

THE DEAL

A short story by AmandaK

Lindsey tried not to cringe when the performer on the stage struck another false chord. He wiped the surface of the bar with the dirty cloth as if it were to blame for the singer's incompetence. By all rights, it should be *him* there on the stage. He would certainly do a better job. Instead, he was tending to the rabble who came in here every Friday night to convert their wages into cheap beer and diluted whiskey, with his ears under constant assault.

"Hey, hey! You're gonna rub right through the varnish." Bill, the other barman, laughed and slapped his shoulder. "What's with you today, eh?"

"Got another turn-down," Lindsey said.

He'd applied with Harper, Woods & Murdock, a major law firm in Chicago, only to be told that, "sorry, Mr. McDonald, we don't have any positions available at the moment."

It wasn't the first rejection he'd received, nor did he expect it to be the last. Time was getting short; soon, he'd graduate with a degree in corporate law, and with no law firm to hire him. Was he doomed to tend bar forever?

Desperate, he'd abandoned applying for associate a couple of weeks ago; he was quite prepared to start as a paralegal, or even work as an intern, as long as he could work in his chosen field.

"Their loss," Bill sympathized. "Something will come up, though. You'll see."

And with those cheerful words, Bill walked to the other end of the bar where a middle-aged gentleman gestured for his shot glass to be refilled. Lindsey spared him a glance, briefly wondering what the man was doing here. His clothes spoke of money, and he looked very out of place among the jeans and plaid flannel shirts of the factory workers who frequented the bar.

"Yo, McDonald!" Ed, the owner of the place, shouted at him from the small stage. "Wanna come up here for a moment?"

The singer's cat squeals had finally been silenced --thank God-- and the stage was empty. Lindsey walked over to Ed.

"What happened to whasisname?"

"Kicked him off," Ed said grimly. "Kid couldn't sing if his life depended upon it."

"Don't I know it," Lindsey muttered. His ears still hurt.

"You want his spot? It's still an hour till closing."

Lindsey stared at his boss. "Are you serious?"

Ed shrugged. "You've always been going on about how much you wanted to get up here. Consider this your lucky day."

A few months ago, Lindsey had come to the bar looking for a job as a musician, but Ed had offered him bartending instead, saying he had plenty of performers lined up and lacked someone to handle the bar. Since bartending brought in money, Lindsey had taken the job, but his heart had always been on the stage, suffering through one terrible performance after another.

"I don't have anyone else available at the moment," Ed continued, "and Bill seems to be doing fine handling the clientele."

"I don't have my guitar." He sighed with regret.

"Take his," Ed suggested. He pointed at the instrument the previous performer had left behind. The careless disregard of the guitar spoke volumes about the singer's love for his craft -- or rather, lack thereof.

Lindsey hesitated a moment more, not sure why he wouldn't take the opportunity. He was always happiest when he could play and sing, wasn't he? His fingers ached to strum the strings of the instrument, even though his mind told him it wasn't tuned properly.

"All right," he said. He lifted the guitar and caressed the strings with the tip of his fingers.

Ed laughed. "You touch that thing like it's a lover or something!"

Lindsey gave him a serious look. "Guitars are delicate. Playing it is not like plucking a chicken."

"Well, then, let's see what you can do," Ed said.

He turned and addressed the room. "People, can I have your attention for a special performance? Tonight, Lindsey McDonald, your faithful server, will sing for us. How 'bout a round of applause?"

Through the spotlights in his face, Lindsey saw some of the drinkers swivel to the stage and cheer; most people were more interested in the content of their glasses than in him, though. At the far end of the bar, he caught a ray of light reflecting on the silver hair of the gentleman who didn't belong. He was looking right at the stage.

For no apparent reason, the stranger's scrutiny made him uncomfortable. Lindsey took a moment to shake off the shiver that wanted to run along his spine. Then he turned his attention to the guitar and tried a few chords, fiddled the pins a bit, and tried again. He longed for his own prized Taylor, but this old thing was all that was available to him.

At last, satisfied that the guitar sounded as good as it was able to, he began to play.

Five songs later, his throat dry and his fingers raw from battling the strange guitar, which threatened go out of tune constantly, Lindsey stepped off the stage to an enthusiastic applause of customers and staff alike. Ed was waiting for him at the bottom of the three steps leading to the stage.

"I've got to give it to you, McDonald," he said with a grin, "you know your stuff. I should've put you up there much sooner."

Lindsey gave him a non-committal shrug in response. He'd asked often enough. "It was okay," he admitted.

"Know what?" Ed continued. "I'm firing you as my bartender."

Lindsey glared at him and opened his mouth to protest.

Ed smirked. "And I'm hiring you as a performer. That is, if you want the job."

"I do," Lindsey said. This was one offer he did not need to think long about.

"Good. That's settled then. Bill!" Ed called. "Give this boy a drink. His throat must be parched."

Bill placed a beer in front of Lindsey. "Told you something would come up."

Lindsey snorted. Right. His big break. In *The Bridge*, a seedy bar in downtown San Francisco. Not exactly what he'd envisioned when he drove west from Oklahoma in the battered '56 Ford and signed up for the academic course at Hastings. Certainly not what he'd worked his ass off for, with sweat, blood, tears, and late nights in the library.

"That was a very touching performance, Mr. McDonald," a cultured voice said to his right. "Or may I call you Lindsey?"

Lindsey turned on his stool. He wasn't surprised to find the well-dressed gent at his shoulder.

"Depends," he offered cautiously.

The man smiled, a smile that did not reach his cold eyes. Lindsey's distrust went up a notch, yet at the same time the air of money and confidence the man exuded intrigued him.

"Ah, of course. I'm sorry." The man held out his hand. "My name is Holland Manners. I was wondering if I could have a word with you, about your future."

"What about it?" Lindsey asked, careful not to commit himself to the conversation.

"Your future with my firm," Manners continued. "Wolfram & Hart, Attorneys at Law in Los Angeles."

Lindsey's heart skipped several beats. "You're a lawyer?"

"Yes," Manners said. "Vice President of the Special Projects Department."

"What's that?"

"Let's sit over there." Manners pointed at an empty table in a dark corner, "and I'll tell you all about it."

"Why me?" Lindsey asked thirty minutes later. "Why so generous?"

It was a risk to question the proposal and Manners might withdraw it, but he had to know. After the constant rejections from respected law firms, Wolfram & Hart's offer was too good to be true. There had to be a catch somewhere.

Did he even want to find the catch? The career path Holland Manners painted was a dream come true: associate for a few years, junior partner, then vice president of this or that department. He'd be set for life. More importantly, so would his brothers and sisters. And that's exactly what was worrying him; he wasn't just making decisions about his own life -- he was making decisions that would influence the life of all the McDonalds in his family.

He could still picture the looks on the faces of his brothers and sisters when the sheriff ushered them out of the house, out of the only home they had ever known. For several months, the family had wandered the Oklahoma roads, sleeping under bridges or in the field, homeless, penniless, until at last his grandparents from his mother's side had taken pity and provided them with an old trailer. It had been a tight fit, the kids three to a bed, but it had been a roof over their heads and protection from the elements. At the time, Lindsey had been too young to fully understand, but he had sworn to himself that he'd never let something like that happen to them again. It was why he wanted to study law. Nobody was ever again going to take something from him that was rightfully his.

Manners showed a white-toothed smile. "I've had my eye on you for a long time, my boy," he said. "You show great promise. At Wolfram & Hart, we require special qualities in our employees. And we expect them to do their very best. In return, the rewards will be on par with the work you deliver. I can see you going places, Lindsey."

Lindsey kept his eyes on Holland Manners, studying him, while he thought things over. In all reality, he didn't have much of a choice; it wasn't as if the country's law firms were lining up outside his door to hire him.

"Okay, Mr. Manners," he said. "I'll be glad to come work for Wolfram & Hart."

The smile on Manners' face widened. "You won't be sorry." He got up and held out his right hand. "Welcome aboard, son."

Lindsey shook the proffered hand, unwittingly signing away his very soul with the gesture.

By the time he found out, it was too late.

Disclaimer: This story is based on the Mutant Enemy/David Greenwalt Productions/Kuzui/Sandollar/Twentieth Century Fox Television/WB Television Network series Angel. All characters belong to their original creators. The story was written for entertainment purposes only and no copyright infringement was intended.