HARD LEMONADE

Chapters One & Two · an early look



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An early look at a novel in progress. This is a work of fiction.

Chapter One

Squeezing Lemons

Our second weekend at McGillicuddy's. Better crowd than last week. Maybe this gig could grow some legs.

I lifted the slide, stroked the final chord, bent the G and D strings into a soft wail, Taco gave me a bump bump bump on the bass and we finished the song and the set. Clean. Eddie leaned over the keyboard and crooned into the mic: "Gonna take a short break, folks. Dooonn't go 'way. We'll be right back. Order up, and don't forget to tip your server."

I laid the Martin in its case and got out the 'Caster. We'd do the last set in a more electric, up tempo urban vein--get the crowd stirred up and dancing and thirsty. Taco and Eddie headed for the table where their current ladies sat. Eddie took the long way, past the end of the bar, and his eyes rested a beat too long on a tall man nursing a beer there. Eddie reads a room the way I read a chord chart. It was Eddie who'd landed us this gig. He'd played McGillicuddy's before, with some other band, before I came along. He'd never said how he got back in.

I wandered over to the bar. The bartender aimed a smile and bottle of Jack Daniels at me but I waved her off. She had paying customers lined up.

I folded my six foot two inch frame onto a swivel stool and leaned my forearms on the bar, thinking, the problem with making lemonade is, first you have to pick the lemons—and lemon trees have thorns. Then you squeeze the lemons. I'm good at both. That may be why I'm sitting at the bar in McGillicuddy's between sets—picking at the sour spots in life and squeezing something

drinkable out of them. That's what I told my therapist anyway, before I stopped going because who has two hundred bucks a week to explain why a forty-three-year-old man sleeps on a futon and plays guitar in a blues band. "But Rick," Dr. Martinez would say in that careful voice, "you switched majors six times."

Yes. Yes I did. How do you choose between Herodotus and Kerouac, between the Anasazi and Civil War battlefields? Life's messier than that. So yeah, I pick lemons for a living now. Metaphorically speaking. I play sad songs for happy people and happy songs for sad people, and somehow we all muddle through.

I watched the bartender work. Fast. Efficient. Quite pretty, with dark auburn hair in a saucy, bouncing ponytail, triangular pixie face. She'd been watching me too, on and off all night; I'd caught her at it twice during "Stormy Monday." When her mini rush slowed, she came down the line and doubled down on the smile. Deep brown eyes and a spray of freckles across her nose. "Beer? Scotch? Wine?"

"Soda with a twist of lemon if you don't mind..."

"Good choice. Been a long night."

She reached up for a glass from the overhead rack and I caught a flash of gold at her throat. A small pendant on an intricate braided gold chain. She charged the glass, slipped a lemon wedge onto the rim and leaned forward to place my drink in front of me. The little chunk of gold on its dull gold chain swung free as she leaned, and swayed into the cleavage between her breasts. Her smile widened a bit as she held her pose for a beat, then faded as she straightened. "Not your first rodeo."

"Yes and no. I've seen breasts before. Yours are lovely. But I don't think I've ever seen a pair frame a Phi Beta Kappa key."

"So--what? You were hoping I was just another dumb bimbo?"

"Far from it. I was wondering what an intelligent woman like you is doing in a place like McGillicuddy's."

"Long story, Rick."

"You know my name?"

"I know all my employees' names."

"Oops."

"Double oops." She extended a hand across the bar. "Delia McGillicuddy. I own the place. And before you ask, yes, it's really my name, and no, I didn't marry into it."

I shook her hand, feeling foolish. "Rick Markus. And I just played the condescending academic card to the woman who signs my paychecks."

"Eddie's played here before. Taco too, once or twice. You're the new one." She leaned against the back bar, studying me. "I like to know what I'm hiring. Is that what you are? Academic? You don't dress like one."

"Recovering academic. Like being a recovering alcoholic, except the academic conferences have worse coffee and everyone's still drunk on their own theories." I sipped the soda, tasting the bitter edge of the lemon. "What gave me away?"

"You used 'frame' as a verb when you talked about my chest. Most guys would've gone with something cruder. Plus you recognized the key." She touched the gold chain absently. "Not many people know what a Phi Beta Kappa key looks like anymore."

"Ancient history major. Well, one major. I collected degrees like some people collect vintage guitars. I had five degrees and five guitars before the divorce. When I changed majors for the sixth time, that was it for the marriage. Eight now."

"Divorce math—where losing half your stuff somehow means you end up with more guitars."

"Exactly. Funny how that works." I traced the rim of my glass with one finger. "Started with a '72 Telecaster Thinline the day the papers were signed. Told myself it was an investment. The truth is, each guitar is a different version of myself I was trying on. The classical nylon-string when I thought I might become a flamenco purist. The resonator when I heard Jerry Douglas play Dobro with Alison Krauss and decided slide guitar was my calling."

Delia wiped down the bar with practiced efficiency, but her eyes stayed on me. "And which one stuck?"

"All of them. None of them. That's the problem with being interdisciplinary—you see connections everywhere but can't commit to just one story." I gestured toward the guitar cases on the stage. "Same reason I couldn't finish a dissertation."

"Sounds exhausting."

"But fun. And satisfying sometimes. The music makes sense of it all, somehow. On stage, all those scattered pieces of knowledge just... fit." I grinned at Delia. "Getting back to frames for a second, the first thing you do when you put together a puzzle is set the frame. Once you've got the frame, all the other pieces are bound to fit. Turns out music is my frame. So--what's yours? You don't buy those gold keys on Amazon."

"It's a long, dull story." She smiled again and looked at the stage. "Psychology. With a second major in Criminology." She nodded at the tiny stage. "Eddie's heading back to his keyboard."

I looked. Eddie wasn't heading anywhere yet. He was standing by the stage with his back to the room, and in the mirror behind the bar I could see him watching the tall man again.

"Yeah. Time to earn the paycheck. Um... you doing anything after work?"

"Just closing."

"Need any help with that?"

"Really, Rick?"

"Hey. It wasn't just the Kappa key, you know."

Delia laughed out loud. "Now there's a twist. I don't know if that was the smoothest pick-up line ever or the dumbest. You sure you want to mop floors and scrape gum off the bottom of tables?"

"Oh, yeah. I want the rest of the story."

"Fine with me."

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"The lemonade," I said. "See you after the show."

Chapter Two

Closing Time

The thing about closing time is it reveals who people really are. The masks come off when the lights come up, and you're left with whatever's underneath. I helped Delia stack chairs and wipe down tables while Eddie and Taco loaded their instruments into Taco's van. The silence between us wasn't uncomfortable—more like the pause between verses when you're not sure if the song's going where you think it is.

"So," I said, flipping the last chair onto table twelve, "psychology and criminology. Let me guess—you were going to save the world, one damaged psyche at a time."

"Something like that." She sprayed disinfectant on the bar top with maybe more force than necessary. "Had this whole plan mapped out. PhD in forensic psychology, work with the FBI, profile serial killers, write bestselling books about the criminal mind." She laughed, but it had that same hollow ring mine did when I talked about my latest dissertation. "Turns out the world's messier than textbooks let on."

"Tell me about it. I spent three years trying to prove that the ancient Greek concept of hubris directly influenced American transcendentalism. Had charts and everything. Color-coded." I straightened a crooked picture frame and admired a hand-carved plaque—some old Irish blessing about may the road rise to meet you. Above it hung a classic blackthorn shillelagh. "What happened?"

"Practicum. They stuck me in a county jail for six months, interviewing inmates. Supposed to be research for my thesis on

recidivism patterns." She paused, cloth in hand. "Ever meet a real sociopath, Rick? Not the Hollywood version. The real thing?"

"Can't say I have."

"They're boring. That's what nobody tells you. All that movie drama about brilliant, charismatic killers? Bullshit. Most of them are just... empty. Like trying to interview a void." She resumed wiping, her movements precise and automatic. "I realized I was studying monsters to avoid looking at the regular people who create them. The neglectful parents, the indifferent teachers, the broken systems. Studying that felt more honest than profiling bogeymen."

I leaned against the bar, watching her work. Even at closing time, after eight hours on her feet, she moved with purpose. "So you bought a bar instead."

"Inherited it. Granddad McGillicuddy."

"Are you happy with it?"

"Happy's a big word," she said, hanging the bar towel on its hook with the same precision she did everything else. "But satisfied? Yeah. Most nights." She gestured around the empty room. "You see all those people who were here tonight? The couple at table six having their first fight about money. The guy at the end of the bar drinking away his mother's funeral. The birthday party that got too loud because nobody wanted to go home to their problems."

I was quiet a moment, fitting her into this new frame. "I told you about me and puzzles and music."

"You're thinking of a song, aren't you. A song about me."

"You like Leonard Cohen's music?"

"Better than his poetry."

"Ever hear his song 'Closing Time'?"

"Can't say I know that one. Why?"

I rethought it. Leonard was capable of some pretty dark stuff--pure lemons. And Delia seemed to be in kind of a mood. I changed tracks, shrugged, said, "You profile your customers."

Delia pinned me with a long, thoughtful look. She knew I had changed what I was going to say, but she answered anyway.

"Occupational hazard. But here's the thing—in a bar, people tell you their real stories. Not the sanitized versions they put on resumes or dating profiles. Just the messy, complicated truth." She pulled out the register drawer, started counting bills. "Turns out I'm better at helping people when they don't know they're being helped. Pour them a drink, listen to their troubles, maybe nudge them toward better choices. No case files, no court orders, no bureaucracy."

I watched her stack twenties, squaring each one before the next. "And you get to be the wise bartender instead of the FBI profiler."

"Exactly. Plus I get to listen to good music." She looked up from the money. "Speaking of which, you mentioned Leonard Cohen."

"'Famous Blue Raincoat.' Been working on an arrangement that mixes his version with some Delta blues fingerpicking. Thought it might fit your story—you know, the line about 'what can I tell you, my brother, my killer?'"

"About studying monsters, you mean."

"About understanding that we're all capable of being monsters. Or creating them." I picked up my guitar case, feeling the familiar weight of the Martin. "Cohen knew something about picking lemons too. Made a career out of beautiful sadness."

Delia finished with the register, locked it. "Play it for me sometime."

"How about now? If you've got a few more minutes."

She considered this, keys in one hand, looking around her empty kingdom. "Why not? The evening could use a proper send-off."

I opened the case, lifted out the Martin, felt the smooth neck settle into my palm like it belonged there. Maybe it did. Maybe Dr. Martinez was wrong about needing to understand everything and not finishing anything. Maybe some things—music, attraction, the

way Delia's long, messy curls, freed from their ponytail, framed her elfin face—just needed to be lived and enjoyed, not understood.

I took a stool and tuned up. I expected her to stay behind the bar, where bartenders stay. Instead she came around the end of it, pulled the stool beside mine a little closer than it needed to be, and sat with her elbows on the bar and her chin on her fists. Close enough that I could smell apples in her hair and lemon on her hands. Close enough that I wasn't playing to the room anymore.

I started with the Cohen. Slow, the way it ought to be done at two in the morning, the Delta picking walking underneath it like somebody pacing a hallway. I sang it low, mostly for the two of us.

She didn't say anything. By the second verse she'd stopped watching my hands and started watching my face, and somewhere around the line about the brother and the killer she looked away, toward the dark window, and touched the gold key at her throat. When I let the last chord ring out, she was quiet so long I thought I'd misjudged the room.

"Nobody's played anything for me since Granddad," she said finally. "He used to sing after close. Terrible voice. Every song was 'The Parting Glass,' whatever it started out as." She laughed, and her eyes were bright. "That was... thank you."

I didn't trust myself to say anything clever, so I didn't. I just kept my hands on the strings, picking something soft and nameless while she pulled herself back together.

"Your turn," she said. "You promised me the rest of the story."

"You want the whole story? Here's the thing about being a recovering academic—you learn to see patterns everywhere, even in your own life." I kept playing under the words. "I was one of those kids who got straight A's because my parents acted like anything less meant I'd end up living in a van. So I collected majors like merit badges. History first, because I loved stories about dead people who couldn't argue back. Then anthropology, because the ghosts of real people turned out to be more interesting than just dead ones. The puzzle thing, you know? Added classics because,

hell, if you're going to study humanity, might as well start with the Greeks. American Lit because Kerouac made more sense than Herodotus after three cups of coffee. Then a flirtation with philosophy, and several semesters of classical Greek. Undergrad majors, but who's counting."

The chord progression shifted minor, matching my mood. "The guitar came during dissertation attempt number three—connecting classical mythology to Beat poetry. Bought a cheap Yamaha to help me think. Turns out my brain works better with my hands busy. All those scattered thoughts about trade routes and Dylan lyrics suddenly made sense when I could hear the connections."

Delia leaned closer, listening. I played softer, more intimate.

"Marriage couldn't survive perpetual student-hood. While my ex-wife climbed the corporate legal ladder, I collected beautiful, useless knowledge. The divorce was... educational. You already know the guitar math."

I let the music trail off. "Now I live in a studio apartment that looks like a music store exploded in a library. But here's what I figured out—all that scattered learning wasn't wasted. When I'm up there reading a room, deciding whether they need Muddy Waters or something sweeter, John Mayer, I'm using everything. The anthropology helps me read body language. The history gives me perspective on why certain songs hit differently. The literature taught me that everyone's carrying a story."

I set the guitar aside. "That's my frame story, Delia McGillicuddy. What's yours?"

She reached over the bar for a bottle of Jameson and two glasses, poured modest measures, and slid one toward me. I reached for it at the same time she let go, and for a second her fingers were under mine on the glass. Neither of us moved at first. Then she did, slowly, and picked up her own.

"My turn for show-and-tell?" she said. "Fair warning—my story's got less music and more blood."

She traced the rim of her glass without drinking. "My parents were so proud. First McGillicuddy to graduate college, let alone pursue a doctorate. They ran a little grocery store in Southie. Worked double shifts so I could focus on studies instead of stocking shelves. Mom would frame my dean's list certificates next to faded photos of relatives from County Kerry we'd never met. This key"—she touched the gold chain—"wasn't just personal achievement. It was generational progress."

"And then the void-faced sociopaths."

"And then Granddad." She gestured around the bar. "Heart attack during my last year, completely sudden. I had one semester left, just needed to finish my thesis. Came up here to settle his affairs, get the business stable, sell it, return to academia." She laughed, but it wasn't entirely bitter. "Something about this work suited me in ways graduate school hadn't. A couple of depth charges and people hand you the messy, complicated truth."

"And you get to help without the bureaucracy and the files and the forty-five-minute hours jammed in one after another. The air may smell like stale beer, but it's easier to breathe."

"Don't romanticize it, Rick. Half my customers are slowly drinking themselves to death, and I'm the one pouring." She touched the gold key again, a gesture I was beginning to recognize as her tell when she was thinking. "But yeah, there's something honest about this work. No pretense, no dissertations that three people will read. Granddad always said he liked closing time best; the feeling of satisfaction at the end of a good day." She turned the glass in her fingers. "It's just quieter up there than it used to be. The apartment. You'd think a bar owner would never be lonely."

I took another sip of whiskey, watching her face soften. "I get that. You know what strikes me? We're both refugees from ivory towers, but you landed somewhere that actually helps people."

"Maybe. Just—" She stopped, glanced at the clock over the register, and laughed at herself. "Just look at the time. Go home, Rick. You've got a gig tomorrow night, and I've got a bar to open."

I packed the Martin. At the door she reached past me for the deadbolt, and for a second we were closer than either of us had planned. Neither of us moved. Her hand stayed on the bolt. I could have kissed her, and she knew it, and she knew I knew it.

She went up on her toes and kissed me on the cheek instead—quick, warm, just at the corner of my mouth, which I don't think was an accident. Then she turned the bolt and held the door.

"Thanks for the song," she said. "Go on. Before one of us does something smarter people wouldn't."

"Thanks for the lemonade."

"You already said that."

"Still true."

The street was empty except for one man under the streetlight across the way, collar up, hands in his pockets. Tall. He wasn't looking at me. He was looking at the bar. I'd seen him before—at the end of the bar tonight, nursing one beer through two sets while Eddie watched him.

By the time I reached the corner and looked back, there was nobody under the streetlight. Upstairs, a light came on in Delia's window, and for a moment there was a shape in it, looking down the street after me.

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