

PREFACE

A

Dreamland 2001

John Saint John was up early. It had stormed the night before and that didn't help his sleep any. Earlier that day he visited a man on Gravesend Avenue, a man whom a colleague put him in contact with. It took almost ten days to get it, but now the man had what Saint John requested...what Saint John wanted. He had his gun.

That night he tossed and turned, thinking about what must be done the next day. He kept the gun in a small black plastic bag—the kind you get at a bodega when buying a can of beer. Saint John didn't like guns. When he preached at the Faith Palace Baptist Church on Union Street, a Sunday side job he cherished, he railed against the gun violence that plagued the streets of Brooklyn. And now he was a hypocrite. But he was also only a man—and a father. And as such had to do what a man—what a father—had to do to protect his family.

That was what he kept telling himself as the storm raged both outside and in his head that night. The morning was clear and, unusual for early September, there was a slight hint of fall in the air. He put on his maintenance department uniform and slipped the black plastic bag into the canvas backpack he carried to work every day. Before leaving, he went into the bedroom where his daughters slept. He kissed them both: eleven-year-old Jasinda and fourteen-year-old Miriam. His wife had already left the house, working to care for an elderly woman who lived in Brooklyn Heights. With their parents' busy schedules, the two girls learned to fend for themselves. They were good girls. He thought about their half-brother, who lived on the little island where Saint

John was from. The boy was almost twenty now. His mother could not control him. He was often in trouble. He had a bad disposition. A quick temper. St. John regretted every day that he was not there to guide the boy, spiritually and morally. But it was a choice he made when he left the island for New York. When he fell in love with another. It was something he had to live with.

He hovered over Miriam, staring at the calm in her face as she slept. He hoped when she woke that calm would remain, that she would in time lose the frightened, tormented gaze that had occupied her face since that day on Eastern Parkway. But he didn't think so. He was worried about her and that was why he had to take care of this thing. He couldn't let what happened to her stand without retribution. She had to see that her father loved and cared for her...and would die for her if necessary.

The 3 train, even at six in the morning, was crowded, but he was fortunate to get a seat. He clasped his arms around his broad chest, hugging the backpack tight to him. He could feel the sharpness of the gun in it. It was as if it were radiating heat. He had the earphones of his portable cassette player plugged into his ears. He was listening to the sweet voice of Marcia Griffiths. She was singing that beautiful song about a dreamland. He needed to hear her voice to help settle him—to calm him for the day ahead.

He got off at Fulton Street and walked across to the North Tower, where he worked. He knew that the financial offices on the top floors were already busy working the overseas markets. On his way in he saw Stanley Clement coming out of the Tower, his shift finished. Clement was short and rotund with very dark skin and a hairless head. The two acknowledged each other. Clement, originally from the Caribbean island of St. Kitts, lived on Lincoln Place, also in Brooklyn.

"Rain hard last night," Clement said to Saint John.

Saint John nodded. "Beautiful day today."

“It is,” Clement said, staring up at the blue sky and then into Saint John’s face. “My friend get you what you need?”

He nodded again but said nothing. He didn’t tell Clement why he needed the gun. He didn’t tell anyone what happened to Miriam and who did it to her, not even his wife. They would know soon enough. He wanted all his people to know.

“A pity we need such things in this country,” Clement said with a shake of his head. “Quiet day for you, I think. I see you at church tomorrow evening.”

“Yes, sir, and thank you.”

Clement nodded and shuffled toward Fulton Street, from where Saint John had just come.

Saint John went into the maintenance entrance to the North Tower and took the service elevator down to the basement, where he had a locker. He put the backpack in his locker and double-checked to make sure he spun his combination lock to secure it. He glanced at the work assignment board in the adjoining maintenance staff lunchroom. He saw that he had to go check a water leak in the kitchen of the law offices on the sixteenth floor.

As he rode the elevator up, he thought about his decision to keep his daughters and his wife in New York. Now he knew he made a mistake. He should have already sent them all to the island, where he would soon join them. He had thought there would be more opportunities in New York than on his tiny island. But here there was evil, promiscuity, and bad boys with guns. But that just confused him more because the irony was that the gun he had in his locker was not to be used on a bad boy with a gun from New York. It was to be used on a man from the island. His island. Evil was everywhere. He knew that from his biblical studies. But the island where he was raised was different, or so he thought. He had made his decision. His wife and the girls would move as soon as possible—while it was still early in their school year. He had already told his

sister that they were coming. She was now making the living arrangements for them. There was much more to do.

After a quick inspection, he discovered that a gasket was loose under the commissary kitchen sink on the sixteenth floor. He tightened it and checked to make sure a new washer or bolt was not needed. Then he felt the floor shake violently under him. He pulled out from under the sink.

“Earthquake?” a young woman asked him as she poured herself a cup of coffee.

“Certainly feel so,” Saint John said. “This building steady though. No worry here about a little New York earthquake.”

She smiled at him and took her coffee back to her desk. The small walkie-talkie he carried on his belt was beeping. He picked it up.

“St. John,” he said into it while he listened to the squawk coming from his supervisor, telling him to check on some fire damage on the ninety-first floor. He sighed; Clement said it was going to be a quiet day. He didn’t think so. And he was actually glad of that. It would keep his mind off what he had to do after work.

There were people huddled in groups and talking quietly as he walked through the office to the elevator bank. The elevator seemed slower than normal but finally arrived and was empty, which was also unusual for the morning. It was rush hour. Usually the elevators were packed. He tried to think if it was maybe a Jewish holiday and that was why it was quiet. He wasn’t sure.

As the elevator ascended rapidly, he thought he should call his son on the island. He should alert him that his half-sisters and stepmother were moving there. The boy’s mother was dead. He had no family there. Now he would have a family. He would have people who cared for him. He hoped that would soften him and dull the rage that seemed to consume the boy.

That Marcia Griffiths song was in his head. "Dreamland." He thought for sure that it was written about the island where he was born. The place where he hoped to soon return. He was humming to himself as he rode the elevator up.

The elevator stopped on the ninety-first floor and the door opened. Just as Saint John was about to step out, thick metallic smoke streamed into the elevator and immediately filled his lungs, knocking him onto his hands and knees. Before he lost consciousness, his mind went to the image of his daughter Miriam, her costume torn, her hair disheveled, wandering Eastern Parkway late into the night of Labor Day. Then he realized that the gun in his locker would never be used. There would be no retribution.

"My babies," he whispered faintly before the hot thick smoke melted his lungs.

B

Land of Promise

The dream always starts with the air thick with smoke. I am running up subway stairs while trying hard to clear my lungs. But my legs are like lead weights. I'm carrying a body over my shoulder. I do this multiple times. Taking body after body up the subway stairs as I strain to breathe. I attempt once again to go back down into the smoky subway tunnel, but this time I'm stopped. Held tight by strong arms. Don't they know there was someone I left behind? Don't they know that was the only reason I was in that tunnel? Those bodies I pulled from the smoke, I

didn't really care if they lived or died. They were in the way. I took them to safety only because I needed to clear a path to get to her. She was still down there. But I couldn't save her like I saved the others.

Sometimes I wake up right there at that point in the dream, but most times the dream continues into a second part—when I fall asleep again. In part two of the dream, I'm in the kitchen in my house in the Bronx, in the neighborhood where I grew up. My wife at the time, Kathleen, is there with my young children, my daughter Kasie and my son, Luke. I'm holding a big silver key.

One of those old-fashioned door keys. On the key are the words "New York City." I don't know what to do with such a key.

"The keys to the city, The June First hero. What a man." I see the lips of my ex-wife move and hear her words. But the voice sounds nothing like hers. It's a masculine voice. It sounds like my own voice. And the tone is sarcastic; the words spoken with derision.

"I didn't want this," I plead to her.

"You wanted it all," I hear her say, again in that strange voice.

I stare at the key that I know will unlock nothing. "No."

"You're a bastard." Her words are hot. So hot it's as if they singe my flesh.

I shake my head. "No...I'm a hero." My words are weak, barely uttered.

"What are you, Daddy?" Kasie, the older of my children, asks.

When I look at my daughter, I see my ex-wife's face on her six-year-old body. The masculine voice replaced now by a child's.

"Daddy? What are you?"

“I’m a bastard.” I say this now in a loud, clear voice. So loud, that sometimes I wake up saying it.

The dream dissipates after that, or an alarm, usually set on my cell phone, wakes me. On this morning it’s the latter, I had set my alarm the night before and now it is buzzing, rousing me from that dream. But it stays with me while I shower and then when I feed my three dogs. I think about it when I go to the big window of my house on the Caribbean island of St. Pierre where I live now, so far from that house in the Bronx. I stare at the Atlantic Ocean. Alone and without my family. I wonder what triggers the dream. I try to remember the last time I had it. I can’t. There is no pattern. I have no idea what ignites it.

I put music from one of my playlists on. The music I choose could be arbitrary. I have many playlists. But this one is a deliberate choice—made by the one I left in that subway tunnel. I tell myself it will help me shake off the effects of that unsettling dream. Her name was Nura Azar and the playlist she made for me so long ago I titled “Nura’s Island.” It was the playlist I listen to more than any of the others. I put it on shuffle. The song that queues up first is Marcia Griffith’s “Dreamland.” Nura called the island we both envisioned a land of promise. But it could have been a dreamland too. I got to see her land of promise. She never did.

I need to get going. I need to start my day. I don’t have time to dwell any further on the dream and why it came to me again. And I’m grateful for that.

I have an old black Jeep—I’ve had it since I moved to St. Pierre. It serves me well on the steep and winding roads of the island. My house is on what is called East Road. It is one of St. Pierre’s major roads, if you consider a narrow, two-lane, semi-paved road as something major. It

connects the east Atlantic coast with the Caribbean Sea on the west coast. I drive from my house toward Garrison Harbor. The Blue Star ferry from St. Vincent will arrive soon and I have to be there to collect my twice-weekly delivery of beer—cases of Carib, Heineken, Dragon Stout and the non-alcoholic Vitamalt. It's a Tuesday morning and, as I knew I would, I see Livingston Harrod slowly maneuvering down the road's steep slope to where he works as caretaker of the Glad Tidings Seventh-day Adventist Church. I pull over as always and open the passenger door for Harrod, who, by now, expects the lift down the hill.

Harrod settles himself into the Jeep and turns to me. His face is grave. "Sassy hurt the Lord bad," he says in a somber tone.

I look at him as I drive down Center Road toward Garrison, St. Pierre's capital. His eyes are staring straight ahead. The windows of my Jeep are open, letting in the morning air. "Lord Ram?" I ask, but I know there really couldn't be any other Lord he is referring to on St. Pierre. Or any other Sassy, for that matter.

"Mmhmm," Harrod, who is bone-lanky and, I estimate, in his late seventies, nods. "They say he not gonna make it. That what I hear on the radio." Harrod then remains silent until I drop him off.

I sit in the Jeep watching Harrod hobble toward the church. "Sassy, she hurt the Lord bad," was what he said. I ponder those words for a moment. But only for a moment. At the time, they mean nothing to me. And then I drive on to the harbor.

PLAYLIST ONE

Tubby's Calypso Jams, Soca, and Such

1. King Tubby Meets the Rockers Uptown, Augustus Pablo
2. Abatina, Calypso Rose
3. Ten to One is Murder, Mighty Sparrow
4. Bee's Melody, Lord Kitchener
5. Man Smart, Woman Smarter, The Duke of Iron
6. Never Ever Worry, The Great Honourable Lord Pretender
7. Sugar Bum Bum, Lord Kitchener
8. Congo Man, Machal Montano and Mighty Sparrow
9. In de Congaline, Burning Flames
10. This de Place, Patrice Roberts
11. Pump Me Up, Krosfyah
12. Big Belly Man, Mac Fingal
13. Cloud Nine, Lyrikal
14. Down de Road, Krosfyah
15. Same Boat, Calypso Rose

1**The Fete**

The *Blue Star* was just pulling into the dock when I arrived. I parked the Jeep and headed over. Tito, co-owner of the Bougainvillea Hotel and head chef of its four-star restaurant, was already waiting for his delivery, as was Sam Suraj of the Yacht Club. I nudged Tito from behind. Tito, whose last name I never learned, turned, grinned and hugged me with his meaty tattoo-adorned forearms. “Lennie, hola, and good morning,” he said.

“Good morning?” Sam Suraj questioned Tito’s jovial greeting. “How this a good morning when the Lord lay dying in St. Elizabeth hospital?”

“Yeah, I heard about that,” I said. The ferry began to unload passengers and cargo.

Janell Vincent, who worked on the ferry, placed the cases of beer at my feet. “Such a glorious man and songsmith. We cannot lose Lord Ram.”

I piled the boxes onto the hand truck I’d brought with me. “Any word on his condition?”

Suraj looked at me as he assembled the supplies he needed for the bar at the Yacht Club. He just shook his head.

I said goodbye to Tito and wheeled my supplies to the Jeep, piling the boxes in the back.

I turned on the radio to the one local AM/FM station (it worked on both frequencies) that broadcast from Garrison. I recognized the distinctive, gravelly voice of Lord Ram as soon as the radio came on. The song was one of his recent calypsos. The voice was weaker and even more gruff than usual. It was hard for me to understand what he was singing about—something to do with the price of goat meat. Like the thousands of other compositions he'd sung over his sixty-year career, the goat meat most likely represented something else. What it could be, I had no idea, but I was not from St. Pierre—or the Caribbean. I was a transplant on this island. What he was singing about was directed to his fellow Peteys, the term used for those living in St. Pierre, as well as those natives who now lived in cities like Toronto, London, and my hometown, New York.

“Today it will be Lord Ram all day,” the somber, deep voice of the radio announcer intoned. “While we listen, let us pray for a speedy recovery for the King of Calypso. St. Pierre’s own. The power of prayer, I know, will heal the great man and we will all, soon, once again, see and hear him entertain us with his genius.”

I turned the radio off and drove up Windy Hill Road and pulled the Jeep into one of the three parking spots of the Sporting Place, the bar I opened soon after I arrived on St. Pierre. My partner in the venture, Tubby Levett, had his old '09 Toyota in one of the other spots. Before I could get out of the Jeep, Tubby was at my car door.

“You heard?” Tubby asked.

“How could I not?”

“Busy day here, Mr. Len,” Tubby said.

“You think?”

“I know,” Tubby said.

We loaded up the hand truck with the cases of beer and I wheeled them into the bar.

“I already call Mike to tell him to come,” Tubby said. “But I think today we need more than Mike.”

I looked at Tubby, my best friend on the island. Tall and lean, he was the furthest thing from being rotund, despite what his name implied. “What is it I’m missing here?”

“The word already out,” he said.

I had no idea what word he was referring to. But that was nothing new for me from Tubby and from St. Pierre where it seemed I was in the dark, even after nearly a decade of living here. “What word is that?” I asked, because Tubby wasn’t volunteering anything.

“Someone say that this the place to fete Lord Ram. This the place, to celebrate the great man and send him the vibes that will heal him.”

Tubby had an answer for most everything, but that wasn’t the answer I wanted to hear. “And who is that someone?” I asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

“Not me, Mr. Len.”

“Not you? Then who?”

“I don’t know, but that the word I hear, and you know when I hear the word, it usually accurate.”

I pondered that. There was a flow of inside information on the island that, despite my years here, I was not privy to. It wasn’t that social media or texting was uncommon; it was as common here as anywhere, but information also came in other ways. Maybe from a brief chat with a taxi driver or fisherman. An exchange between open car windows. Or at a church service, or during a dominoes game at a roadside rum shop. So despite all the twenty-first century technological

advances that the island shared with the rest of the world, that was how most vital news traveled on St. Pierre.

As Tubby predicted, by eleven that morning, the deck was overflowing with customers. Tubby, Mike, our third bartender when we needed a third, and I were behind the bar quickly mixing up rum punches and opening bottles of beer.

Andrew Patrick and Langston Neely, both postal workers, were sitting at the bar, their eyes downcast.

I opened a cold bottle of Carib for each of them. “No mail today?” I asked, looking from one to the other.

“Sick today,” Langston said, apparently speaking for both of them.

“Ah no can work with the Lord lying over at St. Elizabeth,” Andrew added. “The people can wait a day for dem damn mail.”

“They say it just a matter of time,” Langston muttered.

“Where do you get your information?” I asked, noticing another group entering the bar, attendants from St. Pierre’s national park at the base of Mt. Hadali.

“Minerva from the hospital where she work in the kitchen. She text my wife,” Langston said.

“What St. Pierre without Ram?” Andrew asked no one in particular.

“They say the Queen smash the Lord head with a Dutch pot,” Horace Fancy, a retired customs officer, chimed in.

Fancy’s wife, Owena, who was by his side, shook her finger at her husband. “Who tell you such rubbish?”

“I hear it from dem two,” Fancy pointed down to the Brown brothers, Niles and Edwin, who worked at the island’s small aggregate quarry. But they, like most everyone else on the island it seemed, were also not working today.

Niles nodded. “They say the pot hold a chicken fricassee the Queen make special for Lord.”

Owena laughed. “I know that is rubbish for sure. The Queen no can lift a heavy Dutch pot filled with chicken fricassee and smash the Lord’s skull with it. No she cannot.”

“That Sassy stronger than you think,” Niles said, his voice louder to compete with the rising decibel level in the bar. “And when a person get fired up with anger, they even stronger. It’s the adrenaline, you know.”

Langston moved between the group at the bar, displaying a photograph on his cell phone. “Barrington just text from police headquarters. He say it not a chicken fricassee in the pot, but a cook-up with goat.”

Fancy shook his head and threw up his hands. “Now I know that not correct because I remember the Lord telling me many years ago that goat meat was for savages. That’s what he said. The Lord’s words. I remember them like it yesterday.”

His wife stared at him, open-mouthed. “Man, Lord Ram tell you no such thing. That man not know Horace Fancy.”

“The Lord know who I am,” he said. “He talk to me at the airport that time he bring in the case of whiskey he buy in Scotland. It was I who clear that for him. Ram know Horace Fancy.”

“Maybe they quarrel over Queen making a goat cook-up when he wanted chicken in de pot?”
Langston queried.

“So she threw the heavy pot at the old man? She try to kill the man over what in the Dutch pot?” Owena said, shaking her head in disbelief. “She a big star too. Why she risk all that to hurt an old man?”

Another group entered the bar. All the indoor tables were now occupied and the crowd on the deck was reaching overflow capacity. Squeezing through the bodies at the bar was Rondell Myles. Myles, a local music promoter who booked soca acts into small venues around the island, and who was also one of the producers of the island’s low-key Christmas Kaiso Fest, was waving at me to get my attention.

“As you can see, Rondell, it’s kind of busy in here,” I said, leaning close to him. “What is it you want?”

“Yes, very busy. I see yours is the place for those to come to pray for the great man.”

I smiled and looked around the bar—at the bottles of Heineken, Carib, and the small glasses of white rum that were blanketing the tables. “I don’t see anyone praying in here, Rondell.”

“Mr. Len, you been on this island long enough to know that we Peteys show our respect to our loved ones with a fete. We try to turn a sad time into a happy one.”

“And my Sporting Place has been chosen as the site of the fete to celebrate the grave condition of Lord Ram?”

“Yes, exactly,” Rondell said.

“And who anointed it so? The 2020 Club on Marvell Road is much bigger and better equipped to handle a fete than my place.”

“The 2020 Club never have use for the Lord. You know King Delight, one of the owners of that place, and the King and the Lord—well you know those two true enemies both on and off the stage.”

I noticed a group of six from Windward Savings had just come through the door and were making their way to the already two-deep bar. I turned to Tubby and Mike. Tubby shook his head and looked down.

“They close the banks,” Rondell said.

“And someone spread the word to come here?” I asked Rondell.

“Not just I, Mr. Len. Other people say you have a fete up here on Windy Hill to pay tribute to the magnificent Lord Ram. You know that sometimes, on this little island, events just happen. There no planning.”

“No planning?” I looked at Rondell suspiciously. I knew he had other motives. He was well aware that the Sporting Place could not accommodate a fete on such short notice. He smiled at me as if he knew what I was thinking. That I was well aware of his plot would not deter him.

“In half an hour I can set up tables and add another small bar outside in the back. I get my good friend Edison Aloo to work the grill and make his famous spicy chicken. I have Tony X bring his music and play the songs of Lord Ram exclusively. The girls come and help serve and clean up. Nothing to worry about, Mr. Len. We make this a real fete worthy of the great man himself.”

“We?” This was Rondell’s way of proposing a business arrangement.

“Worry about nothing, Mr. Len. I charge at the door. For that we give them beer, rum punch and chicken. We’ll work it out when this over. I’m a fair man. This you know.”

I didn’t know that, and with the din of people in my bar clamoring for beverages, I didn’t really have time to think on it. We needed help. I couldn’t turn away the citizens of my adopted island because I wasn’t able to handle a crowd. How would that affect my status as a foreign interloper here? Tubby had been listening in to Rondell’s proposal. I looked at him.

“No choice,” Tubby said to me. “We must do this.”

I knew Tubby was right even though I wasn't happy about it. I nodded my compliance to Rondell. He beamed a broad glistening smile and hustled out.

Within the hour, just as Rondell promised, there were tables and chairs set up outside on the lawn surrounding the upper deck. Tony X had his mammoth speakers connected to my electricity and already the calypso of Lord Ram was blasting from them. I could smell the charcoal from the hollowed-out oil drum converted into a smoker that Edison Aloo used to barbecue his chicken. Rondell brought a few men he knew to help with setting up—getting the beer bottles and other beverages into big coolers filled with ice. It was if they were all at the ready and waiting for Rondell to give them their cue to begin work. As if there was no doubt that I would approve of his proposition.

The last pieces of Rondell's ploy to arrive were the “girls” he promised to help serve and shuttle drinks from the bar to the customers. Sonia Pitts, outfitted in very short jean shorts and a tight white T-shirt with lettering that read MYLES APART, Rondell's company, emblazoned across her chest, was one of the girls. Sonia was an ambitious young dancer who was part of a local troupe whose major production was the native re-creation shows for the cruise-boat crowd. The troupe also performed every Monday at the Tamarind Tree Resort manager's cocktail party and on Thursdays at the Lime House. The two were St. Pierre's two largest hotels. Following Sonia inside and wearing the same Hooters-like outfit was, to my surprise, Betta Baptiste. I stopped in the middle of mixing a rum punch to look at her. Her eyes caught mine for an instant and she looked down and away. I finished pouring the rum punches into glasses. When I looked

up she was at the bar, a tray in her hand waiting for me to put the glasses on her tray. “Paolo is with Mama,” she said to me in a soft voice, referring to her young son.

I put the rum punch-filled glasses on her tray. She kept looking at me trying to gauge if I was judging her in any way on how she was dressed. I wasn’t. She was a single mother. I understood that a young woman needs to work. Who was I to tell her what that work should be? “Well, that’s good,” I muttered.

Tubby shouted from the other end of the bar that we needed to make another round of rum punches. Betta quickly took the tray of drinks and began to pass them out to those who paid the admission for this impromptu fete. The rush at the bar on this night reminded me of those Friday happy hour two-dollar Mai Tai specials at Harry’s Hula Hut on the Lower East Side in the mid-1990s—one of my first gigs.

Tony X had cranked up Lord Ram’s biggest Carnival hit, “Ram de Back Door,” on the fifteen-foot speakers. The music was so loud, I was sure the pounding bass was probably reverberating down Windy Hill Road and most likely could be heard all the way to Garrison Harbor. The music was acting like a siren call—a summoning to the Sporting Place to pay tribute to Lord Ram.

I was pulling cold Caribs from the ice chest and opening them rapidly when there was a loud, collective clapping and a happy yell over the music. I looked up from my work to see that just about everyone was on their feet dancing, hands in the air and hips swaying.

I opened the Sporting Place with the idea that it would be the island’s first sports bar. We had four televisions: two over the bar and two mounted on the back walls. The main draw, of course, was when there were international sporting events: Grand Slam tennis, the World Cup in soccer, the Olympics, NBA basketball and championship boxing along with, sadly in my opinion, the

travesty of UFC fighting. But Peteys would come also to watch local West Indian cricket, soccer, and track and field. Once we were established, Tubby thought, and I slowly came to agree, maybe we should dedicate a night to music. We decided to do slow-jam Thursdays where couples could come and listen to soca, reggae and old-school R&B. There would be some dancing on those days, but we never packed the place like it was today, when bodies were right up on each other, moving to a heavy bass sound.

I could see Betta in the dancing crowd, holding her serving tray above her head, a smile on her face as she swayed her hips like no other. Sonia was right up against her moving her own hips, both girls coaxing the others to keep the flow going.

“We put on a true bacchanal,” Rondell yelled to me as he pushed to the front of the bar, a self-satisfied smile on his face.

“Who was I to doubt you, Rondell?”

I looked back at Betta and noticed she had stopped dancing.

“Keep your mind on your work, old man,” Tubby teased as he nudged me. “She out there reveling with the others. You know you can’t belly up to her

I looked at him and then quickly looked back at Betta. I wasn’t thinking of going belly-to-belly, back-to-back with Betta. No...something else caught my eye. I was tall, but I had to rise up on my toes to see better. I wanted to know if what I thought I saw—the pale, bald dome of someone I once knew, someone we both knew—talking to her. And a pale, bald dome would surely stand out in this crowd. I looked around, straining to see from my spot behind the bar, but now Betta and whoever she had been talking to were obscured by the others surrounding them. There was no sight of that pale head. Maybe I imagined it. I realized I hadn’t eaten all day and had been so busy I didn’t even think about drinking water despite the intense heat in the crowded

bar. For a moment I felt lightheaded, my head spinning from both dehydration and hunger. Maybe it was a lack of nourishment that had me seeing things? I glanced through the crowd again. Betta was in the back, working now, gathering empty bottles and glasses.

“What’s wrong?” Tubby asked, noticing the look on my face. “You good?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” But I wasn’t so sure. Sweat was running down my face. It was hot inside the bar, but not so hot that I should be dripping.

Tubby opened a bottle of water for me. “You need to drink,” he said. He waved to the girls.

I took the bottle and sucked down the water even though I knew that wasn’t what was making me dizzy. It was that I thought I saw a ghost. Someone I hadn’t seen in years. That I was possibly seeing things had me off balance more than anything. But I never had that problem before. Maybe I needed my eyes checked. Or maybe it was my head that was a little off and that was troubling. I wasn’t young. No, I was closer to being old than the opposite. And that was becoming a frequent thought in my head: my health, mortality, and death itself. They say age is just a number. I needed to keep my mind off my number.

When I looked out at the crowd again, I saw Betta, this time pushing through the crowd, a plate of food in her hands. She came up to the bar and put the plate in front of me—a barbecued chicken leg, cabbage and two grilled plantains. “Please eat,” she said, looking up at me for just a moment before she disappeared into the crowd.

After the food I felt better. I forgot about what I thought I saw in the crowd and plowed through the evening without further incident.

It was a bit past midnight—the fete had been going since four in the afternoon. I saw Myles smiling broadly, happy with what he had accomplished, and chatting with three men. I gestured to him and he came behind the bar.

“We are wiped out here,” I said. “The beer. The rum. It’s all just about gone. When does this end?”

“No worries, Mr. Len,” he answered cheerily. “I send Dickens down to the garage to pick up more.”

“You want to keep this going? It’s late, Rondell.” I stared at him. “How are you going to make money if we keep pouring the drinks?”

“We start a cash bar now. Tell them what they paid up front was good only until midnight.”

I stared at him. He was serious. I was about to tell him that it was over, that I was closing up, when Superintendent Keith McWilliams of the St. Pierre Police Department moved through the crowd. McWilliams leaned his imposing frame over the bar. “A word, Buonfiglio.”

Tubby looked at me and I at him. We both wondered what this meant. I nodded and walked with him outside. He was in uniform: gray pants and a short-sleeved, gray button-down shirt with a pocket covered by his badge. The pants had red piping down the side seam and the sleeves of his shirt had thin red stripes. He carried his hat in his hand.

“Are we disturbing the peace, McWilliams?” I asked. McWilliams and I had a wary friendship. He knew that, since coming to St. Pierre, I was helping his fellow Peteys find justice in places his small department did not dwell. But I tried to work with McWilliams when I could. I knew he was a good man and St. Pierre was lucky to have him in charge. Still, we jabbed at each other whenever we crossed paths in mutual investigations—not that I would ever consider myself an investigator. He was a professional. I was nothing more than a bar owner out to do some good in my adopted home.

“No, Buonfiglio, a fete is a good thing under the circumstances. But I have news now and I know your place here is where most be today. I would like to relay that news, if you don’t mind, before unnecessary rumors begin to circulate.”

“You mean like Queen Sassy hitting Lord Ram over the head with a Dutch pot filled with a chicken fricassee?”

“Exactly, Mr. Len. We do not want that.”

“Of course. I’ll tell Myles to cut the music. Say what you need to say.”

“Thank you, sir,” he said, switching from referring to me by my last name to the more formal use of “Mr. Len.”

We headed back inside. McWilliams stood behind the bar. People were curious and starting to wonder what the police superintendent was doing here. Myles was looking at me.

“Tell Tony to cut the music,” I said to him.

He glanced at me and then at McWilliams. “Why?”

“Just do it,” I said.

McWilliams gave Myles a look along with mine and he scampered off to the DJ setup in the back of the bar. We waited a moment and then the music was off. The bar was quiet except for some last laughs and chatter. Soon all eyes were on McWilliams.

“I would like your attention,” McWilliams said to the crowd in his deep baritone. He waited a moment to continue. Almost immediately, the bar was silent. “I would like you here to be the first to know that at ten forty-nine this evening, the great Lord Ram passed from this life to the next. St. Pierre’s most magnificent citizen is dead.”

There were gasps from the crowd and then soft sobbing could be heard. “She kill he!” someone yelled from the back of the bar. That started more grumbling and shouts.

“Quiet now,” McWilliams said. His face was stern as he surveyed the crowd, and the murmurs and chatter immediately stopped. “Lord Ram die from an accidental fall in his home. There will be more—official details—in the days to come along with the news of his funeral arrangements once they are determined by his family. Thank you for celebrating the great man. Please peacefully respect his memory and those of his loving survivors.”

Almost before McWilliams finished speaking, people were starting to flow out of the bar. I knew McWilliams well enough by now to guess his motives. He hoped that after hearing his statement, when the word would quickly begin to spread about Ram’s death, there would be no wild claims of murder or anything else. But McWilliams also understood that there would still be rumors and doubt. He was used to that on St. Pierre. Like anywhere else, the Peteys were often skeptical of their government and what they were told.

McWilliams put his hat on and came out from behind the bar. He nodded at me and left.

The bar was emptying. People were whispering, some were crying, and in less than ten minutes everyone except for Rondell Myles’ crew were gone. Soon Tony X had his speakers packed up and loaded onto his truck. On his way out, Edison Aloo said he would come for his grill tomorrow. Myles came behind the bar with the cash box under his arm and a wad of Eastern Caribbean bills in his hand. He gave me the bills.

“If you think it’s not enough, you just tell me, Mr. Len. Don’t be shy. I always want to be fair.”

“I’m sure you do, Rondell,” I said.

But I wasn't planning on counting the money. After replenishing my beer and rum supply, whatever was left over would go to Lord Ram's favorite charity. If he didn't have one, I would find an appropriate donation.

I saw Sonia Pitts waiting by the door for Myles. I wondered for a moment if Myles was going to drop her off and then go home to his wife and children, but I knew better than to wonder too long on that. Betta came to the bar and looked at me. "You worked very hard," she said in her quiet voice.

I shrugged, remembering how much harder I used to go at it back in the days when I was hustling to make the bars I owned in Brooklyn work. "I'll drop Tubby at his place and then take you home," I said, coming out from behind the bar. Tubby's wife, Lysah, had come earlier with a friend. She left a couple of hours ago to be with their young children, taking Tubby's car. I could feel Tubby's eyes on me when I said I would take Betta home. Whenever he pushed on how I really felt about her, I told him it was nothing more than friendship. Tubby, however, was very intuitive—he was good at reading people. And I was an easy read. He knew there was more, that our history was about friendship, but underneath it all, there was a quiet, unstated and unconsummated yearning.

"No...no..." Betta said almost anxiously. She shook her head at me. "It out of your way, Leonard."

There—she said it. "Leonard." Only Betta could get away with that without a growl from me.

"I drop her at her home," Rondell Myles said as he moved, smiling, to join Sonia at the door. "She on the way. For you, Mr. Len, up on the East Road, is out of the way."

Betta looked at me and nodded. It was almost as if she was relieved that I was not going to drive her home. I wondered about that.

Tubby and I made sure the bar backlights remained on, but everything else, the overhead fans and the televisions, were off. The back deck door was locked, and we double-locked the front door on the way out. Tubby got into my Jeep. He sat back in his seat as I headed down Windy Hill, not saying anything. I'm sure he was as tired as I was, but that never stopped him from talking.

“Why McWilliams come and tell us that news?” he asked me after the silence.

I glanced at him. “Why?”

“That man not come to the fete to announce that Ram die unless he have a reason.”

“Maybe he didn't want people to spread any unfounded rumors. I guess he wanted to make it clear that Lord Ram did not die, you know, under unusual circumstances.”

“Now the people do the opposite, Mr. Len. And McWilliams know that. He come so we all can speculate more on how Lord Ram really die.”

“What are you talking about? You need some sleep, Tubby.”

“I need sleep, yes, but I know that McWilliams come to our place to put doubt in others' minds about how Ram die. Everyone there know that.”

“See, now, Tubby, what am I supposed to think about that? McWilliams comes to tell us that Lord Ram died peacefully from natural causes, and you say he did that as kind of a...I don't know...subliminal message that he didn't.”

“Subliminal...yes, that's the word. Exactly, Mr. Len.”

“Are you trying to make my head explode?”

He hissed again at me. “How many years now you live here and still you don't understand us? You find out soon what I'm talking about.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, Mr. Len. It mean nothing. Just remember I talk to you here about this when you come to me for some help.”

I looked at him and then back at the very dark road in front of me. I pulled up in front of Tubby’s house. There was a light on outside near the entrance and I could see a light through the front window in his kitchen. His wife and children, I assumed, were sleeping. Tubby started to get out of the Jeep.

“Did you notice any other white men at the bar tonight?”

“White men? Like you?”

“Yeah like me, wiseass. I know we stand out in a crowd here. You would have noticed.”

“Besides your pale skin, I only see that Marcus, from the medical school, who date Corrine Tonsil who work at the hospital. He have very light skin and he not as pale as you. And he not white. Why you ask me this?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “See you tomorrow. No rush. I expect we won’t get any business till later.”

He nodded. “With Ram’s death, people done with celebrating until his funeral. But remember what I tell you about McWilliams.”

“How can I forget?” I drove off, heading to East Road and my house.