

## PROLOGUE

Esperanza shuffled as she lugged the books over to the checkout desk. She lobbed them onto the counter then bent over to inspect the dust at the hem of her orange jumpsuit. From behind the counter, Isoke rose from her computer station.

“Hey, Oshodi,” said Esperanza. Most prison officials insisted on calling Isoke by her government name Debra Cherise Glover. Ever since that Fourth of July incident, Esperanza addressed Isoke by her New Afrikan name to express solidarity with her cellie. Except for the hard rocks with something to prove and the new jills who had no idea who Isoke Oshodi was, all the other inmates soon followed Esperanza’s lead.

“Sister Cepeda. Cleaning out the cell before you rejoin the so-called free world, are you?” Isoke said. With a weathered hand, she brushed back her graying dreads then pulled the returned books toward her. She opened the first book, picked up the computer wand and swiped it across the barcode on the inside cover.

“You could say that.”

Isoke placed the first book onto a cart behind her and opened the second one. She skimmed the titled and sneered. “You actually read all these?”

Esperanza peeked at the title. “Yeah. Finished it, too,” she said, pointing to Macchiavelli’s *The Prince*. “But I just wasn’t feelin’ it. Jesus and his boys be saying shit

like that all the time, but they must've gotten it from watching *Scarface*. Them niggas are illiterate.”

She said it to make Isoke laugh, but the reaction on her face warned of an impending lecture. “Esperanza, I have told you time and again...”

“...that no matter how often young Blacks use them as terms of endearment today, the words *nigger*, *nigga* and even *negro* are laden with white supremacist history of dehumanization.”

Esperanza's recitation finally earned her a smile from her elder. “So you do listen to me from time to time.” Then Isoke picked up and waved *The Art of War* at Esperanza before adding it to the cart. “Did you finish this, too?” Esperanza shook her head, confused as to whether she should be proud or embarrassed. “When you came in here a year ago, you couldn't wait to read this.”

Esperanza shrugged. “I've changed.”

“Have you?” asked Isoke, her voice loaded with daring.

Esperanza and Isoke had argued about this many times. After lights out in strained whispers or during work detail shouting over the hum of the sewing machines, they bantered almost every day about Esperanza's future. Having made a choice but not wanting to hurt Isoke's feelings, Esperanza played ignorant. “How does a person come to a place like this and not change?”

“But is your change for the better?” Isoke issued her challenge in her usual motherly tone, and her eyes narrowed as if to see through to Esperanza's soul. “Are you going to be a thug, Esperanza, or a revolutionary?” she asked. “Because I'm afraid that brother Tupac was wrong. Thug life is not the new Black Power. It makes no sense to

rage against the machine without purpose or principle. You cannot be both a gangsta and a solider, Esperanza, so you must choose.”

Esperanza sighed. *Neither ‘cause either way I’ll end up back in this muthafucka or dead.* “All I know is that I’m never coming back here.”

Isoke looked over her shoulder at the prison librarian reordering books in the stacks several yards behind the counter. She picked up *The Art of War* and tossed it to the side. Then she reached below the counter and emerged with another stack of books. She leaned forward and whispered, “Take these.”

Esperanza shook her head. *Those books again.* “Maybe I shouldn’t. I mean, I ain’t got but a week. I’m not gonna read all that by then so why...” Ever since Dulce’s first visit when she brought Esperanza her Tupac books, Isoke nagged her to read all this political stuff. *Tupac was the son of Black Panther*, she argued. *He had a political analysis, a social vision. He read with the intention to liberate.* Esperanza promised Isoke she would read the books but never did except for the biography of Afeni Shakur that Isoke’s son managed to sneak into the prison in a care package. As much as she appreciated Isoke’s desire to take her under her wing, Esperanza felt the time when such words might have mattered had passed long before she entered Bedford Hills.

Isoke gave the books a decisive shove toward Esperanza. “Take ‘em with you. Just promise to return them when you’re done so another sister can benefit from the wisdom within those pages. Do it for an old lady who’s never going home.”

Esperanza read the cover of the first title, a glossy textbook called *Stenography in Thirty Days*. “Oh.” Probably a donation from Isoke’s political group in Bed-Stuy which did everything from monitoring beat cops to prevent harassment and brutality to offering

tutorial programs with a heavy dose of Black cultural and political history. "OK."

Esperanza accepted the stack. No sense in insulting Isoke's pride seven days before going home, and certainly not after all the ways she had looked out for Esperanza over the past twelve months.

Isoke had become much more than her cellie, commanding Esperanza's respect from the start. Even though prison regulations stated that inmates over forty automatically received the bottom bunk, Isoke insisted that Esperanza take it. "I like the physical challenge of climbing in and out of that top bunk," she said. "It reminds that no matter what they do to me, I'm still alive." In those first critical weeks, how many jealous bitches let her be out of deference to Isoke? How much harder Esperanza's time might have been had Isoke not reminded her of her rights? How much longer would the year have dragged without Isoke's preaching, debating and storytelling? After all she had done, Esperanza had read only one of the books Isoke recommended as if she had so much more important things to do. And she might not have done read that book had it not been about 'Pac's mama and if Isoke had not told Esperanza that the circumstances of Afeni's arrest were similar to her own. As much as she ached to go home to Dulce's homecooking and even her nagging, it scared Esperanza how much she would miss Isoke.

She also felt guilty over her release while Isoke faced another sham parole hearing. That first day when Isoke asked her what she was in for and how long, Esperanza had said, "Got caught out there with a gun, and they gave me twelve months. That's mandatory in New York. You?"

“Got caught out there with a conscience,” said Isoke with a bittersweet smile.

“And they gave me life. That’s mandatory in the U.S.”

Under the weight of the new books, Esperanza shuffled down the gloomy corridor past fellow inmates on their knees buffing the floors. When she reached her empty cell, she yelled to the guard, “7-2-5-7-1-3.”

The bars pulled open with a large buzz, and Esperanza stepped inside her cell. She watched as the bars buzzed again then clanked shut behind her. Only a month into her stint, she had learned to block out that sound. But today she watched and listened. In a week Esperanza would never have to see those bars or hear that hellish noise again. Something about Isoke’s words made her want to seal this sound in her memory lest she have to return to prison to remember it.

Esperanza laid the stack of books on the floor next to the cardboard box provided for her belongings. She reached into it for her notebook and pen, grabbed the textbook, and climbed into the bottom bunk. Esperanza paused to reminisce on the many nights she lay awake thinking about her mother Brenda, wondering if she was doing the same thing in California. To distract herself from the pang in her chest, she cracked open the crisp textbook cover. Flipping through the coarse pages, she discovered lines upon lines of text. No glossy illustrations, penmanship grids or cursive fonts as she expected from a stenography text.

Esperanza turned back to the first page and began to read, and within seconds sat up with excitement. “You go, Isoke!” Over the past year, she had read everything she could get about ‘Pac, and now Isoke had slipped her the biography of his aunt Assata. Maybe not his biological aunt, but she mattered to Tupac, and so she mattered to

Esperanza. She lay back on her bunk, propped her new treasure against her elevated knees and began to read.

CHAPTER 1 – TROUBLESOME

Tupac growled through the speakers, and the accompanying bass shook the portable stereo and threatened to hurl the jagged pile of books that sat on top of it.

*Shit ain't changed since my last rhyme.*

*The crime rate ain't decline,*

*Niggas bustin' shots like they lost they mind*

*Like twenty-five to life never crossed they mind.*

Esperanza finished darkening her eyebrows into a sinister arch then dropped her pencil to join Tupac in his defiant acceptance of judgment.

*Need to take me in heaven and understand I was a sheep*

*Did the best I could, raised in insanity*

*Or send me to hell 'cause I ain't beggin' for my life*

*Ain't nothing worse than this cursed-ass hopeless life  
'cause I'm troublesome.*

From her memories of countless videos, Esperanza channeled 'Pac, lowering her voice into a masculine rumble and jabbing her fingers in the air in West Side formation. Just as she prepared to spew the next verse, the disc halted.

Esperanza turned to face her older sister Dulce, standing there in her supermarket workshirt and carrying her polyster knapsack. Bad enough she had trashed all her Tupac posters, was she going to ban her from listening to him, too? Esperanza watched as Dulce's eyes traveled from her gelled sideburns to her glossy lipstick to her red spandex dress with the Mandarin collar. "What? Why aren't you getting dressed? You seriously not going?"

"No, and you shouldn't be either."

Esperanza understood why Dulce wanted to skip the party. Still she hoped that Dulce would put aside her ill feelings toward Xavier to celebrate her release from prison. And Esperanza really did not want to face Jesus and the others by herself. But she would be damned if his crew and the wannabes partied in her name while she stayed home especially when they owed her so much.

"C'mon, Dulce, when am I ever gonna get another release party?" Esperanza giggled. "Get it? A release party?" Dulce just stared at her so Esperanza flipped the stereo back on and returned to the dresser mirror to check her makeup.

Dulce snapped off the stereo again. "*Me dejiste que va a dejar to' esta mierda. ¡Me lo juraste!*"

“And I meant it, Dulce,” said Esperanza. “But I have to get my money. Otherwise, why’d I fuckin’ spend twelve months on lockdown?”

“You’ve been home three days, and did you find a job or enroll in a program? No, you get all dressed up and run out the door to see Jesus. Have you forgotten what the parole letter said?”

How could Esperanza forget? When her public defender convinced her to cop a plea, he told her that once she did her year, she’d be truly free. “So long as you don’t get in trouble while inside, once they release you, you’re done.”

“You mean they won’t put her on parole?” Dulce asked.

“Exactly.”

But while Esperanza did her time, an election came and laws changed. She had no idea until Isoke schooled her. Once she learned Esperanza’s release date, she began to prepare her as she had many cellmates before her. As Esperanza sewed her final stitch on a slipcover, Isoke said, “Try to get your record expunged. And go to my organization. They have programs that will help you.”

“Ma, I live in the South Bronx. I can’t be going all the way to Bed-Stuy for some program. There’s bound to be some where I live.”

“At least call them. They might know of some that your parole officer doesn’t.”

“I’m not going to be on parole. My lawyer said that when my year’s up, I’ll be done. I don’t have to report.”

“Do you know how much a system can change in just one year?”

Sure enough Esperanza went through a hearing and eventually came home to a letter from the New York State Department of Parole. Because of changes to the state

penal code, she had to report to her assigned parole officer for one year. If she failed to follow this officer's rehabilitative program to the letter, he could violate her parole and send her back to prison.

"The letter didn't say I couldn't have a welcome-home party," Esperanza snapped. Dulce just shook her head, grabbed her knapsack and began to leave the bedroom. "I hate went you do that!"

Her sister whirled around. "Do what, Espe? Just what is it that I do to you?"

Esperanza searched for the words, and Tupac provided them. "Look at me like I'm hopeless. I'm not. You'll see." Dulce scoffed and left the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

Esperanza turned to her reflection in the mirror and found a dash of red lipstick stray across her cheek. She pulled a tissue from the box on the dresser and dabbed at it when her eyes caught a photo of Dulce and herself wedged in the mirror's frame. She plucked it out and studied it.

They took the picture on a trip to Six Flags with Jesus and Xavier. The three-year age difference never diminished the Cepeda sisters' resemblance to each other and their Puerto Rican father. The thick head of coffee curls which both routinely heated into straightened submission. Crescent eyes set deep between short yet plush eyelashes, caked with charcoal mascara. Honeyed skin that emphasized an indigenous nose and African lips darkened around the edges in lipstick pencil. On that day Esperanza wore her hair in a tight ponytail fastened high on her crown while Dulce wrapped her head in a bandana of the Puerto Rican flag. In the photo, they stood back to back, arms tightly knit across their busts as they flicked a choice finger at Jesus's camera.

Esperanza's eyes flickered from the photo to her reflection, and she saw what Dulce had seen. The same manicured hair and hard makeup. Another dress from the ghetto fabulous wardrobe bought one size too small now further straining to contain the additional curves furnished by prison fare. The look of an unrepentant moll.

She wedged the photo back into the frame and gave herself one last inspection in the mirror. Dulce may have decided she had neither the time nor money to waste on her appearance, but after a year of sloppy braids and chapped lips, Esperanza had no intention of leaving the house without hooking herself up. How could Dulce fault Esperanza for not having anything to wear but her old gear? She liked the way the collar of this dress hid her scar the way few sexy dresses did. And just because she decided to go the party that Jesus was throwing for her didn't mean she intended to get caught up with him again.

Esperanza clicked on the stereo and rejoined Tupac in his rebellious declaration. "I'm hopeless! I live a thug life, losing my focus, baby. I'm troublesome!" She gave a short laugh but then grew stern with her reflection. "No, I'm not," she said to her reflection. Then Esperanza turned off the radio, grabbed her coat and purse, and sauntered out of the bedroom.

She entered the kitchen where still furious Dulce tried to study. Esperanza placed her purse on the table to put on her worn wool coat. "So you're not coming with me? Not even for a little while?" She smoothed her collar, picked at lint, and struggled with her zipper just waiting for Dulce to speak. Esperanza welcomed anything – a plea, a protest,

a warning – but nothing came. “C’mon, D, come with me, I don’t plan to...”

“Don’t call me D.”

Esperanza snickered. “OK, Dool-say!” Her sister continued to read even when Esperanza snatched her purse off the table. In her best Tupac imitation she said, “Why niggaz look mad? Y’all supposed to be happy I’m free. Y’all niggaz look like y’all wanted me to stay in jail.” She mimicked his boyish laugh then left Dulce seething.

Esperanza bounded past the busted intercom through the rickety lobby door and onto the walkway. The crisp February air forced her to nestle deeper into her coat. When Jesus gave her the money they owed her, she would break off Dulce with some cash then buy herself a new one.

“Espe!”

She stopped, turned around and looked up. Dulce hung out of their twelfth story window, the wind flattening her curls into lax spirals. Esperanza smiled, waiting for her sister to ask her to wait.

“Tupac’s dead, Espe. He’s not in Cuba with his *titi* or on any other goddamned island writing poetry or making records. He’s fuckin’ dead! Keep messin’ with Jesus and see if you don’t wind up dead, too.” Then Dulce snapped her head back inside and slammed the window shut.

Esperanza looked for witnesses to Dulce’s outburst. Two hefty women with shopping carts made their way home three buildings over while several boys in the playground ahead of her attempted to coax a stray cat toward them with a sliver of beef jerky. Relieved that the gossipy trio of project girls that usually hung out in front of their

building were nowhere in sight, she continued down the walkway toward the street, Esperanza flipped up her collar and buried face in the neck of jacket now more from embarrassment than the cold.

The muffled beat of Fat Joe's latest met Esperanza at the landing of Jesus's floor. As she walked toward his door, she remembered her last time there. He woke up randy that morning, excited about the day's agenda. She had not slept all night, and when he heaved himself on top of her, she cringed in dry pain. Then Chuck and Xavier arrived an hour later, and they rehashed the plan while they waited for Feli. When it became evident that Feli had bailed, Jesus had to revise the plan. Eager to have his back, Esperanza volunteered to drive. Xavier protested and almost convinced Jesus to allow him to drive instead, but eventually Jesus handed her the keys. Ten hours later Esperanza found herself handcuffed to a bench at the 40<sup>th</sup> precinct.

Esperanza paused before Jesus's door and reconsidered her options. She had given the little she saved during her bid to her sister. Dulce refused it at first, but Esperanza insisted she accept it as an act of good faith. In addition to working at the supermarket and attending school at night, Dulce was battling with the New York City Housing Authority to keep Esperanza off its "not wanted" list." Dulce used the little money Esperanza had made as evidence of her rehabilitation and intention to contribute positively to their household. But Esperanza knew after a few utility bill payments, the money would be gone, and Dulce's patience soon would follow. She had no job leads and doubted her street skills were the sales experience that K-Mart and Old Navy sought. Esperanza needed her money. She did a year-long bid in Bedford Hills, the only one of

the crew who got busted that day. Dulce told her to give up Jesus and the others, but she refused, and for that she deserved her cut and to walk away from them for good with no hassle. Esperanza wanted it all – the dough, the daps and the deliverance she earned with her silence and sacrifice.

Just as Esperanza poised to knock, the door swung open. Accompanied by a waft of herb, a young couple stumbled over the threshold and past her. Esperanza entered the apartment, stuffed to the corners with bodies leaning, writhing and grinding. In the corner under a banner that read WELCOME HOME, ESPE!, a deejay spun records as two girls admired his every move. At the opposite side of the room, guests swarmed by tables filled with tins of food – *arroz con gandules*, *tostones y maduros*, octopus salad, even collard greens, yams and macaroni and cheese. As soon as she got her money, she would give a little face time, serve herself a heaping plate, fix one for Dulce and then head straight home.

Esperanza eased her way into the crowd, searching the bobbing heads for a warm face. Even the familiar few were too engrossed in their macks and swerves to notice that she had arrived let alone welcome her home. She spotted clockers working the crowd, slipping powder samples into eager hands yet refusing to accept payment. Esperanza chided herself for thinking that people attended a Jesus Lara party for any reason other than to fulfill their own needs. For Jesus throwing a party was little more than executing a marketing strategy, and with this welcome-home theme, he had cast Esperanza as the pretty spokeswoman that kept heads from switching to another channel and buying the same product from his competitor. Just as she caught herself grudgingly admiring the bastard, the last guest Esperanza expected to greet her became the first.

“Espe!” Priscilla flung her arms around her in a crushing embrace. Over Priscilla’s shoulder, Esperanza looked across the floor in time to catch Xavier close the door to Jesus’s bedroom. She smelled his Chrome on Priscilla’s neck and pulled away from her. “Welcome home, girl!”

Esperanza filled with shame as Priscilla took in her dated outfit. As hard as Priscilla tried to dress older, her low-cut sweater against her buttercup breasts and tiny skirt over her skinny legs made the nineteen year-old seem twelve. Her dark roots screamed from the top of her yellow hair which curled around thrice-pierced earlobes. A slash of blue that matched Priscilla’s sweater cut across her eyelids, and her lips jutted out with the matted pinkness of cotton candy. Yet next to her in last year’s trends, Esperanza felt a decade past her twenty-four years, a never-been desperately trying to hang onto her youth and aging herself that much quicker for trying.

“Mami, it’s so good to see you,” said Priscilla. “You look as fly as ever. Just the other day...”

“Stop frontin’, Priscilla,” Esperanza said. “You don’t think I know you’ve been fuckin’ Jesus while I was upstate?” She shoved Priscilla aside and marched toward the bedroom.

Esperanza barged in and found Jesus splayed across the bed laughing, the air around him filled with buddha and cologne. From the doorway she could see the pink lipstick Priscilla branded on the strap of his undershirt. Jesus, too, had not changed over the past year. He still parted and swept his dark hair to the side over one eye, the other piercing through her like a green knife. Jesus’s goatee remained a rectangular tuft that shadowed upward in fine trails of hair over his jaw into his sideburns. His eyes fixed on

her like a cheetah on his prey, Jesus pulled himself onto his elbows, his biceps flexing under his golden skin. Esperanza had come to hold so many things against Jesus over the past year, but at that moment what she resented about him most was how goddamned sexy he remained.

None of them changed. Dressed in black as always from his Roca Wear sweatshirt to his Tims, Xavier gnawed at a toothpick and camped by the door like a hound before the gates of Hell. Sitting on the floor by Jesus's feet while leaning against the bed, Feli scrunched his acne sprinkled babyface as he dragged on a thick blunt. In front of him on the floor sat the ever present Monopoly game. Feli passed the blunt to Chuck where he leaned against the dresser still tittering from his last toke and wiping sweat off his bald head with a stubby hand.

"Here she is," said Feli as he pulled up to his feet. "What's up, ma? Welcome home." He put his arms around her, the first sincere embrace Esperanza received since Dulce clung to her in the Bedford Hills parking lot. She only pulled away when she saw Jesus eye them with suspicion.

"Thanks, Feli. *How's la doña?*"

"Kickin' it hard still. You know how my *'buelita* be."

Chuck lined up for his turn. "Espe..." He hooked a stiff arm around her shoulder and then retreated. "A year on lockdown ain't change you a bit."

"You think so?" said Esperanza pretending to appreciate the compliment. "You oughta try it some time." Xavier cackled along with her, but when she turned to face him, he had returned to his usual scowl. "Long time no see, X."

“Word.” Xavier removed the toothpick from his mouth, flashing the gap between his front teeth. As if he read Esperanza’s mind, Xavier asked, “Where your sister at? She coming?”

For the first time, Esperanza supported Dulce’s decision to stay home. “If you gotta ask.”

Jesus groaned and stretched to his feet. “OK, y’all need to clear out of here so my lady and I can get reacquainted.” He opened the door and gazed at Esperanza as his lieutenants filed out of the bedroom. As soon as he closed and locked the door, Jesus advanced toward her. He drew her toward him and kissed her in that way that first made her love him. She pulled away from, staring at her feet, and Jesus just laughed. “I have a welcome-home gift for you.”

Esperanza released her smile. “You didn’t.”

“Of course, I did.” Jesus bounded to the dresser, picked up a rectangular jewelry box and handed it to her.

Esperanza hesitated, knowing that accepting it would mean opening herself to him. Over the past year a gift for her birthday or Christmas meant a book from Dulce or a drawing from another inmate. After his first and last visit, she had not received so much as a card from Jesus. Perhaps he wanted to make up for it, and like her cut of the robbery, Esperanza deserved it.

She removed the lid and dropped it on the bed. Along a bed of felt cardboard lay a herringbone necklace with a golden 2 pendant. Esperanza lifted it out of the box and dangled it in the air. Jesus pulled it out of her hand and motioned for her to face the

mirror. As she did, he reached around to hang the necklace around her neck. "A 2, huh? Took a year without me to get over your jealousy."

Jesus clasped the pendant and stepped back. "Jealous?" Before she could answer he yelled, "Fuck no. How'm I gonna be jealous of some dead nigga? Can't believe you still on that shit, Espe." Then as quickly as he blew, Jesus softened again. "That 2's for me and you, ma."

He turned Esperanza around and kissed her again. She cringed as he tightened his grip on her waist and grazed his teeth against her neck. He pressed against her, pushing her back towards the bed. "I missed you so much," he said, his hot breath creeping down her spine like glue. They fell backwards on the bed.

"C'mon, Jesus." Esperanza tossed her head in an effort to get away from his invasive lips. She had to resist those lips. "Slow your roll."

"Still got those sexy legs, I see." Jesus clamped his hand on her thigh and tried to hike up her dress. "Yo, Espe, it's been a year since I've seen you."

She repressed the urge to comment on Priscilla. Instead Esperanza shoved his hand away and said, "That was on you." Jesus rolled off of her, and she sat up.

He leaned back on his elbows. "You know it was too risky."

"Ain't write neither," she continued as if he had said nothing. "Never seemed to be around when I called."

"You know what they say. Ain't no secrets in the penitentiary. Kept your commissary flowin' though."

"More like tricklin'."

“Oh, you still real funny,” Jesus said. “You know they’d only let me put so much there. I put in the max even though that was risky, too.” He leaned in, kissing her neck and rubbing her thigh. *I woulda rather you come see me.* Esperanza jerked away. “What the fuck, Espe?”

“Everybody’s outside and shit.” She expected someone like Priscilla or Chuck to bang on the door at any second. Esperanza almost wished someone would. “Least you can do is talk to me some first.”

“Talk to you about what?”

Priscilla’s name jammed in her throat. “Like what you’ve been up to while I was away.”

Jesus snickered. “What else am I gonna do? Hold it down. You know, for us.”

“Oh yeah? So what’d you do with my cut? Invest in Microsoft or something?”

Esperanza laughed.

But he just glared at her. “So that’s what all this is about? Fine.” He reached under the bed and pulled out a cashbox. Jesus opened it to reveal several envelopes, and Esperanza’s heart leapt when she recognized them as the letters she wrote to him from Bedford Hills. Jesus put the letters aside to reveal several packs of bills. He grabbed a thin stack of hundreds and handed them to Esperanza and then walked over to the window and threw it open.

On sight, she knew it fell short. Without taking her eyes off of him, Esperanza took the stack from him. She snapped off the rubber band and quickly counted the money. “There’s only twenty-five hundred here.”

“I know what’s there.” Jesus lit a cigarette.

“The deal was ten apiece.”

“Look, the guys stepped to me and said that since they took most of the risk...”

“Bullshit!” Esperanza jumped to her feet. “I’m the one who got sent up on that fuckin’ gun charge.”

Jesus dragged on his cigarette and tapped the ashes against the sill. “The cops weren’t supposed to be checkin’ for you, and...”

“I can’t believe you let them do this to me. I want my money, Jesus!”

He took another drag. “Esperanza. Calm. Down.”

Esperanza got into his face. “I will not fuckin’ calm down! I didn’t spend a year on lockdown for you guys so you can fuck me over. And you...”

Jesus pounced on Esperanza, gripping her jaw with one hand and jabbing the cigarette inches from her nose with the other. “I said calm the fuck down. You did what you were supposed to do. Don’t think ‘cause you didn’t roll over and got sent up for a year, shit done changed around here. I still call the shots and you still listen.” The cigarette smoke crept up her nostril and made her cough. Jesus lowered his cigarette but kept his grip on her face. “I don’t keep those shiftless niggas in line just to let your bitch ass step out of it. Now sit the fuck down.” Esperanza backed away from him. “I said sit down.” Instead she stepped away from the bed and stood against the dresser. “So it’s like that now. Prison done toughen you up, huh?”

“So much I ain’t going back.”

Jesus grinned and advanced toward her. “Of course not, baby.” He dropped the cigarette on the floor and squashed it. Then he reached out to caress Esperanza’s cheek. “You and me, we’re gonna go some place new and start fresh.”

Esperanza relaxed. Jesus never talked about leaving before. Not when he first brought her into the game. Not even when they planned to rob the check cashing joint. Certainly not during his first and last visit to Bedford Hills. "Like where?"

"I'm thinking California."

Her mind leapt to perpetual sunshine, blue waters and golden beaches. No Feli, Chuck or Xavier. And depending where they settled, she could see Brenda regularly.

"Really, papi? You mean it?"

"Hell, yeah, sweetheart," said Jesus, lobbing back the excitement in her voice. "We do one last job, and then we bounce."

Esperanza's heart crashed into her stomach. What made her think he was talking about leaving New York *and* the game? Only days out of the pen she had fallen back into her naivete. "Look, Jesus, you do what you gotta do. But between my sister and parole officer, I can't fuck with that."

"Espe, ma, I promise you this ain't some wild shit like the fuck-up we pulled last year. This shit's solid, and I don't want to do it without you. Let me show you love for riding with me." Jesus put his hand on the back of her neck and pulled her face into his. "We need our queen bee, ma, and that's you. You think that after how things went down, we ain't wanna get the hell outta here? The fellas sure as hell did, and I wouldn't let 'em. I said, 'Any nigga try to run now is gonna get his cap peeled.' I wasn't going nowhere without you, Espe. Not after how you showed and proved. We've been waiting on you. I've been waiting for you."

Jesus locked his arms around her waist and smashed his lips against hers. Esperanza pressed her forearms against his chest and pull back her head. "Don't you get

it, Jesus, I can't..." He forced another kiss on her so hard, he wrung tears from her eyes. He pulled Esperanza from the dresser to the bed and forced her down on it.

Experience taught Esperanza not to resist Jesus, and memory reminded her how many times she fantasized about reuniting with him. Even when he never came back to visit her, evaded her telephone calls and ignored all those letters she wrote, Esperanza laid in her bunk many nights, touching herself and reliving Jesus's every loving stroke. When squinting over a piece of fabric in her machine or staring at the curled wire on the fence around the prison yard, Esperanza cursed Jesus. At night, however, she craved him.

Jesus slipped her hands between her thighs and whispered in his ear, "And when it's all over, you and me, we're never gonna be apart again ever. 'Cause you love me, and I love you."

A few moments later, Esperanza left the bedroom with her pocketbook tucked under her arm. She smoothed her hair and wiped her eyes, smearing mascara across her fingers. Keeping her head low, she inched her way through the crowd toward the bathroom. She found a line of partygoers including Feli, Chuck and Priscilla, but Esperanza just filed behind the last person and hoped no one would notice her.

"Ay, yo, Espe!" Feli said, waving her to the front. "Espe, come here." Esperanza pulled away from the wall and headed to the front of the line.

"Hey, no skippin'," said a female partygoer.

"Shut up!" snapped Feli. "She the guesta honor." Esperanza broke a smile as Feli put his hand around her shoulder. She hooked her arm around his waist and eyed

Priscilla. *That's right, bitch. The true queen bee is back.* "Ma, I need you to school these muthafuckas. Tell 'em how you know how Tupac's still alive."

"Nah, they don't want to hear all that right now."

"Aw, c'mon, Espe," said Chuck.

"Maybe later."

Then Priscilla said, "Check this out. In the first video that came out after Tupac got shot, he's wearing some kicks that weren't even out yet when he died." Everyone turned to her, and she started to gush. "And you know how he started to call himself Makaveli? If you change the letters around, you can spell out I'M ALIVE. Oh, and in the *Hail Mary* video, there's this gravestone, right? And it says Makaveli on it, but it's cracked with a big hole in front it."

A male guest said, "Like he rose from the dead."

Esperanza planted her hands on her hips as others on line leaned in to hear Priscilla. "And you know on the album cover where Tupac's, like, crucified?" She looked to Esperanza for the title, but she just let Priscilla hang.

"*Seven Day Theory*," said another male partygoer behind her on line.

"Yeah, that's it. So there's, like, five bullet holes in the picture, and remember? 'Pac was shot five times."

Now the crowd turned to Esperanza and awaited her expertise. She debated whether to bother. Chuck and Feli probably just called her to instigate a catfight between Priscilla and her. But Priscilla had all these people hanging on her every word when she had it all twisted. Esperanza was the guest of honor. Jesus made it clear that only one woman can rise in his organization on his arm, and that would be her. *She* was the

neighborhood authority on all things Tupac. A year on lockdown had not changed that, and these people needed to recognize it.

“Who you think you are, studying videos? Roger Ebert and shit?” said Esperanza. Chuck, Feli and the other guests laughed as Priscilla’s pale cheeks flooded red. “Forget that shit. And forget the numerological, word scramble shit, too.” The guests hooted, and Esperanza felt a fire light in her belly. “All you have to look at are the facts. Fact: ‘Pac never went anywhere without a vest except the night he got capped in Vegas. Fact: he changed his name to Makaveli ‘cause in the book written by the real Macchiavelli, he says, ‘A prince who wishes to achieve great things must learn to deceive’ and that included staging his own death to fool his enemies.” The fire exploded into a blaze that propelled Esperanza’s hands into Priscilla’s flushed face. “And if you’re gonna look at what ‘Pac left behind for clues, to hell with the music videos and album covers. He ain’t control that shit. Look to what he created. Listen to his lyrics.”

Esperanza stood back as if to summon Tupac. Dropping her voice to imitate his, she prepared to rhyme when she spotted Jesus making her way toward her. “There you go,” he said. “Come over here, ma.”

She remained frozen, her hand in the air ready to spit. Jesus hated it when she went on these bents. One time while riding the subway together, he became so furious with her rhyming along with ‘Pac on her portable CD player, Jesus grabbed her stereo, opened the door leading to the next car and tossed it onto the tracks. “I’m a fan of the nigga, too, but you’re fuckin’ obsessed.” Not once had Jesus asked her to lower her voice or stop rhyming all together before he destroyed her stereo, and she would have had he

just asked. The next day he bought her a new and better Discman, but Esperanza left it in the plastic for weeks.

Jesus reached them and took Esperanza's hand. "C'mon out to the front. I got something else for you." As he led her away, he motioned for Chuck and Feli to follow.

Esperanza saw Priscilla's face, her forehead and chin now as ruby as her cheeks. Esperanza stopped and rhymed:

*I heard rumors I died  
in cold blood, traumatized pictures of me in my final states  
you know mamma cried,  
but that was fiction,  
some coward got the story twisted.*

Jesus tugged her arm and squeezed her hand. "Espe, *por favor*, enough with that shit." He led Esperanza to the center of the living room and toward the DJ who faded the current record and handed Jesus the mic. The crowd stopped and closed in on them. Behind Esperanza stood Feli, Chuck and Xavier grinning. "Yo, me and the fellas wanna dedicate this next jam to our first lady. Our Foxy Brown. Our Queen Bitch. Welcome home, boo."

The guest applauded, and Esperanza giggled. "Y'all niggas better not sing."

"Oh, we gonna sing. And you know we had to pick a song by your boy so..." The DJ started the record and at the sound of the Cameo sample the crowd roared and began

to clap along with the song. Jesus joined his crew, and the foursome began their twisted serenade.

*Every little city we go*

*Every other vid-e-o*

*No matter where I go*

*I see the same hooooo!*

The crowd jumped into the chorus.

*It's all about you!*

Jesus pulled Esperanza to him and grinded against her. She buried her face into his shoulder and hoped everyone would mistake her humiliation for shyness.

*Every little city we go*

*Every other vid-e-o*

*No matter where I go*

*I see the same hooooo!*

As everyone continued to sing along with *All About You*, Esperanza riveted her face to Jesus body feeling like Carrie White at the prom after that bitch pulled the string. By the

time the crowd hit the second chorus, Esperanza knew she had to leave before she actually convinced herself to set fire to the entire tenement with nothing but her rage.

Esperanza shoved herself away from Jesus whose hands remained clasped around her waist. "It's all about you," he sang. She forced herself to smile and tried to break away from his grip. "What? Where you going? Dance with me." He grabbed hold of her hand as she pulled away.

"I was tryin' to pee when you dragged me out here," Esperanza said. She wrangled her hand from his and bolted down the hallway toward the bathroom. Esperanza raced past the line of guests, pushed herself past the girl just leaving the bathroom, and closed the door on the curses of those waiting.

Esperanza threw down the toilet seat and dropped onto it sobbing. She reached for some tissue and wiped at her eyes, leaving streaks of black and beige across the whiteness. Esperanza stood up to look into the mirror. Dark smudges of mascara encircled her eyes just as if Jesus had punched her in the face.

She turned on the water and pumped hand soap into her palms. After scrubbing her face clean, Esperanza yanked the towel off the shower rod and rubbed her face dry. She looked down at the towel and the smears of makeup she left behind. Instead of tossing it into the hamper, she flipped it around and tossed it back over the shower rod.

Esperanza looked at her reflection in the mirror, her face now bare and ashen by the anti-bacterial soap. When she noticed the few strands of her hair that poked out from her temple, she trickled water over her fingers and smoothed them back. Then her eyes landed on the 2 pendant around her neck. She grabbed the necklace and shoved it under

her Mandarin collar. Still through her dress, she could feel the bottom of the pendant dangling over her scar and causing it to itch.

Although she doubted she would find the jar, she opened the medicine cabinet. Right in front of her sat the tub of cocoa butter where she had left it. Esperanza undid the buttons of her collar and slid her hand inside. She ran her fingertips along the raised skin as it ran from her clavicle to her breastbone. Opening the jar of cocoa butter, she dipped her fingers into the greasy cake, scooped up a thick dallop of butter and lathered it across her scar. Did Jesus keep it for her or did he just forget about it? After all that happened, Esperanza did not know what she wanted to believe. Jesus's voice echoed in her head. *That 2's for me and you, ma. I wasn't going nowhere without you, Espe. 'Cause I love you and you love me.* That was what he wanted her to believe.

Esperanza yanked, ripping off the necklace and pulling it through the opening over her dress. Then she dangled it over the toilet. As the 2 spun and glistened in the harsh bathroom light, she realized a better use for it. Esperanza stashed the necklace into her purse and opened the bathroom door.

Esperanza peeked around the corner joining the hallway and the living room. She scanned the crowd for Jesus and found him with pouting Priscilla in a corner. Jesus reached out to stroke her hair. But when Priscilla swatted his hand away, Jesus grabbed her arm, dragged her across the floor into the bedroom and slammed the door shut. Esperanza thought of her coat where she had left it on the floor. Checking over her shoulder for the other guys, she bustled toward the door, yanked a random leather jacket off the coat rack and fled the apartment.