

Chapter One

Wild. Mysterious. Primordial.

Bailey throttled the ATV's accelerator, describing to herself the view she saw along Trail Ridge. She smiled in satisfaction as the wind whipped away the sweat clinging to her face and bare arms. Even though she hadn't discovered the Okefenokee Swamp until her teen years, she considered herself a true "swamper" in spirit, if not by birth. The primitive wildlife refuge had been a personal haven during her troubled adolescence, a place to soothe her battered mind and body. It still brought her peace.

An eagle soared above, its huge wings spread as it swooped down to the top of a nearby pond cypress. Quickly she gathered her binoculars for a closer look. An unfortunate squirrel dangled from the bird's marigold beak. But, hey, we all had to eat—including baby eaglets. As a park ranger, she'd often witnessed the relentless need to hunt or be hunted, to kill or be killed in the eternal quest for survival.

She brought the ATV to a stop and hastily noted the location and time in her log. Tracking eagles and gopher turtles was a part of her duties in monitoring protected species. That done, she lifted her binoculars again in time to spot the adult eagle bringing the food to the giant nest that housed his mate and two eaglets.

Heat scorched her arms, and the humidity blanketed her skin. She swiped perspiration from her forehead and clutched the ATV keys, ready to move on.

Loud staccato warbling pierced the air, and several sandhill cranes crashed through a clump of saw palmettos, soaring upward. Appropriately known as the "watchmen of the swamp," these birds let out a distress cry that alerted other creatures. More birds took flight, and even a couple of deer grazing along the blackwater shore went running for cover. Curious, she raised her binoculars and scanned the area from which they'd come but saw nothing unusual. Perhaps an alligator had lumbered near their nest. But normally, in that case, the cranes would hover above, squawking and even swooping down on the gator to drive him away from their eggs or hatched babies.

Bailey hopped off the ATV and made her way down the embankment toward the wide, swampy patch of water that, several miles ahead, formed into a canal that led to the Suwannee River.

The sound of something dragging across the sand was followed by a loud swish of water. Perhaps she'd been right. It was a sunbathing gator returning to the water trail. Near the white sand shore, Bailey caught sight of the disturbance.

Not an alligator. It was a man. Dressed camo, he navigated a long, slender johnboat, sluicing a paddle through the waters.

"Hey, there," she called out in a friendly greeting.

He didn't turn around, and she frowned. Why hadn't he answered? Was he illegally hunting gators or turtles?

"Hey," she called out again, determined to check his fishing license. "Hold up. Park Management here."

His head turned slightly, allowing her to glimpse only a distant profile, but his olive-colored brimmed hat shaded the upper part of his face. Instead of turning around and obeying her command, he pulled the engine throttle and sped off.

Anger flushed her face. The man was definitely up to no good, but he had her at a disadvantage and knew it. She'd never catch up to him in the twisting, winding waters. Bailey pursed her lips, frustrated as he slipped out of reach. By the time she fetched a boat, he'd have disappeared like a snake in high cotton. Her gaze swept the area, looking for a trotline or other signs of illegal activity, but there was only the drag mark of his boat in the sand and muddy footprints by the water's edge.

Her gaze travelled further, and she squinted at the railroad bridge, nearly overgrown by reeds and marsh grass. Had he gone for a hike on the Thirteen Bridges Trail? Usually, that place attracted a younger crowd drawn by the old ghost story—and a place to party. But she might as well take a look anyway and see if the mystery man had left any clues as to his identity.

It'd been months since she'd last walked the trail. She trod heavily on the near-rotten bridges—merely old crossties over wetland—and recalled the legend about a wailing woman searching for her lost baby. Supposedly she and her infant had been murdered out here not long after the Civil War.

Personally, Bailey thought it a bunch of nonsense, brought on by inebriated, highly suggestable kids—although she considered herself fairly open-minded about the supernatural. How could she

not be? Her best friend, Lulu Atwell, was an older Seminole woman who told her tales of Native American lore that often defied rational explanation.

At the end of the trail, the tiny abandoned church still stood. She pushed open the door, surprised at its resistance. Given its age and condition, it should have been falling off its rusty hinges.

She squinted at the sudden darkness. Only two small grimy windows admitted filtered sunlight. Stale, moldy air twitched her nose. Her eyes adjusted, and she focused on two metal cots in the twenty-foot by thirty-foot room.

What the heck? This old place had always been empty, except for the occasional beer and liquor bottles strewn over the rough pine floor, relics from parties. But this?

Prickles washed down her spine as her mind immediately jumped to a story that had dominated the news for a couple of weeks. Two young women, sisters, had been reported missing. They were last seen kayaking away from the outfitter store in Folkston, Georgia—her town, located only seven miles southwest of an Okefenokee Park entrance.

This couldn't be related to those women—could it? No way.

Still, she couldn't shake off the weight of dread that crushed her lungs. Bailey squared her shoulders and marched to the beds. Thin, urine-stained mattresses lay atop the rusting cot frames, and she pulled up one of them.

A bundled strip of gray cotton was stuffed along one of the railings, looking like a mummified mouse.

Oh, no. As she looked at what appeared to be a gag cloth, bile rose in her throat, and her hand beelined for the leather sheaf of her knife at her waist. But she wasn't thinking of the missing women. Instead, her mind leapfrogged to the past. As much as she'd suppressed those memories, they now flooded in.

And she was *there*. Sixteen years old and lying on the damp concrete basement floor, her face and body grinding into the cold concrete with its faint scent of mold. Above, the whistling snap of a belt before it descended. And as much as she tried to brace for it, she could never prepare for the burning sting. Or the screams muffled behind the dirty piece of cloth gagging her mouth.

No, no, no. That was long ago. I'm all grown up and safe. Even as she repeated the mantra to her trembling inner child, her body refused the comfort. Bailey ran out the door, leaned against the side of the church and vomited. That done, she breathed deeply, long, slow breaths, as she took in

her surroundings. The eerie beauty and isolated environment of the swamp assuaged her anxiety as nothing else could. It was her sanctuary. Always had been, even during those dark days.

Resolutely she pushed away from the rotting boards and squared her shoulders. Nothing could erase her past misery, but if someone had been hurt in this abandoned ruin, she'd do everything in her power to bring the abuser to justice.

Bailey pivoted, reentered the building, and went to work. A damn shame there was no cell service in this remote area, but her cell phone wasn't entirely useless. She dug it from her pocket and videoed the entire room from top to bottom. She noticed not another clue of foul play, but if this place was a crime scene, no doubt forensic experts would find microscopic details that she could not. And she was positive something bad had happened here. A heavy energy pervaded the church, seeping into her bones with the chill of certainty.

Briefly she debated collecting the gag cloth for safekeeping but decided against it. Best to let law enforcement gather it and keep it uncontaminated in their chain of evidence. It should be safe enough where it was. Unless... She recalled the man speeding away in the boat. Innocent outdoor enthusiast or illegal fisherman—or something worse? It was possible the man could return.

She shook her head and left the evidence as it was. Instead she walked around the building to check for anything else unusual. At the back of the church was a graveyard of over a dozen crumbling headstones with mostly unreadable etchings. A rusted metal fence sectioned off a patch of long-forgotten graves. Purple pickerel weed and yellow-eyed grass choked the monuments to the dead.

Next to the cemetery was a maze of waist-high boxwoods that formed a labyrinth. Many believed that walking labyrinths was a gate to one's inner self, that its circular structure, combined with its spiral, meandering paths, led to a meditative peace and awareness. Had the mystery man traversed through here for his own nefarious purposes? Could there be another surprise in store?

In the interest of thoroughness, she'd take a look. Besides, she'd always been curious about the maze. She'd heard that no teenager, no matter how drunk, had ever dared to enter, as it was also—no surprise—believed to be haunted. General legend had it that to enter meant you'd be forever lost. No one returned alive.

Bailey entered the maze, boots scrunching against river pebbles that made up the path. Only a handful of weeds managed to push through the stones. The old English boxwoods that lined the maze were slightly overgrown but must have been a miniature variety not to have totally grown

together over the years. Dutifully she walked the curves, searching left and right for foreign objects or anything out of place—a wrapper, a tissue, a sock. Soon, she'd reached the end of the labyrinth, where a large tea rose shrub bloomed at its center.

She inhaled the unexpected floral bouquet before her—but spiritual enlightenment? Nope. She felt none of that. Then again, searching for crime evidence probably emitted too many negative vibes, especially after the horrible memories that'd resurfaced only minutes ago. Turning to exit, she caught sight of silver glimmering from a nearby Tupelo tree. What could this be?

Bailey pushed through one of the boxwoods and strode to the tree for a better look. The bit of silver flashed in the sun from high above, tantalizingly out of sight. Again, armed with the cell phone, she turned on the camera and zoomed in.

The lens of a small security camera blinked back at her.

Bailey gasped and took a step backward. “What the heck?” she muttered.

Nothing about this old chapel and graveyard was valuable. Besides, this was a wildlife refuge, not private property. No one had a right to set up surveillance equipment. Maybe it had been left to catch teenage trespassers? No, that didn't make sense. If park management had bothered to initiate security measures, she'd have been the one to install the camera and monitor its feed.

Which meant...she wasn't sure exactly what, but it couldn't be good. On its own, the discovery would have been perplexing, but when combined with the discovery of the cots, and the gag, it could only mean trouble.

And that man in the boat—was he connected to all this? Again, Bailey silently cursed that she hadn't had immediate access to her own boat.

What if you had? an inner voice taunted. *What might he have done to you?* She swallowed hard. Her mind leapfrogged to yet another dreadful realization. The man hadn't just seen her in person. She was now recorded on his camera. *Not like I'm defenseless*, she reminded herself, patting the knife at her waist. She was no longer a scared, trapped teenager at the mercy of her foster father.

The roar of a motor pierced the relentless cacophony of insects. She whipped around, trying to pinpoint the direction. The rumble came again, closer. Another ATV, she decided. Nobody was allowed to ride through here without specific authorization. So either this was another park employee or someone more ominous. Had the man in the boat circled around and landed? Was he now driving toward her?

One thing she knew for certain: she wasn't going to wait to find out. Bailey scrambled to the front of the church and sprinted toward her ATV parked near Trail Ridge, only twenty yards away. The other vehicle was almost upon her as she cranked the engine and hit the accelerator. If it turned out to be another employee, she'd look foolish, but for now, safety trumped pride.

Risking a quick glance in the mirror, she saw a man in dark sunglasses. The determined set of his jaw, along with the increased speed and direct aim of his ATV, told her that he meant to overtake her. The question was...why?

Unfortunately, the winner in this chase would come down to who drove the faster vehicle. Sadly, her decade-old, bottom-of-the-line ATV would be no match in this contest. The park had a limited budget, and speed was never a consideration in purchasing a serviceable ATV to roam the swamp.

He passed on the left and frowned, signaling her to stop.

Bailey tamped down her uneasiness as she regarded the interloper. He was dressed all in brown, some kind of uniform evidently, but not the park's. For the second time that day, she caught a glint of silver in the scorching afternoon sun. Only this time, she didn't need to zoom in with her cell phone to see it.

Pinned to the shirt on his right upper chest was a six-pointed star badge—the Charlton County Sheriff's Office. *Whew.* Bailey hit the brakes and jerked to a stop. How could they have known she was on her way to call them once she reached her cabin? Unless this area was already under suspicion and they were watching it. Which could explain the security camera. They might have placed it there in the hopes of nabbing a person of interest. Perhaps this officer observed the man exiting the chapel and then slinking off in his boat. Naturally he'd come to investigate.

The moment he turned off his ATV and faced her, Bailey quipped, "You're a day late and a dollar short."

His forehead creased, and he removed the dark sunglasses. Olive-green eyes, the color of faded camo, regarded her in consternation. "Excuse me?"

"I said you're a little late. Your man's already slipped away by boat.

His frown only grew deeper. "Man? What man? I haven't a clue what you're talking about."

This time it was her turn to frown and regard him in confusion. Bailey cocked her head to the side. "Haven't you been watching the old church?"

He gazed over his shoulder at the abandoned structure and then faced her again. "Nooo," he said with a slow, deep drawl. "What makes you think that?"

“But...” She bit her lip, puzzled. In her seven years as a ranger, she’d encountered law enforcement officers only three times. Once, when a local child with autism had gone missing—thankfully, he’d been discovered hours later, unharmed and swimming in the alligator- and snake-infested Suwannee River. The second time had been when a camper had suffered a heart attack, and his family had sent out an SOS flare in the dark of night. The third, of course, had been the recent massive descent of cops, firefighters, and volunteers who had combed as much of the 438,000 acres as was humanly possible to search for the missing women.

“Why are you here then, Officer...” Her glance fell to the stitched letters under his badge, searching for a name. Horror closed her throat as she read it. *Dylan Armstrong*.

For the second time that day, the worst memories of her life resurfaced in an unexpected floodgate that, once opened, refused to recede. She hardly ever thought about that troubled time in her life, yet now, in the space of less than an hour, fate had punched her in the gut twice.

Coincidence?

Bailey believed in many things—that places like that old church contained a certain energy left from its history, that the Okefenokee held mysteries deep within its primitive fortress, that certain plants and animals often appeared at critical moments as messages from the universe. But most of all she believed in signs—not coincidence. And the fact that her past had twice been thrust in her face in rapid succession was a bad sign indeed.

“Ma’am, are you okay?” he asked, exiting his ATV and standing directly in front of her. He wasn’t frowning now. Instead, his forehead was creased with concern. Those unusual olive-colored eyes—so like the elder Dylan Armstrong’s she remembered—appeared kind and trustworthy, inviting her to accept his help.

But she wasn’t going to be fooled. Not again. Not ever again.

He opened a bag tied to the back of his ATV and pulled out a water bottle, then thrust it into her hand. “Perhaps you’re overheated? Dehydrated?” he suggested. “Happens all the time out here. Drink this, you’ll feel better.”

Anger replaced surprised horror and she shook her head. Did he take her for an incompetent idiot? For God’s sake, she was an experienced ranger and knew to stay hydrated in the smothering heat. And even if she was thirsty, she’d never accept anything an Armstrong had to offer.

“I’m perfectly fine,” she answered icily, effectively cutting off his overture. “What are you doing riding the land? Did you obtain a special permit?”

“Of course I did.”

She’d just see about that. Bailey turned the ATV key and the motor roared to life. “Good day, Officer.”

“Hey, wait a minute. What did you mean about the man speeding—”

His words were drowned out as she throttled the accelerator and the ATV wheels spun in the dirt, spraying clumps of soil onto his uniform pants. She watched him through the rearview mirror as he scowled at her, hands on his hips. But he made no move to follow, and the tightness in her chest eased as she drove around a bend and his tall form disappeared altogether.

She’d head straight to headquarters and report everything she’d seen at the church to her supervisors, as was her duty. In turn, it would be their responsibility to contact the sheriff with those findings. If Armstrong complained about her odd behavior today, she’d insist that she’d bypassed him in order to report everything directly to her own supervisors. The Sheriff’s Office had their chain of command, and she had hers.

With any luck, she’d never have to set eyes on Officer Armstrong ever again.