CHAPTER ONE

The New Life Begins

George Adler opened his eyes and wondered if he had slept at all. He remembered lots of tossing and turning as the hours dragged on, his mind churning, the night seeming endless. The next day was going to be important and he’d had a lot to think about. Now suddenly it was morning. As the abundance of thoughts started to wash over him again, he rolled out of bed. It was early, barely even light outside, but he didn’t feel like thinking any more. It would be better to get on with the day.

Sounds from the kitchen told him that someone else was up early. George made his way down the short hallway and came upon his mother, back turned, making breakfast. She turned and gave him a smile. “Well, Georgie,” she said, “today’s your big day.”

“I guess,” George said with a sigh. The handsome young man lingered just a moment before turning around to shower and get dressed. George was medium tall and slender built, with strong arms and lightly stooped shoulders, light brown hair and a pleasant smile that made his brown eyes light up.

He wasn’t smiling all that much this morning, though.

Today was to be George’s first day as a partner and sole employee in Transamerican Auto Parts, a tiny business started by Joe Block, his fiancé’s father. The fledgling company bought and sold surplus World War II Jeep parts. To this point in life, George’s only steady job had been working in a gas station. He enjoyed that job, worked hard and was good at it. George had started at age 15, just helping out. He showed up on time and handled his responsibilities. It made him proud when they promoted him to night manager.

More recently his father had persuaded him to come to work in an accounting business he was trying to start up. It wasn’t long before George regretted his decision. The business did not seem to make sense. There were no real accountants who even worked there. Before long the business closed and George was out of a job entirely, even with his wedding just few months away. He contemplated going back to the gas station to try to get his old job back.

But today was different from any other day he had ever experienced. It was hard to imagine what this new job would have in store for him. It was spring of 1962 and George was just a few weeks shy of his 22nd birthday, getting ready to start down a strange new road.

The young man was surprised at how heavy the traffic was as he started the drive from his family home on the western side of Los Angeles to his new job 30 miles to the southeast in Gardena. He shook his head. Where did all these cars come from? The roads seemed more crowded every day.

George drove south on the 405 freeway, exited at Rosecrans and headed east across town. He made his way into an industrialized part of town, dominated by warehouses and distribution facilities. This was a section of greater Los Angeles populated mostly by trucking companies, salvage yards and parts warehouses. He turned onto Figueroa Boulevard, actually into the small city of Gardena now, and began looking at the addresses. After a couple of blocks, he started looking for a color -- orange. The building was not handsome, but it was bright orange and it certainly stood out. George’s new job was located in the front corner of a large warehouse building. The number on the front of building was 14929 but there was no access to his office there. It was around the side that a small sign composed of wooden letters read Transamerican Auto Parts.

George parked on the street in front of the building, walked up an alley to the front door next to the Transamerican sign, and found it open. Joe Block was inside and greeted him. The entire operation consisted of a single room, not even 20’ x 20’ in size, with bare overhead lights, no windows and the single front door. The atmosphere in the room was dominated by a persistent odor of petroleum. Around the sides of the room were stacked dozens of wooden boxes and crates of assorted sizes. Each box had a military parts number stenciled onto the top and one side with black paint. An old table served as the company desk. On the table was a manual typewriter, a telephone, a pad of paper, a pen and a pencil, all neatly laid out.

The older man handed George the keys. “Good luck, George” he said. They chatted briefly before Joe announced “Well, I have to go to work now.” He worked a few miles away for Markson Brothers, a company primarily based on the East Coast that operated low end retail clothing and furniture stores. Transamerican Auto Parts was a side investment he’d made that wasn’t paying off as he’d hoped. Sales were miniscule and Joe couldn’t afford to give up his real job. In less than five minutes he was gone and George found himself alone.

He had actually been here once before, coming in on a Saturday to assist Joe Block’s former partner, Les Richards, and try to learn some of the basics. Richards was the one who knew the business. He’d worked for the company named Transportation Parts that pioneered buying surplus Jeep parts from military bases and depots overseas and selling them to the new array of Jeep dealers that sprung up after the war. Richards’ employer could buy excess supplies from the Army and Marines and sell them cheaper than dealers could buy them from Jeep itself.

Richards saw the opportunity to start his own business on the West Coast and talked Joe Block, who was his cousin, into putting up some money and helping him start up Transamerican Auto Parts. They would target Jeep dealers in the western states. Richards got the business going and established several accounts. In time, though, he became dissatisfied with the way the enterprise was going and wanted out. Joe’s investment was going to be worthless unless he could find someone else to step in.

He asked around and one person he presented the idea to was his future son-in-law. Joe was not overly impressed with George Adler. He wasn’t thrilled with the prospects of having George become a member of the family and had his doubts about George’s astuteness, let alone his business ability. He didn’t dislike George, but Carole was his only daughter and he wondered if she couldn’t do better. At any rate, Joe needed $ 5,500 to buy out Les Richards’ share of the inventory and he gave George a shot at it.

George did not have any money, nor did he have much of an idea how to raise some. He went to a couple of banks, but absent collateral or even a business plan, they did not give him the time of day. Fortunately George’s sister and brother wanted to help. Anita Adler Markel and her husband Morrie put up most of the money and George’s fraternal twin, Larry Adler, covered the rest. George vowed that he would pay them back, but they were not so sure. They were backing their brother out of love more than confidence in his business abilities. They simply wanted to give him a chance to get something going.

And so those were the developments that led to George finding himself alone in this odd smelling room with no idea what to do. There was a phone, but who would he call? Richards had left behind a list of a few dozen Jeep dealers, parts stores and garages, but no details on who to talk to or what they might want to buy. He looked at the phone and grimaced. “What if it rang and someone wanted something,” George wondered. “What am I even supposed to say?”

He walked to one side of the room and pried open one of the wooden boxes. The petroleum smell was emanating from a substance called cosmoline, a thick, brown, oily protectant used to coat the metallic parts and prevent rust. It dried into a waxy mass and was highly effective for shipping, even in damp cargo holds on Navy transport ships. George scraped off the cosmoline in order to get a look at one of the parts contained in the box. He did the same with several of the other boxes and crates stacked around the room. He had no idea what these parts were or what they did. To make matters worse, he didn’t have a clue about the inner workings of Jeeps -- which would be, of course, the entire purpose of these assorted parts and the basis of his new business.

“Since I didn’t know what else to do, I started writing down the parts numbers and memorizing them,” George recalled. “I had no idea what to do to try to build the business.” He thought about how he had once had the steady job at the gas station and that he had borrowed money for this new venture. His livelihood would depend on it, not to mention that his future wife and father-in-law were depending on him to succeed.

Unfortunately, George did not have a plan.

“I wasn’t really scared, though,” George recalls. “I think I was too naive to be scared.”

George didn’t know enough to realize how unlikely it would be for him to be successful at Transamerican Auto Parts. He had no knowledge of basic business principles, had no idea about inventory management, shipping or billing, cash flow or accounts receivable. He didn’t understand the market, didn’t know the customers, didn’t have a feeling for the state of the industry or future of the business.

On that humble and humbling first day, George Adler certainly did not know that he would indeed be able to repay his sister and brother every penny that they loaned him, with interest. He couldn’t have guessed that one day the business of selling four-wheel drive automotive parts and accessories would be a major industry. He couldn’t begin to imagine that Transamerican Auto Parts would be the pioneering force behind the industry’s immense growth and would progress into a hugely successful company with multiple divisions, hundreds of employees, dozens of retail outlets, manufacturing facilities and operations all over the United States.

Nor did it ever occur to George, even in a dream, that he himself would go on to be such an influential and revered force that he would be universally recognized as the titan of the industry.