

From CHAPTER ONE

The warm, muggy night closed around him, leaving his shirt damp in places. Sweat prickled the back of his neck. Inside Freddie's he'd find air-conditioning, but he'd never again take fresh air for granted. He valued every single breath of humid air that filled his lungs.

The moon climbed the black sky as time slipped by. How much time, he didn't know: he'd stopped keeping track the second he saw her.

Headlights from the occasional passing car came near him but didn't intrude on the shadows where he stood.

Transfixed by *her*.

Damn, he wanted that mouth.

In the short time he'd locked eyes on her, a dozen fantasies had formed—most of them based on her naked lips, the way she occasionally pursed them, how she twisted her lips to the side in frustration, even how she blew out a breath. The whole package was nice...but it was her mouth that kept him unmoving, staring. Imagining.

Slight of build, she served as a bright spot in the dark gloom. Understated and yet something struck him as undeniably sexy.

Once he'd noticed her, he couldn't look away.

After speaking softly into a phone, she bit her plump bottom lip, and her expression showed frustrated defeat.

The lady had made several consecutive calls. Was she in need of assistance? Given the way she'd circled a car, occasionally glaring at it, he thought she did. Judging by her frown, there wouldn't be any help on the way.

Since getting out of prison a year ago, Mitch had spent an excess of time with women. Hell, next to fresh air, freedom and steak, sex topped his list. He'd immersed himself in human contact, the gentleness, the carnality.

He'd taken satisfaction in pleasing someone else while abating a base need. Hell, watching a woman come gave him as much pleasure as his own release.

So he'd gotten his fill and then some—all while making plans to change the course of his life. To make it better. To carve out a meaningful future.

Here he was, where he needed to be, determined, resolute... and sidetracked by a gorgeous woman.

That in itself left him edgy with curiosity. No other woman had snagged his attention this way. He knew zip about her, and yet seeing her had heat building beneath his skin.

He tried to look away, but his attention kept zeroing back.

Freaking bizarre.

It was like seeing something you hadn't known you wanted, but immediately recognizing it as necessary.

Even dressed in jeans, a T-shirt and flip-flops, he knew the lady had nothing in common with him. Innocence all but screamed from her slender body and reserved manner. To someone with his jaded background, that put her in the "do not touch" category.

His fingers curled and his palms burned. Yeah, he wanted to touch her despite that.

And he didn't look away.

From the shadowed corner just outside the bar, he watched her thumb dial another number into her phone. While holding the phone to her ear, she paced. The overhead glow of the security light touched her in select places, alternately highlighting and then shadowing her understated curves.

High cheekbones framed a slender, straight nose. She tucked a few drifting curls behind a small ear. Though rounded, he saw the mulish determination in her stubborn little chin.

And that mouth...thoughts of it under *his* mouth—and on his body—tightened his jaw until his molars ached.

For the first time in years, he wondered if he could put off his agenda for a bit, say something to her, see if there was something between them despite the seemingly obvious roadblocks.

Opposites attract, and all that.

He'd made this trip a center point for a new future.

In this Podunk town he'd subtly uncovered what he could about Brodie and Jack Crews. That was the priority after all. Moving forward, leaving the past behind. It started with the Crews brothers. Hitting the bar tonight might have gained him more insight into them.

But would a slight detour—the type with long curly brown hair and a sweet little body—matter so much?

If he listened to his dick, the answer was no. His balls were giving a resounding "go for it" as well.

His head though... Hell, his head claimed he could afford a delay. In the grand scheme of things, it wouldn't matter.

Since arriving in town, he'd discovered that the men were well liked, each of them married, and they had an odd but interesting business called Mustang Transport. Locals claimed they dealt with mundane shit as well as serial killers and psychopaths. Somewhere in the middle, the truth lurked.

He'd also heard about their mother. He'd been hearing about her for as long as he could remember. For very different reasons she interested him almost as much as Brodie and Jack.

He had no connection to Rosalyn Crews, but meeting the men felt important in a way nothing else ever had. He couldn't explain it, even to himself. He'd gone through life making damn sure he needed no one, and that he wanted only for things he could get for himself.

Now, much as it chapped his ass, he wanted something else— and it depended on Brodie and Jack Crews.

It didn't have to happen right away, though. He wouldn't mind burning off some energy before making that initial contact—especially if he could convince *this* woman to give him a few hours of her time.

He noted every small movement as she spoke into her phone. He couldn't catch every word, but the low murmur of her voice stroked over him. He was pretty sure she left a message.

Suddenly she held the phone back and stared at it. Hot annoyance tightened her mouth and brought down her brows.

“Perfect. Just freaking perfect.”

He heard that loud and clear.

Jamming the phone into a back pocket—a tight fit over that sweetly rounded backside—she dropped her head with a throaty groan that traveled along his spine like a sensual stroke. Her eyes closed, her mouth flattened, and the damp night drew her long, light brown hair into coiling curls.

He'd love to tangle his fingers in her unruly hair.

As if spurred by her innate energy, the curls moved, bouncing a little, drifting with the breeze. Judging people had kept him alive. With this woman, he sensed she didn't indulge in downtime very often. Even standing still, she seemed to...spark with energy.

Curiosity cut into him, mingling with the carnal interest.

Had she been stood up? Walked out on a date?

Just then she growled, “Dead. Stupid phone.” The thump of her hand to a metal lamppost sent a dull clang ringing over the area. “Now what?”

Ah, well that answered his question.

White teeth nibbled her bottom lip in consideration. Considering, she glanced at the bar, shook her head once, and returned to pacing.

Clouds covered the moon, amplifying the darkness. She was far too petite to be stranded alone.

Doesn't mean she wants a quick fuck, he argued with himself.

The young woman stewing in front of him might be more likely to sell brownies at a local bake sale, but engage in a hot one-night stand? Probably not.

Sure, she was standing outside a rowdy bar all alone on a late night—but then, so was he.

So what should he do? Be smart and turn away, or see if she needed help? He remained undecided when two men exited the bar with a lot of noisy fanfare.

Drunken asses.

The woman glanced up, then quickly away with a roll of her eyes—but not quickly enough to avoid notice.

“Charlotte, hey! Whatsup?” With a leer, a mop-headed man added, “You waitin’ for me, sugar?”

Mitch caught the way his unshaven bud snickered, proving the irony in the question.

“Definitely not,” she replied, her tone crisp and clear.

Mitch liked the sound of her voice. Not all girly or too sweet, but firm and no-nonsense.

He did *not* like how the two dunces eyeballed her anyway, stumbling in her direction despite her preferences.

“Ah, c’mon now, don’t be like that,” the talkative one said.

His idiot friend guffawed, stumbled and heckled some more.

Charlotte—*nice name*—propped her hands on slim hips and issued a dire warning. “You’d be smart to keep walking, Bernie.”

“How come you’re here alone?” He tried a teasing voice that Mitch suspected did the opposite of entice. “You know where to find me this time of night.”

“Drunk, as usual. Yes, I know.” Annoyance squared her narrow shoulders. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I finished a late delivery and was heading home, then had car trouble.”

She added with menace, “Help is on the way.”

“I’ll keep ya company until then.”

“No, you will not.”

“But I’m already here.” Intent brought Bernie closer.

She didn’t exactly look afraid, but more like fed up. Before Mitch gave it enough thought, his feet carried him out of the shadows and immediately drew her attention.

Soft blue. Now that he saw her eyes more clearly, he found them every bit as compelling as her mouth.

Alert, maybe a little wary, she zeroed in on him. Her lips parted and she blinked twice.

You’re sealing your fate, sugar. He tried a smile of part interest, part reassurance.

Her gaze went beyond him, searching the darkness, and then snapped back again. “Where did you come from?”

With his attention only on her, Mitch held up his hands and avoided a direct answer. “Just seeing if you need any help.”

Emboldened by liquid courage, the two men blustered at him. “G’lost, asshole. She don’t need nothin’ from you.”

As if Bernie and his bad grammar didn't hover there beside her, Charlotte asked, "You're new around here?"

Mitch gave her a long look. What, did she know everyone in Red Oak, Ohio? Probably. He could jog the main street, one end to the other, without breaking a sweat. "I've been here a few days." Whether he was passing through, or sticking around, wasn't her business. Besides, for now, he wasn't sure.

Brazen stupidity urged Bernie to step up in front of him. "You ain't listening. I told you to—"

Disgust curved Mitch's mouth into a mean smile meant to intimidate. "You're right. I'm not listening to you." Insulting disregard took his gaze over the smaller man before he dismissed him. "I'm talking only to her."

By size difference alone, it was beyond ludicrous for Bernie to issue a challenge.

And yet, he did. "Are you fuckin' stupid?"

Charlotte's voice, now edged with anger, interrupted anything Mitch might have replied or done. "You've been warned, Bernie. If you don't knock it off right now, you are *not* going to like the consequences."

Still, the fool didn't listen. "I said," Bernie blasted, his breath putrid, "for you to *get lost*." A scrawny fist, aiming for Mitch's face, swatted through the air.

Bad move, asshole.

Instincts could be a son of a bitch. Mitch leaned away from the weak hit...and at the same time automatically jabbed with his right.

His fist landed right on Bernie's chin.

Eyes rolling back, the smaller man started to drop.

Infuriated that he'd lost his grip in front of Charlotte, Mitch caught the front of Bernie's shirt and held him on his tiptoes. "You," he whispered between barely moving lips, "need to learn when to quit." Familiar anger surfaced despite his efforts to tamp it down...

And a small, cool hand touched him.

Struck clean down to his toes, Mitch peered first at those pale, tapered fingers with short, neat nails resting lightly against the roped muscles of his sun-darkened forearm.

Fucking sexy, that's what it was, highlighting all their differences, especially those of strength and capability.

Her face drew him next, the delicate lines, smooth skin...that mouth and those eyes.

That wild hair.

“I think,” she said softly, a smile teasing her mouth, “if you let Bernie go now, he’ll make a hasty retreat.” Slanting those mesmerizing eyes toward old Bernie, she added with silky menace, “At least, he better.”

Keen awareness nudged out anger.

Everything about her appealed to him.

She stood to his left, and the heady scent of her skin and hair—like baby powder and flowers—teased his nose.

He drew a deeper, fuller breath, filling his lungs with her and knew he could happily drown on that scent.

Slowly, wanting to keep her close, Mitch unclenched his fingers and allowed Bernie to stumble back to where his buddy helped to prop him up.

Unconcerned with that, Charlotte’s fingers shifted in the lightest of explorations before she snatched her hand away.

Interesting—especially that splash of color on her cheeks.

She looked up at him, gave a wan smile, and whispered, “Thank you.”

“For popping him?”

Curls bounced as she gave a quick shake of her head. “For not doing him more damage.” She wrinkled her nose, leaning closer to confide, “You could have, I know.”

Huh. No recriminations?

She actually *thanked* him?

Not what he was used to, but he’d take it.