

## Chapter 1

She'd been cursed at, spit on, beaten up, run down, and shot at. And still Jordan Delany found each of those events considerably less repulsive than the grimy hand planted on her butt. She squelched the fantasy of putting a bullet hole in the center of the drunken cowboy's unibrow and reminded herself to play nice.

"Lewis, you better leave one hell of a tip since your hand has spent more time on my ass than my underwear has." Okay, so maybe playing nice wasn't her strong suit, but she hadn't permanently rendered his right hand useless either, so all in all, she decided she'd used admirable restraint.

Slinging beer at Buck's Nightclub wasn't exactly Jordan's idea of a good time, but the intel her team had gathered led straight to Titus—middle of nowhere—Missouri. As a detective with St. Louis's Interagency Drug Enforcement Task Force, she'd worked on several undercover operations. This was the first one that had taken her so far out of city limits.

About an hour and a half from St. Louis, the rural, backwoods town promised more trouble than any place she'd ever worked. And that was saying something, considering she'd been undercover in some fairly disturbing paces, including a meth lab and a crack house. Even the crack junkies hadn't assumed it was fine to stroke her backside whenever the mood struck.

"Come on doll-face, let Lewis take you some place private. I'll teach you what our favorite pastime is here in Titus."

*Not in this lifetime or any other, slick.*

She forced a smile and politely served him his beer. Her undercover experience combined with ten years of narcotics and vice work made her hands down the best candidate for this job, but damn, just once couldn't the job take her to a five-star hotel?

Rolling her head from side to side, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. There was no one to blame but herself. She'd argued, begged, and pleaded with Special Agent Bahan to let her continue with the task force. After all that had happened, she'd have come with or without his blessing.

She swallowed, blinked her eyes to beat down the burn that lanced through her at the most inopportune moments.

A dirty, callused hand snaked out and grabbed her arm. "Seriously," Lewis said with a drunken slur, "I'd like to take you out sometime."

*Seriously, I'd like to cut off your groping hands and superglue your dick to your ass crack.*

"Sorry, we're not allowed to date the customers. Buck's rules." Of course touching was against Buck's rules too, but that hadn't put a damper on the number of times her butt had been pinched and palmed. Being stroked by unfamiliar jerks in various states of drunkenness made her teeth itch. She'd pummeled men for less.

But not tonight. Not on this case.

In fact, she'd let the old school sexist thing work in her favor. She'd bet money that Arlo Buck didn't expect a tall lanky female with a navel piercing and wild blond hair to be his undoing. A decent ass and pearly pink lip-gloss had opened more than one door to the underworld.

Arlo "Big Daddy" Buck ran a questionable entertainment establishment—strip club—with his son, Warren, on the outskirts of Titus.

The place oozed impurities like an infected boil badly in need of lancing. Illegal prostitution, gambling, and underage drinking were more prevalent than the common cold.

"Kudos to the cocktail waitresses of the world," she mumbled, stalking through the crowd and thinking that undercover narcotics work had nothing on slinging beer for drunk, horny

men. She gave her order to the bartender, then turned to study the customers while she waited.

She hadn't worked at the nightclub long, but already she'd compiled a mental list of suspicious people who piqued her interest. Like the man who arrived daily with a duffle, drank a beer, and disappeared into Buck's office. Also the dancer with red eyes and blackened teeth who spent a hell of a lot more time in the VIP rooms than she did on the stage. And most interestingly, Buck's son, who liked his whiskey straight up and often. Yes, she'd seen more than enough to know Buck's was a hotbed of illegal activity.

So, on a chilly November night in Titus, she served drinks, made nice with the customers, and decided that the lingering exhaustion from back-to-back cases was the reason for the red-hot irritation prickling up her spine. Of course, it could've also been caused by Lewis's hand stroking across her backside. Again.

*It's just a hand. Don't let it get to you. Serve drinks. Stay calm.*

Might as well be back in the Stone Age, where women were nothing more than objects, just playthings for male pleasure. To top off her frustration, the information she'd gathered so far was nowhere near good enough to spring her from the little backwoods town. Still, there were a few hardcore truths that were hard to miss.

First, most of the women who stripped in Buck's did so more out of desperation than choice.

Second, customers packed in like sardines, which gave every male in the place an excuse to grope the waitresses as they passed by.

And last, she believed the intel on Buck's Nightclub was spot-on. Arlo and Warren Buck were very likely major distributors of the ultra-pure and deadly form of heroin known as China White.

It wasn't the only drug being pushed, but apparently it was the fashionable drug of choice among the younger generation. Not only in Titus, but in St. Louis and all across the Midwest.

That knowledge made all the greedy, sex-seeking hands a small price to pay.

She wanted Arlo and Warren Buck behind bars. Even more, she wanted Buck's supplier. But most of all, she wanted the son of a bitch who ordered the kill on two deep-cover cops from her team.

So she'd deal with the drunks, the hands, and the come-ons. Because at the end of the day she'd not only bring the Bucks down, but she'd enjoy every last minute of watching them crash and burn. If she saved just one person from the gruesome nightmare she'd lived through as a result of drugs, it would damned well be worth it.

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Tonight was going to be interesting. Tyler McGee knew it the second he stepped into Buck's Nightclub and inhaled the scents of fresh sex and stale beer. He was in a lousy place, with lousy people, and about to grovel for a lousy job he didn't want. Yeah, interesting was about the best way to sum it up.

The half-dressed women were as plentiful as the bottles of beer. Between eight and ten o'clock, it was two-for-one ladies night at Buck's. The music blared loud enough to take your head off and the smoke hung still and dense.

A huge T-shaped stage filled the center of the enormous barn-like building. Flashing stage lights and dozens of small circular tables surrounded the dancers while they stripped. Four VIP rooms were partitioned off behind the stage for private dances.

Go figure, Ty mused. Arlo Buck must've been a lot smarter than he looked. Because he looked like a huge overgrown linebacker who'd had his big, meaty head pounded one too many times. His double chin and thick, round neck topped a six-three, four-hundred-pound body, and his sausage-like fingers usually held a soggy, foul cigar.

But as ugly, round, and mean as Buck was rumored to be, everyone in Titus County hung at his nightclub. Ty's jaw clenched just thinking about the son of a bitch's luck.

Unbelievable. Only a bastard like Buck could turn a dirty, rundown barn into the hottest nightclub since the Playboy Mansion. Certainly just as many scantily clad women, most looking significantly older and less optimistic than Heffner's girls.

He glanced over at Big Daddy, wondering if he could muster enough tolerance of this hellhole to ask for a job. Nerves made his hands sweaty. He smoothed them down his thighs, and his thumb snagged on the ring in his pocket. A ring that would never be worn. His gut tightened against the memories and reminded him exactly where the tolerance would come from.

"Here goes nothing." He headed across the room to Buck.

"Good evening, lucky ladies and gents." The boom of the microphone rattled beer bottles and vibrated off the walls. Peripheral lights faded dark, but the stage flashed bright as the mic boomed again. "Welcome to Lucky Ladies Tuesday, where the drinks are cheap and the women are cheaper. Only kidding, ladies. Now put your hands together for the lovely Fionaaaa."

Ty dropped down in a barstool at the edge of the stage. Irritating Buck while a naked woman danced in front of him might not be the way to go. Not when Ty was determined to be gainfully employed by Big Daddy before the night was over.

"Damn it." An irritated female voice shrieked over the vibration of the speakers.

Glass exploded behind him, and Ty whipped around. There she was.

Slender. Sexy. Stunning.

Different. Different from anyone he expected to see in Buck's.

She tossed long blond hair over her shoulder but when she bent to pick up the pieces of broken glass, the thick, wavy mane tumbled in front of her again. An impulse to hold the silky strands out of the way almost had him sliding off his stool.

Laughter and applause broke out around her. A quick, sizzling ache enveloped his chest. Probably a sharp pulse of sympathy for the harassment she was enduring.

After plucking the large shards of glass off the floor, she stood. His eyes locked on long,

slim legs that trailed up to a strip of denim entirely too small to be considered shorts. Above the denim waistband, a tiny, shimmering rhinestone gleamed in her belly button. His eyes continued the journey up to her breasts. Generous, rounded, spectacular breasts.

“Wrong set of eyes, cowboy. I’m up here.” Her brow molded into a scolding arch, irritation plain on her pretty face.

His pride was hurt. He wasn’t a typical male who goggled at women and talked to their chests. Not usually. But, okay, this one caught him by surprise. Embarrassed that he’d gawked like a teenager, he tried to redeem himself. “I’m sorry. I was noticing . . . your rhinestone.”

“Uh-huh.” She snorted. “That’s the first time I’ve heard them called that.”

Busted. He concentrated on keeping his eyes more respectfully on her face, although it was just as intriguing as her body.

She looked him over with attitude and piercing, green eyes.

Her wild, wavy hair ended precisely where the bikini top started. Not that he looked. He damned well wasn’t going to shift his eyes to look, not if it killed him. Thankfully, though, he had excellent peripheral vision. Even without so much as a southward blink, he was well aware of the two miniscule triangles of shiny gold material and string barely covering her chest. If she was that good looking and working as a waitress in Buck’s, she must not be the sharpest pencil in the box.

Leaning in to be heard over the music, she asked, “What can I get you, cowboy?”

Her clean, flowery scent overpowered the club’s stench of sweat and smoke. His body tensed like an over-tightened guitar string. He swallowed hard. “Do I look like a cowboy?”

She cocked the brow again, probably wondering if he needed alcohol to further diminish his brain function.

“It wasn’t an attempt at career counseling.” Her voice strained over the beat of the bass. “Just trying to be nice.”

“Come on, baby, it’s a freaking desert in here,” a drunk at another table hollered. “How long is it gonna take for your tight little buns to bring me a beer?”

“Keep your pants on, Lewis,” she growled back. “Listen, the natives are restless and the show’s up there”—she pointed to the stage—“not here”—she jerked a thumb back toward her chest. “Can I get you anything or not?”

“A real smile and a beer too much to ask?”

Apparently he finally charmed her because her full lips tilted toward a genuine smile, until some guy squeezed behind her and slid obscenely against her bottom.

An irritated scowl replaced any hint of a smile. She whipped around to face the guy.

“I was only trying to get by, sweetheart. It’s crowded in here.”

She turned back and rolled her eyes. “I can get you the beer . . . ”

The music ended abruptly. Ty’s eardrums vibrated in the absence of the thundering bass.

“ . . . but the smile’s gonna be harder to come by.” She lowered her voice to a normal decibel. “House draft okay?”

He nodded and grinned, watched her walk away. It was barely a conversation, only a couple of sentences to judge by, but she didn’t seem like the brainless beauty he’d pegged her for.

Her narrow hips swayed away from him and toward the bar, but her head snapped toward a scuffle a few feet away. Ty watched her zero in on a couple of college-aged guys giving Dave, one of the regulars, a hard time. She tossed her tray onto a table and stalked toward the commotion.

Dave wasn’t your typical, everyday regular. Dave wasn’t your typical, everyday anything. Dave was special. There were a million bad things about living in a small town, but the way people pitched in and took care of one of their own was definitely one of the pluses.

Dave had special needs. He hadn’t finished school and couldn’t read, but he worked hard

bussing tables and doing dishes at the local diner. Thirty-four years old, he still lived with his mom, talked with a fairly severe speech impediment, and couldn't drive.

Ironically, he always had a ride; some local usually took him anywhere he needed to go. Ty couldn't have counted the number of times he'd hauled Dave around. Usually it was home, to the diner, or to Buck's. He had an affection for beer and "boobies" as he would often yell out when the girls were on stage.

"That's a lot of cash for a halfwit." College Guy continued to give Dave trouble. "How 'bout we take some of it off your hands for you." He tossed Dave's wallet to a buddy.

The second jerk laughed and fingered through the wallet. "Look at this—Mr. Big Bucks. We could take your money and invest it for you."

Ty moved, with the intention of taking care of the idiots bothering Dave, but the sexy cocktail waitress beat him to the punch. He slid into a chair and waited, figuring it was only a matter of time before she needed help.

"You better invest in a bulletproof vest and bodyguard if any of these locals hear about you taking anything from Dave," she suggested with an icy stare. "Give me the wallet and get the hell out. Don't come back until you've figured out how to impersonate a human."

The college kid puffed up his chest. "Blondie, you don't have nearly enough muscle to back up your big mouth. You need to poke your scrawny ass into someone else's business."

"You think so?" She stepped closer until they were nose to nose.

Ty wasn't sure whose jaw dropped more, his or the guy's she backed up a step.

"You see Tiny and Tim over there leaning against the doors?" she asked.

Ty glanced in the direction she nodded. He smiled, doubting very seriously whether their names were actually Tiny and Tim, but he appreciated the joke. There was at least eight hundred pounds of flesh between the two hulking bouncers.

"When I turn on the water works and tell 'em you grabbed me in the bathroom hallway

and had your hands all over me, they'll tear you apart just for the sport of it. I doubt a reattached dick ever functions the way it did the first time around."

Ty eased to a stand. He didn't know if the punk was stupid enough to touch her, but given the way she mouthed off, he needed to be ready for anything.

She fished a crumpled tissue out of a skintight pocket, started the fake sobbing, and turned toward the bouncers.

"Screw this," the punk called after her. "We're out of here. And don't worry, we won't be back to your skanky, redneck bar."

Ty studied her with intrigue and awe. He wasn't sure if he wanted to high-five her or take her out back and shake some sense into her. Damn. Was she always like this? No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than she turned to Dave, rolled up a menu, and gently bopped him on top of his head.

"What did I tell you the other night about waving your wallet around?" she said. "Not everybody in here knows you or cares about you. You want someone to take your money? Or worse yet, hurt you and *then* take your money?"

"No," Dave answered, looking down and refusing to meet her eyes.

Her full lips curved into a frown that looked a lot like guilt. She closed her eyes, inhaled a deep breath, then pinched his chin and tilted his head up. "I'm sorry, Davy. I'm not trying to be mean, but you don't need any money in here. Buck runs a tab for you and settles up with your momma once a month, okay? I want you to put the wallet in your pocket and leave it there."

Dave put his arms around her waist. "Okay."

Actually, it sounded more like, "O-ay," but Ty understood the sentiment. She ruffled Dave's hair and stalked away.

Ty continued to watch her. So did half the guys in the place. That annoying little fact stirred an overwhelming urge to cover her up. A T-shirt, a jacket, a chastity belt—hell, anything

would've been an improvement. It was just a matter of time before one of the drunks tried something. Only an asshole like Buck would expect a woman to wear next to nothing in a place like this. Ty slid onto the stool he'd been using when she took his order.

She headed to the bar, filled her tray, and returned to deliver drinks, seemingly unfazed by the altercation.

"Six dollars, cowboy." She set the beer in front of Ty. "Oh, I'm sorry, that's right; you're not a cowboy. Six dollars, Mr. President."

A real smile curved her lips, and his chest tightened again. He attributed the rogue sensation to anger. Buck's lucky streak was still going strong; he'd plucked a gorgeous woman out of what was probably an otherwise decent life and put her to work in the dump he called a nightclub.

The Lewis character eased up behind her and slid a hand under her arm and around her waist. Then he slipped it up to her breast and squeezed.

Ty's final string of self-control snapped. He jumped up from his bar stool, but the waitress spun around and clocked Lewis with a right jab that would have made any boxer proud. By the look of the blood trickling out of Lewis's nose, she could hold her own. She stomped toward him and pushed him hard in the chest.

"Holy crap, Lewis. If you put your goddamned hands on me one more time tonight, I swear to God I'm gonna have Buck kick your sorry self out of here." She spun back around to Ty. "You need anything else?" No smiles this time, just irritation.

"I'm not judging," Ty said, "but I'd think a beautiful woman like you could make a lot more money doing something a little less . . . stressful." Okay, so maybe his tone did sound a little harsh and judgmental, but she clearly didn't belong at Buck's.

She glared, as if *arrogant ass* was etched across his forehead. "Really? Well, I'd think a cute guy like you could get a real date instead of getting his rocks off watching women strip. The

world is full of mysteries.”

The woman had a knack for stunning people into silence. Her sharp, lethal tongue was as dangerous as her fist. *Run away now*, his brain said. Unfortunately, his brain was outnumbered by his other body parts, so he stood there watching her take a deep breath to compose herself.

“I’m sorry. Really. I didn’t mean that. It’s just . . . Lewis is grating on my last nerve.”

Ty dug for a ten and then sat on his bar stool. “No, *I’m* sorry. I didn’t mean—”

Lewis grabbed the back of her bikini top and yanked hard. The straps snapped. Then he reared back in his stool and kicked the thick sole of his work boot fast and hard into her back.

She lurched forward, busting her head on a table and falling face first and topless onto the floor.

“Damn tease,” Lewis hollered.

Ty plowed a fist into Lewis’s jaw, knocking him backwards onto a table. Then he hauled Lewis up by his shirt, but restrained himself from beating the drunk asshole unconscious. Instead, he shoved Lewis to the ground and twisted his arm behind his back.

Buck flew over like a lightning bolt.

Ty had never seen anyone with that much body mass move that quickly.

“Break it up, no fighting in here,” Buck shouted.

“I’m not fighting, just taking down this idiot who attacked”—it dawned on him he didn’t know her name—“your girl.”

They both looked over at her. Bare breasted and with blood pouring down her face, she struggled to sit up and cross her arms over her chest. One of the other waitresses handed her a towel to catch the blood gushing from her forehead. She looked like she didn’t know whether to put it on her head or cover her breasts.

A crowd of customers formed around the commotion. The music continued to play but the noise level dropped considerably. Everyone was too busy gawking at the naked, injured

waitress to be loud. Ty looked up and realized all eyes were on her, and more likely, her breasts, which made him want to throttle every idiot looking in her direction.

Ty dropped his hold on Lewis and stripped off his button-down shirt. He kneeled beside her, guided her arms in, and tugged the shirt closed around her chest. He sucked in a sharp, involuntary gulp of air as he fastened the button directly over her breasts.

*Holy shit!* No wonder every guy in the place was staring. Maybe somewhere there were breasts more beautiful than hers, but he'd certainly never seen any. Why he was so relieved to cover them, he had no idea.

"Lewis, get out and stay out." Buck hauled Lewis up off the floor with one hand. "If I ever hear about you touching one of my girls again, in *or* out of my club, you won't live long enough to regret it. Boys . . ." Buck waved to Tiny and Tim, who caught Lewis when he stumbled halfway across the dance floor. Then he turned back toward Ty and stared.

Ty helped the bloodied waitress up off the floor, but he could feel Buck's eyes burning a hole through him.

"You Ella McGee's boy? The cop over in Longdale?"

"Yes, sir, only I'm not a cop anymore. I ran into a little trouble and decided it wasn't quite the right fit for me. Now I'm doing PI work and personal security. Looks like you could add some brains to your muscle around here."

"Maybe, but I don't hire cops." Buck looked over at one of the other waitresses. "Get Jordan cleaned up. Let me know if she needs stitches."

Two other girls brought more towels and shuffled her toward the back door.

Ty had to admit he was torn. It was the perfect opportunity to get his foot in the door with Buck. But something about the sexy waitress with the gash in her head wouldn't let go of him. He wasn't sure if anyone at Buck's had enough brains not to let her bleed to death on the back step. She might have even blacked out for a second or two, and blood still gushed from her head.

“Damn it,” he muttered as the girls guided her out the door. Then he looked back at Buck. Whether to help a beautiful, injured woman or beg a mean, sweaty asshole for a job he didn’t want, the choice should have been obvious. He was truly worried about his own sanity when he took a few steps in Buck’s direction.

Ty walked up behind the human mammoth. “Buck.”

Buck turned and squinted his cold, mean eyes.

“Sir, actually I was serious about a job. I’ve been out of the cop business for a while now and could use some income. I know how to handle a weapon and take down a drunk like Lewis with one hand tied behind my back. I’ve heard there’s been some trouble here, and I can help with that. If you’re busy right now, we could set up a time to talk tomorrow.”

Buck turned away as though he wasn’t going to answer, but then threw his head around and grumbled over his shoulder, “Three o’clock. You better not waste my time, boy.”

“No, sir, three o’clock tomorrow. I’ll see you here.”

Ty was pleased. He played that just right and it took no more than thirty seconds. Now he was off to find a beautiful, bleeding waitress. Yes indeed, tonight was getting more interesting by the moment.

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So much for having dreams. *Useful* dreams.

Hardly a night went by that didn’t include some haunting vision while she slept. Since she’d been cursed her entire life with images of horrible, violent crimes, Jordan figured she should get a little peek at her own upcoming reality, a helpful warning when she needed one. But, no. Nada. Zilch. Not even a little whiff of impending doom.

“Jordan?”

She looked up. *Great*. The cowboy guy who’d scolded her for working at a strip club, leaned against the frame of Buck’s back door with a big, fat *I told you so* glaring in his

expression.

“You okay?” He moved closer, dipped his hands into his front pockets. “We never got around to full introductions. I’m Tyler McGee. I heard Buck call you Jordan.”

She sat on top of the picnic table used for smoke breaks. Blood from the gash in her head had eased to a trickle, but she’d yet to get the trembling under control. Gingerly, she nodded.

As a rule, Jordan wasn’t typically at a loss for words, but his intense stare frayed her nerves.

Apparently he gave up on any meaningful response. Shaking his head, he turned and walked toward the parking lot.

Even injured, she found it difficult to take her eyes off his backside. Man, was he built. Like a heavily muscled upside-down triangle. His jeans hung enticingly from his hips, and well-worn denim cradled an ass that was pure temptation. Her breathing hitched, and a rush of heat flared through her.

She exhaled slowly. What the hell caused that burst of insanity? The knock on her head must have triggered some comatose pleasure sensor in her brain. Or maybe his backside was just that smokin’. Didn’t matter—those kind of thoughts shouldn’t even be a blip on the radar.

Closing her eyes eased the throbbing, so she rested her head in her hands and rubbed her temples. Just a few seconds of peace, and she could pull it together. Local backup was only a button push away, but a handsy drunk wasn’t an adequate reason to call for backup.

Plus there was a small technicality—she wasn’t supposed to be working inside the club yet. A minor detail.

Ted Bahan, the FBI’s special agent in charge, assigned her the tasks of applying for the job at Buck’s and settling into her apartment. But the team that would wire her and do the surveillance wouldn’t arrive for more than a week.

Who knew Buck would hire her on the spot and ask her to start working the same day?

Failing to mention that turn of events to Bahan pricked her conscience, but Bahan taking over the investigation she'd given countless hours to pricked even more. For the most part, Jordan thrived on being part of the task force. But this time, it chapped her ass that Bahan had pulled rank.

“I don't know if it's the bump on your head or the fact that you're barely dressed in forty-degree weather, but you're shaking.”

She looked up. Cowboy had returned.

“Do you have some real clothes I can get for you?” Sounding annoyed, he slung a jacket around her shoulders and pulled it tight around her neck.

She shook her head.

His hands gripped the collar of the jacket, and he stepped close enough for her to feel the warmth radiating from his body. Working narcotics had honed her sense of smell. From the pungent aroma of a meth lab to the more subtle odor of marijuana use on breath or clothing, she could identify a scent almost as keenly as a canine.

Cowboy smelled like pine needles and rain.

The clean, male scent wrapped around her as warmly as the jacket, and her head started buzzing. Either the head injury was worse than she thought, or he smelled intoxicating.

“Let me see what this looks like.” He gently brushed her hair from her forehead and blotted the cut with a towel. Looking deep in thought, he shifted around, studying her head from different angles.

For the first time she had a close-up view of him. Buck's was dark and smoky, but under the bright parking lot glare and the full moon, his face mesmerized her.

She was all about the eyes. Her whole life she'd believed a person's eyes told the truth even when their words failed. His were a breathtaking metallic gray with the thickest lashes she'd ever seen. Hard to accept such stunning lashes ended up on a man.

Strong jaw, full lips, dark wavy hair just a tad too long. Definitely a total package.

Definitely one a woman could lose herself in. Only by the time she realized she had, he appeared to realize it too.

He smiled slowly and knowingly, as if he'd caught her with her hand in the cookie jar.

She was mortified. Her lungs tightened.

He broke the awkward silence to ask, "Headache?"

"Duh," she said.

"Nausea?"

"Every night I work here."

He pinched the bridge of his nose and ran a hand through his hair. "Damn, woman. Are you always this difficult? Any vision problems?"

"Completely blind." She closed her eyes and stretched her arms out in front of her to feel the air. Her hands bumped his chest.

"What color are my eyes?"

"Gray, okay? They're gray." Of course she realized she hadn't opened her eyes yet. When she did, he smirked with blatant male satisfaction.

"You'll probably live," he said.

So she knew his eye color. Big deal. Any good cop would've picked up on that. Not that she wanted him to suspect she was a cop. Damn, she needed to get rid of this guy.

"Look, you've been really nice coming to my rescue and giving me your clothes. I'll make sure you get your shirt back, and you should take this." She handed him the jacket. "I'm good now."

He didn't acknowledge her words, just moved behind her, raised the shirt a few inches, and gently skimmed a finger across her back. "You've got a bruise starting here."

Heat radiated from the tender spot he touched, like a sip of brandy on a cold night. Great, that's all she needed right now. "Really, you can go enjoy the show. I'm okay."

“I’m not here to watch the show, never was. You need stitches. And I’d feel better if someone looked at your back. Let’s get you to the ER.” He slipped his hand under her arm.

“Hold on a minute, cowboy.” She pushed his hand away. “I appreciate all you’ve done, but surely you don’t think I’m gonna hop in a car with a guy I don’t know, much less let him take me to God knows where, do you?”

“Well, you could sit here and bleed to death if you’d rather. And I hate to point out the obvious, but it doesn’t look like judgment is your strongest asset.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? I didn’t do anything wrong. The guy kicked me when my back was turned.”

He backed up a step and threw his hands up in surrender. “I know. I’m sorry.”

He didn’t *look* sorry. He looked . . . pig-headed and irritated.

“I only meant . . . you, working here. You’re just, really . . . attractive. And all these guys are drunk.” He slung his jacket around her again. “And that outfit doesn’t leave a lot to the imagination.”

He stuffed her arms in the jacket and this time zipped it all the way up to her chin. “Plus you’re working for Arlo Buck. I think maybe you don’t know what you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“So, you think I need big, strong, handsome you to straighten me out?” Who the hell was he, and why on earth did he think she needed him to play protector? Another verbal lashing began to build, but the dripping blood, nausea, and light-headedness returned with a vengeance.

“I’m fine. I am *not* going to a hospital. I *don’t* need stitches, and I certainly don’t need you to . . .” Even as she spoke, tunnel vision closed in black and thick. She felt herself sway sideways off the picnic table. Just a moment before she hit gravel, strong arms closed around her.

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