



Her Holiday Fireman

By Kathleen Y'Barbo

Excerpt proved courtesy of www.kathleenbarbo.com

Leah, somebody needs to tell the guy at table seven that we closed twenty minutes ago. He just ordered another plate of fried shrimp then had the nerve to ask me to bring him a dessert menu."

Leah Berry looked up from the list she was making to see the young waitress scowling at the offending customer. Dark hair, muscles and a leave-me alone expression marked him as a guy who wasn't expecting company or, apparently, planning to leave, even though the sign on the door was clearly marked with the news that Pop's Seafood Shack was only open for lunch on Wednesdays until 3:00 p.m. from the first of November through the end of the year. It was now 3:20 p.m.

Much as Leah needed to get over to the stables and see to the horses, it wasn't worth losing a customer over. If she'd learned anything since she left her curator's job at The Galveston Preservation Society last spring to run the family restaurant, it was that the customer came first.

"Be nice and go fill his tea glass," she said firmly. "And smile when you hand him that menu."

The waitress, barely out of her teens and more set on a modeling career than one in food service, opened her mouth to complain then obviously thought better of it. Kate Murdoch hadn't quite taken to being a waitress but she was willing to work for what the restaurant could afford to pay her during the winter season. Plus, her father was the mayor of Vine Beach and an old friend of Pop's. Much as Leah hoped Kate made a success of her modeling dreams, she didn't wish for it to happen soon.

Grabbing a menu with one hand and the tea pitcher with the other, Kate wound her way through the maze of tables to where the stranger sat mesmerized by the view of the Gulf beyond the wide expanse of windows. He offered the waitress a nod then went back to gazing at the water again. Leah watched to make sure the future super model offered no evidence of her irritation.

"I told you we needed a rule about ordering all-you-can-eat in the last hour before closing," Kate said when she breezed past to deposit the empty plates. "He's picking at the shrimp and staring out the window. Seriously. I'm so over this."

"He probably just doesn't realize we're only open for lunch on Wednesdays," she offered to Kate's retreating back.

Orlando, her father's best pal and the only cook Pop's Seafood Shack had ever had, stepped into her line of sight. Arms crossed over his barrel chest, Orlando seemed to study the U.S. Navy

tattoo on his forearm before lifting his gaze to Leah's.

"What?" she asked softly as she once again set her work aside. "We hold the kitchen open until the last diner's done. House rules, even on Wednesday. You know that."

"Don't get all riled up, Lee-Lee." The cook went back to studying the inked insignia as he managed a shrug. "Just thinking of the bottom line. Overtime for the two of us plus all that food the guy's putting away means you're losing a whole bunch of money. I'd put up the closed sign and flash the lights, if it were up to me." Leah sighed.

He reached to touch her shoulder. "Look, kiddo, I know it ain't the way your pop would've done things but this is a new day." Orlando sent the diner at table seven an irritated look. "And new days call for new ways. That home you're keeping your father in ain't cheap, and I know you're not making enough here to cover what the insurance doesn't."

When Orlando got in a mood, humor was always the best remedy. "So you're saying I should stay open on Wednesday evenings, too? What would the choir down at Grace Bible do with their star baritone stuck behind a stove frying shrimp?"

Tossing his apron aside, the cook headed across the room, hit the switch on the open sign and slid the dead bolt on the door. When the guy ignored the gesture in favor of reaching for his tea glass and draining it, Orlando made a great show of returning to the kitchen. The diner, however, returned to his menu as if nothing had happened.

"Least now we guarantee no one else shows up," Orlando grumbled as he snatched his apron and stalked back to the grill.

The man in question looked up. Their gazes collided, and Leah nodded. Apparently it was time for dessert at table seven. She turned to call for Kate only to find her dressed in her street clothes. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I've got a date." She gestured to the clock on the kitchen wall. "Seriously, you remember what it's like to be in love, right?"

Not really. Leah bit back a response and nodded. "Go. This time."

Kate was gone before Leah could say anything further. Again the sole remaining diner met her gaze. Pasting on a smile, she grabbed for the order pad.

"Ready for dessert?" she said as sweetly as possible. "Pie's good today. Chocolate, coconut and—"

"Banana cream," he said along with her but his Texas drawl drowned out hers. "Yeah, I know." He set down the menu and she noticed his dark blue T-shirt emblazoned with the logo of the Houston Fire Department. "But what I'd really like is another round of redfish. Then we can talk about pie."

"Redfish," she echoed.

"Yeah. Is that a problem?" His gaze swept the room before once again focusing on her. "I'm surprised this place is so empty. The food's not bad."

Not bad? Leah opened her mouth to offer a candid response then thought better of it. "Well," she said carefully, "it is Wednesday."

"Yes," he said slowly but obviously without a clue, "it is."

Out of the corner of her eye, she spied Orlando walking toward the control box for the lights. Leah shot him a look before returning her attention to the diner.

"So.. " Leah paused. "Redfish?"

"Redfish." He dismissed her by picking up his phone.

"Redfish," she echoed as she returned to the kitchen. "And not a word from you, please."

"Wasn't planning on it," Orlando said, though his expression stated the opposite.

She returned to the table with the tea pitcher in hand.

"Sweet, right?"

This time, the fireman offered a dazzling smile. "Yes," he said as he pushed away his phone to offer up his tea glass. "Thank you."

His smile caught her by surprise. She glanced down at the brochures spread across the tabletop. "Looking to rent a place?"

He hurried to shove aside the pages. For a moment he seemed to be trying to decide how to answer.

Leah finished pouring the tea then set down his glass. "I didn't mean to pry. It's just that it's rare we get renters down here this time of year and..." His expression remained unreadable. "I'll just go check on your food."

When she pressed through the kitchen doors, Orlando gave her a look over his shoulder before nodding to the half-filled plate. Leah frowned and silently filled up the remainder of the platter with shrimp and headed toward the dining room. The old cook meant well, but she'd not let Pop's high standards slip for the sake of the balance sheet. If they lost money on the handsome fireman, so be it.

A covert glance told her the fireman had folded away his real estate papers. "Here you are," she

said with a smile. "Is there anything else I can get you?"

"No, thanks."

"All right then. Enjoy." She tucked the tray under her arm and took a step away from the table.

"Wait."

Leah turned to scan the plate and then the table. "Did I forget something?"

His gaze was steady but his expression softer. "No. I did."

She waited a second before shaking her head. "I don't understand."

"My manners." He studied his hands then looked up at her. "It's not exactly my best..." The fireman shook his head. "No excuses. I've been rude. Please accept my apology."

Any lingering irritation at having to stay open well past closing time evaporated. "Hey, don't worry about it. We all have our bad days."

"Yeah," he said under his breath as he looked away.

An awkward silence fell. "Okay, well," Leah said, "I'll just let you enjoy your shrimp."

"Wait. If you're not in a hurry, can you answer some questions about Vine Beach?"

Ryan clamped his mouth shut. Had he actually asked a total stranger for help?

Yup, he had. But her eyes were kind. And he was tired of being alone. Especially today.

He dared a look at the redhead and saw that she seemed to be considering the question. "You don't have to," he hurried to add. "I mean I'm... I was just thinking maybe you could fill me in. I'm new here." He gestured to the stack of real estate listings, meager as they were. "Guess you already figured that out, though."

She glanced over her shoulder at the older fellow watching them from the kitchen door and then she nodded and sat. "Sure, why not?"

Ryan reached across the table to offer his hand. "I'm Ryan," he said as his gaze collided with wide green eyes, noted a sprinkling of freckles. "Ryan Owen."

"Pleased to meet you, Ryan Owen. I'm Leah." Her grasp was firm as she took his hand.

"Just Leah?" he said.

"Leah Berry." She paused only a second as if gauging whether the name held meaning to him.

"So, what brings you to Vine Beach?"

There were a dozen possible answers. He decided on the easiest. "Work. Apparently the city's been without a fire chief since."

"Since my father's illness," she supplied.

Now what? With those green eyes pointed in his direction, his mind went blank. "I'm sorry," he finally managed to say.

"No, it's fine. He's...well, it was time for him to retire. Welcome to Vine Beach," she said...

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