

Chapter 5: The Return of Crazy Larry

The mind awoke. Without checking, I was aware it was 5:45 a.m. I reached across the bed, muscle memory and years of habit driving my actions. Her side was vacant. The emptiness filled my body once again. I was sucker-punched and gasped for air as her loss consumed me. She had always been there. Even before I knew her, she was there. I had to get a grip on myself. I couldn't continue mourning her loss. Life had to go on.

The tremors subsided and I put my feet on the floor. A few more gulps of air, a wipe of my hands across my eyes, and I was able to stand. Simple habits made simple work. Concentration on the tasks at hand returned. It wasn't too long before I moved to exit the bedroom. Forgotten chores pulled at my mind and I looked back. The bed remained disheveled. I moved slowly to straighten the sheets as though my body was too heavily weighted. Even so it was but a little task as only one side required any effort. I soon found myself in the kitchen.

Dennis had already made a hot pot of coffee. A go-cup rested next to the pot, ready for filling.

"Gerry must have informed him of my morning habits," I sighed, wondering if I had become that predictable. I filled the cup and headed for the pickup. Breakfast was something you had after morning work was done.

I wasn't delayed on my trip to the warehouse and a fine thing it was. Gerry's guys had arrived early, but Freddy and Marge were having none of it. Freddy was reaching up with a handy two-by-four ready to strike when I screeched to a halt beside the entrance.

"Whoa, Freddy. Wait a minute," I shouted as I jumped out of the truck. Gerry's men were well trained, but by the look in Freddy's eyes I wasn't placing any odds on the winner.

Freddy backed away as he saw me come forward. He didn't really take his look away from the muscular gentleman standing in front of him.

"He tried to barge in here just a few moments ago, Edgar. No name. No ID. No nothin'. Told him that wasn't happening," Freddy said.

Marge was just as agitated and had a piece of rebar at the ready in case she was needed.

"No worries, Freddy. I hired their company for security. Didn't figure they would get here so early. Thought I would have time to tell you this morning."

Freddy backed down, but still glared at the men in front of him. Marge started to relax a bit, but was still on edge. I noticed I could see Marge's face clean and full for the first time. She definitely didn't stink like she had yesterday. I moved into the warehouse with Freddy and Marge close behind. Gerry's men, freed of the siege, moved in behind them and began determining layouts and vulnerabilities.

"Sorry about that Freddy, Marge. With what we got going on, I need twenty-four hour professional security. I need you two for other things."

I moved Freddy and Marge to a stack of wood and laid out a rough blueprint of what I expected would be warehouse operations. I showed them what I wanted on each floor and how it would work out. Surprisingly for me, Marge offered more than one suggestion that improved the workflow and processes. Once Freddy was fully apprised of the items to be built he offered suggestions to improve structure and save material. I agreed to both proposals and decided to leave the building improvements in their hands.

I informed Freddy that day-laborers would be coming to help. It didn't seem to faze him. He said he would organize the laborers and assign duties. Marge asked for some office supplies to begin the process of accounting for the work. I handed her a couple of bills and she turned and

left, heading for the task at hand, I assumed. Just as I was about to make a comment a horn honked outside the main delivery door.

“Should be the lumber,” Freddy said and moved to raise the door.

As suggested, it was the lumber and a truck full of day laborers right behind it. Freddy let the lumber truck in and began organizing the laborers as soon as they jumped off the truck. He spoke fluently in both English and Spanish as needed. I was beginning to think that maybe I had lucked into a couple of really good hires in Freddy and Marge. My luck usually wasn't that good.

With everyone in place and duties handed out, activity began. Laborers laid out foundations for the tables. Saws appeared along with hammers and drills. Sounds of cleaning could be heard from the second floor. Shouts and laughter emanated from the assembled group as solid work once again filled their hands. Life was growing in the dead confines of a forgotten warehouse. The activity filled my mind and body, stirring old emotions of excitement and purpose. It was a feeling I hadn't experienced for some time, the exhilaration of a new project, new purpose. It felt good. I wanted to stay and wallow in the experience, but there was work to be done and product to be purchased. Smiling, I headed back to my pickup.

A stop at a diner along the Interstate provided a breakfast of eggs and bacon. The basic act of eating diner food seemed daringly taboo. I chuckled at the thought of Molly rolling her eyes in disgust. But I had no idea why I shouldn't. It wasn't like I was preparing for the Olympics. Besides, what was I waiting for? Wasn't like I had to plan for a long future. I was already in my future.

The taste of the toast was exquisite. A warm bite of bread, just crunchy enough with hot butter, real butter, sliding across the taste buds. No wheat bread. No artificial anything. Nothing really good for me. Just the sweet bliss of white toast and real butter. It tasted so good I knew it had to be bad for me. But I didn't care. Right now, life was good and I hadn't felt that way for some time.

Gerry had given me a good list of pot growers and I had chosen the one farthest out. It was a good hour's drive from the warehouse. But the grower was isolated and the background on her showed an independent streak with aversion to intimidation. This was the type of grower I needed to sustain the business. Plus, being so far out from the warehouse would reduce the probability of dealing immediately with the current gangs still trying to control the pot trade. It also would keep the D.A. in the dark a bit longer.

I knew from prior business experiences that once an idea, a business model, was developed and successful there would be copycats. It was unavoidable and I didn't intend to waste time fighting fate. Additionally, those who had developed the business models the new ones would replace wished to maintain the status quo. They would fight anyone and anything that interfered with their profits. To counter these issues, it was always best to partner with someone who only dealt in the mutual benefits of commerce and wouldn't be swayed by threats. Simply put, independent with an aversion to intimidation.

The farm was up a steep foothill that led to the mountains. It was accessed by tuning off the highway at a remote overpass, heading east on a two-lane for ten miles, up a side road for another mile, and finally along a one-mile dirt driveway. The trees hid the fields quite effectively and only when I burst onto the barnyard and farmhouse itself did the landscape reveal evidence of a pot farm. But there was no doubt once revealed. More than a few acres of enclosed pot were ripening in the sun.

I had no preference for field versus greenhouse pot. It was irrelevant to me. But I knew many did and I wanted to please all customers, not just a few. So I slowed to a stop, honked the horn, and stepped out of the truck. It wasn't too long before the dogs came to say hello.

Having lived on and around farms, dogs are a part of life. Same as cats. So I wasn't surprised or intimidated when dogs came running to inspect the new meat. I had been bit more than a few times. Didn't like it, but it was a fact. Best way I found to keep dogs at bay was to respect their space and give them a chance to know you are not a threat. Doesn't take dogs but a minute to discern your intent. People are the ones you have to be wary of. Still, mean dogs or guard dogs will keep barking at you and challenging you no matter what. But that is their nature, or what they are trained to do. Your basic farm dogs are only interested in you and protecting their turf. After a minute, more often than not, they are looking for a scratch behind the ear.

These were farm dogs.

I was giving the blue tick a good scratching when the farmer walked up from the barn. I knew she was single and basically worked the farm alone. Other than that I didn't know what to expect. I really didn't expect her. The worn jeans fit just right, too right. The boots were perfect for working a farm and defining her supple legs. She had on a shirt that was loose, but when tucked in those jeans, confirmed her sexual orientation. Her raven hair was tied back. Her skin was fair, even after working in the sunlight. She had on a ball cap and carried a rifle pointing right at my midsection. I really hadn't thought much about the opposite sex since Molly died. But I have to admit, she was stunning. I was impressed.

"Don't sell retail. Not looking for help. State your business or git," she spoke firmly and clearly.

"Buying wholesale. Looking for product," I replied as I stood up.

She relaxed just a bit. Meaning to say, she pointed the gun a few inches lower. She looked me over and then my truck.

"Hell, you ain't no gang. Where'd you farm?" She cradled the weapon and reached out her hand.

"Back east. Some wheat, some corn. Usual."

"Farmin's farming wherever you're from, I guess. How much you looking to buy?"

"The whole harvest if I can get it. Maybe come back again if it sells."

She stepped back a bit at the offer.

"It'll sell. You licensed?"

I reached into my back pocket and produced the state's papers for buyers and sellers.

"Looks legit. Come on up to the porch and I'll get us something to drink. We can talk. Name's Jean."

"Edgar. Nice place. A bit out of the way."

We made our way up to the farmhouse and Jean motioned to a spot on one of the rockers next to the front door. I really couldn't keep my eyes off her. It was strange. Hadn't felt like this since, well, since before Molly.

"Be right back."

The front screen door opened and then slammed shut as she went inside. I loved that creak and slam of a good screen door. I was to home.

I had figured that my experience as a farmer would have an advantage in dealing with the locals. I knew they didn't like to waste time. But they also wanted to get to know you a bit before doing a deal. I was nonthreatening, familiar and dealt in cash. The ideal partner for a farmer.

It wasn't too long before Jean walked out with a tall, cold iced tea. She had unbuttoned one more button on her shirt, and wiped some dirt from her face. She handed me a glass, leaning over far enough to confirm the lack of intimate apparel. Jean set down in the chair next to mine, threw her boot-covered feet on top of a footstool and smiled one hell of a sexy smile towards me. She had taken the advantage and knew it.

The blue tick came over and rested his head on my lap. I instinctively began scratching his ears.

"He'll go home with you if you keep that up," Jean said, beginning the conversation.

"Sounds fair. Need a dog where I live."

"Where's that?"

Jean and I exchanged information for the better part of a half hour. Shortly, our glasses were empty and business was at hand. Jean mentioned a price per pound for the harvest. I countered. She smiled that luscious smile. But business was business, so we dickered a minute before the deal was done.

"When will the harvest be ready?"

"I can begin today with the bulk of it, if you're ready. The price only includes the plants. You're doing the processing."

"I'll have a truck up here tomorrow. But it will be in the afternoon. That will give you a chance to clear the check, or I can just transfer the funds if you have an account."

I reached in my rear jeans pocket and pulled out a checkbook from Equity Bank. I hesitated, as if giving her a chance to make up her mind about payment. But this was the moment for which I had waited. I wondered if she would become one of Equity's customers. This would make the payouts really worth it. It wasn't too long to wait.

"You have a bank?" Jean asked. "I was expecting cash."

"Cash isn't a problem. But seems like an awful lot of money to have laying around. Sure you don't want to just transfer?"

"Can't keep an account in these parts. Banks are too afraid of the feds. Close the accounts down as soon as you get 'em open. Surprised you have one."

"Private bank. Doesn't seem to worry about the feds."

Jean's eyes widened a bit.

"Heard about private banks coming in. Didn't know how to find one. Got some information on them?"

I finished writing out the check for the full purchase of the harvest and handed it to her.

"Name, address and phone is on the check. Give them a call. Maybe they can set you up. Least ways, they can confirm the check is good," I replied.

"Sounds fair. First part of the harvest be ready tomorrow about 3."

I stood up and extended my hand. Best part of a farmer's contract, the handshake. Most farmers still consider it more binding than paper. Jean took my hand and we were done. I headed back to the truck, but took one more hard look at Jean. I mean, damn! I put the pickup in gear and headed back down the road to the next contact. A quick call to Tommy had him on alert for Jean.

The next contact went about as well as Jean's. Younger man named Jim was setting out to make his fortune in pot. Smoked a little too much of his own product for my mind, but was just as interested in Equity as Jean. Took his whole harvest as well. Jim did most of his growing indoors in two large pole barns. Considered his product exclusive. It was fine by me. Created more profits in the end if we could grade the products.

It was after the third contact in early afternoon when I saw them in the rearview mirror. I had been working my way back toward town on an erratic path. I didn't expect to see them, but I wasn't surprised. There were three of them, each perched upon a custom Harley. Gang colors identified them as Angel Sangre.

They weren't young kids out on a ride. Their bikes were tricked out, but made for business. A couple of worn saddlebags strapped the back. Each man bore the scars of too many days in the sun. Latin features covered in jeans, jean vests, working boots, and dirty T-shirts. Each wore a scarf as a headband. None of them wore a helmet. I was sure closer inspection would reveal various jailhouse tats. Muscles bulged under their shirts and determination set in their features. There wasn't any need for pretense, so I pulled over to the side, got out and made my way to the front of the truck. I wanted them all in front of me. Didn't need to let them get behind me.

I steadied myself against the hood and waited. I knew this was serious and prepared myself. The three bikes slowed down as they passed, then turned around and came toward me and the truck. I was sure they were checking to see if I was alone. The bikers parked their hogs in a semicircle in front of the truck, making a small enclosure that effectively trapped me in place. As one, they stepped off their bikes, sure of their superiority. This was going to be painful, was the only thought I had before my mind quickly snapped into darkness.

I went cold. Morality had left. Care had left. What had to be done would be done. I didn't really feel, see, or hear anything more. Nothing but what was before me. Consequences would be handled later. I noted the same look had entered Sangre's eyes. These were men who had answered their own tough times. We knew why we were here and there was no sense talking about it.

The bike handle screaming past the top of my head broke me from my trance. It startled each of the Angel Sangre as well. Suddenly, I was aware of a red Ford F-450 pickup screeching to a halt on top of the middle bike. The driver-side door burst open and a loud, screaming "Ye Haaawwww" split the air. Disorienting wasn't the word. Confused would have been better. But one look at his mangled bike got one of the Sangres' immediate attention, just as the rifle shot rang out.

"I'd hold off on that, man, if I were you," said the idiot standing on the runner of the truck's cab. He was pointing a rifle directly at the Sangre's head. He had everyone's attention.

"Here's what's going to happen. You and your buddies are going to pick up this busted bike and throw it in the back of this truck. Then, you're going to take the truck and yourselves and get the hell out of here. Meanwhile, my friend and I are leaving."

The idiot stepped down from the cab and made his way toward my truck, keeping his rifle pointed at the Sangres. A closer look at the long hair waving crazily around his face, along with the insane look in his deep blue eyes, confirmed for me that Crazy Larry was in the house. I chuckled, shook my head and headed for the cab. If it had been anyone else I would have been surprised. Larry jumped in on the passenger side and stuck the rifle through his open window, keeping it trained on the Sangres. The Sangre whose bike had been busted was seething.

"Let's get the hell out of here, Edgar," Larry said under his breath, with strong emphasis on the word "out."

I put the pickup in gear and got the hell out of there. Larry turned and looked at me.

"Think they'll follow us?"

I busted out laughing. Only after the rescue did Larry consider the actions' consequences. Always had, always will.

"Naw. But they will be ready for you next time," I replied.

"Don't see why you're laughing. You're the one that has to explain it to Gerry." Larry smiled.

"Yeah, but you lost a new truck."

"Oh, shit! Yeah. Wonder if I can call it a business expense." Larry asked in his perpetual state of confusion.

I grinned, but I was a bit worried. Larry was right. Gerry wouldn't let me out of his sight after this incident. I was going to be baby-sat whether I wanted to be or not.

"Beer?"

"Wondered if you were going to ask," Larry said with an even wider grin.

"How did you find me?"

"GPS on the cell phone. You really think Gerry let you loose? He's more afraid of Molly even when she's not here than he is afraid of you. Can't say I blame him."

We turned into a nondescript bar made for drinking and pulled into the back lot. No sense advertising where you are. I put Larry's rifle in the back under some blankets and we headed into the bar for a couple of cold ones and conversation.