

## CHAPTER ONE

Memories of a faraway jungle lingered around every pose of his sculpture. Parrots, sloths, jaguars, seemed poised to flutter, amble, pounce out of any angle. Jack had brought life out of his sculpture, persuaded marble out of its strictness into the vulnerability of flesh. Creases etched into her face like light through veins in a leaf. Fingers were not marble, but a caress to his cheek from Vicki—the wife he adored, drove him crazy, desired. She had allowed him to work in their root cellar below the basement where he had sculpted her likeness for nine days. Without any windows, he persisted by candlelight. Without night and day, he lived without regard for the underground stream pressing against the grey, mossy walls of the basement outside. Bricks trembled; mortar crumbled. At any time, after a day, an afternoon, she surfaced next to where Jack slept slumped over, head to cement. No desire for words ever challenged by her. She stayed perfectly prim to stop tears from becoming her voice as she removed the mallet in his outstretched hand and replaced it with a partially chewed dried apricot, apple, or peach. Then kissed him on the shoulder and retreated. Jack fumbled about to find the fruit. He wanted to chew it to be reminded how her tongue tasted. His fingers edged over a dead centipede. His anger erupted.

“Now? Goddammit!”

Water trickled over his bare back. Snows had thawed. The stream swelled and crashed through the bricks to flood the basement. Water streamed down the walls, washed away the soot from candles, inched over the toes of his sculpture. Jack grunted and rose. Icy water crimped his fingers as he fisted. Her dimple whenever she smiled subtly chiseled on her left cheek mocked him. He grabbed his mallet. Dust swirled around his scuffed knee. Chunks of plaster from the ceiling splattered over his bony shoulders. He hesitated to add the thick scar on her smooth thigh he felt responsible for. A dead rat plopped beside him. He charged to the stairway and climbed up the soggy plank steps. He squatted and shoved his back against the trapdoor. He pushed. Water pinned the door. He twisted. The mallet slammed into it. It splintered and cracked. He swung wider and hit harder. The mallet bounced off and broke his nose. A board creaked, struggled against its nails, he tasted blood, water rushed down and washed it off. Another board snapped. Jack spun around. Like a spider, he glided down the steps and crouched under the stairway. Water lessened to a trickle. Streams of blue paint, a trap with a shriveled mouse, antique dolls with gunshot wounds from a 22 rifle, old packets of seeds chewed by earwigs bobbed against him. Jack waded out and up the steps. He yanked out another board and crawled into the basement. He stood. The pale sun shined in from the grimy window rubbed clear by the swollen heel of her hand outside.

He hustled to the door and tugged it back against the berm of soggy plaster. He squeezed through and hustled into the kitchen. The damn overhead florescent lights glared against a mason jar partially filled with Jamaican coffee and Ovaltine set on the sleeve of Vicki's white silk bathrobe flung across boxes stacked against the broken refrigerator dragged out from the wall. Vicki was everywhere. In the stems of dried lavender jammed into a shiny brass vase exquisitely etched with positions from the Kama Sutra. In the sponge speckled with coffee grounds. In napkins soggy with red wine on the table. In her *Schwinn Cruiser* bike with a flat tire slammed against the light switch cover she cracked. In the toe of her sandal caught underneath chunks of wood that stunned a king snake. As it struggled underneath, its tongue flickered like those damn florescent lights.

A stellar jay shrieked. Jack hated those birds. An old timer told Jack as a joke to give the birds peanut butter. Jack went farther. He wanted them dead. He let the peanut butter dry stiff. The damn birds would choke to death. It never happened. That night Jack dreamt he cuddled with a jay, decided to be its lover, let its beak touch his lips. He woke up, couldn't shake it off, it was a dream, goddammit, while a jay hopped across his bed and shrieked cause Jack had left the window open after Vicki crawled out during a bombastic fight. He shouted, or the jay did, he whirled around, lunged for the bird, fell off the bed, and knocked himself out against the sculpture of Vicki two reluctant migrants had lugged in so Jack could show her how frigid she had become.

The stellar jay squawked. Jack walked over to the kitchen window. The damn, stupid bird flapped and whacked itself against its glass. Wings fluttered wildly like fire. Wings turned to flames Jack recalled bursting

higher from the pale blue *Chevy Impala* on their front lawn in El Monte in 1966. His sixteenth birthday present from his mother who worked extra hours, every evening to clean up the movie theater after the last show. As she stood at the ironing board next to their big picture window, Jack rushed to tackle her, but slipped on the fancy rubber shower cap with blue tulips partially chewed by their Chihuahua. On his butt, he lunged up too late. The iron hissed steam, the *Impala* exploded. Glass shattered, scattered over his blue jeans with a crease ironed down the leg. He stared at her blue slippers after her body tumbled over his feet. How could he run? Barefooted as he was. Unless he put on her slippers. The front door opened. His father staggered in. He lugged Jack's littlest sister, Rosie, stitches in her forehead, her arms clutched around his leg. Rosie shrieked and dove for her mother. Jack tugged his feet out. He rushed outside, by the *Impala*, in pieces, smoldering, a birthday flag tied to the antenna, fluttered by flames, as if it could fly away and be saved. He dodged the last fire engine pulling up. He ran for miles. He did not care where he was, or what he saw. With his head up, to a sky bluer than its light, where memories are extinguished as if by the sun, he crashed into a strawberry field, stomped plants toasted and crinkled by frost. He tripped over a woman hunched over. He tumbled across the sheets of ice from a leaking irrigation pipe and passed out. The woman draped her sweater over his body and plucked fewer strawberries as the sun rose.

In the kitchen, the fluorescent ceiling lights burst on.

Power back on. Jack blinked furiously. He hated the brighter than bright artificial light. But it brought him back to where he was. Like sun on the face to wake from a dream. To where Vicki should be.

Jack pulled her bathrobe off the boxes. He put it on. He sniffed his shoulder. Her cool scent of tea tree oil she used for a rash made him even angrier that she was not there. He wanted to cuddle his head against her neck and sleep. He hustled outside. Her blue Bug had sprayed gravel and pitted the car door of their old Mercedes sedan. In the distance, snow drifted around the Wallowa Mountains; great granite peaks as mournful and grand as Selena's song, *Dreaming Of You*, they played at his mother's funeral. The beauty of the snowflakes settling into the sunlight exhilarated Jack as if he breathed the dust from his sculpture floating around his face. He smiled briefly. The soul of these mountains was in his sculpture. He shuddered. He could not believe she had left him this time. He had done nothing to hurt her. Had he? Night and day, ignored, became no different from love or hate. She should understand.

Jack glared at an old black *Mercedes* sedan. He stopped, startled. A flicker of blue caught him off guard. On the winding road up the mountains, up to her friend's cabin, Charles Tracking Elk, a blur of blue shone brightly. It disappeared. Could she have spun out on black ice?

He waited. She was too far from his cabin. That damn crazy Indian wouldn't know what happened. If anything had happened, he consoled himself. If anything did? What if she's hurt and wandered off into the wilderness?

Damn Indian. Didn't have a phone. He had to go after her.

God, he hated Grizzlies, brown bears even more, being chased by a mule deer buck, rumors of a wolf that had escaped from the Sawtooth Wilderness area, and ticks, goddammit, even if it wasn't truly spring yet, always found him.

Even if he could get the *Mercedes* out, it probably wouldn't start.

Fuck. He'd hike in.

## CHAPTER TWO

Gecko burped and tasted vomit from his second tofu dog he liked about as much as having to change a flat tire after leaving a grisly murder scene. Or drinking this *Coke* without caffeine, or being told he must stop smoking, or having to already use the air conditioner in April because he worried about how much he sweated. Or the damn punk who sat next to him in his *Ford Crown Victoria* police car and wept uncontrollably like Gecko believed he should have after what happened to the kid's brother.

The kid yanked off his grimy gold and red striped knit cap and jammed it against his crotch.

So, he can pee, Gecko thought. Fuck.

"It should have been me," the kid whimpered.

It would have, dumb ass, Gecko thought, if you skated as well as your brother. They had been on freight train tracks. Little brother fell off and tumbled free of the train.

The kid snapped around. Goopy drool hung from his lip ring.

"You don't care, you bastard," he whined.

"Would it matter?" Gecko asked nonchalantly.

"What?"

"Would it have saved your brother? If I did."

"Fuck you," he said and jumped out.

Gecko would have reached across and shut the door, but the kid had peed on the seat.

"Shit."

Gecko opened his door and climbed out. The sack fell off his lap. He stomped on a tofu dog after it tumbled out. He stepped further into the street and turned. He dumped out the ice from the 7 *Eleven* cup over two cigarettes, half smoked, marked halfway with a blue felt tip pen, smoldering on Santa Monica Boulevard.

Driving by, a *PT Cruiser*, its body splashed with a mass of humanist decals, partially peeled off, crinkled, slowed. A nobody: the passenger shoved out his head and shouted. "Mutherfucker!"

Gecko whipped around. His sunglasses flew out and bounced off a fender.

"Fuck" came first. Then Gecko cried. "Fuck you!"

"Got ya, ass hole!"

They drove off. Gecko did not even bother to look whether he could retrieve his sunglasses. Too much traffic. Fuck LA, he thought. But did it matter someone had gotten Gecko on his phone? It shouldn't. These days he denied the "should nots" as routinely as writing a parking ticket in his early days as a cop. He did not give a shit. Except that he was there to return a third time to a dermatologist for a nasty rash on his neck and belly.

He thundered around the *Victoria* and marched to the glass door of Dr. Crumbrook's office. He looked in. He scowled. The waiting room was full. He reluctantly decided not to go back and change into his loafers. He believed they helped to make his entrance a softer affair. Gecko, a big man, a perfectly, naturally proportioned bulk of 317 pounds, wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible in his work as a LA police detective. Stormy, his favorite, only waitress he can tolerate where he usually ate lunch, who claimed to be an avid surfer, rock climber, skydiver, recommended rock climbing shoes to be much better. He tried, but he felt ridiculous.

He walked in. A pregnant girl with a rash oozing out of a tattoo of half a sperm whale halfway out of a third of a wave on her neck stared. She was as surprised as most people how his big boned features lay lightly on the eyes, how mild his face was, almost feminine, which could be homely or handsome, as if the moon or

sun, depending on the intensity of his interrogation. Gecko smiled to himself. She tugged down her short fake blue leather skirt. He grunted. He had never liked redheads. Why should she think? Fuck.

The receptionist spoke up.

“Mr. Gecko, go right in.”

With her glasses, she nervously tapped the side of her water bottle.

Gecko walked forward. On a leather couch, an elderly man, by himself, black, elbows raw with eczema, awkwardly leaned down and picked up a magazine that had slipped off his lap. Gecko hopped over it.

“Good to see you again,” the receptionist offered as she swung back the half door.

“I’m not,” Gecko replied.

She sank back down, slipping off the edge of the seat. Gecko was about to turn back and apologize. From around the door, Dr. Crumbrook poked his head out.

“Gecko, my man, come in! I got something to show you!” he blurted.

Gecko followed him into the examination room.

“Over here,” Crumbrook said and spread out a plot map on the examination table.

Gecko, as always, wandered over to the wall with the photos of mountains and hillsides, majestic granite peaks of the Wallowa’s, wondrous satin clouds, exquisite blue skies, and a few of the Doc hang gliding. One flight of the Doc’s reminded Gecko of a red tail hawk he once saw sailing in and out of those murderous hot Santa Ana winds. The bird seemed to enjoy the adventure and made Gecko feel less disgruntled about who he must arrest.

Doc edged behind Gecko and patted him on the back.

“Can’t be that beautiful,” Gecko said.

“You haven’t? No, you couldn’t, or you would know.”

Gecko turned around.

“Didn’t think it necessary to drive all the way out there. If I’m committed, I’ll have to stay,” Gecko said.

Doc nodded.

Gecko noticed his right arm in a cast. Dr. Crumbrook grinned.

“None of my business,” Gecko remarked.

“They let me take off at the top of the tram in Joseph. Highest fuckin’ town in the Wallowa’s. At dusk, I sailed off. I forgot where to land.”

Stickers of unicorns and fairies were plastered all over Doc’s cast. Gecko, like how he felt about himself, didn’t think Crumbrook was the kind of man to have grandkids.

Crumbrook laughed. “In a tree. In the arms of a fir rather than that waitress you sent me to.” He laughed harder.

Gecko grabbed Doc’s other arm.

“Doc?”

Doc, his arm still being held, reached out and lifted Gecko’s shirt. He leaned in and peered at his belly.

“Better,” he said.

“It itches,” Gecko replied.

Doc nodded tensely. Gecko let go and scratched. Doc’s fingertips probed the scar underneath the rash fading on Gecko’s neck.

“Looks like a small caliber. Like a 22,” Doc said.

The coolness of Doc’s fingertips diverted Gecko from getting defensive. Like when his mother rubbed ice on his temples after he had his first migraine at fourteen.

“It was,” Gecko said.

Doc backed up and leaned against the examination table.

“It was a sultry afternoon. Smoggy. Could barely see Griffith Park two blocks away,” Gecko said. He wanted to talk. Like when you’re asleep and you scratch the rash till you bleed. “I was a damn rookie. Chain smoked *Pall Malls* then. Parked my patrol car under an oak. Been listening to Marvin Gaye’s AIN’T THAT PECULIAR.

Girlfriend of seven months had called to tell me it was over moments before she lied to me how she was pregnant and didn't want no bastard cop as his father. In a daze, I noticed an old man approaching. He clenched a fine linen handkerchief between his teeth. His cane, its cherry wood stained and charred like the inside of a pipe, swatted furiously at a carpenter bumblebee. The old man slammed against the fender and smacked the windshield. I jumped out and grabbed him around the neck. His skin felt more like bone than flesh. As if his neck could crumble like potato chips. From across the street, his grandson dropped a frosty bottle of *RC Kola*. My hands slipped off. From his back pocket, he took out a pistol and shot me. I never said anything. Even if it did fuck up my vocal cords."

Doc reached behind him. Out of the plastic dish, he picked up a chopstick soaked with soy sauce and poked it inside the cast.

"You want something stronger to help you sleep," Doc offered.

Gecko gradually shook his head.

"You sure?"

"The boy's name was Ricky."

Someone gently knocked on the door. Doc walked over and opened it. She reached in and shook a blue paper.

"I can't right now," he said.

"At least sign the prescription," she replied.

"I have to see her."

"She's already gone across the street."

"To O'Reilly's?"

"Yes."

"Change her appointment. She'll be too drunk when she gets back."

"Fine. You tell her. The last time."

"I know, I know."

His receptionist turned and left. Before the automatic door closed, Gecko heard her. "I hate this job."

Gecko turned back and leaned over the plot map on the examination table. He ran his finger over his name scrawled across a building lot.

"This mine?" he asked.

Doc stretched his foot back against the door. A feeble kick to react to his frustration over his receptionist.

"Doc? My lot?"

Doc pulled out the chopstick and stabbed it into the plot map.

"I'll be over here," he said. "Across the creek. We'll be neighbors. Two old farts able to wade our legs into nothing but leisure."

"Fine!" she shouted and yanked out the papers jammed halfway under the door.

"You still going to build a house?" Gecko asked.

"Nope. Like you. Going to put a manufactured home on it."

Gecko stood up. He stared at the wall. Doc slapped him on the back.

"Yep," he said. "No more drug reps telling me how to treat my patients. What drugs best when I know it isn't. Maybe even go to Africa occasionally. Treat them poor kids."

"No more bastards," Gecko offered.

Doc laughed. "Enough said."

Gecko wondered if his daughter would have been more likely to visit him after he moved to these mountains near Joseph, Oregon. Doc leaned closer to the plot map.

"They spelled the street wrong," he said.

He pushed down on the chopstick and snapped it. Gecko strayed around him and towards the door.

"That story about Carlie?" Doc asked. "Any truth to it? Sounds like you might love her."

Gecko stopped. "Carlie?"

“Hell of a way to get a rash.”

Doc might as well had joked that if Gecko wore silk shirts he might sweat, and his flabby breasts would jiggle. Gecko wanted to get angry. But he had volunteered the tale about Carlie and lately Gecko stopped wearing silky Hawaiian shirts on his few days off.

“You’re not leaving because of her?” Doc asked. “Are you?”

He considered it when he first thought about retirement. But it had never been about Carlie. It was her mother, Charlene, he cared about. The first time he met Charlene was in 1968 at a strip joint in Skid Row. Gecko and his high school buddies had ridiculed Charlene for being too old, too ugly, taking off too little. She had come down off the stage and tried to sit on his lap. He wrestled her off and rushed into the bathroom. She followed him. She explained how she was a single mom and how much she needed this job. Gecko was moved beyond the kid who wanted to see boobs. Ever since then, he had kept an eye out for Charlene and her daughter. By the time she was seventeen, Carlie had turned out as bad and wild as they come. Her beauty reminded Gecko of Marilyn Monroe and her appetites outdid Madonna. At twenty-nine, she was off the charts. For God or man. She began to date two boys. One from the Crips. The other from the Bloods. For months, she juggled the two like she held two feral kittens trying to get them to fight. Just for fun. For the hell of it. By coincidence, the boys found out. At first, they did not go after each other. They went after Carlie. On the street, Gecko got word. But after the Crip guy shot the Blood, he went over to the house and shot Charlene. They looked so much like sisters. Gecko found Carlie curled up under her mother’s *VW Bug* in the garage. He dragged her out and down the hillside behind their house. He hid her among the century cacti ten feet high. Gecko started back up. A shotgun blast from the Crip and Gecko ducked behind a cactus. Toxic juice splattered all over him. The rash brought Gecko to Doc.

“You got to leave her,” Doc said.

Gecko nodded. He had eight days to decide. After that, he would be gone, and he could not help her.

“You don’t want to have shoot anyone,” Doc added. “It is LA.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Mondo treaded deliberately down the BLUES aisle of Tower Records where he worked stocking CD's and cleaning up after the store closed. He climbed up onto the stool. Tonight, thank god, his legs without almost no calves were not cramped up and fatigued. He could work quickly and get home and retire to a solitary life he had let himself become accustomed to. Out of instinct, years of ridicule, he learned to withdraw into himself as if he were a woodland snail wary of hoof, paws, claws on a forest floor whenever he was out in public. He had muddy brown eyes. Light black skin as mottled as a fat speckled slug. A few long, curly hairs stuck out of his wide eyebrows. Loose curls, turning grey, receded far back from his sunken forehead. Nostrils nearly sealed together. He accepted how ugly he was, and he refused to listen to his mother whenever she scolded him about the benefit of having beautiful blue eyes. That was all anyone noticed about him, she claimed. If he let them see, they would be as surprised as having witnessed a stellar jay burst out of a snowbank. Too bad, she nagged, they never saw his smile either. If he smiled, they could not look away from blue. On afternoons when Mondo rode a crowded bus, he recalled what his mother said and crouched and cowered even lower. He was Mondo after all. Wasn't he?

Mondo stopped in front of Diana Ross's CD's. He lugged up a leg onto the step stool. On the cover of DIANA ROSS(1976), his stubby fingertip dusted off her smile. A young woman lingered at the back of the store. She sniffled delicately. Mondo dipped his arms into the stacked CD's.

"You're not scared?" she asked.

Mondo leaned in closer.

"Okay, fine, just point me to the bathroom."

He cocked his head around. The rope untied on her lavender silk lounge pants clung to her long legs. She smiled with a twinge of caution. The subtle flow of her pants exhaled perfume.

Mondo pictured her tiptoeing into his attic room above the garage where his Aunt Pearline dried exotic herbs and mixed them into her famous *JIVE SOAP CAKES*. On a hot sultry night when he could not sleep, this young woman, he imagined, would appear like a kitten, soaked by a thunderstorm, on his windowsill. Cool sheets would settle over his body as she crawled beside him.

She shifted, stepped closer, and crunched the shell of a pistachio Mondo missed stuffing into the pocket of his baggy cargo shorts. In his soul and mind, Mondo listened to the *Theme From Mahogany* from Diana. In that moment, he fell in love with this pretty girl as he had always been with the music of Diana Ross. She stood somewhat behind him.

"Is it too late to buy this?" she asked.

Her voice turned deep; jarred from tension.

"I'm afraid to go outside," she added.

Mondo shifted around. He scrunched his shoulders as if he expected to be whipped. He wished he faced the album in the Motown section, and not her. Her fingertips touched his elbow—the part of his body he thought normal. One leg trembled. He almost fainted off the stool.

"You scared too?"

She touched him even more lightly. He shivered. He wanted to open his eyes and see Mahalia, or Billie, or Aretha. He did not want to hear 2Pac shedding tears for "Dear Mama" someone blasted outside.

“Maybe we could go together,” she continued. “You’re closed, right? You could walk me home. Like a big brother.”

He concentrated on the jangle of her earring, the click of her teeth, her long fingernail scratching herself near the untied rope. Tupac faded.

“I have licorice. Dammit, I bet you like red,” she chattered. “Or ice cream. Like I scoop out at Sav-On’s. Bet you like Rocky Road. I do. Marshmallows and nuts. Ain’t that crazy? Together like me and you. Oh, no sorry. Like me and Mr T. No, maybe that wouldn’t be all that bad. Okay?”

Her voice was sweeter, more tender. How it must be when you make love to someone, he thought.

Two men heaved the seat ripped out of an LAPD patrol car through the front window.

“Oh, god,” she gasped.

Shreds of glass flew against his cheek. She hugged him, then quickly withdrew when the glass fell across her hand.

“She must have seen me,” Mondo muttered.

“The bathroom, please?” she asked.

He leaped up and pointed. She scrambled, weeping, that way. A skinny man rushed down the aisle and knocked Mondo off the stool and over onto his side. He wore three purple down jackets. He stepped up on Mondo like he was rock. He stretched up and grabbed a boom box from off a shelf above the CD’s.

“Harry! Get the other two!” he screamed hoarsely.

Ricky, Mondo’s older brother, leaped through the shattered window and tackled the skinny man. The two tumbled into the mopping bucket filled with fresh soapy water. Mondo watched the bucket roll over his brother’s brand-new USC baseball cap that had been flung off his head.

“Ricky, your cap!” Mondo shouted.

In unison, the man and Ricky hustled up. Mondo hopped up and trotted over to the bucket.

The skinny man glowered at Ricky. “You’re dead, motherfucker,” he said.

Ricky grinned. Mondo pushed the bucket off the cap.

“Yea, you’re big,” the man said.

Ricky was. Lean, muscular, mean. Clean and smooth without any tattoos. He wore a thin lavender tank top to accentuate this.

The man edged his hand behind him. “It don’t mean nothin’,” he said.

Ricky grabbed the man’s goatee. “I want you to listen to me.”

The man paused, startled by the musky scent of JAVA SOAP CAKES on Ricky’s hands.

Mondo sat up. He frowned as he tried to smooth out the crease in the brim.

“You hear me?” Ricky asked.

The man grimaced. Ricky pulled his head up and down.

“Good,” he said. “Now get the hell out of here.”

Ricky guided him around. He shoved his back. The man stumbled towards the entrance.

Mondo stared at the cap. He wanted to rush to the bathroom and run warm water over it to get off the suds. But the pretty girl was in there.

Harry rushed over and showed the skinny man the laundry basket full of CD’s.

“He’s dead,” the skinny man said.

“Huh?”

“He’s just dead.”

“Like what you did to Wiley? Oh, yea, Baxter. Do it. He’s got to come outside.”

Baxter nodded and sneered. They marched out.

Ricky trotted over to Mondo.

“You’re a damn fool, Mondo,” he said. “Good thing Aunt Pearlina called me. They’re rioting even in Griffith Park.”

“Ricky?”

“You would’ve walked home. Right?”

“Ricky,” Baxter remarked as he paused in the doorway and watched a flatbed truck drive by. Two men sat among trumpets, saxophones, trombones stacked clumsily in the middle of the bed. A third man held the end of a PAPPY’S CHICKEN drumstick up against his nostril to stop a bloody nose. In angst, he kicked a cardboard box. Florescent yellow tennis balls flew out and bounced all over the street. Baxter dodged them as he rushed after the truck.

“That’s my cap, Mondo,” Ricky said.

Mondo punched it out.

“So Cal took me,” Ricky said and snuggled on the cap like a woman adjusting her lacy bra over her big boobs. “You believe that?”

Of course, Mondo did. As a running back for Long Beach City College, Ricky had set all kinds of records. The beauty and agility and strength of Ricky’s maneuvers on the field reminded Mondo of a wolf. In and out of trees, around boulders, across streams, in the chase for a deer, Ricky was that hungry lone wolf.

“I got me a scholarship. A goddamn ride,” Ricky said.

Mondo smiled. “Don’t expect me to tutor you.”

“Fuck that!”

They laughed. The girl opened the bathroom door a little wider.

“Now Ma will have come back from those stupid mountains,” Ricky said.

“She won’t, Ricky,” Mondo replied.

“She has to.”

Out on the street, car alarms got louder, horns honked feebly as batteries died, sirens built up pressure in the air as if to signal every building was about to explode.

“Mondo, we got to get out of here,” Ricky said. Fire crackled as if glass could burn and metal could pop. Ricky walked over, turned, and squatted. “Get on my back. Like the old days.”

Mondo fumbled through the pistachio shells in his pocket and felt the store keys.

“But I love this job,” he said.

“Are you crazy?”

Mondo grimaced.

“Fuck ‘em. Get up,” Ricky said.

Reluctantly, Mondo climbed up. The pretty girl tapped Mondo on the shoulder. He wavered as if about to fall back.

“Mondo, what did you promise her?” Ricky asked.

She pressed her forehead against the small of his back. Mondo panted feebly.

“Ricky, didn’t, really, nothing,” he replied.

She edged away. Ricky snorted a piece of ash from off his lip. He turned and bent over.

“Tighter little bro,” he said.

Mondo crawled higher. Ricky juggled him and grabbed bare feet. He hustled down the aisle and swerved around a burning trash can recently shoved into the entrance. Through steam and smoke, Ricky ran by a big busted old woman clumsily removing layers of dresses and skirts to satisfy a group of men, not as drunk as her, who tossed their loot at her to get her naked. By a boy who struggled with two leashes tangled around pure bred pit bull puppies and yanked a third snagged on a slab of glass stabbed into asphalt. Ricky hustled around a grocery cart filled with *Frisbees* set aflame. Offers of wine coolers, tickets to last night’s Laker game, bags of stale caramel corn were ignored. People stood up, rushed out, fell over. Ricky sprinted like they were kids after they fled from cops who caught them as they hid under trees and tossed moldy oranges at passing cars. When they lived with their dad in a nicer district of Compton. Before. Just Before. Mondo lamented.

“Ricky,” Mondo said.

“I know.”

Ricky slowed to a trot as he ran into the empty south side parking lot of the LA Coliseum. He stopped and squatted. Mondo slipped off.

Ricky sighed. "It's okay."

They listened to the pumping of the huge *Rain Jet* sprinklers spraying out over the football field inside the Coliseum.

"Why?" Mondo asked.

"I don't know. Why not?"

"You think I'll get my job back?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It does!"

From the deep front pocket of his pants, Ricky took out a business card from a sports agent. He read it, glanced at Mondo, mouthed the words. Ricky caressed the fancy, glossy paper. A black *Mercedes* without a front bumper did not move after the signal changed green. Mondo drifted back. Ricky returned the card.

"You got to go to Ma and bring her back from those damn Wallowa mountains," he said.

Mondo stopped. He shook his head. "She won't."

"Tell her Aunt Pearlina needs her. She got skin cancer from gathering herbs around all those electric towers."

"She did?"

"Just tell her."

The *Mercedes* squealed back, spun around, and raced back down the street.

"You can get Bunny to drive you," Ricky said.

Mondo followed the brake lights as they bounced over a curb. Ricky strode in front of him and blocked his view.

"Bunny's got a good car. It'll make it."

"Bunny's dead," Mondo replied.

"Bunny's dead?"

"I found Bunny hiding in these huge iron pipes strapped to a truck bed," Mondo said. "He'd been sniffing glue. I get in there with him. It starts to hail. His face bleeds. Like an orange being squeezed. From every pore. I jump out and run into Barney's Liquor. Call someone. I scream. He's bleeding. To death. Chung tosses me a roll of paper towels. He'll call. I can't get the plastic off. I run outside. The truck drives off. I run. But I can't catch it and Bunny dies."

Ricky reached out and twisted the cap around.

"It's a little big," he said.

"Don't you get it?" Mondo asked.

"Bunny was stupid. Always was. It wasn't your fault."

"Bunny was my friend. My only friend."

"You got me."

"I got Ma and she isn't here."

"Then, like I said, go get her."

"How? Hitchhike?"

Ricky shrugged and unwrapped a *Hersey Bar*. "Why not?"

"Why not? You're the one who's stupid!" Mondo blurted. "You got everything. Everyone likes you."

"Mondo, it's not like that."

"Bullshit."

Mondo yanked off the cap.

"You're just being stupid," Ricky said.

Mondo hustled around his brother. "Fuck you."

"Fuck me?"

Mondo dropped the cap. Rather than stomp on it, he lost his balance and stumbled into the street.

“Mondo, goddammit!”

Mondo stopped and cursed. Ricky bent over to pick up the cap. The *Mercedes* swerved around Mondo, dove into a skid, and slammed sideways into an ancient California oak tree. The skinny man crawled out of the passenger side window. He precariously did a handstand. Then fell over. Ricky nudged the cap. Mondo watched several crows drop down onto the roof of the *Mercedes*. They skidded into each other. From a broken back, but able to move, because of shock, Baxter struggled up. Ricky bit off a chunk of the *Hersey Bar*.

“It’s you, you mother fucker. You stupid dead muthafucker,” Baxter growled. From his back pocket, he tugged out a pistol. Like a puppet, his arm got yanked around. He strode, staggered, over to Ricky who spit out a piece of foil.

“You goin’ to bleed, boy,” Baxter said.

Mondo stepped in front of his brother. Baxter grinned and fired over Mondo into the neck of Ricky. Mondo charged Baxter who sank backwards, straight up, and slammed onto his back. Mondo stood over him.

“You’re the motherfucker.”

Mondo slammed his foot on the man’s throat. He stood up on one foot and put all his weight into it.

“Mondo?” Ricky wheezed. “Don’t.”

Mondo turned around.

In his outstretched arm, Ricky clutched the *Hersey Bar*. Blood pooled under his armpit. The crows landed and hopped towards the chocolate.

“No!” Mondo cried.

He rushed the crows. “Leave him alone!”

Ricky’s other eye closed.

**“A fool sits and contemplates every cut into stone  
like a drunk heart surgeon.”**

**RODIN**