

**Six**

Kneeling before *Elegua*, I stare at the four pieces of coconut and let out a laugh. No. It serves me right considering I'm basically just conning some poor lady who only wants her son out of jail. I look up at Carmen and see the fear on her face. She knows that starting off with all the discs dark side up is bad; if she's really superstitious, it could mean death. "He's just playing with me," I say as I scoop *los cocos* back up.

The fear ebbs from her face a bit. She believes me. Not only is she desperate, but like most believers, she knows that *Elegua*, along with being the conduit to the rest of the *orishas*, is a child and a trickster. Legend has it that he was just a boy when he fell to his death while climbing palms for coconuts.

Come on kid, I think, *work with me here*. I close my eyes, tap *los cocos* on the floor like before, and toss them again. This time they come up three light, one dark. Not as emphatic as his last answer, but good enough to continue. I look at Carmen again, pleased to see a smile, however slight.

Because he was the first to die in his tribe, the first to die among the first people that ever walked the earth, he was venerated as the messenger to those who created the tribe, the *orishas*. But he was still just a child who liked to play and joke like any other child. My mother would usually let me throw *los cocos* because, she felt that I, a child myself at the time, would

have a better rapport with *Elegua*. I scoop up the pieces of coconut again. Now what.

Granted, this is all simply an elaborate hoax try to make Carmen feel better about her recently incarcerated son, but I should at least attempt some level of authenticity. What would my mother ask?

*Is Juan Carnero innocent?*

Two up, two down. *Maybe*. Who among us is truly innocent? My question wasn't specific enough. I scoop my cocos up once again and ask a different question. *Does Juan deserve to be free?*

Three up. Yes. Mostly.

"Your son is wrongly accused," I say, looking up at Carmen and watching her face brighten.

"Of course he is," she replies, "that's exactly what I told you. You have to get him out."

I nod, turn back to *Elegua*, and hope Carmen won't be devastated when that doesn't happen. I scoop up the small discs of coconut, and tuck them back behind the small cement fetish. I still can't shake the feeling that he's laughing at me. Fortunately, I don't have any more questions for him. Everything at point is just routine, something I've watched my mother do a number of times before.

"Go to *La Botanica* and get a dove and a seven-colored ribbon. I'll meet you in front of the jail in an hour."

"*Si, Don Pedro,*" she replies, taking my hand and kissing it again, "Thank you so much. I knew that if anyone could help my son, *El Milagrito* could."

I offer her a half-hearted smile as I rise and see her to the door.

Stumbling out of a cab in Hackensack, I drop my *Mountain Dew* bottle and watch it roll under a parked police car. I'm late. Having been living out of state for so long, I wound up going to Jersey City where I remembered the Bergen County Jail to be only to find a crumbling building. A new state-of-the-art facility had been built a few miles away in Hackensack.

I bend down, reach under the cab, and grab my bottle. As I stand back up, I realize that there's an officer in the car. He's looking at me suspiciously. I smile, jiggling my bottle as if to say, *Nothing going on here. Just fetching my soda*, a bit worried with the fact that the bottle is full of urine. He seems unimpressed.

"Don Pedro! Over here!" I hear. I look around and see Carmen waiting patiently across the street. I make my way to her and start apologizing.

"I'm so sorry, Doña Carmen. I didn't realize they had moved the jail." She's a different person now. The oversized curlers are out, and her auburn hair cascades in waves past her shoulders. Made up and dressed up, a pretty purple dress replacing her flowered housecoat, she reminds me more of the typical Hispanic woman who wouldn't normally be

caught dead with her curlers on in public. As I reach her, I catch the scent of lilies and vanilla.

“Oh yeah,” she replies, “They closed that rat trap down years ago, *gracias a dios.*”

I nod, a little agitated that, knowing I hadn’t lived in Jersey for years, she hadn’t thought to share that information with me before leaving my place. I shrug it off, wanting to get my little scam over and done with. “Did you get everything?”

“Yes,” she says as she offers me a small cardboard box with tiny holes punched through it.

“Hold it still,” I tell her as I carefully open the box, reach in, and grab the dove as it tries to scamper away. As I pull it out of the box, I feel a warm moistness streaming on one of my hands. The damned bird just shit on me.

“Don’t get upset,” my mother would say, “It’s good luck!” I could use some right now. If it were good luck, I’d have it in spades by now considering how often I get shit on by birds. That’s not to mention the time I was running chickens from their coop to the basement of my grandmother, Blanca’s house in Puerto Rico. If *Mami Blanca* were living on the island, mom would usually send us to spend our summers in the island. That summer, there was a big hurricane on the way. We had to make sure the animals were safe.

As I helped shuttle the chickens to the higher ground, I felt something warm and slick on one of my hands. Thinking I was being crapped on again, I noticed that the chicken I was carrying had just laid an egg—in my hand. It was soft at first, but immediately began to harden. “Look *Mami Blanca*,” I cried out, showing her the egg once I had put the bird in the basement, “She laid it right in my hands.”

“That’s good, Pepito,” she replied, “That means she trusts you. That means you’ll have good luck for the rest of your life.”

I’m still waiting for that luck to come.

“Don Pedro!” Carmen is trying to attract me attention.

“What? Oh. Sorry. I was... meditating.”

“Oh, okay.” I feel guilty about misleading her. “What do we do now?”

“Now? Right. Now you tie the ribbon around the dove’s leg.” I hold the bird up so Carmen can follow my instructions. As she ties the seven colored ribbon, one color for each of *Las Siete Potencias*, the Seven African Powers, I realize that I should be chanting or something. But I don’t remember any of the songs. Shit. I’d be hard pressed to remember the names of all the *orishas* that make up the Seven African Powers, *Elegua*. *Ochun*. *Ogun*. *Chango*. *Yemaya*. *Olofi*. Who am I missing? I remember one of the tunes and begin to hum it. I don’t even know if it’s appropriate to the situation.

“Okay,” I hear Carmen say, “I’m done.”

"Great," I say, stopping my not-so-holy humming. I close my eyes, bow my head and pray. *Please let this work.*

I let the dove go, and open my eyes. It spirals up, small loops turning into larger loops until it seems that the dove is doing laps around the whole block. Finally, it settles down, glides toward the prison, and lands, perching on one of the building's windowsills.

"Oh my God!" exclaims Carmen, "You did it! Thank you. Thank you so much Don Pedro."

"What do you mean," I ask, confused by her reaction.

"Look," she says, pointing to the dove, "That's him! That's Juanito. The dove landed right near his cell. That's good, right?"

I can make out someone. I can tell he's waving, but I can't make out a face. How does she know it's him? "Yeah, that's real good," I assure her.

"I don't know how to thank you," Carmen says, reaching for my hand with a fistful of cash.

I pull my hand away from her. "You don't have to do that," I say, "A hug will do just fine—if you're okay with that."

"Of course, Don Pedro," she says as she opens her arms for me.

I go for a quick "pat on the back" hug, but she grabs onto me tightly, whispering in my ear. "Thank you for freeing my son. I'm in your debt."

I ease away from her. "Well, he's not free yet. We'll see. If he's not out by tomorrow, let me know," I say, fearing that conversation, "Let me know, either way."

"Yes. Of course Don Pedro."

"Pedro. Just Pedro's fine with me. I'm a bit young to be Don anything."

"Sure. Anything you like Do—Pedro."

We stand there awkwardly for a moment until I finally let her know, "Listen Carmen, I have an appointment I need to get to. Are you gonna be alright?"

"Yeah. I'm great," she says. Her overly optimistic reaction makes me feel even guiltier. "I saw you getting out of a cab. Do you need a ride?"

"No. That's not necessary. It's right around the corner."

"Okay then, if you need anything, just let me know."

I need to be unburdened of this guilt I feel at scamming this poor believer whose son is at the whim of Bergen County Corrections.

"Sure thing," I say as I turn around and walk away. The jail wasn't the only thing that was moved. The probation office where I have to check in was also moved—right around the corner from the jail. I start heading there hoping to get away with my second scam of the day, passing off some of the *clean* urine in my *Mountain Dew* bottle so I don't test positive for cannabis and wind up in a cell next to Juanito's.