

# Chapter One

## Karma

Apple. Even Apple couldn't remember where he picked up the name. In junior high, community college, during his three-month stint in the army, rehab, jail? Who cared? Apple was in a jam. A DUI on the Garden State torpedoed his Uber career in June, and his telemarketing gig was just cut to part-time. Two Tony (nobody knew how Andrew McDougal earned that moniker) promised to take him on as a recycler, but the job didn't start for two weeks. After paying his phone bill, Apple was four hundred short on rent. And tomorrow was the tenth. After that, there was a two-hundred-dollar late fee. Damn!

Four hundred in one day! It would be a long hustle. Apple shaved carefully, polished his best shoes, donned his interview suit, and hung a convention badge around his neck. The slim leather shoulder bag left in his car by a hurried Delta passenger completed his costume. He took a deep breath, practiced faces in the mirror, then straightened his tie a second time for luck. There were two crisp twenties and a pair of stained fives in his wallet, leaving him forty after cab fare. Forty bucks. His last forty. Enough to open with. Forty had Biblical connotations. Forty days and forty nights. Forty years in the wilderness. Glum associations, to be sure, but Apple prayed they might help. Remembering his Irish grandmother, he stared at the stained ceiling and crossed himself.

He took a deep breath, then headed out. To save coin, he hiked up Houston to Fifth before hailing a cab for Penn Station. Enroute, he practiced his routine, recalling his audition for an airline commercial. Alas, he was not, the casting director quietly announced, what they were looking for. The wordless role of smiling flight attendant went to an Off-Broadway actor. Damn. Another defeat, another dead end, another missed opportunity, another disappointment. Apple bit his lip and focused on the present. The Here and Now.

Just as he determined he'd reached an affordable distance, a cab pulled curbside to discharge a laughing couple. The driver, smiling no doubt from a generous tip, smiled wider when Apple raised his arm for an immediate pickup. No downtime this time.

The cab sped north, flashing past commuters and shoppers. People with jobs and money. Apple closed his eyes, rehearsed his lines, and got into character. Remember, his acting coach told him, the secret is *to be*. Don't pretend, don't act like, don't suggest, don't present -- simply *be*. Never let them catch you acting. And never, never dare "indicate." Biting his lip in secular prayer, Apple beckoned the spirits of Stanislavsky and Strasberg, trying to recall every half-watched episode of *Inside the Actors Studio* for guidance.

The cab lurched to a halt. With moderate tip, the trip cost an even ten. His Biblical forty held fast. Taking this as an omen, he adjusted his tie one more time, then hit the sidewalk with mounting confidence.

Striding toward the entrance Apple passed a trio of unshaven panhandlers bearing cardboard signs and rattling dirty Starbucks cups for change. Sad amateurs. Labeling themselves as jobless outcasts, they might score a few charity quarters from people heading to work. To score bucks, big bucks, you had to be one of *them*. Convince *them* that *they* could become *you*.

A string of commuters flowed through the cavernous hall. Apple glanced about, taking in the lighting, the PA system, the chorus of voices, the glass roof, the hard, clean floor. This was his stage, his set, his place of work, his temple. Every person a potential improv partner. He scanned the crowd, then spotted a likely score. Envisioning Strasberg following his every gesture on a rehearsal stage, Apple swallowed hard and got into character. *Be*, he reminded himself. *Just be*. Walking briskly, he approached a heavysset manager type.

“Sorry, man,” Apple apologized, stepping back and rolling his eyes in distress. “Look, I was just getting out of a cab, and someone stole my wallet. Right out of my hand! I got to get home. Look, the ticket’s forty-eight-fifty, I got forty,” he said, showing a pair of crisp twenties. “Think you could help me with the rest?”

Muttering, the man dug into his pocket and slipped Apple an orange sawbuck and ambled off. A solid jump start. Apple waited as the man headed to the escalator, then crossed the concourse to catch another flow of commuters and scored another ten. Now with sixty, he had to level up and refine his game. An old-timer in rehab had schooled him. *The more you have, the more you get. Always show the money. Have more than you ask for. Ask for odd amounts. Tell a story. Promise to pay them back.*

A ticket to Schenectady was seventy-eight. Perfect. Adjusting his convention tag, he had his role down. Upstate rube rolled in the big city desperate to get home to his wife and kid. Method acting, he dismissed the generic “kid” from his mind, replacing the abstraction with Jennie. Two years old with blonde hair and gray eyes. Born premature. The childless Apple envisioned himself praying beside the incubator as his tearful wife, beautiful even without makeup, placed her hand on his shoulder. Now deep into character, Apple felt empowered, real. He had to get home to Jennie.

A clean-cut sales guy barreled through a line of commuters trooping through the station. Waving his tens and twenties in dismay, Apple caught up with him. “Look man, I got robbed. I got to catch the train the Schenectady. It’s seventy-eight dollars. I got sixty, can you help with eighteen?” he pleaded.

The man cut him off, stopped dead in his tracks, peeled off a twenty and headed to the escalator. *Schenectady*. The name was magic. He scored another twenty, then five minutes later haggled down to two fives. Excited, he glanced at the clock. Fifty bucks in five minutes! He was on a roll! There was a break in the traffic, and he paused to catch his breath. A line of commuters headed his way. Schenectady worked again, and he scored another twenty from a sympathetic sophomore from Cornell.

Now with one-thirty in hand it was time to head higher. Chicago was a hundred and sixty-eight dollars. With one-thirty in his hand, he felt safe asking for thirty-eight with a promise to PayPal when he got home.

The train for Chicago was leaving in ten minutes. A knot of passengers spilled off the escalator. In the lead, a young exec was laughing into his phone. “See you soon, babe!” he chuckled, slowing down to pocket his cell.

Distraction, however slight, was blood in the water to Apple.

“Hey, sorry, man,” he panted, “look I just got robbed. The train to Chicago is leaving in ten minutes. I lost my ticket. It’s one-sixty-eight. Look, I have one-thirty,” he said, opening his palm to display a fan of tens and twenties. Can you *loan* me thirty-eight? I can PayPal soon as I get home. Hate to ask, but I’m in a jam.”

Turning, the exec smiled. “Sure, must be rough. They get your phone, too?”

“I lost everything. Lucky I had this cash in my pocket.”

“Well, that is fortunate.”

A surge in crowd pushed them closer, and the man brushed up against Apple. Sweeping the bills from his hand, he nudged Apple to a ticket kiosk.

“No problem-o. I got an expensive account. Bump you up to business class for two hundred. On me.”

The man tapped the screen and swiped his Visa card. Stunned, Apple watched as the machine spat out a bar-coded Amtrak ticket.

“There you go, my man. Have a safe trip. Gotta catch a cab.” Flashing the Jacksons in his palm, he flipped Apple a smug salute and headed to the street.

Apple looked at the smooth slip of paper in his cashless hands and stormed toward the exit.

*Bastard!*

“Hey, pal, where are you going?” the exec laughed. “You’re going to miss your train!”

Apple pushed through the doors burning in rage. He dug into his pocket for his last smoke. Lighting up, his fingers quivered.

Noting Apple’s polished shoes, a homeless man glanced up and rattled his cup hopefully, grinning like a happy Jack-o-lantern.

