

# Five

"I NEVER thought of the Hard Rock Café as an upscale restaurant."

"Hm?"

"I'm glad I'm not over dressed for this place."

"Yeah."

"I mean, there's not much more I could take off and still be legal!"

"Uh-huh."

"Lee?"

Lee dragged his eyes back to his dinner partner. It wasn't her looks that failed to hold his attention. After all, she was a sight to behold with dark hair piled high on her head, revealing a long sinuous neck and sparkling ruby earrings which were perfectly matched to the strapless red sheath that only came about a third of the way down her thighs. Her eyes, a deep brown, were highlighted with just the right amount of make-up, and the vast expanses of exposed skin were flawless. Everything about his date was packaged to entice and Lee should have been captivated at the very least by her physical beauty, even if the conversation was less than stimulating. Instead, Lee found his mind and eyes drifting again and again.

While his mind was left to wander aimlessly, his eyes, at least, had a target when they slid away. About four feet below and twenty feet away, beneath the huge projection screen and flying goddess statue, was a bartender that had snagged his attention away from the prime example of feminine beauty at the table with him. The beverage server, one he had not seen here before, was much more Lee's ideal than his dinner partner.

She moved just so. Her narrow hips, which would have lost the loose black chinos she wore if not for the suspenders, swayed enticingly with each step. She moved to and fro among the bottles oblivious to, or perhaps unconcerned by, the attention she garnered -and each time Lee was forced to draw his eyes back to his dinner-mate, he got a chance to see just how much that was. With each reach into the mirrored glass jungle, toned shoulders barely wider than her hips stretched farther out of the white tank she wore, revealing one or the other of a pair of matching tattoos nearly hidden on her blades. Facing the bar, perfectly sculpted eyebrows would lift in question from beneath the bill of a well-worn driver's cap whenever she paused to acknowledge a customer or would drop in

demand upon delivery of an order. And, though she consistently smiled as money was exchanged or when she recognized a regular, those windows to the soul never reflected any true mirth or even happiness.

"Are you even listening to me?"

Lee blinked. "I'm sorry, what was that?" *This is ridiculous.* He absolutely could not keep his attention on the here and now.

The woman before him, he was pretty sure she had said her name was Kelly, gave him a concerned look -or it might have been a concerned look if not for the accompanying pout that said all attention should be on *her*. "Are you feeling alright?"

Lee sighed. "Yeah, I'm okay."

Kelly's very red lips pursed for a moment then settled back into the seductive smile she had been using all night. "Is it your head? I saw on the TV how you saved that little boy and got knocked out when all that stuff fell on you."

Though he hadn't given much thought to the low level ache in his neck and head since early morning, Lee seized on the excuse now. "Yeah, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ruin your evening."

"Oh, no! I'm having a *wonderful* time with you," she cooed.

Lee nodded. "I'm glad." *And, hey, it might even be the truth. It'd sure explain why I can't seem to concentrate tonight.*

He had opened his mouth to add something more when their server arrived, arms laden. "Hi, folks. I hope you brought your appetites." The waiter flashed them a toothy grin which Lee returned in gratitude for the interruption.

"Yes, I think we're ready."

The waiter's eyes flicked between the plates he carried and Lee and his date as if he were judging just how much of the food he was carrying would need to be boxed or thrown away come the end of the evening. Lee suspected that the waiter had been serving meals long enough that the man's assessment was rarely wrong. The waiter said nothing to reveal his thoughts, however. He simply nodded then turned his attention to juggling plates until he had a hand free with which to distribute them.

"Grilled sirloin steak, medium rare," the waiter announced as he set the plate in front of Lee.

Lee caught the face Kelly made when their server announced his dish; it was the same expression she had worn when he placed his order. *Gods, he groaned silently, why can't I have a nice evening with someone who accepts that not everyone has the same tastes or moral interpretation of what's edible? I mean, I backed her up when she insisted her veggies be sautéed in canola rather than butter. And I didn't even roll my eyes.*

Lee glanced at his own dish, his mind mid-rant. "Thanks," he mumbled just to shut up the internal voice.

The waiter flashed Lee another smile then turned to Kelly. "And for you ma'am, the roasted vegetable pesto pasta, no olives and plain toast."

Lee had sliced into the middle of his steak while their server was placing Kelly's plates and was inspecting the meat's center when the waiter asked, "Is that done enough for you?"

Lee closed the inspection site and squeezed a bit of red from the steak with the flat of his fork before looking up. "It looks perfect, thanks."

If the fact that neither her appearance nor her conversation had been enough to capture his attention and the looks of disapproval she gave him regarding his meal choice weren't enough to tell Lee that Kelly wasn't *The One*, the utter disgust he saw on her face when he looked to see if she was happy with her meal sealed it. *Well, she's a real winner, his mind taunted. I guess that's one more person you can eliminate from the pool of potential mates, eh?*

"Is there anything else I can get you two?" the waiter asked cheerfully. "Would you like some Heinz or A-1 for your steak?"

Lee looked up at his server, removing his date completely from his view. He took a slow breath then gave the waiter a small smile. "A-1 would be good."

"And, for you, ma'am? Would you like some fresh parmesan? More Brancott or more water?"

"No cheese, just refill the wine."

"A-1 and chardonnay," the waiter repeated the requests. He gave Lee one last smile before turning away.

Once their server was gone, Lee chanced a glance at his date. Kelly was carefully picking through the vegetables in her pasta. With relief, Lee attacked his own meal, scooping up forkfuls of cheese covered pasta spirals and leaving the meat until the steak sauce arrived.

When Kelly finally spoke again, Lee was in the process of dipping his first slice of steak into the large brown puddle of sauce on his plate. "You know, I think that waiter is gay."

Lee stopped what he was doing and stared at the woman sitting across from him for a moment. She was holding her near empty wine glass as if it might escape if she loosened her grip even slightly. Her eyes were slightly unfocused but seemed to be tracking something just beyond Lee's left shoulder.

Lee opened his mouth to respond but Kelly continued to vocalize her thoughts, oblivious to his reaction. "I can't believe he was flirting with you. Don't those people have any shame?"

Lee blinked in consternation. "Those people?"

Kelly's eyes drifted over until she was looking at Lee. "You know," she jerked her chin briefly to indicate the group of servers gathered near the entrance to the kitchen, and then dropped her voice to a stage whisper and clarified, "perverts."

Lee let his fork drop to his plate with a clank. "*Those people* are human beings just like you and me, Kelly. They're no more or less perverted than any other group of people on this planet."

"B—"

"And you didn't seem to think there was any shame in flirting the other day when you begged for my phone number."

"That was different," Kelly objected.

"No," Lee countered with a growl, "it wasn't."

Kelly sniffed in lieu of a response, drained the last of the wine from her glass and then turned her attention to the vegetables remaining on her plate. Lee glared at her even after she'd dismissed him.

*Oh, yeah*, his mind taunted again. *This one's a real winner.*

Lee sighed silently and picked up his fork. As he lifted the bite of steak, he caught a glimpse of the bartender he had been watching earlier. She had stopped moving and the broadest smile he had seen all night lit up her face. He stuffed his fork in his mouth as his eyes searched the crowd around the bar for the source of such genuine happiness. He couldn't identify the source, but someone down there sure was lucky. He'd love to have a look like that aimed at him.

Lee sighed again, louder this time. *When is that call due?*

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"Hello?"

"Hey, bud."

Lee glanced at his date to see her looking at him questioningly. He wanted to sag with relief on hearing Cass' voice, but with Kelly watching him, he dared not. Instead, he answered with the first line of a script he and Cass had written right after his children's show was first aired. "Speaking."

"I take it that means you need immediate rescue." Cass' voice was jovial as ever and Lee suspected he was in for a long night with or without his date.

"Yes?"

"Okay. Umm... something about you're the primary contact."

"That's right."

"You poor boy. Next line, the incident."

Lee took a second to call up an expression of concern before asking, "What sort of incident? What happened?"

The scripted phone call was Lee's only 'out' when it came to the dates he allowed himself to be talked into. If, by the end of the first hour, he hadn't hit it off with the woman he was with, then, when the call came, all he had to do was say the lines that would establish his end of the conversation and give him an excuse to leave dinner early. If, on the other hand, he had taken a liking to his date, then he had other lines to give Cass which would indicate whether she should call again later.

"You're gonna date someone eventually that doesn't require a break-in, right?" Cass asked in response.

"Shit! Have you contacted the authorities?"

"If they'd do you any good, you know I would."

"Okay. What do you need from me?"

"I need you to be ready to watch the new Adam Sandler movie. You owe me."

"All right," Lee answered, both to her comment and to the script. He owed her a lot. It was just lucky for him that his best friend hadn't been on a date since they started working on the show together. "Have you called Miss Rist yet?"

"I think that's my favorite line," Cass laughed. "So, where are you?"

"Okay, well, I can't use my car, so ask her to swing by Station Square and pick me up when you call her."

"I'll see you there."

"Good. Thanks for the call. Tell them I'll be there as soon as possible."

*Now we see if Kelly bought the performance.* Lee closed his cell phone with a grimace and looked across to his table-mate. He had to suppress the triumphant grin that wanted to bloom at the look of concern that fought the drink to transform her face. *I guess I've still got it.*

Summoning his most regretful tone, Lee spoke, "I'm sorry, Kelly. I have to leave."

"What happened?"

"Something happened at the studio. I need to go take care of it."

"Oh."

Lee pushed his chair back from the table. "I'm really sorry." *Not really.* "Why don't you stay and enjoy some dessert. I'll leave instructions with my driver to wait and take you home whenever you're ready to leave."

"But-"

Lee lifted a hand stave off her objections as he stood. "Don't worry about the bill. It's already taken care of."

He stepped around the table and paused to steel himself for the last act in the scene. After a second, he slid his hand down his tie as he leaned forward and gave his date a quick peck on the corner of her mouth. "I'll call you," he rumbled before pulling away.

After one last nod to his less than perfect date, Lee turned and wove his way toward the entrance as quickly as he could without giving the impression that he was actually fleeing.

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Lee slowed his flight from the Hard Rock as he neared the doorway that lead to the gift shop and the entrance beyond, his eyes scanning the area to his right where the servers gathered between orders. Before he'd come to a complete stop, the waiter that had served his table pushed through the door to the kitchen while deep in discussion with another member of the wait staff. With relief, Lee altered his direction to put him on a collision course with his waiter.

Lee took the final step which would ensure that the server couldn't continue without running him over just as they both reached the far end of the bar. The waiter flashed Lee a broad smile when he saw who was standing before him. "Problems?"

"Uh, yeah," Lee nodded. "Look, I need to leave right away. Can you take care of my table? Give her anything she wants and just put it on my bill?"

The waiter's brow went up at the request, but Lee forged ahead as he pulled his wallet out. "Here, go ahead and swipe this now, and add an extra twenty-five for yourself."

The server's eyes widened at the mention of the tip, but his features quickly returned to their former relaxed expression. "Sure," he answered taking the proffered card. "I'll be right back."

Lee nodded as the man turned and headed for the register station. He let his eyes roam the room as he waited. The bartender that had caught his eye during dinner was at the far end of the bar now near the entrance leaned over the counter with her head close to another patron's. She was stretched enough that Lee could see the entirety of the devil tattoo on her left shoulder blade. He shook his head in amusement at the image, then turned so that he could see the rest of the room. At his table, Kelly had a cell phone plastered to her ear.

*Probably already spinning an exaggerated tale of her evening*, his mind helpfully interpreted. Lee sighed. Before he could get any farther in his mental rant, though, his server returned and interrupted him.

"Uh... Mr. Rorrison?" The waiter held a tray out to Lee. "I just need to get your signature on this."

Lee blinked, then accepted the tray with a smile. "Sure." He hesitated, though, and in an instant the server produced and offered a pen. "Thanks."

"So," the waiter mused conspiratorially as Lee reviewed the charges and ensured the tip had been added correctly. "She didn't work out either, huh?"

Lee froze with his hand poised to make the sweeping slash that was his signature and lifted his eyes to stare hard at the man before him. The widening

of the eyes peering back at him, and the bob of a heretofore hidden Adam's apple, told Lee that his point had been made without him having ever uttered a word. Lee stared for a moment longer and then turned his attention back to the tray in his hand.

"Umm," the waiter tried again as Lee scribbled his name on the receipt. "I, uh..."

Lee tucked the pen between his thumb and the tray, then handed both back to the server who took them rather nervously. "I'm really sorry, Mr. Rorrison. It's just that..." The man gestured helplessly in the general direction of Lee's date. "I mean... everyone knows..."

Lee's brow came up. "Everyone knows? Knows what?"

The waiter blinked, looked away, heaved a sigh, and then finally faced Lee again. "Look, everyone knows that you come here with a date and almost never leave with her. There's always some mysterious emergency that drags you away in the middle of your meal."

*Smooth move, Shithead. And, here you thought you were being so slick.*

Lee looked down and shook his head. After a moment, he lifted his head again, the corner of his mouth twitching as he fought to keep the sheepish grin that was trying to form off his face. "Well," he drawled, "I guess you got me there."

The waiter's grin bloomed as it became obvious that he wasn't going to be dressed down for his earlier comment. It faltered when something behind Lee caught the server's attention but returned almost instantly. "Well, I gotta get going."

"No problem. Thanks for taking care of my table."

"My pleasure."

Lee hesitated. "And for keeping my dining habits private."

"Anytime." The waiter's eyes twinkled. As he began to move around Lee, he leaned in and, dropping his voice, said, "Maybe you just need a real man to show you a good time."

Lee snorted as he watched his server saunter away. A smirk was still on his face when he turned away from the departing waiter and headed for the entrance. The evening, he decided, was starting to look up.

The smirk had transformed into a genuine smile by the time Lee had reached the stained glass doors guarding the café's entrance. With one last glance towards



the bar and its wholly captivating tender, Lee settled a shoulder against the heavy door and pushed. His body moved with the swing of the door into the chill evening air with his eyes following an instant later.

Lee froze.

On the sidewalk to either side of the door was a clump of people huddled together, a not uncommon sight since folks often waited outside until all members of their party arrived before entering the restaurant. What gave Lee pause was the van sitting on the other side of the street with KDKA's station letters emblazoned across the panel. Behind it, another van had its satellite dish fully extended.

"Holy Hel," Lee swore under his breath as he quickly withdrew from the doorway. *Stacey, I'm gonna kill you!*

The nearest refuge was the little gift shop just inside the door and Lee ducked around the archway into it with relief. He waited to the count of sixty and, when none of the reporters stepped through the doorway, let out the breath he'd been holding.

"They must not have seen me," Lee muttered as he reached for his cell phone and hit a speed dial button without looking. *Or you're not who they're here for.* He moved deeper into the gift shop as he lifted the phone to his ear and waited for it to connect.

As soon as the line opened, Lee spoke, "Hey, where're y'at?"

Laughter was the immediate response, then, "My, aren't we impatient this evening."

"Yeah, yeah."

Cass paused a moment before responding. "There's a bunch of flashing lights up ahead, almost on the other side of the bridge. As soon as I can get over I'll be there."

Lee sighed. "Joy."

"Was she really that bad?" Cass inquired.

"You have no idea," Lee growled as he shifted away from the customer who had elbowed him in the kidney, throwing a glare over his shoulder at the woman moving toward the opposite side of the little shop. "And, to top it off, there're at least two news vans sitting out front."

"Oh."

"Yeah. So, that Adam Sandler movie is starting to sound *real* good." Cass laughed at that. When the chuckles died down, Lee continued, "Gimme a call when you get to the square. I'm gonna go out through the patio and meet you at the pedestrian crosswalk. Hopefully, if I'm not seen leaving the Hard Rock, I'll be able to make it to you unmolested."

"Okay, hun. I'll call you in a bit."

"Thanks." Lee closed the phone with a sigh.

"Now what?" he wondered aloud, letting his eyes wander over the tee-shirts on display before him. There was no point leaving the restaurant before Cass got there and he definitely couldn't risk getting caught by his date sitting at the bar to wait. Something blue caught his eye and he turned to see a spread of denim jackets on the back wall of the tiny shop.

"Ooo!" Lee made a beeline for the jackets. Having been a young teen at the height of the denim 80s, he had always wanted to have a denim jacket just like all the other cool kids and cooler rock idols of the time. However, his family's financial situation had conspired with his body to ensure that he would never get into one. Now, though...

Lee reached up and fingered the slightly stiff cotton wistfully. He debated just a moment, then pulled a jacket from its rack and checked the tag. "Hmm."

"Stop!"

Lee froze, his hand poised to plunge into a sleeve. Slowly, he turned his head to the right to see who had yelled at him. There was no one there. Relaxing slightly, he looked to his left where he saw the back of the woman who had elbowed him earlier. Her shoulders were hunched as if she were trying to compress herself into a smaller area with one hand gesturing emphatically while the other pressed a cell phone to her ear so hard that her knuckles stood out white against her fair skin. Lee watched her pace within the confines of the little gift shop for a moment before shrugging and turning his attention back to the wall full of denim.

He carefully eased the jacket on over his dress shirt and grinned. *Oh, yeah.* He flipped the collar up and pulled the cuffs down. He moved over to the thin strip of mirror that hung lengthways on the wall between the hat rack and the glass display of pins and watches. Lee turned this way and that regarding himself in the mirror.

*Definitely, yeah!* He smirked at his reflection. *If only I'd been a size Small back then.*

“Jess...”

Lee glance behind him through the mirror to see the woman on the phone had moved near him again. She looked vaguely familiar but Lee couldn't quite place her. It didn't help that all he'd seen of her was her back – and that hunched over! What he could see of her auburn hair was pulled tightly against her scalp and ended in a neat bun at the base of her skull. The dress she wore, a deep emerald silk number that covered everything from knee to neck, was simply cut to suggest a womanly figure without over emphasizing her curves and reminded Lee of the kind of dress some of the older women at his favorite Chinese restaurant wore.

“Jess...” The woman's voice was louder despite her having moved away from Lee again. “Please stop.”

Transfixed, Lee watched through the mirror as she moved towards him again. He guessed that she was slightly shorter than he was, though not by much. When she reached apogee, he could hear another woman's voice screeching through the connection, but was still too far away to make out what was being said on the other end of the line.

“Jesimae, that's enough!” the woman finally shouted into the phone, halting her pacing with the outburst. “Just stop it.”

Lee just stared. He was sure it wasn't possible for two people in the same little city to have such an unusual name – especially *this* very non-ethnic little city.

“Now, look,” the woman commanded into the phone and Lee turned to do just that. He could see how he'd mistaken the woman's hair for auburn rather than red. For certain, this was Dillon's mother, the woman who had caught his eye at the beginning of the week, the mother of the boy he'd saved from a storm-maddened horse. Lee swallowed but couldn't tear his eyes away from the vision before him.

“Jess, you lost the right to have any say in my activities two years ago. Who I see and where I go is no longer your concern,” the woman ground out as she began pacing again. Lee followed her with his eyes, as interested in her as her conversation. “If it's too much trouble to spend one weekend a month with your son, just say so. I'll come and get him, and on Monday I'll have visitation rights stricken from the agreement.”

Lee blinked when she turned to begin pacing towards him again. *Shit!* He turned back to face the mirror and began pulling the jacket from his shoulders. His ears, though, were still tuned to the conversation going on behind him.

The woman was silent for a moment as he headed back to the denim display. Lee guessed she was listening to whatever Jesimae had to say in response and chanced a glance over his shoulder. She had stopped moving again and was shaking her head.

Lee returned the jacket he'd tried on to its rack and turned around to regard the woman whose image had dominated every idle moment of his past week. The shade of oriental-cut dress she wore combined with the lighting seemed to darken her hair. Despite the feminine attire – or maybe because of it – that aura of no nonsense competence that had originally attracted him was more than evident now that Lee was actually looking at the woman from a somewhat safe distance.

After a moment, the woman sighed and her voice dropped to a more normal level. “Why can’t you understand? Whoever I’m with – whether it’s a guy or a girl – they’re the only person that matters to me. I’m not looking for something else when I’ve got what I want already.”

Lee’s brow came up at that rather unexpected revelation. *Huh.* At that moment, Lee’s cell phone began to ring. With a frown, he reached back to pluck it from his belt.

“Hello?”

“I’m here.” Cass’ cheerful voice broke the spell the woman’s frustrated words had begun to weave around him.

“Finally!” Lee breathed. He glanced towards the entrance to the gift shop where Dillon’s mother was once again pacing. “Uh...” There was a small display stand separating them and taking up most of the floor space.

“What’s the matter?”

“Uh, nothing.” *How’m I gonna get out of here without her seeing me?* “Are you at the east parking lot?”

“Yup. I’m right where the walkway let’s out.”

“Okay.” Lee started walking, hoping he would be able to time his departure so that Dillon’s mother wouldn’t see him until he’d left the shop, if at all. “I’ll be there in about five minutes. I just gotta get through the restaurant without her seeing me.”

“I’ll be here.”

“You’re the – oh shit!” Either Lee’s timing was off, or the woman had changed directions mid-pace. Either way, the end result was the same: there was nowhere for Lee to dodge when she reached his end of the display stand and she walked right into him.

“Excuse m– oh gosh! Mr. Rorrison!”

*Gosh? Does anyone really still say that?*

“Lee? Are you okay?”

Lee looked down at the cell phone that he’d pulled from his ear when he’d tried to prevent the woman from running into him. Now he lifted it back to his ear as an excuse to avoid eye contact with the woman before him. He held a finger up to her, though, since it was obvious she expected some sort of response from him and he didn’t want her to think that he was ignoring her now that she knew he was there.

“Yeah. I’m here. I’m okay. One of the parents of a boy from our show just ran into me. I’ll be there in a couple of minutes.”

“Okay. See you soon.”

Apparently Dillon’s mom had taken the opportunity he had left by turning his attention to his phone to also attend to her conversation because, when he finally lifted his eyes to look at her, she once again had the phone pressed to her ear with her head bowed. She had shifted her position slightly, leaving him room to edge around her and he took advantage of the opening, carefully inching his way around her without touching. Lee was almost past her when she looked up at him and their eyes met.

For a long instant neither moved nor spoke. It seemed to Lee as if, without his knowing it, he’d placed a foot on a very slippery slope and was suddenly in danger of sliding out of control. He could actually feel his heartbeat pick up in reaction to the danger he sensed. A loud squawk from the woman’s cell phone finally broke the tableau and Lee was able to blink away at the same time that she dropped her gaze.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Lee mumbled as he finished inching past the distracted woman.

He’d taken a step towards the restaurant entrance when he felt a hand on his arm. He paused and glanced down at the hand, following the arm up until he

was again looking into the woman's deep green eyes. She drew in a breath to speak then frowned and dragged her eyes to the right where the cell was once again emitting indignant squawks. She gave him a helpless shrug, tilting her head towards the offending phone.

Lee flashed her a smile, hoping he didn't look as nervous as he was, at that moment, feeling. He reached into his pocket and withdrew his wallet. From it he pulled one of the business cards he always had handy and extended it to her. He tapped the surface of the card with a finger making the universal gesture for a phone call with the other hand.

The woman nodded and took the card, giving Lee a smile in return. With a nod, Lee turned and left. After that, escaping the café was simple.