

# ONE

## *Present day*

Sean Rogan watched Lucy stretch with the grace of a cat, her thick, wavy black hair falling across his bare chest. She sighed as she relaxed on top of him, her dark eyes closed, a half-smile on her face.

There was little Sean enjoyed more than early-morning sex with Lucy.

For the first time in months, they were alone—no friends, no family, no stress—sharing a secluded cabin in the middle of the Adirondacks. Just the two of them. Lucy didn't seem to realize how much she'd needed this vacation—already, after one night, she was looking more rested than he'd seen her in months. Sean hoped their change of plans to help his brother Duke's friend wouldn't put a damper on their week together.

"This is perfect." Lucy kissed his chest. "I wish it could last."

A faint, nagging fear that such unadulterated happiness would come at a cost marred Sean's good mood. He knew Lucy was talking about their time alone, but

he couldn't help but think she had been reflecting on their relationship.

"Luce?"

"Hmm?"

What should he say? That their vacation could last forever? Should he call her out on her skepticism? If he asked her to explain her comment, she'd overthink her response, and worse, she'd put her shields back up. He'd worked hard at getting her to put down her armor; it was these rare moments when she was entirely comfortable that he savored.

"Up for a hike this morning?" he asked instead.

Lucy didn't sound as though she noticed his hesitation. "After breakfast. I'm starving."

Sean laughed.

She leaned up and looked at him, her eyebrows raised. "What's funny?"

"In the four months I've known you, not once have you told me you're hungry, let alone starving."

He grinned, then reached up and tickled her ribs. Her spontaneous laugh was genuine, such a rare sound that every time he heard it he remembered how much Lucy needed him to remind her of the good in life, and forget the evil from her past.

"This is war!" she declared. Before Sean could tighten his abs in resistance, she tickled the sensitive sides of his stomach. He tried grabbing her hands as he laughed, but she enjoyed winning far too much to make it easy for him.

"Stop. Please."

"Say Uncle."

"Uncle."

She stopped, and he flipped her onto her back. “Now that you woke me up—”

“You mean you weren’t awake when we were having sex?”

“That was just a prelude, Princess.”

She tensed, and for a moment Sean thought he’d done or said something wrong. He was about to ask her what it was when she said, “Do you smell something?”

Her hair, their sweat . . . and something else he recognized only as she spoke. “Smoke.”

They jumped up and pulled on the clothes closest to them.

He grabbed his backpack and they ran out the door, the scent of burning wood palpable as soon as they stepped outside.

They sprinted down the shadowy trail to the main lodge. Dawn had just broken over the mountain ridge, casting a fresh but pale light all around. A growing plume of dark gray smoke rose from the trees, and as soon as the lodge came into sight Sean saw smoke pouring from an open kitchen window. Several flickers of orange flames glowed through the thick smoke, but the fire hadn’t reached the external walls.

Sean instantly took in the scene: twenty-two-year-old Adam Hendrickson at the water tank struggling with the hose attachment; his older half-brother Tim bolting across the center clearing, his face a mask of disbelief and rage; the Spruce Lake Inn manager, Annie Lynd, at his heels, her long, dark red braid trailing down her back.

There was something else—a sound in the back-

ground, growing fainter. A motor? Had the saboteur who had caused the Hendricksons' extensive property damage over the last several months now moved up to arson?

Sean scanned the area. Partly obscured by the barn a lone figure dressed in black rode slowly away on an ATV, glancing over his shoulder at the house. When he saw that Sean had spotted him, the rider sped up and disappeared into the trees, hightailing it away from the lodge.

Sean caught up with Tim and gestured toward the fleeing arsonist. Sean said, "I need an ATV."

"In the barn—"

"I'll get him! Take care of the fire." Sean sprinted toward the barn.

Lucy caught up to him as he turned the ignition in the ATV. "Be careful," she said.

"Always." He took his gun from his backpack and threaded his holster through the loops in his jeans. "I'll switch my cell to radio, better to communicate short distances. I'll keep in touch."

Sean sped out of the barn. The arsonist had left a light trail of exhaust, the ground too moist to kick up much dirt. But Sean found the tire tracks in the soft earth and stuck with them, picking up speed, driving the ATV with as much confidence as he drove his Mustang. He lowered the face shield on the helmet and leaned forward. The bastard had picked the wrong way to escape—Sean was boldly proficient on any sort of wheels, from motorcycles to SUVs.

The Yamaha Raptor he was riding had terrific responsiveness. He reached fifty miles per hour on the straightaway leading into the woods, though he sus-

pected he could push it faster. Any other day, he would enjoy being on this powerful mechanical beast, but today, he had a job to do.

He was at a slight disadvantage in that he didn't know the area. Whoever was sabotaging the Hendrickson property was most likely a local, born and raised in the Adirondacks. The saboteur also had a big lead—Sean couldn't hear the other quad over his own engine. Without a line of sight, Sean pursued on instincts alone, following the fresh dirt trail the arsonist's ATV left in its wake.

The trees where Sean had seen the rider disappear came quickly into view, and Sean slowed to maneuver down a trail barely wide enough for the quad. Branches cut into his bare arms and he pulled his elbows in. The cold morning air seeped into his bones, his adrenaline keeping him from shivering.

The trail wound dangerously through the trees, a foot-worn path unsuitable for ATVs. Only the newly turned soil told Sean he was heading in the right direction.

The path came to a sudden end and Sean almost drove straight into the lake. He braked rapidly and turned ninety degrees, fishtailing. Though the drop was short, the sheer ledge led directly to the water below. Sweating, Sean leaned forward and to the left, using his weight to balance and maintain control.

For a split second, he thought he'd stall out; the quad sputtered and jerked. He eased up on the throttle, rolled back an inch, then gunned it. The engine roared back to life, and Sean let out a relieved sigh.

He pushed on along the edge of the lake. The initial cold Sean felt wearing only a T-shirt and jeans had

given way to overheating, sweat dampening his shirt. He barely registered the sharp sting of pine needles on his neck when he came too close to a low-hanging evergreen.

The trees thinned out and Sean found himself in a clearing about half the size of a football field. It appeared to be a seasonal camping spot, with two wood pits on either side.

The asshole he was pursuing had spun donuts in the area in an attempt to confuse him. “You’ll have to do better than that, prick,” Sean muttered. He ignored the disturbed campground and looked for where the other ATV had exited the clearing. Sean grinned when he found it after less than a minute.

The rocky trail turned steep quickly, and a sharp turn took him in the opposite direction of the lake. The terrain was becoming more difficult the higher he climbed up the mountain, with large branches that crunched under the quad’s wide tires. Sean was forced to slow down to circumvent a rock that, had he hit it, would have flipped the vehicle; at thirty miles an hour he’d probably have broken his neck.

But that meant the arsonist had to slow as well. The chase might end when one of them ran out of gas—Sean hoped it was the other guy.

A sharp bend in the path nearly sent Sean down the mountainside fifty feet. His back wheels spun off the edge. He was losing ground and almost jumped from the ATV to save his life when the front wheels caught traction and he lurched forward.

The quad stalled, and he took a moment to breathe. He wouldn’t do anyone any good if he ended up dead.

In the sudden silence, Sean heard the other rider,

much closer than he thought. He saw that the path peaked only twenty yards away; the arsonist sounded like he was right on the other side.

Sean restarted the ATV and cautiously drove up the steep, narrow path until the grade evened out. He then saw the man in black, picking up speed on the downhill slope. He doubled his speed, but the guy was increasing the distance between them. He noticed Sean and added speed. Because he wore a helmet, Sean couldn't see his face; he was skinny and not too tall, and his neck was pale. A short, skinny white guy would fit any number of people in the town. Sean needed to catch him.

The arsonist veered east, away from the ledge, and picked up speed as he sailed through the trees. Sean followed suit. Rocks and fallen trees from the recent winter littered the landscape. The guy was still increasing the distance between them, and when he topped a hill he disappeared from view.

Sean reached the peak and saw the other rider far in the distance, halfway across the clearing, on an old logging road or mining road. Spruce Lake had been a successful mining town for over a hundred years, up until the midseventies. If this was a mining road, they were closer to the main highway than Sean had thought.

Sean used all the power in the Raptor to fly down the packed dirt and rock road. The arsonist glanced back, but his face was hidden by the helmet's face shield. Sean was definitely getting closer. He'd have to maneuver the guy into a canyon or trap him somehow, or hope that Tim had called the sheriff and a helicopter was on its way. Wishful thinking—even if they had a chopper in Canton, it couldn't get here this fast.

He'd have to wing it. The arsonist was zigzagging

to either side of the wide space, looking for an escape; Sean now had the advantage: with both his skill and the Raptor's power in open space, he closed the distance between them to fifteen feet.

The other rider headed toward an obscured path. But he was slowing down and messing with the dash. The guy jerked forward and his wheels caught in a rut. He released the throttle and jerked again, nearly hitting a tree. Panicked, he overcompensated and turned one-eighty, facing Sean.

Sean rode straight toward him, hoping to force him back to the trees where he could block his escape route. Sean was bigger, stronger, and—he hoped—faster.

The other quad's engine was sputtering and a faint whiff of oil told Sean it had a leak. He wouldn't be getting far. Sean went full throttle until he was only feet away, spun into a controlled stop, and leapt from his quad toward the man in black.

Sean tossed his helmet and sprinted toward the guy. The quad stalled out, and Sean tackled him as he tried to run. He head-butted Sean with his helmet before jumping up, his helmet falling to the ground. Sean stood and drew his weapon in one motion, standing cautiously only feet from the arsonist.

He was practically a kid. Sean was surprised that he was so young—he might have been eighteen, but Sean suspected younger. Clean-cut, sandy blond hair, and pale blue eyes that looked both angry and scared shitless. He reminded Sean of himself when he was a teenager, shortly after his parents died. He'd been wild, angry, and felt abandoned—determined that if he was bad enough, his brother and legal guardian Duke

would wash his hands of him. His brother never had, and Sean had finally overcome his anger and deep sadness.

“My name’s Sean Rogan. I can help you, but you need to own up to your actions.”

“Fuck you.”

Sean would have said the same thing when he was a teenager. Probably had.

“You’re not leaving here; I’m not letting you. We can dance around all morning, or you can make this easy.”

Sean looked from the kid’s eyes to his hands, assessing if he had a weapon or was going to bolt. Sean hadn’t wanted to draw his gun on an unarmed kid, but he didn’t know whether or not the kid was carrying.

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

“That’s why you have a fucking gun on me?”

“We’re going back to the Hendricksons’.”

The kid was trying hard not to shake, but Sean saw the telltale signs of fear. He didn’t want to face the Hendricksons anymore than the police.

“You don’t want them to know you’re the one who’s been destroying their property?” Sean said. “I get that. Believe me, I did some dumb-ass things when I was your age.”

The kid snorted.

“Even worse than arson.”

That got the kid interested. Sean didn’t elaborate, but said, “We’ll work this out, okay? If you’re honest with me, I promise, I’ll help make this right.”

The kid’s face changed, from caution to dark sadness. “You can’t,” he said quietly, looking down.

“You don’t know me, you have no reason to trust me, but I mean what I say.”

Sean mistook the downcast eyes as shame or consideration, he realized, when the kid bolted like a rabbit along the edge of the logging road.

He fired his gun into a nearby tree, hoping the sound would make the kid stop. It didn’t.

Sean went after him. Faster, he quickly caught up and was about to tackle him when the kid turned sharply right, off the road. Sean followed, picking up speed, about to tackle the kid, when he veered again to the left. Sean took two more steps forward as he turned, and the ground gave way with a startling *crunch*.

His foot broke through brittle wood. A sharp crackling sound cut through the forest. Sean was falling, the sensation startling him completely, though his reflexes had him reaching for something to stop his descent. Wood and dirt slipped through his fingers. He continued to fall, shouting for help even as the daylight disappeared and he plunged into darkness.

*I’m going to die.*

As he thought of his death, he thought of Lucy, and then he hit the bottom of the narrow pit, his left arm twisting painfully beneath him. He cried out, his body writhing, and an excruciatingly sharp pain hit him in the thigh. His head ached and he couldn’t see. The only thing he heard was ringing between his ears.

But then faintly, from seemingly down a long tunnel, a young man’s voice said, “I’m sorry. I had no choice.”

And then silence and darkness blocked out everything.