need,” he said, “don’t plan to die this very minute.”

Martin watched as Percy opened the car door, precariously slid off the seat and stood up outside the car. Then he bent down to say something.

“Could you do me one more favor? Don’t mean to impose.”

In his mind Martin heard Jenny’s voice telling him what a pushover he was. *So here it is, he’s going to ask me for money. Oh, boy...*

“Could you tell Mojo I’m here? I sure would like to see him.”

Martin looked down at the floorboard. *So maybe there is a Mojo after all.* “OK, Percy, give me his phone number.”

“Oh, there’s no phone. You find him home.”

*Home?* He thought of the report that needed writing, but the eyes and face looking at him expectantly told him this was important.

“OK Percy. How do I find Mojo?” Martin sighed.

The old man seemed to think about it. “I just have to show you. Can’t seem to remember the address.” He opened the door and got back in the car. Martin felt trapped.

They drove through Oakland’s less appealing streets, what once had been a middle-class neighborhood from a hundred years back. Eventually they came to a white, two-story wooden house, one that like the rest in that part of town had seen much better times.

“So this is Mojo’s house?” asked Martin.

“This is my place,” Percy said. “Mojo is staying here with me.” With these words the old man started getting out of the car, and Martin noticed how difficult it was for him to move; it seemed he had been getting weaker by the minute.

“Stay here, I’ll go get Mojo.” Martin told him.

Percy smiled back and nodded. “Thank you. Just ring the bell for number four.” His voice had also gotten noticeably weaker and he now spoke with difficulty, as someone fighting pain.

Martin went around the car and toward the white building. *So I'll ring the door bell...Right, a strange white man in an all-black neighborhood...just go through with it, what the hell...damn.*

Martin rang the button under the faded number four someone had scribbled on the wood with a pen. In short order he heard heavy footsteps coming down creaky wooden stairs. The footsteps stopped behind the door; then he heard the lock turn, and the door opened wide.

He was now looking at a massive black man, of perhaps forty or so, wearing a white tee shirt and black pants. He was taller than Martin by a few inches, so he was at least six-and-a-half feet tall. His body was heavily muscled, as though he had spent most of his life doing grueling physical labor, or lifting weights. However, the face was gentle and calm.

"And how can I help you, friend?" Two warm eyes looked at him under thick, black eyebrows. Then he glanced around Martin at the car and its passenger.

"Ah, Percy! I've been worried about you," the big man shouted past Martin. He went around him and bounded down the steps to the car.

Martin watched as Mojo reached through the open window and gently stroked Percy's head, as a parent would soothe a hurt child.

"Percy, you're weak, and you're in pain. Let's have the nice man take you to the hospital right now." Without further words, Mojo took the bag of groceries the old man handed him and turned around to face Martin.

"Thank you for what you're doing for Percy," he said as he walked back toward Martin and the building. "I'll put these away and be right back down."

Martin walked over to the car and was surprised at Percy's change. It was obvious he was now revitalized, as though he had been given a magic potion. His eyes shone with new vitality, and he sat erect, his face now reflecting a renewed awareness. Martin wondered whether the man named Mojo had somehow made the old man better just by touching him.

"That's my friend Mojo. He can do anything," he explained, as though reading Martin's mind.

On the way back to the hospital Percy again told him he had served thirty years in the Merchant Marines and had traveled "all over God's green earth." He mentioned two wives. He told Martin that six months before, the doctors had found a cancerous tumor in his head and told him there was nothing they could do for him, that he would have to "lie down and die." He had gone home to pack a few things to take to the hospital when Mojo showed up at his door. The moment he met him, his pain had gone away and he had felt much better. The doctors couldn't explain his recovery, and told him to stay at home

for as long as he could. He knew it was Mojo who was keeping him strong until the last. His new friend had moved in and stayed with him ever since. “An angel of the Lord,” the old man described him, and there was no doubt in Martin’s mind that’s what he meant.

As Percy rambled on, Martin glanced at the big man in the rear-view mirror. He was now wearing a crisply ironed white dress shirt. He sat impassively, apparently only half-listening and mostly staring out the window. His face bore a smile and what Martin had decided was the look of someone halfway lost in a very pleasant thought. He had a wide, broad face and strong, well-defined black features on very dark skin. The face could easily have portrayed brutal force; however, kindness seemed to have left its mark, for the feeling Martin got from looking at Mojo was that of gentleness. There was something quite different about the man, Martin thought; it wasn’t his appearance, although that was impressive, but the feeling he had around him, which now seemed to fill the car...it was a deep peace.

Martin drove to the hospital’s main entrance. The two men got out of the car and Martin watched as Mojo helped Percy through the front door. The big man then turned around and waved goodbye as he mouthed a silent “thank you.”

Martin drove off and headed home. It was too late to go to the office. Besides, now he didn’t feel the urgency. *Things can wait until tomorrow.* His son would have been home for at least two hours, and there was no telling where his wife was.

As Martin got closer to home, the emptiness started to get hold of him. He could feel it starting in his chest, the soft aching of something missing. He drove on, a part of him musing about the two men he had just met and another part of him thinking about his wife.

Jenny was not at home. Martin found his son Adam reading a book in the living room. The dogs, Sebastian and Toby, were lying on the rug. He watched the scene of the teenager lying prone on the couch with the two snoring dogs by his side. *I am so glad he’s safe.*

Adam turned to greet him. “Hi, Dad!”

“Hey kid, how you doing...have you taken those mutts out for a walk?”

“Yeah, they peed, they pooped, they sniffed around...they’re happy.”

Martin watched as Adam resumed reading his book. His son was growing up to resemble him. At fifteen he was already almost grown into a man, and Martin could see himself at that age: the slim body and wide shoulders, high forehead with straight eyebrows and aquiline nose; although he could also see his wife’s Irish features, the strong square jaw and a fairer complexion than his own.

“What’re you reading, kid?”

“Oh, some stuff for school. Boring.”

Martin walked into the kitchen. While he prepared a snack of tomatoes, cheese, and bread, he heard his wife drive up.

Jenny came into the kitchen with a bag of groceries, and without a word started preparing dinner. Martin looked at her, shrugged his shoulders and went into his study.

Later that evening, as they sat having dinner, Martin told them about his weird encounter with Percy and Mojo. Jenny didn't say anything, but Adam appeared amused by the incident.

“Maybe he's some kind of saint who goes around helping people,” Adam said referring to Mojo. “He can probably change bodies and become anyone he wants to be.”

His mother grimaced and stood up to pour herself another glass of wine. Martin decided to let her be that evening and keep his distance. He was now feeling a bit remote himself. The empty feeling had now grown in his chest. Everything felt heavy.

Martin watched Jenny eat. Her jaw muscles tightened when she chewed. Her fingers held the fork tightly, and she brought the food to her mouth in choppy movements, her gaze fixed on her plate. It was obvious she couldn't wait to leave the table. She had kept her looks over the years, the silky red hair, well-proportioned petite body and handsome, intelligent face; but it was the look in her eyes that had turned ugly. There was now harshness, and very often anger seemed to be constantly simmering under the surface. He wondered what got into her at moments like that, and whether she didn't care how it made her son feel...and him.

Later, when he came to their bedroom, she was sitting on her side of the bed reading. From the cover he could tell it was another one of those New Age books, someone talking about reincarnation, prophesies, U.F.O's, or some inane thing like that. When he got in bed, she closed her book and looked at him.

“Let's talk, Martin.”

*Oh no, not tonight.* He let out a sigh. He needed quiet and he wanted rest. He had been looking forward to sleep...to letting go.

“I know you find it an imposition, but sometimes married people need to talk.”

He tried to pull himself together so at least he could go through the motions. Her voice now seemed distant, disjointed...but then the whole world was starting to feel that way. He became aware of his breathing, and heart beating, but there were no feelings, except a soft aching. In the last few hours

it had been an effort just to go through the details of life: washing dishes, a phone call with his brother he had kept short, leaving water out for the dogs, brushing his teeth, undressing. He knew it would be almost impossible for him to appear responsive.

She was saying it was lack of communication that was driving them apart. "Oh, I feel it too, Martin. I'm very sorry to see this marriage go down just because you don't ever feel like talking."

He wondered if that was her original topic, or one that she just dove into on the spur of the moment. He watched her eyes glitter with emotion and her mouth become more expressive, but he was most concerned about his depression and whether he would be able to carry on the next day. However, her words had actually registered and he nodded when she told him there was something wrong with him.

"And you go happily around giving rides to strange people from the ghetto, when you are needed at the office. You know they called three times this afternoon."

He almost told her he drove home that afternoon looking for her, but that would probably just prolong the conversation and maybe lead to a fight. *At some point she must have checked the answering machine...she can do it by calling in...and now she's making it sound like she was home.*

"Helen also thinks you need to see a therapist," she said.

*Why would two women sit and talk about me when they could talk about so many other things?* Martin momentarily visualized the two sisters sitting around, in his own living room, passionately discussing his problems. The image dwindled and then grew grotesque. He had no energy left. In her mood anything he said would be an opening for a fight. Martin got up with pillow under his arm as she continued talking. While he walked down the stairs to the guest room he could still hear her voice, now louder.

"That's right, walk out on your problems, big man." She was no longer keeping her anger in check; her voice now had that shrill quality he knew so well. He heard words like "failure" and "jerk" as he made it to the bottom of the stairs. He was tired, very tired. He went into the guest room and locked the door.

*Tomorrow I'll talk to her; tomorrow I'll go to the office early, and tomorrow I'll be fine.* Martin brushed aside the oversized pillows and pulled down the covers. With a sigh he plopped himself down and pulled the blankets over him. *Actually, I miss her; miss the woman she was a few years ago, before... Oh, what the hell, go to sleep.* There was a sullen quiet now, as though their distance was palpable and had spread through the big house, making everything thick, thick and cold.

Martin slept. For a time he fidgeted. Then he went into deeper sleep. After a while he dropped into an even deeper state and his eyes fluttered under his closed lids. His body was now very still. Only a part of him that was always aware, deep down in his subconscious mind, observed a silent being that came into his room and stood by the bed, watching him. An arm reached out and a hand waved across the top of Martin's head. At that very moment he started to dream.

In his dream he was driving along a road on a tropical island, and there was pristine blue ocean and sky, and air that felt clean and warm. Then he came to a gate with a man standing by it. Martin could see him clearly, a heavy-set man with red hair wearing a Hawaiian shirt. He was friendly, and Martin told him he had to get to another world in a parallel universe.

The man told him to go through the gate.

Then there was a curving road and a wooden bridge. He saw a beach, a stretch of sand fringed with trees and black rocks at either end. In the middle of it was a big gold door with white columns on either side. The door appeared to be translucent, because he could see lights shining through it. Martin knew he had to go through to the other side.

An impressive looking old man stood by the door. He had a white beard and hair, with gentle but piercing eyes, and Martin somehow knew he was very wise, had powers, was a magician of sorts.

Martin told him he couldn't go on, he didn't want anything more to do with the world because nothing made sense.

The wise man told Martin he would take him to a place where life made sense, where everything was real.

Then the dream ended.

The being waved a hand across Martin's head again, sinking the memory of the dream into his deep subconscious. He stood watching him sleep, perhaps pondering something or other. Then apparently satisfied, the visitor left.

Martin made it to the office in downtown Oakland by eight in the morning, and as he rode the elevator to his company's floor he thought about Jenny. He had tried to kiss her at the breakfast table but she turned her head away. He made an attempt to explain he wasn't feeling well—the euphemism he used to describe his depression—but she ignored him and kept reading the newspaper. He left after hugging his son and wishing him a good day at school.

The empty feeling was very much there, and would probably be with him the entire day.

Mary was manning the receptionists' desk. She was busy putting together folders for a conference Claudia was coordinating.

“Good morning, Mary. I heard you tried to reach me yesterday.”

“Yes, Mister Devon.” She told him that Sanchez, the Project Officer for their biggest contract, had called saying it was urgent. Mary handed Martin a fax that had been waiting for her when she opened the office. Martin read it. The contract “was being suspended pending a fiscal investigation.” He read the fax several times, digesting its contents after the initial shock. *OK. This is bad...real bad.* Inside he felt as if someone had hit him in the chest, and curiously his first reaction was to think about his partner Ted. *Poor guy, this is going to floor him.* He felt Mary watching his reaction. Martin patted her shoulder as he walked past.

He spent the next hour talking with Sanchez on the phone and getting a feel for what had happened. Martin got a lot of official lingo but no straight answers. Sanchez’s voice, ordinarily friendly, was now cold and formal.

Then he received a call from a woman higher up in the Department. Her name was Ms. Gates, and she sounded sympathetic. She had been one of the VIP participants at a training conference he had organized two years before, and now she sounded like a friend. She told him some people in the Department had decided to cancel the contract, and they would do it at any cost.

“Why?” he asked.

“Mainly because they can. They have the power, and you upset one of them.” She told him what he had heard many times before: the ones with the money are gods, and you have to treat them as such. This was a way to let him know who was boss. She told him it was useless to fight; her best advice was to forget about it. “Fold your tent and go somewhere else.”

The problem was, this was a mainstay contract for his company. Without it they would have to go through hard times for the next few months until they could replace the work. He visualized the long days and nights feverishly writing some ten proposals to obtain maybe two or perhaps three contracts.

His partner Ted walked into his office and sat in a chair facing his desk.

“So what happened, Martin?”

He explained that in all probability he had offended a bigwig.

“How? What did you do?”

“You know what I’ve been doing, steering the project in the right direction and making it seem as though it’s their idea, not mine.” Ted knew all about it, as he had been involved in some of the planning sessions. Ted remained silent and Martin filled the uncomfortable void. “Something along the way went wrong, and old man Phillips got his nose out of joint. I don’t know, maybe something I said, maybe something I didn’t say.” The work, he knew, was

crucial for the Department, and they were performing well. *Done in by a stupid little man with a fragile ego. When Jenny hears this she's going to lose it.* He dreaded telling her the bad news. Inside, he felt the imprint of recent hardships. He recalled how hard it was on her the last time they had lost a contract...and then...It had been a scant couple of years since the fight with the tenants. *I never get a break.*

"Phillips? the Program Chief?" Ted sounded incredulous.

"Yes, good old Mark Phillips."

Ted looked at Martin, and Martin knew what was going through his mind. They had gone through difficult times before, but this one was a heavy blow. They would go through a punitive audit that, no matter what, would pile on an excruciating amount of "evidence" they would spend many months and many dollars disproving. It was a terrible thing to happen, at any time, to anyone. One of the horror stories they had heard over the years...now it was happening to them.

The emptiness he had felt in the previous two days had been temporarily obscured by the adrenaline surge with the news. Now the adrenaline was subsiding and the depression was growing...becoming a heavy sense of doom. Nothing mattered at that moment.

"Excuse me Ted, we'll talk later, all right?" With this Martin got up, reached for his jacket, and left the office. He felt his partner's gaze follow him until he closed the front door behind him. Once outside, he realized he didn't feel like driving. It would require a level of effort he didn't have the energy for. He decided to walk instead.

Walking was an activity requiring crossing streets, looking at lights, and navigating among pedestrians. He could do that. Aimlessly he wandered through the busy streets that gave way to less crowded ones. Martin came to a residential neighborhood, and then after some time, he found himself approaching a familiar place. It was People's Park in Berkeley, and he realized he must have walked for many hours. The park, which he had cut across many times before when he and his family lived in the apartment building he owned, was a funky but mellow place to sit if one could manage to avoid the street people who congregated there.

Martin watched a group of homeless men sitting in the middle of a grassy area, some sipping from bottles wrapped in paper bags, others openly smoking pot. They were a multi-racial bunch, perhaps fifteen of them, mostly young, although a few had gray hair.

Martin found a bench and decided to sit. He felt worn, not so much physically, but worn out inside, depleted. He watched the homeless men talk,

some laughing out loud, one staring down at the ground, shaking his head, a spiral of smoke coming out of the joint he held in his fingers.

*Well, look at them. They seem happy.* Martin recalled a conversation with a pastor when he was a teenager. It had been about God and his mysterious will.

*You certainly are a joker, you know that? Here I am, working my ass off, and you throw nothing but crap at me. And look at those idiots. They do nothing, contribute nothing, are just parasites. What the hell do you want from me? God? Oh, yeah, Praised be the Lord...alleluia... what a joke! You're nothing but a miserable sadist. You like it when people are in pain, don't you? And this depression...why me? Stupid jerk. Monster. Instead of helping me, you make things worse. Go ahead, see if you can destroy me.*

Now he wanted to strike something or someone. Martin looked at the street people, and the thought crossed his mind that he would enjoy fighting one of those men.

He had started to visualize a scenario, when he felt someone sit next to him. It was an old woman who had plopped herself down, oblivious to him. She had a shopping cart in front of her, piled with bags, boxes and clothes. She wore several layers of garments: a sweater and long johns under a frilly pink dress with another sweater over it. Her shoulder-length gray hair framed a wrinkled face. Thin lips and pale blue eyes. She turned her head to meet his gaze, and squinted. Martin could see confusion and pain in those eyes. *Oh, man, poor thing.* Suddenly he felt ashamed of his anger, and sad for a world that would let a woman like her amble aimlessly and alone. He wondered what had happened to her in this life.

Without thinking he reached for his wallet and grabbed the first bill. It was a fifty. *Who cares, you can make more.* He handed it to her and watched her thin hand take hold of the money.

He decided to go somewhere where he didn't have to talk about the failed contract. Martin walked over to nearby Telegraph Avenue to catch a cab. He was going to pay Percy a visit.