

THE THREE

by

Meghan O'Brien



CHAPTER ONE

The only reason Anna knew she was still alive was because her feet hurt so damn much. She limped along through the forest, eyes vacantly on the trees ahead, almost past the point of caring that she could be caught unaware by an attack from either flank. Her feet hurt and she was breathing. She was alive.

And Garrett is dead. This time, it didn't even slow her pace. She felt empty inside; there was no more hurt left. *Garrett is dead and I'm alive.* She kicked at the slippery green and yellow leaves beneath her feet. *What the fuck is the point of it all?*

She stumbled and winced at the dull pain in her ankle. Almost a week old, the injury still ached. She felt sure it wasn't broken, but feared it was more serious than she'd first thought. Gritting her teeth, she trudged on. Not that she had anywhere in particular to go. She was walking for the sake of walking, for no other reason than habit.

Less than a quarter mile later, she stopped and sniffed the air. *Water.* A grin tugged at her lips for the first time in days. She hadn't stopped to bathe since the fight. Sobering, she ran a hand through her tangled hair and studied the reddish-brown stains that still marred her brown skin. *Those guys left me feeling filthy, inside and out.*

She shook her head to chase away the memories. All she wanted was a long, lazy soak in a cool lake. Instinctively cautious, she moved through the woods on quiet feet, attempting stealth despite her injury, blocking out the pain that radiated from her left ankle. She knew that venturing close to a water source would increase the odds of running into people, and the very last thing she wanted to do was see another person.

Not when she wasn't in any shape to defend herself.

She crept through the thick vegetation until she reached a clearing. Hesitating, she peered past a low branch at a small lake that lay beyond. Spruce trees surrounded the water on all sides, except for a break in the forest across the lake where a wide path was forged. The sun illuminated the surface of the water, and the sparkling blue of it captivated Anna where she stood.

Just as she was about to leave the safety of the trees, she zeroed in on exactly what she hadn't wanted to see. She was not alone.

An auburn-haired woman lay stretched out on a blanket next to the lake. Anna's mouth dropped open as she stared at creamy pale skin exposed by a light tank top above snug blue jeans. She was beautiful. Anna glanced anxiously around. *What's a beautiful woman like her doing out here all alone? Doesn't she know how dangerous that is?* Anna took a step backwards. The woman was lucky it was just she who had found her. *And she's lucky the only thing I'm taking from her is a mental snapshot to remind me that, for better or worse, I am still alive.*

With that, she turned away, already feeling lighter for having gazed upon the ethereal redhead for a couple of minutes. Sometimes all it took was a little beauty to give her the will to get through another day.

She began to retreat, intent on setting up camp so she could return to bathe later, but she sensed something in the forest with her and stopped in her tracks, listening.

They weren't alone.

She searched the trees for some hint of the presence she could feel. The redheaded woman by the lake still lay prone, seemingly oblivious to the approaching threat.

Anna bit her lip, torn. She didn't want the woman to be attacked while she hesitated, but she didn't know what kind of danger they were facing. Giving away her position might not be a wise move, and more than likely, the redhead knew how to fight. *At least I hope so, being foolish enough to get caught sunbathing alone. These guys will be on her so fast...*

Anna stopped her train of thought, shuddering. They were men; she was certain of that. She would guess three or four. Stealthy enough to evade all but the barest tickling of her senses, approaching from

multiple directions. Darting her eyes from the redhead to the surrounding trees, she shifted her weight cautiously from her good ankle to the bad. The pain made her cringe, and she swallowed hard. *What if they have weapons? I don't even have my baseball bat anymore. What if I can't defend her? What if I run out there and get captured?* Hot tears stung her eyes. *I can't go through that again.*

When the moment came, she was still frozen with indecision. She heard the rustling of leaves to the north of her position and spotted the three men creeping along the shore toward the unsuspecting woman. Anna stared at the curve of her lower back, at the swell of her hip. She willed her to lift her head and see the danger, but the woman didn't stir.

Goddamn it. Anna lifted her eyes to the leering men who slunk ever closer. *This may be the biggest damn mistake I ever make, but I can't just leave her to them.*

She had taken only two steps when the woman looked up and instantly pushed herself into a crouching position, staring the men down. She glanced backwards, as though considering the possibility of escape, then tipped her head back to let loose a shrill, high-pitched whistle.

The men stopped short no more than twenty feet from her, obviously startled. After a moment, the man in front chuckled.

“Was that supposed to be a warning or a cry for help?” He folded his arms and gave the redhead a condescending look. “Either way, it looks to me like you're all alone out here.”

Still in a crouch, the woman cocked her head to the side. “I suggest you boys keep moving along.” Her calm, gentle voice raised gooseflesh on Anna's arms. “You don't want to cause trouble here, I promise.”

From behind the leader, a stocky, bearded man stepped closer and raised an eyebrow. “Yeah? What's gonna stop us? You?”

The woman leapt to her feet in a lightning-quick move that made even Anna step back in surprise. She held a slim black object in one hand. “If I have to.”

The leader took an aggressive step forward. “All you have to do, honey, is cooperate with us. Nobody gets hurt that way. I promise.”

The redhead appeared to relax, but Anna watched her slightly widen her stance. She recognized the stillness before the strike and held her breath in anticipation.

“No, thanks.” The woman extended a long, steel baton with the flick of her wrist and delivered a hard strike to the legs of the man leading the pack.

He roared in pain and fell to the ground, clutching his shin.

“Fucking bitch!” the bearded man behind him growled.

He lunged with a large hunting knife in his hand, and his buddy followed. The woman was good, but she struggled against the two larger men. She struck out with her baton, forcing one to jump back to avoid the blow. The other punched her shoulder, and she immediately countered with a fierce strike to his arm. He let go a scream of genuine pain and bent at the waist to cradle the injured limb against his stomach. The bearded man rushed her once more, and she landed a quick, hard punch to the face. He barely hesitated before moving forward again, just as his friend recovered and straightened where he stood.

Anna was weighing her options—go and help finish them off, or let the redhead take care of them on her own—when she saw something that chilled her blood. A fourth man was sneaking up behind the woman with what looked to be a crowbar clutched in his hands. Preoccupied with the other attackers, she seemed unaware of his approach.

Anna burst out of the bushes where she hid. “Hey!” she yelled. “Behind you!”

The redhead turned just in time to duck a violent swing of the crowbar. For a split second, she stared at Anna, wide-eyed, then returned to defending herself. Anna didn’t waste any time. She ran as fast as her injured ankle would allow, stumbling down a small hill overgrown with plants.

“Lucky day, boys.” The fourth man leered at Anna’s approach. “Looks like you won’t have to wait to get your turns.”

Anna’s blood turned to ice at the casual comment. Eyes narrowing, she stalked up to the curly-haired man with a cold smile. She forced away her fear until numbness took over. “You going first?”

The man gave her a soulless grin. “Count on it.”

Anna nodded, buying herself a moment’s grace. She could almost feel fear and adrenaline masking her pain. As she detected a slight lowering of the man’s guard, she fainted left, then delivered a solid kick to his midsection with her right foot. He didn’t see it coming. He bent at the waist and curled his arms around his stomach, gagging at

the blow. Anna followed up with a hard strike to his right shoulder that forced him to drop his weapon to the ground.

Busy with thug number four, she glimpsed the first man struggling to his feet, but could not react before he delivered a vicious backhand across the redhead's face, throwing her off balance. Distracted by the woman's grunt of pain as she hit the ground, Anna paid dearly for her momentary lapse when a foot kicked out and made contact with her injured left ankle. She screamed in agony and went down beside the redhead, who was already rolling back into a crouching position.

"Stay down!" The bearded man slapped the woman across the face as she rose to her feet.

She stumbled but remained standing, pinning him with cold eyes so in contrast to the innocent beauty of her face. "Stop this now," she warned. "Walk away or I promise you'll regret it."

The man cocked his head. Blood ran down his face from a gash above his eye, and his lip was split, streaming another trail of blood over his chin. He grinned, showing teeth covered in red, and gestured at Anna. "Go ahead and start with this one. I'll get the other under control."

Anna's throat went dry, and she quickly scabbled backwards, getting to her feet despite the throbbing pain in her ankle. The curly-haired man took a step closer and unbuckled his belt, winding it around his fist.

I'd rather die. Anna set her feet apart in a defensive stance and gave her attacker the most chilling glare she could muster. *I'd rather die than get hurt like that again.*

The redhead flew back into action, delivering furious punches and kicks against the man's assault. Anna clenched her fists, ready to fight no matter the pain from her ankle. She was so full of terrified rage that she almost didn't hear the quiet growl from the trees until after it raised the hairs on the back of her neck.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing with *my* women?"

The low, dangerous voice floated to them on the late afternoon breeze, easily cutting through the noise of the fight and stopping everyone dead in their tracks. A young man emerged from among the trees without a sound, so close that Anna felt shaken at not having noticed his approach. Dark eyes shone with cold malevolence as he

scanned the four men who surrounded them. Anna shivered when the young man's emotionless gaze swept over her, assessing. She checked the redhead's reaction to the stranger.

Her smile was so sunny that Anna blinked in surprise and looked at the glowering young man again. He was dressed in a baggy black T-shirt and dark blue jeans. She couldn't tell what color his hair was, as it was shaved close to his head. His eyebrows were dark and drawn together in quiet anger.

The leader of the men chuckled, and his buddies joined in after a brief hesitation. "I'm sorry, boy. *Your* women?"

The young man took a step forward and fixed Anna with possessive eyes. "*My* women."

"Looks to me like you've got more women than a boy like you can handle," the man next to Anna said. He grabbed at her and squeezed her flesh with cruel fingers. "How about you let us take one off your hands?"

Anna drew back and threw an elbow at his face, catching him hard in the jaw. He recoiled with a grunt of pain, then lunged with his belt held aloft in an upraised fist.

His blow never connected, and for a stunned moment, Anna stood frozen as she waited for her brain to catch up with the action. The man who had tried to hit her was lying on the ground. An instant later, the leader of the thugs was engaged in a whirlwind attack that ended when he dropped to his knees and the young man snapped his neck with merciless hands.

"Didn't my women warn you that you shouldn't cause trouble here?" he growled, and reached behind his shoulder to unsheathe a long sword that was strapped to his back.

The fight was over within seconds.

Fight? More like a massacre. The redhead's friend was the best fighter Anna had ever seen. He moved so fast that she could barely keep up, and his technique was like nothing she had ever witnessed before. When the last of the thugs hit the ground, the young man stopped, breathing hard, and dropped his bloody sword. He examined his hands briefly and wiped them on his pants before taking a tentative step toward the redhead.

"Are you okay, Elin?" His voice was low, urgent.

The redhead, Elin, turned with a tender smile and held out her arms. "I'm fine, baby. Are you okay?"

Eyes flashing with pure relief, their savior stepped into Elin's embrace, pulling her tight against his body. "If you're fine, I'm fine." They held one another quietly while Anna stood by in awed silence.

When the couple broke apart, Elin gave Anna a bright grin. "I'm sorry. How about you? Are you okay?"

With an embarrassed nod, Anna mumbled, "I'm okay."

The man scanned Anna with stormy eyes. "I don't know what the hell you were thinking, running into the middle of a fight like that."

That set her on the defensive. "I can fight."

"Yeah, you can fight so well that you were about to get raped right here on the ground in front of me."

Anna's chin trembled at his harsh comment, and she swiped an angry hand across her face to hide her weakness. "Fuck you." She felt raw, exposed by the cruel words, and her chest stung. "You don't know anything about me."

"I know that you're damn lucky Elin held them off until I got back." He stared at her with a blank gaze that made her feel even more the hysterical woman.

"Kael," Elin said, "she probably saved my life. I didn't see the fourth guy sneaking up behind me. If she hadn't warned me, I most likely would've gotten a crowbar to the back of the head."

Momentary panic flashed in the young man's eyes, then his expression softened, and he engulfed Elin in another hug.

Elin squirmed and giggled within his embrace. "I said I'm fine."

He dropped a tender kiss on her hair. "Bloody," he observed, and dabbed at a cut above her eyebrow.

"A little. So much for my sunny, relaxing afternoon."

Anna folded her arms across her chest, still hurt and upset by Kael's comment. "Speaking of bad decisions, I don't know what the hell *you* were doing, leaving her alone out here like that. You can't be so thickheaded as to think *that's* safe."

He glanced at her. "I don't answer to you."

"Kael can't be with me every second," Elin responded with a gentle shake of her head. "Nor do I *want* Kael with me every second. I think you saw that I'm rather capable in my own right."

"You're right," Anna said. "I'm sorry."

She met warm hazel eyes when Elin stepped close and lifted Anna's face with a hand under her chin. "Hey, don't be sorry. I'm just glad you were here when I needed you. Kael got back fast, but it could've been a lot worse if you hadn't decided to help me."

Kael gave a quiet snort. "I'm just wondering what she's doing out here alone in the first place."

"Just walking," Anna mumbled.

"Well, I left dinner in the woods. I should go back and get it." Kael nodded at Elin, eyes shining with affection. "I caught you a rabbit."

Elin clapped and a wide smile lit up her whole face. "My perfect afternoon is back on track." She placed a gentle hand on Anna's arm. "And now we have a dinner guest and everything. You will stay for dinner, won't you?"

Anna blinked in surprise. She glanced at Kael, but his face betrayed no emotion. Thanking Elin for the offer, she said, "My name's Anna, by the way."

"Nice to meet you, Anna." Elin pressed a hand against the blood that still oozed from the cut above her eyebrow. "I don't know about you, but I could use a bath."

Anna blushed and ran a hand self-consciously through her hair. "That's what I was planning when I happened upon this whole sordid mess."

Elin nudged her playfully. "What do you say you and I wash off while Kael gets dinner ready?"

Kael nodded. "No offense, but it looks like you're both in desperate need of a good soak."

As he picked up his sword, Anna lowered her eyes to the prone bodies sprawled on the ground around them. "Are they all dead?"

"Yeah." There was a hint of sadness in Kael's dark eyes.

Anna gazed down at the curly-haired man at her feet, remembering the feeling of his hand groping her body. "Good." She was surprised to catch Kael staring at her with quiet sorrow, and asked, wondering if she'd missed a comment, "I'm sorry, did you say something?"

"I'm just glad you're both okay." Kael tipped his head, serious, and walked away. As he passed Elin, he said, "I set up camp in that clearing we passed through earlier. The one with the"—he dropped his voice—"pretty flowers."

Elin grinned, waving him away. “We’ll be there in no time.” Walking toward the lake, she called, “Hey, Anna! Come on, the water’s fantastic.”



Anna watched Elin dive into the water, and her throat went unexpectedly dry at the glimpse of pale, naked skin. Still trembling with adrenaline from the fight, stomach in knots over her confrontation with Kael, she summoned her strength and limped to the shore.

Elin’s head broke the surface of the water. “This feels wonderful.” She slicked back her hair with both hands. “You hurt your ankle?”

“About a week ago, during a fight. I keep thinking it should feel better—”

Elin stood and Anna watched breathlessly as water sluiced over her bare skin. “I’ll look at it after dinner. Maybe I can help. Now take off your clothes and get in here. You don’t know what you’re missing.”

Anna licked her lips and stared at the dark pink nipples only yards from where she stood on shore. This was the closest she’d ever been to a real live naked woman. *You’re right, I probably don’t.* As much as she wanted to dive into the water and get closer to Elin, shyness held her back. She dropped her eyes to her own chest. Her green T-shirt was torn and dirty, her light brown skin smudged with blood and filth. She rubbed her hands over the seat of her pants, remembering all too well the scars that littered her body.

“Not used to being naked in front of someone else?” Elin’s voice was full of quiet sympathy. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about.” At Anna’s quick backwards glance to where Kael had disappeared into the woods, she added, “And you have no reason to be afraid.”

“He doesn’t like me, does he?” Anna pulled her T-shirt over her head after a brief hesitation. She folded her arms over her stomach, skin burning beneath Elin’s gaze.

“Kael just doesn’t know you. It isn’t easy for him to trust. Give him some time.”

Anna unsnapped her pants, stepped out of them quickly, and shot another look at the trees around them. “He’s one hell of a fighter.”

“One hell of a person.” Elin held one hand playfully in front of her

eyes. "I'm not peeking. Get the rest of those clothes off, and get your ass in here, girl!"

With a nervous giggle, Anna shed her bra and panties, then, putting as much weight on her left ankle as she could bear, she moved into the water. She was submerged safely to her upper chest when Elin uncovered her eyes.

"Feel good?"

"Wonderful."

"Want to feel even better?"

Anna tried hard not to stare at Elin's creamy collarbones. She worked her jaw for a moment, unable to produce a sound. *If she had any idea what I was thinking, she'd hate me.* Playing it safe, she croaked, "That depends."

Elin brought a hand out of the water and displayed a small, capped bottle with a triumphant grin. It was half full of thick amber liquid. "Shall I wash your hair?"

Anna couldn't remember the last time she'd experienced the luxury of shampoo. She skimmed one hand over the surface of the water. "I don't want you to waste—"

Elin clicked her tongue in disapproval and put a soothing hand on Anna's shoulder. "Don't be silly. It'd make me really happy to give you this simple pleasure. Given that you saved my life and all."

"But—"

Encouraging Anna to face away from her, Elin said, "Dunk."

Anna did, bending her knees until her head was underwater. She held the position for only a moment, until a powerful feeling of vulnerability propelled her to the surface. Sputtering, she pushed away the wet locks of dark hair that hung in her face.

"I'm not sure I saved your life," she said, keeping her back to Elin. She jerked in surprise when Elin touched her head, then released an involuntary moan when strong fingers rubbed fragrant shampoo into her hair. "My fighting skills aren't exactly up to par these days."

"You saved my life." Elin scratched at Anna's scalp, and Anna had to fight hard not to whimper in pleasure. "So it's just your ankle that's hurt?"

"Among other things." *My head. My heart. My will.*

"Well, you look exhausted." Resting a hand on Anna's shoulder,

Elin encouraged her to bend her knees and crouch. She scooped up fresh water to pour over Anna's soapy hair and asked, "Where are you headed?"

"I'm not sure." Anna closed her eyes to enjoy the slow rinsing of her hair.

Elin was quiet for a minute, then asked, "Where are you from?"

Anna flashed on a nightmare image of her last day at home, unable to suppress a shudder. "Near the Pennsylvania-Maryland border. I grew up in a tribe that settled in that area."

"Nomadic?"

Anna managed a weak shrug. "Not nomadic enough, I guess."

For a moment Elin's movement faltered, and then she began rubbing one hand over Anna's upper back. Anna blinked and brought her hands to the surface of the water, scrubbing at the dried blood that still clung to them.

"Your tribe was attacked?"

"Last year." To Anna's surprise, it all came tumbling out. "Nearly everyone was killed. The rest were captured by raiders. My best friend Garrett and I managed to escape." She hesitated, then murmured, "He was killed last month."

"I'm sorry." Elin curled her fingers around Anna's shoulder, giving her a tender squeeze. "So you're alone now?"

"Yeah," Anna whispered. It was the first time she had spoken it aloud. "I'm alone."

Anna wasn't even aware that she was crying until Elin tightened her grip on her shoulder and pulled her around into a warm embrace. Then she felt the wetness of her cheek pressed against Elin's, and her shoulders shook within the circle of Elin's slim arms. She barely registered the thrill of naked breasts pressed against her own, she was so overcome with her private agony.

"It's okay, sweetheart," Elin cooed, and rocked her where they stood. "It's okay. You're not alone anymore."

The whispered words, and Elin's fingers stroking the small of her back, shocked Anna out of their embrace. Wiping at her tears with both hands, she glanced around at the trees once more. Her whole body trembled at the thought of Kael coming back and finding them like that.

Elin interlaced delicate fingers with Anna's battle-roughened ones. "I never lived in a tribe," she said, pulling Anna's attention back to her face. This close, she could see the furious smattering of freckles across pale skin. "I grew up all alone with my father. He took us to the country just as the sickness reached its peak, then spent years teaching me how to hide from other people. It must have been amazing for you, growing up around so many others."

"Your biological father?" Anna had never met an adult raised by a biological parent before. Her own parents died early on, shortly after the President had declared a state of emergency for the entire country. Anna couldn't remember a lot of the details, but Uncle Roberto had sometimes talked about it on those nights when he got drunk enough to summon up that time without breaking down.

It had taken only months for the country to dissolve into chaos. There were so many dead and dying, the hospitals had to close their doors. Anarchy erupted and the military struggled to maintain order amid rising violence from a citizenry driven to blind panic. The president was assassinated, and the federal government imposed martial law. But it was too late to stem the spread of rebellion. Throughout the nation, state and local government collapsed and small competing militias emerged, vying for power in shattered communities.

Eventually, the army turned on the White House and deposed the administration, and a series of generals attempted to run the country and combat the militias. But the army and the National Guard were decimated by illness and had no hope of winning the guerilla wars that followed. Uncle Roberto often said he wasn't sure who the lucky ones were: those who lived through the sickness and the factional warfare, or those who never had to adapt to this barren new world.

"I was lucky," Elin said. "My father survived the sickness and the troubles. I was only two years old at the time, so I barely remember my mother."

"I remember my family. Not as much as I'd like. One of my uncles survived. I always thought I was really lucky for that. He's the one who took me with him to the tribe."

"We were both lucky." Elin took Anna's hand and walked them to shore. For a moment, her eyes looked haunted. "There are much worse ways to grow up."

Anna nodded. She trailed behind Elin, trying not to stare at her

shapely bottom as they reached shallow water. “So how long have you been traveling with Kael?”

Elin gave her a serene smile. “Well, I guess it would be just over two years now. My father died just before that—natural causes, I think—and I set out on my own. I wanted to explore the world, see new things. I found Kael, or we found each other, a couple of months later.”

Anna grew bashful as they emerged from the water and stepped onto the shore. She covered her breasts with one arm, desperate to hide the ugly white scars on the left one, and dropped an awkward hand to conceal the curly triangle of hair between her thighs. “You must feel really safe with him.”

Elin knelt to collect their clothing from the ground. “Kael makes me feel safe, yes. In every way.”

Anna blushed at the obvious adoration in Elin’s voice and cast her eyes to the grassy shore. Feeling shy, and not knowing how to talk about love, she stayed quiet, looking up only when Elin thrust her soiled clothing at her.

“I’m sorry you’ve got to put these things on again. Unless you have something clean with your stuff?”

“No.” Anna accepted her dirty clothes, with red-tinged cheeks. She had nothing now.

“I guess it’s time for some new clothes, huh?” Elin pulled on her tank top. “I’ve got a shirt you can borrow for now, back at camp.”

Anna tried not to stare at erect nipples outlined against the cotton of Elin’s top. “Thanks.”

When they were both dressed, Elin asked, “Where’d you leave your stuff?”

Anna’s face grew hot with shame. “I don’t have anything.”

“Nothing?”

“Not since I was attacked last week. The men who jumped me...I left my bags behind when I escaped them. My weapon. Everything I had—” She stopped, not wanting to dwell on the thought of all that she had lost. After Garrett was killed, nothing had mattered anymore. Not even what little she had left in life.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Elin breathed, and rubbed her thumb along the back of Anna’s hand. “I’m so glad you found us.”

Anna allowed herself to be pulled into another spontaneous hug.

This time she pressed her nose into Elin's neck and inhaled, soaking up the comfort. Despite her reservations about Kael, she found herself agreeing with the soft words. "Me, too."

"Are you hungry?" Elin slid her hands casually down Anna's sides, sending a rush of shivered pleasure through her body. "You feel like you could use a good meal."

"I'm starving." A simple statement, and Elin would never know how true it was.

"Come on, then," Elin said. "I saw some fresh cuts on your back when we were bathing. I want to look at those when we get to camp, okay?"

Anna followed the chattering redhead with a dazed smile on her face. For the first time since Garrett had drawn his last breath—perhaps for the first time since the attack last year—she felt a tingling of something deep in her belly. It was a feeling she thought she'd never know again. It was hope.