

Better Man

Bonus Content

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Finding a decent-paying gig in New York City without an agent or at least some kind of following was proving pretty much impossible. And forget finding a place to live; he couldn't even afford a room in a crack house.

Heading back to Kansas wasn't an option Billy would consider, so instead, he found himself in Bayonne, New Jersey, a city small enough to be affordable, but big enough to boast several bars and clubs where he might find a gig. The location was a stone's throw from Jersey City and just across the river from Staten Island. If he could find a steady gig in any of those locations, he might even be able to find a small apartment. Sleeping in his van—his six-foot, four-inch body curled around amps, monitors, and guitar cases—was getting mighty old.

At this rate, he'd have the posture of an eighty-year-old man before his twenty-first birthday. Which was why it was so important to get this gig at The Bridgeview Tavern.

"I don't need a solo act. I need a dishwasher." Sal, the owner, pushed past Billy struggling to carry a pan of dirty dishes and beer mugs. With a quick shift of his jaw, he swapped the fat stogie jutting from between his lips from one side of his mouth to the other. "Besides, without hearing a demo, I ain't interested."

A demo tape. Yeah, Billy had them, but of his band back in Kansas. Fat lot of good that would do when he was trying to book a solo gig.

Billy lifted the man's load and carried it to the counter next to the sink, hoping the gesture would win him a few brownie points. "Look, you won't regret it, I promise," he begged. "I'm good. Really good."

“Humble too.” Sal folded his arms over his sizeable paunch. “But like I said, what I need is a dishwasher.”

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

“What if I take the dishwashing job, provided you allow me to play two nights a week, for free?”

That got the old coot’s attention. “You’re willing to wash dishes for free?”

Nice try, Sal.

“No, but I am willing to *play* for free, at least until I can prove myself. I’ll play on your two slowest nights of the week for the next four weeks. After that, we renegotiate. If I don’t start bringing in enough money on those nights for you to start paying me, I’ll be on my way.”

Sal scraped a hand across his salt-and-peppered stubble in consideration of Billy’s offer. “And you’ll work for minimum wage? Sunday through Friday, eleven a.m. to nine p.m.?”

“That’s ten hours a day.” Billy might have thrown away his chances for a college degree, but that didn’t mean he was stupid. “Isn’t that illegal or something?”

“What are you? An undercover union boss?”

Billy needed this chance, fucked up as it was.

“Tell you what, I’ll work the two extra hours a day for straight pay—for now—but if I fulfill my promise to bring in the extra bucks, you either start paying me overtime or hire a part-timer to cover the extra hours, and you give me a Friday or Saturday night.” If everything went the way Billy expected it would—the way it had to—he’d be on his

way to earning his living as a full-time musician by this time next month. If not . . . well fuck. There was no Plan B. He had to make it work.

The stogie jumped back to the other side of Sal's mouth. His eyes scanned the kitchen, stopping at the piles of dirty dishes in the sink and on the counters, then turned back to Billy. He extended a meaty paw.

“Sunday night, and if you start now, you got yourself a deal.”

With a grin, Billy accepted Sal's hand. “Deal. And thank you. You won't be sorry. I promise.”

“We'll see,” Sal said, shuffling toward the door that led into the bar. “Detergent's on the counter. Make sure the water is extra hot and be sure to rinse well. If you don't, it cuts the foam on the beer and the customers start bitchin' that the beer's flat.”

Flat beer. He wished that was all he had to bitch about.

Sal poked his head back through the swinging door. “What'd you say your name was again, kid?”

“Billy. Billy—” He hesitated. This was his fresh. The last thing he wanted was to be like his father—not even his name. “McDonald,” he said, snatching his grandmother's maiden name out of thin air.

“Billy McDonald.”

The best thing about The Bridgeview Tavern was the small parking lot behind the bar. With tall shrubs on two sides and a fence on the third, it provided enough shelter for Billy to park the van overnight behind the dumpster without worrying about the cops discovering him and charging him with vagrancy or loitering, or whatever the fuck else

they felt like. It wasn't how he chose to live, but with no paycheck for at least a week and ever-dwindling funds, he didn't have any other options.

He bought an alarm clock and set it for seven a.m. to make sure he was gone before Sal came in to open up, then he'd drive to a truck stop out on the highway and grab a shower and some breakfast. The old man could be a bit of a jerk, but at least he let Billy eat lunch and supper during his shift.

He finished up in the kitchen, stacking a few plates and mugs that had come in from the dining room to take care of later, and removed his grandfather's guitar from its case. The old Martin wasn't his best instrument, but for tonight at least—his first night performing—he needed a reminder of the love and affection he'd received from his grandparents. Gramps had given him the classic guitar shortly before he died, and Gram had stalked every pawn shop in east Kansas until she found it and was able to buy it back after Billy's mother had stolen it out from under him and sold it.

Giving his head a quick shake to ward off the anger and disappointment that filled him whenever he thought of his mother, he grabbed Gramp's guitar and made his way into the bar and onto the good-sized stage at the far end of the room. The Bridgeview Tavern was known for featuring four- and five-piece bands on weekends, but Billy was determined to make that stage his bitch before the night was over. With a paltry dozen or so regulars lining the bar and a few couples scattered at tables, if more customers didn't show up tomorrow night—or God forbid, he lost customers tonight—owning the stage wouldn't help him in the long run. It would still belong to the stale, old bands that haunted the joint on primo nights.

Spending his last few bucks on a new set of strings, Billy had changed them earlier that day, but he gave them each a tug to give them a stretch, then he re-tuned. No one was paying him any mind, and it didn't look like Sal had any intention of introducing him. At least he'd turned off the piped in music and put the television over the bar on closed caption. If that was all he'd be getting in way of an intro, so be it. His introduction would be his music.

He'd done a sound check earlier but clicked his tongue a few times into the mic to make sure it was on, then he started to play.

Playing hard, driving rock on solo guitar wouldn't be easy, but that didn't mean he couldn't do it. If there was one thing he'd had an innate talent for, it was rearranging songs. Just about any song could be re-created for a single instrument. You just had to be talented enough to pull it off, which he was. So it was exactly how he approached this first gig. Once he had their attention, he'd be more daring.

And once he had his foot in the door in a few locations and a few steady gigs, he'd start building a band.

Fingering the first few notes of John Waite's *Missing You*, Billy closed his eyes and let the music flow from deep down inside him. It poured forth from his core, his very soul, down and out through his fingers. There was no drum kit. No bass. No backup of any kind, yet he captured each note, each chord, putting his own spin on a Top 100 Billboard hit. Halfway through the song, he dared to open his eyes and looked up to find almost everyone in the bar watching, listening. Toes tapped, fingers kept rhythm along the bar top and tables. Even Sal had paused. He leaned against the cash register, arms folded, a bar rag thrown over his shoulder, the ghost of a smile playing on his lips.

It was an auspicious start but charming thirty Monday-night patrons was a long way from staking a claim on a bigger paycheck.

Over the next three hours, he ran through a repertoire of cover tunes—Eagles, Wham, Led Zeppelin, Foreigner—holding off on playing any originals until he had won himself a following. He even got brave enough to take on The Boss, despite Springsteen being a beloved Jersey boy and risking an uprising on the off chance that he played him poorly.

By the end of the night, the crowd had almost doubled. Sal, in a move that surprised the shit out of him, had placed a brandy snifter at Billy's feet near the edge of the stage and it was stuffed with fives and singles. He even spied a couple of tens. The larger bills had been accompanied by winks and overt looks from a table of women to his right.

After his last song, he wiped the sweat from his brow as he stood and with a heartfelt grin and nod of his head, thanked the patrons for their support on his first night there. The applause continued so long and loud, even for the smallish crowd, that Sal waved him on to do one more song, even though they were pushing closing time.

Going for broke, he finished the evening with a solo-guitar arrangement of *Hotel California*, which was as well-received as everything else he'd played that night. And the way the blonde in the tight red sweater was eye-fucking him, the night was bound to get a lot more interesting.

It didn't take long for him to break down his setup, and by the time he was rolling his last cord, the woman sauntered over to him.

Sipping some sweet-looking cocktail through a slim, red stirrer, she looked up at him coyly, too coy for someone her age, which was older than he'd first thought her to be. She wore too much makeup, too much perfume, and her hair was far too big and stiff. Still, she was attractive, in an overblown sort of way.

"You're pretty good," she said, her harsh nasal accent an assault on his Midwestern ears. "I didn't know Sal had entertainment on Monday nights. I'll have to stop in more often."

He grinned. "Glad you enjoyed it. I'll be here tomorrow night as well."

Her lips pulled into an exaggerated pout. "I work Tuesday nights. I usually work Mondays as well, but today's my birthday so my girlfriends took me out to celebrate."

Billy snapped the latches on his guitar case and faced her. "Well, happy birthday . . ." He hesitated, waiting for her name.

She jutted an arm out, her hand hanging loosely. "Darlene."

Taking her hand in his, Billy pulled her closer. "I think I can do a little better than that," he said, before planting a chaste kiss on her cheek. "After all, it is your birthday," he added, his lips lingering close to her ear. "I'm honored that you hung around for my little show on your big day."

Darlene giggled. "We popped in for a nightcap." She gnawed delicately on her bottom lip. "You were just a pleasant surprise. In fact, I called a few of my other friends, and they came out in time for your last set."

That sure explained things. If word kept spreading, he might be able to attract a big enough crowd to fill the place, even on a Monday or Tuesday.

“That was mighty sweet of you.” He glanced over at the table where the women had been sitting to thank them for comin, too, but it was empty. “Looks like your friends left without you.”

“Yeah, they all have to work in the morning. We hadn’t planned to stay out this late. I think they’ll all be blaming you when they sleep through their alarm clocks.” She leaned in and ran a finger over his arm. “I’m a unit clerk. I work second shift at Hudson County General, which means I can sleep till noon.”

Billy swept his tongue over his bottom lip, then bit it. He waggled his brows in case the smile didn’t do the trick. “Noon is my favorite time to get up.”

Swaying slightly, Darlene gave him a lopsided grin. “Then perhaps I can interest you in a late breakfast? My place?”

Yeah, she was a bit tipsy, but she wasn’t drunk. Neither was he, which made him wonder why he was even considering her offer. She was forty if she was a day. He’d been with an older woman before. It wasn’t the highlight of his youth, but she’d taught him a hell of a lot. Not that he was in need of any lessons these days, but the chance to sleep in a real bed and eat a home-cooked meal, even if it was just bacon and eggs, was too damn tempting.

He slipped on his jacket and picked up his guitar case in one hand and his amp in the other. “Sounds good,” he said as she hoisted her purse onto her shoulder. “Lead the way.”

Her grin widened. “Super! I’m not far from here. My friend drove, so I need a ride anyway.”

Guess he must've looked like a sure thing if she didn't even have another way to get home. He gave Sal a nod goodnight while Darlene opened the door. As they walked to the car, she slipped her hand into the back pocket of his jeans, cupping his ass in the process.

"I hope you're hungry," she said, "because I'm starving."

Maybe bacon and eggs weren't on the menu after all, 'cause it seemed like he was the one about to be devoured.