

## Freedom Drop

### PART ONE

#### 1

“Be a man” Tubby Levett said.

Those were the first words Tubby had uttered since I picked him up at his house. We were in my Jeep and he was to my left, in the passenger seat. Here on the Caribbean island of St. Pierre, a former British colony, we drove on the left side of the road. And like most roads on this small island, it was a particularly narrow one. There is very little flat land on St. Pierre so not only, for me as an ex-New Yorker, was I not driving on the *right* side of the road, but I had to contend with oncoming vehicles, while swaying down the slopes of the island’s many hills and mountains.

“Are you asking me or are you telling me?” I asked Tubby, my eyes on the road. We were heading to St. Pierre’s airport, which wasn’t much more than an airstrip. I could see the small control tower ahead of us and the blue Atlantic a few hundred yards beyond the airport’s one runway,

“What?” Tubby was surprised by my own question.

“To be a man.”

“I’m not asking. And I’m not telling,” he replied.

“Then why did you say it?”

He pointed to the Jeep’s speaker. “You play that Jamaican music, reggae music, all the time, but you don’t know who sing them songs and such? I hear you play this song many times. The song called ‘Be a Man.’ A title like that should not be forgotten.”

I was smiling because he was right. I didn’t know the name of the song, but I should have. I had listened to it countless times and liked it, but never bothered to find out the song’s title or who recorded it. I was bad with names, titles, stuff like that. I was better with faces, sounds, sensory things.

“You make this reggae playlist I hear you play so many times?” Tubby asked.

I hugged the curb, careful not to spill the Jeep into the recessed drain gutter. That would not be good for my shocks or alignment. We were almost at the airport.

“No, someone I once knew made it for me a long time ago,” I said.

“Who?” I could feel his eyes on me.

I thought about his question for a moment.

“No one you know. It doesn’t matter,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter?”

“Nope,” I said with what I hoped was finality, but I knew he was staring at me. Then I heard him hiss through his teeth, the sound he made whenever I avoided his questions. Whenever I was

keeping something from him. When I first met Tubby, he was working part-time at the St. Pierre Yacht Club bar. I had just arrived on the island. Tubby impressed me with his charming, easy-going manner and after I tasted his, now-legendary, version of that famous Caribbean cocktail, the rum punch, I immediately offered him a full-time job working with me at my bar. Tubby's help getting my venture up and running was invaluable. Our different skill sets complemented each other. And that he once saved me from having my brains splattered on the bar's expensive burnished wood, from a gun pressed to the back of my head by a Guyanese drug trafficker, sealed the deal. Tubby wasn't only my business partner; he was the best friend I had on St. Pierre. So I was used to those hisses. They were no big thing.

Before he could continue his questioning, I pulled into the airport's small carport, and then both of us got out of the Jeep and headed inside.

The airport waiting area was mostly deserted. Tubby and I were manspreading on an otherwise unoccupied row of plastic chairs facing the landing strip. We were quiet, just sitting there with our legs stretched out, staring at the little runway, when Tubby, out of nowhere, said: "I hear they have traffic lights on Barbados."

I nodded. "I think I remember some traffic lights there," I said, having visited Barbados a few times. "Some paved roads too. But they still drive on the wrong side of them, paved or not."

Tubby snorted. "Wrong side for you, maybe. Why then you come to an island with bad roads and no traffic lights when you can pick any island? Why not live on an island that got those good things we don't have here?"

I turned to look at him.

“Who says those are good things?”

He thought about what I said and nodded in agreement. “You know I been to Trini for Carnival when I a young man. I save my money from working at the quarry for one whole year after I finish my schooling for that trip. On Trini—Port of Spain—I see a few traffic lights too.”

“What did you think?” I asked.

“Didn’t help the traffic much,” Tubby said.

“Traffic lights just make more traffic, I think,” I said. “They never helped move traffic in New York, Tubby.”

“That might be, but traffic bad around the harbor here, especially at the roundabout, and we have no traffic light. Maybe we need one there,” he said.

“Could be,” I said, but to be honest, I wasn’t really thinking about traffic lights. I was barely listening to what Tubby was saying. I was a little anxious and I think he understood that, so he cut me some slack.

I looked at the time on my phone and then back out the window in front of us. I could see the sharp glint of sun off the silver metal of a plane in the bright blue sky. The plane was heading toward the runway.

I nudged Tubby with my elbow and pointed to the sky.

“She come?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

The plane, a Liat ATR-42 turboprop, swerved away from the strip and out over the Caribbean Sea, and then circled back toward the runway. I watched as it broke through a few small puffy clouds and then saw as the wheels were lowered.

I stood up and went close to the window. I clenched my fists as I watched the plane descend. My palms were sweaty. When the plane touched ground, bounced and then leveled as it eased down the runway, I released my fists and exhaled.

Tubby got up now and stood next to me. The plane taxied toward us and then stopped, the propellers slowing and finally coming to a halt. I watched Kingsley Durant, who worked as one of the grounds crew on duty that day at the landing strip, push the ladder with one hand and wheel a baggage cart with the other. Soon the door opened and one of the flight crew appeared. A tall, slender, light brown-skinned woman emerged first, carrying her luggage in one hand and a big purse around her shoulder. She had sunglasses on, and her hair was long and straight and was blowing over her face in the wind. She wore a form-fitting pencil skirt.

“You see what I see?” Tubby said.

“How can I not?” I said, but really I was looking beyond the woman at the other passengers as they exited and descended the steps attached to the plane’s front door.

Two white men wearing dark blue suits and carrying briefcases followed the woman off the plane.

“Men in suits,” Tubby said.

“Thanks for pointing them out to me, Tubby,” I said.

An older couple, who moved slowly down the ladder and across the strip, was followed by a young woman carrying a baby in her arms. I could feel my heart beating in my chest. There couldn't be many more on that small plane. Then, finally, I saw her. Her golden hair was in a ponytail, and she was wearing dark leggings with a bulky burgundy sweatshirt. I watched as she struggled to get her roll-on bag down the steps. I wanted to go there to help her, but that wasn't allowed. When she got it down, she rolled her luggage easily across the runway toward the small terminal where we were perched. I took off my sunglasses and wiped at my eyes.

Tubby turned to look at me and then back at what I was looking at. He looked back at my damp eyes and grinned.

“You got allergies or something, Mr. Len?”

“Let's go,” I said, ignoring his crack.

We headed back outside on the other side of customs and immigration. We waited in the midday sun, our sunglasses back on, as the woman with the pencil skirt pushed through the door. I peered beyond her, trying to locate the girl with the blonde ponytail, but the door closed quickly.

I turned my attention back to the woman in the pencil skirt as she moved toward us. As she got closer, I noticed the scent of vanilla, along with something else I couldn't identify but knew was expensive. The combination was what they would describe in a perfume ad as “intoxicating.” I wasn't sure how obvious I was being, but Tubby made no effort to hide his appreciation with a

broad, toothy smile. Sensing our mutual admiration and not caring one bit, she smiled at me, or maybe it was both of us, but I didn't think so.

“What she see in you?” Tubby grumbled, confirming what I thought was true.

“Maybe she likes a man with a few miles on him,” I said.

“Yeah?” He grinned. “That is until she find out he need a serious tune-up.”

We turned to follow her movements as she was met at the curb by St. Pierre's superintendent of police, Keith McWilliams, and one of his deputies, James Baines. Baines held the back door of the police cruiser open and the woman slid into the back seat, smoothing that pencil skirt under her as she did.

“Looks like she get a police escort,” Tubby said.

“It does, doesn't it?” I turned back to the darkened glass door of the airport. The two men in suits were next to emerge. They headed to the curb where a limousine, which on St. Pierre was a well-preserved Toyota Camry, waited. Opening the rear door for them was Royston Barksdale, normally a taxi driver but playing chauffeur today. The two men slid in, but, I noticed, neither made any effort to smooth their slacks under them as they did.

The elderly couple came out, and the woman, ignoring me, asked Tubby if he could take them to the Lime House. There were not many hotels on St. Pierre, but of the few, the Lime House was one of the popular ones.

“He's with me,” I said to her, indicating Tubby.

“Oh?” She looked to her husband, whose face was pink and what little hair he had was white, sparse and bushy around his ears.

“Can you take us?” the man asked me.

We were leaning against a railing as we waited. “They think we taxi drivers,” Tubby said.

“Yeah I got that,” I said to Tubby.

The man and woman looked at both of us—waiting.

“No, we can’t take you, but he can,” I said as I pointed to a white minivan parked near the curb where Kenneth Ambrose was licking at his fingers and then wiping them with a paper towel. I imagine he had just finished eating a very juicy mango. The couple headed toward Ambrose without even a thank you, not that I really cared.

I turned back to the darkened door just as it opened and the girl with the blonde ponytail came out. She looked around, her eyes scanning the sparse crowd, then finally caught my eye and smiled. Her pace quickened as she headed toward us.

I think then I smiled too. I know that I had my arms open and wide for her. And she ran right into them.

“Daddy,” she said.