
A HUNDRED MILES OUT IN THE FLORIDA STRAITS, we sat in two circles under a large tropical almond tree on a moonless star-filled night, illuminated more closely by candlelight. Blue Heaven at nine o'clock on a Saturday night had never been so empty, but tonight, it was closed for special circumstances.

I watched the men in the larger circle as they played instruments and took turns singing a variety of songs. There wasn't much of an audience: me; town council member and part-time bartender Lenny Jackson; Bruiser Lewis and his brother Truck; Shawn Martin, the rum maker at Pilar; and Ray Floyd, my eccentric aviation mechanic and partner at Last Resort Charter and Salvage. And we were anything but festive.

"How old was Willy?" Shawn asked.

"Sixty-four, man," Lenny said. "Too damn young to die."

"Diabetic with heart problems," I said. "Same as a lot of others who've died from—"

"That and being a black man," Truck said. "Shit's killed more of us and Latinos than anyone else."

Truck was right about the stats from around the country. Thankfully, only a few dozen had died in the Keys.

I took a long pull on the dark and stormy Lenny had made me. Reverend Willy Peebles of the Church of the Redeemer had been a pillar of the Bahama Village community in Key West for most of his life. To those who knew him well, he'd been called the Ruler because he'd used a wooden ruler to smack the hands—or occasionally the heads—of the wayward youth in his flock, steering them back onto the straight and narrow path of righteousness. Lenny, Bruiser, Truck—hell, even I'd been nudged by Willy into doing the right thing on occasion, even if in some cases that meant doing the wrong thing to get there. Social justice didn't always conform to the legal system.

I exhaled a deep breath.

And here we were, on the day of his sudden passing, thanks to the damned pandemic, to honor him.

“I’ll fly away, oh glory
I’ll fly away, in the morning
When I dies, Hallelujah by and by
I’ll fly away ...”

David Wegman, the painter and raconteur, sang the words of the dirge in a voice much softer than you’d expect for a man of his physique. Broad shouldered, stout, with close-cropped hair under a straw hat and a braided silver beard that made him instantly recognizable. He strummed a tiny banjo as he tenderly whispered the words.

“Oh, how glad and happy when we meet
I’ll fly away
No more cold iron shackles on my feet
I’ll fly away ...”

Truck shook his head. “Some wake this is, man. Iron shackles? Willy wouldn’t like that shit.”

“Better than hanging out at the vestry with all them weeping old women,” Lenny said.

Bruiser shifted his muscular bulk to stare at Lenny a long moment. “Gonna need to change your tune and get used to that, brotha.”

“Shit.”

Lenny poured himself a short shot of Patrón and slammed it down with a flourish. The tension between them was as palpable as the humidity after a tropical storm.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I said.

Lenny glanced at each of us, poured another shot—full this time—and downed it. He cleared his throat.

“This’ll be my last night tending bar here, boys,” he said. “Not to mention the end of my political career, too.”

What the hell?

In the silence that followed—I realized Wegman had finished his song—Richard, the owner of Blue Heaven, began to tap his palms on a bongo drum. Wegman picked up the beat on his banjo, followed by Robin Smith Martin on acoustic guitar.

“You gonna tell everybody the Ruler’s dying command, Lenny?” Bruiser said.

Lenny poured another shot. A grimace twisted his mouth as he pushed the tequila toward Truck.

“Willy’s dying request was for me to take over as pastor of the church,” Lenny said.

I choked—then sprayed the cocktail from my mouth onto the bar.

“More like ordered you to,” Truck said.

“What?” I said. “*Pastor* Lenny?” He may not have been present for the original sin, but Lenny had worked his entire thirty-plus years racking up as many as he could. “After all these years of Willy grooming you for politics?”

“I thought you were going to run for mayor,” Shawn said.

“Was,” Lenny said. “Not no more.”

Dizziness or disbelief caused me to shake my head. “But Willy was the badass Ruler,” I said. “No offense, but how’re you going to fill those shoes?”

“I’ll handle that part of the job,” Bruiser said. The once-professional boxer had the look of Mike Tyson mixed with Aaron Neville, complete with tattoos on his neck, thick chiseled arms, and soft voice.

Shawn smiled. “You two gonna talk like a butterfly and sting like a .44 Magnum.”

“Something like that,” Lenny said.

“Damn, conch man,” I said. “Hearts will be breaking all over town tonight.”

Cayman Martin, Robin’s brother, leaned into his stand-up bass guitar and began to pluck what I recognized as a song by Pink Floyd.

“Long you live and high you fly,

Smile's you'll give and tears you'll cry,
 And all you touch and all you see
 Is all your life will ever be ..."

The musicians were in their own heads, playing their instruments, following each other's leads. Paying homage to Willy in their own ways.

"We need to get the older people to take better care of themselves," Lenny said. "That's why they're dying from this crap."

"And get better jobs," Truck said. "They've been more exposed from front line bullshit at grocery stores, labor—"

"Being pastors," Ray Floyd said.

"Willy's flock always came first," Truck said. He glanced toward Lenny and narrowed his eyes. "Not about himself—"

"You want the job?" Lenny said. "It's yours."

"He raised you for this," Bruiser said. "It's what you were meant to do."

"Damn," I said.

Bruiser swiveled his thick neck to gaze at me. "What are you meant to do, Reilly? Fly people around in them old seaplanes of yours? Get your ass kicked in the boxing ring every now and then?"

"There it is." Truck laughed.

Bruiser loved to remind me of the time we boxed here at Blue Heaven years ago. I nearly had him—or he'd played possum—only to surprise me with an island-size paw to my chin that knocked me out.

"Good question, man," Lenny said. "Times like these, they make people think hard on their lives. With all you done, Buck, what do you believe in your heart you're *meant* to do?"

They all stared at me, waiting for an answer. As if I had one.

I felt my throat constrict as a wave of memories passed over me.

I coughed. "Still trying to figure that out."

Cayman belted out the next verse.

"Run, rabbit, run,
 Dig that hole, forget the sun,

When at last the work is done

Don't sit down, it's time to dig another one ..."

A chill curled my shoulders forward. Richard tapped harder on the bongo, Robin strummed, and Wegman glanced over toward me. It was as if he could smell my discomfort.

Wegman tilted his head toward our circle. "Last thing Willy would want—any of us would want—would be some mopey gathering crying over his passing." He paused. "Celebrate his life, dammit."

I slid off my stool, as much to avoid their question about what my purpose was as to step into the music. I took a tambourine painted with a nude ebony island woman from Wegman's pile of instruments. I'd never learned to play guitar, much less banjo. I shook the tambourine slowly and tried to keep the beat.

But even through the music, Bruiser and Lenny's question played like a loop in my mind: What the hell *was* I meant to do?

