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CATHERINE COWLES



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Prologue

ASTER

TWELVE YEARS AGO

"DO YOU THINK THERE'S ANYWHERE THE STARS ARE brighter?"

I spoke the words barely louder than a whisper, the dark gobbling them up like some sort of silent vacuum, but Maverick still heard them. He always did. It was as if he could hear things I didn't even say. Maybe because he listened so intently, or maybe because he gave me a safe place to say the things I wasn't comfortable letting slip free anywhere else.

His strong fingers flexed around my shoulder, pulling me closer to him in the bed of the truck. "I don't think there's anywhere they're more beautiful."

The whole landscape was breathtaking—the back pasture of Twisted Oak Ranch, where we could see the forests and fields, and even the pond on my granddad's ranch peeking out through the trees.

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Everything about it felt like my favorite place to be. With Maverick, most of all.

I let the heat of his body seep into mine, my eyes drifting shut for just a moment. I only allowed myself brief, stolen moments like this one when I could pretend that Maverick was more than just my confidante, my partner in crime, and my best friend. When I could pretend my father didn't hate him and his entire family with a fiery passion. Stolen moments when he was simply *mine*.

I forced my eyes open, not letting myself linger in that place where I longed for things that would never be for so many reasons.

"There's something about the stars here," I agreed, as I rubbed my cheek against the soft flannel of his shirt. It didn't matter that it was early June; the nights in Starlight Grove still got cold. Something about that tip-top Northern California mountain air.

Mav absentmindedly tangled his fingers in my hair. "Maybe because it's darker here. It means they burn brighter."

"I like thinking of it that way." Because there was darkness here. Despite the quaintness of the small town that we called home, with its adorable shops and idyllic beauty, there was always darkness. And we'd both learned the hard way that pitch-black could hide behind the tidy yards and smiling faces.

I shivered, and Maverick pulled me closer, always making sure I was okay. But as he did, I felt his wince. Heard the hiss of air between his teeth.

I instantly sat up. "What's wrong?"

Mav grimaced but shook his head. "Nothing. Come back. You're my personal heater."

A scowl twisted my lips as I tugged up his flannel and the tee beneath. Even in just the moonlight, I could see the bruises. Angry, black-and-purple mottling that I knew meant more than one blow. And I didn't miss the scars below the bruising. Or the tattoo that spanned his chest and some of his rib cage. I'd seen the scars before, knew what they were, but they never ceased to stop me in my tracks.

My fingers itched to ghost over the raised and puckered skin as if

they could magically erase all the pain that had come with them. Pain of the mind and the body.

"What happened?" I gritted out.

Mav's hand covered mine, pulling down his shirts. "Nothing new. Ben and his goon squad got me outside the party last night."

My scowl only deepened, both at Ben's assholery and Maverick's need to hit up every party graduation week had to offer. Sometimes, it felt like he was determined to swallow up everything life put in front of him. Like if he missed one tiny thing, he'd cease to exist.

I bit the inside of my cheek, feeling the sting of my teeth against the flesh. "What was it this time?"

Maverick shrugged, shoving up to sitting and leaning against the cab of his truck. "The usual. Doesn't want my serial killer blood tainting his town."

Anger flooded my system, making my face flush so hot it felt like my cheeks were burning. "You need to tell someone."

Maverick stared back at me, those dark-hazel eyes going the same inky black as the forest around us. "Tell them what? That he spoke the truth?"

Anger swirled with worry, creating a riotous stew. "You're not your father."

Pain swept across Mav's face, digging grooves that spoke of things far beyond his eighteen years. "He's in me."

I moved on instinct, placing my hand on his chest and pressing my palm hard against the spot over his heart. The beats came faster than normal, more erratic. "You're nothing like him. You are good. Kind. Caring. He has nothing to do with you."

I couldn't imagine all Mav and his four older brothers had been through. He'd only talked about it a handful of times since coming to live with his great-uncle Waylon in Starlight Grove seven years ago, when he'd arrived still recovering from injuries at the hand of his father—a man they'd discovered had killed thirty-six women and nearly one of his sons.

Much of the town hadn't been pleased about their arrival—my parents included. Others became obsessively fascinated by the Archer

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brothers, wanting to know every gruesome detail. But me? All I could think about was the emptiness in the eyes of the boy who sat two rows over from me in class.

Maverick's hand covered mine, pressing it harder against his chest as if he were trying to permanently meld us together. "You don't know. Maybe a switch will flip someday, and I'll want to hurt people, too."

Pain swept through me. I wanted to burn out every doubt Mav had, shine light on every demon. "Do you really think that?"

His gaze drifted to the left, toward the forest, the place he'd escape to when he needed to breathe. "I don't know what I think."

"Mav," I whispered.

Those haunted eyes came back to me.

"I see you. All of you," I said. "The good and the bad. The light and the dark."

A hint of fear edged into his expression, the muscles around his mouth tightening.

"You're impulsive. Sometimes, downright reckless. But there is nothing in you that wants to hurt others. The only thing you want to do is help: fix a broken tractor on the ranch, help a mama cow give birth, make sure no one you care about is alone when they need you."

"You sound so sure." His voice grew rough, as though his throat were strangling each word.

"I am. Because you shine that light on me." And there was nothing like basking in the glow of Maverick. No other high could touch it.

"Rebel." He lifted a hand to cup my cheek, the roughened pad of his thumb gliding over the apple of it.

I tried to grab hold of every sensation, burn it into my brain so I'd never lose it. His nickname for me ghosted over my skin, and I tried to hold tight to that, too. The moniker he'd given me from the moment I'd snuck onto the Archers' ranch, trying to catch a glance of the infamous boys.

"Gotta be a rebel if she's brave enough to steal away over here. I say we keep her."

And they had, in a way. *He* had.

Maverick's body shifted, leaning closer to me. My breath caught,

lungs seizing at the what-if. My mind went wild, wondering if maybe, just maybe, this was the moment I'd imagined ever since I no longer believed boys had cooties.

He was so beautiful, staring at me in the moonlight, his dark-brown hair a little wild…just like him. Those haunted eyes were so captivating, even with the ghosts that lived there—maybe partly because of them.

His gaze dipped to my lips, tracing their curve and swell. My heart hammered against my ribs, and blood roared in my ears. I wanted to know what it was like to have Mav's mouth pressed against mine. To know what he tasted like. To feel the heat that always seemed to engulf him.

I leaned forward ever so slightly, but Mav didn't miss it. He never missed anything about me. He closed the distance, moving slowly, giving me every chance to stop him. I knew I should—for so many reasons.

But I didn't.

Instead, I played with fire.

Maverick's mouth eased over mine, all heat and gentle pressure. And my body felt like a live wire, sparking to life with an energy I'd never felt before. His fingers slipped into my hair as his tongue slid into my mouth.

He tasted like oranges. Oranges and a hint of something earthy I couldn't name. But my body recognized it as everything I'd ever wanted.

I moved into him, instinct taking over. It didn't matter that I'd only kissed one boy before this: Gabe Jensen in a stupid *seven minutes in heaven* dare. My body knew what it wanted. More Maverick.

Only Maverick.

I let out a tiny mewling noise, a vibration that swept from my mouth to his. Maverick reacted instantly, lifting me onto his lap so I could straddle him. His tongue drove deeper, and my hips rocked against him.

Mav let out a moan, only spurring me on. I wanted more. I wanted…everything.

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A ringing sound broke through the buzzing in my ears. Not a phone call, I realized—an alarm. I tore my mouth from Mav's and grabbed my phone, a curse slipping free.

Maverick's lips twisted in that lopsided grin I loved so much. "Aster Carrington, as I live and breathe. Did you just drop an F-bomb?"

I glared at him as I silenced my alarm. "I curse sometimes."

He arched a brow.

"Occasionally. When the situation calls for it."

That grin only grew. "And now calls for it?"

I let out a huff of breath. "I have to go home."

It was Mav's turn to scowl. "We're going to college in a couple of months, and your dad still insists on a curfew?"

My lips thinned. "You know how he is."

Maverick shook his head. "He's an asshole."

My mind filled in other descriptors.

Controlling. Manipulative. Brutal.

"I don't want to push him," I said quietly. It was a delicate dance as it was, getting him to let me go to UC Davis instead of Vassar like he wanted. If he'd known Mav would be there, too, he might not have been so understanding.

Mav's hands moved to my hips, squeezing gently. "You can't let him control you."

"It's complicated." And that was the world's greatest understatement. Christian Carrington was always playing chess, while the rest of us were playing checkers.

"Camilla can't cover for you?" Mav pressed.

I shot him a look that encompassed how ridiculous it was to think my twin sister would help me with anything. As identical as we were in appearance, we were the complete opposite in every other way. "She'll dance a jig if I'm late and make sure my dad knows by exactly how many minutes."

"How your sister is such a bitch is beyond me," he muttered.

Maverick might not understand it, but I did. My dad grew it in her, nurtured it with his own cruelty. And because I could see that, I could never bring myself to hate her. If anything, I felt sorry for her.

A *ding* sounded, and I worried it might be Dad even now, checking on my whereabouts. But my phone screen was empty.

Mav swiped up his cell, unlocking it. "It's Sean. Wants to know where I am."

"See?" I said softly. "You have places to be, too." Another night, another party. The thought of it twisted my stomach, especially when there was so much unsaid between us.

Maverick dropped his phone, his hands coming up to frame my face. "The only place I want to be is with you."

My heart gave a riotous tumble and twirl. "Okay."

He stretched up, brushing his lips against mine. "Okay. We'll talk tomorrow."

My pulse thrummed, making blood whoosh in my ears. Would that be a good *talk*? Or a this-was-a-mistake talk? It had to be the former. That organ in the center of my chest did another dip and roll. "Tomorrow," I promised.

Maverick pressed his forehead to mine. "Let's get you home."

I climbed off Mav's lap, even if it was the last thing I wanted to do. "I'm gonna take the shortcut," I said as I slid off the tailgate of his truck.

He moved to follow me. "Rebel, it's pitch-black. Let me drive you."

I made a face. "It's right next door."

Twisted Oak Ranch, home to the Archers, butted up against my grandfather's ranch, Moonridge Meadow. The place that had always been my refuge—except for the ten acres he'd given my father and the ostentatious house Christian Carrington had built, which didn't fit with the rest of the place. The house that had never felt like a home.

Maverick frowned. "He'll be mad if I drop you off."

It wasn't a question. It was a sad reality. Still, I offered, "Two more months, and we're at college. Two more months, and it won't matter."

Mav's fingers wove through mine. "Two more months."

His words felt like a vow, and I held on to them with everything I had.

My phone sent out another reminder.

"I gotta go."

"Text me when you get home. I want to know you got there safe."

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He always did.

I simply nodded as I jogged to the fence, hopping over it and onto the bike I'd left there. I took the makeshift trail across Moonridge Meadow Ranch. The horses were in for the night, but I could still make out the silhouettes of the cattle illuminated by the moonlight. It was comforting somehow, knowing I wasn't alone, even in the darkness.

My hair flew behind me as I pedaled harder, trying to channel the energy of all the reckless mountain biking and rock climbing Mav favored. I raced past two massive barns, the bunkhouse, the foreman's house, a few guesthouses, and Granddad's sprawling place that somehow still felt homey.

In a matter of minutes, I saw the glow of the Victorian-style house Dad had built. Everything about it was fancy and ornate—but somehow fake, too. Because it wasn't actually old with character and endless stories. Nothing about it said *family ranch*. It was all formal stiltedness.

I jumped off my bike, hurrying to store it in the equally ornate garage. I had two minutes to spare. I quickly typed out a text.

Me: *Home.*

The reply was instant.

Maverick: *Miss you already.*

My body warmed as I headed into the house. Not even the coldness of this place could chill me now. I moved as quietly as possible. It was better not to be noticed. Flying under the radar was always better.

It had gotten easier over the past few months, as my parents spent more time in Santa Barbara, where my dad had opened a financial planning office. It was the perfect job for him, helping the rich get richer. Now, he was rarely in Starlight Grove.

But whenever he was, it felt like an infinite number of invisible mines had been placed under the floorboards of the house. One wrong move, and everything would detonate.

I crept through the kitchen, listening for something, anything. There was no crackle of a fire in the fireplace, no hum of some news program on the TV, no clink of glasses. I let out a breath.

But I shouldn't have.

"Aster."

His voice cracked like a whip, making my spine snap straight and every muscle in my body turn to stone.

I forced myself to swallow, to breathe. Turning slowly, I took in the man sitting in the near dark of the library. There was only the glow of a reading lamp, illuminating a newspaper and a lowball of bourbon sitting on the side table by the leather chair.

Sometimes, I felt like I didn't recognize the man who'd raised me: the dark hair gone silver at the temples, the lines bracketing his mouth, the glasses that did nothing to hide the coldness in his eyes.

Nothing about our appearance was similar. His hair was so dark it was almost midnight. Mine, a pale blond. His eyes were amber, and mine were so pale blue they were nearly translucent. Even Camilla's were darker than mine—still light blue but more pigmented. She always said mine were like zombie eyes. But most of our shared appearance came from our mother. We had none of our father's dark features.

My throat constricted as he rose from his chair. "Sir," I greeted, using the address he preferred. No *Dad* or *Daddy*. Not even *Father*.

His gaze scanned my face, then the rest of me, as if looking for evidence. "Where were you?"

My pulse thrummed in my neck. "Riding my bike."

Not a lie. That was the key. Never give an untruth. He could read them.

He scoffed. "In the dark."

I shrugged. "The moon's nearly full, and it's finally cool."

My father's gaze narrowed. "Why do I feel like you're lying, Aster?"

My airway tightened, making it nearly impossible to breathe, let alone speak.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. "I know where she was."

There was such glee in my sister's voice—pure joy at giving our father every piece of ammunition he needed. Maybe it was that she was still making up for the stunt she'd pulled junior year, running off to LA for a month and getting caught up with a rough crowd. She'd done thirty days in rehab before she was allowed home.

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And our father had been solely focused on her misery for months after. He and my mother had made up a story about an eating disorder, but even that had cost them. As if they couldn't stand the thought of any child of theirs being less than perfect.

"She was with Maverick Archer," Camilla finished, the joy in her words only intensifying.

Panic set in. My forearms cramped to the point of pain as my hands curled into fists.

My father's head swiveled slowly, away from my sister and toward me. There was nothing on his face. No fury or disappointment. Only emptiness. And that scared me more than rage ever would.

But Camilla? She grinned. Maybe facing so much of our father's cruelty had made her this way. Perhaps it was because she so badly wanted a break from his focus that she *reveled* in the times when I caught it.

It could've been because I was usually so good at flying under the radar. A 4.1 GPA. Always completed my chores. Never missed a curfew. Bit my tongue so hard it bled when I wanted to speak out.

Maverick was my only weakness.

And now, it had caught up with me.

"Is that true?" Dad's voice was deceptively calm. But I knew better than to lie to him.

"Yes."

A muscle fluttered beneath his eye. The only tell.

"Camilla, leave us."

My twin's smile only widened. "Of course, sir. Can I get ice cream with Edison?"

The last thing she was going to do with her boyfriend was get ice cream at ten o'clock at night, but I swallowed my words like always.

"Sure," Dad said, his gaze flicking to her. "Because you show good judgment in your company."

Camilla preened under his praise. "Thank you, sir."

She didn't wait. She ran for the front door. It was a smart move and didn't leave room for our father to change his mind, which he did often and on a dime.

There was a time when Camilla and I had been allies. I had brief snatches of memory of us hiding from our father when he was in one of his *moods* or jumping to each other's defense. Not anymore.

Now, I was alone with the monster. Mom was rarely around in the evening hours unless she needed to give a command performance. She would take a pill and tune out the world, slipping away from her bleak reality and into a Xanax-fueled haze. I didn't blame her in some ways. But in others, I held her wholly responsible. Because she *knew*. And yet, she stayed. Forced *us* to stay.

My father folded his hands in front of him. "I told you that I didn't want you spending time with that boy."

I didn't speak, simply cast my gaze downward.

"Yet you disobeyed me."

It wasn't a question, but this time, I knew he demanded an answer. "Yes, sir."

"You're so smart in so many ways, yet stupid enough to get mixed up with trash."

My head jerked up. "He's not trash."

A flash of anger—rage—streaked across Dad's face. "His father slaughtered over three dozen women, and you want to tie his name to ours? *Carrington* means something in this town. And I will *not* have you sullying it."

The backhand came so fast and fierce I didn't have a prayer of stopping it. His knuckles hit me right in the mouth, the lips that had, just minutes ago, buzzed from Maverick's kiss. Now, the coppery taste of blood bloomed.

I stumbled back a step from a mix of shock and the force of the actual blow. My father had never hit me in the face before. I'd gotten about a dozen blows to the torso over the years and had been forced to kneel on rice on the floor for two hours when I broke a prized vase at the age of nine. I'd even been made to sleep on the floor with nothing more than a blanket when I spoke out of turn at one of the dinners where Dad had hosted business associates.

He liked his creative punishments, rarely stooping to physical

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violence—it was a last resort. But I could see it now: the glassy eyes, hair askew. He was drunk. And his restraint was gone.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

I swallowed more words. Let the blood from my split lip fill my mouth. I didn't tell him that Maverick Archer was the best thing to ever happen to me. That he provided me with the only place I felt safe, the only place I truly felt like myself. I pulled it all inside of me and held it close. A silent vow.

My dad stalked toward me. "You're not sorry. You're a lying little slut. Probably spreading your legs for that killer filth. And I won't stand for it."

The punch took my breath and sent me crumpling to my knees. I'd barely sucked in a wheezing breath before his loafer-clad foot connected with my ribs. I swore I felt the crack before the blazing, white-hot pain engulfed me.

Spots danced in front of my vision as a second kick landed, this time somewhere around my kidneys. Blow after blow until one connected with my head, and everything went blissfully black.

Hazy images passed. The art on the staircase. The ornate runner in the hall. The gingham checkerboard of my duvet. But none of them lasted. The darkness claimed me again.

When I woke, it was dark, and my cheek was pressed to the carpet in my bedroom.

Confusion swamped me, but the moment I tried to move, the memories surged, bringing the pain right along with them. Everything hurt. Even my toes.

My phone dug into my hip like a tendril of hope. I forced myself onto my back, letting out a whimper of pain as I did. Breathing through my nose, I hoped I wouldn't throw up. In a few minutes, the worst had passed.

I moved slowly, tugging at the cell in my pocket and finally pulling it free. The screen was blurry. *Concussion?* It didn't matter. There was only one person I could call. One person I trusted to help. One person who might be able to get me out without anyone else knowing.

My fingers fumbled over the screen until I reached Maverick's contact.

It rang and rang and rang until the voicemail picked up.

I hit *end* and called again. More ringing and voicemail.

Again.

Ringing and voicemail.

Hot tears flooded my eyes, spilling out and down my temples, into my hair. I managed to type two words. *Need you.*

But it didn't matter how long I waited. He didn't come. And as the familiar figure stepped into my room, head shaking, letting out a tsking sound, that was the moment I found out my hurt was far worse than lies and broken promises. It was more than that. It was betrayal. At the hands of my best friend. And it was when I learned the most valuable lesson of all.

The only person I could count on was myself.

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Chapter One

MAVERICK

PRESENT DAY

"You all are the sorriest sons of bitches I have ever seen in my three decades on the job," Chief Parker called out across the parking lot at the edge of the picturesque park.

"Sons and *daughter* of bitches," Tabby called as she jumped up from a burpee.

Chief scowled at her. "Ten more, thanks to the smart-ass over here."

"My abs are going to murder you," Nick snarled in her direction, his dark-brown hair slicked down with sweat.

"Your abs need it," she shot back. "You're starting to get a beer gut."

I snickered. "She's not wrong, buddy. Ever since you shacked up with Diana, you've gone soft."

"Not me," Logan managed between heaved breaths. "Abs of steel."

"Too bad it's accompanied by a douchebag personality," Tabby wheezed.

Sean and I both barked out a laugh at that one.

"Traitors," Logan hissed, narrowing the blue eyes he used to his advantage with every woman he came across.

"Hey," Chief barked. "If you can laugh and talk, you're obviously not working hard enough. Double time for a minute."

Everyone groaned at that. And when he blew his whistle, we collapsed onto the pavement. While it was only March, the sun was out in full force, and I was drenched after our three-mile run.

But I didn't care. This was simply the pain required to get to the other side. That other side being a current member of the Starlight Grove Fire Department, my employer for about eight months out of the year. The other four were spent working for the U.S. Forest Service as a smokejumper, parachuting into the worst, most isolated forest fires. There wasn't anything I wanted to do more.

Maybe it was helping people, maybe it was the adrenaline rush when I walked into flames instead of running away, but I couldn't imagine doing anything else. I just had to get through the training Chief liked to put us through at regular intervals throughout the year—training that often ended with us heaving into trash cans at one point or another.

"Why do I feel like this gets harder every year?" Sean moaned, laying an arm over his eyes to shield them from the sun.

"You're just getting old, Grandpa," Logan chided.

Sean was a year above Logan, Nick, and me in school, and we never failed to remind him that he was gonna go gray before the rest of us.

Tabby grinned as she sat up and grabbed her water. "So glad *I* have both youth and beauty."

At four years our junior, with freckles and a pixie cut, Tabitha Hanson was equal parts shit-stirrer and Tinker Bell.

Logan flipped her off. "We know the only real beauty around here is Mav."

I flicked invisible locks over my shoulder. "I'm so glad you noticed."

"Hey, assholes," Chief called. "Stop yammering and start your wall sits."

"Fuck," Nick muttered. "Who pissed in his Cheerios today?"

Sean poured a little water over his head of close-cropped black

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hair as we crossed to the outer wall of the park's office and bathrooms. "I heard he found out Clover Creek has a weeklong boot camp every year. Got jealous."

I scrubbed a hand over my face as I winced. "He's the most competitive asshole I know. He once got into a brawl over a game of quarters *without* the alcohol."

"We're all gonna be paying the price for him finding out that little tidbit," Sean said, shaking his head.

"I said wall sits." Chief's voice boomed across the parking lot.

Everyone picked up their pace. We scattered along the cinderblock wall, taking seated positions against it without the support of a chair.

"I wanna see ninety degrees," Chief ordered. "No cheats."

Darren grimaced next to me, his red hair and pale complexion only making his strain more evident. "My knees don't wanna do this shit no more."

It was the wrong thing to say.

Chief strode toward him, bending down and getting right in his face. "And what happens when you gotta carry some bastard down three flights of stairs when everything's burning around you?"

Sweat poured down Darren's brow. "I'm gonna give him to Mav. He's young and dumb. He can handle it."

"The *real* gramps is showing his age and his cantankerous attitude," I shot back, my muscles starting to burn.

Darren only grinned at me. "Not afraid to sacrifice."

"Brutal," I murmured.

I couldn't help but keep an eye on him, though. He'd cracked fifty this year, and this sort of thing got harder and harder on the body. Not to mention the fact that fifty-seven—and mandatory retirement—was around the corner.

"Let's make it interesting, boys," Chief called out.

"And girl," Tabby singsonged.

He waved a hand. "And girl."

Tabby just grinned. She *loved* giving him shit.

"Whoever lasts the longest has no cleaning duties for the next two weeks."

Logan let out a hoot as he shook sweat from his blond hair, a dimple popping in his cheek. "No question, I got this. Not cleaning a damn bathroom after you pricks drop bomb after bomb in there."

A series of snickers passed through the group.

"No way," I shot back. "My ass is so tight you could bounce a quarter off it."

Sean's lips twitched. "You been working that second gig at the strip club again?"

"Please," I clipped. "Bachelorette parties only. I'm classy like that."

Tabby snorted. "I'd pay you to keep your clothes *on*."

"That hurts, Tabs."

She just rolled her eyes.

"We're past the two-minute mark. We're playing for honor and to not have to clean up Nick's shit stains," Chief boomed.

Nick flipped him off, but I didn't miss the wince on his face.

Darren dropped first, shoving off the wall and walking in circles as he panted. One by one, my squad members fell away until it was just me, Nick, Tabby, and Logan.

"I could do this all damn day," Tabby singsonged.

"That's because you're about a hundred pounds soaking wet," Nick clipped.

She glared at him. "Can still carry you and your beer gut."

And she could. She was small, but she could likely kick the ass of most everyone on our team.

"Aw, hell. Cramp." Nick shoved up and off the wall, rubbing at the back of his thigh.

Logan chuckled. "That's karma."

Nick flipped him off, too.

Logan looked at me and Tabby. "And then there were three."

Tabby was great at keeping a poker face, but I saw the way her thighs were trembling. It wouldn't be long before she dipped out.

Thirty seconds later, she simply slid to the pavement. "Dammit. Next time, I'm burying you both."