

Two

Why did she have to fit so perfectly in his strong arms? One might assume their height difference, him over six feet, her just barely over five would make it difficult. It did not. Claire found it impossible to hold herself stiff in Jeremy's warm embrace.

They moved gracefully around the dance floor, a live jazz band playing in the background. Other couples moved around them, but she did not even notice them. She felt so safe and comfortable with this tall man for some bizarre reason.

'Don't get too relaxed. Remember what happened in the past. Keep your distance,' she reminded herself.

Yet, Claire found herself nudging closer to his chest, inhaling his scent and sighing. "You are going to run out of girlfriends to palm off on my dates if you insist on following me around. I told you I intended to start going out with other men. Eventually, you will get bored and run the other way. Save us some time, and do it now before either of us gets too involved."

The stylish bun in her hair had been destroyed earlier when he pulled it down. Now he parted the long curls that hid her neck, he started nibbling on a sensitive spot. Jeremy tightened his hold. "Too late," he whispered in her ear. "I'm already too involved."

"And if I keep going on dates with other men?" she challenged, biting back a moan. "Are you just going to smile and wait for me to change my mind?"

"If you want a repeat of tonight's events, I guess so."

"You would let me set up dates with strange men?"

His hands ran through her red hair. Usually she hated when guys tugged on her hair. The long strands made her scalp tender. Instead of hurting, his smoothing actions had her relaxing even more. Jeremy was always telling her how much he loved her long, silky hair. He made her promise never to cut it.

His easy agreement to let her go on more dates was too simple to accept at face value. He was up to something, she knew. Jeremy never gave up without a good reason. "What is the catch?"

"First of all, you have to promise you will meet these 'dates' in a public place like you did tonight."

"So you can hunt us down?"

"Oh, I will track you down no matter what, but that's not why. There is safety in numbers, as I am sure you knew when you set up tonight's date at Katrina's Aftermath. Jenny was able to watch out for you until I got there."

"I didn't know you would be showing up." She tried to concentrate, but now he was kneading her slender shoulders.

"No matter how hard you try to push me away, I will always be there, Red. It may take me some time to find you, but I always will."

The song ended, and he grabbed her hand to lead her back to their table. He held out her chair for her to sit, then sat beside her, ignoring how crowded they were in the tiny space. Jeremy studied the hard-headed woman for a moment. She was shorter than the women he used to date in the past and way too sassy. Claire had an impulsive side that drove him crazy. She was always flitting from one disaster to another.

Her fragile features and wide eyes appealed to the protective side of men. They assumed she would be quiet and compliant, happy to let the right man lead her. What a mistake! Claire

could not stand to be contained. She needed freedom and just enough control to learn from her own mistakes. A man would have to accept that if he hoped to win her heart and trust.

Lucky for her, he understood it perfectly. She could pretend to have all the power she longed for, so long as she let him step in when things got out of control. She was stubborn, not stupid. Once he extracted her from a bit of trouble she managed to get involved in, Claire found a way to avoid it in the future.

Of course, if she did manage to need aid learning from her mistakes, he would be up to the challenge of helping her see reason. Claire would not approve of the method he planned to use in those instances. So far, she had managed to avoid him having to take those measures, but he had little doubt a lesson was coming sooner rather than later.

They met at his brother's wedding. Everett was the subject of some viral videos a few months back. His then girlfriend, Angela, had dumped Everett so she could pursue the older Schnaydre. Embarrassed because the videos caused him lots of trouble, his brother set out to find the people responsible. His now wife was one of the culprits. Claire and her best friend Jennifer were the other responsible parties.

Mary Elizabeth caught his brother's eye, and theirs was a perfect match. Jeremy was pleased his younger brother, Everett, had not set eyes on Claire first. The two women looked a lot alike, but their personalities were as different as winter and summer. Angela never even made a ping on his radar. It was easy to turn her way. It was lucky Everett fell for logical, proper Mary Elizabeth because Jeremy probably would have had to fight him if he fell for Claire instead.

His little redhead was the breathtaking maid of honor at Everett and Mary Elizabeth's wedding. Standing up for his brother, Jeremy took one look at Claire and was lost. That was all it took for him to fall for her. A daring Claire was wearing a strapless emerald dress with lace atop chiffon. It had a plunging neckline, ensuring every available male would notice her.

The oldest Schnaydre had quickly concluded he was the best man for her. The more he got to know her, the more convinced of that fact he became. When she smiled, the world brightened. She was smart, funny and sassy. What was there not to love?

"How did you know where to find me tonight?"

"I have my sources," he smiled at her, his hazel eyes teasing her. No need to tell her the owner of Katrina's Aftermath, his good friend called him, he decided. "Did you use the wine signal tonight? Your cousin, Mary Elizabeth promised you would never go on a blind date without setting up some safety net if the guy turned out to be a nut."

"I wondered how you knew that?" she smiled, a bit pleased he put in the effort to find out where she would be and what safety precautions she planned. "Let me get this straight, because I do not want any misunderstandings later on. So long as I meet men in public, a safety escape in place, I can go out with other guys? You won't get all macho on me?"

He nodded. "I am not promising not to crash your dates and use whatever means I find necessary to end it, but yes, you are safe if it is in a public setting."

The urge to challenge him was too hard to pass up. Reaching over to whisper in his ear, she teased him, "I already have a date for tomorrow night."

Jeremy groaned. Damn! So much for small victories. "Where at?"

"Check with your sources." She laughed, knowing they would not be able to help him out this time. Claire knew this for a fact because she did not really have a date for tomorrow. How could his sources help him figure out her plans when she did not even have any?

After their date, Claire and Jeremy returned to where she had left her car earlier. Katrina's Aftermath was an upscale restaurant owned by two former college buddies. They opened for

business shortly after the disastrous hurricane by that name tore through the Big Easy. The restaurant became a symbol of the endurance of the people in this region. They had fought the odds to rebuild their city when others predicted the death of the area.

Parking beside her car, he reached over to pull her to him. The electric seat of his truck slid back, and soon she was sitting on his lap. The evidence of his attraction to her was digging into her thigh. He kissed her slowly, enjoying her passionate response.

This was one part of their relationship Claire did not question. They were physically drawn to one another from the start. If he pushed things, Jeremy knew he could have her in his bed before the night was over. But she would claim it was lust, not love that got her there. Until she was ready to admit she felt as strongly for him as he did for her, he held himself back. One day she would trust him, he promised himself. Until then, he would make sure she went to sleep just as sexually frustrated as he.

Those long fingers were undoing the buttons of her dress before Claire could protest about the public setting. His warm breath had her nipples hardening before his lips even lowered to taste them. She arched her back, allowing him better access. "One day, soon, I am going to rub every inch of this perfect body in honey. Then I will start at the top and work my way down, licking off every speck."

The mental image he painted had Claire soaking her panties. His fingers eased up between her legs, and he marveled at how wet and welcoming she was for him. Right then and there, he almost lost his resolve to hold off. If he was not careful, he could easily lose control. After a few more minutes of sweet torment, he righted her clothes and forced her to break the kiss.

"Time to go home, Red. You need to get ready for your big date tomorrow night, and I need to get in touch with my sources. Admit it. You are secretly hoping my sources help me find you tomorrow. Do you really want to continue this game of cat and mouse with me?" She purred in his ear, accepting his challenge.

At first, her mind clouded with passion, Claire was baffled by his comment about her big date night. Then she remembered her lie about going out tomorrow. 'Pull yourself together,' she thought and managed to reclaim her seat somehow. Exiting the truck, he walked around to help her down. Her small stature made it challenging to exit without his help.

Pulling her out, he held her suspended a few inches off the pavement for a moment. Another sensual kiss robbed her of coherent speech. Slowly he eased her down his body until her feet touched the pavement, his erection sending tingles up her body every place it brushed against.

"No speeding, Red." He ordered, slapping her fanny before allowing himself to let her go. She looked up at him to give him a challenging glare. He laughed back at her, unfazed by the threat there. Behind him, the truck caught her attention. Even his company's logo mocked her. It showed a picture of his handsome face with the slogan, 'Call me when you want to talk dirty'. She hated the thought of other women reading that promise and calling him up.

"My sources tell me you have a heavy foot when you're behind the wheel, Red. Do not let me catch you driving too fast. I would hate to bust that sexy ass of yours."

"You can forget that," she ordered him. "I am not into those kinky things."

"You will be before I'm finished with you," he promised. "But trust me, spanking that beautiful bottom for speeding would not be for sexual gratification. Well, not yours anyway. Those types of spankings are for good little girls. I am talking about giving you your first naughty girl paddling if I find out you ever drive dangerously."

How she longed to speed up as he followed her to her exit, but she dared not provoke Jeremy tonight. Every time her foot started to push down on the accelerator, her butt clenched

uncomfortably. She automatically backed off. Sane, logical men did not threaten to spank women. But who said Jeremy Schnaydre was either sane or logical? She wished he would just get tired of her already and run away.

A few times in the past, back when she was naive and stupid, Claire allowed herself to believe men who promised they loved her and would always be there for her. She was even engaged twice, having actually purchased a wedding dress the last time.

Men always left, though. She had some freakish knack for chasing men away. Jeremy would abandon her one day, too. Only this time she would not be taken by surprise. This time she knew what to expect. No one was ever going to break her heart again. She would be the one doing the breaking.