

## Lucky Larry

Xavier Turley (2022)

Lights cast down from the ceiling, illuminating the wooden tables strewn across the room. At the back of the room were shelves lined with a wide assortment of alcohols, each enclosed in stained glass bottles—some a dim yellow, others emerald green. A long table sat in front, a man with greying hair stood polishing a round glass with a cloth the colour of ash.

The seat squeaked as Mathew McKane sat on the bar stool. The cushioning was stiff and gravelly, but it was better than nothing. ‘The usual please.’

The man nodded, turning to the various bottles. The room buzzed with movement; to the right laughter and the clattering of pool balls, to the left the whizz of darts and the disgruntled disappointment of poker. *Clank*. The dull gold liquid spilled into the glass with a gurgling sound.

‘Thanks Mark.’

The bartender smiled through his beard and tended to the next patron.

As Mathew lifted the glass to his lips there was a thunderous slam from the other side of the room. Putting down his drink, he turned to see a lanky man with slicked back hair, dressed in a ragged brown suit. He stood with his hand held on the door which was pressed back against the wall. The man staggered toward the stools and sat with a heavy thud.

Mark placed a bottle of whiskey on the wall and approached the man from behind the countertop.

‘Get me a ...’ He pondered his choice for many moments.

Mark opened his mouth to speak—

‘Beer! Yeah, I’ll just have beer. Wait no, get me some whiskey. Good old-fashioned whiskey!’

Mark pulled a bottle from the wall and placed it on the table, but before he could grab a glass the man had already opened the bottle and began guzzling it.

‘Celebrating?’ Mathew asked.

‘Oh yeah.’ The man gave a grin. ‘This is the one-week anniversary of Lucky Larry!’ He spat the name like it tasted bitter and took a swig of his whiskey.

Mark sighed and left to serve more ruly patrons.

‘Really. May I ask why that’s something to celebrate?’

The man laughed. ‘Have you really not heard of Lucky Larry!’

‘Never. Why?’

‘Boy, do I have a story for you.’ He drank from the bottle before slamming it on the table, eyeing Mathew with amusement. ‘You ever heard of the Bellrad Casino?’

‘Afraid not.’

‘Seriously, it’s just the centre of gambling, drugs, firearms, and just about anything you can think of, and home to one of the most notorious ...’ His eyes widened but Mathew’s face was a blank slate. The man chuckled.

Mathew sipped his drink and waited calmly.

‘Anyway.’ The man pulled at the edge of his collar. ‘This guy shows up one day and starts a winning spree, every machine in the house is spitting out coin after coin for him. If he bet on black, you best of bet on black. It was crazy!’ He took another drink.

‘That sounds ... impossible, no one has that kind of luck.’

‘I know, right. Guy said his name was Larry. So, everyone started calling him Lucky Larry. Boy, that stuck. At first it was just weird, some of the big wigs thought it was funny!’ He went to drink again only for empty air to greet him. ‘Bartender! Glass of bourbon. Right, that was until people started waiting for his call so they could match it.’

Mark poured a drink for the man, who quickly snatched it.

‘Boy, it was a mess.’ He swung the golden-brown contents around as he spoke, some spilling out onto the counter. ‘People stopped betting because they knew if they ended up on the other side of Larry there was no point. It was costing old Bellrad a fortune.’

His speech was starting to slur.

‘Alright, so the guy was costing them some money—what’d they do?’

‘First, they tried to ban him from the casino. That didn’t work so well.’

‘Why not?’

‘He kept sneaking in. Or people smuggled him in. Either way, a ban wasn’t gonna be enough.’ He swigged at the glass and looked Mathew in the eye, something glittering in his iris. ‘Promise you’ll keep this next part a secret,’

‘Sure.’ Mathew responded tentatively. *Relax, you deal with this stuff all the time.*

‘Right, right. So,’ his head bobbed a little before snapping into place, ‘Bellrad decided to get rid of him by you know—’ He dragged a finger over his throat. ‘First, they got him drunk so one of their boys could pound him into the cement, next day they found their guy in a dumpster.’ He shook his head. ‘No-one knows what happened, guy said it was all a blur.’

*This Larry might not be that harmless,* Mathew thought.

‘So naturally the next course of action was to bring in the snipers.’

It took Mathew a few seconds to register what he'd heard. It seemed unthinkable. Snipers for a drunk gambler. And if they used what he thought they would have ... *Wait did he say?*

'Anyway, that didn't work either. BARTENDER!'

'It what!' Mathew barely had time to think before the words left his mouth. The man gave him a confused look as if expecting him to understand every twitch of his eyebrow.

'No,' he said finally, 'anytime they got a clear shot—zwip—he'd stumble out of the way.'

Mathew sat there, dumbfounded. 'What?'

'Yeah. They hired ...' He started counting fingers. He concentrated so hard Mathew assumed he'd forgotten what he was doing. 'At least four ... I think one of them ended up having a beer with him.'

He didn't even know how to respond to that so instead he just drank from his glass. 'What happened next?'

'Well, if you're that, uh ...' He scratched his head.

'Curious?' Mathew suggested.

'Yeah ... that.'

*This is getting old fast.*

'Anyway, the boss got sick of Larry and decided to take care of him, himself.'

'How?' he asked, unsure he wanted the answer.

'Mr Bellrad gathered up his best guys, which included me,' he said.

*More like he scooped up whoever he could.*

'Wait, where's the bartender?' the man cried. 'Ah, he'll show up eventually. Uh, the boss. He had us corner Larry in an alley one night ... Larry, alley, ha.'

Mathew gulped down more of the alcohol. 'He got us to hold him down, then got the rest of us to take turns shooting him.'

'Sounds like overkill.'

'You'd think so, but I haven't even talked about the truck. One guy got the knees, another shot his arms, then *I* got to shoot him right in the gut three times! It's the most the boss has ever trusted me to do,' he said.

*I can see why.*

'The boss shot him himself. It was something I'll tell you—he had this whole speech and everything about how the tale of Lucky Larry would be one of caution, blah blah blah.'

Something very familiar buzzed in Mathew's mind about the places he said the bullets had struck.

‘What happened next?’ he asked, lifting the glass to his lips and letting the golden liquid trickle down his throat.

‘Well, I thought he was dead to rights but *no*.’ He sounded nervous and somehow rebellious but ... he was still very. Very. Drunk. ‘Apparently we shot his legs because we couldn’t be sure that’d kill him—it’s a load of ... what was I talking about again?’

‘What did you do with the body?’ Mathew felt odd asking the question so casually, but that was what this conversation had led to ... he made sure to drink as much as he could while waiting for his new companion to continue.

‘Oh, we dumped it far north of the pier.’

Mathew almost choked on his drink.

The drunk gave him a puzzled look. ‘You, okay?’

Beating his chest, he gave the man a thumbs up. Unfazed, the storyteller searched his pockets before pulling out and lighting a cigarette.

‘I wouldn’t smoke in here.’ Mathew coughed.

‘Why not?’

‘Mark doesn’t like people who smoke.’

‘Whose Mar—’ He was lifted by the collar and dragged out of the bar in five seconds flat. There was barely a struggle.

As Mathew sat there listening to the rattling of cues and the clank of glasses, he glanced at his watch—11:15 p.m. He gave Mark a wave and headed out the door.

It was a long drive. The alcohol was starting to wear off and Mathew had time to think. Time to think about the man’s torn suit. Time to think about the way this Larry was shot. Time to formulate an idea.

As he walked through the sanitised white halls, he put on his coat. It was clean and long. He folded down the collar and found himself at his destination. He gave a nod to his assistant, Cathy, and took a clipboard from the back of the bed.

‘Welcome back, Doctor McKane.’

‘Cathy,’ he said, ‘can you tell me again where Mr Mystery was recovered?’

‘Just off the coast near the docks. He was picked up by a passing fisherman, why?’

‘No reason.’

He looked up at the man wrapped with bandages around his chest knees, arms, and head. He hid his disbelief behind a calculating exterior. Despite his excitement and shock, he kept his voice level. ‘I take it the neurosurgery was a success?’

‘It was,’ she said. ‘He might regain his speech with time, but don’t bet on it.’

Mathew held back a smile.

‘I’m gonna get a coffee, you want anything?’ Cathy asked.

‘I’m fine thank you.’

‘Alright. Oh, remember to check in on his X-rays.’

‘Thank you, Cathy, I will.’ As she turned the corner, he sat by the man and looked over the statistics reading them aloud. ‘Vital signs, steady, breathing, shallow, and motor operation, next to gone, yet somehow Mr Mystery, you’re on the fast track to recovery.’ The man didn’t move, then again Mathew wasn’t expecting a response. He lowered his voice and continued. ‘Or ... should I call you Lucky Larry?’

The man breathed steadily, he didn’t move, he didn’t speak, but Mathew was certain he saw his mouth twitch and curve into the slightest of smiles.