

Chapter 6: Molly's Last Wish

The bar was a basic rectangular block building sitting by itself, surrounded by a parking lot that had known better days. There was one door in the front that sported a small, cracked and dirty oval window in the center top. This served as the main entrance. It was a heavy wooden door that required but a push to open and slammed shut after passage. The room it secured had a bar set on the right as you entered. It ran almost the full length of the room, stopping short at a wall that separated the bar and public area from a block of rooms crowded into a single corner and used for storage, a small kitchen, and restrooms. Hard pressed by the men's room door was the back exit. To say the place was shabby granted it a compliment.

It was midday but the room was dark. It was lit by the buzzing advertising signs at the back of the bar and a few random tinted windows perched high on the surrounding walls. It could be noted that the tint was largely due to years of neglect and lack of even occasional cleaning. Tables surrounded a trodden wooden surface laid into the tiled floor. It was apparently an attempt at a dance floor as an old jukebox stood silently close at hand. The air conditioning blew constant and cool, but didn't clear any of the stench of booze, sweat and misery that permeated the place. An air of commercial antiseptic wafted across the room and mingled with the permanent odor. This wasn't your exotic pub for young professionals. This was a bar for drinking, men and women accepted.

I moved toward the taps and an old geezer with a towel across his shoulder met me. I pointed to the local brand, held up two fingers and laid a twenty on the counter. Without a word, two frosted mugs filled with the local best appeared on the bar, followed by some change. I left the bulk of the change on the counter and headed to a table in the back corner. The table allowed me to see both doors and watch the entire room. It was also the coolest, darkest place in the bar and the quickest to the rest room, a necessity as I grew older.

Larry sat down to my left and grabbed a mug in both hands. With a quick movement, Larry had turned the mug up to his lips and quaffed half of it before letting loose a serious belch and setting the mug back down.

"Thirsty?" I chuckled as I followed Larry's actions.

"A bit. Think we are going to need more than this," Larry replied. He pushed his chair back, stood up and made his way to the bar. The old geezer met him. Larry laid some money on the counter and shortly came back with a full pitcher of the area's best.

"Now we're ready," Larry smiled and finished off the original glass. He then filled it again from the pitcher.

I had only finished about a quarter of my mug as Larry poured a new glass.

"The décor might have much to be desired, but the damn beer is cold and good," Larry commented as he drew his breath.

"I have to agree. The beer is damn cold and I couldn't ask for finer company. But why the hell are you here?" I asked.

"Because you asked."

"Don't recall asking."

"I don't mean you asked me to come out here exactly. You asked if I wanted to be a part of the business. Damn, Edgar, it's the first time you ever asked me for anything. It's been thirty years. Not even a question. Had to come," Larry replied.

I had forgotten how Larry's mind worked. Usually on a plane no one else even knew existed. I shook my head at Larry's logic and chose not to argue. It would be a fool's game.

“Created a day-care business. Dedicated it to Molly.” Larry was serious now. He looked toward me as he spoke. “Would-a come to the funeral if I’d known. Would-a come to care for her if I’d known.”

“Molly’s choice, Larry. She said she wanted the time with me. Didn’t want friends frettin’ over her. I asked. You know she cared for all of you.”

“You know it’s not what happened in that damn house or even after. It was y’all never forgot any of us. Molly always sendin’ a card at a birthday, a small gift at a graduation. It was the bed that was always available, a plate of eggs and sausage made by your own hand. That’s why,” Larry said.

It was getting uncomfortable and awkward. Molly and I had made the hard choice to keep low after that night. When Larry and I found the money, it was Molly that invested it and then made sure each got a share. She and I were quite aware we were orphans. Nobody cared for us. Finding us with a stack of money all of a sudden would have drawn attention and questions. If the law didn’t do something about it, then those that lost it sure would have.

“There isn’t any statute of limitations, Larry. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I know. But it isn’t just your burden to bear. It’s long past being an obligation or duty, Edgar.”

“Never wanted it to be an obligation. Molly neither. It was what was. What had to be done. That was all.”

“And it isn’t. Never was. We knew. We all knew we each had a stake in what happened. Shouldn’t have carried that burden that far, Edgar. Got friends that don’t mind totin’ it a bit for you.” Larry spoke in a hushed voice. “So why are you here, Edgar? What are you doing?”

I just sighed. Why was it always Crazy Larry that could get past the armor and break down my walls? Why not Tom, or Tina? How could Larry always be the one? Wasn’t like he had acres of sympathy. Hell, I didn’t know what Larry was doing or saying half the time myself. And I was the one everyone else turned to when Larry just didn’t add up. More than once I just shrugged my shoulders and soldiered on with him.

I grabbed my mug and gulped down the last dregs. I moved to fill it again with the pitcher, but Larry already had it pouring. A high sign to the barkeep and two more pitchers were on their way to the table. Larry asked for some wings, slapped a hundred on the table and sat back to wait on me. The barkeep picked up the bill and headed toward the back room.

I grabbed hard on the mug. The night of her death burned in my memory, flooding back. I looked once again at my hands. A tear lingered at my eye for fear of falling and bringing with it a flood of its brothers. My gut wrenched and my muscles tensed. Larry just waited and worked on the second pitcher. I knew Larry would let no man nor beast interfere with this moment, nor would Larry back off until it was done.

“She was only about 80 pounds when she died. Looked less than nothing in that bed.” I spoke with resigned pain. “Took all of her hair, but she had those eyes and that smile. Smiled right up to the last day. Don’t know how she did it. I would have been depressed as hell. Shit, I *was* depressed as hell. But couldn’t stay that way with her. She wouldn’t abide it. She fell asleep holding my hand. Hers was so tiny and small. Then it went limp. Just wasn’t there anymore. The nurses and doctors came rushing in, but I knew.

“Best part, if there was any, was reminiscing about our lives, how we got there. She remembered you coming in the door after, well after you know. Hell, you hadn’t bathed in three days, your hair hadn’t been washed in months and you had the odd bandage sticking out in ten or

twelve places. But there you were waving one of the bags over your head with a big smile on your face.” I smiled at the thought.

“I remember. I had to have been a sight. But she grabbed my arm, sat me down, and took a look after me.” Larry chuckled to no one in particular.

“Always the practical one. First things first. But you did make her smile and laugh, Larry.”

“My benefit entirely. How could one not want Molly to smile and laugh? Truly made the angels jealous.”

I got quiet again. Larry knew I was stalling. I reached for the mug and gulped it down again. It wasn’t really that hard to understand. There was no mystery in it. Still I found it hard to talk about. I drew a deep breath.

“I wasn’t right after that night. Molly could sense it. I didn’t know I could do those things and it frightened the hell out of me. When it happened, it was like I was another person. I was cold inside, purposeful. There was no emotion. It wasn’t anger or passion that drove me, but a sense that it had to be done. When we were done, after you left, I broke down. I thought I was insane. I lashed out, then would hide in the apartment for days. Wouldn’t eat. All I wanted to do was drink and drink until that night left me.

“Damn it, Larry, I could see the blood in my hands. I would swear it was there. I would wash them over and over again until they were raw. It was a month before Molly could get me to even go out the door. I lost about 20 pounds and stank like a brewery. But I pushed through. Molly helped, but really, I had to make that journey. About six weeks later I was sitting on the balcony floor just in front of the apartment. My legs were dangling through the rails. I was swinging them back and forth just passing time. Molly came up and sat next to me.

“What’s next?’ she asked.”

“Now this was a damn sore point between me and Molly. It was what we fought about all the time. She always wanted a plan. She wanted to know what I was going to do next. She drove me, made me make decisions I didn’t want to make. I hated that. I thought she was just trying to start another fight. I began to get angry, but I looked over at her first. She had an irritating smirk on her face.

“What’s next? I thought. Who gave a damn? It wasn’t like we had any say in our future. Nobody was giving us a hand up. Nobody cared if we lived or died. We were orphans, the least of the least. At least that was the way I thought about things. But then, right then, I realized I had just been through hell and back. I decided I would live. Me. Edgar had made the choice. So who was I waiting on? Whose permission was I seeking? Pissed me off that she was right. I didn’t want to tell her, so I just sat for a bit. Then I replied.

“‘Time to get married,’ I said.”

“Shit, no! That’s how you proposed to Molly!” Larry burst out laughing. Beer snorted through his nose. I began to laugh at the spectacle.

“Hell, yeah. Turned it right back on her.”

“What’d she say?” Larry asked.

“OK,” I replied.

“OK? That was it? Just OK?”

“Yep, OK. Like some practical and perfect plan had just been decided. Then she took my hand, smiled at me and sat with me on that damn balcony until it got dark.”

“That’s a hell of a nice memory,” Larry smiled.

“Yeah. But that’s what she did to me for the rest of our lives together. What next? Always, what’s next? Could drive a man crazy. But it also made me realize I could do things. So, well, I began to make plans. Sometimes big plans. I would get all excited, do the research and then, well, there was Molly. I just wouldn’t risk Molly. So they would just die on the table.

“The night she died, she looked at me and tears began to fall on her face. She asked, ‘What’s next, Edgar?’ She told me it was about time to do some of those great ideas. I wasn’t going to have to worry about her anymore. She told me she knew. She had always known I didn’t try any of those things because of her. Now it was my time. If I wanted to know what she wanted from me after she died, she desperately wanted me to do one of those great ideas. Just do what was next. I promised I would.”

“So here you are. Keeping your promise to Molly,” Larry said.

“One of our biggest dreams was to make a hell of a lot of money, provide good jobs to those that need ‘em, and shove it in the ass of those pricks who stand in the way. I wanted the losers to win. I want us all to be counted.”

I slammed my mug down as I made my point.

“Still fighting the battle, eh? Still think you have to make your life have meaning because you are an orphan? Want to prove the importance of your existence, huh?” Larry gulped another mug to its finish and reached for a hot wing.

“Well, maybe. But not so much anymore. It’s an old dream. Still, it’s a good idea, regardless of its seed,” I said as I poured another round. I was getting a bit bolder with each mug.

“True, it still is a good idea. Molly would approve. But, why pot? Seems there would be a safer means of making money. Real estate comes to mind.” Larry chuckled. “Not that I really mind the product, you know?”

I had to laugh. Larry really had no objections to the product. That was well documented.

“Seemed the fastest means to an end. We aren’t getting any younger, bud. Time isn’t on our side. Besides, what we lack in youth we more than make up for in experience and contacts.”

“True that.” Larry raised his glass as a toast to the comment. I joined him in the toast and we clinked mugs. I downed mine in a gulp.

“Besides, if I’m right, we are going to need all the assets we can muster to reap what we have sowed. Seems our sainted DA isn’t what he pretends.”

Larry held his mug in midair, then placed it on the table.

“What are you getting at?”

I looked up from my drinking and glanced around the room. It was empty save for two men in dark suits and sunglasses at the front and back doors. They each nursed a beer, but it was painfully obvious they weren’t there to drink.

“Gerry’s found us,” I chuckled.

Larry looked up and smiled. “That boy is good.”

“You have no idea. Wouldn’t have believed it if you saw him when Molly found him. Looked about as bad as you after one of your early benders. She took him in, set him on his feet, and put him on a path. Don’t know how she handled assholes like us, but we did what we were told. You know he back-talked her one time?”

“Shit! No. What happened?” Larry asked.

“Molly walked up to him and slapped him across the face, hard. Can you imagine that wisp of a woman slapping Gerry? He was so stunned he just stood there. Molly chewed him a new one for 20 minutes. By the end of it, Gerry was crying and nodding yes to anything she said. I just sat out of the way and snickered. He never did that again.”

“He was lucky. She made me clean the toilets one time,” Larry chuckled. “The ones in the outhouse at the camp.”

“I think he’d rather die than disappoint Molly. She told him to look after me when she was gone. Didn’t think he was going to do it so literally.” I grabbed another round and took a sip. I followed it with a hot wing.

“You’re dodging the question. What’s wrong with the DA?”

“Well, rumor is that his daughter did indeed die from a drug overdose. It’s also true she started out using pot, then graduated to the hard stuff. But what isn’t known is that dear old dad was a serious pothead and drug dealer. He was the dealer that introduced her to pot. He was also the one that gave her the overdose later. Used his position as a prosecuting attorney to hide the fact and then sabotaged the investigation.

“There are questions about how his first wife died, too. Some think he set it up to protect himself. Worse still is he has been using his position as the head enforcement officer to build himself a little drug empire in this county. Nobody knows if there are connections between him and the other dealers and gangs, but some prosecutions seem quite convenient. Legalization is hurting him big time and he is looking for ways to regain control. Wholesale pot growers and sellers are not part of his plan.”

“So, does Gerry know all this?”

“Who do you think told me?”

“Pot, corrupt government officials, biker gangs and money. Who wouldn’t want to be a part of all this? Damn, I’m hanging around to see where all this goes.” Larry laughed and grabbed the pitcher to re-fill his mug.

Two more pitchers and four trips to the john later, Larry and I were still partying down. Somehow, a large pizza appeared next to the wings. Another two pitchers followed. It felt good to laugh. Weight seemed to lift from my shoulders with each drink. Larry and I talked about damn near everything, even his numerous wives. I don’t recall when, but sometime much later I rested my head on my hand and I slept.

Without prodding, I awoke. I knew it was 5:45 a.m. but I couldn’t remember where the hell I was. Larry was over in the corner on a cot, snoring away. I fumbled and grumbled but finally made my way out of the bed. I couldn’t focus and my head hurt like hell. I found a door and went into the facilities. I turned on the light and answered nature’s call. On the counter next to the sink was a bottle of aspirin and a glass of water. Clarity began to return to my mind and eyesight as I made use of the offering.

I was back at the farmhouse. I was positive Gerry had made sure I got here safely. I stumbled out of the bathroom and took a moment to look around. I realized I wasn’t as dark as I had been. I smiled at Crazy Larry trying to get some sleep on that tiny rack. I looked down at my bed and realized I would have to make the whole damn thing this time. Somehow, that felt good.

I made my way to the kitchen. There on the counter Dennis had already made a hot pot of coffee. A go-cup rested next to it. Even with my tired red eyes, stinking cotton mouth and beer-stained clothes, it had been months since I’d felt as ready to tackle the day as I did then.

“Larry! Get your ass up! Time to go,” I shouted. I headed back to dress and get going.